

On places and positions of stars

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In this article, I will demonstrate how readings from a few medieval manuscripts can be used to correct what will be identified as an error in printed editions of *Örvar-Odds saga* and *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*. Both sagas include similar accounts of people who are said to be skilled in sorcery and were thought to be able to fasten or glue together (connect) “stod” and stars (*stjörnur*). According to a commentary from 1680, the phrase is explained as an act of connecting a herd of horses (ON *stóð*) and stars. Ever since, the publishers of both sagas have printed the word “stod” as *stóð* or, occasionally, *stoð*, however, with the same meaning. The act in question has not been explained any further, i.e. what is involved in connecting or fixing herds of horses and stars together.

The primary focus of this study will be an examination of the various forms of the word “stod” in selected manuscripts of both sagas. By comparing these forms, I will consider the meaning of the phrase in question and suggest a more probable translation. Before turning to the manuscripts themselves, however, I will explain how these readings are spelled in text editions and how this can change the semantic context of a text, and even our ideas about some obscure customs of past ages. Thus, I will use the readings to demonstrate that a misinterpretation of a single word can lead to misconceptions and even cause people to look up into the sky and read something out of the stars that isn’t really there.¹

As a matter of course, numerous scholars – both editors and translators –

¹ The basic idea discussed in this article has previously been introduced, first in a short outline in Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir (2018) and later in a paper delivered at 26. Arbeitstagung der Skandinavistik, Universität Bonn, 2024.

have previously engaged with the two sagas, drawing either directly from the manuscripts or from already edited versions of the texts. In the course of their work, they undoubtedly considered the meanings of individual words. In a few instances, there appears to have been some complications with the phrase *stóð ok stjörnur*. However, none of these scholars have, to date, explicitly questioned the correctness of this reading or proposed an alternative variant.

Although it may be worthwhile to further explore the hypothetical act of fixing together herds of horses and stars – particularly in terms of the popular beliefs such an act might reflect – this line of inquiry will not be pursued in the present article. Consequently, the discussion will only briefly engage with cosmological interpretations or notions of magical belief. Rather, the article aims to address the alleged misinterpretation by publishers, which has led to the reading *stóð ok stjörnur*, a rendering I consider to be incorrect and, therefore, irrelevant.

Readings from two sagas

Two legendary sagas, or *fornaldarsögur*, *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* and *Örvar-Odds saga*, written in the late 13th century, include a similar account of people who are said to be *fjölunnig*, or skilled in sorcery. These people were thought to be able to fasten or glue together *stóð* and stars, literally, a herd of horses and stars. In a passage from chapter 3 of *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, edited by Carl Christian Rafn (d. 1864), based on AM 152 fol., it says:

Pann mann er at nefna til sögunnar, er Kolr hét, mart gott er af honum at segja, þat fyrst, at hann var stórr sem jötun, ljótr sem fjandinn, ok svá fjölunnigr, at hann fór í jörðu ok á, ok límði saman stóð ok stjörnur; (*Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda* 1829–1830, II: 389–390)

Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar has been translated into various different languages, and two different English translators present the text as following:

The Saga must also mention a man by name Kol, of whom a great many good things are told: first, that he was large as a giant, ugly-looking as the devil, and so well skilled in the black art that he could pass through the earth as well as walk upon it, could glue together steeds and stars ... (*Viking Tales of the North* 1877: 7)

A man should also be named in this story; he was named Kol. There are many notable things to say about him. First of all, he was as big as a giant, as ugly as the devil, and such a sorcerer that he could travel into the earth as well as on it.

He could hitch a star to a stud-horse. He was such a great shape-shifter that he could take on the appearance of any living creature. He could travel equally well with the winds or through the sea. (*The Sagas of Fridtjof the Bold* 2009: 6)²

Örvar-Odds saga is essentially preserved in two versions, a shorter and a longer version. The shorter version was edited by Richard Boer (d. 1929), first in 1888 and then again in 1892. In his two editions, he used two main manuscripts, Holm perg 7 4to (the S-version) and AM 344 a 4to (the M-version).³ In chapter 40, it says:

S-version: ... konungr heitir Álfir, er ræðr fyrir landi því er Bjálkaland heitir; því er hann kallaðr Álfir bjálki. Hann á konu þá, ef konu skal kalla, er Gyða heitir, son þeira heitir Víðgripr, þau eru fjölkunnig, svá at þau líma saman stóð ok stjörnur. (*Örvar-Odds saga* 1888: 171; *Örvar-Odds saga* 1892: 87)

The S-version has not been translated into English, but only summarised, including the given phrase: “they are so skilled in magic arts, that they can stick together a stud of horses and the stars” (Clunies Ross 2017: 874).

