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THE INCREDULITY OF HÖGNI.  
THE IMPORTANCE OF BELIEVING IN GHOSTS IN *NJÁLS SAGA*

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CHAPTER 59 OF *NJÁLS SAGA* introduces the reader to Gunnarr's two sons: *Gunnarr ok Hallgerðr áttu tvá sonu; hét annarr Högni, en annarr Grani. Högni var maðr gerviligr ok hljóðlyndr, tortryggr ok sannorðr* 'Gunnarr and Hallgerðr had two sons, one named Högni and the other Grani. Högni was an accomplished man but taciturn, incredulous but truthful' (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 150).<sup>1</sup> This description might be applied to many saga heroes, except for the detail that he is *tortryggr* 'incredulous' or 'sceptical'.<sup>2</sup> While the other details create an expectation in the reader's mind as to the sort of character Högni is going to be and the role he may play in the saga, the same cannot be said for *tortryggr*, the significance of which is not immediately clear. Högni's scepticism looks forward to an event later in the saga when he encounters his father's ghost in Gunnarr's *haugr* 'burial mound'. This encounter seems to have a profound effect upon Högni's life, changing him from a boy who has recently lost his father and been separated from his mother, and who does not yet have adult status, to a man pursuing vengeance for his father's death and taking his rightful role as head of the farm household. The theme of credulity—of believing and being believed—plays an important part in the episode and has an impact on the events that follow as a result. It is this theme that I am going to explore in this article through an examination of the scene at Gunnarr's *haugr* and what it means to be *tortryggr*: incredulous or hard to trick.

*A short biography of Högni Gunnarsson*

Högni Gunnarsson is not mentioned in medieval sources other than *Njáls saga*. The Hauksbók redaction of *Landnámabók* records Gunnarr's sons as Grani and Hámundur (*Landnámabók* 1968, 357). It is possible that Hámundur

<sup>1</sup> Translations from Old Norse are my own; I have, however, consulted Robert Cook's translation (Cook 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson (1957, 637) gloss *tortryggr* as 'doubtful, incredulous'. I suggest this be extended to 'sceptical' or even 'hard to trick', given the positive assessment of Högni throughout *Njáls saga*; this is expanded upon below. *Tor-tryggr* combines the prefix *tor-* 'difficult' with *tryggr* 'trusty', 'faithful' or 'true' (Cleasby and Vigfusson 1957, 637 and 643; de Vries 1962, 595).

corresponds to Hǫgni in an alternative oral tradition, but this is unlikely in view of the order in which the names are introduced in *Njáls saga* (Hǫgni then Grani), implying that Hǫgni is the elder, whereas the naming of Grani first in *Landnámabók* suggests that he is Gunnarr's eldest son.<sup>3</sup> Even if we are willing to accept that Hǫgni and Hámundr correspond to the same individual (whether in historical, oral or literary tradition), *Landnámabók* gives us no further information about Hámundr and therefore cannot contribute to our understanding of Hǫgni in *Njáls saga*. Nor is Hǫgni (or indeed Grani or Hámundr) Gunnarsson mentioned in any other saga. It is relatively safe, therefore, to say that the author of *Njáls saga* was not confined by or working with an existing tradition (whether historical or not) about Hǫgni, and was free to construct the character and his actions as fitted his narrative purpose.<sup>4</sup>

The complex questions of authorship, orality and literacy, and performance are beyond the scope of the present article. In what follows I will refer to the 'narrator' as the voice telling the story within the narrative; the 'author' as the creative process (oral and written) that brought the text we now recognise into being and the 'audience' as the original readership (whether readers, listeners or witnesses) of that text. The use of 'he' to refer to narrator, author or potential audience is in no way intended to indicate the gender of any of these.

If we turn to the internal evidence of *Njáls saga*, the description quoted above, from Chapter 59, is the first mention of Hǫgni. Hǫgni is next mentioned in Chapter 75 where he is contrasted with his younger brother: *Þeir váru frumvaxta synir Gunnars, Hǫgni ok Grani. Þeir váru menn óskapglíkir: hafði Grani mikit af skapi móður sinnar, en Hǫgni var vel at sér* 'Gunnarr's sons, Hǫgni and Grani, soon became young men. They

<sup>3</sup> Unless there is some requirement from the narrative to introduce characters out of order, both the *Íslendingasögur* and *Landnámabók* follow the principle of listing first male children in chronological order of birth, and subsequently female children. The name Hámundr for a son of Gunnarr complies with the tradition of naming a child after a grandparent (here Hámundr Gunnarsson, Gunnarr's father). *Landnámabók* disagrees with *Njáls saga* on other details regarding Gunnarr's family: his brothers are named Kolskeggr, Hjørtr and Ormr skógarnef in *Njáls saga* but Helgi, Haftr, Hjørtr and Ormr skógarnef in *Landnámabók* (see *Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 53–54 n.).

<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the expectations the audience might be assumed to bring to bear on, for instance, Snorri goði or Síðu-Hallr Þorsteinsson, even if the narrator chose to subvert such expectations. Regarding the audience bringing to bear expectations of particular characters based on their presentation in earlier oral and literary tradition, see Gísli Sigurðsson 2004, 123–90.

were men of different character: Grani had a great deal of his mother's temperament, but Hǫgni was a fine person' (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 182). This economical description shows Hǫgni to have inherited his father's positive characteristics whereas his brother, who later takes part in the burning of Njáll and his family at Bergþórshváll, is dismissed as taking after his mother Hallgerðr Hǫskuldsdóttir. The author creates an opposition between the positive characteristics of Hǫgni and those of his mother and brother. The author's favouring of Hǫgni over Grani is shown to be shared by their father when, later in Chapter 75, Gunnarr asks that Njáll offer protection to Hǫgni after his death, but not to Grani, of whose behaviour he disapproves (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 184).

Following Gunnarr's death, the mismatched brothers separate; Grani leaves the farmstead with his mother (who, we are told, can no longer bear Gunnarr's mother Rannveig's harsh treatment of her) and receives income from the farms rented to tenants while Hǫgni takes control of the farmstead. Following the *haugr* scene, Hǫgni takes up Gunnarr's halberd and he and Skarpheðinn exact revenge on Gunnarr's killers, killing first Hróaldr Geirsson and Tjorvi at Oddi, and then Starkaðr Barkarson and his son Þorgeirr at Þríhyrningr. Njáll then arranges a settlement with Geirr goði on Hǫgni's behalf and a marriage for Hǫgni to Álfeidr, the daughter of Vetrliði skáld, with whom he has a son, Ari.<sup>5</sup>

After this marriage, Hǫgni is declared to be out of the saga (*ok er hann ór þessi sögu* (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 196)) although this turns out to be a little premature, as he is mentioned, albeit briefly, in Chapters 92, 93 and 109. In Chapter 92, Skarpheðinn says that on Hǫgni's account he will spare Grani (again contrasting Hǫgni as ally of the Njálssynir with his brother who is allied to their enemies). In Chapter 93, Hǫgni supports Ketill í Mörk in his suit against the Njálssynir for the killing of Þráinn Sigfússon, but only after Ketill has agreed with Njáll to arrange a peaceful settlement (indeed, it is probable that Hǫgni supports Ketill to ensure the remaining litigants also agree to the settlement, rather than in opposition to Njáll). Hǫgni's final part in the saga is told only in the report of a character, and is likely to be an inaccurate report at that. On several occasions in the saga, events that are told in the reported speech of a character, and for which the narrator does not offer his assurance, operate at a lower level of narrative truth than those that the narrator expects the audience to accept at face value. For events

<sup>5</sup> Although Vetrliði is mentioned widely in other texts (for example *Landnámabók* (1968, 348) and *Kristni saga* (2003, II 21–22) (for further references see Grønlie (2006, 56 note)), neither Álfeidr nor Ari is known elsewhere, reinforcing the supposition that the author's depiction of Hǫgni was not dependent on an existing tradition.

narrated only through characters' report, the audience must rely on their own assessment of the credibility of the character to indicate whether the report is to be accepted. While trying to stir up trouble between the Njálssynir and Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði, Mǫrðr (whom Hǫgni had spared at Þríhyrnigr) tells the Njálssynir that Hǫskuldr had planned to attack them, but was prevented from doing so by Hǫgni. Despite the implausibility of the peaceful Hǫskuldr planning such an attack, the assertion that it was thwarted by Hǫgni—which in itself seems entirely plausible—lends it credibility for the Njálssynir. Mǫrðr plays upon one of the characteristics stressed by the narrator in his introduction of Hǫgni—his honesty—to give credence to his lie.<sup>6</sup>

For the purposes of this paper, it is not necessary to consider the existence or non-existence of an historical Hǫgni Gunnarsson. As shown above, however, there is no evidence of Hǫgni's existence in other texts, which in turn suggests that the author was not confined to, or working with, a pre-existing tradition about Hǫgni. The depiction and actions of Hǫgni, which are consistent within the saga, suit the author's purpose for his story and are bespoke choices for their role in the narrative and impact on the audience.

### *Gunnarr in his burial mound*

In Chapter 77, Hǫgni's father Gunnarr Hámundarson makes his dramatic final stand and is killed in his home by the massed forces of his enemies led by Gizurr hvíti and urged on by Mǫrðr Valgarðsson, but his role in the saga is not quite complete. The first posthumous appearance of Gunnarr is witnessed not by Hǫgni, but by a nameless shepherd and serving woman as they drive sheep past the burial mound. This encounter is told with minimal detail: *Sá atburður varð at Hlíðarenda, at smalamaðr ok griðkona ráku fé hjá haugi Gunnars; þeim þótti Gunnarr vera kátr ok kveða í hauginum* 'It so happened at Hlíðarendi that a shepherd and a servant woman were driving livestock past Gunnarr's burial mound. It seemed to them that Gunnarr was happy and reciting verses in the burial mound' (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 192). Despite the supernatural nature of the event, Gunnarr's cheerfulness, together with his benevolent demeanour while alive, makes this encounter less sinister

<sup>6</sup> I have elsewhere described how the author constructs an arch and knowing demeanour for Mǫrðr, most noticeably when he seeks to take advantage of Njáll's prophetic advice that Gunnarr should not break the settlement by killing twice in the same family, as if he were becoming aware of the saga narrative around him (Cochrane 2016, 116–43, particularly 131). This is a further example of such self-awareness, as if Mǫrðr is aware at a meta-level of narrative of the description of Hǫgni the audience has read, and so plays on Hǫgni's reputation for honesty to make his lie more believable on the narrative level of the saga plot.

than the malevolent hauntings of Víga-Hrapp of *Laxdæla saga* or Grettir Ásmundarson's ghostly adversaries in his saga, among many saga instances of encounters with the undead.<sup>7</sup> Gunnarr is not said to be a poet elsewhere in the saga (at least in the manuscripts usually favoured by editors),<sup>8</sup> so his reciting adds to the supernatural, but not sinister, tone of the episode.

The shepherd and serving woman investigate no further, but instead report the matter to Gunnarr's mother Rannveig, perhaps in part because of a concern that they would not be believed by Høgni on account of his natural scepticism. Høgni has by now taken ownership of the farmstead, but the reporting of the apparition to Rannveig rather than her grandson reflects some tacit recognition that the farmhands see her (rather than Høgni) as the head of the household. This account of the first appearance of Gunnarr's ghost gives few details: the text does not indicate whether the witnesses see Gunnarr with the mound open (as Høgni and Skarpheðinn do a few paragraphs later) or whether they just hear him. Anticipating the imminent repetition of the scene, the narrator withholds details of this initial apparition to reveal later in the chapter.

Without involving Høgni, Rannveig sends the farmhands to Njáll who, on learning what they have seen, sends his son Skarpheðinn to Hlíðarendi (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 192):

Þau Høgni ok Rannveig tóku við honum allvel ok urðu honum fegin mjök; Rannveig bað hann vera þar lengi, ok hann hét því. Þeir Høgni gingu út ok inn jafnan. Høgni var maðr vaskligr ok vel at sér gorr ok tortryggr; þorðu þau eigi af því at segja honum fyrirburðinn.

They, Høgni and Rannveig, received him very gladly and were pleased to see him. Rannveig told him to make his stay a long one and he promised this. He and Høgni were always coming and going. Høgni was a valiant man, worthy and sceptical. On account of this, they did not dare tell him about the occurrences.

<sup>7</sup> Gunnarr fits neither the ritual model suggested by Nora Chadwick (1946, 50–65 and 106–27) nor the categories of the watchman and roaming ghost or vampire suggested more recently by Ármann Jakobsson (2011, 281–300), and is not mentioned in Rebecca Merkelbach's chapter on 'Revenants Reconsidered' (2019, 31–49) (perhaps because he is not relevant to her focus on monstrosity). On ghosts in the *Íslendingasögur*, see further Vésteinn Ólason 2003, Tulinius 2011 and 2015, Kanerva 2013 and Vídalín 2012, particularly 79–86.

<sup>8</sup> Reykjabók and the X group of *Njáls saga* manuscripts include verses spoken by Gunnarr while still alive. Most editors, including Einar Ól. Sveinsson, have believed these to be late additions to the text (see *Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 466–70, 474–78). More recently Guðrún Nordal (2005) has shown the stanzas (in those manuscripts that include them) present characters in a subtly different light (also see Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir and Lethbridge 2018, 9).

The description of Hǫgni at this point underlines the importance of the episode in his life. Descriptions of saga characters are most often placed when the character is first introduced to the saga, but also strategically at other key points in the narrative such as before a battle or, as in this case, to underline the changing status of Hǫgni from the ‘promising young man’ character type to that of the full-grown head of household. This description mirrors the one in Chapter 59, the saga commonplaces *vaskligr* and *vel at sér gǫrr* set alongside the statement that he is *tortryggr*.

Having once more stressed Hǫgni’s scepticism, the narrator progresses to the description of Gunnarr in his burial mound that he has skirted around in the episode with the servants (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 192–94):

Þeir Skarphedinn ok Hǫgni váru úti eitt kveld fyrir sunnan haug Gunnars; tunglskín var bjart, en stundum dró fyrir. Þeim sýndisk haugrinn opinn, ok hafði Gunnarr snúizk í hauginum ok sá í móti tunglinu; þeir þóttusk fjögur ljós sjá brenna í hauginum, ok bar hvergi skugga á. Þeir sá, at Gunnarr var kátligr ok með gleðimóti miklu. Hann kvað vísu ok svá hátt, at þó mátti heyra gǫrla, þó at þeir væri firr:

Mælti dǫggla deilir,  
 dáðum rakkr, sá er háði  
 bjartr með beztu hjarta  
 benrǫgn, faðir Hǫgna:  
 Heldr kvazk hjálmi faldinn  
 hjǫrþilju sjá vilja  
 vættidraugr en vægja,  
 val-Freyju stafr, deyjja—  
 ok val-Freyju stafr deyjja.

Síðan lauskr aptr haugrinn.

One evening they, Skarphedinn and Hǫgni, were outside just to the south of Gunnarr’s mound. The moonlight was bright though clouds dappled across the moon. It seemed to them that the mound was open, and that Gunnarr had moved himself within the mound and was looking at the moon. They thought they saw four lights burning in the mound, but no shadows were cast. They saw that Gunnarr was happy and in very good spirits. He spoke a verse so loudly that they might hear it clearly, even though they were a distance away:

‘The bold sharer of rings, the father of Hǫgni—he who waged battle, bright and full of courage—spoke: “Rather than yield, I would prefer that the warrior died wearing a helmet, he died wearing a helmet.”’<sup>9</sup>

Then the mound closed again.

<sup>9</sup> This translation is intended to show the general meaning of the stanza and does not reflect the detail of the kennings. See further below.

Despite the restrained style of the *Íslendingasögur*, here the narrator allows himself some narrative flourishes such as the moonlight straining through the cloud-cover (literally ‘dragged over’ [with cloud]).<sup>10</sup> Compared to the apparition to the farmhands, this later scene abounds with detail. Gunnarr has moved from the position he was laid in at burial to look at the moon. Four lights illuminate the whole chamber, but cast no shadow, presumably because they illuminate the scene from each angle. Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (1960, 173) gloss the passage as ‘four lights burning inside the mound, illuminating the whole chamber’, implying that the four lights are dispersed across the chamber to give complete coverage and therefore do not cast a shadow. The *four* lights may be intended to symbolise the four men who will be killed by Högni in revenge for his father’s death: Hróaldr Geirsson, Tjörvi, Starkaðr Barkarson and Þorgeirr Starkaðarson; the four lights will be put out once Högni takes revenge. There are parallels for the use of a flame to represent a life in the longer version of *Flóamanna saga* where Þorgils örrabeinsstjúpr dreams that he has five candles on his knee; one, the largest, has ash on as if about to go out; the candles represent the lives of Þorgils and his four companions, the candle that is about to be extinguished representing Þorgils’s son Þorfinnr (*Flóamanna saga* 1990, 294) (see Perkins 1974–77, 217–21); and in the legendary *Norna-Gests þáttur* (1944), where the span of Gestr’s life is measured by the burning of a particular candle.<sup>11</sup>

The vision of Gunnarr in his *haugr* can be compared with the scene in *Eyrbyggja saga* in which, shortly after (or perhaps concurrently with) the death of Þorsteinn þorskabíttr, he is seen entering Helgafell, the sacred hill in which his father has previously been entombed (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 19):

Þat var eitt kveld um haustit, at sauðamaðr Þorsteins fór at fé fyrir norðan Helgafell; hann sá, at fjallit lausk upp norðan; hann sá inn í fjallit elda stóra ok heyrði þangat mikinn glaum ok hornaskvöl; ok er hann hlýddi, ef hann næmi nokkur orðaskil, heyrði hann, at þar var heilsat Þorsteini þorskabíttr ok fönunautum hans ok mælt, at hann skal sitja í öndvegi gegnt feðr sínum.

<sup>10</sup> Moonlight and its sudden appearance through cloud is a significant motif in Grettir’s battle with Glámr in *Grettis saga* (*Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* 1936, 121) (see Chadwick 1946, 51).

<sup>11</sup> A further parallel might be drawn with Gísli Súrsson’s dream in which he enters a house where he sees many of his friends and relatives and seven fires burning, and the later dream in which his better dream-woman invites him home with her to a well-furnished hall and tells him that he will have dominion over that place when he dies (*Gísli saga Súrssonar* 1943, 70–73, 94–96). For modern readers the four lights in Gunnarr’s mound may call to mind the Scandinavian Christian tradition of the Advent wreath on which four candles are lit on the consecutive weeks of Advent.

It happened one evening in the autumn that, while Þorsteinn's shepherd was tending sheep north of Helgafell, he saw that the north side of the mountain opened itself up. Inside, he saw large fires and heard there a great deal of merriment and the sound of drinking bouts, and when he listened to whether he might catch some distinct words, he heard Þorsteinn þorskabitr and his crew being welcomed and it was said that Þorsteinn should sit in the high-seat opposite his father.

The two episodes share the following elements: the textual similarity between *eitt kveld fyrir sunnan haug Gunnars (Njáls saga)* and *eitt kveld . . . fyrir norðan Helgafell (Eyrbyggja saga)*; the event is first witnessed by a shepherd tending sheep; the fact that the mound / hillside has opened itself up allowing the inhabitants to be seen by witnesses (contrasting with 'mound-breaking' scenes in which a hero descends into a mound to defeat an undead foe); the illumination of the chamber inside by lights or fires; the cheerfulness of the inhabitant(s) of the tomb, made clear to the witnesses by the sounds coming from it; and finally, the fact that each scene relates to the relationship between a dead father and his son (for this aspect in *Eyrbyggja saga*, see Tulinus 2012–14, 2–23). In *Njáls saga*, the relationship is between Gunnarr and his son Hǫgni; in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Þórólfr Mostrarskegg is welcoming his son Þorsteinn into the family tomb despite his earthly body being lost at sea. In both cases the son is tacitly approved or acknowledged by the parent, most noticeably in Gunnarr's case in his self-identification by the epithet *faðir Hogna* 'Hǫgni's father' in the verse he speaks, and in *Eyrbyggja saga* in the welcome Þorsteinn receives. Whether Gunnarr is aware of his son's presence will be examined further below.

A further example comparable to both Gunnarr's appearance and Þorsteinn's arrival in Helgafell can be found earlier in *Njáls saga*. Svanr á Svanshóli, uncle to Hallgerðr Hǫskuldsdóttir and a sorcerer of some notoriety, drowns on a fishing trip, and *fiskimenn þeir, er váru at Kaldbak, þóttusk sjá Svan ganga inn í fjallit Kaldbakshorn, ok var honum þar vel fagnat; en sumir mæltu því í móti ok kváðu engu gegna, en þat vissu allir, at hann fannsk hvárki lífs né dauðr* 'those fishermen who were at Kaldbakr thought that they saw Svanr walking into the mountain Kaldbakshorn and receiving a good welcome there. But some spoke against this and said there was nothing in it, but all knew for certain that he was never seen again either living or dead'.<sup>12</sup> The passage demonstrates the *Njáls saga* narrator's antipathy to the supernatural, in particular pagan notions of the afterlife. The events occur offstage and we are merely told that news comes from Bjarnarfjorðr that Svanr has gone fishing and drowned.

<sup>12</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 46. Svanr's drowning and his entrance into the mountain are also mentioned in the Þórðarbók redaction of *Landnámabók* although the relationship between the accounts is not certain (see *Landnámabók* 1968, 199 n.).

The narrator does not explicitly tell the audience that Svanr has entered the mountain, merely that some nameless fishermen have reported the occurrence. Furthermore, he calls into question this version of events by saying that others deny it. William Ian Miller (2014, 66–67) suggests, unconvincingly in my view, that this emphasis on the fact that Svanr is never seen again, alive or dead, creates an expectation on the part of the reader that Svanr may become a revenant (*aptrganga*). Rather, I think the narrator is using the questionable nature of the report he is making to call the reality of the event into question. The account of Svanr's posthumous, supernatural journey into the mountain challenges the acceptance of the reader more than the report of his drowning. However, as it is said to happen away from the main theatre of action<sup>13</sup> and the truth of the episode is not germane to the plot, the narrator attributes the report to questionable characters, thereby relishing the account, rather than being troubled by any issue regarding its veracity. The issue is turned on its head, with the narrator asking the characters, and by extension the audience, whether they believe the report rather than having the question addressed to him.

#### *Belief, believing and different levels of reality*

Returning to Högni's scepticism, we might ask ourselves what the implication of this attribute is for our interpretation of the scene at Gunnarr's *haugr*? Pertinent to this are questions of the 'realness' or believability of saga literature. Such questions have challenged saga readers, scholars and students for centuries. One might break this discussion down into three key questions, each exploring the reality of the text at a different level: 1. Were the sagas reflective of actual historical events? 2. Did the original audience accept the sagas as reflective of historical events? 3. Within the stories themselves (whether historical or not), were the audience expected to accept the reality of all the events to the same extent (i.e. were some saga events more real than others)? The first question, that of the sagas as historical documents, has been widely commented on; the second question is less widely discussed, but the answer is to a large extent unknowable; therefore it is the third question I intend to explore further. For the present argument I will limit myself to this question of believability and credibility

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Sävborg (2009) identifies techniques used by saga narrators to delineate the boundary between the natural world and the supernatural. He notes that these markers of distance (in which he includes Högni and Skarphæðinn testing the veracity of their vision of Gunnarr) are more prevalent in supernatural episodes located in Iceland than in those set further afield where the supernatural is presented in a more commonplace manner. For a slightly different interpretation see Vídalín 2012.

within the saga: i.e. whether the audience is intended to understand that the events at the mound *occur* to the same extent that (for example) Gunnarr's death *occurs* in the story, and whether the characters *believe* in the apparition in the *haugr* in the same way that they *believe* that Gunnarr is killed. For the time being I will set aside the question of an historical Gunnarr or Hǫgni and with it any question of whether the saga author and his audience believed in ghosts themselves.

I have already identified two instances in which the saga calls into question the reality of events. The first is Mǫrðr's claim (in Chapter 109) that Hǫskuldr has invited the Njálssynir to a feast and had them stay in a storehouse far from the farmhouse with the intention of burning them in the building. According to Mǫrðr, this plot is only thwarted by the arrival of Hǫgni, of whom Hǫskuldr and his companions are afraid. As already stated, the audience is not really expected to give credence to this fabrication (Mǫrðr has already been established as unreliable, and staging such an attack is out of character with what we know about Hǫskuldr) and can therefore consign this story to the category of apocrypha—a false story within the story. The example of Svanr disappearing into the mountain is a less clear-cut example, but nonetheless presents the possibility of different levels of reality within the story. Svanr's death is indubitable, but his entry into the mountain is narrated only by the fishermen, not the narrator (who is at pains to stress that others deny the account) and therefore 'exists' to a lesser extent, or on a different level to the death itself.

Svanr's welcome into the mountain falls into a category of events that most modern readers would regard as supernatural, by which I mean that, regardless of whether we believe in supernatural occurrences, we categorise one set of expectations—laws governing what is possible—with the everyday, the 'natural' world, and another set of expectations with the 'supernatural', where things beyond the limit of those laws can occur. In his book on *Njáls saga* (although specifically in reference to an episode from *Eyrbyggja saga*), Richard Allen (1971, 9) outlines his view on the saga-mind with regard to the supernatural:

The marvelous was a part of the daily life of the Icelanders; it was not at the edge of things but in and about the central events of men's lives; it was none the less real for being marvelous and none the less marvelous for being real.

He goes on to qualify this: despite the 'matter-of-fact style' there is 'awe and contained fear'. This basic tenet of 'marvellous but real' fits the presentation of the supernatural in the *Íslendingasögur* in general; it nonetheless does not quite capture the nuance and variety across the corpus, or even within *Njáls saga*. Writing on *Þorsteins þátrr skelks* in

*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, John Lindow (1986, 274) allows for a more nuanced understanding of characters' credulousness and scepticism with regard to the supernatural:

Later medieval literature could endow its characters with . . . scepticism. The supernatural certainly did make up a part of daily life for most Icelanders, but I suggest that any given occurrence of it, inside or outside saga literature, could be a subject for legitimate debate or doubt.

The description of Högni as incredulous and the account of the reaction (of both Högni and other witnesses) to the events at Gunnarr's *haugr* seem to confirm Lindow's observation. By extension, the level of that 'legitimate debate or doubt' depends on not only the accounts of supernatural events in the saga, but also the response, and general characterisation, of the characters who witness them.

Rory McTurk (1992) considers how the narration (in particular the narrative 'levels of focalisation') of supernatural events affects our understanding of them. McTurk lists many of the instances of the supernatural in *Njáls saga*, dividing them into the diegetic (pertaining to the story itself) and the metadiegetic (pertaining to accounts given by the characters within the narrative). McTurk further divides events according to their level of narrative (who is telling the story) and focalisation (who is witness to the events). Although he does not specifically mention Svanr's entrance into the mountain Kaldbakshorn, it clearly fits into the metadiegetic category in McTurk's analysis. Although Svanr's death itself could be either diegetic or metadiegetic, his entry into the mountainside exists only in the questionable reports of local fishermen. Furthermore, the Kaldbakshorn episode is both narrated (summarily) and focalised at the second level, in the fishermen's stories which are then themselves called into question by the narrator, indicating that contradictory accounts exist.

On the episode at Gunnarr's *haugr* McTurk (1994, 111) has this to say:

Here the ghost's activities are diegetic, i.e. they are narrated in the first degree, but they are at the same time focalised in the second degree; each account is introduced by an expression meaning, 'it seemed to them', (*þeim þótti, þeim sýndisk*), and is presented in terms of what was witnessed by observers—a shepherd and a housemaid in the first case, and, in the second, Njáll's son Skarphedinn and Gunnarr's son Högni. In the second account in particular the narrator seems at pains to disclaim full responsibility for the report he gives, using in addition to *þeim sýndisk* such expressions as *þeir þótuusk . . . sjá* and *þeir sá* ('they thought they saw', 'they saw').<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Sävborg (2009, 328) also notes this, suggesting that it indicates the difficulty that the characters had in believing their eyes.

Without taking issue with this analysis, I would change the emphasis. Where McTurk sees the narrator avoiding responsibility for the narrative (for what ends: reluctance to give full credence to the existence of the supernatural, or disdain at potential pagan themes in the passage?), I suggest that the narrator deliberately places ‘full responsibility for the report’ with the witnesses themselves. It is not the narrator’s intention to call into question the veracity of the occurrence at Gunnarr’s *haugr* in the same way that he allowed the vision of Svanr to be questioned.

In fact, everything about the account of the events at the *haugr* seems to be building up to the reader’s acceptance that the events did occur and should be believed (in the context of the story). The account of the farmhands might be called into question. Njáll, however, challenges their witness through rigorous cross-examination, asking them to give their account three times, presumably testing them (as if in a law court) for inconsistencies, or any other tell-tale sign that their report is fictional.<sup>15</sup> Although Njáll (and presumably Skarpheðinn) are aware of the farmhands’ account, the text makes it clear that Hǫgni has not been told about the earlier encounter. Therefore, through Njáll’s repeated interrogation, and Hǫgni’s ignorance of it, the farmhands’ account provides corroboration of Hǫgni’s experience. Furthermore, Hǫgni is a thoroughly reliable witness—he is *tortryggr* and not someone predisposed to seeing imaginary phantasms.<sup>16</sup> The narrator’s careful depiction of Hǫgni and his scepticism have therefore been building to this point, specifically to stress the reality (within the context of the story) of the events witnessed at the *haugr*.

### *The impact of the encounter upon Hǫgni*

Seen in this context, phrases such as *þeim þótti*, *þeim sýndisk* which McTurk takes as evidence of the narrator avoiding responsibility, stress the importance of the event and its effect upon the witnesses as they doubt the evidence of their own eyes. The impact of the events at the *haugr* seems to galvanise Hǫgni into taking action to avenge his father’s death, for which there has so far been no reprisal. At the beginning of Chapter

<sup>15</sup> The same motif also occurs in Chapter 40 when Njáll enquires about the killing of Hallgerðr’s kinsman Brynjólfr by Þórðr leysingjason. In that example, Njáll’s disbelief that the peaceful Þórðr could be induced to carry out such an act leads him to test the report presented to him so thoroughly.

<sup>16</sup> Sävborg (2009, 327–28) sees Hǫgni’s scepticism, and his inability to believe in the occurrence should anyone except Njáll have told him, as indications that such an event would have been seen as rare, beyond the everyday, but notes that we are not intended to doubt its veracity.

78, the Sigfússynir (Gunnarr's maternal uncles) approach Njáll asking whether they should initiate a case against his killers, but Njáll explains that the legal position is hopeless since Gunnarr was already an outlaw when he was slain. Instead he suggests that *heldr mundu verða at veita þeim í því vegskarð at vega nokkura í hefnd eptir hann* 'rather they [i.e. the Sigfússynir] should dishonour them [i.e. Gunnarr's killers] by killing some of them in revenge for him' (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 191–92).<sup>17</sup>

The Sigfússynir do not pursue Njáll's Machiavellian advice although they, not Høgni, take responsibility for Gunnarr's burial. Rannveig makes sure that his halberd is not buried alongside him, suggesting that she hopes it will later be used to avenge her son. Rannveig drives Høgni's mother from the homestead, seemingly without any protest from Høgni himself. Grani accompanies their mother, resulting in the division of the property between himself and Høgni. When the farmhands first witness Gunnarr in his mound, they report the events to Rannveig, not Høgni, and she sends them directly to Bergþórshváll without consulting him. When Skarpheðinn arrives at Hlíðarendi, he is welcomed by both Høgni and Rannveig. All of this seems to indicate that Høgni is not yet seen as master of the house. It is not possible to estimate exactly the age of the unmarried Høgni at this point, but it is clear that although he is old enough to technically take on the ownership and management of the farmstead at Hlíðarendi, his grandmother continues to be the main power-broker within the household. Høgni's delay, albeit relatively short, in seeking vengeance for his father is either cause or result of this sense that he has not yet taken on mastery of his household.

In relation to *Porsteins þáttur*, Lindow argues that the 'verisimilitude' (i.e. the realness within the context of the story) has an important relationship with the individual witnessing it. Lindow argues that the witnessing of supernatural events in *Porsteins þáttur* and other saga narratives conforms to a folkloric *memorate* model, according to which a supernatural event might be precipitated by an individual failing to conform to a social norm; is experienced in circumstances that might make perception difficult (such as exhaustion, inebriation or darkness); involves supranormality being tested or challenged; and, following the vision, might require the witness to adjust their behaviour to conform to the social norm. If we assume that Høgni's inaction following his father's death represents a deviation from the social norm (the demand for vengeance); the dappled moonlight represents difficulty of perception; and the discussion between Høgni and Skarpheðinn on the

<sup>17</sup> Njáll does eventually get legal compensation of sorts for Gunnarr's death when he has Gunnarr's killing counted against the killings of Starkaðr and Þorgeirr in the settlement made following Høgni and Skarpheðinn's acts of vengeance.

believability of the episode is a test of supranormality, then the episode at the *haugr* conforms very closely to Lindow's model. Even if we do not accept Lindow's *memorate* model in its entirety, Hǫgni's experience at his father's *haugr* is a key moment in his personal development, marking his transition from boy to man, and its realness is stressed by Hǫgni's scepticism.<sup>18</sup>

Regardless of whether we accept Lindow's *memorate* model, or the more straightforward 'real but marvellous' approach of Allen, the episode foregrounds Hǫgni's experience of events, and that these events have 'really' happened (within the fictional–historical context of the story). The 'incredulity' inherent in Hǫgni's character stresses that he has not invented the occurrence, and his ignorance of Gunnarr's previous manifestation before the farmhands makes it clear that he has not been influenced by the accounts of others. Skarphæðinn's questions as to whether he would have believed the events if another had told him of them underline the importance of Hǫgni having experienced the events for himself and compound their impact upon Hǫgni. In this way the events at the *haugr* prove a crucial point in Hǫgni's life, prompting him to take vengeance for his father's death and thus make the transition from boy to man, from scion and heir to master of the household in his own right, both in his own mind and in the eyes of society.

### *The incredulity of Hǫgni*

The title of this article is inspired by the image of the apostle Thomas as depicted in Caravaggio's painting 'The Incredulity of Saint Thomas' (c.1601–02). The author of *Njáls saga* and his original readership would not have known Caravaggio's painting, but Thomas the Apostle was a key figure in medieval liturgy. The Bible (John 20: 24) reports that Thomas is not with the other disciples when Jesus first appears on the Sunday following his crucifixion. When he is told of the resurrection, Thomas refuses to believe it unless 'I see the mark of the nails on his hands, unless I put my finger into the place where the nails were, and my hand into his side' (John 20: 25).<sup>19</sup> Later, Jesus reappears to the group and invites Thomas, 'Reach your finger here; see my hands. Reach your hand here and put it into my side' (20: 27).

<sup>18</sup> Tulinius (2012–14) approaches a similar question in relation to *Eyrbyggja saga*, stressing the link between supernatural (ghostly) episodes and the Freudian relationship between dead fathers and their sons, as well as the potential power (as well as social responsibility) that a posthumous visitation of the father might bestow on the son. The same argument could also be applied to the episode at Gunnarr's *haugr* (also see Tulinius 2011, 66–68). Kirsi Kanerva (2013) discusses the 'authority' of the dead in saga literature from a ritualistic point of view.

<sup>19</sup> Quotations are from *The New English Bible* (1972).

Although Jesus invites Thomas to ‘be unbelieving no longer . . . Because you have seen me you have found faith’ (20: 27–28), he goes on to say ‘Happy are they who never saw me and yet have found faith’ (20: 29). Medieval tradition added to the canonical biblical account a further story of Thomas receiving the girdle of the Virgin Mary upon her ascension. (In some versions Thomas is the only apostle to witness this and, in a reversal of the biblical episode, strives to convince his companions of the veracity of the relic.)<sup>20</sup>

There are two medieval sagas telling Thomas’s life, and he is mentioned in sagas of the other apostles and homilies.<sup>21</sup> Although these texts give more detail than the gospels (for example, he is said to end his life in India), the overwhelming characteristic associated with him is his incredulity: ‘doubting’ Thomas. The Old Norse term for this is the same as that used in *Njáls saga* for Høgni: he is described as *tortryggr* or *inn tortryggvi* ‘the incredulous’ (see for example Unger 1874, 286 and 415). It seems likely that the medieval audience was intended to make an association between Høgni and Thomas the Apostle, to think of him as ‘doubting’ Høgni. If so, what might we make of such an allusion?

The biblical episode of Thomas doubting Christ’s ascension and Thomas’s subsequent encounter with Christ has two functions: the first, to witness Thomas’s own journey from spiritual doubt to belief, the second—as evidenced by Christ’s praise of those who have never seen him but have found faith—to underline the imperative of faith without the need for empirical evidence. The link between the reality of the episode and Høgni’s scepticism has already been made and does not require religious or scriptural reference. The Høgni/Thomas parallel however draws to the surface of the *Njáls saga* narrative the theme of the impending conversion of Iceland to Christianity, which follows soon after the *haugr* episode. Lars Lönnroth has argued that the Conversion has a considerable impact on the overall tone, imagery and theme of the saga.<sup>22</sup> Whether or not the Conversion episode is based on a separate source or sources,<sup>23</sup> it is not

<sup>20</sup> See for example the woollen weavers’ *Assumption of the Virgin* in the York mystery plays (Beadle 1982, 392–99).

<sup>21</sup> *Thomas saga postola* I and II (Unger 1874, 712–34); *Tveggja postola saga* *Petrs ok Pals* (Unger 1874, 286); *Jons saga postola* I (Unger 1874, 415); Wisén 1872, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Scholars disagree on the nature of the impact of the Conversion on the text, but most agree there is a change precipitated by the Conversion narrative. See for example Lönnroth 1976, 128–29; Allen 1971, 117; Maxwell 1957–61; Miller 2014, 188–93.

<sup>23</sup> The sudden shift in subject at Chapter 100 of *Njáls saga* and the subsequent chapters describing the events of the Conversion have been seen as evidence that it was based on a written source. For accounts of the debate see *Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, xliii–xliv, and Lönnroth 1976, 34–35.

presented in the saga as a digression or diversion from the main thrust of the narrative. Instead, as one approaches the Conversion episode, the narrative seems to be preparing the way, introducing Christian themes or allusions more overtly.<sup>24</sup> The episode in the mound can be seen as part of this foreshadowing. Gunnarr is happy in his mound. He has been given a pagan burial, but despite the mysterious cloud cover over the moon, the area inside his mound is so bright that no shadow can be seen—almost angelically bright. Hǫgni and Skarpheðinn have nothing to fear from Gunnarr and he in turn has nothing to fear from the coming change of faith.

While the link between Hǫgni and Thomas the Apostle is part of the introduction of Christian motifs, concepts and imagery in the chapters leading up to the Conversion, there may be a further reason for such a specific allusion. If Hǫgni represents the sceptical Thomas, who only finds faith by being convinced of the truth, who then are the ones who according to Christ found faith without needing proof? Following Gunnarr's verse and the mound closing up once again, Skarpheðinn is the first to speak. His reaction is interesting (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 194):

‘Myndir þú trúa,’ segir Skarpheðinn, ‘ef aðrir segði þér?’

‘Trúa mynda ek, ef Njáll segði mér,’ segir Hǫgni, ‘því at þat er sagt, at hann ljúgi aldri.’

‘Would you believe that,’ said Skarpheðinn, ‘if others told you about it?’

‘I would believe it, if Njáll told me,’ Hǫgni said, ‘because it is said that he never lies.’

This alludes to the concepts of plausibility, credibility and trustworthiness which have all been discussed in detail above. It underlines Hǫgni once more as a sceptic like Thomas. It implies that Hǫgni would have refused to believe the account of the farmhands even if he had heard it, just as Thomas refused to believe his fellow Apostles when they told him of the resurrection of Christ. Just as Thomas needed to touch the wounds of Christ, so Hǫgni needed to witness Gunnarr in his *haugr* for himself.

Hǫgni, however, rejects absolute scepticism and says that he would have believed Njáll's account if he had told him: *því at þat er sagt, at hann ljúgi aldri* ‘because it is said he never lies’. Hǫgni's reference to Njáll's honesty at this point is apropos of nothing, but does remind the reader of the original description of Njáll in Chapter 20 (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954,

<sup>24</sup> For example, Gunnarr's brother Kolskeggr's dream in Chapter 81 of a shining man saying he should go south and become his knight (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 197). The motif of a bright shining light, sometimes associated with salvation, either spiritual or physical, and its relationship to Christianity is described by Loomis (1948).

56–57), where he is said to be wise and give good advice, and it is said that everything which he promises always comes true. Högni elevates Njáll above other men as one who not only always tells the truth, but should always be believed even by the most sceptical. According to Högni, Njáll's word should be taken as 'gospel'—it should be taken as truth without the need to witness it with one's own eyes.

Where Gunnarr demonstrates Christian attributes (but, crucially, without understanding their origin and impact),<sup>25</sup> Njáll is shown to have an intuitive, almost uncanny predisposition to and understanding of Christianity prior to its arrival in Iceland. A few chapters later, Chapter 100 recounts the change in ruler and adoption of Christianity in Norway and the subsequent conversion of Shetland, Orkney and the Faroes (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 255):

Þá mæltu margir, svá at Njáll heyrði, at slíkt væri mikil firn at hafna fornum átrúnaði. Njáll sagði þá: 'Svá lízk mér sem inn nýi átrúnaðr muni vera miklu betri, ok sá mun sæll, er þann fær heldr. Ok ef þeir menn koma út hingat, er þann sið bjóða, þá skal ek þat vel flytja.' Hann mælti þat opt. Hann fór opt frá qðrum mǫnnum ok þulði, einn saman.

At that time many were saying, and Njáll heard them, that it was an abomination to give up the old faith. Then Njáll said: 'It seems to me that the new faith will be a great deal better, and those will be blessed who accept it. And if those men who preach that faith come here, then I shall speak much in favour of it.' He said this often. He often went off alone and muttered to himself.

Njáll's solitary muttering to himself can be interpreted as prayer. The author and audience, with the benefit of a post-Conversion outlook, understand Njáll's behaviour, but their experiences are distanced from that of the narrator, who cannot comprehend Njáll's behaviour, reflecting the bafflement of Njáll's contemporaries with regard to Christian practices in the years prior to the Conversion (see Lönnroth 1976, 141–42). Njáll's status as a good Christian is later confirmed by his support of Þangbrandr's mission and ultimately by the miraculous preservation of his body in the fire at Bergþórshváll, but it is his proleptic acts of proto-Christian behaviour which interest me here. He is among the first Icelanders to be converted, but more than that, Njáll (unlike, say, Síðu-Hallr Þorsteinsson) does not need to be persuaded of the superiority of Christianity over the old faith.<sup>26</sup> As soon as he hears of the new faith he understands its

<sup>25</sup> For example, he is more reluctant to kill than other men, but finds this difficult to understand (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 138–39).

<sup>26</sup> For the conversion of Síðu-Hallr Þorsteinsson, see *Brennu-Njáls saga* (1954, 256–57) and *Kristni saga* (2003, 17–19). In this episode the emphasis in both texts is on the theological conversion of the individual. The words and acts of

inherent value, and prior to the formal baptism of his family, begins to pray in private. In this way Njáll can be seen as similar to the figurative person who, in Christ's words at John 20: 29, 'has faith without requiring proof'. If Høgni is doubting Thomas finally arriving at the truth, then Njáll is the man who is more blessed still, as he has faith from the outset.

### *Vengeance for Gunnarr*

I understand the word *tortryggr*, repeated as it is twice, as a direct allusion to Thomas the Apostle and to the Biblical episode in which his doubt is overcome by evidence. Furthermore, Høgni's mention of Njáll as one who only ever speaks the truth should be taken as a reference to Njáll's representation of Christian values, and thus obliquely to Njáll as the hypothetical man in the Biblical story who arrives at truth without resorting to proof. All of this raises Njáll in the audience's estimation, in terms of both his moral and his theological status. The problem with Høgni's description of Njáll as one who only ever speaks the truth, however, is that on closer scrutiny his behaviour in the saga does not always tally with it.<sup>27</sup> In Chapter 22, Njáll devises a convoluted plan for Gunnarr to revive the legal case to challenge Hrútr over the recovery of Unnr Marðardóttir's dowry. In Njáll's plan, Gunnarr must disguise himself as the travelling pedlar Kaupa-Heðinn, deliberately selling poor goods and renegeing on deals in order to establish his reputation as part of the disguise, and in this character, persuade Hrútr to help him revive the case. Admittedly Njáll does not lie himself throughout the episode, but he certainly encourages Gunnarr to do so. Similarly, in Chapter 97, Njáll gives people legal advice which leads to their cases becoming deadlocked, purely so that he can suggest a resolution by introducing a court of appeal, in order to acquire a *godorð* for his foster-son Høskuldr Þráinsson. One might argue that Njáll's motives are altruistic: he believes that by obtaining a *godorð* for

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the missionary Þangbrandr convince the practising pagan Síðu-Hallr to transfer his allegiance to the Christian god. Síðu-Hallr witnesses the mass and hears of the role of the Archangel Michael, whom he asks to be his guardian spirit (see Cochrane 2010, 197–232). In contrast, there is no account of Njáll's conversion by Þangbrandr, just his baptism (perhaps a further indication that, not requiring proof, he has already arrived at his decision prior to Þangbrandr's arrival).

<sup>27</sup> Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1971, 163 and 166–67) seems to take Høgni's comment at face value as a fair representation of Njáll's character, which he finds entirely in line with 'the spirit of Christianity', and only stops short of suggesting that he represents a Christian ideal on the grounds that he demonstrates such behaviour before the Conversion of Iceland.

the son of Þráinn slain by Njáll's own sons, he can reinforce the fragile peace he has brokered by fostering Hǫskuldr. Nonetheless, Njáll can hardly have engineered such a situation without misleading those who have sought his advice, and further examples of his Machiavellian wit, and his manipulation and misdirection of others could be cited. Hǫgni's very specific assertion that *hann ljúgi aldri* may be literally true, and may lead the audience to the conclusion that Njáll represents a Christian ideal, but some of his actions in the course of the saga challenge this portrayal.

Vésteinn Ólason (2003, 161) sees the vision in the *haugr* as a call to arms to Hǫgni to avenge Gunnarr's death:

We can characterise Gunnarr as one of the grateful dead, because of his cheerfulness, his *gleðimót*; we can understand his appearance to signify that he is grateful to his future avengers, Skarpheðinn and Hǫgni, and happy to have had a heroic death. It is obvious, though, that his spirit, or whatever we shall call it, has felt a need to ensure revenge actually takes place and that this has prompted his appearance before the avengers.

This presupposes, however, that Gunnarr's ghost is aware that Skarpheðinn and Hǫgni are witnesses to his appearance in the *haugr*. In fact, there is nothing in the episode to indicate that Gunnarr is aware of being observed. This is Skarpheðinn's response to Hǫgni's assertion that Njáll never lies: *'Mikit er um fyrirburði slíka, segir Skarpheðinn, 'er hann sjálf vitrask okkr, at hann vildi heldr deýja en vægja fyrir óvinum sínum, ok kenndi hann okkr þau ráð.'* 'There is great significance in such a wonder,' said Skarpheðinn, 'that he himself reveals to us that he preferred to die rather than flee before his enemies, and he has told us what to do.' (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 194)

Skarpheðinn adds a further layer of meaning to the vision which was not immediately apparent in the vision itself. Gunnarr's stanza (the only words he speaks in the vision) refers to his own defence. The stanza underlines his status as a valiant and perhaps foolhardy hero refusing to back down. Although the stanza is not directly addressed to Hǫgni, his use of the epithet identifying himself as Hǫgni's father can be read as having an inspiring effect on his son looking in on him. In the scene, both narrated and focalised in the first degree (to use McTurk's terminology), there is no specific indication that Gunnarr is aware of Hǫgni's presence outside his burial mound. On the other hand, according to Skarpheðinn, Gunnarr's verse is not only intended to be heard, but is a specific message for Hǫgni, instructing him how to proceed. In Skarpheðinn's interpretation of the verse, the man (or men) who should not flee from Gunnarr's enemies is not Gunnarr, but Hǫgni and himself. According to Skarpheðinn, Gunnarr's words are intended to spur Hǫgni on and to assure him that

following Gunnarr's own example, he should not be cowed when taking revenge against his enemies.

I am unable to see this didactic tone in Gunnarr's stanza itself. Reading the stanza in isolation, I interpret it as self-eulogising. It seems that Gunnarr's lack of moderation in celebrating his own attributes extends to his grave.<sup>28</sup> The first *helmingr* is almost entirely made up of kennings or expanded adjectival phrases referring to the speaker himself: *ðoggla deilir* 'sharer of rings' (generous man), *dáðum rakkr faðir Høgni* 'bold-in-deeds father of Høgni' and *sá er háði bjartr með beztu hjarta benrogn* 'he who, bright and with full courage, wages war'. The second *helmingr* is similar, celebrating the heroism of the speaker. We are told that this mighty warrior (*vættidraugr hjörpilju* 'carrying-spirit of the sword-deck' (he who carries a shield), *val-Freyju stafr* 'stem of the valkyrie') would rather die than yield. Indeed, the whole stanza might be condensed into the eight words: 'I said I would rather die than yield!'. In itself the stanza does not acknowledge Høgni and Skarpheðinn at all, or try to instruct them. Gunnarr's words relate to his own life in general, his death in particular and his view of himself rather than his son. Looking back to the previous description of the apparition to the servants does not give us any clues either. It is too vague to confirm whether Gunnarr speaks the same verse on this occasion, although it is implied that he is reciting (*kveða*) verse in the mound.

Skarpheðinn therefore chooses to contextualise the vision of Gunnarr in his *haugr* in these terms. It is he, as a spin-doctor, who suggests that Gunnarr's stanza is intended as instruction for his son. He takes the vision and recasts it with his own interpretation, namely that Høgni should at once pursue vengeance for his father. Skarpheðinn does not exhibit much political subtlety or acumen throughout the saga and we might reasonably assume Njáll's hand is behind this appropriation of the vision. It seems that the one-to-one discussion between Njáll and Skarpheðinn that was so deliberately obscured from the audience earlier in the chapter was more than a general instruction to watch over and support Høgni (which one might reasonably expect to have been spoken in a public setting), and was a very specific instruction as to how to behave if they should encounter the vision that the shepherds had described to Njáll over the course of three tellings. Njáll (who in Høgni's eyes never lies) has told his son exactly how to reinterpret, and by adding a subtle commentary, revise the meaning of the vision of Gunnarr to his son, to spur Høgni into action over his father's killing.

Why should Njáll want to appropriate the vision in this way? One answer is suggested by Miller (2014, 144–47), who points out how the alliance

<sup>28</sup> On Gunnarr's lack of moderation see Miller 2014, 147–52.

between Gunnarr and Njáll, which has so successfully ensured their pre-eminence in the district during the first half of the saga, has suddenly been forcibly dissolved with Gunnarr's death. Njáll and Gunnarr have been able to hold sway effectively between Markarfljót and Þjórsá despite neither of them holding the rank of chieftain (*goði*). The killing of Gunnarr directly and immediately challenges that dominance, and the decision of Geirr *goði* to remain in the district to support Þorgeirr Starkaðarson against reprisals from the Sigfússynir (related in Chapter 77) further undermines Njáll's powerbase. According to Miller, Gunnarr's killers might reasonably expect retribution from Gunnarr's relatives, but would not expect it from Njáll's family, nor that Skarpheðinn (on the instruction of Njáll) would involve himself in the revenge so as to control its aim and extent. This vengeance is targeted upon Þorgeirr Starkaðarson, his father and Hróaldr, thereby removing the need for Geirr to remain in the district to protect them. Högni and Skarpheðinn stop short of killing Mǫrðr, instead forcing him to pay compensation for the killings undertaken. Mǫrðr's death, as the son of a *goði*, might reasonably have been expected to have resulted in further reprisals. Geirr accepts the compensation for his illegitimate son Hróaldr (who has compromised his position legally by boasting of giving Gunnarr his death-wound and who is after all illegitimate) and moves back to his main home at Hlíð, leaving the district to Njáll once more. Miller mentions the episode at the *haugr* only in passing and does not relate it to his argument about Njáll's motives for involving himself in Gunnarr's revenge. Nonetheless, the argument provides a convincing motive for Skarpheðinn and ultimately Njáll's behaviour throughout the sequence.

Perhaps the most challenging element of Miller's argument is that it relies on considerable insight on the part of the author, composer or narrator. Characters, most notably Njáll, but also Gunnarr, Mǫrðr and others, are given ulterior motives, hidden agendas and emotions only hinted at and not acknowledged on a superficial level by the narrator and which are sometimes even at odds with his description of those characters.<sup>29</sup> Njáll, for example, is described by the narrator in positive terms, but according to Miller, is shown by the events to be manipulative and scheming. At no point in his book does Miller address any questions of authorship, orality or literacy, or historicity. If we accept his view of a more morally challenging Njáll who is initiating, controlling and ultimately limiting the extent of vengeance for the murder of his friend, then we do so with

<sup>29</sup> Along with Miller, recent studies by Armann Jakobsson (2013, 232–33), Yoav Tirosh (2014) and Anita Sauckel (2016, 100–04 and 110) have presented more negative, challenging or complex interpretations of Njáll.

no information as to whether this is the result of authorial intention, oral tradition or some distant historical precedent. In this case however I am willing to recognise the logic of his conclusion, particularly in light of the Biblical associations (which Miller does not refer to) noted above.

A less cynical interpretation of Njáll's motivation than Miller's is that he is guided by what he knows (or feels) is just and right. He has already stated to the Sigfússynir that there is no legal remedy for the death of Gunnarr, who has been killed 'outside the law', but his sense of justice motivates him to initiate a carefully limited revenge—which in other circumstances might have been entirely legal. While more in tune with modern sensibilities, such an interpretation is no less problematic for our interpretation of Njáll. Njáll is associated with attempts to resolve confrontation through legal settlement, most obviously through invocation of the saying *með lögum skal land várt byggja, en með ólögum eyða* 'with laws our land shall be built up, but with lawlessness laid waste' (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 172; see also lxxviii–lxxix). At the point where legal recourse is no longer available to further the course he wishes to pursue, Njáll utilises a supernatural event to drive forward events so that he can control their outcome. In her chapter on monstrous revenants, Rebecca Merkelbach describes the undead as 'the most socially disruptive' and 'most malevolent of monsters' (2019, 31), and stresses the impact of the ghosts on the people and farmsteads that they haunt. It would be hard to characterise Gunnarr's ghost in such terms, but the dappled moonlight provides a link to Grettir's encounter with Glámr and, although the farmhands come to no harm, the episode clearly leaves them deeply affected (reminding us of the devastating effects of the hauntings Merkelbach describes). Through Skarpheðinn's reinterpretation of Gunnarr's verse, Njáll contains the potential social disruption that the supernatural encounter might threaten and channels it into the confines of the socially accepted vengeance system, which he is able to control.

Rannveig seems to have a part to play too as she chooses not to share the account of the farmhands with Hogni and instead, seeing the opportunity to galvanise Hogni into taking revenge for his father's death, sends them to Njáll. For Hogni to pursue vengeance suits Njáll's purposes, either his desire to see his friend Gunnarr avenged, or the more specific aims that Miller outlines. Njáll has informed his son exactly how he wants him to behave, but does not want his involvement to be generally known, because of the way in which Skarpheðinn will manipulate the events at the *haugr* to move Hogni into action in a manner that he, Skarpheðinn (and ultimately Njáll), will control. Hence the lengthy discussion between Njáll and his son taking place in private. Skarpheðinn takes his axe with him to Hlíðarendi—for the

audience, a shorthand to indicate that there is likely to be a battle in due course. Furthermore, the axe reveals Skarpheðinn's intent as he departs for Hlíðarendi. Whether fully apprised of all of the details or not, Rannveig is clearly familiar with the general outline of what might happen, and so although both she and Hǫgni greet Skarpheðinn, it is she who invites him to stay a long time. Skarpheðinn and Hǫgni are forever going in and out, giving Skarpheðinn ample opportunity to sow the seed of vengeance in Hǫgni's mind and maximise the chance of his witnessing the apparition. Having seen Gunnarr happily chanting verse in his *haugr*, Skarpheðinn seizes his chance to set his father's plan in motion. He reframes what they have just witnessed to whet Hǫgni's appetite for vengeance, thereby placing himself in a position to direct it toward removing Geirr from the district without escalating the conflict whilst denying the Sigfússynir any opportunity to further their own ends after the death of their kinsman. Wonderfully ironically, despite being *tortryggr*, Hǫgni is completely taken in by Njáll. His assertion that Njáll never lies blinds him to the more subtle deception Njáll orchestrates. Thus, at the deepest level, Hǫgni's scepticism is testament to just how accomplished a manipulator Njáll is.

### Conclusion

The description of Hǫgni as *sannorðr* and *tortryggr* underlines the 'truth' of the episode in which Hǫgni encounters the ghost of his father in his burial mound. In this way, the saga audience is guided not to doubt the veracity of the episode, unlike that of Svanr's departure into the mountainside earlier in the saga. The episode highlights the potential for false stories within the narrative, in particular in relation to the supernatural, while at the same time underlining that the present one is 'true'. Whatever their own view on the supernatural, the audience should accept that within the confines of the story the events occurred. The verisimilitude of the episode and its effect on the saga audience is further underlined by the way in which it conforms to the *memorate* model outlined by Lindow. This in turn emphasises the importance of the event as a life-changing moment for Hǫgni as he develops from a boy overlooked even by his own servants, to a man commanding respect from the wider community. The word *tortryggr* had religious associations to the medieval audience, specifically with Thomas the Apostle and Christ's revelation to him. This heightened the importance of the historical context at the moment at which Gunnarr is revealed: the episode looks back to the pagan traditions of his burial and its parallels with Svanr earlier in the saga and with Helgafell in *Eyrbyggja saga*, and forward to the Conversion episode a few chapters

later. Furthermore, the episode can be read as a parable in which Høgni represents Thomas the Apostle, blessed by Christ despite his doubt, and in which Njáll—who adopts Christian practices even before the arrival of the missionaries and whose honesty is unaccountably stressed at this point—represents the hypothetical believer to whom Christ compares Thomas, who accepts the truth of Christ’s resurrection without empirical proof. Yet even in this same *haugr* episode, the depiction of Njáll as a paragon of Christianity is subtly called into question. The apparition at the *haugr* is appropriated by Skarpheðinn, presumably at the behest of his father Njáll, to ensure that Høgni pursues a path of bloody vengeance which is under the control and guidance of Skarpheðinn and ultimately Njáll. The vision itself is not the creation of Njáll and his son. Such is Høgni’s *tortryggr* character that they need not construct or fabricate the event. It genuinely occurs in the world of the saga (rather than being invented or imagined by a character in the text), as Høgni bears witness. They are merely eager beneficiaries. In this way, we see Njáll as both strategist and opportunist: predicting the course of events and manipulating other characters accordingly, but not fabricating or lying outright. The verdict on Njáll’s motivation for doing so—the extent to which he manipulates events for his own strategic, political ends as opposed to a more benign desire to see justice for his friend and for Høgni’s maturation into the respected head of a household—will depend on how we as audience react to him throughout the rest of the text.

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## IN DEFENCE OF EMENDATION. THE EDITING OF *VǪLUSPÁ*

By HAUKUR ÞORGEIRSSON

*Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum*

### *Introduction*

THE EDITING OF EDDIC POETRY for a broad audience is a problem scholars have wrestled with since Resen's edition of *VǪluspá* and *Hávamál* in 1665. For the last half-century or so the general emphasis of scholars has been on reflecting the existing witnesses as faithfully as possible. The variation in the sources has been treated sympathetically with the view that different versions of the same verses,<sup>1</sup> stanzas or poems can reflect different but equally meaningful and authentic oral versions and medieval perspectives. In this climate, scholarly attempts to combat errors in the sources with conjectures and emendation of the text are often met with suspicion. This is not without reason, and we should certainly insist that any scholarly emendation is accompanied with careful arguments, based on an understanding of the transmission of the text and a respect for medieval textual variation.

Nevertheless, the use of traditional philological methods for identifying and correcting errors in the manuscripts is a valuable service that a good editor offers to readers. This is a statement I aim to defend in this article with detailed discussion of particular examples. I limit myself to the editing of *VǪluspá*, which is a particularly rich topic owing to the complicated preservation of the poem. There is more than one valid approach to creating a critical edition of the poem but I believe they will all have some things in common. I seek to defend the following statements:

(a) All manuscripts contain multiple scribal errors. A critical edition should in a number of cases correct the text by emendation, either by introducing text from another manuscript or by conjecture.

(b) No critical edition of *VǪluspá* should be based solely on a single manuscript.

(c) Metrics is a useful tool in identifying corrupt readings, in deciding between manuscript variants and in evaluating proposed conjectures.

As well as elaborating on and defending these statements, I present a survey of how several different editors have dealt with a selection of difficult verses in the Codex Regius text of *VǪluspá*. As will become apparent, the state of the art of

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article 'verse' is used rather than 'line', as the latter allows potential ambiguity between 'full' and 'half' lines.

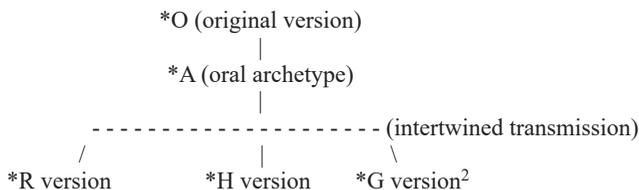
Eddic editing is certainly not a wholesale rejection of emendation. Mainstream editions contain many well-founded corrections but these corrections are often underdiscussed and invisible to readers. Discussing them explicitly gives an opportunity to bring out the qualities that a successful emendation should have.

Throughout this article I have found it useful to refer to the works of Judy Quinn (2001, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c) who has published in detail on editing theory as applied to the Eddic poems. I find much of value in Quinn's writings, but I will naturally focus most on cases where I would like to offer another perspective.

### *The editing of *Völuspá* in light of its preservation*

Roughly speaking, *Völuspá* is preserved intact in two versions and partially in a third version. The complete versions are preserved in the Codex Regius of the Eddic poems (GKS 2365, 4to), traditionally dated to c.1270, and in Hauksbók (AM 544 4to), dating from the early fourteenth century. Furthermore, parts of the poem are preserved in the manuscripts of *Gylfaginning*, dating from c.1300 and later. The three versions differ in the number and order of stanzas as well as in individual verses and words. The differences between the versions are such that most scholars believe that we are dealing with three independent recordings from oral tradition (e.g. Quinn 2016c, 52). The possibility that the poem was learned by heart from a written version and then again written down from memory ('reoralisation') is intriguing but there do not appear to be any compelling arguments for it—unlike the case of *Hávamál*, where this is probably the best explanation for the two surviving versions (Haukur Þorgeirsson 2015).

There are good reasons to be wary of constructing a stemma to show oral transmission, but as long as the important differences between oral and scribal transmission are kept in mind I find that a diagram can be a helpful visual aid. With this caveat—and more caveats to follow—Figure 1 shows one way to visualise the oral transmission of *Völuspá*.



**Figure 1. Oral transmission of *Völuspá***

<sup>2</sup> For the sake of simplicity I speak of one \*G version, but I actually agree with Quinn (2001, 84) and Jón Helgason (1964, ix) that the manuscripts of *Gylfaginning*

The original version is the poem as composed and performed by its author, beginning the oral transmission of the poem. I conceive here of the poem as an authorial work, ‘from the beginning carefully thought out in content and polished in form’ (Jónas Kristjánsson 1990, 147; see also Tolley 2002; McKinnell 2013, 96). Of course it may well be the case that the author modified the poem, consciously or not, over the course of his or her lifetime and performed it with some differences from day to day. It is even conceivable, though I do not think it likely, that some of the variety we have in the preserved versions reflects this sort of original authorial variation.

It is unlikely that each of the three versions we have of the poem represents an independent line of transmission all the way back to the days of the author (Gísli Sigurðsson 2013, 53). It is more probable that they all have some changes in common. We can think of them as all deriving from an oral archetype at some remove from the original poem. This archetype could be quite concrete. It might be the case that all preserved versions of the poem are derived from one particular version known to a particular performer in, say, the twelfth century, and that all earlier variation has been lost. But the archetype can also be conceived of more abstractly as a version of the poem incorporating all changes from the original common to the surviving witnesses and no other changes. This might not correspond exactly to the poem as performed at any particular moment but can still be a useful abstraction to work with, analogous to the way linguists work with proto-languages. It was assuredly never the case at any point in time that there were no dialectal differences among the Germanic-speaking inhabitants of Scandinavia. But an abstraction like ‘common Scandinavian’ as ‘a variation-free reconstructed language’ (Barnes 1997, 34), can still be a valid and useful tool, as long as its limitations are kept in mind.

The diagram above should not be taken to imply that the three versions all derive independently from the archetype. The nature of oral transmission is that reticulation<sup>3</sup> is pervasive and not necessarily systematic. Judy Quinn (2016c, 49) has described this phenomenon well and the reader is invited to imagine her ‘mass of intersecting, overlapping, and thickening

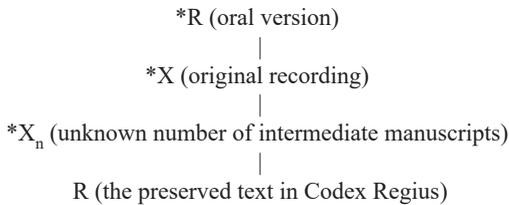
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show signs that the scribes occasionally deviate from their exemplar and follow their own knowledge of a particular verse or stanza. This may even be true of the copy of Codex Wormianus in AM 756 4to (Haukur Þorgeirsson 2010).

