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OLD NORSE RELIGION IN THE SAGAS OF ICELANDERS¹

THE SAGAS of Icelanders as sources of Norse religious belief are obscure and difficult to handle. So to begin with I shall run through some main themes of the research carried out these last decades, and refer to leading experts on the origin and nature of Icelandic saga-writing.

It is some fifty years since Sigurður Nordal wrote the introduction to his edition of *Egils saga* in the series *Íslensk fornrit*. This introduction set the standard for this admirable series of texts, and many of the chief ideas characteristic of the so-called 'Icelandic school' have been published there. In his introduction, Nordal reviewed (among other things) the differing opinions held by older scholars on the part authors took in the composition of sagas, and he added: 'It is generally recognised that most of the material in all the older sagas comes from oral accounts, yet many sagas clearly show that they were first formed as a whole by their authors, not to mention those sagas that are entirely or mostly fictitious.'²

Nordal next attacked the doctrine that the Sagas of Icelanders for the most part reflect a fully-formed oral tradition, saying: '... my own conclusion, after considering separate sagas and the development of saga-writing in general, is briefly this; that no saga now before us was written down in the form in which it was told. This is plainly true of the Kings' Sagas, where in some passages we can follow the development of the written text step by step. But the same rule applies to the Sagas of Icelanders, though in a different way. They too are the product of saga-writers, authors who have worked over the material and set their own stamp on the narrative'.³

Nordal has this to say about the development of saga-writing in Ice-

¹ A paper read at the University of Oxford November 18th 1985.

² *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar* (ÍF II, 1933), introduction, p. lix.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. lx.

land: 'In the work of Snorri saga-writing attains the fullest harmony of knowledge and art, attractive narrative controlled by historical judgment. The genre inclines ever more towards the historical novel, yet without sacrificing the touch of authenticity, and it was to reach a new pitch of artistry in *Njáls saga*.'⁴

The basic principles here set out were to be further expressed in the introductions to other Sagas of Icelanders in *Íslenzk fornrit* during the following years and decades.⁵ Nordal's essay *Hrafnkatla* was published in 1940, and there he argues that the principal events narrated in *Hrafnkels saga* never took place.⁶ In this essay he also alludes to the objectives which had been followed in editing *Íslenzk fornrit*, and he says: 'The editors of *Fornrit* texts up to now have, generally speaking, made too much of the element of oral tradition in the Sagas of Icelanders, and have overestimated the historical value of such traditions. The authors of the sagas have been credited with no more than a grudging minimum.'⁷

This passage sounds an express warning which needs to be kept in mind when estimating the material of the Sagas of Icelanders. But there has been a certain tendency in work on these sagas since 1940 to make generalizations from Nordal's essay on *Hrafnkels saga*;⁸ for this reason it is as well to quote here some things he says in his conclusion: 'Although I have not had space here to make any significant comparison between *Hrafnkels saga* and other sagas, I have tried to make it plain that all sagas must not be measured by the same yardstick: not as to their veracity, nor their sources, nor their handling of material. In my opinion which I have been able to confirm time after time, every single saga should be most carefully analysed in its own right. Of course they all belong to one literary genre, and their common characteristics are immediately obvious. But the individuality of each sep-

⁴ Op. cit., p. lxiii.

⁵ See, for example, Einar Ól. Sveinsson in the introduction to *Laxdæla saga* (ÍF V, 1934) and to *Eyrbyggja saga* (ÍF IV, 1935). See further, Jón Jóhannesson, introduction to *Austfirðinga sögur* (ÍF XI, 1950).

⁶ Sigurður Nordal, *Hrafnkatla* (Studia Islandica 7), Rvík 1940, p. 66.

⁷ Op. cit., p. 78.

⁸ Jónas Kristjánsson, 'Íslendingasögur', *Saga Íslands* III, ed. Sigurður Línadal, Rvík 1978, p. 304 ff; Vésteinn Ólason, 'Íslendingasögur', *Hugtök og heiti í bókmenntafræði*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Rvík 1983, p. 137 ff.

arate saga is even more important: both to understand the work itself and also to achieve a general view of this type of literature as a whole, and to observe its variations. It would be altogether wide off the mark to propose sweeping judgments on sagas after considering one of them; and conversely, as has more often happened, to construct a generalized attitude to them and then impose it on the most diverse works.⁹

In 1953 Nordal published a chapter in *Nordisk Kultur* on the Sagas of Icelanders. Here he divides the sagas into five groups, according to period of composition. Most of them (12 in all) fall into the second group, of which he says: 'It can be assumed that all the sagas in this group are to a more or less significant degree based on *popular tradition*.'¹⁰ The same is of course even truer of the oldest sagas of all. The third group of sagas contains only five, including *Hrafnkels saga* and *Njáls saga*.¹¹

I judged it necessary to make these points here about the 'Icelandic school', and particularly about the work of Sigurður Nordal; for he was the originator of this school, he first blazed the trail, and he it was who took the main share in those studies that laid the foundations of the school.