M-version: ... konungr sá, er Álfir heitir ok er kallaðr bjálki. Hann er kvángaðr maðr, ok heitir kona hans Gyða; hann er meiri blótmaðr, ok þau bæði, en aðrir menn, þau eiga son þann, er heitir Víðgripr. En þau öll eru svá fjölkunnigir menn, at þau festa saman stóð ok stjörnur. (*Örvar-Odds saga* 1888: 170)⁴

In chapter 28 of the longer version, edited by Carl Christian Rafn,⁵ the clause is quite similar, now based on AM 343 a 4to:

A-version: ... sá konúngr, er Álfir heitir, ok kallaðr Bjálki; hann er kvongaðr; kona hans heitir Gyða; hún er mikill blótmaður, ok bæði þau; þau eiga son saman, ok heitir Víðgripr; svá eru þau fjölkunnug, at þau festa saman stóð ok stjörnur. (*Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda* 1829–1830, II: 282)

As with *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, the A-version of *Örvar-Odds saga* has been translated into different languages,⁶ here is an example of an English translation:

² See also Danish translation: “lime sted og stjerner sammen” in *Oldtidssagaerne* 4, 2017: 68.

³ For Holm perg 7 4to, see also Isl. perg. 7 4to. The text is based on a shortened version in Holm perg 7 4to (S), while variants are taken from AM 344 a 4to (M). In Boer’s latter edition, the given phrase is within ch. 41.

⁴ The M-version is slightly longer than S, and has been positioned as lying between S and the manuscripts of the longer version.

⁵ The longer version divides into two groups, printed here after AM 343 a 4to and AM 471 4to.

⁶ Cf. Danish translation: “binde sted og stjerner sammen” in *Oldtidssagaerne* 5, 2017: 125.

A king named Alf, known as Alf Plank, rules over that land. He is married, and his wife is named Gydja. She is a great sacrificer; both of them are. They have a son named Vidgrip. They're such powerful sorcerers [sic!] that they could hitch a stud-horse to a star. (*The Hrafnista Sagas* 2012: 126)

Guðni Jónsson (d. 1974), who based his edition of the longer version on more recent manuscripts, printed the given phrase from chapter 28 in exactly the same way, as 'stóð ok stjörnur' (*Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda* 1950, II: 322). In their English translation built on Guðni Jónsson's text, Hermann Pálsson (d. 2002) and Paul Edwards (d. 1992) translated the phrase as "hitch a stallion to a star", i.e. to fasten a horse to a star rather than e.g. a fence (*Seven Viking Romances* 1985: 109). This translation is similar to later translations of both *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* and *Örvar-Odds saga*, referred to above, where the sorcerers are said to be able to either "hitch a star to a stud-horse" or "hitch a stud-horse to a star".

We notice that in both sagas, the four sorcerers, Kolr kroppinbákr, Álfir bjálki, Gyða/Gyðja and Víðgripur, were thought to be able to connect or glue together stars and *stóð*, as listed in the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (ONP): "líma/festa saman stóð ok stjörnur".⁷ The word *stóð* is already printed as such in most earlier editions, but in some of them the word is printed as *stodð*, however, with the same meaning. In the edition of *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* by Jacob Reenhielm (d. 1691) from 1680, it says 'stod og stiorner', and according to a commentary in Latin, the phrase is explained as an act of fixing together or gathering a herd of horses and stars, cf. "... congregasse equas et cæli stellas". The full commentary goes like this:

Quod autem dicit auctor, ipsum congregasse equas et cæli stellas, adagium est historicisque minus reuens, eleganter tamen hoc ipso exprimitur, colum præstigiatiorem summum, se exhibuisse inter stellas etiam equi insædentem ...⁸

(What the author says about him gathering horses and the stars of the sky is a proverb with little relevance to history. However, it elegantly expresses the idea that the supreme magician presented himself among the stars, even as riding a horse.)

The idea presented here seems to be based on ideas about shamanic practices, where shamans were believed to interact with spirits and animal helpers.⁹

⁷ See <<https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?o75682>>.

⁸ *Thorstens Viikings-sons Saga På Gammal Göthjka* 1680, "stod og stiorner", p. 12a (Swedish translation: "stod och stiorner", p. 12b), cf. "notæ", p. 36.

