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*SÍÐU-HALLS SAGA OK SONA HANS

Creating a saga from tradition[1]

Introduction

IN THE YEAR 999 or 1000,[2] some 130 years after the settlement and a mere 70 years since its establishment, the very existence of the young Icelandic Commonwealth was threatened. Prior to Christian missions of the 970s there was a relatively small number of Icelandic Christians and Christian tradition had little influence within Iceland. To have a Christian in one's family was considered a grave dishonour for a 10th-century Icelander. However, by the year 999, although Christians still represented a minority in Icelandic society, they were a powerful minority as many of the most important, powerful and wealthy chieftains had become Christian. At the Alþingi of that year (whether it be 999 or 1000) Christian and pagan chieftains squared up for what seemed like an inevitable showdown. To the Christians it seemed impossible to live under the same set of laws that governed the pagans and they turned to one man, Hallr Þorsteinsson, a chieftain from Síða in East Iceland, to declare those laws that were appropriate to them. Such an arrangement would have surely led to social division and ultimately to civil war, social breakdown and the failure of the Icelandic Commonwealth. Hallr, however, rather than seeking to create a rival Christian law-code and thereby escalate the conflict, approached the pagan Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði the law-speaker and, after getting chieftains from both sides to agree to the outcome, gave him money to declare

1 An early version of this article was presented at the Viking Society for Northern Research Summer Meeting in Leeds 2007. I am grateful to the Society for inviting me to speak and for all the comments and suggestions made in the course of the discussion afterwards, from which this paper has benefited.

2 Modern scholars tend to date the conversion to 999 rather than 1000 (see Ólafia Einarsdóttir 1964, 107–126; also Strömbäck 1975, 2 note). See the discussion below regarding the account of the conversion at the Alþingi.

whether Iceland should be officially Christian or pagan. After some 24 hours beneath a cloak,[3] Þorgeirr eventually ruled in favour of the Christians, following which Christianity was adopted as the official religion of the Commonwealth. In this article I want to consider Hallr and his family. Who was this man who the Christians chose as their de-facto lawspeaker and why did he chose to forego the position? Hallr and his family appear in a great many sagas and *þættir*, yet we lack any text directly concerning his life. Despite this, we can easily trace his story, and that of many of his kinsmen and descendants, through peripheral roles in other people's stories. By reconstructing this story from such fragments, I hope to demonstrate a potential method of saga genesis giving a glimpse of how a thirteenth-century saga-writer might have constructed a lengthy and cohesive story from disparate oral sources.

The purpose of this article is not to attempt to understand the life and character of the real historical Síðu-Hallr; I leave such questions to historians. Instead I am seeking to understand the story (as opposed to history) of Hallr and build up a picture of how Hallr must have appeared to any readers or audience in the twelfth or thirteenth century, provided they were equipped with a relatively extensive knowledge of saga narratives. In doing this I will look at the following questions: To what extent does Hallr's story form a cohesive and coherent narrative? What are the nature of any discrepancies we can find between the texts? Can the cohesion and overlap between the stories be assumed to be based entirely on literary loans between texts or did oral tradition also play an important part? By answering these questions I hope to demonstrate one potential way in which sagas came into being; that is by the gradual accumulation of material into a coherent whole. In a 1986 article Carol Clover reviewed the 'long prose form' across world literatures (Clover 1986). She suggested the existence of 'immanent sagas' during the saga-writing age in Iceland, whereby oral tradition developed until it contained all the elements and episodes that might occur in a saga, but was not necessarily told as a continuous whole. Gísli Sigurðsson (2004) pushed these ideas further, stressing the importance of

3 According to Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson (1978) the most likely explanation for Þorgeirr's behaviour is that it represented an ancient soothsaying ritual searching into the future.

oral tradition.[4] However, unlike the so-called '*þáttr* theory' of saga origins (that is the school of thought citing preserved *þættir* as evidence of the assembly of sagas in medieval times from short tales),[5] each story element within oral tradition is not seen as a random building block, but a strand woven into the existing tradition. I believe that, by taking the story of Síðu-Hallr as an example, we can get an idea of how an immanent saga grew and might have finally been turned into an actual saga by an author, who only needed to make small adjustments and additions to the assembled material.

Of Hrollaugr and his descendants

No saga writer would begin his story as I have done, starting with the climactic event – the events at the Alþingi – in an effort to grab attention. A saga writer would probably not even begin with the hero himself, but with his ancestor and so I will turn back several generations to the time of King Haraldr *hárfagri*. *Orkneyinga saga* tells of Hrollaugr, the bastard son of Earl Rǫgnvaldr. Rǫgnvaldr gives (with King Haraldr's approval) the earldom of Orkney and Shetland to his brother Sigurðr, who dies from a wound caused by his beheaded enemy's tooth. When Sigurðr's son Guttormr dies childless it seems control of the islands may be lost to the family, especially after an attempt to restore order by Rǫgnvaldr's son Hallaðr ends in ignominy. Rǫgnvaldr asks his sons which of them is willing to go west and restore order in Orkney. Þórir, his legitimate son, volunteers, but Rǫgnvaldr tells him to stay at home. His third son Einarr, he encourages to go, though in a rather disparaging way, implying that he would like him out of sight and Orkney seems as good a place as any. Indeed Rǫgnvaldr's disdain for his illegitimate offspring is a theme throughout this section of the saga. It is, however, the conversation with his middle son Hrollaugr which interests us here:

4 See Gísli Sigurðsson 2004, throughout, but particularly 182–184 where he proposes an immanent saga of Þorkell Geitisson of Krossavík. Also see Andersson 2002 and 2006, 3–20 and Gísli Sigurðsson 2007.

5 For short accounts of the '*þáttr* theory' of saga origins see Andersson 1964, 61–64 and Clover 1986, 30–34.

> Þá spurði Hrollaugr: "Villtu, at ek fara?" Jarl segir: "Eigi mun þér jarldóms auðit, ok liggja fylgjur þínar til Íslands, þar muntu auka ætt þína ok mun gǫfug verða í því landi."(*ÍF XXXIV*, 10)
>
> Then Hrollaugr asked: "Do you want me to go?" The Earl said: "You are not destined for the earldom, and your fate lies in Iceland, there you will raise a great family and become famous in that land."

The phrase *liggja fylgjur þínar til Íslands* is above paraphrased as 'your fate lies in Iceland', but the words have a more complex and anachronistic meaning. Rǫgnvaldr's words refer to the beliefs in guardian spirits, often in female form, which accompanied people throughout life and could sometimes be associated with families.[6] *Fylgjur* (singular *fylgja*) protected, aided and provided luck for their charge. The concept shared a number of features with (but was not identical to) the concept of *hamingja* (a personification of luck and protection) and the *dísir* (guardian goddesses). Rǫgnvaldr's prophecy, however, relates specifically not only to Hrollaugr's spirits, but also their close relationship with Iceland. As such it is a prophecy regarding settlement, of which there are many in saga tradition. In particular, there are a number of stories about early Icelandic settlers whose farms, livelihoods and even persons are aided and protected by spirits associated with the land or land-spirits – the term *landvættir* ('land-spirits') is only used in a handful of instances, but is a useful term under which to classify all these spirits who seem to be particularly related to the landscape or country itself.[7]

6 On the concept of *fylgjur* in general see Rieger (1898, 277–290); de Vries (1956–1957, I, §163, 226–227); Ström (1956–1978b, 5, 38–39); Turville-Petre (1964, 227–230); Mundal (1974, 72–142; and 1993, 624–625); and Jochens (1996, 37); in particular relation to this passage from *Orkneyinga saga* see Turville-Petre 1972. Probably the most relevant comparable instances of female guardian spirits (whether described as *fylgjur*, *hamingjur* or *dísir*) are the giant woman seen by Víga-Glúmr in a dream representing the *hamingja* of his maternal grandfather (*ÍF IX*, 30–31) and the woman following the ship in which Hallfreðr *vandræðaskáld* lies dying (*ÍF VIII*, 198). Both these examples exhibit the relationship between fate, luck and one's family found in Rǫgnvaldr's prophecy.

7 I have discussed land-spirits and their relationship to the wording of Rǫgnvaldr's enigmatic prophecy in greater detail in Cochrane 2006. Among the instances of *landvættir* are the *bergbúi* ('rock-dweller') encountered by Bjǫrn Molda-Gnúpsson in a dream in *Landnámabók*

Gabriel Turville-Petre (1972, 56–58) objects to interpreting Rǫgnvaldr's words literally on the grounds that such an interpretation would be curious or vague and claims that Rǫgnvaldr's use of the word *fylgja* is purely abstract, referring to his son's fortune or fate rather than his spirits. I would argue, however, this concept is entirely reconcilable with a more literal interpretation of the word, combining traditions of personal and family guardian spirits with traditions of the land-spirits. Indeed, it is unsurprising Rǫgnvaldr's words are anachronistic and an unfamiliar turn of phrase. He is, after all, making a supernatural prophecy about the future. Moreover the association with both the *fylgjur* and land-spirit traditions fit the specific aspect of Rǫgnvaldr's prophecy – the success of Rǫgnvaldr's family in Iceland – better than a general and vague reference to fate. In addition, as we shall see, female guardians are to figure prominently in the lives of Rǫgnvaldr's descendants. We can see a comparable use of words referring to luck or fate as abstracts on one hand and tutelary spirits in *Vatnsdœla saga*, where the use of the word *hamingja* (among others) is particularly emphasised: referring both to the inherent fortune of the family descended from Ketill *raumr* and suggesting a possible guardian spirit or spirits providing that good fortune.[8] Indeed A.U. Bååth (1885) used *Vatnsdœla saga* as an example of a saga in which fate acted as a connecting thread by which *þættir* might be assembled into a complete text. The idea of sagas as amalgamations of entirely separate texts crudely arranged into a whole with fate as a single uniting factor is not acceptable to modern scholars. However it does seem plausible that the use of prophetic and proleptic devices represented one of a number of ways by which composers or writers could link new stories to existing tradition. As traditions grew up about individual families and their good fortune grew up, so new stories drew upon these same elements.

