

„1236: ÓRÆKJA MEIDDR OK HEILL GÖRR“

THE TITLE of this article is taken from the „Flateyjarannáll“,¹ and refers to the infamous episode in Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga* that describes the castration and blinding of Órækja Snorrason at the hands of his cousin, Sturla Sighvatsson, and Órækja's subsequent miraculous recovery.² According to the saga, Sturla Sighvatsson, after a year abroad, returns to Iceland in 1235, only to discover that Órækja has taken up residence in the Western fjords and is terrorizing the countryside with raids and plundering. The next spring (1236), Sturla and his father, Sighvatr, demand compensation from Snorri for the damages caused by his son Órækja, but to no avail. The upshot of the disagreement is that Snorri is forced to leave for Bersastaðir, and Sturla settles at Reykjaholt and appropriates all of Snorri's property. Sturla then meets with Órækja in Dýrafjörður, and they reach a tentative settlement, stipulating that Sighvatr should arbitrate between them; that Órækja should stay at Stafaholt; and that Sturla should retain Snorri's property and stay at Reykjaholt.³ Shortly thereafter, Órækja

¹ *Flateyjarbok* I–III (ed. Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Carl R. Unger, Christiania (Oslo), 1860–1868), III, 529 (henceforth abbreviated *Flat* I–III). For „gera heill“ in the meaning ‘cure,’ ‘restore to full health,’ see Johan Fritzner, *Ordbog over det gamle Norske Sprog* I–IV, 4th ed. (Oslo, etc., 1973), I, 759. See also the entries in the „Annales regii“ („Órækja meiddr“), in Gustav Storm, ed., *Islandske annaler indtil 1578*, 1888; rpt. Oslo, 1977, p. 130; the „Annales Reseniani“ („Órækja meiddr“; *ibid.*, p. 25); the „Skálholtsannáll“ („Órækja meiddr ok heill görr með jarteinum“; *ibid.*, p. 188); the „Lögmansannáll“ („Órækja meiddr ok heill“; *ibid.*, p. 256); the „Gottskálksannáll“ („Órækja meiddr“; *ibid.*, p. 327); and the „Oddverjaannáll“ („Órækja Snorrason meiddr ok heill“; *ibid.*, p. 480). When necessary, the orthography of all Old Norse texts has been normalized. A preliminary version of this article was printed in *Samtíðarsögur* I–II (Preprints of the Ninth International Saga Conference, Akureyri, 31.7.–6.8. 1994), I, 194–207.

² *Íslendinga saga* (henceforth abbreviated *Ísl*), in *Sturlunga saga* I (ed. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnboegason, and Kristján Eldjárn, Reykjavík, 1946), pp. 395–96.

³ *Ísl*, pp. 392–94; cf. *Flat* III, 110.

and his men, among them Sturla Þórðarson, join Sturla Sighvatsson in Reykjaholt, and the saga continues:⁴

Þeir Órækja mötuðust í litlustofu um kveldit. En um morgininn, er þeir gengu frá messu, fóru þeir í stofu. Þá var Órækja kallaðr í litlustofu ok Sturla Þórðarson. Litlu síðar kom Sturla Sighvatsson í stofudyrr, þær er eru frá litluhúsum, ok kallaði Sturlu Þórðarson til sín, ok gengu þeir í loft þat, er þar var. Tók þá Sturla Sighvatsson til orða: „Pér var kunnigt, nafni, um sætt vára í Dýrafirði. En nú kom faðir minn ekki til. En svá var mælt, at Órækja skyldi hafa Stafaholt ok búa þar, en ek hér. Ok þykkir þat eigi heilligt, at hann siti svá nær við lítit efni, en ek svima í fé Snorra. Er þar nú knefat um annat ráð, at ek ætla, at hann skuli fara norðr í Skagafjörð ok þar útan, ok mun nú skilja yðvart föruneysi.“ Tók hann þá til sverðsins Kettlings, er lá hjá þeim, er Sturla Þórðarson hafði í hendi haft. Gengu þeir þá til stofu, ok í durum kómu í móti þeim menn Órækju ok váru þá allir flettir vápnum ok klæðum. Var þeim þá fylgt í loftit ok þar settir menn til gæzlu. ... Sturla reið nú á brott með Órækju upp til jökla ok Svertingr með honum einn hans manna. Þeir riðu upp á Arnarvatnsheiði, þar til er þeir koma á Hellisfitjar. Þá fara þeir í hellinn Surt ok upp á vígit. Lögðu þeir þá hendr á Órækju, ok kvaddi Sturla til Þorstein langabein at meiða hann. Þeir skorðuð af spjótskafti ok gerðu af hæl. Bað Sturla hann þar með ljósta út augun. En Þorsteinn lézt eigi við þat kunna. Var þá tekinn knífr ok vafiðr ok ætlat af meir en þverfingr. Órækja kallaði á Þorlák biskup sér til hjálpar. Hann söng ok í meiðslunum bænina Sancta Maria, mater domini nostri, Jesu Christi. Þorsteinn stakk í augun knífinum upp at vafinu. En er því var lokit, bað Sturla hann minnast Arnbjargar ok gelda hann. Tók hann þá brott annat eistat. Eftir þat skipaði Sturla menn til at geyma hans. En Svertingr var þar hjá Órækju. En þeir Sturla ríða þá í brott ok ofan í Reykjaholt. Lét Sturla þá fara á brott menn Órækju, ok heldu þeir flestum föngum sínum. En hestar Órækju ok vápnráttu tekinn. Þá er þeir Sturla ok Svarthöfði kómu til Hvítár, kom þar á móti þeim Játvarðr Guðlaugsson. En er þeir segja honum þessi

