

NEGOTIATING TRADITIONS: RECENT HISTORY IN *ORKNEYINGA SAGA*

Judith Jesch

Den overordentlige detaljerede fremstillingsmaade, de mange personnavne, de nøjagtige tidsangivelser — alt dette fører hyppigt tanken hen paa Sturlunga saga og peger paa en nedskrivning, som ikke ligger meget fjernt fra selve begivenhederne.

Sigurður Nordal, *Orkneyinga saga*

Sigurður Nordal, unsurprised that 'Rognvald jarl og hans færd skildres meget og udførligt' went on to note the, in his view, unreasonable preoccupation with Sveinn Ásleifarson in the latter part of the saga, concluding that 'Forfatteren maa have kendt en overlevering om Sven, som stammede fra denne selv og kun havde gaaet igennem et par mellemlid i det højeste.'¹ Nordal noted three characteristics of the saga which suggest that much of its latter part derived from Sveinn's own account of events: (1) two references to such an account (in chs 75 and 99), (2) a preoccupation with Sveinn's point of view, and (3) a mass of colourful detail in the parts of the narrative dealing with Sveinn. Nordal's brief comments formed part of his discussion of the saga's date of composition and he did not explore the ways in which these Sveinian traditions were incorporated into or modified in the saga, except to suggest that the author's relative independence of Sveinn shows he had not known him personally.²

The text and the traditions

*Orkneyinga saga*³ is a long saga with a complicated textual history. My starting-point for this paper is not so much the recognition of the somewhat idealised nature of the reconstructed text as presented by editors such as Sigurður Nordal and Finnbogi Guðmundsson, but a hypothesis that the disjointed and unfinished quality of the saga

¹ *Orkneyinga saga*, 1913-16, p. iii.

² *Orkneyinga saga*, 1913-16, p. v.

³ cited from the edition of Finnbogi Guðmundsson, 1965.

is a characteristic of the text itself, even before its more mechanical fragmentation in the manuscript tradition. This is a saga which lays bare its skeleton more clearly than most, and in which it is possible to study the processes by which a variety of source materials were narrativised in the early days of saga-writing. Borrowing an idea from Gérard Genette, I would like to explore what might be called the 'polymodality' of *Orkneyinga saga*.⁴ The shifts of narrative mood within the text reflects this variety of sources, and it is my contention that such shifts are 'effects of the actual genesis of the work'.⁵

The second half of the saga (from ch. 58) is a particularly fascinating example of narrative shifts which suggest the intertwining of a variety of more-or-less clearly-identifiable traditions, in particular Nordal's Sveinian account and an account based possibly on 'an annotated collection of poetry associated with Earl Rognvaldr Kali'.⁶ The saga also attracted a supplementary account of Haraldr Maddaðarson.⁷ A full study of this second half of the saga would require more space than is available to me here, so I will concentrate on chs 90-104 to explore the implications of Nordal's view of *Orkneyinga saga* as a 'contemporary saga', an account of events that took place within living memory (if we accept the traditional view that the first version of the saga was written ca. 1200), deriving at least in part from the account of people who were involved in those events.

The cast of characters

Chapters 90-104 show the final shakedown which established Haraldr Maddaðarson as Earl of Orkney (he went on to rule for a further 48 years). There are four main players in this section, Haraldr himself, his two rival earls, Rognvaldr kali Kolsson and

⁴ *Narrative Discourse*, 1980, p. 210.

⁵ *ibid.* p. 225.

⁶ Paul Bibire, 'The poetry of Earl Rognvaldr's court', in Barbara E. Crawford (ed.), *St Magnus Cathedral and Orkney's Twelfth-Century Renaissance*, 1988, pp. 208-40, at p. 211.

⁷ Michael Chesnutt, 'Haralds saga Maddaðarsonar', in Ursula Dronke *et al.* (eds), *Speculum Norroenum. Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, 1981, pp. 33-55.

