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Some Heroic Motifs in Icelandic Art

Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir

Heroic legends were popular across the Germanic world throughout the Middle Ages. Most of them originated in the time of the great migrations which lasted for about three or four centuries, from late fourth century AD until c. 700.[1] Characterised by vast human migration in Europe, this period was one of tribal and national conflicts. Some of these are described by contemporary historians, who record sieges, great battles, alliances, forced marriages, hostage-taking and other dramatic situations. Such circumstances are likely to see the emergence of prominent warriors and figures who attain the status of heroes. The memory of such heroes then lived on in stories that were spread and handed down in poetry and oral legends, undergoing gradual transformation as the cultures developed over the centuries. The material was malleable, and the heroes and their exploits, quarrels and battles could easily become merged with similar tales about completely different characters and situations. As a result, connections between individual tales take many different forms and this body of material can be seen as constituting a living narrative tradition.

Historical and legendary figures celebrated in the heroic tradition include Attila the Hun, the East Gothic king Ermanaric, Theoderic the Great, Theuderic I, king of the Franks, Hildebrand, the Burgundian king

[1] The actual time limits of the Migration Period are extremely varied according to different historians, who even believe that it began earlier than mentioned here, in about AD 300. Others state a more specific period, from AD 375/6, when the Huns attacked the Visigoths, to AD 568. Still others choose to narrow the period down to c. AD 400–500, while others extend it to c. AD 700/800 (Künzl 2014: 107–85, 136). The period is sometimes divided into two phases, before and after c. AD 500.

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Gunther, Sigurðr/Siegfried the Dragon-Slayer and, finally, Hild, daughter of the legendary king Hagen. However, while these figures represent what is traditionally known as the Germanic heroic legends, new heroes emerged in European literature in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in the chivalric literature of the time, the medieval romance. Some of them form part of the Arthurian tradition, as for example Yvain, the hero of *Yvain, le Chevalier au Lion* by Chrétien de Troyes, while others belong to the French tradition of *chansons de geste*, like for example the champions of Charlemagne. Yet, some other heroes may belong to the tradition of medieval romance in a broader sense. During this time, some earlier characters from the heroic tradition underwent further development, as a result of influence from the popular heroes of the romance tradition. For the time being, however, we will focus on heroes from the Germanic legends.

Extant materials indicate that people in Scandinavia knew some of the heroic legends as early as the eighth or ninth century. The earliest records do not present a complete picture, however, and it is possible that this material was current in Scandinavia at a much earlier date (Haymes and Samples 1996: 46–7). But what is certain is that these heroic legends flourished in the narrative traditions in the Nordic countries for many centuries after that time, as is attested by the texts and artifacts that have been preserved. The sources that testify to the currency of this material in the Nordic countries consist, on the one hand, of physical objects (carvings in stone and wood, and tapestries) and, on the other, the poems preserved in the Edda, which are commonly believed to have been composed between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries. Traces of the heroes of legend are also to be found in other kinds of Old Norse poetry, and prose texts including the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus (from about 1200), *Þiðriks saga af Bern* (from about 1200–1260), the thirteenth-century *Völsunga saga* and *Snorra Edda*, and the fourteenth-century *Héðins saga ok Högna*, relating the story of Hildr Högnadóttir (Hild, daughter of King Hagen) and what is known as the ‘everlasting battle’.[2]

Some heroes of the Germanic tradition have been identified in pictorial art. If we begin by focussing briefly on sources from outside Scandinavia, we find that two of the heroes play a part in the story of the Völsungs, as preserved in *Völsunga saga* and earlier legends and poems, i.e. Sigurðr Fáfnisbani (Sigurðr/Siegfried the Dragon Slayer) and his brother-in-law

[2] On the Hildr legend and the ‘everlasting battle’, see, e.g., Almqvist 1978–81.

Depictions of *Völsunga saga* in Scandinavian art.

Century	The legend of the Völsungs	The Sigurðr legend	The legend of the Gjúkungar
8th –10th	×	(×)	×
9th–11th	(×)	(×)	×
11th		×	×
12th		×	×
12th–13th	×	×	×

Gunnarr Gjúkason (Gunther/Gundaharius), who ended his life in the snake pit. Of the two, Sigurðr was far more popular than Gunnarr, judging by the preserved artifacts (Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2012a: 63–8). A few images have survived of another popular hero, Theoderic the Great (d. 526) who became known in legend as Dietrich von Bern (Melin 2012: 172–8), and two images may refer to the Hildr legend (Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2012c: 69). Most of the pictures were carved on stones or stone crosses in England and the Isle of Man in the tenth century, particularly in areas inhabited by Scandinavians.

If we turn to images from Scandinavia, we not only find more protagonists from known sagas, but also more artifacts. For example, examining the distribution of the Hildr images in Scandinavia, we find five artifacts that have been interpreted as representing Hildr, along with her father Högni and her lover Héðinn (Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2012c: 67). If, on the other hand, we turn to images referring to *Völsunga saga*, we find quite a number of images, showing not only Sigurðr and Gunnarr, but other figures from the story as well, i.e. persons from different episodes of the saga as it is now preserved. Sigurðr is by far the most popular hero, with 31 images in Scandinavia, while at least 16 images have been interpreted as representing Gunnarr. Table 1 outlines the preservation of three of the main legends behind *Völsunga saga* in Scandinavian art down to the thirteenth century (for more detailed tables, see Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2012a: 76, *cf*. 72–4).

Theoderic the Great, known in Scandinavia as Didrik av Bern/Þiðrikr (or Þiðrekr) af Bern, shows up on a few occasions as well (Hauck 1965: 435–8; Melin 2012: 172–75), and some scholars have also mentioned Theuderic I (d. 534), who is sometimes identified with the legendary hero Wolfdietrich (Malone 1977: 13; *cf*. below). Most of the Scandinavian

images are located in present-day Sweden and Norway, and only one has been discovered in Denmark. No image has been identified in Iceland, even though it belonged to the Old Norse cultural milieu and stood in close relationship to Norwegian cultural currents. Communication between the two countries was constant during the middle ages, as is demonstrated in numerous medieval works, both historical and literary. Various scholars have written about pictorial representations of the heroic legends, particularly of that of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani (e.g. Blindheim 1972–73; Düwel 1986; Ney 2017).[3]

Icelandic art

There may be various reasons for the popularity of individual heroic legends or motifs in European art, but instead of going into that discussion, interesting as it may be, let us ask: What about Icelandic art? As is well known, the Icelanders preserved the old legends in their poetry and literature, so it might be expected that at least some traces of this material would be found in their art as well, not least since it is generally believed that the tradition of carving wood goes as far back as the settlement of the island (Magerøy 1999: 6), with increasing knowledge and skills from c. 950 (Guðmundur G. Þórarinsson 2014: 33).[4] There are, in fact, some indications that the Icelandic people knew the tradition of heroic images, and some literary texts suggest that artistic traditions (and media) in Iceland and the Scandinavian countries, particualrly Norway, were similar. These texts mention carvings in wood in Icelandic farmhouses, or walls that were covered with tapestries and shields (Paulsen 1966: 43–4). What kind of scenes were depicted on these artifacts is another matter, but it must be considered as a possibility that they were from the legendary tradition, since examples of such illustrations are found in Iceland's neighbouring countries, where Icelanders were frequent visitors. Icelandic chieftains, visiting the royal house as well as their fellow Norwegian chieftains,

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[3] For Anglo-Scandinavian sculptures of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, see Kopár 2012. The present author has recently published articles on images from *Völsunga saga* and *Héðins saga ok Högna* (Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2012a; 2012b; 2012c).

[4] For a recent discussion on Icelandic carvers in medieval times, and Icelandic carving traditions, see Guðmundur G. Þórarinsson 2014: 30–36 and 49–51. See also Þóra Kristjánsdóttir 2005: 12–17.

would hardly have escaped noticing the art on wall carvings, tapestries and other artifacts.

There are few reliable sources on heroic images in Iceland, but we might for example mention a shield that the Icelandic poet Einar *skálaglamm* received as a gift when he declaimed his poem *Vellekla* to Hákon *jarl* in Norway. This is mentioned in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, from the thirteenth century, which says that the shield was decorated with pictures from the old tales (*fornsögur*) (Egils saga Skallagrímssonar 1933: 271–2). We might also consider the carvings mentioned in *Laxdœla saga*, also from the thirteenth century. This says that there were excellent stories depicted on the wooden wall-panelling and the ceiling in Ólafr Pá's kitchen at Hjarðarholt in western Iceland ("... markaðar ágætligar sǫgur á þilviðinum ok svá á ræfrinu") (Laxdœla saga 1934: 79). The poet Úlfr Uggason described these pictures in his poem *Húsdrápa*. The poem is unfortunately poorly preserved, but from fragments in *Snorra-Edda* it is clear that the scenes in these carvings included Baldr's funeral, the swimming contest between Loki and Heimdallr for the Brísingamen, Freyja's necklace (this is related in *Snorra-Edda*), and the fight between Thor and the Midgard serpent (Laxdœla saga 1934: 80; Paulsen 1966: 44).[5] In a similar vein, Gríma, a female character in *Fóstbrœðra saga* from the early thirteenth century, is said to possess a big chair with an image of Thor carved on it (Fóstbrœðra saga 1943: 245). All these pictures, however, are from mythology, and not from heroic legends. In addition to this, we might also want to consider the thirteenth century *Brennu-Njáls saga*, which tells of a certain Þorkell *hákr* who claimed to have killed a flying dragon on his journeys abroad. When Þorkell returned to Iceland, he had his alleged heroic deeds carved in images on the panels above his bed and on his chair ("... lét hann gera þrekvirki þessi yfir lokhvílu sinni ok á stóli fyrir hásæti sínu") (Brennu-Njáls saga 1954: 303).[6]

The contents of literary texts like *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, *Lax-*

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[5] It has been suggested that the images may have been carved in Norway and imported to Iceland, mainly because the pictorial motifs in question were common in Norwegian carvings (Schjeide n.d.: 5, 7 and 32). However, this does not affect the value of the text, which indicates that Icelanders knew the tradition of images from the old legends. On *Húsdrápa*, see further Schier 1976.

