

GUÐRÚNARKVIÐA III (*The Third Lay of Guðrún*)

Bellows' Introduction (1936)

The short *Guthrunarkvitha III*, entitled in the manuscript simply *Guthrunarkvitha*, but so numbered in most editions to distinguish it from the first and second Guthrun lays, appears only in the *Codex Regius*. It is neither quoted nor paraphrased in the *Volsungasaga*, the compilers of which appear not to have known the story with which it deals. The poem as we have it is evidently complete and free from serious interpolations. It can safely be dated from the first half of the eleventh century, for the ordeal by boiling water, with which it is chiefly concerned, was first introduced into Norway by St. Olaf, who died in 1030, and the poem speaks of it in stanza 7 as still of foreign origin.

The material for the poem evidently came from North Germany, but there is little indication that the poet was working on the basis of a narrative legend already fully formed. The story of the wife accused of faithlessness who proves her innocence by the test of boiling water had long been current in Germany, as elsewhere, and had attached itself to various women of legendary fame, but not except in this poem, so far as we can judge, to Guthrun (Kriemhild). The introduction of Thjothrek (Theoderich, Dietrich, Thithrek) is another indication of relative lateness, for the legends of Theoderich do not appear to have reached the North materially before the year 1000. On the anachronism of bringing Thjothrek to Atli's court cf. *Guthrunarkvitha II*, introductory prose, note, in which the development of the Theoderich tradition in its relation to that of Atli is briefly outlined.

Guthrunarkvitha III is, then, little more than a dramatic German story made into a narrative lay by a Norse poet, with the names of Guthrun, Atli, Thjothrek, and Herkja incorporated for the sake of greater effectiveness. Its story probably nowhere formed a part of the living tradition of Sigurth and Atli, but the poem has so little distinctively Norse coloring that it may possibly have been based on a story or even a poem which its composer heard in Germany or from the lips of a German narrator.

Hollander's Introduction (1936)

The legend, fairly current in Germany, of a queen who is falsely accused of adultery, and clears herself by the ordeal is here amalgamated with the Niflung story, showing Guðrún in a role which but ill agrees with the generally accepted turn that she slays Atli immediately after the fall of her brothers. No wonder the lay is not used in the *Volsunga saga*.

Apparently, the poem is wholly Christian and Medieval in spirit—but only apparently: the oath “upon the white and hallowed stone” and the punishment allotted Herkja point in the very opposite direction. We know that the ordeal of boiling water was introduced from Germany into Norway at the beginning of the eleventh century, during the reign of Ólaf the Saint; but in the poem it is still regarded as a new and foreign practice requiring the ministrations of a “Saxon.” Neither language nor versification affords a clue. However, we shall probably not err greatly in suspecting the pleasing little poem to be the work of an Icelander of, say, the late twelfth century who cleverly counterfeited the earlier manner.

OUTLINE

P1	Guðrún accused by Herkja of Indiscretion with Theodoric
1	Guðrún questions Atli about the cause of his sorrow
2	Atli repeats Herkja's accusation
3-6	Guðrún's Plea of Innocence
7-8	Guðrún's Ordeal by Boiling Water
9-10	Of Herkja's Fate

