

# Distinguishing Discourses of the *Dísir*

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**ABSTRACT:** *Previous studies of the dísir have tended to focus on either their links with fertility or use of the term to designate a wide range of supernatural female figures. This study reassesses the textual evidence for the nature of these beings, applying Jens Peter Schjødt's notion of "discourse" to argue that we should not be searching for a single coherent category of beings. Rather, it argues, our sources depict three semi-distinct "dísir" discourses: a group of prosperity-focused female figures with strong links to local landscapes worshipped during the late pagan Iron Age; the use of the signifier "dís" as a poetic synonym for a range of female figures in verse; and a medieval textual discourse of "martial dísir" construed on the basis of poetic texts, but which has no basis in pre-Christian religion.*

**RESUME:** *Tidligere studier af dísjerne har haft en tendens til at fokusere enten på deres forbindelse til frugtbarhed eller på brugen af termen til at beskrive en bred vifte af overnaturlige kvindeskikkelser. Dette studier revurderer tekstgrundlaget for disse væseners natur og benytter Jens Peter Schjødts begreb "diskurs" til at argumentere for, at der ikke er tale om én standardiseret kategori af væsener. I stedet argumenteres der for, at kilderne afslører tre mere eller mindre særskilte diskurser om "dísir": En gruppe kvindefigurer med fokus på velstand med stærke bånd til lokale landskaber, som blev dyrket i den sene jernalder; brugen af termen "dís" som et poetisk synonym for diverse kvindeskikkelser i digte; og en middelalderlig tekstdiskurs omkring "krigeriske dísir" konstrueret ud fra poetiske tekster, men uden understøttelse i førkristen religion.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Supernatural females; pre-Christian beliefs; taxonomy; heiti; Eddic poetry*

The study of religion in the pre-Christian Nordic region is something of a fraught endeavour, caught between empirical difficulties on the one hand ("do we have enough source material to say anything meaningful on a given topic?") and theoretical quandaries on the other ("is "religion" even an appropriate thing to study in the Iron-Age North?"). Fortunately, there has been a recent drive in our field to reflect more explicitly on these problems, resulting in a small but growing methodological discourse

(Hadley & Richards 2000; Jackson 2012; Schjødt 2012; Frog & Latvala 2013; Heide & Bek-Pedersen 2014; Frog 2015; Brink & Collinson 2017; Glauser *et al.* 2018; Murphy 2020; Murphy & Mancini *forthcoming*). Key amongst this wave has been the work of Jens Peter Schjødt, who has introduced a range of analytical tools – modelling, semantic centres, levels of comparativism, and discourse – to our field (1999; 2009; 2012; 2013; 2017a; 2017b). In this article, I wish to experiment with the last of these analytical frameworks, and argue that considering discourses is a particularly productive approach to take when attempting to understand the various signifieds behind the Old Norse signifier “*dís*”.

The study of discourse is, of course, not an approach restricted to the study of pre-Christian religion (Angermüller *et al.* 2014). As Schjødt proposes its use, however, it is as a “space of possible expressions” regarding Nordic paganisms – or particular aspects thereof (Schjødt 2012, 272). Thus, we might have multiple versions of “the same” myth, or different expressions of mythological figures: Óðinn can be a cunning tactician, or a determined lover, but nowhere in the Óðinnic discourse as we have access to it today is it appropriate for Óðinn to be portrayed as unintelligent (Schjødt 2009, 17). This approach is generally an effective one, and researchers have modelled a number of late-pagan discourses regarding a range of pre-Christian religious life and thought. Some of these discourses are focused, formulating what seem to have been commonly-held ideas throughout the late pagan period (Taggart 2018, 200). Others are broader, likely reflecting figures or phenomena that were expressed much less coherently (Nygaard 2022). Rather than being seen as a failure of approach or evidence that our source corpora are helplessly incomplete, I believe instances of broad – even irreconcilable – discourses should be seen in the light of the recent “diversity discourse”. This is a body of scholarship seeking to demonstrate the intense variation within pre-Christian religion, arguing that different reflexes of this “same” religion may have shared certain common precepts and structures, but could differ from one another as much as any dialects of a language group (Nordberg 2012; cf. Ljungberg 1938; McKinnell 1994; Svanberg 2003; Bertell 2006; Brink 2007; Schjødt 2009; Gunnell 2015; Murphy 2016; 2017; 2018a; 2018b).

There are nonetheless some instances where the data available to us seems impossible to reconcile into a single discourse, however broad that might be. Of the *fylgjur*, for example, Else Mundal argued that the Old Norse signifier seems to have designated two quite distinct types of supranatural beings: anthropomorphic beings (which always appear as women) that offer protection to their charges, and theriomorphic spirits that represent the personalities of the humans to whom they are attached (Mundal 1974); even going so far as to declare that the two “have little in common but the name” (Mundal 1993, 624). The *fylgjur*, like the *álfar*, thus make a strong case that what Alaric Hall has called “the convention of creating taxonomies of mythological races on a one-name, one-race basis” is badly outdated (Hall 2007, 22), as recent studies of the *Vanir* and *Æsir* have further demonstrated (Simek 2005; 2010; Frog & Roper 2011; Frog 2021).

It is in this light I wish to consider the *dísir*. Not unlike *fylgjur*, *dísir* appear in a range of guises throughout the extant sources purporting to describe pre-Christian worldviews. In the most general terms, they can be described as female supranatural beings who usually (but not universally) appear *en masse*, are typically nameless, and are found in contexts varying from battlefields to dreams. It can thus be extremely difficult to distinguish *dísir* from similar supranatural female figures, particularly the *nornir*, *valkyrjur*, *fylgjur*, and *draumkonar*. In Karen Bek-Pedersen's terms, "they do tend to merge more or less into each other, yet without ever becoming entirely synonymous with one another" (Bek-Pedersen 2011, 64). Of course, Schjødt has stressed that discourses should not be regarded as "closed space[s] with watertight barriers to other discursive spaces" (Schjødt 2012, 272), and some blurring around the edges of adjacent conceptual categories is to be expected. Nonetheless, the sheer breadth of ideas attached to the Old Norse signifier "*dís*" seems worthy of closer inspection. Previous attempts to define the nature of these creatures are primarily split between those preferring an understanding of *dísir* as protective, fertility-focused female spirits (Ström 1954; Raudvere 2003, 68; Lindow 2000, 1497–98), and those regarding "*dís*" as a general term for "(supernatural) lady" (Hall 2007, 22). My goal here is not to prove (or disprove) that any one such definition – and the discourse behind it – is *the* correct way to regard Iron-Age *dísir*, but rather to demonstrate that we are likely dealing with *multiple* overlapping *dís* discourses.

