

From Iceland to Norway: essential rites of passage for an early Icelandic skald

We all know that Iceland was established as a largely Norwegian settlement in the last decades of the ninth and the first decades of the tenth century after Christ. Modern studies of the settlement of Iceland and its relations with Norway during the early Middle Ages have sometimes stressed continuities, sometimes discontinuities between the two communities. From a modern, empirical perspective, the two societies' similarities in terms of language, beliefs and social customs are striking and yet, as we know, Iceland very quickly differentiated itself from its parent society in a number of important respects, in land ownership and the transmission of property, in law, in political organisation, in language and in many other ways. We may infer that Icelanders needed to be different in order to assert their independence as well as for a host of more pragmatic reasons and, in much Icelandic literature, the ideology of separateness from Norway is clearly articulated.

In this short paper I investigate the representation of the relationship between Iceland and Norway through the analysis of a medieval narrative which presents a rite of passage undergone by an Icelander who made the transition from Iceland back to Norway to further his career. The figure of the young, upwardly mobile Icelandic male who wants to venture into the big, wide world, with Norway usually his first port of call, is commonplace in Icelandic sagas and forms the standard plot type of the *páttur* (Harris 1976; Lindow 1993). Typically, the journey from Iceland to Norway involves risk, but, if it pays off, it tends to do so handsomely. Sometimes, it is true, there are problems for young Icelanders when they return home, particularly if they have behaved badly (as far as Icelandic women are concerned) while they were in Norway.

The story I am investigating here does not involve sex, but it has plenty of other interesting features. Its protagonist is a skald, a young man whose profession more or less requires him to travel to Norway to make his reputation. In terms of the values attached to the concepts 'Iceland' and 'Norway' in Old Icelandic literature, as we shall see, the professional Icelandic poet occupied a paradoxical position, which this story explores. The paradox turns on that fact that Icelanders appear to have been acknowledged specialists in the courtly and elitist art of skaldic poetry, yet they did not grow up in a courtly environment. On the contrary, Iceland was, from a Norwegian perspective, provincial and retarded. From this viewpoint, it is thus an almost miraculous event that the most sophisticated, the most talented and most courtly of the entourage of the Norwegian king, St. Óláfr, should emerge from the Icelandic backwoods in the person of the skald Sighvatr Þórðarson. The narrative of how young Sighvatr became a fine poet through catching and eating a magnificent fish offers a mythic 'explanation' of how an unpromising and inexperienced Icelandic lad turns into the principal court poet, companion and adviser of the Norwegian king.

The narrative of Sighvatr and the fish is found among the so-called short narratives or *articuli* attributed to the priest Styrmir Kárason the wise in his version of the saga of St. Óláfr according to *Flateyjarbók* (III, 237-48). Most of the *articuli* consist of short, self-contained tales about St. Óláfr himself or about his poets, and include other stories about Sighvatr. These *articuli* are printed in the second volume of O. A. Johnsen's and Jón Helgason's 1941 edition of Snorri Sturluson's separate saga of King Óláfr the Saint, where the tale of Sighvatr and the fish is number 12 (pp. 683-95; no. 12 is on pp. 689-90). Parallel texts to Styrmir's *articulus* of the fish story are found inserted in several manuscripts of the separate saga of St Óláfr, and these give a slightly varying version of the Sighvatr story (Johnsen and Helgason 1941, II, 706-7). One variant is inserted into chapter 38 of the saga, and the other into chapter 44, this latter extant in several manuscripts deriving from the version of *Óláfs saga* in *Bæjarbók*, the manuscript which Árni Magnússon was given by Guðrún Eggertsdóttir (1636-1724; see Johnsen and Helgason 1941, II, 978-1005).

