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THE LAY OF HAROLD

[HARALDSKVÆTHI OR HRAFNSMÓL]

BY THÓRBIORN HORNKLOFI

NORWAY enters into the full daylight of recorded history with King Harold, surnamed Fairhair¹ (ca. 860-933), the son of Halvdan the Black, a petty king of Southeastern Norway. While still a youth, Harold after a bitter struggle with the independence-loving nobles brought the whole realm under his sway. The final victorious battle, against a coalition of chieftains of the West reinforced by auxiliaries from the British Isles, was a naval action fought in the Hafrs-firth (873), an inlet of southwest Norway. It is celebrated in this lay. After this battle, rather than submit and pay tribute to Harold, many nobles left the land with all their kin and possessions, settling in the Western Isles and, chiefly, in Iceland.

Among the engaging qualities of this masterful ruler must be reckoned his fondness for poetry. We are told in the reliable *Egils saga* that “of all his followers, he valued most his skalds,”² thus probably initiating the tradition of court poets that lasted for centuries. In fact, he is said to have been a poet in his own right, like many of his successors. Several of his court poets are named in the sagas and represented by poems. Of Thórbjorn hornklofi’s³ personality we know little, except that he was of high birth and “an old friend of kings, who had always been attached to their courts.” Two longer poems are attributed to him, the *Glymdrápa*,⁴ a lay apparently descriptive of Harold’s many battles before accomplishing the unification of Norway, thoroughly Skaldic in manner, which exists only in inconsiderable fragments; and the present poem, much simpler in style, which is given no name in the sources. This, the *Haraldskvaethi* p. 57 or *Hrafnsmól*, as it has been called by some editors, is in a most deplorable condition.

As here given⁵ it is pieced together from fragments found mainly in the large historical work called *Fagrskinna*,⁶ which contains a history of the Norwegian kings. There is considerable difficulty about the authorship of these portions, some editors considering stanzas 7 to 11, in particular, as a separate poem dealing with the battle in the Hafrs-firth. The remainder, with descriptions of the life at Harold’s court, is probably incomplete.

The structure of the poem is simple. After the usual admonition to the assembled court to lend their ears, the poet tells us what he heard a raven—scavenger of the battle-field—say to a valkyrie who questions him about Harold’s deeds—naturally all warlike ones. For once, the scenes of carnage here described are individualized. There is grim Viking humor, a dramatic tension, a zest in these descriptions which one inevitably associates with a contemporary and participant.⁷ Upon her further questioning we are given realistic, even coarse-grained, glimpses of Harold’s youth, his many marriages, and his life at court with berserkers, skalds, and jugglers. In all this, the poem is likely to have set the fashion; possibly also in the alternation of meters. The greater part is in sonorous *málahátt*, smaller portions also in *líóthahátt* and *fornyrthislag*.

- 1 Hearken, ye ring-bearers,⁸ while of Harold I tell you,
the mightily wealthy, and his manful war-deeds;
words I o'erheard a maiden high-minded speaking,
golden-haired, white-armed, with a glossy-beaked raven.
- 2 Wise thought her the valkyrie; were welcome never
men⁹ to the bright-eyed one, her who birds' speech knew well.
p. 58 Greeted the light-lashed maiden, the lily-throated woman,
the Hymir's-skull-cleaver¹⁰ as on cliff he was perching.
- 3 "How is it, ye ravens— whence are ye come now
with beaks all gory, at break of morning?
Carrion-reek ye carry, and your claws are bloody.
Were ye near, at night-time, where ye knew of corpses?"
- 4 Shook himself the dun-hued one, and dried his beak,
the eagle's oath-brother, and of answer bethought him:
"Harold we follow, Halfdan's first-born,
I the young Yngling, since out of egg we crept.
- 5 "That king thou knowest, him who at Kvinnar¹¹ dwelleth,
the hoard-warrior of North men, who has hollow war-ships
with reddish ribs¹² and with reddened war-shields,
with tarred oar-blades and with tents¹³ foam-besprinkled.
- 6 "Fain outside¹⁴ would he drink the ale at Yule-tide,¹⁵
the fight-loving folk-warrior, and Frey's¹⁶ game play there.
Even half-grown, he hated the hearthfire cozy,
the warm women's room, and the wadded down-mittens.¹⁷
- 7 "Hearken how the high-born one in the Hafrs-firth¹⁸ fought there,
the keen-eyed king's son, against Kiotvi¹⁹ the wealthy:
p. 59 came the fleet from the eastward,²⁰ eager for fighting,
with gaping figureheads and graven ship-prows.²¹
- 8 "They were laden with franklins and lindenshields gleaming,
with Westland spearshafts and with Welsh broadswords.
The berserkers²² bellowed as the battle opened,
the wolf-coats²² shrieked loud and shook their weapons.
- 9 "Their strength would they try, but he taught them to flee,

