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THE PRESENTATION OF THE SKALDS IN ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR

In answering the question of the presentation of the skalds in the Íslendingasögur it is natural to draw on all those sagas that have been called "skáldasögur". Six sagas are generally included in this group: Kormáks saga, Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds, Bjarnar saga Hítðalakappa, Egils saga, Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu and Fóstbræðra saga. With the exception of Gunnlaugs saga these sagas are among the oldest ones preserved. They are assumed to have been written in the beginning of the 13th century.

In view of the debate that has arisen concerning the historical veracity of the sagas, the question put in this paper must be formulated with greater precision if the attempt to answer it is not to fail on account of these differences of opinion. This could not be prevented if we were to understand by the question of the presentation of the skalds that we can get information on the skalds of the 10th and early 11th century from these 13th century works. Such a question could only have a meaning if the debate on the claims of the sagas to be historical sources were to be settled, and then only if we were to see them as detailed biographical works. But as this question has not been answered, and probably cannot be answered in the above sense, our question must be put differently: How did the writers of the 13th century present the skalds?

On the strength of the titles of the sagas, e.g. Kormáks saga, we might expect to find an account of the poet's life, his biography. And this has been the opinion

of many scholars: that the saga was a biography supported by sources, the preserved work of the poet on the one hand and oral tradition on the other. When the strictly historical interpretation of the sagas had been abandoned and they were seen as a combination of different traditions, the interest was no longer centered on the saga itself, but on the traditions it preserved. This has now been justly criticized by a number of scholars. But thereupon, as is usually the case, the other extreme was proclaimed: the saga is a pure fabrication, it is a work of art created in the 13th century, devoid of ties with the past. Thus Bjarni Einarsson has attempted to show that the four skáldasögur - excepting Egils saga and Fóstbræðra saga - contain imitations of the Tristan story, and that their lausavísur, composed in the 13th century, are imitations of troubadour poetry. Time does not allow me to enter into the discussion that has arisen since the publication of his book in 1961, but I think my considerations here offer a certain contribution to that discussion.

I agree with Bjarni Einarsson that we must attempt to see the saga in question as a work of art, to penetrate the artistic aims of the author. It seems to me, however, that it does not necessarily follow that all the poems preserved in the saga are the work of the author of the saga himself - and this is first and foremost true of the lausavísur. In my opinion it is possible to conceive of the saga as a work of art, even though parts of it are the work of another author. The question whether the lausavísur attributed to the skalds were actually made by them, or whether they were actually spoken in the reported circumstances, does not necessarily have to be answered when we are trying to understand the saga as a whole and the artistic aims of its author. This does not mean, however, that we are going to ignore the question of oral tradition. But it must not be the only one we ask in approaching the saga. Scholars who have concerned themselves with the sagas have, in my opinion, expended

too much energy on the problem of the authenticity of the lausavísur. This should rather be a problem for those scholars who concern themselves with the poets. The method that has chiefly been used is to prove the authenticity of the stanzas by their discrepancies with the prose context. I do not think this is a profitable method. For neither disagreement nor agreement can prove anything. Agreement can be the result of the composition of the lausavísa by the author of the saga, or he may have correctly interpreted and inserted the one handed down by tradition. Disagreements can be created through carelessness on the author's part, but would sooner be taken as an indication that we are dealing with something that has been handed down by tradition. On the other hand it is no argument against the authenticity of a stanza, that it could not possibly have been spoken in the circumstances related in the saga. There are fairly frequent examples of this. It would be foolish to think that Kormákr recited a stanza as he was swimming and the eels coiled themselves around his arms and legs. But this does not mean that the stanza has to be spurious. He could have composed it later, while relating the incident, just as Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld versified his story of his exploits in Greenland when he told it to the king.

For the question of the artistic formation of the saga, however, the authenticity of the lausavísur is not one of the most important problems, for even when the author of the stanzas is not identical with the author of the saga, the choice of the stanzas, sometimes their final form, and the ordering of the episodes remain the artistic creation of the author and conform to his plans, aims and ideas. We will now look more closely into these ideas and aims.

If we were given the task of writing the biography of a skald, we would above all take pains to show his special characteristics as a poet and perhaps his particular social position. We would try to see him against the background of his poetic works. We would describe how and

when he first showed his poetic talent. When considering an art with as strict a formal tradition as that of skaldic poetry, it would interest us to know how and from whom the art was acquired. The chief works of our poet and the circumstances of their creation would take up a great deal of space.

