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Pórr and wading

Abstract: Crossing rivers and boggy ground would have presented a number of dangers to early Scandinavians. There is a good deal of mythological evidence that Pórr is associated with the challenges of travelling by sea, as well as on various kinds of watery situations on land, such as rivers, lakes and bogs. There is literary evidence for the invocation of Pórr in seafaring, and this paper hypothesises that Pórr was invoked in related activities of crossing rivers and wet ground. The paper demonstrates a strong geographical relationship between Pórr-worship (as shown by settlement place-names) and crossing rivers and marshes (as shown by runic inscriptions commemorating bridges and fords), and attempts an explanation of this relationship in terms of the mythological evidence.

I have had the pleasure of meeting with Professor Marold at 16 consecutive annual meetings of the skaldic project. Each year we have discussed where next to hold the meeting, and at suggestions of more adventurous locations Edith always offered to bring her ‘telt’. I therefore offer this as a tribute to her love of the outdoors, particularly field runology and inscriptions in the landscape, as well as her mythological analyses and her new edition of Eilífr Goðrúnarson’s *Pórsdrápa* for the skaldic project.

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For those who have ventured with heavy packs into the relatively wild countryside of rugged and beautiful (that is, cold, wet and mountainous) northern Europe or similar places such as Tasmania and New Zealand, with modern hiking infrastructure one rarely has to cross a dangerous river except by means of a bridge. There have been occasions in my travels, however, when bad weather removes such aids to crossing. In other places, such as Þröngá near Þórsmörk in Iceland, the terrain makes it very difficult to build a permanent bridge, or the nearby Krossá, where the footbridge has been known to be washed away in floods. Elsewhere, such as canyoning in the Blue Mountains near Sydney, the activity itself involves wading and swimming through rivers and creeks.

The advice given to walkers encountering river crossings varies from cautious to terrifying (“Simply put, river crossings are one of the most dangerous and deadly threats to climbers, hikers, and backpackers”¹). Crossing in such a location in New

1 <<http://climbing.about.com/od/staysafeclimbing/a/9-Safety-Tips-To-Safely-A-River-Or-Stream>>.

Zealand, in the company of another Old Norse scholar, is probably the most dangerous experience of my long outdoor experience, where losing footing would probably mean death in the rapids. As always in such situations in cold climates, becoming wet from a fall, even in a slower body of water, without available shelter nearby, risks hypothermia (the other type of dangerous situation I have found myself in), even if the river crossing is successful.

Hypothermia is a risk even in warmer climates. Canyoning involves walking, climbing, wading, swimming and abseiling through the dozens of beautiful, narrow and often water-filled canyons that are found in the Blue Mountains. In such locations one of the main risks is hypothermia from exposure to the relatively cold water. Hypothermia ultimately causes death, but it also indirectly increases the risk of serious injury: early symptoms of hypothermia include confused and irrational behaviour and an inability to walk or move (Pozos and Born 1982), which can exacerbate a difficult situation and indirectly cause death or serious injury through falls or poor decisions.

Some dangerous activities practised by early Scandinavians such as sea-based sailing are still common in modern times. Fishing, for example, remains a relatively dangerous occupation – one of the most dangerous industries in modern Britain, with 256 deaths between 1992–2006 and 443 vessels lost.² Conversely, the idea of crossing out of necessity a fast-moving river by wading is completely alien to the vast majority of the contemporary population. For a medieval Scandinavian, especially a Norwegian or Icelander, such crossings would have been a frequent part of land travel. Horses could assist in many places but in narrow, deep sections of landscape horses may have added to the risks. At times bad weather can dramatically increase the volume and energy of water in an otherwise small stream in a short space of time.

Streams and rivers pose dangers for walkers, but there are also dangers inherent in walking conditions where feet are exposed to cold, damp conditions for a long time. Non-freezing cold injury (NFCI), better known as trench foot, causes frost-bite-like damage to feet from prolonged exposure to damp, cold conditions (Redisch / Brandman / Rainone 1951, pp. 1163–1168; Irwin 1996, pp. 372–379). The term ‘trench foot’ arises from its prevalence in trench warfare during the first world war, but it can occur in situations where an individual is required to walk through boggy, wet conditions for extended periods. Fourteen percent of casualties in the Falklands war, for example, were affected by the condition (Irwin 1996, pp. 372–379). Pre-modern footwear is unlikely to have prevented such a condition.

Rivers and boggy ground can be crossed by means other than wading, such as bridges, which span the stream, and fords which allow safer passage through the

htm>(accessed 29/4/16); see also <<http://www.safetravel.is/outdoors/hiking/crossing-a-river/>>, <<http://www.thehikinglife.com/skills/river-crossings/>> (accessed 29/4/16).

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fishing-vessel-safety-study> (accessed 29/4/16)

water by providing a secure and shallow surface to cross. Fords may be marked by poles to indicate a safe path through the river. In winter natural ice bridges may form over smaller and slower streams, which will also have a reduced flow of water, and these temporary, natural bridges may be used to cross the water. Boggy ground becomes frozen in very cold conditions, making it safer and easier to cross. However, as weather warms ice bridges may become unreliable or dangerous. Ferries may also provide a means to cross a river, presumably in return for some kind of payment (cf. *Harbarðsljóð* 3: *Ferðu mik um sundit, / fæði ek þik á morgon* (von See et al. 1997, p. 173) ‘ferry me across the sound and I will feed you in the morning’³).

