

# *The Language of Magic*

Edited by Eleonora Cianci and Nicholas Wolf



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# CONTENTS

Introduction <i>Eleonora Cianci</i>	7
Neumes in Three Old High German Charms <i>Eleonora Cianci</i>	13
Words as Gestures: Allusions to the Christian Iconography in East-Slavic Charms and Magic Formulas <i>Liudmila V. Fadeyeva</i>	33
Undoing the “Evil Eye” in Italy: A Comparison of Folk Documentation from 1965-70 with Present Research <i>Lia Giancristofaro</i>	53
Taboo Words and Secret Language as Verbal Magic in Childbirth (Russian North) <i>Lubov’ Golubeva - Sofia Kupriyanova</i>	69
Charms, Changelings, and Chatter: Sonic Magic in the <i>Secunda Pastorum</i> <i>Sarah Harlan-Haughey</i>	81
A Written Charm in Oral Tradition: “Peter Sat on a Marble Stone” in Ireland <i>Barbara Lisa Hillers</i>	103
Arguments for the Authority of the <i>Tietäjä</i> <i>Henni Ilomäki</i>	123
<i>The Dream of the Mother of God</i> and Its Oral-Written Performances, with Examples from Early Modern and Contemporary Romanian Tradition <i>Laura Jiga Illiescu</i>	141
Euphemisms upon the Example of Incantations <i>Mare Kõiva</i>	163

Old Norse Poetry and the Language of Magic <i>Maria Cristina Lombardi</i>	191
An Episode from the History of Publishing Russian Folklore Charms and Their English Translations <i>Andrei Toporkov</i>	201
Urine for a Treat! Or, How to Cure Urinary Disease in Early Medieval Ireland <i>Ilona Tuomi</i>	219
Magic as a Statement of Power and Weapons of the Weak: Heroine of the Russian Epos <i>Inna Veselova</i>	235
Restrain, Liberate, Kill: Parsing the Language of Blocking Sickness in Irish Charms <i>Nicholas M. Wolf</i>	251
The Authors	263

# OLD NORSE POETRY AND THE LANGUAGE OF MAGIC

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## ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to point out the relationships between Old Norse poetry and later or contemporary magic texts in two runic objects. On the example of the poetic lists prepared for poets as the *kenning-* and *heiti* catalogues reported by Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241) in his *Edda* and by his nephew Sturla Þórðarson (1214-1284) in the Fourth Grammatical Treatise, I hypothesize analogue lists of alliterating formulas that magicians and sorcerers would have used in order to compose their charms. The two charms are presented here with the aim of understanding how rhetorical tropes and mythologic figures, typical of Old Norse poetry, appear reworked in late magic texts in runes.

*Keywords:* magic runes; Old Norse poetry.

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This paper aims to point out the relationships between Old Norse poetry and later, or contemporary, magic texts. On the example of the poetic lists prepared for poets as the *kenning-* and *heiti* catalogues reported by Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241) in his *Edda*<sup>1</sup> and by his nephew Sturla Þórðarson (1214-1284) in the *Fourth Grammatical Treatise*<sup>2</sup>, I hypothesize analogous lists of alliterating formulas that magicians and sorcerers would have used in order to compose their charms. This phenomenon seems to be especially relevant in Scandinavia, where magic was often performed by the clergy, who were also the copyists of old manuscripts as well as writers of sagas and skaldic poetry. Therefore, I have investigated some charms with the aim of understanding how rhetorical tropes and mythologic figures, typical of Old Norse poetry, appear reworked in some late magic texts in runes.

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<sup>1</sup> Faulkes 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Olsen 1884.

One interesting link between Old Norse poetic sources and some late medieval magic texts is clearly shown by the fact that, although Þórr is the only heathen god to be invoked on runic inscriptions spread in northern Europe in the Viking period, and albeit several invocations to this divinity to bless runes, monuments, and landscape also appear on funerary stones outside of Scandinavia (such as the blessing Þórr in the German Norden-dorf amulet, or an eleventh-century runic charm against blood-poison from Canterbury, where Þórr is called upon to bless the wound causer), Óðinn is more frequently invoked in late medieval charms. This seems to point at the crucial role played by the Old Norse literary sources, where Óðinn is said to be the inventor and master of runes. He is called *galdrsfáðir*, “father of incantations”, in *Baldrs draumar*<sup>3</sup> (*Baldr’s dreams*), St. 3, and his skills as a healer are attested in *Hávamál*<sup>4</sup> (*The Sayings of the High One*), St. 80-90. Another element indicating the close relationships between poetry and magic is the huge quantity of formulas and rhetorical figures loaned from ancient poems.

