

*1236: Órækja meiddr ok heill gerr*

The title of this paper is taken from the "Flatø-annal" (*Flat.* III, 529), and refers to the infamous episode in Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga* (pp. 395-96) that describes the castration and blinding of Órækja Snorrason at the hands of his cousin, Sturla Sighvatsson, and Órækja's subsequent miraculous recovery.<sup>1</sup> According to the saga, Sturla Sighvatsson, after a year abroad, returns to Iceland in 1235, only to discover that Órækja has taken up residence in the Western fjords and is terrorizing the countryside with raids and plundering. The next spring (1236), Sturla and his father, Sighvatr, demand compensation from Snorri for the damages caused by his son Órækja, but to no avail. The upshot of the disagreement is that Snorri is forced to leave for Bersastaðir, and Sturla settles at Reykjaholt and appropriates all of Snorri's property. Sturla then meets with Órækja in Dýrafjörðr, and they reach a tentative settlement, stipulating that Sighvatr should arbitrate between them; that Órækja should stay at Stafaholt; and that Sturla should retain Snorri's property and stay at Reykjaholt (*Ísl.*, pp. 392-94; cf. *Flat.* III, 110). Shortly thereafter, Órækja and his men, among them Sturla Þórðarson, join Sturla Sighvatsson in Reykjaholt, and the saga continues (*Ísl.*, pp. 395-96):

In the evening, Órækja and his men ate in the antechamber, and in the morning, when they came from mass, they went to the main room. Then Órækja and Sturla Þórðarson were summoned to the antechamber. A little later, Sturla Sighvatsson appeared in the door that leads from the antechamber, and summoned Sturla Þórðarson. They went into the attic that was there. Then Sturla Sighvatsson said: "You were aware, namesake, of our settlement in Dýrafjörðr. But now my father has failed to appear, and our agreement was that Órækja should have Stafaholt and live there, and I should stay here [at Reykjaholt]. However, it does not seem desirable that he should stay that close with such small means while I swim in Snorri's wealth. I will therefore now resort to another plan: I intend for him to go north to Skagafjörðr and leave for Norway from there. Your companionship has now come to an end." He then took the sword Kettingr that lay beside them and which Sturla Þórðarson had held in his hand. They went to the main room and Órækja's men met them in the door. They were all stripped of their weapons and clothes. Then they were led to the attic and men were set to guard them there. . . .

Now Sturla rode away with Órækja and Svertingr, as the only one of Órækja's men, up to the glaciers. They rode along Arnarvatnsheiðr until they reached Hellisfitjar. Then they went to Surtshellir and up to the stronghold. They seized Órækja and Sturla appointed Þorsteinn langabeinn to maim him. They cut off a

spearshaft and made a peg from it. Sturla told him to put out his eyes with it, but Þorsteinn said he couldn't do that. Then they took a knife and wrapped it so that no more than the breadth of a finger was left. Órækja called on bishop Þorlákr to help him and while he was being tortured, he also sang the prayer "Sancta Maria, mater domini nostri, Jesu Christi." Þorsteinn thrust the knife into the eyes all the way up to the wrapping. When that had been done, Sturla told Órækja to think of Arnbjörg and told Þorsteinn to castrate him. He then removed one testicle. Then Sturla appointed men to guard him, and Svertingr stayed there with Órækja.

Sturla and his men then rode away down to Reykjaholt and Sturla gave Órækja's men permission to leave. They were allowed to keep most of their belongings, but Órækja's horses and weapons were taken.

When Sturla Þórðarson and Svarthöfði came to Hvítá, they met Játvarðr Guðlaugsson. When they told him the tidings, he wanted to go up to Surtshellir to find Órækja, but they discouraged him from doing that. He nonetheless persisted in going, and said he would come to no harm because his uncle, Þórir jökull, was there. Sturla told him to hurry back from the mountain and out to Stað to tell them what he had found out. . . . Svarthöfði then traveled west to Hjarðarholt, and Sturla and his companions went to Stað and then to Helgafell to be shriven. Thereafter they went to Eyrr to Þórr. But Þórr felt that Sturla's penance was too heavy and told him to go to the bishop in Skálaholt.