⁹ In the Northern regions of Scandinavia, the shamans were believed to ride their "steed" in the form of their drum. On shamanic journeys, and on drums (the shaman's "horse"), see Tolley 2009, I: 138–139, 414–419, 344, 433, 525–526. In southeastern Siberia, the Mongolian

Although there is no reference to any specific source to support this, it may be that the note came from either Reenhielm's colleague Olof Rudbeck (d. 1702), or Jón Jónsson (aka. Jonas Rugman, d. 1679), who assisted him with the edition, where he is specifically identified as a learned informant. The Swedish editors generally relied heavily on Jón when it came to explaining elusive phrases in their editions of Old Norse texts. Although Jón had passed away by the time *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* was published in 1680, it was presumably ready for printing while he was still alive (Heimir Pálsson 2017: 73, 172). As will be shown later, Jón is a far more likely contributor here than Rudbeck, but of course, the explanation may have been made by Reenhielm alone. The commentary shows that even if the editor printed the word as *stoð*, his note is indeed on the word *stóð* (a herd). Whether based on Reenhielm's commentary or not, the editors of *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* have ever since printed the word as *stóð*.

For *Örvar-Odds saga*, some early editors also printed the given word as *stoð*. Rasmus Rask (d. 1832), who published the saga in his *Specimina Literature Islandicæ* in 1819, based on Holm perg 7 4to (the S-version), printed 'stod ok stiörnur'.¹⁰ Rask's text was reprinted by Rafn in his edition of *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda*, at the end of volume two, as a secondary text of *Örvar-Odds saga*, also with the phrase 'stoð ok stjörnur'.¹¹ Johan Gustaf Liljegren (d. 1837), who translated the saga from Rask's edition into Swedish in 1819, decided not to translate the given phrase in a specific way, but stated in a more general way that Álfir, Gyða and their son Víðgripur were so skilled in sorcery, 'att de dermed uträtta till och med de orimligaste' (i.e. that they were capable of doing the most improbable things) (*Skandinaviska fornålderns Hjeltesagor* 1819, II: 165). Thus, the few editors who have printed the word as *stoð*, have either explained it as meaning *stóð*, or not commented specifically on

ethnic group Buryats "saw the Great Bear as a herd of horses" (Tolley 2009, I: 344). However, even if there are some loose connections between shamanism and Norse myth, especially in relations to the world tree, shamanic ideas are not characteristic for Norse myth and Old Norse sorcery (*fjölkyngi*) in general, especially not the *seiðr*, see Dillmann 1992: 32, and Tolley 2009, I: 344, 434, 550.

¹⁰ Ch. 39: "... konúgr heitir Alfr, er ræðr fyrir landi því er Bjálkaland heitir, því er hann kallaðr Alfr Bjálki; hann á konu þá, ef konu skal kalla, er Gyða heitir, son þeirra heitir Víðgripur; þau eru fjölkunnig, svá at þau líma saman stoð ok stiörnur." Rasmus Rask 1819: 113. As a rule, Rask uses 'o' with an acute accent when writing /ó/.

¹¹ The chapter division is not exactly the same and the given phrase is in ch. 38 in Rafn's edition. The spelling is almost identical: "... konúgr heitir Alfr, er ræðr fyrir landi því, er Bjálkaland heitir, því er hann kallaðr Alfr bjálki; hann á konu þá, ef konu skal kalla, er Gyða heitir, son þeirra heitir Víðgripur; þau eru fjölkunnig, svá at þau líma saman stoð ok stjörnur." *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda* 1829–1830, II: xii, 552–553.

its meaning at all. In his edition of the shorter version of *Örvar-Odds saga* from 1892, Richard Boer who printed the given phrase as ‘stóð ok stjörnur’ offers a brief comment on the phrase. He says: “líma saman stóð (eine anzahl pferde) ok stjörnur, unglaubliche zauberkünste ausführen” (*Örvar-Odds saga* 1892: 87). The act described here has not been further explained, i.e., what it means to connect or fix together a herd of horses and stars.

Considering the exaggerated descriptions of Kolr kroppinbaki, Álfir bjálki, Gyða/Gyðja and Víðgripur and their abilities, it may be that people did not think it was surprising at all when it came to sorcerers that they were considered capable of connecting a herd of horses and stars, whatever that might have entailed.¹² Perhaps, however, we can assume that people might have understood the act in different ways, and it is not certain that everyone envisioned a pack of horses but could have imagined a group or cluster of something else. The result would then be that people skilled in magic or sorcery could connect the most disparate things or carry out something impossible, as suggested by Liljegren’s translation in 1819 and by how dictionaries usually explain the given expression. In his Icelandic-Danish dictionary, Sigfús Blöndal (d. 1950) claimed that the phrase was used to refer to things being turned upside down, to: “vende op og ned paa alt (ved overnaturlige Kunster)” (Sigfús Blöndal 1920–1924: 804).¹³

As these examples demonstrate, some scholars have chosen to broaden the interpretation of *stóð ok stjörnur*, suggesting that it alludes more generally to the capacity of individuals skilled in sorcery to accomplish the impossible. Nevertheless, none have critically questioned the phrase itself, nor suggested a different meaning for *stóð/stoð*. In light of this, it is now appropriate to consider possible alternative readings of the phrase *stóð ok stjörnur*.