Erlendr Haraldsson, and that great earlmaker, Sveinn Ásleifarson. Sveinn had smoothed Rognvaldr's path by kidnapping his earlier rival Páll Hákonarson (chs 74-6), and two years later an agreement was made that also gave the then five-year-old Haraldr the title of earl (ch. 77). Erlendr, a grandson of Hákon Pálsson (father of the deposed Páll), took advantage of Rognvaldr's absence on crusade to make his own claim to be an earl. The final act of this drama is precipitated when Rognvaldr returns from his crusade, and the earldom is clearly too small to hold all three of them.

The three earls and Sveinn are presented successively in chs 90-92. Ch 90 shows Rognvaldr returning to Orkney from Norway after his crusade. Even before his return he hears of the *ófriðr mikill* at home, with everyone flocking to one of two opposing factions, that of Haraldr, and that of Erlendr backed by Sveinn. The stage for conflict is set. Just as a play might begin with an exposition, so ch. 91 begins analeptically: *Nú skal frá því segja, hvat til tíðenda varð í Orkneyjum, meðan Rognvaldr jarl var í útforinni*. Chapter 91 then relates how Haraldr was kidnapped by the marauding Norwegian king Eysteinn Haraldsson and forced to ransom himself by acknowledging Norwegian overlordship. Chapter 92 relates how Erlendr sees his opportunity when Rognvaldr is abroad and enlists the support of both the Scottish and Norwegian kings in his claim on the earldom (or part of it). Sveinn joins Erlendr, having come to a settlement with him in the matter of a long-standing feud.

The staging

The stage is set, the characters have been marshalled. As in a drama, the actors in this story make moves that represent someone else's interpretation of the action. In chapters 92-3 it gradually becomes clear that this director is one of the actors, Sveinn Ásleifarson. Sveinn's control of the moves is revealed in several characteristics of the narrative: a precise chronology, an increased use of numerical detail and a preoccupation with Sveinn's 'point of view'.

Chronology - Frequent references to exact dates and periods of time provide a backbone for the narration:

ch. 92

Þat var Óðinsdag í efstu viku ...

... um páskana ...

... þegar eptir páskaviku ...

... hann [Melkólmr Skotakonung] var þá níu vetra gamall. Þar var Sveinn

mánuð í allgoðum fagnaði ...

Þat var Míkálmessumorgin ...

... leituðu hans tvá daga ...⁸

... er dró at jólum ...

ch. 93

... inn tíunda dag jóla ...

... at jólum ...

... inn þrettánda dag jóla ...

Þat var miðvikudag inn næsta fyrir föstu ...

Of várit ...

... of sumarit ...

... of haustit ...

... þetta sumar ...

... ok kom Rognvaldr jarl litlu fyrir jól í Orkneyjar.

Numbers - There are regular references to the numbers of ships and men involved in the action, and exact details are given of payments:

ch. 92

... í þeirri fyr tóku þeir tólf aura gulls af Sigurði klaufa ...

ch. 93

Haraldr jarl ... hafði fjögur skip ok tíu tigi manna ...

Þeir Haraldr jarl drápu þar tvá menn ... en þeir tóku hondum fjóra menn ...

... þeir Anakol ok Þorsteinn Rognuson fóru yfir á Nes með tuttugu menn á skutu

þá skiptu þeir Anakol liði sínu ok gengu tíu til sævar ... en aðrir tíu gengu á bæinn ...

... hann keypti at Beruvíkrmönnum hundræði marka silfrs ...

⁸ This passage is not in the *Flateyjarbók* text, see Sigurður Nordal (ed.), *Orkneyinga saga*, 1913-16, p. 270n.

Þeir fóru fjórtán skipum at leita þeira ...

... sá hann, at skip váru fjórtán saman ...

... riðu tólf menn í móti þeim ...

