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THE FANTASTIC IN ÍSLENDINGA ÞÆTTIR,
WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS
ON ÞORSTEINS ÞÁTTR FORVITNA

AMONG THE *Íslendinga þættir* that employ fantastic elements extensively we find on the one hand such widely known and much discussed tales as *Þorleifs þáttur jarlsskálds* and on the other such an “insignificant” story (Finnur Jónsson 1923, 758) as *Þorsteins þáttur forvitna* which has hitherto attracted hardly any attention at all. It seems, however, that in spite of its modest artistic value this latter tale deserves a closer look.

Þorsteins þáttur forvitna is supposed to have been composed in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century presumably by a cleric, which may account for its resemblance to Christian legends (*ÍF* XIII, CCII f.). The þáttur is known in one version only and is preserved in the later part of *Flateyjarbók*, which was added to the main body of this compilation during the last half of the fifteenth century, when the owner of the book was Þorleifur Björnsson of Reykhólar. The tale of a curious Icelander is placed there among some other stories which immediately follow *Haralds saga harðráða*, thus constituting a sort of a supplement to this major work.

Þorsteins þáttur forvitna is one of the so called *utanferðar þættir*, tales of an Icelander abroad, whose core structural elements are most often based on the Alienation / Reconciliation of the Icelander and the king (Harris 1972). Despite the variety of themes and plots, most þættir of this type are structured according to a limited number of traditional patterns. The choice of a particular pattern is largely motivated by the way the conflict between a king and an Icelander is initiated, and in most cases it is the Icelander who provokes such a conflict. *Þorsteins þáttur forvitna* belongs to a small subgroup of stories in which a conflict between the heroes arises from a fault of an Icelander who has violated a king's interdiction (to this

type also belong *Egils þáttir Stíðu-Hallssonar* and *Þorsteins þáttir skelks*). These tales share a common structural characteristic, i.e. a 'framed construction': an account about the trial the hero undergoes as a result of his disobedience invariably constitutes an autonomous embedded narrative, whereas the story describing his relationships with the king forms the narrative frame. A compositional pattern of this type is not rare in the *þáttir* in general. Among the obligatory properties of the embedded episode the following should be singled out. Firstly, it is set in another scene of action, which does not coincide with that of the main (or outer) story. Secondly, its *dramatis personae* differ at least partially from those the protagonist deals with in the main story. Thirdly, there is the hostility the hero encounters in his dealings with other characters of the embedded episode, which exposes his life to danger. Fourthly, the hero's behaviour and actions as described in the embedded episode ultimately work to his benefit, so that after his return the king not only pardons the Icелander but even rewards him with his particular benevolence (Gurevich 2004, 115–134).

The story in question demonstrates all these formal properties. Here the king becomes angry with the Icелander for his curiosity: Þorsteinn looked into Haraldr's bag when the king was bathing and found there something he ought not to have seen. The object that attracted his attention was unprecedented indeed. It was two knife handles which seemed to be made of pure gold, although apparently with wooden ends. When the king noticed that Þorsteinn was examining his things he was displeased and announced to the Icелander that he would no longer enjoy his favour. Time went on, but the king did not forget this incident, and when the summer arrived he demanded that the Icелander should pay for his fault. To win the king's favour again Þorsteinn was assigned a difficult task. He had to undertake a dangerous journey to a distant land in order to find and bring to the king the shoots of that marvellous golden tree from whose branches Haraldr had cut the handles the Icелander had noticed in his bag.

Þáttir are sometimes compared to folktales and attempts have even been made to trace them back to the latter (Lindow 1978, 178). However, the postulated similarities normally do not go further than some very general analogies. In both types of narrative we usually find a protagonist of humble origin (it is worth mentioning that in the introduction to our story

Þorsteinn is characterised as “a poor and swift” man — *fielitill og fraligr* (*Flat* III, 431), and that none of his relatives is named in the þáttir. Such a hero successfully gets through all the trials he has to undergo, overcomes a mighty opponent and finally wins and enhances his social status. But in other respects *Íslendinga þættir* can actually be shown to contrast with folktales. The heroes of such stories succeed primarily owing to their personal abilities and efforts, and not relying on supernatural assistants (some of them receive a powerful backing, but mostly in addition to their own endeavours). Besides, protagonists of *útanferðar þættir* never aim at anything utterly unrealisable, pursuing which would have exceeded the limits of human power and experience. Furthermore, all the action in these stories takes place in real historical time and space, unlike the normally undefined setting of the action in folktales, and all the events depicted in the þættir are presented in such a way that they enjoy the confidence of the audience. Like the sagas of Icelanders *Íslendinga þættir* are narrated in the realistic mode (more precisely, that of “archaic realism” as the saga style was defined by M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij)¹ and their medieval audience considered these stories trustworthy.