<sup>3</sup> The traditional term of art is ‘contamination’, but since this is sometimes taken to imply a value judgement I have chosen a more general word. I am grateful to Alaric Hall for pointing this out to me.

forms' for the transmission from the oral archetype to the three versions. For one given variant it might be the case that \*R preserved the original and \*H and \*G had a common change, while for the next, \*G might have the original and \*R and \*H might have a common change. And so on. But in the absence of a demonstrated pattern of common errors, the only heuristic we have—quite an imperfect one—is that when two versions agree they will be more likely than the dissenting witness to have the older reading.

The reader may be wondering why I have marked the \*R, \*H and \*G versions with asterisks. Are these versions not in fact preserved? Not quite. The oral versions which the diagram refers to are lost to us. What we have are written versions at some remove, and for this it is useful to refer to another diagram.



**Figure 2. The written transmission of *Völuspá* into the Codex Regius**

At some point there was a scribe who aimed to record the poem from its oral version \*R. Perhaps the scribe recorded it from his own memory, or perhaps he did it from the recitation of a performer. This is not a trivial task. We lack direct information about how such things took place in medieval Iceland but a chance survival from the seventeenth century gives us some material for comparison.

The earliest known ballad collector in Iceland was Gissur Sveinsson (1604–83), who compiled a collection of ballads and other old poems preserved in oral tradition, including some Eddic fairy-tale poems (*sagnakvæði*, for which see Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2013). Some of his notes happen to have survived, and they give us a bit of information on his method (Jón Helgason 1960, 51–54; the following is based on his analysis). Notes made in the recording of *Magna dans* and *Ásu dans* demonstrate that Gissur initially recorded the first few words of each stanza—probably in an effort to gather up all the stanzas and place them in the right order. When these initial notes are compared with the final versions, it turns out that there are some differences. The final versions have more stanzas and some differences in wording, even if we only have a few words of each stanza for comparison.

Presumably more stanzas came to light as Gissur continued working with his informant.

This example goes to show that recording a long poem from oral tradition is a challenging task. The collector may even miss stanzas known to the informant but accidentally skipped over in a particular performance. It is possible that some of the differences between the recorded versions of *Vǫluspá* came about in this way. In any case, as soon as a poem is committed to writing it starts to accumulate scribal mistakes. Even the initial recording can have confusing misspellings as well as accidentally omitted words and letters. Each copyist will then add new errors by, for example, misreading or skipping over particular words and letters. All copies include some innovations and the task is all the more challenging when copying an old poem with many obscurities. We do not know how many intermediaries there were between the initial recording of *Vǫluspá* and the preserved Codex Regius, but the Codex Regius is not the initial recording (Lindblad 1954) so we can certainly expect copyist errors to be present.

With these considerations in mind, what should be the goal when *Vǫluspá* is edited? It is, of course, desirable that high-quality photographs and accurate transcriptions of every manuscript be accessible to scholars. But a transcription is not much of an edition, and the matter cannot be left there. A critical edition will seek to make sense of the text and make it accessible to a wide audience of scholars and students—and suitable for translation into other languages as well.

Different critical editions can have different but equally legitimate aims. The traditional goal of textual criticism is to get as close to the original text as possible. This was the goal of, for instance, Sigurður Nordal's edition of *Vǫluspá* (1952). It is sometimes implied that there is something wrong or unscientific about this goal, but this is not so. Of course the original text can never be fully recovered but this is no reason not to get as close to it as we can. Every day, scholars and scientists in various fields attempt to reconstruct things based on partial remains. An archaeologist will speculate on the original form of a sword based on a few fragments. A linguist attempts to reconstruct a proto-language based on its descendant languages spoken thousands of years later. A paleontologist attempts to reconstruct the form of an ancient creature based on fragmentary fossilised remains.

It might be objected that any reconstruction of *Vǫluspá* cannot reach back to the original and can at most approach the oral archetype in Figure 1. Is that not a *non plus ultra* for any reconstructive project? This is

largely but not entirely true. To resume the analogy with other fields, linguists attempt to reconstruct not only Proto-Indo-European, the common ancestor of all attested Indo-European languages, but also to get further back in time and reconstruct Pre-Proto-Indo-European—an earlier stage of the language. This is possible, to a limited extent, based on internal arguments. Similarly, a scholar can argue based on internal arguments that certain parts of *Völuspá* which are common to all preserved versions were not found in the original poem. The prime example of this is the list of dwarfs which Sigurður Nordal omitted from his reconstructed version. Like many other scholars he was convinced that it was not a part of the original poem. The arguments for this, even if they have not convinced everyone, are reasonable and by no means hubristic or unscientific (see e.g. McKinnell 2013, 94).

Attempting to get as close as possible to the original text is not the only legitimate goal of a critical edition. Another approach is to print the different attested versions separately. This has the virtue of giving every oral version its due, allowing each to be considered as a whole. How is this to be done? A first impulse might be to edit the text of R separately without any input from the other manuscripts, and then treat the text of H similarly. I will argue that this is not the best way to proceed, because every manuscript has many scribal errors which *can* and *should* be corrected, and a valuable tool for doing this is comparison with the other witnesses. Instead, the editor can aim to reconstruct something closer to \*R and \*H, the oral versions which are imperfectly represented by the surviving manuscripts.

There are several factors which come into play when considering whether to emend a reading X to a corrected version \*X. The following are important:

(a) It is impossible or very difficult to construe a grammatical sentence out of X whereas \*X makes for normal syntax.

(b) The meaning of X is gibberish or fits the context very poorly whereas \*X makes sense and fits the context.

(c) It is easy to see how \*X might have been turned into X by a scribal mistake, considering our knowledge of typical scribal errors. This includes such common errors as omitting or transposing words or letters, jumping from one instance of a word to the next (*saut du même au même*, see e.g. Haugen 2013, 105), replacing an unfamiliar word with a familiar word (*lectio difficilior potior*) and getting confused about sequences of characters consisting of minims (<i, u, n, m>).

(d) While X is metrically unique or abnormal in the poem, \*X perfectly fits the metrical pattern.

In happy cases, multiple criteria come together to recommend \*X over X. We may have a manuscript text that is ungrammatical, senseless and a metrical monstrosity and also have a strong theory of how it could have come about through a copyist mistake. When we only have one criterion, our footing is much less secure. On the other hand, we demand less of \*X when it is a reading from another manuscript than when it is a conjectural emendation.

### *Ten problematic readings in the Codex Regius: a survey of editions*

After these theoretical considerations it is time to look at some actual manuscript text and examine how editors go about their business in practice. For this exploration I have selected ten problematic readings from the Codex Regius text of *Völuspá* and six editions of the poem. I include four editions from the scholarly mainstream, namely Kuhn (1962), Jón Helgason (1964), Gísli Sigurðsson (1998) and Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólafsson (2014). I also include two lesser-known editions, by Ólafur M. Ólafsson (1965) and Þráinn Löve (2000). These are especially interesting for their attempts to interpret the manuscript text as preserved in cases where other editors employ emendation. Löve goes as far as to say that his edition rejects all ‘corrections’ of the manuscript (*öllum „leiðréttingum“ á handritinu hafnað*, Löve 2000, 5), but as we shall see, this is no simple matter.

The six editions under study have different goals but they all base their text principally on the Codex Regius. When they deviate from R with an emendation I keep track of whether or not this is visible to the reader. I should note at the outset that I think silent correction of obvious scribal errors is no great sin, especially in an edition geared towards the public.

#### **Reading 1: <meins vara>**

In the description of the wicked wading heavy currents,<sup>4</sup> the Codex Regius mentions <meins vara> (2r, 16)<sup>5</sup> which, if taken at face value, would have to be translated as something like ‘of the harm of wariness’, which makes

<sup>4</sup> The best interpretation of this scene may be Kure 2013.

<sup>5</sup> For transcriptions of the Codex Regius text I mostly follow Vésteinn Ólafsson and Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson 2001, but my diplomatic transcript does not use all the special characters of that edition.

little sense in the context. Every editor I am aware of has undertaken an emendation to *\*meinsvara* ‘perjurers’, which is also the text in Hauksbók and the manuscripts of *Gylfaginning*. The error is understandable; mistakes in word division are frequent and the word *meinsvari* might not have been familiar to the scribe. This is the only attestation in poetry and *ONP* has only three in prose. Of the editions under study, Ólafur M. Ólafsson (1965, 90) explicitly mentions the emendation and it is also visible in Kuhn (1962, 9) but silent in the other four editions (Löve 2000, 80–81; Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014, 301; Gísli Sigurðsson 1998, 12; Jón Helgason 1964, 9—though see p. xi).

### Reading 2: <borð uegr>

In the description of the war between the Æsir and the Vanir the Codex Regius tells us that <brotiN var borð uegr borgar asa> (1v, 18), which would seem to mean that ‘the plank-road of the fortress of the Æsir was broken’. This is rather surprising: a road is not typically something you break and not typically made of planks. But everything falls into place if we emend to *\*borðveggr* (the text in Hauksbók), meaning ‘plank wall’, a word also occurring in *Glælognskviða*. This is a solution favoured by all editors, and it is a good one. Scribes frequently make the minor mistake of not making a distinction between a single and a double consonant. The emendation is carried out visibly by Jón Helgason (1964, 6) and Löve (2000, 54–55) and silently by the other editors (Kuhn 1962, 6; Gísli Sigurðsson 1998, 8; Ólafur M. Ólafsson 1965, 102; Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014, 297).

### Reading 3: <or log folgin>

The *vǫlva* begins her account of Baldr’s death with these words: <Ec sa baldri blodgom tivor odins barni or log folgin> (2r, 2–3). This could be translated as follows: ‘I saw for Baldr, the bloody god, Óðinn’s child—out of a lake, hidden.’ The last verse comes out of the blue. It is also metrically defective; the unstressed preposition *ór* carries the alliteration, something found nowhere else in the poem. The adjective <folgin> has a masculine singular form and its referent is unclear. Alternatively, we could take *ór lög* to mean ‘our laws’ rather than ‘out of a lake’. This is metrically better, but even harder to parse syntactically. This stanza is only preserved in the Codex Regius so there is no alternative text to help us out. We are left with conjectural emendation. As in the case of <meins vara> we can surmise that the scribe infelicitously divided the word *\*ørlog*.

However, we need another emendation, since the masculine singular in <folgin> is left hanging. If it is emended to neuter plural \*fólgin every-thing falls into place: The *vǫlva* saw Baldr's fate sealed. Here we have two emendations in one verse, based on conjecture and no support from other manuscripts. Yet scholars have found these corrections so trivial and obvious that they are carried out silently in all the editions under study, apart from the emendation of <folgin> to \*fólgin which is visible in Löve (2000, 68–69) and noted by Jón Helgason (1962, xiv) in his preface. As Jón points out, the Codex Regius scribe sometimes fails to distinguish between a single and a double *n*. And while *ørlog* is written as one word elsewhere in R, various compound words are written in two parts, so it is not impossible that this was the word intended by the scribe when he wrote <or log>. With these considerations in mind, we have a case which straddles the boundaries between emendation and mere normalisation of spelling.

#### Reading 4: <vullu hęri>

Continuing her discussion of Baldr's death, the *vǫlva* describes the mistletoe as follows: <stóð v̄m vaxin vullu hęri mior oc mioc fagr mistiltein> (2r, 3–4). The words <vullu hęri> are difficult, and the first word is usually emended to \*vǫllum. This is a conjectural emendation—the stanza is not preserved elsewhere. The stanza as emended can be translated thus: 'It stood grown, taller than the fields, slender and very beautiful, the mistletoe.' The emendation to \*vǫllum is carried out silently by Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (2014, 299) and visibly by Jón Helgason (1962, 8), Gísli Sigurðsson (1998, 10) and Kuhn (1962, 7). Löve (2000, 69) does not emend the text but also does not make explicit how he parses it. He takes *vǫllu* to mean 'field', perhaps construing it as dative singular of an otherwise unattested \*valla, taken to be synonymous with *vǫllr*.

Ólafur M. Ólafsson (1965, 105) attempts to make sense of the text as preserved. He takes <vullu> to be what it appears, the accusative plural of *vǫllr*. But he takes *hęri* to be the optative of the verb *hęra* meaning 'to shear' or 'to mow'. The words *vǫllu hęri* then mean 'may the fields be mown'. This he takes, in the context at hand, to be a wish that mistletoe be destroyed. This solution is ingenious but ultimately less than convincing. The syntax is strained, the sense is far-fetched and the verb *hęra* is not attested until much later. The conjectural emendation to \*vǫllum is more likely to represent the sense and text as recited. A final *m* is often represented with a nasal stroke over the preceding vowel, something which is easy to omit by mistake.

### Reading 5: <þar sǫg nǫphavgr>

In the description of the punishment of the wicked, the *vǫlva* says the following: <þar sǫg nǫphavgr nái fram gengna> (2r, 16–17). This is quite a challenge to parse as preserved. Our best option for <sǫg> is to take it as the accusative singular of *súgr* ‘a draught of wind’—certainly something which can be produced by large winged creatures. But we would like to have a verb, which must then be *nái* and we must take it to be the optative of *ná*, with *Níðhoggr* as subject. The adjective *framgengna* could be taken as accusative masculine singular and must then stand with *súg*—though we would have expected strong rather than weak inflection. We are left with something like this: ‘There may *Níðhoggr* get the departed draught of wind’. Unfortunately, this makes no sense and the syntax is very strained. Furthermore, the metrics do not match up. A noun in *fornyrðislag* must alliterate unless some previous word in the verse carries the alliteration. Since *súg* is a noun and *þar* does not alliterate, *súg* must alliterate—but does not.

Fortunately, we can get a perfectly rational text by consulting *Hauksbók*. If we emend <sǫg> to *\*saug*, the meaning becomes: ‘There *Níðhoggr* sucked the corpses of the departed.’ Now we have a text which has a natural word order, makes good sense and has no metrical problems. Four of the editions under study make this emendation; it is visible in Kuhn (1962, 9), Jón Helgason (1964, 9) and Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (2014, 301), but silent in Gísli Sigurðsson (1998, 12). Löve (2000, 81) does not emend and seems to take *súg* to be an alternative form of *saug*. This is quite unsatisfactory—strong verbs never have *ú* in the preterite.

Ólafur M. Ólafsson (1965, 108) emends to *só*, an alternative form of *saug*. In a later article (1966, 178) he came to the conclusion that <sǫg> is not a random error after all but has a numerological explanation.

### Reading 6: <at en galla>

In describing the end of the world, the *vǫlva* mentions *Gjallarhorn*. The text is as follows: <at en galla giallar horni> (2r:32–3r1). Most scholars emend *en* to *\*enu*, supported by the text in *Hauksbók*. This yields the sense: ‘at the sharp *Gjallarhorn*’. This emendation is visible in Kuhn (1962, 11) and Jón Helgason (1964, 11) and silent in Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (2014, 302) and Gísli Sigurðsson (1998, 13).

Ólafur M. Ólafsson (1965, 112–13) has a different interpretation, construing the text as follows: *at—enn gall ó—Gjallarhorni*. Here

*enn gall ó* is taken to mean ‘still the river resounded’. Little seems to be gained here. The syntax is strained, as we do not expect an aside to be inserted into a prepositional phrase. The metrics are strained as well, since we would expect *enn* to alliterate, rather than *gall*. Finally, this still involves emending the manuscript text and it is not clear that emending *en* to *\*enn* and *galla* to *\*gall* *\*á* is cumulatively a lesser emendation than *en* to *\*enu*, which is also supported by the Hauksbók text.

Löve has a different take, normalising the first five verses of the stanza as follows. For comparison, Gísli Sigurðsson’s text is to the right:

Þráinn Löve (2000, 95)	Gísli Sigurðsson (1998, 13–14)
Leika Míms synir	Leika Míms synir
en mjötuður kyndist að	en mjötuður kyndist
en galla	að inu galla
Gjallarhorn í	Gjallarhorni,
hátt blæs Heimdallur	hátt blæs Heimdallur

This is a clever way to read the text, as preserved: *en* simply becomes a conjunction. But ultimately it is not convincing. The syntax is strained and verses 2–4 all become unmetrical. The standard emendation is a much better choice.

### Reading 7: <havlþa at hiarar>

The *völva* mentions the rooster of the gods: <Gól um asom gullincambi sa uecr havlþa at hiarar at heriafavdrs> (2r, 23–24). The words <at hiarar> are normally regarded as a scribal error—an initial misreading of <at heria> which the scribe has failed to mark for deletion. Five of the editions under study omit the words; the emendation is visible in Kuhn (1962, 10), Jón Helgason (1964, 10) and Ólafur M. Ólafsson (1965, 88), but silent in Gísli Sigurðsson (1998, 13) and Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (2014, 302).

Þráinn Löve (2000, 89) reads the text as follows:

Gól um ásum  
Gullinkambi  
sá vekur hölda athjarar  
að Herjaföðurs

Þráinn takes *athjarar* to be the genitive of an otherwise unattested *\*athjorr* ‘sword’, formed analogously to *atgeirr*. There are no overwhelming semantic or syntactic problems here, but what sinks this reading is that the verse is unmetrical and it is very easy to see how

it would arise by scribal error. We are better off with the emendation than the manuscript text.

### Reading 8: <allar kindir>

The beginning of the poem in R is as follows: <Hljóðs bið ec allar kindir> (1r, 1). There are no syntactic or semantic difficulties with this; it means: ‘I ask silence of all creatures’—a perfectly reasonable beginning to a poem. But metrically this is a very difficult text. It is sometimes printed as follows:

Hljóðs bið eg  
allar kindir  
(Gísli Sigurðsson 1998, 3; Löve 2000, 9)

The implication here is that *ek* alliterates with *allar*. But the structure of the first verse is highly abnormal—we would have to take it as an example of type A3- with a disyllabic initial drop. There are no other examples of this in *Vǫluspá*, and Suzuki (2014, 82–85) knows only two examples in his entire corpus, one of which (*Oddrúnargrátr* 4.1) is suspicious for independent reasons. This would already be enough to make the verse suspect, but there is an even more serious problem in that we are required to see *ek*, a pronoun at the end of the verse, as carrying the alliteration in preference to a noun (*hljóðs*) at the beginning of the verse. This is essentially unparalleled and a strong indicator of textual corruption. Fortunately, a much more plausible text is preserved in Hauksbók:

Hljóðs bið ek allar  
helgar kindir

This is metrically perfect and was most likely also the form which the verses had in the oral \*R version. The omission of *helgar* from the preserved text in R is easily explained as a *saut du même au même*—two words in a row end with *-ar* and a scribe’s eyes jumped from the first to the second.

The text is emended to follow the Hauksbók version by Kuhn (1962, 1), Jón Helgason (1964, 1), Ólafur M. Ólafsson (1965, 88) and Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (2014, 291). In all cases the emendation is explicitly indicated.

### Reading 9: <Baldr mun koma>

The *vǫlva* sees that Baldr will return: <baldr mvn. coma>; *Baldr mun koma* ‘Baldr will come’ (2v, 28–29). A fine sentence, grammatically and

semantically. But it is metrically unique in the poem, and the type is rare elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> The text in Hauksbók, however, is metrically perfect: *man Baldr koma*. The Hauksbók text was preferred by Sievers (1885, 29), but an emendation is not undertaken in any of the six editions in this survey (Kuhn 1962, 14; Jón Helgason 1964, 14; Ólafur M. Ólafsson 1965, 119; Gísli Sigurðsson 1998, 17; Löve 2000, 122–23; Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014, 306).

Since the meaning is identical either way, this is not a problem which has attracted debate. But I would like to call attention to the dot after <mvn>. There is also a dot above the word <baldr>, which has been taken to be punctuation indicating the end of a stanza—but if that is the case, it is more distant than is typical from the preceding word. We could alternatively take the dot above <baldr> and the dot after <mvn> to be transposition dots, indicating that the words should be read in reverse order. This is a method employed by the scribe of R, e.g. on 2r, 14–15 and 9r, 4–5. To be sure, the dot is normally placed above the word, but there was no room above <mvn>, so the scribe might have settled for placing the dot after the word. If this is true, which I concede is far from certain, it would mean that the scribe of R intended to indicate the same word order as we have in H. This would be one of numerous scribal corrections in the text of *Völuspá*—by Ursula Dronke’s count there are 27 (Dronke 1997, 88–90; see also Katrín Axelsdóttir 2003, Boulhosa 2015).

### Reading 10: <oc a fimbvltys>

Describing the world after *ragnarøk*, the *völva* has a stanza which has this text in the Codex Regius: <Finaz ęsir aiþa velli oc vm mold þinvr matkan dǫma oc a fimbvltys fornar rvnar.> (2v, 24–26). This is difficult to interpret as preserved. We have the phrasal verb *dǫma um* in verses 3–4, and this is unproblematic. But verse 5 starts with *á* rather than *um*, and *dǫma á* is unexpected and abnormal. We might suspect that some text has gone missing, and this suspicion is strengthened by the fact that the stanza is only six verses long—it is much more common to have eight verses in a stanza. The solution is clear once the text in Hauksbók is taken into account:

<sup>6</sup> Suzuki’s (2014, 36–40) discussion of this is marred by his conflation of verses like Grp 12.5 *leið at huga* with relatively normal verses like HH II 11.6 *hildings synir*. Suzuki operates on the assumption that affixes never carry secondary stress but this is hardly valid for the Norse corpus.

**Codex Regius**

Finaz æsir  
 aþa velli  
 oc vm mold þinur  
 matkan dōma

oc a fimbvltys  
 fornar rvnar.

(2v, 24–26)

**Hauksbók**

Hittaz æser  
 a iða uelli  
 ok um molld þinur  
 matkan dema  
 ok minnaz þar  
 a megin doma  
 ok a fimbultys  
 fornar runar.

The text in Hauksbók has a stanza of the typical eight verses. The text is lucid and unproblematic—the problematic *á* is here revealed to be part of the phrasal verb *minnask á*. Furthermore, we have a ready-made explanation for why the missing verses were left out in R. With three verse pairs in a row beginning with *oc*, it is easy to jump accidentally over one (*saut du même au même*). Finally, a paraphrase of this stanza in *Gylfaginning* further backs up the text in Hauksbók: <ok minaz arvnar sinar> (Finnur Jónsson 1931, 75).

Every editor in this survey has made it clear that the verses are left out in R through mere scribal error and should be restored (thus, the emendation is visible in Kuhn 1962, 14; Jón Helgason 1964, 14; Gísli Sigurðsson 1998, 17; Löve 2000, 5, 119; Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014, 306), except for Ólafur M. Ólafsson (1965, 118–19) who has an ingenious solution for parsing the text in R, which he prints as follows without emendation:

Finnask æsir  
 á Íðavelli<sup>7</sup>  
 ok of moldþinur  
 máttkan dœma  
 ok ó fimbultýs,  
 fornar rúnar.

Ólafur takes *ó fimbultýs* ‘the river of Óðinn’ to mean ‘tear’, based on the previous reference in the poem to *ó af veði Valføðrs* ‘a river from the forfeit of Óðinn’, i.e. a river from his eye. This is clever, and if we absolutely had to parse the R text as preserved, this would be the way to do it. It is, however, impossible for metrical reasons (*á* cannot be a noun here), and the cumulative evidence makes a very strong case that the text in R is defective.

<sup>7</sup> The reading *Íðavelli* has little to recommend it; the metre shows that *Iðavelli* is the correct form.

Judy Quinn (2016b, 135–36) has criticised the editorial incorporation of the lines from H into a text based on R. In a review of the edition by Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason she explains:

A reappraisal of philological conventions has also been underway, leading to a more nuanced understanding of medieval manuscript culture . . . As a result, the integrity of each manuscript text has come to be regarded as having independent value as unique testimony to the textual tradition of a particular time and place.

In light of this she is critical that ‘portions of one text are imported into the edition of the other—for example two verses from the Hauksbók text into the Reginus text of stanza 58’, taking this as evidence that the editors have resisted a shift towards modern methods of editing. By contrast, I see the restoration of the omitted verses in stanza 58 as a good example of the usefulness of traditional philological methods. We have the agreement of a plurality of witnesses (H and G), we have a good account of how the scribal error arose (*saut du même au même*) and we have the fact that the preserved text in R is metrically suspicious (with a stanza of six verses) and difficult to make sense of. There is a constellation of matching evidence to show that the omission in R is a mere scribal mistake, and fixing it is consistent with respect for the different versions of the poem.

### *Metrics*

Knowledge of the structure of poetry is one of the traditional tools of philologists in evaluating manuscript readings. Like all tools, it needs to be used with judgement and care, but any scholars who refuse to work with metrics will deprive themselves of a powerful and useful method. Many scholars of Old Norse, however, harbour a deep-seated scepticism of metrical arguments. Quinn (2016a, 65) comments in a way which exemplifies this point of view:

Moreover, across the eddic corpus, a significant number of lines do not fit with the versification ‘rules’ derived by Eduard Sievers for early Germanic poetry, a situation which should at least give us pause before semantic interventions are made.

The unwary reader may take some unfortunate ideas away from these words. The first is the implication that Sievers’s metrics are a Procrustean bed, derived from musings on Germanic poetry in general and failing to actually fit the Eddic poems. But in reality, Sievers (1893) handled each tradition separately, dealing with the peculiarities of

Nordic metres in detail, while taking note of commonalities with West Germanic poetry.

The second implication is to link Sievers and his theories with heavy-handed emendation of the text. But a look at Sievers's 1885 booklet, where he presents his analysis of Eddic metrics, reveals a different picture. The text presented is very much in the scholarly mainstream—though it is true that many pronouns are placed in brackets, with some uncertainty on whether to count them for metrical purposes. The footnotes to *Vǫluspá* are revealing in that Sievers shows that the contemporary edition by Guðbrandur Vigfússon and F. York Powell (1883, 621–30) is full of adventurous conjectures that fail to fit the metre of the poem. Indeed, Sievers's discoveries serve to restrict scholarly conjectures at least as much as they do to support them.

The third impression the reader may get from Quinn's article is that Eddic metrics is an antiquated relic of nineteenth-century German thought.<sup>8</sup> But there has been significant progress in the field since then—evidenced not least by the monumental *The Meters of Old Norse Eddic Poetry* by Seiichi Suzuki (2014) which incorporates a number of insights from the study of West Germanic poetry into the Eddic field. The analytic tradition begun by Sievers is constantly being refined and developed, but as noted by R. D. Fulk (2016, 270), 'the past thirty years have seen a thoroughgoing rehabilitation of Sievers's initial views, which now dominate metrical scholarship'.

Scholars who champion an oral perspective on the Eddic poems should particularly strive to make use of the power of metrics. The metrical structure of poetry is not a mere intellectual exercise of dusty professors. It was the lifeblood of the oral tradition. For as long as the poems were known and recited aloud their structure was felt by the performer and the audience. The rhythm was integral to the aesthetic effect and it aided the memory—forming a partial barrier against arbitrary innovation. But when the poems were committed to writing they became subject to slips of the pen and all manner of random changes.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> A similar dismissal of the usefulness of metrics for textual criticism is delivered by Lars Lönnroth (2016, 366) in a review of *A Handbook to Eddic Poetry*:

Den förutsättningen kan i dag inte accepteras. Allt tyder i stället på att såväl de ursprungliga skalderna som senare traditionsbärare känt sig ganska fria i behandlingen av versläran. De har knappast känt sig tvungna att låta sina versfötter taktfast marschera i vare sig Snorres, Heuslers eller Sievers fotspår.

<sup>9</sup> A reviewer points out that oral performers can also produce various odd innovations. I do not deny this, but my claim is that scribal and oral innovations

An objection to the use of metrics to identify corrupt readings is that it entails a paradox, as eloquently phrased by A. E. Housman (1921, 80): ‘The MSS. are the material upon which we base our rule, and then, when we have got our rule, we turn round upon the MSS. and say that the rule, based upon them, convicts them of error.’ But the paradox is only apparent, and Housman answers it himself: ‘It is quite possible to elicit from the general testimony of MSS. a rule of sufficient certainty to convict of falsehood their exceptional testimony.’ This applies very much to the text of *Vǫluspá*. The general patterns are clear enough for the exceptional verses to stick out like a sore thumb. To see an example, we can compare variants in different manuscripts:

af veiði Valfǫðrs (Codex Regius of the *Prose Edda*; more on this variant below)  
af veði Valfǫðrs (the other manuscripts)

The text with *veiði* is of a common metrical type, dubbed C2 by Sievers, which consists of one or more unstressed syllables followed by a short stressed syllable, an unstressed syllable, a long stressed syllable and a syllable without stress or with secondary stress. There are some fifty-five other instances of this pattern in the poem (Haukur Þorgeirsson 2016, 133). But the text with *veiði* represents a metrical pattern found nowhere else in the poem, except for scribal errors in other manuscripts such as *fyrir Gnúpahelli* (Hauksbók) or *en bjáni Belja* (Codex Trajectinus) (Haukur Þorgeirsson 2012, 4–5). In no case do the manuscripts agree on a reading with this pattern—a clear hint that they represent secondary scribal variation, that is, errors.

A single change from one vowel to another can easily cause a verse to become unmetrical: to move from a type abundantly attested by all manuscripts to a type which only occurs in isolated readings, all but certain to be corrupt. This is an important qualification to the widespread perception of the poem as ‘metrically loose’ (Quinn 2016c, 72).<sup>10</sup>

### *Scribal mistakes in the manuscripts of Gylfaginning*

When the versions of *Vǫluspá* in R, H and G are compared, it is apparent that many of the differences between them are best explained by

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have different characteristic patterns. While scribal transmission is more likely to produce metrical errors, oral transmission is more likely to confuse the order of stanzas.

<sup>10</sup> This is not to deny that some poetry genuinely is metrically loose; *Hárbarðs-ljóð* could reasonably be described as free verse, and *ljóðaháttur* allows for more variation than *fornyrðislag*.

variation in the oral tradition. This is true for the order of the stanzas, but it is also true for some individual readings. Take the beginning of stanza 62:

Sal sá hon standa (R) Sal sér hon standa (H) Sal veit ek standa (G)

All three texts make good sense and all are metrical. The variation they represent is typical of oral tradition. Much of the variation in the manuscripts is of this kind, but there is also another type of variation, arising from various types of scribal mistakes. The manuscripts of *Gylfaginning* are a rich trove of such readings and I would like to demonstrate some of my favourites.

The least well known medieval manuscript of the *Prose Edda* is the fragmentary AM 756 4to—little known because it is a copy of the extant Codex Wormianus and so mostly deprived of textual value. Like all manuscripts, it has its share of scribal errors. Here is one, in the first refrain of *Völuspá* where an extra <c> has been inserted:

<þa gengu regin aull áá rockstola> (AM 756 4to, 1r) ‘then all the gods went to their spinning-wheel chairs’.

We must here take <rock> to represent the root of the word *rokkr* ‘spinning wheel’ rather than of the word *rök* ‘argument’, giving us the sense ‘then all the gods went to their spinning-wheel chairs’. Perhaps *rokkstóll* was a word known to the scribe, though it is not attested until later.

In the Codex Regius of the *Prose Edda* (R<sub>s</sub>) we have the following verses (in bold are the words which are unique to this manuscript):

dreckr **mōð** Mimir (other manuscripts: *mjōð*)  
 morgvñ hverian  
 af **veipi** Valfavðrs (other manuscripts: *veði*)  
 (Finnur Jónsson 1931, 22)

This is syntactically unproblematic, but the meaning is surprising: ‘Mimir drinks **leftover hay**, every morning, from the **hunt** of Valföðr.’ Are these interesting oral variants? Almost certainly not—they have every appearance of being scribal errors. The scribe has left out an <i> in the word *mjōð* and inserted an extra <i> in the word *veði*. As with so many scribal errors, the second one here makes the verse it is in unmetrical.

Another eccentricity in the *Völuspá* text of R<sub>s</sub> is found in the description of *ragnarök*, where we read *ormr kyk unnir* (Finnur Jónsson 1931, 73) which we would have to translate as ‘quiet worm, you love’. A surprising sentiment in this context. Every other manuscript has *ormr knýr unnir*

‘the worm propels the waves’, and we can safely assume that the scribe of  $R_S$  made a mistake. Other mistakes in  $R_S$  include <Ár var halda> (Finnur Jónsson 1931, 11), where an extra <h> makes the text senseless, and <horn er a lopt mey Öþin> (Finnur Jónsson 1931, 73) which is unmetrical gibberish. The errors in  $R_S$  are by no means unusual; every medieval manuscript of more than trivial length has its share of scribal errors. The Codex Regius of the *Poetic Edda* also has many errors, most clearly seen in cases like *Völuspá* where we have other manuscripts to compare with. Quinn (2001, 83) speaks of the Codex Regius scribe as if there were a scholarly consensus that he was ‘so careful’, but I am not aware of any attempt to demonstrate that the R text has an uncommonly low rate of scribal mistakes.

The text of the Codex Upsaliensis (U) has rather more than its fair share of eccentricities. Quinn (2001, 84–85) interprets some readings from its text of *Völuspá*:

The Upsaliensis text is significantly different, its mythological perspective scattered among footnotes, or ignored altogether not only in translations of the poem but also in editions. The nurturing woman is not old, but is poor, or wretched (‘armr’), and a certain one of her charges, an ‘ima’, will become the sun’s griever (‘tregari’) (Grape et al. 1977 II: 7) . . . What is particularly interesting here is that she is described as the one who will grieve for the sun, not the one who will destroy it. Giants too will perish at *ragnarök*, and this quoted verse seems to empathise briefly with the perspective of the wretched woman whose role it is to rear the creatures who are not only destined to kill the gods but doomed to destroy their own kind as well. For a moment, we glimpse one of the ‘enemy’ grieving for the sun which gives life not just to gods but also to giants.

Careful consideration of the readings of individual manuscripts is valuable, but it can be risky to read mythological interpretation into variants which are likely to be the result of scribal happenstance rather than a strong tradition.<sup>11</sup> The verse *tungls tregari* is unmetrical and unlikely to thrive in oral transmission—there are no verses in *Völuspá* with this rhythmical structure. What we have is most likely a scribal variant, either a simple misreading or an erratic attempt at correcting the text into something intelligible. The *hapax legomenon* *tjúgari* (the text of

<sup>11</sup> A reviewer points out that under the banner of reception studies there is nothing illegitimate about studying how a reader of an error-laden manuscript might have understood the text. I agree. My first philological publication (Haukur Þorgeirsson 2008) was exactly this sort of study, looking at how an error in the Codex Upsaliensis gave rise to new kennings.

the other manuscripts) will not have been familiar to the scribe, but is seemingly formed from a verb *\*tjúga*. By replacing this, consciously or unconsciously, with the familiar verb *trega* ‘to grieve’, the scribe of U or its exemplar arrived at the intelligible *tregari*. To read into this some particular ‘mythological perspective’ runs the risk of attributing meaning and structure to what is most likely a random change, undertaken without any larger goal in mind.

Quinn (2001, 87) treats another variant from U with similar enthusiasm:

Another possible kenning occurs in the text of the Upsaliensis quotation of *Völuspá* 57: ‘the sun, triumph of the earth, turns black; bright stars turn from the sky’ (‘Sol mvin sortna sigrfoldinnar. hverfa af himni heiðar stiorrn’ Grape et al. 1977 II: 34). Syntactically, the kenning ‘sigrfoldinnar’ appears to be in apposition with *sól*, the sun described as ‘the triumph of the earth.’ Poetically, this description reinforces the tragedy of *ragnarök*—when the glorious earth is put out like the sun’s brightness.

A serious problem with this interpretation, pointed out by Bäckvall (2007, 42), is that *foldinnar* does not actually mean ‘of the earth’; that would be *foldarinnar*. Furthermore, there is no precedent for any such kenning for the sun and it remains unclear to me how the sun could be seen as the victory of the earth. Nevertheless, in the 2012 edition of *Codex Upsaliensis* by Heimir Pálsson (2012, 82), Quinn’s interpretation is accepted and the text is emended to *\*sigrfold<ar>innar*—a verse with a metrical structure found nowhere else in the poem. Heimir comments that <sigrfoldinnar> ‘is hardly a misreading or scribal error for *sigr fold í mar*’ (2012, 82) but does not explain how he came to that conclusion.

Bäckvall (2007, 43) offers another suggestion for parsing <sigrfoldinnar>, namely *sigrfoldin ár*, where *\*foldin* is to be an otherwise unattested variant of *faldin* ‘covered’. But surely the most straightforward way to read this sequence of letters, if we allow ourselves the insertion of spaces, is as *sigr fold innar* ‘the land sinks further in’. This is how Eysteinn Björnsson normalises the text of U in his online edition.

Quinn (2001, 87) ultimately concedes that <sigrfoldinnar> may be an error:

This kenning is not preserved in other manuscripts; in fact they all preserve a clause that makes the Uppsala text look suspiciously like a mishearing of dictated or recited words: ‘sigr fold í mar’, the earth sinks into the sea. Nonetheless, to make of this phrase a kenning for the sun is a valiant semantic gesture by the Upsaliensis scribe or his forerunner, and it would be a pity if the editorial apparatus worked to write off or play down such an effect.

Here too, Quinn emphasises the oral nature of the text by suggesting a mishearing. But *sigr* ‘victory’ and *sígr* ‘sinks’ have vowels which are distinct in pronunciation but are written alike. Furthermore, *í mar* does not sound particularly like *innar*. It is more likely that we are dealing with a misreading than a mishearing. The word *innar* is common enough; it occurs e.g. on p. 25, line 7 in U while <*sigrfollinnar*> occurs on p. 34, line 10. In Old Norse manuscripts, a preposition is often written attached to the noun it precedes, and an unfamiliar sequence like <*imar*> could easily be misread as the familiar sequence <*innar*>. A misreading of a sequence of characters composed of minims (m, n, u, i) is a very common type of scribal error (as noted also by Bäckvall 2013, 165, who cites Derolez 2003, xxi), amply represented in the manuscripts of the *Prose Edda*. In his edition of *Grottasöngur*, based on the Codex Regius of the *Prose Edda* and the Codex Trajectinus, Clive Tolley (2002, 35) notes that ‘a common source of misreadings in both manuscripts has been minim confusion’, and cites seven examples in this relatively short poem.

To sum up, there is every reason to believe that the sequence <*sigrfollinnar*> arose from a mundane misreading and represents no mythological insight or poetic creativity.

### *Falsifying the witness?*

The final textual problem I will discuss is from the description of Óðinn’s meeting with the *vǫlva*. The verses in question are only preserved in the Codex Regius and the text is as follows: <Valþi henne herfavðr hringa oc men fe spjoll spaclig oc spa ganda> (1v, 29). In Quinn’s article (2016a, 65) this is normalised as follows (I have added line breaks after verses 1 and 3):

Valði henni Herföðr  
hringa ok men,  
fê, spjöll spaklig  
ok spáganda

Quinn translates: ‘War-father [a heiti for Óðinn] chose for her rings and necklaces, treasure, wise words and prophecy-wands.’

The text of the manuscript is printed unemended in some critical editions (including Jón Helgason 1964, 7) but, as Quinn notes, it has seemed unsatisfactory to many scholars and editors, beginning with Ettmüller in 1861 and continuing up to the *Íslenzk fornrit* edition in 2014 where Ettmüller’s conjectural emendation of <fe> to *\*fekk* is employed (Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, 298):

Valði henni Herföðr  
 hringa ok men,  
*fekk* spjöll spaklig  
 ok spá ganda

Quinn (2016a, 66) notes: ‘This is a ritual moment of some importance, the emended text treated as a source in studies of religion and mythology.’ I certainly agree that it is not without problems to use text with a conjectural emendation as the basis for conclusions. But Quinn goes further: ‘The emendation of *fé* to *fekk* falsifies the witness, changes the nature of the transaction between Óðinn and the *vǫlva*, and alters our understanding of the mythological dynamic between them.’

There is no need to refer to a good-faith attempt to remove an error from the text in these terms. The proponents of the emendation believe that the text makes better sense with it than without it, meaning something like this: ‘Herföðr [Óðinn] selected her for her rings and necklaces; he received wise news and a prophecy by *gandar*’ (see further Heide 2006, 101, 194–96). This is, then, in accordance with the first stanza of the poem which also has Óðinn (Valföðr) receiving news (*spjöll*) from the *vǫlva*. To be sure, this semantic argument would not be strong enough on its own to justify a conjectural emendation.

The verse *fé, spjöll spaklig* is a stylistic oddity, but the principal objection is that it is unmetrical. A nomen (noun or adjective) must alliterate unless something earlier in the verse already alliterates. There are four exceptions to this rule in the Codex Regius text of *Vǫluspá*. Four exceptions! Does that not mean that this rule is no rule at all and nothing to worry about? Not at all, when we look at these exceptions in context. I have highlighted the offending nouns in R:

R	H	G
a) <b>hljóðs</b> bið ek allar kindir	hljóðs bið ek allar helgar kindir	<not in G>
b) <b>fé</b> spjöll spaklig ok spá ganda	<not in H>	<not in G>
c) þar <b>súg</b> Niðhoggr nái framgengna	þar saug Niðhoggr nái framgengna	þar kvefr Niðhoggr nái framgengna
d) ok um Moldþinur máttkan dæma ok á Fimbultýs, fornar rúnar.	ok minnask þar á megindóma ok á Fimbultýs fornar rúnar	(paraphrase) ok minnask  á rúnar

In three cases, already discussed above, the rule is broken in R while H has a better text. And in the only remaining case we have no H or

G text to compare with. If the rules of alliteration were imaginary then it would be highly unexpected that H and G should fail to back up this sort of text in R in four out of four cases. The explanation is that the rule is very real and any violation of it is a strong indication of a scribal error.

It is likely that R has a scribal error in the verse <fe spioll spaelig>. Etmüller's emendation to *fekk* is a good guess. The word is repeatedly written <feç> in R, so this is an omission of one letter, much like <svg> for *\*saug*, <en> for *\*enu* or <vollu> for *\*vøllum*. A case can also be made for an emendation to *fyr*, which would entail that an abbreviation was misread. Semantically, this would give a very similar result with the stanza describing an exchange between Óðinn and the *vølva*.

Using an emended text as a source is to be done with caution but using a manuscript text which is highly likely to be corrupt is to be done with no less caution.

### Conclusions

It is my contention that there are numerous scribal errors in the manuscripts of *Völuspá* and other Eddic poems and that critical editors should do their best to identify and correct these errors. For comparison we can look at *Hymiskviða*, which is preserved in Codex Regius (R) as well as in AM 748 I a 4to (A). In Jón Helgason's edition (1965, 40–46), some eighty-seven textual differences are noted between these two manuscripts for this poem of thirty-nine stanzas—a bit more than two differences per stanza. Yet R and A are closely related manuscripts deriving from the same written archetype. With this comparison in mind we should expect that a great many of the differences between the R and H texts of *Völuspá* are of scribal rather than oral origin.

The emphasis on oral tradition over the last decades has brought a welcome perspective to the study of Eddic poems. We expect that different oral variants of the same verse, stanza or poem can each have interest and legitimacy and that it is typically difficult or impossible to determine which is older or more authoritative. But this perspective should not obscure the hard-won insights of traditional philology into scribal variation, which typically arises through unintentional errors of predictable patterns as well as through conscious, but often poorly informed, efforts to correct the text.

One important tool to aid us in distinguishing oral variants from scribal errors is an understanding of the structure and rhythm of

poetry. Unfortunately, the field of metrics has acquired a reputation among many Eddic scholars as, at best, an abstruse and useless intellectual exercise and, at worst, an active impediment to an authentic understanding of the texts. This is regrettable, and to some extent we metrists have ourselves to blame. There is a lack of accessible up-to-date material to communicate the validity and usefulness of the discipline—something which goes beyond handbook chapters like Fulk 2016, good though it is, but stops short of a 1000-page expert-oriented tome like Suzuki 2014. A day when we had something similar to Jun Terasawa’s brilliant *Old English Metre: An Introduction* would be a happy day.

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EGILL'S *ARINBJARNARKVIÐA*. HOW ONE PRAISE POEM  
CAN UNLOCK ANOTHER

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OF EGILL'S THREE LONGER POEMS, *Arinbjarnarkviða* seems to have attracted the least attention.<sup>1</sup> Although Gabriel Turville-Petre (1976, 15) describes it as 'a fine poem' in his *Scaldic Poetry*, he says nothing further about it beyond identifying the metre, and in his *Origins of Icelandic Literature* (1953) it is not even named. It is often used as evidence for the validity of *Höfuðlausn* as a genuine tenth-century poem (Hines 1995, Nordland 1956), but with few exceptions, most notably Carolyne Larrington (1992), is rarely appreciated as a poem in its own right.

*Arinbjarnarkviða* is a poem of praise for Egill's staunchest ally, Arinbjörn *hersir* Þórisson, giving an account of the time when his friend quite literally saved his head. It is in *kviðuhátt*, the same metre as *Sonatorrek*, the lament for Egill's own dead sons.<sup>2</sup> The similarity of metre allows us to consider the possibility, in spite of the saga context, that this too may be an *erfidrápa* composed on the death of his friend and patron (Larrington 1992, 50). The events remembered in stanzas 3–11 of the poem take place *í Jórvið* (4) 'in York', where Egill is forced to compose a poem of praise for the king, the reward for which will be his own head; he describes this praise poem as *mín . . . höfuðlausn* (8) 'my head-ransom'.

The events described in the poem seem to echo for the most part the events detailed in the saga relating to the composition of *Höfuðlausn*, a poem of praise for Eiríkr blóðøx, king in York, with one exception. Egill seems to imply that he came to Eiríkr's court voluntarily: *lét ek hersi / heim um sóttan* (3) 'I sought out the prince at home'. However, although

<sup>1</sup> This article is adapted from a paper given at The Viking World conference held at the University of Nottingham in 2016. All quotations from Egill's poems are taken from *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* 1933. The numbering of the *lausavísur* also follows the *Íslenzk fornrit* edition.

<sup>2</sup> Pete Sandberg (2019, 107–08) draws some interesting parallels between the imagery in *Arinbjarnarkviða* and in *Sonatorrek* to describe the ease or difficulty of the poetic process.

neither *Arinbjarnarkviða* nor *Höfuðlausn* refers overtly to Egill's presence at York as involuntary, it is hard to imagine, given the animosity between the two men which is corroborated by the very fact of the head-ransom, why Egill would have voluntarily put himself in this position. As Margaret Clunies Ross points out with reference to *Höfuðlausn*, 'it may . . . have been part of the head-ransom convention for the poet not to allude to his forced praise of his lord, as that may have been thought to lessen the depth and apparent sincerity of the praise itself' (Clunies Ross 2015, 77–78). There is perhaps a hint of obligation in the second stanza of *Höfuðlausn* where in return for the prince's hospitality he feels *þar ák hróðrar kvøð* (2) 'there I have an obligation to [offer] praise'. The reference to the invitation, *buðumk hilmir løð* (2) 'the prince offered me an invitation', may also be ironic, as *bjóða* is ambiguous and can mean either 'offer' or 'command'.

Further evidence for Egill's feelings about this event and his relationship with the king in York are to be found in several of the *lausavísur* collected in the saga. The poems speak to one another and of one another, or at least *Arinbjarnarkviða* speaks of *Höfuðlausn* and the attitudes are corroborated in the *lausavísur*. This metatextuality (Genette 1982, 10) provides a key to understanding the poems and the poet's attitude to the events and characters referred to without having recourse to the saga text, despite Larrington's assertion (1992, 55) that we can only really understand *Arinbjarnarkviða* in the context of the saga and knowledge of Egill's personal history.<sup>3</sup> Analysing the anecdotes in the saga pertaining to old age, Alison Finlay (2015, 114) argues that they are 'likely to have been stimulated by . . . *Sonatorrek*'. It is equally probable that the saga account of the head-ransom episode was 'stimulated by' *Arinbjarnarkviða*, thus rendering reference to the saga account of events largely unnecessary here.

We cannot completely ignore the saga prose when interpreting the poem, however, as it is to the manuscript contexts of the saga that we owe preservation of the poems. Curiously perhaps, *Höfuðlausn* and *Arinbjarnarkviða* do not share a manuscript context. *Arinbjarnarkviða* is found only in AM 132 fol., known as *Möðruvallabók*. As the saga is preserved in that manuscript, a blank space is left where the scribe

<sup>3</sup> Genette defines metatextuality as 'la relation, on dit plus couramment de "commentaire", qui unit un texte à un autre texte dont il parle, sans nécessairement le citer (le convoquer), voire, à la limite, sans le nommer' ('the relationship, one might call it "commentary", which links one text to another text which it refers to, without necessarily quoting it (bringing it up), or even, at a stretch, without naming it').

presumably intended to insert the first stanza and the text of the poem is written after the saga in a now illegible hand. A copy of *Möðruvallabók* by Ásgeir Jónsson dating to c.1700 provides a readable version, and one stanza is preserved in *Snorra Edda* (see Bjarni Einarsson 2003, xv–xvi). The *Íslenzk fornrit* edition supplies the last two stanzas from the *Mál-skrúðsfræði* of Óláfr hvítaskáld (*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* 1933, 267). *Höfuðlausn* is not found in *Möðruvallabók* at all, but in K (a seventeenth-century copy of the saga in the hand of Ketil Jörundarson), and W, the Wolfenbüttel codex. There are also four stanzas of *Höfuðlausn* preserved in *Snorra Edda*. (For full details of manuscript context for Egill's three long poems, see Reichardt 1934.) The initial omission of the texts of the poems and subsequent additions suggests that the poems were not composed by the saga author(s), and perhaps were expected to be familiar to the saga audience, this obviously being no longer the case by the seventeenth century.<sup>4</sup>

This paper seeks to develop, first and foremost, an analytical reading of *Arinbjarnarkviða* (and the related *lausavísur*), that will demonstrate that it is as deserving of critical attention as *Sonatorrek* or *Höfuðlausn*. It is not my intention to use the poem as a historical source, or as J. R. R. Tolkien (1997, 5) said of *Beowulf*, as a 'quarry for fact and fancy', but to study it 'as a work of art'. Through this analysis we can see how Egill uses poetic technique to reveal his relationship to and feelings about both Arinbjörn and Eiríkr blóðøx (and indeed about himself), and to direct our understanding of the poem of praise composed for Eiríkr blóðøx under duress.

Inevitably such an argument relies on a number of suppositions. The first is that any or all of these poems are genuine tenth-century poems by Egill Skallagrímsson. Recent criticism argues for the acceptance of *Höfuðlausn* as genuine (see the arguments of Hoffman 1973 and Hines 1995); *Arinbjarnarkviða* is accepted by extension, being cited as evidence for *Höfuðlausn*. If the poems are not genuine, then some historical significance is lost. Considered as works of art, however, it must be noted that whatever the provenance, the artistry remains intact, if not augmented. If these poems were not autobiographical as they purport to be, they would form an impressive construct.

The following analysis also supposes that *Höfuðlausn*, as we have it, was composed in York under the conditions outlined briefly above, and

<sup>4</sup> Clunies Ross (1989, 138) sees the verses as 'fitted into the prose of the saga' with a function 'to point up the morally positive side of Egill's poetic genius'.

that the poem referred to in *Arinbjarnarkviða*, as we have it, refers to that version of *Höfuðlausn*. The preservation of *Höfuðlausn* is particularly problematic as there is no way of knowing if the version we have (even if it is by Egill) is a version passed on by a witness at Eiríkr's court or by Egill himself. It would seem more likely that it was preserved and disseminated by the poet, in which case it is conceivable that the version we have may have been adapted into a more polished and more subversive version by the poet, once safely away from York (see Matthew Townend (2003, 50) and Sarah Foot (1999, 187) on reminiscent memory—that is, memory based on recollected personal experience—and constructed memory. Whilst *Arinbjarnarkviða* purports to be reminiscent, it is almost certainly to a degree constructed).<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to offer a detailed analysis of *Arinbjarnarkviða*, considering the way it seeks to undermine *Höfuðlausn* and the poet's relation to Eiríkr blóðøx, as well as the way it interacts with those *lausavísur* which refer to Egill's relationship with the king in York and the head-ransoming episode. For the purposes of this paper I align myself with the majority of critics in accepting these as genuine tenth-century productions by Egill Skallagrímsson (Finlay 2015; Hines 1995; Hofmann 1973; Larrington 1992; Nordland 1956; Townend 2003 and 2014 among others).

The few critical studies of *Arinbjarnarkviða* comment wryly on the fact that Egill begins a poem for his friend by talking about himself (Hallberg, 1975, 130; Larrington 1992, 51 and Ruseckienė 2004, 12). This is true, but it is necessary to enable him to construct the elaborate 'cairn of praise' that it becomes. It is in many ways an intensely personal poem, although presumably composed for a public audience. Egill's love for and gratitude to his friend are at the very heart of this poem, and the strongest reason for gratitude that he has stems from the particular moment in time when Arinbjörn, in King Eiríkr's retinue, saves the life of his friend through his intercession. Egill uses the confrontation as the basis for his praise of Arinbjörn. Eiríkr's faults become a foil for Arinbjörn's qualities.

Peter Hallberg (1975, 133) remarks that in *Arinbjarnarkviða* 'Egill speaks in a conspicuously self-centred manner about his own work as a

<sup>5</sup> It should be mentioned that there are other poems entitled *Höfuðlausn*, two by Óttarr svarti (SP I, 739–67) and a fragment by Þórarinn loftunga (SP I, 849–51), so it could be argued that the head-ransoming idea is a poetic trope and not necessarily evidence of a historical event. However, coming later, these poets may well have been influenced by Egill's version.

poet; it becomes to a certain degree a poem about poetry'. It can be said that each of the three longer poems opens by linking its circumstances of composition to the conceit of the production and flow of the mead of poetry. It is worth bearing in mind that for Egill this seems to have been more than a conceit; as Carol Clover (1978, 70) explains,

these [metaphors relating to the mead of poetry] are more than mere verbal equivalents—they constitute brief allusions to a more elaborate image . . . in which the recitation is conceived quite literally as a delivery in which the poet bodily divests himself of the poetic liquid.

Thus the kennings and images relating to the mead of poetry represent a poetic convention that expresses a spiritual reality. This gives the poet a dual nature that tends on the one hand to the comic and on the other to the sacred, as we will see.

*Arinbjarnarkviða* opens with the poet contrasting two types of man: the generous man is pitted against the liar and miser. It becomes clear as the narrative unfolds that these two types correspond to two specific men, Arinbjörn the generous friend and Eiríkr, the liar and miser. The whole first part revolves around the confrontation between Egill and Eiríkr at York, and it is useful to consider the background to this supplied by the *lausavísur*. These short verses collected in the saga provide a history of Egill's relationship with Eiríkr, much of which is revisited in the longer poem.<sup>6</sup>

*Lausavísa* 28 shows Egill's relationship with the king before the head-ransoming episode and takes the form of a prayer to the gods for revenge. The differences between the two men are pronounced and are clearly the basis for their mutual animosity.<sup>7</sup>

Svá skyldi goð gjalda,  
gram reki þond af löndum,  
reið sé rogn ok Óðinn,  
rön míns féar hönum;  
fólkmýgi lát flýja,  
Freyr ok Njörðr, af jorðum;  
leiðisk lofða stríði  
landóss, þanns vé grandar.

(*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* 1933, 163)

<sup>6</sup> The authenticity of certain of the *lausavísur* in *Egils saga* has been questioned, but if we accept the longer poems as genuine tenth-century poems by the same poet, then those which seem to echo the voice and sentiment of the longer poems as these do will also be accepted as such, at least for the purposes of this analysis.

<sup>7</sup> I have made some emendations to punctuation. Translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

May the binding ones (gods) drive the fierce one from the lands, in this way must the gods pay him for the pillaging of my goods, may Óðinn and the ruling ones (gods) be angry.

Freyr and Njörðr, make the oppressor of the people flee from the territories; god of the land [Þórr], despise the enemy of mankind, the one who destroys sanctuaries [or: god of the land, despise the destroyer of sanctuaries?].

Egill invokes all the gods against Eiríkr and accuses him of theft, indicating that the difference between them is significant and of a financial nature. He also calls Eiríkr a destroyer of sanctuaries. Egill has put his own grievance (*rón míns féar*) first, explaining the reason for this invocation; he then parallels his own grievance with that of the gods—‘he has taken my property and destroyed yours’—for added incentive. Whilst a king’s reasons for appropriating the wealth of others may be apparent, his motives for destroying sanctuaries are not, and the only logical conclusion, if the accusation is true, is that Eiríkr was a Christian convert. Gareth Williams (2010, 96) argues that it is quite possible that Eiríkr was a Christian, at least in his time in England, on the basis that the Christian imagery used on the coins Eiríkr had minted whilst king of York suggests a more than token faith. Matthew Townend (2014, 83) also argues for Eiríkr’s Christianity, and Finnur Jónsson (1924, 180 n.) asserts that although there is no evidence of Eiríkr damaging sanctuaries, *in England trat er zum Christentume über* ‘he was converted to Christianity in England’. Egill’s accusation relating to the destruction of sanctuaries would certainly seem to corroborate this hypothesis. If this is the case, then the opposition between Egill and Eiríkr is more pronounced and the account of the head-ransoming episode takes on a heightened significance from the point of view of a pagan believer. Although *Egils saga* refers to Egill and his brother accepting *prima signatio* (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* 1933, 129), neither the saga nor Egill’s poetry suggests that this was anything more than a token acceptance of Christianity to allow the brothers to fight in the army of a Christian king (for an appraisal of Egill’s religious beliefs deduced from *Sonatorrek*, see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999, 159–79).

Eiríkr blóðøx was an unpopular and unsuccessful king, with a reputation for tyranny and ruthlessness. He killed at least two of his brothers in order to obtain the Norwegian throne before being chased out of Norway by his younger brother Hákon inn góði.<sup>8</sup> Setting up anew as king

<sup>8</sup> See *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* chs 34 and 43 (*Heimskringla* 1941–51, I 138–39, 149), *Hákonar saga góða* chs 2 (on Eiríkr’s unpopularity in Norway) and 3 (on his acceptance of Christianity when he became king of York). (*Heimskringla* 1941–51, I 151–52),

in York he would again find himself being chased out of this role on at least two occasions in 948 and 954. There have been doubts raised as to whether Eiríkr blóðøx ever was the king named in the saga as Eiríkr and said to rule in York, but whilst not conclusive, the burden of the evidence points this way not least because he had Arinbjörn, a Norwegian nobleman, in his retinue (Townend 2014, 74–78). It has even been suggested that the apparent anachronism, or ‘gross historical error’ (Hines 1995, 84), in the saga putting Eiríkr in York at the time that Aðalsteinn was on the throne in England may in fact be correct. Both Williams (2010, 86) and Townend (2014, 75) argue convincingly that it is quite possible and even probable that Eiríkr was a sub-king under Aðalsteinn, foster-father of Eiríkr’s younger brother, Hákon, in the period following the battle of Brunanburh. This would then corroborate both the saga account (*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* 1933, 175–76), and an account in the life of St Cathroe of a meeting between king and saint in York somewhere between 941 and 946 (Williams 2010, 80 and Dumville 2001, 172–88).

A direct reference to the head-ransoming episode appears in *lausavísa* 34, which expresses Egill’s happiness at being able to keep his head. The joke about its ugliness reappears in *Arinbjarnarkviða*. Indeed, *lausavísur* 34–36 can be read as a summary of the poem.

34. Erumka leitt,  
þótt ljótr séi,  
hjalma klett  
af hilmi þiggja;  
hvar’s sás gat  
af goðfuglyndum  
œðri gjöf  
allvalds syni.

(*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* 1933, 193–94)

It is not hateful to me, although it is ugly, to receive this crag for helmets (head), from the helmeted one (prince). Where is the one who got a more generous gift from the son of an all-powerful [king]?

35. Svartbrúnum lét sjónum  
sannsparr Hugins varra,  
hugr tjóðum mjök mága,  
mognuðr Egil fagna;  
arfstóli knák Ála  
áttgoðguðum hattar  
fyr regnaðar regni  
ráða nú sem áðan.

(*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* 1933, 194)

The truly foretelling<sup>9</sup> sweller of Hugin's (the raven's) wake (i.e. the warrior, Eiríkr) let Egill welcome back his dark-browed eyes. The mind of my kinsman helped me greatly. Now as before I rule the well-born inherited throne of the sea-king's hat (my head) in front of Óðinn's sword.

[*regnaðar regni*: (Nordal (*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* 1933) and Jónsson (1924, 204 n.), following Falk (1888), amend M *regna þar* (W *regn gnar*, K *regn gnar*) to *rógnaþra reginn* 'god's battlesnake', i.e. Óðinn's sword).]

36. Urðumk leið en ljóta  
landbeiðaðar reiði;  
syngrat<sup>10</sup> gaukr, ef glamma  
gamm veit of sik þramma;  
þar nautk enn sem optar  
arnstalls sjötulbjarnar;  
hnigrat allr, sás holla  
hjálpendr of þor gjalpar.

(*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* 1933, 200)

The ugly anger of the one who demands land (king) became hateful to me; the cuckoo does not sing if it knows the vulture of *din* (eagle) is sitting around him (i.e. nearby); there, as often before, I benefitted from the bear of the eagle's perch (rock; bear + rock = Arinbjörn, since *arinn* means 'stone hearth'). He will not fall down at all who boasts of loyal helpers on his way.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, Egill refers to Eiríkr as 'son of an all-powerful king' in stanza 34 rather than king himself. *Hávamál* 86 ranks kings' sons with

<sup>9</sup> *Sannsparr* is problematic. Nordal renders it as *spar á sann* which he translates as 'fairness' (*sanngirni*, *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* 1933, 194); Bjarni Einarsson (2003, 113 and 259) translates it as 'the one sparing of fairness'; Finnur Jónsson (1924, 204) takes *sannsparr* as a qualifier for *hugr mága* 'mind of [my] kinsman by marriage', i.e. Arinbjörn, translating it as *wahrhaftes weissagend*, according with Cleasby and Vigfusson (1975), 'prophesying what is true'. I have followed this translation but construed it as qualifying 'the one who swells the raven's wake'. This may be a reference to Eiríkr's nickname, as the raven's wake is blood (*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* 1933, 194).

<sup>10</sup> I follow the emendation of *sigrat* to *syngrat*, proposed by Gunnar Pálsson and adopted by Finnur Jónsson (1924) and Bjarni Einarsson (2003).

<sup>11</sup> Both Nordal and Bjarni Einarsson give *glamma gamm* as a kenning for 'eagle'; Finnur Jónsson (1924) argues the phrase is corrupt and makes no sense, tentatively offering the sense 'vulture of noise' (*glam*) as a kenning for 'dog'. Nordal suggests 'the cuckoo does not sink down (is restless)' for *sigrat gaukr*. In view of the manuscript variants (M *sigrat*, W *sigart*, K *singja*) I have followed the reading *syngrat* because it seems to me that the image of a cuckoo unable to sing makes more sense in relation to both the function of the cuckoo and the function of the poet it represents.

snakes, flying darts and bride's bed-talk as things to be most wary of (*Hávamál* 1986, 56)—a reference that Eiríkr's siblings might have found most apt. The reference to Eiríkr as his father's son, rather than king in his own right, serves not only to make him dangerous, but also to belittle him and question his right to rule. There seems to be a degree of sarcasm in this stanza. Whilst it is 'not hateful' to him to get his head back, is it really a fine gift from a generous man? The kenning in *lausavísa* 35 referring to his head as an inherited throne reinforces Egill's rightful ownership of his head and his own right to rule it. Egill uses kennings to add layers of meaning. For example, the reference to the cuckoo who cannot sing in the presence of an eagle implies that he finds it difficult to compose his poetry knowing Eiríkr is watching him and wanting him dead. Implicitly Egill is comparing Eiríkr to both an eagle and a vulture. If *glamm* is 'noise' or 'voice' (Nordal), then the prince (eagle) feeds off declaimed poetry, and the vulture hints at the anticipated death of the 'singer'. Taken with *lausavísa* 35, Egill links Eiríkr to two of the beasts of battle, the raven and the eagle. The *glamm* then becomes both the noise of battle and the poet's voice. The poet represents himself as the cuckoo, perhaps hinting that Egill is an intruder at Eiríkr's court. If we stretch the association with the cuckoo further, as a bird that intrudes into another bird's nest and fools it into giving food, we might even glimpse a hint that Egill has in some way tricked Eiríkr. Although quite a stretch, this is not without plausibility. Egill has pitted a cuckoo against a bird of prey. A cuckoo is not perhaps the most likely choice for a songbird; in roughly contemporary Old English and Old Welsh poetry it is associated with sorrow because of the melancholy nature of its voice (*The Seafarer* l. 53, *The Husband's Message* l. 23, *Claf Abercuawg* 10; see Klinck 1992, 80, 100, 270). Whilst a bird of prey has an obvious superiority of force over other birds, a cuckoo uses cunning to fool its unwitting host (admittedly not usually birds of prey). If Egill is hinting at trickery here, it is perhaps in the nature of the praise poem he has composed, which, as we will see below, may not be as flattering as it first appears.<sup>12</sup>

We have seen that Egill's poetry is intensely self-conscious, taking its composition and the circumstances of its composition as subject. The *lausavísa* ends, extending the animalistic imagery, with his friend offering him a safe perch, as it were, cleverly tied into a kenning for Arinbjörn's name. This is doubly fitting because if the king is the eagle

<sup>12</sup> The cuckoo's habit of laying its eggs in the nests of other birds appears to have been well known. It is referred to in Exeter Book *Riddle* 9 (Krapp and Dobbie 1936, 185) and earlier in Isidore's *Étymologies* (Isidore of Seville 1986, 277).

