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THE PAST AS GUEST

*Mortal men, kings's men, and four gestir in Flateyjarbók*¹

1. INTRODUCTION

FOUR narratives in *Flateyjarbók* depict the past as a guest of the Norwegian king. The four share a few basic plot elements. A mysterious and aged stranger comes to the court of the Norwegian king. The stranger tells stories about the great pagan heroes and sovereigns. The king is always an Óláfr, either Óláfr Tryggvason or Óláfr helgi, and he always listens with great interest. The stranger is always a *gestr* in at least the two senses of being both a stranger and a guest, and in three of the four he is even named *Gestr*. In some cases the stranger is benign, but in others he turns out to be something quite malevolent. In all cases, he is a representative of the *fornöld* and an irruption of the heathen past into the Christian present. His presence creates a condition of temporal disorder in which past and present exist simultaneously, heaped up on top of each other in one time and place. My larger project is the examination of this group of narratives as attempts to grapple with the conceptual problem presented by the presence of the past. The use of the word/name *gestr* in these episodes is striking. The dominant metaphor in all of them is *the past as guest*. Interpreting this material and how it takes on the inherently disordered situation of the presence of the past will depend on a solid understanding of the semantic and conceptual range of this lexical item. This essay attempts to throw a bit of legal light on the semantic range of *gestr* by investigating the part of that range that extends into law texts: *gestir* as participants in the system of inheritance and *gestir* as members of the royal *hirð*.

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2. THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST

The narratives described are *Nornagests þáttur*, *Tóka þáttur Tókasonar*, and two episodes without formal titles: Óðinn's visit to Óláfr Tryggvason at Ögvaldsnes and a similar episode in *Óláfs saga helga*. The table below sets out the major essential affinities and points of difference among the narratives most pertinent to this study.

I am essentially in agreement with Joseph C. Harris and Thomas Hill, who see *Nornagests þáttur* and these allied texts as a means of mediating the contradictions involved in thinking about the pre-Christian past and especially in reusing that past (Harris and Hill 1989:121). There must have been, as Harris and Hill note, a dimension of real spiritual danger at play in the vexed desire

Flateyjarbók	fols	<i>the guest</i>	<i>tells tales of</i>	<i>turns out to be</i>	<i>conclusion</i>
<i>Nornagests þáttur</i> (ÓlTr)	45v — 47r	Norna- Gestr an old man, a stranger, very wise	Sigurður Fáfnisbani, Starkaðr inn gamli, Ragnars- synir Loð- brókar	300-yr old man, primesigned but unbaptized	He takes Christianity is baptized, and dies.
Óðinn at Ögvaldsnes (ÓlTr)	49v — 50r	Gestr/gestr , an old man with one eye	King Ögvaldr and his cow	Óðinn, i.e., the Devil or his messenger	He vanishes during the night.
Óðinn kom til Óláfs ² (ÓlH)	95r — 96r	Gestr , a stranger with a low hat	heathen kings, Óðinn among them	Óðinn, i.e., an unclean spirit in the shape of Óðinn	He vanishes when Óláfr moves to strike them.
<i>Tóka þáttur</i> <i>Tókasonar</i> (ÓlH)	96r	Tóki, an old man, a stranger	King Hálf. Hrólfkraki, and their champions	An old man destined to live two lifetimes, primesigned but unbaptized	He takes Christianity, is baptized, and dies.

² This name (or more properly 'Odin kom til Olaf',) was first assigned to the narrative by Sigurður Nordal in his doctoral dissertation (Sigurður Nordal 1914:92). It is derived from the chapter rubric in *Flateyjarbók* itself (II k. 106): *Óðinn kom til Óláfs konungs með dul ok prettum*. Another version of Sigurður Nordal's title is used by Jón Helgason and Oscar Albert Johnson ('Odin kommer til Olav') in their edition of *Óláfs saga helga* (Jón Helgason and Johnson 1941:771), but subsequently it seems to vanish from scholarly tradition.

to preserve intellectual goods closely associated with the prior age — for example, narratives about heroes of the *fornöld* — in the later age. That danger can only have added to the anxiety associated with disorder in general, what Mary Douglas called matter out of place (Douglas 1966), or in this case, out of time. Matter that was understood as not belonging to the time in which it is was, in fact, apprehended, must have seemed disordered in exactly the Douglassian sense and accordingly, anxiety-provoking.

Gestir play a role in the system of inheritance as recorded in texts like *Gulapingslög* and *Grágás*. *Gestir* are also a specific rank in the King's *hirð*, one whose duties are outlined in *Hirðskrá* and *Konungs skuggsjá*. Drawing evidence from legal texts, in some cases Norwegian ones rather than Icelandic, is of course somewhat dangerous praxis for generic as well as geographical reasons. Gulapíng in Norway is far from Þingeyrar in Iceland, and an even greater gap, one might argue, lies between the genres of legal text like *Gulapingslög* and narrative that engages so intimately with the matter of *fornaldarsaga* as *Nornagests þáttr* and its kindred texts do (though they are not *fornaldarsögur* themselves). Law would seem to be at one end of the scale of historical reliability (or at least a kind of realism) and these eerie tales of mysterious visitors to the King at the other. But my intent here is not to argue for either the historicity of any of these episodes in *Flateyjarbók* or for the legal validity of *Gulapingslög* within the narrative world depicted within them. Regardless of how fantastical we regard *Nornagests þáttr* and its allied tales or believe their the consumers of *Flateyjarbók* to have regarded them, they reside in the same discursive realm as *Gulapingslög* and *Hirðskrá* in that they are part of Old Norse letters. For this reason, I feel justified in turning to the legal texts as to any other texts in the Old Norse world that might throw light on the semantics of a specific word. The word *gestr* is played upon so centrally in this constellation of narratives that it seems wise to seek broadly for the possible associations of the word in any attempt at interpretation.

3. GESTIR: SOCIAL AND MYTHOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 *Gestir and hospitality*

Before getting to the legal sources, some social background should be sketched in. There is a great deal to the word *gestr* and its associations on the level of custom that would serve to create and maintain order and distinction in a

situation that is inherently disordered. The word means guest as well as stranger. This makes good sense exactly because guests are a kind of alien matter maintained in a socially sanctioned frame. A guest is a stranger who is inside. Hospitality is a social charter that allows for a stranger to be brought into the house in a non-disruptive manner, just as a narrative frame may allow foreign material to be embedded in the story with a minimum of conflict — and such narrative frames are a dominant device in all these tales. Maintenance of the frame in both the narratological and the social case preserves the strangeness of the embedded material. The guest is still a stranger. Hospitality does not permanently incorporate the guest into the household in the way that marriage incorporates a stranger into the family. In fact *Háv.* 35 makes a point of the temporariness of the guest-host relationship, though from the point of view of the guest, who does not feel himself quite at home *annars fletiom á* (Neckel and Kuhn 1983:22). Later in the poem, Loddfáfnir is exhorted to refrain from mocking or driving off *gestr* and *gangandi* (*Háv.* 132 and 135, Neckel and Kuhn 1983:38, 39). Though 135 at least may concern beggars more than other sorts of guests, and though both stanzas imply that good hospitality did not come naturally to all hosts, *Háv.* 132 and 135 reflect a societal norm that demanded that visiting strangers be afforded at least minimal respect. As a result, the past as guest would have been a good metaphor for the idea of tolerating the presence of the past without losing the ability to distinguish oneself from it.

The place of the guest within the social frame of hospitality is significant for another reason. It is part of what permits the existence of narratological frames, not just in these stories but in the Old Norse cultural context in general. That is, part of the custom of offering hospitality to strangers is asking them for news. Their narration provides entertainment for the members of the household and repays them for food, drink, and shelter. According to st. 4 of *Hávamál*, a traveller needs not only water and other basic necessities but, if possible, an attentive audience for his speech:

Vatz er þörf, þeim er til verðar kómr,
 þerro oc þjóðlaðar,
 góðs um æðis, ef sér geta mætti,
 orð oc endrþögu (Neckel and Kuhn 1983:17).

