 Persistent Motifs of Cursing from Old Norse Literature in Buslubœn

La Buslubœn presenta analogie significative non solo con le maledizioni di cui ab- biamo notizia dalla letteratura norrena, ma anche con generi affini ma parzialmente differenti nelle forme e nei propositi, come le formule di giuramento, la magia eroti ca e il níð. Parte della critica suggerisce che la Buslubœn nella sua forma attuale sia più o meno contemporanea al testo tràdito della Bósa saga ok Herraudž: il par- rallelo con altri testi della tradizione norrena permette dunque di cogliere le affinità di carattere generale tra la Buslubœn e altri testi di tradizione norrena, evidenziando di conseguenza la presenza di un certo numero di peculiarità, dovute verosimilmen- te alla scelta da parte dell’autore di creare un testo ex novo, ma riutilizzando fram- menti di tradizione. Da qui risulta per la Buslubœn una natura composita non infre- quente nei testi di epoca tarda che si propongano di ricostruire un paganesimo in gran parte già dimenticato.

1. Introduction

Buslubœn (‘Busla’s prayer’) is a sequence of nine stanzas, that are said to belong to a longer curse, comprised in Bósa saga og Herraudž, one of the so-called Icelandic fornaldarsögur or ‘heroic sagas’. It is widely agreed that the saga must have been written down after the mid-14th century even though, like most heroic sagas, it recounts events that occurred in the Scandinavian countries during the Viking Age: this sets
a *terminus ante quem* for the curse in its present form, but it may still be held that at least some of its material must predate the saga.4

The main character, Bósi, is a kind of Don Juan who repeatedly ends up in dangerous situations. In one episode, he is sentenced to death, together with his friend Herrauðr, and abandoned by his relatives and friends, with the sole exception of his foster-mother (or rather wet-nurse) Busla, who is a sorceress and convinces King Hringr (Herrauðr’s father) to commute the sentence to exile by threatening him with the *Buslubœn*.5 The inclusion of such a curse within the saga is in accordance with the taste of the author for the obscene and the scandalous, as shown by the crude sexual episodes and the blasphemous blessing addressed to the reader by ‘saint Busla’ which ends the narration.6

This text is of great interest as far as the history of magic is concerned, as it represents a unique source of evidence of the role of the curse in Viking, pre-Christian Scandinavia. As a matter of fact, the history of medieval hostile magic has been influenced by fears about the power of such words and formulas;7 *Bósa saga* itself provides a telling example of such an attitude, as the author claims to have transcribed only parts of the text of the curse and advises in particular against reciting its last section after sunset.

The purpose of this article is to show how the text of the curse (excluding those parts that are directly linked to its context and thus hold no comparative value, such as the first stanza) contains elements that may be linked to different genres of religious or magical rites, two of which had an acknowledged role within Norse society – truce-oaths and defamations (*nīð*) – while two others are known from literary sources – love magic, as attested in *Skírnismál*8 and Þuríðr’s *maleficium* in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*.

It has been already remarked by Jónas Kristjánsson that the text displays some similarities with at least two Eddic lays (*Skm.* and *Hel-*

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4 Kristjánsson unequivocally states that the text must be older than the saga itself (1997: 361), and also Raudvere seems inclined to consider this possibility (2003: 141). Simek / Pálsson (1987: 49), *s.v. Buslubœn* do not believe *Buslubœn* to be older than the saga itself, but it is not ruled out that it may contain earlier material.


7 Lozzi Gallo (1997).

8 Henceforth *Skm.*, as in Neckel / Kuhn (1962).
gaqviða Hundingsbana ònnor) and a “recital of curses [...] reproducing a series known to him in the vernacular” in the *Gesta Danorum* by Saxo Grammaticus (probably 1.8.11):9 the latter text displays similarities mainly with curses for oath-breaking and will be examined together with them. Here the evidence provided by *Buslubæn* shall be considered in relation to all four kinds of magical rites described in our sources, highlighting those elements which appear to have influenced the author of this curse.

2. Cursing in oath-swearing

Truce-oaths comprise the main body of evidence for the role of the curse in Norse culture. Although an oath in itself is neither a magic nor a religious act, but rather the legal sanction of a contract, Marcel Mauss, in his study on magic, argues that when oaths contain magic or religious rituals, they must be considered also in this respect.10

This statement is reinforced by Köbler who, in his definition of the role of the oath in Germanic cultures, states: “Seinem Wesen nach wird der E[id] als bedingte Selbstverfluchung erklärt. Entsprech das beeidete Wort nicht der Wahrheit, sollte durch übermenschliche Einwirkung den Sprecher eine ungünstige Folge treffen.”11 More recently, the same concept has been expressed by Graf about classical cultures.12

Evidence for the importance of truce-oaths in Norse culture comes from both literary and legal texts, a constant feature being the fact that the oath is sworn on places, objects or beings regarded as *mana* – that is, possessing a supernatural power that is unleashed in the case of perjury;13 Beck refers to them using the generic term *Kraftzentren*.14

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9 Kristjánsson (1997: 361-362), probably following Herrmann’s commentary (1922: 119-121), where the relation with *Buslubæn* and further with the Eddic lays is mentioned.
10 “[... ] Dans la mesure où ils ont une efficacité particulièere, où ils font plus qu’établir des relations contractuelles entre des êtres, ils ne sont pas juridiques, mais magiques ou religieux” Mauss (1950: 11).
12 Cf. Graf (1994: 233-236), where the scholar puts the stress upon the function of the ritual in lending new strength to the meaning of the oath-formulas.
The oldest body of evidence for the suspended self-curse involved in oath-swearing is provided by three Eddic lays: *Atlakviða inn grendlenzka, Helgakviða Hundingsbana onnor* and *Völundarkviða.*

