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Graeco-Roman Metaphor of Human Fate as a Fabric Woven and Thread Spun by Supernatural Beings in Medieval Icelandic Contexts*

This article offers an analysis of the Old Icelandic use of the weaving and spinning of fate metaphor, which projects the patterns of the practices of weaving and spinning on the notion of fate. The study aims primarily at reviewing the Latin provenance of this metaphor in the Old Icelandic literature, and examining the probability of the transfer of this metaphor through the reception of ancient Roman literature in medieval Iceland.

Keywords: metaphor, fate, Old Icelandic literature, Latin literature

Greeks and Romans in Antiquity and Norsemen in the Middle Ages conceptualised human fate, life and death as a fabric woven, or a thread spun, by supernatural beings, three aged women who held decisive power over humans' lot, the course and length of their life: the Greek *Moīrai* (Μοῖραι), Latin *Parcae* (or *Tria Fata*), and the Old Icelandic Norns (*Nornir*). They represented the determinants of man's transient being in the world, uncontrolled by man, but themselves subjected to only one greater power, that of necessity or destiny (Gr. *anáńkē*, ἀνάγκη, Lat. *fatum*, *necessitas*, OIc. *urðr*).

In Ancient Greek, they were named after the successive stages of spinning, their individual names being: the thread-unravelling *Klōthō* (ἡ Κλωθώ), who spun the thread of life from a distaff onto a spindle, *Láchesis* (ἡ Λάχεσις), who measured the length with a rod and apportioned it (the measure of good and evil), and *Átropos* (ἡ Ἄτροπος), the one who cut the thread (thus determining the individual's time of death). The *Moirai*'s collective name is etymologically related to the act of dividing and apportioning, expressed with verbs such as *moiráo* (μοιράω) and *meíromai*

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(μείρομαι). Their collective cognomen, *Klōthes* (Κλώθες), stems from the act of binding, spinning and weaving together, *klōthō* (κλώθω).

In Latin, their collective name, *Parcae*, is connected to the verb *pario* = to give birth, or to *parco* = to spare, *plecto* = to beat, punish, or *plico* = to fold, to lay or wind together, to fold up, and thus also to Gr. *plékō* (πλέκω): to intertwine, to tie. If derived from Lat. *plico*, their names may possibly signify that they are weavers and spinners as well. Their individual names, however, mirrored the passing days of human life, which connects them with human birth: the ninth (day), *Nona* (*dies*), when a newborn was recognised and named by *pater familias* (during a familial ceremony known as *dies lustricus*) and *Nona* began to unravel its thread of life; the tenth (day), *Decima* or *Decuma*, when *Decima* measured the length of its thread of life; and *Morta*, the day of its death, when the thread was cut by *Morta*, as attested by the Roman myth of the *Parcae* as birth and childhood deities. According to Marcus Terentius Varro's *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* (cited by Aulus Gellius in *Noctes Atticae*, III, XVI, 9), the names of *Nona* and *Decima* derive from the length of a human pregnancy, as the ninth and the tenth month. These notions link *Parcae* with the etymology derived from Lat. *pario*.

In Scandinavia these three women, Norns, had ambiguous Old Icelandic individual names, perhaps denoting the chronological aspects of time: that which has come to pass, past or fate – *Vrðr*; that which is becoming, present – *Verþandi*; and that which will be, future or debt to pay – *Skvld*. According to Jan de Vries (1962: 412), the collective name of the Old Icelandic Norns is also, like the Greek and Latin equivalents, derived from weaving through its etymological relation to the verb *að snara* (to turn, to twist, to wring), but his etymological theory is disputed by Karen Bek-Pedersen (2011a: 73–82). Being therefore ambiguous and uncertain, in this case etymology cannot serve as decisive evidence of a common provenance of the motif of spinning or weaving of fate from the Proto-Indo-European ideology.

The linguistic image of the Norns' activities is represented in mythological and heroic Eddic poetry, *Prose Edda*, a mythographic and poetic treatise by Snorri Sturluson, and Icelandic sagas,¹ in the metaphoric stratum of the Old Icelandic language the authors used. They decided men's fate by ruling over it or ordering it (*ráða örlögum manna*), steering (*stýra örlögum*), shaping (*skapa, sköp*), foretelling (*örlög seggja / segja / spá*), passing judgements (*norna dómr, kviðr norna, lög leggja, dæma örlög manna*), carving runes (*skera á skíði*), and spinning the thread or weaving the fabric of man's life. See headwords: *norn*, *ørlog*, *ørferð*, *örlygi*,

¹ The Old Icelandic sources on Norns: *Ynglingatal*, 24 (*Ynglinga saga*, 47); *Darraðarljóð* (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, 157); *Poetic Edda: Fáfnismál*, 12–13; *Völuspá*, 8; 20; *Vafþrúðnismál*, 49; *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, 2–4; *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, 26; *Reginismál*, 2; 14; *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma*, 7; *Guðrúnarkviða II*, 38; *Guðrúnarhvöt*, 13; *Hamðismál*, 29–31; *Sigrdrífumál*, 17; *Prose Edda: Gylfaginning*, 23–24; 40; *Völunga saga*, 43; *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, 67 (*Hlöðskviða*); *Norna-Gests þátr*, 36; *Hrólfs saga kraka*, 111; *Jökuls þátr Þúasonar*, 56; *Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns*, 51; *Barlaams saga ok Jósafats*, 126.

forlog, *skop* in *A Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*. On the Nordic belief in fate, see: Bauschatz 1982: 119–154, Gropper 2017, Holtsmark 1951, Lindow 2015, Sayers 2007, Ström 1967.

