

Soundboxes of the Divine: Hœnir, Sencha, Gwalchmai

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In a recent study entitled "Divine Names, Myths and Etymologies in the Germanic World", Edgar C. Polomé has reviewed a number of largely Norse theonyms and the widely divergent explanations for these names and functions of the divine figures that have been constructed on the frequently narrow base of etymological speculation. After comment on *Ingunar-Freyr*, *Mardöll* (a name of Freyja), *Gymir* (a giant), *Jólfr* and *Jólfrúðr* (epithets of Óðinn), and the *matres* or *matronae*, he offers the following cautionary summary: "Before venturing any hypothesis as to the origin of a divine name, one has to first study the whole FILE: texts, monuments, iconography, geographic distribution, archaeological evidence of the cult, socio-cultural context, etc." (456). But he surely shares the frustration of other scholars in the field over the frequent absence of evidence from several of these categories. He then turns to a study of the Norse deity Hœnir, with which he closes his article.

After passing in review most of the sparse textual evidence for Hœnir, drawn from *Völuspá* and Snorri's various writings (see *infra*), he schematically presents the etymological options that have been elaborated in earlier studies: a) derivations from bird names, b) reference to intellectual acumen, c) identification with Óðinn, d) interpretation as an atmospheric god, and e) epithets relating to his attributes, e.g., power, protection. He concludes: "Accordingly, none of the currently proposed etymologies accounts for Hœnir's functions, and none can therefore be considered as adequate. For the time being, the Old Norse divine name Hœnir remains, actually, without etymology" (459).

The great virtue of such an article is to relevel the playing field and provide a vantage point on the centre stripe from which to start fresh play. Given that our meagre evidence for Hœnir is exclusively textual, it might be in the spirit if not the letter of Polomé's insistence on the complete file to seize on the category of geography, not to look for distribution, for which we have no encouragement, but for what we

may provisionally call cultural isoglosses.

The Old Irish Ulster cycle of epic tales, so profitably summarized in Rudolf Thurneysen's *Die irische Helden- und Königsage*, features a considerable number of recurrent major figures: King Conchobar, the paramount hero Cú Chulainn, his foster-father Fergus mac Roích, the warriors Conall Cernach and Lóegaire Búadach, the venom-tongued Bricriu, but also an even greater number of incidental figures, who nonetheless maintain distinct and consistent profiles throughout the tales. One of these is a close companion of Conchobar, the well-spoken Sencha mac Ailella, an Irish Nestor figure. In *Compert Con Culainn* (*The Conception of Cú Chulainn*, 7f.) he is selected with other members and functionaries of the royal court as foster-father to the infant Sétanta, Conchobar's nephew (incestuously conceived son in another tradition), later to be renamed Cú Chulainn. Blai, the hospitaller, will teach him hospitality, Fergus, martial valor, Amergin, poetry. In his bride-winning tale, *Tochmarc Emire* (*The Wooing of Emer*), Cú Chulainn summarizes the contribution of Sencha as follows:

Fair-speeched Sencha has taught me, so that I am strong, wise, swift, deft. I am prudent in judgment, my memory is good. Before wise men, I make answer to many; I give heed to their arguments. I direct the judgments of all the men of Ulster, and through the training of Sencha, my decisions are unalterable (29).

In one of the troops that are passed in review in *Táin bó Cúalnge* (*The Cattle-raid of Cooley*, ll. 3623f.), Sencha is seated before the king, a single other prominent warrior beside him. Epithets attached to Sencha underscore his speaking abilities; frequently called *erlabraid* 'eloquent', his voice is slow and sonorous. He is depicted as aged, with white hair and clothing. In the *Táin*, it is Sencha who advises the Ulster host to wait in the valley until sun-up, before the final attack on the enemy; elsewhere, too, Sencha has a counselling role. His main function, however, is mediation, which takes a number of forms: 1) negotiation, as Conchobar's emissary to secure Cú Chulainn's temporary surrender of his kingdom, or the king's representative receiving delegations (*Mesca Ulad: The Intoxication of the Ulstermen*), 2) arbitration, referring Cú Chulainn and two other warriors contending for the Champion's Portion to Ailill for a judgment on their bravery, or encouraging their wives to engage in a war of words to settle precedence at court, rather than tussling (both in *Fled Bricrend: The Feast of Bricriu*), and 3) pacification, either waving his branch of peace (*cráeb sída*) to quieten

the contentious Ulster warriors, quarrelling and scrapping among themselves (*Mesca Ulad*, *Fled Bricrend*, *Táin bó Cúalnge*) or identifying an approaching host as friendly (*Cath Ruis na Ríg: The Battle of Ruis na Ríg*). There is some scant evidence to suggest that the Sencha of the Ulster cycle may have had divine antecedents. Cú Ruí describes him as a good speaker among mortal men and peacemaker among the Ulstermen, a man of the world from sun to sun, one who can make peace with three fair words (*Mesca Ulad*, ll. 756ff.). In *Fled Bricrend* he is even called *día talmaide* (ll. 8209f.), a 'god on earth', because of his compelling eloquence.

