

Curses! Swords, Spears and the Supernatural in the Versions of *Gísla saga Súrssonar*

Emily Lethbridge
(University of Cambridge)

1. The structural characteristics of *Gísla saga Súrssonar*

The cohesive, symmetrically balanced structural and artistic organisation of *Gísla saga Súrssonar* has often been remarked upon by critics of the saga. Even a cursory reading reveals the extent to which the saga is consciously built around repeated parallelisms—episodic, thematic, motivic, verbal—whose careful presentation and juxtaposition generates much of the impact of the saga. The two nocturnal murders, with the double funerals and ball-games that accompany them, are the most prominent, large-scale examples of such binary pairs.

Throughout the saga, individual objects are imbued with considerable symbolic significance; the recurring deployment of some of these motifs both reinforces the saga's overall structural unity, and heightens the tension of the unfolding drama.¹ As a central part of life in Viking Age and medieval Scandinavian society, weapons are inevitably a commonplace in all saga narratives; at the most concrete level, physical possession was an indication of social status.² Unsurprisingly, therefore, weapons are crucial to the narrative of *Gísla saga*. But the weapons in *Gísla saga* also possess a more abstract, paradoxical significance that resides in their double-edged potential to destroy enemies and protect the family honour on the one hand, while simultaneously operating as the instruments that bring about tragedy within the family itself, in the process.

Swords, spears, axes, scythes, wooden clubs, and even a money-bag all feature in violent clashes between characters throughout *Gísla saga*. Individual weapons are almost highlighted, picked out, in descriptions of violent action. The act of using a weapon is highly charged in all saga narratives, but especially powerful in *Gísla saga*. This is especially evident in the two famous murder scenes in which first Vésteinn Vésteinsson, and then Þorgrímr goði (Gísli Súrsson's brothers-in-law through his wife and sister, respectively), are killed with the same weapon. The murder weapon is a spear, Grásíða ('Grey-flank', or 'Grey-blade'), whose blade has been re-forged from the broken fragments of a fateful sword that bore the same name, introduced at the beginning of the saga.³

The motif of the magical or cursed weapon is widespread in Old Norse literature.⁴ Such weapons are, of course, especially prevalent in the *fornaldarsögur*, but several examples are found in the *Íslendingasögur*, where they often add colour to

¹ See Mundal (1997) for a discussion of symbols and their functions in saga literature, with particular reference to *Gísla saga* and *Laxdæla saga*.

² Swords, of course, were the most prestigious of weapons. See Falk (1914) and Liestøl (1972) on swords in Viking Age and medieval Scandinavia.

³ There are many examples of named swords in Old Norse literature; see Falk (1914, 47–64) for a list of sword-names, and Barnes (1972) on the practice of naming swords and categories of sword-names.

⁴ See Boberg (65, 81–82, 131–132) for refs. to magical weapons in Old Norse literature.

the narrative at the same time as functioning as structural devices.⁵ Various aspects of the portrayal and significance of the enchanted weapon Grásiða in the opening section of *Gisla saga* (the so-called 'Norwegian Prelude') have been addressed by critics in the past; Anne Holtmark's consideration of the weapon in her monograph 'Studies in the *Gisla saga*' (1951, especially 6–20) is particularly valuable. The thematic and structural functions of Grásiða in the saga narrative have been examined by a number of scholars (for example Garmonsway 1935, 161–64; Holtmark 1951, 6–10; Culbert 1959, 153–54, 165; Kroesen 1982; Mundal 1997, 62–64; Hermann Pálsson 2000, 101–04). Other areas of discussion include the problematic feminine gender of the sword's name (Holtmark 1951, 14–16; Barnes 1972, 547); and the purported existence and implications of an historical counterpart to the weapon—a spear said to have belonged to Gísli Súrsson that is mentioned on two occasions in Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga* (Holtmark 1951, 10–13; Kroesen 1982, 569; Perkins 1989, 250–52).

