

Jónas Kristjánsson:

SIGURDAR SAGA

AND THE PROSE PASSAGES IN CODEX REGIUS

First of all I would like to apologize for the limited amount of quotation in this little lecture of mine - a feature which is, of course, very unscholarly. I would have liked to adorn it with the names of some of the eminent scholars who have devoted so much of their energy to the study of the Eddic poems. Most of these eminent earlier scholars would, however, have disagreed very much with what I am going to say here today, so it is perhaps of no great weight to quote all their learned productions. The field of Eddic studies is indeed a vast one, and in half an hour one couldnot be expected to explore it thoroughly. However, I must acknowledge that I have encountered, in old writings or speech, some theories or suggestions that strongly remind me of what I am saying here today.

The principal manuscript of the Eddic Poems is usually called Codex Regius, or Áonungsbók (the King's Book) because of its long sojourn in the Royal Library in Copenhagen. It was presented to the King of Denmark in 1662 by the Bishop of Skálholt in Iceland, and brought back to Iceland in 1971 when the Danes began to return the old Icelandic manuscripts to their home-country. Most of the poems in Codex Regius are to be found nowhere else. Five of the mythological poems (or the poems about the heathen gods) are, however, also preserved

in another and fragmentary manuscript of somewhat later date, and in the same manuscript are ^{also} the first few lines of the prose passage preceding Völundarkviða; at this point this later fragment breaks off and we know nothing of its original size or further contents. It is preserved in the Arnarnaglean manuscript collection and is, therefore, usually referred to under the letter A.

Even if most of the contents of Regius are in poetic form there are also several prose passages, some long, some short, closely connected with the poems. These passages are not evenly distributed among the poems: some poems are quite free of them, whereas in others they constitute a considerable part of the whole. Sometimes they occur only at the beginning or end of a poem, sometimes they are inserted into the poem at various places. They are, on the whole, much more frequent in connection with the heroic poems, even though some prose passages also occur in the mythological section of the manuscript, where as a rule they constitute either an introduction or an addition to a poem.

Some of the poems of Regius are quoted by Snorri Sturluson in his Edda, especially the mythological poems. Snorri does not directly quote any of the prose passages. However, there is some kind of connection between the prose of Snorra Edda and our prose passages and, indeed, Snorra Edda can help us to arrive at a better understanding of them.

The prose passages may be divided roughly into two main groups: those which introduce some additional information to

what is found in the poetry, and those which may be explained simply as an extract made from the poems themselves, or a handy explanation of or comparison between two or more different poems.

The fact that the passages are so unevenly distributed amongst the various poems seems to indicate that they were originally written down by two or more different scribes: one scribe just stuck to the poetry, however incomplete and corrupt it might be; another relied on some kind of prose, written or oral, to fill in the gaps in the old poems.

Surely we could think of many possible explanations or reasons for these prose passages, and I am sure that scholars have suggested them all - and even some impossible ones; but three solutions seem to me the most probable at first sight:

(1) The scribe who first wrote down these poems or, rather, the wise man or woman who gave them to him in oral form did not know them by heart as a whole, even if he could recite many strophes and some continuous episodes; but he (or she) knew the contents of the whole poem and so was able to fill the gaps of the poetical memory with prose accounts. I am sure that many in my honoured audience will have experienced something similar; we may know the theme of a poem and even at our most transcendent moments be able to quote one or two strophes, but seldom more. Of course our ancestors would have had a much keener memory than we have, but however, it may sometimes have failed even them, especially in their old age; then the collector of Eddic poems would have had to

content himself with whatever combination of poetry and prose as they could offer him.

If we stick to this explanation we must necessarily reckon with those two or more different collectors that I mentioned earlier; otherwise why should, for instance, a poem like Völundarkviða be filled with passages in prose, when another similarly old and corrupt poem like Atlakviða is completely free of them?

(2) Some scholars incline to the opinion that the relevant Eddic poems have never existed except as this strange combination of verse and prose; on the oral stage people would have recited the strophes as far as they went, and then in between have quoted the necessary prose insertions more or less verbatim. I well understand that some will find this suggestion rather hard to swallow: that such wonderful poems as Völundarkviða or Helgakviða Hundingsbana should have been created partly in prose - and that this should have happened a thousand years before the official invention of prose poetry. However, this is how the poems have come down to us, and the burden of proof lies upon those who believe in an older and different form which has not.

