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I

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I

THE RELATIONSHIP between oral tradition and literary authorship is a classical problem in Icelandic saga scholarship, but it is also a classical problem in the study of other types of early epic narrative in ancient Greece, Anglo-Saxon England and Medieval France. Works like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, *La Chanson de Roland* and *Njáls saga* have all been interpreted as orally transmitted texts, but they have also been interpreted as literary artifacts composed in writing by an author. Most literary historians have tended to agree in principle that these texts contain both oral and literary elements, but they have, in each case, very much disagreed about the proportions and the relative importance of orality versus literacy. While some have tended to see the text primarily as a product of a long oral tradition, others have seen it primarily as a product of writing at a particular time and place.

Within the field of saga scholarship this disagreement was for a long time known as the conflict between Freeprose and Bookprose. The Freeprose Theory, vigorously defended by Knut Liestøl in Norway, Andreas Heusler in Germany and by several other Germanists and folklorists before the Second World War, maintained that the *Íslendingasögur* originated essentially in the Viking period and then circulated in oral tradition for a couple of hundred years until they were finally written down in the Sturlung Age. The Bookprose Theory, which has been particularly strong in Iceland after the war and brilliantly represented by Sigurður Nordal, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson and other prominent members of the so-called “Icelandic school”, maintained that *Íslendingasögur* originated essentially in the Sturlung Age as individual written

¹ Gísli Sigurðsson. 2002. *Tálkun Íslendingasagna í ljósi munnlegrar hefðar*. Tilgáta um aðferð. Rit 56. Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, Reykjavík.

literary compositions by prominent authors such as, for example, Snorri Sturluson.

When I say “originated *essentially*” I want to emphasize the fact that fundamentalism has not been very common on either side in the conflict between Freeprose and Bookprose. It is, on the contrary, important to note that adherents of Freeprose such as Heusler could admit that individual saga-writers had sometimes left their trace on the saga texts, thereby modifying or in some cases even radically changing the previous oral tradition. Likewise, adherents of Bookprose such as Nordal and other members of the “Icelandic School” have often admitted that the authors of the sagas probably had access to some kind of oral tales as basic source material for their literary compositions. Perhaps the most important difference between Freeprose and Bookprose is not one of basic theoretical suppositions but rather one of practical scholarly method: while adherents of Freeprose have worked primarily as folklorists with parallels from various legends and other oral sources, adherents of Bookprose have worked primarily as textual philologists and comparative literary historians, trying to establish manuscript relationships and literary influences, what members of the “Icelandic school” have called *rittengsl*, a crucial concept to which I shall come back later.

Since the 1960s, oral tradition has come back into focus after a long absence, and there has been, internationally, an increasing reaction against Bookprose and the “Icelandic School”. Gísli Sigurðsson’s dissertation is an outgrowth of that reaction as can be seen already from the title, *Túlkun Íslendingasagna í ljósi munnlegrar hefðar*, and still more from his introductory chapter, in which he states his aims and presents the previous discussion about oral tradition and literary authorship in the sagas. From Gísli’s subtitle, *Tilgátta um aðferð*, we may further conclude that his ambition is to introduce new methods or a new approach in dealing with the oral tradition behind the written sagas.

Before going further into this discussion, I think we need to consider for a moment what actually happened in the sixties that triggered the reaction and the return of oral tradition. This was something that happened not only in saga studies but also — and even more prominently — in the study of Homer, *Beowulf*, *Chanson de Roland* and several other verse epics. It happened primarily in the United States, and an extremely influential work was — as Gísli rightly points out — the Harvard scholar Albert B. Lord’s book *The Singer of Tales*, published in 1960.

In this book the nature of oral composition and tradition was explained in an entirely new way, very different from that of, for example, Liestøl, Heusler or other Freeprose theorists. According to Lord and his teacher Milman Parry, who had both closely studied the transmission of long epic songs still circulating in Yugoslavia, oral texts, unlike literary texts, were always composed in actual performance with the help of ready-made epic formulas and traditional action patterns. The texts changed from performance to performance but could always, according to Lord, be recognized as oral if they contained a sufficient number of formulas and stereotyped narrative patterns. This new way of looking at oral tradition was later severely criticized by other scholars but it was soon adopted, first by American and later by European medievalists and students of epic literature. As a result of the critical discussion, Lord's methodology was often taken over in revised or modified form by other scholars but it did lead to a renewed belief that works such as the *Iliad*, *Beowulf* or *Chanson de Roland* were indeed oral texts or at least very strongly influenced by oral traditions. The Icelandic sagas, on the other hand, were never considered formulaic enough to be regarded as truly oral-formulaic texts but the presence in saga texts of certain recurring formulaic patterns was still considered indications of a fairly strong element of orality.

