SCANDIA
Journal of Medieval Norse Studies

THE DISCOURSE OF DREAMS IN MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC SAGA WRITING

O DICURSO DOS SONHOS NA ESCRITA DAS SAGAS ISLANDESAS

Dr. Christopher Crocker[1]

Abstract*:* The dreams described and discussed in the medieval Icelandic sagas always seem to bear some profound connection to the events of waking life. Scholars have often considered how this aspect of the medieval narratives may reflect either native, pre-Christian beliefs common to the medieval Nordic world or foreign literary traditions imported to the area during the later Middle Ages. Interestingly, several such examinations focus on certain passages in the sagas wherein disputes arise over the perceived significance – or insignificance – of a given dream. However, a close exploration of several such passages – within their respective narrative contexts – seems to reveal more complex attitudes towards the perceived significance of dreams to waking life in the sagas than scholars have sometimes allowed for. Moreover, the discourse of dreams employed by medieval saga writers and used to communicate to their medieval audience may ultimately resist attempts to draw a definitive boundary between that which derives from native traditions, on the one hand, and foreign traditions, on the other.

Keywords: Icelandic sagas, dreams, medieval, narrative, paranormal.

Resumo: Os sonhos descritos e discutidos nas sagas islandesas medievais parecem sempre ter alguma conexão profunda com os eventos da vida em vigília. Estudiosos têm frequentemente considerado como esse aspecto das narrativas medievais pode refletir crenças nativas pré-cristãs comuns ao mundo nórdico medieval ou a tradições literárias estrangeiras importadas para a região durante a Idade Média. Curiosamente, vários desses exames se concentram em

[1] Christopher Crocker is an instructor in the Department of Icelandic Language and Literature at the University of Manitoba and in the Department of Rhetoric, Writing, and Communications at the University of Winnipeg. E-mail: crockcwe@umanitoba.ca

certas passagens nas sagas, nas quais surgem disputas sobre o significado percebido - ou a insignificância - de um dado sonho. No entanto, uma exploração minuciosa de várias dessas passagens - dentro de seus respectivos contextos narrativos - parece revelar atitudes mais complexas em relação ao significado percebido dos sonhos para a vida desperta nas sagas do que os acadêmicos às vezes percebem. Além disso, o discurso dos sonhos empregados pelos escritores de saga medievais e usado para comunicar a sua audiência medieval pode, em última instância, resistir às tentativas de traçar um limite definitivo entre o que deriva das tradições nativas, por um lado, e as tradições estrangeiras, por outro.

Palavras-chave: Sagas islandesas, sonhos, narrativa, paranormal.

The narrative of the late-thirteenth-century *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* (hereafter *Gunnlaugs saga*), following the reckoning of a couple of key genealogies, begins in earnest with the description of an event that takes place when two men, the Icelander Þorsteinn Egilsson and a man named Bergfinnr, who is consistently thereafter referred to as *Austmaðr* (the Norwegian), are at work repairing some booths at the local assembly-site in the west of Iceland. Eventually Þorsteinn grows tired and is overcome by sleep but, noticeably to his companion, he does not seem to rest soundly. The *Austmaðr* – who had been introduced as a *vitr maðr* [wise man] and one who "hendi mikit gaman at draumum" [gained great enjoyment from dreams] – does not wake Þorsteinn but rather "lét hann njóta draums sins" [let him enjoy (or benefit from) his dream]. When Þorsteinn wakes up and his companion asks what he had dreamed Þorsteinn simply replies "ekki er mark at draumum" [dreams mean nothing].

Later that evening the *Austmaðr* again asks Þorsteinn about his dreams. Þorsteinn secures an agreement from the *Austmaðr* to interpret his dream "sem hann er til" [as it really is] before himself explaining,

> Þat dreymði mik, at ek þóttumk heima vera at Borg ok úti fyrir karldurum, ok sá ek upp á húsin ok á mœninum álpt eina væna ok fagra, ok þóttumk ek eiga, ok þótti mér allgóð. Þá sá ek fljúga ofan frá fjǫllunum ǫrn mikinn; hann fló hingat ok settisk hjá álptinni ok klakaði við hana blíðliga, ok hon þótti mér þat vel þekkjask. Þá sá ek, at ǫrninn var svarteygr ok járnklœr váru á honum; vaskligr sýndisk mér hann. Því næst sá ek fljúga annan fugl af

> suðrætt; sá fló hingat til Borgar ok settisk á húsin hjá álptinni ok vildi þýðask hana; þat var ok ǫrn mikill. Brátt þótti mér sá ǫrninn, er fyrir var, ýfask mjǫk, er hinn kom til, ok þeir bǫrðusk snarpliga ok lengi, ok þat sá ek, at hvárumtveggja blœddi; ok svá lauk þeira leik, at sinn veg hné hvárr þeira af húsmœninum, ok váru þá báðir dauðir, en álptin sat eptir hnipin mjǫk ok daprlig. Ok þá sá ek fljúga fugl ór vestri; þat var valr; hann settisk hjá álptinni ok lét blítt við hana, ok síðan flugu þau í brott bæði samt í smu ætt, ok þá vaknaða ek. (Anonymous, *Borgfirðinga saga* 53–54)
> [I dreamed that I seemed to be at home at Borg and by the front door, and I saw up on the house along the ridge a lone swan fine and beautiful, and it seemed that she was mine, and I thought it very good. Then I saw flying over the mountains a great eagle; he flew here and set down next to the swan and chattered gently with her, and she seemed to me to take it well. Then I saw that the eagle had black eyes and iron claws; he seemed gallant to me. The next thing was that I saw another bird fly in from the south; that one flew here to Borg and set down on the house next to the swan and wanted to engage with her; it was also a great eagle. Soon it seemed to me that the eagle that was already there got very angry when the other arrived and they fought roughly and for a long time, and I saw that they were both bleeding and their game ended when they fell down from the house ridge on either side and then both were dead, but the swan sat after downcast and very sad. And then I saw a bird flying from the west; it was a falcon; it set down next to the swan and was gentle with her, and then they flew away both in the same direction, and then I woke up.]

However, before the *Austmaðr* has an opportunity to respond, Þorsteinn delivers his own interpretation of the dream. Þorsteinn declares the dream to be *ómerkiligr* [meaningless] and supposes that it is indicative of "veðrum, at þau mœtask í lopti ór þeim ættum, er mér þóttu fuglarnir fljúga" [weather (or winds), that they will meet on the roof, from those directions from which it seemed the birds had flown]. The *Austmaðr* sees things differently and, when prompted by Þorsteinn to "[g]er af drauminum, slíkt er þér sýnisk líkligast" [make of the dream, such as seems most likely], he explains that,

> Fuglar þeir munu vera manna fylgjur; en húsfreyja þín er eigi heil, ok mun hon fœða meybarn frítt ok fagrt, ok munt þú unna því mikit. En gǫfgir men munu biðja dóttur þinnar ór þeim ættum, sem þér þóttu ernirnir fljúga at, ok leggja á hana ofrást ok berjask of hana ok látask báðir af því efni; ok því næst mun inn þriði maðr biðja hennar ór þeiri ætt, er valrinn fló at, ok þeim mun hon gipt vera. Nú hefi ek þýddan draum þinn ok hygg eptir munu ganga. (Anonymous, *Borgfirðinga saga* 55)
> [The birds, they must be people's *fylgjur*[2] but your wife is pregnant, and she will give birth to a promising and beautiful little girl, and you will love her greatly. But honourable men will

[2] The Old Icelandic *fylgja* (nom. pl. *fylgjur*) is often rendered in English as *fetch*, a term attested as early as the eighteenth century when it was glossed as "the apparition of a person living," or "the supernatural facsimile of some individual, which comes to ensure to its original a happy longevity, or immediate dissolution." The English *fetch* shares no etymological relation to the Old Icelandic *fylgjur*, but it is possible that the latter bears some relation to the rare Old English *fæcce*, which is perhaps circuitously

> ask for your daughter from those directions from which it seemed to you the eagles flew and will offer her great love and fight over her and both will die on her account; and then a third man will ask for her from the direction which the falcon flew, and to him she will be married. Now I have explained your dream and that is the way it will go.]