Water is needful for one who comes to a meal,
 a towel and a proper invitation in,
 a good reception, if he can get it,
 opportunity to speak and a hearing in return.

Háv. 2 indicates that the guest is expected to prove himself through performance:

Gefendr heilir! gestr er inn kominn,
 hvar scal sitia síá?
 miȝc er bráðr, sá er á brȝndum scal
 síns um freista frama (Neckel and Kuhn 1983:17).

Hail to the givers! A stranger has come in,
 where shall he sit?
 He is very eager, this one who will try his luck
 from the floor.³

As Adele Cipolla notes, the visiting guest as a bearer of information is a recurring motif elsewhere in the literature and particularly in the stereotyped plot of the episodes Joseph Harris has termed *Íslendingaþættir* (Harris 1972), in which the Iclander who visits the King is portrayed as particularly clever, often a poet and a transmitter of valuable intellectual goods (Cipolla 1996:52–3). The social implications are just as significant as the literary ones: narration involves the guest in a reciprocal social relationship, and the creation and maintenance of such reciprocal relationships is a large part of what a functioning and well-ordered society is.

The implications of hospitality and the status of the guest thus work to create and fortify the distinction between the stuff of the past and the realm of the present. The guest exists in a social frame that keeps him separate from the household in which he is temporarily welcome. The speech of the guest,

³ Here I take *brandr* as meaning a length of wood and *á brȝndum* as ‘on the floor(boards)’, that is, still standing waiting to be offered a seat, like Óðinn (Gagnráðr) speaking *á gólfi* in *Vafþrúðnismál* 9–17. Alternately one might follow Finnur Jónsson’s interpretation of *á brȝndum* as an expression borrowed from the language of maritime warfare, in which the most daring men fought in the bow of the ship (*Lex. Poet.*:60). Indeed, Finnur Jónsson’s reading accounts better for the sense of eagerness in the word *bráðr*.

especially when presented as a performance, also rests in a frame that adds to its appropriateness in that place and time, while at the same time, the shift in narrative level marks this discourse off as distinct from the surrounding text. Separation is achieved at the same time that the intellectual goods of the past are made available in the present, shielded, as it were, by layers of custom and practice. The temporal disorder inherent in the presence of the past does not disappear, but the metaphor of the guest permits all these narrative and social ordering devices.

3.2 *Gestr and Óðinn*

But the ramifications of the metaphor of the guest do not end there. A *gestr* is not always simply a guest, and some of the other associations of the word threaten or toy with all the boundaries and distinctions discussed above. *Gestr* is a stranger, is a near-Óðinsheiti, a more general *dulnefni* (used by Grettir (Hume 1974:479) and others (Lind 1905–1915:330–331)), and a legitimate personal name. It is not my aim to explore all of these fully here, but a few words must be said about Óðinn.

Óðin's strongest connection to the word *gestr* is through his role as a wanderer and what von See calls 'die Gast-Situationen Odins' (von See 1981), seen for example in both *Heiðreks saga* and *Grímnismál*. The opening stanzas of *Hávamál*, the so-called *Gestaþáttur*, also demonstrate special Odinic concern with hospitality and the role of the *gestr*, as seen already above. If we take the implied speaker of those lines to be Óðinn himself, as the title of the poem suggests, then the association is that much more robust. Óðinn does appear under the *dulnefni* Gestumblindi in *Heiðreks saga* 9, and that name is also listed among his *heiti* in the *Pulur* (*Skj.* B I:673; A I:682 *gæstvmblindi*). Christopher Tolkien is doubtless right that *Gestumblindi* derives from a compression of *Gestr inn blindi*, as the name is in fact written in the U-version of the text (Tolkien 1960:32 n.1).⁴ Strictly speaking, *Gestr* by itself (that, is, unqualified by a modifier like *inn blindi*) does not turn up as an Óðinsheiti in surviving texts outside of the corpus of episodes in *Flateyjarbók* under discussion here. However, the common noun would seem to provide the associative link between the name and Óðinn. It also resonates conceptually with better-attested Óðinsheiti such as *Gagnráðr* (*Vm.*), *Gangráðr* (cf. Konráð

⁴ Axel Kock preferred to reconstruct *Gestr unblindi* (Kock 1891:180), which I find unconvincing, but the distinction is not important for the present argument.

Gíslason 1870:135–137), *Gangleri* (Pulur, *Grm.* 46), and *Vegtamr* (*Bdr.*), such that we may conclude that the appearance in narrative of a stranger using the name *Gestr* would have struck the medieval audience in much the same way. This is hardly likely to have been an anxiety-limiting association.⁵

Still, as much as the name *Gestr* would have brought Óðinn to mind, it is worth noting that the frame of hospitality might even mitigate some of the danger posed by this treacherous figure. Óðinn after all shows special interest in hospitality, perhaps even especially royal hospitality. He habitually appears in the role of the guest himself. And if we may judge by *Grímnismál* and its surrounding prose in *Konungsbók Eddukvæða*, should one be so unfortunate as to have Óðinn as one's guest, the best shot at surviving the experience would seem to lie in showing him good hospitality. The social frame of hospitality may allow one to be on the good side of a distressing figure who does not otherwise seem to have a good side.

4. LEGAL SOURCES ON *GESTIR*

4.1 *Inheritance: gesterfð*

With the social and mythological background of the hospitality contract thus in mind, we may now turn to the legal sources that are the true focus of this essay. Hospitality has legal ramifications. Inheritance law as recorded in *Gulapingslög* shows that *gestir*, that is, people on a visit, should their mortality come into play, also have a role in the system of inheritance. The curious word *gesterfð* appears in *Gulapingslög* 113:

Ef maðr gistir mann ok verðr þar dauðr, þá skal hann halda fé hans vetr .iij. ef eigi kemr erfingi til, þá hafi ef eigi er meira en .iii. merkr. En ef meira er, þá a hann hálft en konungr hálft (*NgL* I:51).

⁵ The etymologically inclined will wonder if the related Latin *hostis*, 'stranger, enemy,' exerted influence on the semantics of *gestr* through the medium of translation of Latin texts, but I find no evidence in the 58 citation slips for *gestr* kindly provided to me by the Dictionary of Old Norse Prose in Copenhagen (AMKO) for this having been the case. Neither does *gestr* seem to have absorbed the rather different ambiguity of Latin *hospes*, 'guest, host,' though it at least occasionally was used to gloss that word. For example, Jesus's 'Hospes fui, et suscepistis me' (Mt. 25.35) in the *Vitæ Patrum* is rendered as 'Gestr var ek, ok tóku þér við mér' (*Heilagra manna sögur* II 1877:403): 'I was a stranger, and you took me in.' For a short overview of the historical relations among *gestr-hospes-hostis* see (Beck 1997:462–3).

If a man stays with another man and dies there, then he (the householder) shall keep his property for three winters. If no heir appears, he is to have it if it is not more than three marks. But if it is more, then he owns half and the king half.

This is an interesting piece of law viewed against *Nornagests þátttr*, in which of course Nornagestr stays with the King and dies while enjoying royal hospitality. He does not seem to have any heir. The only kin of his mentioned in the *þátttr* is his father, who has predeceased him. As for property, we know that he carries with him a fragment of what had been the gold saddle ring of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, a lock of hair from Grani's tail, and one of the two molars struck from Starkað's jaw by Sigurðr when they met on the battlefield. The King and the hosting householder are in this case the same person. The word *gesterfð* does not appear in the *þátttr*, and inheritance and the disposition of Nornagest's worldly goods are never mentioned. But if we take *Gulapingslög* 113 as representative of how the audience of *Nornagests þátttr* might have understood, in most general terms, the inheritance relationship between guest and host, then they would have drawn the conclusion that these material fragments of the heathen past, Sigurð's saddle ring included, would have passed to King Óláfr Tryggvason by common custom. The notion of this particular king coming into possession of such artifacts crystallizes the idea of access to the heroic past in a concise image, an especially satisfying one if the means of acquisition were thus sanctioned by law or custom.