(‘vulture of din’), then the eagle’s perch would be his court, so ‘bear of the eagle’s perch’ is not just a kenning based on Arinbjörn’s name, but a description of his function as a powerful and protective presence at court. Egill underlines the importance of his friend’s presence, without whom he would not have been able to perform and thereby save his head, at the same time drawing comparisons between Arinbjörn’s name and his ‘substance’. In a way not dissimilar to the New Testament play on the given name Peter, Egill turns his friend into a metaphor for stability, using the lithic sense of his name. He will take this further in *Arinbjarnarkviða* when he extends the metaphysical image of the material that makes a man into the source material that he crafts into poetry.

John Hines (1995, 100) remarks that in *Hqfuðlausn* ‘it is striking that unambiguous social titles are very rarely used for Eiríkr’. Egill mainly refers to Eiríkr in figurative terms that represent kings in poetic language such as the *hilmir* ‘helmeted one’ and *jöfurr* ‘wild boar’ in the opening of *Arinbjarnarkviða* or the *landbeiðuðr* ‘land-demander’ in *lausavísa* 36. Even in *Hqfuðlausn*, the poem supposedly in praise of Eiríkr, Egill is subtly refusing to recognise him wholeheartedly as a rightful king. Where Egill could afford to be irreverent in his *lausavísur*, it would have been counterproductive in *Hqfuðlausn* and quite probably impolitic even in *Arinbjarnarkviða*, but there are other examples of Egill’s subversive mockery of the king in the poem he is forced to compose, not least in the absence of reference to any specific battles. The most daring, however, is in the opening where he describes himself in a polysemous image as carrying a cargo of poetry with him west over the sea. There is not room here to analyse *Hqfuðlausn* in any depth, nor is it necessary as John Hines (1995, 83–104) has provided a thorough demonstration of the poetic skill involved. He draws attention to Egill’s use of the mead of poetry as a frame for the poem (90):

Through a powerful trope, this symbolic liquid, the mead of poetry, becomes a microcosm of the large, external situation: it is the sea of the mind-shore (*munstrandar marr*) that is both carried by the poet and simultaneously carrying him, transformed in [stanza 1,] line 8 into a boat.

He refers to the paradox of the conflictual relationship between poet and prince and comments on the way Egill draws parallels between himself and his patron, using the image of the mead of poetry to do this (92). This is certainly true, but he also seems to be using the imagery of the mead of poetry to poke fun.

At the end of the first stanza he describes himself as loading a portion (*hlutr*) of praise in the stern of his ship, (*hlóðk mærdar hlut / míns knarrar skut*). If we follow the image through, the ship represents Egill’s

body, container of Óðinn's sacred mead, in which case the stern would be at his rear end. It is either an unfortunate image or a reference to the famous *skáldffla hlutr* 'poetaster's portion', which Óðinn himself excreted as material for lesser poetry (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 5). This is more, I think, a reference to the quality of the material Egill has to work with than a comment on his own poem which, whilst lacking in real substance, is cleverly put together, as Hines so amply demonstrates. One of the conceits in *Arinbjarnarkviða*, as we will see, is that the quality of the poetry and its ease of delivery is affected by the material of the subject.

Another possible dig at *Eiríkr* in *Hofuðlausn* is identified by Kries and Krömmelbein (2002, 17) who see 'ironic overtones' in the final stanza where Egill describes himself as bringing forth the poem *ór hlátra ham* (20) 'from the hull of laughter'. There is perhaps another subtle suggestion of mockery in the previous stanza: *hræðak munni / af munar grunni / Óðins ægi* 'I stirred Óðinn's sea with my mouth, from the bottom of my mind' (trans. Hines 1995, 94–97, 92). If 'Óðinn's sea' is the mead of poetry, then to stir it from the bottom of its container (Egill's mind), would be to offer the lees, that is, the unpleasant residue at the bottom. These associations may be coincidental, but the fact that all three of these subversive images relate to the mead of poetry, its place of storage, quality and means of delivery, is highly suggestive. The overall effect is one of mockery. Belonging to the poem's frame, these images are not part of the main body of the poem; it is not inconceivable, therefore, that they are a later addition by the disgruntled poet.

With the background to the relationship between Egill and *Eiríkr* and the confrontation in York provided by the *lausavisur*, we can now turn our attention to the artistry and wit of *Arinbjarnarkviða*. Here Egill creates a world where nothing is quite what it seems. Men are dismembered and distorted, transformed into monsters or gods. There are forces at play—the transformative power of Óðinn's mead, and the implacable power of an angry king—but there is also the quiet power of honesty and friendship.

The poem opens with a statement that Egill's powers of speech are affected by the nature of his subjects.

1. Emk hraðkvæðr  
     hilmi at mæra,  
     en glapmáll  
     of glögginga,  
     opinspjallr  
     of jöfurs dǫðum,  
     en þagmælskr  
     um þjóðlygi,

(*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* 1933, 258)

I am swift to speak praise for a helmeted one [ruler], and hesitant of speech about misers, free of speech about the deeds of a wild boar [prince / king], but silent of speech about a great lie.

2. skaupi gnægðr  
 skrökberðundum,  
 emk vilkvæðr  
 of vini mína;  
 sótt hefk mǫrg  
 mildinga sjöt  
 með grunnlaust [ms grunlaust]  
 grepps um æði.

(*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* 1933, 258)

Full of contempt for carriers of falsehoods, I am willing of speech for my friends. I have sought the dwellings of many generous men with the boundless [ms. spotless] mind of a poet.

Egill sets in opposition noblemen and scoundrels, generous friends and miserly enemies. He claims that his own ability to speak is affected by the nature of the subject, a conceit used in the opening of *Sonatorrek* where the poet could not call up the mead of poetry because of his extreme sorrow (*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* 1933, 246). Judy Quinn (2010, 201), in explaining the creation of the mead of poetry, remarks, ‘at each transfer, the value of the liquid swells with the attributes of the class of beings who lose it’, referring to Kvasir, the dwarfs and the giants. For Egill the quality of the mead, or at least the ease of its production, grows or dwindles depending on the subject of the poem; it is as if he is using the material of his subjects in a very real way to shape his words. Both *Höfuðlausn* and *Sonatorrek* begin with a self-reflection on their own composition, but *Arinbjarnarkviða* has a broader sweep. In a first experience of the poem the references to princes and misers seem like conventional generalisations. However, it soon becomes clear that *Arinbjarnarkviða* takes the composition of two specific poems as its opening subject, *Arinbjarnarkviða* itself and *Höfuðlausn*. *Arinbjarnarkviða* does not operate in isolation, but works in tandem with *Höfuðlausn* and refers back to it, or at least the circumstances of its composition; when this becomes clear, the epithets become more pointed. They apply to one or the other of the subjects of the two poems, Eiríkr and Arinbjörn, and the consequent ease or difficulty with which the two poems were conceived. This poem he composes freely and willingly because he wants to, the other he composed under duress. This poem is about a man who has performed noble deeds and is a friend, the other is about a miser and a liar.

*Lausavísa* 28 makes it clear that Egill considers Eiríkr to have stolen from him, and 35 hints obliquely that he expects more payment for the praise poem composed, albeit under duress. We do not have any context beyond the saga for the reference to lies, but I do not believe that it is purely formulaic. A clue might be in the term *þjóðlygi* which Nordal translates as *prettir, undirferli alþýðu* ‘deception, subordination of the people’. This echoes the description of Eiríkr in *lausavísa* 28 as *fólk-mýgir* ‘oppressor of the people’. (Nordal also sees a parallel between *jöfurr – þjóð* and *dóð – lygi*, implying that the deeds of the prince are lies.) The reference to lies could be personal, of course; the king has almost certainly accused Egill of something or he would not be able to demand his head. However, the use of *þjóð* suggests that the deception is more widespread, perhaps concerning the king’s subjects; it could therefore be a reference to Eiríkr’s pretensions as king which Egill may well refuse to recognise, or it could be a reference to Eiríkr’s renunciation of the old gods, if he is a Christian convert. In any case, this opening sets the tone for what is to follow. We are to be presented with two men and the circumstances of composition of their two praise poems, one man most deserving of praise who has paid for his poem in advance, and the other who has received praise but did not deserve it, and has not paid sufficiently for the poet’s work.

There follows a complex series of conceits all revolving around the powers of Egill to either transform himself or reveal the true identity of others through the transformative power of the mead of poetry. The first conceit in *Arinbjarnarkviða* is Egill’s own transformation into a figure of Óðinn, as a traveller seeking out hospitality. Óðinn disguises himself as a traveller in a number of Eddic poems (in *Vafþrúðnismál* as Gagnráðr, which Machan (*Vafþrúðnismál* 1988, 75) translates as ‘the one who counsels victory’, comparing it with Gagnráðr in a list of *heiti* for Óðinn in *Snorra Edda* which he translates as ‘the wanderer, perhaps with the suggestion of beggar’; in *Grímnismál* as Grímnir; in *Baldur’s draumar* he calls himself Vegtamur and in *Hárbarðsljóð* he disguises himself as a ferryman called Hárbarðr ‘Greybeard’). Stanza 3 continues the Odinic conceit as Egill draws a bold hat over his dark hair, suggesting that, like Óðinn, he is concealing his identity. Again this is a familiar Odinic image which draws attention to Egill’s head, whilst reminding us that Óðinn’s head was often at stake on his travels too (*Vafþrúðnismál* 19). The third and most direct Odinic reference is in stanza 6, when Egill tells us that he ‘dared to carry the pillow-price of the snake to the king of boundaries’, a reference to the myth of Óðinn stealing back the mead of poetry from the giants (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 4).

In stanza 2 Egill tells us that he has ‘sought the dwellings of generous men with the boundless mind of a poet’. The adjective given in *Möðruvallahólf* is *grunlaust* ‘spotless, guileless or unsuspecting’. Cleasby–Vigfusson cites this particular line for both *grunlaust* ‘without guile’, and *grunnlaust* ‘without boundaries’. A poet’s mind is an Odinic mind, and such a one being ‘unsuspecting’ seems unlikely, unless ironically; this sense also contradicts Egill’s definition of the benefits of Óðinn’s gifts in stanza 24 of *Sonatorrek*, where he thanks Óðinn, albeit grudgingly, for giving him, with the mead of poetry, the kind of mind which allows him to recognise *vísa fjandr / af vélöndum* ‘certain enemies from tricksters’ (*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* 1933, 256).<sup>13</sup> Hines (1995, 91) remarks on Egill’s use of boundary imagery in his poetry, identifying what he believes could be ‘a fine example of figurative amplification’ in stanza 6 of *Höfuðlausn* where he interprets *hné folk á fit* as having the metaphorical meaning ‘men sank to the margin of life’, commenting that this metaphorical use of spatial margins is unique at this time to Egill; he offers further examples from *Sonatorrek* where Egill describes the end of his family line as the edge of a forest, and his family as a ‘kin-enclosure . . . broken by the sea’. It therefore seems to me logical to accept the reading *grunnlaust* as making more sense and being typical of Egill’s use of imagery. If we do accept it, then the ‘boundless mind’ of the poet is neatly opposed to the description of Eiríkr as *markar dróttinn*, king of the boundary, in stanza 6, an indication of Egill’s mental superiority as his mind cannot be contained in the prince’s stern grip.

<sup>13</sup> Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1999, 171–73) queries the lines in *Sonatorrek* 23 where Egill makes the obscure comment, *Blótka ek því / bróður Vilis . . . at ek gjarn sék* ‘I do not make sacrifices to the brother of Vílir . . . because I am eager’ (Jón Hnefill’s text and translation) for lacking sense, especially when he has said that the god has broken faith with him in the previous stanza. Jón Hnefill explains this by demonstrating that the lines of the previous stanza may in fact mean that Óðinn has broken Þórr’s friendship with him. I read this differently; I interpret the reference to unwilling sacrifice as an accusation that Óðinn has taken his boys as sacrifice, or payment for the mead of poetry, something Egill would not have agreed to. His bitter consolation is that he is able to recognise *vísa fjandr / af vélöndum*, the irony being that he now sees Óðinn for what he is: an enemy and trickster. The poem’s close, where Egill waits patiently for Hel, further implies that in his grief he has broken with Óðinn for good. Anger at the gods is a natural effect of grief, and we see a similar sentiment in Ben Jonson’s ‘On my first son’ where he believes his son to have been exacted as payment by God: ‘I thee pay’. Jonson too seems to reject God (presumably momentarily) in the ambiguous line ‘O, could I lose all father now’.

Eiríkr's identity is also revealed over three stanzas: in stanza 3 we are told that he is *Ynglings burr*, a son of the Yngling. This is a reference to his genealogical line as son of Haraldr hárfagri. Stanza 4 tells us he is *í Jórvík* and stanza 5 names him as Eiríkr. At the same time that Egill is revealing the identity of the king, and establishing his own identity as a figure of Óðinn, he is also transforming Eiríkr into a monster.

The king is under an *ygs hjalmr* (4), a helmet of terror. This is the term used by Snorri to describe the helmet worn by Fáfnir before transforming himself into a dragon (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 46 and Larrington 1992, 51). In stanza 5 Egill focuses on the terrifying nature of Eiríkr's eyes: the moonbeam of Eiríkr's eyelashes is not safe or 'unterrifying' to look at, and his eye is described as having serpent-like 'terror-beams' (*ægigeislar*). The image suggests that Eiríkr is wearing a helmet which, mask-like, hides his face, thus leaving Egill with no way to gauge the king's response to his words. The Sutton Hoo helmet has little red gems studded above one of the eyebrows which, in the candlelight of a king's hall, would have shone and flashed red (Price and Mortimer 2014, 522; see also Marold 1998). It is tempting to wonder whether this is not just a figurative image, and that Eiríkr was in fact wearing such a helmet?

Having described the terrifying aspect of the king's head, Egill goes on to describe his own, which seems laughable in comparison. Margaret Clunies Ross (2015, 81) discusses the description and considers it as a possible allusion to a literary topos which involves 'enumerating the monetary value of specific body-parts of [a] woman'. It is certainly reminiscent of Shakespeare's mockery of the blazon when in *Twelfth Night* (1.5) Olivia counts off her features: 'item two lips, indifferent red; Item, two grey eyes with lids to them', and here too the effect is highly comical. If these parts were valued, what would they be worth? In a poem which presents a series of antitheses, and dualities where generous men are opposed to misers, and princes are monsters, the dual and antithetical nature of Egill's head is the most developed. It is at once a priceless sacred vessel and a ridiculously ugly and worthless collection of parts. Despite critics' references to 'Egill's monumentally self-centred disposition' (Hallberg 1975, 130), there is in this duality what seems to be a very real questioning of his own worth, once the sacred element of poetry is ignored. Underlying the humour in this description is a conceit which ties together all the previous conceits and which is much more serious.

First, Egill refers to his head as *ulfgrátt . . . / hattar staup* (7) 'wolf-grey stump of the hat'. At the start of this episode Egill's hair was dark (3), but now it is 'wolf-grey'; both the colour and the animal are

associated with Óðinn. The change adds to the image of Egill's Odinic transformation, but may also be a reminder of the transformation from the young man in his memory to the grey-haired man of the present. The noun *staup* is a 'knobby lump' or a 'knoll' (Cleasby–Vigfusson, *s.v.*), clearly a self-mocking description of the shape of his head. However, it is also the word for a glass or drinking container, cognate with the archaic English word 'stoup' (see also Hallberg 1975, 130). As a knobby lump it is laughable and we can see why the bystanders feel that it was not much of a reward from a supposedly generous host. As a container of sacred mead it is altogether more valuable, and of course its value to Egill is fundamental. At the end of stanza 8, after itemising the eyes, shaggy brows and mouth of the apparently ugly and not very valuable head, Egill reminds us of its function as a sacred conduit: *ok sá muðr / es mína bar / hqfuðlausn / fyr hilmis kné* 'and that mouth which carried my head-ransom before the knee of the prince'. Stanza 9 finishes the list with the teeth, tongue and ears ('listening tents') and announces that that gift from the renowned king was considered better than gold. It may be rash to take this at its face value. Egill is relieved to be allowed to live; however, there is little sense that he feels in any way grateful to the king.

It is striking that, when listing the various parts of his head in stanzas 7–9, Egill refrains from using any possessive forms, and this discreet absence is highly significant. There can be little doubt that it is a deliberate omission, as the possessive forms are present when he describes Eiríkr's body parts: *Eiríks brá* (5) 'Eiríkr's brow', *allvalds ægigeislar* (5) 'the ruler's terror-beams' and *hilmis kné* (8), 'the prince's knee'. And once Egill changes time-frame and returns to the present, he is able, in stanza 15, to refer to *tunga mér* 'my tongue'. So why the resolute absence of these forms when describing his head when it is at stake? Egill is describing his head at this point as if it no longer belongs to him. It belongs to Eiríkr blóðøx. In an extreme act of self-deprecation, Egill describes the itemised head with its accessory organs as belonging to the king, to demonstrate that, as far as the king's generosity is concerned, it is a poor gift.

Further consideration of the particular mythological references made in relation to Egill and to Eiríkr will reveal that they are more than mere *topoi*. Eiríkr with his *ygs hjalmr* is described in terms that remind the listeners irresistibly of Fáfnir, who is described as having an *ægishjálmr* 'terror-helmet' in *Fáfnismál* 16–17 (*Eddukvæði* 2014, II 306) and *Skáldskaparmál* (Snorri Sturluson 1998, I 46, II 440). Fáfnir was killed by Sigurðr, the most famous of the Völsungs, at the instigation of his own brother. The association with fratricide for a king who is famous for

killing two or more of his own brothers, and whose younger brother is his mortal enemy, is a little uncomfortable. Kries and Krömmelbein (2002, 122) see the reference to Fáfnir as invoking ‘a symbol of violence and despotic rule . . . which contrasts with Egill’s own self-portrait as Óðinn’. The comparison is apt, and there is more. Fáfnir stole his brother’s part of the treasure and hoarded it without sharing. A dragon is traditionally not generous with gold, the very opposite of what a good king should be.

Egill refers to himself as daring to carry the *bólstrverð* (6) ‘pillow-price’ to the king. This is generally considered apt because the story refers to Óðinn obtaining the mead of poetry, for which he risks his head, and of course a pillow is a place for the head. But beyond that, Óðinn is getting back mead that has been *stolen*. He pays a pillow-price by seducing a giant’s daughter, Gunnlōð, and fooling her into thinking he loves her in order to steal back the mead. Egill too is paying the pillow-price of seduction to get back his stolen head—also a container of the mead of poetry. Egill’s head has value for Egill, but it is worthless to Eiríkr; therefore it cannot be a generous gift from a generous king. The king is a *glöggvingr* ‘miser’ and a thief, just like Fáfnir. It seems likely that Egill feels he deserves gold, real gold, in return for a poem that will continue the reputation of Eiríkr blóðøx through the ages. This said, the underlying implication is that Egill’s flattery of Eiríkr in *Hofjuðlausn* is as insincere as Óðinn’s love-talk to Gunnlōð.

Until now the true subject of the poem has been hidden. What of Arinbjörn? Where is he? It turns out that he is right there at Egill’s side. Stanza 10 reveals that

Þar stóð mér  
 mörðum betri  
 hoddfinnøndum<sup>14</sup>  
 à hlið aðra  
 tryggj vinr minn.

(*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* 1933, 261)

There stood at my side my faithful friend, better than many hoard-finders.

*Hoddfinnandi* ‘hoard-finder’ is a kenning for a prince; however, having already compared Eiríkr to Fáfnir, to refer to him as a hoard-finder seems to underscore his want of generosity. Arinbjörn is generous, Eiríkr is not. Thus Arinbjörn is the true prince. If we refer back to the poem’s opening

<sup>14</sup> I have retained M *hoddfinnøndum* ‘hoard-finders’. Nordal emends to *hoddfiøndum*, ‘hoard-enemies’.

it is clear that the qualities Egill refers to are not just a selection of the typical qualities of a noble man and their antonyms, but set up a direct comparison between Arinbjörn and Eiríkr blóðøx. If Eiríkr is the miser and bearer of falsehoods, then clearly Arinbjörn is not just the generous man, but the noble prince as well. He may also be standing discreetly at the end of stanza 3: *Létk hersi / heim of sóttan* ‘I sought out the prince at home’; ostensibly this refers to the king in York, as we have seen, but the title *hersir* is specifically Arinbjörn’s, adding ambiguity, and even if it can be used poetically to describe any prince or king, it seems to me quite likely that Egill is playing around with the identification of who is noble and who is not; after all, York may not be Arinbjörn’s castle, but it is his home.

Egill has reduced all those present at York to a series of dismembered body parts: heads, knees, eyes, mouths, and in one particularly effective but freakish image, ears that are mouths drinking in the poetic mead, *hvers manns / hlusta munnir* ‘each man’s hearing-mouths’ (6). Larrington (1992, 52) calls these ‘nightmarish glimpses’ which hint at the ‘real danger of death and decapitation’, despite the comedy. These ‘nightmarish glimpses’ are only ended by the appearance in entirety and splendid isolation of Arinbjörn’s name to open stanza 11. He is a complete man and he is rare in this. This simple yet effective device sets Arinbjörn above the other players in this adventure: the king, his retinue and even the poet.

Egill, having described himself in Odinic terms and detailed his encounter with a prince who does not behave in a princely fashion, sets the stage to contrast this with a man who is everything a prince should be. Egill credits his friend with saving him *frá konungs fjónum* ‘from the king’s hatred’ (11), and goes on to explain in stanza 13 the extent of his debt to his friend.<sup>15</sup> The list of negative characteristics which would define him were he not to repay his friend is reminiscent of the opening stanza. He would be a friend-thief, woefully lying and unworthy of Óðinn’s cup, and a breaker of promises, if he does not pay what he owes. Again it is implied that all of these negative characteristics do apply to Eiríkr, because he has not paid what he owed. Furthermore, it establishes the value of Egill’s poetry. Arinbjörn has saved his life and helped him generously with financial support and good advice. This poem, *Arinbjarnarkviða*, is payment for all of that. A poem then, is worth a great deal—a life and a good deal more, which Arinbjörn has paid in advance. Eiríkr’s payment for *Höfuðlausn* then clearly falls short.

<sup>15</sup> Stanza 12 is too badly damaged to be interpreted.

Once Egill turns his attention to his friend, he ceases to speak in Odinic terms. We leave the sombre glow of the hall to step outside into a field and into Arinbjörn's world. Egill describes himself establishing a praise poem with the feet of poetry on a steep path. Egill is still referring to himself as a series of body parts and still merging himself with the stuff of poetry, but now that stuff is no longer liquid. Stanza 15 refers to wood: now Egill's tongue is an *ómunlokarr* 'voice-plane' and thus the material for praise of his friend is wood. One of the effects of this move away from the court and the Odinic nature of poetry is that it allows a more personal note to enter the poem, one that is more humble. This is a gift from Egill to his best friend. Arinbjörn himself is the material for Egill's poem and in a chiasmic pattern he is described as wood in stanza 15, stone in stanza 16 where his name is broken down into the most complex kenning of the poem, *bjóða björn / birkis ótta* 'bear-of-tables-of-the-fear-of-birch', where the 'fear of birch' is fire and the 'tables of the fire' are the stones of the hearth (*arinn*). In stanza 17 he is stone again, with another play on his name, *grjót-björn* 'stone-bear', then in 18 he is the 'head-tree' (*hofuðbaðmr*) of his father, Hróaldr, so back to wood. The two elements, wood and stone, married in this chiasmic pattern combine the stone that represents Arinbjörn's name with wood, the substance Egill uses to describe the material of praise for his own family in *Sonatorrek* (5, *mærðar timbr*). The poem will close movingly with a return to these images as Egill builds a cairn of praise, *lofkǫstr*, in the field of poetry (25).

Egill also leaves Óðinn aside here to bring in the gods he sees as closer to his friend. Where Óðinn was generous to Egill with his gifts of mead, Freyr and Njörðr are generous towards Arinbjörn (17), in a nod towards the worlds of commerce and farming. It seems likely that Arinbjörn would have had more reason to worship these gods than Óðinn. Njörðr, as god of the sea, is presumably favourable towards the transport of commercial goods, and Freyr, god of fertility, is also god of the harvest and as such provides vital rain and sunshine. Arinbjörn's wealth must have come in part from the land. Snorri (Snorri Sturluson 2005, 23–24) also tells us that one may pray to Freyr for prosperity and peace and to Njörðr for prosperity of land or property. Although it is highly speculative, it is worth noting Nordal's suggestion, cited by Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1999, 170), that Egill himself would have been brought up following the agricultural gods Þórr and Freyr before turning to the worship of Óðinn (Nordal 1924, 157–59). It is clear from *lausavísa* 28 that Egill does not align himself exclusively with Óðinn, as he addresses himself to Freyr,

Njorðr and Þórr as well. Nevertheless Egill's chief allegiance is to Óðinn, and his verse makes it evident that he believes Óðinn to have repaid this allegiance with the gift of poetry (see especially *Sonatorrek* 23–24).

Stanza 19 describes Arinbjörn as *vinr Véþorms, / veklinga tōs* 'friend of Véþormr, helper of weaklings'. The identity of Véþormr has remained elusive. Cleasby–Vigfusson refers to it as a Teutonic name, but it is attested in the opening chapter of *Droplaugarsona saga* (*Droplaugarsona saga*, 1) so it may be a reference to a now forgotten contemporary. Nordal derives from the elements of this unknown name an allusion to one who saves holy ground or sanctuaries (*þyrmir véum*). Another possibility is that it is a scribal error for Véþórr, Þórr of the holy-places. Although not attested, this is a credible epithet for the Thunder-god (cf. Vingþórr in *Þrymskviða* 1 and *Alvissmál* 6), who was known as a helper of the weak. It is tempting, looking back at *lausavísa* 28, to see further support for this suggestion. When Egill curses Eiríkr blóðøx, he names the same gods, inversely asking them to take away their gifts, and here too, significantly, he links Þórr to sanctuaries or *vé* (*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* 1933, 163). Paleographically it is difficult to judge, as the poem can only be read in Ásgeir Jónsson's early eighteenth-century copy of *Möðruvallabók*. It is not impossible that the earlier scribe may have erroneously doubled the minims at the end of the name, but in the absence of any other attestations this must remain little more than entertaining speculation.

Whether or not Egill is associating Arinbjörn with Þórr as he associates himself with Óðinn, he is describing his friend as a helper of weaklings. This could be another dig at Eiríkr, as Arinbjörn was in his retinue, so 'helper of weaklings' would be an insult to the king as a receiver of Arinbjörn's help, but simultaneously it also refers to Egill's own position of weakness at that terrible moment. There is very much a sense in this poem, despite the aggressive use of the first person in the opening, that Egill considers his friend to be the better man.

Egill repeatedly refers to Arinbjörn's generosity, the mark of a true nobleman—see also *lausavísa* 43, in which Egill thanks him for the gift of a silk coat with golden buckles (*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* 1933, 213)—and he adds to this quality that of being able to please everyone, though *né auðskept / almanna sjor* 'nor [is it] easy to haft every man's spear' (20), possibly a reference to Arinbjörn's ability in York to arrange an outcome that both Eiríkr and Egill would see as positive.

In stanza 22, there is another veiled negative reference to Eiríkr when Arinbjörn is called *sokunautr / Sónar hvinna* 'adversary of the thief of

Són'. This has been explained as a kenning for a generous man because the 'thief of Són', one of the vessels containing the mead of poetry, was Baugi, the genitive plural of which would be *bauga*, so by substitution, 'enemy of rings' is a kenning for a generous man (*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* 1933, 266, Bjarni Einarsson 2003, 161). Nordal remarks on the repetitive nature of the kennings involving generosity in this stanza (*Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* 1933, 266) and points to their complexity. There is a further layer of meaning to be drawn out from this particular image. Són, as a vessel containing poetic mead, could also refer to Egill's head—the *hattar staup*. Egill's account of the head-ransoming episode implies that the king in York 'stole' Egill's head, in which case the 'thief of Són' would be Eiríkr. The image, continuing the overall thrust of the poem, neatly puts the two men once again in opposition.

Stanza 23 is incomplete, although Larrington convincingly demonstrates that it most probably balanced the stanza on Arinbjörn's generosity with a tribute to his martial prowess. She also argues that stanza 24, where Egill hints at a downturn in his friend's fortunes linked to the sea, would 'seem to fit better with the account of Arinbjörn's death, fighting in the sea-battle of Limfjörðr' (Larrington 1992, 54–55). Indeed the plaintive *þvís veitti mér* (24) 'for he supported me' is reminiscent of Egill's sorrow at the loss of the support of his sons in *Sonatorrek* (12 and 14).

The poem finishes with the conceit telling us that Egill has got up early like a farmer or workman and that he has now constructed a cairn of praise—*lofkøstr*—for his friend that will stand *i bragar túni* (25) 'in the field of poetry' for a long time. Clunies Ross (2015, 88) links stanza 15, where Egill 'has chosen his lengths of timber . . . and is all ready to begin building' with this one, and sees in it a suggestion of a sacred function. There is something of Shakespeare's certainty—'so long lives this and this gives life to thee' (Sonnet 18)—in Egill's confidence that this poem will speak of his friend throughout the ages.

John Hines (1995, 102) wrote of *Höfuðlausn* that 'It is only with the mating of the unique, creative capacities of the prince and poet that the poem and all that it involves can be born'. The metatextual references to *Höfuðlausn* in *Arinbjarnarkviða* are such that neither poem can really fully be understood without the other. These poems and the *lausavisur* which concern the relationship between Egill, Eiríkr and Arinbjörn complement one another and combine to give a clearer vision of Egill's relationship with, and opinion of, each of the two other men. *Arinbjarnarkviða* provides a key to reading *Höfuðlausn* as a praise poem

composed under duress and lacking sincerity. If its primary purpose is to create a lasting memorial to Egill's friend, its secondary purpose is to create a lasting memorial to the infamy of Eiríkr blóðøx, one which directly subverts his own poem of praise. The complexity of the imagery and conceits conceal a scathing attack on the king in York, portraying him to be a miser, a liar and anything but a prince.

A cairn in a field is a monument for all to see, and this implies that, little though we know of the diffusion of such poems in the tenth century, the poet anticipates that many will encounter it. This anticipation of a large audience aware of his poetic corpus makes sense of the way Egill uses one poem to refer back to a previous one (*Hofuðlausn*), effectively undermining it in the process and changing the way that its audience will perceive and understand it. Whether or not these poems and the related *lausavísur* are genuine (and what do we mean by genuine?), they are works of poetic genius and the construct they form plays with the very nature of praise poetry, the identity of the poet and the art of poetic composition itself.

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TWISTED MIRROR TWINS: ÞORGEIRR HÁVARSSON  
AND GRETTIR THE STRONG

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*FÓSTBRÆÐRA SAGA* SITS AS AN ODDITY among the *Íslendingasögur*, continuing to spark lively debates that tend to veer in three general directions. The first concerns the saga's peculiar style which, unlike its often exemplary thematic strands and narrative conventions (foster-brotherhood that turns awry, revenge, king-Icelander encounters), could not be more uncharacteristic of the genre. The saga abounds in idiosyncratic appropriations of apparently disparate discourses (e.g. medical, religious, chivalric), intermittently florid modes of expression and a narratorial voice that does not shy away from explicit ethical judgements for the spiritual benefit of the reader. The puzzlement over whether these passages (commonly referred to as *klausur*) constitute late interpolations or were integral to the saga as it was first set into writing, whether they were meant in earnest or were predominantly used for comic effect (see Kress's Bakhtinian reading, 1996), often feeds into another major debate strand: that concerning the saga's dating. The composition of *Fóstbræðra saga*, initially considered one of the earliest *Íslendingasögur* (Nordal 1943, especially lxxi–lxxiv), was pushed towards the end of the thirteenth century by Jónas Kristjánsson (1972), whose radical redating was widely accepted for decades, only to be recently challenged by Theodore M. Andersson (2013; see also Clunies Ross 2010, 67–69) who presents a number of compelling arguments for the restitution of the early, c.1200 dating.

The present study, however, aims to contribute to the third major area of scholarly discourse on *Fóstbræðra saga*: its relationship with *Grettis saga*. This is another strand that tends to feed into the dating debate, with scholars studying the shared episodes in order to establish which saga is likely to have borrowed from the other. While it was previously thought that *Fóstbræðra saga* drew on *Grettis saga* (see Guðni Jónsson 1943, lxvi–lxviii), the current consensus is that the latter borrows from the version of *Fóstbræðra saga* upon which the Flateyjarbók text is also based (Jónas Kristjánsson 1972). The question of dating, however, is of no particular concern here, not least because positing a unidirectional borrower-lender connection between the two narratives seems predicated upon obsolescent attitudes towards saga origins. As Gísli Sigurðsson (1994; also 2004,

especially 191–245) has demonstrated, short of ample and sustained word-for-word correspondences, it is difficult to prove a strictly literary relationship (*rittengsl*) between any two given sagas, especially if the similarity between their episodes can be plausibly explained by a shared (if locally variable) tradition, regardless of whether this tradition preceded saga writing or whether it sprang up later and involved oral circulation of stories that may have originated in writing. The overlapping episodes in *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Grettis saga* are cases in point: much like those shared by *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Finnboga saga ramma* that Gísli (1994) has scrutinised, these too exhibit subtle yet important differences that betray their writers' disparate agendas, allegiances and intended audiences, possibly pointing to different local traditions that may have arisen around the events in question.

As an example, one might consider the very different ways in which the foster-brothers' conflict with Grettir's relative Þorgils Másson over a beached whale is presented in the two narratives (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, ch. 7; *Grettis saga* 1936, chs 25–27).<sup>1</sup> To be sure, the core of the matter related is the same: Þorgils has found the whale first and is willing to share only the uncut part of it with the latecomers, while the foster-brothers demand that either both the cut and the uncut meat be shared equally, or that Þorgils give up to them all that now remains of the animal. Yet the ways in which the incident is related paint different pictures of the parties involved. The peaceful Þorgils Másson of *Grettis saga*, accommodating yet firm in his understanding of what is his fair share, is much more argumentative and pluckier in *Fóstbræðra saga*, almost provoking the conflict with the sworn brothers, while Þorgeirr the bully we encounter in *Grettis saga* is more of a gallant knight in *Fóstbræðra saga*, suggesting that Þorgils and he fight the matter out alone, without anyone else getting hurt. Further, while *Grettis saga* offers a detailed account of the ensuing legal proceedings in which Grettir's father Ásmundr and their powerful relative Þorsteinn Kuggason play prominent roles, *Fóstbræðra saga* confines itself to a single, neutrally toned sentence, simply stating that Þorgeirr has been outlawed. *Grettis saga* is also rather vocal about the failure—even the plain unwillingness—on the part of Þorgeirr's cousin, the respected chieftain Þorgils Arason, to put up a stronger defence on his behalf in order to prevent the sentence of full outlawry. The saga seems to imply that the famously righteous Þorgils himself disapproved of his cousin's actions,

<sup>1</sup> Þorgils Másson is the preferred form of this name in *Fóstbræðra saga* (1943, 148 and onwards, though see n. 2), while *Grettis saga* has Þorgils Máksson.

even if he did secretly aid his escape to Norway. Indeed, Þorgils's response to Þorgeirr's 'news' is that he will offer Þorsteinn Kuggason compensation for the slaying; however, should that offer be refused, he openly forewarns his cousin: *mun ek þetta mál ekki með kappi verja* 'I shall not make a firm stand in your defence' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 92; *CSI*, II 92).<sup>2</sup> That Þorgils's legal action on Þorgeirr's behalf appears more sluggish than expected is accentuated by the formulaic reference to the critical strand of public opinion: *töluðu sumir menn, at Þorgils hefði lítt fylgt málinu* 'some claimed Þorgils had not put much effort into pursuing the case' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 94; *CSI*, II 93). Conversely, *Fóstbræðra saga* harbours no suspicions of this sort but rather places great emphasis on Þorgils Arason's indefatigable loyalty to, and affection for, Þorgeirr. Tight-lipped though it is about the legal proceedings themselves, the saga offers an elaborate account of their aftermath. It relates in detail how, having secured passage for his outlawed cousin aboard a ship bound for Norway, Þorgils Arason (along with his merchant brother Illugi) accompanies Þorgeirr to Flói so as to ensure that he safely boards the vessel. Moreover, the Arasynir show great forbearance and maintain their good humour throughout this rather eventful journey, even as they keep having to pay compensation for all the further killings that their unruly cousin commits along the way.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly the sympathies in the two sagas lie with opposite camps. Thus, regardless of whether their material was acquired by consulting written texts or by hearing oral tales (or even a little bit of both), the poetic attitudes evidenced by the two sagas' respective authors have strong affinities with those generally characteristic of oral storytellers, showing no reverence for the particular wording of their source(s). In other words, the oral and the written seem so inextricably intertwined within the two sagas that the only semblance of a linear chronological order we might impose between them is to date their manuscripts and extra-diegetic features, not their narratives, which is why, as already noted, the present study does not aim to engage directly in the dating debate nor the question of which saga came first. Rather than proffering explanations for the special connection between the two sagas, it will explore instead the compelling nature of their parallels, especially those between their unruly protagonists. The

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all translations of quotations from *Grettis saga* are by Bernard Scudder in *CSI* (II 1–191). The translations of *Fóstbræðra saga* are by Martin S. Regal, also in *CSI* (II 329–402).

<sup>3</sup> As will be discussed later, two of these killings (involving Torfi Bundle and an unfortunate shepherd, ch. 8) actually only appear in the Flateyjarbók version of the saga.

assumption is that, whatever their ultimate cause(s), these connections deserve attention in their own right, since, as I hope to show, a close comparison between Þorgeirr Hávarsson and Grettir the Strong opens up a perspective on these two complex characters that is entirely lacking when each is considered separately, within the bounds of his own saga. In juxtaposing them so that they act as mirror images of one another, the uniqueness of each hero becomes enhanced rather than obliterated; each becomes more, rather than less of himself.

### **In the beginning there was . . . Grettir? On the peculiar opening of *Fóstbræðra saga***

Readers of *Fóstbræðra saga* need not wait long for its first striking link with *Grettis saga* to emerge. Indeed, in its opening chapter they will encounter the episode, well-known from ch. 52 of *Grettis saga*, in which Þorbjörg the Stout rescues the famous outlaw from a bunch of angry farmers who are about to hang him.<sup>4</sup> This is also the first conundrum that *Fóstbræðra saga* raises: one cannot help but wonder why the saga about the two renowned sworn brothers should start with their chief rival for fame rather than, for instance, with a prelude featuring their heroic ancestors in Norway, as do so many other specimens of the genre. Of course, as the closing sentence of the chapter suggests, its point is to showcase the wisdom, magnanimity and power of Þorbjörg the Stout, the wife of the local chieftain Vermundr, with whom the two unruly foster-brothers will soon come into conflict. Still, the episode's position at the outset of the saga and the prominence of Grettir there make the reader wonder whether the scene is indeed *alveg óviðkomandi* 'completely irrelevant', as it is deemed by the editor of both sagas, Guðni Jónsson (1936, xxvii; also see 1943, lxvi–lxviii, as well as 121 n. 2). Scholars' subsequent reactions suggest that Guðni's laconic dismissal of the scene's relevance to *Fóstbræðra saga* was taken as a challenge to come up with an explanation that would make sense of it. Thus Úlfar Bragason (2000, 271) suggests that this 'digression emphasizes Þorgeirr's hubris through parallelism',

<sup>4</sup> At least in the Möðruvallabók and Codex Regius versions of the saga. There is no way of knowing whether Hauksbók featured this episode too, since the first part of this earliest surviving *Fóstbræðra saga* manuscript is missing. The Flateyjarbók version is the only one that does not include this episode, which is perhaps not surprising considering its subordination to *Óláfs saga helga*, into which it is inserted piecemeal. Jónas Kristjánsson (1972, 81–82; 315) argues that the episode was present in the first written version of *Fóstbræðra saga* but omitted from Flateyjarbók, rather than originating as a later interpolation from *Grettis saga*.

while in general concurring that the scene is ‘otherwise unrelated to the main plot of the saga’. Others, however, have found it to be of more than passing significance. Laurence de Looze (1991, 89), for instance, views Grettir’s role there as that of a precursor poet such as typically appears in the introductory chapters of poets’ sagas. Without specifically emphasising Grettir’s role as a poet, Giselle Gos (2009, 288) argues in a similar fashion that the function of *Fóstbræðra saga*’s apparently ‘bizarre beginning’ is to foreshadow the main themes of the narrative:

These include the comparison between the foster-brothers and Grettir, their relationships to their communities, and the need for mediators in those relationships, as well as the large part women play in that social mediation in Iceland, a role which is consonant with and compared to King Óláfr’s part in mediating in Norway and the wider Scandinavian community.<sup>5</sup>

From among these themes, Gos places a particular emphasis on the important role that women’s *heilræði* ‘sound advice’ plays in the saga.<sup>6</sup> The centrality of this concept has been challenged, however, in a recent article by Richard L. Harris (2015, 61, 64, 66) who argues that Þorbjörg’s intervention is only the first of many allusions to ‘the traditional Old Icelandic proverb “Jafnan segir inn ríkri ráð” (The more powerful always decides)’ which he considers to encapsulate *Fóstbræðra saga*’s main theme.

Rather than singling out any theme as the main one, I find that the complexity of the saga allows for a multitude of important themes to be explored simultaneously. Regarding Þorbjörg’s rescue of Grettir, I would like to emphasise not only that the subsequent intervention of the wise widow Sigrfljóð on behalf of the sworn brothers (ch. 5) closely corresponds to it, but also that such a pairing of episodes that invites comparison—a mirroring of sorts—is exemplary of *Fóstbræðra saga*’s general fondness for doubling of scenes and parallelism (whether complementary or contrasting) at various scales of the narrative. Gos (2009, 288) makes an important connection between Þorbjörg and Sigrfljóð, but her further comparisons with other female characters in the saga and the role she argues they have in integrating difficult men into society somewhat obscures this particular pairing pattern that permeates *Fóstbræðra saga*.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In the context of this comparison I cannot resist pointing to the coincidence of King Óláfr’s and Þorbjörg’s nicknames, *digri/digra* ‘the Stout’.

<sup>6</sup> This as opposed to the proverbial ‘cold counsel’ that women in the sagas are routinely accused of proffering: *köld eru kvenna ráð*.

<sup>7</sup> In my opinion, Gos’s point regarding social integration only fully applies to the example of Sigrfljóð who indeed manages to put the foster-brothers’ ‘belligerence to good use’, if only ‘for a time’ (2009, 288) and, one must add, primarily

### Mirroring: the architectural and aesthetic underpinning of *Fóstbræðra saga*

Not only is the whole of *Fóstbræðra saga* structured in two major parts, Þorgeirr Hávarsson dominating the first and his sworn brother Þormóðr Bersason the second, but we find similar parallelisms on various smaller scales in the narrative too. The most conspicuous examples appear in quick succession in comic episodes, as when, forced to share with the unsavoury Butraldi the horrible food his miserly host has provided, Þorgeirr sticks to eating the nasty old cheese, leaving the nasty old mutton to his opponent, only for the two to swap foods the next evening (ch. 6); or when, bent on provoking Þorgeirr, Gautr Sleituson chops up his spear and shield to use as firewood, only for Þorgeirr to return the favour the next day (ch. 15). Similarly, in ch. 3, the flippant remarks of Jódurr's thrall about the identity of the unwelcome night visitor Þorgeirr (*Veit ek at síðr; hvern hann er; at ek ætla, at hann viti eigi sjálf* 'I have no idea who he is, and I suspect he doesn't know himself, either' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 129; *CSI*, II 333)), are later echoed by what could have been his alter ego, the sleepy farmhand of Þorgeirr's mother, equally annoyed at being awoken in the middle of the night: *Pat er bæði, at ek veit eigi, hvern hann er; enda þykki mér ekki undir* 'I don't know who he is, and I don't care' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 131; *CSI*, II 335). Similar parallelisms within single chapters can also be found in the second, 'Þormóðr's part' of the saga. For example, Þormóðr's enemy in Greenland, Þórdís, and his protectress Gríma both have prophetic dreams (ch. 23), while the skipper Skúfr asks first Þormóðr, and then his shipmate and nemesis, Gestr, to repair a broken sail-yard, only to receive identical refusals: *Ekki em ek hagr* 'I don't have the skill' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 223; *CSI*, II 373). Each man in turn suggests that Skúfr ask the other, with an acerbic elaboration as to why his rival would be better suited to the task.

Other, perhaps less obvious parallelisms occur across chapters: Hávarr's quarrel over unlawful possession of his horse (ch. 2) is later played out in the conflict between his son Þorgeirr and a certain Bjarni (ch. 8),<sup>8</sup> and the already mentioned Sigfrljóð (ch. 5) assuages Vermundr's anger at the foster-brothers by enticing his greed and pouring three hundred silver pieces into his lap—the seductive gesture that will later be performed for

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to serve her own interests. However, the same cannot as easily be claimed for the other women in the saga.

<sup>8</sup> Both scenes are in turn reminiscent of the crucial transgression in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* (1950, chs 4–6), when Hrafnkell's shepherd Einarr resorts to riding his master's favourite horse despite being expressly prohibited from doing so.

a Norwegian ship's captain by another widow, Gríma (ch. 10), in order to secure a safe passage for her freed slave.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, when the fifteen-year-old Þorgeirr comes up to the house of his father's slayer to seek vengeance (ch. 3) we are told that the cover of darkness gives him a strategic advantage over the seasoned warrior Jóðurr who, by contrast, appears in the doorway bathed in bright light from the inside of his farmhouse. Two chapters later (ch. 5), the exact opposite happens when Þorgeirr and Þormóðr confront the two troublemakers in Ísafjörðr. This time round we are told that the house is dimly lit, with the two foster-brothers exposed in the moonlight, finding themselves at a disadvantage. This, of course, makes their subsequent victory all the more remarkable.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the saga potentially invites comparisons between its core protagonists, the sworn brothers Þorgeirr and Þormóðr, and the other brotherly duos it features (whether biological or adoptive): a pair of ill-fated foster-brothers, Þorgeirr Boundless and Eyjólfur of Óláfsdalr, destined to slay one another, and, conversely, the paragons of fraternal harmony Þorgils and Illugi Arasynir on the one hand (see Gos 2009, 294), and Kálfr and Steinólfr of Garpsdalr on the other.

Mirroring, then, could be said to provide the architectural and aesthetic underpinning of *Fóstbræðra saga*, but it will be suggested here that there is a certain mirroring taking place at an even higher level—between the protagonists of *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Grettis saga*, and especially between Þorgeirr Hávarsson and Grettir the Strong. Since they are the central characters of their respective sagas, the parallels between them are, naturally, more conspicuous. However, it is also worth noting the resemblances between some of the minor characters in the two sagas. For example, the two servants of Jóðurr and Þorgeirr's mother Þórelfr (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, ch. 3) are strongly reminiscent of Grettir's thrall, Þorbjörn Noise (*Grettis saga* 1936, chs 69–82), who is similarly fond of grumbling and also brings some comic relief to the story. On the other hand, the two skippers—Hafliði (*Grettis saga* 1936, ch. 17) and Skúfr (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, ch. 20)—mirror one another in their impressive people skills and the elegant ways in which they manage to pacify their difficult crew

<sup>9</sup> In both instances the gesture seductively eroticises money: the silver flows piece by piece from the women's hands into the intimate spaces of the men's laps, igniting their desire and greed by allowing them time to appreciate fully the bounty they are receiving. The only difference is that Gríma pours two, rather than three hundred silver pieces; then again, she is only paying to spirit away the slave who had, at her bidding, badly wounded Þormóðr, whereas Sigrfljóð is paying compensation for two of Vermundr's men slain by the foster-brothers.

members (Grettir on the one hand, and Þormóðr and Gestr on the other) by setting them challenging, creative tasks that will fruitfully occupy their busy minds and channel their surplus energy into something more positive than picking quarrels. Furthermore, Þormóðr's rival shipmate Gestr, a hooded, initially withdrawn and prodigiously strong Odinic figure later revealed to be a certain Helgu-Steinarr, another would-be avenger of Þorgeirr, is himself evocative of Grettir, especially in the bailing scene (compare *Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, ch. 20 and *Grettis saga* 1936, ch. 17).

To return to the two sagas' protagonists, Gos (2009, 288; also see 286) includes among the themes said to be foreshadowed in the opening chapter of *Fóstbræðra saga* 'the comparison between the foster-brothers and Grettir', a point also made by Jónas Kristjánsson (1988, 281): 'between them Þorgeirr and Þormóðr have some of Grettir's traits'. Indeed, while Þorgeirr can be said to share Grettir's bravery and brusqueness, his martial aptitude and even some of his prodigious strength, Þormóðr shares his sense of humour, cunning and intelligence, as well as a capacity for emotional depth that befits the poets that Grettir and he are. The two sagas also feature some explicit comparisons of these three heroes (made by the narrators, other characters or the protagonists themselves). In the case of *Fóstbræðra saga*, these are confined to its Flateyjarbók version, the only one that, paradoxically, does not feature the mysterious opening chapter centred upon Grettir's misadventure in Ísafjörðr.<sup>10</sup> Thus, for example, in *Grettis saga* we are told that *lék Þorgeiri næsta ofund á um afl Grettis* 'Þorgeir was especially jealous of Grettir's strength' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 162; *CSI*, II 127),<sup>11</sup> while, also on the subject of physical prowess, *Fóstbræðra saga* informs us that *hafi verit nær um afl þeira tveggja ok Grettis eins* 'the combined strength of the two sworn brothers almost equalled that of Grettir' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 191; *CSI*, II 361).<sup>12</sup> The most famous comparison is the judgment passed on the difficult trio by Þorgils Arason, the respected Reykjahólar chieftain, mentioned earlier,

<sup>10</sup> This fact is partly responsible for the hypothesis of a borrower-lender relationship between *Grettis saga* and the version of *Fóstbræðra saga* upon which the Flateyjarbók text is based (see the introductory discussion). For the likely reason for the omission of this scene from the Flateyjarbók version of the saga, see note 4.

<sup>11</sup> It could be said that this trait of Þorgeirr's, his obsession with comparison, his jealousy of others' abilities and the need to come out on top every time, is precisely what costs him the most important relationship of his life: that with his foster-brother Þormóðr.

<sup>12</sup> At least in this instance of concession, *Fóstbræðra saga* seems to show more generosity of spirit towards its heroes' rival than does *Grettis saga*.

who has harboured all three men for a time, gaining much prestige from being able to put up with such unruly characters and keep them all under control. According to Þorgils (*Grettis saga* 1936, ch. 51; *Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, ch. 13), brave as all three heroes are, his kinsman is the most courageous yet, because Grettir is afraid of the dark, Þormóðr of God, while Þorgeirr fears nothing at all.

My present concern, however, reaches beyond these explicit instances of comparison and, in the discussion that follows, I will trace some deeper-running parallels in the epic biographies of Þorgeirr Hávarsson and Grettir the Strong specifically,<sup>13</sup> considering especially their apparent inability to control their tempers and the lucklessness (*ógæfa*) that is said to plague them both. Along the way, I will also point to some verbal echoes that reverberate between these two sagas, despite their otherwise vast differences in style.

### **Þorgeirr and Grettir: Echoing epic biographies**

Outlined in this section are some of the more prominent narrative features that the stories of Þorgeirr and Grettir have in common:

1. Troubled youth: difficult father, protective mother
2. Problematic sentencing to outlawry
3. Elimination of hostile shipmate en route to Norway
4. Momentous encounter with King Óláfr Haraldsson
5. Noble death at the hands of ignoble enemies: posthumous decapitation and mutilation
6. Elaborate, exotic vengeance
7. Heroic legacy: no marriage, no heirs, but saga immortality

While many a saga hero could certainly be found to share this or that element from the above list, one would be hard-pressed to find even one other that shares them all. Thus, for example, like our two ill-tempered heroes, the surly Egill Skallagrímsson also has a fraught start in life, similarly encumbered with a difficult, overbearing father (who, furthermore, very nearly costs him his life), and blessed with a supportive mother, a woman of strong character and noble ancestry. However, unlike Þorgeirr and Grettir, Egill leaves the glorious adventures of his troubled youth behind, settling down on his farm and marrying the woman he has loved all his life, thus also ensuring that his family tree continues to thrive. Nor is Egill's death as dramatic and tragic as Þorgeirr and Grettir's, even if,

<sup>13</sup> On this occasion, I will set Þormóðr Bersason aside.

for a warrior, that is in itself a tragedy of sorts. Instead Egill lives to see his old age, being finally laid low only by ‘God, the old executioner’.<sup>14</sup> To take Gísli Súrsson, the differences from Þorgeirr and Grettir are more conspicuous than the similarities: while Gísli too is an outlaw beleaguered by ill fortune, he is also a well-established, respected farmer and a happily married man who, following his sentence, seeks no sojourns in the service of Scandinavian kings or jarls, nor is he beheaded after his own heroic last stand. By contrast, as I will try to show in this section, the story patterns involving Þorgeirr and Grettir unravel in a very similar vein.

### 1. *Troubled youth: difficult father; protective mother*

Already in childhood and early youth, Þorgeirr and Grettir are marked out as troublemakers; then again, so were both of their fathers, Hávarr and Ásmundr, difficult and domineering people too. At the outset of *Fóstbræðra saga* Hávarr is said to have left his birthplace in the south owing to some killings and is further described as *mikill vígamaðr ok hávaðamaðr ok óðæll* ‘[someone who] greatly loved fighting, and was a boisterous and overbearing man’ (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 123; *CSI*, II 330). Along with Þormóðr’s father Bersi, Hávarr is directly blamed for the sworn brothers’ unseemly behaviour: *virðu margir menn sem þeir heldi þá til rangs* ‘many believed it was they who were actually encouraging the lads to do wrong’ (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 125; *CSI*, II 331).

At first glance, Ásmundr has nothing in common with these two irresponsible fathers, going out of his way to suppress his son’s insubordinate behaviour. By the time the two lock horns over Grettir’s wilful resistance to the menial tasks his father sets him, Ásmundr is a powerful and prosperous farmer widely considered, unlike Hávarr, *vinsæll maðr ok skilríkr* ‘a popular and trustworthy man’ (*Grettis saga* 1936, 34; *CSI*, II 63). It is easy to overlook the fact that this pillar of the community was once a difficult youth himself, who *vildi lítt vinna* ‘was reluctant to work’ (*Grettis saga* 1936, 34; *CSI*, II 63) just as his son is now, which is why he and his own father, Þorgrímr, did not get on well either (*Grettis saga* 1936, ch. 13). And while Ásmundr may have eventually managed to overcome his early loathing of farm-work, the obstinate determination with which he is trying to force his unruly son into submission bears witness to the

<sup>14</sup> This is a South Slavic epic formula frequently employed to denote a hero’s death of old age or illness, as opposed to a glorious demise in combat. Such a hero is said to have died *ni od puške ni od noža, no od Boga, staroga krvnika* ‘not by rifle, nor by knife, but by God, the old executioner’ (my translation).

fact that he has retained the difficult temper he had as a young man—the temper which he now recognises but will not tolerate in his son. That the father and son’s obdurate dispositions are evenly matched is attested by their long-suffering wife and mother, Ásdís, who finally vents her despair at her husband: *eigi veit ek, hvárt mér þykkir meir frá móti, at þú skipar honum jafnan starfa, eða hitt, at hann leysir alla einn veg af hendi* ‘I don’t know which I object to more: that you keep giving him jobs, or that he does them all in the same way’ (*Grettis saga* 1936, 41–42; *CSI*, II 67). Thus, regardless of whether Hávarr and Ásmundr respectively encourage or discourage Þorgeirr and Grettir’s unbridled behaviour, both fathers seem to have imparted to their sons some of their own difficult temperament.

The resemblance between their mothers, Þórelfr and Ásdís, is more conspicuous, both being strong and influential women who prize their sons above all else. Indeed, in Þorgeirr’s case, the father disappears from the scene very early on, as if his main function was to provide his teenage son with an opportunity to commit his first heroic deed by avenging his killing. It is rather the mother and her kin who offer support and sustained protection to the hero throughout the saga. Moreover, in this case, the mother is clearly of nobler stock than the father whose ancestry, in a departure from the sagas’ typical fondness for genealogy, reaches no further back than his patronymic, Kleppsson. In contrast, Þorgeirr’s mother Þórelfr is introduced as the daughter of the prominent settler Álfr of Dalir, who is not only widely connected to the foremost families in Iceland, but is, on his mother’s side, said to trace his lineage all the way back to the legendary dragon-slayer, Sigurðr Fáfnisbani (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, ch. 2). Following Þorgeirr’s encounter with his father’s killer, Þórelfr engages in dark yet jolly banter with the fifteen-year-old, purposefully delaying the dénouement of his story the better to savour her son’s victory, and culminating in an unreserved expression of motherly pride: *Óbernsligt bragð<sup>15</sup> var þat, ok njóttu heill handa, sonr minn* ‘This was no child’s deed. May your hands always serve you this well, my son’ (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 132; *CSI*, II 335). Praise and blessings duly bestowed, Þórelfr immediately turns to practicalities, sending him off to her influential nephew, Þorgils Arason of Reykjahólar, to seek protection.

<sup>15</sup> This unusual negative phrase does not appear elsewhere in the *Íslendingasögur* corpus. Its positive counterpart, *bernskubragð* ‘childish trick’, ‘prank’, however, is employed in *Grettis saga*, forming a further verbal parallel between the two sagas under discussion: *Mörg bernskubragð gerði Grettir; þau sem eigi eru í sögu sett* ‘Grettir played many more pranks in his youth which are not recounted’ (*Grettis saga* 1936, 42; *CSI*, II 67).

The same kind of resourcefulness and motherly pride is shared by Grettir's mother Ásdís, who has a deep understanding and respect for Grettir's valiant nature and appreciates his grand ambitions, as a proud granddaughter of the famous Vatnsdalr chieftain Jökull Ingimundarson whose warlike demeanour, enormous physique and fiery disposition she sees reflected in her son.<sup>16</sup> As if in defiance of her husband who has refused to provide Grettir with a weapon or any goods to trade while in Norway save for a little homespun cloth,<sup>17</sup> Ásdís equips her son with a sword, her own family heirloom, directly enabling the first of his many heroic adventures:

Eigi ertu svá af garði gorr, frændi, sem ek vilda, svá vel borinn maðr sem þú ert . . . Sverð þetta átti Jökull, fõðurfaðir minn, ok inir fyrri Vatnsdælar, ok var þeim sigrsælt; vil ek nú gefa þér sverðit, ok njót vel. (*Grettis saga* 1936, 49–50)

You haven't been sent on your way as well equipped as I would like to see someone of your standing, my son . . . This sword belonged to my grandfather Jokul and the most prominent people of the Vatnsdal clan, and it brought them many triumphs. I want to give you this sword. Make good use of it. (*CSI*, II 70–71)

Later, when Grettir avenges the killing of his brother Atli, Ásdís draws another emphatic connection between her son and her side of the family: *hon varð glöð við þetta ok kvað hann nú hafa líkzk í ætt Vatnsdæla* 'she was pleased at the news and said that now he had shown the Vatnsdal family traits' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 155; *CSI*, II 124).

Ásdís's particular devotion to her troubled middle child is nowhere more keenly felt than in the scene in which she is so perturbed by Grettir's fear of the dark, and the loneliness and privations of his outlaw life, that she consents to let her youngest remaining son, Illugi, join his brother so as to alleviate his suffering and share his fate (*Grettis saga* 1936, ch. 69). To Grettir's bitter end and beyond (e.g. when she bravely withstands the sight of his severed head and the cruel taunts of his killers), Ásdís remains her unfortunate son's staunchest supporter, the most faithful ally and the most eloquent advocate of his virtues.

<sup>16</sup> These traits Jökull is supposed to have inherited from his namesake and great-uncle, the Norwegian outlaw (and giant) Jökull Ingimundarson (*Vatnsdæla saga* 1939, ch. 3). On Grettir's affinities with his mother's kin, see Poole 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Here, too, history seems to be repeating itself as Ásmundr's gesture is highly reminiscent of his father's: upon Ásmundr's own first venture to Norway Þorgrímr says *þau lítill verða mundu ok fekk honum þó nokkut af flytjanda eyri* 'he would not let him have very much, but let him have a few goods to trade' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 34; *CSI*, II 63).

Scholars (e.g. Poole 2004) have argued that in a highly patriarchal society, a strong maternal influence such as those we witness in our two sagas was most likely viewed with suspicion, and while in itself this hypothesis is plausible, using it to explain away Þorgeirr and Grettir's adverse actions would mean reducing these two complex characters to boys spoilt rotten by their mothers' mollycoddling. More importantly, it is the positive portrayal of the mothers themselves in the two sagas that undermines any attempt to assign their sons' troublesome behaviour to maternal influence, Þórelfr outshining her husband in both ancestry and parental responsibility, and Ásdís being so universally esteemed that, following Grettir's slaying, we are told that even his former enemies supported her cause (*Grettis saga* 1936, ch. 83). Having difficult fathers on the one hand, and protective mothers on the other, is one of the first features in which the epic biographies of Þorgeirr and Grettir coincide.

## 2. Problematic sentencing to outlawry

After such stormy beginnings in life, it is hardly surprising that both heroes should end up outlaws very early in their careers, Grettir 'graduating' from lesser to full outlawry (*Grettis saga* 1936, chs 16 and 46) and Þorgeirr going straight to the latter (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, ch. 7). Þorgeirr and Grettir's cases have further in common that their sentencing appears to be rather heavy-handed—arguably, disproportionately so—in relation to the crimes committed. While it is true that Þorgeirr does not enjoy the popularity of Þorgils Másson, whom he has slain, it is far from clear which party was in fact justified in the already mentioned dispute over the beached whale. With reference to the relevant laws in *Grágás*, Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (1993, 405–06) surmises that 'although on the face of it [Þorgils Másson] appears to have law on his side, it may be that Þorgeirr's demand is not as unreasonable as it sounds'. As discussed in the introduction above, it seems that the case is not necessarily decided purely on legal grounds anyway, but rather on the strength, numbers, wealth and power of the prosecuting party led by Grettir's father Ásmundr and Þorsteinn Kuggason, their relative Skapti Þóroddsson being the lawspeaker at the time to boot (*Grettis saga* 1936, ch. 27). With the odds stacked in favour of his formidable opponents, Þorgils Arason's reluctance to engage in a more vigorous defence on behalf of his disastrously unpopular cousin is more than understandable, even if it does inspire criticism from those tirelessly judgemental *sumir menn* 'some people' (see above).

If Þorgeirr's case is ambiguous, both of Grettir's sentences have distinct elements of unfairness. Even in the case of his lesser outlawry, although he is admittedly guilty of killing a man, it is difficult to see what option the unarmed fourteen-year-old Grettir has but to defend himself, wrenching the axe out of the hands of the farmhand Skeggi, who has struck at him first. In such circumstances, Skeggi's attempt on Grettir's life should have made his own life forfeit, rendering void any subsequent claims for compensation or retribution. Of course, there is the unresolved matter of the food-bag, but the saga remains pointedly silent on the ownership of the disputed item, claimed by both Skeggi and Grettir. Even if the law is on the side of the lowly farmhand (as, based on the harshness of the sentence alone, one is tempted to assume), it is not clear why Grettir could not be released by the compensation that his Vatnsdalr kinsman Þorkell Scratcher is prepared to pay, especially if the influence wielded by Grettir's father and relatives is indeed as imposing as we later witness in their prosecution of Þorgeirr Hávarsson.

Already, then, the reader is confronted with the effects of Grettir's unfathomable ill fortune which, compounded by his equally bad temperament and the ill-fated encounter with the revenant Glámr, reaches greater heights when he is sentenced to full outlawry for a crime he did not commit. During his second trip to Norway, Grettir is accused of burning twelve of his countrymen to death when, pressed by his shipmates, he agrees to swim across the freezing channel in which their ship is moored and fetch them some fire from the cabin on the other side (*Grettis saga* 1936, ch. 38). Not only is the incident that takes place there an accident (in which Grettir is guilty only of bad manners), but any lingering doubts raised by evil rumours should have been quashed by the ever-righteous and discerning King Óláfr who, we are told, is inclined to believe Grettir's version of the story (*Grettis saga* 1936, ch. 39). Instead, following yet another spectacular jolt of bad luck through the abortion of the ordeal arranged by the king to give the wrongly accused hero a chance to prove his innocence,<sup>18</sup> Grettir is tried and sentenced back in Iceland to full outlawry *in absentia*, without the chance to defend his case.

The problematic nature of the circumstances leading to the two heroes' sentencing to outlawry suggests that, possessed of tumultuous tempers and prone to quarrelling as they are, both Þorgeirr and Grettir nevertheless bear the kind of *ógæfa* 'bad luck', 'misfortune' that goes well beyond 'just deserts', in Grettir's case, overwhelmingly so.

<sup>18</sup> This scene is discussed at length in Ranković 2017, especially 394–408.