However, only passing attention has been paid to the fact that throughout the episode in which Grásiða is introduced into the saga narrative, the representation of both the blade, and its original owner, Kolr, as well as the other characters involved, is subject to considerable variation in the different versions of *Gisla saga*.⁶ The main aim of this paper is to outline the differences in the longer and shorter versions' presentation of the episode: on the whole, the variation here results from the inclusion of more narrative detail in one version—most often the longer version—over the other. An evaluation of this variation is an interesting exercise, because in many cases, it has a significant impact on our impressions and understanding of the episode in each respective version, in terms of the portrayal of events and implications of the action, and the characterisation of the principal figures involved.⁷

⁵ Drachmann (1967) surveys the roles and individual characteristics of named swords in saga literature. The most well-known examples of magical swords in the *formaldarsögur* are Tyrtingr (*Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*) and Gramr (*Völsunga saga*); there are a number of parallels to Grásiða in the portrayal and function of both of these swords in their respective narratives. In the *Íslendingasögur* corpus, there are especially notable parallels between Grásiða and the cursed sword Fótbítr (*Laxdæla saga*); see Heller (1966, 182–84), and Mundal (1997, 62–64).

⁶ *Gisla saga* is preserved in three distinctive versions: a longer version (represented principally in two eighteenth-century paper manuscripts, AM 149 fol. and NkS 1181 fol.), a shorter version (preserved in the fifteenth-century parchment AM 556 a 4to and later, paper manuscripts), and a fragmentary version (partially preserved in four leaves of the badly damaged, fifteenth-century parchment AM 445 c I 4to). The longer version has been edited by Agnete Loth (1960); the shorter version by Björn K. Þórólfsson (1943) amongst others; the fragment by Jón Helgason (1956). The question of the versions' relative ages and textual relationships is complex; see Vésteinn Ólason and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson (2000, 99–102) for an overview.

⁷ Previous literary analysis of the saga has been based largely on the text of the shorter version, thus the significant nuances that the variation in each version often has on the narrative have been overlooked; one important exception to this is Vésteinn Ólason and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson's study (2000). A comprehensive examination and interpretation of the variation throughout the saga in the medieval and post-medieval versions is the subject of my forthcoming PhD thesis ('Narrative Variation in the Versions of *Gisla saga Súrssonar*').

2. The Grásíða episode in the longer and shorter versions of *Gísla saga*

In its first incarnation in the Norwegian Prelude (set in mid-tenth-century Norway), Grásíða is a sword with magical properties that Gísli Súrsson's uncle, Gísli Þorkelsson, borrows from the thrall Kolr in order to fight a *berserkr*. The *berserkr* has killed Gísli's elder brother, Ari, and claimed the family lands and women; Gísli vows to fight the *berserkr* in order to protect the honour of his family, and Ingibjörg, Ari's widow, advises Gísli to ask Kolr for his sword. Armed with Grásíða, Gísli defeats the *berserkr* and is subsequently unwilling to part with such a valuable weapon. When Kolr asks Gísli to return the sword, the two men come to blows and they both lose their lives simultaneously.

The fragments of the sword are saved and kept together. The family emigrates to Iceland and the broken blade comes into the possession of Gísli Súrsson's brother, Þorkell, when the two brothers divide their inheritance. Þorkell has the fragments reforged into a spear; shortly after this, the spear is used by an unnamed intruder to murder Vésteinn Vésteinsson. Confronted by Vésteinn's corpse, Gísli Súrsson draws the fateful weapon out of the body of his sworn brother and brother-in-law, hides the bloody weapon in a chest, and one year later, kills Þorgrímr goði with it, in order to avenge Vésteinn's death.

One of the principal functions of the Grásíða episode in the Norwegian Prelude is to introduce to the narrative the motif of the doomed weapon that will be the instrument of tragedy within the family (Garmonsway 1935, 162–63; Culbert 1959, 154; Holtsmark 1961, 10; Heller 1966, 182). The rifts between the family members that arise because of irreconcilable conflicts of loyalty, and that culminate in the deaths of Vésteinn, Þorgrímr, and ultimately Gísli himself, are structurally and thematically anticipated by the ominous circumstances that surround the introduction of Grásíða to the saga; the supernatural weapon subsequently operates as the highly symbolic agent, or executor, of fate.