'Point of view' - Many of these details are associated with Sveinn's actions and movements. Some details that appear to derive from an omniscient narrator turn out to have come from Sveinn. Thus, when Sveinn robs Knútr, the wealthy merchant of Berwick, the latter sends fourteen ships to chase Sveinn. Later, we are told that *Sveinn var allra manna skyggnastr, ok er hann hugði at, sá hann, at skip váru fjórtán saman*. The number of ships involved in this chase in fact must come from Sveinn himself, and this is underscored by the previous emphasis on the watchmen who could not work out what it was they were seeing. Another event which is, literally, seen through Sveinn's eyes is the attack in ch. 92 by Sveinn and his men on Haraldr's tax collectors (*Þá sá þeir, at byrðingr fór austan of Pétlandsfjörð; þóttisk Sveinn vita, at þat myndi vera menn Haralds jarls*). Sveinn's clear sight extends to prophetic powers: ch. 93 begins with his statement at a Christmas feast that *'Þat er ætlun mín, at nú sé Haraldr jarl á fgr til eyjanna'*, and he is proved right, despite the protestations of his followers that the weather is too bad for this to be true. There is also a preoccupation with the reaction of other characters to Sveinn that amounts to giving us his point of view:

ch. 92

Þar var Sveinn mánuð í allgóðum fagnaði, ok það Skotakonungr hann hafar þar gæði oll á Katanesi, er hann hafði áðr haft en hann varð ósattir við Harald jarl.

Þar var sættarfundr þeira, ok gekk seint saman sættin; ok svá kom, at Sveinn skylði einn gera þat, sem hann vildi.

Svá var gort sem Sveinn mælti.

... þá fór Sveinn heim til bús síns, en það jarl vera eigi at óvarara, þótt þeir skildi. Ok svá gerði jarl...

ch. 93

Konungr talði lít at féláti Knúts ok sendi Sveini skjöld dýran ok fleiri góðar gjafar.

Once we become aware how much of these events is filtered through Sveinn's

consciousness, it becomes possible to link to him even those events which are not obviously told through his eyes. Events involving Erlendr and his followers are naturally linked to Sveinn because of his support for Erlendr's power-play at this point. A case in point is Anakol's rescue of his brother Arnfinnr from the clutches of Haraldr by taking a hostage Eiríkr, who *myndi eigi fyrr lauss látinn en þeir Arnfinnr kæmi heilir til Erlends jarls; ok þat gekk eptir því, sem mælt var*. This same Arnfinnr may indeed have been the source of the account of Haraldr and his men taking shelter in Orkahaugr during a storm and how two of them went mad there. The account in ch. 92 of how Haraldr and his men saw the approaching attack of Sveinn and Erlendr leads into a reference to an otherwise unknown eyewitness (Þorgeirr, in the church)⁹ which counterbalances the impression that we are experiencing the attack from Haraldr's point of view. Even ch. 91, which appears to give information that could only have been known to Haraldr and King Eysteinn of Norway (and an omniscient narrator), could be traced to the Sveinn/Erlendr camp, through Erlendr himself, who also approached King Eysteinn (ch. 92) and was granted Haraldr's portion of the islands, a fact which he lost no time in telling Sveinn.

Thus it is possible, though not necessary, to trace all the events of chs 91-3 back to a tradition ultimately deriving from Sveinn, and seemingly filtered through his consciousness. Conversely, it would not be possible to trace all of the events in these chapters back to any one of the other three main characters. If these chapters are based on a single tradition, it must be both a Sveinian one and an Orcadian one. This link is made clear at the end of ch. 92, when Haraldr, defeated, retires to Shetland with *fótt Orkneyinga*, while Erlendr and Sveinn hold a *þing* in Kirkwall, *ok sóttu bændr til of allar Eyjar*.

The drama

With the end of ch. 93, the analepsis is completed (indicated by the narrative marker *sem fyrr var ritat* referring back to ch. 90), the exposition is finished and the drama can begin. Chapters 94-104 describe how first Erlendr and then Rognvaldr are picked off,

⁹ See Finnboði Guðmundsson (ed.), *Orkneyinga saga*, 1965, p. 245 n. 4, and note 8 above.

leaving Haraldr in sole power in Orkney and Caithness. The complicated and shifting alliances and enmities (involving minor characters as well as the four major ones) do not allow a straightforward, single-strand narrative. Nevertheless, it can be shown that the action continues to be interpreted by Sveinn up to chapter 101. There is not enough room here to do an exhaustive analysis, but some examples should make the point. It is most useful to consider the action chapter by chapter, not least because of Sveinn's shifting role in the events.