### *Dísir* as a Coherent Category: Prosperity *Dísir*

Perhaps the best-known study of *dísir*, Folke Ström's *Diser, normor, valkyrjor* (1954), is also one of the strongest advocates of the *dísir* forming a distinct "genus" of supranatural beings. For Ström, the "diskollektiv" (*dís*-collective; 1954, 57) can best be distinguished from related supranatural female collectives (particularly *nornir* and *valkyrjur*) in that there is evidence they were the recipients of cult during the late pagan period, which he links to a "fruktbarhetskult" (fertility cult; 1954, 20). By modern standards, Ström's study is badly over rationalised, with a number of barely-related phenomena subsumed within his *diskollektiv* without sufficient critical reflection. That said, he is right to note that the *dísir* seem likely to have received active worship: *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* record two separate instances of a "*dísablót*" (sacrifice of/to the *dísir*) performed at high-status settlements in Norway towards the end of the year, specifically linked to the *Vetrnætur* (Winter Nights) in *Víga-Glúms saga* (*Eyfirðinga sögur*, 17; *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, 106–11; cf. Gunnell 2000). Given that both texts make use of the *dísablót* as little more than background settings for social gatherings at which their Icelandic heroes reveal something of their characters (Glúmr transforming from *kolbítr* to promising young man and Egill confirming his status as a troublemaker by crossing King Eiríkr), it seems to me that these medieval *Íslendingasögur* deployed the *dísablót* primarily to lend a certain archaic colour to their narratives, with the *Egils saga* account in particular describing the rituals in wholly conventional terms. Nonetheless, the coherence of the two accounts is noteworthy, as is the implied familiarity

of their thirteenth-century audience with the concept, which suggests they drew on genuine pre-Christian tradition.

Elsewhere, Snorri Sturluson's early thirteenth-century *Ynglinga saga* also witnesses the *dísablót*, albeit setting it in the legendary past of Sweden when the unfortunate King Aðils falls to his death when riding his horse around "dísarsalinn" (the hall of the *dís*) during the festival at Uppsala (Snorri Sturluson 1941, I, 58). Snorri's source, the poem *Ynglingatal*, makes mention of neither the *dísablót* nor the *dísarsalr*, although it does blame Aðils' death on a "vitta vétrr" (being of magic), and it is not impossible that Snorri, during his time in Norway in AD 1218-19, heard – perhaps from the Swedish lawspeaker Eskil Magnusson – a version of the tale that made explicit the involvement of a *dís* (or several *dísir*), or at least a female supranatural figure (Faulkes 2008). That the "vétrr" in question was female is also recorded in the early thirteenth-century Latin *Historia Norwegiae*, where Aðils "ante edem Diane dum ydolorum sacrificia faceret" (fleeing from idolatrous sacrifice, fell from his horse in front of the temple of Diana; *Historia Norwegie*, 76–9).<sup>1</sup> Regardless of Snorri's sources, there does seem to have been some variation between Norwegian and Swedish praxis regarding the *dísir*. While the West-Norse tradition suggests the Winter Nights took place in the autumn, *Upplandslagen* – a medieval law code from the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries – locates "distingsfriden" (the holiday of the *þing* of the *dís(ir)*) and "distingsdagen" (days of the *þing* of the *dís(ir)*) between Christmas and Holy Thursday (The Feast of the Ascension, part of the Easter festival; Holmbäck & Wessén 1993, 205; cf. Nordberg 2006; Lindow 2020, 1496). Nonetheless, these texts do suggest that the *dísir* were generally seen as some sort of anonymous collective of female supranatural figures – Ström's "diskollektiv". Similar ideas may underlie the *vetrnatur* festival in *Þiðranda þátr ok Þórhalls*, a semi-independent narrative preserved within the late fourteenth-century compilation codex *Flateyjarbók*, to which I will return below.

What might complicate this is the singular nature of *dísarsalinn* in *Ynglinga saga*, which also appears in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*. This fourteenth-century Icelandic *for-naldarsaga*, which makes no mention of any ritual connected with the *dísir*, employs the *dísarsalr* as the location for the suicide-by-hanging of Helga when her husband, the eponymous Heiðrekr, kills her father (FSN, I, 209).<sup>2</sup> That we might be dealing with at least some traditions where there is only one *dís* (or at least one prominent *dís* among many) is also implied by the *interpretatio romana* of this being as Diana in *Historia Norwegiae*. In line with his highly-rationalised approach to female supranatural figures generally, Ström (and other commentators) sought to identify this being as Freyja, a key goddess in Uppland during the late pagan period, presenting her as something of

<sup>1</sup> I have no wish to claim that Snorri made use – or was even aware – of the *Historia Norwegiae*, which only marginally predates his *Edda*. Snorri's role in the propagation of the *dísablót* is particularly complex, given his (putative) role in the composition of *Egils saga* (Vésteinn Ólason 1968; Haukur Þorgeirsson 2014).

<sup>2</sup> It is possible that the literary *Hervarar saga* was attempting to contrast the worship of the *dísir* with the masculine, warlike nature of Heiðrekr's Óðinn-worship, thus implying that *dís*-worship may have been a primarily female concern (cf. Gunnell 2000).

a lead-*dís* heading the collective (Ström 1954, 6; cf. de Vries 1970, II, 307–08; Sundqvist 2002, 210). Although this is entirely possible, I am unconvinced of any genetic link between Freyja and the more general “diskollektiv”, and am thus somewhat sceptical that the *dísarsalr* at Uppsala belongs to the collective discourse at all. Indeed, one of the key reasons Ström is so keen to associate Freyja and the *dísir* is their alleged common interest in fertility – something more recent scholarship has significantly complicated in the goddess’ case (Ingunn Ásdísardóttir 2007; 2020).