The story of the discussion between Rǫgnvaldr and his sons is also

(*ÍF I*, II, 330) and with whom Bjǫrn actually goes into partnership and the instance of Hallfreðr being warned (again in a dream) to move his farm over Lagarfljót to avoid being engulfed in a landslide (*ÍF XI*, 97–98; also see *ÍF I*, II, 299; and *ÍF XI*, 183).

8 *Hamingja* is mentioned repeatedly throughout *Vatnsdœla saga* always with at least a semi-concrete sense (see for example *ÍF VIII*, 5–6, 11–12, 15, 17, 28, 32, 37, 56, 70, and 89). On the concept of *hamingja* in *Vatnsdœla saga* see *ÍF VIII*, xxviii–xxix; and Hallberg 1973, 166–168.

summarised in *Landnámabók* (*ÍF I*, II, 314–317), according to which Hrollaugr settles an enormous tract of land from Horn to Kvíá in the East of Iceland between Vatnajǫkull and the sea. Like a number of the early settlers Hrollaugr selects his land by means of throwing his high-seat pillars overboard and making his farmstead at the place where they are eventually washed ashore. While this process undoubtedly had very real and mundane benefits (selecting the place which in future years was most likely to benefit from driftage), it also had a symbolic function. The high-seat pillars that had been transported from Norway represented the settler's former home. These were then being accepted into the new land through a process, not of chance, but one over which the settler had no direct control, similar to Hrollaugr's spirits associating themselves with Iceland without his knowledge or forethought.

Unlike many of the early settlers of Iceland, Hrollaugr comes to the land with the approval of King Haraldr *hárfagri*. *Landnámabók* then tells of Hrollaugr's descendants. His son is Ǫzurr *keiliselgr*, who marries Gróa, the daughter of a neighbouring *landnámsmaðr* Þórðr *illugi*. Their daughter is Þórdís who is Síðu-Hallr's mother, thus completing the picture of Hallr's maternal ancestry.

Landnámabók also tells Hallr's paternal ancestry, though in rather less detail (*ÍF I*, II, 310–311). Bǫðvarr *enn hvíti* is also a *landnámsmaðr* descended from Viking kings. He settles land in the south east of Iceland, a little to the north east of Hrollaugr's land and builds a temple at Hof. Bǫðvarr's son Þorsteinn marries Þórdís, daughter of Ǫzurr *keiliselgr* and Gróa, thereby forming a powerful alliance between the descendants of Hrollaugr, Bǫðvarr *enn hvíti* and Þórðr *illugi*. Relatively little is known about this Þorsteinn. He was a *goði* probably in the oldest sense, with his power linked to the administration of the large temple at Hof and *Landnámabók* lists him among the most important chieftains of the east quarter (*ÍF I*, II, 396). From *Landnámabók* and *Orkneyinga saga* we have therefore built up a picture of Hallr's ancestors; a picture which agrees in most details. It is of course possible to assume a direct relationship between these texts to explain their agreement, but not necessary to do so. The events referred to in Rǫgnvaldr's prophecy in *Orkneyinga saga* – the success of Hrollaugr and his family in Iceland – are not really elaborated on in the preserved text of

that saga nor indeed is the prophecy of particular relevance to that text. In fact the prophecy only really makes sense if the readership is expected to know that Hrollaugr's descendants can be traced down to Síðu-Hallr, his sons and eventually several Icelandic bishops (see below), thereby implying a familiarity with other stories or sagas about the family not contained in the extant version of *Orkneyinga saga*.

Of Síðu-Hallr Þorsteinsson and the years before the Conversion

Here at last our hero takes the stage; Hallr is the son of Þorsteinn and Þórdís. Details of his childhood and young adulthood are scant, though one assumes he inherits a chieftaincy from his father and becomes a highly successful and respected lawyer. A brief sketch of the character and life of Síðu-Hallr Þorsteinsson is described by stanza 22 of the *Íslendingadrápa* by Haukr Valdísarson:

> Helt til fulls, sás fylla,
> fúrrunna, lǫg kunni,
> (sén raun vas þess) sónar
> Síðu-Hallr við alla;
> átti élbjóðr hrotta
> ágætr sonu mæta,
> dýrr skóp himna harri
> hǫfuðsmanna veg sannan.
>
> (Finnur Jónsson 1912–1915, BI, 544)

> Síðu-Hallr, who knew how to make laws, held his own against all trees of the fire of blood [fire of the blood, i.e. sword; trees of the sword, i.e. men]. This was proven. The excellent one who offers the shower of swords [shower of swords, i.e. battle; one who offers battle, i.e. warrior] had great sons. Great Lord of Heaven granted these chieftains true honour.

Stripping away the kennings we find a picture of a shrewd and sagacious lawyer. This is in contrast to many of the verses of *Íslendingadrápa*, which stress the physical prowess or feats of their subjects. Nonetheless, the

verse also stresses that Hallr holds his own against men. The ability with law fits with Hallr's eventual role in the confrontation at the Alþingi and indeed the phrase *sás kunni fylla lǫg* ('he who knew how to make laws') specifically points towards these events;[9] that is as someone skilled in making laws he would be a suitable choice as someone to speak those laws that might be applicable to the Christians. According to the verse Hallr has had to prove his ability and steadfastness (*sén raun vas þess*). Whether this refers to the events of 999/1000 or another story for which we have no preserved source in which Hallr had to prove his ability in legislating and his steadfastness is hard to know. Few sources preserve details of feuds and conflicts in which Hallr was actively involved other than as peacemaker and mediator. It would seem unlikely, however, that the Christian chieftains would have seen Hallr as an appropriate representative for their cause at the Alþingi in 999/1000 unless he had had to demonstrate his resilience, ability and fortitude on one or more previous occasion. The phrase *dýrr … himna harri* relates to a specifically Christian God, granting understanding to Hallr's family. Thus the verse, albeit very briefly, suggests a two-fold aspect to Hallr. He is a chieftain, but his power is given by a specifically Christian God – again suggesting his importance in the conversion of Iceland to Christianity.

Haukr's verse also stresses the success of Hallr's sons (something which calls to mind Rǫgnvaldr's prophecy). According to *Landnámabók*, he marries Jóreiðr the daughter of Þiðrandi: their children are Þorsteinn, Egill, Þorvarðr, Yngvildr and Þorgerðr (*ÍF I*, II, 318). Further sons are named in other sources, including Þiðrandi, Ljótr and Kolr[10] and the list of Hallr's daughters varies considerably between texts. *Þiðranda þáttr ok Þórhalls* (published in the Íslenzk fornrit series as *Af Þiðranda ok dísunum*) is a short

9 Under the verb *fylla* Cleasby (1957, 179) gives the meaning "to fill, complete, make up"and specifically "fylla lög ok lof, to make laws". It seems therefore reasonable Haukr's words refer not merely to Hallr's brilliance as a lawyer, but more specifically to a role in creating or writing laws, perhaps as part of the *lǫgrétta* ('law-council') of which (as *goði*) he would have been part.

10 In fact *Landnámabók* does mention Kolr, when describing a particular sword sent by King Haraldr to Hrollaugr (*ÍF I*, 317): *sverð þat átti síðar Kolr, son Síðu-Halls* ('that sword which Kolr, son of Síðu-Hallr later owned'). When listing Hallr's descendants, however, *Landnámabók* overlooks him. It is possible of course that Kolr may have been a nick-name for one of Hallr's sons already mentioned.

text preserved in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* and *Flateyjarbók* (where it is also preserved within *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*) (*ÍF X*, 119–125). According to this short tale, Þiðrandi and not Þorsteinn is the eldest son of Hallr and a most promising and gifted man (*vænstr ok efniligastr*). Þiðrandi meets his end during one winter-nights celebration shortly before the conversion of Iceland. Before the celebration a wise man staying with Hallr named Þórhallr speaks with apprehension regarding the festival as he has a foreboding that a *spámaðr* ('soothsayer' or 'prophet' but also Þórhallr's nickname) will die. Þórhallr seems to assume that this refers to his own death, however Hallr reassures him that there is an ox named Spámaðr which he plans to have killed and it is to this that the prophecy refers.[11] Despite this, Þórhallr warns the company not to leave the building during the night. Later in the night there is a knock at the door and Þiðrandi answers it and steps outside where he sees nine women riding from the north in black clothes with drawn swords and nine others riding from the south in light clothes with white steeds. The black women attack Þiðrandi and he dies in the morning after telling the household of these events. This dream-like but clearly tangible apparition is explained by Þórhallr:

> Þat veit ek eigi, en geta má ek til at þetta hafi engar konur verit aðrar en fylgjur yðrar frænda. Get ek at hér eptir komi siðaskipti, ok mun því næst koma siðr betri hingat til lands. Ætla ek þær dísir yðrar er fylgt hafa þessum átrúnaði munu hafa vitat fyrir siðaskiptit ok fyrir þat at þér munuð verða þeim afhendir frændr. Nú munu þær eigi hafa því unat at hafa engan skatt af yðr áðr, ok munu þær þetta hafa í sinn hlut. En inar betri dísir mundu vilja hjálpa honum ok komusk eigi við at svá búnu. Nú munu þér frændr þeira njóta er þann munuð hafa er þær boða fyrir ok fylgja. (*ÍF XV*, 124)

11 Merrill Kaplan (2000, 386) suggests that Spámaðr as the name of ox may be a sort of pun, as Hallr comments the animal is *spakari*, usually translated as 'wiser' but here, according to Kaplan, merely implying 'more docile', than other animals. The name, however, also resonates with beliefs, common in agricultural communities (and in many cases with justification), of animals being able to predict or detect natural phenomena, for example lying down before rain. In *Laxdœla saga* an ox called Harri protects and finds food for the rest of his herd (*ÍF V*, 83–85) and as such Spámaðr might be an appropriate name for him (particularly if one compares its usage to instances in another conversion *þáttr*: *Þorvalds þáttr víðfǫrla I* (*ÍF XV*, 63–68) where it is used of a stone-dwelling spirit whose advice protects the farmer Koðrán).