⁴ *Isl*, pp. 395–96.

tíðindi, lézt hann vilja upp í hellinn at finna Órækju. En þeir löttu þess. Hann vildi fara eigi at síðr ok kallaði sik eigi saka mundu, er þar var Þórir jökull, móðurbróðir hans. Sturla bað hann skunda aftr af fjallinu ok út til Staðar at segja þeim tíðindi slík, er hann yrði viss. ... Reið Svarthöfði þá vestr í Hjarðarholt, en þeir Sturla út til Staðar, þaðan til Helgafells at láta skrifta sér ok svá á Eyri til Þórðar. En Þórði þóttu skriftir Sturlu of miklar ok kvað hann skyldu fara í Skálaholt á fund biskups. Fóru þeir þá til Staðar, ok var þar komin Arnbjörg ok Játvarðr, ok segir hann þau tíðindi í hljóði, at Órækja hefði sýn sína ok var heill. ... Þau Sturla Þórðarson ok Arnbjörg riðu þá suðr. ... En er þau kómu í Borgarfjörð, var Órækja brott ór hellinum. Hafði hann riðit suðr um land við þriðja mann. Riðu þau þá til Skálaholts, ok kom Órækja þá til móts við þau austan ór Klofa ok var inn hressasti. Allvel tók Magnús biskup við þeim ok leysti þá miskunnsamliga. Fekk hann Órækju tíu hundruð vaðmála ok lagði þat til með honum, at hann skyldi útan, – sagði, at hann myndi enga uppreist hér fá sinna mála. Riðu þau Órækja þá ofan á Eyrar, ok tók hann sér far með Andréasi Hrafnssyni.

This episode, which Sturla Þórðarson describes in such great detail, and which is documented in most Icelandic annals, is difficult to reconcile with reality and raises a number of interesting questions: for instance, what motivated Sturla Sighvatsson to resort to such unprecedented and radical measures to divest his cousin of his power? Miracles aside, what exactly transpired in Surtshellir? Why did Sturla Þórðarson feel the need to go to confession after he heard about the incident, and why was his penance so great? Why was Órækja awarded such a small compensation for the outrage, and why was he forced to leave the country while the perpetrator of the action, Sturla Sigvatsson, got off scot free?

Despite the number of questions raised by the Surtshellir episode, scholarly discussion of the maiming and miraculous recovery of Órækja is virtually nonexistent. It is the purpose of this article, then, to try to answer the questions posed above and to shed light on the motivating forces behind the episode, as well as on the obscure circumstances surrounding the torture of Órækja and, finally, on the rôle the author of *Íslendinga saga*, Sturla Þórðarson, might have played in the incident.

I. The Torture

According to *Íslendinga saga*, Sturla Sighvatsson appointed a certain Þorsteinn langabein to put out Órækja's eyes and to emasculate him. Þorsteinn, although reluctant to carry out the order to put out Órækja's eyes with the peg, complied with Sturla's request to thrust a finger breadth of a knife into his eyes. He then proceeded to remove one of Órækja's testicles. The saga specifically mentions that Órækja called on Saint Þorlákr and the Virgin Mary while being tortured. Some time later, Órækja left Surtshellir, rode off, met Sturla Þórðarson, and was „as fit as could be.“

Of the few scholars who have commented on the episode, Andreas Heusler appears to believe that the maiming of Órækja actually took place. He writes: „Die Art, die derselbe Sturla im Jahr 1236 den Vetter Órækja der Verstümmelung ausliefert, bezeichnet etwa die obere Grenze von dem, was zwischen Blutsverwandten zweiten und dritten Grades vorkam.“⁵ Other scholars, however, have been more sceptical. In *The Age of the Sturlungs*, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson attributes Órækja's lack of injury to the *drengskapr* of Þorsteinn langabein, who refused to carry out Sturla's command, while the editors of *Sturlunga saga*, who do not speculate about the events that took place in Surtshellir, suggest that Sturla Þórðarson believed Órækja had been miraculously saved through the intervention of Saint Þorlákr and the Virgin Mary.⁶

Despite Heusler's contention to the contrary, there can be no doubt in a modern reader's mind that Sturla's description of the events in Surtshellir is purely fictional: no one mounts a horse shortly after the removal of one testicle and cheerfully embarks on a journey. There is

⁵ Andreas Heusler, *Zum isländischen Fehdewesen in der Sturlungenzeit* (Abhandlungen der Königl. Preuss. Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse, Berlin, 1912), p. 36.

⁶ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *The Age of the Sturlungs* (tr. Jóhann S. Hannesson, Islandica 36, Ithaca, New York, 1953), p. 73; *Skýringar og fræði*, vol. III of *Sturlunga saga I–III* (ed. Bergljót Kristjánsdóttir, Bragi Halldórsson, Gísli Sigurðsson, Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, Guðrún Ingólfssdóttir, Jón Torfason, Sverrir Tómasson, and Örnólfur Thorsson, Reykjavík, 1988), p. lxix.

no evidence, however, that Órækja escaped unscathed because of Porsteinn's *drengskapr*, as Einar Ólafur claims, because Porsteinn does indeed thrust the knife into Órækja's eyes, and he complies with Sturla's command and removes one of Órækja's testicles.