The 'Icelandic school' or the 'Reykjavík school', as it was sometimes called, had an influence far beyond the borders of Iceland. Here I should like to refer to two scholars who were outstanding in the field about the middle of this century. Dag Strömbäck, in an article on the Sagas of Icelanders published in 1943, had this to say: 'To a great extent they are based on traditions and oral narrative; but their structure and formation bear the imprint of nameless artists with a proper sense of the mastery and imagination of their authorship.'¹²

Ten years later, Gabriel Turville-Petre published *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, and he says this among other things about the Sagas of Icelanders: 'The researches of recent years seem to suggest that the family sagas originated under the influence of the Kings' sagas, just as the Kings' sagas originated under the influence of hagiography and of

⁹ Sigurður Nordal, *Hrafnkatla*, p. 70.

¹⁰ Sigurður Nordal, *Sagalitteraturen* (Nordisk Kultur VIII:B), Kbh. 1953, p. 249.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 235 ff.; p. 254 ff.

¹² Dag Strömbäck, 'Författarskap och tradition i den isländska ättesagan', *Folklore och Filologi* 1970, p. 252.

other learned writing. This suggests that the family sagas were based on sources of many different kinds, on written records and genealogies, on the *Landnámabók*, works of Ari and other historical literature such as that discussed in earlier chapters of this book. It is widely agreed that the authors also used oral records, preserved both in prose and in verse.¹³

On the part played by authors in the writing of sagas, Turville-Petre has this to say: 'Every family saga, if studied in detail, seems to bear the individual stamp of an author; it shows something of the author's personal interests and of his artistic taste.'¹⁴

Much has been written on the Sagas of Icelanders in the last three decades, and many theories have been put forward. In a recent general survey, Jónas Kristjánsson gives an appraisal of these investigations, and he says: 'Instead of regarding the Sagas of Icelanders as records of ancient Iceland, people have increasingly come to look on them as reflecting the environment of the authors, the Icelandic community in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Some, on the other hand, would regard them as the true-born offspring of medieval European culture, would even suppose them written to convey definite Christian ideas and a moral message. And finally there come literary historians and critics whose one idea is to assess the sagas in terms of literary art, with some attention to cultural trends at the time of writing.'¹⁵

Following up the words just quoted, Jónas Kristjánsson gives his own estimate of the matter in hand:

There is something to be said for all of these views. But those who look at the sagas blinkered by any of these aspects are on the wrong track, no less than the others who hold a blind faith in the truth of the sagas. The authors were not acting as independent moralists or artists. They were always tied by the leg to the purpose of the stories and to their sources: oral traditions, verses and poems, and older works.'¹⁶

The extracts I have quoted from criticism of the sagas in the last fifty years, together with references to some leading scholars of the time,

¹³ G. Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, Oxford 1953, p. 231.

¹⁴ Op. cit., p. 233.

¹⁵ Jónas Kristjánsson, 'Íslendingasögur', *Rvík* 1978, pp. 272-3.

¹⁶ Op. cit., p. 273.

reveal an opinion once general and still dominant that Sagas of Icelanders are based on traditions. The next step is to consider whether there is any way of establishing the age of these traditions at the time when the authors of the sagas incorporated them. Sagas of Icelanders for the most part tell of individuals living in the tenth and early eleventh centuries, reckoning by other historical sources. The question then arises whether records of these people survived in oral transmission all the time from the tenth century, or whether their names have been associated with traditions established later.

In folklore studies, it is a recognised fact that traditions are modified by the environment in which they survive. Traditions that migrate from one country to another change colour according to the area, and adjust themselves each time to the cultural environment in which they are recited.¹⁷ On the other hand, traditions firmly formulated in one cultural environment can remain unchanged in new cultural surroundings for some time, long or short, even when they are at variance with current attitudes. Then it is their form that keeps them going.¹⁸ We must always take these two contrasting principles of folklore study into account whenever we examine traditions that have travelled a long way in time or space.

The cultural environment in Iceland changed but little in the period between the completion of the settlement in the early tenth century right up to the thirteenth century, when the Sagas of Icelanders were written. Domestic conditions would have been in the main exactly the same all this time, the size of the population was similar, habitation was just as scattered. The one change in this period that was of any significance and could have influenced the form and preservation of traditions was the Conversion (in 999 or 1000 AD). The great majority of sagas deal with events which actually happened before the Conversion, some of them going back to the early tenth century. If traditions of leading characters had achieved a set form and stamp before 1000 AD, they could perhaps still carry some trace over into the sagas. But then we have to reckon that these same traditions would have had to be orally preserved for about two hundred years after the Conversion. Such transmission was likely to leave its mark, presumably as

¹⁷ Anna Birgitta Rooth, *Öskubuska í austri og vestri*, Rvík 1982, p. 140.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 141-2.

a tendency to discard ideas bearing the stamp of attitudes and concepts of Norse paganism. At the end of this process, in comes the author and adjusts the material to suit his story. Considering the progress of any conceivable traditions through nearly three centuries, not much of a harvest can be expected when we look for motifs of Norse paganism in the sagas.

