Destiny and ‘shapings’ in the poetic Edda:
Örlög and Sköp

Introduction

I undertook to analyze these two concepts by starting from the original texts that use them. This asks for a quite large amount of information. I could not yet achieve it on the saga corpus, which thus remains a task to come.

I used the whole Eddic corpus, and for the sagas, 96 sagas including all the traditional ones. The number of available documents is large enough to lead to some clear conclusions. The translations are mine, but I compared them with existing translations that tend to forget the importance of magic in the Old Norse worldview.

The quotations of the words örlög and sköp are always given in context, with a few lines of the poem that make it possible to understand their meaning or meanings.

For my translations, I used de Vries’ etymological dictionary (published in German only - in short ‘de Vries’), Cleasby-Vigfusson’ Icelandic-English dictionary (C - V) and also very often, Lexicon Poëticum antiquæ linguae septentrionalis of Sveinbjörn Egilsson (I used the original version in Latin language and not new Finnr Jonsson’s Danish edition - in short LexPoet). This last provides the meaning of a greater number of words than C - V, associated to a wealth of quotations illustrating the use of the words, mainly in poetry.

Here is the order of the poems some stanzas of which will be used:

Völuspá, Hávamál, Vafþrúðnismál, Grímnismál, Lokasenna, Alvíssmál, Völundarkviða, Grípisspá, Fáfnismál, Sigdrifumál, Reginsmál, Sigurðarkviða in skamma, Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta, Guðrúnarkviða in forn, Oddrúnarkviða (Oddrúnargrátr), Atlakviða (Dauði Atla), Atlamál in grænlenzku, Grógaldr, Fjölsvinnsmál, Hrafnaagaldur Óðins.

An unexpected consequence of this magic orientated skimming through poetic Edda is bringing forth an original view of it, one less warlike than the usual ones, though terribly impressive.

We will analyze the meaning of a little more than 60 stanzas belonging to the poetic Edda. This leads to a dispersion of attention that tends to concentrate on the current stanza, and somewhat forgets the other ones. In order to avoid this dispersion, the following introduction plays the role of a kind of guide to our journey among these stanzas by providing us some advance information that will be rediscovered and detailed during this journey. We will need to reach our general conclusion in order to completely justify our guide. It will then become a detailed and argued chart of the main actors of magic in Poetic Edda and a valuable approximation of the magical sides of old Norse civilization.
The Poetic Edda is our principal source of knowledge on örlög [1] but it also quite often uses two other words: sköp, also met in the sagas, and rök [2]. Less often, fate is named mjötuðr or urðr, that is, Norn Urðr’s name: we will meet several examples of this use.

On örlög

The traditional spelling of this word is orlog. The one provided by C-V, örlög (I will use it in this paper) simplifies, with no confusion, the correct spelling. Note nevertheless that the first editors (before Finnur Jónsson) did not have a fixed rule. For example, Rask (1818) spells as ‘avrlavg’, and Möbius (1860) and Egilsson (1860) as ‘orlög’.

The neutral substantive örlag (spelled here as ørlag) means ‘closing, ending’ and its plural, ørlǫg (örlög) means ‘destiny, death, combat’.

On sköp

The neutral substantive skap indicates the state or the mood of a person. But it is also associated to verb skapa that means ‘to shape’. This is why its plural, sköp took the meaning of ‘shappenings’, i.e. of everything that shapes our life, our fate. In the following, I will keep the Norse word örlög which is well-known or I will translate it if necessary into English by ‘destiny’ or ‘fate’. The word sköp, conversely, is quasi unknown and I will systematically translate it by “shapings” in order to avoid confusing it with destiny. Our life takes its course during such shapings. They are carried out, with more or less softness, by our parents, our friends, our passions. When our mother softly explains that “you should not behave in this way…” she gently shapes us. When a wizard casts a spell, when someone is tortured, both wizard and torturer carry out brutish shapings. In the following, we will slowly access these principles of Heathen spirituality and will look further into the difference between örlög and sköp.

It is also necessary to add a few word on sköpuð, past participle of verb skapa, and on its preterit skóp (he/she shaped). We will meet below 9 occurrences of sköpuð and 4 of skóp which always take place in a context either explicitly magic of destiny shapings, or in the majestic context of the world creation. The only occurrence which can be seen as a material shaping is found in Völuspá stanza 7 saying that the gods “tangir skópu (they shaped tongs),” though the materiality of such tongs could be disputed…

On rök [2]

This word became famous because of ragna-rök, the gods’ rök that Snorri Sturluson (and more recently, Wagner) understand as being the word rökkr or rökr: darkness, twilight. Other sources (among which Poetic Edda) led the experts to understand it as rök (it is then a plural without singular) meaning: causes, signs, explanations, the course of things, fate. The multiplicity of these meanings does not enable to learn a clear lesson on the nature of rök in the ancient Germanic world. We will clear up this problem after having studied 4 characteristic examples of them.

We will meet two more words which can translate as ‘fate’:

Mjötuðr,

is the ‘measure-supplier’ we meet five times in poetic Edda. We will not be able to fully explain the use of this word before commenting on Sigurðarkviða in skamma § 11.
Auðna,

‘luck’ that we will see in stanza 98 of Atlamál in grænlenzku. This word evokes ‘chance’ with the modern meaning of ‘fortunate coincidence’.

[1] (ørlög, plural of ørlag - lag is a layer), i.e., a structure defining a vertical order.

[2] rök is perhaps linked to singular rak: an alignment of cut hay, or with rök: a line, a trail, that is, an order on a horizontal plane. I do not believe it is necessary to show feasts of imagination on the space difference between lag and rak, but that it may be judicious to notice that both define an ordered structure.

1 - Destiny in Völuspá: stanzas 17-20 and 31, then 2, 46 (on miöt, measure)

1.1. - Humankind and its destiny

Völuspá, that will be supplemented by Hávamál, describes the fundamental components of humankind: what defines a human being? We find this in Völuspá stanzas 17, 18 and 20.

First of all, let us stress that stanza 17 speaks of a human couple, Ask and Embla, who are not yet a man and a woman, because they still miss two features to belong to humankind. I want to stress that these features are common to men and women. This forever splits old Germanic spirituality from the one of all the cultures in which the gods differentiate man and woman while bringing them into humankind either in a well defined order, or by different qualities [Note 1].

Note 1.
It is interesting to compare, from this point of view, the Scandinavian myth with one of the Sumerian myths of humankind’s creation. The great Sumerian god Enki quarrels with Ninhursaja, his wife, because she grew eight plants of which he did not determine their destiny. He hastens to do so and Ninhursaja is furious with the destiny inflicted to her plants - they will be used as food, which she did not wish. She curses Enki who then sickens and suffers in eight parts of his body. The dispute is then settled by a crafty fox conciliator and Ninhursaja begins taking care of Enki’ diseases. Associated to Enki’s eight healed pains are born eight children, gods or goddesses. The first two children and the last one are male and the five others seem to be female. When Enki’s ribs are looked after, Ninhursaja gives birth to a seventh child, a goddess, Ninti the future “goddess of the month.” In this Sumerian myth, going back to at least 5000 years, beings of the two sexes are created in sequence and we easily observe, without being able to know why, that men begin and close the procedure.

A complete French (sorry) version is available at http://www.nordic-life.org/MNG/MytholSumer.pdf

Before going into details, let us consider another general characteristic of these human features. Stanzas 17 and 18 describe five non human inabilities, two in stanza 17, three in stanza 18. The two incapacities of stanza 17 will not be removed, they are not a ‘gods’ gift’. Conversely, the gods will gift humankind with the capacities described at the beginning of stanza 18.

The two deficiencies described in stanza 17 are to be litt megandi, i.e. ‘having little strength to act’ (i.e. weak and inactive) and being ‘örlöглаuss’, without destiny. It thus seems that it is up to mankind to manage to acquire strength for acting and destiny. [We will later refine this statement.]
The three gifts of the gods, quoted in stanza 18 are: önd, breath, óðr, intelligence and lá, properly ‘the sea along the shores’ a rather obvious image of internal water, blood, lymph and cell water which I will call here ‘life force’ and ‘joy of life’, that gives also beautiful color to human faces, as claimed by stanza 18. In other words, breath, intelligence and life force/joy are gods’ gifts and they should be enough for humankind to find the means of creating its own capacity of action and its destiny. Note that this interpretation exactly matches the modern belief of being able of “self-forging our destiny.”

Note 2.
See more details in Völuspá stanza 20 , but the essential argument is as follows. This assertion becomes absolutely obvious if we realize that, in stanza 20, line 7 “skáru á skíði (they scraped on small planks) ” does not have a direct object and that line 12 “örlög seggja (destiny of humankind) ” does not have a verb. This indicates that, as

Three Norns driving the army to battle
From an image by Dorothy Hardy, named ‘The Dises’ in « Myths of the Norsemen: From the Eddas and Sagas » by H. A. Guerber
Norns do not lead the army to battle as shown above. It is however not forbidden to think that they are a bit too enthusiastic at programming slaughters, which is properly evoked by this image.

However, this incredibly modern point of view, found in stanzas 17 and 18, must immediately be moderated by an information given later, in s. 20. This last stanza teaches us that three Norns decide of human destiny by ‘scraping wood tablets’ [Note 2], i.e. by carving runes. There is a compelling aspect in a destiny decided by higher powers, and this contradicts the above interpretation, a voluntarily hasty one. The problem of örlög is thus more complex than stanzas 17 and 18 implied.
usual in skaldic poetry, it is judicious to join them together, this leads to a meaningful sentence that is: “They scraped on small planks the destiny of humankind”.

We will come back in more detail on this argument, due to Mrs. Jackson, when studying Völuspá s. 20.

To have a destiny is certainly a fundamental component of human life though it opposes our need for freedom. For better understanding stanza 17 meaning, we should reconsider the relation between our capacity to act and örlög. The capacity to act opens the doors of freedom whereas örlög tends to shut them. If we state that rebelling against our destiny is, to some extent, forsaking our human statute, it should at once be recalled that the first human capacity, the one of acting, moderates the inexorability of destiny.

It finally seems that a ‘human destiny’ is wedged between an inexorable destiny and a capacity for acting: human ones cannot do more than their best! Despite everything, the capacity to act provides us the possibility of discovering hints of our own destiny instead of blindly undergoing it.

Once we will finally have acknowledged and understood our destiny, it will not appear absurd any more to us and we will be able to heartily achieve (or undergo) it. This is how I understand the message sent by the völva to humankind.

But this is only my opinion, briefly exposed. Let us now see what deeper understanding we can reach with these Völuspá stanzas.

The gods gifted us with three capacities.

The first, Óðinn’s gift, is breath. We should never forget the obvious mechanical process such that the shape and disposition of our ribs makes it possible that our lungs would fill up with air. This is for the bodily point of view. Beyond that, though, breath enables us to identify with the forces of air (or celestial forces) and also to have “a lot of breath” that is to say, to find both inspiration and guts to carry on a difficult task.

The second, Hœnir’s gift, is intelligence. From the bodily point of view, it is born in our brain (or also, for some, in our heart or our entrails) and it should not be forgotten that this faculty, of which human ones seem to be so proud, finds its source in one part of our body. In addition, it is obviously the faculty for proper thinking, for placing ourselves in space and time and for behaving rationally. Intelligence is also the partner of courage to give us reasons to continue a complex task, that can even become pleasant because it titillates our intelligence.

The third, Lóðurr’s gift, is ‘the sea along the shore’, i.e. the water of our body which ensures its functioning and which constitutes the greatest part of it. Here again, the material aspects of water should not be neglected. But it is also what puts us in contact, as the sea waves that break on the beach, with the combined forces of water and ground, which is a quite complete image of the forces of earth. In addition, this internal waters are the paramount source of life force and joy and of mankind’s “beautiful hue”, as pointed out by s. 18 last line as an expression of our zest for life.

Now, we can perhaps a little better understand why the gods did not judge propitious to provide us an örlög nor a capacity specific to action.

Let us combine courage, intelligence and joy in life and we will obtain a particularly effective way to motivate us to act “as it is necessary” i.e. without gloom, stupidity nor despondency. Discouragement is often the cause of our failures and joy in life helps us not to
give up in front of the more overwhelming problem, otherwise “rather commit suicide” would be an obvious solution to all problems.

The case of örlög is more complicated to analyze. It seems to me that the gods did not want to take care of our örlög because they well know that this topic belongs to the Norns and, in the old Norse religion, the gods themselves are exposed to a destiny. But they also know that Norns do not deal with ‘small details’ of our lives. It is known that Norns are “the world’s Hamingjur” [Note 3] and they determine only the broad outline of our small individual destinies.

Note 3.
This way of speaking is given by C-V at the word Hamingja. It probably results from an interpretation of the two occurrences of this word in poetic Edda, namely in Vafþrúðnismál S. 49 and Vegtamskvida (Baldr’s dream) a stanza known as ‘d’ in Bugge’s edition. A Hamingja is a protective spirit (the word hamingja means also ‘luck’) that sticks to certain individuals of a clan in order to protect the clan. The stanzas a-d aren’t often translated. Here is first half of ‘d’:
Baldr’s premonitory dreams throw the Æsir into a panic, and all omens confirmed that Baldr should soon die. Then the ‘d’ stanza starts as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valföðr uggir, Father of Death suspects</th>
<th>vað sé tekit, lack is obtained,</th>
<th>hamingjaur ætlar he thinks</th>
<th>horfnar may; may have disappeared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Óðinn suspects that)</td>
<td>(there is a ‘lack’)</td>
<td>(he thinks the hamingjur,)</td>
<td>(may have disappeared);</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In other words, the situation appears to him as hopeless, due to Hamingjur’s disappearance.

We will not escape, for example, from the global climatic warming which seems to belong to humankind’s örlög. There are however thousand global reactions to be opposed to a catastrophic reheating and thousands of other individual ones for living this reheating, even if a catastrophic one, in order to suffer the least possible. All these reactions, if they make use of a certain form of magic, could be named ‘sköp’, conceived beside örlog. Each one of these sköp constitutes a particular way to live the climatic reheating. This depends indeed on the courage, intelligence, life strength and joy in life of present time humankind, although we are subjected in an inexorable way to humankind’s destiny. Those who disputed this climatic reheating in front of evidence, and the countries that refuse to take into account this fact, act typically as all the individuals who reject our gods’ gifts and thus become unable to see their destiny and to act accordingly.

Some deny the existence of destiny, others are blindly subjected to it. Both standpoints deny the higher forces driving us or our gods’ gifts. They are two parallel roads leading to a personal and social disaster.

1.2. Stanzas 17 - 18: Of gods and humankind

Völva’s account is cut at stanza 9 by a succession of 9 stanzas giving the list of Dwarves’ names. Völva’s account starts again at s. 17. You will find at: http://www.nordic-life.org/nmh/VoluPagaEng.htm or https://www.academia.edu/35996140/VolusPagaEng.docx
a commented translation with which you will be able to put back in context stanza 17.

Everything happened as described in stanzas 1-8, until…

**Stanza 17:**

- **Unz þrír kvámu** - 1. Until three came
- **ór því liði** - 2. out of their people (family place)
- **öflgir ok áskir** - 3. strong-always and loving-always
- **æsir at háusi,** - 4. æsir to (mankind’s) house,
- **fundu á landi** - 5. they found on the ground
- **litt megandi** - 6. little having might
- **Ask ok Emblu** - 7. Ask(r) and Embla
- **örlöglausa.** - 8. örlög-less (deprived of örlög).

**Comments on the vocabulary**

v. 5. The word *land* describes the ground as opposed to the sea: ‘Where the sea stops’.

v. 7. The names of the first two human ones are here in the accusative (direct object of ‘found’).

We can read the man’s name as Ask or Askr, identical in the accusative case. Askr means ash-tree but the experts sought in vain a tree name (and anything else) which corresponds to Embla. Some translators wanted to attribute to her a tree name according to their personal beliefs. A modern-traditional example is the one of ‘vine shoot’ conveniently evoking a vine finding support on the solid ash, image of a fragile woman leaning on her strong man. All this is ridiculous, as well, from the point of view of the name ‘Embla’.

**Comment on the meaning of the stanza**

Honesty however forces me to notice that the end of s. 17 tells of a man named *ask* and s. 19 beginning tells that Yggdrasill is also a ‘askr’, which gives to man some right to be looked upon as a support post. Indeed, if we examine the structure of the ancient Icelandic society as it is described by sagas, it seems that man is the (sometimes disputed) support in the external world whereas woman is the (undisputed) support of an inner world represented by the family dwelling.

This stanza gives us also three valuable indications on what defines a ‘real’ human person.

Firstly, Ask and Embla are found both together and we will see that all positive features the gods will allot to them, in stanza 18, are given to both, without reference to genre, as already announced in § 1.1. This stanza thus describes what misses in the primitive Ask and Embla for them truly being human.

Secondly, they are both ‘litt megandi’ i.e. ‘being only little able’, unable to act. A fundamental quality of humankind is thus it to be able to act on the world.

