‘Vinar em ek vinar míns’: Guðrún Gjúkadóttir in Gísla saga and Íslendinga saga.

Teodoro Manrique Antón
(Universidad de Salamanca)

Among the scholars who in the past decades have busied themselves with the significance of the figure of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir for Icelandic literature of the thirteenth century, Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (1988a) has, as far as I know, presented the most complete analysis. He comes to the conclusion that:

‘Im Bewusstsein dieser Epoche [thirteenth-century] war das Heldenzeitalter historische Wirklichkeit, und in seinen Personen mit ihren Handlungsweisen sah man Menschen und Ereignisse der eigenen Zeit abgespiegelt.’

In the following pages I will approach the literary use of some motifs of the heroic lays, especially Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, in the so called ‘dream-verses’ of Gísla saga Súrssonar and in Jóreíðr’s dreams in Íslendinga saga. The author of Gísla saga was more dependent on the limitations of his sources and on the fictional tradition than Sturla, who, although writing about events of his own time, had a wider freedom to include or adapt different elements of different literary traditions to suit his political or moral standpoint.

Of all the Íslendingasögur, Gísla saga is the one where the literary traits of the Heroic Age are most obvious and many of its thematic units were modelled after the tragic happenings of the Nibelungen legend. Gíslí’s ill-fated life, for example, is dictated by the omnipresence of the ideas of fate, honour and family loyalty and a direct mention of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir in st. 10 [M]¹, where Gíslí reproaches his sister’s lack of loyalty, offers us another very clear point of contact between the saga and the heroic lays which dealt with Guðrún’s tragedy, specifically Guðrúnarvöða í fyrsta and Guðrúnarvöða önnur. This is not, however, the only stanza in the saga which has been influenced by the Guðrún story.

Gísla saga has been the object of intense analysis since at least the beginning of the twentieth century. Some scholars, aware of its distinctiveness, have tried to find the origins of the saga in a combination of various sources, such as a local tradition about Gíslí, a poetic one (probably shaped under the influence of the heroic lays), and a disputable later Christian re-elaboration of some passages. The saga as we know it shows the traces of a conscious and deliberate process of adjustment, which would have resulted in at least two different versions of the story of the poet and outlaw Gíslí Súrsson. Attempted solutions to the dilemma of these two versions have consisted mainly in looking at the so-called ‘Norwegian prologue’ and labelling it as archetypal or artificial according to structural, thematic or stylistic features. The differences in the poetry, however, have hardly been considered.

Gísla saga contains thirty six stanzas attributed to Gíslí, one of which is only preserved in the long version of the saga. Most of them are spoken by the poet, composed in the dröðkvætt metre and thematically connected to the expression of

¹ References to the stanzas and the prose as they appear in the long version [S] apply to Agnete Loth’s edition (1960). For the short version [M] I have used Finnur Jónsson’s edition (1929).
Gísli’s emotions about the main events of his life. The dating and authorship of the stanzas has also been the subject of much debate among those who variously believed that they were the work of a Christian poet of the twelfth century, of the author of the saga or of Gísli himself. This is a question that for obvious reasons I shall not face here.

A thematic analysis of the stanzas in the saga reveals that more than half of them are dream-stanzas. They do not deal with the real world, but with Gísli’s dream encounters with two valkyrie-like women, who exert an enormous influence on the poet’s spiritual struggle from their first appearance until the day of his final battle.

St. 27 [M] is among those in the saga which have received the most attention, mostly due to the fact that in it, one of Gísli’s dream-women overturns the prophecy made by the other. Such a contravention represented a breach of the unspoken rule that predictions could not be annulled unless they contained an element that allowed this, as with the spell that Pógrímr nef cast on Pórgrim’s assassin (ch. 21). The first half of the stanza in Agneth Loth’s edition of the long version [S] in Membrana regia deperdita2 is as follows:

Skulu þo it kvæð skorða
skapfkars, saman verja,
svo hefyr yckr til ecka
eitr goðurnar leitaf.

You shall not, said the woman (lady of the Vessel), abide together,
So has the poison of good love (?)
turned into sorrow for you.