Þorsteins þáttir forvitna apparently stands out against the background of other narratives of this type. The story is supposed to be an *exemplum*, intended to illustrate how curiosity, which was regarded as a reprehensible quality, leads to serious trouble (*ÍF* XIII, CCII).² But the account of Þorsteinn’s adventure shows even more resemblance to a magic folktale, with which it shares both the general narrative pattern and a number of notable features that are generally alien to tales of Icelanders. Indeed, in no other *Íslendinga þáttir* does an ‘expiatory’ mission of a hero take the form of a typical fabulous motif, namely an assignment to fulfil an impracticable task. When king Haraldr sent Þorsteinn away for the shoots of a marvelous tree, contrary to the usual habits of a Norse ruler, he gave him no ‘address’ of a wonderful golden grove. And what is more, he altogether refused to explain to the Icelandic where he should direct his steps. The parting words Þorsteinn heard from the king were hardly encouraging:

- 1 See, e.g., his essay *Ot sagi k romanu* [From Saga to Romance] (Steblin-Kamenskij 1984, 199).
- 2 Cf. in *The King’s Mirror*: “Enga luti skallþú þá forvitna við höfðingia þinn er þu ser at hann vil at læynliger se <...>” (*KS* 57) [“You should never be curious about anything you see that your lord wishes to keep in secrecy”].

Þu uerdr sialfr fra þui ath seigia huad þier þikir líklegaztt hvar eg hafa mest um laund farit (Flat III, 431) ["You're going to have to say yourself where you think it is most likely that I have travelled." (CSI I, 393)].

The Icelander, however, did not even make an attempt to solve this puzzle on his own and preferred instead to search for assistance from a much more competent adviser. For that purpose he went to the shrine of Saint Óláfr and that very night dreamed that he had a visit from a man who advised him to start on a journey but did not say a word about the location of the object he was supposed to find and fetch. When Þorsteinn awoke, he did as he was counselled and set out without delay. He travelled far and long, "without resting and suffered much from lack of sleep and hunger." Once when he was going through deep forests, Þorsteinn came upon a stone where he finally found shelter. In that place was the abode of a hermit who welcomed the stranger and listened to his story. The hermit told the hero that he was on the right road and gave him detailed instructions which should enable him to fulfil his task. It turned out that Þorsteinn had almost reached the place he was searching for. Very soon he was to see a small islet covered with forest. All the trees there would look like gold, and this precious grove would be guarded by a fierce serpent. So as not to attract the serpent's attention, the Icelander should not remove anything but the two knife handles he was sent for, and any delay might cost him his life.

Having arrived to the wonderful island, the hero found a beautiful sapling which looked as if some of its twigs had already been cut off, and recognised the tree he was searching for. Then he rushed up, cut off two knife handles and, despite the warning he had received, was planning to take some more, but at that very instant he heard a hissing and jumped into the water. When the serpent perceived that his domain had been invaded by a thief it started after the stranger and would certainly have gained on him if Þorsteinn had not been rescued by Saint Óláfr, whose protection he had invoked. Having heeded his entreaty the holy king arranged for the enraged guard of the island to suddenly lose sight of the Icelander and have to return. As soon as Þorsteinn reached the shore, he set off back to Norway, and after having travelled "through many lands" he finally came to king Haraldr. He narrated his adventures to the king and showed him the knife handles he had taken, after which the king compared them to the

ones he already had and ascertained that they were of the same tree. When the king heard the whole story he concluded that the Icелander had been a very fortunate man and thus not only pardoned him but also rewarded him generously. For, as king Haraldr explained, in having acted in this way he was evidently meeting the wishes of the one who had taken care of Þorsteinn throughout his journey, and that is Saint Óláfr, his brother. Then Þorsteinn parted from the king and returned to Iceland, but as it is reported at the very end of the þáttir he later died with Haraldr in England (*Flat* III, 431–32).

