

Mythic Elements in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*: Prolonged Echoes and Mythological Overlays

Lars van Wezel

Germanic Languages and Literatures, Urbana, IL

Most earlier scholars discussing *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*¹ focus on the cultural climate of the thirteenth century, when the saga is thought to have been written, in order to place the text in a specific context. The legitimacy of this approach need not be doubted. What does need to be questioned, however, is which aspects of thirteenth-century Icelandic culture one chooses to address and emphasize. Hermann Pálsson, for instance, looks primarily at the Christian side of the culture. The outcome of his approach is well-known: *Hrafnkels saga* is a *dæmisaga* based on Christian ethics and morals, a view that after a period of increasing criticism has lost a great deal of its initial convincing force. A political interpretation of *Hrafnkels saga* seems to be more satisfying and

¹ For quotations from the text, given between square brackets, see “Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða,” *Austfirðinga sögur*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson. Íslensk fornrit 11 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska Fornritafélag, 1950) 95-133.

successful, although it is difficult to establish a general *consensus*.

A critical assessment of all the prevailing theories will not be essayed in the present paper. It cannot be claimed that the Christian interpretation is fundamentally ‘wrong,’ nor that the political one is ‘correct,’ or *vice versa*. What can be claimed, though, is that to focus on one particular aspect of the cultural context limits the possibilities of interpreting *Hrafnkels saga* and is bound to result in a one-sided and, therefore, questionable conclusion. In this respect, it should be mentioned that Theodore Andersson is able to offer one of the more satisfying interpretations so far, by taking both the Christian and the political side of medieval Icelandic culture into account.² In the present essay emphasis will be placed on an aspect of thirteenth-century culture that, in the discussion of *Hrafnkels saga*, has not been taken into consideration at great length, namely the one that relates to mythology. Admittedly, this is a one-sided approach as well, but in order to embark upon a long journey, a first step needs to be taken. In the course of the present paper, a combined political-mythological approach will be offered based on Andersson’s contribution. It needs to be emphasized that this is merely one of the many ways to come to terms with *Hrafnkels saga*, and moreover not the most complete and comprehensive one; such an enterprise cannot be endeavored within the scope of a single, short presentation. It is to be hoped, though, that this contribution opens new doors and initiates a further discussion.

A number of earlier studies of *Hrafnkels saga* deal with mythology. These studies, however, mainly focus on isolated elements related to Freyr, and mostly on the authenticity of these elements, such as Hrafnkell’s nickname *Freysgoði*, and the part Freyfaxi plays within the cult of Freyr.³ Up to the present day, no study has offered a summarizing overview of the considerable number of mythic elements in the saga.⁴ Before turning to the meaning these elements can evoke and their function, based on the findings of, among others, Clunies Ross,⁵ that will be discussed below, the mythic climate in *Hrafnkels saga* needs to be described, for which it is necessary to review and combine earlier research results.

Georgia Kelchner poses the hypothesis that the man appearing in Hallfreðr’s dream [97] is Freyr. However, since in *Landnámabók* the dream is dreamt by Hrafnkell himself, but his relationship to Freyr is not mentioned, she

² Theodore M. Andersson, “Ethics and Politics in *Hrafnkels saga*,” *Scandinavian Studies* 60 (1988): 291-309.

³ Cf. John Lindow, *Scandinavian Mythology. An Annotated Bibliography* (New York/London: Garland Publishing, 1988) entries 838, 1468, and 2150.

⁴ For the term ‘mythic elements,’ see John Lindow, “*Íslendingabók* and Myth,” *Scandinavian Studies* 69 (1997): 454-64.

⁵ Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes. Old Norse myths in medieval Northern Society*. Volume 1: *The Myths*, Viking Collection 7 (Odense: Odense UP, 1994), and Volume 2: *The reception of Norse myths in medieval Iceland*, Viking Collection (Odense: Odense UP, 1998).

concludes that it is not possible to identify the dream man as Freyr.⁶ Marco Scovazzi, though, strongly argues that the man indeed is Freyr, albeit not explicitly stated in both *Landnámabók* and *Hrafnkels saga*.⁷ Dietrich Hofmann and Óskar Halldórsson have argued that the fact that *Landnámabók* was written down before *Hrafnkels saga* does not necessarily prove that *Landnámabók* offers the better version of the accounts of Hrafnkell and his family.⁸ Therefore, Kelchner's argument and conclusion can be questioned. In the present essay, it can be claimed that the dream does not become "interessanter, weil Hallfreðr statt Hrafnkell ihn träumt" (Hofmann 22). It suffices to state that the dream itself is a mythic element with a possible reference to Freyr, which will be discussed below in a larger context.

