

## Between Tradition and Innovation: The Story of Starkaðr in *Gautreks saga*

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Among the heroic figures of Old Norse literature, Starkaðr is undoubtedly one of the most prominent and complex ones. References to him and to his memorable deeds are spread throughout the whole corpus of the Scandinavian literatures of the Middle Ages, from *Snorra Edda* and the sagas to Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* (Naumann, 2005, 538). In Old Norse scholarship the interest in his story has been persistently growing since the nineteenth century (Skovgaard-Petersen, 1987, 152-160). This is due, among other things, to the fact that the literary accounts about this legendary hero reveal significant ties with Old Norse mythology.

Interestingly, the mosaic of sources that have come down to us provide an image of the hero that shows some significant discrepancies between one source and another, as previous studies have clearly demonstrated (Olrik, 1910; Ciklamini, 1971). Yet it is possible to identify some core features of Starkaðr which we may label as traditional because they are attested in different sources, albeit not to the same degree and not in the same way. The legendary hero is generally represented as an excellent warrior and superb poet of giant origin, a figure whose fate is strictly related to the influence of Óðinn. In addition, in his long life he is said to have committed three abominable crimes. The killings of two kings, Víkarr and Áli, are explicitly mentioned in the sources, while on the identification of the third there is no consensus among scholars.

The fullest accounts of Starkaðr are represented by Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* and by the longer redaction of *Gautreks saga*. Besides the different degrees to which these two texts are concerned with the life of Starkaðr, they are also characterized, among other things, by a number of relevant divergences regarding the portrayal of the hero and how his supernatural characteristics are described.

To date, the majority of studies on this figure have taken *Gautreks saga* into account mainly in order to make a comparison with the *Gesta Danorum*. Thus less attention has been paid to its specific nature as a *fornaldarsaga*.

The aim of this paper is to propose an analysis of how the story of Starkaðr has been adapted and re-shaped in *Gautreks saga*. Particular attention will be devoted to investigating how the adaptation into the narrative universe of saga literature has affected the way in which the story is told through the use of devices and mechanisms that enable the introduction of innovative elements and the reworking of traditional aspects. In the limited space of this paper, I will confine myself to discussing only some of the major points.

As is well known, Saxo's account and *Gautreks saga* differ first of all in the way they cover the story of the hero. In fact, whereas the *Gesta Danorum* tells of the whole life of Starkaðr, *Gautreks saga* focuses primarily on his youth.

Before starting the analysis, it is necessary to discuss a number of preliminary issues.

### The dating of *Gautreks saga*

*Gautreks saga* has been handed down to us in two main redactions, a long one and a shorter one. The main difference between them consists in the presence of three stories (customarily called *Gauta þáttir*, *Vikars þáttir* and *Gjafa-Refs þáttir*) in the long redaction instead of two (*Gauta þáttir*, *Gjafa-Refs þáttir*) in the shorter one. *Vikars þáttir* is centred on the figure of Starkaðr and tells of his adventures and deeds as the bravest champion in Víkarr's retinue. As regards the relative chronology of the two redactions, it is reasonable to assume that the long redaction is younger and represents a reworking of the shorter version, as most scholars think.

A major problem is certainly represented by the dating of *Gautreks saga*. In general, it is a commonly-held opinion that it was probably composed in the thirteenth century (see, among others, Simek/Pálsson, 1987, 98; Nedoma, 1990, 16).<sup>1</sup> Yet, whereas we possess a single fragmentary medieval manuscript of the shorter redaction (MS. AM 567, XIV γ, 4<sup>r</sup>; c. 1400), no medieval witness of the long redaction has come down to us. In fact, the oldest surviving manuscript of it – MS. AM 152, fol. – dates from the period 1500-1525. Thus we cannot exclude the possibility that the long redaction in its present form is the result of a process of reworking of a previous version of which we have no knowledge (Skovgaard-Petersen, 1987, 161).