They then went to Stað, and Arnbjörg and Játvarðr had already arrived. Játvarðr secretly told him the news that Órækja had the use of his eyes and that he was unhurt. . . . Sturla Þórðarson and Arnbjörg then rode south . . . . When they came to Borgarfjörðr, Órækja had left Surtshellir and had ridden south with two men. They then went to Skálaholt, where they met Órækja who came from Klofa in the east. He was as fit as can be.

Bishop Magnús received them heartily and absolved them mercifully. He gave Órækja ten hundreds of *vaðmál* and made the stipulation that he should go abroad. He said that he would never be able to further his case here in Iceland. Thereafter Órækja and Arnbjörg rode down to Eyrr and he took passage with Andréas Hrafnsson.

This episode, which Sturla Þórðarson describes in such great detail, and which is documented in all Icelandic annals, is difficult to reconcile with reality and raises a number of interesting questions: for instance, what motivated Sturla Sighvatsson to resort to such unprecedented and radical measures to divest his cousin of his power? Miracles aside, what exactly transpired in Surtshellir? Why did Sturla Þórðarson feel the need to go to

confession after he heard about the incident, and why was his penance so great? Why was Órækja awarded such a small compensation for the outrage, and why was he forced to leave the country while the perpetrator of the action, Sturla Sigvatsson, got off scot free?

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

### *1. The Torture*

According to *Íslendinga saga*, Sturla Sigvatsson appointed a certain Þorsteinn langabeinn to put out Órækja's eyes and to emasculate him. Þorsteinn, although reluctant to carry out the order to put out Órækja's eyes with the peg, complies with Sturla's request to thrust a finger breadth of a knife into his eyes. He then proceeds to remove one of Órækja's testicles. The saga specifically mentions that Órækja called on the holy Bishop Þorlákr and the Virgin Mary while being tortured. A couple of hours later, Órækja leaves Surtshellir, rides east, meets Sturla Þórðarson, and is "as fit as could be."

Of the few scholars who have commented on the episode, Andreas Heusler appears to believe that the maiming of Órækja actually took place. He writes: "Die Art, die derselbe Sturla im Jahr 1236 den Vetter Órækja der Verstümmelung ausliefert, bezeichnet etwa die obere Grenze von dem, was zwischen Blutsverwandten zweiten und dritten Grades vorkam" (1912:36). Other scholars, however, have been more sceptical. In *The Age of the Sturlungs*, Einar Ól. Sveinsson attributes Órækja's lack of injury to the *drengskapr* of Þorsteinn langabeinn, who refused to carry out Sturla's command (1953:73), while Örnólfr Thorsson (*Sturlunga saga*, p. lxix), who fails to speculate about the events that took place in Surtshellir, claims that Sturla Þórðarson believed Órækja had been miraculously saved through the intervention of Holy Þorlákr and the Virgin Mary.

Despite Heusler's contention to the contrary, there can be no doubt in a modern reader's mind that Sturla's description of the events in Surtshellir is purely fictional: no one mounts a horse shortly after the removal of one testicle and cheerfully embarks on a journey west. There is no evidence, however, that Órækja escaped unscathed because of Þorsteinn's *drengskapr*, as Einar claims, because Þorsteinn does indeed thrust the knife into Órækja's eyes, and he complies with Sturla's command and removes one of Órækja's testicles.