While the *Austmaðr* expresses confidence in his interpretation, Þorsteinn expresses only contempt, remarking "Illa er draumr ráðinn ok óvingjarnliga … ok munt þú ekki drauma ráða kunna" [Poorly is the dream interpreted and unfriendly … and you don't know how to interpret dreams]. From then on Þorsteinn "lagði fæð á Austmanninn" [was cold towards the Norwegian]. Despite his casual and later vociferous objections, however, Þórsteinn soon tells his now pregnant wife that the child will be exposed if it is born a girl.[3] Þorsteinn's scheme goes predictably awry when the *ákafa fagrt* [exceedingly beautiful] child is born and, unbeknownst to her father, is carried away to be secretly raised by his sister Þorgerðr.

Þorsteinn's dream plays a pivotal role by setting in motion the saga's central narrative, the events of which follow the broad strokes laid out in *Austmaðr*'s interpretation of Þorsteinn's dream concerning the love life of the Þorsteinn's daughter Helga the fair. This brief episode offers a remarkable example of the significance of dreams within the kind of reality commonly depicted in medieval saga narratives, suggesting that such phenomena bear profound connections to the events of waking life. However, the conflict in the dialogue between the two

---

related to the Old Icelandic *mara*, referring to "a nightmare" or "an incubus or hag"; see "Fetch," in *The Oxford English Dictionary*; *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* p. 660; Hall, 2007, pp. 299–317. As in this passage from *Gunnlaugs saga*, the term *fylgja* has traditionally been thought to refer to a kind of animalistic guardian-spirit or soul reflecting native Icelandic pre-Christian traditions; see, for example, Kelchner, 1935, p. 17; Mundal, 1974, pp. 26–62; Argüelles, 1994, pp. 243–44; Friesen, 2015, pp. 255–80. However, some scholars have recently questioned this common interpretation of the term; see Sonne, 2009, pp. 5–30; McCreesh, 2012, pp. 225–26; and Crocker, 2016, pp. 117–61. Bearing little impact on the concerns of the present analysis, it may be helpful to keep in mind that the term *fylgjur* certainly did take on the primary meaning that it is now generally ascribed during some stage of medieval Icelandic society, surviving into the modern period in various folk traditions. However, the concept's supposed roots in native Icelandic pre-Christian traditions may not be as clearly identifiable as modern scholars, editors, and translators have often assumed.

[3] Both Jófríðr and the narrator of the saga assert that such an order, though perhaps customary at the time, is unbecoming of a man of Þorsteinn's wealth and standing. When Christianity was officially adopted in Iceland near the turn of the first millennium child exposure was one of the customs that, according to *Íslendingabók*, Icelanders were unwilling to fully concede, along with the consumption of horseflesh. These provisions were said to have been overturned only a few years later (Anonymous, *Íslendingabók*, *Landnámabók* 17; Anonymous, *Brennu-Njáls saga* 272. On the complex social reality of this custom, see Lawing, 2013, pp. 133–50.

men concerning Þorsteinn's dream should not be overlooked. Indeed, a closer examination of their disagreement, and others similar examples, suggests that the medieval sagas frequently attest to a more complex discourse concerning dreams and their significance or insignificance than scholars have sometimes allowed for or at least implied.

Questions of Origins

Like many of the so-called *Íslendingasogur*, or Sagas about Early Icelanders, *Gunnlaugs saga* has long inspired debate among those who have regarded it to be a work reflecting either indigenous Icelandic traditions, rooted in earlier Germanic culture, or foreign, romantic traditions imported to Iceland during the later Middle Ages. Some have regarded the sage as whole in this light, while others have analyzed its constituent parts in effort to understand the nature of the whole as some combination of both indigenous and foreign traditions. Some scholars have, for example, drawn attention to several parallels shared between the description of Þorsteinn's dream and its interpretations and passages found in other medieval Icelandic sagas. For example, parallels have been drawn between Þorsteinn's dream and the description of a dream found in *Gísla saga Súrsonnar* in which two birds are attacking one another or, in another version of the saga, a flock of birds attacks a farmstead. A dream found in *Flóamanna saga* features a swan that notably seems also to bear a connection with a woman named Helga. In *Laxdæla saga* the saga's heroine, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, describes a series of four dreams that are connected to her own future love interests and the fate of these relationships (Cochrane, 2004, pp. 200; Perkins, 1974–77, pp. 216–17, 235; Olsen, 1911, p. 32).[4] Parallels have also been drawn between Þorsteinn's dream and the descriptions and interpretations of dreams found in sources reflecting ancient Germanic traditions, including both the medieval Icelandic *Völsunga saga* and the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*, each including dreams featuring birds that seem to represent the dreamer's, Guðrún's (or Kriemhilt's), future husband, the famous dragon-slayer Sigurðr fáfnisbáni, or Sivrit (Liestøl, 1974, pp. 176–77).[5]

[4] For the descriptions of these dreams and some of their interpretations see, respectively, Anonymous, *Vestfirðinga sögur* 110–11 and Anonymous, *Membrana regia deperdita* 74–75; Anonymous, *Harðar saga* 293–94; and Anonymous, *Laxdæla saga* 88–91.

[5] In *Völsunga saga*, Guðrún first describes a dream to her ladies-in-waiting in which a golden-feathered hawk was perched on her wrist that seemed more valuable to her than all else, but when she later seeks

On the other hand, some have observed that the early events of *Gunnlaugs saga* share parallels with and may reveal the influence of certain medieval accounts of the Trojan Epic cycle, including the medieval Icelandic version of the story, *Trójumanna saga* (Nordal, 1938, pp. 9–10). Early in this version of the story Priam's wife Hecuba

> dreymði þa er hon var vravst at ein logbrandr liði fram af mvnni hennar þar fyri þotti henna oll Troio borg brenna. hon var rædd miok ok sagði Priamo dravmin enn spekingar reðv sva at hon mvndi fœða ein s(vn) þann er fyri hans sakir mvndi niðr vera brotin oll Troio borg. (Anonymous, *Trójumanna saga* 9–10)
> [dreamed when she was pregnant that a firebrand passed from out of her mouth, from which it seemed to her all Troy burned. She was very frightened and told the dream to Priam and wise men interpreted it such that she would give birth to a son on whose account all of Troy would be destroyed.]

Priam – like Þorsteinn – orders that the child be exposed, but when Hecuba sees how beautiful he is she – like Þorsteinn's wife Jófríðr – takes steps to ensure the child's safety by enlisting another to raise her son Alexander in secret. He then takes the new name Paris, and – like Helga – survives to fulfill the role that his mother's dream and the wise men who had interpreted it had cast for her son.[6]

---

out Brynhildr in order to discover the precise identity of her future husband she describes a dream of golden-haired hart that she had obtained but which Brynhildr had subsequently killed before giving Gunnhildr a wolf-cub that sprinkles her and her brothers with blood (Anonymous, *Vǫlsunga saga ok Ragnars saga loðbrókar* 61). In the *Nibelungenlied*, Kriemhilt recounts a dream perhaps more closely akin though not exactly parallel to the dream described in *Gunnlaugs saga* in which two eagles attack and kill a falcon (Anonymous, *Das Nibelungenlied, Kudrun* 4).

[6] The Old Icelandic *Trójumanna saga* is largely adapted from *De excidio Troiae historia*, commonly dated to the sixth century, though the saga also seems to draw on other sources including Ovid's *Heroides*. The reference to Hecuba's dream is found only in the *Hauksbók*-version of *Trójumanna saga* and is not referred to in *De excidio Troiae historia*, though it is mentioned in Ovid's *Heroides*. References to Hecuba's dream also appear in other medieval versions of the story, some of which may share connections with the Old Icelandic *Trójumanna saga*. These include, for example, the so-called *Rawlinson Excidium Troiae*, difficult to date with precision but possibly a medieval redaction of a pedagogical text from late antiquity, and Joseph of Exeter's *Daretis Phrygii Ilias De bello Troiano* from the late twelfth century. References to Hecuba's dream can also be found in several vernacular versions of the story from the Middle Ages, including the *Libro de Alexandre*, a Spanish epic poem from the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, Konrad von Würzburg's Middle High German epic poem *Der trojanische Krieg* from the mid- to late-thirteenth century, and *The Seege or Batayle of Troye*, an anonymous Middle English poem dated to the early fourteenth century. There is considerable variance in the texts with respect to the episode concerning Hecuba's dream. In *The Seege or Batayle of Troye*, for example, no effort is made to expose or kill the child but rather he is sent away to a place with no weapons where he would "nought lerne for to fight" (7–8). For an overview on the different medieval versions of the story and the various connections

Such parallels may be useful in revealing the direct or indirect influence that indigenous or foreign traditions may have exercised during the composition of the medieval sagas. Alexander Argüelles has, for example, applied such an approach to the contrasting interpretations provided in the episode concerning Þorsteinn's dream. Argüelles identifies the *Austmaðr*'s interpretation of the dream as the "native interpretation," in part because it proves to be correct within its narrative context (1994, p. 250).[7] However, it is worthy to note that the rather mundane and apparently foreign interpretation that Þorsteinn offers – that the dream only signifies the directions of the winds – parallels several episodes found in other medieval Icelandic sources, including two passages found in the late-thirteenth-century *Völsunga saga*. Indeed, in the abovementioned passage in which Guðrún Gjúkadóttir describes a dream to her ladies-in-waiting, one among them first suggests that "iafnan dreymir fyrir vedrum" [dreaming always precedes (or foretells) weather (or winds)], though Guðrún herself is adamant that "[þ]etta er ekki vedr" [this is not weather (or winds)] (Anonymous, *Völsunga saga ok Ragnars saga loðbrókar* 61).[8] Later in the same saga, Kostbera, the wife of Guðrún's brother Högni, recounts a dream of a menacing bear to which her husband replies, "[þ]ar man koma vedr mikit, er þu ętladir hvitabiorn" [great weather (or winds) will come thereof, where you thought of a polar bear] (93).

