



TWO BORGFIRÐINGA SÖGUR: THE OLDEST OR THE YOUNGEST ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR?

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In a review of *Túlkun Heiðarvígasögu* (Bjarni Guðnason 1993), David Evans commented that the author “has made himself something of a specialist in works that no longer exist”. The allusion was to Bjarni Guðnason’s earlier studies of the lost or fragmentary Kings’ Sagas, *Skjöldunga saga* and *Hryggjarstykki*. Bjarni Guðnason’s study of *Heiðarvíga saga* – a work which “is not actually lost, but came as close to being so as any work that exists at all can have done” (Evans 361) – radically revises the received view of this as probably the oldest of the Sagas of Icelanders, a view based on its apparently primitive style and absence of influence from other sagas. In Bjarni’s opinion it is derivative of other sagas, most notably *Laxdæla saga*, and dates from the mid-thirteenth century or later. A year later Bjarni extended his investigation to another supposedly primitive, and again fragmentary saga, *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, detecting in it influences from many texts including *Njáls saga* and repositioning it even more radically at the end of, rather than in the early part of the thirteenth century (1994).

Bjarnar saga is preserved only in seventeenth-century and later manuscripts, from which the first five chapters are missing and have to be supplied from a summary preserved in versions of Snorri’s *Óláfs saga helga*. *Heiðarvíga saga* is partly preserved in a medieval manuscript, which Bjarni Guðnason believes to date from c.1300 rather than the traditional estimate of c.1250, and partly in a transcript made from the beginning of this manuscript before it was destroyed by fire in the eighteenth century. Thus, fortunately, neither saga really fits the category of “works that no longer exist”. It is probable, though, that the poor preservation of both works has led to a general lack of critical attention, which has made it dangerously easy for Bjarni Guðnason’s new dating to be accepted without much scrutiny. In a recent authoritative collection of saga translations, the date of *Heiðarvíga saga* appears without explanation as “mid-13th century” (Viðar Hreinsson *et al.*, IV 97); that of *Bjarnar saga* as “late 13th century” (I 255).



Initial critical reception of *Túlkun Heiðarvígasögu*, though, was more sceptical. Evans found that the central thesis “leaves me on the whole unconvinced” (364). Theodore M. Andersson’s verdict on the assertion of influence from *Laxdæla saga* on *Heiðarvíga saga*, crucial to the proposed late dating, was that “the criteria seem to me quite uncertain” (1995, 451), and on the saga’s awkwardness of style, “it remains difficult to imagine that the level of writing in *Heiðarvíga saga* postdates the prose standard established by such masterpieces as *Egils saga*, *Gísla saga*, and *Laxdæla saga*” (450). In the nature of things, Bjarni Guðnason’s Festschrift article on the date of *Bjarnar saga* has received less evaluation (but see Finlay 2000, l–lii). A recent literary survey deferred judgement, commenting on Bjarni Guðnason’s reading of *Heiðarvíga saga*, “Þetta sýnir hve ótraustar eru niðurstöður um aldur Íslendingasagna, en rétt mun að biða átekta og sjá hvernig röksemdum Bjarna farnast þegar aðrir fræðimenn taka að grandskoða þær” (Böðvar Guðmundsson *et al.* 1993, 113) [this shows how unreliable are conclusions about the age of the Sagas of Icelanders, but it is necessary to await developments and see how Bjarni’s arguments fare under the scrutiny of other scholars], and acknowledging his theory on *Bjarnar saga* only in passing: “Lengst af hefur verið talið að hún sé fremur gömul, eða frá fyrri hluta 13. aldar, en það hefur nýlega verið dregið í efa” (98) [It has usually been considered that it is rather old, or from the earlier part of the thirteenth century, but doubt has recently been cast on this]. But the further evaluation anticipated here, and which such a thorough and radical study as *Túlkun Heiðarvígasögu* deserves, has not followed (see also Vésteinn Ólason 1998, 253 n. 46). This paper aims to address Bjarni Guðnason’s claims in greater detail, in the context of some comments on the methodology of saga dating.

