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Crafted Words and Wood: Kennings, Carvings and Sensory Perception in Óláfr's *Eldhús*

Today I will be talking about a hypothetical scenario described in *Laxdæla saga*; namely, the recital of the poem *Húsdrápa* by Úlfr Uggason at the wedding of Þuríðr Óláfsdóttir. In the poem, Úlfr describes mythical scenes depicted in Óláfr pái Høskuldsson's *eldhús*. The poem is not recorded in *Laxdæla saga*, but it is named. The extant verses are known scattered among *Skáldskaparmál* as Snorri uses them for examples of kennings. Finnur Jónsson compiled these into twelve verses in his edited version, and those are what I will be referring to here. Finnur dates the poem to 983. Of course, none of what I have presented thus far is without complications, other than perhaps the term hypothetical. For example, *Laxdæla saga* was probably first written more than two hundred fifty years after the events described. The verses take various forms in the manuscripts of the *Edda*, and one included in Finnur's edition is also attributed to Bragi. The order in which Finnur arranges the quatrains is an invention... It is important to view the sources critically; nevertheless, it is not the purpose of this paper to flesh out these issues. I believe what we have left of the poem does date from the late 10th century. Here, I take the position that oral tradition remained intact enough to pursue research questions related to the scenario. Today I will focus on reconstructing the space and evaluating the input to the senses during the recital of the poem in Óláfr's *eldhús*.

The exposition in *Laxdæla saga* relevant to my presentation occurs in Chapter 29. The saga writer informs that Óláfr sailed abroad to Norway in order to acquire *húsaviðr*, or "building timber". [Slide 1: map and ship] I have argued elsewhere that when he was in Hlaðir with Hákon jarl, Óláfr could have acquired the woodcarvings that Úlfr subsequently described. In probability, timber purchased abroad by Icelandic chieftains, due to economy of weight, were

those crucial members of a planned structure. In this case, it could have included those wood carved mythic scenes available for purchase in the vicinity of Hlaðir. For this study, one of the more important statements by the saga writer, is (as translated by Kunz): "That summer Óláfr had a fire-hall built at Hjarðarholt which was larger and grander than men had ever seen before."

This leads to questions of the actual dimensions of such a structure. Archaeological sites and reconstructions of Viking Age dwellings in Scandinavia and Iceland provide potential prototypes. [Slide 2: Borg] For example, the excavation and reconstruction at Borg in Lofoten, Norway, reveals an enormous longhouse with several stages of development over centuries. As might be expected, excavations in Iceland such as in the Mosfell valley and the reconstructed farmhouse called Stöng are of a more modest size - about 28 meters long and 5 -6 meters wide in the center. Yet, these sites reveal a similar three aisle construction as Borg and other Scandinavian Viking Age structures, with two central rows of posts running the length of the house forming a roof supporting framework. [Slide 3: sketch] Wealthier conditions allowed an outer row of posts lined with interior wood paneling and wainscoting, with an insulating gap between the wood and the exterior turf. [Slide 4: Stöng] The interiors of these houses were typically divided into different "rooms" of varying sizes and purposes. What concerns this study is the central "great" room, sometimes referred to by saga writers as the *skáli*.

It appears that *eldhús* could also be a term used for this inner partitioned area of a house, or, as likely in the case of Óláfr's *eldhús*, it could be an entirely separate building. If indeed it was "larger and grander than men had ever seen before", that begs the question if the comparison was made to the overall size of the structure or to other known interior partitioned sections of houses. For example, in northern Iceland the site at Hofstaðir is the largest house excavation on the island thus far. It was in use ca. 940-1070, contemporary to the dating of *Húsdrápa*. The

house is approximately 38 meters in length. However, judging from the locations of the postholes, it is possible that the partitioned central room measured about 18 meters. [Slide 5: floor plan] If one were to accept that the *eldhús* in Hjarðarholt was "larger and grander" but simultaneously consider that saga writers may have been prone to exaggeration, it is possible that Óláfr's new house was not larger than Hofstaðir, but the inner chamber included more square meter coverage. A common spread between posts appears to have been a fathom, about 1.85 meters. Based on all of these variables, the inner hall of Óláfr's *eldhús* could have been about 20 meters long and a standard 3 fathoms, or 5 and a half meters wide. [Slide 6: 3D view]

