



Thinking comparatively about Greek mythology XIV, with a focus on the role of He#rakle#s as a leader of fighting men

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October 25, 2019 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

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2019.10.25 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. In my essay for [2019.10.18](#), I argued that the role of Hēraklēs as a leader of fighting men is interchangeable in Greek myth with his wider role as a leader of people in general. And then, toward the end of that same essay, at §14, I indicated that a parallel argument can be made in the case of the Germanic hero named Starkaðr/Starcatherus as we see him represented in the mythological traditions of medieval Scandinavia. As a preview for such an argument, I showed a woodcut picturing the Germanic hero in such a role, and now I show again the same woodcut, this time as the illustration for introducing my essay here.



Starkaðr leads a mass of fighting men to war. From a woodcut in the book of Olaus Magnus, "Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus." Rome 1555. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

§1. This woodcut, found in a book dating back to the year 1555, pictures Starkaðr in the act of leading a mass of fighting men—and they are all armed for war. The visual zoom-out that is pictured in the woodcut, which was designed to match the text of a story being told by Olaus Magnus, the author of the book, is in turn matched by the verbal zoom-in created by the text itself. But this text, which retells within a narrower narrative framework the story being retold within the wider narrative framework of the picture, is about the role of Starkaðr as a helper of the 'oppressed'—the Latin word here, *oppressi*, corresponds closely to what we mean when we say the oppressed. This word actually figures in the title of the story that is being told by Olaus: *De patrocinio oppressorum* 'About his [= the hero's] protecting of those who are oppressed'. I find it most significant here that such a protective role is not strictly militaristic, even though the overall context is indeed a state of war, as we see from the picture showing Starkaðr in the act of leading a mass of armed fighting men.

§2. Before I proceed, I offer some background about the text and about the accompanying woodcut that was designed to illustrate the text. The text and the woodcut, bearing the title *De patrocinio oppressorum* 'About his [= the hero's] protecting of those who are oppressed', come from "Book" V Chapter 5 of a book by Olaus Magnus, a Swede who lived as an exile in Rome and who published there in 1555 his *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*. (The Gothenburg University Press has made the Latin original available as a PDF [here](#).) The story retold in the text and in the picture that comes with the text is all about Starkaðr and the Nine Brothers. This story is a variant of another story—about Twelve Berserk Brothers—as retold by Saxo Grammaticus, who is dated to the 12th/13th century. The story as retold by Olaus Magnus is in some ways derived from the story as retold earlier by Saxo Grammaticus, but, as we will soon see, it is in other ways different from and even independent of the transmission that had been curated by Saxo. In what follows, I will start by interpreting the story as retold by Olaus Magnus—but not before I record here my lasting debt to the unfailingly helpful advice of my prized friend and colleague Stephen Mitchell, whose expertise in Norse mythology is nonpareil. And I must quickly add that Steve is not to be held responsible for any missteps I may be making in the interpretation that follows in §3.

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§3. So, what is the 'oppression' that is going on in the story that we see being retold, by way of both text and image, in "Book" V Chapter 5 of the book by Olaus Magnus? As I interpret this story, it is all about a violent challenge to a king, and the violence is staged by a set of Nine Brothers who are challenging the king of Norway, named Helgo (known as Helgi in other sources), who is seeking to marry a princess named Helga. The Nine Brothers seek to prevent violently the marriage of the king, and one of them even claims that he too is eligible to marry Helga. But now Helgo, king of the Norwegians, travels to Sweden, where the hero Starkaðr is at the time in service to the king of the Swedes, in order to ask this hero for help in resisting oppression by the Nine. Starkaðr accedes to the royal request. So, now in service to the king of Norway, Starkaðr becomes leader of the Norwegian people. As I see it, the woodcut that accompanies the text of this story pictures the larger context of what happens next, which is a general war of resistance against the oppressive Nine Brothers, and now Starkaðr can be pictured as leading the fighting men of Norway as they set out to resist the oppressors. But whom are these oppressors really oppressing? Again, as I also see it, the Nine Brothers are oppressing not only the king of Norway but also the people of Norway by way of oppressing the king of the people, since the violence of the Brothers is threatening the marriage of the king Helgo to the princess Helga. In the context of such violence, the king of Norway would have had to engage directly in fighting the Nine Brothers, but now our kingmaker Starkaðr arranges to do the fighting himself, all by himself, single-handedly. On the day of the royal wedding, Starkaðr proceeds to kill every one of the Brothers, thus saving the life of the king Helgo and protecting this king's marriage to the princess Helga.

