

Seiðr, seið, Sol-Iss-Purs and Nordic shamanism

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This article is composed of two very different parts.

The first part is personal, and it exposes my practice of seiðr, by comparing it several times to the one coming from Diana Paxson's group and in Jordsvin's papers. I thus recommend to read at first these papers before mine. The second part explains and supports my own practice of seiðr, but the facts it contains are independent of any belief. It is subdivided in two sections. The first is a rather scholarly description of the linguistic problems involved with the word seiðr in Old Norse, the ancient Norwegian, (and Icelandic, Danish, Swedish) language, used in the sagas and the Eddic and Skaldic poems. The second is an annotated presentation of the runic inscriptions referring or alluding to seiðr.

On seiðs practice

I was not fortunate enough to meet someone like Diana Paxson, nor a group of persons devoted to reconstruct such a seiðs practice that might reconcile the scarce written tradition available to us, and the present day ethical choices. Even though I know nothing of group seiðs practice, I do feel strongly my belonging to the 'seiðfolk', as Jordsvin calls them. I thus worked the seiðr in isolation but, inversely, I had, over the years, the luck to practice several different approaches to 'non Nordic' shamanism in various settings. I therefore use the so-called classical shamanic techniques to deal with some of the problems instead of using systematically seiðr. For instance, both American Indian and Siberian shamanisms include the re-gathering of lost soul parts, the cutting of abusive soul links, different kinds of spiritual counseling, and the hard psychopomp work, that is, convincing the souls of the dead ones to accept the loss of life and helping them to join the realm of the Dead. I followed the teachings of many master shamans and the most influential one has been Sandra Ingerman. I strongly suggest the reading of

[Sandra Ingerman, Soul Retrieval : Mending the Fragmented Self, Harper San Francisco, 1991].

It follows that, in the surface, I look like some Heathens who use the word seiðr for a kind of active magic, mostly of an aggressive and destructive type, but this is due to no theory of mine. It simply follows from some random choices that happened during my life. Anyhow, as I shall explain now, I do not believe that it is possible to oppose a nice shamanism to a harmful seiðr. More generally, I strongly oppose the concepts of 'black magic' and a 'white magic': obviously people have varied social and ethical positions, but magic is of one unique brand. My shiatsu master liked to say that there is a feature, strongly common to the shiatsu healer and the samurai, which is that both have to single out, at first sight, the weakest point of the person standing in front of them. This point shows where Death starts worming its way in this person. Both move fast their hand towards this weakest point. The samurai does it to increase Death's speed in his

opponent, the shiatsu healer does it to reduce this speed in the patron. Any society produces its own shiatsu healers, and its own samurais. We are only able to try, as much as our social ranking allows us to do so, to choose which class we wish to belong to.

Since I have always been interested in understanding the why and the how of illness, I practice seiðr mainly as a healing technique. It seems to me however obvious that the knowledge used for healing could be very easily used also for the sickening, almost in the same way. We shall now analyze the example of shiatsu, which is further from magic than seiðr, thus easier to tell in words. In principle, the work of a shiatsu healer is finding out which parts of the sick body possess some excess of energy (excess of ki, we call jitsu) and which ones lack energy (lack of ki, called kyo). An optimistic view of reality could lead some persons to believe that kyo and jitsu should have a natural tendency to balance themselves. This is partly true in the healthy body, but the sickness is nothing but an evidence that the imbalance is fixed and now stable in the sick body. The hard part of the healer's work is to fight this acquired tendency of the sick person. We observe sometimes the contrary among the beginners who confuse jitsu and hard-under-the-hand, and kyo and soft-under-the-hand. Fortunately, they are usually also very bad at balancing the energies and their treatment is harmless, if useless. I know that what I will now say, may cause stomach heaving to shiatsu healers who read this, since we are so intensely trained towards fighting illness. Nevertheless, that it is a beginner's mistake, hints strongly at the possibility it is easier to perform than the normal healing treatment. I cannot witness directly the truth of my hypothesis since I never tried to practice this harmful shiatsu, but I am quite convinced that a well-trained shiatsu healer, moved by hate or greed, could very well reinforce the imbalance of ki causing the sickness, thus sickening rather than healing the patient.

Similarly but in a still more irrational way, seiðr tries to reenact a balance that has been destroyed for any number of reasons. A destructive magician (called an adept of 'black magic') must observe the potential victim, spot the victim's weakest point and push forward in the same direction as the forces creating this weakness. The sagas offer us description of harmful magical behaviors that follow exactly the pattern I just described. There are also obvious cases of constructive magicians ('white magic' adepts) who oppose the irrational forces that created weakness in their patron, they are seldom described since they are not very interesting in a story.

There will always exist people that find it more interesting to destroy than to build, but all of them use de same magic which, as the natural forces and human knowledge, is neither good nor bad, but exactly neutral.