Thirdly, they are both ‘örlöglauss’, without destiny. The second fundamental feature in the definition of humankind is being carried by an örlög. In the Anglo-Saxon literature *wyrd*, destiny, is invariably presented like an unbearable constraint (see ‘wyrd’ on my academia site or at [http://www.nordic-life.org/nmh/WyrdEng.htm](http://www.nordic-life.org/nmh/WyrdEng.htm)) whereas here, constraint or not, it is one of two paramount features of human beings. To rebel against our destiny is to some extent leaving our human status.

However, the first god’s gift, the one of acting, moderates the fate’s inexorability. Our human destiny is to be wedged between an inexorable outer destiny and our capacity to act and we have to manage it.
Stanza 18

Önd þau né átto, 1. Breath they did not own,
óð þau né hófðo, 2. intelligence they did not have
lá né læti 3. ‘the sea’ [internal waters] does not flow
né lito góða; 4. nor (shows) a hue good (beautiful);
önd gaf Óðinn, 5. breath gave Óðinn
óð gaf Hœnir, 6. intelligence gave Hœnir
lá gaf Lóðurr 7. ‘sea’ gave Lóðurr
oc lito góða. 8. and hue beautiful.

This stanza does not explicitly speak of örlög but it shapes the general structure of a human being who does not exist without his/her örlög.

1.3. Stanza 19 - Yggdrasill

Old Norse | Word for word | Translation
---|---|---
Ask veit ek standa, | An ash-tree I know rises, | I know that an ash-tree stands up,
to heitir Yggdrasill, | it is called Yggdrasill, | called Yggdrasill,
hár baðmr, ausinn | raised tree, splashed | raised tree, splashed
hvita aurí; | of white mud; | of white mud;
þaðan koma döggvar | from there comes the dew | from there the dew comes
þærs í dala falla, | which in the valley fall, | who fall on the valley,
stendur æ to yfir | it is always drawn up above | always green, it is drawn up above
greinn | green |
Urðar brunní. | Urðr’ source. | Urðr’ source.

Comment on the vocabulary

Askr, here in the accusative, ask, means an ash-tree. The saying ‘askr Yggdrasill’ appears several times in Norse literature. This is why almost everyone claims that the tree of the Norse world is an ash-tree… with the modern meaning of the word, Fraxinus excelsior. This is a typical anachronism and I have the feeling that the only goal of the ‘ash-tree-fanatics’ is to introduce yet another contradiction in our mythology: Everyone knows that an “always green ash-tree” does not exist. In skaldic poetry, a classical technique is the one of using heiti, i. e. replacing the name of an object by another of similar meaning. For example, stating ‘ash-tree’ instead of ‘tree’. There even exist lists of heiti that indicate which replacements were successfully used by the old poets. For example the heiti for a tree (“viðar heiti”) contains the word askr. It means that a traditional way to speak uses the word ‘ash’ to speak of a ‘tree’. In this list of heiti, we find also the words sverða, skipa, hesta (sword, boat, horse) which could express the word tree, according to the context. (Source: Jónsson, Skjaldedigtning B1, downloadable at http://www.septentrionalia.net/etexts/skjald_b1.pdf).

Here, the word baðmr in the third line provides a context pointing at a tree.
Yggdrasill breaks up into yggr = fear and drásill (or drösull) = horse (exclusively in poetry).
- On yggr. The word yggr does not appear in C-V that gives only ýgr = wild. It is found in de Vries that associates it to uggr = fear. It is also given by LexPoet that identifies it with ýgr. The last two dictionaries announce that Yggr is one of the traditional names of Óðinn, which C-V does also but not at the word yggr.

- On drasill. The three dictionaries we use here provide the words drasill and drösull with this spelling. The spelling ‘Yggdrasill’ is how translators write it, avoiding to write the letter marking the nominative, here the second ‘l’.

*Döggvar* = old plural nominative and genitive of dögg, dew.

**Comment on the meaning of the stanza**

Lines 3-6 describe a way of explaining why dew can settle on grass even from an uncloudy sky. By its roots, Yggdrasill is the support of all the Chthonian forces, including Niðhöggr. I call it ‘bottom snake’ because I do not put an accent the ‘i’ (nìð, slandering, and niðr, the son or ‘at the bottom’, have very different meanings).

By its trunk, its higher roots and its lower branches, it is the support of the nine inhabited worlds.

By its high branches and its leaves, it is the carrier of all heavenly forces. The atmosphere, with or without clouds, contains some amount of moisture that settles in dew. The allegory contained in lines 3-6 *is thus explained*. It nevertheless could also bear a more mystical meaning, namely that the trees pour down a life source that flows upon our world.

1.4. Stanza 20 – Norns

20.

Paðan koma meyjar 1. From there come maids
margs vitandi 2. much knowing
þrjár ór þeim sæ/sal, 3. three out of their sea/hall
er und þolli stendr; 4. which below a pine stands;
Urð hétu eina, 5. Urðr is called one,
aðra Verðandi, 6. the other *Verðandi*,
- skáru ú skiði, - 7. - they scraped *on* a wooden tablet -
(örlög seggja, line 12) (12) (“the örlög of humankind” as in 12 with seggja=humankind’s)
Skuld ina þriófu. 8. Skuld the third one.
þær lög lögðu, 9. They fixed the laws
þær lif kuru 10. lives they chose
alda börnum, 11. of humankind’s children,
örlög seggja [or segja?] 12. örlög of-human-ones [or örlög they said].

**Norns’ names**

The Norn’s names are given in a special order which is certainly significant since the poem specifies that Urðr “is the one” and Skuld “is the third.”

The word urðr is one of the Norse words meaning ‘fate’, as örlög and sköp among others. Due to the high frequency of “spinning of the wyrd” on the world web, we should be weary of
possible Latin-Greek influences through Parcae’s/Moirai’s roles. This kind of misunderstanding is unavoidable since all translators are educated persons whose culture has been influenced by the Greek and Latin civilizations. Because of the meaning of the plural preterit of *verða, urðu* (they became), we can suppose that Urðr is somewhat linked to what happened in the past. Since the Norns do not deal only with individual destinies, we must understand that this ‘past’ actually is the sum of what happened to humankind, including our genetic inheritance, and even more generally the result of the whole evolution of our universe.

Verðandi is related to verb *verða*, now in its present participle tense, thus meaning ‘becoming’. Here, there exists no real link with time since ‘becoming’ is an action that takes some time to occur and I feel cheated by people who claim she is the Norn of present time. Present time is a nice grammatical category but its semantics are almost empty since it has, so to say, a foot in our past and the other foot in our future. Verðandi is the Norn of what is undergoing a transformation and I see her as the Norn of evolution and action.

The word *skuld* means a debt, i.e., a commitment that cannot be avoided. When the saga or poetry characters complain of the unavoidable fate decided by the Norns, they essentially refer to Skuld. This name is also associated to a verb, *skulu* (shall and they shall). Its preterit is *skyldi*. It thus seems that Skuld could be associated to a sort of mix of a present and a past, which starts being absurd. It very clearly does not refer to any fixed period of time, and this confirms my doubts that the time-based academic categorizations would apply at all to the Norns.

As announced, the ordering of the three Norns in s. 20 should be significant and as already stated, I am very weary of an order based on time, namely past, present and future. I want to propose instead an ordering such that each Norn plays a specific role, based on logical relationships between them, while each is active in all three segments of grammatical time.

The above analysis of name Urðr suggests someone who, as a conscientious doctor provides a complete check-up, or as a financial controller provides an audit on the state of affairs. We could thus qualify her as being a **controlling authority**, who builds up a statement of accounts describing how humankind, and also individuals, have been, are, and will be managing their existence.

The role of Verðandi is easier to grasp, she is the **active authority** who decides on the way all actors of our universe have behaved, behave and will behave in view of the account provided by Urðr.

Skuld’s name tells of her role: she evaluates the debts, and, with Verðandi’s help sees that these are refunded. We could thus call her a “**refunding authority.**”

It is understood that these three activities cooperate among them along the line of time. The order met in s. 20 can be understood as a measure of the amount of direct constraint their decisions wield on people, even though each of them is not easy to counter. Controlling asks for no more action than being aware of what has been happening. Acting with efficiency implies a kind of common agreement between the leading authority and the many actors who are involved. When mistakes have been done, the refunding authority, Skuld, is in charge of forcing on the actors what and how they should (*skyldi*) repay, like it or not.
We should notice that Norns’ names and tasks may be interpreted in a way such they have some relationship with the ones of the Parcae and the Moirai. The main task of the last ones, however, is clearly devoted to the handling of individual fates. The Norn’s tasks include the ones of their Greek and Latin counterpart and they besides deal with the fate of the gods and of the world.

**Comments on the vocabulary and the structure of the stanza**

The verb *skára* points at the action of mowing, which is not at all adapted to the context. The experts read *skara*, which means to scrape/poke and *skaru* gives ‘they scraped’. The ON grammatical use of verb *skara* is similar to that of the English language, someone ‘*skarar*’ an inscription (direct object - called here ‘accusative’) on a support (indirect object - called here ‘dative’). You see that in line 7 the verb is followed with a dative and it carries no accusative, it thus does not specify what the Norns *skara*.

We must also note that line 7 cuts the list of the names of Norns in an almost ‘rude’ way, where from comes the pair of - - added by the editors of the poem. A detailed explanation is provided below.

The preposition *á* followed by a dative means on/upon. Since most translators do not read line 12 just after line 7, they tend also to forget to translate this slightly useless ‘upon’, in their understanding of these lines. They thus render the unambiguous dative *skíði* by an accusative: “they scrape wooden tablets.”

The last line has always given serious trouble to the translators. This ‘*seggja*’ can be read as the verb *segja* (to say). With this last choice, örlög is an accusative related to this verb. It can also be read, as chosen here, as *seggja*, which makes of it the genitive plural of *seggr*, a messenger (who indeed ‘says’ something) and, in poetry, a human person. The choice between the two understandings is complicated because we know that the Middle Ages copyists themselves hesitated: There are two manuscripts (Codex Regius and Hauksbók) the first of which gives ‘*seggja*’ and the second one ‘at segja’. I think that this dilemma has been definitively solved by Elizabeth Jackson in a downloadable paper available at [http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~alvismal/9scaro.pdf](http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~alvismal/9scaro.pdf). She proposes an elegant solution as follows: “The present article will argue, first, that the verb for line 12 is provided in line 7…)”. This solution consists in keeping *seggja* and reading line 12 just after line 7: “*skáru á skíði / örlög seggja*” (they scraped on a wooden tablet / the örlög of humankind). Note a significant difference between the two versions. If Norns *segja* (state) örlög, any logical person will conclude: “they only state, therefore someone else allots these örlög. Jackson’s interpretation makes it clear that the Norns are these who allot humankind’s örlög.

1.5. - Stanza 31: Baldr

*Ek sá Baldri,* I looked at Baldr
*blóðgum tívar,* blood-covered *divine being,*
*Óðins barni,* Óðinn’s son,
*örlög fólgin;* (I saw) örlög hidden;
Comment on the vocabulary

Verb *sjá*, to see, gives *sá* in its preterit first person. The name of god Baldr is in the dative case so that we must read verb *sá á* (to ‘see on’ = to look at). This meaning will be kept in the two following lines. In line 4, örlög is in the accusative case, we must thus understand ‘sá’ alone and the völva says that she saw his hidden örlög.

The declension of *tíví* as *tívar* is somewhat irregular. This word is used in general in the plural and its dative is ‘normally’ *tívum*. Dronke tries to find an explanation to this variation and says that she failed finding a convincing one… I’ll certainly not do better than her!

Verb *fela* means to hide, confuse/entrust, its past participle is *fólginn*.

Adjective *hár*, high, does *hæri* in the comparative. Mistletoe is taller than the other trees or plants.

Comment on the meaning of the stanza

After being run through by Höðr’s arrow, Baldr’s corpse has certainly been covered with blood. If we try to see an allusion here, our only reasonable choice is to think of Óðinn, wounded by a spear while hanging and alive on the world tree. He had also to be blood-covered, as hinted at in Hávamál stanza 138. In addition, it seems that the warriors who did not die in combat could nevertheless join Óðinn in Valhöll by being ‘marked’ with “Óðinn’s sign” by a spear, another bloody process related to Óðinn.

Baldr’s örlög is hidden as everyone’s else. It however seems that Frigg and Óðinn were informed of anyone’s örlög, as it is noted several times in Lokasenna. Since this stanza underlines this topic, it must mean that neither Frigg nor Óðinn were able to foresee their son’s fate. We already (Note 3 in § 1.1.) spoke of the gods’ panic when they were aware of Baldr’s imminent death: Óðinn has been afraid that the Hamingjur - certainly those of the gods’ clan - had left as long as such a disaster could occur. Baldr is the first to die within gods’ family and we can easily imagine that his death announces that other Æsir could die as well. Baldr’s death can thus be looked upon as the first signal of Ragnarök’s arrival.

The last four lines further increase the feeling of ‘end of a world’ for the Æsir. One of the three ‘actors’ in their son’s murder, mistletoe, is proudly standing on the fields, as if pointing out their ultimate mortality. It may had seemed that the universal chaos forces had been defeated by the Æsir, but chaos strikingly, though poetically, forces the Æsir to remember them, through a vigorous mistletoe branch.

We can assume that the name ‘mistletoe’ points at a mythical plant the botanical name of which is unknown, since it cannot “proudly stand in the fields.” Celtic religions gave a mythical status to botanical mistletoe, it quite possible that Norse people chose this name to point at a magical tree.

1.6. Stanzas 2 and 46 (on miōt, measurement)
These two stanzas deserve comments that are given in my translation of Völuspá. They are quoted here because they provide indications on the meaning of mjötuðr, and the three other instances in poetic Edda use in the meaning of ‘destiny’ as we will later see.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stanza 2</th>
<th>Old Norse</th>
<th>Literal translation</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Ec man iötna ár um borna, þá er forðom mic fœdda höfðo; nío man ec heima, nío íviði, miötvið møran fyr mold neðan.</td>
<td>I remember the giants in old times born, those who in the past me nourished to someone adult; nine remember I countries, nine Giantesses (or ogresses) the measure-master famous toward the ground under.</td>
<td>I remember the giants in old times born, those who in the past nourished me to become an adult; I remember nine countries, nine Giantesses and the famous measure-master still under the ground.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This stanza uses the word miöt-viðr = measurement-tree. C-V sees in this formulation a copyist errors as if the expression ‘measurement-tree’ did not have any meaning. Quite to the contrary, here, the tree of measure can only be Yggdrasill, which is still growing under ground. This indicates that the time evoked by this stanza is incredibly ancient… which explains the last line of the stanza. This way of speech allots a divine role to Yggdrasill since mjötuðr was understood, after conversion, as Christian God.

In stanza 46 below, Dronke very aptly translated mjötuðr by “fate’s measure.” A complete explanation of this word will not be provided before our ‘general conclusion’ at the end of this paper.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stanza 46</th>
<th>Old Norse</th>
<th>Literal translation</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>46. Leica Míms synir, enn miötuðr kyndiz at ino gamla Giallarhorni; hátt blæss Heimdallr, horn er á lopti, mølir Óðinn við Míms höfuð;</td>
<td>Play/Move about Mímir’s sons, and measure ruler burns at him (= when resounds) old Gjallahorn ; up blows Heimdallr, the horn is aloft, speaks Óðinn with Mímir’s head ;</td>
<td>Mímir’s sons move about, and the measure ruler burns while old Gjallahorn ; loudly resounds. up blows Heimdallr, the horn is aloft, Óðinn speaks with Mímir’s head ;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. – Hávamál stanzas relative to destiny: Stanzas 41, 53, 56, 15, 126 and 145, 59 and 141, then 84 and 98
The great Hávamál poem (Háva-mál = High’s-word) by its title announces that the god Óðinn speaks to us through the skalds who wrote this poem. It contains 164 stanzas, all of them more or less allude to destiny, in particular the 95 first ones that give advice about properly carrying out one’s life. We will study the ones specifying the meaning of örlög for Óðinn, even if they do not use this word.

We will start with stanza 41 that provides us a somewhat commonplace example where destiny is regarded as unavoidable and constraining, as it happens in most sagas and with Anglo-Saxon wyrd. Other stanzas give interesting precise details as we shall now see.

Stanza 53 provides an example of a use of the verb verða which should have drawn the attention of the specialists. Even though its traditional meaning ‘to become’ is possible, the context rather hints at “being destined to” and, as if by chance, it is used in its plural preterit ‘urðu’.

Stanza 56 is the only one explicitly using word örlög and, together with stanza 15, it introduces an unexpected concept: the one of “non-sadness” linked to ignorance of one’s own destiny, i.e. with the life joy associated to this unawareness.

Three other stanzas give guidance in order to improve one’s destiny.

Stanza 126, in a hidden way (according to my interpretation) Óðinn advises to avoid influencing other people’s destiny because it is a source of social rejection.

Stanza 59 introduced the importance of feeling motivated in our life, just as a modern coach could advise us. Self-care and avoiding insouciance are necessary if we wish to achieve our private goals.

