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## THE MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF ÞORSTEINN KUGGASON

### *Authorial Imagination and Saga Narrative*

ÞORSTEINN KUGGASON is one of many recurring characters in the *Íslendingasögur* and related sources. He is mentioned in *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga* and the Hauksbók version of *Landnámabók*. He appears throughout *Grettis saga* and in an isolated scene in *Laxdæla saga*. In *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa*, Þorsteinn has a larger role when he switches allegiance from Þórðr Kolbeinsson to Björn Hítðelakappi and ultimately wins compensation for Björn's death. Although there is narrative silence regarding the end of Þorsteinn's life, and none of these surviving narratives is centred on him or his perspective, the earliest Icelandic annals note that he was killed in the year 1027.

Hints found across the sources have been used to argue that, according to the traditions that contributed to the saga narratives, Þorsteinn Kuggason was most likely killed because of his rivalry with Snorri goði Þorgrímsson. In this article, I will look at the evidence for this, exploring Þorsteinn's appearances in *Laxdæla saga* and in *Grettis saga* in more detail. I intend to approach the sources from an agnostic position with regard to their dating, in order to avoid circular reasoning about which source might have influenced another. By showing how consistent the portrayal of Þorsteinn and his personality is across the sagas, I will argue for the existence of immanent oral traditions concerning this character, before moving onto more detailed narrative analysis.

Þorsteinn's role in *Laxdæla saga* is irrelevant to the main plot; he only interacts with his cousin, Þorkell Eyjólfsson, and with Halldórr Ólafsson, whose land Þorsteinn covets. Similarly, in *Grettis saga*, he appears as one of the farmers who shelters Grettir in his outlawry, but he does nothing to affect the overarching plot of the saga. His death makes Snorri goði briefly an ally of Grettir's, but Snorri dies before he can overturn the hero's outlawry.

Þorsteinn might largely be termed a background character, contributing to the scenery of the society depicted, but not influencing the drive of the story. Confronted with characters like this – a familiar feature of the *Íslendingasögur* – we are minded to ask why they made it into the story at hand. The scenes that I will examine here have been explained by Judith Jesch simply as products of a saga author’s “imagination”, functioning only to illustrate the personalities of Þorsteinn’s relatives, Þorkell and Grettir.<sup>1</sup> This is a conclusion that I will question, considering how “authorial” or compositional imagination might have interacted with established tradition as well as the needs of the story at hand. As will be developed further below, this is not to claim that compositional imagination is a purely literary phenomenon, and it must be recalled that even an established tradition must have featured variants and innovation as much as conservatism. Both *Laxdæla saga* and *Grettis saga* contain information that allows us to piece together aspects of an immanent saga of Þorsteinn Kuggason, but the material is muted and manipulated in order to fit the context of the sagas that make use of Þorsteinn, according to their own narrative priorities.

## Immanent sagas and lost sagas

Medieval Icelandic literature is full of references to sources that we can no longer access, some of which may have been written down, some of which may only have existed as oral accounts. Some of these are named, whilst others are little more than allusions to tales, or the suspicion that arises when a character reappears frequently with little introduction. These instances have naturally precipitated discussion of the “lost” literature of medieval Iceland; that is, sagas that were written down but have subsequently disappeared from the canon through loss and damage. Building upon speculation regarding the number of manuscripts lost, the proportion of these that contained otherwise unattested material, and upon assumptions regarding the chronology of saga composition, the search for lost sagas has sought to recover proof of physical documents from little concrete evidence.<sup>2</sup>

1 Judith Jesch, “The Lost Literature of Medieval Iceland: Sagas of Icelanders,” (PhD diss., University College London, 1984), 266; 268.

2 See, for instance, the summary of previous scholarship in Jesch, “Lost Literature,” 27–28

There can be no doubt that we have completely lost some written sagas, along with copies of existing texts, but discovering the extent to which the surviving corpus preserves either direct quotations from them, or modified passages, remains difficult to prove. The only systematic attempt to analyse this problem has been Judith Jesch's 1984 doctoral thesis, which did not deny the role of oral traditions in saga formation, but nevertheless focussed solely on the evidence for lost written stories.<sup>3</sup> Two of Jesch's case-studies that will be referred to in the present article are *\*Þorgils saga Hollusonar* and *\*Þorsteins saga Kuggasonar*. The former is a narrative mentioned in *Laxdæla saga* that does not survive elsewhere, whilst *\*Þorsteins saga Kuggasonar* is included in Jesch's study because of arguments made by Sigurður Nordal.<sup>4</sup>

Barði Guðmundsson was the first modern scholar to observe that clues as to Þorsteinn's fate can be found within his appearances in the *Íslendingasögur*.<sup>5</sup> Following Barði, Sigurður Nordal combined the evidence to suggest that a written saga of Þorsteinn's life had once existed, and had been used as a source by the authors of the surviving texts mentioned at the opening of this article.<sup>6</sup> Jesch was justly sceptical of the existence of such a written saga; however, she largely ignored the evidence relating to Þorsteinn's death and instead felt that his life had not been "sufficiently remarkable" to be the subject of a saga narrative.<sup>7</sup>

Two years after Jesch defended her thesis, Carol Clover's influential article on the oral background of the "long prose form" was published, introducing the notion of the "immanent" saga.<sup>8</sup> Whilst Jesch's thesis remains an extremely useful resource, the idea of immanence perhaps makes the search for "lost" sagas redundant. Clover's suggestion, based on the study of epic oral traditions around the world, was that whilst a full-length prose saga need not have existed as a single oral story (ready to be dictated

and *passim*. As Jesch has pointed out, the editors of the *Íslenzk fornrit* series have often been the main investigators of references to what seems to be 'lost' saga literature.

3 Jesch, "Lost Literature," 10.

4 Sigurður Nordal, Introduction to *Borgfirðingasögur*, eds. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, *Íslenzk fornrit*, vol. 3, 2nd ed. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1956).

5 Barði Guðmundsson, "Tímatál annála um viðburði söguvaldar," *Andvari* 1936 (1936): 33–34.

6 Sigurður Nordal, Introduction to *Borgfirðingasögur*, lxxxii.

7 Jesch, "Lost Literature," 269.

8 Carol J. Clover, "The Long Prose Form," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 101 (1986): 10–39.

to a scribe with parchment to hand), the components of the story could have been maintained orally. The existence of an immanent saga meant, simply, that there was the *potential* to tell a full-length saga narrative about a person, region, event or family, and that episodes could be recounted to an audience already familiar with the immanent whole. Thus, immanence links the story being told not only to the expertise of the teller, but also to the knowledge of the audience.<sup>9</sup> Clover's idea was further developed with a specific eye to approaching the immanence of the *Íslendingasögur* by Gísli Sigurðsson, whose methodology has been invaluable to this article.<sup>10</sup>

Assuming the existence of immanent tales allows us to account for inconsistencies in the portrayal of recurring saga characters. Gísli Sigurðsson has demonstrated this in the case of Guðmundr ríki, where the chieftain is depicted by different sagas in varying ways that are at times unflattering.<sup>11</sup> The differences between the narratives do not indicate that one is the "right" portrayal of Guðmundr, and another therefore "wrong" in its depiction. Rather, the differences can be accounted for through the inherently local, variable nature of oral traditions. As Gísli states: "Guðmundr ... comes across as a multifaceted personality, though always with certain underlying traits that help to mark him out".<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, with regard to another postulated "immanent saga" about Síðu-Hallr Þorsteinsson and his family, extant sources are more consistent in their portrayal of these characters and even of the overarching themes that dominated their story. According to Jamie Cochrane, the conception of an immanent story of Hallr's life is indicated rather by the

9 This idea was expanded upon by John Foley in his *Immanent Art: from Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), see esp. 42–45.

10 Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method*, trans. Nicholas Jones, Publications of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). Originally published as *Túlkun Íslendingasagna í ljósi munnlegrar hefðar: Tilgáta um aðferð*, Rit 56 (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 2002). Gísli in fact states explicitly: "One clear advantage of assuming an oral tradition in the background is that it frees us from the need to assume the existence of hypothetical lost written sources", *Medieval Icelandic Saga*, 309.

11 Gísli Sigurðsson, "The Immanent Saga of Guðmundr ríki," trans. Nicholas Jones, *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, eds. Kate Heslop, Judy Quinn, et al., Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe, vol. 18 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 201–18.

12 *Ibid.*, 218.

number of separate narratives relating to him and his family that can be found in different sources.<sup>13</sup> Hallr, unlike Guðmundr, was not drawn into the destructive oppositions of feuding in the way that so many chieftains were; I would suggest that, unlike Guðmundr ríki, there were perhaps fewer people interested in preserving the perspective of Hallr's enemies.