[6] See further *Rauðúlfs þáttr*, where Saint Ólafr visits a certain Rauðr, and stays overnight in his richly decorated house, with painted Christian symbols, as well as images of ancient kings ("...v*or*o markaðar fornsa᷎gur. *ok* frasagn*ir* fra agêtum k*onung*u*m*") (*Den store saga om Olav den hellige* 1941: 669). This night, the king had a dream, and saw a crucifix with a metal human figure that was decorated with various symbols, including images from

dæla saga, *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Brennu-Njáls saga* are of course intangible. Scholarly discussions of pictorial representations of heroic legends have, unaccountably, focussed almost exclusively on the texts and failed to mention Icelandic artifacts, except for the famous carving on the door from the church at Valþjófsstaður (discussed below). It is therefore only natural to ask if there are any indications, apart from literary texts, that Icelanders used motifs from the heroic material in their art, as people elsewhere in the Nordic region did? And is it possible that there are some artifacts with heroic motifs in Iceland which have not so far been discussed? If this is the case, might these objects indicate that more objects of the same kind were probably made, but are now lost? These possibilities will be explored in this article, with an attempt made to shed new light on six Icelandic images from c. 1200 down to the eighteenth century to see if they might be interpreted as referring to heroic legends. The images concern three of the above-mentioned heroes, the dragon slayers Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, Þiðrikr af Bern, and Wolfdietrich.[7] In the following sections, each of the six images will be discussed with attention given to 1) its age, 2) the description of the image, and 3) the story or legend from the heroic tradition that the image might represent.

Sigurðr Fáfnisbani is without doubt the most renowned dragon slayer of the three; nevertheless, the other two also fought dragons, according to legend, as well as rescuing lions from dragons or 'serpents'. In order to analyse the Icelandic images, the following criteria will be used.

1) Iconographically, we notice that Sigurðr is usually identified by the fact that he slays the dragon Fáfnir from below, and is sometimes situated in a pit, as related in the eddic poem *Fáfnismál*, the oldest textual source, and *Völsunga saga* (*Eddukvæði* 1999: 208; *cf*. Düwel 1986: 234 and 246; Ney 2017: 154); this is not, however, conclusive (see, e.g., Blindheim 1972–73). Other motifs from his legend may be present, and help us with the identification, such as, for example, his horse Grani with the gold on its back, the golden ring Andvaranautr, and the presence of birds (Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2012a: 73).

ancient stories ("fornu*m* søgu*m*"), such as that of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and Haraldr hilditönn (ibid.: 676).

[7] Besides, from the tradition of *chansons de geste*, an image of Olger the Dane, one of Charlemagne's champions and the hero of the Icelandic *Olgeirs rímur danska*, may have been carved on a seventeenth century wooden chest (Þóra Kristjánsdóttir 2005: 66–67).

2) Þiðrikr af Bern (Dietrich von Bern) is portrayed in a variety of ways. In earlier work, he is sometimes depicted hunting, or else riding on a horse on his way to hell. He can also be shown fighting in single combat, breathing fire, and in a German manuscript illumination from the twelfth century he is shown with a dragon hovering above his head (Paulsen 1966: fig. 81, *cf*. Hauck 1965: 435); in a manuscript from the first half of the fifteenth century, he is shown with a lion on top of his helmet (Melin 2012: 172–8). As will be shown in this article, when involved in a dragon-slaying combat, he may also be identified, and distinguished from Sigurðr, by a lion by his side.
3) Wolfdietrich has not been identified in medieval art apart from the example given below, where, like Þiðrikr af Bern, he is shown as a dragon slayer in the company of a lion.

To avoid complications, it should be mentioned right from the start that the legend of Wolfdietrich is not preserved in any Old Norse text, while the legend of Þiðrikr is preserved in his medieval saga, *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, and Þiðrikr is also mentioned in some of the eddic poems. *Þiðriks saga af Bern* is preserved in a Norwegian manuscript, SKB perg. 4 fol., from c. 1275–1300, which was compiled by two Norwegian and three Icelandic scribes, and also in Icelandic paper manuscript copies from the seventeenth century and later.[8] It is also obvious that Þiðrikr was known in Iceland in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; first, he is probably referred to in the *Leiðarvísan* by Abbot Nikulás (d. 1159) in the place-name 'Þiðreksbað' (*Sturlunga saga* 1988: Skýringar og fræði 57), and then several times, along with other champions from *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, in the indigenous Icelandic *Mágus saga jarls* from the late thirteenth century or c. 1300 (Mágus saga jarls 1949: 284–302). Secondly, the king, 'Theódóricus', is mentioned in *Árna saga biskups* from the fourteenth century; the author of the saga also points out that he is commonly known as 'Þiðrekr af Bern' (*Sturlunga saga* 1988: II 861). Finally, a ballad, *Kvæði af Þiðrik kongi og ljóni*, which relates the story of the dragon-slaying episode of *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, was translated into Icelandic from Danish, and written in an anthology of poems dating from 1699–

[8] AM 177 fol. (1690–1691); AM 178 fol. (c. 1625–1672); Lbs 982 4to (1803); Lbs 4556 8vo (late 19th century); ÍB 52 fol. (c. 1700); Harvard Ms Icel. 32 (1789); SÁM 4 (1890–1910). See also Eriksen and Johansson 2012: 42. In addition, some late Swedish paper manuscripts include copies, excerpts and translations (Gödel 1897–1900: 324–327).

1700 (*Íslenzk fornkvæði* 1962: 247–52, *cf.* Dgf. 9 in *Danmarks gamle folkeviser* 1853: 429–41).[9] To sum up, Þiðrikr was known in Icelandic texts from medieval times and onwards. The legend of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani is preserved in several eddic poems and other kinds of poetry from later centuries, *Snorra-Edda*, *Völsunga saga*, and as a special episode within *Þiðriks saga af Bern*. Thus, *Þiðriks saga af Bern* relates two of the legends in question.

It should be kept in mind that there are inevitably certain methodological difficulties when approaching this material, for example the lack of standardised or codified iconography for the identification of pictorial representations of legendary material, and its relation to Christian iconography; for example, Sigurðr and Saint Michael, and even Saint George, are often depicted in similar iconographical contexts.[10] Therefore, the examination must take into consideration previous research when possible, and comparison with the legendary tradition as well as with other preserved images. Some allowance may also be made for uncertainties in dating and for regional variation in motifs and styles. Without ignoring these problems, I believe that the following comparison, emphasising the similarity between the pictorial motifs and the texts, should take us one step further towards identifying literary themes in the visual representations in question.

The church door from Valþjófsstaður

The oldest of the six Icelandic objects is the famous door from the church at Valþjófsstaður in Fljótsdalur, in the east of Iceland, which is now preserved in the National Museum of Iceland (Þjms. 11009/1930-425).[11] It is generally dated to about 1200 (Magerøy 1967: 31–32, fig. 48; 2001: 17), though possible dates between 1150 and 1255 have been suggested;

[9] The ballad was translated from the anthology published by Anders Sørensen Vedel in 1591. The original Icelandic text is now lost, and only extant as a copy in JS 405 4to from 1819 (Jón Helgason 1962: ix–xxiv). Some further ballads related to the material of *Þiðriks saga af Bern* were translated into Icelandic, but do not concern the dragon fight episode discussed in this article.

[10] For some of the most important works, see, e.g., Blindheim 1972–73; Margeson 1980; Düwel 1986; Nordanskog 2006; Fuglesang 2007; Hohler 1999.

[11] For the description of the object in situ given by Vigfús Ormsson in 1821, see Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 1984: 35–36; 636.

for the purposes of this article, a date of c. 1200, or the following two decades, is assumed.[12] The door is richly carved, with an illustration that was painted, probably already in late medieval times, with beautiful colours, especially in light blue, pink and red (Geilmann 1966: 287–88; Magnús Már Lárusson 1970: 256–57).[13] It is fitted with a door ring, made from iron and silver, presumably in the first quarter of the thirteenth century (Paulsen 1966: 217–18 and 277).

