

FOLKLORE IN THE ICELANDIC SAGAS
AND THE BLÓT OF GUÐRUN ÓSVÍFRSDÓTTIR

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I

The folklore of the Icelandic sagas is a subject that has attracted scholars for many decades. One of the originators of the folkloristic method of research into the Icelandic sagas, Dag Strömbäck, stated at one time that every saga should be examined from the viewpoint of both philology and folkloristics in order to realise fully what the saga contained (DS, 1943, 53). This statement has lost none of its validity over the fifty years that have passed since it was made. There can be little dispute that the Icelandic sagas are to some degree based on local legends that were formed and passed on in Iceland. In some cases, these legends have roots that go back as far as the tenth century, although it is evident that some of them only took final shape shortly before they came to be recorded. Various methods can be used to evaluate, to some degree, the age of the legends used in the Icelandic sagas. I shall begin by briefly mentioning the principal and most successful ways of dealing with this question.

A legally based Commonwealth founded on pagan Nordic belief was established in Iceland c.930. In about A.D.1000, the Icelandic Alþingi agreed that the inhabitants should become Christian. The Age of Writing began c.1100, and in 1262, the Icelanders submitted to the rule of the Norwegian king. These turning-points should all be borne in mind when discussing the sagas, and their subject matter. Most of the sagas are supposed to have taken place during the period 930-1030, and many of them were recorded between 1230 and 1290. The majority of legends told about the saga heroes would thus probably have been formed in a pagan society, and then been taken into a Christian society where they existed in oral tradition for roughly two hundred years before the authors of the sagas came to commit them to vellum. The religious bias reflected in the subject

matter of the sagas can therefore provide us with information about the probable age of a particular legend. If the legend is told from a pagan viewpoint, then one has good reason to believe that it was formed during the tenth century, and survived in a virtually uncorrupted state until the time the author recorded it in his book. On the other hand, if the legend is told from a Christian viewpoint, then there are two possibilities: either it is a legend that originated in the tenth century and underwent alteration in the Christian society, or it did not come into being until after the Conversion, either in oral tradition or at the hands of the saga author.

To explain this further, one can take two examples of local legends contained in the sagas which reflect obvious religious inclinations to one side or the other.

Víga-Glúms saga tells of how Víga-Glúmr desecrated a field and some land belonging to Freyr, while his enemies sacrificed an ox in order to make Glúmr abandon the farm. It proved hopeless for Víga-Glúmr to struggle against the might of Freyr, and eventually he was driven off his homestead (ÍF IX, 22ff). This legend has all the marks of having been formed at a time when Freyr was still seen as being an active, living god (JHA 1990, 308-314).

Gísla saga Súrssonar describes Gíslí's murder of Þorgrímr Freysgoði in his marital bed at the end of the autumn festival. Þorgrímr's gravemound remained unfrozen throughout the winter, a marvel that was accredited to Freyr. Gíslí glanced at the mound, and uttered a verse in which he revealed himself to have been Þorgrímr's murderer (ÍF VI, 53ff). This story has an obviously religious context, and according to the legend Freyr played a direct role in revealing the name of the murderer. Once again, this legend has all of the marks of having been formed in pagan times, and of having survived in an almost uncorrupted state until the time it came to be recorded (JHA, 1990, 321).

Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða contains a legend telling how a bag was pulled over the head of Freyfaxi before the horse was pushed over a cliff to its death. Certain goðar are said to have taken part in this deed (ÍF XI, 123-4). This legend conflicts with pagan Nordic belief and can therefore hardly have existed

in oral tradition before the Conversion. It is an example of a tale that has taken shape after pagan beliefs have begun to fade (JHA, 1987, 82). Another story in Hrafnkels saga tells how certain goðar were implicated in the burning of a hof, and that later one of these took power in the area, and maintained it for many years. As was pointed out a long time ago, this tale is also at variance with tenth century conditions and is unlikely to have existed in oral tradition at that time (SN 1940, 66ff). It is yet another example of legendary material that has come into being after Christianity has taken hold, either in oral tradition or as a piece of fiction created by the author (JHA, 1987, 84).

