

**PART I:
MYTHS AND TEXTS**

Gold is Red: *Sigurðarkviða en skamma* 49–50

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Brynhildr Buðladóttir knows how to make a grand exit. Having brought about the death of Sigurðr and told her own version of her sad tale, she is bent on self-destruction. In *Sigurðarkviða en skamma*, she stages for herself a final scene in which the gifts of gold she proffers to her maidservants are an invitation to join her on the pyre. But we may have overlooked a further gruesome implication of Brynhildr's words, the specifics of the promised death. The idea hinges on an oft-mentioned detail of the lexicon: in Old Norse, gold is red.

In st. 46, we find Brynhildr distributing her riches (*mǫrc menia /meiðmom deildi*;¹ tree of necklaces (= lady) shared out treasures), which I take to be her executing her own will, a hands-on approach to inheritance. She gazes upon her property, including already sacrificed maidservants. When Brynhildr dons her golden mail-coat in st. 47, she is preparing her own funerary goods. Only once thus attired does she deal herself the mortal sword blow. She still has plenty to say. In st. 49, she invites any who would receive gold from her to come forward. These are her words:

<i>Nú scolo ganga,</i>	<i>þeir er gull vili</i>
<i>oc minna því</i>	<i>at mér þiggia;</i>
<i>ec gef hverri</i>	<i>um broðit sigli,</i>
<i>bóc oc blæio,</i>	<i>biartar váðir.²</i>

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I'll render the lines this way:

Now should come forward those who would have gold
 And remember that they receive it from me;
 I'll give to every woman an ornamented necklace,
 A figured coverlet and sheet, bright clothes.

The women in the audience know that those gifts would also be their own funerary goods, that Brynhildr is offering a spot on the pyre. There are no takers: they turn her down in st. 50. Brynhildr seems to shrug in st. 51: she doesn't want anyone to die unwillingly (*Vilcat ec mann traudan / né torbcænan / um óra sœc / aldri týna*), but (st. 52) when they do follow her, she warns them, their bones will burn without any riches at all! (*Þó mun á beinom / brenna yðrom / færi eyrir, / þá er ér fram komið, / neit Menio góð, / mín at vitia*). The essential action is clear. Less clear is the best translation of *broðit sigli*, which I treat in detail below. Taken together, reading *broðit sigli* as “ornamented necklace,” as have many before me, and the famous redness of gold, Brynhildr's offer of gold, jewelry, and bright clothing becomes an offer of red rings around the neck and stained cloth, or, more bluntly, slit throats and fabric soaked in gore.

This interpretation relies on a very close association between gold and the color red. Quite a lot of things are red in the Old Norse corpus, but, as it happens, gold is very red indeed. Here I rely on Jackson Crawford's 2014 dissertation *The Historical Development of Basic Color Terms in Old Norse – Icelandic*. Crawford's corpus is extensive though not exhaustive, including the Eddas, the skaldic corpus, the sagas and *þættir* of Icelanders, *Heimskringla*, *Physiologus*, *Elucidarius*, and *Hauksbók*. In this corpus, things red include blood, fire, angry human faces, human hair, horses, oxen, mythological roosters, and internal organs. Red is emblematically the color of blood – the lexicon includes blood-red (*blóðrauðr*), but not horse-red, hair-red, or fire-red – and the most frequent referent of the word *rauðr* is blood or things covered with blood, in fact 33% of all usages. No color term is more consistently associated with a specific referent than *rauðr* with blood. Gold is the second most frequent referent of *rauðr*: 10% of occurrences of *rauðr* refer to gold, and of all color terms and all referents the second-most

consistent correlation is of *rauðr* with gold.³ Put another way, gold is redder than anything save blood itself.

The vocabulary of material culture of this stanza is also relevant, and some of the words are difficult or rare. *Sigli* is often translated simply as “jewel,” but older lexicographers such as Finnur Jónsson, Hugo Gering, and Sveinbjörn Egilsson understood it as more likely a necklace or neck-ring than anything else. They reasoned in part from the Anglo-Saxon cognate, *sigle*, which is unproblematically a necklace.⁴ *Hroðit* is also unique, and scholars have likewise had recourse to Anglo-Saxon, where the cognate past participle *hroden* (from a lost verb **hreoðan*), means ornamented or adorned. (Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon understood the Anglo-Saxon verb **hreoðan* to have meant ‘to paint or stain’, an interpretation that fits very nicely with my blood-stained ideas, but for which I do not see supporting evidence.) Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon read Old Norse *broðit* as ‘gilt’. For *broðit sigli*, Sveinbjörn Egilsson offered *monile inauratum*, ‘gilded necklace,’ a reasonable conjecture based on limited evidence. We cannot know exactly what manner of ornamentation the Old Norse word signified – gilding or inlaying or stamping in already precious metal – but whatever its proper sense, it was consonant with the gold (*gull*) promised in the first line of the stanza. “Gilded” captures that idea even if it may miss the precise semantics of *broðit*.