Óláfr's potential inheritance deserves a closer look. The piece of gold Nornagestr carries is finer than Hnituðr, the ring Úlfr inn rauði brings back from his travels, as the bet at the beginning of *Nornagests þátttr* establishes. Hnituðr has a not unworthy provenance, either.

Pann hring hafði gefit Úlfi einn bóndi er Loðmundr hét. En þenna hring hafði átt Hálftr konungr er Hálfssrekkar eru frá komnir ok viðkenndir er þeir höfðu kúgat fé af Hálfðani konungi í Ylfing (*Flb.* I: 347).

That ring had been given to Úlfr by a certain farmer who was named Loðmundr, and King Hálftr, whom the Hálfssrekkar are descended from and named after, had owned this ring when they extorted money from King Hálfðan at Ylfingr.

King Hálfir used to own this ring, and the Hálfisrekkr had it in their possession at the time that they did something heroic, though to whom, exactly, is unclear.⁶ The freeholder Loðmundr, who gave Hnituðr to Úlfr, seems to be no one special however, and we know nothing of how Hnituðr passed from King Hálfir to this *bóndi*. That, at least, we can say of the genealogies of the two treasures: that of Nornagestr's *gull* is clearer, with fewer steps. Sigurðr himself has given it to Nornagestr. The saddle ring fragment is also purer gold, as the King himself declares. More reliable claims attach to the fragment, claims about purity of content and directness of historical trajectory. If we interpret it as a fragment of the past, then it seems fair to see it as symbolic of pure, direct, reliable access to or contact with that past, more specifically with Sigurðr Fáfnisbani.

Sigurðr's associations are at least a partially known quantity. Sigurðr appears to be emblematic of the best of the heroic heathen past, the part that is still worth making a claim on in the Christian era. His not infrequent appearance in the ornament of stave churches may have to do with Norwegian royal claims to Völsung lineage (Byock 1990). Sigurðr is portrayed as admirable, if damned, and he contrasts with the cowardly regicide Starkaðr in *Porsteins þáttur skelks*. In *Nornagests þáttur* itself, in Nornagestr's account, Sigurðr was the foremost of his brothers, even greater than Sinfjötli and Helgi Hundingsbani, and *voru þeir umfram alla menn um afl ok vöxt*. Furthermore, *er mönnum þat*

⁶ Probably Cipolla is right that *j Ylfing* is an error for simply *Ylfing*, as the word appears in AM 62 fol. That would make this not Hálfðan at Ylfing but rather Hálfðan the Ylfingr (of the Ylfingar, corresponding to OE Wulfingas) perhaps even the Hálfðan Ylfingr mentioned in *Sögubrot* as the slayer of Ella (Cipolla 1996:176 n. 54). If we are meant to understand Hálfðan as Danish, then Hnituðr might be a token of Norwegian superiority over the Danes by virtue of its connection with Hálfir at the moment when he triumphed over Hálfðan. Hálfir certainly embodies Norwegian superiority over the Danes in the *fornöld* in *Tóka þáttur*, as Harris and Hill and later Cipolla have noted (Harris and Hill 1989); (Cipolla 1996:176 n. 53). Then again, the Ylfingar are at least sometimes synonymous with the Völsungar, as in the prose introduction of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, where we learn that 'Sigmundur konungr ok hans ættmenn hétu Völsungar ok Ylfingar' (Neckel and Kuhn 1983: 146). Perhaps the superiority of Sigurðr's saddle ring to Hálfir's arm ring is part of a re-ordering of Norway's heros. If Hnituðr is connected to Hálfir having been superior enough to a Völsungr to extort payment from him, then the superiority of Sigurðr's ring to Hálfir's puts a Völsungr back on the top, comparatively speaking. When the King asks Nornagestr where he found it best to stay, Sigurðr and the Gjúkungar make the list (*mest gleði þótti mér með Sigurði ok Gjúkungum*), whereas Hálfir and the Hálfisrekkr do not. It is difficult to know just what to read into the role of Sigurðr, Hálfir, and the more mysterious Hálfðan in the stories attached to the two gold items without forcing the *Flateyjarbók* text beyond the limits of compelling interpretation.

ok kunnigt at Sigurðr hefir verit göfgastr allra herkonunga ok bezt at sér í fornum sið. On a more personal note, Nornagestr says that Sigurðr was greatly loved by all because he was *bæði blíðr ok lítillátr ok mildr af fé* (Flb. I:349). He seems in all ways exemplary but for the matter of being a man of the heathen age. Sigurðr's milder virtues get more attention in *Nornagests þáttur* than in *Völsunga saga* or *Konungsbók Eddukvæða*. Bergur Þorgeirsson has shown that the treatment of *Reginismál* and surrounding prose in *Nornagests þáttur*, contrasted with that in *Konungsbók*, shifts responsibility for some of the more excessive parts of the heroic idiom (the cutting of the 'blood eagle,' greed for gold) from Sigurðr to Reginn, leaving Sigurðr an even more exemplary hero from the standpoint of the pious reader, even a temperate one in the sense of *temperantia* (Bergur Þorgeirsson 2000:80, 82–3). He even detects a resemblance between the lord-retainer relationship between Sigurðr and Nornagestr and the relationship between Christ and his apostles (Bergur Þorgeirsson 1997:77). But even barring the last, in Sigurðr we find a superlative hero, one rendered even more admirable in this specific context.

The other items also provide connections to Sigurðr. The lock of hair from Grani's tail is a *pars pro toto* representation of Grani, gift of Óðinn to the youthful hero. Grani is an impressive enough part of the heroic past on his own to be worth establishing a connection with. Grani's sire was Sleipnir himself, and Grani was a noble-hearted beast to judge by his having braved Brynhild's wall of flame, but these details are all still part of his role in Sigurðr's life. The tooth, even, though it is a part of Starkaðr's body, is emblematic of Sigurðr's strength and heroism, especially as compared to Starkaðr. Since it was Sigurðr who struck it from the other's jaw, a blow that caused Starkaðr to flee the field in a cowardly manner, the tooth itself is like an embodied *mann-jafnaðr* in which Sigurðr is the clear superior. In other words, the physical goods Nornagestr carries with him provide a symbolic link to Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, and Sigurðr seems to stand for the best and most admirable of the *fornöld*.

Gesterfð or a law or custom like it could provide the social frame for the transfer of these goods. Just as hospitality permits the guest a temporary place in the home of the host but does not integrate him into the family structure as an inlaw, *gesterfð* suggests that the inheritance relationship between guest and host is similarly asymmetrical. The host may inherit from his guest, but the reverse does not seem to be reflected in the laws. The guest, along with being a bearer of news and provider of entertainment, is potentially a channel

through which heritable goods might flow, but only in one direction. In *Nornagests þáttur*, those heritable goods are transparently symbolic of the same heroic past as is contained in his narratives, where their passage from guest to host is smoothed by the social framing devices discussed earlier. *Gesterfð* rhymes well with these other strategies for thinking about the past in the present.

Gesterfð would apply obviously only to mortal guests and, as argued thus far, to tangible goods. Tóki, like Nornagestr, is mortal, but he carries no comparable material treasures. He does carry intangibles like those Nornagestr bears, that is, narrative and *fræði*. I would suggest here that the notion of *gest-erfð* might have applied to the narrative situation in which Tóki finds himself, not at all as a law, but in a broader conceptual way influencing how the audience of *Tóka þáttur* understood the text. That is, familiarity with a law or custom like *gesterfð* may have predisposed this audience to expect that should a guest die, the goods he carried with him would pass to his host—including intangible goods. Several things point to inheritance having been a natural way for medieval Icelanders to conceive of the continuity and passage of such intangibles as knowledge and narratives. We need not even reach for anachronistic ideas of ‘cultural heritage.’ Plenty of intangibles are heritable in saga, among them *hamingja* and *gæfa* as well as skill at poetry or at matters spiritual (Clunies Ross 1998:93–6). Even God’s mercy is referred to as *eilíf erfð* (eternal inheritance) elsewhere in *Flateyjarbók*, in *Þáttur Þiðrandar ok Þórhalls*, (*Flb.* I:421; *ÍF* XV:cxc). In a society so concerned with genealogy and its expression in literature (Clunies Ross 1998:95), it makes sense that inheritance would be a useful way of thinking about the persistence of narrative goods and *fræði* through time.