The oral-formulaic theory of Parry and Lord was not the only reason, however, why oral tradition again, from the sixties and onwards, became regarded as a crucial and important factor in the development of sagas, particularly *Íslendingasögur*. Other influences came from a new breed of folklorists with structuralist ideas inherited from Vladimir Propp, the famous Russian formalist who tried to introduce a sort of "narrative grammar" for the study of oral folktales. Still other influences came from students of rhetoric, speech and mass communication or from historians, linguists and anthropologists interested in the development of literacy in nonliterate societies. Important new contributions were made, for example, by Frances Yates in *The Art of Memory* (1966), Jack Goody in *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (1968), and Michael Clanchy in *From Memory to Written Record* (1979). Several new ideas and approaches to oral texts introduced by these scholars and by followers of Parry and Lord were later incorporated by Walter Ong in his extremely influential book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), a work that soon became used as a textbook in many parts of the world and in many different subjects — from Comparative Literature to Linguistics and Social Anthropology.

Finally, the introduction of all this modern theory, which has focussed our attention especially on the transition from oral to literate societies, should not make us forget that the old ideas of Freeprose had never completely disappeared from the scene — in fact they had been revitalized in 1964 in a doctoral dissertation by Theodore M. Andersson, a young American who had been taught at Yale by a German refugee, Konstantin Reichardt, who in his turn was a pupil of the great Germanist Andreas Heusler, one of the leading proponents of Freeprose before the Second World War. It was Andersson who first systematically attacked the concept of *rittengsl* as developed by the Icelandic Bookprose school, and he did so long before he himself or any other saga scholar had become influenced by the new theories of Parry and Lord.

I think it is important to point this out, because Gísli in his introductory chapter to some extent exaggerates the historical importance of Lord's *Singer of Tales* and his method of formula-counting as THE Great Event that revived the international interest in oral tradition. I think other contributions, for example Clanchy's, would have been worth mentioning. At the same time Gísli also to some extent makes too little of *The Singer of Tales* when he suggests that Lord's methodology has now become more or less obsolete, since later studies have shown that formulas could be of literary just as well as oral origin, and that formula-counting therefore cannot prove that a text is oral. Although I share Gísli's sceptical attitude to formula-counting, I think it would be fairer to say that Lord's approach is still partly valid, in that formulaic composition *could* indeed, under the right circumstances, be a very strong indication of orality, but it is certainly not an infallible method, and I think most scholars would nowadays agree that it must be supplemented with other methods. This is also exactly what Gísli tries to do in his dissertation, but he is certainly not the first to do so, as he himself is quite willing to admit. A lot of research on the oral roots of the sagas has in fact recently been carried out by other saga scholars such as Theodore Andersson, Dietrich Hofmann, Carol Clover, Óskar Halldórsson, Vésteinn Ólason, and others.

It should also be pointed out, that although Gísli is searching for oral tradition he does not really believe in a purely oral saga as some Freeprose advocates did. He is quite willing to accept the fact that the sagas were influenced by literary texts such as saints' lives or foreign *riddarasögur*, and he is also willing to accept the fact that sagas influenced each other through literary borrowing, *rittengsl*. What he himself wants to establish is not the oral *Urgestalt* of any saga but rather its oral roots.

II

But let us now take a closer look at Gísli's own contribution! What is it that he wants to do, and how does he attempt to do it?

Actually, I think his dissertation can best be characterized as a collection of separate studies in which he uses not one but several methods in order to come to grips with various problems that do not necessarily have very much in common except for the fact that all of them, in some way or other, involve a search for oral tradition. Most of the chapters have in fact been published earlier as individual articles, and Gísli's attempt to fit them together may sometimes seem a little bit eccentric or artificial like a colourful quilt or *rúm-ábreiða* patched together from different pieces of cloth with different patterns. Let me say already at this stage, however, that I think most of the patches are well made and competently sewn together. To me, then, the quilt or *rúm-ábreiða* as a whole looks attractive.