When seeking to identify characters whose immanent biographies were known to medieval audiences, there are two key requirements. The first is that there is an underlying consistency in the portrayal of the character: variations and discrepancies may exist, but they can be explained by their contexts in different narratives, and serve to add depth to the character's portrait, rather than simply to support or discredit different sources. The second is that a variety of apparently independent narratives exist regarding the character: the individual does not appear only in a single scene or event retold across a number of sagas, but they are involved in different proceedings. Often, the character is given only the most perfunctory introductions in these episodes, the saga narrator assuming a basic familiarity with the character's personality.

#### *Narrative usefulness/uselessness*

Both Hallr and Guðmundr were chieftains, and both (according to the written sources in which they are mentioned) were prominent figures during Iceland's conversion to Christianity. Þorsteinn Kuggason seemingly remained on the fringes of the power-struggles of this period, however, and is never said to have been a chieftain, despite moving in the upper echelons of society. In the surviving material, Þorsteinn nevertheless interacts with, and is related to, major saga figures at a period that receives a lot of attention in the sagas. Jesch has compared him to other recurring, supporting characters such as the chieftain Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson and the prophetic Gestr Oddleifsson.<sup>14</sup> Chieftains are ever-present in the sagas, and assemblies are a convenient place to introduce them; similarly, Gestr's prophetic abilities make him useful to narrators. He is introduced into *Gísla saga* with very little preamble, but the audience understands Gíslí's

13 Jamie Cochrane, "*\*Síðu-Halls saga ok sona hans*: Creating a Saga from Tradition," *Gripla* 21 (2010): 197–234.

14 Jesch, "Lost Literature," 269. Another productive comparison might be Þorkell Geitisson, whose immanent saga is discussed by Gíslí Sigurðsson in his *Medieval Icelandic Saga*, 161–84.

response to Gestr's foreboding words because Gestr is established as a seer elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> It matters little whether Gestr's involvement in Gísli's story is authorial invention or "imagination", or whether in the thirteenth century he was considered to be part of an accurate historical tradition: he has a role in the society depicted that translates to a narrative function. He is narratively useful.

Yet, even as a supporting character, Þorsteinn does not always appear relevant to the plots in which he appears. He is not a chieftain or a seer, he is never explicitly said to be a lawyer, and not all his appearances concern legal cases. Is Þorsteinn "narratively useful" in some other way? Or, like a rounded character such as the immanently present Hallr and Guðmundr, did the perception of Þorsteinn's role in the events of the early eleventh century transcend the need for him to be useful to the telling of a particular story?

Characterisation in the sagas is a vexed issue; the stories were largely meant to be historically plausible to their medieval audiences, concerning the accomplishments of their forebears. But the stories are also clearly shaped by traditional conventions and narrative demands.<sup>16</sup> The *Íslendingasögur* perfectly exemplify the struggle to reconcile character and characterisation with narrative structure, as articulated in relation to the modern novel:

The literary character is itself divided, always emerging at the juncture between structure and reference. In other words, a literary *dialectic* that operates dynamically within the narrative text gets transformed into a theoretical *contradiction*, presenting students of literature with an unpalatable choice: language *or* reference, structure *or* individuality.<sup>17</sup>

When Jesch explained Þorsteinn's appearances in *Laxdæla saga* and *Grettis saga* as the result of authorial imagination, she emphasised Þorsteinn's usefulness to the narratives. But she claimed that he is useful only because

15 *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, in *Vestfirðingasögur*, eds. Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, Íslensk fornrit, vol. 6 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943), 20–22.

16 See Joanne Shortt Butler, "Narrative Structure and the Individual in the *Íslendingasögur*: Motivation, Provocation and Characterisation" (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2016), esp. 125–29.

17 Alex Woloch, *The One Vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 17.

of how well he contrasts with his more important relatives: relatives whose personalities are perfectly clear even before their interactions with Þorsteinn Kuggason. In the following analysis, I argue that this is not reason enough for someone to have “imagined” Þorsteinn’s presence – as opposed to anyone else’s – in these scenes. Why some characters or details were included in the sagas, and others were not, is a question that has a more complex answer than subjective recourses to narrative “style”.<sup>18</sup> Paying attention to these details can allow us to understand more about material that has not been preserved, as well as improving our understanding of the relationships between surviving sagas and the attitudes of those in the thirteenth century, and later, who shaped the narratives into their current forms.

*\*Ævisaga Þorsteins Kuggasonar*

In roughly chronological order, I will give an account of the events of Þorsteinn Kuggason’s life that can be pieced together from the sagas and annals. The account demonstrates that the stories concerning Þorsteinn are varied enough to come from multiple sources. I will follow this summary with a brief examination of Þorsteinn’s personality in these sources, which is remarkably consistent. This summary of his “biography” and character provide the context for the ensuing analysis of scenes involving Þorsteinn.

***Bjarnar saga ch. 27; Grettis saga ch. 26; Laxdæla saga chs. 7, 31, 40.***

Þorsteinn was the son of Þorkell kuggi Þórðarson gellis and Þuríðr Ásgeirsdóttir æðikolls. He was born towards the end of the tenth century. He married Þorfinna, daughter of Vermundr mjóvi Þorgrímsson and Þorbjörg digra Ólafsdóttir. Þorsteinn and Þorfinna lived at Ljárskógar in Western Iceland.

***Fóstbræðra saga chs. 7–8; Grettis saga chs. 26–27 and passim.; Laxdæla saga ch. 40.***

After the death of Kjartan Ólafsson (Þorsteinn’s uncle by marriage) in the early eleventh century, Þorsteinn fostered Kjartan’s young son, Ásgeirr.

<sup>18</sup> Theodore M. Andersson, *The Partisan Muse in the Early Icelandic Sagas 1200–1250*, *Islandica*, vol. 55 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 26; cf. Sigurður Nordal, Introduction to *Borgfirðingasögur*, lxxxiii.

A decade or so later, Þorsteinn was asked by his cousin Ásmundr hærulangi to assist in the prosecution of Þorgeirr Hávarsson for the murder of their kinsman, Þorgils Másson. Þorsteinn pursued the case vigorously, and knowing his zeal, Þorgeirr's allies helped him out of the country whilst Þorsteinn was away at the assembly. Over the next ten years or so, Þorsteinn offered shelter when it was needed to Ásmundr's son, Grettir.

***Bjarnar saga* chs. 27–32, 34; *Grettis saga* ch. 57.**

During this time, Þorsteinn forged an alliance with the poet Þórðr Kolbeinsson and was invited to a winter feast at Þórðr's farm. As he travelled south with his wife and householders, Þorsteinn was caught in bad weather and forced to accept the hospitality of Þórðr's enemy, Björn. Because of his wife's family connection to Björn, Þorsteinn and Björn eventually agreed to an alliance of their own. Þorsteinn promised that he would try to broker a peaceful settlement between Björn and Þórðr. This settlement failed, however, and when Þorsteinn's alliance with Þórðr foundered too, he and Björn agreed that they would each get vengeance for the other, if he died a violent death. As Christian men, they pledged that this vengeance should be based on the payment of fines and on legal prosecution rather than on the principles of blood feud. During this period, Þorsteinn sent his second cousin Grettir down to Mýrar when search-parties looked for the outlaw in the area of Þorsteinn's farm.<sup>19</sup> Björn was ultimately killed by Þórðr, and Þorsteinn took over the case from Björn's family. He achieved an unprecedented monetary settlement from Þórðr. The settlement was achieved with the help of Þorsteinn's cousin, Þorkell Eyjólfsson.

***Laxdæla saga* ch. 75.**

Þorkell Eyjólfsson returned from a trip to Norway in about 1025, and stayed the winter with Þorsteinn. During his stay, Þorsteinn confided in Þorkell that he hoped to gain the land at Hjarðarholt in Dalir. This farm, owned by Halldórr Ólafsson, was struggling, with not enough livestock for the land. Þorsteinn thought that he could make a reasonable offer to Halldórr, but that if the offer was not accepted then with Þorkell's help he

19 *Bjarnar saga* suggests that Grettir's connection with Björn was formed independently of Þorsteinn: *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*, in *Borgfirðingasögur*, eds. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, Íslensk fornrit, vol. 3, 2nd ed. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1956), 162–63; Jesch, "Lost Literature," 267–68.

could intimidate Halldórr into submitting. When they called at the farm in the early months of 1026, Halldórr Ólafsson guessed their purpose and ensured that he had protection from threats. Þorsteinn was angry to have his time wasted by Halldórr, but Þorkell successfully diffused the situation and the cousins returned to Þorsteinn's farm at Ljárskógar. Halldórr retained Hjarðarholt.