The charms I am presenting here belong respectively to the “thieves-discovering type” and to the “sickness-banishing type”. The first charm, signed as N-B241<sup>5</sup>, appears on one of Bergen runic sticks, found in the 1950s during the archaeological excavations of Bryggen, the old port district of Bergen in Norway. They go back to a time ranging from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries and bear short inscriptions in runes, in many cases interpreted as charms. The one signed N-B241 reads:

Ek særi þik, Óðinn, með heiðindómi, mestr fjánda;  
játa því; seg mér nafn þess manns er stal;  
fyr kristni; seg mér nú þína ódád.  
Eitt níðik, annat (?) níðik: seg mér, Óðinn!  
Nú ér særð ok árafár (?) með öllu heiðindómi.  
Þú nú öðlisk mér nafn þess er stal. A(men).

I exorcise thee, Odin, with heathendom, greatest of fiends;  
assent to this: tell me the name of the man who stole;  
for Christendom; tell me now your misdeed.  
One I revile, second I revile; tell me, Odin!  
Now is conjured up and lots of devils with all heathendom.  
Now you shall get for me the name of the one who stole. A(men)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bifröst, “Ljóða Edda Baldrs Draumar”, *Bifröst Library*, 2008, <http://bifrost.it/GERMANI/Fonti/Eddapoetica-30.Baldrsdraumar.html> [May 30, 2021].

<sup>4</sup> Neckel - Kuhn 1983, 32-43.

<sup>5</sup> Spurkland 2001, 68.

<sup>6</sup> MacLeod - Mees 2006, 31.

Although slightly obscure, since the text is fragmentary, in general the language is quite comprehensible. We are in the presence of a “theurgical” ritual: the charm aims at making Óðinn act according to the wish of the theurgist. The text is rhetorically complex, with alliterations and assonances (i.e., *Óð, eð, ið, in, in, an* of the first line are echoed by the sequence *ið, ið, Óð*, of the fourth line), rhymes, word repetitions, and variations, with a kind of stylistic framing by the phrase “seg mér nafn þess manns er stal”, “tell me the name of the man who stole”, of the second line repeated in the last verse with the variation of the verb *öðlisk* preceded by *Þú* “you”, which emphasizes the threatening tone. The anaphoric sequence of imperatives such as *játa*, “consent, obey”, and *seg*, “say”, dominates the charm, while personal pronouns, in the nominative *ek*, “I” and in the dative *mér*, “to me”, grant the performer a dominant position and contribute to his boasting. By pronouncing and carving the runic charm, he would compel the supernatural entity to reveal the thief’s name. Such formal aspects partly match the founding principles of Old Norse metrics, further meeting popular expectations in terms of formal qualities since texts sounded familiar to magicians’ clients.

Odin is called “mestr fjánda”, “the greatest of fiends”, which – together with “fyr kristni” in the third line and the closing formula “Amen” – shows that the charm is written from a Christian point of view. These formulas were used in the catalogs of spells reported in the Icelandic *Galdrabók* (“Book of Magic”) by Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson, the discoverer of Codex Regius 2364 4° (the main code of the poetic Edda) in 1648. Before that date, only a few eddaic lays were known through the prose *Edda* by Snorri Sturluson, who quoted parts of them mainly as examples of metrical forms and rhetorical items. In the bishop’s lists, Óðinn is invoked by twenty-six signs or sigils, among which *Ægisbjálmur* is mentioned in *Fáfnismál*, “The Lay of Fáfnir”, one of Sigurðr’s lays. This circumstance further testifies to the close link between eddaic poetry and Scandinavian magic lore.