Everywhere belief and religious practice are important elements in the creation of traditional stories. In the traditions of Christian communities, this feature usually takes the form of various powers, good or evil, which reward or punish the leading characters according to their deserts. By contrast, it is a usual feature of polytheistic religions for separate gods to take a hand in the course of affairs; they step out to defend their protégés and to oppose enemies of these. Here it is sufficient to refer to the poems of Homer, which produce too many examples of the Greek gods in this role for quotation here.¹⁹ In the tenth century, when Norse paganism was dominant in Iceland, we may expect the Norse gods to resemble the Greek gods in this habit of meddling in the life of their protégés, protecting or avenging them. Such intervention by the gods would most probably occur in stories of individual heroes circulating in the tenth century. Such traditions would inevitably fall on evil days after the Conversion, once the Norse gods had been uprooted from everyday experience. Of course it is true that the change of religion came about gradually and slowly, and even when the Norse gods had quitted the field various undergrowths of Norse belief remained in full vigour for a good while, becoming in course of time an active part of the superstition of the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries.²⁰ It is essential to allow for this alteration in traditional beliefs when we come to assess theological material in the Sagas of Icelanders.

Now I will set out some motifs in the sagas which could be taken as evidence of traditions formulated in the days of Norse paganism. I have in my paper concentrated on motifs from two sagas, *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Gísla saga Súrssonar*.

In some passages of *Víga-Glúms saga* there are express references to

¹⁹ *Odyseifskviða*, Rvík 1973, pp. 293, 343, 351 and passim.

²⁰ Dag Strömbäck, *Sejd*, Lund 1935, 3 ff.; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak*, Uppsala 1978, pp. 28–30 and references there given.

the god Frey. Early in the saga it is said that 'the temple of Frey' stood near the farm Þverá; and the property included the field *Vitazgjafi*, which never fell 'barren'.²¹ Scholars have naturally assumed that Frey was responsible for the fertility of the field, and thus it was consecrated to him, although this is not said outright.²² When Sigmund and Þorkel had unjustly appropriated use of the field from Glúm and his mother for a while, Glúm killed Sigmund on the spot. Glúm won the case arising from the killing, and Þorkel had to hand over his part of Þverá. Then the saga says:

Ok áðr Þorkell fór á brott frá Þverá, þá gekk hann til hofs Freys ok leiddi þagat uxa gamlan ok mælti svá: 'Freyr,' sagði hann, 'er lengi hefir fulltrúi minn verit ok margar gjafar at mér þegit ok vel launat, nú gef ek þér uxa þenna til þess, at Glúmr fari eigi ónauðgari af Þverárlandi en ek fer nú. Ok láttu sjá nökkurar jar-tegnir, hvártú þiggr eða eigi.' En uxanum brá svá við, at hann kvað við ok fell niðr dauðr, ok þótti Þorkatli vel hafa við látit ok var nú hughægra, er honum þótti sem þegit myndi heitit.²³

Before Þorkel departed from Þverá, he went to the temple of Frey, leading an old ox, and spoke thus: 'Frey,' said he, 'you who have long been the patron who has received many gifts from me and repaid them well, I now give you this ox, in order that Glúm may leave Þverárland under no less compulsion than I do now. Manifest some signs to show whether you accept or not.' The effect on the ox was such that it bellowed and fell dead; and Þorkel thought the answer favourable, and was now easier in mind, when it seemed to him that the prayer had been heard.

The next allusion to Frey is in connection with outlawry of Vigfús, son of Víga-Glúm. Of him it is said:

En hann mátti eigi heima vera fyrir helgi staðarins . . . ok helt Glúmr hann á laun. En því skyldu eigi sekir menn þar vera, at Freyr leyfði eigi, er hof þat átti, er þar var.²⁴

²¹ *Víga-Glúms saga*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson (ÍF IX), Rvík 1956, pp. 16, 22.

²² ÍF IX, p. 22 n. 1 and works there cited.

²³ ÍF IX, p. 34.

²⁴ ÍF IX, p. 66.

But he could not live at home because of the consecration of the place . . . and Glúm kept him in hiding. And men under penalty were not admitted because Frey, deity of the temple there, did not allow it.

Frey last appears in the saga when enemies of Víga-Glúm once more brought a case of homicide against him, a case that ended with Glúm being forced to give up Þverá and leave. The saga says:

En áðr Glúmr riði heiman, dreymði hann, at margir menn væri komnir þar til Þverár at hitta Frey, ok þóttisk hann sjá mart manna á eyrunum við ána, en Freyr sat á stóli. Hann þóttisk spyrja, hverir þar væri komnir. Þeir svara: 'Þetta eru frændr þínir framliðnir, ok biðjum vér nú Frey, at þú sér eigi á brott færðr af Þverárlandi, ok tjóar ekki, ok svarar Freyr stutt ok reiðuliga ok minnsk nú á uxagjöf Þorkels ins háva.' Hann vaknaði, ok lézk Glúmr verr vera við Frey alla tíma síðan.²⁵

Before Glúm rode away from home, he dreamt that many people had come to Þverá to meet Frey, and he seemed to see a crowd on the gravel banks by the river, while Frey sat on a throne. He thought he asked who they were. They answered: 'These are your departed kinsmen, and we are praying to Frey that you should not be taken away from Þverárland; but all in vain, for Frey answers shortly and angrily, and he remembers the gift of an ox by Þorkel the tall.' He awoke, and Glúm said his relations with Frey were worse ever after.