> I do not know, but I might think that these women were none other than the guardian-spirits of your kinsmen. I think that there will later come here a change in faith and that a better faith will soon come to this land. I think these guardians of you and your kinsmen who have accompanied the old faith will have known about the change in advance and how you and your kinsmen will spurn them on account of that. Now they have not profited previously from your tributes and thus they have taken their due. And the better guardian spirits would have wanted to help him, but they did not arrive in time. Those of your kinsmen will benefit who adopt the faith which they foretell and accompany.

Thus the prophecy of the death of the *spámaðr* in the tale deliberately creates a false expectation for the reader not once but twice; foretelling neither the death of Þórhallr nor Hallr's ox, but of Þiðrandi, who by his death predicts the arrival of Christianity in Iceland and is in that sense a prophet. The women dressed in black riding from the north are associated with paganism and therefore their authority and their claim over Hallr and his family is under threat from the Christian concepts arriving from the south (i.e. the direction of Rome and the Holy lands).[12] The passage above refers to the mysterious women as both *dísir* and *fylgjur*. These two traditions probably had quite distinct and different origins. Unlike the *fylgjur*, the *dísir* were revered deities who would have been worshipped and considered quite distinct from the beneficiaries (*fylgjur* as their name suggests may have been thought of as some metaphysical part of people whom they aided).[13] Worship of the *dísir* was connected with traditions of fertility, death and ancestry. Thus although not the same as the *fylgjur*, traditions surrounding the *dísir* had similar associations. It is a small step from fertility – that is luck with one's crop – to luck in a more general sense.

12 On this apparition and its meaning see Strömbäck 1970; Turville-Petre 1966, 345–346; Kaplan 2000; and *ÍF XV*, clxxxviii–cxcvii.

13 The noun *fylgja* is related to the verb *fela* ('to conceal') (de Vries 1962, 147–148) and as such seems to represent some sort of hidden part of the self. Both words are linked to folk traditions surrounding the supernatural properties of the afterbirth and its relation to the human soul. Furthermore the similarity between the noun *fylgja* and the identical verb may have led to many in both the saga-age and saga-writing-age considering them 'guardian spirits that accompany one' even if such an explanation was not etymologically sound.

Similarly, inherent in worship of one's dead ancestors is the idea that they may have an influence on the present, hence the idea of the luck of the ancestor being passed to someone at the moment of death. The author of *Þiðranda þáttr* uses the terms *fylgjur* and *dísir* interchangeably suggesting for this author (and, I suspect, for many Icelanders of the saga-age and saga-writing-age) the concepts had become indistinct. These women resemble the *fylgjur* which Hallr's ancestor Rǫgnvaldr predicted were linked inextricably with Iceland. Thus, in the nocturnal vision, the ancestral spirits which have accompanied Hallr's family to Iceland are replaced or at least transformed into a more appropriately Christian model, thereby supporting the view that the tradition of Hallr and his family contained a common element referring to family good fortune perhaps personified in female form.

The story of Þiðrandi's death can therefore be read symbolically, anticipating and predicting the arrival of Christianity in Iceland which will occur a few years later and in which his father will play a pivotal role. In both *Flateyjarbók* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* the *þáttr* precedes the description of the conversion. While *Kristni saga*, *Njáls saga* and *Íslendingabók* stress Hallr's role as an early Christian convert, in *Þiðranda þáttr* we see at least implicitly his role prior to this as heathen *goði* and host. Hallr holds one last pagan feast with disastrous consequences. The feast represents the ushering out of the old era, with its reliance on figures such as the *spámaðr* Þórhallr for advice and protection[14] and the heralding of the new era, though not without cost as the most promising son of the chieftain is taken as an unwilling sacrifice. The end of this short text tells of a dream that Þórhallr has, where he sees the hills and mounds in Iceland opening up and all sorts of creatures large and small departing prior to the arrival of Christianity (*ÍF XV*, 125). Þórhallr's dream resembles in miniature the story told in the *þáttr* as a whole, whereby Hallr's spirits (and perhaps those of his ancestor Hrollaugr, with their similarity to land-spirits) are replaced by sanctioned Christian spirits.

Thus within the chronology of our story, associations between Hallr

14 One might even wonder whether the character of Þórhallr (who is not known from other sources) should also be read as an allegorical figure. His name, Þórhallr, Þórr + Hallr, may represent the pagan aspects of Hallr's character that are about to be given up. Yet a further comparison might be made between the symbolic sacrifice of Þiðrandi in the *þáttr* and Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac on God's command in Genesis 22.

and Christianity date back to prior to the year 1000. Furthermore these associations stress the importance of personal advocates or guardians. In terms of this story, our **Síðu-Halls saga*, this episode introduces and foreshadows the most important events of Hallr's story.

The introduction of an additional son into Hallr's family is not too problematic. The name Þiðrandi is credible given that it is the name of Jóreiðr's father. It is supported by *Njáls saga*, whose author either knew the *þáttr* directly or at least the tradition it preserved:

> Synir Halls á Síðu váru þeir Þorsteinn ok Egill, Þorvarðr ok Ljótr ok Þiðrandi, þann er sagt er, at dísir vægi. (*ÍF XII*, 239)
>
> The sons of Hallr at Síða were Þorsteinn and Egill, Þorvarðr ok Ljótr and Þiðrandi, of whom it is said that the *dísir* killed.

Although *Þiðranda þáttr* does not match perfectly with the genealogy preserved in *Landnámabók*, it fits well thematically with the rest of our knowledge of Hallr's life and character.

Of Hallr's conversion

The next important episode in Hallr's story is his own conversion to Christianity. *Íslendingabók* (*ÍF I*, I, 14) mentions that Hallr is among the first chieftains to be baptised when the missionary Þangbrandr arrives in Iceland. *Kristni saga* (*ÍF XV*, 17–19) gives a fuller account of Hallr's conversion. Þangbrandr's mission gets off to an unpromising start, when he arrives in Iceland and people refuse to direct him to a harbour. Þangbrandr, however, goes to meet with Hallr and tells him that King Óláfr Tryggvason has told him to approach Hallr if he should find himself in that part of the country. Hallr has Þangbrandr's cargo brought to his farm and a tent is erected in which Þangbrandr sings mass. On the eve of the feast of St Michael, Hallr witnesses Þangbrandr singing mass in the tent and it is following this that he is convinced to take the faith:

> Hann spurði: "Hví létti þér nú verki?"
> Þangbrandr segir: "Á morgin er hátíð Mikjáls hǫfuðengils."

Hallr spurði: "Hversu er hann háttaðr?"

Þangbrandr svarar: "Hann er settr til þess at fara mót sálum kristinna manna." Síðan sagði Þangbrandr mart frá dýrð Guðs engla.

Hallr mælti: "Voldugr mun sá er þessir englar þjóna."

Þangbrandr segir: "Guð gefr þér þessa skilning."

Hallr sagði um kveldit hjónum sínum: "Á morgin halda þeir Þangbrandr heilagt guði sínum, ok nú vil ek at þér njótið þess ok skulu þér ekki vinna á morgin, ok skulu vér nú ganga at sjá athœfi kristinna manna."

Um morgininn veitti Þangbrandr tíðir í tjaldi sínu, en Hallr gekk ok hjón hans at sjá athœfi þeira ok heyrðu klukknahljóð ok kenndu ilm af reykelsi ok sá menn skrýdda guðvef ok purpura. Hallr spurði hjón sín hversu þeim þóknaðisk athœfi kristinna manna, en þau létu vel yfir. (*ÍF* XV, 18–19)

He asked: "Why do you stop work now?"

Þangbrandr said: "Tomorrow is the festival of Michael the archangel."

Hallr asked: "Of what nature is he?"

Þangbrandr answered: "He is appointed to go to meet the souls of Christians." Then Þangbrandr said many things about the glory of God's angels.

Hallr said: "That one, whom these angels serve, must be powerful."

Þangbrandr said: "God grants you this understanding."

During the evening, Hallr said to his household: "Tomorrow Þangbrandr and the others observe a feast day for their God, and now I want that you take advantage of this and you shall not work tomorrow and we shall see the rites of the Christians."

In the morning Þangbrandr held mass in his tent, and Hallr and his household went to see their rites and heard the noise of the bells and the sweet scent of incense and saw men adorned in velvet and fine material. Hallr asked his household how the rites of the Christians had struck them, and they expressed their approval.