What therefore requires further scrutiny at this point is the alleged link between the *dísir* and fertility. The *dísir* are invoked to help in human childbirth in the eddic poem *Sigrdrífumál* (*Eddukvæði*, II, 315), and the *dísablót* may suggest links with the growth of the natural world via harvest (in the Norwegian autumn festival) and planting (in the Swedish spring festival). Looking beyond narrowly-defined biological fertility to a more general interest in material prosperity – which I believe would prove more productive in the study of pre-Christian Nordic religions generally – further support for the interest of the *dísir* in prosperity may be found in the Icelandic “landdísasteinar” (stones of the land-*dísir*). These stones in the West Fjords, the most isolated part of Iceland, were recorded as being subject to specific prohibitions in the early nineteenth century (Turville-Petre 1963; cf. de Vries 1970, II, 297–8). The taboos are clearly part of a wider Icelandic *álagablettir* (places of power) phenomenon, where specific landscape features were regarded as the mansions of particular supranatural beings who took an interest in the prosperity of the local area (Gunnell 2018). This tradition seems to have been established as early as the tenth century, when the missionary Bishop Friðrekr, visiting the farm at Giljá, destroyed the stone in which the farm’s “ármaðr” (steward), who guarded the settlement’s livestock, lived (*Biskupa sögur I*, II, 7–8). These figures appear to have modern reflexes in the *huldufólk* (hidden people), and it is notable that, at least in the West Fjords, the local expressions of these beings were named *dísir* rather than *álfar* or *landvættir* (land spirits), as is more common elsewhere – which might suggest that local landscape spirits throughout the Nordic region may have amalgamated *dísir* into their collectives. The survival of some complex toponyms, such as Disin in Norway (from \*Disavin, meadow of the *dísir*; de Vries 1970, II, 157–58, 298–99, 475; cf. Lindow 2020, 1496), further suggests that *dísir* could have an investment in the local landscape, although I am sceptical of Ström’s claim that such toponyms “peka[r] på ett klart samband mellan diserna och manliga fruktbarhetsgudar” (point to a clear connection between *dísir* and male fertility gods; 1954, 20).

Overall, then, the evidence in favour of the *dísir* being a distinct genus of supranatural females is not expansive, but it is suggestive of certain reoccurring associations: the celebration of the *dísablót* at significant settlements (*Víga-Glúms saga*, *Egils saga*, *Ynglingasaga*, *Historia Norwegiae*); the importance of these rituals for the wider community rather than just the masculine martial elite (*Víga-Glúms saga*, *Egils saga*, *Upplandslagen*; potentially *Þiðranda þáttr* and *Hervarar saga*); and an association of the “diskollektiv” with material prosperity in the local landscape (*Víga-Glúms saga*, *Egils saga*,

*Sigrdrífumál*, and toponymic evidence). To my mind, this evidence implies the existence of a coherent “space of possible expressions” regarding a particular category of supranatural female figures, best described as “prosperity *dísir*”. Rather than offering too strict a definition of such beings, I believe it suffices to lightly adapt the one offered by Catharina Raudvere:

The function of the [prosperity] *dísir* seems to have been the protection of crops and production at a specific location. They are more connected to the landscape, and have a more pronounced protective role than the more abstract *fylgjur*. The latter are related to an individual or family, while [these] *dísir* seem to be linked primarily to a specific location. (Raudvere 2003, 68; trans. mine)

### “*Dísir*” as a General Term: Supranatural Female Figures

If something like the prosperity-focused *dísir* I have outlined here reflects one of the two major positions in current scholarship, the other is a much broader understanding of the signifier “*dís*” as a general term designating something like “(supernatural) lady” (Hall 2007, 22). There are clearly instances where a range of supranatural female figures from goddesses to minor mythological characters are indeed labelled *dísir*, which led Jan de Vries to propose that “man sogar von einem Sammelnamen für übernatürliche Wesen hat reden können” (one might even be able to speak of [“*dísir*” as] a collective name for supernatural beings), noting also that uses of the signifier are “nicht einheitlich” (inconsistent, not uniform; 1970, II, 297). However, studies like those of de Vries and Ström, which were keen to link every possible use of the signifier “*dís*” to the pre-Christian phenomenon (or, more likely, phenomena) of the *dísir*, tend to downplay that many of these figures are only called “*dísir*” in poetic diction. I am therefore doubtful that pre-Christian uses of the signifier “*dís*” were genuinely polysemic, that is, able to designate either i) a member of a prosperity-focused collective of female spirits, or ii) any supranatural female figure.

Let us begin by looking at the relationship between the *valkyrjur* and *dísir* – or perhaps better “*dísir*”. Matthias Egeler, for example, rightly noted that the signifier “*valkyrja*” is used comparatively rarely in early sources (2011, 33–34), appearing only twice in eddic poetry.<sup>3</sup> Many figures we modern readers regard as *valkyrjur*, therefore, are not explicitly labelled as such in the sources that preserve them, and in some instances these beings are indeed identified as “*dís(ir)*”: for example, both Brynhildr and Sigrún, elsewhere widely identified as *valkyrjur*, are called “*dís skjöldunga*” (“*dís* of the *Skjöldungar* [a legendary dynasty]”) in *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu* 14 and *Helgakviða Hund-*

<sup>3</sup> *Völuspá* 30 and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 38 (*Eddukvæði*, I, 298; II, 254). On the other hand, the term is more freely used in prose sections of the *Codex Regius*, albeit mostly concentrated in the three so-called “*Helgi* poems” (*Völundarkviða* pr., *Eddukvæði*, I, 428; *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* pr., II, 261; 262; 266; *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* pr, 271, 273, 274, 283; *Sigrdrífumál* pr., II, 314). This distinct concentration might lend some credence to the suggestion that the *Codex Regius* in its current state was put together from a number of smaller, previously-independent collections of poetry.

*ingsbana* II 51 (*Eddukvæði*, II, 326; 282). Even the famous riders from Logafjall in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* 15, later revealed to be Sigrún and her *valkyrjur* companions, are called “*dísir suðrœnar*” (southern *dísir*) in the next strophe of the poem (*Eddukvæði*, II, 249–50). Of course, for Brynhildr, Sigrún, and other similarly-named *valkyrjur*-cum-*dísir* (what Ström called “*diser-valkyrjor*”; 1954, 97), such labels are only part of their complex social identities in the imagined worlds of the legendary literature that preserves them. While examples like these could be taken as evidence for the existence of a discourse of *dísir* as a catch-all “supranatural female figure” category, I am strongly inclined to believe that cases like these are simply clear examples of poetic diction, where the unwieldy three-syllable term “*valkyrja*” (pl. “*valkyrjur*”) has been replaced by the more manageable one- or two-syllable “*dís(ir)*” for reasons of metrics or rhyme. That *dís* was seen by these poets as an acceptable substitution reflects, indeed relies upon, the significant overlap between the semantic fields of the two terms, almost certainly based around the nature of both groups as collectives of supranatural, human-like, exclusively female beings that typically appear *en masse* (Murphy 2013; Quinn 2020). Given we have already demonstrated the existence of a coherent discourse of prosperity *dísir*, which would be an ideal indirect referent for such constructions, I see no reason to posit the existence of the wider category on this basis.