Directly after the dream, a landslide takes place in which two animals are killed [97-98].⁹ In all the extant manuscripts of *Hrafnkels saga* and *Landnámabók*, the animals are identified; therefore, Finn Hansen assumes an underlying intention, namely "en sammenkobling mellem sagaens første kapitel og den øvrige text...."¹⁰ Problematic, however, seem to be the different names given in the accounts of the landslide. *Landnámabók* offers the most logical alternative, *göltr ok griðungr*, since both animals are associated with Freyr.¹¹ The manuscripts of *Hrafnkels saga* give two versions: *göltr ok hafr*, and *geit ok hafr*.¹² The discrepancies between the manuscripts of *Hrafnkels saga*, however, need not trouble us.¹³ Hansen's further remarks and final conclusion are worth mentioning: in the landslide-passage the words *týndusk* and *gripir* are used in relation to the two animals. Freyfaxi is also called *gripir* [100, 123], and when the Þjóstarssynir throw the horse of a cliff, *týna* is used [124], hence:

⁶ Georgia Dunham Kelchner, *Dreams in Old Norse Literature and Their Affinities in Folklore* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1935) 33.

⁷ Marco Scovazzi, *La Saga di Hrafnkell e il problema della saghe islandesi* (Arona: Editrice Libreria Paideia, 1960) 11.

⁸ Dietrich Hofmann, "Hrafnkels und Hallfreðs Traum: Zur Verwendung mündlicher Tradition in der Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða," *skandinavistik* 6 (1976): 19-36; cf. Óskar Halldórsson, *Uppruni og þema í Hrafnkels sögu*, *Rannsóknastofnum í bókmenntafræði við Háskóla Íslands, Fræðirit 3* (Reykjavík: Íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1976) eps. 70-71.

⁹ Worth mentioning is a parallel in *Víga-Glúms saga*; Glúmr, formerly devoted to Freyr, but at the present time to Óðinn, has - after having killed Sigmundur on the sacred land Vitazgjafi - a dream in which an aggravated Freyr appears. Later in *Víga-Glúms saga*, a landslide destroys his farm. For Glúmr's relationship with Freyr and Óðinn, cf. Hilda Ellis Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe* (London/New York: Routledge, 1993), 103.

¹⁰ Finn Hansen, "Hrafnkels saga: del og helhed," *Scripta Islandica* 32 (1981): 23-29, 25.

¹¹ See Hansen 27, with references to Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*. 3rd ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1970) I: 370, and II: 189. It should be mentioned, though, that Scovazzi was the first one to notice this allusion: "e' noto che i due animali, di cui parla la *Landnámabók*, il cinghiale e il bue, sono sacri ai *Vani*: bastere' ricordare il cinghiale *Gullinbursti*, caro a *Freyr*..." (13).

¹² Cf. Hansen for manuscript-references.

¹³ See Hansen 27-28.

Freyr's *indirekte repræsentation* i 1. kapitel er endvidere negativ ved dyrenes ødelæggelse. Heri ligger et fremadpegende vink mot sagaens videre forløb, at der vil komme et eller andet om den negative relation, der består mellem denne gud og de(n) involverende, i sagaen parallelt udtrykt ved, at et tredje dyr (hingsten Freyfaxi) også dræbes. (28, my italics).

according to Hansen a “mytologisk allusionsteknik” (28). His interpretation of this mythic element will be discussed below.

In 1992 Preben Meulengracht Sørensen discussed a number of Freyr-related mythic elements in four *Íslendingasögur*: *Gísla saga*, *Víga-Glúms saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, and *Hrafnkels saga*.¹⁴ In this study he did not discuss *Hrafnkels saga* at great length,¹⁵ but the conclusions based on an investigation of the other sagas, especially *Vatnsdæla saga*, can be applied to it, which will be made clear below.

Based on Meulengracht Sørensen's conclusion concerning *Vatnsdæla saga*, it is possible to claim that also the *landnám* in *Hrafnkels saga* is “divinatorisch vorherbestimmt” (Meulengracht Sørensen 728): the dream-man urges Hrafnkell's father to move away and to cross the Lagarfljótr because of his *heill* [97].¹⁶ The landslide causing the death of the two animals indicates that Hrafnkell and his family do not belong in Geitdalr.¹⁷ When Hrafnkell rides out looking for a place to found his own farm, it is said that Jökulsdalr was *albyggðr* [98]. However, when he proceeds, Hrafnkell suddenly enters an *eyðidalr* that is *byggiligri en aðrir dalir* [98].¹⁸ After Hrafnkell has built Aðalból, he marries Oddbjörg, who gives him two sons bearing mythic names: Þórir and Ásbjörn [98].¹⁹ Immediately thereafter, *þá efldi hann blót mikill*, and

¹⁴ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, “Freyr in den Isländersagas,” *Germanische Religionsgeschichte. Quellen und Quellenprobleme*, ed. Heinrich Beck et alii (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1992) 720-735.

¹⁵ Meulengracht Sørensen, “Freyr in den Isländersagas” 728: “Die Zeit erlaubt es nicht, daß ich näher auf die Verwendung des Freyr-Motivs in den folgenden Kapiteln der Saga [= *Hrafnkels saga*] eingehe.”