Lastly, stanza 141 gives us a difficult to achieve rule of building a harmonious and creative destiny by being ‘learned’, that is educated in all things and especially in magic.

You will find a literal translation for each Hávamál stanza with accompanying commentaries on my site ‘nordic-healing’ or on ‘academia’:
https://www.academia.edu/35189078/English_translation_of_H%C3%A1vam%C3%A1l

Pompeian mosaic illustrating how much mixing destiny, chance and fortune’s wheel was already common during Roman times
This image is supposed (medley source) to represent destiny. A kind of structure is based on the attributes of poverty (on the right), of royalty (on the left) and death (central cranium), supported by a butterfly and a wheel. The butterfly represents the soul of a dead person in this mythology.

Thanks to:

2.1. Self knowledge of destiny and life joy:
stantzas 56 and 15

Stanza 56:
Not over-much wise
should be each human being,
ever (striving) towards wisdom;
his örlög
(does) not (stay) in front of the wise one
whose mind lacks the most of sadness.

Stanza 15 (lines 4-5-6):
glad and happy
will (be) each man
until he **endures** his death.

The three first lines of s. 56 state that excess of wisdom is not desirable, we should not constantly look for wisdom. Last lines of 56 describe, in a complicated way, the state of mind of a wise one who does not know his/her destiny (because it is not “in front of him/her”).

Modern society has this in common with old Scandinavian society that, in another stanza, Óðinn denounces alcoholic abuse with no inspiratory motivation. Abuse of wisdom is denounced in s. 56 above, which nowadays is not looked upon as a possible shortcoming. Imagine that we, nowadays, meet as many wise people than alcohol addicts and that both features were equally ostracized! We should however insist again on the fact that in old Scandinavian civilization, ‘wisdom’ largely includes knowledge of magic. Such Óðinn’s remark thus underlines the importance, undoubtedly excessive, that magicians brought into discovering their personal örlög.

We also know that Frigg and Óðinn knew the örlög “of anything.” To some extent, trying to know one’s own destiny amounts to competing the gods, and this is the mark of an impertinence which, indeed, is perhaps not really advisable to simple human ones.

In addition, stanza 15 specifies that each one should live a merry life throughout life. When comparing with s. 56, we become aware that s. 15 implicitly tells that wisdom should not be too much concerned with destiny. Óðinn explains that wisdom excess leads to the knowledge of one’s own örlög and brings a “spirit of sadness.” This opposes the advice given by stanza 15. This shows that s. 15 is not a minor stanza because it advises a form of happy unconcern. It rather is a deeply pagan stanza that rejects the concepts of austerity, of research of Christian holiness or Buddhist illumination, i.e. a spirituality by which people aspire to forsake their humble human needs concerned with “shameful basely bodily” cares.

### 2.2. Motivation:
#### stanza 59

He will rise early
he who reaches poets (*or* gets hold of workforce)
and goes towards the conscience of his verse-making (*his poetical works*),
(*he goes into*) much delaying
who sleeps the whole morning,
under (*the urge of*) impulses half of fate (*or* wealth) (*is won*).

The meaning of this stanza is ambiguous as shows the above translation. All the words used can either evoke a ‘business’ or poetic work. Many translators chose the most prosaic version but I cannot imagine Óðinn being impassioned for the ways of becoming rich while he was impassioned for poetry. To recover the magic mead of poetry, he accepted risking his life, and even breaking a sacred oath, as explicitly stated by Hávamál stanza 110. Hávamál context thus evokes a poet who must feel moved by his poetic destiny if he wishes to fulfill it. There is no question of implying here that a ‘businessman’ would not deserve to have a destiny but that Óðinn was certainly much more interested by the poets than by the good managers of their fortune.
2.3. Do not step in another being’s destiny: 
Hávamál 126 and 145

 stanza 126
Here are two possible translations of this stanza

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commonplace understanding</th>
<th>Magic understanding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Would not be a shoe craftsman nor a shaft craftsman, unless you do them for yourself, if a shoe is ill-shaped or a shaft is bent then misfortune will be called on you.</td>
<td>Do not wield your art to move things nor to stop an action (or send a curse, as in s. 145), except when you deal with your own destiny, if the things do not move anymore or if the action (or sending) turns badly, then hatred will fall down upon you.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The commonplace interpretation gives two precise examples of the social activity and social penalties associated to their failure to fulfill their role. It is clear that we could say the same of any kind of trade. The fury which falls down today on the medical doctors, while they have been protected until now by their high specialization, gives us a current example of it. All this is however absurd: What the craft of a craftsman is good to if he/she should work for him/herself only?

The two examples given in this stanza are very significant if they are understood as metaphors. The metaphor associated with shoes is probably associated to the situation in which the wizard is supposed to solve a problem, and the one associated to arrows is the one in which the wizard has to stop or to send a curse. Thus, Óðinn’s advice is understood as: “Do not block the course of other people örlög, let them solve this kind of problems by themselves.”

Note that cursing wizards spend their time intruding in other people’s örlög whereas healing wizards try to help their customers to find back a way to örlög’s normal course (including a backing to accept death). Besides, cursing wizards are usually frantic of using their power, while curing ones try to help their customers to stop their self-damage.

In all cases, Óðinn’s advice amounts to: “Don’t be so eager for power, and never use it without weighing its dangers.”

Stanza 145

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>text</th>
<th>literal translation in pseudo-English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Betra er óbeðít</td>
<td>Better he does not ask for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in sé ofblóttir,</td>
<td>than over-sacrifices to the gods,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ey sér til gildis gjöf;</td>
<td>ever (might) you be (or to you) to the proper value the gift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>betra er ósent</td>
<td>Better he does not dispatch (and even kills)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>en sé ofþótt.</td>
<td>than too much use (possibly up to ‘wiping out’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Svá Þundr of reist</td>
<td>Thus Þundr (Óðinn) carved</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
fyr þjóða rök,  
þar hann upp of reis,  
er hann aft of kom.

[fyr rök = rök ahead] **future destiny** of the people  
there he up rose  
who him again came.

Translation

Better to avoid asking  
than ‘over-sacrifice’ to the gods,  
always (might) the gift for you be at the proper value,  
Better to avoid dispatching  
than over use (magic).  
Thus Þundr (Óðinn) carved  
the people’s future örlög  
there he rose up (after catching the runes)  
him who came back  
[from hanging in Yggdrasil].

**Comment on the vocabulary**

*biðja* (line 1) means to beg, to require.  
*blóta* (line 2) means to sacrifice.  
*senda* (line 4) means to send, dedicate, and according to de Vries, also to kill (in poetry). A wizard may raise up a spirit and send it to harm an enemy, this is called a *sending*.  
*sóa* (line 5) means, for C-V, the same as *blóta* to sacrifice, but LexPoet proposes three different meanings: 1. *serere* (to intertwine) 2. *consumere* (to employ), 3. *interficere* (to wipe out). If speaking of a sacrifice (*blót*), then *sóa* is much stronger than *blóta*.  
*rísta* (line 6) means ‘to gash, chop, scrape, cut, carve’.

The translation of “*fyr þjóða rök...*” by “the future örlög of the people…” will be explained when we will have met other examples using the word *rök*, in § 3, 4, 5 and 7.

**Comment on the meaning of the stanza**

This stanza clearly announces that *biðja* and *senda* are magic activities that must be very seldom or never practiced, and that *blóta* and *sóa* should never be applied in excess.  

It is not really necessary to ask/beg (*biðja*) something from magic or from the gods, nor to dispatch (*senda*) spells or curses, unless your goal is to kill someone. A comparison with their Christian equivalent will help to understand the meaning of these two verbs: see how much Christians are keen to ask something (it is often the base of a ‘prayer’ to their God) and hate the idea of dispatching (this is criminal ‘black’ magic). In other words, Óðinn says, without including here any particular ethical judgment, that both requests and curses are possible but not primarily important.  

It is dangerous to overdo sacrifices to the gods (*blóta*) and ‘wiping out’ (*sóa*). There again, no ethical judgment but a similar opposition to Christian habits, though we need to replace the idea of sacrifice by the one of an offering, more Christian than a pagan sacrifice. Óðinn says that we should not exaggerate the practice of sacrifices (or offerings) while the Christians are fond of
offerings to their God. Óðinn says that one should not exaggerate the practice of magic murdering on enemies, while Christians loathe the idea of magic murder. We also see that these lines enable us to specify the meaning given here to the verbs senda and sóa. The first means probably ‘to send a spell’ without any specific will to kill, while the second certainly means ‘to wipe out an adversary by killing him/her’.

We should add a few words on ethics associated to Óðinn’s advice. Fighting criminals usually relies on two opposed principles. The one tries to eliminate criminals, the other one thinks better to ‘manage’ criminality so as decreasing its social impact. Hating criminals as been since long proven to be ineffective while criminality management is still under discussion and testing. In this stanza, Óðinn clearly takes sides for a ‘controlled magic criminality’. More generally, Óðinn’s advice in whole Hávamál shows zero compassion though it goes with an ethics favoring an as harmonious as possible society, “things being what they are.”

2.4. To be creative and knowledgeable:

Stanza 141

I then became fertile
and was full of knowledge
and grew and well throve,
a word, out of my speech,
looked for another word,
a deed, out of my deeds,
looked for another deed.

Stanza 141 explains how Óðinn obtained a harmonious destiny, according to which his spirit is fertile and his life is prosperous. The ‘recipe’ is given by the four last lines: if your deeds and words intermingle in a harmonious evolution, without ever hampering each other, you then deserve a harmonious destiny, as the one described in the first three lines. The way in which these two capacities operate and are laid out determines chaotic destinies - known as unhappy ones - and the harmonious ones - known as happy.

Let us nevertheless observe that the advice provided here is not easy to follow. Admittedly past words and action always interact with the future ones, but a great sincerity associated with a very clear spirit are necessary so that the actions and the words of past do not hamper those of the future if they interact as Óðinn recommends it.

While avoiding speaking about destiny, we would say that a harmonious life proceeds when none of the dreams of youth are disavowed in the ripe or old age, which underlines in another way how much this seldom happens.

2.5. Stanzas 84 and 98

These stanzas describe sköp, a less constraining version of fate than örlög.

In Hávamál translation this stanza is subtitled as: does Hávamál say that women are frivolous? I send you to this translation to look further into this aspect. The question we are asking now is: does this stanza implicitly call upon the concept of destiny?
### Stanza 84

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Norse</th>
<th>Literal translation</th>
<th>English translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meyjar orðum</td>
<td>Of a maid the words</td>
<td>In the words of a girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skylí manngi trúa</td>
<td>should no man have confidence</td>
<td>no man should have confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>né því, er kveðr kona,</td>
<td>nor what, is to say [or sing, recite] a woman [or wife],</td>
<td>nor in what an (adult) woman says;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>því at á hverfanda hvéli</td>
<td>because on a turning wheel</td>
<td>because on a revolving wheel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>váru þeim hjörtu sköpuð,</td>
<td>were to them hearts shaped [or created]</td>
<td>their hearts have been shaped,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brigð í brjóst of lagið.</td>
<td>breach in the (their) breast is lying.</td>
<td>cutting (or flexibility, or change or inconstancy) is lying in their chest.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The word used in line 5, sköpuð, is the past participle of verb skapa which can mean ‘shaped’ without calling upon magic. We could also translate lines 5 by “their hearts are destined” without changing the meaning nor evoking magic. We find another example of sköpuð in Reginsmál s. 6, where we observe a curse sent by Loki on a person whose ‘sköpuð’ will be unhappy and the use of magic is obvious.

We thus should not forget that verb skapa past participle caries also the meaning of destiny shaping. Instead of translating line 5 by “women’s heart is made/shaped / on a turning wheel” we can also understand as “a curse shaped women’s hearts on a turning wheel.”

This is why I do not understand these lines as kind of jest à la Offenbach. Öðinn states the women’s fates, their sköp. If he intends to imply that women are really ‘fickle’… then for one Öðinn says a stupid thing, and for two, and more convincingly, the description of two women, provided in the following stanzas, does not fit at all this feature. Billings mær is incredibly crafty and cutting since she joins insult to rupture (see Hávamál s. 96-102). Gunnlöð is not at all frivolous nor cutting, she is the one broken by Öðinn, showing her weakness.

These two examples occur in worlds where women are not respected (remember that Gunnlöð is a Giantess), they have the choice between being cutting (‘breaking’) or being broken, which illustrates their sköp. Refusing the insult ‘fickle’ as a valid translation and accepting the meaning ‘breaking’ changes stanza 97 from being a bad joke into a social assessment of how girls have been taught and are often still taught nowadays. This understanding is nearer to a feminist complaint than a low rate joke.

Note also that, implicitly by stating their sköp, Öðinn suggests that this is not their örlög. In his worldview, women’s sköp is shaped by other people, while their specific örlög is still largely unknown.

### Stanza 98

“Also near the evening you shall, Öðinn, come
if you will request a mistress for you; all (we both) are fate-less (dead) except if (us) alone are aware of our misbehavior.”
The word *sköp* is prefixed here by the negation ‘ó’ and we can understand it either as ‘no-destiny’, or as ‘death’. In the sagas, it takes sometimes the meaning of ‘curse’.

Billingr’s mær fakes being as eager as Óðinn for having sex together. She speaks of their behavior as a ‘flaw’ or, at least as ‘misbehavior’. I suppose that her aim is to definitively convince Óðinn to leave her quiet for now, promising to give him more pleasure next night. Her trick will fully succeed. We may ask why she thinks it necessary to resort to such a trick. I do not see another reason than Óðinn has been so insistent that she fears to be raped if she tersely refuses. We can see in s. 102 that Óðinn seems to have, afterwards, well understood that his haste pushed Billingr’s mær to mislead him as she did.

She is certainly a crafty one. ‘Cheater’ is even a little strong as long as she is trying to keep her freedom of having no unwanted sex. She is certainly nor ‘unfaithful’ nor ‘fickle’. This still substantiates our interpretation for *brigð* (‘cutting, sharp’ rather than ‘fickle’) as in stanza 84.

In conclusion, sköp could be seen from a modern atheist’s view either as thought over personal choices or as social constraints imposed by some lobbies that think these constraints are justified. Since magic pervades Ancient Scandinavia, thus personal choices are often seen there as produced by magic.

3. VafDrúðnismál and Grímnismál

VafDrúðnismál twice contains the form *skópu* (s. 25, 39) and three times *sköpuð* (s. 21, 29, 35).

Grímnismál twice contains the form *sköpuð* (s. 40, 41).

These are two mythological poems which explain, among other things, how our Earth (Jörð) was formed, shaped by the gods using various body parts of the primary giant, Ymir. VafDrúðnismál stanza 21 and Grímnismál 40 are almost identical:

**VafDrúðnismál 21**

¡Or Ymis holdi
var jörd of *skópu*,
en ör beinum björg,
himinn ör hausi
ins hrímkalda
jötuns,
en ör sveita sær.

**Literal Translation**

From Ymir’s flesh
has been earth shaped,
though from his bones, fells
sky from his skull
of him frost-cold giant,
though from his sweat, the sea.

**Grímnismál 40**

¡Or Ymis holdi (1 Vaf.)
var jörd of *skópu*, (2 Vaf.)
en ör sveita sær, (6 Vaf.)
björg ör beinum, (3 Vaf.)
báðmr ör hári, (literally: tree, from his hair)
en ör hausi himinn. (4 Vaf.)

VafDrúðnismál 29, 35 and Grímnismál 41 again use the last participle *sköpuð* for saying that the ground or the clouds were worked by the gods. In all these cases, even if we refuse to consider the concept of ‘earth destiny’, its shaping by the gods is an operation held with some magic. To say that the gods have ‘manufactured or done’ Earth amounts to hiding this magic aspect and to use the verb ‘create’ on the one hand belongs to the vocabulary of Christian myths and on the other hand it is inaccurate here since ‘creation'
started with Ymir appearance. It would be then more exact to say than they have ‘shaped Earth’s fate’ which renders the presence of magic when using the past participle sköpuð.

Vafþrúðnismál 42 provides a further example of the use of the word rök:

Óðinn said:
"Seg þú þat it tölfta,
hví þú tíva rök
öll, Vafþrúðnir,vitir"

entirety, Vafþrúðnir, is informed
(you, Vafþrúðnir, who knows all the gods’ rök)

This could allude either to magic knowledge ("you know the origin and the causes of the gods") or a factual knowledge ("you know all mythology related to the gods.") This being said, I am not certain that Ancient Norse people would have seen a difference between these two formulations.

This is why it seems to me more reasonable to think, as that will become clear in Alvíssmál § 5, that “gods’ rök” points at this part of the universal örlög specifically describing the gods’ örlög.

4. Lokasenna

Stanza 21

Óðinn said:
Ærr ertu, Loki,
ok örviti,
er þú fær þér Gefjun at gremi,
þvi at aldar örlög
hygg ek, at hon öll of viti
jafrgörla sem ek.

Mad are you, Loki
and not-clever
that you bring to you Gefjon in wrath
because humankind’s örlög,
think I, to her all of knowledge,
equally-clearly as I (do).