On the Saturday before Easter, Hallr and all his household are baptised in the river. This is a charming tale of a personal conversion. The episode is strikingly mundane, contains no supernatural element and therefore creates a contrast with many of the other episodes in *Kristni saga*, in which the superiority of the new faith is demonstrated as the means by which Þangbrandr can overcome his pagan adversaries and win the approval of potential converts. Hallr questions Þangbrandr first out of curiosity, but quickly becomes impressed by the faith, in particular he is interested in hierarchical structure whereby angels report to a higher authority.[15] This concept of the hierarchy of God's angels was familiar across medieval Europe, but here it is made particularly appropriate to the medieval Icelandic mindset. Hallr's comment that the one whom these angels serve must be powerful is deliberately obtuse. It could refer to Michael as archangel, but could also refer to God as Michael's superior. It could even refer to Hallr's own desire to befriend Michael and therefore have the benefit of the angels' support. The comment shows that Hallr recognises the power of the individual as being dependent on the level of support. This resembles the social structure in Iceland, whereby each *bóndi* must declare themselves 'in thing' with a *goði*. Although the *goðar* were the most powerful class in medieval Icelandic society, the power of an individual *goði* and the ability to win court cases in his own interest and for his *þingmenn* was, in part, dependent on the number of *bœndr* supporting him. Thus Hallr sees this structure not only in theological and moral terms, but also with the shrewd political eyes which make him such a formidable chieftain.

The scene provides a personal counterpoint to the description of the political conversion of the entire country at the Alþingi later in *Kristni saga*. Hallr seems to be persuaded even before he suggests his household witness the mass, as he says he wants them to take advantage (*njóta*) of Þangbrandr's presence. However, he tells his household to observe the mass for themselves and then questions them on what they have seen. Although Hallr is instrumental in the mass conversion at the Alþingi at the turn of the millennium, where the faith of thousands of people hung on a

15 A more detailed version of Þangbrandr's explanation of Michael and angels is preserved in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (*EA AII*, 152–154). In this version Hallr even requires that Þangbrandr prove the veracity of his claims and has two old women in his household baptised. The health of old women improves and Hallr is convinced.

single decision of the Law-speaker,[16] for his own family and servants he prefers that they experience their own personal conversion by witnessing Þangbrandr's mass. Unlike Hallr, it is the trappings of the mass rather than its content that seem to impress them, as they are struck by the fine vestments, sights, sounds and smells of the mass.

Njáls saga also describes Hallr's conversation with Þangbrandr and his subsequent conversion. Again the subject of the conversation is the archangel Michael:

> "Hver rǫk fylgja engli þeim?" segir Hallr. "Mǫrg,"segir Þangbrandr; "hann skal meta allt þat, sem þú gerir, bæði gott ok illt, ok er svá miskunnsamr, at hann metr allt þat meira, sem vel er gǫrt. "Hallr mælti: "Eiga vilda ek hann mér at vin." "Þat munt þú mega," segir Þangbrandr; "ok gefsk þú honum þá í dag með guði." "Þat vil ek þá til skilja," segir Hallr, "at þú heitir því fyrir hann, at hann sé þá fylgjuengill minn." "Því mun ek heita," segir Þangbrandr. (*ÍF XII*, 257)

> "What marvels are associated with this angel?" said Hallr. "Many," Þangbrandr said, "he shall weigh up all those things which you do, both good and bad, and is so merciful, that he places greater weight on the good which is done." Hallr said: "I want him as a friend." "That is possible," said Þangbrandr, "if you give yourself to him and God today." "I want to stipulate this," said Hallr, "that you promise this on his behalf, that he will be my guardian angel." "I will promise this,"said Þangbrandr.

The episode as depicted in *Njáls saga* gives us some further insight into Hallr's character. He quickly realises the importance of the distinction between good and evil in Christianity and the concept of being judged on moral grounds. This passage of *Njáls saga* illustrates some of the theological distinctions between the old and new ways. Although inevitably written by a Christian from a Christian standpoint, the passage does have some

16 Although pagan worship was not outlawed immediately, the decision inevitably ensured that all but a few chieftains prudently adopted Christianity and thus farmers and members of their households inevitably followed suit.

plausibility in its depiction of the encounter between the religions. Although he accepts truth in what Þangbrandr says, Hallr still seems to be approaching the religion from a pagan and polytheistic mindset. He is impressed by the position which Michael holds in the hierarchy and by his influence and therefore surmises that he should position himself in as close relation to Michael as possible. Although pagans believed in many gods, some would associate themselves closely with a particular deity, whom they would think of as patron or friend (see for example Hrafnkell Hallfreðarson of *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* who was a friend to Freyr or Þorgils *ørrabeinstjúpr* of *Flóamanna saga* who owes the debt of an ox to Þórr). Such a desire to have a deity as a personal patron or advocate is comparable with the desire expressed by Hallr in his request to have Michael as a *fylgjuengill,* a detail not present in the *Kristni saga* account. The reader's attention is drawn to this word by its echo of Hallr's question (*Hver rǫk fylgja engli þeim?*) earlier in the paragraph. This term, *fylgju* + *engill* – clearly blends the Christian concepts of guardian-angels with pagan traditions of guardian spirits. Medieval Christian tradition sometimes mentions good and bad angels which accompany men throughout their lives urging them to act morally or reprehensibly[17] and it is possible that a literal translation of the term (if not an etymological one) might have been 'accompanying angel'. The term thus combines the pagan tradition of the hidden or invisible part of the soul in the form of an animal associated with a man's birth, with the Christian tradition of guardian angels associated with his Christening guarding his moral path and acting as intermediaries between him and God. This continues the theme of guardian spirits pervading the tradition surrounding Hallr's family. Hallr is giving up the protectorship of the guardian spirits who accompanied Hrollaugr to Iceland and ensured the success of his family there. He therefore expects to receive a powerful protector in return.

17 On traditions of guardian angels in saga literature in particular relation to *Gísla saga Súrssonar* see Cochrane 2004, 154–157. Examples in Old Norse include a description in the *Old Norse Homily Book* (Indrebø 1931, 142) that each man gets both a good and bad guardian angel (*varðhaldsengill*) at baptism who encourage him towards good or evil throughout his life. Similarly *Michaels saga* (Unger 1877, I, 683) says that each man has a good and bad *nærgǫngull engill* ('accompanying angel') – a construction strikingly similar to the *fylgjuengill* above. In an exemplum preserved in Old Norse, a man in York named Vilhjálmr sees a vision of two spirits, one of whom belongs to God, the other is an evil spirit (Gering 1882, I, 303–305).

Of The taking of Christianity

Arguably the most important single episode in Hallr's life is his role in the decision for Iceland to become a Christian country taken at the Alþingi near the turn of the millennium.The missionary Þangbrandr in fact has no part in the proceedings and has already returned to Norway somewhat despondently. Instead King Óláfr has sent two Icelanders, Gizurr *inn hvíti* and Hjalti Skeggjason, to continue Þangbrandr's work. *Íslendingabók* describes the conversion in a characteristically understated manner:

> En annan dag eptir gingu þeir Gizurr ok Hjalti til lǫgbergs ok báru upp erendi sín. En svá er sagt, at þat bæri frá, hvé vel þeir mæltu. En þat gørðisk af því, at þar nefndi annarr maðr at ǫðrum vátta, ok sǫgðusk hvárir ýr lǫgum við aðra, enir kristnu menn ok enir heiðnu, ok gingu síðan frá lǫgbergi. Þá báðu enir kristnu menn Hall á Síðu, at hann skyldi lǫg þeira upp segja, þau es kristninni skyldi fylgja. En hann leystisk því undan við þá, at hann keypti at Þorgeiri lǫgsǫgumanni, at hann skyldi upp segja, en hann vas enn þá heiðinn. (*ÍF I*, I, 16)
>
> The next day, they, Gizurr and Hjalti, went to the Law-rock and made their case. And so it is said that it was extraordinary how well they spoke. And what happened as a result was that one man after another named witnesses, and each side, both the Christians and heathens, said that it was exempt from the laws of the other, and then they left the Law-rock. Then the Christians told Hallr at Síða, that he should announce the laws, those which the Christians should follow. But he got out of this, because he paid Þorgeirr the Law-speaker, that he should announce it, and he was then still a heathen.

Having retired beneath a cloak for one day and a night, Þorgeirr emerges the following morning to announce that all Icelanders should be Christian and receive baptism and that although men may continue to make heathen sacrifices and eat horse meat, they must do so privately (exemptions that were removed some years later). Þorgeirr's speech is related in some detail

in *Íslendingabók* and portions are even quoted verbatim (the only instance of direct prose speech in *Íslendingabók*). *Kristni saga* (*ÍF XV*, 33), *Njáls saga* (*ÍF XII*, 271) and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* by Oddr Snorrason (*KS I*, 105–109) all tell a similar story, although none of the versions go into any detail regarding the Christians' decision to elect Hallr as the man to proclaim their laws. This decision suggests Hallr had considerable influence over the other chieftains. It seems likely he was considered sage, incorruptible, and even-handed (qualities supported by the other episodes about him in *Njáls saga*). But neither these qualities nor his Christian principles alone would be enough to afford him the role. Rather, I suggest, that his Machiavellian side (as hinted at by Haukr Valdísarson) was of no less importance to those who elected him to the role. It was his skill in law, political acumen and ability to uphold his own rights against all men that they believed would ensure the success of their cause. Furthermore these characteristics also decide his approach to the matter. Without a King, the Icelandic Commonwealth was dependent entirely upon the adherence to and recognition of the agreed laws for social stability, and, although undoubtedly fulfilling a utilitarian and practical role in the pre-literate culture, the role of the Law-Speaker was also symbolic.[18] It was the highest (though unlike a royal or presidential role not necessarily the most powerful) single office in the constitution and was called upon to arbitrate and establish the correct legal principles in the most contentious disputes. The refusal of Christians to recognise the law established by their pagan ancestors and their attempt to establish their own Law-Speaker threatened to destabilise the foundations upon which the Commonwealth was established.[19] Although what is proposed is not revolution, but the establishment of a separate sub-culture, it is hard to see how such a constitution could operate. Two social groups living under separate laws, administered by separate institutions would

18 On the office of the Lawspeaker see Jón Jóhannesson 1974, 47–49 and Gísli Sigurðsson 2004, 53–92.

19 Jón Jóhannesson (1974, 56–58) notes that under the old law part of the process of consecrating legal assemblies involved swearing oaths to pagan deities. As such, to even have access to legal process the Christian chieftains would have potentially been required to enter into pagan practices. This may have been one of the aspects of the pagan law that appeared so distasteful to them and the reason why the question discussed at the Alþingi was so specifically focussed on the law under which men should live and not the religious behaviours they would be allowed to practise.

surely lead quickly to social disintegration, anarchy and civil war. Hallr realises the precariousness of the position and that civil war will benefit no-one, especially not him. Hallr is aware of the honour bestowed on him by the Christian chieftains, but not overawed by it and thus gives it up. He hands over the decision as to whether Iceland will be Christian or pagan to Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði and in so doing increases the likelihood of being on the victorious side (through the generosity of this act and the payment made to Þorgeirr by Hallr) and reduces the risk of being on the losing side. Such a strategy is undoubtedly a risk, but probably a lesser risk than the prospect of social division leading ultimately to social breakdown.