The story of Þorsteinn's travelling employs supernatural elements on a larger scale than most of the other *útanferðar þættir*.³ Moreover, it contains exotic motifs, which is exceptional for *Íslendinga þættir* in general. And last but not least it is easy to see, that this story is patterned entirely after the common scheme of a folktale as outlined by Vladimir Propp. The following 'functions' of *dramatis personae* may be detected in it (although some in slightly modified form): III. The Interdiction is Violated (The very fact that the interdiction itself is not verbalised within the þáttir is irrelevant since the Interdiction and Violation of the Interdiction constitute a binary element in which, according to Propp's analysis of the magic tale, "The second half can sometimes exist without the first" (Propp 1979, 27)); VIIa (3) Wondrous Objects are Lacking; IX. Misfortune or Lack is made Known; The Hero is approached with a Request or Command; IX. (B²) The Hero is Dispatched Directly; XI. The Hero Leaves Home; XIV. Hero acquires the use of a Magical Agent (here this function is manifested in one of its traditional varieties, namely F₉⁶ — various magical creatures suddenly appear without any warning, or are met on the way, offer their services and are accepted as helpers); XV. The Hero is Transferred, Delivered or Led

³ In fact, of thirty one tales of this type (for details see Harris 1972) only *Þorleifs þáttir jarlsskálds* may be compared to *Þorsteins þáttir forvitna* in this respect. There we find three episodes each having the supernatural at its core: one depicts the magical effect of a *níð* poem, in another there is a wooden man with a human heart, a 'robot' produced with the aid of sorcery in order to kill the hero of the þáttir, and the third tells of a fantastic procedure which turned Hallbjörn hali, a man who had never composed verses, into a competent poet. As to the other þættir of Icelanders abroad, those tales that resort to the supernatural at all are mostly content with the motif of saintly assistance (*Egils þáttir Síðu-Hallssonar*, *Gísls þáttir Illugasonar*, *Halldórs þáttir Snorrasonar I*, *Hrafn þáttir Guðrúnarsonar*, *Þorvalds þáttir tasalda*, *Þórarins þáttir Nefjólfs sonar*) which is sometimes preceded by the hero's encounter with a malevolent marvellous creature (a demon in *Ögmundar þáttir dýtt ok Gunnars helmings*; a visitor from Hell in *Þorsteins þáttir skelks*).

to the Whereabouts of an Object of Search (here G⁴ — the route is shown to him); XIX. The Initial Misfortune or Lack is Liquidated — the hero obtains the object of his quest; XX. The Hero Returns; XXI. The Hero is Pursued; XXII. Rescue of the Hero from Pursuit (Propp 1979, 27; 35–36; 39; 43–45; 50; 53; 55–57).⁴

The close relationship with folktale does not, of course, preclude the fact that the story of Þorsteinn's adventure is nevertheless an *útanferðar þáttir* and that as such, as has been mentioned above, it shares the common formal properties and subject-matter of this genre. As in other tales of Icelanders abroad, we find in *Þorsteins þáttir forvitna* both the general narrative structure typical of this group of þættir (Introduction — Journey In — Alienation — Reconciliation — Journey Out — Conclusion (Harris 1972)), and its most common topic, namely the success of an Icelandic hero who after undergoing a series of trials has managed to win the king's favour and to get on in life. It is not sufficient, however, just to state that the story is modelled on the folktale. The very fact that such a tale has been associated with the name of Haraldr Sigurðarson and placed among the stories accompanying the saga of this king in *Flat* needs an explanation, not least because this is the only *útanferðar þáttir* narrating conflicts between the Icelanders and king Haraldr in which fantastic elements are used at all. In contrast to other tales of the Icelanders and Haraldr harðráði, which never deviate from the realistic mode of representation, the entire narrative here is centred round extraordinary wonderful objects and an unprecedented quest set in some vaguely defined distant land.

It seems that the latter circumstance deserves a closer look, for it may become the starting-point of an inquiry into the origins of the story of Þorsteinn's adventure. Strangely enough, this very short and condensed tale contains a detail which is of no practical use in the action. Although the king told Þorsteinn to try to guess where he could have got the golden handles, the hero did not even try to think where Haraldr had travelled and preferred to appeal directly to Saint Óláfr. It is evident, however, that the reader of the þáttir should have understood the king's reply as a hint at Haraldr's long sojourn in the East, which was related in the preceding text

⁴ Attempts to find a parallel to Þorsteinn's tale, either in I. M. Boberg's *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature* (on the quest for marvellous golden wood for a knife handle — see Boberg 1966, 159), or in the Aarne-Thompson Tale Type Index, yielded no results.

of the saga. But from the king's biography the reader should have learned not just the direction of the journey the hero had to undertake but the relevant frame of associations as well.

