

Dvergar and the Dead

Prof. Santiago Barreiro

Cátedra de Literatura Europea Medieval
Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
Universidad de Buenos Aires
santiagobarreiro@filo.uba.ar

Resumen

En este artículo analizamos, a través de fuentes antiguo nórdicas, la evidencia que ha llevado a los académicos a proponer una conexión entre los *dvergar* míticos y los muertos en la edad media escandinava. En lugar de focalizarnos en la reconstrucción de sentidos originales y raíces etimológicas, analizamos las fuentes a la luz del sistema social existente en el área cultural escandinava, comenzando con el período pre-cristiano tardío hasta la baja edad media. Criticamos la perspectiva que imagina a los *dvergar* como representando a los muertos, y proponemos una interpretación alternativa para su posible significado y asociación durante el marco temporal analizado, conectándolos con los extraños y con el rol del intercambio de dones como creador de lazos sociales.

Palabras Clave: Dvergar, Mitos, Escandinavia.

Abstract

In this article we analyze, through Old Norse sources, the evidence that has lead scholars to propose a connection between mythical *dvergar* and the dead in the Scandinavian Middle Ages. Instead of focusing on the reconstruction of original meanings and etymological roots, we analyze the sources under the light of the social system existing in the Scandinavian cultural area, beginning with the late pre-Christian period up to the late Middle Ages. We criticize the perspective that imagines *dvergar* were representing the dead, and propose an alternative interpretation for their possible meaning and association during the analyzed timeframe, connecting them with outsiders and to the role of the gift-exchange as a creator of social ties.

Keywords: Dvergar, Myths, Scandinavia

I. INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarship has described *dvergar*¹ in two main aspects. Some analyses stress their links with beliefs concerning death, afterlife, and ancestors, while other explore the role of *dvergar* (and dwarfs in general) as master smiths. Both approaches have been developed by scholars from different disciplines, but historians had taken a minor (if any) role in these studies.

Both social and, especially, cultural historians have appropriate conceptual tools for the task, and many more can be taken from anthropology. While looking at the previous scholarship on the issue, it is easy to realize that evidence is taken from very different times and places, so the risk of anachronistic interpretations is high.

A good example is a book by Claude Lecouteux, entitled *Les elves et les nains au Moyen Age*. A quite misleading name, as it is mostly concerned with indo-European roots and etymology, and it has much more to say about dwarfs than about elves. A trifunctional, Dumézilian approach to religion and myth underlies most explanations, and that usually means that specific historical contexts are lost, while long term comparisons and a search for the blurred 'Indo-European origin' are promoted. While this is valuable to understand the development of prehistoric cultures and languages, it provides little help to the medievalist.

We will briefly introduce the ideas of Lecouteux in more detail, as they are the prime example of 'the French view' on dwarfs. He has taken his main ideas about *dvergar* from the French scandinavist, Régis Boyer, who wrote '*plus nettement encore que les géants, les nains sont clairement concus comme étant les esprits des morts. C'est pourquoi ils ne présentent pas la même complexité, à l'étude, que les géants. Ceux-ci pourraient être les morts en tant que grands ancêtres, nous l'avons vu. Les nains seraient les morts, sans plus (...)*' (Boyer 1994: 46) and explains their wisdom along the same line: '*comme les géants, les nains, en tant que morts, sont dépositaires du savoir, notamment ésotérique*' (Boyer 1994: 47). His arguments have to do mostly with etymological reasons, but it is clear for him that *dvergar* were not complex to understand, so he did not go further into his analysis, as Lecouteux did.

On the other hand, the Norwegian folklorist Lotte Motz wrote from a different point of view. In her article *The Chanter at the door*, she examines the main features of *dvergar* as a group, narrowing their sources to the Eddas and the Sagas. She points out some important issues: *Dvergar* lack interest in social life, but have masterful skill in crafting items, great wisdom, and knowledge of magic, and Motz connects them with a priestly class. But later she turns her attention to the dwelling place of *dvergar* (mostly stones), and consequently to all kind of public social phenomena related to stones, from medieval assembly places to megalithic constructions in the Baltic area. Here anachronism begins again, even if she took preventive measures against possible objections: '*It may seem unlikely that a figure of medieval literature should be traceable to structures erected and ceremonies performed millennia before the recording of the tales, but we must consider how well the ancient sepulchers were remembered*' (Motz, 1982: 255), and then she quotes medieval texts (*Beowulf* 2717-2719, and the memorial rune stone raised for King Gormr at Jelling) to obtain credibility for her stance. Her proposal is unconvincing, as it can be pointed out that 'remembering' does not imply a real knowledge of the past, but narrative constructions to create a past that fits a given present (See Sawyer and Sawyer 1993: 214-238).

Instead of focusing in another attempt to reconstruct the blurred origins of *dvergar*, in this paper we shall attempt to explain the mythical role of these beings in Viking age and medieval Iceland, as it provides the vast majority of written sources

available for the subject. Their links with death and dead, that is a key issue on the previous interpretations, will be especially focused in our article.

II. SOURCES

Both the prose and the poetic Eddas could be used to provide information about the *dvergar*. The same applies for sagas as well, especially *fornaldarsögur*, while the sagas of Icelanders (*islendingasögur*, also known as ‘family sagas’), and the contemporary and bishops sagas are concerned with the daily life and feuds of Icelandic farmers and chieftains, and provide little information on mythical beings.

