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INTERPRETATION OR OVER-INTERPRETATION THE DATING OF TWO ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR¹

Introduction

SINCE the inception of the influential *Íslenzk fornrit* series of saga editions in 1933, it has been traditional to rank the *Íslendingasögur* according to a system of relative chronology, based on a methodology originating in the writings of Björn M. Ólsen. Some of the criteria employed in this method were more objective than others; in the case of texts for which only little or late manuscript evidence survives, their literary relations with other texts and the degree of sophistication of their style were crucial factors. Although some datings have been disputed with varying degrees of conviction, for a long time a fixed point in the shifting sands of relative chronology has been the antiquity of *Heiðarvíga saga*, considered to be ‘probably the oldest extant *Íslendingasaga* ... Evidence for its age are its awkward style and composition and its influence on later saga literature’ (Schach 1993, 275). It is the only *Íslendingasaga* sometimes considered to date from before 1200 (Jónas Kristjánsson 1988, 224). *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa*, too, has usually been ranked among the oldest in the genre. It is disconcerting, therefore, that in the recent collection of saga translations, issued by the publisher Leifur Eiríksson in 1997, the date of *Heiðarvíga saga* is given without further explanation as ‘mid-13th century’ (Viðar Hreinsson 1997, IV 97); that of *Bjarnar saga* as ‘late 13th century’ (Viðar Hreinsson 1997, I 255).² This paper traces the minor upheaval which has led what were by common consent our oldest sagas to be ranked

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² Diana Whaley, in her introduction to the version of the same translation of *Bjarnar saga* in *Sagas of Warrior Poets*, is more circumspect: ‘Some scholars have seen the saga as an earlier

among the youngest, and questions the reliability of the methodology underpinning this change of perception.

Alluding in a review to Bjarni Guðnason's studies of the lost or fragmentary kings' sagas *Skjöldunga saga* and *Hryggjarstykki*, David Evans commented that 'Bjarni Guðnason has made himself something of a specialist in works that no longer exist'. In the book which is the subject of Evans's review, *Túlkun Heiðarvígasögu* (Bjarni Guðnason 1993), Bjarni turned his attention to the *Íslendingasögur*, more particularly *Heiðarvíga saga* — a work which in Evans's words, 'is not actually lost, but came as close to being so as any work that exists at all can have done' (Evans 1997, 361). The book radically revises the received view, based on its apparently primitive style and absence of influence from other sagas, of the antiquity of *Heiðarvíga saga*. Bjarni does not dissent from the criteria on which the standard dating was based, but develops a new, and in my view questionable, approach to the identification of literary influence, and also imposes a semi-allegorical reading on the text to propose a later date on ideological grounds. In his view the saga is derivative of other texts, most notably *Laxdæla saga*, and hence should be dated from the middle of the thirteenth century or later. In an article published the following year Bjarni extended his investigation to another supposedly primitive, and again fragmentary saga, *Bjarnar saga Hítðalakappa*, whose dating he revised even more radically. He detected in it influence from a wide range of texts including *Njáls saga*; consequently he repositioned the saga at the end, rather than in the early part of the thirteenth century (Bjarni Guðnason 1994).

The textual incompleteness of *Bjarnar saga* is of a different kind from that of *Heiðarvíga saga*. It is preserved only in seventeenth-century and later manuscripts, from which the first five chapters are missing and have been supplied, in many of the surviving copies as well as in modern editions, from a summary preserved in versions of Snorri Sturluson's *Óláfs saga helga*. *Heiðarvíga saga* is preserved in part in a medieval manuscript, which Bjarni believes to date from c.1300 rather than the traditional estimate of c.1250 (Bjarni Guðnason 1993, 187), and in part in a transcript made from memory by Árni Magnússon's scribe, Jón Ólafsson frá Grunnavík, of the first part of this manuscript after this first part had been destroyed by fire in Copenhagen

thirteenth-century product, and more or less independent of other Sagas of Icelanders, others as late thirteenth-century, and highly dependent; some reckon with later revision of an early saga' (Whaley 2002, xl).

in 1728. Thus, fortunately, neither saga really belongs to the category of 'works that no longer exist'. It is probably true, though, that the poor preservation of both texts has been responsible for a general lack of critical attention that has made it dangerously easy for Bjarni's new dating to be accepted without much scrutiny.

This endorsement flies in the face of the sceptical critical reception that initially met Bjarni's theory. *Túlkun Heiðarvígasögu* was reviewed by Fredrik Heinemann in *Alvissmál* in 1994 and by Theodore M. Andersson in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* in 1995, as well as by David Evans in *Saga-Book* in 1997. All had reservations about its central thesis, which Evans said 'leaves me on the whole unconvinced' (Evans 1997, 364). Andersson's verdict on the assertion of influence from *Laxdæla saga* on *Heiðarvíga saga*, crucial to the proposed late dating, was that 'the criteria seem to me quite uncertain' (Andersson 1995, 451), and on the saga's awkwardness of style, 'it remains difficult to imagine that the level of writing in *Heiðarvíga saga* post-dates the prose standard established by such masterpieces as *Egils saga*, *Gísla saga*, and *Laxdæla saga*' (450). In the nature of things, Bjarni's Festschrift article on the date of *Bjarnar saga* has received even less evaluation, although it is criticized in the introduction to my translation of the saga (Finlay 2000, l–lii). In a recent survey of saga literature, published in the same year as Bjarni's book, Vésteinn Ólason deferred judgement, commenting on Bjarni's reading of *Heiðarvíga saga*: 'Þetta sýnir hve ótraustar eru niðurstöður um aldur Íslendingasagna, en rétt mun að bíða átekta og sjá hvernig röksemdum Bjarna farnast þegar aðrir fræðimenn taka að grandskoða þær' (1993, 113) [this shows how unreliable are conclusions about the age of the Sagas of Icelanders, but it is necessary to await developments and see how Bjarni's arguments fare under the scrutiny of other scholars], and acknowledging his theory on *Bjarnar saga* only in passing: 'Lengst af hefur verið talið að hún sé fremur gömul, eða frá fyrri hluta 13. aldar, en það hefur nýlega verið dregið í efa' (98) [It has usually been considered that it is rather old, or from the earlier part of the thirteenth century, but doubt has recently been cast on this]. But the further evaluation anticipated here, and which such a thorough and radical study as *Túlkun Heiðarvígasögu* deserves, has not yet taken place (see also Vésteinn Ólason 1998, 253 n. 46). This article aims to address Bjarni's claims in more detail, placing them in the context of some comments on the methodology of saga dating.

Dating the Icelandic Sagas

The problem of the inconclusive re-dating of sagas is, of course, not new. Jónas Kristjánsson's relocation of *Fóstbræðra saga* towards the end rather than the beginning of the thirteenth century, proposed in 1972, is still neither universally accepted nor dismissed;³ nor has the argument of Dietrich Hofmann in the same year for an early date for *Reykðæla saga* been scrutinized in detail. At the other end of the spectrum, Stefán Karlsson (1994) has argued that *Fljótsdæla saga*, conventionally held to be the latest of the *Íslendinga-sögur* and to date from the end of the 15th century, is in fact contemporaneous with *Hrafnkels saga*, of which it is a continuation, and dates from c.1300.

In a comprehensive review of the conventions of dating established by the so-called 'Icelandic School', Örnólfur Thorsson has argued that the locating of the 'golden age' of saga writing in the period before the annexation of Iceland by the Norwegian crown in 1262 had an ideological basis in the movement for Icelandic independence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and urged a reconsideration of the dating of these texts that would diminish the gap between their estimated time of writing and the age of surviving manuscripts:

Ef aðeins er tekið mið af varðveislunni virðist blómaskeið Íslendinga sagna miklu fremur vera á fjórtánda öld og fyrsta fjórðungi þeirrar fimmtánda en í umröti Sturlungaaldar á 13. öld — og þar með er ekki fullyrt að varðveisla sé ávitull um aldur. Það hentaði hins vegar ágætlega í sjálfstæðisbaráttunni á síðari hluta 19. aldar og fyrstu áratugum þessarar að bestu bókmenntir okkar hefðu verið saman settar meðan við enn vorum frjálsir menn í frjálsu landi, fyrir 1262: þaðan eru kannski komnar lífseigar hugmyndir um blómlegt rithöfundarstarf 'um miðja 13. öld', 'á þriðja fjórðungi þrettánda aldar', o.s.frv.⁴

³ Jónas Kristjánsson 1972. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (1999, 160–62) argues that a version of the saga was written early in the thirteenth century, 'snarest i det andet eller tredje tiår'; see also von See 1976.