There are good grounds for believing that the fabulous story of an Icelander who is persuaded by the Norwegian king to travel far away in search of some exotic objects, earlier acquired there by the king himself, could have alluded to another episode in the tradition ascribed to Haraldr. This is the famous story describing the future king's fight with a dragon-like serpent while he is imprisoned in a dungeon in Constantinople.⁵ The story in question is known both from *Mork* and *Flat* — it is worth emphasizing at this point that it is in the latter compilation that *Þorsteins þáttr forvitna* is included — and it tells of Haraldr being slandered before the Byzantine emperor by queen Zoe, who accused him of having misappropriated the booty that belonged to the crown and “of being familiar” with her niece (*Mork*, 12; *Flat* III, 304). On that account, Haraldr (who called himself Norðbrikt at that time) was arrested and thrown into prison, together with his two retainers, Úlfr stallari and Halldór Snorrason. The saga relates that the dungeon they were kept in was like a vertical cave and there was a great poisonous serpent that “fed off the corpses of men who came into conflict with the emperor or his magnates” (*Mork* trans., 145). Despite the danger, the prisoners took the risk of attacking the sleeping monster, and Haraldr succeeded in slaying it after a stubborn fight in which his only weapon was a small knife he happened to have with him.

The account of this adventure in *Flat* does not differ at all noticeably from that of *Mork*, however, interestingly enough, there are some minor distinctions precisely in those passages which deal with the weapon the monster was killed with.

First of all, both redactions of the saga inform the reader that all three of the prisoners were disarmed before they were thrown into the dungeon. The audience therefore did not expect that any of them could still have some sort of implement to fight the serpent. Consequently, the saga author was facing the need to decide at which point in the narrative it would be most suitable for the knife to come to light. In this regard *Mork* coincides

⁵ It has been pointed out that this story may originate from a verse by Illugi Bryndælaskáld (*Skj* A I, 384, 1, 1) in which Haraldr's exploits were interwoven with those of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. See note 6 in Eric Christiansen's edition of *Gesta Danorum*, Book XI (*Saxo* I, 222–23).

with *Flat* only in that neither of the two versions of the saga explains how Haraldr could manage to hide the knife. As to the method of its introduction into the narrative, the *Mork* redaction prefers to mention the secret weapon prior to description of the battle itself. When addressing his companions and suggesting they attack the serpent, Haraldr tells them that he has a little knife, with which he intends to strike the monster. In the *Flat* redaction of the king's speech all mention of the knife is omitted. In the following quotation from *Mork* the underlined words are absent in *Flat*:

þa melti Haralldr at þeir mundi scipaz til atgongo við orminn. Þv Halldorr segir hann scalt fara a hofvþit hans. en Vlfr er stercastr hann scal fara a sporþinn þvi at þar er aPLIT ormannna. en ec hefi a mer tygilknif litinn þann. mon ec ganga at honom framan oc vinna a honom þar sem mer syniz. þvi at minni treystvmc ec hamingionni bezt oc gefvnni at styra knifinom (*Mork*, 13). [Then Haraldr said that they should ready themselves for an attack on the serpent. "You, Halldór," he said, "should attack its head. Úlfr is the strongest and should attack the tail, because that is where the strength of serpents resides. I have a little knife and will go at him from the front and strike where it seems best because I have the greatest confidence in my own luck and good fortune in aiming the knife (*Mork* trans., 146).]

In the *Flat* redaction of the saga the knife does not appear until the action approaches the point when Haraldr starts preparing himself for combat with the serpent:

Sidan biozt Haralldr suo ath hann tok af sier 'gran' felld er hann var j og snarade felldinn vm hond sier og hafde kefle j framanverdre hendinne og knif j annarre (*Flat* III, 304). [Then Haraldr prepared himself by taking off a gray skin cloak he was wearing and wrapping it around his hand. He had a stick in his leading hand and a knife in the other.]