Yet there can be no doubt that the allusion to Órækja's prayer during the torture, which must have been reported to Sturla Þórðarson by Sturla Sighvatsson upon the latter's return to Reykjaholt, was intended to evoke images of miraculous healings in hagiographic literature.⁷ The entry in the „Skálholtsannáll,“ which reads „Órækja meiddr ok heill görr með jarteinum ok fór útan,“ clearly shows that, at least to some members of Norse society, the healing of Órækja had miraculous overtones.⁸

But there is no evidence that Sturla Þórðarson himself attributed Órækja's fitness to divine intervention and, despite the entry in the „Skálholtsannáll,“ it is doubtful whether Órækja's alleged recovery was considered a miracle by contemporary clerics. After the Surts-hellir incident, Sturla Þórðarson and Órækja both sought out Bishop Magnús of Skálholt, who „received them heartily and absolved them mercifully.“⁹ Magnús awarded Órækja ten hundreds of *vaðmál*, stipulated that he must leave the country, and asserted that he would never be able to further his case in Iceland. As mentioned above, the damages awarded Órækja for the alleged castration and blinding are completely out of proportion with the codified compensation for such crimes. According to all Old Norwegian and Old Icelandic laws, blinding, as well as castration, were considered „major wounds“ and puni-

⁷ When Sturla Þórðarson and Svarthöfði meet Játvarðr after they have left Reykjaholt, they tell him „the tidings,“ that is, they tell him about the location and the participants in the incident (and, we must assume, of the incident as reported to them). Játvarðr, however, only reports that „Órækja had the use of his eyes and that he was unhurt,“ cf. *Ísl*, p. 396.

⁸ See Storm, *Islandske annaler*, p. 188. As far as similar miracles go, Saint Þorlákr is said to restore the eyesight of those who call on him. See *Þorláks saga byskups*, p. 106; *Jarteinabók Þorláks byskups 1199*, p. 186; *Jarteinabók Þorláks byskups önnur*, pp. 203, 220; in vol. I of *Byskupa sögur I–III* (ed. Guðni Jónsson, Reykjavík, 1948). One of the most famous miracles of Saint Óláfr involves the healing of the English priest Ríkarðr, whose eyes had been put out and tongue cut off in an episode of maiming. See *Heimskringla* (ed. Finnur Jónsson, 1911; rpt. Oslo, 1966, pp. 587–89).

⁹ *Ísl*, p. 396.

shed with full outlawry.¹⁰ Not only is there no mention of any legal action against Sturla Sighvatsson after the incident, but the sum that Órækja received from Magnús is considerably lower than what would normally be awarded even for a superficial wound.¹¹ The men wounded in Sturla Sighvatsson's raid on Hvammr in 1228, for example, received twenty hundreds for their wounds, and, upon hearing the verdict, Sturla remarked drily: „Eigi er of mikít gert til handa sáramönn-um, ok þat skal vel gjalda.“¹²

We must conclude, then, that Órækja's version of the incident as told in his confession, and to which Sturla Þórðarson certainly was privy, did not entitle him to the restitution that should have been awarded for the crimes of castration and blinding. Moreover, the episode must have entailed humiliating circumstances for Órækja, since he would never be able to further his case in Iceland and was advised

¹⁰ See *Grágás: Konungsbók* (ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen, 1852; rpt. Odense, 1974), pp. 147–48; *Grágás: Staðarhólsbók* (ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen, 1879; rpt. Odense, 1974), pp. 299; *Frostapingslög, in Norges Gamle Love indtil 1387 I–V* (henceforth abbreviated *NGL I–V*) (ed. R. Keyser, P. A. Munch, Gustav Storm, and Ebbe Hertzberg, Christiania (Oslo), 1846–95), I, 171; *Landslög* (*NGL II*, 50); *Jónsbók* (*NGL IV*, 207). *Grágás* mentions the right to castrate landlopers, clearly as a preventive measure to protect female relatives (*Konungsbók*, p. 203; *Staðarhólsbók*, p. 151). See also Lúðvík Ingvarsson, *Refsingar á Íslandi á þjóðveldistímanum*, Reykjavík, 1970, p. 381. *Frostapingslög* grants a slave owner the right to castrate his run-away foreign slave (*NGL I*, 226), and in both *Gulapingslög* and *Frostapingslög* castration is mentioned as the punishment for bestiality (*NGL I*, 18, 123). However, none of these sections would apply in Órækja's case. The Church laws also stipulate that no castrated man may marry (*Gulathings-Christenret*, *NGL II*, 333; *Biskop Arnes kristenret for Island*, *NGL V*, 38). Although these Church laws are later than the castration episode in *Íslendinga saga*, they do point to an ecclesiastic tradition of prohibition of marriage for men who were unable to procreate, which, in turn, could account for Sturla Sighvatsson's comment that Órækja should „remember Arnbjörg“ (*Ísl*, p. 395).

¹¹ For fines incurred for various crimes (including manslaughter and maiming) in the age of the Sturlungs, see Lúðvík Ingvarsson, *Refsingar*, pp. 364–76. See also Valtýr Guðmundsson, „Manngjöld-hundrað,“ in *Germanistische Abhandlungen zum LXX. Geburtstag Konrad Maurers* (ed. Oscar Brenner et al., Göttingen, 1893), pp. 521–54. Valtýr (pp. 538–45) argues that the unspecified „hundreds“ awarded as compensation in *Sturlunga saga* refers to „hundrað verðaura“ and not to „hundrað alna vaðmála,“ the latter of which is always specified by a qualifier. If that is the case, the compensation awarded Órækja was very low indeed compared to the compensation for other crimes.

¹² *Ísl*, p. 318.

to leave the country. It is also noteworthy that, in later literature recording the miracles of Saint Þorlákr, there is no mention of divine intervention on Órækja's behalf: if, indeed, the clerical opinion in thirteenth-century Iceland had been that Órækja's healing could be attributed to Saint Þorlákr, such a miracle would certainly have been recorded among Þorlákr's *jartein*.