The latter passage echoes, and perhaps directly draws upon, one found in the Eddic poem *Atlamál in grænlenzku* [The Greenlandic lay of Atli], likely dating to the twelfth or early thirteenth century but perhaps reflecting older oral traditions. Here Högni's response to his wife Kostbera's description of her dream is rendered in verse as follows: "Veðr mun þar vaxa, / verðr ótt snemma. / Hvítabjörn hugðir: / þar mun hregg austan" [Weather (or winds) will grow thereof, / quickly becoming furious. / (You) thought of a polar-bear: / so an easterly

---

they might share, see Atwood, 1934, pp. 379–404. On the different versions of *Trójumanna saga*, see Louis-Jensen, 1981, pp. xi–lxx.

[7] The argument here may also rely on the *Austmaðr*'s use of the term *fylgjur* within his interpretation of the dream, which Argüelles regards as an aspect of the "Old Norse worldview" reflecting ancient Northern traditions (1994, p. 243).

[8] In its surviving form, the saga is generally thought to have been composed sometime during the thirteenth century, though reflecting much older Germanic traditions (Olsen, 1906–8, pp. xiii–lxxxiii).

storm (or wind) will come] (Anonymous, *Eddukvæði* I, 386).[9] As in the other cases mentioned above, Högni's interpretation is proven incorrect within its narrative context. However, the notion that his false interpretation – along with those other parallel interpretations found in *Völsunga saga* – is rooted in foreign rather than native traditions remains speculative and, in such instances as this, attempts to separate utterly the elements that might be traced to native traditions, on the one hand, and to foreign traditions, on the other, may be rife with pitfalls. For example, in the passage from *Gunnlaugs saga* discussed above, if the *Austmaðr*'s interpretation of Þorsteinn's dream reflects well-established native traditions, it is difficult to understand why it would necessitate such a lengthy explication while Þorsteinn's terse and more mundane interpretation seems to parallel a phrasing found in both the older Eddic poem *Atlamál in grænlenzku* and in *Völsunga saga*. This line of counterargument does not, however, verify that Þorsteinn's interpretation is more likely to reflect native traditions, but simply suggests that the criteria for determining whether such textual elements reflect native or foreign traditions remains highly speculative. Moreover, such efforts might obscure the significant part that disagreement sometimes plays in the discussions of dreams in the medieval sagas, likely itself reflecting an important aspect of inherited traditions or the experience of the sagas' authors and their medieval audience.

---

[9] *Atlamál in grænlenzku* appears in the late thirteenth-century manuscript GKS 2365 4to (the *Codex Regius* or *Kónungsbók Eddukvæði*), following the poem *Atlakviði*, itself originating perhaps as early as the ninth or tenth century. Though the two poems recount some of the same events, it remains uncertain whether the original author of *Atlamál* knew of *Atlakviði* in its extant form. In any case there is no corresponding mention of dreams found in the older poem. Furthermore, while in the *Codex Regius* both poems are said to be Greenlandic in origins (39v; 41r), *Atlamál* contains a number of elements, including the specific mention of a polar bear, that may betray its specific Greenlandic origins, and most consider the reference to the Greenlandic origins of *Atlakviði* to be erroneous; on the connections between, the dating, and the origins of the two poems, see Ólason, 2014, I, pp. 117–50; on the relation between the two poems and *Völsunga saga*, see Finch, 1981, pp. 123–38. Much of the narrative of *Völsunga saga*, and also the *Nibelungenlied*, corresponds to the narrative related in the body of heroic poetry found in the *Eddukvæði* (or *Poetic Edda*), preserved in the *Codex Regius*, alongside some of the most important poems relating certain aspects of the Old Norse Mythological cosmos. However, there is a lacuna – the so-called "Great Lacuna" of likely eight leaves – in the manuscript that may have once contained portions of a poem corresponding to the section of *Völsunga saga* in which Guðrún's dream is described and interpreted, though it can never be known for certain whether the no longer extant poem contained any references to dreams. On the speculative contents of the missing leaves and supposed connections between the three sources concerning Guðrún's (Kriemhilt's) dreams, see Nordmeyer, Jan. 1, 1940, pp. 292–99; Andersson, 1981, pp. 6–26.

Ekki er mark at draumum

Much of the focus during the abovementioned scene from near the opening of *Gunnlaugs saga* is naturally placed on the *Austmaðr*'s interpretation of Þorsteinn's dream. However, the escalating tension pervading the prolonged exchange between the two men hinges on Þorsteinn's initial claims that dreams may convey only a mundane or perhaps even no significance at all to the events of waking life. Indeed, when first encouraged to disclose the details of his dreams Þorsteinn immediately issues the sweeping dismissal, "ekki er mark at draumum" [dreams mean nothing]. Failing to stifle the *Austmaðr*'s interest, as the conversation continues, the reverberating effects of Þorsteinn's initial remark seems to gradually erode its ostensible meaning, culminating in a final angry outburst.

In the wider context provided by the saga, Þorsteinn's remark that "dreams mean nothing," thus seems to become a powerful assertion of that which he appears to deny, which is to say an assertion of the significance of his dreams to the events of his waking life. In rhetorical terms the remark appears to be an instance of *apophasis*, an assertion of something by way of a firm denial of that very thing.[10] The term, and rhetorical device, dates back at least to antiquity in the tradition of "apophatic" or "negative" theology (*Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology)*. Some scholars have suggested that Þorsteinn's remark was a popular proverb in Iceland for many centuries (Gering, 1916, p. 16; Turville-Petre, 1972, p. 30). However, other than the instance referred to above, the phrase is found only in one other surviving medieval source, the late thirteenth-century *Íslendinga saga*, preserved within the *Sturlunga saga* compilation. Here the chieftain Sturla Sighvatsson is said to have awoken one morning – namely the morning before the Battle of Örlygsstaðir in 1238 where he meets his death – with sweat covering his face and issues the remark "ekki er mark at draumum" and nothing more is said about the matter (I, p. 523).[11] Like the example from *Gunnlaugs saga*, the narrative context here – namely the sweat covering Sturla's face and his imminent death – seems to suggest that his remark may be

[10] John Smith provides an early-modern definition of this term as a rhetorical tool, stating that it is "a kind of an Irony, whereby we deny that we ſay or doe that which we eſpecially ſay or doe" (1665, p. 156).
[11] There are many others dreams explicitly described and discussed throughout the saga, which have attracted the attention of several scholars; see, for example, Glendinning, 1974; Nordal, 2006, pp. 304–13; Bragason, 2006, pp. 971–77.

similarly shaded in irony in that his dreams must be closely tied to the later events of his waking life (Bragason, 2006, pp. 971–73). Just as the question of whether Þorsteinn delivered the initial remark in earnest or in effort to deny to himself or his companion the significance of his dreams remains unsolvable, whether Sturla should be regarded as the conscious author of this aspect of the text is unclear. In any case, its usage could be another example of the way medieval saga writers adapted to their own developing literary traditions stylistic devices common to Latin rhetoric – including *aphodos*, *litotes*, and *inversio* – that appeared in foreign writings they likely had access to (Sävborg, 2017, p. 121).

