

5 Snorri specifically mentions *hofgoðar*. The evidence for these figures is overwhelmingly Icelandic in origin, though the sagas place them in other countries too, such as Norway. Outside Iceland the term is known only from two Danish runestones, with inscriptions that hint at the *goðar* having once had a purely ritual function, their political power developing over time (Brink 1996: 267; Näsström 2002b: 94ff).

The *goði* also had a female equivalent, the *gyðja*, whom we will encounter again in the context of sorcery. The role of women in the officialdom of cultic practice was taken up relatively early in Viking studies, especially in relation to fertility rituals (e.g. Phillpotts 1914), and it is clear that some of the *gyðja* enjoyed a very high status in the apparatus of cult. Several factors suggest a connection to Freyja and the Vanir, and both the *goði* and the *gyðja* could have responsibility for the sacrificial *blót* (cf. Näsström 2002b: 97f).

A constant element in the written descriptions of all these ‘offices’ and ‘titles’ is that they could occasionally be combined with additional roles - again, this merging of secular and ‘religious’ power. There are suggestions that the inner access to the gods and their servants was relatively restricted, but more along lines of social standing than of initiation into the mysteries. Similarly, the various ‘officials’ mentioned above do not seem to have had a priest-like monopoly on communication with otherworldly powers, and this is important when we come to consider sorcery below. It is also clear that behind the cultic rites and those responsible for them, there was another level of popular belief and unarticulated superstition.

Here we find the mythology reflected in small ways, in everyday practices corresponding to everyday beliefs – though the latter may be far from mundane. In *Gylfaginning* (51) Snorri gives us a glimpse of this, relating to two aspects of the Ragnarök story. In the account above we have seen the ‘Nail-Ship’, Naglfar, and the vital role it plays in ferrying the armies of evil to fight against the gods. Because it is made from the fingernails of the dead, Snorri explains that this is why one should be very careful to trim the nails of a dying person – there is no reason to hasten the ship’s construction by contributing the raw materials. The exact corollary of this is mentioned later in the same passage, in relation to Víðarr’s shoe. After Fenrir has swallowed Óðinn, his son Víðarr plants his foot on the wolf’s lower jaw, which he presses down while forcing its mouth wider and wider. Fenrir is torn in two, and Óðinn is avenged. The animal’s jaws are enormous, stretching from the earth to the sky, so Víðarr obviously needs some impressive footwear: Snorri tells us that his shoe is sewn from all the tiny scraps of leather left over when anything is made here in Miðgarðr. One should therefore be careful to throw these away, because every little helps.

The same process is probably visible in the archaeology of pendant ‘amulets’ and ‘charms’ of the kind that we shall consider in chapter three. Occasionally we are given a small window onto a broader scene, in which we can perceive not just objects but actions taken with them. A good example emerged at Birka in the excavations of the early 1990s, when a number of amulets of different kinds were found built into the make-up of a road through the town. Too many of these were found within a small area for there to be any question of accidental loss, and it seems certain that an amulet ring, Þórr’s hammer and a miniature weapon were deliberately laid down while the road was undergoing one of its periodic repairs (see Price 1995b: 75f).

The fabric of religious belief and practice in Viking Age Scandinavia can be seen to have been nuanced, multi-scalar and far from static, with a degree of regional variation and change over time. Seen against this pattern of semi-structured spirituality, how does sorcery fit in?

## The double world: *seiðr* and the problem of Old Norse ‘magic’

In 1986 when the French Viking specialist Régis Boyer published his study of Old Norse magic, he chose as his title *Le monde du double*, ‘the world of the double’. As he makes clear in his introduction, it often comes as a surprise to realise just how fundamental a role the practice of magic played in the Scandinavian mental universe. In his concept of the ‘Double’, he tries to frame this as a kind of parallel belief, a mirror held up alongside the more elevated apparatus of Viking ‘religion’ proper. To some extent I would agree with his assessment, though I feel that the two worlds are more closely

linked than he credits. The reason for this lies once again in terminology and what we understand by it.

We have already seen how our modern concepts of ‘religion’ are not necessarily compatible with those of the Viking Age. We can make the same observation about the social environment of sorcery at the same period. The first problems come at the level of apparently simple definition, which on closer inspection turns out to be far from straightforward. Today we speak fluidly of ‘magic’ and ‘witchcraft’, the working of ‘spells’ and ‘charms’, all performed by ‘sorcerers’, ‘witches’, ‘warlocks’, ‘wizards’ and so on. In popular parlance there is little to choose between any of these terms, but no-one would link them with formal religion as it is generally perceived. In the early medieval period the situation was very different, in two ways.

Firstly, there seems to have been a very precise vocabulary of sorcery, encompassing its forms, functions, practice and practitioners. Secondly, through intimate links with divinities such as Óðinn and Freyja, and also in its underlying principles which included some of the soul beliefs reviewed above, the whole structure of sorcery was interlaced with that of cult. Simek (1993: 199) has perhaps come closest to illuminating this relationship when he writes of magic as “the mentality [and] the practices with which the mechanisms of supernatural powers are set into motion”.

When defined in this way, it is clear from the written sources that one concept above others lay at the core of Old Norse concepts of magic. Its name was *seiðr*, and its closer study will be central to much of this book.

*Seiðr* would have been pronounced approximately ‘saythe’, rhyming with the modern English ‘swathe’, but with a slightly inflected ‘r’ sound at the end in the nominative form (similar to ‘the’ when spoken before a consonant, thus ‘sayther’). Several scholars have noted that etymologically it seems to belong to a group of Indo-European words with connotations of ‘binding’, especially in a sorcerous context (e.g. Dronke 1997: 133).

It is described at length in a number of Old Norse sources, and circumstantially in a great many more. These are all reviewed in detail below, but at this point we can simply note that it seems to have been a collective term for a whole complex of practices, each serving a different function within the larger system of sorcery. There were *seiðr* rituals for divination and clairvoyance; for seeking out the hidden, both in the secrets of the mind and in physical locations; for healing the sick; for bringing good luck; for controlling the weather; for calling game animals and fish. Importantly, it could also be used for the opposite of these things - to curse an individual or an enterprise; to blight the land and make it barren; to induce illness; to tell false futures and thus to set their recipients on a road to disaster; to injure, maim and kill, in domestic disputes and especially in battle.

More than anything else, *seiðr* seems to have been an extension of the mind and its faculties. Even in its battlefield context, rather than outright violence it mostly involved the clouding of judgement, the freezing of the will, the fatal hesitation. It was also closely linked to the summoning of spirits and other beings of various kinds, who could be bound to the sorcerer’s will and then sent off to do her or his bidding. In line with the ‘invisible population’ we have encountered above, an important category of these beings were also extensions of the individual in its manifestations of a multiple soul – the *fylgjur*, *hamingjur* and so on.