(3) Third and last, there is the conceivable explanation that the collector or his informant did, indeed, know the poems but allowed himself nonetheless to shorten them and retell parts of them in prose. This would seem to be a strange method if used by somebody whose main object was to write down ancient poetry. On the other hand, it would be

quite natural if the poems were originally written down as part of a longer prose relation or a saga; as is well known we have in the sagas many examples of poems being quoted in more or less complete form; I just remind you of Snorri Sturluson's method as he describes it in his introduction to Heimskringla.

If this third explanation would apply to the prose passages in the Edda, we might be able to detect some echo of the lost poetry in the lines of the prose. This can sometimes be done in case of later Icelandic prose literature which is based on poetry. For instance, it is fairly obvious that the saga of Hamlet - the Amlóða saga is based on the Amlóða rímur which have also been preserved. But the form of the rímur poetry is much more complicated and, therefore, easier to detect than potential Eddic poetry which has neither rhyme nor firm rhythm. In the Eddic poems we have only the alliteration to build upon, and this is the more unreliable as we often find it in ordinary Icelandic prose. All the same we can sometimes perceive alliteration and even division into verse-lines in prose which is derived from Eddic poetry, e.g. in Völsunga saga. On p. 1 of my handout I have, as Nos. I and II, printed as samples two strophes from Fáfnismál and the Second Lay of Guðrún which I compare with Chs. 19 and 35 of Völsunga saga.

It would seem worth while to look for similar poetic sources behind the first part of Völsunga saga where we, as is well known, do not have any corresponding Eddic poetry.

This is not the right time or place to carry out such an investigation, but poetic influence seems, indeed, to be easy to discover. I have just printed one little example as No. I on p. 2.

On the other hand I have tried to look for some poetical remnants in the prose passages in Codex Regius, and I am sorry to say that the results have been mostly negative. There is some alliteration to be found in the prose introduction to Lokasenna, but it is mostly restricted to parallel names or kindred words, and would not at all have to be derived from poetry: "Freyr ok Freyja"; "Byggvir ok Beyla"; "Mart var þar ása ok álfa"; "Þá skóku æsir skjöldu sína". The passage that seems to me most likely to go back to lost verses is the introduction to Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar and I have, therefore, printed the possibly alliterating elements therefrom as No. II on p. 2.

Of course we must take into account the fact that different authors would not necessarily have employed the same methods; even if the author of Völsunga saga found it apposite to write poetical prose, the collector of Eddic poems might have been more pedestrian. Also, we must keep in mind my earlier suggestion that the prose passages in Regius are remnants of a longer saga or sagas which had once used and quoted the Eddic poems; potential alliteration and other poetical remnants would then be likely to have disappeared in the short Regius version.

Before proceeding any further let us briefly summarize

the three most popular explanations of the prose passages in Codex Regius: (1) that they are a substitute for such parts of the poems as the collector or his informant(s) did not remember verbatim; (2) that they have from the very first constituted an inseparable part of the poetic whole or (3) that they are a prosaic retelling of poetry left out on purpose by the collector or, rather, by a saga author composing his prose from heroic poetry.

Let us now proceed to a further investigation of these hypothetical saga or sagas.

As I mentioned earlier, there is certainly some literary relationship between Snorra Edda and the prose passages in Regius. As in all such situations there are three theoretical explanations: (1) Regius depends on Snorra Edda. (2) Snorra Edda depends on Regius or, rather, on the archetype of Regius since the manuscript itself must be of a later date than Snorra Edda. (3) Both Regius and Snorra Edda are derived from a common source (which then would not have survived in its original shape). This third possibility does not exclude the other two; in addition to a common source there might be some direct connection between Regius and Snorra Edda. Scholars nowadays try as far as possible to avoid such complicated solutions, but the ways of literature are sometimes more intricate than rational investigators would like them to be.

As I mentioned before it is commonly acknowledged that Völsunga saga is to a great extent made up from Regius or, rather, from an older exemplar of the same collection. Verbal

likenesses between the saga and the prose passages in Regius might then, at least partly, be explained as direct influence from this older Regius on Völsunga saga.