One aspect that Hallr does seek to control is the payment made to Þorgeirr to make the decision. The amount paid to Þorgeirr varies considerably in the different versions of the stories. *Íslendingabók* merely states that a payment is made (*ÍF I*, I, 16), Oddr's *Óláfs saga* states that Þorgeirr is paid half a mark of silver (*KS I*, 108), *Njáls saga* gives the value as three marks (*ÍF XII*, 271), and *Kristni saga* as a massive half hundred (i.e. sixty) weight of silver (thus over seven marks) (*ÍF XV*, 33). The exact nature of this payment is not clear. Dag Strömbäck (1975, 30–31) suggests that it is a cynical bribe on Hallr's part to influence the decision (rather than a legitimate fee for Þorgeirr to make the decision). For my part I think this reflects the plurality and diversity in the presentation of Hallr across all the texts that mention him. He is both a benign Christian (which I will discuss further below) and a shrewd realist. All the texts play upon this plurality in their silence as to the exact nature of this payment. Hallr pays for the decision – he pays to ensure that a decision is made, to ensure that he is not making that decision and perhaps to influence that decision too. Even if this money was merely Þorgeirr's due as Law-Speaker, the fact that it is Hallr – a Christian – who hands it over (a detail consistent in all versions) can only have helped his cause.[20] Þorgeirr retires beneath the cloak and emerges to rule in favour of the Christians, that Iceland will become a

20 Paul Schach (1982, 190) observes that this may not actually be Hallr's money but that of King Óláfr sent with his envoys and missionaries to help encourage the adoption of Christianity in Iceland, nonetheless this only underlines my point that the money is being paid to Þorgeirr from the Christian camp. Schach's observation must, however, be regarded as speculation given there is no preserved account indicating that Hallr is using money provided by the King.

Christian country. Hallr's role in these events is pivotal. He realises the danger for Iceland and sees the danger to his own position. The most important single action of Hallr's life is one of both sacrifice and cunning. Hallr is not remarkable in that he was elected as Law-Speaker by the assembled Christians, but that he saw fit to give that honour up and it is in this way he is remembered in the texts.

Of Hallr's descendants

Hallr's role in *Njáls saga* is not quite done. He has one further act of benevolence. In addition to Þiðrandi, this saga has already mentioned a further son of Hallr, not mentioned in *Landnámabók*, Ljótr (*ÍF XII*, 239). Regarding Ljótr it is said that if he can ride to the Alþingi three times and return unscathed he will become the greatest chieftain and the longest-lived of all his kinsmen (*ÍF XII*, 287). This prophecy reminds one of Hallr's success as a chieftain and perhaps even Rǫgnvaldr's prophecy regarding the family. In chapter 145 fighting breaks out at the Alþingi following the failure to reach a settlement over the burning of the Njálssons. The scuffles quickly turn into a full-scale battle. Hallr realises the enormity of this social breakdown and goes to get sufficient forces to separate the combatants, telling his son Ljótr to wait for him, to which Ljótr only partially agrees: saying that he will wait, but if he feels his kinsman Flosi needs his aid he will assist him (*IF XII*, 405). As Hallr and his son try to intervene, a spear flies from the melee and strikes Ljótr. The text makes it clear that it is never revealed who threw the spear. Ljótr is not one of the burners, nor is he drawn into the conflict through avarice (unlike Eyjólfr the greedy lawyer). He is an innocent killed as a result of the imminent social disintegration. Hallr does eventually separate the forces, but not in time to save his son. After he has stopped the fighting at the Alþingi, Hallr makes a speech where he urges Snorri *goði* and other good men to settle their differences and by example demands no compensation for the death of Ljótr. Hallr's benevolence is rewarded in that everyone freely contributes to his compensation and Ljótr's death is paid for with some eight (or according to one manuscript tradition twelve) hundreds of silver (*ÍF XII*, 414). This episode is told only in summary and Ljótr's death is somewhat passed over within the text, but there is circumstantial evidence to suggest

that the story of Ljótr's death was relatively well known. A mention by Þórhaddr Hafljótsson of Ljótr's killing and the subsequent compensation in *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* (*ÍF XI*, 305) suggests that the existence of Ljótr was an established part of the tradition surrounding Hallr's family.[21] The potential tension of the prophesied three visits to the Alþingi is not exploited (Ljótr is in fact killed on his second visit). Nor is there any emphasis placed on the potential symbolism of this killing. For example, the spear is reminiscent of the spear of Longinus piercing Jesus, but it also resembles the pagan tradition of Baldr being killed by the blind Hǫðr (see, for example, Faulkes 1988, 46). In the case of Ljótr, the blindness of the religious/mythological models has been transferred to the anonymity and accidental nature of the killing. Both the Christian and pagan traditions involve the killing of an innocent at a moment or period of social or moral disintegration and (certainly in the case of Christian tradition, but perhaps also in the pagan) through this death the redemption of that society is brought about. All of this – the killing of the innocent, the social disintegration, and the redemption or resolution – could be easily applied to the death of Ljótr in *Njáls saga*. None of these themes or analogies, however, are brought to the fore in *Njáls saga*. Ljótr is a peripheral character in *Njáls saga*, of relevance only through his relationship to his father, who is himself only indirectly linked to the central conflicts. The author probably knew the story of Ljótr from elsewhere (either written or orally), where it was told in more detail perhaps exploiting either the dramatic tension or symbolic resonance to greater effect and placing Ljótr closer to the narrative centre. The author chose only to use the outline of these events and place Ljótr as one of the many peripheral casualties of the increasing social catastrophe of the events surrounding the killing of Njáll and his family.[22]

Hallr's part in this history is now all but at an end. I know of no contemporary accounts of Hallr's death. Given this lack of information and

21 In fact Þórhaddr stresses how Hallr did not get (*missa*) compensation, but I assume this is a deliberate misremembering or reinterpretation of established facts in order to anger Þorsteinn. *Þorsteins saga* is dependent upon *Njáls saga* (and indeed mentions it), and the author of the former clearly felt that his readership would be sufficiently familiar with the story of Ljótr to recognise the allusion in Þórhaddr's goading.

22 Ljótr is mentioned in *Geirmundar þáttr Heljarskinns* where some of his descendants are listed (Jón Jóhannesson *et al.* 1946, I, 10).

the fact that few sources tell of any significant enemies of the old chieftain (though he surely must have had some) it seems likely he died of natural causes. Had Hallr been dramatically murdered (either in history or oral tradition) one might have expected some evidence of an account preserved in one or other of the sources mentioning him. One can date his death, however, with relative certainty to the years 1012 to 1014 as he is present at the Alþingi following the burning of Njáll in the summer of 1012, but his son Þorsteinn seems already to be in possession of the *goðorð* of the Síðumenn before the Battle of Clontarf in 1014.[23] Although less impressive, Þorsteinn's story is rather better documented than his father's. Þorsteinn has a saga named after him, which is preserved in two paper manuscripts (AM 142 fol. and JS 435 4°). *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* is notable for having the greatest number of dreams preserved in any of the sagas of Icelanders.[24] Although the dreams themselves contain many interesting examples of word-play and metaphor, the rest of the saga is somewhat less exceptional and resembles slightly the plot of *Bandamanna saga*. It tells of Þorsteinn's conflict with the scoundrel Þórhaddr Hafljótsson. The opening of the saga is missing and therefore can give us no clue as the circumstances of Hallr's death. The end of the saga mentions that Ljótr was indeed an elder brother of Þorsteinn (*ÍF XI*, 319) and one might suppose the early part of the saga made mention of him and perhaps explained how Þorsteinn inherited the *goðorð* unexpectedly. It also mentions Kolr, Þorsteinn's brother in *Landnámabók* (see above). The missing opening must also have contained an account of the initial friendship between Þorsteinn and Þórhaddr, as, despite misgivings about his character, Þorsteinn entrusts Þórhaddr with looking after his *goðorð* while he goes abroad. Þorsteinn goes to the Orkneys which are under the rulership of Sigurðr jarl Hlǫðvisson, a descendant of Rǫgnvaldr, Þorsteinn's pre-eminent ancestor. Þorsteinn accompanies Sigurðr to Ireland and takes part in the battle of Clontarf (*ÍF*

23 These dates come from the timeline of Einar Ól. Sveinsson (*ÍF XII*, lxi–lxii) (based in turn on earlier work by Guðbrandur Vigfússon).

24 There are a total of 15 dreams in *Þorsteins saga*, the next greatest number is in *Flóamanna saga* where there are 13 and even this is a conjectural figure assuming that we can add the dream preserved only in the fragmentary 'longer' redaction of the saga to the complete 'shorter' redaction. On saga dreams, and in particular number and distribution, see Cochrane 2004, in particular 255–258.