The premise of this paper is that crossing rivers, lakes and wet ground on foot is a high-risk activity for which a pre-modern Scandinavian may have called upon divine assistance. In this sense it can be compared to other high-risk and important activities where gods (including the Christian god) are either invoked or myths provide a model, such as sailing (e. g. in *Landnámabók*, Eiríkur Jónsson and Finnur Jónsson 1892–1896, p. 73), battle and fighting (Davidson 1972, pp. 26–27), settling new land (Clunies Ross 1998, p. 132) and major life events such as marriage (Mitchell 1983, pp. 118–119).

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There are a number of myths and related narratives that describe the god Þórr as crossing rivers, other bodies of water and wet ground. Much of this activity has to do with the role of Þórr in crossing boundaries, particularly into foreign territories in order to deal with giants (Lindow 2001, pp. 290–291). It also is consistent with the observation that Þórr’s natural adversary is water (Clunies Ross 1994, p. 267), which is strongly associated with dangerous and sexualised female forces (see e. g. Quinn 2014, pp. 94–95). Þórr is notably absent, for example, when the gods visit the hall of Ægir, a figure personifying the sea (Quinn 2014, p. 72). Some of the evidence regarding Þórr and river-crossings is as follows. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but serves to show the prevalence of evidence associating Þórr with wading and crossing dangerous bodies of water.

The association between Þórr and wading was discussed as early as 1855 in connection with the figure of Wado/Wate/Wade in various legends. In particular, Wilhelm Mannhart points to connections between Þórr and wading in support of his (unlikely) thesis that the god is identical with the legendary figure Wade (Mannhart 1855, pp. 298–299).

There are a number of passages in the Old Norse literary corpus that suggest this connection. A stanza in Snorri’s *Gylfaginning* (Faulkes 2005, pp. 17–18), traditionally assigned to the poem *Grímnismál*, describes Þórr engaged in daily river-crossing activ-

³ All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. Editions of the Poetic Edda are taken from the *Kommentar* where available and from Íslenzk fornrit in other cases.

ity: *Körmt ok Örmt | ok Kerlaugar tvær, | þær skal Þórr vaða | dag hvern | er hann dæma ferr | at aski Yggdrasil, | þviat ásbrú | brenn ǫll loga, | heilög vötn hlóa* (Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014, p. 374) ‘Körmt and Örmt and the two Kerlaugar, those Þórr must wade each day when he goes to judge at the ash of Yggdrasil, because the bridge of the Æsir burns all with flames, the holy waters boil’.

Hárbarðsljóð concerns Þórr’s attempt to get Óðinn in disguise to ferry him across a body of water (noted only as a *sundr* ‘sound’). Stanza 13/1–3 reads: *Harm liótan mér þikkir í því, | at vaða um váginn til þín | ok væta ǫgur minn* (von See et al. 1997, p. 187) ‘It seems a great shame to me in this, to wade across the water to you and wet my ǫgur’. The word *ǫgur* is a *hapax legomenon*: the *Edda-Kommentar* (von See et al. 1997, pp. 188–189) lists a number of interpretations with ‘male member’ being perhaps the best (so Larrington’s translation, ‘prick’ [Larrington 2014, p. 66]).

Þórr is eventually forced to take the long way around: *Taka við víl ok erfíði | at uppverandi sólo, | er ek get þána* (*Hárbarðsljóð* 58; von See et al. 1997, p. 250) ‘You will get there with toil and trouble, while the sun is up, as I suspect it will thaw’. Presumably there is boggy ground and/or an ice bridge over the stream at the head of the inlet which may be affected by the warm weather, forcing Þórr to wade either way.

In the myth of Þórr’s fight with the World Serpent, described in various sources including *Snorra Edda*, Þórr and the giant Hrungnir row far out to sea so that Þórr can fight the beast. Snorri describes how, at the point where the serpent takes the bait, Þórr puts his foot through the hull of the boat. Þórr braces himself against the sea floor in order to haul the serpent up to the gunwale. This detail is not specifically described in the poetic versions of the myth (*Húsdrápa* and *Hymiskviða*), but is sufficiently important that two apparent pictorial representations of the myth, both independent of Snorri’s *Edda*, show it in the form of a foot through the hull of the boat, namely, the Altuna stone (U 1161) and the Hørdum stone (DR EM85;274; see Meulengracht Sørensen 1986, pp. 260–266). In this myth Þórr grapples with phenomena that threaten the boat. The action is akin to wading as it involves him bracing himself against the ground below water, against a hostile aquatic force.

There are occasional kennings that suggest Þórr’s significance in crossing bodies of water. A number of these occur in *Þórsdrápa* and are discussed in detail below. A kenning in Úlfr Uggason’s *Húsdrápa* stanza 6 also suggests this association: The kenning *Víðgymnir vaðs Vimrar* ‘The Víðgymnir <giant> of the ford of Vimur [= Þórr]’ alludes directly to the myth of Þórr fording Vimur (Marold et al. [forthcoming b]; see also Lindow 2014, p. 5).