Two studies, which together constitute Part I of the book, are not about saga-writing at all but about the function of oral tradition in other areas of Icelandic culture after the conversion of Iceland. The first deals with the office of the lawspeaker and attempts to find out how that office was changed when orally transmitted law was replaced by written law in the 12th century. The second one deals with Ólafur Þórðarson Hvítaskáld's range of knowledge about orally transmitted poetry in 13th century Iceland. Both these studies are, in my view, convincing in their conclusions about the nature of oral tradition, but I shall not comment on them further, since they are of limited interest for the saga problems I have chosen to discuss and will be scrutinized by the second opponent, Guðrún Nordal.

I shall, however, have something to say about the studies presented in Parts II and III. Part II deals with the literary universe of the Eastfjord sagas, and the question Gísli attempts to answer here is to what extent this universe existed in oral tradition already or was a result of literary development in the 13th century as saga-writers influenced each other through *rittingsl* and continued to write about the same people and the same events. Part III deals with the oral tradition behind the two Vínland sagas, and the question Gísli tries to answer here is to what extent the nature of this tradition may be determined by comparing the sagas with each other and with recent archeological findings concerning Viking activities in Newfoundland and the natural history of North America around the year 1000.

Finally, I shall have just a few things to say about Part IV, where Gísli compares *Finnboga saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga*, discusses mythical patterns in *Hænsna-Þóris saga*, and, towards the end, attempts to draw some general conclusions from all his studies about oral tradition in the sagas. Here again, the second opponent will have more things to say than I have, but I will to some extent comment on the general conclusions.

III

In the section about the Eastfjord sagas, Gísli makes use of a concept that was first introduced by Carol Clover and later taken over by John Miles Foley, namely that of “immanent narrative”. An “immanent narrative” or an “immanent saga” is one that is not explicitly told in the text but assumed to be known by the audience or the reader. The narrator or some character in the story may, for example, refer in passing to some event that has never been told or some hero that has never been introduced but is still considered well known by everybody. When this happens in a saga text, it usually indicates that the saga was told for people who were already well informed about at least some of the characters and events, and this information is likely to have come through oral tradition. One of the things that Gísli thus tries to do in his comparative study of the Eastfjord sagas is to find traces of immanent Eastfjord sagas that were probably never written but still somehow part of common knowledge.

Although I would tend to agree with Carol Clover, John Miles Foley and Gísli Sigurðsson that this is an interesting and potentially fruitful approach to the problem of oral tradition, I think it should be pointed out that a purely literary tradition could also sometimes give rise to an immanent saga or an immanent narrative. In Conan Doyle’s well-known detective stories about Sherlock Holmes, for example, there are many references to mysteries that Holmes has solved in the past or criminals that he has brought to justice, even though the stories of these mysteries and criminals are never told by Doctor Watson. At one occasion, for example, Sherlock Holmes, in a conversation with Watson, makes a passing reference to some crook who once knocked out one of his teeth in Charing Cross Station, but the story of this remarkable incident is never told, and there is no indication that it ever existed on paper, perhaps not even in the mind of Conan Doyle. Such references may in fact function as a very effective but purely literary device to whet the reader’s

curiosity. So I would like to ask Gísli: How do you separate immanent narratives that are rooted in oral tradition from those that are purely literary like the untold stories of Sherlock Holmes?

However one regards the concept of “immanent saga”, it is in my view an excellent idea to compare — as Gísli has done — sagas about a particular area at a particular time, in this case the Eastfjords in the late 10th century and early 11th century, in order to see what they have to say about the same people and the same events. By scrutinizing passages where two or more sagas overlap or tell versions of the same story, he tries to draw conclusions about the tradition behind these sagas. Is it, as Jón Jóhannesson appears to think in his edition of *Austfirðinga sögur* in *Íslensk fornrit*, a primarily literary tradition, based on *rittensl*, or is it primarily an oral tradition, from which each saga-writer has chosen his own story or combination of stories, selected from a wide range of narratives included in the large “immanent saga” of the Eastfjords?

