The Native Romance of Gunnlaugr and Helga the Fair

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It is commonly held that *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* is a late text that partakes of the romantic tonalities which accrued in Iceland from foreign models during the thirteenth century. This view goes back to a study by Björn M. Ólsen, who not only emphasized the romantic components but provided a detailed comparison of the text to other sagas, notably *Hallfreðar saga*, *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*, and *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*. He concluded that the author of *Gunnlaugs saga* made use of these and other sagas in his composition, which must therefore be a relatively late phenomenon in the literary chronology. As far as I can determine, Björn M. Ólsen's analysis has gone largely unchallenged and has now enjoyed widespread acquiescence for nearly a century. In this paper I undertake a belated critique of his view, arguing that *Gunnlaugs saga* is more likely to be very early, specifically that it did not make use of *Hallfreðar saga*, *Bjarnar saga*, and *Egils saga*, but rather served as a source for these texts. Furthermore, the romantic inflections are not borrowed from foreign narratives but replicate native romance as it was known in Iceland in the early thirteenth century.

Gunnlaugs saga and *Hallfreðar saga*

We may begin with *Hallfreðar saga* because it has the most obvious link to *Gunnlaugs saga*. In chapter 10, about two thirds of the way through the text, *Gunnlaugs saga* relates Gunnlaugr's visits to several northern

courts. He travels from the court of King Olaf of Sweden to England, where he is well received by King Ethelred II but is eager to return to Iceland to honor his betrothal to Helga the Fair. King Ethelred detains him for a time because of an impending invasion by the Danes. Once released, he goes to the court of Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson in Norway hoping to find passage to Iceland. At first it appears that all the ships bound for Iceland have departed, but then it emerges that the ship belonging to the skald Hallfreðr "vandræðaskáld" Óttarsson is not yet on the high seas. Jarl Eiríkr therefore arranges for Gunnlaugr to reach his ship, and Hallfreðr gives him a warm welcome.

During the passage Hallfreðr reveals that Gunnlaugr's rival Hrafn has asked for the hand of Helga the Fair. When Gunnlaugr belittles Hrafn in a dismissive stanza, Hallfreðr wishes him better luck with Hrafn than he himself has had. He then tells the story of how he withheld payment from one of Hrafn's workers and how Hrafn cut his ship's cable and stranded his ship, thus extracting self-judgment from him. The same story is told in substantially abbreviated form in the last chapter of *Hallfreðar saga*. In adjacent columns the texts run as follows:

Gunnlaugs saga (ÍF 3.84–85)
Eiríkr jarl lét þá flytja Gunnlaug út til Hallfreðar, ok tók hann við honum með fagnaði, ok gaf þegar byr undan landi, ok váru vel kátir. Þat var síð sumars. Hallfreðr mælti til Gunnlaugs: "Hefir þú frétt bónorðit Hrafns Ǫnundarsonar við Helgu ina fǫgru?" Gunnlaugr kvezk frétt hafa ok þó ógǫrla. Hallfreðr segir honum slíkt sem hann vissi af ok þat með at margir menn mæltu þat, at Hrafn væri eigi óríǫskvari en Gunnlaugr: Gunnlaugr kvað þá vísu:

Rœkik lítt, þótt leiki,
létt veðr es nú, þéttan

Hallfreðar saga (ÍF 8.196)
Ok at sumri fór Hallfreðr út til Íslands ok kom skipi sínu í Leiruvág fyrir sunnan land [Fl. neðan heiði]. Þá bjó Ǫnundr at Mosfelli. Hallfreðr átti at [gjalda] hálfa mǫrk silfrs húskarli Ǫnundar ok svaraði heldr harðliga. Kom húskarlinn heim ok sagði sín vandræði. Hrafn kvað slíks ván, at hann myndi lægra hlut bera í þeira skiptum. Ok um morgunin eptir reið Hrafn til skips ok ætlaði at hǫggva strengina ok stǫðva brottferð þeira Hallfreðar. Síðan áttu menn hlut í at sætta þá, ok var goldit hálfu meira en húskarl átti, ok skilðu at því.

Annat sumar eptir áttu

austanvindr at ǫndri
andness viku þessa;
meir séumk hitt, en hæru
hoddstríðandi bíðit,
orð, at eigi verðak
jafnrǫskr taliðr Hrafni.

Hallfreðr mælti þá: "Þess þyrfti, félagi, at þér veitti betr [en] mér málin við Hrafn. Ek kom skipi mínu í Leiruvág fyrir neðan Heiði fyrir fám vetrum, ok átta ek at gjalda hálfa mǫrk silfrs húskarli Hrafns, ok helt ek því fyrir honum; en Hrafn reið til vár með sex tigu manna ok hjó strengina, ok rak skipit upp á leirur, ok búit við skipbroti. Varð ek at selja Hrafni sjálfdœmi, ok galt ek mǫrk, ok eru slíkar mínar at segja frá honum."

(Jarl Eiríkr had Gunnlaugr conveyed out to Hallfreðr's ship, and he welcomed him gladly. There was a prompt offshore breeze, and they were in good spirits. It was late in the summer. Hallfreðr addressed Gunnlaugr: "Have you learned of Hrafn Ǫnundarson's wooing of Helga the Fair?" Gunnlaugr said he had heard something but not in detail. Hallfreðr told him what he knew about it and added that lots of people were saying that Hrafn was no less a man than Gunnlaugr. Gunnlaugr recited a stanza: "I care little whether the east wind

þeir Hallfreðr ok Gunnlaugr ormstunga ferð saman ok kómu á Melrakkasléttu; þá hafði Hrafn fengit Helgu. Hallfreðr sagði Gunnlaugi, hversu honum hafði vegnat við Hrafn.

(In the summer Hallfreðr sailed out to Iceland and brought his ship into Leiruvágr in the south [Fl. below the heath]. At that time Ǫnundr lived at Mosfell. Hallfreðr owed one of Ǫnundr's men half a mark of silver and gave him a rather hard answer. The man returned home and told of his problem. Hrafn said that he could expect to come out second best in their dealings. The next morning Hrafn rode to the ship thinking that he would cut the cable and prevent the departure of Hallfreðr and his men. Then others intervened to make peace between

blows stiffly at the snowshoe of
the promontory [ship] during this
week—there is clear weather now;
I fear the report more that I am
not considered as Hrafn's equal
in courage—a treasure breaker
[out- standing man] does not await
(expect) old age." Then Hallfreðr
said: "Companion, you would need
to come out better against Hrafn
that I did. I sailed my ship into
Leiruvágr [Mud Bay] south of the
Heath a few years ago and I owed a
half mark in silver to one of Hrafn's
men. I withheld it from him. But
Hrafn rode at us with sixty (or
seventy-two) men and severed the
cable so that the ship pitched up
on the mud and it almost came to
a shipwreck. I had to give Hrafn
self-judgment and pay a mark, and
that is my experience with him.")

them and twice as much as was
owed to the man was paid up.
With that they parted. The next
summer Hallfreðr and Gunnlaugr
Serpent Tongue traveled together
to Melrakkaslétta [Fox Field].
At that time Hrafn had married
Helga. Hallfreðr told Gunnlaugr
how he had fared with Hrafn.)

That the two passages are interdependent is suggested not only by motival and verbal similarities but by other factors as well. Both passages are bipartite; they tell on the one hand of the poets' shared voyage to Iceland and on the other hand of Hallfreðr's run-in with Hrafn on a previous occasion. It seems unlikely that this particular collocation would recur twice independently and more likely that one text is reproducing the other. That the joint voyage and the encounter between Hallfreðr and Hrafn are connected is explained by the fact that Hallfreðr reports the incident to Gunnlaugr in a conversation during the voyage. *Gunnlaugs saga* provides a fuller account, while the report in *Hallfreðar saga* appears more in the light of a summary.[1]

1. See W. Van Eeden, *De overlevering van de Hallfreðar saga*, Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam, afdeeling letterkunde (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1919), nieuwe reeks, vol. 19, no. 5: "[U]it den excerptachtigen stijl waait ons een pergamentlucht tegemoet . . . " (p. 95).