Perhaps the most important of these Þórr myths is his crossing of the river Vimur as recorded in *Þórsdrápa* and elaborated further in *Skáldskaparmál*. The episode belongs to the myth of Þórr’s visit to Geirrøðr, which is discussed at length in Clunies Ross (1981) and elsewhere. The myth is preserved in Eilífr Goðrúnarson’s *Þórsdrápa* (Marold et al. [forthcoming a]) and the *Skáldskaparmál* section of the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson (Faulkes 1998, pp. 24–25), which is likely to be based to some extent on Eilífr’s poem. The part of the myth concerning the difficult journey to Geirrøðar-

garðar can be found in analogue in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* (Friis-Jensen / Fisher 2015, pp. 598–603) and *Þórsteins saga* (or *þáttr*) *bæjarmagns* (Sveinbjörn Egilsson et al. 1827, pp. 183–185).

The basic content of the myth is summarised by Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál*, but with some divergence from the other versions. The part of particular relevance to this paper is as follows:

Hon léði honum megingjarða ok járngeipr er hon átti ok staf sinn er heitir Gríðarvölr. Þá fór Þórr til ár þeirar er Vimur heitir, allra á mest. Þá spenti hann sik megingjörðum ok studdi forstreymis Gríðarvöl, en Loki helt undir megingjarðar. Ok þá er Þórr kom á miðja ána þá óx svá mjök áin at uppi braut á oxl honum. Þá kvað Þórr þetta:

‘Vaxattu nú, Vimur,
alls mik þik vaða tíðir
jötna garða í;
veiztu ef þú vex
at þá vex mér ásmegin
jafnhátt upp sem himinn.’

Þá sér Þórr uppi í gljúfrum nokkvorum at Gjalp, dóttir Geirrøðar stóð þar tveim megin árinna, ok gerði hon árvøxtinn. Þá tók Þórr upp ór ánni stein mikinn ok kastaði at henni ok mælti svá: ‘At ósi skal á stemma.’ Eigi missti hann, þar er hann kastaði til. Ok í því bili bar hann at landi ok fekk tekit reynirunn nokkvorn ok steig svá ór ánni. Því er það orðtak haft at reynir er björg Þórs. (Faulkes 1998, p. 25)

She [Grid] lent him a girdle of might and some iron gauntlets of hers, and her staff, called Grid's pole. Then Thor approached the river called Vimur, greatest of all rivers. Then he buckled on the girdle of might and pressed down on Grid's pole on the side away from the current, while Loki held on beneath the girdle of might. And when Thor got to the middle of the river, the river rose so much that it washed up over his shoulders. Then Thor spoke this: ‘Rise not thou now, Vimur, since I desire to wade thee into the giants' courts. Know thou that if thou risest then will rise the As-strength in me up as high as heaven.’ Then Thor saw up in a certain cleft that Geirrod's daughter Gjalp was standing astride the river and she was causing it to rise. Then Thor took up out of the river a great stone and threw it at her and said: ‘At its outlet must a river be stemmed.’ He did not miss what he was aiming at, and at that moment he found himself close to the bank and managed to grasp a sort of rowan-bush and thus climbed out of the river. Hence comes the saying that Thor's salvation is a rowan. (Faulkes 1987, p. 82)

The preserved *ljóðaháttir* stanza here suggests that there were more versions of the myth than now exist. Snorri's version is not particularly concerned with the actual journey leading up to the crossing of Vimur, but all other versions of the myth that describe the journey dwell on the difficulties in crossing seas, rivers and/or marshy ground. Lindow argues that parts of the myth be taken as standalone narratives, with the river-crossing episode as an etiological narrative explaining why rowan is Þórr's salvation (Lindow 2014, p. 12). Other versions of the myth may therefore be more concerned with the challenges of the journey. In Snorri's account there are details on how a fast-moving river might be forded, including the way in which the staff *Gríðarvölr* is

used to brace against the current (although modern advice would be to use the pole on the upstream side).

Eilífr Goðrúnarson's *Þórsdrápa* (Eil *Þdr*) gives a more detailed account of the river crossing and preceding journey. It is recorded in *Skáldskaparmál*, except for one stanza (4 in the edition cited here) which is found in the *Third Grammatical Treatise*. Little is known about Eilífr apart from him being active at the court of Hákon jarl Sigurðarson, who ruled at the end of the tenth century. The poem describes the myth of Þórr's visit to Geirrøðr but lacks any information that would help to contextualise its production (see Marold et al. [forthcoming a]).

Þórr sets out on what appears to be a dangerous sea-journey (Eil *Þdr* 3/6–8⁴):

gall- manntælendr halla
-ópnis ilja gaupnum
Endils um Mó spenndu.

manntælendr halla gall-ópnis spenndu gaupnum ilja um Mó Endils

'the destroyers of the man of the halls of the shrill-crier <eagle> [*lit.* 'man-destroyers of the halls of the shrill-crier')] MOUNTAINS > GIANT > = Þórr and his companion] clasped the Mór <horse> of Endill <sea-king> [SHIP] with the palms of their foot-soles.'