Yet there can be no doubt, as Örnólfr points out (*Sturlunga saga*, p. lxix), that the allusion to Órækja's prayer during the torture, which must have been reported to Sturla

Þórðarson by Sturla Sighvatsson upon the latter's return to Reykjaholt,<sup>2</sup> was intended to evoke images of miraculous healings in hagiographic literature.<sup>3</sup> The entry in "Skálholts-Annaler," which reads "Órækja maimed and healed by miracles and went abroad" (Storm 1888:188), clearly shows that, at least to some members of Norse society, the healing of Órækja had miraculous overtones.

But there is no support for Örnólfr's claim that Sturla Þórðarson himself attributed Órækja's fitness to divine intervention and, despite the entry in "Skálholts-Annaler," it is doubtful whether Órækja's alleged recovery was considered a miracle by contemporary clerics. After the Surtshellir incident, Sturla Þórðarson and Órækja both seek out Bishop Magnús of Skálholt, who "recieved them heartily and absolved them mercifully" (*Ísl.*, p. 396). Magnús awards Órækja ten hundreds of *vaðnál*, stipulates that he must leave the country, and asserts that he will never be able to further his case in Iceland (*ibid.*). As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, the damages awarded Órækja for the alleged castration and blinding are completely out of proportion with the codified compensation for such crimes. According to all West-Norse laws, blinding, as well as castration, were considered "major wounds" and punished with full outlawry.<sup>4</sup> Not only is there no mention of any legal action against Sturla Sighvatsson after the incident, but the sum that Órækja receives from Magnús is considerably lower than what would normally be awarded even for a superficial wound.<sup>5</sup> The men wounded in Sturla Sighvatsson's raid on Hvammr in 1228, for example, received twenty hundreds for their wounds, and, upon hearing the verdict, Sturla remarked drily: "Not overly much is awarded those who were wounded, and I'll certainly pay up" (*Ísl.*, p. 318).

We must conclude, then, that Órækja's version of the incident as told in his confession, and to which Sturla Þórðarson certainly was privy, did not entitle him to the restitution that should have been awarded for the crimes of castration and blinding. Moreover, the episode must have entailed humiliating circumstances for Órækja (he would never be able to further his case in Iceland and was advised to leave the country). It is also noteworthy that, in later literature recording the miracles of Holy Þorlákr, there is no mention of divine intervention on Órækja's behalf: if, indeed, the clerical opinion in thirteenth-century Iceland had been that Órækja's healing could be attributed to Holy Þorlákr, such a miracle would certainly have been recorded among Þorlákr's *jarlein*.

Thus, all the facts point in one direction: not only did the maiming in Surtshellir never take place, but Sturla Þórðarson must also have been perfectly aware of what really had transpired. This view is supported by the entry under the year 1236 in "Annales Reseniani," usually attributed to Sturla, which reads as follows: "Órækja maimed" (Storm 1888:25), and which omits all references to healing and divine intervention.<sup>6</sup> The question

is, then, what prompted Sturla Sighvatsson's version of the events, which clearly formed the basis for Sturla Þórðarson's account, and why would the latter, if he knew what had taken place in Surtshellir, suppress that information in favor of a story clouded in miracle mongering?

## *II. Sturla Sighvatsson's Motivation*

In *Hákonar saga hins gamla*, also written by Sturla Þórðarson, we are told that Sturla Sighvatsson spent the winter 1234-35 with King Hákon in Túnsberg, and that the king was quite perturbed about Sturla's reports of unrest in Iceland. Sturla Þórðarson writes (*Fla.* III, 110):

The king asked Sturla how difficult it would be to introduce absolute monarchy in that country and said peace would be easier to maintain if one person were in power. Sturla agreed with him and said it would not be difficult if the person in charge was relentless and resourceful. The king asked if he would take this task upon himself. Sturla answered that he might try if he had the authority and support of the king and had the prospect of such rewards as the king would deem appropriate if he were to succeed in this mission. The king said that he should not subjugate the country by manslaughter; rather, he should capture men and force them to go abroad or divest them of their power by other means if he could. Sturla frequently met with the king that winter and they spoke a lot about this.