We already know that, when Brynhildr offers gold, she offers death. But when she offers specifically a *broðit sigli*, she offers a red ring around the neck, a ring the color of blood, and in that image, it is easy to see a slit throat or a decapitation.

Red Ring Around the Neck

There is precedent for this sort of imagery elsewhere in the literature, in dream, and rather more explicitly.⁵ Recall the dismal end of Hákon jarl and Þórmóðr Karkr in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* 49 in *Heimskringla*.⁶ Karkr and Hákon are hiding in the famous pigsty; Hákon frets that Karkr will betray him, but Karkr insists on his loyalty. They were born the same night, after all, and their fates are intertwined. Hákon is keeping watch while Karkr sleeps

fitfully. Hákon wakes him, and Karkr says he's dreamt of being at Hlaðir, *ok lagði Óláfr Tryggvason gullmen á háls mér* (Olaf Tryggvason set a gold necklace around my neck). Hákon interprets the dream immediately: *Par mun Óláfr láta bring blóðrauðan um háls þér, ef þú finnr hann* (Olaf will put a blood-red ring around your neck there, if you meet him); *Vara þú þik svá* (So watch yourself accordingly). *En af mér muntu gott hljóta, svá sem fyrr hefir verit, ok svík mik eigi* (But from me you will receive only good, as has been the case before, and do not betray me). Gold is red – red as blood – and receiving a blood-red ring about the neck is the opposite of being treated well. Hákon does not completely unpack the *bringr* as being a wound; the text does it for us. Dreams being what they are, and the depiction of slaves in this literature being what it is, Karkr gets spooked and kills Hákon in his sleep. When he brings Hákon's head to Olaf Tryggvason in hope of reward, yes, Olaf has Karkr's own head cut off. End of Chapter 49.

Thus the case for the red ring around the neck. It remains to locate the resultant blood on the named textiles: *bók*, *blæja*, and *bjartar váðir*. *Bók* is a very uncommon word when it does not mean simply “book.” This other *bók* is an embroidered cloth, or so we extrapolate from the verb *gullbóka* in *Guðrúnarkviða qnnur* 14, where one woman entertains another by *gullbóc*-ing a textile with southern halls and Danish swans: *hon mér at gamni / gullbócaði / sali suðrœna / oc svani dansca*. The usual translation is “embroidered with gold,” by analogy with Anglo-Saxon *gibōkod*, perhaps borrowed from northern German⁷ – perhaps in this very context. More relevant than the specific technique is the narrative associations it is likely to have had for the poem's medieval audience. Aside from here in *Sigurðarkviða en skamma*, *bóc* by itself appears only in *Guðrúnarhvot* and *Hamðismál*, where it seems to be part of the bedlinen. The two stanzas tell the same moment: Guðrún awakening in her marital bed, her slain husband beside her. The sole narrative function of the *bœcr* is being covered in blood.

<i>bœcr vóro þínar,</i>	<i>inar bláhvíto</i>
<i>roðnar í vers dreyra,</i>	<i>fólgnar í valblóði (Hhv.)⁸</i>
<i>ofnar vølundom,</i>	<i>fluto í vers dreyra. (Hm.)⁹</i>

Your blue-white *bæcr* were
 (in *Guðrúnarhvøt*) reddened in a man's gore, drenched in
 slaughter-blood
 (in *Hamðismál*) woven by skilled craftsmen, (they) were floating
 in a man's gore.

When Brynhildr offers embroidered coverlets in *Sigurðarkviða en skamma*, they are not explicitly soaked in blood, but for the medieval audience of Eddic poetry the very word *bóc* may have been colored by its role in the scene of Sigurðr's murder, the only surviving context in which it appears. To a contemporary mind, *bæcr* might have been the kind of embroidered coverlets one has on one's bed if one's bed is soaked in blood. We might compare English "veranda." The word means "porch," but functionally it means the kind of porch you have if you live in an antebellum mansion in the American South.