There are, however, some cases where specific (supranatural) women, in the sense of named individuals, are labelled “*dís(ir)*”. This, in turn, might speak to the existence of a broader semantic range than the one indicated by the prosperity discourse: the goddesses Freyja and Skaði, Lyngheiðr Hreiðmarsdóttir, and Guðrún Gjúkadóttir. This, in turn, might speak to the existence of a broader semantic range than the one indicated by the prosperity discourse.

In *Gylfaginning* 35, for instance, Snorri tells us that:

Freyja á mǫrg nǫfn, en sú er sǫk til þess at hon gaf sér ýmis heiti er hon fór með ókunnum þjóðum at leita Óðs. Hon heitir Mardǫll ok Hǫrn, Gefn, Sýr. Freyja átti Brísingamen. Hon er kǫlluð Vanadís. (Snorri Sturluson 2005, 29.)

Freyja has many names, and this is the reason for it, that she gave herself various names when she travelled among unknown peoples searching for Óðr. She is called [i.e. her names are] Mardǫll and Hǫrn, Gefn, Sýr. Freyja owned [the necklace] Brísingamen. She is called [i.e. known as] Vanadís.

“*Vanadís*” (*dís* of the *Vanir*) is here clearly treated differently from Freyja’s other appellations. Not only is it separated from a list of the names she went by amongst different peoples by a description of an important mythological possession – the necklace Brísingamen – but the language used to introduce it is also distinct: Mardǫll, Hǫrn, Gefn, and Sýr are introduced by “*heitir*” (hight, is called), while Vanadís is something other people call Freyja, rather than part of her identity. Compare, for example, the common construction used to introduce characters in *Íslendingasögur*, such as the opening line of *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*: “Þorvaldr hét maðr ok var kallaðr skiljandi” (‘A man was called [i.e. his name was] Þorvaldr, and [he] was called [the] Insightful’; *Vatnsdæla saga*, 135). As such, Vanadís is not one of Freyja’s many names, but rather another way of referring to her. This is further reflected when the term also appears in

a list of Freyja kennings in Chapter 20 of *Skáldskaparmál*, alongside others such as “dóttur Njarðr” (daughter of Njörðr), “systur Freys” (sister of Freyr) and “eigandi valfalls ok Sessrúmnis” (owner of the fallen-*valr* and Sessrúmnir [her hall]); Snorri Sturluson 1998, I, 30). Notably, these are not names, but periphrastic descriptions that would help an informed listener recognise Freyja.

I therefore believe that “-dís” is used here – and in the Skaði kenning “ǫndurdís” (‘snowshoe-dís’) preserved in the mid-tenth century poem *Háleygjatal* 4 (SkP, 195) – as an interchangeable base-word for a female being, just as “-brúðr” is in the Freyja kenning “Vanabrúðr” (bride of the Vanir; Snorri Sturluson 1998, I, 40). Indeed, Snorri himself explicitly instructs would-be poets to construct exactly this type of kenning: “Heitir ok dóttir barn, jóð. Heitir ok systir dís, jóðdís” (A daughter is also named a child, a baby. A sister is named a *dís* [or] baby-*dís*; Snorri Sturluson 1998, I, 108).<sup>4</sup> I therefore see no reason to believe that either Freyja or Skaði had any particular connection to the category of *dísir* as independent beings (despite the claims of Ström, de Vries, and Sundqvist noted above), nor that their cognomina Vanadís and Ǫndurdís imply the existence of a broader discourse of “supranatural female figure” *dísir*, given such *heiti* could draw on the demonstrably coherent discourse of prosperity *dísir* examined above.

A similar conclusion must be reached regarding the cognomen of the late-tenth century poet Þorbjörn dísarskáld. Only two strophes of Þorbjörn’s poetry survive, both preserved in *Skáldskaparmál*, the first recounting the deeds of Þórr (Snorri Sturluson 1998, I, 16–17), the second describing a baptism (Snorri Sturluson 1998, I, 76). The grammatically singular form of the genitive “dísar-” in his cognomen might imply a dedication to a particular pre-Christian goddess, perhaps Freyja. On the other hand, the baptism in his second verse has been used to suggest that Þorbjörn converted to Christianity (Snorri Sturluson 1998, I, 200), which I would argue opens up another possible set of referents for the *dís* of his epithet – the Virgin Mary and female saints – as well as the possibility that the skald’s byname came about through some form of syncretism, perhaps like that dramatised in *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds* (*Vatnsdæla Saga*, 133–200). Alternatively, it is not impossible that Þorbjörn, as a skald, once used the signifier “dís” to refer to a particular human woman, and gained his cognomen on that basis. Regardless, the poet’s cognomen seems to employ “dís” as a poetic synonym for a term now lost to us, rather than as a direct invocation of the *dísir* as a particular type of supranatural female being in their own right. Þorbjörn can therefore offer little concrete to our present discussion.

Stronger support for the existence of a *dísir* discourse focused on “supranatural female figure” can be found in the case of two human(?) women, Lyngheiðr Hreiðmarsdóttir, and Guðrún Gjúkadóttir. Lyngheiðr is a minor figure who appears in *Reginismál* 12: before Sigurðr appears in the poem (and thus before the mention of

<sup>4</sup> Unlike the case of Freyja’s introduction in *Gylfaginning* 35, the use of the verb “heita” here should not be understood as implying that daughters were named “child” or “baby”. Rather, a secondary use of the term “heita” seems to have been to introduce *heiti* (poetic synonyms), with which it clearly shares an etymology.



hostile *dísir* in strophe 24), the dying Hreiðmarr curses Lyngheiðr, one of his daughters, as “*dís úlfhuguð*” (wolf-hearted *dís*) when she refuses to avenge Hreiðmarr’s murder by her brother (*Eddukvæði*, II, 299). Given that the two key aspects of Lyngheiðr’s identity are as daughter and sister, it is entirely possible that *Reginsmál* is simply employing “*dís*” as a *heiti* for “woman”. On the other hand, it is also possible to read this use of “*dís*” literally, in line with Hall’s definition of the term as “(supernatural) lady”: according to the poem, Lyngheiðr’s family is said to include at least one dwarf and two brothers capable of taking on the shape of an otter and a dragon (cf. Liberman 2002). If there were to be one “lady” suitable to be judged “supernatural” by dint of her birth, it would be Lyngheiðr. However, we know almost nothing about the woman herself – she and her sister disappear from the poem after Lyngheiðr speaks one more verse to Reginn, revealing nothing about her own nature – and the identification of her as “supernatural” on the basis of genetic relationships may very well be flawed. It is quite possible that she was regarded neutrally as simply a (human) woman, without any particular claim to the signifier “*dís*”.