That the incident is more at home in *Gunnlaugs saga* is also suggested by the appearance of Hrafn, a co-protagonist in *Gunnlaugs saga* but only a momentary extra in *Hallfreðar saga*. The conversation in *Gunnlaugs saga* is about Hrafn's personal distinction. That has no place in *Hallfreðar saga* and is accordingly suppressed. Indeed, the incident is tacked on at the last moment in *Hallfreðar saga* and seems to be an oddment that the author picked up as an afterthought.

That the author of *Hallfreðar saga* is referring not just to the incident but knows *Gunnlaugs saga* as a whole, is indicated by the information to which he appears to have access but does not himself convey. *Gunnlaugs saga* explains Gunnlaugr's delay in detail and relates specifically that Gunnlaugr in effect caught the last ship to Iceland. The author of *Hallfreðar saga* accounts for none of this detail, but it clearly underlies his story because he adds at the last moment that "Hrafn had already married Helga." That presupposes the chronology of *Gunnlaugs saga*.

We can observe further that there is a particular drift in *Hallfreðar saga*'s revision of the incident as it is told in *Gunnlaugs saga*. The author of *Hallfreðar saga* is clearly intent on improving the image of his protagonist.[2] In *Gunnlaugs saga* Hallfreðr explicitly withholds payment from his creditor ("helt ek því fyrir honum"), but the author of *Hallfreðar saga* shrinks from making him a debt defaulter and refers more generally to hard words ("Hallfreðr átti at [gjalda] hálfa mǫrk silfrs húskarli Ǫnundar ok svaraði heldr harðliga"). In *Gunnlaugs saga* Hrafn cuts Hallfreðr's ship's cable and strands his ship, but in *Hallfreðar saga* he merely intends to do so ("ætlaði at hǫggva strengina"). That modification reduces the seriousness of the damage done to his protagonist. Finally, in *Gunnlaugs saga* Hallfreðr is forced to surrender self-judgment ("Varð ek þá at selja Hrafni sjálfdœmi"), but in *Hallfreðar saga* he saves face because others intervene to settle the matter ("Síðan áttu menn hlut í at sætta þá."). It makes sense to suppose that the author of *Hallfreðar saga* intervenes on his hero's behalf, but much less sense to believe that the author of *Gunnlaugs saga* revised *Hallfreðar saga* in such a way as to derogate a figure who is quite peripheral in his story.

2. See Björn Magnússon Ólsen, *Om Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu. En kritisk undersøgelse*, Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskabs Skrifter, historisk og filosofisk afdeling (Copenhagen: Høst, 1911), 7. række, vol. II, no. 1, p. 39. Hereafter abbreviated as B. M. Ólsen.

All critics seem to agree that this episode is more original as it stands in *Gunnlaugs saga* and is secondary in *Hallfreðar saga*.[3] At the same time, this recognition has posed a considerable problem for critics like Björn M. Ólsen, who considered *Gunnlaugs saga* to be a much later composition than *Hallfreðar saga*. The only escape from this impasse was to view the shared episode as a later interpolation in *Hallfreðar saga*, and B. M. Ólsen tries to reinforce this supposition by interpreting two other verbal correspondences as loans from an original *Hallfreðar saga* into *Gunnlaugs saga*.[4] In a certain sense, we may accept the idea of an interpolation; the episode involving Hallfreðr and Hrafn is tacked onto the end of *Hallfreðar saga* in a rather mechanical way and looks superimposed. On the other hand, the interpolation seems to be more the work of the saga author, with an overview of *Gunnlaugs saga* and a definite partisanship on behalf of his protagonist Hallfreðr, rather than the work of a later interpolator making a small mechanical addition.

The invocation of an interpolator is often a desperate remedy and prompts skepticism. The alternative in this case is that *Gunnlaugs saga* is older than *Hallfreðar saga* and that the author of the latter drew on the former. That possibility runs counter to the thesis advanced by B. M. Ólsen, who argued for a late date for *Gunnlaugs saga*, at least in the middle of the thirteenth century and, allowing for the possibility of a loan from *Njáls saga*, perhaps as late as 1300.[5] B. M. Ólsen's argument seems to have convinced almost all later critics,[6] and there is no doubt that his monograph is an extraordinarily thorough investigation, remarkable for an unmatched familiarity with all the sources. It should

3. See B. M. Ólsen, p. 39; Van Eeden, *De overlevering*, p. 95; Sigurður Nordal in Íslenzk fornrit 3 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1938), p. L. Hereafter Íslenzk fornrit will be abbreviated ÍF with volume and page numbers.

4. See B. M. Ólsen, pp. 40–41. For the dating of *Hallfreðar saga,* see Russell Poole, "The Relation between Verses and Prose in *Hallfreðar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*" in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2001), p. 137. Hereafter: *Skaldsagas*.

5. See B. M. Ólsen, pp. 53–54.

6. Finnur Jónsson, in his edition of *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, Samfund til Udgivelse af Gammel Nordisk Litteratur 42 (Copenhagen: S. L. Møller, 1916), p. XXVI, maintained a dating around 1200. Margaret Clunies Ross, "The Skald Sagas as a Genre: Definitions and Typical Features" in *Skaldsagas*, ed. Russell Poole, p. 40, leaves latitude for both an early and a late date. More typical is Jónas Kristjánsson's assumption of a late date in *Eddas and Sagas: Iceland's Medieval Literature* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1988), p. 284.

nonetheless be reviewed in some detail on the chance that *Gunnlaugs saga* might after all be dated earlier.

Gunnlaugs saga and *Egils saga*

According to B. M. Ólsen's analysis, easily the most important source for *Gunnlaugs saga* is the neighboring *Egils saga*; indeed, he considers *Gunnlaugs saga* to be a sort of continuation of *Egils saga* (p. 30). This hypothesis rests to a large extent on the supposition that *Gunnlaugs saga* borrows genealogical material from *Egils saga* (pp. 141–9). By now the fallacy in this thinking has become rather clearer than it was a century ago. B. M. Ólsen and many of his successors in Iceland approached the sagas with the idea that genealogies were derived from written rather than oral sources, notably from *Landnámabók*. B. M. Ólsen's long series of papers on *Landnámabók* and various sagas is predicated on this supposition, and the monograph on *Gunnlaugs saga* carries the argument one step further.[7]

Where *Egils saga* fails as a genealogical source, direct loans from *Landnámabók* do service instead (pp. 131–9). Only where both *Egils saga* and *Landnámabók* fail does B. M. Ólsen allow for the possibility of oral transmission (as in the case of Hrafn's two brothers) or authorial invention (as in the case of two cousins). Helga's second husband, Þorkell Hallkelsson, is also not to be found in written sources and is therefore given the benefit of oral transmission (p. 19). The difficulty in this system is that when oral transmission can be invoked to explain the presence of minor characters, it seems strained to invoke only written sources for the major characters. B. M. Ólsen is inclined to argue that one loan from *Landnámabók* justifies the assumption of other loans by analogy (e.g., p. 15), but we could just as well argue that the loan of two brothers, two cousins, and Helga's second husband from oral tradition also justifies other loans from oral tradition.

B. M. Ólsen posits literary as well as genealogical loans from *Egils saga*. Thus he argues that the description of Helga's father, Þorsteinn Egilsson, in *Gunnlaugs saga* (chap. 1; ÍF 3.51) is borrowed directly from *Egils saga* (chaps. 79–84; ÍF 2.274–93).

7. I list these papers in *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180–1280)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 222.

Egils saga

Þorsteinn, sonr Egils, þá er hann óx upp, var allra manna fríðastr sýnum, hvítr á hár ok bjartr álitum; hann var mikill ok sterkr, ok þó ekki eptir því sem faðir hans. Þorsteinn var vitr maðr ok kyrrlátr, hógværr, stilltr manna bezt.

Þorsteinn var maðr órefjusamr ok réttlátr ok óaleitinn við menn, en helt hlut sínum, ef aðrir menn leituðu á hann, enda veitti þat heldr þungt flestum, at etja kappi við hann.

(Egill's son Þorsteinn was a very handsome man when he grew up, with blond hair and a bright countenance. He was tall and strong, though not to the same degree as his father. Þorsteinn was a wise and peaceable man, gentle and very calm. Þorsteinn was an unbelligerent man, just and unaggressive toward others, but he could hold his own if others challenged him. And indeed, anyone who took issue with him was likely to suffer the consequences.)