It is not possible here to illustrate fully the connection between the three works, Regius, Snorra Edda and Völsunga saga. However, if you compare them you will notice that besides having a lot in common, each of them - especially Snorra Edda and Völsunga saga - gives some information that is not to be found in the other. Even in the short prose passages in Regius we find some information which we do not find in Snorra Edda or Völsunga saga - or, for that matter, anywhere else.

Now let us look at the stemma which I have printed as No. I on page 3. The unbroken arrows indicate the direct relationship between the three texts and, also, their dependence on the Eddic poems. Both Völsunga saga and Regius go back to an older recording of the Eddic poems; Snorri may have used such a copy - or else he ^{may} just have quoted the poems from oral tradition. The unbroken arrows pointing from Snorra Edda to Völsunga saga and Regius are, on the other hand, not quite as certain. Even though I do not find it very probable, it is of course possible that Snorri may have known a manuscript of the Eddic poems containing prose passages similar to those in Regius; and, secondly, that the interrelation between Snorra Edda and Völsunga saga, on one hand, and Regius on the other may depend on a common (lost) source; this is indeed the solution given in Stemma II on p. 3, which we shall soon examine

more closely.

The original information given by each of the three works is indicated by the three arrows ending in a dotted line somewhere up in the air. This stemma is the inevitable result of the common opinion of the relationship between those texts. But it does not seem to be really convincing; we should like to combine those loose ends in some way or other. Why not have a fresh try at it?

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One of the works related to the prose passages of Regius is a short fornaldarsaga or þáttur called Norna-Gests þáttur. I have not included it in the stemma on p. 3 because most scholars seem to agree that it is solely based on Regius or a closely related collection of the Eddic poems. This conclusion might, however, need some modification; and in any case this short saga gives us a very important piece of information about the "missing link" in our pedigree. Near the end of chapter 6 we read the following: "After this he (viz. Sigurður Fáfnisbani) rode to Hindarheiði, and there he found Brynhild, and their exchange went as is related in the Saga of Sigurd the Dragon-slayer". (In Icelandic: "Eftir þat reið hann upp á Hindarheiði ok fann þar Brynhildi, ok fóru svá þeira skipti sem segir í sögu Sigurðar Fáfnisbana").

In his commentary to Háttatal in Edda Snorri Sturluson gives the following information about the metre skjálfhent or hin forna skjálfhenda, "the old metre skjálfhenda": "This metre was first discovered by Veili; he was then lying on a

remote islet, being shipwrecked there . . . then he composed a poem which is called "the lay in the shaking metre" or "the drápa without a refrain", and it is based on the Saga of Sigurd." (In Icelandic: "Þenna hátt fann fyrst Velli; þá lá hann í útskeri nökkuru, kominn af skipsbroti, ok höfðu þeir illt til klæða ok veðr kalt. Þá orti hann kvæði er kallat er "kviðan skjálfhenda" eða "drápan stefflaus", ok kveðit eptir Sigurðar sögu.") There is general agreement that this must have been the Saga of Sigurd the Dragonslayer.

The third mention of Sigurðar saga is to be found in three manuscripts of the so-called Greater Saga of Saint Olaf, which is supposed to be composed about 1300 but is based on many older works. The manuscripts are Flateyjarbók, Bergsbók and Rejarbók, written in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. In the Greater saga we find the information that the poet Sighvatur Þórðarson intended to make a memorial poem about King Olaf and adorn it with refrains (or stál, "steel") with motifs from Sigurðar saga. On the advice of the dead king, however, he changed his intention and used the more godly Uppreistar saga instead of Sigurðar saga; Uppreistar saga was presumably the account of the Creation. This episode about the memorial poem is not to be found in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla even though he quotes a lot of poetry by Sighvatur Þórðarson; most likely Snorri left it out because he knew that no such memorial drápa had ever existed.

The two above-mentioned poets, Þorvaldur veili and Sighvatur Þórðarson, lived in the last part of the 10th and

the first part of the 11th centuries; therefore they could not possibly have known a written saga of Sigurd the Dragon-slayer which at the earliest would have been put onto parchment some 200 years later. But the authors of the quoted 13th century sources, Snorri Sturluson and the unknown author of the anecdote in the Greater Saga of Saint Olaf, might have known a written Sigurðar saga; and in any case their mention of it cannot be taken as an argument against its existence.