the lord of the Eastmen²³ who at Útstein²⁴ dwelleth.
 The steeds-of-Nokkvi²⁵ he steered out when started the battle.
 Then boomed the bucklers ere a blow felled Haklang.²⁶

- 10 “The thick-necked atheling behind the isle took shelter:
 he grew loath, against Lúfa²⁷ to hold the land of his fathers.
 Then hid under benches, and let their buttocks stick up,
 they who were wounded, but thrust their heads keelward.
- 11 “Their shoulders shielded the shifty heroes²⁸—
 were they showered with slung-shot— with the shingles-of-Gladhome.²⁹
 p. 60 Home from Hafrs-firth hastened they eastward,
 fled by way of Iathar,³⁰ of ale-cups thinking.³¹
- 12 “On the gravel lay the fallen, given to the one-eyed
 husband of Fulla;³² were we³³ fain of such doings.
- 13 “Of more and other things shall the maids of Ragnhild,³⁴
 the haughty women-folk, now have to gabble
 than of the heath-dwellers³⁵ which Harold not ever
 feasted on the fallen, as their friends had done oft.³⁶
- 14 “The high-born liege-lord took the lady from Denmark—
 broke with his Rogaland sweethearts and their sisters from Horthaland,
 with those from Heithmork and Hálogaland eke.”³⁷

THE VALKYRIE

- 15 “Whether is open-handed he-who-hastens-the-battle,³⁸
 to those who fend faithfully foemen from his homeland?”

THE RAVEN

- 16 “With much goods are gladdened the gallant warriors,
 who in the hall of Harold while the time with chess-play:³⁹
 with much wealth he rewards them, and with well-forged broadswords,
 p. 61 with gold from Hunland⁴⁰ and with girls from the Eastfolks.⁴⁰
- 17 “Most happy are they when there is hope for battle,
 all ready to rouse them and to row strongly,⁴¹
 so as to snap the thongs and to sunder the thole-pins,

to churn the brine briskly at the beck of their liege-lord.”

THE VALKYRIE

- 18 “Of the skalds’ lot would I ask thee, since thou skill of that boastest:
how the bards fare there thou full well knowest—
they who are in Harold’s hall.”

THE RAVEN

- 19 “Is seen from their raiment and their red-gold finger-rings
that a kind king they have.
Red fur-cloaks own they, most fairly bordered,
swords wound with silver,⁴² and sarks ring-woven,⁴³
gilded baldricks and graven helmets,
heavy gold bracelets which Harold bestowed on them.”

THE VALKYRIE

- 20 “Of the berserkers’ lot would I ask thee, thou who batten’st on corpses:
how fare the fighters who rush forth to battle,
and stout-hearted stand ’gainst the foe?”

THE RAVEN

- 21 “Wolf-coats are they called, the warriors unfleeing,
who bear bloody shields in battle;
p. 62 the darts redden where they dash into battle
and shoulder to shoulder stand.
’T is men tried and true only, who can targes shatter,
whom the wise war-lord wants in battle.”

THE VALKYRIE

- 22 “Of Andath and all his ilk, too, have I asked thee but little:
how fare the fiddlers, how fare the jugglers
in the halls of Harold?”

THE RAVEN

- 23 “His earless dog does your Andath fondle;

the churl with his fool-tricks makes the folk-warder chuckle.
 Yet be there others who about the fire
 bowls of hot wine bear;
 their flapping fools'-caps they tuck fast in their belts—
 fellows you're free to kick.”⁴⁴

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Footnotes

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[1](#) Concerning his name, cf. the [note](#) on stanza 10.

[2](#) Their gratitude finds typical expression in stanza 19.

[3](#) This surname probably means “raven”—given him with reference, it may be, to his most famous poem.

[4](#) “War-alarum drápa (song of praise).”

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[5](#) I follow Finnur Jónsson’s arrangement.

[6](#) “Beautiful skin (Parchment).”