The much more common word *blæja* is less colorful by comparison. *Blæja*, a cloth covering, sheet or spread, is used of the linen of the marital bed – in Eddic poetry especially of the extra-marital bed, as in *Oddrúnargrátr* 6 and 25. The older *Frostafingslög* mentions *blæja* in the context of the blood-stained site of possibly non-consensual intercourse.¹⁰ In *Grágás*, *blæja* is a shroud,¹¹ in *Laxdœla* 55, *blæja* is Guðrún's shawl, on which Helgi Harðbeinsson wipes the blood of the new-slain Bolli.¹² It would be too much to claim that *blæja*, like *bóc*, was stereotypically bloody, but it was, at least, often a cloth for lying down with and not always while still alive. The use of *blæjur* here suggests the serving women's bodies stretched out rather than standing attentively.

Váðir are cloths or clothes depending on the register. In prose, *váð* is the raw material wool cloth measured and traded by the ell or the mark, except in the compound *hvítaváðir* "baptismal whites." In poetry, *váðir* is clothing. Here, and only here, are *váðir* bright, *bjartar*.¹³ *Bjartar* is an interesting word of itself. Like English "bright," it tells us nothing about color in the sense of hue. Cloth and wool are not normally "bright" in Old Norse. Things typically *bjartar* include weather, fire, light, the countenances of handsome people, and metals – especially gold, which is bright twice in *Skáldskaparmál* 40.39; 41.8.¹⁴ Fire can be *rauðr* as well as *bjartar*.¹⁵ That gold was

stereotypically bright is reflected in the word *gullbjartr*, attested twice in Eddic verse. Referring to Valhøll in *Grímnismál* 8.2, it might mean “bright-with-gold” owing to the shields making up the roof; it could mean “bright as gold” as in *Hárbarðsljóð* 30.5, where it refers to a radiant woman. Compared to the rest of the corpus, *bjartr* seems inappropriate to its object, *váðir*, on the level of the materials. Are the *bóc* and *blæja* also *bjartar*? Grammatically, as feminine nouns, they could be. Semantically, the same problem applies. The mismatch sends the reader searching for the nearest material thing that can partake of brightness. The nearest thing, the promised thing, is the gold offered in the first line of the stanza. The juxtaposition of somehow “bright” textiles of no specified color with gold itself invites us to see the clothing as having taken on the color of bright gold, and bright gold is red, like blood. Blood, too, can be bright as in Sighvatr Þórðarson’s *Erfiðrápa Óláfs helga* st. 8.¹⁶ At this point we can see the gory image float to the surface: slit throats, bright blood flowing down to stain dresses, sheets, and coverlets on and around the bodies of the serving women.

Thus the textual case for this essay’s gory interpretation. Archaeology confirms that human sacrifice was sometimes part of burial custom in the Old Norse cultural area in the Viking Age, though the method of execution is not always discernable from the human remains. The body at Gerdrup shows a broken neck; the Stengade sacrifice was decapitated, which would have given him the same red ring Karkr received; the young woman at Ballateare was killed with a sword blow to the back of the head, which just might reflect a botched decapitation.¹⁷ Methods aside, *Sigurðarkviða en skamma* appears to preserve a cultural memory of heathen practice, at least as far as funerary sacrifice goes. We might credit both oral tradition and centuries of grave robbing and less larcenously motivated grave opening¹⁸ with helping keep some knowledge of pre-Christian funerary customs alive. One does not need an archaeology degree to notice a sliced-open cranium or a skull lying far from its ribcage. Here we begin to veer towards speculation, however, and might profitably return to the poem for some final thoughts.

Brynhildr can make a grand exit, taking with her trappings of wealth both animate and inanimate, but if the interpretation

presented here is correct, she is less than straightforward about just how bloody she intends that grandeur to be. Therein lies the pleasure of the text at this juncture. Therein too, lies the scholarly anxiety that one has pressed the source material too hard and found meaning that would not have been apparent to the audience of the poem's own days. The intertextual case for that interpretation has been made above. One last intratextural point should be mentioned. Brynhildr's words in st. 49 need some unpacking, but the rhythm of the text suggests that they are meant to be understood. The poem gives us time to do so by building a pause into the action: in stanza 50, everyone falls silent.