In the ordinary way this would have been sufficient foundation for scholars to build a lost saga upon it. When we have in old Icelandic literature the mention of a saga, this refers as a rule with certainty to a written saga (even if we could also point out some cases where the word saga applies to an oral tale). In this case, however, scholars seem to be strangely reluctant to reckon with a written saga of Sigurd, and even those who believe in its existence treat it rather superficially, just as if it was a matter of secondary importance whether this saga had existed or not. However, we are also happy to find some scholars who properly believe in the Sigurðar saga.

Some sixty years ago Finnur Jónsson published a short paper called Sigurðarsaga og de prosaiske stykker i Codex Regius.¹⁾ Two years later Andreas Heusler gave his agreement to Finnur's conclusion about this hypothetical Sigurðar saga, even if he naturally did not want to ascribe to it

1) In Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie, 1917, pp. 16-36. (Reprinted in F.J.'s Seks afhandlinger om eddadigtene, 1933.)

quite the same contents as Finnur.¹⁾ Moreover, Heusler seems to be of the opinion that the saga only existed in oral form; but this would seem to be of minor importance since according to him an orally composed saga was mostly equivalent to a written saga.

In his great work on the sources of Völsunga saga Per Wieselgren declared his belief in Sigurðar saga.²⁾ Few later scholars would agree with all of Wieselgren's conclusions regarding the lost saga, but even if he does not find it necessary to prove its existence he brings forth many indirect argument for it.

Some more arguments may be put forward to support the hypothesis of a Sigurðar saga or, in any case, a fornaldarsaga or sagas that would have preserved the heroic lays about Sigurd.

In Hervarar saga (or, as some would like to call it, Heiðreks saga) there are, near the end, some quotations from a heroic poem that seems to be very old; it is now usually called Hlöðskviða but the Germans like to call it "das Hunnenschlachtlied" because it tells us a lot about the well-deserved slaughter of the Huns. This poem constitutes the essence of the story, and it is supplemented by prose passages very much in the same way as some of the heroic poems in Codex Regius;

1) Altnordische Dichtung und Prosa von Jung Sigurd, in Sitzungsberichte der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1919, pp. 186-195.

2) Quellenstudien zur Völsungasaga, 1935.

the main difference is that here the prose is somewhat more elaborate. We have no doubt that the poem is incomplete, parts of it being retold in the saga. Indeed, this is like a half-way house between the poems and prose about Sigurd and the Gjúkungar in Regius, on one hand, and Völsunga saga on the other.

In the prose-supported poems in Regius like, for instance, the so-called Reginismál and Fáfnismál, what is left of the poems is mostly the direct speech of the heroes. Obviously the scribe or collector has estimated highly the speech of the protagonists, not venturing to lower it to his own everyday prose. Exactly the same method is used by the author of Hervarar saga: most of the preserved strophes are the direct speech of Hlöður and Angantýr and other heroes of this old poem. In later copies of the saga we detect that this evolution is carried even further; in the end almost nothing is left of the narrative strophes.

The existence of a fornaldarsaga interspersed with poems is by no means restricted to Hervarar saga. As is well known, many fornaldarsögur quote verses or poems in a more or less complete form, even if none of them are estimated to be as old as Hlöðskviða.

In the first and last (but not middle) parts of Regius the prose passages, as a rule, mark the beginning or the end of a poem, and the contents of these passages are for the most part derived from the poems themselves as Finnur Jónsson pointed out; the compiler of the collection has obviously found

this method very appropriate. Commonly each piece of prose is given a special heading beginning with the preposition frá: "Frá sonum Hraðungs konungs". "Frá Ægi ok goðum". "Frá Loka", etc. Three times the scribe has just the heading Cap(itulum) instead of the more informative frá heading. Where the poems themselves begin (sometimes without any preceding prose passages) there are as a rule special headings giving their names, such as Hávamál, Vafprúðismál and Grímnismál in the first part, and in the last part such names as Guðrúnarkviða, Kviða Sigurðar, Atlakviða hin grænlenzka, Atlamál hin grænlenzku.