***Grettis saga* ch. 68; *Laxdæla saga* ch. 76; Resensannáll 1027.**

Þorkell prepared to leave for his own farm at Easter and Þorsteinn repeatedly attempted to dissuade him, even unloading Þorkell's cargo from his ship. Finally, he conceded to Þorkell's will, and allowed him to leave. Þorsteinn had a premonition that his cousin would drown in a severe storm once he set out, and this happened as predicted. The following year, 1027, Þorsteinn Kuggason was killed. This apparently precipitated some anger from Snorri goði against his son Þóroddr and his half-brother Sámr Barkarson. Sámr was later killed by a man named Ásgeirr.

### Þorsteinn's personality

A strikingly consistent element of Þorsteinn Kuggason's appearance in the sagas is that he is described as a disruptive individual. Þorsteinn's introductions in both *Grettis saga* and *Bjarnar saga* say as much, and he is accused of similar behaviour by Halldórr Ólafsson in *Laxdæla saga*. These three sagas are the ones in which he appears more than simply in passing, and *Grettis saga* and *Bjarnar saga* unequivocally ally him with the eponymous heroes of those tales. These sagas describe him using surprising terms for a character that the audience is ostensibly meant to think well of. According to *Grettis saga*, Þorsteinn was an *ofstopamaðr* [overbearing man], and *Bjarnar saga* tells us that he was an *ójafnaðarmaðr* [inequitable man].<sup>20</sup> These sentiments are echoed by Halldórr Ólafsson in *Laxdæla saga*, who finds himself on the receiving end of Þorsteinn's threatening behaviour and responds with reference to “ofsa þínum ok ójafnaði” [your arrogance and inequity].<sup>21</sup>

20 *Grettis saga*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit, vol. 7 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1936), 90; *Bjarnar saga*, 180.

21 *Laxdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, vol. 5 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934), 220. Translations are my own.

First impressions matter, not least in the sagas. When our introduction to Þorsteinn in both *Grettis saga* and *Bjarnar saga* warns of overbearing, trouble-making, inequitable behaviour, certain associations are formed. The names that spring to scholars' minds when discussing *ójafnaðarmenn* are those of murderers (Þjóstólfr in *Njáls saga*), tyrants (Hrafnkell Freysgoði) and greedy revenants (Þórólfr bægifótr in *Eyrbyggja saga*) – or those who encompass all three identities (Viga-Styrr Þorgrímsson).<sup>22</sup> Yet Þorsteinn's most aggressive actions in *Grettis saga* and *Bjarnar saga* are lawsuits, legally presented as far as the sagas are concerned, brought for the killings of men he was related to and allied with. His behaviour in *Laxdæla saga* warrants the description somewhat better, but it is still distinct from the provocations of Þorbjörn Þjóðreksson in *Hávarðar saga* or even Þórðr hrossamaðr in *Þorsteins þáttur stangarhöggs*.<sup>23</sup>

*Grettis saga* demonstrates something of an ambivalent attitude towards negative personality traits, absorbing the difficult personality of its hero within a family of rogues, vikings and warriors.<sup>24</sup> In this sense, Þorsteinn's description ensures that he fits in well. Yet a character's introduction is a period of the saga's narrative in which an audience might be more alert to the significance of the information provided. If we are told that a character is good or bad, fights well or poorly, is popular or unpopular, then we expect the actions that follow to adhere to this description.

- 22 See William Ian Miller, "Why is your Axe Bloody?" *A Reading of Njáls saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 288; Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære: studier i islendingesagaerne* (Aarhus: Universitetsforlag, 1993), 197; Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age. Narration and Representation in the Sagas of Icelanders*, trans. Andrew Wawn (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1998), 157; Theodore M. Andersson, "The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas," *Speculum* 49 (1970): 580–82.
- 23 Þorbjörn and Þórðr are both introduced as *ójafnaðarmenn* by the narrator in the texts in which they appear. Of those named above, only Þjóstólfr is not called this by the narrator of his saga; Miller claims that Þjóstólfr fits the mould of the character type better than *Njáls saga's ójafnaðarmenn* (the Egilssynir, see *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslensk fornrit, vol. 12 [Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954], 147). My doctoral thesis explores the definition of *ójafnaðarmaðr* in more detail and questions whether we should be applying the term where the sagas do not, if we wish to establish a useful idea of what the term meant. See Shortt Butler, "Narrative Structure and the Individual in the *Íslendingasögur*."
- 24 Katherine Hume, "The Thematic Design of *Grettis saga*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 73 (1974): 478–79; Russell Poole, "Myth, Psychology, and Society in *Grettis saga*," *Alvissmál* 11 (2004): 7; also cf. Hermann Pálsson, *Úr hugmyndaheimi Hrafnkels sögu og Grettlu*, *Studia Islandica*, vol. 39 (Reykjavík: Menningarsjóður, 1981), 97.

A detailed character description functions somewhat like a prophecy in narrative terms.<sup>25</sup> This is no doubt why, in her discussion of *\*Þorgils saga Höllusonar*, Judith Jesch accused the “author” of *Laxdæla saga* of “bias” and “falsification” in their portrayal of Þorgils.<sup>26</sup> Although he is introduced by the saga as “inn loðkænsti maðr” [the most legally astute of men]<sup>27</sup> he is depicted as a vain buffoon, easily outwitted by Guðrún and Snorri goði’s schemes (*Laxdæla saga* chs. 57–67).<sup>28</sup> Similarly, *Bjarnar saga*’s introduction of Þorsteinn misleads an audience familiar with the normal behaviour of *ójafnaðarmenn*, because instead of killing anyone, or refusing compensation for his crimes, Þorsteinn goes on to win non-violent justice for the tragically-deceased hero. Naturally, the outcome of a lawsuit can be as inequitable as any other aspect of the sagas,<sup>29</sup> but one would not expect a saga narrator to think negatively of the punishment handed out to Þórðr, who is cartoonishly villainous throughout much of *Bjarnar saga*.

Björn is not a straightforward hero himself, however, and he has this in common with Grettir; their affinities are emphasised by *Grettis saga* when Björn supports Grettir in his outlawry.<sup>30</sup> Grettir has several ambivalent allies, from Hallmundr (who dies accused of *ójafnaðr* by his own daughter)<sup>31</sup> to the *ofsamaðr* [overbearing man] Jökull Bárðarson.<sup>32</sup> It is thus less remarkable that Þorsteinn could have a troublesome disposition and yet be a friend to these two saga heroes.<sup>33</sup>

25 Paul Schach, “Character Creation and Transformation in the Icelandic Sagas,” *Germanic Studies in Honor of Otto Springer*, ed. Stephen J. Kaplowitt (Pittsburg, PA: K & S Enterprises, 1978), 248.

26 Jesch, “Lost Literature,” 260.

27 *Laxdæla saga*, 171.

28 I am not convinced that legal acumen in the sagas goes hand in hand with pragmatic intelligence (cf. Eyjólfur Þólværksson in *Njáls saga* and Sámur Bjarnarson in *Hrafníkels saga*), but it is Jesch’s response to the saga narrator’s introduction to Þorgils that is particularly telling in this instance.

29 See William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 302.

30 *Grettis saga*, 186–89.

31 *Ibid.*, 205.

32 *Ibid.*, 117; cf. Robert Cook, “The Reader in *Grettis saga*,” *Saga-Book* 21 (1985): 149.

33 Linking the portrayal of these difficult characters to their interactions with the Norwegian crown, Gísli Sigurðsson emphasises the way in which their presentation was affected by the politics and events of the thirteenth century, particularly when viewed from the perspective of the Sturlungar: Gísli Sigurðsson, “‘I’m on an Island’: The Concept of Outlawry and Sturla’s Book of Settlements,” *Sturla Þórðarson: Skald, Chieftain and Lawman*, eds. Jón

Yet if one description of Þorgils Hölluson's legal nous is enough to make readers including Jesch doubt the motives of the narrator of *Laxdæla saga*, then what is the collective result of these descriptions of Þorsteinn's difficult personality? *Ójafnaðarmenn* in the *Íslendingasögur* rarely get a happy ending: most are dead by the end of the saga in which they appear, if not by the end of the chapter in which they are introduced.<sup>34</sup> If an account existed during the thirteenth century, or had existed, of a dispute in which Þorsteinn was unequivocally viewed as the provocateur, then that would explain the agreement of these sagas regarding his forceful nature.