On places and positions

Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon (d. 1987), the author of *Íslensk orðsifjabók* (the Icelandic Etymological Dictionary), was apparently not convinced by the traditional explanation of the phrase and stated that it was not entirely clear what the word *stóð* meant in this context. He attempted to link the word

¹² In Norse myth, the horse is sometimes presented as taking the soul of the departed to the world beyond (Tolley 2009, I: 544, 550).

¹³ See also online version at: <<https://blondal.arnastofnun.is/faersla/251814>>.

to the Urban East Norwegian word *sto*, meaning an area of land, though he believed that the word was undoubtedly of the same origin as a herd of horses or a cluster. This suggestion by Ásgeir Blöndal does not change the fact that it is difficult to see why people skilled in sorcery would connect an area of land with the stars. His conjectures are nonetheless interesting because they show that one of the leading Icelandic etymologists was not convinced that the phrase referred to herds of horses at all (Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989: 964). Additionally, in *Íslensk orðabók* (the Icelandic Dictionary, 3rd ed.), it is suggested that the word *stóð* can mean *stæði* (a spot) in poetic language. It says: "... það sem e-ð, sem vex, stendur á, stæði þ *kampa stóð* sá hluti andlitsins sem vaxinn er skeggi" (that which something that grows stands on, a spot þ *kampa stóð* the part of the face that is covered in beard) (*Íslensk orðabók* 2003: 1486). Even if we are not dealing with poetic language in this case, but rather a prose narrative, we could try to interpret the meaning of *stóð/stóð* as connecting a spot or a place and stars, or even a location and stars. As many know, astrology largely revolves around connecting places and stars, i.e., interpreting the position of the stars in the sky.

In this context, it may be worth consulting other genres of Old Norse literature, such as mythological texts and Old Icelandic calendars, as these sources may offer alternative conceptual frameworks or provide illustrative examples in which spatial or positional references are significant within an astronomical context. Let us, therefore, consider the meaning of the word *stóð* as *stæði*, or a place/station (ON *staðr*, pl. *staðir*). In Norse mythology, there is a connection between the words *staðir* and *stjörnur*, and it can even be said that the two terms are presented in a formulaic way, as seen in *Völuspá*, st. no. 5:

... sól þat né vissi
 hvar hon sali átti,
 stjörnur þat né vissu
 hvar þær staði áttu,
 máni þat né vissi
 hvat hann megnis átti. (*Eddukvæði* 2014, I: 292)

(Sun did not know where she had her hall,
 the stars did not know where they had their stations,
 the moon did not know what might he had.¹⁴)

As Gísli Sigurðsson points out, Snorri Sturluson (d. 1241) uses two key terms for the location of celestial lights in his *Gylfaginning*: the sun has *salir*

¹⁴ In the translation by Carolyn Larrington (*The Poetic Edda* 2014: 4).

(halls), and the stars have *staðir* (places) (Gísli Sigurðsson 2014: 192–193 (on *staðir*); Gísli Sigurðsson 2019: 557–558; Gísli Sigurðsson 2022: 239).¹⁵ According to this, it is clear that if one interprets the word *stóð* as *staði* (a spot or a place), it refers precisely to the same old idea that the stars had places, and one of the things that sorcerers could do was to connect the stars and their places; that is, to read the celestial bodies.

Although other medieval sources attest to the presence and practice of astronomy in Iceland, including information about *staðir* being the location of stars, they provide no further information regarding the association between celestial bodies and herds of horses.¹⁶ In particular, the medieval calendars attest to a range of astronomical knowledge, including associations between celestial bodies and specific locations (*staðir*). Although the calendars also indicate that the horse Pegasus was believed to be part of a constellation, they do not directly illuminate the specific phrase, *stóð ok stjörnur*, under investigation (*Alfræði íslensk* 1914–1916: 252, 256–58).