If the phrase "ekki er mark at draumum" has become a popular proverb during the centuries since these sagas were first written down, its scant appearance in surviving medieval Icelandic texts fails to verify that this phrase was unusually popular during the Middle Ages. However, many similar remarks expressing similar sentiments with respect to the significance, or lack of significance, of dreams to the events of waking life appear throughout medieval saga writing. In the late-thirteenth-century *Brennu-Njáls saga*, for example, shortly after the burning from which the saga gains its name, the leading figure in the party that had committed the infamous arsonous act, Flosi Þorðarson travels the country to gather support for his an impending lawsuit.[12] Amongst those whose support he secures are the two brothers Þorkell *fullspakr* [all-wise] and Þorvaldr, but only after he has given them each three marks of silver, which elicits a tearful reaction from their mother Yngvildr. She goes on to describe to Þorkell a harrowing dream she had experienced in which his brother Þorvaldr was wearing a tight red tunic and in poorly laced red hose. She felt this vision was awful to see but was unable to do anything about it. Her sons, however, simply "hlógu at ok kváðu vera loklausa ok sǫgðu geip hennar ekki skyldu standa fyrir þingreið sinni" (Anonymous, *Brennu-Njáls saga* 351–52) [laughed and said it was nonsense and said that her baloney would not stand in the way of them riding to the assembly]. Despite the brothers' collective mirth, Yngvildr's anticipatory despair finds validation when Þorvaldr meets his death during the subsequent Battle at the Alþingi.

[12] On the many other dreams described and discussed in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, see Cochrane, 2004, pp. 38–89; Crocker, 2015, pp. 261–91.

A similar exchange appears in the thirteenth-century *Laxdæla saga*, shortly preceding the death of Kjartan Óláfsson. Here one of Kjartan's men, Án, recounts a harrowing dream that similarly inspires laughter amongst Kjartan and his other followers. Án is given the ignominious nickname *hrísmagi* [twig-belly], inspired by the events of his dream, and he is poked and prodded by the others to extend the joke. A woman called Auðr, however, chastises the men for their mockery and tells Kjartan that he should either put off his journey or henceforth ride with a greater force than he had travelled with previously. Kjartan replies, "Vera kann, at yðr þykki Án hrísmagi mjǫk merkimáll, þá er hann sitr á tali við yðr um dagana, er yðr þykkir allt sem vitran sé, þat er hann dreymir; ok fara mun ek, sem ek hefi áðr ætlat, fyrir þessum draum" (Anonymous, *Laxdæla saga* 149) [It may be that you think Án twig-belly is very trustworthy when he sits and talks to you all day, so that it seems to you entirely as if it is a vision [or revelation] what he dreams; but I will move on, as I had already intended, before this dream].[13] Both Án's dream and Auðr's unheeded warning prove prescient just a short time later when Án is wounded and Kjartan is killed by his foster brother Bolli.

The thirteenth-century *Gísla saga Súrssonar* provides another interesting example of one who explicitly refuses to disclose the contents of their dreams. Here, shortly before the death of his close companion Vésteinn, it is said of the eponymous hero of the saga that he "lætr illa í svefni tvær nætr í samt, ok spyrja menn, hvat hann dreymði. Hann vill eigi segja drauma sína" (lay poorly in his sleep for two strait nights, and people asked what he had dreamed. He did not want to report his dreams). Later, after the killing of Vésteinn, Gísli makes reference to these same events, describing two dreams that he had experienced during the previous two nights, which he claims reveal the author of the deed though he refuses to name the killer. He then tells his brother Þorkell, "sagða ek því hvárngan drauminn fyrr en nú, at ek vilda, at hvárrgi réðisk" (Anonymous, *Vestfirðinga sögur* 43, 46; see also Anonymous, *Membrana regia deperdita* 28, 30–31) [I recounted neither dream until now, because I wanted no one to interpret (them), (or they would not come true)].[14] Gísli is explicit in providing the reason for his reluctance to recount his

[13] Án's dream is the first of a pair of dreams, the latter of which he experiences after the conflict that follows the earlier dream and is connected to his own recovery from the wounds he suffers during battle; see *Laxdæla saga* p. 155.

[14] Cochrane notes that there is some uncertainty in the phrase "at hvárrgi réðisk," which may refer to either the act of interpreting, or to the supposed truth-value of the dreams (2004, pp. 146–47). The identity

dreams, though there may now be some uncertainty over precisely why he feels that way. In any case, his words and a verse that follows, clearly suggest that his reluctance to relate the details of his dreams is not based on an assumption that dreams are meaningless or deceptive but rather that by keeping them to himself he is either able to conceal their significance or perhaps even to prevent the forthcoming events that they seem to signify coming to pass.

In contrast to Gísli's explicit concern for his dreams, an interesting parallel to some of the more dismissive remarks referred to above appears in the early- to mid-thirteenth-century *Þiðreks saga af Bern* [The Saga of Theoderic (or Dietrich) the Great], composed in its surviving form in Norway but perhaps composed by an Icelander.[15] *Þiðreks saga* is based on or at least shares roots with some of the same traditional material reflected in the abovementioned sources concerning the Völsung legendary cycle. In fact, the saga contains a particularly interesting passage in which the brothers Gunnarr and Högni, and a third brother named Gíslher, are also similarly to visit their brother-in-law in the land of the Huns. Prior to their leaving, however, their mother Queen Oda describes a dream that she had experienced in which, she says, "ek sá í Húnaland svá marga dauða fugla, at allt land várt var autt af fuglum" (I saw in the land of the Huns so many dead birds, that our entire land was void of birds). She then asks the brothers not to make their planned journey to meet their sister's husband Attila to which Högni dismissively replies, "ekki herðum vér um drauma yðra gamalla kvinna. Fátt got vitið þér. Ekki megu yður orð standa um vára ferð" (Anonymous, *Þiðreks saga af Bern* II, 490–91) [we do not follow your dreams old woman. Little good you know. Your words will not stand in the way of our journey].[16] Like Þorkell and Þorvaldr's response to their mother's tearful reaction to her harrowing dream – found in *Njáls saga* and referred to above – it is worth noting that the

---

of Vésteinn's killer, which is never explicitly revealed here nor anywhere else is certain versions of the sagas, and its connections to these dreams has inspired considerable scholarly debate (Porter, 2013, pp. 173–95).

[15] The question of the precise origins of *Þiðreks saga* has never been fully settled. While scholars generally agree that the narrative's sources were German, arguments remain over whether the saga as it now survives originated as a German or Norwegian project, with scholars dating the saga to either the late-twelfth or early- to mid-thirteenth century respectively; on the former view, see, for example, Andersson, 1986, pp. 347–77; and on the latter, see Kramarz-Bein, 2002.

[16] In the *Nibelungenlied*, Queen Uote (Oda) describes the same dream and Hagene (Högni) issues a more general disclaimer against putting too much faith in the significance of dreams since they could be easily misinterpreted; see *Das Nibelungenlied, Kudrun* p. 174.

dreamer's gender may play a pivotal role in shaping the tone of this and other similar verbal exchanges. Kjartan's dismissal of Auðr's advice following Án's harrowing dream may also bear a subtle sexual quality, specifically in Kjartan's euphemistic reference to the long conversations that Auðr and Án frequently share together (Cochrane, 2004, p. 126).[17] A similar dismissal appears in *Droplaugarsona saga* when Helgi Droplaugarson dismisses his male companion's urge that he change his plans on account of a dream that Helgi describes to him, stating "mun ek fara sem ek hefi ætlat" (Anonymous, *Austfirðinga sögur* 161) [I will travel as I had intended]. Thus, such remarks are not always addressed to women, though Helgi's refusal to change his plans may, like the others, still reflect certain gender expectations and ideals of heroic masculine conduct (Cochrane, 2004, p. 36).[18]

Gender may also play an implicit role in the abovementioned passages found in both the Eddic poem *Atlamál* and in *Völsunga saga*, where Högni's wife Kostbera. In the poem *Atlamál*, after providing opposing and rather mundane interpretations of several of her dreams, including her dream of the bear, Högni responds to his wife's claim that his brother-in-law Atli has wicked intentions towards both he and Gunnarr by declaring, "heill er hugr Atla, / hvatki er þik dreymir" (Anonymous, *Eddukvæði* II, p. 386) [good is Atli's mind [or intention(s)], / however you dream]. In *Völsunga saga*, Högni more severely reproves Kostbera at different stages of the exchange, first proclaiming "Þer erut opt illudgar, ok a ek ecki skap til þess at fara illu i mot vit menn, nema þat se makligt. Mun hann oss vel fagna" [You are often evil natured, and I have no reason to proceed badly toward anyone but those who deserve it. He [Atli] will receive us well], and then closes the conversation stating that "mun heil hugur Atla vid oss" (*Vǫlsunga saga* pp. 93–94) [Atli has a good mind [or intention(s)] towards us]. In neither instance does Högni suggest a direct correspondence between his wife's dire misreading of her dreams and her womanhood, though the gender dynamics of the exchange are perhaps difficult to ignore. Högni's attitude may even call to mind another proverbial phrase that was supposedly popular in medieval Iceland: "eru (opt) kǫld kvenna ráð" [(often) cold are the counsels of

[17] Cochrane also notes that Kjartan's remark may be particularly cutting given Auðr's history of supposed transvestism relating to her earlier divorce, which earned her the nickname Bróka [Breeches]-Auðr (Anonymous, *Laxdæla saga* 95–98).
[18] For a similar exchange in *Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa* wherein such a remark is directed towards a woman, see Anonymous, *Borgfirðinga sögur* 158.

women].[19] Like those examples referred to above, the refusal here to put much stock in dreams or to let dreams influence one's actions may not reflect an explicit rejection of the significance of dreams to the events of waking life in general – especially given the way Atli does welcome his brothers-in-law, which does indeed lead to their deaths – but may reveal important aspects of heroic masculine expectations or ideals.