Correlations between the conceptual worldview of ancient Greeks and Romans and medieval Scandinavians can be observed both in the structure of the religious myth of fate and fortune (three senile women symbolising past, present and future weave or spin the fate of men from their birth to death), and in the conceptual system of language denoting the object on which they perform their actions – the human condition. These three women are shaping man's fate (Gr. ἀνάγκη, μόρος, αἴσα; Lat. *fatum*, *necessitas*; Oic. *ørlog*, *ørferð*, *ørlygi*, *forlog* and *skop*), a phenomenon which in all three languages is expressed through the vocabulary metaphorically derived from weaving or spinning practice, even if *Moirai*, *Parcae* or *Nornir* are not recalled directly or even indirectly in an utterance. The use of such concrete terms, weaving and spinning, in an utterance about an abstraction, such as LIFE, DEATH and FATE, gives it the form of a conceptual metaphor – a transference of the meaning, or its aspects, from a given object (the source domain, from which the meaning is sourced) onto a given idea (the target domain, which draws the meaning from the source domain), on the basis of association with it. In this case the association is that of human LIFE, DEATH and FATE as a FABRIC woven or a THREAD spun by preternatural beings.

What factors explain this correlation? Is it an indigenous, culture-specific concept for each one of these three civilisations, or rather a common element of their shared Proto-Indo-European ideological heritage? Perhaps the occurrence of this concept of fate in these three languages could be attributed to its cultural transfer from Latin Europe to Scandinavia? This might have been possible in the period of intensification of contacts between European and Scandinavian societies in the Middle Ages, during the Christianisation of Scandinavia, after the introduction of a classical Latin-based education system during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and through the consequent Scandinavian reception of classical Greek and Latin culture.

Up to now, several scholars, including Richard Onians (1954: 303–468), Michael Enright (1990) and Anthony Winterbourne (2004: 84–103), noting the wide spread of the weaving and spinning vocabulary among societies when talking about human fate, have regarded this motif as either a universal marker of human thinking, or, due to its occurrence from India to Scandinavia, an Indo-European legacy inherited from the common ancestor culture of the Proto-Indo-Europeans. Georgios Giannakis (1998, 1999), in an insightful study of the possible origin of this Proto-Indo-European motif, concludes that the belief that human fate is woven or spun like a fabric or a thread by supernatural beings comes directly from the Proto-Indo-European ideology about life, death and the afterlife. Giannakis presents his findings in two articles, submitting evidence from languages and literatures of multiple ancient and medieval cultures, reaching from India to Ireland.

However, Giannakis' study does not cover Scandinavia, and moreover it does not consider a diachronic scale. So far, neither the hypothesis of autochthonous, or Proto-Indo-European, origins of this metaphor or motif, nor the possibility of its cultural transfer, has been yet conclusively confirmed or disproven in the existing literature on the subject.

A hypothesis of the cultural transfer of the concept of weaving or spinning of man's fate from Rome and Greece to Northern Europe, as opposed to the supposition of its autochthonous or Proto-Indo-European provenance, has been put forward by several scholars. Gerd Weber argued for the Latin roots of this metaphor in first Old English, and then in Old Norse conceptual systems, to which it was said to have found its way through Old English literature (for example *Riming Poem*, 70; *Guthlac*, 1351; *Beowulf*, 697; 1942; riddles from the Exeter Book, 56), expanding through the influence of Latin writings the semantic field of Old English *wurd* and Old Norse *urðr* by adding the Greek-Latin metaphor of the weaving or spinning of human fate (Weber 1969: 115–125). Karen Bek-Pedersen in this context examined not only the contacts between Scandinavians and Anglo-Saxons in the Viking Age, but also their encounters with the Irish as a possible source of influence. Bek-Pedersen pointed to the Old and Middle Irish literary works, where the metaphor of the weaving or spinning of fate occurs, also under Latin influence, in *Chlaidib Cherbail*, *In Cath Catharda*, and *Dindshenchas*, which might have inspired Scandinavian writers. Bek-Pedersen (2006, 2007: 6–7, 2009, 2011a: 141) proposes *In Cath Catharda* as a medium of cultural transfer from Ireland, a text which is itself derived from the Graeco-Roman culture, as it is a Middle Irish translation of Lucan's *Bellum civile*. It is, however, unlikely that these literary works in Old English and Old and Middle Irish were known in Iceland in the Middle Ages, as there are no traces of their reception (for example intertextual relations).

Thus far the possibility of a direct impact of Roman culture on Germanic and Scandinavian societies – be it as a consequence of the Romanisation of Germanic tribes in Antiquity (in Scandinavia this was notable only in Denmark at that time, as some of the Danish warrior aristocracy served in the Roman army), or through the transmission of Latin texts in medieval times – has not been considered in the context of the cultural transfer of the concept of weaving or spinning of human's fate.

The Roman religious idea of fate might have infiltrated Scandinavian culture as a consequence of the conversion of Germanic mercenaries enrolled in Roman legions to Roman religion: they carried it to their kin and tribes, contributing to the development of the Romanisation of Germanic provinces and peoples living in settlements near Roman garrisons. Germanic tribesmen serving as mercenaries in auxiliary units of the Roman army (*auxilia*) were undoubtedly exposed to the influence of Roman religion in the form of the cult of fortune and fate practised by Roman soldiers. Worship of goddesses or impersonal, divine powers of fortune and fate (*fatum bonum, matres parcae, fortuna redux/cohortis/respiciens,*

fortunae cohors) was observed by legions and their subdivisions along with their commanders in Roman Britannia and Germania, as attested by altars, shrines, as well as images and inscriptions on artefacts. These goddesses and supernatural powers acquired local names and forms of worship in the process of *interpretatio indigena* among the tribes in provinces and in *barbaricum*, transforming by Romanisation the local modes and objects of worship, e.g. the cult of matrons.