The portrayal of Grásíða

In sum, the powers attributed to Grásíða are typical of the magic weapons found throughout saga literature, but at the point of the sword's introduction into *Gísla saga*, the longer version provides more detail about its appearance and magic properties than the shorter version. In the shorter version, the only reference to the sword's supernatural power is found in Ingibjörg's comment to Gísli where she describes how Grásíða guarantees victory to whoever carries it in battle ('*þat fylgir því sverði, at sá skal sigr hafa, er þat hefir til orrostu*', ÍF 5).⁸ In the longer version, it is not Ingibjörg but Kolr who communicates the nature of the sword to Gísli, although prior to this, Ingibjörg does describe the sword as better than most others, and implies that there is some disparity between Kolr's casual name for the sword and its real worth ('*hann [Kolr] eigi sverð þat, er betra skal vera en flest önnur, þótt hann láti óvirðuliga yfir, ok kallar hann þat brytskálm sína*', ÍF 9).

The details that the sword is dwarf-made, will bite whatever it strikes, even iron, and cannot be blunted are presented in the longer version as part of Kolr's direct

⁸ In the Íslenzk fornrit (ÍF) edition, Björn K. Þórolfsson prints both the longer and shorter versions' texts of the Norwegian Prelude; for convenience, quotations from both versions are taken from this edition in my analysis of the Grásíða episode.

speech to Gísli during the course of their first exchange ('sverðit mun bíta þat, sem því er til hoggvit, hvárt sem er járn eða annat; má þat ok ekki deyfa, því at þat er dvergasmíði', ÍF 9); this exchange is not recounted in any detail in the shorter version. There is no verbatim parallel to Ingibjörg's (shorter version) statement about Grásiða's victory-granting power in Kolr's speech in the longer version, but this is, of course, inherent in his description of the sword's ability to cut anything without being blunted. Despite the stock nature of Grásiða's magical attributes and value, the additional detail in the longer version especially emphasizes the sword's potency, thus further clarifying the motivation behind Gísli's later desire to keep the sword in his possession.

The portrayal of Kolr and Gísli Þorkelsson

Kolr is introduced in both the longer and shorter versions at the point in the narrative when Ari Þorkelsson asks for Ingibjörg's hand in marriage: he accompanies Ingibjörg as part of her dowry. In the shorter version, all we are told about Kolr is the narratorial comment that he is a thrall (*Kolr hét þræll, er í brott fór með henni*, ÍF 4), but the longer version provides more detail about Kolr's original background, the inclusion of which makes Kolr's possession of such a valuable weapon as Grásiða more plausible. The longer version states that Kolr is of good family, but was captured and enslaved in war (*hann var mikill at kyni. Hann hafði hertekinn verit ok var kallaðr þræll*, ÍF 5). Ingibjörg also refers to Kolr as her foster-father in the longer version ('*Kolr fóstri minn*', ÍF 9); this close relationship is nowhere suggested in the shorter version.

Kolr is summoned before Gísli and Ingibjörg: in the shorter version, Gísli's request to borrow the sword is reported indirectly, and Kolr's hesitant reaction only noted briefly by the narrator (*Hann biðr þrællinn sverðsins, ok þótti þrælnum mikít fyrir at ljá*, ÍF 5). In the longer version, Kolr's response is conveyed principally through his own words, which are reported directly. Initially, the value of the sword is stressed again: Kolr states that his sword is a small treasure, and that there is much in a free man's house that is not found in a king's court ('*Litil gersimi er sverð mitt, en þó er þat margt í karlshúsi, at eigi er í konungsgarði*', ÍF 9). This enigmatic, proverbial-sounding statement enhances the sense of mystery that surrounds Kolr's characterisation in the longer version; there is no such intrigue in the shorter version's perfunctory portrayal.