### 3. *Elimination of hostile shipmate en route to Norway*

It seems appropriate to note at this point another, albeit minor, shared coincidence in the two heroes' biographical chronologies. As they each prepare to board a ship bound for Norway—Þorgeirr for the first time, as he has just been proclaimed an outlaw, and Grettir for the second, in order to seek adventure which, as we have seen, will lead him into full outlawry too—each hero encounters a would-be shipmate full of hostile intentions. In Þorgeirr's case, this person is Grettir's relative Gautr Sleituson who bears a grudge against Þorgeirr because of the killing of Þorgils Másson (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, ch. 8), and in Grettir's case it is Þorbjörn the Traveller, the man who has already been besmirching his reputation by spreading false rumours about him and is now openly insulting both Grettir and his old, ailing father, brazenly disregarding all the warnings of Grettir and other fellow travellers (*Grettis saga* 1936, ch. 37, discussed below; see also Ranković 2014, 50). While this encounter spells an instant end for Þorbjörn the Traveller whom Grettir kills there and then, the Norwegian crew of Þorgeirr's ship intervene and eventually send Gautr away, refusing him passage. Far from being resolved, however, the conflict between these two belligerent men is only postponed until Þorgeirr kills Gautr on another occasion (discussed below; *Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, ch.15). Incidental as they appear to be, these encounters will cost both heroes dear: Grettir will, as a result, lose his elder brother, Atli, and Þorgeirr his own life.

### 4. *Momentous encounter with King Óláfr Haraldsson*

That, once in Norway, both heroes attempt to enter King Óláfr's service is not very surprising, given that seeking a Norwegian king's favour is a rite of passage for many a saga hero. In particular, according to *Grettis saga*, King Óláfr Haraldsson *tók þá menn alla bezt, sem váru atgørvismenn um nokkura hluti, ok gerði sér þá handgengna* 'gave the warmest welcome of all to men who were accomplished in some way, and took them into his service' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 124–25; *CSI*, II 108). This, we are told, has prompted many enterprising young Icelanders to try their luck at his court. What is surprising, however, is that the king should greet Þorgeirr and Grettir in an almost identical manner, starting with a question that indicates he has already heard of the person in front of him: *Hvárt ertu Þorgeirr Hávarsson?* 'Are you Thorgeir Havarsson?' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 159; *CSI*, II 348); *Ertu Grettir inn sterki?* 'Are you Grettir the Strong?' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 132; *CSI*, II 112). The finely balanced judgments the king then pronounces on the heroes' virtues and flaws also closely mirror one

another. Both Þorgeirr and Grettir are praised for their imposing physical stature and martial qualities but are found wanting when it comes to luck (*gæfa*), a complex concept based as much on one's character as on blind chance (see, e.g., Sommer 2007). On meeting Þorgeirr, King Óláfr comments: *Þú ert mikill maðr vexti ok drengiligr í ásjónu ok munt eigi vera í öllu gæfumaðr* 'You are a big man and have the look of a champion, but are not endowed with great luck' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 159; *CSI*, II 348). While he grants Grettir's request for an ordeal, the king's remarks about the hero are a similar blend of praise and misgivings: *Ærit ertu gildir, en eigi veit ek, hverja gæfu þú berr til at hrinda þessu máli af þér* 'You are a big enough man, but I do not know if you will have the good fortune to clear your name of this charge' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 132; *CSI*, II 112).<sup>19</sup> As his forebodings prove right and Grettir's ordeal is abandoned, the king reiterates his earlier assessment: *Sé ek þat . . . at fáir menn eru nú slíkir fyrir aftls sakar ok hreysti, sem þú ert, en miklu ertu meiri ógæfumaðr en þú megir fyrir þat með oss vera* 'I can see there are few men to match you in strength and valour . . . but you are far too ill-fated to be with us' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 134; *CSI*, II 113).

As with Þorgeirr, King Óláfr particularly emphasises Grettir's impressive physique and courage on the one hand and his *ógæfa* on the other. However, while these mirroring descriptions draw a tight parallel between the two heroes, the king's subsequent decision to reject Grettir because of his bad fortune but to accept Þorgeirr in spite of it drives a sharp wedge between them, and from this point on their life-paths bifurcate. Regarding the potential reason for such discrepant treatment, it might be significant that the king carefully qualifies the extent of Þorgeirr's misfortune, saying that he is not a lucky man *í öllu* 'in everything', 'in every respect', perhaps perceiving the possibility of containing and sublimating Þorgeirr's lucklessness and temperament under his royal guidance. By contrast, Grettir's misfortune appears to be boundless and hence unmanageable even by this saint-to-be. And yet, reasonable as it may sound, the king's decision here

<sup>19</sup> Note that, unlike Scudder above, George Ainslie Hight translated the phrase *ærit ertu gildir* as 'you are worthy enough' (1914, 108), while William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon (1869, 118) opted for 'thou art great enough'. The adjective *gildir* means both 'of full value/worth' and 'of full size/measure', i.e., 'brawny' (Zoëga 2004, 165) or 'stout' (Cleasby and Vigfusson 1874, 200); thus each of the three translations is valid in its own way, the oldest one trying to capture both nuances of *gildir* by choosing 'great' as its English counterpart. Denton Fox and Hermann Pálsson's rendering, 'you are certainly a brave man' (*Grettir's saga* 1974, 86), departs from the literal meaning.

is still distinctly unfair, especially taking into account that, accomplished as he is, Þorgeirr is an outlaw, a fugitive from Icelandic justice, whereas at this point Grettir is a renowned champion and his alleged guilt is never proven. The saga also makes it clear that the hero did not fail at his ordeal but that it was aborted owing to an incident which Grettir did not initiate. In any case, the king's decision is momentous for both young men and has far-reaching consequences: while his acceptance of Þorgeirr staves off the hero's bad luck (at least for the duration of his service), his rejection of Grettir is not even neutral, but actively exacerbates the hero's misfortune, as his subsequent sentencing to full outlawry *in absentia* testifies. The king's rejection is all the more severe in that he is bound to Grettir by bonds of kinship, as he is not to Þorgeirr: his maternal great-grandmother, Guðbjörg, was the sister of Grettir's paternal great-grandfather, Qunndr Tree-leg (*Grettis saga* 1936, ch. 1). The hero has thus had every reason to count on the king's special favour and support. Instead, it is Þorgeirr who gets the benefits of what could easily have been Grettir's epic career: consorting with Norwegian gentry and the jarls of Orkney, raiding and trading abroad, collecting the king's tax, even acting as his representative in Iceland where he can rely on the protection of his powerful patron to trump the laws of his homeland that would otherwise have had him hunted down and killed. Conversely, for all the colourful adventures and brave feats that Grettir later accomplishes in Iceland, his life becomes ever more insular, eventually disappearing into the tiny dot on the map that is the island of Drangey—the hero's mighty fortress and his sad prison too.

In addressing the king's discrepant treatment of Þorgeirr and Grettir, Joonas Ahola (2014, 294–95) suggests that Óláfr's enmity towards Grettir's maternal kin may underlie his rejection. In particular, Ahola refers to an episode from *Heimskringla's Óláfs saga helga* (1945, 331–32) in which the king has Grettir's brave, defiant uncle, Jøkull Bárðarson, executed as the enemy of the crown for supporting his rival, Jarl Hákon. According to Ahola (2014, 295), the close bond between uncle and nephew evidenced when Jøkull warns the young hero against fighting the revenant Glámr (*Grettis saga* 1936, ch. 34) 'lays a foundation for enmity between Grettir and King Óláfr'. Intriguing though this hypothesis may be, it seems more likely that the shabby treatment of Grettir was the cause of his uncle's enmity towards the king (thus prompting Jøkull to lend his services to the king's opponent), in light of the narrative chronology according to which Grettir's encounter with the king occurs nearly two decades prior to Óláfr's conflict with Jøkull. To be fair, in the complex temporalities of tradition and communal memory, it is not unlikely that the general remembrance of *some* enmity would carry more weight than the exactitudes of chronology.

Still, what speaks most eloquently against Ahola's hypothesis is the scene of Grettir's encounter with the king itself in which, prior to the aborted ordeal, no underlying tensions between the two can be detected.

Of course, the king's rejection of Grettir can be ascribed to his saintly prescience (the final excuse he gives to the hero is that it is in Iceland that *mun þér auðit verða þín bein at bera* 'you are ordained to rest your bones' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 134; *CSI*, II 113)), as well as to his wisdom in recognising when someone is beyond help. Such shrewdness does the king credit, but it also deepens the tragic irony with which *Grettis saga* suffuses its protagonist and for which, as I have argued elsewhere (Ranković 2017), it seems to have a particular penchant. However, it is also possible that the king's adverse choice reflects not only on the hero but on Óláfr Haraldsson himself, revealing some fissures and darker undercurrents in medieval Icelanders' outlook on this saintly king. For, while duly revered, Óláfr Haraldsson seems not to have inspired in Icelanders the same affection as his namesake and predecessor, Óláfr Tryggvason. In fact, on several occasions in *Heimskringla's* version of his saga St Óláfr is portrayed as a cunning ruler, a schemer with unabashed designs on Iceland's sovereignty, trying to impose a tax on the people there and coerce them into giving him the island of Grímsey as a gift, while constantly interfering in their internal affairs and even keeping hostage the sons of some of the most prominent Icelandic chieftains.<sup>20</sup> Of course, at the time Snorri Sturluson wrote *Óláfs saga helga* he and his countrymen were facing similar political pressures, allurements and designs from the Norwegian Crown, so it is probably not so surprising that these should be reflected in his portrayal of this powerful (though saintly) king.

In this context, different renderings of a particular scene in the respective *Möðruvallabók* and *Hauksbók* versions of *Fóstbræðra saga* may

<sup>20</sup> *Óláfs saga helga* (1945, chs 125, 126, 128, 136 and 138). As attested by *Laxdæla saga* (1934, chs 41–43) and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (1941, ch. 95; also see chs 81–84), Óláfr Tryggvason is also said to have taken prominent Icelanders hostage to put pressure on the island to accept Christianity as its official religion. Note, however, the crucial difference that, having accepted the 'true faith', Kjartan Ólafsson and other Icelanders willingly participate in Óláfr Tryggvason's strategy to Christianise Iceland. This is not the case with Óláfr Haraldsson and his desire to impose taxes on the island. The young Icelanders held hostage by Óláfr Haraldsson are much aggrieved by their loss of freedom, as is testified by the story of Steinn Skaptason (the son of the already mentioned lawspeaker Skapti Þóroddsson) who invests great effort in escaping from the king's clutches, and, as a direct consequence of his ignoble treatment, ends up serving Óláfr's rival in England, King Knútr the Great (*Óláfs saga helga* 1945, chs 136 and 138).

be instructive. While for most of the saga (especially the second half, ‘Þormóðr’s part’), the king’s character is presented as beyond reproach, in the Möðruvallabók rendering of the scene in which he requests Þorgeirr to go to Iceland in order to avenge the wounding of one of his retainers, King Óláfr is uncharacteristically spiteful—and not merely towards the Icelander who has caused him offence, but towards the people there in general and the irksome liberties they seem to take: *Þat vil ek, Þorgeirr, at þú hefñir þessa áverka, er hirðmaðr minn fekk út á Íslandi, ok leiðir svá Íslendingum at berja á mínum monnum* ‘I want you, Thorgeir, to avenge the wounding of one of my men out in Iceland, so that the people there will think twice before attacking my men’ (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 183; *CSI*, II 358). Þorgeirr’s discomfort and reluctance to comply are evident from the circumlocutions he employs in answering:

Þorgeirr svarar: ‘Þat væntir mik, at ek muna hefnt fá þessa mótgörða, er yðr hafá gorrvar verit í þessu verki.’

Konungr mælti: ‘Því býð ek þér um þetta mál, at ek hygg, at þú munir minn vilja gera í þessu verki.’

Þorgeirr svarar: ‘Skyldr em ek til þess at gera þat, sem þú vill.’

Thorgeir answered, ‘I expect I will be able to avenge this offence against you.’ The king said, ‘I am asking you because I believe you will do my will in this matter.’

Thorgeir replied, ‘I am obliged to do as you bid me.’

By contrast, in Hauksbók’s version of the same scene, Þorgeirr needs no further prodding by the king, nor does he acquiesce under sufferance, merely out of obligation. Instead, he gives an immediate, concise and affirmative answer: *Þat skal ek gjarna gera* ‘That I shall willingly do.’ Then again, the king’s request in Hauksbók is clad in softer language, so that, for example, Icelanders are to be deterred not from ‘attacking’ (*at berja*) the king’s men, but from ‘shaming’ (*at skamma*) them, which is a less explicit term. Furthermore, the victim, Þorfinnr, is designated as Þorgeirr’s companion (*logunautr þinn*), which renders the king’s request a personal appeal rather than an order, since Þorgeirr is invited to avenge not simply the king’s retainer, but his own companion too. Rather than being an arbitrary variation, the divergence in the Hauksbók’s version of the scene acquires a special significance when one considers that the author of this formidable work, Haukur Erlendsson, was himself a retainer of the Norwegian king and therefore likely to be familiar with how the appropriate answer to a royal request should sound. By the time of the completion of Hauksbók in c.1310, the Norwegian Crown had fully established its rule in Iceland which had surrendered its independence some

fifty years earlier. It is therefore tempting to conjecture that, even though some four decades younger, *Möðruvallabók* in fact preserves an older, more complex set of attitudes to King Óláfr (and Norwegian royalty in general). This would not be very surprising given the general tendency of the sole scribe of *Möðruvallabók* to adhere closely to his exemplars,<sup>21</sup> which were most likely written at a time when Iceland's status was still in flux—a situation that was particularly amenable to the parallel circulation of disparate, ambivalent and even contradictory attitudes to Norwegian royalty. It is also conceivable that some of this attitudinal complexity seeped into *Grettis saga* at various stages of its development (whether oral or written), influencing its portrayal of King Óláfr and his ambiguous treatment of the hero. This perspective opens the possibility of reading the scene of their encounter not simply as Grettir's failure to acquire royal favour, but as the king's failure to bestow it and thus grant the hero—as a true saint well might—a reprieve from the misfortune that blights him.

#### *5. Noble death at the hands of ignoble enemies: posthumous decapitation and mutilation*

If for a time King Óláfr's disparate decisions set Þorgeirr and Grettir on different courses, as their lives draw to a close they will converge once more: both heroes are killed while defending themselves against overwhelming odds and are subsequently decapitated and mutilated by ignoble enemies.

Favoured as he may have been in the service of King Óláfr, Þorgeirr—like many other saga heroes overcome by nostalgia (or compelled by fate) while abroad—eventually succumbs to the impulse to return to his homeland, ignoring the warnings of his cousin, Illugi Arason, and even shunning the king's own wise counsel. Having spent a winter in Reykjahólar with the Arasynir, come spring, Þorgeirr is asked by his cousins to go north and prepare Illugi's ship for sailing abroad, while they attend the Althing. At Melrakkaslétta where their ship is moored, Þorgeirr again

<sup>21</sup> See Ranković 2016, 322. Although more than one hand is detected in *Möðruvallabók*, only one scribe was responsible for copying the prose parts of the codex (see <https://handrit.is/en/manuscript/view/is/AM02-0132>). My own observations regarding this scribe's conservative copying tendencies are based on detailed examination of the employment of the back-referring formula *sem fyrr var sagt/riat* 'as was said/written before' in the *Íslendingasögur*, which in this codex varies widely from saga to saga. This probably reflects the usage habits of the exemplars rather than of *Möðruvallabók*'s scribe, as otherwise one would expect the employment of the formula to be more consistent across the codex.

crosses the path of the troublesome Gautr Sleituson to whom, unwittingly, Illugi has granted a place aboard his vessel on a separate occasion. Soon enough, Gautr finds an opportunity to provoke Þorgeirr and, this time round, gets killed. As already mentioned, this action spells Þorgeirr's own demise since, upon learning of Gautr's death, his kinsman Þórarinn the Overbearing breaks the truce he has made with Þorgeirr when he docks his own ship in the same harbour. With the help of his partner, the Greenlander Þorgrímr Troll, Þórarinn first lures and kills some of Þorgeirr's men, and with his forty-strong crew swiftly launches a full attack on the hero and the remaining eight men aboard his ship. Such grossly uneven odds provide Þorgeirr with a memorable last stand: once all his men are slain, he withdraws to the ship's prow putting up a valiant defence with his axe and killing fourteen men in total, including two Norwegians who have managed to wound him, one by striking at his hand and the other by plunging a spear into him. With that spear lodged inside him, we are told that Þorgeirr still manages to remain on his feet and even exchange a few blows with Þórarinn and Þorgrímr who, daring to approach the hero only now that he is severely incapacitated, join forces and overpower him. Not content with breaking the truce and killing an already doomed man,<sup>22</sup> Þorgeirr's enemies hack the head off his lifeless body, as well as opening up his chest in order to satisfy their curiosity as to what the heart of such a brave man would look like. Hoping to gain honour from their feat, Þórarinn and his men are intent on taking Þorgeirr's head to the Althing. Along the way they make sport of it, placing it on mounds and laughing at it until at one point the ghastly sight of its open eyes and protruding tongue frightens them so much that they are forced to bury it hastily on the spot, thus forgoing the pleasure of showing off their trophy among the foremost men of the country. Clearly, even dead and gone, Þorgeirr proves to be too much for his enemies.

Like Þorgeirr, Grettir is brought down by ignoble characters. Led by Þorbjörn Hook, a local bully and devoted foster-son of the evil sorceress Þuríðr, Grettir's attackers are reminiscent of Þorgeirr's, and though the

<sup>22</sup> For an assortment of curses and punishments directed at truce-breakers see, for example, *Grettis saga* (1936, 232), with reference to *Grágás*, n. 3. As an excuse for breaking his pledge and thus committing one of the most damning offences known in his world, Þórarinn invokes the fact that at the point of agreeing to the pact he did not know that Þorgeirr had slain Gautr. Whether this is enough to exculpate Þórarinn would have been questionable even if he had shown himself capable of nobler behaviour; as things stand, his subsequent treatment of Þorgeirr amply confirms the baseness of his character.

specifics of their respective conflicts with the two heroes are different, their actions closely mirror one another. Þorbjörn Hook, like Þórarinn the Overbearing, must resort to trickery to get to Grettir, even outdoing his *Fóstbræðra saga* counterpart by employing black magic. Þorbjörn too acts only after making sure the odds are well stacked in his favour, and when he launches the attack, has no qualms either about the fact that his opponent is already on the brink of death. Overpowered by the septic wound he has inflicted upon himself when his axe glances off the log enchanted by Þuríðr for just that purpose (see Ranković 2017, 395–400), Grettir is forced to fend off his assailants from his deathbed, barely able to rise to his knees. And yet, even though his last stand may not match Þorgeirr's in terms of vigour and body count, it is by no means less spectacular. Already delirious, Grettir still manages to kill two of his attackers, after which, just like Þorgeirr, he is run through by a spear. However, while *Fóstbræðra saga* does not stipulate the place where the spear makes contact with Þorgeirr's body, *Grettis saga* locates it between Grettir's shoulders, which is to say that the man who threw the spear, Þorbjörn Hook, did so behind the hero's back. Unlike Þorgeirr, Grettir gets some help at this stage from the young but valiant Illugi, who covers his dying brother with his shield and defends him fiercely until he finally gets hemmed in and captured by their assailants. With no one to bar their way now, the attackers fall upon what is left of Grettir and deal him, we are told, *mörg sár, svá at litt eða ekki blæddi* 'so many wounds that there was little or no blood left to come out of each one' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 261; *CSI*, II 176). Evocative of saintly martyrdoms, this overkill bears witness not so much to the rage as to the hysterical relief of Grettir's cowardly attackers who must make absolutely sure their victim can pose no further threat. This, as Þorbjörn Hook's simultaneously anxious and cynical quip suggests, is one of the reasons for cutting off the hero's head too: *Nú veit ek víst, at Grettir er dauðr* 'Now I know for certain that Grettir is dead' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 262; *CSI*, II 176). Only it is not enough for Þorbjörn to use just any blade for this purpose; he is intent on using Grettir's own. Grettir's lifeless body, like Þorgeirr's, continues to defy his enemies, however. First, to get to the hero's sword, they must stoop to cutting off the hand that still grips the weapon so tightly that it cannot be prised open. And then, as he tries to fulfil his macabre fantasy, Þorbjörn finds reality to be in the way as, embarrassingly, he is unable to behead the hero elegantly, in one fell swoop, but must strike at the apparently impregnable bone and sinew several times before managing to sever them. As the head finally comes off, so does a piece of Grettir's sword, thus leaving a permanent blemish on Þorbjörn's prize and his pride too.

Like Þórarinn the Overbearing, Þorbjörn Hook means to show the outlaw's head off as a trophy, as well as use it as a proof of slaying and hence claim the reward placed upon it. Like Þórarinn, Þorbjörn too is not averse to having some fun with the head along the way; his idea of it raises him to even greater heights of brutality, as he decides to visit Bjarg and taunt the bereaved Ásdís with the sight of her son's severed head. Loath to give her sons' killers the satisfaction of feeding upon her grief, this heroic mother of heroic sons serves them a barrage of mocking verses instead, thus making sure they get something for their trouble. Grettir's killers leave her farm otherwise empty-handed, as the people gathered there in support of Ásdís relinquish none of the property Þorbjörn had meant to confiscate. As in Þórarinn's case, Þorbjörn's 'victory' turns out to be futile and his gruesome trophy becomes a shameful burden, to be hidden out of sight and disposed of, rather than displayed and bragged about. Dissuaded from taking it to the Althing and incensing any further Grettir's numerous kinsmen there, Þorbjörn too ends up burying the hero's head in a mound along the way. As with his *Fóstbræðra saga* counterpart, neither great honour nor riches awaits Þorbjörn at the Althing, only public scorn, a countersuit and, as we shall soon see, exile too.

The deaths of Þorgeirr and Grettir form a particularly strong point of comparison, especially as the decapitation of heroes in the *Íslendingasögur* is exceptionally rare.<sup>23</sup> For all the similarities uniting Þorgeirr and Grettir in death, the most profound is the fact that they each face their destiny with eyes wide open, knowing what awaits them. Despite the apparent success of his effort to secure peace with the rival crew, Þorgeirr *trúði eigi til fulls þeim Þorgrimi ok Þórarni, þó at grið væri sett meðal þeira* 'did not believe that Thorgrim and Thorarin would keep to the pact they agreed on' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 203–04; *CSI*, II 366), while Grettir instantly recognises Þuríðr's malevolent agency behind the fatal log, referring to it as *illt tré ok af illum sent . . . okkr til óheilla* 'an evil tree by evil sent . . . to bring us misfortune' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 171; *CSI*, II 250). It is thus not for lack of vigilance that the two heroes get killed, but the gullibility of Þorgeirr's men on the one hand and the carelessness of Grettir's slovenly thrall Þorbjörn Noise on the other. As the foreknowledge of his impending betrayal lends further gravity, grace and poignancy to Christ's sacrifice,

<sup>23</sup> The only other example is that of Björn Hítðelakappi. The scene in which Þórðr Kolbeinsson throws Björn's severed head at the feet of his mother Þórðis, asking if she recognises it and whether it needs a wash, is reminiscent of Þorbjörn's taunting of Ásdís. Þórðis, too, acts stoically, managing an instantaneous, scathingly witty retort and shaming her son's killer (*Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa* 1938, ch. 33).

so foreknowledge raises Þorgeirr and Grettir above being mere playthings of fate, even if, unsurprisingly, they are neither as patient nor accepting as the Son of God. And if the two heroes must eventually succumb to fate, they do so as actants and owners of their destinies: by ‘doing’ death rather than being done by it.

### 6. *Elaborate, exotic vengeance*

Even as its hero dies, no saga is complete without an account of the aftermath, and the avenging of a slain hero is as integral a part of his story as his splendid feats and foolhardy adventures. In this respect, too, the epic biographies of Þorgeirr and Grettir converge, as each is avenged spectacularly, in an elaborate, three-tiered fashion, both at home and abroad in exotic locations, one in Greenland, one in Byzantium. Already, the complete reversal of their enemies’ hopes, the universal condemnation of their deeds, can be conceived of as the first act of retribution—the kind that comes in the guise of a comeuppance. The second act constitutes revenge in the more straightforward legal sense of the word. Instead of being rewarded at the Althing for ridding the country of two infamous outlaws, each set of killers faces countersuits brought by the slain man’s powerful relatives, Þórarinn the Overbearing ending up killed and Þorbjörn Hook exiled for life. As already mentioned, the third and final stage of vengeance for the two heroes takes place abroad, with Þormóðr Bersason penetrating the northern reaches of his known world in pursuit of his sworn brother’s second killer, the Greenlander Þorgrímr Troll, and Grettir’s Norwegian half-brother Þorsteinn Galleon heading in the opposite direction to seek out the exiled Þorbjörn Hook among the Varangian Guard in Constantinople.

If, as discussed earlier, Þorgils Arason does not or cannot do much to prevent Þorgeirr from being outlawed, he certainly outdoes himself when it comes to prosecuting his cousin’s killers. According to the Hauksbók version of *Fóstbræðra saga* (1943, ch. 18), Þorgils manages to get Þórarinn the Overbearing and all the men who had participated in the killing outlawed at the next year’s Althing, after which he and the famous chieftain Guðmundr the Powerful arrange for Þórarinn to be killed at a gathering in Eyjafjörðr. Although it presents us with the same outcome, the *Möðruvallahók* account of these events is rather more intriguing. To begin with, there is no mention of Þorgeirr’s killers being outlawed; instead, we are told that Þorgils makes Þórarinn pay compensation amounting to two hundred silver pieces, demanding that a further hundred be paid to Guðmundr the Powerful. It is not stated why Guðmundr is entitled to this payment, but the very next sentence offers a clue to Þorgils’s motive for procuring it

for him: *Þat sumar var Þórarinn veginn á mannamóti í Eyjafirði* ‘That summer, Thorarin was slain at a gathering in Eyjafjord’ (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 215; *CSI*, II 370). Although neither Þorgils’s nor Guðmundr’s involvement is mentioned, the fact that Eyjafjörður falls within the latter’s sphere of influence strongly suggests that he has had a hand in arranging the assassination of Þorgeirr’s killer. And while the slaying of Þórarinn in the *Hauksbók* version is straightforward, as the culprit is said to have been outlawed, the fact that his assassination in the *Möðruvallabók* version lacks such clear legal grounds and that Þorgils and Guðmundr are still prepared to take the risk makes their vengeance bolder, fiercer, and also complete and final since, although their identity is easily guessed at, Þórarinn’s killers remain unnamed and unprosecuted. The *Möðruvallabók* rendering is therefore chillingly cynical—not only because Þórarinn ends up both paying a hefty compensation and getting killed, but because of the implication that Þórarinn has effectively been made to pay for his own killing by giving those hundred silver pieces to Guðmundr.

Yet another version of events is given in Þórarinn the Overbearing’s own tale, one of the *þættir* recounting the dealings of Guðmundr the Powerful appended to *Ljósvetninga saga* (1940, 141–47). Unlike *Fóstbræðra saga*, ‘Þórarins þáttir’ makes no mention of Þorgils Arason’s involvement; rather, it stipulates that it was the outraged King Óláfr himself who sent eight marks to his follower Eyjólfir (the son of Guðmundr the Powerful) to arrange Þórarinn’s killing and thus avenge his much-loved retainer Þorgeirr. Interestingly, while this account diverges from both the *Hauksbók* and *Möðruvallabók* versions of *Fóstbræðra saga*, it ties in really well with the earlier discussed episode in which King Óláfr similarly charges Þorgeirr with avenging one of his followers in Iceland. Although the ending of ‘Þórarins þáttir’ is missing, the portion of text immediately preceding its breaking off indicates that Þórarinn the Overbearing most likely died by the hand of his slave (1940, 147; *Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 215 n. 1), which, in the world of the sagas, is a particularly ignoble end.

Despite the differences in detail, all three accounts agree on one point: Þórarinn the Overbearing is made to pay dearly for the life of Þorgeirr Hávarsson. A similar fate awaits his *Grettis saga* counterpart, Þorbjörn Hook. The case he presents at the Althing demanding the reward set on Grettir’s head is overturned, and instead he finds himself charged for employing sorcery and killing an already dying man. Not only is Þorbjörn sentenced to lifelong exile, but his case also sets a precedent, prompting the assembled men to introduce a new law, stipulating that *alla forneskjumenn gerðu þeir útlaga* ‘all practitioners of black magic should

be outlawed' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 269; also see reference to *Grágás*, n.1); *CSI*, II 180). And while his enemy is thus condemned, Grettir himself is publicly (if posthumously) exonerated, as we are told that *fellu niðr allar sakar þær, er menn höfðu á höndum Gretti* 'all the charges that had been made against Grettir were waived'.

Of course, this is only the first instalment of Þorbjörn's punishment; the next awaits him a long way from home, in Constantinople where, unbeknownst to him, Þorsteinn Galleon follows him and where they both join the Varangian Guard. A Weapon-taking ceremony there provides the ever-eager Þorbjörn with an opportunity to show off Grettir's prized sword and share the tale of its acquisition. As the weapon is passed around for the gathered warriors to admire, Þorsteinn asks to see it, then swiftly sinks it inside its new owner's head. In a deep twist of irony, the same sword he had insisted on using to cut Grettir's head off has now cost Þorbjörn his own; if in its perfect state this magnificent weapon faltered when it made contact with Grettir's mighty neck, it still proves more than an adequate tool—now chipped—for splitting Þorbjörn's skull *í joxlum* 'down to his jaws' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 273; *CSI*, II 182). Having heard Þorsteinn's reason for killing Þorbjörn, we are told that *þá tóku margir undir, at sjá inn sterki maðr myndi mikill fyrir sér hafa verit, þar sem Þorsteinn hefði rekizk svá langt út í heim at hefna hans* 'many of the Varangians agreed that this strong man must have been important, considering that Thorstein had travelled so far across the world to avenge him'. Two iterations of this stance in the saga further emphasise the exceptional character of Þorsteinn's Byzantine revenge, ultimately reflecting Grettir's own uniqueness. In one we are told that *vitu menn varla dæmi til, at nokkurs manns af Íslandi hafi hefnt verit í Miklagarði, annars en Grettis Ásmundarsonar* 'apart from Grettir Asmundarson, scarcely any instance is known of an Icelander being avenged in Constantinople' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 286; *CSI*, II 189). The adverb *varla* 'scarcely' is a litotes; thus, no other Icelander apart from Grettir has been avenged in Constantinople. Indeed, this fact is also said to be attested by the renowned lawspeaker and author, Sturla Þórðarson. In the final evaluation of the hero ascribed to him at the end of *Grettis saga*, Sturla states as his third and final (thus gradationally the strongest) reason for deeming Grettir the most distinguished outlaw in the land: *hans var hefnt út í Miklagarði, sem einskis annars íslenzks manns* 'unlike any other Icelander, he was avenged in Constantinople' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 290; *CSI*, II 191).

The location of the revenge for Þorgeirr Hávarsson is neither less remote nor less exotic, and Þorgeirr is the only other saga hero to elicit comparably

extravagant exertions on the part of his avenger. In perfect opposite symmetry to Þorsteinn's south-eastern trajectory, Þorgeirr's sworn brother Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld heads north-west, undertaking a long journey from Norway to Greenland to achieve his goal.<sup>24</sup> Despite the differences in detail (involving a comical episode with Egill the Fool), the context and manner in which his revenge against Þorgrímr Troll is executed closely mirrors Þorsteinn Galleon's slaying of Þorbjörn Hook. Each killing takes place during a public event (Althing and Weapon-taking, respectively) and directly after the bragging perpetrator has told a lengthy story of his getting the better of a great hero in front of an eager and numerous audience. More moderately skilled in combat than Grettir and Þorgeirr, both their avengers employ an element of surprise during the attack on their respective enemies: as we have seen, Þorsteinn pretends to admire Þorbjörn's sword, thus lulling his opponent into a false sense of security, while, pretending to be interested in Þorgrímr's tale, Þormóðr suddenly pulls an axe on him which he has hidden under his cloak. Finally, although different weapons are employed (Grettir's sword on Þorbjörn, and an axe, Þorgeirr's weapon of choice, on Þorgrímr), both perpetrators receive exactly the same blows to the head, Þorsteinn splitting Þorbjörn's skull down to the jaws (see above), and Þormóðr Þorgrímr's *i herðar niðr* 'down to the shoulders' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 233; *CSI*, II 378). The similarity of these revenge-related particulars is uncanny, although, of course, there are important differences in the narratives surrounding them: Þormóðr's adventures in Greenland acquire a life of their own and Þorsteinn's story slips into a fabliau-like series of love escapades with Lady Spes (a cunning damsel who, for once, gets her hero out of distress). More pertinently to the revenge narrative, Þormóðr—unlike Þorsteinn—is not satisfied with taking only one life in exchange for his sworn brother's, but further proceeds to kill four of Þorgrímr's nephews, along with some of their men. However, as he later says in justifying this extreme action to King Óláfr, some of these slayings were also committed because his own honour was at stake (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, ch. 24; see Grove 2009, 35).

These instances of vengeance taken abroad are exceptional not simply for the length of the journeys that the avengers undertake, but the

<sup>24</sup> Speaking of extravagant exertions, it should be borne in mind that not only Þormóðr but also his mysterious rival 'Gestr' (or rather, Helgu-Steinarr) set off to Greenland with the same purpose of avenging Þorgeirr. As Ahola aptly observes (2014, 147), 'the fact that there were simultaneously two champions in Greenland whose aim was to avenge Þorgeirr's death elevated Þorgeirr's significance as a memorable hero'.

liminal quality of the destinations themselves. Being on the fringes of their known world, Greenland and Constantinople each exudes its own brand of confusing strangeness in which the hero finds himself immersed. As Jonathan Grove notes (2009, 33), Greenland represents ‘a recognized stepping-stone in the career path of the Icelandic adventurer, a peripheral setting in which manhood is challenged and vigorously asserted’. And just as, in pursuing his goal, Þormóðr must traverse Greenland’s unfamiliar terrain and harsh conditions, so Þorsteinn is forced to manoeuvre his way through the utterly foreign social milieu and unknown customs of the glossy but perilous capital of Byzantium. These alien environments place the two avengers at a significant disadvantage, testing their ability and resolve to the limit, with both men very nearly losing their lives to achieve their aims. And yet, despite all their trials and tribulations (or, rather, because of them), the revenge Þormóðr and Þorsteinn manage to take is not only successful but also final, with the perpetrators themselves remaining forever unavenged. And while the narratives of revenge now cast Þormóðr and Þorsteinn into the role of hero, in line with the above expounded Varangians’ logic, the fact that Grettir and Þorgeirr merit such extraordinary efforts reflects directly back on them, bearing witness to the extraordinariness of their own heroic selves.

### *7. Heroic legacy: no marriage, no heirs, but saga immortality*

One of the most prominent features of the sagas is their copious genealogies, with a hero’s worth measured not only by the illustrious ancestors named at the outset of his story, but equally by the scope of the genealogy at its close, enumerating his notable descendants. In a certain way, such eminent progeny, the most recent offshoots of which are likely to be the saga writers’ contemporaries (or, in some cases, the saga writers themselves), represents the hero’s own reach into the future and his continued influence.<sup>25</sup> And yet, magnificent heroes as Þorgeirr and Grettir are, the endings of their sagas boast no closing genealogies, as they neither marry nor leave any heirs. From a purely practical point of view this is hardly surprising considering that, unlike other famous outlaws such as Gísli Súrsson or Hörðr Grímkelsson, Þorgeirr and Grettir are outlawed at a comparatively young age, before they get the chance to marry. Being therefore bereft of property and a place of residence while constantly facing the prospect of

<sup>25</sup> My assumption here regarding the anonymous *Íslendingasögur* writers is based on the practices of their known counterparts working in related genres such as Haukr Erlendsson and Sturla Þórðarson.

untimely death makes neither of our heroes a particularly desirable match, despite their many qualities. And yet, even without these impediments, it is doubtful whether their marital status would have been any different, as their sagas indicate that their relationships with women are problematic. We are informed outright that Þorgeirr is *lítill kvennamaðr* ‘not much of a ladies’ man’ (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 128; *CSI*, II 333). While not averse to occasional dalliances with women and giantesses alike, Grettir forms no lasting attachments and leaves no heir either. Even the rumour that he may have fathered a son on the Sandhaugar widow, Steinvǫr, eventually amounts to nothing, as the boy in question, Skeggi, is said to have died before reaching adulthood (*Grettis saga* 1936, ch. 67).

However, the fact that they leave no heirs does not mean that Þorgeirr and Grettir are unconcerned with their respective legacies. Quite the contrary. They do not see this in terms of a continuation of their flesh and blood, though, but as leaving a lasting memory among their kind, achieving a continued existence in story. Much in line with the heroic ethos that predates the *Íslendingasögur* (see Ahola 2014, 357), this stance may also go some way towards explaining the two heroes’ fraught relationships with women, who, from this point of view, can only be deemed a distraction from their pursuit of heroic deeds and eternal glory. I believe that it is in this spirit that we should understand Þorgeirr’s reported statement that *þat vera svívirðing síns krapts, at hokra at konum* (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 128). Regal translates this as ‘it was demeaning to his strength to stoop to women’ (*CSI*, II 333); but the misogynistic undertones of this wording are avoided in Jónas Kristjánsson’s (or rather, his translator, Peter Foote’s) rendering: ‘it was a shameful misuse of his strength to crawl over girls’ (Jónas Kristjánsson 1988, 280). Regal’s translation suggests that women are unfit recipients of Þorgeirr’s devotion, whereas in Foote’s the focus is on the sexual act itself (elliptically referred to as ‘crawling over girls’), which the hero considers a contemptible way of expending his strength. From this latter perspective, Þorgeirr’s abstention can be regarded as almost priestly. It is not that he considers women unworthy of his attentions but that, in veneration of his calling as a warrior, he forgoes any pleasure that might sap his energies and detract from his single-minded pursuit of heroic fame, and ultimately, immortality. Seeking eternal glory is a part of the familiar heroic ethos common to epic literatures around the world and throughout the ages, while self-imposed celibacy likewise characterises various warrior orders, historical and fictional alike, from the medieval Knights Templar to the futuristic *Star Wars*’ Jedi Knights.

Unlike Þorgeirr, Grettir permits himself an occasional liaison with a woman, but it is beyond doubt that his heroic *raison d'être* matches that of his *Fóstbræðra saga* counterpart. Grettir, indeed, seems more self-aware about his calling as a hero and grows restless, purposeless and moody if he has no opportunity to exercise his skills. For example, just prior to his encounter with the revenant Glámr, *þá þótti Gretti mikit mein, er hann mátti hvergi reyna afl sitt, ok fréttisk fyrir, ef nokkut væri þat, er hann mætti við fask* '[Grettir] sorely regretted not having anything to test his strength against, and asked around for a challenge to take up' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 107; *CSI*, II 100). He is also more explicit than Þorgeirr regarding his legacy, showing more concern with what will be said and remembered about his deeds than what they will cost him. Thus when, during Grettir's second sojourn in Norway, Þorsteinn Galleon laments his half-brother's boundless misfortune and the life he will lose as a result, the hero replies: *Þess verður þó getit, sem gort er* 'What is done shall be told all the same' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 137; *CSI*, II 114). Similarly, as his mother bursts into tears upon bidding her sons what she intuits is a final farewell, the only consolation Grettir can offer her is the stoical *Grát þú eigi, móðir; þat skal sagt, at þú hafir sonu átt, en eigi dætr, ef vit erum með vápnum sóttir* 'Do not weep, mother. If we are killed, it will be said of you that you had sons, not daughters' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 224; *CSI*, II 158).

It is, then, in what is remembered, sung, told and written about them that Þorgeirr and Grettir seek to leave their legacies, yet producing no heirs of flesh and blood has two further intriguing implications. On the one hand, the fact that they do not reproduce further highlights their uniqueness, their unrepeatability as heroes: being the last scion of his family line, each represents its culmination—the last and the best that that line could have produced. On the other hand, with no descendants to lay claim to them and thus belonging to no one, heroes such as Þorgeirr and Grettir more readily become the property of their readers; they belong to everyone.

### **Þorgeirr and Grettir: Parallels in Portrayal**

If the parallels between Þorgeirr and Grettir's epic biographies are compelling, the similarities in their character traits are even more so, especially the apparent ambiguity at the heart of their portrayals. They both seem to be men of contradiction: heroes of great promise who fall just short of fulfilling it, their spectacular abilities compromised by violence of temper and crippled by the *ógæfa* that, some scholars argue, seems to stem from

their irascibility and hence is felt to be deserved.<sup>26</sup> Thus, for example, Meulengracht Sørensen (1993, 406–07) perceives Þorgeirr as an ambivalent and essentially amoral character:

What distinguishes Þorgeirr is that sometimes, sure enough, he uses his weapons and bravery in a valid cause, but he is also just as likely to do so for no good reason at all. In one situation, his character blossoms in heroic bravery, as circumstances require, but next moment he acts from sterile self-assertion and with senseless violence.

Kathryn Hume's (1974, 469) description of Grettir mirrors the above encapsulation of Þorgeirr's contradictions to such a degree that these two quotations could almost be used interchangeably to describe either of our two heroes:

[Grettir] switches disconcertingly between irascibility and ugly-mindedness on the one hand, and fantastic forbearance and patience on the other. He can be insolently lazy when any reasonable person would agree that work was necessary and fair, but galvanically active in odd spurts. He is overbearing and arrogant to one person, kind and helpful to another.

There is, however, a crucial difference in how these two scholars approach the apparently paradoxical behaviour of Grettir and Þorgeirr. While Meulengracht Sørensen views Þorgeirr's contradictions as more or less arbitrary, and so assesses the hero's character as amoral (1993, 407), Hume discerns a pattern to Grettir's contradictions, thus attempting to account for them. She astutely notices that in the company of noble-minded people and in circumstances that call for his extraordinary talents 'Grettir is portrayed as nearly ideal' (473) and more than capable of controlling his temper. On the other hand, he is at his absolute worst when he is being forced to conform to the drudgery of everyday life and perform menial tasks as, according to Hume, 'he has an unusual, aristocratic set of values which makes him consider such labor demeaning, no matter how necessary it might be' (471). For Hume, Grettir's tragedy is that of anachronistic displacement, the clash between the heroic ideal of old that he embodies and the real, more prosaic world of agrarian Iceland that has 'few appropriate opportunities' (471) to offer heroes of his calibre, the warriors who crave to be a part of a grander historical canvas and whose natural enemies are monsters, or at least their human appropriations, the *beserkir*. In other words, when an epic hero finds himself trapped in a

<sup>26</sup> For this line of thinking with regard to Grettir, see in particular Hermann Pálsson 1969, Hawes 2008 and Hamer 2008. Regarding Þorgeirr, see for example Meulengracht Sørensen 1993 and Richard Harris 2015.

predominantly peaceful farming society that has no need of his abilities, he is likely to be perceived as a menace. Hume's observations here apply just as easily to Þorgeirr, whose adverse behaviour within the confines of the Iceland of his time can be ascribed to the same malady of displacement that plagues Grettir. Indeed, once he finds himself at King Óláfr's court, Þorgeirr thrives, not simply because of the king's good fortune and guiding wisdom, but also because the court is a perfect setting for him, providing challenges worthy of his talents and opportunities to express them to the full.

From this perspective, Þorgeirr's behaviour, like Grettir's, is far from arbitrary or amoral, and neither is it, in fact, as contradictory as it may at first seem. Even without the important issue of displacement, a closer scrutiny of the two heroes' conflicts reveals that, contrary to the expectations raised by overt pronouncements regarding their tempers, both Þorgeirr and Grettir are rarely guilty of the purely gratuitous, wanton violence of which they are frequently accused. Of Grettir it can even be said that it never takes place, except perhaps when as a ten-year-old boy he mistreats the animals on his father's farm. However, even these childhood incidents, which are designated in the saga itself as things of the past, *bernskubrögð* 'childish tricks', 'pranks' (Zoëga 2004, 50) need to be considered against the backdrop of the feud of sorts in which Grettir and his father get locked. For reasons of both kinship and his youth, Grettir is left with only limited and indirect means of avenging what he perceives as deliberate humiliations on his father's part. Viewed from this perspective, the unfortunate animals at Bjarg become the victims of this fierce clash of wills.<sup>27</sup>

Þorgeirr, on the other hand, acts with vicious extravagance on only two occasions, yet it is precisely these two outliers that are commonly cited by scholars (including Meulengracht Sørensen, above) as ultimate illustrations of his unbridled cruelty. Both of these instances take place in ch. 8 of *Fóstbræðra saga* en route to the ship that will take the outlawed hero to Norway. The first incident involves the killing of the farmer Torfi Bundle whose impaired hearing Þorgeirr mistakes for insolence, and the other that of a nameless shepherd whose head Þorgeirr cannot resist lopping off as, bent over his short staff with his neck sticking out, the poor wretch *stóð svá vel til hoggsins* 'stood so well poised for the blow' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 157; *CSI*, II 347). Even these two scenes, whose sensationalist

<sup>27</sup> Grettir's childhood behaviour is discussed in greater detail in Ranković 2009 and 2013. On the matter of Ásmundr's questionable treatment of his son, also see Cook 1984–85, especially 136–40.

violence has distinct elements of slapstick humour, provide some mitigating circumstances: just prior to these incidents Þorgeirr has, with words carelessly spoken, caused a split with the person who mattered most to him: his sworn brother, Þormóðr. The narrator informs us that Þorgeirr *var áðr skapþungt* ‘was already feeling depressed’ when Torfi Bundle’s failure to respond to his repeated calls exacerbates his mood to the point of rage.<sup>28</sup> After the loss of Þormóðr, these two instances of unrestrained violence could be read as Þorgeirr’s way (if a morbid one) of venting grief, acting out. This, of course, does not justify his deeds, but it does contextualise them, taking the ‘senselessness’ out of the equation.

Even disregarding these extenuating circumstances, a new perspective on Þorgeirr is revealed by the provenance of these damning episodes: they are exclusive to the Flateyjarbók version of *Fóstbræðra saga*, which is not presented as a self-contained narrative, but is disjointed, its various parts serving as supplementary material to *Óláfs saga helga*. No other version of *Fóstbræðra saga* features the episodes with Torfi Bundle and the doomed shepherd. Indeed, when Jónas Kristjánsson (1980, 280) describes Þorgeirr as a ‘cold-blooded connoisseur of killing’, he makes sure to stipulate—unlike most other commentators—that he has the Þorgeirr of Flateyjarbók in mind. Considering the two scenes’ uniqueness to this codex, it is reasonable to assume that their inclusion reflects the particular agenda of its compiler, Jón Þórðarson, as well as his intended readers, or rather reader who, Elizabeth Ashman Rowe (2005) has persuasively argued, was most likely the young Norwegian king, Óláfr Hákonarson. In his preface, Jón justifies the inclusion of *Fóstbræðra saga* in the following way (cited in Rowe 2005, 57): ‘From this, one must notice the grace and good luck of King Óláfr, that he showed that restraint to such terribly unruly men as these foster-brothers were, who loved the king above all other men’. According to Rowe (2005, 58), ‘although Jón appears to be celebrating the “grace and good luck” (*gætzku ok giftu*) of St Óláfr, he is simultaneously suggesting that King Óláfr take St Óláfr as his model and reward his loyal (if unruly) Icelandic subjects, “some with gifts of money, some with titles”’. From this point of view, it would have paid off to accentuate the foster-brothers’ irascibility: if even such men as these were worthy of St Óláfr’s regard, how much more deserving would be the

<sup>28</sup> *Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 153. I have supplied my own translation here as, according to Zoëga (2004, 368) and Cleasby and Vigfusson (1874, 539), the adjective *skapþungt* means ‘depressed in spirit/mind’. Regal translates it as ‘in a bad mood’ (*CSI*, II 345), thus losing what is to my mind a vital emotional nuance.

present king's presumably much more temperate (if not always compliant) Icelandic subjects? And besides, *Fóstbræðra saga* also shows how a little unruliness can go a long way when utilised by a clever ruler.

According to Úlfar Bragason (2000, 273), the disjointed Flateyjarbók version of *Fóstbræðra saga* does not merely constitute a structural and thematic modification but is also meant to reflect 'the reality that Iceland was now a part of the kingdom of Norway'. The fact that King Óláfr Haraldsson features as the hero of this text has a direct impact upon the portrayals of the sworn brothers (now cast in supporting roles), in particular the passages describing Þorgeirr which, Úlfar notes (2000, 271), 'underscore his arrogance to the point of parody'. In other words, the sworn brothers' unfavourable characteristics are meant to offset the virtues of the saintly king. For this reason, Úlfar (2000, 272–73) also considers it unlikely that such unflattering portrayals would have featured in the first written version of *Fóstbræðra saga*:

When the compiler of [the Flateyjarbók] version stresses the relation between the sworn brothers and King Ólafur, he could easily be giving a less positive picture of Þorgeirr and Þormóður than that of the original. In a story telling of a hero's tragic death and the revenge extracted as a result, as is the case presented in *Möðruvallabók* and *Hauksbók*, the hero himself has to be sympathetic, at least to a certain degree. In Flateyjarbók, on the other hand, the emphasis is not on the tragic death of Þorgeirr but the rewards of the king. His judgement directs the sympathy of the reader, not least because the entire collection presents the king in a positive light. Courtiers are included in the king's own fame and eternal glory.

From this perspective, it seems problematic to claim as Þorgeirr's defining characteristics those derived from the two most *uncharacteristic* instances of his behaviour, the instances that, as we have just seen, were specifically featured by Jón Þórðarson to suit the purposes of his codex.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that, while an irascible Þorgeirr may have been a conveniently good fit for Flateyjarbók's broader agenda, it is unlikely that Jón had entirely invented him. After all, *Grettis saga* too refers to the killing of Torfi Bundle (ch. 27), even if it does not provide any detail of the circumstances that had led to it. Of course, this should not be surprising if, as Jónas Kristjánsson (1972) argued, the episodes in *Grettis saga* featuring the sworn brothers were indeed derived from the (now lost) version of *Fóstbræðra saga* upon which the Flateyjarbók text was also based. However, in that case it becomes difficult to square Flateyjarbók's Þorgeirr, who is too proud to call out to Þormóður for help even though his life is literally hanging on a thread of angelica root (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, ch. 13), with Þorgeirr the scoundrel from *Grettis*

*saga* who shows no scruple in first launching a surprise axe attack on an unarmed Grettir and then, when the latter manages to dodge his blow and throw him to the ground, appealing with annoyance to his hesitant sworn brother to help him out of the tight spot: *Skaltu standa hjá, er fjáandi sjá drepr mik undir sik?* ‘Are you going to stand around watching while this madman flattens me?’ (*Grettis saga* 1936, 162; *CSI*, II 127). As the conflict over the beached whale discussed earlier also testifies, the Þorgeirr of *Grettis saga* is an even more unsavoury character than the Þorgeirr of *Flateyjarbók*. This seems to suggest that, more than any shared inheritance (which in itself may have involved not a common written ancestor, but various, sometimes mutually contradictory, traditions woven around Þorgeirr’s character),<sup>29</sup> these two unflattering portrayals of Þorgeirr share the convergence of the purposes they were meant to serve in the two texts in question, which is to enhance the virtues of their central characters: Grettir and St Óláfr respectively. Indeed, when only the Möðruvallabók and Hauksbók versions of *Fóstbræðra saga* are consulted—in which he plays the principal role himself—a rather different Þorgeirr emerges: one who is also said to suffer from violent temper but does not allow it to rule him nor to prevail at the expense of reason and his idea of justice. It is therefore this Þorgeirr that will take precedence in the ensuing discussion of the character traits he has in common with Grettir. In particular, the following (sub)sections will focus on the traditional narrative convention regarding heroic restraint that both *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Grettis saga* employ in order to highlight their heroes’ endeavours to curb their turbulent natures (1), as well as other important ways in which Þorgeirr and Grettir are shown to rise above the typical *ójafnaðarmenn* ‘unjust men’ that they are sometimes accused of being (2). Finally, the apparent contrast between our two ill-fated heroes and their more fortunate avengers is considered and its implications for characterisation explored (3).

### 1. *Fighting one’s violence of temper: the ‘no-reaction’ formula*

What distinguishes Grettir and Þorgeirr from other brittle-tempered characters in Old Norse literature is the great effort that they both invest in curbing their choleric dispositions. Despite explicit narratorial references to their rashness (and the heroes’ own ready admissions of it), when actually provoked, both Þorgeirr and Grettir are shown to adhere surprisingly

<sup>29</sup> The different treatments of the sworn brothers’ conflict with Þorgils Másson over a beached whale in *Grettis saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga* respectively, discussed earlier, is a case in point.

staunchly to the code of conduct that requires a hero to possess emotional stamina and keep his temper in check, showing no immediate reaction to an offence. In the *Íslendingasögur*, this stance is encapsulated within the traditional narrative pattern I have termed the ‘no-reaction’ formula, according to which a hero pretends not to see, hear, know or take notice of an insult to his honour, [*X*] *lét/lætr sem hann heyrði/viti/vissi/sé . . . ekki/eigi* or [*X*] *gaf sér ekki/eigi/fátt [at]* being the most typical expressions employed.<sup>30</sup> In most cases, however, this initial restraint is only a temporary measure, with revenge sure to follow once reason has been given the chance to take over from raw emotion. Both *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Grettis saga* regularly apply the ‘no-reaction’ formula to their two protagonists, tapping into its associative power within the *Íslendingasögur* corpus (see Foley 1991 on ‘traditional referentiality’) and so metonymically aligning Þorgeirr and Grettir with other saga heroes capable of controlling their tempers. The traditional, connotative semantic layer is thus harnessed to actively undermine the overt narratorial assertions regarding the two heroes’ fiery temperaments, opening a representational ‘gap’ (see Cook 1984–85, 144) between the characterisation strategies of ‘showing’ and ‘telling’. This contrast powerfully dramatises Þorgeirr and Grettir’s internal struggles, lending poignancy to their sustained efforts to resist their violent impulses and hence remain heroes. From this perspective, Þorgeirr and Grettir come across as more complex, and perhaps more admirable, characters than their *Íslendingasögur* heroic counterparts who, being already blessed with temperate dispositions, suffer no such inner conflicts and need only fight external foes.

Moreover, compared to other saga heroes (whether mild- or short-tempered) to whom the ‘no-reaction’ formula is applied,<sup>31</sup> Grettir and Þorgeirr often show a superior capacity for self-restraint, enduring multiple taunts from their enemies and allowing them to incriminate themselves thoroughly before proceeding to kill or otherwise punish them. Thus, for example, when the fifteen-year-old Þorgeirr sets out to avenge his father—to the news of whose slaying, we are told, *brá honum ekki* ‘he showed no reaction’ (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 127; *CSI*, II 333)—he does not simply thrust his spear into his father’s killer, Jǫðurr, but at first patiently and

<sup>30</sup> My usage of the term ‘formula’ in general and ‘no-reaction formula’ in particular is elaborated upon in Ranković 2017, 384 n. 13. An array of examples illustrating the use of the formula in the *Íslendingasögur* is provided 385–86.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, *Víga-Glúms saga* (1956, 24), *Vápnfirðinga saga* (1950, 25), *Droplaugarsona saga* (1950, 145) and other instances discussed in Ranković 2017, 385–86.

repeatedly asks for compensation.<sup>32</sup> Young though he is, Þorgeirr is polite yet firm throughout the tense exchange that ensues, meticulously keeping to the protocol and coolly maintaining the moral high ground over Jǫðurr who, despite his mature years, is the one who behaves irrationally and irresponsibly. Living up to his reputation as *ódæll ok lítill jafnaðarmaðr* ‘an unjust man and difficult to deal with’ (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 126),<sup>33</sup> Jǫðurr is not content to refuse Þorgeirr’s legitimate claim, but must also flaunt his arrogance and try to humiliate his young opponent (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 129–30; *CSI*, II 334):

[Þorgeirr] sagði: ‘... eptir vil ek leita, ef þér vilið nokkuru bæta víg þat, er þú vatt Hávar, fǫður minn.’

Jǫðurr mælti: ‘Eigi veit ek, hvárt þú hefir þat spurt, at ek hefi mǫrg víg vegit ok ek hefi ekki bætt.’

‘Ókunnigt er mér þat,’ segir Þorgeirr; ‘en hvat sem um þat er, þá kóm þetta til mín, at leita eptir þessum vígsbótum, því at mér er nær hǫggvit.’

Jǫðurr segir: ‘Eigi er mér allfjarri skapi at minnask þín í nokkuru, en fyrir því mun ek eigi þetta víg bæta þér, Þorgeirr, at þá þykkir ǫðrum skylt, at ek bæta fleiri víg.’

Þorgeirr svarar: ‘Þér munuð ráða, hvern sóma þér vilið gera, en vér munum ráða þykkju varri.’

[Thorgeir] replied: ‘... I’ve come to find out whether you will compensate me for slaying my father.’

Jod said, ‘I don’t know whether you are aware that I have killed many a man and never once paid compensation.’

‘I did not know that,’ said Thorgeir, ‘but whatever the case, it is my duty to seek compensation from you now since I stand closest to the man you have slain.’

Jod said, ‘I’m not averse to giving you some pittance, but I will not pay compensation for this slaying, Thorgeir, or others will think they can make similar claims on me.’

Thorgeir answered, ‘It’s for you to decide how much you pay, and it’s for me to decide whether I accept or not.’

Even at this point we are told that *ræddusk þeir þessu orð við* ‘they continued to discuss the matter’ (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 130; *CSI*, II 334)

<sup>32</sup> Quite uncharacteristically for the ‘no-reaction’ formula’s context of usage (and for the *Íslendingasögur* in general), the narrator here proceeds to offer a range of elaborate psychosomatic explanations of Þorgeirr’s extraordinary ability to control his emotions.

<sup>33</sup> My translation; as Regal’s translation (‘he was difficult to get along with and had a reputation for being generally unfair’; *CSI*, II 332) is too cumbersome for my purposes, I have opted for a more pointed one, even if, for the sake of readability and elegance, I reversed the order of the original epithets.

before Þorgeirr, presumably realising that this discussion is getting him nowhere, finally drives his spear through his father's killer. Once undertaken, Þorgeirr's revenge is executed perfectly, with Jǫðurr falling backwards *í fang þeim fylgðarmönnum sínum* 'into the arms of his servants' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 130; *CSI*, II 334), which, according to Else Mundal, is a sure sign in the sagas that the slain man will remain unavenged.<sup>34</sup> No wonder, then, that later, while recounting the event to his mother, Þorgeirr makes special mention of this seemingly minor detail (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 132). He is effectively communicating to her (and the informed audience) that the revenge he has taken on their enemy is complete, with no repercussions or counter-action likely to follow. With Jǫðurr's death justice is served, but his falling backwards ensures that poetic justice is served too: there will be no revenge taken nor compensation paid for the man who has so pointedly denied redress to the kin of the many whom he himself has slain.

Similarly, during the momentous journey to Flói (and ultimately to Norway), in a scene reminiscent of the pivotal moment in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* (1950, ch. 5), Þorgeirr *lætr . . . sem hann viti eigi* 'pretends not to notice' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 154) that his beautiful russet horse that went missing the previous night is now being ridden by a local farmer, a certain Bjarni.<sup>35</sup> Unlike Freyfaxi's enraged master, Þorgeirr is calm and collected when he approaches the perpetrator, asking a series of questions about the provenance of the animal aimed at making Bjarni face up to the

<sup>34</sup> Mundal 2011. There are two other occasions in *Fóstbræðra saga* (at least in *Möðruvallabók*) on which troublemakers slain by Þorgeirr fall backwards. One of them involves the already mentioned Butraldi who *fellr . . . á bak apr* 'fell back down the slope' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 146; *CSI*, II 342) when he is cut down by Þorgeirr, sliding down a snowy hill. (This is reminiscent of Skarpheðinn's famous killing of Práinn Sigfússon on ice; see *Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, ch. 92.) The other incident involves Þórir of Hrófá, the Icelander whose killing was ordered by King Óláfr. Having been refused compensation on the king's behalf, Þorgeirr drives his spear into the chest of the culprit, who *fell . . . inn í dyrrnar ok dauðr* 'fell backwards into the house, dead' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 185; *CSI*, II 359). An example where, by contrast, a hero falls forwards and *is* avenged, is the slaying of Grettir's elder brother Atli who, after being speared through by Þorbjörn Oxenmight, *fell . . . fram á þreskoldinn* 'fell forward onto the threshold' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 146; *CSI*, II 119) and is indeed later avenged by Grettir. For more examples of this narrative pattern in the *Íslendingasögur*, see Mundal 2011.

<sup>35</sup> My translation; as this is one of the prime examples of the formula expressions cited above, I preferred a more literal translation of Regal's 'he showed no reaction' (*CSI*, II 346).

illegitimacy of his action. After it becomes apparent that the latter is fully aware of yet entirely unperturbed by it, Þorgeirr still repeatedly urges him to dismount and return the horse to its rightful owner. In the end, it is only Bjarni's persistent, stubborn refusals (peppered with some dry humour), that prompt Þorgeirr to violence.

The encounter with Gautr Sleituson (the grudge-bearing relative of Þorgils Másson), mentioned earlier, is another instance of the 'no-reaction' formula, Þorgeirr proving himself to be much better than his opponent at reining in his anger. When the hero learns that while he has been out gathering firewood, Gautr has decided to burn his shield and spear in order to cook his meal, we are told that *nú fann ekki á Þorgeiri, at honum mistlkaði sjá tiltekja Gauts* 'there was no indication from Thorgeir that he was upset by what Gaut had done' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 199; *CSI*, II 364). In fact, in the Hauksbók version of the saga, Þorgeirr in addition pretends to take seriously Gautr's deliberately feeble, insolent excuse—that he and his companions have burnt the weapons because they did not fancy eating their food raw—and even goes on to elaborate on the legal necessity of cooking one's food, referring both to the Icelandic laws and his Norwegian liege, King Óláfr, who has strictly forbidden his men to eat their food raw (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 199). Of course, at this point the informed audience is likely to guess that the stronger the hero's restraint is now, the fiercer will his wrath be, once unleashed. And yet Þorgeirr will still not be the first to resort to violence. He initially does no more than give his enemy a taste of his own medicine, burning Gautr's shield and spear-shaft to prepare his own food. Unlike the hero, however, Gautr openly shows his displeasure, accusing Þorgeirr of deliberate provocation, to which the latter responds calmly with a piece of proverbial wisdom, reminding his opponent that it was he, Gautr, who had started it all: *Svá er leikr hverr sem heiman er gørr* 'The run of the game is decided by the first move' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 200; *CSI*, II 364). It is at this point that the infuriated Gautr finally attacks him, grazing his leg in the process, and although Þorgeirr allows himself to be separated from his enemy by 'men of good will', later that night he goes into Gautr's tent and kills him.

Like Þorgeirr, when faced with open provocation Grettir too shows himself capable of unexpected forbearance and is likely to give the perpetrators quite a few chances to desist before making his move. For example, out of respect for his Norwegian host Þorkell, Grettir endures a long, escalating series of affronts from the farmer's arrogant relative Bjørn, trying to make little of them and only once allowing himself the relief of throwing a barbed verse (rather than a barbed spear) at his

enemy.<sup>36</sup> Ignoring their host's public admonitions, refusing to offer Grettir any compensation for his brazen behaviour (or allow Þorkell to pay it on his behalf), even challenging Grettir to single combat, Björn changes his attitude dramatically when he later encounters the hero on neutral ground in Trondheim, with Grettir no longer bound by moral obligation to his host. Unable to hide behind Þorkell's authority any longer nor count on Grettir's restraint, Björn is now more than eager to pay compensation, only to find that his offer has come too late.

Grettir's subsequent conflicts with Oddr the Pauper-poet and Þorbjörn the Traveller also show him in full control of his temper. When Oddr attempts to cheat the hero's elder brother Atli in a horse-fight, we are told that *eigi lét Grettir sem hann sæi þat* 'Grettir showed no sign that he noticed this' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 99; *CSI*, II 96). He acts only when, not content with prodding Atli's horse, Oddr uses his goading staff to jab at Grettir instead, causing a swelling on his shoulder-blade. However, even in the heat of the moment, Grettir does not lose his sense of proportion, and so Oddr ends up with a few broken ribs, rather than dead. Þorbjörn the Traveller, on the other hand, is not so lucky; then again, his offence, aimed at tarnishing Grettir's honour, is much graver than any bruise inflicted in a sporting brawl. As Þorbjörn arrives at the camp at Gásir to board the ship bound for Norway, the crew and fellow passengers ask him for some news, to which he replies that he has none to offer except that Grettir's old, ailing father Ásmundr is likely to have died by now, adding: *Lítit lagðisk nú fyrir kappann, því at hann kafnaði í stofureyk sem hundr, en eigi var skaði at honum, því at hann gerðisk nú gamalærr* 'That warrior did not meet a great end. He suffocated in the smoke of his own fireplace like a dog. But it was no loss, he'd gone senile anyway' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 126; *CSI*, II 109). Undeterred by general disapproval of his vicious words and insolent manner, Þorbjörn also shrugs off concerns regarding Grettir's reaction, going on to ridicule the hero himself, making snide comments about his performance during a skirmish with the people of Mélar that had followed the horse-fight incident. All this while Grettir is present at the camp too, and although, we are told, he had clearly heard everything that was being said, he *gafsér ekki at* 'took no notice' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 126),<sup>37</sup> patiently waiting for Þorbjörn to finish his story first. It is only

<sup>36</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this episode, see Ranković 2017, 387–88.

