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**Animal Imagery in *Íslendinga saga*:  
the Wolf and the Fall of Sturla Sighvatsson**

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SNORRI Sturluson offers this description of the wolf's characteristics in *Skáldskaparmál*:

Vargur heitir dýr; það er rétt að kenna við blóð e(ða) hræ svo, að kenna lund hans; eigi er rétt að kenna svo við fleiri dýr. Vargur heitir og úlfur (Edda (U) 168 (72)).

Codex Upsaliensis is the only manuscript of *Snorra Edda* to contain the reading: (svo) *að kenna lund hans* (by which to depict his temperament), instead of (svo) *að kalla verð hans e(ða) drykk* (to call thus his food and drink). I suggest in this essay that these two variants may reflect different perceptions of the wolf in skaldic poetry and metaphorical language in predictions, dreams and visions in Old Icelandic literature.<sup>1</sup> The wolf has an ominous presence in pagan mythology, but it also plays a potent role in animal imagery in medieval Christian thinking. It is possible to discern at least these two 'wolf' traditions in thirteenth-century Icelandic literature, yet the dividing line is certainly not always clear. It is the decisive, historical, evidence of *Íslendinga saga*, which invites us to contrast the symbolic Christian usage to the traditional image of the wolf as the beast of battle and strife.

Lexical information on the two *heiti* for wolf first mentioned in *Skáldskaparmál* provides us with clues to their semantic content. Fritzner's divisions for *vargr* are: "1. ulv; 2. tyv, røver; 3. fredløs person." By contrast *úlfr*, in his dictionary, simply denotes 'ulv'. In *Lexicon Poeticum* (LP), the dictionary for poetic usage, *vargr* is explained as: "1. ulv; 2. fredløs man, skovgangsman; 3. blandt sværddele." The meaning of *úlfr* in poetry is divided into five categories: "1. ulv; 2. særlig om Fenrisulven; 3. ofte i udtryk, hvorved mandefald betegnes, samt i kenninger for kriger; 4.

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<sup>1</sup>This analysis of the wolf belongs to a full study of animal imagery in skaldic poetry and Icelandic medieval writing in which I am presently engaged. This paper only contains references that have a bearing on the *Íslendinga saga*-episodes. All quotations are normalised to a Modern Icelandic spelling, except for the references to the dictionaries below.

alm. betydning, 'skadeligt væsen, uhyre, røver'; 5. som mandnavn - sagnpersoner." These glosses do not betray the date of the sources and therefore it is not possible on this evidence alone to determine whether perceptions of the wolf changed over time nor whether these entries capture the full range of meaning of the two terms. We notice that *vargr* in prose writing (Fritzner does not distinguish between its usage in metaphorical language and 'realistic' narrative) has more layers of meaning than *úlfr*. The poetic language, however, preserves the ambiguity of both terms.

It is worth reiterating Meissner's observation in his impressive work on kennings that "es ist auffallend, dass der Wolf, der so unendlich oft in Kampfschilderungen vorkommt ... doch nur äusserts selten durch Beziehung zu Leichen, Blut, Kampf oder sonst kriegerische Bestimmungen in seinen Kenningar charakterisiert wird" (Meissner 1921:124). Furthermore it is noteworthy that the instances quoted in LP (s.v. *vargr*, *úlfr*) are to a great extent derived from eddic poems: the wolf is rarely called simply *úlfr* or *vargr* in skaldic diction. Allusions to the animal are more often cloaked in symbolic images.

## 2

The wolf is greedy. Even though skaldic poets use the wolf in battle kennings, its unquenchable thirst for blood is rarely mentioned, as Meissner noted. In Christian symbolism, however, the animal's insatiable greed turns into a symbol for the intemperate and avaricious conduct (wolfishness in ModEngl) of men. Few examples will have to suffice to demonstrate the complicated meanings attached to this animal in medieval writing.

Medieval bestiaries enumerate the human characteristics possessed by fictive and real animals. McCulloch lists the wolf's particular features in some medieval Latin and French bestiaries, and notes that the animal is not found in the oldest Latin versions (McCulloch 1962:188-9). She does not analyse its symbolic meaning. The wolf does not figure in the *Physiologus* translated into Icelandic (probably) in the twelfth century (preserved in a manuscript from c. 1200; Dahlerup 1889:232; Hermannsson 1938:7; Louis-Jensen 1984:59). This omission does not entail that the wolf was not perceived as an embodiment of certain characteristics of human nature in Iceland at the time. The wolf is a well-

known symbol in Christian writings for greed and avarice, or for deceitful behaviour, of which Jesus's famous image of the false-prophets, who "come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves" (Matthew 7.15), is the best example.