This brings me to the purpose of the *eldhús* that Óláfr had built. At least initially, I imagine it was primarily a large, open hall able to accommodate large gatherings such as the wedding in question. In 2001, Terry Gunnell made some convincing arguments that in Iceland, the chieftain's farmstead was transformed at times for the purpose of ritual functions. While environmentally related spirits were left behind in Norway, settlers symbolically brought their traditions with them embedded in the *qndvegissúlur*, or high seat pillars, which were also fundamental members of the interior spaces of the new dwellings. Names of other building parts, such as the *dvergar*, short posts that support the *áss*, or ridge beam of the hall, bring to mind how the dwarves in mythology held up the corners of the heavens. The *goði*, Icelandic chieftain, apparently had the function of both a political and a religious leader, and his farm would have been considered a central place that had both a secular and sacral function. Indeed, the farmstead and his house could be considered a pre-Christian Norse microcosm.

In *Laxdæla saga* Óláfr is not described as a *blótmaðr*, one who partakes in sacrifice, nor a particularly religious person, but he is portrayed as being concerned about his status - to the extent that he would desire to mimic someone like Hákon jarl, who in legend is portrayed as a

descendent of the Æsir. Óláfr sought recognition for his ancestry, and this found expression in his displays of finery - such as having the carved mythological scenes in his new building. Those tales depicted on the paneling represented a mythic Norse macrocosm in themselves.

The placement of the woodcarvings described by Úlfr is an important consideration for the overall reception of the poem. Here, again quoting Kunz, is another important piece of information from *Laxdæla saga*: "On the wood of the gables, and the rafters, decorative tales were carved." I would like to note, however, that the sagawriter uses the terms *piliviðr*, which may refer to wood paneling placed anywhere in the house, and *ræfr*, or "roof", which points generally to the ceiling, and that also could be paneled. [Slide 7: high seat] The location of the *qndvegi*, high seat, in Óláfr's "hall" seems like it would be a determining factor for a more precise setting of the programme, as it is only natural that the chieftain would want to be centrally seated surrounded by the carvings. In excavations, concentrations of luxury artifacts and stamped gold foils suggest that the high seat may have been situated in the corner or gable end of a hall. However, one may also consider other possibilities - as found in saga literature. In *Fagrskinna*, the saga writer states that Óláfr kyrri (in the 11th century) moved the high seat to the gable end of the hall, but, as I translate, "it was the old custom in Norway, Denmark and Sweden at the king's residence and feasting halls, that there was a doorway at each end of the room, and the king's high seat was in the middle of the long-bench that faced toward the sun." In regard to the reliability of that statement, Olof Sundqvist notes that it is little more than a hundred years between Óláfr kyrri's reign and the writing of *Fagrskinna*, so oral tradition has a relatively high mode of credibility regarding this matter. [Slide 8: central hall] My point is that Óláfr pái also would have wanted to be located in the middle of his feasting hall, surrounded in hierarchal fashion by his guests. I argue that with the inclusion of woodcarvings, a central location in the

hall would be favorable, with prominent depictions surrounding the area of the high seat. Such a layout would also be practical for the purpose of oration, as in addressing a gathering, so that one end would not have been favored over the other. These are matters concerning sensorial perception in the hall. Now I will talk a bit more about the senses of hearing and vision in regard to the particular attributes of this space.

Research in the field of archaeoacoustics has demonstrated that certain ritual sites from antiquity may have been designed to enhance particular sound frequencies. These are primarily stone chambers, and what they have in common is a frequency resonance that would augment, for example, a chanting male voice. In addition, certain frequencies dominant in the male voice, baritone in particular, have been demonstrated with EEG experiments to evoke a response in areas of the brain related to a meditative state and enhancement of visualization. [Slide 9: Newgrange] It is possible that ancient ritual sites, such as Newgrange, Ireland, intentionally had been designed to exacerbate the resounding effect of these frequencies and thereby enhance a ritual experience.