When starting to learn how to deal with illness, I was able to choose my side, which is not the samurai's one. I am therefore politically correct, but I find it ridiculous to be too proud of it. There have been 'alrunae' who used to practice harmful magic, probably using the runes in view of their name, within the Gothic armies, until the 3rd-4th centuries AD. They played the role of samurai magicians in order to destroy the enemy, such was the society they lived into, and they might have not been so free to choose their way. I absolutely refuse to call them 'wicked' and 'witches', seeing them rather as my sisters, even if those that enjoyed their position do not look very attractive to me. This kind of fighters using magic must have been used quite late in our era since the Inquisition

castigated them so much.

[Jordanes, Getica, around 550 AD] and [Kramer et Sprenger, Malleus Maleficarum, 1486]

As a side remark, I find it anyhow ridiculous to look for social power through magical means: If you are obsessed by power, try banker or industrialist, these roles are much more efficient for this purpose!

It happens nevertheless that the magicians' role becomes hard to agree with when they bear heavy social responsibility, as was the rule in ancient societies. For instance, we find witnessing of Siberian shamans who 'fly away' to 'steal the soul' of person they judge of secondary importance, in order to 'grant' it to their patron who recovers health in this way. This behavior is also attested quite late by Inquisition reports, as for instance Pierre de Lancre who says:

"As if we heal by the means of these stupidities, this is temporary: & if (it happens) by chance (then) the sickness removed by a witch & (will be) given to someone else of higher stature & and whose death is hundred times more important than the first one whom the illness was removed from."¹¹

[Tableau de l'inconstance des mauvais anges et démons, par Pierre de Lancre à Paris chez Nicolas Buon, 1613]

The shamans of the past would hold social roles much different from today shamans. The role of deciding, in some specific cases, who is going to live or die is now in the hands of the medical doctors who can decide to stop intensive care of a no-hope patient in case it would save another one. It is obvious that Inquisition, among other things, managed to convince its 'witches' that they no more held such a responsibility.

Working with such an active seiðr has yet other consequences on the health of the practitioner, but I strongly dislike to speak of this problem except among fellow seiðfolk. Just recall that those working with the ki energy are well-known for catching cancer easily, even before this sickness became so popular due to pollution. For instance, the 'old witches' have always been shown with a wart covered face: Do not believe this was nothing but a lie to debase them.

Nordic texts relative to seiðr

In Old Norse, a seeress using seiðr to perform her foreseeing is called a völva. Many texts speak of the völva, for example Vatnsdæla saga reports that during a feast

"[the hosts] prepared a seiðr in the old heathen fashion, so that men could examine what the fates had in store for them. A Lapp völva was amongst those present. ... The Lapp woman, splendidly attired, sat at the high seat. Men left their benches and went forward to ask about their destinies. For each of them she predicted that which eventually came to pass ..."

[Old Norse web version available at <http://www.snerpa.is/net/isl/isl.htm>.

English translation : either mine or from The complete sagas of Icelanders, Viðar Hreinsson (Ed.), Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997]

In some cases, the shamaness is lying on a special scaffolding and goes in a trance induced by a special song . We find an example of that in Eiríks saga rauða ('saga of Erik the Red'). The völva asked for a warlock song sung by ladies of the company before she could start her art :

“Bað hún fá sér konur þær sem kynnu fræði (fræði = traditional knowledge often tainted with magic), það er þyrfti til seiðinn að fremja og Varðlokur heita. En þær konur fundust eigi.”

“She asked for women who knew the traditional knowledge required for carrying out seiðr, which is called guardian-spirit ('ward') songs. But such women were not to be found.”

The complete sagas of Icelanders adds the footnote : “Ward songs (varðlokkur) were chants likely intended to attract the spirits to the sorceress, who was enclosed in a ring of wards as described below.” Anyhow, varðlokur is translated as it is here in

[Cleasby-Vigfusson, An Icelandic-English Dictionary, 1962 edition].

The saga of Erik the Red stresses later that very good results were obtained (i.e., the spirit wards agreed to come) because the only woman who knew these ward-songs sung them particularly well.

These ward-songs are obviously forgotten now, and I consider that one of the duties of the seiðfolk is to attempt finding them again. I presently try to check some music collected at the end of the 18th century by J. Acerbi.

[Joseph Acerbi, Travels through Sweden, Finland, and Lapland to the North Cape in the years 1798 and 1799, J. Mawman, London, 1802]

This explains why I never use a drum to practice seiðr, and that I prefer song to drum, even in the more traditional shamanism.

Note however that the saga stresses that women only are aware of this traditional knowledge, and that confirms that Diana Paxson was right to recreate seiðr with a group of women. This is why I am simply documenting the ward-songs, and I will have to ask confirmation from women to help me, as I do always in my seiðs practice.