The same episode is quoted in *Íslendinga saga*, where Sturla again mentions King Hákon's warning to Sturla Sighvatsson not to increase manslaughter in Iceland; rather, he must force people to go abroad (*Ísl.*, p. 439).

In light of these circumstances, the rationale behind Sturla Sighvatsson's actions the subsequent year becomes clear. In his conversation with Sturla Þórðarson at Reykjaholt prior to the Surtshellir incident, he declares that "I intend for him [Órækja] to go north to Skagafjörðr and leave for Norway from there" (*Ísl.*, p. 395). Thus Sturla's sole intention with the capture of Órækja was, in keeping with the king's command, to force him to leave Iceland and to "divest him of his power by other means;" the "other means" being the alleged castration and blinding. What is not clear, however, is why Sturla devised such an elaborate scheme to force Órækja to go abroad, and why blinding and castration loomed so large in that scheme.

## *II. Blinding and Emasculation in Norse Literature and Society*

Although the literature shows that blinding and emasculation of powerful enemies was not entirely unknown in Medieval Scandinavia, the most famous example being the

maiming of King Magnús Sigurðarson by the Irish Haraldr gilli in 1135 (*Heimskringla*, p. 560), these types of corporal injuries are seldom mentioned in the Icelandic family sagas and, with two exceptions, no episodes of castration and blinding are recorded in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Iceland.<sup>7</sup> However, if we turn to other provinces of the Norse empire, namely to the Northern Isles of Orkney, Man, and the Hebrides, the sources, both literary and historical, mention blinding and emasculation as being the most frequently used means to disempower an opponent. Consider the following examples:

1. 1095? Haraldr, son of Guðrøðr Crovan of Man, is captured by his brother Lögmaðr, blinded and emasculated (*ESSH*, p. 98);
2. 1154? Guðrøðr Ólafsson, king of Man, captures three of his cousins, slays one and blinds the other two (*ESSH*, p. 226);
3. 1198. King William of Scotland blinds Þorfinnr, son of Earl Haraldr Maddaðarson of Caithness (*ESSH*, p. 350, n. 2);
4. 1223. Óláfr Guðrøðsson of Man blinds and emasculates his nephew, Guðrøðr Rognvaldsson (*ESSH*, p. 456-60).

The Norse *Orkneyinga saga* further describes how Earl Páll, the opponent of Earls Rognvaldr kali and Haraldr, is captured by Sveinn Ásleifarson and brought to his sister Margrét and her husband Maddaðr (p. 169). When, after days of secret deliberations between Margrét, Maddaðr, and Sveinn, Páll is faced with the possibility of losing his realm, he answers as follows (*Orkneyinga saga*, p. 170):

I'll tell what is on my mind, and that is that I shall leave my earldom in such a way that men will never have heard about similar travels. I wish never to return to Orkney. . . . I wish to be given sufficient means to enter some monastery, and you will see to it that I never leave it. But I want, Sveinn, for you to go to Orkney and say that I have been blinded and maimed as well, because my friends may wish to join me if they know that I am a fit man. It may be that I will not be able to refuse to go to my realm with them, because I know that they may feel worse about our parting than is the case.

This episode not only demonstrates how emasculation and blinding could be used to divest an enemy of his power, it also explains *why* these types of maiming were so successful as a means of neutralizing a contender: an enemy deprived of his manhood would immediately lose his supporters and pose no threat to the establishment, either in terms of his own person or in terms of siring offspring that could contend for future power. Furthermore, it seems that in such cases, the victim's former followers never inflicted vengeance on the offender, possibly because they had no interest in supporting an emasculated leader. What is even more important, however, is that, as in the Surtshellir incident, the blinding and

maiming do not appear to have taken place: to dissuade Páll's followers, Sveinn is told to report the alleged injuries to them, whereas Páll, like Órækja, in reality will relinquish his power and depart from his realm.<sup>8</sup>

