



# WHY SKALDIC VERSE? FASHION AND CULTURAL POLITICS IN THIRTEENTH-CENTURY ICELAND<sup>1</sup>

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## 1

Skaldic verse became one of the class symbols of the Icelandic aristocracy of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, by which I mean that excellence and patronage of skaldic verse-making contributed to its cultural identity and social prestige. This seems to have been a new phenomenon. Skaldic verse had for long been worthy of foreign royalty. According to the kings' sagas and *Skáldatal*, the catalogue of court poets, the court poets had earned their living at the courts of Scandinavia and the British Isles. These professional skalds provided the earl or king with elaborate poems, and this profession was highly respected from the 9<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. However, the most influential chieftains are rarely among these poets until the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The new prestige attached to skaldic verse-making in an Icelandic context coincided with the chieftains becoming increasingly more involved with Norwegian courtly life (as courtiers, for example), and even proclaiming themselves descendants of the king, as in the case of the Oddaverjar family, and ultimately all of their descendants. Then, it seems, that the Icelandic aristocrats started imitating their Norwegian counterparts and began their own patronage of skalds in Iceland.

## 2

One of these patrons was the chieftain Sturla Sighvatsson, himself not a poet. He was one of the more aggressive chieftains in thirteenth-century Iceland. Sturla apparently strove, on behalf of King Hákon, to gain control over the country in the last years of his life, but was defeated in the battle at Örlygsstaðir in 1238 by Kolbeinn ungi Arnórsson and Gissur Þorvaldsson, the latter becoming the earl of Iceland in 1258. Sturla is known to have been involved in literary activity when he visited his uncle Snorri Sturluson at Reykholt, and copied his sagas. Sturla kept a poet in his company, Guðmundur Oddsson, a well-respected court poet. Guðmundur had spent some time in Norway and composed verse for Earl Skúli Bárðarson and King Hákon Hákonarson. When he returned to Iceland he frequented the



company of Sturla Sighvatsson, with whom he lived, and commented in verse at important junctures of his life. The fact that the author of *Íslendinga Saga*, Sturla Sighvatsson's cousin, Sturla Þórðarson, chose to highlight this special relationship between the poet and the patron in Iceland in *Íslendinga Saga*, contributes to the aristocratic portrayal of Sturla Sighvatsson in the saga.<sup>2</sup> Other chieftains also kept poets, such as Snorri Sturluson.

### 3

We need to tread carefully when we build a general thesis of the social and cultural situation in Iceland on the basis of a few selective sources. The story of Icelandic cultural and political life in the thirteenth century is mainly told by the men of the Sturlungs' family, and their own political and cultural perspective inevitably governs their version of events. These men were poets and writers, chieftains and lawmakers, and friends of royalty in Norway. It is through their eyes that we look at political life in the thirteenth-century Iceland in *Sturlunga Saga* and *Hákonar Saga*, in *Snorra Edda*, *Heimskringla*, and perhaps also in some of the family sagas. We know this family intimately, while the names of other known authors are lost to us. The Sturlungs were particular champions of skaldic verse; Snorri composed his *Edda* and Ólafur Þórðarson magnificently brought the indigenous tradition in contact with Latin learning in the *Third Grammatical Treatise*. These sources, as well as the sagas already mentioned, give an impression of a society deeply interested in skaldic verse. But was this generally so in Iceland? The citation of skaldic verse in thirteenth-century sources is a highly political act; it contributes to the presentation of historical fact. We can clearly see that in Sturla Þórðarson's hands, skaldic verse-making became in *Íslendinga Saga* and *Hákonar Saga* a conscious semantic layer in the writing of a saga, and particularly so in the king's saga: where the poet and the writer are the same man.<sup>3</sup> *Sturlu þáttr* in *Sturlunga Saga* symbolises the Sturlungs' ultimate manipulation of the medium of skaldic poetry in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. There we witness a poet entering the court like a beggar, but conquering the court with his cultural and literary skills. But have we been deceived by the unusually wide-ranging information we have of the literary activities of this family in the 13<sup>th</sup> century?