Now we must explain the connection between the cult of Frey and Glúm's occupation of Þverá. A diagram will show it thus:

<i>Cult of Frey</i>	<i>Activities of Glúm</i>	<i>Activities of Glúm's enemies</i>
Frey's temple	Killing of Sigmund	
Vitazgjafi	Presence of Vigfús under penalty	Þorkel the tall gives an ox
Legal sanction on Þverá		

All three activities here shown point directly to the destruction of Glúm's right to live at Þverá. Indeed it appears that in the days of ac-

²⁵ ÍF IX, pp. 87-8.

tive paganism in Iceland the dedication of an ox by Porkel the tall would alone have been enough to get Glúm out of Þverá. We have only to take account of the portents accompanying the gift, and also to notice Frey's subsequent answer, revealed to Glúm in dream according to the saga. Sacrilege in the field was also bound to do Glúm great damage, according to the concepts of Norse paganism. In terms of the general religious outlook, it was a case of grave and gross sacrilege, not likely to be left unavenged by the gods. The third point, the sanctity imposed on Þverá by Frey and the god's prohibition of the presence of men under penalty, is especially interesting from the point of view of theology and administration. The motif here expressed, indistinct and laconic though it is, turns our thoughts to the links between administration and pagan worship in tenth-century Iceland, a matter that has been much discussed. Elsewhere I have given rather full attention to these links, and to the role of the *goðar* and their activity in this area; so I refer you to this work.²⁶ But the isolated motif shown here gives valuable support to conclusions already reached by other means: that a close and unbroken link existed between cult and administration in tenth-century Iceland.

I have just glanced at the accounts of Frey in *Víga-Glúm's saga* in the light of Norse beliefs. If these beliefs are regarded as a living religion, and the god Frey as an active object of worship, then these traditions preserve memories of forces which could well be the basis and explanation of a momentous result. There is an obvious logic in this account of Frey, and it is easy to perceive the causes and effects which set a story or tradition on its way.

The next step is to consider the place of these traditions of Frey in *Víga-Glúm's saga* itself, and what part they play in the development of the story. The short answer is that these passages make little difference to the development, and nowhere count as a motive force in the plot. When Glúm kills Sigmund in the field Vitazgjafi, it is simply stated as a fact, and the mention of Porkel the tall sacrificing an ox is entirely neutral. The same is true of the passage where *Víga-Glúm* pollutes Þverá by secretly sheltering his outlawed son. No particular results of this deed come into the story. Towards the end of the saga it

²⁶ Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 'Blót and Þing. The Function of the Tenth Century *goði*', *Temenos* 21, Helsinki 1985, pp. 23-38.

is finally mentioned that Víga-Glúm dreamed of Frey, just before the prosecution was brought up at the Assembly which closed with his expulsion from Pverá. The fact that Frey in dream forbids Glúm to live at Pverá any longer is treated casually. Other points are brought up, which are considered more relevant to the expulsion of Glúm from Pverá and his final downfall.

Thus Frey is not really operative in *Víga-Glúm's saga*, and his divinity has no motive power in the story. But other, more potent incidents do occur. First of all, there are the treasures given to Víga-Glúm by his maternal grandfather, Vigfús of Vors:

. . . einkagripi vil ek þér gefa, feld ok spjót ok sverð, er vér hofum mikinn trúnað á haft frændr; ok meðan þú átt gripina, vænti ek, at þú týnir eigi virðingu, en þá em ek hræddr um, ef þú lógar þeim.²⁷

And I will give you especial treasures, a cloak, a spear and a sword, in which all our kin has put great faith; as long as you keep possession of these treasures, I do not expect you to lose your distinction; but I fear for it, if you part with them.

Then there is the occasion when Glúm dreams of a stately woman whom he invites to his home. His interpretation of the dream is that the guardian-spirit of his grandfather, recently dead, was seeking out an abode.²⁸ Soon after, it is stated: 'Glúmr tók nú virðing mikla í heraðinu.'²⁹ 'Glúm now gained a high reputation in that district.' The plain inference is that the good-fortune of his grandfather had a favourable effect. The auspicious treasures of Vigfús come into the story again, when Einar of Pverá says:

Glúmr hefir nú lógat þeim hlutum, feldi ok spjóti, er Vigfúss, móðurfaðir hans, gaf honum ok það hann eiga, ef hann vildi halda virðingu sinni, en kvað þaðan frá þverra mundu. Nú mun ek taka við málinu ok fylgja.³⁰

Glúm has now parted with the cloak and spear that Vigfús his

²⁷ ÍF IX, p. 19.

²⁸ ÍF IX, pp. 30-31.

²⁹ ÍF IX, p. 35.

³⁰ ÍF IX, p. 87.

grandfather gave him, enjoining him to keep them if he wanted to retain his reputation; but he said it would be on the wane thenceforth. Now is the time for me to take up the prosecution, and press it.

Predictably, Glúm lost the case, but he was still reluctant to leave Pverá, and sat himself in the place of honour at the time when he had to depart. Then came Hallbera, mother of Einar, the new master of Pverá, and addressed him in these words:

komit hefi ek nú eldi á Pverárland, ok geri ek þik nú á brott með allt þitt, ok er helgat landit Einari, syni mínum.³¹

I have now taken fire to Pverárland, and I expel you and all yours, and the land is appropriated to my son Einar.

At this juncture, Glúm could in no way keep his position, and he took himself off from Pverá.