The inconclusive re-dating of sagas is, of course, not new. Jónas Kristjánsson’s relocation of *Fóstbræðra saga* towards the end rather than the beginning of the thirteenth century, proposed in 1972, is still neither universally accepted nor dismissed; nor have Dietrich Hofmann’s arguments for the earlier dating of *Reykðæla saga* (1972), or Stefán Karlsson’s of *Fljótsdæla saga* (1994), been scrutinized in detail. Significantly, all the sagas mentioned here as candidates for revised dating are oddities among the *Íslendingasögur*: their eccentricity or ineptitude of narrative style has allowed them to be labelled as primitive and archaic, seemingly predating the conventions established in what has been constructed as the communal activity of saga construction. Essentially Bjarni Guðnason and other re-daters are calling in question the perhaps ill-founded assumption that saga-writers worked in the full awareness of the achievements of their predecessors and contemporaries, and this is perhaps a



development that reflects a change in fashion in our attitude to the sagas, which we are now more inclined to see as the creations of individual authors rather than impersonal products of tradition.

In the words of Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, “Of all the means of deciding the ages of sagas, it is their literary relations which are the most fruitful” (1958, 76). The underlying premise of his handbook on dating the sagas is that every saga writer would have known every saga that had been written before his own, and that therefore a saga lacking allusions to, or less overt influence from, other texts could be assumed to be early. This fails to take account of the possibility that a less learned saga writer in one part of the country – especially one whose style showed signs of amateurishness or eccentricity – might have known little and cared less about literary developments elsewhere, or that, as Einar Ólafur Sveinsson goes on to acknowledge, “an unskilful author of later times might perhaps show a similar clumsiness in his first work”. The methodology of dating largely on the grounds of literary relations was derived from works that were in contact with the learned main stream, and is not adapted to more individualistic or amateurish endeavours that may have flourished alongside it.

It is revealing that Einar Ólafur Sveinsson goes on to say of this reliance on literary relations as a dating criterion, “It is well known that this is the case with the Kings’ Sagas, but the same conditions apply to the Family Sagas, although research is not so far advanced” (77). Here he acknowledges that, in the development of a methodology for dating the *Íslendingasögur*, certain criteria were transferred from investigations of a similar kind on historical texts. But the analogy may rest on a false assumption. As Theodore Andersson has said, “Unlike the family sagas, which almost never tell the same story twice, the kings’ sagas tell the same story, especially the biographies of the Norwegian kings, many times” (1985, 197). The analogy with the *konungasögur* works to some extent where sagas do share the same or related material, but does little to account for the anomalous texts discussed here. The problem is exacerbated since most of the *Íslendingasögur* do not exist in manuscripts from the thirteenth century. As we have no access to the early forms of these texts, we are forced to base our conclusions on the versions we have, even where the manuscripts are no earlier than the seventeenth century. The writers of *konungasögur*, by contrast, because of their constant sharing of material, were participating in a continuing process of cross-reference, and we often have a glimpse of earlier versions of existing works through those that made use of them.



Literary relations are at least more concrete than judgements about style. In his chapter on “artistry”, Einar Ólafur cautiously advances the theory that a clumsily written saga is likely to be early:

We might well suppose that such accomplishments developed gradually; at the beginning authors had less control over their material, but this developed as more sagas were written. [. . .] It is reasonable to expect that the sagas which were written first would show certain marks of the primitive, if only we can detect them. But an unskilful author of later times might perhaps show a similar clumsiness in his first work (115).