⁴ 'If only the manuscript preservation is used as the frame of reference, it appears much more likely that the heyday of the Sagas of Icelanders was in the fourteenth century and the first quarter of the fifteenth than in the upheaval of the Age of the Sturlungs in the thirteenth century — although it is not asserted that preservation is an indication of age. On the other hand it was very convenient in the struggle for independence in the latter part of the

This view informs Örnólfur's argument for a re-dating of *Grettis saga* to around 1500, rather than the traditional date of 1310–29 (1994, especially 915–19; see also 1994b). But while this theory is based on sceptical scrutiny of the saga's reference to Sturla Þórðarson, which, it is argued, could be a later addition to the text, as well as statistical analysis of the vocabulary of the surviving manuscripts, Örnólfur's passing reference to other proposed later datings, including those of Bjarni Guðnason, implies that these form part of the same project (Örnólfur Thorsson 1994a, 915 n. 3):

Varðveisla íslenskra miðaldabóka er þó með þeim alkunnu ósköpum að handrit geta aldrei vitnisburður um aldur þeirra. Það er þó umhugsunarvert að þrjár sögur sem lengi voru taldar gamlar hafa yngst mikið undanfarna áratugi og færst nær elstu handritum sínum: Fóstbræðra saga (sbr. Jónas Kristjánsson 1972), Heiðarvíga saga (sbr. Bjarna Guðnason 1993) og Bjarnar saga (sbr. Bjarna Guðnason 1994).⁵

— this despite the fact that the earliest manuscript of *Bjarnar saga*, as noted above, is no earlier than the seventeenth century, and that Bjarni's methodology follows firmly in the tradition established by the 'Icelandic school' (Heinemann 1994, 100).

It is significant that all the sagas mentioned here as candidates for revised dating are to some degree oddities among the *Íslendingasögur*: their eccentricity or ineptitude of narrative style has allowed them to be labelled as primitive and archaic, seemingly predating the conventions established in what has been constructed as the communal activity of saga production. Proposals for the later dating of such texts reveal a paradox at the heart of the methodology evolved for the dating of sagas by writers of the so-called 'Icelandic school'. On the one hand it is taken for granted that saga-writers worked in the full

nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth that our best literature should have been composed while we were still free men in a free land, before 1262: perhaps this is where the persistent ideas about flourishing literary activity "around the middle of the thirteenth century", "in the third quarter of the thirteenth century", etc, came from?"

⁵ "The preservation of medieval Icelandic works, however, suffers from the well-known disadvantage that the manuscripts never bear testimony to their ages. It is however worth consideration that three sagas that for a long time were considered old have become much younger in the past few decades and moved closer to their oldest manuscripts: *Fóstbræðra saga* (cf. Jónas Kristjánsson 1972), *Heiðarvíga saga* (cf. Bjarni Guðnason 1993) and *Bjarnar saga* (cf. Bjarni Guðnason 1994)."

awareness of the achievements of their predecessors and contemporaries, so that sagas are fitted into a typology of increasing stylistic sophistication, backed by a network of perceived literary relations between their texts. On the other, the increasing primacy awarded to the individual author in the creation of saga texts has led to a tendency to assert idiosyncracies — individuality of style and taste, a particular authorial point of view, variations in the literary accomplishment of authors — that sit uneasily with the conception of saga writing as to some extent a communal endeavour.

Bjarni Guðnason's methodology exemplifies these conflicting tendencies. While arguing for literary influences on the supposedly early texts he discusses, he also establishes his dedication to what has been called 'the fiction theory'⁶ by implicitly rejecting the general assumption that the sagas draw on a body of broadly accurate historical material, legitimized by communal memory. The English summary of *Túlkun Heiðarvígasögu* ends with a call for

a reconsideration of some old ideas about saga criticism. This involves, for instance, reexamining the relationship between the predominant theory of saga evolution and the dating of the sagas, reconsidering ideas about the objectivity of the saga style, the realism of the oldest sagas and, last but not least, the regard for the historical veracity of the sagas that has obstructed the vision of many a scholar ... the Icelandic sagas ... must be studied as literature with a sharper focus on the author, his way of thinking and his intentions (Bjarni Guðnason 1993, 284).

The standard criteria for the relative dating of the *Íslendingasögur* were laid down in 1958 by Einar Ól. Sveinsson in his handbook *Dating the Icelandic Sagas*.⁷ Although described by its editor as 'a pioneer work, for no general treatment of the subject has been published since modern methods of criticism have been applied' (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1958, vii), it consists of an exposition, both cautious and critical, of the techniques for dating evolved over the preceding decades, in particular in the writings of Björn M. Ólsen and the editors of the *Íslensk fornrit* series (1933–), as 'modern methods of

⁶ See Mundal 1993, 53.

⁷ A revised and expanded version was published in Icelandic in 1965 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1965). For a full and critical account of the origins and development of the 'Icelandic school', see Örnólfur Thorsson 1990, 36–46.

criticism' began to shake themselves free of the 'regard for the historical veracity of the sagas' still criticized by Bjarni Guðnason, but which was most characteristic of the time when 'scholars used to regard the Icelandic Family Sagas as true pictures of events' (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1958, 1).

A central premise of Einar Ólafur's book and of the technique of relative dating of the sagas in general is the assumption that every saga writer would have known every saga that had been written before his own, and that therefore a saga lacking allusions to, or less overt influence from, other texts could be assumed to be early. This assumption surfaces not only in the chapter on 'Literary Relations' — in the words of Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 'Of all the means of deciding the ages of sagas, it is their literary relations which are the most fruitful' (76) — but also in that on 'Artistry', which deals with

the skill displayed in the sagas, the ability of their authors in constructing them, their control of the material, their narrative methods and literary artistry. We might well suppose that such accomplishments developed gradually; at the beginning authors had less control over their material, but this developed as more sagas were written ... It is reasonable to expect that the sagas which were written first would show certain marks of the primitive, if only we can detect them (115).

Still invoked by Andersson in his scepticism about a late date for *Heiðarvíga saga* (see above, p. 63), this view presupposes an environment in which saga writing is a communal endeavour, with writers not only scanning their predecessors' works for useful source information but participating in the continuing development of a shared convention of form and style. And of course this can be demonstrated in many instances of clear literary influence, though it is not always so clear in which direction the influence has gone — witness the continuing debate over the relative ages of *Laxdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*, reopened by Bjarni Guðnason (1993, 221–22). It is also evidenced in the use made of the *Íslendingasögur* by compilers of successive versions of *Landnámabók* and the poetic treatises that include citations of saga *lausavísur*. But Gísli Sigurðsson's recent analysis of the works which served Óláfr Þórðarson hvítaskáld as sources for *The Third Grammatical Treatise* suggests that the range of reading of even a learned writer in the thirteenth century was likely to be circumscribed to his own region: 'Óláfr had ... read all the most recent literature in Borgarfjörður, but he does not seem to have

known much from other parts of the country' (Gísli Sigurðsson 2000, 102).⁸ Gísli also, with some caution, raises the possibility that recognizable versions of the sagas as we know them may have existed in oral form: 'we could use the opportunity to reconsider the commonly held idea that a saga did not exist unless it was written' (102). The practice of dating the sagas according to their literary relations also fails to take account of the possibility that a less learned saga writer in one part of the country — especially one whose style showed signs of amateurishness or eccentricity — might have known little and cared less about literary developments elsewhere, or that, as Einar Ólafur goes on to acknowledge, 'an unskilful author of later times might perhaps show a similar clumsiness in his first work'.

The methodology of dating largely on the grounds of literary relations was derived from works that were in contact with the learned main stream, and is not adapted to more individualistic or amateurish endeavours that may have flourished alongside it. It is revealing that, after asserting the primacy of literary relations as a dating criterion, Einar Ólafur continues, 'It is well known that this is the case with the Kings' Sagas, but the same conditions apply to the Family Sagas, although research is not so far advanced' (77). Here he acknowledges that, in the development of a methodology for dating the *Íslendingasögur*, certain criteria were transferred from similar investigations into historical texts. But the analogy may rest on a false assumption. As Theodore M. Andersson has said, 'Unlike the family sagas, which almost never tell the same story twice, the kings' sagas tell the same story, especially the biographies of the Norwegian kings, many times' (Andersson 1985, 197). The analogy with the *konungasögur* works to some extent where sagas do share the same or related material, but largely fails to account for the anomalous texts discussed here.