In *Akv.*, Guðrún prays that her husband Atli might be afflicted by the self-curse he had uttered in a truce-oath sworn with her brother Gunnarr, whom he has just had killed:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Svá gangi þér, Atli,} & \quad \text{‘May your fate, Atli,} \\
\text{sem þú við Gunnar áttir} & \quad \text{fit the oaths that you swore} \\
\text{eiða oft um svárða} & \quad \text{often to Gunnarr} \\
\text{ok ár of nefnda,} & \quad \text{and pledged long ago,} \\
\text{at sól inni suðrhóll} & \quad \text{by the sun southward-curving} \\
\text{ok at Sigtýs bergi,} & \quad \text{and by Óðinn’s crag,} \\
\text{hölkvi hvílbedíar} & \quad \text{by the steed of sleep’s pillows} \\
\text{ok at hringi Ullar.} & \quad \text{and by Ullr’s ring.’}
\end{align*}
\]

Guðrún is clearly recalling the *Kraftzentren* by which Atli had previously sworn: the sun, a hill sacred to Óðinn, and a ring sacred to another Norse god named Ullr, about whom very little is known, but the role of sacred rings in oath-swearing in Norse culture is well-established in saga literature. The reference to ‘the steed of the sleep’s pillows’ has been interpreted by Dronke as a *kenning* for ‘bed’; nevertheless, since this phrase (unlike the other three) is not preceded by the preposition *at,* I would suggest that it could instead be interpreted as an addition to *Sigtýs bergi,* which should then be regarded as a burial mound, where the dead metaphorically rest. Anyway, even if this suggestion is accepted, this does not mean that a medieval reader would necessarily have interpreted it thus.

Guðrún only mentions the powers on which Atli had sworn; on the other hand, in *Vkv.* these *manas* are ignored and only objects are men-

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15 Henceforth abbreviated *Akv., HH, II* and *Vkv.* as in Neckel / Kuhn (1962).
17 Mainly on the basis of place-names, Holtsmark affirmed that Ullr’s cult must have been linked with the Svíar and their kings (1975: 280-281); since then, Simek has recommended a certain amount of caution in drawing conclusions from this kind of evidence (1993: 339-340).
18 The earliest mention of such oaths is to be found under the year 876 in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. Garmonsway (1972: 75 and n. 1), concerning a truce between Alfred of Wessex and a King of the Danes.
tioned when Völundr compels King Niðuðr to swear the following truce-oath:

\begin{verbatim}
Eiða skaltu mér áðr
alla vinna,
at skips borði
ok at skialdar rønd,
at mars begi
ok at mækis egg, [...] 
\end{verbatim}

‘First, you must swear to me every oath, by the side of the ship and by the rim of the shield, by the withers of the horse and by the edge of the sword, [...]’

From this text, it is clear that the king must swear on the symbols of his warlike life: ship, shield, horse, sword; these crucial instruments will cause his defeat if he breaks his oath.

In the third Eddic instance of a truce-oath, in \textit{HH. II} (probably a recent lay), we find mention of both the \textit{Kraftzentren} and the objects of the oath. Here Helgi’s wife Sigrún reproaches her brother Dagr for breaking a truce with her husband and killing him, and her curse follows the truce-oath closely:

\begin{verbatim}
31 Pic scyli allir eiðar bíta,
þeir er Helga hafðir unna,
at ino ljósa Leiptrar vatni
oc at úrsvólom Unnar steini.

32 Scríiat fr at scip, er und þer scríði,
þött oscabyrr eptir leggiz;
rennia sá marr, er und þer renni,
þöttu fjándr þína forðaz eigir
33 Bítia þer þat sverð, er þá bregðir,
nema siálfom þer syngvi um hofði.

Dá væri þer hefnt Helga dauða,
ef þá værir vargr á viðom úti,
ausð andvání ok allz gamans,
hefðir eigi mat, nema á hrowom
sprýngir.]20
\end{verbatim}

‘All oaths should bite you, that you have sworn to Helgi on the clear water of river Leiptr and on the cold, damp stone in the sea!

May not glide the ship that glides under you though a favourable wind drives her!

May not run the horse that runs under you even if you must escape your fiends.

May not bite the sword that you brandish unless it sang on your own head!

Helgi’s death would then be avenged, if you were an exile outside in the wood, deprived of riches and of all joy, if you had no food unless you sprang on carrion!’


20 \textit{HH. II} 31-33, text from Neckel / Kuhn (1962: 157). Though the text has been arranged differently, it must be noted that it shares the metre (\textit{fornyrðislag}) with the Eddic lays quoted before.
Sigrún’s curse lists three of the four elements mentioned by Völundr: ship, horse, sword. The shield is missing, and some scholars have suggested that a couple of long lines may have been lost, for instance at the beginning of stanza 33, on the ground that this stanza has six lines instead of four like the surrounding ones, so that the first two lines may belong to a different thematic unit.21

Almquist has been the first to notice how closely Sigrún follows the tradition of the truce-oaths.22 It may be noted that Dagr’s reply: Ör eru tu, systir, oc ervita, / er þú bræðer þínom biðr forscapa; / einn veldr Óðinn òllo bolvi, / þvíat með sifingom sacrúnar bar,23 clearly states that Sigrún’s speech is not a direct curse. Magic terminology is carefully avoided: a phrase such as biðir forscapa is generic; the word sok ’dispute’ (in the compound sacrúnar) pertains rather to the legal vocabulary, as it is fitting for a truce-oath.

Prose narratives provide very different evidence, undoubtedly because of a change in the religious context; while the Eddic oaths are located in a heathen past, where magic and religion mix, the ones in the sagas and in the legal code called Grágás are framed in the context of a mainly if not exclusively Christian society. Meulengracht Sørensen made a sharp distinction between griðamál and tryggðamál according to their intention, to whether they arrange provisional or permanent legal settlements respectively:24 this distinction is not evident in form and style, though.