Together these several examples suggest a tradition – if only a literary one – of commonly assigning to women a grave concern for the significance of dreams, though a concern that is often dismissed. However, like the brief exchange referred to above from *Droplaugarsona saga*, another passage found in the previously mentioned *Brennu-Njáls saga* may – on its surface – provide an interesting counter example to this tradition. In the saga, shortly after his sons and son-in-law have killed their foster-brother Höskuldr, the eponymous Njáll asks his son Skarpheðinn what he and his brothers are planning to do next. Skarpheðinn tells his father, "Lítt rekju vér drauma til flestra hluta" (Anonymous, *Brennu-Njáls saga* 295) [we reckon little by dreams, for the most part], even though Njáll had made no reference to dreams. Considering the many dreams described elsewhere in the saga, and the other examples discussed above, Skarpheðinn's remark is likely not simply a strange non-sequitur but rather a sharp rejoinder against the sources of knowledge he supposes his father might be keen to draw upon. When introduced into the saga, Njáll is said to be very wise but also *forspár* [foresight-ful] and *langsýnn* [far-seeing], qualities that may indicate his ability to access paranormal channels of knowledge, which are not exclusively but are commonly associated with women or other socially marginalized figures (Friðriksdóttir, 2009, p. 411). There is, however, no overt indication that Njáll's reputation suffers on this account, as opposed to some others who

[19] Like the phrase "ekki er mark at draumum," this apparently "proverbial phrase" appears only a few times in the surviving corpus of medieval saga writing, in both *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and also in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, for example, amidst two highly charged exchanges between men and women (Anonymous, *Vestfirðinga sögur* 61; Anonymous, *Brennu-Njáls saga* 292). However, in the Eddic poem *Völundarkviða*, the king Níðuðr once similarly remarks to wife, "kǫld eru mér ráð þín" (Anonymous, *Eddukvæði* I, 435). Furthermore, *Partalopa saga* – an Old Norse adaptation of a continental romance poem – contains an expanded version of a similar phrase: "eigi ma konvm trva ok kavlld erv jafnan kvenna rad þviat þav erv favitvr ok brad" (Anonymous, *Partalopa saga* 91–92). A similar phrase also appears in Chaucer's *Noones Preestes Tale*, where it is once said that "Wommennes conseils been ful ofte colde" (Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* 254). In *Laxdæla saga* a similar remark also appears, however, in this instance the remark – "hafa mér þaðan jafnan kǫld ráð komit" – refers to the counsels of a man, namely Snorri goði (Anonymous, *Laxdæla saga* 195; see also Harris).

channel the paranormal in this and other sagas and seem to suffer for it, which may be more reflective of their social status than their behaviour (Jakobsson, 2017, pp. 101–11). While Skarpheðinn's remark may not be regarded as overtly gendered, Njáll notably faces several memorable affronts to his perceived lack of masculinity in the saga, commonly drawing on the fact that is unable to grow a beard.[20] Furthermore, this exchange between father and son may be emblematic of what has become an extremely tense and perhaps irretrievable relationship by this point in the saga following Skarpheðinn's role in the killing of Njáll's foster son Höskuld, an event which would soon cause Njáll to claim that he would have rather have lost all his sons than to have experienced Höskuld's death (Anonymous, *Brennu-Njáls saga* 309; Tirosh, 2014, pp. 208–26). Perhaps it remains unlikely that Skarpheðinn would seek to insult his own father in this way. Nevertheless, Skarpheðinn's remark does coincide with similar remarks found in other sagas either dismissing the significance of dreams or refusing to let them guide one's action, an important facet of the imagined masculine heroic ideals commonly expressed in saga writing.

A remarkable example cleverly countering those instances discussed above in which the supposed significance of certain dreams is dismissed appears in the so-called *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*. Here the Icelandic poet Sneglu-Halli is said on two occasions to have recounted dreams that he had likely never actually experienced at all. In the first instance Halli recounts a dream that he claims to have experienced before King Haraldr in which he seemed to be another man altogether and to compose slanderous verses, some of which he claims to still remember. The King then tells the poet Einarr fluga "þetta var ecki draum" [this was no dream] and compels Einarr to pay compensation to Halli to avoid running the risk of these slanderous verses going public. In the second instance Halli finds a ship that he wishes to board to be fully occupied. He then recounts another dream that he claims to have experienced in which a large man appeared and recited a menacing verse, which Halli then repeats before the ship's passengers. Upon hearing Halli's account, all of the passengers leave the ship fearing for their lives, following which, it is said, "Halli reztt þegar j skip og sagdi ath þetta uar prett*r* hans enn eingi draum*r*"

[20] These affronts are perhaps not presented as reflections of authorial judgement and may in fact form a part of the larger authorial criticism of the apparent norms of the misogynist society depicted in the saga and its exaggerated and incoherent masculine ideals (Jakobsson, 2007, pp. 191–215).

(Anonymous, *Flateyjarbók* 424, 426) [Halli then boarded the ship and said that it was a trick of his and not a dream].[21] In both instances Halli seems to take advantage of the significance that others might ascribe to their own or others' dreams. In the first instance, he employs a sophisticated means of threatening to defame an adversary without having to voice outright the slanderous verses of which he might only tangentially be considered the author.[22] In the second he similarly relies upon a commonly held belief in the supposed significance of dreams to incite fear to make room for himself on a fully-boarded ship.

Unlike Halli, in another interesting passage found in *Laxdæla saga*, the powerful magnate Óláfr pái [peacock] appears to experience a rather harrowing dream but longs for the dream to have been some kind of trick or meaningless illusion. In the dream Óláfr encounters a woman who tells him that she will claim his most-loved son, presumably Kjartan, in response to Óláfr having recently slaughtered a remarkable ox that the woman claims to be her own son.[23] The dream has a profound and disturbing effect on Óláfr. However, the saga describes that he "segir vinum sínum, ok varð ekki ráðinn, svá at honum líki. Þeir þóttu honum bezt um tala, er þat mæltu, at þat væri draumskrǫk" (Anonymous, *Laxdæla saga* 84–85) [told his friends, and it was not interpreted to his liking. He thought it best to talk to those who said that it was a *draumskrǫk*]. The term *draumskrǫk* appears nowhere else in extant saga writing, though it seems to be somewhat synonymous to the only slightly less rare and somewhat later terms *draumskrímsl* and *draumórr*, each of which refers to a "false" or "delusional dream" or "phantasm" (*Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog*).[24] Óláfr's inclination towards the opinions of

[21] This passage is found in the late-fourteenth-century manuscript GKS 1005, or *Flateyjarbók*. The same tale is recorded in the early-thirteenth-century *Morkinskinna*, with only minor differences in the first instance, whereas in the latter there is only an indirect inference that Halli has fabricated the events of his dream (Anonymous, *Morkinskinna* 283–84).

[22] Though he makes no mention of *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*, William Ian Miller has discussed the ways in which dreams, prophecies, or consultations with wise men or local diviners were used in the medieval Icelandic society depicted in the sagas as a means to voice suspicions and assign blame without running the risk of making outright accusations that might be considered slanderous (1986, pp. 101–23).

[23] On the details and narrative context of the dream and its possible roots in regional folk traditions, see Cochrane, 2004, pp. 92–99.