As Örnólfur Thorsson points out, the problem is exacerbated since most of the *Íslendingasögur* do not exist in manuscripts from the thirteenth century. As we have no access to their texts in their early stages, we are forced to base our conclusions on the versions we have even where the manuscripts are no earlier than the seventeenth century. The writers of *konungasögur*, by contrast, because of their constant sharing of material, were participating in a continuing process of cross-reference, and we often have a glimpse of earlier versions of existing works through those that made use of them.

⁸ Cited here from the article which is a version in English of a chapter from the author's doctoral thesis, more recently published in Icelandic (Gísli Sigurðsson 2002).

Literary relations are at least more concrete than judgements about style. In his discussion of 'artistry', Einar Ólafur cautiously advances the theory that a clumsily written saga is likely to be early (see above). But he continues, speaking of conventions that developed to preserve the 'illusion of reality', 'there are some sagas in which these rules are more flagrantly broken than others. These sagas might perhaps be called "archaic"' (115–16; the first example to be named is *Heiðarvíga saga*). This term inevitably implies age, although he later questions, 'We may ask whether archaic sagas are necessarily old sagas, and whether these archaic characteristics are enough for us to conclude that a saga is old' (119), and instances *Reykðæla saga* as an exceptional case of a saga which is not dated early despite apparently 'archaic' features. Nevertheless he confirms that in the case of *Heiðarvíga saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga* archaic style is a criterion which, if supported by other considerations, may be used as an indication of early date. The inconsistencies of this discussion reveal the unreliable assumptions that tend to be made about archaic style. I pass over here the larger questions of how archaic style is to be defined, and indeed, how we are to know what the style of a genuinely early text was like, since few survive in anything like their original form.

Bjarni Guðnason is on safe ground, then, in pointing out the inadequacy of definition in these notions of primitive style to justify his scepticism about the early dating of *Heiðarvíga saga*: 'frávik frá staðli stíltægundar eru í sjálfu sér ekki aldursmerki' (1993, 206) [deviations from a particular type of style are in themselves no indication of age]. His arguments are less convincing, however, when he uses this rejection of conventional typology to assert the individuality of the author, whom he then attempts, on ideological grounds, to place in a specific historical context. I turn now to a more detailed consideration of Bjarni's arguments in favour of the late dating of these two texts. I shall focus first on the question of literary relations, taking the example of connexions he asserts between both sagas and *Laxdæla saga*; then on his arguments about literary echoism; and finally his attempt to locate *Heiðarvíga saga* in a specific cultural and ideological context.

Literary Relations

Sigurður Nordal in his edition of *Bjarnar saga* found little or no specific dependence on earlier written texts, though the saga's use of established conventions led him to believe that it was not among the very earliest of the *Ís-*

lendingasögur (*Borgfirðinga sögur*, lxxix–lxxx). Opposing this view, Bjarni Guðnason revives and extends the earlier opinion of Hugo Gering, that *Bjarnar saga* is a highly derivative text, its clumsy style attributable to the author's attempts to string together material freely adapted from a wide range of other sagas:⁹

Höfundur Bjarnarsögu seilist eftir yrkisefni til ritheimildar og getur hennar að engu. Hann dregur um leið hulu yfir hana með því að færa aðföngin í nýtt samhengi, sníða hana að söguefni sína og varast líkindi í orðafari ... Bjarnarsaga er eins og dauf skuggamynd ritheimilda sinna, og heimildakönnun hennar verður af þeim sökum fólgin í því að greina strjál nöfn og máðar línur á tjaldi, sem er bæði torvelt og tafsammt, eins og glámskyggni fræðimanna í þessum efnunum ber með sér (1994, 74).¹⁰

⁹ In his edition of *Eyrbyggja saga* (cited by Bjarni Guðnason 1994, 78 n. 29) Gering argued (against Boer (1893, xxxiii) and Finnur Jónsson (1920–24, I 507, 510)) that two of the verses of Björn Hítédalakappi derived from those of Björn Breiðvíkingakappi, supporting this by reference to 'der ganze charakter der Bjarnar saga, die ihre motive von überallher zusammengebettelt hat (die rivalität der beiden dichter, die verlobung der heldin mit ihrem geliebten kurz vor dessen abreise ins ausland und ihre verheiratung mit dessen gegner aus der Gunnlaugs saga, die erbschaftsreise des Þórðr und die heerfahrten des Björn im osten aus der Eigla, die ehebruchsgeschichte u.a. aus der Eyrbyggja); dafür auch der ganze zusammenhang, in dem die vísur hier und dort mitgeteilt werden. Man vergleiche die detaillierte erzählung im 40. cap. der Eyrbyggja, wo alle die kleinen nebenumstände, auf die sich die vísa 27 bezieht, anschaulich in der prosa geschildert werden, mit der farblosen darstellung im 21. cap. der Bjarnar saga ... und man kann nicht einen augenblick ungewiss sein, wo das original und wo die kopie zu suchen ist' (Gering 1897, xxiii–xxiv). Sigurður Nordal, on the contrary, was equally convinced that 'sé nokkur tengsl milli Eyrb. og Bjarnar s. (og að því tel eg Gering ekki hafa fært sannfærandi rök), þá er miklu sennilegra, að Bjarnar s. sé þar veitandi en þiggjandi' (*Borgfirðinga sögur*, lxxxix). Bjarni Guðnason argues that *Bjarnar saga* derives material from *Heiðarvíga saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Njáls saga*, *Óláfs saga helga* and — less confidently — *Gísla saga*, *Hallfreðar saga* and *Kormáks saga*, as well as those listed by Gering.

¹⁰ 'The author of *Bjarnar saga* snatches at a written source for subject matter and does not acknowledge it at all. In the process he conceals it by placing the borrowing in a new context, shaping it to fit the subject of his story and preserving the similarity of phrasing ... *Bjarnar saga* is like a dull mirror-image of its written sources, and for that reason the investigation of its sources must take the form of the interpretation of scattered names and faded threads in a tapestry, which is both difficult and time-consuming, as the blindness of scholars in these matters clearly demonstrates.'

Bjarni reads the *Bjarnar saga* author's taste for naïve exaggeration of his hero's merits as evidence of literary influence according to an inflationary principle. He instances the similarities between Bjørn's heroic last stand and that of Kjartan in *Laxdæla saga*. Each hero is warned by an ominous dream, carries a useless sword, and fights near a large stone; but *Bjarnar saga* exaggerates the situation, since Kjartan is ambushed by nine men, Bjørn by twenty-four. Bjørn also improves on his supposed model by defending himself only with shears (Bjarni Guðnason 1994, 74). This argument is inconclusive; an equal or stronger explanation, if literary influence is to be detected, could be that the more adept narrator of *Laxdæla saga* refined the excessive zeal of the earlier *Bjarnar saga*. Or indeed the author may have had quite different reasons, not involving a literary relationship, for the element of exaggeration.¹¹

Bjarni argues more specifically that Kjartan's loss of the valuable sword bestowed on him by King Óláfr Tryggvason, and use of an inferior weapon in his last fight, was the inspiration for the account, in the parallel scene in *Bjarnar saga*, of the hero's weaponless state, having exchanged his weapons for those of his insignificant cousin Þorfinnr Þvarason. The fact that Kjartan has been deprived of his own weapon by his enemies, whereas Bjørn gives his up voluntarily, is claimed by Bjarni as sounder motivation, and therefore evidence that the primary version is that of *Laxdæla saga* (Bjarni Guðnason 1994, 76–77). The incident is indeed rather awkwardly introduced in *Bjarnar saga* by a multiplicity of explanations for Bjørn's inability to use his own prestigious sword Mæringr — which is parallel to Kjartan's weapon in being, according to the account of *Óláfs saga helga*, the gift of a missionary king.¹² The saga says that Bjørn has exchanged swords with his cousin (*Borgfirðinga sögur*, 192): 'Á því hausti fór Þorfinnr Þvarason út á Nes til föður síns ... ok hafði hann sverð Bjarnar, Mæring, en Bjørn hafði vápn hans' [That autumn Þorfinnr Þvarason went out to Nes to visit his father ... and he had Bjørn's sword Mæring, and Bjørn had his weapons], and a few lines later that Bjørn's father has borrowed his weapons: 'Arngeirr karl fór heiman ok ætlaði í

¹¹ In a paper delivered at the Twelfth International Saga Conference (Bonn, 2003) I argued that the saga's heightened treatment of this scene may derive from an attempt to emphasize the hero's association with St Óláfr by introducing echoes of the king's martyrdom in battle at Stiklarstaðir.