The link to cultic practice comes primarily through the god Óðinn, who as we shall see is named in several sources as the supreme master of *seiðr*, along with Freyja from whom he learnt its power. The Vanir provide a clue to another important aspect of this sorcery, in their role as divinities of fertility and sexual potency. Not only do many *seiðr* rituals seem to have been sexual in their objectives, but they may also have been so in the nature of their performance. Beyond the practices with specific carnal intentions, this emphasis on sexuality is also often found in a surprising number of *seiðr*’s other functions reviewed above. By extension, the enactment of these rites seems to have placed so great a demand on their performers as to mark them with a different form of gender identity, outside the conventional norms of Viking Age society.

It is in connection with all these elements that *seiðr* has consistently been viewed as a Norse counterpart to what has elsewhere been called shamanism. This, together with the social context and functions of *seiðr*, forms the subject of the following chapters. We shall look especially at *seiðr*’s employment in warfare and as part of what we might call a divinely-inspired ideology of martial

valour, backed up by the constructions of sexuality and gender with which it was underpinned. However, *seiðr* is far from the only form of sorcery mentioned in the Old Norse sources, and before proceeding further we first need to pose a question as to the nature of these other magics, their relationship with *seiðr*, and the degree to which they may be considered collectively.

### The other magics: *galdr*, *gandr* and ‘Óðinnic sorcery’

Essentially there occur five categories of sorcery in the sources, besides *seiðr* itself. Three of them were also named complexes of ritual and technique – though apparently in a looser sense than *seiðr* – while the others are modern constructions which derive from an analysis of the texts:

- *galdr*
- *gandr*
- *útisetá*
- a group of un-named rituals connected through the abilities of the god Óðinn, here termed ‘Óðinnic sorcery’
- a general ‘background noise’ of popular magic, often unsophisticated or indeed completely unarticulated in a practical way, occurring throughout the literature

The most distinctive of these five is undoubtedly *galdr*, which seems to have been a specific form of sorcery focusing on a characteristic type of high-pitched singing. The word has a relative today in the modern Swedish verb *gala*, used for the crowing of a rooster and for the most piercing of birdcalls (see Raudvere 2001: 90-7 and 2002 on the importance of verbalising this kind of sorcery). The saga descriptions of *galdr*-songs note that they were pleasing to the ear, and there is a suggestion of a special rhythm in view of the incantation metre called *galdralag*, as described by Snorri in *Háttatal* (101-2) and used occasionally in Eddic poems such as *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrifomál*.

One of the first major studies of the form was made by Ivar Lindquist (1923), but he applied the term very liberally to a broad range of charms from the whole of the Iron Age. Reichborn-Kjennerud (1928: 71, 76, 81) argued that *galdr* was employed most often for cursing, with an emphasis on the destructive power of the tongue – he cites examples of its use to induce sicknesses of various kinds in both humans and animals, and also to kill. He claims a close connection between *galdr* and runic lore (*ibid*: 81). However, *galdr* in fact occurs in a variety of contexts as we shall see in the coming chapters, and it seems that its status as a distinct form of magic was probably beginning to blur by the end of the Viking period.

It performed many, if not all, of the same functions as *seiðr*, and in a great many instances the two are used in combination (the term *seiðgaldr* even occurs in a fourteenth-century source that we shall examine below). Despite this, in every case it is *seiðr* which sets the pattern for the ritual as a whole. *Galdr* can be seen rather as a particular element in a larger complex of operative magical practice, one option in the toolkit of ritual. By the Middle Ages proper, the term had become synonymous with magic in general.

*Gandr* forms yet another distinct category here, with origins that go back much earlier than the Viking Age. The basic sense of the word is often argued to mean simply ‘magic’, and de Vries has suggested that it can be related to the concept of Ginnungagap (1931a; his interpretation is discussed in chapter three). This is important, as it suggests *gandr* to be one of the primal forces from which the worlds were formed, and thus implies that this form of sorcerous power was of considerable dignity. That this type of sorcery also had an early history is shown by tantalising references from Classical writers, for example the name *Ganna* attributed by Dio Cassius in his *Roman History* (67: 5) to the prophetess of the North German Semnones, and which is also from the same root (de Vries 1957: §229; see also Closs 1936).

By the Viking Age, and as with *galdr*, we find combinations of ritual forms. In several instances there are references to sorceresses using *gandr* in conjunction with *seiðr* in order to prophesy, for example in *Völuspá* (22, 29). The term also had a special application in the sense of both spirit beings and the staff that may have been used to summon them; these are discussed in chapter three.

Another aspect of Norse sorcery was the practice of *útiseta*, ‘sitting out’, which does not seem to have been a specific ritual so much as a technique to put other rituals into effect. Clearly related to Óðinnic communications with the dead, in brief it seems to have involved sitting outside at night, in special places such as burial mounds, by running water or beneath the bodies of the hanged, in order to receive spiritual power. It is considered in greater depth in chapter three.

The rituals performed by Óðinn form a category in their own right, beyond the specific complexes of *seiðr* and *galdr*, both of which the god employs. Several of them are also available to human sorcerers, but the Eddic poems make it clear that others are not, and are among the powers purchased on the god’s many quests for magical knowledge. These skills are recorded in the list of spells in poems such as *Hávamál*, in the catalogues of runes of power, and in the narratives of sagas. Again, they are reviewed in the following chapters.

Besides the magic used by Óðinn, we also find the fifth category of ‘general’ sorcery. One aspect of this has a vocabulary of terms that appear to mean simply ‘magic’ in the same vague sense as we use the word today. The most common of these was *ffolkyngi*, which seems to have been especially well-used. In the Old Norse sources we also find *fróðleikr*, and slightly later, *trolldómr* (cf. Raudvere 2001: 88ff). The latter concept became increasingly common through the Middle Ages, and together with *galdr* it continued as one of the generic words for ‘witchcraft’ long into post-medieval times (see Hastrup 1987: 331-6 for Icelandic terminologies of magic during this period).

There were also other terms which were used as collectives. These include *gerningar*, *ljóð* and *taufr* - all apparently kinds of chant or charm - and the complexities of runic lore as set out in Eddic poems such as *Sigrdrifomál* and *Rígsþula*. Another group of terms refers to various forms of unspecified magical knowledge, and include affixes implying this on the part of people or supernatural beings. Thus we find *visenda-*, *kúnatta-* and similar words used for ‘those who know’, a relatively common perception of sorcerous power that occurs in many cultures.

Given these ‘other’ magics, to what extent can we discuss Old Norse sorcery in generic terms, and can we use the terminologies of *seiðr* for this purpose?

The key lies in the definition of sorcery itself, both in the sense usually employed by historians of religions and also with specific reference to the Viking Age. Even without the conventions of ‘worship’ discussed above, the human relationship to the gods was not an equal one, and inevitably involved a degree of subservience that characterised all the different kinds of cult activity that we have examined. This applies to the notion of *blót*, ‘sacrifice’, in particular. In the world of sorcery this was not the case, a state of affairs that hinges on the idea of control. Magic seems to have been used by human beings as a means of *actively* steering the actions of supernatural beings for their own ends, first attracting or summoning them, and then binding them to do the sorcerer’s will (cf. Ström 1961b: 221f).