Strictly connected with the question regarding the dating of the longer redaction is the role played by the so called *Vikarsbálkr*. This name is customarily employed to define the poetic stanzas which are interwoven with the prose in *Vikars þáttir*. They are generally thought to be older than the prose.<sup>2</sup> The date of composition of *Vikarsbálkr* has been variously placed between the late eleventh century (Heusler/Ranisch, 1903, XXXIII) and the thirteenth century (Finnur Jónsson, 1920-1924, 159).<sup>3</sup>

As is the case with a number of *fornaldarsögur*, the prose substantially represents a narrative expansion of what is told in the verse sections. In particular, as *Vikarsbálkr* is a sort of retrospective poem uttered by Starkaðr at the court of the Swedish kings, the prose comments upon it and adds some details. Given the purported age of *Vikarsbálkr* and the relationship between verse and prose, it is probable that the latter was fashioned on the basis of the former, as Torfi Tulinius (2002) has recently suggested in relation to the *fornaldarsögur* as a genre.<sup>4</sup>

Both the early dating of *Vikarsbálkr* and the analogies with the *Gesta Danorum* enable us to assume that at the time of Saxo, a stock of common features

<sup>1</sup> Olrik (1910, 204) dates the longer redaction to the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries.

<sup>2</sup> Yet, as Ranisch pointed out in his introduction to the edition of the saga (*Gautreks saga*, 1900, LXXXIII-XCII), not all of the strophes of *Vikarsbálkr* seem to date from an earlier period. Ranisch claims that some of them might have been composed by the originator of the longer redaction of the saga (1900, LXXXIII-LXXXVIII). On this issue see also Olrik (1910, 204-206).

<sup>3</sup> Olrik (1910, 206-210) and, more recently, Vermeyden (1993, 224) attribute it respectively to the second half of the twelfth century and to the late twelfth century.

<sup>4</sup> M. Clunies Ross (1998, 92) cites *Vikarsbálkr* among the poems 'which the writers of the prose histories and legendary sagas probably used as sources'.

characterizing the story of Starkaðr had already been codified in Icelandic literature (Skovgaard-Petersen, 1987, 161).

One of the major problems a scholar is forced to face from the perspective underlying this study is the question of whether a previous saga dedicated to the life and deeds of Starkaðr ever existed. Obviously, the fact that no such saga has been handed down to us constitutes a decisive obstacle to any attempt to give a definite answer. The relevance of this issue lies in the fact that some of the innovations which characterize the story of the legendary hero in the long redaction of *Gautreks saga* – mainly in comparison with the *Gesta Danorum* – could derive from a previous stage in the development of the narrative material within the universe of saga literature of which we have no direct knowledge.

Nevertheless, the very nature of Starkaðr's story in *Gautreks saga* needs to be stressed here. In fact, since *Vikars þáttur* is part of a wider narrative, we can reasonably assume that it probably underwent some changes. These changes are to be imputed to the intent to intertwine the story with the narrative material *Gautreks saga* was already composed of.<sup>5</sup> If *Vikars þáttur* is a later interpolation, then we may assume that some kind of rewriting strategy must have been employed to fit it into the overall structure and to maintain the thematic unity of the saga.

### Thematic unity and narrative dynamics

On these premises, I shall now carry out an investigation into the mechanisms that seem to govern the reshaping of Starkaðr's story in *Gautreks saga*. This investigation should contribute to clarifying the very process of composition of a saga categorized as representative of the mythic-heroic subgenre.

As a general statement, the modalities of reworking of the story should be evaluated in light of a twofold influence, an *intertextual* and an *intratextual* one. As to the former, while it is notoriously difficult to trace possible narrative models adopted by the saga author,<sup>6</sup> the analysis of the section of the saga devoted to Starkaðr reveals the application of some major narrative devices widely employed in saga literature and particularly in the corpus of the *fornaldarsögur*, as will be shown in some detail later on.

As regards the intratextual influence, in *Vikars þáttur* we may trace the result of what might be called a 'process of adaptation' that is at work *within* the text. This process seems to have been carried out primarily in order to stress some relevant analogies or differences with the other two *þættir* that make up the longer redaction of the saga.

