

THE SIGN OF A HERO: DRAGON-SLAYING IN *ÞIÐREKS SAGA AF BERN*

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In medieval Germanic literature, the ability to slay a dragon is the defining characteristic of each of the greatest heroes: one need only think of Þórr, of Beowulf, and especially of Siegfried to prove the point. In the Old Norse *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*, however, dragon slaying is no longer the exclusive province of the greatest heroes; instead, in these sagas the formula "hero equals dragon slayer" has led to a wholesale multiplication of monster-killing heroes and created the "wilderness of dragons" that R. W. Chambers once offered to trade for a single good story about Ingeld.¹ Once inside that wilderness of dragons, the traditional mythic, religious, and psychological significations of a dragon fight are lost: the hero is no longer fighting a cosmic chaos-monster or a typological figure of Satan; his victory over the dragon no longer serves as the culmination of his maturation into adulthood. Instead, as Kathryn Hume has pointed out, the major function of a dragon slaying in the *fornaldarsögur* is to distinguish the saga's greatest hero from other, lesser heroic figures.²

This presents an interesting problem in *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, a thirteenth-century retelling of the story of Dietrich von Bern which includes a version of the Siegfried story within the larger saga. The author/compiler does not want to allow his account of Siegfried, who is here called *Sigurðr sveinn*, or "Young Sigurðr," and who is the most famous dragon slayer of Germanic legend, to overshadow that of the saga's titular hero, Þiðrekr. He attempts to solve this problem in part by making Sigurðr Þiðrek's vassal, but more effectively by giving Þiðrekr two dragons—as well as three baby monsters—to conquer for Sigurðr sveinn's one, by making those dragons more powerful and dangerous than the one Sigurðr kills, by turning Þiðrekr into a more courtly hero than Sigurðr, and finally by playing down the heroism involved in dragon slaying in general and in Sigurðr sveinn's dragon slaying in particular.

Not all the dragons in *Þiðreks saga* are alike: those which Þiðrekr fights all seem at least on one level to be "natural," i.e.,

bestial in both form and character; they resemble huge flying reptiles. However some dragons in the saga are clearly supernatural, conjured up through magic or created through shapeshifting. For example, Queen Ostasia of Vilkingaland

[s]vá mikit gerði hún af sér í fjölkunngi ok trollskaþ, at hún seiddi til sín margs donar dýr, leóna ok björnu ok flugdreka stóra.... Svá segir í kvæðum þýðerskum, at hennar herr væri líkrfjöldum sjálfum. Hún sjálf var ok sem einn flugdreki. (ch. 352)³

carried out such great spells of magic and trollship that she conjured up many kinds of beasts, lions and bears, and great flying dragons.... It is said in the poems of the Germans that her army was like the devil himself. She herself was like a flying dragon.

The dragon Sigurðr kills is of course also a transformed mortal, but unlike Queen Ostasia, Reginn, as Sigurðr sveinn's dragon is called in the saga, does not become a *flugdreka*, "flying dragon," but rather a wingless *ormr*, a term which has as its primary meaning "snake" or "serpent."⁴ Reginn seemingly stems from an older tradition less influenced by romance literature; he appears less powerful than the flying monsters and his transformation appears to present a somewhat smaller danger to Sigurðr sveinn than the dragons encountered in the rest of the saga.

Moreover, some of the vocabulary used to describe Þiðrek's dragons—but not Reginn—can also be understood as hinting that these dragons could be viewed as supernatural in a Christian sense, that is, as types of Satan. Þiðrek's first dragon is called *andskoti*, "adversary" or perhaps "demon" (ch. 105), and *fjándi*, "enemy" or "fiend" (ch. 106); this is the word translated as "devil" in the quotation above. Both words can signify demonic opponents, but neither need do so: *andskoti* is sometimes used in reference to Satan, while *fjándi*, cognate with Modern English "fiend," developed the same connotations the English word carries. Words like *andskoti* and *fjándi* most likely became standard terminology for describing dragons as a result of the common medieval equation of dragons with the devil, and their usage here might tend to increase Þiðrek's prestige by a subtle analogy with hagiographic dragon tales, even though these dragons behave like large predatory animals, not

Satanic fiends. Neither word is used to describe Reginn, Sigurðr sveinn's dragon, who, although he is *allra manna verstr*, "the worst of all men" (ch. 163), seems to carry no demonic connotations.