Gunnlaugs saga

Þorsteinn hét maðr; hann var Egilsson, Skalla-Gríms sonar, Kveld-Úlfs sonar hersis ór Nóregi; en Ásgerðr hét móðir Þorsteins ok var Bjarnardóttir. Þorsteinn bjó at Borg í Borgarfirði; hann var auðigr at fé ok hǫfðingi mikill, vitr maðr ok hógværr ok hófsmaðr um alla hluti. Engi var hann afreksmaðr um vǫxt eða afl sem Egill faðir hans, en þó var hann it mesta afarmenni ok vinsæll af allri alþýðu. Þorsteinn var vænn maðr, hvítr á hár ok eygr manna bezt.

(There was a man named Þorsteinn, the son of Egill, who was the son of Skalla-Grímr, who was in turn the son of Kveld-Úlfr, a chieftain in Norway. Ásgerðr was the name of Þorsteinn's mother, and her father was named Bjǫrn. Þorsteinn lived at Borg in Borgarfjǫrðr. He was a wealthy man and a great chieftain, gentle and moderate in all respects. He was no superman in stature or strength, like his father Egill, but nonetheless he was an outstanding man and popular with everybody. Þorsteinn was a handsome man, blond and with a fine look in his eyes.)

One could argue that important saga characters are described consistently throughout the corpus; thus Snorri goði is recognizably the same personality whatever saga he appears in. The characterizations of Þorsteinn above are, however, somewhat more than consistent.

It is particularly the phrasing, "vitr maðr ok kyrrlátr, hógværr, stilltr manna bezt" or "vitr maðr ok hógværr ok hófsmaðr um alla hluti" and the feature that Þorsteinn is big and strong but not to the same degree as his father that suggests more than a general similarity. But if one passage echoes the other, is *Egils saga* necessarily the lender and *Gunnlaugs saga* the borrower? The other direction for this borrowing would in fact be easier because the author of *Egils saga* had only to look at the first page of *Gunnlaugs saga* to draw his portrait. It is slightly more cumbersome to imagine that the author of *Gunnlaugs saga* pieced his opening paragraph together from late chapters in *Egils saga*. But we may leave the question in abeyance for the moment.

Another close parallel between *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Egils saga* is found in the well-known remark that there were two contrary strains in the family of the Mýramenn, one notably handsome and the other no less ill-favored. This observation is formulated as follows (*Gunnlaugs saga* [Stockholm 18 4to], chap. 1: ÍF 3.51; *Egils saga*, chap. 87: ÍF 2.299–300):

Svá segja fróðir menn, at margir í ætt Mýramanna, þeir sem frá Agli eru komnir, hafi verit menn vænstir, en þat sé þó mjǫk sundrgreiniligt, því at sumir í þeira ætt er kallat, at ljótastir menn hafa verit. Í þeiri ætt hafa ok verit margir atgørvismenn um marga hluti, sem var Kjartan Óláfsson pá ok Víga-Barði ok Skúli Þorsteinsson. Sumir váru ok skáldmenn miklir í þeiri ætt: Bjǫrn Hítdœlakappi, Einarr prestr Skúlason, Snorri Sturluson ok margir aðrir.

(Wise men relate that many men in the family of the Mýramenn, descended from Egill, were

Frá Þorsteini er mikil ætt komin ok mart stórmenni ok skáld mǫrg, ok er þat Mýramannakyn, ok svá allt þat er komit er frá Skalla-Grími. Lengi helzk þat í ætt þeiri, at menn váru sterkir ok vígamenn miklir, en sumir spakir at viti. Þat var sundrleitt mjǫk, því at í þeiri ætt hafa fœzk þeir menn, er fríðastir hafa verit á Íslandi, sem var Þorsteinn Egilsson ok Kjartan Óláfsson, systursonr Þorsteins, ok Hallr Guðmundarson, svá ok Helga in fagra, dóttir Þorsteins, er þeir deildu um Gunnlaugr ormstunga ok Skáld-Hrafn; en fleiri váru Mýramenn manna ljótastir.

(Þorsteinn had many descendants, many important men and many poets. They make up the family

very handsome, although there were major differences, because some men in this family are said to have been very ugly. In this family there were also outstanding men in many respects, for example Kjartan Óláfsson Peacock and Warrior-Barði and Skúli Þorsteinsson. Some in the family were also great skalds: Bjǫrn Hítdœlakappi, Einarr Skúlason the priest, Snorri Sturluson, and many others.)

of the Mýramenn and they are all descended from Skalla-Grímr. It was a long tradition in that family that the men were strong and great warriors, and some were wise. But there were major differences because into the family were born some who were the handsomest in Iceland, for example Þorsteinn Egilsson and Kjartan Óláfsson, Þorsteinn's nephew, and Hallr Guðmundarson, and Helga the Fair as well, Þorsteinn's daughter, over whom Gunnlaugr and Skáld-Hrafn quarreled. But many of the Mýramenn were very ugly.)

There can be little doubt that these passages are copied one from the other, but there are special considerations that complicate the question of priority. The passage is found only in one of the two manuscripts of *Gunnlaugs saga*. B. M. Ólsen thought that it was part of the original saga, but the editors of the Íslenzk fornrit edition, Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, thought that it was an interpolation in Stockholm 18 4to and printed it as a footnote.[8] If it is an interpolation, it is certainly easier to believe that it was interpolated from *Egils saga*, where it is conspicuously located at the very end of the saga.

On the other hand, the passage is very logically placed in *Gunnlaugs saga*. The previous sentence states (ÍF 3.51): "Þorsteinn var vænn maðr, hvítr á hár ok eygr manna bezt" (Þorsteinn was a handsome man, blond and with a fine look in his eyes). The topic is therefore good looks, and it would make perfect sense for the author to continue in the same vein by generalizing about the history of good and ill-favored

8. See B. M. Ólsen, p. 21, and ÍF 3:51. See also Bjarni Einarsson, *Skáldasögur. Um uppruna og eðli ástaskáldsagnanna fornu* (Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 1961), pp. 268–69.

looks in the family as a whole. It would make particularly good sense if we believe that the author of *Egils saga* knew chapter 1 of *Gunnlaugs saga* and had already made use of the preceding sentences. We would not expect him to include the generalizing comment in his earlier description of Þorsteinn because he is not yet writing about the family as a whole and over time. He therefore reserves the generalization for the final summation.

It is of course perfectly possible that the author of *Gunnlaugs saga* fashioned his first chapter from scattered passages toward the end of *Egils saga*, but there are some indications that *Gunnlaugs saga* provides the original text. In the first place, *Gunnlaugs saga* is centrally about Þorsteinn and his beautiful daughter; Þorsteinn in *Egils saga* is a marginal and even slightly effete character. The real source on his life is *Gunnlaugs saga* and it is that source to which a writer on his ancestry might turn. As B. M. Ólsen points out (p. 21), the theme of personal beauty is also at the core of *Gunnlaugs saga* and is memorably embodied in Helga. The theme of beauty and idealized appearance is therefore more at home in *Gunnlaugs saga* than in *Egils saga* and is more likely to have originated in the former. Last but not least, the author of *Egils saga* concludes the passage by reminding the reader of the quarrel between Gunnlaugr and Hrafn over Helga, as he has already done once before in chapter 79 (ÍF 2.276). In effect he is referring to *Gunnlaugs saga*, and it might very well be the written *Gunnlaugs saga* we know since he echoes the text so closely.

If *Egils saga* is indeed referring to the written *Gunnlaugs saga*, and the chances that this is the case seem to me rather better than even, that does not help greatly with the absolute date of *Gunnlaugs saga*. Even if *Egils saga* was written by Snorri Sturluson, it could still be as late as 1240, and *Gunnlaugs saga* only slightly earlier, but a date around 1235 is not substantially different from B. M. Ólsen's earlier alternative of ca. 1250. We must therefore explore other literary relationships.

Gunnlaugs saga and *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*

Among the distinguished poets in the Mýramenn clan mentioned at the beginning of *Gunnlaugs saga* (in Stockholm 18 4to) is Bjǫrn Hítdœlakappi. According to B. M. Ólsen (p. 23), this mention suggests that the author of *Gunnlaugs saga* was familiar with *Bjarnar saga*

Hítdœlakappa. Without argument, he goes on to express certainty that *Bjarnar saga* is the older of the two (p. 32), and he proceeds to trace the influences in *Gunnlaugs saga*. He notes first of all that Skúli Þorsteinsson is assigned the same role in both sagas. In *Bjarnar saga* Skúli is Bjǫrn's host and patron at Borg: "He grew up with Skúli at Borg" (ÍF 3.112). Skúli outfits him for a voyage abroad, seconds his wooing of Oddný Þorkelsdóttir, and, when he is ready to sail, Skúli gives him a gold token as an introduction to his "friend" Eiríkr jarl Hákonarson. Accordingly, Bjǫrn is made welcome at Eiríkr's court.