Another example shows that Germanic shamans used ‘soft’ techniques to perform their journeys. It is provided by Orkneyinga saga ('The history of the earls of Orkney'). One of the saga characters consults a seer who declares :

“These believers [the Christians] behave in a very strange way, depriving themselves of food and sleep so as to be informed about that which they desire to know; despite all their efforts, the higher the stakes are, the less they find. People like me do not bother with self-punishment, and are able to easily find what their friends want to know.”

Finally, and as a second example of a male performing seiðr, Gísla saga Súrssonar ('Gisli Sursson's saga') reports a very powerful sorcerer, Thorgrim the Nose. In this saga, 'sorcerer' is actually seiðskratti, where skratti refers to the strange noise made by the performer of the seiðr. It reads classically :

Thorgrim the Nose performs the seiðr, prepares himself as usual, builds a scaffold and devotes himself to his sorcery, with all its spells and evil-doings.

The original Old Norse says that Thorgrim the Nose prepared his seiðr "með allri ergi ok skelmiskap." While skelmiskap means indeed 'devilry' or 'evil-doing', ergi features a man who has been buggered, so that it seems that Thorgrim the Nose received sodomy while preparing his seiðr.

We find another example of a seiðr performed by Lapp shamans who foresee correctly but they are unable to bring back an object, as they had been asked to do. They do try to modify physical reality but fail in this task. Many more information will be found in the excellent paper of H. R. Ellis Davidson : "Hostile Magic in the Icelandic Sagas," that gives many examples of this kind of behavior.

[published in : The Witch in History Venetia Newall (Ed.) Barnes & Noble, NY 1996].

Passiveness, homosexuality, and seiðs practice

Why seiðs practice would become an insult or a curse for the medieval people of Northern countries is a challenging question we shall examine now. As striking examples of this hate for seiðr, the warden of a grave is this formula, a seemingly dreadful one : "Let him practice seiðr who will desecrate this grave !" We will also report of a runic inscription in which the 'wolf', fought by the inscription, is cursed by a "Enjoy seiðs practice !"

Even the highest of the Nordic Gods, Óðinn (Odin), is said to have been buggered because he participated in a shamanic séance. Loki, in the Lokasenna says to Óðinn:

« You practiced magic in Samsey

...
[\[2\]](#)

And, there, you received sodomy. »

The word used by Loki is argr (written in runes as arageu on the runic inscriptions of the Stentoften and Björketorp standing stones we shall study later), an adjective form of ergi. It qualifies either a man who has been buggered or who is sexually impotent. Óðinn is better known for his lechery with women than anything else, thus Loki can accuse him nor to be sexually impotent nor homosexual. That Loki accuses him to be argr is then better understood if sodomy is part of the seiðr séance, and Óðinn receives this treatment as a kind of accident, necessary to practice seiðr.

This and the story of Thorgrim the Nose leads us to suppose that the preparation of the seiðr séance included a buggering of the sorcerer. It is obviously possible that the words used in these texts had been said in a figurative mode as the translators do, who tend to

use ‘extreme vice’ or other imprecise ways of speaking. However, the authors had a very large pool of insults at their disposal, and I cannot believe that they chose to use ergi without a very good reason. This help also to understand an often cited sentence of Ynglinga saga (‘Prose Edda’). After saying that the Goddess Freya^[31] taught seiðr to the Aesir, the saga states :

“Seiðr, when perfectly performed, is followed by such a tendency to sexual impotence (or homosexuality) that they say it is shameful for a man to practice it. It was taught by the priestesses.”

It is well-known that the Viking society considered passive homosexuality as an extreme shame. For instance, slaves were systematically, so it seems, submitted to this mistreatment, simply to stress their ‘non-human’ status, and the insult of ergi was an offence that no wergild could buy back^[41]. All this makes obvious the reason why seiðr was such a shame in the Viking society. Saying to a man “You practiced seiðr” was simply a secure way of telling him “You are sannsorðinn” without being punishable by law.

We have no much more information on seiðs practice, except what I have just reported. The word *ergi* expresses obviously a form of passivity that, if not focused on its sexual meaning, gives an idea on the way of practicing seiðr. Whereas the Indian or Siberian Shamans are very active, they fight the bad Spirits, they seek allies, it would seem that seiðr, on the contrary, requests a deep passivity, associated to receptivity, an opening to the voice of the Spirits which can indeed look like self-debasing. I suppose that the Viking sturdy virility made them reject strongly a way that undoubtedly went back to times when the Mother-Goddess still reigned, for example under the name of Nerthus, with Njörðr as a consort, as some texts hint at.

Finally, why seiðr should have included a buggering of the wizard? An obvious answer is that he had to become female to practice the seiðr, which agrees well with the statement of the prose Edda. This is all the more certain as women can obviously practice seiðr without receiving this treatment. Another example of this feminization is provided to us by some Siberian shamans, called the ‘soft men’, who dress like women and sometimes marry men. As for the antiquity of this behavior, it is without doubt since even Hippocrates reports this fact for certain Scythian soothsayers scythes who also state they received from a goddess their divinatory knowledge (named Aphrodite by Herodotus, and thus the goddess of love of the Scythian civilization).