Bernardus Sylvesteris's twelfth-century commentary on Vergil's Aeneid is a resounding testament to the interpretative method of medieval writers. He offers a vivid interpretation of the wolf that will have a bearing on our interpretation of the animal in *Íslendinga saga*:

beasts - that is, men transformed in their very nature by vice. For philosophy calls the lustful pigs, the deceitful foxes .... the greedy wolves ... All of these dwell among temporal goods, just as, on the other hand, "the occupation of the just is in Heaven" (quoted in Piehler 1971:115).

The wolf's natural habitat is distinct from man's; in literature the wolf inhabits the wild forest (*selva selvaggia*) that encompasses human, organised territory. One of the best known references to wolves in medieval literature is in the First Canto of Inferno in Dante's *Divinia Commedia*. The wolf blocks the poet's road up the mountain but forces him to follow a path to hell. This frightful animal is clearly a symbol of greed and horror and this terrifying image in the wild wood echoes Jeremiah 5.6. The wolf is linked to the 'heathen' conduct of chieftains who turn away from God and as a result roam in the wild. Another biblical reference shows the wolf as a greedy man. In *Genesis*, 49.27 Jacob describes his twelfth son, Benjamin, as: *uerandi skizædr uargr man um morgininn þat eta. sem rænt er ok rifsat. enn at kuelldi man hann ránfenginú meðr odrum skipta* (Stjórn 236).

These examples are chosen at random to indicate the complex role played by this wild animal in medieval writing. The wolf was not only a symbol for particular traits of human nature (this aspect of its make-up is my main concern in this paper), it can, for example, represent the devil as is attested by an early homily: *úr úlfs munni, það er djöfuls veldi*: (Íslensk hómilíubók (Postulamál) 20). Such a meaning of the wolf may be implied by Gunnar Hliffarsson's words in *Hoensa Þóris saga*: *er nú vel, að þér reynið eitt sinn, hver yðar drjúgastur er höfðingjanna, því að þér hafið lengi úlfs munni af etist* (ch. 11).

*Sturlunga saga* is not merely a political *historia* of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Iceland. The structure of the compilation, the choice of imagery to depict crucial events and the moral point-of-view that underpins its composition, bear witness to the allegorical thinking of its creators. Animal symbolism may not play an obvious role in *Íslendinga saga*, yet animals, such as the wolf, are part of the author's symbolic vocabulary. Even though references to wolves are common in skaldic poetry, they are rare in verse in *Íslendinga saga* (there seem to be only four wolf-kennings in *Sturlunga*, one in a verse by Ormur Svínfellingur after Sauðafellsfór (1229), two in stanzas by Ingjaldur Geirmundsson (1244/5) in *Þórðar saga kakala* and one in a stanza composed at Svínafell in *Arons saga* (1222)). Only two poets in *Sturlunga* use *heiti* when referring to the wolf: Snorri Sturluson (*úlfur*:1238), after Örlygsstaðir, and Páll Þorsteinsson (*ylgur* 1254), after Gissur Þorvaldsson's seven-fold revenge after Flugumýrabrenna. An unknown poet in Borgarfjörður refers implicitly to the practices of wolves in a dreamverse in 1238.

The wolf inhabits not only the imaginative world of skaldic poets, but rests comfortably in the diction of the thirteenth-century's most important spiritual leader in Iceland. The animal makes its first appearance in *Íslendinga saga* in Bishop Guðmundur's prophecy in the winter of 1237, shortly before his death. This prophecy carries a political as well as moral weight in the saga and is appropriately cryptic and allegorical in content:

Hann kvað fáa vetur mundu líða, áður mótgangsmenn hans mundu hendur á leggjast og þeirra afkvæmi og drepast niður sem vargar, kvað þar mundu mest eftir verða, er það var mestur uppgangurinn (*Sturlunga* I 385 (268) 1237).