An alternative wording of verse 4 is preserved in Nks. 1181 fol. and AM 149 fol. (eitr goðumur leitaf), but its meaning is equally obscure.

The variant of this helmingr in the main manuscript of the short version [M], AM 556 a 4to, has been transcribed several times, e.g. in Konrad Gisladason’s, Agneta Loth’s and Finnur Jónsson’s editions (see below).

Skulut þi ei, kvæð skorda
Skapt kers, saman vera,
svo hefyr yckr við ecka
eitr gudrunar heitit,

You shall not, said the woman (lady of the Vessel), abide together,
So has Gudrun’s poison (?)
sorrow for you promised.

The main problems posed by st. 27 therefore, concern the interpretation of line 4 and its second helmingr. The scholars who have followed the different variants of the manuscripts of the long version, eitr goðurnar, eitr goð munar, eitrgoð munar have not agreed as to the significance of the kenning. Finnur Jónsson’s (Skj B I, 101) reading sva hefr goð leitaf ykkr munar eitrs til ekka, ‘sáledes har gud bestemt eder gladens gift med sorg’, i.e. ‘God has prescribed for you the poison of love [grief] with grief’, where he isolates goð from the rest of the kenning, did not convince Ernst A. Kock (1923, 42-43), who initially rejected Finnur Jónsson’s interpretation, proposing an alternative ekkra eitrs, ‘grief’s poison’, but later (1930, 28-29) admitted that the isolated appearance of goð could be united to eitr, eitrgoð, ‘bitterhetsens gud’, i.e. ‘the god of wrath’, to refer to one of the gods of the Norse Pantheon. Pórólfsason’s (1943, 102-3) eitr goðmunar, ‘the poison of the great love, i.e. “an extraordinary love” does not offer a convincing explanation. Konrad Gisladason’s rendering of the line (1849, 186), ‘Saaledes er Gudernes Bestemmelse,’ ‘So is the decision of the gods’, where goð is interpreted as a plural form and the whole kenning then as ‘the poison of the will of

2 Agneta Loth’s edition of the poetry is based on Árni Magnússon’s own handwritten copy preserved in AM 761 B 4to.
the gods [fate]’ was probably based on Jonsonius’ Latin translation in Nks 1181 fol. In Jonsonius the noun munr acquires the sense of ‘voluntas’ (Cf. Fritzmer, 1891, II, 751), and thus godmunar is rendered as ‘deorum voluntas’:

Vos faxo, inquit sustentatrix
Poculi manubriati, non conuivetis;
Quod vobis ad moerorem fatum
Venefica deorum voluntas
destinavit (quaesivit)
Potentissimus mundi rector
(Odinus)
Te ex regione misit (missum vult)
Unum ex vestra domo
Ad cognoscendum alium mundum
You will not, said the holder of the handle of the vessel, live together;
The poison of the will of the gods has prescribed this fate for your sorrow
The all-powerful ruler of the world has sent you away from the land
alone from your home
to explore another world.

Jonsonius’ translation reflects the idea which is recurrent in the prose, that Gisli’s fate was the ruling power in his life, which of course leads the translator to avoid the Christian interpretation of allvaldr aldar, but also leaves us with the unexplained problem of why Gisli’s future is placed in Öðinn’s hands. As we can see from the divergent analyses of st. 27, 1. 4 in [S], its various readings do not offer an unambiguous understanding of how Gisli’s ‘pitiful fate’ has come into being.

The interpretations of the kenning as it stands in [M] ‘eitr guðmunar’, although more unanimous, also fail to give an explanation of how ‘the poison of Guðrún’ is to be understood in the context of the stanza. Konrad Giselson (1849, 176) translated it as ‘Gudrún’s Forbittrelse’, ‘Guðrún’s bitterness’ and admitted that although it was a very plausible reference to the historical Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, he could not prove that this was the case, due to ‘Mangel paa bestemte Data’, ‘lack of reliable data’. In his edition of the short version Finnur Jónsson quoted the verses from AM 556 a 4to (1929, 64, 104-5), but he did not mention Guðrún in his explanation of the stanza. He insisted on translating the verse as if he were doing so from S, because according to him, ‘[det] må være den ægte læsemåde’, ‘[that] must be the original reading’. Agnete Loth (1956, 88-89) concluded that the stanza is of ‘incomprehensible meaning’. Despite the variations of form, the message uttered by the bad woman in the first half of the stanza seems to be that Gisli will not enjoy the future happiness that the good woman had ‘changed into’ sorrow (leitar [S]) or ‘promised’ (heiti [M]) him.