Kolr's pessimistic and prophetic statement in the longer version that he expects Gísli will behave in the same dishonourable, selfish way as others do when they learn the worth of a valuable object ('*Þá mun þér fara sem öðrum um þá gripi, er gersemar eru unðir, oc nennið þá eigi at láta af hǫndum*', ÍF 9) emphasizes his mistrust of Gísli to a greater degree than is present in the shorter version. The explicit warning Kolr adds in the longer version, that Gísli should beware the consequences if he does not get the sword back when he wants it ('*En svá máttu til ætla, at mér mun illa hugnask, ef ek nái eigi þá sverðinu, er ek vil við taka*', ÍF 9) in tandem with Gísli's forthright assurance of honourable conduct ('*Ómakligt er annat ... en þú nái sverði þínu, þá er ek hefi haft í nauðsyna mína*', ÍF 9-10), further heightens the anticipation of inevitable discord in the future.

When Kolr claims the sword back from Gísli, the longer version again relates the whole episode in strikingly more detail. In the shorter version, we are told that

when Kolr asks for the return of the sword, Gísli is unwilling to give it up and attempts to buy it from the thrall (*Þrællinn heimti sverð sitt, ok vill Gísli eigi laust láta, ok býðr hann fé fyrir*, ÍF 5–6). Kolr will not take anything in exchange for the sword though, and is displeased by the situation (*En þrællinn vill ekki annat en sverð sit, ok fær ekki at heldr. Þetta líkar þrælnum illa*, ÍF 6). The shorter version outlines how the two men fight and wound each other mortally; the detail that the force of Gísli's blow shatters both the sword and Kolr's skull is included (*ok veitir Gísla tilræði; var þat mikit sár. Gísli hæggr í móti með Grásiðu í hǫfuð þrælnum, svá fast at sverðit brotnaði, en haussinn lamðisk, ok fær hvárrtveggi bana*, ÍF 6), but that is all. The conclusion to the episode is thus dealt with in a few lines; there is a sense of uneasiness, but the narrative moves on swiftly with the details of how Þorbjörn súrr (Gísli Súrsson's father) then inherits everything from his father and brother.

In the longer version, an ominous narratorial phrase which notes the passing of time, and Gísli's failure to return the sword to its rightful owner (*Líða nú stundir fram, oc selr Gísli eigi sverðit af hendi, enda hefir Kolr ekki tilkall*, ÍF 11), serves to build up tension in a tangible way before the two men's final encounter. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of this phrase with a comment about the renown Gísli gained from his victory over the *berserkr* anticipates Gísli and Kolr's charged meeting, and hints at the potential reversals to which Gísli's previous successes might be subject. When the men eventually chance upon each other, the longer version includes the detail that the men are outside, and that Gísli has Grásiða in his hand, and Kolr an axe (*Einn dag hittask þeir úti tveir saman; hafði Gísli þá í hendi sverðit Grásiðu en Kolr áxi*, ÍF 12): a violent and ill-fated clash seems inevitable.

The exchange between Gísli and the thrall—transmitted in a few sentences in the shorter version—is expanded significantly in the longer version. At first, the exchange is conveyed in indirect speech: seemingly neutrally, Kolr asks Gísli how he found the sword, and Gísli replies positively (*Spurði Kolr, hvé honum hefði sverðit gefizk. Gísli lét vel yfir*, ÍF 12). The dialogue between the two men then shifts to direct speech: Kolr expresses his wish to have the sword back immediately, if it has served Gísli's purposes; Gísli responds by making several, repeated attempts to buy the sword from Kolr, offering the thrall his freedom, trading goods, land, livestock, cash, and a good wife in return for the sword.

As in the shorter version, Kolr is immovable; in the longer version though, his resolute stance is further emphasized by the short refusals with which he punctuates Gísli's increasingly extravagant offers (*'Viltu selja?' segir Gísli. 'Eigi,' segir Kolr... 'Eigi vil ek selja,' segir Kolr ... 'Eigi vil ek at heldr selja,' segir Kolr*, ÍF 12). These repetitions have the effect of building up the tension of the scene: there can only be one way of resolving this deadlock, and the fact that we have been told that both men are armed points towards this confrontational outcome. Finally, Kolr dismisses Gísli absolutely, and alludes to the reservations he expressed in their earlier exchange (*'Ekki er um at tala,' segir hann; 'Ek mun eigi selja, hvat er þú býðr til. En nú fer þetta eptir því, sem mik grunaði í fyrstu, at eigi væri vist, hvárt þú vildir þegar laust láta, ef þú vissir, hverf gersimi í væri'*, ÍF 13).