In one form or another this concept is common to all the different magics reviewed above, but only in one of them is it made explicit – in *seiðr*. This ‘binding’ sorcery is also the only one conceived as a complete type of magic in the original sources, and the only form of it that combines elements of the others into a greater whole. As we have seen, although both *galdr* and *gandr* are also categorised in the written sources, the former was more of a technique while the latter seems to have referred mainly to a general kind of sorcerous energy from which all power was drawn. Again, when each (or both) of these are performed in conjunction with *seiðr*, there is never any doubt that the latter is the primary, formative element in the ritual.

In this specific sense, there are therefore grounds for discussing *seiðr* as a generic for Old Norse sorcery. However, this is also warranted by the general vagueness of the descriptions of Viking magic, this lack of consistent orthodoxy which as we have seen was an integral part of the Norse attitude to the spiritual. Again and again in the sources, and in the terminologies of sorcerers that we will examine in the next chapter, we seem to find *seiðr* used *simultaneously* as a precise term and also as a generalisation for ‘sorcery’ in our modern sense of the word. In using *seiðr* as a primary category, in a manner that implicitly includes the other magics, we would therefore seem to be following the fashion in which the Norse themselves understood the concept.

We can now review the written sources on which our knowledge of *seiðr* is based.

## *Seiðr* in the sources

By the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when many of the heroic sagas and *fornaldarsögur* were composed, *seiðr* had become incorporated into the general stock of fantastic magical phenomena with which medieval authors entertained their readers. However, there is no doubt that at least in Iceland, and very probably in Norway and the rest of Scandinavia too, at least some details of its Viking Age reality were remembered. Not least, these included the breadth of *seiðr*'s applications and functions, and its capacity to produce positive and negative effects. The prologue to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, one of the most outlandish of the medieval 'Viking' romances, gives us a brief glimpse of how *seiðr* was perceived in the High Middle Ages:

Er þat ok margra heimskra manna náttúra, at þeir trúá því einu, er þeir sjá sínum augum eða heyra sínum eyrum, er þeim þykkir fjarlæggt sinni náttúru, svá sem orðit hefir um vitra manna ráðagerðir eða mikitt afl eða frábæran léttleika fyrir manna, svá ok eigi síðr um konstir eða huklaraskap ok mikla fjölkyngi, þá þeir seiddu at sumum monnum ævinliga ógæfu eða aldrtila, en sumum veraldar virðing, fjár ok metnaðar. Þeir æstu stundum höfuðskepnur, en stundum kyrrðu, svá sem var Óðinn eða aðrir þeir, er af honum námu galdrlistir eða lækningar.

Moreover there are plenty of people so foolish that they believe nothing but what they have seen with their own eyes or heard with their own ears - never anything unfamiliar to them, such as the counsels of the wise, or the strength and amazing skills of the great heroes, or the way in which *seiðr*, skills of the mind [*huklaraskap*] and powerful sorcery [*fjölkyngi*] may *seið*\* death or a lifetime of misery for some, or bestow worldly honours, riches and rank on others. These [men] would sometimes stir up the elements, and sometimes calm them down, just like Óðinn and all those who learnt from him the skills of *galdr* and healing.

\* *seið* is here used as a verb - see chapter three

*Göngu-Hrólfs saga* prologue

translation after Hermann Pálsson & Edwards 1980: 27, with my amendments

Viewed as a whole, it is true to say that the corpus of Icelandic sagas, skaldic verse and Eddic poetry is saturated with references to sorcery in general, and *seiðr* in particular. Its practitioners are of both sexes and are given a variety of titles, but the constant prevalence of magic never subsides.

Even taking into account the wavering reliability of the sagas as sources for the Viking Age that they describe, in view of the sheer cumulative volume of references to 'everyday' witchcraft it is surprising that so little work has been done on its integration into our models of the Viking world. Philologists have discussed sorcery, certainly, but almost exclusively in terms of medieval literary motifs and narrative structure. They have not tried to relate it to any kind of Viking Age reality, and understandably so because this is not part of the research agenda for ancient linguistics. Historians of religions have sought patterns of behaviour, and the 'roots' of different aspects of cult - especially that of Óðinn - but here again there have been relatively few attempts to build up an image of sorcery as it was perceived at the time. Although there are numerous synthetic treatments of Viking religion, referenced throughout this book, these do not generally present belief in the broader context of society in general (a good exception is Steinsland & Meulengracht Sørensen 1994, but this is deliberately written at a popular level and does not go into depth). Archaeological syntheses, equally common, tend to suffer from the same problem in reverse, reducing religion to a summary of the gods and Eddic myths in so far as they can be linked to material culture. These works have largely tended to ignore magic and witchcraft due to the difficulties of accessing such phenomena through the archaeological record. There are, of course, exceptions to which we shall return below.

We can begin by briefly summarising the textual sources for *seiðr* (cf. Strömbäck 1935: 17-107; Almqvist 2000: 250-60). The most important of them are quoted in full here, while others are merely referenced; all of them are taken up in detail in this and subsequent chapters.

## Skaldic poetry

The corpus of skaldic poetry contains two direct references to *seiðr*, and a number of kennings that play upon it. The earliest dated reference occurs in a *lausavísa* of Vitgeirr seiðmaðr, significantly a sorcerer himself. It was probably composed around 900 and is contained in chapter 35 of Snorri's *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*. It is quoted in full in chapter three, in the section on male practitioners of magic.

*Seiðr* is also mentioned in strophe 3 of the skaldic praise-poem *Sigurðardrápa*, composed by Kormákr Ögmundarson around 960. The poet alludes to Óðinn's rape of Rindr, achieved by means of disguising himself through sorcery, with the words: *seið Yggr til Rindar*, 'Yggr [i.e. Óðinn] got Rindr with *seiðr*'.

Two verses from the thirteenth-century *Friðþjófs saga hins frækna*, attributed to Friðþjof himself, mention rituals that are described as *seiðr* in the accompanying prose, but cannot be taken as direct early evidence for it (in *Skjaldedigtning* BII: 295).

The term also appears in four kennings, from three sources. The first is from a *lausavísa* of Egill Skalla-Grímsson, dated c.924 by Finnur Jónsson:

Upp skulum órum sverðum,  
ulfs tannlituðr, glitra,  
eigum dōð at drygja,  
í dalmiskunn fiska;  
leiti upp til Lundar  
lýða hverr sem bráðast,  
gerum þar fyr sjot sólar  
seið ófagran vigra.

We shall, painter of the wolf's tooth [warrior], make our swords glitter in the air. We have to perform our deeds in the mild season of the valley-fish [snakes > summer]. Let everyone go as quickly as possible up to Lund. Let us make the harsh spear-*seiðr* before sunset.