If this was the case, the metaphor of weaving a fabric or spinning a thread of human life could be traced to the earliest Germanic literatures as a fully adopted concept present in the mentality of these peoples. Nevertheless, the chronology and frequency of this metaphor in Germanic literatures, notably in the Old Norse-Icelandic writings, suggests otherwise, and therefore I consider it unlikely that it was culturally transferred that early on in Antiquity. Through sampling of the conceptual, metaphorical stratum of Old Norse-Old Icelandic language and literature we can trace the transfer of the Graeco-Roman concept of fate, as it occurred through the reception of ancient Roman literature in Scandinavia, which was undergoing Christianisation in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, after the introduction of a classical Latin-based education system.

1. Greek *Moirai* and Roman *Parcae* – Weavers of human fate

The religious concept of the weaving of human fate is preserved in the oldest Greek literary iterations, in the epic poetry of the archaic Greek *aoidoi*, conveyed under the name of Homer, although crafted collectively in the oral form by a group of wandering minstrels in the period between the ninth and eighth centuries BC.² In Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* we find numerous fragments depicting the fate of Greek and Trojan heroes through the lens of these religious concepts in the form of a Homeric formula: a hero is "destined to suffer what Aisa, Klotho or Moira wove for him at his birth" (πείσεται, ἄσσα οἱ αἴσα κατὰ κλωθῆς τε βαρεῖαι / γιγνομένῳ νήσαντο λίνῳ).³ In *Iliad* (XX, 127–128), Hera spares Achilles' life on the day when

² The spinning of fate by *Moirai* in ancient Greek literature, see: Homeros: *Ilias*, II, 111; XVIII, 367; XX, 127–8; XXIV, 209; 525–526; *Odysseia*, I, 17; III, 208; 269; IV, 208; VII, 196; VIII, 579; XI, 139; XVI, 64; 379; 421; XIX, 141–147; XX, 196; XXIV, 95; 131–137; Callinus: *Elegies*, I, 6–9; Bacchylides: *Odes*, V, 143; fragment 24; Theocritus: *Idylla*, I, 139–140; *fragmenta melica adespota*, XIII, 2–3; Quintus Smyrnaeus: *Posthomerica*, 13, 486; Callimachus: *Hymnos in lavacrum Palladis*, 103–105; Pindaros: *Olympiana*, VI, 39–42; Aeschylus: *Eumenides*, 334–349; *Prometheus vincetus*, 1078–79; Euripides: *Orestes*, 12; Plato: *Politeia*, X, 617 c; *Nómoi*, XII, 960 c–d; Lycophron: *Alexandra*, 143; 584; Stesichoros: fragment 222b; Pausanias: I, 19, 1; Lucianus Sophista: *Jupiter confutatus*, 1–2; *Charon*, 13; 16; *Quomodo historia conscribenda sit*, 38; Marcus Aurelius: *Ta eis heauton*, III, 4; 16; IV, 26; 34; V, 8; VI, 38; VII, 57; X, 5; Proclus: *Eis Helion*, 48–50.

³ See the following examples of the Homeric formula: Homeros: *Ilias*, XVII, 514; XX, 127; 435; XXIV, 209; 525; *Odysseia*, I, 17; 267; 400; III, 208; IV, 208; VII, 196; VIII, 579; XI, 139; XVI, 64; 129; XX, 196.

the gods deliberated the life and death of fighting heroes during a fierce battle between the Greeks and Trojans, reminding the other gods that later “he is bound to suffer anyway what Aisa has woven for him at his birth” (ὑστερον αὔτε τὰ πείσεται ἄσσά οἱ αἴσα / γιγνομένων ἐπένησε λίνω).

The Greek lyric poets who came after Homer in the seventh/sixth centuries BC conceptualised fate in a fashion similar to Homer (Bacchylides: fragment 24; Stesichoros: fragment 222b; Pindaros: *Olympiana*, VI, 39–42). In fragment 222b of Stesichoros in the Lille papyrus, a part of a poem on the Theban myth of the house of the Labdacids, Stesichoros turns into verse Jocasta’s words, lamenting the prophesied fate of Eteocles and Polynices, her sons – they are destined to kill each other in battle. Jocasta attempts to reconcile them, saying: “But if to see both my sons die, each at the hand of the other, / is my appointed lot, and their fate has been spun, / let the fulfilment of an abhorrent death be mine this instant” (αἰ δέ με παίδας ιδέσθαι ὑπ’ ἀλλάλοισι δαμέντας / μόρσιμόν ἐστιν, ἐπεκλώσαν δὲ Μοίραι, / αὐτίκα μοι θανάτου τέλος συυγεροῖο γένοιτο).

In Greek tragedies, *ananke* – as the governing rule of necessity and probability over the plot – decides men’s fate by giving them their own moral and ethical character and internal psychological qualities, and by determining the state of their environment, the polity and society they live in, and other external factors. Aeschylus (6th/5th c. BC), in *The Eumenides* (334–349) tells of the trial of Orestes, hunted by the Erinyes, deities of vengeance and punishment, who are chasing him for the killing of his mother Clytemnestra, who had murdered his father. Orestes seeks justice in Athens, where he stands trial before the goddess herself. There he calls for aid from Apollo and Athena, but the Erinyes reply that neither Apollo nor Athena can save him from them, because exacting vengeance for crimes “is a duty given to them for all eternity by *Moirai* upon the weaving of their fate” (τοῦτο γὰρ λάχος διανταῖα / Μοῖρ’ ἐπέκλωσεν ἐμπέδως ἔχειν).

The religious concept, first preserved in the epic poetry of the archaic *aioidoi*, is becoming by the fifth/fourth centuries BC a philosophical notion about the metaphysical structure of the universe, and as such does it appear in Platonic philosophy. In the ending of *Politeia* (X, 617c–620e), a dialogue on justice in public life, an ideal state, society and the citizen, Plato presents the myth of Er, which illustrates a cosmological vision of the structure of the universe in the Platonic world of ideas and the forces that rule and move them: necessity and fate. An axis of the universe was placed in the Spindle of Necessity (Gr. ἀνάγκης ἄτρακτον), spinning heavenly bonds around the earthly globe. The spindle was handled by the *Moirai*. Their whorls were fitted onto the Spindle, which they used to spin the threads of fate as the concentric celestial spheres onto a common axis centred on Earth. The three *Moirai*, while spinning, moved these celestial spheres, and thus determined human fate. In this way Plato linked the common belief among the Greeks that the *Moirai* determine future by spinning, with the ancient belief in astrology widespread in the Mediterranean, that our fortunes depend upon the stars.