In a comparable case, “*dís*” is also used of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir in *Atlakviða* 37, just before she feeds the cooked remains of their sons to her husband Atli: “Skævaði þá in skírleita veigar þeim at bera, afkár *dís*, jöfroom” (then the pure-faced one strode, terrible *dís*, to bring drink to them, the warriors; *Eddukvæði*, II, 380). It is difficult to know how to read “*dís*” here: on the one hand, it might be a straightforward poetic synonym, in this case what Snorri calls an “*ókend heiti*”: terms of similar meaning that could, in poetic contexts, serve as (near) synonyms. These are defined by Anthony Faulkes as “names, appellations, designations, terms without periphrasis, without qualifiers or attributives (determinants)” (Snorri Sturlusson 1998, I, lxxii). Alternatively, “*afkár*” (terrible, odd, strange) may have served as enough of a qualifier to enable “*afkár dís*” to serve as a kenning – although for what, precisely, is unclear. Guðrún is otherwise portrayed in *Atlakviða* as a human woman, albeit one with remarkable strength of will. Given the extreme nature of her actions in this episode – certainly “*afkár*” in comparison to those of most human women – I believe the use of “*dís*” in this context is intended to signal that her transgressive behaviour edged her beyond (human) social boundaries and into the category of “female Other” (cf. Clunies Ross 1994, 42–102), perhaps only temporarily.<sup>5</sup> Even if this were to have been the poet’s intent, this case would seem to offer little support for a discourse of “supranatural female figure” *dísir*, given the ambiguous nature of the signifier in *Atlakviða* 37.

Two final pieces of evidence that might imply “*dís*” could be used for a broad range of supranatural beings can be found in Snorri’s *Skáldskaparmál*. The first is the mythological poem *Haustlög* by Þjóðólfr ór Hvini. In this early tenth-century text, Þjóðólfr

<sup>5</sup> This is notably distinct from ideas underlying (at least some) comparative material. The Old English *ides*, Old Saxon *idis*, and Old High German *itis* are occasionally used for extraordinary women of a supranatural bent – *ides* for Grendel’s Mother in *Beowulf* (ll. 1259, 1351; 48–51), and both *itis* and *idis* for the Virgin Mary (Meany 1990, 158) – but the terms seem first and foremost to have designated human women of significant social stature (Meany 1990). This also comfortably explains their application to Mary, and (ironically) to Grendel’s Mother.

parallels the interest of the gods with those of the *dísir*: “þönd öllu því... vildu svá *dísir*” (all the powers [caused] this... the *dísir* desired it; Snorri Sturlusson 1998, I, 23). To my mind, this “*dísir*” is clearly an *ókend heiti* for the *ásynjur*, rather than a reference to an entirely separate group of beings. This reading is supported in Chapter 31 of *Skáldskaparmál*, where Snorri explains that *dís*-names may be used as *heiti* for women: “Kona er ok kend við allar *ásynjur* eða *nornir* eða *dísir*” (women are also called the names of all the *ásynjur* or *nornir* or *dísir*; Snorri Sturlusson 1998, I, 40). Given that nowhere in the prosperity discourse are *dísir* given individual names, appearing anonymously and *en masse*, this may suggest that Snorri was aware of a tradition where either *dísir* did have names, or that other named beings could also be regarded as *dísir*, either of which would support the idea of a distinct discourse of *dísir* as a general term for “supernatural female figures” beyond the prosperity *dísir*. Tempting as it might be to imagine that Snorri had access to a now-lost *\*Disapulr*, however, I believe it is more likely that he was not aware of any *dís* names himself, but wished to imply that – in Skaldic poetry, at least – *dísir* could be equivalent to *ásynjur* or *nornir*. Lotte Motz has demonstrated that Snorri’s sources came up short on female mythological beings, forcing him to invent some of the *ásynjur* in his *Edda* (Motz 1980), and it seems to me that Snorri would thus have had significant motivation to exaggerate the role of any genuine pre-Christian tradition of supernatural female figures he did have knowledge of. I am therefore unconvinced that Snorri’s words here support the existence of a widespread discourse where “*dísir*” designated supernatural female figures generally.

Overall then, there seems to be little evidence in these texts to support the idea that the Old Norse signifier “*dís*” could be used as a general term for “supernatural female figure”. The cases where it is applied to *valkyrjur* (or valkyric women), the goddesses Freyja and Skaði, and other human-like women can all be comfortably explained by the use of the signifier “*dís*” as either a poetic synonym for another term designating a type of supernatural female figure or as the base word of a kenning. In such cases, I wholly agree with John Lindow that “considerable caution must be exercised” (Lindow 2020, 1498). Some of these instances are less clear-cut, with *Reginsmál*’s Lyngheiðr (whose “racial” identity as *dís*, human, dwarf, or something else entirely is deeply ambiguous) perhaps the most likely candidate for an independent *dís*-hood. Nonetheless, I see no reason that the prosperity *dísir* could not have served as the referent of these synonyms and base words, and am therefore sceptical that “*dís*” was truly a polysemous concept in pre-Christian times.

### *Dísir* as a Semi-Coherent Discourse: Martial *Dísir*

Thus far, we have considered evidence for the *dísir* as a collective of prosperity-focused spirits, and I have argued that many of the other usages of the signifier “*dís*” do not represent a general category of “supernatural female figures”, but are rather poetic synonyms on the basis of the former discourse. There remains, however, a not insignificant corpus of “*dísir*” that I have not yet examined here. These cases demonstrate no link to fertility, productivity, or material success, and I have therefore excluded

them from consideration as potential prosperity *dísir*. I have similarly excluded them from the putative “supranatural female figure” discourse (the inherently all-encompassing nature of which would allow the inclusion of almost any female being) because I believe the remaining *dísir* in fact form a semi-coherent discourse of their own. These *dísir* demonstrate an interest in the outcome of armed conflict, appear on battlefields, and are sometimes depicted as wearing or carrying war gear, and I have therefore termed this discourse “martial *dísir*”. I believe a case can be made that these beings constituted, if not a particular type of supranatural being in the late Iron Age, at least a distinct discourse in textual imaginings of the Middle Ages.