The door comprises two roundels in the Romanesque style, the lower of which consists of interlaced zoomorphic patterns depicting dragons or serpents, a common motif in Romanesque art. The carving may support the readings of the pictorial scenes in the upper roundel, and can therefore be seen as historiated (i.e. with an identifiable figure or a specific scene), even if it has not been interpreted separately in relation to a known narrative. The upper picture is divided into three scenes. One shows a knight or a warrior (i.e., an armed man on horseback, accompanied by a hawk or another kind of large bird) slaying a dragon, or, more precisely, rescuing a lion from a winged dragon; the heads of three serpents or off-spring of the dragon are depicted in the upper right corner; the next shows the same man accompanied by the lion, while holding something his hand, and the third shows the lion lying on the man's grave. An inscription in runes on the grave reads: [See the] "mighty king, who slew that dragon, buried here" ([Sé inn] "ríkja konung hér grafinn er vá dreka þenna"). The

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[12] The earliest date, about 1150 or a little later, was proposed by Otto Blom, who believed that the door may have belonged to an older building before it was used in the new building. George Stephens, who was one of the first scholars to study the door, states that "[a]ll agree that this fine wood-carving cannot be *later* than *about* 1190" (1873: 253 and 260). Based on the runic inscription (see below), Björn Magnússon Ólsen considered it to be no earlier than 1200, and possibly as late the middle of the thirteenth century (1885: 30–1). In 1939, Barði Guðmundsson had dated the carving to 1250–55, as he believed it to have been carved by a certain Randalín Filipusdóttir, a mistress of the household of Valþjófsstaður, who was regarded as highly accomplished at handicrafts (Barði Guðmundsson 1939: 2–4; on Randalín, see *Sturlunga saga* 1988: II 671, 803, 806). This theory still enjoys some popularity (Helgi Hallgrímsson 2006: 132–134). Þórgunnur Snædal proposes a date of about 1200 or shortly before (2003: 49–50), while one of the leading authorities on Icelandic medieval carving, Ellen Magerøy, argued for a date of about 1200 (1967: 31–32, fig. 48; 1999; 17; 2001: 17). *Cf*. Bæksted 1942: 181, where the carving is dated to c. 1200 (see also the overview on pp. 184–85). In a letter written by the Icelandic archaeologist Kristján Eldjárn in 1964, he considered that the door might be from around 1200–1220, but in his published book, *Hundrað ár í Þjóðminjasafni*, the door is dated to 1200 (1994: ch. 11; ch. 68). In the online catalogue from the National Museum of Iceland, it is dated to 1175–1200 (Sarpur 11009/1930-425).

[13] Samples of the paint show that it included ash (Geilmann 1966: 287–88).

first two words are missing and the reading proposed here is conjectural (Bæksted 1942: 192; Þórgunnur Snædal 2003: 49–50; *cf*. Stephens 1873: 258). What is beyond dispute, however, is that the pictures and the inscription in the upper roundel depict a king and a grateful lion.

The story portrayed in the carving is a well-known tale about the 'knight with the lion', (in German, 'der Löwen-Reiter-Drachenkampf') in which a hero (most often a king or a knight) rescues a lion from a dragon. The variant illustrated on the Valþjófsstaður church door includes the lion's gratitude and fidelity to the king who has saved his life. An oral tale containing the main elements of the knight-with-the-lion motif was recorded in Italy as early as the eleventh century, but the motif *per se* did not become popular until the twelfth century, in association with the writing of French chivalric material (Brodeur 1924: 514–5). The motif is symbolic, with the emphasis on the knight's Christian conduct. As on the Valþjófsstaður carvings, the knight comes across the lion fighting the dragon, helps the lion and slays the dragon, after which the lion follows him faithfully and serves him in gratitude. The interpretation is that the lion represents Christ; as the knight joins with him against the forces of evil, so Christ will remain faithfully with him (Brodeur 1924: 507–8).[14]

Many scholars have studied the carvings on the door from Valþjófsstaður. While they have not firmly established whether the door was made from imported timber or driftwood,[15] most of them consider the carvings to have been made in Iceland, and I see no reason to doubt previous studies on this, the most thorough of which is that by Peter Paulsen.[16] We know that the door ring is Icelandic (Paulsen 1966: 217–18 and 277) and the runes are also considered to have Icelandic characteristics (Björn Magnússon Ólsen 1885: 36–7).[17] Scholars do not, however, agree on the

[14] On the symbolic meaning of dragons and lions in medieval iconography, especially of dragons and lions as enemies, see, e.g., Kjesrud 2014: 235–39; Liepe 2008: 189.

[15] The wood is *rauðviður* (conifer, larch or pine; Kålund 1986: 25, 27, *cf*. n. 9), as is the wood of the old farmhouse at Valþjófsstaður (see note 18). In his aforementioned research, Stephens considered the wood to be driftwood (1873: 254), but *rauðviðr* was common as a driftwood in Iceland in former centuries (Helgi Hallgrímsson 2006: 136).

[16] The following text from the exhibit at the National Museum of Iceland states that the door is considered without doubt to have been carved in Iceland, and that more carved doors may have existed, as similar door rings have been preserved from churches in eastern Iceland: "Hún er talin án efa skorin hér á landi og er nú einstæð, fleiri skornar hurðir kunna þó að hafa verið til því að svipaðir hringir hafa varðveist frá kirkjum á Austurlandi" (Sarpur 11009/1930-425; *cf*. Paulsen 1966: figs. 118–24; Kålund 1986: 27).

[17] Björn Magnússon Ólsen considered the runes to have been carved in Iceland, and hence also the images (1885: 36–7). Some further runes have been identified, and interpreted as

Fig. 1. The church door from Valþjófsstaður. Photo by courtesy of the copyright holder. © The National Museum of Iceland.

original purpose of the door, or whether it may have belonged to the stave church that was built at Valþjófsstaður in the late twelfth century.[18] We cannot even rule out the possibility that it was made for another building,

being the mark of the carver, or 'the artist's monogram' (Stephens 1873: 255). It is also possible that these binding runes (situated on the left below the upper roundel) may have been carved on the door at a later date.

[18] According to *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar hin sérstaka*, written in the thirteenth century, Markús Gíslason, who died in 1196, imported timber from Norway and donated it to Valþjófsstaður for a church building (*Sturlunga saga* 1988: II 889; Bæksted 1942: 193). Björn Magnússon Ólsen considered it likely that the church was built around 1180 (1885: 35–6; see M. Lárusson 1966: 285, who extends the time of the building to c. 1180–90; *cf*. Harris 1970: 126–7; Kålund 1986: 27). It has been considered as a possibility that the door was initially located inside a large farmhouse (*skáli*), and later became used as a church door (Björn Magnússon Ólsen 1885: 24–37; Sigurður Vigfússon 1887: 102; Harris 1970: 127); more wood from the same farmhouse is supposed to have had some similar carvings (Helgi Hallgrímsson 2006: 133–34). Some scholars believe, however, that the door was originally made as a church door, or more precisely as the inner door between the entrance and the main church and that it was originally larger, being shortened by a third when

owned by a chieftain, and transferred to the church of Valþjófsstaður later on, as is stated in recent research on Icelandic monasteries (Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir 2017: 306–9; *Á ferð um Ísland* 2016: 164).

Early studies are described in Anders Bæksted's *Islands runeindskrifter* (1942). He describes how, although it had certainly been suggested that the carvings followed foreign models,[19] attention was turned to the domestic (i.e. Icelandic) saga tradition as the source of the material, and it was found that at least four knights or kings associated with lions were known from sagas in medieval Iceland. These were Íven Artúskappi (the Arthurian knight Yvain, *cf. Ívens saga*), Þiðrikr af Bern (Theoderic the Great, known from *Þiðriks saga af Bern*), Konráð keisarasonr (*cf. Konráðs saga keisarasonar*) and Vilhjálmr sjóðr (*cf. Vilhjálms saga sjóðs*).[20] On the basis of a comparison with the stories about these saga heroes, Bæksted came to the conclusion that the most likely sources for the door-carvings were *Ívens saga* and, as an even more likely choice, *Vilhjálms saga sjóðs*, while *Konráðs saga keisarasonar* was the most remote candidate (1942: 190–92).

Yvain (*Ívens saga*) is of French origin; it was composed by Chrétien de Troyes (d. c. 1181–91) in the 1170s, but was not translated into Old Norse until the middle of the thirteenth century, or even slightly later, in Norway (Harris 1970: 128). Hence, it must be considered rather unlikely that the carving, if it was executed around 1200 or shortly after (as Ellen Magerøy and others propose), was based on *Yvain*, unless the story was known from oral tradition. Furthermore, there is no mention that the dragon, as described in the translation, had wings, as does the one in the carving. Rather closer to the probable date of the carving is *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, which has been dated to between c. 1200 and 1260. *Konráðs saga keisarasonar* is thought to be from c. 1300, or slightly earlier, and it is probably safe – as with *Ívens saga* – to exclude it as a model for the Valþjófsstaður carving, at least as a literary work, on grounds of its age.[21] The same

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reused in a new church (M. Lárusson 1966: 285–86; *cf.* Kålund 1986: 26; Magerøy 1999: 16).