The cursing element within the oath formulas preserved in Grágás consists of a ban from society, and God’s wrath against the griðnìðingr (‘truce-breaker’; literally ‘truce-infamous’), elements which are common to all attested formulas.25 One of the formulas also contains a long

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23 ‘You are insane, sister, and out of your mind / that to your brother wish misadventure; / Woden alone is the cause of all evil, / because he between relatives brought runes of dispute’ HH. II 34, 1-8; Neckel / Kuhn (1962: 157-158).
24 Sørensen (1993: 95), probably following Finsen’s older Grágás edition, based on ms. Københavns, Det kongelige bibliothek, Gamle kongelige samling 1157, where the editor distinguished a formula for griðamál (1852: 204-205) and another for tryggðamál (1852: 205-207); in the recent edition by Karlsson / Sveinsson / Árnason, such a distinction is blurred: Tryggðamál og griðamál is a heading under which several formulas are listed (1992: 281-284).
list of all places from where the oath-breaker will be banned, which in a way substitutes the catalogue of things on which the curse will have effect in the pagan tradition. A list very similar to this one is found in Grettissaga and Heiðarvígasaga, where a different feature also appears, that is lacking in the Grágás formulas: both lists end with a similar statement, whose meaning is that the gríðnídýingr must be kept away from every shelter except hell (nema helvíti).

These formulas have been taken by Kabell to be variations of the same archetype; the scholar first analyses their marked rhythmic pattern as metrical, so that he defined this formula as “Prunstück der rhythmisch allitterierenden Prosa.” The stability of the formula is shown by its re-use in an entirely different context, within an Icelandic wedding speech from the 16th century, where it – somewhat incongruously – defines gríðnídýingr anybody who should attempt to part the happy couple.

The most evident parallel between Buslubœn’s first section and truce-oaths is the list of places where the curse will have effect; stanzas 5 (curse on sailing) and 6 (curse on riding) recall in expanded form Vkv. 33, 3 and 33, 5 and HH. II 32, 1-4 and 5-8 respectively; stanza 7 could in fact be connected to Akv. 30, 7, where a connection to the notion of ‘rest’ is evident, even if its meaning may be disputed (which needs not have concerned the medieval reader), and stanza 3 must be related to Akv. 30, 5, as the sun clearly symbolizes the meteorological conditions.

The prose truce-oaths have a different structure, in that they list places from where the gríðnídýingr will be banned, not a proper curse though; these texts, thanks to the doubtless influence of Christianity,

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26 En ef annartveggi þeirra verður svo óður að hann gengur á gerva sætt og vegur á veittar tryggðir, þá skal sá rekkinn vera frá Guði og frá allri Guðs kristni, svo viða sem menn varga reka, kristir menn kirkjur sækja, heiðir menn hof blóta, móðir móð fæðir, mögur móður kallar, eldar upp brenna, Finnr skríðr, fura vex, valur flygur vorlangan dag og standi byr undir þáða vængi. ‘But if one of them is so insane that he violates the convened truce and treads upon the oaths he has sworn, then he must be chased from God and all God’s Christians, as far as men chase wolves, Christians attend churches, heathens sacrifice in temples, the mother feeds her baby, the baby calls for its mother, fires burn, the Sami glides, the fir-tree grows, the hawk flies on a spring day and wind stands under his wings.’ Grágás, Vígslóði 126, ed. Karlsson / Sveinsson / Árnason (1992: 283).

know only one curse, and it is indeed terrible: the truce-breaker will find no place for himself nema helvíti, but Hell.

A nema-clause that involves a worsening of conditions (instead of an exception, as is to be expected) is also to be found in HH. II 33, 4 and 33, 12 where the conjunction nema puts the stress on the misery of Dagr’s future condition; in these instances, nema-clauses stand at the end of the sentence. In Buslubœn the use of the nema-clauses in the same position (at the end of stanzas 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 in the first section and of the only stanza of the second) has an entirely different goal: Busla wants to convince Hringr to act according to her will, so that her curse might effectively be stopped by Hringr’s actions. Yet, the device is the same. Another rhetoric device is the beginning of a curse with svá: it is found in Akv. 30, 1 (and, as we will see, in Egill’s first níð-stanza) and it is paralleled by Buslubœn 4, 1.

The weather-curse is known from a different temporal and geographical setting, in Saxo’s Gestum Danorum, where a woman curses Hadingus the hero for killing a god:

Seu pede rura teras, seu ponto carbase tendas,  
infestos patiere deos totumque per orbem  
propositis inimica tuis elementa videbis.  
Rure rues, quatiere mari, dabiturque vaganti  
perpetuus tibi turbo comes, nec deseret umquam  
vela rigor nec tecta tegent, quae si petis, icta  
tempestate ruent, diro pecus occidet algu.  
Omnia praesentis sortem vitiata dolebunt.  
Ut scabies fugiere nocens, nec taetrior ulla  
pestis erit. Tantum poenae vis caelica pensat.  
Quippe unum e superis alieno corpore tectum  
sacrilegae necuere manus: sic numinis almi  
interfector ades! Sed cum te excéperit aequor,  
carceris Aeolici laxos patiere furores.  
Te Zephyrus Boreasque ruens, te proteret Auster,  
et coniuratos certabunt edere flatus,  
donec divinum voto meliore rigorem  
solveris et meritam tuleris placamine poenam.31

31 Gestum Danorum 1.8.11, ed. Olrik / Ræder (1931:29). Translation from Fisher (1979: 29-30): ‘Whether you tread the fields or set your canvas to the ocean, / to you the gods will be hostile, and throughout the whole earth / you shall find the elements of Nature thwarting all your designs. /
Herrmann had first drawn attention to the features connecting this text with *Buslubœn*, as well as with *Skm.* and *HH. II*;32 Dumézil held that this curse could not be compared with *Buslubœn* because the former only revolves around the sea,33 and this thesis is quoted with no objection by Ellis Davidson in her recent commentary of *Gesta Danorum*.34 This difference does not imply that the curses cannot be related, even though it can be assumed that two different stanzas from the ancient Scandinavian poetic tradition have been conflated by Saxo into this single Latin verse: while the second stanza (maybe corresponding to ll. 9-18) was entirely about sailing, the first one (ll. 1-8) paralleled land and sea. It is worth mentioning that the sailing motif is concordantly mentioned at first place in *HH. II*, *Vkv.* and *Buslubœn*, so that the two stanzas could have been easily contiguous in Saxo’s model curse. Otherwise it would be impossible to explain why the author felt to put such an emphasis on sailing, even though the curse’s effects are equally related to sea-faring and to lack of shelter on land, as stated by its context.35 The curse can thus be regarded as an adaptation from traditional Scandinavian poetry, especially since no Latin analogues have been reported so far. On the other hand, Friis-Jensen, the scholar who has dealt the most with Saxo’s verse passages, has pointed out the use of couplets and a general tendency towards parallelism, that he regards as characteristic of Saxo; like alliteration, these are nonetheless also common features in Scandinavian tradition.36