*Orkneyinga saga* also contains an episode of blinding and maiming with subsequent miraculous healing that closely mirrors the episode in *Íslendinga saga*. This instance concerns the bishop of Caithness, Jón, who is captured by Earl Haraldr Maddaðarson in 1201 (*Orkneyinga saga*, p. 294-95):

But what happened was that Earl Haraldr let the bishop be seized and had his tongue cut out. Thereafter he let a knife be thrust into his eyes, blinding him. Bishop Jón called on the maiden, the holy Tredwell, while he was being tortured, and as soon as they let him go, he went over to a slope. A woman was there on the slope and the bishop asked her to help him. She saw how the blood dripped from his face and said: "Be quiet, bishop, because I shall help you." The bishop was brought to the resting place of the holy Tredwell, and there he regained the use of both his tongue and his eyes.

In the Caithness episode, however, the version of the miraculous events as told in *Orkneyinga saga* differs somewhat from the version recorded in contemporary sources. According to Fordun's annals, the Earl of Caithness commanded that the bishop should be blinded and that his tongue should be torn out, but "it turned out otherwise, for the use of his tongue and of one eye was in some measure left to him" (Maxwell 1912:199). In his *Chronicles Relating to Scotland*, Herbert Maxwell comments on this discrepancy of events as follows (pp. 200-1):

It will be seen from this that John of Fordun, instead of exaggerating the narrative, brings it into sober prose, eliminating the miraculous element and suggests what was probably the case, that Earl Harald's men were of milder mood than their master, who was probably drunk, and, by wounding the bishop in the face and mouth, deceived the earl into the belief that his orders had been carried out.

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

#### *IV. The Orkney Connection*

The connections between Norway and Iceland and the Northern Isles during the first half of the thirteenth century were very close. The contemporary sagas record frequent traffic

between Norway, Iceland, the Orkneys, Man, and the Hebrides, and the news of events that took place in the Isles must have spread quickly in Norway and Iceland (Finnur Jónsson 1901:655; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1937:17-18). Óláfr Guðrøðsson's emasculation and blinding of his cousin Guðrøðr Rognvaldsson, for example, is recorded in all Icelandic annals, including "Annales Reseniani."<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Sturla Þórðarson's *Hákonar saga* mentions that Óláfr himself and Páll Bálkason, the instigator of the punishment, visited Hákon's court in Norway 1230 (*Flax*, III, 101), and, according to the Chronicle of Man, Óláfr, as well as Páll Bálkason and the victim, Guðrøðr, take part in Hákon's expedition to the Hebrides and Man in 1230-31 (*ESSH*, p. 472). There can be no doubt, then, that the incidents reported from the Northern Isles at this time (including the maiming of Guðrøðr at the hands of Óláfr and Páll Bálkason, who was killed by Guðrøðr in the Hebrides later that year [*Flax*, III, 103]), were based on first-hand information that was current in Norway as well as in Iceland.

As to the events recorded in *Orkneyinga saga*, scholars agree that a copy of the original *Orkneyinga saga* was available to Snorri and used by him when he worked on his *Heimskringla* (*Orkneyinga saga*, p. vi; SN). It has further been argued that the original version of the saga was reworked at Reykjaholt around 1230 under Snorri's supervision (*ibid.*, pp. cvii-cviii), and speculations have been made to the effect that Sturla Sighvatsson did the copying of *Orkneyinga saga* (*ibid.*, p. cviii). Whatever the case may be, there can be no doubt that *Orkneyinga saga* was one of the sagas available to Sturla Sighvatsson during his stay at Reykjaholt in 1230, when he "was preoccupied with writing sagas after those books that Snorri put together" (*Ísl.*, p. 342).