Aldar is the genitive of öld = a large duration of time, an age. In poetry this word takes the meaning of humankind / people / all existing beings.

This stanza adds credit to the belief that Gefjon, Frigg and Óðinn knew everyone’s örlög, that encompasses past and future.

Stanza 25

Frigg said:
Örlögum ykkrum
skylíð aldregi
segja seggum frá,
hvat it æsir tveir
drygðóð i árdaga;
firrisk æ forn rök firar.

Of örlög to you both
you should never
tell humankind among (among humankind)
what you, Æsir twofold,
you committed at times ancient;
Let (them) avoid for ever old ‘deeds’ (past örlög), human ones.
Loki has criticized just before, in s. 24, some of Óðinn’s behavior and Frigg recommends to Loki avoiding to speak of Óðinn’s örlög or of his own. This is the first time he gets the advice to be silent about past events. Boyer skillfully translate: “What belongs to the past has to remain in the past” but this translation does not render the idea that the gods seek to hide something to human beings.

The expression used by Frigg to speak of these ‘old deeds’ is forn rök. The popular meaning of the English word ‘destiny’ (which refers to future events) does not agree at all to the context. In a translation it will thus be necessary to choose a word as ‘deeds’ while “old örlög” that indicates the örlög of past times in spite of being a ‘non-translation’, exactly describes what Frigg means by forn rök. In this instance, rök is used in order to indicate a special part of the whole örlög, here the past.

Thus, Frigg affirms that there are old stories about which it is better not to speak. The need for hiding “what everyone knows but that nobody says” is clearly rejected by Loki who goes on revealing gods’ past without restraint. Moreover Loki’s answer to Frigg strikes back at once: in stanza 28 he states “I am the reason why you cannot see any more Baldr riding in the halls,” which stresses that he has been responsible twice for his death: once by inducing Höðr to kill Baldr, twice by refusing to cry his death.

Stanza 29

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Freyja said</th>
<th>Freyja kvað:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mad are you, Loki</td>
<td>Ærr ertu, Loki,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that you to both say</td>
<td>er þú yðra telr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ugly hateful-runes</td>
<td>ljóta leiðstafi;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>örlög Frigg</td>
<td>örlög Frigg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>think I in all is known</td>
<td>hygg ek at öll viti,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>though she not-herself speaks (of it)</td>
<td>þótt hon sjálfgi segi.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As in stanza 25, line 2 alludes to the dialogue of two persons by using the dative case of ‘thou’ in the plural = ‘to you’ (yðra).

Loki has insulted Frigg in s. 28 and Freyja again tells him, as Frigg did in s. 25, that some things must remain unspoken of. It is obvious that Loki is the one who insists in revealing unpleasant truths to the gods and he obstinately refuses to stay silent.

Lines 3 uses the form leiðr-stafr = hateful-stafr. The word stafr means a staff and it is also used to designate a staff carved with runes, i.e. a runic inscription. Since Norns carve örlög in runes, it is not surprising that ‘staff’ might be directly understood as ‘runes’ and to speak of “hateful runes”. Boyer translates by “hateful charms”, Dronke by “hatefulnesses” and Orchard by “horrible deeds.” This illustrates the tendency of the American school to systematically refuse to evoke magic in their interpretations, as soon as this does not produce nonsense.

It should also be noted that Freyja’s words: “hon sjálfgi segi (she herself does not speak)” could be interpreted as Frigg being unable to speak about örlög. The last line of s. 25 indicates that she avoids speaking of it because it is better for humankind to “þírðsk æ (avoid always)” this knowledge, especially when related to the past. Hávamál stanza 56 (§ 2.1) hints at the same idea.
From all these discussion, comes out that the concept of ‘past örlög’, which is not rendered by the commonplace meaning of ‘destiny’, is obvious for the Æsir. When Gefjon, Óðinn and Frigg are said as to know all örlög, this implies that they know the past as well as the future. In other words, Germanic örlög are not associated to temporality: they are as one temporal block, fully present at each moment. This consolidates my refusal to see in each of the three Norns the now classical image relating them to segments of time, we call past, present and future (see Völuspá stanza 20 § 1.4 comments).

This stanza 20 says also that Norns write örlög and “writings remain,” i.e. what has been written will exist out of time. But “words fly away” and this why, in addition to the arguments presented in stanza 20, its last lines cannot use “segja” which implies they state the örlög: stated only örlög fly away at the first blow of time whereas, when they are carved, they become timeless.

**Stanza 27**

Frigg said:

*Frigg kvað:*  
Veiztu, ef ek inni ættak  
Ægis höllum i  
Baldri likan bur,  
út þú né kvæmir  
frá ása sonum,  
ok væri þá at þér vreiðum vegit.*

Know-you, if here I had  
Ægir’s hall into  
Baldr similar son,  
outside you could not come  
from the Æsir sons  
and he would to you angrily carried/have fought/have killed.

This stanza does not specifically speak of destiny but it underlines how much Frigg’s sköp failed to modify Baldr’s örlög.

Frigg’s fury, expressed here in such a fierce way, undoubtedly reveals her frustration and guilt feelings. She feels guilty because she revealed that Baldr was protected from all natural forces, except mistletoe. She is frustrated because all her magic failed to protect her son. This is also an example of örlög powers: if the Norns took care of including any event in someone’s örlög, no amount of magic, here called sköp, is able to prevent from it.

Frigg used all her knowledge of magic to protect her son, i.e. she formulated the most powerful possible sköp in order to protect him and she could note their impotence when opposed to örlög, whereas a more subtle use of skillful sköp could undoubtedly have prolonged Baldr’s lifespan for some length of time (and even a potentially infinite one). We begin to understand why sköp may modify someone’s destiny, though only in the case where they do not oppose to his/her örlög.

**5. Alvíssmál**

This poem tells how Þórr checked a dwarf’s knowledge of mythology. He used thirteen times a fixed formula, translated below, before his questions. In this case, we could obviously translate rök by destiny, but as in Vafþrúðnismál and Grímnismál the meaning events’ or ‘story’ is possible. Owing to the fact that, in Lokasenna, we noted that rök is used to indicate a facet of örlög, and that the stanza below deals with the rök of humankind, it seems to me justified to see in “rök fira”, below, humankind’s örlög, just as in
Lokasenna (§ 4), s. 25 “ancient rök” points at “ancient örlög.” This meaning of rök (specific facets of örlög), seems to be valid in poetic Edda, thus will become its accepted meaning in the general conclusion.

s. 9:

Segðu mér þat Alviss, Tell me Alviss,
- öll of rök fíra all of örlög [past and future] of humankind
vörumk, dvergr, at vitir foresee, dwarf, you get the meanings…

6. Völundarkviða

The comments given here refer to Völundarkviða various episodes.

If you do not remember the details of this poem, I recommend to have a look on the illustrated version of the tale of Völundr, http://www.nordic-life.org/MNG/VolTaleIllustEng.pdf.

Stanza 1

Meyjar flugu sunnan, The maidens fled (from) South,
myrkvið í gögnum, dark-wood through,
alvitr unga, full of wisdom (was) a young one,
örlög drýgja; örlög to endure/carry out/commit.

Verb drýgja is very polysemic. C-V gives “to commit, perpetrate, especially in a pejorative meaning, for example, drýgja hórdóm = ‘commit’ prostitution. The translators have, in the case of örlög drýgja, selected: “to try one’s luck.” De Vries does not give this meaning but the ones of ‘to carry out/endure’ which are thus closer to the etymological meaning of this verb. LexPoet gives the basic meaning of facere = to achieve, and adds a great number of examples showing that, as in Norse, it can take many possible meanings, going from ‘to indulge’ or ‘to endure’ until ‘to perpetrate’. It thus seems that C-V’s “especially pejorative” meaning is not as obvious as he states, at least in poetry.

Stanza 3

sjö vetr at þat Seven winters at that (they remained)
en inn átta but the eighth one
allan þráðu all they longed
en inn niunda but the ninth
nauðr um skilði; need splits (them);
meyjar fýstusk the maidens wished (to go)
á myrkvan við, towards dark-wood,
alvitr unga, full of wisdom (was) a young one,
örlög drýgja.
örlög to endure/carry out/commit.

The feminine substantives nauð and nauðr mean ‘need’. This is the name of rune Naudiz (Nauð in Norse). In our description of each Norn’s role (see Völuspá stanza 20 §), it would be thus Norn Skuld who is implied in the maidens’ departure. I understand that a person indifferent to runes will find this remark stretchy. On another hand, I cannot imagine how a rune magic knowledgeable Norse person could be unaware of this hint.
The use of the verb *drýgja* when evoking the achievement of a destiny deserves the following precise comments.

******

First of all, remember that Frigg already used it in Lokasenna s. 25. She says to Loki: “*hvát it to æsir to tweir drýgðuð i àrdaga,* (what you, the double god, *perpetrated* in the olden days)” as being part of his örlög.

Other typical instances of using verb *drýgja* in poetic Edda are as follows.

*Atlamál in grænlenzku*

s. 45 “*Hvat úti drýgðu* (what outside ‘happened’) ” is the massacre of a guest, therefore to translate *drýgðu* by ‘was perpetrated’ is valid (Boyer however translated by ‘was done’).

s. 86 Guðrún announces to Atli that she has killed their children. He answers by warning her that he will kill her and adds: “*drýgt þú fyrr to hafðir…* (you *perpetrated* before…)”.

*Grímnismál*

s. 35 “*Askr Yggdrasils to drýgir erfiði…* Ash Yggdrasill endures a suffering”.

*Hárbarðsljóð*

s. 48 Hárbarðr says to Þórr that his wife maintains a lover at his place and that when he returns “*jann muntu þrek drýgja,* (then you will have courage to practice)” In this context, ‘courage practice’ implies suffering and/or violence.

******

We see that the meanings of *drýgja* in Edda is the one of an action that is carried out either with violence or in enduring some suffering. Völundarkviða thus teaches us that örlög cannot be carried out quietly: they are carried out with violence or they are received in suffering.

In the poem, the örlög of the *drýgiendi* (perpetrating, etc.) girls illustrate this rule. They do not seem themselves to suffer from the circumstances but rather to bring suffering: when they leave their lovers, Völundr’s two brothers are desperate (they will go on to searching them and disappear from the story) and Völundr himself stays open to the terrible destiny awaiting him.

**Comment on the meaning of stanzas 1 and 3**

From the point of view of örlög, the girls’ behavior confirms what we already know: that örlög are binding us tightly. It besides adds the necessity to fully assume them without balking. These ‘young girls’ are divine beings, “coming from the south,” and they are certainly subjected to örlög although being foreigners. Moreover, the next to last line of the two quoted stanzas, implies that each one is “very wise” and young. To say that they are very wise means that they are also knowledgeable, in particular about magic. We now understands why they leave their lovers without balking because they are informed of their örlög and what exactly means assuming one’s örlög.

Here is an active use of örlög. Some beings can perpetrate them, some others endure them. It is not surprising that, according to circumstances, the poets insisted on a different facet of örlög. We can certainly see here a “web of contradictions”, but we may also choose to see here the richness of this concept.
7. Grípisspá

The poem Völu-spá (‘Völva’s-prophecy’) clearly shows that a völva is able to prophesy (spá). We can also say that a völva is a spákona (prophecy-woman) or spá-mær (prophecy-maiden). These last forms are the ones used for men and Grípir is a spámaðr (prophecy-man), the male equivalent of a völva, and the name of the poem means ‘Grípir’s prophecy’.

A prose introduction tells that “hann… var allra mannna vítrastr ok framvíss. (He was… of all men the wisest and the most certain (or wisest) about the future).” We must notice that Grípir is Sigurðr’s maternal uncle. In Germanic tales in general, we know that the maternal uncle very often has major bonds with his nephew. He may even raise him as a foster father. Here, he will be in charge of teaching him his destiny (örlög), i.e. what kind of life örlög will force on him.

Sigurðr requires of him to state his future. Grípir speaks of a girl, beautiful of look and raised by a king named Heimir. Sigurðr answers as follows:

Sigurðr kvað: 28.
“Hvat er mik at því, þótt mær séi fógr áliti förd at Heimis?
Þat skaltu Grípir gérva segja, því at þú öll of sér örlög fyrir.”

Sigurðr said: “What is it to me, though the maiden might be fair of look nurtured by Heimir?
That you must Grípir clearly and enough tell since for you all foresee örlög before (me).”

Translation: What matters to me that the girl is beautiful of aspect and risen by Heimir?
It is necessary that, Grípir, clearly and without restriction say all what you foresee of my future örlög.

Grípir is not very willing to tell Sigurðr who insists, and pushes his uncle who will finally reveal what he knows. At the beginning he insists on the meeting with Sigrdrífa-Brynhildr and says that they will deeply love each other but (s. 31) “It munuð alla / eída vinna / fullfastliga, / fá munuð halda (You will want all / oaths work / fully-firm / little will you hold.” Of course Sigurðr is indignant at his own fickleness, and Grípir must explain the causes of this fickleness and he cannot anymore hide something from him.

In Lokasenna, we met örlög indicating the past, in Völundarkviða timeless örlög that appear when they must. Here, at the beginning of the poem (s. 6-9) we meet the örlög of the past. Then Grípir states the victories to come (s. 9-19) then refuses to continue. As we said, Sigurðr manages to force his uncle to reveal all of his “örlög fyrir (örlög in front, i. e., his future örlög)” (s. 27-53).

We again meet a character who knows all örlög. Just like Frigg, he is reluctant to reveals his knowledge.

In the last stanza, we understands that Grípir is quite concerned to have told the whole truth to a fighter as dangerous as Sigurðr. Grípir knows that he has risked his head because Sigurðr is
famous for his angers. Not without some elegance, he quiets down Grípir in the two first lines of this stanza. He says:

“Skiljum heilir,
mun-at sköpum vinna...”

“Let us separate happy,
we cannot on the sköp win...”

This conclusion is noticeable because Sigurðr does not cite örlög but sköp, seemingly confusing them. He obviously knows that örlög are nothing else than Norns’ sköp. But Norse culture states that örlög decisions are impossible to circumvent, as opposed to sköp that can be modified by their creator. We simply agree with Sigurðr and state that ‘Norn’s sköp’ is nothing but, here, another way of speech for örlög.

8. Fáfnismál

(the poem starts with a prose introduction):
Sigurðr and Reginn leave to find Fáfnir and they spot the path he follows between his cave and the river where he waters himself. Reginn disappears hiding in a close moor while Sigurðr digs a pit that crosses Fáfnir’s path. When Fáfnir appears, spitting his poison, Sigurðr is hardly touched by it. As Fáfnir passes above him, he pierces Fáfnir’s heart with his sword. Fáfnir does not die at once, and they exchange some words with each other. Fáfnir says to him: “it gjalla gull / ok it glóðrauða fé
(this howling gold and this wealth red as embers) will bring death to you.”

(He adds)
Fáfnir kvað:

11.
Norna dóm
þú munt fyr nesjum hafa
ok örlög ösvinns apa
...
al er feigs forað.

Norns’ doom
you will in front of the nesses have
and an örlög of an unwise monkey
... all is danger to the sentenced ones.

Literal translation

The doom of the Norns,
you will meet while sailing
and an idiotic monkey’s örlög
... all is danger to a sentenced one.

In this stanza, Fáfnir attempts cursing Sigurðr but we know that he will not drown “in front of a ness” and will not become either an “idiotic monkey.” Here, the curse is ineffective because it is not grounded in some real knowledge that Fáfnir would have about Sigurðr. At least, it confirms that Norns that there are catastrophic örlög. The following stanza shows that Fáfnir holds a great deal of knowledge and that Sigurðr knows that.
Sigurðr, as he did with Grípir, seeks to receive a teaching. Here is their exchange and it is deeply instructive for us.

12.

{
Segðu mér Fáfnir...

hverjar ro þær nornir,
er nauðgönglar ro

ok kjósa

maðr frá mögum.

Fáfnir kvað:

Translation

Tell me Fáfnir…

which are these Norns, who go to those in need [or who are need-walkers]

and choose/part/bewitch mothers from (their) sons.


At first, let us note that these two stanzas seem to confuse Norns and Dísir. Norns do not wander around, they are all three of the giants ‘race’ and they do not deal with childbirth. Moreover, in stanza 11 Fáfnir correctly allots to them örlög management. In stanza 12, Sigurðr raises questions that point at Dísir but uses the word Norn. Either Fáfnir also confuses Norns and Dísir or he understands it as a heiti, made obvious by the just enounced contradictions. The use of heiti being so widespread in Norse poetry, it seems to me that the second assumption is most probable.

Other poems teach us that the divinities who govern childbirth are called Disir, (in the singular, one Dis) instead of being called Norns.

Lastly, Fáfnir informs us about the origins of the Disir that seem to be quite varied as opposed to the Norn’s. As long as the Disir are closer to individual fates than of the one of the Universe, it is not surprising that each divine race provides its own ‘leaders of the shapings’ for the human race. Notice that the giants are not quoted here, which is to be expected since the Norns’ are known to be Giantesses.