Egill Skalla-Grímsson *lausavísa* 6 (*Skjaldedigtning* BI: 43), translation after Fell 1975: 184

This is a problematic poem, mainly because we know from archaeological data that the town of Lund was definitely not in existence in the early tenth century. There is thus no doubt that the text of Egill's verse is at least partly corrupt. However, the attribution of the poem to a different battle than that for which it was written, for whatever reason, does not affect the kenning of *vigra seiðr*, nor its probable location in the original verse.

Two more *seiðr*-kennings were used by the eleventh-century skald Eiríkr víðsjá, in *lausavísur* dated to the year 1014. Both occur in battle contexts, and seem to refer to warriors in both instances (*lögðis seiðr*, 'destruction's *seiðr*' - str. 5; *Fjölfnis seiðr*, 'Fjölfnir's *seiðr*' - str. 6). The fourth kenning, from strophe 12 of Sturla Þórðarson's *Hákonarkviða*, dates to the 1260s. Simpler in form, *sverða seiðr* means 'sword-*seiðr*' and is a clear parallel to Egill's *vigra seiðr* of three centuries earlier.

The intended sense in all these examples seems to be of *seiðr* as a song, depicting the fighting warrior as embodying a sort of hymn to combat or to the patrons of such (a common theme in kennings).

## Eddic poetry

From the corpus of Eddic poetry, we first find references to *seiðr* in *Völuspá* (22), with slight variations between the Codex Regius and Hauksbók texts (Strömbäck 1935: 17-21). The original composition of the poem is most often dated to the very late tenth century, though its preservation stems from the early 1200s when the first - now lost - versions of the Codex Regius version seem to have been composed. Our existing texts derive from the late thirteenth century (Dronke 1997: 62f). The text is given here from Dronke's edition, with a rather free translation by Larrington; its interpretation and alternative, more exact translations are discussed below:

Heiði hana héto                      Bright Heiðr they called her,  
hvars til húsa kom,                    wherever she came to houses,

vǫlo vel spá	the seer with pleasing prophecies,
- vitti hón ganda.	she charmed them with spells;
Seið hón kunni,	she made <i>seiðr</i> whenever she could,
seið hón leikin.	with <i>seiðr</i> she played with minds,
Æ var hón angan	she was always the favourite
illrar brúðar.	of wicked women.

Vǫluspá 22; text after Dronke 1997, translation after Larrington 1996: 7

*Seiðr* appears again in *Lokasenna* (24), the ritualistic exchange of insults which many scholars believe to be an original composition by a pagan poet of the late Viking Age, or at least a twelfth- or thirteenth-century embellishment of such (Dronke 1997: 355). In one of his series of slanders directed against the gods, and in reply to Óðinn, Lóki makes the following allegation:

En þik síða kóðo	But you, they said, performed <i>seiðr</i>
Sámseyio í,	on Samsø,
ok draptu á vétt sem vǫlor.	and tapped on a <i>vétt</i> like the <i>vǫlor</i> .
Vitka líki	Like a <i>vitka</i>
fórtu verþjóð yfir,	you went over the world of men,
ok hugða ek þat argð aðal.	and that I thought to be <i>argr</i> behaviour.

*Lokasenna* 24; text after Dronke 1997, with her translation and my amendments

This introduces several of the key themes in the study of Old Norse sorcery: its context, its practitioners (the *vǫlor* and the *vitkar*, amongst others), the ritual itself and its equipment (the *vétt*), and its social connotations (the idea of *argr*, or *ergi*). All these are taken up in detail in chapter three, where the *Lokasenna* passage is reviewed.

The third *seiðr*-reference in the Eddic corpus comes from strophe 33 of *Hyndluljóð*, as part of what is generally agreed to be an interpolation known as the ‘Shorter Vǫluspá’ (*Vǫluspá in skamma*) which is also quoted in *Gylfaginning* 5. The passage recounts the genealogical ancestry of sorcerers:

Ero vǫlor allar	frá Viðólfi,
vitkar allir frá Vilmeiði,	
en seiðberendr	frá Svarthöfða,
iǫtnar allir frá Ymi komnir.	

All the *vǫlor* are descended from Viðólfr,  
all the *vitkar* from Vilmeiðr,  
and the *seiðberendr* from Svarthöfði,  
all the giants come from Ymir.

Text: Neckel & Kuhn 1983; translation after Larrington 1996: 257

The ‘Shorter Vǫluspá’ is generally agreed to be later than the rest of *Hyndluljóð*, with datings ranging from the late 1100s (Klingenberg 1974: 9, 36) to a century later (Finnur Jónsson 1920: 206; de Vries 1967: 107ff; the arguments are summarised by Steinsland 1991: 247f, who suggests that the poem is in fact a unified work, including the ‘interpolation’). Here the focus is once again on specific types of practitioner, with the *vǫlor* and *vitkar* being joined by the *seiðberendi*, the ‘*seiðr*-carrier’ which is discussed in chapter three.

### The sagas of the kings

In the royal sagas of Snorri’s *Heimskringla* we encounter *seiðr* on numerous occasions, generally presented in incidental fashion embedded in the narrative. However, in one source it is presented in a more explanatory context, and this is of course the *Ynglingasaga*. It first appears in chapter 4, when we read of the introduction of sorcery to the Æsir gods by Freyja:

Dóttir Niarðar var Freyja; hon var blótgyðja; hon kendi fyrst með Ásum seið, sem Vönur var títt.

The daughter of Njörðr was Freyja; she was a *blótgyðja* ['priestess of sacrifices']; she was the first to teach *seiðr* to the Æsir, as it was practiced among the Vanir.

*Ynglingasaga* 4; my translation

The importance of this gift becomes clear in chapter seven of the *Ynglingasaga*, when Snorri declares how it was used by Óðinn, who came to be the supreme master of this form of magic. The reference to *seiðr* is contained in a longer description of the god's powers, and this context is important to preserve in its shifts of emphasis and tone, and the distinctions drawn between different categories of sorcery which are here introduced for the first time:

Óðinn skipti hómum, lá þá búkrinn sem sofinn eða dauðr, en hann var þár fugl eða dýr, fiskr eða ormr, ok fór á einni svipstund á fjarlæg lönd at sínum erendum eða annarra manna. Þat kunni hann enn at gera með orðum einum at slökva eld ok kyrra sjá ok snúa vindum, hverja leið er hann vildi, ok hann átti skip þat, er Skíðblaðnir hét, er hann fór á yfir höf stór, en þat mátti vefja saman sem dúk. Óðinn hafði með sér höfuð Mímis, ok sagði þat honum tíðendi ór öðrum heimum, en stundum vakði hann upp dauða menn ór jörðu eða settisk undir hanga; fyrir því var hann kallaðr draugadróttinn eða hangadróttinn. Hann átti hrafna ii, er hann hafði tamit við mál; flugu þeir víða um lönd ok sögðu honum mörq tíðendi. Af þessum hlutum varð hann stórliga fróðr. Alla þessar íþróttir kendi hann með rúnnum ok ljóðum þeim, er galdrar heita; fyrir því eru Æsir kallaðir galdrasmíðir. Óðinn kunni þá íþrótt, svá at mestr mátr fylgði, ok framði sjálfr, er seiðr heitir, en af því mátti hann vita ørlög manna ok óorðna hluti, svá ok at gera mǫnnum bana eða óhamingju eða vanheilendi, svá ok at taka frá mǫnnum vit eða afl ok gefa öðrum. En þessi fjölkyngi, ef framið er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlmǫnnum skammლაust víðat fara, ok var gyðjunum kend sú íþrótt. Óðinn vissi um alt jarðfé, hvar fólgit var, ok hann kunni þau ljóð, er upp lausk fyrir honum jörðin ok björg ok steinar ok haugarnir, ok batt hann með orðum einum þá, er fyrir bjoggu, ok gekk inn ok tók þar slíkt, er hann vildi. Af þessum kröptum varð hann mjök frægr, óvinir hans óttuðusk hann, en vinir hans treystusk honum ok trúðu á krapt hans ok á sjálfan hann. En hann kendi flestar íþróttir sínar blótgoðunum; váru þeir næst honum um allan fróðleik ok fjölkyngi. Margir aðrir námu þó mikit af, ok hefir þaðan af dreifzk fjölkyngin víða ok haldizk lengi.

Óðinn could change his shape [*hamr*], when his body would lie there as if asleep or dead, while he himself was a bird or an animal, a fish or a snake, and would travel in an instant to far-off lands on his errands or those of other men. He was also able, using words alone, to extinguish fires and to calm the sea, and to turn the winds wherever he wished. He had a ship called Skíðblaðnir ['Built From Pieces Of Thin Wood'] with which he sailed over great seas, but which could be folded up like a cloth. Óðinn had with him Mímr's head, and it told him many tidings from other worlds [*heimar*]; at times he would wake up dead men out of the ground or sit beneath the hanged; from this he was called Lord of Ghosts or Lord of the Hanged. He had two ravens, which he had endowed with the power of speech; they flew far over the land and told him many tidings. In this way he became very wise. And all these skills he taught with runes and those chants [*ljóð*] that are called *galdrar*; because of this the Æsir are called *galdrasmíðir* ['*galdra-smiths*']. Óðinn knew the skill from which follows the greatest power, and which he performed himself, that which is called *seiðr*. By means of it he could know the futures of men and that which had not yet happened, and also cause death or misfortune or sickness, as well as take men's wits or strength from them and give them to others. But this sorcery [*fjölkyngi*], as is known, brings with it so much *ergi* that manly men thought it shameful to perform, and so this skill was taught to the priestesses [*gyðjur*]. Óðinn knew everything about treasures hidden in the earth, where they were concealed, and he knew such chants [*ljóð*] that would open up for him the earth and mountains and stones and burial mounds, and with words alone he bound those who dwelled there, and went in and took what he wanted. By these powers he became very famous - his enemies feared him, but his friends trusted him, and believed in him and his power. Most of these skills he taught to those in charge of the sacrifices [*blótgoði*]; they were next to him in all magic knowledge [*fróðleikr*] and sorcery [*fjölkyngi*]. But many others learned much of it, and for this reason sorcery [*fjölkyngi*] was widespread and continued for a long time.

*Ynglingasaga* 7; my translation

*Ynglingasaga* 7 is a crucial text for the study of *seiðr*, as it provides both a wealth of detail and a degree of social orientation for its rituals. We can also speculate that *seiðr* was originally mentioned in Þjóðólfr



ór Hvíni's *Ynglingatal*, because the above prose seems to constitute a summary of the stanzas that Snorri does not directly cite (Tolley 1995a: 57). Óðinn's powers are examined in the next chapter.

*Seiðr* appears occasionally in the rest of *Heimskringla*, in a series of incidents that are discussed individually below. *Völur* and other kinds of sorceresses are mentioned in *Ynglingasaga* (13f), while *seiðmenn* and male sorcerers appear in chapter 22 of the same saga, together with *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* (35) and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (62). In Oddr Snorrason's version of the latter story (27 / 35), the same idea is repeated, and many of the same traditions are also recounted in the *Historia Norvegiae*.

### The sagas of Icelanders (the 'family sagas')

By far the greater part of our information on *seiðr* comes from the corpus of family sagas, and as such must be used with very great caution in any attempt to reconstruct genuine Viking Age practices from stories written down (if not actually invented) several centuries later. The saga debate has been briefly summarised above, so here we can confine ourselves to an overview of the relevant sources themselves.

Of all the saga accounts that mention *seiðr*, one takes precedence due to the unparalleled detail of its description and its social context. This is contained in chapter 4 of *Eiríks saga rauða*, the saga of Eiríkr the Red which is one of our primary sources for the Norse explorations westwards to Greenland and the Atlantic coast of Canada. The text exists in two versions, contained in the *Skálholtsbók* and the *Hauksbók*, the former of which was published in a normalised edition by Storm in 1891 (this was the text employed by Strömbäck in 1935: 49-54). Both texts have been published in parallel by S.B.F. Jansson, and been translated a number of times. Given the central nature of the *Eiríks saga rauða* account, I reproduce it here in full in his edition of the *Skálholtsbók* text.

The following events take place in the very late tenth century at Herjolfsnes in Greenland, at the farm of Þorkell, the leading man in the district:

99. I þenna tíma, uar hallæri mikít a grænlandi [.]
100. haufdu menn feingít lítid. þeir sem í vedr ferd haufdu uerít enn sumir eigi aþr komnir.
101. sv kona uar í bygd er. þorbiorg. het. hun. var spa kona. hun. var kaullut lítill volve.
102. hun. hafdi aatt ser. niv. systr. ok var hun. ein eptir. aa lifi.
103. þat var hattr. þorbiargar. a vetrvm. at hun for a ueizlr ok budv menn henni heim. mest þeir er forvitni var a. um forlug sin. eda. at ferdir.
104. ok med því at. þorkell var þar mestr bondi þa. þotti til hanns koma. hvenær at vita letta mundi varani. þessv sem yfir stod.
105. þorkell bydr spakonv þangat ok er henni buin god vit taka. sem sidr var til þa er vit þess haattar konu skylldi taka
106. bvit var henni ha sætti ok lagt unndir hægindi. þar skylldi í vera hænsa fidri.
107. enn er. hun. kom vm kuellidit ok se madr er í moti henni uar sennr. þa var. hun suo buin at hun. hafdi yfir sier tygla mauttvl blann. ok var settr steinum. allt í skaut ofan
108. hun. hafdi a. haalsi ser gler taulr. hun hafdi. a haufdi lamb skinz kofra suartann ok vid innan kattar skinn huitt staf hafdi hun. í henndi ok var.a. knappr
109. hann uar buinn messingv. ok settum steinum ofan vm knappinn
110. hun. hafdi vm sik hnioskv linda ok var þar aa skiodu punngr mikill. varduetti hun þar í taufr þau er hun þvrfti til frodleiks at hafva.
111. hun hafdi kalf skinnz sko lodna a. fotum ok í þveingi langa ok sterkliga. latuns knappar. mikler. a enndvnm.
112. hun hafdi a. haundvm ser katt skinnz glöfa. ok uoru hvitir innan ok lodner.
113. Enn er hvn kom inn. þotti avllvm mavnum skylld at velia henni sæmiligar kvedivr.
114. enn hun tok þui eptir sem henni uoru menn skapfelldir til.