Anyone familiar with the so-called skáldasögur will see immediately that none of them answers to the demands we would make of a poet's biography. In the description of the hero the fact that he was a poet takes a completely subordinated position. Here, for example, is a comment on Egill, whom we generally regard as the greatest of these poets, which occurs at the beginning of Gunnlaugs saga:

"For it was said by learned men that Egill was the greatest fighter and duelist in Iceland, and most highly regarded of all farmers' sons. He was also a scholar and the wisest of men." 1)

When Björn, the hero of Bjarnar saga, is introduced, there is absolutely no mention of the fact that he was a skald.

When we observe the kind of situation in which the saga authors have their heroes step forward for the first time as poets, we get the impression that they have taken great care to choose the most unimportant and insignificant situations possible. A few examples of this:

Gunnlaugr. has to pay a farmer damages for striking one of his farmhands. When the farmer demands more, Gunnlaugr recites a stanza in which he urges the farmer to be satisfied with his original offer. 2) A totally trivial incident.

Pormóðr, one of the two heroes of Fóstbræðra saga, speaks his first stanza in a conversation with his father about a fight with a slave. But anyway Pormóðr is already

1) "því at svá er sagt af fróðum mönnum, at Egill hafi mestr kappi verit á Íslandi ok holmgongumaðr, ok mest ætlat af bondasonum: fræðimaður var hann ok mikill ok manna vitrastr." IF III, p. 52.

2) ch. 5, IF III, p. 63.

well introduced as a poet, as the first part of the saga, which describes the exploits of Þormóðr's blood-brother, Þorgeir, has already quoted as sources several stanzas from Þormóðr's poem composed after Þorgeir's death.

Björn Hítðælakappi speaks his first stanza lying wounded in a tent in Russia. But in fact the stanza does not seem to relate to the narrative at that point, as its subject matter indicates Iceland rather than Russia: "Oddný would wish to lie here with me as my wife if she knew that I was here, not far from her".

Only in Kormákr's case is his first performance as a poet used artistically: an overflow of stanzas bursts like a flood at his first meeting with Steingerðr, aroused by the love that was to bring him so much misery.<sup>3)</sup>

It may also be possible in the case of Hallfreðar saga to speak of an artistic use of the first poetry. Hallfreður's first poetry is directed against Gríss Sæmingsson, who has taken him to task for his unseemly visits to Kolfinna. He says in the stanza that he does not fear his anger, and warns Gríss not to ask for Kolfinna's hand.<sup>4)</sup>

This arbitrary nature of the first appearance of these heroes as poets also relates to the fact that we are not told in a single one of these sagas where or from whom the poet learnt his craft. It is, however, beyond doubt that this craft, with its high regard for formal skill and mythological knowledge, required long apprenticeship.

The minimal conclusion that can be drawn from the above considerations is, that it was not in the poetic talent of the hero and its development that the interest of the saga author was centered.

<sup>3)</sup>Cf. Bjarni Einarsson, *The Lovesick Skald*, in *Med. Scan.* IV (1971), p. 25.

<sup>4)</sup>Ch. 4, *IF VIII*, p. 146.

We will now observe how the authors treat the major poetic works of their heroes: Of Gunnlaugr's long poems not a single one is quoted in full. From the Aðalráðsdrápa the refrain (or stef) is preserved; from the drápa of Sigtryggr of Dublin only the refrain and a stanza and a half, the poem about Earl Sigurðr Hloðvesson is merely mentioned, likewise that about Earl Sigurðr í Skorum and the one about King Ólafr of Sweden. In the case of Björn's enemy, Þórðr, only the name of his prize poem for Earl Eiríkr, Belgstaðadrápa, is mentioned; of his poem for King Ólafr we hear nothing. Kormákr's poem for Earl Sigurðr, Sigurðardrápa, is not even mentioned. Nor do we hear of his stay with Haraldr gráfeldr, of which we know through the Skáldatal. Only Hallfreðar saga is an exception, but there is a reason for this which will be discussed later on. The same is to a certain extent true of Egils saga, for some of Egils poems are only quoted by the first stanza in the text of the saga, and preserved in full only in an addendum.