[24] The terms *draumaskrímsl* and *draumórr* are most commonly attested in later medieval Icelandic romances, both those of native and those of foreign origins. The Old Icelandic *draumskrǫk* combines the nouns *draumr* and *skrǫk*, the latter referring to a "falsehood" or "untruth." The fourteenth-century *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* contains a similar sentiment wherein the king – speaking in verse – refers to one of his followers account of the dreams he has experienced as "fifl skapur taladr" (foolishly spoken),

those who regard his dream to be false or delusional is particularly interesting in light of the profound effect that the experience itself had upon him. Like the opening passage from *Gunnlaugs saga*, there is no explicit remark suggesting that Óláfr or his unnamed friends' presumptions that his dream should be considered insignificant are categorically wrong. However, certain aspects of this scene seem to suggest that the saga's audience should remain suspect of such a claim, and such suspicions are likely confirmed when his son Kjartan meets an untimely death later in the saga.

Discourse of Dreams

The dreams described in the sagas – and frequently though not always interpreted – always seem to bear some profound connection to the events of waking life. However, it is important to recognize that the dreamers themselves, or others to whom their dreams are communicated, do not always readily admit that such connections are anything more than trivial, even outright denying such a connection in some cases. The discourse of dreams found in the sagas is arguably less uniform than scholars have sometimes allowed for or recognized. Indeed, many of the examples discussed above reveal a complexity of possible attitudes towards the significance of dreams to the events of waking life, including remarkably skeptical views on the matter. Of course, the expression of some of the more skeptical views towards the significance of dreams found in the sagas are often contradicted by different elements of their respective narrative contexts, revealing that these dreams in fact bear profound significance on the events of waking life. On the other hand, the passage from *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* discussed above provides an interesting example of a cynical or irreverent approach to this matter wherein Halli takes advantage of the stock others' place upon the significance of dreams to the events of waking life. Halli's actions do not entirely undermine the notion that dreams may bear significant connections to the events of waking life, but they do suggest to that one might be well served by using some degree of skepticism when encountering such claims.

The surviving textual evidence suggests that skeptical or even outright dismissive attitudes towards the significance of dreams would have likely been familiar to some members

---

commanding him, "seg þu aungua / suo at heyrí / drauma þína / j degi siþan" (Anonymous, *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* 182).

of the sagas' medieval Icelandic audience. In fact, some of the examples cited above hint that such ideas had been or became common enough to have generated their own vernacular vocabulary by the thirteenth century, though some of this vocabulary may also have arisen from contemporary translation projects. Returning to the opening scene from *Gunnlaugs saga* discussed above, the complexity of the attitudes towards dreams expressed in the sagas have sometimes been obscured by an even greater complexity, which is the complex nature of the medieval sagas themselves, many of which depict not the society in which they were first written down but purport to represent an earlier Icelandic or Nordic society – or varied images of that society – at several centuries remove. From this complexity arises the modern scholarly practice of attempting to trace the origins of the written sagas, or more commonly of their constituent parts, to either native, pre-literary traditions or to later foreign literary traditions. Such an approach has doubtlessly provided a deeper understanding of the literary culture of medieval Iceland. However, considering the complex attitudes towards the significance of dreams expressed throughout medieval saga writing, the criteria that has been used – as mentioned above – to attribute Þorsteinn's mundane interpretation of his dreams to foreign traditions and his Norwegian companions more profound interpretation to native Icelandic traditions is hardly convincing, even if the Norwegian's interpretation proves to be prescient.

A similar example of a dream that inspires contrasting interpretations again appears in *Laxdæla saga*, which has similarly been understood as reflective of the opposing influence of native and foreign traditions. Here, the abovementioned Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir's fourth husband, Þorkell Eyjólfsson, recounts a dream in which he seemed to have a beard so great that it seemed to cover over Breiðafjörðr. Þorkell claims that the dream shows that his *ríki* [power or rule] will spread over the entire region, while Guðrún claims the dream indicates that he will "drepa skeggi í Breiðafjörð niðr" (Anonymous, *Laxdæla saga* 215) [dip (his) beard down into Breiðafjörðr]. Several scholars have noted that Þorkell's interpretation seems to correspond to a passage found in the *Somniale Danielis*, a "dreambook" originating in late antiquity and popular throughout the Middle Ages,[25] which was also adapted to several other languages including

[25] The "dreambook" tradition arises in many forms, the *Somniale Danielis* being among its most popular product. The *Somniale Danielis* has been dated to late antiquity, having been adapted to Latin as early as the seventh century, but its origins may be much earlier. The name of the book purports to attribute the

Old Icelandic.[26] Though absent from the incomplete Old Icelandic version of the text, in the *Somniale Danielis* a dream of a lush beard suggests the prospect of increasing power or wealth, which is precisely the message that Þorkell takes away from his experience. Guðrún's interpretation, on the other hand, is a kind of euphemism or symbolic way to refer to death by drowning, possibly relying also on the double meaning of the phrase *drepa niðr*, meaning "to dip down," but also "to strike down" (Henzen, 1890, p. 45). Guðrún does not elaborate on the meaning of the phrase herself, but a time later when Þorkell drowns it becomes clear just what she had had in mind.[27]

Like the opening scene from *Gunnlaugs saga*, some scholars have viewed the disagreement between Guðrún and Þorkell as evidence of contrary foreign and native traditions. Þorkell's – like Þorsteinn's – incorrect interpretation of the dream is taken to derive from the foreign *Somniale Danielis* tradition. On the other hand, Guðrún's interpretation of the dream, later proven prescient, is thought to reflect authentic, native traditions (Turville-Petre, 1968, p. 28; Argüelles, 1994, p. 332). However, it is worth noting that symbolic associations

---

book to the biblical prophet Daniel, renowned for providing interpretations to the dreams of King Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2, 4). The purported attribution was dismissed in the twelfth-century *Decretum Gratiani*, the most influential book of canon laws compiled during the Middle Ages. This dismissal attests to the popularity and potency of the *Somniale Danielis* tradition during that time (*Corpus iuris canonici*, I, pp. 1045–46). On the *Somniale Danielis* and other medieval dreambook traditions, see Kruger, 1992, pp. 7–16, 123–24; Thorndike, 1923, II, pp. 290–302.

[26] See, for example, Larsen, 1917, p. 84; Turville-Petre, 1968, p. 28; Cochrane, 2004, pp. 129–30. The Old Icelandic version of the *Somniale Danielis* survives in the manuscript AM 764 4to, which is dated to the latter half of the fourteenth century. The leaf containing what appears to be an incomplete Old Icelandic version of the *Somniale Danielis* is not contemporary with the other parts of the manuscript and has been dated c. 1500. On the Old Icelandic *Somniale Danielis*, its possible connections to other Latin and vernacular versions of the text, and a transcription and English translation of the manuscript, see Turville–Petre, 1968, pp. 19–36; Óskarsdóttir, 2000, pp. 118, 240. Larsen considered nearly all the descriptions and interpretations of dreams found in the *Íslendingasögur* to derive from the *Somniale Danielis* tradition, perhaps not directly but likely through enduring oral traditions (1917, pp. 37–85). Turville-Petre, prior to and following his later discovery of the surviving Old Icelandic version of the *Somniale Danielis*, was more tempered in his view, allowing for the influence of the *Somniale Danielis* but also the persistence of native traditions (1972, pp. 30–51; 1968, pp. 19–36). Alexander Argüelles, on the other hand, sought to emphasize the differences between the *Somniale Danielis* tradition, as preserved in the incomplete Old Icelandic version of the text, and the kinds of interpretations provided by the *Íslendingasögur*, which he contends present "an independent oneirocritic tradition, rooted in pre-Christian Scandinavian imagery" (1994, pp. 326–42).

[27] Guðrún's interpretation of the dream, and her husband's death by drowning, correspond also to Gestr's interpretation of the fourth of the dreams that Guðrún had earlier enlisted him to interpret, as referred to above (Anonymous, *Laxdæla saga* 89–91).

between a man's beard or hair and masculinity, which is often synonymous with power and wealth, are not otherwise unknown in the sagas. The most famous example of this link appears in *Njáls saga* in connection with Njáll's abovementioned inability to grow a beard, which inspires several others in the saga to attack his masculinity (Anonymous, *Brennu-Njáls saga* pp. 57, 113, 229, 314).[28] Furthermore, Þorkell's interpretation of his dream bears certain similarities with traditions or medieval literary conventions associated with Norwegian kings, which is particularly noteworthy in light of a pivotal encounter leading up to Þorkell's death (Cochrane, 2004, pp. 131–33).