[19] It has been suggested that the door might have been made abroad and possibly carved before its was brought to Iceland (Sarpur 11009/1930-425; Sigurður Vigfússon 1887: 102–3; Stephens 1873: 260; Bæksted 1942: 199). Svend Grundtvig stated that it was carved in Norway, without giving any arguments for this view (1869–83: 684).

[20] *Ívens saga* 1898: 75–78; *Þiðriks saga af Bern* 1905–11: II 361–63; Konráðs saga keisarasonar 1949: 311–12; Vilhjálms saga sjóðs 1964: 26–27.

[21] It has been pointed out, that if the 'knight' (i.e., the king) is holding a dragon's claw in his hand, and not a lily, as most people believe, the reference could only apply to *Konráðs saga*

applies to the 'knight-with-the-lion' Vilhjálmr from *Vilhjálms saga sjóðs*, as that saga is believed to be from the fourteenth century. Naturally, a comparison between these late medieval sources and the carving from Valþjófsstaður may throw light upon Icelandic variants of the motif, and hence establish that the motif was generally known in Iceland, but we cannot avoid the fact that most of them are somewhat more recent than the carving.

Four late medieval sources have now been added to the Icelandic group of 'knight-with-the-lion' stories, including *Sigurðar saga þögla* from the fourteenth century, bringing the number to eight (Harris 1970: 129; Kalinke 1981: 228).[22] Nevertheless, those that have already been mentioned are the main ones used in comparative studies.[23] Taken together as a group, however, these eight sources demonstrate clearly that the motif of the 'knight-with-the-lion' enjoyed considerable popularity in Iceland, particularly in the fourteenth century.[24] These heroes are, except for Þiðrikr af Bern, from the tradition of medieval romance.

None of the above mentioned works, with the possible exception of *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, was in circulation in Iceland in 1200 or shortly thereafter, or at least not in the form that we have them today. However, Bæksted, and Magerøy, who has made the most recent study of the Valþjófsstaður carvings, agree in saying it is rather unlikely that the figure on the door represents Þiðrikr af Bern, though some scholars have argued for this identification (e.g. Grundtvig 1869–83: 682–5; Stephens 1873: 254; Hauck 1965: 435–8; *cf*. Ploss 1966: 104, n. 292), not least because of the three smaller dragons, believed to represent the offspring of the dragon in

keisarasonar (Paulsen 1966: 132). However, compared to the dragon's claws in the picture below, the object he is holding seems to be much too small for this kind of interpretation (Magerøy 1967: 31).

[22] *Cf*. Sigurðar saga þǫgla 1963: 134. The knight-with-the-lion motif is also to be found in the Faroese ballad *Fjallbøndurnir* (E 91), which actually deals with a farmer rather than a knight, and could be considerably more recent than the Icelandic variants (Jonsson *et al*. 1978: 237).

[23] In her research on 'the lion-knight legend', Karoline Kjesrud, however, uses six sources; the four basic ones, together with *Sigurðar saga þögla* and *Ectors saga* (2014: 225).

[24] Besides this, we have another illustration of a 'knight-with-the-lion', which is found in the Icelandic Drawing Book (*Íslenska teiknibókin*); this is usually believed to represent David taking the lamb out the mouth of the lion. The image, which has been dated to late medieval times (1459–1475; Guðbjörg Kristjánsdóttir 2013: 104 f.), represents a well-known Christian image and is therefore not relevant to the literary works discussed above. *Íslenska teiknibókin* was compiled by four artists over a period of about 150 years, from c. 1350 to 1500 (ibid.: 35, 42, 56 and 64).

their nest, as related in *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, to which the dragon feeds the lion. However, there are points in which the picture differs from the account in *Þiðriks saga af Bern,* including the details of the slaying of the dragon. I fully agree with this view, not least because in *Þiðriks saga af Bern* the lion which Þiðrikr rescues dies in the dragon's lair; in other words, the Þiðrikr of the saga does not succeed in saving the lion's life, and therefore the lion does not follow him in gratitude thereafter; on the contrary, it is eaten by the dragon and its offspring (*Þiðriks saga af Bern* 1905–11: II 361–3). Bæksted points out that in fact the carving does not correspond perfectly to any of the literary sources mentioned above, and that none of these texts mentions the lion lying faithfully on his master's grave. Magerøy adds that it is impossible to say which hero is represented in the carving, and all that we know for sure is that he is a king, *cf*. the runic inscription (Bæksted 1942: 183–92; Magerøy 1977: 51–3; 1999: 18; 2001: 18; *cf*. Kjesrud 2014: 235), a factor that might be used to rule out Íven, who was one of King Arthur's knights, while Þiðrikr af Bern, Konráðr keisarasonr and Vilhjálmr sjóðr were all kings, according to their sagas.

The interesting thing in the quest for a model for the carving is that according to the prologue to the translated *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* (from Thomas of Britain's *Tristan*)*,* the translation of chivalric romances into Old Norse only began in 1226 (*Saga af Tristram og Ísönd* 1987: 7). If the traditionally accepted date of the carving (around or slightly later than 1200) is correct, therefore, then it is unlikely that it was based on any chivalric saga, since this literary genre would still have been unknown in the Nordic region.[25] This obstacle does not apply, on the other hand, to stories or poems that may have been current in oral tradition at this time, so perhaps we should ask instead which of the known knights/kings with a lion is most likely to have been known in Iceland, or elsewhere in the Nordic region, at this early date.

To begin by examining sources of the motif from outside Scandinavia, Hermann Schneider suggested that the image from Valþjófsstaður might

[25] *Cf*. Björn Magnússon Ólsen 1885: 28. Even though scholars have not been able to verify the date 1226, it is certain that chivalric romances were being translated in Norway in the days of King Hákon *gamli* Hákonarson (King Hákon the Old) of Norway, who reigned from 1217 to 1263. The paragraph from *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* stating the date 1226 is only preserved in paper manuscripts from the seventeenth century (Sverrir Tómasson 1977: 69 and 75). It should be noted, however, that translations were made in the late twelfth century, like *Trójumanna sögur*, *Breta sögur* and *Alexanders saga*, that are usually not grouped together with the chivalric romances.

represent Heinrich der Löwe (Henry the Lion, d. 1195), a twelfth-century duke of Saxony and Bavaria, as his story contains all the main elements depicted in the carving (1913: 229, 244–45): Further discussion of this was then continued in Peter Paulsen's *Drachenkämpfer, Löwenritter und die Heinrichsage*, with the deduction that Páll Jónsson (d. 1211), bishop of Skálholt, might have introduced the story to the artist. He himself possessed a carved crozier, depicting a beast biting a smaller animal, possibly a dragon and a lion (Þjms. Sk-2/1954-1-2); this was probably carved by Margrét *hin haga*, the most skilled carver of his day in Iceland (Paulsen 1966: 180, 194, figs. 61a–b; Guðmundur G. Þórarinsson 2014: 31–35). Naturally, the story of Henry the Lion may have been known in Iceland (ibid.: 195), even if no Icelandic version is extant today, but it should be noted that Henry was not a king, unlike the knight in the carving, and that he died only a few years before the carving is supposed to have been made. Therefore, as scholars have pointed out, and in view of the popularity of the knight-with-the-lion motif in Icelandic literature, it is appropriate to take a closer look at the domestic tradition in comparison to European literature (*cf*. Harris 1970: 125).

European stories or narrative poems that contained the motif of the knight-with-the-lion and became especially popular in the twelfth century include the French *Yvain, le Chevalier au Lion* by Chrétien de Troyes, together with at least two other versions of the same basic legend (that of the knight *Golfier*, and an episode in *De Naturis Rerum* by Alexander Neckam), followed by more variants, and the motif remained popular in Continental European narratives throughout the thirteenth century, or even longer. Like the Icelandic variants, the twelfth-century stories differ from the Valþjófsstaður carving in that they do not mention the lion lying on his master's grave (Brodeur 1924: 492–500 and 524). About thirty years after the composition of *Yvain*, around 1203, Hartmann von Aue (d. c. 1210–1220) adapted the story for a German audience (a Middle High German verse romance) under the title *Iwein, der Ritter mit dem Löwen*.[26] Arthur G. Brodeur, who studied the origin of the motif in the first half of

