

Apardjón

VOLUME 2

Apardjón Journal for Scandinavian Studies

University of Aberdeen, UK

2021

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First published in 2021

ISSN 2634-0577 (Online)

ISSN 2634-0569 (Print)

Published in Aberdeen, United Kingdom

Apardjón Journal for Scandinavian Studies

Centre for Scandinavian Studies

University of Aberdeen

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Editors: Hannah Booth, Heidi Synnøve Djuve, Deniz Cem Gülen, Ingrid Hegland, Jennifer Hemphill, Simon Nygaard, Alessandro Palumbo, Solveig Marie Wang, Jessie Yusek.

Cover image: © 2021 Karine Djuve Riisdal

Creative and type: Heidi Synnøve Djuve and Jennifer Hemphill

Special font design: Blake Middleton

Back cover illustration: The Aberdeen Bestiary (MS 24), Folio 8r – Tigris/the tiger (University of Aberdeen)

The present volume of this periodical was financially supported by the University of Aberdeen Development Trust Experience Fund.

BOOK REVIEW

Crawford, Jackson. 2019. *The Wanderer's Hávamál* (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett)

Giulia Mancini

As a result of the increased attention to the Viking Age, brought about for example by TV series such as *Vikings* and *Norsemen*, the past decade or so has seen a resurgence of attention to the Norse subjects. A fascination with the religious practices of this period, especially the mythological aspects and its characters, is at the forefront of this renewed interest on the topic, which attracts both people from inside and outside of academia. Although this wave of interest is undeniable, the mythological texts, especially the Eddic poems, remain largely inaccessible to the general public. This is a result of the archaic — and often complicated to read — tone of the existing translations, that are catered more towards an academic audience than a popular one. While this is understandable, given the highly enigmatic and often obscure nature of the sources, it seems that Jackson Crawford has set his mind on changing the status quo with his publication of *The Wanderer's Hávamál* (2019).

Translator of the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga Saga* (*Saga of the Völsungs*), as well as being a YouTube sensation with a channel counting thousands of followers, Crawford has made a name for himself in making Old Norse material accessible to everyone. He carries on with his mission in this new volume, an eminently readable translation of the Eddic poem *Hávamál*, meaning 'Words of the High One' or 'Words of the One-Eyed' (pp. xviii–xix). The final product is a well-structured volume, which includes an in-depth analysis of the Eddic poem, the original text, a commentary, four related texts, a glossary, and the *Cowboy Hávamál*, which is one of the jewels on the crown of this publication.

From the beginning, Crawford takes his time in providing a detailed and yet clear overview of the poem which is suitable for both scholars and a general audience. His introduction delivers just the right measure of details about the text, without leaving the reader overwhelmed with information. He starts by succinctly introducing what *Hávamál* is in its entirety, and then proceeds in placing the text into context in terms of its provenience, content, structure, and linguistic aspects. Discarding the notion of the poem as a ‘Viking code of ethic’ (p. xii), as it is often billed, Crawford describes it as ‘resolutely a poem of this world, of enduring its hardships rather than of withdrawing from them’ (xii). He then continues by discussing the possibility that the five sections that compose the poem may have been written at different times, before detailing each section by providing the name and a summary its contents.

After describing the poem’s structure, Crawford deals with the etymology and meaning of the title *Hávamál*, the poetic metres, and the choices that he made to provide a fluid English translation. This is possibly one of the most technical parts of his work, and it might have incurred into the risk of becoming either too complex or too oversimplified for the reader. Crawford, however, manages to keep this section simple yet informative, while also providing an explanation of the terms *leaf*, *recto* ‘front leaf’, and *verso* ‘back leaf’ in a note, a seemingly small bit of information that is often implied in academic publications, but one that is important for the general reader. Finally, he concludes the introduction by producing a series of useful tools to approach the text on hand, such as notes on language, spelling, pronunciation, and further readings for those interested (xxviii-xxxvii).