Ch. 94 begins with attempts to reach an agreement between Rognvaldr and Erlendr to divide the earldom and oppose Haraldr. Then Rognvaldr and Haraldr reach agreement despite an attack by Haraldr's supporter Þorbjörn klerkr. Sveinn and Erlendr attack the other two earls, but Rognvaldr is hidden by an Icelandic poet so only Haraldr suffers. Sveinn again warns Erlendr to take care, but despite this he is killed in an attack by Rognvaldr and Haraldr and his men swear their allegiance to them.

As usual, the narrative alternates between an apparently panoramic and omniscient perspective, and an orientation closely associated with Sveinn, and we can find that what appears to be the former is in fact the latter. Thus, when Haraldr returns from Norway with seven ships, we are told that three of them were driven off course (*urðu saðhafa*) to Shetland. But when they are captured there by Erlendr, it becomes clear that the detail is significant from Sveinn and Erlendr's point of view. And when Sveinn and Erlendr sail south to meet Haraldr, they are similarly affected by the weather, but this is only significant to them and not to the other side (or even to the plot). The scene contains detailed description of the weather,¹⁰ and the focus stays with Sveinn rather than Erlendr when they are separated: *Heldu þeir þá þegar suðr í Eyjar á fimm skipum ok fengu í Dynrqst strauma váðvæna ok storm veðrs, ok skildu þar með þeim, ok hugðu þeir jarl týndan. Heldu þeir þaðan suðr undir Sandey, ok lá þar fyrir Erlendr jarl með þrjú skip, ok var þar fagnafundur mikill.* And when there is a shift to give us some detail about Haraldr, this is clearly marked in the narrative: *En þat er at segja frá ferðum Haralds jarls, at hann kom í Þórsá ok hafði sex skip.* It is characteristic that when

¹⁰ Sveinn and Erlendr are similarly affected by weather (described in detail) during a brief sojourn in Caithness later in this chapter.

Rognvaldr and Haraldr meet in the castle at Thurso, and talk *tveir einir*, we never really find out what transpired between them, suggesting that the narrator is perhaps not omniscient, but dependent on the information available (to Sveinn and Erlendr?) by eyewitness report (such as the immediately following attack by Þorbjörn klerkr). We are told that Sveinn and Erlendr left Thurso with seven ships, and that Rognvaldr and Haraldr *logðu þá skipum sínum til Skálpeiðs*, but not how many ships they had until Sveinn and Erlendr hear about it: *Þar spurðu þeir, at jarlar lágu við Skálpeið fjórtán skipum*. There are frequent references to Sveinn's decisions made on behalf of Erlendr, underscoring the latter's foolishness which leads to his death, despite Sveinn's last-minute attempt to avert it: *sendi hann Margað Grímsson til jarls ok tvá menn aðra ok bað hann gaum gefa at ráðum hans*, but he knows it is futile. His comment anticipates the transfer of his allegiance to another earl: *'en þat þykki mér uggligt, at ek þurfa skamma stund at gera ráð fyrir jarli þessum'*. Although Sveinn was not present at the attack on Erlendr, we are left in no doubt, at the beginning of ch. 95, that he was fully informed about it: *Eptir fall Erlends jarls fór Sveinn Ásleifarson til Rennudals ok fann þar þá Margað, ok kunnu þeir honum gqrla at segja frá þeim tíðendum, er gorkk höfðu í Damínsey*.

Ch. 95 begins with Sveinn's revenge on a man who boasts of having killed Erlendr. He is reconciled with the two surviving earls, but it is immediately clear that Rognvaldr goes out of his way not to provoke Sveinn, while Haraldr and Sveinn quickly get embroiled in a dispute. The chapter ends with a scene in which Sveinn attempts to kill Jón vængr, Haraldr's steward.