¹² 'Ólafur konungur gaf Birni sverð gott er hann kallaði Mæringh' (*Saga Óláfs konungs hins helga* 1930–41, II 766). According to *Bjarnar saga*, Bjørn won the sword in a duel with the *kappi* Kaldimarr in Garðaríki (*Borgfirðinga sögur*, 122).

Knarrarnes at leita kynnis ok tók um morgininn vápn Bjarnar, þau er heima váru' [Old Arngeirr left home, meaning to go to Knarrarnes on a family visit, and in the morning he took those of Björn's weapons that were at home]. The second statement does not strictly contradict the first, but seems designed to emphasise the hero's lack, not only of his sword, but of all his own weapons. A further complication is a verse in which the hero represents himself as carrying 'sverð mitt' as he goes into battle (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, 197–98):

Út gengk með lið lítit,
litt sék hers við víti;
sverð fylgir menmyrði
mítt ok skjöldr enn hvíti;
en fyr einum runni
Ægis dýrs of Mýrar
vǫndr skal hjalts ór hendi
hrökkva, fyrr en ek stökkva.¹³

Because the phrase *sverð mítt* does not fit the borrowed sword very happily, it has been suggested that *menmyrðir* refers to Þorfinnr Þvarason (Boer 1893, 103) or to Arngeirr (Bjarni Einarsson 1961, 242). But the *hjalts vǫndr* of the second helming, which is most naturally understood to refer to the same sword, makes these suggestions unlikely.¹⁴ In any case, though, the verse clearly represents the hero as armed. The saga's equipping Björn with 'manskæri mikil ... ok skjöld á hlið; sverð hafði hann í hendi, er Þorfinnr Þvarason átti' (197) [a large pair of shears ... and a shield at his side; he had in his hand the sword owned by Þorfinnr Þvarason] is likely to represent an attempt to assimilate two competing purposes, that of exploiting the pathos and drama of the brave defence of a 'næsta vápnlauss maðr' (203) [almost unarmed man], and that of signalling the coming conflict through a warlike

¹³ 'Out I go with a small following; I am not very wary of men's vengeance; my sword and the white shield go with the killer of necklaces (= the generous man); but the wand of the hilt (=sword) must be wielded in the hand before I run away over Mýrar from one bush of the beast of the sea (= man).'

¹⁴ Edith Marold (2000, 92–93) agrees that 'sverð mítt' refers to the sword the hero is carrying, though I do not agree with her claim that the saga author himself took *menmyrðir* to refer to the borrower of the sword. Her implication is that this belief motivated the attempts to account for the absence of Björn's own weapons. But Björn's 'near-weaponless' state is fundamental to the entire episode (see below).

display; Björn's setting out fully armed demonstrates his disclaimer, 'Ekki læt ek drauma ráða fœrum mínum' (196) [I don't let dreams decide my movements] to be a hero's conventional insistence on embracing a perceived threat that he ostensibly dismisses.

A further, and intriguing, multiplication of explanations for the disabling of Mæringr may lie concealed in a verse in a previous chapter. Early in the saga Björn's acquisition of the sword from the *kappi* Kaldimarr in Garðaríki has been related (*Borgfirðinga sögur*, 122). In verse 30, placed before the hero's penultimate fight, he recounts a dream which could have been misinterpreted as predicting the breaking of Mæringr:

Draum dreymðumk nú, Nauma
Nið-brands skarar landa,
koma mun Yggr á eggjar
enn bragsmíðar kenni,
báðar hendr í blóði,
braut kaldhamars nauta,
mér of kenndr í mundum
Mæringr roðinn væri.¹⁵

(*Borgfirðinga sögur*, 178)

Kaldhamarsnautr is included as a sword-*heiti* in a *pula* in *Skáldskaparmál* (*Skáldsk.*, I 121), and is most likely to be a kenning similar to the Old English *fela laf*, *homera laf* (*Beowulf* 1032, 2832), with the sense 'survivor, product of the cold hammer'.¹⁶ The saga author rightly does not take its use in Björn's verse to apply to the reddened Mæringr; rather, it is part of a periphrasis indicating that battle is taking place: 'swords were breaking'. But its occurrence in a verse in *Bjarnar saga*, in proximity to the name of the sword,¹⁷ has

¹⁵ 'I have just had a dream, Nauma of river fire of hair's land (= lady)—Yggr (Óðinn) will again bring the knower of metres (= poet) to sword-blades (i.e. to battle)—that both hands (were) covered in blood, comrades of the cold hammer (= swords) broke; in my hands famous Mæringr was reddened.'

¹⁶ The compilation of the *pulur* is dated to the 12th century or later (*Skáldsk.*, I xvi–xvii). The form *kaldhamarsnautr* may derive from Björn's verse; it does not occur elsewhere. But its listing as a *heiti* shows that the compiler understood it to be a sword name, rather than a periphrasis, showing how the misinterpretation of it as a reference to Mæringr could arise.

¹⁷ De Boor (1913) interprets *Mæringr* here as a *heiti* for 'man', from which the sword-name was derived. Marold (2000, 92, n. 25) adopts this interpretation, but Nordal (*Borgfirðinga sögur*, lxxix) finds it unconvincing.

proved an irresistible temptation to link it with the sword Mæringr. Along with other early editors, Finnur Jónsson went so far as to emend *kaldhamars nauta* to *Kaldamarsnauta* (*Skj.*, BI 282), and to translate ‘sværdet gik itu i min hånd’, taking *-nauta* as the accusative singular of a postulated weak form **-nauti* (Boer, xxx), though in *Lexicon poeticum* it is glossed as a plural of *-nautr*. In fact, the influence is most likely to be in the other direction, the name Kaldimarr for the original owner of the sword being derived from this verse (Boer, xxx); *Borgfirðinga sögur*, lxxviii). If so, the saga’s inclusion of the entire Kaldimarr episode shows that, as Nordal says, ‘hér er um misskilning að ræða, en sá misskilningur er eldri en ritun sögunnar’ (*Borgfirðinga sögur*, lxxix) [this is a case of misinterpretation, but the misinterpretation is older than the writing of the saga]. Although in *Bjarnar saga* as it stands, the verse is not taken to predict the breaking of Mæringr, the currency of this misinterpretation at or before the time of writing of the saga meant that there must have existed one or both of two further explanations of Björn’s unarmed state: either that his famous sword had broken in a previous skirmish, and therefore was not available to him in his last fight; or, assuming that verse 30 was originally anticipatory of his last fight (as Vogt 1921, 55 argues), that it is broken in the course of the last fight, leaving him to fight on unarmed.

These signs of confusion indicate a multiplicity of divergent sources behind the saga’s account. It is interesting that in these instances the confusion clearly derives from different interpretations of the verses, most if not all of which clearly predate the writing of the saga and are likely to have been in oral circulation.¹⁸ This is at odds with the cobbling together of literary borrowings envisaged by Bjarni Guðnason. There is further overt evidence for multiple sources, which the wording suggests are likely to be oral, relating to Björn’s weaponless state in the saga’s account of Björn’s killing of a man with the point of his shield, whereupon the saga adds, ‘en sumir menn segja at hann legði hann með sǫxunum til bana’ (*Borgfirðinga sögur*, 201), that is, that he did the killing with the shears he was carrying for trimming horses’ manes.

It is often difficult, in a case of shared narrative material, to determine which text has influenced the other. But in the case of the motif of the borrowed sword, the similarity may well come down to an archetype so common in oral tradition as to make a search for literary influences pointless.

¹⁸ I have argued elsewhere (Finlay 1994) against the contention of Bjarni Einarsson (1961) that the verses were composed by the saga author himself.

The theme of the borrowed sword which fails the hero in need has parallels, not only within the *Íslendingasögur*,¹⁹ but in other Germanic heroic literature. A famous example is in *Beowulf*, where Unferð bestows the sword Hrunting on Beowulf as the hero prepares for his underwater assault on Grendel's mother. The hero, like Björn, is lent an ultimately useless sword by a lesser man; Beowulf, like Björn, but unlike Kjartan, relinquishes his own sword voluntarily. The loan is elaborated into an exchange of weapons, since Beowulf offers his own sword to Unferð in case he is not able to return with Hrunting (1488–90). The motif has been examined in Icelandic literature by Peter Jorgensen, who found parallels between the loan or gift of a useless sword in *Beowulf* and the *fornaldarsögur* (Jorgensen 1979).