¹⁶ Pointed out by Meulengracht Sørensen, without further elaborating a parallel with *Vatnsdæla saga*. Cf. *Vatnsdæla saga*, where Ingimundr in Norway receives a *hlutr* with Freyr's image on it. This *hlutr* disappears mysteriously, but re-emerges when Ingimundr is looking for a place to stay in Iceland; Ingimundr's emigration receives a religious meaning that is emphasized with “Ausdrücke, die mit „Schicksal“ wiedergegeben werden können... .” (Meulengracht Sørensen 722). Cf. for a discussion of *heill*, Hans Hartmann, ‘*Heil' und Heilig' im nordischen Altertum* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1943); *heill* (adj.) means “vom Schicksal begünstigt, glücklich” (6). *Heill* (subst.) means “Wirkung der Schicksalsmacht” (62). Cf. also: “Als ganz besonders wichtig erkennen wir, daß in dem Wort „*heill*“, ... , ein durchaus aktiver, energiegeladener, fast magischer Sinn liegt.” (6-7). Marco Scovazzi had already pointed out the importance of *heill* in *Hrafnkels saga* (11-12).

¹⁷ Briefly pointed out by Meulengracht Sørensen, but not further elaborated.

¹⁸ Not pointed out by Meulengracht Sørensen, but cf. his discussion of *Vatnsdæla saga* (723).

¹⁹ Not pointed out by Meulengracht Sørensen, but cf. *Vatnsdæla saga*, where Ingimundr's wife gives birth to a girl named Þórdís as soon as they have reached the designated place to live (Meulengracht Sørensen 723).

he has built a *hof mikit*. It is said then that *Hrafnkell elskaði annat goð meir en Frey*, and that he gave the god the half of his most precious possessions [98]: he consecrates the land to which Freyr, perhaps through Hallfreðr, has (implicitly) directed him. Although not explicitly stated, it is clear that Hrafnkell's *landnám* fits the pattern that Meulengracht Sørensen has been able to detect in *Vatnsdæla saga*, and that he believes to represent a topos traditionally linked to the practices of Freyr-worshippers; this will be further discussed below. Equally implicit, but no less clear, is Hrafnkell's sanctifying land for himself.²⁰

For the moment being, it needs to be stressed that the *landnám*-pattern connected to Freyr does not surface as explicitly in *Hrafnkels saga* as it does in *Vatnsdæla saga*. In fact, the *landnám* fits a larger, traditional mythic pattern, but this, too, is not explicitly stated: the phrase *at helga sér land* is not used.

After the *landnám*, it is said that Hrafnkell *gaf Frey, vin sínum, þann hest [= Freyfaxi] hálfan* [100]. This makes Freyfaxi a mythic element. Aslak Liestøl placed the horse in a larger (Indo-Germanic) context.²¹ Within the scope of the present essay, Freyfaxi's historical reliability need not be established. It is more useful to point out, that because of the important part the horse plays in Hrafnkels saga - without Freyfaxi the story would not have been able to develop as it does -, it is reasonable to assume "that there was an oral tradition about him" (Halldórsson, 71). Besides that, Hrafnkell is not the only *Freysgoði* who had a relationship to a (Frey)faxi.²² It might very well be that 'Freyfaxi' was a traditional element in a larger Freyr-pattern Meulengracht Sørensen discerned that will be discussed below. In *Hrafnkels saga*, however, this element is more dominant, in all likelihood due to the local oral traditions assumed by Knut Liestøl and Halldórsson.

Significant is the description of Hrafnkell and his situation after Sámr has driven him away from Aðalból: he buys a small farmstead in an area not well suited for farming, but it is said that after only half a year *nálíga væri tvau höfuð á hverju kvikindi* [122]. This phrase appears almost verbatim in *Vatnsdæla saga* concerning Ingimundr's pigs that had disappeared during the previous summer (Meulengracht Sørensen 724). The phrase also occurs in *Víga-Glúms saga*, when the land Vitazgjafi is described (see footnote 9): the land itself is dedicated to Freyr, to whom the name Vitazgjafi refers (Meulengracht Sørensen 730).²³ In other words, it can indeed be seen, daß

²⁰ Cf. Clunies Ross 1988, 149: "The act of claiming for oneself while declaring that one had some form of supernatural backing for it was expressed in Icelandic by the idiom *at helga sér land*, 'to sanctify land for oneself', that is, to appropriate land for oneself by resort to supernatural. Those settlers who are represented as believing in pagan gods are said to have dedicated their lands to a specific deity." Scovazzi had already pointed out the concept of *at helga sér land* in combination with *heill* (11-12).

²¹ Aslak Liestøl, "Freyfaxi," *Maal og Minne* (1945): 59-66.

²² See Edgar C. Polomé, "Freyr," *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, ed. Heinrich Beck et alii, vol 9 (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995) cols 587-594, col 589-590.

²³ Meulengracht Sørensen does not point out this parallel between *Hrafnkels saga* and *Víga-*

Hrafnkels Erfolg nach der Vertreibung ... mit den Symbolen des Frey-kultes beschrieben wird” (Meulengracht Sørensen 728).²⁴ Hrafnkell’s person gets a mythic dimension with Freyr, the god of rebirth and regeneration, as a model; Hrafnkell experiences a rebirth, and his presence has a positive influence on the surrounding area. This can be derived from the saga text, although it is not explicitly stated. Noteworthy is that the mythic description of Hrafnkell’s rebirth comes before his statement, *[e]k hygg þat hégóma at trúa á goð* [124].