In *Gunnlaugs saga,* Skúli becomes Gunnlaugr's protector at the court of the same Eiríkr when Gunnlaugr delivers his famous rejoinder to the effect that Eiríkr should make no dire predictions at his expense but rather wish for a better death than his father had (ÍF 3.69). Only Skúli's intervention saves Gunnlaugr's life. Aside from the fact that Skúli is located at his father's farm in Iceland in one case and at Eiríkr's court in Norway in the other case, and that he functions as a reference in one case but as a rescuer in the other, the motif of intervention by a friend or relative on behalf of a man who has incurred a monarch's wrath is commonplace in the sagas. The parallel is not close enough to suggest borrowing.

In both sagas, the rival skalds and ultimately wooers, Gunnlaugr and Hrafn in *Gunnlaugs saga* and Bjǫrn and Þórðr in *Bjarnar saga*, meet at a foreign court. Here, too, B. M. Ólsen (p. 34) believes that one meeting has influenced the other but once again there are significant differences. In *Gunnlaugs saga,* the two skalds meet at the court of King Olaf of Sweden and compete with their panegyrics in a lively scene that aligns their poetry with their characters. In *Bjarnar saga* the skalds Bjǫrn and Þórðr meet at the court of Jarl Eiríkr of Norway and manage to live on companionable terms despite earlier frictions; there is no rival presentation of praise poetry. As we know from the *Legendary Saga of Saint Óláfr*, simultaneous visits to royal courts by more than one skald were not unusual and such double visits in the skald sagas may not be striking enough to suggest a literary connection.

B. M. Ólsen (p. 35) also saw a significant similarity between Bjǫrn Hítdœlakappi's gift of a cloak presented to him by King Óláfr Haraldsson (ÍF 3.134) to Oddný (ÍF 3.150) and the cloak given to Gunnlaugr by King Ethelred in England (ÍF 3.71) and later presented to Helga (ÍF 3.90). The Íslenzk fornrit editors, Sigurður Nordal and

Guðni Jónsson, have pointed out, however, that the cloak given by King Óláfr to Bjǫrn is not the same as the one he gives to Oddný.[9] Quite apart from that discrepancy, the parallel is not close enough to carry conviction. It is an inconspicuous moment in *Bjarnar saga* but a highly significant moment in *Gunnlaugs saga* because Helga's dying gesture is to unfold the cloak and gaze at it (ÍF 3.107). It does not therefore appear that B. M. Ólsen was able to make loans from *Bjarnar saga* into *Gunnlaugs saga* plausible.

If we reverse the procedure, however, and explore the possibility that *Bjarnar saga* made use of *Gunnlaugs saga*, the result is a little more promising.[10] Both Gunnlaugr and Bjǫrn go abroad with the understanding that the betrothed woman will wait for three years. The stipulation is more clearly spelled out in *Bjarnar saga* (ÍF 3.114):

> Fóru þá þegar festar fram, ok skyldi hon sitja í festum þrjá vetr, ok þó at Bjǫrn sé samlendr fjórða vetrinn ok megi eigi til komask at vitja þessa ráðs, þá skal hon þó hans bíða, en ef hann kemr eigi til á þriggja vetra fresti af Nóregi, þá skyldi Þorkell gipta hana ef hann vildi. Bjǫrn skyldi ok senda menn út at vitja þessa ráðs ef hann mætti eigi sjálfr til koma.
>
> (The engagement was contracted, and [it was stipulated] that she would remain engaged for three years. Even if Bjǫrn was in the country [Iceland] in the fourth year but unable to revisit his engagement, she should still wait for him. But if he did not arrive from Norway within the three-year period, Þorkell would be free to marry her off if he wished. [It was also stipulated] that Bjǫrn

9. See ÍF 3:150n1.

10. This possibility has already been explored in detail by Bjarni Guðnason in "Aldur ok einkenni Bjarnar sögu Hítdœlakappa" in *Sagnaþing helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni sjötugum 10. Apríl 1994*, 2 vols. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1994), vol. 1, pp. 69–85. He took the view that *Bjarnar saga* implicitly measures its protagonist against such saga heroes as Gunnlaugr ormstunga, Bjǫrn Breiðvíkingakappi, and Kjartan Óláfsson (p. 76). Despite earlier views assigning priority to *Bjarnar saga* (see p. 78, notes 28–29), Bjarni argued that *Gunnlaugs saga* served as a model. In particular, he suggested Gunnlaugr's combat with Þórormr in England as the prototype for Bjǫrn's single combat with Kaldimarr in Russia (p. 78). He did not, however, use this evidence to date *Gunnlaugs saga* early; instead he argued that *Bjarnar saga* drew on ten different sagas, including *Njáls saga*, and was not written until 1300 or a little later. I persist in believing that *Bjarnar saga* is early, but *Gunnlaugs saga* even earlier.

should dispatch men out [to Iceland] to revisit the engagement if he could not make the trip himself.)

The provisions seem a trifle over-specific, as if there were in fact some expectation that Bjǫrn will not appear at the appointed time. If he returns in three years but cannot make a personal appearance, Oddný must wait a fourth year. If he does not return in three years, Þorkell is free to marry his daughter to someone else, unless Bjǫrn sends delegates to confirm the arrangement.

These provisions recapitulate in a nutshell the circumstances in *Gunnlaugs saga*, although the stipulations are not nearly so precise in the latter case. Under pressure from Gunnlaugr's father Illugi, Helga's father Þorsteinn agrees to an informal marriage commitment for three years but not to a formal betrothal (ÍF 3.67–68): "Þá skal Helga vera heitkona Gunnlaugs, en eigi festarkona, ok bíða þrjá vetr; … en ek skal lauss allra mála, ef hann kemr eigi svá út. …" (Helga should be committed to Gunnlaugr, but not be his fiancée, and should wait three years; … but I will be released from all commitments if he does not come out [to Iceland] …). These general terms are then more precisely articulated when Gunnlaugr is delayed and Hrafn makes his bid for Helga's hand (ÍF 3.81–82):

> Þorsteinn svarar: "Hon er áðr heitkona Gunnlaugs, ok vil ek halda ǫll mál við hann, þau sem mælt váru." Skapti [the lawspeaker Skapti Þóroddsson, who is acting on Þóroddr's behalf] mælti: "Eru nú eigi liðnir þrír vetr, er til váru nefndir með yðr?" "Já," sagði Þorsteinn, "en eigi er sumarit liðit, ok má hann enn til koma í sumar." Skapti svarar: "En ef hann kemr eigi til sumarlangt, hverja ván skulu vér þá eiga þessa máls?" Þorsteinn svarar: "Hér munu vér koma annat sumar, ok má þá sjá, hvat ráðligast þykkir, en ekki tjár nú at tala lengr at sinni."
>
> (Þorsteinn replied: "She was committed to Gunnlaugr before, and I wish to maintain all the commitments that were stipulated with him." Skapti said: "Have the three years not passed that were agreed on by you?" "Yes," said Þorsteinn, "but the summer has not passed, and he could still make it here during the summer." Skapti answered: "But if he does not arrive during the summer, what is to

be our expectation in this matter?" Þorsteinn answered: "We will come here next summer and look into what seems most advisable, but there is no point in talking further for the time being.")

The theme here, as in *Bjarnar saga*, is the matter of extensions; Gunnlaugr has not returned, but may still do so. Even if he does not, Þorsteinn wants to hold the agreement open for a fourth year. In both cases there are two back-up positions to prevent foreclosing the agreement prematurely. The difference is that the author of *Bjarnar saga* anticipates all the contingencies at once, perhaps a less realistic alternative. It looks as though *Gunnlaugs saga* has provided him with an overview of the possible contingencies and the author of *Bjarnar saga* has availed himself of the blueprint.