115. Tok þorkell. bonndi. i haunnd visennda konunni. ok leiddi hann hana til þess sætis. er henni var bvit.
116. þorkell. bad hana renna þar avgum yfir hiord ok hiv. ok hybyli.
117. hun var fa malvg vm allt.
118. bord voru vpp tekin um kvellidit. ok er fra því at. segia at spakonvnni var mat bvit.
119. henni var giord grautr af kidia miolk enn til matar henni uoru buin hiortv ur allz konar kvikenndum. þeim sem þar. var. til.
120. hun hafdi messingar spon. ok hnif tannskeftan tui holkadann af eiri. ok var af brotinn . oddrinn.
121. Enn er bord uoru vpp tekin. gengr. þorkell bonndi firir. þorbiorgv ok spyrr huersv henni viridizt þar hybyli. eda. hættir manna. eda. hersv fliotliga hann mun þess vis uerda er hann hefvir spurt eptir ok menn uilldv vita.
122. hun kvezt þat ecki mundv vpp bera fyrr enn vm morgvinn þa er hun hefdi sofot þar vm nottina.
123. Enn eptir a alidnvm degi var henni uettir sa vm bvningr. sem hun skyllidi sein fremia.
124. bad hun fa sier konr þær. sem kynni frædi. þat er þyrfti til seidinnar fremia ok uardlokr heita. enn þær knor funnduzt eigi
125. þa uar at leitad um bæinn. ef nauckr kynni.
126. þa. svarar. Gvdridr. huerki er ek fiolkvnnig ne visennda kona. enn þo kenndi halldis fostra min. mer a. islanndi. þat frædi er hun kalladi vard lokr.
127. þorbiorg. svaradi. þa. ertu frodari enn ek ætladi.
128. Gvdridr. s. þetta er þesskonar frædi ok at ferli . at ek ætla i avngvm at beina at vera. þviat ek er kona kristin.
129. þorbiorn, suarar. svo mætti uerda at þu yrdir mavnnum at lidi. her vm enn værir kona at verri
130. enn vid. þorkel met ek at fa þa hluti her til er þarf.
131. þorkell herdir nu at gvdridi. enn hun kuezt mundv giora sem hann villdi.
132. slogv knor hring vm hverfis. enn. þorbiorg vppi a seid hiallinvm.
133. qvad. Gvdridr. þa kuædit. suo fagurt ok uel at eingi þottizt fyrr heyrt hafva med fegri ravst kvedit. sa er þar uar.
134. spakona. þackar henni kvædit. hun hafdi margar nattvrur higat att sott ok þotti fagurt at heyra. þat er kuedit var. er adr uilddi far oss snuazt ok oss avngua hlydni veita.
135. Enn mer erv nu margar þeir hluter aud synar. er aadr var bædi ek ok adrir dulder.
136. Enn ek kann þat at segia at hallæri þetta mvn ecki halldazt leingr. ok mvn batna arangr. sem uarar.
137. Sottar far þat sem leignt hefir legit mvn batna vonv bradara.
138. Enn þier. Gvdridr. skal ek launa i havnd lid sinni þat sem oss hafir af stadit. þviat þin forlagv eru mer nu aull glaugg sæ
139. þat muntu gíaf ord fa hier. aa grænlanndi. er sæmiligazt er til þo at þier verdi þat eigi til langædar. þviat uegir þinir liggia vt til islanndz. ok mvn þar koma fra þier ætt bogi bædi mikill ok godr ok yfir þinvm ætt kvislvm mvn skina biartr geisli. ennda far nu uel ok heil. dottir min.
140. Sidan gengu menn at uisennda konunni. ok fretti hver eptir því sem mest foruitni. var a
141. var hun ok god af fra savgnvm geck þat ok litt i tavma. s. hun.
142. þessv næst var komit eptir henni af audrvn bæ ok for hun þa þanngat.
143. var. sennt eptir. þorbirni þui at hann uilldi eigi heima vera medan slik heidni var framan.
144. Vedradtta battnadi skiott. þegar er uora tok sem þorbiorg hafdi sagt.

At this time there was a great famine in Greenland. Those who had gone out hunting had caught little, and some never came back. In the Settlement there was a woman named Þorbiörg, who was a *spákona*; she was called *Lítill-völva* ['Little-Völva]. She had nine sisters, who had all been *spákonur*, and she