The underlined words deserve special attention, as they are repeated in other predictions and comments about Sturla Sighvatsson in 1237-8. The prophecy links verbally several statements about Sturla in the saga.<sup>1</sup> Guðmundur does not name his enemies, but it is clear from the context, that two men fit the description, Sighvatur Sturluson and his son, Sturla,

<sup>1</sup>These verbal echoes will be underlined when they occur. I will also underline those words and phrases which support the allegorisation of Sturla Sighvatsson.

who had been condemned by the Archbishop of Niðarós (1232) for their attack on Guðmundur and his men in Grímsey in 1222 and general opposition (*mótgangur*) to him. Guðmundur's depiction of his enemies as *mótgangsmenn* has roots in the Archbishop's letter:

Þetta haust komu út bréf Sigurðar erkibiskups er þá var nýkominn í land. Voru þau mælt harðlega til þeirra Sturlu og Sighvats um Grímseyjarförl og annan mótgang við Guðmund biskup (Sturlunga I 347 (239) 1232)

Guðmundur compares the two Sturlungs to wolves, that lie on all four (*leggjast á hendr*). His choice of metaphor suggests that the wolf is - in his mind - an accurate and powerful symbol to characterise their downfall. Guðmundur's *vargur* does not stand for an anonymous enemy, as is the case in many family sagas (see below). The beastly image alludes to a distinct human vice - the intemperate *lund* of Sturla Sighvatsson- which is interpreted as the cause of the Sturlung's fall.

This striking observation is taken up a year later in an implicit allusion to wolves in a dreamverse in Borgarfjörður in 1238. The place of origin is poignantly Snorri Sturluson's domain, himself a friend of the bishop and a victim of Sturla Sighvatsson's aggression (*ofsi / uppgangur*):

Í þenna tíma dreymdi mann í Borgarfirði að maður kæmi  
að honum mikill og illilegr og kvað þetta:

Sumar munat þetta  
svarflaust vesa,  
rýðr rekka sjöt  
rauðu blóði.

Her mun finnast  
fyrir hraun ofan,  
þar mun blóð vakið  
betra en ekki (Sturlunga I 404-5:verse 84, 1238).

I have, on another occasion, discussed this verse in the context of dreamverses in general in *Íslendinga saga* (Nordal 1990, 218-19), and suggested that it reverberated verse 80 of *Sólarljóð*. *Sólarljóð* contains two other references to wolves, one in verse 31 and the other in verse 9, where

those who believe their *heill* (fortune) will never *hrapa* (collapse) are likened to wolves:

Ekki þeir hugðu  
Unnar og Sævaldi  
að þeim myndi heill hrapa.  
Naktir þeir urðu  
og næmir hvervetna  
og runnu sem vargar til víðar (Sólarljóð 9).

This idea of the fall of the mighty into the habitation of wolves, the wild forest (*viður*), is the same as we encounter in Guðmundur's prophecy. The nakedness of Unnar og Sævaldi rhymes with the haunting picture of the stripping of Sturla's body at Örlygsstaðir. This image brings also to mind the legal meaning of *vargur* in *Grágás*: the outlaw, who has forfeited his rights to human existence and is driven into the *skógur* (wood) or *viður*, is called a *vargur*; the convict transformed into a wild beast. References to such a meaning of *vargur* are not limited to the law, but are found in some family sagas (*Egils saga* and *Grettis saga*) and eddic poetry.

Snorri Sturluson's in a stanza sent to his nephew Þórður Sighvatsson after the battle of Örlygsstaðir completes this 'wolfish' portrayal of Sturla Sighvatsson:

Tveir lifið Þórðr enn þeira  
þá var æðri hlutr bræðra,  
rán vara lýðum launað  
laust, en sex á hausti.  
Gera svín, en verðr venjast  
vor ætt, ef svo mætti,  
ýskelfandi, úlfar,  
afarkaupum, samhlaupa (Sturlunga I 425:vísa 106, 1238)

It seems that Snorri is describing Sturla Sighvatsson and his companions as *úlfar* in this verse, and his opponents, Gissur Þorvaldsson and Kolbeinn *ungi*, as *svín* (Nordal 1992:65). Sighvatur, however, is excepted from this succinct criticism, as is evident from the prose context. The juxtaposition of the two animals is noteworthy. A parallel can be found in the political prophecy *Merlínússpá* (30, 37-45), where wolves (and foxes) goad swines into terrible actions.

