

The Lay of Atli

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Introduction

Much of Norse literature is violent and bloody, but the current poem stands out as exceptionally gruesome. It is preserved in a single manuscript dating to around the year 1270, written in Iceland: the famous Codex Regius or King's Book. This document is primarily a collection of short or medium-length poems, some on mythological matters about the Norse gods, and some about heroes like Helgi the slayer of Hunding, Sigurth the dragon-slayer, and the Niflung family of Gunnar, Högni, and Guthrún. The heroic poems are arranged into a kind of loose narrative cycle, but since the poems are of fairly diverse origins, they don't form a fully consistent or coherent tale, and most of them are clearly intended to stand alone as independent works of art. Collectively, and supplemented with a few further poems from other manuscripts, these poems are known as the Poetic Edda.

The Lay of Atli is one of the most celebrated of the heroic poems from this collection. It is most likely significantly older than the surviving manuscript, though just when it was composed is hard to tell: some have argued that it could date as early as c. 800, meaning that it would have been transmitted (first orally, later in writing) for almost half a millennium before our surviving copy was transcribed. Even if it is not quite that old, it clearly has a long transmission history, and there are a large number of textual difficulties. Some of these are probably due to age: in particular, the poem contains a fairly large number of archaic words that occur nowhere else in Norse, and whose meanings are not always clear. Metrical faults suggest that at various points words or phrases have dropped out, and there are two places where material from other heroic poems on similar themes has clearly been inserted, as if a reciter accidentally recalled the wrong lines for a moment. Some scholars have argued that the poem also underwent one or more phases of conscious expansion and reworking, which would have altered its shape more significantly, though these claims must remain speculative. On top of all this, the style of

the poem as we have it is compact, with touches of the obscurity characteristic of skaldic poetry (including several kennings: oblique metaphorical poetic expressions). It is, all in all, a very difficult poem involving many detailed problems in establishing and interpreting the text. The following translation is, accordingly, provisional in a number of respects, and I have not hesitated to add question marks at particularly difficult points.

The narrative assumes a good deal of background knowledge. The story focuses on three siblings in the Niflung family. Gunnar is king of the Burgundians (also called Goths in this poem) along the river Rhine. His younger brother Högni lives with him. They have a sister named Guthrún who is married to Atli, king of the Huns. Gunnar possesses immense wealth, which Atli covets. The first section of the lay involves Atli sending an invitation to Gunnar and Högni to come and visit; Guthrún warns her brothers with a ring wrapped in wolf-hair that it is a trap, but they come anyway, after hiding their treasure in the Rhine. In the middle section, both brothers are taken captive: Högni after a long fight, but Gunnar without resistance (his act of defiance will take a different form). Atli tries to persuade Gunnar to ransom his life with the Niflung gold, which he says he will do only if they bring him Högni's heart first. They eventually do this, and Gunnar then reveals that he only had Högni killed in order to make sure he never revealed where the treasure was hidden. Furious, Atli has Gunnar brought to the 'Mirk-region' (possibly the same as the Mirkwood mentioned elsewhere in the poem), and thrown in a snake-pit to die. In the final section, Guthrún takes her revenge for the killing of her brothers. First, she kills the two sons she had had with Atli, preparing their flesh as food, which she has Atli eat at a feast. Then she kills Atli (who seems to be passed out from drink or shock), and burns down his hall with everyone inside except the servants and dogs.

This poem has literary connections to many other works of medieval literature, notably including the *Nibelungenlied*, a Middle High German epic. The Niflungs of this story are the Nibelungs of German legend, and the plot of the Lay of Atli is clearly closely related to the second half of the *Nibelungenlied* (though there are also innumerable differences, both big and small). Unravelling the history of the Niflung stories and the relationships between different German and Norse versions is the subject of more than a few books and articles in medievalist scholarship.

Many of the characters have historical roots. Gunnar is an echo of a real Burgundian king named Gundaharius, and Atli is Attila the Hun. In history, the Huns did indeed defeat the Burgundians and kill Gundaharius, but this

occurred before Attila's time: the two were not contemporaries, much less in-laws. The few historical kernels are really just that: the bulk of the story here is literary invention.