Thus, all the facts point in one direction: not only did the maiming in Surtshellir never take place, but Sturla Þórðarson must also have been perfectly aware of what really had transpired. This view is supported by the entry under the year 1236 in the „*Annales Reseniani*,“ usually attributed to Sturla, which reads as follows: „Órækja meiddr,“ thus omitting all references to healing and divine intervention.¹³ The question is, then, what prompted Sturla Sighvatsson's version of the events, which clearly formed the basis for Sturla Þórðarson's account, and why would the latter, if he knew what had taken place in Surtshellir, suppress that information in favor of a story clouded in miracle mongering?

In a comment on the preliminary version of this article, Helgi Þorláksson suggested that Órækja had been excommunicated at the time of the Surtshellir incident, and that Sturla Þórðarson's need to go to confession and his subsequent penance were caused by his having associated with his excommunicated cousin. That view Helgi found supported by the fact that Sturla Þórðarson explicitly mentions that Órækja and his men and the company of Sturla Sighvatsson kept separate households on the two occasions they stayed together during the spring and early summer of 1236.¹⁴ Furthermore, on March 28, 1236, Sturla Sighvatsson raided Órækja's farm at Stafaholt, carried food out of the church, and justified this sacrilege with the comment that „kirkja ætti eigi at halda bannsettra manna fé.“¹⁵ Sturla's statement on that occasion is obscure, because there is no evidence, either in *Íslendinga saga* or in the annals, that Órækja was under the ban of the

¹³ Storm, *Islandske annaler*, p. 25. Stefán Karlsson, „Alfræði Sturlu Þórðarsonar,“ in *Sturlustefna* (ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir and Jónas Kristjánsson, Reykjavík, 1988), pp. 47–50; 54, argues convincingly that Sturla Þórðarson was responsible for the first part of the „*Annales Reseniani*“ (until the year 1283).

¹⁴ *Ísl*, p. 393.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

church at that point.¹⁶ Furthermore, Órækja and his men were detained by Sturla Sighvatsson on their return from church at Reykjaholt on the feastday of Þorlákr, and it is unlikely that Sturla, if he took care not to associate with his cousin for fear of clerical punishment, would have allowed him to attend mass in his church.¹⁷ It seems more likely that Sturla Þórðarson's statement concerning the separate households was a literary device, indicating hostility between the two factions. That probability is strengthened by a similar statement in *Hákonar saga hins gamla*: „høfðu sín herbergi hvárir, jarl ok hans menn ok þeir Hánefr. Hvártveggju høfðu miklar sveitir, ok optliga skildi á sveitunga þeira, er þeir fundusk drukknir á kveldum.“¹⁸ We must conclude, then, that there is nothing, except Sturla Sighvatsson's statement, to indicate that Órækja had been excommunicated in 1236, and the reasons for Sturla Þórðarson's need to go to confession, as well as for the heavy penance inflicted upon him, remain obscure.

II. Sturla Sighvatsson's Motivation

In *Hákonar saga hins gamla*, also written by Sturla Þórðarson, we are told that Sturla Sighvatsson spent the winter 1234–35 with King Hákon in Túsberg, and that the king was quite perturbed about Sturla's reports of unrest in Iceland. Sturla Þórðarson writes:¹⁹

Konungr spurði hversu mikit fyrir mundi verða at koma einvaldi yfir landit, ok kvað þá mundu vera frið betra, ef einn réði mestu. Sturla tók þessu líkliga, ok kvað lítit mundu fyrir verða, ef sá væri harðvirkr ok ráðugr, er við tæki. Konungr spurði, ef hann vildi taka þat ráð. Hann kvazk til mundu hætta með konungs ráði ok forsjá, ok eiga slíkra launa ván af honum sem honum þætti verðugt, ef hann fengi þessu á leið komit. Konungr sagði svá, at hann skyldi eigi með manndrápum vinna landit, en bað hann taka menn ok senda útan, eða fá ríki þeira með öðru móti,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 568, n3 on ch. 114. On a later occasion, in 1242, Órækja and his men were indeed excommunicated, and the saga describes how Bishop Sigvarðr released them from the church ban and stipulated their penance (fasting) and a monetary fine to be paid to the Church (*ibid.*, pp. 463–64).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

¹⁸ *Flat* III, 104.

¹⁹ *Flat* III, 110.

ef hann mætti. Sturla var optliga með konungi um vetrinn, ok tóluðu þeir þetta mál.

The same episode is quoted in *Íslendinga saga*, where Sturla again mentions King Hákon's warning to Sturla Sighvatsson not to increase manslaughter in Iceland; rather, he must force people to go abroad.²⁰

In light of these circumstances, the rationale behind Sturla Sighvatsson's actions the subsequent year becomes clear. In his conversation with Sturla Þórðarson at Reykjaholt prior to the Surtshellir incident, he declares that he intends for Órækja to go north to Skagafjörður and leave for Norway from there. Thus Sturla's sole intention with the capture of Órækja was, in keeping with the king's command, to force him to leave Iceland and to „divest him of his power by other means;“ the „other means“ being the alleged castration and blinding. What is not clear, however, is why Sturla devised such an elaborate scheme to force Órækja to go abroad, and why blinding and castration loomed so large in that scheme.

III. Blinding and Emasculation in Old Norse Literature and Society

Although the literature shows that blinding and emasculation of powerful enemies was not entirely unknown in medieval Scandinavia, the most famous example being the maiming of King Magnús Sigurðarson by the Irish Haraldr gilli in 1135, these types of corporal injuries are seldom mentioned in the Icelandic family sagas and, with two exceptions, no episodes of castration and blinding are recorded in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland.²¹ However, if we turn to other pro-

²⁰ *Ísl.*, p. 439.

