

'Ekki er mark at draumum': The Fantastic in *Íslendinga saga*

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Chapter 138 of Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga* (*Ísl. s.*),¹ one of the main parts of the *Sturlunga* compilation, says the following:

Sturla [Sighvatsson] vaknaði, þá er skammt var sól farin. Hann settist upp ok var sveittr um andlit. Hann strauk fast hendinni um kinnina ok mælti: 'Ekki er mark at draumum.' Síðan stóð hann upp ok gekk til salernis ok Illugi prestr með honum. En er hann kom aftur, lá hann litla hríð, áðr maðr kom í skálann ok kallaði: 'Nú ríðr flokkrinn Sunnlendinga ok er herr manna.' Hljópu menn þá þegar upp ok til vápna [430].

These words mark the start of the battle of Örlygsstaðir, in which Sturla Sighvatsson, the protagonist of the first half of the saga, dies. This event comprises the central climax of *Ísl. s.* and at the same time can be taken as the first climax of the entire *Sturlunga* compilation.²

This paper will discuss the narratological role of dreams in *Ísl. s.*, with special attention to the description of the battle at Örlygsstaðir. *Ísl. s.* contains an unusually large number of episodes involving dreams: twenty-three in the part that is considered to be the original narrative, or forty-five if the parts are included that are most likely to be additions made by the compiler. By comparison, there are an average of three to four dreams in each of the *Íslendinga sögur* (Glendinning, 1973-74, 128). In his doctoral thesis, *Träume und Vorbedeutung in der Íslendinga saga Sturla Thordarsons* (1974), Robert J. Glendinning investigated dreams and prophecies in the saga.³ His conclusion is that dreams and prophecies are utilized in the saga both to predict and to draw attention to fateful events, to explain these events indirectly, and to pass moral judgements on individuals and their affairs. Most of the dreams are connected with the main theme of the first half of *Ísl. s.*: the rise and fall of the Sturlung clan.

The writer Gunnar Benediktsson has already investigated the life and career of Sturla Þórðarson in his work *Sagnameistarinn Sturla* (1961). There he describes the special interest shown by the narrator of *Ísl. s.* in dreams, supernatural events and prophecies, and shows how his skillful manipulation of these phenomena increases the narrative's dramatic effect and the audience's eagerness for crucial events to be told. Dr. Helgi Pjeturss even describes the continuity in the description of Sturla Sighvatsson in *Ísl. s.* in an article in the journal *Skírnir* in 1906, discussing among other things the dreams that he and his main rival Gizurr Þorvaldsson have before the battle at Örlygsstaðir. *Ísl. s.* tells of Gizurr's dream as follows:

Gizurr sagði þeim Kolbeini [Armórssyni] og Brandi [Kolbeinssyni] draum sinn [...]. 'Þat dreymði mik,' sagði Gizurr, 'at mér þótti Magnús biskup, fððurbróðir minn, koma at mér, ok mælti hann svá: 'Standið þér upp, frændi,' sagði hann, 'ek skal fara með yðr.' Þá vaknaði ek.'

¹ Citing *Sturlunga saga*, 1946, vol. 1.

² For more on the narrative of the battle of Örlygsstaðir, see Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 1988, and Úlfar Bragason, 1986.

³ See also Guðrún Nordal, 1990.

'Þetta er vel dreymt,' sagði Kolbeinn, – 'eða hversu lízt þér?'

'Þetta þykkir mér dreymt en ódreymt,' sagði Gizurr [428–29].

Helgi reads the saga narrative as a true story and explains the causes of the characters' differing dreams as Sturla's having slept in the closed and stifling huts of Miklabær, and Gizurr out under the clear sky.

The poet Guðmundur Friðjónsson objected to such a reading in an article in *Eimreiðin* in 1907.⁴ He says that it is clear that Sturla has dreamt badly, even horrifically, and that Helgi was openly contradicting the saga by searching for biological explanations for the various dreams of the saga characters. Guðmundur writes:

How could the dreams have had meaning and been *premonitions* of future events if they originated sometimes from bad air and sometimes from good? We see throughout all of the sagas, both the *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, which are of course enormously fantastical, as well as the *Íslendingasögur*, which are supposedly truthful—we see in all of these sagas that the characters dream about the events of the coming day, and sometimes they dream well into the future—sometimes lucidly, sometimes vaguely, in unclear images [263].