In the shorter version, the description of Kolr's displeasure is immediately followed by his assault on Gísli; in the longer version—before their verbal exchange becomes a physical one—Gísli warns Kolr that if he will not grant his wish, the

outcome will not be good for either of them, as he will not let the sword come into any other man's hands (*'Ek mun ok segja þér,' segir Gísli, 'hversu fara mun, at hvárrgi mun hafa vel; því at ek nenni sverðit eigi laust at láta, oc ekki kemr þat þórum manni í hǫnd en mér, ef ek má ráða'*, ÍF 13). The more negative aspects of Gísli's character revealed in his insistent efforts to bribe Kolr, and his selfish, even reckless, determination to keep the sword whatever the cost, are apparent in the shorter version but are brought out more clearly through his direct speech in the longer version. At the same time, the fuller detail in the longer version provides a more explicit illustration of the baleful and corrupting influence that the sword is capable of exerting over an otherwise heroic character.

The description of the blows exchanged by the two men is slightly fuller in the longer version: where the shorter version states only that Kolr attacks Gísli and wounds him seriously, in the longer version we hear that Kolr's axe embeds itself in Gísli's brain (*hjó Kolr í hǫfuð Gísla, svá at í heila stóð*, ÍF 13), as well as how the force of Gísli's blow causes both the thrall's skull and the blade to shatter (*en þó var svá fast til hǫggvit, at haussinn rifnaði, en sverðit brast sundr*, ÍF 13). However, we also learn that when Gísli hews at Kolr's head, the sword does not bite (*en sverðit kom í hǫfuð Koli ok beit ekki*, ÍF 13), despite the fact that earlier in the longer version, we have been told that the sword can cut through anything. The longer version's description of how Grásíða does not bite into Kolr's head here carries with it the implicit suggestion that Kolr himself possesses considerable supernatural powers, not even hinted at in the shorter version.

Neither Gísli nor Kolr utter any final words in the shorter version's account of the fateful meeting; in the longer version, however, the inclusion of a powerful curse that Kolr delivers with his dying breath reinforces the suggestion of his supernatural potency, and concludes the episode in a dramatic fashion, augmenting the sense of general foreboding. The first part of his dying speech is grim and sardonic in the best saga-tradition. *'Nú hefði farið betr, at ek hefða tekit við sverði minu í fyrstu, sem ek beidda'* (ÍF 13), he quips; this is followed up with the threat of the misfortune, unleashed by Gísli's actions, that will consequently befall Gísli's kinsmen: *'ok mun þó endir einn leyst vera um þá ógiptu, er yðr frændum mun þar af standa'* (ÍF 13-14). After this utterance, both men die.

The implications of the variation between the versions

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, and as I hope has become clear through the preceding analysis, the variation between the versions with respect to their narration of the Grásíða episode is interesting because to a significant degree, there is considerable potential for nuancing our impressions and understanding of the narrative in certain ways. The fundamental details that comprise the episode are largely identical in both versions, but in places, the variation impacts on the precise characterisation of the individuals involved in the action, the motivation behind these characters' actions, and the general atmosphere or tone of the narrative itself.

Some variation arises as the result of more or less detail transmitted by the narratorial voice; in other places, additional detail is conveyed through direct or indirect speech in one version that is not articulated to the same extent, or at all, in the other version. In the longer version, the addition of a significant amount of direct and

indirect speech realises the dramatic potential of the action more fully, and greatly intensifies the immediacy of the particular scenes. The sustained use of direct and indirect speech in the longer version is also the principal way in which the individual traits, psychology, and motivation of the characters are illuminated and conveyed to a greater degree than is found in the shorter version. The two extended dialogues between Gísli and Kolr in the longer version are the most obvious example of how the longer version fills out the characterisation of both men to a greater extent than the more cursory treatment in the shorter version allows.