Thurneysen (72) called Sencha one of the court poets (*filid*), but this must be seen as an introductory reference in passing rather than a narrow categorization. Elsewhere Sencha is identified among the *áes dána* 'people of art' (*Cath Ruis na Ríg*), although a specific function such as druid, judge, poet is never formally ascribed. Had an early Irish public been asked to identify Sencha in stricter terms, they might well have assumed that it was the common term *sencha(e)* 'historian', here archetypically raised to the status of a personal name. Related terms were the older form *senchaid* 'custodian of tradition, historian', *senchas*, *senchus* 'history', and derivative verb forms. The semantic core here is *sen* 'old' (cf. Lat. *senex*). But, as we have seen, Sencha, while an eloquent speaker, is never presented as speaking of history or traditional lore.

It then seems legitimate to question whether the name and function might not have originated in another conceptual field. It is now generally believed that the responsibilities of poet, judge, and historian were over time split off from the central function of druid, as Irish courts grew in size and complexity, perhaps in proportion to their material prosperity. If Sencha's origins are then to be sought in the druid's multi-faceted role, one might entertain the speculation that the semantic core of the name is not *sen* 'old' but *sén* 'sign, omen, portent; incantation, charm; favorable sign' (cf. Welsh *swyn* 'charm, sign', Cornish *sona* 'bless'; Lewis and Pedersen, 57; Vendryes, s. v. *sén*). **Séncha* would then have been an augur or seer, and the Irish texts give frequent examples of the druid as prophet, as in *Longes mac nUislenn (The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu)*, where it is Sencha who calms the Ulstermen, startled when Derdriu cries out in her mother's womb, but the druid Cathbad who gives the fateful prophecy. But OIr. *sén*, whatever its subsequent semantic downgrading or popularization to 'charm', originated as a loan word from the Latin of the Christian

church (*signum*) and it must be judged highly unlikely that such a derivative would become attached to a conventional figure of the Ulster cycle of texts, especially one thought to display affinities with a non-Christian conception of the divine.

Early Irish also had a verb *sennid* (*DIL: seinnid*) ‘sounds, plays (an instrument)’, verbal noun *senim* ‘sounding, sound, note’, deriving from the I-E root **suen-* (cf. Lat. *sonare*, Skt. *svánati* ‘sounds’, OE *swinn* and OIr. *séis* ‘music’, the latter from **suens-*, ON *svanr* ‘[male] swan’, Eng. *swan* [Pokorny, 1046; Mann, 1347]; on the belief that the bird sang only before death, see *infra*). A derivative from this source accords extremely well with the sonorous quality of Sencha’s voice. As a figure branching off from the druid’s, Sencha did not carry the function of foretelling the future with him but, with a Janus-like twist, bore a name perhaps resonating with the past, while making, in the contingent present, performative utterances in the interests of peace with external forces and the resolution of contention within the Ulster community. The Irish tradition is noteworthy for the many instances of artistic creation illustrated in human terms as the transformation from blindness to sight, from ugliness to beauty, and, of interest in this context, from dumbness to speech, e.g., the judge Morann (Ford). Here, we would do well to recognize an Old Testament precedent in Moses’ lack of eloquence and God’s reference to the dumb, deaf and blind to whom he alone grants the necessary faculties (Exodus 4:10ff.). In the Irish tradition the artist is the medium of the divine Logos. In synchronic terms, speech must stand in functional opposition to silence, and the question of whether or not to speak will recur in our consideration of the Norse evidence. Before leaving Sencha it is worth noting in how sharp contrast he stands to Bricriu Venom-Tongue, whose epithet is also speech-related and whose purpose it is to promote strife and contention. In this he often becomes an unwilling victim, e.g., falling from his bower in *Fled Bricrend*, when it collapses over the hall he had specially constructed in order to invite the Ulstermen, spy on them, and create the preconditions for a debilitating internal struggle over precedence and rank.