Let us start with the straightforwardly martial *dísir* found in Chapter 11 of *Völsunga saga*, where the Óðinnic hero Sigmundr is protected in battle by “hans spádísir” (his prophecy-*dísir*; FSN, I, 26), at least until the deity appears on the battlefield to dramatically withdraw his patronage, resulting in Sigmundr’s death. The presence here of the particle *spá-* (prophecy) – found in other compound nouns like “spámaðr” (prophet), “spákona” (prophetess, sibyl) and “spámæli” (prophetic speech) – could be taken to imply some guiding or determining function in these *dísir*’s role.<sup>6</sup> However, no such function is apparent from the text, and I believe it more likely that the *sagamaðr* responsible for the saga in its current form chose to designate these *dísir* as *spádísir* in order to differentiate them from the (somewhat confused) presentation of *dísir* that appear in Glaumvǫr’s dream later in the text.<sup>7</sup> While the presence of these *spádísir* on the battlefield is a feature they share with *valkyrjur*, their explicitly protective role is distinct from Óðinn’s psychopompic servants – and the signifier *valkyrja* was clearly known to the compiler of *Völsunga saga* as it appears earlier in the text (FSN, I, 21).

A similar set of circumstances can be found in *Grímnismál* 53, where, upon Óðinn’s escape from his torture between the fires of Geirröðr’s hall, the deity declares:

Eggmóðan val  
nú mun Yggr hafa,  
þitt veit ek líf um liðit;  
úfar ro dísir;  
nú knáttu Óðin sjá,  
nálgazt mik ef þú megir! (*Eddukvæði*, I, 379)

Yggr will now have [the] edge-hewn slain,  
I know your life to have passed; *dísir* are hostile;  
now you can see Óðinn, come at me, if you can!

As in *Völsunga saga*, the context is highly Óðinnic, and the god’s royal protégé does not survive the scene. Unlike the saga text, however, these *dísir* are not protective, but hostile to Geirröðr. Whether we should understand them as Óðinn’s protective *dísir*, or

<sup>6</sup> I have not been able to locate any evidence for Catharina Raudverð’s claim that “in the sagas, a *vǫlva* is also referred to as *spádis*, or female diviner” (2008, 240). It is possible that “*spádis*” is an error here for “*spákona*”, which occurs multiple times in texts, including *Kormáks saga* (*Vatnsdæla saga*, 282) and *Eiríks saga rauða* (*Eyrbyggja saga*, 206–08).

<sup>7</sup> On the compiler of *Völsunga saga*’s use of his source material, see Finch 1962; Clover 1986; Tulinius 2002.

Geirröðr's own turned against him by the deity's power, is unclear. Still another possibility is that the audience were intended to understand that these *dísir* were "actually" *valkyrjur*, represented here by the two-syllable term "dísir" due to the metrical constraints of the poetry. Although the stanza's use of the term "valr" (those killed in battle) might call the *valkyrjur* to mind, there are a number of other instances where *dísir* play an active role on the battlefield, which makes me reluctant to assume that "dísir" in this context is purely a poetic synonym. In *Reginsmál* 24, for example, the young Sigurðr (another Óðinnic hero) picks up an Óðinn-like hitchhiker while on a sea journey. This figure advises the young hero that, in battle "tálar dísir standa þér á tvær hliðar ok vilja þik sáran sjá" (deceitful *dísir* stand on either side of you and want to see you wounded; *Eddukvæði*, II, 302). Here too, it is somewhat ambiguous whether or not the poet intended to invoke *valkyrjur*: the female spirits are anonymous, *en masse*, and they desire Sigurðr's defeat, all of which could describe *valkyrjur* just as well as *dísir* seeking to protect the hero's enemies.

Less valkyric, but clearly still part of the same discourse, are the *dísir* described in the flyting between the warriors Úlfsteinn (a champion of King Hálfir) and Úlfr in *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*. As the two men trade barbs in *fornýðislag*, Úlfsteinn declares:

[Úlfsteinn: ...] hygg við hjálmum  
hingat komnar  
til Danmarkar  
dísir várar.

Úlfr kvað: Yðr munu dauðar  
dísir allar,  
heill kveð ek horfna  
frá Hálfs rekkum. (Skj B2, 284; cf. FSN, II, 175–77.)

[Úlfsteinn: ... I] believe our *dísir*  
are coming here  
to Denmark  
in helmets.

Úlfr said: All your *dísir*  
must be dead,  
I say luck disappears  
from Hálfir's warriors.

The portrayal of the *dísir* as wearing military equipment ("við hjálmum") is decidedly valkyric. However, that Úlfsteinn's men (at least) have their own, presumably protective, *dísir* – and that these can be defeated – suggests we should take *Hálfs saga* at face value when it names these beings *dísir* rather than *valkyrjur*. Of course, *Hálfs saga* is an early-fourteenth century *fornaldasaga*, and thus reflects medieval ideas about pre-Christian beliefs rather than those beliefs themselves.

Comparable ideas appear to be at play in the eddic poem *Atlamál in grænlenzko*: when Gunnarr and Högni prepare to visit their sister Guðrún and her husband Atli, their wives each dream a series of visions featuring a group of female figures.

Glaumvǫr sees “Konur [...] dauðar” (dead women) who wished to “kjósa” (choose) her husband Gunnar, inviting him “brálliga til bekkja sinna” (quickly to their benches; *Eddukvæði*, II, 387). Following this ominous description, Glaumvǫr declares to Gunnar that “aflima orðnar þér dísir” (your *dísir* have become cut off from you; *Eddukvæði*, II, 387). I read the description in the first three lines of the strophe to be drawing on the *valkyrja* tradition, which would suggest that the laconic description of these women as figures who “værit vart búnar” (were not festively equipped; *Eddukvæði*, II, 387) was intended to imply they had arrived in military accoutrement, rather than in simple everyday clothing. Vitally, there is a clear distinction between the valkyric dream women and Gunnar’s own protective *dísir*. (The analogous scene in Chapter 35 of the younger *Völsunga saga* appears to conflate the two groups of spirits; FSN I, 78.)