Before going further into this question, I think we should for a moment look closer at the concept of *rittensl*. What is really meant by this word? Does it just mean, in the narrow sense, a direct influence from a written text on another written text, as for example when a scribe copies a section from an older manuscript or “borrows” a passage from something he has read? Or could *rittensl* also, in a wider sense, refer to a more indirect influence through oral intermediaries, as for example when a saga-writer tells a story in writing that he once heard somebody else read aloud or tell freely, even though the story as such is ultimately derived from some written text? In the latter case, *rittensl* is not very easy to distinguish from an influence that is based on oral tradition alone. Gísli is aware of this difficulty, as can be seen from his criticism of the “Icelandic school”, but he himself does not make very clear what he means by *rittensl*. Perhaps he could tell us here today more exactly what he means by this term.

However, the method used by Gísli to determine the relationship between the Eastfjord sagas is, on the whole, a sound one, I think. When he compares what the sagas tell about the same people and the same events, he is thus open to the possibility that there may be literary influence, *rittensl*, between them, but he is only prepared to regard the *rittensl* as proven when he finds a reasonably large number of direct verbal parallels. If, on the other hand, the stories differ from each other not only in the wording but also in various factual details, Gísli tends to conclude that the stories are unrelated but based

on the same oral tradition. This conclusion is strengthened whenever the character or event mentioned is presented in a way which presupposes that the audience is already familiar with the person or event in question. If, for example, a saga says “At this time Bjarni lived at Hof” without ever introducing Bjarni, one may conclude that Bjarni was a well-known character in the tradition. It also appears likely that many different stories were told about Bjarni in the oral tradition, if his living at Hof is described in several sagas but in widely different ways. We may, on the other hand, safely conclude that two sagas are connected through literary influence, *rittengsl*, if both texts portray Bjarni in exactly the same way with the same words and expressions in the same order, particularly if the words are not formulaic phrases (like the ones studied by Parry and Lord) but fairly unusual literary expressions.

So far I tend to agree wholeheartedly with Gísli. The problem with the method, however, is that you cannot completely exclude the possibility of *rittengsl* in the wider sense even when there is no exact similarity of wording. A saga-writer may well have heard some written saga being read aloud and become influenced by it, even though he may have forgotten the wording, so that he renders it in a completely different manner. Or he may have decided that he wanted to tell a different story altogether, even though the story he does tell is ultimately derived from the older text. A literary analysis of the text could sometimes reveal that such a revision has taken place, but this may not always be possible.

Yet Gísli's method appears to work very well when he compares what the various Eastfjord sagas tell about four famous saga characters from the same period: Brodd-Helgi Þorgilsson, Víga-Bjarni Brodd-Helgason, Geitir Lýtingsson and Þorkell Geitisson. All four of them play important roles in *Vápnfirðinga saga*, but they are mentioned as important people in other texts, although they usually appear in the background as subordinate characters. Víga-Bjarni appears in several texts, including the poem *Íslendingadrápa*, and he is in some of these texts pictured as an aggressive warrior-type, while other texts picture him as a peaceloving and very fair chieftain; Gísli argues that both opinions probably existed in the oral tradition. Geitir Lýtingsson does not seem to have been talked about quite as much, since his name does not appear as often in the texts, but the story of his death in *Vápnfirðinga saga* has so many close similarities with the story of Kjartan's death in *Laxdæla saga* that Gísli finds it reasonable to suppose some kind of literary influence, *rittengsl*. In the case of Þorkell Geitisson, whose full biography is never told in any

written saga, Gísli is able to reconstruct his “immanent saga” from information in a large number of different saga texts. The fact that such a reconstruction is possible appears to suggest that Porkell Geitisson was a well-known character in the oral tradition, even though no saga seems to have been written about him specifically. In the case of Brodd-Helgi, on the other hand, there are, as Gísli points out, close verbal parallels showing that the presentation of him in *Þorsteins saga hvíta* was borrowed directly from *Vápnfirðinga saga*, so in this case it is actually possible to prove *rittengsl*, but Brodd-Helgi was also mentioned in passing in other sagas, where it seems most reasonable to suppose that the information was, at least to some extent, based on oral tradition.