It is instructive to compare references to Frey with those events here mentioned, which are in truth the motive force of the story. I shall turn first to a theological equation, which would have held good in the tenth century, when Norse paganism was in force in Iceland. In those days we can expect to find a belief in personified fate, such as the figure Glúm is said to have dreamt. It may also be reckoned that various things were considered lucky objects, connected with some kind of belief. It is also plain in various Old Icelandic sources that in pagan times it was an active and well-known custom to take possession of land by carrying fire round it. Yet this practice applied exclusively to land not already belonging to other people; for the person who carried fire round took possession of the land by this means, according to the laws of gods and men.³² It will be clear that the above-mentioned beliefs were in the tenth century assigned a level lower than belief in the Norse gods themselves. Personal luck, lucky objects, and rites of possession in taking land must all have been subordinate to the gods worshipped, those who controlled the fates of men and things yet to come, who ruled over the winds and weather, and the fertility of man and beast.³³

³¹ ÍF IX, p. 89.

³² Dag Strömbäck, 'Att helga land', *Folklore och Filologi* 1970, p. 135 ff.

³³ See *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, ed. (1931), p. 31 ff., 41.

The Conversion brought a total change of this conceptual system. The Norse gods vanished from the scene, but many other products of Norse belief continued to thrive, and turned into *superstition* as it was called, as soon as the one true religion had entered the country. The way *Víga-Glúm's saga* uses the practice of encircling land with fire is especially arresting. This custom, which had been a legal method of taking possession, one of the links between religion and law, becomes in this narrative a kind of aversion-charm, the cunning contrivance of an old woman safeguarding the interest of her son.³⁴ It is a frequent feature of religious history that various practices of an older religion will, under the new dispensation, become means of sorcery. This is what might have happened here.³⁵

In view of these matters, it is natural that mention of the god Frey falls into the background in *Víga-Glúm's saga*, and exercises no motive power in the development of the story. Instances of superstition accord better with the range of ideas in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and with the state of things confronting people at that time. The fact that traditions of Frey are nevertheless preserved in *Víga-Glúm's saga* strongly suggests to me that they had at some time played an effective part in traditions about Víga-Glúm. The inner logic of these accounts, where the result follows on the cause, can most plausibly be traced to the tenth century, when Norse religion was a living force and Frey was actively worshipped. This, it seems to me, is a basis for dating the initial formation of traditions in the Sagas of Icelanders all the way back to the tenth century. It is harder to establish just when Frey gave way before the instances of superstition, but I would think that this happened at least to some extent while traditions about Glúm were circulating orally. All the same, it can never be firmly decided what changes occurred in oral tradition, or what was there after the work of the author of *Víga-Glúm's saga*.

There are some references to Frey in the saga of Gísli Súrsson. It is said of the chieftain Þorgrím Þorsteinsson, also called *Freysgoði* (priest of Frey):

Þorgrímur ætlaði at hafa haustboð at vetrnóttum ok fagna vetri ok

³⁴ Cf. Dag Strömbäck, 'Att helga land', p. 150 f. and references where slightly different view is expressed.

³⁵ Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak* (1978), p. 21 and works there cited.

blóta Frey ok býðr þangat Berki bróðr sínum ok Eyjólfí Þórðar-syni ok mǫrgu ǫðru stórmenni.³⁶

Þorgrím planned to hold an autumn feast at the onset of winter, to welcome-in winter and make sacrifice to Frey; he invited his brother Þörk and Eyjólf Þórðarson, and many other leading men.

The night after the feast, Gísli Súrsson got secretly into the sleeping-hall of the farm at Sæból, as in this description:

Nú gengr hann innar eptir húsinu ok at lokhvílunni, þar er þau Þorgrímr hvíldu ok systir hans, ok var hnigin hurð á gátt, ok eru þau bæði í rekkju. Gengr hann þangat ok þreifask fyrir ok tekr á brjósti henni, ok hvíldi hon nær stokki. Síðan mælti hon Þórdís: 'Hví er svá kǫld hǫnd þín, Þorgrímr?' ok vekr hann. Þorgrím mælti: 'Viltu at ek snúumk at þér?' Hon hugði, at hann legði hǫndina yfir hana. Gísli bíðr þá enn um stund ok vermir hǫndina í serk sér, en þau sofna bæði. Nú tekr hann á Þorgrími kyrrt, svá at hann vaknaði. Hann hugði, at hon Þórdís vekði hann, ok snerisk þá at henni. Gísli tekr þá klæðin af þeim annarri hendi, en með annarri leggr hann í gegnum Þorgrím með Grásíðu, svá at í beðinum nam stað.³⁷

He moved to the inside of the building and to the closet-bed where his sister and Þorgrím were sleeping; the door was closed, and both were in bed. He went up, feeling his way, and touched the woman's breast, for she was lying next the bed-board. Then said Þórdís, 'Why is your hand so cold, Þorgrím?' and woke him. Þorgrím said, 'Do you want me to turn towards you?' She had supposed that it was Þorgrím putting his arm across her. Gísli waited for some time, and warmed his hand in his bosom, and they both fell asleep. Now he touched Þorgrím lightly, enough to wake him. Þorgrím supposed that Þórdís had woken him, and turned towards her. Gísli then stripped the bedclothes from them with one hand, and with the other he stabbed Þorgrím with the spear Grásíða, so that it stuck in the slats under the bedding.

