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 supranatural 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 “dis” 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 diserne 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 kvindeskikkels. Dette studier revurderer tekstgrundlaget for disse væsener 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 ”disir”: En gruppe kvindefigurer med fokus på velstand med stærke bånd til lokale landskaber, som blev dyrket i den sene jernalder; brugen af termen ”dis” som et poetisk synonym for diverse kvindeskikkels i digte; og en middelalderlig tekstdiskurs omkring ”krigeriske disir” 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
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 (Angermuller 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 irrefusable – 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 ðifar, 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 disir. Not unlike fylgjur, disir 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 disir from similar supranatural female figures, particularly the nornir, valkyrjur, fylgjur, and draunkonar. 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 disir 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 disir, but rather to demonstrate that we are likely dealing with multiple overlapping dis discourses.

Disir as a Coherent Category: Prosperity Disir

Perhaps the best-known study of disir, Folke Ström’s Diser, nornor, valkyrjor (1954), is also one of the strongest advocates of the disir forming a distinct “genus” of supranatural beings. For Ström, the “diskollektiv” (dis-collective; 1954, 57) can best be distinguished from related supranatural female collectives (particularly nornir and valkyjur) 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 disir seem likely to have received active worship: Víg-Glúms saga and Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar record two separate instances of a “disablót” (sacrifice of/to the disir) performed at high-status settlements in Norway towards the end of the year, specifically linked to the Vetrnætur (Winter Nights) in Víg-Glúms saga (Eyfrøðinga sögur, 17; Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar, 106–11; cf. Gunnell 2000). Given that both texts make use of the disablót 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 disablót 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 disablót, albeit setting it in the legendary past of Sweden when the unfortunate King Aðils falls to his death when riding his horse around “disarsalinn” (the hall of the dis) during the festival at Uppsala (Snorri Sturluson 1941, I, 58). Snorri’s source, the poem Ynglingatal, makes mention of neither the disablót nor the disarsalr, although it does blame Aðils’ death on a “vitta véttr” (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 dis (or several disir), or at least a female supranatural figure (Faulkes 2008). That the “véttr” 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).¹ Regardless of Snorri’s sources, there does seem to have been some variation between Norwegian and Swedish praxis regarding the disir. 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 disir) and “distingsdagen” (days of the þing of the disir) 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 disir were generally seen as some sort of anonymous collective of female supranatural figures – Ström’s “diskollektiv”. Similar ideas may underlie the vetrnætur festival in Þjörðranda þáttur ok Pórhalls, 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 disarsalinn in Ynglinga saga, which also appears in Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks. This fourteenth-century Icelandic fornaldarsaga, which makes no mention of any ritual connected with the disir, employs the disarsalr as the location for the suicide-by-hanging of Helga when her husband, the eponymous Heiðrekr, kills her father (FSN, I, 209).² That we might be dealing with at least some traditions where there is only one dis (or at least one prominent dis 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

¹ 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 disablót is particularly complex, given his (putative) role in the composition of Egils saga (Vésteinn Ólason 1968; Haukur Þorgeirsson 2014).

² It is possible that the literary Hervarar saga was attempting to contrast the worship of the disir with the masculine, warlike nature of Heiðrekr’s Óðinn-worship, thus implying that dis-worship may have been a primarily female concern (cf. Gunnell 2000).
a lead-dis 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 disarsalr at Uppsala belongs to the collective discourse at all. Indeed, one of the key reasons Ström is so keen to associate Freyja and the disir 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 disir and fertility. The disir are invoked to help in human childbirth in the eddic poem Sigdrífrumál (Eddukvæði, II, 315), and the disablót 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 disir in prosperity may be found in the Icelandic “landdisasteinar” (stones of the land-disir). 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 disir 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 disir into their collectives. The survival of some complex toponyms, such as Disin in Norway (from *Dísavin, meadow of the disir; de Vries 1970, II, 157–58, 298–99, 475; cf. Lindow 2020, 1496), further suggests that disir could have an investment in the local landscape, although I am sceptical of Ström’s claim that such toponyms “pek[a]r på ett klart samband mellan diserna och manliga fruktbarhetsgudar” (point to a clear connection between disir and male fertility gods; 1954, 20).

Overall, then, the evidence in favour of the disir being a distinct genus of supranatural females is not expansive, but it is suggestive of certain reoccurring associations: the celebration of the disablót at significant settlements (Viga-Glúms saga, Egils saga, Ynglingasaga, Historia Norwegiae); the importance of these rituals for the wider community rather than just the masculine martial elite (Viga-Glúms saga, Egils saga, Upplandslagen; potentially Bóranda þáttr and Hervarar saga); and an association of the “diskollektiv” with material prosperity in the local landscape (Viga-Glúms saga, Egils saga,
Sigrdrífunál, 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 disir”. 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] disir 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 fulgjur. The latter are related to an individual or family, while [these] disir seem to be linked primarily to a specific location. (Raudvere 2003, 68; trans. mine)