Dashed down on land, tossed at sea, the perpetual companion / of your wandering shall be the whirlwind; an inflexible stiffness will never / desert your sails, if you should seek a roof for your head / it will fall struck by a tempest, and your herd will perish with cold. / Shunned like a noxious itch, no plague will ever have been / more vile than you. Such punishment the powers of heaven dispense. / For you have killed with sacrilegious hands a sky-dweller / wrapped in another body: there you stand, the slayer / of a benign deity. When you take to the waves you will feel / the frenzy of the winds upon you, let loose from their keeper’s dungeon; / the West and the rushing North and the South shall sweep to crush you, / conspire together and vie to shoot forth hurricane blasts, / until with more winning prayers you appease divine severity / and, having suffered the earned punishment, offer placation.’

32 Herrmann (1922: 119-121).
33 Dumézil (1973: 45-46).
34 Ellis Davidson (1980: 34).
The structure of the Latin text also includes a sentence similar to the nema-clauses in Buslubœn (and further the nema-clauses in HH. II) introduced by donec (ll. 17-18) with conative function in final position.

The weather-curse and the curse on sea-faring connect this text to both oath formulas and Buslubœn, while the ban from other human beings (ut scabies fugiere nocens) and the wrath of the gods are not to be found in Buslubœn; nonetheless, these motifs recur in other texts, as we will later notice.

3. Cursing as defamation

The word níða (‘infamy’) usually refers to a rite or sequence of rites combining insult, defamation and cursing, whose main intent is to harm its victims mostly by accusations of shameful behaviour (ergi). There is abundant evidence for this in saga literature; here the examination of this genre must be restricted to exclusively consider its influence on the composition of Buslubœn.

Norwegian and Icelandic laws distinguish between verbal níða and ‘carved’ níð referring in particular to the use of the ‘infamy pole’ (núðstong) although both are forbidden, and their victims are entitled to react with the utmost violence. Although verbal níða can be regarded as a kind of curse, it differs considerably from the curses contained in the truce-oaths described above: while the former are stereotyped, the latter springs from the imagination of the poet, whose will to harm can actually influence the real world, as is shown in the episode of the Jarlsníð performed by Þorleifr against jarl Hákon Sigurðarson, as narrated in Þorleifs þáttr jarlaskálds. This poem is apparently an encomium, but its three sections cause terrible effects on its victim.

Most níð poems are explicitly aggressive, though, combining defamation of their victim with a curse. Both ‘carved’ and verbal níð are described in details in Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar, where the poet Egill

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38 On the definition of níða, see Almquist (1965: 15-16), which is still to be considered the most complete study on this subject.
39 Almquist (1965: 43-44).
40 Ed. Kristiánsson (1946: 222-223); see also Almquist (1965: 186-188).
insults king Eiríkr Blóðóx and his queen Gunnhildr, reciting an offensive stanza where he directs the wrath of the gods against the royal couple:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Svá skyldi goð gjalda,} & \quad \text{‘The gods should pay you back thus,} \\
\text{gram reki bjónd af lóndum,} & \quad \text{may the gods chase you from the lands} \\
\text{reið sé rógn ok Óðinn,} & \quad \text{wrathful be the gods and Woden,} \\
\text{rón mínís fær honnum;} & \quad \text{against him for the looting of my riches;} \\
\text{folmýgi lát fylja,} & \quad \text{Let the tyrant of the people flee,} \\
\text{Freyr ok Njörðr, af jórðum,} & \quad \text{Freyr and Njörðr, from the earth,} \\
\text{leiðisk loða striði} & \quad \text{be wrath the áss of the land against the enemy,} \\
\text{landóss, þanns vé grandar.}^{41} & \quad \text{the one that destroys sanctuaries.’}
\end{align*}
\]

When Egill learns that he has been banished from Eiríkr’s kingdom, he utters a second stanza, where he threatens the royal couple with revenge:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Logbrigðir hefr lagða,} & \quad \text{‘The outlaw has prepared,} \\
\text{landalfr,}^{42} & \quad \text{alf of the land, for myself} \\
\text{fyr mér sjólfum,} & \quad \text{– the bride has in her power} \\
\text{blekkir braðra sökkva} & \quad \text{the brother-slayer – long ways;} \\
\text{brúðfjöng, vega langa;} & \quad \text{I must pay back Gunnhildr:} \\
\text{Gunnhildi ák gjalda,} & \quad \text{cruel is her nature, this,} \\
\text{greyp’t’s hennar skap, þenna,} & \quad \text{as a young man I avenged the offence} \\
\text{ungr gatk ok la launat,} & \quad \text{quickest in the land, I destroyed with the sword’}. \\
\text{landrekstr, bili grandat.}^{43} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

These skaldic lines are much more complex than the Eddic ones quoted above; nevertheless, there are some significant analogies, particularly in the first stanza, with Skm., as will be shown below.

Egill keeps on killing and looting throughout Eiríkr’s kingdom; moreover, he reinforces his threat by raising an infamy pole. The saga describes this ritual in detail:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Hann tók í hónd sér heslistong ok gekk á bergsnös nokkura, þá er vissi til lands inn; þá tók hann hroshelfuð ok setti upp á stóngina. Síðan veitti hann formála ok mæli svá: ‘Hér set ek upp núðstong, ok sný ek þessu}
\end{align*}
\]

\footnote{41 Egils saga 56, ed. Nordal (1933: 163).}

\footnote{42 Jónsson (1912: 47) would correct it in lindalfs, intended as a kenning for ‘warrior’: this correction would cancel a crucial parallel between the two stanzas, the call for supernatural pagan entities, which my opinion has relevance in the history of the genre, and it seems hardly required by context.}
‘He took a hazelnut pole and climbed on a rock protruding towards the mainland. Then he took a horse’s head and stuck it on the pole. Then he uttered this formula and said: “Here I raise a pole of infamy, I turn this infamy against king Eiríkr and queen Gunnhildr – he then turned the horse’s head towards the mainland – I turn this infamy against the spirits of the land, that inhabit this land, so that they all loose their way, do not reach nor find rest until they have driven king Eiríkr and queen Gunnhild from this land”. Then he put the pole in a cliff of the rock and let it stand. He turned the head towards the mainland and carved runes on the pole, and they say this whole formula.’