But he continues, speaking of developing conventions for preserving the “illusion of reality”, “there are some sagas in which these rules are more flagrantly broken than others. These sagas might perhaps be called ‘archaic’” (116). And the first example he names is *Heiðarvíga saga*. This term inevitably implies age, although he later questions, “We may ask whether archaic sagas are necessarily old sagas, and whether these archaic characteristics are enough for us to conclude that a saga is old” (119), and mentions *Reykðæla saga* as an exceptional instance of a saga which is not considered early despite apparently “archaic” features; but he confirms that in the case of *Heiðarvíga saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga* archaic style is a criterion which, if supported by other considerations, may be used as an indication of early date. The inconsistencies of this discussion reveal the unreliable assumptions that tend to be made about archaic style. I pass over, for lack of time, the larger questions of how archaic style is to be defined, and indeed, how we are to know what the style of a genuinely early text was like, since few survive in anything like their original form.

I am in general agreement, then, with Bjarni Guðnason’s rejection of the assumption of primitiveness as a criterion for the early dating of *Heiðarvíga saga* and *Bjarnar saga*. But now I turn to a more detailed consideration of his positive arguments. I shall focus first on the question of literary relations, taking the example of connexions he asserts between both sagas and *Laxdæla saga*; then on his arguments about literary echoism; and finally his attempt to locate *Heiðarvíga saga* in a specific cultural and ideological context.

Sigurður Nordal found little or no evidence in *Bjarnar saga* of dependence on earlier written texts, though its use of established conventions showed that it was not among the very earliest of the sagas (lxxix–lxxx). Bjarni Guðnason argues on the contrary that it is a highly derivative



text, its clumsy style attributable to the author's attempts to string together material freely adapted from a wide range of other sagas (1994, 74):

Höfundur Bjarnarsögu seilist eftir yrkisefni til ritheimildar og getur hennar að engu. Hann dregur um leið hulu yfir hana með því að færa aðföngin í nýtt samhengi, sníða hana að söguefni sína og varast líkindi í orðafari. [. . .] Bjarnarsaga er eins og dauf skuggamynd ritheimilda sinna, og heimildakönnun hennar verður af þeim sökum fölginn í því að greina strjál nöfn og máðar línur á tjaldi, sem er bæði torvelt og tafsam, eins og glámskyggni fræðimanna í þessum efnunum ber með sér.

[The author of *Bjarnar saga* reaches for subject matter in a written source and makes no mention of it. He draws a veil over it by placing the borrowing in a new context, adapting it to the material of his story and preserving the similarity in phrasing. [. . .] *Bjarnar saga* is like a dull mirror-image of its sources, and the investigation of the sources is for these reasons hidden in the discerning of sparse names and faded threads in a tapestry, which is both difficult and belated, as the blindness of scholars in these respects clearly shows.]

Bjarni Guðnason reads the *Bjarnar saga* author's taste for naïve exaggeration of his hero's merits as evidence of literary influence according to an inflationary principle. He instances the similarities between Björn's heroic last stand and that of Kjartan in *Laxdæla saga*. Each is warned by an ominous dream, carries a useless sword, and fights near a large stone; but *Bjarnar saga* exaggerates the situation, since Kjartan is ambushed by nine men, Björn by twenty-four; he also improves on his supposed model by defending himself only with shears (1994, 74). This argument is inconclusive; an equally or more convincing explanation could be that the more adept narrator of *Laxdæla saga* refined the excessive zeal of the earlier *Bjarnar saga*.

Bjarni Guðnason further argues that Kjartan's loss of the valuable sword bestowed on him by King Óláfr Tryggvason, and use of an inferior weapon in his last fight, was the inspiration for the account, in the parallel scene in *Bjarnar saga*, of the hero's weaponless state, having exchanged his weapons for those of his insignificant cousin Þorfinnr Þvarason. The fact that Kjartan has been deprived of his own weapon by his enemies, whereas Björn gives his up voluntarily, is claimed by Bjarni Guðnason as sounder motivation, and therefore evidence that the primary version is that of *Laxdæla saga* (1994, 76–77). The incident is indeed rather awkwardly introduced in *Bjarnar saga* by a multiplicity of explanations for Björn's inability to use his own prestigious sword Mæringr – which is parallel to Kjartan's weapon in being,