On the other hand even if the aforementioned ‘sagas of ancient times’ (the aforementioned *fornaldarsögur*, sometimes labeled ‘legendary sagas’) provide a wealth of information, we must be extremely careful about them. There, the influence of continental models is deep, especially that of French and German romances, and a ‘dvergr’ in this saga may be hard to differentiate from a continental dwarf. Considering their relatively late dates, these sagas show us the late evolution of the figure; Ruled by the Norwegian king through his legates, and losing its peculiar church structure from 1264 onwards, Iceland was slowly attached to standard European societal models, and its literature shifted accordingly.

Even so, this shift took time and the local figures did not completely disappear, and some of these sagas, notably the *Volsunga saga* and *Hervarar saga* provide some useful *dvergar* figures as they could have been imagined in Scandinavia around the time of conversion (c.1000), as those sagas are modeled on ancient poems and tales.

Even more important than sagas, our main written sources related to *dvergar* are the eddic poems and the prose Edda by Snorri Sturlason. Along this article *snorra edda* is treated as an attempt to rationalize and systematize the heterogeneous and non-systematic information contained on eddic poetry. This implies that we follow the traditional image of eddic poems (i.e. the works collected in the so-called Poetic Edda), especially those on the cycle of Sigurð, as relatively earlier and based on oral material, while the proper Edda being composed at a later date and probably already composed as literature by Snorri himself, and thus deserving more careful treatment.

Hence, we should distinguish between a *mythology*, like that built by Snorri, from the myths expressed at some degree in the different eddic poems. Underlying this assumption is the concept of ‘myth’ as it was defined by Mauss nearly a century ago: ‘*A myth, mythos (...) is a myth of the gods, fable of the gods, apologetics, morality (...). A myth is a believed history, which implies, in principle, rites. Myth is an obligatory part of the religious representations, there is an obligation to believe in myth.*’ (Mauss 2006: 314. Our translation.)

This implies that when this particular body of myth was (or is) rationalized into a mythology, its social usage – or, in Maussian words, its moral and apologetic role – might have been lost, as the society which used it changed, and probably those myths now have a different meaning and function. If we accept the eddic poems as being less rationalized and closer to the original milieu where the myths were created, while the rationalizations of those mythical poems by Snorri is more in line with educated medieval thinking, comparing the picture of *dvergar* given in both sources can be used to set up the preliminary sketch for a general description of the mythical function of *dvergar* during the period that roughly goes from the time of the conversion to the late Middle Ages (c.950-c.1400).

III. OUTLINE FOR A CHRONOLOGY FOR *DVERGAR*

We already know the last incarnation of *dvergar*, or more properly dwarf, in the bearded, small, mining and smiting beings prevailing in folktale and modern fantasy. As we have shown, their origin has been subject to much speculation; none of those are strictly important to the aim of our paper, unless they provide specific knowledge about *dvergar* in the Middle Ages and the later Scandinavian iron age. Fortunately, Anatoly Liberman demonstrated, grounded on linguistic proofs, that ‘*the emergence of the dwarf in the folk tales as we know him did not happen before approximately the year 600*’ (Liberman 2002: 187). Parallel to the usual folk traits (like mountain-dwelling), he insists that ‘dwarves’ had a religious role in pre-Christian ‘Germanic’ cosmology and religion:

‘All three races – the gods, the dwarves and the giants –, were anthropomorphic, and their place in the universe, not their size, distinguished them: the gods ensured that the world would run its course, the giants fought to destroy order, and the dwarves were the gods’ “support staff”, for without the tools (treasures) the dwarves forged, the gods would have been powerless and destitute’ (Liberman 2002: 176).

In his view, there are two different but mixed levels: the folktale dwarf and the mythical/religious dwarf.

The first one is a relatively stable figure since its ‘invention’ around c.600, and the main novelties in its evolution is the diminishing in size and power, that is linked with Christianization (See Lecouteux 1998: 151-169). Their mythical/religious role is quite different in Liberman’s point of view (*dvergar* as servants of the gods) from that of the French authors (*dvergar* as closely resembling the dead). In his view, they could have been ‘stalwart’ supporting ‘beams’, one of the etymological explanations of *Æsir*. Thus, *dvergar* had a role in religion that faded out on late the Middle Ages, without losing his presence (even if it was heavily transformed) in folktales, making eddic *dvergar* and folktale dwarfs hard to compare, as the second one lost its religious meaning, while the first still keeps it, even if its ‘already mixed with folktale’ (Liberman 2002: 187). Even if we will not follow him closely, the evolution of folktale dwarves that replace a religious-mythical group of beings with more complex significance should be taken into account, and this transformation will take place, slowly, during the Middle Ages. While *dvergar* are turned completely into folktale beings, the reach of our study ends.

Also, another important idea developed by Liberman is that the etymology of *dvergr*, obviously linked with their role and meaning, points to ideas like ‘insane’/ ‘stupid’/ ‘unsociable’, and ultimately to ‘servant’.

IV. *DVERGAR* IN WRITTEN SOURCES

4.1 Eddic poetry

Dvergar play important roles in some eddic poems. The main example is *Álvissmál*, where a *dvergr*, *Álviss* (lit. all-wise) answers the questions *Thór* asks him. While the answers are not particularly useful, as it was probably a late didactic poem, there are two interesting facts in the poems: when *Álviss* appears, he wants to marry *Thor*’s daughter, and, while the red-bearded god refuses to agree, and argues that he

knows not the *dvergr*, and that he looks like a *jötunn* and a corpse. Álviss lies, saying that he was given the bride, but Thór replies that he, as the father, has the right to rule who will marry her daughter. Then Álviss asks him again, and Thor tricks him into answering his questions (*Álvissmál*², st. 1-8), that later end with the dwarf turning to stone.