Shortly after his exchange with Guðrún, Þorkell travels from Iceland to Norway where he gathers timber to build a church in Iceland to match the size of the church built by King Óláfr helgi [the Saint]. The King petitions Þorkell to reduce the scale of his plans. After Þorkell refuses, the King admonishes him for his *of* (excess or pride), and ominously remarks that "menn hafi litla nytse mð viðar þessa, ok fair því firr, at þú getir gǫrt neitt mannvirki ór viðinum" (Anonymous, *Laxdæla saga* 216–17) [people will make little use of this timber, and it will be far from it that you will be able to get any labour out of the timber]. Thus, Þorkell's subsequent death shares some connection to his excessive pride and overbearing nature, crucially juxtaposed against the figure of the Saintly King (Cochrane, 2004, p. 132; Jakobsson, 1998, p. 375). A less commonly discussed example of a husband and wife disagreeing over the significance of a dream appears in *Flóamanna saga* when Þorgils Örrabeinsstjúpur's travel party are ice-bound in a remote part of Greenland. Þorgils wife Þórey, suffering from illness, experiences a dream in which she is in a beautiful land (estate) populated by beautiful and radiant people. Þórey understands the dream to signify that the group will soon be relieved from their hardships. Þorgils, however, counters that the dream signifies what Þórey can expect when she reaches the next world (*annars heims*) (Anonymous, *Harðar saga* 286–87). Þórey soon dies and presumably makes her way to the paradise that her husband had promised her, clearly attesting to the influence of medieval Christian vision literature on the written saga (Perkins, 1974–77, pp. 208–11). In addition to providing another example of the complexity of possible

[28] As mentioned above, while others in the saga use Njáll's beardlessness as grounds for attacking him, the narrative itself may not endorse such attitudes, and the connection between beards or hair and masculinity in the sagas is not always straightforward (Jakobsson, 2007, pp. 195–98; Phelpstead, 2013, pp. 1–19.

attitudes towards the significance of dreams found in the sagas, this passage seems to counter the idea that whenever a man and a woman disagree over the significance of a dream described in the sagas it is always the woman's interpretation that is proved true (Cochrane, 2004, p. 83).

It remains difficult to trace definitively contrasting interpretations to dreams described in the sagas to either foreign or native traditions. In the case of the opening scene from *Gunnlaugs saga*, as discussed above, the fact that the *Austmaðr*'s interpretation ultimately proves prescient has been used to support the notion that his interpretation reflects authentic native and likely pre-Christian traditions (Argüelles, 1994, p. 250; Turville-Petre, 1968, p. 29). However, in the example from *Flóamanna saga*, Þorgils prescient celestial interpretation of his wife's dream is clearly inspired by medieval Christian rather than pre-Christian native traditions. Moreover, the *Austmaðr*'s interpretation somewhat corresponds to a passage found in the *Somniale Danielis* – though not in the incomplete Old Icelandic version of the text – in which a dream featuring birds fighting one another is said to signify forthcoming strife, wrath, or confusion, so the notion that this interpretation reflects only native Icelandic tradition is not altogether certain. In any case, it seems difficult to conclude that the saga writers commonly used their narratives to bolster deliberately native traditions concerning the significance of dreams in opposition to their foreign counterparts (Turville-Petre, 1968, p. 29; Argüelles, 1994, pp. 326–42). If these saga writers were conscious of the roots of these traditions when introducing contrary interpretations of dreams within the narratives it may be more likely that these new, foreign traditions were viewed as something to add to rather than replace any existing native traditions (Cochrane, 2004, p. 251). Indeed, the passage from *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* suggests that both saga writers and at least some portion of their medieval audience were able to view certain attitudes towards the perceived significance of dreams to the events of waking life in an irreverent, perhaps even skeptical or highly ironic light.

Attempts to trace the roots of certain elements from passages in the sagas concerning dreams to either native or foreign traditions have sometimes yielded interesting results, most commonly when the direct influence of an earlier text can be detected. However, supposing that all such passages, particularly those passages in which contrasting attitudes towards dreams are expressed, lend themselves well to this kind of discrete analysis can overshadow other crucial aspects of the saga narratives. Indeed, in many of those examples discussed above, the complex

discourse concerning the significance of dreams often plays a crucial role within the narratives, revealing or reinforcing valuable information about certain characters or the fabric of the saga narratives as a whole. In fact, as Torfi Tulinius writes, the *Íslendingasögur* characteristically "create a hesitation about the ontological status of what is portrayed" (pp. 255, 257), which is commonly accomplished through a reluctance to describe direct – or perhaps objective – contacts or experiences with the paranormal, which consists of those things which fall outside of the range of the normal or expected human experiences, including dreams.[29] Efforts to resolve this kind of hesitation by dissecting portions of the narratives to discover traces of the supposed constituent traditions they may contain can, indeed, conceal more significant aspects of the narratives, including the complex attitudes towards the significance of dreams to the events of waking life to which several of the sagas attests. Whether such attitudes, characterised by different degrees of cynicism, doubt, scepticism, or belief, or any of their specific iterations, accurately reflect either native or foreign cultural or literary traditions, the contexts provided by the written sagas suggest that their thirteenth- and fourteenth-century audience were likely aware of a variety of attitudes towards the significance dreams may relate to the events of waking life. Recognizing this quality in the texts allows for a deeper understanding of the cultural and literary contexts in which the written sagas were first recorded, but also encourages a more profound understanding of the singular effect of the medieval saga narratives each on their own terms.

Bibliographical references:

Primary Sources

ANONYMOUS. *Austfirðinga sögur*. JÓHANNESSON, Jón (Ed.). Íslenzk Fornrit XI. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1950.

ANONYMOUS. *Borgfirðinga sögur*. NORDAL, Sigurður and Guðni Jónsson (Eds.). Íslenzk Fornrit III. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1938.

ANONYMOUS. *Brennu-Njáls saga*. SVEINSSON, Einar Ól. (Ed.). Íslenzk Fornrit XII. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornitafélag, 1954.

[29] On this conception of the "paranormal," as opposed to the "supernatural," see Ármann Jakobsson, 2017, pp. 22–23.

Corpus iuris canonici. FRIEDBERG, Aemilius (Ed.), 2 vols. Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1879.

ANONYMOUS. *Das Nibelungenlied, Kudrun*. HOFFMANN, Werner (Ed.). Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972.

ANONYMOUS. *Eddukvæði*. KRISTJÁNSSON, Jónas and Vésteinn Ólason (Eds.). Íslenzk Fornrit Goðakvæði and Hetjukvæði, 2 vols. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2014.

ANONYMOUS. *Flateyjarbók: En samling af norske konge-sagaer med indskudte mindre fortællinger om begivenheder i og udenfor Norge samt annaler*. VIGFÚSSON, Guðbrandur and C. R. Unger (Eds.), 3 vols. Christiania: P. T. Mallings, 1860–68.

ANONYMOUS. *Harðar saga*. VILHJÁLMSSON, Bjarni and Þórhallur Vilmundarson (Eds.). Íslenzk Fornrit XIII. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1991.

ANONYMOUS. *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*. SEELOW, Hubert (Ed.). Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi Rit 20. Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, 1981.

ANONYMOUS. *Íslendingabók*, *Landnámabók*. BENEDIKTSSON, Jakob (Ed.). Íslenzk Fornrit I. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968.

ANONYMOUS. *Laxdæla saga*. SVEINSSON, Einar Ól. (Ed.). Íslenzk Fornrit V. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1934.

ANONYMOUS. *Membrana regia deperdita*. LOTH, Agnete (Ed.). Editiones Arnamagnæanæ Series A, vol. 5. Copenhagen: E. Munksgaard, 1960.

ANONYMOUS. *Morkinskinna*. JAKOBSSON, Ármann and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson (Eds.), 2 vols. Íslenzk Fornrit 23–24. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2011.

ANONYMOUS. *Partalopa saga*. ANDERSEN, Lisa Præstgaard (Ed.). Editiones Arnamagnæanæ Series B, vol. 28. Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels forlag, 1983.

ANONYMOUS. *Sturlunga saga: efter membranen Króksfjarðarbók, udfylt efter Reykjafjarðarbók*. KÅLUND, Kr. (Ed.), 2 vols. Copenhagen and Christiania: Gyldendalske boghandel. Nordisk Forlag, 1906–11.