<sup>37</sup> My translation; as with instances from *Föstbræðra saga* (e.g., see note 35), I have opted here for a more literal translation, to highlight the use of the 'no-reaction' formula, which disappears in Scudder's otherwise more elegant translation (*CSI*, II 109).

then that Grettir publicly rebukes his slanderer, issuing repeated warnings (in prose and verse), each of which is met with scorn by the unrepentant Þorbjörn. Even as Grettir springs into action, he first bids his opponent defend himself—an act of chivalry that further throws into relief Þorbjörn's unchivalrous behaviour.<sup>38</sup>

These are just some of the more conspicuous, but by no means isolated, instances of the self-control that the two heroes are commonly said to be lacking. These episodes reveal that Þorgeirr and Grettir can not only subdue themselves when circumstances require it, but persist in doing so for quite some time (and with panache too) when others would have already reacted. The sole two instances in which Grettir is shown to lose his temper—in Trondheim cathedral (ch. 39) and while hacking at the enchanted log (ch. 79)—are also the instances that directly lead to his death. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Ranković 2017, 394–408), both these episodes lack the same vital ingredient for the 'no-reaction' formula to play out as expected: an adequate adversary. Indeed, a careful examination of the instances in which the hero's temper is provoked reveals that, whenever confronted with a social equal, Grettir invariably exercises some form of self-restraint. In the two divergent episodes, however, the hero's temper is challenged by social inferiors: an insolent boy (or a malevolent spirit) and his lazy thrall Þorbjörn Noise, with evil and black magic said to play a crucial role in both cases. Viewed from this perspective, Grettir's fatal mistake in these two instances is reflected not so much in his inability to control his temper as in his failure to recognise that heroic restraint was necessary in the first place, his ability to read these situations correctly marred deliberately by evil agents.

Similarly, it could be argued that the explanation for Þorgeirr's lack of restraint in those two damning episodes from *Flateyjarbók* (discussed above) is that the low social status of his two victims fails to trigger the code of conduct that underpins the 'no-reaction' formula. Even if so, however, modern egalitarian sensibilities would still be offended by the proposition that self-control should only be practised towards social equals (and 'betters'). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the élitism that seems to underlie the actions of Grettir and Þorgeirr is not of their own making. Social discrimination (whether based on class, race, gender, age or disability) is deeply ingrained in the historical and cultural milieu that gave rise to these characters. Numerous examples from the sagas testify to this: from Gísli Súrsson's unabashed use of his slave as

<sup>38</sup> I discuss this scene in greater detail in Ranković 2014, 50.

decoy and his impersonation of the mentally impaired Helgi, to Hallgerðr and Bergþóra's treatment of their thralls as expendable pawns in their feud in *Njáls saga*, the lives of all these men tragi-comically reduced to the same paltry sack of coins toing and froing between their next-to-indifferent masters, Gunnarr and Njáll. As always, of course, there are notable counter-examples too, such as Hrútr's famously magnanimous gesture in giving a ring, by way of compensation, to a boy whom his brother Hǫskuldr has struck for acting out the humiliating dispute between Hrútr and his former father-in-law, Mǫrðr Fiddle (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, ch. 8). However, if granting children (slaves and women too) compensation for being slapped, or even just sparing them from violence, was an everyday occurrence, the incident of Hrútr and the boy would hardly have been given such special attention in *Njáls saga*, and neither would a certain Qlvir from *Grettis saga* (1936, ch. 3) earn the approving yet chilling sobriquet of 'Child-sparer'. It is their rarity that makes these narrative instances saga-worthy.

Intriguing though it is, the problem of élitism and its relation to heroic restraint merits a separate investigation. The goal of the present discussion is to illustrate the ample effort that Grettir and Þorgeirr regularly invest in what, given their psychological make-up, is the most difficult feat for them to achieve: controlling their tempers.

## 2. Þorgeirr and Grettir: beyond the typical ójafnaðarmenn

Their commitment to self-restraint, to choosing what is right over what comes naturally, is the crucial characteristic that separates Þorgeirr and Grettir from their enemies who, like our two heroes, are said to be prone to rage and of whom unflattering epithets such as *óðæll* / *ekki ðæll* 'difficult to deal with' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, chs 1, 2, 3, 8, 13; *Grettis saga* 1936, chs 14, 29, 30, 52, 70) *óvinsæll* / *eigi/ekki vinsælir* 'unpopular' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, chs 2, 12, 13; *Grettis saga* 1936, chs 21, 72, 73), *ójafnaðarmenn* / *ekki . . . jafnaðarmenn* / *lítill jafnaðarmaðr* 'unjust men/man' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, chs 2, 3, 16; *Grettis saga* 1936, chs 25, 28, 51), *nasbráðr* 'hot-headed' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, chs 6, 12), *lítillir skapdeildarmenn* 'short-tempered men' (*Grettis saga* 1936, chs 14, 19) are also used.

In addition to the instances discussed here of self-control practised according to the 'no-reaction' formula, Þorgeirr and Grettir are also set apart from the average saga hothead by their self-awareness, the fact that they treat their tempestuousness not as their entitlement as great men, but as a shortcoming to be overcome. Even as they come to blows with people who have provoked them and are in turn restrained by 'men of good will',

both Þorgeirr and Grettir are eager to reassure those present (themselves included) that they can be trusted to keep their tempers in check. Thus, as he is being separated from the enraged Gautr Sleitusson (see the discussion above), Þorgeirr calmly remarks: *Eigi þurfi þér at halda mér, því at ek mun mik nú til engis ófriðar líkligan gera* ‘You don’t need to hold me back. I have no intention of making a fight out of this’ (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 200; *CSI*, II 365). Of course, this does not mean that Þorgeirr is ready to let Gautr’s offences slide (and, as soon transpires, he does not), but neither is he disingenuous in complying with the mediators’ endeavour to stop the fight. Rather, he is quick to demonstrate that he is well aware of the correct protocol in the delicate business of vengeance, where each action has its right time, as famously attested by the adage that Grettir utters under similar circumstances: *Grettir kvað ekki þurfa at halda á sér sem ólmum hundi ok mælti þetta: ‘Þráll einn þegar hefðisk en argr aldri’* ‘Grettir said there was no need to hold him like a mad dog; “Only a slave takes vengeance at once, and a coward never”’ (*Grettis saga* 1936, 44; *CSI*, II 68). Underpinning Grettir’s retort is an explicit awareness of the socially desirable behavioural pattern that gave rise to the ‘no-reaction’ formula, a metatextual engagement with it: the proper time for a hero to take revenge is after an initial restraint; that is, later than a slave who lacks the nobility and character to resist the instant gratification of the impulse, but certainly sooner than a coward who lacks the courage to take action at all.

Curiously, the actual words the two heroes utter in these scenes do not simply convey the same sentiment but to an extent also mirror each other literally. Couched in proverbial wisdom and adorned with an arresting simile, Grettir’s statement is grander and more memorable than Þorgeirr’s, yet the first parts of their responses verbally echo one another, the only difference being that Þorgeirr’s is rendered as direct and Grettir’s as reported speech. Whether this is a coincidental contextual convergence or a direct or indirect borrowing, one cannot be certain; what is certain, however, is that this way of employing self-awareness to manage one’s own as well as other people’s emotions is peculiar to Þorgeirr and Grettir. As far as I have been able to determine, nowhere else in the *Íslendingasögur* corpus is there a scene in which a restrained hero reassures the interveners that there is no need to hold him back, that he is in full possession of his faculties.

On other occasions, Þorgeirr and Grettir even use their self-knowledge as a diplomatic tool of sorts, taking charge of a potentially volatile situation. Thus, for example, instantly recognising impending trouble on the arrival of a new ship in his harbour, Þorgeirr attempts to preempt conflict (and for

a while succeeds) by addressing the skippers, Þorgeirr Troll and Þórarinn the Overbearing (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 202; *CSI*, II 366, my emphasis):

Þorgeirr mælti: . . . ‘Þat er mælt af mörgum mönnum, at vér sém hváirtveggju nokkurir ójafnaðarmenn ok ekki óagjarnir við aðra. Nú vil ek þess biðja, at vér gerim eigi vára hreysti ok harðfengi at fólsku ok ófriði; sýnisk mér þat ráð, at vér setim grið meðal vár til varúðar.’

Thorgeir said: . . . ‘Many people say that *both parties here are trouble-makers and not slow to take the offensive*. So I’m going to ask you that our valour and our courage turn not to foolishness and fighting, and that we make a peace pact between us to that end.’

Grettir behaves similarly while trying to find a way to evade a pledge of companionship with the drunken *beseðkir* who have attacked the farm of his absent host, Þorfinnr (*Grettis saga* 1936, 66; *CSI*, II 79, my emphasis):

Grettir kvað þat eigi skyldu, ‘því at þat er satt, sem mælt er, at ǫl er annarr maðr, ok skal eigi bráðabug at þessu gera, framar en áðr hefi ek sagt; eru vér litlir skapdeildarmenn hváirtveggju.’

Grettir declined, saying, ‘There’s truth in the old saying that “Ale makes another man.” Let’s not rush into doing any more than I have already said. *We are all rather impetuous characters.*’

Thus, paradoxically, by openly acknowledging their problem with self-restraint, both heroes show that they can rise above this flaw and not only master their own emotions but also manipulate other people’s tempers when the circumstances necessitate it.

The conscious effort that Þorgeirr and Grettir invest in curbing their impulsiveness is further buttressed by the social scruples which, for all their imperfections, the two heroes still feel firmly bound by. Thus, for example, despite the provocations they encounter at the various places they stay, both Þorgeirr and Grettir uphold their duties as guests admirably, treating their hosts with the utmost respect and invariably managing to refrain from desecrating their homes with violence. This is so regardless of whether the hosts in question are as noble-minded and deserving as the farmers Þorkell and Þorfinnr who accommodate Grettir in Norway (see above) or Þorgeirr’s universally liked cousin, the Reykjahólar chieftain Þorgils Arason, who takes the outlawed Grettir in when no one else will (*Grettis saga* 1936, chs 18–21; also ch. 50), or whether they are as cowardly and miserly as Þorkell of Gervidal who only grudgingly gives shelter to Þorgeirr while hosting another difficult man, the already mentioned Butraldi (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, ch. 6). Þorgeirr’s keen sense of obligation to the unwritten, traditional rules of hospitality is particularly evident in the earlier discussed episode with Sigrfljóð (ch. 3) when, even as Þormóðr

voices his misgivings as to the soundness of the good widow's advice, Þorgeirr follows it unquestioningly, ready to risk both of their lives, as well as incur the wrath of the powerful local chieftain, in order to repay their hostess's kindness by killing the men who had long been harassing her and the community at large.

One does not expect to encounter such a heightened sense of obligation towards others in men marked out as unjust, yet more than anything, what separates Þorgeirr and Grettir from the *ójafnaðarmaðr* type (and from their enemies in particular) is their ability to bestow and inspire loyalty, friendship and admiration in people widely esteemed in their communities, such as the cunning and powerful Snorri goði, whose favour Grettir secures when he spares this wise chieftain's foolish son (*Grettis saga* 1936, ch. 68), or indeed King Óláfr whose high regard for Þorgeirr is reflected not only in the honour and riches he bestows upon the hero while he is in his service and alive, but in zealously spurring on, aiding and generously rewarding any efforts to avenge the slaying of his valiant follower.<sup>39</sup> And while both heroes may find it difficult to form close personal relationships, those attachments that they do manage to establish tend to be firm and lasting. Thus Þorgils Arason who, we are told, *hafði af [Þorgeiri] gott yfirlæti* 'favoured [Þorgeirr] greatly' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 126, also 147; *CSI*, II 332, also 343), spares no expense nor effort in continuously proffering protection to his unruly cousin, arguing his legal cases, paying compensation for his slayings, providing him with shelter and ensuring his safety, while Þorfinnr Kárason, Bersi Skáld-Torfuson and Þorsteinn Galleon show peerless loyalty and devotion to Grettir during his sojourns in Norway, not least by refusing to surrender the hero to the wrathful Earl Sveinn, thus openly defying their lord and readily risking their own lives to safeguard Grettir's (*Grettis saga* 1936, ch. 24). Similarly, so fierce is the affection that young Illugi feels for his elder brother that he chooses death sooner than promise Grettir's killers that he would refrain from avenging him. Even as Þorgeirr's careless remark leads Þormóðr to break off their partnership, their emotional bond remains strong, as is evident from the verses Þormóðr composes to immortalise his sworn brother, as well as the extraordinary lengths he goes to in order to exact revenge for his slaying. No other *ójafnaðarmenn* in the two sagas are shown to be capable of inspiring this kind of selfless love and loyalty.

<sup>39</sup> Note that, upon his triumphant return from Greenland, poor Þormóðr at first receives a cool welcome from the king who has already richly rewarded another Iclander claiming to have avenged Þorgeirr (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, ch. 24).

### 3. Þorgeirr and Grettir: the luckless bringers of luck

While inspiring such devotion must surely imply virtue in Þorgeirr and Grettir, it is paradoxically in relation to their sworn / half-brothers that, some commentators argue, the two sagas cast shadows over their heroes' characters. In particular, the good fortune that is said to favour their avengers, Þormóðr Bersason and Þorsteinn Galleon, is invoked against Þorgeirr and Grettir's own notorious *ógæfa* and is taken as a sign of the two sagas' moral condemnation of their heroes. For example, Meulengracht Sørensen (1993, 410–13; echoed by Harris 2015, 75) draws a sharp line between 'Þormóðr's purposeful life and noble death' at the side of a royal martyr and Þorgeirr's apparent 'moral decline', especially as reflected in his deficiency as a Christian who 'misuses [his] God-given talents' and 'serves demonic powers after his death' which, Meulengracht Sørensen concludes, 'is the saga-author's final judgement of his conduct in life'.

Andrew Hamer (2008, 34) similarly juxtaposes Þorsteinn Galleon's good fortune which he sees as directly stemming from his faith in God with Grettir's heathenish self-reliance, asserting in particular that the aborted ordeal in the Trondheim cathedral 'proves Grettir a sinner, and his festered thigh and belly are evidence that still, at the moment of death, he remains *immundus/óhrein*' (i.e. 'unclean'). And while Grettir is not directly accused of serving demonic powers after his death, there is the suggestion of a possible 'demonic contamination' through his contact with the undead he had laid low (see Ármann Jakobsson 2009), with Hamer (2008, 36) further proposing that, through decapitation, Grettir's body receives the same treatment as the hero himself has earlier administered to the *draugar* Kárr the Old and Glámr. As with Meulengracht Sørensen's judgement on Þorgeirr, Hamer reads the manner of Grettir's death as opposed to the blessed, 'purposeful' life of his half-brother as representing the saga's condemnation of its protagonist.<sup>40</sup>

The crisp parabolic clarity of the contrasts drawn between these brothers of good and bad fortune is, however, as deceptive as it is alluring, and the complexity of both sagas patently resists their neatness. For instance, if Þorgeirr's supposed moral downfall and servitude to demonic powers are indeed to be understood as the 'final judgement' on

<sup>40</sup> According to Hamer (2008, especially 24–35), even as adulterers and cheats at a holy ordeal, Þorsteinn and his lover, Lady Spes, still place their hope in God during the proceedings, deserving their luck by subsequently legalising their illicit relationship through marriage, living chaste Christian lives and finally undertaking a pilgrimage to Rome to seek absolution for the sins of their youth.

his character, how are we to account for the fact that St Óláfr, the holiest of Scandinavian kings, advocates vengeance for this contemptible soul with such relentless fervour, even miraculously aiding Þormóðr's efforts to execute it? And equally, if the 'final judgement' on Grettir is that he is deemed a sinner unworthy of God's grace, why does the saga make a point of noting that, despite the precariousness of his position as an outlaw, Grettir still clings to his faith, doing his best to observe fasts even in the wilderness (*Grettis saga* 1936, ch. 61), while towards the end, in a brief and measured summary of the hero's life, we are told that he *helt ávallt vel trú sína, ór því sem ráða var* 'kept his faith well, as far as he had the chance' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 262 n. 1; *CSI*, II 177)? If moral condemnation of the hero was indeed the goal, why invest this effort in reassuring the reader of the soundness of Grettir's faith, at the same time highlighting the distinctly unchristian agenda of his enemies?<sup>41</sup> Indeed, it is the two heroes' foes that are tainted by association with demonic powers, with Þorbjörn Hook relying on his foster-mother's nefarious skills to bring about Grettir's death and the sister of Þorgeirr's Greenlandic killer, Þorgrímr Troll, employing her dark arts to locate and eliminate Þormóðr. Even if there were more solid textual evidence for Grettir's demonic contamination, one would at least expect that someone worthier and more pious than the fallen hero would have been chosen to lay his troubled soul to rest, rather than the reprehensible Þorbjörn Hook. And if Grettir's decapitation is indeed meant to echo his own treatment of *draugar*, then why did his slayers not bury his body as is customary in such cases, by placing his severed head against his buttocks, instead of taking it with them as a trophy and a proof of slaying entitling them to a hefty reward, while also using it to taunt the hero's bereaved mother?

Equally, one wonders what exactly are the grounds for associating the (alleged) ghostly appearance of Þorgeirr and his slain men with demonic powers. In the sagas we encounter a range of posthumous apparitions—from the already mentioned malicious *draugar* who terrorise local farmers to the contented Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi, boisterously reciting heroic verses out of his open mound while gazing at the brightly shining moon (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, ch. 78). What, then, marks out the spectres of Þorgeirr and his men as demonic: the fact that they turn out to be the harbingers of death, their unnerving appearance, covered in blood, or the act of haunting in itself? Observed closely, none of these factors is particularly helpful in

<sup>41</sup> This matter is discussed in more detail in Ranković 2017, 402–04.

determining the nature of the force behind Þorgeirr's ghostly appearance. For instance, if portending death were in itself demonic, then what are we to make of all those venerable biblical prophets of doom claiming to be merely conveying God's own bad news? Besides, the demise of the ill-fated foster-brothers, Eyjólfur and Þorgeirr Boundless, is prophesied long before this moment in the saga (1943, ch. 15), so that Þorgeirr's apparition is unlikely to have meant more than a warning, or simply a grim confirmation of the inevitable that was about to happen. As to the act of haunting itself and the eerie look of Þorgeirr's blood-covered party, rather than being demonic, one wonders whether, as in *Hamlet*, this was an indication of 'unfinished business', a call for a wrong to be righted so that the restless spirits can finally find peace and the perturbed cosmic balance can reestablish itself.

Apart from the issues pertaining to revenge, the appearance of the shades of Þorgeirr and his followers might also be a consequence of the irregular interment of their bodies. Through no fault of their own, these brave warriors are buried right where they have fallen, in the unconsecrated ground of the Slétta harbour, without the proper church rites. In this context, it does not seem like a coincidence that the people who witness the haunting are none other than the brothers Kálfr and Steinólfr, the lucky survivors of the carnage in which all other members of Þorgeirr's crew have perished.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps what these two brothers *geta . . . at líta* 'thought they saw', what *þeir þóttusk kenna* 'appeared to them' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 217; *CSI*, II 371), was a manifestation of the guilt they may have felt as, fettered and powerless, they first watched their shipmates and their brave leader being slaughtered, then helped the local farmers bury their earthly remains—improperly at that.<sup>43</sup> The saga offers an apology for this irregularity: *þeir nenntu eigi til kirkju at færa líkin; því at í þenna tíma váru engar kirkju í nánd hqfninni* 'It would have been too great an effort for them to bring the bodies to a church because in those days there was no church anywhere near the harbour' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 212; *CSI*,

<sup>42</sup> All, that is, except for the quick-footed Helgi Selseista who, having witnessed the treachery of Þórarinn the Overbearing and Þorgrímr Troll, runs off to the Althing to fetch help (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, ch. 16).

<sup>43</sup> These suggestive qualifiers, subtly employed so as to avoid taxing the readers' credulity by allowing for the possibility that Þorgeirr's apparition may have been just a trick of the mind, are quoted from the *Íslensk fornrit* edition's base text, *Möðruvallabók*. In accordance with its usual tendencies, Hauksbók here favours a simpler, starkly affirmative expression: *þeir . . . sá / þeir kenndu* 'they saw' / 'they recognised' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 217; my translation).

II 369). Nevertheless, it is questionable whether the two brothers—worthy men that they are said to be—would consider themselves absolved by this pragmatic explanation. Even though the sighting of their fallen comrades does not help Kálfr and Steinólfr prevent the quarrelling foster-brothers (Eyjólfur and Þorgeirr Boundless) from killing one another, the occasion still presents them with an opportunity to do things properly this time, giving comfort to the mortally wounded duo, then taking their bodies to the church to be buried with dignity and in accordance with Christian laws. If this act could be constituted as a redemption of sorts, then a more complex light is cast on Þorgeirr's ghostly party, which would have instigated it.

Engaging the questions raised above with the seriousness and depth they deserve would far exceed the scope of this study; for now, it will suffice that they should raise some doubt concerning the two sagas' supposedly negative final appraisals of Grettir and Þorgeirr. I have tried to show that both texts, far from branding their protagonists *óhreinn* 'unclean', offer grounds for at least perceiving them as Hermann Pálsson and Denton Fox (1974, xiii) viewed Grettir: as an errant human being who at the point of death 'attained a surprisingly high stature' as his 'trials seem to have purified him'. More fundamentally, however, in the absence of 'final judgements', what strikes me as particularly significant about the discussed contrast between the two heroes and their avengers is the largely unnoted causal connection at the heart of it, the fact that a large portion of that good luck that Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld and Þorsteinn Galleon end up enjoying comes as a direct consequence of their association with their two luckless sworn /half-brothers and their untimely demise. It takes nothing less than Þorgeirr's death for Þormóður finally to find the purpose for his own, abandoning his hitherto lazy, wasteful existence to become a follower of King Óláfr and pursue revenge for his sworn brother. Whereas Þorgeirr needed no further introduction to King Óláfr than his own name (*Hvárt ertu Þorgeirr Hávarsson?* 'Are you Thorgeir Havarson?'; *Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 159; *CSI*, II 348), Þormóður is identified by the king when he is first presented at court *in relation* to Þorgeirr: *Hvárt ertu kallaðr Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld ok ert svarabróðir Þorgeirs Hávarssonar?* 'Are you the man they call Kolbrun's Poet, sworn brother of Thorgeir Havarson?' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 213; *CSI*, II 369). The king makes no secret of the fact that, for him, Þormóður's main value lies precisely in being Þorgeirr's sworn brother and therefore his potential avenger: *Njóta skaltu hans frá oss, ok vel ertu hér kominn; ok víst máttu vita þat, at*

*ek tel mér misboðit í vígi Þorgeirs, hirðmanns míns, ok þókk kynna ek þess, at hans yrði hefnt* ‘Then you shall enjoy our favour for his sake and are welcome here. And you shall know that I account myself deeply offended at the slaying of my follower, Thorgeir, and would be grateful to have him avenged’ (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 213; *CSI*, II 369). At this point Þormóðr’s defining quality, his skill in poetry, comes second: only after the connection with Þorgeirr is established and the expectation with regard to his revenge voiced does the king listen to Þormóðr’s verse and express his approval: *Gaman má vera at skáldskap þínum* ‘I think we shall enjoy your poetry’ (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 214; *CSI*, II 370). Even when Þormóðr returns victorious from Greenland, the king initially pays him little attention, having in the meantime already rewarded another Icelander (a certain Grímr) who claims to have avenged Þorgeirr and thus seems to have beaten Þormóðr to it.<sup>44</sup> Only after our poet voices his displeasure at such treatment in verse and gets the king to listen to the daring feats he accomplished in Greenland while avenging his sworn brother (and his own stained honour) does Þormóðr earn his proper place at the court and start being appreciated in his own right.

Similarly, Þorsteinn Galleon, who has otherwise led an unremarkable life in Norway, only rises from obscurity and fulfils his true potential once he undertakes the responsibility of avenging Grettir. It is only after achieving this initial goal that he eventually wins great renown, love and riches in the dazzling capital of Byzantium. In fact, on two occasions *Grettis saga* draws an explicit causal connection between Þorsteinn’s luck and the revenge he has taken for Grettir. On the first, we are told that, upon his return to Norway, Þorsteinn was well received by King Magnús the Good *því at hann var mjök frægr orðinn af því, er hann hafði hefnt Grettis ins sterka* ‘because of the great renown he had earned for avenging Grettir the Strong’ (*Grettis saga* 1936, 286; *CSI*, II 189). The second instance occurs in the final passage of the saga, imputed to Sturla Þórðarson, which asserts that Grettir is distinguished not only as the wisest and strongest of outlaws, but that because, unlike any other Icelander, he was avenged in Constantinople, *ok þat með, hverr giptumaðr Þorsteinn drómundr varð á sínum efstum dögum, sá inn sami, er hans hefndi* ‘and what is more, the man who avenged him, Thorstein Dromund, became

<sup>44</sup> Þormóðr quickly discovers that this Grímr is a scoundrel and a murderer, but the fact that King Óláfr allows himself to be so easily deceived by this man (and does not even seem to have bothered to check either his claim or his background before lavishing honour and gifts on him) testifies to how eager he must have been to have Þorgeirr avenged.

so exceptionally favoured by fortune in the last years of his life' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 290; *CSI*, II 191). In other words, the very luck bestowed on Þorsteinn for avenging his half-brother is here interpreted as evidence of Grettir's own worth.

If, as the two sagas suggest, Þormóðr and Þorsteinn are rewarded with good fortune *because* they have taken revenge for their unfortunate brothers, if the relationship between the two is therefore causal rather than contrastive, then the notion that God would favour the avengers and approve of the vengeance, but condemn the avenged, becomes difficult to fathom. If despite all their failings God does not judge Þorgeirr and Grettir harshly in the end, why would the saga authors do so?

### **Þorgeirr and Grettir through the glass (of past ages), darkly**

While, for the reasons laid out above, the title of this paper playfully refers to Þorgeirr and Grettir as 'twins', it also acknowledges that they are perceived as such through a particular lens: the sort of twisted mirror that hermeneutics is by nature, its reflective surface further obscured by the patina of past ages whence our two heroes emerged and through which they evolved. And yet, such as this mirror is, when placed in front of it, Þorgeirr and Grettir still cast a powerful light on one another, revealing extraordinary similarities in their epic biographies and character traits, even some of their individual features becoming fully perceptible only through comparison. Mapped out in detail, the parallel reflections of our two heroes can now be superimposed so as to bring their differences into a sharper focus, and I will thus draw the present study to a close by briefly considering some of the most salient ones.

That Grettir is the stronger of the two but that Þorgeirr is the more fearless, we have already learnt from the explicit comments in both sagas, including the famous comparison made by Þorgils Arason (see above). However, what sets the two heroes apart more profoundly is, to my mind, well encapsulated in the celebrated verse by the nineteenth-century Icelandic poet, Matthías Jochumsson (1897, 600): *Þú ert Grettir; þjóðin mín* 'you Grettir, are my nation'. Why should Grettir and not Þorgeirr (or any other saga character, for that matter) merit metaphorical identification with 'my nation', the ultimate praise that any hero (invariably a communal figure) can hope for? In fact, nearly four centuries before the Romantic tide of national awakening had swept through Europe and inspired the creator of the Icelandic anthem, at least one scribe of *Grettis saga*, Þorbjörn Jónsson, had already expressed a similar sentiment towards Grettir, ending his manuscript by referring to the hero as *vár[r] samland[i]* 'our

fellow countryman' (*Grettis saga* 1936, 290 n. 2; *CSI*, II 191).<sup>45</sup> A thorough search of the *Íslendingasögur* online corpus reveals that, again, no other saga champion has had this honour bestowed upon him,<sup>46</sup> which raises the question: what is it that marks Grettir out as a particularly suitable candidate to be a national hero and inspires the kind of emotional attachment that emanates from the quoted verse and seems to persist to this day,<sup>47</sup> thus setting him apart from all other saga heroes—even Þorgeirr (or especially Þorgeirr), with whom, as we have seen, he otherwise shares an inordinate number of both conspicuous and more obscure features?

In a private conversation, Gísli Sigurðsson once suggested to me that, unlike other saga heroes who tend to be tied to their particular localities, Grettir's travails as the longest-surviving outlaw force him to traverse the entire island, making him a uniquely pan-Icelandic saga figure. According to Gísli, even the small island on which Grettir lives out his final days could be construed as a symbolic *mise-en-abîme* of Iceland as a whole, its people as strong (and headstrong), independently-minded and talented as the lonely inhabitant of Drangey—and just as isolated and confined, stripped of sovereignty and plagued by misfortune. While Gísli's

<sup>45</sup> The manuscript in question is the fifteenth-century AM 551 a 4to which, along with AM 556 a 4to, features the earliest surviving version of *Grettis saga*. Despite its dilapidated state, AM 551 a 4to was used as the base text for the *Íslenzk fornrit* edition of the saga as its editor, Guðni Jónsson, considered it *að halda hinn bezta texta* 'to contain the best text' (1936, lxxvi). While two anonymous hands are responsible for the very beginning of this version of *Grettis saga*, Þorbjörn Jónsson wrote the rest of it—the vast majority, amounting to more than four-fifths—including the quoted ending. Little else is known about Þorbjörn except that he was from Steingrímsfjörður (see <https://handrit.is/en/biography/view/ThoJon023>) and had most likely served as a priest at the southern episcopal see of Skálholt where his name is mentioned in relation to the keeping of the monastery's records concerning driftwood (see <https://handrit.is/en/manuscript/view/is/AM04-0261>). Of course, we cannot know whether Þorbjörn copied the reference to Grettir as 'our countryman' from his exemplar or inserted it himself. However, as this epithet does not appear in any other manuscript (even the closely related AM 556 a 4to), the latter seems more plausible. Whether the reference originated with Þorbjörn or not, Guðni Jónsson deemed it a later interpolation, which is why he removed it from the main text and relegated it to a footnote (*Grettis saga* 1936, 290 n. 2).

<sup>46</sup> Available at: <https://www.snerpa.is/net/isl/isl.htm> [accessed September 12, 2019].

<sup>47</sup> For more on Grettir's enduring popularity in Iceland, see Hastrup (1986). The hero continues to inspire modern Icelandic authors (see for example Bolli Gústavsson 1989), and the tourist industry too (see for example Clynes 2002, where Grettir is dubbed the 'medieval Jesse James' and 'your best guide' to Iceland).

observations astutely address the spatial and symbolic dimensions of Grettir's national character, Kirsten Hastrup (1986) in her seminal anthropological survey has thoroughly dealt with the temporal dimension, or rather the timelessness, the enduring relevance of Grettir's character, showing how its complexity and capaciousness has ensured the persistence of the hero's appeal throughout the ages, different facets coming to the fore at different times, well accommodating Icelanders' changing needs and communal self-perceptions. According to Hume (1974, 480), it is precisely this complexity, the contradictions and 'oscillations' within Grettir's character, that account for the hero's strong emotional appeal, compelling the reader to 'respond to him as if he were a real person'. One is reminded of an anecdote related by Torfi Tulinius (2002, 31), about an early twentieth-century Icelandic farmer whose habit it was to have *Grettis saga* read to him once a year, whereupon he would listen to it quietly, without reaction, 'except at two or three moments in the story when he would exclaim: . . . "you would have been better off not doing that, my dear Grettir—then you would still be alive!"'. Indeed, set against his imposing physique, superior martial skills and arrogant, warlike demeanour, Grettir's slips, errors of judgement and human failings lend him poignancy and make him strangely easy to relate to, 'as if he were a real person', as if we, like Torfi's farmer, should shout at him, in frustration, our warnings, admonitions, terms of endearment. Grettir's wittiness entices laughter; his ability to feel shame elicits forgiveness; his constant upward struggle for his better nature to prevail over raw impulse, and his capacity for suffering, arouse sympathy. All that prodigious strength, which, being part of Grettir's very name, is supposed to define him, only gives further weight to his vulnerability, a fragility that, being self-confessed, draws us in, makes us complicit. Whether it is the pain at losing his father, brother and his freedom (consigned to verse), or his despair at his crippling fear of the dark and his loneliness (intimated to his mother), we are often made privy to Grettir's most secret emotions, which elicits an emotional response and imposes upon the reader a duty of care, as if to compensate for his unfathomable misfortune. Of all the aspects of Grettir's character I have mentioned that make him a national hero, it is this emotional embroilment and participation of the reader that make him also an international hero.

As Hume (1974, 479; 480) observes, neither 'the new romance style hero' such as Grettir's half-brother Þorsteinn Galleon nor the older tragic type such as Sigurðr (or Þorgeirr for that matter) 'affects us in the directly painful way that Grettir does'. Of course, in light of the sheer length of

*Grettis saga* and the scope it allows for its protagonist's character to develop, the comparison might seem unfair to other heroes. And yet, even if *Fóstbræðra saga* were to be expanded to match *Grettis saga* in size, it would still be difficult to imagine how things would change for Þorgeirr when presented as his greatest strengths are his apparent imperviousness to pain and suffering, his general opacity, inscrutability, aloofness and, of course, a fearlessness so extreme that it requires a special medical explanation: his heart is bloodless and *harla litit* 'very small' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 210; *CSI*, II 368), *eigi meira en valhnot ok hart sem sigg* 'no bigger than a walnut and as hard as a callus' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 211; my translation of the Hauksbók description).<sup>48</sup> All these characteristics give Þorgeirr an enormous advantage; because of them his enemies cannot read him, but for the same reasons, neither can the reader, creating a distance that makes it hard to identify with him. Þorgeirr thus might inspire fascination and admiration, even awe, but not intimacy or affection. He might be so courageous that *menn þóttusk eigi hans jafningja fundit hafa* 'none thought his equal had ever been found' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 208; *CSI*, II 368), like no other saga hero, he might be called *óarga dýr, ljón, león* 'a lion' (*Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 133, 133 n. 1, 142; *CSI*, II 336, 340), but not *várr samlandi* 'our fellow countryman', not *þjóðin mín* 'my nation'.

To be sure, a national hero must be admired, but not from a distance. He must be superior to be a role-model, to offer something to aspire to, but not to the point at which it becomes impossible to identify with him. And if he is to be the hero of a small people who have lost their independence and felt continuous threat to their identity, he must not be all that perfect either, and he had better have a wicked sense of humour.<sup>49</sup> How else is the gloomy present to be understood if its germs are not already to be found in the past, and the heroes were all high and mighty? How else to fight gloom if not with laughter?

<sup>48</sup> For an engaging discussion of the competing conceptions of the heart featured in *Fóstbræðra saga* (i.e. medieval theory of humours vs. traditional Icelandic view), see Kanerva 2014.

<sup>49</sup> In my PhD thesis (Ranković, 2006), I have made similar observations about Kraljević Marko ('Prince Marko'), his great popularity in the Balkans (especially among the Serbs) under Ottoman rule and the reasons why his roguish peasant charm made him more enduringly appealing than the 'nobler' South-Slavic heroes, including the tragic participants in the 1389 Kosovo battle, and even the celebrated slayer of the Turkish sultan, Miloš Obilić.

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## MENOPAUSAL MARVELS: ELDERLY FEMALE SEXUALITY IN THE *FRÓÐÁRUNDUR* OF *EYRBYGGJA SAGA*

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THIS ARTICLE CONSIDERS the sexual commentary presented in the *Fróðárundur*, or ‘wonders at Fróðá’, in *Eyrbyggja saga*. I focus on the central character of Þórgunna and suggest that, when interpreted symbolically, each of the wonders pertains and contributes to the problematisation of her senescent sexuality. The *Fróðárundur* include a blood rain, a moon apparition, and a series of hauntings by human and non-human spectres. The sheer density and variety of these marvels have led numerous scholars to conclude the impenetrable mystery or randomness of certain components. However, I assert that many, if not all, of the wonders can be interpreted to present a consistent commentary when Þórgunna’s explicit age and implicit infertility are seen as the episode’s thematic epicentres. The *Fróðárundur* seem to rebuke this woman’s efforts to cling on to adult socio-sexual functionality, with especial reference to her post-menopausal state and her unrequited romantic interest in the adolescent Kjartan.

It is first necessary to establish what medieval Icelandic audiences considered to be the boundaries of senescence, and to get a sense of their perceptions of female sexual activity beyond this threshold. To begin with, notwithstanding assumptions of ubiquitously shorter lifespans in the Middle Ages (Miller 1988, 759), both women and men—especially but not exclusively clerical or high-status lay individuals—seem to have been capable of surviving to extreme old age in Iceland and, indeed, in medieval Europe more broadly (Ármann Jakobsson 2008, 269–71). The point at which individuals were deemed to reach senescence was based on a combination of chronological age and declining functionality. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (2008, 233) has asserted that senescence was exclusively determined by use-value. He has even gone so far as to suggest that incapable persons over the age of twelve were considered old, while capable adults, regardless of their chronological age, were not, a claim that has been repeated since (Morcom 2018, 25–26, 48). However, it is surely significant that saga characters seem only to be labelled ‘old’ after reaching certain ages. Unless they are exceptionally advanced or otherwise ‘sagaworthy’, statements of adults’ chronological ages are admittedly rare in the sagas (Miller 1988, 759; Callow 2007, 50). However, when such specifications coincide with insinuations of elderliness, it is only those

above fifty or sixty who are described as senescent, while others in their thirties and forties are exempt, implicitly and occasionally even explicitly, from this classification (*Flóamanna saga* 2009, 315–17; *Íslendinga saga* 1946, 434–35; *Fóstbræðra saga* 1943, 265; *Stjörnu-Odda draumr* 2009, 469). Furthermore, even in the absence of numerical specifications, the impression upon tracing the use of relevant terminology throughout the corpus (*gamall/gomul, elli*, etc.) is that these terms are never applied literally, and seldom even metaphorically, to figures who are young adults in more approximate chronological terms. This includes the quintessentially useless adolescent male *kolbítar*, who tend to be compared to females (*Göngu-Hrólf's saga* 1944, 369, and *Króka-Refs saga* 1959, 123–24), as well as the adult Helgi Ingjaldsson, a literary representation of an individual with severe mental and/or physical disabilities, who is compared to an animal, a troll, but never an old man (*Gísla saga*, 79–83). One exception is found in *Hálfðanar saga Brönufostra*, where an apparently feeble adolescent is sarcastically asked if he is *gamall maðr* ‘an old man’ (1944, 334). However, Hálfðan’s immediate rebuttal, stating that he is actually sixteen years old, confirms that elderliness is a primarily chronological classification, from which his age is enough to exclude him. Owing to his chronological youth, his incapacity cannot literally make him old. Additionally, as demonstrated in phrases like *gamall ok þó hraustr* ‘old and yet strong’ (*Flóamanna saga* 2009, 317) and *gamall ok þó inn vaskasti* ‘old and yet the most valiant’ (*Ljósvetninga saga* 1940, 77), it is clear that enduring capacity was not sufficient to prevent chronologically aged individuals from being considered old either. Nonetheless, such examples do corroborate Jón Viðar’s implication that oldness was strongly associated with physical and/or mental deterioration. It therefore seems plausible that, once individuals crossed a chronological threshold of senescence around the age of fifty, they might have been labelled ‘old’ earlier or later depending on the extent of this decline.

Throughout medieval Europe, one sphere of expected senescent decline was that of sexuality: the elderly were supposed to have reduced sexual appetites and abilities, and were encouraged to curtail their erotic activities accordingly (Youngs 2006, 166–84). Icelandic expressions of such notions can be found throughout the saga corpus, including in episodes featuring elderly male characters (*Egils saga*, 294; *Hrólf's saga Gautrekssonar* 1944, 49; *Sturlu saga* 1946, 78–79).<sup>1</sup> However, scholars suggest that sexual

<sup>1</sup> See also Ármann Jakobsson (2005, 304) and William Ian Miller (1988, 760). For a more detailed analysis of these and other episodes, which in fact demonstrates that the love lives, and even sex lives, of old men are surprisingly often defended in the sagas, see Roby (2019, 174–79).

capacity was more significant to the identification of, and norms surrounding, senescence for medieval women than men (Youngs 2006, 166–67; Shahar 1997, 151). Not only were women’s roles more comprehensively defined by reproduction, but also their transition to infertility was more conclusively demarcated by menopause, usually occurring in their late forties or fifties (Shahar 1997, 18; Amundsen and Diers 1973, 610). Menopause seems to have been no less significant in medieval Iceland, where Gillian Overing asserts that it was an essential factor in defining female senescence (1999, 211).

The sagas corroborate the profound impact of menopause on women’s status, particularly on their potential as sexual or marital partners. Philadelphia Ricketts finds that not one widow in the *samtíðarsögur* remarries beyond childbearing age (2010, 159). In the *Íslendingasögur*, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir is an instructive example of the same pattern. As Jochens notes, for as long as she is fertile, Guðrún’s reaction to being widowed is to remarry (1995a, 62). However, once she is widowed in peri- or post-menopausal senescence, her response changes. Despite remaining a formidable woman, she adopts a non-sexual life as an anchoress (*Laxdæla saga* 1934, 204–23).<sup>2</sup> That this issue of marriageability pertains to the connected notions of chronological senescence and infertility is substantiated in *Stjörnu-Odda draumr*. This text is conspicuously swift and specific in its justification of the widowed Hildigunnr’s eligibility as a bride for Hjörvarðr jarl: *Hon var þá enn ekki meir en fertug kona at aldri . . . ok eru samfarar þeir . . . eigi langar, áðr en þau áttu dóttur* ‘She was not yet then more than a forty-year-old woman in age . . . and they were not together long before they had a daughter’ (2009, 469–70). This *enn ekki meir* construction suggests precisely which assumption the saga author endeavours to pre-empt. Since she is a widow with a mature daughter, audiences might have presumed Hildigunnr to be older than forty and, hence, an apparently dubious choice of wife. That this concern was connected to the questionable fertility of a woman over forty is implied in the second part of this excerpt, which affirms her pre-menopausal status.

The sagas often express similar notions—that chronologically aged and/or post-menopausal women are inappropriate romantic partners—in far harsher terms. There are many memorable depictions of elderly females

<sup>2</sup> Jochens states that Guðrún’s last marriage and reproductive act occur around the age of forty-eight, with her fourth and final widowhood therefore occurring in her sixties (1995a, 200, n. 151). However, the chronology outlined in Einar Ól. Sveinsson’s edition indicates that she is around thirty-four and fifty-two at these junctures (*Laxdæla saga* 1934, lix). In either case, Guðrún must have been interpreted as pre-menopausal in the first instance and was likely interpreted to be peri- or post-menopausal in the second.

seeking sexual pleasure, often with younger men and to disastrous effect (Jochens 1995b, 387; 1991, 5, 24 n. 11). The high frequency of these portrayals is significant, as it represents an inversion of the apparent medieval European preference for the literary trope of the *senex amans* ‘lustful old man’ over its female counterpart, the *anus amans* ‘lustful old woman’ (Shahar 1997, 77–81; Burrow 1986, 156). In the sagas, the latter is far more common than the former (Roby 2019, 244). Examples appear in numerous naturalistic episodes (*Hallfreðar saga* 1939, 142; *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* 1944, 121–25). However, the most common, and unflattering, iterations of the *anus amans* are found in supernatural depictions. These include many witches and other troll-women who embody a nexus of mutually denigrating traits, often incorporating senescence, physical loathsomeness, hyperactive sexuality and/or moral corruption (*Egils saga einhenda* 1944, 162–78; *Ketils saga hængs* 1943, 259–60; *Vatnsdæla saga* 1939, 69–70). Perhaps the most famous supernatural *anus amans* is Gunnhildr konungamóðir, who casts a malevolent and sexually significant spell over Hrútr, her young lover, apparently out of jealousy regarding his impending marriage in Iceland (*Njáls saga*, 20–24). For the purposes of this article, however, it is most pertinent to recall an example from *Eyrbyggja saga*: the wicked witch Katla. This older woman’s lust is presented as vulgar and unwelcome in her failed flirtations with the young Gunnlaugr (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 28), but her deviant sexuality is most resoundingly condemned via the motif of supernatural riding. This is employed to symbolise her rape of Gunnlaugr, a monstrous act that devastates the boy’s physical and social prosperity, as well as precipitating the feud that ultimately leads to Katla’s execution (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 28–54).<sup>3</sup> The following analysis of the *Fróðárundur* should be considered with these ideologies in mind. Based on their portrayals in the sagas, women in medieval Iceland seem to have been thought to cross at least one important threshold of senescence around the age of fifty, in conjunction with menopause. Such women were considered ineligible romantic partners and, if widowed or otherwise uncommitted, seem to have been expected to curtail their erotic pursuits. When elderly female saga characters do attempt to remain active in this sphere, including elsewhere in *Eyrbyggja saga*, they are usually portrayed as deviant or even monstrous.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of this riding as a symbolic rape, see Roby (2019, 51–65, 249–50, 303–04; 2015, 14–19). See also Arnold (2005, 118–19, 129–30).

<sup>4</sup> There are rare exceptions to the corpus’s otherwise consistent criticism of active elderly female sexuality. The most notable are the sexualised rituals of senescent, supernatural foster-mothers, which are gladly accepted by, and provide effective

The *Fróðárundur* episode is complex and confusing. Forrest Scott and Gillian Overing both surrender to its impenetrability, concluding that ‘all is kept effectively mysterious’ (Scott 2002, 235) and labelling the wonders as ‘mayhem’ once they become more numerous and varied (Overing 1999, 220). More confident readings have been performed, however. Knut Odner argues that the wonders should be interpreted not only symbolically, but also holistically, as interdependent components of a unified whole. Odner himself asserts that the episode pertains to a series of lofty binaries: male and female, living and dead, *miðgarðr* and *útgarðr* (1992, 129, 136–39). Closer to my focus, Kirsi Kanerva presents a persuasive reading related to deviant sexuality, though she concentrates more on Þuríðr, the adulterous housewife at Fróðá, than on Þórgunna (2011, 35–37). However, though a great many scholars have stressed the importance of Þórgunna’s sexuality, as well as that of her advanced age in relation to the object of her affections, none has yet presented a symbolic interpretation of the *Fróðárundur* in relation to these features (Kanerva 2011, 38–44; Scott 2002, 235; Overing 1999, 219; Grundy 1996, 233; Sayers 1996, 248; Jochens 1995b, 378; 1991, 5; Odner 1992, 134). As I indicate below, some have come close, but (owing to what may be reticence surrounding menstruation and menopause) they have neglected to examine how such symbols function or interact.

Considering the enigmatic nature of the episode as a whole, it is perhaps fitting that Þórgunna, the character at the centre of the marvels, is a highly complicated figure. The *Íslendingasögur* are often hailed for their multifaceted and morally ambiguous characters (e.g. Tulinus 2000, 261), and Þórgunna exemplifies this to a greater degree than many whose depictions are much lengthier. Among her positive traits are her work ethic, general politeness and dutiful Christianity. Some of the wonders associated with Þórgunna could also have been interpreted as miraculous in a Christian sense, most obviously her prophecy about Skálholt’s episcopal significance. However, she is also a prideful character, deeply and even aggressively protective of her earthly possessions and status. As I argue below, she seems particularly proud of her adult socio-sexual functionality, which is threatened by her senescence. Furthermore, the majority of the wonders associated with Þórgunna are more eerily supernatural than miraculous, and some have even been argued, especially by Odner (1992, 133–34), to associate her with witchcraft or paganism. When presented with such distinctly ambiguous characters in a genre that is also famed for its lack of narratorial mediation, Heather O’Donoghue states that

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protection for, their young male wards (Roby 2019, 281–306). For other exceptions, see also Roby (2019, 240–42).

audiences seem ‘positively invite[d]’ to make inferences about the meanings and motivations behind their words and actions (2004, 29–36). When a character like this is also at the centre of a series of potentially symbolic supernatural events, the significance of which is also largely unmediated, it is further appropriate to consider how the depictions of these occurrences might cohere with such inferences. This paper presents one such reading of Þórgunna and the *Fróðárundur*, paying close attention to the details presented in this episode, as well as other concepts and traditions with which medieval audiences might have been familiar from elsewhere in the corpus. However, this reading stakes no claim to exclusivity and, indeed, I will make reference to other possible interpretations throughout.

Audiences are primed to focus on Þórgunna’s age in her opening description. After an unflattering account of her physical features, the saga states *þat var áhugi manna, at Þórgunna myndi sótt hafa inn séttu tög* ‘it was people’s opinion that Þórgunna would have reached her sixth decade [i.e. her fifties]’ (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 139). Though relaying communal sentiment is a common method of circumventing the narratorial restraint of the *Íslendingasögur* (O’Donoghue, forthcoming), it arguably bears greater significance here. First, it characterises Þórgunna’s age as a topic of discussion, contributing to the sense that it is ‘sagaworthy’ and inviting audiences to ask why. Second, it implies that Þórgunna never offers clarification on this point, perhaps suggesting the sensitive and/or surreptitious nature of this gossip.<sup>5</sup> As mentioned above, the age of fifty was significant in relation to senescence, especially for women, and scholars have already noted that it provokes doubts about Þórgunna’s fertility (Kanerva 2011, 33; Odner 1992, 134). Considering the proximity of these details, Þórgunna’s menopausal age might also have been interpreted as congruent with her unfavourable physical portrait, which describes her coarse features and implicit romantic undesirability.

This statement of her age is immediately qualified: *ok var hon þó kona in ernasta* ‘and yet she was the most vigorous woman’ (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 139). This *þó* construction indicates that her age entails expectations of senescent frailty. However, this caveat also suggests that Þórgunna is resisting this stereotype—so far successfully. She does this in at least two spheres, the first being that of work. In seemingly defensive anticipation of expectations to the contrary, she has already demanded to be treated as

<sup>5</sup> Not a saga scholar, though surely an insightful reader, Robert Louis Stevenson in his retelling of this episode imagines Þórgunna’s prickly response when young men unthinkingly refer to her senescence (Stevenson 1916, 14). Indeed, corroborating my reading more generally, Stevenson imagines Þórgunna’s vain attempts to cling on to youth and sexual desirability as central to the narrative.

a capable member of Fróðá's workforce: *en vita skaltu þat, at ek nenni lítt at gefa fyrir mik, því at ek em vel verkfær; er mér ok verkit óleitt, en þó vil ek engi vásverk vinna* 'but you should know that I am hardly inclined to pay for my keep, because I am well able to work; and work is not disagreeable to me, yet I do not wish to do wet-work' (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 138). In addition to foreshadowing the first marvel, this conspicuously repetitive declaration positions Þórgunna as both conscious and defiant of the expectations of her senescent frailty. The uncanny extent of her occupational defensiveness is also soon intimated: she has a special hay-rake made exclusively for her, and she refuses its use to others.

A second sphere in which Þórgunna asserts her adult functionality is that of sexuality. This is first implied in her possession of fine *kvenbúnað[r]* 'women's attire' and, even more significantly, her *rekkjuklæði* 'bedclothes', which are so sumptuous that nobody at Fróðá has seen the like (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 137–39). The saga author employs many terms to describe these furnishings—*silkikult* 'silken quilt'; *rekkjurefil[l]* 'bed curtain'; *ársal[r]* 'bed hangings'; and even *rekkjutjald* 'bed-tent, canopy'—all of which convey the lavish ornamentation of Þórgunna's sleeping place (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 138–42). Like the decadent bowers of maidens and princesses more common to the *forndaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*, Þórgunna's bedclothes are implicit symbols of her imposing sexual capital (see, e.g., *Helga þátr Þórissonar* 1944, 422; *Sigrgarðs saga frækna* 1963, 56). This symbolism is corroborated in the fact that these objects are coveted by Þuríðr, whom the saga has already characterised as a figure of intense eroticism via her recurring infidelities (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 77). Þórgunna's biting responses to Þuríðr's requests to buy these fabrics characterise her as defensive of her status in this sphere also: as of her rake, Þórgunna demands exclusive use of these items (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 137–39).

Þórgunna's sexual activeness is soon stated more directly (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 139):

Kjartan, sonr bónda, var þar svá manna, at Þórgunna vildi flest við eiga, ok elskaði hon hann mjök, en hann var heldr fár við hana, ok varð hon opt af því skapstyggi. Kjartan var þá þrettán vetra eða fjórtán.

Kjartan, the farmer's son, was the one with whom Þórgunna most wished to interact of all the people there, and she loved him greatly, but he was rather reserved with her, and so she often became irritable. Kjartan was then thirteen or fourteen years old.

This passage affirms the intensity of Þórgunna's investment in the amorous dimension of her persona, since Kjartan's snubs are enough to sour her generally *háttagóð* 'well-mannered' demeanour (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 139). Especially considering the fact that this excerpt occurs in the same

passage as the implication of Þórgunna's senescence, its statement of the boy's age is also significant. Though such specifications are admittedly more common for youths (Callow 2007, 45–50), the proximity of these two details emphasises Þórgunna's status as an *anus amans*. While she is on the cusp of female senescence, with her sexual functionality becoming increasingly questionable, the object of her affections is at the opposite end of his life-course, poised to accede to male adulthood (Callow 2007, 54). Their respective ages might also have been construed to explain their amorous discord. The interdependent attributes of Þórgunna's unattractive physical appearance and menopausal age were presumably interpreted to explain Kjartan's indifference to her loving advances (Jochens 1991, 5). Like the tacit expectation that she is too old to maintain her vocational status, this inference characterises Þórgunna's active sexuality as defiant. It too violates expectations—presumably, that she should be less eager to court this boy—that stem partially from her old age.

The first wonder to intersect with these notions is the blood rain, which occurs while the farmhands are drying hay in the fields. Despite his explicit intention to interrogate each of the *Fróðárundur* symbolically, Odner (1992, 132) suggests only that this is an ill omen, expanding his interpretation no further than the preliminary survey of medieval blood rains undertaken by John Tatlock (1914, 446–47). However, this deluge and Þórgunna's reaction to it can be interpreted to correspond directly to her defiant status as a functional adult (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 140):

En er mjök leið at nóni, kom skýflóki svartr á himininn norðr yfir Skor ok dró skjótt yfir himin ok þangat beint yfir bæinn . . . Þóroddr bað menn raka upp heyit, en Þórgunna rifjaði þá sem óðast sitt hey; tók hon eigi at raka upp, þótt þat væri mælt. Skýflókann dró skjótt yfir . . . sá menn, at blóði hafði rignit í skúrinni. Um kveldit gerði þerri góðan, ok þornaði blóðit skjótt á heyvinu öllu öðru en því, er Þórgunna þurkaði; þat þornaði eigi, ok aldri þornaði hrífan, er hon hafði haldit á.

But very soon after noon, a black cloud appeared in the sky north above Skor, and it drew swiftly across the sky and thither directly over the farm . . . Þóroddr told people to rake up the hay, but then Þórgunna tossed her hay wildly; she did not take to raking it up, though that had been ordered. The cloud drew swiftly over . . . people saw that blood had rained in the storm. In the evening the weather turned good, and the blood dried quickly on all the hay other than that which Þórgunna had dried; that did not dry, nor ever did the rake she had held.

This cloud uncannily targets Fróðá, while the rain itself has an equally uncanny affinity for Þórgunna. This affirms the marvel's specific significance to her character. Because it precipitates an immediate, and ultimately terminal, end to her farmwork, the rain can be seen as a threat to her occupational activeness, which Þórgunna initially attempts to defy. Despite being ordered

to cease her labours, she continues to toss her hay wildly. The phrase used to describe this refusal to down tools—*sem óðast* ‘as if overcome with madness’—now characterises Þórgunna’s claim to manual functionality as desperate, rather than merely defiant. Beyond the already established notion that her senescence is incongruent with her manual labour, other features of this storm could also have been construed to connect this enforced retirement with Þórgunna’s age. For one, the storm occurs early on an autumn afternoon, which is both seasonally and diurnally evocative of being just beyond the prime of life, as figured in some common metaphors from the *Aetates hominis* tradition (Burrow 1986, 12, 36, 56). Moreover, as has been suggested of the logic of some Old English riddles, the colour of a raincloud might evoke grey hair, thus signifying old age (Klein et al. 2014, 35).

On a more symbolic level, this deluge might represent the cosmic repudiation of Þórgunna’s sexual activeness. Considering her menopausally significant age, it seems possible that the blood rain was interpreted as a menstrual metaphor. As intimated above, I am not the first to acknowledge this possibility. Scott notes (1985, 84), ‘it has also been suggested to me that the shower of blood is relevant here. Though such is a not infrequent portent of death, it may be that its descent here figuratively signifies menstrual blood and hence denial of (desired) fertility’. The retention of this wording in a reprint of the same work (2002, 235) demonstrates his choosing to distance himself from this hypothesis even after more than a decade of reflection. Scott essentially disowns this hypothesis and, by not naming his sources, intimates that nobody would care to own it. Such reticence is unhelpful. It admittedly serves to log the notion in the scholarly record, albeit obliquely. However, it fails to provide the space properly to analyse this symbolism, including how it intersects with the other wonders.

In medieval Scandinavian mythological texts, and in mythic sources more broadly, scholars assert a pervasive symbolic connection between environmental waters and female ‘effluvia’ (Clunies Ross 1981, 373). Uli Linke notes that the repetitive nature of liquid cycles, such as tides and variations in precipitation, might ‘circumscribe the periodicity of menstrual bleeding’ (1992, 270). A commonly cited example of such symbolism in Old Norse–Icelandic is the troll-woman Gjálp’s obstruction of Þórr’s river-crossing (*Skáldskaparmál*, I 25). Here, the swelling waters implicitly emanate from between Gjálp’s legs, which scholars variously interpret to symbolise her urine or menstrual blood (McKinnell 2005, 8, 182; Motz 1993, 21, 82; Clunies Ross 1981, 377). Linke further notes that the potential to construe ecological deluges as menstrually symbolic is strengthened when the liquid is expressly stated to be blood, as it is in Þórgunna’s case

(1992, 278–79). Indeed, such a connection seems to be upheld in other saga accounts of blood rain, a trope that is commonly connected to supernatural female forces (Odner 1992, 132) and, in some instances, with their sexually connoted blood in particular. Although these seem to be more general omens of battle and/or death, many such episodes imply women to be the sources of bloody precipitation, whether they cause it by weaving on a grisly loom, chant and rock to and fro together as it streams in through the roof, or pour it over the earth from a great trough (*Njáls saga*, 454–59; *Íslendinga saga* 1946, 251; *Víga-Glúms saga* 1956, 71). *Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns*, however, is more assuredly instructive on the potential for such fluid to be not only feminine, but also genital. Here, a group of troll-women perform handstands, while their companions whip their exposed *klof* ‘crotches’ with wet goatskins. They then dip these goatskins into blood falling from an aerial naumachia and proceed to flail them around, creating a gory drizzle (1963, 51–53). Though this blood nominally derives from the battle above them, audiences could hardly have forgotten the excruciating and sexually charged wounds these wet goatskins have recently dealt, which were perhaps also imagined to draw blood, implying a connection between the rain and the groins of these troll-women.

As demonstrated in the figures of Gjalp and these sadomasochistic troll-women, there are instances in which supernatural deluges are linked to female genital blood from both before and after the composition of *Eyrbyggja saga*. Such episodes establish the general basis for similar interpretations of blood rain elsewhere in the corpus. However, Þórgunna’s explicit amorous proclivities and implicit menopausal status substantiate the extension of such interpretations to the *Fróðárundur* in particular. Since menopause is definitively demarcated by the cessation of menstrual bleeding, a rain of blood—particularly in a culture already prone to associate such liquids with females and their genital effluvia—could surely have been interpreted as pertaining to Þórgunna’s recent or current experience of this transition. Since regular menstruation indicates fertility, her rain of blood could have been construed, as Scott intimates, as a mocking expression of the youthful fecundity now beyond Þórgunna’s reach. Alternatively, though the actual experience of female menopause can be prolonged, featuring variable cessations, reductions and even increases in menstrual flow (Sievert 2006, 5–10), Þórgunna’s blood rain could be a dramatic representation of her own theoretical final menstruation. Finally, peri- and post-menopausal women might even have recognised Þórgunna’s extreme and persistent wetness as symbolic of several, more specific features of this transition, including hot flushes or menorrhagia, better known as perimenopausal flooding (Astrup et al. 2004, 200–02).

Considering the rain's possible menstrual significance, Þórgunna's attempts to ignore it and continue wildly tossing her hay might not merely symbolise this woman's desperate defence of her manual capability. They might also represent Þórgunna's fervent desire to cling on to her adult sexual functionality, in the face of its permanent withdrawal in menopause. Contributing to this reading, it is further significant that the phrase *sem óðast* is derived from the related terms *óðr* and *æði*, which elsewhere refer to specifically sexual madness, including excruciating lust in the absence of relief (*Skírnismál* 2014, 387; *Hyndluljóð* 2014, 468–69).<sup>6</sup> Once the storm abates, however, Þórgunna seems to surrender. She returns to the farmstead and takes off her wet work clothes. In this act, Þórgunna might be interpreted as shedding the trappings of not only her occupational status, but also, since they are now covered in symbolic menstrual blood, her reproductive capacity. Þórgunna then retires to bed and utters a potentially significant phrase: *Hon kvazk þat ætla, at hon myndi eigi taka fleiri sóttir* 'She said she expected that she would never be sick again' (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 141). This is a stock euphemism for imminent death, and can be used of male as well as female characters (see, e.g., *Króka-Refs saga* 1959, 121). However, it is also potentially polysemous, and some of its additional meanings seem significant here. First, in a general sense, period pains could conceivably be described as sickness, in which case Þórgunna's statement might describe the cessation of her menstruation. Second, particularly in the Old Norse–Icelandic linguistic context, this phrase could further imply her post-menopausal state, since terms for sickness—including *sótt*—are commonly used to denote pregnancy and labour pains (Jochens 1996, 211). As shown in *Örvar-Odds saga*'s exclusive use of such euphemisms to indicate Lophthæna's pregnancy (1943, 284), they were robust enough to be recognised even in the absence of more direct statements, presumably based on the sex and sexuality of the character in question. Considering Þórgunna's gender, amorous proclivities and menopausally significant age, it seems plausible that audiences recognised this meaning here, strengthening interpretations of the menstrual significance of the blood rain. Following this deluge, Þórgunna will never again experience pregnancy.

The more conventional meaning of her polysemous prophecy soon comes true: shortly after this menstrual marvel, Þórgunna dies. As attested in the prosperity of many senescent female saga characters, menopause was hardly considered fatal in medieval Iceland (see, e.g., *Laxdæla saga* 1934, 7–13, 223–24). Admittedly, symptoms like acute menorrhagia could have threatened women's lives in a context without appropriate medical interventions

<sup>6</sup> See also McKinnell (2005, 89, 159) and Clunies Ross (1994–98, I 70, 110).

(Astrup et al. 2004, 200). I suggest, however, that Þórgunna's immediate death following her menopausal marvel is more symbolic than realistic. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson posits that old age was universally deprecated in medieval Iceland, and that old people who outlasted their functionality were socially dead (2008, 235, 242). Though he overstates the ubiquity of this ideology, I do not doubt its currency as part of a range of conceptions, including those that lauded the continued and even newfound utility of the elderly (Roby 2019, 162–79; 227–52). In her death following the blood rain, Þórgunna might represent the tragic embodiment of this negative conception of old age. According to her own vehement self-concept as a sexually viable woman, this menopausal marvel might as well signify her death.

However, though she admits her impending demise, Þórgunna's other deathbed prophecies imply that her protectiveness of her sexual capital is far from over. She demands that her bedclothes be burned, an imperative that becomes central to the *Fróðárundur* (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 142). Þuríðr greedily rescues these furnishings from destruction, which seems to trigger the ensuing marvels, while their eventual incineration forms part of a composite exorcism that brings the wonders to a close. Scholars have noted that the centrality of the bedclothes to this episode is exceptional in the corpus (Kanerva 2011, 28–29; Tulinius 2011, 71–72; Sayers 1996, 248). Hence, especially considering Odnér's demand for holism, it seems essential that their significance be accounted for in any compelling interpretation of the *Fróðárundur*. Scott offers, albeit cursorily, one persuasive suggestion which could exist alongside this sexual reading. The blood-spattered bedclothes of this dying woman might constitute a pre-germ-theory symbol of a disease vector, with the imperative that they be destroyed representing a sensible measure to avoid contagion (2002, 234). This interpretation is bolstered in that one of the ensuing marvels is a plague of sickness, death and haunting. This plague passes from person to person, sometimes via physical contact with the revenants, who are equally compelling symbols of disease vectors (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 146–47). Corroborating this interpretation, the sagas and laws contain numerous directives to avoid or destroy objects associated with illness or death, which in *Egils saga* (229) even refers to a sickbed.<sup>7</sup>

However, Scott further notes the possibility that Þórgunna's instructions relate to her 'unfulfilled sexual feeling' (2002, 234), which aligns more closely with my interpretation. As noted above, Þórgunna's bedclothes seem likely to have been interpreted as the physical embodiments of her proud sexual capital. Hence, her instruction that they not be used after her death,

<sup>7</sup> See also *Egils þáttur Síðu-Hallssonar* (2009, 379–84), *Grænlandinga þáttur* (1935, 277), *Þorsteins þáttur tjaldstæðings* (2009, 430–01) and *Grágás* (1852, I 12).

particularly by the intensely sexual Þuríðr, might have been understood to be motivated by Þórgunna's ongoing jealousy over her erotic status. Admittedly, her choice to bequeath her *skarlatsskikkj[a]* 'scarlet/coloured cloak' to Þuríðr could be seen as her relinquishment of some of this coveted sexual capital to the younger woman (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 142). Such coloured clothing is a common marker of opulence and erotic desirability in the sagas (see, e.g., *Njáls saga*, 44, 85). Þórgunna makes this concession only to facilitate the uncontested burning of the bedclothes, which are surely the most critical symbols of her erotic persona. Þórgunna explicitly protests that her command to have these items burned is not motivated by her intention to deny their use to the living (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 139). Whether medieval audiences would have taken her at her word is another matter, however. On the one hand, it must be noted that it is during this same deathbed speech that she makes her miraculous prophecy about Skálholt, which might lend greater weight to her statements. On the other, Þórgunna's repeated refusals to allow Þuríðr the use or ownership of these items during her lifetime are expressly related to her own exclusive enjoyment of them and, by extension, of the sexual capital they conferred (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 139). This precedent could surely have primed audiences to interpret Þórgunna's deathbed request as similarly motivated, despite her statement to the contrary. More generally, Þórgunna's ambiguous characterisation makes her a far from infallible figure and, as I demonstrate below, the selflessness of her command does not go unquestioned by other characters in the saga. Þórgunna's deathbed prophecy also comes with a warning: if her wishes are disregarded, people will suffer '*mikit þyngsl af mér*' 'great affliction on account of me' (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 142). Þórgunna claims not to desire this scenario herself, which might support the notion that she warns of consequences that she cannot prevent. However, it is also plausible that this *af mér* construction implies a punishment that will emanate not 'on account of' but rather directly 'from' her. This could have been construed as a threat or curse that she will carry out from beyond the grave, underpinned by her own personal, perhaps jealous or spiteful, conviction that these items must not be used after her death.

