Jan Ragnar Hagland:

Ingimundr Prestr Þorgeirsson and Icelandic Runic Literacy in the 12th Century.

Within the corpus of texts which is the concern of the present part of the conference there is, as is well known to everybody here, a group of text variants chronicling the remarkable events of bishop Guðmundr Arason's life. The saga of Guðmundr Arason is known from different manuscript versions currently referred to as *Guðmundar sögur biskups* (cf. Stefán Karlsson (ed.) 1983). The saga of Guðmundr also forms part of the *Sturlunga saga*-collection, that is to say the account of Guðmundr's life until he was ordained bishop *á messo degi heilgarar meyjar Evfemiu* [in 1203] (cf. Stefán Karlsson (ed.) 1983: 144f.; Sturl.s. I, 116-159).

The present contribution will focus on some specific parts of the *Guðmundar sögur*, included in the 'Guðmundar saga prests' of the Sturlunga saga complex as well as in the relevant sections of the bishops saga versions (on the textual relationship between the versions cf. Stefán Karlsson 1986: 277ff.). The parts of the saga which have been singled out for closer examination here might, with some justification, be termed an 'Ingimundar þáttr Þorgeirssonar' as they, when linked together, give us a brief and condensed Life of Ingimundr, as it were.

The story of Ingimundr is told with a maximum of economy portraying the life of a man of learning in twelfth century Iceland chronicling, in part, the conditions under which an Icelandic man of books and letters lived and worked at the time. The small glimpses of a man of letters at work provided by the Ingimundar þáttr, it appears, convey interesting pieces of information about Icelandic medieval literacy which, I suppose, is one of the concerns even of saga studies. The brief account of Ingimundr's life in these sagas is chosen here in order to reopen the case set already in the 19th century by different scholars' use of its final part as evidence for Icelandic runic literacy. The Ingimundar þáttr as a source for the study of twelfth century Icelandic literacy will, then, be the focus of interest in the present contribution: what in particular does the þáttr say about the use of different scripts in Iceland and what is the significance of the story which is told?

It should perhaps be added, before we proceed any further, that opinions about

the status of runic script in Iceland have, over the years, changed like the swing of a pendulum from one side to the other. This is not the time or place, however, to review all the positions taken for and against the existence of a runic literacy in early medieval Iceland. The question has been dealt with in runic studies on several occasions even by the present speaker (cf. Hagland 1989, 1993). Two extreme positions have been taken regarding this issue: on the one hand there is the idea of a well developed Icelandic literature written in runes as maintained by Björn Magnússon Ólsen (1883 and 1884, hereafter BMÓ) and on the other the denunciation of the existence of a runic tradition in Iceland prior to 1200 as claimed primarily by Bæksted (1942). As is often the case, the truth probably lies somewhere in between the two extremes.

Ingimundr, then, is presented in the saga as a *prestr ok mikit gøfugmenni* (a priest and a most noble man). Being a priest he is, probably not by definition, a man filled with the love of books and learning. His association with books is depicted as that of a student and an owner of books - the saga does not reveal any scribal or authorial activities related to books. The episode of the shipwreck at Hornstrandir (in 1180) serves to underscore his love of books in making a particular point of his feeling of distress when he discovers that he had lost his book case at sea: *þá þótti honum hart um høggva, því at þar var yndi hans sem bækrnar váru* (because his delight was where his books were). Ingimundr then makes a prayer, we are told, to have his book case drift ashore. A few nights later, as if by divine providence, the case is reported to have been found at Drangar, undamaged with the books intact. Ingimundr went there to dry his books, the saga tells us (Sturl.s. I, 128-29). Elsewhere we learn that his serious attitude towards the reading and studying of books came to serve his nephew, the bishop to be Guðmundr Arason, rather badly. Guðmundr had to be beaten to the books, the saga tells us with a tinge of good humoured malice, when Ingmundr undertakes to educate him after the boy's father had died (*hann var barðr til bækr*). This was Guðmundr's only inheritance from his father as he was an illegitimate child (Sturl.s. I, 123). So when Guðmundr eventually was ordained a priest, at the age of twenty four, uncle Ingimundr made him a present of the best and most learned books he owned (*gaf honum bækr þær allar er hann átti beztar ok fróðastar*, Sturl.s. I, 133).