In the middle section of the manuscript up to the lacuna - viz. in the part related to Helgi Hundingsbani, Helgi Hjörvarðsson and Sigurður - there is a marked difference regarding both the prose passages and the titles of the poems:

(1) As mentioned earlier, here the prose passages are longer and more numerous, and taken together they constitute a fairly coherent relation which looks very like a summary of a longer narrative.

(2) With the exception of Helgakviða Hundingsbana I there are no real titles, even if the verses as well as the prose passages are in some cases given explanatory headings beginning with frá: "Frá Hjörvarði ok Sigrlinn". "Frá Völsungum". "Frá dauða Sinfjötla". "Frá Sigurði" (?). "Frá dauða Fáfnis". As mentioned, the only poem in this part of Reglus which has got a real title - even two titles - is

Helgakviða Hundingsbana I. This poem marks the beginning of the story of the Völsungar. It is without any prose passages and seems to be fairly intact and well preserved; most likely its origin is different from that of the following fragmentary poems. The same would apply to Grípisspá which also has no prose and, strange to say, no heading - a fact that might be caused by its being mixed up with various fragmentary poems without any marked beginnings.

(3) It is sometimes difficult to tell where one poem ends and another begins. For instance, what is the beginning of Völsungakviða hin forna? Is it the strophe "Segðu Hæmingi at Helgi man ...", or does it not begin until the strophe "Sótti Sigrún sikling glaðan", where the name of the poem is explicitly quoted?

(4) The poems in this part of Regius seem to be more fragmentary than elsewhere (with the exception of Helgakviða Hundingsbana I and Grípisspá).

(5) In some cases it seems likely that two or more poems have been mingled together. For instance, in the complexes usually printed under the titles Reginismál and Fáfnismál we have mixtures of two different metres, fornyrðislag and ljóðaháttur. Many scholars have taken this as evidence that they are made up out of two different poems, one in each metre. Such a mixture would be quite natural in a saga using the two poems as its sources.

Granted that the Sigurðar saga once existed, what can this tell us of the works that have been preserved, first and

foremost the three works that have been under discussion here today: Codex Regius, Snorra Edda and Völsunga saga? First, it comes in very handy to explain the relationship between the three works: just cast a glance at the second stemma on page 3 - how much simpler and more convincing it looks than the first one! No loose ends up in the air.

The existence of a lost Sigurðar saga - and, eventually, one or more other lost sagas - would also supply us with a complete and natural explanation of the prose passages in the middle section of Codex Regius, and the strange mixture of verses where, literally, you cannot find the head or tail of the individual poems. I have mentioned such poems as Reginismál and Fáfnismál which modern scholars have tried to fish out of the manuscript-soup, and also the Second Lay of Helgi Hundingsbani, or Völsungakviða hin forna - where does it begin, and where does it end?

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me finally to sum up the outcome of this little investigation. Once upon a time there existed a saga of Sigurd the Dragonslayer and the Gjúkungar. This saga was based on old heroic lays - to a great extent the same poems as are preserved in Codex Regius, but also some others which are now completely lost. There may, of course, have existed more than one source-saga for Codex Regius or its exemplar. This saga (or sagas) quoted diligently the poems used, in a similar way to that which, f. ex., Hervarar saga quotes Hlöðskviða.

Sigurðar saga was known and used by Snorri Sturluson when he wrote his Edda, but Snorri of course also knew many Eddic poems (in oral or written form) outside this saga(s). Sigurðar saga was also one of the main sources for Völsunga saga, but the author of this last saga also had access to a written collection of Eddic poems similar to the one we have got in Codex Regius. After Völsunga saga had been written, the older saga - being more archaic and incomplete - was neglected and lost. (Incidentally, I might remind you of the fact that Völsunga saga also was nearly lost; it is only to be found in one single manuscript from the middle-ages.) Finally - or initially - Sigurðar saga with its inserted poems was used by the collector of the Eddic poems, who drew heavily on it for the central section of his collection. Being most interested in the poems, he shortened the prose as much as he possibly could. But the parts of the poems which the older saga-writer had left out he could not record. Neither can we.