The description of the battle coincides in both redactions but in *Flat* there is a scribal error just in the passage commenting on the difficulty of fighting a huge and severe monster with "such a small blade". However,

notwithstanding its corrupt record in the manuscript, the statement is unambiguous for the audience. Cf.:

síþan gecc hann framan at orminom oc stacc vinstri hendi i ginit. en leggr hann þegar með enni høgri enom vinstra megin þar sem hann hvgði at næst scylði ganga hiartano ormsins. oc leggr knifi at hepti vpp. oc var vandalvtr at vinna með sva litlo iarni a sva miclo qviqvendi oc illo. [*Flat* III, 304–5: en so fast lagde hann til ormsins ath skellr uid hepte vppe og var mikell vande j ath vinna hann med mycklu.⁶] Viþ þetta vacnar ormrinn oc bryz vm fast. oc letr Haralldr nv felldinn taca við eitrim. oc førisc hann a orminn ofan við. en sva er hann sterck at stvndvm hefir hann a lopti .ii. hveria. en með hamingio oc travsti Olafs konvngs oc hvatleic Harallz oc tionaði liðsmanna hans þa sœfiz ormr. oc fa þeir hlapit honom (*Mork*, 13). [Then he advanced against the serpent and thrust his left hand into its maw, striking immediately with his right hand into the serpent's left flank where he thought the knife would penetrate closest to the heart. He plunged the knife in up to the hilt, and it was no easy thing to contend with such a huge and evil creature with such a small blade. At that moment the serpent awoke and went into contortions. Haraldr let the cloak absorb the poison and at the same time was dashed down on the serpent. It was so powerful that it sometimes tossed two of them in the air simultaneously, but with the luck and aid of King Óláfr and Haraldr's own valor, as well as the support of his followers, the serpent was overcome, and they were able to get the best of it (*Mork* trans., 146).]

We can only guess which of the two variants of the story may be closer to the original. It is possible that the idea of introducing into the story, prior to the scene which depicted Haraldr's heroic combat with the monster, the weapon the serpent was defeated with could belong to a later scribe or redactor of the saga, who thus aimed to make the narrative more consistent and clear for the audience. But it is equally possible that it might have been the other way round, that is, a decision of a later redactor to omit reference to the knife from the king's speech, in order to impress the reader with its unexpected appearance at the very moment of the dra-

⁶ Here there is an editor's note to this passage: "r. so litlu jarne" (*Flat* III, 305).

matic fight. Anyway, both versions of this episode agree on the main point, namely that Haraldr had accomplished a great and extraordinary deed when he managed to kill a huge and fierce monster with a small knife, i.e. a weapon by no means intended for battles with dragons. Hence, the knife itself naturally came to play a prominent role in the traditions dealing with this remarkable adventure of the future king of Norway.

It is no surprise that in the much more eloquent and expressive account of the same story in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* (Book XI, ch. 3) we do not only find this weapon again but are also supplied with a more or less satisfactory explanation of how the king could keep it in prison.

According to Saxo's version of the Byzantine episode, Haraldr "was convicted of manslaughter" and sentenced "to be thrown to a captive dragon and torn to pieces". It is said that on his way to the prison Haraldr was followed by his companion, an unnamed "faithful servant", who "bravely and voluntarily offered to share his fate". Both of them were carefully searched by the warder and went into the prison "unarmed and stripped", but while the slave had to enter the cave naked, Haraldr was allowed "to keep his linen on for the sake of decency" (thus the reader is given a hint that the noble prisoner could hide something on his body, as was actually the case). In order to gain time Haraldr bribed the jailer who fed the monster with little fishes, so that while the dragon "was satisfying the first pangs of his appetite", the prisoners' eyes got used to the darkness after which they managed to get ready for an attack by their fierce enemy. Having picked some bones from the skeletons Haraldr tied them up in a bunch, constructing a sort of club (cp. *kefli* in the saga). Using this self-made weapon in their fight with the dragon, his helper then smashed its head with repeated blows until it was killed. But before that, the monster was attacked and wounded by Haraldr, who happened to have another weapon: "<...> when the dragon appeared, rushing eagerly at its prey, he climbed on to its back with a 'rapid bound', and sank a 'tonorial blade', which he happened to have 'covertly introduced', into its navel, the only part vulnerable to steel. For the serpent was covered with very hard scales, which prevented any other part of his body from being cut." (Saxo I, 54).