On the other hand, this poem provides little evidence for the *dvergar* as the dead (or as smiths). While Álviss is called ‘pale’ (*fölr*), and asked if he ‘was at night with corpses’ (*vast í nótt með ná*) these are probably just ways to say he is like a horrible *jötunn*³ (*þursa líki*), and thus that his daughter will not be given to him, as Æsir never give their women to *jotnar* like Vanir do. What the poem provides is a hint on mythical kinship and on the greed of the *dvergr*, and also of their inability to follow proper procedures for bride-requests. Also, the riddle duel adds to the image of *dvergar* as wise creatures, as the name *Álviss* does.

Dvergar also appear in the *Völuspá*. This poem is probably much older (c.1000), than *Álvissmál*, and it contains some of the fundamental myths of Norse cosmology. Stanzas 9-10 tell an origin of *dvergar*, which are created by the gods in the shape of humans, using blood and bone from the primeval giant Ymir. Alternatively, it might be read that *dvergar* created the shape of humans. The text is unclear, but the confusion regarding the relationship between *dvergar* and humans reinforces the link between them in terms of shape. Both interpretations imply that both groups look quite similar. Thereafter comes the long name-list of *dvergar* (st. 11-16), whose names have been taken as proof of the links between them and the dead. Lecouteux quotes (Lecouteux 1998: 107) *Nár* and *Náinn* (‘corpse’ and ‘corpse-like’), *Dáinn* (‘dead-like’), *Haugspori* (‘one who enters in a grave’ or, with a better translation, ‘one who treads on mounds’). See Gansum 2004: 46) and some others. This etymological interpretation has severe problems. First, it must be said that some other names of *dvergar* that appear in the poem seem not to be appropriate names for the dead, or even *opposed* to death (*Glói* ‘glowing’, *Litr* ‘colour’). Also, the interpretation of the names can be forced by the preconception that sees all *dvergar* as the dead. The aforementioned ‘Haugspori’ is a good example, as it could mean a *pillager* and not a *dweller*; No *dvergr* is named *Haugbúi* (‘mound-dweller’), and certainly some names can easily be linked with pillages and thievery, like the name ‘*Alþjóf*’ (lit. ‘all-thief’). The same unstable meaning comes from *Fjölsvinnsmál* (stanzas 33-34), where the only sure thing is that those *dvergar* built some kind of structure (The hall of Ménglod?) that belongs to the Æsir (*Fjölsvinnsmál*, st. 33), thus acting as craftsmen.

As a whole, names provide a wide arrange of meanings and probably they are not a useful guide to analyze the social meaning of *dvergar*; except in one sense. As Chester Gould noted in a classical article, ‘*the ordinary themes which make up the greater part of Old Icelandic names are entirely missing (...). We are dealing with a very different class of names*’ (Gould 1929: 958). Thus we must be aware that *dvergar* are set aside from ordinary men, even if they look human-like. Stanza 37 might contain a mention to a golden dwelling of *dvergar*, oddly located on underground plains (*niðavellir* could be translated as nether plains), if the *Sindri* mentioned in ‘*Sindra ættar*’ is a *dvergr*. In stanza 48, *dvergar* just groan in their stones, but take no part in the upcoming struggle between the gods and the *jotnar*, and this implies that they are an independent group, while the *álfar* seem to be sided with the gods, even if they do not appear directly battling in the following stanzas. That is similar to the scene set up at the beginning of *Lokasenna*, where Æsir, Vanir and Álfar are feasting together, while *dvergar* do not appear, uninvited to the hall meeting.

Dvergar play a major role in the poems concerning Sigurð. *Gripispá* (st. 11) tells how the hero will kill both Reginn and Fáfnir, which is called ‘the shining ormr’ (*orm hinn frána*) and ‘greedy’ (*gróðugr*). Neither Grípir nor Sigurð try to separate clearly the smith from the *orm*, and this suggests that their kinship tie between them is the important thing here. Recently, Neil Price commented, in an article that asked for a reexamination of our preconceptions about the way different groups were represented in pre-Christian Norse myths, that Reginn has no particular physical feature to make him different from other males depicted on the Ramsund rune stone⁴. Going further on his comment, I would add that if Reginn is a *dvergr*, his brother Fáfnir should also be a *dvergr* (or, at least, it was one before turning himself into an *ormr*), if kinship operates with *dvergar* as it does with other mythological groups. And the same could be said about the remaining members of the family (Hrériðmar and Ótr)

But problems arise with the following poem, *Reginismál*. In the prose introduction to the poem, it is said that Reginn ‘*var hverjum manni hagari ok dvergr of vöxt*’. He is called both a man (in fact, the most skillful of men) and a *dvergr* ‘*of vöxt*’. While this is usually translated as meaning ‘a *dvergr* in stature’, we already know that *dvergar* seem to have had the same size that men do. So there happens to be a possible solution to this contradiction: either we imagine this to be a late interference from medieval beliefs about the small size of all ‘dwarfs’⁵ or we translate the word by its meaning ‘condition, state’ so we can still hold to a man-sized Reginn with a ‘*the condition of a dvergr*’, whatever that could mean. But the problem goes further: in *Fáfnismál* (stanza 38), he is referred to as a ‘*hrímkalda jötunn*’, this is a ‘rime-cold *jötunn*’, thus placing him into a third group. But probably, that could be explained as a poetic device – the verse *needed* another word beginning with ‘h’ for alliterative reasons–, or as a way to explain that Reginn was wise and ancient, like many *jotnar* are. This is supported by the way he is referred to in stanza 34 of the same poem, *hinn hára þul* ‘the gray-haired sage’. Hilda Ellis Davidson goes into a very complex theory to explain these problems in her article *The hoard of the Nibelungs*, and concluded that there was ‘*an earlier Norse tradition representing him as giant rather than dwarf*’, and that they are also related to the dead (Ellis 1942: 475). Sadly, once again her theory says nothing about the perception of *dvergar* when the poem was composed and goes back in time to an ancient period, and thus is not useful for the aim of this article.