In *Beowulf* and in *Bjarnar saga*, the relationship between a sword and its owner or user is an index of the quality of a fighting man. Unferð lends his sword to *selra sweordfreca*, 'a better swordsman' (1468), and in the saga the mismatch between man and weapon is signalled by the hero's words, 'Illt sverð á hér góðr drengr' (*Borgfirðinga sögur*, 199) [Here a good man has a bad sword]. The authors of *Laxdæla saga* and *Bjarnar saga* were probably both, in different ways, exploiting a resonance in the idea of the sword as index of its owner's quality which comes from outside the context of the saga itself. In both cases the theme expresses loss and frustration. In *Bjarnar saga* the main point is not, as it is in *Beowulf*, to make a comparison between men, since the owner of the 'bad sword' is the cipher Porfinnr Þvarason; rather it emphasizes the hero's loneliness and extremity in his last fight, deserted even by his own sword.²⁰ In *Laxdæla saga* the loss of the 'good' sword is the counterpart of the disappearance of the precious headdress; both symbolic of the marriage that never happened between Guðrún and Kjartan. Alternatively, it could be seen to represent the former friendship of Kjartan and Bolli, rejected by Kjartan once it is shown to be flawed. The fact that the theme is put to different uses in the two sagas does not rule out borrowing. But a theme that was resonant throughout Germanic culture, and probably other warrior societies as well, could crop up independently in quite separate texts, and

¹⁹ Examples, besides that of *Laxdæla saga*, are found in *Kormáks saga* (*Vatnsdæla saga*, 234–41) and *Droplaugarsona saga* (*Austfirðinga sögur*, 157–63).

²⁰ Edith Marold makes the attractive suggestion that the *sverð mitt ok skjoldr enn hvíti* of v. 35 (cited above, p. 72) is 'a clarification of the irony of the first line [*Út gengk með lið lítit*]; his small retinue is expressly limited to his sword and white shield' (2000, 93). This semi-personification of the weapons furthers the purpose of emphasizing the hero's isolation.

would very likely be current in oral stories that might not ever achieve written status. Its antiquity does not automatically define a saga in which it appears as old, and the greater clumsiness with which the author of *Bjarnar saga* integrates it into his text indicates only that he was less adept than the author of *Laxdæla saga*.

A similarly venerable theme is the subject of Bjarni Guðnason's claim that the episode in *Heiðarvíga saga* (ch. 22) in which Þuríðr, mother of Barði Guðmundarson, incites her sons to avenge the death of their brother Hallr, is derivative of *Laxdæla saga* (ch. 54), in which Kjartan's mother Þorgerðr whets her surviving sons to avenge him (Bjarni Guðnason 1993, 66–91). The female inciter is such a familiar presence in both edda and saga, 'a stock figure' in David Evans's words, that we must be cautious about assuming direct literary influence. The classic figure of the avenging mother is Guðrún Gjúkadóttir (*Hamðismál*, *Guðrúnarhvöt*). The similarities in theme and phrasing that Bjarni Guðnason points out between *Heiðarvíga saga* and other eddic and saga texts (1993, 69–82) suggests this strong traditional background rather than specific literary echoes.²¹

A more telling parallel arises in the sequel to the whetting, where in both sagas the mother insists on accompanying her sons on their mission of vengeance. A consideration in favour of a connection between the two episodes is the familial link between the two inciters; Þuríðr is the daughter of Þorgerðr, as *Laxdæla saga* makes clear (*Heiðarvíga saga* gives no details of Þuríðr's family), and both may owe their bloodthirstiness to their kinship with Egill Skalla-Grímsson, whom Þuríðr invokes in her rebuke to her sons: 'eigi myndi svá gera Egill, móðurfaðir yðvarr, ok er illt at eiga dáðlausa sonu' (*Laxdæla saga*, 162) [Egill, your mother's father, would not have behaved like that, and it is a bad thing to have spineless sons]. Among those who have considered the similarity to arise from literary influence, the choice of originating saga varies with the preconceptions of the critic; Jenny Jochens suggests, 'Perhaps the author of *Laxdæla saga* borrowed the theme from the older saga and rendered the story more elegant and plausible by placing the inciter a generation earlier' (1996, 194).

Bjarni Guðnason's argument for influence in the reverse direction depends on the seemingly better integration of the episode into *Laxdæla saga*. Þor-

²¹ For a full analysis of the female whetter (which, however, is more concerned with the potential historicity of the stereotype than its literary functions) see Jochens 1996, chapter 8.

gerðr's egging is necessary to move the story forward, since it is the spur which prompts her sons to take revenge. They are caught up in the complex web of family loyalties constructed by the saga; to sting them into overriding the peaceable instincts of their father, and moreover into attacking their cousin and foster-brother Bolli, Þorgerðr takes the extreme and unfeminine course of riding with them, 'því at ek veit gørst um yðr sonu mína, at þurfi þér brýningina' (*Laxdæla saga*, 164) [for I know this very well about you, my sons, that there is a need to whet you]. The similar words of Þuríðr as she accompanies her sons on their journey, 'fyrir því at eigi skal skorta til áeggjun, fyrir því at þess þarf við' (*Borgfirðinga sögur*, 279) [because there must be no shortage of urging, for there is a need for it], are less well motivated. In *Heiðarvígá saga* the whetting scene is logically redundant, for it takes place on the very eve of a revenge expedition that has been steadfastly planned over a long narrative sequence. Bjarni Guðnason acknowledges that its function is in fact not strictly that of the conventional whetting: 'Það er ... eftirtektarvert, að eggjun Þuríðar er í raun og veru herhvöt mælt fyrir fylktu liði en ekki venjuleg frýja' [It is noteworthy that Þuríðr's whetting is in fact an urging to battle spoken before a marshalled army, not a customary challenge].²² Þuríðr's words, in his opinion, 'eru ekki felld að innviðum Heiðarvígásögu, heldur eru þau að öllum líkindum eftirlíking af ummælum Þorgerðar, móður hennar' (82) [are not fitted to the framework of *Heiðarvígá saga*, rather they are in all probability an imitation of the speech of her mother Þorgerðr]. But the only verbal similarity in the two declarations is the repetition of *þarf* / *þurfi*, and literary borrowing is hardly necessary to explain the coincidence that the inciter in each case is convinced of the need for her intervention. Whereas Þorgerðr's belief is ratified by her sons' acting on her word, the unseating of Þuríðr, like the redundancy of her egging, shows her to be out of step with the predominant, male, direction of events in the saga.

Bjarni's argument is not just about literary priority, but also an essential plank in his contention that *Heiðarvígá saga*, rather than being an *erindislaus*

²² 1993, 81. The same point is made by Martínez-Pizarro (1986): 'Þuríðr is made to speak as if she were actually driving her sons to violent action ... In fact, however, she behaves this way only because she has understood that they are setting out that morning to attack the Borgfirðingar ... She has waited three years for this moment; her performance on this particular morning is determined by the men's decision to fight' (1986, 232). He argues that this, like other dramatic but inconsequential scenes involving women in the saga, represents an attempt to compensate for the 'exclusively masculine cast of the narrative'.

athafnasaga hefnda og víga (1993, 21) [an action story of vengeance and battles without a message], represents a concealed attack on the destructive values of the heathen past which continued to inform the violence of the Sturlung Age (and therefore must date from much later than the early 1200s). He sees parody in the treatment of Þuríðr, who is referred to dismissively as *kerling*, in contrast to *Laxdæla saga*'s positive presentation of Þorgerðr. It is indeed difficult to interpret as anything other than parody the burlesque sequel to the whetting in *Heiðarvíga saga* (ch. 23), in which Þuríðr's sons rid themselves of their importunate relative by having her saddle-girth loosened so that she tumbles into a brook. Bjarni sees the purpose of the parody as symbolic. In the words of Theodore M. Andersson, 'condemnation is reinforced when ... Þuríðr is disgraced by her sons Her unregenerate spirit literally takes a fall'. Andersson adds, 'A minor problem in this interpretation is that her dull-witted companion, who has no other part in the saga, suffers the same fall' (Andersson 1995, 451).