³⁶ *Gísli saga Súrssonar*, ed. Björn K. Þórolfsson (ÍF VI, 1943), p. 50.

³⁷ ÍF VI, pp. 53-4.

Gísli escaped, and no-one knew who did the killing. He helped to bury Þorgrím. Soon after, the saga says:

Varð ok sá hlutr einn, er nýnæmum þótti gegna, at aldri festi snæ útan ok sunnan á haugi Þorgríms ok eigi fraus; ok gátu menn þess til, at hann myndi Frey svá ávarðr fyrir blótin, at hann myndi eigi vilja, at frøri á milli þeira.³⁸

Now a certain thing felt to be unprecedented was that snow never lay on the seaward and southern side of Þorgrím's mound, and there was no frost; and people concluded that he must be so dear to Frey because of the sacrifices he had offered, that the god would not tolerate any chill between them.

Then we are told that the same winter people were holding ball-games, when the bat cracked, and Gísli offered to repair it:

Gísli sezk niðr ok gerir at trénu, horfir á hauginn Þorgríms; snær var á jorðu, en konur sátu upp í brekkuna, Þórdís systir hans ok margar aðrar. Gísli kvað þá vísu.³⁹

Gísli sat down to mend the bat, looking towards Þorgrím's mound. There was snow on the ground, and the women were sitting on the bank above, Gísli's sister Þórdís and many others. Gísli then spoke a verse.

In this verse, Gísli let out that he had killed Þorgrím. His sister Þórdís, widow of Þorgrím, memorised the verse and then *worked it out*, that is, she grasped the full sense of what it meant. From that moment, Gísli's fate was sealed.

I will now consider the probable age of the passages I have quoted, with some attention to any inner cohesion there may be between them. The account of Þorgrím's autumn sacrifice is short and factual, and offers no particular information about the method or practice of sacrifice. Such general description as it contains could be widely available to the author of the saga. The description of how Gísli went to the sleeping-place of Þorgrím and Þórdís at night after the sacrifice is altogether more copious and precise. There is a parallel to this account

³⁸ ÍF VI, p. 57.

³⁹ ÍF VI, p. 58.

in *Droplaugarsona saga*, in the passage where Grím Droplaugarson kills Helgi Ásbjarnarson at Eiðar. This is how it goes:

Þá gekk Grímr í hvílugólf þat, er var hjá sæng þeira Helga, ok setti þar niðr fyrir framan þat, er hann hafði í hendi, ok gekk síðan at sænginni ok lagði af Helga klæðin. Hann vaknaði við ok mælti: 'Tóktu á mér, Þórdís, eða hví var svá kold hönd þín?' 'Eigi tók ek á þér,' sagði hon, 'ok óvarr ert þú. Uggir mik, at til mikils dragi um.' Ok eptir þat sofnuðu þau. Þá gekk Grímr at Helga ok tók hönd Þórdísar af honum, er hon hafði lagt yfir hann. Grímr mælti: 'Vaki þú, Helgi, fullsofit er.' En síðan lagði Grímr sverðinu á Helga, svá at stóð í gegnum hann.⁴⁰

Then Grím went into the closet enclosing the bed of Helgi and Þórdís, setting down in front of it what he was carrying [i.e. the small round stick]. Next he went to the bed and turned the bed-clothes off Helgi. He woke at this, and said, 'Did you touch me, Þórdís, and why was your hand so cold?' 'I didn't touch you,' said she, 'and you are reckless. I fear that great trouble is on the way.' And after that they fell asleep. Grím then went to Helgi and lifted off the arm that Þórdís had thrown over him. Grím said, 'Wake up, Helgi, you have slept long enough.' And then Grím struck Helgi with the sword and ran him through.

Scholars soon noticed the similarity of these two accounts, but have not agreed on which of the two has drawn on the other.⁴¹ Jón Jóhannesson alludes to these researches in his introduction to *Austfirðinga sögur* in Íslenzk fornrit: 'For a long time, *Droplaugarsona saga* was taken to be the borrower, but most recent researches have demonstrated the opposite, there can be no doubt about it, for the poem *Íslendinga drápa* supports the nucleus of the saga account.'⁴² The researches that Jón Jóhannesson refers to are found in the introduction to the edition of *Gísla saga* by Björn K. Þórólfsson in Íslenzk fornrit. This editor compares the two accounts, and finds two decisive points to show that *Gísla saga* is here drawing on *Droplaugarsona saga*. One

⁴⁰ *Droplaugarsona saga* ed. Jón Jóhannesson (ÍF XI, 1950), p. 170.

⁴¹ ÍF VI, p. xx n. 1 and works there cited.

⁴² ÍF XI, p. lxxiii.

concerns the clothing of the assassin, the other the relative positions of sleeping-hall and byre in the farms Sæból and Eiðar; and further, the purpose of tying together the cows' tails in the byre in each context. Björn K. Þórólfsson says that on both these points the account of *Droplaugarsona saga* is consistent, while that of *Gísla saga* is inconsistent and redundant.⁴³ This is true enough, yet these two points do not seem to me as weighty or decisive as Björn and Jón think. What matters most, it seems to me, is that these scholars have not made a detailed comparison in those sections that are after all most important in each separate account; namely, the description of the killing. I will now take these sections, referring to the passages I have already quoted.