Basic to the understanding of the whole stanza is the reading of the second helmigr. The differences between the two versions (S and M) are also remarkable:

Allvaldr hefir aldar
erlendis plik sendan
einn or yfru ranni
annan heim at kanna.
(God has sent you away from your home to explore a new world)

Allvaldr hefir alda
erlenndis mik sennda
enn ur oðru ranni
annann heim at kanna.
(God has sent me again far from the other world to explore another abode)

In the second helmigr of the stanza in the S-version, the bad woman, addressing Gisli, announces God’s/Oðinn’s future plans for him. In M, on the contrary, the pronoun mik, the feminine past participle senda and the adverb enn allow for a completely new interpretation of the stanza. The bad woman is now talking about
herself, declaring that Óðinn, once again, has sent her away from her previous dwelling to explore a new world.

Bearing in mind the importance played by some heroic poems in the conception of Gísla saga, it will not seem implausible that some clues for the interpretation of Gisli’s stanzas might be found within them. As some scholars have pointed out, the unfriendly encounter between Brynhildr and Guðrún by the river probably served as a model for the conversation between Audr and Ásgardr in ch. 9. The enmity between Brynhildr (the alter-ego of the valkyrie Sigrdríf, as is stated for example in Helreidd Brynhildar) and the ill-fated and disconsolate Guðrún, seems a very likely source for the conception of the dream-women cycle in Gísla saga. As we will discuss later, some of the qualities of the heroic characters were reshaped according to Christian literary usage in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In this way, the figure of Guðrún in Gísla saga would have acquired some traits of the ‘piety’ later ascribed to her, for example, by the dream in question in Íslandinga saga.

Brynhildr, on the other hand, is still represented as the gruesome valkyrie whom Óðinn (allvædr aldor) once compelled to abandon her warlike nature, and who was later deprived of Sigurðr’s love. According to the tradition preserved in the heroic lays, but also in sagas contemporary to Gísla saga (such as Völsunga saga), Brynhildr and Guðrún blamed each other for their misfortunes. In st. 13 of Helreidd Brynhildar, Brynhildr accuses Guðrún and her brothers of betraying her:

Dá varð ec þess vís, er ec víldiga,

at þau vélt mic í verfangi (Neckel, 1962, 222)

‘Then I grew aware of what I wish I had never done,

that they betrayed me in my choosing a husband.’

In Sigurdargvíða in scamma, Guðrún also blames Brynhildr

ec velt gorla, hví gognir nú:

ein velt Brynhildr ölla bólni (Neckel, 1962, 211)

‘I know well why this is happening now:

Brynhildr alone has caused all this grief.’

Although the characters of the Burgundian cycle are presented from different points of view, sometimes putting emphasis on the suffering widow, sometimes on the injustice of Sigurðr’s murder or the feeble natures of Atli and Gunnar, I agree with Preben M. Sørensen (op. cit., 194) that the apparent inconsistencies in the presentation of Guðrún in the various lays of the Edda are only due to the fact that their authors emphasize different aspects of her personality.