The location of these insertions and their relationship to the main narrative of the separate saga of St. Óláfr is significant for our analysis. Chapter 38 tells how Sighvatr, son of the poet Þórðr Sigvaldaskáld, himself a court poet, came from Iceland to King Óláfr's court, not long after the latter had risen to power:

Þórðr Sigvallda scald var með Olafi konungi þa er hann var i heraði. Sigvatr het son Þórðar hann var at fostri með Þorcatli at Apavatni. en er Sigvatr com í NoReg a fund Olafs konungs. oc bauð at fœra honom kveði. konungr sagði at hann vill ecki lypa kvepi hans. oc hann vill ecki lata yrkia um sec. [Sighvatr nevertheless utters a verse in which he confidently asserts and demonstrates his credentials] ...Olafur konungr gaf Sigvati at bragarlaunum gullhring er stoð halfa marc. Sigvatr gerðiz hirðmaðr Olafs konungs.' (Johnsen and Helagson 1941, I, 81-2)

The main narrative here presents Sighvatr's access to St. Óláfr's court as breezily straightforward. It tacitly acknowledges Sighvatr's incipient membership of the fraternity of court poets that surrounded the king by virtue of his father's prior membership of it and his own talents. What is required, according to the main narrative, is for the young poet to travel from Apavatn to Norway and persuade Óláfr of his fitness to be included in the circle of court poets by reciting a verse in the king's honour, which demonstrates both the king's need for skalds, and the reason why, even if Óláfr dismissed all his other poets, he, Sighvatr should remain in post, *því kank yrkja*, 'because I know how to compose poetry'. The insertion of the fish story occurs in one manuscript, AM 61 fol., probably of the latter part of the fourteenth century (Johnsen and Helagson 1941, II, 970-78), after the phrase 'at Apavatni', and offers a rather more elaborate view, as we shall see, of the genesis of Sighvatr's poetic talent.

Chapter 44 of the saga comes immediately after a description of the King's royal palace at Niðaróss, with its magnificent buildings and his entourage of spiritual and secular advisors and guests. Chapter 43 stresses the king's observance of Christian ritual and his establishment and keen observance of Christian law. The following chapter mentions the king's Icelandic companions in this way:

Þá var þar með konungi Sigvatr scald sem fyR var sagt. oc fleire islenczir menn.' (Johnsen and Helagson 1941, I, 105) Immediately after this sentence, the versions of the saga in manuscripts deriving from *Bæjarbók* have a text of the fish story. In the context of my interpretation of this story below, it is worth remembering that the main part of Chapter 44 in *Óláfs saga* does not dwell on the Icelanders at the king's court beyond mentioning them as members of his retinue, but rather gives voice to his concern that Iceland is lagging seriously behind Norway in the timing and enthusiasm of its conversion to Christianity and is still allowing such overtly pagan practices as the eating of horse meat and the exposure of unwanted babies to take place. In the manuscripts that add the story of Sighvatr and the fish here, the tale of the backward youth's miraculous acquisition of his poetic powers by some kind of supernatural intervention while he is still in Iceland amplifies the concept of Iceland as a backward place, unlike metropolitan Niðarós, but (the inserted story avers) with the right kind of supernatural intervention even backward places can produce men of genius to serve the royal saint.

Yet another version of the story of Sighvatr's youth should be mentioned here, before we turn to the fish story itself. This is Snorri Sturluson's account in his saga of St. Óláfr in *Heimskringla*, which is generally accepted as having been written after the separate saga. Following his usual practice, both in the *Edda* and *Heimskringla*, of devising a story from a number of pre-existing and possibly conflicting narratives, Snorri here offers a rationalisation of how Sighvatr rose to his position of poetic eminence from Icelandic obscurity. He does not mention the fish story, if he knew it (both Bagge 1991, 208-15 and Whaley 1991, 130-3 have commented on Snorri's avoidance of the supernatural in his historical writings), but he offers a plausible rationalisation of the apparent discrepancy between Sighvatr's poetic lineage and his obscure youth. Why should the son of a poet and the uncle of another, Ottarr svarti, be fostered in an out-of-the-way part of Iceland? Snorri's answer, which may of course have been realistically plausible, was that Sighvatr was not brought up by his own father, an acknowledged poet, who was away from Iceland furthering his career during his childhood,

but by a fosterfather, who had nothing to do with the sophisticated world of court poetry (*Heimskringla, Óláfs saga helga*, ch. 43; Bjarni Aðalbarnarson 1945, 54).¹