At any rate, it seems strange that a sexual act of any kind might bring a form of serenity to the *seiðmaðr* to achieve a task of mystical nature. The point of view of Carol Clover that the male/female difference was more social than physiological in the Viking society sheds light on this obscure point.

[Carol J. Clover, “Regardless of Sex : Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,” *Speculum, A Journal of Medieval Studies* 68, April 93, pp. 363-387.]

Without recalling her whole argumentation, suffice to say that her position is in agreement with the status changes in the Viking society. For example, a widow taking in

hand the management of her property became socially a man and she is described in the sagas by adjectives normally reserved to the men, like her briskness, her aptitude for command. Conversely, a biological man, when growing old lost his virile status to become a social woman: He lived among the women, and was described as inactive, sensitive, plaintive. It is then completely possible that this strange buggering is in last analysis only a fast way for the *seiðmaðr* to become a true (social-)woman for the time of his *seiðr*, in order to practice it “to the perfection”, as put by the prose Edda. This concept of social-man or woman misses in our way of thinking, it is not surprising that the anthropologists did not notice it until now. Modern anthropology, with its new attitude of “try to identify, not to analyze” undoubtedly will emphasize the ordinary presence of a ‘social-transgendering’ in the societies concerned with their spirituality. The only example that I know already is found in a book devoted to the fights of the Yurok Indians of Northern California^[51], to assess their spirituality against the Spanish aggression followed by an American one.

[Thomas Buckley, Standing Ground, Yurok Indian Spirituality 1850-1990, Univ. Cal. Press, 2002]

First, remember this book deals with the relations between spirituality and politics, not with the sexuality of the Indian doctors. Nevertheless, without insisting, Buckley makes several remarks on the social organization of the shaman Yurok doctors. Many of these Yurok medicine-men (as we called them, quite correctly as we shall see) are in fact biological women and the Yurok way to speak of them can be translated as ‘real gentlemen’. Thus, contrary to us who designate a virile woman by despising or condescending words, the Yurok people use an extremely respectful manner of speaking to indicate this social-transgendering. For them as well, magic knowledge is delivered by a female entity, and this is illustrated by the account of one of these female ‘real gentlemen’ describing her initiation to medicine as taking place during a long trance, and she is initiated by a female entity. Lastly, there are obviously many biologically male ‘real gentlemen’. Some among them indeed show some degree of feminization (like wearing ladies’ garments) and even, some have regular sexual intercourse with other men. It is however striking that the author’s informants (always with a measure of contempt for his awkward questions) insist on the fact that they became social-females is the main issue, that is, their sexual behavior has no interest.

Jordsvin’s remarks about *seiðr* practitioners being always somewhat aside, ‘others’, thus finds here a canonical illustration. I simply makes it more precise by adding that this otherness is primarily of social nature, and does not relate to the sexual taste of the practitioners.

In my opinion, by going deeper in the kind of otherness shown by the *seiðfolk*, we meet a much more tragic otherness. In order to explain it, I will make use of a concept due to Van Gennep who analyzes the rites of social transition in the French civilization, for the various occasions of the social life.

[A. Van Gennep, Les rites de passage, Picard, Paris 1909.]

He introduces three states, the one of interest to us being usually of short duration. In this

state, the person undergoing a transition in his/her social life is no longer what s/he was, not yet what s/he will be, only someone in the process of becoming. In this state, s/he is ‘other’ to the society, an unstable element that is isolated and that must disappear as fast as possible. This transitory state seems to me describing perfectly well the social position of the shaman. In most social environments, and more particularly in ours, the passage from life to death happens only once for each individual. The French underline the apparent obviousness of this statement with a comic character, Sir Lapalisse, who is “alive as long as he is not yet dead.” This apparently obvious truth is a major error : At each moment of our life something dies in us, a memory, some cells, an aptitude which decreases, our beloved baby child who changes into a hostile teenager, our parents who die. The conscience of this fact is universally rejected as being morbid and depressive. The shaman is the one who, in his/her society, is the carrier of this truth and who is enough strong to avoid being crushed by this truth. Shamanism includes a compulsory death, certainly followed by a rebirth, but the mark of death remains recorded in the shaman’s heart. Thus, and using Van Gennep’s concepts, the shaman undergoes a social transition rite, the one of the transition from life to death, but as long as s/he does not die physically, s/he remains obviously in a transitory state, and thus someone socially unstable.

That this instability would be marked by odd behaviors should not be surprising. Moreover, insofar as a female entity bequests initiation, it is normal that the male shaman wishes to transgender to a ‘social-woman’.

Seiðr and the Nordic culture

In seiðr, the paramount divinity is without question Freya, the divine sow, symbol of fertility. The seiðfolk are thus Freya’s priests and priestesses, and there are, for me, five main runes associated to seiðs practice.