In ancient Neoplatonic philosophy, the astrological power exercised over humans by the revolutions of the heavenly bodies was compared to spinning, for example by Proclus, in his *Hymn to the Sun (Eis Helion)*, 48–50): “And if some ill comes my way through the threads moved by the stars / from the spindles of destiny that revolve in helices, / ward it off yourself with your mighty radiance” (εἰ δέ τι μοιριδίοισιν, ἐλιξοπόροισιν ἀτράκτοις, / ἀστεροδινήτοις ὑπὸ νήμασιν οὐλοὸν ἄμμιν / ἔρχεται, αὐτὸς ἔρυκε τεῖ μὲγαλη τὸδε ῥιπῆ).

This metaphor also functioned in the mentality of the wider and lower strata of ancient Greek society, as testified by numerous funeral inscriptions, in which funders often blame *Moirai* for the premature “cutting of the thread of life of their beloved” (Μοιράων με μίτος πικρὸς ὤλεσεν), as evinced by the funeral epigram on a tombstone from Kourion, a city-state on the southwest coast of Cyprus.⁴

Ancient Roman beliefs were syncretic in nature. Romans tended to accept the cults of foreign deities in order to secure the favours of diverse supernatural forces for the Roman state and for themselves. Influenced by Greek civilisation, Romans underwent significant Hellenisation, adopting Greek culture, religion and tongue (taught among their elites as a second language). By accepting the Greek cult of the Fates – which impacted the cult of Roman *Parcae*, leading to the identification of *Moirai* with *Parcae* – Hellenised Romans adopted a whole set of concepts, myths, rituals, and religious formulae. Among them was the idea that *Parcae* are responsible for the weaving and spinning of the fate of men, which found an appropriate expression in Latin, widespread in classical pagan and Christian Latin literature in Antiquity and later on in the Middle Ages.⁵ In the Middle Ages, the metaphor appears under the influence of Latin in Old English (*Riming Poem*,

⁴ See the funeral inscriptions in: *Inscriptiones Graecae metricae ex scriptoribus praeter Anthologiam collectae*, 36, 2; *Epigrammata Graeca ex lapidibus collecta*, 167; 274; *Inscriptiones Graecae* IX, 2, 640; XII, 7, 117.

⁵ The spinning of fate by *Parcae* in ancient Roman literature, see: Catullus: 64, 305–381; Vergilius: *Aeneis*, I, 22; VI, 882; X, 812; *Eclogae*, IV, 46–47; Tibullus: I, 3, 86; 7, 1–2; III, 3, 35–38; Ovidius: *Tristia*, IV, 1, 61–64; V, 3, 25–26; 10, 45–46; *Metamorphoses*, II, 654; VIII, 452; X, 31; *Epistulae ex Ponto*, I, 8, 63–64; IV, 3, 35; *Amores*, I, 3, 17–18; *Heroides*, XII, 3–4; *Consolatio ad Liviam*, 443–444; Horatius: *Carmen saeculare*, 28; *Carmina*, II, 3, 15; III, 24, 8; *Epodi*, XIII, 15; Statius: *Thebais*, V, 274; VII, 774; *Silvae*, V, 1, 154; 3, 64; Seneca: *Hercules furens*, 181; 566; *Hercules Oetaeus*, 1097–1098; *Oedipus*, 980–996; Iuvenalis: *Saturae*, X, 252; XII, 64; Martialis: IV, 54, 9–10; VI, 3, 5–6; Valerius Flaccus: *Argonautica*, IV, 458; Apuleius: *De mundo*, 38; Terentianus Maurus: *De syllabis*, 1295; Donatus: *Ars maior*, III, 6; Chalcidius: *Platonis Timaeus*, 144; Ausonius: *Cento nuptialis*, 78–79; *Epistulae*, XII, 43–45; Claudianus: *De raptu Proserpinae*, I, 48–53; *In Eutropium*, II, 460–461; Martianus Capella: *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, 1, 3; Sidonius Apollinaris: *Carmina*, VII, 600–602; Rutilius Namatianus: *De reditu suo*, I, 134. This conceptualisation of fate was widespread in Roman society, as testified by the sepulchral inscriptions with *Parcae* imagery (including weaving and spinning instruments) in Rome and the Roman provinces, such as the one on a tomb at Rome dated to the second century AD (*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*: VI, 25063): “so abruptly have *Parcae* ripped the bright ties of your [life]” (*stamina ruperunt subito tua candida Parcae*). See also: *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*: III, 754; 7436; 9623; IV, 21521; VI, 25063; XI, 5357; *Carmina Latina Epigraphica*: 443, 5; 456, 4; 493, 8; 494, 2; 1011, 5; 1114, 4; 1156, 4; 1523, 4; 2296, 14.

Guthlac, *Beowulf*, *Exeter Book*, Aldhelm), Middle English (Geoffrey Chaucer and *The Kingis Quair*), Old French (*Les Échecs amoureux*), Old High German (Ulrich von Etzenbach), and medieval Italian (Dante and Boccaccio).⁶ However, it seems unlikely that Icelanders had access to these works of literature. Among the authors of Roman literature known in Iceland were most probably only Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Sallust, Lucan, and anonymous literary works such as *Ilias Latina* and *De excidio Troiae* (Latin translations or adaptations of Homer).

