Þjalfi

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Little is known about Thor's (Þórr's) servant Thialfi (Þjalfi or Þjálfi), and this is why the origin of his name, the central subject of this paper, also remains a matter of dispute. An etymologist ignorant of a word's exact meaning wanders in the dark. The name of an ancient tool (to give a random example) can be explained only when sufficient information exists about the uses to which the tool was put. Likewise, a mythological name (except for such as *Freyr* 'lord' and *Þórr* 'thunder'), if treated only as a linguistic sign, is open to all kinds of interpretation. To choose the most persuasive of them, we have to ascertain the character's place in the system of beliefs.

Finn Magnusen 1828: 608–09 compared the name *Þjálfi* (with *á*) and the Mod. Icel.[1)] verb *þjálfa* 'to work', but laid no particular stress on this comparison. Uhland 1868: 33 (first published in 1836) glossed *Þjálfi* as 'Arbeiter', without referring to Magnusen, and is believed to have been the originator of this etymology. Many distinguished scholars repeated it (see, for example, Hermann 1893: 338, Much 1898: 46, Detter 1901: 117, Detter-Heinzel 1903: 221/40[5], and R. Meyer 1910: 291). Since Uhland's time several more etymologies of Thialfi's name have been proposed, and with the exception of one older and one later one, all of them had circulated by 1938 (see a brief survey in Schröder 1938: 214, note 1). Jan de Vries 1977[2] examines the works of the same authors. Lorenz 1984: 511/14, sec. 2 offers an even shorter survey.

The *Elder Edda* mentions Thialfi only once. In *Hárbarðzlióð* 37–39, Thor tells Othin (Óðinn) that he had fought "berserks' brides," who attacked him with iron cudgels and *elto Þjálfa* 'chased away Thialfi'. Berserks' brides must have been giantesses. No description of this battle has come down to us, but giantesses as Thor's adversaries figure in Snorri's *Edda*, and the theme – Thor battles giantesses and is later mocked for vanquishing women – was popular, as evidenced by several echoes of it in the sagas. Thialfi turns up here as Thor's companion and, uncharacteristically, flees.

Approaching the Viking Age. Proceedings of the International Conference on Old Norse Literature, Mythology, Culture, Social Life and Language. Edited by Ērika Sausverde and Ieva Steponavičiūtė. (Scandinavistica Vilnensis 2). Vilnius University Press, 2009.

https://doi.org/10.15388/ScandinavisticaVilnensis.2009.2.6

The *Lexicon Poeticum* (LP) cites two occurrences of the word *þjalfi* in skaldic poetry. Kormákr used the kennings *eyja þjalfi* and *þangs þjalfi*. Both mean 'sea' (*eyja* 'of islands', *þangs* 'of the sea weed tang'). Guðbrandur Vigfússon (Cl.–V.) was uncertain about how to gloss *þjalfi*; at present, the kennings are usually translated as "islands' / sea weed's encircler, confiner." The noun *þjalmi*, the basis of a similar kenning, may be a phonetic variant of *þjalfi* (see the end of the paper on this word). De Vries 1977 has separate entries for *þjalfi* and *þjalmi*. Although he distinguishes between *þjalmi* 'rope, noose' and *þjalmi* 'encircler' (in poetry), he admits that they may belong together. For *þjalmi* as a prose word Guðbrandur Vigfússon suggested the gloss 'caltrop' (that is, 'snare') or 'pitfall'. *Þjálmi* 'three loops on a rope' and *þjálmur* 'snare' have continued into Modern Icelandic. Bugge 1889: 12 also understood *þjálmi* (with *á*) as 'trap, snare'. It follows that Kormákr's verses do not provide any new information on *Þjalfi*, for, to interpret the kennings, we have to decide whether they refer to a character called *Þjalfi* or to the common name homonymous with it.

From the skald Eilífr Guðrúnarson's *Þórsdrápa* we learn that Thialfi assisted Thor manfully and that neither of them trembled with fear during their encounter with the giant Geirrøðr (strophes 9 and 10). Olrik 1905: 130 believed that the same poet composed *Þórsdrápa* and *Hárbarðzlióð*, but no evidence supports this conjecture. According to Snorri, who depended on Þjóðólfr hinn hvinerski (Thiotholf of Hvin), Thialfi did not accompany Thor on his expedition to Geirrøðargarðar but took part in his master's duel with Hrungnir. Thialfi's association with Thor must have given rise to numerous versions of their encounters with the giants. He was a good servant, and this is why the line from *Hárbarðzlióð* comes as a surprise, unless it implies that Thor's opponents were so dangerous that even the faithful Thialfi fled. Simek 1993 remarks that in *Hárbarðzlióð* and *Þórsdrápa* Thialfi may be another god, rather than Thor's servant. This is probably going too far.

Snorri's version contains a puzzling moment. It is unclear why the giants produced Mǫkkurkálfi, a clay giant of enormous size. They made him stand near Hrungnir, and Thor's appearance filled him with great fear. Thialfi attacked, and Mǫkkurkálfi "fell with little renown." The situation in which a duel by a minor character precedes or duplicates

the main one is known from both heroic literature and myth. Compare Hǫttr's mock fight with a dead dragon after Bǫðvarr Bjarki killed it (*Hrólfs kraka saga*). Even in real fights the moment of triumph resembles an anticlimax. Sigurðr wounded Fafnir from a pit, and Bǫðvarr's encounter with a terrible beast lasted a short time. Only Beowulf and Wiglaf (another pair) struggled in good earnest, and the same holds for the great saga heroes when they defend themselves from mortal enemies.