Snorri links Sturla's crimes to *rán*, and not surprisingly, as Sturla had appropriated his properties in Borgarfjörður in 1236. These three references to wolves reflect the author's endeavours to allegorize Sturla Sighvatsson's conduct before the battle at Örlygsstaðir.<sup>1</sup> The last prophecy of a saintly-like bishop, the dream verse and finally Snorri Sturluson's stanza represent Sturla as a wolf, the rapacious beast of the wilderness. He has fallen from the company of men into the wild forest because of his *ofsi*. Such an interpretation is anchored in the author's comment on Sturla's aggression in 1237:

Í þenna tíma var svo mikill ofsi Sturlu Sighvatssonar, að nær öngvir menn hér á landi héldu sér réttum fyrir honum. Og svo hafa sumir menn hermt orð hans síðan að hann þóttist allt land hafa undir lagt ef hann gæti Gissur yfir komið (Sturlunga I 388 (271) 1237).

Criticism of Sturla's behaviour in the two years leading up to the battle at Örlygsstaðir is not limited to these instances. Comments by Snorri's brothers, Þórður and Sighvatur, are verbally linked to Snorri's and Guðmundur's imagery, and give substance to the view that Sturla's unquenchable thirst for power was the cause of his fall. Þórður's warning to his brother Sighvatur at Easter 1236 preempts Bishop Guðmundur's words:

Engi em eg spámaður en þó mun eg þér verða spámaður. Svo mikill sem þú þykist nú og trúir á þinn mátt og sona þinna þá munu fáir vetur líða áður það mun mælt að þar sé mest eftir sig orðið (Sturlunga I 378 (264) 1236).

Þórður introduces *mátt* to the portrayal of Sturla which echoes both the pagan belief in *mátt ok megin*, and the Christian concept of the fall of the mighty. The time he allows his prediction to be fulfilled (*munu fáir vetur líða*) and the last sentence - *að þar sé mest eftir sig orðið* - are reflected in Bishop's prophecy a year later.

The comments by Sighvatur Sturluson carry the greatest weight in the saga author's attempt to build a moral portrayal of Sturla, as his

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<sup>1</sup> There are clear references to Sturla Sighvatsson's religious remorse before the battle, which comply to the norms in writing about death at the time.

relationship with his son is exceptionally affectionate in the saga. He does not compare his favourite son to a wolf, but his comments are verbally linked to Guðmundur's prophecy and therefore form a part of the allegorical picture drawn up in the saga. His jest to Sturla in 1237 - *allmjög þykist þú nú upp hafa gengið* - echoes the noun *uppgangr* used by Guðmundur to depict Sturla aggression and pride (Sturlunga I 393 (275) 1237). Sighvatur's comment on the actions of his son in a conversation with an old friend (*fornvinr Sturlunga*), Már, in the summer of 1238, contains a powerful reference to the fall of the aggressive man. He ponders *hve lengi mun haldast ofsi sjá inn mikli er Sturla hefur umfram alla frændur vora?* When Már answers that Sturla's kinsmen uphold his aggression and therefore they should provide the answer, Sighvatur attempts a prediction into the future:

Ekki kann eg til slíks að sjá en fá eru óhóf alllangæ. En þó má vera að þetta sé langætt ef hann drepur eigi fæti fyrr en ef hann drepur þá mun hann drepa eigi sem minnst (Sturlunga I 397 (277) 1238).

Again the verb *drepa* (*drepast* in Guðmundur's prophecy) is used to designate Sturla's fall, just as *uppgangr* and the phrase *upp hafa gengit* have described his overambition. The verb *drepa* plays on the double meaning of the outcome, the killing and the fall, which is also inherent in the well-known answer by Jón Loftsson, when women and children killed the chieftain, Einar Þorgilsson: *en þó þykir mér í óvænt efni komið ef það skal eigi rétta er skillitlir menn drepa niður höfðingja* (Sturlunga I 182 (180) 1186). Sighvatur's last comment is spoken to his son when he had made claims on Kolar hinn auðgi's wealth, which Sighvatur regards as ill-begotten money (*illa fengið*). This reference to Sturla's avarice is echoed in Snorri's stanza.

Verse 8 and 9 of *Sólarljóð* describe the fall of the overambitious man, who believes in his own might. These images are reflected in *Íslendinga saga's* account. The allegorization of Sturla Sighvatsson is achieved by the reference to *vargur* and *úlfur*. The presence of this symbolic beast invites the reader to suspect a spiritual meaning to Sturla Þórðarson's account of events in 1236-8.