It is in this chapter that the Sveinian perspective on events is clearest. The chapter makes extensive use of focalisation, with references to Sveinn's sensory perceptions showing him as the 'character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective',¹¹ despite the consistently anonymous and apparently omniscient third-person narration. Thus, Sveinn and his companions hide on a farm in the dark, where they hear a certain Erlendr boasting of having killed Earl Erlendr, *Ok er Sveinn heyrdi þetta, hléypr hann*

¹¹ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 1980, p. 186. See also my 'Narrating *Orkneyinga saga*', *Scandinavian Studies* 64 (1992), 336-55.

inn í húsit at þeim. When Sveinn confronts Haraldr at his own farm on Gairsay, it is clear that he does not quite know what he is coming to, and the truth is revealed to us as it is to him: *kómu síð um kveldit. Þeir sá eld í bakhúsi; fór Sveinn þagat til. Vildi hann, at þeir tæki eldinn ok bæri at skálanum ok brendi bæinn ok jarl inni. Sveinn Blákarason ... latti þessa mest ok kallaði vera mega, at jarl væri eigi á bænum. ... Hljópu þeir menn þá upp, er í skálanum váru, ok kómu aptr hurðu. Urðu þeir Sveinn þá varir, at jarl var eigi á bænum.* He is prevented from burning his own house with his own wife and daughters in it. A more complex scene occurs in the confrontation between Haraldr and Sveinn around Hellisey, starting with their mutual recognition: *ok sá þá hvárir aðra ok kenndu.* When Sveinn sees Haraldr following him, he hides in the cave from which the island took its name. Then we temporarily see things through Haraldr's eyes: *Þeir Haraldr jarl fóru at leita þeira um daginn um eyna ok fundu þá eigi; þeir sá ok skipafarar engar frá eyjunni. Þetta undrudusk þeir mjök; þótti þeim ólíkligt, at Sveinn myndi hafa sokkit niðr.* But this shift of focalisation is illusory for it turns out that even the reactions of Haraldr and his men are filtered through Sveinn: *Þeir Sveinn hófðu heyrt viðræðu þeira jarls ok hans manna.* This last sentence (which comes after Haraldr has gone away, still puzzled) has no function other than to remind us who is interpreting the story. The final scene in this chapter also involves Sveinn once again concealing himself on a farm, and hearing the insults of Jón vængr through a thin wall: *Ok er Sveinn heyrði þetta, þá mátti hann eigi standask ok þreif til vápna sinna ok hljóp at laundurum.*

Ch. 96 follows the shifting visual perceptions of Sveinn and Rognvaldr in their encounter on South Ronaldsay (there are six occurrences of the verb *sjá* and one of *kenna* in this short chapter). But the encounter is framed by Sveinn's perceptions: he sees the arrival of Rognvaldr's ship at the beginning of the scene, and he sees Rognvaldr raise the shield of peace at the end of it. And Rognvaldr's seeing is as observed by Sveinn from his vantage point: *en þeir Sveinn váru á hæð nokkurri ok grýttu þaðan á menn jarls. Ok er þeir [i.e. Rognvaldr] sá þat af skipinu, brutu menn upp vápn sín. En er þeir Sveinn sá þat, hljópu þeir af hæðinni...*

Ch. 97 shows Sveinn making peace with both Rognvaldr and Haraldr, and the scene showing his encounter with the latter is almost a repeat of the narrative technique of ch.

96, with alternating references to what Sveinn saw and what Haraldr saw, ending in a storm that forces them share a bed that night. The scene is not quite so clearly visualised from Sveinn's standpoint as in ch. 96, but coming immediately after it, there can be no doubt that the main character in all this is Sveinn, and that he is the link between all these episodes. Sveinn's control of events is reflected in his dismissive reaction to rumours that Haraldr did not plan to keep their agreement, *littinn gaum gaf Sveinn at því*, and Rognvaldr's final comment in the chapter to Jón vængr that he would have no peace from either Sveinn or Kolbeinn hrúga if he harmed a hair of Óláfr Sveinsson's head.

Chs 98-9 tell of renewed efforts to make peace between Sveinn and Haraldr, encouraged by Rognvaldr. Sveinn is still clearly the central character and the narrative follows him closely, but this is not intensified by revealing events through his eyes, indeed the narrator provides a rare external view of him: *þeir Rognvaldr jarl ok Sveinn stóðu hjá kirkjudurunum, meðan seglit var út borit ... ok var Sveinn heldr ófrýnlig, er þeir báru út seglit.*

This external view indicates that we are moving away from a narrative focalised through Sveinn. Although he still has a part to play in some of the remaining chapters, he is no longer a central character, except in the accounts of his viking voyages in chs 100 and 101, which are told briefly and without any special narrative characteristics.