Þjálfi and *kálfi* ~ *kálfr* rhyme, but despite the consensus that *kálfi* means 'calf' (that is, a young bull), Mǫkkurkálfi need not have been a "calf." There was a proper name *Kálfr*, from **Ká-ulfr* (De Vries 1977). Therefore, Thialfi may have had a worthy foe to combat rather than a dummy made of clay. *Mǫkkur-* in *Mǫkkurkálfi's* name probably meant 'mist'. The giants (so Snorri) could not find a heart big enough for their creature and put a mare's heart into him. Unlike Mǫkkurkálfi, Hrungnir had a sharp-edged three-cornered heart of stone. The duplication of the heart motif has no justification, and it is usually nonfunctional details that provide a clue to the origin of myths. Here we see two of them: a parallel non-heroic duel and a mention of a mare's heart in Mǫkkurkálfi's body. In medieval Scandinavian literature, horses are never denigrated. There is nothing wrong with a mare's heart, except that it became part of a male (and this is, of course, the whole point).

I will venture the hypothesis that in an earlier myth Mǫkkurkálfi, far from being a huge coward made of clay, was a mighty giant with a stout heart of a stallion (Ká-ulfr) from the land of the mist, perhaps Hrungnir's servant. Both had famous hearts, and the battle between Thor and Hrungnir was preceded by a duel between Þjalfi (? Þjálfi) and Kálfi. Thialfi overpowered the servant, and Thor, though not unscarred (a piece of Hrungnir's hone got stuck in his head and remained there forever) got the better of an almost invincible giant. With time, the story was forgotten and turned into a farce like the gods' adventure in the kingdom of Útgarðaloki or Hǫttr's attack on a dead beast. E. Meyer's idea that *-kálfi* means 'calf of the leg' (1891: 147), though repeated by von der Leyen 1938: 223, strikes me as fanciful.

Our only authority for the beginning of Thialfi's career is Snorri. According to his tale, Thor set out to visit Útgarðaloki and stopped at a farmer's house (a typical checkpoint separating people's habitat

from the Other World; see my discussion in Liberman 1994: 185–89). The farmer, his wife, and their two children Thialfi and Rǫskva invited Thor to a meal. Thor slaughtered his goats and the company partook of them, but Thialfi violated the order not to touch the bones and split the thigh of one of the goats, so that when Thor resuscitated the animals, that goat was lame. He was furious, but, on seeing everybody's fear, calmed down and did not punish the family. He only took both children with him as servants. All three and Loki show up in Útgarðaloki's kingdom. Rǫskva is never heard of again, but Thialfi participates in the contests at Útgarðaloki's. He claims to be a swift runner, and, although he acquits himself well (he is indeed the swiftest runner on earth), he loses to Hugi ('Thought') in all three heats.

The lameness of Thor's goats and the defective handle of Mjǫllnir belong with Othin's sacrifice of an eye, Oedipus's bad foot, Jason's loss of a sandal, Hephaistos's lameness, and many other cases of ritual mutilation (they are marks of special destiny) in the myths of the world. In my work on Útgarðaloki, I pointed out an odd detail: the farmer and his wife have no names. In myths everybody and everything (dwarves, giants, swords, kettles, etc.) has a name. Consequently, when we are told that, for instance, Baldr's nameless horse was buried with him or that Thor dined with an anonymous farmer, we may suspect that Baldr did not have a horse and that such a farmer never existed. Rydberg 1886: 642 (and seemingly, no one else) commented on the farmer's anonymity, but he had a penchant for imaginative cross-references and did not realize that we are dealing with multiple versions of a fluid tale rather than fragments of a fixed text. It is said in *Hymisqviða*, stanza 7, that when Thor decided to visit Hymir, the giant Egill took care of the goats. Rydberg concluded that the maiming of the goats happened during Thor's absence and that Thialfi was Egill's son. Snorri, in his opinion, did not know the name of Thialfi's father (he says that in the *Younger Edda* the name was forgotten). This reconstruction is groundless. Thor would not have sought a servant among the giants' sons. But in one respect Rydberg was right. Snorri's account does contain a flaw: Thialfi could not be "some farmer's" son either.

An additional source used in unraveling the Thialfi myth is the Old Swedish *Guta saga*. It begins with a legendary description of Gotland,

an enchanted (*eluist*, that is, *elvist* / *elfist*) island that sank into the ocean at night and came to the surface during the day. The power of elves was broken and the sinking stopped when a man called Thielvar (Þieluar, that is, Þielvar) came to Gotland with fire (*quam…eldi*). Nothing is known about his wife; however, he had a son Hafþi who married Huitastierna (that is, Hvitastierna); she appears in the legend from nowhere. On their first night, she had a prophetic dream, and so on. The inhabitants of Gotland are the offspring of that first couple. Since only one personage in Scandinavian myths is called Thialfi, researchers identify him with Thielvar. I will look at this tradition in some detail, but its shaky foundation should be pointed out at once. Compare Läffler's reservations (1908: 171) and Finnur Jónsson's cautious remark: "Some people think that Thialfi is identical with Thielvar" (1913: 59). Peel 1999: xviii is also noncommittal.