The scene of Þuríðr's refusal to allow the bedclothes to be burned supports this interpretation. To begin with, in order to convince her husband to disobey Þórgunna's dying wishes, *lagði hon hendr yfir háls honum* 'she laid her hands around his neck' (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 143). This action, which denotes female seduction elsewhere in the corpus (e.g. *Gísla saga*, 31), reminds audiences of Þuríðr's ongoing sexual activeness. This reaffirms that her desire for the bedclothes is sexually motivated, rather than just generally acquisitive, as has been speculated elsewhere (Kanerva 2011, 40; Sayers 1996, 248–49). This inference bolsters the

sense that Þórgunna's deathbed consternation arises from the thought of their employment to erotic ends by other characters, especially Þuríðr. Moreover, Þuríðr's verbal pleas even accuse Þórgunna of jealousy over the bedclothes outright: *unni hon engum manni at njóta* 'she wished that nobody might enjoy [them]' (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 143). The verb *njóta* 'enjoy' is a common sexual euphemism, which could also indicate that Þuríðr charges Þórgunna with specifically sexual jealousy here (McKinnell 2005, 178; Jochens 1995b, 372). Though audiences might have questioned Þuríðr's status as a reliable speaker, her version of events still gets reported and—as is often the case with conflicting testimonies in the narratively unmediated *Íslendingasögur* (O'Donoghue, forthcoming)—has the undeniable opportunity to influence audience interpretations. At least one of these women's statements must be inaccurate, though the audience is left to decide which. Hence, based on her own explicit motivations in life, and Þuríðr's interpretation of them in death, it seems plausible that Þórgunna's directive to burn the bedclothes was construed to be underpinned by destructive sexual jealousy: if she couldn't have them, no one could.

A further possible interpretation is that Þórgunna insists that her bedclothes be burned in order to access them, and their embodied sexual capital, after death. This interpretation relies somewhat on Þórgunna's ambiguous connection to paganism, as asserted especially by Oðner (1992, 133–34). This notion is substantially undermined by the churchgoing piety noted in her initial portrait, as well as her ability to foresee Skálholt's episcopal significance and her insistence on Christian burial there (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 139–41). It is true, though, that Þórgunna exhibits some distinctly 'witchy' characteristics, including her Hebridean origins, her possible curse on the bedclothes, and, as Oðner notes, her apparent connection to a seal apparition, discussed below (1992, 133). Moreover, although the Christian piety she displays in *Eyrbyggja saga* might problematise interpretations of her paganism in that text, there certainly are versions of Þórgunna's story, including in other medieval sagas and later folkloric accounts, which explicitly associate her with pre-Christian magic (*Eiríks saga rauða* 1935, 210; *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur* 1862–64, I 227). If audiences did perceive a contradictory aura of paganism around Þórgunna, it is possible that they also interpreted her desire to enjoy these objects following their cremation. Contemporary audiences would have been familiar with pagan characters from numerous sources—including Eddic materials and *fornaldarsögur*—who supposedly access objects, and even other people who are immolated or interred with them after death (*Sigurðarkviða in skamma* 2014, 347–48; *Völsunga saga* 1943, 70). Consequently, audiences might have interpreted Þórgunna's intention not only to rob younger characters of these symbols

of sexual capital, but also to enjoy them herself in the afterlife. This would again indicate her unwillingness to submit to post-sexual status in her senescence, this time even in death.

The next of the *Fróðárundur* is Þórgunna's appearance as a human revenant. The first of her reanimations in this form occurs in the larder of a household that has refused hospitality to her pallbearers. To a greater extent even than with the blood rain, Odner's interpretation of this episode contravenes his aim to examine the wonders symbolically and holistically. He throws up his hands, suggesting that it 'only had entertainment value. Not much can be made out of Þórgunna's nakedness when she prepared the meal for the pallbearers . . . alive, fat, naked and rambling along with pots and pans' (1992, 146). Conversely, I argue that this haunting pertains directly to Þórgunna's unwilling transition into senescence, with its attendant connotations of social and sexual obsolescence. Once her pallbearers have taken unwelcome shelter at the farm, the householders are awoken by a clattering in the kitchen: *ok er menn kómu til búrsins, var þar sén kona mikil; hon var nokvið, svá at hon hafði engan hlut á sér; hon starfaði at matseld* 'and when people came to the larder, a large woman was seen there; she was naked, such that she had not a thing on her; she worked at preparing food' (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 144). After Þórgunna finishes cooking and serving her meal, the terrified householders agree to provide better hospitality. This seems to satisfy the undead woman, who promptly exits. On the one hand, this episode could enshrine another discrete commentary. For example, it might emphasise the importance of *greiði* 'hospitality', the provision of which *Grágás* notes to be obligatory for funeral journeys (1852, I 8). Indeed, beyond his offhand dismissal, this is Odner's only suggestion about the episode's significance, and has been repeated elsewhere (Martin 2005, 76; Sayers 1996, 248). However, even this interpretation seems to have a bearing on Þórgunna's characterisation as exceptionally proud of her socio-sexual prominence. Beyond a general statement about the importance of providing *greiði* to travellers or even specifically to pallbearers, Þórgunna's actions might have been interpreted as assertions of her character's particular worthiness to receive respectful hospitality, befitting her grand self-image.

Moreover, Þórgunna's defiant catering also resembles her previous attempts to retain functional adult status, this time in a profoundly gendered sense. Just as she defended the exclusive use of her rake and bedclothes, she here attempts to cling on to an important symbol of adult femininity in the face of its withdrawal. This withdrawal now pertains to her senescent decline no longer only in a literal sense, however, but also in a symbolic sense. As Ármann Jakobsson argues, ghosts and revenants can embody conceptions of old age (2005, 325). This is because their very nature is characterised by

activities beyond their natural lifespans and, especially in the case of the corporeal revenants found in the sagas, their bodies are visceral representations of decay. As indicated in sources throughout the medieval Scandinavian and broader Germanic worlds, the serving of food and drink was central to one of the conventional female roles—the cupbearer—in many early Northern societies (*Gylfaginning*, 30; Jochens 1995a, 107). Presumably more relevant to the saga’s medieval Icelandic audiences, *Grágás* also defines the *búr* as þat er konor hafa matreiðo í ‘the place where women prepare food’ (1852, II 352). Numerous female saga characters take advantage of this role, employing the alimentary tools available to women to circumvent their customary exclusion from public power. For example, some present unusual fare to their male kin, such as stones or impossibly large portions, to remind them of their duties of vengeance (*Heiðarvíga saga* 1938, 277; *Guðmundar saga dýra* 1946, 195). As speculated above, the lesson Þórgunna’s meal teaches seems related to the provision of *greiði*, perhaps especially in light of her grand self-image. However, in her case, the lesson might not be as important as the fact that she teaches it, and the manner in which she does so. By serving this meal, a quintessentially feminine task, Þórgunna defies her literal and now, by virtue of her revenant status, symbolic senescence to assert her status as a functional woman.

There are yet more layers to the pertinence of this haunting to Þórgunna’s defiant adult status, particularly in the sexual sphere. The analysis above omits a crucial aspect of this episode: Þórgunna is completely naked and, by Jochens’s reckoning, she is the only female character in the *Íslendingasögur* to be explicitly described as such (1995b, 372; 1991, 5). Of course, within the saga’s internal logic, Þórgunna’s corpse has no control over its apparel. She was presumably interpreted to have been placed unclothed into her shroud, in accordance with Christian custom (DuBois 1999, 73). However, and especially since its extreme rarity would have made audiences pay attention to it, Þórgunna’s nakedness adds an unmistakable valence of sexuality to this episode. Owing to the conceptual proximity of nudity to eroticism, the saga’s audiences might have added their own meaning to her exposed state, imagining this woman in sexual terms. Hence, while participating in an activity that defiantly asserts her functional, adult womanhood, Þórgunna’s nakedness could have been construed as implicit exhibitionism: a public expression of her sexuality that she makes after both her literal and then symbolic ageing. Moreover, as a decomposing revenant making a potentially sexualised display to the living, further use of Ármann’s logic might characterise this as another depiction of the attempted sexual interactions of this *anus amans* with younger individuals.

By virtue of their living status, her onlookers become representatives of the sexually eligible adult population, a group no longer accessible to the symbolically hyper-aged Þórgunna.

If Þórgunna's exhibitionism was interpreted as an implicit sexual advance towards these figures, their response—like Kjartan's earlier coolness—serves as its emphatic repudiation. These involuntary voyeurs *urðu svá hræddir, at þeir þorðu hvergi nær at koma* 'became so afraid, that they dared not come near' (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 144). Jochens notes that, since 'saga people were used to revenants, it was Þórgunna's nakedness, not her ghostly presence, that was fearsome' (1995a 76–77; 1995b, 372). Based on her analysis of the same episode elsewhere, it seems that Jochens's reasoning refers to Þórgunna's age and concomitant ugliness, which she also suggests hindered her sexual desirability during life (1991, 5). Jochens exaggerates here, since elsewhere in the corpus—and even elsewhere in the *Fróðárundur*—clothed revenants elicit understandable dread (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 93, 149). However, the substance of Jochens's implication is similar to my own: in addition to fear of Þórgunna as a revenant, audiences might have interpreted the onlookers' horror as indicating their disgust at her naked, explicitly senescent, and, in its bloated, decomposing state, symbolically hyper-senescent form. This repulsion serves to emphasise Þórgunna's inappropriateness as a sexual entity, reaffirming the deviance of this and other examples of her efforts to remain active in this sphere.

In a variant of *Eyrbyggja saga*, Þórgunna reanimates once more in human form, this time during her burial. This episode is first attested in AM 445 a 4to, a seventeenth-century paper manuscript of the saga. Since this attestation has no single exemplar of which we are aware, but rather seems to amalgamate components from numerous prior versions of *Eyrbyggja saga*, it is theoretically possible that this variant has medieval origins, no longer extant (*Eyrbyggja saga* 2003, 124\*). It is important to note that the basic features of this variant are also found in folkloric sources circulating separately from the saga as a whole (*Íslenzkar þjóðsögur* 1862–64, I 227). The provenance of these folkloric accounts is similarly difficult to ascertain. They might be derived from the variant version of *Eyrbyggja saga* as it appears in AM 445 a 4to, but they might also have their origins in immanent—and potentially medieval—versions of the *Fróðárundur* narrative that pre-date, and therefore serve as the source material for, that redaction. However, even if this variant is post-medieval in origin, its contents should still be analysed to speculate on reinterpretations of the *Fróðárundur* among scribes and audiences from the time of its composition—certainly no later than the seventeenth century—which can be

shown to be consistent with the sexual reading of the episode presented here. In this reanimation, Þórgunna seems to complain about the coldness of her new grave-mate (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 145):

‘Kalt á fótum,  
Mána-Ljótur.’

Var þá svarað:

‘Það gerir, [að] fáir unna,  
Þórgunna.’

‘Cold at feet,  
Mána-Ljótur.’

Then came the reply:

‘So it goes: few love,  
Þórgunna.’

Þórgunna’s complaint at being buried alongside other corpses might more generally represent this woman’s consternation at her permanent removal from the society of the living. However, based on how frequently the grave and marital bed are elided in the Old Norse–Icelandic corpus, Þórgunna’s grumbling has more profound sexual connotations. A night spent in the mound with a former partner, or a female character’s own death and placement alongside her lover, serve as symbols of undying love among pagan characters in many Eddic and *fornaldarsaga* episodes (*Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* 2014, 280–83; *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* 2014, 342–48; *Völsunga saga* 1943, 68–70; *Örvar-Odds saga* 1943, 331). Hence, as with the notion that Þórgunna intends to enjoy her burned bedclothes in the afterlife, this interpretation is bolstered by, but this time certainly does not require, audience speculations about her ambiguous link to paganism. The horizontality and physical proximity of two bodies in a grave could surely have allowed such a pair to be interpreted as metaphorical bedfellows regardless of the religious context. Indeed, similar concepts are even depicted among Christian characters, including when Bergþóra elects to die beside Njáll in their marital bed. However, it is noteworthy that, in this case, the couple’s grandson lies between them, serving to assure audiences that this representation of everlasting love in senescence is chaste, more social and familial than carnal (*Njáls saga*, 330–31). Similarly, in *Grettis saga*, although the devout Spes and Þorsteinn enter eremitic cells that are adjacent but explicitly *unconnected* to one another, the notion that they will enjoy each other’s company in a Christian afterlife is stated outright (*Grettis saga* 1936, 289). In contrast to the undying affection of such pagan and Christian couples, Þórgunna’s ambiguous complaint implies this woman’s rejection of her new bedfellow.

Based on Ljótur's name alone, Þórgunna's complaint about this male corpse might simply reflect her high standards for romantic partners. As a self-styled figure of sexual desirability, she might consider him too *ljótur* 'ugly'. However, it also seems plausible that her rejection of Mána-Ljótur is once more underpinned by her role as an *anus amans*, desiring partnership specifically with younger men. Relying on Ármann Jakobsson's logic once more, Mána-Ljótur could conceivably represent a figure of male senescence based on his status as a decomposing revenant, making him and Þórgunna similarly aged in a symbolic sense. Furthermore, Ljótur's connection to male senescence is strengthened by the specific attribute Þórgunna identifies as unappealing: his cold feet. Kanerva translates Þórgunna's verse as 'it is cold at the feet of Mána-Ljótur' (2011, 30), referring to the frigid soil of the grave they will share. Based on the non-oblique declension of Ljótur's name, this cannot be literally accurate. However, like many *lausavísur*, this verse is semantically flexible. If Ljótur's name is rendered in the vocative—which seems likely, since Þórgunna's name is also rendered non-obliquely, despite her being more clearly the grammatical object of the verb *unna*—the sense of Kanerva's translation is possible: '[it is] cold at [your] feet, Mána-Ljótur'. But other meanings are also possible, including '[you have] cold feet, Mána-Ljótur' or, if his name is rendered in the nominative, 'Mána-Ljótur [has] cold feet.'<sup>8</sup> The potential for Ljótur to be understood as the one with cold feet is significant, since this feature is shared by the most famous old man in the corpus, Egill Skalla-Grímsson. In identical diction, Egill is said to become *kalt á fótum*, causing him to huddle by the fireside (*Egils saga*, 145). Mána-Ljótur may thus be interpreted as an even more compelling symbol of a hyper-aged man than his revenant status alone suggests. Hence, Þórgunna's complaint about Ljótur's cold feet might not merely be a captivatingly timeless lament about the unwanted touch of a lover's icy limbs in bed.<sup>9</sup> She might also be upset at the implied root cause of this coldness: his literal and symbolic ancientness. Þórgunna's snubbing of Ljótur is then criticised in the utterance of her new bedfellow: *this* is why few love Þórgunna. If my reading of Ljótur's significance as an embodiment of male senescence is plausible, his own couplet may suggest that Þórgunna would be more likeable if she curtailed her lust for younger men—whether literally young like Kjartan, or now symbolically young

<sup>8</sup> As suggested to me by Carolyne Larrington and Ármann Jakobsson, Þórgunna's verse could even mean '[I have] cold feet, Mána-Ljótur'. Rather than her aversion, this line might actually imply Þórgunna's desire for intimate contact with this male corpse, further corroborating her incorrigible sexuality.

<sup>9</sup> Recall *Gísla saga* (53).

like the living—and adhered to the sexual expectations more befitting her aged and now hyper-aged status. Her forced placement into the grave might suggest that one such expectation is that, being dead, she should now curtail her socio-sexual activeness altogether. On a more symbolic level, her placement alongside Ljótur might suggest that she, and the elderly female demographic she represents, ought only to engage in romantic interactions with similarly aged figures.

The *Fróðárundur* include a further marvel that dovetails with this commentary. There is an elderly couple living at Fróðá during Þórgunna's stay there: Þórir viðleggr and Þorgríma galdrakinn. The saga notes animosity between this couple and Þórgunna, the cause of which is never explained (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 139). Scholars have proposed numerous theories, such as the opposition between Þorgríma's heathendom and Þórgunna's Christianity (Scott 2002, 85; Odner 1992, 139). Alternatively, the couple's resentment toward Kjartan, whose real father, Björn, killed their sons in an earlier episode, might make them Þórgunna's enemy based on her love for the boy (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 79; Kanerva 2011, 41). However, when it comes to Þórgunna's repeated literal and symbolic refusals to surrender her sexual activeness in general, or her desire for younger partners specifically, another possibility comes to the fore. Þorgríma and Þórir can be interpreted as foils to Þórgunna as positive representations of love in old age, whose lasting union she scorns.

The senescence of this couple in life is not the only feature that facilitates this interpretation; it is also bolstered by their own undead roving. During the plague at Fróðá, they are the only two named individuals to die, after which they are seen walking together at night: *tók sótt Þorgríma galdrakinn, kona Þóris viðleggs . . . it sama kveld, sem hon var jorðuð, sásk hon í liði með Þóri, bónda sínum* 'Þorgríma galdrakinn, the wife of Þórir viðleggr, became sick . . . the same evening that she was buried, she was seen in the host with Þórir, her husband' (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 150). This excerpt draws seemingly superfluous attention to their married status, which perhaps guided audiences to consider their temporally proximate deaths and post-mortem walks in reference to their conjugal relationship: they were united in life, and continue to share each other's company in death. Their burial was also presumably interpreted to have been in the same churchyard at Fróðá, if not explicitly in connected or adjacent graves, which lends their interment some of the aforementioned associations between grave-mates and eternal paramours. Moreover, although this excerpt draws specific attention to the presence of this named couple in the undead company, it is important to note that Þórir's host also comprises the other unnamed victims of this plague. The presence of these figures alongside this married couple might serve a similar symbolic function to that of Njáll and Bergþóra's grandson,

lying between them on their deathbed. Though they do not detract from the sense of this senescent couple's everlasting union, they might imply its reduced emphasis on private, implicitly carnal intimacy. Hence, Þórir and Þorgríma serve to underline and nuance some of the commentaries presented negatively in the character of Þórgunna. Unattached old women should not be sexually covetous, especially of partnerships with younger men, though their romantic relationships can be justified if expressed within the confines of a pre-existing marriage. However, even in such partnerships between similarly senescent individuals, the nature of their relationships should shift in old age. The intimacy evinced in Þórir and Þorgríma's earlier procreation of sons should be redirected into a union that remains close—strong enough to persist even in death—but becomes more social and less sexual.<sup>10</sup>

Another marvel unfolds on the night the pallbearers return to Fróða: *þá sá menn á veggþili hússins, at komit var tungl hálf . . . Þessi tíðendi bar þar við viku alla* 'Then men saw on the wall of the house that a half moon had come . . . This happening occurred there for a whole week' (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 145–46). As with the centrality of the bedclothes, this moon apparition is considered exceptional in the corpus, though interpretations of its significance have gone no further than the general foreboding stated in the saga itself (Kanerva 2011, 30; Tulinius 2011, 71–72). However, numerous features of this wonder facilitate its interpretation as an additional menstrual marvel. First, the moon—not only a periodic natural occurrence, but also one that recycles itself monthly—has cross-cultural menstrual significance, a valence defended in the medieval Icelandic context by Ásdís Egilsdóttir (2002, 321–22). Second, this marvel lasts for a week, the approximate duration of menstruation (Wood et al. 1979, 216–19). The menstrual potential of this marvel corroborates the similar significance of the other wonders, especially the blood rain, substantiating my reading of the episode as a whole.

The remaining *Fróðárundur* are also obliquely linked to Þórgunna and her defiant socio-sexual activeness, since the deaths and reanimations of other characters at the farm are implicitly caused by the continued use of her bedclothes, and are also terminated in part by the cremation of these items.<sup>11</sup> However, there is one final marvel that warrants closer scrutiny

<sup>10</sup> The prescription that elderly people in pre-existing marriages should curtail their sexual lives is also found in the fourteenth-century statutes of Bishop Árni Einarson; see Agnes Arnórsdóttir (2010, 120). Recall also *Grettis saga* (1936, 286–89).

<sup>11</sup> As Kjartan G. Óttoson notes, even the spectres who die by drowning might be more directly related to Þórgunna's curse, as they could have been understood to have been capsized by the Þórgunna seal (1983, 86). Recall, for comparison, *Laxdæla saga* (1934, 41).

for its more overt connection to Þórgunna, her proud defence of the physical manifestations of her sexual capital and her ongoing weakness for a younger man. This is the seal apparition, which rises from the fire-pit and resists attempts by two unnamed servants to subdue it, before its eventual defeat by Kjartan (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 147):

Hann gekk upp við höggit ok gægdisk upp á ársalinn Þórgunnu . . . Þá hljóp til sveininn Kjartan ok tók upp mikla járnþrepsleggju ok laust í höfuð selnum . . . ok svá fór jafnan um vetrinn, at allir fyrirburðir ótuðusk mest Kjartan.

It reared up at the blow [from the servant-woman] and glared at Þórgunna's bed-hangings . . . Then the boy Kjartan leapt up and took a great sledge-hammer and struck the seal's head . . . and so it went all winter, that all the spectres feared Kjartan most.

Numerous scholars have noted this seal's connection to Þórgunna, whether as her *fylgja*, a disembodied expression of her will or her literal revenant self in bestial form (Odner 1992, 131; Kanerva 2011, 31; Scott 2002, 83). However, it is the possibility of her ambiguous connection to this beast, rather than the precise nature of this connection, that is sufficient for my purposes. Owing to their amphibious nature and uncannily human faces, seals have been identified as symbols of liminality (Sayers 1996, 244; Odner 1992, 135). Þórgunna's connection to this seal therefore contributes to her characterisation as transitional, perhaps referring to her position between life and death, but perhaps also between adulthood and old age, or between fecundity and infertility. Indeed, Kanerva (2011, 38–40) and Bragg (2004, 101) both note the potential of seals to denote sexual liminalities in particular. The seal spectre is explicitly interested in the bedclothes, which is one of the primary features connecting it to Þórgunna. The verb *gægja* 'to stare intently, agog' implies the intensity of the beast's emotional, perhaps specifically lustful, investment in these objects, with the same term being used to describe the (also elderly) Þráinn's ogling of the nubile Þorgerðr at her mother's wedding (*Njáls saga*, 89). The seal's extreme interest in these objects could be a further expression of Þórgunna's eagerness to reacquire them in death, or of her continued resentment that they are being enjoyed in her absence. In either case, the implication that Þórgunna's intense emotional connection to these objects persists beyond her death corroborates and heightens the sense of her desperate jealousy regarding her erstwhile sexual capital.

The identity of the figure able to conquer the seal is further significant to Þórgunna's status as an *anus amans*. It seems no accident that the saga relates that first a woman and then a man are unable to subdue the beast. It is perhaps unsurprising that the female servant could not defeat this manifestation of Þórgunna, who demonstrated considerable authority when

arguing with Þuríðr and, as an emphatically heterosexual woman, could not be swayed by desire for such an opponent. However, with reference both to men's and women's respective positions in the medieval Icelandic socio-sexual hierarchy (Evans 2019, 11–13; Clover 1993, 379–80), and to a man's status as a potential sexual partner for Þórgunna, it seems more significant that the male servant could not beat this seal back into the fire-pit. The Þórgunna seal is susceptible only to Kjartan. Þórgunna's proud self-image might support the notion that the seal's selective vulnerability follows socio-economic lines: it is resistant to attacks from servants, but must capitulate to householders. However, it seems equally likely that the seal's weakness against Kjartan was interpreted to arise from the dead woman's romantic attraction towards him and, since this excerpt reminds audiences of his juvenility as a *svein[n]* 'boy', perhaps his youthful appeal in particular. This detail compounds Þórgunna's status as an incorrigible *anus amans*, who exclusively, inappropriately and self-defeatingly covets this younger man. Indeed, her love for Kjartan is so strong that it ultimately precludes its own satiation, since, unlike the sexual predator Katla, Þórgunna cannot override the rejections of her would-be paramour. As a living woman, she is bitter but ultimately tolerant of Kjartan's coldness; as an undead woman somehow expressing herself through this seal, she once more capitulates to his will. Hence, though her senescent sexuality is surely criticised throughout the *Fróðárundur*, it must be noted that Þórgunna's adoption of the *anus amans* role is more tragic and perhaps even more pitiful than that of Katla. This wonder also confirms the relationship between Þórgunna and all the other spectres. Not only are their deaths and reanimations caused by the disobedience of her wishes, but also their actions are somehow governed by her romantic or sexual proclivities: they apparently *all* submit to Kjartan's will. Hence, they too become symbolic of the tragic futility of the sexual deviance of Þórgunna, who is unwilling or unable to surrender her erotic persona in the face of her chronological, physiological and socio-sexual senescence, yet not sufficiently aggressive to satisfy it through the monstrous means of women like Katla.

It is ultimately Kjartan who brings the wonders to a close. Not only is he able to defeat the seal and terrify the other spectres, but he also burns the bedclothes and leads the legislative action against the human revenants (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 151–52).<sup>12</sup> The *Fróðárundur* even end with a sycophantic statement

<sup>12</sup> The notion that elderly people in pre-existing marriages should curtail their sexual lives is presented in *Grettis saga* (1936, 286–89), and is also intimated in the fourteenth-century statutes of Bishop Árni Einarsson; see Agnes Arnórsdóttir (2010, 120) and *Diplomatarium Islandicum* (1857–1972, II 836–49).

of his assumption of adult male roles, which compels audiences to prioritise the episode's impact on him: *tók Kjartan sér hjón ok bjó at Fróðá lengi síðan ok varð inn mesti garpr* 'Kjartan took upon himself the establishment of the household and lived at Fróðá long afterwards and became the greatest of champions' (*Eyrbyggja saga* 1935, 152). Hence, in addition to describing Þórgunna's unwilling transition into post-sexual life, this episode also serves as an initiatory period for the boy, charting his accession to socio-sexual adulthood. Furthermore, the detail of Kjartan setting up his *hjón* might not only imply his control at Fróðá or his employment of new servants, but also, owing to the other highly prevalent connotations of this term, his establishment of a household in the conjugal sense: taking a wife and starting a family. This implication would serve as a final repudiation of Þórgunna's desires, suggesting that Kjartan finds a more appropriate partner, presumably younger and more fertile, as a component of his ascent to manhood.

Though Þórgunna never poses a physical threat to Kjartan as the predatory Katla does to Gunnlaugr, the *Fróðárundur* become a complementary example to that earlier episode. They too use supernatural symbolism to suggest the negative consequences of the romantic or sexual desires of older women, including for the women themselves, for the objects of their affections and for society at large. They also show how promising young men might evade the perils of inappropriately lustful old women, establish their masculine prowess through the social and even figuratively martial dominance of such figures—if only Gunnlaugr had remembered his sledgehammer!—and become sovereign adult males. The *Fróðárundur* thus constitute *Eyrbyggja saga*'s second repudiation of the figure of the *anus amans*, this time not only with respect to her unwelcome interest in younger men, but also with symbolic indications of the importance of menopause to her ineligibility. They implicitly criticise the figure of the sexually active older woman, suggesting that such individuals should curtail their insistent eroticism and submit gracefully to their non-procreative twilight years.

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## LINES IN LAVA. OF METES AND BOUNDS IN OLD ICELAND

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**L**INE-DRAWING IS AN OBVIOUS and necessary feature of law. There are lines, such as the ones marking the legal from the illegal, the ‘in-law’ from the outlaw, or those that define mine from yours. Call them metaphorical, if you wish, though that would not be quite right; but they are a bit more figural than those visible lines drawn in the sand or dirt, or marked by fences, or sighted between boundary stones, or those naturally defined lines that run along watersheds or rivers, even if these lines need not be straight, but twist and turn, the various Rang Rivers of Iceland. A physical line though, with the slightest nudge, starts to behave metaphorically, no differently from the simplest nouns and verbs, and metaphorical lines seem to desire at times to be hard lines too—or bright lines—lines, that is, that are easily discernible, clearly demarcated; a person will be assumed to know damn well when he crosses one, or raises risk levels by tiptoeing up to it. He is on notice.

Bright lines can be notional yet no less real for that—like the forty-ninth parallel that distinguishes most of Canada west of the Mississippi from the United States. Lines like this are hard and bright on maps, indeed they are the creatures of maps, but they can (though at considerable expense) become hard and sharp on the ground—like the thirty-eighth parallel in Korean history: barbed wire, lookout posts, mines, searchlights, infrared and motion detectors. At other times official boundaries and lines of demarcation, though purporting to be geometric lines of no width, are not sharp on the ground at all: like the line between the US and Mexico as seen through the eyes of Donald Trump, who would wish it looked more like the one at the thirty-eighth parallel, and is trying to make it so. But the sharpness of a line like the thirty-eighth parallel generates fuzziness on both sides of it. In other words, the area close to a bright line has a way of getting compromised by that line, becoming something like a part of it, thickening it here, thinning it there.

Lines, as we say, can be bright and hard, or soft and fuzzy. When the lines of law are fuzzy they begin to look like what we call *standards*; the

harder they are, the more they are understood to embody *rules*.<sup>1</sup> The line that separates a rule from a standard is often hard to pin down. Moreover, rules and standards have histories, taking work to uncover and providing grounds for dispute among historians. And plain old lines also have histories, for how we understand them, not just wondering why they are here rather than there, but how we imagine and conceive of them, depends, at least in part, on the available technology of measurement and units of measure, which of course also have a history.

In the American law-school world, by the way, there is a politics of hard and fuzzy lines. The hard lines are associated with the free-market right; make property rights sharp and clear to facilitate trading them. The fuzzy liners are the mushy people loaded with easy fellow-feeling but only for certain preferred groups, the so-called academic left.

But lines—real or virtual—meant to be bright are seldom blur- or fuzz-proof; surely any lawyer worth his salt is supposed to redefine lines when it suits his client's interests, as does many a confessor, and that very fuzzing is what is thought nearly universally to imbue the lawyer and the confessor, especially if a seventeenth-century Jesuit in the eyes of some, with a somewhat fuzzy moral character. But try as we might, we are stuck with interpretation (a process which may also harden as well as fuzz up) with all the suspicions it brings in its train.<sup>2</sup>

Not only do lawyers make things messier or harden things up that are by nature messy enough, but sometimes the very line itself evidences an

<sup>1</sup> Related matters can be discussed in terms of having to make on/off decisions in scalar domains, or face up to the large consequences in bumpy as opposed to smooth rules of liability. See, e.g., Alexander 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Notice that what the laity seems to think of as fuzzing out often involves the lawyer insisting on the jot and tittle. The history of many of the real freedoms that the English common law assisted in generating came from lawyers demanding absolutely no variance in form in the writs and summons that royal officials used to compel a person to appear before an authority. To the laymen such pettifoggery is so much fuzz, but it can just as easily be understood as hardening things up.

And then consider that a thick line need not be a fuzzy line. One can think of a thick line as simply putting a lot of dead space between the two areas thus separated to make sure they remain utterly distinct. An ocean can thus be a thick line, and once we eliminate the wet sand on each side of the Atlantic, it can also be a rather bright and hard line when we are talking about distinguishing, say, Europe and Africa from the Americas. At its edge, though, a thick line will often raise some of the issues any finely drawn bright line might. Consider the frequent international disputes over fishing rights and the extent of territorial waters. See further the discussion of the *gildingr*-line below.

animus, a soul of sorts, and behaves wilfully and wantonly. Portions of Iowa have turned up in Nebraska owing to the whims of the Missouri River and required the US Supreme Court to determine whether some of Iowa thus became Nebraska and *vice versa* (they did not).<sup>3</sup> In geologically active Iceland, glacial boundary rivers are frequently changing course, leading the law in some cases to declare the boundary river to be not the actual river that is, but the river that was, river boundaries thus requiring feats of memory or making sure the old course itself was clearly marked on the dry land either by signs of the former flow or by marking that flow with man-made monuments.<sup>4</sup>

Just what are we to make of these lines that the early Icelandic law required to be drawn in the lava where the courts were held at the Alþing when proceedings threatened to get a bit out of control?

the men selected for court guarding are to scratch two lines around the place where the judges sit, and if men cross these, they are to name witnesses to that effect . . . the case lies with the guards, and they split the fine with the judges.<sup>5</sup>

Hard lines, right? What if the fines to be split are paid in sheep? And the total fine amounts to an odd number of sheep in a society without coinage? Why on earth require the guards to scratch *two* lines in the sand around the judges? Could it be that the first line is meant as a kind of yellow light, the very notion of the yellow light, admitting and enabling the difference between red and green, stop or go, to be ambiguous, not as bright a line as it purports to be; the green, seconds before it is to turn red, has its greenness already compromised and sullied as it must notionally redden somewhat in anticipation of crossing the bright line separating red from green. A stop light is tainted by its half-life. ‘Listen, Þórhallr, you cross the first line, and I am warning you, do not even think of crossing the second . . .’ But maybe instead of that first line—the outer one—working as a threat or a warning, a call to attention (the distinction between warning and threat is fuzzy too, as we well know from personal

<sup>3</sup> *Nebraska v. Iowa* 143 U.S. 359 (1892); *Nebraska v. Iowa* 406 U.S. 117 (1972).

<sup>4</sup> See *Grágás*, II 511 for shifting river mouths as they apply to rights to whales and driftwood: old mouth governs; Ib 98, II 471 for shift of boundary streams: land stays with previous owner. References to *Grágás* throughout are to the edition of Vilhjálmur Finsen, though quotations are taken from the corresponding passages in the translation of Dennis et al., who include Finsen’s pagination within their text. Here and there I make small changes in their translation too trivial to note.

<sup>5</sup> *Grágás*, Ia 72–73; on ‘court rings’ in the archaeological record, see Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson 1991.

experience), it might work perversely to make a person not take the second line quite as seriously as if there were only one line. The two sides of this—whether the two lines cheapen ‘linedom’ or work effectively to get one to think and focus attention—are captured nicely by the difference in these two familiar character types: those who think the yellow light means press the pedal to the floor *vs.* those, to the near-homicidal annoyance of the party of the first part who is following, who stop as soon as the yellow appears.

Moreover, this two-lines-in-lava law adds even more fuzz: ‘If a man hurries out again (*hleypr út*), then he is not fined, but if he lingers then [he is] (*hírir við*).’ But how quick is a hurry, how long a linger? Presumably it depends on rather more than length of time, but also on the facial expressions and bodily gestures of the party concerned; is he shamefaced or apologetic, was he pushed, or does he saunter, or put a challenging big toe just over the first line? Let us count the ways we have of showing respect or disrespect by overplaying or underplaying obedience, of making obedience and disobedience a matter of fuzz and necessary interpretation. Think of a little kid producing a coerced apology.

The temporal thus figures in line-drawing too, the three-day time-period working jurisdictional and substantive magic in laws of seventh-century Kent as well as the laws of medieval Iceland.<sup>6</sup> Then as now it was common to mark distance by time: it is a twenty-minute walk, Polaris is a mere 434 light-years away, and in the early Icelandic law there is the measure of the ‘full day’s journey’.<sup>7</sup>

Some lines are expressly declared to govern for a particular period in time, and are erased once they have served or failed in their function: those two lines scratched around where the judges sit, for instance. Other lines are meant to exist in perpetuity unless people formally undertake to erase them, like boundary stones, to the immortal enmity of the occasional

<sup>6</sup> E.g. *Hlophere and Eadric*, c. 15, in Liebermann 1903–16, I.11, which imposes liability for a householder who hosts a guest for more than three days; the same rule also appears in a collection of laws from some five centuries later known as the *Leges Edwardi Confessoris* §23. The text is in Latin but switches to English for its substance, the very switch indicating that the rule has taken on proverbial force: *quod Angli dicunt, tuo niht gest, þridde niht, o[g]ene hine* ‘as the English say “two nights a guest, third night your own household member”’ (O’Brien 1999, 182); cf. Einar Helgason’s visit to Egill in *Egils saga*, ch. 81.

<sup>7</sup> For ‘travel a full day’s journey’ (*fara fullum dagleiðum*), see e.g. *Grágás*, Ia 61, 90, Ib 16, II 321. Dennis et al. note that in later times it was meant to indicate about twenty-three miles (2000, 42 n. 87).

family corpse buried beneath them whose demonic presence is to protect the position of the stone forever.<sup>8</sup>

If we use time to measure distance, distance returns the favour and measures time, as on the face of an analogue clock, and indeed the basic units of human time, the location and movement of the sun, moon and stars, as when the sun cuts the sky into slices of a pie which it then traverses to mark when you say prime, tierce, sext, etc. Months, days and years are determined by objects traversing, or appearing to traverse space. Or, as in this Icelandic law which employs a remarkable measure: if one 'holds someone or restrains his movement in any way so that the delay is such that he would otherwise have gone the length of an arrow-shot or more, the penalty is lesser outlawry'.<sup>9</sup>

All this is fairly trite and obvious, but it serves as a general introduction to a mixed bag of examples that will follow. I must confess I had to cut out a longish section dealing with the lines separating *in* from *out* in matters of outlawry and sanctuary.<sup>10</sup> I will make gestures toward these subjects, but to more than gesture would transgress the rather hard line that governs the proper length of a lecture (my digressions during the lecture led to a transgression of this rule).

### *Of flexible units of measurement*

Law, as I said, draws lines. It must. How and where to draw them is much of what occupies legislative bodies and courts. Let me start generally with two examples that define *meum* and *tuum*, and another which deals with setting the time at which Sunday work rules begin on Saturday afternoon. Notice what making the anticipation of Sunday extend well into Saturday must mean for the fuzziness inherent in the concept of 'day' or 'when a day properly begins'. Even among us it is not clear whether the day ends at midnight, or when you go to bed, or when you wake up, or even earlier, when you leave work and go home the previous day.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Moving the boundary stone of your neighbour ranks third of the twelve curses of Deuteronomy 27.15–26, well ahead of murdering your neighbour in secret at number ten. See Hrappr in *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 17, who intends his corpse to protect that highly charged symbolic line, the threshold to his home.

<sup>9</sup> *Grágás*, II 365.

<sup>10</sup> See Sverrir Jakobsson 2010.

<sup>11</sup> And despite the fact that Sunday intrudes itself in the church law in *Grágás* on how Saturday is to be treated, the law legislates generally that for calendrical purposes 'a day precedes the night' (*Grágás*, Ia 37). This is perhaps as good an example as any of the density and specificity that characterises *Grágás*.

*The gildingr*

Of the first two examples that follow, one draws a line in the sea; the other tries to set the time in a world without clocks, and in a place where only around the equinoxes do days and nights beat to the rhythm we—in the middle of things nearer to halfway between equator and pole—are used to. In both the sea plays a role, and the beach too.

Consider this law regulating the limits of the landowner's valuable rights to driftage floating off his shoreline:<sup>12</sup>

A man has the right to salvage timber which he finds floating off another man's land if it is beyond the range at which an unsplayed fish can be seen on a boat's side: that is to be a codfish of such a size that when splayed it is an ell wide (19¾ inches) across the ribs. Such a fish is called a *gildingr*. That fish has to be visible on a boat's landward side, seen from the shore on a line from where the tide goes out farthest.

Among several strange elements in this provision is the specificity of determining the size of this specially named fish, named for being the standard cod and thus appropriate to its role in this particular ritual.<sup>13</sup> And not just its size, but which side of the boat it is to be hung over so as to be observed from the shore, as if there could be any doubt.<sup>14</sup> The properly defined *gildingr* requires us to splay him notionally so that we can measure his size. Such measuring is done by educated estimation, though in a society of cod eaters presumably everyone has an idea of what the size of a proper cod is. Yet something about this concern with the cod's size does not seem surprising to me: a certain kind of emerging professionalised law wants to make things look precise, even if they cannot be made precise. This propensity is easily mocked, the mind-deadening diction of boilerplate, the stuff of making lawyers hated, but it evinces good intentions, the desire to define precisely, to nail things down so that we know what the law IS. The intention is to cut off tricksterism were someone to employ a cod, say a fingerling, whose size would clearly rig the proceeding. Here we measure our cod 'precisely' to see if it qualifies as a proper

<sup>12</sup> *Grágás*, Ib 125, II 528.

<sup>13</sup> *Gildingr* would mean something like 'true to form, worthy'; the root *gildr* implicates evaluation, gauging worth, validity, indicating a solid specimen, a full worthy cod. Here followed in the lecture a digression on the idea of standardisation and how it might be related to determining what qualifies as an adequate and valid offering of, say, a lamb or a ram for ancient temple sacrifices. See Laum 1924.

<sup>14</sup> The translation makes that detail more salient. In the original it does not seem silly, but more a natural way of fixing the sightline from the boat to the shore.

cod for playing its role in this ritual, for it in turn will serve as the measuring rod for determining the extent of the shore-owner's reach over the water. In any event, actually splaying the cod and hanging it spread-eagled, so to speak and mix a metaphor, over the side of the boat would make for a unit much too generous to the shore-owner's interests, so we keep that cod whole.

But this *gildingr* is not the sole measure of the boundary line; we also need to situate the *gildingr*-spotter, the person whose eyesight is to be tested for its ability to discern a properly sized cod hanging off the side of a boat. He is not actually mentioned, but he is there by implication, for someone's eyes are needed to spot the *gildingr*, and the place he is to stand is specified quite precisely. He is to stand as far out as he can get and still be considered to be on something that can qualify as land. This is ambiguous land, arguably not land at all, for it is the wettest of the wet sand lying most of the day under water and only appearing as land when the tide is at full ebb.<sup>15</sup> That 'land' is magical in being the least land-like land possible. It can only pass for land at most twice a day, for less than half an hour each time, if that.<sup>16</sup> Magical moments make for magical spaces, a place in many cultures for burying witches and criminals, but note that the designated seer is located at the most advantageous position for maximising the landowner's claims to the sea.

Given all this care in defining the measuring instruments and their location, it may count as a small surprise that no concern is shown to determine the quality of the seer's eyesight, or whether the sun should be shining, though the time the sighting is to take place is fixed by the tide.<sup>17</sup>

We have no saga example to show how this determination worked in practice, but I suspect there was a man who was the district's official *gildingr*-spotter, just as the laws provide elsewhere for assayers to value the various means of payment when cows, cloth, sheep, even catskins, in the absence of coinage, had money functions: these men are called 'law-seer,

<sup>15</sup> Classifying land that only appears about thirty minutes a day from under the sea is in effect an inverted one-drop rule working in favour of land.

<sup>16</sup> The wet-sand line is also magical in the law of several American states bordering on the sea. The public cannot be excluded from it by the landowner. Instead of being a no-man's land it becomes everyone's land.

<sup>17</sup> There is a powerful philological relationship between *tide* and *time* in English. The word *tide* only came to mean the rise and fall of the sea in the late Middle English period. Until then it simply meant time, as in Yuletide. Indeed, both elements in the phrase 'time and tide' are claimed to derive from the same Indo-European root and as a rhetorical figure it is thus a kind of *hendriady*s. The ON cognate *tíðr* means 'time', but not 'tide (of the sea)'.

law-measurer' (*lögsjáandi*, *lögmetandi*), good at appraising and setting values in a world of very thin markets and very little liquidity; these would often be drawn from the five nearest neighbours, but there is no mention that the *gildingr*-spotter was a 'neighbour' in its juridical sense.<sup>18</sup> But for our purposes, the point to be made is that all this precision in determining the means of measurement is used to secure a measure that is about as fuzzy as a bright line drawn in the sea can be. This is not the old three-mile limit, or its replacement, the twelve nautical-mile limit.<sup>19</sup> The measure is dependent on the official seer's vision, and people's willingness to trust he is not squinting excessively so as either to see or not to see that standard cod, having been tempted by one of the parties to sharpen or dull his vision that day. Presumably he is making his judgment before others, with eyesight no better or worse than his, whose presence could influence or constrain him in any number of ways.

His eyesight is the least of the sources of variability in the unit of measurement, for if there is someone who is designated the district *gildingr*-spotter his eyesight is relatively constant. But the tides are not; they vary not just as to when they rise and ebb, but how robustly they do so, varying with the season, the location and other ponderables. For if the Missouri River has a mind of its own, oceans are possessed by daily and even seasonal 'lunacy'. At more moderate latitudes there would be but one daylight moment at which this ritual could take place, and that would not be the same time on any particular day, and the light available would be different, but in June and July in Iceland there would be two times a day, on most days, at which the determination could be carried out.

The line which declares whether the driftwood is mine or yours (the same line governs certain rights to a whale, an extremely valuable item of flotsam, as indeed was driftwood in near-treeless Iceland)<sup>20</sup> can be drawn anywhere from as little as 500 yards to as much as a mile out. When the

<sup>18</sup> E.g. *Grágás*, Ib 141–42, II 215; II 61, 255. The Icelandic law code *Jónsbók*, introduced in 1281 after Iceland passed into the domain of the Norwegian king c.1262, applies the same rule to determining rights to a whale drifting offshore (ch. 65, Ólafur Halldórsson 1904, 203). Evidently the method was used as late as 1881 to determine rights to a dead whale floating offshore; see Dennis et al., II 142, n. 181.

<sup>19</sup> This is usually agreed to be measured, as in the *gildingr* law, from the low-water mark, the bias being, I suppose, to have land-dwelling rule-makers exercise as much sovereignty as possible over Poseidon's and Leviathan's world. Since the wet sand in some places in the world extends to more than a mile, the starting point of the twelve-mile limit matters.

<sup>20</sup> See Miller and Vogt 2015.

*gildingr*-spotter says ‘I see it now’ we get an all-or-nothing decision.<sup>21</sup> So is this a bright-line rule, or the fuzziest of precisely determined lines imaginable? Or is this really a strange form of ordeal? That last question is meant to be rhetorical. A final point: since no one is going to put a buoy out there or would trust it to stay there if they did, this ritual would declare a line of duration of ‘for the nonce’, and then have to be redetermined should the occasion arise, perhaps no more than a week later.<sup>22</sup>

### *Shaft-high sun*

We have just drawn a line in the sand in order to draw a line in the sea. Let us remain on the beach, not to mark distance this time, but to mark time. The laws require that work stop on Saturday in preparation for Sunday when the sun is spear-shaft high (*skapt há söl*); they also provide that a chieftain must arrive at the local spring Thing before the sun sinks to shaft-high.<sup>23</sup> The law then defines shaft-high; in it the weather matters and is addressed. We need to see the sun, or at least the solar disc behind thin clouds, to make the determination, for the sun must be seen to rest atop an imagined spear placed beneath it over the water:

The sun is shaft-high when a man standing on the shore where land and sea meet, with the tide half out, can look out at the ocean where the sun sinks toward the water. And he is to imagine a spear set upright under the sun of such a length that one could reach up to the socket [and viewed, as it were, at a distance of nine paces,] with its point touching the bottom of the sun and the butt of the shaft touching the sea.<sup>24</sup>

Unlike the boatside cod which has all the look of a determination that was actually made, the property rights at issue too valuable not to be contested fairly often, the shaft-high sun determination is a different kettle of fish. It must be made on the fly if made at all. Notice how fictional the exercise is. The spear is imaginary, and nearly everything else is too, for the

<sup>21</sup> Or maybe he says, ‘I can no longer see it.’ One wonders if the *gildingr* started miles out and was rowed in until it appeared, or started in and was rowed out until it disappeared. The latter would better allow for others to test the *bona fides* of the official seer’s vision, and whether it was one or the other would surely alter where the line would be drawn.

<sup>22</sup> For another boundary set by fish, consider this law, alleged to have been made by King Hákon the Good, claimed to apply to ‘the whole country along the coast and as far up inland as the furthest salmon go’; *Hákonar saga góða* ch. 20, in *Heimskringla* I, 175; Finlay and Faulkes 2011–16, I 104.

<sup>23</sup> *Grágás*, Ia 27–28, II 36.

<sup>24</sup> *Grágás*, Ia 28 (the phrase in brackets added from II 36).

determination as defined could not take place anywhere but on the west coast where the sun could be seen sinking to the sea. And then, given the latitude, it could only be a seasonal measurement, the sun unlikely ever to get up to shaft-high for a good three months on either side of the winter solstice and then only at something like ‘high’ noon.<sup>25</sup> Even in the summer, when the sun virtually swings an entire circle around the heavens, still the distance it climbs from the horizon to its maximum altitude is a much smaller swing up and down than down here in London, where it is not as far down as where I live in the northern central United States (I grew up thirty miles south of the forty-fifth parallel in Green Bay, Wisconsin); so a rough measure like this one is a whole lot rougher up there. But like the *gildingr* provision, this one mobilises a lot of specificity in the service of what? Pure virtuality this time,<sup>26</sup> a determination via an exercise of imagination of when it is about early to mid-afternoon. Especially strange is that this purely imaginative exercise stipulates where you are to place your imagined self, not at the high-water mark or the low-water mark as in the boatside cod provision, but halfway between the two. So why this bizarre exercise in specificity to determine a time by a means that could give a two-hour chunk of fuzziness, serviceable for only a couple of months a year in only a few select places?

What we might be seeing is the consequence of putting something like a rule of thumb into the form of a law or legal regulation. Certain kinds of knowledge are just known (without knowing why) by a member of a culture and are not quite articulable in the form of a law or by precise definition or in any better form than by referencing itself, as in those self-defining classifications of people we denominate jerks, or by especially apt vulgar terms I will avoid in print: ‘you know he is just an X, I mean you know, a real X’. My hunch is that the shaft-high sun represents a time everyone would converge on roughly but could not really pin down; it would be like the ‘I know it when I see it’ standard in judging pornography, which is a standard always unfairly mocked as not even pretending to meet the demands of legality. Try for instance to put any number of our rules of eye contact into statute form; the same with rules governing body-space.

<sup>25</sup> Also noted by Dennis (1974, 73 n. 14) in his remarkable dissertation, probably the best thing written on *Grágás*, filled with non-obvious apt insights.

<sup>26</sup> Whole tractates of the Talmud are exercises in pure virtuality, a zone in which the legal imagination can soar and sink unconstrained by reality, since the elaborate sections on the regulation of Temple rites had no Temple in which they were to govern after Titus’s destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, well before most of the regulations had been composed.

‘See ya at shaft-high time’ could thus be used by any native to get two people together within about two hours of time either way, which given the difficulties of travel over rough terrain, the quickly variable weather, the inability to communicate your delay any faster than you can get there anyway, would be the amount of time you would have to give anyone before you could entertain murderous thoughts for their not being ‘on time’.<sup>27</sup>

No, it is not the medieval mind we can blame this on, but more likely the legal mind, whenever and wherever it appears. Again, we see evidence of the parodiable tendency of lawmen to make laws that confirm a layman’s prejudice that lawyers just muck up the simple. But these kinds of arabesques of specificity seem to be the almost necessary consequence (indeed the sought-after end) of competitive legal expertise. So competitive that a minor leitmotif of *Njáls saga*, from its first paragraph on, is the question just who are the top three, or the top one, lawyer(s) in Iceland. Think too of the Talmudic rabbinic culture or Roman juristic culture or the culture that produced the Upanishads, each delighting in hyper-specificity, a love of distinction-making, thought of sometimes ungenerously and sometimes fairly as technicality, which maybe bears a necessary connection to specificity, a kind of legal comic poetry, played out in a culture of one-upmanship: ‘Match this, R. Jehudah, Ulpian, Bergþórr, Njáll, Þórhallr Ásgrímsson, see if you can pick nits better than I can.’ But look at the diction and form of the shaft-high sun provision. Would anyone doubt they were looking at a law?

### *Timing fast-days*

In another context—the beginning- and endpoints of religious fasts—we see a concern to deal with the big swings in light over the course of the year.<sup>28</sup>

Night in the autumn and winter is to be counted as the time when there is no daylight to be seen by a man who, were he there, might look out to sea in cloudless weather. Night in summer is to be counted the time when the sun passes through the northern eighth: the northern eighth extends from the sun’s

<sup>27</sup> Rough and ready as these time measurements are, there is a fairly firm concept of being late, and in some circumstances there are penalties for it; see, e.g., *Grágás*, Ia 43–44. And the laws governing payments and delivery of goods have a multitude of regulations about when it can be said someone did not show up on time. Showing up on time for a duel figures importantly in *Gísla saga*, ch. 2 and *Vatnsdæla saga*, chs 34–35.

<sup>28</sup> Like the shaft-high rule, these time rules are found in the Christian law section of *Grágás*.

arrival midway between northwest and north to its arrival midway between north and northeast (viz.  $337.5^\circ$  to  $22.5^\circ$ ).<sup>29</sup>

The first sentence openly admits that night is to be delayed until somewhere in the range of what we would call astronomical twilight.<sup>30</sup> It is meant to milk as much day out of the hibernal night as possible. No one need be actually looking out to sea; such looking is conceived explicitly as an imaginative exercise. The sea is there as a way of saying, without admitting, that you are to be as generous in your determination of making out a glimmer of light as is possible, willing yourself to imagine seeing an horizon even when it is no longer visible at all. The viewpoint of where to stand looking out is not even confined to the shore, thereby allowing one in his imagination to climb up to some eminence and look out at a virtual sea from a virtual cliff above the shore.

The second sentence, setting when night begins in summer, shows they could go mathematical when they wanted to, dividing the sky into eighths with the northern eighth straddling true north. A summertime night fast by this reckoning is not very long at all, roughly three hours. The concern, obviously, is with making winter fasts as easy as possible. Given the recent rush to force Christian piety on the sagas, this is a nice reminder that medieval Icelanders were not about to face up to Irish standards of self-mortification.<sup>31</sup> Life was hard enough as it was.

Timing religious observance could lead to disputes, not as grand as those generated by setting the date of Easter, but lethal nonetheless. Take this saga case: two brothers wish to partition their inheritance (*Valla-Ljótts saga*, chs 3–4). Ljóttr, the local chieftain, does the dividing to the brothers' satisfaction. This is shortly after Christianity has been led into the law (1000 CE) and the division takes place on Michaelmas (29th September). A certain Halli, intending to contest Ljóttr's dominance in the district, summons Ljóttr: 'The law, I believe, prohibits working on Michaelmas even if

<sup>29</sup> *Grágás*, Ia 36. On marking points of the compass see Hastrup 1985, ch. 1.

<sup>30</sup> As low as eighteen degrees below the horizon thus appearing as night to most of us, but the dimmest stars are still not quite visible. Compare civil and nautical twilight.

<sup>31</sup> Recall, for instance, Kjartan's Lenten dry fast that drew crowds to watch him sup rather fully on what we would think the healthiest of diets (*Laxdæla saga*, ch. 45). 'Humble' Kjartan liked drawing adoring crowds. (Here, in the lecture, I interjected a '*pace* Haki' to my host, Haki Antonsson; see, e.g., Haki Antonsson 2018. I was mortified when he walked out about five minutes later, which he insisted was only to put name-cards in their proper places for the post-lecture dinner.)

it doesn't fall on Sunday. I am summoning you for violating the holiday' (*Þat ætla ek við lög varða at vinna á Michaelsmessu, þótt hon væri eigi á dróttinsdegi, ok mun ek stefna þér um helgibrigði*).<sup>32</sup> Answers Ljótr: 'But the faith is still new' (*Ung er enn trúan*). Ljótr knows he should set a good example, but claims that his transgression is a mere inadvertence, not meriting a summons. Nonetheless, he agrees to pay an amount Halli sets in the interest of peace and 'because I do not wish to anger the angel' (*eigi vil ek reiði engilsins*) (242).

Later, another chieftain admonishes Halli for taking money for such a 'trivial case' (*fyrir litla sþk*, 243); he warns him to expect retaliation and advises him to move out of the district. Halli ignores the advice and, predictably, Ljótr ambushes him. Halli asks the reason for the attack, to which Ljótr answers: 'so that you won't be giving me any more lessons about observing holidays' (*þú skalt eigi optar kenna mér helgihaldit*, 245).

<sup>32</sup> *Valla-Ljóts saga*, 241 (my translation). This is one of those cases that can be prosecuted by 'anyone who wishes to' (*sá á sþk er vill*). According to Heusler 1911, §§61, 102, the sagas give us no examples of such cases. But this seems to be one such case (probably the only one, for it is not wise ever to doubt Heusler); see *Grágás*, Ia 28, II 33 where all Saturday and Sunday work violations are to be enforced by 'anyone who wishes to'. It would seem that work prohibitions that govern Saturday afternoons and Sundays would also apply to those mandatory feast days of which Michaelmas is one (Ia 30–31; see esp. Ia 32, noting that, with exceptions of no relevance here, feast days and Sunday share the same form of observance). But is the judicial 'work' Ljótr undertakes here considered to be 'work' within the Sunday and holiday work prohibition rules? The *Staðarhólsbók* version of the church law assumes that walking boundaries is permitted on holidays (II 33), but boundary-walking need not take place the same day as the main bargaining and warranting of the sale of land and presumably on partition (*Grágás*, Ib 80; II 33, 420–21; on partition generally see Ib 86–89, II 446–50); but then states, in another section specifically governing partition and evaluation of land, that such proceedings are to be valid 'though [made on] a legal holiday or in Lent' with this obscure proviso, 'wherever there are no district courts' (II 504). But it should also be noted that Rogation Week does not prevent the business of a spring Thing (*Grágás*, Ia 100), though in this too there is some equivocation since some subset of possible summons are not to be made at that Thing should it fall in that week. In any event, even Halli does not suggest that the partition is void, only that a fine must be paid. Of course the laws we have are much later than the events depicted in the saga, but it seems that though such divisions should ideally not take place on Sunday or holidays, exceptions were made, and even when such exceptions do not govern, the partition is not voided. It seems that Halli would be acting no less officiously in the thirteenth century than he was in the early eleventh.

Saga wit is quite simply to die for. With continued mordant irony, Ljótr tells Halli that we will let the ‘angel’ decide whose motives, yours or mine, were more excusable. Ljótr’s wit is to make the archangel Michael the only real party of interest, not some busybody like Halli, certainly not Ljótr himself; it is properly Michael’s claim and he will choose the winner in this bilateral ordeal.<sup>33</sup> Here we see equitable concerns working to fuzz out stricter, brighter rules regarding holiday observance. Ljótr suspects that lack of bad intention and lack of knowledge should be grounds for cutting him some slack, to which it seems everyone agrees including Michael, and in fact Halli is not moved by piety at all but is only using the new layers of rule-density that Christianity has added to an already rule-dense culture to find grounds to provoke or pursue enmity.

### *Arrow-shots*

Remember that arrow-shot used to measure time by how far it would take to walk it? The arrow-shot is an ubiquitous measure of distance in the laws and figures greatly in the regulations of various forms of outlawry: the court of confiscation of the outlaw’s property must be held an arrow-shot outside the fence of the outlaw’s domicile; lesser outlawry (*fjorbaugsgarðr*) allowed for sanctuary within an arrow-shot of three specifically designated safe houses and along the way measured from his own person until the lesser outlaw could get to a ship to take him abroad for three years.<sup>34</sup>

The Norse term for the space created by that arrow-shot is *orskotshelgi*; all three elements of the compound word have English cognates, ‘arrow-shot-holy’. The term *helgi* is rich in significance, participating in a constellation of concepts that mark out zones that are drawn with lines of varying thickness in *Grágás* and as *mund* in earlier Germanic law codes. *Helgi* largely embodies the no-harm principle, and though that is an oversimplification, it will serve well enough. A person declared *óhelgi* ‘un-holy’ is one who has forfeited his right not to be harmed. In the laws, as is confirmed by the sagas, issues of self-defence, and other claims where a right to kill are asserted, are raised procedurally by the defendant declaring his victim

<sup>33</sup> One need not argue for ecclesiastical influence to account for Ljótr claiming that state of mind mattered. So-called early legal systems understood the concepts of accident, intention, purpose, knowledge, etc., and how these might bear on culpability.

<sup>34</sup> Heusler (1911, 130, 159–63) and Liebermann (1910) see lesser outlawry as a very different species of sanction from *skóggangr* or full outlawry that denies passage. The latter operates in the realm of a death sentence, the former in exile.

to have died *óhelgi* with respect to him, having forfeited his right to no-harm by virtue of wrongs he has done the defendant.<sup>35</sup>

This line which marks a person's inviolability is extended to apply to a space around him, a space of sanctuary that is movable and flexible, much as our notion of bodily space is flexible. Compare for instance the space you can claim to have rights to in a lift when you and only one other occupy it, with the space you can claim when it is crowded.<sup>36</sup> It also extends into an amorphous social space, so that giving someone an unflattering nickname or otherwise issuing an insult can deprive the slanderer of his *helgi*.

The verb *helga* means 'to hallow', as is done at the beginning of a Thing session when a special peace is inaugurated; hallowing is about drawing lines and marking off, creating various kinds of sanctuary both temporal and spatial. Hallowing also figures in the formal staking of land claims, by performing a ritual which can involve arrow-shots.<sup>37</sup> A certain

<sup>35</sup> It is also possible to raise the issue of self-defence as a plaintiff by summoning the person you harmed to *óhelgi*; see e.g. *Grágás*, Ia 181–82; *Njáls saga*, chs 64–66. The difference between being 'un-holy' and being outlawed is that the outlaw loses his immunity with regard to everyone, whereas in matters of self-defence the person declared *óhelgi* is only so with regard to the person defending himself, or those rightfully defending the person being attacked. The sacral aura imbuing the arrow-shot also figures when Hagar goes a 'bow-shot' away from her son as she awaits what she expects will be his slow death; Gen. 21.16. For more, see Miller 2006, 135–39.

<sup>36</sup> The word *helgi* finds itself in various compounds used to define hallowed spaces or times: thus we have *pinghelgi*, the inviolability of the public moots, *fiskhelgi*, which marks out rights of flotsam and jetsam. The word gives rise to the common Norse names Helgi (m.), Helga (f.), which were taken up by the Slavs as Oleg and Olga. Compare the Arabic idea of *harem* being off-limits, a space forbidden to all except those specially privileged, or the related biblical notion of *herem*, a kind of anti-sanctuary. To counter arguments made in the context of lawsuits that 'you' stop at your skin, the laws clarify that it still counts as a 'blow' 'even though clothes or mail or a helmet lies between' (*Grágás*, Ia 147). One can see how the need for such clarification arose, as when defensive armour really ensured that there was little damage to the person it covered. That reproduces an acceptable argument made all the time in pick-up sports: 'no harm, no foul'.

<sup>37</sup> Cf., e.g., *Landnámabók*, 229 (S 189, H 156) (bearing fire around the bounds) with the way Helgi the Lean, acting out his name, manages his hallowing by setting up large fires at river-mouths (S 218, H 184): *gerði eld mikinn við hvern vatsós ok helgaði sér svá allt herað* (252). Helgi's method suggests that one could spare oneself riding around the perimeter by letting a drainage basin be claimed via its mouth. That gives a very different sense to the idea of the 'oral formulaic' from that which it usually has in medieval studies.

Eiríkr is intending to claim land presumably by bearing fire around it, but he is beaten to the punch by Qnundr the Wise who ‘shot over the river with a flaming arrow and thus hallowed for himself the land to the west of the river’.<sup>38</sup> It was obviously the movement of the firebrand that was ‘performative’.<sup>39</sup>

The same source that memorialises Qnundr the Wise’s fire-arrow preserves an account in which the variability of the arrow-shot-*helgi* figures in the outcome of a dispute.<sup>40</sup> The sons of Qnundr (not Qnundr the Wise but some other Qnundr) bring an outlawry action against Qrn for grazing his sheep on their property and a judgment is entered that *Qrn skyldi falla óheilagr fyrir Qnundarsonum hvervetna nema . . . í qrskotshelgi við landeign sína* ‘Qrn should fall justifiably (*óheilagr*) at the hands of the sons of Qnundr if he ventured an arrow-shot outside his own farm’. The sons of Qnundr keep a constant watch, and eventually catch Qrn driving cattle off his land; they kill him, *ok hugðu menn at hann mundi óheilagr fallit hafa* ‘and men thought that he had fallen justifiably’. But Qrn’s brother pays a certain Þormóðr, who has a strong arm and a strong bow, to shoot an arrow. His arrow manages to put Qrn’s body within an arrow-shot of his farm. The result is that the Qnundarsynir, Qrn’s killers, are themselves

<sup>38</sup> *ok varð þá Qnundr skjótari ok skaut yfir ána með tundurora ok helgaði sér svá landit fyrir vestan ok bjó milli á (Landnámabók, 234 (S198, H166)).* It is of interest that in the Norwegian Gulathing law a man can claim ‘as far as he can throw his sickle’ beyond the fence he has built around grain fields or meadows (NGL, I.58, §145).