This is not the only loose end left by Bjarni's interpretation. It is true that Þuríðr is discredited, not only by coming to grief in the stream, but by the hysterical overtones of the whetting scene, where she strikes her son as close to madness: 'er á þessu mikit vanstilli, ok ertu nær óvitandi vits' (277); and 'gekk hon útan ok innar eptir gólfinu eiskrandi' [there is great excess in this, and you are almost out of your wits ... she went raging back and forth over the floor]. But this is not to say that the ethic of revenge is discredited along with her. Her hot-headed vengefulness is contrasted in the saga, not with any such endorsement of peaceable values as Bjarni implies, but with the more controlled vengeful purpose of her son Barði. The expedition of vengeance concludes a sequence in which Barði, under the direction of his foster-father Þórarinn, steadfastly pursues the goal of redress for his brother's death; a matter, first, of negotiating unsuccessfully for compensation, then of antagonizing an opponent so as to give an excuse for more active vengeance, then of manœuvring for support, all the time keeping these activities secret from the targets of the attack. The saga offers, not a critique of the primitive values of feud, but a carefully articulated illustration of the proverb 'revenge is a dish that should be eaten cold'.

In comparing the saga's boorish treatment of Þuríðr with the respectful stance adopted towards Þorgerðr in *Laxdæla saga*, it is necessary to bear the wider literary context in mind. Throughout *Laxdæla saga* the actions and consciousness of women are foregrounded to an unprecedented extent; the

point of view of *Heiðarvíga saga*, as scholars have observed, is overwhelmingly masculine.²³ Nevertheless, despite the effectiveness of Þorgerðr's whetting in *Laxdæla saga*, the motif of her accompanying her sons on their mission of vengeance is inconclusive. It gives her the opportunity for a further energetic declaration, but no further inciting speeches are recorded. Once the attack begins she fades away, yielding her role of assertive female to Guðrún, who first declares her intention of remaining with her husband, and after his death, calmly makes sure of identifying his attackers. From this point of view, the incident of the accompanying mother is more completely rounded off in *Heiðarvíga saga*, although the female consciousness is of little importance to this author. In ridding themselves of her company— 'Þetta horfir til óefnis, er hon er á ferð komin, ok mætti vér þess vel án vera' (*Borgfirðinga sögur*, 278) [It looks like getting complicated now she has come on the journey, and we could well do without it]—her sons are re-asserting the primacy of the masculine in the taking of effective action. Significantly, the inciting scene, to which this is a sequel, occupies the feminine sphere of the serving of a meal and makes metaphorical use of food to signal the outrage that calls for vengeance. There is shame in having to be urged to revenge by a woman; the hero and his brothers graphically confirm their heroic state of mind through the bizarre unseating of Þuríðr. The insecurity of the humour is in line with the uncertainty of narrative tone throughout the saga.

Literary Echoism

As these examples demonstrate, the establishing of the relative dates of sagas by means of proposed literary influence is an uncomfortably subjective endeavour. It is likely to remain unconvincing without the support of detailed verbal parallels. It is presumably in an attempt to supply this deficiency that Bjarni Guðnason places great weight on what he perceives as extensive literary echoism, in both *Bjarnar saga* and *Heiðarvíga saga*, particularly in personal names. Thus, for example, Bjarni argues that the minor villain of *Bjarnar saga*, Kálfr illviti, has no basis in history or tradition, but is an invention of the author's, who modelled the name on that of the chief enemy of St Óláfr. In *Óláfs saga helga*, the king is brought down by an army of

²³ 'Though many women are listed among the characters, there are no important roles for them to perform' (Martínez-Pizarro 1986, 220).

farmers led by Kálfr Árnason, of whom it is said, 'Þat er mark á um Kálf, ef hann mælir vel, at þá er hann ráðinn til at gera illa' (*Heimskringla*, II 378). Bjarni offers this suggestion not so much as evidence of late date, but as a defining example of the author's habit of cobbling together allusions to other texts: 'Ljósin í heimildarmyrkrinu eru *Kálfsnafnið* og auknefnið *illviti*. Kálfrur illviti er gott sýnidæmi um, hvernig höfundur fer yfirleitt með tilföng sín' (Bjarni Guðnason 1994, 74) [What illuminates the obscurity of the sources is the name *Kálfr* and the nickname *illviti*. Kálfrur illviti is a good example of how the author deals with his borrowings overall]. From a literary point of view, according to this theory, the allusion to the killer of St Óláfr could be intended to intensify the saga's representation of Björn as a devotee of the king and saint.

Bjarni implies that Kálfr's name and characterization are derived from *Heimskringla* itself, although as he himself acknowledges, the casting of Kálfr Árnason in the role of Judas figure clearly pre-dates Snorri (Fidjestøl 1997 [1990], 186). Kálfr is described in the Norwegian translation of Óláfr's twelfth-century *vita* as 'illr ok útrúr, ... Sá hinn illi maðr var í svikum við hann' (*Gamla norsk homilieboek* 1931, 111) [wicked and unfaithful ... That wicked man was in the plot against him], and is said in *Ágrip* to be eager for battle at Stiklarstaðir 'bæði fyrir kapps sakar ok illsku' (*Ágrip*, 30) [on account of both his aggression and his wickedness]. Apart from the coincidence of names and of the extremely common word *illr*, the analogy is not close; it is not Kálfr but the conniving villain of *Bjarnar saga*, Þórðr Kolbeinsson, to whom the commonplace 'því flára mun Þórðr hyggja, sem hann talar sléttara' is applied (*Borgfirðinga sögur*, 138).

It is true that Kálfrur illviti is 'furðu rótlaus í sögunni' (Bjarni Guðnason 1994, 73) [strangely unsettled in the saga]. The text as it survives gives no details of his family origins, although it must be presumed that the beginning of the saga, before it was lost, would have given some information about this, whether historically authentic or not. But there is some hinterland to the character which argues against his being the author's invention. In chapter 27 of the saga it is said that Þorsteinn Kuggason and his party 'fóru á Dunkaðarstaði til gistingar, til Qzurar, fœður Kálfs' (*Borgfirðinga sögur*, 181) [went to Dunkaðarstaðir to stay with Kálfr's father Qzur].²⁴ The unlikelihood of two

²⁴ Nordal considers the name of Qzur to be among details likely to have come from a now-lost **Þorsteins saga Kuggasonar* (*Borgfirðinga sögur*, lxxxii–iii). Judith Jesch (1982) argues against the existence of this saga.

men named in the saga bearing the rather unusual name *Kálfr* suggests that this refers to *Kálfr illviti*; as the reference occurs at the point where *Porsteinn*'s allegiance is finely balanced between *Björn* and his enemies, the mention of *Kálfr illviti* here would give colour to the supposition that *Porsteinn* is about to align himself against *Björn*. Against this, *Kálfr*'s family origin is located elsewhere after the death of *Björn*, where the settlement imposed by *Porsteinn* requires that *Kálfr* must 'láta jorð sína í Selárdal ok fara suðr um heiði í áttaga sinn' (210) [give up his lands in Selárdalr and go south across the heath into his native territory]. Both references suggest that more was known about the origins of *Kálfr* than the author chooses to tell us, or than survives in the now fragmentary text. *Kálfr* is also referred to by name in a verse attributed to *Björn*, in which the hero boasts of his killing of *Kálfr*'s son *Porsteinn* (167). *Bjarni Guðnason* does not engage in detail with the question whether the verses attributed to *Björn* are older than the prose narrative, but the implication of his argument is that he agrees with the opinion of *Bjarni Einarsson* that the verses are the invention of the saga author. But the verse in which *Kálfr* is named is one of many in the saga in which scholars have pointed out elements that are not consistent with the prose narrative, and it is therefore most likely that the verse is older than the prose;²⁵ therefore this verse must be borne in mind as a likely source of the name, though not the nickname, of *Kálfr illviti*.

