

**MANUSCRIPT VARIATION IN *EYRBYGGJA SAGA***

**by**

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines manuscript variation in *Eyrbyggja saga*, one of the *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of Icelanders, or family sagas) set on the Snæfellsnes peninsula in western Iceland, and telling of events in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries. I examine variation among the four vellum manuscripts of the saga, all of which are fragmentary, as well as one paper manuscript.

The first chapter looks at the critical history of *Eyrbyggja saga*, explaining why an examination of the manuscripts is necessary. The following four chapters discuss the three narrative areas where significant variations were discovered, as well as variation among verses. Chapter two considers the large amount of genealogical information we are given, particularly with reference to the most prominent character Snorri goði's alleged descendants, as well as some comments about characters. In chapter three, I discuss variations in the journeys depicted in *Eyrbyggja saga*, examining four travel-centred episodes. Chapter four considers the depiction of slavery in the manuscripts. The final chapter looks at the skaldic verse preserved within the saga, and how this can affect the audience's response. Through this examination we are able to see individual authors' perspectives on the events and characters in the stories they tell.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## ABBREVIATIONS

### Abbreviations of editions

Scott, <i>Erybyggja saga</i>	Forrest S. Scott, <i>Eyrbyggja saga: the Vellum Tradition</i> (Copenhagen, 2003)
Sveinsson, <i>Erybyggja saga</i>	Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthias Þórðarson, (eds.), <i>Eyrbyggja saga, Brands Þátr qrva, Eiríks saga rauða, Grænlandinga Saga, Grænlandinga Þátr</i> , Íslenzk fornrit vol. IV (Reykjavík, 1935)

### Abbreviations of manuscripts

E	AM 162 E fol.
W	Cod. Guelf. 9.10.4to
M	AM 445 b 4to
G	AM 309 4to
447	AM 447 4to

## OTHER NOTES

Manuscript transcriptions use a variety of letters and punctuation marks to represent what is written in the manuscripts. I have converted these to the modern alphabet, for reasons of legibility. I have also expanded brackets indicating abbreviations silently.

As chapter divisions vary significantly among the manuscripts, when a chapter number is given it refers to the divisions in the *Íslenzk fornrit* edition.

All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation will look at a medieval Icelandic text known as *Eyrbyggja saga*. This is one of the so-called ‘family sagas’ (*Íslendingasögur*), written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, based on events around the settlement of Iceland in the 870s and the centuries after. *Eyrbyggja* is an unusual saga in that generations of critics have struggled to understand its structure. It has been called ‘kaleidoscopic’<sup>1</sup> and ‘exceptionally meandering.’<sup>2</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga* is set on the Snæfellsnes peninsula in western Iceland, and prominently features the character Snorri goði, a chieftain from the area who appears in a number of other sagas.<sup>3</sup>

Four vellum manuscript fragments of *Eyrbyggja saga* survive. The aim of this dissertation is to analyse the variations between these manuscripts, with a view to understanding why there are variations, and what their significance is.

Several editions of the saga exist; the first was a 1787 work by Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin, based on the paper manuscript AM 449 4to and containing a Latin translation. Following this in 1864 Guðbrandr Vigfússon produced a new edition, distinguishing between three classes of *Eyrbyggja* manuscripts. The current standard edition by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, on which most critical work is based, is part of the *Íslensk fornrit* text series and was published in 1935.<sup>4</sup> The most recent edition, produced by Forrest S. Scott in 2003, focusses on the vellum manuscripts, providing transcriptions of all four manuscript fragments, plus one paper

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<sup>1</sup> G. N. Garmondsway, ‘Eyrbyggja Saga,’ *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, XII (1937–45), p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> T. Tulinius, ‘Is Snorri goði an Icelandic Hamlet? On Dead Fathers and Problematic Chieftainship in *Eyrbyggja saga*,’ Thirteenth International Saga Conference, Durham and York, 6th–12th August 2006, 9 pages, <http://web.archive.org/web/20080926164407/http://www.dur.ac.uk/medieval.www/sagaconf/torfi.htm>, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Snorri features prominently in *Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga*. He also has significant roles in *Heiðarvíga saga*, *Grettis saga* and *Ölkoфра þátr*. He is mentioned briefly in *Kristni saga* and *Gunnars þátr Þiðrandabana*, and his family history is detailed in *Gísla saga*.

<sup>4</sup> F. S. Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga: the Vellum Tradition* (Copenhagen, 2003), pp. 4\*-7\*.

manuscript, AM 447 4to. This latest text contains corrections, additions and other marginalia written by Þórður Jónsson in the seventeenth century, which preserve many readings from now deficient parts of the vellum AM 445 b 4to (M). Previous editors of the saga were not aware of the significance of these marginalia.<sup>5</sup> Scott provides a detailed examination of each of the four manuscript fragments as well as the paper text containing corrections. Scott's edition is invaluable in revealing the textual history of *Eyrbyggja saga*. However, he does not appear interested in examining the significance of what he has written and what it means for future studies of the saga. A close examination of the manuscripts reveals crucial variations which have an impact on the study of the text.

Scott was motivated to provide these transcriptions because previous editions of the work rely significantly on one paper manuscript, AM 448 4to, a copy made by Ásgeir Jónsson in Copenhagen, in 1686–88.<sup>6</sup> This text belongs to the 'A' class of manuscripts, and Scott believes that this class actually constitutes a revision of the original story, and that therefore, the texts of the manuscripts named E, W, M and G may represent an earlier version of the saga.<sup>7</sup>

Almost every critical analysis of the saga is based indiscriminately on the *Íslenzk fornrit* edition. While this does not necessarily invalidate every point, it does mean that scholars have missed vital variations which have a significant bearing on the way we view the text. The *Íslenzk fornrit* series are critical editions. This kind of criticism evolved in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and 'essentially involves reconstructing on the evidence of the surviving manuscripts the earliest recoverable form (or forms) of the text that lies behind

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<sup>5</sup>Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 3\*.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. XIII.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

them.’<sup>8</sup> This involves working out the relationship between manuscripts to create a stemma, at the head of which is either one manuscript from which all others are descended, or more often, a hypothetical lost text which is assumed to have been the ‘archetype.’<sup>9</sup> This creates a kind of hierarchy of manuscripts, based as it is on the assumption that one manuscript can be said to be superior to another. One of the most obvious flaws in this system is that the criteria for deciding which text is ‘better’ than another must always be subjective. I would argue that it is not useful to privilege one manuscript, or manuscript group, above another. Each manuscript represents its author’s interpretation, and each is equally valid.

This is the kind of thinking that has led to the production of diplomatic editions of texts, rather than critical editions. Kirsten Wolf highlights perceived flaws in producing this kind of work: ‘the modern reader is overwhelmed by a multitude of texts representation. And so, in a similar vein, each text is granted a voice, until we are left not with elucidation, but with a babble of voices clamoring for primacy between two book covers.’<sup>10</sup> She later complains that such editions can be ‘extraordinarily difficult to read’ and ‘are virtually impossible to quote from with any kind of accuracy approaching the edition.’<sup>11</sup> Wolf is fundamentally missing the point here. A ‘best text’ edition is of course useful for scholars new to the discipline, but surely any serious study of a saga needs to look at its manuscript history and textual variants.

One reviewer of Scott’s edition commented ‘before this edition, it was really not possible for anyone to gain a consistent picture of the likely character of the original *Eyrbyggja saga*.’<sup>12</sup> I

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<sup>8</sup> M. J. Driscoll, ‘The Words on the Page: Thoughts on Philology, Old and New,’ in J. Quinn and E. Lethbridge (eds.), *Creating the Medieval Saga: Versions, Variability and Editorial Interpretations of Old Norse Saga Literature* (Odense, 2010), p. 89.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> K. Wolf, ‘Old Norse–New Philology,’ *Scandinavian Studies*, 65 (1993), p. 343.

<sup>11</sup> K. Wolf, ‘Old Norse–New Philology,’ *Scandinavian Studies*, 65 (1993), p. 345.

<sup>12</sup> M. Clunies Ross, ‘Eyrbyggja saga: The Vellum Tradition by Forrest S. Scott. Review by Margaret Clunies Ross,’ *Speculum*, 81 (2006), p. 599.

would argue that this comment falls into the trap of assuming that there was one ‘original’ saga and that it is possible to somehow get back to it. This is an anachronism; we must appreciate that medieval writing was fundamentally different to modern writing, and it is a mistake to attempt to apply modern concepts about the way texts are written to sagas.

This is the approach with which Emily Lethbridge has studied *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, another tale which features some of the same characters as *Eyrbyggja*.<sup>13</sup> Lethbridge considers the texts and transmission of *Gísla saga*, comparing the surviving medieval manuscripts of the saga and providing a detailed analysis of the variations she comes across. It must be acknowledged that these variations are undoubtedly on a greater scale than *Eyrbyggja saga*. Lethbridge’s approach, in her own words, ‘is predicated on the conviction that a secure understanding of the medieval narrative tradition of *Gísla saga* can only be reached through an unbiased and comprehensive evaluation of the spread of textual variation manifested in the extant manuscript texts.’<sup>14</sup> It is with this attitude that I approach *Eyrbyggja saga*.

### **The socio-political context of saga writing**

In order to appreciate the saga properly, we need to understand its context. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson divides the Commonwealth period into three phases.<sup>15</sup> The first phase he highlights, from around 930 to the mid-eleventh century, was ‘characterised by creation of new chieftaincies and a relatively large number of chieftaincies at any one time, possibly between fifty and sixty.’ This is the world familiar to saga readers. The second phase of

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<sup>13</sup> E. Lethbridge, *Narrative Variation in the Versions of Gísla saga Súrssonar*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge (2007).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Jesse Byock cautions against seeing Icelandic history as having very distinct phases, stressing that ‘continuity rather than discontinuity’ was the salient aspect. While it is indeed important to acknowledge that changes must have been gradual rather than sudden, Sigurðsson’s model is helpful for understanding the social context of the time (J. L. Byock, ‘The Age of the Sturlungs,’ in E. Vestergaard (ed.), *Continuity and Change: Political Institutions and Literary Monuments in the Middle Ages. Proceedings of the Tenth International Symposium Organized by the Center for the Study of Vernacular Literature in the Middle Ages* (Odense, 1986), p. 27).

development started at the end of the eleventh century and finished in approximately 1220. Here ‘the creation of new chieftaincies came to halt. The number of chieftains was reduced from some fifty or sixty to around ten.’ Over this period the chieftaincies of old became domains, and five major families established domains during this period.<sup>16</sup> By the beginning of the twelfth century, five families were in control of nearly half the population: the Ásbirningar, the Austfirðingar, the Haukdælir, the Oddaverjar, and the Svínfellingar.<sup>17</sup> The final phase, after 1220 (lasting until 1262/64, when Iceland came under the power of the Norwegian king, marking the end of the Commonwealth), was when domains had come onto the scene, and conflicts arose about them, resulting in political changes: ‘the development of domains made it necessary for chieftains to use new methods of governing and new instruments of government.’<sup>18</sup> This period is known as the Sturlunga Age, named after the Sturlunga family who became the most influential of all. It was not a peaceful age – the Sturlungar often fought between themselves as well as with others. The period is characterised by complex power struggles, described in contemporary writings such as *Sturlunga saga*. Úlfar Bragason examines this time period using genealogies from *Sturlunga saga*, suggesting that ‘the ruling families of the Sturlung Age felt that they had a claim to power, based upon the chieftaincies held by their ancestors for many generations, preferably as far back as the Settlement... they also began to use specified names for their families and seemed to believe that they implied certain qualities (e.g. ‘it had long been the hallmark of the men of Haukadalur and of Oddi that they held splendid feasts’) and the luck of the family was believed to reside with certain names.’<sup>19</sup> This environment had an influence on *Eyrbyggja saga*, as we will see in chapter two (Genealogy and Character).

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<sup>16</sup> J. V. Sigurðsson (trans. J. Lundskær-Nielsen), *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth* (Odense, 1999), p. 82–3.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>19</sup> Ú. Bragason, ‘The Politics of Genealogies in *Sturlunga saga*,’ in J. Adams and K. Holman (eds.), *Scandinavia and Europe 800–1350: Contact, Conflict, and Coexistence* (Turnhout, 2004), p. 318.

So which of these phases do the sagas reflect – the time they are set in, or the time they were written down in? Fundamentally I would agree with William Ian Miller here: ‘It is simply safest to assume that the society of the family sagas is the society the author knew by experience, idealized somewhat to advance his narrative agenda. He presented his own world adjusted in certain ways difficult to pinpoint to reflect the knowledge acquired from his parents’ and grandparents’ generations. To this there might also occasionally be added genuine information preserved from the time in which the narrative is set.’<sup>20</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga* is not nostalgic, however. I would argue the opposite: the saga is forward-looking, celebrating Snorri as the kind of politician needed in their society.<sup>21</sup>

### **About the saga**

Having considered the world of saga writing, we can now move on to discussing *Eyrbyggja saga* itself. One critic has commented ‘with its complexity, shifting loyalties, and episodic nature, it is difficult to present a plot summary or spell out what the saga is *about*.’<sup>22</sup> With that in mind, what follows is an attempt to provide a summary of the main events and characters of the saga, to enable readers unfamiliar with its story to understand the content of this dissertation.

The beginning of the saga chronicles the history of the first settlers on Snæfellsnes, western Iceland, with a particular focus on Þórólfr Mostrarskegg, who settles in Þórsnes, where he has a temple built. Björn, son of Ketill flatnefr, settles at Bjarnarhöfn, and is succeeded by his son

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<sup>20</sup> W. I. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: feud, law and society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago, 1990), p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> Magnúsdóttir, E. B., ‘An Ideological Struggle: An Interpretation of *Eyrbyggja saga*,’ Paper given at the Thirteenth International Saga Conference, 6th-12th August 2006, Durham University/University of York, 9 pages, <http://web.archive.org/web/20080926165040/http://www.dur.ac.uk/medieval/www/sagaconf/elin.htm>, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> J. Livesay, ‘Women and Narrative Structure in *Eyrbyggja Saga*,’ *Folklore Forum*, 21 (1988), p. 183.

Kjallak. Kjallak's descendants (the Kjalleklingar) enter into a conflict with the descendants of Þórólfr Mostrarskegg (the Þórsnesingar) over the temple grounds. Another important settler is Geirriðr, who lives with her son Þórólfr bægifótr in Álptafjörðr.

Following this introduction, the saga mostly focusses on Snorri goði, the great-grandson of Þórólfr Mostrarskegg, who, shortly after his introduction, tricks his uncle Börkr into selling him the farm at Helgafell. Snorri's nephew Gunnlaugr begins to visit Geirriðr, the daughter of Þórólfr bægifótr (and granddaughter of the settler with the same name). Katla, a widow, is jealous. When Gunnlaugr is found unconscious after a visit (for which we later understand Katla was responsible), Snorri tries to prosecute Geirriðr, but loses the case.

The younger Geirriðr's son, Þórarinn svartí, is accused of stealing horses by Þorbjörn digri, and a fight breaks out, in which Katla's son Oddr cuts off the hand of Þórarinn's wife.

Þórarinn asks for help from his uncle Arnkell and Vermundr (one of the Kjalleklingar), and they execute Katla and Oddr. Þórarinn goes abroad, and is outlawed by Snorri in his absence. This section is often referred to as the *Máhlíðingamál*.

Two of Snorri's shepherds fall out with a man named Vigfúss Bjarnarson, whose shepherd is then wounded. Snorri suppresses the case at the þing (local assembly). At the same time, Eiríkr rauði is exiled, and discovers Greenland.<sup>23</sup> Vermundr has been in Norway, and returns with two *beseerks*, Halli and Leiknir. Unable to handle them, he requests his brother Styrr to take them. Halli asks to marry Styrr's daughter. An assassin sent by Vigfúss fails to kill Snorri, who kills Vigfúss in retaliation. Arnkell reluctantly agrees to prosecute the case

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<sup>23</sup> Eiríkr rauði is known to modern audiences as Erik the Red, and also features in *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grænlandinga saga*.

against Snorri on behalf of Vigfúss's wife, and Snorri receives penalties at the þing. On Snorri's advice, Styrr kills the two *beserks*. Snorri then marries Styrr's daughter.

Snorri has a conflict with Björn Breiðvíkingakappi, who seduces his sister Þuríðr. Björn is outlawed. A conflict arises between Snorri and Arnkell over woodlands owned by Arnkell's father Þórólfr bægifótr. After Þórólfr dies, he haunts the valley until Arnkell stops him. Snorri sends some slaves along with his friend Haukr to the woodland, and Haukr attacks Arnkell, who kills him. Snorri's attempt to prosecute Arnkell for this fails. Snorri then sends an assassin to Arnkell, but Arnkell again foils the plan. Finally, Snorri and his relatives manage to kill Arnkell.

Björn Breiðvíkingakappi returns to Iceland, continuing his visits to Þuríðr; Þuríðr's husband Þóroddr hires a witch to create a storm, in which Björn becomes lost for three days.

A fight arises (the battle of Álptafjörðr) between the men from Álptfjörðr and the men from Eyrr, which Snorri mediates. The Álptfirðingar send a slave to kill one of the Breiðvíkingar (Björn and his brother), but he is discovered and killed. A fight breaks out over compensation until Snorri and a friend negotiate a truce. A second fight (the battle of Vigrafjörðr) ends with the defeat of the Álptfirðingar. Vermundr mediates the conflict at the þing.

Snorri fails to kill Björn Breiðvíkingakappi but persuades him to leave; Björn goes abroad. We hear of two other characters who travel abroad, to Greenland and Vínland. We are given a brief account of Iceland's conversion to Christianity and the main characters involved, including Snorri's part.

Þórgunna, a Hebridean woman, comes to stay with Þuríðr at Fróðá, who covets her expensive belongings. When Þórgunna dies, Þuríðr defies her wishes by refusing to destroy Þórgunna's beautiful bedclothes. The farm then plays hosts to numerous hauntings and apparitions, leading to a number of deaths. Snorri advises them to have a mass said, burn Þórgunna's possessions, and banish the ghosts, which brings an end to the supernatural events. This episode is often referred to as the 'Fróða marvels.'

Snorri successfully takes action against a man named Óspakr, who has been terrorising the local residents. Some Icelanders on a trading voyage are blown off course to an unnamed country, there they meet an Icelandic chieftain who sends gifts to Þuríðr and Kjartan; it is heavily implied that he is Björn Breiðvíkingakappi. The saga ends by giving a brief description of Snorri's life and listing his descendants.<sup>24</sup>

## Manuscripts

There are four medieval vellum manuscripts of *Eyrbyggja saga* surviving, all fragmentary: AM 162 E fol. (thirteenth century), Cod. Guelf. 9.10.4to (fourteenth century), AM 445 b 4to (fifteenth century) and AM 309 4to (c. 1498); over fifty post-medieval paper manuscripts also survive.<sup>25</sup> A brief overview of each of these follows.