The episode in *Orkneyinga saga* involving the maiming and miraculous healing of the bishop of Caithness, however, occurs in a later addition to *Orkneyinga saga*. The informant of this and later episodes concerning events in Caithness is usually believed to be Andréas Hrafnsson, son of the lawman of Caithness, who in the winter of 1234-35 visited Iceland in the company of Andréas Andréasson, grandson of Sveinn Ásleifarson of Orkney (Sigurður Nordal 1913-16:1; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1937:37; cf. *Ísl.*, p. 387). What scholars have failed to realize, however, is the close connection between Andréas Hrafnsson and the Sturlungs, in particular Órækja and Sturla Þórðarson. According to *Íslendinga saga*, Andréas Hrafnsson gave Órækja the sword "Sættarspillir," a sword that was coveted by such important personages as Böðvarr frá Stað, Þorleifr ór Görðum, and Gizurr Þorvaldsson (*Ísl.*, p. 387) and, after having been forced to return to Iceland by bad weather in the Fall of 1235, Andréas and his companion, Svarthöfði Dufgusson, joined Órækja and Sturla Þórðarson during the following winter (*Ísl.*, p. 389). Finally, when Órækja was



forced to leave Iceland after the alleged maiming, he took passage with Andréas Hrafnsson to Norway (*Isl.*, p. 396).

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

#### V. Sturla Þórðarson's Complicity

Sturla's version of the incident as told in *Íslendinga saga* is distanced and noncommittal: he relates the events in the third person, records the story of the maiming as he heard it from Sturla Sighvatsson and Játgeirr, and makes no mention of his own implicit knowledge. In *Hákonar saga*, he devotes an entire section to Sturla Sighvatsson's conversation with King Hákon, including Hákon's admonition to seize power by forcing people to leave Iceland (*Fla.* III, 109-10). But, although he mentions the subsequent dealings between Sturla and Órækja, he explicitly refrains from mentioning the Surtshellir incident, and states that "there is no need to write anything about their dealings here. It ended with Órækja's traveling to Norway that summer, on the advice of Bishop Magnús of Skálholt" (*Fla.*, III, 110).

Similarly, in the same saga, Sturla records the arrival of the men from the Hebrides at the court of Magnús in 1224 after the castration of Guðrøðr in 1223, but, although he must have been aware of the reasons for their mission, he categorically refrains from going into detail and merely states that "they brought many letters concerning the plight of their

country" (*Flat.*, III, 61). This lack of information has led historians to speculate about the nature of the Hebridean mission (e.g., *Regesta Norvegica*, p. 168, n. 1; Bugge 1914:117, n. 2). As Bugge correctly remarks, the messengers, Gillikristr and Óláfr Snækollsson, must have brought news about the treaty that granted Óláfr Guðrøsson absolute power in Man and the Hebrides (*ibid.*), however, "the plight" of the islanders most certainly referred to the events that took place prior to that treaty, namely, to the castration and blinding of the royal pretender Guðrøðr at the hands of his uncle, Óláfr (*ESSH*, pp. 456-59). Sturla's lack of reference to that event is even more puzzling in view of the fact that it is mentioned in "Annales Reseniani" (Storm 1888:24), and, as Hákon's chronicler, he undoubtedly would have had first-hand access to the information contained in the Hebridean letters.

The only time Sturla makes reference to blinding and emasculation as a means to disempower enemies is in the following quote from *Hákonar saga*, describing how Hðfi, retainer of Earl Hákon galinn, offers to rid the earl of the young pretender Hákon Hákonarson. That conversation is reported by Sturla as follows (*Flat.*, III, 11):

"There is a lad with you who is said to be the son of King Hákon, and if he grows up here, it may be that many men will love him for the sake of his father and grandfather. It will not be easy for your son to succeed you to power if he opposes it. I know, however, that if this had happened abroad, people would have hit upon such a remedy that the chief of the country had no need to fear for his own offspring. This lad would have been sent to another country to chieftains who owed him no allegiance, and he would either have been maimed or placed in such a situation that there would be no need to fear him. If you want, I am prepared to undertake such a journey, and I will take care to carry out the mission to your satisfaction." . . . The earl answered: "It cannot be God's will that I purchase the power of the realm for my son with such means that I destroy the son and grandson of the man I owe the most."