Additionally, it is the victors who get to write history; Þorsteinn has no recorded descendants, nor does his foster-son, Ásgeirr Kjartansson. As Gísli Sigurðsson demonstrates in the case of Guðmundr ríki, the nature of stories told about prominent figures can vary drastically depending upon the interests of the audience and of those telling the stories.<sup>35</sup> Traditions regarding Þorsteinn's life seem to have been of interest largely to the compilers of sagas that focussed on events in the west of Iceland, and given that he was apparently involved in some sort of dispute with Snorri goði, we might suspect a certain bias when it comes to medieval perceptions of his character. Snorri was, after all, a man whose many children were well-provided for in terms of land and high-status marriages, and who were remembered as important ancestors by many in the thirteenth century.<sup>36</sup>

This overview of Þorsteinn's portrayal thus tells us that he was a well-connected man with a disruptive personality, despite his unremarkable behaviour in many of the surviving sources. He fulfils another aspect of a character with immanent traditions: enjoying a consistent portrayal across

Viðar Sigurðsson and Sverrir Jakobsson, *The Northern World*, vol. 78 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 83–92, particularly p. 91.

34 Shortt Butler, "Narrative Structure and the Individual," ch. 3.

35 Gísli Sigurðsson, "Guðmundr ríki," 215. Ármann Jakobsson has also examined the variation in the many portrayals of Skapti Þóroddsson. Although he initially took a chronological view of the source material, Ármann has since re-written his observations to focus instead on thematic nuance in the representation of Skapti. His articles are more interested in the individual development of different sources than in an "immanent saga" but, like Gísli, he does not prioritise one version of the character over another: Ármann Jakobsson, "Skapti Þóroddsson og sagnaritun á miðöldum," *Árnesingur* 4 (1996), 217–33; "Tradition and the Individual Talent: The 'Historical Figure' in the Medieval Icelandic Sagas, a Case Study," *Viator* 45.3 (2014), 101–24.

36 *Eyrbyggja saga*, eds. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, *Íslensk fornrit*, vol. 4, 2nd ed. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1986), 180–84.

several sources. Jesch felt that *Grettis saga* owed a lot to *Bjarnar saga*'s portrayal of Þorsteinn, and although she agreed that he must have been "a well-enough known character" to have been referenced despite the lack of any single source for his life, she remained sceptical that his life was saga-worthy at all.<sup>37</sup> Yet, given the amount of authorial manipulation evident in the portrayal of characters in the sagas, it seems likely that "saga-worthy" stories were a mutable category, affected by the location and teller of a particular tale. Indeed, the term "saga-worthy" might now be considered somewhat out-dated and redundant, as material deemed such is only partially represented by the surviving content of the sagas, and so much other material, oral and written, has been lost.

In the next section, I will conduct a detailed examination of three scenes. Analysing *Laxdæla saga* and *Grettis saga*, Jesch argued that Þorsteinn's presence served only to inform the audience about the personalities of Grettir and Þorkell Eyjólfsson. I will interrogate the assumption that Þorsteinn's presence can only be explained by authorial inventiveness, exploring wider details in the narratives of *Laxdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Landnámabók*. As a minor character, Þorsteinn brings into focus questions of narrative purpose and saga plotting; ultimately, if his inclusion is down to an author's imagination, then it must be asked: why include Þorsteinn as opposed to anyone else?

### A saga-worthy death

In the legal cases recounted in *Bjarnar saga*, *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Grettis saga*, Þorsteinn's personality remains consistent, as does his narrative function. He is loyal and somewhat forceful, but his legal ability is never questioned. His cases are all brought correctly as far as these narratives are concerned, and Þorsteinn achieves the results deemed necessary in the context of the saga plots: the outlawry of Þorgeirr Hávarsson on the one hand, and the punishment of Þórðr Kolbeinsson on the other.

It is his other appearances in *Grettis saga*, and his scenes in *Laxdæla saga*, that make Þorsteinn more than a flat, functional character, however. He is not simply a well-connected lawyer, brought out on parade by the narrator when his relatives need assistance: Þorsteinn does not get his

37 Jesch, "Lost Literature," 267–68.

own way in *Laxdæla saga*'s decidedly "extra-legal" dealings, and *Grettis saga* provides entirely incidental details about his property and his abilities as a blacksmith. Identifying Þorsteinn's narrative function in these episodes is not straightforward, as his scenes have very little bearing on the plots of the two sagas.

It is my contention that Þorsteinn's appearance in *Laxdæla saga*, and the references to his farm and to his death in *Grettis saga*, are not wholly the products of an imaginative author. Rather, I will demonstrate that although the material is manipulated by the narrative requirements of each saga, these scenes point to a coherent understanding of Þorsteinn's place in eleventh-century power struggles: the place of a defeated political figure, squeezed to the margins of the *Íslendingasögur*.

*Laxdæla saga: Land and legacy*

*Laxdæla saga*'s narrative tone undergoes a shift following the death of Kjartan.<sup>38</sup> As repercussions spread from Kjartan's death and the obligations of feud begin to take hold, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir is briefly nudged aside as the focal point of the story, and Snorri goði's influence becomes more marked. Snorri first helps Guðrún to persuade Þorgils Hølluson to kill Helgi Harðbeinsson in vengeance for her husband Bolli's death. Þorgils expects to marry her in return for this deed, but Snorri advises Guðrún to stipulate only that she will not marry another man in Iceland. Þorkell Eyjólfsson, who is abroad when Guðrún makes this promise, remains eligible, and thus he becomes her fourth husband, not Þorgils.

In introducing Þorgils and Þorkell to the saga, new narrative avenues are opened up that lead the saga away from the story of Guðrún entirely. One concerns Þorgils Hølluson's death and another, through his relationship to Þorkell, concerns Þorsteinn Kuggason's interest in Hjarðarholt. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, Þorgils and Þorsteinn are mentioned together as significant enemies of Snorri goði. *Eyrbyggja saga* ends its narrative with this note; a reference that harks back to the beginning of Snorri's story and appears to provide the closest thing this saga has to a theme.<sup>39</sup>

38 Observations to this effect are numerous: examples include Theodore M. Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180–1280)* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 141, and Thomas Bredsdorff, *Chaos and Love: The Philosophy of the Icelandic Family Sagas*, trans. John Tucker (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2001), 45–46.

39 Torfi H. Tulinius, "Deconstructing Snorri. Narrative Structure and Heroism in *Eyrbyggja*

Snorri goði bjó í Tungu tuttugu vetr, ok hafði hann fyrst heldr ofundsamt setr, meðan þeir lifðu stórbökkarnir, Þorsteinn Kuggason ok Þorgils Hǫlluson ok enn fleiri inir stærri menn, þeir er óvinir hans váru.<sup>40</sup>

[Snorri goði lived at Tungu for twenty years, and at first he had to contend with hostility, whilst the ‘big bucks’ Þorsteinn Kuggason and Þorgils Hǫlluson lived, and still more great men, those who were his enemies.]

The rivalry between Snorri and Þorgils is explicit in *Laxdæla saga*, and was no doubt dealt with by the now lost narrative described by *Eyrbyggja saga* as “*saga Þorgils Hǫllusonar*”.<sup>41</sup> The nature of Þorsteinn’s dispute with Snorri is not made clear in *Laxdæla saga*, however, where Þorsteinn’s only meaningful interactions are with Þorkell Eyjólfsson (an ally of Snorri’s) and Halldórr Óláfsson.

*Laxdæla saga* introduces Þorsteinn’s brief scenes by describing the closeness between him and his cousin Þorkell – “ástúðigt var með frændum” [the kinsmen were on close terms]<sup>42</sup> – a portrayal that matches *Bjarnar saga*’s depiction of the men. Þorsteinn then confides in Þorkell, telling him of his plans for the land at Hjarðarholt. He complains that the good land is going to waste because Halldórr does not have enough livestock after paying compensation for the killing of Bolli Þorleiksson. Þorsteinn and his cousin Þorkell set out to discuss this with Halldórr, accompanied by over twenty men.

This show of force makes their intentions clear, and Halldórr sends for men from the next farm but agrees to talk with just the two cousins present – and the loyal servant Beinir sterki. Halldórr tells Beinir that if either man attacks then Halldórr will handle Þorkell and Beinir should take Þorsteinn. Þorsteinn and Þorkell lead Halldórr some distance from the homestead and sit menacingly on the edges of his cloak whilst they talk; Beinir stands behind them with a large axe in his hand. Þorsteinn makes his offer (a *sæmileg* [appropriate] one) and gets a good response

*saga*,” *Narration and Hero: Recounting the Deeds of Heroes in Literature and Art of the Early Medieval Period*, eds. Victor Millet and Heike Sahn (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 199.