AM162 E fol. (hereafter referred to as E), is the oldest existing fragment. It contains seven leaves; ff. 1–5 are for *Laxdæla saga*, and ff. 6–7 are from *Eyrbyggja saga*. It is believed to date from the thirteenth century.<sup>26</sup> Of all the manuscripts, E provides the smallest amount of

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<sup>24</sup> For a more detailed synopsis, see T. M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), pp.153–8.

<sup>25</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, p. 1\*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29\*-42\*.

*Eyrbyggja saga* material: two short sections, one covering from the introduction of Christianity to Iceland to Óspakr's terrorising of the community, the second picking the story up during the Óspakr episode.

Cod. Guelf. 9.10.4to (hereafter referred to as W) has 54 leaves, and contains two well-known sagas: *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Egils sags Skallagrímssonar*. It contains three lacunae, one of which occurs in the *Eyrbyggja saga* section. The beginning of the saga – just over a quarter of the saga overall – is missing; nevertheless, it is the most complete of the four manuscripts. It is estimated that the manuscript dates from around the middle of the fourteenth century.<sup>27</sup> W begins during the *Máhlíðingamál* section and continues to the end without lacunae.

AM 445 b 4to (hereafter referred to as M), commonly known as *Melabók*, contains fragments of *Landnámabók*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Flóamanna saga*, and *Eyrbyggja saga*. Scott suggests that it originates from somewhere around the end of the fourteenth century, probably between 1380 and 1420.<sup>28</sup> M covers most of the saga in a fragmentary fashion, with the exception of one major lacuna of around ten chapters, beginning when Björn Breiðvíkingakappi starts visiting Þuríðr and ending just before the battle of Vigrafjörðr.

AM 309 4to (hereafter referred to as G) is the only manuscript for which a more definite date can be posited. The writer gives the date of 1498 on the first folio, and this can therefore be taken as the date for at least part of the manuscript. Approximately 1500 can thus be assumed to be a general date for the whole manuscript, making it the latest of the four. G contains material from *Flateyjarbók*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Njáls saga*.<sup>29</sup> With one

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 43\*-67\*.

<sup>28</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 69\*-103\*.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 105\*-121\*.

lacuna, G covers nearly the first half of the saga, ending around when Björn Breiðvíkingakappi starts his visits to Þuríðr.

AM 447 4to (hereafter referred to as 447) contains readings from M, inserted by Þórður Jónsson into the copy written by his son. The date of this text lies somewhere between 1654 (when his son wrote the copy) and 1670, when Þórður died. He made corrections and amendments to the text, although not necessarily consistently.<sup>30</sup> Although 447 is a much later text, it can be used to provide an interesting comparison with the earlier manuscripts, as there is considerable variation between 447 and the others. Its readings from M are also useful in cases where the manuscript is defective.

There is one section which none of the manuscripts (except 447) cover: this begins in the introductory section when Þorstein Þorskabítr dies, and ends within the *Máhlíðingamál* section with conflict between Þorgrímr Kjallaksson and Illugi inn svartí.

### **The range of manuscript variation in *Eyrbyggja saga***

Commenting on the way saga authors worked, Judy Quinn observes ‘the impetus to vary performance that is likely to have obtained in the oral mode – through fine-tuning of characterisation, embellishment of scenes through poetic quotation, foreshadowing of crucial episodes with prophetic interludes or the amplification of elements within the plot – appears to have continued into the written tradition, with those producing manuscript texts of sagas sometimes authoring what were effectively new versions as they wrote.’<sup>31</sup> We will see that this continuation of the ‘oral mode’ has led to many variations within *Eyrbyggja saga*.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 123\*-130\*.

<sup>31</sup> J. Quinn, 'Introduction,' in J. Quinn and E. Lethbridge (eds.), *Creating the Medieval Saga: Versions, Variability and Editorial Interpretations of Old Norse Saga Literature* (Odense, 2010), p. 15.

When discussing variation, it is worth noting that the chapter divisions are different in every manuscript. While modern editions and translations divide the saga into chapters and often give them titles, we must always be aware when reading them that they are imposed by the editor and not original. 447 never has titles and simply states ‘Cap 1’, ‘Cap 2’ while M also lacks chapter headings. The other texts sometimes have chapter titles, but not always. So it is clear, even before delving into the text itself, that there are variations in the way the manuscripts are written and presented.

Naturally, no two copies of a manuscript will be exactly the same. At one end of the scale, scribes will use different spellings, and grammar and punctuation will differ from one copy to the next. Different words may sometimes be used, without greatly changing the meaning of the text. Scribal error is also common, and future copyists may then correct what they suspect was an error. Mistakes such as ‘eye-skip’, confusion between graphically-similar words, and mistaking unfamiliar terms for others are common types of errors.<sup>32</sup> These are occasionally noted by the scribe; the writer of M at one point notes at the foot of the page that the name he gave as ‘Porbergr’ should actually have been ‘Bergþorr.’ The error is repeated several times throughout the section, and W also contains the same error once.<sup>33</sup>

These are all relatively minor differences which do not greatly affect the sense of a text. Other variations which may not have been errors also have no major impact on the narrative as a whole. An example which occurs frequently is variation in numbers – that is, one manuscript will say that there are, for example, 15 men at a scene, while another will say 14. This rarely impacts on the narrative. Such small variations will not be mentioned here. Re-arrangement of sentences is a phenomenon that frequently happens. Unless there is

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<sup>32</sup> M. B. Parkes, *Their hands before our eyes: a closer look at scribes: the Lyell lectures delivered in the University of Oxford, 1999* (Aldershot, 2008), p. 67.

<sup>33</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 99\*.

significant re-arrangement, this does not impact on the narrative and will therefore not need to be discussed here. At an even more detailed level, there are numerous orthographical variations between manuscripts. A linguistic analysis of this could prove fruitful, but again, is beyond the scope of this discussion.

As regards more significant variations, entire sections could be deliberately removed, added or shortened. In some cases, these differences are so great that we must view the texts as separate redactions. However, the differences in *Eyrbyggja saga* manuscripts are not on this scale. The core narrative of *Eyrbyggja saga* remains the same across the manuscripts, it is in the details that variations are found. While initially may appear trivial, the cumulative effect of all these small variations is that we can see distinct interpretations of the story.

The first chapter of this dissertation will examine the critical history of *Eyrbyggja saga*. The other four chapters focus on variations in the *Eyrbyggja saga* manuscripts. I noted four distinct thematic or structural areas where variations occur. Chapter two covers the large amount of genealogical information and descriptions of characters in the saga. Chapter three considers the theme of travel. Chapter four discusses the depiction of slaves. Finally, chapter five covers variation in the verses preserved within the saga. The limits of this dissertation do not make it possible to discuss every variation; I have therefore limited my discussion to these four main areas. I would like to acknowledge that there are almost certainly more variations than I have been able to perceive. Finally, Einar Ól. Sveinsson, some years after he edited *Eyrbyggja saga*, said of its textual variation that ‘material differences are small, and

comparison of the manuscripts does not suggest that the wording has been radically altered.<sup>34</sup> This, as the following chapters will demonstrate, is inaccurate.

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<sup>34</sup> E. Ó. Sveinsson, 'Dating the Icelandic Sagas: An Essay in Method,' *Viking Society for Northern Research Text Series* (1958), p. 20.

## Chapter One

### A CRITICAL HISTORY OF *EYRBYGGJA SAGA*

This chapter will consider the critical history of *Eyrbyggja saga* – what people have thought about it and why, with a view to appreciating why a study of the manuscripts is so necessary.<sup>35</sup>

On a general level, the debate on saga origins – that is, how they came to be – has dominated saga studies. Perhaps the most succinct overview of this debate comes from Jesse Byock: ‘although no-one denies a mixture of oral and literary elements, theories differ widely over how much the sagas reflect an oral compositional prehistory and how much they reflect artistry of self-conscious author.’<sup>36</sup> The terms ‘freeprose’ and ‘bookprose’ were invented by Andreas Heusler to refer to these two sides of the debate on saga origins.<sup>37</sup> A definition of the bookprose theory is that ‘they assumed that the origin of the Icelandic saga, although based originally upon oral sources, was fundamentally in written sources and that saga authors crafted their narratives from a variety of written works that were available to them, including, in some cases, works in Latin or foreign vernaculars.’<sup>38</sup> Essentially, this viewpoint states that the sagas are primarily literary creations of thirteenth century authors, an approach most closely associated with the so-called ‘Icelandic school’; dedicated to using traditional methods to establish the relationships between manuscripts. It was out of this context that the widely-used *Íslenzk fornrit* saga editions were produced.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Parts of this chapter were included in a previous essay (Literature Review) submitted for this degree.

<sup>36</sup> J. Byock, ‘Saga Form, Oral Prehistory, and the Icelandic Social Context,’ *New Literary History*, 16 (1984), p. 153.

<sup>37</sup> M. Clunies Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 39.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

The 'freeprose' theory can be summed up thus: 'that the sagas were orally composed and transmitted and that they existed in something like their present form before they were written down.'<sup>40</sup> In recent years Gísli Sigurðsson has taken a new approach to the question of saga, attempting to understand the oral background of the sagas.<sup>41</sup> Sigurðsson has looked at every saga in which the character Gudmunðr inn ríki appears, arguing that there is 'coherence and consistency' in the way he is portrayed, because 'a substantial body of varying stories circulated about him in oral form.' Thus Sigurðsson argues that we can recreate his life story from the sagas, calling this 'the immanent saga of Guðmundr ríki.'<sup>42</sup> In arguing this Sigurðsson places himself firmly at the extreme end of the 'freeprose' theorists. I agree with Sigurðsson's argument that the sagas are based on oral traditions. However, I think it is possible to see that individual writers have put their own perspective and insights into the texts. They were writing from oral traditions, but made deliberate changes too.

This debate about origins has implicitly informed all critical opinion on *Eyrbyggja saga*, which the rest of this chapter will now consider.

### ***Eyrbyggja saga's structure***

The majority of *Eyrbyggja saga* studies have focussed on its structure, the most prominent of which will be discussed in chronological order.<sup>43</sup> It has been said that it reads more like a chronicle or local history, rather than a traditional saga.<sup>44</sup> While some have argued that the

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<sup>40</sup> C. J. Clover, 'Icelandic Family Sagas,' in C. J. Clover and J. Lindow (eds.), *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide* (Ithaca, 1985), p. 239.

<sup>41</sup> G. Sigurðsson (trans. N. Jones), *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Traditions: A Discourse on Method* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004). Originally published in Icelandic in 2002.

<sup>42</sup> Sigurðsson, G. (trans. N. Jones), 'The Immanent Saga of Guðmundr Ríki', in J. Quinn, K. Heslop, and T. Wills (eds.), *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross* (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 215-6.

<sup>43</sup> I discuss English language scholarship only here.

<sup>44</sup> V. Ólason, *Gisli Sursson's saga, and the Saga of the People of Eyri* (London, 2003), p. xxv.

saga is structured around the life of Snorri goði, others have suggested that the focus is on the exchanges of power between the chieftains in the area.<sup>45</sup>

Lee Hollander's 1959 article is the earliest piece of criticism I shall consider. He rejects the nineteenth century view of Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Finnur Jónsson that many of the saga's episodes are interpolated,<sup>46</sup> and instead, proposes that the saga is intentionally formed of interwoven episodes. This 'interbraiding,' he argues, is the result of 'conscious planning' by the author: 'he does not merely string along the traditions of his countryside artlessly...but arranges them to suit his purpose.' The purpose of interweaving the episodes rather than telling each story in succession is, according to Hollander, to create suspense.<sup>47</sup> However, the complex pattern Hollander proposes is frankly too far-fetched to be taken seriously.

Theodore Andersson, pointing to the lack of climax and direction in the tale, suggests that there is 'a sequence of ten contests in which Snorri is either a principle or a potent counsellor,' although Snorri is not depicted as a standard saga hero.<sup>48</sup> Andersson is also perplexed by the unusual interweaving, suggesting that perhaps the author was using chronological sources which necessitated this interweaving, although this intriguing proposition is not developed.<sup>49</sup> Andersson's examination avoids the unnecessary complexity of Hollander's analysis, but his loose structure does not fully envelop the entire saga, and Andersson readily admits the interweaving is beyond his understanding.

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<sup>45</sup>J. L. Byock, 'Inheritance and Ambition in Eyrbyggja saga' in J. Tucker (ed.), *Sagas of the Icelanders. A Book of Essays* (New York, 1989), p. 186.

<sup>46</sup>L. M. Hollander, 'The Structure of Eyrbyggja Saga,' *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 58 (1959), p. 222.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., pp. 225-7.

<sup>48</sup>T. M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), p. 160.

<sup>49</sup>Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga*, p. 162.

Writing around a decade later, Bernadine McCreesh considers Hollander's pattern 'ingenious' but 'far-fetched.'<sup>50</sup> Vésteinn Ólason's notion that Christianity is an integral part of the saga provides a starting point for her own ideas, and she argues that the Conversion of Christianity is the central point of the saga. From this she asserts that the Conversion must have been very important for thirteenth century Icelanders.<sup>51</sup> However, McCreesh ignores that fact that the saga does not appear to give a great deal of attention to the moment of conversion, with very little build-up to the moment. The chapter (chapter 49) is very short in all the manuscripts. Fundamentally, the saga does not show a great deal of interest in religion, which does great damage to McCreesh's religion-centred thesis.

Rory McTurk rightly dismisses McCreesh's argument about the centrality of the conversion,<sup>52</sup> and uses the saga's many verses to work out an outline: 'a pattern emerges of six narratives in each of which the crisis is pointed by a verse attributed to Oddr or Þormódr; the seven strophes serve as a unifying device, linking together all the narratives concerning Snorri goði, and thus help to emphasize his central importance in the saga.'<sup>53</sup> There is one major flaw – some episodes simply do not fit into his verse-centred outline at all. He acknowledges this, suggesting that these sections give 'the effect of spaciousness in dealing with events of national rather than local importance,' particularly the conversion.<sup>54</sup> This vein of argument is quite obviously flawed, regardless of the vague concept of 'spaciousness', some of the sections which do not fit, such as part of Snorri's dispute with Arnkell, cannot simply be relegated to the background in looking at the structure of the text.

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<sup>50</sup> B. McCreesh, 'Structural patterns in the *Eyrbyggja Saga* and other sagas of the Conversion,' *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 11 (1978-9), p. 272.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 272-80.

<sup>52</sup> R. McTurk, 'Approaches to the Structure of *Eyrbyggja Saga*,' in R. Simek, J. Kristjánsson and H. Bekker-Nielsen (eds.), *Sagnaskemmtun – Studies in Honour of Herman Pálsson on his 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday, 26<sup>th</sup> May 1986* (Vienna, 1986), p. 237.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

In more recent years, new approaches to the structure of the saga have been taken. Torfi Tulinius looks at the structure of the saga, examining the relationship between the ‘exceptionally meandering’, ‘multi-stranded’ narrative and the depiction of the main character, Snorri.<sup>55</sup> He combines structuralist and psychoanalytic methodologies to conclude that ‘the apparently loose structure of the saga has a hidden logic which allows one to read it as a social myth of the authority of the chieftain class, an authority which is undermined by an ambiguous relationship with its paternal inheritance.’<sup>56</sup> According to Tulinius, this approach not only explains the multi-stranded structure of the saga, because the author needed several narratives to express his thoughts, but also explains why the saga is rife with fantastic elements, because they allow the author to say things that could not be said in a more realistic text.<sup>57</sup>

In one of the most recent studies of the saga, Elín Bára Magnúsdóttir like many others sees the structure as episodic,<sup>58</sup> noting that Snorri is the principle character around whose life the saga is framed, while acknowledging that he is not a traditional saga hero. Magnúsdóttir uses episodes such as the conflict between Snorri and Arnkell to delve deeper into the ideology of the saga, arguing that the author was trying to create ‘a new kind of saga-hero’ in Snorri, in a chaotic society which needed this new kind of leadership.<sup>59</sup> Thus Snorri is depicted as the kind of strong leader needed for this new social structure. Magnúsdóttir’s analysis is

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<sup>55</sup> T. Tulinius, ‘Is Snorri goði an Icelandic Hamlet? On Dead Fathers and Problematic Chieftainship in *Eyrbyggja saga*,’ Thirteenth International Saga Conference, Durham and York, 6th–12th August 2006, 9 pages, <http://web.archive.org/web/20080926164407/http://www.dur.ac.uk/medieval.www/sagaconf/torfi.htm>, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> E. B. Magnúsdóttir, ‘An Ideological Struggle: An Interpretation of *Eyrbyggja saga*,’ Paper given at the Thirteenth International Saga Conference, 6th–12th August 2006, Durham University/University of York, <http://web.archive.org/web/20080926165040/http://www.dur.ac.uk/medieval.www/sagaconf/elin.htm>, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

somewhat frustrating in that she makes no attempt to understand why the author may have wanted to do this.

### **Other critical approaches**

Others critics, rather than discussing structure, have taken a less holistic approach, choosing to focus either on one theme of the saga, or one section. One critical approach has been to examine short sections of the saga in detail. Jesse Byock analyses the Snorri/Arnkell conflict in detail, examining the legal machinations of the chieftains over the ownership of land, which has a serious impact on the balance of wealth and power in the area.<sup>60</sup> William Ian Miller also discusses this episode as one of three case studies examining different ways of resolving conflict in the sagas. Miller shows how conflict can escalate very quickly, and how the chieftains were able to manipulate the legal system.<sup>61</sup>

Vésteinn Ólason examines the section near the beginning of the saga known as the *Máhlíðingamál* in detail, interpreting it to mean that the author has learnt the literary tradition of saga-writing and uses its conventions, but the unique details strongly point to the existence of an oral tradition which the author used.<sup>62</sup>

Knut Odner looks at an aspect of *Eyrbyggja Saga* from an anthropological perspective. He the Þórgunna episode and analyses it as a myth.<sup>63</sup> He sees the process of saga-writing as if there were a “treasure box” of ideas’ in which the authors found ‘bits and pieces which

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<sup>60</sup>J. L. Byock, ‘Inheritance and Ambition in Eyrbyggja saga’ in J. Tucker (ed.), *Sagas of the Icelanders. A Book of Essays* (New York, 1989), pp. 185-205.