XI, 301–302). The saga mentions several episodes of note in the battle such as Þorsteinn's reluctance to carry the Earl's standard. When three of the Earl's standard bearers are killed, the Earl asks Þorsteinn to carry the standard. Þorsteinn replies curtly: *Ber sjálfr krák þinn, jarl!* (*ÍF XI*, 301) ('Carry your own crow, Earl!'). The significance of this passage can only really be understood with reference to *Orkneyinga saga* where it is told that Sigurðr's mother makes a standard in the likeness of a raven and prophesies that the man before whom this standard is carried will have victory but he who carries it will die (*Orkneyinga saga* also mentions the death of three standard bearers but at a battle in Orkney rather than Ireland) (*ÍF XXXIV*, 25). Thus rather than merely being frightened or rude, Þorsteinn is demanding that Sigurðr show the courage of his conviction to do as he would command his followers to do and Sigurðr in picking up the standard is fully aware that he is sacrificing his own life.[25] These details are not mentioned by the saga writer, suggesting the mere reference to the raven standard must have been enough to call such details to the mind of those among the audience familiar with the tradition.

After the defeat of Sigurðr in Dublin, Þorsteinn chooses not to flee as he cannot hope to reach home by nightfall, a detail also present in the *Njáls saga* account of the battle (*ÍF XI*, 302; *ÍF XII*, 451). Þorsteinn is given quarter and goes to Norway and according to the saga joins the court of King Magnús Óláfsson, although historically this would be some two decades before Magnús comes to the throne. There is, however, some evidence to connect Þorsteinn with Magnús and it seems likely that, in a more perfectly preserved tradition, he would return to Norway later. There is a *þáttr* preserved in *Morkinskinna* and *Flateyjarbók* in which Þorsteinn falls out of favour with Magnús after failing to pay a landing tax on an unauthorised trading trip to Dublin and is outlawed, but eventually pardoned and reconciled (*ÍS III*, 2285–2291). Even more interesting is the

25 *Njáls saga* tells the story of the Earl's standard somewhat differently from *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*. In the former Ámundi *hvíti* discourages Þorsteinn from carrying the standard as all who have previously done so have died (*ÍF XII*, 451). It is worth noting that in neither *Njáls saga* nor *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* is the battle really a victory (despite the death of the Irish King Brjánn) and therefore the prophecy is imperfect in the preserved tradition.

deathbed encounter between Þorsteinn and Magnús told in *Morkinskinna*, where the dying King tells him:

> godra hluta erttu verdr fra mer Þorsteinn firir margra hluta sakir og sialfr ertu mikils verdr og vel vnna eg þier nafns þessa ath þu gefir þinum syne. enn þo eg hafa litils hattar konungr verit þaa er þo nauckr so diorfung otignum monnum ath kalla born sin eptir mier. en allz er þu bidr þessa med alhuga og eg skil ath þier þiker þetta mali skipta þaa uil eg ath visu gefa þier. en þat segir mer hugr vm ath mune liggia (a) þessu nafne harmr og tign. (Finnur Jónsson 1932, 142–143).
>
> "For many reasons you deserve only the best from me, Þorsteinn, and you yourself are an estimable man. I am content that you should have my name to give to your son. But even if I have been a king of no great account, it is nonetheless something of a presumption for non-noble men to name their children after me. Nonetheless, since you ask for this earnestly and I can see that it matters to you, I will assuredly grant it to you. Still I have a foreboding that there will be both nobility and grief attached to this name". (Andersson and Gade 2000, 183)

This prophecy suggests that a more extensive tradition about Þorsteinn Hallsson and indeed his son Magnús Þorsteinsson was known to the *Morkinskinna* scribe than he chose to record and that has been passed down to us in any extant text. Þorsteinn does name his eldest son Magnús and there is the implication that he only survives Þorsteinn by a short time (see the discussion below). More subtly, however, the King's comment that nobility as well as grief may be attached to the name may point forward not to Þorsteinn's son, but to his great grandson, also called Magnús, who was Bishop at Skálholt from 1134 to 1148.

If we return to *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, we find the remainder of the text focuses upon Iceland and the somewhat mundane feud between Þorsteinn and Þórhaddr Hafljótsson. In contrast to the summary nature of the Irish scenes, the author devotes some detailed attention to a dispute between Þórhaddr and his son-in-law Haukr over a kettle, which leads to

the eventual conflict between Þorsteinn and Þórhaddr. Unlike his magnanimous father, Þorsteinn is eventually goaded to take action against Þórhaddr. Following a series of incidents in which Þórhaddr needles him, Þorsteinn attacks and kills Þórhaddr. The latter portion of the saga, following Þórhaddr's death, is damaged and the account of Þorsteinn's own death is missing. A clue to the circumstances of this death can be found in one of the dreams told by Þórhaddr at a meeting where friends of both parties had hoped to broker a settlement between the pair. As the discussions descend into arguments Þórhaddr tells two dreams, both of which foretell his killing by Þorsteinn (*ÍF XI*, 314). In the first of these a white bear jumps over Þórhaddr and his sons, but is later killed by a fox. The bear fetch clearly represents Þorsteinn as a warrior and leader.[26] The fox, however, is less easily understood. In some cases fox fetches in dreams seem to represent sorcerers (*ÍF VI*, 349–350; *FSN II*, 208–209), however in these cases the animals are vixens whereas the word *refr* in *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* implies a male, or at least a fox of indeterminate sex. The common medieval association of the fox with cunning (which seems to have been well established in medieval Iceland) suggests that Þorsteinn was not killed by a great warrior in fair and open conflict, but by some lowly character in an underhand manner.

Þorsteinn's death and with it the explanation of Þórhaddr's dream are missing from the extant version of his saga due to a lacuna. An account, however, is preserved in a separate text referred to as *Draumr Þorsteins Síðu-Hallssonar*. In this short text Þorsteinn has three dreams in which three women appear and warn that a slave, Gilli, is planning to kill him on account of being castrated (*ÍF XI*, 323–325). In each dream the women stand in a different order and the foremost of them speaks a verse. These verses contain a great deal of allusion to pagan tradition in their imagery and have a ninth line which is an almost verbatim repetition of the eighth: a feature of the *galdralag* metre, particularly associated with supernatural spirits and magic (Stefán Einarsson 1951). Despite several searches being made for Gilli, he is not found and later kills Þorsteinn in his bed. There is

26 For other examples of bear fetches see *ÍF XIII*, 77; *ÍF XII*, 64–65; *FSN I*, 77 and 292–293; *FSN II*, 116; *Atlamál* stanza 24, Neckel 1962, 251 – many of these examples relate specifically to Kings or men with kingly attributes, the later of which might be the case for Þorsteinn (see Cochrane 2004, 44–45).

no extant manuscript which preserves both Þorsteinn's saga and his *draumr* and the exact relationship between the two is uncertain.[27] It is therefore impossible to be certain whether the fox in Þórhaddr's dream is identical to the thrall in the *Draumr*. Nonetheless the treachery of the slave fits well the fox-symbol's sly and cunning nature (even if the modern sympathy for the thrall is somewhat greater than that of the medieval audience).[28]

In the last of Þorsteinn's three dreams the woman who is nearest to him asks where they should go after his death. Þorsteinn tells them to go to his son Magnús, to which they reply (*ÍF XI*, 325): *Litla stund munum vér þar mega vera* ('We might be there but a little time'). The women who warn Þorsteinn are undoubtedly his *fylgjur* or those of his family. I do not believe it is too far-fetched to relate these women to the *fylgjur* mentioned in Rǫgnvaldr's prophecy about his son and descendants, to both sets of guardians who appear to Þiðrandi shortly before his death and to Hallr's concern over guardian spirits at the moment of his conversion to Christianity (even though this is linking episodes preserved in quite distinct texts). These spirits have accompanied the family throughout the generations, first ensuring their success in the settlement era and later being transformed and translated into more Christian forms through the piety in the family (although in the *Draumr* they still display a surprising number of strikingly pagan characteristics). Realising the failure of their attempts to avert Þorsteinn's doom, his family guardian spirits look where they will move to after his death.[29] However, their reservations about Magnús inadvertently reveal that his death will quickly follow his father's. Although we have no preserved text recounting Magnús Þorsteinsson's untimely demise, the allusion to it both here and in *Morkinskinna* strongly suggests that such a

27 *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* is preserved in JS 435 4° and AM 142 fol. The *draumr* is preserved in AM 564 c 4°, AM 165 m fol. and AM 594 a 4°.

28 The only counter-argument to equating Gilli with the fox, is that the end of *Draumr Þorsteins* reveals Gilli is actually descended from King Kjarvalr of Ireland (*ÍF XI*, 326) and therefore a more noble fetch might be expected to represent him; however, one can scarcely expect such perfect allusion in a single text, let alone when combining details from multiple and possibly indirectly related texts. As to the medieval audience's lack of sympathy with the slave, although probably providing entertainment for many members of the household, the world-view of most sagas is that of the more senior members of society, the *bœndr* and *goðar*, and as such the quality of loyalty in the lowest classes is praised most highly.

29 As in the examples from *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Hallfreðar saga* cited above.

story was once part of the narrative material surrounding Hallr's family.