Let us now turn to Styrmir's *articulus* 12, which Johnsen and Helagson entitle 'Sigvats ungdom' (1941, II, 689-90). The text in *Flateyjarbók* (col. 752) is as follows:

'Ólafur konungr hafði með ser marga íslenska menn ok hafði þá í godu yfirleti ok gerdi þá sína hirdmenn einn af þeim var Sighvatr skaalld hann var Þordarson. hann var fæddr vt aa Íslandi a þeim bæ er at Apavatni heitir þar bio sa madr er Þorkell heitir. hann fæddi vpp Sighuat ok fostradi. Sighuatr þotti helldr seinligr fyrst í æskunni í Apavatni var fiskueidr mikil a vetrum. þar barst at einn vetr þa er menn saatu aa isi ok veiddu fiska at þeir saa einn mikinn fisk ok fagran í vatnu. þann er aukendr var fra odrum fiskum. þann fisk gaatu þeir eigi veitt. Austmadr einn var aa vist med Þorkeli hann moelti einnhuern dag vid Sighuat at hann skyllði fara til vatn med honum ok sitia aa isi ok er þeir koma aa isinn þa bio austmadrinn til veidarfæri Sighuatr sipan saatu þeir a isinum vrn daginn. Sighuatr veiddi þa enn fagra fisk þann er margir villdu veitt hafa. Sipan foro þeir heim ok saud austmadr fiskinn. þa moelti hann vid Sighuat at hann skyllði fyst eta hofudit af fiskinum kuad þar vera vit huers kuikendis í folgit. Sighuatr aat þa hofudit ok sidan allann fiskinn ok þegar eftir quad hann visu pessa.

Fiskr geck oss at oskum
eitrs sem ver hofum leitad
lysu vangs or lyngi
leygiar orm at teyia

atrennir let annan
aungul gripinn hanga
vel hæfir auRrida at egna
agn gaalga mer hagnat.

Sighvatr verd þadan af skyRr madr ok skaalld gott.'

This narrative is clearly on a different plane from Snorri's version of events in *Heimskringla* and from those manuscripts of the separate saga of St. Óláfr that do not include it as an insertion. Gabriel Turville-Petre classified it as 'one of those mysterious stories about how the art of poetry was acquired' (1976, 77). That is so, and we will examine it in that context shortly, but it has other functions too which relate to Sighvatr's historical position as the chief skald, confidant and ambassador of that Norwegian Christian king who did most to consolidate the work of converting both Norway and Iceland to the dominant faith and polity of mainstream Medieval Europe. Icelandic skalds played an essential part in developing Óláfr's reputation as a ruler in the mainstream of Medieval European Christendom, yet they were *ex origine* provincials in Norwegian eyes, as the *articulus* expresses it of Sighvatr: 'hann var fæddr vt aa Íslandi'. His birth and upbringing were peripheral (*út*), away from the centre. And the fact that Sighvatr grew up in Iceland at a time when Christianity was only shakily established there may have provoked the development of a mythic narrative of how he acquired the art of poetry, predominantly in celebration of a Christian king, that both conformed to traditional Icelandic ideas of poetic inspiration and explained how he made the abrupt transition from a hardly-converted Icelandic backwater to the metropolis of Niðaróss and succeeded so brilliantly at being an Icelandic skald at the Norwegian court.

In order to understand the story of Sighvatr and the fish, we need to consider it both as an independent tale and as part of a larger Icelandic complex of narratives about the life and acts of St. Óláfr, in which stories about his Icelandic skalds and their compositions form an important part. The narratives we are considering are Icelandic compositions, yet their focalisation is equivocal, as one might expect from their role as records of the power and importance of a Norwegian ruler. Often the short narratives, such as Styrmir's *articuli*, which appear in some texts of the sagas of St. Óláfr, articulate the equivocal positioning of the predominantly Icelandic recorders of the achievements of Norwegian kings. The tale of Sighvatr and the fish does this most effectively on several levels, which we will now examine.