If we are willing to permit the extension of metaphorical *gesterfð* to the intangibles of *fræði*, then both Nornagestr and Tóki as mortal guests become one-way channels for the movement of narrative goods not just as performers but as participants in the system of inheritance. Along with the social embedding discussed above, these implications of and associations with the term *gestr* make for excellent tools for thinking about the past in the present, once the past has been conceived of as a *gestr*.

4.2 King's men: *konungs gestir*

But there are still more sides to the concept of the *gestr*, and some of them call into question just the things that had made hospitality and its consequences so practical as frames for the dangerous stuff of the past or charters for its preservation in the present. *Gestir* are mentioned in the þulur among the *mannahiiti*, grouped specifically with king's men:

EN eru eptir
aldar heiti
hirð ok gestir
ok hvrskarlar (*Skj. A I: 661*).⁷

Gestir were members of a specific rank in the king's *hirð*. The duties of the *konungs gestir* are described both in *Hirðskrá* and in *Konungs skuggsjá*; they play the role of the secret police or domestic security force. Cipolla characterizes the *gestir* as a sort of 'untouchable' class of *hirðmenn*, whose 'dishonorable duties' account for their relegation to the outer benches in hall (Cipolla 1996:15–16). Untouchable is perhaps a little strong for these men, but they do have a curious status, *handgengnir* but not *borðfastir*, and as will be shown, they have a complicated relationship with hospitality both at court and in private homes. As for their physical place at court, their seating is not mentioned in the laws as far as I can tell. It seems to have been read out from *Nornagests þátr*, in which the protagonist is *skipat útar frá gestum* on the *gestabekkr*. It may well be correct, given that they receive less pay, half that of *hirðmenn*: 'þessir menn ... taka hálfan hirðmanna mála' (*KS: 41*). Still, a little caution on this point seems prudent, given that the word *gestabekkr* appears, according to Fritzner and the AMKO, only in *Nornagests þátr*.

Cipolla places the *konungs gestir* and, by association, *Nornagestr* in the context of what we might presume to have been the prehistory of the rank. Cipolla wishes to see in *Nornagests þátr* an echo of prehistoric Germanic society, in which travellers possessed of great traditional knowledge wandered the European continent from chief to chief, orally transmitting the great poetic patrimony of the Germanic peoples (Cipolla 1996:54–55). That background, resting as much behind sense of *gestr* as 'stranger' as behind *gestr* as *húskarl*,

⁷ Finnur Jónsson normalized this as follows: Enn eru eptir / aldar heiti. / Hirð ok gestir / ok húskarlar (*Skj. B I:662*).

probably does lie behind *Nornagests þáttr* at whatever distance, but that very long historical view is unlikely to have been shared by the medieval consumers of this text and its analogues.⁸

In order to get a better idea of what those consumers might have connected with these *gestir*, a closer look at the laws is in order, particularly at what is said about their being called *gestir*:

Hirðskrá 38 (43)

Flestum mönnum er þat kunnigt í konungs hirð at gestir eru næstir hirðmönnum at sæmdum ok at nafnbótum ok öllu réttar fari. ... Því heita [þeir] gestir at þeir hafa þar mörgum stöðum gisting sem þeim verðr engi þökk fyrir kunnat (Imsen 2000:154, 156).

It is known to most people that in the king's *hirð* the *gestir* are next to the *hirðmenn* in honor and title and in all rights. ... They are named *gestir* because they take hospitality many places where they are shown no gratitude.

A comparable sentiment is to be found in *Konungs skuggsjá*:

... ok heita þeir gestir ok fá þeir þat nafn af fjölskyldri sýslu, því at þeir gista margra manna *híbýli [*ms. hilyli*] ok þó eigi allra með vináttu (*KS*:41).

and they are called *gestir* and they get that name from their varied duties, for they stay at many men's homes, and yet not with the friendship of all.

Most remarkable about these passages is the seeming irony implicit in the very name of these *húskarlar*. They are called guests, but apparently they are so called for being less than exemplary in that role, or at least for the breakdown of that role around them. *Hirðskrá* goes on to give some hint of what in the duties of the *konungs gestir* results in their peculiar reception:

⁸ Compare Beck's suggestion that the *gestr* complex in these tales, *Hervarar saga*, and *Vafþrúðnismál* reflects the social reality of the professional warrior as wanderer. Like Cipolla, he seems also to be thinking about a very ancient background, citing *hlewagastiR* from the Gallehus horn inscription for evidence on the connection between warmaking and *gestir* (Beck 1997:466).

Hirðskrá 39 (44): Hver skylda ok gaumgæfi hæfir gestum.

... þeir eru skyldir sem allir handgengnir menn konungs at fara allar þær ferðir sem konungr býðr þeim eftir því sem framast megu þeir, hvárt sem hann vísar þeim til kunnra manna eða ókunnra. En þó berr konungi vel fyrir at sjá at eigi vísi hann þeim til ókæmiligra <h>luta ok eigi til þess sem guði sé óþekkt í, eigi ok til þess sem ofmikit ofrefli er í. Þeir eigu ok sjálfir vandliga at at hyggja til hverja <h>luta þeir eru sendir. Þeir eigu ok iðuliga at minnaz á eið sinn ok trú ok minna á aðra þá sem þeir sjá at misgera; varaz við rán ok stuld ok allra helzt um kvenna frið ok þeira fé; <h>laupa eigi bráðlega til manndrápa hvervetna þar sem þeir vitu eigi görla hvat þeir gera eða hverjum þeir gera (Imsen 2000:156).

40 (44) En þar sem gestir verða görvir til at taka menn af, þá sé fyrir vandlega at [ei] verði saklausir menn fyrir vápnum. Ok þar sem þeir eigu þess kost þá skulu þeir handtaka menn ok bera eigi þegar vápn á þá, heldr nái þeir fyrr einum presti ... En ef þeir gera öðruvís þá svari þeir fyrir guði, ok eigi berr höfðingja at láta þat vera *hirtingalaust [ms. hirtingialaust] ef svá prófaz ... (Imsen 2000:158).

What duties and concerns befit *gestir*.

... they are bound, like all the sworn men of the King, to go on all the journeys the King bids them to, in keeping with their abilities, whether he directs them to known persons or unknown ones. However, it be- seems the King to ensure that he does not direct them to inappropriate tasks, nor such that it would displease God, nor such that he were abusing his power. They themselves should also carefully consider each task in which they are sent. They should also remember their oath and faith with care, and admonish others who they see are doing wrong; [they should] guard themselves from raiding and theft and above all from troubling the peace of women; not rush to slaying where they do not have proper understanding of what they are doing or to whom.

... And where *gestir* are set to do away with people, care must be taken to ensure that innocents do not have weapons brought against them. Andwhere they have it in their power to choose, they should arrest

people and not bring weapons against them, rather let them get first to a priest ... But if they do otherwise, let them answer for it before God, and it does not become a lord to let it go without punishment if that turns out to be the case.