We should instead analyze in more depth Reginn and his family, and attempt to discover what could be the aforementioned ‘condition’. *Reginismál* tells on how three gods (Loki, Óðinn and Hœnir) accidentally killed Ótr (‘otter’), another shape-changing brother of Reginn. They are asked for ransom by his father, Hrériðmar. They send Loki to find gold to pay. He captures another shape-changed *dvergr*, named Andvari, and threatens him to surrender his gold or die. Andvari conceals a ring, trying to keep it for himself. After being discovered by Loki, he hides in his rock and curses the gold, claiming that *mun míns féar mangi njóta*, (‘no man will enjoy my riches’, *Reginismál*, stanza 5). After that, Loki goes back and pays the ransom, filling Ótr’s skin with gold. Hrériðmar points out that a single whisker was still uncovered, pushing the deal to an extreme. Then Loki, now free, announces that the curse was passed to the new owners. Hrériðmar replies (*Reginismál*, st. 7) that they did not give *ástgjafar* ‘friendly gifts’, given *af heilum hug* ‘in a friendly mood’, even if the ransom itself could not be denied, because it fulfills in the terms of the agreement. Even more, Hrériðmar seems not to care about the curse on the gold, being content with owning it now, and states it will be his as long as he lives (*Reginismál*, st. 9). Thereafter he expels the gods from his own home, without any sign of the hospitality he portrayed when they first came.

Then the remaining sons, Fáfnir and Regin, ask their father for a share of the wealth given as ransom. Hréiðmar rejects the request and Fáfnir attacks him while he is sleeping. Hréiðmar claims for revenge, and speaks with his daughters, that might be the only female *dvergar* that appear on the sources. While one – Lyngheið – says she will not avenge him on her brother, the other – Lofnheið – gives no reply, but Sigurð will be her grandson and the killer of Fáfnir. Reginn reacts asking his inheritance from his father, and Fáfnir says no. Reginn asks his sister Lyngheið what to do to get the inheritance, and she answers he should try to persuade him with goodwill and not with violence. Reginn, of course, will pay no attention to her sister.

Lyngheið portrays the wish for peaceful settlement, placing kinship over any other principle. The male members of her family, on the other hand, seem to place greed and personal property above other principles, and they are not prone to negotiate. It is interesting to note that they, instead of using wealth as a mean for settling disputes – as it is usual in the sagas, or was usual in real practice, through institutions like the *wergild*–, settling disputes seem to be a way to obtain gold, that appears to be their end.

Later, Reginn fosters Sigurð, and incites him to kill his own brother, who turned into an *ormr* because he has to protect a treasure from being distributed⁶. Sigurð has heroic motives to kill him: first, winning the treasure for him (to be put into circulation again through gifts to their followers, which will make him powerful) and also, avenging his great-grandfather, Hréiðmar. He will do both deeds, but he avenges his father in first place. Sigurð pays proper attention to kinship matters, and this contrasts deeply with the reasons Reginn has to kill Fáfnir.

The poem *Fáfnismál* describes the death of the hoarder. There is a strong contrast between the hero and his victim, as they show quite different attitudes. While Sigurð says no man enjoys gold after death (*Fafnismál*, st. 10), he shows that he is interested in obtaining for other reasons (*Fafnismál*, st. 21). Later it is seen how he uses that gold in a proper way, for example, to get Brynhild into marriage (*Sigurðarkviða in Skamma*, st. 38-39), even if that finally causes his own death, fulfilling the curse placed on him by Andvari. Fáfnir, on the other hand, vomited poison in its hoard, to protect it and secure it will not be used by anyone (*Fafnismál*, st. 18). That means that he was now greedier than while he was still a *dvergr*. He hoards for no reason outside hoarding.

Scattered in that part of the poem are the mysterious stanzas referring to the *Ægishjalm*, (lit. ‘Terrifying helm’). It is related to expressions like *hefir ægishjalm í augum*⁷ that means literally ‘has the terrifying helm in the eyes’ but means ‘has a frightening glance’. The helm is somehow related to the ownership of gold (*Fafnismál*, st. 19). The helm might be interpreted as a metaphor similar to that of the aforementioned expression. Following that interpretation, *Fafnismál*, stanza 16 could be translated as:

‘A frightening glance bore I at men,
while I laid with (guarded) my treasures
Alone strongest of all I thought i was,
As found I not many youngs (warriors)’⁸