Even though the Christian image of the greedy wolf in the wild forest can be a powerful symbol for avarice and immodesty in medieval writing, it does not comply with all references to the animal in the thirteenth century. Some family sagas (of various dates) - *Njáls saga*, *Droplaugarsona saga*, *Pórðar saga hreðu*, *Harðar saga*, *Hávarðar saga*, *Gísla saga* (prose, not in the accompanying stanzas) - feature the *vargur* in prophetic dreams, where the animal signifies the enemy, not necessarily his attributes. In some instances, however, the *vargur*-image may not have been chosen arbitrarily. Eyjólfur hinn grái in *Gísla saga* benefits financially from carrying out the killing of Gíslí, and thus one of his motifs is avarice. Hörður Grímkelsson, in the saga of his name, and his group live the life of outlaws (thus *vargar* in a legal sense; yet Hörður, who is the outlaw, is symbolised by a *hvítabjörn*). The dreambook *Somniale Danielis*, popular in the later middle ages (Icelandic manuscript c.1500:Turville-Petre 1968:22) offers, on the other hand, the simple explanation of dreaming *vargar* as:

ef þu sier uarga sia uid ouinum þin[um]. (nr. 67).

The animal imagery of dreams in the family sagas - and the *fornaldar* sagas which follow the same tradition - does not point to a deeper allegorical meaning to the wolf. Yet a closer study (which is under way) may produce other results, especially when other animals are taken into account.

To finish - and to compare with *Íslendinga saga*'s wolf - I would like to discuss an instance in *Bandamanna saga* where a symbolic usage of the wolf, of the kind suggested by Bernardus, is implied. *Bandamanna saga* can with some justice be interpreted as an allegory on greedy chieftains, particularly the *Möðruvallabók*-version. Ófeigur uses the image of the *vargur* in his well-known speech in ch. 10, when he is commenting on the qualifications of the avaricious chieftains to judge Oddur's case:

Átti eg næsta vöð  
nýtra drengja,  
nú er úlfs hali  
einn á króki.

"Og hefir mér farið sem varginum; þeir etast þar til er að halanum kemur og finna eigi fyrr. Eg hefi átt að velja um marga höfðingja, en nú er sá einn eftir er öllum mun þykja illt að von og sannur er að því að meiri er ójafnaðarmaður en hver annarra, og eigi hirðir hvað til fjárins vinnur ef hann fær þá heldur en áður (Möðruvallabók's text: ch.10)

Ófeigur ingeniously describes himself as a wolf, but the real victims of his criticism are the chieftains, in particular Egill from Borg, who has overtly betrayed his need for money. The verse (not in the *Konungsbók*-manuscript of the saga) is more explicit: only Egill is the *úlfs hali*. The eight chieftains have involved themselves in Oddur's case in the hope that they would acquire his wealth. Their motif is avarice. Ófeigur had - by alluring them with his *sjóður* - swayed two of the chiefs, Egill and Gellir, to his side. Corrupt judges who accept bribes (fill their *sjóður*) are also described as *vargar* in the Norse translation of Alcuin's *De virtutibus et vitiis*:

Ragnlátir dæmendur dvelja oft dóma eða missnúa fyrir féginri sakar, og eigi enda þeir sakar áður en fullur sé sjóður þeirra. En þá er þeir dæma, eigi líta þeir á sökina, heldur á gjafarnar. "Ragnlátir dæmendur," sem propheti mælti, [eru] "svo sem vargar; það er þeir grípa að aftni, eigi láta þeir eftir á morgni. Það er, að þeir hyggja á hagræði þessa lífs aðeins, en ekki á annað. Á varga venju grípa þeir alla hluti, en veita fátt veslum (ch.20).

This quotation could serve as a commentary on this section of *Bandamanna saga* in the tradition of Bernardus's interpretation on Vergil. The image of the *vargur* is the key to an allegorical reading of this section of the saga, and other references in the text support such an interpretation.

The wolf - *vargur* - in Bishop Guðmundur's prophecy is also the key to the allegorization of Sturla Sighvatsson's conduct on his return to Iceland in 1235. He had been absolved of his sins in Rome - *fékk lausn allra sinna mála í Rómaborg og föður síns og tók þar stórar skriftir* - yet he did not mend his ways, as the Bishop's words confirm. Despite the author's care to portray Sturla's religious preoccupation in the days before Örylgsstaðir, the wolf haunts the text as a terrifying symbol of his heinous crimes and uncontrollable *ofsi*, which finally swallow him at Örylgsstaðir.

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