B. M. Ólsen thought that a significant shared feature in the two sagas was the intermediary role of Skúli Þorsteinsson at Jarl Eiríkr's court, but perhaps a greater similarity can be found in the way the skalds are introduced at court. Gunnlaugr introduces himself, but the jarl immediately turns to Skúli to ask about him (ÍF 3:69):

"Herra," segir hann, "takið honum vel; hann er ins bezta manns sonr á Íslandi, Illuga svarta af Gilsbakka, ok fóstbróðir minn."

("Sir," he said, "give him a good welcome; he is the son of an excellent man in Iceland, Illugi the Black from Gilsbakki, and he is my foster brother.")

In *Bjarnar saga* he turns to Bjǫrn to get information on the newly arrived Þórðr (ÍF 3.116):

Jarl spurði Bjǫrn, ef honum væri kunnleiki á Þórði. Bjǫrn kvazk gǫrla kenna Þórð ok kvað hann vera skáld gott,—"ok mun þat kvæði rausnarsamligt, er hann flytr." Jarl mælti: "Þykki þér þat ráð, Bjǫrn, at ek hlýð kvæðinu?" "Þykki mér víst," segir Bjǫrn, "því at þat mun báðum ykkr til sœmðar."

(The jarl asked Bjǫrn if he know Þórðr. Bjǫrn said that he knew Þórðr very well and said that he was a good poet—"and any poem that he presents will be splendid." The jarl asked: "Do you think that it

would be advisable for me to listen to the poem?" "I do indeed," said Bjǫrn, "for it will be a source of honor for both of you.")

In both cases the acceptance of the guest is by recommendation, though in *Bjarnar saga* there is an ironic undertone, voluntary or involuntary, because the referee and the beneficiary of the reference become bitter rivals and deadly enemies.

After Bjǫrn and Þórðr have spent a sociable winter at Jarl Eiríkr's court, Bjǫrn resolves to go harrying, but Þórðr advises against it in the following terms (ÍF 3.118):

> Þat sýnisk mér óráðligt, fengit nú áðr góða sœmð ok virðing, en hætta sér nú svá, ok far þú miklu heldr með mér í sumar út til Íslands, til frænda þinna gǫfugra, ok vitja ráðahags þíns.
>
> (It seems to me inadvisable, now that you have gotten honor and respect, to take such a risk. [You should] much rather travel with me out to Iceland this summer to your distinguished kinsmen, in order to revisit your engagement.)

This advice is either illogical or deeply hypocritical because Þórðr presumably already has it in mind to make off with Bjǫrn's betrothed. That option becomes more plausible the longer Bjǫrn stays away from Iceland, and the advice to return home therefore contradicts Þórðr's intention. The delayed return is also a prominent feature in *Gunnlaugs saga* and is formulated one final time in the following terms (ÍF 3.82):

> Þorsteinn gekk þá til Skapta, ok keyptu þeir svá, at brúðlaup skyldi vera at vetrnáttum at Borg, ef Gunnlaugr kœmi eigi út á því sumri, en Þorsteinn lauss allra mála við Hrafn, ef Gunnlaugr kœmi til ok vitjaði ráðsins.
>
> (Þorsteinn then went to Skapti, and they arranged that the wedding should take place at the beginning of winter at Borg if Gunnlaugr did not come out [to Iceland] that summer, but that Þorsteinn should be free of all commitments to Hrafn if Gunnlaugr arrived and revisited his engagement.)

The phrase "vitja ráðs" (or "ráðahags") is a very slight echo, but it is precisely what both suitors fail to do. Both betrothal stories are centered on the failure of the grooms to appear at the appointed time, but the author of *Gunnlaugs saga* handles the theme more logically. There may, therefore, be a suspicion that the author of *Bjarnar saga* took it over mechanically and failed to make the necessary logical adjustments.

The final impediment to prompt arrival is that it is late in the summer and all the ships have already sailed from Norway to Iceland. Jarl Eiríkr informs Gunnlaugr in the following words (ÍF 3.84): "Nú eru ǫll skip í brottu, þau er til Íslands bjuggusk" (now all the ships that were readied for Iceland have sailed). But the bad news turns out to be premature, and Jarl Eiríkr is able to get passage for Gunnlaugr with Hallfreðr (ibid.):

> Eiríkr jarl lét þá flytja Gunnlaug út til Hallfreðar, ok tók hann við honum með fagnaði, ok gaf þegar byr undan landi, ok váru vel kátir. Þat var síð sumars.
>
> (Jarl Eiríkr had Gunnlaugr conveyed out to Hallfreðr's ship, and he welcomed him gladly. There was a prompt offshore breeze and they were in good spirits. It was late in the summer.)

The departure of all the ships to Iceland and the lateness of the season are duplicated when Bjǫrn returns to Norway from Kiev (ÍF 3.122): "Ok er hann kom þar, váru ǫll skip gengin til Íslands, ok var þat síð sumars" (and when he got there, all the ships had sailed to Iceland, and it was late in the summer).

One final similarity occurs at the end of *Bjarnar saga*, when Þórðr overcomes Bjǫrn in a notably one-sided combat and must bring his wife Oddný the news, along with a torque belonging to Bjǫrn (ÍF 3.205). At the sight of it, Oddný falls back unconscious and lapses into an illness that leads to her death. Her fate is not a little reminiscent of Helga's final moments as she unfolds and gazes at the cloak given her by Gunnlaugr. In both scenes the woman is described as gazing at the treasure and collapsing (ÍF 3.107: "hné hon aptr"; ÍF 3.205: "hneig hon aptr").

The echoes in these texts are not unambiguous; it can still be argued that both authors are working from literary commonplaces. Even if we

believe that the echoes are textual, there is not much to suggest which text has the priority. I would nonetheless argue that *Gunnlaugs saga* is more likely to have set the tone. It is more thoroughly constructed on and pervaded by the theme of the procrastinating groom. In *Bjarnar saga*, on the other hand, this theme is confined to the first four short chapters and the death of Oddný at the end. The body of the saga, which is about twice as long as *Gunnlaugs saga*, has no reminiscences of this theme and is focused single-mindedly on the exchange of stanzas and the hostilities between Bjǫrn and Þórðr. Here the author seems entirely dependent on the stanzas and whatever tradition may have accompanied them. My own sense of the composition as a whole is that the author was intent on telling the story of the feud between Bjǫrn and Þórðr but prefaced and concluded that core story with a romantic frame inspired by *Gunnlaugs saga*.

Further textual correpondences

Other echoes detected by B. M. Ólsen are slight in comparison. I mention only two cases because they were accepted by Sigurður Nordal.[11] Chapter 1 of *Gunnlaugs saga* notes the marriage of Þorsteinn to Jófríðr, daughter of Gunnarr Hlífarson. The Stockholm manuscript provides a comment on Gunnarr not found in the other manuscript (ÍF 3.52):

> Gunnarr hefir bezt vígr verit ok mestr fimleikamaðr verit á Íslandi af búandmǫnnum, annarr Gunnarr at Hlíðarenda, þriði Steinþórr á Eyri.
>
> (Of all the farmers in Iceland Gunnarr was the most stalwart and agile next after Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi, and Steinþórr at Eyrr was the third.)

B. M. Ólsen (p. 26) saw no reason to consider the passage to be an interpolation and viewed it as a combination of a passage in *Hœnsa-Þóris saga* and another in *Eyrbyggja saga*. *Hœnsa-Þóris saga* comments as follows (ÍF 3.44):

11. See ÍF 3:XLIX, LII–V.

> "Já," sagði Gunnarr, "svá er þat," ok gengr heim til bœjarins ok tók boga, því at hann skaut allra manna bezt af honum, ok er þar helzt til jafnat, er var Gunnarr at Hlíðarenda.
>
> ("Yes," said Gunnarr, "that is so." He went back to the house and took his bow, because he was the best of shots, and Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi is the best comparison.)

The passages are not close enough to suggest first-hand borrowing; one is about general athleticism, the other specifically about bowmanship. It is easy to believe that there were general traditions about comparative prowess, as there may have been about Barði Guðmundarson and Grettir Ásmundarson.[12] The following passage from *Eyrbyggja saga* illustrates the same point (ÍF 4.212–2):

> Steinþórr var framast barna Þorláks; hann var mikill maðr ok sterkr ok manna vápnfimastr ok inn mesti atgørvismaðr; hógværr var hann hversdagliga. Steinþórr var til þess tekinn, at inn þriði maðr hafi bezt verit vígr á Íslandi með þeim Helga Droplaugarsyni ok Vémundi kǫgur.
>
> (Steinþórr was foremost among Þorlákr's children. He was a tall man, strong and most accomplished with weapons, a man of prowess, though he was gentle on a daily basis. Steinþórr was considered to have been the third greatest warrior in Iceland along with Helgi Droplaugarson and Vémundr kǫgurr.)