<sup>39</sup> Qnundr the Wise’s tricksterism with fire is more than matched by King Magnús Bareleg’s with what it meant to sail a ship. *Magnúss saga berfætts* ch. 10 suggests a ritualised way to formalise a claim to land where islands lie close to the coast and may or may not at various tide levels be fully islands. Are these lands to be counted as islands or as part of the mainland? This time the measuring unit is the draught of a ship with a rudder. The Scots concede that ‘King Magnús was to have all the islands that lie to the west of Scotland, all those that a ship with a rudder attached could travel between and the mainland. So when King Magnús came from the south to Kintyre, then he had a light warship dragged across Kintyre isthmus with the rudder fastened in position. The king himself sat on the raised deck holding the tiller and thus gained possession of the land, what lay on the port side . . . Longships are often dragged across it’ (Finlay and Faulkes 2011–16, III 128; I substitute Kintyre for their Saltíri). Compare the least landlike land where the *gildingr*-spotter was to stand, which was more sea than land, with Magnús turning dry sand about a foot above sea level into sea.

<sup>40</sup> *Landnámabók, 354 (H 307, S 348).*

outlawed.<sup>41</sup> *Ǫrn* had not lost his inviolability, for he was still within the lawful sanctuary provided by an arrow-shot.

The Old Icelandic prose style, the details of the account, the concern to name real people, make this story look rather plausible, but then too it has the look of a folktale, the standard kind of legalistic tricksterism common to folktale, and enabled by the layman's suspicions of anything smacking of legal cunning which ends by making 'legalism' a pejorative term. But either way, truth or folktale, the story shows that the large amount of play-in-the-joints in the units and means of measurement was something the Icelanders themselves thought story-worthy, no less than we do when we hear tell of it. Indeed, given the variables—the bow's draw-weight, the archer's strength, the type of arrow, its feathering, angle of elevation, barometric pressure, temperature, altitude, wind—they decided to legislate on the matter, suggesting that the variability of an arrow-shot caused trouble in the real world and that people gamed it. In one manuscript of the laws we find, marked as a new law, the following:<sup>42</sup>

An arrow-shot-*helgi* is now to be two long-hundred (240) legal fathoms measured on flat land.

This is a reasonably precise measurement, but since it is about 500 metres, a distance not possible as a real arrow-shot, given that even an English longbow with draw-weights reaching an incredible 190 pounds (86 kg) could not reach 400 metres at the most, it ends by making the arrow-shot a figurative measure, a tall tale, but in fathoms very mundane and rather precise.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> It is not altogether clear from the narrative whether *Ǫrn* was driving his own animals off his land or strays that might well have been sent onto his land so as to entice him outside his safe zone in order to drive them off.

<sup>42</sup> *Grágás*, II 352. Compare the similar development of a 'cartload' (*hlass*, *hlasshvalr*) for measuring how much a tenant gets of a whale that washes up on the land he is renting: 'as much as a single draft animal can pull on thawed ground over flat land, given that the whale is twenty ells or longer'. Then a new law pins the cartload down as 'six eight-quarter loads, half blubber, half *rengi*', which is the meat under the grooved underside of finback whale (II 516–17). A load, a *vætt*, was eighty pounds of eight ten-pound quarters, so the tenant gets 480 pounds of meat and fat. Note too what happens when a 'quarter' (*fjórðungr*) becomes the term for a fixed amount of weight; a load can thus have eight quarters, the stickiness or grease in the history of words working havoc with the diction of measurement, much like our ounce, one/sixteenth of a pound, deriving from the Latin for 'twelfth'.

<sup>43</sup> See Strickland and Hardy 2005, 408–10, with most shots topping out at around 300 metres. Very few people I know could have drawn such a bow for more than

*The dogs bark (or the silence of the dogs?)*

If arrow-shots are fuzzy but eminently practical, consider this way of drawing a line separating in from out, employing sound rather than sight or arm-strength. This is from *Gísla saga*, and the events take place in Norway. Attackers set Gísli's father's farm on fire; some of the people inside break out and, hidden by the smoke, reach the safety of the mountains 'beyond dogs' bark' (*ór hunda hljóðum*).<sup>44</sup> Both the *Íslenzk fornrit* editors and the most recent English translator append a note to the passage explaining that 'because they could not hear the dogs, they were safe'.<sup>45</sup> Dead wrong. Not hearing the dogs hardly makes Gísli's party safe unless it is also true that the dogs cannot hear or smell them.

The phrase has a quasi-judicial ring to it; it is a way of indicating that a fugitive has got far enough away to have objectively eluded his pursuers. He is in the zone where he is no longer being 'hounded' because the dogs are no longer warning their master *of*, and by so doing warning any intruders *off*, by indicating to them what the dog had already told his master.

But real dogs need not be involved. In *Orkneyinga saga* ch. 61, one Hávarðr and a companion, fleeing avengers, express relief because they believe themselves 'beyond dogs' bark',<sup>46</sup> but they are sadly mistaken. Only men are chasing them. What the passage shows is that the term 'beyond dogs' bark' had indeed acquired a technical meaning, marking where a fugitive's *de facto* sanctuary began.

*The law-fence and the gildingr of a man*

*Grágás* defines a legal fence, literally a law-fence (*löggarðr*),<sup>47</sup> that one landowner can compel a neighbouring one to join him in building; it draws

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a second. Skeletal deformations of medieval bowmen reveal the costs involved in using a yew longbow, despite the advantage it gave over crossbows in rate of fire, with reasonably effective penetrating force too.

<sup>44</sup> *Gísla saga*, 13. Old Norse *hljóð*, cognate with English 'loud', is an auto-antonym, meaning both itself and its opposite, noise and silence. The preposition *ór* fairly indicates that *hljóð* here is properly understood as bark or noise, not the silence of the dogs. For a special case of auto-antonymy see further the Epilogue to my *Outrageous Fortune* (Miller, forthcoming Autumn 2020).

<sup>45</sup> Regal 2003, 7, 201 n. 5.

<sup>46</sup> *Nú eru vit komnir ór hundahljóði* 'now we have got beyond dogs' bark' (*Orkneyinga saga* 1965, 134).

<sup>47</sup> It is remarkable how often the word *lög* 'law' figures as the initial element of a compound bearing both adjectival and substantive senses in the Icelandic laws. Recall the law-seer and law-measurer above.

a rather thick line when we compare it to our chain-linked or barbed-wire fences. Lacking much wood, Icelanders built their fences from what they had at hand: turf and stones. Here are the specifications of a law-fence (*Grágás*, Ib 90, II 451):

five feet thick at ground-level and three at the top. From the base it should come up to the shoulder of a man whose arm-size gives valid (*gildar*) ells and fathoms.

Man, here, is the measure of all things, not in the sense Protagoras meant, but rather to indicate that the human body will be looked to to provide units of measure. Feet measure the base of the fence and the width across the top, these fences (walls) being substantial constructions, demanding much labour to build and maintain. But the foot, deemed suitable for widths, is abandoned when measuring the height of the law-fence. Instead, we look to the shoulder-height of a man with a certain size arm, the length of his arms serving as a proxy for how high his shoulders are likely to be. His arms must be such that he is a truly standard-issue man, a *gildingr* of a man, one whose arms match up with proper (*gildar*) ells and fathoms, both of which measures are derived from arm-length (really and philologically), and were officially marked on the church wall at the Alþing. An ell is what its name suggests, the length from the *el*bow, that is the bend (bow) in the ell<sup>48</sup> to the fingertips, in Iceland coming to 19¾ inches, as noted before; the fathom is the measure from fingertip to fingertip of arms stretched out horizontally, coming to about six feet, but it seems the core sense of the Germanic ‘fathom’ was that those arms should fold in and hug another person.<sup>49</sup> Strange, is it not, how this law shifts the units of measure when it goes vertical, and then makes the vertical unit dependent on the horizontal extent of an idealised man’s arms?

This is a thick fence, which means it might well be called a wall, and some render *garðr* as ‘wall’. The regulations governing its building, maintenance and location also require that irrational salients along boundary lines be smoothed out; these laws are models of hard-nosed good sense. But fences are hard to keep from becoming symbolic and magical, for they mark a special place, a line in the sand. Fences fence in and fence out, dividing not only what is mine from yours, but in the world of the Icelanders separating what is human from, a mere arrow-shot outside the *garðr*, the world of demons and outlaws, and unbaptised dead children,

<sup>48</sup> See *OED*, s.v. ell, n.1; *Grágás*, II 288–89.

<sup>49</sup> In both OE and ON the linear measure of around six feet coexists with the sense of enfolding in one’s arms, embracing.

the world outside the law, with 'law' bearing in part the sense of a geographical space as it does in the term 'Danelaw', for instance. Fences even divide up one's own property into zones, in Iceland marking off the *tún*, a more valued space, where the richest hay was grown; only the fence one set at the boundary was meant to separate mine from yours, 'yours' encompassing what belonged to neighbours as well as enemies, strangers, outlaws and monsters.

One not only shot out from the fence to mark, as we saw, the location where an outlaw's court of confiscation was to be held; the laws also envisaged shooting in from it to measure by an arrow-shot a reduction in your rights to your own property. Suppose you have hay stacked on your land within an arrow-shot of another man's land. You are required to build a law-fence around it, because it is just too tempting for your neighbour's cows, horses, and sheep. If they eat your unfenced-in hay lying less than an arrow-shot inside your own boundary you have no claim.<sup>50</sup> The hay loses its *helgi*, for it too carries with it legal notions of a vulnerable inviolability.<sup>51</sup>

### *Concluding matters*

I have perhaps erred on the side of the strange and peculiar as a way of drawing a line around this talk. I have not been quite fair to the tough-minded practical intelligence that pervades the laws. I think some of the strangeness of the material I have presented might lie in the failures of our own imagination to conceive adequately what it meant to live in a world in which the degrees of precision were rather larger than we are used to, and the strangeness that still remains is really the strangeness of a certain kind of legal grammar and diction applied in domains we would not think

<sup>50</sup> *Grágás*, Ib 97–98; presumably this indicates that no law-fence had yet been completed on the boundary separating you from your neighbour.

<sup>51</sup> Animals and vegetables both have *helgi* which can be lost; if, for instance, a dog bites someone and was not properly tethered the dog loses its *helgi*, as does a polar bear for the same reason (*Grágás*, Ib 187, II 371). The medieval Icelandic world, it appears on cruising the web, is beloved of cranky libertarians. They see it as a society committed to minimal government, with no intrusive regulation, privatisation to the nth degree. My work on Icelandic feud is at times cited as evidence for this, somewhat to my horror. These people have not read the laws, it seems, where they would find myriad intrusions of the communal interest into the 'private' domain, like these dealing with the compromised nature of your property rights within an arrow-shot inside your boundary. Hyperregulation is the impression the laws give, not freedom from it, especially as regards property and the application of the remarkable poor-law.

to apply it to. The arrow-shot as a measure mostly worked for what the Icelanders needed to use it for and when it didn't, they tightened it up but kept the name; it became a metaphor rather than the thing itself, just as I am six feet, but not six-footed, not quite Gregor Samsa yet.

One final data-point: Though the official ell was drawn on the Alþing church wall, as I have just noted, the law excused deviations from it if they were off by no more than five percent (*Grágás*, Ib 169, II 289–90). Some people undoubtedly were quite aware that buying by the longer but still legal ell and selling by the shorter one could yield a nice ten-percent gain on top of whatever profit was realised were they to use an ell measuring up exactly to the one on the church wall. Ten percent, by the way, was the legal rate of interest (*Grágás*, Ib 140, II 213). But the Icelanders lived by making compromises, often forced upon them by the give in their measuring instruments and the units of measurement themselves. Praised be the fuzz, lest exactitude bring all transactions and exchanges to a standstill or deny all justice, as it did in Portia's denial of it to Shylock under the guise of requiring an unachievable exactitude in the means of cutting a 'just pound'.<sup>52</sup> Consider that without that fuzz, without that give in the joints, those maximally beautiful Viking warships would have broken apart in the sea.

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<sup>52</sup> For a fuller discussion of Portia's unjust administering of justice see my *Eye for an Eye* (Miller 2006), ch. 6. Notice the play on 'just' meaning both 'exact' and 'rightful'.

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## REVIEWS

SKALDIC POETRY OF THE SCANDINAVIAN MIDDLE AGES. VOLUME VIII. POETRY IN *FORNALDARSÖGUR*. Edited by MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS. *Brepols*. Turnhout, 2017. xcvi + 1076 pp. ISBN 978-2-503-51900-5.

This is volume eight of a nine-volume series, of which four volumes are yet to be published. The aim of the series is to provide a new and complete edition of a very large corpus of medieval verse preserved in (mostly) Icelandic manuscripts. The international editorial board composed of seven respected scholars of Old Norse–Icelandic literature, ably led by Margaret Clunies Ross of the Universities of Sydney and Adelaide, has brought together a large and impressive group of specialists in each of the varieties of this poetry. Their editions follow sound rules giving the best possible readings of the texts as well as the relevant manuscript variants. Each body of poetry is presented in detail, with English translations, commentary and bibliographical guides, as well as various indexes and glossaries of technical terms. The editions of the poetry are mostly based on new readings of the manuscript material. In addition, detailed introductions are provided for each volume, with extensive information on the different corpora that are gathered there. The four volumes that are already published have been warmly welcomed by the academic community and there is no doubt that the one under review here will be received with the same enthusiasm, possibly even more so as it incorporates a substantial body of poetry that has hitherto not been considered part of the skaldic corpus.

Like the others, this volume consists of two books. It contains poetry from twenty-one sagas belonging, or related to, a sub-group of medieval Icelandic sagas, the *fornaldarsögur* (legendary or mythical-heroic sagas). In addition, the editors have judiciously decided to include an important work from the early thirteenth century, *Merlínussþá*, which is Gunnlaugur Leifsson's (d. 1219) Old Icelandic version in poetic form of *Prophetiae Merlini* by Geoffrey of Monmouth. They have also added *Skaufhalabálkr*, a fourteenth-century autobiographical poem narrated by a fox, Skaufhali, and attributed to the Icelandic poet Svartr from the farm of Hofstaðir in western Iceland.

In the original planning for the complete edition of the skaldic corpus, the editors did not intend to publish the poetry from the legendary sagas. However, a discussion initiated by Prof. Rory McTurk at the International Saga Conference in Sydney in 2000 led to their inclusion, though most of this poetry is not composed in the most common skaldic metre, *dróttkvætt*. The rationale behind this was that the same applies to a considerable amount of poetry that is customarily included in the skaldic corpus and is edited in the other volumes. Indeed, some of the poetry from the Kings' Sagas is composed in similar metres to those of the *fornaldarsögur*, for example *fornyrðislag* and *málaháttir*, while some of the poetry in the *fornaldarsögur* sagas is composed in *dróttkvætt*. Furthermore, the poetry of the legendary sagas is preserved in a narrative setting, as is much of the poetry forming the received skaldic corpus. Finally, a complete edition of this poetic corpus, meeting modern standards, was lacking. The felicitous decision was therefore made to add this body of poetry to the editing project.

Like all the volumes of the series, this one opens with a succession of sections presenting important information to readers. Between the cover and the fly-leaf, as well as at the end of the volume, the designers have included an example of a stanza with its critical apparatus, along with captions indicating the function of each of its parts: the stanza itself, the supposed prose order, its translation, explanations of kennings, lists of manuscripts in which the stanza is found, description of the prose context in which the stanza occurs, etc. This provides a very convenient visual guide to users about to read the volume.

The more traditional front matter is followed by a preface by the volume editor, Margaret Clunies Ross, in which she acknowledges the important work of the eleven contributing editors, all experts in their field. They are Beatrice La Farge, Peter Jorgensen, Wilhelm Heizmann, Russell Poole, Hubert Seelow, Hannah Burrows, Richard L. Harris, Rory McTurk, Philip Lavender and the late Desmond Slay. Furthermore, Margaret Clunies Ross and Kari Ellen Gade, in addition to their work as general editors of the series, have edited some of the texts. The preface is followed by indispensable information about abbreviations, sigla used, technical terms and the contributors. At the end of the volume, the editors have included different indexes as well as an impressive bibliography.

The introduction to the volume is written by its editor, Margaret Clunies Ross, except for the section on metres. Parts of it are revisions of sections from the introductions to earlier volumes, but the rest offers an interesting and illuminating presentation of the *fornaldarsögur* and their poetry. An opening section describes the saga genre in which most of the poetry in the volume is to be found. This is a comprehensive, up to date and very useful overview of the origins of this group of sagas, its typical subject matter and the poetry it contains. The present reviewer has no issues with this section and welcomes the author's discussion of the possible early development of this group of sagas. Even though the manuscript evidence does not support this hypothesis, other evidence does. Indeed, the nature of the poetry in many of the *fornaldarsögur* indicates that the inclusion of poetry in narratives of legendary heroes was already common at least by the twelfth century, and that these narratives may have been written down around the same time as the earliest Kings' Sagas. The author also insists on the importance of poetry in most of the *fornaldarsögur*. Some of the poetry is arguably quite old and probably circulated in oral form before being incorporated into written narratives. Some of it is more recent and may have been composed for the sagas, which indicates that prosimetry was a defining feature of the genre.

This justifies the inclusion of verse from outlier texts such as *Þjalar-Jóns saga* and *Mágus saga jarls*. Boundaries between saga genres are notoriously fluid and these two sagas are customarily viewed as autochthonous (as opposed to translated) chivalric romances or *ridðarasögur*. Exceptionally for that subgenre, these two contain poetry and are therefore included in this corpus.

In earlier volumes of the series, the poetry is in most cases ascribed to named poets who existed historically. The poetry of each skald is therefore preceded by his biography, and all his poetry is printed together irrespective of whether it is preserved in one or several works or prose contexts. Though most of the poetry is

spoken by characters of the *fornaldarsögur*, they cannot be considered as poets in the same way, as verse is the medium in which they communicate with each other. Therefore, the poetry is arranged in chapters according to the saga from which it stems. The only exception is Starkaðr Stórvirksson. Despite his legendary status, he is included in medieval lists of poets. The editors felt therefore that he was entitled to a biography.

The section on literary history is followed by a description of the manuscripts of the *fornaldarsögur*. Here again, the editorial practices diverge slightly from those in other volumes. Instead of discussing individual manuscript witnesses for each saga, a general presentation of the manuscripts containing this corpus is preferred. This is a very useful overview which to my knowledge did not exist before for this group of sagas. The manuscripts are presented in three groups, respectively from the fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and finally post-reformation manuscripts. The result is a panorama of the manuscript tradition of the *fornaldarsögur*, which suggests certain trends, such as the genealogical ordering of these sagas based on the family ties between their heroes, or the association of sagas belonging to this genre with certain *Íslendingasögur* (sagas about early Icelanders). There is a minor error on page lxvii concerning the provenance of one of the manuscripts. Eyri is in Seyðisfjörður in the Westfjords, not in the better-known fjord bearing the same name in eastern Iceland.

Another important contribution made in the introduction is the section penned by Kari Ellen Gade on the different metres of the poetry in the volume. It describes the main metres (*dróttkvætt* and various forms of Eddic metre) and draws attention to several noteworthy facts, the first being that, owing to the late date of most *fornaldarsögur* manuscripts, individual stanzas may have changed through linguistic evolution, but also that these changes may have altered the metres. A second is that some evidence concerning the age of the poetry can be inferred from these changes, as well as indications of later additions to the poetry contained in the sagas. None of these suggestions can be viewed as proof of early or late dating of the verse.

Margaret Clunies Ross writes the next section of the introduction on 'Structure, style and diction' in this corpus of poetry. This is arguably its most stimulating part, as it offers a review of literary features of the corpus by addressing questions of genre, style, the use of kennings and other poetic devices as well as the relationship with both older and younger poetry, and that of the verse with its prose context. As the author states in the final paragraph of the section, much remains to be done, but her presentation opens avenues of research for those who wish to pursue them. Among the aspects of the poetry of the *fornaldarsögur*, as highlighted by Clunies Ross, are dialogue and autobiographical poems. Both types have parallels in other corpora but also contain features characteristic of this one. Dialogues are more frequently antagonistic, and the autobiographical poems are spoken by male characters, not female as in the *Poetic Edda*. The possibility of resorting to both high and low style is productive, as can be seen in the remarks about the poetry of *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, which is stylistically as well as metrically more elaborate than most of the poetry in the *fornaldarsögur*. The author suggests that this may

be a way to underscore the nobility of Ragnarr and his progeny, which included several important families in medieval Iceland. Another insight that the present reviewer found particularly interesting concerned the poetry of *Friðþjófs saga* and its special blend of love themes and navigation in stormy weather. Though not explicitly stated, this association of passionate feelings and powerful natural phenomena can explain why the saga became so popular in the Romantic period, when the Swedish poet Esaias Tegnér paraphrased it in his epic poem *Frithiofs saga* from 1825.

The poetry itself, with its critical apparatus, extends over one thousand pages. Spelling is normalised, though this poses some challenges for the *fornaldarsögur*, as most of the manuscripts are so late. However, the board of editors wisely opted for the thirteenth-century standard, which readers will be most familiar with.

A short review does not allow full discussion of either the poetry or the work done by individual editors. The poetry is both splendid and varied, as readers will either find or rediscover. A good example is provided by the verse from *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, edited by Hannah Burrows, with the ominous dialogue poem between the eponymous heroine and her dead father, or the riddle contest between her son, King Heiðrekr, and Óðinn himself in the guise of Gestumblindi, and finally the superb epic poem *Hlöðskviða* narrating a tragic fratricidal battle between Goths and Huns. Angantýr's lament upon finding his brother's dead body on the battlefield culminates in these memorable lines (p. 487): '*Bölvat er okkr; bróðir; bani em ek þinn orðinn; þat mun æ uppi; illr er dómr norna!*' 'We are cursed, brother; I have become your slayer; that will always be remembered; the judgement of the norms is evil.'

Other famous lines from the *fornaldarsögur* are '*Hjuggu vér með hjörvi*' 'We hewed with the sword' that opens each of all but one of the twenty-nine stanzas of *Krákumál*, edited by Rory McTurk, or this beautiful half-stanza from *Örvar-Odds saga*, edited by Margaret Clunies Ross (p. 834): '*Hrafn flýgr austan af háam meiði; flýgr honum eptir örn í sinni. Þeim gefek erni efstum bráðir; sá mun á blóði bergja mínu*' 'A raven flies from the east from a tall tree; an eagle flies after him in company. I will provide meat for the last eagle; that one will taste my blood.'

Finally, the present reviewer would like to applaud the inclusion of *Merlínusspá* and *Skaufhalabálkr* in the volume, though they are not poetry from the legendary sagas. The former is admirably introduced and edited by Russell Poole. As an early translation in verse of a Latin prose text, *Merlínusspá* is of great interest for several reasons. One is that we know its author, the prominent Icelandic cleric Gunnlaugr Leifsson, who lived into the thirteenth century and authored several texts in Latin. The translation shows good understanding of Latin. Therefore, comparing it with the Latin original can give important lexicographical information on the meaning of Old Icelandic words. From the perspective of translation studies, the question why Gunnlaugr decided to compose a poem instead of translating prose to prose demands an answer. His choice of metre and style indicates that he is referring to an autochthonous pagan, or semi-pagan, tradition of verse prophecies, i.e. Eddic poems such as *Völuspá*. He was obviously well acquainted with contemporary secular poetry, as can be seen in his use of kennings as in skaldic poetry.

*Skaufhalabálkr* is a very different piece, edited by Kari Ellen Gade. Her introduction thoroughly reviews the preceding literature on the poem and gives a clear and complete presentation of what can be known about it. It is believed to have been composed in the late fourteenth century by a Svartir from Hofstaðir in the Westfjords, though the attribution is uncertain. It is both humorous and entertaining and provides a distinctively Icelandic perspective on the European beast epic. Skaufhali is a fox who is wounded when attempting to hunt a sheep to feed his family. The stark environment in which the events are staged is in keeping with the country's climate. After many a misadventure, the fox returns in bad shape to his wife and tells her the story, parodying the tradition of autobiographical poems composed on their deathbeds by heroes of *fornaldarsögur* such as Órvar-Oddr.

The cultural importance, and in many cases beauty, of the poetry in the eighth volume of the *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* series make it a worthy addition to the bookshelves of anyone interested in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. The general editors as well as the editors of poetry from individual sagas deserve praise for the great care and professionalism with which this extensive corpus has been presented and edited. The quality of their work will ensure the enduring value of this volume for decades to come.

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INFLUENCES OF PRE-CHRISTIAN MYTHOLOGY AND CHRISTIANITY ON OLD NORSE POETRY. A NARRATIVE STUDY OF *VAFBRÚÐNISMÁL*. By ANDREW MCGILLIVRAY. *Medieval Institute Publications*. Kalamazoo, 2018. x + 217 pp. ISBN 978-1-58044-335-7.

Andrew McGillivray's book is part of the series *The Northern Medieval World: On The Margins of Europe* published by Western Michigan University's Medieval Institute, a pleasingly varied collection of monographs, edited collections and translations. This book is for the most part a sustained analysis of the narrative structure of the Eddic poem *Vafþrúðnismál*. McGillivray's stated aim is to demonstrate the coherence of that structure in terms of its relation to time, and furthermore to investigate the mythic and religious dimensions of that relation. This study therefore examines the poem in terms of both mythology and narrative. *Vafþrúðnismál* is, the author urges, 'more than an "empty vessel" or narrative framework to which a poet at some point in the medieval North added the details of the poem as we now have it' (p. 189). This point is convincingly argued throughout. The book is adapted from the author's doctoral thesis, the material of which clearly lends itself well to monograph format.

McGillivray's first methodological task in this study is to attempt to distinguish 'mythology' from 'narrative', a separation which has never been successfully completed. 'Mythology' as a term has entirely escaped the control of theorists and, as words are wont to do, gone on to live a life of its own. At the time of writing this review, on typing 'mythology' into the search field of Wikipedia one finds among the top recommended results entries for 'Mythology of *Stargate*', 'Mythology of

*Lost*, and ‘Mythology of *The X-Files*’. This seems to belie the author’s implication at the end of the book that we secular moderns must look to the past to find mythologies. How are these new mythologies different from Eddic mythology? McGillivray’s only answer to this question is the cautious suggestion that ‘a myth is a story that is thought to have originally been religious in nature’ (p. 3). He does not attempt a definition of ‘religion’, however, and so the distinction is largely left for the reader to interpret in their own way. A broader discussion of the terms ‘mythology’ and ‘narrative’—and perhaps, time allowing, ‘religion’—and a more critical attitude toward the uses of those terms, would have put this study on more solid theoretical ground. The author very briefly cites Roland Barthes on narrative (p. 4 n.), but that writer’s well-known work on myth could have added an interesting element to the discussion. Mikhail Bakhtin’s writing on the chronotope could have provided a productive bridge, alongside Paul Ricœur, from the discussion of narrative to the discussion of time. However, the list of potential theorists on mythology and narrative could probably be extended indefinitely. Though a broadening of this discussion would have been desirable, McGillivray is perhaps wise to not get too bogged down in the definition of terms.

Three theorists are introduced in the second chapter ‘whose works importantly inform’ the analysis that follows: Paul Ricœur, Aron Gurevich and Mircea Eliade (p. 27). The author’s exposition of the thought of each of these is admirably elegant. The summary of Ricœur’s writing on time and narrative, in particular, deserves praise as a succinct elaboration of the theory presented in *Narrative Time*, in a way that shows its relevance to the text under examination. The study that follows is primarily a close reading of *Vafþrúðnismál* interspersed with references to Ricœur’s theory, productively anchoring the specific analysis in a broader discussion of the themes it addresses. However, wider reference to Ricœur’s thought on this subject, which includes an admittedly intimidating three-volume work in addition to the essay McGillivray cites, would have been desirable. Gurevich and Eliade appear more as guiding spirits than as methodological components, though the fifth chapter refers specifically to Eliade. As with other studies of specific subjects that refer to Eliade’s wide-ranging thought, McGillivray has to work constantly to keep above that theorist’s penchant for sweeping generalisation and over-extension of concept. Though McGillivray mostly approaches Eliade’s thought with an instrumental attitude, the Eliadean tendency to view any repetition or recurrence as a ‘cycle’, and anything that cannot be interpreted thus as ‘linear’—and the attendant lumping together of all ‘cycles’ as ‘pre-Christian’ and all ‘linearities’ as ‘Christian’—seems to limit the discussion rather than enrich it. Eliade’s main role in this methodology is as a bridge connecting the narrative themes of *Vafþrúðnismál* to notions of religion, yet one wonders whether this connection is really required by the analysis itself.

The main body of the book, from Chapter 3 to Chapter 6, analyses *Vafþrúðnismál* in linear fashion from beginning to end, identifying a sequence of units moving through both time and space (again, Bakhtin’s chronotope seems to cry out for a mention in several places). In Chapter 7 there is an excursus on *Alvíssmál*, analysing that poem’s temporal structure in something like a miniature version

of the analysis of *Vafþrúðnismál*. Though this seems to fit somewhat uncomfortably in the book's otherwise elegant structure, the comparison of similar themes and stylistic devices in the two poems, as well as differences between them, is both useful and welcome. *Vafþrúðnismál*, along with other Eddic wisdom-contest poems, has often been viewed by modern scholars as a collection of mythological tidbits framed by a merely arbitrary formal structure. McGillivray's case for insisting on the importance of the poem's 'frame' is convincing, and perhaps the most important element of his study is its persuasive argument for *Vafþrúðnismál*'s narrative coherence. The author also makes clear that, rather than engaging in the murky business of attempting to recover authentically pre-Christian themes in texts written down in the thirteenth century, his study views *Vafþrúðnismál* as preserving Christian interpretations of a pre-Christian cultural inheritance. The poem is therefore seen as a layered work, as with Gurevich's approach of an 'archaeology of the mind'. McGillivray's choice of perspective, and the sustained attention with which he treats his subject, make this book a valuable contribution to the study of Eddic poetry. The author frequently relates the narrative material of *Vafþrúðnismál* to mythological narratives known from other sources, and some might object to the conjectural nature of many of these connections; it is rarely possible to know what other narratives the creators of specific texts would have known. However, McGillivray generally remains conscious of this himself, and the conclusions reached seem prudent.

Throughout his study, but particularly in the introduction and conclusion, McGillivray emphasises the supposed universality of the concepts under investigation—time as movement, recurrence, linearity, progression—to 'humankind', 'human tendencies', 'human impulses' and the 'human condition'. What the author seems to be defending himself against here is an anticipated charge of ahistoricism, or perhaps anachronism; his answer is to emphasise the recurring sameness of universals over the disjunctive difference of specific historical circumstances. Such a defence seems unnecessary, yet one might well question what it brings up, particularly as it appears under the shadow of Eliade. Eliade's world is one in which eternal, 'sacred' structures assert themselves against 'profane', fluctuating historical conditions; in this world, 'humanity' reaches for something beyond the profane politics of its own historical circumstances. Eliade developed these ideas in the process of constructing a career as an intellectual in the United States in the 1950s, after having spent much of the 1930s in Romania as a leading intellectual supporter of the violently anti-Semitic and xenophobic Iron Guard. His interest in telling us to look away from the political, from ideology and power, is clear enough. McGillivray's desire to hold up something we can all appreciate may stem from an admirable sense of empathy, but that does not mean we need to accept uncritically any concept as a universal, devoid of ideology; nor does this contribution to the study of Eddic poetry need to speak to the universal to be valuable, and valuable it is.

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THE ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH COMPANION TO THE MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC SAGAS. Edited by Ármann Jakobsson and SVERRIR JAKOBSSON. *Routledge*. London and New York, 2017. xii + 363 pp. 3 figs, 1 table. ISBN 978-1-4724-3330-5.

In their Introduction to this volume of twenty-seven chapters by different writers the editors briefly compare it (p. 3, n. 1) with two fairly recent handbooks: *Old Norse–Icelandic literature: a critical guide*, edited by Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (2nd edn, 2005), and the Blackwell *Companion to Old Norse–Icelandic Literature and Culture*, edited by this reviewer (2005), pointing out that the book under review includes discussion of topics not covered in those two volumes. This is not so surprising given that those volumes aim at relatively wide coverage of other forms of Old Norse–Icelandic literature than just the sagas, whereas the present volume, concentrating solely on the sagas, has space to give them extended treatment. The editors also note that the focus of their volume is especially on research undertaken over the thirty years preceding its publication.

While this detailed treatment is obviously to be welcomed, I am not convinced that focusing on such recent scholarship always justifies the disregard of earlier work that this volume shows in some cases. Not in all: Jonas Wellendorf takes Gabriel Turville-Petre's *Origins of Icelandic literature* (1953) as a framework for his admirable discussion of 'Ecclesiastical literature and hagiography', not always agreeing with it but recognising its value for subsequent work on its subject; and Stefanie Gropper, in her chapter on 'Fate', finds that Walter Gehl's *Der germanische Schicksalsglaube* (1939) 'can still form a basis for contemporary research' (p. 198; cf. p. 208, n. 4). Time-honoured work on the sagas, whether one agrees with it or not, may often provide a helpful starting-point for discussion of more recent work, and reference to it can serve the useful purpose of showing how research has developed over a longer period than thirty years. I should like to have seen some reference to Peter Foote's essay 'Some account of the present state of saga-research' (*Scandinavica* 4 (1965), 115–26) in the present volume, as well as to Vilhelm Grønbech's *Vor folkeæt i oldtiden* (1955; first published 1909–12; translated as *The culture of the Teutons*, 1932). Parts of this immensely stimulating study of the sagas and related literature would have made admirable starting-points for some of the chapters in this volume, including the one on fate already mentioned ('they will their own fate', writes Grønbech (*Culture*, I 158), of characters in the sagas); and those on 'Gender', by Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir ('A wise man would not disregard what his wife said upon any serious matter', says Grønbech, also of saga characters, in *Culture*, II 122); on 'Emotions', by Christopher Crocker (who quotes Grímur Thomsen's comparison of the Greek and Northern temperaments (p. 240); see Grønbech's view (*Culture*, I 17) that 'compared with the Celt, the Northman is heavy, reserved, a child of earth, yet seemingly but half awakened'); on 'Marginality', by Bjørn Bandlien ('There is no joy lying about loose in the wilds', Grønbech, *Culture*, I 62); on 'Feud', by Santiago Barreiro ('The avenger has the centre of his thoughts in himself. All depends on what he does, not on what the other suffers' (Grønbech, *Culture*, I 69)); and on 'World view', by Sirpa Aalto ('The ancient view of the world will not fit in with our geographical maps,

in which the different countries lie neatly side by side with linear frontiers' (Grønbech, *Culture*, I 181)).

The work of Walter Baetke is referred to here and there in the volume under review, but I have found no reference to his article 'Zum Erzählstil der Isländersagas' (*Mitteilungen der Islandfreunde* 17 (1930), 63–69, reprinted in W. Baetke, ed., *Die Isländersaga* (1974), 165–72; reviewed in *Saga-Book* XIX (1975–76), 320–24). In this article Baetke finds in the *Íslendingasögur* a contradiction between their psychological realism and the impressionistic narrative technique evident in, for example, their relative lack of scene-setting descriptions, and seeks to resolve this by characterising their style as dramatic. One might have expected a reference to it not only in the chapter on 'Style' by Daniel Sävborg, but also in that on 'Drama and performativity' by Lena Rohrbach. And given Baetke's statement (1974, p. 166) that 'Der Erzähler sieht sozusagen den Menschen nur im Flusse der Handlung, d. h. in der Zeit und nicht im Raum', a reference to it would not have been out of place in the chapter on 'Time' by Carl Phelpstead, and even in that on 'Space' by Sverrir Jakobsson. I am also struck by the fact that in this book on the Icelandic sagas one has to read to almost the final page (p. 351, in 'Digital Norse', by Jan Alexander van Nahl) to find a reference to Jan de Vries, and then not to any direct engagement with the sagas, but to his *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*. One might have expected at the very least a reference to his *Heldenlied en heldensage* (1959; translated as *Heroic song and heroic legend*, 1963), in the chapter on 'Heroism' by Viðar Pálsson.

The volume holds together well, given the number and variety of chapters and contributors. For those not reading the chapters in numerical order it will be misleading to find it pointed out in the chapter on gender (p. 235, n. 2) that Ralph O'Connor's chapter 'History and fiction' deals with historicity, since O'Connor makes it clear (p. 88) that his chapter is not concerned with the sagas as historical sources. It is also strange that Gérard Genette's term 'focalisation', introduced in the chapter on style (p. 113), is not discussed in relation to the supernatural either in that chapter (p. 120) or in Miriam Mayburd's chapter on 'The paranormal' (particularly on p. 271). On the other hand, discussion of Gottskálk Jensson's hypothesis that the earliest *fornaldarsögur* were written in Latin links the chapter on ecclesiastical literature (p. 54) to those on 'Indigenous and Latin literature' (by Annette Lassen, see p. 77) and on history and fiction (p. 95), and discussion of the Lómagnúpr episode in *Njáls saga* links the first two of these chapters (pp. 50, 52, 82) to that on 'Christian themes' by Haki Antonsson (see pp. 286–87). Discussion of *Trójumanna saga* and *Breta sögur*, first mentioned in Stefka G. Eriksen's chapter on 'Courtly literature' (p. 60, cf. p. 62), is taken up briefly in the chapter on history and fiction (p. 96) in the context of genre, with an implicit link of these two chapters with the chapter on 'Genre' by Massimiliano Bampi, whose reference (on p. 8) to Alastair Fowler's *Kinds of literature* (1982) looks forward to Elizabeth Ashman Rowe's chapter ('The long and the short of it', see pp. 153, 155) on *þættir*, a subject discussed in relation to the sagas also by Chris Callow in 'Dating and origins' (on p. 19). Prosimetrum, a topic not mentioned in this book as often as one might have expected, nevertheless links Ármann Jakobsson's chapter on 'Structure' (see p. 130) with those on drama (pp. 143–45) and heroism (p. 224, n. 23). Chapters

on ‘Literacy’, by Pernille Hermann, and ‘Narratives and documents’, by Patricia Pires Boulhosa, discuss from different angles references to writing in the sagas; Hans Jacob Orning’s chapter on ‘Class’ is anticipated by a number of references to class in the chapter on gender (pp. 232, 233, 235); and Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough’s chapter on ‘Travel’, with its reference to the *Finnar* as mysterious, otherworldly figures (p. 214), finds echoes in the chapters on marginality (p. 261) and world view (p. 323). Finally, Julia Zernack’s chapter on ‘Artistic reception’, placed appropriately near the end of the book, emphasises the shift of interest from the *fornaldarsögur* to the *Íslendingasögur* in the mid-nineteenth century, thus recalling much of what has been discussed in earlier chapters.

This book is greatly to be welcomed. I must however add one more reservation to my view that it takes insufficient account of older scholarship, and that is that it is thin on poetry, an important element in at least four of the seven saga genres listed on pp. 4–5. Poetry is mentioned, it is true, in at least twenty of the book’s twenty-seven chapters, but usually only in passing. I should like to have seen an additional chapter devoted to the interaction of prose and verse in the development of the sagas: an updated version, say, of Davíð Erlingsson’s admirable essay on ‘Prose and verse in Icelandic legendary fiction’, in *The heroic process: form, function and fantasy in folk epic*, The Proceedings of the International Folk Epic Conference, University College Dublin, 2–6 September 1985, edited by Bo Almqvist et al. (1987), 371–93.

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LONG LIVES OF SHORT SAGAS: THE IRREPRESSIBILITY OF NARRATIVE AND THE CASE OF *ILLUGA SAGA GRÍÐARFÓSTRA*. By PHILIP LAVENDER. *The Viking Collection 25*. University Press of Southern Denmark. Odense, 2020. 401 pp. ISBN 978-87-408-3249-5.

‘Popular and beloved sagas have a habit of confirming the beliefs that we hold about saga literature and pre-modern Iceland as a whole. Studying a less popular saga can thus play a role in helping us become more aware of the current assumptions which undergird our use of texts and our subjective assessments of value as regards them’ (p. 20). With these words Philip Lavender closes his introduction to *Long Lives of Short Sagas*, a monograph devoted to one of the lesser known Icelandic legendary sagas, *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, and promises new perspectives on Icelandic saga literature. The following chapters, six in total, more than deliver on the promise of the introduction and situate the saga’s long life in multiple contexts.

Lavender’s study fits a growing trend of research dealing with the transmission and reception history of Icelandic legendary sagas, an earlier representative of which is, for example, Jeffrey Love’s *The Reception of Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Munich, 2013; reviewed in *Saga-Book XXXIX* (2015), 121–23). The reader should not, however, be misled by the title of Lavender’s monograph and assume that it is exclusively a case study of

a single literary work. While *Long Lives* indeed takes a case study of *Illuga saga* as its point of departure, it extends the traditional framework of text-critical study and examines the position of the saga in the fascinating network of reworkings, including ballads, sagas and *rimur*. Chronologically, it spans the early modern and modern periods, from the late sixteenth century, when the oldest surviving manuscript of the saga appeared, to the twentieth century, when the youngest set of *rimur* of Illugi was composed. Lavender, whose edition and translation of *Illuga saga* was published by the Viking Society in 2015, meticulously examines the transmission and reception of the story of Illugi in various literary media, paying great attention to the circumstances of the texts' creation and dissemination.

Each chapter presents a different perspective on the long history of the Illugi-related materials and gives insight into the ways in which the saga was written, re-written, adapted, read and commented upon. The first chapter gives an overview of the scholarship on the relationships between *Illuga saga* and Scandinavian ballads, where the author engages critically with earlier discussions and points out numerous shortcomings, leading to his own interpretation of the relationships. The prose saga, as known from all modern editions and translations, is the subject of the second chapter, which will be of great value to manuscript scholars and philologists interested in Icelandic post-medieval scribal culture. Here the reader is presented with five case studies of manuscripts or manuscript groupings, which illustrate the variety of circumstances in which the saga was produced. Chapters 3 and 4 approach the saga from a literary perspective, focusing respectively on intertextual connections considering the saga's characters, and gender representations, with an emphasis on their potential for literary humour. In Chapter 5, the analysis turns back to manuscript witnesses in the context of the saga's early editions and its scholarly reception. This chapter would possibly work better immediately following Chapter 2, but its current placing makes a contrast between the historiographical focus of early modern scholars and the humorous character of the narrative, discussed in the preceding chapter. The most recent adaptations of the story in the form of *rimur* are discussed in the final chapter, where the saga's textual groups are identified as sources for six independent sets of *rimur*. In the brief conclusion, Lavender emphasises the importance of studies of shorter and lesser-known sagas in order to create a fuller view of the history of Icelandic literature. As the case of *Illuga saga* demonstrates, the short stories were converted into *rimur* on multiple occasions, showing the continuous interest in legendary material in Iceland well into the twentieth century. The volume closes with a bibliography, two appendices including Shum's and Müller's commentaries on *Illuga saga* (in Danish with English translations), an index of manuscripts and a general index, including titles of literary works, personal and place names, and selected subjects (e.g. curses, humour and the truth test).

*Long Lives* is the first full-scale study of *Illuga saga* and related materials, providing a fine introduction to the story and its transmission and adaptation history. The greatest strength of this work, besides the richness of its previously unpublished source material, lies in its interdisciplinary approach to saga literature, which draws extensively on the history of ideas, literary analysis and textual criticism, with a strong text-sociological angle, even though the works of neither

McKenzie nor McGann appear in the bibliography. Moreover, the engaging discursive style, with the prose flowing naturally from one subject to another, assures an extremely pleasant reading experience. Only in the second chapter is the flow somewhat interrupted, and the reader might feel lost at times. In section 2.4, the reader is misled by the title, which suggests that this section is dealing with four manuscripts: AM 592 a 4to and AM 203 fol. (both belonging to group B), AM 582 4to (belonging to group C2) and AM 163 fol., which is nowhere to be found in the stemma on pp. 78–79. A case study devoted to manuscripts from three different textual groups sounds exciting, as the reader might anticipate an overview of the scribal connections among scribes producing texts which are not directly related to each other. It turns out, however, that this is a simple shelfmark error, and the section deals in fact with four manuscripts in group B (AM 592 a 4to, AM 203 fol., AM 169 e fol. and AM 363 I 4to), which all are very closely related to each other textually. The following section (2.5), devoted to the textual study of the manuscripts in groups A and C and their geographical distribution, might be hard to comprehend at times. This is the sole section of the monograph where the stemmatic analysis of the saga's texts is presented, in a mere fifteen pages, which additionally include an analysis of the scribal milieu that produced these texts. Arguably, this is not enough space to develop a convincing argument for the proposed relationships between eight manuscripts of group A and nine manuscripts of group C. In the introduction to the chapter the author refers to his unpublished doctoral thesis (2014) for further information on the stemmatic analysis, forcing the reader to accept his interpretation as presented in *Long Lives* without the most basic information on the manuscripts. An appendix including a list of manuscripts, their scribes, places and dates of origin, as well as collations of individual texts, would make this section much more effective. Given the extensive references to manuscript witnesses and their groupings in Chapters 5 and 6, one might, moreover, want to discuss the justifiability of the decision to omit 'long lists of variants [which] make for somewhat dull reading' (p. 75).

The publication of *Long Lives* is in my view one of the highlights of this year, and I sincerely recommend it to anyone interested in Scandinavian literature in general. *Long Lives* can serve as an excellent introduction to the topic of intertextuality in Old Norse–Icelandic literature for newcomers to the field, but it will also satisfy the taste of connoisseurs of post-medieval literary production in Iceland. Separate chapters lend themselves to classroom use, especially the discussion of the early modern scholarly reception of Old Norse literature in Scandinavia (Chapter 5) and the discussion of gender representations in the sagas (Chapter 4). The innovative approach to humour in *Illuga saga* has, moreover, a significant potential for successful application to other works of Icelandic literature, and it is to be hoped that the author will explore this subject further in the future.

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*Þjóðminjasafn Íslands*

MEN AND MASCULINITIES IN THE SAGAS OF ICELANDERS. By GARETH LLOYD EVANS. *Oxford University Press*. Oxford, 2019. xv + 170 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-883124-2.

It seems only a short while ago that undergraduates interested in the topic of gender in the sagas would be advised to read Rolf Heller's *Die literarische Darstellung der Frau in den Isländersaga* (1958), and yet oceans appear to separate that book from Gareth Lloyd Evans's treatment of the same corpus in *Men and Masculinities*. In the early 1990s, Old Norse gender studies meant women's studies—Jenny Jochens's two pioneering books (*Women in Old Norse Society*, *Old Norse Images of Women*) appeared in 1995 and 1996—whereas *Men and Masculinities* is, as far as this reviewer knows, the first monograph about Old Norse masculinities to be published with a major scholarly press. This fact alone means that it is bound to be significant in future scholarship, and, fortunately, *Men and Masculinities* is a careful and nuanced study worthy of this ground-breaking status.

Two studies from the early 1990s hover over this book, both produced at the University of California, Berkeley. One is Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) which theorises that gender is performative—a cornerstone of Evans's monograph. The other is Carol Clover's article 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe' (*Representations* 44 (1993), 1–28): revolutionary in its day but now a text that seems to provoke scholars of the younger generation, including Evans, to scholarly matricide. Perhaps even more important for Evans's book is the work of the late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, whose concept of 'homosocial desire' revolutionised gender studies and whose triangular scheme is very significant to *Medieval Masculinities*. Many, the present reviewer not excepted, will remember reading her work for the first time and thinking, 'Finally, someone has said what was in my own brain waiting to come out,' and thus it is not surprising that she has now become the 'fairy godmother' to Old Norse masculinities studies in Evans's book.

*Medieval Masculinities*, like all Gaul, is divided into three main parts. The first part concerns homosocial bonds that may be said to be the Old Norse norm; as Evans puts it: 'Homosociality, for better or worse, is implicated in all interactions between men in the sagas' (p. 62). This strong statement is well supported by a variety of examples, each given a nuanced discussion. Among the topics touched on in this part are the domination of men by other men, triangular relationships where the woman mediates the relationship between the two men, and men judging other men. While this section of the book may be the least exciting for a reader well-versed in the topic, it performs well the function of laying the groundwork for future discussion. It also demonstrates Evans's awareness of the scholarship of the last few decades; he never hesitates to take up points raised by other scholars and either argue against them or provide additional insights.

The second part concerns 'Intersectional Masculinities', a concept which would have been unthinkable a few decades ago which provides another valuable starting-point for future study. Masculinity is juxtaposed with youth, old age, race, disability, sexuality, religion and class (Evans says 'socio-economic status' but the present reviewer sticks with class). As the few scholars who have researched these 'other identity categories' (p. 64) in Old Norse–Icelandic literature during

the last few years have illuminated, they play a significant role in how masculinity will be performed in individual cases. The discussion of each category is necessarily brief and leaves the reader wanting more, but the result seems to be a whole greater than the sum of its parts. As Evans remarks, the interaction of these categories ‘problematizes masculine status’ (p. 106), leaving virtually all masculine subjects in a precarious position. This is an important insight; this precariousness escaped the earliest generation of masculinity scholars though it has been previously identified in some sagas (see e.g. Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls saga*’. *Viator* 38 (2007), 191–215; Carl Phelpstead, ‘Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow’: Hair Loss, the Tonsure, and Masculinity in Medieval Iceland’. *Scandinavian Studies* 85/1 (2013), 1–19). The intersectional part of Evans’s book establishes it well.

The last (but not least) part of the book concerns ‘hypermasculinity’ and is a long case study of the Grettir of *Grettis saga*, possibly one of the most interesting character constructions of the whole saga corpus. The late Robert Cook, in ‘Reading for Character in *Grettis saga*’, *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays* (1989), 226–40, was one of the first scholars to draw attention to the intricate development of the Grettir character from the point of view of audience studies, and since then Grettir has been dissected by some of the most sophisticated scholars in the field, but never so fully from a gender perspective. In this part Evans may be said to draw all his important insights together to produce an intriguing interpretation of Grettir as a case of dysfunctional masculinity. According to Evans, ‘Grettir, through his social failure, enacts a striking critique of the cultural hegemony of masculinity and also of the impossible—and even contradictory—demands that it places upon the masculine subject’ (p. 143). I cannot help but find this eerily similar to my own reading of *Njáls saga* in *Viator* (2007). I argued there that the implied author of the saga (Evans seems less interested in the authorial figure in his analysis) was deliberately demonstrating an identical critique and find myself agreeing with Evans that the same applies to *Grettis saga*, composed in the fourteenth (or even the fifteenth) century. What clearly emerges is that there is a more critical stance inherent in the text than earlier scholars believed, and, of course, than might be observed by some modern saga readers who come to the sagas to find unproblematised or even ideal masculinity.

Evans modestly ends his book by stating that ‘there is much exciting work still to be done’ (p. 147), after spending a few words on those saga genres that are not surveyed in the book. Their absence is not to be lamented, though, since instead the reader gets a very cohesive study of an important topic in the *Íslendingasögur*, a central category of Icelandic medieval literature. I would agree that there is still much exciting work to be done. However, Gareth Evans’s book, brief though it is, has paved the way for future studies and there is no doubt that many a future undergraduate or graduate student will find it a helpful guide through the maze of Old Norse masculinities.

*HRAFNKEL OR THE AMBIGUITIES. HARD CASES, HARD CHOICES.* By WILLIAM IAN MILLER. *Oxford University Press*. Oxford, 2017. xxii + 257 pp. 2 maps. ISBN 978-0-19-879303-8.

William Ian Miller's follow-up to his 2014 *Why Is Your Axe Bloody?*, with its close-reading of *Brennu-Njáls saga* (reviewed in *Saga-Book XLI* (2017), 167–70), features a play-by-play analysis of *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*. In this book Miller sets out to correct many of the misconceptions that have characterised readings of *Hrafnkels saga*. The key to understanding the heart of *Hrafnkels saga*, he argues, is three kinds of ambiguity; character ambiguity, cultural constraints and the uncanny. How Miller defines these three terms is itself ambiguous, and he does not engage with theoretical literature or general literature in Old Norse studies that deals with these topics. Miller then proceeds to introduce former scholarship in a self-attested 'querulous' manner; one gets the impression that Miller is both very well versed in *Hrafnkels saga* scholarship and, equally, very displeased by most of it.

Where previous scholarship picked sides and harshly evaluated different characters' actions (the use of 'foolish' / 'heimskur' of various characters abounds in *Hrafnkels saga* interpretations), Miller tries to understand how they operated within the social and legal logic of their time. Instead of joining in the chorus of scholars scolding Þorbjörn's infamous decision to reject the substantial financial aid offered by Hrafnkell following the killing of his son Einarr, Miller brilliantly exposes the logic behind this refusal. Indeed, as has been pointed out in the past, Þorbjörn wishes to bring the chieftain down to his own level and thus humiliate him; but Miller points out that the alternative—to accept Hrafnkell's generous offer—has no assurances attached to it, since the chieftain has refused to acknowledge it as legal compensation. Þorbjörn's insistence on arbitration is therefore not only a form of vengeance, but also a means of holding the chieftain to his word.

With similar astuteness, Miller breaks down and analyses all the major and controversial decisions made in the saga. Einarr's decision to ride Freyfaxi is explained through reference to a clause in Hrafnkell's words to the shepherd. Þorkell's preoccupation with feet and pedagogy is well articulated, the lesson he teaches his brother Þorgeirr through his swollen toe tied to the one he teaches Hrafnkell through his pierced tendons. Sámr's ruinous decision to spare Hrafnkell is explained as being motivated by his wish to distance himself from the Þjóstarssynir's act of torture, a genuine concern for the district's welfare and a sense of evenness. Finally, much care is taken to show how Hrafnkell's decision to kill Eyvindr indicates that the chieftain has become a *jafnaðarmaðr*, an 'even' man, though one with his own sense of justice. The only character who evades Miller's complete understanding is Eyvindr: why does he provoke Hrafnkell, and why does he decide not to run when it is clear that Hrafnkell is in pursuit?

Despite the countless merits of this book several issues arise, none of them new to readers of Miller's previous saga-related efforts. The question of audience persists throughout: at times the author makes sure to explain in detail the examples from the saga corpus that he uses, but at times—especially in the cases of *Njáls saga* and *Þorsteins þátrr stangarhöggs*, both treated extensively in his previous

work—prior knowledge of saga research and even of Miller’s own scholarship is needed to understand fully what is being said. If this book is meant for the general public or the inexperienced undergraduate, these obscure references to saga texts are confusing. In addition, Miller’s decision to avoid a clear statement on which historical reality is reflected by the sagas is unfortunate. He explains that this issue ‘hardly has great consequences for understanding confrontations between a shepherd and his head of household, a father and his son, a servant and her master, or between an old man and his nephew’ (p. 8). While this rings true, it also flattens out the significant cultural differences that existed throughout the period of the text’s transmission. The meaning of Hrafnkell’s devotion to Freyr and his oath banning the riding of Freyfaxi, for example, must have been significantly different for an eleventh-century (hypothetical) oral teller, a late thirteenth-century (hypothetical) author and a fifteenth-century scribe.

At times Miller’s referral to common sense in his analysis produces the astoundingly penetrating conclusions that are the pillar of his scholarship, while at times it brings about more controversial statements. For example, when he addresses why Sámr gives Þorbjörn a warmer reception than does Þorbjörn’s brother Bjarni, Miller suggests: ‘uncle and nephew seem to be on quite good terms, which probably means Thorbjörn has not been in the habit of importuning Sam for loans and such’ (p. 102). This is based on too many assumptions about human nature and one’s reaction to needy family members that are inherently subjective. (It also implies that the saga is based on real people with a real psychology that is external to the text.) At another point, Miller tries to justify Hrafnkell’s breaking of the settlement imposed on him by Sámr through the rationale that nothing lasts forever. That may be, but he continues by invoking a modern parallel (p. 198):

Maybe a starry-eyed bride and groom, when vowing ‘till death do us part,’ suspend in that brief instant that their marriage must survive a fifty percent divorce rate . . . ‘Forever’ in marriage or in these settlements and treaties has an endpoint; if you want something *in perpetuum* you better specify that, and then reconfirm it every decade or generation or so, because even an *in perpetuum* clause has an endpoint unless renewed and reaffirmed now and then.

While many (modern) marriages do indeed end in divorce, a breaking of the marriage contract requires compensation—this is the bread and butter of divorce lawyers. Moreover, a legal contract made *in perpetuum* or without an end date is, *de facto*, ‘forever’ (thank you to Natalia Soler Huici for these legal points). Miller seems here to conflate social understanding and legal matters to justify Hrafnkell’s clear breach of the law after his supposed transformation into a *jaǫnaðarmaðr*.

Another issue is Miller’s treatment of Þorkell Þjóstarsson. Owing to Þorkell’s long stay abroad, Miller feels that he is ‘not quite of the saga world and saga convention . . . He brings different literary genres from abroad with him that he and the others must figure out how to mesh with standard saga conventions’ (p. 112). This reading, however, discloses an approach that confines what is ‘saga-like’ to its being grounded in Icelandic daily reality, deeming the paranormal and anything foreign-influenced to be external to the generic conventions of the *Íslendingasögur*.

Furthermore, Miller's reading of Þorkell as unique in the saga corpus is somewhat misleading; Hermann Pálsson has, for example, pointed to similarities between Þorkell and *Njáls saga's* Kári, and between him and Broddi Bjarnason in *Ólkofra þáttur/saga* (*Mannfræði Hrafnkels sögu og frumþættir* (1988), 39, 85). *Deus ex machina* is standard saga fare and while Þorkell certainly smacks of a certain *je ne sais quoi*, *ævintýrablaer* as Hermann Pálsson puts it (1988, p. 39), this only means that he is out of place, not out of genre. Moreover, this interpretation of Þorkell ignores the fact that in one fell swoop Þorkell manages to captivate both Sámr and Þorbjörn: Sámr must have seen in Þorkell his seafaring brother Eyvindr, while Þorbjörn could have responded to the man's self-description as an *einhleypingr* 'a man unattached to a domicile' by remembering his son, Einarr, whose fears of becoming an *einhleypingr* have led to his desperate and disastrous employment at Hrafnkell's farm. In this sense, Þorkell certainly belongs in the saga world.

The translation of *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, glossary of Norse terms and maps are very valuable additions to the book, which help give it a sense of completeness. The index is also very well thought-out, and its choice of thematic topics is a very useful one.

Anyone who is interested in saga studies, and especially the *Íslendingasögur*, should read *Hrafnkel or the Ambiguities*, since it reminds us, as with Miller's reading of *Njáls saga*, that many of the saga authors had a keen sense of how their society and the human mind works. Miller's salvaging of Þorbjörn's character is heroic, as are many other of his thought-provoking analyses. One comes out from reading the book with a newfound appreciation of the saga, a feat which one hopes Miller will continue to perform on other sagas in the coming years.

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THE SAGA OF THE SISTER SAINTS. THE LEGEND OF MARTHA AND MARY MAGDALEN IN OLD NORSE–ICELANDIC TRANSLATION. By NATALIE M. VAN DEUSEN. *Studies and Texts* 214. *Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies*. Toronto, 2019. xiii + 222 pp. ISBN 978-0-88844-214-7.

Natalie Van Deusen's book is an exemplary piece of scholarship, providing an edition in normalised spelling of *Mörtu saga ok Maríu Magðalenu* and its English translation, along with a thorough study of its transmission and the background of the cult of the sister saints in Scandinavia. The book is built in an accessible way, offering the reader short summaries after each chapter, allowing more straightforward navigation through the presented material.

The introduction of the book presents a very sharp overview of the literary composition of the Latin *vita*, as well as discussing the confusion between Marias, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and the 'unnamed sinner' from the Gospel of Luke (p. 5) in Latin sources. Throughout the book, the importance of Origen's allegory of Martha as *vita activa* and Mary of Bethany as *vita contemplativa* is stressed, especially in relation to the Icelandic audience of the composite vernacular saga.

In the first chapter, Van Deusen discusses different roles attributed to the sister saints in Scandinavia, dividing the topic geographically: Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland. The comprehensive overview provides an overwhelming number of references to Mary Magdalene and Martha in art, liturgical material and literature, which sometimes takes the form of a list, rather than adding to the argument. Particular emphasis is put on the ballad tradition across the Nordic region, which focuses on Mary Magdalene's repentance. In conclusion, Van Deusen states that Martha received limited attention in the medieval North and is almost always portrayed in the sources about Mary Magdalene as a 'representative of the *vita activa*' (p. 34).

In the second chapter, Van Deusen discusses not only the text of the composite saga but also the cults of the sister saints in Iceland where the saga was produced, and their representations in Old Icelandic literature and art. Mary Magdalene's cult was primarily located in northern and western Iceland, while Martha did not gain a separate cult, despite a better representation in Icelandic literary sources than in those of medieval Scandinavia. The uniqueness of the composite sisters' saga, as Van Deusen points out, lies in its emphasis on Martha's *vita activa*, as 'the most appropriate (and practical) saintly model for women in medieval Iceland' (p. 60).

An in-depth analysis of the manuscript transmission of the saga is presented in the third chapter. Among a variety of sources, Van Deusen identifies a prayer-like passage for the reformed sinners, Peter and Mary Magdalene, which connects the saga to the Dominican tradition. In this passage, Mary Magdalene is referred to as *apostolotum apostola* 'apostle of the apostles', a controversial term in medieval times. Moreover, Van Deusen suggests that the text of the saga was composed by the Benedictine abbot Arngrímur Brandsson, most probably at the Þingeyrar monastery around the 1350s. Her argument is built upon a thorough stylistic analysis, which identifies a plethora of unique stylistic tropes, like alliteration, rhetorical questions, litotes, antitheses, and loan words that are employed in other texts attributed to Arngrímur, such as *Guðmundar saga D.* The chapter also includes a very useful table of correspondences between the Old Icelandic and Latin texts (pp. 76–82).

In the fourth chapter, Van Deusen raises the question of the text's genre. Usually the saga is classified as a *heilagra meyja saga*, a legend of virgin martyrs. However, Van Deusen states that because of 'its content, sources, and style, as well as its focus on the apostolic mission of both of the "sisters"' (p. 91), the text should instead be classified as a *postola saga* 'apostles' saga'. Special attention is given to 'the issue of women preaching' (p. 98) and to the verb *prédika* 'to preach'. Van Deusen's survey of the Old Norse–Icelandic literary corpus allows the conclusion that, except for Mary Magdalene's and Martha's apostolic activity, this verb is only used of male apostles or priests. The analysis presented in the book provides a better understanding of medieval Icelandic attitudes towards women's preaching, which was generally contentious on the Continent. Van Deusen states that 'Old Norse-Icelandic sagas of a religious nature . . . make no mention of heresy in relation to women preaching' (p. 101), their preaching being predominantly described through the verbs *mæla* 'speak' and *svara* 'answer'.

The second part of the book presents the edition along with the facing translation (pp. 114–203). The text is normalised to the spelling standards of *Íslenzk fornrit* editions, based on the suggestions of the *First Grammatical Treatise* from around 1200, and is supplemented by a critical apparatus. Van Deusen notes that the translation's goal is readability and, undoubtedly, this goal is reached.

The book is presented in a way that is helpful both to scholars who are interested in the cults of saints or manuscript studies and to those who are interested in reading the saga in translation. By situating the vernacular saga in the broader context of Scandinavia and Western Christendom, Van Deusen succeeds in identifying and underlining the uniqueness of the Old Norse–Icelandic composite legend of Martha and Mary Magdalene, sister saints.

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UM SNORRA EDDU OG MUNKAGAMAN. DRÖG TIL MENNINGASÖGU ÍSLENSKRA MIÐALDA. By SVEINBJÖRN RAFNSSON. *Ritsafn sagnfræðistofnunnar* 43. Háskólaútgáfan. Reykjavík, 2016. 284 pp. ISBN 978-9935-23-136-9.

In this book Sveinbjörn has two aims: one is to discuss sources of Snorri's *Edda* (*SnE*) that are not named in the text, the other is to edit and discuss one of these in particular, namely the Icelandic translation of the *Ioca monachorum*—a collection of questions and answers, sometimes approaching the form of riddles, on a wide range of topics.

On the positive—indeed, very positive—side, the book points to many intriguing possibilities that have not been suggested before, or only rarely so. At a time when much scholarship aims at shifting perspectives rather than finding out something new, this comes as a relief, at least to this reader. On the negative side, however, most questions receive insufficient scrutiny, and weak indications are allowed to trump scholarly opinions that are based on much cumulative evidence (such as the belief that translations from French appear to have been made only after *c.* 1200, and mainly from the 1220s onwards). This leaves the reader with a big workload: the ideas are stimulating and invite further reading, but the constant sifting requires much effort and competence. Below, I illustrate this by going through and briefly commenting on the suggested sources of influence.

Sveinbjörn notes that the comparison between potential Latin sources and Snorri's text is hampered by inherent stylistic and linguistic differences. This is certainly true, and the situation is made worse by Snorri's efforts to make everything appear as native as possible. Sveinbjörn therefore proposes to study texts that were translated into Old Norse (p. 15), and this seems methodologically sound, given that it facilitates the comparison, and since the act of translation shows that the texts in question were thought to be of central importance.