- Fehu (or Feoh, or Fé, Fee) the rune of wealth but also the rune of the creative woman, the primary cow Auðhumla who licked the primitive ice so that our universe could come in existence. This rune is described in a unique way in the *Prídeilur Rúna*, a late, never translated runic poem, by the ambiguous Old Norse : “fee er... grapseidis gata”, unambiguously commented in Latin by “fee est ... deliciæ viperæ via,” i.e., “fé is... the delicious way of the adder” which indicates almost obviously the vagina, a delicious way for the penis.

- Uruz (or Ur, or Úr), the rune of the aurochs but also the rune of the medical doctors, and thus, often, the one of a biological-woman doctor, a social-man. It is thus the rune of Eir, “læknir beztr”, the best of the doctors. As the Anglo-Saxon runic poem says, it is also the rune of the “hiker of the moors, a powerful being.”

- Pertho (or Peorð), a somewhat mysterious rune which disappeared from the Viking Futhark, but which seems to me to be Frigg’s rune, the mother who gives orders to all elements of Nature. In short, linguists do not find a probable root for the word *pertho*. The only trace that I found, in a more recent language, is in Lady (*Frau*) Perchthta, celebrated during the *Perchtenabend* (evening of Perchta) in Saalthal, Germany, and Lady Perch, celebrated in Austria. Frau Perch and Frau Perchtha make either gifts of pure

gold nuggets, or curse the sloppy ones with : “As many hair [*scattered around*], As many unhappy years!”

[O. Freiher von Reinsberg-Düringsfeld, Aberglaube-Sitten-Feste Germanischer Völker, das festliche Jahr, Reprint-Verlag-Leipzig (reprint of the original 1898)]

- Berkana (or Beorc, or Bjarkan), it is the rune of the birch, the tree par excellence of the woman as a being of beauty, the one of “the white arms” desired by each man. It is the rune of Freya’s seductive powers. Þrideilur Rúna calls it very aptly as being “Betúla, viridæ frondes,” the birch with green branches full of strength.

- Lastly, the fifth, Othala (or Eþel), rune of the ancestral property and thus rune of the ‘true gentleman’ as the Yurok say, noble of birth and of soul.

It might look somewhat surprising, but I also see in Loki a great master of seiðr. He is neither God nor Giant, neither man nor woman, neither human nor animal, and yet simultaneously both for all of them, spreading disorder then repairing it when possible. He is the typical God of the otherness, thus the one of the seiðfolk who live between their life and their death, since there is no better way to scrape to blood our society by reminding each one that s/he is in the process of becoming a corpse, never forget it, and do not cave in under it.

Loki is not only a symbol of monstrous fertility, but he practices a sharp tittering added to a constant wheedling. This seems to oppose him to the smiling serenity of Freya, straightforwardly seducing and symbol of healthy fertility. In order to accept/understand my position, first remember that the dichotomy between good and evil looks so obvious to us because of our Christian environment. It does not exist in the Pagan Scandinavian mythology. This is why I can claim that, instead of being incompatible because of their differences, Freya and Loki are, on the contrary, complementary to each other, in order to foster a complex harmony typical of seiðr. In other words, Freya, great priestess of the seiðr, but perfectly balanced, needs a Loki in order to reach this harmony of the imbalance which is central to seiðr.

My personal reconstruction of seiðr

My main recommendation is that seiðs practice requests primarily to accept a deep passivity inside one’s self. This requirement is difficult for modern people, both men and women. Sexual behavior has little to do in this business.

- The study of seiðr is a lifelong activity that changes the life of those who practice it.

Except professional shamans, I met during my life hundreds of temporary shamans who are interested in getting in touch with shamanism, out of plain curiosity. Few are those who are able to go on with the various dismemberments, tearing to shreds, and journeys to the kingdom of Death that are naturally imposed to each apprentice shaman. In the case of seiðr, add to all that, as we shall now see, a passive acceptance of one’s conscious mind, of one’s unconscious mind, of the external world, all together, and you will understand why seiðs company is not really crowded.

- It includes also living constantly in the company of Death. This might explain why so many shamans are depressive or simply sad. My personal explanation is rather that most of the shamans who have been reported upon are American Indians, who live a terrible social injustice. This is certainly not true for all of us. Actually, we of the seiðr, we have been despised and chased at least as much as the Indians, by our own people on the top of it. I nevertheless do not find it sad. Challenging and depressing are the two faces of the same reality, I live happy by looking at the challenging side of seiðs practice.

- Be ‘womanish’

All this leads me to specify which reconstruction I wish for seiðr. I certainly do not dream to live again as the Vikings, I wish to rebuild an old custom by adapting it to the values of our modern society. In the Viking society, the goal of the buggering was to feminize the men, to cut down their virility. I thus think that modern seiðr must include a feminization, but not in this brutal form and, all considered, a very superficial one.