Steinþórr recurs in this passage but is compared to entirely different men. Once again the echo is too thin to carry conviction.

A few pages later B. M. Ólsen (p. 29) identifies another loan from *Eyrbyggja saga*. When Gunnlaugr asks Þorsteinn for the hand of his daughter and is turned down, he responds in his characteristically undiplomatic fashion by telling his potential father-in-law that he is a lesser man than his own father Illugi. As a case in point he refers to Illugi's triumph over Þorgrímr Kjallaksson at the Þórsnessþing (ÍF 3.66):

12. See ÍF 7:106–7.

> Eða hvat hefir þú í móti því, er hann deildi kapp við Þorgrím goða Kjallaksson á Þórsnessþingi ok við sonu hans ok hafði einn þat, er við lá?
>
> (Or what can you compare to his having contested against the chieftain Þorgrímr Kjallaksson and his sons at the Þórsnes Assembly, with the result that he won the whole stake?)

The exchange develops into a little flyting, but Þorsteinn soon appreciates that it is foolish and disengages.

The dispute between Illugi and Þorgrímr Kjallaksson is narrated in a little greater detail in *Eyrbyggja saga* (ÍF 4.31–33). We learn that the dispute was over the marriage portion of Illugi's wife Ingibjǫrg Ásbjarnardóttir. It came close to armed conflict, but the money was finally paid out on Illugi's terms. It is quite unlikely that the author of *Gunnlaugs saga* needed to refer to *Eyrbyggja saga* for this information, especially because the event was commemorated in a praise poem by a certain Oddr and titled "Illugadrápa." Two stanzas are quoted in the retelling of *Eyrbyggja saga*, and the author of *Gunnlaugs saga* could just as well have taken the reference from the poem. The author in fact treats it as general knowledge that any reader could be expected to have.

B. M. Ólsen (p. 36) nonetheless argues for the influence of *Eyrbyggja saga* in yet a third passage. In *Gunnlaugs saga* Illugi visits Þorsteinn at Borg to support Gunnlaugr's wooing of Helga. Þorsteinn suggests that they walk up to the overhanging hill (*borg*) in order to talk (ÍF 3.67): "Gǫngum upp á borgina ok tǫlum þar" (let us climb the hill and talk there). This scene reminds B. M. Ólsen of a scene in *Eyrbyggja saga* in which Víga-Styrr (Arngrímr Þorgrímsson) visits Snorri goði at Helgafell to ask for advice on his troublesome berserks. Snorri suggests that they climb up Helgafell to discuss the matter (ÍF 4.71–72):

> Snorri spurði, ef hann hefði nǫkkur vandamál at tala. "Svá þykki mér," segir Styrr. Snorri svarar: "Þá skulu vit ganga upp á Helgafell; þau ráð hafa sízt at engu orðit, er þar hafa ráðin verit."
>
> (Snorri asked if he had any problems to discuss. "I think I do," said Styrr. Snorri replied: "Then we should climb Helgafell; the plans forged there have been least likely to come to nothing.")

During the consultation on Helgafell Snorri hatches a plan that will enable Styrr to kill off the two berserks. Part of the secret deal is that Snorri will then get the hand of Styrr's daughter in marriage. Thus the situation in both sagas revolves around a marriage negotiation. B. M. Ólsen acknowledges that there is no mention of the idea that Borg, like Helgafell, is auspicious for consultations, but he believes that the idea is implied, even though the betrothal of Gunnlaugr and Helga is anything but auspicious. This parallel too seems less than compelling, and I can find no strong evidence that *Gunnlaugs saga* echoes *Eyrbyggja saga*.

Far more interesting is the case to be made for our author's having known *Laxdœla saga*. He cites that saga explicitly in chapter 5 (ÍF 3.64):

> Reið Illugi þá heiman skjótt ok keypti skip hálft til handa Gunnlaugi, er uppi stóð í Gufuárósi, at Auðuni festargram. Þessi Auðunn vildi eigi útan flytja sonu Ósvífrs ins spaka eptir víg Kjartans Óláfssonar, sem segir í Laxdœla sǫgu, ok varð þat þó síðar en þetta.
>
> (Illugi rode off from home quickly and purchased half a ship in Gufuáróss from Auðunn festargramr. This Auðunn did not want to give passage to the sons of Ósvífr the Wise after the killing of Kjartan Óláfsson, as it is told in *Laxdœla saga*, but that happened after this [i.e., after what is told here].)

There would seem to be no good reason to believe that this is not a reference to the written *Laxdœla saga* and no good reason to believe that the reference in *Gunnlaugs saga* is interpolated (ÍF 3.64n1). B. M. Ólsen was in no doubt that the author of *Gunnlaugs saga* made use of *Laxdœla saga*, although the reference above is not precise.[13] *Laxdœla saga* (ÍF 5.158–59) does not state that Auðunn refused passage to the sons of Ósvífr, only that he made a dire prediction about their survival. The remark in *Gunnlaugs saga* that "the latter [the passage of Ósvífr's sons abroad] was later than this [Gunnlaugr's voyage abroad]" is also peculiar. Looking at the reconstructed chronologies in the *Íslenzk fornrit* editions, we can observe that modern scholars estimate that

13. See B. M. Ólsen, pp. 23, 27, 30–32, 50.

Gunnlaugr went abroad in 1002 and Ósvífr's sons probably in the summer of 1003.[14] That medieval authors or scribes would have made such a narrow calculation is indeed surprising and difficult to explain. It is more likely that the sequence is based on a vague tradition than on a written source.

Apart from this passage, the evidence that the author of *Gunnlaugs saga* made use of *Laxdœla saga* is again very thin. B. M. Ólsen (p. 23) believed that the reference to Kjartan Óláfsson in the first chapter of *Gunnlaugs saga* presupposes a knowledge of *Laxdœla saga*, but surely a reference to one of the most famous heroes of the Saga Age does not equate to the knowledge of a particular text. B. M. Ólsen (p. 27) also supposed that the mention of the spouses Óláfr pá and Þorgerðr Egilsdóttir in chapter 3 rested either on *Egils saga* or on *Laxdœla saga*, probably the latter. Again, the mention of these Saga Age notables hardly requires a written source. In addition, B. M. Ólsen urges a verbal echo in the introduction of Óláfr pá (ÍF 3.57):

> Ok þá reið Þorsteinn til heimboðs vestr í Hjarðarholt, til Óláfs pá, mágs síns, Hǫskuldarsonar, er þá þótti vera með mestri virðingu allra hǫfðingja vestr þar.
>
> (Then Þorsteinn rode to a feast west in Hjarðarholt, at the residence of his kinsman Óláfr Peacock Hǫskuldarson, who at that time was reputed to be the worthiest of all the chieftains there in the west.)

It is theorized that we can find the source for this description in chapter 24 of *Laxdœla saga*, where there are remarks such as "gerðisk hann hǫfðingi mikill" (he became a great chieftain) (ÍF 5.66) and "óxu nú mjǫk metorð Óláfs" (Óláfr's reputation was now greatly increased) (ÍF 5.68). Once more, the similarity is too approximate and the sentiment too general to allow for such a conclusion.

On p. 32 B. M. Ólsen associates Þorsteinn's memorable dream forecasting his daughter's marriages with Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir's fourfold dream visions of her marriages in *Laxdœla saga*, but we will see below that there is a considerably closer parallel in the Eddic material. Since the plot of *Gunnlaugs saga* can be documented for a prior tradition

14. See ÍF 3:LIX and ÍF 5:LIX.

because of various references to it, B. M. Ólsen (pp. 31–32) does not subscribe to the view that the author invented the romantic plot under the influence of *Laxdœla saga*. Indeed, it seems more likely that both authors owe their romantic impulses to the Eddic antecedents, but B. M. Ólsen (p. 46) mentions only two Eddic echoes from *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* and *Atlamál*. We will see that the Eddic substratum can be construed to yield a good deal more.