In *Galdrabók* other divinities are invoked and a ritual action is also requested, as in example n. 33:

In case of theft, you just carve these staves on the bottom of a dish of ash wood, put water in it, and straw millefolium into the water and say [...]: Óðinn, Loki, Frö, Baldur, Njörðr, Týr, Birgur, Freyja, Gefjon, Gusta.<sup>7</sup>

This double strategy made of both words and actions is absent in rune sticks. This is partly due to the lack of space for carving runes. But another

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<sup>7</sup> Flowers 1989, 127.

reason may be that in this kind of object the focus is undoubtedly on words, usually the language of the Bergen sticks in verse while the quoted *Galdrabók* charm is in prose. The language of poetry is so powerful that uttering magical words was enough to obtain what one asked.

The charm on N-B241 starts directly by appealing to the supernatural (Óðinn, together with all other spirits): naming the god is crucial for the human user of the charm, whose tone is quite aggressive through the formula “Ek særi þik”, “I exorcise thee”. The text presents two substantives in the accusative expressing the requested object: *nafn*, “the name” of the thief; three substantives in the dative: *fyr kristni*, “for Christianity”, declaring the powerful religious background in the name of which the enchanter is demanding the thief’s name; and two other *heiðindómi*, “all pagan forces”, repeated twice, referring to Odin’s followers. Then the list of ways to bind the malevolent spirit follows, and finally, the performer’s boasts over the enemy, uttering his curse: “Eitt níðik, annat níðik”, “one time I revile you, a second time I revile you”, bragging about his capacity of manipulating the evil force.

Examining the verb *níðik*, which I interpret as the indicative first person of the verb *níða*, with the enclitic form of the first-person pronoun *ek*, “I”, is of some importance. The verb derives from the term *níð*, which represents a Nordic juridic, magical, and cultural concept. All Scandinavian medieval law codes (the Icelandic *Grágás*, the Norwegian *Gulapingslag* and *Frostapingslag*, the Swedish *Upplandslag* and *Västergötalag*, the Danish *Skånske lov*, etc.) provide for the crime of *níð*, which was punished by the most severe penalty: outlawry, or *skoggangr*, “going to the forest”<sup>8</sup>. The criminal who was guilty of *níð* was condemned to be excluded from human society and to live in the wild as a wolf. Thus, the word has a particularly negative connotation and also plays a central role in Nordic black magic, where it is used for curses while performing special rituals of scorning and humiliation of an adversary. They are often expressed in verse, sometimes with a sexual connotation, occasionally even by using horse-heads as in the well-known *níðdiktning* “revenge poem” in *Egilssaga*, pronounced by the protagonist against his mortal enemy, the King of Norway, Eirík Blóðøx<sup>9</sup>. Despite the fact that no runic inscription uses the term *níð* or *níðingr*, several runic stones use the opposite term: *oníðingr*, with the *o-* prefix to describe a man as being virtuous. This proves the negative magical power of the word that one could not write even in runes. An example can be found on runestone Sm5 in Transjö:

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<sup>8</sup> Almquist 1965.

<sup>9</sup> Sigurður Nordal 1979, 33.

A: kotr : sati : sten : þana : eftR : ketil :  
B: sun : sin : han : far  
C: mana : mestr o:niþikR : eR a : eklati : ali : tunþi  
A Gautr satti st *níðingr* in þenna æftir Kætil  
B sun sinn. Hann varR  
C manna mæstr oníðingR, eR a Ænglandi aldri tyndi  
A Gautr placed this stone in memory of Ketill  
B his son he was  
C the most unvillanious of men, who forfeited his life in England <sup>10</sup>

The same alliterative expression, “mana : mestr o:niþikR”, appears on Ög 77 (Oppeby, Östergötaland) <sup>11</sup> and Dr 68 (Denmarks runinskrifter) <sup>12</sup>.

In medieval folktales and ballads, the *Níðing* was a character aided, guided, or coerced by an evil force to do his evil deeds. A *Níðing* had originally been a human being of fiendish nature that had either sought evil deliberately or had been taken into possession by evil forces unwillingly. The *Níðing* used its malicious power to destroy anything owned or made by someone. Envy was regarded as the primary cause of *níð*-curses. The verb *níða* therefore has the meaning of “cursing” or “reviling” an adversary to the point of destroying him. In the above-quoted charm the destruction of Odin and his host is threatened.