“Disir” as a General Term: Supranatural Female Figures

If something like the prosperity-focused disir I have outlined here reflects one of the two major positions in current scholarship, the other is a much broader understanding of the signifier “dis” 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 disir, 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 [“disir” 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 “dis” to the pre-Christian phenomenon (or, more likely, phenomena) of the disir, tend to downplay that many of these figures are only called “disir” in poetic diction. I am therefore doubtful that pre-Christian uses of the signifier “dis” 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 disir – or perhaps better “disir”. 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.3 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 “dis(ir)”: for example, both Brynhildr and Sigrún, elsewhere widely identified as valkyrjur, are called “dis skjöldunga” (‘dis of the Skjöldungar [a legendary dynasty]’) in Brot af Sigurðarkviðu 14 and Helgakviða Hund-

3 Völluspa 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” (Völlumarkviða pr., Eddukvæði, I, 428; Helgakeviða Hjörvarðssonar pr., II, 261; 262; 266; Helgakviða Hundingsbana II pr, 271, 273, 274, 283; Sigrdrifumál 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 “disir suðrœnar” (southern disir) in the next strophe of the poem (Eddukvæði, II, 249–50). Of course, for Brynhildr, Sigrún, and other similarly-named valkyrjur-cum-disir (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 disir 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. “valkyjur”) has been replaced by the more manageable one- or two-syllable “dis(ir)” for reasons of metrics or rhyme. That dis 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 disir, 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 “dis(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 Skade, 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 sók til þess at hon gaf sér ýmis heiti er hon fór með ókunnnum 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” (dis 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: “Porvaldr hét maðr ok var kallaðr skiljandi” (“A man was called [i.e. his name was] Porvaldr, 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

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a list of Freyja kennings in Chapter 20 of Skáldskaparmál, alongside others such as “dóttur Njarðr” (daughter of Njórðr), “systur Freys” (sister of Freyr) and “eigandi valfells ok Sessráumnís” (owner of the fallen-vulr and Sessráumnir [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 that “-dís” is used here – and in the Skaði kenning “ǫndurdís” (“snowshoe-dís”) preserved in the mid-tenth century poem Hálegjatal 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 dis [or] baby-dis; Snorri Sturluson 1998, I, 108). 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 dis 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 skáld, 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 Reginsmál 12: before Sigurðr appears in the poem (and thus before the mention of

4 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 disir in strophe 24), the dying Hreiðmarr curses Lyngheiðr, one of his daughters, as “dís úlfhuguð” (wolf-hearted dis) 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 “dis” as a heiti for “woman”. On the other hand, it is also possible to read this use of “dis” 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 “dis”.

In a comparable case, “dis” 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, jǫfrom” (then the pure-faced one strode, terrible dis, to bring drink to them, the warriors; Eddukvæði, II, 380). It is difficult to know how to read “dis” 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 dis” 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 “dis” 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.5 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” disir, given the ambiguous nature of the signifier in Atlakviða 37.

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

5 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 (Meaney 1990, 158) – but the terms seem first and foremost to have designated human women of significant social stature (Meaney 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 disir: “bønd ðillu þvi... vildu svá disir” (all the powers [caused] this... the disir desired it; Snorri Sturlusson 1998, I, 23). To my mind, this “disir” is clearly an ökend 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 dis-names may be used as heiti for women: “Kona er ok kend við allar ásynjur eða nornir eða disir” (women are also called the names of all the ásynjur or nornir or disir; Snorri Sturlusson 1998, I, 40). Given that nowhere in the prosperity discourse are disir given individual names, appearing anonymously and en masse, this may suggest that Snorri was aware of a tradition where either disir did have names, or that other named beings could also be regarded as disir, either of which would support the idea of a distinct discourse of disir as a general term for “supranatural female figures” beyond the prosperity disir. Tempting as it might be to imagine that Snorri had access to a now-lost *Disałpur, however, I believe it is more likely that he was not aware of any dis names himself, but wished to imply that – in Skaldic poetry, at least – disir 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 supranatural female figures he did have knowledge of. I am therefore unconvinced that Snorri’s words here support the existence of a widespread discourse where “disir” designated supranatural female figures generally.

Overall then, there seems to be little evidence in these texts to support the idea that the Old Norse signifier “dis” could be used as a general term for “supranatural 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 “dis” as either a poetic synonym for another term designating a type of supranatural 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 Regimsnl’s Lyngheiðr (whose “racial” identity as dis, human, dwarf, or something else entirely is deeply ambiguous) perhaps the most likely candidate for an independent dis-hood. Nonetheless, I see no reason that the prosperity disir could not have served as the referent of these synonyms and base words, and am therefore sceptical that “dis” was truly a polysemous concept in pre-Christian times.