I find Gísli’s conclusions about these men reasonable, and I also find his conclusions plausible when he compares what different sagas have to say about the same event, for example the Battle in Böðvarsdal, or the escape of Gunnar Þiðrandabani from his enemies. Here again, Gísli tends to explain most of the similarities between the accounts in different texts as a result of several saga-writers using the same oral tradition. Nevertheless, he does in a few cases — six in all, listed on p. 245 — admit that one written text may have influenced or probably did influence another text through a literary borrowing, *rittengsl*. He thus agrees with Jón Jóhannesson that there are some similarities between *Landnámabók* and *Brandkrossa þáttur*, or *Landnámabók* and *Droplaugarsona saga*, which should be explained as resulting from *rittengsl*. On the whole, however, he rejects the large majority of Jón Jóhannesson’s theories about *rittengsl* as unfounded. One of his most interesting conclusions is that the fairly late *Fljótsdæla saga*, unlike the earlier Eastfjord sagas, does not presuppose as much knowledge in the audience about people and events but makes things more explicit and explains things in more detail. This would indicate that the oral tradition, which was still alive in the 13th century, when the older sagas were written, had died out or diminished when *Fljótsdæla* was being written.

One could probably quibble with Gísli about various minor points in his detailed comparative investigation of the Eastfjord material, but on the whole his conclusions are convincing, and my only important objection is that he could have gone one step further and asked himself: *When is it most likely that a saga-writer will use written sources as basis for his narrative and when is it most likely that he will not?* After having read Gísli’s chapters on the Eastfjord sagas I am myself prepared to give a tentative and hypothetical but

commonsensical answer to this question. The saga-writer will probably base his narrative on oral tradition when he is writing about the actions of the main heroes or about well-known dramatic events such as the Battle in Böðvarsdal. On the other hand, he may in some cases be consciously or unconsciously influenced by some great written work that he has read or heard somebody read aloud. He is also likely to consult a written source like *Landnámabók* or some earlier saga that happens to be available when he is compiling "background material" about the hero's ancestor or some other matter that has no direct bearing on the main plot but is still considered relevant to include in the saga. In this way one could possibly explain three of the cases where Gísli does find clear examples of direct verbal borrowing (*rittengsl*) in accounts of the same events: the description of Brodd-Helgi and the story of his nickname, the dream of Hrafnkell Hrafnsson in *Brand-Krossa þáttr*, and the story of Ketill þrymr and Arneiðr jarlsdóttir from the Hebrides.

The three remaining examples of *rittengsl* admitted by Gísli are, however, of a somewhat different kind. All three cases deal with major scenes in *Laxdæla saga* that are also somehow echoed in certain Eastfjord sagas, but not in a way that suggests direct copying from a written source. In these cases it seems to me likely that *Laxdæla*, which was a great and memorable literary work, left its mark in the minds and works of several Eastfjord saga-writers. Needless to say, any theories about the reasons for these instances of *rittengsl* must be speculative. It would nevertheless be interesting to hear Gísli's opinions about this matter. What is certain, however, and this is convincingly demonstrated by Gísli, is that saga-writers did not normally work like modern scholars, constantly quoting each other and copying long sections from books available in their library. Saga-writers are in fact not likely to have had access to a lot of books, and that in itself makes it reasonable to suppose that *rittengsl* (in the narrow sense) was a fairly unusual phenomenon, except when manuscripts were copied.

IV

I shall now turn my attention to Part III, which deals primarily with the tradition behind the Vínland sagas. There are clear indications that such a tradition existed long before the sagas were written, because the discovery of Vínland is mentioned in the Church History of Adam of Bremen from around 1075 and then in Ari fróði's *Íslendingabók*, written about fifty years

later. The two Vínland sagas, *Grænlandinga saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða*, were both written in the 13th century, both describing roughly the same series of events and the same characters — Eiríkr the Red, Leifr Eiríksson, Guðríðr Þorbjarnardóttir and several others — but with considerable variation in a large number of details, suggesting that the two sagas are at least partly based on different oral traditions. We can also, in this particular case, compare the testimony of the sagas with geographical facts and with modern archeological findings from the newly excavated Norse settlement L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland. All this should give us at least some possibility to check the truth of the sagas and thus to some extent their use of oral tradition. That is why Gísli calls this part of his thesis “Sögur og sannleikur”, in spite of the fact that he has previously warned his readers that one should not believe that a saga tells the truth just because it is based on oral tradition. The oral tradition may very well lie and often does. On the other hand, a saga that tells the truth is likely to be based on some kind of reliable source, which may be either oral or written.