according to the account of *Óláfs saga helga*, the gift of a missionary king (Johnsen and Jón Helgason 2: 766). On the one hand it is said that Björn has exchanged swords with his cousin, and on the other that his father has borrowed his weapons; a further complication is a verse in which the hero represents himself as carrying “sverð mitt” as he goes into battle (Nordal 197–98). These signs of confusion indicate a multiplicity of divergent, probably oral, sources behind the saga’s account, rather than literary borrowing. Further overt evidence for multiple sources relating to Björn’s weaponless state is the author’s comment, after the account of Björn’s killing of a man with the point of his shield, “en sumir menn segja at hann legði hann með soxunum til bana” (201), that is, that he did the killing with the shears he was carrying for trimming horses’ manes.

It is often difficult, in a case of shared narrative material, to determine which text has influenced the other. But in the case of the motif of the borrowed sword, the similarity may well come down to an archetype so common in oral tradition as to make a search for literary influences pointless. The theme of the borrowed sword which fails the hero in need has parallels, not only within the *Íslendingasögur* (*Kormáks saga*, *Droplaugarsona saga*), but throughout Germanic heroic literature. A famous example is in *Beowulf*, where Unferð bestows Hrunting on Beowulf as the hero prepares for his underwater assault on Grendel’s mother. The hero – like Björn – is lent an ultimately useless sword by a lesser man; Beowulf like Björn, but unlike Kjartan, relinquishes his sword voluntarily. The loan is elaborated into an exchange of weapons, since Beowulf offers his own sword to Unferð in case he is not able to return with Hrunting (lines 1488–90). The motif has been examined in Icelandic literature by Peter Jørgensen, who has found parallels between the loan or gift of a useless sword in *Beowulf* and the *fornaldarsögur*.

In *Beowulf* and in *Bjarnar saga*, the relationship between a sword and its owner or user is an index of the quality of a fighting man; Unferð lends his sword to “selra sweordfreca” (‘a better swordsman’), and the mismatch between man and weapon in the saga is signalled by the hero’s words, “Illt sverð á hér góðr drengr” (Nordal 199) [here a good man has a bad sword]. The authors of *Laxdæla saga* and *Bjarnar saga* were probably both, in different ways, exploiting a resonance in the idea of the sword as index of its owner’s quality which comes from outside the context of the saga itself. In both cases the theme expresses loss and frustration. In *Bjarnar saga* the point is not, as in *Beowulf*, to make a comparison between



men, since the owner of the “bad sword” is the cipher Þorfinnr Þvarason; rather it emphasizes the hero’s loneliness and extremity in his last fight, deserted even by his own sword. In *Laxdæla saga* the loss of the “good” sword is the counterpart of the disappearance of the precious headdress; both are symbolic of the marriage that never happened between Guðrún and Kjartan. Alternatively, it could be seen to represent the former friendship between Kjartan and Bolli, rejected by Kjartan once it is shown to be flawed. The fact that the theme is put to different uses in the two sagas does not rule out borrowing. But a theme that was resonant throughout Germanic culture and probably other warrior societies as well could well crop up independently in quite separate texts, and would very likely be current in oral stories that might never achieve written status. Its antiquity does not automatically define a saga in which it appears as old, and the greater clumsiness with which the author of *Bjarnar saga* integrates it into his text indicates only that he was less adept than the author of *Laxdæla saga*.