Kolr's articulation of the curse on the weapon in the longer version enhances his general characterisation and the impression of his supernatural potency, but it also underlines the structural function of the Grásíða episode in the wider context of the whole narrative more explicitly than anything in the shorter version's account does. Even without the curse attached to it, the fateful role and forceful symbolism of the weapon is not ambiguous in the shorter version—a weapon that causes such discord and the violent death of two men in such a way must embody bad luck, and it carries its history with it when it reappears later in the narrative. But Kolr's unequivocal association of bad luck with Grásíða through his curse in the longer version both structurally anticipates the reintroduction of the weapon more overtly, and sharpens the sense of the impending tragedy that will surround the circumstances of its reintroduction (Holtmark 1951, 13).

The variation between the versions in their treatment of the Grásíða episode has a discernible effect on the general character of the narrative, and on the atmosphere created at the beginning of the saga, which is quite distinct in each version. Holtmark writes that the story of Grásíða is a 'conglomeration of commonplaces', easily recognised as 'stock motives from folk-tales, medieval epic, and romance' (1951, 7). In the longer version, the stock nature of the additional detail pertaining to Grásíða's magical attributes, as well as the inclusion of Kolr's curse, allies its account of the episode more closely with *fornaldarsögur* narratives, which are typically characterised by their more fantastic subject-matter.

Clunies Ross has advocated a more modal conception of, and approach to, saga literature, and observes that the shift from the predominantly realistic mode that is the defining feature of *Íslendingasögur* narratives, to the more fantastic mode that is the default of *fornaldarsögur* narratives, often occurs 'precisely where there is some uncertainty as to the nature of reality, or where the social norms of the culture are subverted, or where the present confronts the past and the author needs to produce an explanation of how and why things have happened or people have acted in certain ways' (2002, 449–50). This interpretative framework is a useful one within which to understand the dynamics of the Grásíða episode. Each point is relevant to the Grásíða narrative, and the last point is especially relevant to the *Gisla saga* narrative as a whole in a number of interrelating ways.

The relationship between past and present in the saga is complex, with both perspectives carefully differentiated from each other, yet simultaneously, inextricably bound up with one other. The opening section of the saga is obviously set apart from the main narrative temporally, and the geographical location of the action in Norway, as opposed to Iceland, reinforces this sense of separation in physical, spatial terms. Through conferring a more distinct sense of otherness on events and characters, the

more overt emphasis in the longer version on the fantastic elements of the Grásíða episode serves to further distinguish and distance the opening section from the main narrative of the saga, already separated temporally and spatially. At the same time, however, past and present are yoked together through the motif of the cursed weapon; the compelling symbolism of Grásíða when it reappears in the saga narrative lies precisely in the fateful associations with the past that the weapon embodies and carries into the present. As Garmonsway writes: 'cause and effect are thus brought into sharp relation and ... the object ... serves at one and the same moment to recall the past and forebode the future' (1935, 162).

3. The treatment of the supernatural across the versions

Bearing in mind the nuances in the longer and shorter versions' respective treatments of the Grásíða episode, I will conclude with a brief survey firstly of the differences between the versions' presentation of Grásíða when it appears later on in the saga, and then of other supernatural elements in the wider context of the whole saga narrative. There is some variation in the individual versions' presentation of supernatural elements at different points in the saga narrative, but with a couple of exceptions, it is not extensive. It is particularly notable that there is hardly any variation at all in the versions' treatment of the two supernatural women who visit the outlawed Gísli Súrsson in his dreams in the second half of the saga; this is striking given that Gísli's dreams are perhaps the most prominent and sustained supernatural element in the narrative.

When Grásíða is reintroduced into the narrative (shorter version, chapter 11; longer version, chapter 16), there are some small discrepancies between the two versions' accounts which do not have any direct repercussions on the unfolding narrative, but nonetheless faintly nuance the presentation of the scene and characterisation of those involved. In both versions, Þorkell Súrsson, Þorgrímr goði, and the sorcerer Þorgrímr nef are all present in the smithy but there is a shade of ambiguity in the shorter version over whether it is Þorgrímr goði or Þorgrímr nef who does the smithying. Only the longer version distinguishes between the two men specifically, referring to Þorgrímr 'Freysgoði' and describing him as a skilful blacksmith (*Þorgrímr Freys goði var maðr vel hagr á jarn, Loth 24*); the shorter version offers no value judgement (*Þorgrímr var hagr á jarn, ÍF 37*).