It has, as Gísli points out, been argued by Jón Jóhannesson, that *Grænlandinga saga* was older and more reliable than *Eiríks saga rauða*, which had, according to Jón, used the former work as a source. In the 1980s, however, Ólafur Halldórsson compared the two sagas very carefully and came to the conclusion that one cannot prove *rittengsl* between them. Gísli, in his turn, concludes from Ólafur Halldórsson's investigation that *Grænlandinga saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða* were written down independently from oral tradition. On the basis of this conclusion, Gísli then assumes that whatever the two sagas have in common probably belongs to a very old oral tradition and may even be reliable as a testimony about what actually happened in Vínland, where the travellers landed, where they set up their camp, and so on.

This assumption, however, is in my view, unfounded and in fact rather dubious. There is at least one incident which is found in both sagas but could not very well have been part of any tradition, either literary or oral, before the latter half of the 12th century. I am referring to prophecies that appear in both sagas to the effect that the heroine of the Vínland voyages, Guðríðr, will one day return to Iceland and have very great and prominent descendants, who according to *Eiríks saga* will “shine with a bright light” (“yfir þínum kynkvíslum skína bjartari geislar en ek hafa megin til at geta slíkt vandliga sét”) And according to *Grænlandinga saga* these same remarkable people will be “shining and fine, sweet and sweet-smelling” (“bjart ok ágætt, sætt ok ilmat

vel"). At the end of both sagas these remarkable shining and sweet-smelling descendants of Guðríðr are listed, and we learn that they are three prominent Icelandic bishops who all lived in the 12th century: Bishop Þorlákr, who was bishop of Skálholt between 1118 and 1133, Bishop Björn, who was bishop of Hólar between 1147 and 1162, and Bishop Brandr Sæmundarson, who was bishop at Hólar between 1163 and 1201. The people who first told the stories about the Vínland voyages in the early 11th century could not very well have known that Guðríðr would have these three episcopal descendants more than a hundred years later, unless they really had access to some kind of second sight and could look into the future. And since we do not today believe in the existence of such second sight, we are forced to conclude that the story about the prophecy and the three bishops did not in fact enter the tradition until the 1160s at the earliest, probably from some kind of clerical source, since the language in the prophecy describing the three bishops is typical of religious style in written clerical texts.

If this conclusion is accepted, and it is in fact an unavoidable conclusion, we must also accept the possibility that other material may have entered the tradition of the Vínland sagas as late as the 1160s. Furthermore, we must accept the possibility that there may, after all, have been some kind of direct or indirect literary influence, *rittengsl*, from some kind of clerical source on both sagas, or from one of the two sagas on the other saga, even though such an influence cannot now be ascertained with certainty.

What is then the consequence of this reasoning for Gísli's argument?

First of all, we cannot be certain that the two Vínland sagas present independent testimonies about the same historical events. Even when they do agree about something, for example that Leifr Eiríksson and his men were the first to set foot on Vínland, this may not necessarily have been the case. It may very well have been some other Viking sailors who first came ashore in North America, and the circumstances may have been very much different from what the sagas say. The very fact that the tradition about the Vínland expeditions was evidently preserved and cultivated in the 12th and 13th centuries by Icelanders who claimed to be descendants of Guðríðr and relatives of the three bishops makes it in fact rather likely that the role of Guðríðr, Leifr Eiríksson and the Brattahlíð family for the discovery of Vínland has been exaggerated in both sagas.

On the other hand, it may well be that the two sagas have preserved real memories of what actually happened in Vínland insofar as their information

tallies with geographical, ethnographic and archeological facts. I would therefore tend to agree with Gísli that the sagas may well have preserved quite a lot of truthful information about sailing distances, vegetation, camping, nature along the North American coast, the discovery of grapes, the confrontation with Skrálings, and various other such matters. Unlike Gísli, however, I do not think that such information gives us any right to conclude, for example, that Leifr Eiríksson and his people established their camp in L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, or that they found grapes after having made an expedition to the southern part of the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. Not only is the information in the Vínland sagas much too vague and imprecise to allow any such conclusions but it is also likely to have changed considerably in the course of oral transmission. Furthermore, even though L'Anse aux Meadows has now been established by archeologists as a genuine Viking settlement, we cannot be certain that it was the only one — other such settlements may very well be discovered in the future, and if that happens, those who want to find out precisely where the Viking travellers landed will have to start their calculations from the beginning again. I somehow suspect that Gísli has been tempted by American Viking enthusiasts to speculate a bit more about these matters than his good scholarly sense would normally permit him.