[26] Yvain was depicted in a fresco in Burg Rodenegg in South Tyrol no later than 1230, presumably influenced by Hartmann von Aue's *Iwein*. Even more interesting for the context of this article, are wall paintings at Schmalkalden in Germany, possibly from around 1240. Unlike the earlier one, this one contains a scene depicting Yvain and a lion fighting a dragon. From the last quarter of the same century, a French manuscript known as Princeton University Library Garrett 125, contains illuminations from *Yvain*, including Yvain's rescue of the lion from the dragon. Finally, another *Yvain* manuscript, Bibliothèque Nationale fr. 1433 from the first half of the fourteenth century, contains an image depicting

the last century, believed that this then went on to influence Middle High German tales about one Wolfdietrich, who probably became one of the best known of the knights-with-a-lion in the thirteenth century, even if it is not impossible that Chrétien's *Yvain* continued to influence German storytellers and reciters of poems directly. Wolfdietrich, who is regarded by many as corresponding to Theuderic I, King of the Franks, the son of Clovis (d. 511), was one of the major figures in Germanic heroic poetry, though he perhaps never attained the same popularity as Theoderic the Great (Dietrich von Bern/ Þiðrikr af Bern). It is evident, however, that the Middle-High German heroic epic *Wolfdietrich*, composed in the thirteenth century,[27] had far-reaching influence because short accounts of the dragon-slaying episode became current all over Europe. Finally, the motif became so common that it enjoyed popularity not only in the form of narratives, but also in that many a knight began to associate himself with a lion, e.g. adopting a lion as an heraldic symbol on his coat-of-arms (Brodeur 1924: 512–4, 517 and 523–4; *cf*. Müllenhoff 1848: 435–43). This is also reflected in the literature, where it says that Þiðrikr's shield was decorated with a crowned lion (*Þiðriks saga af Bern* 1905–11: II 2; *cf*. description of Þiðrikr in *Mágus saga jarls*, the more recent version from c. 1350 (Mágus saga jarls 1949: 287), and in *Kvæði af Þiðrik kongi og ljóni* in *Íslenzk fornkvæði* 1962: 251).

Scholars of Germanic literature have suggested that parts of the story of Wolfdietrich came to be reflected in the story of Dietrich von Bern (Þiðrikr af Bern), and that this probably happened with regard to the knight-with-the-lion motif (Björn Magnússon Ólsen 1885: 28; *cf*. Harris 1970: 129 and 131; de Vries 1965: 38, 46–7 and 54); some of them even believe that Dietrich and Wolfdietrich merged to some extent into the same hero, at least in so far as they took on the role of the knight who slays a dragon (e.g. Schütte 1935: 128–9). In fact, both of them fight more than one dragon during their lifetime, and both of them slay the offspring of a dragon as well. This might be seen as a parallel to the lower

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how Yvain got hold of his lion (see Rushing 1995: 37, 94–7, 124–6, 134, 140–1, 162 and 182–5; Melin 2012: 167).

[27] Wolfdietrich's story is related in the Middle High German epic poem *Wolfdietrich*, now preserved in four versions, A, B, C and D. Wolfdietrich, the son of Hugdietrich, emperor of the Roman/Byzantine Empire (in Constantinople, according to the text), becomes famous for his courage when fighting against his brothers, who drove him from inheritance after their father's death. Wolfdietrich finally gained his rightful kingdom and became his father's successor. He was also famous for his various deeds, e.g. fighting a dragon that had slain his friend Ortnit. For a thorough summary, see Millet 2008: 382–400.

roundel on the Valþjófsstaður door, depicting more dragons, possibly even a dragon's nest, and the three young dragons' heads in the upper roundel. Wolfdietrich's dragon slaying is more complex than that of Dietrich/Þiðrikr. Although, like Þiðrikr in *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, he fails to rescue the lion from the dragon, he rescues another lion from a 'serpent' (*saribant*, i.e. dragon), and this lion follows him faithfully in gratitude (Harris 1970: 131). Hence, the legend of Wolfdietrich must be seen as an even closer parallel to the carving than that of *Þiðriks saga af Bern*.

This leads us to the question of whether the two heroes, Wolfdietrich and Þiðrikr af Bern, were known in the Nordic countries around the year 1200. As has been mentioned, some scholars believe that *Þiðriks saga af Bern* was composed at about that date, while others consider it to be slightly more recent, from the mid-thirteenth century, or even from the second half of the century (e.g. Eriksen and Johansson 2012: 23). However, as has already been mentioned, *Þiðriks saga af Bern* has been ruled out of the discussion, and for a good reason,[28] and so it is appropriate to shift the focus to Wolfdietrich, even though his adventures are not recorded in Icelandic literature. Like Þiðrikr af Bern, he meets the requirement of being a king (*cf.* the runes) and was, according to medieval poems, the son and successor of a certain Hugdietrich, King/Emperor of the Roman/Bysantine Empire, and indeed a mighty king (*cf.* [Sé inn] "ríkja konung ...").

Although most of the extant sources about Wolfdietrich consist of Middle-High German poems from the thirteenth century, the figure of Wolfdietrich himself is probably considerably older and, as already mentioned, is believed to be based on Theuderic I.[29] In addition, he is believed to have been known as a heroic figure in the Nordic region. A ballad about him was composed in Denmark, and Sophus Bugge argued that he was probably known among Scandinavians in the eleventh

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[28] Despite differences, Karl Hauck believed that the carving might have been based on oral tales about Þiðrikr af Bern, as there are indications that he was known among the Nordic peoples at least from the tenth or the eleventh centuries. He believed the motif became attached to Þiðrikr at an early date, and was not derived from the Wolfdietrich tradition (1965: 435–8). Þiðrikr af Bern/Dietrich is depicted in a German manuscript, Cod. Pal. Germ. 359 from c. 1418, with a lion above or on his helmet (Melin 2012: 176–7).

[29] Most scholars believe that Wolfdietrich corresponds to Theuderic I, though some argue that it is in fact his father, Hugdietrich, who corresponds to the ancient king (Malone 1977: 11–13). In that case, Wolfdietrich is believed to correspond to Theuderic's son, Theudebert (d. 547). As the father and son Theuderic and Theudebert not only had similar names, but were also involved in the same historical events, they tended to merge in legend (Müllenhoff 1848: 436–44).

century (1896: 53–4, 72–3, 80–2 and 93).[30] As Bugge's arguments are in many ways convincing, it must be considered as highly probable that the material was known at an early date in Iceland.

Bugge, who was one of the first scholars to consider a possible model for the carving from Valþjófsstaður, came to the conclusion that the image would most likely represent Wolfdietrich, partly because he believed that Wolfdietrich was known among the Nordic peoples, and partly because he read the runic inscription as "Grikkjakonungur hér grafinn ..." (1896: 71–3), which might refer to Wolfdietrich of the legend, who was an emperor (possibly understood as ruling over Greece). Later scholars, on the other hand, usually read [Sé inn] "ríkja konung hér grafinn ..." (Bæksted 1942: 192; Þórgunnur Snædal 2003: 49–50). Even though the more recent reading certainly weakens Bugge's arguments, it should be borne in mind that it is not unequivocal. In his study of the knight-with-the-lion legend in Iceland, Richard L. Harris, who also believes that the Wolfdietrich legend may have influenced the carving, concludes that "[p]resumably, the source related to the *Wolfdietrich* material was in Iceland at a very early time, in the first part of the thirteenth century" (1970: 140, *cf*. 129).[31] Not only did this version of the legend, which was probably related to a German poem, influence the carving, but probably also *Konráðs saga keisarasonar* and *Vilhjálms saga sjóðs*, argues Harris (1970: 140 and 145).

The motifs of the carving from Valþjófsstaður are not isolated within Icelandic art history in a broader sense, and for example, a beast, reminiscent of a lion surrounded by a serpent or serpents was carved on a stone sinker sometime between the tenth and the twelfth century (Þjms. 1985-118-53; Kristján Eldjárn 1981: 19–29). While this is not stylistically related to the Valþjófsstaður carving, it shows that a symbolic combat between a lion

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[30] Bugge believed that the Wolfdietrich legend influenced one of the eddic poems preserved in the *Codex Regius* (dating from about 1270). This is the *Helga kviða Hundingsbana* I (*Völsungakviða*), which probably dates from the eleventh century (1896: 54). Both heroes, Wolfdietrich, and Helgi, are compelled to roam as outlaws after their fathers' death without receiving their share of the kingdom, and must therefore get rid of the usurpers who have wronged them. In *Helga kviða Hundingsbana* II, Helgi even identifies himselef as a gray wolf ('úlf grán', *Eddukvæði* 1999: 182), which corresponds to Wolfdietrich's Scandinavian ballad-name, Gralver (meaning 'grá-úlfr'). Helgi Hundingsbani is a descendant of the Ylfingar (the Wolflings). See further in Bugge 1899: 67–96; Müllenhoff 1848: 442. For the ballad *Gralver Kongesön*, see *Danmarks gamle folkeviser* 1853: 374–84 (Dgf 29).