At the end of the saga, Hrafnkell is buried in a *haugr* [133]. True, this need not be more than an example of “the author’s antiquarianism” (Pálsson 1971 18), but it is no less true that *haugar* were associated with Freyr, and that they were typical for those, “who, in pagan time, are specially close to the god Freyr and share his power to produce rich crops and ensure the fertility of beast and soil” (Clunies Ross 1998 37).

All the elements discussed above relate to Freyr, which need not surprise us, since this god is explicitly mentioned in the saga. Two elements in *Hrafnkels saga*, however, might refer implicitly to Óðinn, namely Hrafnkell’s hanging and Þorkell’s character, which will be dealt with first.

While discussing a mythic model in *Bandamanna saga*, John Lindow remarks in passing that Þorkell in *Hrafnkels saga* resembles Óðinn: “... his cloak is described and we learn what he has in hand and a few tantalizing details of his appearance.”²⁵ With regard to appearance, however, this similarity is rather doubtful; Þorkell’s cloak is *laufgrænn* [111], whereas Óðinn’s is ominously *blár*; Þorkell has *búit sverð í hendi* [111], but the attribute typical for Óðinn is the spear, to which I shall return below; When Óðinn enters the human world, he usually wears a large hat, hereby concealing his identity.²⁶ Compared to this, Þorkell’s appearance can be called extravagant.

Lindow is more convincing when he points out the similarity in (literary) function between Þorkell and Óðinn: both appear suddenly and unexpectedly when their help is needed (253). It can be added, that both are *einhleypingar*, wandering homeless men.²⁷ Lindow compares Ófeigr, one of the protagonists in *Bandamanna saga*, with Óðinn (and Loki):²⁸ “... the spellbinding quality of ... speech, the sowing of discontent among kinsmen - these are important

Gláms saga.

²⁴ Cf. also Polomé, “Freyr” col 587.

²⁵ John Lindow, “A Mythic Model in *Bandamanna saga* and Its Significance,” *Sagas of the Icelanders. A Book of Essays*, ed. John Tucker (New York/London: Garland Publishing, 1989) 241-256, 253 [originally in *Michigan Germanic Studies* 3 (1977): 1-12].

²⁶ For Óðinn’s characteristics, see Rudolf Simek, *Lexikon der germanischen Mythologie*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner, 1995) 302-303.

²⁷ Cf., with regard to Óðinn, Lotte Motz, *The King, The Champion and The Sorcerer. A Study in Germanic Myth* (Wien, 1996) 85-86 [III.2.2.7 The Visitor and Wanderer].

²⁸ Lindow looks at Loki as a hypostasis of Óðinn, cf. also: “... the duality of the Óðinn-Loki model need not trouble us, since the relationship between the gods was a close one and, indeed, Óðinn shares certain aspects of the trickster.” (254).

characteristics of Óðinn's which Ófeigr uses to his advantage." (254). The same can be said about Þorkell; his little *oratio* to convince his brother Þorgeirr to take up the law-suit [113-115] is a good example of "spellbinding quality of speech." Þorkell even deviates from the truth by saying that Hrafnkell has killed Einarr *saklausan* [114].²⁹ When he realizes his efforts remain without success, he threatens Þorgeirr to look for help somewhere else, hereby endangering his family relationship - "to his own advantage," namely to acquire fame and prestige, Þorkell is willing to "sow discontent among kinsmen."

Hanging is not an unusual motif in Old Norse literature; in the *Íslendingasögur* it occurs four times.³⁰ The hanging in *Hrafnkels saga*, however, is unique with regard to how Hrafnkell is hanged, namely upside-down. In *Hrafnkels saga* the hanging is described as a part of *féránsdómr*, which is, according to Kari Ellen Gade, unhistorical (179). It is remarkable to see that Hrafnkell is not mutilated for life, since Sámr and his men cut a hole in his ankles and pull a rope through it [120]. Hrafnkell's hanging has puzzled many a scholar. One of the more challenging views is offered by Dietrich Hofmann, who believes it is "ein Stück echter Tradition," and mentions the possibility of "eine Maßnahme von Óðinsverehrern."³¹ In passing he refers to an article by Jere Fleck, without further discussing it.³² Fleck uses *Hrafnkels saga* as source material, but does not elaborate a possible link between Hrafnkell's and Óðinn's hanging. For the description of the mythic climate in *Hrafnkels saga*, the similarities on the surface need to be pointed out: both Óðinn and Hrafnkell are hanged upside-down, without the intention of being killed; both are severely wounded through piercing, and afterwards they experience a rebirth. A similarity in imagery can be established. A comparison on a deeper level of meaning will be addressed below.

Significant might be Hrafnkell's spear, a typical Odinic attribute,³³ which is mentioned twice, namely first directly after Hrafnkell's hanging [121], i.e., after his symbolic death, and secondly after his actual death as a grave-gift in his *haugr* [133]. Klaus von See pointed out the consciously and skillfully made, structural function of the spear, a part of "[d]ie Ausgewogenheit der dreiaktigen Komposition," that underlines the "Rückkehr zum status quo."³⁴ A meaning cannot be ascribed to the spear; Hrafnkell does not use it, for instance, to kill Eyvindr, which would have been an ironic statement, since the spear was the only weapon the Þjóstarssynir and Sámr allowed Hrafnkell to take with him. A

²⁹ For Hrafnkell's four (legitimate) reasons to kill Einarr, cf. Jan G. Johansen, "The Hero of *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*," *Scandinavian Studies* 67 (1995): 265-286.