<sup>61</sup> W. I. Miller, ‘Avoiding Legal Judgement: The Submission of Disputes to Arbitration in Medieval Iceland’, *American Journal of Legal History*, 28 (1984), pp. 126-132.

<sup>62</sup>Ólason, V., “‘Máhlíðingamál’”: authorship and tradition in a part of *Eyrbyggja saga*,’ in R. McTurk & A. Wawn (eds.), *Úr Dölum til Dala* (Leeds, 1991), p. 198.

<sup>63</sup> K. Odner, ‘Þórgunna’s testament: a myth for moral contemplation and social apathy,’ in G. Pálsson (ed.), *From sagas to society: comparative approaches to early Iceland* (London, 1992), pp. 125-146.

might be useful for their project and sewed them together,<sup>64</sup> and demonstrates how the author used aspects of pagan and Christian beliefs and local folklore to create the events and structure of the myth. 'Fidelity to traditions' must have been important to the authors, he reasons, but there was also some blending with other traditions.<sup>65</sup>

Tulinius also looks at the ideology of the saga, influenced by Claude Lévi-Strauss' analysis of myths. Focussing on the Fróðá episode, Tulinius argues that the saga reflects the ideology of its time.<sup>66</sup> In observing the way the hauntings were resolved, he suggests that the episode 'could be some kind of commentary on the struggle for power in Icelandic society between clergy and laity.'<sup>67</sup> He argues that the lay chieftains are represented in a positive way, and that 'the saga asserts the chieftains' dominant role in legal matters, affirming their identity by circumscribing the sphere of action of the clergy.'<sup>68</sup>

Some critics have chosen to take a less all-inclusive approach to the saga and have focussed on specific individual themes, such as the supernatural,<sup>69</sup> the role of women,<sup>70</sup> and even the role of bodily substances.<sup>71</sup> Looking at one specific theme in the text, Ian Wyatt has examined how the author of *Eyrbyggja Saga* used depictions of landscape, geography and weather as a narrative device, challenging the view that the landscape depicted in the sagas

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<sup>64</sup> Odner, 'Þórgunna's testament,' p. 146.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>66</sup> T. Tulinius, 'Political Echoes: Reading *Eyrbyggja Saga* in Light of Contemporary Conflicts,' in J. Quinn, K. Heslop and T. Wills (eds.), *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross* (Turnhout, 2007), p. 56.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>69</sup> J. D. Martin, 'Law and the (Un)Dead: Medieval models for understanding the hauntings in *Eyrbyggja saga*,' *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, XXIX (2005), pp. 67-82.

<sup>70</sup> F. S. Scott, 'The Woman Who Knows: Female Characters of *Eyrbyggja Saga*,' in Anderson, S. M. and Swenson, K. (eds.), *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse literature and mythology: a collection of essays* (2002), p. 226; J. Livesay 'Women and Narrative Structure in *Eyrbyggja Saga*,' *Folklore Forum*, 21 (1988).

<sup>71</sup> K. J. Wanner, 'Purity and Danger in Earliest Iceland: Excrement, Blood, Sacred Space, and Society in *Eyrbyggja Saga*,' *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 5 (2009).

was the actual landscape of medieval Iceland<sup>72</sup> Implicit in Wyatt's work is the idea that the authors controlled the stories they were telling for a reason, rather than merely recounting parts of the local oral tradition without interpreting them, but he does not explore this implication.

## Dating

The dating of the saga has been another topic of consideration. Most discussions of the dating have remarked upon a reference in the final chapter to *Laxdæla saga*, and have taken this to indicate that *Eyrbyggja* was written after *Laxdæla*, although Einar Ól. Sveinsson, arguing for an earlier date, was sceptical about this reference and suggested it may have been a later addition by a copyist.<sup>73</sup> Scott provides an overview of the main arguments but is himself fairly non-committal.<sup>74</sup>

Related to this is the issue of the relationship between *Eyrbyggja* and other sagas. Paul Schach suggests that the saga's brief account of Eiríkr rauði's life reads like a summary of the kind of writing that may have existed in the 'original' *Landnámabók*<sup>75</sup> and also points out similarities between *Eyrbyggja* and *Heiðarvíga saga*.<sup>76</sup> Schach is mainly concerned with the relationship between *Eyrbyggja* and *Gísla saga*, however, and argues that the *Eyrbyggja* author used a written copy of *Gísla saga* (the M redaction) as a source for his work.<sup>77</sup> Schach summarises his underlying argument by saying that 'points of divergence can be satisfactorily

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<sup>72</sup> I. Wyatt, 'Landscape and Authorial Control in the Battle of Vigrafjörðr in *Eyrbyggja Saga*,' *Leeds Studies in English*, 35 (2004), pp. 43-5.

<sup>73</sup> T. H. Tulinius, 'Dating *Eyrbyggja saga*: the Value of "Circumstantial" Evidence for Determining the Time of Composition of Sagas about Early Icelanders,' in E. Mundal (ed.), *Dating the Sagas: Reviews and Revisions* (Copenhagen, 2013), p. 125.

<sup>74</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp.19\*-27\*.

<sup>75</sup> P. Schach, 'Some Observations on the Helgafell Episode in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Gísla saga*,' in J. M. Weinstock (ed.), *Saga og språk: Studies in Language and Literature presented to Lee M. Hollander* (Texas, 1972), p. 117.

<sup>76</sup> Schach, 'The Helgafell Episode,' p. 118.

<sup>77</sup> Schach, 'The Helgafell Episode,' p. 134.

explained...without recourse to hypothetical oral traditions for the existence of which, in the parallels discussed here, there is no tangible evidence.<sup>78</sup> He furthermore imagines the saga author at work ‘surrounded by notes and books, leafing back and forward in his won manuscript, and skilfully piecing together bits of local tradition.’<sup>79</sup> Schach argues forcefully against oral tradition being the cause of these similarities, but his underlying assumption is flawed. There is no reason not to assume that similarities between the sagas were not the result of oral traditions. Since some of the events of *Gísla* and *Eyrbyggja* take place in the same area, I would argue that the similarities are the result of oral traditions, not literary borrowings.

Theodore M. Andersson also considers the relationship between sagas, and assumes that the author knew not just *Gísla saga*, but *Laxdæla saga* and *Heiðarvíga saga* too. He accepts that *Eyrbyggja saga* seems older compared to *Laxdæla*’s ‘decorative’ style, but suggests this can be accounted for by different tastes on that part of the authors. He suggests assigning the saga to the middle of the century, suggesting that this could account for the unusual prose style as the author may have been influenced by texts written around that time, such as *Sturlu saga* and *Guðmundar saga dýra*, both of which exhibit similarities to *Eyrbyggja*.<sup>80</sup> Andersson suggests that the author may have been motivated to produce ‘something more like history’; that by removing exaggerations and adornments used in earlier texts such as *Laxdæla* he would create a more realistic world recognizable to its audience.<sup>81</sup>

In recent years Torfi Tulinius has again written about the dating and historical context of the saga, discussing an early thirteenth century conflict between Kolbeinn Tumason, a powerful

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<sup>78</sup> Schach, ‘The Helgafell Episode,’ p. 136

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>80</sup> T. M. Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas* (New York, 2006), pp. 150-4.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

chieftain, and Guðmundr Arason, bishop of Hólar, about an article of canon law (the concept of *privilegium fori*) which Iceland had not adopted. Tulinius suggests that the saga ‘may have been composed in a milieu close to the Sturlungar, in the 1230s when the whole issue of *privilegium fori* is likely to have been on the table again...in this context, it is likely that the godar would have wanted to produce some kind of narrative that would ground their social position in history.’ Tulinius also proposes a later historical context to consider: around 1253, suggesting ‘it is not unlikely at all that a saga that both grounds the power of the chieftains in history and also portrays the difficulties of a society in which chieftains compete for power would have been relevant to the concerns of an author and public in the 1250s.’ Tulinius’s aim is not to decide which historical context best fits *Eyrbyggja saga*, but to show that studying the context of the period in which the sagas were written ‘will greatly enhance our understanding of how they developed as an art form.’<sup>82</sup>

Questions about dating naturally lead on to questions about who actually wrote the saga, although this is a topic that few have confronted directly. There is a general assumption that he must have lived in the area, because he clearly knew its landscape so well.<sup>83</sup> Beyond that, in their English translation Schach and Hollander assume that he must have been clerically trained, probably at the monastery at Helgafell, while acknowledging that he was probably not a clergyman as Christianity does not seem important to him.<sup>84</sup> I would suggest, however, that it is unhelpful to dwell too long on the question of authorship; we will never have a definitive answer. Emily Lethbridge’s comments on *Gísla saga* are pertinent here:

‘Attempting to pin the written composition of the saga onto one specific individual is,

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<sup>82</sup> T. Tulinius, ‘Dating *Eyrbyggja Saga*: The Value of “Circumstantial” Evidence for Determining the Time of Composition of Sagas about Early Icelanders,’ in E. Mundal (ed.), *Dating the Sagas: Reviews and Revisions* (Copenhagen, 2013), pp.115-132.

<sup>83</sup> E.g. L. M. Hollander, ‘Introduction,’ in P. Schach and L. M. Hollander (eds. and trans.), *Eyrbyggja Saga* (Lincoln, Neb. 1977), p. xvii; Schach, ‘The Helgafell Episode,’ p. 114; H. Pálsson and P. Edwards (eds. and trans.), *Eyrbyggja Saga* (London, 1989), pp. 2-3.

<sup>84</sup> Hollander, ‘Introduction,’ p. xvi.

ultimately, an unproductive exercise, shifting the critical focus from the evidence that does survive and that testifies to the continuous, regenerative tradition of the saga narrative, to a single, hypothetical, irrecoverable articulation.<sup>85</sup> I would argue that this approach, applied to *Eyrbyggja saga*, will be the most helpful.

### **Concluding remarks**

The majority of scholars have attempted to understand the saga's structure, although no clear consensus has been arrived at. *Eyrbyggja saga* appears to be unusual in this respect.

Underlying this issue is the fundamental problem of authorship: who wrote the saga, and how did they put it together?

Over time, we can see a shift in emphasis in critical thinking on the saga, from queries about its physical structure to more abstract concepts such as the ideology of the saga. New approaches such as that of Torfi Tulinius, who studies the saga from the point of view of its historical context, have been particularly illuminating. Nevertheless, few critics have really considered *Eyrbyggja saga*'s manuscript history, instead basing their work upon the *Íslensk fornrit* edition, failing to appreciate the range of variation which the next four chapters of this study will consider.

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<sup>85</sup> E. D. Lethbridge, *Narrative Variation in the Versions of Gísla saga Súrssonar*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge (2007), pp. 58-9.

## Chapter Two

### NARRATIVE VARIATION: GENEALOGY AND CHARACTER

This chapter will discuss variation in genealogy and character within the manuscripts of *Eyrbyggja saga*. There is a great deal of genealogical information within the saga. Actual descriptions of characters are rarer. The first eleven or twelve chapters of the saga are commonly referred to as the introduction or prologue.<sup>1</sup> There is a large amount of genealogical information here. Dora Mäcek has analysed stylistic features of the sagas, and notes that chapters often begin with the introduction of a person, in which a formulaic phrase is often used. The ends of chapters are usually 'more static,' she suggests; we are frequently given a comment on how people reacted to the event, and short genealogies are sometimes given.<sup>2</sup> The end of the saga also contains genealogical information relating to Snorri and his descendants.

Genealogies may have been among the first kind of writing in medieval Iceland; mid twelfth century texts such as *Íslendingabók* and the *First Grammatical Treatise* mention genealogical writing as something that was being done at the time.<sup>3</sup> Genealogies were not an attempt to create full family trees as in the modern day. Instead, Margaret Clunies Ross argues, their purpose were 'usually to legitimise some power or authority.'<sup>4</sup> We will see possible examples of this within *Eyrbyggja saga*.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. H. Pálsson and P. Edwards (eds. and trans.), *Eyrbyggja saga* (London, 1989), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> D. Mäcek, 'Some Stylistic Features of the Classical Icelandic Sagas,' in R. Simek, J. Kristjánsson and H. Bekker-Nielsen (eds.), *Sagnaskemmtun: studies in honour of Hermann Pálsson on his 65th birthday, 26th May 1986* (Vienna, 1986), pp. 211-2.

<sup>3</sup> M. Clunies Ross, 'The Development of Old Norse Textual Worlds: Genealogical Structure as a Principle of Literary Organisation in Early Iceland,' *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 92 (1993), p. 376.

<sup>4</sup> Clunies Ross, 'Old Norse Textual Worlds,' p. 379.

Kathryn Hume notes that statistics have shown that any Sturlung-age audience member would have been related to at least one of the principal settlers of Iceland,<sup>5</sup> and we can assume that most members of the thirteenth century elite would have been able to connect themselves to colonists. This means that the saga genealogies were not just a way of introducing characters, they were connecting their audience with their past. The names listed in *Eyrbyggja saga* would surely have had great meaning, probably even to members of Iceland's elite in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It is therefore especially significant if information about these characters is changed or missed out. The following discussion will comment on five particularly interesting examples of this.

### **Ketill and family (chapters 1 and 2)**

The earliest chapters of the saga are dedicated to recounting the story of Ketill flatnefr, one of the first settlers, and his family.<sup>6</sup> We have M, G, and 447 here. There are some minor variations in names here: Ketill's wife is named as Yngvild (M and G) or Ingebiorg (447). The father-in-law of his daughter Þórunn hynna is named as either Eyvindr (M and G), or Vermundr (447). Both of these cases may be an example of a similar-sounding names being confused, particularly as neither are important characters.

Ketill is said to have married a daughter to Óláfr hvíti, about whom all of the texts acknowledge 'er þa var mestur herkongur firir vestan haf.'<sup>7</sup> Óláfr is said to have been descended from Ragnarr loðbrók; G does not give this detail about Óláfr's illustrious ancestry. Perhaps the writer assumed the audience would know this from hearing that he was descended from Ragnarr and did not feel the need to explicitly state it.

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<sup>5</sup> K. Hume, 'Beginnings and Endings in the Icelandic Family Sagas,' *The Modern Language Review*, 68 (1973), pp. 603-4.

<sup>6</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 2-21.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4, from 447. 'He was the best warrior king in the western seas.'

According to most versions of the saga, when Björn Ketilsson is banished from Norway, the king allegedly sends a follower named Haukr hábrók to kill him if he can be found. Björn's friends get wind of this and he moves on. In G, however, this story is changed somewhat. Rather than sending Haukr after Björn, the king himself pursues him in this version (as indicated by the phrase 'enn er kongr kom svdur um Stad...' <sup>8</sup>), although this later becomes the king's men in line 15. <sup>9</sup>

From this overview of Ketill's family, it does seem clear that there were variations in the stories being told about Ketill, often where a marginal character has been forgotten or become confused with another over time.

### **Þórólfr mostrarskegg (chapter 3)**

Still within the introductory section of the saga, we can also see variations in the description and genealogy of Þórólfr mostrarskegg, the first settler of Helgafell, and grandfather of Snorri goði. Again, M, G and 447 are extant here. M omits the phrase 'og hinn meste rausnar madur' describing Þórólfr mostrarskegg, perhaps indicating a slightly less noble characterisation. <sup>10</sup> A brief discussion of Þórólfr's family is found in 447: 'Hallsteirn Þorolfsson fíeck Oskar, dottur Þorsteinz raudz. Þorsteirn hiet son þeira. hann fostrade Þorolfur og kallade Þorstein suartann, sinn son kallade hann Þorstein þorskabýt. <sup>11</sup>'

This is missing from G (there is a lacuna in M at this point), somewhat surprisingly, because it had the potential to cause confusion later in the story, as a son of Snorri, another Þorsteinn,

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<sup>8</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 7. 'And when the king came south to Stad.'

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 8-9. 'And he was the most eminent man.'

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 22. 'Hallsteinn Þórólffson married Óskar, the daughter of Þorsteinn the Red; their son was called Þorsteinn. Þórólfr fostered him and called him Þorstein surt, and his own son he called Þorsteinn þorskabít.'

is also given the nickname þorskabít at one point towards the end of the saga, in M and 447 but not W.<sup>12</sup> The second Þorsteinn does not have a major role; G is perhaps cutting to save space; it is interesting to note that the author felt he could lose this information without losing any sense. Again, there are variations in the way people thought and wrote about this character.

### **Þórólfr bægifótr (chapter 8)**

There are also variations in the introduction of Þórólfr bægifótr, which tells of the process of his acquiring land.<sup>13</sup> 447 and G exist here, but G has a longer comment. 447 merely states ‘og var jafnan hinn meste ojafnadar madur,’<sup>14</sup> while G elaborates ‘ok er hann lengi uid þessa sogv ok sialldan uid gott kendr sem sidar mun sagt uerda. hann gerdi bu j Huammi j Þorsaar dal ok tok hann lónd óll epter Vlfar ok uar hinn mesti oiafnadar madr.’<sup>15</sup> Intriguingly, this somewhat disparaging first sentence does not occur in 447. Here, G has more details about the event and also expressed more negative comments about the character.

In all these introductory sections, we see that the manuscripts treat characters in differing ways: sometimes they are portrayed in a more negative light, sometimes the stories told about them vary. The audience may then respond to the characters differently, particularly in the case of Þórólfr bægifótr, where an obnoxious character is given an even more harsh introduction to the saga.

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<sup>12</sup> He is mentioned as taking part in Snorri’s attack against Óspakr, ch. 62.

<sup>13</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 22-3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 22. ‘He was always a very unpleasant man.’

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 23. ‘And he is in this saga for a long time and seldom with good kin as will later be said. He built a house at Hvammr in Þórsárdalr. He took over Úlfarr’s land and was an extremely unpleasant man.’