The stanza's imagery suggests that the sailing is rough and difficult, given that Þórr and his companion (Þjálfi in this version) have to keep their footing on the ship.

Stanza 4 is a *helmingr* found in the *Third Grammatical Treatise* where it is attributed to an Eilífr. Most editors have taken it to belong to *Þórsdrápa*, and it describes a difficult land journey (Eil *Þdr* 4):

Vöru vötn ok mýrar
– verðr hitt at þau skerða –
(svell vas áðr of alla)
öll torráðin (halla).

Öll vötn ok mýrar vöru torráðin; hitt verðr, at þau skerða; svell vas áðr of alla halla.

'All the lakes and marshes were difficult [to traverse]; it happens that they intersect [the path]; ice was previously⁵ on all the cliffs.'

There are a number of difficulties with the stanza and the accompanying commentary in the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, including the attribution to this Eilífr (see Marold [forthcoming a]). Despite these textual difficulties, all the manuscript versions as well

⁴ Verse from the forthcoming edition is presented here with the verse text, prose word order in italics, followed by translation in quotation marks in the form used by the Skaldic Project. References to the poem are given using the internal referencing format for the project. In the translation glosses to *heiti* are given in angled brackets and glosses to kennings in square brackets.

⁵ Marold's forthcoming edition has 'already' for *áðr*.

as the emended edition by Marold presented here suggest that the stanza describes the difficulty in travelling through boggy and wet terrain, particularly as the season is thawing.

Stanzas 5–11 treat the crossing of the river in great detail. They nevertheless lack some of the features of the myth that are found in Snorri’s account, including the gauntlets and girdle of might. Most importantly, in the extant stanzas, Þórr does not succeed by throwing a rock at Gjálp but rather by his own skill in fording and an intervention by Þjálfí, apparently hovering in the air (*sjálflopta*, Eil *Þdr* 10/4) on a shield.

In stanza 5 Þórr’s party is described as *gangs vanir* ‘the ones accustomed to walking’ as they approach the river. Stanzas 6–7 contain a wealth of imagery and detail describing Þórr crossing the dangerous river. This includes kennings such as *vegþverrir varra Nǫnnu* ‘the path-diminisher of the waters of Nanna’ (Eil *Þdr* 6/1–2), where the waters of Nanna are rivers, hence ‘path-diminisher of rivers’ is Þórr, suggesting that Þórr is able to keep the power of rivers in check, and re-emphasise the association between rivers and powerful female beings. In the kenning *stikleið* (‘stake-path [FORD]’, Eil *Þdr* 6/6) the poem gives an indication of how river-crossings may have been marked by stakes to show the safest route.

Stanza 7 is particularly detailed in its description of the fording of the river:

Par í mörk fyrir markar	Knátti, hreggi hoggvin*,
málhvettan byr settu	hlympél við mól glymja,
(né hvélvǫlur Hallar	en fellihryn fjalla
háfs) skotnaðra (svǫfu).	Fedju þaut með steðja.

Par settu skotnaðra imörk háfs fyrir málhvettan byr markar; né svǫfu hvélvǫlur Hallar. Hlympél knátti glymja við mól, en hreggi hoggvin fellihryn fjalla þaut með steðja Fedju.*

“There they set shot-adders [SPEARS] in the borderland of the fish trap [RIVER] against the chattering wind of the borderland [RIVER]; the wheel-knuckles of Hǫll <river> [STONES] did not sleep. The din-file [SPEAR] resounded against the gravel, and the storm-blasted toppling-noise of the mountains [RIVER] roared against the anvil of Fedje <river> [ROCK].”

The emphasis here is on the use of spears as poles to dig into the rocks of the river bed against the current, with the imagery evoking the sound and movement of the god wading.

The poem describes sailing in possibly rough conditions; wading through wet and marshy ground and (if the emendation in st. 6 is to be accepted) lakes; and culminating in the fording of a dangerous river. Þórr accomplishes this in the usual way, by physical strength and, in Snorri’s version, violence against an antagonist that is a giant and structurally associated with the feminine and nature.

The narrative in Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum* has been discussed at length in relation to the Þórr’s visit to Geirrǫðr (e. g. Clunies Ross 1981, pp. 371–388). Saxo’s version is not very relevant to the present discussion except in some details: the journey begins with difficult sailing (book viii.14.3; Friis-Jensen / Fisher 2015, pp. 600–601) and Biar-

maland, the location of Geirrøðr's hall in this version, is said to be a cold, desolate land with a great many dangerous rivers (book viii.14.6; Friis-Jensen / Fisher 2015, pp. 600–603). We get a sense of the significance of the principal river that needs to be crossed from Guthmund, brother of Geirrøðr: *Cuius transeundi cupidos a proposito reuocauit, docens eo alueo humana a monstruosis rerum secreuisse naturam nec mortalibus ultra fas esse uestigiis* 'When they wanted to cross it Guthmund called them back, telling them that the bed of this stream formed a natural boundary between the human and the supernatural worlds and no mortal was permitted to step beyond it' (book viii.14.7; Friis-Jensen / Fisher 2015, pp. 602–603). In Saxo's chronology, these events take place after Þórr's visit to Geirrøðr and therefore after he has subdued the giants and giantesses.