What is certain, however, is that the two Vínland sagas are both very much based on oral tradition, and that at least parts of that oral tradition may be two hundred years old and based on genuine memories from Viking expeditions to North America. At least this much is clear from Gísli's chapters about Vínland, and even though several other scholars have said so before, Gísli's research has in some respects made this conclusion even more certain. At the same time, Gísli is aware of the fact that both sagas are also to be regarded as literary constructions from the 13th century. I would have liked him to analyse these literary constructions a bit more than he does, because I think such analysis may reveal more about the relationship between oral tradition and literary authorship than even the most careful consideration of sailing routes and archeological findings can do. In my opinion, Gísli's method in the section on "Sögur og sannleikur" is therefore not as convincing as his method in the section on "Sagnaheimur Austfirðingasagna". But he does succeed in convincing me that the Vínland sagas are texts with deep oral roots.

V

I shall now finally say a few words about the fourth part of Gísli's dissertation. This part is called "Ný viðmið" and starts with a chapter called "Áhrif á forsendur rannsókna". We are thus led to expect that we have come to the final conclusion, where the results of all the preceding chapters will be summarised and discussed. To some extent these expectations are also fulfilled, but in addition this concluding part also contains two completely new and independent studies, one about the relationship between *Finnboga saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga*, and another one about mythical patterns in *Hænsna-Póris saga*. These studies will be commented by the second opponent, Guðrún Nordal. I shall confine myself to some comments on the conclusions of this dissertation as a whole.

Several of these conclusions I have found convincing or at least plausible. This is particularly true of the conclusions presented in Parts I and II. I find it for example easy to agree with Gísli's conclusion that the introduction of written law radically changed the office and the political status of the lawspeaker, whose power had until then depended on his knowledge of oral tradition. One important result of the change was evidently that the office of the lawspeaker became monopolized by a few highly literate chieftain families with good clerical contacts in the church — families like the Haukdæla family and the Sturlung family. This may in fact have paved the way not only for increased political power but also for saga-writing within these families.

I also find it easy to agree with Gísli's conclusion that Ólafr Þórðarson's knowledge of orally transmitted poetry was largely confined to court poetry about the kings plus poetry that circulated in the Western part of Iceland. This conclusion may to some extent support Gísli's supposition that oral tradition about Icelanders was largely of a local or regional nature — a supposition that he further explores in his chapters about the Eastfjord sagas.

As I hope to have made clear already, I also find it easy to agree with Gísli's conclusion that the similarities that may be found between the Eastfjord sagas should largely be explained by their access to the same local oral tradition and not by theories about literary borrowing, *rittengsl*.

I have found it much more difficult to agree with Gísli's conclusions about the celebrated Vínland expeditions, since he has not succeeded in convincing me that the oral traditions about Vínland were sufficiently old and sufficiently

trustworthy to reveal the truth about what actually happened there. But there is no doubt that both Vínland sagas are based on ancient oral traditions.

FINALLY. The value of Gísli's dissertation does not primarily consist in his new conclusions, since several of them were in fact anticipated by other scholars: Ólafur Halldórsson, Óskar Halldórsson, Theodore Andersson, Carol Clover, Dietrich Hofmann and others. The value of his dissertation rather consists in the new approaches and comparative methods that he has introduced. On the other hand, I do not agree with Gísli when he, towards the very end of his dissertation on p. 327, summarily dismisses some other methods that have been used by his predecessors in their search for the oral roots of the sagas. Unlike Gísli, I think that a simple, formulaic saga style and direct references to what people have said — “some say this, others say that” et cetera — can still be used as pretty strong indications that a saga is based on oral tradition, even though it is true that such style and such references may also, sometimes, be used as purely literary devices to give the audience a faked impression of orality.

What we should do when looking for genuine oral tradition behind the written saga text is probably to use as many different methods as possible — intrinsic as well as extrinsic — and let them supplement each other, in some cases correct each other, to find how important or unimportant the underlying orality of the text may be. And one should of course not forget what Gísli also says at the end of his book, namely that sagas are never purely oral texts but always literary artifacts, in some cases obviously influenced by other literary texts, including the learned literature of medieval Europe. Yet the search for the oral roots of these texts will continue. Gísli Sigurðsson's dissertation has provided several helpful tools and instruments to future saga scholars who want to continue this search, and that in itself is a considerable achievement. From the bottom of my heart I want to congratulate you to a job well done — a quilt or *rúmábreiða* that will hold for wear and tear, *óbrotgjörn í bragar túni*.

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