2. Weaving and spinning of fate in the sagas of the Mediterranean Antiquity

The concept of the weaving or spinning of fate is present in the Icelandic sagas about Mediterranean Antiquity (*Antikensagas*), translations into Old Icelandic of selected Latin writings about Troy (*Trójumanna saga*), Alexander the Great (*Alexanders saga*), Rome (*Rómverja saga*) and the Israelites (*Gyðinga saga*), which constitute one of the earliest branches of Old Icelandic literary works, and which might have influenced the development of vernacular Icelandic genres of literature. The Old Icelandic translations of Virgil, Ovid, Sallust and Lucan, *Trójumanna saga* (dated to the mid-thirteenth century) and *Rómverja saga* (the saga dated to the 1180s at the earliest),⁷ may have been the link between the Roman conceptual system and the Old Norse one.

From among the source-texts of the *Trójumanna saga*, in Book I of *Aeneid* (22) Virgil praises Aeneas' arrival at Carthage after his roaming across the Mediterranean with Trojan companions, says that their advent was prophesied and that their descendants are destined to bring destruction upon Libya: "thus the Parcae spin their thread" (*sic volvere Parcās*). In *Metamorphoses* (II, 654), Ovid tells the story of Chiron, an immortal centaur who is destined to die in torments (after resigning his immortality to be released from pain), saying that it will be the "three sisters who shall eventually untie his threads" (*triplicesque deae tua fila resolvent*).

In the source-texts of the *Rómverja saga*, Sallust rarely refers to *fatum*, but for Lucan, however, who was an atheist of Stoic and Epicurean views, the concept

⁶ See the following examples in medieval Latin and vernaculars: Fulgentius: *Mythologies*, I, 8; Isidorus: *Etymologiae*, I, 37, 24; VIII, 11, 93; Aldhelm: *Aenigmata*, 45; 89; *Beowulf*, 696–697; Alan de Lille: *Anticlaudianus*, VI, 218; Thierry de Chartres: *Glosa super Boethii librum De Trinitate*, II, 21; Geoffrey Chaucer: *Troilus i Criseyde*, V, 1–7; Dante: *Inferno*, XXXIII, 126; *Purgatorio*, XXI, 25–27; *The Kingis Quair and Other Prison Poems: Complaint of a Prisoner Against Fortune*, 44–63; *The Old French Chess of Love*, 52; Boccaccio: *Genealogia deorum*, I, 5; Bernardus Silvestris: *Cosmographia*, II, 11; Ulrich von Etzenbach: *Alexander*, 3737–3746; Gualterus de Castiglione: *Alexandreis*, V, 143–145; Nigellus de Longo Campo: *Speculum stultorum*, 1597.

⁷ The source-texts of *Rómverja saga* were known in Norway before 1177 (Lucan), and in Iceland before 1198 (Sallust).

of *fatum* replaced the old deities as the force guiding the life of man and the history of the world. It is used repeatedly in *Bellum civile*, among other instances in statements having the structure of the metaphor of fate as fabric or thread of human life.⁸ In *Bellum civile* Book I (112–114), Lucan writes about the beginning of the civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey, giving as one of its main causes the death of Julia, daughter of Caesar and wife of Pompey, who prevented the outbreak of war between her father and her husband for as long she lived, before she was “cut off with the cruel hand of Parcae” (*abstulit ad manes Parcarum Iulia saeva / intercepta manu*). In Book II (107), Lucan describes the seizure of Rome by Marius during the first civil war, and the crimes committed by his soldiers, who “dared to cut the fate of children in infancy” (*nec primo in limine vitae infantis miseri nascentia rumpere fata*).

These examples demonstrate the structure of the metaphor of FATE AS FABRIC OR THREAD of human life in ancient Latin. The human fate (*fatum*) and life (*vita*), metaphorically materialised as threads, binds, weft and warp in a fabric (*stamen, filum, subtemen*), is subjected to manual treatment (by hand – *manus*, or thumb – *pollex*) by supernatural beings, the *Parcae*, who perform on such conceptualised human fate the following actions: *traho* = spin, draw out; *texo* = weave; *volvo* = roll; *neo* = spin, weave; *iungo* = tie, bind; *rumpo* = tear, rend; *resolvo* = unbind, untie; *intercipio* = cut. The above linguistic realisations of this metaphor can thus be generalised as follows: LIFE of humans is a THREAD spun by supernatural beings, DEATH of humans is a cutting of the THREAD, LIFE of humans is a FABRIC woven by the supernatural beings, DEATH of humans is a ripping of the FABRIC.

Passages from Lucan indicated so far have corresponding *lacunae* in the defective manuscript ÁM 595 α–β 4° of *Rómverja saga*, while from the abbreviated version of ÁM 226 fol. the metaphor has been entirely removed, as this abridged version of the Old Icelandic translation tends toward very simplified non-figurative language uses (234, 248–249, 262, 322). *Rómverja saga* was, however, one of the hypotexts for *Adonias saga*, from which this text was partly derived. The author of this erudite *fræðisaga*, which is set in the Mediterranean region, sourced information on this area from *Rómverja saga*, by copying translated excerpts of its texts, including the passage from *Bellum civile* about three sisters, the *Parcae*, unable to keep up with cutting the threads of life of the soldiers destined to fall in battle. In Lucan this happens at the time of the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, and in *Adonias saga* during the battle between Adonias and King Constancius:

⁸ See Lucanus: *Bellum civile*, I, 112–114; II, 107; III, 18–23; VI, 703–704; 777; IX, 838.

Sedibus Elysiis campoque expulsa piorum
ad Stygias' inquit 'tenebras manesque
nocentis post bellum ciuile trahor. uidi ipsa
tenentis Eumenidas quaterent quas uestris
lampadas armis; praeparat innumeras pup-
pes Acherontis adusti portitor; in multas
laxantur Tartara poenas; uix operi cunctae
dextra properante sorores sufficiunt, lassant
rumpentis stamina Parcas.