In the following stanza (s. 14) Sigurðr uses a striking metaphor to speak of Ragnarök. He points at it by “er blanda hjörlegi / Surtr ok Æsir saman (they merge the sword-lake / Surtr and the Æsir them together)”. During Ragnarök, the Giants, personified here by Surtr, and the Æsir will destroy saman (each other) and thus the blood of these two groups will merge. He uses this metaphor to ask Fáfnir where Ragnarök will take place and Fáfnir answers: “Óskópnir hann heitir (it is called ‘Unshaped one’)” and this may imply that the place where Ragnarök will take place is not yet ‘worked out’. I send you back to Hrafnagaldur, stanzas 2 to 5 for a hint of the magic charms that will shape this place so that Ragnarök might occur.

Finally, Fáfnir announces to Sigurðr that Reginn will betray and kill him, just as he has been betrayed. (s. 22): “Reginn mik réð, / han þik ráða mun…(Reginn me advised and betrayed, and you betray and advise he will…).”
When Fáfnir is dead, Reginn reappears and recalls that Sigurðr has recently killed his brother “though he is partially guilty himself,” he thus threatens Sigurðr of some kind of revenge. The last replies in two points. First, he recalls that he would never have attempted to kill Fáfnir if Reginn had not pushed him over the edge by questioning his courage. Second, he also recalls that Reginn behaved like a coward: While he, Sigurðr, fought with the dragon, he, Reginn hid somewhere in a close moor (s. 28) “afli mín / atta ek við orms megin, / meðan þú í lyngvi látt (strength mine / I [had to exert] against the dragon’s power / while you in a moor were lying).”

Then, Reginn goes to Fáfnir’s corpse, extracts his heart and drinks the blood running from this wound. He feels tired after having drunk all this blood and he asks Sigurðr to cook Fáfnir’s heart while he sleeps to recover. While cooking the heart, Sigurðr checks if the heart is well-cooked, burns his hand and put a finger in his mouth. Then, at once:

\[
\text{En er hjartablóð Fáfnis kom á tungu hánun,} \\
\text{ok skilði hann fugls rödd,} \\
\text{Hann heyrði, at igður klókuðu á hrísinu.}
\]

But the blood of Fáfnir’s heart came on tongue his [Sigurðr’s], and could him of the bird [understand] the language.

He heard the nuthatches that whispered on the bushes.

[A nuthatch is a small bird, approximately titmouse sized, that feeds on worms it finds in the bark of trees. Though much smaller, its beak shape is similar to a woodpecker’s and it is very discrete, as opposed to more familiar birds such as a titmouse. I see in them what we now call the “spirits of the forest,” or, in the present context, the Disir. Their language is certainly as full of ‘magic’ as the celebrated ‘bird language’.

\[
\text{Igðan kváð:} \\
\text{The nuthatch said:}
\]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>s. 33</th>
<th>Literally</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Önnur kváð:</td>
<td>One said:</td>
<td>Here is Reginn lying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Þar liggr Reginn,</td>
<td>planning for himself,</td>
<td>calculating for his own interest,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>raðr um við sik,</td>
<td>he will betray the boy</td>
<td>he will betray the boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vill tæla mög</td>
<td>who relies on him…</td>
<td>who has confidence in him,…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>þann er trúir hánun,</td>
<td>will want the evil-doer</td>
<td>this evil-doer will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vill bólvasmiðr (bólva-smiðr)</td>
<td>the brother to avenge.</td>
<td>want to avenge his brother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bróður hefná.</td>
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</table>

Sigurðr has already been informed of the danger he is facing by Fáfnir, then by Reginn himself, and this is now confirmed by the forest spirits, all say to him to be wary of Reginn. But he also knows that Reginn is a powerful wizard and that he may have shaped Sigurðr’s fates so that they irrevocably lead to his death (Sigurðr’s). We can express this, in this case, by saying that Reginn had cast a spell on Sigurðr so that his fate becomes to die after Fáfnir’s killing.

Sigurðr, however, wards off this spell by stating, or by understanding that he has a way out if he kills Reginn.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>s. 39</th>
<th>Literally</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Verða-t svá rík sköp,</td>
<td>Will become-not so powerful the shapings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at Reginn skyli</td>
<td>that Reginn must</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
mitt banorð (ban-orð) bera; my ‘of death-word’ [my death sentence] carry;
því at þeir báðir bræðr because them two brothers
skulu bráðliga soon will travel
dara til heljar hedan.” towards Hel from here.

Translation
The shapings (‘sköp’) will not be so powerful
that Reginn must
carry my death sentence;
because, soon, the two brothers
will leave this place
to travel towards Hel.

He thus cuts Reginn’s head and, as the text insists upon, he eats Fáfnir’s heart and drinks the blood of the two corpses, the one of Reginn and the one of Fáfnir. Here is a literal translation of this episode:

Sigurðr hjó höfuð af Regin, ok þá át han Fáfnis hjarta ok
drakk blóð þeira beggja, Regins ok Fáfnis.
þá heyrði Sigurðr, hvar ígður mæltu:
Sigurðr cuts the head off Reginn, and then ate him Fáfnir’s the heart and
drunk the blood of all two, Reginn and Fáfnir.
Then heard Sigurðr, what the nuthatches said:

s. 40 Literally Translation
Bitt þú Sigurðr Pack up, Sigurðr,
bauga rauða, the red rings, the treasure of red gold rings
er-a konungliti is-not regal it is not worthy of a king
ekviða mörgu; to fear much; to fear and hesitate so much;
mey veit ek eina a maid know I single I know an exceptional maid,
miklu færgra, very beautiful, she is full of beauty
gulli gædda, of gold equipped, and with gold outfitted,
ef þú geta mættir. if you obtain meet. if you are able to obtain her.

After all these events, it is quite possible that Sigurðr was a little hesitant at choosing a best behavior. The ‘spirit-nuthatches’ call him to order and say that he now has to go to Sigdríf, the woman he must meet. Grípir already announced his future and already announced to him the need for this meeting.

In the following stanza, the nuthatches warn him on the fact that awaking her is not an excellent idea.

s. 44 Literally Translation
Knáttu mögr séa You know how, boy, to see You, lad, will be able to see
mey und hjalmi, the girl under the helmet the girl under the helmet
þá er frá vígi when towards the combat when she rode to combat
Vingskorni reið; on Vingskornir rode; on Vingskornir (her horse);
má-at Sigdrífar you are able-not Sigdrífa
svefní bregða, of her sleep to split,
skjöldunga niðr, child of Skjöldungr, Child of Skjöldungr, (son of a great family)

31
Sigdrífa is a Valkyrie who disobeyed Óðinn’s orders by not bringing to Valhöll the warrior he wanted to die in combat. To punish her, he pricks her with “the thorn of sleep.” Óðinn, in this case, is who decided of Sigdrífa’s shapings. In this very case again, we could also say that he “cast a spell on her,” that is he “shaped a spell on her.”

The nuthatches say very clearly that Sigurðr will be unable to awake her. When we will see how he awakes her, we will understand that either the ‘spirits’ were misled, or they wanted to imply that awakening her was very dangerous because he would then find himself overlapping with the Norns’s intentions, i.e. he would follow the destiny Grípir has foreseen. This last assumption seems to me most probable.

In other words, the nuthatches tried to prevent Sigurðr from wakening Sigdrífa because this would provide him a possibility for escaping his örlög. Obviously, the last is unthinkable and Sigurðr will properly behave (i. e. awaken Sigdrífa) and this brings him into enduring his örlög.

This may seem somewhat complicated: in the general conclusion we will precise the meaning of sköp, a word that can be used pejoratively, or even insultingly, to point at who sends the sköp.

The following poem is called Sigdrífu-mál, ‘of Sigdrífa - the word’, because when she meets Sigurðr she is still a Valkyrie (she will be called Brynhildr later, her best known name).

9. Sigdrífumál

The poem begins with a comment:

Sigurðr gekk í skjaldborgina
ok sá, at þar lá maðr ok svaf með öllum hervápnunum.
Hann tók fyrst hjálminn af höfði hánum. Pá sá hann, at þat var kona.
Brynjan var fóst sem hon veri holdgróin.
Pá reist hann með Gram
frá höfuðsmátt brynjuna í gögnnum niðr ok svá út í gögnnum báðar ermar.
Pá tók hann brynju af henni, en hon vaknaði, ok settist hon upp
ok sá Sigurðr ok maelti...

Sigurðr entered the **stronghold-shield** [I suppose this is name for a stronghold built in a particular way]
and he saw, there was human person and (who) was ‘quiet’ and fully armed.
He removed first the helmet off the head. Then, he saw that she was a woman.
The coat of arms was tight as if it had grown in the flesh.
Then he gashed with Gram
the coat of arms from the neck to down and the two arms.
Then he took the coat of arms out of her and she woke up, and sat up
and saw Sigurðr and said…

Sigdrífa sleeps in a very particular place, which is a fort bearing the name of a war tactic. Let us note that, when he arrives, Sigurðr sees a fully-armed warrior so that he calls him/her a human person (maðr). As foresaw the spirits-nuthatches, he “can see the girl under her helmet.” It is the first action he does when meeting her.
Up to that point, he followed the nuthatches advice and he was able to shape the fates in order to keep some control on his destiny. Does he know he will awake her by slicing her coat of arms? At any rate, this coat of arms seems to be grown in the flesh and he can suspect that it will awake the sleeping beauty. Thus, voluntarily or by negligence, and in spite of the nuthatches advice, he will slice this coat and he will awake Sigrdrífa, and with her, their örlög.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>s.1</th>
<th>Literally</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hvat beit brynju?</td>
<td>What bit the coat of mail?</td>
<td>What sliced the coat of mail?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hví brá ek svefni?</td>
<td>Why I stopped my sleep?</td>
<td>Why I stopped my sleep?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hverr fellði af mér</td>
<td>Who fell from me</td>
<td>Who made fall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fólvar nauðir?</td>
<td>the pale needs?</td>
<td>the pale needs that bound me?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this context, the “pale needs" evoke the paleness of a corpse-like Sigrdrífa in her bewitched sleep due to Óðinn’s shapings. Thus, Sigurðr awoke Sigrdrífa and their destinies went as far as becoming the Germanic representatives of the pressure destiny can put upon us. They will passionately love each other and as Grípir said: (s. 29), “gár-a þú manna / nema þú mey séir [you will not give any more attention to humankind / nothing except the maid you will see]” but (s. 31) “It munð alla /eíða viðna / fullfastliga, / fá munð halda [You two together will want all / oaths work out / fully-firm ones / few will you be able to keep].”

10. Reginsmál

This poem begins with the well-known myth where Loki buys back his involuntary murder of Hreiðmarr’s son, Otr, while this last was in the shape of an otter. The three Æsir, Óðinn, Hœnir and Loki, make a bag of his skin. Ignoring the exact nature of this otter, they show the bag to Hreiðmarr, who recognizes the skin of his son and requires a weregild, otherwise he will have to avenge his son. This compensation is enormous (according to the usual standards), it consists in filling the bag with gold, to put it upright on its ‘legs’ filled up with gold, then to cover it with a gold heap. Loki who killed Otr is in charge to gather the gold, which includes a ring coveted by Loki.

Loki joins the dwarf Andvari (details in the ‘tale’ [http://www.nordic-life.org/nmh/NibelungsThreeCurses.htm](http://www.nordic-life.org/nmh/NibelungsThreeCurses.htm)) who lives in water in the form of a pike. This last asserts:

2.  
   “Andvari heiti ek,  
   Øinn hét minn faðir,  
   margan hef ek fors of farit,  
   aumlig norn  
   skóp oss í árdaga,  
   at skylía ek í vatni vaða”  
   Andvari I am called,  
   Óinn was my father called,  
   by many torrents I travelled,  
   a wretched Norn  
   shaped for us in the old days  
   thus it occurs that in water I vade.

The form skóp employed here is the preterit of the verb skapa, to shape. In this case, the allusion to a fate thrown by a wretched Norn (aumligr is a kind of insult!) is denounced by
Andvari and the sköp thrown at Andvari by this mysterious Norn shaped him into a pike. This way of speaking shows that Andvari estimates to have undergone an unbearable prejudice.

Since örlög has to be proudly endured, it would be shaming to complain about one’s örlög. This is why Andvari, who believes that the örlög he deserved has been twisted, puts responsibility on a ‘twisted’ Norn, here presented as a commonplace witch who shapes sköp.

The nuthatches, Sigurðr’s advisers, also speak of Norn’s sköp (§ 8, stanza 44). In the same way, the “ljótar nornir skópu langa þrá (dreadful Norns (who) shaped a long painful desire)” to Brynhildr and Sigurðr (§ 11, stanza 7) are insulted by Brynhildr.

These ways of speaking differ from those relating Norns to örlög creation. For example, in § 8, stanza 11, Fáfnir prophesies to Sigurðr that he will know “Norna dóm (Norns’s doom)” which is nothing else than (once again!) to describe his örlög.

We will partly explain these differences when meeting other examples and fully in the general conclusion.

Once Loki has obtained Andvari’s gold, the Æsir can pay the requested weregild. When this is done, Hreiðmarr notices that one otter hair is still visible, which forces Óðinn to hide it with this invaluable ring. Loki thought he had already much given to obtain all this gold and he is exasperated by Hreiðmarr’s meanness. Loki will thus utter a curse (a sköp) onto Hreiðmarr. We know that this curse will take place: Fáfnir, another of Hreiðmarr’s sons, will kill his father and seize the treasure… and we will later see how this sköp will strike again. The wizard, here Loki, who throws a sköp has precise reasons (here Hreiðmarr’s meanness) for shaping it, and he is able to explain them.

This curse is sent in stanza 6:

\[
\begin{align*}
Gull & \text{ er þér nū reitt} & \text{Gold is yours now wrathful [the wrathful gold]} \\
en & \text{þú gjöld of hefr} & \text{But you compensations increase} \\
mikil & \text{mínns hōfuðs,} & \text{much of my head} \\
syni & \text{þínum} & [\text{you increase much the compensations for my head}], \\
verðr-a & \text{sela skópuð;} & \text{for son yours} \\
\hat{p}at & \text{verðr ykkarr beggja bani.} & \text{not becomes happy the shaped; that becomes of you two both the death.}
\end{align*}
\]

A curse is intended to modify the destiny of the cursed one. Loki does not try to modify Hreiðmarr’s örlög but he requests the forces of sköp in order to change the course of Hreiðmarr’s life. In addition, we also notice that Loki does not give details on the way in which Hreiðmarr and his son will die. On the other hand, Loki makes a point of specifying the reason for which Hreiðmarr’s shapings can be modified: he has been unable to be generous when obtaining a generous compensation. This shows that sköp are not randomly thrown: the sorcerer is able to validate his use of sköp.

Hreiðmarr has two more sons: Reginn (name that I do not associate to ‘regin’, the gods, but to regi, cowardice - the Coward - and this name suits him well) and Fáfnir (meaning dubious, perhaps resulting from fá-fengr = catch-spoils?). In all cases, Reginn and Fáfnir request of their father their share of the spoils because they took part in the violence made to the Æsir. Facing his
father’s refusal, “Fáfnir lagði sverði Hreiðmar föðu sinn sofanda (Fáfnir put a sword (in) Hreiðmarr, father his, sleeping)” and seizes the spoils. Reginn would like to have also his share and requests it from Fáfnir who refuses. Reginn then asks his sister advice and she advises him to use softness: “Bróður kveðja / skaltu blíðliga… (your brother in good mood will you ask…”). His sister holds him a coward and, as expected, Reginn does not obtain anything. We also know that Fáfnir will disappear with his treasure while being transformed into a dragon as we saw in the preceding poem, Fáfnismál.

Reginn does not have thus the courage to face a dragon shape-changed brother and decides to raise a future hero who will be able to achieve this feat: Sigurðr whose he becomes the adoptive father.

He declares in s. 14:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Icelandic</th>
<th>Translation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ek mun fœða</td>
<td>I will raise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>folkjarfan gram;</td>
<td>the people-proud furious one;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nú er Yngva konr</td>
<td>now is Yngvi’s kinsman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>með oss kominn;</td>
<td>with us come;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sjá mun ræsir</td>
<td>he will (be) a leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ríkstr und sólu;</td>
<td>most powerful under the sun;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>þrymr um öll lönd</td>
<td>glorious in all lands,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>örlógsímu.</td>
<td>örlög-ropes [örlög-bound].</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Sigurðr will carry three features : powerful, glorious and ‘bound by his örlög’]

The neutral substantive síma (plural símu), cord, stringcourse, primarily indicates according to its etymology (given by de Vries) something that links, constrains, i.e. rather a bow cord that a cord dangling down. We see that this significant image tells of binding Sigurðr to Reginn and that the tension thus created between the two men informs the listeners to the poem recitation that their relation will finish dramatically.

Reginn thus wishes to take along Sigurðr to Fáfnir’s cave with the intention to recover this famous treasure with which Loki paid his weregild. Sigurðr haughtily refuses. He argues that it would be ridiculous that the prince (him) has more “the desire to seek / red rings (of red gold) / than avenge his father!” They thus go away in order to punish Sigurðr’s father killer.