50	<i>Pǫgðo allir, oc allir senn “Ærnar soltnar, verða salkonor</i>	<i>hugðo at ráðom, annsvor veitto: munum enn lífa, sæmð at vinna.”¹⁹</i>
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All were silent, and all together “Enough have died, we would yet live, Be serving-women in hall, earning honor.”	considered their courses, gave answer: –
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Brynhildr says her bit about gold and bright clothing, but those addressed are silent in response for two whole, tension-building lines. People in Eddic poetry do not fall silent very often. The only other place I can find is in response to Brynhildr saying something confusing. In *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu* 14, Sigurðr has already been killed when Brynhildr wakes before dawn and cries out:

<i>Hvetið mic eða letið mic sorg at segia</i>	– <i>harmr er unninn – eða svá láta!²⁰</i>
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Urge me on or hinder me to tell my sorrow	– the harm is done now – or so leave be!
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At that, all fell silent:

<i>Pǫgðu allir fár kunni þeim er hon grátandi þat er hlæiandi</i>	<i>við því orði, flióða látum, gorðiz at segia, hǫlða beiddi.²¹</i>
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At that, all fell silent.
 Few understand the behavior of women,
 when, crying, she spoke of the deeds
 she had, laughing, ordered men to do.

Silence falls to mark an interpretive crux: how should Brynhildr's words and actions be understood? (Or perhaps that of women in general, as per *Hyndluljóð* 84.) The answer is both ways. Brynhildr wanted Sigurðr dead *and* yet mourns him. Her whole story is about a double bind of conflicting obligations that reflects an internal conflict between love and a need for revenge. The silence in *Sigurðarkviða en skamma* falls at a similar moment, though less obviously so. The sudden silence signals to the audience that we, too, might *huga at ráðum* and consider whether we missed anything in the preceding stanza.

Gold is red, sometimes it is bloody, perhaps especially so in the Burgundian material. After all, the cycle revolves around the hoard that, thanks to Wagner, we think of as the Rhinegold, but that is just where it ends up. It all starts with a killing and the first payment of compensation. Fáfnir's treasure, the Niflung gold, the gold ring that reveals Sigurðr's betrayal of Brynhildr. It is the original blood money. In Snorri's Edda, after Loki kills Ótr, he and his companions owe the family enough red gold to fill his flayed skin and then cover it entirely: *fylla belginn af rauðu gulli ok sva hylia hann allan*;²² In the prose before *Reginsmál*, the line is *Fylla otrbelginn með gulli oc hylia útan oc með rauðo gulli*. They must literally replace the body of the slain kinsman with gold and then bury the body completely with more gold, effectively making a burial mound. This gold is wergild and grave mound in one. It acquires as guardian Fáfnir, in the shape of a dragon, an animal not infrequently mentioned in realms of the dead like Náströnd. The Burgundian gold circulates from the chthonic and watery Otherworld to a recently vacated skin and a burial mound via a serpent-like monster's hoard to the world of men, where it drags many to their own deaths – and then ultimately back underwater, where it shines like fire. Fire is red, like gold, like blood. In heroic legend and myth, gold may always be an Otherworld material, hailing from and returning to the world of the dead, leaving a crimson trail behind it.

These are larger ideas than the rather small point of interpretation to which this essay is dedicated – perhaps they will resonate with others besides myself. The hope is rather to have convinced the reader that the striking image painted here is not this author’s own fantasy, but a real part of the poem as it has come to us, an especially gruesome scene in an already violent cycle of narratives.

Notes

1. All quotations are taken from (Neckel/Kuhn 1983).
2. *Sigurðarkviða en skamma* 46.
3. Crawford 2014:131.
4. Bosworth and Toller 1972.
5. Thanks go to Jonas Wellendorf for reminding me of this episode.
6. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941:297–298.
7. de Vries 1962:48.
8. *Guðrúnarhvöt* 4.
9. *Hamðismál* 7.
10. Frostatingsloven IV 39, Keyser & Munch 1846–1849:169–170.
11. Vilhjálmur Finsen 1852 I:238.
12. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934:168.
13. *Klæði* can be *bjart* when translating Latin: I find one instance of *klæddr með björtu klæði* (clad in bright clothing) in A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose, where *björtu* renders *candente*.
14. Crawford 2014:28–31.
15. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1945:60.
16. Finnur Jónsson 1912, A1:259, B1:240.
17. Christensen 1981; Skaarup 1972; Bersu & Wilson 1966.
18. Jankuhn 1978; Soma 2007.
19. *Sigurðarkviða en skamma* 49.