(Lucanus: *Bellum civile*, III, 18–19)

Among the texts translated from Latin to Old Icelandic, the translator of *Alexandris*, a medieval Latin epic poem by Walter of Châtillon, into Old Icelandic as *Alexanders saga*, who supposedly was Bishop Brandr Jónsson of Hólar (d. 1264), also used the metaphor of fate as determined by spinning (*spinna órlags þrað*), and death as a cutting or tearing apart (*slita órlags þraduna*) of the thread of fate.

During the battle between Alexander and Darius, Hades became filled with the dead and one *Parca* could not keep up with cutting the thread so the other two abandoned their roles (spinning) and helped her break the fates of countless dying men:

Rumpere fila manu non sufficit una sororum,
Abiectaque colo Cloto Lachesisque uirorum
Fata metunt, unamque duae iuere sorores.

(*Alexandris*, V, 142–144)

Ok nu goriz sua mikit mannfal at Atrops
ein af þeim iij systrum er orlógunum styra
fær æigi sua skiott slitit órlags þraduna sem
þeim þickir þurfa. leGia systr hennar nu nidr
verk sitt. ok slita nu allar órlags þraduna sem
þær megu tidaz.

(*Alexanders saga*, p. 77)

At the battle of Hydaspes in India the Greek and Indian soldiers fell so quickly that two of the sisters could not finish spinning before the third sister cut the threads:

Feruent hinc inde ruentes
In mortem cunei: mortalia fila sorores
Sufficiunt uix nere duae que tertia rumpit.

(*Alexandris*, IX, 193–195)

Geriz bratt mikit mannfal af hvaromtveg-
giom. oc sva for þat sciott ívoxt. at tver af
þeim þrim systrum er orlogom styra fa nu
varla sva títt spunnet órlagsþrað.

(*Alexanders saga*, p. 134)

These lineages of textual transmission, through Lucan and *Rómverja saga* and *Alexandris* and *Alexanders saga*, which might have allowed the cultural transfer of this Graeco-Roman metaphor of fate from Latin to Old Icelandic, were not controversial for contemporary Christians and would not have been liable to arouse suspicions of paganism, because at that time the Roman *fatum* had been adopted

by Christianity to signify the divine order of causes determined in the material world by God's providence, especially in the Christian Neoplatonic philosophy, as was also the case with the Roman *fortuna*. Among the Christian Neoplatonists, at least the French twelfth-century Neoplatonist Alain de Lille was known in Iceland in the Middle Ages, as his works were held in the book collection of Viðeyjarklaustr around 1397, when a book register which has survived was made at this monastery (*Viðeyjarmáldagar* in *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, IV: 110).

3. Weaving of fate in the vernacular Icelandic literature

The metaphor of weaving or spinning was also used to conceptualise the decisive power of the Norns and in some instances also the valkyries over human fate in original Old Icelandic literature. It was expressed in language through terminology borrowed from weaving and spinning. Man's fate (*örlög*) could be metaphorically woven or spun (*að vefa* = to weave; *að snúa*, *að snara* = to spin, to tie, to plait; *að spinna* = to spin; *að greiða* = to comb), and cut (*að skera*, *að slita* = to cut), and it had its thread or fabric = *þráðr*, rope = *síma*, strand = *þáttr*, bonds = *band*, and fabric = *vefr*.

In the Eddic poem *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (3), dated to the late eleventh century, Helgi's fate is defined by the Norns at his birth, "who firmly wove the threads of his fate, tied them to the sky and spread across the earth" (*Sneru þær af afli / örlögþáttu, / þá er borgir braut / í Bráluni; / þær of greiddu / gullin símu / ok und mánasal / miðjan festu*).

Völundarkviða (1–3), another Eddic poem which also dates to the late eleventh century, begins with stanzas invoking the encounter between Völundr and his brothers and the valkyries seated on the lake shore, "weaving precious linen" (*dýrt lín spunnu*), "to fulfil destiny" (*örlög drýgja*).

The Eddic poem *Reginismál* (14), dated to the second half of the thirteenth century, tells of the youth of Sigurðr *Fafnisbani*. Sigurðr was fostered by Reginn, the craftsman, who told him that he would be the most powerful prince under the sun, "whose threads of fate are spread over all lands" (*sia mvn ræsir / ricstr vnd solo, / þrymr vm öll lond / örlogsimo*). I will not belabour the obvious parallel between these three Eddic passages and the previously mentioned fragment from Plato's *Politeia* (X, 617c–620e) about the working of the Spindle of Necessity, spinning heavenly threads of fate around the earthly globe.

Composed no earlier than the late eleventh century, the poem *Darraðarljóð* (1–4) is preserved in the late thirteenth-century *Brennu-Njáls saga* (157) in a passage on the battle of Clontarf (1014) in which the Irish forces of King Brján faced the Norse armies of Sigtryggr *silkiskegg*, and numerous Icelanders fought on both sides. Icelanders cultivated the memory of this battle by crafting accounts of it

in the sagas, and in a poem called *Darraðarljóð*, which was overheard – in poetic convention – by a man called *Darraðr*, when he was peeking at the valkyries sitting at their looms, singing as they wove the fates of the warriors who were fighting in this battle, using their body parts and weapons as weaving tools and materials (human heads as weights, men's entrails as warp and woof, blood for dye, spears as heddle rods, swords as shuttles, arrows as pin beaters), and who thus influenced the course of the battle by the performance of weaving (spinning *the spear-grey fabric* = battle ranks, winding *the web of spears* = battle). In *Jómsvíkinga saga*, dating to ca. 1200, *Íngibjörg*, the wife of *Pálnir*, had a dream on their wedding night in which she was weaving a grey fabric on the loom when she noticed human heads being used as weights, with King *Haraldr Gormsson's* head among them (*Jómsvíkinga saga*, 15).