Compared with this the number of lausavísur quoted is surprising. The reason for this remarkable state of affairs cannot be that the saga author regarded them as more valuable than the longer poems, but rather that these stanzas, whether they are the work of the poet or the saga author, are important for the action and presentation of the story.

The saga author subordinates his quotations (or pretended quotations) to the action of his saga. This explains why Hallfreðr's poems are quoted in full: the author is writing the story of a court skald. This concentration on the relationship between King Ólafr and his skald also explains why the poems about Earl Sigvaldi and King Ólafr of Sweden are only mentioned and not quoted.

What the sagas present us with from the works of the heroes does not, therefore, have to be everything that the authors knew, or knew about. They selected from what had been preserved the stanzas that served their presentational

purposes.

We must, then, start by asking for each saga, what it is the author wants to present. We have already seen that it is not the biography of the poet as poet. Let us now go through the sagas, one by one.

Gunnlaugur's saga begins with a prophetic dream in which the father of the heroine, Helga, foresees the fate of his daughter and the men she is to love. By means of this dream at the beginning of the saga and the romantic death of Helga when she sees her lover's mantle at the end of the saga, we are presented with the theme: a woman torn between two men. This point of view is also used in the presentation of Gunnlaugr's life, which would have been handled quite differently by a modern biographer. All Gunnlaugr's travels abroad and his stays at various courts, which earned him great distinction, are quickly and schematically dealt with, in order to get back to the main theme: the rivalry between Gunnlaugr and Hrafn, who has used cunning to steal his bride. It ends with the death of both in a duel, as the dream had foretold. It is in keeping with its theme that Gunnlaugr's saga ends, not with the death of the hero, nor with the revenge for him, but with the death of the woman who stands at the centre of the action at the beginning of the saga.

Although Bjarnar saga is thematically close to Gunnlaugr's saga, its construction still shows that the point of view is different: instead of the theme of a woman torn between two men we have that of two men fighting over one woman. This can be seen immediately by the fact that in Gunnlaugr's saga the first chapter is devoted to Helga, whereas Bjarnar saga begins with these words: "Here we will tell of Icelanders who lived at the time of Ólafr Haraldsson and were his trusted friends."

And then we are at once presented with the two rivals, Þorðr Kolbeinsson and Björn. It is not the deceitful stealing of Björn's betrothed, whom Þorðr has married, having spread the news that Gunnlaugr had been killed,

that marks the beginning of their enmity. No, the author tells us that they had been fighting already in Iceland, and that the stealing of the bride is a consequence of these earlier quarrels. And the conclusion of the fighting in Þorsteinn's sentence against Þórðr and his helpers is also the end of the saga.

In Kormáks saga we have the story of the life-long love of the hero for a woman he cannot attain - and when she is attainable he rejects her. The first time when she is betrothed to him, and the second time when he saves her and her husband is ready to give her up. And everything is subordinated to this theme of unhappy love. Only a small role is played by Kormákr's stays with Norwegian kings and his viking trips, which we know about from other sources.

In Hallfreðar saga the theme of love's desire sounds again, but it is not put as squarely in the foreground as it is in Kormáks saga. Like Kormákr, Hallfreðr has the opportunity to marry his beloved Kolfinna, but does not use it. But it is after this that the main theme of the saga is begun: Hallfreðr as court poet. The close relationship between the great king of the conversion and his unruly skald, whom he converts to Christianity and gives the nickname "vandræðaskáld", but also the profound affection of the loyal poet, who is deeply hit by the fall of his king, more deeply than by the loss of the woman he loved. As a whole the saga is not as thematically unified as the others. We are given many details on the origin of the family in Norway, Kolfinna and the struggle over her take up a great deal of space, as does the trip to Sweden. One gets the impression that the author did not have a definite point of view in mind when he decided to write the life of this poet. No particular course of events is given emphasis through the whole of the saga. This might tempt us to think that here we have found a naive storyteller, and therefore a historically accurate one.

Egils saga covers a still wider field. Several chapters



are concerned with Egill's ancestors and their quarrels with the Norwegian kings. The end of the saga does not coincide with Egill's death, as might be expected, as there follows an account of his son Þorsteinn and his quarrels, which seems rather out of place to us, who are interested in the great poet. If we were to try to state the theme of the saga it would be something like this: Egill as one of the most important members of the Kveldulf-family.