was the only one still alive. It was Þorbiörg's custom to spend the winter attending feasts, invited home mostly to those who were curious to know their own future or what the coming year would bring. As Þorkell was the leading farmer there, it was felt that it was up to him to find out when the bad times that had been weighing upon them would let up. Þorkell invited the *spákona* to visit, and a good welcome was prepared for her, as was the custom when a woman of this kind was received. A high-seat was prepared for her, and a cushion laid upon it; this was to be stuffed with hen's feathers. When she arrived in the evening, together with the man who had been sent to escort her, she was wearing a blue [or 'black'] cloak fitted with straps, decorated with stones right down to the hem. She wore a string of glass beads around her neck. On her head she wore a black lambskin hood lined with white catskin. She had a staff in her hand, with a knob on it; it was fitted with brass and set with stones up around the knob. Around her waist she had a belt of tinder-wood, on which was a large leather pouch. In it she kept the charms (*taufr*) that she used for her sorcery [*fróðleikr*]. She had hairy calfskin shoes on her feet, with long, sturdy laces; they had great knobs of tin [or 'pewter' or 'brass'] on the end. On her hands she wore catskin gloves, which were white inside and furry. When she came in, everyone was supposed to offer her respectful greetings, which she received according to her opinion of each person. Þorkell the farmer took the *vísendakona* by the hand, and led her to the seat that had been prepared for her. Þorkell then asked her to cast an eye over his flock, his household and his homestead; she had few words for all of it. Tables were set up in the evening, and it must now be told what food was prepared for the *spákona*. A porridge of kids' milk was made for her, and for her meat the hearts of all the animals available there. She had a brass spoon and an ivory-handled knife clasped with copper [or 'bronze' or 'brass'], and with the point broken off. Then when the tables had been cleared away, Þorkell the farmer walked up to Þorbiörg and asked what she thought of what she had seen there and the conduct of the household, and how soon he could expect a reply to what he had asked after and which people wanted to know. She said that she would not reveal this until the morning, after she had spent a night there. Late the next day she was provided with the tools she needed to carry out her *seiðr*. She asked for women who knew the charms [*fræði*] necessary for carrying out *seiðr* and which are called *varðlok(k)ur*. But there were no such women to be found. Then they searched through the household, to see if there was anyone who knew [the charms]. Then Guðríðr answered, "I am neither skilled in sorcery [*fjólkynnig*] nor a *vísendakona*, but Halldís my foster-mother in Iceland taught me such charms [*fræði*] that she called *varðlok(k)ur*". Þorbiörg answered, "Then you know more than I expected". Guðríðr said, "These are the sort of charms [*fræði*] and proceedings in which I feel I want no part, for I am a Christian woman". Þorbiörg answered, "It may be that you could help the people here by so doing, and you would be no worse a woman for that; but it is to Þorkell I must look to provide me with what I need". Þorkell now pressed Guðríðr hard, until she said she would do as he wanted. Then the women formed a circle around the *seiðr*-platform [*seiðhjallr*] on top of which was Þorbiörg. Guðríðr then chanted the chants [*kvæði*] so beautifully and so well, that no-one there could say that they had heard anyone recite with a more lovely voice. The *spákona* thanked her for the chant and said that many spirits [*náttúruv*] had been drawn there who thought it beautiful to hear what had been chanted, "who before wanted to turn from us and refused to obey us; moreover many things are now clear to me which were earlier hidden both from me and from others. And I can tell you that this famine will not last longer than this winter, and that the season will mend when the spring comes. The sickness that has long troubled you will also improve sooner than expected. And you, Guðríðr, I will reward on the spot for the help we have had from you, for your fate is now very clear to me. You will make a match here in Greenland, the most honourable there is, though it will not last long, because your path lies out in Iceland, and there will spring from you a progeny both great and good, and over your line will shine a bright ray. Now fare you well, and health to you, my daughter". Then people went up to the *vísendakona*, and each asked after that which they were most concerned to know; she gave them good answers, and little that she had said was not fulfilled. Next she was sent for from another house, and so she went on her way. Then they sent for Þorbiörg, who did not wish to remain at home while such heathen things were going on. With the arrival of spring the weather soon improved, as Þorbiörg had said.

*Eiríks saga rauða* 4; text from Skálholtsbók after Jansson 1944: 39-44;  
my translation, generally following Kunz 2000 and Jones 1961;  
translation includes amendments from the Hauksbók text

Female *seiðr*-workers are also mentioned in *Laxdæla saga* (76), *Egills saga Skalla-Grimssonar* (59), *Kormáks saga* (6) and *Landnámabók* (194). A Sámi *völva* performs *seiðr* in *Vatnsdæla saga* (10; an episode also glossed in *Landnámabók*), a rather late source that must be used with particular caution (see Strömbäck 1935: 69-75). *Seiðmenn* appear again in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (18) and *Laxdæla saga*

(35); in *Njáls saga* (30) a man has his spear enchanted by *seiðr*. Each of these, and other appearances by sorcerers of various kinds, are taken up in detail over the following chapters.

### **The *fornaldarsögur* ('sagas of ancient times', 'heroic sagas')**

Among the later sagas, principally concerned with heroic or mythical stories of a kind far more removed from any Viking Age reality than the family sagas, there are also a number of references to *seiðr*.

Some of these are extensive, and they include one in particular which has in the past been taken together with *Eiríks saga rauða* as a 'type example' for a *seiðr* performance, from *Hrólfs saga kraka* (3); this is reproduced in full in the next chapter. A second extended passage (*ibid*: 32ff) also concerns *seiðr*, but in the context of its use on the battlefield; this is presented and discussed in chapter six. Composed in the fourteenth century and only preserved in paper manuscripts from the seventeenth century and later, *Hrólfs saga kraka* is a problematic source - not least because despite its late date, like *Völsunga saga* it concerns some of the earliest of the heroic tales. It also contains a number of parallels with Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*.

Strömbäck (1935: 86f) believed that the *seiðr* elements in *Hrólfs saga kraka* were almost certainly medieval inventions, whereas the descriptions of shape-shifting and 'totemistic' relationships with animals were more likely to be of ancient origin. However, this can be reassessed in the light of the broader context of *seiðr* as battlefield magic, which I believe it possible to establish and which I discuss below. While there is no doubt that the saga is a highly problematic source, it is striking how well its descriptions of combat sorcery fit other evidence that is independent of the text. We shall explore this in subsequent chapters.

Among the later sources, references to *seiðr* and its practitioners also appear in *Norna-Gests þátr*, *Friðþjófs saga frækna*, *Orvar-Odds saga*, *Orms þátr Stórolfssonar*, *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, *Sögubrot af fornkonungum*, *Þorsteins saga Víkingassonar*, *Völsunga saga*, *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, *Grimms saga loðinkinna*, *Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra*, *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*, *Sörla saga sterka*, *Nikulás saga leikara*, *Ektors saga*, and *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*. The term *seiðskratti* also appears in *Hálfðanar saga Barkarsonar* (8), but this is a very late source, perhaps even post-medieval.

All these episodes, together with many more that refer to different kinds of sorcery and other activities related to these practices, are discussed in chapter three.

In addition to these, *seiðr* is also mentioned in a number of sources as late as the Reformation, and on into the early modern period. These can be seen more in terms of developing folklore and the longevity of words and concepts in the Icelandic language. These sources are mentioned in passing by Strömbäck, and many of them are collected by Almqvist (2000: 261ff).

### **The Bishop's sagas (*Biskupasögur*)**

From the contemporary sagas, that is those of similar date to the family sagas but describing the period of their composition, we also find a brief reference to something that may be a *seiðr* performance. In *Kristni saga* and the related text *Þorvalds þátr víðfjörla* appears an episode in which two Christians are disturbed by the wailing of a pagan 'priestess', a *gyðja* of the type that we have seen above. She is sitting on a raised altar, apparently to make a sacrifice (*blót*). *Seiðr* is not mentioned by name, but the implied platform is strikingly similar to those mentioned in connection with sorcery, and it may be that this passage is describing such a ritual.

### **The early medieval Scandinavian law codes**

An important category of sources for the contemporary reality of *seiðr*, as opposed to its literary construction in the sagas, are the early medieval Scandinavian law codes. Strömbäck (1935: 106f) found two references to this practice. The first derives from a collection of royal and episcopal court records from 1281, preserved in a manuscript from c.1480. In one passage it is stated that,

... ef þat verdr kent korllvm eda konum at þau seide eda magne troll vpp at rida monnum eda bvfe ... þa skal flytia utt aa sio og sockua til gruna. og aa kongur og biskup hvern penning fiar þeirra

... if it is discovered that a man or woman has performed *seiðr*, or raised a great troll to ride people or animals ... then they shall be driven out beyond the parish bounds, and forfeit all their property to the king and bishop

Dipl. Isl. II: 223; my translation

There is some comparison here with the Norwegian Gulaping laws cited below (NGL I: 19, 182), which also mention raising trolls by sorcery, but Strömbäck (1935: 106f) considers that the act of *seiðr* and the act of summoning are separate events.