## Arnkell (chapter 37)

We now move on to a much later point in the saga. Arnkell's death is one of the most interesting sections of the saga to analyse in terms of character descriptions. Manuscripts W, and 447 cover this episode.<sup>16</sup> It is particularly significant because 447 contains several lines which are not found in W:

...þui hann hefur vered allra manna best ad sier gior vmm alla hlute j fornum sid  
hier a lande / manna vitrastur og vel skape farenn / hiartaprudur og huorjum  
manne diarfare og þo alluel stilltur / hafde hann og jafnan hinn hærra hlut j  
malaferlum vid huorja sem skipta var / fieck hann af þui ofund sem nu kom  
framm.<sup>17</sup>

These lines are rather extreme in their praise of Arnkell. Forrest Scott tentatively suggests it may have been an insertion, rather than an omission, but does not come to a firm conclusion himself.<sup>18</sup> Other critics have also discussed this section: Jesse Byock scrutinises the complex dealings between Arnkell and Snorri but ignores the eulogising, other than a throwaway remark within a footnote that the sentences may be an interpolation.<sup>19</sup> Given the detail in which Byock dissects the interactions between the leading men of the district, this omission is indefensible. Elín Bára Magnúsdóttir comments on how the author's sympathy for Arnkell, as indicated by this eulogy and other sections, makes Arnkell the 'real hero' of the saga.<sup>20</sup> In the manuscript in which the above sentences are omitted, we are presented with a somewhat

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<sup>16</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 174-181.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 178-180. 'Because he was the best of all men in the land in the old religion. He was the wisest of men and good-tempered, generous and daring as any man and yet calm. He was always successful in lawsuits, with whoever he had to deal with. Because of this people were envious of him, as is shown now.'

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14\*

<sup>19</sup> J. L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: society, sagas and power* (Berkeley, Calif., 1988), p. 197 n. 16.

<sup>20</sup> E. B. Magnúsdóttir, 'An Ideological Struggle: An Interpretation of Eyrbyggja saga,' Paper given at the Thirteenth International Saga Conference, 6th-12th August 2006, Durham University/University of York, <http://web.archive.org/web/20080926165040/http://www.dur.ac.uk/medieval.www/sagaconf/elin.htm>, p. 7.

different picture. Although Magnúsdóttir acknowledges the omission, she writes ‘nevertheless, it sums up all that Arnkell stands for and is therefore an important text for the understanding of the saga.’<sup>21</sup> This seems like a very simplistic way to approach the text which fails to capture the significance of the omission/insertion.

Vésteinn Ólason has looked at this section more closely, pointing out that ‘there is rather more praise of Arnkell than is justified by the saga’<sup>22</sup> This leads him to suggest that ‘it may be that we are dealing with a scribe who was much affected by Arnkell’s noble life and heroic final moments, and felt impelled to supply the passage.’<sup>23</sup> Although we cannot know for sure, I feel this is the most likely explanation.

The significance of Arnkell’s ‘eulogy’ is made clearer when we consider the descriptions the saga gives of Snorri’s character. Upon Snorri’s death, we are given no such tribute. In fact, the only real description we get of Snorri is in chapter 15, which includes a physical description:

Snorre var meðal mata madur að hæð og helldur grannlegur. Hann var hoguær  
huorz daglega / frydur synum / riettleitur / lioslitadur bleikt har og  
raudskieggjadur. fann lytt a honum huort honum þotte vel edur illa. hann var vitur  
madur og forsiall umm marga hlute langrækur og heiptugur heilradur vinum  
synum enn oviner hans þottust helldur kulda kienna af hans radum.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Magnúsdóttir, ‘An Ideological Struggle,’ p. 10, footnote 3.

<sup>22</sup> V. Ólason (trans. A. Wawn), *Dialogues with the Viking Age: narration and representation in the sagas of the Icelanders* (Reykjavík, 1998), pp. 103-4.

<sup>23</sup> Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, pp. 104.

<sup>24</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 38. ‘Snorri was of average height and somewhat slender. He was calm of mind every day. He was a handsome man of regular features and a light complexion, blond hair and a red beard. It was hard to tell if he thought well or badly of something. He was a wise man with foresight, vindictive and with a long memory, giving wholesome counsel to his friends, but his enemies thought he was somewhat cold in his advice.’

None of these attributes are universally positive. Compared to Arnkell's eulogy, it is certainly less impressive. The author of 447 felt the need to praise the character of Arnkell, elevating him above the rest. But the writer of W did not do so; the two characters appear on a more equal footing in his version. This can change the way we view the characters and their relationship.

### **Snorri (chapter 65)**

We can now move on to looking at the final chapter of the saga (covered by M, W and 447), which contains a great deal of genealogical information about Snorri, listing each of his children and their descendants. Additionally, the M manuscript includes an appendix after the final chapter, known as the *Ævi Snorra goða* ('the life of Snorri goði'), which gives a skeletal account of Snorri's life.<sup>25</sup> We must assume that the *Ævi* as we have it today is incomplete, since it ends with the word 'þa', intending to start a new sentence. The whole passage is included in 447; in this case the writer has not included the final word 'þa', presumably since there was little sense in doing so because he was working with a manuscript which had already lost the rest of the sentence. Given that the *Ævi* is in an unfinished form as we have it now, it is plausible it may have contained much more information, but I would argue against this. Brief though it is, the *Ævi* does mention the main events of his life and his death; I cannot think that a great deal more could be missing.

The manuscripts do not agree on how many children Snorri had: M lists 16, W also has 16 (but not the same names as M), 447 has 17, while the *Ævi* explicitly states that Snorri had nineteen children and names all of them. I shall look at the information we are given about

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<sup>25</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 322.

each character, using the order they are presented to us in the saga. Only five of Snorri's children are described consistently across all texts – Þuríðr, Halldórr, Þórðr kausi, Eyjolftr, and Snorri. Another two, Hallbera and Þorsteinn, have only one minor variations.<sup>26</sup> With the exception of Halldórr, we are given very little information about any of them, so they will not form part of this discussion.<sup>27</sup>

The first child, Sigríðr, is named as the grandmother of Viðkunnr í Bjarkey, one apparently well-known descendant of Snorri in 447. Other texts dispute this, however. Both M and W state that Viðkunnr was descended from Unni, Snorri's second daughter, while 447 omits Unni altogether. Both M and 447 have praise for Viðkunnr;<sup>28</sup> W, however, mentions nothing but his name; we are not told of the high standing he apparently enjoyed.<sup>29</sup> In all three texts Snorri's daughter Þórdís is said to have married Bolli Bollason, a major character in *Laxdæla saga* and subject of *Bolla þátrr*. While M and 447 allege that they were the ancestors of the Gilsbekkingar, W provides no details about their descendants.<sup>30</sup> According to M, another daughter, Þóra, is said to have married Kerru-Bersi, a character who also appears briefly in *Laxdæla saga*, named as Hólmgöngu-Bersi.<sup>31</sup> 447 has this character's name as Kjartan. It is possible, of course, that Kerru-Bersi, Hólmgöngu-Bersi and Kjartan are not actually the same person, and that we are seeing a case of three separate stories having been confused with one another. According to M and 447 Þóra then married Þorgrímr sviði, and a large and respected

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<sup>26</sup> W omits the first name of husband, referring to him only as the son of Sturla Þjóðreksson (Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 316-7). With Þorsteinn, while both M and W claim that he was the ancestor of the Ásbirningar, 447 is more precise, giving the name of the family as the Viðmýringar. (Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 318-9).

<sup>27</sup> The *Ævi* also gives the names of three illegitimate children: Þórðr kausi, Jörundr and Þórhildr. The latter two are not mentioned elsewhere, but there is some confusion over Þórðr kausi, because he bears the same name as one of Snorri's legitimate children, listed as the eldest in the *Ævi*. Additionally, Snorri supposedly had a foster son named Þórðr köttur, according to *Laxdæla saga*. Sveinsson considers it unlikely that Snorri had three sons with the same name and very similar nicknames, and suggests that one of the Þórðr kausi's died early, and the other was named after him (Sveinsson, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 150-1 n. 4)

<sup>28</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 316-7. M: 'er einn hefir gaufgættur uerit lendra mana j Noregi' (he was one of the most noble landed man in Norway). 447: 'er eim hefur vered hellstur lendra manna j Noreige.' (he was one of the best landed men in Norway).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 314-7.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 316-7.

<sup>31</sup> Sveinsson, *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 181 n. 7.

family came from them, but there is no mention of Þóra at all in W. In all three of these cases, W is quite different in the information it provides – sometimes omitting characters entirely, or not mentioning their descendants.

There is also some confusion about the lives of two more of Snorri's daughters. W alleges that Guðrún married Kolfiðr of Sólheimar, 447 has his name as the similar-sounding Kálfr, while M states that she married Jörundr Þorfinnsson, brother of Gunnlaugr of Straumfjörðr, the man the other texts claim was the husband of Guðrún's sister Álöf.<sup>32</sup> M entirely misses out Álöf as well as another daughter, Halldóra, who in W and 447 is said to have married an otherwise unknown man named either Þorgeirr of Ásgarðshólar (M) or Þórarinn of Auðgeirshólar (W)<sup>33</sup> – the latter place name is likely to be an orthographical error as it does not exist. I would suggest that M's omission of the two daughters was also a mistake: the names go in the order of Guðrún, Halldóra, Álöf, and Halldórr; M omits the middle two. It seems plausible here that the scribe accidentally skipped the names due to confusion between Halldóra and Halldórr.

After naming the daughters, Halldórr is the first of Snorri's sons to be mentioned in all of the texts. All three texts appreciate his role: 'Halldor Snorra son g(oda) var gofugastur sona hanz. hann bjó j Hjarðarhollte j Laxardal. fra honum eru komner Sturlungar og Vatzfyrðingar.'<sup>34</sup> However, another son is also claimed to have had similar connections. Mána-Ljótr, Snorri's grandson through his son Máni, is a particularly well-known descendant because the Sturlungar claimed they were descended from him: in *Sturlu saga* it is stated that Sturla Þórðarson (the elder) inherited his goðorð from his father Þórðr Gilsson, who inherited it

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<sup>32</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 316-7.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 316-7.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. This quotation is taken from 447, it is duplicated in both other manuscripts. 'Halldórr was the best of Snorri goði's sons. He lived in Hjarðarholt in Laxárdalr. From him are descended the Sturlungar and Vatnsfirðingar.'

from Mána-Ljótr.<sup>35</sup> Both M and 447 say of Ljótr that ‘han uar kalladr mestr sonar sona Snora goda (M),<sup>36</sup> emphasising his historical significance as the link between the Sturlungar and their alleged ancestors. In W, however, this phrase is not included. Furthermore, this text states that Mána-Ljótr was the son of Þóroddr, although none of the other manuscripts mention any descendants of Þóroddr.<sup>37</sup> It is clear that there is some confusion over which, if any, of Snorri goði’s sons had this connection to the Sturlungar. This could well indicate that the connection was fabricated by the Sturlungar themselves, which could easily have led to confusion over which son was the ancestor over time. Margaret Clunies Ross has suggested that genealogies were often altered ‘in order to strengthen claims of contemporary individuals to particular relationships’, which is why we frequently come across several different versions of who was descended from whom.<sup>38</sup>

Both M and 447 state that Þorleifr, another son, lived at Meðalfellsströnd and that the people of Ballára are descended from him (‘frá honum eru komnir Ballæringar.’).<sup>39</sup> W, however, does not include this detail about his descendants. Again, it seems that W is less keen to provide information about Snorri’s descendants.

Finally, there is the intriguing matter of Snorri’s last child, who is named as Kleppr (M) or Blydfinnur (447), and is not mentioned at all in W.<sup>40</sup> Kleppr’s name is listed among Snorri’s children in the *Ævi*, but it is clear that there is considerable confusion over who this person was, or if he even existed in the first place. The two very different names – Kleppr and Blydfinnur – suggest that there may be two people that have been conflated into one.

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<sup>35</sup> G. Jónsson, *Sturlunga saga* vol. 1 (Íslendingasagnautgáfan, 1954), p. 64.

<sup>36</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 318-9. ‘He was called the best grandson of Snorri goði.’

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 316-9.

<sup>38</sup> Clunies Ross, ‘Old Norse Textual Worlds,’ p. 377.

<sup>39</sup> Sveinsson, *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 183 (the spelling of M and 447 make this line difficult to read). ‘From him the Ballæringar are descended.’

<sup>40</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 318-9.

As discussed above, it is claimed in the saga that Snorri was the ancestor of several families. We can compare what is written about the connection between Snorri and thirteenth century Icelanders to *Sturlunga saga*, which contains a section of genealogies of families in Iceland, several of whom are indicated to have had links with Snorri. This is understood to have been the work of Sturla Þórðarson of the Sturlungar, although the compiler may have made some changes.<sup>41</sup> The second section of the genealogies concerns the Sturlungar, beginning with Þórðr Gilsson. The author makes sure to highlight the link between Þórðr and Snorri goði: ‘móðir Þórðar var Þórdís Guðlaugsdóttir. Móðir Þórdísar var Þorkatla, dóttir Halldórs Snorrasonar goða.’<sup>42</sup> Within this first paragraph alone, the author relates the family to Snorri goði, to another renowned tenth century Icelandic, Guðmundr inn ríki, and notes that Þórðr was a contemporary of Bishop Gizurr, clearly indicating that this is a family with illustrious connections. The third section of the genealogies discusses the Ásbirningar; their relation to Snorri goði is again mentioned in the very first sentence: ‘Ásbjörn Arnórsson átti Ingunni, dóttur Þorsteins Snorrasonar goða.’<sup>43</sup> The sixth section of the genealogies is about the Vatnsfirðingar, from Ísafjörður in the north-west. Again, a connection with Snorri goði is mentioned right at the beginning: ‘Þórðr í Vatnsfirði var sonr Þorvalds Kjartanssonar ok Þórdísar Hermundardóttur. Móðir Þorvalds var Guðrún, dóttir Halldórs Snorrasonar goða.’<sup>44</sup> So three of these families are explicitly said to have a connection to Snorri in *Sturlunga saga*.

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<sup>41</sup>Ú. Bragason, ‘The Politics of Genealogies in *Sturlunga saga*,’ in J. Adams and K. Holman (eds.), *Scandinavia and Europe 800-1350: Contact, Conflict, and Coexistence* (Turnhout, 2004), p. 315.

<sup>42</sup>G. Jónsson, *Sturlunga saga* vol. 1 (Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), p. 80. ‘Þórðr’s mother was Þórdís Guðlaugsdóttir. The mother of Þórdís was Þorkatla, the daughter of Halldórr, who was the son of Snorri goði.’

<sup>43</sup>Jónsson, *Sturlunga saga*, p. 82. ‘Ásbjörn Arnórsson married Ingunn, the daughter of Þorstein, who was the son of Snorri goði.’

<sup>44</sup>Jónsson, *Sturlunga saga*, p. 85. ‘Þórðr from Vatnsfirðir was the son of Þorvaldr Kjartansson and Þórdís Hermundardóttir. Þorvalds’s mother was Guðrún, the daughter of Halldórr, who was the son of Snorri goði.’

Úlfar Bragason has said about the Sturlungar that there are ‘strong indications that their efforts, whether armed with the sword or the pen, may be traced to their lack of a respectable lineage.’ The vague and imprecise comments that Snorri was their ancestor in the saga could, then, be because the relationship was fabricated. Bragason further comments:

The Sturlungar were a relatively new family in the theatre of power in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. When a Sturlung enumerates the descendants of Þórðr Gilsson among a series of genealogies of the greatest families of chieftains in the country, and points out that the forefather, who holds the chieftaincy of Snorri Þorgrímsson of Helgafell (Snorrungar chieftaincy), was related further back to both the Ásbirningar and Vatnsfirðingar, thus breaking the rule of only mentioning descendants, he does so in order to demonstrate the social status of his own family.<sup>45</sup>

If we take this to be true, we can see that the variations in genealogy in *Eyrbyggja saga* may have been due to attempts to increase the social standing of the Sturlungar family.

### **Concluding remarks**

Across all the saga, it is clear that there is frequent variation in genealogies. Sometimes the authors seem to assume more knowledge on the part of their audience. We see some characters omitted or added in – perhaps somebody like Haukr hábrók, or Snorri’s daughter Unni were unremarkable, so that over time they were simply forgotten by some people. We also see characters described in more negative ways in some manuscripts. The death of

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<sup>45</sup> Bragason, 'The Politics of Genealogies,' p. 317.

Arnkell highlights this particularly well – clearly at some point, somebody felt the need to elevate Arnkell’s standing in the saga.

Both M and W seems to have a fairly high number of discrepancies with reference to Snorri’s descendants; too many, I would suggest, to ascribe simply to scribal error. W seems particularly interesting, since it omits the praise of Mána-Ljótr and states that he is the son of Þóroddr, rather than Máni. In general, W has less information about the descendants than is provided in the other manuscripts, potentially indicating that there were variations in the oral traditions about Snorri over the years. While some are only minor discrepancies, in other cases the differences that have evolved might have had wider consequences, such as the disagreement about Mána-Ljótr’s father, which changed the Sturlungar’s story of their ancestry.

Why did these variations evolve? I would suggest that it happened because the Sturlungar were trying to increase the strength of their connection to him. As Clunies Ross points out, fabricating this connection could easily have lead to confusion over how Snorri was supposedly related to these people.<sup>46</sup> Slavica Rancovic argues that genealogy can become a ‘powerful authenticating device’<sup>47</sup> – I think this is what we are seeing here – the desire to authenticate power, and, further, the desire to show a connection to a specific saga character who had the qualities that were valued in this society.

Elín Bára Magnúsdóttir, looking at the saga as a whole, concludes the author’s aim ‘must have been to create a saga-hero he considered society to be in need of...thus, the

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<sup>46</sup> Clunies Ross, ‘Old Norse Textual Worlds,’ p. 377.

<sup>47</sup> S. Rancovic, Golden Ages and Fishing Grounds: the Emergent Past in the *Íslendingasögur*,’ *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, XXX (2006), p. 48.

characterization of Snorri goði is built on the qualities such a leader must possess.’<sup>48</sup>

Magnúsdóttir does not delve deeper into the historical context of the saga; I would agree with her analysis but would further state that the Sturlungar highlighted this connection because Snorri was portrayed as the kind of leader they needed in this new society.

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<sup>48</sup>Magnúsdóttir, ‘An Ideological Struggle,’ p. 8.

## Chapter Three

### NARRATIVE VARIATION: TRAVEL

Travels and journeys frequently occur in *Eyrbyggja saga*. From major expeditions to Greenland, to small journeys to the Alþing, the saga is constantly reporting on where people are, and where they are going. Icelanders were not geographically isolated; in particular, the practice of young men going abroad on trading expeditions before beginning farm life meant that they had experience of other cultures,<sup>1</sup> albeit cultures often similar to their own.