²¹ *Heimskringla*, p. 560. *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* (ed. Sigurður Nordal, *Íslenzk fornrit* II, Reykjavík, 1933, 228) describes how Egill poked out the eye of Ármóðr with his finger; in *Hallfredar saga* (ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Íslenzk fornrit* VIII, Reykjavík, 1939, 166–67), Hallfreðr deprived both Þorleifr spaki and Kálfr of one eye; in *Haralds saga harðráða*, Haraldr is said to have blinded the Greek emperor (*Heimskringla*, pp. 455–56), and Óláfr Haraldsson blinded his rival, King Hrórekr (*ibid.*, p. 235). Aside from the Órækja episode, *Íslendinga saga* reports one instance of castration, namely, when Sturla Sighvatsson castrated two priests, Snorri and Knútr, in retaliation for the slaying of his brother Tumi (p. 292). For episodes of castration and blinding in other genres of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, see Inger Boberg, *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature* (Bibliotheca Arnarnæana 27, Copenhagen, 1966), 238–39.

vinces of the Norwegian empire, namely to the northern isles of Orkney, Man, and the Hebrides, the sources, both literary and historical, mention blinding and emasculation as being the most frequently used means to disempower an opponent. Consider the following examples:²²

1. 1095? Haraldr, son of Guðrøðr Crovan of Man, is captured by his brother Løgmaðr, blinded and emasculated;
2. 1154? Guðrøðr Óláfsson, king of Man, captures three of his cousins, slays one and blinds the other two;
3. 1198. King William of Scotland blinds Þorfinnr, son of Earl Haraldr Maddaðarson of Caithness;
4. 1223. Óláfr Guðrøðarson of Man blinds and emasculates his nephew, Guðrøðr Rognvaldsson.

Orkneyinga saga further describes how Earl Páll, the opponent of Earls Rognvaldr kali and Haraldr, is captured by Sveinn Ásleifarson and brought to his sister Margrét and her husband Maddaðr.²³ When, after days of secret deliberations between Margrét, Maddaðr, and Sveinn, Páll is faced with the possibility of losing his realm, he answers as follows:²⁴

„Pat er frá mínu skapi at segja, at ek em svá farinn frá ríki mínu, at eigi munu menn til slíkra ferða spurdaga haft hafa; vil ek ok aldri koma síðan til Orkneyja ... en ek vil, at mér sé fengit fé at staðfesta mik í munklífi nokkuru, ok hafi þér vörð á, svá at ek komumk eigi á brott þaðan. En ek vil, Sveinn, at þú farir í Orkneyjar ok segir, at ek sé blindaðr ok þó at fleira meiddr, því at vinir mínir munu sækja mik, ef þeir vita, at ek em heill maðr; kann þá vera, at ek mega eigi synja at fara til ríkis míns með þeim, því at ek get, at þeim myni þykkja meiri skaði at skilnaði várum en þeim mun vera.“

²² Quoted from Alan Orr Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History A.D. 500 to 1286*, I–II, Edinburgh and London, 1922, II, 98, 226, 350, n2, 456–60.

²³ *Orkneyinga saga* (ed. Finnbogi Guðmundsson, *Íslensk fornrit* XXXIV, Reykjavík, 1965), p. 169.

²⁴ *Orkneyinga saga*, p. 170.

This episode not only demonstrates how emasculation and blinding could be used to divest an enemy of his power, it also explains *why* these types of maiming were so successful as a means of neutralizing a contender: an enemy deprived of his manhood would immediately lose his supporters and pose no threat to the establishment, either in terms of his own person or in terms of siring offspring that could contend for future power. Furthermore, it seems that in such cases, the victim's former followers never inflicted vengeance on the offender, possibly because they had no interest in supporting an emasculated leader. What is even more important, however, is that, as in the Surtshellir incident, the blinding and maiming do not appear to have taken place: to dissuade Páll's followers, Sveinn is told to report the alleged injuries to them, whereas Páll, like Órækja, in reality will relinquish his power and depart from his realm.²⁵

Orkneyinga saga also contains an episode of blinding and maiming with subsequent miraculous healing that closely mirrors the episode in *Íslendinga saga*. This instance concerns the bishop of Caithness, Jón, who was captured by Earl Haraldr Maddaðarson in 1201:²⁶

En þeira skipti fóru svá, at Haraldr jarl lét handtaka byskup ok skera ór honum tunguna, en síðan lét hann stinga knífi í augun ok blinda hann. Jón byskup kallaði á meyna, ina heilögu Tröllhænu, í meizlunum ok gekk síðan á brekku nokkura, þegar þeir létu hann lausan. Kona ein var á brekkunni, ok bað byskup hana hjálpa sér. Hon sá, at blóð fell ór andliti hans, ok mælti: „Vertu hljóðr, herra, því at gjarna vil ek hjálpa yðr.“ Byskup var færðr til þess staðar, er hvílir in helga Tröllhæna. Par fekk byskup heilsubót bæði máls ok sýnar.

In the Caithness episode, however, the version of the miraculous events as told in *Orkneyinga saga* differs somewhat from the version recorded in contemporary sources. According to Fordun's annals, the Earl of Caithness commanded that the bishop should be blinded and that his tongue should be torn out, but „it turned out otherwise, for

²⁵ The author of *Orkneyinga saga* emphasizes that the episode related in the saga represents Sveinn Ásleifarson's version of the incident: according to some informants, Margrét had hired Sveinn to blind her brother, then hired another man to kill him (p. 170).