Sigurð will link (*Fafnismál*, st. 19) the ownership of the ‘helm’ with the measures taken by Fáfnir turn the gold useless. Both issues are related once again to greed: Fáfnir turns to be a loner for his determination to be aggressive and unfriendly to others, as this made him avoid the constant reciprocal and agonistic gifts usual in the Norse culture. In fact, the ‘terrifier helm’ is closely similar to an expression about the ‘rotten face’ applied to a native American chieftain unwilling to give, because, as Mauss cleverly noted, refusing to give means to lose the status as a member of the community, as a

person (Mauss 1971: 205). Fáfnir wants to hoard, and not to give and share, so he has a terrifying gaze and is lonely, having lost his face as he ‘wears the helm’. Even if this interpretation about the ‘helmet’ is wrong, being the helmet actually imagined as an artifact and not as a metaphor, the loneliness and greed of the *ormr* are obviously related, as he destroyed the ties of kinship ruthlessly to obtain the treasure. On the other hand, the only possible link with the dead – the dwelling of Fáfnir, the mound he inhabits at Gnitahiðr –, can hardly be used as proof to connect *dvergar* with afterlife beings. In fact, the description of the lair of the *ormr* resembles little of a Viking age mound, as it is mostly made with iron, including a door; the emphasis is on metal and treasures and not in the mound itself (*Fafnismál*, prose ending). This may be pointing to a connection with chthonic features.

Later, the last episode of eddic poetry involving a *dvergr* is the death of Reginn. Here it becomes obvious that greed also is the main motive of action, as it was for his elder brother: it is also said that Reginn was hidden while Sigurð killed Fáfnir, thus making him a coward (*Fafnismál*, 28), even if he tries to justify itself as the provider of the weapon used by the hero, reinforcing his role as a craftsman (*Fafnismál*, 2*) . He plans to treason and kill his foster-son, Sigurð, to obtain the gold. He discovers the plot and kills Reginn.

As it was seen, there is stronger evidence for the huge greed of *dvergar* than for their connection with the dead in Eddic poetry, and for their ill will towards the system of agonistic gifts upheld in the heroic milieu of eddic poems. Now we must turn to the role of *dvergar* in the eddic prose.

4.2 Snorra Edda

The prose Edda by Snorri Sturlason provides many details concerning *dvergar*. First we will consider those sections where he provides new versions of the material already present in eddic poetry, and then we will proceed on the new evidence provided by Snorri himself.

Snorri retells the creation of *dvergar* mentioned in the *Völuspá* (*Gylfaginning*, ch.14). His version adds that *dvergar* were originally worms or maggots (*maðkar*) sprouting from the flesh of the primeval giant, Ymir. Here, they are transformed by the gods into beings with the intelligence and likeness of men (so physical appearance was still not perceived as a sign that indicates what a *dvergr* is), and also states that they live in rocks and earth. He quotes the *Völuspá*, which provides a different origin for *dvergar* (being created by the gods directly from the blood and bone of Ymir), so he was not aware of the contradiction between his own version and the one in the poem. Their origin as maggots may be related to a proposed etymology of *dvergr* (sometimes proposed as ‘twisted ones’, for example by Boyer and Lecouteux) but also to their closeness with worm-shaped beings like *ormar*, that we will discuss closely later.

Skaldskaparmál retells the story of Reginn. The different origins of the smith that was said to be a man, a *dvergr*, and a *jötunn* in the eddic poems are not mentioned there: the only figure explicitly labeled as a *dvergr* here is Andvari, but besides these small details, Snorri does not provide new insight, with a slight exception. He explains that Fáfnir took the helm of terror from his father. In his interpretation he provides an origin for the helm, thus supporting a literal reading, somewhat similar to that in the prose ending of *Fafnismál*, of the helm as an actual helm. This marks probably in late medieval contexts, the meaning of the item could not have been metaphoric anymore, if it ever was.

A new tale containing *dvergar* is presented by Snorri, when he explains the origins of poetry (*Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 4-6). He explained that the wisest god, Kvasir, was captured and killed by two of them, Fjalar and Gálar, while he went to their home. Their behavior is criminal, as Kvasir is said to have gone to a *heimboði* (normalised *heimboði*, lit. ‘home-bidding’, but this means an invitation to a feast), so he should have been their guest. Here, it is again remarked the unwillingness of *dvergar* to follow the social rules: instead of offering hospitality, food, drink and gifts, they trick Kvasir and murder him⁹. Later they use his blood to produce the powerful ‘mead of poetry’¹⁰, so here is again obvious that greed is the main reason for these unsociable actions.

Later these *dvergar* invite a *jötunn*, Gilling, and his wife to their home and kill them both. This explains that *dvergar* are also not willing to deal properly with the rivals of the gods, thus reinforcing their role as alien beings, placed outside the struggles of other mythical groups. Later they are captured and menaced of death by the avenging son of Gilling, Sútung, so they trade their mead for their life, in a way that closely reminds us about the way Andvari lost his gold.

Another interesting story introduced by Snorri tells about the origin of the treasures of the gods, and emphasizes the creative power of the *dvergar* as smiths (*Skáldskaparmál*, 44). Loki cut Sif’s hair, so the other gods threaten him to find new hair for her. He says that the *svartálfar* will create new hair for the goddess. Then Loki requests some *dvergar*, the sons of Ivaldi, to create a golden-hair for Sif and they also create Frey’s ship and Óðinn’s spear. This implies that the *svartálfar* are the same as *dvergar*, at least in Snorri’s account: he even names¹¹ the place where some *dvergar* dwell *Svartálfheimr* (lit. ‘Home of the black *álfar*’). This means as well that for him *dvergar* were a kind of *álfar*, a group of ill-defined beings that appear to be allied with the gods (especially with the *vanir*), and that might have received some worship as local fertility deities (Lindow, 2002: entry ‘Álfablót’). But *dvergar*/*svartálfar* shows a strong contrast with *álfar*, as they surely were not worshipped nor are they allied with gods, and have no link with fertility. Even so, there might be some connection because both groups are closely linked with the land, so *dvergar* might be seen as an unfriendly (greedy) kind of those beings lately labeled *landvættir* (‘land-beings’), while *álfar* are friendly (generous). In a religion where *do ut des* prevailed like it did in Norse paganism, greed will surely prevent worshipping.