Even though it is necessary to have caution in interpreting the evidence provided by this episode, it can still be used as a source of information. The horse in níðr literature must be interpreted as a symbol of supposed unmanly activities. The accusation of homosexuality is highly dishonourable in Norse medieval culture: a man is even entitled to kill to avenge such an offense as being called sorðinn, stroðinn or argr, words which refer to a male that has engaged in sodomy. As the stallion is the symbol of male sexual power, the mare becomes the symbol of passive sexuality; passive sexuality is then equated with lack of manliness, and this explains the use of the word merr as an insult, like in Vatnsdæla saga, where Jökull calls for Bergr to engage in a duel ‘if you have a man’s spirit and not a mare’s’; in Snorri’s Edda, there is a reference to a mare’s heart concerning the enormous golem Møkkurkál–
ţi, that was due to help the giant Hrungnir against Þórr the giant-slayer: but of course a mare’s heart is too timid and the golem shamefully displays its fear as soon as the god appears.49

Regarding the parallels between Buslubæn and verbal nið, first it must be noted that Buslubæn is divided into three sections in order of effectiveness, like the Jarlsnið; two further elements must be mentioned: firstly, the invitation to the vættir to lose their path also to be found in another curse from roughly the same time, Allra flagða þula in Vilhjálms saga sjóðs,50 considered by Almqvist as a typical feature of nið;51 secondly, the obscene element in the phrase hestar streði þik seems more appropriate to an insult than to a curse, but it would have serious social consequences, implying that Hringr could face being called a stroðinn and a mare and this would cause him to lose his social status, like the wish that Hringr become impotent, which is actually closer to Skírnir’s curse than to nið.

Finally, in Buslubæn different kinds of supernatural creatures (among them the hrímþursar) are conjured up against Hringr, like the heathen gods in Egill’s nið stanzas: the conjuration of supernatural powers occurs in the Latin curse mentioned by Saxo (infestos patiere deos) and also in Skm., as we will notice.

4. Cursing as love-magic

Unlike the former two curse-types, the text which we shall be considering now is a purely literary product, with no demonstrable correspondence with usage in real life: the episode of Skírnir’s wooing of Gerðr on account of Freyr, in the Eddic lay called Skm. (or, following the manuscript heading, For Skírnís), where the servant has to threaten the giantess with a powerful curse before she agrees to marry the god, thus entering the clan of her enemies. The occurrence of a curse as a magical means of winning the love of a maiden must not surprise us; in European medieval tradition, love magic is mostly regarded as black

50 Vilhjálms saga sjóðs 27, ed. Loth (1964: 66-68); a parallel between nið and Buslubæn in this respect had already been traced along these same lines by Ström (1952: 25-27).
51 Almqvist (1965: 92-95).
magic, since its purpose is to influence a person’s free will. In a similar way, love charms are part of the Odinic knowledge in Norse heathen culture, as shown in the so-called Ljóðatal section of Hávamál.

The dialogue between Skírnir and the giant-maiden can be divided into three phases (Klingenberg describes it as “ein taktischer Dreischritt”): first, the servant offers gifts, then he threatens the maiden with his sword, and finally he resolves to curse her, until she finally consents to marry Freyr. The curse is to be found in stanzas 26-36; this sequence of stanzas has also been divided into three sections by Dronke, that follows Neckel-Kuhn’s edition but for minor details: at first (stanzas 26-28) Skírnir threatens Gerðr that she will be subject to his will thanks to his ‘taming stick’ and is going to be confined in Hel or its whereabouts; moreover, she will become monstrous to look at and shunned by all. In the second section (stanzas 29-31) he doubles his efforts and describes the tortures she will have to endure in the kingdom of giants (depicted as at least contiguous with Hel, but probably as a part of it) where she will be at the mercy of a hideous giants. Lastly (stanzas 32-36), Skírnir proceeds to act with his magic twig, by conjuring the gods’ wrath, adding further description of the tortures and humiliations she will have to endure at the hands of her giant master, finally carving hostile runes (whose names are revealing indeed: Pörs ríst ek þér / ok þriá stafi, / ergi ok æði / ok ópolu), even though he careful-

52 Flint draws a sharp distinction between heathen love magic, generically frowned upon to some extent (1991: 231-239) and other kinds of what she regards as “Christian love magic”, that enjoyed a higher degree of acceptance (1991: 290-301).
53 On Skírnir’s Odinic role, see Klingenberg (1996: 49).
54 Klingenberg (1996: 26).
55 In von See (1997: 113-114) Skm. 28, 5-7 is interpreted as a reference to Heimdalr; the verb gapa in line 7 is thus difficult to explain; Dronke’s explanation, that Gerðr will look like a monstrous figure-head (such as those found on ships), clearly fits better into this context (1997: 409). It is also possible, in my opinion, to compare Gerðr’s attitude with the infernal watchdog Garmr: about this creature see Simek (1993: 100, s.v. Garmr).
56 Further considerations and references concerning the word gambanteinn are to be found in von See (1997: 128).
57 Interestingly enough, Skírnir does seem to make a distinction between jötnar and hrímpursar, but this distinction is hardly clear, as in most sources – on the problem of giant races, see Motz (1987).
58 “Ogre” I carve for you / and three characters: / “Lust” and “Burning” / and “Unbearable Need” Skm. 36, 1-4, edited and translated by Dronke (1997: 384). It is uncertain whether Pörs is to be considered as a rune repeated three times (one for ergi, the second for æði, the third for ópolu) or as a rune itself followed by three other distinct runes; on the question cf. See (1997: 135-136),
ly adds that they may still be erased. Then Gerðr abruptly changes her behaviour and welcomes her guest with a formal greeting, offering mead in a costly goblet.⁵⁹