Thorpe (1866)	Bellows (1936)	Hollander (1962)
<p>Atli had a serving-woman named Herkia,¹ who had been his concubine. She informed Atli that she had seen Thiodrek and Gudrun together; whereat Atli was much afflicted. Then Gudrun said:</p> <p>1. What ails thee ever, Atli! Budli's son! Hast thou sorrow in thy heart? Why never laughest thou? To thy jarls it would seem more desirable, That thou with men wouldst talk, and on me wouldst look.</p> <p>Atli</p> <p>2. It grieves me, Gudrun! Giuki's daughter! That in my palace here, Herkia has said, That thou and Thiodrek have under one covering slept, And wantonly been in the linen wrapt.</p> <p>Gudrun</p> <p>3. For all this charge I will give my oaths By the white sacred stone, That with me and Thiodrek nothing has passed, Which to man and wife only belongs;</p> <p>4. Save that I embraced the prince of armies, The honoured king, a single time. Other were our cogitations, When sorrowful we two sat to converse.</p> <p>5. Hither came Thiodrek, with thirty warriors; Now there lives not one of those thirty men. Surround me with thy brothers, and with mailed warriors; Surround me with all thy noblest kinsmen.</p> <p>6. Send to Saxi the Southmen's prince; He can hallow the boiling cauldron."</p> <p>7. Seven hundred men entered the hall, Ere in the cauldron the queen dipt her hand.</p> <p>8. "Now Gunnar comes not, nor call I Hogni: I shall not see again my loved brothers: With his sword would Hogni such wrong avenge: Now I must myself purify from crime."</p> <p>9. She to the bottom, plunged her snow-white hand, And up she drew the precious stones.² "See now, ye men! I am proved guiltless In holy wise, boil the vessel as it may."</p>	<p>[P1]⁴ Herkja⁵ was the name of a serving-woman of Atli's; she had been his concubine. She told Atli that she had seen Thjothrek⁶ and Guthrun both together. Atli was greatly angered thereby. Then Guthrun said:</p> <p>1. "What thy sorrow, Atli, Buthli's son? Is thy heart heavy-laden? Why laughest thou never? It would better befit the warrior far To speak with men, and me to look on."</p> <p>Atli spake:⁷</p> <p>2. "It troubles me, Guthrun, Gjuki's daughter, What Herkja here in the hall hath told me, That thou in the bed with Thjothrek liest, Beneath the linen in lovers' guise."</p> <p>Guthrun spake:</p> <p>3. "This shall I with oaths now swear, Swear by the sacred stone⁸ so white, That nought was there with Thjothmar's son⁹ That man or woman may not know.</p> <p>4. "Nor ever once did my arms embrace The hero brave, the leader of hosts; In another manner our meeting was, When our sorrows we in secret told.</p> <p>5. "With thirty warriors Thjothrek came, Nor of all his men doth one remain;¹⁰ Thou hast murdered my brothers and mail-clad men, Thou hast murdered all the men of my race.</p> <p>6.¹¹ "Gunnar comes not, Hogni I greet not, No longer I see my brothers loved; My sorrow would Hogni avenge with the sword, Now myself for my woes I shall payment win.</p> <p>7.¹² "Summon Saxi,¹³ the southrons' king, For he the boiling kettle can hallow." Seven hundred there were in the hall, Ere the queen her hand in the kettle thrust.</p> <p>8. To the bottom she reached with hand so bright, And forth she brought the flashing stones: "Behold, ye warriors, well am I cleared Of sin by the kettle's sacred boiling."</p>	<p>Herkja¹⁶ was the name of one of Atli's bondmaidens. She had been his leman. She told Atli that she had seen Thjóthrek and Guthrún together. This made Atli very downcast. <i>Then said Guthrún:</i></p> <p>1. "What is it, Atli, that aileth thee? Art sad in mind? Why smil'st thou never? 'Twould seem better to barons in hall If thou spak'st to men and on me didst look."</p> <p><i>(Atli said:)</i></p> <p>2. "I grieve, Guthrún, Gjúki's daughter, O'er what in hall Herkja told me: That thou with Thjóthrek, Thjóthmar's¹⁷ son, Hast lain in love 'neath linen cover."</p> <p><i>(Guthrún said:)</i></p> <p>3. "I swear to thee all sacred oaths Upon the white and hallowed stone:¹⁸ That we twain never and nowise did What for maid and man is unmeet to do.</p> <p>4. "I never kissed¹⁹ the Gothic king, The noble warrior, one time even: Far other were our earnest words, When full sorrow we sate together.²⁰</p> <p>5. "Thanes full thirty followed Thjóthrek hither: None after liveth of all these men. Of my brethren didst rob me, the byrni-clad men, Didst rob me of all my next of kin.</p> <p>6.²¹ "Gone is Gunnar, nor greet I Hogni; I will see no more my sweet brethren twain; With his sword would Hogni this slur avenge— Now myself I must of this sin clear me.</p> <p>7. "Send for Saxi,²² the Southron lord, For he can bless the boiling kettle." In hall foregathered seven hundred thanes When Atli's queen to the kettle went.</p> <p>8. To the bottom plunged she her bright forearm, And out she fetched the flashing gems: "Behold, ye heroes, upheld my honor By holy award, though the water boil."</p>