20. *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu* 14.

21. *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu* 14.

22. Faulkes 1998:45.

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Response

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Merrill Kaplan's interpretation of Brynhild's funerary goods in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* is based on a close association between gold and the colour red, and this in turns means blood and death. She particularly emphasizes Brynhild's gifts to the maidservants. The question is what kind of funerary goods she is proffering them. Gold is only one of the gifts mentioned. However, Kaplan includes *broðit sigli*, 'ornamented necklace', to the golden goods. According to Kaplan, it is "easy to see a slit throat or a decapitation" behind *broðit sigli*. She supports her interpretation with one example from another literary genre and another context, but in which it is told that one man is decapitated by a king.¹ It is not fully convincing, and furthermore, in an archaeological aspect, maidservants, as far as I know, were neither decapitated nor had their throat slit before following their matron to death.

But what of the textile gifts *bók*, *blæja* and *bjártar váðir*? Merrill Kaplan argues that they also are associated with red, and thus with blood. That the audience would associate *bók* with something bloody depends, according to Kaplan, on evidence from two other heroic poems. That the medieval audience had heard of other poems belonging to the Sigurðr tradition is a reasonable assumption, but I doubt that the word *bók* in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* would conjure the bloody bedlinen from the death of Sigurðr from other poems. However, a grammar detail may question this interpretation. In the two poems referred to, the plural form *bækr* is used and not the singular *bók*.²

Blæja means linen sheet and is bright in colour, and cannot generally be associated with red gold or blood, so what is the function of linen sheet as funerary goods? In comparison with the other grave goods, *blæja* can, according to Kaplan, not immediately be associated with red, but via the adjective *bjártr*, it would still be possible. I would like to point out another possible interpretation: the word *blæja* could also mean grave-clothes, as it is

used in *Guðrúnarkviða I* (stanza 13): *Svípti hún [Guðrún] blæju of Sigurði [...]*.³

Brynhildr also wants to give away *bjártar váðir*. The phrase is similar to *hvítaváðir*, which in previous research has been perceived as white grave-clothes, something that would fit within the context.⁴ As the word *bjártr* is not associated with *váðir*, the “reader”, according to Kaplan, therefore is looking for something else that can, namely *gull* (gold), and the red gold can “colour” the textiles red or blood-red. Kaplan’s interpretation actually leads to the conclusion that all Brynhild’s gifts can be associated with blood. This leads Kaplan further to decapitated human sacrifices as part of Nordic burial customs during the Viking Age.

In her concluding arguments, Merrill Kaplan inter alia reflects on whether the source material, after all, might have been pushed too hard and “found meaning that would not have been apparent to the audience of the poem’s own days.” One difficulty is rather what “the poem’s own days” refers to. Is it the contemporary audience or the audience in a more indefinite period of oral tradition?⁵ None of Brynhild’s women accepts the funerary gifts (stanza 50). This is in my opinion the text’s own evidence of a present contemporary ideology that also provides for an alternative interpretation. If both stanzas (49–50) can be said to preserve the cultural memory of a pre-Christian custom, the women would not have rejected the gifts. It would hardly have been a choice in the context. Since this kind of grave ritual was no longer in general use in the Medieval Ages, or was disappearing, the poet can let the women reject the gifts and also argue that too many have already been killed.⁶

Notes

1. *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*. Vol 1:236.
2. *Guðrúnarhvöt*, in *Eddukvæði II*, *Hetjukvæði*:403, *Hamðismál*, in *Eddukvæði II*:408.
3. *Guðrúnarkviða I*, in *Eddukvæði II*:331.
4. When *hvítaváðir* appears on Swedish runic monuments, on at least seven rune stones in Uppland, it generally refers to men who died in baptismal clothing, for example at U 243 in Vallentuna

Parish:”Holmlaugr ok Holmfríðr latu ræisa stæina æftir Fasta ok Sigfast, sunu sina. Þær dou í *hvítavaðum*.” Cf. Larsson 2007:255ff., 285f., 332ff., and her references to other works.

5. Gräslund 2001:9–10, 43ff.; Larsson 2007:249ff.

6. Brynhild’s suicide can be a later motif in relation to other heroic poems belonging to the Sigurðr legend, *Eddukvæði* II:87, cf. Klaus von See et al. 2009:317 and their references to other works.

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