The medieval Icelandic saga literature reveals several instances in which celestial phenomena – particularly stars and comets – were interpreted by Norse observers as omens of death or impending warfare. One such example appears in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* by Sturla Þórðarson (d. 1284), which states:

Pat var níu nóttum eftir jól er konungr gekk um kveldit út, ok var heiðviðri á. Hann sá undarliga stjörnu, miklu meiri en aðrar ok ógurligri ok af sem skaft væri. Konungr lét kalla til sín meistara Vilhjálmm, ok er hann kom ok sá stjörnuna mælti hann: „Guð gæti vár. Þetta er mikil sýn. Þessi stjarna heitir kómeta, ok sýnisk hon fyrir fráfalli ágættra höfðingja ella fyrir stórum bardögum.“ Þessi stjarna var sýn á mörgum löndum um vetrinn. (*Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* 2013, II: 66)

(It was nine nights after Christmas when the king went out in the evening, and the weather was clear. He saw a strange star, much larger and more frightful than other stars, and it had a tail like a shaft. The king had Master William summoned, and when he came and saw the star, he said: “God protect us. This is a great vision. This star is called a comet, and it appears as a portent of the death of distinguished chieftains or of great battles.” This star was seen in many countries during the winter.) (My own translation)

¹⁵ Cf. Snorri Sturluson 2005: 12, 15, 18, 20, 22–27 *et passim*. On Pre-Christian cosmology in Germanic tradition, see Tolley 2009, I: 272–413.

¹⁶ The most renowned Icelandic astronomer in the medieval area was Oddr Helgason (d. 1140/1150), commonly known as Stjörnu-Oddi (“Star-Oddi”), who was particularly noted for his nocturnal observations of the stars. On one occasion, he is recorded as reflecting on a dream while looking into the stars (*Harðar saga* 2009: 459, 471; *Alfræði íslensk* 1914–1916: 48–49).

Star lore was for a long time prevalent among the Nordic peoples. In his *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* from 1555, the Swedish Archbishop Olaus Magnus (d. 1557) claimed that the Nordic peoples were skilled in the art of reading celestial bodies, and that they were able to foretell the future by studying the stars. Such people were both from the ranks of the learned and the common, and those who belonged to the folk tradition passed their knowledge on from their forefathers to their offspring (Olaus Magnus 1996, I: 73–74). Although Olaus Magnus' writings on magical arts are general, and possibly under the influence of earlier scholars, and do not refer to Icelandic sources in particular, they bear witness to general beliefs by Nordic people in the 16th century.¹⁷ However, a folk tradition would not have been homogenous, but diverse in nature, as Gísli Sigurðsson suggests:

We have no way of determining what is “right” or “wrong” in this wealth of stories. People are not wrong about their own tradition but they never practice it exactly the same way as some other person, contemporary or from another period – even though they can continue to associate it with the same locations (*staðir*, *salir*, stars and planets) in the sky for a very long time, thus ensuring some stability as the myths are in a sense “written” in the sky. (Gísli Sigurðsson 2022: 242–243)

In the 16th and 17th century, Icelanders were well familiar with people who were able to read into the position of stars, and according to sources from this time, such a specialist would have been called *stjörnumeistari* or *stjörnurímsmeistari*.¹⁸ But rather than delving further into traditional knowledge about reading the celestial bodies, it is now apt to explore the relationship between stars and their specific locations. Most importantly: How widespread were the old ideas that the stars belonged to places, or *staðir*?

Reenhielm's explanation from 1680 suggests that the ancient cosmology of *Völuspá* and *Gylfaginning*, and thus the connection of stars and places, was not commonly understood in the 17th century, even if *Snorra-Edda*, where stanza 5 from *Völuspá* is cited, had been edited and printed in Copenhagen as early as 1665 (Resen 1665a: printed under “VI. dæmesaga”). The same goes for *Völuspá* as such, that had been printed separately in the same year by the same editor, Peder Hansen Resen (d. 1668), and therefore available

¹⁷ On divination from stars in European traditions, see Tolley 2009, I: 113. On the connection between stars and fertility in Old Norse religion, see p. 285.

¹⁸ For Old Norse examples, see ONP: *stjörnurímsmeistari* (13th century and later); *stjörnumeistari* (14th century and later); *stjörnufróði* (17th century). For early printed examples, see Arngrímur Jónsson [1597]: C vj r; Verelius 1691: 244. See also Guðmundur Andrésson 1999: 151. The words *stjörnuspeki*/*stjörnuspekingur* and *stjörnufræðingur* are more recent.

to Scandinavian scholars.¹⁹ Neither do 18th-century translations of *Völuspá* into different languages seem to have influenced the understanding of the given phrase.²⁰ Still, one might wonder how the future editors of the two sagas would have treated the texts had Reenhielm's explanation not been available. Would they indeed have printed *stóð* instead of *stod* or even *stöð*?