²⁶ *Orkneyinga saga*, pp. 294–95.

the use of his tongue and of one eye was in some measure left to him."²⁷ In his *Chronicles Relating to Scotland*, Herbert Maxwell comments on this discrepancy of events as follows:²⁸ „It will be seen from this that John of Fordun, instead of exaggerating the narrative, brings it into sober prose, eliminates the miraculous element and suggests what was probably the case, that Earl Harald's men were of milder mood than their master, who was probably drunk, and, by wounding the bishop in the face and mouth, deceived the earl into the belief that his orders had been carried out.“

Thus all the ingredients of Sturla Sighvatsson's scheme to rid himself of his troublesome cousin Órækja were present, in one way or another, in both contemporary insular sources and in *Orkneyinga saga*. The question is whether these events, historical or literary, were known to Sturla Sighvatsson and whether they could have loomed large enough on his horizon to have served as the model for the Surts-hellir incident.

IV. The Orkney Connection

The connections between Norway and Iceland and the northern isles during the first half of the thirteenth century were very close. The contemporary sagas record frequent traffic between Norway, Iceland, Orkney, Man, and the Hebrides, and the news of events that took place in the isles must have spread quickly in Norway and Iceland.²⁹ Óláfr Guðrøðarson's emasculation and blinding of his cousin Guðrøðr Rognvaldsson, for example, is recorded in all Icelandic annals, including „*Annales Reseniani*.“³⁰ Furthermore, Sturla Þórðarson's *Hákonar saga* mentions that Óláfr himself and Páll Bálkason, the in-

²⁷ Sir Herbert Maxwell, *The Early Chronicles Relating to Scotland*, Glasgow, 1912, p. 199.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 200–01.

²⁹ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Sagnaritun Oddaverja* in *Studia Islandica. Íslenzk fræði* 1, Reykjavík, 1937, 17–18.

³⁰ Cf. the „*Flateyjarannáll*“ (*Flat* III, 526); the „*Annales Reseniani*“ (Storm, *Islandske annaler*, p. 24); the „*Henrik Høyers annáll*“ (*ibid.*, p. 63); the „*Annales regii*“ (*ibid.*, p. 126); the „*Skálholtsannáll*“ (*ibid.*, p. 185); the „*Gottskálksannáll*“ (*ibid.*, p. 326); „*Oddverjaannáll*“ (*ibid.*, p. 479). See also *Guðmundar saga Arasonar*, in *Byskupa sögur* II, 369.

stigator of the punishment, visited Hákon's court in Norway 1230, and, according to the Chronicle of Man, Óláfr, as well as Páll Bálkason and the victim, Guðrøðr, took part in Hákon's expedition to the Hebrides and Man in 1230–31.³¹ There can be no doubt, then, that the incidents reported from the northern isles at this time (including the maiming of Guðrøðr at the hands of Óláfr and Páll Bálkason, who was killed by Guðrøðr in the Hebrides later that year), were based on first-hand information that was current in Norway as well as in Iceland.³²

As to the events recorded in *Orkneyinga saga*, scholars agree that a copy of the original *Orkneyinga saga* was available to Snorri and used by him when he worked on his *Heimskringla*.³³ It has further been argued that the original version of the saga was reworked at Reykjaholt around 1230 under Snorri's supervision, and speculations have been made to the effect that Sturla Sighvatsson did the copying of *Orkneyinga saga*.³⁴ Whatever the case may be, there can be no doubt that a version of *Orkneyinga saga* was one of the sagas available to Sturla Sighvatsson during his stay at Reykjaholt in 1230, when he was preoccupied with writing sagas from those books that Snorri put together.³⁵

The episode in *Orkneyinga saga* involving the maiming and miraculous healing of the bishop of Caithness, however, occurs in a later addition to *Orkneyinga saga*. The informant of this and of later episodes concerning events in Caithness is usually believed to be Andréas Hrafnsson, son of the lawman of Caithness, who in the winter of 1234–35 visited Iceland in the company of Andréas Gunnason, grand-grandson of Sveinn Ásleifarson of Orkney.³⁶ What scholars have failed to realize, however, is the close connection between Andréas Hrafnsson and the Sturlungs, in particular Órækja and Sturla Þórðarson. According to *Íslendinga saga*, Andréas Hrafnsson gave Órækja the sword „Sættarspillir,“ a sword that was coveted by such important personages as Böðvarr frá Stað, Þorleifr ór Görðum, and Gizurr Þorvaldsson, and, after having been forced to return to Iceland by bad weather in the fall

³¹ *Flat* III, 101; Anderson, *Early Sources*, p. 472.

³² *Flat* III, 103.

³³ *Orkneyinga saga*, p. vi.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. cvii–cviii.

³⁵ *Ísl*, p. 342.