Since Thialfi was Thor's servant, and Thor, as his name indicates, was originally a thunder god, an attempt has been made to treat Thialfi as lightning. It seems to have been E. Meyer's idea (1891: 204; 1903: 277), but Much developed it like no one else (1898: 46 = p. 55 of the book edition). The episode in *Guta saga* allowed him to compare Thialfi / Thielvar with Prometheus. However, the comparison is weak. Thielvar did not steal fire from the gods or bring it to people (Gotland was uninhabited). His action had a different purpose: to take possession of land, one had to carry fire over it (hence the phrases *koma eldi* and *fara með eldi um landnám*). This is what happened to Gotland: once Thielvar performed the ritual, the elves lost their power over the island and the area became his property (cf. Rydberg 1887: 103, who held this opinion). Detter 1893: 116, in a review of E. Meyer 1891, asked: "Why should Thor's servant Thialfi be lightning?" The reason is clear but wrong.

Some mythologists treated Loki as an ancient fire demon or fire god, stressed the proximity of Thialfi's and Loki's roles (both often accompany Thor), and thus justified their treatment of Thialfi / Thielvar, the alleged Scandinavian counterpart of Prometheus. One of them was Schröder 1924: 117. Later we will see that Loki and Thialfi have nothing in common, but Schröder's views deserve more than a passing mention, for he gave the problem of Thialfi his serious consideration. Regrettably,

when he returned to it (1938: 212–15; 220; 221, note 2; 222), he offered an eccentric hypothesis. He repeated his old idea that Thielvar was a fire demon but now added that he was the son and husband of Gotland's mother goddess. A long passage follows to the effect that such a situation is common in mythology. Huitastierna, Thielvar's daughter-in-law, turned out to be his wife, identical with Tacitus's Nerthus. Her name ('White Star'), so Schröder, may mean 'die blondgelbe (Acker)fläche', approximately 'blond-yellow (plowland)' but, most probably, means 'a cow with a white star on the forehead'; she was, he proposes, a cow goddess (this is an old conjecture). In other cases Schröder also reconstructs theriomorphic deities. For example, from Thor's association with goats he concludes that at one time Thor was a god in the shape of a goat. "Beyond any doubt, the Gotland creation tale is based on the idea that the god of fire and fertility forms a union with the earth goddess. This is the first couple, and all people are their offspring" (215).

Now that, according to Schröder, not a single dark corner has remained with respect to Thialfi's nature, the origin of his name, as he believes, also becomes clear. Presumably, Gmc. **þelfēⁿ* goes back to PIE **telp-* or **telbh-*, whose root is *(s)tel-* 'drip, urinate', as in Gk σταλάσσω 'drop, drip', G *stallen* 'urinate' (said about horses), and others. More cognates can be found in WP 642–46, especially on p. 646. The connection between G *stallen* and Gk σταλάσσω is questionable, but the Greek verb and Gmc **þelf* (whatever its meaning) may be related. However, the similarity between ejaculation of semen expected from a fertility god (or urination) and dripping ~ dropping is distant, to put it mildly. *Þjalfi* is a weak noun (an *n*-stem), while *Þielvar* is not. Schröder could not account for the difference and referred to the possibility of an ancient alternation in the suffix (*n* ~ *r*).

Schröder was not fully confident of his etymology and dismissed the question with the statement that the origin of mythic names plays a subsidiary role in understanding the origin of myths. As to the myth, he thought he had found support for his reconstruction in the fact that Thialfi was Thor's servant. Another long passage is devoted to Indra and Vishnu and Indra as an ithyphallic god ('god with an erect phallus') and to other gods, mainly Greek, having the same characteristics. The excursus led him to the conclusion that when a great god is accompanied by a

small servant (Schröder emphasizes the servant's size), the god embodies the force of procreation, whereas the servant (as far as his origin is concerned) is the god's worshipped anthropomorphic phallus. By way of afterthought (221, note 2), Schröder mentions the Hittite vegetation god Telepinu ~ Telebinu, whose name looks like a perfect congener of Gmc **þelf-*, but adds that more research is needed to make this comparison valid and promises to return to the ties between Germanic and the languages of Asia Minor. In his later works, Thialfi does not seem to have surfaced again.

The first to represent Thialfi as small was probably Olrik (1905). He objected to the understanding of Thialfi as a worker, because Thialfi was a short, weak, even though nimble companion of the thunder god (138). Olrik mentioned two circumstances relevant to his interpretation: in myths, strong gods are seldom smart (he could have referred to the usual folklore juxtaposition of brawn versus brain, especially prominent in animal tales) and need small resourceful servants; besides, loud thunder peals are usually preceded by weaker, more distant ones (138–39). Considering that in the extant corpus of Scandinavian myths even Thor has nothing to do with thunder (only his name means 'thunder', and his hammer, especially if *Mjǫllnir* is related to Russ. *molniia* 'lightning', resembles a thunder god's weapon) and that, as we will see later, according to Olrik's untenable proposition, Loki, rather than Thialfi, was Thor's original servant, his hypothesis holds out no promise. Nor did he connect Thialfi's name with thunder. He thought that *Þjalfi* was perhaps a variant of *Þialfar* and decomposed the latter name into *þial*, the Old Swedish form with breaking corresponding to OI *þel* 'ground; strength', and *far-*, as in the verb *fara*. The whole yielded 'precipitous runner' (138).