However, in comparison, stone chambers are of course a quite different material and construction than the Viking Age wooden "hall". With the archaeoacoustic effects of the shape and construction of the hall there other considerations involved in the design, ones that favor both enhancement and intelligibility. First, consider an outdoor event where a speaker addresses a crowd. If in an open area, the voice dissipates. [Slide 10: Lawrock] It is interesting to think about the choice of the assembly place at Þingvellir, and how the speaking location of the "law rock" could have been situated in the landscape. The rock faces surrounding that area would capture and distribute the sound waves, making the speaker's voice audible. Comparatively, in a closed room with angular walls constructed of flat surfaces there is an acute degree of reflection

of the sound waves, and due to wavelength, particular frequencies are exaggerated. The result of such excessive and specific reverberation sounds disturbing. A balance between reflection and absorption is desirable for intelligibility. [Slide 11: wood-carved panels] The wood paneling in the hall at Hjarðarholt would have provided highly reflective surfaces, but the woodcarvings would have served to diffuse the sound waves to make the acoustics more evenly distributed. In fact, wood surfaces with random patterns in relief and of uneven depth are used in modern sound studios in order to gain this effect. [Slide 12: music studio] Another technique used to soften harsh echoes is the strategic placement of fabric. This makes the saga writer's statement about the hall all the more interesting, (and again I quote Kunz), "It was so well crafted that it was thought more ornamental without the tapestries than with them." Perhaps due to the carvings the hall "sounded" better than usual, as well. [Slide 13: hall pulled back] Add to this the common tapering and somewhat curved shape of the Viking Age hall: as noted in his 2006 publication, Graeme Lawson suggests the lack of parallel walls of this type of structure probably would have enhanced the intelligibility of speech and made it more audible toward the ends of the building. So, unlike Neolithic and Bronze Age stone sites, where the amplification of indirect sound waves carrying the frequencies of the male voice may have been desirable for intensification of chanting, the design of a hall at Hjarðarholt would have enhanced similar sound waves for the purpose of oration and the recital of poetry. The acoustic design of the hall may have been deliberate, and although it would be difficult to measure with all of the variables, the dimensions of the *eldhús* could have favored the particular resonance of Úlfr's male voice.

Regarding the visual aspects of perception, I would like to point to a couple of the potential effects of the woodcarvings in the hall. For this, it is useful to refer to some of the insights of Alfred Gell regarding art and agency. In addition, I am in the process of designing

some hypothetical reconstructions of the woodcarvings described by Úlfr that can serve as examples. [Slide 14: woodcarving, tilt] One of the aspects Gell refers to is the mesmerizing effect of repeated patterns. This is, of course, a prominent feature of Viking Age art, displayed by interwoven ring-chains and gripping beasts. A lot has been written about the possible apotropaic intention behind such designs, i.e. protection from evil forces. And indeed, the idea that a demon would get lost in the patterns - essentially bound by the obstacles and never fulfilling its evil intention, seems valid. Similarly, I argue that such designs can have a hypnotic effect on humans. The patterns draw the eye in, and especially when other stimuli is introduced, viewers are captivated for their attention and taken on a journey by the seemingly interminable tendrils.

Yet at the same time, engraved Viking Age surfaces typically feature orifices into which ribbon-like extensions dip and reappear. These openings add another dimension to the patterns. As one gazed at the external material object, these orifices beckoned the viewer as a portal to the mysterious, unknown interiority of the deity. [Slide 15: Þórr eye zoom] Here, Þórr's eyes are relevant, as he is known in mythology for his terrible glance. In the "W" manuscript of *Skáldskaparmál*, in a quatrain that is attributed Úlfr, he refers to this twice.

Here, I offer a translation with modified word order:

The in-(laid) moon of the forehead [eye] of the fierce friend of the gods [Þórr]
shone. The famous god [Þórr] shot awful glances toward the necklace of the land
[Miðgarðsormr].