Historically the link between Norway and Iceland was important; this geographical significance is reflected in the language; to go from Norway to Iceland was to sail *út*, while to go from Iceland to Norway was to sail *útan*, which translates as ‘from the place which is “out”’.<sup>2</sup> The majority of the settlers in *Eyrbyggja saga* came from Norway, and major historical events referenced in the saga such as Christianisation came from Norway.<sup>3</sup>

It has been noted that the saga author was ‘meticulously exact in his topographical descriptions,’<sup>4</sup> which gives ‘an impression of realism.’<sup>5</sup> In all the sagas, the volume of topographical references has created ‘a remarkably vivid sense of place.’<sup>6</sup> Scholarly attention relating to the geography and topography of the sagas has mostly been towards attempting to locate actual saga sites. Ian Wyatt suggests that the apparent parallels between the texts and the actual landscape have been ‘a major factor in the acceptance of sagas as historically valid

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<sup>1</sup> H. Pálsson, ‘Vinland Revisited,’ *Scottish Society for Northern Studies*, 35 (2000), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> J. Jesch, ‘Geography and Travel’, in R. McTurk (ed.), *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Malden, Mass. and Oxford, 2007), p. 120.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> P. Schach, ‘Some Observations on the Helgafell Episode in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Gísla saga*,’ in J. M. Weinstock (ed.), *Saga og språk: Studies in Language and Literature presented to Lee M. Hollander* (Texas, 1972), p. 114.

<sup>5</sup> I. Wyatt, ‘Landscape and Authorial Control in the Battle of Vigráfjörðr in *Eyrbyggja Saga*,’ *Leeds Studies in English*, 35 (2004), p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> I. Wyatt, ‘Narrative Functions of Landscape in the Old Icelandic Family Sagas,’ in J. Hines, A. Lane and M. Redknap (eds.), *From Land, Sea and Home: Proceedings of a Conference on Viking-period Settlement, at Cardiff, July 2001* (Leeds, 2004), p. 271.

texts,<sup>7</sup> and Paul Schach has suggested that the saga author's precise knowledge of the location of his saga may have led to a greater belief in the creditability of his work than is strictly applicable.<sup>8</sup> I disagree with Schach's stance that the saga's exactness can be traced to one individual author. Instead, I would suggest that the saga is precise in its topography because it arose out of an oral tradition created by people who knew – and, indeed, lived in – the area well.

There are some minor variations in the saga relating to travel or location. For example, in relation to some ball-games, 447 has: 'það var siddur Breydvykinga á haustum að þeir hofðu knattleika um veturnatta týma undir Oxlenne suður frá Knerre. þar heita síðan Leikskálaveller.'<sup>9</sup> While W states: 'Þat uar uandi Breiðvíkinga huert haust um uetrunáttu skeið at þeir hofðu knattleika þar sem Leik skalauellir heita.'<sup>10</sup> Here, 447 has more detail about the location of the games, but this variation is not significant enough to have any impact on the narrative. I have therefore chosen four episodes which discuss major travel abroad to analyse: Þóroddr's travels, Guðleifr's travels, Eiríkr hinn rauði's expedition to Greenland, and the mention of Vínland.<sup>11</sup>

## **Þóroddr (chapter 29)**

The first major travel episode concerns a man named Þóroddr, who marries Snorri goði's sister, Þuríðr.

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<sup>7</sup> Wyatt, 'Narrative Functions,' p. 274.

<sup>8</sup> Schach, 'The Helgafell Episode,' p. 114.

<sup>9</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 192-3. 'It was the custom of the Breiðvík people to hold ball-games during the winter nights below the Óxl mountain, south of Knerre. The place is still called Leikskálaveller.'

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 'It was the habit of the Breiðvík people in the autumn during the winter-nights that they held ball-games in the place called Leikskálaveller.'

<sup>11</sup> Snorri goði also travels abroad as a young man near the beginning of the saga. Unfortunately, the descriptions of his travels fall into the part of the saga where we have only one extant manuscript (447), hence there are no variations to discuss during this section.

Throughout this section, we can see W and G excising material. The first example is when the saga talks about his journey to Ireland. M points out that Þóroddr has to travel west to Ireland, while W and G simply put ‘Þoroddr hafði farit af Noregi til Dyflynnar,’<sup>12</sup> assuming that the audience knows that one has to travel west to get to ‘Dyflin’ (which we now know as Dublin).<sup>13</sup> When Þóroddr returns, W and G do not bother to specify where Snorri (who he is staying with) is, again assuming that knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

The interesting point in the journey is when Þóroddr comes across some of the Earl of the Orkneys’s men, who have been shipwrecked on an uninhabited island north of Ireland. The Earl’s men ask for Þóroddr’s help, but their reasons are written about differently. W and G have: ‘en þeir skorðu a fast þuiat þar la uið fe þeira ok frelsi at þeir uæri æigi upp leiddir a Irlandi eðr i Sudr eyium. þar er þeir hofðu heriat.’<sup>15</sup> M says ‘en þeir skorodu aa han fast þuiat þeim þotti bani sinn uid liggia.’<sup>16</sup> 447 has ‘enn þeir skorodu a hann fast, þui þeim þokte vid liggia fie og frelse ad þeir være ey vppleidder a Yrlande edur Sudureyumm, þar þeir hofdu adur herjad.’<sup>17</sup> These variations may represent differing attitudes on the part of the author. W,

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<sup>13</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 144-5. M has ‘Þoroddr hafði sigllt af Noregi kaup ferd uestr til Irlandz til Dyflinnar’ (‘Þóroddr sailed west on a journey from Norway to Ireland to Dublin’), W & G, with inconsequential orthographical differences, have ‘Þoroddr hafði farit af Noregi til Dyflynnar’ (‘Þóroddr sailed from Norway to Dublin’) and 447 has ‘Þoroddr hafdj siglt j kaupferd til Yrlandz til Dyflunnar.’ (‘Þóroddr sailed on a journey to Ireland to Dublin.’)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 146-7. W&G do not bother to specify that Snorri is at Helgafell, both saying ‘ok for til uistar með Snorra goða’ (‘and went to the home of Snorri goði’) while M gives more detail: ‘oc for til vistar med Snora goda um haustid til Helga f(ellz)’ (‘and went to the home of Snorri godi at Helgafell in August’). 447 rearranges the words but is essentially the same as M. During his journey, Þóroddr comes across some of Earl Sigurðr of the Orkney’s men, who have been shipwrecked. Þóroddr goes to help them, and here a sentence is omitted in M: ‘Þoroddr let skiota bati til þeira ok gekk þar a sealftr en er þeir funduz hetu jarls men a Þorodd til hialpar ser.’ (W) (‘Þoroddr had the boat launched and got in himself, and when he got to them the Earl’s men urged him to help them.’) This may have been an accidental omission; the sentence is framed either side by the phrase ‘til hjálpar sé’ which could easily lead to confusion.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 146-7. ‘But they urged him strongly, because they thought their possessions and freedom were at stake if they were brought ashore in Ireland or the Hebrides, where they had raided.’

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. ‘But they urged him strongly because they thought they might die ashore.’

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. ‘But they urged him strongly, because they thought their possessions and freedom were at stake if they were brought ashore in Ireland or the Hebrides, where they had raided before.’

G and 447 all state that the people are afraid of losing their freedom, but M does not, providing insight into the particular concerns of that author.

Throughout this section W and G seem to excise details that seem unnecessary, assuming more knowledge on the part of their audience. Nevertheless, W and G give the fullest explanation of what the Earl's men fear from lands abroad.

### **Guðleifr (chapter 64)**

In the penultimate chapter, we are introduced to an Icelander named Guðleifr, who sets out to go to Ireland, but runs into bad weather and comes ashore at an unknown island. There he meets a man heavily implied to have been Björn Breiðvíkingakappi, who asks after the inhabitants of Breiðafjörðr, particularly Þuríðr and her son Kjartan. Björn forbids anybody to come looking for him.

We have M, W and 447 here. M states that the travellers believed the inhabitants of the land were speaking Irish,<sup>18</sup> which neither of the other texts mention. The writer of 447 seems to have excised all that he considers unnecessary; for example, when the man asks where Guðleifr and his companions are from, the text reads: '“af Ýslande,” sogdu þeir “og vr Borgarfyrde,” þa spir hann huadan vr Borgarf(yrde) hann være.' While M and W spread this interaction over around five lines (in Scott's text).<sup>19</sup>

It is interesting that this should be such a vague place when generally speaking the author is so keen to precisely state where every place is. Einar Ól. Sveinsson suggests that this may be

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<sup>18</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 306. 'Enn hellzt þotti þeim sem þeir mellti irsku.' ('but they thought the people were speaking Irish.')

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 308-9. "From Iceland," they said, "and from Borgafjörðr," then he asked who in Borgafjörðr was there.'

a reference to either ‘Írland hið milka’ (Ireland the Great) or ‘Hvítramannaland’, a mythical land mentioned in both *Landnámabók* and *Eiríks saga*.<sup>20</sup> Hermann Pálsson suggests ‘this tale may contain echoes of Irish stories about a legendary land west beyond the sea.’ There are no details allowing us to identify it as any mythical land, though, (in all manuscripts, the only description is that it is big) hence neither of these explanations is entirely satisfying.

Pragya Vohra, looking at *Eiríks saga* and *Grænlandinga saga*, suggests that there is a ‘motif of sailors adrift at sea [which] is often repeated in medieval Icelandic sources as the usual circumstance under which new lands are discovered in the North Atlantic. First Iceland, then Greenland, and eventually Vínland, all seem to have been first sighted by sailors blown off course, and their voyages are later retraced by either themselves or other more enterprising souls in an effort to gain the wealth and prestige that accompanied such discoveries.’<sup>21</sup> The section on Guðleifr is interesting because it initially seems to follow this common motif, but then becomes the exception to the rule. There is no indication that anybody does try to find the land.

### **Eiríkr (chapter 24)**

The following two travel sections tell of events in two other *Íslendingasögur*, both of which describe journeys to North America. *Eiríks saga rauði* tells of the eponymous Eiríkr’s banishment from Norway and founding of the first settlement in Greenland, allegedly around 985 or 986, followed by an expedition to Vínland.<sup>22</sup> *Grænlandinga saga* mainly concentrates

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<sup>20</sup> Sveinsson, *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 177, n. 1.

<sup>21</sup> P. Vohra, ‘The Eiríkssynir in Vínland: Family Exploration or Family Myth?’ *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 4 (2008), p. 253.

<sup>22</sup> G. Sigurðsson, ‘Introduction,’ in K. Kunz and G. Sigurðsson (eds. and trans.) *The Vinland Sagas: the Icelandic Sagas about the First Documented Voyages across the North Atlantic* (London, 2008), p. xviii. Vínland is the name given in the sagas to one of the places they visit, believed to be on the North American coast.

on Eiríkr's son Leifr's expedition to Vínland.<sup>23</sup> *Grænlandinga saga* is preserved only in one manuscript, *Flateyjarbók* (1387), while *Eiríks saga* is preserved in *Hauksbók* (1302-1310) and *Skalholtsbók* (c. 1420).<sup>24</sup> Prior to Jón Jóhannesson's major 1956 work, the prevailing view was the *Eiríks saga* was the older. Jóhannesson argued that *Grænlandinga saga* was the older saga, upon which *Eiríks saga* was dependent. Ólafur Halldórsson's theory, put forth in 1978, was that the texts were unrelated, and the common elements were the result of oral tradition.<sup>25</sup>

The Vínland sagas have excited an enormous amount of critical work, particularly during and after the year 2000, that being the alleged 1000 year anniversary of Leifr Eiríksson's voyage.<sup>26</sup> Many people have attempted to find the actual locations mentioned in the sagas; a forlorn hope, as the descriptions in the sagas are not very detailed. The issue of historicity – whether the Norse really did 'discover' America – has been written about a great deal. This potential discovery was a participation in a 'broader historical context' which contemporary Icelanders could derive national pride from.<sup>27</sup> Richard Perkins quite reasonably points out that the Norse presence in America has little actual historical significance, at least for the later history of America.<sup>28</sup> It may also be said that the focus on location has meant that there has been less debate on the texts than they warrant. Journeys to Greenland and Vínland are mentioned in *Eyrbyggja saga*, but very little has ever been written about these mentions. The

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<sup>23</sup> Sigurðsson, 'Introduction,' p. x.

<sup>24</sup> H. Þorláksson, 'The Vínland Sagas in a Contemporary Light,' in A. Wawn and Þ. Sigurðardóttir (eds.), *Approaches to Vínland: a conference on the written and archaeological sources for the Norse settlements in the North-Atlantic region and exploration of America, the Nordic House, Reykjavík, 9-11 August 1999* (Reykjavík, 2001), p. 64.

<sup>25</sup> Þorláksson, 'The Vínland Sagas,' p. 63.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. S. Lewis-Simpson (ed.), *Vínland Revisited: the Norse World at the Turn of the First Millennium. Selected Papers from the Viking Millennium International Symposium, 15-24 September 2000, Newfoundland and Labrador*, (2003).

<sup>27</sup> J. C. Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland and the Discourse of Eurocentrism,' *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 100 (2001), p. 158.

<sup>28</sup> R. Perkins, 'Medieval Norse Visits to America: Millennial Stocktacking,' *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, XXVIII (2004), p. 30.

scholarly focus on the so-called Vinland sagas may have led to the references in *Eyrbyggja saga* being ignored.

The first reference to these events is a short chapter concerning the well-known saga figure Eiríkr rauði. Action is brought against Eiríkr for a killing, and he persuades various figures, including Snorri, to withdraw their support from his enemies. Eiríkr manages to evade his enemies and sets out on a voyage, upon which he discovers Greenland. We have W, G and 447 here, and there are variations.<sup>29</sup> 447 includes a list of Eiríkr's supporters, which is missing from W and G. W and G include one sentence missing from 447: 'Eiríkr bio um þingit skip sitt til hafs i Eiríks uági i Auxna ey.'<sup>30</sup> There is confusion over which people were involved: 447 has Styrr and Þorbjörn, G has just Styrr, and W has 'Þorbrandz synir.' The sons of Þorbrandr are mentioned in the list of supporters, but this is missing from W.<sup>31</sup> The possibility that these are all errors in some way must be acknowledged, but I would suggest that the number of variations here indicate that there were variations among the oral traditions associated with Eiríkr and his early travels.

The final sentences, which help orientate us both geographically and chronologically, are: 'Í þeiri ferð fann Eiríkr rauði Grænland ok var þar þrjá vetr ok fór síðan til Íslands ok var þar einn vetr, áðr hann fór at byggja Grænland; en þat var fjórtán vetrum fyrir kristni lögtekna á Íslandi.'<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> One of which is presumably a mistake; 447 names the character as 'Gieller hinn gamle' as opposed to 'Þorgestr hinn gamle' in the other MS, this has been corrected by ÞJ. A similar mistake, occurs a few lines later in 447; Eyjolftr Æsuson is given the first name of Eiríkr, this is presumably a mistake as he has just been given the name Eyjolftr above.

<sup>30</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 100-3. 'Eiríkr prepared his ship in the sea at Eiríksvági in Øxnaey.'

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Sveinsson, *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 60. 'On this voyage Eiríkr the red found Greenland and stayed there for three years and then went to Iceland and was there for one year, before he went to settle Greenland; and that was fourteen years before Christianity accepted by law in Iceland.'

All the manuscripts include these lines, but 447 then includes the line ‘þad var anno 997 enn Ysland var bigt, anno 874.’<sup>33</sup> These dates are particularly interesting because actual dates are so very rarely used in *Eyrbyggja saga*. 447 later explicitly states that Christianity was introduced in the year 1000.<sup>34</sup>

Paul Schach has suggested that this passage reads as if it were a summary of ‘an account such as may have existed in the original version of *Landnámabók*’ and notes its similarity to the account of the same events given in Sturla’s version of *Landnámabók*. Schach’s aim here is to argue that the author, whom he tellingly terms ‘the compiler’, mainly used written records in the creation of his saga. He does not believe that oral traditions played any great part in the history of the saga – ‘there is no tangible evidence.’<sup>35</sup> Schach was apparently unaware of the variations among the *Eyrbyggja* manuscripts, which suggests that there was variation in the stories being told, particularly with respect to who was involved.

### **Vínland (chapter 48)**

The next mention of Greenland is more than twenty chapters later. It is a very short chapter – no more than four or five sentences – and in it we are given a skeletal account of the lives of two characters:

Eptir sætt Eyrbyggja ok Álptfirðinga fóru Þorbrandssynir til Grœnalands, Snorri ok Þorleifr kimbí; - við hann er kenndr Kimbavágr á Grœnlandi í millum jökla; - ok bjó Þorleifr á Grœnlandi til elli. En Snorri fór til Vínlands ins góða með

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<sup>33</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 102. ‘That was the year 997, and Iceland was settled in the year 874.’

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>35</sup> Schach, ‘Helgafell Episode,’ p. 136.

Karlsefni; en þeir börðusk við Skrælinga þá á Vínlandi, þá fell þar Snorri Þorbrandsson, inn röskvasti maðr.<sup>36</sup>

W, E, M and 447 are extant here. W has a variation relating to the location of Kimba Bay, missing the detail that it is located between two glaciers. Interestingly, Snorri Þorbrandsson does not die in battle with the skrælings in *Eiríks saga*, he returns home to Greenland.<sup>37</sup> A man named Þorbrandr Snorrason does,<sup>38</sup> and it is plausible that confusion over the similar names led to varying accounts about the fate of this character.

The biggest variation here, however, is the location of the passage. In W, this section has been moved to a later point in the text, after the Fróðá marvels.<sup>39</sup> It is not clear why the chapter has been transplanted. The section seems to have been omitted from E; since we only have two short fragments of E, we cannot tell if it has been moved elsewhere as in W. The M manuscript is somewhat less clear. The section is clearly not contained in the same place as in the standard *Íslensk Fornrit* version, and Þórðr Jonsson's marginalia on the 447 manuscript also indicate that it was not contained at this point in M.<sup>40</sup> Since the M manuscript has several lacunae, we cannot be sure that the section was not transplanted elsewhere and then lost; however, on balance, Einar Ól. Sveinsson believes it is unlikely the section was ever written in M.<sup>41</sup> This is one of the longest sections that has been omitted in any of the manuscripts, hence it is important to consider why.

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<sup>36</sup> Sveinsson, *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 135. 'After the agreement between the Eyrbyggjar and the Álptfirðingar the sons of Þorbrandr, Snorri and Þorleifr kimbi went to Greenland. Kimbavágr Bay between the glaciers in Greenland is named after Þorleifr, who lived in Greenland until he was an old man. And Snorri went to Vínland the good with Karlsefni, and there he died in battle with the *skrælings*. He was the bravest of men.' (*Skræling* is the term used in the sagas to refer to the indigenous people of North America.)

<sup>37</sup> E. Ó. Sveinsson, *Eiríks saga rauða* (Reykjavík, 1935), p. 234.

<sup>38</sup> Sveinsson, *Eiríks saga rauða*, p. 229.