In Scandinavian myths, unlike what one encounters in later romances and the eddic verses based on them, in which monsters with 900 heads threaten the protagonist, the giants, dwarves, and gods are anthropomorphic, and their stature depends on their status: the giants are dangerous (and this eventually made them look big in people's eyes), the dwarves are the gods' servants (this factor contributed to their becoming diminutive), while Thor is a giant slayer (and hence towering over everyone else). Other than that, they interact as physically equal

beings. The dwarf Alvíss woos Thor's daughter, Freya sleeps with four dwarves, dwarves overpower a giant, Thor experiences no discomfort while staying in a farmer's house, and so forth (cf. Liberman 2008: 47–49; the beginning of the entry *dwarf*). Pictorial representations of Thor as big and Thialfi as small reflect the dichotomy master / servant, not tall / short. To boost the idea of Thor's little servant, Schröder (1938: 219, end of note 4 from the previous page) glossed *Lytir*, the name of an obscure Swedish divinity (he wrote *Lýtir*), as 'der Kleine; Däumling'. Neither *Lytir* nor *Lýtir* (a less probable variant) is related to OI *lítill* 'little' (see Liberman 2008: 144, the end of the entry *lad*). Von der Leyen 1938: 223 called Þialfi one of the most delicate (*zierlichsten!*) gods. The passage in his book devoted to Thialfi is unfortunate. He followed E. Meyer and considered *Mǫkkurkálfi* to be a misty calf of the leg and Thialfi a quick sunray piercing the mist. Not a single source calls Thialfi small, weak, nimble, or delicate. Those are fancies. The epithets applied to him are *sjálflopti* 'self-soaring' (Eilífr) and *fóthvatari* 'swifter of foot' (than anyone else; Snorri).

Comparative mythology reaches its lowest point when it allows itself to be carried away by wide-ranging convergences. The topic at hand tends to be lost in a display of erudition. We only know that Thielvar brought fire to Gotland, broke the spell the elves had laid on it, and had a son Hafþi by an unknown mother, who in turn married a woman called Huitastierna. That couple populated the entire island. In *Guta saga*, Thor does not appear. In Old Icelandic poetry (skaldic and eddic) and prose (Snorri), Thialfi is Thor's servant. Where are the fire demon, the mother goddess, the ithyphallic Thor, his anthropomorphic phallus, and a son sleeping with his mother? Some of them occur in other religions, and that is where they should stay. I prefer to treat with equal disbelief Lemke's dream-symbolic explanation of Thielevar's activities (1986: 13–16).

As already mentioned, Olrik believed that Thialfi ousted Loki from the place of Thor's servant. In an Estonian tale (he noted) it is the trickster who is inseparable from the thunder god: he gets him into trouble (cf. the stealth of Iðunn's apples) and rescues him (cf. *Þrymsqviða*). Also, since, according to Olrik's theory, a strong god of limited intelligence needs a smarter helper, Loki appears to be qualified

for the resourceful servant's role, whereas Thialfi does not (the ruse that secured Thor's victory over Hrungnir was suggested by the gods, not by him). In *Þrymsqviða*, Loki flies to Thrymr's kingdom with Thor, and in the adventure at Útgarðaloki's Thor, uncharacteristically, has two companions: Loki and Thialfi, in addition to Rǫskva (Olrik 1905: 138, 140–46). Olrik was consistent and called Thialfi's participation in the Hrungnir myth a late detail (130).

This reconstruction disregards several moments. To begin with, no single role fits Loki, and he is too important to be a mere companion of another god (see Liberman 1994 for a full discussion of Loki's character and his development from a chthonian deity). It may be true that someone like Thor needs a smart servant to offset his simple-minded brutality, but he also needs someone who will help him win battles (a Wiglaf at the side of a Beowulf), and Loki despite his participation in the Ragnarǫk, an all-out confrontation between order and chaos, is not a fighter. Secondly, the eddic gods regularly travel in groups. Alongside Odin and Thor, we sometimes see obscure figures like Hœnir and Lóðurr (for instance, in *Vǫlospá* 18). Occasionally Loki bears them company. Olrik's idea appeals to those who treat Loki as a primordial fire demon (compare what has been said above about Thialfi / Thielvar 'lightning'). Few scholars were ready to substitute Loki for Thialfi in the latter's capacity as Thor's servant. (See Celander 1911: 90–92; De Vries 1937, II: 45, and Ström 1956: 51; Lorenz 1984: 510/11, sec. 3 mentions the controversy but does not discuss it. Neither does De Vries, who only registers his disagreement with Olrik.) Philippson 1953: 48–49 suggested that Loki as Thor's companion supplanted the colorless Thialfi, though *Þórsdrápa* gives Thialfi his due. In reality, two independent lines – Thor / Loki and Thor / Thialfi – must have crossed at the earliest time. Thor had many companions but only one known servant (Thialfi). Rǫskva may have been another, but her mythology is lost.