The following section of the book is the parallel translation itself. Stemming from popular demand, the translation presented in this standalone version of *Hávamál* was previously published, with some modifications, in *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes* (2015), together with his *Cowboy Hávamál*. The latter was also originally featured on his website. Here, Crawford employs what he defines as a ‘rhythmic free verse in English’ (xxvi), choosing to preserve the meaning over the technical form of the poem. This results in a more modern-sounding translation, aimed at making the text palatable for all types of audiences. The translation consists of a facing-page text, through which the reader can follow the original Old Norse while reading the translation. This choice brings immense benefits to the work, making it an excellent tool for those who wish to learn and practice Old Norse, as well as for those who simply want to enjoy a more

readable translation. Furthermore, the choice of a parallel translation allows the readers to formulate their own theories in the face of the more-obscure portions of it, and to disagree with the Crawford's choices in translation.

Indeed, while Crawford is an undeniably skilled and highly trained linguist, I found myself disagreeing with some of the choices that he made in the translation, albeit these disagreements represent only an infinitesimal percentage of the work and are often simply a case of personal taste and interpretation. An example of this disagreement is, for example, the phrase 'Margr verðr af qðrum api', which he translates as 'you become foolish by listening to the fools' in stanza 75 (pp. 36-37). As Crawford explains in the commentary (note 75), the translation of this phrase depends on whether one chooses to follow Sophus Bugge emendation, which has the third and fourth word as 'af qðrum' ('of others'), or David A. H. Evans' which sees the third and fourth word as 'af aurum' ('of wealth') (p. 109). Crawford chooses to follow Bugge's emendation, thus translating the line as 'you become foolish by listening to the fools', fools being the others, as opposed to Evans's, which would read 'many become fools because of money' (p. 109). However, given the meaning of the following three lines 'one man is rich, another man is poor, neither has the one to blame' (p.37), Evan's interpretation would make more sense in my opinion, as Bugge and Crawford's choice seems slightly removed from the following lines.

A similar case is the recurring phrase 'Ósnotr ψ [maðr]' which he translates as 'an unwise man' in stanzas 24 and 25, and then as 'a stupid man' in stanza 26 and 'a fool' in 27 (pp. 12-15). Here the meaning of the text does not change, and it is evident that he chose the fluency of the text over adherence to the form, as he specifies in the introduction. However, one might argue that this choice ends up erasing the traces left of the supposedly oral past of the poem, which is instead evident in the original text through the use of formulaic phrases such as this one. Furthermore, throughout the translation, his position on formulaic verses is not consistent, sometimes choosing to translate recurring phrases in the same way, and sometimes changing his translational choices from stanza to stanza.

Lastly, in strophes 61 and 114, I had issues with his choice to completely ignore the word *þing* in the translation. In strophe 61, for example, the phrase 'Ðveginn ok mettr ríði ψ þingi at' – which, to my knowledge, would translate to 'a man should ride to the assembly washed and fed' (transl. by the reviewer) is translated instead with '[Y]ou should always go out well-kempt and well-fed'. Whether the word was

omitted because of the scholarly tendency to leave the word *þing* (assembly) implied or to make the text clearer for the general reader, the lack of a comment explaining such a choice remains somewhat odd to me. Whatever the reason, I believe that this could have been the perfect setting to introduce the audience to this custom in Crawford's clear and informal style. Furthermore, I always understood this strophe to mean that one should always appear at one's best at important functions — i.e. the assembly — without feeling shame for one's wealth and condition, which acquires an even deeper meaning in a context of law and politics, such as the *þing*. Thus, omitting it, takes away part of the power of this strophe. A similar case can be done for strophe 114, where Crawford translates the phrase 'Hon svá gørir at þú gáir eigi þings né þjóðans máls' as 'She will enchant you so that you will not care for advice nor a powerful man's words'. Again, this may be clearer for the general reader, but the strophe loses its power. Translating it slightly more literally as 'she will enchant you so that you will not care for the assembly or the words of a ruler' (transl. by the reviewer) shifts the meaning entirely. It is not only that one may grow reckless by not listening advice, but rather that one may end up placing oneself outside of the law (i.e. not caring for the assembly and/or the words of a king).