³⁶ Sigurður Nordal, *Orkneyinga saga* (Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur 44, Copenhagen, 1913–16), p. I; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Sagnaritun*, p. 37; cf. *Ísl*, p. 387.

of 1235, Andréas and his companion, Svarthöfði Dufgusson, joined Órækja and Sturla Þórðarson during the following winter.³⁷ Finally, when Órækja was forced to leave Iceland after the alleged maiming, he took passage with Andréas Hrafnsson to Norway.³⁸

It is clear, then, that Sturla Sighvatsson, as well as Órækja and Sturla Þórðarson, were privy to first-hand information about the events in the northern isles, in particular about the events in Orkney and Caithness, and the presence of Andréas Hrafnsson of Caithness in the company of Órækja and Sturla Þórðarson in 1235–36 testifies to the novelty and immediacy of that information. It is very likely, therefore, that the events described in *Orkneyinga saga* (and reported by Andréas Hrafnsson) served as the model for the Surtshellir incident. In compliance with King Hákon's command, Sturla Sighvatsson refrained from killing his adversary Órækja, an action that certainly would have had severe repercussions for Sturla and would have placed him at odds with his powerful uncles Snorri and Þórðr. Instead, Sturla decided to compel Órækja to leave the country, and to achieve that goal, he resorted to means that were known to him through saga literature and hearsay. The question is whether Sturla Sighvatsson was the sole instigator of this ingenious plot. Although he certainly knew the episode of the alleged maiming of Earl Páll from *Orkneyinga saga*, there is no evidence that he had immediate access to any information from Andréas Hrafnsson, who spent time in the company of Órækja and Sturla Þórðarson, but seems to have had scant opportunity to interact with Sturla Sighvatsson. We may ask, then, whether Sturla Þórðarson, the saga author, could possibly have played an active part in the conspiracy.

V. Sturla Þórðarson's Complicity

Sturla's version of the incident as told in *Íslendinga saga* is distanced and noncommittal: he relates the events in the third person, records the story of the maiming as he heard it from Sturla Sighvatsson and Játvarðr, and makes no mention of his own implicit knowledge. In *Hákonar saga*, he devotes an entire section to Sturla Sighvatsson's con-

³⁷ *Ísl*, pp. 387, 389.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 396.

versation with King Hákon, including Hákon's admonition to seize power by forcing people to leave Iceland.³⁹ But, although he mentions the subsequent dealings between Sturla and Órækja, he explicitly refrains from mentioning the Surtshellir incident, and states that „þarf þeira skipti eigi hér at skrifa. En sá varð endir á, at Órækja fór útan þat sumar með ráði Magnúss biskups af Skálaholti.“⁴⁰

Similarly, in the same saga, Sturla records the arrival of the men from the Hebrides at the court of Hákon in 1224 after the castration of Guðrøðr in 1223, but, although he must have been aware of the reasons behind their mission, he categorically refrains from going into detail and merely states that they brought many letters concerning the plight of their country.⁴¹ This lack of information has led historians to speculate about the nature of the Hebridean mission.⁴² As Alexander Bugge correctly remarks, the messengers, Gillikristr and Óttarr Snækollsson, must have brought news about the treaty that granted Óláfr Guðrøðarson absolute power in Man and the Hebrides. „The plight“ of the islanders, however, most certainly referred to the events that took place prior to that treaty, namely, to the castration and blinding of the royal pretender Guðrøðr at the hands of his uncle, Óláfr.⁴³ Sturla's lack of reference to that event is even more puzzling in view of the fact that it is mentioned in the „Annales Reseniani,“ and, as Hákon's chronicler, he undoubtedly would have had first-hand access to the information contained in the Hebridean letters.⁴⁴

The only time Sturla makes reference to blinding and emasculation as a means to disempower enemies is in the following quotation from *Hákonar saga*, describing how Híði, retainer of Earl Hákon galinn, offers to rid the earl of the young pretender Hákon Hákonarson. That conversation is reported by Sturla as follows:⁴⁵

„Hér er sveinn sá með yðr, er kallaðr er sonr Hákonar konungs,

³⁹ *Flat* III, 109–10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁴² *Regesta Norvegica* I: 822–1236 (ed. Erik Gunnes, Oslo, 1989), p. 168, n1; Alexander Bugge, tr., *Norges kongesagaer* IV: *Haakons, Guttorms, Inges saga, Haakon Haakonssøns saga, Magnus Haakonssøns saga* (Kristiania [Oslo], 1914), p. 117, n2.

⁴³ Anderson, *Early Sources*, pp. 456–59.

⁴⁴ Storm, *Islandske annaler*, p. 24.

⁴⁵ *Flat* III, 11.

ok kann vera, ef hann vex upp hér, at margir menn elski hann bæði fyrir fǫður ok fǫðurfǫður, ok mun yðrum syni eigi auðvelt at stíga til ríkis eptir yðr, ef hann stendr í móti. Nú veit ek enn, ef svá væri útanlands við vaxit, þá mundi þat ráð fyrir gort, at eigi þyrfti at hræðask landshǫfðingi um sitt afspringi, ok mundi sveinn þessi vera sendr í önnur lönd til þeira hǫfðingja, er enga vináttu ætti honum at gjalda, ok mundi hann þá annathvart meiddr eða svá illa settr, at hann þyrfti eigi at hræðask. En ef þér vilið, þá bjóðumsk ek til þessar ferðar, ok mun ek svá sýst fá, at yðr líki.“ ... En er jarl hafði þagat um stund, tók hann svá til orðs: „Eigi mun guð vilja, at ek kaupí svá ríki mínum syni, at ek fyrirkoma þess manns syni ok sonarsyni, er ek ætti bezt at gjalda.“

The quote is particularly illuminating because it not only shows that Sturla was keenly aware that maiming could be used to neutralize a powerful enemy but also leaves no doubt as to Sturla's sentiments about this measure. According to him, such things happened „abroad“ (in the northern isles?), and through the words of Hákon galinn he thoroughly condemned the practice.