³⁰ Kari Ellen Gade, "Hanging in Northern Law and Literature," *Maal og Minne* (1985), 159-188.

³¹ Hofmann 33 with references to earlier research.

³² Jere Fleck, "Óðinn's Self-Sacrifice - A New Interpretation," *Scandinavian Studies* 43 (1971): 119-142 [I: The Ritual Inversion], 385-413 [II: The Ritual Landscape].

³³ Cf. Motz 73; Ellis Davidson 98.

³⁴ Klaus von See, "Die Hrafnkels saga als Kunstdichtung," *skandinavisk* 9 (1979): 47-56, 50.

mythic meaning will be taken into consideration below.

The summarizing overview of earlier research shows that the mythic climate in *Hrafnkels saga* is not limited to a superficial description of a man who is said to be a *Freysgoði*. Both explicit and implicit mythic elements can be discerned, and it is clear that *Hrafnkels saga* belongs to those texts that have a potential to “utilise myths and mythic references in their larger discourse” (Clunies Ross 1998 11). Clunies Ross argues that “... a knowledge of the Old Norse mythic world and its workings was an expected cultural resource and point of reference for the original readers or audience of Old Icelandic literature and that without it one cannot fully understand the semiotics of these texts” (Clunies Ross 1998, 12). In other words, overlooking the mythic elements in *Hrafnkels saga* means losing one of the important possibilities for interpretation the saga itself might offer.

Mythic elements, however, do not necessarily have to be a part of the “text’s main action or plot,” and it should be pointed out that they “... operate on the medieval Icelandic audience ... at a level that was *not fully conscious* all of the time” (Clunies Ross, 1998 12-13; my italics). Mythic elements that traditionally had a prominent role in heathen society continue to exist in Christian Icelandic society, albeit not always equally prominently. It is possible that such elements have been used by thirteenth-century saga-authors in their narratives, either deliberately or unconsciously. These mythic elements will here be labeled “prolonged echoes.” Not taken into account by Clunies Ross, but no less significant, are Haraldur Bessason’s “mythological overlays.”³⁵ According to Bessason, the use of mythic signifiers can be seen as “a stylistic technique by which the authors of both *Konungasögur* and *Íslendingasögur* could gradate their characters, i.e. elevate or lower their levels of performance according to the degree of emphasis they wished to achieve” (275).³⁶ The similarities between Clunies Ross’ and Bessason’s theories need not be underlined; it is more useful to point out a subtle, yet important, difference. “Prolonged echoes” are primarily cultural manifestations that, nevertheless, can find their way into literary narratives. “Mythological overlays,” however, are mythic elements whose occurrence is confined to a literary framework that exists as such, for instance, as or within an Eddic lay.

“Mythological overlays” could therefore be labeled as pure intertextuality, whereas “prolonged echoes” should be called a form of cultural intertextuality that not necessarily has to be a part of a narrative discourse that exists in

³⁵ Haraldur Bessason, “Mythological Overlays,” *Sjötú ritgerðir helgaðar Jakobi Benediktssyni 20. júlí 1977*, ed. Einar G. Pétursson and Jónas Kristjánsson (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi, 1977) I: 273-292.

³⁶ This calls to mind Clunies Ross *Prolonged Echoes. Old Norse myths in medieval Northern Society*. Volume 2: *The reception of Norse myths in medieval Iceland* 25: “... those humans whose behaviour is most extreme in saga literature are often tagged as god-like by a variety of myth-based signifiers.”

writing, such as the mythic knowledge that is alluded to in scaldic stanzas, but that is not represented in, for example, the *Poetic Edda* or *Snorra Edda*. In other words, if we do not have a literary text at our disposal that might have been used as an example for a mythic element in an other (literary) text, the mythic element in question cannot be called a “mythological overlay.” A theoretical objection should be made: it is of course possible that a saga author has used a text that is no longer extant. Although it is difficult to make the distinction between a “prolonged echo” and a “mythological overlay,” it should nevertheless be endeavored, for as soon as it is possible to call a certain mythic element a “mythological overlay,” it can be assumed in all likelihood that the author in question consciously intended to make a statement or to embellish his narrative, which cannot be claimed in the case of a “prolonged echo.”

With regard to the Freyr-elements he investigated, Meulengracht Sørensen comes to the following conclusion:

Elemente von Mythen und Riten werden in den Erzählungen benutzt, die wir in den Isländersagas vorfinden; aber es ist eine Wiederverwendung in einem neuen historischen Kontext. In einigen Zusammenhängen sind die Mythos-Elemente organische Teile der historischen Erzählung geworden; aber in anderen Fällen ist der tradierte Mythos sozusagen „unverdaut“ mit aufgenommen. (735).