In *Þórsteins saga* (or *þáttr*) *bæjarmagns*, the role of Þórr has been transposed to that of Þórsteinn, a retainer of Óláfr Tryggvason. The episode, like that in Saxo, has its focus on the events in Geirrøðr's hall, with the river-crossing reduced in significance to establishing Þórsteinn's toughness:

Ríða þeir nú til árinna, var þar eitt hús, ok tóku þeir þar önnur klæði, ok klæddu sik ok sína hesta; þau klæði voru þeirrar náttúru at ekki festi vatn á þeim, en vatnit var so kalt, þegar hljóp drep í, ef nokkut vöknaði. Ríðu þeir nú yfir ána, hestarnir vóðu sterkliga, hestr Goðmundar rasaði, ok varð Þórsteinn votr á tánni, ok hljóp þegar drep í; en er þeir kvomu af ánni, breiddu þeir niðr klædin til þerris; Þórsteinn hjó af sêr tána, ok fanst þeim mikit um hreysti hans. (Sveinbjörn Egilsson et al. 1827, p. 184)

They now ride to the river. There was a building and they took a second set of clothes there and dressed themselves and their horses. Those clothes were of such a nature that the water couldn't touch them, because the water was so cold that it would cause instant frostbite to anything that touched it. They then rode through the river. The horses waded powerfully. Goðmundr's horse stumbled and Þórsteinn's toe got wet, and at once was struck by frostbite. And when they got out of the river they spread out their clothes to dry. Þórsteinn cut off his toe, and they thought a great deal of his courage.

As in the other versions, the river crossing is aided by Goðmundr/Guthmund or other giants, and their magical objects. Although the significance of the river crossing is reduced, it is still preserved (at least in the outward journey), and includes the dangers of exposure to cold, wet conditions.

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The mythological sources and analogues can only serve to present an association between Þórr and these types of challenges to travel (sailing on open seas, wading and fording, traversing boggy ground). They do not in themselves suggest that there were actual religious practices related to these activities.

The textual evidence for such practices is largely limited to the particular activity of sailing on open seas. There are a few representations of pre-Christian practices in

Old Norse settlement narratives that suggest that Þórr was invoked for control over the sea and help in sea travel. The most prominent example is that of Helgi *inn magri* ‘the Lean’, mentioned in *Landnámabók* where he is said to worship Christ on land but Þórr at sea: “*hann var miok blandin i trvnni. hann trvði a Crist en þo het hann a Þor til sæfara ok harðræða ok allz þers er hanum þotti merstv varða*” (Eiríkur Jónsson / Finnur Jónsson 1892–1896, p. 73) ‘He was very mixed in his faith; he believed in Christ but he called upon Þórr in seafaring and difficulties and everything which seemed most important’. It is unclear what might constitute other *harðræði* ‘difficulties’, but based on the collocation one could speculate that it includes challenges in travelling akin to seafaring.

Another example in *Landnámabók* is of a Kollr, who invokes Þórr during a storm off the coast of Iceland. “*enn er þeir komv i landvön gerði at þeim storm mikinn ok rak þa vestr vm Island. ... þa het Orlygr a Patrek byskvp fostra sinn ... enn Kollr het a Þor. þa skilði i storminvn ok kom hann þar sem Kollz vik heiter ok bravt hann þar skip sitt.*” (Eiríkur Jónsson / Finnur Jónsson 1892–1896, p. 11) ‘And when they came close to land a great storm came upon them and drove them west along Iceland. Then Orlygr called upon Bishop Patrick his foster-father ... But Kollr called upon Þórr. They were separated in the storm and he came to the place called Kollsvík and his ship was wrecked there.’.

Þórr is also called upon to direct high seat pillars thrown overboard at sea, such as in *Eyrbyggja saga*, where Þórólfr Mostrarskegg invokes Þórr to direct the objects carved with depictions of the god in order to determine where to settle (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson / Matthías Þórðarson 1935, p. 7).

These accounts, if they can be taken to reflect pre-Christian practices, suggest that Þórr was invoked for assistance in difficulties of seafaring. There seems to be a strong association in the mythological material between Þórr and seafaring, but also land-travel that involves crossing bodies of water (rivers and lakes) and wet ground (bogs and marshes). The hypothesis of the present paper is that Þórr was invoked not only for seafaring but for these other types of difficulties in travelling over bodies of water and wet ground.

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There is unfortunately very little reliable information about actual practices of pre-Christian religious worship and invocation in literary sources. Consequently, there is little chance of finding information about the precise invocation of Þórr for wading, if such a practice in fact occurred. In order to test the hypothesis further we need to find evidence from the kinds of sources that do retain vestiges of pre-Christian practices. These include material culture, which is preserved through the archaeological record, place-names, which often retain pre-Christian theophoric elements, and potentially Christian reactions to pre-Christian practices, which may indirectly record such beliefs and practices in the process of promoting Christian beliefs and practices.