I suggest to you that the citation of skaldic verse is a conscious narrative and ideological strategy, and therefore we need to look at ways to judge its importance from a narratological as well as cultural viewpoint. Why cite skaldic verse? Who was in the audience? Who enjoyed



skaldic verse in the 13<sup>th</sup> century? Is there another story to be told? Is there, perhaps, another audience – even in the Sturlungs’ milieu – lurking in the background?

In this paper I intend to address these questions through the poetic evidence of the sagas of Icelanders, by analysing two sagas written in the west of Iceland in the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. They are products of the same time, and probably of the same cultural milieu, as both have been associated, rightly or wrongly, with the Sturlungs’ family. *Laxdæla Saga* and *Eyrbyggja Saga* tell the stories of two friends, Snorri goði Þorgrímsson and Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir, and therefore the subject matter is tightly related. However, both authors are careful not to trespass on each others’ territory. Everyone will agree that these two sagas are different, in style and atmosphere. *Eyrbyggja* and *Laxdæla* reflect their authors’ different perspectives, although they have a lot in common. Which issues and concerns determine the differences between them?

#### 4

Before the dawn of the Sturlung age there is little evidence of praise poems and eulogies for Icelanders. Two poems are mentioned in *Eyrbyggja Saga*, *Illugadrápa* by Oddur skáld<sup>4</sup> and Þormóður Trefilsson's *Hrafnsmál*, where the cleverness and cunning of Snorri goði Þorgrímsson are praised.<sup>5</sup> A memorial poem by Arnór jarlaskáld on Gellir Þorkelsson – Guðrún’s son, the bearer of Hrólfr kraki’s weapons - is mentioned at the end of *Laxdæla Saga*.<sup>6</sup> These three poems are extraordinary in the context of the sagas of Icelanders, as they are praise poems in the formal sense. The other poems are more personal in their expression of praise and lament after the death of a loved one. Two poems were composed in honour of dead friends or relatives: Egill Skalla-Grímsson composed *Sonatorrek* after the death of his sons, Böðvar and Gunnar,<sup>7</sup> and Þormóður Kolbrúnarskáld his *Þorgeirsdrápa* in memory of his foster brother Þorgeir Hávarsson.<sup>8</sup> Egill and Þormóður did not compose in the service of these men.

Through the evidence of skaldic citation in the sagas, it may be possible to discern different attitudes to verse making and its social function. These differences are both geographical and cultural.<sup>9</sup> Few sagas depicting events in the north-east and eastern regions contain verse. These regional differences are very interesting, but cannot be addressed at present. Sagas from other parts of the country, for example the west, either contain a lot of verse or none at all, and here



the poetic preference seems to be determined by narratological issues or cultural or ideological considerations.

*Laxdæla Saga* and *Eyrbyggja Saga* were written in the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century in the western part of Iceland (manuscript evidence helps to date them), but their authors make different use of the corpus of skaldic verse. The author of *Laxdæla Saga* knows long poems relating to characters in the saga, such as Gellir Þorkelsson, but refrains from citing any verses, whereas the writer of *Eyrbyggja Saga* cites examples from such poems known to him. The reasons for the choice, or the omission of, skaldic verse indicates authorial preferences which most likely depend on the sagas' intended audience. The most ardent students of the indigenous skaldic art are found in all parts of the country (even though the east and northeast of Iceland is poorly represented in the sources, as already noted) and the sagas of the skalds serve the interest and preference of this group. The sagas of those who preferred the pure art of story-telling to narratives interlaced with skaldic verse is equally large. Skaldic art was secured a prominent place in this society while it was practised, encouraged and enjoyed by the prominent members of society, and this lasted till the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The evidence of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century sagas, however, shows that taste in skaldic verse, particularly when it was applied to prose narratives, was not shared by everyone writing in this textual culture. The case of *Laxdæla Saga* is a particularly strong one, as the saga originates in the skaldic milieu of the Sturlungs.

