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Thirty Viking Haikus

(A Sampling of the Original *Hávamál*)

Introduction:

THE *Hávamál* ('Sayings of the High One') is a poem containing a series of adages or pithy sayings in Old Icelandic verse, usually attributed to Odin. A hitherto unknown manuscript of this poem was recently unearthed in an ancient amphora in Turkey, and this manuscript clearly antedates the form of the text found in the *Codex Regius*.[1] Interestingly, the *Amphora Codex*, as it has now been designated, presents these short poems in the form of haikus, the Japanese three-line verse form having five syllables, then seven syllables, then five. These are also the earliest haikus known, it having been formerly believed that the form was invented in the fifteenth century – but the extreme age of the parchment and its ink is indisputable.

How is such a cultural synthesis possible? It is clear that Odin and his fellow Æsir (the tribe to which he belonged) came from Asia. The identity of the two names Æsir/Asia demonstrates this provenance, but in any case the Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson (AD 1178-1241) says so in the prologue to his *Prose Edda*, arguing that these so-called gods, the Æsir, were really men.[2] Snorri says further that "they spread throughout Saxland and from there throughout the northern regions, so that their language – that of the men of Asia – became the native tongue in all these lands" (Snorri, trans. Byock 8). Who are we to dispute the word of the wise Icelander Snorri? We must presume that the poetry-writing ruler Odin, before leading his people to the northern part of the world, learned the haiku verse form from a visiting Japanese poet. Perhaps that poet was traversing the famous "Silk Road" as a wandering holy man.

The following translation attempts to recreate in modern English the original syllabic form of these ancient, usually sensible, adages. The numbering of items in parentheses refers to the corrupt but well-known editions of the *Hávamál* based on the *Codex Regius* text, but it should be noted that this more genuine earlier text, most likely by Odin himself and possibly even an autograph manuscript, is considerably shorter than the awkwardly expanded and much-distorted version in the later codex.[3] That there are precisely thirty items here, a number associated in the cultures of the early Middle East with wisdom, serves further to authenticate the text.

If many of these brief texts seem trite, it should be remembered that an aphorism by definition is a familiar saying. That is why it is comforting, like an old pair of slippers. Some of these sayings, of course, would seem more familiar to a Viking than to people now: how often these days do most of us who will read these pages wish for a cow or venture to cross ice?

1 (1)

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1 The manuscript of this name, compiled in the mid-thirteenth century, is housed in the Arnamagnaean Institute in Reykjavik, Iceland. For an aesthetically pleasing English translation of *Hávamál*, see that by W. H. Auden and P.B. Taylor, available online. Interestingly, many of these more ancient haikus appear closer to the meaning of the verses recorded in the *Codex Regius* text than does the Auden-Taylor translation.

2 Jesse Byock, translator, *The Prose Edda* (Penguin, 2005), 6-7. (Other translations are available.)

3 A good example of distortion is the reversed order of the final two items, 29 and 30, in the later text of the *Hávamál*, appearing in the *Codex Regius* as items 84 and 79. The "cattle die" haiku is clearly intended to conclude the series. A similar statement is found at lines 108-09 of the Old English poem *The Wanderer*, at the end of a section of the poem.

At every doorway,
stop! Look around you. Look out!
You might find a foe.

2 (2)

Hail to hosts! Where shall
a guest in the hall sit down?
Near the blazing fire.

3 (3)

Give fire, food, and warm
clothes to guests who come over
cold hills to your hall.

4 (5)

It takes sharp wits to
travel in the world. Home folk
aren’t so hard on you.

5 (10)

Take with you good sense,
for wealth like this on the road
is better than gold.

6 (12)

Beer’s no boon! The more
you gulp, the less you remain
master of your mind.

7 (16)

Fools, by avoiding
fights, think they’ll live forever.
Old age spares no one.

8 (19)

Don’t cling to the cup.
Drink, speak useful words, or be
Silent. Pass it on.

9 (21)

Cows know when it’s time
to go home, but fools forget
how much they can drink.

10 (27)

No one will notice
how stupid someone is, if
he doesn’t talk much.

11 (29)

A gabbler who is
never silent will blunder.
Fast tongues do damage.

12 (30)

Many *seem* smart – if
asked no questions, and they don’t
stand out in the rain.

13 (35)

Love turns to loathing
if you linger too long on
someone else’s bench.

14 (37)

A farm of one’s own
is best, even small. We all
are someone at home.

15 (38)

Don’t leave weapons out
in a field. You never know
when you’ll need your spear.

16 (40)

Spend money on things

you want. Saving too long might
help someone you hate!

17 (42)

One should repay gifts
with gifts, laughter with laughter,
treachery with lies.

18 (48)

Generous folk live best.
They’re rarely sad. Misers moan
when they get a gift.

19 (49)

Seeing two stick men,
I gave them my clothes, for who
hails naked heroes?

20 (50)

A fir tree withers
standing alone, so how can
we live without love?

21 (52)

Large gifts aren’t all best:
half a loaf and a lifted
cup have found me friends.

22 (54)

Be just wise enough.
Those who live the fairest lives
know a few things well.

23 (56)

Be just wise enough.
Wishing for too much knowledge
ends a carefree life.

24 (57)

Flames leap log to log.
From each others' minds we learn;
fools prefer their own.

25 (58)

To take someone's life
or money, rise early. Wolves
asleep kill no prey.[4]

26 (63)

One man can know, but
a second should not. The whole
world knows if three do.

27 (70)

It's better to be
alive than dead. The living
can hope for a cow.

28 (78)

Even a dolt who
knows nothing, knows this: money
makes monkeys of men.

29 (84)

Praise day at nightfall,
wives when dead, maidens when wed,
ice when you've crossed it.

30 (79)

Cattle die, kin die,
one day you will die yourself.
Praise alone lives on.

4 The manuscript text is obscured here by a slit in the parchment, identified by noted archaeoarmologist R. J. S. Stone as a shallow dagger thrust (personal communication, 7/18/2012). The word translated 'prey' may in fact be 'sheep': "Wolves asleep kill no sheep." One must disregard as unlikely A. C. Munchavin's suggestion that the wolves are 'praying' (*Hittite Review* 29 [2004], 86).