A particular interest must be attached to the part of the narrative which gives the details of Ingimundr's tragic death. The episode tells us how Ingimundr, in the summer of 1189, sets out from Bergen bound for Iceland on board the ship 'Stangarfoli'[1], and, to use the words of the saga *skip þeirra kom í óbygðir á Grænalandi, ok tyndust menn allir. En þess varð svá víst, at fjórtán vetrum síðar fannst skip þeira, ok þá fundust sjau menn í hellisskúta einum. Þar var Ingimundr prestr. Hann var heill ok ófúinn ok svá klæði hans, en sex manna bein váru þar hjá honum. Vax var ok þar hjá honum ok rúnar þær, er sögðu atburð um liflát þeirra* (Sturl.s. I, 138)[2].

The salient core of this rather well known account, is that Ingimundr, when using script is explicitly told to have used runes. The question for us to ask then, is: what is the significance of the reported claim that Ingimundr's unmarked choice of script in the desperate circumstances in which he had ended up was that of runes? Given his intimate acquaintance with books there is every reason to assume, as do BMÓ and others, that he also knew how to write with Roman letters. The þáttr thus, although indirectly, depicts a literate man of what is in modern terms known as a digraphic competence.

This particular point in the saga of Guðmundr has been a matter of concern to scholars ever since Peter Erasmus Müller (1776-1834) expressed his opinion on it. From his time onwards the incident reported in the saga has been used as evidence for almost any position taken on the question of runic literacy in 12th century Iceland. Nobody, it seems to me, has been prepared to reject Ingimundr's reported use of runes as a historic fact. Müller assumed that the learned Ingimundr would not taken to the use of runes had he not known that, on a desolate spot like the one on which he had ended up, anybody arriving there by chance would be more liable to understand runes than Roman letters: *Quid vero induxisset sacerdotem, quam doctiorem fuisse scimus, ut*

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[1] *Stangarbolli* according to one manuscript variant.

[2] "the ship was driven onto the deserted shore of Greenland and all the men perished. This was known because their ship was found fourteen winters later and the remains of seven men were discovered in a cave, one of whom was Ingimundr the priest. He was whole and uncorrupted as was his clothing also. Beside him lay the skeletons of six men and also wax and runes relating the story of their fate."

runis uteretur, nisi illi constitisset, cives huc forte venientes facilius runas quam litteras Romanas intellecturos esse (Müller 1858, 9; cf. also Thorsen 1877, 25, note 25).

BMÓ (1883, 105ff.) goes along with Müller's view and adds, as his own contribution to the exegesis, that Ingimundr himself might have thought it easier to use runes rather than Roman letters when writing in the mother tongue. This, of course, fits well into his own views on the status of runic script in Iceland towards the end of the 12th century. When evaluating the truthworthiness of the Greenlandic episode he does not, however, seem quite comfortable with the reported fact that Ingimundr was found *heill ok ófúinn* (whole and uncorrupted) after fourteen years. Bearing in mind the latitude and the possibility that the body might have been covered with snow or ice, this should not, however, says BMÓ cause us to question the authenticity of what is told. He also draws attention to the fact that Einar, Ingimundr's brother is told in the saga to have suffered the same fate and died in Greenland under circumstances similar to those surrounding Ingimundr's death. Also Einar was reported to have been *ófúinn* when he was found after having been missing for one year. BMÓ seems to disregard or forget the fact that it is explicitly stated in the texts that the only body which was *ófúinn* when the crew of 'Stangarfoli' was found, was the corpse of Ingimundr. Beside him were the skeletons of six other men (*sex manna bein váru hjá honum*).

Even Bæksted believes in the authenticity of what is told about Ingimundr's use of runes. It must be admitted though, that the reasons he states for doing so are not particularly well-founded and are, in part, circular to his own hypothesis concerning the chronology of runic usage in Iceland. His main argument is that the detail about runes having been carved in wax is very specific and should for that reason be regarded as truth. If merely a folk tale motive, the runes would probably have been carved on a piece of wood, a feature which, Bæksted states, would have been part of a more conventional stock of narrative units relating to runic script. The remaining part of the account he disregards by referring to the detail about the runes as constituting the only true part ('fortællingens delvise troværdighed', Bæksted 1942, 30). His argument that Ingimundr can be seen as a representative of the type of learned Icelandic traveller to Norway who at this particular point in time took an

interest in the use of runes is circular to Bæksted's own arguments for a chronology of runic usage in Iceland, and need not be elaborated on here.

There is, as can be seen, an apparent flavour of hagiographic style to the Greenlandic episode of what we for the sake of convenience have been referring to as the Ingimundar þáttr, suggesting that *jarteikn* of a quasi divine nature be associated with Ingimundr, much in the same way as we have seen indicated already in connection with the account of the regained book case at Drangar.