Lindow 2001: 286 writes: "Following Georges Dumézil, many observers, especially those who, like Dumézil, approach the material from the Indo-European side, see here [in Þjálfi's failed attempt to lift Hrungnir's lifeless leg off Thor] a reflection of warrior initiation: Under the tutelage of an elder warrior, the initiant slays a made monster. I find the theory attractive even though there is nothing in Snorri's

text to indicate that Thjálfi's status changes after the encounter with Mökkurkálfi, which we would expect in an initiatory context. Made monsters turn up in all sorts of cultures, not always in initiatory contexts (e. g. golems)." Indeed, the farce, mentioned above in connection with Hǫttr, looks like a parody of initiation, while the episode involving Mǫkkurkálfi does not.

The loss of the Rǫskva myth deprived us of valuable material, for some conclusions regarding Thialfi could have been drawn from the character of his sister. Rǫskva does not participate in the games at Útgarðaloki's, and in Old Icelandic poetry her name appears only twice as part of kennings, in which it functions as a trivial synonym for "woman" (LP). Etymologists have interpreted *Rǫskva* as a cognate of OI *rǫskr* 'brave' (this connection is beyond dispute) and possibly of OI *roskinn* 'ripe, mature' (related to Go. *gawrisqan* 'bear fruit'). *Rǫskr* may have begun with **h-* (though an *h*-less variant has also been recorded), while *roskinn* began with **w-*; for this reason, they cannot be related, unless we resort to the formulation that they were "variants" of the same root. *Þórsdrápa* (stanza 21) has *Vrǫsku*, not improbably, a deliberate archaicization of the name on analogy with *roskinn* rather than a decisive argument for the *Rǫskva-gawrisqan* connection. In the older scholarly literature, in which *Rǫskva* was most often understood as a cognate of *gawrisqan*, her name led to recognizing an ancient goddess of growth and fertility.

Since a thundergod controls clouds and rain, protecting crops also falls within his jurisdiction. But nothing testifies to the role some nineteenth-century researchers ascribed to Rǫskva. Her name, despite Eilífr's *Vrǫsku*, is, more likely, related only to *rǫskr*. The distant origin of *rǫskr* is of no importance in the present context, for even in Eilífr's days *roskin* had no *v-* and *rǫskr* had no *h-* and speakers could not distinguish between the two roots. OE *ræscan* 'quiver, flash' and the development of *rǫskr* (*rask* means 'quick' in all the modern continental Scandinavian languages) show that the semantic kernel of **raskur* was 'impetuous, energetic' (this is the meaning of Mod. Icel. *röskur*); Engl. *rash* (from Scandinavian) and G *rasch* have made the same way as *rask* in Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish. It seems more natural to assume that *Rǫskva* meant 'an energetic, impetuous, brisk one' (such

is also the opinion of nearly all later scholars) and that she could run as well as her brother Thialfi. (Is this the reason she has nothing to do at Útgarðaloki's?)

One of the oldest interpretations of Thialfi's function and name appears in Cl.–V. Here is the relevant part of the entry: "Þjalfi… the name of the servant and follower of Thor. Edda; and also as a pr[oper] name; the word prop[erly] means *delver, digger*, Germ. *delber, delben, = to delve, dig*; the names Þjálfi and Röskva… indicate that Thor was the friend of farmers and the god of agriculture." For completeness' sake, I will also reproduce the entry about Rǫskva: "Röskva,… rhymed Vröskva, Þ[órs] d[rápa]; the name of the maiden follower of Thor; she is a personification of the fields of harvest" (the next entry is *röskvask* 'to grow up, to ripen'). *Þjalfi* and *delve* (from OE *delfan*) cannot be related, for an Old English cognate of *Þjalfi* would also have had initial *þ*, as Detter 1893: 117 observed, but he made his point so quickly that to notice it is hard.

Guðbrandur Vigfússon, the author of the *Þjálfi-delve* etymology, found an enthusiastic supporter in Rydberg, who spun one of his imaginative reconstructions around it. As we remember, according to Rydberg, Thialfi was the son of the giant Egill and the splitting of the goat's thigh allegedly happened in his house. Rydberg recalls a *fornaldrasaga* in which Gróa finds a little boy in a *flæðarmál* and brings him up (a *flæðarmál* is the space between low and high water), cites several other episodes of the same type, and concludes that the name *Þjalfi* suggests a similar idea. He identifies *Þjalfi*, the name, with *þjalfi* 'sea encircler' and calls Thialfi a discoverer of lands and a circumnavigator of islands. Unexpectedly, he interpreted the verse in *Hárbarðzlióð*, in which "berserks' brides" are said to have chased away Thialfi, as meaning that Thialfi conquered giants, to make the land inhabitable. This, naturally, brought him to *Guta saga*. Thialfi emerged as a delver, ready to work the ground with a spade (Rydberg 1886: 708–10). Thialfi did not delve anything, but as will be shown, one of Rydberg's ideas can be salvaged.

I am aware of five more comments on *Thjalfi*. Loewenthal, the author of numerous mechanical etymologies, connected *Þjalfi* with Russ. dialectal *tolpega* 'lout' (stress on the second syllable; the pejorative meaning comes from the suffix). Since, according to Olrik, the concept

of the Germanic fire demon (*Feuergeist*) developed from "he who brings fire," in Loewenthal's view (1921: 261–62), *Þielvar* may be understood as 'someone who forces his way [with fire]'. The root of *tolpega* is *tolp-* (cf. Russ. *tolpa* 'crowd', stress also on the second syllable; the older meaning of the root must have been 'to have enough room'). No tie can be detected between *tolpega* and *Þjalfi*, and all the important questions, such as the relationship between Thialfi and Thielvar, remain unanswered in this etymology.