Then Loki bets his own head with other *dvergar*, Brokk and Sindri, saying that they cannot create items as good as those he now has. They accept, and create Thor’s Hammer, Óðinn’s ring and Frey’s golden boar. The gods accept those creations as the best, so Brokk points that Loki must pay his debt and lose his head. When Loki tries to offer a gold compensation instead, the *dvergr* says no, even if he is alone inside the Ásgarðr. So Loki easily flies and then tricks him, avoiding the death punishment. This shows again the lack of ability *dvergar* have in social matters, and also shows them as preferring blood to gold, a fact that reinforces their image as unsocial beings, but that does not portray their typical greed. But the main aim of this tale is to show the wonderful skill of *dvergar* and the creation by them of the treasures of the gods, who provide nothing in exchange. As the *dvergar* do not provide them as gifts (we do not know how did Loki get the treasures from the sons of Ivaldi, and those created by Sindri and Brokk are obtained through the competition invented by Loki for that reason), it is reasonable to imagine that *dvergar* are ranked below the gods, that can make them obey without providing them nothing in return, and are placed out of their allied groups. A similar picture is offered in the tale of the binding of the Fenris wolf. There, Óðinn wanted the *dvergar* to create a chain, after the failure of those created by the gods (*Gylfaginning*, ch. 34). There is no information on how Skirnir, the emissary to the

dvergar, actually persuaded them to create the chain, as neither gifts nor menaces are mentioned, yet we can deduct there was some uncertainty about the success of the mission, because it is stated that the gods thanked the messenger Skírnir for the good results.

4.3 Sagas

Dvergar do not appear in the sagas of Icelanders, but are common in *Fornaldarsögur*. An exhaustive list of all of their appearances in the sagas exceeds the aim of this article, so we will highlight only some of them to analyze some of the regular motives that are presented.

The first example of *dvergar* comes from the *Volsunga Saga*¹², which tells in prose what eddic poetry and prose told about the cycle of Sigurð, Fáfnir, and Reginn. In this text, the image is nearly the same presented by Snorri: Fáfnir is an *ormr*, but not a *dvergr*, and Reginn is only a master smith. Andvari is still a *dvergr*, and only minor details change from eddic prose, like naming the waterfall where Andvari dwells *Andvaraforis*. For the anonymous author of this saga, it was not important to state which kind of being was Reginn, but it was important to stress his greed and treachery, and the same applies to the young Fáfnir as well, even if he is said to be an *ormr* in this text. We should remember that even in the less mythical version of the tale, the German *Nibelungenlied*, the ‘dragon’ to be killed by Sigurðr/Siegfried is still present. This might be explained because serpents (or dragons, or any kind of reptile) were still a powerful allegory for evil in Christian religion, when *dvergar* might have lost any kind of moral significance they had before conversion.

Another saga providing a significant episode including *dvergar* is *Hervarar saga*, built around the fate of the bearers of the magical sword Tyrfingr. One of the manuscripts of the saga, the version known as H, contained in the vellum manuscript named ‘Hauksbók’ (Am544) there is a story about how the first human owner got the sword; while the manuscript was written in the first years of the 13th century, it collects older material as well as new, and mixes vernacular texts with translations from continental Latin sources, leading to the uncertain dating given to this saga. Thus, we must be especially careful when dealing with these *dvergar*, as they can be quite different from those that appear more consistent sources.

The king Svafrlami was hunting, and met two *dvergar*, Dvalinn and Dulinn. The king threatened them with his sword, and they asked him for their lives. So he spared their lives if they forged a sword for him. The *dvergar* agree, and made the sword. Later the king came back to the stone where they lived, on the appointed date. They gave him the sword as promised, but told them it was cursed to kill a man each time it was drawn, and also will be the cause of three wrongful acts, and that finally it will cause the king’s death (*Hervarar saga*, version H, ch. 2. The saga occupies pages 350-369 in the published edition of *Hauksbók*). So the king wanted to strike them with his own sword, but they fled again into their stone.

This story shows remarkable similarities with the Sigurð cycle. Threatened *dvergar* beg for their lives, and trade it for a highly valuable item, which is later cursed by the same *dvergar*. The dominant features are cowardice, craftsmanship and unwanted ‘gifts’. Again, the link with the dead is thin, as it was in the case of Reginn, Fáfnir or Andvari.

A striking contrast with the sources analyzed so far is presented in the episodes containing *dvergar* that appear in the late *Þorsteins Þátrr Bæjarmagns* and in a Saga of

Égill and Ásmundr (*Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, lit. ‘The saga of Égill one-handed and Ásmundr bersekerbane’), both probably composed during the XIVth century, when Iceland was already controlled by a Christian monarch, and was already completely inside a medieval Christian milieu in cultural terms. The continental literature, taken from French or German sources, had a strong influence in this kind of late sagas. If the *Volsunga Saga* and, to a lesser degree, *Hervarar saga* are atypical representatives of the *Fornaldarsögur*, the sagas that we will discuss now are not. Unsurprisingly, the figures of *dvergar* that appear here are quite different from those of the previous sources.