The first dragon to appear in *Þiðreks saga* is encountered by Þiðrekr and his companion Fasold as it carries its prey, a knight named Sistram, off to its lair. The two heroes have just ridden out of a forest when the monster makes its dramatic entrance:

í munni sér hefir hann einn mann ok hefir sólgit
fótunum ok allt upp undir hendr. En ór muninum
út stóð höfuðit ok herðarnar. Hendrnar váru í
neðra keftinum, ok enn lifir maðrinn. (ch. 105)

He held a man in his mouth and had swallowed his legs and everything up to his arms. The head and shoulders still protruded from the mouth. The hands were on the lower jaw, and the man was still alive.

This dragon is described as *einn mikinn flugdreka...bæði langr ok digr*, "a huge flying dragon...both long and stout" (ch. 105). Despite its size, however, it is not quite large enough or strong enough to fly while carrying a human victim: when Þiðrekr and Fasold first see it, the dragon is half flying, half running, *ok hvervitna sem klær hans taka jörðina, þá var sem með inu hvassasta járni væri höggvit*, "and everywhere his claws touched the earth it was as if the sharpest iron had struck it" (ch. 105). Later the sagaman explains that the dragon is severely hampered by the weight of the man and his weapons, so much so that *komst hann eigi á loft at fljúga ok eigi sik at verja, svá sem hann væri lauss*, "he could not get aloft to fly or defend himself, as he would have if he had been free" (ch. 105).

The two heroes have a difficult time with the dragon from the start, for while Þiðrekr's sword is sharp enough to wound it *nokkut* "somewhat" (ch. 105), Fasold's sword is virtually useless. Ironically—since they are supposed to be rescuing him—Sistram comes to their aid. He instructs his rescuers to reach down into the monster's jaws and draw his sword, which he says has a good chance of cutting through the dragon's hide, and then tells them how and where to strike:

Högg varliga. Mínir fætr eru harðla langt komnir
niðr í háls drekans, ok skaltu varast þat, at eigi vil

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ek hljóta sár af sjálfs mín sverði. (ch. 105)

Strike carefully. My legs are very far down into the dragon's throat, and you should be careful since I do not want to receive a wound from my own sword.

Sistram not only retains his presence of mind while in the dragon's jaws, he is positively chatty. His calm explanations and suggestions contrast humorously with the grim silence of his rescuers, although it is finally difficult to say whether or not the juxtaposition was intended to be funny.⁵ In any case, the tale is constructed in such a way that the most memorable character is Sistram, the dragon's victim,⁶ not Þiðrekr, or even Fasold, who seems to show the most courage in that it is he who retrieves Sistram's sword from the monster's jaws. Additionally, it is Sistram who adopts a dragon as his heraldic device, even though it is more usual for the dragon slayer to do so.

At first glance it would seem that this is no way to upgrade the status of Þiðrekr to match that of Sigurðr sveinn. Still, if a dragon can be killed by an obviously lesser hero like Fasold, albeit with the help of Þiðrekr and the direction of Sistram, then perhaps one should not judge the heroism of Sigurðr sveinn merely on the basis of his ability to slay monsters; other factors will doubtless be as important, if not more so, and when those other factors are taken into account Þiðrekr can and will emerge as the greater hero. In fact Sigurðr sveinn and his dragon slaying offer a striking contrast to Þiðrekr and his *flugdreka*. Þiðrekr is depicted as a courtly knight, while Sigurðr sveinn's birth and upbringing are marvellous in a way that owes more to folktales than to heroic legend: born in a forest to a treacherously disgraced and dying mother, he is placed in a *glerpott*, "glass vessel" (ch. 160), which is accidentally kicked into a river. The jar drifts downstream, breaks open, and Sigurðr, who in the manner of many folk heroes has been growing larger by the minute, is rescued by a hind, which suckles him with her own young (ch. 162). A year or so later, when Sigurðr is as large as a boy three times his age, the smith Mímir finds him in the forest, naked and speechless, and decides to adopt him, naming him, in what must have been a careless conflation of source material, "Sigfreðr," although this name occurs only three times within the text (ch. 164).