II

I shall now examine an account from Laxdæla saga in order to see what can be revealed using the folkloristic approach. The saga tells how conflict broke out between the Hjarðhyltingar and the Laugamenn, with Kjartan Ólafsson on one side, and on the other Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and Bolli Þorleiksson. Kjartan had forced the Laugarmenn to stay indoors for three days. Shortly afterwards, they received word that he would be travelling with little support on the Thursday after Easter. The story now moves to Laugar on the morning of the day in question:

"Þat var tíðenda at Laugum í Sælingsdal, at Guðrún var snimma á fótum, þegar er sólu var ofrat. Hon gekk þangat til, er bræðr hennar sváfu; hon tók á Óspaki. Hann vaknaði skjótt við ok svá þeir fleiri bræðr; ok er Óspakr kenndi þar systur sína, þá spurði hann hvat hon vildi, er hon var svá snimma á fótum. Guðrún kvazk vildu vita, hvat þeir vildu at hafask um daginn. Óspakr kvazk mundu kyrru fyrir halda, - "ok er nú fátt til verknaðar." Guðrún mælti: "Gott skaplyndi hefði þér fengit, ef þér værið dætur einhvers bónda ok láta hvárki at yðr verða gagn né mein; en slíka svívirðing ok skömm, sem Kjartan hefir yðr gört, þá sofi þér eigi at minna, at hann ríði hér hjá garði við annan mann, ok hafa slíkir menn mikit svínsminni; þykki mér ok rekin ván, at þér þorið Kjartan heim at sækja, ef þér þorið eigi at finna hann nú, er hann ferr við annan mann eða þriðja, en þér sitid heima ok látið vænliga ok eruð æ hölzti margir." Óspakr kvað hana mikit af taka, en vera illt til mótmæla, ok spratt hann upp þegar ok klæddisk,

ok hverr þeira bræðra at öðrum. Síðan bjuggusk þeir at sitja fyrir Kjartani. Þá bað Guðrún Bolla til ferðar með þeim. Bolli kvað sér eigi sama fyrir frændsemis sakar við Kjartan ok tjáði, hversu ástsamliga Ólafur hafði hann upp fæddan. Guðrún svarar: "Satt segir þú þat, en eigi muntu bera giptu til at gera svá, at öllum þykki vel, ok mun lokit okkrum samförum, ef þú skersk undan förinni." Ok við fortölur Guðrúnar miklaði Bolli fyrir sér fjándskaþ allan á hendr Kjartani ok sakar ok váþnaðisk síðan skjótt, ok urðu núu saman." (ÍF V, 149-50).

At first sight, there might not appear to be much folklore in this account; indeed, the style and exposition reveal the genius of a creative novelist. Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir takes the initiative in both words and action. She rises before everyone else, and wakes her brothers with such strong words of goading that they are unlikely to go back to bed without having killed somebody first. It is Bolli's turn next. Getting him to set off against his foster brother might seem an impossible task, but Guðrún succeeds with ease. After a short conversation, Bolli arms himself, and proceeds against Kjartan alongside his brothers-in-law.

The passage of *Laxdæla* I quoted from is easily understood, and there are few likely matters of dispute. I would like to pause, however, on one particular point. At the start, we are informed that Guðrún had got up early, "þegar er sólu var ofrat." The phrase er sólu var ofrat is encountered in most MSS, although one other variation does exist (i.e. "í sólarroð"). In the *Íslensk fornrit* edition of *Laxdæla*, the verb að ofra is taken to mean "to lift" (ÍF V, 149). This is further explained by reference to Chapter 18 of *Eyrbyggja saga*, where certain warriors "ofruðu vápnunum", the latter expression being interpreted as meaning that they raised their weapons, or had them in the air as their enemies approached (ÍF IV, 37). In this sense, the verb að ofra is related to other words such as ofar and ofr found in compounds like ofrefli (overwhelming force), ofrhugi (a fearless, daring man) and ofrkapp (fierceness, stubbornness). In another sense, however, the verb að ofra is considered to be identical to the verb að offra, which is comparable to the German word opfern and the English offer, in the sense of "to make an offering" or "sacrifice". Another meaning of the word is "to make a gift, to present, in an eccl. sense" (Cleasby/Vigfússon).