[7](#) To be sure, it has been observed that the king could not be said to reside on the estates of Útstein and Kvinnar until some time after the conquest of the districts in which they are located.

[8](#) Kenning for “warriors.”

[9](#) As lovers or husbands. The line is difficult.

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[10](#) According to *Grimnismól*, st. 40, the sky was made of the giant Hymir’s skull. The raven cleaves the sky in his flight.

[11](#) No such estate is known. Very likely, the famous royal farm on Ogvaldsnes, on the island of Karm (Rogaland), near the present town of Haugesund, is meant.

[12](#) Adopting Finnur Jónsson’s emendation.

[13](#) The awnings under which the crew slept at night.

[14](#) *I.e.*, at sea.

[15](#) The great banquet and reunion, called the “Yule-ale,” was held at the winter solstice.

[16](#) Frey is the god of fertility and not associated with warfare. One should expect a valkyrie’s name; but as it happens the text is clear, and no valkyrie’s name begins with the alliterating F.

[17](#) Or “pillows.”

[18](#) “Goat-firth,” on the coast of the old district of Rogaland in southwestern Norway.

[19](#) “The Fat”; which is supposed to be the nickname for King Guthrœth of Agthir.

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[20](#) That of the allies: owing to the lay of the land in Western Norway, “east” came frequently to be used for “south.”

[21](#) The warships of the Viking Age frequently had their stems and sterns carved in the likeness of a dragon’s head and tail. Hence the term “dragon-ship.”

[22](#) Both designations for fierce warriors; cf. *Hárbarthslióth*, 37, note.

[23](#) Harold, whose home dominions were in southeastern Norway.

[24](#) This estate, like those mentioned above, is situated in southwestern Norway.

[25](#) Nokkvi is the name of a mythical sea-king; his steed, therefore, is the “ship.”

[26](#) “Long-chin” (or “Long One with the Harelip”); which is thought to be the nickname for Ólaf the White, famous Viking chief of Dublin.

[27](#) “Untidy shock of hair,” Harold’s nickname. The legend tells that, when rejected by the fair Gytha, as not being the lord of all Norway, he made the vow neither to cut nor comb his hair till he had brought the whole land under his sway, or else died. But after he had fulfilled his vow, and had it cut and cleansed, he was called “Hairfair,” from his long silky hair.

[28](#) *I.e.*, in fleeing.

[29](#) *Glathsheimr* “the shining abode,” the dwelling of Óthin in Valholl (see *Grimnismól*, stanza 8), is here substituted by the translator for *Sváfnis salnæfrar* “the-shingles-of-Óthin’s-hall,” *i.e.*, the shields with which (*ibid.*, stanza 9) the roof of Óthin’s hall is covered.

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[30](#) The present Jæ(de)ren, the southwesternmost district of Norway.

[31](#) *I.e.*, to be home again at their ease; but the interpretation is doubtful.

[32](#) Óthin. Fulla, a hypostasis of Frigg, his wife, is substituted here by the translator.

[33](#) *I.e.*, the ravens. There is the suspicion that something is lacking after this line.

[34](#) The Danish princess who superseded Harold's many other wives.

[35](#) *I.e.*, the wolves.

[36](#) The meaning of this difficult stanza is, that the Danish women can now no longer taunt Harold for not having fed the wolves on the carcasses of the slain, *i.e.*, for not being warlike. It has been supposed that stanzas 13 and 14 may be fragments of another poem.

[37](#) In order, these districts lie in the southeast, the west, the east center, and the north, of Norway. The order has been changed here.

[38](#) The king.

[39](#) Or, perhaps, the game referred to in *Heithrek's Riddles*, 26.

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[40](#) Here, probably generalized names.

[41](#) It was by no means below the dignity of warriors to ply the oars in warships; cf. the situation in *Atlamól hin grænlænzku*, stanza 34. The oar moved against a tholepin and was secured by thongs.

[42](#) *I.e.*, the hilts, which were wound with silver wire.

[43](#) *I.e.*, the shirts of mail.

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[44](#) The valkyrie rather falls out of her rôle in asking about Harold's jesters and jugglers. The raven voices the scorn generally felt, and expressed by the skalds, of the low buffoonery of these foreigners—for such they were generally—who competed with the skalds for the favors of their prince. The meaning of lines 3-5 is much debated. I follow S. Blöndal's recent suggestions.