The division into three acts in this translation is not present in the manuscript, and is an insertion to make the structure of this difficult poem easier to follow. The stanza numbering is that of the foundational edition of the Poetic Edda by Sophus Bugge (1867), which has been used in most subsequent editions. Brief explanations of oblique references or kennings are given as marginal notes (and marked with an asterisk in the text). A few footnotes are also given, though it would be excessive to try to indicate every difficulty, interpretation, or piece of contextual information in a translation like this. Those who are interested in further details should consult an edition of the original Norse, such as Neckel (1936) or Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (2014), or the major German commentaries, chiefly Gering and Sijmons (1931) and von See et al. (2012).

Translation

Act I

- 1 Atli sent a messenger to Gunnar,
A bold warrior riding – he was called Knefrøth.
He came to the courts of Gjúki,* and the hall of Gunnar, A Niflung king.
To the benches around the hearth, and to the sweet beer.
- 2 Courtly warriors there drank wine in a Roman¹ hall.
Hiding their thoughts they sat silent: they were wary of the
Huns' wrath.
Then Knefrøth called forth with a cold voice;
That southern warrior sat on a high bench.
- 3 “Atli sent me here on an errand, riding
This bit-champing horse through the mysterious Mirkwood²
In order to invite you two, Gunnar [and Høgni], to come to the
seats
Under helmets which encircle the hearth, to seek out Atli at
home.
- 4 “You’ll get to pick out sheilds and smoothed ash-spears,
Helmets decorated with gold and a large troop of Huns,
Silver-gilded saddle-cloths, shirts dyed Roman red,
Shafts, banners, steeds champing their bits.
- 5 “He declared that he’d also give you the broad plain of Gnita
Heath...³”
...⁴

1. The element I very loosely translate as ‘Roman’ is *val-*, cognate with the root of *Welsh*. In later Norse, this element would come to mean ‘French’, but its older reference was probably rather vaguely to speakers of Celtic or Italic languages. Its use in this poem seems to be for things of exotic splendour.

2. *Myrkviðr*, ‘Mirkwood’, is a conventional term for a great forest separating two peoples.

3. Elsewhere in Norse legend, Gnita Heath is the home of the dragon Fáfñir, whom Sigurth kills to win a great treasure—in those sources, this is the very same treasure that Gunnar now possesses and which Atli covets. The current poem, however, has neither Sigurth nor dragon, and Gnita Heath seems rather one of the possessions of the Huns. This lay may predate fusion of the Sigurth-dragon story with the Niflung-Atli story.

4. The remainder of this stanza has been corrupted with material from a distinct poem. It most likely originally continued to list further things that Atli promised to Gunnar and Høgni.

- 6 Then Gunnar turned his head and said to Hǫgni,
 “What do you counsel, young warrior, as we hear such things?
 I’m not aware of any gold on Grita Heath
 Which the two of us don’t have as much again.
- 7 “We’ve got seven buildings full of swords,
 The hilt of each of which is made of gold.
 I know my horse to be the best, and my sword the sharpest,
 My bow to be proud above the bench, and my armour of gold,
 My helm and shield the whitest: they come from Caesar’s hall.
 A single one of mine is better than those of all the Huns.
- 8 “What do you think the bride* signified when she sent us a ring
 Wrapped with the clothing of heath-dweller.* I think she’s show-
 ing us a warning. Guthrún.
Wolf’s hair.
 I found the hair of the heath-dweller tied around the red ring.
 The path for us two is wolfish, riding on this errand.”
- 9 None of the clan urged Gunnar on, nor anyone else close to him,
 Neither counsellors nor advisors, nor those who were powerful.
 Gunnar then spoke up like a king ought to,
 Renowned in the mead-hall, moved by his great spirit.
- 10 “Get up, Fjǫrnir,⁵ send the golden cups of the men
 Around the hall-floor into peoples’ hands.
- 11 “The wolf will rule the inheritance of the Niflungs,
 Old ones clad in grey, if Gunnar is gone.
 Black-pelted bears will bite with hostile teeth,
 Leaving sport for dogs(?), if Gunnar doesn’t return.”
- 12 The people were not cowards, while weeping they escorted the
 land’s leader
 And the ones eager for battle from the court of the [Niflungs].⁶
 Then the young heir of Hǫgni said,
 “Travel now fortunately and wisely, wherever your intent leads
 you.”