In the the *Páttr*, the hero, Thorstein reaches an isolated clearing where a hideous *dvergr* is shouting, from the top of a boulder. Then the *dvergr* tells him that an eagle captured his *dvergr*-child, and the eagle is explained as a devil sent by Óðinn. Thorstein helps the *dvergr*, and he offers him gold and silver, rejected by the humble Thorstein. But this *dvergr* gives him the offered goods anyway, and even more gifts, magical in nature, are given to the hero. Now, he accepts them. In fact, if some standard elements remain (the boulder, the wonderful items and riches) others have changed, and now the *dvergr* is generous, and takes care for kinship, protecting his son. Also, it is described as hideous, with details on his physical appearance that is not common in other sources, but that are common, for example, in the dwarfs of Arthurian romances.

In the Saga of Égill and Ásmundr, it is told how Égill was hurt and lost his hand (making him *einhenda*) and tried to ease the pain submerging his arm on a stream. Meanwhile, a *dvergr*-child comes out of a rock, and Égill gives him a gold ring. So an adult *dvergr* comes and asks who was so kind with his son. The hero replies that he was, and that in his situation gold was not very useful. So the friendly *dvergr* lets him inside his rock, and heals him. Égill spends the night there, and then the *dvergr* forges a blade to replace his hand, and gives him many gifts, so when the protagonist leaves, they are said to be on very friendly terms. This is another unexpectedly generous *dvergr* that cares for his child, and helps an outsider (instead of ignoring or even killing him as usual), providing hospitality inside his own rock-home. In this case as well some standard elements are repeated, like riches, craftsmanship and rocks. Also, there are no more links that point to the world of the dead than before, even if the chthonic element is always present.

From these examples, it can be argued that during the late Middle Ages, *dvergar* shifted from their original greedy behavior and became literary figures much in consonance with the standard dwarfs of western literature. From then on, the road to folktales including small-sized *dvergar* was open, and the aim of our study reaches a chronological barrier, while their meaning was completely different from the one presented in older sources.

V. CONCLUSION

We have shown that pairing *dvergar* with the dead is at odds with much of the medieval evidence that suggests other roles for them. While their role as smiths (and magicians/wise men) is undeniable and should be seen in the light of a connection with the earth, an abstract entity imagined as holding all the riches, *dvergar* fit in the mythical cosmology as a group of beings related to secretive, greedy behavior, excluded from the ties created by intermarriage and gift-giving that tie Æsir, Vanir, Álfar and Jötnar, either as allies or enemies. *Dvergar* seem to be excluded from the relationship, and are dealt with mostly through threatening or force, thus showing their inferior

status. Their role is similar to the actual place in society that smiths had. In a recent article about the myth of Wayland, J. Calmer has stressed that

‘It is most important to accept the independence of the craftsman and to reach a respectful agreement which is advantageous for both sides. The reason for this necessity is the importance of objects of great prestige which could only be produced by individuals wielding exclusive knowledge of how the specialized crafts could be executed with complete mastery’ (Callmer 2002: 358).

The main difference to be noted here is that *dvergar* represent the negative aspects of that independence, as they seem to lie outside of the pressures of kinship and local affairs. Their relationship with other groups is marked with the same uneasiness that marked the relationship of smiths and aristocrats or even peasant leaders in Viking or early medieval Scandinavia¹³. It is important to note that Wayland is never called a *dvergr*, but an *álfr*, so his role in *Völundarkviða* is that of a vengeful victim, far more positive than that of *dvergar* in most sources. Probably they were seen as a kind of ungenerous land spirit, a *svartálfr*¹⁴, a type of greedy *álfr*, but kept the same connection with the earth riches.

But *dvergar* are also linked to another group of beings, a fact noted, but not explained by C. N. Gould in his analysis of dwarf-names (Gould, 1929: 960, footnote). The link between *ormr* and *dvergr* was not obvious under etymological grounds, but their literary role is similar. Both are greedy beings, concerned with guarding the riches of the earth. But there are two notable differences. While *dvergar* transform and ‘create’¹⁵ wealth, *ormar* do not. The second aspect of divergence is far more important, because it is what turns an *ormr* into a monster. *Dvergar* can be persuaded, threatened or tricked into social interaction concerning their treasures, but *ormar* can only be killed as a way to reinsert their gold into the social circuit, reestablishing the proper order, a typical task accomplished by heroes.

It can be useful to summarize the role of *dvergar* as they appear in the reviewed texts along the model of reciprocity developed by Marshall Sahlins (1974: 210-214). While *álfar* should be placed inside the positive, balanced aspect of reciprocity, and *ormar* are placed in the extreme of negative reciprocity (this is, the total lack of it), *dvergar* are somewhere in between, as the relations other groups have with them range from trade to menaces. It is obvious that *dvergar* are strangers or inferior beings. Their link with the dead is not evident (even if it could have been in ancient times), but they are closer in behavior to the *jotnar*, also a group of outcasts, sometimes enemies, sometimes friendly. But while *jotnar* are probably the mythical portrait of foreign, non-agrarian groups, *dvergar* could be seen as inner outcasts, that do not fit well inside the network of gift-giving so typical in Norse literature, but still have a role (as craftsmen) that makes them necessary. Their unsocial behavior reflects this conception, as do their association with other groups of partial ‘inner outcasts’, like smiths or (post-conversion) magicians. The *dvergar* of the late pagan period and up to the late Middle Ages were neither monsters nor gods, nor were they the dead, but a group of neutral, covetous beings that lived on the fringes of the (mythical) society.

LITERARY SOURCES

FINNUR JÓNSSON (ed.) *Hauksbók*. 3 vols. Copenhagen: Thieles bogtrykkeri, 1892-1896.