If we accept the hypothesis that the longer redaction is a later expansion, we cannot avoid asking ourselves why a third *þáttur* has been added. Despite the differences characterizing the three *þættir* a thematic unity links the stories. As R. Nedoma (1990) and E. Ashman Rowe (1998) have, among others, recently pointed

<sup>5</sup> I agree with E. Ashman Rowe when she argues that 'the saga-author wanted to provide a basis for comparing him with Gautrekr on one hand and with Refr on the other' (1998, 161).

<sup>6</sup> On these aspects see in particular Ranisch's introduction to his own edition of *Gautreks saga* (*Gautreks saga*, 1900, I-CXII).

out, the younger redaction is built on a series of oppositions regarding a number of motifs (wisdom and foolishness, generosity and stinginess).

It is safe to assert that the saga writer has probably decided to insert *Vikars þáttur* into *Gautreks saga* because the story of Starkaðr was suitable to represent a further example of the themes the saga dealt with. In particular, the analogies between *Gjafa-Refs þáttur* and *Vikars þáttur* are rather interesting in that they represent stories of gift exchange with different outcomes.<sup>7</sup> In fact, whereas Starkaðr is forced by Óðinn to accept his gifts in exchange of Vikarr's innocent life and ends his life in solitude as an outsider, Refr succeeds in becoming richer and famous by giving away the only property he had (an ox) and subsequently accepting as a compensation the precious advice of the wise but stingy jarl Neri.

As the study of the literary traditions of the Middle Ages clearly demonstrates, whenever an item of narrative material enters into a new (cultural, linguistic or textual) context it can be subjected to changes made primarily to adapt it to a new horizon of reception and/or to serve a new purpose (Zumthor, 1972).

How these changes are brought about is certainly a matter of great interest. The principle of open composition described by Clover (1982, 19-60) in relation to saga literature as a whole implies the tendency toward what has been called 'plot proliferation' (Clover, 1982, 39), that is to say the expansion of the plot through the introduction of additional material into a pre-existing text. This process of agglomeration is based on the use of interlace techniques that enables the saga writer to sew all the parts of the narrative together into a new narrative. This is also true in the case of the long redaction of *Gautreks saga*, 'which as a whole work owes its very existence to the concept and mechanisms of stranding' (Clover, 1982, 133).

Thus, if we approach the question regarding the use of the legendary hero's life and deeds in the saga from a narratological perspective, we may assume that the re-contextualization of the story of Starkaðr in *Gautreks saga* not only involves a substantial re-arrangement of the narrative material but also probably entails the acquisition of a new meaning for the story itself.

### **Modalities of reworking of Starkaðr's story in *Vikars þáttur***

As mentioned above, in *Vikars þáttur* we find both traditional and innovative traits characterizing the figure of Starkaðr and his story (Olrík, 1910, 178-220). In light of the arguments proposed thus far, we will now turn our attention to examining some of the major features that crop up in the account given in *Gautreks saga*.

The first issue to be dealt with concerns the very origins of the hero. In the *Gesta Danorum* (VI, v) a version of the story is told according to which Starkaðr is descended from the giants. Furthermore, Saxo reports that according to that story it was the god Þórr who tore off four of the six arms of the giant, thus giving him a human appearance.

The saga accounts for the uncertainty regarding the hero's origins in an interesting way. In fact, two characters bearing the same name (Starkaðr) are introduced. The hero Starkaðr is said to be the grandson of a giant named Starkaðr

<sup>7</sup> On the analogies between *Gauta þáttur* and *Vikars þáttur* see Rowe (1998, 160-161).

Áludrengr. Interestingly, there is no mention of this character outside the corpus of the *fornaldarsögur*. Beside in *Gautreks saga*, he also crops up in the U redaction of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, although the version of the story in that account shows some differences from *Vikars þáttur* (Tolkien, 1960, 66-67).

As matters now stand, we are not in a position to determine whether the duplication of the figure of Starkaðr is to be attributed to the redactor of the saga or to a previous stage (oral or written) of development of the narrative material, where the tradition may have forked into two different strands each accounting for different features of the hero.