Sighvatr and the fish as wondertale

Like a number of the Styrmir *articuli*, the fish story has some characteristics of the Proppian wondertale (Propp 1968), though there is one crucial and significant difference from the wondertale format in that the young hero, after he has made good abroad, does not return home with an enhanced reputation as most wondertale heroes do. By virtue of his profession, Sighvatr must stay away from Iceland indefinitely and follow his patron St. Óláfr. However, like some other promising Icelanders of saga literature and heroes of *fornaldarsögur*, the Sighvatr of the fish story is rather slow (*seinligr*) in his youth at Apavatn, in south-west Iceland, and has something of the coal-biter about him.² Interpreted in this framework, the role of the *austmaðr*,³ conforms to that of the Donor of the wondertale, who provides the hero with a magic object or gives him special knowledge so he can undertake his quest of discovery and adventure successfully.

In this case the visiting Norwegian instructs Sighvatr on how to hook the mysterious fish of great size and beauty, 'þann er aukendr var fra odrum fiskum', which no one could catch, though they all wanted to. The stranger prepares the fishing expedition and takes Sighvatr out onto the ice, where he eventually catches the fish. Afterwards they go home and the Norwegian cooks it (*ok saud austmaðr fiskinn*). Then he gives Sighvatr advice on what he must do next: 'þa mælti hann við Sighuat at hann skyldi fyst eta hofudit af fiskinum kuad þar vera vit huers kuikendis i folgit.' After he had eaten the head, the source of the wisdom of each living being, Sighvatr proceeded to eat all the rest of the fish, after which he was immediately able to compose a *dróttkvætt* verse celebrating the event. The narrative concludes with the statement that Sighvatr thereafter became a bright clever man (*skýrr maðr*) and a good poet (*skáld gott*).

There are many interesting dimensions to this narrative, but, in the context of the *austmaðr*'s role as supernatural Donor, it is important to note both his function as instructor and his facilitating role in cooking the fish. The poet-to-be must himself catch the fish in its raw state, and must later eat it, ingesting its powers, but the Donor as mediator must evidently transform the supernaturally provided food from its raw to its cooked state, after which it becomes available to the poet in the form of intellectual nourishment as the source of his poetic powers.

Sighvatr and the fish as a myth of initiation and a rite of passage

An audience used to Old Norse myths and heroic legends would have had no difficulty in aligning this tale with a number of heroic poems and myths of the Norse gods that are initiatory in kind and, whether sub-consciously or overtly, would have understood it in this light. These myths often involve a rite of passage from youth to adulthood, frequently in the course of an expedition into unfamiliar territory. Some of these mythic parallels include the theme of the hero's ingestion of a substance that increases his intellectual or spiritual powers, and this is also part of the Sighvatr story.

One mythic parallel which reveals the significance of the Sighvatr story as a rite of passage, in this case between his youthful ineptitude in Iceland and his adult brilliance at the Norwegian court, is that of the god Þórr's fishing expedition, on which he catches (but in some versions fails to kill) the World Serpent, Miðgarðsormr. Some versions of this myth, particularly the one told in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, depict Þórr as a youth and the fishing expedition therefore has a clearly initiatory aspect, with the giant Hymir as the somewhat equivocal figure who accompanies the god outside his own territory and further and further onto the element of water, which is not Þórr's natural milieu (Meulengracht Sørensen 1986). As we know, in some versions of the myth, the god catches and kills the World Serpent, while

in others Miðgarðsormr escapes and survives to battle against Þórr again at Ragnarök. The *austmaðr* of the Sighvatr story plays a similar role to Hymir, though it is not an equivocal one; he removes the poet-to-be from his childhood environment by taking him out onto the ice, he teaches him new skills (how to catch the mysterious fish) and he brings him back to his old environment and provides him with the wherewithal to change himself from slow youth to gifted adult poet and so make a successful transition between Iceland and Norway.