While the *dísir* in *Atlamál* do not themselves appear in Glaumvǫr’s dream, armed and supportive *dísir* do appear in a prophetic dream in the fourteenth-century *Ásmundar saga kappabana*. Here, the eponymous hero is fighting a series of duels when women “með hervápnum” (with weapons of war) appear to him in a dream and identify themselves as “spádísir þínar, ok skulum vér vörn veita þér móti mönnum...” (your *spádísir*, and we shall provide you with (a) defence against those men...; FSN II, 304). In this episode, which is absent from the narrative’s earlier Danish analogue in Book VII of Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum* (2015, I, 506–07), we are once again confronted with (*spá*)*dísir* who act *en masse*, are nameless, carry weapons, are attached to a specific individual, and offer that individual protection in battle. Of course, female figures appearing in dreams need not always have been *dísir*: the existence of the Old Norse signifier *draumkona* (dream woman) testifies to a related but distinct cultural category, and some of these could be valkyric (as in the glimpse of the warrior’s afterlife offered by one such dream woman in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*; *Vestfirðinga sögur* 76, 94) or explicitly protective, as in the intervention of the dream woman who prevents the death of *Án svarti* (later *hrísmagi*, brushwood-belly) from a stomach wound in *Laxdæla saga* (149–55). That said, a highly varied range of dream figures – hostile, protective, and neutral – appear in Old Norse literature (Kelchner 1935; Turville-Petre 1966), and are also common in medieval European literature (Hieatt 1967), so I believe we are dealing with an overlapping of multiple supranatural-being discourses: *dísir*, *valkyrjur*, *draumkonar*, and other dream-beings.

Two final instances of (potentially) martial *dísir* are the cryptic women of *Þiðrandi þáttr ok Þórhalls* and *Hamðismál*. The action of the *þáttr* is set within the wider context of the ongoing Christianisation of Iceland (*Flateyjarbók* preserves the text within the saga of the missionary King Óláfr Tryggvason), and culminates with an atmospheric account of how the hapless Þiðrandi Síðu-Hallsson ignores the advice of the wise Þórhallr and ventures out into the in-fields after a *veizla* (sacral feast) held during the Winter Nights. There he meets two opposing groups of nine female riders, one dressed in black and one in white, falling victim to the former despite the protective intent of the latter. These riders are described variously as “konur” (women), “fylgjur yðrar frænda” (the *fylgjur* of your relatives), and finally as *dísir*: respectively “*dísir yðrar, er fylgt hafa þessum átrúnaði*” (the *dísir* of those who have followed this paganism) and

“hinar betri *dísir*” (the better *dísir*; *Flateyjarbók*, I, 467–68). Although much of the martial imagery here would not be out of place in a description of *valkyrjur*, the female figures are explicitly called both *fylgjur* and *dísir*, and they likely represent an amalgamation of ideas regarding anthropomorphic *fylgjur* and the martial *dísir* discourse under examination here. Such an amalgamation might have been construed specifically for *Þiðrandi þáttr*, or reflect pre-existing ideas, perhaps including those of prosperity *dísir*, particularly if the focus on the in-fields of the farm as the site of conflict between competing supranatural groups is meant to imply a particular interest in not just Þiðrandi’s family, but their local landscape as well.

In *Hamðismál* 28, as Hamðir and Sqrli are killed by their erstwhile brother-in-law Jormunrekkr, one of the two brothers (it is unclear which) laments the fact that they murdered their half-brother Erpr. This killing was committed on the way to Jormunrekkr’s hall, and thus caused their defeat and death. As part of this, the speaker claims “hvöttomk at *dísir* [...] gørðumsk at vígi” (the *dísir* drove us... readied [us /ourselves] to kill; *Eddukvæði*, II, 412–13). Regarding the *dísir* themselves, very little can be said: they certainly come across as bloodthirsty, to the point where their aggression causes the death of the brothers, which might suggest that these *dísir*, like the (*spá*)*dísir* of King Sigmundur in *Völsunga saga* and Gunnar in *Atlamál*, sought to protect the Gothic king, but could not gainsay his fate entirely. I do not find the suggestion that these *dísir* should be seen as *valkyrjur* abetting an Óðinnic sacrifice at all convincing (von See *et al.* 2012, 987), given that the poem makes it clear the brothers’ motivation for killing Erpr lay in his boasting (*Eddukvæði*, II, 409). Further data might potentially be extracted from the earlier description of the killing as “at mun flagði” (to the troll-woman’s delight; *Eddukvæði*, II, 410), although I am inclined to regard the phrase as a circumlocution for fratricide or murder (in line with the inclusion of fratricide in the chaotic, destructive crescendo leading to Ragnarøk in *Völuspá* 44; *Eddukvæði*, I, 302), rather than attempting to identify the singular *flagði* as one of the *dísir* of strophe 28.

In addition to these new cases of *dísir* not considered under one of the two discourses I proposed above, some of the “*dísir*” examined as “supranatural female figures” – particularly the *valkyrjur* and Freyja – may also be termed “martial”. If I am correct in my proposal of a new discourse of martial *dísir*, however, this similarity may have been used to strengthen the association of these other beings with the *dísir* whose signifier was used to periphrastically identify them in poetic diction, and need not – in my opinion – suggest that martial *dísir* were “actually” *valkyrjur*, or vice versa. Rather, such conceptual overlaps further demonstrate the permeable nature of these discursive spaces, allowing creators to draw upon the ambiguity of the relationship between these two groups (Schjødt 2012, 272).



Figure 1. The Oseberg Wagon “Triangle Carving”. Image Source: Annie Dalbéra (via Wikimedia Commons), CC BY 2.0.