A similar criticism applies to Bjarni Guðnason’s claim (1993, 66–91) that the episode in *Heiðarvíga saga* in which Þuríðr, mother of Barði Guðmundarson, incites her sons to avenge their brother’s death is derivative of the egging of Þorgerðr, mother of Kjartan in *Laxdæla saga*, of her sons to avenge Kjartan’s death. The female inciter is such a familiar presence in both edda and saga, “a stock figure” in David Evans’s words, that we must be cautious about assuming direct literary influence. A consideration in favour of a connection between the two episodes is the familial link between the two inciters; Þuríðr is the daughter of Þorgerðr, as *Laxdæla saga* makes clear (*Heiðarvíga saga* gives no details of Þuríðr’s family), and both may owe their bloodthirstiness to their kinship with Egill Skalla-Grímsson, whom Þuríðr invokes in her rebuke to her sons: “eigi myndi svá gera Egill, móðurfaðir yðvarr, ok er illt at eiga dáðlausa sonu” (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1934, 162) [Egill, your mother’s father, would not have behaved like that, and it is a bad thing to have spineless sons]. In both sagas the mother insists on accompanying her sons on their mission of vengeance. Again the argument depends on the seemingly better integration of the episode into *Laxdæla saga*. Þorgerðr’s egging is necessary to move the story forward, since it is the spur that prompts her sons to take revenge. They are caught up in the complex web of family loyalties constructed by the saga; to sting them into overriding the peaceable instincts of their father, and moreover into attacking their cousin and foster-brother Bolli, Þorgerðr takes the extreme and unfeminine course of riding with them, “því at ek veit gørst um yðr sonu mína, at þurfi þér brýningina” (164) [for I know this very well about you, my sons, that there is a need to whet you]. The similar words



of Þuríðr as she accompanies her sons on their journey, “fyrir því at eigi skal skorta til áeggjun, fyrir því at þess þarf við” (Nordal 279) [because there must be no shortage of urging, for there is a need for it], are less well motivated. In *Heiðarvíga saga* the whetting scene is logically redundant, for it takes place on the very eve of a revenge expedition that has been steadfastly planned over a long narrative sequence. Bjarni Guðnason acknowledges that its function is in fact not strictly that of the conventional whetting: “Það er [. . .] eftirtektarvert, að eggjun Þuríðar er í raun og veru herhvöt mælt fyrir fylktu liði en ekki venjuleg frýja” (1993, 81) [It is noteworthy that Þuríðr’s whetting is in fact an urging to battle spoken before a marshalled army, not a customary challenge]. Þuríðr’s words, in his opinion, “eru ekki felld að innviðum *Heiðarvígasögu*, heldur eru þau að öllum líkindum eftirlíking af ummælum Þorgerðar, móður hennar” (82) [are not fitted to the framework of *Heiðarvíga saga*, rather they are in all probability an imitation of the speech of her mother Þorgerðr]. The only verbal similarity in the two declarations, however, is the repetition of *þarf/þurfi*, and literary borrowing is hardly necessary to explain the coincidence that the inciter in each case is convinced of the need for her intervention. Whereas Þorgerðr’s belief is ratified by her sons’ acting on her word, the unseating of Þuríðr, like the redundancy of her egging, shows her to be out of step with the predominant, male, direction of events in the saga.

But Bjarni Guðnason’s argument here is not just about literary priority, but an essential plank in his contention that the saga, rather than being an “erindislaust athafnasaga hefnda og víga” (31) [an action-story of vengeance and slayings, without a message], represents a concealed attack on the destructive values of the heathen past, which still informed the violence of the Sturlung Age (and therefore must date from much later than the early 1200s). He sees parody in the treatment of Þuríðr, who is referred to dismissively as *kerling*, in contrast to *Laxdæla saga*’s positive presentation of Þorgerðr. This does seem the only way to read the burlesque sequel in *Heiðarvíga saga*, but Bjarni Guðnason interprets its purpose as symbolic. In the words of Theodore M. Andersson, “[. . .] condemnation is reinforced when, in the following episode, Þuríðr is disgraced by her sons, who arrange to loosen her saddle girth so that she tumbles unceremoniously into a brook. Her unregenerate spirit literally takes a fall.” Andersson adds, “A minor problem in this interpretation is that her dull-witted companion, who has no other part in the saga, suffers the same fall” (1995, 451).