The second charm I wish to mention was carved on a copper amulet found in Sigtuna (Sweden) and is signed C10. It can be dated to the eleventh century and belongs to the “sickness-banishing” type. It has been analyzed and examined in an illuminating article by Alaric Hall. The runes were carved to ward off the evil spirit of the disease. Its purpose is healing fever caused by a wound:

Þurs sarriðu, þursa drottinn! Flú þú nú! Fundinn es(tú).  
Haf þæR níu nauðiR, úlfR!  
Haf þæR níu nauðiR, úlfR!  
iii isiR þis isiR auki (e)s uniR, ú lfR. Niút lyfia!

Ogre of wound-fever, lord of the giants! Flee now! (You) are found.  
Have for yourself three pangs, wolf!  
Have for yourself nine needs, wolf!

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<sup>10</sup> Skaldic Project Academic Body and Brepols, “Sm 5 (Sm5) – Transjö”, *Skaldic Project*, 2022, <https://skaldic.abdn.ac.uk/m.php?p=ms&i=15243> [March 20, 2021].

<sup>11</sup> “Östergötland Runic Inscription 77”, *Wikipedia*, November 28, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%96sterg%C3%B6tland\\_Runic\\_Inscription\\_77](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%96sterg%C3%B6tland_Runic_Inscription_77) [March 20, 2021].

<sup>12</sup> Marcus Smith, “DR 68”, *Runinskrifter.net*, n.d., <https://www.runinskrifter.net/signum/DR/68> [March 20, 2021].

*iii* ice (runes). These ice (runes) may grant that you be satisfied (?), wolf. Make good use of the healing-charms!<sup>13</sup>

The enchanter commands the spirit (of the sickness) to run away, appealing to it as a kind of monster by using the Old Norse lexeme *þurs* which means “giant” and contains a connotation of “monstruosity” if compared with other Norse substantives alluding to giants’ other qualities such as wisdom (e.g., *iötun*).

The use of this specific formula *þursa trutin Þursa dróttin*, “Lord of giants”, alliterating with *Þurs*, seems to me to follow the well-known strategy of analogy evident also in comparisons, similes, metaphors, and *historiolae*. Metaphorically, it refers to the illness using personification, recalling the myth of the giant *Þrymr*, the prince of evildoers, since it appears as a mythological kenning in the Eddaic poem *Þrymskviða*, “The Lay of *Þrymr*”, in which *Þrymr* is defeated by *Þórr*. Later in the text, the sickness is addressed as a wolf, a beast which in Scandinavia has an especially wide range of religious and mythological implications.

Like many other animals (bears, serpents, etc.), wolves have been associated with magic since antiquity. As Versnel has illustrated in his article<sup>14</sup>, these species belong to the world of the wild, to all that is outside, to the so-called “Otherness”<sup>15</sup>. In Old Norse mythology, wolves are related to Óðinn (Freki and Geri), and during the Ragnarök (the final judgment of heathen gods), Óðinn will be killed by the wolf Fenrir, Loki’s child. Moreover, as mentioned above, in all Scandinavian law codes, outlaws are named *skoggangar*, “those who go through the forest”, and are occasionally called wolves in poetic diction. Returning to *Þursa dróttin* in the first line of the charm, classified in the category of mythological kennings<sup>16</sup>, it is interesting to observe that the kenning occurs in six stanzas of *Þrymskviða*: “*Þrymr sat á haugi, þursa dróttinn*”<sup>17</sup>, “*Þrymr sat on a mound, the lord of the giants*” (stanza 6); “*Þrymr hefr þinn hamar, þursa dróttinn*”<sup>18</sup>, “*Þrymr has your hammer, the lord of the giants*” (stanza 11); “*Þá kvað þat Þrymr,*

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<sup>13</sup> MacLeod - Mees 2005, 118.

<sup>14</sup> Versnel 2002, 105-115.

<sup>15</sup> For “Otherness” as a concept, see Straubhaar 2001, 105-123 and Jakobsson 2007, 141-157.