One gets the impression, particularly from the latter half of the description, that these *gestir* were dangerous men, not the sort whose sudden appearance on the threshold of the family home would be apt to inspire celebration. Their role was to 'cleanse the realm,' as it is put in *Konungs skuggsjá* (ch. 27):

... þeir eru skyldir at halda njósnir um allt ríki konungs ok verða varir ef hann á nökkura óvini í ríki sínu. En ef óvinir verða fundnir þá skulu gestir fyrir koma þeim ef þeir megu því á leið koma. ... ok hvar sem konungr verður varr við óvini sína þá er þat skyldarsýsla gesta at liggja á óvinum konungs ok hreinsa svá ríki hans (*KS:41*).

... they are bound to carry out investigations/spying throughout the king's realm and to be aware if he has any enemies in his kingdom. And if enemies should be found, the *gestir* are to bring about their deaths if they are able. ... and wherever the King becomes aware of his enemies, it is the bound duty of the *gestir* to do away with the King's enemies and thus to cleanse his realm.

Their work lies in distinguishing the enemies of the King from his friends, and then doing away with the enemies. It is an admirably structuralist sort of job. But the unavoidable impression given by *Hirðskrá* 44 is that the *gestir* were or were perceived to be both dangerous of themselves and apt to carry out their duties with varying degrees of precision. This would be a distressing tendency in any police force.

That these sworn men of the King are called guests is ironic, and the irony resides in that the social frame of hospitality breaks down around them. They may, with the King's blessing, kill those to whom they pay a visit, as great a breach of the role of the guest as might be imagined. Their prospective hosts, furthermore, might not be in a welcoming way. In fact, it is exactly their duties as *konungs gestir* that make them troublesome as *gestir* in the more usual sense.

The dubiousness of the *konungs gestir* as guests, as participants in the contract of hospitality, is not limited to their activities on duty and away from

court. *Konungs skuggsjá* 27 explains that they are *handgengnir menn* but not *borðfastir*. This has implications for the operation of hospitality:

... ok eigi skulu þeir í því húsi yfir borð stíga⁹ til matar eða drykkjar er konungr sitr eða hirð nema um jól ok páskir, þá skulu þeir eta ok drekka í konungs höll með hirð hans en eigi þess á millum (*KS*:41).

... and they shall not partake of food or drink at table in the same building where the King sits or his *hirð* but for during Christmas and Easter, then they shall eat and drink in the King's hall with his *hirð*, but not between.

These guests of the King are only welcome as guests, as visitors partaking of food and hospitality, twice a year. Royal lack of confidence in these men as participants in the contract of hospitality is institutionalized as part of their official job description as set out in *Konungs skuggsjá*. If the *konungs gestir* and their role are part of the broader field of associations consumers of *Flat-eyjarbók* had with the word *gestr*, then imagining the past as a *gestr* in the present is much more problematic than it has seemed thus far.

The trouble with the past in the present, as mentioned at the very beginning of this essay, is temporal disorder, the conceptual threat of matter out of place. Many of the implications of the term *gestr* work to domesticate the matter of the past portrayed as guest by making it part of systems of social and narrative order. The trouble presented by the *konungs gestir* in this context is twofold. First, they are meant to distinguish between friends and enemies within the kingdom, between people in the right place and those in the wrong place, and then, in strikingly Douglassian terms, to cleanse the realm by doing away with the matter out of place. Yet, *Hirðskrá* 44 suggests that they were not exemplary in the first part of this work of imposing order. Second, they seem often to be out of place themselves, welcome neither by the King nor abroad in the land, and marginal among the *húskarlar* under the best of circumstances. Under less exemplary conditions, for instance, if they failed to

⁹ I take *stíga yfir borð* to mean much the same thing as *setjast yfir borð*, which Fritzner glosses as to set oneself at table, much as *sitja yfir borð* is to sit at table. Fritzner himself lists *stíga yfir borð* in this context with several other phrases (*stíga fram yfir borðið*, *hlaupa yfir borðið*) drawn from contexts in which the actor is more clearly vaulting the table or crossing before the high table to address the King (Fritzner III 1896:169–70). I see no easy way of reading this phrase that way, however.

resist the temptations of raiding, thieving, and bothering women, they may have begun to resemble the very *óvinir* whom they were meant to find and root out. The past in the present imagined as this manner of *gestir* is likely to seem all the more like a dangerous item out of place.

It is worth having a look at the wider literature to see if the image of the *konungs gestir* we are met with in *Konungs skuggsjá* and *Hirðskrá* exists elsewhere. A more in-depth study of the topic could certainly be made, but a quick survey reveals a literary image of the *gestir* that does not seem to make up much for their negative portrayal in the laws. Some of the mentions of the *gestir* are neutral, included merely to increase the prestige of the king under whom they serve. Such is the case in *Saga Óláfs kyrra*, in which we are told that King Óláfr had sixty *gestir* in his retinue, whereas earlier kings had had only thirty.¹⁰ In *Sturlunga saga*, Ásbjörn Guðmundsson receives nine men from Þórðr Sighvatsson to serve him as *gestir*, which is likely the same sort of detail to do with a chieftain's status (*Sturl.* II:15). But among fairly neutral references to the *gestir*, *gestamerki*, *gestalúðr*, *gestaskip* in a number of *konungasögur* (for references see (Fritzner 1886 I:589)) there are a few episodes that present an image of the *gestir* not so dissimilar from that in the laws. In *Magnúss saga berfætts* 18, Icelanders tangle with a *gestahöfðingi* named Sóni. In *Haralds saga gilla* 7, King Magnús receives advice he does not like and that the advisor himself concedes is 'illt ráð,' namely to send *gestir* on a mission of assassination. In *Njála* 4, none other than Gunnhildr konungsmóðir sends two ships with her then-favorite Hrótr. With them she sends 'inn hraustasta mann,' the *gestahöfðingi*, a man with the less than confidence-inspiring name of Úlfr óþvegin. These examples on their own do not add up to much, but in *Sverris saga* 103 we see the *konungs gestir* behaving badly in Bergen. The heading in one manuscript is *Frá óspektum í Björgvin*, and indeed the *gestir* rumble drunkenly with *húskarlar*, inspiring Sverrir to a speech on the evils of drink in the next chapter. The *gestir* do not loom large in Old Norse literature, but the small figure they cut does not contradict, at least, the dubious character presented in the legal texts.

There is yet another way in the laws suggest that these *gestir* threaten to bring with them disorder, disruption, and boundary violation. Part of *Hirðskrá* 44 already cited above stresses that the King also bears responsibility for the tasks he sends his secret police in:

¹⁰ The detail appears in both *Morkinskinna* (1932:290) and *Heimskringla* I (*ÍF* XXVI: 207)

En þó berr konungi vel fyrir at sjá at eigi vísi hann þeim til ókæmiligra
 <h>luta ok eigi til þess sem guði sé óþekkt í, eigi ok til þess sem ofmikit
 ofrefli er í. Þeir eigu ok sjálfir vandliga at at hyggja til hverja hluta þeir
 eru sendir.

The risk of deploying the *gestir* in inappropriate tasks, of displeasing God, of *ofrefli*, excess — the opposite of the virtue of *hófsemi*, *temperantia* — and the necessity of the *gestir* themselves acting as a check on their own use by the King all give the impression that the *gestir* are a weapon one could easily be tempted to misuse. The danger is temptation of the King over the line between being a good Christian ruler and being an excessive tyrant. As we shall see below, this chimes with some of the dangers implicit in Óðin's visit to Óláfr helgi.

5. GESTR IN THE FOUR TEXTS

What remains is to take up the semantics of *gestr* in the individual texts at hand, where the primary associations vary from one to the next and make sense of the workings of this word in the narrative group as a whole.