In its description of the re-forging scene, the shorter version offers a couple of details not found in the longer version, which modify the configuration of the narrative somewhat. Firstly, we are told that the men lock themselves into the smithy, thus reinforcing the impression of their sinister intent which is conveyed but not made explicit in the longer version. The shorter version also describes the blade of the re-forged spear as damascened or ornamented in appearance (*mál váru í, ÍF 38*). This detail is not included in the longer version, but its presence in the shorter version chimes with the description of another spear used earlier in the saga as part of the failed blood-brotherhood ceremony (*ok settu þar undir málaspjót, ÍF 22*). When the re-forged Grásíða appears in the two murder scenes (shorter version, chapters 13 and 16; longer version, chapters 18 and 20; fragment, AM 445 c I 4to at 2 recto and 3 recto), there is hardly any variation between the versions other than whether or not it is referred to by name: the shorter version names it twice, the longer and fragmentary

versions once. Perhaps the shorter version's expression of the name *Grásiða* twice is slightly more evocative of the weapon's significance.

Elsewhere in the saga, the shorter version twice denounces Þorgrímr nef and his practice of sorcery in slightly stronger terms than the longer version (shorter version, chapters 11 and 18; longer version, chapters 16 and 20). However, the most striking difference is the longer version's unparalleled attribution of the storm on the night of Vésteinn's murder to the sorcerer, Þorgrímr nef, in chapter 18. Further supplementing this detail, the longer version explains how Gísli was drawn outside as a consequence, thus leaving the coast clear for the murderer—explicitly identified as Þorgrímr goði—to enter the farmstead and kill Vésteinn. In the shorter version, the description of the storm's violent intensity does suggest the possibility of supernatural interference, but neither this nor the identity of Gísli's murderer is made explicit at any point in the text. In fact, it seems that the shorter version deliberately sustains the mystery surrounding the identity of Vésteinn's murderer, although a chapter-heading in the medieval parchment, AM 556 a 4to, nevertheless ascribes the deed to Þorgrímr.

4. Conclusions

Although there is not much extended variation between the versions in their treatment of the supernatural over the course of the whole saga, some of the variation that does exist is significant in character, and certain patterns in the character of this variation are discernible across the versions. A general tendency towards the fuller explanation of supernatural occurrences can be identified in the longer version, along with the more overt signalling of the shift from the realistic to the fantastic mode that this entails, at times. Moreover, the unequivocal detail in the longer version concerning the supernatural origin of the storm, along with the identity of Vésteinn's murderer, is consistent with its fuller descriptive treatment of the *Grásiða* episode at the beginning of the saga.

Concurrently, it might be argued that the terser and more allusive character of the shorter version's treatment of the *Grásiða* episode corresponds neatly with its later, conscious perpetuation of the ambiguities—supernatural or otherwise—that surround Vésteinn's murder. Nonetheless, there are the couple of occasions mentioned above, where the shorter version's treatment of the supernatural is more explicit than the longer version's. Furthermore, when the full extent of the variation between the versions over the whole saga is examined—not just that pertaining to the supernatural—the shorter version provides additional or more explicit detail at a number of significant junctures in the narrative. Among the most striking are the formulaic references to the inevitability of fate, articulated by Gísli Súrsson, that punctuate the shorter version's narrative at regular intervals throughout the saga.

The inevitability of fate is one of the central forces that propel the saga narrative and the variation in the two versions serves to articulate this in different ways. The more frequent and pointed references to fate that are found in the shorter version particularly alert us to this dynamic, structural principle, whilst the longer version explicitly highlights the link between *Grásiða* and the doomed fate of the Súr family through the expression of Kolr's curse. As much as any other example, this manifestation of the variation between the versions of *Gisla saga* illustrates how such variation can significantly nuance the understanding and interpretation of the narrative

both in its immediate context, and in the wider context of the saga as a whole. Regardless of how it has arisen, the variation in the versions testifies to differing literary designs, tastes, and interpretations of *Gisla saga* across time, and any study of the saga that does not take the variation in the versions into account cannot wholly appreciate the many complexities of its resonant narrative.

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