Some manuscript readings

Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar and *Örvar-Odds saga* are preserved in numerous manuscripts that will not all be treated here, even if reading them all would certainly cast a light on the reception, and thus the development, of the given phrase. By examining the oldest manuscripts or particularly the ones that have been used by the editors, it is clear that they all share the reading *stod/stod*:²¹

Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar, chapter 3: AM 152 fol.: 'ftod ɤ ftiornur' (17ra, 7–8); AM 556 b 4to: 'ftod ɤ ftiðznur' (36v, 2);²² AM 579 4to: 'ftod ɤ ftiornur' (8r, 33).

Örvar-Odds saga, shorter version, chapter 40: Holm perg 7 4to: 'ftoð ok ftiðznur' (55v, 12);²³ AM 344 a 4to: 'ftod ɤ ftiðznur' (22r, 33).

Örvar-Odds saga, longer version, chapter 28: AM 343 a 4to: 'ftod ɤ ftiðznur' (78r, 5–6); AM 471 4to: 'ftod ɤ ftiðznur' (89v, 27–28); AM 173 fol.: 'ftoð oc ftiornur' (54v, 30).

The eight manuscripts presented here are thought to be written from the first quarter of the 14th century until c. 1700. In order to find out how the scribes of these comparative manuscripts wrote the sounds /o/, /ó/ and

¹⁹ Cf. "Sól thad nie visse hvar hun Sale átte / Stiórnur thad ne vissu hvar thær stade attu / Mane thad ne visse hvar hann Meigins atte" (Resen 1665b: [1]).

²⁰ In the 18th century, *Völuspá* had been translated into Swedish, German and French. Stanza 5 had also been translated into English. For an overview, see *Völuspá – The Völva's Prophecy: A Study Guide*: s.p.

²¹ Both sagas are preserved in numerous manuscripts that will not be considered here. For manuscript lists, see Early North Data Service: <gefin.ku.dk/q.php?p=ends/texts/text/35> (for *Örvar-Odds saga*) and <<https://gefin.ku.dk/q.php?p=ends/texts/text/10906>> (for *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*).

²² AM 152 fol. was recently edited in Consagra 2022. On a new edition of AM 556 b 4o, see *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, 2025, p. 9 ('stod ok stionur').

²³ The folio has been paginated as no. 119, but according to the manuscript catalogue it should be 55v.

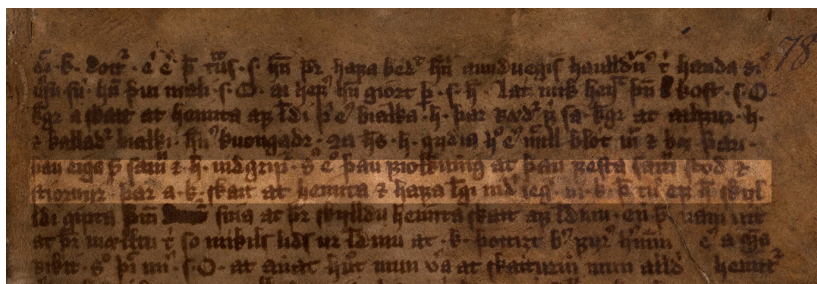


Fig. 1. AM 343 a 4to, 78r, 5–6 (The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies).

/ö/, let us examine how they wrote the word *stjörnur*. In three out of eight examples, /ö/ is represented with a loop/curl or an acute accent above “o,” suggesting that the scribes of these three manuscripts distinguished between the sounds in *stod* and *stjörnur*, so that they did not consider the meaning to be *stöd* (and *stjörnur*), but rather *stod̊/stöd̊*. However, this distinction is not present in five out of eight manuscripts. If we consider the representation of the sounds /o/, /ó/, and /ö/ in the manuscripts, we observe the following:²⁴

AM 152 fol.	/o/ = o, ǫ	/ó/ = o, ǫ	/ö/ = o, ǫ
Holm perg 7 4to	/o/ = o	/ó/ = o, ó	/ö/ = o, ǫ, au
AM 556 b 4to	/o/ = o	/ó/ = o	/ö/ = ǫ
AM 579 4to	/o/ = o	/ó/ = o, ó	/ö/ = o, (ó), ǫ
AM 173 fol.	/o/ = o	/ó/ = o	/ö/ = o
AM 343 a 4to	/o/ = o	/ó/ = o, ó	/ö/ = o, ó, au
AM 344 a 4to	/o/ = o	/ó/ = o	/ö/ = o
AM 471 4to	/o/ = o, ó	/ó/ = o, (ó)	/ö/ = ó, (ö)

It should be noted, however, that not all marks are clear, and therefore brackets are used in some cases. Also, one of the manuscripts, AM 173 fol., is more recent than the others, from c. 1700, and could represent a modern pronunciation. Nevertheless, this scribe uses the same character in all cases. Even if the examination is far from being scientifically accurate, as only some selected samples were searched for symbols representing /o/, /ó/, and /ö/, the examples suffice to suggest the following possibilities:

- The short, rounded back vowel /o/ = is written as ‘o’ in all the manuscripts, and nothing prevents the word from being read as *stod̊*.