In von See’s commentary, the occurrence of a large number of rare words and hapax legomena is registered, leading to this conclusion: “hier kommt eine sonst nicht in die literarische Überlieferung gedrungene Schicht des a[lt]nord[ischen] Wortschatzes zum Vorschein”;⁶⁰ this original character would be consistent with the occurrence of galdralag and fornyrðislag in a lay otherwise almost entirely in ljóðaháttur.⁶¹

Liberman seems to reach an entirely different conclusion: “Skírnismál is an unnatural (and rather inept) blend of both plots: winning a heroic maiden and taming the shrew, a blend that could appeal only to people with ‘decadent’ tastes’”,⁶² and the late date is agreed upon by most scholars who have studied this lay in recent years.⁶³ This, anyway, need not be in conflict with von See’s conclusion on the traditional character of this curse: it may well have been composed re-using heathen elements that the author must have known (or at least presumed to know) much better than we do.

Thus, two elements connect Skm. to Buslubæn. The first is the threat of an unhappy sexual life, as in stanzas 34-35, where the giantess is threatened with lack of sexual pleasure but within the giant community, thus stressing the role of giants, and especially frost-giants, in love-magic against women: and the fundamental role of giants in this curse is summarized by Skírnir’s carving of a þurs-rune. Literary sources depict giants as permanently attracted to gods and human beings as sexual partners (especially male giants to female goddesses), but they are usually met with revulsion and refusal:⁶⁴ a curse suggesting such a

where a parallel with a magic formula on a runic stick from the excavations in Bergen can be easily drawn: the curse revolves essentially around the loss of modesty and rationality; for further discussion and references see Lozzi Gallo (2001: 147-148).

union would thus be extremely fearful for the female victim, even if she is of giant stock herself.65

The second element of connection with Buslubœn is the conjuration of the wrath of supernatural creatures against Gerðr. In this Eddic lay the god who will hate Gerðr is, understandably, Freyr himself, but she will incur the wrath of the other deities as well (stanza 33); the motif of supernatural wrath recurs in Egill’s invocation and in the curse mentioned in Saxo’s Gesta Danorum as well as in Busla’s threat, where it is referred to giants instead of gods.

5. Cursing as physical attack

Lastly, we shall analyse another account of cursing, found in Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar, that is currently dated to the 14th century, even though stories about Grettir were in oral circulation before.66 Grettir’s enemy, Þorbjörn Óngull, asks his fostress Þuríðr to help him to prevail over Grettir. Þuríðr had been instructed in pagan magic in her youth, and was considered an evil person. She begins by cursing Grettir in front of him, thus conjuring ill luck upon the hero:

\[ \text{Nú mæli ek þat um við þik, Grettir, at þú sér heillum horfínn, allri gipti ok gæfu ok allri vörn ok vízku, æ því meir, sem þú lifir lengr. Vænti ek, at þú eigir hér fá gleðıdaga heðan frá en hingast til.} \]

‘Now I utter this against you, Grettir: may you be abandoned by fortune, by all good gifts, by all resources and from your senses, always more and more, as long as you live. I believe that you will have less glad days from now on, than you have had until now.’

Grettir reacts by railing at Þuríðr, calling her a görnigavætt ‘witch’ and finally throwing a large stone at her which breaks her thigh bone. She later takes her revenge by carving a rune-inscription on a tree root, which she reddens with her own blood while reciting a galdr ‘charm’ and per-

65 For further discussion and reference, see Lozzi Gallo (2001: 144-146).
forming other rituals and ummæli (‘cursing’). While the simple utterance of the curse seems to have had little effect on Grettir, the carved root will cause the hero to injure himself while trying to hack it off, leaving a wound that will never heal and will ultimately cause his death.

This episode shows the violent reaction of the male opponent to a female magic-user; after the first section, Hringr attempts to react in a similar way, as he calls Busla vánd vættr and threatens to let her be mistreated by his servants. This conduct is prevented through Busla’s powers, as she magically succeeds in blocking Hringr and imposing a magic torpor on his servants, much like a mara (a malignant being who may also be a witch or shape-shifter and who ‘rides’ people in their sleep). The text bears no resemblance to the ones examined until now for its simplicity. What is most noticeable, though, is the final carving of the runes: as in Skm. and in Egill’s níð, it marks the climax and the conclusion of the ritual.

6. Conclusions: Buslubœn in context

Taken as a whole, Buslubœn may be interpreted as a sort of potpourri of ancient curse formulas derived from such diverse sources as truce-oaths, verbal níð and some accounts of hostile magic in the sagas. It shares with them both stylistic and thematic features, but integrated into a new system, together with elements that are only pertinent to its context, and others that have been adapted to fit therein; the complete stanzas 1, 2, 4 and 9 have no close parallel within Norse literature: even though this can be easily understood in case of the first two stanzas, that are entirely functional to the context, stanzas 4 and 9 might show evidence of traditional features, but the great variety of curses does not encourage to support this theory.

McKinnell has recently enclosed the episode of Busla’s cursing in a series of similar stories where a vólva is facing an “unjust patriarch”, found in such different sources as Hrólf’s saga kraka, Saxo’s Gesta

69 For a fuller exposition of the characteristics of the mara and its similarities with incubus see Raudvere (1993: 71-93).
Danorum and Snorri’s Ynglinga saga, in the story of Vanlandi’s killing by a saami witch already alluded to by Djóðólfr Ór Hvíni in his Ynglingatal; the scholar concludes: “they [scilicet “these different episodes”] probably reflect traditional (and perhaps related) story patterns”. If Busla’s cursing must be regarded as a story pattern, Buslubæn can hardly have been part of it from the beginning in its actual form: in fact, most episodes paralleled by McKinnell mention hostile magic, but there is no evidence of similar verbal curses.