We still have Fóstbræðra saga to look at. Regardless of all theories concerning the prehistory of the saga, we can state this: in its present form it is divided into two parts, first the activities of Þorgeir and the poet Þormóðr's love affair, which earns him his nickname Kolbrúnarskáld, and then Þormóðr's revenge for his blood-brother at the behest and under the protection of King Ólafr the Saint, in whose service Þormóðr was killed. Even Þormóðr's love poems - the Kolbrúnarvisur - which have earned him his nickname, are sacrificed to this theme. Of Þormóðr's works, apart from the lausavísur, nothing is quoted except the poem composed after the death of his sworn blood-brother, Þorgeir, and this is only used as a source for his life story, in a way which reminds us of the method of the Konungasögur. This poem is not quoted as a notable work of the skald Þormóðr, it has hardly any relevance to its creator in the saga, it is only a source of information about the actions of another person. We are not even told that Þormóðr composed a poem on Þorgeir's death, nor whether or when he recited it.

Summing all this up it may be said that the skáldasögur are divided into two groups: one group made up of Gunnlaugs saga, Bjarnar saga and Kormáks saga, where each saga derives its structure from a particular conflict: a woman torn between two men, two men fighting over one woman, and the life-long, unfulfilled love of a man for a woman.

The second group is made up of Egils saga, Fóstbræðra saga and Hallfreðar saga. Here the sagas are not subordinated

to a single point of view. One common characteristic can be brought out, however: the strong ties with the Norwegian king, whether it is the enmity between the Kveldulf-family and Haraldr hárfagri or Eiríkr blóðøx, or the strong human ties between Ólafr the Saint and his skalds, Hallfreðr and Þormóðr. Haðlfreðar saga, which also contains the theme of lost love, forms a bridge between these two groups.

It would be tempting to conclusions concerning the chronology and origin of the sagas from these groupings. Then it might be claimed that the group closer to the konungasögur is the older one. But in fact this would only be valid for an "inner chronology", which does not necessarily coincide with the "outer" one, the actual dating. The old and the young are found in juxtaposition in all ages.

We have also seen that the saga author is not interested in the skald on account of his poetic talent; neither is he his biographer. The interest is not centered on the person, but on the action, the incidents.

Taking this into account we can then sum up what the saga authors have to say about the skalds in general.

Let us begin with their description. A fairly typical characteristic of our heroes seems to be that they are somewhat misanthropic and sarcastic, and therefore not greatly loved by the public. This is true of Egill, who is presented in clear opposition to his handsome and friendly brother, Þórólfr. This opposition between handsome, friendly people on the one hand, and ugly, boorish, though talented ones on the other, runs through the whole saga. Perhaps the author of Gunnlaugs saga had it in mind when he remarked that Gunnlaugr's brother, Hermundr, was more popular than he and looked more like a nobleman.

Gunnlaugr's character is described thus:

"He was thoroughly obstreperous in disposition, ambitious already at an early age, unyielding in everything, ruthless and an able poet, but a rather scurrilous one; he was called Gunnlaugr Serpent-Tongue."<sup>5</sup>

As has already been noticed, Hallfreðr's character is quite similar:

He was a good and rather scurrilous poet, and somewhat capricious; he was not popular." 6)

In the same way Þórðr, Björn's opponent, was said to be "mocking and malicious towards all those he did not like". 7)

Similarly the two blood-brothers, Þorgeir and Þormóðr, were not well liked by their neighbours and were not considered pleasant.

It seems probable that this is not a literary tradition, but rather that there was a strained relationship between the skalds, whose polished sarcasms were feared by all, and the general run of the settlers. But the talent that led to conflicts with the local farmer population found its right environment at the king's court. Thus we are told that Þórðr Kolbeinsson was constantly going abroad where he was highly valued for his intelligence by men of high standing. 8)

It also agrees well with this presentation that some poets got into conflicts with their parents in their youth: Egill forced Þórólfr to take him along on a voyage abroad by cutting the mooring ropes on Þórólfr's boat, so that it drifted off. Gunnlaugr had worse luck, as his father used force to prevent him from going on a journey abroad. The father's motive is characteristic: he feared that his son would not behave himself abroad, as he had hardly been able to keep him in check at home. 9)

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5) "hávaðamaðr mikill í öllu skaplyndi ok framgjarn snimmendis ok við allt óvægin ok harðr ok skáld mikit ok heldr níðskár ok kallaðr Gunnlaugr ormstunga." Ch. 4, IF III, p. 59.