5.1 *Nornagests þáttur*

The semantic slipperiness of the word is brought to the reader's attention early in the *þáttur*, as soon as the King engages the stranger in conversation. He says his name is Gestr (*hann sagðiz Gestr heita*), to which the King replies that he will be a guest there, whatever his name might be (*gestr muntu hér vera, hversu sem þú heitir*). The reply extends hospitality while simultaneously nodding to the possibility that a man who calls himself *Gestr* is quite possibly not what he claims to be. The visitor protests that he has given his name truthfully, but accepts the offer of hospitality: *satt segi ek til nafns míns herra, en gjarna vilda ek at yðr gisting þiggja ef kostr væri*. This exchange activates the senses of *gestr* that have to do with hospitality (*gisting*), with *dulnefni* and disguised guests, even though this one maintains that he is not one such, and with the personal name Gestr. The text takes him at his word, for he is referred to throughout as Gestr.¹¹ Mostly the word appears to be a personal name, rather

¹¹ The nickname Nornagestr has been given to him by Sigurðr and his fellows: *Í þessa ferð var með Sigurði Hámundr bróðir hans ok Reginn dvergr. Ek var ok þar og kölluðu þeir mig þá*

than a common noun, that is, without the definite article. Frequently it is even abbreviated to *G*. Abbreviation of common nouns to a single capital letter is quite rare in medieval Icelandic manuscripts, but much more usual for personal names (Stefán Karlsson, personal communication).

The associations of the name Gestr with Óðinn do nothing to soothe the attentive reader. Nornagestr is perhaps mildly Odinic in appearance by being old and strongly built, though we are not told that he is one-eyed or any such thing, but as noted above, his appearance on the royal threshold under the name *Gestr* might have been enough to prompt an association with Odinic appearances such as that in *Hervarar saga*, in which Óðinn takes the name Gestumblindi. Nornagestr's Danish roots might also have linked him to Óðinn.¹² These details of name and origin all come out early in the *þáttir* and serve to heighten narrative tension surrounding the true nature of this mysterious *Gestr/gestr*.

Shortly before the half-way mark, the Óðinn-related tension is stepped up a notch when Hnikarr appears in the embedded narrative, a cloaked figure who addresses Sigurðr. He is revealed after the fact to have been Óðinn: *Ok þá er lýsti um morguninn var Hnikarr horfinn ok sást eigi síðan. Hyggja menn at þat hafi Óðinn verit* (*Flb*. I:352). In the corresponding episode in *Völsunga saga* 17 (Grimstad 2000:135) and *Reginsmál* in *Konungsbók eddukvæða* (Neckel and Kuhn 1983:173–5) it is left to the reader to draw the conclusion that the mysterious, wisdom-spouting figure was in fact Óðinn. In *Nornagests þáttir*, the revelation is explicit, and it reminds the reader once more that Óðinn is apt to appear under *dulnefni*, only to vanish again. Another narrative possibility is activated, that of this Gestr vanishing mysteriously only to turn out to have been Óðinn.

The sense of *gestr* as a rank in the *hirð* also appears early in the *þáttir*, long before Hnikarr appears, when Nornagestr is seated with the *konungs gestir*.

Nornagest (*Flb*. I:350). That name appears otherwise only in the titles, and not in the main text.

¹² Hollander pointed this out in 1916, at which time it was already an old observation. He mentions in passing Icelandic 'folklore and learned cosmogonies [that] maintained that the cult of Odin was introduced from the South and still had its main seat there' (108). Hollander added to the list of Nornagestr's Odinic connections his Danish heritage and his father's name and nickname. His father's nickname *Pingbítur* (assembly-spoiler?) might strengthen the Odinic association further if we are willing to follow Hollander's conjecture that Þórðr is a version of Þrór and then make the leap to Óðinn in *Grímnismál* 49, where he calls himself *Þrór þingum* (Hollander 1916:106–8).

Implicitly, this categorizes him with them, or beyond them (*er honum skipat útar fra gestum*). It is also with these *gestir* that he wagers. Fritzner is unsure that the *gestasveit* is comprised of the *gestir* of the laws, but rather ‘her maaske de fremmede som opholdt sig i Huset’ (Fritzner I 1886:589). To my eye, the *gestasveit* on the *gestabekk* and in their dealing with the King himself look rather more like *hirðmenn* than visitors. The title of the section dealing with wager also names them as such: *Veðjun Gests við hirðmenn*. Play on the common noun continues throughout the piece. Nornagestr is sometimes referred to as *gestr hinn ókunni/nýkomni*, or *þessi hinn komni gestr* in the same sentence with the other *gestir*, inviting comparison with the King’s men.

All this polysemy is activated in the first half of *Nornagests þátr*, but the tale develops in such a way that our concerns about Nornagestr are put to rest. Nornagestr benefits from comparison to the *konungs gestir*. They are roundly scolded by the King for being too quick to wager with an unknown character—we might compare the hotheadedness of the *gestir* as suggested in the laws cited above. Nornagestr’s gold proves to be better than Úlfr’s ring Hnituðr, which redounds to Nornagestr’s honor as a truthful speaker rather than an idle boaster and as the direct conduit to the admirable parts of the heroic past he turns out to be. As for his name, Nornagestr turns out to be just who he says he is. His identity is resolved, and his death makes any concern that he would turn out to be Óðinn moot. Nornagestr dies as a *gestr* in the King’s care, so the King ought to receive the *gesterfð*, both the material tokens and, if we are willing to allow ourselves the metaphor, *forn fræði*. The positive associations of *gestr*, the ones that make the confrontation with the past figured as a *gestr* less fraught are stressed in *Nornagests þátr* inasmuch as the narrative as a unit is concerned. *Gesterfð* smooths some of the conceptual way to accepting the goods Nornagestr brings with him. Nornagestr himself is an admirable *gestr* despite and because of the proximity of the less savory associations of the word. But those same associations, once raised, are then fresh in mind and condition how the other narratives read.

5.2 Ögvaldsnes

At Ögvaldsnes, the visitor’s name is never mentioned explicitly; he is never asked to introduce himself, and he never volunteers the information himself. *Gestr* seems to appear as both name and common noun. That he is a guest provides a frame for his performance. On the other hand, his involvement in

the hospitality contract is problematic, as though he is involved in the exchange of food, it is he, the guest, who provides it to his host, and it is poisoned food at that. Accordingly, the emphasis falls on his defectiveness as a participant in hospitality.

The sense of *gestr* as a stranger is clear when the King asks the cooks if they had seen anyone unfamiliar (*maðr ... sá er þeir bæri eigi kennsl á*), and indeed they had seen an aged fellow whom they had not recognized (*maðr aldraðr sá er vér kenndum eigi*) (*Flb.* I:376). When the King puts questions to him, *gestrinn fekk ór öllu leyst* — the guest or stranger answered all of them well, and this is the common noun with definite article, and it is spelled out. But sometimes the name appears. When he begins his narration, the text reads *G(estr) sagði*, which looks like a name, and when he comes to sit at the King's footboard and is called *gestr hinn gamli* (*G hín gamli*) which also looks like a personal name with a nickname. The section heading reads *Frá viðtali konungs ok gests*, which is ambiguous.

The instability here might simply be scribal carelessness, but it also seems to be peculiar to the *Flateyjarbók* version of the text. The text as it stands in AM 62 fol uses the common noun throughout (Ólafur Halldórsson 1961: 86–87; Ólafur Halldórsson 1993:38rb). It may be coincidence, or the version in *Flateyjarbók* may be influenced by *Nornagests þáttur*, which ended only a couple of leaves previously, with its extended play on the name and the several senses of the word. But considered or unconsidered, the variation in the rendering of the word/name *gestr* here, together with the stranger's very Odinic appearance — aged, well-spoken (*orðspakr*), one-eyed and weak-sighted, and wearing a low hat — makes for uncertainty about the figure's true identity, and that uncertainty makes for narrative tension.