<sup>39</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 263.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>41</sup> Sveinsson, *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 135. 'Þessi kapítuli er í B-flokknum á eftir Fróðárundrum, en vafasamt, hvort hann hefur staðið í M.'

The fact that the journey to Greenland is apparently not mentioned at all in M, and possibly not in E, suggests that the writer had a somewhat different outlook. It could be suggested that he was simply less interested in these country-wide events and preferred a more local focus. However, the writer does discuss Iceland's conversion to Christianity, another event with wider implications. Rather than suggesting that the writer of M simply was not interested in writing about foreign travel, we could consider that he preferred to write about subjects which emphasised the role of his central character, Snorri goði. As the journey to Greenland had very little to do with Snorri, the writer did not feel the need to concern himself with it. However, Snorri is an important character in the conversion episode, and it is a chance for the writer to enhance his character, and potentially augment his role. Looked at in this way, it can be said that missing out the Greenland episode could have been a deliberate action on the part of an author who wanted to build up the reputation of his character, and was uninterested in anything which did not fulfil this purpose.

### **Concluding remarks**

We have seen examples here of writers deliberately changing details of the story, removing sections that they felt were not necessary. Moreover, some writers seem to assume more knowledge on the part of their audience. Interestingly, the Þóroddr section gave us an example of one manuscript appearing to have a different perspective on events. Pragya Vohra has applied memory theory to the Vínland sagas, arguing that 'in the context of the exploration of Vínland, the individual memories of the explorers operate within the social framework of a seafaring culture in which the discovery of new lands features as a recognizable part of the society's collective memory and the communicable details feed into the knowledge bank used by later explorers, as well as the social memory of the

explorations.<sup>42</sup> While we must acknowledge that the sagas Vohra has chosen for her study – *Eiríks saga rauði* and *Grœnlendinga saga* – are not typical sagas at all, we can, to some extent, see a similar phenomenon in *Eyrbyggja saga* too. It is clear that among the manuscripts, there is a shared understanding of the basic events they wanted to tell. And yet, going beyond Vohra's analysis, we can see that some writers have manipulated this shared understanding by choosing to remove or augment certain aspects to suit their own interests.

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<sup>42</sup> P. Vohra, 'The Eiríkssynir in Vinland: Family Exploration or Family Myth?' *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 4 (2008), p. 256.

## Chapter Four

### NARRATIVE VARIATION: SLAVERY

Slaves rarely play a major role in *Sagas of Icelanders* and *Eyrbyggja saga* is no exception. Nevertheless, upon reading the various manuscripts of *Eyrbyggja saga*, it became clear that there are variations in the way they are written about. In particular, the W manuscript displays noticeably less interest in their lives, and I will consider why this might be. This chapter will begin with a general discussion of slavery in medieval Iceland – in order to appreciate the historical context, before analysing each the variations in specific episodes.

Slavery in Scandinavia is not a topic which has ever excited a great deal of critical response, perhaps due to embarrassment that such an institution was ever part of everyday life. Ruth Mazo Karras' 1988 work *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia* remains, to my knowledge, the only English language monograph written on the topic.<sup>1</sup> A few others have considered the historical role of slaves,<sup>2</sup> or freed men,<sup>3</sup> and social anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup has considered the subject, as part of larger works on Icelandic society,<sup>4</sup> but very little work has been done on the imagery of slaves in the sagas.

Some basic historical context will be helpful here, to appreciate the kinds of stereotypes the saga authors may have been using. A slave in Old Norse is referred to as a *þræll* (pl. *þrælar*), which Karras defines as 'one bought, sold, manumitted, and compensated for with payment to

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<sup>1</sup>R. M. Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia* (New Haven, Conn., 1988).

<sup>2</sup>J. Myrdal, 'Milking and Grinding, Digging and Herding: Slaves and Farmwork 1000-1300,' in B. Poulsen and S. M. Sindbæk (eds.), *Settlement and Lordship in Viking and Early Medieval Scandinavia* (Turnhout, 2011), pp. 293-307.

<sup>3</sup>J. H. Aðalsteinsson, 'The Position of Freed Slaves in Medieval Iceland', *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, XXII (1986-89).

<sup>4</sup>K. Hastrup, *Culture and history in medieval Iceland: an anthropological analysis of structure and change* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 107-118; K. Hastrup, *Island of Anthropology: Studies in past and present Iceland* (Odense, 1990), pp. 61-6.

the master instead of the kin.<sup>5</sup> They are considered property. They stand outside the law and are not able to participate in any aspects of society beyond their work. In *Eyrbyggja saga* we see several examples of someone killing someone else's slaves; this was a serious crime against that person's property and often led to hostilities.<sup>6</sup>

In this society, the laws, *Grágás*, recognized two classes of people: slaves and free men.<sup>7</sup> The social structure was based on this binary division: the opposition between the *friálsborinnmaðr* (freeborn man) and the *þræll*,<sup>8</sup> although people could become slaves having been born free, and slaves could also be freed. The Icelandic language had a particular phrase for freeing slaves: they had to be *í lög leiða* (led into the law).<sup>9</sup> This phrase brings with it implications of being led into society from outside. A freed man was never quite free, however. The most salient legal point for *Eyrbyggja saga* is that if a freed man died without legitimate heirs, his manumitter, or the manumitter's heirs, succeeded to the property.<sup>10</sup> The character Úlfarr provides an example of this law in action in *Eyrbyggja saga*.

Stereotypes about slaves abound in Icelandic literature. They are often depicted as physically distinguishable from free men – frequently by being portrayed as small and dark – but it is unlikely that this was true in reality.<sup>11</sup> Ethnically, there were often said to be Irish.<sup>12</sup> Hastrup suggests that the portrayal of these characters as dark, or in some way physically different, was a 'symbolic device for distinguishing in this way what was already socially set apart.'<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Karras, *Slavery and Society*, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Hastrup, *Culture and History*, p. 115.

<sup>7</sup> W. I. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago, 1990), p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> Hastrup, *Island of Anthropology*, p. 61.

<sup>9</sup> S. P. Leonard, 'Social Structures and Identity in Early Iceland', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 6 (2010) p. 152.

<sup>10</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Karras, *Slavery and Society*, pp. 56-65.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56-65.

<sup>13</sup> Hastrup, *Culture and History*, p. 108.

The most notable non-physical stereotype of slaves was cowardice,<sup>14</sup> in *Eyrbyggja saga* slaves run away in fear while their masters fight.

It is important to note that the authors picked slaves, rather than free men, to be portrayed as negative characters. However, it would be rash to presume that Icelandic society really did hold slaves in such contempt at the time the sagas are set. They are portrayed in this way because the authors of the sagas believed that was what life at that time was like.<sup>15</sup> The slaves were others, distinguished physically, ethnically and mentally, unable to participate in a society which valued honour above all else.<sup>16</sup> Whether this was reflected in reality is somewhat beside the point – these were the stereotypes a saga author would have used when telling their story; we see this in practice in *Eyrbyggja saga*.

With this wider literary context in mind we can now move on to discussing the situation in *Eyrbyggja saga*. There are six episodes in the sagas where slaves have a major role to play, all of these slaves are male, and three are named: Svartr, Ófeigr, and Egill. The other three episodes involve groups of slave characters: Þórarinn svartí's slaves, Þórólfr bægifótr's slaves, and Snorri's slaves. There are also slaves who merely have background roles and make no impact on the narrative. The slave characters fulfil a variety of functions in this text. They are sometimes lookouts, warning their masters of incoming assailants. On several occasions, they are sent to assassinate various figures in ways which are laughably unlikely to succeed, implying that they are seen as little more than cannon fodder. They often appear as stupid – defeated in comical ways such as by tripping over their own shoe, or falling off something – and are frequently terrified out of their wits. Twice in the saga, slaves are so afraid that they jump or fall to their deaths. Generally speaking, the slaves do not partake in

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<sup>14</sup> Karras, *Slavery and Society*, p. 64.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

major action themselves, but their actions - particularly their deaths - can lead to major events. These people are not fully fleshed-out characters; we gain no real idea of what they were like as people but they are usually distinguished by physical characteristics, such as being particularly fast at running.

We see an example of a stereotypical slave episode in chapter 26: Svartr is a slave belonging to Vigfúss of Drápuhlíð, sent by him to assassinate Snorri. He fails in a humiliating way, wounding the wrong person and falling as he attempts to escape. Once he has fulfilled his narrative purpose, his fate is left unclear. Svartr, meaning black, is a common name for slaves and suggests the stereotypical appearance of a slave, as discussed above.<sup>17</sup> Svartr does have a nickname, the strong, and as a standalone name, it would not necessarily be pejorative, but taken with the embarrassing failed assassination attempt it seems to be a derogatory name given to a cowardly character who fails in his task. In terms of manuscript variations, W and G are slightly more sympathetic towards Svartr, including a longer conversation between he and Vigfúss, in which Svartr expresses his misgivings.<sup>18</sup> However, this is not really enough to come to any firm conclusions.

Variations do occur in other slave-centred episodes, and the rest of this chapter will discuss the variations in the four main episodes which feature slaves.<sup>19</sup> Nagli and the slaves (chapter 18), Þórólfr's slaves (chapter 31), Arnkell's slaves (chapter 37), and Egill (chapter 43). These episodes demonstrate that the manuscript authors had different perspectives on their saga. In one of the few critical comments on the slave characters in the saga, Lee M. Hollander

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<sup>17</sup>Karras, *Slavery and Society*, p. 66.

<sup>18</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 114-5. W: “‘Ek skal raðit til leggja” sagði Uigfuss. “sua at þetta megi mannhættu laust fram ganga.” “heyra uil ek þat” sagði Suartr. (‘I’ll tell you how to do it,’ said Vigfúss. ‘so that you might do it without danger to your life.’ ‘I would like to hear that,’ said Svartr.)

<sup>19</sup> The sixth episode, mentioned above – Snorri’s slaves – has no meaningful variations so will not be part of this discussion.

remarks of the author ‘that he belonged to the upper class of society seems indicated by his scornfully humorous treatment of the dull, awkward, easily panicked slaves.’<sup>20</sup> This is demonstrably inaccurate: we will see different attitudes towards slaves on the part of the manuscript authors.

### **Nagli and the slaves (chapter 18)**

This episode, early in the saga, involves a Scottish man named Nagli. After a violent altercation between his host Þórarinn svarti, and Þorbjörn and Oddr Katlason, Nagli runs away in terror where he meets two of Þórarinn's slaves. They see a group of men riding towards them, and take them to be Þorbjörn and his companions. Terrified, the trio continue running; Nagli is saved, but the slaves jump to their deaths off a cliff, which is now named *Þrælarskriða* ('Slaves' scree'). The slaves are not named, all we know about them is their task: looking after the sheep. Nagli is the subject of a verse (12) when Þórarinn tells the story, but the slaves are not mentioned.

M, G, and 447 all include this episode. Both M and 447 give the full story of the slaves' deaths; G, however, gives a shorter version, with about five lines omitted.<sup>21</sup> As a result G does not explain that Nagli and his companions believed the riders to be Þorbjörn's party; a mistake which led directly to their deaths. It also, therefore, fails to make explicit why they

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<sup>20</sup> L. M. Hollander, 'Introduction,' in P. Schach and L. M. Hollander (eds. and trans.), *Eyrbyggja saga* (Lincoln, Neb., 1977), p. xvi.

<sup>21</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 56-8. M: 'Toko þeir Þórarinn þa at hleypa þviat þeir villdv hialpa Nagla at hann hlypi æigi aa sio vt ædr firere biörg ofan. ok er þeir Nagli sa at mennirnir ridv æsiliga þa ætlodv þeir at Þorbiörn mvndi þar fara. Toko þeir þa allir raas af nyiu jnn til höfdans ok runnv til þess ær þeir komo þar er enn heitir Þræla skrida þar j höfdanvm. þar fiengv þeir Þórarinn tekid Nagla þviat hann var þa næsta sprvnginn af mædi. En þrælarnir hlvpv þar framm af höfdanvm...' ('Þórarinn and his companions began to ride fast because they wanted to help Nagli so that he did not jump into the sea or off the cliff. But when Nagli and the slaves saw men riding towards them they thought they were Þorbjörn. They started running up the cliff and ran to the place that is now called Þrælaskriða. There Þórarinn and his companions caught up with Nagli, because he was nearly dead from exhaustion. But the slaves jumped from the cliff.')

G: 'toku þeir Þórarinn þa ad hleypa þviad þeir uilldu hialpa honum Nagla. enn þrælarnir hlupu fram af höfdanum...' ('Þórarinn and his companions began to ride fast because they wanted to help Nagli. But the slaves jumped from the cliff.')

kept running, and omits the explanation of the place-name Þrælaskriða.<sup>22</sup> While the entire tale in each manuscript paints a bleak picture of the lives of the slaves and is embarrassing for all of them, M and 447 do at least explain *why* the slaves jumped off the cliff. Since G does not, it reflects even worse on them. With the description in M and 447, one even feels sympathy for them and can appreciate why the mistake happened. The audience is not given this opportunity in G. This may well reflect differing attitudes towards social class on the part of the writers. The writer of G seems less interested in these people, perhaps because they came from a lower social class, and Nagli himself was not from Iceland.

### **Þórólfr's slaves (chapter 31)**

In this episode Þórólfr bægifótr (the father of Arnkell) gets his slaves drunk and then convinces them to set fire to Úlfarr's house and burn him inside it, promising to free them as a reward. We have only W and 447 here. The slaves' motives are not expanded upon in W; while 447 includes the sentence 'þrælarnir sögdu þetta mundu vinna til frelses síer / ef hann efndi ord sín,'<sup>23</sup> this line is omitted from W.<sup>24</sup> The slaves actually succeed in setting fire to the house, but it is barely damaged and Úlfarr is unharmed. The manuscripts describe the aftermath of this encounter slightly differently. 447 has that they 'foru þangad sydan og toku þrælana / enn slöktu elldenn'<sup>25</sup> while W just has 'foru þeir til þegar ok slöktu elldinn'.<sup>26</sup> So W does not say that Arnkell and his men seized the slaves. Arnkell has the slaves hanged the next day, resulting in a legal argument between Snorri and Arnkell, which Snorri wins on a technicality. In its description of the court 447 explains Arnkell's legal argument: 'ad þrælarnir voru tekner með kueikum elldi til bæiarbrennu,'<sup>27</sup> while W does not include it.

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<sup>22</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 56-9.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 154-5. 'The slaves said that they would do it to get their freedom, if he kept his word.'

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 154-7. 'They went there and took the slaves and put out the fire.'

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 'They went there immediately and put out the fire.'

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 158-9. 'Because the slaves were found setting fire to the buildings.'

Throughout this section we can see that the scribe of W has cut bits of information pertaining to the slaves and their movements. In the next episode, we will also see W being more economical with words when discussing the lives of slaves, and I will consider why.

### **Arnkell's slaves (chapter 37)**

By this point, Arnkell is running the farms at Úlfarsfell and Ørlygsstaðr. One night, he wakes three of his slaves, one of whom is named Ófeigr, and takes them to Ørlygsstaðr. They are spotted by one of Snorri's men, who go over to Ørlygsstaðr, armed. Upon sighting them, Ófeigr correctly surmises that they are in trouble and suggests they go back to the farm; Arnkell sends them back to rouse his men.

W and 447 cover this section. Ófeigr, realising they are about to be attacked, says in 447 "og er sa eýrn, ad vid forum heim"<sup>28</sup> and in W "ok er sa til at uer hlaupim til bearins."<sup>29</sup> These two phrases essentially say the same thing, although W is perhaps a shade more dramatic.

Terrified, Ófeigr falls over a waterfall as he races to get back home; we discover that this is the location of his death and the waterfall is then called Ófeigsfors (Ófeigr's falls). W omits the detail that Ófeigr is faster than the other slave ('vard Ofeigur skiotare'), a detail which is probably meant to explain demise.<sup>30</sup> The second slave runs home, and when the third slave (who had already returned) asks for help with the hay, 447 has: 'var þar firer fiælæge hanz og bar inn heýed'<sup>31</sup> while W states: 'uar laugu nauþr hans þar fyrir.'<sup>32</sup> So W omits the detail of what they were actually doing, perhaps because it was obvious since we had earlier been told they were dealing with the hay.<sup>33</sup> The third slave asks for help: 447 'enn þad fanst þar a ad

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<sup>28</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 176-7. 'The only thing for us to do is to get back home.'

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 'Ófeigr was faster.'

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 'One of his fellow slaves was carrying in the hay'

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 'His work-fellow was there.'

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 176-7.

þrælunum var eckj leitt verked, og for hann til med honum.’<sup>34</sup> W does not have this line. Only after they have finished with the hay, does the slave tell Arnkell's men where he is, by which point he is of course already dead.<sup>35</sup>

In this episode, again, we can see that W has noticeably less to say about the slaves and their movements. Compared to 447, W seems less interested in these characters and has removed some of the details which are not essential to the narrative. We may theorise that W, as a person of a higher class, had no interest in hearing about or telling about these people beneath him.

### **Egill (chapter 43)**

This encounter takes place during ball-games held by the Breiðavík people; episodes involving sports and competitive games are common in the sagas and can serve a variety of dramatic and literary functions. This episode features Egill hinn sterke (the strong), a slave of Þorbrandr of Álptafjörður, who is desperate for freedom. In relation to the ball-games, John D. Martin comments ‘Violent events on the ball field illustrate the ongoing nature of the feud and give context to some of its key incidents.’<sup>36</sup> I would agree with this, but would also note that the ball games – an occasion for the free men to display their strength and honour – provide a notable contrast between these men and the unfree and somewhat physically inept Egill.

Egill first serves as a warning, having observed a worrying omen which forewarns both the characters and the saga audience that a bad event is imminent. The Þorbrandssons, possibly

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<sup>34</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, ‘And the slave did not mind doing the work, and went to help him.’

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> J. D. Martin, ‘“Svá lýkr hér hverju hestaðingi” Sports and Games in Icelandic Saga Literature’ *Scandinavian Studies*, 75 (2003), p. 28.

on Snorri's advice, instruct Egill to go to the Breiðavík ball-games and kill either Björn, his brother Arnbjörn, or Þórðr. Egill follows the instruction but, like Ófeigr, is defeated in a humiliating way – in this case by his own shoes, tripping on a loose tassel. He is discovered, and killed the next day by Þórðr and Björn.