Guðmundur then discusses several phenomena and dreams that *Sturlunga* says occurred before the Örlygsstaðir battle, and states:

It is evident that the supernatural world opened up at that time and allowed numerous people to see into it and hear it, both awake and asleep. Sturla's dream the night before the battle does not contradict the other portents in any way, but is rather a link in a long and complicated chain. Trying to turn it into a delusion completely contradicts almost all of *Sturlunga* [270].

Guðmundur feels that *Sturlunga* is narrated 'as precisely as it is possible to tell a story [270]':

It is because of this *precision*, which the saga writer has been granted in rich measure, and the aura of truth that surrounds the saga, that it is scarcely possible to dispute any of its events, including those that involve mysterious portents [271].

As every attentive reader can rest assured, and as Glendinning has clearly demonstrated, the first of these two assertions by Guðmundur is correct: Sturla's dream is in full accord with the saga in other respects than the fact that he does not announce it. The reader can guess from Sturla's discomfort upon waking that he has dreamed the future, as events later confirm. On the other hand, Guðmundur makes the same mistake as many readers of *Sturlunga* before or since when he equates the precision and probability of the narrative with its being 'true' in terms of a modern understanding. He tries to confirm the veracity of the saga's dream sequences by

⁴ Glendinning, 1974, 20-37 discusses medieval ideas about dreams, and the difference of opinion between Helgi and Guðmundur reflects the differing views of people of those times. Some searched for natural causes of dreams, others were unconvinced of their validity, and still others searched for their deeper meanings and even looked upon them as divine revelations.

comparing them with contemporary prophetic dreams, even his own dreams. But *Sturlunga* is an epic work, not simply a narrative of actual events arranged in chronological order. On the other hand, it seems that medieval Icelanders had firmer beliefs in supernatural phenomena than they do now, although they too disagreed on the veracity of narratives about such things (Úlfar Bragason, 1994; cf. Clunies Ross, 2002, 449).

Margaret Clunies Ross has pointed out that '[t]he hallmark of the fantastic as a literary mode is that it juxtaposes elements of both the realistic and the marvelous or improbable, often without comment, and thereby problematizes both' [Clunies Ross, 2002, 448]. This is what happens with the dream narratives in *Ísl. s.* On the other hand, it is unclear in the saga whether the narrator is in these narratives 'as engaged with 'reality', as he perceives it, as when he writes objectively and creates an impression of realism' [Clunies Ross, 2002, 449]. At the same time the narrator is given the opportunity to use the dreams in the narrative to communicate something other than is readily apparent, that is, the authorial position toward and understanding of the internal cohesion of the events of the saga.

Lars Lönnroth has stated that dreams play three different roles in the sagas. In the first place, they predict future events, and in this respect they have a structural role. Secondly, dreams suggest that some supernatural power is playing a part in the events, and thus they can influence a saga's theme or message. Thirdly, dreams can be used to characterize those who dream them, and can thereby play a role in character description (Lönnroth, 2002, 455–56). In what follows, this triple role of dreams will be viewed with respect to the narrative of the battle at Örylgsstaðir.

It is uncertain when the name Örylgsstaðir was first used. Bjarni Einarsson has stated that the name means 'battleground,' and it is likely that the name is taken from the battle that took place there, rather than that the enclosure and the sheephouse had that name previously (Bjarni Einarsson, 1989). *Örygi* ('battle') and *örlög* ('fate') are related words. In the narrative of *Ísl. s.*, Örylgsstaðir is where the Sturlungs meet their destiny, and the entire structure of the saga is directed toward this fateful event. It is there that they trade destinies with their adversaries. The author of the compilation lays even more emphasis on the importance of the Örylgsstaðir battle for the entire saga by adding, before the battle is narrated, a whole chapter on dreams and prophecies concerning the bloodletting, beginning with the following words:

Fyrir tíðindum þessum, er hér fara eftir, urðu margir fyrirburðir, þó at hér sé fáir ritaðir [424].

In the saga itself there are also several dream narratives that are clearly meant to direct the audience's attention to the brewing conflict, and to prepare it for what shall come.

Some of these dreams are attributed to anonymous individuals, and as the saga proceeds it becomes clearer that they predict the fall of Sturla Sighvatsson and the defeat of his men. Chapter 130 tells how one woman at Munka-Þverá (where Sturla Sighvatsson was later buried) dreamt that a man came to her in her sleep and spoke this verse:

Saman dragask sveitir,
svellur órói, –
varir mik ok varir mik,
at viti Sturla.

Ætla lýðir,
þótt á laun fari,
– kemr vél fyrir vél –,
vélar at gjalda.

