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LIFE-CYCLES OF MEN AND TREES IN *SONATORREK*

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According to Snorri Sturluson's *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar,* the warrior poet Egill Skallagrímsson composed *Sonatorrek* ('On the Loss of Sons') in response to the death by drowning of his son Böðvarr (c.960), who was shipwrecked off the coast of Iceland during a sudden storm. Egill found Böðvarr's lifeless body washed up on the shores of Iceland, and bore it to be buried within the mound where his own father Skallagrímr lay at rest.[1] Two strophes of the poem are devoted to another of Egill's sons, Gunnarr, who had fallen victim to a *sóttar brími* ('burning sea-fever', *Sonatorrek* 20; Nordal 1933, 246-56) a little while before. In *Sonatorrek*, Egill appears to make a subtle allusion to an enigmatic tradition also preserved in the Old Norse *Völuspá*, in which wooden figures are found upon the seashore and brought to life through the endowment of human gifts.

After the fashion of many Skaldic and Eddic poets, Egill makes references to Böðvarr, Gunnarr, and his other family members in a manner which identifies them with trees. Meissner, in his study of Skaldic poetry, catalogued no fewer than twenty-nine tree and plant sourced 'basic words' in kennings for men that are used in a variety of ways throughout the corpus (Meissner 1984, 266-72). Egill himself referred to fallen warriors as *Óðins eiki* ('Óðinn's oaks'; Jónsson 1912-15, 32:8:7) in *Höfuðlausn*, whilst Kormákr Ögmundarson, who composed poetry in memory of Sigurðr Hlaðajarl, described him in *Sigurðrdrápa* as a *meiðr* ('beam'), and Eyvindr Skáldaspillir depicted Earl Hákon as a *viðr, vápnberr* ('tree, weapon-bearing') in *Háleygjatal* (Jónsson 1912-15, 69:2:1; Jónsson 1912-15, 61:9:2). At least two strophes in *Sonatorrek* utilise this motif to especially poignant effect. After Böðvarr's death, Egill laments that:

> Þvítt ætt mín, á enda stendr,
> hræbarnir sem hlynir marka;
> esa karskr maðr sás köggla berr
> frænda hrørs at fletjum niðr.
>
> My line stands at its end, like a storm-battered forest-maple. It is no cheerful man that must bear the joints of the corpse of a loved one from his home.
>
> (*Sonatorrek* 4; Nordal 1933, 246-56)

Later in the poem, in brief reference to Gunnarr (and perhaps also Böðvarr), Egill says:

> Þat mank enn es upp of hóf
> í goðheim Gauta spjalli
> ættar ask, þanns óx af mér
> ok kynvið kvánar minnar.
>
> I remember that yet, that the comrade of the Gauts [Óðinn] raised up into the realm of the gods the ash of my kindred that grew from me, and the kinwood of my wife's kin.
>
> (*Sonatorrek* 21; Nordal 1933, 246-56)

Here, Gunnarr is explicitly identified as an ash tree. However, the death of more than one 'tree' - not only Gunnar but perhaps Böðvarr also - seems to be implied by the *ok* separating *ættar ask*

[1] Although some doubt has been cast upon the authenticity of *Sonatorrek,* due to the survival of the full poem only in seventeenth-century paper copies, the first strophe is preserved with the full text of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* in the Möðruvallabók, whilst Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* refers explicitly to strophes 23 and 24 of the poem (Jón 1968, 29-30; Turville-Petre 1976, 27-8).

(Gunnar) from *kynvið* (Böðvarr). It is worth noting that particular attention is drawn to the limbs of Böðvarr, whose sudden absence leaves Egill's family to stand like a storm-beaten tree of the forest.

Turville-Petre noted that strophe 21 of *Sonatorrek*, in its reference to an ash, was particularly reminiscent of the account in *Völuspá* of the creation of the first man and woman from trees or driftwood (Turville-Petre 1976, 39). This couple were named Askr and Embla - Ash and Elm. In *Völuspá,* which was probably composed in Iceland during the twilight years of the first millennium, the Seeress recalls how three of the Æsir set forth for the world of men (Dronke 1966-9, 307):

> Fundo á landi lítt megandi
> Ask ok Emblo ørlöglausa.
>
> Önd þau né átto, óð þau né höfðo,
> lá né læti né lito góða.
> Önd gaf Óðinn, óð gaf Hœnir,
> lá gaf Lóðurr ok lito góða.
>
> They found on the shore Ash and Elm, capable of little, and fateless. They had neither breath nor spirit, nor flesh, nor voice, nor fresh complexions; Óðinn gave breath, Hœnir gave spirit, Lóðurr gave flesh and fresh complexions.
>
> (*Völuspá* 17/5-8, 18; Dronke 1997, 7-24)[2]

This account of human creation is reaffirmed by Snorri Sturluson in *Gylfaginning*, where he recalls how the gods took:

> …tré tvau, ok tóku upp tréin ok sköpuðu af menn. Gaf hinn fyrsti önd ok líf, annarr vit ok hrœring, þriði ásjónu, málit ok heyrn ok sjón; gáfu þeim klæði ok nöfn. Hét karlmaðrinn Askr, en konan Embla, ok ólusk þaðan af mannkindin þeim er bygðin var gefin undir Miðgarði.
>
> …two trees, and they took up the trees and shaped men from them. The first gave breath and life, the second movement and consciousness, and the third an aspect, speech and hearing and sight. They gave them clothes and names. They called the man Askr, and the woman Embla, and to all the mankind that sprang from them was given Middle-Earth.
>
> (Faulkes 2005, 13)

It is possible that Egill and the *Völuspá* poet were drawing upon a common tradition in order to suit quite different purposes. *Völuspá* demonstrates the creation of humans from wood; the first man from ash, and the first woman from elm. They are wooden figures brought to life through the divine bestowal of sacred gifts.[3] Significantly, they are discovered upon the seashore, the same place where Egill discovered the lifeless body of Böðvarr, whose own tree-ness, as the kin-wood

[2] The translation of Embla as Elm is based upon Dronke's note that *embla* may have been a feminine diminutive form of *almr*. Dronke also draws attention to the tradition found in Hesiod's *Works and Days* that 'a generation of men were sprung from ash-trees' (Dronke 1997, 123). Hesiod refers to the birth of the Meliai (ash-tree-nymphs) from the blood of Ouranos, in both *Works and Days* and the *Theogony* (Most 2006, 99:143-44, 19:187; West 1978, 187; Rowe 1978, 63, 125; Athanassakis 2004, 41).

[3] A feat similarly achieved by Óðinn in *Hávamál* 49, a strophe thought to date to the tenth century, where *tveim trémönnom* ('two tree-men') are bought to life through the endowment of clothing (Neckel and Kuhn 1991, 122-44; North 1991, 122-25, 130).

of Egill's wife, is also implied by Egill's reference to his family as a forest-tree. That Böðvarr's brother Gunnar, similarly identified as an ash tree, was taken by a *sóttar brími* ('burning sea-fever', *Sonatorrek* 20; Nordal 1933, 246-56), suggests that Egill was using the metaphor of the sea, as destroyer, to express the manner in which his sons had been deprived of the goods of life. It may be a comparison with the same story found in *Völuspá* that lies behind these profoundly moving lines, as Egill ruminates upon how, in death, his sons complete the life cycle of men that began with the bestowal of gifts upon those two trees that were also found bereft upon the seashore: Askr and Embla, *ørlöglausa*.

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