On their way, they meet an old magician, Hnikarr, who will inform Sigurðr about his future as a warrior, as already done by Grípir. This knowledge will be useful for him in the necessary fights against his father’s murderer. Sigurðr requires from Hnikarr the signs, the omens or predictions by which a warrior may foresee the outcome of a battle.

He begins his request as:

19. Segðu mér Hnikarr, alls þá hvártveggja veizt, goða heill ok guma:…

Tell me Hnikarr, all, for both of them, you know the omens for the gods and humankind…

The substantive heill has several meanings. When it is a neutral (as here) it means ‘forecasts, predictions’.
Sigurðr undoubtedly follows Hnikarr’s invaluable advice because he fights his father’s killers and overcomes them. To his father’s murderer, he applies the ancient punishment, the one that restores your honor, i.e. death by the ‘bloody eagles’.

Sigurðr states:

26.  
*Nú er blóðugr örn* Now is the bloody eagle  
*bitrum hjörvi* With a biting sword  
*bana Sigmundar* for the death of Sigmundr (Sigurðr’s father)  
*á baki ristinn*... on the back carved…

The poem uses word örn meaning a bird, the eagle. However, the symbolic value of this execution is so strong that the two lungs spouting out of the back of victim evoke an emblem also called an eagle, i.e. proclamation that justice has been done. Its purpose is not the one of a stupid torture, as we tend to see nowadays. The poem does not insist on this point, but it is clear that these settings of a ritual death are of extreme importance in the way the hero shapes his life, his sköp. This is understood implicitly because, to some extent, Reginn shaped for Sigurðr’s a life in which he would kill Fáfnir so that Reginn could finally recover the treasure. To some extent, Sigurðr rebels against Reginn’s skóp and shapes himself his own ones. We already met this behavior, much more explicitly expressed in Fáfnismál.

Reginn thus takes along Sigurðr towards Fáfnir’s cave with the intention of having him killing Fáfnir in order to get this obsessing treasure.

**11. Sigurðarkviða in skamma**

This ‘short’ Ballad is nevertheless 71 stanzas long. It describes how Sigdrífa, now called Brynhildr, will push her husband (Gunnarr) to organize Sigurðr’s murder. She describes her own suicide and how, during her anguish, she predicts the future of Gunnarr and Sigurðr’s widow, Guðrún.

Stanza 5 tells us of a Brynhildr without defects and of a rather pure naivety: destiny is seen as responsible for her death and Sigurðr’s.

5.  
*Hon sér at lífi* She led her life  
*löst né vissi* of a flaw did not know  
*ok at aldrlagi* and until death  
*ekki grand,* no guile,  
*vamm þat er væri* (or) blemish of any kind  
*eða vera hygði,* to exist she could think of;  
*gengu þess á milli* went in between that  
*grimmar urðr.* stern and ferocious fates.  

[Orchard : « cruel fates », Boyer : « the cruel Norns »]

Note on the translation: Orchard and Boyer’s translation are perfectly ‘correct’. I have been unable to choose between ‘cruel’ and ‘stern’. These two qualifiers are so different that choosing one or the other mutilates the text.
"Löstr" means defect, boob, “bad behavior.” It carries no allusion to a Christian ‘sin’, except perhaps after conversion times.

Stanza 5 is enounced by an unbiased witness and he/she uses a classical way of speech to describe the unpleasant sides of our ērlög. Here, typically, a translation that does not take into account the Norse worldview may lead to a complete misunderstanding of the poem. Adjective grimr is certainly not a laudatory one. In this stanza, though, the story teller expresses a well-known fact, his speech carries no hate towards Norns. We will in s. 7 meet a desperate Brynhildr, herself furious at the Norns in a way similar to Dwarf Andvari in § 10.

These ‘stern and ferocious’ fates will explain why, in stanza 6, Brynhildr’s heart and body flare up and she declares: “Hafa skal ek Sigurð. - eða þó svelta, - (I have to get Sigurðr - or yet die / kill).” Verb svelta means both to die and to kill and she indeed is starting the process by which they will both die.

Moreover, she at once regrets the words she just uttered… but she will go on enduring her destiny, while blaming the Norns for the misfortunes-sköp they sent upon her, as stanza 7 shows:

7.
Orð mæltak nú, A word I uttered now,
iðrumk eptir þess: I will be sorry later of it :
kván er hans Guðrún, his wife is Guðrún,
en ek Gunnars; and I Gunnarr’s;
ljótar nornir wretched nors
[Orchard: « contrary nors », Boyer: « The ugly nors »]
skópu oss langa þrá. shaped for us a lengthy painful yearning.
[Orchard: « pitched us », Boyer: « caused to us »]

In principle, Norns, as divinities, write the destinies and they do not throw curses that will shape the destinies. We already have met, in § 10, Dwarf Andvari who qualifies a Norn as ‘wretched’. The two cases have in common a sharp resentment against Norns. It follows that the explanation in § 10 applies also here: Brynhildr does not dare complaining of her ērlög though she is unable to refrain from cursing Norns, which does not seem as shameful as whining at one’s ērlög.

Another fact will interact with a deep understanding of Brynhildr’s behavior. She knows that a woman, Grímhildr, did shape her destiny and that herself and Guðrún also contributed to her fate.

It is thus possible to see here a double meaning for word nornir: on the one hand Norns themselves (when they wrote her destiny) and on the other one, a ‘heiti’ for ‘women’ who would be then these “wretched women-Norns” responsible for the chaotic course of her life.

For better knowing these women’s personality, we need exposing the two versions of Grímhildr’s poisoning history, one told by Völsunga saga, the other by poetic Edda, in particular stanzas 21-26 of Guðrúnarkviða in forna.

**Interlude:**
Magic drinks used in Völsunga saga and Guðrúnarkviða in forna.
Völsunga saga version As the preceding poems taught us, Völsunga saga tells how Sigurðr released Brynhildr (ex-Sígrdrifa) off Óðinn’s shapings. Sigurðr expresses his desire to take Brynhildr as wife: “þess sver ek við guðin, at ek skal þik eiga eda enga konu ella” (I oath near the gods, that I will you ‘possess’ (to marry) and not a different woman)” says Sigurðr, and the saga adds “Hún mælti slíkt” (She spoke in the same way).”

From our point of view, the one of the comprehension of destinies, three women will decide of Sigurðr’s destiny: Brynhildr herself, of course, but also Grímhildr and Guðrún. Grímhildr is the wife of the king with whom Sigurðr decided to live, and she is Guðrún’s mother. The saga describes her as being “fjölkunnga (very-knowing, witch)” and “grimmhuguð kona (wild-hideous spirited woman).” When this beautiful warrior appears, fantastically wealthy from Fáfnir’s recovered treasure, she decides that he will marry her Guðrún. She is quite conscious of the bonds linking Brynhildr and Sigurðr and she nevertheless uses her magic by making him drink a potion of memory loss, so that this last one forgets his promises. The saga says simply that she makes him drink this potion without giving details on its composition.

Guðrúnarkviða in forna version

None of the poems dealing with this topic explain in detail why Sigurðr forgets his oaths to Brynhildr. Here is, in Gripeisspa, s. 33, the most complete explanation that I could find: “þú verðr, siklingr, / fyr svikum annars, / muntu Grímhildar / gjalda ráða…(You will become, young prince, / by other treacheries-poisons, / you will from Grímhildr / suffer the counsels).” When a translator forgets the meaning ‘poison’ as does Boyer: “treasons,” and Orchard: “(plots),” the reader cannot imagine the existence of a bond between the poisoned drink of Völsunga saga and stanza 33 of Gripeisspa. However svik carries the two meanings of treason and poison, i.e. one should translate it here by “treacherous poison”, for example.

We will see in Guðrúnarkviða in forna below that Grímhildr again uses a forgetting potion on Guðrún, in order to make her forget her sorrow after Sigurðr’s death and to push her to marry another king. In this case, the magic process will be described in detail.

All things considered, the conjunction of Völsunga saga and poetic Edda indicates that Grímhildr used twice the magic of a potion for memory lapse, which makes of her a dangerous witch. By her charms, she is able to shape the fate of her close parents, and this is what I read in stanzas 5 and 7 of Sigurðarkviða in skamma.

End of interlude

We now will study stanza 58 that confirms all these assumptions. During her death throes, she pronounces several prophecies related to Gunnarr, and, she besides interprets in an interesting way their relation failure in the stanza two last lines:

58.

Muntu Oddrúnu
    eiga vilja,    You will Oddrún
    en þik Atlí
    mun eigi láta;
    it munuð láta
    á laun saman,

own wish, (you will wish to marry Oddrún)
though to you Atlí
will not let (Atlí will not agree to your relationship)
both will you lower yourselves (agree to)
in secret together (meet in secret),
Oddrún is the sister of Atli (who corresponds to the historical character Attila). The verb verða, to become, is the verb plural preterit of which is urðu, associated to Norn Urðr.

The last two lines indicate that Brynhildr does not attribute to destiny the failure of her relation with Gunnarr, i.e. an immutable örlög, but to ‘bad shapings’ (bad sköp), were thrown as them, as if her and Sigurðr had been simple human ones and not heroes tightly fitted around their örlög. The interlude above describes us how these bad spells have been cast.

Her life now comes to its end:

71

| Mart sagða ek, | Much could I say, |
| munda ek fleira, | would I have more, (I could have said much more) |
| er mér meir mjötuðr | if for me mjötuðr (‘measure-supplier’) |
| márlúm gæfi; | word-place (enough speaking time for other words) gave me; the |
| ómun þverr, | voice dies out, |
| undir svella, | under (the effect of swelling), |
| satt eitt sagðak, | truth one (the truth) I declared (about me - I truly described myself) |
| svá mun ek láta. | thus I will let go. |

We already saw that mjötuðr is the ‘measurer’ who allots the measure of everything, as would be the conductor of a spiritual orchestra. According to the context, it will mean, in Norse either (optimistic view) a god, a guard, or (pessimistic view) a plague. Thus, this word assigns an organizer who can be either favorable or unfavorable.

The commentators were deeply influenced by an Anglo-Saxon related word: meotud or metod which means ‘destiny, creator, God, Christ’. In this language, metod represents only the optimistic side of the measure giver. The simultaneously negative aspect present in Old Norse mjötuðr is rendered, in Anglo-Saxon, by the close word metodsceaft: ‘creation/construction of metod’ which means ‘decree of the destiny, doom, dead’.

**Conclusion**

In final analysis, Brynhildr’s vocabulary suggests that she does not consider that her split from Sigurðr was registered on Norns engraved, immutable ‘small wooden planks’, as Völuspá says. She deems that she underwent two sköp. The first has been inflicted by Óðinn for her rebellion, of which she does not violently complain since it led her to meet Sigurðr. As for the second one, as we have now seen, she bitterly complains of Grimhildr’s sköp because they ‘reshaped’ her örlög so as including her split up from Sigurðr.

Brynhildr was herself a powerful magician, and by teaching the runes to Sigurðr, as described by Sigdrifumál, she believed to have forged some sköp that would for ever bound them. She obviously is wounded as a magician and as a loving woman, and also as an Old Norse person who values the ethic worth of sworn oaths. She says to Gunnarr that she despises him
because he is an oath breaker, which shows that she must think the same of her Sigurðr: he certainly is the most courageous warrior (as opposed to Gunnarr), but he is also an oath breaker, though an unintentional one since Grímhildr tricked him. Lastly, she realizes that Grímhildr was a more powerful magician than her (or a more clever one: she strikes on the weak link, that is Sigurðr who finds Guðrún quite attractive…) and thus Grímhildr could separate them.

This battle of magicians between Brynhildr and Grímhildr is implicit in the texts, but I hope to have made feel its existence.

12. Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta

This poem describes Guðrún’s suffering when she discovers Sigurðr’s body. It starts with a prose comment.

“Guðrún sat to yfir Sigurdhí dauðum... hon var búinn til at springa af harmi. Til gengu beði konur ok karlar at hugga hana, in þat var eigi auðvelt.”

Guðrún sat for Sigurðr’s corpse… she was about to burst with sadness. To her, women and men went to take care of her, but that was not easy.

In particular, her sister Gullrönd tries to comfort her by asking her to kiss the corpse’s lips and, obviously, Guðrún’s pain intensifies. She ends up insulting Brynhildr calling her “armrar vættar (malicious soul, here = essence of wickedness).” The last one is here and answers, which causes Gullrönd’s fury and she shouts at her as follows:

24. Þá kvað þat Gullrönd Gjúka dóttir: Thus Gullrönd spoke, Gjúki’s daughter girl:
   “Þegi þú, þjóðleið, urðr öðlinga
   þeira orða; the fate (here: an unhappy one, death) of princes
   þéi ðú æ verit, you always have been;
   rekr þík alda hver you unfold to these people
   illrar sképnu, a bad a shape/fate/‘shaping’,
   sorg sára (you have been) a sorrow wound
   sjau konunga to seven kings
   ok vinspell and friendship-destruction
   vífa mest.” of women the largest.”

_Skepnu_ is also related to the verb _skapa_, to shape, and means here a shaping, as a singular form for sköp. Here, Brynhildr is accused to have shaped evil on ‘these people’. Since we know that she taught magic to Sigurðr, accusing her of magic behavior is certainly justified, though all we know reduces to our hypothesis of a magic fight between her and Grímhildr in the ‘interlude’ of §11.

13. Guðrúnarkviða in forna

This poem is interesting because it explains how have been concocted Grímhildr’s sköp, her shapings.
21. Brought to me Grimhildr
full at drekka a full (horn) for drinking
cold and wounding.
svalt ok sárligt, not I to blame could (I could no more blame something)
né ek sakar munðak; it was enhanced
þat var of aukit by earth power,
jardar magni, by cold and frozen sea
svalkøldum sæ and by a porcine-sacrificial blood (blood of a sacrificial pig).
ok sónum dreyra. Hávamál 137 quotes as well “earth power” and the role of a corn-ear in magic.

22. Were (written) on the horn
hvers kyns stafir any kind of magic signs
carved and (blood-)reddened
ristnir ok roðnir, - to read (them) I could not;
- ráða ek né máttak;
lyngfiskr langr, heather-fish (serpent) long,
lands Haddingja of Haddings’ country
ax óskorit, a corn ear unmarked (not carved, intact),
inneið dyra (dyra).
bowels of a beast (any animal except a bird).
We know of a family of heroes, the Haddingjar, we however know nothing of their exact localization. Boyer states “the country of dead ones” and Orchard, “the sea” without real justification.

23. Were there in the beer
böl morg saman, many evils together,
roots of all trees
urt alls viðar and of acorns roasted,
and of acorns roasted,
umdøgg arins, around-dew of hearth (= soot)
ðrvar blóðnar, entrails (coming from a) blót,
svins lifr soðin, of a pig the boiled liver,
því at hon sakar deyfði. with that the pains blunted.
Grimhildr’s goal is double, blunting Guðrún’s pain and making her forget Sigurðr’s death.

It is obvious that we do not understand anymore the magic recipes of old. But, as long as sköp are so present in skaldic poetry, they should have been extremely important. Here, it is enough for me to convince the reader that sköp are the methods used by the magicians to shape örlög. In a sense, örlög are fate ‘raw material’, and sköp are the result after a wizard-artist left his/her trace on them, as a piece of furniture testifies the skill of a craftsman at shaping wood.

14. Oddrúnarkviða
Oddrúnargrátr
In this poem, Oddrún describes her misfortunes. She is Atli’s and Brynhildr’s sister. The three of them are king Budli’s children.

16

\[ En\ hann\ Brynhildi\ ]
\[ bað\ hjalm\ geta,\ ]
\[ hana\ kvað\ hann\ óskmey\ ]
\[ verða\ skyldu;\ ]

And he (Budli) for Brynhildr
begged (asked) the helmet to obtain,
she said that she wish-maiden (Valkyrie)
to become wanted;
Budli (humbly?) requested that Brynhildr could become a warrior. On her side, she wished to become a Valkyrie.

\[ kvað-a\ hann\ ina\ æðri\ ]
\[ alna\ (gen.\ plur.)\ mundu\ ]
\[ mey\ (acc.)\ í\ heimi,\ ]
\[ nema\ mjötuðr\ spíllti.\ ]

(she) that said that she highest
of the ‘measures’ should
maiden in the house (the world), (he said that she was to become the highest maid reference in the world)
unless the giver of measures would waste (all that).

This stanza uses the word ‘alna’ genitive plural of alin, the length of a forearm, or any measurement. Mjöt is also a measure, and it is impossible that the skald could have been unaware of it.

We can thus see here a pun on Brynhildr’s ‘measure’ and the one used by the universal measure giver. We have seen, in Sigurðarkviða in skamma s. 5, a similar way of speech where everything is perfect until “grimmar urðir” come in play. It is thus clear that this mjötuðr is here a form of urðr, of destiny.

Recall also that the word mjötuðr is used in Sigurðarkviða in skamma s. 71, there also with a meaning similar to the one of urðr.