<sup>16</sup> For mythological kennings catalogs and definitions, see Marold 1983; Clunies Ross 1987; Lombardi 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Neckel - Kuhn 1983, 78.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

þursa dróttinn”<sup>19</sup>, “Then Þrymr said, the lord of the giants”<sup>20</sup> (stanza 22); “Þá kvat þat Þrymr, þursa dróttinn”<sup>21</sup>, “Then Þrymr said, the lord of the giants” (stanza 25); “Þá kvat þat Þrymr, þursa dróttinn”<sup>22</sup>, “Then Þrymr said, the lord of the giants” (stanza 29); “Þrym drap hann fyrstan, þursa dróttinn”<sup>23</sup>, “He killed Þrymr first, the lord of the giants” (stanza 30). The formula mainly seems to function as a metric unit, meeting the requirements of the alliterating verse. We find a great number of variations of this kenning also in later poetry (in *rímur* and in *folkevísir*). In late medieval poetry, the plural genitive *þursa*, “of giants”, the kenning determinant (BW), is associated with different base words, i.e., *þursa þilja*, “the board of the giants”, in *Friðhjófsrímur* (III, 58, 3)<sup>24</sup>, showing its adaptability to different contexts. These rather mechanical variations were listed by Snorri Sturluson in the *þulur* in *Skáldskaparmál* and by Sturla Þorðarsson in order to provide poets with fixed formulas to use in their compositions. This enabled traditional formulas, and with them, terms bound to old institutions, to survive. This is the case for the term *dróttin*, “chieftain”, which originally referred to the leader of Viking expeditions and occurs in Old Norse epics and skaldic texts as well as in runic inscriptions indicating kings or gods when commemorating war and trading enterprises. Its presence in the charm recalls a time of wars and adventures, founding values of the early Scandinavian history and – in the case of the eleventh-century amulet – in a time when those values still existed. Snorri’s *þulur* were also aimed at preserving the memory of ancient myths and rhetorical tropes while keeping the native poetic diction alive. As in Greek, Roman, or Egyptian charms, Homer and Virgil were quoted, and in Nordic charms, exempla from Eddaic and skaldic texts were quoted or hinted at. Such knowledge, as well as local beliefs, were possessed by clergy who could use, mix, and elaborate on them according to the purpose of their works. Preserving past traditions was, together with poetry composition, manuscript copying, and writing books of magic, concentrated in the same social class. Therefore, we can conjecture that in some cases, Snorri’s lists based on Old Norse poetic language might have played a role of intertexts for the language of magic. Moreover, this specific kenning could be regarded

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>24</sup> Larsson 1893.

as a sort of *historiola*. In fact, the association with the *Þrymskviða* as an authoritative model happens through a very concentrated and “enigmatic” riddle-kenning<sup>25</sup> (suggesting: who is the lord of giants?). By including a typical rhetoric traditional trope, the kenning, the evil protagonist of the *Þrymskviða* is recalled and the comparison made between the elimination of the sickness and that of *Þrymr* by *Þórr*. As Versnel argues, poetic and magic languages share many formal aspects. In particular metaphors and personifications are two aspects of the same process of transforming an abstract concept into a concrete element<sup>26</sup>.

But at the time of this amulet carving, Codex Regius (containing *Þrymskviða*) had not been written yet, nor was Snorri’s *Edda*. This charm shows that the kenning was already known and circulating as a formula. Probably it belonged to *Þrymskviða* (or to some other poem), when it was still performed orally in front of Viking kings and chieftains.

Analogously another rune stick from Bergen shows a better version of another lay passage. It is interesting that enchanter used themes and expressions as well as ancient poetic formulas and, according to Jonas Liestøl<sup>27</sup>, sometimes the runic text is even more reliable than the corresponding text in the main Edda Codex. This casts light on the importance of oral tradition in the transmission of poetic formulas and on the manifold channels through which poetry has influenced contemporary and later charms.

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<sup>25</sup> Lombardi 2017, 247-248.

<sup>26</sup> Versnel 2002, 41-42.

<sup>27</sup> Liestøl 1963, 41-50.

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