Then the narrator says: 'Margir váru þá stórdraumar á landinu víða, bæði fyrir norðan land ok sunnan [417].' With this verse he clearly expresses the gloom that has gripped him because of the struggle which is now being waged openly for control of the country by Sturla Sighvatsson and Gizurr Þorvaldsson, and concludes with the moral pronouncement that they have both resorted to foul play.

The next chapter of the saga says that a man in Borgarfjörður dreamt that he had been visited by a huge, evil-looking man who recited the following:

Sumar munat þetta
svarflaust vesa,
rýður rekka sjöt
rauðu blóði.
Herr mun finnask
fyr hraun ofan,
þar mun blóð vakit
betra en eigi.

The time of the conflict has thus been predicted, and even the place as well, if the word 'hraun' is understood in its meaning of 'landslide'. The dream character is satisfied that the conflict will end in bloodshed, which might be understood as the narrator taking a position here against Sturla in his conflict with his kinsmen Snorri Sturluson and Þorleifr Þórðarson of Garðar, which has crystallized in the battle at Bær the year before, when the sons of Þórðr Sturluson supported Snorri.

Chapter 132 tells of how Sighvatr Sturluson dreamt of his roan horse, and the verse that he recites suggests that he interprets the dream as predicting his death. In chapter 134 an anonymous man in Skagafjörður dreams, after Sturla's supporters have come there in August, of a big, ogre-like man, whom he questions concerning the outcome of the imminent strife. The ogre-like man replies: 'Ílla mun verða ok allilla. Sturla mun falla, en Kolbeinn mun eigi á braut komast [421].' The man interprets the dream as indicating that both Sturla and the leader of the men of Skagafjörður, Kolbeinn ungi, will fall. But the saga later reveals that the dream actually referred to Kolbeinn Sighvatsson, who was killed after the battle of Örylgsstaðir. The same chapter tells of the dream of Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir at Keldur. She dreams that a named individual, Þorgrímr from Gunnarsholt, who is sitting on the wall of a cattle pen, looks at a man's head lying on the wall and recites this verse:

Sit ek, ok sék á
svarit Steinvarar:
Hví liggir hér á vegg
höfuð í örtröð?

Steinvör's reply might have been that it could be the head of Sturla or of any of her brothers whom the men of the South kill at Örylgsstaðir, while the pen could symbolize the enclosure where the battle takes place. The narrator has now prepared the audience so well that he feels it unnecessary to cite the dream of anyone who does not participate in the battle, and says:

‘Margir váru aðrir draumar sagðir í þennan tíma, þó at hér sé eigi ritaðir, þeir er tíðindavæmir þóttu vera, svá ok aðrir fyrirburðir [421].’

Considering who the narrator is, the next dream narrative gives a good indication of how he views these events. On the morning of the day before the battle, Sturla Sighvatsson asks Sturla Þórðarson whether he thinks their adversaries will come from the south. Sturla Þórðarson says that he expects them to do so. Then Sturla asks what he has dreamt:

‘Mik dreymði þat,’ sagði Sturla, ‘at ek var í Hvammi á föðurleifð minni, ok þar várum vér allir fyrir handan ána upp frá Akri. Kross stóð hjá oss á holtsmúlanum, hár ok mikill. Þá þótti mér hlaupa skriða mikil ór fjallinu, ok var smágrjót í – allt nema einn steinn. Hann var svá mikill sem hamarr hlypi at oss, ok þótti mér undir verða margt várra manna, ok margt komst undan. En Vigfúss Ívarsson varð undir, svá at ek kennda, en þá vaknaða ek,’ sagði hann.

Sturla Sighvatsson svarar: ‘Oft verðr sveipr í svefni,’ sagði hann [422].

The narrator indicates here that his *alter ego* warned his cousin Sturla of the slaughter of his men as plainly as was possible for a man of such a saturnine personality according to the saga’s character descriptions, but Sturla’s impetuosity prevented him from placing any faith in the prophetic value of the dream. The symbol of the cross, however, indicates that this was actually a Christian revelation. At the same time it recalls the faith of Unnr djúpuðga at Hvammr, the ancestress of the Sturlungs. The same thing happens to Sturla the next morning, when he himself dreams badly about approaching events. But this seems completely to contradict the fact that earlier in the saga Sturla announces his dreams and pretends to heed them.