5. An otherwise obscure figure.

6. The surviving text says they came from the court of the Huns, but this is presumably an error.

Act II

13 The fierce ones had their horses, champing their bits,
Rush across the fells with their footfalls, across mysterious Mirkwood.

All the land of the Huns shook where they passed, stern in spirit.
They drove them on, flinching from their rods, over ever-green
plains.

14 They saw Atli's land and tall protecting towers,

...⁷

A hall for the southern peoples provided with bench-timbers
And tightly bound, gleaming shields.
(They saw) shafts, banners – and there Atli drank
Wine in his Roman hall. Guards sat outside
To guard against Gunnar's group, if they should coming visiting
With shrieking spear, in order to wake up the prince with battle.

15 Their sister* found out fastest that they had come into the hall,
Both of her brothers. She hadn't drunk much beer.
"You're betrayed now, Gunnar. Mighty one, how will you fight
Against the harmful intent of the Huns? Leave the hall at once!

Guthrún.

16 "Brother, it would have been better if you'd come in armour,
And also in helms that hang about the hearth(?), to see Atli's
home.

You should have remained in your saddles these days bright with
sunlight.

You should have let the Norn's weep at the corpses, pale from
distress, Spirits of fate.

(Let) the Huns' shieldmaidens get to know the harrow,⁸
And Atli himself you should have put in the snake-pit.
Now the snake-pit lies hidden for the two of you."

(Gunnar spoke.)

17 "It's too late now, sister, to gather the Niflungs.
It's a long ways to look for a company of people

7. Another intrusive line, properly belonging to a different poem, has found its way in here.

8. I.e. be enslaved and put to farm work.

- For brave warriors from the Rosmu-fells⁹ of the Rhine.”
- 18 They seized Gunnar and placed in fetters
The lord of the Burgundians, and bound him firmly.
- 19 Høgni hewed down seven with his sharp sword,
And he tossed the eighth into a hot fire.
Just so should a fierce person defend against enemies:
Høgni defended himself...¹⁰
- 20 They asked the fierce one* if he would purchase Gunnar.
His life, the king of the Goths, with gold.
- 21 “Høgni’s heart must lie in my hand,
Carved bleeding with a dagger that bites evilly
From the chest of the bold rider, of the son of the king.”
- 22 They carved the heart from the chest of Hjalli,¹¹
Laid it bleeding on a plate, and carried it to Gunnar.
- 23 Then Gunnar said this, the lord of men:
“I have here the heart of the cowardly Hjalli,
Not similar to the heart of the fierce Høgni:
It’s trembling a lot now that it lies on the plate,
And it trembled twice as much when it lay in his chest.”
- 24 Høgni laughed when they cut out his heart, Warrior.
The living smith of wounds* was slow to think about screaming.
They laid it bleeding on a plate, and carried it to Gunnar.
- 25 Renowned Gunnar said this, the Spear-Niflung.
“I have here the heart of the fierce Høgni,
Not similar to the heart of the cowardly Hjalli:
It’s trembling little now that it lies on the plate,
And it trembled not so at all it lay in his chest.

9. *Rosmu* might be an altered form of the name Worms, via an intermediate form *Wrosm- (with transposed *r*). In the Middle High German *Nibelunglied*, Worms (on the Rhine river in what is now Germany) is the main city of the Nibelungs.