In a footnote beginning 'Bardaginn á Stiklarstöðum hefur verið höfundir *Bjarnarsögu* hugleikinn' (1994, 74, n. 14) [The author of *Bjarnar saga* must have been preoccupied with the battle of Stiklarstaðir], *Bjarni Guðnason* extends his suggestion that *Heimskringla* was the inspiration for the climactic battle scene in *Bjarnar saga*. He derives *Kálfr*'s pun on *Björn*'s name, 'ek veiða nú þann björn er vér vildum allir veiða' (*Borgfirðinga sögur*, 199) [now I am hunting the bear that we all want to hunt] from *Óláfs saga helga*, where Þórir hundr says as he kills *Björn stallari*, 'Svá bautu vér björnuna' (*Heimskringla*, II 384–85) [Thus we kill the bears]. In fact the use of animal puns in

²⁵ The killing of *Porsteinn* is said in the verse to take place *á roðnum Klifsjörva*, but this place-name recurs later in the saga referring to a location that does not agree with the prose account of the site of the killing of *Porsteinn Kálfsson* (*Borgfirðinga sögur*, 167–68). *Bjarni Einarsson*'s attempt to explain away the discrepancy is not convincing (1961, 240–41). *Nordal* notes the similarity of this verse to one in *Fóstbræðra saga* believed to belong to *Pormóður Kolbrúnarskáld*'s *Þorgeirsdrápa* (*Vestfirðinga sögur*, 200–01), but considers it impossible to say which poem has influenced the other (*Borgfirðinga sögur*, lxxiii n. 2).

this episode, like the characterization of Kálfr, can be traced back before Snorri; Bjarne Fidjestøl sees their origin in a verse by Sigvatr describing Þórir hundr's attack on the king as *hunds verk* (Fidjestøl 1997 [1987], 171–72).²⁶

It is impossible to prove that the image of bear-hunting in *Bjarnar saga* does not derive from stories of Stiklarstaðir (if not necessarily from *Heimskringla*), though the pun on the name *Björn* could easily arise independently. But the theme is much more essential to the scene of Björn's death than Bjarni's footnote implies, and can be related to the traditions of the hero's fight as *næsta vápnauss maðr* (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, 203), described above. The image is extended as the attackers plan to encircle their disabled quarry, waiting for their leader to deal the final blow.²⁷ The characterization of Björn as a hero who fights impressively without weapons is also alluded to earlier in the saga in the verse describing the killing of Þorsteinn Kálfsson, mentioned above:

ok vágum þann þeygi
 Þundar gráps með vápnum;
 fall varð fleygipolli
 fjorgrand Niðar branda.²⁸
 (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, 167)

In the accompanying narrative the saga author elaborates this, telling how Björn kills Þorsteinn, who had aimed an axe-blow at him, by seizing him around the waist and throwing him to the ground, 'ok tekr um barka hans ok kyrkir, til þess at hann var dauðr, ok hafði engi vápn við hann' (166) [and he took him by the windpipe and squeezed until he was dead, and he had no weapons with him]. The theme of the warrior who relies on his bare hands rather than weapons is ubiquitous in older tradition; Egill Skalla-Grímsson, who kills a man by biting through his windpipe, is a model for Björn, while more far-flung prototypes are the werewolf Vǫlsungar Sigmundur and Sinfjötli, and, once again, Beowulf.

²⁶ For these and other uses of animal puns, see Whaley 1993, 140.

²⁷ Compare the description in *Hrólfs saga kraka* of the surrounding of the warrior Björn, transformed by enchantment into a bear: 'Þar kom, at þeir slógu hring um hann, ok sveimaði hann þá innan um hringinn ok sér, í hvert efni komit er, at hann fær eigi undan komizt' (*Hrólfs saga kraka*, 50).

²⁸ 'and by no means did we (I) kill him with weapons of Óðinn's storm (= battle): a fall caused mortal harm to the scatterer of river-fire (= generous man).'

Bjarni claims to detect a similar free association of literary echoes, which he dubs ‘kálfarnir’ after this example, derived by *Bjarnar saga* from *Heiðarvíga saga*. Here he follows the lead of Bjarni Einarsson, who was also inclined to see *Bjarnar saga* as pure fiction, and found parallels between the death of Björn and that of Þorbjörn Brúnason in *Heiðarvíga saga* (Bjarni Einarsson 1961, 254):

Þorbjörn er snemma á fótum og matast; húskarl hans kemur þegar við sögu. Þorbjörn hefur dreymt erfiðlega og segir draum sinn og fer með tvær vísur (sem hann kveðst hafa ort í draumnum); sverð hans er ekki heima (er í láni, sbr. ÍF III 280) og minnst hann þess í síðari vísunni að betra væri sér að bera ‘ókostalausan benvönd í gný randa’. Þorbjörn missir annan fótinn í bardaganum ‘ok eigi bersk hann at síðr’, sækja þá að honum synir Guðbrands; Þorbjörn mælti við þá: ‘Leitið ykkir annars færís; ekki hafði þat ungmennis verit fyrr meir at keppask við oss’. Eftir það er sagt frá viðureign Þorbjarnar við Barða og fellur Þorbjörn fyrir honum við gott orð.²⁹

Bjarni Guðnason adds to this the suggestion that the unusual adjective *brúnvölur* ‘frowning’, used of Björn Hítðælakappi before his last fight, represents an echo of the name of Þorbjörn Brúnason: ‘Hin andlega starfssemi er þannig: Þor-björn Brúna-son og Björn brún-völur’ (1993, 224; see also 1994, 75). But coincidence accounts more adequately for this ‘echo’ too. The adjective may be unusual, but reference to the brows as an index of anxiety or anger is extremely common.³⁰ The suggestion of influence from *Heiðarvíga saga* on *Bjarnar saga* does not affect the issue of relative dating, since both the

²⁹ ‘Þorbjörn is up early and has a meal; his servant comes into the narrative immediately. Þorbjörn has had a troubled dream and tells his dream which is accompanied by two verses (which he claims to have composed in the dream); his sword is not at home (cf. ÍF III 280) and he recalls in his last verse that it would have been better for him to have carried “a faultless wand of wounds in the clash of shields”. Þorbjörn loses one foot in the battle “and he fought on no less fiercely”, then the sons of Guðbrandr attack him; Þorbjörn said to them, “find yourselves another match; it has not before been for boys to fight against me”. After that the exchange of Þorbjörn and Barði is related, and Þorbjörn falls before him with brave words.’

³⁰ As in the phrases *bítr í brún* ‘makes (sby) furrow his brow, (sby) becomes concerned’, *bregða í brún* [e-m] ‘disquiet (sby)’, *líta brún síga* ‘show disapproval/anger’ (*DONP*, II 857). The form *brúnvölur* occurs only in *Bjarnar saga*, but Fritzner gives four citations of the equivalents *brúnvölvi*, *brúnólfi* (1886, I 200); in one of these instances, a variant text has *reidugligr* (*DONP*, II 870).

traditional theory and Bjarni's revision consider *Heiðarvígga saga* to be the older text.

For Bjarni, the supposed echoing in *Bjarnar saga* of names and phrases from earlier texts represents no more than further evidence of the author's magpie recycling of earlier sources to create a fictional text. In his analysis of *Heiðarvígga saga*, however, the symbolism read into names is a fundamental interpretative tool: 'Menn ná ekki langt í túlkun Heiðarvígga sögu án þess að skilja nöfnin táknrænum skilningi' (258) [One will not get far with the interpretation of *Heiðarvígga saga* without interpreting the names symbolically]. Thus the dark forces of unregenerate heathenism and the culture of revenge are alluded to in the name *Barði* (*sá sem ber*) (1993, 151–52), as well as the more obvious *Vígga-Stýrr*; the name of the bloodthirsty *Þuríðr*, evolved from *Þór-ríðr, aligns her with the god Þórr, and her tumble into the stream echoes the story in *Snorra Edda* of Þórr's struggle in the river Vimur (87–89). By contrast all reference to Þórr has been expunged from the name of the more peaceable *Gestr*, named *Porgestr* in some other sources, to bring into prominence the significance of *Gestr* as a name for Christ, a guest among men on earth. But David Evans's caveat to this highlights the subjectivity of this method of interpretation: 'the number of Icelanders in the sagas with *Þór*- as the first element in their names must be at least 1500, and they cannot all have been champions of paganism; Þórlákr inn helgi was not'.³¹

Clear examples such as the punning on Björn's name in *Bjarnar saga* demonstrate that saga authors were alive to the possibility that some names could be used to express idiosyncrasies of character, though this was more usually conveyed by the addition of a nickname or the modification of a name (such as that of Styrbjörn Svíakappi, originally called Björn *tout court*, until 'gaf Eirekr konungr honum viðnefni af harðfengi sinni ok styrjöld ok kallaði hann Styrbjörn' (*Flateyjarbók* 1944–45, II 147)). But precisely because so many Icelandic personal names are also common nouns, it is unsafe to read into all of them (still less into a selected few) the kind of allegorical significance signalled by Langland's 'Kynde Wit' or 'Conscience' or the 'False Semblaunt' of the Romance of the Rose. As Evans's comment underlines, instances where a name appears to bear semantic weight must be weighed against many others where the same name clearly does not. This consideration, not to mention the frequency of the element Þór- in other names,

³¹ 1997, 364. Evans also points out that Bjarni is wrong to claim that *Gestr* is called *Porgestr* in *Eyrbyggja saga*.

rules out of count the suggested interpretation of the very common name *Puríðr*.