Reading the Saga of Gudmund to day, we need to have the entire text and its probable time of composition as vantage point, rather than removing its narrative elements from their context and by assumption regarding these integral parts as historically either true or false. Seen as a whole there are then, elements in the Vita Ingimundae, if we may venture to use a term like that to indicate a function of what is told about Ingimundr in the saga, elements which are there to anticipate or to foreshadow a claim of sanctity made on Gudmundr's behalf by the saga. This being said even if readers like Finnur Jónsson have considered the episodes dealing with the brothers of Guðmundr's father as superfluous additions to the saga as such ("slet ikke vedkommer sagaen som saadan", Finnur Jónsson 1901, 573). Building up on Gudmundr Arason's sanctity is, of course, an important aspect of the saga, an aspect which never earned him canonization, but which has undoubtedly contributed to the popular cult of him as a saint for several hundred years after his death in 1237 (cf. KLNM V, 538ff.).

Having this hagiographic ideology as a hind carpet it seems, to me at least, an interesting fact that the Greenlandic epilogue to Ingimundr's vita makes such explicit point of the kind of script used in the wax found together with Ingimundr's dead body. The story in itself does not obviously require any statement about what script was used. That is probably also the reason that this particular piece of information has been thought of as recording a historical fact on this particular point (in addition to the scholars already mentioned, cf. e. g. Musset 1965, 298). The point here is not to take an opposite stand and make much ado about rejecting a detail like this as a recording of something that did actually take place. The saga's explicitness on the particular point with which we have been occupied here, does in all probability go back to a living tradition about the dramatic incident which must have been given the

written literary form we know less than a hundred years, probably not much more than half a century (cf. below) after the remains of Ingimundr were found, in 1203 or 1207 according to the saga versions, in 1200 according to Icelandic annals (cf. Stefán Karlsson (ed.) 1983, 63 and Storm 1888, 121, 181, 477). The dramatic circumstances of Ingimundr's death and the story of how posterity came to know about his tragic fate are such that the specific information about the script could be remembered and kept alive for a long time.

Even so, a note on the tradition on which the account of Ingimundr's death appears to build seems to be appropriate at this point. As commented upon by BMÓ (1883, 106) the different versions of *Guðmundar saga* have all kept a Greenlandic episode of a similar kind at two different places in the narrative - chapters 1 and 13 in the prests saga version of the *Sturlunga saga*,[3] 1 and 29 in the A-version of the bishops saga. The first one relates in rather elaborate detail how Einar Þorgeirsson, brother of Ingimundr, lost his life in Greenland, *á Grænalandi í óbyggðum*. Almost the same phrasing, as we know, is used about Ingimundr: his ship came *í óbygdir á Grænlandi*. The source for Einar's *liflát* is reported to be oral, well accounted for in all versions of the saga. The circumstances of Einar's death are said to be based on the account of a certain Styrkár Sigmundsson who came from Greenland. Styrkár, it is added, was a reliable source (*sagnamaðr mikill ok sannfróðr*). According to the Sturlunga saga version of the episode, Einar was found one winter after the shipwreck. The A-version of the bishop's saga adds: 'or two' (*eða .ij.*). The texts all refer to an additional tradition about Einar's death (*eru tvennar frásagnir*), the report ascribed to Styrkár being one of them, the texts state without making explicit what the other tradition had to tell (*Sú var søgn Styrkárs*). The one that is not mentioned should, in my opinion, be seen as anticipating what is later in the texts going to be told about Ingimundr. Einar is never mentioned as a member of Ingimundr's crew at any point in any of the versions. His presence in the saga has, it seems, no function to fill in the narrative other than being part of the usual genealogy. He is out of the story once the intriguing circumstances of his death have been related, more or less

[3] This implies that the two episodes have been within the same part of the Prestssaga in the mss. of *Sturlunga saga* (cf. Tranter 1987, 16f).

as one of several asides to set colour to the narrative.

There is every reason to believe that these two accounts relate to the same tragic set of events. By putting them together we get, as I see it, a more complete picture of what the tradition has known about Stangarfoli's fate at some uninhabitated spot on the coast of Greenland. The account of Einar's death conveys a tradition that the crew split up in two groups, and after having fought each other over the remaining supplies Einar and two other men made off onto the inland ice trying to find a settlement. They were, however, overtaken by death only a day's march from the settlement of Herjólfsnes. That part of the tradition also knows that the ship had been found *í óbyggðum, heilt* (undamaged) according to the bishop's saga versions only. Einar's body is told to have been whole and uncorrupted (*heilt ok ósakat*) and he is reported to have been buried at Herjólfsnes (*ok hvílir hann á Herjólfsnesi*, Sturl.s. I, 116).