Another compelling parallel for an audience familiar with the poems of the Elder Edda is the complex of myths concerning the youth of the hero Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. Like Sighvatr and the *austmaðr*, Sigurðr is also under instruction, first by Reginn, his deceptive fosterfather, and then, after he has killed the dragon Fáfnir, eaten his roasted heart and drunk his blood, by the wise valkyrie Sigrdrífa.⁴ In Sigurðr's case, he is led into the unfamiliar territory of Gnítaheiðr and later ascends the mountain Hindarfjall. As importantly he gains wisdom and knowledge by eating the heart (rather than the head) and drinking the blood of the supernatural creature he has caught and killed, in this case the man-turned-dragon Fáfnir. It is after these initiatory adventures that he is able to embark on his adult life.

Myths of ingestion of special powers

There is a well-known group of myths or myth fragments in Old Norse literature that attribute a god's or a man's special powers to his having eaten or drunk a particular foodstuff. Sometimes that food is a fish or something else associated with a watery environment, sometimes, as in the Sigurðr myth, it is a heart.⁵ This is the dimension to the story of Sighvatr and the fish which has attracted previous scholars and caused them to see parallels with myths in early Irish literature, particularly in the cycle of stories concerning the hero Fionn Mac Cumhail, which associate the gift of wisdom and poetry with the eating of a fish, especially a salmon (Sophus Bugge 1897; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1932, 112-13). There is no doubt that the Sighvatr tale belongs within this interpretative framework, but it is also important to recognise that this is only one of the interpretative frameworks in which we need to understand it, whether we consider it as a free-standing narrative or as part of the complex of narratives that grew up around Sighvatr Þórðarson and his life as a poet and counsellor of King Óláfr the Saint.

The notion that eating an unusual or supernaturally powerful substance will give the eater special powers is exemplified in two places in the eddic poem *Hyndluþjóð*, first in connection with the strange fertilisation of a god, probably Heimdallr, at the sea's margin by ingestion of the strength of earth, the ice-cold sea and the blood of a boar (Dronke 1981) and then with reference to the god Loki's eating the half-cooked heart of an evil woman, from which he became pregnant and gave birth to all the ogresses on earth (stanzas 35-8 and 41, Neckel-Kuhn 1983, 294). These ideas appear to be parodied in Björn Híttdælakappi's satirical poem *Grámagaflið*, which Joseph Harris has shown (1980) ridicules certain standard motifs in the life history of a hero, including this one, when it suggests that the poet's rival Þórðr was conceived when his mother ate a disgusting slimy fish that she had found on the sea-shore. We note that all the myths in this group relate to and explain unusual circumstances of conception and birth as contributing to the special character of the hero.⁶

Another myth which associates ingestion of a foodstuff with the acquisition of special mental powers is of course the myth of the god Óðinn's acquisition of the art of poetry by drinking the mead made from the fermented blood of the wise being Kvasir. The fullest account of this myth occurs in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (Finnur Jónsson 1931, 82-5). The story of Sighvatr and the fish has some similarities to the myth of Óðinn's acquisition of the mead of poetry, but the parallel is not as close, I believe, as that between the Sighvatr story and the initiatory myths of the young Sigurðr in Old Norse or the Irish hero Fionn Mac Cumhail.

Sighvatr and the fish - a window on Icelandic-Norwegian relations

The art of reading medieval narratives involves understanding them in their context of preservation, for that gives us closest access to their lost context of production. In this case, one cannot simply point to a number of mythic and folkloric paradigms the story relates to and leave it at that. As I indicated at the beginning of this discussion, the story of Sighvatr and the fish belongs in the context of a range of narratives about King Óláfr the Saint and his Icelandic poets, among whom Sighvatr held pride of place. Certain themes and antithetical pairs of terms, which are present in the narrative, can only be understood in that narrative and cultural context.

A set of binary oppositions is pervasive in this short narrative and give us a clue to the way in which we should read it. They may be summed up in the following list:

west	east
Iceland	Norway
country	court
youth	maturity
slowness	cleverness
lack of [poetic] skill	poetic skill
Sighvatr	St. Óláfr.

The group of terms on the left are, in the course of the story, brought to or transformed into those on the right. The dull young Sighvatr is located in a remote corner of south-western Iceland when the story opens. His mentor, the unnamed Norwegian, rescues him from his country seclusion and ineptitude and, by taking him out of his usual environment (their fishing on the ice) instructing him and causing him to eat the fish (which is found in Icelandic waters though it will allow him to succeed as a poet in Norway), he brings about Sighvatr's personal transformation from dullard to clever man and good poet and effects his geographical transition immediately afterwards from Iceland straight to the court of King Óláfr.