However important the identification of the provenance of this motif may be, for our purpose it is more interesting to note that through this device the features traditionally linked with one single figure are attributed to two different characters, strictly linked to each other and yet different in some ways. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning the way in which this duplication is presented in the text:

Stórvirkir hét maðr; hann var sonr Starkaðar Áludrengs. Starkaðr var hundviðs jötunn. Hann tók ór Álfheimum Álfhildi, dóttur Álfs konungs. Álfr konungur hét þá á Þór, at Álfhildr skyldi aftr koma. Þá drap Þórr Starkað, en flutti Álfhildi heim til föður síns, ok var hún þá með barni. Hún fæddi son þann, er Stórvirkir hét, er áðr er nefndr. Hann var fríðr maðr sýnum ok þó svartr á hárr, meiri ok sterkari en aðrir menn. Hann var víkingr mikill (*Gautreks saga*, 1900, 12).

Stórvirkir nam á brott Unni, dóttur Freka jarls af Hálogalandi, ok fór síðan heim til bús síns í Þrumu. Þau áttu son, er Starkaðr hét. Synir Freka jarls, Fjóri ok Fýri, fóru at Stórvirkir ok kómu á bæ hans um nótt á óvart með her ok brenndu bæinn ok Stórvirkir inni ok Unni, systur sína, ok alla menn, þá er þar váru, því at þeir þorðu eigi dyrr upp at lúka ok hræddust, at Stórvirkir mundi út komast (*Gautreks saga*, 1900, 12).

The hero Starkaðr is the grandson of a giant killed by the god Þórr and the son of a brave Viking, Stórvirkir, killed by the relatives of the jarl of Hálogaland's daughter. Here the application of what might be called a 'genealogical pattern' seems to be at work.

In re-assigning the characteristics of Starkaðr to two different figures bearing the same name the saga author seems to have resorted to a narrative device well attested in saga literature. An interesting parallel could be drawn, for example, with *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, where some of the most peculiar traits of Kveld-Úlfr appear both in Skalla-Grímr and in Egill.

As in *Egils saga*, it is the three male members of the family (Starkaðr Áludrengr, Stórvirkir and Starkaðr) that show common features linking them to one another; a stock of family traits that to different extents are passed down from one generation to the other. Interestingly, the giant Starkaðr and his son both kidnap the daughters of two prominent men. What is further remarkable in these scenes is that they have a good number of interesting analogues in saga literature. In particular, scenes involving giants kidnapping women are undoubtedly 'one of the most popular types of rescue' in Old Norse romance, as Schlauch pointed out (1934, 104-105).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> This scene could represent further evidence indicating the nature of Stórvirkir as a giant himself. In fact, although the saga does not tell us anything about this, his name seems

Another difference from the *Gesta Danorum* regards the places where the legendary hero's memorable deeds are set. In the saga, most of the actions and the expeditions of Víkarr and Starkaðr are set in Norway, with particular reference to the regions of Agðir and Hörðaland. In addition, the whole story is inserted into a wider narrative context characterized by the political enmities among kings and jarls of different reigns, as is the case with a good number of mythic-heroic sagas.

As to the origin of this geographical setting, the hypothesis has been raised by H. Schneider (1933) that *Víkars þáttur* was originally a genuinely Norwegian story which was only later intertwined with the story of Starkaðr. Yet, as de Vries pointed out, this remains 'eine durchaus unbeweisbare Hypothese' (de Vries, 1955, 288).

Unlike the situation in the *Gesta Danorum*, in *Gautreks saga* Starkaðr is a Norwegian hero born on the isle of Þruma, in Agðir. Then he grew up on the isle of Fehringr, in Hörðaland, as is also told in *Sögubrot af fornkonungum* (*Danakonungasögur*, 1982, 63).

In depicting the early years of the hero, the saga employs a set of recurring motifs in the *fornaldarsögur*. Interestingly, some of them are referred to in *Víkarsbálkr*, while others have no counterpart in it. Starkaðr is said to have been kidnapped by a prominent man named Hrosshárs-Grani (later revealed to be the god Óðinn) who becomes his *fóstri*. He grows up in Ask and spends his days sitting by the fire. Then, at the age of twelve, he suddenly proves to be strong and courageous, and embarks on a series of Viking expeditions together with Víkarr.