[31] In his study, Harris assumes that the carving was made between 1200 and 1220 (1970: 129).

and a serpent/dragon was known at an early date in Icelandic art.[32] Apart from Páll Jónsson's carved crozier mentioned above, and illuminations in medieval manuscripts (see note 46), rounded dragons or dragons interwoven with vegetation are a common theme in Icelandic carvings (Magerøy 1967: figs. 41, 50, 53, 54, 62 *et passim*) and may be seen, for example, on the famous chair from Grund in Eyjafjörður ('Grundarstóll A'), a church chair from the mid-sixteenth century, on which there are images of a knight, a lion and a dragon in separate roundels (Þjms. 10925/1930-336, see fig. in Kristján Eldjárn 1994: ch. 66). Also of interest is a wooden spoon-box from the second half of the sixteenth century, on which there is an image of a man thrusting a weapon into an unidentified animal (Þjms. 2707/1885-114, see fig. in Kristján Eldjárn 1994: ch. 23). Finally, mention should be made of a wooden board from the seventeenth century, possibly from a closet, showing an unidentified dragon slayer (Magerøy 1967: 40 ff. and 64, figs. 22–4, 64, 68; 2001: 28–9 and 55). More remarkable, however, are two carvings from the north of Iceland, one on a wooden panel from Munkaþverá, and the other on a chair from Draflastaðir, both to be discussed below.

These images, along with other Icelandic wood carvings (see, e.g. Magerøy 1967), show that the door from the church at Valþjófsstaður can easily be placed within Icelandic carving tradition. The same can be said about the runes in the carving; runes were carved on Icelandic artifacts and gravestones until the nineteenth century, the oldest preserved carving dating from the tenth or eleventh century (Þórgunnur Snædal 2003: 5; Björn Magnússon Ólsen 1885: 36–7; Bæksted 1942: 57–8). In conclusion, we know that the door was carved with illustrations of a story of the type known as 'the knight-with-the-lion', 'the lion-knight legend' or 'the grateful lion,' showing all the elements of the story. However, the carving does not correspond exactly to any written story that was definitely known in the Nordic countries, and therefore it may have been based on an oral tale containing the relevant motifs (Schier 1980: 174). This could have been a tale about Wolfdietrich's dragon slaying or dragon slayings, or comparable material, even though it may have been influenced by similar stories, such as that of Henry the Lion (Paulsen 1966: 181), or other medieval legends, and we must remember that some of the narrative

[32] Dragons and lions are prominent in Scandinavian art from the late Viking Age period, and can be found in the three main styles, the Mammen Style, Ringerike Style and Urnes Style. It is usually believed that the combined motif reached Scandinavia from the British Isles or the Continent, even if it developed further in Nordic tradition (e.g. Fuglesang 1980: 92 ff.).

elements might have been known folktale motifs at this early date, like for example a lion lying on a man's grave (Schier 1980: 173). In other words, we have good reason to believe that the image formed part of the Germanic heroic tradition, as the hero Wolfdietrich and his more general dragon slayings certainly did, even if the episode of the knight-with-the-lion motif *per se* only became attached to the legend at a later stage (most probably in the late twelfth or the thirteenth century), and consequently does not belong to the old Germanic heroic tradition. The suggested relationship between the carving and the heroic tradition is therefore based upon the identification of the figure as representing Wolfdietrich.

The wooden panel from Munkaþverá

Next, let us turn to a wooden panel from Munkaþverá in Eyjafjörður, which is usually dated to about 1300 or the fourteenth century (Þjms. 964/1873-47, Kristján Eldjárn 1994: ch. 11; Magerøy 1967: 38; 1999: 21), even if a more recent date has also been proposed.[33] The panel, which is of an uncertain function, is richly carved in a mixed style (partly Romanesque), and even though part of it has been cut off, one can make out the figure of a knight in the centre who is slaying a dragon by thrusting a spear downwards.[34] While admitting the possibility that this could represent Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, Ellen Magerøy nevertheless thought it more likely to be Saint George (*cf*. Magerøy 1967: 37–8, fig. 51; 2001: 21–2; Þóra Kristjánsdóttir 2005: 23), as Kristján Eldjárn had previously suggested (1994: ch. 11). However, Magnús Már Lárusson considered it to be an open question whether to interpret the figure as Sigurðr Fáfnisbani or Saint George (1970: 257).

The board contains roundels or 'medallions', i.e. images set in a circular surrounding of decorative plants and birds, similar to Norwegian carvings which have been interpreted as representing stories in which the images are connected by a narrative thread (e.g., Margeson 1980: 184).

[33] It has been suggested that the panel might have been carved in the first half of the fifteenth century (Magerøy 1999: 22 and cited works; *cf*. Sarpur 964/1873-47).

[34] It is not known whether the panel belonged to the Benedictine monastery at Munkaþverá, the church or the farmhouse. It has been suggested that it could have been situated next to a door (Magerøy 1999: 22 and cited works, *cf*. Sarpur 964/1873-47), or even that it was a fascia board (Kristján Eldjárn 1994: ch. 11).

Fig. 2. Detail from the wooden panel from Munkaþverá, now in the National Museum of Iceland. Photo © Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir.

In the light of this, it seems reasonable to ask whether the Munkaþverá carving also has a narrative background, i.e. whether the images are interconnected. The two roundels at the top contain vegetation images: flowers and leaves. Then comes one of a lion with a rather human head. In the fourth there is a man, possibly a hunter, thrusting a spear into a stag.

The fifth image, which is also the largest, shows the slaying of a dragon. While it is undoubtedly meant to depict one of the dragon slayers popular in medieval times, we can more or less rule out the possibility that it is Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, who, as has been mentioned, is normally shown slaying the dragon from below, or from a pit, as related in the eddic poem *Fáfnismál*. Further, none of the surrounding motifs, especially that of the lion, can be connected directly to his legend. The lower part of the board, half of which has been cut away, consists of four circular frames with images that are difficult to identify with full confidence. The first seems to be a non-human face, possibly that of an owl or a lion. All that is visible in the second is vegetation. The third seems to show a lion or some other wild beast, as does the fourth, where the image may have been that of a

lion or possibly a dragon or some other beast. Below the bottom frame, a dragon bites the ornamental growth that surrounds all the images. No obvious connection between this lower dragon and the dragon slayer can be established, except for the symbolic value of the two dragons.

Judging from the context, it seems fair to propose that the subject matter here is a knight-with-a-lion, as on the door from Valþjófsstaður, and the hunter in the fourth roundel can easily be included in this interpretation if we assume that the knight here is Þiðrikr af Bern, who was known for his hunting skills, and is depicted as slaying a stag in an Italian image from the twelfth century (Hauck 1965: 437). Þiðrikr af Bern was known in Iceland at this time, as indicated by his presence in eddic poems in relation to the story of the Völsungs and the Gjúkungar (under the name of Þjóðrekr, *cf.* the German Nibelung tradition), *Árna saga biskups* and *Mágus saga jarls*, as mentioned above. In the light of this, we may conclude that the fourth and fifth roundels show images that correspond to the known medieval saga of king Þiðrikr af Bern. The other roundels, depicting vegetation, lions and dragons, may be interpreted as apt accompanying decorations. The recurrent images of lions, for example, fit well with the identification of the figure as Þiðrikr, as he had – as already mentioned – his shield decorated with an image of a lion; morover, he fought more than a single dragon, possibly as indicated in the Munkaþverá carving.

It must be borne in mind that it is always possible that different generations or different individuals interpret pictorial material in different ways, based on predominant traditions, their knowledge or even their personal interest. There is, for example, no way to rule out the possibility that the dragon slayer depicted on the panel is Saint George, as for example Magerøy suggested, as images of George and the Dragon are common in churches in other countries. However, there are no indications that Saint George enjoyed popularity in Iceland, and he was not a patron saint of any Icelandic church. Therefore, if we consider Christian imagery, Saint Michael would be a more likely choice.[35] However, combined with the

[35] One example of the personal name *Georgius* is found in an Icelandic calendar, but there are no indications of a *cultus* of Saint George in Iceland before 1400 (Cormack 1991: 47). Saint Michael was, on the other hand, a well-known saint in Iceland. In some images, he can be identified by holding his sword above his head (Hamer 2014: 250–51); this is, however, far from conclusive. Concerning possible images of Saint George and Saint Michael in medieval art, it should be kept in mind that in certain cases, Catholic relics were demolished in post-Reformation times, even if it was probably more common to remove them from churches and other buildings and set them aside (Helgi Þorláksson 2003: 109 and 118; Jónas Jónasson 1961: 371–7).

Fig. 3. A wooden panel from Munkaþverá, now in the National Museum of Iceland. Photo by courtesy of the copyright holder. © The National Museum of Iceland.

other pictorial motifs, the lion and the hunter, Þiðrikr af Bern becomes a more viable interpretation. The carvings are in this respect reminiscent of Norwegian church doors that depict images from the heroic legends, or that of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and his brother-in-law Gunnarr; they are shown on church door jambs from Hylestad, Austad and Vegusdal, all from c. 1200 (Blindheim 1972–73: 21–24, 37–38; Hohler 1999: I 112–13, 178–81, II 102, 254–55 and figs. II 135–36, 220–22, 321–22). According to the above interpretation, this would also fall within the same tradition as the church door from Valþjófsstaður, also depicting a known hero from the heroic legends.