In other words: during the pagan time mythic narratives connected to rites, cults, and actual myths came into being.³⁷ In the course of time these narratives developed into historical-literary topoi that continued to exist even when the phenomena to which they were originally related disappeared from the cultural life. The extent to which these narratives surface in the *Íslendingasögur* varies. This can be seen from the *landnám*-accounts in *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Hrafnkels saga*: a similar pattern can be discerned in both sagas, but in *Hrafnkels saga* this pattern is not explicitly connected to Freyr.³⁸

One thing that can be determined with certainty is the fact that compared to, for instance, *Vatnsdæla saga*, the Freyr-elements in *Hrafnkels saga* largely remain ‘undigested;’ in *Vatnsdæla saga* it is made clear that it is indeed Freyr who directs Ingimundr and his family to Iceland, and the birth of Þordís is regarded as a sign given by the god of fertility (Meulengracht Sørensen 723). This is not the case in *Hrafnkels saga*. In all likelihood, it can be assumed that the saga-author either used mythic elements belonging to an oral traditional Freyr-narrative, that he did not understand completely, and that therefore surface implicitly, or that he deliberately chose not to emphasize or elucidate

³⁷ Cf. Halldórsson 71: “It is known ... that ancient and obsolete religious customs tend to be forgotten unless they are linked with incidents that survive in narrative.” Cf. also Polomé, “Freyr” 589.

³⁸ Cf. Meulengracht Sørensen (with regard to *Vatnsdæla saga*) 725: “Wenn man nun diese Züge, ... , zusammenfaßt, zeigt sich ein Bedeutungsmuster unterhalb der Sagaerzählung, ein Muster, das die Erzählung Punkt für Punkt auf Freyr und seine Verehrung bezieht.”

these elements. Less likely, but also possible to assume, is that the Freyr-elements disappeared to the background during the oral transmission of the stories about Hrafnkell, or that in the course of the copying history of the thirteenth-century saga these elements were (increasingly) neglected and left out. In any case, it is fairly legitimate to exclude the possibility that we are dealing with purely fictional thirteenth-century examples of antiquarian interests; if it had been the intention of the saga-author to create nothing more than just a literary image of the heathen past, he surely would have seized the opportunity to exploit the traditional material at hand and render it more explicitly.

The saga-author's literary and rhetorical skills have been discussed by scholars.³⁹ The author's ability to connect the landslide-passage with the killing of Freyfaxi in a subtle way, as Hansen showed, need not be doubted. His use of a mythic allusion, however, may seem somewhat surprising, since he either overlooked the elements of the traditional Freyr-narratives or chose not to render them explicitly. It should be pointed out, though, that this allusion is not likely to have been a part of the larger Freyr-narrative that Meulengracht Sørensen discerned in several sagas. It need not be regarded as contradictory and hence unlikely that an author who renders traditional mythic material in a fragmentary way, is able to consciously make a mythic reference - that is not related to the traditional material - at the same time.

Hansen gives an interpretation of the mythic allusion: he believes that it shows "at der vil komme et eller andet om *den negative relation*, der består mellem denne gud og de(n) involverede ..." (28; my italics). However, there is no mention of a negative relationship; on the contrary: Hrafnkell and his family are urged to move because of their *heill*; Hrafnkell himself finds a valley *byggiligri en aðrir dalir*, and after his expulsion by Sámr he still seems to enjoy Freyr's support. It can be argued that there is no evidence of all this in the saga. This is a valid argument. Explicitly, Freyr's goodwill towards Hrafnkell and his family is not mentioned, but it can be reasonably assumed based on the striking similarities between the mythic Freyr-elements in *Hrafnkels saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga*. Hansen's mythic allusion is in all likelihood nothing more than a structural subtlety that is not relevant to (the meaning of) the story. This should be kept in mind when discussing the Odinic elements in *Hrafnkels saga*.

For Þorkell's Odinic character, no underlying larger mythic discourse should be assumed. Lindow's plausible conclusion at the end of his discussion of *Bandamanna saga* is relevant for interpreting and understanding Þorkell too: "I ... suggest that the figure of Loki and Óðinn appealed to the narrator and

³⁹ Cf. Anne Saxon Slater, "From Rhetoric and Structure to Psychology in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*," *Scandinavian Studies* 40 (1968): 36-50, 36: "... highly developed sense of literary craft ...," Kathleen Dubs, "The Discourse of Persuasion in *Hrafnkatla*," *Scandinavian Studies* 49 (1977): 464-474, 456: "... means of subtle and skillful persuasion" See also von See, "Die Hrafnkels saga als Kunstdichtung."

audience of *Bandamanna saga* because of the deepseated psychological appeal of the trickster figure..." (256). Porkell's mythic appearance can be seen as a mythological overlay. His "level of performance" is elevated. Porkell's cunning nature cannot be compared in great detail to the elaborated and obvious trickster-nature of Ófeigr, but they both do have some Odinic characteristics in common, and it can be argued that these characteristics intensify Porkell's appearance and behavior too; it is an apt literary embellishment.

An attempt to prove Hrafnkell's hanging to be "ein Stück echter Tradition" is bound to remain fruitless, since a larger Odinic narrative does not emerge in the saga. The only vague indication of the Þjóstarssynir's Æsic affinities are their names,⁴⁰ which excludes the possibility of the hanging being "eine Maßnahme von Óðinn verehrern" (Hofmann 33; my italics).