Similarly, wearing a woman’s garment evokes Carnival time to me, rather than a deep mystical state. I prefer to accept my ‘manish’ condition but, during seiðs practice, I let come back to the surface many features called “typically feminine.” Namely, notwithstanding and survival, adaptability to constraints, apparent passivity (i.e., giving soft answers to aggression – and, honestly, this is still an impossible task for me!), acceptance of the differences, etc. Obviously, some women could also reconsider their femininity.

- A biological male can always humbly ask the help of a biological female

Obviously as well, most women will have a greater capacity to find (back) in them these female values. They will therefore be able to practice seiðr if not “to the perfection”, at least in a very effective way. As for the men whose aggressiveness is a little too cumbersome to practice easily a passive seiðr as recommended, they can do as I do, that is recognize this inferiority in them, and ask for the assistance of a woman when they practice a seiðr. Not each woman accepts playing this role, but I know that many are, on the contrary, happy to perform this form of nonsexual exchange of love.

- seiðr is the Zen

As compared with traditional shamanism, instead of setting a goal and to go in a place to meet the Spirits, seiðr requests to let go, to stop wishing this or that, to shut up the little voice that constantly chatters inside us. Our soul can then open to the influence of our environment and of our unconscious mind, and we can balance these influences. This state is very similar the one called Zen by the Easterners. In the practice of Zen, however, the ultimate goal is to reach this state. In seiðr, as in the activities associated with Zen (classically in Japan, bow practice and ikebana – for which “practice is the Zen”), and as we often say in shiatsu (“shiatsu is the Zen”), seiðr is the Zen. Seiðr adds up the difficulty of an identification with the Spirit on the one hand, and on the other hand with social or individual imbalances, in order to lead the Spirits to cooperate, exactly as in shamanism.

- seiðr is tiring

The passive attitude requested in the practice of seiðr makes it much more difficult to perform than ordinary shamanism, but when the correct attitude is reached, it makes it

much more efficient. As a consequence, and as the Scandinavian texts insist upon, this work is exhausting.

The meaning of the word seiðr : *gadus virens* or magic?

In Old Norse, only the word *seiðr* exclusively means ‘magic’. The word *seiðr* can have two meanings, the one of ‘magic’ and the one of a kind of fish (*gadus virens*), which I believe to be this fish named coalfish. You can bet that the fish-meaning gradually overwhelmed the one of magic in modern Icelandic. All this would be without more importance than a slightly stupid pun, if the scholars did not systematically sought to translate *seiðr* by ‘fish’ as soon as possible. In Skaldic poetry, this is indeed possible because of the richness of the images (the kennings) used by Skaldic poets.

For example, the snake or dragon which encircles our world, Jörmungandr (*jörmun* = huge, *gandr* = magic stick, or monster, or wolf), is called by many different kennings, of which some mean ‘the fish of the ground’ or use a fish name: *grundar fiskr*, *grundar hvalr*, *grundar hoeingr* (fish-, trout-, male salmon-of the ground). Thus, when *seiðr* is met in other kennings for Jörmungandr, these speaking of the ‘*seiðr* of the ground’ like *jarðar*, *moldar* (*jörð*, *mold* = ground) or *grundar seiðr*, it can seem natural to understand, ‘coalfish of the ground’ and not ‘magic of the ground’. That is what the scholars did.

[Rudolf Meissner, Die Kenningar der Skalden, Berlin 1921]

However, there exists also many kennings indicating a sword as being the ‘*seiðr* of the battle’, systematically translated by ‘the coalfish of the battle’, with several different words for battle (*hjaldr*, *geirveðr*, *sóknar*, *þrimu*, *fleina skúrar - seiðr*) but it is clear that the sword could as well be the ‘magic of the battle’. Besides, another traditional kenning for a sword is *hræseiðr*, of course translated by ‘coalfish of the corpse’. However, one also finds *hræ - storð* (*storð* = a kind of tree), *hræ - gagarr* (*gagarr* = dog), *hræ - skóð* (*skóð* = hammer), but no other ‘name-of-a-fish of the corpse’.

Finally, it happens that ‘fish’ is absolutely impossible in some kennings such as : *seiðr lögðis* (*seiðr* of the dagger), *seiðr sverða* (*seiðr* of the swords), *seiðr vigra* (*seiðr* of the lances), since one cannot understand what could be a ‘the fish of the sword’, for example. In these cases, some translations do accept ‘magic’ for *seiðr*.

As you can see, translating *seiðr* by ‘fish’ or ‘coalfish’ avoids speaking too much of magic when translating Skaldic poetry, but introduces other problems. In particular, the word *seiðr* means systematically magic in the sagas. How a Scald who knew well the double meaning of *seiðr*, could completely forget the most common meaning, the one of magic, and mostly use this fishy meaning? At the very least, it should be acknowledged that the Skalds used intentionally the word *seiðr* because of its double meaning, so that an exact translation of *grundar seiðr* and others kennings containing *seiðr*, should take into account this double meaning, instead of eliminating it systematically.