Gordon 1927: 178, note to line 116, says that *Þjálfi* (sic) is probably identical with Þieluar, "who took fire to Gotland and so disenchanted it. The name means 'one who seizes and holds', and is etymologically identical with *þjálmi* 'receptacle', 'noose'" (the same in the second edition by A. R. Taylor, 1957, and in the 1962 reprint from corrected sheets, p. 199). The equation *Þjálfi* = *þjálmi* is old, but the gloss 'one who seizes and holds' that Gordon gives must have justified, in his opinion, Thielvar's "seizing and holding" of Gotland. No one seems to have shared Gordon's idea.

Gutenbrunner 1936: 159–60 suggested that *Þjalfi* is an abbreviated form of *Þjelvar* (from **Þelba-harja-*). He assumed their identity with *þjalfi* ~ *þjalmi* 'snare; fetter' and referred to the custom of some warriors among the Chatti of wearing rings; hence his gloss *Þielvar* 'fettered fighter' (*Fesselkämpfer*). It remains unclear whether the common name *þjalfi* is also an abbreviation of some longer word, for if it is not, then the argument falls to the ground. Besides, neither Thialfi nor Thielvar was fettered or wore a ring as a mark of belonging to a religious union, and neither deserves the name of a *Weihkrieger* (? 'an initiated warrior'). Therefore, this interpretation can also be dismissed as unrealistic.

Mogk traced *Þjalfi* to **Þjalfr* (a strong form alternating with a weak one), which allowed him to combine the Icelandic name with *Þielvar*, and etymologized it as **Þewa-alfaR*. In his additions to the commentary on the *Elder Edda*, Gering 1927, II: xviii mentioned this etymology without discussion, and Sturtevant 1952: 1147 found it the best there was. (Did Mogk suggest **Þewa-alfar* to Gering in a letter? In the first, 1891, edition of Paul's *Grundriß*, p. 1093, Mogk wrote "*Þjálfi*, d. h. der Gräber," that is, "delver," "probably lightning going into the ground" [*der in die Erde fahrende Blitz*], and referred to "a popular Germanic

myth," according to which fire is lightning coming out of the ground. He glossed *Mǫkkurkálfi* as 'a heavy cloud' and *Rǫskva* as 'a quick one'. The text in the 1908 edition, p. 358, is the same. Mogk's 1898 book is an offprint of his chapter from the *Grundriß*: see p. 132 on Thialfi. In Hoops's *Reallexikon* [Mogk 1918-19: 323], *Þjálfi* again appears with *á*, but no gloss follows his name. *Rǫskva* is 'a quick one', and *Mǫkkurkálfi* is not mentioned. Sturtevant gives no reference either.)

Sturtevant saw no difficulties in the derivation **þewa-alfaR* > **þē-alfr* > **þjalfr* but realized that *Þjalfi* was not an elf ("*Þjalfi* and *Rǫskva* were of peasant origin"). His explanation runs as follows: "…from the standpoint of the relation between Thor and *Þjalfi* as 'master' and 'servant', it does not seem inappropriate to call the 'servant' an 'elf', inasmuch as the elves, like the dwarfs, were subservient to the gods–note that *Freyr* became king of the elves and resided in *Alf-heimr…*, an abode which the gods had already bestowed upon him. The name *Þewa-alfaR* might then be equated with the name *Þór-alfr…* as an elf who was in the service of Thor. Mogk's derivation offers no more serious difficulties than do the other derivations discussed by Gering (1: 250)." Although this derivation may be better than the others, the ancient metaphor (a servant called an elf) does not inspire confidence. Our sources say little about the elves in Scandinavian myths. Their status has been examined many times, most recently by Árman Jakobsson 2006: 229–38. No revelations came to light, and, however broadly we may wish to interpret the material, the statement that the elves, along with the dwarves, were subservient to the gods would be hard to confirm. Hall's 2007 book should also be consulted. His theme is Anglo-Saxon and later beliefs, but he cast his net broadly.

Finally, Gust Johansson 1969 discussed all the names in *Guta saga* and said that *Þielvar* might perhaps be understood as *Tjäll-vard* 'hut guardian' (18; the Modern Swedish form of the name is *Tjälvar*). The element *-var* is irreconcilable with *vard* (for what happened to *-d?*), and in what sense was Thielvar, let alone Thialfi, the keeper of a house? Surveys of scholarship can be found in three works: Gering 1923–27, 1: 250; Schröder 1938: 215, note 1, and De Vries 1977 (*Þjalfi*). De Vries missed Olrik and mistakenly presented E. Meyer as the originator of the *Þjalfi-delve* etymology (the reference should have been to Cl.-V.);

besides, the comparison *Þjalfi* – Mod. Icel. *þjálfa* goes back to Magnusen, not Uhland. With respect to *þjálfa*, Schröder made the same mistake. The other etymological dictionaries of Icelandic offer nothing new. Holthausen 1948 and Alexander Jóhannesson 1956: 447 compare *Þjalfi* and *þjálfa* and derive both from the root **telp-*. ÁBM follows their example but mentions some of the older conjectures.