The mysterious stranger turns out to be Óðinn, who in turn is really Satan, *óvin alls mannkyns sjálfr fjándinn*, and thus here the name *Gestr* is the *dulnefni*. The fact that the Devil in disguise would be afoot in this episode has in fact already been given away in the section immediately prior, on which more below, but that explanatory prose does not mention Óðinn. Thus the revelation of identity at the end of the episode is not completely empty. It is rather the fulfillment of exactly the suspicions likely to have been aroused by the word or name *gestr*. The stranger is revealed to be Óðinn, and the tale is revealed to be the sort of tale in which a mysterious figure turns out after the fact to have been Óðinn. This narrative possibility is one for which we had been primed already in *Nornagests þáttur*, both by the play on *gestr* at the outset

and by the Hnikarr episode, and that tension is not disarmed by the explanatory material about the wiles of the Fiend. The tale set at Ögvaldsnes falls out in such a way that a thread left hanging in *Nornagests þáttur* is taken up anew and woven into a different sort of text. On the plane of narrative expectation, this is a resolution. But on the level of plot, this very resolution leaves us with the unsettling knowledge that Óðinn/Satan is out there still.

As far as the other *gestir* are concerned, the *konungs gestir*, the time of year is quite explicitly Easter, such that they should be in attendance, if the laws are to be believed. They are not mentioned explicitly. However, the episode at Ögvaldsnes is only scant pages past the end of *Nornagests þáttur* (the gap is between 47v and 49r), so they may still be in mind. Furthermore, the Fiend is really a former *hirðmaður* of God, and we are reminded of this fact in the short theological tag already mentioned, at the end of ch. 304:

Óláfr konungr var á Ögvaldsnesi.

En svá sem margheyrir <er> ok sannprófat at síðan er allsvaldandi guð hafði sér skipat til þjónustu háleita hirð himneskra krapta svá steypiti öfund ok ofmetnaðr þeim englinum er einna var ágætastr skipaðr ór hæstu sæmd ok sælu er honum var gefin af guði ok svá öllum þeim er honum voru samhuga í ofbeldi mót skaparanum, ok svá sem hann var áðr fegri ok fríðari öllum englum í hinni hæstu dýrð svá varð hann þá ok æ síðan ljótari ok leiðinlegri öllum djöflum í hinu neðsta helvíti svá illskufullr ok öfundar með sínum árum ok örendrekum at hann kostgæfir allra mest fyrir at koma hverju góðu ráði ok byrlar optlaga eitr sinna slægða mannkyninu með ýmislegri ásýnd eðr yfirbragði, því at ef hann sér nökkut sinn eyðaz flokk sinna þjónustumanna en fjölgaz sauði guðligrar hjarðar af fortölum ok fagrligri áeggjan örendreka Jesú Krists þá leitar hann við á alla vega at tæla með nökkurum svikum þá er hann þykiz skömm eðr skaða af hafa hlotit ok ætlar síðan aptr at leiða í myrkr ótöluligrar villu þat sama fólk er hann þykiz áðr hafa týnt ok tapat, sem sýnaz má í því sem eftir ferr (*Flb.* I:375).

King Óláfr was at Ögvaldsnes

But as (is) often heard and truly proven, that after All-Powerful God had appointed to his service a *hirð* of heavenly powers, then jealousy and pride cast down that angel who was best placed of all from the

highest honor and joy given to him by God along with all those who were of like mind in violence against the Creator. And thus, as he was before more beautiful and handsome than all angels in the highest virtue, so he became ever after uglier and more hideous than all devils in the deepest hell, so full of wickedness and jealousy with his devils and his messengers that he tried most of all things to destroy every good plan and often pours out the poison of his trickery for mankind with various appearance or seeming, because if he ever sees the flock of people in his service decrease but the sheep of the divine herd increase due to the speeches and fair exhortations of the messengers of Jesus Christ, then he seeks by all means to entrap with some trickery those by whose hand he thinks he has suffered shame or harm of and intends thereafter to lead into the darkness of unreckonable error those same persons whom he thought to have lost and lost before, as may be seen in what follows.

I wonder if it would impose too much on the text here to see a troublesome divine *hirð* member in some little way parallel to those troublesome *gestir* of the laws. It's admittedly difficult to imagine the half-pay *húskarlar* as those set highest in the King's honor, and their liminal position in the *hirð* and cavalier carrying out of their duties are hardly comparable to the revolt in Heaven. However, the favored angel who falls so far does so because he crosses the crucial line between high-set servant and enemy of the sovereign, and that is the line the *gestir* seem to be flirting with in *Hirðská* 44. It is after all explicitly God's least-well behaved *hirðmaðr* who visits the King here, and he does so under the name *Gestr*.

The primary associations with the word as it attaches to the embodiment of the past at Ögvaldsnes are considerably more negative than in *Nornagests þáttur*. The *dulnefni* plays a significant role, the strangeness and unknown quality of the stranger is stressed, and even some of the hospitality-related aspects of *gestir* are problematic. *Gesterfð* does not apply, and the oblique connection to the *hirð*, if we may read so far here, would only increase the sense of anxiety and spiritual danger attaching to this episode.

5.3 Óðinn kom til Óláfs

Here the visitor calls himself *Gestr* (*nefndisk Gestr*), and this also is a *dulnefni*, as this is Óðinn again, or rather, an unclean spirit that has taken his

form. He is called *maðr ókunnr*, which emphasizes his strangeness and strangerhood. Interestingly enough, he is never called *gestrinn*. Once he is referred to as *komumaðrinn*, which connects him rather more loosely, if at all, to the customs of hospitality than *gestr* would have, if we may judge by the hospitality-related vocabulary related to the word *gestr* (*gestrisni*, *gestgjafi*). As a result, he is less well-connected to the ordering and anxiety-limiting aspects of the hospitality contract.

He appears to rub up against the *konungs gestir*, however. He is seated *útar frá gestum*, the same phrase as in *Nornagests þáttur*, so though the time of year is not mentioned, I expect these are meant to be the *gestasveit*. Unlike Nornagestr, this Gestr does not benefit from comparison with them. He is so difficult (*óþýðr*, *stikkinn*, *uppivözlumikill*) that the King instructs his men to have few words with him (*bað menn vera fáskiptna við komumanninn*). This is not a promising characterization under the best of circumstances, but if it is the *gestasveit* seated nearest him, the body of men whose duty it is to root out the enemies of the King, and the King does not want even his secret police to have dealings with this stranger, then he must be very difficult indeed.

This Gestr is the one who asks the King to tell him which ancient ruler he would choose to be if he could. When the King expresses his admiration of Hrólfr kraki's more noble virtues (*atferð ok höfðingskap*), but makes clear that he would want to retain his faith, Gestr tempts him with a promise of power: would the King not rather be like that king who always had victory? An attempt to tempt the King over the narrative boundary, as discussed above, this tactic also recalls the temptation to excess embodied in the *gestir* in *Hirðskrá* 44. Eternal victory sounds like it would count as *ofrefli*, and in this case it is certainly one in which God would be *óþekkt*—displeased.

In this penultimate episode, the dominant senses of *Gestr* are as a *dulnefni* for undesireables, and the common noun meaning stranger, moreso than guest, hospitality as a frame is scarcely in play, *gesterfð* not at all, and any associations with the *gestir* in the service of the King are also not positive.

5.4 *Tóka þáttur Tókasonar*

At the end of this series of texts in which the primary semantic associations with *gestr* have become increasingly negative we come to *Tóka þáttur*. It is clearly the same kind of tale as the others in the group, but *gestr* appears nowhere in the text, neither as name nor common noun. The visitor is *ókunnr*,

unfamiliar, but he identifies himself by name and his father's name: Tóki son of Tóki inn gamli. Tóki is not an *Óðinsheiti* or a traditional *dulnefni*.¹⁰³ One of the heroes at Brávellir is named Tóki, and perhaps that would have given the name in this context a more ancient, heroic cast, which would not be inappropriate given the subject of the *þáttur*. But Tóki as a personal name does not have the associations that the name Gestir does. It seems fairly harmless. This Tóki's resemblance to the Gestir of the other tales has nothing to do with his name.