In chapter 74 of the saga Sturla uses his dream that Snorri Sturluson will die before him as the reason for stopping his attack against Snorri, but in fact he has not secured the support of his men for the attack. In chapter 84 he also tells his men his dream before the Hundadalur battle: the dream is interpreted as saying that he will have the upper hand in his dealings with the men of Vatnsfjörður, and indeed, he has the greater number of supporters. He has his adversaries killed, although he has previously been reconciled with them and has promised them mercy. But Sturla’s laughter after the dream is interpreted favourably for him could just as well indicate his viciousness and the fact that he is playing with men’s faith in dreams, even though his laughter is mentioned more than once in connection with this battle.

Sturla’s audacity and uncertainty in his interactions with Gizurr Þorvaldsson are revealed in the fact that he pays no heed either to Sturla Þórðarson’s dream before the Örygsstaðir battle or to his own. Þórðr Þorvaldsson from Vatnsfjörður also refuses to pay attention to the dreams of his brother Snorri before the Hundadalur battle, and they are both killed. Sturla, however, would doubtless have been able to escape like the men of Vatnsfjörður if he had wanted to. But he decides to bring matters to a head even though he expects the worst, thereby giving himself to the power of either the fates or predestination, according to whether his behaviour is understood in terms of an old pagan fatalism or of Christianity. Although the narrative of the Örygsstaðir battle is written in epic style and Sturla is described as a champion who fights against overwhelming odds, it contains various elements that suggest that Sturla is to be

viewed as a Christian crusader, even a holy martyr. The entire narrative of his death is sympathetic toward him.⁵

On the other hand, Gizurr Þorvaldsson tells his men his dream on the morning of the Örylgstaðir battle: it indicates that he and his companions will prevail, since Bishop Magnús, his uncle, who has died the year before, appears to him and says that he will go with him. Gizurr feels that it is better to have dreamt this than not. With this dream, the saga is pointing toward his valour, his calmness and his confidence. The saga verifies what Sturla said to Gizurr during the Apavatn excursion:

‘En mér þykkir sem þá sé allir yfirkomnir, er þú ert, því at ek uggi þik einn manna á Íslandi, ef eigi ferr vel með okkr’ [414].

An indicator that the narrator was of the opinion that doubts about the outcome of the conflict with Gizurr had already taken hold of Sturla when he went to the Örylgstaðir battle is the fact that the author of the compilation, who is generally considered to have been Þórðr Narfason, a relation of Sturla Þórðarson by marriage, says that the following verse had been spoken to Sturla the summer before the battle:

Leyft esat yðr né öðrum
almtýnöndum sýna,
hvárir grams ór grimmri
grjóthríð heðan líða [426].

He also cites a verse that had been spoken to Sturla Þórðarson:

Valfalli, mun vella
vápnröst, náir föstu,
valr slítr varma kilju,
verðk þangat til ganga [427].

This verse suggests that Sturla Þórðarson went to the Örylgstaðir battle reluctantly and full of doubts about his cousin's methods, and that he expected the worst, just as the dream that he told Sturla indicates. But the narrator of *Ísl. S.* still admires Sturla Sighvatsson's valour. In chapter 75 he makes an intrusion into the saga with these words:

Reið Sturla á löstum hesti, er Álfarleggr var kallaðr, allra hesta mestr ok fríðastr. Hann var í rauðri ólpu, ok hygg ek, at fáir muni sét hafa röskligrá mann [334].

As I have now shown, the narrative of the Örylgstaðir battle displays the three types of roles that dreams play in the *Ísl. s.*: they prophesy and prepare the audience for the saga's main events; they give indications of the saga's inner meaning, and they play a role in its character descriptions. The dreams call forth the contradictory personalities of Sturla Sighvatsson and Gizurr Þorvaldsson, as the narrator does directly in chapter 121, and reveal that Sturla was valiant, but not lucky. The narrator also draws attention to the differences in the intellects of Sturla Sighvatsson and his *alter ego*, which doubtless becomes Sturla Þórðarson's main explanation for the fact that he survived the conflicts of his age and put them into writing. Furthermore, the gloomy nature of the dream verses emphasizes the central political theme of the

⁵ Mariene Ciklamini (1988) has interpreted the narrative of *Ísl. s.* of the battle of Örylgstaðir in the light of medieval Christian ideas on divine retribution. Although it is not to be doubted that Sturla Þórðarson was a child of his times in religious matters, *Ísl. s.* is a political saga and not a religious work, and should be understood in *secular terms*.

Sturlunga compilation as a whole: a curse had been visited upon the country because its chieftains had not restrained their lust for wealth and power. The compilation's point of view is thus apocalyptic (cp. Kermodé, 1981, pp. 3-31). Accordingly, the unreal or fantastic meets the realistic in the sagas.

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