Mímir, as one might expect, has a brother, here named Reginn:

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Hann var mikill fyrir sér ok allra manna verstr, ok honum var þat ok goldit, at hann fekk svá miklar gerningar ok kynsl, at hann varð at ormi. Ok nú gerðist svá, at hann var allra orma mestr ok verstr, ok nú vill hann hvern mann drepa, nema vel er hann við bróður sinn.... (ch. 163)

He was very strong and the worst of all men. This was repaid him in that he took so much to sorcery and magic that he became a dragon. He was the greatest and the worst of all dragons and he set out to kill any man he met, except for his brother.

This description is somewhat reminiscent of the description of Fáfnir, Sigurðr's dragon in *Völsunga saga*, whom the saga calls *miklu mestr ok grimmastr*, "the largest and grimmest,"⁷ of his brothers and who of course also transforms himself into a dragon. But instead of wanting to kill any man he met, Fáfnir *vildi allt eitt kala láta allt þat er var*, "wanted everything to be called his." No mention is made in *Þiðreks saga* of greed being a motive in Reginn's transformation into a dragon; in fact, a hoard as such is not mentioned until after Sigurðr sveinn's death. Reginn's motivation in attacking Sigurðr is neither greed for gold nor hunger for food; he is acting on his brother Mímir's orders to kill the boy.

That Mímir would order Sigurðr sveinn killed is certainly harsh, but within the context of the saga it is almost understandable. Sigurðr is uncontrollable, sullen, and violent. Mímir's apprentices are justifiably afraid of him. Even after the dragon fight, he breaks down the iron gates of Brynhildr's city and needlessly kills seven men before Brynhildr welcomes him despite his behavior. The violence he exhibits is in keeping with his childish temper tantrums at Mímir's smithy: it is crude, unexpected, and entirely gratuitous. The courtly Þiðrekr af Bern would never behave in such a fashion.

Nevertheless, Sigurðr sveinn's violence in the dragon slaying is at least motivated, if only in terms of self defense. In fact, he expresses three different motives in killing Reginn: self defense, a desire to prove himself as a warrior, and simple hunger, since he has in one day eaten the food Mímir told him should last at least nine (ch. 166). Reginn is quickly dispatched: Sigurðr sveinn takes *it mesta tré*, "the largest beam" (ch. 166), from his fire and clubs the dragon to death, then cooks the monster for dinner. When he burns his hand on the hot broth, he puts his fingers in his mouth

and is able to understand the language of birds, who tell him the dragon was Mímir's brother and advise him to kill the smith (ch. 166). In addition, by rubbing himself with the dragon's blood he acquires the invulnerability of horn-hard skin. He returns to Mímir's smithy, carrying the dragon's decapitated head instead of a hoard of gold (ch. 166).

In fact, if Sigurðr sveinn gains anything resembling a hoard as a result of his dragon slaying, it consists of the horse Grani and the armor and sword that Mímir gives him to appease the anger of his dangerous foster son. But if Mímir expects to buy his own safety through these gifts, he is sadly mistaken: Sigurðr sveinn accepts them, arms himself, draws the sword, and kills the smith (ch. 167).