The *gestasveit* is nowhere hinted at, and the time of year is not given, which further distances those troublesome *húskarlar* from the tale at hand. Tóki is of course a guest, the most mundane and comforting sense of the word *gestr*. He accepts hospitality and provides diversion for his host, fitting into a system that makes him and his stories welcome in their context, and unlike his immediate forerunner, the *óhrein andi*, Tóki fits smoothly into this role. On the inter/intratextual plane, then, the tale rounds off and resolves the series on an acceptable and safe note after the low mark of hospitality failure and high danger level in *Óðinn kom til Óláfs*. Even better, from the standpoint of resolution and safe relations between past and present, Tóki dies. As for *gesterfð*, its implicit workings do not seem to depend on the presence of the word *gestr*. We may judge by *Grágás* (*Konungsbók*), *arfapáttur* ch. 120, 121, and *um austmanna arf* ch. 249:

Ch.120. Ef sá maðr andask er engi á frænda hér á landi. ... En ef hann kómr í vistina, ok andask hann þar, þá á félagi hans þat fé at taka ... En ef eigi er félagi þá á at taka búandinn (*Grágás* Ia:228–229).

If a man dies who has no kinsman here in the country. ... But if he comes into his lodging and dies there, then his partner has the right to take the property ... But if there is no partner, then the householder has the right to take it (Dennis, Foote and Perkins 2000:10).

¹⁰³ Lind cites one incidence of a nickname *tóki*, but that may not be the same name (Lind 1920–21:384). The meaning of *Tóki* is unclear. Cipolla translates as ‘fool,’ ‘lo “stulto,” il “gonzo”’ (Cipolla 1996:70), based on de Vries’s etymology from a verb meaning to play or entertain (de Vries 1962:594). *Nudansk ordbog* explains it differently, as a short form of names like Þórkell and Þórgrímur (Becker-Christiansen et al. 1986:976). Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon agrees with this latter derivation and dismisses de Vries’s theory (Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989:1051). Whatever its meaning, the name Tóki seems to have been common in Denmark and Danish in origin (Lind 1905–1915:37).

121. Um gongumanns erfð. Ef gongumaðr verðr dauðr inni at manns þá á sá maðr þat fé at taka er inn hefir hann, bæði þat fé er hann hefir á sér, ok svá þat er hann spyrr til at hann hafi átt (Grágás Ia:229–230).

On inheritance from a vagrant. If a vagrant dies in someone's house, then the man who is housing him has the right to take his property, both what he has with him and what he learns he had [elsewhere] (Dennis, Foote and Perkins 2000:11–12).

Ch. 249. Um austmanna arf hér á landi. Ef austmaðr deyr út hér, sá er hér á engi frænda. ... Ef austmaðr andask í vist, þá á búandi sá er honum veitti vist ef eigi er félagi til. (Grágás Ib:197)

On inheritance left here in Iceland by a man from overseas. If a man from overseas who has no kinsman dies here in Iceland If a man from overseas dies in a lodging, then the householder who gave him lodging has the right to take what he leaves, as long as no partner exists (Dennis, Foote and Perkins 2000:213–14).

These paragraphs nowhere mention *gesterfð* or *gestir*, but the essential idea is identical to that in the *gesterfð* paragraph in *Gulapingslög*. Individuals away from home, engaged with the system of hospitality, are also entangled in the system of inheritance. They are, whatever they may be called, potential mediums for the transfer of goods. Thus we have one more positive association with Tóki, who dies within the system of hospitality in such a way that he might be such a medium, but without the label of *gestr*.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The past as guest is a complicated metaphor, it would seem, and the importance of understanding it is perhaps not limited to the interpretation of these specific narratives. Interpolations have been regarded rather like guests in later manuscripts and texts. The metaphor of *interpolation as guest* has not to my knowledge been made explicit, but designating an episode or detail as an interpolation confers many of the same conceptual benefits described above, benefits of separation and systematization, without the lexically-driven, problematic associations with dubious members of the medieval *hirð*. The

identification of interpolations is a scholarly method for imposing discipline upon texts and manuscripts that appear to suffer from temporal disorder. An element that does not seem to fit in, one the content of which seems to be older or younger than the surrounding material, can be categorized as an interpolation, a visitor, as it were, from another text or another period. In the preparation of the scholarly editions so crucial to most scholar's access to the textual matter of the past, many an interpolation has been removed from its supposedly ill-gotten seat of relative honor in the bosom of the main text and been shown to the outermost benches of the edition, in the afterword or the appendix. Such editorial practices have been part of the history of the narratives under discussion here becoming difficult to find and, as a result, less frequently subject to scholarly inquiry.

But having inquired into the metaphor of the past as guest for interpretation of those narratives, this essay returns to that matter here. This group of narratives concerns itself with the past in the present, a particularly urgent conceptual problem in the sagas of Óláfr in *Flateyjarbók*, where the past is ever interrupting and coming into dialogue, figuratively and pre-figuratively speaking, with the present. These works are a nexus of several typologies, both learned and popular. Óláfr Tryggvason is a forerunner of Óláfr helgi. Óláfr helgi as a saint is a type of Christ, and thus Óláfr Tryggvason as his forerunner becomes a type of John the Baptist. The matter of whether the Saint King is in fact the reincarnation of his namesake the pagan Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr is also at issue, a telling example that not all relations between past and present are as spiritually benign as those just mentioned. The constellation of narratives in *Flateyjarbók* under discussion here is an attempt to grapple with the problematic relations that arise between past and present as a result of the typological thinking, broadly conceived, that attached to the Óláfs. The ramifications of this typological nexus and the mechanisms at work in it extend beyond the metaphor of the past as guest, but the teasing out of a more representative sample is the subject of a larger project, of which this essay is a small part. This is the place to sum up, in closing, what the legal meanings and implications of *gestr* mean for an understanding of that dominant metaphor in these four texts.

The legal associations of *gestr* are quite vexed. Nonetheless, we should not draw the simple conclusion that that the word and name is an ill-suited tool for thinking about the presence of the past. To be sure, figuring the past as a *gestr* is not a perfect solution the the conceptual problems inherent in thinking about

the past in the present. The word is too broad in its semantic range for that, and it brings with it additional threats of disorder and disruption at the same time that it provides some order and conceptual comfort. To have dealings with the past in the form of a *gestr* is to invite trouble to your door, and indeed some of the pleasing outcome we find in *Tóka þátrr* hinges on the narrative having freed itself from this complicated and complicating word entirely. But in these specific narratives the usefulness of *gestr* as a lexical, conceptual tool for thinking about the past rests on a higher plane. The resolution in *Tóka þátrr* is dependent on the tension the word *gestr* helps create in the previous episodes. The constellation of narratives as a whole is a greater narrative engine that takes the reader or auditor through several possible ways of thinking about the stuff of the past, serving up much of that very stuff along the way and then providing a happy ending. Though that ending involves getting rid of the word *gestr*, it has been the ambiguity and difficulty of that word that has provided the combustible fuel for that engine all along.

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EFNISÁGRIP

Í fjórum frásögnum Flateyjarbókar kemur fulltrúi fortíðarinnar sem gestur til hirðar Noregskonungs. Sagt er frá dularfullum, gömlum manni sem þar er ókunnur og gestkomandi og ber reyndar nafnið *Gestr*. Athyglisverð er notkun orðsins/nafnsins *gestr* í þessum frásögnum. Fram kemur að samjöfnun fortíðarinnar við gestinn hvílir á traustum skilningi á hugtakinu og merkingarsviði orðsins *gestr*. Í þessari grein er gerð tilraun til að varpa lögfræðilegu ljósi á merkingarsvið orðsins með því að kanna hvernig hugtakið/orðið kemur fyrir í fornum lagatextum, hvernig farið er með *gesti* í erfðabálkum laganna og hvernig hlutverki þeirra er lýst við hirð konunga. Höfundur þessarar greinar gerir sér vonir um að sýna fram á gagnsemi rannsóknar á merkingarsviði hugtaksins *gestr* og hvernig hugsun um fortíðina hvílir á flókinni merkingu þess.

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