Norse Loki, he too a builder of halls, comes readily to mind, and with this we return to Hœnir. Hœnir, along with Loki, is a frequent travelling companion of Óðinn (stories of the theft of Iðunn’s apples and the otter and his human family). In this regard, Loki is called in skaldic verse ‘the trier of Hœnir’s mind’ and ‘Hœnir’s friend’, although perhaps no great emphasis should be put on amity; companion,

colleague, or functional opposite may better catch the distinction. He also figures at one remove from Loki in the listing of the twelve major Norse gods at the beginning of Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál*, with Forseti, the settler of disputes, perhaps strategically placed between them. Other descriptors listed by Snorri are 'Óðinn's table companion, comrade, confidant' plus the more enigmatic 'swift Ás', 'longfoot' and *aurkonungr* 'mud king' (*Skáldskaparmál*, par. 23). In this listing, too, Hænir is followed by Loki. Proximity to Óðinn is also apparent in *Völuspá's* version of the creation myth, where the first humans Askr and Embla are given breath by Óðinn, *óðr* by Hænir, and hair and fair countenance by Lóðurr. *Óðr* is a debated word in this context, the issue complicated by a substitution in Snorri's prose retelling, which has as the second gifts *vit ok hræring* ("consciousness and movement", Faulkes, 13). *Óðr* is thought to lie behind the theonym *Óðinn*, and is also used of rage and fury. When the malevolent sons of the Hebridean sorcerer Kotkell in *Laxdæla saga* learn that a court charge is being made concerning their thieving, they are described as follows: *þeir bræðir urðu óðir við þetta* "the brothers became furious at this" (Ch. 35), an economical linking of the supreme divinity, magic and emotional arousal. *Óðr* in the creation story has been variously translated as "soul" (Ström), "reason" (Schach, 92), *pensée réfléchie* (Dumézil, 223ff.). The conclusions, however tentative, towards which my inquiry directs me encourage support for Polomé's renderings: 'inspired cerebral activity/thought'.

This brings us to the knotty problem of Hænir's role in the peace treaty between the Æsir and Vanir. As hostages, the latter send Njorðr, the former the handsome Hænir accompanied by the wise Mímir. But Hænir, while well received among the Vanir, is indecisive when not supported by Mímir. It then seems legitimate, as Polomé has done, to see Hænir as a mouthpiece, through which wisdom, originating elsewhere in the suprahuman world, is communicated. This accords well with the earlier proposed identification of *óðr* as divinely inspired thought, still at the potential stage preceding speech and communication. Were the Æsir acting in good faith? Ethics in Ásgarðr, we know, was not a strong point. The Vanir conclude that the Æsir intended to dupe them through a hostage that appeared to offer more than he was ready to deliver, a ruse that they saw through and countered by cutting off Mímir's head. The head is eventually appropriated by Óðinn to provide prophetic wisdom.

Hænir has been called the 'silent' god and 'most timid' (*Sögubrot*),

but 'reticent' may better capture his nature, since we are here faced not with speechlessness but the unrealized potential for speech, perhaps the inspired thought, but not the word. As a hostage, Hœnir represents potency, power contained. But when Hœnir does speak, we may assume these to be performative utterances; once communicated, inspired thought modifies and determines external reality. In Gimlé, after the apocalypse of Ragnarøk has cleared the way for a better world, Hœnir's responsibility will be divinatory practises, aided by his magic wand. Here, in a new age of innocence, one might expect Hœnir to be less reticent.

At best, the early Irish *Sencha* can but offer interesting points of reference for our closer scrutiny of Norse Hœnir, unless we have some clinching piece of evidence that would tip the balance in favor of the identification of a clear-cut cultural isogloss. Certainly, the names as we know them do not, from the phonological vantage point, provide much encouragement. But if *Sencha* is related to *sennid* 'sounds', we might at a minimum explore Hœnir for some similarity. Most of the earlier proposed etymologies offer no contact with this conception, but one, at a certain remove, does. Point (a) in Polomé's concluding summary of etymological options reads as follows:

Derivations from birds' names: Grk *κύκνος* 'swan' as well as the Germanic name of the rooster have been considered. In the first case, it would represent Gmc **huhnjaz*, derived from IE **kukno-*, whose original meaning would be 'shining, white'. In the second case, it would reflect Gmc **hōnisnō* and be connected with ON *hani* 'rooster', *hæna* 'hen' (from Gmc **hōnjōn*), which are, furthermore, related to Lat *cicōnia* 'stork'. Would he, accordingly, be a 'rooster god'? His affinity with certain birds does not seem sufficiently well-established to warrant such an etymology, which would, anyhow, be fairly difficult to reconcile with his essential function as we have defined it. (458)