The Jónsbók illumination

The third item to be considered is an illuminated capital from a fourteenth-century manuscript of the law code Jónsbók, GKS 3269 a 4to, f. 15va. This shows a man killing a dragon from below, which is a feature of the representations of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani (Blindheim 1972–1973: 30–1; Düwel 1986: 234 and 246), and which distinguishes this image from those on the Valþjófsstaður door and the Munkaþverá carving. The dragon slayer, holding a shield and thrusting a sword into the dragon with his left hand, is inside the belly of the letter Þ (forming a roundel comparable to those in the Norwegian images, which have been interpreted as representing the pit from which Sigurðr slew Fáfnir according to the eddic poem *Fáfnismál* (Margeson 1983: 101)). At the bottom of the page, there is a creature of uncertain species, biting the ornament. The illustration, that stands at the beginning of the section on Christian law (*Kristindómsbálkr*), has some Christian connotations regarding the victory of good over evil, represented by the dragon and the dragon slayer.[36] As shown by the carvings on the aforementioned Norwegian church door jambs, Sigurðr

[36] Halldór Hermannsson 1935: 24 and 31, pl. 50. This section of the law code deals with the authority of the king and the bishop, and the duty of subjects towards the authorities (e.g. *Jónsbók* 2004: 89–96). As Stefan Drechsler has kindly pointed out to me, the *Kristindómsbálkr* is illuminated in different ways in the preserved *Jónsbók* copies from the fourteenth century, and therefore, it is not a surprise that the image in GKS 3269 a 4to has unique characteristics. In this manuscript, however, some other illustrations are clearly related to the text, e.g. in the section containing laws on theft (*Þjófabálkr*; Halldór Hermannsson 1935: pl. 49). On the dating of the manuscript, see *Ordbog* 1989: 472. The image in GKS 3269 a 4to is also described in Acker 2013: 65–66, without further interpretation.

Fig. 4. Fig. 4. GKS 3269 a 4to, f. 15v. Photo by courtesy of the copyright holder. © The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies.

was regarded to be an appropriate representative of a hero fighting against the evil from outside, as a defender of the society.

There is a comparable drawing in the manuscript *Kálfalækjarbók*, AM 133 fol., f. 14v, from c. 1350 or earlier. However, although there are certain stylistic features in common between the two, indicating that they are related as a product from the same cultural environment (Liepe 2008:

fig. 2, 182–3, and fig. 5, 188), there is no indication of a pit in *Kálfalækjarbók*. Unlike the dragon slayer in *Jónsbók*, this one kills the dragon with his right hand, and in a standing position.[37] Naturally, both drawings could represent Saint George or Saint Michael, who were both popular in medieval art throughout the middle ages, but as already stated, there are no indications of a *cultus* of Saint George in Iceland. Saint Michael, on the other hand, is found in many Icelandic calendars and was the patron saint of several Icelandic churches, and his saga, *Michaels saga*, was written in Iceland in the second quarter of the fourteenth century (Cormack 1991: 40, 72, 132–3). While it would perhaps be natural to see the figure of GKS 3269 a 4to as representing Saint Michael, it is also important to remember that it has the features that argue for an identification with Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. For this reason, it must be considered as a possible representation of the heroic legend of Sigurðr, and, in fact, Sigurðr seems to have taken over the role of Saint Michael to a certain degree in Scandinavian church art, as the defender of society against evil.[38]

The *Jónsbók* figure is the only Icelandic image from medieval times that corresponds to the standardized depictions of Sigurðr slaying the dragon from below (or from a pit).[39] Given, however, the fact how few images of dragon slayers in medieval/premodern Icelandic art have been preserved, this should not necessarily constitute a reason to doubt the interpretation. As *Jónsbók* was based on Norwegian laws, it may have been considered appropriate to illustrate it with a pictorial motif, prominent in Norwegian art, even if the artist may not have been influenced by Norwegian art elsewhere in the manuscript (a matter that is, however, outside the scope of this article). Besides, cultural influences between Norway and Iceland was

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[37] The figure has been interpreted in different ways, e.g. as symbolically representing Njáll, the character of the aforementioned *Brennu-Njáls saga*, and as a symbol for the "good judgement", represented by Saint Michael (see discussion in Hamer 2014: 246). Even if not mentioned in this particular context, the initial of GKS 3269 a 4to might be seen in the light of Lena Liepe's research on the initial of AM 133 fol., where the pictorial motif of the dragon slayer is connected to the continuous tradition of motifs from picture- and rune stones (Liepe 2008: 192–96). Furthermore, it should be mentioned that Saint Ólafr is depicted as a dragon slayer in the *Jónsbók* manuscript GKS 3268 4to, f. 2v (c. 1350), holding an axe, his martyrium symbol. This image is not, however, at the beginning of *Kristindómsbálkr*, and has obvious connections to the text, where he is mentioned.

[38] As some scholars have already pointed out, Sigurðr and Saint Michael are very much related when it comes to medieval church imagery (e.g. Bertelsen 2015: 23–24, 27; Hamer 2014: 251).

[39] For a discussion about a few small dragons on the bottom margins of GKS 2365 4to, see Acker 2013: 65–67.

Fig. 5. The carving on the chair from Draflastaðakirkja, now in the National Museum of Iceland. Photo © Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir.

in fact so common in medieval times, that it is only natural to assume that Norwegian art would have influenced Icelandic artists. Just as the figures from the carvings from Valþjófsstaður and Munkaþverá, the *Jónsbók* figure belongs to a tradition where Christian symbols have been applied to heroic figures. Whether the dragon slayer was only considered as a symbol for the fight between good and evil, or also as a character from the story of the Völsungs, is debatable (e.g. Nordanskog 2006: 258), but as stated above, this may have been changeable between generations and even individuals.

The chair from Draflastaðir

The fourth image to be examined is a chair from the church at Draflastaðir in Fnjóskadalur in the north of Iceland, which is thought to date from the second half of the sixteenth century (Þjms. 443/1868-6, Magerøy 1967: 53–4, figs. 66–7). The wooden boards across the back of the chair are carved with images of a horse and a man with an axe or a cudgel, and also a dragon holding a lion in its mouth. At either end of the scene there are animals in strange postures. At one end there are two animals biting each other's tails, while at the other there are animals in a crouching position. They do not seem to bear any relation to the scene in the centre, and comparable pictorial motifs are found on older artifacts. Carved letters in and above the images testify to the owner of the chair, as well as addressing God and Jesus, begging for their protection (*cf*. Magerøy 1967: 54, fig. 22–4; Þóra Kristjánsdóttir 2005: 22).

Quite possibly, the main scene of the carving is meant to depict a narrative or refer to some narrative motifs. From the heroic tradition, *Þiðriks saga af Bern* and the legends of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and Wolfdietrich must be

Fig. 6. Detail from the chair from Draflastaðakirkja. Photo © Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir.

considered, together with the medieval romances listed above and the two saints, since all of them deal with a hero fighting a dragon. The similarity to *Þiðriks saga* is close, since Þiðrikr comes on horseback to where a dragon and a lion are fighting, and in his combat with the dragon he tears a tree up by the roots (which might be represented by the cudgel) while the dragon seizes the lion in its mouth, as in this carving (*Þiðriks saga af Bern* 1905–11: II 361–3).[40]

There are some details which suggest that it might be appropriate to compare the scene with the story of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, specifically the horse, which has a girth strap, and seems to be carrying a small chest on his back, as Grani, Sigurðr's horse, does in his legend (*cf*. Scandinavian images that represent the hoard of gold that Sigurðr put on Grani's back after the slaying of the dragon).[41] However, a lion plays no part in the

[40] It is only in *Þiðriks saga af Bern* that the dragon seizes the lion in its mouth, but the closest parallel is to be found in a particular version of *Sigurðar saga þögla*, where it seizes the lion in its claws (Harris 1970: 137).

[41] See, Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2012a, 73–4. Furthermore, the horse seems to be walking through something that may represent vegetation or possibly fire (*cf*. Scandinavian images that may represent the magic ring of protective fire; in legend, Grani walks through

legends of Sigurðr, so if this carving is interpreted as a composite scene, then it can perhaps best be seen as being based on *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, which enjoyed popularity in Iceland, as already mentioned.

Guðrún Skúladóttir's saddle

The next object, and considerably more recent than the previous four images, is a saddle made for Guðrún Skúladóttir (d. 1816), the twelve-year-old daughter of Magistrate Skúli Magnússon (d. 1794), in 1751. The saddle was made of pine and decorated with sheets of brass, which were carved with pictorial motifs from the Bible and from old legends. In a recent catalogue, published by the National Museum of Iceland, it is stated that one of the images represents Sigurðr slaying Fáfnir (Þjm. 2641/1885-46, see Markús Þór Andrésson et al. 2015: 89).[42] However, as the image in question does not show Sigurðr in his characteristic iconographical position, kneeling down and/or slaying the dragon from a pit, but rather a man mounted on his horse, stabbing the dragon with his sword, the figure could be that of any of the dragon slayers from the old legends; Sigurðr is never shown slaying the dragon from his horse. The image could possibly represent Saint George or Saint Michael, judging from the surrounding Biblical imagery, except for the fact that Catholic saints were not likely to enjoy popularity in post-reformation times, at least not this late (e.g. Jónas Jónasson 1961: 371–7).