6) "skáld var hann gott ok heldr níðskár ok margbreytinn; ekki var hann vinsæll." Ch. 2, IF VIII, p. 141.

7) "Ekki var Þórðr mjök vinsæll af alþýðu, því at hann þótti vera spottsamr ok grár við alla þá er honum þótti dælt við." Ch. 1, IF III, p. 112.

8) Ch. 1, IF III, p. 111.

9) Ch. 4, IF III, p. 59.

Hallfreðr's father, Óttar, is particularly violent towards his son, who threatens to challenge Kolfinna's suitor to a duel. He lures him home on a false pretext, has him tied up and refuses to put him free until he promises to put the case into his father's hands.

We see that in the skáldasögur there is a certain uniformity of pattern, in that the skalds are difficult, though unusually intelligent and talented people, who already from their youth do not adjust well to their surroundings. It is difficult to decide whether this is a literary tradition. In my opinion it is possible to show such a connection between Gunnlaugs saga and Egils saga: to the common wish to travel abroad other parallels can be added, as B. M. Olsen has shown.<sup>11)</sup> But I do not think it probable that all the skáldasögur show a literary interdependence in presenting the skald as a difficult and partly unpleasant character. But this apart: what is the importance of literary influence. Even when an author seeks his model in an earlier work of art, he will only take what fits his purpose. And the total outcome is more important than the origin of the individual parts.

It is furthermore peculiar that all six poets have difficulties in their relationships with women; in three of our sagas this is the main theme. Gunnlaugr and Björn are robbed of their betrothed by a trick, and in fact by poets who have stayed with them at the courts of Norway and Sweden. Here literary influence seems a fairly obvious possibility. According to Bjarni Einarsson, the model for these episodes is to be found in the story of the skald Ívar Ingimundarson in Morkinskinna<sup>12)</sup>. It is the well known motif of the suitor on someone else's

11) B. M. Olsen, Om Gunnlaugs saga orrmstungu, Kbh. 1911. (Det kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskabs Skrifter, 7. række, Hist. og filos. Afd. 2,1)

12) Bjarni Einarsson, Skáldasögur, Reykjavík 1961, p. 290.

behalf, who marries the woman himself. But in fact I cannot agree with Einarsson when he names Tristan as the most famous example of this motif. In his case the situation is the direct opposite: the suitor by proxy is actually in love with the bride, but still leaves her to the rightful bridegroom.

We are succinctly told about Hallfreðr, that he did not want to marry, and Þormóðr refuses to marry Gríma's daughter, because his mind was not set on marriage.

In Kormákr's case the author, or rather the tradition, has called upon the influence of magic to solve the puzzle, why Kormákr suddenly loses all interest in marrying his betrothed. I do not know whether E. O. Sveinsson is right in explaining it by the "skaldlund", the poetic temper, which prevents him from stooping to such a prosaic level. 13) The explanation is attractive, but is it not derived from the spirit of our own age?

Even in Egils saga, which hardly concerns itself with the theme of love at all, we are told that Egill found it difficult to ask for the hand of Ásgerðr, his brother's widow, whom he loved greatly. Still, Egill is the only one of our poets to be lucky in love.

These strong parallels in this theme, in spite of all the differences, are striking. Following in the footsteps of Paul Rubow and James Carney, Bjarni Einarsson has in his book, *Skáldasögur*, tried to show that the theme of a life-long, unlucky love is derived from the Tristan story. This theme of unlucky love appears with a comparable intensity in *Kormáks saga*, but when we turn to the other sagas the life-long hate for the rival becomes much more prominent. And this seems to me to mark a fairly clear difference. The theme of a life-long unlucky love seems to me too abstract, and the similarities in the action too negligible, for us to be able to feel an actual influence here. The lack of similarities in the

13) E. O. Sveinsson, *Formáli*, IF VIII, p. LXXXI.

course of the action seems to me a weighty argument against this, when we take into account that in the medieval epic the course of events is more significant than the presentation of character. This has been demonstrated as far as the Middle European novel of the High Middle Ages is concerned, and it must also hold true, to a certain extent, for the sagas.