40 *Eyrbyggja saga*, 180.

41 *Ibid.*, 199; Jesch, “Lost Literature,” 261–62.

42 *Laxdæla saga*, 218.

from Halldórr.<sup>43</sup> Following an enthusiastic but fruitless discussion, it is Þorkell who realises that they have been wasting their time. Þorsteinn angrily demands an agreement from Halldórr, who replies with his own idea of what should happen:

Halldórr ... mælti: “Verða mun annat, fyrr en ek mæla þat, er ek vil eigi.” “Hvat mun þat?” spyrr Þorsteinn. “Boløx mun standa í hofði þér af inum versta manni ok steypa svá ofsa þínum ok ójafnaði.” Þorkell svarar: “Þetta er illa spát”.<sup>44</sup>

[Halldórr ... said: ‘there will be another outcome before I agree to something that I do not want.’ ‘What’s that?’ asked Þorsteinn. ‘A wood-axe will be lodged in your head by the worst type of man and it will put an end to your arrogance and inequity.’ Þorkell said, ‘that’s an evil prophecy.’]

When Þorkell repeats their demand, adding that Halldórr must agree now after his misleading behaviour, Halldórr provides another prediction: “fyrr muntu spenna um þongulshöfuð á Breiðafirði en ek handsala nauðigr land mitt” [you will embrace the tangled seaweed of Breiðafjörður before I am coerced into the sale of my land].<sup>45</sup>

Þorkell is chastened, but Þorsteinn wants to attack. Eventually, with his cousin’s persuasion, Þorsteinn relents and Þorkell points out why violence would have been pointless: “sáttu eigi Beini, er hann stóð yfir þér með reidda øxina? Ok var þat in mesta ófœra, því at þegar mundi hann keyra øxina í höfuð þér, er ek gerða mik líkligan til nokkurs” [didn’t you see Beinir, where he stood over you with axe aloft? And it was utterly beyond our means [to attack], because then he would have driven the axe into your head before I was able to do anything].<sup>46</sup> With Þorsteinn’s plans on hold, Þorkell loads a ship with the timber he has brought back from Norway for the construction of a church. The building is intended to be the same size as the King’s own church, a fact that earned Þorkell a warning from King Óláfr Haraldsson. Þorsteinn has a bad feeling about the voyage and

43 Ibid., 219.

44 Ibid., 220.

45 Ibid., 221.

46 Ibid., 221.

unloads his cousin's timber, but Þorkell eventually makes Þorsteinn agree to the departure. As the winds rise, Þorsteinn weeps for his cousin and the sound of his killer (the weather).<sup>47</sup> This unusually emotional scene is the last that we see of Þorsteinn in *Laxdæla saga*, which ends shortly afterwards with an account of Guðrún's old age as an anchoress.

Þorsteinn's appearance in *Laxdæla saga* is something of a loose thread: we are not told what becomes of him or of the land at Hjarðarholt. Jesch struggled to explain the existence of the scenes other than as a way of expanding on Þorkell's personality, and she concluded that the whole episode was the work of authorial imagination: "[t]he author of *Laxdæla saga* used the family relationship between the two men as a base on which to build a contrast of personalities to be used for his own ends in the structure of the saga. There is no particular reason to suppose that the source of Þorsteinn's appearances in *Laxdæla saga* was anything other than the author's imagination".<sup>48</sup>

But why should Þorsteinn be the character to teach us about Þorkell's personality, when he does not feature in *Laxdæla saga* for any other reason? Not least, when the interactions between the two men reveal nothing new about Þorkell's character. The scenes do show a contrast between them, where Þorsteinn is more hot-headed and emotional, whilst Þorkell is cautious and pragmatic, but perhaps over-confident. However, we have previously witnessed Þorkell back down from conflict with his new bride when they disagreed over the treatment of the outlaw Gunnarr Þiðrandabani, and the future saint Óláfr Haraldsson referred directly to Þorkell's pride at their final meeting.<sup>49</sup> Contrasting him with Þorsteinn in a scene that is never followed up by the narrative would be unnecessary, were that the scene's only function.

However, the material of Þorkell's interactions with Þorsteinn is more likely to have been included for its reference to a prophecy. *Laxdæla saga* is packed with prophetic statements, predictions, bad feelings and dreams. It piles prediction upon omen when it comes to Kjartan Ólafsson's fate; Þorgils Hǫlluson is confronted by visions and verses of doom as he travels to his final assembly; and Guðrún's dreams form a thematic backbone to

47 Ibid., 222.

48 Jesch, "Lost Literature," 266.

49 *Laxdæla saga*, 203; 217.

the narrative of her life, through the introduction of the saga's vast number of minor characters and its meandering fringe disputes.

This interest is present in Þorkell's part of the narrative, too. Þorkell Eyjólfsson's fate is first alluded to in Guðrún's fourth dream, where a splendid helmet falls from her head into the water of Hvammsfjörðr.<sup>50</sup> Later, King Óláfr Haraldsson expresses foreboding about the arrogant ambition of Þorkell, a farmer's son, and then Halldórr Ólafsson tells Þorkell that he will get hold of the seaweed in Breiðafjörðr before his cousin gets hold of Hjarðarholt. Finally, Þorsteinn has a sense that Þorkell's journey home will not go well and tries to dissuade him.

The audience does not need to be told four times that Þorkell is going to drown in the process of maintaining of his own splendour; but then again nor does the audience need it repeating that Kjartan and Bolli's friendship will come to an unhappy ending. *Laxdæla saga* makes more use of foreshadowing than most sagas. In gathering together accounts of various prophecies and traditions about Þorkell's fate, the saga has strayed into another person's story: that of Þorsteinn Kuggason.

Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Sigurður Nordal took Halldórr's pronouncement regarding Þorsteinn's fate to be as accurate as the prophecy concerning Þorkell.<sup>51</sup> It certainly fits an observable pattern in the sagas, where a seemingly casual suggestion is later revealed to be an accurate prediction of events. The compiler of *Laxdæla saga* seems to confuse the matter though: the inclusion of Beinir sterki and his axe in the scene makes Halldórr's statement that "boløx mun standa í hofði [Þorsteins]" look more like an immediate concern than a warning of future events. Describing Beinir as "inn versti maðr" is extreme, given what we are told of him (he has been a loyal member of the household since Óláfr pái ran Hjarðarholt), but his presence adds to the ambiguity of the scene. If *Laxdæla saga* had some other source for Halldórr's encounter with the cousins, then it was not aware of, or interested in, the fulfilment of the prophecy related to Þorsteinn. Perhaps Þorsteinn's fate at this point was so well known that it did not need to be spelled out, but this does not explain why the saga would include Beinir in this scene, in a role that muddles the clarity of the prediction. Perhaps, it rather indicates an awareness that Halldórr's dangling prediction, if not

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 220, n. 3; Sigurður Nordal, Introduction to *Borgfirðingasögur*, lxxxii.

returned to later in the narrative, needed an explanation within the scene itself.

Yet Þorsteinn's designs on Hjarðarholt are worth examining in more detail: what would draw a compiler or author to associate Þorsteinn with that land? *Laxdæla saga* does not tell us what happened to Hjarðarholt in the end, which is notable given the lengths it goes to in order to relate how the farm came to Óláfr pái, via shipwrecks and the hauntings of Víga-Hrappr. *Eyrbyggja saga*, however, offers two possibilities: "Þóru, dóttur sína, gipti Snorri Kerru-Bersa, syni Halldórs Ólafssonar á Hjarðarholti" [Þóra, his daughter, was married by Snorri to Kerru-Bersi, the son of Halldórr Ólafsson at Hjarðarholt]; "Halldórr var gofgastr sona Snorra goða; hann bjó í Hjarðarholti í Laxárdal" [Halldórr was the most honourable of the sons of Snorri goði; he lived at Hjarðarholt in Laxárdalr].<sup>52</sup> I will only discuss the former here; Einar Ól. Sveinsson makes a reasonable suggestion as to how the two might be reconciled.<sup>53</sup>

Snorri's schemes drive *Eyrbyggja saga* as well as parts of *Heiðarvíga saga* and *Njáls saga*, and they have a palpable effect on the story of *Laxdæla saga*. When he learns that Guðrún and Bolli's sons are looking for vengeance on the Ólafssynir for their father's death, Snorri redirects their attention to Helgi Harðbeinsson first, then later ensures that the Ólafssynir pay for the act through a fine.<sup>54</sup> *Laxdæla saga* presents these as the actions of a benevolent onlooker, concerned for the stability of the district, but there are nevertheless telling words in the conversation between Snorri and Halldórr. Halldórr acknowledges his gratitude and his distrust of (the now-deceased) Þorgils Hölluson and once more defends his and his brothers' landholdings:<sup>55</sup>

Þessu vil ek játta, ef þat er vili bræðra minna, at gjalda fé fyrir víg Bolla, slíkt sem þeir menn dæma, er til gørdar eru teknir; en undan vil ek skilja sekðir allar ok svá goðorð mitt, svá staðfestu; slíkt it sama þær staðfestur, er bræðr mínir búa á; vil ek ok til skilja, at þeir eigi þær at frjálsu fyrir þessa málalykð.<sup>56</sup>

52 *Eyrbyggja saga*, 181; 182.