Bridge-building appears to be an important Christian activity in Anglo-Saxon England, where a number of sources equate the process with good Christian deeds and aiding of the soul on its journey to heaven. For example, a sermon of Wulfstan's (no. 58, "Sermo bone praedicatio") states: *we magon swyþe micle þearfe and ælmesan us sylfum gedon, gif we willað bricge macian and þa symle botettan*. (Napier 1883, p. 303) 'we can do great benefit and charity for ourselves if we will construct bridges and always maintain them'. Old Norse sources expressing similar sentiments are notably absent from the 88 citations in the Dictionary of Old Norse Prose (*ONP*) for *brú* ('bridge') and relevant compounds (*brúargerð* 'bridge-building', *brúarhald* 'bridge maintenance').⁶ However, the evidence presented below is exclusively from the East Norse area, and an absence of evidence for bridge-building being a Christian practice in the corpus of *ONP* should not be taken as evidence of its absence, particularly in parts of Scandinavia not covered by that work.

Lund (2005) lists a plethora of evidence for the religious significance of bridge-building in pre-Christian and Christian times as well as reasons for this significance: rivers are liminal spaces and may represent the border of the dead and living; they may therefore be seen as significant in helping the dead transition from the world of the living to that of the dead. While the phenomenon is generally considered to be Christian, there are pre-Christian examples of the religious significance of bridge-building such as the bridge at Tissø in Denmark (Lund 2005, p. 128).

One of the most abundant examples of the religious significance of crossing rivers comes from the early Christian period at the end of the Viking Age in Sweden. At this point, a very large number of rune stones were erected – particularly in Sweden, but also with isolated examples in Denmark and Norway – commemorating the building of a nearby bridge. These normally with Christian invocations to save the souls of those involved. Per Stille identifies a possible link between such inscriptions and early church sites (Stille 2014, p. 142).

Using the Samnordisk runtextdatabas (Rundata), one finds at least 140 inscriptions which have 'bridge' in the translation. (These figures are based on searching for the word 'bridge' in the translation, as there is considerable variation in the use and preservation of the word **bro/bru** in the inscriptions themselves.) Almost all these inscriptions date from the end of the Viking Age, and all but a handful are found in Sweden. These inscriptions may commemorate the building of a ford rather than a conventional bridge (Brink 2000, p. 36), but for the purposes of the present study, the two types of crossing are considered equivalent.

The content of the bridge inscriptions (and possibly also their location) suggest that bridge-building was a Christian activity, although with pre-Christian antecedents. The literary evidence suggests that Þórr was associated with crossing bodies of water and wet ground and was invoked for assistance in such situations. Without at

⁶ As referenced on <http://onp.ku.dk> (accessed 29/4/16).

this stage making a claim about the underlying motivations behind the bridge inscriptions, the question addressed in the remainder of the paper is whether the practice of bridge-building and its Christian commemoration was in some way related to earlier local practices of Þórr-worship. The specific hypothesis addressed in this section of the paper is that bridge-building, or at least its commemoration, was geographically associated with pre-Christian Þórr-worship.

Testing such a hypothesis is a difficult proposition because it requires some knowledge of local practices. If we work from the assumption that, firstly, worship of particular gods was a geographically variable phenomenon (as is asserted by Brink 2007, p. 125) and, secondly, that theophoric place-names may reflect the worship of individual gods in a particular area (Brink 2007, pp. 124–125), we have potentially a point of comparison with our bridge inscriptions that allow us to test whether there is at least a collocation of naming practices involving Þórr and later bridge-building as commemorated in runic inscriptions. This cannot fully confirm or reject the hypothesis, but it can provide some evidence to this end.

The Samnordisk runtextdatabas (Rundata) includes a database of all known runic inscriptions, including map coordinates, text and translation. This information can be used to plot inscriptions according to the content of their text, using GIS software or even web resources. For this study, I have converted the map coordinates (originally in Swedish RT90 format) to WGS84 latitude/longitude coordinates. Using an SQL database, tables of coordinates and inscriptions were generated by searching the text and translations of the inscriptions. This table was used to generate a map as in Figure 1. It should be noted that some of the inscriptions are not in their original locations, but in all the specific cases discussed below these are unlikely to have been removed far from their original positions. The Rundata text and translation, too, may represent disputed interpretations of the inscriptions, but again, in the cases discussed here, there is no doubt regarding the substantive interpretation of the inscription commemorating a bridge.

I have not applied statistical tests to this material. Typical spatial statistical tests (e. g. those based on χ^2 tests or Syrjala's test [Syrjala 1996]) do not yield useful results as they generally require a much larger sample size than is available with the preserved material for this study. In order to understand the results, I have included in the resulting map all inscriptions, including those that do not mention a bridge, in order to evaluate the expected distribution of runic inscriptions, which is based in part on population, cultural practices and preservation.

The distribution of theophoric place names is based on the appendices to Brink 2007. The author gave me permission to construct a database of theophoric place names based on the appendices to that paper, which is restricted to Denmark, Norway and Sweden, and which includes the theophoric names that can be reliably identified in settlement place-names (field names are excluded from Brink's study). Týr-names have not been included here, but such place-names appear to be largely restricted to present-day Denmark (Holmberg 1986, p. 109), which is not included in the results

below. The resulting data set, which has been incorporated into the Pre-Christian Religions of the North Sources Database (abdn.ac.uk/pcrn or prechristianreligions.org), is used here to generate a map of Þórr settlement names as well as all theophoric settlement names. The four datasets (bridge and non-bridge inscriptions, Þórr and non-Þórr theophoric settlement names) are plotted on the same map.