In describing Starkaðr's youth, the saga resorts to the well-known motif of the *kolbíttr*, a 'male Cinderella', the kind of unpromising hero of which we have a number of significant attestations in the *fornaldarsögur*.<sup>9</sup> The application of this characterization scheme is certainly one of the features that enable us to reconstruct the *modus operandi* of the saga writer within the narrative framework of the mythic-heroic sagas. As has been pointed out by several scholars (Righter-Gould, 1980, 425), the protagonists of the legendary sagas are generally portrayed either as *kolbíttr* (like, for example, Ketill hængr in *Ketils saga hængs* and Göngu-Hrólfr in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*) or as 'born leaders' (Mitchell, 1991, 56). Interestingly, Refr, the protagonist of the third *þáttur* of *Gautreks saga*, is also depicted as an unpromising hero (*Gautreks saga*, 1900, 26). If we stick to the hypothesis that the redactor of the longer version of *Gautreks saga* aimed at adapting the story of Starkaðr to the structure and the thematic unity of the saga, we could interpret the portrayal of Starkaðr as a *kolbíttr* to some extent as the result of his intent to draw a parallel with the figure of Refr in *Gjafa-Refs þáttur*.

In fact, if on one hand it is true that the *kolbíttr*-motif is already hinted at in verse (*Gautreks saga*, 1900, 15), other details might point to a reworking influenced by the overall strategy of integration discussed above. For example, the transformation of Starkaðr and Refr into heroic figures – although with different features – is signalled in

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to point to the fact that he also was a giant. As M. Ciklamini (1971, 171) points out, the name *Stórverkr/Stórvirkr* 'is known only as a giant *heiti* and the name of Starkaðr's forebear'.

<sup>9</sup> Yet *kolbíttr*-like figures also appear in some *Íslendingasögur*. Significant examples are represented by Grettir Ásmundarson (*Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*) and Víga-Glúmr (*Víga-Glúms saga*).

the text by a change of garments (*Gautrekssaga*, 1900, 15; 26). Further evidence in support of this hypothesis is provided by the description of the relation of both characters to their foster-fathers, as will be shown later on.

Among the significant innovations attested in *Gautreks saga* is the description of the relationship between the hero and Víkarr. In fact, whereas in the *Gesta Danorum* it is just told that Starkaðr became an excellent champion in the king's retinue, in *Gautreks saga* he is also his foster-brother (*Gautrekssaga*, 1900, 15). Although the motif is only mentioned without any further development in the plot, its presence might again indicate the adoption of a paradigm well attested in saga literature, where examples of *fóstrbræðr* are numerous. As regards the *fornaldarsögur*, it is sufficient to mention the case of Oddr and Ásmundr in *Órvar Odds saga*.

What is interesting to remark here is that the introduction of this motif into the story probably serves the purpose of further underlining the evil action of Starkaðr. In fact, in killing Víkarr, Starkaðr commits a twofold crime, against his king and against his foster-brother. Furthermore, this strategy would seem to be consistent with the intent of depicting the negative influence exerted by Óðinn in *Gauta þáttur* and *Víkars þáttur* that is apparent in the saga. It is hardly a coincidence, as E. Ashman Rowe (1998) has persuasively pointed out, that the only story in the saga with a 'happy ending' – *Gjafa-Refs þáttur* – distinguishes itself through the absence of Óðinn. In addition, it is worth mentioning that another significant difference between the two redactions consists of the fact that in the longer one the mention of Óðinn in association with the chains of suicides in *Gauta þáttur* has no counterpart in the shorter one, where no link with the god is established (*Gautrekssaga*, 1900, 52-61). Such a presentation of Óðinn as an entirely negative figure is certainly not surprising, as a number of other *fornaldarsögur* demonstrate (Mitchell, 1985).

Strictly related to this point is another remarkable feature of the saga in terms of narrative re-arrangement. It concerns the role played by the deities in the shaping of Starkaðr's destiny. As is known, Saxo's account tells of the relationship of the hero with both Óðinn and Þórr. At the centre of this story is Óðinn's intent to have Starkaðr kill king Víkarr. He succeeds in persuading the hero to do this by bestowing on him a number of good gifts (VI, v). Yet he also condemns him to commit an abominable deed in each of his three lives. Þórr's role is not as clear as Óðinn's. In the *Gesta Danorum*, he is said to have torn off four of the six arms that the hero possessed as a mark of his descent from the giants, as was mentioned above.