The *austmaðr* and the fish itself are the agents of Sighvatr's transformation and the narrative's construction of their mediatory role deserves careful attention.⁷ An important feature of this story in contrast to a number of its near analogues from pagan myth or heroic legend is the identity of the being who brings the poet into contact with the source of his powers. Whereas in the myth of Sigurðr's youth, which I think provides the closest analogue to the story of Sighvatr and the fish, the young hero's mentors are firmly located in the Old Norse mythological world, the *austmaðr* appears to be an ordinary Norwegian, enjoying the hospitality of Sighvatr's fosterfather over the Icelandic winter. Yet his sureness of purpose, his ability to cause Sighvatr to catch the fish that no one else could catch and his authoritative plan for Sighvatr's supernatural transformation all require us to identify him with the paranormal rather than the normal world. His identity remains indeterminate, however, even if his country of origin - the direction in which Sighvatr must go - is revealed. This lack of clarity is presumably deliberate - the *austmaðr* is a neutral figure in terms of both Christianity and paganism and could be claimed by either. His role in the story could lead us to Reginn and Sigrðrifa or it could lead to the Christian God, who may be supposed to have caused Sighvatr's miraculous catch and may have inspired him to become a great poet in the service of a Norwegian king who was to become a saint. Appropriately, the story speaks to the old and to the new, to paganism and to Christianity, to recently-converted Iceland, out of which the poet came, and to Norway, where he was to go. It could be included or excluded from versions of the saga of St. Óláfr, depending in part on whether compilers thought it more or less appropriate to the history of a great Christian Norwegian king and his chief court poet.

But there is another pointer to why some versions of the story of how Sighvatr Þórðarson became a successful skald include the fish narrative and some do not. It has to do with the equivocal focalisation of many Icelandic representations of Norwegian history and Icelandic-Norwegian relations. It is not difficult to detect a kind of schizophrenia in Icelandic writers' own representations of these issues, and I think my identification of the binary oppositions central to the story of Sighvatr and the fish reveals very clearly that the left-hand (western or Icelandic) side of the binary pairing carries pejorative or negative values in contrast to the positive values of the right-hand (eastern or Norwegian) side. Hence, those Icelandic writers who developed and used this narrative were implicitly accepting and promoting a general view of Iceland and Icelandic culture that was negative: it was backward, provincial and generally unenlightened. A salve to Icelandic self-respect lay in a second implicit premise of this tale, that in spite of its general backwardness Iceland every now and then threw up young men of genius whose talents were far greater than those of Norwegians, for all their sophistication, though they had to travel to Norway to practise their skills in the service of a great Christian king.⁸ A Norwegian talent-spotter, such as the *austmaðr* of this story, might be able to identify such a talented person and act as an agent to bring him into contact with the source of his talent, but the talent itself was of supernatural origin. The story also seems to be suggesting that Icelanders had a special relationship with supernatural sources of poetic talent, and here one thinks of the precedent of the myth of Óðinn's mead. These underlying premises of the Sighvatr story seem to have allowed medieval Icelandic writers (and presumably their audiences) to have their cake and eat it: to write in positive terms about Norway and Norwegian politics (which they had good reason to feel equivocal about), to downplay Iceland and Icelandic culture (which, as Icelanders, they should have felt positive about) and to argue a rule of exceptional supernaturally inspired talent in the cases of eastwardly mobile young men.