In this paper I have chosen to look more closely at *Laxdæla Saga* and *Eyrbyggja Saga* for the following reasons:

1. both have been associated with the skaldic-verse loving Sturlungs;
2. both are written at around the same time, *Eyrbyggja* perhaps a little later, if the reference to *Laxdæla Saga* in the final chapter is reliable, and therefore are products of the same culture;
3. both portray events which took place in the same period, and indeed in the same area, and even depict the same people.

My questions are the following: Why is the author of *Laxdæla* disinterested in skaldic verse, and if he is, why does he even choose to quote four skaldic stanzas? Why not omit them altogether? Similarly, how important are the poetic quotations to the author of *Eyrbyggja*? The



answers to these questions may raise a number of issues concerning the overall narrative strategy of the sagas, as well as the cultural background of the authors.

## 5

The many strands of narrative of *Eyrbyggja Saga* all come together in the colourful character of Snorri goði Þorgrímsson. The way skaldic verse is cited and interlaced in the saga, resembles the structure of a king's saga, and contributes to the interpretation of the saga as 'aristocratic' or, even, 'royal', though the saga seems to be more occupied with district politics than the greater issues of government. Let us look briefly at the evidence for this statement, and in doing so, let us concentrate on the identity of the poet, the subject matter of the stanza, and where the verse cuts the prose narrative. The first two stanzas (1-2, ch. 17) in the saga are by one Oddur skáld from his *drápa* about Illugi svarti, the father of the famous poet, Gunnlaugur ormstunga (from Gilsbakki in Hvítársíða), cited at the occasion of a lawsuit at a territorial assembly. A fight broke out at the gathering, and in the second stanza there is a reference by name to Snorri goði's role in securing a peaceful solution. The verse serves as documentary evidence, in the same way as verse in the kings' sagas. Snorri goði is the focal point; the evidence for his special talents as leader of the district is substantiated at this early stage in his life. The stanzas are not drawn from *lausavísur*, but from a longer, datable and thus reliable poem.

The next sequence of stanzas (3-19, ch. 18-19, 22) are the famous *Máhlíðingavísur*, by Þórarinn máhlíðingur. Þórarinn is a respected source, and known, in the Sturlungs learned milieu, a half-stanza is cited in *Snorra Edda*, in *Háttatal* to be precise. This scene is reminiscent of the quotation of Sighvatur Þórðarson's stanzas in *Heimskringla*. Substantial research has been devoted to the matter of the earliness of these stanzas; Russell Poole has concluded that they were composed in the 11<sup>th</sup> century in praise of Snorri goði's deeds, and other scholars have concurred with his assessment.<sup>10</sup>

Interlaced throughout the saga are five laudatory stanzas by Þormóður Trefilsson from a poem about Snorri (20, ch. 26; 26, ch. 37; 33, ch. 44; 34, ch. 56; 35, ch. 62). Þormóður is known, from entries in the Hauksbók- and Þórðarbók-versions of *Landnáma*, to have composed in praise of Snorri goði. These sources post-date *Eyrbyggja Saga* and are not, therefore, of independent value.



The stanzas by the two berserks and Snorri goði's father-in-law (21-3, ch. 28) Víga-Styr are cited in a comic episode, where the old killer and warrior is unable to cope with his eager helpers. This scene reveals Snorri goði's cunning, which secures him his wife. As a consequence of the advice given to him, he marries Víga-Styr's daughter Ásdís; an alliance which proved very profitable to him, and his father-in-law.

The second long sequence of stanzas is by Björn Breiðvíkingakappi (24-25, ch. 29; 27-31, ch. 40 ), where he sings the praises of Snorri's sister, Þuríður, the wife of Þóroddur at Fróðá. Þuríður is here in a role reminiscent of a married courtly lady known in the troubadour tradition, who is being wooed by the love-sick troubadour. She is not, however, a disinterested party. Their relationship causes all sorts of trouble for Snorri, but he manages to persuade Björn to leave the country and not return.