53 Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Introduction to *Laxdæla saga*, lxxviii.

54 *Laxdæla saga*, 177; 208–11.

55 *Ibid.*, 209–10.

56 *Ibid.*, 210.

[I will agree to this, if my brothers are willing, to pay money for the killing of Bolli, such as men judge who are taken as arbitrators; but I want to make an exception for all kinds of outlawry, and for my chieftaincy, and my landholdings; the same should be said of the landholdings of my brothers, where they live; I also want to exempt their possessions from this settlement.]

Yet Hjarðarholt apparently ends up in Snorri goði's family anyway.

This agreement is made just before Þorsteinn reveals his interest in the land. It is a convenient situation (in the way that many situations are for Snorri goði) that Halldórr ends up in Snorri's debt. Halldórr agrees to pay an unstipulated, but presumably large, sum of money for a peaceful settlement, and finds himself with the farm that he insisted on keeping, but with too few animals to make the most of it. With a son of a marriageable age, who goes unmentioned by *Laxdæla saga*, we might imagine that the next arrangement between Halldórr and Snorri was easily completed.

Just as the wood-axe with which Þorsteinn Kuggason was threatened made Barði Guðmundsson and Sigurður Nordal think of Snorri's other enemies in *Eyrbyggja saga*, so the fate of Hjarðarholt might recall Snorri's first success: tricking his uncle into selling him the farm at Helgafell for a fraction of its worth. His land-grabs in *Eyrbyggja saga* are just as important to his growing power as his political and martial victories are, as could be inferred from the way in which *Eyrbyggja saga* describes the marriages made for his daughters, followed by the land inherited by his sons.<sup>57</sup> The desirability of Hjarðarholt itself is not to be questioned; *Laxdæla saga*'s description of Óláfr pái's processional moving-in and of the lavish standard in which he lived there evoke a wealthy piece of land.

Considering this, it is not so far-fetched to suggest that the scene between Þorsteinn, Þorkell and Halldórr had some basis in tradition. Þorsteinn's interest in the land was more than simple opportunism: his foster-son was Ásgeirr, the son of Kjartan Ólafsson. Kjartan was killed before he could inherit Hjarðarholt from Óláfr pái, but it is reasonable to expect that the farm might have been passed on to him; additionally, Þorsteinn's step-father was Kjartan and Halldórr's brother, Steinþórr

57 Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (St Ives: Penguin, 2001), ch. 6; *Eyrbyggja saga*, 180–83.

Ólafsson.<sup>58</sup> However, should Þorsteinn have chosen to pursue his interest in the land further than the scene in *Laxdæla saga* shows, we might note that Þorkell Eyjólfsson, when alive, had been an important bridge of goodwill between Þorsteinn and Snorri goði.

*Grettis saga*: Bridges and bells

Þorsteinn and Snorri are linked throughout *Grettis saga*. Following the lawsuit against Þorgeirr, Þorsteinn's next role is to offer Grettir shelter during his outlawry. When Grettir's pursuers catch up with him, Þorsteinn directs Grettir to Snorri goði's farm first. The saga tells us this was partially because "þá var málfriðr með þeim" [that was when they were on peaceful terms].<sup>59</sup> Grettir's response to Þorsteinn's killing (which is not recounted by the saga) is later overshadowed by Snorri goði's reaction. In this section I will probe the details of Þorsteinn's representation and of Snorri's response to his death. The passage in *Eyrbyggja saga* naming Þorsteinn as an enemy of Snorri's might be considered enough to account for *Grettis saga*'s vague allusions to their dispute, but I will argue that the details reveal links to a wider tradition.

*Grettis saga*'s opening comment on Þorsteinn and Snorri's relationship is embedded in the wider context of the characters' interactions. It positions Þorsteinn and Snorri within the story and alludes to broader knowledge of them by mentioning that it was only 'in that time' that they got on well. Snorri initially excuses himself from helping Grettir more proactively because of his age, but it is ultimately Þorsteinn's death that moves Snorri to offer Grettir his legal support. *Grettis saga* thus intertwines the characters of Þorsteinn and Snorri goði in its narrative, making use of their dispute and of Snorri's powerful reputation in its pursuit of Grettir's own story.

Þorsteinn's longest appearance in *Grettis saga* comes shortly after Grettir's stay with Vermundr mjóvi and Þorbjörg digra (Þorsteinn's in-laws). It amounts to a curious description of Þorsteinn's lands, including the church he built himself and, more strikingly, a bridge covered in bells that rang when anyone crossed it.

58 *Íslendingabók; Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, Íslensk fornrit, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1986), 199.

59 *Grettis saga*, 158.

Þorsteinn var iðjumaðr mikill ok smiðr ok helt mǫnnum mjök til starfa ... Þorsteinn hafði látit gera kirkju á bæ sínum. Hann lét brú gera heiman frá bænum; hon var gǫr með hagleik miklum. En útan í brúnni undir ásunum, þeim er upp heldu brúnni, var gǫrt með hringum ok dynbjöllur, svá at heyrði yfir til Skarfsstaða, hálfu viku sjávar, ef gengit var um brúna; svá hristusk hringarnir. Hafði Þorsteinn mikinn starfa fyrir þessarri smíð, því at hann var járngrøðarmaðr mikill.<sup>60</sup>

[Þorsteinn was a great craftsman and smith, and people thought a great deal of his work ... Þorsteinn had built a church on his farm. He built a bridge on the way home from the farm; it was made with a lot of skill. And out on the bridge, under the boards that held the bridge up, it was made with bells and chimes, so that it could be heard over at Skarfsstaðir, half a week across the sea, if anyone went over the bridge; then the bells would peal. Þorsteinn had put a great deal of work into this smithing, because he was an accomplished blacksmith.]

Guðni Jónsson observed that a very similar bridge is described in *Trójumanna saga* and that the unusual word *dynbjallar* appears in *Þiðreks saga*, both of which are indisputably earlier compositions than *Grettis saga*.<sup>61</sup>

Jesch felt that the episode therefore said little regarding Þorsteinn that could not have come from the author's imagination. Þorsteinn's diligence is contrasted with Grettir's workshy attitude, just as Þorsteinn's hot-headed behaviour contrasts with Þorkell's more rational approach in *Laxdæla saga*. According to Jesch, it therefore simply "serves to reiterate Grettir's well-known laziness when faced with work, and fits this into a pattern which recurs in the saga – in which Grettir goes from farm to farm, always having to leave when his enemies hear that he is there".<sup>62</sup> This is not to be argued against – the episode continues themes that run through *Grettis saga* – though it might be asked whether the saga had any reason for using Þorsteinn to explore them once more. After all, Grettir stays at many

60 Ibid., 173.

61 *Trójumanna saga*, ed. Jonna Louis-Jensen, Editiones Arnarnagnæanae, series A, vol. 8 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1963), 5; *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, ed. Henrik Bertelsen, 2 vols., STUAGNL, vol. 34 (Copenhagen: S. L. Møller, 1905–11), II, 239.

62 Jesch, "Lost Literature," 268.

farms, and any one of them could become the location of a fantastic bridge and a hard-working smith in an author's imagination.