To the best of my knowledge, all of the scholars that have discussed the passage from Laxdæla have explained að ofra in this particular context as meaning "to raise aloft" or "to lift". Thus, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir left her bed at about the time that the sun "was lifted", meaning probably the time at which the sun rose above rim of the valley. In Laugar, in Sælingsdalur, on the day in question (i.e. the Thursday after Easter, 1003) this would have taken place between 6 and 7 o'clock in the morning, GMT. Nonetheless, sólu var ofrat in the sense of "the sun was lifted" sounds somewhat dubious. The implication must be that someone or something "lifted" the sun. This is a very unusual concept if one considers the way the sun is normally discussed in early Scandinavian literature. There, the sun usually directs its own movements: the sun rennur, or kastar á fjöll; the sun rennur, kemur or ríður upp; the sun roðar, or rýður fjöll; the sun fer, lægir and sest (Cleasby/Vigfússon). In all of these examples, the sun is the active party, and in consideration of this, the expression er sólu var ofrat is highly unnatural if it is taken to mean "the sun was lifted". That of course raises the question of "Who raised the sun?", and the text of Laxdæla offers us no answer to this.

It is thus questionable whether er sólu var ofrat means "when the sun was lifted". However, it could mean "þegar sólin var blótnð" (i.e. "when a sacrifice was made to the sun"), as I mentioned earlier. Such an expression sounds natural, and indeed, it is this interpretation that first comes to mind on reading the text. The next step is to examine the evidence that might support such an interpretation.

III

In Patterns of comparative religion, Mircea Eliade discusses sun worship in a variety of countries, and as part of this, also mentions European sun worship. He notes, for example, the traditions of rolling burning wheels down hills at particular times of the solstice, and especially at the summer solstice. He also points out that the carrying of wheels in wagons or boats formed part of religious processions during the Middle Ages, something that has obvious parallels in prehistoric times (ME 1983, 148).

There can be little dispute that sun worship formed part of Scandinavian religion

during the Bronze Age. This is proved beyond doubt by, for example, the widely encountered Swedish petroglyphs from that period (OA 1926-7, 8ff). The sun horse and sun chariot from Trundholm in Sjælland are believed to have come from a similar time (PVG 1983, 99ff). Indeed, the concept of a horse that draws (N.B. not "lifts") the sun across the heavens is encountered in ancient Indian and Greek mythology, and also occurs in the poems of the Edda. In Vafþrúðnismál, st.12, for example, Óðinn asks Vafþrúðnir about the name of the horse that pulls Day above men, and receives the following reply:

Skínfaxi heitir
 es hinn skíra dregr
 dag of dróttmögu;
 hesta baztr
 þykkir hann með Hreiðgotum;
 ey lýsir mön af mari. (Eddukvæði 1926, 59).

In Grímnismál, st.37, a different description is given:

Árvakr ok Alsviðr
 skulu upp heðan
 svangir sól draga. (Eddukvæði 1926, 78).

The horse or horses of the sun were thus very much alive in the minds of people during the last days of pagan worship in Scandinavia. Yet there is still more evidence that suggests that sun worship was a living phenomenon right up until the time of the Conversion. In Grímnismál, sts.39-40, the sun is called "skínandi goð", "skírleitt god", and "heið brúðr himins". And one lausavísa composed by Skúli Þorsteinsson, the grandson of Egill Skallagrímsson, who lived in the tenth or eleventh century, states the following about the sun:

Glens beðja veðr gyðju
 goðblíf í vé síðan. (FJ, AI, 306, BI, 284)

Reordered, these words can be interpreted as meaning "Blíf sem goð veður

beðja Glens síðan í helgidóm gyðjunnar." The shrine of the goddess is where the sun reposes at night, and the skáld is thus describing here how the sun sinks into the sea, or simply sets. The identity of Glenr is unclear, although the name has been explained as meaning "hinn geislandi" (i.e. "the shining one") (AK 1898, 264-5). Glens beðja would thus probably be the same kenning as brúður himins. Indeed, one might note that in Snorra-Edda, Sól is listed amongst the goddesses (Snorra-Edda, 1935, 58).