Polymodality: 'Rognvalds saga'

So far, it may have seemed as if the purpose of this paper was to substantiate J. Storer Clouston's claim that *Orkneyinga saga* 'is practically the story of Sweyn's adventures.'¹² However, Clouston qualified this statement by excepting from it 'the chapters dealing with Rognvald's crusade and its preliminaries, and then again the dramatic episode of his murder', and these are both important qualifications, though for different reasons.

There is no doubt that Sveinn Ásleifarson dominates much of the latter half of *Orkneyinga saga*. The examples given above of perspective, emphasis and detail

¹² *A History of Orkney*, 1932, p. 119.

pointing to Sveinn could be multiplied from earlier chapters of the saga. Yet Sveinn does not have it all his own way, for substantial parts of the saga concentrate on Rognvaldr. He is dominant enough, in some parts of the saga at least, for some scholars to feel that he overshadows Sveinn: Alexander Taylor suggested an 'oral Saga of Earl Rognvald Kali ... that has survived two generations' telling unusually well' as the main source for chs 58-108, scarcely mentioning Sveinn.¹³ Finnbogi Guðmundsson inclined to the Taylorian view, noting that 'saga Rögnvalds Kala' is the 'höfuðpáttur' of *Orkneyinga saga*,¹⁴ and giving Rognvaldr's crusade the bulk of his attention in discussing the second half of the saga. For Paul Bibire, too, 'Earl Rögnvaldr Kali of Orkney ... is the central figure of the latter part of *Orkneyinga saga*'.¹⁵

It is likely, as Bibire suggested, that the parts of the saga dealing with Rognvaldr are derived from 'an annotated collection of poetry associated with Earl Rognvaldr Kali'.¹⁶ This use of a different type of source is reflected in the narrative. Despite the interest in Rognvaldr, there is not the same kind of detail in the sections dealing with him as there is in the Sveinian accounts. Apart from ch. 67, which is quite detailed in both chronology and numbers, we get such details in the Rognvaldian sections either when his actions are closely entwined with those of Sveinn (chs 84, 94), or when the narrative is clearly based on verses (chs 85-6). We rarely get a sense of seeing things through Rognvaldr's eyes. When we do, it is either because Sveinn is seeing the same thing (ch. 97: *þá sá þeir siglingu Haralds*) or because it is clearly derived from a verse, as in the beginning of ch. 72: *Sunnudag hlýddi Rognvaldr jarl tíðum þar í þorpinu, ok stóðu þeir úti hjá kirkjunni. Þá sá þeir, hvar gengu sextán menn, stýppir ok kollóttir; þeim þóttu þeir undarlíga búnir. Jarlsmenn ræddu um, hverir vera myndi. Þá kvað jarl vísu.* Chapter 77 also begins with Rognvaldr observing some curious-looking clerics:

¹³ *The Orkneyinga Saga*, 1938, p. 78.

¹⁴ *Orkneyinga saga*, 1965, p. lxii.

¹⁵ 'Few know an earl in fishing-clothes', in Barbara E. Crawford (ed.), *Essays in Shetland History. Heiðursrit to T.M.Y. Manson*, 1984, 82-98, at p. 82.

¹⁶ 'The poetry of Earl Rognvaldr's court', in Barbara E. Crawford (ed.), *St Magnus Cathedral and Orkney's Twelfth-Century Renaissance*, 1988, pp. 208-40, at p. 211.

Þat var inn séttá dag jóla, at skip var sét fara sunnan af Pétlandsfirði. Veðr var gott, ok stóð jarl úti ok mart manna hjá honum ok hugðu at skipinu. The ship contains 15 or 16 men, including *Jón byskup ofan af Skotlandi af Atjókklum*. This apparent focalisation through Rognvaldr can be explained in one of two ways. Either it is in fact the same episode as that recounted in ch. 72, and therefore depends on the same (or a similar) verse,¹⁷ or it could even be another example of a scene observed by Sveinn, since he turns out at the end of the chapter to have been involved in the bishop's negotiations to promote Haraldr.