Gade is surely right when she states that "[h]anging must have been an intended outrage and a symbol of ultimate degradation" (167). But Hrafnkell's hanging is unusual⁴¹ and bears a mythic connotation; it is a potential "mythological overlay" that could have been recognized by the thirteenth-century audience familiar with, for example, *Hávamál* and *Gautreks saga*, where Víkarr's hanging up-side-down is part of a mock-Odinic rite. It is a potential "prolonged echo," when the idea behind Óðinn's hanging can be applied to Hrafnkell's. This needs to be established in order to consider Hrafnkell's hanging as a convincing mythic element.

Óðinn's "suffering is always linked with gaining or disclosing knowledge," and his "dangling from a tree ... allowed him to attain ... the growing of his person ..." (Motz; 75 and 82). The early Óðinn was a lesser deity who in the course of mythic time acquired a prominent position.⁴² According to Fleck, "... it was through the self-sacrifice that Óðinn achieved his position of preëminence in the Germanic pantheon. To use Dumézil's terminology, Óðinn rises to power by virtue of the fact that he assumes responsibility for all three functions of the Indo-European trinity" (400). Hrafnkell starts as a ruler with religious power, designated by Freyr himself. After his hanging, his presence has a positive influence on the surrounding area, and since he has acquired social skills, he is to become an improved and even more powerful ruler.

Of course, it cannot and will not be claimed that it could have been Sámr and the Þjóstarssynir's intention to enable Hrafnkell to grow and become a better ruler. In the same vein, a detailed comparison between the development of Óðinn's life and character and that of Hrafnkell should not be undertaken; Hrafnkell is not Víga-Glúmr whose conversion to Óðinn is reflected in his

⁴⁰ Cf. Edgar C. Polomé, "Germanic Religion: An Overview," *Essays on Germanic Religion*, ed. Edgar C. Polomé, Journal of Indo-European Studies Monograph 6 (Washington, 1989) 68-138, 105-106.

⁴¹ It needs to be called to mind, that, in a historical context, hanging was primarily a punishment for theft and not for murder (Gade 162-164).

⁴² Cf. Motz 67-70 (with references to earlier research).

character, appearance, and behavior.⁴³ What can and will be taken into consideration, though, is the possibility that the saga-author has used the mythic image of Óðinn's hanging and its general underlying thought in order to underline and intensify an intention of his narrative, namely the intention of which Andersson offers an interpretation.

Andersson's starting-point is that "Hrafnkell is and remains the chieftain, while Sámr is by no means a right-minded alternative, but an imposter and something of a fool who needs to be put in his place" (301). Then, he argues, "that the saga author was participating in a general medieval dialogue on the limits of authority, one that oscillated between forceful expressions of divine right and an increasing emphasis on royal responsibilities" (302); *Hrafnkels saga* advocates the Christian doctrine "that even wicked kings should be obeyed" (303). Within the scope of the present essay, Andersson's view need not be discussed at length. Worth mentioning is that in the line of his interpretation Hrafnkell's hotly debated (change of) character need not be explained and justified: "Pride was, to be sure a moral flaw, but in the long run it could not justify the deposing of a king or even a chieftain. Moral failings were subject to political consideration and were not sufficient to disqualify legitimate power" (306).

During the thirteenth century the Icelanders were increasingly forced to start thinking about the implications of royal power, since the Norwegian kings made their presence felt (Andersson 304-305). In order to come to terms with the concept of kingship, they could not fall back on a continuous native tradition dealing with monarchs. The Icelanders were, however, familiar with their own 'monarchs,' the *goðar*, and with the impending Norwegian rule in mind, the legitimacy of their power could be put under discussion and, more importantly, it should be established, too. For this, the historical past could not offer any arguments. The mythic past, however, was able to draw to a link between the power of the *goðar* and that of the *god*.

The mythic past enabled the thirteenth-century Icelanders to provide their "noble-heathen" ancestors with a divine right with which their institution of power could be legitimized; the Icelanders could participate in the larger Scandinavian tendency to explore its mythic past, an effort of which for example Snorri's *Ynglinga saga* is an offspring.

Óðinn was a suitable point of reference, since he was the "Ancestor of Kings" (Motz 77). The thirteenth-century Icelanders can be expected to have been familiar with mythic stories about Óðinn that show the legitimacy of his status as ruler, for example, *Snorra Edda*, and *Hávamál*, and especially the

⁴³ Cf. footnote 9 above. Cf. also, for Glúmr's Odinic features, Ursula Dronke, "Sem jarlar forðum. The influence of *Rígsþula* on two saga-episodes," *Speculum Norroenum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. Ursula Dronke et alii (Odense: Odense UP, 1981) 56-72, 57-64. Cf. also Polomé, "Freyr" col 593.

hanging scene and its connotation as pointed out by Fleck and Motz. If *Hrafnkels saga* was indeed intended to address the legitimacy of power, the possibility should be taken into consideration that Hrafnkell's hanging is an intended mythic element. Hrafnkell's spear could be considered as a structural device with a mythic connotation: it underlines the mythic allusion of the hanging, and as a part of his *regalia* at the end of the saga it affirms the legitimacy of Hrafnkell's leadership. It should be mentioned that Freyr is no less a ruler, albeit a different one, than Óðinn:

Óðinn represents the king in relation to his retainers, frequently landless men who follow in his wake. Freyr, himself the owner of a hereditary estate, represents the king in relation to the land, as he was seen by men of hereditary property. Freyr and Óðinn may have evolved in different social and possibly regional traditions which were blended, imperfectly, at some time in the Middle Ages. (Motz, 30)

The elements in the mythic narratives Meulengracht Sørensen showed to have existed all relate to Freyr as a fertility god. Since these Freyr-narratives are thought to have originated in connection with the actual ritual practices, it can be assumed that Freyr was indeed a god traditionally associated with fertility. In Iceland, his status as a ruler is therefore likely to reflect a later interpretation and extension of his divine responsibilities. This multifunctionality of Freyr deserves more attention.

If it has been the saga author's intention to address the legitimacy of power, it can be assumed that Freyr as a divine ruler appealed to him. In this respect Hrafnkell *Freysgoði* was a suitable character for exactly the story he wanted to tell. This raises an interesting question: did the saga author want to impose an idea on the stories about Hrafnkell that were orally transmitted and that he decided to write down, or did he start with an initial idea for which he then had to find the narrative frame and material most suitable to address this idea? This question is not likely to be answered in a conclusive way, and a discussion will not be initiated. Suffice it to say, that for the argument made in the present essay, the option that the saga author started with an idea first is appealing, since it might explain why the 'historical' account of Hrafnkell that contained (at least a residue of) traditional material relating to Freyr as a god of fertility, is as fragmentarily rendered as it is in *Hrafnkels saga*.

According to Lotte Motz, the notion of Freyr's role as a "king and ruler among gods and men" originated on the Scandinavian continent, where it in the course of time was emphasized (Motz 16, 22-32). It is possible that certain families devoted to Freyr brought this tradition to Iceland (Motz 24). For the discussion of *Hrafnkels saga*, however, is it more likely that in thirteenth-century Iceland Freyr became known as "The King as Giver of Peace and

Fertility” - with an emphasis on his status as a ruler⁴⁴ - due to the influence of texts such as *Snorra Edda* and *Ynglinga saga*, because of the fact that it conflicts with the traditional presentation of Freyr as a fertility god.

Since it is not possible to establish a literary connection between texts such as *Snorra Edda* on the one hand and *Hrafnkels saga* on the other, the mythic elements related to Freyr should be labelled as “prolonged echoes” rather than as “mythological overlays;” the thirteenth-century ‘mythological’ texts such as *Ynglinga saga* and *Snorra Edda*, are expressions of mythic ideas, and exactly these ideas, and not the texts as literary artifacts, might bear a specific relevance for the interpretation of the mythic elements in *Hrafnkels saga*; an author intended to discuss power and its legitimacy could very well have used mythic elements relevantly corresponding to these topics.

In summary, the following concluding remarks can be made. Meulengracht Sørensen’s findings indicate the existence of a mythic narrative discourse that, to some extent, is historically reliable. These findings combined with earlier results of, among others, Knut Liestøl and Halldórsson give reason to believe that *Hrafnkels saga* as it exists in the transmitted manuscripts was preceded by a historically more reliable account in which the mythic elements could have played a more prominent role and in which these in all likelihood were expressed more explicitly and coherently. A reconstruction of the ‘original’ fable is an exciting endeavor indeed, but because of its speculative nature, such an effort is not to be favored. It suffices to point out the plausibility of its existence.

With regard to the manuscripts of *Hrafnkels saga* that are actually attested, it can be concluded that the mythic elements in the earlier accounts of Hrafnkell have survived in a distorted and fragmentary way. One possible explanation is to assume that it has not been the author’s intention to render these accounts faithfully; it is possible that he did not ‘understand’ the mythic elements that were transmitted to him orally, but it is more likely to assume that his knowledge of Freyr was primarily derived from literary narratives – such as *Ynglinga saga* – that in their presentation emphasize the deity as a ruler and a “divine model of the king,” an idea appealingly suitable to utilise in the discourse of his own narrative. This specific knowledge obscured the older traditional representation of Freyr as a fertility god.

The Odinic reference of Hrafnkell’s hanging in combination with the mention of the spear is, admittedly, not overtly clear, but it can be discerned and it is possible to assign a thematic meaning and relevance to it, something which could have been noticed as well as appreciated by a contemporary audience.

In order to come to terms with texts such as *Hrafnkels saga*, as many aspects as possible of the culture that produced them should be taken into account. It is a positive and legitimate assumption that the contemporary

⁴⁴ Cf. Motz 29: “Freyr is not only a divine ancestor but also the divine model of the king.”

audience of *Hrafnkels saga*, familiar with all the aspects of their own culture, was able to experience the saga as a coherent and recognizable whole, offering a straightforward rather than an ambiguous message. It remains to be seen whether this can be achieved by a twenty-first century audience as well. A first step to include a mythological interpretation in the discussion of *Hrafnkels saga* has been taken; a first attempt to combine it with an already established one, has been made.