In the fourteenth-century *Kirjalax saga* (34) there is an account of a battle so bloody that fallen warriors and their weapons covered the entire battlefield, and the earth was no longer able to absorb blood so it flowed in streams. In that battle “the fates of many were turned, and those three who steer destiny had difficulty tearing the threads of life, so they started cutting them instead” (*Her umturna margz mannz aurlug, ok þær þriar, sem aurlaugunum styra, geta nu varla slitit svo skíott aurlaug þraduna. at eigi verði þær sem skiotazt at skera hann heldr*).

The fourteenth-century *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* (299–300) tells the story of *Rémundr*, who falls in love with a woman he encounters only in his dreams. Holding her effigy, he embarks on a mission to find her. He fights numerous battles, once receiving a wound which can be cured by the most beautiful of women, as says his dying enemy, *Eskupart*. *Rémundr* discovers her in India and recognises in her the woman from his dreams – *Elina*. The author writes that one of the battles *Rémundr* had fought before he found *Elina* had been so fierce that “the sisters had difficulties cutting the threads of destiny” (*Er nú orrostan svá ströng, at undrum gegnir, því at varla fá þær systir orlögspáðinn slitit svá skjótt, at eigi verði seinna at*).

The fifteenth-century *Skáld-Helga rímur* (III, 4) is a *rímur* poem about the poet *Helgi Þórðarson*, who tells of his life as a courtier and member of retinue of *Erikr Hákonsson* and *St Olaf*, his pilgrimage to Rome and emigration to Greenland, and finally his love for *Þórkatla*, which is made impossible by fate and human malice: “I believe rightfully that no hands / are capable of tearing down these bonds of fate, tied with such pains / of overpowering both old and new” (*Ek trúi røtt at eingi hönd / örlögs megi þau slíta bönd / er svá hafa verit með sorgum hnýtt, / sigrat bæði gamallt ok nýtt*).

These three texts, *Kirjalax saga*, *Rémundar saga keisarasonar*, and *Skáld-Helga rímur*, together with the afore-discussed *Adonias saga*, are undoubtedly intertextually related, as the related passages come close to a citation or an extended verbal allusion. Their definite source-texts are *Rómverja saga* and *Alexanders saga*, from which, among other reused hypotexts, they were bricolaged.

4. Magic of woven cloth

A belief in the magic of woven cloth among medieval Icelanders is revealed in the following examples of a magical banner leading to victory and a magical chastity-testing cloak.

The raven banner theme is most likely an indigenous Norse motif, as contemporary Latin and Old English sources attest to the use of the raven banner by Scandinavian warlords and kings during the Viking Age raids in Western Europe. Most prominently, *Encomium Emmae reginae* tells of King Canute the Great's magic banner, woven of white silk, on which a raven appears before a battle, as a harbinger of the victory or defeat to come. This motif appears in *Orkneyinga saga* (11), dated to ca. 1230, the thirteenth-century *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* (2), and *Brennu-Njáls saga* (156) from the same period. In these texts, a raven banner was believed to bring luck in battle to the army bearing it, but also death to him who carried it on the battlefield as a standard-bearer.

The motif of a magically woven chastity-testing cloak appears in *Möttuls saga*, *Samsons saga fagra* and *Skikkju rímur*. Their source-text, however, was a French Arthurian *fabliau* entitled *Le lai du cort mantel*. Undoubtedly, therefore, this was a foreign motif that was transferred to Icelandic literature. *Möttuls saga* (the earliest extant manuscript, AM 598 I β 4^o, dates from ca. 1300–1350, the text itself being dated to the first half of the thirteenth century, namely, the reign of Hákon Hákonarson, king of Norway in 1217–1263), one of the translated Old French literary works, tells of a magical mantle woven by an elf-woman which would reveal their infidelity if worn by women (the fabric would shrink and expose the body of an unfaithful woman). When it was sent as a gift to King Arthur, the ladies of his court had to undergo a chastity trial (IV). Written probably late in the fourteenth or early in the fifteenth century, *Samsons saga fagra*, a late-medieval Icelandic chivalric and legendary saga, put together from sources of indigenous and foreign provenance, uses the motif of a magic cloak, drawing most probably on *Möttuls saga*. The cloak was magically woven of fleece by elf-women, as a consequence of which it was invested with a chastity-testing application, but also, which was added in this text, it could expose a thief, if worn by one.

In this context I may introduce the example of *Gísla saga* (9), although I am aware that it is ambiguous. In *Gísla saga*, dated to 1225, the fates of the saga's protagonists are decided when their women are sewing clothing for them but chatting about other men they find attractive. When the talk was overheard by one of the husbands, the jealous men were obliged to avenge this dishonour, thus commencing a bloody chain of revenge. This interpretation of the passage, linking fate with sewing clothes, can only be triggered by a prejudiced reader's response to the text, a reader who is conscious of the notion of fateful spinning or weaving. But even then it only makes sense intertextually – as related to the texts designating fate as a thing spun

or woven. It may be a literary device used intentionally by the author to trigger that response in the saga's readers: from the fateful sewing and needlework, conducted by the women while having an inconsiderate conversation, there arises a blood feud. But this interpretation has to be based on the assumption that the notion of the weaving or spinning of fate was quite well known in early thirteenth-century Iceland, which is not certain, as the infrequency of this motif (or conceptual metaphor) in contemporary literature, shows.