I have listed above several examples of ideas involving sun worship as reflected in archeology and mythology from Scandinavia. The accounts of rituals related to sun worship in the extant source material are admittedly somewhat few and far between. Yet legends related to such activities are not totally absent. Landnámubók, for example, contains the following information about Þorkell Máni Þorsteinsson, the grandson of Ingólfur Árnason who first settled in Reykjavík:

"Hann lét bera sik í sólargeisla í helsótt sinni ok fal sik á hendi þeim guði, er sólina hafði skapat; hann hafði ok lifat svá hreinliga sem þeir kristnir menn, er bezt eru síðaðir" (IF I, 47).

This account obviously involves a mixture of pagan and Christian custom. In real life, Þorkell Máni can hardly have commended himself to that God that created the sun. Indeed, the concept of a creator of the heavens and stars would hardly have been ~~recognized~~ recognised by him even if he had encountered it elsewhere. When the account goes on to state that he had lived as pure a life as the best of Christian men, then almost certainly we are faced with someone doing their best to beautify the image of a deceased ancestor. Yet at the same time, there can be no denying that the legend of how Þorkell Máni had himself borne out into the rays of the sunshine during his fatal illness again has all the marks of being a noteworthy oral legend. It is unlikely to be something composed by the author of Landnámubók. Þorkell Máni must have had some form of belief in the sun, since he wished to be close to the heið brúður himins when he felt the approach of death. This account can thus be said to contain in all likelihood evidence of sun worship taking place in Iceland during the tenth century.

IV

Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir was a generation younger than Þorkell Máni, and, like him, lived in the west of Iceland. She therefore grew up in an area where at least one man was supposed to have had himself borne out into the sunshine at the time of his death, and one might therefore assume the possibility that she knew about sun worship. Someone of a similar age to Guðrún, who lived not so far away from her was Skúli Þorsteinsson of Borg, the man who spoke of* the "goðblíða beðju Glens" who travelled to her shine* in the evening, and returned from there in the morning.

It should be borne in mind that the blót in question probably took place approximately three years after the acceptance of Christianity. In this context, it is worth remembering that at the Conversion, people were for the time being permitted to sacrifice in secret, this not being considered a punishable offence unless witnesses were present (ÍF I, 17). A sacrifice that took place before everybody else woke up would therefore not have been seen as a offence at this time.

V

The expression er sólu var ofrat is not encountered in any other Old Icelandic texts outside this passage from Laxdæla. As I mentioned earlier, this expression is at variance with other expressions that deal with the rising and subsequent passage of the sun. It thus seems unlikely that the author of Laxdæla composed these words himself, but instead received the expression along with the other legendary material dealing with Kjartan's murder and Guðrún's actions on the day in question. An oral tale dealing with the events of that day would make no distinguishment between the words ofrat and offrat, and it could thus be difficult at a later stage in the oral tradition to say what the legend had originally involved. If, however, the legend had originally involved an account of a blót, the expression would make sense. It only becomes out of place when one attempts to alter the meaning of the legend and remove the idea of sacrifice. In her later

years, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir became a nun, and erected a church at Helgafell where she eventually received a Christian burial (ÍF V, 228-9; ÍF IV, 186). It would thus be natural that oral tradition would emphasise other things in her memory than pagan sacrifice. Certainly, the author of Laxdæla saga does not state directly that Guðrún herself ofrað to the sun, only that she was up at that particular time of day. The written form ofrat was possibly a further attempt by the writer to distance Guðrún from the blemish of having been involved in a sacrifice.

Nonetheless, the ancient meaning of the expression is still apparent. All the logical indications are that a sacrifice, or offering was made to the sun that Thursday morning at Laugar in Sælingsdal and that Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir was the one who carried out this ceremony.

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