The account of *Gísla saga* has one feature over and above that of *Droplaugarsona saga*, when it tells of the talk and mutual relations of Þorgrím and Þórdís in bed. 'Do you want me to turn towards you?' says Þorgrím when he wakes for the first time. The sense of this question is clear, for it means straightforwardly 'Do you want me to have intercourse with you?' When again a few lines further on it is said that Þorgrím 'thought that it was Þórdís waking him, and he then turned towards her', the meaning is equally clear. Þorgrím turns to his wife to have intercourse with her, and at the same instant he is stabbed to death.

This feature has no parallel in other sagas, and therefore it seems natural to suppose that here we have the residue of a tradition about the slaying of Þorgrím. The next task is to consider whether this episode could have had any particular significance at any time in the period when the tradition would have arisen, roughly speaking between the years 960 and 1240.

In terms of Christian thought, there is no particular significance in a man being killed in the circumstances described, except in so far as the tragedy is made unusually gruesome. It becomes a totally different matter if this account is set in the conceptual and theological context of the tenth century.

In fertility cults, ritual worship or celebration culminates with the king/high priest or the god of sacrifice copulating with the appropriate

⁴³ ÍF VI, pp. xix-xx and works there cited.

consort.⁴⁴ In this way he brings the rite to an end; and we may think that Þorgrím, the 25-year old priest of Frey, was playing this role when he is made to say to his wife Þórdís: 'Do you want me to turn towards you?' And so, when soon after he turns to his wife to have intercourse with her, and is stabbed to death in the act, it is not simply a matter of a man being killed in his bed at night; it is rather that the presiding priest is killed while completing the ritual. By tenth-century standards, the death of Þorgrím would have been not simply murder by night, but also sacrilege of the gravest kind.

Frey was god of fertility and fruitfulness in general, of the fertility of men and beasts in particular. The poem *Skírnismál* depicts his impatient longing for his own marriage; Adam of Bremen says that the idol of Frey in the temple at Uppsala was carved with a gigantic priapus; and an image found in Sweden which is generally thought to represent Frey has the same distinctive feature.⁴⁵ Considering all this, I regard it as no accident that a text which records the killing of Þorgrím takes especial trouble to demonstrate that at the point of death Þorgrím was exactly like Frey.

Þorgrím was killed about forty years before the Conversion. Thus there was plenty of opportunity for a tradition of the slaying to be fully formulated and established while Norse religion was still dominant in the country. At that time, all the circumstances would be seen from the standpoint of Norse belief; cause and effect would be interpreted in accordance with current concepts. It seems to me that these concepts and this interpretation can still be read between the lines of *Gísla saga*, once it is carefully examined. As far as transmission of the episode goes, we can call to mind that Snorri *goði* was present in bed with his parents, as yet unborn. Snorri became father of Þuríð, the wise, well-informed and reliable woman who supplied material to Ari *fróði*. So in this case there were unusually fair prospects that a tradi-

⁴⁴ Rosalie David, 'Egypt', *Mythology*, ed. by Richard Cavendish, London 1980, p. 102; Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, London 1983, pp. 331-366 and references.

⁴⁵ *Sæmundar-Edda* (1926), p. 83-4, 92-3; Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, ed. B. Schmeidler (1917), 257; E.O.G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (London 1964), p. 248 n. 51.

tion would be kept alive over a long period, undamaged and word-for-word as it had originally been formulated.

A priest of Frey who was killed in the fertility episode of ritual had reason to expect a special reward from the god of fertility. According to *Gísla saga*, Þorgrím did not have long to wait for the recompense. A 'thing without precedent' happened: his mound stayed unfrozen, and people assumed that Frey would not tolerate any frosty relation between them. This 'unprecedented thing' brought about the fall of Þorgrím's slayer. Gísli lost sight of his own interests as he looked at the mound, and composed a verse which gave him away.

The theological chain of reasoning in the situation I have described is quite clear. It seems to me so clear and logical that it is hard to entertain any other idea than that it was formulated in the days of Norse paganism, while Frey was still a powerful and living pagan god.

In *Gísla saga*, little weight is given to the traditions of Frey here recounted. Their function in the narrative is more or less as infilling, and they are not regarded as making any difference to the development of events. The saga puts it in this way, when Þorgrím has been buried:

Börkr kaupir at Þorgrími nef, at hann seiddi seið, at þeim manni
yrði ekki at björg, er Þorgrím hefði vegit.⁴⁶

. . . Börk struck an agreement with Þorgrím 'the claw', who was to bring it about by shamanistic practices that the man who had slain Þorgrím should be deprived of all succour.

The shamanism of Þorgrím 'the claw' is described immediately before the mention of the 'unprecedented thing' at the mound of Þorgrím, priest of Frey, and in such a way as to give readers the impression that Gísli composes the verse under the influence of the spell. The methods used by this Þorgrím are described in a very general way.

Shamanistic practices survived the Conversion, but black magic and incantations were forbidden:⁴⁷ Another item from the realm of Christian superstition which is influential in *Gísla saga* is the ill-fated weapon Grásíða.⁴⁸ These manifestations of superstition were no doubt in full vigour in the first centuries after the Conversion, right up to the

⁴⁶ ÍF VI, p. 56.