The dream-stanzas of the Christian author of Gísla saga may have modelled Gisli’s dream women on the opposed roles of Brynhildr and Guðrún. As the personification of family loyalty, Guðrún is also given the Christian attributes of what Lönnroth (1969) defined as a noble heathen. Brynhildr, on the other hand, appears as the vindictive valkyrie who covers Gisli in human blood (stt. 28 and 29 [M]) and tells him that ‘Guðrún’s bitter fate’, eitr Guðrúnar, will prevent them from being together. In this way we interpret eitr, ‘poison’, as the negative force present in both Gisli’s and Guðrún’s destiny. The fact that the bad woman managed to oppose the prophecy of the good one was due to her valkyrie nature and her sharing some attributes with the norms, who controlled fate. Brynhildr’s characterization in the poems as a woman capable of foretelling the future makes her knowledge of Gisli’s destiny
understandable. A similar instance of Brynhildr’s prophetic aptitude in Völsunga saga illustrates my point. In ch. 28 Brynhildr tells Guðrún:

Njöti þér svá Sigurðar sem þér hafði miki eigi svikit, ok er yðart samveldi
ómaskligt, ok gangi yðr svá sem ek hygg

‘And enjoy Sigurd now as if you had not betrayed me, although you don’t
deserve to live together, and may it happen to you as I predict.’

Although Völsunga saga probably postdates Gísla saga by a few decades, a good part
of its content is nothing but a retelling of some of the lays dealing with Guðrún’s story
as preserved in the Codex Regius. That both works contain motifs belonging to the
same tradition about Guðrún is not very unlikely. St. 27, as preserved in the short
version of Gísla saga, could thus be understood as a representation of Gísli’s
subjection to fate based on the example of Guðrún’s. The second part of the stanza,
where the bad woman speaks about herself, offers us clear clues to her identity, and to
that of allvaldr aldar, who according to Jonsonius’ Latin rendering of the verse, must
be none other than the Potentissimum mundi rector, Odinus.

Another example of the use of heroic-mythological motifs in Gísla saga can be
found in the controversial mention of the mythical vargr in two prose paragraphs
connected to the dreams. There is only one dream in Gísla saga that is not recounted
in poetical form. In chapter fourteen, in the prose paragraph that precedes st. 3 [M],
Gísli tells about the two dreams, already mentioned in the first two lines of the
previous chapter, that he has had during the nights before the murder of Vésteinn.
These two dreams about Vésteinn’s death offer a clue to the identity of the assassin.

If we take into account that all of the other dreams in the saga are told in verse
and that in many cases they are introduced by a prose summary of their content, we
cannot but ask ourselves whether st. 3 is not the only remaining one of a now lost
group of stanzas. It is in these stanzas that Gísli’s ominous dreams about Vésteinn’s
murder were probably put into poetical form. At the same time it is worth asking
whether the whole prose paragraph before st. 3 did not originate as an attempt to
recreate the content of the second verse (bíðkat draums ens príðja and the allusion to
the dreams in the opening of ch. 13 [M]).

The abrupt thematic change which takes place between Pöckl’s and Gísli’s
conversation about Auðr’s grief and Gísli’s announcement of his prophetic dream, also
points in that direction.3 After Gísli has refused to reveal the content of the dreams
(though he suggests that they were quite clear), he suddenly changes his mind and
renders them in prose, adding that his previous silence was due to his desire that
nobody should interpret them. After the narrator announces that Gísli had composed a
verse about it, one would expect to find a stanza (or more), with mythical kennings for
the wolf and the serpent that have been mentioned earlier. What we have instead is a
single stanza where Gísli expresses his relief at not having to wake up a third time
from such horrible dreams and praises the friendship that he and Vésteinn had enjoyed
when they were together in Vébjörg.

---

3 The long version contains a better elaboration of the scene. Pöckl’s direct question to
Gísli about the content of his dreams offers a less abrupt transition between the theme of
Auðr’s grief and Gísli’s dreams, but fails to explain the incongruence between Gísli’s first vil
ök eigi a kveda and the sudden Pat dreýnde mik hina rœre nòt (page 21).
A plausible explanation of such inconsistencies, is that the writer, influenced by the dream-stanzas of the last part of the saga and by the mentions of the two dreams in st. 3 and the opening of ch. 13, might have considered it acceptable to invent the two missing dreams by using ingredients known to him from the heroic lays. If our author’s intention was to produce a dream which pointed at the culprit of an assassination where blood-brothers were involved, it is not improbable that he might have thought of Sigurðr and Guðrín’s tragic story. In st. 4 of Broð af Sigurðarqvíðo we read:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{sumir úlf sviðo,} & \quad \text{sumir orm sniðo,} \\
\text{sumir Gothormi} & \quad \text{af gera deldó,} \\
\text{þór þeir mætti,} & \quad \text{meins um lystir,} \\
\text{á horscom hal} & \quad \text{hendr um leggia.}
\end{align*}
\]

(Neckel, 1962, 198)

‘Some a wolf did roast/ some a snake sliced/ some fed it to Guthorm/ before, prone to evil, they were able/ to lay their hands on the noble man.’