Maybe the most striking feature taken from the Christian tradition of truce-oaths is a phrase in Syrpuvers: sál þín / sökke í viti ‘may your soul / sink into damnation’. This is definitely out of place in a heathen curse, since both sál and viti are Christian words (the latter usually found in the compound helvíti ‘hell’); although here viti could be assumed to be synonymous with the pagan Hel, its use in this context must have been inspired by oath formulas such as those found in Grettis saga and Heiðarvíga saga, where the oath-breaker is condemned to hell.

The absence of any conjuration of heathen gods may also be ascribed to the influence of Christian tradition, as found in the Latin curse, in Egill’s níð and in Skm., though the character of Busla is presented as heathen. Such conjuration is not found in the first ummæli by Þuríðr, that takes place in a Christian context; but it is also far too short to draw significant parallels. Busla conjures the wrath of the giants against Hringr, instead of that of the gods; in my opinion, this could be regarded as a synthesis of two motifs, that of divine wrath and that of the malignant (and originally libidinous) giant.

A very important element connecting Buslubæn to Egill’s níð, to Þuríðr’s cursing ritual and to Skírnir’s curse is the carving of the runes as the climax of the ritual, after the third section (the only one to have a name: Syrpuvers, i.e. ‘The witch’s verse’) has been uttered. Busla’s

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70 McKinnell (2003: 128; see also 118-122; 126-127).
71 On sál, see Haugen (1976: 218); cf. also Blöndal Magnússon (1989: 319, 793) s. vv. helvíti, sál.
72 Here viti probably stands for helvíti because the word hel occurred two lines above.
73 The word syrpa is one of many heiði’s for ‘woman’. Cleasby / Vigfússon interprets it negatively as ‘dirty woman’ (1957: 614, s.v. syrpa); in a younger version of Snorra Edda, the so called Edda Laufassina, edited by Faulkes (1979: 291) syrpa is mentioned in a list of words for ‘giantess, (bad) woman’. According to de Vries, the word is etymologically connected with Old Norse sorp ‘rubbish, waste’ (1977: 574, s.v. syrpa).
curse will only have effect if a condition is fulfilled, if Hringr solves the riddle or if he gives in, as he eventually will do. The riddle introduces an interesting Ódinic feature in this charm, which is not at all unsuited to the aim (Óðinn’s connections with magic are well-known).74

The runic sequence at the end of Syrpuvers is well known from archaeological discoveries: the solution currently accepted reads ṛoḥkmu iiiii ii ss ii ii s I I I I I, to be read ristill, φøystill, ṭistill, kistill, mistill, vistill75. Similar sequences have been found in a number of runic inscriptions, although their interpretation is controversial: while mistill (‘mistiltoe’) is a plant of relevance within Old Norse mythology, playing a major role in the killing of the god Baldr76, and ṭistill (‘thistle’) is mentioned in Skírnir’s curse,77 the other words pose greater difficulties, and Thompson advises against any attempt to interpret them.78

This gibberish procedure is easily grouped together with the formulas that Ohrt called lønord (known as Ephesian letters in classical terminology);79 these place strong emphasis on the value of numbers: it is worth noting in this context that six could be regarded as a negative number in Christian tradition, because of its supposed connection with the Antichrist.80

The parallels I have been considering have in part been noted before,81 but a careful study has allowed us to discern that the similarities are less profound than we might have expected: Buslubœn does not appear to be genuinely heathen magic, though it certainly includes some features of the magic texts we know from literary tradition and therefore would have been familiar to the author and his audience.

Buslubœn, much like Skm., must rather be regarded as a fictional

74 McKinnell has treated of the Ódinic character of the wisdom or riddle contest (1994: especially 95-98); here it is no question of a contest, but there are two opponents facing and the riddle is used as the ‘final weapon’ to victory. For a thorough survey of Óðinn’s roles see Simek (1993: 240-246).
75 First proposed in Thompson (1978).
77 On this subject, see Harris (1975).
78 Thompson (1978: 54).
79 Ohrt (1922: 12); for some Norse instances, see Moltke (1985: 104, 487, 496).
80 For an analysis of the symbol of the Antichrist in Revelation 13: 18, see Renoir (1913).
81 The most recent instance being in a paper presented by Rose (2003) at the Saga Conference in Bonn, which was mainly devoted to the study of the combined function of speech and action in the tryggðamál and in Skm.
curse, made up with different elements of magic literature, heavily re-worked in style, so that very few lexical or stylistic features recall heathen magic, and depurated from potentially dangerous features such as the conjuration of the heathen gods; yet, it is to be considered invaluable evidence in the study of Old Norse heathenism.

It must be clear that no magic text could be quoted by someone who entirely believed in its power, since the mere act of pronouncing or writing those magic words might unleash their effects; we have noted that even the author of Bósa saga, in creating this fictional curse, exercises a certain amount of caution, in catering to his audience’s (and his own) ‘decadent’ taste, much like the one Liberman attributed to the (earlier) audience of Skírnismál, together with an antiquarian interest in the heathen past that has given origin to the fornaldarsögur as a genre.

Appendix: the episode of the cursing in Bósa saga

That same evening, Busla came to the room where king Hringur was sleeping and began the prayer that has since been called Buslubæn, and has become famous; there are many ill words in it, that for Christians are improper to recite; nevertheless, this is the beginning:

‘Hér liggur Hringur konungur
hilmir Gauta,
einráðastur
allra manna.
Ætlar þú83 son þinn

Do you plan to murder

82 The text follows Tómasson (1996: 12-15), based on Jiriczek (1893), but variant readings by Finnur Jónsson (1915: 350-353) have been marked, unless the difference is merely one of spelling. I chose to match the text with a more literal translation than the one proposed by Pálsson / Edwards (1985: 205-208), whose main purpose is apparently to present the readers with an attractive text.

83 Omitted by Jónsson (1915: 350).
sjálfur að myrða?  
Þau munu fáðæmi  
fréttast víða.

your own son yourself?  
This incredible mischief  
will be widely known.