⁴⁷ Dag Strömbäck, *Sejd* (1935), p. 61 ff.

⁴⁸ ÍF VI, pp. 5, 6, 9, 12, 13, 37, 52, 54.

author's own time. The practices in question are similar to those already discussed in connection with *Víga-Glúm's saga*. Superstitious practices are allowed to operate as a motive force in the story, while a traditional pattern associated with the god Frey lies in the background, inactive for the most part. We may think that this traditional pattern was formulated in the days of Norse paganism, when Frey was still a potent and living god.

Translated by Joan Turville-Petre

ÁGRIP

Íslendingasögur eru torræðar og vandmeðfarnar heimildir um norræna trú. Því ber nauðsyn til, áður en lítið er á slík dæmi í sögunum, að hyggja að rannsóknarsögu síðustu áratuga og líta á niðurstöður fremstu vísindamanna um hvernig Íslendingasögur séu til orðnar. Fyrir þá rannsókn sem hér er gerð skiptir mestu máli hvort gera megi ráð fyrir gömlum sagnleifum í sögunum sem hugsanlega væru frá dögum norrænnar trúar.

Í formála Egils sögu árið 1933, sem var stefnumótandi fyrir viðhorf útgefenda Íslenzkra fornrita, segir Sigurður Nordal, að meginefni margra Íslendingasagna sé sótt í munnlegar frásögur, en sögurnar séu verk höfundar sem hafi farið frjállega með efni sitt. Í verkum Snorra Sturlusonar náir sagnaritunin fyllstu samræmi vísinda og listar. Sama grundvallarviðhorf til Íslendingasagna setti Sigurður Nordal einnig fram í Nordisk kultur tuttugu árum síðar. Þar segir hann, að meginhluti Íslendingasagna byggi að meira eða minna leyti á arfsögnum. Meira vafamál telur hann um arfsagnirnar hvað sumar yngri sögurnar varðar, en í þeim hópi eru Hrafnkels saga og Njáls saga. Í ritgerð um Hrafnkels sögu hafði Sigurður Nordal einnig varað við því að heimfæra þær niðurstöður sem hann komst þar að á önnur verk.

Sigurður Nordal var frumkvöðull og brautryðjandi hins svonefnda 'Íslenska skóla', sem kom fram sem arftaki 'bókfestu-' og 'sagnfestukenninga', og var mikils ráðandi um miðja öldina og gætir allt fram á þennan dag. Af talsmönnum þess skóla utan Íslands má sérstaklega nefna Dag Strömbäck og Gabriel Turville-Petre. Í nýlegu yfirlitsriti um Íslendingasögur heldur Jónas Kristjánsson fram svipuðum viðhorfum og hér hafa verið rakin. Hann gerir grein fyrir kenningum um Íslendingasögur er fram hafa komið á síðustu áratugum og telur höfundar þeirra alla kunna að hafa nokkuð til síns máls. En hann bætir við, að einstrengingsleg fastheldni við einstakar kenningar leiði menn á villigötur, því að höfundar Íslendingasagna séu bundnir í annan skó af ætlunarverki sagnanna og heimildum sínum, sögnum, bundnu máli og eldri ritum.

Torvelt er að færa rök að hugsanlegum aldri munnmælasagna í Íslendingasögum. Þau tímamörk sem helst verður tekið mið af eru kristnitakan. Þá vaknar sú spurning, hvort unnt sé að leiða líkur að því, að enn megi finna í sögunum sagnamunstur er beri þess einkenni að hafa orðið til fyrir kristnitöku.

Í Víga-Glúms sögu eru nokkrar frásagnir um samskipti Víga-Glúms og Freys. Víga-Glúmur vanhelgar það sem guðinum tilheyrir og guðinum er færð fórn til að koma Víga-Glúmi frá Þverá. Niðurstaðan verður sú, að Víga-Glúmur verður að láta jörðina af hendi. Hér er til staðar innra sambengi orsaka og afleiðinga sem gæti borið vitni viðhorfum tíundu aldar. Í Víga-Glúms sögu eru þessi minni þó óvirk og þar eru ýmis atriði úr hjátrú elleftu, tólftu og þrettánda aldar látin fleyta fram atburðarás. Sú staðreynd, að heillegt sagnamunstur úr hugarheimi norrænnar trúar er þrátt fyrir allt enn í sögunni, er veigamikil röksemd fyrir því, að umræddar sagnir hafi mótast meðan norræn trú var enn ríkjandi á Íslandi.

Í Gísla sögu Súrssonar segir frá Freysdýrkun Þorgríms, sem Gísli Súrsson vó í hjónarekkjunni við lok haustblóts. Frásögn sögunnar dregur fram, að Þorgrímur hafi engum verið líkari en Frey á banastundinni. Haugur Þorgríms hélst þíður og var þakkað Frey. Gísli leit til haugsins og kvað vísu þar sem hann kom upp um sig. Hér er auðlesið trúarsögulegt sambengi, en þó gegna þessir atburðir ekki samfelldu hlutverki í sögunni, þar sem atburðarás er borin uppi af ýmsum hjátrúarfyrirbærum. Hér gæti einnig verið um sagnleif frá tíundu öld að ræða, er tekið hefði á sig mynd meðan Freyr var enn lifandi og virkur guð.