The different themes of the individual sagas can also be discerned in the lausavísur. In agreement with its theme, Kormáks saga does in fact contain numerous love poems. But in Bjarnar saga these are fairly few in number, and, as might be expected, scurrilous and derogatory stanzas are predominant.

The greatest similarity to the Tristan story is found in the fact that two of the skalds - Kormákr and Hallfreðr - recite a poem at their hour of death, in which they think back to the love of their youth. This seems to me to be too scant to require us to look to Tristan as a model. We can also see Kormákr's and Steingerðr's stay on the small farm as comparable with Kolfinna's adultery with Hallfreðr, but in order to do so, do we really need Tristan as a model.

The question remains why it is to the skalds that this motif has attached itself. Might this be a reflection of a continental love poetry, whose single theme is the love and desire for an unattainable loved one? But is it so easy to tear this motif out of its proper breeding ground, the brilliant courts and the noble ladies who were the objects of the poets' songs, and transplant it to a country where this social reality did not exist? Troubadour poetry is no "pure poetry", it is a social art. And the jump from this to an epic work of art is a very great one.

Perhaps we should also remember that the themes of love and passion also appear in heroic poetry, which concerns itself with the honour of the hero.<sup>13)</sup> The heroic

poems of the Edda leap to mind, but also the story of Hildir, Héðinn and Högni, an old precursor of the theme of two men fighting over one woman.

It is of particular interest for us to see what concepts the saga authors have of the life of the skalds at the courts of princes, and of their role there, as this is the original home of the skaldic art.

But here we suffer a disappointment. Very frequently we find nothing but the cliché: the skald comes to the court and presents himself with the stereotyped address: "I have composed a poem in your honour and would like to be heard". Most often the prince gives his permission, the skald recites the poem, is given a present and invited to stay.

Particularly in Gunnlaugs saga do we find a frequent use of this cliché. In fact we come across a scene that reminds us strongly of a scene in Egils saga. When Gunnlaugr comes to Earl Eiríkr in Norway he angers the prince by his impudent answer, in which he refers to the shameful death of the Earl's father in a pigsty. The Earl wants to have him taken prisoner. Then Skúli Þorsteinsson steps forward and asks for pardon for his friend, so that Gunnlaugr is only exiled and sails to England, to King Aðalráðr. The parallels leap to the eye: Eiríkr blóðox - Earl Eiríkr, Skúli - Arinbjörn, Aðalráðr - Aðalsteinn.

In Hallfreðar saga we can plainly see the influence of the planned theme on the structure of the saga: The poems and the stays with princes other than Ólafr the Saint, are treated in a cursory and stereotyped way.

A detailed picture of the life of a skald at a prince's court is only found in those sagas that show the close ties between a skald and a prince, i.e. Hallfreðar saga and the latter half of Fóstbræðra saga, which describes the loyalty of the skald Þormóðr to the

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14) P. G. Foote, The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent Tongue, New York 1957, Introduction, p. XII.

king Ólafr the Saint, along with whom he was killed in the battle of Stiklastaðir. These two poets are the skalds of the king, they remain the skalds of King Ólafr even when they stay at the courts of other princes. Comparing this with Egill or Gunnlaugr or Þórðr Kolbeinsson we see the difference: these were not regarded as the skalds of a particular king. Egill was a follower of King Aðalsteinn in England, but did not function as his skald. Skalds like Gunnlaugr or Þórðr give guest performances at various courts, but they are not regarded as the skalds of a particular prince. This may well have a historical explanation. It seems that certain princes held court for skalds, like Haraldr hárfagri, Ólafr the Saint and Haraldr harðráði. A number of anecdotes then come into existence about these kings and their skalds. And the sagas in question must build on these anecdotes. This does not amount to saying that in these cases the saga only presents historical events. Anecdotes may come into existence with the passage of time.

In this connection one episode comes to mind. Egils saga gives us the great account of the composition of Egill's poem Höfuðlausn. Egill is supposed to have composed it during one night, in order to reconcile himself with Eiríkr blóðøx, into whose hands he had fallen in York. There exist many accounts closely related to this one, such as the ones of Bragi, Þórarinn loftunga, Gísli Illugason and others. Odd Nordland has shown fairly conclusively that these accounts constitute a recurrent story. Now it seems to me that there is a parallel in Hallfreðar saga which also belongs to this type of anecdote, but has not been noticed before.