This is not the only awkwardness in Bjarni Guðnason's explanation. I would rather see the comic embarrassment of the sons at being accompanied by their tutelary relative – “Þetta horfir til óefnis, er hon er á ferð komin, ok mætti vér þess vel án vera” (Nordal 278) [It looks like getting complicated now she has come on the journey, and we could well do without it] – as a conservative reinforcement of the rhetoric of honour expressed in the classic way by both mothers. There is shame in having to be urged to revenge by a woman; the hero and his brothers graphically demonstrate that they have reached an appropriately heroic state of mind through the bizarre unseating of Þuríðr. The insecurity of the humour is in line with its uncertainty of tone throughout.

Even less convincing is Bjarni Guðnason's detection in both *Bjarnar saga* and *Heiðarvíga saga* of extensive literary echoism in personal names. Thus in *Bjarnar saga*, the name of the minor villain Kálfr illviti is supposed to allude to *Óláfs saga helga*, in which the king is brought down by an army of farmers led by Kálfr Árnason, of whom it is said that when he speaks well “þá er hann ráðinn til at gera illa” (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 378) [then he is determined to do evil]. This is adduced as part and parcel of the author's habit of cobbling together allusions from other texts: “Ljósín í heimildarmyrkrinu eru *Kálfsnafnið* og auknefnið *illviti*. Kálfr illviti er gott sýnidæmi um, hvernig höfundur fer yfirleitt með tilföng sín” (Bjarni Guðnason 1994, 74) [What illuminates the obscurity of the sources is the name *Kálfr* and the nickname *illviti*. Kálfr illviti is a good example of how the author deals with his borrowings overall]. Bjarni implies that Kálfr's name and characterization are derived from *Heimskringla* itself, although as he himself acknowledges, the casting of Kálfr Árnason in the role of Judas figure clearly pre-dates Snorri (Fidjestøl (1997 [1990], 186). Apart from the coincidence of names and of the extremely common word *illr*, the analogy is not close; it is not Kálfr but the conniving villain of *Bjarnar saga*, Þórðr Kolbeinsson, to whom the commonplace “Því flára mun Þórðr hyggja, sem hann talar sléttara” is applied (Nordal 138) [the more smoothly Þórðr talks, the more falsely he will be thinking]. And although it is true that Kálfr illviti is “furðu rótlaus í sögunni” (Bjarni Guðnason 1994, 73) [strangely without roots in the saga], there is some hinterland to the character, which argues against his being the author's invention.

As far as *Bjarnar saga* is concerned, Bjarni Guðnason represents this free association of literary echoes, which he dubs “kálfarnir” after this example, as no more than further evidence of the author's magpie recycling of earlier sources to create a fictional text. But the symbolism



read into names is fundamental to his allegorical reading of *Heiðarvíga saga*: “Menn ná ekki langt í túlkun Heiðarvígasögu án þess að skilja nöfnin táknrænum skilningi” (1993, 258) [One will not get far with the interpretation of *Heiðarvíga saga* without interpreting the names symbolically]. Thus the dark forces of unregenerate heathenism and the culture of revenge are alluded to in the name *Barði* “sá sem ber” (151–52) [he who fights], as well as the more obvious *Víga-Stýrr*; the name of the bloodthirsty Þuríðr, evolved from *Þór-ríðr, aligns her with the god Þórr, and her tumble into the stream echoes the story in *Snorra Edda* of Þórr’s struggle in the river Vimur (87–89). By contrast, the name of Þórr has been expunged from the name of the more peaceable Gestr, named Þorgestr in some other sources, to bring into prominence the significance of Gestr as a name for Christ, a guest among men on earth. David Evans sensibly points out that “the number of Icelanders in the sagas with Þór- as the first element in their names must be at least 1500, and they cannot all have been champions of paganism; Þórlákr inn helgi was not” (364), a caveat that highlights the subjectivity of this method of interpretation.