The distribution of Þórr settlement names in Scandinavia is widespread but shows distinct regional variation on both a small and large scale (Brink 2007, pp. 113–115). In many regions, Þórr place-names are frequent but there are few or no relevant inscriptions to compare them with. Other regions, such as Uppland in Sweden have such a high density of both theophoric place-names and bridge inscriptions that it is impossible to identify patterns of distribution by visual inspection. In other regions, however, such as in Småland and surrounding areas, the medium density of each phenomena allows us to see the relative geographical distribution of Þórr place-names and bridge inscriptions. Figure 1 shows the part of the map covering this area.

Based on visual inspection, the pattern of bridge-inscriptions is distinct from the normal distribution of inscriptions in the region. There are many areas with high numbers of inscriptions but no bridge inscriptions; and bridge inscriptions tend to be clustered. Likewise there are non-Þórr theophoric place names with non-bridge inscriptions clustered nearby, and two Þórr place-names in the west of the region shown do not have any associated bridge-inscriptions, but all bridge inscriptions are relatively close to Þórr place-names.

From this map we can see that in Småland, bridge inscriptions are always clustered around Þórr settlement-names, in particular (place-name information from Brink 2007):

1. Torsjö (Ö. Torsås sn, Konga hd – first recorded as ‘in Thorsyo, parochia Thorsaas’ 1348). The associated bridge inscription is Sm 15 (Kåragården, 0.6 km away).
2. Torset (Vallsjö sn, Västra hd – first recorded as ‘j torssryd’ c. 1500). The associated bridge inscriptions are: Sm 80 (Vallsjö stomhemman, now 2.6 km away), Sm 73 (Terle, now 6.9 km), Sm 96 (Brobyholm (Lillemark), 6.9 km), Sm 100 (Glömsjö, 10.8 km) and Sm 99 (Lannaskede kyrka, 10.9 km). In this district (Västra härad) there is also a Freyr place name, namely Fröset (Fröderyds sn). However, all the inscriptions except Sm 80 feature personal names with Thor-, which suggests that the people named in connection with the inscriptions may have historically had a family association with the worship of Þórr.
3. Torsjö (Höreda sn, S. Vedbo hd – first recorded as ‘ij Torsrijd’ 1406, ‘thørsio’ 1409). The associated bridge inscriptions are: Sm 137 (Kvarnarp, now 2 km away), Sm 130 (moved to Eksjö kyrka, 4.5 km).

Further examples can be found in areas that provide sufficient data to analyse the form of bridge inscriptions and theophoric settlement names. For example, the only confirmed Þórr settlement name in Skåne (Torsjö, Solberga and Örsjö snr, Vemmen-



Fig. 1: The region of Småland in Sweden. Black diamonds represent settlement names in *Pórr*-, and white diamonds other theophoric settlement names (based on Brink 2007); grey stars represent runic inscriptions mentioning a bridge, and white circles are all other inscriptions (based on Rundata 3.1 (2015); full map at <https://goo.gl/sKsqrb>).

högs hd, Skåne, Sweden – ‘de Thorsyo’ 1349, ‘thorssiø’ 1428) is also relatively close to the only known bridge inscription in that region (DR 269 (Källstorp, Jordberga, 9.2 km away) ÷ **þurkil ÷ karpi ÷ þurþar ÷ sun (÷) bru ÷ þisi ÷ aft ÷ uraka ÷ brupur ÷ ¶ sin** ‘Thorkell, Thórðr’s son, made this bridge in memory of Vragi/Rangi, his brother.’) As with most of the Småland inscriptions associated with Þórr- place-names, the inscription contains multiple personal names beginning in Þórr-.

There are various collocations in other regions. One striking example is around Torsberga (Runtuna sn, Rönö hd, Södermanland, Sweden – ‘torsberga’ 1535), which has a number of bridge inscriptions nearby: Sö 149 (now 2 km), Sö 157 (4.2 km), Sö 127 (4.3 km), Sö Fv1948;282 (now 4.3 km), Sö 141 (4.9 km), Sö 142 (now 11.2 km). There are also a number of sites in Uppland that follow a similar pattern, but given the general density of both theophoric place-names and bridge inscriptions in this region, it is harder to show particular patterns.

As previously stated, the preponderance of inscriptions and theophoric place-names in regions such as Uppland makes it difficult to discern patterns, there are still areas where the same types of distribution can be identified. One such example is the rather promisingly-named Torsbro (Ramsta sn, Hagunda hd – ‘torsbro’ 1460), which has five bridge inscriptions in the vicinity (U 859, U 854, U 856, U 851, U 867, all within 8 km; see Figure 2). Nearby Torslunda (Haga sn, Ärlinghundra hd – ‘in thorslundum’ 1335) has four bridge inscriptions within 5 km of the settlement (U 327, U 462, U 475, U 476; see Figure 2).

Some of the inscriptions in these examples are a long way (10–11 km as the crow flies) from the place-name, so we would have to presume a fairly broad conception of what constitutes local worship of a particular god. There is nevertheless clear evidence in these regions that bridge-inscriptions are associated with Þórr- settlement names.