Finally, the fostermother of Þóroddur, Snorri's fosterbrother, composes two stanzas as warning to Þóroddur. He, however, does not heed her advice and is subsequently killed (36-7, ch. 63).

My contention at this stage in my research into the role of skaldic verse in the sagas of Icelanders, is that skaldic stanzas are used specifically in *Eyrbyggja* to highlight and enlarge Snorri's character in relation to others on the scene. They are placed at strategic points in the saga. The verse is carefully chosen; these are sequences of verse rather than haphazard *lausavísur*, i.e. the majority of the verse is formal verse, not occasional stanzas. The skaldic citation, particularly the reference to praise poems for Snorri goði, contributes to the aristocratic portrayal of this chieftain. There is an implicit comparison between him, being worthy of praise poems, and earls, or even kings, in other countries. This is no coincidence. Snorri was the forefather of the Sturlungs, and this portrayal may be their own. Another source may support such a 'royal' reading of Snorri's life. One of the backbones of the saga is 'The life of Snorri goði', a brief synopsis of his life, preserved in one of the manuscripts containing *Eyrbyggja* (Melabók-version).<sup>11</sup> This skeleton has been attributed to Ari Þorgilsson. If this is so, this text brings writings about Snorri in line with the beginning of royal historiography in Iceland.



## 6

*Laxdæla Saga* has often been described as a courtly saga, or by Ármann Jakobsson as a king's saga in the courtly sense.<sup>12</sup> I do not argue with such a categorisation. *Laxdæla* portrays the 'royal' family of the Laxdælir, but at its centre there is undoubtedly a woman. The saga focuses on Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir and her relationship with the men in her life; the most enduring being the one with Snorri goði Þorgrímsson, the curious hero of *Eyrbyggja Saga*. However, she is not a heroine in his mould, and through the citation of verse in this saga – which is sometimes attributed to the verse-loving Sturlungs, such as Ólafur Þórðarson – the generic affiliation of the saga is not with kings' sagas or the typical family sagas, but rather with riddarasögur and legends. Much has been written about this extraordinary saga, but here I will only bring your attention to the four stanzas, and show how they serve to distance Guðrún from the typical northern pastime of skaldic entertainment loved by her great friend Snorri goði.

The narrative fabric of *Laxdæla saga* is quite different from *Eyrbyggja's*. Contrary to *Eyrbyggja*, *Laxdæla* is pronouncedly Christian throughout. Beginning with the Christian settler Unnur djúpúðga, and ending with Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir's conversion at Helgafell, Snorri goði's erstwhile estate and the site of the Augustinian monastery in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. There are only 4 stanzas in the saga (I disregard the two-lines, probably non-poetic attributed to Auður, the spurned wife of Þórður Ingunnarson).

The first is a light-hearted stanza in *fornyrðislag* by the bedridden Hólmgöngu-Bersi in which he looks at the infant, his new foster son, Halldór, son of Ólafur pá, and compares the immobility of both. The remaining three are cited in conjunction with Þorgils Hölluson, who is represented as a man belonging to the old social order, not understanding the manoeuvrings of Guðrún and Snorri. Þorgils composes a stanza when he has done Guðrún the service of avenging the death of her husband Bolli. The stanza is simple in style, *áttmælt*, each line comprising of a sentence, each line with end-rhyme. The metre, perhaps, intended to echoe his simple-mindedness. The two last ones are ditties, spoken to him by supernatural beings. These stanzas show Þorgils as a man of the past, who cannot speak his mind, and they contribute to the negative – even comic – portrayal of the man in the saga. The only poet in the saga is ridiculed by the author.