Interestingly, the dragon on the saddle has the tail of the horse in its jaws, which is compatible with the legend of Wolfdietrich, where the dragons in fact eat his horse (Harris 1970: 132; Ploss 1966: 103–4), and

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the protective fire. It has been suggested that the fire is represented on a chair from Heddal in Norway, and possibly also on a picture stone from Alskog Tjängvide in Gotland (Blindheim 1972–1973: 32–38; Staecker 2006: 365). Also of interest is the fact that the man in the carving is either depicted with an open hand, which is of no importance, or is holding a ring, as Sigurðr does in some of the Scandinavian images (Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2012a: 73–4). In his other hand, he is holding an axe or a cudgel. According to *Þiðriks saga af Bern,* where Sigurðr's story is partly related, he fights the dragon with a blazing cudgel that he has taken from a fire (*Þiðriks saga af Bern* 1905–11: I 310–1).

[42] In a catalogue from 1914, Sigurðr Fáfnisbani is not mentioned; instead it is stated that the saddle is decorated with Biblical images (Matthías Þórðarson 1914: 91). In an online catalogue from the National Museum of Iceland, it says that it is probably Sigurðr Fáfnisbani ('Sigurður Fáfnisbani að drepa Fáfni, að því er helst má ráða', Sarpur 2641/1885-46).

Fig. 7. Detail from Guðrún Skúladóttir's saddle. Photo by courtesy of the copyright holder. © The National museum of Iceland.

with the ballad *Kvæði af Þiðrik kongi og ljóni*, where the dragon seizes the horse in its mouth in order to bring it to its offspring (*Íslenzk fornkvæði* 1962: 244; Kålund 1986: 28). The scene is also reminiscent of a Norwegian wood carving from the fourteenth century, usually believed to depict the legend of Sigurðr (Blindheim 1972–73: 30–33).[43]

All things considered, there is not much evidence to identify the dragon slayer on Guðrún Skúladóttir's saddle as Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. However, it fits the description of Þiðrikr af Bern according to a ballad that had already been translated into Icelandic when the saddle was made. Also, it inevitably raises the question of whether a Wolfdietrich tradition existed in Iceland, oral or written, or even in the ballad form, comparable to the Danish ballad *Gralver Kongesön* (*cf*. n. 29).

[43] Emil Ploss believed the scene in question (Lundevall, Norway), where the dragon bites the horse's tail, to reflect an ancient dragon-hunt motif, where Sigurðr would have lured the dragon with his horse playing the role of a helping animal (1966: 105–8); this must be considered a rather far-fetched explanation, as there is no extant text with such a scene.

A wooden panel from Trékyllisvík

The last object, and possibly the most recent of the six images under discussion, is a wooden panel. In fact, two wooden panels from the church of Árnes in Trékyllisvík in the north-west of Iceland, probably carved in the eighteenth century,[44] are believed to depict scenes from *Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans*, a chivalric romance from the late fourteenth century. One of these depicts a man killing a dragon (Þjms. 978/1869-3, see fig. in Kristján Eldjárn 1994: ch. 7). The dragon has the head of another man in its jaws, while another dragon has its mouth wide open above the hero's head.[45] According to the saga, the dragon-slayer is King Þiðrikr af Bern, also known from *Þiðriks saga af Bern*, *Mágus saga jarls* and other sources. A thorough comparison between the saga motifs and the carvings has already been made (Gísli Gestsson 1977: 208–220). A shorter account of the same episode is in *Þiðriks saga af Bern* (1905–11: I 196–97).

Both lions and dragons – and even lions and dragons fighting – occur in illustrations in a few Icelandic manuscripts,[46] and in carvings other than those discussed here, without being directly connected with any particular story, as they are not depicted in conflict or relationship with human beings and the illustrations include no other legendary material such as swords, horses, golden rings, etc. Rather, they are primarily stereotyped artistic motifs (*cf*., e.g., Magerøy 1967: fig. 41, 50, 53–4, 57, 64, 73, 79–80, 82, 85 *et passim*; Liepe 2008: 189), though they could, of course, have had some symbolic or even religious connotations. Although images of dragon fights are also found elsewhere,[47] the images examined here come

[44] Kristján Eldjárn claims that the carvings cannot be older than from the seventeenth century (1994: ch. 7), while Gísli Gestsson believes that they were made between 1700 and 1770 (1977: 213; Magerøy 1967: 104, fig. 225). See also Sarpur 978/1869-3; Sarpur 679/1869-4.

[45] While fitting the discription of *Flóres saga konungs ok sona hans*, other parallels may be noted. In *Sigurðar saga þögla*, mentioned above, the dragon seizes two men in its claws and then swallows the third one, before going off to a mountain (Sigurðar saga þǫgla 1963: 134). In *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, written approximately in the fourteenth century, a flying dragon swallows a man (Bósa saga ok Herrauðs 1830: 230), and similarly, in *Erex saga*, translated into Old Norse in the thirteenth century, a flying dragon swallows a man all the way up to his waist (*Erex saga Artuskappa* 1965: 48–9). Finally, a dragon seizes a man in its jaws and flies off with him in the fourteenth century *Gull-Þóris saga* (*Íslendinga sögur* 1953: 346 f.).

[46] See the Icelandic manuscripts *Kálfalækjarbók*, AM 133 fol., f. 14r (c. 1350), *Staðarfellsbók*, AM 346 fol, 25r (c. 1340–60) and AM 431 12mo, 12r (c. 1550).

[47] *Cf*. Magerøy 1967: fig. 68; Magerøy 1999: 54–5. For a discussion on dragons in Old

Fig. 8. The carving on the wooden panel from Árneskirkja, now in the National Museum of Iceland. Photo by courtesy of the copyright holder. © The National Museum of Iceland.

closest to revealing points of contact with the Germanic heroic legacy. It should be borne in mind, however, that pictorial representations need not to be a part of a tradition that refers to a specific literary work, but may reflect various tales, written or oral, that were popular at the time.

Conclusions

The conclusion of this comparison is that heroes from the old heroic legends may be the models behind the following artifacts:

a) The door from Valþjófsstaður (possibly Wolfdietrich)
b) The panel from Munkaþverá (possibly Þiðrikr af Bern)
c) GKS 3269 a 4to (possibly Sigurðr Fáfnisbani)
d) The chair from Draflastaðir (possibly Þiðrikr af Bern)
e) Guðrún Skúladóttir's saddle (possibly Þiðrikr af Bern or Wolfdietrich)
f) The panel from Trékyllisvík (probably Þiðrikr af Bern)

All these images include features, which, although they are explicable as Christian motifs, nevertheless resonate strongly with the legends of the three famous heroes Þiðrikr af Bern, Wolfdietrich and Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. Three of them – those in the Munkaþverá carving, in GKS 3269 a 4to and on the chair from Draflastaðir – have not been mentioned in this context before now. In the light of the literary works cited above indicating that

Norse tradition, see Evans 2005: 231–69; Acker 2013.

Icelandic people knew the tradition of heroic images, for example, as shown in *Laxdœla saga*, as already cited: “markaðar ágætligar sǫgur á þilviðinum ok svá á ræfrinu” (Laxdœla saga 1934: 79), or, as it says in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, images from the *fornsögur*, these sources are definitely of value, even if they are few in number, at least compared to the number of preserved images of the brothers-in-law Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and Gunnarr Gjúkason in both Norway and Sweden. But few though they are, they indicate that Icelanders were familiar with the tradition of decorating and carving wood with images from, or comparable to, heroic legend. Whether there once existed more carvings of this type in Iceland is impossible to say, as Icelandic turf houses were of very limited durability, typically requiring complete or partial rebuilding every century or even every 50 years, approximately (Mook and Bertelsen 2011: 86–7).[48]

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[48] Some scholars even believe that turf houses had to be rebuilt every 15–20 years, depending on their locality (van Hoof and van Dijken 2008: 1023–30). The present article is based on a paper I gave at the Sixteenth International Saga Conference, held in Zürich and Basel in August, 2015. I would like to thank Jeffrey Cosser for assistance with the final English version, and Stefan Drechsler for some valuable comments.

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Summary

This article deals with heroic legends that were widely known in the Nordic countries and further south in Europe for many centuries. Though many of these legends were first written down in the thirteenth century, they had been circulating for a long time before that time in the form of poetry and their subject-matter was depicted in art; images of the most popular heroes were carved in stone and wood and woven into tapestries, especially in Sweden and Norway. As is well known, the Icelanders preserved the old legends in their poetry and literature, but the motifs seem to have been less prominent in their art. In scholarly debate about pictorial sources of this kind, Icelandic artifacts are barely mentioned, except for the famous carving on the door from the church at Valþjófsstaður. It is therefore reasonable to ask: Did the Icelanders use motifs from the heroic tradition in their visual arts, as their neighbours did? And is it possible that there are some preserved artifacts with heroic motifs in Iceland which have not so far been discussed? These possibilities are explored, and an attempt is made to shed new light on some Icelandic images that are strongly reminiscent of figures or incidents from the heroic legends of past centuries.

Keywords: Old Norse-Icelandic literature, heroic legends, Icelandic art, carvings, manuscripts

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