A brief mention should also be made of *Vǫðu-Brands þáttr*, a short text preserved as part of one redaction of *Ljósvetninga saga* (see *ÍF X*, 123–139). Brandr is the sort of irritant we find in a number of sagas. His actions and legal disputes, either through accident or intention, become part of a larger power struggle between chieftains. Despite having relatively little power and influence himself, Brandr's dispute threatens to disturb the uneasy peace between Þorkell Geitisson and Guðmundr *inn ríki*. According to the *þáttr*, Þorsteinn Síðu-Hallsson sides with Þorkell who defends Brandr against Guðmundr for the wounding of a man at some games. Þorsteinn, however, seeks a peaceful resolution (albeit to the benefit of his comrade Þorkell) and proposes the marriage of Þorkell to Jórunn, the daughter of Einarr, Guðmundr's brother. Guðmundr finds himself in the awkward position of potentially prosecuting a member of his own kin-group and backs down letting Þorkell have his way. As with Þorsteinn's supposed visit to King Magnús in *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, this episode poses chronological inconsistencies when compared with other sources (see *ÍF X*, l–lv; also Gísli Sigurðsson 2004, 149). Þorkell probably became a *goði* before 987, and (as shown above) Þorsteinn not until 1012, making it historically unlikely that the real Þorsteinn and Þorkell were ever allies. It is possible that the story has somehow shifted from Síðu-Hallr himself and been reapplied to his son. If, however, we are to assume that Þorsteinn and his family are part of popular oral tradition, more important than the historical details are the thematic and personal characteristics associated with his character. Ignoring the chronological inconsistency, the *þáttr* fits the tradition of Hallr's family well. Þorsteinn is eager to find a solution that avoids bloodshed and he goes about it in a creative and cunning way, which ultimately achieves the best result for his companion; not unlike Hallr's behaviour at the Alþingi. Despite the disagreement over dates, the story fits thematically and in general terms with the picture being built up in our immanent saga.

Þorsteinn's untimely death and (or so we assume) that of his son Magnús almost brings to an end the stories associated with their family in the saga age. Only a short *þáttr* about Þorsteinn's younger brother Egill's travels expands the material further (*Egils þáttur Síðu-Hallssonar*; *ÍS III*,

2108–2114). Egill becomes a retainer of King Óláfr Haraldsson, but falls out of favour when he frees some Danish prisoners. Egill only regains the King's favour when he undertakes the dangerous mission to convert Jarl Valgautr of Gautland to Christianity. In one particularly interesting episode King Óláfr permits Egill to bring his wife Þorlaug and daughter Þorgerðr to court (*ÍS III*, 2109). When the king sees the maid Þorgerðr he comments that she will be lucky (*hún mundi eigi gæfulaus*). The narrator goes on to observe that she is later the mother of Bishop Jón *inn helgi*. Indeed Hallr's family has many notable descendants including Jón Ǫgmundarson (first bishop at Hólar from 1106–1121), Magnús Einarsson (bishop at Skálholt 1134–1148) and later Guðmundr Arason (bishop at Hólar 1203–1237) among his descendants. Similarly *Landnámabók* traces the ancestry of the Sturlusons directly to Þorsteinn (*ÍF I*, 310) and *Sturlunga saga* traces Sæmundr *inn fróði* to Yngvildr Hallsdóttir (Jón Jóhannesson 1946, I, 10). If one were to imagine an ending to our saga of Síðu-Hallr and his sons, it might be expected to list some of these genealogies, thereby tracing a direct line of descent from the kingly ancestors, through the *landnámsmenn*, through the heroes of the saga age to the most powerful families, most important literary writers and most senior religious leaders of the society for whom these stories must once have been told.

Considering the saga

What I have tried to do is put together a coherent story from disparate evidence. I have used only the extant texts and I have not filled in or elaborated. I would not necessarily claim that all of this is actually true (as stated above, that is beyond the scope of this article), but I have not actually invented or created anything. What we find is a surprisingly coherent saga. If we were to imagine that saga, it starts with the settlement of Hallr's ancestors and a prophecy foreshadowing the success of the family within Iceland. This is told relatively briefly with one or two episodes given much attention (for example Rǫgnvaldr's discussion with his sons, and perhaps Haraldr's sponsorship of Hrollaugr's voyage). It moves on to narrate a couple of episodes as precursors to the conversion of Iceland to Christianity. At this point time moves relatively quickly, but certain episodes are

narrated in detail (such as Þiðrandi's death). There then follows the climax of the saga: the account of the conversion. At this point, time in the narrative moves relatively slowly with a number of episodes told in detail close together chronologically. There then follows the aftermath, telling of subsequent generations with time moving ever faster in the narrative the further one moves from the centre of the saga.[30]

In this saga there is a general consistency of detail. For example we can build up a rough picture of Hallr's family tree with only a few discrepancies. In many areas the details fit perfectly, such as the mention in *Njáls saga* (*ÍF XII*, 239) of *Þiðrandi, þann er sagt er, at dísir vægi* ('Þiðrandi, of whom it is said, that the *dísir* killed') or King Magnús's prophecy in *Morkinskinna* pointing forward to the death of Þorsteinn's son and the success of his great-grandson. There is an even greater consistency of characterisation. Hallr is proud, strong, generous and kind; and an association with Christianity runs throughout. There is, however, another side to his character hinted at; he is perhaps ruthless, certainly a realist and pragmatist. His sons are similar but do not match their father's patience (for example Þorsteinn's eventual killing of Þórhaddr, Þiðrandi not heeding the advice of Þórhallr, Ljótr wanting to offer aid to Flosi at the Alþingi rather than listen to his father).

As well as this consistency regarding detail there is also a tremendous consistency of themes, throughout our assembled saga. Christianity features prominently in one form or another throughout the immanent saga; such as in the events prefiguring the conversion, the conversion itself and in the numerous bishops among Hallr's prominent descendants. Fate and the protection of some unseen force guarding and supporting the family is another theme throughout. This is first brought to the fore in Rǫgnvaldr's prophecy regarding the *fylgjur* and their association with Iceland. One might suppose these *fylgjur* assist in the difficult years following the settlement and aid in building the family's powerbase that we read about in *Landnámabók*. The events at the *dísablót* involve a change of the old guardians for new ones, however the theme of supernatural and theological

30 Terms like 'climax' and 'aftermath' are inevitably indebted to Theodore Andersson's (1967) study of saga structure *The Icelandic Family Saga, An Analytic Reading*, though one would scarcely describe Hallr's story as a feud narrative.

guardianship continues to be of importance. The old guardians forcibly take one final sacrifice (Þiðrandi) before they are replaced or transformed into Christian versions of the same. The importance of this is described at Hallr's conversion where he realises he is giving up his former guardians and wants to receive the protection of the archangel Michael in return. These new guardians – though rather pagan in appearance – try unsuccessfully to aid Þorsteinn and his son Magnús and, we assume, are eventually inherited by the Bishops of the saga-writing age. Thus Rǫgnvaldr's prophecy for the success of Hrollaugr's kin points vaguely but very certainly to Hallr and on to his sons Þorsteinn, Egill and their descendants Bishop Magnús Einarsson and Bishop Jón Ǫgmundarson. If one were to look for extant examples of a saga comparable to that described above one might look to *Vatnsdœla saga*. As mentioned above *Vatnsdœla saga* contains a series of episodes focussed upon the lives of the family descended from Ketill *raumr*. The episodes are somewhat loosely strung together (indeed the story described above is considerably more coherent and cohesive) but they are linked by a continuous focus upon what is referred to as the *hamingja* of the family. If the concept of a family's *hamingja* were enough to give a structure to the otherwise rather disparate episodes of *Vatnsdœla saga* the idea of family spirits being passed from one generation to the next might offer further cohesion to the already structured saga of Síðu-Hallr and his sons.

Given such evidence, we must consider the possibility that there was a **Síðu-Halls saga ok sona hans*. However, I feel the existence of such a complete saga is unlikely. There are a number of discrepancies. For example, both *Njáls saga* and *Þorsteins saga* agree that there is familial link between Hallr and Flosi. However, in the former Flosi is Hallr's son-in-law (married to his daughter Steinvǫrr) whereas in the latter he is a brother-in-law (married to a supposed sister of Hallr, Álǫf).[31] Þiðrandi and Ljótr are mentioned in some sources but not others. It seems possible that, as they never became *goðar*, they were of less historical importance than their brother Þorsteinn (who features consistently). Alternatively it is of course possible

31 This discrepancy is surprising considering the author of *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* clearly knew of *Njáls saga*, although that is not to say he necessarily knew it well or had access to it when he composed *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*. I would still argue that in a complete **Síðu-Halls saga ok sona hans* such a discrepancy would have been resolved.

that stories were added to the tradition as apocrypha at a late date by story-tellers intertwining new or borrowed material into the pre-existing tradition. As the stories did not contradict the audience's expectation in their specific content (for example the stories do not claim either Þiðrandi or Ljótr become *goðar*, as such a claim might be too easily disproved and contradict oral tradition elsewhere) and fitted well thematically with existing material, they were easily subsumed into that tradition. Indeed we find further discrepancies in the lists of sons and, particularly, daughters attributed to Hallr. One might expect the existence of a saga about Hallr to reduce some of these discrepancies. Secondly, throughout all the material relating to Hallr, I have found no specific reference to a saga. If the preserved material were dependent on a text that existed in the thirteenth century, one might expect one of the many references to cite their source, perhaps using a formula of the sort we find in *Þorsteins saga* (*ÍF XI*, 300), *... sem segir í Njáls sǫgu* ('...as is told in Njáls saga') or as in *Landnámabók* (*ÍF I*, I, 140 and II, 316) *... sem segir í sǫgu hans* ('... as is told in his saga').[32]

How, then, do we explain such a coherence in this imagined saga? To do so we must turn to oral tradition. A grounding in history must have helped shape the story. Although I have sidestepped the question of the real historical Hallr, that such a man existed there seems little doubt. It is also likely that he became a *goði* and had an important role in the political Christianisation of Iceland. Although the detail is not consistent between the different preserved accounts, the idea that the 12th/13th century Icelandic Bishops, the Sturlusons and even Sæmundr *inn fróði* counted Hallr among their ancestors seems plausible.[33] History, however, might be

32 This phrase appears twice in Sturlubók, the first time referring to an otherwise unknown saga of Þórðr gellir and the second to a saga relating to Earl Rǫgnvaldr – perhaps *Orkneyinga saga*. Examples of this phrase or equivalents are relatively common in the sagas of Icelanders (see for example *ÍF V*, 202; *ÍF VII*, 25, 37 and 62; *ÍF XI*, 301; *ÍF XIII*, 82 and 104). It is, however, striking how many of these for which we have no directly corresponding extant text suggesting that in some cases it may be an oral or indeed even an immanent saga to which is being referred.