The argument that I have just developed is not enough because the meaning of a word results from a kind of consensus relating to the texts that contain it. To complete my argument, I thus have still to consider again all the Skaldic poems containing the word *seiðr*, and to retranslate them completely to show that the meaning ‘magic’ is more

probable than the meaning ‘fish’. In addition to the amount of work needed, it is necessary to understand that the various manuscripts present several versions, one with seiðr, the other with seðr, a third with skeiðr, etc., and the academic editors chose the version which was most appropriate to their view of the Skaldic poems that ‘must’ speak of magic as least as possible. It is thus necessary to seek all the possible versions, and show that in all cases where at least one version includes seiðr, the choice: seiðr = magic is at least probable. I began this work but it is far from being completed.

Seiðr and runic inscriptions

Runic inscriptions speaking of seiðr are found on the amulet of Sigtuna (12th or end of the 11th century) and on runic stones, some of which are difficult to date.

The inscriptions which I present here are written in bold, and each letter represents a rune, except **X** which indicates an illegible rune. The works quoted are:

[Wolfgang Krause, Runen, Sammlung Göschen, 1970; Die Sprache der urnordischen Runeninschriften, Heidelberg 1971.

Erik Moltke, Runes and their Origin, Denmark and Elsewhere, The National Museum of Denmark, 1985, ISBN 87-480-0578-9]

Amulet of Sigtuna:

Moltke gives only one part of it:

þurXsarriþuXþursa trutin fliu þu naked funtin is

‘Troll of fever wound, Lord of the Troll, flee now you are discovered’.

Krause does not give the original runic text, but notes its significance is not certain. He translates it as :

“Thurs of the fever of the wounds,

Lord of the Thurs,

Now you must flee!

You have been discovered!

Receive three kinds of pains, Wolf!

Receive three kinds of miseries, Wolf!

||| the rune of the ice,

These runes of ice will be your only joy, Wolf!

Enjoy well your seiðr!”

Stone of Saleby (Sweden):

Neither Moltke nor Krause give the runes, but both translate:

“He will become a *retti* [Krause: *wizard*] and an *arg* woman who breaks it!”

Krause notes that ‘*arg* woman’ means ‘perverted magician’ and Moltke adds that *arg* in this context designates an expert of the black magic, therefore “this woman is a magician.” I find comical to see how much these distinguished scholars are unable to take into account elementary facts of our sexual life, facts which have to be true since the beginnings of humanity. Without going too much into embarrassing details, only the very innocent ones are still unaware that a woman needs to be very sexually excited to take pleasure in anal sex, and then her pleasure is very intense. This is why this runic curse says something like: “not only you will have to be buggered (to practice your seiðr), but moreover, you will like it.” This is such a traditional macho insult, that I hope it is not necessary to provide more explanations.

Stone 2 of Skern:

a standard inscription followed by:

sípi its manr is/þusi kubl ub biruti

“Let him practice seiðr the man who destroys this monument! ”

Moltke translates **sípi** by ‘wizard’.

Stone 2 of Sonder Vinge:

sarþi auk síþ r[a]ti saR manR ias auþi mini þui

“Wizard *seiðr-retti* the man who destroys this memorial”

It will be noted that, on these two last stones, the seiðr is called **síþ**: Sol - Iss - Þurs, according to the names given to these runes in the Viking Futhark. I could have entitled my article: “seiðr, seið or síþ, all name Scandinavian shamanism.”

Stone of Tryggevoelde:

One side comprises a long traditional inscription and on the others two sides :

sauarþi at rita isailstainþansi iþaiþantraki

“Let him become *reti* the one who damages this stone or moves it from here”

Stone of Glavendurp:

It carries a long traditional inscription ending by:

þur uiki þasi runaR / / at rita sa uarþi is stainþansi ailti iþa aft anan traki

“Thor hallows these runes! //Let him become *reti* the one who damages this stone or moves it (so that it rises) in memory of another”.

We thus find four inscriptions which use *reti* or *retti* like insults in relation to the practice of seiðr, this is why Krause and Moltke tends to translate it by ‘wizard’.

However, the meaning of the word *rétti* (which can have, among others, the meaning of ‘bad treatment’) and the verb *rétta* (= to rectify, to straighten. See also footnote 4 related to full compensation, the word *fullrétti* breaks up into *full-rétti* : full rectification or full compensation) in Old Norse leads me to think that the curse of the runic inscriptions rather refers to a straightening or a compensation. For example: “Let him be straightened (or that he pays compensation) the one who damages this stone or moves it from here”

There are two very famous runic stones carrying almost exactly the same inscription, a very long inscription according to the standards of the runic inscriptions.