_____. *Heimskringla: Nóregs konunga sögur*. Copenhagen: Gads, 1911.

_____. *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, København: Glydendal, 1931.

_____. *De gamle Eddadigte*. Copenhagen: Gads, 1932.

GUÐNI JÓNSSON and BJARNI VILHJÁLMSOÐN, (eds.). *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, 3 vols. Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Forni, 1944.

REFERENCES

BARREIRO, Santiago. La monstruosidad en los mitos escandinavos: La visión de la adivina. In: BARRANCOS, Dora et al. (eds.) *Actas del congreso Monstruos y Monstruosidades. Perspectivas disciplinarias II*. Instituto Interdisciplinario de Estudios de Género, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2006, 132-141.

BERNÁRDEZ, Enrique. *Los mitos germánicos*. Madrid: Alianza, 2001.

BOYER, Régis. *La mort chez les Anciens scandinaves*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1994.

CALLMER, Johan. Wayland. An Essay on Craft Production in the Early and High Middle Ages in Scandinavia. In: HÅRDH, B. (ed.) *Uppåkra studies*, 6. Lund: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2002.

ELLIS, Hilda. The Hoard of the Nibelungs. *Modern Language Review* 37, 1942: 466-79.

GANSUM, Terje. Role the bones – from iron to steel. *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 37 (1), 2004: 41-57.

GOULD, Chester Nathan. Dwarf-Names: A Study in Old Icelandic Religion. *PMLA* 44, 1929: 939-67.

LECOUTEUX, Claude. *Enanos y Elfos en la edad media*. Barcelona: José Olañeta Editor, 1998.

LIBERMAN, Anatoly. A Cobweb of Dwarves and Dweebs. In: ANDERSON, L. and LULL, J. (eds.) *A Certain Text: Close Readings and Textual Studies on Shakespeare and Others*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002, 173-192.

LINDOW, John. *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

MAUSS, Marcel. *Sociología y Antropología*. Madrid: Tecnos, 1971.

_____. *Manual de etnografía*. Buenos Aires: FCE, 2006.

MOTZ, Lotte. The Chanter at The Door. *Mankind Quarterly* 22, 1982: 237-256.

PRICE, Neil. What's in a name?: An Archaeological Identity Crisis for the Norse Gods (and some other friends). In: ANDERS Andrén, JENNBERT, Kristina and RAUDVERE, Catharina (eds.), *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006, 179-183.

SAHLINS, Marshall. *Economía de la edad de piedra*. Madrid: Akal, 1974.

SAWYER, Peter and SAWYER, Brigitt. *Medieval Scandinavia: From Conversion to Reformation. Circa 800-150*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

NOTES

¹ *Dvergr*, usually translated as ‘dwarf’, even this is only a matter of tradition. Along this text, the words ‘dvergr/dvergar’ are used to the Norse being, while ‘dwarf/dwarfs’ name the small-sized, usually misshapen and mischievous continental beings.

² Eddic poetry is quoted by the name of the poem and stanza. Eddic prose or sagas are quoted by name and chapter. English translations are ours unless specified. Quotes from eddic poems have slightly modified and ‘normalised’ spellings. Thus, for example, Jónsson’s *Ægishjalm* becomes *Ægishjalm*.

³ Male *jotnar* are usually depicted as hideous, as some females are.

⁴ ‘Now, Reginn is a dwarf, so *this* is what a dwarf looks like, although with head attached. In other words, apparently no different from any other male figure’ (Price 2006: 181).

⁵ This is masterfully explained by Lecouteux in his book (1998: 98-101).

⁶ It is the gold that creates the *ormr*. In a previous article, we have analyzed the role of the *ormr* as a hoarder (See Barreiro 2006).

⁷ For example, *Sörla þáttur*, ch. 9, in *Fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda II*.

⁸ ‘*Ægishjalm bar ek of alda sonum, / meðan ek of menjum lák; einn rammari / hugðumk öllum vera, fannk-a ek svá marga mögu*’.

⁹ A similar tale is presented by Snorri in the *Ynglinga Saga* (ch. 12) of *Heimskringla*. Here the victim is not a god, but the mythical human king Svegdir.

¹⁰ ‘(...)þeir (The dvergar) *blendv hynangi við bloþit, ok varð þar at mioðr sa, er hverr, er af dreckr, verþr skald eþa fræpa maðr*’. (Skaldskaparmál, 4).

¹¹ See *Gylfaginning*, ch. 34, and *Skaldskaparmál*, ch.39. Eddic poems do not mention the name of any clear ‘land of dvergr’, but the land *Níðavellir* (lit. ‘plains below’, indicating an underground place) mentioned in *Völuspá*, st. 37 might have been so, as its inhabited by some of them, Sindri’s kin.

¹² The editions we used of *Volsunga Saga*, *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* and *Þorsteins Þáttur Bæjarmagns*, and appear in the *Fornaldarsögur Norðrlanda* corpus. *Volsunga saga* appears on the first volume, and the other two texts appear both in volume III.

¹³ The wide range of the gift as a creator of social bonds in all the aforementioned societies, might explain the surprising similarities that appear in the character of dvergar in literatures stemming from very different social milieus like those of continental Scandinavia and Iceland.

¹⁴ The colour black is used by Snorri frequently to describe negative figures like *Surtr* or *Hel*, much in lines with Christian thinking.

¹⁵ On the meaning of ‘creation’ in the ancient Germanic languages, see Bernárdez (2002: 71).