Again, we have only W and 447 here. 447 begins the chapter with: ‘Þorbrandur bonde j Alftafirde ate þann þræl er Eygell sterke // hiet / hann var manna mestur og sterkastur.’<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile W has: ‘Maðr er nefndr Egill. Hann uar þræll Þorbrandz i Alptafirði. Hann uar manna mestr ok sterkaztr.’<sup>38</sup> The wording of these introductions is almost exactly the same, but W seems to give greater emphasis to Egill as a person. In 447, we learn of him only in reference to the person he is attached to; in W he is introduced as his own person. It is a subtle difference, but W seems to attach more significance to Egill than 447. This is borne out later, when W gives a fuller description of Egill’s movements; 447 merely states he ‘fiell jnnar a golfed’<sup>39</sup> while W has ‘rak hann niðr a golfit. uarð þat suo mikil dykr sem nautzbuk flegnum uæri niðr kastað.’<sup>40</sup> This is a considerably more dramatic telling of the story than 447’s rather prosaic phrasing. Clearly at some point within the textual tradition, somebody wanted to tell a more elaborate tale here.

The manuscripts continue to treat the narrative differently throughout the episode. Egill is discovered, Björn asks who he is, and 447 says: “Eygell er hier Biorn fielage” sagde hann /

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<sup>37</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 192-3. ‘Þorbrandr the farmer of Álptafjörðr had a slave who was called Egill the Strong. He was a very large and powerful man.’

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. ‘There was a man named Egill. He was a slave of Þorbrandr of Álptafjörðr. He was a very large and powerful man.’

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 194-5. ‘He fell onto the floor.’

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. ‘He tripped and crashed onto the floor with a great thump that sounded like the carcass of a skinned bull being thrown down.’ (translation for this very unusual sentence from H. Pálsson and P. Edwards, *Eyrbyggja saga* (London, 1989), p. 113.)

Þordur tok sverð og villde hoggva hann'<sup>41</sup>, while W states ““Egill er her uinr” sagði hann. “Egill huer” sagði Biorn “Egill or Alptafirði” sagði hann. En er Þorðr heyrði getit Alpta fiarðar hliop hann upp ok bra sverðinu ok uilldi hoggva hann.’<sup>42</sup> Again, W has a fuller and more dramatic scene. The particularly interesting aspect of this variation is that 447 Egill does not say that he is from Álptafjörðr, nor does it say that it is this detail which incites Þórðr. In W the violence is clearly regional, but 447 downplays this. It is not clear why, but we can suggest that perhaps in this case, W is keen to give more information because he is more committed to one of the regional sides.

This episode stands in contrast to earlier parts of the saga, where W omitted quite substantial information about the slave characters. Although it is of course not possible to know for certain why this happened, I would suggest that it is because, although Egill does fail in a humiliating way, he is not a typical slave character. He does not fit the slave stereotype, he is described as very large and strong (‘hann uar manna mestr ok sterkaztr’, W, the same is in 447<sup>43</sup>). He is not shown expressing fear about his mission. The author of W shows more interest in Egill and does not see him as a clichéd slave figure.

### **Concluding remarks**

Throughout the saga, we can see that one manuscript in particular, W, frequently omits information about slave characters. It is possible that the author was simply cutting things he did not consider important, but if this is the case it is important to note that the author

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<sup>41</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 196-7. 'Egill said, "Egill is here, Björn," he said. Þórðr took his sword and wanted to strike him.'

<sup>42</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 194-7. "It is Egill, friend," he said. "Egill who?" said Björn. "Egill of Álptafjörðr" he said. And when Þórðr heard he was from Álptafjörðr he jumped up and took his sword and wanted to strike him.'

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 194-5. 'He was a very large and powerful man.'

specifically chose not to include information about slave characters. In other words, in terms of story-telling, he felt he did not need these details for his characters to fulfil their functions.

It seems clear that the author of W was fundamentally less interested in these lower-class characters (excepting Egill, who did not fit the stereotype), which led to him deciding not to mention, or expand upon, parts of the stories concerning them. As to why, we can only hypothesise, but it seems clear that he did not feel they needed a major role in his narrative. W may have been considering a slightly different audience in his saga – perhaps a more upper-class audience who would not expect or want slaves to play an important role. He certainly appears to have conformed generally to basic stereotypes, and only in one of these cases is the slave character actually fleshed-out, whereas in the other manuscripts the slaves are somewhat fuller characters.

In her discussion of depictions of slavery in the sagas, Karras argues ‘that slaves rarely play heroic roles in the sagas and often have no name given, for example, does not necessarily mean that they were considered nonpersons at the time they lived; thirteenth-century Icelanders wanted to hear tales focused on their ancestors, not on slaves.’<sup>44</sup> I would suggest that this is what we are seeing here: the writer of W perhaps had a heightened awareness that his audience did not want to hear about unfree people; the writer of 447 was more sympathetic.

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<sup>44</sup> Karras, *Slavery and Society*, p. 181.

## Chapter Five

### VARIATION IN VERSES

This chapter will consider the skaldic poetry within *Eyrbyggja saga*. I have chosen to treat the verses separately from the prose because, as the following discussion will demonstrate, this kind of writing may have been transmitted over time in different ways.

It is worth going into some detail explaining what skaldic poetry is and what critics have written about it, in order to better understand how it is used in the saga. A basic definition is that skaldic poetry is the work of skalds, or composers of verses, from the late ninth to the late fourteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> It is commonly defined in opposition to eddic poetry, which is anonymous and generally concerned with myths. In contrast, authors of skaldic poetry are named, and a specific context is given. The language of this type of poetry is generally archaic, elaborate and far removed from the more prosaic diction that typifies the saga style.<sup>2</sup> Skaldic verses are usually eight lines long and frequently composed in the *dróttkvætt* metre.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps one of the most helpful comments is that of Roberta Frank: ‘The Norse skalds were essentially recorders of events, advertisers, men whose profession it was to fix or stabilise memory in a brief statement that would outlast time.’<sup>4</sup> The most common subject is probably praise of a king, chieftain or other significant figure;<sup>5</sup> we see examples of such praise poetry in *Eyrbyggja saga*.

What, then, is the relationship between the verse and the prose? One extreme view, as put forth by Baetke, is that the verses are to be seen ‘not as nuclei of tradition but as fragments

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<sup>1</sup> M. Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics*, (Cambridge, 2005) p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> D. Whaley, ‘Skaldic Poetry,’ in R. McTurk (ed.), *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Malden, Mass., and Oxford, 2007), pp. 480-1.

<sup>3</sup> R. Poole, ‘Metre and Metrics,’ in R. McTurk (ed.), *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Malden, Mass., and Oxford, 2007), p. 269.

<sup>4</sup> R. Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry: the Dróttkvætt Stanza* (Cornell, 1978), p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry* (Oxford, 1976), p. xvii.

without context or connection,' essentially meaning that the plots of sagas were invented around the verse material.<sup>6</sup> The flaws in this point of view are quite clear: It is extremely unlikely that the verses could have survived intact for more than two centuries with no tradition or context attached to them, as Theodore Andersson points out.<sup>7</sup>

Peter Hallberg suggests four different ways of looking at this problem. First, we could assume that both the verses and the saga are fully historical accounts of a real person, preserved in an oral tradition until it came to be written down. A second possibility is that the verses are authentic, but the saga was freely created around them. A third view is that both the stanzas and the narrative were creations of the author. Hallberg's final possibility is that the prose is authentic but the stanzas are later additions.<sup>8</sup> This appears to be an unnecessarily rigid way of looking at the problem; Hallberg is assuming that *all* the verses fit neatly into one category, which seems to be a rather dubious assumption. There is no reason why several of these categories may not have been at work at the same time in a saga, as we will see.

In addition, Guðrún Nordal examines the praise poems in *Laxdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*, pointing out that 'both saga authors acknowledge skaldic poetry as contributing to the portrayal of the[se three] chieftains, who are the forefathers of thirteen-century aristocrats; they deserved skaldic eulogizing in the same way as the rulers of Scandinavia.'<sup>9</sup> This kind of poetry was 'a powerful tool that functioned as an instrument of both praise and punishment.'<sup>10</sup> Skaldic verses were a potentially powerful device for the saga writer. They were 'able to confer or destroy honour and hence a potent agent in the dynamic of political

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in T. Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins: a Historical Survey* (Connecticut, 1964), p. 113.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>8</sup> P. Hallberg, (trans. P. Schach and S. Lindgrenson), *Old Icelandic Poetry – Eddic Lay and Skaldic Verse* (Lincoln, Neb., 1962), p. 142-3. Hallberg uses *Kormáks saga* to illustrate his point here, but his ideas apply equally to any saga.

<sup>9</sup> G. Nordal, *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Toronto, 2001), pp. 130-1.

<sup>10</sup> K. E. Gade, 'Poetry and its changing importance in medieval Icelandic culture,' in M. Clunies Ross (ed.) *Old Icelandic Literature and Society* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 64.

and social relations.’<sup>11</sup> It follows, therefore, that removing verses could also be used as a way for the author to subtly praise or malign a character without explicitly saying so. We will see examples of this in *Eyrbyggja saga* later.

Having looked at the general issues surrounding skaldic poetry, we can now turn to the specifics of *Eyrbyggja saga*. Most of the *Eyrbyggja* verses are *lausavísur*: disconnected single stanzas, which can cover a wide range of subjects. With the exception of one short rhyme, all verses in *Eyrbyggja saga* are eight lines long. For the sake of clarity, I shall refer to each verse with the number given in the *Íslensk fornrit* edition. Verses are preserved in every manuscript fragment except E, which does not cover any sections of the text in which poetry is composed, and will therefore be exempt from this discussion.

Despite critics such as Gabriel Turville-Petre<sup>12</sup> suggesting that the verses would have been easy to memorize, the *Eyrbyggja saga* manuscripts show plenty of variation. The *Íslensk Fornrit* edition contains 37 stanzas, all of which comprise the conventional eight lines except for the short four-line verse 32 (there is no evidence to suggest that this was ever a full-length verse). However, not all of these verses are contained in all the manuscripts. It is clear that 447 has the most missing verses. This manuscript covers the entire text but only contains sixteen of the 37 verses. This chapter will attempt to explore the reason for this.

The following discussion is divided into four categories: first, the seventeen verses spoken by Þórarinn svarti, then seven verses spoken by Björn Breiðvíkingakappi, then the five verses which form the poem *Hrafnsmál* by Þormóðr Trefilsson, and finally a brief discussion of the last two verses. The following verses do not contribute to the analysis as there is no variation between different manuscript versions: 1, 2, 21-3, and 32. These verses will therefore not form part of the discussion. The following table shows which verses are preserved in which

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<sup>11</sup> Whaley, ‘Skaldic Poetry,’ p. 480.

<sup>12</sup> Turville-Petre, *Scaldic Poetry*, p. lxxiv.

manuscripts. Blue indicates that a verse is present in the manuscript, red indicates that the verse is missing. Blank indicates that that section of the manuscript is missing.

**Table One: Verses in *Eyrbyggja saga***

Verse number	Character's name, name of composition (if given) <sup>13</sup>	First line (according to <i>Íslenzk Fornrit</i> edition)	M	W	G	447
1	Oddr breiðfirðingr <i>Illugadrápa, 1</i>	Vestr vas þröng				Blue
2	Oddr breiðfirðingr <i>Illugadrápa, 2</i>	Drótt gekk synt			Blue	Blue
3	Þórarinn svarti <i>Máhlíðingavísur</i>	Varðak mik	Blue		Blue	Blue
4	Þórarinn svarti <i>Máhlíðingavísur</i>	Knátti hjörr und hetti	Blue		Blue	Blue
5	Þórarinn svarti <i>Máhlíðingavísur</i>	Myndit vitr í vetri	Blue		Blue	Red
6	Þórarinn svarti <i>Máhlíðingavísur</i>	Skalk þrymviðum þremja	Blue		Red	Blue
7	Þórarinn svarti <i>Máhlíðingavísur</i>	Sóttu heim, þeirs hættu	*		Blue	Red
8	Þórarinn svarti <i>Máhlíðingavísur</i>	Urðum vér at verja	*		Blue	Red
9	Þórarinn svarti <i>Máhlíðingavísur</i>	Knöttu hjalmi hættar	*		Red	Red
10	Þórarinn svarti <i>Máhlíðingavísur</i>	Reka þóttumk ek Rakna	*		Red	Blue
11	Þórarinn svarti <i>Máhlíðingavísur</i>	Kveðin man, Hropts, at heiptum	Blue		Blue	Blue
12	Þórarinn svarti <i>Máhlíðingavísur</i>	Nágöglum fekk Nagli	Blue		Blue	Red
13	Þórarinn svarti <i>Máhlíðingavísur</i>	Grátandi rann gætir	Blue		Blue	Red
14	Þórarinn svarti <i>Máhlíðingavísur</i>	Muna munum vér at vörum	Blue		Blue	Red
15	Þórarinn svarti <i>Máhlíðingavísur</i>	Vas til hreggs at hyggja	Blue		Blue	Red
16	Þórarinn svarti <i>Máhlíðingavísur</i>	Hétu hirðinjótar	Blue		Blue	Red
17	Þórarinn svarti <i>Máhlíðingavísur</i>	Skalat öldrukkin ekkjja			Blue	Red

<sup>13</sup> For the sake of clarity, I have used the names given to these verses in the online *Skaldic Database*, edited by Judy Quinn. [<http://abdn.ac.uk/skaldic/db.php?id=10&if=default&table=text&val=verses>, accessed 8th June 2015].

18	Þórarinn svartí <i>Máhlíðingavísur</i>	Láta hitt, at hljóta				
19	Þórarinn svartí <i>Máhlíðingavísur</i>	Esat sem gráps fyr glæpi				
20	Þormóðr Trefilsson <i>Hrafnsmál, 1</i>	Felldi folkssvaldi				
21	Halli berserkr	Hvert hafið, Gerðr, of görva.				
22	Leiknir beserkr	Sólgrund Siggjar linda				
23	Víga-Styrr	Syndisk mér sem myndi				
24	Björn breiðvíkingakappi	Guls mundum vit vilja				
25	Björn breiðvíkingakappi	Munat hyrlesti hraustum				
26	Þormóðr Trefilsson <i>Hrafnsmál, 2</i>	Fekk enn folkrakki				
27	Björn hitdælakappi / Björn breiðvíkingakappi	Sák, hvar rann í runni				
28	Björn breiðvíkingakappi	Þá mun þöll en mjóva				
29	Björn breiðvíkingakappi	Myndit Hlín of hyggja				
30	Björn breiðvíkingakappi	Sylda skark svana föld				
31	Björn breiðvíkingakappi	Spurðusk vör und vörðum				
32	Anonymous	Roðin es Geirvör (four lines only)				
33	Þormóðr Trefilsson <i>Hrafnsmál, 3</i>	Saddi svangreddir				**
34	Þormóðr Trefilsson <i>Hrafnsmál, 4</i>	Meir vá enn móðbarri				
35	Þormóðr Trefilsson <i>Hrafnsmál, 5</i>	Böð varð í Bitru				
36	Anonymous	Haus knyr hjarðar vísi				
37	Anonymous	Opt es auðar þopta				

\* Manuscript is damaged or partially illegible at this point.

\*\* Only the first four lines have been preserved.

### The *Máhlíðingavísur*

This part of the saga deals with Þórarinn *svarti*, who is alleged to have accidentally cut off his wife's hand in a fight, a shameful action for which he is mocked. There is a long section of

mainly verses with little prose interspersed. In the case of this section, thirteen of the seventeen verses are missing in 447. Three are missing from G. Clearly, this is simply too many missing verses to attribute to mere scribal error.

Verse 3 is preserved in M, G and 447, and is spoken by Þórarinn to his mother Geirríðr after he had accidentally cut off his wife's hand. There are only minor variations here and they do not impact on the narrative.<sup>14</sup> However, variations in the next verse *are* significant. Verse 4 is part of the same conversation, and Þórarinn tells Geirríðr that Þorbjörn has been killed. Again it is extant in M, G and 447, but there are significant differences between 447 and the other two texts. M and G begin 'knatti hiorr i hofi,' while 447 reads 'kantu hior vid hnotner.' While M and G begin the next line with 'hræflod', 447 uses 'hrod.' The third line is very different – 'rann vm soknar sæki' (M), and 'reik vard rokna sæker' (447). The fourth line begins with 'slijdrebitir' (M) in M and G, but 'rydz beitz' in 447. The penultimate line also has minor differences – 'þa var dæmesalr doma' in G, 'þa var dæmt dualar domum' in 447. It appears that the verse has changed a great deal in transmission through the centuries.

From verse 6 onwards, Þórarinn is at Vermundr's home in Bjarnarhöfn, for the evening meal. Verses 6 to 13 are essentially a conversation between Þórarinn and Vermundr: Vermundr asks a question, Þórarinn replies in verse, and the pattern repeats.<sup>15</sup> Of these verses, 7, 8 and 9 are not contained in 447. These verses can be seen as Þórarinn's attempt at self-aggrandisement. He is aware that this has been an immensely embarrassing episode for him and is trying to retain his honour. He rather avoids direct questions about the honour he may have lost through this: he is asked twice about this ("Hefir þú nökkut varit þik nú

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<sup>14</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 58-9. The fifth line in 447 begins with 'huatka' rather than 'bark' (M) or 'barkad' (G) – probably an example of similar-sounding words being confused – and in G, the penultimate line reads 'mæleg liod firer fliode' rather than 'mæli ek ohol firir hæli' (M) and 'mæle eg huol firer hæle' (447). There are also discrepancies in the final line: M and G read 'hialldrs gods af því sialldan' and 'hialldurs gods vm það sialldan' respectively, while 447 misses out 'gods'.

<sup>15</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 64-73.

frýjuorðinu þeira út þar?”<sup>16</sup> and “Hvárt vissu þeir nú, hvárt þú vart karlmaðr eða kona?”<sup>17</sup>), the former question, from his sister Guðný, making the situation even more humiliating, and while his response to the latter, a particularly damaging accusation, is included in 447, the first is not. These missing verses could potentially be a deliberate attempt to discredit the character by removing his ability to explain what happened. Silencing him could be a method used to subtly paint the character in a worse light.