Although a comparison between Þiðrekr and Sigurðr sveinn is implicit in these two dragon slayings, such a comparison is made explicit in Þiðrekr's second dragon fight. This dragon is stronger and more dangerous than the first monster, a fact impressed upon the audience by the dragon's previous killing of King Hertnið, who has foolishly gone into his forest alone to attack the monster *annathvart vinna frægð eða fá bana*, "either gain fame or be killed" (ch. 417). Whereas Sistram's dragon had been unable to fly while carrying its prey, this dragon easily lifts Hertnið *ok flýgr með hann í einn djúpan dal, ok þar er eitt berg ok einn hellir mikill*, "and carrie[s] him to a deep valley where there was a mountain with a large cave" (ch. 417). In the cavern three young dragons eat the king's corpse as the adult dragon, far from coveting the gold and silver-plated armor, tidily *rótar í brott öllum hans vápnum ór sínu bæli*, "rooted out the armor from its den" (ch. 417). The second dragon's main concern seems merely to be feeding its young, and it accordingly hunts in the same forest as King Hertnið. It is called both *dreki* and *ormr*, and the young dragons are referred to once, significantly, as *dýranna*, "animals" (ch. 418).

When Þiðrekr encounters the dragon, the monster is fighting a lion. This is a common enough type-scene in the *riddarasögur* and owes its existence primarily to Norse translations of Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain*.⁸ Usually, however, when the knight enters the fray on the side of the lion, together they are able to defeat the serpent/dragon, and the lion becomes the constant companion and champion of the knight. One might expect something of the sort to occur here, especially when Þiðrekr remembers that he carries a lion as his heraldic device and decides to intervene, even calling upon God to aid him in the battle (ch.

418).

But Þiðrekr is not carrying his best sword, and the sword he does have fails him: the blade breaks off at the hilt, while the dragon, lifting the lion in its mouth, kills it. As Þiðrekr prepares to defend himself with *eitt mikitt tré*, "a large tree" (ch. 418), which he has torn up by the roots, the dragon wraps its tail around him and flies off to its lair, carrying both Þiðrekr and the lion. The lion functions only as a distraction for the baby dragons: they devour it and go to sleep, leaving Þiðrekr unharmed. Thus he is able to escape long enough to find Hertnið's sword, which he uses to kill the monsters.

The saga describes at some length the "hoard" Þiðrekr finds; that is, Hertnið's jewelled and plated armor and his horse, which Þiðrekr must subdue before he can ride. The parallels here are not with the emblematic type-scene which began the dragon fight, but rather with the dragon slaying of Sigurðr sveinn, narrated earlier in the saga.

By this time at least some of the parallels between Sigurðr sveinn's dragon slaying and that of Þiðrekr should be apparent. Both encounter their dragons while alone in a forest: Þiðrekr on a romantic quest to kill the dragon; Sigurðr on the not-so-romantic task of burning charcoal. Sigurðr sveinn, of course, has no sword, while Þiðrekr's sword breaks; thus each hero is forced to fight his dragon with a large (*mesta* or *mikit*) *tré*, "tree, log"; neither obtains a traditional dragon's hoard, but instead each receives armor, a sword, and a horse as a result of killing his dragon. Each hero needs to tame the horse by the unlikely expedient of tripping it, even though we are told that *þetta máttu eigi tólf menn gera at taka þenna hest*, "twelve men would not have been able to capture that horse" (ch. 419); Brynhildr in fact sends twelve men out to bring Grani to Sigurðr, but they fail to capture him (ch. 168). Sigurðr then tries alone, and Grani, seemingly recognizing his master, obediently comes *at móti honum*, "to meet him" (ch. 168).

The formal parallels between the episodes would indicate that the two dragon slayings are to be considered parallel and equivalent, or at least comparable. Þiðrekr appears as the greater hero, in part because the saga gives much more space and attention to his adventure (almost three pages to Sigurðr sveinn's one). In addition, his motive in helping the lion is the more honorable of the two; his method of killing the dragon, by using Hertnið's sword, is the more knightly; and his accomplishment, performed in the

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dragon's own lair and including the three young dragons as well as the large one, is the more prestigious.