10. Metrically deficient.

11. His further identity is unclear, though he is clearly considered inferior to Høgni in bravery.

- 26 “Atli, you’ll be just as far from [joy(?)]
 As you’ll be from my jewels.
 In me alone is hidden the entire
 Hoard of the Niflungs, now that Hogni doesn’t live.
 I always had doubt while the two of us lived.
 Now there isn’t any, while I alone live.
- 27 “The Rhine, the divine river(?), will rule
 The strife-metal of men, the inheritance of the Niflungs.
 The Roman rings will gleam in the surging water,
 Rather than shining gold on the hands of the children of the
 Huns.”
- [Atli commanded:]
- 28 “Roll out the wheeled chariots! The captive is now in bonds.”
 And more after that: the shaker of the bridle* Horse.
 Dragged the defender of gems, the prince of wounds,* towards Gunnar.
 death.
- 29 The powerful Atli, their brother-in-law, rode a horse
 With bells(?)¹² in its mane, set about with slaughter-thorns.
 ...Guthrún, of the gods of victory, refused her tears,¹³
 Pacing in the crowded hall.
- 30 “Let it come about for you, Atli, in the same way as you
 Often and long ago had sworn and declared oaths with Gunnar,
 By the sun in its southern hall, and by the rock of the God of
 Victory,
 By steed of the rest-bed,* and by Ull’s ring.¹⁴” House.
- 31 A troop of warriors put the living warrior
 In a pit which was swarming
 With snakes within. But Gunnar, on his own,
 Raging in his spirit, struck a harp with hand:
 The strings resounded. Just so should a fierce
 Dispenser of rings keep his gold against men.

12. Or else the horse is named Glaumr.

13. These lines are deficient in sense and metre, and their interpretation remains unclear.

14. Ull is a god. There are references to swearing oaths on holy rings in temples elsewhere in Norse literature.

Act III

- 32 Atli had his sod-destroying(?) horse run
Back to his land, returning from murder.
There was tumult in the court with horses pressed in,
And the singing of warriors' weapons: they'd returned from the
heath.
- 33 Guthrún went out towards Atli
With a golden chalice, to give the warrior his reward.
"King, you can now take happily from Guthrún
And taste (the meat of) kids¹⁵ gone into the dark.*" Died.
- 34 Atli's ale-cups resounded, heavy with wine,
When the Huns assembled themselves in the hall,
Men with long mustaches: each of them entered the hall.
- 35 Then the lady with her hair coming loose strode, her face shining,
Carrying cups to those boar-like warriors,
And under duress she arranged ale-snacks
For the those men with paled faces, and declared the malice to
Atli.
- 36 "O sharer of swords, you have chewed with honey
Your own sons' hearts, dripping raw.
Mighty one, you've had to digest the slaughter-meat of humans,
Eating it for ale-snacks, and sending it to the seats opposite.
- 37 "You'll never again call Erp and Eitil* Their sons.
To your knee, the two happy with ale.
You'll never again see those givers of gold
Shafting spears in the middle of the benches,
Trimming manes, or spurring on horses."
- 38 There was noise among the benches, distraught song of warriors,
A roar beneath garments fit for gods: the children of the Huns

15. The word translated as 'kids' here is very difficult. It seems to be a word for some kind of young animal (most likely a piglet, to judge by the evidence of later Scandinavian dialects), which could be used as slang for human children: Guthrún seems to speak of animals, but actually means humans. 'Kid' is a poor translation, since it now refers most commonly to human children, but it is the closest word I could come up with.

- lamented,
 Except for Guthrún, who never lamented
 Her brothers, stern as bears, or her dear sons,
 Young, inexperienced, whom she had with Atli.
- 39 Bright as a gosling she sowed gold,
 With red rings she made the house workers happy.
 She made fate grow, and bright metal flow.
 The woman wasn't ever bothered about the god-houses.
- 40 Atli unaware...¹⁶
 Had drunk himself to sleep.
 He didn't have a weapon, wasn't wary of Guthrún.
 The play was often better, when they would gently
 Embrace each other more often in front of the nobles.
- 41 With the point (of her sword) she gave the bed blood to drink,
 With her hand bound for hell, and she set the dogs loose,
 And woke up the house workers. She thrust a hot torch
 Towards the door of the hall. She let these things be a recom-
 pense for her brothers.
- 42 She gave to the fire everyone who was inside
 And who'd come from Gunnar's killing, from the Mirk-region.* Mirkwood?
 The ancient beams collapsed, the god-houses smoked,
 The dwelling of the Buðlungs* burned, and also the shieldmaid- Atli's clan.
 ens
 Within, their lives dammed up(?). They fell into hot fire.
- 43 Concerning this it's fully told. Never again will a bride
 In armour go to avenge her brothers like this.
 She has brought a sentence of death to three
 Kings of peoples,¹⁷ bright before she died.

16. This line is metrically deficient.

17. It is not immediately clear which kings are meant. Possibly this refers to Atli and his two sons, though this could be an allusion to other legends involving Guthrún (though if so, this would be the only reference to such stories in this poem).

References

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