Three of these verses are missing from G – 6, 9 and 10. In this text we go straight from Vermundr asking for news to verse 7. Immediately after 7, Guðný asks her humiliating question and Þórarinn responds with verse 8. The manuscript skips two verses and picks up again at the prose before verse 11, followed by verse 11 itself. Missing verse 10 means that we skip Vermundr’s most demeaning question: ‘hvárt vissu þeir nú, hvárt þú vart karlmaðr eða kona?’<sup>18</sup> but it also gives Þórarinn less time to explain himself. Missing verse 6 does make sense – it is somewhat superfluous. 9 and 10 also come across as superfluous when verses 7 and 8 are present. Verse 9 is yet another description of the fight. In verse 10, Þórarinn again responds to accusations of cowardice, telling his audience that he defended himself well against the slander. The opposite seems to have happened in 447: verse 8 is missing, but 10 is present, perhaps indicating that the scribe didn’t feel two verses in which Þórarinn defends himself were needed.<sup>19</sup>

Þórarinn spends the night at Bjarnarhöfn, and the following day he and Vermundr ride out to visit Þórarinn’s relative Arnkell. Verse 14 is spoken as they start out, 15 and 16 are spoken when they arrive there, in response to Arnkell. 17 and 18 are spoken during the following

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<sup>16</sup> Sveinsson, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, p. 42. ‘Have you cleared yourself of the taunting words of the people out there?’

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43. ‘Do they know now if you are a man or a woman?’

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> The M manuscript is very damaged from half way through verse 7 until verse 11, and there is little one can say about these verses other than the fact that they did exist in this MS.

winter; the former in response to Arnkell and the latter in response to one of Arnkell's servants.<sup>20</sup>

Verse 19 is spoken by Þórarinn, after Snorri takes action against him for the killing of his brother-in-law, Þorbjorn. The verse is preserved in W and G, but is missing from 447.<sup>21</sup> Since it has not been added by Þórður Jónsson, we can assume it was not in M. There are no differences, other than spelling, between W and G. The verse reflects well on Þórarinn, and, again, missing it seems to portray him in a less positive light.

In *Eyrbyggja saga*, these poems are not presented as a coherent entity – they appear to be formed individually in response to specific questions or remarks. However, the verses are also referenced in *Landnámabók* – 'The Book of Settlements' – a text describing the settlement of Iceland in the ninth and tenth centuries. Five medieval versions survive; the one referred to here is from the *Hauksbók* manuscript, written by lawspeaker Haukr Erlendsson in the early fourteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Here they are given the name *Máhlíðingavísur*, implying they are a 'collective entity'<sup>23</sup>: 'um þat orti Þórarinn *Máhlíðingavísur*, eptir því sem segir í Eyrbyggja sögu.'<sup>24</sup>

Russell Poole has looked at these verses with respect to understanding the relationship between the verse and the prose. He argues that all of the stanzas were composed by the same person, but later than the saga indicates:<sup>25</sup>

The *Máhlíðingavísur* are probably not by Þórarinn but by a later, unidentified poet. They were probably composed as an embellishment to a twelfth or late

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<sup>20</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 74-79.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92-5.

<sup>22</sup> H. Pálsson and P. Edwards (eds. and trans.), *The Book of Settlements: Landnámabók* (Manitoba, 1972), p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> R. Poole, 'The Origins of the *Máhlíðingavísur*,' *Scandinavian Studies*, 57 (1985), p. 250.

<sup>24</sup> J. Benediktsson, *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók*, Íslenszk fornrit vol. I (Reykjavík, 1986), p. 115. 'About that Þórarinn composed the 'Máhlíðinga-verses', as is said in *Eyrbyggja saga*.'

<sup>25</sup> Poole, '*Máhlíðingavísur*,' p. 270.

eleventh-century account of the deeds of Snorri goði (perhaps one resembling the extant *Eyrbyggja saga*). Whether or not they were composed extempore we cannot say. Originally the constituent stanzas formed a single continuous poem but in a subsequent treatment of the saga material a redactor detached them from one another and dispersed them through a long series of scenes, embellishing them with dialogue of his own invention.<sup>26</sup>

The problem with Poole's analysis is that, like so many other critics, he bases his observations almost entirely on the text contained within the *Íslensk fornrit* edition. He therefore fails to take into account the fact that some of these verses are not contained in all manuscripts. This does not lend weight to his conclusion that the verses must have originally formed a continuous poem and were detached by a redactor. I would argue that here we see examples of an author using verses he already knew – which were probably genuinely old, but not spoken by the character the saga gives – to change perceptions of the character by deliberately missing or adding verses.

### **Björn's verses**

What I have termed the 'Björn verses' are those spoken by Björn Breiðvíkingakappi, who composes several poems on the theme of his relationship with Þuríður, Snorri goði's sister; these are verses 24, 25, and 27-31.

Verse 24 is missing from 447. No mention is made of it at all; there is no 'Björn qvað visu'<sup>27</sup> here. The verse is in W, but M and G are defective here.<sup>28</sup> However, we can assume that M would have included this verse as Þórður Jónsson has inserted the verse in his marginalia on 447. This verse is particularly emotional, giving some insight into how deeply Björn feels for

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>27</sup> Björn spoke a verse.

<sup>28</sup>Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 148-9.

Þuríðr. Interestingly, the next verse (25), in which Björn describes his violent encounter with Þuríðr's husband, *is* included in 447.<sup>29</sup> This verse is considerably more heroic than 24 and shows the character in a much better light.

In verse 28, Björn essentially admits that Þuríðr's son Kjartan is biologically his. Without this verse, the matter is left uncertain, although there are heavy hints in the prose. In the next three verses Björn describes what happens during the winter when he goes to visit Þuríðr: her husband pays a witch to conjure up a storm and Björn is forced to stay in a cave for three days before it abates. Björn says that he is cold and laments 'víglundr nú um stund / helli byggir hugfullr / hingat fyr konu bing'.<sup>30</sup> In verse 31, he confirms that he believes the storm to be the work of a witch, rather than a natural event.<sup>31</sup> This rather ignominious situation is not set out in such explicit detail in text 447 where these verses are missing. In each case, the text does say 'þa qvad B(iorn) vysu' but continues on immediately in prose.<sup>32</sup>

The writer is evidently aware that Björn is supposed to have spoken these verses, but did not write them down. We can theorise that this is a deliberate attempt to improve Björn's reputation by minimising the embarrassing aspects of his journey. Without the verses, less attention is drawn to the shameful image of Björn cowering in a cave for three days. In the earlier verses, Björn's heroism also shines through. It appears that the medium of poetry may have been used to improve the character's reputation here.

On a slightly different note, verses 27 and 28 provide a particularly interesting case of transmission. These two verses are very similar to verses 12 and 29 of *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, in which the titular character Björn Hítðælakappi also recognises his illegitimate son. This could simply be a case of name confusion, since both characters who

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 150-1.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 111. 'And now he lies / cowering here in the cold / cave, instead of her bed.' Translation from P. Schach and L. M. Hollander (eds. and trans.) *Eyrbyggja saga* (Lincoln, Neb., 1977), p. 84.

<sup>31</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 111.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 186-188.

speak this verse are called Björn; one can imagine that they could get mixed up over time. However, Edith Marold has looked at the relationship between these four verses and has shown that the relationship is not merely borrowing between one saga and another. The verses are more than variants, she argues, they are adaptations. Marold suggests that the second *Eyrbyggja saga* stanza was revised by the writer of *Bjarnar saga*, 'who wanted to fit it into a pre-ordained context,' and that the same can be said for the first stanza, although there is less evidence to support it.<sup>33</sup> She proposes that there was probably 'a wide-spread practice of adapting existing stanzas to suit the purposes of the saga author.' Marold is very clear that the two verses were originally connected with Björn Breiðvíkingakappi, and were later adapted to fit with the context of *Bjarnar saga*. If we take Marold's view, we see a saga author using verses he already knew deliberately put into a different context to suit his narrative.

### ***Hrafnsmál***

*Hrafnsmál* is a series of five verses preserved in various manuscripts of *Eyrbyggja saga*, said to be composed by Þormóður Trefilsson. Each of them recounts and praises a specific event in Snorri goði's life.

The first of Þormóður's verses, number 20, is present in W and G, but missing from 447.<sup>34</sup> We can assume it was in M, which is defective at this point, since it has been added as marginalia to 447 by Þórður Jónsson. W introduces the verse with 'um uig Uigf(uss) orti Þormóðr Trefils s(on) uisu þessa.'<sup>35</sup> G uses similar wording but only has the poet's first name. 447 does not mention the verse or its composer at all.<sup>36</sup> We can theorise that the verse may have been

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<sup>33</sup> E. Marold, 'The Relationship Between Verses and Prose in *Bjarnar saga hitdælakappa*,' in R. Poole (ed.), *Skaldsagas : text, vocation, and desire in the Icelandic sagas of poets* (Berlin, 2001), p. 115.

<sup>34</sup> Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 'Þormóður Trefilsson composed this verse about the killing of Vigfus.'

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 118-9.

deliberately left out in order to call less attention to this event, and therefore depreciate Snorri's character.

Þormóðr's third verse, 33, is preserved in W, the only manuscript available at this point. The first four lines are present in 447, but, oddly, the second half is missing.

447	W	<i>Translation</i>
sadde suan gieddu /	Suaddi suangræddir.	The feaster of ravens
sara dyr baru /	saara dynbáru.	fed to the eagles flesh,
ørn a ulfz virde	aurn a ulfuerdi.	fit that food
j Alffta firde	i alpta firði.	for wolves at Alfta Fjord!
	þar let þa S(norri).	Five of those fighters
	þegna at hiorregni.	fell to Snorri,
	fíorfui .u. numna.	in the flashing of the war-storm
	suo skal fiandr hefna. <sup>37</sup>	were his foes defeated. <sup>38</sup>

The second half of the verse is explicitly praising Snorri, mentioning the specific number of people he killed in the battle. We can speculate that the writer deliberately left it as a short verse (the verse just before this, 32, is only four lines). Again, this appears to divert the focus from Snorri.

Þormóðr's fourth verse, 34, is present in W but missing from 447.<sup>39</sup> Since no marginalia have been added to 447, we can assume it was also missing from M. 447 mentions that Þormóðr told the tale in *Hrafnsmál* but the actual verse is not recounted. The same situation is seen in

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., pp. 202-3.

<sup>38</sup>Translation from H. Pálsson and P. Edwards, *Eyrbyggja saga* (London, 1989), p. 119.

<sup>39</sup>Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 266-7.

the final verse, 35, except no mention is made of Þormóðr in 447.<sup>40</sup> Since these are both verses praising Snorri's accomplishments in vanquishing his enemies, not having them there seems to lessen his significance as a historical character.

We can also compare these five verses to what is written about Snorri in the rest of the saga; this provides us with an interesting insight into differing attitudes towards the character. The verses eulogise him, presenting him as a warrior heroically overcoming his enemies. The rest of the saga does not concur. When reading the first of the verses, that pertaining to the killing of Vigfúss, one could be forgiven for assuming that Snorri killed him single-handedly. Yet the prose does not explicitly state who killed Vigfúss: 'komu þeir at þeim ouorum ok drapu Uigf(us) bonda' (W)<sup>41</sup> the other texts also use the plural form of the verb – 'drapu' in 447 and 'uogu' in G.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the verse on the killing of Arnkell implies that it is Snorri who kills Arnkell, while the prose text again uses the plural and does not explicitly state who dealt the final blow.<sup>43</sup> Where these verses are present, they unambiguously praise Snorri for his achievements. However, when they are missing – especially when the author states that the verse was composed, but does not actually copy it out – it appears that the author is trying to diminish his accomplishments. The author is using the medium of poetry to change the way the saga audience views the character.

### **Other verses**

For verses 36 and 37, in which Þóroddr's foster-mother expresses concerns about the bull Glæsir, only W and 447 are extant at this point, and 36 is missing from 447.<sup>44</sup> It may well be that the author of 447 removed it because he considered it to be superfluous. Here we have an

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., pp. 296-7.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 'They took them by surprise and killed Vigfus.'

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., pp. 116-7.

<sup>43</sup> The prose simply states 'Arnkell fiell' (Arnkell fell) in both manuscripts. Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 178-9.

<sup>44</sup>Scott, *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 300-1.

example of an author perhaps deliberately removing material that doesn't contribute to the immediate action.

### **Concluding remarks**

While we can never be sure of why a scribe did not write down certain verses, we can speculate that this was a deliberate action with specific intended consequences. We have seen examples of verses missing because they seem superfluous, but in other cases missing verses or parts of verses can shed a light on how the author of the manuscript viewed the character: when a particularly heroic verse is missing, the character is shown in a less positive light, whereas a verse recounting a humiliating escapade missing can lessen the impact of an embarrassing situation for the character. The character of Björn seems to benefit from the way he is treated in verse (although the existence of one of his verses in another saga complicates the matter), while Snorri's historical importance seems to be diminished by missing out the poems praising him. The absence of praise poems can also have a subtle but serious implication on how that character is viewed.

## CONCLUSIONS

I have demonstrated how manuscripts emphasise certain themes or aspects of the narrative, to their own specific effects. The people who wrote these manuscripts knew the basic narrative from their oral tradition, but wanted to add their own perspective on characters, or insights into events. Sometimes this seems to have happened because they wanted to increase the value of a character's connections to the scribe's contemporaries; at other times they may have wished for a certain theme to be expressed more prominently.

In 447, a large number of verses are omitted, and this has an impact on how the characters are viewed in that text, particularly when the writer indicated he knows there is a verse about an event but has not included it. When verses describing Björn's humiliating circumstances are missed, this elevates his standing as a character, but omitting verses about Snorri's accomplishments has the opposite effect. 447 is also the text which contains a very admiring 'eulogy' after the death of Arnkell. This indicates that the writer of 447 was subtly attempting to denigrate the character of Snorri in his text. This could have been a reaction against the Sturlungar family, who claimed a connection to Snorri, although we must acknowledge that 447 was written significantly after the events of the thirteenth century.

W, meanwhile, appears to have been written for a different audience, which we can see in the way the writer treats slave characters. W also contains a great deal of variation with respect to Snorri's descendants, which is probably attributable to thirteenth century Icelanders deliberately changing the lines of descent to increase their connection to Snorri.

Guðrún Nordal has touched on the portrayal of Snorri within the saga as a whole, suggesting that the writer "builds a "royal" portrayal of the main character ... by authenticating the account with formal skaldic verse and punctuating the main events in his life with verse citations."<sup>1</sup> Nordal does not consider manuscript variation, but this quasi-royal portrayal is evident in some of the manuscripts, particularly in W where the *Hrafnsmál* verses are included. We can see this as an attempt by Snorri's descendants, the Sturlungar, to elevate their alleged ancestor's importance in order to authenticate their own power. 447, however, appears to have the opposite aim: to downplay his significance and elevate his enemies, Arnkell and Björn.

This leads on to questions about authorship. Clearly, at some point somebody must have written down the story of *Eyrbyggja saga* for the first time, but the circumstances in which that happened, and the way the narrative looked at that point, are not clear. It would not be possible to ever recover this 'original' text, but we can make some general comments on how the saga came to be.

Snorri died in the eleventh century. After his death, traditions about him began to circulate, particularly in the areas he was well known. Poems about him such as the *Hrafnsmál* verses must have been known and circulated, possibly with traditions relating to the poem's context attached to them. Some traditions related to his descendants. People began to claim they were descended from him, partly because a connection to a famous saga-age person legitimised authority, and partly because he was the kind of person they idealized in their evolving society. Over time, people started to write down these traditions in the form of sagas, based on oral traditions which had evolved about Snorri, but the process of developing the narrative

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<sup>1</sup> G. Nordal, 'Skaldic citations and settlement stories as parameters for saga dating,' in E. Mundal (ed.), *Dating the Sagas: Reviews and Revisions*, (Copenhagen, 2013), p. 207.

did not stop there. People were keen to put their own ‘spin’ on it; some were less interested in parts of the narrative, others had a particular perspective they wished to impart, providing subtly different interpretations of characters and themes.

Forrest Scott, although he is in general not particularly concerned with the wider ramifications of his edition, suggests that the manuscripts he provides transcriptions of may represent an earlier version of *Eyrbyggja saga*. Whilst acknowledging the immense value of Scott's work, it is unhelpful to consider a hypothetical ‘original’ saga; that is fundamentally missing the point. As Emily Lethbridge comments in her study of narrative variation in *Gísla saga*, ‘analysis of multiple articulations of the same work gives us insights into how different individuals understood the same narrative at different times, and actively responded to that narrative in order to make it more meaningful in its contemporary context for themselves and also for the saga’s audience, or to make it conform to their sense of the overall narrative, and their audiences’ expectations.’<sup>2</sup> This approach, applied to *Eyrbyggja saga*, has shown the different interests and perspectives of the saga writers.

While Lethbridge's work has been invaluable in illuminating the process of saga transmission over time, she does not fully succeed in explaining why these variations have happened in terms of the historical context of saga writing. I would suggest that we can see some historical reasons for variations in *Eyrbyggja saga*, primarily relating to the Sturlungar family attempting to promote their ancestor Snorri. In 447 meanwhile, we are seeing a reaction

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<sup>2</sup> E. D. Lethbridge, *Narrative Variation in the Versions of Gísla saga Súrssonar*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge (2007), p. 226. Lethbridge has also produced a similar, though shorter, study of the manuscripts of *Njáls saga*, similarly arguing ‘each manuscript witness presents subtly different interpretations or understandings of individual characters and of the action that the saga narrates.’ E. Lethbridge, “‘Hvorki glansar gull á mér /né glæstir stafir í línunum’” Some observations on *Íslendingasögur* manuscripts and the case of *Njáls saga*, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 129 (2014), p. 56.

against the Sturlungar family, possibly by people who disliked their rise to power, subtly attempting to discredit their revered ancestor.

This gives us insight into the way sagas were written. Editions such as the *Íslensk fornrit* versions of sagas – heavily influenced by the so-called 'Icelandic school' of saga studies<sup>3</sup> – give the impression that sagas are simply one unchanging narrative. But on the contrary, this study has shown the process of saga writing as a process of an evolving narrative, constantly fine-tuned and modified by its tellers to suit their own interests and audiences.

It is beyond the limits of this dissertation to discuss the entire *Eyrbyggja saga* tradition, but an examination of all the surviving manuscripts – vellum and paper – would undoubtedly yield interesting results, potentially with greater variation. From the small sample of four or five manuscripts, it is not possible to decide whether there were regional variations in the stories told about Snorri, but it is plausible that he was remembered in different ways in certain areas. A full examination of all the manuscripts could yield results in this regard.

*Eyrbyggja saga* is unusual, in that as many critics have pointed out it does not have a clear and obvious focus. However, even if this lack of focus is unique to *Eyrbyggja saga*, similar studies of other *Íslendingasögur* will doubtless be rewarding.

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<sup>3</sup> Á. Jakobsson, 'The Life and Death of the Medieval Icelandic Short Story,' *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 112 (2013), p. 265.

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