At this point the set-piece duel Sigurðr sveinn and Þiðrekr fight might seem somewhat superfluous. In the duel the two are evenly matched, notwithstanding Sigurðr sveinn's obvious advantage of horn-hard skin, and the fight lasts for three days. As long as Þiðrekr fights with Ekkisax, his own sword, the outcome seems likely to be delayed indefinitely; only with Viðga's sword Mímung can Þiðrekr hope to wound Sigurðr sveinn (ch. 221), and Sigurðr has insisted that Þiðrekr swear an oath not to fight with Mímung (ch. 222). But on the third day of the duel Þiðrekr does use Mímung, having cleverly worded his oath to deceive Sigurðr: driving the sword into the earth past the point and letting its hilt rest against him, he swears

at eigi veit hann Mímungs odd fyrir ofan jörð ok eigi veit hann hans meðalkafla í nokkurs manns hendi. (ch. 222)

that he did not know of Mímung's point being above the earth and he did not know of any man's hand being on its hilt.

Sigurðr is satisfied until he finds himself wounded five times in short order. Realizing that he is outmatched, he surrenders his weapons and himself to Þiðrekr (ch. 222). Although at this point in the saga Þiðrekr has yet to slay his second dragon, the import of the scene is clear: despite Sigurðr sveinn's accomplishment of killing a dragon in his youth, he is and will remain a secondary hero within the saga.

To slay a dragon is traditionally the greatest accomplishment of the greatest heroes. This single deed wins everlasting fame and honor for anyone who can perform it: it gives Sigurðr his epithet of *Fáfnisbani*, "Fáfnir's bane" and ensures that

hans nafn gengr í öllum tungum fyrir norðan Grikklandshaf, ok svá mun vera, meðan veröld stendr. (ch. 185)⁹

his name is known in all tongues north of the Greek Sea, and will be known as long as the world lasts.

If the name of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani is not to overshadow that of Þiðrekr af Bern in his own saga, not only must Þiðrekr accomplish

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the same feat more heroically and more often, but the deed itself must be diminished in significance, played down so that Þiðrek's life and legend can assume paramount importance. In *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, a dragon slaying is simply one heroic accomplishment among many, not the heroic measure par excellence.

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Notes

1. J. R. R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," in *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism*, Reprinted from *Proceedings of the British Academy* 22 (1936) 245-295, ed. L. E. Nicholson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), 51-103.
2. Kathryn Hume, "From Saga to Romance: The Use of Monsters in Old Norse Literature," *Studies in Philology* 77 (1980), 3.
3. All citations from *Piðreks saga* are from Guðni Jónsson's reading edition, *Piðreks saga af Bern*, 2 vol. (Reykjavik: Litbrá, 1962). Translations, unless otherwise noted, are from Edward R. Haymes, *The Saga of Thidrek of Bern* (New York: Garland Press, 1988).
4. Cp. Geir T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910; rpt. 1975), which does not list "dragon" as a possible meaning.
5. Marianne E. Kalinke calls the situation "ludicrous" and adds that "[t]he potentially parodistic character of the scene is unmistakable, regardless how the author of *Piðreks saga* intended an audience to react," in *King Arthur North-by-Northwest: The matière de Bretagne in Old Norse-Icelandic Romances*, Bibliotheca Arnarnagnæana 37 (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Boghandel, 1981), 195.
6. Cp. Kalinke, who states, "Authorial focus in *Piðriks saga* is on the beast—through extensive description—and on the victim—through extended dialogue, or to be more exact, monologue, since Piðrikr and Fasold do not reply with words..." (194).
7. Citations and translations from *Völsunga saga* are from R. G. Finch, ed. and trans, *The Saga of the Völsungs* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1968).

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8. For a good discussion of this motif, see Richard L. Harris, "The Lion-Knight Legend in Iceland and the Valþjófsstaðir Door," *Viator* 1 (1970): 125-45.
9. Cp. *hans nafn mun aldrii tynast í þýðverskri tungu ok slíkt sama með Norðmönnum* (ch. 348), "his name will never die in the German language, and the same among the Northmen."