Guthorm was the only one of Gjúki’s sons who was not bound by the loyalty-oaths sworn to Sigurðr just as Porgrímur was not bound to Vésteinn after the fóstbræðralag ceremony could not be completed. Guthorm needed to be fed magical food to increase his courage, and Porgrímur needed the assistance of his namesake, the evil Porgrímur nef, to re-forge the magical sword Grásiða into a ‘sacrificial’ spear. In this way, the meat of the two mythological animals ingested by Guthorm to perform the killing could have impelled Gísli saga’s author to create two new dreams (the number implied in the stanza), where the two animals represented the man responsible for Vésteinn’s slaying,4 i.e. Porgriður.

This is not, however, the only instance where the writer of the saga decided to add a popular mythological element to the basic plot. In the prose preface to the dream unit composed by stt. 30, 31 and 32 [M] we find:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Einn þeira for fystr, grenianda miok, ok þottumzt ek hauggva hann} \\
\text{sumdr í midu, ok þotter mer vera áa honum vargs höfud. Paa sottu} \\
\text{margir at mer; ek þottumzk hafa skjölldinn í hende mer ok veriazt leingi}
\end{align*}
\]

(Finnur Jónsson, 1929, 65)

‘One of them went first, howling loudly, and I think I cut him asunder at the waist, and thought that he had the head of a wolf. Then many warriors attacked me; I thought I had my shield in my hand and defended myself for a long time.’

Rendering the content of the verses, the writer mentions the long-lasting defence Gisli manages with his shield (st. 31 [M]), as well as the fact that he cuts a man’s body into pieces, (in st. 32 [M] it is only one leg). Most interesting is that the writer has found it necessary to add ‘vera áa honum vargs höfud’. Curiously enough, the only two mentions of the mythological vargr in the short version of the saga occur in the prose summaries of the dream-stanzas.5

\footnote{Cf. Völsunga saga, ch. 32.}

\footnote{St. 4 only preserved in the ‘Norwegian prologue’ of the long version contains also a reference to the vargar in line 4 (en vargar sadder). It is though of a much different kind, since it does not imply any mythological references and only points to the fact that people had been killed and that the wolves had thus been fed.}
In this second case, the prose summary contains information that cannot be found in the verses. It is also presented by an introductory prose summary, but, unlike the other stanzas, it is in a different order. The name of one of Gísli’s enemies is referred to in the first sentence, at menn kæme at oss ok væri Eyjólf rífair, although in the verses no man is singled out, and we have only plural forms as fiannrð (st. 30 [M]) or þeir (st. 31 [M]). In this case, it is very likely that our author might have composed the prose summary following the order of the account of Gísli’s last encounter in chapters 34-36 [M], and then later added the supernatural-mythical element, which appears neither in the poetry nor in chapters 34-36. Presumably these changes were made to emphasize the wickedness of the attackers. The first to attack Gísli is described in the prose summary as ‘howling loudly and wearing a wolf’s head’. This first attacker is no other than Njósnar-Helgi, who according to the narration of ch. 34, accused Eyjólfur of cowardice for not daring to attack first. When he finally attacks Gísli, although rather cautiously, the result is that Gísli strikes him in the loins and cuts him down. As is evident from the adjectives used of him in the saga, such as lafræðr ok felmtsfullr, ‘very scared and frightened’ (ch. 31), Helgi does not show much wolfs’ courage. All in all, the first depiction of Helgi as a dreadful warrior is nothing but an attempt, for pure dramatic effect, to invest the text with a sense of pagan antiquity.