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

Sturla's reluctance to deal with this issue cannot be coincidental, and it is not inconceivable that this reluctance can be traced to the event that took place in Reykjaholt in 1236. We are told that, prior to the capture of Órækja and his men, Sturla Sighvatsson summoned Sturla Þórðarson and informed him of his intention to force Órækja abroad (*Isl.*, p. 395). That this conversation was not quite as friendly as Sturla Þórðarson gives it

out to be, but had rather violent overtones, is indicated by the fact that Sturla Sighvatsson seizes Órækja's sword, "Kettlingr," which his cousin, Sturla, had held in his hands. That same sword was later taken from Sturla's dead body by Gizurr Þorvaldsson after the battle of Örylgsstaðir in 1238 (*Ísl.*, p. 436), and, according to Sturla Þórðarson, it was returned to Órækja the following year: "Then Órækja collected from him [Gizurr] the sword called 'Kettlingr,' that was taken when Órækja was maimed" (*Ísl.*, p. 445). The fact that Sturla takes such great pains to trace the history of that sword and to record its eventual restoration to Órækja shows beyond any doubt that he, Sturla, felt responsible for the loss and testifies to his own bad conscience concerning the episode.

It emerges from the discussion above that Sturla must have felt less than heroic about his own behavior in Reykjaholt in 1236. In his later writings, he explicitly refrains from any mention of emasculation and blinding, and he takes great care to mention that Órækja's sword, which had been "taken" by Sturla Sighvatsson on that occasion, was eventually restored to its owner. Although we will never know exactly what transpired during the conversation between the two namesakes in the attic at Reykjaholt, it is possible that Sturla Þórðarson, however reluctantly, was forced to partake in the plot to divest Órækja of his power and, in the attempt to avoid the actual implementation of the injuries (which certainly would not have been beyond Sturla Sighvatsson), he may even have suggested the "ruse" of miraculous healing from his knowledge of Andréas Hrafnsson's histories about the bishop of Caithness. If that was the case, it would explain Sturla's need to go to confession, as well as the "great penance" inflicted on him by the cleric at Helgafell. As for Órækja in Surtshellir, faced with the option of bodily injury or loss of honor, he certainly would have opted for the latter and corroborated Sturla Sighvatsson's story of the maiming and subsequent healing. Through this scheme, Sturla Sighvatsson effectively achieved his goal in compliance with King Hákon's orders; namely, to force his adversary to go abroad,<sup>10</sup> as well as to divest him of his power by "other means," the "other means" being modeled on his knowledge of similar incidents from *Orkneyinga saga*. The scene in Surtshellir as described by Sturla Þórðarson, then, is not an instance of literature recording life, but rather, as Oscar Wilde might have put it, life imitating art.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See similar entries under the year 1236 in "Annales regii" (Storm 1888:130); "Annales Reseniani" (*ibid.*, p. 25); "Skálholts-Annaler" (*Ibid.*, p. 188), "Lögmanns-Annáll" (*ibid.*, p.

256); "Gottskalks Annaler" (*ibid.*, p. 327); "Oddveria Annall" (*ibid.*, p. 480). All translations from Old Norse are my own.

<sup>2</sup> When Sturla Þórðarson and Svarthöfði meet Játvarðr after they have left Reykjaholt, they tell him "the tidings", that is, they tell him about the location and the participants in the incident (and, we must assume, of the incident as reported to them). Játvarðr, however, only reports that "Órækja had the use of his eyes and that he was unhurt" (*Isl.* p. 396).