Following the translation, the volume then moves onto the third section, where Crawford comments on the text and justifies his translation choices. He starts by describing the poem in the context of the manuscript in which is found, and then gives a few more details on the abbreviations present in the original text (e.g., ψ for *maðr* 'man'). The commentary, in its simplicity, is very thorough and gives great insight into the thought process behind his translation choices. Here, too, his explanation of the linguistic and scribal elements, oddities, and characteristics is not overwhelming and at the same time, not patronizing towards the reader. This balance ensures that his commentary is useful for both scholars and the general reader. Furthermore, while one may disagree with some of the choices made in the translation, Crawford's commentary gives the possibility of contrasting one's ideas with those of the translator, providing food for thought, and a confrontation of ideas, albeit indirect.

One of the most interesting features of this publication is, however, the presence of four related texts, each translated by Crawford. These additions are included to contextualise Óðinn and the other figures connected to him. The texts are the *Darraðarljóð* (*Dorruð's Poem/Song*), which is included in *Brennu-Njáls Saga* (*Saga of Burned Njál*), *Eiríksmál* (*Words of/for Eirik*), *Hákonarmál* (*Words*

of/for *Hákon*), and an excerpt from *Gautreks saga* (*Saga of Gautrek*). These works are succinctly introduced by Crawford and translated in the same modern style that he uses for his translation of the *Hávamál*. I found Crawford's choice to not include other excerpts from the *Poetic* and *Prose Edda* to further contextualise the god extremely interesting. Indeed, while one could easily access the more famous mythological texts, which are already suggested and named in the introduction, he chose excerpts that the casual reader is less likely to stumble upon. Furthermore, the texts included provide a wonderful overview of the god in other types of literature, such as sagas, skaldic poems, and funerary songs. The related texts are followed by a four-page glossary, aimed at briefly introducing the characters and figures that are featured in those additional readings. This inclusion proves once more just how much this is a text addressed to the most rather than the few. In terms of the structure, the glossary is brief and concise, making it a great tool for both for those already acquainted with the Nordic mythological world, and for those who seek a starting point to further delve into it.

Lastly, the book finishes with the *Cowboy Hávamál*, which is, without a doubt, Crawford's most interesting addition to the volume. It consists of a modern and condensed rendition of the section of the poem called *Gestabáttir* (Guests' Portion), inspired by the similarity between *Hávamál*'s down-to-earth nature and his grandfather's advice. Composed by Crawford in an 'eye dialect' of sorts, based on his grandfather's, the 80-stanzas' composition reads like a homage to what must have been an impressive man. In addition to this, Crawford's reinterpretation of *Hávamál* succeeds in giving a fresh start to such an ancient poem, bringing it closer than it could ever be to a modern audience and proving just how much the wisdom it carries is not a thing of the past, but still relevant nowadays.

In conclusion, *The Wanderer's Hávamál* is a read that I have enjoyed immensely. Jackson Crawford has succeeded in creating a volume that could easily be a step forward in making the Norse Poetry a less niche subject. He produced a translation that is not only readable and modern in tone but is also supported by a detailed explanation and supplementary reads and caters to a much wider audience than ever before. The work perfectly balances factual information and an informal tone, without once falling into oversimplifications or sounding condescending towards the reader. This achievement is something that speaks volumes, not only about the quality of *The Wanderer's Hávamál*, but also of Crawford as a communicator. This is, without a doubt, a text that I would have loved to have access to when I started making my first steps into the Norse world, and that I still

appreciate now, a few years later, as it brings new life and vitality to the wonderful and enigmatic world of Norse mythology.

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