The appearance of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir in Jóreíðr’s dreams as depicted in Íslendinga saga shows some traces of a similar type of treatment of the heroic material. The words uttered by Guðrún when Jóreíðr asks her whether heathens are coming to Iceland reveal a conscious adaptation of Guðrún’s character:

‘Aungu skal þic skipma’, segir hon, ‘hvart ek en kristin eða helpin, enn útnir em ek vinar mins.’

‘That should make no difference to you’, she said, “whether I am Christian or heathen, because I am a friend of my friends.”’

Jóreíðr’s dream-cycle is contained in chapter 190 of Íslendinga saga, although only in the fourteenth-century Króksfjarðarbók (AM 122a [I] fol.), one of the main manuscripts of the Sturlunga saga. The first of the four dreams is said to have happened during the summer of the year 1255 after the battle of Íverá, one of the many bloody encounters that took place in the first two thirds of that century. In the first three dreams Guðrún answers Jóreíðr’s questions about her origin and identity, and expresses herself in verse when questioned about the news from some of Iceland’s most prominent chieftains.

The discussion about whether or not that chapter, and possibly the last ten in Íslendinga saga, were written by Sturla Þórðarson (1214-1284), has not yet offered any reliable conclusions. Most scholars are of the opinion that it diverges both stylistically and thematically from the rest of the work and therefore might not be a part of the original saga. The different types of metre used in the stanzas that contain the kernel of the dreams, together with some inconsistencies in the relationship between prose and verse have been presented as a proof that the stanzas originally belonged neither together nor in the prose context, where they must have been inserted at a later time (Sørensen, 1988, 184-85). A broader consensus seems to reign about the fact that the main aspiration of those chapters would have been to praise two of the most important characters of the time, Ólafur Þórarinsson and Gústur Þórandóttir.

6 References to Íslendinga saga refer to Jón Johannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn’s edition of Sturlunga saga (1946).
Although *Íslendinga saga* and *Gisla saga* were written within a few decades of each other, their varied treatment of the same material was determined by their sources and by the fact that they were dealing with events and characters from periods separated by more than two centuries. *Íslendinga saga* was written as a historical work with the intention of offering a trustworthy account of the present, while *Gisla saga* dealt with less verifiable facts and characters of a much admired, but also idealized past age.

Guðrún is, however, not the only figure from the past who appears in a dream to one of the main characters of *Íslendinga saga*. The appearance of Egill Skallagrímsson to one of Snorri Sturluson’s relatives, Egill Hall dórrson, serves a purpose similar to that of Jóreiðr’s cycle, since Egill’s dream contains Sturla’s veiled criticism of his uncle’s greed. In that dream Egill tries to warn Snorri against leaving his farm at Borg by reminding him of a similar event that happened to Hróflr kraki. By using this device, Sturla is pointing at Snorri’s death caused by his unrestrained lechery and ambition. Even though the structure and function of this episode diverge from Jóreiðr’s episode, both demonstrate that in the minds of the Icelanders, the literary boundary between heroic-age characters and those of the Settlement period was permeable enough to permit their use with a political or moral agenda.

Whether Jóreiðr’s dream was written by Sturla Bóðarson or not, its inclusion in *Íslendinga saga* suggests a certain interest in heroic lays among the learned class in Iceland. If we have a look at what is preserved of Sturla’s poetical activity, it comes as no surprise that he shows himself to be well-informed in ancient Norse lore, having benefited from the literary inclinations of his erudite uncle Snorri Sturluson, as well as from a similar education to that of his brother Óláfr hvitaskáld. The use of mythological references in some of the dream stanzas of *Íslendinga saga*, as well as in some of his well-known poems, such as Hákonarkviða or Hrafnsmál, is one of the many witnesses to the re-evaluation of the pagan literary heritage that took place in Iceland from the end of the twelfth and during most of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The parameters of the literary genre where these old heroic and mythological motifs or characters were included clearly determined its shape and the nature of its representation.