Standing stone of Stentoften (Sweden, middle of the 7th century) carries five lines of inscriptions, of which we will consider now only the fourth and the fifth:

I5: hideR runono felaheka hedera ginoronoR

I6: heramalasaR arageu weladud sa Þat bariutiP

This is translated without hesitation, as runologists claim, by

I5: “The line of the shining runes, I preserved here, runes carrying magic”

I6: “Without rest, by *ergi*, abroad, a malicious death to whom this (this monument) destroys”

There is indeed no ambiguity in the formulation of Stentoften.

There is also another, slightly younger, standing stone, the one of Björketorp (Norway, second half of the 7th century) which carries:

B1: haidRruno ronu

B2: falahak haidera g

B3: inarunaR arageu

B4: haeramalausR

B5: uti aR weladaude

B6: saR Þat barutR

In the translation, the final ‘g’ of B2 is associated the beginning of B3 to produce the word *gina* = carrying magic)

In spite of small differences of vocabulary, it is impossible that the rune master of Björketorp could have been unaware of the Stentoften inscription considering the near identity of the two (lengthy) inscriptions, and by noting that Björketorp is slightly younger than Stentoften. Why then this inversion in the order of the words : Stentoften’s

'heramalasaR arageu' becomes Björketorp's 'arageu haeramalausR'?

If the dating was opposite, it could be argued that the rune master of Stentoften wanted to correct the ambiguity in the text of the rune master of Björketorp by avoiding an ambiguous interpretation of 'ginoronoR arageu'. Conversely, since the dating prohibits this interpretation, I see only one possibility, that is, the Björketorp rune master willingly introduced this ambiguity.

One can interpret Björketorp as Stentoften : "Shame on you who will be *ergi*", but also as a claim to power : "my runes are powerful by means of ergi". A magician can indeed have praised himself to have been *ergi*, because it emphasizes his magic power. Of course, my interpretation opposes to everything we know, but it might be because what we know comes from the sagas, the Eddas etc., all written by late commentators, and who insisted on shame of being *ergi*. Insofar as any proof of magic ability was regarded as devilish, it is not surprising that these commentators insisted on the shameful aspects of *ergi*. On the other hand, in a text written by the magician himself, I do not see why he would not brag about his magical powers, B3, and B4 becoming B5:

"Runes carrying magic by means of *ergi*.

Without rest,

In foreign lands, a malicious death..."

The Björketorp rune master would have thus inverted the meaning of Stentoften's at the small cost of a simple inversion of two words.

Gratitude to Marijane Osborn : the importance of the concept of 'social-transgenders' appeared to us during long discussions on the slopes of various mountains sacred to the Indians of California, November 2004.

[1] Original citation, in the French of the end of 16th century: « Que si nous guerissons par le moyen de ces inepties, ce n'est que pour un temps : & si paravanture il faudra que le mal qui est osté par un sorcier, soit redonné à quelq'autre plus relevé & dont la mort est cent fois plus importante que celle du premier à qui on oste la maladie. »

[2] I do not give the two intermediate lines that show a variety of different translations: Óðinn would have knocked from door to door, jumped from house to house, played the drum or stricken the hinge of a trunk, etc. To analyze these two lines would take us away from our topic. It should be noted however that, contrary to the translations speaking of drums, the word 'drum' does not appear anywhere in these lines. That Óðinn played the drum or not is significant from my point of view because this would have been the only allusion I know of the magic use of the drum by a Northern shaman, except Lapp ones.

[3] It is interesting to note that Herodotus, more than 300 years BC, announces that some Scythian soothsayers attribute their knowledge to the teaching of a Goddess Herodotus calls Aphrodite, thus a love goddess such as Freya. [Herodotus, *History*, T 4, § 67.]

[\[4\]](#) Here is the text of the Gulaþing code which describes this type of insults: “There is a way of speaking known under the name of *fullréttis orð* (word of full straightening up/compensation). One is that a man says of another that he had a child. The second is that a man says of another that he is *sannsorðinn*, truly (or provably) *sorðinn*. Third is if he compares him to a mare, if he calls him bitch or whore, or compares him to the female of any animal.”

There is another text dealing with these problems, Icelandic Grágás, which specifies that a lifelong exile is due when the following insults are used: *ragr* (adjective form of *ergi*), *stroðinn*, *sorðinn*.

As for the words *sorðinn* and *stroðinn*, they are both the past participles of *serða*, to prostitute oneself [De Vries: “unzucht treiben”], or, as Cleasby-Vigfusson puts it so decently: “stuprare, with the understanding of Sodomite practices,” and finally, *stuprare* means, in Latin, to soil, to dishonor. Despite all this beating of the bushes by the dictionaries, we thus understand finally that *sannsorðinn* means exactly ‘provably fucked’.

[\[5\]](#) A big “Thank you Marijane !” is in order here.