There is little evidence for the significance invested by Bjarni Guðnason in personal names in either saga. True, the name of the hero of *Bjarnar saga* gives rise to an elaborate punning metaphor of bear-hunting, and Kálfr’s exclamation, “ek veiða nú þann björn er vér vildum allir veiða” (Nordal 199) [now I am hunting the bear that we all want to hunt] is linked by Bjarni Guðnason to a similar use of animal puns in *Óláfs saga helga*. But this explicit example is different from the covert symbolism claimed by Bjarni Guðnason as support for his reading of the moral message of *Heiðarvíga saga*. As David Evans observes, “As so often nowadays when scholars espy hidden religious symbolism and spiritual messages in works seemingly secular, one wonders just why the writer had taken such care to hide his important message” (363).

While there is no space here to consider all of Bjarni Guðnason’s extensive and detailed arguments, my analysis of two of his main techniques of analysis demonstrates that an allegorical reading of *Heiðarvíga saga* cannot be sustained. The suggestion that the ridiculing of Þuríðr constitutes a critique of the ethics of the feud has been challenged above, as have the negative connotations of the names *Barði* and *Þuríðr*. But even if the work could be accepted as a moralising tract denouncing pagan values, what evidence is there that this moralising



fervour is a more likely phenomenon at the end than at the beginning of the thirteenth century? Bjarni Guðnason outlines a three-fold ideological time-scheme:

Víga-Styrr represents the old times and heathen values while Barði is the champion of contemporary times, believing excessively in his own might and main at the expense of God's tenets. The third phase is expressed in the author's vision of a world without warfare or violence, a mirage of a world where peace prevails (1993, 281).

(No major character can be found to exemplify the third stage, though elsewhere Bjarni (?Björn, Barði) represents Gestr, unconvincingly, as a figure of Christ. Not only is the message difficult to tease out, but there is in fact nothing about it more appropriate to the period after 1260 than to the early part of the century.)

My discussion of *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa* shows that themes concentrated in the climactic scene of Björn's last battle are more likely to have their origin in oral tradition than in literary dependence on other sagas. While it is notoriously difficult to prove that this has been the case, it must be taken into account as a probability in the case of highly traditional themes that can be shown to be ubiquitous not only in the sagas, but in other Germanic literatures; this applies to themes such as the hero's borrowed sword, the hero's fighting unarmed and (in *Heiðarvíga saga*) the inciting female, and could also be argued in the case of a parallel Bjarni Guðnason perceives with *Njáls saga* and *Hallfreðar saga*, of a fight taking place from either side of a river (1994, 82). There are many indications in *Bjarnar saga* of the development of the narrative from earlier sources, written or oral: the reference in the saga to an account of Björn by Runólfur Dagsson (probably more correctly Dálksson); the chapter about Björn's dealings with King Óláfr, possibly derived from Runólfur's account, in a version of *Óláfs saga helga*; the mention of an alternative version of his killing (see above, (page6)); and, not least, the verses cited in the saga, many of which can be shown to be independent of the saga prose.

If the case for literary dependence in these two sagas is dismissed, the arguments for their late dating also dissolve. But this does not automatically confirm the traditional view of their "archaic" status. An absence of dependence on other literary texts is one consideration that may point towards an early date, but is not decisive. The accompanying criterion of unsophisticated narrative style, characteristic of both texts, may also be an indication of authors working outside an established, more learned tradition, rather than in its vanguard. The indications of the influence of oral tradition might appear to suggest an early date, but there is



no reason to suppose that oral narratives did not continue to flourish throughout the time of writing of the sagas. If Bjarni Guðnason fails to convince of the specific datings he argues for, his work has the negative virtue of helping to cut these sagas loose from conventional assumptions of their early date. It remains for further and more detailed investigations of possibly archaic word forms and stylistic features, and in particular the ways in which the development of written narrative from oral traditions might work, to provide a more convincing picture of the genesis of these texts.

NOTES

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