The last stanza concludes:

34

\[ Sattu\ ok\ hlýddir,\ ]
\[ meðan\ ek\ sagðak\ þér\ ]
\[ mörg\ ill\ of\ sköp\ ]
\[ mîn\ ok\ þeira;\ ]
\[ maðr\ hverr\ þifir\ ]
\[ at\ munum\ sinum.\ ]
\[ Nú\ er\ of\ genginn\ ]
\[ grátr\ Oddrúnar.\ ]

You had sat and listened
while I told you
much evil of the shapings
mine and theirs. (I said much evil of my and the others’ shapings)
human being each lives
with duties his
Now is gone (ended)
the wailing of Oddrún.

Thus, the two sisters, Brynhildr and Oddrún use the word sköp to speak about the sköp they devised on themselves and others ‘since’ usual human people and gods do not deal with örlög.

15. Atlakviða

Dauði Atla

Guðrún eventually marries Atli, as her mother wished. This poem, as well as the following, describes how Atli kills Guðrún’s brothers, and how the latter are avenged. In stanza 39, we reach the outcome, and Guðrún in a fury takes part in the fight.
39.

Gulli söri
in gaglhbjarta,
hringum raðum
reiföi hon húskarla;
sköp lét hon vaxa,
en skíran málm vaða,
æva fljóð ekki
gáði fjarghúsa.

Gold she sowed
the shining-goose, [in this time geese were not yet stupid!]
with the red rings
untied them servants;
let them swell, grow,
and the pure metal ‘wade’ (stride),
ever the torrent (Guðrún, as a torrent) ever
was concerned with the large house.

She sprinkles with gold the servants of the house so that they join her in battle and she lets the shapings take power upon the participants in this battle, i.e. she boundlessly uses her magic and her gold to fight the enemy.

16. Atlamál in grænlenzku

In the first stanza, we understand that Atli’s warriors meet to discuss the situation:

2.

Sköp æxtu skjöldunga
- skyldu-at feigir, -
ila réðsk Atla,
ätti hann þó hyggju;

Sköp they let grow ‘those of the shield’ (Skjöldungs, warriors)
- should not have been strange/near-death/mad -
badly has been advised Atli,
he had though quite a good mind;

Thus, the warriors, just as Guðrún does in Atlakviða above, cause a ‘swell’ of the sköp i.e., here, the warriors try to shape fate in order to cause a battle. In modern language, one would say that they “increase pressure” but this removes the magic hinted at in this stanza.

Högni and his brothers have been invited to meet Atli at his castle. Guðrún, his wife (and Högni’s and Gunnarr’s sister), who attended or spied upon the warriors’ ceremonies, knows that this is a trap. She thus sends a message in runes to warn her brothers but the messenger scrambles the runes. Another woman notices that these runes were tampered with and she tries to warn the guests, with no success. Moreover, Högni shows such an arrogance that he cannot change his mind unless being called a coward. At departure time, Högni is his wife exchange a long glance in which they share their love a last time:

36.

Sásk til síðan,
áðr í sundr hyrfi,
þá hygg ek sköp skiptu,
skilðuskar vegir þeira.

They ‘saw each other’ (looked at each other) ‘towards since’ (then)
already separately ‘rotated’ (taking opposite ways)
thus I think the sköp had appointed them
their ways were branching off...

When her brothers arrive, Guðrún is afflicted to see that her try at warning them had failed.
48.
Leitaða ek í líkna  I sought a way out
 at letja ykkr heiman,  to let you at home
 sköpum vîðr manngi,  fates against nobody (nobody (can go) against the fates),
 ok skuluð þò hér komnir.  and it happens nevertheless that you came.

The sköp of which speak s. 36 and 48 are those about which s. 2 speaks: the ones that will push Atli’s warriors to fight to death Guðrún’s brothers.

The battle rages and Guðrún’s brothers are submerged by the mass of their opponents. The battlefield is flooded with blood.

53.
…floði völlr blóði,  … flooded the (battle) field blood,
 átján áðr fellu,  eighteen already fell,
efrí þeir urðu...  the best of them ‘became’… (the best warriors died)

We meet an unexpected way (for our time) to use verb verða, to become. The context clearly announces that they died, thus ‘to become’ is not appropriate. We can suppose, as everyone does, that it then takes the meaning: ‘to become what we all must become, i.e. a corpse’.

The following stanza provides some information on the concept of destiny. It is simply an example of a very ambiguous use of the word ‘auðna, chance’. Atli and Guðrún quarrel one last time during Atli’s death anguish, she has wounded him to death. Atli tries to justify himself by telling a part of his youth. He and his sisters (I suppose), following Sigurðr, wandered on the sea:

98.
Frjú várum systkin,  Three we were, brothers and sisters ((?), Oddrún, Atli and Brynhildr)
  ...  ...
 skæva vér létum,  To stride we ‘let go’,
skipi hvert várt stýrði,  on a ship driven by,
 örkuðum at auðnu, unz  unknown to chance/fate (led by an unknown chance/fate) until
 vér austr kvómum.  we in the East reached.

The word auðna appears only once in poetic Edda, it means ‘luck’, a favorable meaning. A ship driven by an unknown luck can, indeed, evoke a ship the course of which is subjected to fate. An anachronistic translation would as much make sense: “our ship followed a random trajectory (and by a fortunate coincidence we arrived in the east).” This is why I have the feeling that auðna can evoke a luck, with the same meaning or we speak “to try one’s luck”, possibly with very little hope of success, as those who play games of luck.

17. Grógaldr
This poem may be somewhat hard to spot. Grógaldr and Fjölsvinnsmál were joined together by Bugge under the name of Svipdagsmál, (Bugge, 1867, [http://etext.old.no/Bugge/](http://etext.old.no/Bugge/)). Some editors may not follow this convention.

Gróa’s son, called Svipdagr, calls upon the assistance of his dead mother because he was put in charge of an impossible mission by his mother-in-law.

4. Gróa said
"Löng er för,
langir ’u’/ro farvegar,
langir ’u’/ro manna munir;
ef þat verðr,
at þú þinn vilja biðr,
ok skeikar þá
Skuld/Skuldar at sköpum.

4. Gróa kváð
Long is the journey
long are the ways,
if that may be,
with you to you goodwill (genitive) preserve
(you keep for you the goodwill)
and that then (she) twists (to your advantage)
(Skuld then twists in your favor)
Skuld [nominative] by the sköp.
( if possible, preserve Skuld’s favor and
may her shape thus your fate.)

Verb bíða, ‘to remain, support, preserve’, has its direct object in the genitive, hence the form vilja, genitive of vili, favor, delight.

The reading Skuldar (gen. sing.) provides “Skuld’s favor.” This would lead to the translation: “you preserve ‘upon you’ Skuld’s favor and that then she modifies by the sköp.” Both translations are somewhat strange and we can suppose that this is a ritual formula stating “if possible, preserve Skuld’s favor and may her shape thus your fate.” In any case, Skuld is not called upon to modify Gróa’s son örlög, but to shape them favorably, understating that they could have been also shaped for the worse.

Word skuld means debt, which is not something to deal lightly with, it has to be refunded at any price. If we connect Skuld to verb skulu, ‘must’, and its past forms skyldi and skyldu, this lightly connects it to the past. In my opinion, Skuld is not at all connected to temporality: a debt is contracted in the past, we pay it in the present or the future. She is thus only the Norn of debt’s refunding. We do not know the details of the debt Svigpadr must pay, except that he complains of it in stanza 3, thus Skuld is in proper place here as suggested by our discussion on Norns’ names in § 1.4.

In order to comply to her son’s request, Gróa will utter/sing nine incantations, while standing on a stone stuck in the ground at the edge of the dead’s dwelling … magic can hardly be absent here! The second incantation is:

7.
Þann gel ek þér annan,
ef þú árna skalt
vígvalauss á vegum:
Urðar lokur
háldi þer öllum megum,
er þú á sinnum sér.

Thus I shout/sing a second one,
if you receive will
bad luck on the ways
(may) Urðr’s bonds
hold for you the whole strength,
that you (may) in (good) company (or on a good way) be.
The expression *á sinnum* has also a fixed meaning “on the way (and until its end).”

Remember that word *urðr* is one of the Norse words meaning destiny, as *örlög* and *sköp* among others. As seen in § 1.4, she draws up the assessment of all our actions. Urðr’s bonds must thus refer to the life assessment of Svipdagr (‘Changing-day). Gróa requests of Urðr that no force can separate Svipdagr from his past, in order that he may overcome his ordeal.

### 18. Fjölsvinnsmál

As noticed by Bugge, this poem looks like a continuation of the one before. However, in this second poem, he is initially presented under the name of Vindkaldr (Wind-Frozen). Only at end of the poem he will say that he is called Svipdagr, as in Grógaldr. If Bugge’s assumption is exact, we could thus confuse Svipdagr and Öðr, Freyja’s husband, who left her for reasons unknown, we only know that she cried gold tears at his departure [I provide all these details because, in the translations, we see Vindkaldr popping out of nothing and mysteriously disappearing at some point].

Freyja is called Menglōð in this poem, Svipdagr-Vindkaldr approaches her dwelling. He meets an unpleasant reception from the guard who says to him that he has nothing to do here. They at first insult each other by both calling the other one a troll (“*Hvat er þat flagða?* (Who is this troll?),” then the guardian adds “*ok dríf þú nú vargr at vegi.* (and you wipe out now, wolf/monster, toward your way).” These kindnesses being said, they can pass to serious things and here begins a competition in knowledge. Vindkaldr-Svipdagr asks to the guard questions relating to mythology. As we see, the newcomer is the one who actually puts to test the guardian. This ends when he asks a question that only Svipdagr can ask - just as Óðinn raises a last question by which he reveals his identity. In this case, the loser seems quite happy to have lost the contest, he only is a bit concerned by the possibility of an error: he justly fears Freyja’s wrath in case the newcomer is not Svipdagr.

One of the questions Vindkaldr asks the guardian is relative to the name of the dogs that control also the entrance of the place. The guardian is at first a little scorning (“if you want that knowledge…”) but he ends up providing an interesting information. The role of the dogs is to protect the eleven Freyja’s maids “*unz rjúfask reginn* (until the gods break),” that is until Ragnarök. Hence, in this sentence, rök is paraphrased by ‘break’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>14.</th>
<th>The guardian said:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Gífr heitir annarr,</em></td>
<td>Gífr is called one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>en Geri annarr,</em></td>
<td>and Geri the other,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ef þú vilt þat vita;</em></td>
<td>if you want that to know;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>varðir ellifu</em></td>
<td>guards to the eleven ones (they are guardians for eleven ones)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>er þeir varða,</em></td>
<td>that protect them, (and they protect Freyja’s servants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>unz rjúfask reginn.</em></td>
<td>until the <strong>gods break.</strong> (until the gods break down.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another question which Vindkaldr raises is related to Yggdrasill. The whole exchange explains us why Yggdrasill is also called: “*mjötudr*,” measure-supplier, a word that has nothing in common with the word ‘tree’. The guard explains him that Yggdrasill’s fruits (possibly yew
berries) help during a difficult childbirth [1] and this is why Yggdrasill is human ones’ “measure-supplier.”

22. Út af hans aldni skal á eld bera fyr kelisjúkar [1] konur; útar hverfa þats þer innar skyli, så er hann með mönnum mjötuðr. Since its fruits will be in the fire carried for women in labor; outside to turn what to them inside should, from this ‘it’ (! or rather ‘he’) is the measure-supplier for human ones.

From the point of view of mythology, this denomination is also very interesting. It shows that some ‘objects’, such as Yggdrasill and Óðrœrir, have a soul as the poet Lamartine says [Milly ou la terre natale, 1830] and that, in exceptional circumstances, they can play a direct role. We will meet this phenomenon with Óðrœrir in Hrafnagaldr stanza 2 below.

Lastly, Svipdagr, who has just won his knowledge duel (in a way a ‘hypocrite’ one, as one often said of Óðinn) provides his name. The last three lines are famous since they clearly state that örlög is not likely to be modified under any pretext. The sköp really do not modify it, but they shape what is not yet decided in it. For example, all human ones carry death in their örlög. It is possible that, at least for some of them, the how or when of it is not fixed in their örlög.

47. Svipdagr kvað: Svipdagr ek heiti, Sólbjart hét minn faðir, þaðan rákumz (Rask. Bugge gives räumk) vindar kalda vegu; Urðar orði kveðr engi maðr, þótt þat sé við löst lagit.

Svipdagr (Swift-day) I am called Sólbjart (Sun-brilliance) was called my father, from there led us winds by a frozen way; of Urðr the word says/sings/challenges no man, although this one (word) with error may be kept.

Against Urðr’ word no one speaks/sings even if this word is laid by mistake.

The verb reka, to lead, does ráku in the plural preterit; this is why I preferred the reading of this word given by Rask.

The verbs kveðja and kveða both do kveðr in the indicative third person singular. Kveðja can mean ‘to challenge’. Kveða means to say/sing. The idea of ‘singing’ evokes an attempt to oppose örlög by magic.

[1] On bays of yew: It is not impossible that the Old Norse people noticed that bays of yew or their flesh (not poisonous) alone helped the dilatation of the uterus.

On kélisjúkr: This word is translated ‘hysterical’ by C-V, ‘sickly’ by de Vries. It is clear, according to lines 4 and 5, all this is about a difficult childbirth which, indeed, can make women insane with pain, but which (since only approximately a century in our civilization) has nothing to do with hysteria nor a morbid temperament. Moreover, LexPoet precisely gives: “utero laborantes feminae (uterus of a woman in labor)”, we see how much it was difficult to introduce differently than in Latin this tricky topic.

19. Hrafnagaldur Óðins
This poem describes the moments preceding Ragnarök (also called ‘worst winter’) and, in addition, it refers to little or unknown myths so that its interpretation is awkward. For more details see my translation with accompanying notes at http://www.nordic-life.org/nmh/HRAFENGNEW.htm or on my Academia site: https://www.academia.edu/36097347/HRAFNAGALDUR_%C3%93%C4%90INS_%C3%93%C3%B0inns_Ravens_Galdr

Urðr is seen here as representing the gods’ destiny. The poem seems to suggest that Ragnarök occurs following a falsification of örlög, which is Norn written and thus Urðr herself.

I suppose that the author of the poem wanted to refer to the other magic forces which are the sköp. All our mythology seems to indicate that, in fact, the örlög of the universe and of our gods announce an inevitable doom that will upset our universe. However, nothing says neither when nor how this catastrophe will happen. The supernatural entities that the poem names ‘verpir’ (my ‘twisters’ and Lassen’s ‘unpredictable ones’) will, according to my interpretation, use their runes and, according to Lassen, modify Öðinn’s runes in order to obtain the magic shapings, the sköp, which will enable Ragnarök to take place on ‘the morrow’ and according to the process described by Völuspá stanzas 59-66. In this case, Norns (represented by Urðr) are too much weakened to go on managing the gods’ örlög that ‘slips between their fingers’ because their runes are falsified.
General conclusions

First of all, since we are going to speak of various forms of ‘destiny’ in the Old Norse world, it is desirable to know what is understood by ‘destiny’ in modern English. If not, we will discuss on the basis a multitude of “For me, destiny it is… ” and it will be impossible to compare that with örlög, with Norns’ magic, rök etc.

Here are two traditional definitions of destiny. Webster’s: “seemly inevitable or necessary succession of events. What will necessarily happen to any person or thing; (one’s) fate. That which determines events: said of either a super natural agency or necessity;” Littré: “the sequence of the things regarded as necessary.” In addition, my own experience of this word brings up a feature that I call ‘commonplace’ in which destiny, as dictionary defined, is reduced to the unknown future aspects of a living creature or a thing.

In the non commonplace definitions, the temporal aspect of “the succession of events” is not clarified. Indeed, we can very well speak in the past tense of the destiny of a character (preferably a famous and deceased one) and speak of the future destiny of a living character. Especially in the commonplace definition, it would be absurd to speak of the past destiny of an alive character. On the contrary, in Norse culture, we have seen that it is usual to speak of past örlög. In the same register of ideas, the majority of our cultural examples of destiny describe a person as being headlong opposed to the achievement of his/her destiny as long it has not be concocted by him/herself. This is not really the case in poetic Edda. When an allusion is made to the reaction of an individual to his/her destiny, he/she is rather advised to subject oneself to it (not without at least implicit pride).

This is why I often refused to translate the words örlög, sköp, rök, mjötruð uniformly by ‘destiny’ while hoping that the context helps he reader to understand that they are more complex forces than that of our modern destiny.

On Norns and their magic

We could note that poetic Edda provides seven allusions to the Norns’ magic capacities.
- Völuspá stanza 20 says that they “scrape on small planks (or less probably: ‘they state’)” human ones’ örlög.
- Fáfnismál stanza 11 speaks of “Norna dóm (Norns’s doom)” i.e. of their capacity to bring doom to a human destiny.
- Conversely, Hrafnagaldur Óðins stanza 2 declares that Norn Urðr, because of an interference of ‘twisters’, mattkat (‘non-has-capacity, fails’) to protect humankind from the famous “worse winter” that announces Ragnarök, which suggests that she had, at normal times, a function of humankind’s protection.