Disir as a Semi-Coherent Discourse: Martial Disir

Thus far, we have considered evidence for the disir as a collective of prosperity-focused spirits, and I have argued that many of the other usages of the signifier “dis” do not represent a general category of “supranatural female figures”, but are rather poetic synonyms on the basis of the former discourse. There remains, however, a not insignificant corpus of “disir” 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 disir. 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 disir in fact form a semi-coherent discourse of their own. These disir 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 disir”. 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 disir found in Chapter 11 of Völsunga saga, where the Óðinnic hero Sigmundr is protected in battle by “hans spádisir” (his prophecy-disir; 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 “spámaelí” (prophetic speech) – could be taken to imply some guiding or determining function in these disir’s role. However, no such function is apparent from the text, and I believe it more likely that the sagamáðr responsible for the saga in its current form chose to designate these disir as spádisir in order to differentiate them from the (somewhat confused) presentation of disir that appear in Glaumvǫl’s dream later in the text. While the presence of these spádisir 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 lódit;
úfar ro disir;
nú knáttu Óðin sjá,
nálægt mik ef þú megir! (Eddukvæði, I, 379)

Yggr will now have [the] edge-hewn slain,
I know your life to have passed; disir 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 disir are not protective, but hostile to Geirröðr. Whether we should understand them as Óðinn’s protective disir, or

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

7 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 disir were “actually” valkyrjur, represented here by the two-syllable term “disir” 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 disir play an active role on the battlefield, which makes me reluctant to assume that “disir” in this context is purely a poetic synonym. In Reginsmál 24, for example, the young Sigurðr (another Öðinnic hero) picks up an Öðinn-like hitchhiker while on a sea journey. This figure advises the young hero that, in battle “tálar disir standa þér á tvær hliðar ok vilja þik sáran sjá” (deceitful disir 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 valkyjur just as well as disir seeking to protect the hero’s enemies.

Less valkyric, but clearly still part of the same discourse, are the disir described in the flying between the warriors Úlfrsteinn (a champion of King Hálfr) and Úlfr in Hálfssaga ok Hálfssrekkja. As the two men trade barbs in fornyðislag, Úlfrsteinn declares:

[Úlfrsteinn: ...] hygg við hjálmum
hingat komnar
til Danmarkar
disir várar.

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

[Úlfrsteinn: ... I] believe our disir
are coming here
to Denmark
in helmets.

Úlfr said: All your disir
must be dead,
I say luck disappears
from Hálf’s warriors.

The portrayal of the disir as wearing military equipment (“við hjálmum”) is decidedly valkyric. However, that Úlfrsteinn’s men (at least) have their own, presumably protective, disir – and that these can be defeated – suggests we should take Hálfssaga at face value when it names these beings disir rather than valkyjur. Of course, Hálfssaga is an early-fourteenth century fornalda saga, 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 grœnlenzko: when Gunnarr and Hǫgni 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 disir 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 disir. (The analogous scene in Chapter 35 of the younger Völsunga saga appears to conflate the two groups of spirits; FSN I, 78.)

While the disir in Atlamál do not themselves appear in Glaumvǫr’s dream, armed and supportive disir 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 vérit veita þér móti mönnum...” (your spádisir, 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)disir 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 disir: 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 sogur 76, 94) or explicitly protective, as in the intervention of the dream woman who prevents the death of Án svarri (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: disir, valkyrjur, draumkonar, and other dream-beings.

Two final instances of (potentially) martial disir are the cryptic women of Þiðranda þáttr ok Þórhalls and Hamðismál. The action of the þátr 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 frenda” (the fylgjur of your relatives), and finally as disir; respectively “disir yðrar, er fylgt hafa þessum átrúnaði” (the disir of those who have followed this paganism) and

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“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 biðranda þátr, 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 Piðrandi’s family, but their local landscape as well.

In Hamðismál 28, as Hamðir and Sǫrli are killed by their erstwhile brother-in-law Jórmunrekkur, 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 Jórmunrekkur’s hall, and thus caused their defeat and death. As part of this, the speaker claims “hvðttomk 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 Sigmundr 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 Ragnarök 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).
Perhaps also worth noting in the context of protective disir 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. Ettlinger 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 disir – 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 disir 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 disir, I believe the evidence surveyed here is suggestive of at least a semi-coherent discourse of disir 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; Regimsmál; Hálfs saga; Atlamál; Ásmundar saga; and Þiðranda þáttr; 8 appear at

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8 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 supranatural abilities that both kept

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

At this point, it is worth considering the antiquity of the martial disir 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 “dis” 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 disir for a genuine pagan tradition of martial disir. (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 disir we have examined here, there is a dichotomy in their interests: some sought to protect human heroes, others to secure their defeat. Notably, the disir of the two eddic poems Grímnismál and Reginsmál – 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; Sigdrifumál prose; Edukvæði, II, 313; 350–51; cf. Murphy 2013, 126-131). The disir 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 disir 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 “dis” 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 disir were a collective of anonymous female spirits, located in the local landscape,
with an interest in the success of local humans⁹ – 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 “dis” could designate something like “supranatural female figure”, although my reading of the sources suggests such usages were confined to poetic diction, where “dis” 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 disir 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 disir”, 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 “dis” as a poetic synonym in specific circumstances and applied it more broadly.

Overall then, when we encounter a dis in our source material, we should not look for a single explanation of what “the disir” 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 disir and the other supranatural female collectives of pre-Christian thought, particularly fyldjur and valkyrjur. To my mind, this study of disir 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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⁹ The suggestion that these disir 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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