The relationship does not automatically suggest a causal connection, but there are two possible lines of causation given that the place-names almost certainly predate the inscriptions. The first is that the two phenomena arise from an external cause, and the second is that the bridge-building and commemoration were in some way motivated by earlier practices of Þórr-worship.

An obvious external cause is the landscape itself. Although these regions are not characterised by the kinds of dangerous rivers that I described in the introduction, they have rolling landscapes with creeks and small rivers, and what would have been marshy ground in pre-modern times. Such a landscape would have been boggy and difficult to traverse before modern drainage, agricultural improvements and road-building. The lack of navigable waterways in Småland and Skåne (unlike the inland waterways of Götaland, Uppland and parts of Södermanland) may have made this problem particularly acute and led in part to bridge construction. Likewise, the survival of Þórr place-names in these areas may be related to the landscape itself, as the god may have had particular relevance to people coping with such a local environment.

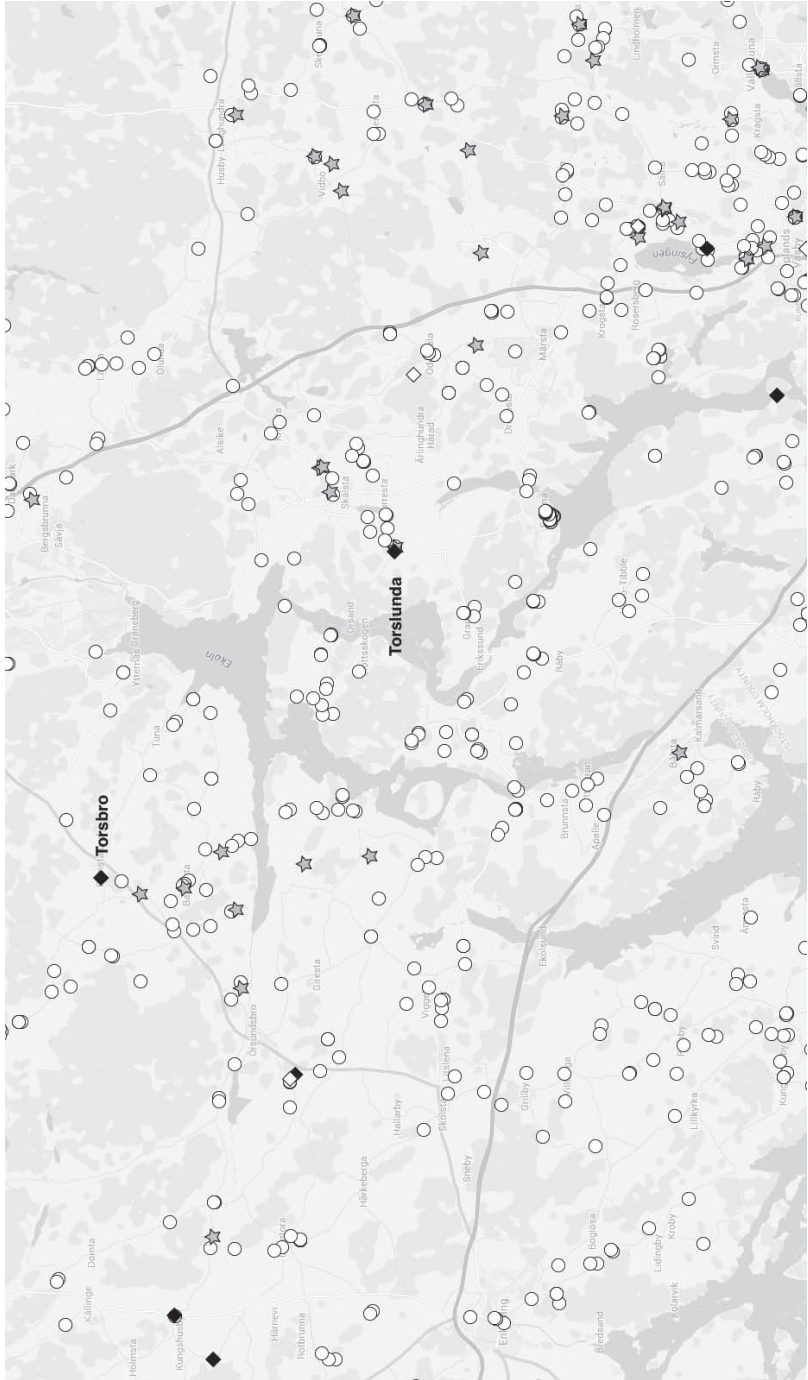


Fig. 2: Part of Uppland in Sweden. Sources and legend as for Figure 1.

An alternative – and not incompatible – causation might be that there was a particular impetus in bridge building that was related to pre-Christian practices. Using the case of *Helgi inn magri* as a point of comparison, it may have been that during the period of Christianisation in this part of Sweden, local people continued to invoke Þórr for help in traversing wet terrain (sea, rivers, lakes and bogs). Creating safer means to cross such terrain may have helped eradicate this pre-Christian practice. Such an explanation, however, can only be speculation, unless archaeological or other evidence can be found to support the invocation of Þórr for crossing rivers and wet ground in these regions.

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