These three examples describe the Norns magic capacity to manage human destinies in general, in favor of or against humankind that confirms the traditional role of Norns and looks like our ‘destiny’. Nevertheless, in the four following examples, they seem to be interested in individual destinies, apparently in the same way as a human wizard.

- in Fáfnismál stanza 44, the nuthatches ‘who’ warned Sigurðr of Reginn’s threat, prophesy (wrongly) Sigurðr’s incapacity to wake up Sigdrífa, which would have turned him away from
‘Norn’s sköp’. That the nuthatches might have been mistaken is of no importance, but this way of speech implies that, in this case, the sköp were shaped by Norns rather than by a human person or by a divinity.

- In Sigurðarkviða in skamma s. 44, Brynhildr also complains about ljótar nornir (dreadful Norns) who skópu (shaped) for her and Sigurðr a “long painful desire.”
- In Regimsmál s. 2, dwarf Andvari insults an « aumlig (wretched) » Norn, skóp (shaped) him into a pike.”
- In Grógaldr s. 4, Gróa wishes to her son to be protected from misfortune by Skuld’s sköp.

These examples seem to imply that Norns can practice the same magic as human persons and gods, i. e. the one of sköp. Examining the contexts in which they seem able to leave their main role, that is figuring örlög, we will note three possible explanations to this kind of ‘deviation’.

The first consists in supposing that the word ‘norn’ is a heiti pointing at particularly powerful sorceress. This would undoubtedly be possible for Grímhildr in Sigurðarkviða in skamma, who played such an active role in Sigurðr’s and Brynhildr’s life course but does not fit the three other cases.

The second is to understand that sköp turn often to be curses, and that the cursed ones react by insulting the cursing ones. To speak about the sköp of a Norn amounts calling her a ‘cheap witch’, as way of expressing one’s anger. This way of speaking enables the speaker to avoid the shame of vilifying his/her own örlög, that makes of us ‘true human ones’, therefore avoiding self-debasing.

The third amounts to hypothesize that some specially important characters bear such significant örlög that the sköp sent to them cannot but bring them back on the way traced by their örlög. The French poet La Fontaine, in L’Horoscope, inspired by an Aesop’s Fable (which suggests a possible Sumerian influence), nicely expressed this ancient knowledge, classically illustrated by Oedipus’ fate: “We meet our destiny / Often on the ways by which we try to avoid it…” In this case, örlög and sköp intermingle so much that it is impossible to make a difference between them. In the examples met here, Sigurðr and Brynhildr are first size human heroes, Sviögpadr certainly is Freyja’s chosen, and Andvari is a Dwarf. Remember that Dwarves are invaluable auxiliaries to the Æsir. Moreover, they are the first ones to be wounded by Ragnarök onset, as told by stanzas 3 and 4 of Hrafhagaldr (reference in § 19): “bráinn’s thought is / a dream with a burden [a somnolence], / with dissimulation/conceit, Dáinn’s / thought [is] a dream…The doughtinesses with (of) the dwarves / dwindles, the worlds / down to Ginnung / go down to sink;”

It follows that all three are kind of special, important characters.

In the case of superhuman characters, we can thus conclude that the poets state that örlög indeed were hardly different from sköp. Thus, in the Norse civilization, a rule is that magic cannot interfere with destiny except in the case of exceptional beings. We could also express their situation by saying that their örlög have been so precisely devised by the Norns that apparently unexpected (for us human people) sköp are actually included within their örlög.

**On örlög**

Almost all the stanzas quoted here speak of örlög. This word is often inappropriately translated by ‘destiny’ or ‘fate’. My opposition to this translation has already explained in the
above section dealing with the Norns. Similarly, the commonplace meaning of word ‘destiny’ in Lokasenna is rejected because, in this poem, örlög are declared as a knowledge including the future as well as the past. In Lokasenna s. 25, Frigg advises Loki not to speak about örlög because it exposes what he “drýgðuð í árdaga (perpetrated in old times)” and that it is better that “firrisk forn rök firar (the human ones avoid (to know) old rök [= ‘past örlög’]).”

It is also useful to point out the expression of Reginsmál stanza 14 where Reginn decides to adopt Sigurðr and to control him by an örlögsími, an örlög-string, a way of stating that he will dominate him by magic and will accordingly reshape his destiny. The rest of the story showed us how he lamentably failed to carry out this feat.

Lastly, in § 6 “Comment on stanzas 1 and 3 meaning”, we already announced that the behavior of the three girls in Völundarkviða confirms the idea that örlög not only are binding us, but even more that we must drýgia endure/achieve/make them without balking, in suffering or in violence. Völundarkviða also teaches that örlög action can be as frozen for some time, and then strikes humankind at a suitable moment. This ‘suitable moment’ is called ‘munr’ in Old Norse and constitutes a possible root for the name of the one of the two Óðinn’s ravens, Muninn (‘the munr). You will find on my Academia site or at _http://www.nordic-life.org/MNG/HuginnMunninSiteEng.pdf_ a detailed explanation on the meanings of munr and its bonds with the unconscious. We will a little further see that sköp belong at least partially to the conscious of the wizard who handles them. On their side, örlög are clearly a magic that handles us without us being aware of it, until munr arrives and ‘a lightning strikes us’.

The taboo to use sköp for modifying örlög is also clearly expressed in § 18, Fjölsvinnsmál 47: “Urðar orði kveðr engi maðr, þótt þat sé við löst lagit. (with the word of Urðr no one finds fault, even if it is established by error).” All this confirms the conclusion of § 13 by which we can consider örlög as a rough block upon which a magician-artist traces his sköp while carefully respecting the direction of the fibers composing the block.

**About rök**

Let us at first recall famous Snorri Sturluson’s confusion of between rök and rökr (or rökkr). It seems that he quite simply preferred an allegorical meaning (twilight) to Fjölsvinnsmál 14 direct meaning: “unz rjúfask Reginn (until the gods break)”. This difference is not even an error and it does not deserve its celebrity.

This being said, it remains that the four uses of ‘rök’ in poetic Edda deserve discussion.

a - Rök as a part of örlög
   - Hávamál stanza 145 says that Óðinn engraved the “fyr rök...” (before rök) which indicates the future destiny of humanity.
   - Lokasenna stanza 25 speaks about “forn rök (past rök)” in their traditional translation. Thus, not only örlög cover history of the present and history of the past, but there is a form, rök, which means ‘a part of örlög’.

b - Rök as a redundant way to point at örlög
   In the two other instances, the word rök is used in an emphatic and redundant way as being the ‘entirety of the particular parts’.

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Vafþrúðnismál stanza 42, “tíva rök öll (the entirety of the gods’ rök) i.e. all parts of the god’s örlög.

Alvissmál stanza 9 says that Alvís knows “öll rök (all rök)”, then identical to all örlög. These two forms are rendered by “all destiny” in the traditional translations, which does not underline their emphatic aspect. A special case is the one of Alvissmál, where Þórr addresses several times Alvís by “vitir öll rök fira (you make meaning of all humankind’s rök).” Here, emphasis is obviously ironical, which agrees to the situation of a Dwarf coming to claim Þórr’s daughter in marriage.

These remarks also enable us to suggest an interpretation of the discussed meaning of word Ragnarök. It quite simply means ‘the rök (particular örlög) of the powers’.

On mjötuðr

We met the word mjötuðr in several Eddic poems. Namely, in Völuspá 2 (miötvirð) and 46 (miötuðr), in Oddrúnarkviða 14, Fjölsvinnsmál 18 and Sigurðarkviða in skamma 71. Our comment of this last stanza explains the possible interpretations of this word. Mjötuðr is the ‘measurer’, who tells the measure of things, similarly to the conductor of an orchestra of a spiritual music. According to the context, it will mean in Norse either (optimistic view) a god, a guard, or (pessimistic view) a plague. Thus, this word indicates an organizer who can be either favorable or unfavorable. The commentators were deeply influenced by a similar Anglo-Saxon word: meotud or metod that means ‘destiny, creator, God, Christ’. In this language, metod points only at the optimistic side of the measurer. The simultaneously negative aspect in Old Norse mjötuðr is rendered, in Anglo-Saxon, by the close word metodsceaft: ‘creation/construction of metod’ which means ‘decree of the destiny, doom, dead’. The unconscious influence of metod shows up by a propensity to associate this word to the Christian God by forgetting the existence of metodsceaft. For example, C-V, at mjötuðr, speaks of the existence of meotud (or meotud) in Anglo-Saxon homilies with the meaning of God. On the other hand, when it gives the meaning ‘plague’ (bane), it forgets to announce the existence of metodsceaft which exactly means ‘plague’. A reader should be very wary not to tend associating mjötuðr to the Christian God.

But here, it is destiny, in the meaning of ‘what gives the measure of our lives’. This is confirmed by Oddrúnarkviða, stanza 16 § 14, that compares Brynhildr’s measure to the one the cosmic measurer, Yggdrasill.

On a similar trend, the occurrence in Völuspá s. 2: miötvirð, pointing at Yggdrasill, has been regarded as a scribe error by C-V. First of all, it should be noticed that Völuspá quotes Yggdrasill tree very often: In stanza 2, it is called miötvirðr; in 27th: helgi baðmr (holiness-tree); in s. 46: miötuðr, when it starts to burn; in s. 47, Yggdrasill and aldna tré (ancient tree) and in s. 57th aldrnara (old nourisher) - when it is burning in full. Thus, in stanza 2, it is still the tree of the measure and, in the 27th, the crowned tree, because the flames did not reach it yet. In stanzas 46 and 47, when Ragnarök is set up, it starts to burn, it is named three times by pointing out its three functions (mjötuðr, yggdrasill and ancient tree). Lastly, in s. 57, when Ragnarök fully holds, it is not any more a tree but a burning stump, a thing of the past, a ‘former nourisher’. Some people see here an allusion to the fact that fire is used to cook food: fire is not always destroying. During Ragnarök’s accomplishment, however, Yggdrasill itself is destroyed (not
cooked!) and this is why it has been necessary to remind us, in s. 2, 27, 46 that, until Ragnarök begins, Yggdrasill has still been a divine tree.

In our civilization, trees are things and to see them as being divine looks immensely primitive and ridiculous. In a surprising way, however, the trend of personalizing them, if not of divinizing them, became again acceptable under the influence of ecology and the realization that humankind is unable avoid global warning, the spectacular decrease of biological diversity and a still discrete desertification.

**On sköp**

We could observe that ‘sköp’ and its derivatives have many instances in Poetic Edda. First of all, we should underline the considerable capacity shown by the sköp in shaping someone’s life. This is clearly stated in Grípißpá, where Grípir accepts announcing his örlög to Sigurðr. As they are not very favorable, and since the last one is prone to anger, Grípir is anxious when he meets Sigurðr again. This last understands it and, to comfort Grípir, states (s. 53): “Skiljum heilir, mun-at sköpum vinna... (let us split happily, none can against sköp win...). In Atlavíða, Guðrún allots to the sköp (sköpum víðr manni: against the sköp, nobody can anything) the fact that she did not succeed in warning her brothers of the treachery Atli planned for them.

Hávamál 84 is a special case in the sense that last participle sköpuð has been so often translated in order to forget its magic properties. It evokes women by saying that “váru þeim hjörtu sköpuð (their hearts were shaped)” on a revolving wheel, which I always saw understood by that they are “fickle.” Another more probable translation is the one of ‘breaking’, explained in my translation of Hávamál stanzas 6 and 84 (see s. 84 in § 2.5). In turn, this can be understood as a statement that, in a civilization that does not respect femininity, it true that their destiny is to be either breaking or broken, as Óðinn suggests. Unexpectedly, the recent women’s revolts illustrate that women reject such shapings (may them magic or not) from our civilization, even for whoever follows the news in an absent-minded way. But in the case of Hávamál quotation, we cannot neglect the possibility that the female hearts are thus “magically shaped” as if society would “throw sköp (fates) at them.”

Hávamál 98 presents a negative version of sköp when Billingr’s girl warns Óðinn that they both risk death if he does not yield to the necessary secrecy of their relationship because, in that case, “allt eru ósköp (we are both without sköp).” In this case, no-sköp takes obviously the meaning of ‘no-future’. This way of speech is often used in the sagas to indicate a curse. Thus, we should not confuse unfavorable sköp as those stated by Óðinn about women and ósköp that announce imminent death. For example, in Reginsmál stanza 6, Loki utters kind of curse addressed to Hreiðmarr: “verðr-a sæla sköpuð (not-will become happy (your) shaped)” where he modifies Hreiðmarr’s sköp. This curse first effect appears quickly, but it will be carried on for years on his two killer sons. In the same way, in Sigurðarkviða in skamma stanza 7, Brynhildr complains that “nornir sköpu (Norns shaped)” an unhappy life to her and Sigurðr, i.e. the sköp cursing carried on throughout their lives. This aspect of long duration feature is common to örlög and sköp.
We saw that, in the case of heroes, sköp and örlög merge more or less. On the other hand, when human beings feel the need to modify their örlög, they can try to build sköp that may be ‘örlög-compatible’, i.e. these do not oppose to the runes engraved by Norns.

Sköp design is almost always allotted to a human or divine sorcerer (Óðinn, Loki, Frigg) though exceptionally to Norns as it is explained in the above section “On Norns and their magic ” of these conclusions.

The fact that sköp are not automatically unfavorable is hinted at by Brynhildr who, in Sigurðarkviða in skamma stanza 58, said to Gunnar that they could have been happy if “góð sköp gerði verða (good sköp had been granted to us).” This is confirmed by Gróa who, in Grógaldr 4, wishes her son to be protected from misfortune by Skuld’s sköp. In a different way, in Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta stanza 24, Guðrún’s sister states that Brynhildr brought “illrar skepnur (bad shapings)” in everyone’s life: she needed to specify that they were unfavorable. Earth creation is certainly not unfavorable and Vafðrúðnismál 21 teaches that it was shaped (var jórð of sköpuð) by Æsir who used Ymir’s body.

It is necessary nevertheless to acknowledge that the number of complaints of misfortunes that the sköp could cause largely exceeds the good fortunes. To the ones already stated in this conclusion, we can add the following ones.

In Reginsmál stanza 2, dwarf Andvari complains to have been changed into a pike by the sköp of a Norn “norn skóp… (a Norn shaped…)”.

In Oddrúnarkviða stanza 34, Oddrún confesses that she much complained of the sköp that herself and others shaped.

In Atlamál in grænlenzku, stanza 2, the warriors let grow the sköp that here seem to be the magic of a warlike fury.

In Atlakviða stanza 39, Guðrún, in the same way, “lets grow the sköp (sköp lét hon vaxa)” of her fury with the result of a gigantic massacre.

In addition, Sigurðr is an excellent example of the difference between örlög and sköp. There no way Sigurðr would oppose his örlög. In Fáfnismál 11, however, he realizes that Reginn’s magic will not be able to reach him, which he states as: “verða-t svá rík sköp (sköp [Reginn’s] will thus lose their power).” He will hence be able to dominate Reginn’s magic. Similarly, in stanza 44, the nuthatches predict his failure to awake Sigdrífa, which will not happen because he will dare to slice her armor (and this action will cause to reinstall him inside his örlög). There again, Sigurðr’s magic and daring are enough powerful to cancel the sköp uttered by the nuthatches.

Here is a last example of how much the sköp are compelling. A little before the slaughter described in Atlakviða, Högni, Guðrún’s younger brother, and his wife must split and they share a last fatalistic glance: “þá hygg ek sköp skiptu, skildusk vegir þeira (then I think the sköp had (them) appointed, their ways split)” because both know well that Högni was going to his death. Högni is a fierce warrior but this fierce warrior tenderly loves his wife and shares with her a last instant of love before Atli’s warriors and Gudrún’s sköp send him in the middle of a slaughter.

The sköp are thus in general ‘spells’ or ‘curses’ thrown on a person by a wizard in order to modify the course of this person’s life (in good or evil). In Reginsmál stanza 5 (§ 10), the wizard,
here Loki, has clearly in mind the reason why he throws this spell and he can explain it. All this suggests that a Norse wizards are able to justify their sköp: They are not driven by their unconscious since they does not release their magic in an irresponsible way, randomly in the universe. This enables us to state that sköp belong to a class of conscious magic, which suggests that örlög belong to unconscious magic. We should, however, be cautious of crude dichotomies. Since the conscious and the unconscious are fuzzy concepts; it is perhaps more reasonable to state that sköp are mostly conscious driven and the örlög, unconscious driven.

Sköp powers are restricted because modifying örlög, once they have been stated, is impossible. Wizards can nevertheless, to some extent, use magic for working in örlög’s ‘hollow parts’ that have been regarded as without interest relative to the Norns’ vast purposes.

**Bibliography**

The dictionaries used are presented in the introduction.

Old Norse texts were obtained from several sources: Rask’s, Jónsson’s, Dronke’s, Lassen’s versions and anonymous internet versions.