<p>10. Laughed then Atli's heart within his breast, When he unscathed beheld the hand of Gudrun. "Now must Herkia to the cauldron go, She who Gudrun had hoped to injure." No one has misery seen who saw not that, How the hand there of Herkia was burnt. They then the woman led to a foul slough.³ So were Gudrun's wrongs avenged.</p>	<p>9. Then Atli's heart in happiness laughed, When Guthrun's hand unhurt he saw; "Now Herkja shall come the kettle to try, She who grief for Guthrun planned." 10. Ne'er saw man sight more sad than this, How burned were the hands of Herkja then; In a bog so foul the maid they flung,¹⁴ And so was Guthrun's grief requited.¹⁵</p>	<p>9. Laughed the Hunnish king's heart in his breast, When shole he saw the hands of Guthrún. "Let Herkja come to the kettle now, She who to Guthrún this grudge did bear." 10. No sadder sight was seen ever Than when Herkja's hands were wholly burnt. To stinking moor was the maid then ta'en.²³ Thus was Guthrún all guiltless seen.²⁴</p>
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¹ Herkia, the Erka or Helche of the German tradition, who here appears as a slave or servant, is, according to that tradition, the queen of Etzel or Atli, who did not marry Kreimhilt (Gudrun) until after her death. The falsification of the story, the pitiful subordinate part acted by Thiodrek, the perfect silence of all the other poems on this event, and the ordeal of the cauldron, sufficiently show that the poem is a later composition. P.E. Muller (II., p. 319) ascribes it to Sæmund himself.

² The *iarknastein* of the original was a milk-white opal.

³ This punishment was known to the old Germans.

⁴ The annotator derived all the material for this note from the poem itself, except for the reference to Herkja as Atli's former concubine.

⁵ Herkja: the historical Kreka and the Helche of the *Nibelungenlied*, who there appears as Etzel's (Attila's) first wife.

⁶ Thjothrek: cf. Introductory Note.

⁷ The manuscript omits the names of the speakers throughout.

⁸ Holy stone: just what this refers to is uncertain; it may be identical with the "ice-cold stone of Uth" mentioned in an oath in *Helgakvitha Hundingsbana II*, 29.

⁹ Thjothmar's son: the manuscript has simply "Thjothmar." Some editions change it as here, some assume that Thjothmar is another name or an error for Thjothrek, and Finnur Jonsson not only retains Thjothmar here but changes Thjothrek to Thjothmar in stanza 5 to conform to it.

¹⁰ Regarding the death of Thjothrek's men cf. *Guthrunarkvitha II*, introductory prose, note. It was on these stanzas of *Guthrunarkvitha III* that the annotator based his introduction to *Guthrunarkvitha II*. The manuscript repeats the "thirty" in line 2, in defiance of metrical requirements.

¹¹ In the manuscript this stanza follows stanza 7; many editions have made the transposition.

¹² Some editions make two stanzas out of stanza 7, and Mullenhoff contends that lines 1-2 do not constitute part of Guthrun's speech.

¹³ Who Saxi may be is not clear, but the stanza clearly points to the time when the ordeal by boiling water was still regarded as a foreign institution, and when a southern king (i. e., a Christian from some earlier-converted region) was necessary to consecrate the kettle used in the test. The ordeal by boiling water followed closely the introduction of Christianity, which took place around the year 1000.

¹⁴ The punishment of casting a culprit into a bog to be drowned was particularly reserved for women, and is not infrequently mentioned in the sagas.

¹⁵ The word "requited" in line 4 is omitted in the manuscript, but it is clear that some such word was intended.

¹⁶ Historically, Kreka. In the *Nibelungenlied*, Helche is the name of Atli's first wife.

¹⁷ Historically, Theodemer, who actually was in Attila's service.

¹⁸ Probably, a phallic symbol. Compare with the similar oath in *Helgakvitha Hundingsbana II*, St.30.

¹⁹ According to Sijmons' emendation.

²⁰ See *Guthrunarkvitha II*, Introductory Prose.

²¹ The sequence in the original is St. 7, St. 6.

²² "The Saxon," that is, German.

²³ This is the Old Germanic mode of capital punishment for women.

²⁴ Translated *ad sensum*.