After the death of Ólafr the Saint Hallfreðr is captured by his enemy, Earl Eiríkr, and is to be killed. Among the Earl's courtiers was Þorleifr spaki, the heathen prince whose life and one eye Hallfreðr had spared, against King Ólafr's orders. He now asked the Earl to spare Hallfreðr's life. He took Hallfreðr into



his retinue and offered to help reconcile him to the Earl. To this end he advised him to compose a poem about Earl Eiríkr and finish it on the third night. Hallfreðr then recited his poem and received his reward, but because of King Ólafr the Earl does not want the skald at his court.

The similarity with the episode in Egils saga is obvious: the anger of the prince, the intermediary, the completion of the poem within a set period.

The sagas describe the skalds as the trusted friends of the king. In spite of his difficult temper, Hallfreðr enjoys the king's favour to such a degree that other courtiers are envious of him. He is forgiven both his insubordination and his attack on Kálfr, a courtier he had quarreled with. This trustful relationship not only indicates the high regard the king had for his skald, but also that he was his godfather.

A total exception from the rule is found in the first meeting of King Ólafr and Þormóðr. Unlike other skalds Þormóðr does not bring a heroic lay to offer the king. He is brought to the court on account of his blood-brother, who was one of the king's men, and challenged to take revenge for him. The saga goes on to describe how Þormóðr fulfills his revenge, to some extent under the protection of King Ólafr, who appears to a man in a dream and urges him to go to Þormóðr's aid. Þormóðr comes back to stay with the king for good - even in exile, which is something that other skalds do not do. The skald's loyalty towards his king is most impressively described on the day of the battle of Stiklastaðir, where Þormóðr exhorts the army with the Bjarkamál to keep their loyalty to the king, and asks the king to promise him that they will spend the night in the same place, if it is in the king's power to decide so. Bjarni Einarsson has seen in this a deliberate echo of the words of Christ to the robber<sup>15)</sup>. In the scene where the farmer's wife asks

15) Bjarni Einarsson, *Frá Þormóði, kappi hins helga Ólafs konungs*, in: *Íslensk tunga* 4 (1963).

him whether he is of the king's or the farmers' party, he sees a parallel to the woman's question to Peter. Now the answer would put Þormóðr above Peter, if it were not for the fact that nothing else fits the situation. In the former example, we would have a comparison of Ólafr with Christ, and I do not think that this agrees with the religious ideas of the time. The similarities are too superficial. In the middle ages the central point of the story of the robber was seen in his repentance, which did not come too late. In the expression "find the same place to spend the night", I would be more inclined to see a figurative way of saying "die together", and would in support point to an expression frequently used in the saga: "rest under weapons for the night" for "dying in battle".

And the second example is a complete reversal of the situation: the dying Þormóðr can only gain increased honour by not repudiating his king, as he has already given up his life.

Let us finally sum up the conclusions of this resumé:

The so-called skáldasögur are not historical or biographical accounts of the lives of the skalds. Rather each of them is built round a certain theme, to which the action, the preserved traditions concerning the skalds, and the quotations from their works, are subordinated. The themes have hardly any connection with the fact that the heroes of these sagas were skalds; they could just as well have been told of any other Icelander. Even the stories about the skalds of the kings could be told of any loyal courtier. Faced with these facts we must ask the question: Why are skalds chosen as heroes of five of the oldest sagas.

I can only offer the following guess: From the way the skalds are presented it is seen that they were thought to be men who found it difficult to adjust to the norms

and rules of the environment in which they were brought up; they were regarded as arrogant, mocking, rather unpleasant, but very ambitious and inflexible. Apart from Egill, these skalds were looked upon as black sheep by most farmers in Iceland, in spite of their poetry and the honour in which they were held in Norwegian courts. And black sheep are more memorable than white. I also assume that there existed certain traditions concerning these skalds and their lives, and a knowledge of their poetry, which made the choice of a definite theme for the saga lie easily at hand. And this is where the creative work of the author begins, which we must neither ignore nor undervalue.