In summary, B. M. Ólsen was convinced that the author of *Gunnlaugs saga* was palpably influenced by *Hallfreðar saga*, *Egils saga*, *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, and *Laxdœla saga*. In the first three cases I believe that the influence ran not to *Gunnlaugs saga* but from it. In the case of *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Laxdœla saga,* I find the evidence inadequate, although the direct reference to the latter poses a real puzzle. B. M. Ólsen also believed in influences from *Heiðarvíga saga*, *Hœnsa-Þóris saga*, and *Njáls saga*, but Sigurður Nordal considered that the case had not been made and I will not pursue it further.[15]

The romantic undertone

Readers of Björn M. Ólsen's treatise, after a few years' time, are more likely to remember his general assessment of the romantic flavor in *Gunnlaugs saga* than the details on the possible influences from other sagas, even though his treatment of the romantic streak is very brief (pp. 10–11). He speaks of the "chivalric-romantic undertone that pervades the saga from beginning to end," although he qualifies that description by suggesting that the tone is downplayed to accord with normal saga style. He detects the romantic tone in Þorsteinn's conferral of the name "Helga the Fair" and in her golden tresses, but also in the chivalric sensibilities of the male protagonists. It emerges most emphatically in the motif of unquenchable love until death and the sentimental conclusion. B. M. Ólsen sums up the evidence by labeling *Gunnlaugs saga* a "chivalric romance against a Norse backdrop" and the male protagonists "knightly figures in disguise." In particular he judges the description of Helga's golden hair ("fagrt sem barit gull") to have undergone the influence of chivalric romance.

15. See B. M. Ólsen, pp. 23, 26, 36–37, and Sigurður Nordal in ÍF 3:XLIX.

One need not resort to foreign romance to find models for beautiful, lovelorn, and grief-stricken women, and we will locate more immediate models presently. Generally speaking, however, it appears in retrospect that B. M. Ólsen's emphasis on chivalric romance was considerably exaggerated. This criticism was voiced most forthrightly by Vésteinn Ólason:[16]

> It has often been maintained that the Saga of Gunnlaug bears the marks of the influence of a fashionable literary genre of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the French chansons de geste and romances of chivalry that were being translated into Norse and enjoyed considerable popularity in the later part of the thirteenth century at least among the upper classes. In fact this influence was quite limited and not very profound.

Vésteinn tries, for example, to moderate the glorification of Helga's beauty and align it with other sagas. The most memorable detail is probably the comparison of Helga's hair to "barit gull" (beaten gold). B. M. Ólsen (p. 11) takes the phrase to reflect chivalric style, but his two examples are not from chivalric texts; one is from *Þiðreks saga* and the other is from a curious little text in *Flateyjarbók* titled *Hauks þáttr hábrókar*. These instances are the only ones recorded in the dictionaries and are a thin basis for arguing chivalric style.[17]

Whether *Gunnlaugs saga* is chivalric and inspired by foreign models or not, most critics can agree that in some sense it is a love story. The less it is judged to partake of foreign influence, the more it constitutes

16. See *The Saga of Gunnlaug Snake-Tongue together with the Tale of Scald-Helgi*, trans. Alan Boucher, with an Introduction by Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík: Iceland Review, 1983), p. 16. See also Else Mundal's "Foreword" in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* (Oslo, etc.: Universitetsforlaget, 1980), pp. 11 and 16, and Alison Finlay, "Skald Sagas in Their Literary Context 2: Possible European Contexts" in *Skaldsagas*, ed. Russell Poole, p. 237.

17. Susanne Kramarz-Bein's recent and compendious book *Die Þiðreks saga im Kontext der altnorwegischen Literatur* (Tübingen and Basel: A. Francke Verlag, 2002), especially pp. 207–63, associates *Þiðreks saga* with chivalric romance, but I continue to believe that it was translated from a Low German text composed in Soest ca. 1180 at a time when chivalric romance had hardly begun in Germany. The phrase "barit gull" could reflect an original Low German or High German "gehemertes golt" or the like. The *Hauks þáttr hábrókar* to which the dictionaries refer, not to be confused with the *Hauks þáttr hábrókar* in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, Editiones Arnamagnæanæ, Ser. A, vol. 3 (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzel, 2000), pp. 104–5, is found only in *Flateyjarbók*. It is printed in *Fornmanna sögur*, 12 vols. (Copenhagen: S. L. Møller, 1825–1837), vol. 10,

evidence for a native tradition of love stories. That such a tradition existed is borne out by the existence of love stanzas and a variety of love anecdotes pertaining to both kings and commoners, not least of all skalds such as Þormóðr Bersason and Kormákr Ǫgmundarson.[18] The chief guarantee of a native romantic tradition is the legend of Brynhild and Sigurd, with a blighted love story at its core. Romantic blight seems in fact to be the preferred mode in the native tradition, in which a happy outcome is quite unknown. The wrong match is the rule; the passionate swains never get the beloved, and the objects of their affection, passionate in action in the poetry but passionate only in grief in the sagas, become so many *mal mariées*.

Both the women and the men differ greatly in verse and prose. The men of heroic poetry are decisive, Sigurd in his wooing and the Burgundian brothers in their action against Sigurd. The men in the sagas, on the other hand, are curiously irresolute; it is as if they had all partaken of Grimhild's potion of forgetfulness and lost track of their commitments.[19] The women of heroic poetry waver even less than the men; Brynhild contrives the death of Sigurd, and Gudrun avenges him with unexampled ferocity. The women in the sagas by contrast wither away in melancholy.

And yet there are similarities that suggest a continuity. The common theme is the thwarted marriage with tragic consequences. The sagas rarely attain the high passion of the Eddic poems, although *Gísla saga* and *Laxdœla saga* come close and *Gunnlaugs saga* has high moments in the encounter between Gunnlaugr and Hrafn and the death of

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pp. 198–208, and later editions. In her recent *The Development of Flateyjarbók: Iceland and the Norwegian Dynastic Crisis of 1389* (N.p.: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2005), p. 100, Elizabeth Ashman Rowe reminds us that Finnur Jónsson believed that the run of text including *Hauks þáttr* could have been authored by Jón Þórðarson himself. Jón or a contemporary could very well have modeled his description of King Haraldr's hair as "fagrt sem silki eðr barit gull" (p. 206) on *Gunnlaugs saga*. On the *þáttr* in general see also Stefanie Würth, *Elemente des Erzählens. Die þættir der Flateyjarbók*, Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie 20 (Basel and Frankfurt am Main: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1991), p. 110.

18. For a survey of these stanzas see Bjarni Einarsson's *Skáldasögur* (note 8), pp. 11–39. See also Alison Finlay, "Skalds, Troubadours and Saga," *Saga-Book* 24 (1995), pp. 105–53, and "Skald Sagas in Their Literary Context 2: Possible European Contexts" in *Skaldsagas*, ed. Russell Poole, pp. 232–71.

19. See Robert G. Cook, "The Character of Gunnlaug Serpent -Tongue," *Scandinavian Studies* 43 (1971), p. 12.

Helga. Without rivaling the poems, the sagas do have certain devices, gestures, and phrasings that are reminiscent of them.