The second mention of *seiðr* in the legal codes comes from an elaboration made c.1326 to the twelfth-century *Skriptaboð Þorláks biskups helga*, in which Bishop Jón Halldórsson sets severe penalties for:

sitr madr vti til fordleiks. eda fremr madr galldra. eda magnar madr seid. eda heidni.

a person who sits outside to make sorcery (*fróðleikr*), or a person who performs *galdr*, or a person who makes powerful *seiðr*, or heathenism.

Dipl. Isl. I: 240ff, my translation

Neither of these notices tells us anything about the practice of sorcery itself, but its concept - and, presumably, reality - was clearly still current in the period of the sagas' composition.

### Non-Scandinavian sources

*Seiðr* is mentioned explicitly in only two non-Norse sources. The first of these is *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, which as the name implies is an Icelandic version of a tale that derives from mainland Europe. The term is thus used to translate what was originally something different. The relevant passage is reviewed in chapter three.

The second reference comes from *Upphaf Rómverja*, an introduction to *Rómverja sögur* from the early fourteenth century (or perhaps earlier) that deals with the origins of Rome (Almqvist 2000: 252f). In the story of Romulus and Remus we find the words *seiðgaldr* and *seiðmagnan*, both of which are unique. The former represents a new kind of magic term and the second would seem to mean 'great *seiðr*'. They are clearly translations of Latin words, though which these might be is uncertain. The late date and context renders them largely uninformative for our purposes, but the concept of *seiðgaldr* is intriguing.

Although it does not mention the term by name, there is also a crucial reference to something that probably was a *seiðr* performance in a rather unusual source from Ireland. The *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, 'The Wars of the Irish with the Foreigners [i.e. the Norse]', is a series of retrospective chronicles of the Viking Age written for the great-grandson of Brian Bórama, Muirchertach Ua Briain, who died in 1119 (see Ní Mhaonaigh 2001: 101). It exists in several manuscripts, in three of which we find a single brief reference to the sorcerous activities of a Scandinavian woman called Otta. She is described as the wife of a Viking chieftain named Turges - probably an Irish reading of the Norse name Þurgestr (Ó Corráin 2001: 19) - who temporarily gained control of several key centres in Connaught during a raid sometime in the period 838-45.

The oldest version of the *Cogadh* is contained in a single folio of the *Book of Leinster* (see the introduction to Todd's edition), and this fragment also contains the most complete note on the ritual. After listing the settlements occupied by Turges' Vikings, the chronicler comments:

Tuc Cluain mic nois da mnai. Is and ra bered a frecartha daltoir in tempoil móir. Otta ainm mnaa Turgeis.

Cluain mic nois [Clonmacnoise] was taken by his wife. It was on the altar of the great church she used to give her answers. Otta was the name of the wife of Turgeis.

*Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, Leinster fragment (Ms. L): XI; translation after Todd 1867: 226

The Dublin version of the manuscript has it slightly differently:

... ocus is and dobered Ota ben Turges a huricli ar altoir Cluana mic Nois.

... and the place where Ota, the wife of Turges, used to give her audience was upon the altar of Cluain Mic Nois [Clonmacnoise].

*Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, Dublin manuscript (Ms. D): XI; translation after Todd 1867: 13

The Brussels manuscript of the *Cogadh* has a third variant of the woman's name, where it is given as Otur. Little work has been done on this episode, though in 1960 W.E.D. Allen interpreted 'Ota' as being a member of a foreign embassy to the Irish Vikings. Again, the *Cogadh* will be taken up in the next chapter.

## *Seiðr* in research

Having reviewed *seiðr* in the sources, we can now look to an overview of scholarly studies in this field. Though it means losing a little momentum in the pace of our argument, the work set out in the following chapters demands that we first make a brief survey of the ways in which Nordic sorcery has been taken up by previous researchers. The notes below are not intended as an exhaustive synthesis, and a great many more works are taken up as appropriate throughout the book. Archaeological studies which have tried to identify aspects of *seiðr* through the material record are treated separately in chapters three and five.

Probably the earliest work to specifically discuss the role of *seiðr* in Norse religion appeared in 1877, written by Johan Fritzner, and it is significant that even at this initial stage of tentative interpretation we find these rituals being connected both with Sámi religion and the broader framework of shamanic belief systems. Fritzner's paper is primarily a discussion of Sámi religion in a comparative context (a subject more fully explored in chapter four below), and although he devotes some space to the possible transfer of specific divinities from one culture to another, the bulk of his detailed discussion is concerned with sorcery. As we have seen above, the problem of distinguishing between the different forms of Old Norse magic has a long research history, and we can note that even in this first account Fritzner interweaves his discussion of *seiðr* and *gandr* without distinction (1877: 164-83, 188-200). Nevertheless, all the key elements are present in his analysis, including the use of staffs, the *seiðhjallr* and the metaphor of 'riding' - to all of which we shall return below - as well as the important relationship between human agents of sorcery and the various supernatural powers with which they communicate (the *valkyrjur*, *disir* and so on). Most crucially of all, he addresses the use of these forms of sorcery for aggressive ends, with a discussion on magical projectiles (Fritzner 1877: 185ff, 208-10) - a subject avoided by the majority of subsequent *seiðr*-scholars, as we shall see.

Fritzner's important essay stimulated a small but steady interest in the trance rituals of the Norse, resulting in a suite of publications over the next few years that included Bang's 1879 study of *Völuspá* in the context of Græco-Roman oracular traditions, and Bugge's arguments for the Christian overtones of Óðinn on the tree (published in 1889 but written in the early 1880s).

The first specific study of *seiðr* came in 1892 with Finnur Jónsson's landmark paper in an Icelandic Festschrift to Páli Melsteð. As with Fritzner's work, 'Um galdra, seið, seiðmenn og vödur' set out a number of key aspects of *seiðr* and other forms of Old Norse magic that would come to be overlooked by the majority of twentieth-century researchers. In particular, Finnur focused on the practitioners of this sorcery, and made the first attempt to compile a terminology for them (*ibid*: 7ff). Crucially, he recognised that the different terms referred to different types of sorcerer - a realisation with far-reaching implications as we shall see below. He further addressed the performance and material culture of *seiðr*, reviewing the sources for *seiðr* platforms, staffs and various forms of songs used in the rituals (*ibid*: 17ff). This was also the first work to attempt to carefully distinguish the dual complexes of *seiðr* and *galdr*.

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, these ideas were spreading into other areas of Old Norse studies, for example to the analysis of dreams and their significance in the sagas (e.g. Henzen 1890); these preoccupations naturally also reflected contemporary developments in psychology and the interpretation of dream symbolism. The *draumkonur* - the strange spirit-women who appear as harbingers of ill-fortune and advice - and other inhabitants of dreams were compared to the soul-travelling agents of *seiðr*, and began to be linked to ideas about the personification of luck and the