Bjarni is on safer ground in pointing out that the characterization of a genuinely historical person may be influenced by the significance of his name: 'þótt einstaklingur sé sögulegur, svo sem ætla má um Víga-Styr, kann sjálfst nafnið að draga að honum eiginleika og hlutverkaskipan, sem gerir hann að tákni' (Bjarni Guðnason 1993, 259) [Even if an individual is historical, as Víga-Styrr may be considered to be, the name itself may have attracted to him characteristics and a role which make him into a symbol]. The unambiguous and uncommon name *Styrr* does seem likely to have contributed to the relentless and motiveless violence of this character in the saga, whose only aim seems to be to increase the tally of his killings: 'Pá kvað Styrr vísu, í hverri hann segisk nú hafa vegit þrjátígi ok þrjá menn, sem hann hefði eigi fébótum bætt' (*Borgfirðinga sögur*, 225) [Then Styrr recited a verse in which he said that he had now killed thirty three men for whom he had paid no compensation]. The episodic construction of the saga in the section concerning Styrr suggests that this was a process of accretion over time, rather than the invention of an individual author.³² But the attempt to impose a similar significance on the name of the saga's other protagonist, Barði, as 'táknmynd bardagamannsins' [a symbol of the man of battle], is fanciful. The name is believed to derive not from *berja* (or the related *bardagi*) but from one of the (probably related) nouns *barða* 'axe' (de Vries 1977, 26) or *barð* 'beard' (Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989, 41). Its true derivation would not, of course, prohibit a medieval author from making the same less authentic association as occurred to Bjarni Guðnason, but this is unlikely, since the name would have been familiar from references to jarl Eiríkr Hákonarson's ship *Barðinn* or *Járnbarðinn*, where it probably refers to a battering ram attached to the prow.³³

³² Another example whose character may have been determined by his name is Snorri goði. Snorri derives from *snerra* 'battle, sharp onslaught'. *Eyrbyggja saga* asserts the name to have been derived from his character: 'var sá sveinn kallaðr Þorgrímr eftir feðr sínum ... hann var heldr ósvífr í æskunni, ok var hann af því Snerrir kallaðr ok eptir þat Snorri' (*Eyrbyggja saga* 20). A character partly formed by the legendary associations of her name is Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir in *Laxdæla saga*, whose story was probably developed in a way that emphasized perceived parallels with that of her namesake Guðrún Gjúkadóttir.

³³ The word *barð* 'prow' may well be the same in origin as *barð* 'beard'. The form *barði* was used generically by poets as a *heiti* for 'ship'; it occurs in a verse by Halldórr Ókristni, cited in Oddr Snorrason's *Saga Óláfs Tryggvasonar* and later sources, where it refers specifically to Eiríkr's ship (Oddr Snorrason 1932, 222).

Where and when were these sagas written?

While there is no space here to consider all of Bjarni Guðnason's extensive and detailed arguments, my analysis of two of his main techniques of analysis demonstrates that an allegorical reading of *Heiðarvíga saga* cannot be sustained. The suggestion that the ridiculing of Þuríðr constitutes a critique of the ethics of feud has been challenged above, as have the negative connotations of the names Barði and Þuríðr. But even if the work could be accepted as a moralizing tract denouncing pagan values, what evidence is there that this moralizing fervour is a more likely phenomenon at the end than at the beginning of the thirteenth century? Bjarni outlines a three-fold ideological time-scheme: 'Víga-Styrr represents the old times and heathen values while Barði is the champion of contemporary times, believing excessively in his own might and main at the expense of God's tenets. The third phase is expressed in the author's vision of a world without warfare or violence, a mirage of a world where peace prevails' (1993, 281) (no major character can be found to exemplify this stage, though elsewhere Bjarni represents Gestr, unconvincingly, as a figure of Christ). As David Evans observes, 'As so often nowadays when scholars espy hidden religious symbolism and spiritual messages in works seemingly secular, one wonders just why the writer had taken such care to hide his important message' (Evans 1997, 363). Not only is the message difficult to tease out, but there is in fact nothing about it more appropriate to the period after 1260 than to the early part of the century.

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

Runólfur's account, in a version of *Óláfs saga helga* (see above, note 12); the mention of an alternative version of his killing (see above, p. 74); and, not least, the verses cited in the saga, many of which can be shown to be independent of the saga prose.

If the case for literary dependence in these two sagas is dismissed, the arguments for their late dating also dissolves. But this does not automatically confirm the traditional view of their 'archaic' status. An absence of dependence on other literary texts is one consideration that may point towards early date, but is not decisive. The accompanying criterion of unsophisticated narrative style, characteristic of both texts, may also be an indication of authors working outside an established, more learned tradition, rather than in its vanguard. The indications of influence from oral tradition might appear to suggest early date, but there is no reason to suppose that oral narratives did not continue to flourish throughout the time of writing of the sagas. The close analysis of existing manuscripts advocated by Örnólfur Thorsson may be valuable for the sake of more detailed knowledge of the texts at a particular moment in their evolution, but must not be allowed to overshadow indications, such as those I have pointed out in the case of *Bjarnar saga*, of the existence of earlier layers in that evolution. The investigations of Gísli Sigurðsson suggest that it may be possible to deduce more about the oral prehistory of the written saga than scholars have allowed themselves to believe.

If Bjarni Guðnason fails to convince of the specific datings he argues for, his work has the negative virtue of helping to cut these sagas loose from conventional assumptions of their early date. It remains for further and more detailed investigations of possibly archaic word forms and stylistic features, and in particular the ways in which the development of written narrative from oral traditions might work in detail, to provide a more convincing picture of the genesis of these texts.

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EFNISÁGRIP

Bjarni Guðnason hefur á undanförunum árum tekið hugmyndir um aldur Heiðarvíga sögu og Bjarnar sögu Hítðelakappa til endurskoðunar. Þessar sögur hafa yfirleitt verið taldar með elstu Íslendingasögum en Bjarni færir rök fyrir því að þær hafi fremur verið skrifaðar í lok 13. aldar en í byrjun hennar. Hann bendir á að báðar sæki þær efni til annarra texta og jafnframt að Heiðarvíga saga sé merkt hugmyndum sem hæst bar í lok aldarinnar. Í greininni er hugmyndum Bjarna andmælt um leið og rífaðar eru upp fyrri tilraunir til afstæðrar aldursgreiningar Íslendingasagna.

Örnólfur Thorsson hefur haldið því sjónarmiði á loft að hugmyndir um aldur sagnanna ættu að taka meira mið af aldri þeirra handrita sem þær varðveita, en þau rök hafa litla þýðingu fyrir sögur eins og Heiðarvíga sögu og Bjarnar sögu þar sem þær eru einvörðungu varðveittar í handritum frá síðari öldum. Fræðimenn af íslenska skólanum studdust einkum við athuganir á rittengslum í sínum aldursgreiningum sem stangaðist mjög á við þá áherslu sem þessir fræðimenn lögðu á þátt hins skapandi einstaklings í tilurð sagnanna — en hvorttveggja viðhorfið gerir of lítið úr þætti munnlegrar

sagnahefðar. Að áliti Bjarna er Bjarnar saga að mestu samsett úr vísunum í aðrar sögur. En hefðbundin minni eins og sverðslánið í Bjarnar sögu og eggjun móðurinnar í Heiðarvíga sögu, sem Bjarni telur bæði fengin að láni úr Laxdæla sögu, benda fremur til þess að munnleg hefð búi að baki sögunum; og sú staðreynd að frásagnir í Bjarnar sögu virðast runnar úr mörgum ólíkum áttum styðja þá tilgátu. Bjarni kembir báðar sögurnar í leit að rittengslum sem hann finnur einkum í mannanöfnum, en árangurinn er ekki sannfærandi að mati greinarhöfundar. Rittengslunum er ætlað að renna stoðum undir þá túlkun Bjarna að í Heiðarvíga sögu felist kristileg gagnrýni á ribbaldasiðferði Sturlungaaldar, en slík gagnrýni ætti allt eins vel við þótt sagan væri talin rituð fyrr. Í greininni er því sýnt fram á annmarka hefðbundinna aðferða við aldursgreiningu, en jafnframt bent á að frekari rannsókna sé þörf, einkum á því hvernig tengslum sagnanna við hina munnlegu frásagnarhefð er háttað.

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