5. *Herfjöturr* – Combat stress reaction as a feeling of being put in fetters

Although often connected with the notion of fate or fortune on a battlefield, the group of texts about battle-bonds or war-fetters (*herfjöturr*) represents a separate set, in my judgment, of linguistic realisations of a different conceptual metaphor than the weaving and spinning of fate. It is an example of embodied cognition (mental dissociation as motoric impairment), a metaphorical representation of combat stress reaction (CSR), psychological and physical exhaustion that makes a warrior unable to fight and even defend himself, as a feeling of being put in fetters – battle bonds (*herfjöturr*) fixed by supernatural beings (*valkyries*). It is most likely an indigenous Norse and pre-Christian notion, as it appears in the early Eddic and skaldic poetry, or even a universal one.⁹

Among the contemporary sagas (*samtíðarsögur*) there are two thirteenth-century sagas in which the protagonists fail because their physical movements were impeded by supernatural beings. In *Íslendinga saga* (144, 148) this happens to Guðmundr on the battlefield. Svarthöfði notices that Guðmundr is having difficulty fighting and keeps slowing down, so “he asks his companion whether battle-bonds were put on him” (*ok spurði Svarthöfði hvárt her-fjöturr væri á hónum*). In *Þórðar saga kakala* (25, 188) Þorleifr, the son of Gill Þorleifsson, attempts to escape from his foes but he is bound by the *herfjöturr* – his movements become limited and impaired, metaphorically entangled (*En þá kom á hann herfjöturr; og kunni hann ekki at ganga nema í móti þeim, ok þó seint*). In one of the later *Íslendingasögur*, composed around the turn of the fourteenth century, *Harðar saga* (XXXVI), the same condition befalls Hörðr in his last battle when he falls into a trap with his outlaw companions. He is struck by *herfjöturr* which makes him unable to shield himself from blows, and eventually falls under the enemy's axe. In *Sverris saga* (LXVIII), dated to the 1180s, when King Magnus leads an unexpected assault on Þrándheimr, the Birkibeinar hastily escape the town. Some of them board a boat only

⁹ *Herfjöturr* is also a *heiti* for valkyrie: *Grímnismál*, 36; *Gylfaginning*, 36 and *Nafnaþulur*, 26 in *Snorra Edda*.

to discover that it cannot be got underway, as they suddenly lack strength to move it. The Birkibeinar are convinced that battle bonds have been put on them so they are destined to die.

The importation of this metaphor into the Old Norse-Icelandic conceptual system from the Latin conceptual system is testified by the dissemination of its linguistic realisations in Old Norse-Icelandic texts in the chronological dimension, and the close affinity between the structure of the metaphor in Latin and in Old Norse-Icelandic, as attested by its linguistic realisations in both languages.

The close similarity between the structure of the metaphor in Latin and Old Norse-Icelandic points to its being a result of importation by means of cultural transfer initiated by the translations of Latin literature to Old Icelandic. Evidence can be found in closely corresponding terminology appropriated from the spinning and weaving trades, used to realise the metaphor in both languages:

Latin:

fatum, fata = fate

traho = to spin, draw out

texo = to weave

volvo = to roll

neo = to spin, weave

iungo = to tie, bind

rumpo = to tear, rend

resolvo = to unbind, untie

intercipio = to cut off

stamen, stamina = warp, thread

filum, fila = thread, string, cord

subtemen = woof, weft

manus = hand (*manu* = by hand)

pollex = thumb

Old Icelandic:

ørlög, örferð, örlygi, forlög, skop = fate

að greiða = to comb

að spinna = to spin

að vefa = to weave, plait, twist

að snúa, að snara = to twine, twist, wring

að skera = to cut

að slita = to snap, break, tear

þráðr = thread

síma = cord, rope, string

þáttr = a single strand of a rope

band = band, cord

vefr = woven cloth

The oldest texts including this metaphor are dated to the eleventh and twelfth centuries at the earliest: *Darraðarljóð*, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, *Völundarkviða*. Most of the texts come from the period between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries: *Rómverja saga* (ca. 1180s), *Jómsvíkinga saga* (ca. 1200), *Gísla saga* (ca. 1225), *Orkneyinga saga* (ca. 1230), *Alexanders saga* (mid-13th c.), *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*

(13th c.), *Reginismál* (13th c.), *Brennu-Njáls saga* (13th c.), *Sturlunga saga* (1300), *Harðar saga* (13th/14th c.), *Adonias saga* (14th c.), *Kirjalax saga* (14th c.), *Skáld-Helga rímur* (15th c.). As the metaphor does not occur in the oldest preserved vernacular Icelandic texts, especially in skaldic poetry and the earliest Eddic poetry, it can be considered likely that its importation is the result of early Latin influences on the Old Icelandic writings of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, as well as later ones, which had an effect on the oral poetry during its written codification in Icelandic monasteries, or when it was transmitted during the copying of the manuscripts by the introduction of interpolations as a consequence of the linguistic impact of Latin-based education of the scribes and the popularisation of the metaphor between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries.

The fact that the metaphor of human FATE as a FABRIC WOVEN OR THREAD spun by supernatural beings appears most often in texts of rather late origin, some of the earliest of which are largely derived from foreign traditions (*Rómverja saga*, *Alexanders saga*), could suggest that it was a conceptual borrowing from Latin into Old Norse, as the reception of their source-texts (*Bellum civile* by Lucan, *Alexandreis* of Walter of Châtillon) in Iceland occurred earlier. And I think this change in the conceptualisation of FATE in Old Icelandic written texts was mediated by new metaphors imported into medieval Icelandic culture in the form both of original texts, mainly Latin, and of translated texts.

This seems likely especially as at the same time in Iceland, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, there were established the first centres for scholarly study and research, education and literary production, namely schools, libraries and scriptoria: the first bishoprics in Iceland were founded at Skálholt (1056) and Hólar (1106), as were the first Benedictine and Augustinian monasteries – in Þingeyrar (1133), Þykkvibær (1133), Munkaþverá (1155), Flatey-Helgafell (1172) and Kirkjubær (1186) – while the first cathedral and monastic schools were established at Skálholt as early as 1056 and at Hólar in 1106. In these schools, works by Lucan and Sallust were prominent in the Latin *curriculum*, which also included Virgil and Ovid, and possibly Horace.

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