For Lat. *cicōnia* 'stork', Pokorny (525) entertains a root reflective not of color but of song: **kan-*. Familiar derivatives are Lat. *cano* 'sing' but also 'prophecy' and *carmen* 'song, incantation' < **canmen* (cf. Welsh *gogoniant* 'fame'). If the notion of sacred speech informs the Hœnir figure, interference from the chromatic quarter, i.e., IE **kukno-* 'shining', and avian associations may have subsequently been added, as the contours of the divine figure sharpened (cf. the association of white hair and clothing with *Sencha*). Noting the Swedish expression *odensvala* 'Óðinn's swallow' for the stork, it is of interest that the family of ciconiiforms, to which the stork, heron and bittern belong, are distinctive in their vocalization. Storks are rather silent, at most

croaking or grunting, or clapping their mandibles; herons emit harsh cries; bitterns boom over long distances. Such characteristics might well be seen as the natural world's equivalent to the often enigmatic message of prophecy or the heightened emotion that accompanied communication with the divine. Germanic terms for the swan (< I-E **suen-*), believed silent until on the point of death, also reflect this pairing of silence and heightened utterance. Another lexical complex of interest in this context is ON *galdr* 'sacred incantation', the metrical term *galdralag* 'incantation metre', characterized by parallelism and limited lexical variation in pairs of lines (*Háttatal*, 101), and the verb *gala* 'sing, chant', but also 'crow (of a cock)'. Here we are not too far from some of the roles played by Hænir, the epithets used of him, or the faculty of *óðr*, divinely inspired thought, realizable in speech as counsel, admonition, prophecy. *Galdr* and *óðr* might be seen as the two paths, upwards and downwards, of communication between the human and the divine. The larger context for these considerations is the widespread practise of ornithomancy or prediction of future events on the basis of birds' flight (Ross).

One further note. ON *aurr* 'wet clay', whence Hænir's epithet *aurkonungr*, seems to refer to the bogs and marshes of the natural environment, rather than the mud of the farmyard. Is it legitimate to see in *aurr* a meeting of earth and water, as one may, in the heron and stork, see a meeting of air, earth and water? At these liminal but also nodal points such wading birds may symbolize mediation between the human and the divine, perhaps active at equivalent points, not spatial but temporal, in the life of man, most significantly before death (see Mallory, 232; of the birds here considered, only the crane figures in his putative Proto-Indo-European avian lexicon, as *ger*). In addition to the aquatic bird-maidens of Irish tradition and the god Lug's magically endowed crane-bag, one notes the association of herons with longevity and communication, a potent enough symbol to have been appropriated for Christian ecclesiastical purposes, e.g., heron motifs in the Colum Gille stories (Nagy).

If the points of contact between Sencha and Hænir are judged more than fortuitous, one is encouraged to consider briefly one more 'file' from medieval European legendary history, that of the Welsh warrior Gwalchmai, the antecedent of the better known Gauvain/Gawain of Arthurian romance. The most archaic body of evidence for Gwalchmai is found in the Welsh *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* (*Triads of the Island of Britain*). In Triad 4, Gwalchmai is called one of the three

well-endowed men of Britain. *Deifnyawc* 'important, well-endowed, wealthy, substantial' is related to *defnydd* 'material, substance' and has as an Irish cognate *damnae* used of individuals who are qualified to fill a specific role, e.g., *rigdamnae* 'makings of a king'. Information on Gwalchmai's role is found in triad 75, devoted to the three men most courteous to strangers and guests. As well as Gwalchmai, it lists Cadrieith, whose name can be interpreted as 'Fine-Speech'. Gwalchmai, identified in other legendary lore as Arthur's sister's son, is given the epithet *dafod aur* 'of the golden tongue'. A late medieval text names him among three golden-tongued heroes, claiming that all lords listened to them and they obtained their every request (*Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, Appendix IV). In *Culhwch ac Olwen* (15) it is stated that Gwalchmai never returned home with his mission unaccomplished. In the Welsh romances Gwalchmai is seen resolving contentions between Arthur and his knights, more through conciliatory speech than through force of arms. Despite the later development of the Gawain figure, the earliest conception of Arthur's nephew and his function then seems very close to that of the well-spoken peace-maker Sencha at Conchobar's court. We may also note the relational parallels in the three bodies of evidence: supreme god and secondary god, king and courtier-confidant, kingly uncle and warrior nephew (of the important sister's son kind).