Thus, while the 'Sveinian' traditions cannot always be kept apart from the 'Rognvaldian' ones, in general it is fair to say that they are intertwined rather than fused. The differences in the narrative techniques of these two strands arise from their very different status as sources, one a prose eyewitness account by a participant in events, who gives his own interpretation of those events, the other a much more neutral narrative reconstructed from a set of verses. Current writers on narrative, influenced by their study of more recent (and generally 'literary') texts like to assert that 'the ultimate source of everything in the narrative is the narrator', and like to distinguish the 'author' from the 'narrator' without showing much interest in the former.¹⁸ For *Orkneyinga saga* (and possibly for other sagas), it is methodologically neatest to equate 'narrator' and 'author' precisely because the narratorial activity in the text appears to reflect the 'actual genesis of the work'. Since this narratorial activity did not aim at a complete transformation, or narrativisation, of the source materials, these differences of narrative technique reflect the difference of the sources.

This can be demonstrated by a clearly visible join between the two sources in ch. 94. In the context of a section of the saga that is clearly dominated by a Sveinian perspective, we can see how an element of the narrative based on Rognvaldr's verses has been introduced. The incident is the attack by Sveinn and Erlendr on Haraldr and Rognvaldr, who are both supposed to be at Knarston. The attack on Haraldr is successful, with many men killed on his side, but few on the attackers' side: *Fátt fell*

¹⁷ as suggested by Alexander B. Taylor, *The Orkneyinga saga*, 1938, pp. 386, 388.

¹⁸ Michael J. Toolan, *Narrative: a Critical Linguistic Introduction*, 1988, pp. 76-8.

af þeim Erlendi jarli; en jarl tók þar fjórtán skip, er jarlar áttu, ok allt fé, þat er á var. This statement is repeated later in the chapter: *Þeir Erlendr ok Sveinn tóku öll skip jarla ok ófamikit fé annat.* In between this unnecessary repetition comes the anecdote which describes how Rognvaldr escaped the attack by being sheltered by Bótólfr begla, *Íslenzkr maðr ok skáld gott*, centring on a verse by Bótólfr himself. This basis in a verse links this anecdote to the Rognvaldian strand in the saga, embedded in the Sveinian strand.

Thus the latter half of *Orkneyinga saga* is mainly based on one hand on a poetic, and probably Icelandic, tradition about Rognvaldr, and on the other hand on an Orcadian eyewitness tradition probably deriving from Sveinn Ásleifarson himself. Yet both these strands are abandoned in chs 100-104 of the saga which describe the murder of Rognvaldr.

The final act

In these chapters, there is nothing that can obviously be traced to a particular source of the type just described, and precious little focalisation, circumstantial detail or emphasis to hint at a controlling orientation behind the narrative of this tragic climax. In this section, *Orkneyinga saga* approaches the state most commonly associated with *Íslendingasögur*, but also with other sagas, in which 'no persona of a storyteller intervenes between the events and the hearer or reader'.¹⁹ It could be said that this climactic section of *Orkneyinga saga* has been fully narrativised.

This dramatic high point of the saga is presented in terms of a classic feud narrative. The situation is set up in ch. 100: after a brief reference to Sveinn a shift is indicated by the narrative marker *Þat var mælt*, and the events concern a dispute between a follower of Rognvaldr and a follower of Þorbjörn klerkr (himself in Haraldr's camp). The episode has its fair share of killings, attempts at settlement and compensation, disguise and outlawry. Chapter 102 has the function of bringing both Rognvaldr and Haraldr to Caithness, where the exiled Þorbjörn klerkr (who had been outlawed by

¹⁹ quoted from Paul Bibire's review of the Hermann Pálsson / Paul Edwards translation of *Orkneyinga saga* in *Saga-Book* 20 (1978-81), 236-7.

Rognvaldr) is also lurking. His murder of Rognvaldr is told in true saga style in ch. 103: there is copious use of direct speech, including long and rhetorical speeches by Þorbjörn and Magnús Hávarðsson; there are ominous and/or fatal events (Rognvaldr's sneeze and his foot caught in his stirrup) and homely, pastoral detail (*var Hallvarðr bóndi uppi á kornamstri einu ok hlóð*); there is Þorbjörn's flight and heroic nine-ell jump across the ditch; and there is the final revenge on Þorbjörn by Magnús, in which he is burnt in a deserted shieling, after which it is discovered that his guts had spilled out of the wound given to him just after he killed Rognvaldr.