33 It is at this point that my confidence in the historical veracity of this depiction of Hallr's life wavers, not because I have issue with the likelihood of such notable descendants, but because there are such obvious political motivations either for the bishops or the ambitious political/literary family of the Sturlusons to promote positive aspects of Hallr's life. One wonders whether some of these named individuals might not have been among those spreading positive report of Hallr's role in the conversion and his overall piety and kind

consistent but is not necessarily coherent. History, for example, cannot explain the emphasis on guardian spirits found in many of the texts. The characterisation of Hallr as the benevolent peacemaker seems likely to be an artistic creation rather than being entirely historically accurate. Such an archetype probably owes much to Christian teaching. It is also easy to see how the figure of a man able to resolve disputes peacefully must have been appealing to audiences familiar with the violence of the Sturlung age.

So it seems in the period between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries a patchwork of stories about Hallr and his family developed. During this time the basic tradition containing shared common material could then be added to by story tellers. Each new addition must agree in details where these were commonly known and might be disputed by a potential audience. The new story elements would also have to agree with the characters as they were already depicted in the existing material. Finally each new tale would have to agree thematically. The audience became familiar with the character of Hallr and his importance in relation to the Christianisation of Iceland and as a result did not want an irrelevant story but a story that fitted into the pre-existing tradition. In this way our immanent **Síðu-Halls saga ok sona hans* develops becoming ever more coherent and lucid. The 'immanent whole' of the story of Hallr and his sons and their ancestors and descendants was known to many saga tellers (and thus to audiences) and each could add or tell a bit. Any addition or embellishment did, however, have to conform in detail, character and theme with what was already there. Thus with each new episode added or retold the immanent saga took on a more and more consistent shape caused by the constraints under which the saga tellers had to tell their tales.

Finishing Touches

This development of an immanent oral saga might go on until it reached a point where there is a saga merely waiting to be told – for a skilled craftsman to fit these pieces together. As already mentioned, I have kept to the sources as they are preserved to us. A saga author (by which I mean the

demeanour. Thus the story calls itself into question, as the very presence of such figures in the story I have assembled reminds us we are discussing the story and not the reality.

man who finally turned the immanent saga into a complete, and probably written, text) need not feel so constrained. He could embellish, fill in, add direct speech, edit and fit the episodes into a seamless whole. For example Rǫgnvaldr's prophecy could be more specific pointing forward more definitely to the events later in the story. It might also be made to specifically predict the conversion to Christianity (as many prophecies do in the sagas), thereby creating a further unity with the potential climax of the saga (the scenes surrounding the conversion at the Alþingi). King Óláfr Tryggvason's instruction for Þangbrandr to go to Hallr is unmotivated (other than perhaps by Hallr's reputation as a fair, generous man); however such a problem could be overcome by insertion of an episode with Hallr travelling abroad and gaining a reputation in the Norwegian court (chronologically this may need to be prior to Óláfr's ascension to the throne). The episodes surrounding Ljótr could be expanded to create greater tension and the mysterious prophecy that he should die unless he can survive three summers at the Alþingi could be made by the guardian spirits present throughout the tradition. King Magnús's prophecy could be expanded to specifically mention both Magnús Þorsteinsson's death (which is clearly a story originally part of the immanent saga, but not preserved for us) and the success of his grandson. All these, nonetheless, would still represent comparatively small adjustments or additions to what is already a coherent story. For many years comparative analysis of saga plots and characters has shed light upon the historical reliability, authenticity and age of some texts. But I believe in this case, it rather gives us a glimpse of one way in which sagas might have come into being. Hallr provided a focal point about which stories could be located, but only stories which were sympathetic in tone, content and did not contradict the established facts too seriously. These stories waited for a saga-man to perform the final act of shaping them into a whole. In the case of Síðu-Hallr Þorsteinsson it seems this never happened, but perhaps in the cases of some extant sagas this was exactly the process that occurred.

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SUMMARY

**Síðu-Halls saga ok sona hans*: Creating a Saga from Tradition

Keywords: Sagas of Icelanders, oral tradition, immanent saga, saga composition, *Síðu-Hallr Þorsteinsson*, conversion of Iceland, guardian spirits (*fylgjur*)

This article traces the life of the 10th-century Icelandic chieftain Síðu-Hallr Þorsteinsson and that of his ancestors and descendants, through numerous mentions in extant sources particularly *Íslendinga sögur* and *þættir*. Hallr is descended from significant *Landnámsmenn* on both his mother and father's sides. Most significant of these is Hrollaugr Rǫgnvaldsson who settles Iceland on the advice of a mysterious prophecy which seems to relate his female guardian spirits (*fylgjur*) to Iceland. A relatively consistent family tree of Hallr's ancestors and descendants can be ascertained from disparate sources, with only a few discrepancies, particularly around the number and names of Hallr's sons. Hallr himself is portrayed consistently as honourable, magnanimous and a noble heathen before becoming an early convert to Christianity. There is however also a suggestion that Hallr had some degree of cunning and shrewdness. The most important single event in his life story is his role in the conversion of Iceland to Christianity in the year 999 or 1000. His actions at the Alþingi underline the picture of him both as generous peacemaker, but also shrewd political realist. If we turn to his sons Þorsteinn, Þiðrandi and Egill, we find many of the same characteristics, though without the same degree of patience as their father. Hallr are his sons are ancestors of many of the notable bishops, literary figures and chieftains of the saga-writing age.

Having assembled the material for this **Síðu-Halls saga ok sona hans* the article then argues that the story forms a relatively coherent whole. Although there are some inconsistencies of detail, there is a consistency in the portrayal of the central characters and the themes addressed in the texts. For example the theme of supernatural female guardianship runs throughout, as does the theme of Christianity and conversion. The notion of this saga actually having existed in medieval times is rejected primarily on the grounds that throughout the assembled material no such saga is ever mentioned as a source. The conclusion is therefore that the story of Síðu-Hallr and his sons developed orally. It had, no doubt, some kernel of truth, but as such stories were told and retold they developed an ever increasing organisation. Whenever new material was added it needed to agree in terms of characterisation and theme with that which existed. Having reached such a point as to be an immanent saga, it would have taken a saga author only comparatively light touches to change the oral material into an artistic whole. In

the case of Síðu-Hallr, this final development never took place, but this may have been the creative process by which other sagas came into existence.

EFNISÁGRIP

Í þessari grein er rakin æfi tíundu aldar höfðingjans Síðu-Halls Þorsteinssonar, forfeðra hans, -mæðra og afkomenda með því að taka saman vísanir til þeirra í varðveittum heimildum, aðallega Íslendinga sögum og þáttum. Hallur er rakinn til helstu landnámsmanna, bæði í móður- og föðurætt. Þekktastur þeirra er Hrollaugur Rögnvaldsson sem nam land í kjölfar spásagnar um að fylgjur hans lægju til Íslands. Ættir Halls er raktar í óskyldum heimildum og ber vel saman að mestu leyti nema hvað ósamkvæmni gætir í nöfnum og fjölda sona hans. Sjálfur kemur hann jafnan fram sem göfuglyndur heiðingi áður en hann er meðal þeirra fyrstu til að taka kristni. Vísbendingar eru um pólitíska slægð hans og mikilvægasti viðburðurinn sem hann kemur við er kristnitakan árið 999/1000. Framganga hans á Alþingi er bæði til vitnis um friðarvilja og pólitískt raunsæi. Synir hans, Þorsteinn, Þiðrandi og Egill sýna mörg sömu einkenni en þó án þeirrar þolinmæði sem kemur fram hjá föðurnum. Ættir helstu biskupa, bókamanna og höfðingja á ritunartíma sagnanna eru raktar til Halls og sona hans.

Með því að draga saman efni í **Síðu-Halls sögu og sona hans* úr ólíkum áttum færir höfundur rök fyrir því að heimildirnar sýni heilsteypta mynd. Þrátt fyrir ósamræmi í ýmsum smáatriðum séu þær samhljóða í lýsingu helstu persóna og atburða. Til dæmis sé hugmyndin um fylgjurnar rauður þráður, sem og þemað um kristnitökuna. Ekkert bendir til að sérstök saga af þessu tagi hafi nokkru sinni verið rituð. Niðurstaðan er sú að sagan um Síðu-Hall og syni hans hefur mótast á munnlegu stigi. Án efa geymir hún einhvern sannleikskjarna en þar eð sögurnar hafa verið margsagðar og endursagðar hafa þær breyst og slípast í meðförum. Þegar nýju efni var bætt við þurfti það að falla að því sem fyrir var, bæði í tengslum við persónusköpun og þá atburði sem persónur voru viðriðnar. Efnið má því kalla *almælta sögu* og það hefði verið létt verk fyrir sagnaritara að fella það saman í listræna heild. Sú saga var þó aldrei skrifuð en dæmið af Síðu-Halli gæti engu að síður verið upplýsandi um hvernig sköpunarsögu annarra Íslendinga sagna var háttað.

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