<sup>3</sup> Holy bishop Þorlákr, for example, is said to restore the eyesight of those who called on him (*Þorláks saga byskups*, p. 106; *Jarleinabók Þorláks byskups 1199*, p. 186; *Jarleinabók Þorláks byskups önnur*, pp. 203, 220), and one of the most famous miracles of St. Óláfr involves the healing of the English priest Ríkarðr, whose eyes had been put out and tongue cut off in an episode of maiming (*Heimskringla*, pp.587-89).

<sup>4</sup> See *Grágás* I, 147-48; *Grágás* II, 299; *Frostafingslög* (*NGL*, I, 171); *Landslög* (*NGL*, II, 50); *Jónsbók* (*NGL*, IV, 207). *Grágás* mentions the right to castrate land lopers, clearly as a preventive measure to protect female relatives (I, 203; II, 151; Lúðvík Ingvarsson 1970:381). *Frostafingslög* grants a slave owner the right to castrate his runaway foreign slave (*NGL*, I, 226), and in both *Gulafingslög* and *Frostafingslög* castration is mentioned as the punishment for bestiality (*NGL* I, 18, 123). However, none of these sections would apply in Órækja's case. The Church laws also stipulate that no castrated man may marry (*Gulathings-Christenret* [*NGL*, II, 333]; *Biskop Arnes kristenret for Island* [*NGL*, V, 38]). Although these Church laws are later than the castration episode in *Íslendinga saga*, they do point to an ecclesiastic tradition of prohibition of marriage for men who were unable to procreate, which, in turn, could account for Sturla Sighvatsson's comment that Órækja should "remember Arnbjörg" (*Isl.* p. 395).

<sup>5</sup> For fines incurred for various crimes (including manslaughter and maiming) in the age of the Sturlungs, see Lúðvík Ingvarsson 1970:364-76. See also Valtýr Guðmundsson 1893. Valtýr (1893:538-45) argues that the unspecified "hundreds" awarded as compensation in *Sturlunga saga* refers to "hundrað verðaura," not "hundrað alna vaðmála," the latter of which is always specified by a qualifier. If that is the case, the compensation awarded Órækja was very low indeed compared to the compensation for other crimes.

<sup>6</sup> Stefán Karlsson (1988:47-50; 54) argues convincingly that Sturla Þórðarson was responsible for the first part of "Annales Reseniani" (until the year 1283).

<sup>7</sup> *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* (p. 228) describes how Egill pokes out the eye of Ármóðr with his finger; in *Hallfreðar saga* (pp. 166-67), Hallfreðr deprives both Þorleifr spaki and Kálfr of one eye; in *Haralds saga harðráða*, Haraldr is said to have blinded the Greek emperor (*Heimskringla*, pp. 455-56), and Óláfr Haraldsson blinded his rival, King Hrorekr (*ibid.*, p.235). Aside from the Órækja episode, *Íslendinga saga* reports one

instance of castration, namely, when Sturla Sighvatsson castrates two priests, Snorri and Knútr, in retaliation for the slaying of his brother, Tumi (p. 292). For episodes of castration and blinding in other genres of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, see Boberg 1966:238-39.

<sup>8</sup> The author of *Orkneyinga saga* emphasizes that the episode related in the saga represents Sveinn Ásleifarson's version of the incident: according to some informants, Margaret had hired Sveinn to blind her brother, then hired another man to kill him (p. 170).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. "Flata-annaler" (*Fla.*, III, 526); "Annales Reseniani" (Storm 1888:24); "Henrik Heyers Annaler" (*ibid.*, p. 63); "Annales regii" (*ibid.*, p. 126); "Skálholts-Annaler" (*ibid.*, p. 185); "Gottskalks Annaler" (*ibid.*, p. 326); "Oddveria Annal" (*ibid.*, p. 479). See also *Guðmundar saga Arasonar*, p. 369.

<sup>10</sup> According to *Grágás* (I, 148; II, 304), a man who falsely says he has been wounded was subject to the penalty of lesser outlawry.

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