Skaldic verse in *Laxdæla Saga* – or the absence of skaldic verse – shows that the author is not looking for cultural associations in the world of Icelandic indigenous traditions, but that he looks to courtly romance – and an audience that appreciated new types of saga writing. The citation of verse is more a comic relief, and the verse in association with Þorgils Hölluson shows him to be apart from the culturally *au fait* people in the saga. All the verse is simple in style, which suggests an audience not trained in skaldic verse-making. Snorri goði walks easily from one world to the next; and in *Eyrbyggja* he is granted a portrayal fitting an aristocrat, even an earl.

## 7

These thoughts are a part of a larger study, and I hope to be able at a later stage to give you a more systematic arguing of my case, and not only in conjunction with these two sagas. I suggest to you that skaldic verse in *Laxdæla* and *Eyrbyggja* is a conscious semantic and narratological tool, and that the two authors, and their audience, left their signature in the narrative fabric of the sagas through their citation of this verse.

‘Íslendingasögur’ is the name of a group of more than 40 sagas that are bound together by the period in which the story takes place, the place of action, and the social and cultural circumstances of the characters. It therefore seems plausible that they are bound together. But appearances are deceptive, because the term is, like the novel nowadays, an umbrella for a number of different types of sagas, from a long period of time. One way of breaking through this generic barrier is to use skaldic verse as our incisive tool. The citation of skaldic verse in the sagas, i.e. the type of verse, the identification of the poet, and to which effect it is used in the narrative, is an active component in the saga’s internal world, and it may furthermore suggest the cultural and social preferences of its author, and his – or her audience.





## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This paper reflects work in progress. I have chosen not to revise the paper given at the conference, as I hope to be able to present my conclusions more thoroughly at a later stage. I refer to my book *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the 12th and 13th Centuries* (Toronto, 2001), for a more thorough discussion on various aspects of Icelandic textual culture of the 13<sup>th</sup>, especially in relation to the role of skaldic verse.

<sup>2</sup> On the life of Guðmundur Oddsson, see: Guðrún Nordal. 1991. 'Höfðingjaskáld á Sturlungaöld'. *The Audience of the Sagas. The Eighth Saga Conference Preprints 1*. August 11-17. 1991. Gothenburg University:132-41.

<sup>3</sup> On verse in *Hákonar Saga*, see Bergljót S. Kristjánsdóttir. 1994. "... ekki ætlaða ek at þat væri mín yfirseta ..." Vangaveltur um vísur og vinnubrögð sagnaritara í Hákonar sögu'. *Samtíðarsögur. The Contemporary Sagas. Preprints I*. Níunda alþjóðlega fornsagnaþingið. Akureyri 31.7. - 6.8. 1994:96-110.

<sup>4</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*. Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Íslenzk fornrit 3). 1934, 31-2. All references to the saga are to this edition.

<sup>5</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga* 124, 156, 168.

<sup>6</sup> *Laxdæla saga*. Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Íslenzk fornrit 5). 1936, 229. All references to the saga are to this edition.

<sup>7</sup> *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. Ed. Sigurður Nordal (Íslenzk fornrit 2). 1933, 246-56.

<sup>8</sup> *Fóstbræðra saga*. In *Vestfirðinga sögur*. Ed. Björn Karel Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson (Íslenzk fornrit 6). 1943, 152, 156, 181, 209.

<sup>9</sup> Guðrún Nordal 2001:135. Table 4.2 contains a complete list of the citation of verse in the sagas of Icelanders.

<sup>10</sup> Russell Poole. 1985. 'The origins of *Máhlíðingavísur*'. *Scandinavian Studies* 57:244-85. See also Vésteinn Ólason. 1989. "'Máhlíðingamál": authorship and tradition in a part of *Eyrbyggja saga*'. *Úr Döllum til dala. Gudbrandur Vigfússon Centenary Essays* (Leeds Texts and Monographs 11). Ed. Rory McTurk and Andrew Wawn, 187-203.



<sup>11</sup> Printed at the end of *Eyrbyggja Saga* in Einar Ól. Sveinsson's edition.

<sup>12</sup> Ármann Jakobsson. 1998. 'Konungasagan *Laxdæla*'. *Skírnir* 172:357-83.