In contrast to *Saga Haralds harðráða*, in which the killing of the serpent does not entail Haraldr's and his companions' release from the prison, the

story in *Gesta Danorum* ends with their reconciliation with the Byzantine emperor. It is related that when the king learned of their heroic accomplishment "his desire for revenge was changed to admiration, and he decided to remit the brave men's punishment and reward their courage by letting them live." Moreover, like a king in a þáttir pardoning the prisoners for bravery, he 'added' to forgiveness his "friendship and gave them a ship, and money, and allowed them to leave" (Saxo I, 54).

It is noteworthy that of all Haraldr's remarkable adventures Saxo had chosen and included in *Gesta Danorum* this very episode. No doubt his sources could have supplied him with many other impressive examples from Haraldr's expeditions in the southern lands while he was at the emperor's service. There are enough stories describing the future king's boldness and inventiveness as a leader of the Varangians, e.g. those reporting the brilliant stratagems which allowed him to win numerous cities and strongholds. That preference was nevertheless given to a fabulous dragon tale cannot be accidental and testifies that this legend must have been very popular. This is also corroborated by the fact that the same heroic exploit of Haraldr is mentioned in William of Malmesbury's *De gestis regum Anglorum* (II, 318), written about 1125, although in the latter work it has undergone some notable transformations.⁷ First of all, in William of Malmesbury's account of this episode we no longer find any serpent — it is said instead that Haraldr was thrown to a lion for having seduced a highborn woman. Also there is no mention of any weapon at all — it is stressed that Haraldr smothered the huge beast with his bare hands (*leoni objectus, beluam immanem nudo lacertorum nisu suffocavit*). Hence, in this version of the legend, one exotic beast is substituted for another. As to the notion that the monster was defeated mostly "by main strength", this may be easily traced in the Norse variants of the story as well, for they all stress the insignificance of the blade Haraldr used in his fight with the dragon.

Whereas one group of Old Norse sources demonstrate their fascination with the legend of Haraldr's fight with a great serpent, the other, on the contrary, show a clear mistrust in its authenticity. In spite of the fact that both *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna* recount the episode of Haraldr's imprisonment in Byzantium, each of these books confines itself to the

⁷ If not vice versa, for considering the dating of William's chronicle its account of the story of Haraldr's imprisonment may be closer to the 'original' legend.

second part of the story and omits the dragon tale altogether. According to this second part, which is common to all versions of the saga, Haraldr and his men were rescued from prison by a noble widow who was sent to free them by Saint Óláfr. It is said that the holy king visited this woman in a vision and told her that she would be cured from the illness she was suffering, but in return she should release his brother Haraldr from prison. Obeying this order, she hurried to the dungeon with her servants. They climbed the tower, lowered a rope for the prisoners and pulled them up by it (*Fsk*, 228 f.; *Hkr* III, 86; *Mork*, 13 f.; *Flat* III, 305). In *Mork* and *Flat* this episode immediately follows the scene of Haraldr's combat with the monster; in *Hkr* and *Fsk* there are no other details concerning Haraldr's imprisonment besides those told in the story of the widow. It is most likely that the omitted encounter with the dragon was one of the stories Snorri could first of all have had in mind when he critically evaluated the reliability of traditions depicting Haraldr's adventures (cf. "Yet many more of his famous deeds have not been set down, both because of our lack of information and because we do not wish to put down in writing stories not sufficiently witnessed. Even though we have heard mentioned, or touched upon, a number of things, it seems better that they be added later, rather than that they need to be omitted then." *Hkr* trans., 607).

It seems that even those authors who were less captious with their sources than Snorri nevertheless also strove to represent the stories of Haraldr's deeds they were putting in writing as "sufficiently witnessed". Perhaps for this reason, Saxo added to his account of Haraldr's combat with the dragon a reference to the authority of king Valdemar the Great of Denmark, presumably addressing his remark primarily to those readers who were inclined to mistrust the whole story: "King Waldemarus, who loved hearing adventures, and telling them, often used to show this knife to his attendants, 'eaten away with rust, and scarce sufficient to its office' of cutting" (Saxo I, 54). No doubt *Íslendings þáttir sögufróða* must have been included into *Saga Haralds harðráða* in *Mork* for similar purposes.⁸ A little account of a young Icelander who ran the risk of telling king Haraldr the saga of his foreign adventures and received his full approval is an obvious 'authentication story'. The king's judgement that the saga he heard was

⁸ On relationship between the 'main narrative' and the þættir in *Mork* see Ármann Jakobsson (1998; 2002).