²⁴ Isl. perg. 7 4to, c. 1300–1325; AM 152 fol, c. 1500–1525; AM 173 fol, c. 1700; AM 343 a 4to, 1450–1475; AM 344 a 4to, 1350–1400; AM 471 4to, 1450–1500; AM 556 b 4to, c. 1476–1499; AM 579 4to, c. 1450–1475.

- The long, rounded back vowel sound /ó/ = is written as ‘o’ in all the manuscripts, with an additional acute accent or a hook above in a minority of manuscripts. Nothing prevents the word from being read as *stóð*.
- Finally, the rounded front vowel /ö/ = is written as ‘o’ in six manuscripts, with an additional acute accent or a hook above in four cases. In two manuscripts, it is only written as ‘o’ with an acute accent or a hook above, i.e. in neither case without these additional marks. Nothing prevents the word from being read as *stöð* in all the examples.

That said, the question is: how significant are these spelling variations? The word *stóð* (in the sense of *stæði*, a place) could mean that the sorcerers read the stars from their places, or positions. *Stoð* means foundation, or something that supports something else. It is not impossible to interpret the phrase to mean that the sorcerers were reading into the connection between the stars and the support (the *stoð*), or the firmament. The third possibility, examining the reading as *stöð*, although less likely than the other two, also yields a similar result; that the stars are connected to a “station” in the sky (related to the word *staðr*), position/placement (also related to the word *stjörnustaða* meaning star position), or *slóð* (area), which are other meanings of the word provided in dictionaries. Yet another meaning of the word *stöð* is *samband* (relationship) or *afstaða* (position), marked in *Íslensk orðabók* as an archaic or obsolete term.

As previously mentioned, the study does not encompass all preserved manuscripts of the sagas. For example, it was not intended to include the text of the longer version of *Örvar-Odds saga* that Olof Rudbeck published in 1697, from Holm papp. 32 4to from 1650–1674, because the printed edition does not include the relevant phrase (*Sagan af Orfuar Odde syne Grims lodinkinn* 1697: 41).²⁵ However, upon examining the manuscript itself, it becomes clear that the phrase does occur, and the omission seems to be made by the editor. But why should Rudbeck have excluded the phrase from his edition? Perhaps because he did not understand what was being discussed, or because he did not agree with Reenhielm’s interpretation in his edition of *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* from 1680 and the reference to horse herds. The latter is likely, given that in Rudbeck’s main manuscript, Holm papp. 32 4to, there is simply no mention of *stoð* or *stöð*, but instead, it says ‘stad og stiörnur’ (54v, 3), which would have been impossible to interpret in the same way as Reenhielm did.²⁶ *Staðr* means a place, and is perhaps

²⁵ The edition includes a Latin translation by Ísleifur Þorleifsson (d. 1700).

²⁶ The manuscript is written by three scribes. The text of *Örvar-Odds saga* is written by

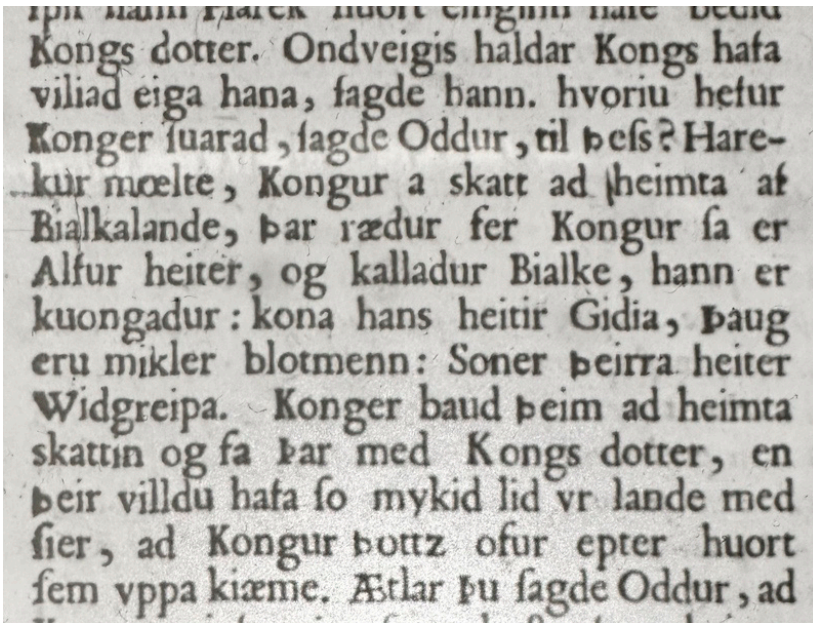


Fig. 2. Rudbeck's edition of Örvar-Odds saga: 41.