The church evokes status, wealth, and probably the ability to import timber; *Laxdæla saga* attributes the ownership of a *ferja* [ferry] to Þorsteinn, which adds consistency to the accounts, although it could be a coincidence.<sup>63</sup> *Dynbjallar* usually adorn exotic royal standards, as in *Þiðreks saga*, *Sigrgarðs saga frækna* and *Vilhjálm's saga sjóðs*, and it is King Solomon who owns the bridge described in *Trójumanna saga*.<sup>64</sup> Bridges in Scandinavian archaeological contexts, like Ravning Enge in Denmark and the bridge connected with the Kuli stone in Norway, are also associated with royal power and prestige, particularly in a Christian context.<sup>65</sup>

On the other hand, there is the well-established connection between blacksmiths and social marginality, and Solomon's bridge is designed specifically to warn him if his enemies are approaching. *Grettis saga* does not make it explicit that the bridge is designed with Þorsteinn's enemies in mind, nor is it the bridge that alerts him to the approach of Grettir's pursuers.<sup>66</sup> For such a piece of defensive architecture to go unused in *Grettis saga* seems, furthermore, to indicate a *lack* of imagination on the author's part rather than its opposite. This is a subjective impression, but we could have been told of Þorsteinn's smithing and Grettir's aptitude for assisting without the description of the bridge. Even just by mentioning that the bridge's bells can be heard across the fjord at Skarfsstaðir when it is crossed, the saga encourages the audience to question the purpose of this feature. Is it to warn of enemies or trespassers, or to allow the landowner to offer a warm welcome to guests?

As much of an artifice as the fantastic bridge is, being possibly a *mélange* of at least two pre-existing written sources, it complements other depictions of Þorsteinn remarkably well. This could be the result of an author's knowledge of the other sagas in which Þorsteinn appears, as Jesch has suggested, or it could be the product of a more widespread knowledge

63 *Laxdæla saga*, 218.

64 *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, ed. Agnete Loth, 5 vols., Editiones Arnarnagnæanæ, series B, vols. 20–24 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1962–65), V, 51; VI, 97.

65 Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings*, trans. Susan M. Margeston and Kirsten Williams (London: Allen Lane, 1991), 80.

66 In *rimur* about Grettir by Magnús Jónsson (1763–1840) these obvious connections are made. ÍBR 95 4to: 60r.

of immanent traditions regarding Þorsteinn.<sup>67</sup> As a man who worked hard, but was often uncompromising and forceful, and who was well-connected but perhaps came to an ignominious end, the juxtaposition of the church and the act of smithing suit him well.

Þorsteinn does not appear again in *Grettis saga*, but the eponymous hero is first told of his killing at a time when Grettir has just lost Hallmundr, another ally.<sup>68</sup> In need of new supporters, the hero is to encounter Snorri goði once more. Shortly after Grettir is told the news of his second cousin's killing, the saga switches perspective:

Eptir víg Þorsteins Kuggasonar lagði Snorri goði fæð mikla á þá Þórodd, son sinn, ok Sám, son Barkar ins digra, en þat er eigi greint hvat þeir hófðu helzt til saka, útan þat, at þeir hafa eigi viljat gera eitthvert stórvirki, þat er Snorri lagði fyrir þá, ok því rak Snorri goði Þórodd brott frá sér ok bað hann eigi fyrr aptr koma en hann hafði drepit einnhvern skógarmann, ok svá varð at vera.<sup>69</sup>

[After the killing of Þorsteinn Kuggason, Snorri goði became very cold towards his son, Þóroddr, and Sám, the son of Þorkr inn digri, but it is not clear what the reason was for this, other than that they had not wanted to do some great deed that Snorri had required of them, and so Snorri goði drove Þóroddr away from him and told him not to come back until he had killed some outlaw, and that was simply the way it had to be.]

The implications are not subtle: Þóroddr will inevitably encounter Grettir. When Grettir spares him, Snorri finally agrees to help Grettir seek a pardon after twenty years of outlawry. Like many of Grettir's interactions with other known characters, the drive of the plot remains broadly unaffected, but his character and the tone of the narrative is built up through these encounters. He is broadly on the side of the good, well-connected people we recognise from elsewhere – Björn, Þorbjörg digra – and when Skapti Þóroddsson and Snorri goði agree to provide him with legal support, we expect success to follow. Where *Grettis saga* touches

67 Jesch, "Lost Literature," 268.

68 *Grettis saga*, 219.

69 *Ibid.*, 219–20.

directly on the plots of other sagas, its hero remains unable to influence their action, which generally echoes what we already know from other sagas. Barði Guðmundsson's encounters with Grettir, for instance, and Þórarinn spaki's advice to Barði, build elegantly on what *Heiðarvíga saga* tells us of these characters (who do not encounter Grettir in *Heiðarvíga saga*).

Snorri's reaction to Þorsteinn's death might equally be said to build upon material found in other sagas. For instance: Snorri's son Guðlaugr refuses to take part in the attack on Þorsteinn Gíslason in *Heiðarvíga saga*; Þóroddr Snorrason's incompetence is demonstrated by an episode in *Óláfs saga helga*; Þóroddr and Sámur are linked in battle at the siege of Óspakr's fortress in *Eyrbyggja saga*; and 'svá varð að vera' is precisely how *Eyrbyggja saga* describes Snorri's negotiations with his uncle Þorkr to claim the farm at Helgafell.<sup>70</sup> Yet, apart from this phrase, there is little precise overlap, more a sense of consistency and familiarity in the portrayal of these individuals.

*Grettis saga* samples from the content of many saga narratives, but not all need necessarily have been written sources. Let us assume that a more detailed account of the killing of Þorsteinn Kuggason existed in an unwritten form, linking the killing explicitly to Snorri and implicating Þóroddr and Sámur in the attack itself. Without side-stepping into another narrative, or making Snorri an enemy of the family, *Grettis saga* puts this story to use for its own purposes. It shows the good families of Iceland, and the characters who are respected in tradition the most, uniting to support Grettir in his – unfairly earned – outlawry. *Grettis saga* prioritises the prestige of being associated with Snorri goði over the details of a loosely linked dispute with Þorsteinn, Grettir's second cousin.

The saga manipulates its material carefully: Snorri becomes angry with the implied killers of Þorsteinn and distances himself from the act, making the likelihood of an alliance with Þorsteinn's relative, Grettir, seem more hopeful. He makes a nonsensical demand of his son to kill any outlaw and Þóroddr inevitably stumbles upon Grettir, recently frustrated in his search for his friend Hallmundr's killer. Yet Grettir admits to his second greatest fear (after the dark): "hærukarlinn Snorra goða ... ok ráð hans" [Greylocks

70 *Eyrbyggja saga*, 26.

Snorri goði ... and his counsels].<sup>71</sup> The shrewdness of showing mercy to his son amuses Snorri, who agrees to become Grettir's ally, making it all the more tragic when Snorri and Skapti, a powerful legal team, die prior to the assembly at which Grettir is to have his outlawry reviewed.<sup>72</sup> None of this decoration need interfere with the kernels of two separate stories: that of a man called Grettir who was outlawed but survived for nineteen years afterwards, and that of Þorsteinn Kuggason, who was thought to be related to Grettir, and was apparently killed in a dispute with Snorri goði.

Additionally, Sámr Barkarson's association with Snorri's response to Þorsteinn's death is a significant detail. Sámr's appearances in the sagas are limited to this mention in *Grettis saga* and the fight against Óspakr in *Eyrbyggja saga*. He is little more than a background name in both instances, yet in both he is paired with Þóroddr Snorrason. If, as Jesch was inclined to argue in her thesis, this scene in *Grettis saga* is pure authorial invention, then why invent Sámr's presence? It cannot be explained by any "useful" narrative function or role in the plot; he is there because of his familial connection to Snorri. For narrators who believed that they were telling historical, or historically-plausible stories, there were no benefits to be had from inventing the inclusion of a known person who amounted to little more than narrative baggage.

Finally, *Landnámabók* reveals that Sámr was himself killed in an incident we have little knowledge of: "Þorgrímr, faðir Snorra goða, ok Þorkr enn digri, faðir Sáms, er Ásgeirr vá" [Þorgrímr, the father of Snorri goði, and Þorkr inn digri, father of Sámr, whom Ásgeirr killed].<sup>73</sup> Nothing for certain can be said about this incident, but, as Barði Guðmundsson noted, Ásgeirr Kjartansson was Þorsteinn Kuggason's foster-son.<sup>74</sup> Little imagination is required for the bare bones of a typical feud to emerge: Þorsteinn over-reaches in his pursuit of Hjarðarholt; Snorri has his rival killed, probably by Þóroddr and Sámr; Ásgeirr Kjartansson takes vengeance for the death of his foster-father Þorsteinn by killing Sámr.

Þorsteinn Kuggason was well-connected enough to be the subject of established narratives within the vast immanent whole that informed the

71 *Grettis saga*, 221.

72 *Ibid.*, 243.

73 *Landnámabók*, 126.