“perfectly faithful to the actual events” served as a sort of authorisation which applied to the written saga as well, for the latter was ultimately going back to the same oral source (*ÍF* XI, CXIV; Gurewitsch 1992). What is particularly remarkable about the storytelling of the ‘sagawise’ Icelander is that his success was owing to the fact that he learned his saga from Halldór Snorrason, one of Haraldr’s comrades who, as we know, participated in the fight with the serpent.

Íslendinga þáttir sögufróða is contained in *Mork, Hulda* and *Hrokkinskinna* but it has been left out in *Flat*. Could it be for that reason that the compiler of the respective part of the book replaced the tale of an anonymous story-teller with another tale intended to verify the most shaky episode of Haraldr’s travels in the southern lands? There are good grounds for thinking that one possible function of *Þorsteins þáttir forvitna* in *Flat* could have been the authentication of the king’s fantastic adventure with the serpent. Although their plots are unlike, there are important similarities between the two narratives which speak in favour of their interconnection. In each of the stories we find a hero who has fallen out with a mighty king and in consequence of this conflict is compelled to face a fierce serpent; in both stories the hero shows courage in his dealings with the monster but all the same owes his life to Saint Óláfr, to whom he appeals for help. And last but not least, both stories give most prominent place to short daggers which are somehow connected with monsters. That these common features could really underlie the associations between an adventure of the curious Icelander and an incident with the future king of Norway may be testified by the fact that by design of the compiler of *Flat Þorsteins þáttir forvitna* was placed in this book immediately after a story hinting at ambiguous attitude towards the episode of Haraldr’s fight with the dragon, i.e. *Halldórs þáttir Snorrasonar* I. It is striking that *Halldórs þáttir* I was recorded in *Flat* twice: once in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (*Flat* I, 506–11) and again, in a considerably reduced form, among the þættir accompanying Haraldr’s saga (*Flat* III, 428–31), although the latter king (in contrast to his position in the omitted *Halldórs þáttir* II) did not play any noticeable role in this story. According to this tale Halldór killed an offender who dared to mock and lampoon him for stories “from his travels abroad with king Haraldr”. The full version of the þáttir provides more specific information about this incident. As we learn from it, Halldór was particularly insulted by a slanderous statement

of his opponent that when he was kept in a dungeon in Greece he lay “on the tail of a snake unable to do a thing” (*Flat* I, 507, *CSI* V, 219).

Thus there are reasons to think that *Þorsteins þáttr forvitna* alluded to a famous deed ascribed to king Haraldr and might have been intended to authenticate the corresponding episode of his saga. Of course, we will never know for certain but the very plot of the *þáttr* suggests that it could fulfil the proposed function. Whereas the story of Haraldr’s fight with the serpent was not regarded sufficiently trustworthy and required an ‘external’ corroboration, the no less fantastic report of Þorsteinn’s adventure contained its own ‘internal’ authentication. In fact, nothing could serve as a better proof of an extraordinary event than the possibility of its exact replication. Having, step by step, accomplished everything that Haraldr had done to get the marvellous golden knife handles, the hero of the *þáttr* not only successfully fulfilled a difficult task and regained the king’s friendship. He also succeeded in turning a folktale into a ‘truthful’ story and verified for the reader the reality of wonderful objects and of the famous deeds of his predecessor, the king himself.

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Þorsteins þáttur forvitna er einn þeirra þátta þar sem hetjan brýtur gegn banni konungs og er dæmd til að takast á við erfitt verkefni með hjálp frá helgum aðstoðarmanni. Sagan líkist að mörgu leyti ævintýri, almennt frásagnarmynstur er hið sama og þar eru einnig nokkur atriði sem yfirleitt koma ekki fyrir í Íslendinga þáttum. Það þarfnast því skýringar að slík frásögn skuli vera tengd við nafn Haralds Sigurðarsonar og sé að finna meðal frásagna í sögu hans í Flateyjarbók. Í ljós kemur að sagan gæti vísað til annars atburðar í sagnahefðinni sem tengist Haraldi, þ.e. sagnar sem lýsir bardaga Haralds við dreka. Í norrænni frásagnarhefð má finna sannanir bæði fyrir því að þessi sögn naut vinsælda og að menn efuðust um sannleiksgildi hennar. Margt bendir til þess að Þorsteins þáttur forvitna í Flateyjarbók gegni því hlutverki að staðfesta þátttöku Haralds í þessum yfirnáttúrulega atburði.

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