It remains to comment on Snorri Sturluson's accounts of Sighvatr's early career, bearing in mind that we cannot be sure whether Snorri did or did not know the fish story, and recognising his apparent distaste for stories with an explicitly supernatural involvement. His version of events in the separate saga of St. Óláfr, which scholars generally regard as earlier than that in *Heimskringla*, appears to subscribe not at all to the concept of Icelandic inferiority, at least as it applies to Sighvatr himself. On the contrary, as we have seen, Chapter 38 presents a cocky, self-confident young man, who brushes aside even the king's initially negative response to his request to become his court poet with a practical demonstration of his poetic skills. Nor does this narrative give any indication of problems of distance, physical and cultural, between Iceland and Norway. Given Snorri's own experiences of negotiating Icelandic-Norwegian relations, and given also his own expertise as a skald and his interest in, and knowledge of, the art of poetry, this is a position one might expect from someone who presumably identified strongly as an Icelandic poet and politician. On the other hand, Chapter 44 of the separate saga gives a strong put-down to the Icelanders as backward in accepting Christianity in contrast to the forwardness of Norway under such an enlightened Christian king as Óláfr. Here, then, we see exemplified, though in a different way, exactly the same kind of cultural schizophrenia as the fish story reveals, and the same kind of exemption granted to young men of talent. The difference is that Sighvatr's excellence as a poet is not attributed here to supernatural inspiration, but, implicitly, to the fact that he comes from an Icelandic poetic family. It is in the blood. The version of *Heimskringla* lies in an intermediate position, because it gives muted rein to the concept of the distance between Iceland and Norway, by mentioning more detail of Sighvatr's fosterage and the fact that his father was away from Iceland during his youth.

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¹ This rationalisation has commended itself to modern commentators on Sighvatr's life like Finnur Jónsson (1920, I, 590): 'Sighvatr blev ikke opfostret hos sin fader, der siges at have været meget på rejser, men, i hvert fald for en længere tid, på gården Apavatn i Grimnes hos en bonde Þorkell.'

² The version of the story in *Bæjarbók* and its derivatives has elaborated this feature of the narrative: 'Sighuatz þotti helldr obradgiörr i vppRuna sinum ok sæinlighr i öllum þroska. ...hann [austmaðrinn] var til Sighuatz miklu betr enn adrir menn. þuiat flestum þotti hann sæingörr ok ecki miok sinnughr' (Johnsen and Helgason 1941, II, 706).

³ It is significant for the semiotics of this tale, and for our understanding of the representation of Icelandic-Norwegian relations generally, that Norwegians are generally referred to as *austmenn* in Old Icelandic literature, that is, described in terms of Iceland's geographical relationship to Norway.

⁴ Again, the parallels are not exact, but I think their general outlines are similar. In Sigurðr's case, Fáfnir's roasted heart was intended for Reginn, who wanted to manipulate the neophyte to cook Fáfnir's heart for his own consumption. The plan went wrong, however, when Sigurðr burned his finger on the cooking juices from the heart and sucked it to assuage the pain. Thereafter he, and not Reginn, was possessed of supernatural wisdom and understood the speech of the birds, who instruct him to kill Reginn, take Fáfnir's hoard, and make his way to Sigdrífa.

⁵ Both the head and the heart in such narratives seem to signify the concentration of intellectual and spiritual powers. A parallel but different idea, that a person's soul may take the form of a fish, especially (in Irish analogues) a salmon, and that its vomiting up may presage or bring about the individual's death, is found in both Irish and Icelandic literature (Almqvist 1991).

⁶ I have investigated the pseudo-procreative ideas behind this complex of myths in Clunies Ross 1994, 179-84.

⁷ Sophus Bugge 1897, 211, fn. 2 draws attention to the stereotypical role of the prescient *austmaðr* in sagas of Icelanders, 'som paa et tidligt Punkt griber ind i den islandske Hovedpersoners Skjæbne', noting, for example, the visiting Norwegian who interprets Þorsteinn Egilsson's dream at the beginning of *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*.

⁸ It is possible that another implicit premise of the Sighvatr story is that only a polity ruled over by a Christian king can be a truly 'modern' Christian country. If so, there is also a sense in this narrative, at least in the version inserted in Chapter 44 of the separate saga of St. Óláfr, that the Icelandic commonwealth was incompatible with a forward-looking Christian political system, where the interests of Church and state could be focused through the rule of a strong Christian king.

The idea that Icelanders, once they get out of Iceland, show themselves to be better, smarter and cleverer than other people (especially Norwegians!) is a cultural stereotype widespread in Old Icelandic sagas and *pættir*.