These details all go well together with what is later in the texts told about Ingimundr. In the latter there is no reference to the condition of the ship and only the skeletons of six men are reported to have been found together with Ingimundr's body. The numbers seem to fit well in with the previous account which has it that the members of the crew split in two groups. This then, is the members of one of the groups which fought over the provisions, as accounted for in the beginning of the saga. The texts refer to the runes as the only source to what is told about Ingimundr's final fate. When we take into consideration the text as a whole this gives, in retrospect, a rational explanation to the elaborate details given about Einar's death. Probably the tradition has had it that the brothers were found at different times, Einar after one or two winters, Ingmundr after fourteen. The tradition about the events, however, seems to have been one and the same. Only after having found the wax and the runes it would have been possible to know the whole story, including the time of the shipwreck and of Einar's death. In the texts, then, the *atburð um líflát þeirra* (the circumstances of their death) revealed by the runes on Ingimundr's wax-tablets are indeed given explicitly at the very beginning of the saga(s), suggesting also that the message left on the tablets was a text of some length. Furthermore, the reference to the written record of the events is there also to give credibility to the account.

As the details of the shipwreck in Greenland are known to all versions of the

saga, the tradition about it must have been used already in the first version of a saga about Guðmundr, believed to have been written before 1250 (cf. Jónas Kristjánsson 1988, 185). The saga writer, of course, did not have access to the written runic source. When knowledge of the shipwreck was gained and the fate of the men on board had been figured out, it was naturally turned into an oral tradition immediately and should be treated as such when used as evidence, for instance for runic literacy as we have tried to do here. However convinced we may be of the authenticity of the tradition about Ingimundr's use of runes, we should probably restrict ourselves to treating it as a mid-thirteenth century view on what kind of script would be used in a particular situation half a century earlier. Even so it is an interesting piece of evidence about Icelandic literacy towards the end of the 12th century. Whatever the truth is about Ingimundr and his use of wax and runes in the last decade of the 12th century, it is a fact that a mid 13th century narrator did think of runic script and writing tablets as the most likely way in which information about the tragic events could have been conveyed at the time. An observation like that would most certainly be based upon experience and detailed knowledge about what kind of script was to be expected at the time of the incidents. It clearly demonstrates that runes were not thought of as an exotic script for the esoteric few. The realities on which an attitude like that must be based cannot have changed dramatically over a period of time only covering five to six decades. If, as Bæksted suggests, the use of runes was a novelty and an activity restricted to the learned section of the public around the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the story would make no sense to a mid-thirteenth century audience.

At this point I think it is pertinent also to draw attention to evidence provided by archaeological excavations of recent years. A substantial number of finds unambiguously connect the use of runes to writing tablets and wax. Finds from Trondheim, Bergen and Oslo in Norway, Lödöse in Sweden, Stóraborg in Iceland and Dublin in Ireland dated from the 11th to the 13th century all more or less explicitly connect the use of runes to "wax" as expressed in the Ingimundar þáttr, which again is to say that Scandinavian users of runic script by the 12th century were well accustomed to the old Roman technique of using tablets filled with wax as materials on which to write. The Ingimundar þáttr together with the somewhat younger find

from Stóraborg may be taken as evidence that this applies also to Iceland (cf. Þórður Tómasson 1982, 103-107).

Equally, the Ingimundar þáttr is a part of the saga which seems to provide an excellent illustration to what Stefán Karlsson once has pointed out, also referring to *Guðmundar saga* "that there was a continual cross-fertilization between oral and literary tradition in Iceland in the Middle Ages" (Stefán Karlsson 1986, 286). A nice example of how this process continues into post medieval times may, in conclusion, be taken from Björn Jónsson of Skarðsá's *Grænlandsannall* in which there is a 'Tosta þáttr' interpolated (AM 115, 8vo, fol. 35r - 38v). The þáttr explains how a certain *Líka-Loðinn* earned his name:

> Í þessum Norðr-hafsbotna ís hafa flest skip forgengið alltið forðum, sem margt segir af í Tosta þætti þviat Líka-Loðinn tók þar af auknefni sitt, að hann kannaði opt á sumrum norðóbygðir, ok flutti lík manna til kirkju, er hann fann í hellum ok skutum þar sem þeir höfðu af ísum eðr skipbrotum komit, en hjá þeim láu jafnan ristnar rúnir, um alla atburði þeirra ófara ok kvalninga [cf. also GhMII, 656].

The phrasing of Björn's story does not make it difficult to detect the provenance of this particular passage. It is equally interesting to observe how Björn of Skarðsá restructures the different pieces of the Greenland episodes of the *Guðmundar sögur* into a coherent story, probably much in line with the original tradition about Ingimundr's shipwreck.

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