Sturla's reluctance to deal with this issue cannot be coincidental, and it is not inconceivable that this reluctance can be traced to the event that took place in Reykjaholt in 1236. We are told that, prior to the capture of Órækja and his men, Sturla Sighvatsson summoned Sturla Þórðarson and informed him of his intention to force Órækja abroad.⁴⁶ That this conversation was not quite as friendly as Sturla Þórðarson alleges, but had rather violent overtones, is indicated by the fact that Sturla Sighvatsson seized Órækja's sword, „Kettlingr,“ which his cousin, Sturla, had held in his hands. That same sword was later taken from Sturla's dead body by Gizurr Þorvaldsson after the battle of Örygsstaðir in 1238, and, according to Sturla Þórðarson, it was returned to Órækja the following year, when Órækja collected from Gizurr the sword called „Kettlingr,“ that was taken when Órækja was maimed.⁴⁷ The fact that Sturla took such great pains to trace the history of that sword and to record its eventual restoration to Órækja shows beyond

⁴⁶ *Ísl*, p. 395.

⁴⁷ *Ísl*, pp. 436, 445.

any doubt that he, Sturla, felt responsible for the loss and testifies to his own bad conscience concerning the episode.

It emerges from the discussion above that Sturla must have felt less than heroic about his own behavior in Reykjaholt in 1236. In his later writings, he explicitly refrains from any mention of emasculation and blinding, and he takes great care to mention that Órækja's sword, which had been „taken“ by Sturla Sighvatsson on that occasion, was eventually restored to its owner. Although we will never know exactly what transpired during the conversation between the two namesakes in the attic at Reykjaholt, it is possible that Sturla Þórðarson, however reluctantly, was forced to partake in the plot to divest Órækja of his power and, in the attempt to avoid the actual implementation of the injuries (which certainly would not have been beyond Sturla Sighvatsson), he may even have suggested the ruse of miraculous healing from his knowledge of Andréas Hrafnsson's histories about the bishop of Caithness. If that was the case, it would explain Sturla's need to go to confession, as well as the great penance inflicted on him by the cleric at Helgafell.

As for Órækja in Surtshellir, faced with the option of bodily injury or loss of honor, he certainly would have opted for the latter and corroborated Sturla Sighvatsson's story of the maiming and subsequent healing. The motif for the inclusion of the maiming is consequently that Órækja needed to be freed from any implication of cowardness.⁴⁸ Through this scheme, Sturla Sighvatsson effectively achieved his goal in compliance with King Hákon's orders; namely, to force his adversary to go abroad,⁴⁹ as well as to divest him of his power by „other means,“ the „other means“ being modeled on his knowledge of similar incidents from *Orkneyinga saga*. The scene in Surtshellir as described by Sturla Þórðarson, then, is not an instance of literature recording life, but rather, as Oscar Wilde put it, life imitating art.

⁴⁸ This is corroborated by Órækja's obsession with his own honor, which emerges from the following quotations: „Vildi Órækja ekki annat en sjálfðæmi, – kallaðist vilja hafa sæmð af því, en lézt vera ekki fésjúkr“ (*Isl*, p. 378); „Hann [Órækja] lézt vera ekki fésjúkr, en sagði þat, at Sighvatr myndi ekki vilja minnka hann“ (*ibid.*, p. 388).

⁴⁹ According to *Grágás* (*Konungsbók*, p. 148; *Staðarhólsbók*, p. 304), a man who falsely claims to have been wounded was subject to the penalty of lesser outlawry.

EFNISÁGRIP

Í grein þessari er leitað svara við fjórum spurningum: 1) hvers vegna Sturla Sighvatsson beitti svo dæmalausum og róttækum aðferðum eins og geldingu við að koma Órækju Snorrasyni frá völdum; 2) hvers vegna Sturla Þórðarson varð að ganga til skrifta hjá Magnúsi Gissurarsyni biskupi í Skálholti; 3) hvers vegna Órækja fékk svo litlar bætur meina sinna og 4) hvers vegna hann varð að fara utan en Sturla Sighvatsson virtist vera laus allra mála. Nafn greinarinnar er sótt í Flateyjarannál, þar sem vikið er að hinum illræmda atburði sem gerst er sagt frá í Íslendinga sögu Sturlu Þórðarsonar þegar Sturla Sighvatsson lét gelda og blinda Órækju Snorrason í Surtshelli árið 1236. Mjög örðugt er að sjá að þessi atburður komi heim og saman við raunveruleikann. Í Íslendinga sögu Sturlu Þórðarsonar er gefið í skyn að Þorlákur helgi eða jómfú María hafi gjört Órækju heilan en ekki er svo að sjá að Magnús Gissurarson biskup eða Sturla Þórðarson hafi eignað árnaðarorði heilagra manna hversu vel Órækja var á sig kominn, þegar hann kom í Skálholt eftir atburðinn. Þessa atburðar er hvergi getið í jarteinabókum Þorláks helga og í Resensannál sem eignaður er Sturlu Þórðarsyni segir aðeins að Órækja hafi verið „meiddr“. Í annan stað ber að nefna hversu miskunnsamlega Magnús biskup leysti þá Órækju og Sturlu en fékk þeim fyrrnefnda „tíu hundruð vaðmála“ í bætur fyrir þann glæp sem samkvæmt norskum og íslenskum lögum varðaði útleigð og tjáði honum að hann „myndi enga uppreist hér fá sinna mála.“ Höfundur þessarar greinar hyggur efalaust að Órækja hafi aldrei verið „meiddr“ og þetta hafi bæði Sturla Þórðarson og Magnus biskup vitað. Fyrirmyndi að þessum atburðum sé hins vegar að leita í Orkneyinga sögu. Hún greinir frá pínslum svipuðum meiðingum Órækju og voru frásagnir hennar vel þekktar með Sturlungum. Athöfnin hafi verið táknræn, en engu að síður dugað til að Órækja missti æruna og varð að fara úr landi eins og Sturla og Hákon gamli vildu.