The act of ekphrasis with Úlfr's recital in the *eldhús* would have called attention to the wood carved eye of Þórr, and in turn directed the audience to access the interiority of the god's essence through the aural and visual experience.

So, in regard to the input of the senses there are many potential factors involved in evaluating the reception of the poem *Húsdrápa* in the hall at the wedding gathering. I also suggest that the sensory input interacted exponentially. For this, I first refer to the phenomenon of synesthesia: As described by Merleau-Ponty, our vision, hearing, and abilities to smell, taste and touch merge in various ways as we move our attention and focus on various elements in our surroundings. Within the experience of synesthesia there is a primary layer that precedes the division of the senses, where a cross-over may occur. For example, in some instances people report to be able to "hear" a color. Additionally, as Halvard Lie wrote regarding skaldic poetry: language sounds have a color effect, and there may have been an artistic equivalent between the colors of objects perceived by the poet and his recital.

It is interesting to consider synesthesia as an example of a cross-over of the senses that could have occurred among the participants in the hall, but people who actually exhibit this mode of perception on a regular basis are rare. [Slide 16: ideasthesia] Ideasthesia is perhaps a more universal and useful model here. As described by Danko Nikolic, this model suggests that at the layer of reception, ideas and concepts associated with stimuli are also activated in order for the process of identification to occur. So, rather than the classic model of the brain deciphering sensory input and forming empirical recognition, pre-existing ideas are also involved in perception. How people experience an emotional response to art is an example of this phenomenon, in this case relevant to the visual perception of the woodcarvings and hearing the poem. It follows that sensory perception is associative and, at least in humans, integrated with the linguistic network in the mind. This also helps illustrate how the cross over in metaphor is understood, when referents used are empirically quite different than the indices alluded to. Indeed, Ulfr's use of kennings is another factor in the perception of the stimuli in the hall. [Slide

17: zoom serpent/Iceland] For example, the metonymic imagery evoked by the simple kenning *men storðar*, "necklace of the land" as heard by those who gazed upon a depiction of Þórr's fishing expedition, could lead to a quite tactile experience in relation to the landscape. Through the orifice created by the encircling serpent, the mind's eye simultaneously would have been transported *útangarðs*, as Hastrup would describe it, beyond the interiority of the farm to a larger awareness of existence on an island and the surrounding sea.

Returning now to the layout of the hall, Finnur's intuitive ordering of the quatrains in his edition of *Húsdrápa* is useful as a model. The topography at Hjarðarholt makes it likely that the *eldhús* would have had an east-west orientation. If the carvings were placed centrally on the long north wall, they would be most visible on the paneling of the ceiling above the high seat and benches. [Slide 18: stanza 2] As the sun rises in the east, a depiction of stanza 2 is appropriate as it has been interpreted as an origin myth. It follows that the depictions of Þórr would be centered. [Slide 19: Þórr's fishing expedition] Arguably, he was a prominent object of cult veneration in Iceland at the time. [Slide 20: Baldr's funeral procession (1)] To the west towards the setting sun, and moving right to left as in other examples of Viking Age art, Baldr's funeral procession would have continued a representation of the cosmological cycle. [Slide 21: Baldr's funeral procession (2)]

As Úlfr ambled along the central portion of the *eldhús*, the acoustics of the room would have made his recital intelligible and resound in both directions down the hall. As he made verse about the mythic imagery depicted on the paneling, the content, rhythm and cadence of his delivery, and also possibly the enhanced frequencies of his voice, can be described as a guided meditation. For those near enough and privileged to see, his kennings would have drawn the viewer to salient, mesmerizing features of the carvings, and the ideas generated by the tropes in

combination with the aural and visual experience would have provided the participants a profound perception of, and portal to, a Norse macrocosm within the microcosm of Óláfr's hall.

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- Electroencephalography (EEG) measures electrical activity of the brain along the scalp. It records wave-lengths, and the theta wavelength range is associated with reports of relaxed, meditative, and creative states.