74 Barði Guðmundsson, "Tímatál," 34.

*Íslendingasögur*. Jesch has compared Þorsteinn to figures such as Gestr Oddleifsson and Ásgrímur Elliða-Grímsson, explaining that as a familiar character, he was useful to the compilers of sagas.<sup>75</sup> Unlike Gestr, he is not associated with prophecy or foresight, however, nor is he a chieftain, like Ásgrímur. So what was so useful about Þorsteinn Kuggason that an author might “invent” his role in *Grettis saga* or *Laxdæla saga*? Broadly speaking, his usefulness to a narrator appears to come from his kinship with more renowned men, and his role in significant legal cases.

This idea of narrative usefulness applies to the sheen of compilation, or composition, that makes the written sagas what they are, but could have applied to oral narratives as well. However, to be effective – for an audience to establish which details of the story were important and which were not – and in order to account for the vast quantity of shared material across the sagas, and the amount of unexplained references and unaccounted for details – the usefulness of a character like Þorsteinn had to be based on immanent ideas of their character and actions. The scenes in which Þorsteinn appears are too consistent in their characterisation, too bound up with significant moments (like the deaths of Björn and Þorkell), and they all edge too conspicuously around the subject of his death to be dismissed as the product of an imaginative glance at the annals and a genealogy or two.

The fact that none of the sagas gives us clear-cut information about Þorsteinn’s death may suggest that it was not a well-known story at the time they were written down, but on the other hand, its presence in the earliest annals (which simultaneously neglect to mention the death of his contemporary, Þorgils Hölluson, for instance), would suggest otherwise. The original manuscript of *Resensannáll* was a victim of the fire of Copenhagen in 1728, but Árni Magnússon’s own copy notes that the hand changed from 1283 onwards; this puts a clear *terminus ante quem* on the composition of the saga-age sections.<sup>76</sup> Few would suggest that the surviving version of *Grettis saga* pre-dates these annals, so they are the earliest reference that we have to Þorsteinn’s killing.

<sup>75</sup> Jesch, “Lost Literature,” 269.

<sup>76</sup> Elizabeth Rowe, *The Medieval Annals of Iceland*, 2 vols. (forthcoming); pers. comm., Elizabeth Rowe.

## Conclusion

Þorsteinn Kuggason's biography cannot be brought into full focus by these sources, but elements of it have become clearer. He was evidently a good man to have on one's side, as the settlements for Björn's and Þorgils's deaths show, but by the time of his death he had lost many important allies, including his cousins Þorkell Eyjólfsson and Ásmundr hærulangr as well as Björn. His forceful approach to legal settlements – and to the land at Hjarðarholt – made it likely that he would gain enemies of his own, as is implied by the descriptions that call him *ójafnaðarmaðr* and *ofstopamaðr*. And perhaps there was a hint of bad timing in his move on Hjarðarholt, coinciding as it did with Snorri goði's newly-agreed peace with Halldórr and the other Ólafssynir, and with Snorri's own efforts to secure good land and marriages for all of his children. The death of their mutual friend, Þorkell, may have allowed tensions to reach a climax. In the aftermath, neither Þorsteinn nor his foster-son Ásgeirr are recorded as having had any descendants, leaving Þorsteinn's story squeezed to the edges of the surviving accounts of eleventh-century jostling for power and land.<sup>77</sup>

The accounts of the *Íslendingasögur* in which Þorsteinn appears do not have to be entirely accurate with regard to history, nor dismissed as purely authorial inventions in order to reveal information about Þorsteinn and other minor characters, not least because such binaries should no longer be deemed applicable to this complex body of narrative material. By piecing together the stories of supporting characters such as Þorsteinn, and considering the often conflicting narrative intentions of different sagas, we may uncover elements of the shared immanent whole that underlies them.

Þorsteinn Kuggason is useful to the narrators of sprawling regional epics like *Laxdæla saga* and *Grettis saga* because of his relationship to people directly involved in these sagas' plots. He also appears in several instances because of his connection with specific legal cases. But beyond this, Þorsteinn's appearances reveal the blurred edges between saga narratives and immanent traditions. He is not merely useful: Þorsteinn is also never fully separated from the details that provide a wider context for his actions, even if they are not directly relevant to the stories being told by

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Arnkell Þórólfsson in *Eyrbyggja saga*.

*Laxdæla saga* and *Grettis saga*. His designs on Hjarðarholt and the carefully expressed description of his farm, church and bridge, indicate that Þorsteinn once received more consideration from wider tradition than the written texts preserve. A degree of imagination certainly went into the use of these details – particularly in *Grettis saga*, where Snorri goði's motives are made more oblique than ever – but it built on a consistent, recognisable tradition.<sup>78</sup>

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78 Many thanks to Rebecca Merkelbach for organising the *Hungrvaka* strands at Leeds IMC 2016 where I presented a preliminary version of this paper. I am especially grateful to those who engaged with the discussion afterwards. Thanks are also due to *Gripla's* editorial team and anonymous reviewers for their advice, and to Edward Carlsson Browne for reading drafts of this article. Finally, especial thanks to Elizabeth Rowe for providing me with access to her unpublished material on the Annals, and to Judith Jesch for making her PhD thesis freely available – I hope I have not misrepresented her arguments.

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## SUMMARY

The Mysterious Death of Þorsteinn Kuggason: Authorial Imagination and Saga Narrative

**Keywords:** Old Norse literature, oral tradition, immanence, Icelandic family sagas, Íslendingasögur, characterisation

Þorsteinn Kuggason is a recurring character across several major Íslendingasögur. He exists on the fringes of significant political manoeuvrings in the sagas, and is referenced in several well-known sources. Although Þorsteinn might be called a minor character in these sources, the tangible details of his life hint at more dramatic instances in his story and the Icelandic annals record the fact that he was killed in 1027. The circumstances of Þorsteinn's death are not preserved in any of the sagas in which he participates, although *Grettis saga* mentions it in passing, and references to it may be discerned in *Laxdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*.

In this article, the portrayal of Þorsteinn in three scenes found in *Laxdæla saga* and *Grettis saga* is re-evaluated. His characterisation is consistent across the sagas, and his narrative role is largely connected to the portrayal of his more significant relatives. It has previously been suggested that Þorsteinn was the subject of a lost saga; Judith Jesch, however, has argued that Þorsteinn's appearances were more likely due to authorial "imagination" than to the existence of an earlier, written saga. Here, the portrayal of Þorsteinn is returned to in light of an understanding of the role of oral tradition and immanence in saga narrative. Thus, details of Þorsteinn's position in the narratives of *Laxdæla saga* and *Grettis saga* are examined, and apparently irrelevant information in each saga is examined side by side in order to demonstrate the evidence for a coherent reading of Þorsteinn Kuggason's life, and his death.

## ÁGRIP

Hinn dularfulli dauði Þorsteins Kuggasonar: Hinn dularfulli dauði Þorsteins Kuggasonar. Ímyndunarafli höfundar og íslendingasögur

**Lykilorð:** fornbókmenntir, munnleg hefð, almæltar sögur, Íslendingasögur, persónusköpun

Þorsteinn Kuggason kemur fyrir í nokkrum hinna stærri Íslendingasögna. Hann birtist þar sem aukapersóna í mikilvægum pólitískum atburðum og vísað er til hans í nokkrum vel þekktum heimildum. Þótt hægt sé að segja að Þorsteinn gegni ekki stóru hlutverki í sögunum má af ýmsu sem frá honum er sagt skynja sögulegri atburði úr lífi hans en þar koma fram, og í íslenskum annálum er skráð að hann hafi verið drepinn árið 1027. Hvergi í sögunum er lýst hvernig hann dó, en dauði hans

er nefndur í Grettis sögu, og í Laxdæla sögu og Eyrbyggja sögu kemur aðeins fram að Þorsteinn er ekki lengur á lífi. Í greininni er sú mynd, sem birtist af Þorsteini í þremur tilfellum í Laxdæla sögu og Grettis sögu, endurskoðuð. Persónusköpun hans er stöðug í sögunum og staða hans í frásögninni tengist helst lýsingum á mikilvægari ættmennum hans. Áður hefur verið sett fram sú hugmynd að Þorsteinn hafi verið aðalpersóna glataðrar sögu; en Judith Jesch hefur aftur á móti haldið því fram að birting Þorsteins í söguefninu stafi frekar af „ímyndunarafli“ höfunda en því að eldri, rituð saga hafi verið til. Hér er því litið aftur til Þorsteins og lýsinga á honum út frá sjónarhorni munnlegrar hefðar og hinna almæltu sagna. Staða Þorsteins í frásögnunum í Laxdælu og Grettlu er skoðuð nákvæmlega og upplýsingar sem virðast í fljótu bragði óviðkomandi efninu eru bornar saman til að sýna fram á að hægt er að lesa þar ævi Þorsteins Kuggasonar og dauða hans í samhengi.

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