It should be added that the style of some etymological works deserves little praise. Hypotheses are often rejected with one word ("improbable," "erroneous," and the like). Schröder called Olrik's derivation a *Verlegenheitserklärung*, that is, 'an explanation offered when there is nothing to say', 'an explanation born of despair, a face saving device to avoid embarrassment'. Gutenbrunner suggested his gloss 'fettered warrior' without examining the opinions of his predecessors, as though they did not merit even a passing negative remark. By contrast, one's own view is usually promoted most forcefully and all difficulties are treated as relatively insignificant.

I also have a proposal, but, before launching it, I will give a short summing up. Old Icelandic poets and Snorri remembered Thialfi only as Thor's servant. Someone often dupes and helps the thunder god (it may be the same person), but, in dealing with Thialfi, I will disregard the evidence of comparative religion, rely on the meager information at our disposal, and proceed on the assumption that Thialfi had always been Thor's servant and did not supplant Loki or anyone else in that role. Like Freyr, who had a male and a female servant (Byggvir and Beyla), Thor had Thialfi and Rǫskva in his service (brother and sister), but no tales of Rǫskva seem to have circulated in the North even in the 10th century. While accompanying Thor, Thialfi killed *Mǫkkurkálfi*, a giant. Thialfi enjoyed enough popularity in Sweden, for his name to be used among mortals. *Þielvar* may be a variant of the same name. The likelihood of their identity is great. Yet the two mythic characters share no obvious common features, unless we identify Thialfi with lightning (which is inadmissible). Thielvar did not serve Thor (or any other god) and did not fight giants. He was the culture hero of Gotland: he took possession of the island, cleansed it of evil spirits, married Huitastierna (a woman of unknown antecedents), and became the progenitor of Gotland's population. *Huitastierna* is indeed a typical cow name, but the distance

between the figure in *Guta saga* and a cow goddess is too great for us to span. (Likewise, no path leads from Thor, as he appears in the extant Scandinavian myths, to an ancient goat god.)

Some time after I formulated my proposal concerning the origin of Thialfi's name, I noticed a reference to Jacob Grimm in E. Meyer 1891: 204 ("hardly the same as Thjolf, Donarulf") and learned that Grimm had not missed Thialfi. (In *Deutsche Mythologie*, he is not mentioned.) It turned out that I had partly reinvented his etymology (a common case in etymological studies). In a footnote to an article on the names of thunder (Grimm 1865: 409, note, continued on p. 410; first published in 1853), he asked whether Thialfi could not be understood as *Donnerwulf* 'thunder wolf', for he assisted Thor in carrying his cudgel (Grimm took *kyll* 'bag' for a cognate of G *Keule* 'club, cudgel, a weapon of a thunder god') and his sister also made a lot of noise (he connected *Rǫskva* with OI *raska* 'displace', that is, 'cause disorder'). Grimm, quite naturally, was aware of Magnusen's works but may not have consulted his entry *Þjálfi*, for he found *þjálf* 'work' not in Magnusen's *Lexicon* but in Bjørn Haldorsen's 1814. He thought of Go. *þeihvo* 'thunder' and *ulfr* 'wolf'. It is a brilliant etymology: perfect with respect to meaning and flawless from a phonetic point of view (cf. Go. *leihvan* 'lend' and OI *ljá* < *liá*). **Þeih-ulfr* would have yielded *Þjálfr*. This idea must have occurred to Grimm too late to be incorporated into the 1854 edition of his *Deutsche Mythologie*.

My starting point was such Old Icelandic names as *Hrólfr*, *Bjólfr*, *Jólfr*, *Þjóðólfr* (see them in De Vries 1977, under *ulfr*), and *Sǫkkólfr* (Noreen 1923: sec. 130). All of them have *-ólfr* from *ulfr*. (This, however, does not hold for *Gylfi*, in which *lf* belong to the root; its likeliest cognate is OI *gjalfr* 'sea'. See Olrik 1910: 12, Finnur Jónsson 1934–35: 294, Björn Sigfússon 1933: 131, and Sturtevant 1940–41: 223–24.) I assume that the original form of the name was **Þjalfr*, with *Þjalfi* considered to be more familiar and more appropriate for a servant. Strong and weak forms of the same name often existed side by side: cf. *Yngvar* and *Yngvi* (an extreme case). So many ingenious etymologies of *Þjalfr* have led nowhere because everybody, except Jacob Grimm, tried to explain *Þjal-fi* instead of *Þja-lfi*. However, Grimm's **Þeih-ulfr* was not the best choice, because Go. *þeihvo* has no cognates in Germanic; consequently,

such a Scandinavian word for "thunder" (to the best of our knowledge) did not exist. Here I think Mogk guessed well: the first element was **þewa-*, as in OI *þjá* 'serve' (< **þewan*). Thus, *Þjalfi* came into being as **Þewa-ulfr* ('serve' + 'wolf'), an ideal name for a servant.