Taking this into account, it should not come as a surprise that Guðrún, as represented in *Íslendinga saga*, emerges as a hybrid figure with both pagan and Christian features, even if some of this figure’s literary components were only distant echoes of her original characterization in the heroic lays. In Jóreiðr’s four dreams Guðrún answers the girl’s questions both in prose and in verse, although it is mostly in the prose where we find information concerning her identity and disposition. In the

---

7 Cf. Kjartansson 1992, 274. Having such a great control over his material, it is most unlikely that Sturla would have fallen into significant errors like the one contained in Jóreiðr’s last dream. In it Guðrún declares that she is going to chastise Eyjólf for mistreating Hallr, while in previous chapters Sturla had said that all of Gissur’s sons had perished in the burning.

8 Cf. st. 4 of *Íslendinga saga* (1946, 251). After the battle of Viðines, a man from Skaga fjörður dreamt that he came to a very large house where two women covered in blood were rocking to and fro as if rowing. They identify themselves as the valkyries, Guðr and Göndul, and say that they are on their way to Raftahlíð.
prose Guðrún is given the external appearance of a powerful valkyrie coming from the realm of the dead (násheim), riding a large grey horse (as in Gísla saga) and dressed in the dark colours of the place she comes from (Hon var þá í bláum klæðum, ok syndist henni konan mikilvöldig). Guðrún’s irregular depiction throughout the chapter is not easy to explain except as reflecting the author’s implicit intention of reconfiguring the most famous literary representative of Germanic family loyalty in new Christian apparel.

In some of the stanzas in the introductory prose and in the final dream (especially 88 and 90), Guðrún is portrayed as the vindictive and loyal woman of the old lays (e.g. st. 9 of Guðrínarvíða önnor: ‘hitt sceyli hiarta hrafnar slíta’). In other instances she acquires an almost pious appearance. By labelling the men responsible for the burning of Flugumyr as ‘wicked bearers of paganism’, and by the half-hearted rejection of her paganism, the author is offering us a clear backing for her surprising final statement ‘þat er ok eigi síðr, at góð er guðs þrenning’. Guðrún’s explicit profession of faith would serve the purpose of validating her previous judgements about the main characters of the saga. The author’s apparent freedom to modify conflicting elements of an ancient literary tradition in order to include them in dreams about events of his own time is more understandable if we appeal to their literary and moral function. The presence of Guðrún in Jóreiðr’s dreams would stress the importance of the values she stands for, loyalty and strength of character, in such a tragic era as the Age of the Sturlungs.

To sum up, the inclusion of different motifs and characters of the heroic poems in Iceland’s thirteenth century literature was subject to both the author’s agenda and the literary character of the text into which they were inserted. Gísla saga’s unusual wealth of heroic motifs, its abundance in dream-stanzas (their habitual literary environment) makes it possible that some obscure points in their presentation can be clarified by interpreting them in the light of the material contained in the Heroic Lays. The fact that the author of Gísla saga included the heroic-mythological ormr and vargr in his attempt to reproduce the possible loss of a few stanzas, and in his characterization of one of Gíslí’s enemies, suggest that heroic-mythological characters and motifs were still in use in the Christian period when most sagas were put into writing. Their inclusion in dream-stanzas or in connection with them can thus be interpreted as a clear sign that although they were not to be considered a part of the real world, they were capable of exerting considerable influence on it.

Bibliography


Gísla saga Súrssonar, 1929, ed. Finnur Jónsson, Gyldendalske Boghandel, København.


Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda (Völsunga saga), 1943, ed. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, I, Búkaútgáfan Forni, Reykjavík.

Ordbog over Det gamle norske Sprog, 1891, ed. Johan Fritzner, II, Den norske Forlagsforening, Kristiania.


Lexicon Poeticum antiquae linguæ septentrionalis: Ordbog over det norsk-islanske skjaldepros, oprinelig forfattet af Sveinbjörn Egilsson, 1931, ed. Finnur Jónsson, Møller, København.


Membrana regia deperdita, 1960, ed. Agneta Loth, Munksgaard, København.

Mundal, Else, 1974, Fylgjemotiv i norrøn litteratur, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo.


Skjaldedigtning, 1912, ed. Finnur Jónsson, B I, Gyldendalske Boghandel/Nordisk Forlag, København og Kristiania.