Chapter 104 adheres to another convention, for Rognvaldr is venerated as a saint after his death, and this chapter describes the removal of his body to St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, and the taking up of his relics there. The chapter includes a eulogy of the saint which harks back to his own verse self-presentation in ch. 58 in which he enumerated his talents: *Hann hafði verit hjálparmaðr mikill mǫrgum mǫnnum, qrr af fê, hógværr ok vinholtr, íþróttamaðr mikill ok skáld gott*. This not only brings Rognvaldr's story full circle, but reflects the hagiographical story pattern of the first half of the saga (St Magnús).

Thus the 'narrativisation' (using both secular and Christian conventions) of chapters 100-104 is closely linked with Rognvaldr's story, even though this section is not based on verse as the rest of that story is. The feud in ch. 100 that precipitates Rognvaldr's murder has similarities to that told in ch. 61, both involving a dispute in their cups between a follower of Rognvaldr and of another man. In ch. 61, the feud marks the beginning of Rognvaldr's career as earl, when Kali is renamed Rognvaldr by King Sigurðr of Norway, while the feud of ch. 100 leads to the end of his career. Rognvaldr's own death and his burial recall his more illustrious saintly predecessor, St Magnús, whose church he and his father built and he was buried in.

Sveinn is not mentioned in ch. 103, but the attentive reader will note his contribution. The chapter begins by recalling the events which put Rognvaldr in power, and in which Sveinn was very much concerned (see chs 74-6): *Þá er Rognvaldr hafði jarl verit tvá vetr ok tuttugu, síðan er Páll jarl var handtekinn, þá fóru þeir jarlar yfir á Katanes*. Thus, Rognvaldr lost the earldom as he had gained it, by the reduction of two earls to one. And, in the same way as Rognvaldr kept a low profile, and could not be blamed

for the death of Páll Hákonarson, so Haraldr is also carefully absolved of blame for the death of Rognvaldr: the two earls go to Caithness together, and together hear of the threat posed by Þorbjörn klerkr, and we are told that Haraldr was not aware of Rognvaldr's death till long after it happened. Yet, just as Rognvaldr was not averse to profiting from Sveinn's actions, so Haraldr is happy to benefit from the death of Rognvaldr and would have let Þorbjörn go: it is Magnús Hávarðsson who chases him and exacts revenge. And so the cycle goes on.

Writing recent history

Despite, or possibly because of, its fragmentary and unsatisfactory state of preservation, *Orkneyinga saga* enables us to see how recent events were translated into saga. We have, on one hand, clear evidence of local, oral traditions based on an eyewitness account, with a precise chronology which may suggest that these traditions underwent a written, almost annalistic, phase before being incorporated into the saga (the 'Sveinian' strand). On the other hand, we have a tradition clearly deriving from Icelandic interest in skaldic verse, and showing how such verse could be turned into narrative (the 'Rognvaldian' strand). Bringing these two strands together, we have a narrative or authorial presence. This presence is not necessarily an author in the sense of the book-prose school of saga studies, completely transforming (or even abandoning) his source materials and creating a 'literary' saga in the classical style, anticipating the last word of his saga when writing the first. But neither is this authorial presence a mere scribal linker of disparate traditions. It is true that some of the linkage is quite mechanical, and that we can trace the different traditions because they are not fully homogenised in the narrative. But chs 100-104 show how such disparate traditions could be transcended, to create the narrative art (with its self-effacing narrator) more familiar to us from the *Íslendingasögur*. In these chapters, we can no longer distinguish the source material that was transformed in this way, and we also see the architectonic activities of the author/narrator, linking events to the larger framework of the saga, in which the story of Rognvaldr provides the shape of the second half of the saga.

Thus, I would argue, *Orkneyinga saga* is an appropriate laboratory in which to study the mechanisms by which history and fiction were united to produce saga.