§4. As I have learned from an incisive study by Stephen Mitchell (2003), there are many variations to be found in the attested retellings of such a story in Nordic sagas and balladry. According to one group of variants, for example, the hero who prevails in the battle against the Brothers is not Starkaðr but another Strong Man, named Oddr the 'Arrow' (Ǫrvar), and the battle is localized at a place by the name of Sámsey. These Brothers are described as Berserkers, and they are normally Twelve in number, not Nine. Further, according to some of the variants, the fighting is all about a quest to win a princess for a bride, while other variants show no sign of any such princess. In these stories, I also find details that are particularly relevant to my comparison of Starkaðr—and of other such Germanic heroes—with the Greek hero Hēraklēs: in some variants of the story of the Battle at Sámsey, for example, the Strong Man named Oddr the Arrow is wielding a makeshift club with which he smites the Twelve Brothers all at once. In any case, one way or another, all these Berserkers get killed in the Battle at Sámsey.

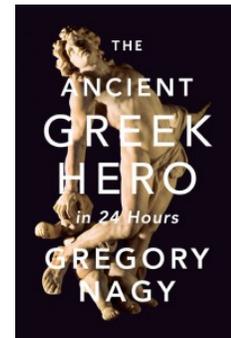
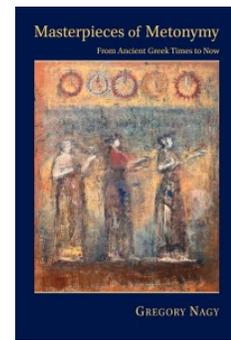
§5. In the *Gesta Danorum* by Saxo Grammaticus (5.13.4), we find another variant of such a story about the battle at Sámsey, again involving Twelve Brothers, one of whom is pointedly named Angantýr/Anganterus. But then we find yet another variant in a subsequent phase of the retelling by Saxo, and this time the hero who kills the Berserkers is Starkaðr/Starcatherus himself (introduced at 6.5.1). Further, this time the Brothers are Nine rather than Twelve in number—though the eldest of them is again Angantýr/Anganterus (beginning at 6.7.2, with the fight at 6.7.8–9).

§6. Likewise in the narrative of Olaus Magnus, as we have seen, Starkaðr/Starcatherus fights singlehandedly a set of Nine Brothers. But the narrative of Olaus Magnus is not quite the same as the narrative of Saxo Grammaticus. In the version of Saxo, the role of Helgo (Helgi) as king of Norway is elided: instead, 'Helgi' is simply 'a Norwegian' who is courting a princess who happens to be the sister of the king of Denmark, and this princess is named Helga. Further, the Nine Brothers in the version of Saxo are natives of Zealand in Denmark. So, our first impression when we read Saxo Grammaticus is that the setting for the fight against the Nine Brothers is Denmark. By contrast, as I have already noted, the setting seems to be Norway in the narrative transmitted by Olaus Magnus, and so the princess named Helga in that narrative seems to have been brought over to Norway from Denmark by our Helgo, king of Norway. As for the Nine Brothers, they seem to have mounted an expedition from Denmark to Norway in order to impede the marriage of the Norwegian king, thus oppressing the king and, by extension, the king's people as well. But then, as we read further in the narrative of Saxo (7.4), Helgo (Helgi) undertakes a mission to Uppsala in Sweden, where Starkaðr is in service at that time to the king of the Swedes, and the Norwegian king now asks for the hero's help against the oppression. As we see earlier, in Saxo (7.3), Helgo (Helgi) had undertaken his mission of seeking the help of Starkaðr because he had heard of the hero's reputation as a most powerful helper of 'those who are in need' of protection: the Latin word that I translate here as 'those who are in need' is *indigentes*. Thus Starkaðr now becomes the leader of the Norwegian king's fighting men, though in the end he acts alone in killing the Nine Brothers.

§7. I propose, then, that the story transmitted by Olaus Magnus, featuring Starkaðr/Starcatherus coming to the aid of the 'oppressed' king of Norway, shows clearly that the role of this hero as leader of an army, like the role of Hēraklēs, benefits not only the army but also the people at large, as represented by the king. As Olaus Magnus himself observes in his "Book" V Chapter 4, the hero Starkaðr/Starcatherus is 'another Hēraklēs', alter Hercules. As a learned transmitter of Germanic traditions who is at the same time eager to display his familiarity with the distinct but nevertheless cognate traditions of the ancient Greco-Roman world, Olaus Magnus seems quite aware that Starkaðr/Starcatherus as well as Hēraklēs/Hercules are leaders of the people, not only leaders of the army. And these heroes can lead the people precisely because they are kingmakers whose kings embody the people at large, not only the armed forces that serve the king.

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