The only hitch is the vowel length. It seems that **Þewaulfr* should have become *Þjálfr*. This form exists but is believed to be secondary, due to vowel lengthening before certain consonant groups, one of which was *lf-* (Noreen 1923: sec. 124.3 and 237.2). Sturtevant, famous for his attention to phonetic detail, reconstructed, as noted, the string **þewa-alfaR* > **þē-alfr* > **þjalfr* (he also assumed the primacy of the strong form) and said nothing about why *Þjalfr* had short *a*. **Þewaulfr* must have yielded **Þiáulfr* ~ **Þjáulfr*, with contraction in hiatus producing a long vowel. Is it possible that *Þjálfi* was an original form and that the skalds used the variant *Þjalfi* to fit the meter and that *á* in this name did not emerge as *ú* did in *úlfr* 'wolf' (< *ulfr*), thanks to lengthening? Considering the fact that *lf* functioned as a lengthening group, we should expect some vacillation. In my opinion, the development of *a* in *Þjalfi*, though problematic, need not derail the protoform **Þewaulfr*.

Once upon a time **Þewa-ulfr* encountered **Mǫkkur-ulfr* and vanquished him. He deserved to enter into Thor's service. It becomes clear why the young man's greatest virtue was "great speed." A servant is first and foremost a messenger and is expected to be everywhere in no time. His sister was also quick, rather than a fertility goddess. Compare the etymology of OI *þræll* 'slave, servant'. Usually the forms OE *þrægan* and Go. *þragjan* 'run' are given as the most secure cognates of *þræll* (a good semantic parallel in Greek, first suggested by Brugmann, can be found in Feist 1939, *þragjan*). Russ. *sluga* 'servant' (stress on the second syllable) has no accepted etymology, but, according to one of the proposals, it may be related to the words with the root **sel-* 'move, flow' (see the end of the entry *sluga* in the Russian translation of Vasmer's dictionary: III, 676).

The question about the relation between Thialfi and Thielvar defies a definitive answer. With the fire lightning motif discredited, only their names remain a connecting element between them. Yet a certain detail may rescue their affinity in myth and legend. One was allowed to take as much land as one could carry fire over or plow from sunrise to

sunset (see Olrik's discussion of this ritual in various cultures in Olrik 1910: 4–8). If Thielvar had not run all the way around Gotland in one day, after sunset it would again have sunk into the ocean. To perform such a task, he had to be a very swift runner, for the island is large. Perhaps this is the reason Thialfi was chosen as Gotland's culture hero, but the link is admittedly weak. The identity of Thialfi and Thielvar should be neither denied nor made too much of; see also what is said below on OI *þjalfi*.

Mod. Icel. *þjálfa* 'to work hard; train' was recorded only in the 17th century, and *þjálf* 'training' was derived from it (ÁBM). A verb with such a meaning would probably have surfaced in Old Icelandic if it had existed in it. Most likely, both *þjálfa* and *þjálf* are late formations, so that it would be wrong to trace *Þjalfi* to them. If *Þjalfi* reflects the mythic character's nature (as **Þewaulfr* is supposed to do), the common name *þjalfi* 'encirler, confiner' is not related to it. Its etymology constitutes a problem of its own, but the coexistence of the homonyms *Þjalfi* 'Thor's servant, the best runner in the world' and *þjalfi* 'encircler' inevitably affected the meaning of both or at least of the proper name. If *Þjalfi* came to mean 'encircler' (in addition to 'servant; runner'), the kenning *eyja þjalfi* would have merged with *eyja Þjalfi* 'an "encircler," *or* "Thjalfi" of islands'. This is where Rydberg's 'circumnavigator of islands' may come in. In the kenning, an encircler, confiner of islands was the sea, but, if applied to a human being, it would have fit the activities of someone like Thielvar, who "encircled" Gotland from within, rather than from without. This is one more argument for identifying Thialfi and Thielvar. The whole, of necessity, remains guesswork.

The skalds used *þjalmi* 'rope; snare' as a doublet (variant) of *þjalfi*. The correspondence OI *þjalfi* ~ OIr *tailm* 'snare' cannot be fortuitous. Bugge 1889: 12, ever on the lookout for the Celtic influence on Old Icelandic, cited OIr *tailm* ~ *teilm* (genitive *telma*) and Welsh *telm* (the same meaning) and explained the name *Þjálfi* (sic) as a borrowing from Old Irish. He did not distinguish between *Þjálfi* and *þjálfi* and equated *Þjálfi* with *Þjálmi*. His idea of borrowing has nothing to recommend it; note only that he gives *a* in all those forms length (Mogk and Neckel-Kuhn, as we have seen, also wrote *Þjálfi*). Noreen 1923: sec. 237.2 was not sure whether the variation *þjalfi* ~ *þjálmi* went

back to phonetic reasons: the Celtic forms lend *þjalmi* an independent existence and make the picture unclear. OI *þjalfi*, whatever its origin and whatever its relation with OIr *tailm*, seems to be a different word from *Þjalfi ~ þjálfi*, but, once their paths crossed, they could not help beginning to interact.

Notes

1. The following abbreviations are used in the text of this paper: Engl. – English, G – German, Gk – classical Greek, Gmc – Germanic, Go. – Gothic, Mod. Icel. – Modern Icelandic, OE – Old English, OI – Old Icelandic, OIr – Old Irish, PIE – Proto-Indo-European, Russ. – Russian.
2. When a word occurs in a dictionary, page numbers are not given.

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