Sveinbjörn first discusses the influence of *Trójumanna saga* on *SnE*. Somewhat curiously, he notes that the manuscripts RTW have material on Troy at the end of *Gylfaginning* and the beginning of *Skáldskaparmál*, whereas U does not, but he

draws no conclusions from this (see *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (1931), p. 36). Finnur Jónsson (p. xx) saw the Troy material in RTW as interpolated, based on the Prologue. This reader would have been gratified by some discussion of this matter. For instance, it now seems clear that U has indeed been abbreviated, rather than RTW being expanded (Daniel Sävborg, ‘Blockbildningen i Codex Upsaliensis. En ny metod att lösa frågan om *Snorra Eddas* ursprungsversion’, *Maal og Minne* (2012), 12–53). One might therefore have thought that Troy material had been cut out of U, but this runs counter to U’s mode of abbreviation: ‘factual’ information is retained, whereas unnecessary words are deleted. It does not seem likely, therefore, that the Troy material would have been cut out. Furthermore, Finnur did not note that the Troy section in *Skáldskaparmál* contains the phrase *at ásiánda enum mikla Akille* ‘when the great Achilles was watching’, a calque on the Latin absolute ablative (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. Finnur Jónsson (1931), p. 87). Such a pronounced Latinism is found nowhere else in *SnE* and appears to be alien to the ‘native’ style that Snorri attempted there. Thus, even if one were to allow for more than one draft by the author, as Sveinbjörn does, this simply does not sound like the author of *SnE*. Furthermore, the common assumption that *Trójumanna saga* was produced before Snorri’s day is uncertain at best. This is relevant, since Sveinbjörn notes that *SnE* does not rely on any preserved version of *Trójumanna saga* (p. 34). Given the vast proliferation of Troy material in the period, one may ask whether *SnE* relies on any version of *Trójumanna saga* at all, and whether the same situation is valid for the Prologue and the interpolations. Sveinbjörn here unlocks the door to the crime scene and peeps in, but then moves on to the next door. He leaves the door open, however, and his comments certainly suggest that it would be worthwhile to go in and investigate.

Sveinbjörn then turns to the description of Charlemagne’s journey to Jerusalem—the so-called *Jórsalaferð*—found in *Karlamagnúss saga*. In order to argue for influence, Sveinbjörn dates this part of the saga to the twelfth century, which would be extremely early for a translation from French. There are two main similarities. One is the rare expression *þat veit trúa mín* ‘my faith knows that’, ‘by my faith’ (p. 65), which is found in some translations from French, including the text discussed by Sveinbjörn. Sveinbjörn does not mention the phrase’s relation to French *par ma foi*, which is attested from the twelfth century onwards, or Anne Holtsmark’s discussion of this matter (*Studier i Snorres mytologi* (1964), 21). The second similarity is the mention of twelve kings and one high king in both the *Jórsalaferð* and *SnE*. The collocation of *þat veit trúa mín* and the twelve kings in both texts is noteworthy, but the expression is found in other texts as well, and the twelve kings have a folkloric ring to them (cf. the two booties which were taken twelve times and the twenty kings on the Rök runestone). Exceptional claims regarding the chronology of translations from French ought to be backed up by correspondingly strong evidence.

Sveinbjörn also sees influence from Nikulás Bergsson’s *Leiðarvisir* in *Gylfaginning*, based on Ásgarðr / Jerusalem as the centre of the world and the thirteen seats of the Æsir / the thirteen seats of Christ and the apostles in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (pp. 68–74). In this instance the chronology is plausible,

but especially in the period from the First Crusade onwards, such lore is likely to have been widespread. Sveinbjörn's observations are useful in so far as they allow us to see how Snorri modelled his description on perceptions of the Holy Land, which brings us closer to Snorri's strategies. This usefulness is, however, somewhat obscured by the specificity of the conclusions. In order to benefit from an increased understanding of Snorri's strategies, the reader must take care not to let doubts about the certainty regarding textual influence spill over onto the main, valuable point.

Sveinbjörn on a number of occasions mentions the influence of *Elucidarius* on *SnE*, but he nowhere gives arguments that offer any real support. I therefore pass over this issue, even though influence from *Elucidarius* is plausible enough (see, for instance, *Elucidarius*. Ed. Jón Helgason (1957), xxxi). Similarly, the influence from *Ioca monachorum* which Sveinbjörn postulates is not supported by any lexical evidence, and the 'similarities' are remarkably dissimilar. Thus, for instance, *SnE*'s description of the rainbow is supposedly based on a description of the waters and fires—i.e. celestial bodies—over, around and under the firmament (p. 79). Here the reader struggles to find any similarity whatsoever, except that the word *eldr* 'fire' is used in both texts. This reflects a key methodological issue in the book at large: Sveinbjörn often accords diagnostic value to highly frequent words or phrases, e.g. *svá sterkr* 'so strong' (p. 34), *ríkr* 'mighty' (p. 66), *land* 'land' (p. 67).

Influence from *Piðreks saga* was postulated by Finnur Jónsson, and Sveinbjörn is able to flesh this out (pp. 80–82). Importantly, however, Finnur postulated this based on the very rare word *köpuryrði* 'boast', found only in *Piðreks saga*, *SnE* and *Karlamagnúss saga* (Sveinbjörn does not, in this instance, argue for influence from the last of these). Based on this word and some overlap in content, Sveinbjörn's analysis of more trivial lexical overlap has a sound methodological base.

The most intriguing part of the book may be the discussion of Hyginus (pp. 127–38). Sveinbjörn notes that the Hauksbók version of *Trójumanna saga* appears to have been redacted with recourse to Hyginus. The problem here is that *Hygini Fabulae* have only survived in a print version based on a now lost manuscript, and demonstrating direct influence would thus seem to be out of the question. The parallels that Sveinbjörn adduces are certainly noteworthy, however, and they are all from chapters 89–93, 96, 98 in the *Fabulae* (p. 137). The *Fabulae* are organised into chapters, each dealing with a person, mythological being or famous event, and the chapters in question together constitute a chunk of Trojan lore. One wonders about the possibility that 'Trojan' excerpts from Hyginus might, after all, in some form or other may have reached Iceland. This possibility is all the more intriguing, since Anthony Faulkes writes of *SnE* that 'the most similar treatment of mythology is found in Hyginus, another author that it is inconceivable that Snorri read' ('The Sources of Skáldskaparmál: Snorri's intellectual background'. In *Snorri Sturluson. Kolloquium anlässlich der 750. Wiederkehr seines Todestages* 1993. Ed. Alois Wolf, 59–76 (at p. 74)). Given that Sveinbjörn suggests the possibility of influence from Hyginus in Hauksbók—in spite of its extremely limited transmission—and that whatever manuscript Haukr might have had access to could have been in Iceland

for a long time, it is somewhat surprising that Sveinbjörn does not mention Hyginus as a possible source of inspiration for the mythographical exposition in *SnE* (pp. 139–42). The medieval transmission of Trojan material is vast and complex, and I am not competent to draw any firm conclusions on this matter, but Sveinbjörn's discussion certainly invites further investigation.

To sum up, Sveinbjörn's book is valuable for bringing so much new or understudied material to the table. It certainly shows that the study of Snorri's possible sources is far from exhausted. In a way, the book's weaknesses also have a positive side, in that the use of unmarked lexical items, for instance, similarly invite further research, based on a more consistent methodology. All in all, this reader finds that the book has certainly made the field richer.

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THEODORICUS. DE ANTIQVITATE REGVM NORWAGENSIVM / ON THE OLD NORWEGIAN KINGS. Edited and translated by EGIL KRAGGERUD. *Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning / The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture (IFSK) Serie B*, 169. *Novus*. Oslo, 2018. 326 pp. ISBN 978-82-7099-915-6.

The short but fascinating and important late twelfth-century chronicle *De antiquitate regum Norwagensium* by Theodoricus has long deserved an entire publication of its own. In a way it already got one in 1998, when a new translation by David and Ian McDougall came out under the aegis of the Viking Society. That was an excellent publication with English translation, introduction and a mainly historical commentary. Only now, though, do we have the Latin text on its own, no longer hiding in Gustav Storm's outdated multitext *Monumenta* volume from 1880. This new publication of the text, and the Viking Society translation, supplement each other very nicely, as Kraggerud's rich commentary is mainly philological. The new Latin text also comes with a facing English translation by Peter Fisher (strangely not acknowledged on the title page) and a new Norwegian translation by Kraggerud as appendix which replaces Astrid Salvesen's from 1969.

A welcome innovation already awaits the reader on the cover, with the author's name now given only as Theodoricus without the seventeenth-century label 'monachus'. This has been quite unhelpful, as there can hardly be any doubt that the author was an Augustinian or Victorine canon. Furthermore, Kraggerud (p. xxxi) strongly favours the identification of Theodoricus with Tore Gudmundsson (Þórir Guðmundarson), who later became archbishop of Trondheim (1206–14). Much scholarship had already been leaning towards that as the obvious possibility, but Kraggerud provides new arguments. However, he has not gone all the way and made that identification on the front cover too.

A less welcome surprise, however, meets us in Kraggerud's outline of the author's career and intellectual milieu. It is known that Þórir was a canon in

Oslo when he was called to become archbishop, but for some reason Kraggerud (pp. xxxii–xxxviii) also wants to detach him from the Trondheim environment, in the years when he studied in France (probably the 1170s) and in the period in which he wrote the pioneering chronicle (which must have been between 1177 and 1188). This in spite of the fact that the work is dedicated to the archbishop of Trondheim, Eysteinn (1161–88), and that the chronicle displays a clear alignment and engagement with the text of *Passio Olavi* which underwent its significant expansion and rewriting at precisely this time, the 1170s and 1180s, in Trondheim. As I have discussed elsewhere, we have smoking-gun evidence of these relations in the contemporary manuscript Douai, BM 295: this contains both the earliest extant copy of *Passio Olavi* and the crucial excerpt from William of Jumièges' Norman history (c.1050–70) which states that Óláfr was baptised in Rouen. This is also what we find in the very first sentence of the *Passio Olavi*: Óláfr turned to Christianity in England and was baptised in Rouen. When we combine this with the fact that Theodoricus' chapter 13, dedicated to the discussion of where Óláfr was baptised, adduces exactly that passage from William of Jumièges as an important textual discovery by Theodoricus himself, the conclusion is inescapable: Theodoricus was part of the influential Trondheim team (led by Eysteinn) who established in the 1170s / 1180s, through the *Passio Olavi*, that Rouen was indeed the place. This was obviously an important issue which needed discussion (Theodoricus ch. 13), evidence (Theodoricus and Douai 295 quoting William—the only possible source, by the way, for this opinion) and resolution (the opening line of *Passio Olavi*). By isolating Theodoricus in Oslo, Kraggerud glosses over this (and other) evidence and must postulate that the chronicle was conceived as a private project in Oslo, rather than as part of an institutional effort at the archdiocese. He is also forced to relocate the other early Latin chronicle, *Historia Norwegie*, which is not aligned with the Trondheim texts (including Theodoricus), from a probable home in the Oslo diocese (see *Historia Norwegie*, ed. Inger Ekrem and Lars Boje Mortensen, 2003) to Bergen or somewhere else. This suggestion, along with his comment (p. xxxvi) that many scholars suspect that *Historia Norwegie* was never finished (only book 1 has been transmitted), does not give a fair description of the *status quaestionis*.

Turning to the editorial work done by Kraggerud on the Latin text of Theodoricus, it is surprising to note that he does not undertake any recension of the manuscripts as his point of departure; he seems to have begun with the text in Storm's edition and then proceeded to use the existing manuscripts as a quarry for variants and suggestions to consider their readings, one at a time, on their individual merits. Section 6 of the introduction, 'Transmission, editions, readings', is not helpful, and one has to turn to the sigla on p. 2 to actually identify the manuscripts in play. The chapter bears the subtitle 'the lost ms (=H) and its apographa (MALS+B)', but 'apographa' is a somewhat deceptive term as the existing seventeenth-century manuscripts mostly seem to be copies of lost copies of the medieval codex that turned up in Lübeck in the 1620s and disappeared again, probably before the *editio princeps* was published by Bernhard

Kirchmann in 1684. The editor does not explain how the seventeenth-century manuscripts might relate to each other based on grouping the significant variants, and the least he could have done was to refer to the existing recension by Gertz (1917–18, II 444–54). Gertz was editing the sister text, *Profectio Danorum*, which shares its transmission history with that of Theodoricus, and from his analysis it is clear that the consensus of manuscripts M (not known to Storm) and A represents the safest access to the *textus receptus* (of the lost medieval manuscript), whereas S (on which Storm based his edition together with the *editio princeps*, K) is more like a preliminary edition by Stephanius with a number of separate readings / conjectures. Likewise, L seems to be a clean copy by Johann Kirchmann the Elder from 1629, and as far as I can judge from Kraggerud's reporting in the critical apparatus, it is often on its own with dubious or wrong readings against MA.

Without a recension and a firm idea of how to access the *textus receptus*, Kraggerud is free to use his considerable powers as conjectural critic. His text deviates in a number of places from Storm's and he offers a useful list of changes on pp. xciv–xcvi. Some of his emendations are certainly right, others laudable suggestions, but some, I think, are unnecessary intrusions. For instance, he wants to seclude *benevolentie* (Prol. 12), and in *Normandia* (13.6), cases where the *textus receptus* makes very good sense (although one needs to move in *Normandia* by one word). Against the manuscripts he also changes *unquam* to *usquam* (4.11) and *comperto* to *comperit* (with Storm, 7.1) where one could easily tolerate a slightly looser usage in medieval Latin. More dramatically, he removes an entire relevant and well-formed passage explaining Óláfr Haraldsson's genealogical link back to Haraldr hárfagri (13.4); this, however, is not listed in the deviations from Storm, and to judge by the commentary on p. 219, even the editor himself does not believe in this seclusion.

The Latin text is meticulously presented and proofread, but otherwise the production of the book shows that Novus Forlag is not used to critical editions or publications in English. The critical apparatus is contained in footnotes, which is intrusive both in the text and on the page, where it takes up excessive space. There are many small errors, inconsistencies and repetitions in the introduction and commentary where an editorial hand could have been expected, and the hyphenation of the English is embarrassing for a critical edition (bro-ught, sho-uld etc., e.g. pp. xxix, lxix).

In spite of these many idiosyncracies of the edition and its paratexts, the effort is still to be celebrated. We now possess a modern critical edition of this crucial Nordic medieval Latin text, and it has been sifted linguistically by a brilliant Latinist who has left no stone unturned in his philological commentary. Taking it together with McDougall and McDougall 1998, we should now be equipped to move on to the next level of Theodoricus scholarship and dedicate a conference volume or a monograph to him.

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(MAGIC) STAFFS IN THE VIKING AGE. By LESZEK GARDEŁA. *Studia Medievalia Septentrionalia* 27. Fassungbaender. Vienna, 2016. 347 pp. ISBN 9783902575777.

Leszek Gardela's in-depth study of magic staffs or rods—or what have been termed 'staffs of sorcery' by Neil Price—not only details the archaeological and textual evidence for all known such objects, but also extends that consideration deep into the world of those pre-Christian ritual specialists who evidently wielded them, and their relationship to the practice of the special form of magic in the Old Norse world called *seiðr*. Gardela's treatment of these important and multifaceted topics leads readers with purpose and care through an exhilarating array of data: an introductory chapter sets the stage, and the terms, for the author's analysis, after which he by turns examines the evidence, the interpretations and the *comparanda* in chapters dedicated to 'The Archaeology of Viking Age Ritual Specialists', 'Staffs in Viking Age Archaeology', 'Staffs in Old Norse Textual Sources' and 'Interpreting Staffs'. The final chapter, 'Multivalent Objects', presents the author's consideration of the meaning of these objects within the magico-religious world of the pre-Christian North, summarised in part by the author's comments about the fear and respect these objects aroused in performance: 'Viking Age staffs were multivalent objects, which depending on the individuals who used them or who observed them during their rituals, had the capacity to bring forward a wide spectrum of symbolic associations' (p. 234).

Richly documented, the book concludes with a roughly eighty-page item-by-item catalogue covering over three dozen such objects, mostly based on the author's personal inspection of each of them. This valuable catalogue, the author notes, 'includes details about their measurements and manufacture and is supplemented with new photographs, drawings, x-rays, and extensive bibliographies' (p. 41).

Gardela is no stranger to this topic, having published on it in a variety of venues, including a number of engaging articles and his 2012 doctoral thesis at the University of Aberdeen, *Entangled Worlds: Archaeologies of Ambivalence in the Viking Age*. Knowing the subject as he does, Gardela is a highly competent dragoman through the long and complicated history of the Nordic staffs, as well as the all-important context for such a presentation within the discussion of pre-Christian magical practices in the North, both the works of older generations (e.g. Dag Strömbäck, Åke Ohlmarks) and those of contemporary scholars (e.g. Gro Steinsland, Olle Sundqvist, Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, Jens Peter Schjødt). Naturally, this volume owes much, as Gardela readily points out at various junctures (e.g. pp. 55, 99–101, 118), to the ground-breaking work of Neil Price, whose 2002 *The Viking Way: Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* represents a pivotal moment in reconsidering the relationship between texts, objects and ethnographic analogues, not least with respect to staffs of this sort.

In that same important spirit, (*Magic*) *Staffs in the Viking Age* is not only about (magic) staffs—although that by itself would be enough for many readers—but also includes valuable methodological deliberations, particularly with respect to how, and on what basis, archaeological objects can be successfully collocated with other data, such as the surviving Old Norse philological materials. In his wide-ranging discussion of the archaeology of Viking-Age magic and ritual specialists

(Ch. 2), Gardela provides readers with both a concise summary of the current state of research (e.g. Peter Pentz et al. on the Fyrkat 4 grave), as well as his own contributions to the debate, such as the notion that large stones purposefully placed on the dead in some graves is a further indication that the deceased individual was a magical operator. Contradicting (with Price) many of the utilitarian interpretations of these staffs made by earlier generations of archaeologists, who inclined to see in them such practical articles as cooking spits and measuring rods (however ill-suited the evidence seems to be to these earlier interpretations), Gardela's informed interdisciplinarity allows him to establish specific, significant similarities between the staffs as represented in the philological and archaeological records (pp. 172, 223). As Gardela writes at an earlier point in his consideration of this problem (p. 134):

‘By perceiving the practice of magic (or *seiðr* specifically) as an elaborate form of mental manipulation, which has the capacity to transform the mundane into the supernatural, we may arrive at understanding the problematic iron and wooden staffs in a new light . . . with the help of the powerful minds of Viking Age individuals, they may have become something entirely different—objects with supernatural qualities endowed with multiple layers of symbolic meanings.

Bringing together these textual and material data in Chapter 5, Gardela assesses by turns the degree to which the staff may be understood as, i.a., a distinctive attribute of a ritual specialist, *axis mundi*, a weapon, a phallus, a tool of supernatural exchange, a key, a lamp and a musical instrument. Also highly illuminating are Gardela's observations on similar objects among the Anglo-Saxons, Slavs, Balts, Greeks and Romans; although, as he writes, ‘I have refrained from suggesting that the magic staff of the Viking world was a direct loan’, he does expect that ‘interesting cross-cultural confluences’ could be found (p. 234). Users of this book will, I believe, find it to be cautious and empirical in its presentation of the data, yet engagingly bold in its interpretations, an admirable example of an emerging symbiosis that can exist between fields with shared interests after many decades of overly atomistic disciplinary pedantry. On the other hand, so complex a volume as this one will naturally be subject to a few criticisms. I note, for example, that outside the specific field of Old Norse, western scholarship has struggled mightily with the concept of ‘magic’ over the past century and a half (as suggested by my own use of ‘magico-religious’, for example), and many readers would be helped by a more nuanced sense of how that larger debate, external to Old Norse studies itself, from Edward B. Tylor to Stanley J. Tambiah and beyond, has also played a role in the interpretation of these objects. Moreover, any work casting its net as broadly as this book does is likely to make the occasional misstep, as no one can be expert in all fields: I cannot believe that many scholars who specialise in Old Norse folklore, for example, would agree with Gardela's characterisation of the field (pp. 34–35). On a more mundane level, a criticism of a very practical sort concerns the decision not to include an index for a volume as complex and data-rich as this one. Although the book does sport an extensively articulated Table of Contents, even such a comprehensive roentgenogram of the author's

organisational plan fails to compensate for the lack of an index, the inclusion of which would certainly enhance the usefulness to readers of this important book.

These squibs should, however, in no way detract from the achievement this book represents. Intellectually a far more substantial and capacious work than its slightly pinched title indicates, *(Magic) Staffs in the Viking Age* is a reference volume of which no scholar of Viking-Age or medieval Scandinavia will want to remain ignorant. For those with a special interest in the magico-religious dimension of the pre-Christian Nordic world, it will, I expect, join Price (2002) as a landmark in the study of Nordic paganism—and it is certainly most welcome testimony to the value of interdisciplinary scholarship.

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THE SWORD IN EARLY MEDIEVAL NORTHERN EUROPE. EXPERIENCE, IDENTITY, REPRESENTATION. By SUE BRUNNING. *Anglo-Saxon Studies* 36. *The Boydell Press*. Woodbridge, 2019. xvi + 213 pp. ISBN 978-1-78327-406-2.

As curator for the Sutton Hoo and European Early Medieval collections at the British Museum, Sue Brunning is an excellent authority on the material and cultural landscapes of early medieval northern Europe. This interdisciplinary, holistic study of early medieval swords and their representations, perceptions and material realities builds on her doctoral research on the ‘living’ sword in early medieval northern Europe, c.500–1100 AD. This volume incorporates the latest developments in archaeological evidence and trends in critical thought. As Brunning discusses in her introduction (pp. 1–17), there has been a shift of focus within sword scholarship, moving from categorisation, materials and manufacture to the social, cultural and experiential contexts surrounding swords and those who lived alongside them (p. 4). The introduction acts in part as a literature review of the wider field, making this book accessible to those newly interested in swords, while the interdisciplinary approach ensures that it is engaging also for experts.

The book’s organisation is achieved through the categorisation of evidence in parts: ‘Image’ (pp. 18–58), ‘Archaeology’ (pp. 59–110) and ‘Text’ (pp. 111–38). Despite the appearance of self-containment within each part, Brunning strikes an excellent balance of attention between the disciplines, recalling evidence and analysis from across the various chapters in order to draw attention to recurring themes. In her discussion of the ‘animated’ sword as conceived of in Old English and Old Norse kennings (p. 124), for example, she refers back to particular artistic motifs which were discussed in Chapter 1 (pp. 42–47). Each chapter is then divided further into sections which follow roughly the same trajectory, starting with a brief survey of the evidence and a discussion of emergent themes, moving on to focus on the relationship between swords and their wielders—including perceptive and nuanced comments on women, which will be discussed in more detail shortly—before a consideration of how perceptions and representations shifted over time and through geographical space. This structure has the added

methodological advantage of being able to approach each body of evidence within its own disciplinary contexts, as well as providing Brunning with the opportunity to challenge any invisible biases that exist within each field.

Brunning's handling of warrior identity and the subsequent questions surrounding 'women warriors' is noteworthy. Rather than focusing on whether or not women warriors existed, she establishes that 'warrior' should be viewed not as a literal role, but rather a social one (p. 145). It is well established that the presence of weapons in a grave does not immediately signify that the deceased was a warrior (p. 8, citing Härke, 1989). However, the modern definition of 'warrior' as an adult male who participated in fighting may not have been shared by medieval society (pp. 9, 145). She argues that the same evidence used to dismantle the association between 'warriors' and the weapons buried with them can also signal a more fluid attitude towards warriorhood. The diversity in archaeological evidence alone demonstrates that, regardless of age, physical ability or biological sex, an individual buried with a sword may have been viewed as being in possession of warrior-like characteristics, thereby becoming a warrior (pp. 93–96, 145). When the discussion moves, inevitably, to grave 581 in Birka, Sweden, Brunning asserts that this is indeed an unusual burial, but in its exceptionality it is actually consistent with other graves in which women are buried with swords (pp. 108–09). This discussion is refreshing and much-needed, inviting us to consider, as Brunning puts it, 'whether warrior identity was quite so gender binary as once assumed' (p. 147).

Brunning also maintains a 'strong comparative eye' on Scandinavia, with a view to engaging in a more nuanced analysis of how the sword was perceived within what she terms 'connected but distinctive peoples' (p. 16). However, as Brunning notes (p. 15), the book pays more attention to the evidence derived from Anglo-Saxon culture, meaning that its engagement with Scandinavian sources, while critical and well-executed, is somewhat ancillary. This means that there are, understandably, omissions in the Scandinavian evidence. In particular, the selected Old Norse texts have been restricted to works with identifiable authors, meaning the named skalds of the *konungasögur*. Brunning's rationale for this choice is sound: owing to their complexity, the works themselves have been transmitted from the Viking period 'uncorrupted', making them a more accurate window through which we can view early-medieval Scandinavian perceptions of the sword.

The lack of consideration of prose texts (as well as Eddic poetry) cannot be called a flaw as such, particularly as Brunning is aware of the cultural importance of sagas. There is a limited discussion of this towards the end of Chapter 3 (p. 136), as well as a reference to a recent doctoral thesis dealing with combat and swords in saga literature (p. 136, n. 170, citing Sixt Wetzler (2017). 'Combat in Saga Literature. Traces of martial arts in medieval Iceland'. Eberhardt Karls Universität, Tübingen), but it does mean that the large majority of Old Norse textual sources have been left out (p. 111, n. 2). This is unfortunate, as they are rich in depictions of swords, many of which would support or enhance the discussion; the scene in *Grettis saga* ch. 17, in which Ásdís presents Grettir with an heirloom sword, would add texture to Brunning's analysis of women and their relationships with swords, for example.

As can be inferred from the existence of a thesis on the subject, the body of Old Norse textual material is simply too large to be dealt with in an interdisciplinary study such as this. Furthermore, the same argument could be made for any visual or archaeological evidence that has been omitted, depending on the interest and expertise of the reader. The true value of this book lies in Brunning's ideas, particularly surrounding the social and experiential identities of sword-wielders. In *The Sword in Early Medieval and Northern Europe*, Brunning has laid the groundwork for exciting further study. In literary and textual scholarship, for example, there is a need to interrogate the 'male warrior' and 'female weaver' stereotypes, which find support in the type of archaeological analysis of which Brunning is critical. This book would make an excellent starting-point for such a reassessment.

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THE PRE-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS OF THE NORTH: RESEARCH AND RECEPTION. Edited by MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS. *Brepols*. Turnhout, 2018. I: FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO c.1830. xxxiv + 637 pp. ISBN 978-2-503-56879-9. II: FROM c.1830 TO THE PRESENT. xxiii + 635 pp. ISBN 978-2-503-56880-5.

The two volumes of *The Pre-Christian Religions of the North: Research and Reception* (hereafter *R&R*) are an incredible achievement. They are part of the wider *Pre-Christian Religions of the North* project, the brainchild of the late Jónas Kristjánsson, an international and collaborative effort to update the *Stand der Forschung* on pre-Christian religions in Scandinavia and those areas of Europe where Iron-Age Scandinavians settled or had significant cultural impact. Two other 'strands' of the *PCRN* are designed to explore the available source material, and to update the rapidly aging English-language handbooks on pre-Christian religions of the North, providing a so-called 'new de Vries'. *R&R*, however, builds on theoretical innovations that emerged from literary studies in the 1970s to offer something entirely new: a thorough examination of the myriad of ways in which ideas about pre-Christian Nordic religions have been received, understood and reinvented in local terms by populations outside pre-Christian Scandinavia. Clunies Ross, who edited both volumes single-handedly, deserves praise for clearly establishing in her introduction that such reception studies are not intended to pass value judgements on these reinventions, but rather to help scholars understand the reasons for these uses of the pre-Christian religions of the North (vol. I, p. xxv). Indeed, the stated aim of *R&R* is to explore how and why 'people of European background have found it urgently important to invoke Nordic religion and myth and sometimes to appropriate them as their own' (I, p. xxiii)—an aim which these volumes undoubtedly meet.

*R&R* is a project with a large scope. Its sixty-seven chapters, penned by thirty-five authors, comprise over 1300 pages, and cover the (primarily European) reception history of pre-Christian Nordic religions from the third century BC to 2018. The chapters are almost entirely new contributions, with only a handful reusing previously published text, even where they draw heavily on their authors' previous

research. A small number were originally written in a Nordic language or German, but are presented here in English. Significant effort has been made throughout to ensure that chapters are accessible to non-expert readers, and capable of standing independently of the volume in which they appear: full bibliographical information appears on the first page of each chapter, and all chapters have stand-alone bibliographies. This is a laudable goal, and bound to increase the impact and longevity of the work. Generally speaking the standard of translations is high, and non-Latin terms and quotations are both Romanised and translated. On a more abstract level, I found it impressive that I gained as much from the parts of *R&R* that explored my own areas of expertise as I did from the rest of the work, to much of which I am, in many cases, a complete newcomer. While the intended audience of *R&R* is never made explicit, having read both volumes I believe subject experts and relative newcomers will all find this a useful contribution to scholarly discourse in reception studies generally, and within the individual research fields represented.

Structurally, the two volumes are broken down into large parts (eight in vol. I, ten in vol. II), each containing between one and nine chapters. Most of these contributions are between ten and twenty pages in length, with some outliers in both directions. (The difference in length is usually, if not universally, justified by the subject under consideration.) Frustratingly, the part, chapter, and page numbers are not continuous between the two volumes, which makes cross-references clumsy. The parts progress in a largely chronological order, generally unified by the media under consideration—drama, visual arts, scholarship, etc. Within these parts, chapters typically consider the reception within a given geographical region, artistic movement or individual's works.

*R&R* begins very strongly, its first part exploring the construction of ideas about religion in Northern Europe from a 'Non-Scandinavian Perspective' (vol. I, pp. 3–89). These six chapters, prefaced by a dedicated editor's introduction to the part, offer a wonderfully critical look at sources on the pre-Christian religions of the North produced by foreign cultures. Taken together, they make a compelling case that researchers interested in these religions tend to overlook the complications inherent in the cultural and generic conventions within which our source data are embedded. For all that the picture emerging from these close critical readings is 'revisionist and . . . will disappoint some readers who are hoping for rich pickings' (vol. I, p. 5), I found this a refreshingly honest wake-up call for those of us without direct access to the corpora considered in this part. Equally praiseworthy is the following part, I.2 'The View from Inside: Medieval Scandinavian Reception', which is further subdivided into four chapters each on key theoretical responses to, and generic presentations of, pre-Christian religion. Chapters I.2.1–3 (by Mats Malm, Annette Lassen and Clunies Ross) deserve particular praise for encapsulating three distinct medieval Christian paradigms within which pre-Christian religions are often presented in Old Norse and Latin sources, but which are rarely made explicit in our sources themselves.

The first volume continues with parts outlining receptions in Nordic humanism (I.3), the intellectual shift from humanism to Romanticism (I.4), Romanticism itself (I.5) and drama and visual art (I.6), before concluding with two short parts

each containing only a single chapter: one on the development of comparative linguistics as an 'Essential Precondition for a Scholarly Reception of the Pre-Christian Religions of the North' (I.7.1); and one on 'The Early Grundtvig' (I.8.1). These two contributions conclude the first volume somewhat awkwardly, especially given that 1830 is stated to mark the division between the two volumes: The first, Clunies Ross's chapter on early philology, is focused and useful, but overlaps conceptually with coverage in II.3 and II.10 (and chapter II.10.2 in particular) in volume II. I also found Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen's two chapters on Grundtvig, one closing the first volume and the other opening the second, overly descriptive and notably uncritical—his presentation of Grundtvig's early critics in particular seems particularly subjective, and left me wondering what about Oehlschläger's style was 'vulgar' (vol. I, p. 616), why the historian Baden was 'earth-bound' (vol. I, p. 616), and how exactly Grundtvig successfully dismissed Møller's critiques in a 'very brief statement' (vol. I, p. 617). I was also left wondering how Grundtvig had earned a lengthy chapter in each volume of *R&R*. His influence may well justify it, but this was not made clear to me in Lundgreen-Nielsen's contributions. Fortunately, the second volume returns quickly to form with a short part on general non-Nordic intellectual reception in Germany (II.2.1) and Finland (II.2.2), before moving on to studies of the reception of the pre-Christian religions of the North in nineteenth-century scholarship (II.3), nineteenth- and twentieth-century music (II.4), post-1830s drama (II.5), modern literature (II.6), 'Mass Culture' (II.7), modern visual art (II.8), cultural ideologies (II.9) and twentieth-century academia (II.10).

The standard of the individual contributions across both volumes of *R&R* is very high indeed, with only the occasional weaker chapter. In addition to those noted above, I would highlight the work of Simon Halink (ch. II.3.5 on Jacob Grimm and German appropriations of Nordic mythology), Stefanie von Schnurbein (ch. II.9.2 on 'Germanic Neopaganism') and Clunies Ross herself (several short contributions outlining key issues not addressed in other chapters, particularly chs I.4.3 on the sublime and II.3.1 on early comparative study of religion) as particularly accessible, engaging and effective presentations of extensive and complex topics. While contributions to broad-ranging handbooks like *R&R* can sometimes run the risk of becoming uncritically descriptive, two chapters in *R&R* deserve recognition for their polemical approach: David Clark's examination of Nordic medievalism in Anglophone children's literature (ch. II.6.3.1) offers not only a useful catalogue of primary sources for this understudied field, but also proposes an original categorisation of age-related and generic groupings by which to organise this material (vol. II, pp. 373–81). Similarly, Julia Zernack's dissection and subsequent rejection of the term 'Germanic' in non-linguistic academic discourse (ch. II.10.1) reflects an ongoing debate in Germanophone scholarship, and it is excellent to have this presented here in English. On the subject of original research, I would also like to praise Clunies Ross's decision to include Sarah Timme's *catalogue raisonné* of twentieth- and twenty-first-century German visual art (ch. II.8.1) in lieu of her full analysis (equivalent to her ch. I.6.2.4 on nineteenth-century representations in the same media) which a footnote explains could not be included for reasons

beyond the editor's control; it will doubtless serve as a useful springboard for future research in the field. Many other contributors deserve praise for their chapters in *R&R*, but as the standard is so impressive I cannot name them all here.

As with any work, particularly of this scope, there are some areas in which *R&R* may be criticised. Most of these are very minor indeed: in addition to an occasional disparity in the provision of translations and/or non-English original texts, there are a handful of typographical errors and formatting slips, none of which affects the understanding of the text, and some inconsistencies in the use of standard editions for Old Norse texts. A more pressing complaint arises in part I.6.2, on visual arts in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the five chapters of this part do an admirable job of outlining national receptions of pre-Christian religions of the North, but frequently make reference to visual works for which no illustration is provided. Granted that including figures takes up valuable space and increases the production costs, several apparently innovative or influential works (many of which are also difficult to find reproduced online) are excluded, such as Freund's 'Ragnarök' frieze (vol. I, p. 455) or Flintoe's 'Torshov' (vol. I, p. 506). Admittedly, other parts and chapters make excellent use of illustrations, tables, photographs depicting German dramatic works (ch. II.5.1), and even sheet music (ch. II.4.3) to communicate the multimedia nature of the reception of the pre-Christian religions of the North.

The two remaining issues I wish to raise are both highly subjective: which fields, areas, media and temporal periods deserve representation in a work like *R&R*; and how should their coverage be organised? To be clear, I understand and respect the editorial decisions Clunies Ross has made in these interrelated matters, but wish to note some of the potential shortcomings arising from them. Structurally, the division of the same artist's works into separate parts sometimes leads to fragmentary coverage, such as the lack of mention of Adam Oehlenschläger's dramatic works (ch. I.6.1.1) in the chapter on his poetry (ch. I.5.2). Similarly, some parts of *R&R* where chapters are divided along national lines give a somewhat siloed impression of the reception of the pre-Christian religions of the North in their fields (e.g. part I.6, on visual art). While Clunies Ross's editorial part introductions and dedicated chapters on the international reception of particular works or themes (e.g. Zernack's chapter I.5.8 on the cross-cultural Romantic reception of *Baldurs draumar*) go a long way to combatting this, the provision of such contributions is not universal. While it is also laudable that *R&R* recognises that research *is* reception, and simultaneously feeds into and draws on contemporary understandings of pre-Christian religions, *R&R*'s division of scholarly reception into three parts across the two volumes feels disjointed. Part II.10 on 'Modern' (i.e. twentieth- and twenty-first-century) scholarship seems to suffer in particular from this, with Annette Lassen's chapter (II.10.2) on 'Philological Studies' actually spending much of its time on (admittedly useful) surveys of philology from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries (vol. II, pp. 543–59) that might have been better contextualised in part II.3. A similar privileging of philology is detectable in the lack of a dedicated chapter considering the archaeological reception of the pre-Christian religions of the North. Clunies Ross's concluding survey of twenty-first-century scholarship attempts to address

this by providing her ‘non-archaeologist’s assessment’ of recent developments in the archaeology of pre-Christian Nordic religions (vol. II, pp. 603–07). Nonetheless, an archaeological equivalent of John Lindow’s excellent chapter on the development of folkloristics as a discipline and its application to the pre-Christian religions of the North (II.3.6) would have been a welcome addition.

As for *what* reception to include, I have the impression that despite Clunies Ross’s stated desire to cover both ‘highbrow’ and ‘popular’ media (vol. II, p. xv), *R&R* prioritises the former. Much of part I.6.2 (covering ‘the Visual Arts from c.1750’) is focused on élite fine art, despite the fact that most people’s encounters with pre-Christian mythology in this period would have come via book illustrations and postcards. Indeed, Timme makes her lack of engagement with such popular media explicit and deliberate (vol. I, p. 533), despite Clunies Ross’s own efforts in her chapter on British visual arts (vol. I, pp. 568–76). While there are obviously difficulties in securing sources for popular reception pre-1830, I was disappointed that there was only a single chapter in part II.7 on ‘The Reception in Mass Culture’: Jón Karl Helgason’s impressive study of ‘Nordic Gods and Popular Culture’ (ch. II.7.1). (What the distinction between ‘Mass’ and ‘Popular’ culture might signify is not addressed.) Of course, chapters on children’s and science-fiction/fantasy literature (chs II.6.2–3) also contribute to popular reception, but as contributions are elsewhere dedicated to areas in which there was very little employment of pre-Christian religions (e.g. chs I.5.6 and I.6.2.3), I would have liked more attention paid to reception in late twentieth- and twenty-first-century media. Metal music, for example, could easily have merited a dedicated chapter alongside Wagner’s *Ring* cycle and other opera in part II.4. Despite this somewhat uneven coverage, *R&R* nonetheless demonstrates the viability of analytical surveys of reception in popular modern media, and I would encourage researchers working on, for instance, popular history, video games, tabletop RPGs, and Japanese manga and anime to consider producing studies of their fields taking the chapters of *R&R* as models. Similar efforts by scholars in other fields without dedicated coverage in these volumes should also be encouraged: Latin American and Russian literary responses are only hinted at (vol. II, p. 285); Zernack’s well-executed chapter on European political ideology (II.9.1) leaves room for a study of North American propagandistic and political uses of pre-Christian religions of the North; and Nordic occultism, touched upon briefly in the existing chapters on dramatic works (II.5.1) and neopaganism (II.9.2), could benefit from a focused study.

Despite the criticisms I have raised here, I wish to close by reiterating that the two volumes of *R&R* are innovative, ambitious, well-executed and, where I am qualified to comment, academically sound. This work makes a major contribution, not only to the study of the titular pre-Christian religions of the North, but also to Reception Studies and many empirical fields of History, Art History, the Study of Religions, Folkloristics, Musicology, Performance Studies, Sociology and other intersecting disciplines.

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THE SEA KINGS. THE LATE NORSE KINGDOMS OF MAN AND THE ISLES c.1066–1275. By R. ANDREW McDONALD. *Birlinn*. Edinburgh, 2019. xxii + 426 pp. ISBN 978-1-910900-21-5.

This book takes on the huge task of addressing a critically understudied primary source. The *Chronicle of Man* is a short text that provides tantalising insight into a place and a kingdom with very few other source attestations or comparanda, and so with little that can be established as fact. McDonald has undertaken the task of parsing the history of the kingdom from this main source and as many other fragmentary sources as possible. First and foremost, it is necessary to commend the painstaking work that has gone into this monograph and the sheer amount of information that has been produced. Including the notes section at the end, the book is over 400 pages, which I found consistently impressive given the paucity of source material.

This book will be most useful as a starting-point for any scholar wanting to study the Isle of Man in the ‘post-Viking’ period. Chapters 4–7 largely present an attempt at constructing a chronological narrative of the kingdom roughly between the dates given in the title. It is usefully broken down by king or leader so that it would be possible for a reader of narrower interests to dip in and out of the text. However, there is merit in reading it straight through to obtain a fuller sense of how this historical narrative is being constructed (both in the primary sources and by McDonald himself).

Chapters 8–11 provide a commendably wide-ranging discussion on various themes: from an approach to economic history; the history of the church; a discussion of kingship and its role in the islands; seafaring and trade; to a discussion of the role of women. This gives the sense that there is very little left unconsidered. It is perhaps not as contextualised within wider traditions of scholarship on some of these topics, even within High-Medieval and Viking studies of the region, as it could be. However, this should not be levelled as a criticism, as the task the book sets out for itself is very clear: as stated in the introduction, it simply aims to explain what we know, and how we know it, about the Late Norse kingdoms of Man and the Isles c.1066–1275.

Where one might find room for critique is the framing; the introduction argues strongly for the periodisation and boundaries of the book, yet it falls short in contextualising what existed prior to this chosen period and where the book’s narrative comes from. While I appreciate the difficulty of studying the Isle of Man in the period before 1066, where there is no textual tradition, the paucity of written sources does not equate to no knowledge of the pre-existing landscape of the island. This can be seen in the geographical discussion of the Isles whose relationships are formulated prior to the events discussed, which is worthy of further consideration. This lack of contextualisation is most obvious in Chapter 11 which discusses the Church. There is much discussion of the reform of the Church and the establishment of Rushen Abbey, but what existed prior to this reform is very shallowly considered. Although work on the earlier Church around the Irish Sea Region, particularly at sites like Iona or Maughold, is discussed, this examination would have been enriched by further contextualisation of the sites’ earlier histories.

There is much speculation and inference in this book, and this is largely signposted by the author. In many cases this adds to the discussion; however, it is also

cause for a note of caution, as it is not always clear to the reader how much is being extrapolated and from what sources. Information about the kings is based on close textual reading of the *Chronicle* and a large variety of contemporary chronicles, saga material, poetry and documentary evidence. Nevertheless, there are other analyses based on far fewer sources, a notable example being the discussion of the coronation of the Sea Kings for which there is no evidence whatsoever. I sympathise with the author, and agree that the existence of some form of ritual is not only possible but probable, and further that Tynwald is a viable prospective location for such a ritual. Yet, given that there is actually no evidence for this suggestion, it seems extreme that over five pages of text is dedicated to it and no other site is considered. The notion of an open-air ritual is a possibility, but it is not the only one. No consideration is given to an ecclesiastically based ritual, such as at Rushen Abbey, which the kings founded and where many scholars place the writing of the *Chronicle of Man*, or to Iona, where the kings of Man are famously buried. Neither of these suggestions is completely substantiable either, but by including only the discussion of Coronation at Tynwald, the author perpetuates claims that are not founded in the evidence of the Late Norse period.

Similarly, the brief speculation about the Lewis Chessmen, whose illustration on the back of the dust jacket and within the set of image plates makes them a feature of the book, and their potential relationship to the Sea Kings, is again perfectly plausible but does not add to our evidence-based understanding of them as objects or our understanding of any other chance find from Man or the Hebrides. These suppositions unfortunately undercut the parts of the book that are more firmly based in the sources. They do, however, indicate the encyclopedic aims of the author, and the thoroughness of the discussion of the *Chronicle of Man* is the chief merit of this book. Scholars will appreciate the approach taken here which makes the history of the kingdom of Man and the Isles far more accessible. This book contextualises the *Chronicle of Man* and thus will allow for the source to be incorporated in further scholarship of the Irish Sea Region beyond the Viking Age.

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GAELIC INFLUENCE IN THE NORTHUMBRIAN KINGDOM: THE GOLDEN AGE AND THE VIKING AGE. By FIONA EDMONDS. *Studies in Celtic History* 40. Boydell Press. Woodbridge, 2019. xvii +300 pp. ISBN 978-1-78327-336-2.

Despite the multidisciplinary nature of medieval studies, it has generally been all too easy for scholars to stay in their own lane. This remains the case, whether they are intimidated by the vastness of an unfamiliar field, or for other reasons prefer not to engage extensively with fields other than their own, despite the popularity of the buzzword ‘interdisciplinarity’. In *Gaelic Influence in the Northumbrian Kingdom: The Golden Age and the Viking Age*, Fiona Edmonds demonstrates the nuance and effectiveness of interdisciplinary research. She sets out as a prerequisite for interdisciplinary research a question that only two or more disciplines can answer;

her book's subject matter fits this definition as, owing to fragmentary evidence, it is impossible for any single discipline to fully represent the extent and evolution of Gaelic influence in the Northumbrian kingdom (p. 17). The concept of 'disciplinary adequacy' is an important one to highlight: Edmonds does not claim to be an expert in all of the fields she draws evidence from; rather, by achieving an understanding of the scholarly frameworks within these fields, she is able to produce a compelling and nuanced study.

In Chapter 1, 'Concepts and Historiography of the Northumbrian and Gaelic Worlds: Medieval to Modern', Edmonds begins by interrogating the two concepts that underpin her study: the Gaelic world, and the term 'Northumbrian'. She observes a tangible Gaelic consciousness, with language as its principal unifying feature, during the early Middle Ages, but this was often more of an undercurrent in identities that developed in different parts of the Gaelic-speaking world, including in relationships with Picts and Scandinavians. 'Northumbria' is presented less as a unifying element of identity, than as a useful term to indicate the geographical boundaries of the Northumbrian kingdom at its height.

These observations lay the foundation for Chapter 2, 'Exiles and Emperors: Gaelic-Northumbrian Political Relations in the Golden Age'. This examines the political relationships both within what would become the Northumbrian kingdom, and between that region and the Gaelic-speaking regions around the Irish Sea leading up to and during the Northumbrian Golden Age. Already at this point, the critical role of the Isle of Man as a conduit and connection point becomes clear. The chapter provides a thorough analysis of a period of rapid political change, and concludes with the reign of Aldfrith (r. 685–704/5), the last king of the Northumbrian Golden Age. Chapter 3, 'Fragmentation and Opportunity: From the Eighth Century to the Viking Age', continues the broadly political focus of the previous chapter, beginning chronologically with Aldfrith's sons. Ties between different parts of the Gaelic world were enhanced and complemented by political and familial ties among Scandinavians, particularly, as Edmonds shows, along the York-Dublin axis, from the latter half of the ninth century. Both internal and external conflicts meant that the Northumbrian kingdom's élites' attention ultimately became more localised and reactive.

Moving away from the focus on political connections, Chapter 4, 'Pathways through the Past: Routes between the Gaelic World and the Northumbrian Kingdom', examines and traces the physical connections—travel routes by land and sea—between different parts of the Gaelic world and Northumbrian kingdom. Indeed, Edmonds's initial goal for the chapter is to show that 'travel was feasible' during this period in the first place (p. 72). Not only was there a considerable variety of possible routes, but much of the road network and many ports were underpinned by Roman infrastructure.

Where Chapters 2 and 3 deal with political interactions, Chapters 5 and 6, 'A Golden Age of Ecclesiastical Contacts' and 'Saints and seaways in the Viking Age', explore links based on church organisation and the movement of saints respectively. When examining ecclesiastical links, Edmonds concentrates her analysis on three groups of churches: Iona/Lindisfarne, York and Whitby. The

connections within and between these groups both intersect with and deviate from political patterns, and, in contrast to previous research, Edmonds argues that in some cases they persisted through the Viking Age. During the Viking Age itself, the foundation of new churches and transformation of old ones provides a window onto the concurrent changes in both political and ecclesiastical contacts, particularly in the north-western parts of the fragmented Northumbrian kingdom. Edmonds acknowledges the difficulty in tracing medieval church veneration and dedication, but argues convincingly for a complex web of relationships traceable through the foundation of new proprietary and local churches (particularly driven by Scandinavian settlers).

The evidence for multilingualism discussed in Chapter 7, 'Medieval Multilingualism: Gaelic Linguistic Evidence in the Northumbrian Kingdom', is predominantly onomastic, and derives from western and northern Northumbria. Edmonds prioritises evidence within this specific geographic area, rather than evidence for Gaelic, Old English and/or Norse multilingualism more broadly, which means that few (if any) texts or manuscripts are available for inclusion. She examines pre-Viking-Age as well as Norse place-name evidence, revealing multilayered traces of Gaelic and Scandinavian movement. Chapter 8 turns from onomastic to material evidence with 'Movement and Material Culture in the Northumbrian and Gaelic Worlds'. Particularly interesting in this chapter is Edmonds's observation that the patterns of links indicated by sculptural motifs sometimes complements textual evidence, but also indicates greater, and different kinds of, complexity than that suggested by text alone. It is worth noting that despite Edmonds's caution against attempts to identify an essentialist 'Northumbrian' or 'Gaelic' culture through material remains, and her reference to the problematisation of the term 'Anglo-Saxon' in the introduction, Edmonds nevertheless uses the term liberally and without comment throughout this chapter, particularly when discussing metal dress accessories. She cites older, existing studies of the emergence and use of the term 'Anglo-Saxon', but of the recent body of work cites only Mary Dockray-Miller's 2017 article for JSTOR Daily, as the book was in advanced stages prior to the specific cultural moment sparked by Mary Rambaran-Olm's resignation from ISSEME (then ISAS). This demonstrates, albeit inadvertently, how difficult it can be to escape essentialist labels even in a work that is otherwise conscious of doing so. Indeed, one may wonder how accurate 'Anglo-Saxon' is in this context, given the presentation elsewhere of individual kingdoms, as well as the geographically specific nature of the multilingual evidence used.

Both Edmonds's questions and her approach reflect the complexity and partiality, in every sense of the word, of the sources. In some areas (e.g. the complex political relationships of Chapter 2) Edmonds's prose tends to be overly dense, and here particularly more maps to help orient the reader would have been helpful. Overall, however, this is a wide-ranging and stimulating book with a multidisciplinary and multi-field appeal.

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HANDBOOK OF PRE-MODERN NORDIC MEMORY STUDIES: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES. Edited by JÜRIG GLAUSER, PERNILLE HERMANN and STEPHEN A. MITCHELL. *De Gruyter*. Berlin and Boston, 2018. xxv + 1163 pp. ISBN 978-3-11-044020-1.

This large two-volume set provides a summary of work in the field of pre-modern Nordic memory studies up to the time of publication, offering a starting-point for understanding the current state of play and pointers on how this new and burgeoning field might develop. However, it is not a manual on how to work on memory studies, but a substantial work featuring short essays by nearly eighty contributors. The first volume is divided into two parts: thematic introductions to memory studies, and case studies. The second, much shorter, volume presents a series of texts and images that illustrate how memory studies is evidenced in the primary material.

The introduction sets out the work's rationale and offers ideas on how to approach reading and working with it. Jürg Glauser then opens part one of the work with an essay on the history of memory studies, explaining where it fits into classical thinking and how that relates to medieval and later understandings of the theme. This first part contains thirty thematic introductions to memory studies. Each essay is structured in the same way by consistent subheadings in the same order: 'Definition', 'State of research', discussion and finally 'Perspectives for future research'. This means that each essay is readily comparable with the others in the collection and guides the reader in a structured fashion that aids comparison of the different topics.

The content of each essay is variable. Some authors have chosen to give detailed background information while others provide more of a summary. Depending upon one's own discipline, some of the contextual information will be more or less familiar. For example, Stephen Mitchell's summary of oral theory and book-prose versus free-prose in 'Orality and Oral Theory' (pp. 120–31) will contain no surprises for scholars of Old Norse literature, but will be useful for students, or those from other disciplines.

As with the literature reviews and discussion, the 'perspectives for future research' sections vary. Some examples provide exhortations to engage with memory studies as a complementary field to the one discussed, or a broad sense of what directions such research might take (e.g. Hennig on 'Environmental Humanities', pp. 330–31), while others offer more detailed and concrete perspectives that suggest specific areas for further research (e.g. Carstens on 'Late Iron Age Architecture', pp. 154–55). Despite the variability between essays, these sections form a particularly practical feature of the Handbook, offering users ways to relate the content of this work to their own research.

The second part of the first volume focuses on specific case studies. These are structured in the same format, each starting with an introduction. The case studies illustrate how memory studies can be used to enhance understandings of the past. For example, Lena Rohrbach ('Writing and the Book', pp. 399–405) shows in concrete fashion how the placement of narratives within a wider volume can inform conceptualisations of that narrative as perceived by the compiler. Similarly, Slavica Ranković ('Remembering the Future', pp. 526–35) applies cognitive science research in collective memory to a selection of female saga characters, including Hallgerðr Höskuldsdóttir and Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, and then to Grettir. Her essay demonstrates how this recent scientific research can change the ways in

which we read and relate to Old Norse literature, and has wider application to other areas in which communal memory is expressed. These case studies demonstrate practical applications of the theories of memory studies and provide easy access to those theories for the scholar new to them.

The third part is a separate volume that comprises texts and images to illustrate aspects of how memory was depicted and is represented within pre-modern Nordic sources. It aims to provide readers with the opportunity to engage directly with the primary source material through a curated collection of texts and visual art. Texts are provided in translation and in the source language. In the case of Old Norse, this varies between normalised and non-normalised language according to which edition has been chosen as the source for the text. The English translations are taken from published works. It is disappointing that the editors have chosen to use Henry Adams Bellows's 1923 translation of *Völuspá* to accompany the text when more modern translations are available, and, indeed, are used later in the same volume. For consistency and accuracy, more recent translations would be preferable. It is good, then, that the translations used for extracts from the *Íslendingasögur* are drawn from *The Complete Sagas of The Icelanders Including 49 Tales* (ed. Viðar Hreinsson, 1997).

For the runic inscriptions, we are provided with the 'original text' and a translation. 'Original text' is a misleading description of what is in fact a normalised Old Norse version, rather than a transliteration of the runes. It does provide the sense of the inscription but at one remove from the original text.

The colour plates supplement and illustrate the essays in parts I and II, rather than making up a coherent collection in themselves. This is not inherently a problem, but will require a degree of cross-referencing between volumes that may be more cumbersome than is desirable. The second volume also contains the index to both volumes; it is clear from this and the way the colour plates supplement the first volume that the two volumes are intended to be sold and used together.

While there is a good mix of early-career and established scholars among the authors, the gender balance is less good. Of one hundred essays, thirty-nine have female authors. Parity could have been achieved by approaching more of the excellent female scholars who could have contributed to this volume. Moreover, a wider range of expertise could have been called upon to assign more appropriate contributors for some of the essays. For example, while Mats Malm's essay on runology offers a basic background and some future perspectives, a dedicated runologist working on runestones as communication could have offered different and more specific perspectives.

This criticism aside, the *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies* is a valuable work and the editors have done a great job in showcasing the manifold ways in which memory studies can be applied. A multitude of perspectives on the field of memory studies is presented, and scholars at all levels should be able to find something in it that is useful to them or that inspires them to think differently about their research. The cost will put off most individuals, but this work certainly merits a place in libraries where related fields are taught.

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EVERGREEN ASH. ECOLOGY AND CATASTROPHE IN OLD NORSE MYTH AND LITERATURE. By CHRISTOPHER ABRAM. *University of Virginia Press*. Charlottesville, 2019. 254 pp. ISBN 978-0-8139-4226-1 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-8139-4227-8 (paperback).

As the first monograph-length ecocritical study of Old Norse literature, Christopher Abram's *Evergreen Ash* is a welcome contribution to this burgeoning critical approach in Old Norse studies. One of Abram's main contentions is that, far from offering a window onto an earlier, pre-Christian and ostensibly 'greener' or more ecologically harmonious worldview, the myths preserved in our surviving Norse sources (with a few exceptions) subscribe to the same kinds of ecologically unsustainable attitudes as are prevalent today, especially in the Western world. Abram asserts that the *Æsir* constitute the principal 'In-group' of Norse myth, self-isolated from the 'natural' world with which the *jötnar*, the principal 'Out-group', are aligned. Having created the world from the slain primordial *jötunn* Ymir, the *Æsir* impose their will on the world, and exploit various non-human Others—especially the *jötnar*—in order to further their own ends. Such exploitation, moreover, is also evident in narrative accounts of human settlers in Iceland, Greenland and beyond.

In 'Prologue: Ash', the first of two introductory chapters, Abram raises questions about the processes of mythologisation common to both Old Norse literature and modern ecological discourse by juxtaposing the destructive ash produced by volcanoes with the life-giving ash tree, especially as manifested in the 'world-tree' Yggdrasill. Abram asserts both the literal and conceptual centrality of Yggdrasill in the Norse cosmos, which he considers to be the principal *oikos* of the *Æsir* and, by extension, humans (p. 9). However, the term *oikos*, a commonplace in ecocriticism, is defined in neither of the book's introductory chapters, and its etymology and importance in ecocritical discourse are only cursorily acknowledged on p. 64. Similarly, 'natureculture' and the derived 'naturecultural' are used throughout the book without any explanation of the term.

Chapter 1, entitled 'Ecocriticism and Old Norse', offers a wide-ranging discussion about what ecocriticism and Old Norse studies can each bring to bear on the other. Despite a somewhat cursory treatment of what ecocriticism has to offer Old Norse studies, Abram's explanation of what Old Norse literature and myth can do for ecocriticism is rather more compelling. He successfully argues that medieval Iceland and its literary culture provides ecocritics with a distinctive case study and an unique corpus of pre-modern texts which challenge many of the preconceptions that ecocritics hold concerning the representation of 'nature' in literary and other cultural productions. Abram concludes this chapter with what he calls 'a non-apology for anachronism' (pp. 38–40), in which he responds proleptically to reviewers who would level the 'charge' of anachronism by stating that 'this book embraces anachronism as an inevitable and even welcome condition of any ecologically oriented medievalism' (p. 38). Whether such anachronism is 'inevitable' or 'welcome', though, depends very much on the individual critic's point of view.

In Chapter 2, Abram first examines Lynn White Jr's 1967 thesis—infamous amongst ecocritics—which states that the unfolding ecological crises of today have their roots in the ideology of exploitation implied in the Book of Genesis. Abram then considers our Old Norse mythological sources and the problems posed by

the interplay of ‘pagan’ and Christian elements in them, especially in *Völuspá* and Snorri’s *Edda*. The main focus of much of this chapter is the transition from the cosmic void to a world built from the body parts of the primordial *jötunn* Ymir, whose violent death at the hands of the *Æsir* is a quintessential act of both creation and destruction. Indeed, the *Æsir* are regularly the target of Abram’s criticism in this chapter, which concludes that, through their exploitative actions (especially the killing of Ymir), the Norse gods uphold the Nature/Society binary central to White’s controversial thesis.

Chapter 3 consists primarily of an analysis of three words for ‘world’ in Old Norse: *heimr*, *veröld* and *jörð*. Abram attempts to unpick the specific connotations of each word by examining it in the context of a number of predominantly mythological texts. He concludes that *heimr* denotes the idea of a dwelling-place, but that in the plural it is typically used to refer specifically to the dwellings of members of various out-groups (e.g. *Jötunheimar*). As its etymology suggests, *veröld* pertains to the age of man, and therefore history, i.e. the world as both space and time. Finally, *jörð*, according to Abram, is ‘greener’ (p. 72) in its connotations than either *heimr* or *veröld* in so far as it denotes the earth beneath our feet. He concludes that when represented as the goddess *Jörð*, moreover, the earth is dominated by men in the Norse tradition, much as many modern critics, especially ecofeminists, view the Earth as being subject to patriarchal, capitalist forces today. It is regrettable, however, that, in a chapter concerned with the definitions of words, the only two references to a dictionary are to the *OED*. Citations from any number of the standard Old Norse–Icelandic dictionaries would have undergirded Abram’s assertions here.

In Chapter 4, Abram brings together the worldly and the cosmological, first with an examination of the origin myth of the Norse settlement of Iceland and its ecological impact (especially deforestation). He then explores the significance of *Yggdrasil* as cosmological world-tree, what *Askr* and *Embla* reveal about the mythic relationship between trees and humans, and the function of tree kennings in the skaldic corpus. Abram views these as evidence of the ‘ontological’ link (p. 94) between people and trees in Old Norse literature. Whilst his meditation on ‘Tree-People and People-Trees’ (the chapter’s title) is an original examination of the relationship between the anthropological and the arboreal, his literal interpretations of kennings for men/warriors (of the ‘tree of battle’ type) are not without their problems. Abram alleges that ‘kennings have *sometimes* been viewed as being metaphorical’, before proposing instead that, in skaldic poetry, ‘a tree is *simply* a man and a man a tree, and we do not need to think of it in metaphorical or even imagistic terms’ (p. 97; emphasis added). This, to say the least, unorthodox approach to the role of kennings in skaldic verse is then applied, less convincingly still, to *Sonatorrek*, which, he claims, ‘is, in part, a naturecultural attempt to come to terms with deforestation’ (p. 102).

Continuing with the subject of deforestation, Chapter 5 begins with a brief overview of the trope of the Golden Age (pp. 104–07), especially as encountered in Ari Þorgilsson’s comment about the state of Iceland’s forests at the time of the Settlement. Although a pertinent preface to Abram’s discussion of the settlement of

Greenland and the Norse arrival in *Vínland*, this brief section could have benefitted from a closer reading of this trope in the context of the narratives in which it appears. The subsequent examination of the short-lived stay in, and retreat from, *Vínland* is more compelling from an ecocritical point of view, with a fruitful discussion of the agrarian, and exploitative, culture of the Norse explorers—or ‘colonizers’ (p. 115)—counterposed with that of the indigenous *Skrælingar*.

Chapters 6 and 7 are devoted to *Völuspá* and Ragnarøk, which Abram treats, respectively, ‘as a document of ecological catastrophe and . . . as a situation analogous to the one we currently find ourselves in with respect to global warming’ (p. 126). Much of the first part of Chapter 6 is concerned with modern ecological anxieties, and ecocritical responses to such concerns. The discussion also encompasses the ‘Anthropocene’ and the myth of environmental apocalypse (that is ‘myth’ as story, rather than an idea to be dismissed). Abram returns to the trope of the Golden Age, which, for the *Æsir*, is only possible because of their separation from ‘Nature’ by instituting religion, industry and leisure at the expense of the ‘natural’ world. The chapter closes with one of the more pointedly anachronistic parts of the book, in which Loki and his offspring are likened to ‘weapons of mass destruction, doomsday devices’ (p. 143) since they foreshadow the apocalypse at Ragnarøk, when their powers are fully unleashed on the *Æsir*.

Finally, in Chapter 7, Abram views Ragnarøk as Norse myth’s own ‘Great Acceleration’, a term describing the rapid changes to the Earth’s environment and human society. The ensuing discussion about the post-apocalyptic, post-Ragnarøk world is one of the strongest in the book, and Abram’s reading successfully asserts the dependency of the post-apocalyptic world of *Völuspá* on the myth of the Golden Age found earlier in the poem. In the second half of the chapter, Abram identifies six features which Ragnarøk and the manifold crises of the Anthropocene have in common, demonstrating very well the considerable parallels between Ragnarøk and our own period of ecological catastrophe. Just why these parallels are significant—apart from the suggestion that humans have throughout history come to terms with apocalypse in much the same kinds of ways—is less clear, however.

Whilst one could argue that any piece of scholarship on the Middle Ages will be in some measure anachronistic—especially if it is applying the modes of thought engendered by post-structuralist critical approaches—anachronism need not be inevitable and should, indeed, be handled with care. Highlighting the similarities and differences between Old Norse literary sources and the narratives prevalent in environmental discourse today can no doubt open up avenues for new ways of thinking about our own dire predicament, something which Abram’s book amply demonstrates, and it will no doubt, therefore, be an illuminating read for ecocritics. However, for ecocriticism to offer more probing insights into the medieval past, it must surely be tempered by a respect for the cultural and intellectual frameworks of the period in which the texts that we as medievalists study were recorded. For example, given the extensive treatment of *Völuspá* and myths of the Golden Age and apocalypse in *Evergreen Ash*, Abram might have considered the foundation myths and eschatological concerns found in texts such as *Trójumanna saga*, *Breta sögur* and the *Elucidarius*, all of which appear in *Hauksbók* alongside *Völuspá*

(as well as some pertinent ‘encyclopaedic’ material concerning aspects of what we might today call the ‘natural world’). Abram’s comments about *Kristni saga* (pp. 7–8), for instance, touch on eschatology, but reading the text alongside its neighbours in *Hauksbók* might have made for a richer discussion still.

In the book’s conclusion, Abram rightly condemns the misguided nostalgia amongst some people today for a ‘Green Middle Ages’—our very own Golden Age—as he does the grotesque desire in some quarters for a return to a white Middle Ages, but in suggesting that such nostalgia functions ‘by appropriating the medieval world for modern political ends . . . and by projecting our present-day desires onto a world that is forever lost to us’ (p. 177), Abram is hoist with his own petard. An anachronistic reading of Old Norse literature, however well intentioned, will inevitably be similarly guilty of appropriation and projection, and it is here, unfortunately, that Abram’s ‘non-apology for anachronism’ finally falls short.

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— Other death omens of ill-luck are shared by Scandinavian, Orcadian and Gaelic tradition (cf. Almqvist 1974–76, 24, 29–30, 32–33).

— Anne Holtsmark (1939, 78) and others have already drawn attention to this fact.

— Ninth-century Irish brooches have recently been the subject of two studies by the present author (1972; 1973–74), and the bossed penannular brooches have been fully catalogued by O. S. Johansen (1973).

— This is clear from the following sentence: *iðraðist Bolli þegar verksins ok lýsti vígi á hendi sér (Laxdæla saga 1934, 154).*

— It is stated quite plainly in *Flatexjarbok* (1860–68, I 419): *hann tok land j Syrlækjarosi.*

— There is every reason to think that this interpretation is correct (cf. *Heilagra manna sögur*, II 107–08).

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