In the name *Gwalchmai* commentators have seen Welsh *gwalch* 'hawk', often used of heroes, but the second element has proved troublesome. Bromwich reviewed the evidence for seeing a reference to the month of May or to a plain (-*ma*), but called attention to the inexplicable lack of lenition of the initial consonant of the second element. Rowlands proposed a derivation from a Welsh cognate of Irish *smech* 'chin' with a meaning such as 'Hawk-Beak'. As in the above proposal for Hœnir, this interpretation would yield both avian and vocal associations, if, on the basis of other references to eloquence, we are to see in 'beak' a suggestion of the bird's cry rather than predatory habits. More recently, Jenkins convincingly argues that *gwalch* was used of the goshawk, not the falcon, thus offering a tenuous connection to the aquatic birds considered above. The etymology of *gwalch* is no less problematic than that of other terms here under review. Jenkins explores three options: a derivation from I-E **uel-* 'see' (Pokorny's sense 1) or 'rip, rob' (Pokorny's sense 8), and **ul-q** dissimilated to **ul-k-*. Related, then, to OIr. *olc* 'bad', the general meaning in this last derivation would be 'predator'. It would, however,

be hazardous to bring any of the evidence for the role of Gwalchmai or prophetic avian spokesmen to bear on this question.

The function of similes and analogies is to bring us with a clearer eye and wider frame of reference back to our original object of concern. No greater role for the Irish Sencha or Welsh Gwalchmai is claimed in this note, although the evidence for the cultural isogloss earlier alluded to is more than slight. OIr. *sennid* 'sounds' derives from a root distinct from, but perhaps not semantically unrelated to, I-E **kan-* 'sing, chant (prophesy?)'. But the functional similarities between Sencha and Hænir and degree of semantic consonance in roots proposed for the names, while suggestive, do not warrant the assumption of an Indo-European god of communication and mediation. The more modest goal of this exercise has been to renew etymological speculation on the theonym *Hænir* with a fresh look at one of the options so profitably reviewed by Polomé.

Having reviewed the slanderer and promoter of dissension, and the truth-speaker and peace-maker, one may in closing call attention to yet another spokesman function in the early medieval European world, whom we might call the interpellator. His 'calling out' function is activated when the outsider crosses the societal boundary, as the watchman on the territorial border (Connall Cernach in Cú Chulainn's *Macgnímratha* [*Boyhood Deeds*], the Danish coastguard in *Beowulf*), doorkeeper to the royal banquet hall (Kei in *Culhwch ac Olwen*), or courtier before the king's dais (Unferþ in *Beowulf*). In the world of the epic, this confrontation, as well as formally preceding the incorporation of new potency in the society, often provides the occasion for the verbal self-validation of the hero, the words about past deeds that will commit him to future deeds, according to the dictates and dynamic of lasting honour. (Connall Cernach in Cú Chulainn's *Macgnímratha* [*Boyhood Deeds*], .

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Apollo the Wolf-god

Daniel E. Gershenson

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The Use of Family Names in the Study of Human Migration During the Last Two Centuries

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Family names listed in telephone book were used to trace the regional origins of Italians who emigrated to Toronto, Canada. To date, only three regions (Tuscany, Abruzzi, and Campania) have been considered. This study indicates that the greatest flow of migration to Toronto has come from Campania. This approach appears to be capable of providing more detailed data concerning immigration than is customarily found.

A characteristic of human populations is the continual experimentation with and invasion of new ecological niches. This impetus towards territorial exploration, together with an adaptability to different human environments, characterizes the migrations of many populations in both prehistoric and historic times. Economic needs customarily, though not always, supply the impetus. But while many anthropologists like to classify whole populations as either sedentary or migrant, it is often only the younger males and females, and sometimes only the young males, who migrate. The success of migration depends not only on the genetic adaptability of the migrant population to its new ecological niche but also to the interaction between the migrating and the indigenous population; the examples of the Romans and of the Vikings represent well known significant conflicts and cultural adaptations which migration can cause.

Migrations often lead to varying degrees of conflict between the incoming and native populations due to cultural differences which are always exacerbated by presumptions of superiority by both groups, in addition to competition for local resources in the struggle for survival. In studying migration it is not enough to chronicle the population movements themselves; it is also important to consider the numbers of people involved, and their age, sex, and social characteristics.

The reconstruction of historical events requires quantitative and qualitative evaluation to be useful and meaningful. Among human migrations to different territories, those from Europe to America are