Both the heroic legend (most likely in the largely lost *Sigurðarkviða in meiri* now preserved only in the prose of *Vǫlsunga saga*) and *Gunnlaugs saga* begin with elaborate premonitory dreams.[20] In the legend, Gudrun dreams of holding a hawk with golden feathers, which she values above all things.[21] When she seeks counsel from Brynhild, she recounts another dream (Finch, p. 46) in which she sees a stag with a golden coat, also valued most highly, but which Brynhild strikes down at her feet. No less explicitly predictive is Þorsteinn's dream about two eagles succumbing in a fight over a beautiful swan in *Gunnlaugs saga*. The prophetic eagles are in fact matched in one of the premonitory dreams that warn Kostbera of the fate that awaits the Burgundian brothers if they travel to Hunland (Finch, p. 67). She dreams of an eagle flying through the hall splattering blood. For a chivalric parallel we can of course resort to the *Nibelungenlied*, but the Norse parallels are closer to hand.[22]

Saga readers remember Helga as the quintessential, almost proverbial, beauty. The theme of beauty has also put critics in mind of chivalric models; the figure of Enid in the romances of Chrétien and Hartmann might illustrate this tradition. It is true that feminine beauty is not much dwelt on in the sagas, but here again the heroic legend fills the gap. When Sigurd first sees Brynhild in her remote tower, he is captivated by her beauty (Finch, p. 42): "Þá sér hann eina fagra konu ok kennir at þar er Brynhildr. Honum þykkir um vert allt saman, fegrð hennar ok þat er hon gerir" (then he sees a fair woman and realizes that it is Brynhild. He is altogether struck by her beauty and by what [the work] she is doing). He reports the vision to his companion

20. In "Die Lieder der Lücke im Codex Regius der Edda," *Germanistische Abhandlungen, Hermann Paul dargebracht* (Strassburg: Trübner, 1902), pp. 1–98; rpt. in his *Kleine Schriften*, ed. Stefan Sonderegger (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969), vol. 2, pp. 223–91 (esp. pp. 249–56) Andreas Heusler posited a separate "Traumlied" to account for the premonitory dream. In "The Lays of the Lacuna in Codex Regius," *Speculum Norroenum: Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. Ursula Dronke et al. (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), pp. 6–26, I suggested that the dream could well have been part of "Meiri."

21. *The Saga of the Volsungs*, ed. and trans. R. G. Finch (London and Edinburgh: Nelson, 1965), p. 44. Hereafter cited as: Finch.

22. See *Das Nibelungenlied*, ed. Helmut de Boor, rev. Roswitha Wisniewski (Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1979), p. 6.

Alsviðr; then, when he makes his first visit, he kisses Brynhild and praises her unique beauty (Finch, p. 43): "Enga kona hefir þér fegri fœzk" (no woman more beautiful than you has been born).

The chief symptom of love in both legend and saga is melancholy. Sigurd's first view of Brynhild depresses his spirits and prompts a sympathetic inquiry from Alsviðr (Finch, p. 42):

> "Hví eru þér svá fálátir? Þessi skipan þín harmar oss ok þína vini. Eða hví máttu eigi gleði halda? Haukar þínir hnípa ok svá hestrinn Grani, ok þessa fám vér seint bót."
>
> ("Why are you so taciturn? This change of heart grieves us and your friends. Why can you not keep your spirits up? Your hawks are downcast and your horse Grani too, and it will take a time for us to recover.")

When Brynhild learns what has happened, her lovesickness takes on more epic dimensions (Finch, p. 51): "Brynhildr fór heim ok mælti ekki orð um kveldit" (Brynhild returned home and said not a word in the evening). What follows is a long sequence of efforts to rouse her from her catatonic state. Her condition is described as illness (Finch, p. 53): "Brynhildr er sjúk" (Brynhild is ill). A series of interviews remains without effect on her, other than providing an opportunity for Brynhild to vent her indignation and grief, a venting with analogues in *Guðrúnarkviða fyrsta* and *Guðrúnarkviða ǫnnur*.

In Brynhild's case there is no question of consolation, although Gudrun entertains the vain idea that returning to the hall and taking up her needlework might cheer her. She instructs one of her companions accordingly (Finch, p. 54): "Vek Brynhildi, gǫngum til borða ok verum kátar" (awaken Brynhild and let us go to our embroidery and be of good cheer). In the case of Guðrún this strategy actually succeeds. She takes refuge with King Hálfr in Denmark after Sigurd's death and stays there for seven years, during which time Þóra Hákonardóttir distracts her with embroidery (Finch, p. 62):

> [H]on sló borða fyrir henni ok skrifaði þar á mǫrg ok stór verk ok fagra leika er tíðir váru í þann tíma, sverð ok brynjur ok allan konungs búnað, skip Sigmundar konungs er skriðu fyrir land fram.

> Ok þat byrðu þær er þeir bǫrðusk Sigarr ok Siggeirr á Fjóni suðr. Slíkt var þeira gaman ok huggaðisk Guðrún nú nǫkkut harms síns.
>
> (She embroidered and pictured many a great deed and fair pursuits that were customary at that time, swords and byrnies and all the royal accouterments, King Sigmund's ships that sailed along the coast. And they embroidered Sigarr and Siggeirr south on Fyn. This was their amusement and Gudrun was somewhat consoled in her grief.)

This passage is guaranteed for the poetic record by stanzas 14–17 of *Guðrúnarkviða ǫnnur*.[23] Perhaps the consolation afforded by needlework echoes in Helga's death scene in *Gunnlaugs saga* where the point is made that Helga's only consolation was to unfold and gaze at the cloak given her by Gunnlaugr.

It will be recalled that it is precisely at one of these moments that she falls back and dies (ÍF 3.107):

> Ok er skikkjan kom til hennar, þá settisk hon upp ok rakði skikkjuna fyrir sér ok horfði á um stund. Ok síðan hné hon aptr í fang bónda sínum ok var þá ørend.
>
> (And when the cloak was given her, she sat up and unfolded the cloak before her and gazed at it for a time. And then she collapsed back into her husband's arms and expired.)

The falling back also echoes Eddic passages. As Brynhild commits suicide, she too falls back against the cushions (Finch, p. 60)—"hneig upp við dýnur." Guðrún duplicates this posture when she sees her slain husband in *Guðrúnarkviða fyrsta* (st. 15):

> Þá hné Guðrún hǫll við bólstri;
> Haddr losnaði, hlýr roðnaði,
> Enn regns dropi rann niðr um kné.

23. See *Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. Gustav Neckel, rev. Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg: Winter, 1962), pp. 226–27.

(Then Gudrun collapsed athwart the cushions;
Her hair was loosened, her cheek was reddened,
And liquid drops ran down her lap.)

We do not need to have recourse to chivalric models to explain the romantic inflections in *Gunnlaugs saga*. Most of them are anticipated in the heroic and elegiac poems of the *Edda*. The elegies are particularly revealing, although they do not shed any light on the dating. If they are late, as Heusler thought, they could have been part of a new literary wave at the time *Gunnlaugs saga* was written, let us say 1210 to 1220. If they are part of an earlier heritage, as Daniel Sävborg has argued, they could have been available at almost any time before that period, a feature of the general tradition rather than the current literary scene.[24]

Conclusion

We do not need to take recourse to the flowery meadows of medieval chivalry to account for *Gunnlaugs saga*. The passion and melancholy of the native poetic tradition are more apposite. Consequently there is no need to posit a late date for the saga. Bjarni Einarsson in particular was convinced that there must have been an early *Gunnlaugs saga* available to the author of *Egils saga*.[25] That led him to posit one version early in the century and one version considerably later, but there is not much evidence that sagas were rewritten for the sake of different styles. Nothing stands in the way of supposing that there was only one *Gunnlaugs saga* and that it was written early.

The most likely progression of saga writing in Borgarfjörður appears to me to be first *Gunnlaugs saga*, then *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*, and finally *Egils saga*. The tone of *Gunnlaugs saga*, the premonitory dream, the misdirected marriage, and the lovesickness are all drafts on the heroic elegies of the *Edda*, which were probably being committed to parchment in the same period. The author of *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa* borrowed these effects, not without awkwardness, from *Gunnlaugs saga* and cast them as a frame for the rivalry between

24. Daniel Sävborg, *Sorg och elegi i Eddans hjältediktning* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1997).

25. See Bjarni Einarsson, *Skáldasögur* (as in note 8), pp. 267–70.

Bjǫrn Arngeirsson and Þórðr Kolbeinsson. Both sagas are anchored at Borg and both are skald biographies, perhaps elaborations of the skald anecdotes included in the *Oldest Saga of Saint Óláfr*. *Egils saga* stands in the same tradition but greatly expands every aspect by adding a great deal more verse, creating a far fuller biography, and enlarging the historical context.

This little slice of literary history from Borgarfjörður may serve to demystify ever so slightly the miracle of *Egils saga*. If it really was composed as early as the 1220s, it is a prodigy of the first order that such a fully formed and perfected composition could have come into being at the dawn of saga writing.[26] If we consider it as an incomparably more ambitious elaboration of the skald saga form as the author found it in *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Bjarnar saga*, there is at least the semblance of a historical progression, although the mystery of narrative genius can never be satisfactorily dispelled.

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26. On this puzzle see Anne Holtsmark, "Det nye syn på sagaene," *Nordisk tidskrift för vetenskap, konst och industri* 35 (1959), p. 521.

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