Heyr þú¹⁸⁴ bæn Buslu,  
brátt mun hún¹⁸⁵ sungin  
svo að heyrst skal  
um heim allan,  
og⁸⁶ öþörf öllum  
þeim sem⁸⁷ á heyra  
en þeim⁸⁸ þó fjandlegust  
sem eg vil fortala.⁸⁹

Hear Busla’s Prayer,  
quickly will it be sung,  
so that it will be heard  
all over the world,  
and unpleasant to all  
those that listen,  
but most hostile to the one,  
that I want to persuade.

Villist vættir,  
verði ódæmi,  
hristist hamrar,  
heimur sturlist,  
versni veðratta,  
verði ódæmi.⁹⁰  
nema þú¹⁹¹ Hringur konungur  
Herrauð friðir  
ok honum Bósa⁹²  
hjargir veitir.

May the vættir go astray,  
may a prodigy happen  
may the hammers shake  
may the world quake  
may the weather worsen  
may a prodigy happen  
unless you, Hringur  
protect Herrauður  
and on Bósi  
bestow your help.

Svo skal eg þjarma  
þér að brjósti,  
að hjarta þitt  
höggormar⁹³ gnagi,  
en eyru þín  
aldregi heyri  
og augu þín  
úthverf snúist

Thus I shall hit  
you in your breast,  
that vipers may  
gnaw you heart,  
and your ears  
ever hear  
and your eyes  
turn to the inside,

⁸⁴ Omitted by Jónsson (1915: 350).
⁸⁵ Omitted by Jónsson (1915: 350).
⁸⁶ Omitted by Jónsson (1915: 351).
⁸⁷ Jónsson instead of þeim sem has þeims (1915: 351).
⁸⁸ Omitted by Jónsson (1915: 351).
⁸⁹ This line in Jónsson reads þeims vilk fyrir telia (1915: 351).
⁹⁰ Jónsson: órói (1915: 351).
⁹¹ Omitted by Finnur Jónsson (1915: 351).
⁹² Jónsson instead of honum Bósa has Bøgu-Bósa (1915: 351).
nema þú Bósa
björg um veitir
ok honum Herraud
heifi upp gefir.

Ef þú siglir,
slími reiði
en af styri
stókkvi krókar,
 rifni reflar,
 rekí segl ofan
en aktaumar
allir slími,
nema þú Herraud
heifi upp gefir
og svo Bósa
biðir til sátta.

Ef þú ríður,
 raskist taumar,
 helíst hestar
en hrúmist klárar
en gótur allar
og gagnstígar
troðist allar
í tröllhendur
fyrir þér,
nema þú Bósa
bjargir veitir
og Herraud
heifi upp gefir.

unless you on Bósi
bestow your help
and to Herraud
offer revenge.

If you sail,
may the equipment break
and from the rudder
may the crooks break
may the sheets tear,
and the braces
all break,
unless you to Herraudur
offer revenge
and thus to Bósi
propose an agreement.

If you ride a horse,
may the reins break,
may the saddle horses become lame
and the carthorses become ill,
and all roads
and short cuts as well
may be followed
to your ruin,
unless you on Bósi
bestow help
and to Herraudur
offer revenge.

94 Jónsson instead of þú Bósa has Bógu-Bósa (1915: 351).
95 Jónsson: bjargir (1915: 351).
96 Omitted by Jónsson (1915: 351).
97 Jónsson: styri (1915: 351).
99 Omitted by Jónsson (1915: 351).
100 Jónsson instead of svo Bósa has Bógu-Bósa (1915: 351).
102 Jónsson: nýfaldar (1915: 352).
103 On such expressions as að senda i trollhendur see Fritzner (1973: 722, s.v. troll).
104 Jónsson instead of þú Bósa has Bógu-Bósa (1915: 352).
Sé þér í hvílu
sem í hálmeldi
en í háseti,
sem á hafðáru.
Þó skal þér seinna
sýnu verra
en ef þá105 vilt við meyjar
manns gaman hafa,
villist þá þá vegarins.106
Eða viltu þulu lengri?'

Pá svarar konungur: ‘Þegi þú,
vond vættur, og vert í burtu elle-
gar mun eg láta meða þig fyrir
forbænin þína’. ‘Svo höfum við
nú fundist’ segir Busla ‘að við
munum eigi skilja fyrir en eg hefí
minn vilja.’

Konungur vildi þá upp standa og
var hann þá þastur við sængina,
en smásveinar vöknudu eigi.

Busla lét þá frammi annan
þriðjuð bænarinnar, og mun eg
láta það um líða að skrifa hann
því það er öllum þarleysa að
hafa hann eftir en þó má svo síst
eftir hafa hann að hann sé eigi
skrifaður, en þó er þetta þar up-
phaf á:

‘Tröll og álfar
og tófurnornir,
búar, bergrisar
brenni þínar hallir,
hati þig hrímþussar
hestar streð107 þig,
stráin stangi þig
en108 stormar æri þig

May trolls and elves
and magic norns,
spirits, mountain-giants
burn your palace,
may frost-giants hate you,
may horses rape you,
may the straw prick you,
and storms pursue you closely,

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105 Jónsson instead of en ef þá has ef (1915: 352).
108 Omitted by Jónsson (1915: 352).
and woe come upon you, unless you do my will.’

When the catalogue was finished, the king talked to her: ‘Before you curse me more, I shall spare Herrauð’s life, but Bósi must travel from this land and be killed, if I can catch up with him.’

‘This must still have further influence on you’ said Busla. Then she began the song that is called Syrpuvers and great magic is hidden therein, and it is not recommended that it be recited after sunset, and this comes near the end:

‘May six men come here, tell me their names, all unbound, I will show them to you: If you cannot interpret them as I deem right, then hounds will gnaw you to death, and may your soul sink to hell.’

R O P K M U IIIIII SSSSSS:
TTTTT: IIIIII:LLLLLLL:

‘Interpret immediately these names in the right way, or else may all the worst I have prayed for come true, unless you do my will.’

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110 Omitted by Jónsson (1915: 352).
111 Omitted by Jónsson (1915: 352).
112 Omitted by Jónsson (1915: 352).
113 Omitted by Jónsson (1915: 352).
114 Omitted by Jónsson (1915: 352).
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