the most logical of all the variants, and the one that resembles the verse in *Völuspá* most evidently.

The fact that Rudbeck excluded the phrase from his own edition makes it less likely that it was in fact he who advised Reenhielm regarding the meaning of the expression; after all, it may have been Reenhielm's own explanation, or that of Jón Jónsson.

Conclusions

In conclusion, most evidence supports the understanding that the sorcerers Kolr kroppinbakr, Álfr bjálki, Gyða/Gyðja and Viðgripr simply connected

Jón Eggertsson (d. 1689), see Gödel 1897–1900: 303–305; some pages are missing from the manuscript, but were located later among copies in Holm papp. 1 4to (Boer in *Örvar-Odds saga* 1888: vi; Gödel 1897–1900: 259). Richard Boer considered this manuscript, along with later copies made in Stockholm, without interest for text critical comparison. See Boer in *Örvar-Odds saga* 1888: vi–vii. Manuscript photos are available online at: <<https://www.manuscripta.se/ms/101476>>.

stöð/staðr/stæði (or, station/place/position) and stars, i.e., read into the position or location of the stars. In Norse mythology, the stars had places, and in that context, it is far-fetched to connect them to *stöð* in the meaning of cluster, whether it be a herd of horses or any other kind of group. When we also consider the evidence from Holm papp. 32 4to, it is evident that the spelling of the word has confused people, since it was also possible to write the word with an ‘a’ (o/a), but of course it can be difficult to distinguish between o and a in the hand of some scribes. In our saga tradition and medieval literature, it is clear that people who were skilled in sorcery were attributed various abilities, but the act of gluing or binding together a herd of horses and stars is hardly one of them – even if people with magical powers or shamans from Northern-Scandinavia could have seen themselves as riding in the air.²⁷

The consistent use of *stod* across different manuscripts, together with the important variant *stad*, suggests a meaningful connection between places and stars in the cultural and mythological context of the two sagas, *Órvar-Odds saga* and *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*. The variations in notation, however, indicate a nuanced understanding of vowel sounds by scribes and editors, while the overarching phrase hints at a deeper, possibly astrological, significance. The conclusion of the comparison is therefore that the connection between *stöð/staðr-staðir/stæði* and stars might reflect an astrological practice or belief, where understanding the positions of stars (or their places) was significant. This practice could involve reading the heavens to predict or explain earthly events, a common aspect of magical traditions. With this comparison, a new light has been shed on the readings of different manuscripts, and in fact, I think we might agree with the astronaut Sally Ride, who said, when she was out in space: *The stars don’t look bigger, but they do look brighter* (a now common quote). In the same vein, the meaning of *staðr/stöð* and *stjörnur* should now have been made somewhat clearer.

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²⁷ The author of the article does not know of any such legend.

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Summary

This article examines readings from several medieval manuscripts in order to correct what is identified as an error in the printed editions of *Örvar-Odds saga* and *Forsteins saga Víkingssonar*. Both sagas contain a similar narrative involving individuals reputed to possess magical abilities, specifically the capacity to “fasten” or “glue” together *stod* and stars. A commentary from 1680 interprets this phrase as referring to the act of connecting a herd of horses (*ON stóð*) with stars. Since then, editors of both sagas have consistently rendered the term *stod* as *stóð*. However, the nature of this connection – how herds of horses and stars might be joined – has not been further elucidated.

The article seeks to reassess this editorial interpretation, which has resulted in the reading *stóð ok stjörnur*. By analysing the orthographic variants of the word *stod* across different manuscript witnesses of both sagas, the study proposes a more plausible interpretation, considering alternative readings such as *stöð* and *staðr*. The comparative analysis suggests that the linkage between *stöð/staðr* and stars may reflect an astrological practice or belief system, where understanding the positions of stars (or their places) was significant. This connection may thus allude to the practice of reading the stars to forecast or explain earthly events – a common feature of magical traditions.

Keywords: Old Icelandic literature, legendary sagas, manuscripts, astronomy, astrology

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