Perhaps also worth noting in the context of protective *dísir* is the so-called “triangle carving” (Fig. 1), preserved on the uppermost board on one of the long sides of the ceremonial wagon buried in the high-status mound at Oseberg in 834 AD (Bonde & Christensen 1993; Christensen *et al.* 1993, 224–56; Nordeide 2011; cf. Ettliger 1976). The panel depicts two warriors, one on foot (centre) facing one on horseback (right). The central man is grasping the bridle of the rider’s horse in one hand and raising what looks like a short, heavy blade in the other. The knife-wielding wrist, however, has been seized from behind by another standing figure (left), this one identifiably female by her skirt, necklace, and hair-knot. I in no way wish to claim that this female figure is, or was seen by those who buried the wagon, as a *dís* – the application of signifiers from medieval textual accounts to archaeological evidence is a practice rife with unconscious bias and assumptions (Moreland 2001; Price 2006). I would suggest, however, that it is likely that who- or whatever this figure was intended to represent, she likely drew on ideas very similar to those circulating in the martial *dísir* under discussion here, as her grip on the knife hand of the warrior locates her on a battlefield, puts her in conflict with the standing fighter, and protects the horseman.

To sum up: while not as coherent-seeming a category as the prosperity *dísir*, I believe the evidence surveyed here is suggestive of at least a semi-coherent discourse of *dísir* sharing traits we can term “martial”: they take an interest in the outcome of armed conflict, at least as it pertains to specific (groups of) warriors (*Völsunga saga* ch. 11; *Grímnismál*; *Reginismál*; *Hálfs saga*; *Atlamál*; *Ásmundar saga*; and *Þiðrandar þáttr*);<sup>8</sup> appear at

<sup>8</sup> Similar ideas may lay behind the *idisi* of the *First Merseburg Charm*, an Old High German text typically dated to the tenth century. Despite the Christian context of the manuscript in which the *Charm* is preserved, these beings appear to have supernatural abilities that both kept

the site of such conflicts (*Völsunga saga* ch. 11; *Grímnismál*; *Reginismál*; and *Þiðranda þáttr*); and are depicted in war gear and/or bearing weapons (*Hálfs saga*; *Ásmundar saga*; and *Þiðranda þáttr*).

At this point, it is worth considering the antiquity of the martial *dísir* discourse, as there is reason to believe that it is more the product of a medieval literary milieu than of pre-Christian belief. As we have seen, in some cases the signifier “*dís*” seems to have been used as a general term for “supranatural female figure”, including for women elsewhere identified as *valkyrjur*, but only within poetic diction. Such uses could have inspired medieval writers less familiar with the nuances of complex skaldic language to mistake instances of *valkyrjur* being called *dísir* for a genuine pagan tradition of martial *dísir*. (A similar misunderstanding has long been argued to have been the aetiology of the infamous blood eagle ritual; Frank 1984; 1986; 1990; however, cf. Murphy *et al.* 2022). It is thus noteworthy that, of the martial *dísir* we have examined here, there is a dichotomy in their interests: some sought to protect human heroes, others to secure their defeat. Notably, the *dísir* of the two eddic poems *Grímnismál* and *Reginismál* – which share a *terminus ante quem* of 1287 AD – are aggressively hostile. This is in keeping with valkyric tradition, where *valkyrjur* were tasked with securing heroic recruits to Óðinn’s *einherjar* by ensuring their deaths in battle. (This tradition also witnesses *valkyrjur* who attempted to protect warriors against Óðinn’s wishes and were therefore expelled from their mythological role and mansion, e.g. *Helreið Brynhildar* 8–10; *Sigrdrífumál* prose; *Eddukvæði*, II, 313; 350–51; cf. Murphy 2013, 126–131). The *dísir* of *Atlamál* (traditionally dated to twelfth-century Greenland; von See *et al.* 2012) and the late-thirteenth and fourteenth century *fornaldarsögur*, on the other hand, are protective of their sympathetic human protagonists. Of course, a complicating factor is that the *valkyrjur* themselves were hardly a static phenomenon, and have themselves been argued to reflect just one stage in a *longue durée* development of unmarried martial female figures (Andersen 2002). Overall, I am inclined to doubt, but not dismiss, the existence of martial *dísir* as distinct from other supranatural figures in late pagan thought. In medieval texts, however, they appear to have been a firmly established discourse, drawing on a rich tradition of martial female figures – both valkyric and otherwise – from earlier times.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe the extant evidence demonstrates that the signifieds of the Old Norse term “*dís*” appear to have fallen into three overlapping, but still identifiable, discourses. I agree with scholars such as Ström and Raudvere that one key grouping of *dísir* were a collective of anonymous female spirits, located in the local landscape,

armies in check and released them, although it is entirely possible that such *idisi* were conceived of as human women with sorcerous powers, rather than female spirits (Beck & Heizmann 2009).



with an interest in the success of local humans<sup>9</sup> – although I prefer the term “prosperity” to the narrower focus on “fertility”. Similarly, it is not incorrect of scholars like Hall to have proposed that the signifier “*dís*” could designate something like “supranatural female figure”, although my reading of the sources suggests such usages were confined to poetic diction, where “*dís*” could serve as a synonym for any female figure, albeit perhaps with the implication of a less- (or more-) than human nature. These two discourses seem likely to have coexisted within late pagan society, with poetic discourse drawing on what we might term the religious discourse of the prosperity *dísir* as its indirect referent. (This is not to say that the poetic discourse could not reflect or have influenced ideas in society more generally, as recent work on implications of tree-kennings for people has demonstrated; Klitgaard 2018, 126–41; cf. Bintley 2015.) Somewhat separately, I have sought to demonstrate that our sources also evidence a discourse of what I have termed “martial *dísir*”, which take interest in the outcome of armed conflict, appear on battlefields, and are sometimes depicted as wearing or carrying war gear. Notably, however, these instances generally appear to be comparatively late, and I believe that this discourse is likely the result of a medieval literary tradition that, knowingly or not, misunderstood usages of “*dís*” as a poetic synonym in specific circumstances and applied it more broadly.

Overall then, when we encounter a *dís* in our source material, we should not look for a single explanation of what “the *dísir*” were. Rather, we should be aware that we are dealing with a polysemic term that could reflect up to three semi-distinct discourses, each of which drew on and fed into one another throughout the medieval period that produced our sources – to say nothing of the significant overlaps between some of these *dísir* and the other supranatural female collectives of pre-Christian thought, particularly *fylgjur* and *valkyrjur*. To my mind, this study of *dísir* discourses demonstrates the productivity not only of careful source criticism, but also of Schjødt’s formulation of “discourse” as a tool for the study of pre-Christian Nordic religions in the first place.

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<sup>9</sup> The suggestion that these *dísir* might have been (or perhaps more likely, evolved out of) ancestor spirits (Turville-Petre 1963, 201; cf. Laidoner 2020) is enticing, but I do not believe we have enough evidence to definitively decide for or against such a proposal.

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