Although *Gautreks saga* substantially preserves the traditional features attested in Saxo's work, new elements are woven into the story which appear to be among the most widely employed motifs in saga literature. A first difference consists in the way in which Óðinn acts out his role towards Starkaðr. The aim of his acting on the scene is the same as in the *Gesta Danorum*. Yet in the saga he is presented as Starkaðr's *fóstri*. The use of this motif could have been intended to emphasize both the demonization of the god and his ambiguous behaviour toward the hero.

In addition, another parallel seems to have been intentionally drawn with the fate of Refr in *Gjafa-Refs þáttur*. As briefly mentioned above, Jarl Neri is Refr's *fóstri* in the third of the stories that make up the longer redaction. The pairs Refr-Neri and Starkaðr-Óðinn seem to have been consciously depicted as opposite examples of a relationship based on fosterage. While Starkaðr's fate is one of sorrow and grief after

the killing of Víkarr, Refr's career as a hero is based on a series of lucky adventures at the end of which he manages to marry the daughter of King Gautrekr.

One of the most interesting scenes in *Gautreks saga* is represented by the verbal duel between Óðinn and Þórr and the preceding description of the assembly of the gods who had gathered to judge the hero's fate. Here it needs to be observed that no mention of such a scene is made in *Vikarsbálkr*. Thus it is probable that we should attribute this motif to the saga author himself, who may have been inspired by traditional material already codified in Eddic poetry.<sup>10</sup> In *Völuspá*, for example, the recurrent image of the gods gathering to make important decisions as to the fate of the world (stt. 6, 9, 23, 25) shows some similarities with the scene portrayed in the saga.

While Saxo ascribes the responsibility for Starkaðr's fate only to Óðinn, the saga explains it as the outcome of a verbal duel between the two gods. As a result, *Gautreks saga* reorganizes and reassigns the roles in the story by attributing to Þórr the decisions condemning the hero to a life full of sorrow and scorn, while Óðinn bestows on him a number of gifts. Interestingly, Þórr's enmity toward Starkaðr is explained as an act of indirect revenge on Starkaðr Aludrengr.

Again, although the source for this motif is difficult to trace, we cannot exclude the possibility that the inspiration for this scene could have been taken from an Eddic lay, *Hárbarðsljóð*; there the two gods engage in a verbal duel that puts on stage some of the characteristics of their relation that are depicted in the saga as well.

Although the analysis carried out so far is only in its preliminary phase, it may contribute to drawing attention to some basic points for further research. In particular, in light of what has been underlined above it seems reasonable to think that the form in which the story of Starkaðr is told in the longer redaction of *Gautreks saga* ought to be seen as the result of a process of reworking in which intratextual dynamics have probably played a major role.

In fact, on the basis of the assumption that a thematic unity permeates the whole saga, the intention of the saga writer to build a symmetrical structure within a common framework has probably affected the way in which the interpolated story has been reshaped. However old some of the building blocks used to build the new text may be, the way in which they are disposed within the structure of the text into which they are introduced is novel.

In addition, while some of the most interesting innovations in *Vikars þáttir* seem to have originated from the strategy discussed above, others point to the fact that the overall reworking of the story has been carried out by making use of an array of stylistic features and narrative techniques that are widely attested in the *foraldarsögur* and, on a more general level, in saga literature.

All this makes the story of Starkaðr in *Gautreks saga* a blend of traditional elements and innovative features, a further example of the extraordinary vivacity that characterizes the reception and manipulation of traditional narrative materials in Old Norse literature.

<sup>10</sup> Although the question regarding the origins of motifs and episodes in the legendary sagas is certainly a complex and thorny one, it appears that the hypothesis of a learned origin of this scene could be substantiated by the identification of other learned material in the composition of the longer version of *Gautreks saga* pointed out by Ranisch (*Gautreks saga*, 1900, LXXXVIII-CIX).



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