CHAUCER, Geoffrey. *The Riverside Chaucer*. BENSON, Larry D. (Ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

ANONYMOUS. *The Seege of Troye*. WAGER, C. H. A. (Ed.). New York: The MacMillan Company, 1899.

ANONYMOUS. *Trójumanna saga*. LOUIS-JENSEN, Jonna (Ed.). Editiones Arnamagnæanæ Series A, vol. 8. Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1963.

ANONYMOUS. *Vestfirðinga sögur*. ÞÓRÓLFSSON, Björn K. and Guðni Jónsson (Eds.). Íslenzk Fornrit VI. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1943.

ANONYMOUS. *Vǫlsunga saga ok Ragnars saga loðbrókar*. OLSEN, Magnus (Ed.). STUAGNL 36. Copenhagen: STUAGNL, 1906–8.

ANONYMOUS. *Þiðreks saga af Bern*. JÓNSSON, Guðni (Ed.), 2 vols. Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1951.

Secondary Sources

An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary. TOLLER, T. Northcote (Ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898.

ANDERSSON, Theodore M. "The lays in the lacuna of *Codex Regius*." In: DRONKE, Ursula, Guðrún P. Helgadóttir, Gerd Wolfgang Weber, and Hans Bekker-Nielsen (Eds.). *Specvlvm norroenvm: Norse Studies in memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1981, pp. 6–26.

_____. "An Intepretation of Thidreks saga." In: LINDOW, John, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber (Eds.). *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism of Edda and Saga Narrative*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1986, pp. 347–77.

ARGÜELLES, Alexander. *Viking Dreams: Mythological and religious dream symbolism in the Old Norse sagas*. PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1994.

ATWOOD, E. Bagby. "The Rawlinson *Excidium Troie* – A Study of Source Problems in Mediaeval Tory Literature." *Speculum*, 1934, vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 379–404.

KRAMARZ-BEIN, Susanne. *Die Þiðreks saga im Kontext der altnorwegischen Literatur*. Tübingen and Basel: A. Francke Verlag, 2002.

BRAGASON, Úlfar. "'Ekki er mark at draumum': The Fantastic in *Islendinga saga*." In: McKINNELL, John, David Ashurst, and Donata Kick (Eds.). *The Thirteenth International Saga Conference, Durham University and York University, 6-12 Aug. 2006*. Durham: The Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006, pp. 971–77.

Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology. FERGUSSON, David A. S., K. Kilby, *et al*. (Eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

COCHRANE, James Alan. *Bright Dreams and Bitter Experiences: Dreams in Six Sagas of Icelanders*. PhD diss., University College of London, 2004.

CROCKER, Christopher. "To Dream is to Bury: Dreaming of Death in *Brennu-Njáls saga*." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 2015, vol. 114, no. 2, pp. 261–91.

_____. *Situating the Dream: Paranormal Dreams in the Íslendingasögur*. PhD diss., University of Iceland, 2016.

FINCH, R. G. "*Atlakviða*, *Atlamál* and *Vǫlsunga Saga*: A Study in Combination and Integration." In: DRONKE, Ursula, Guðrún P. Helgadóttir, Gerd Wolfgang Weber, and Hans Bekker-Nielsen (Eds.). *Specvlvm norroenvm: Norse Studies in memory of Gabriell Turville-Petre*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1981, pp. 123–38.

FRIÐRIKSDÓTTIR, Jóhanna Katrín. "Women's Weapons: A Re-Evaluation of Magic in the *Íslendingasögur*." *Scandinavian Studies*, 2009, vol. 81, no. 4, pp. 409–36.

FRIESEN, William. "Family Resemblances: Textual Sources of Animal *Fylgjur* in Icelandic Saga." *Scandinavian Studies*, 2015, vol. 87, no. 2, pp. 255–80.

GERING, Hugo. "Altnordische sprichwörter und sprichwörtliche redensarten." *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 1916, vol. 32, pp. 1–31.

GLENDINNING, Robert J. *Träume und Vorbedeutung in der Islendinga Saga Sturla Thordarsons: Eine Form- und Stiluntersuchung*. Bern and Frankfurt am Main: Herbert Lang and Cie AG, 1974.

HARRIS, Richard L. *Concordance to the Proverbs and Proverbial Materials in the Old Icelandic sagas*, https://www.usask.ca/english/icelanders/index.html.

KELCHNER, Georgina Dunham. *Dreams in Old Norse Literature and their Affinities in Folklore*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935.

HALL, Alaric. "The Evidence for *maran*, the Anglo-saxon 'Nightmares'." *Neophilologus*, 2007, vol. 91, pp. 299–317.

JAKOBSSON, Ármann. "Konungasagan Laxdæla." *Skírnir*, 1998, vol. 172, pp. 357–83.

_____. "Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls saga*." *Viator*, 2007, vol. 38, pp. 191–215.

_____. *The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North*. punctum books, 2017.

KRUGER, Steven F. *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

LARSEN, Sophus. "Antik og nordisk drømmetro" *Aarbøger for nordisk oldkyndighed og historie*, 1917, pp. 37–85.

LAWING, Sean B. "The Place of Evil: Infant Abandonment in Old Norse Society." *Scandinavian Studies*, 2013, vol. 85, no. 2, pp. 133–50.

LIESTØL, Knut. *The Origin of the Icelandic Family Sagas*, trans. A. G. Jayne. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1930 (reprt. 1974).

LOUIS-JENSEN, Jonna. "Introduction." In: LOUIS-JENSEN, Jonna (Ed.). *Trójumanna saga: The Dares Phrygius Version*. Editiones Arnamagnæanæ Series A, vol. 9. Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels, 1981, pp. i–lxx.

McCREESH, Bernadine. "Animal-*Fylgjur* – Cultural Memory or Literary Fiction?" In: NORDVIG, A. Mathias Valentin and Lisbeth H. Torfing (Eds.). *The 15th International Saga Conference: Sagas and the Use of the Past, 5th–11th August 2012, Aarhus University*. Aarhus: Aarhus University, 2012, pp. 225–26.

MILLER, William Ian. "Dreams, Prophecy and Sorcery: Blaming the Secret Offender in Medieval Iceland." *Scandinavian Studies*, 1986, vol. 58, no. 2, pp. 101–23.

MUNDAL, Else. *Fylgjemotiva i norrøn litteratur*. Skrifter fra Instituttene for nordisk språk og litteratur ved universitetene i Bergen, Oslo, Trondheim og Tromsø 5. Oslo, Bergen, and Tromsø: Universitetsforlag, 1974.

NORDAL, Guðrún. "To Dream or Not to Dream: A Question of Method." In: McKINNELL, John, David Ashurst, and Donata Kick (Eds.). *The Thirteenth International Saga Conference, Durham University and York University, 6-12 Aug. 2006*. Durham: The Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006, pp. 304–13.

NORDAL, Sigurður. "Formáli." In: NORDAL, Sigurður and Guðni Jónsson (Eds.). *Borgfirðinga saga*. Íslenzk Fornrit III. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1938, pp. v–clv.

NORDMEYER, George. "Source Studies on Kriemhild's Falcon Dream." *Germanic Review*, Jan. 1, 1940, vol. 15, pp. 292–99.

OLSEN, Björn M. *Om Gunnlags saga ormstungu: En kritisk undersøgelse*. Copenhagen: Høst, 1911.

OLSEN, Magnus. "Fortale." *Vǫlsunga saga ok Ragnars saga loðbrókar*. In: OLSEN, Magnus (Ed.). Copenhagen: STUAGNL, 1906–8, pp. i–cii.

Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog, 2010. Retrieved from http://onp.ku.dk.

ÓLASON, Vésteinn. "Formáli." In: KRISTJÁNSSON, Jónas and Vésteinn Ólason (Eds.). *Eddukvæði*. Íslenzk Fornrit Goðakvæði and Hetjukvæði, 2 vols. Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 2014, I: pp. 11–287, II: pp. 7–204.

ÓSKARSDÓTTIR, Svanhildur. *Universal history in fourteenth-Century Iceland: Studies in AM 764 4to*. PhD diss., London: University College London, 2000.

PERKINS, Richard. "The Dreams of Flóamanna saga." *Saga-Book*, 1974–77, vol. 19, pp. 191–238.

PHELPSTEAD, Carl. "Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow: Hair Loss, the Tonsure, and Masculinity in Medieval Iceland." *Scandinavian Studies*, 2013, vol. 85, no. 1, pp. 1–19.

PORTER, Edel. "Lost in Transmission: Reconstituting Forgotten Verses in *Gísla saga Surssonar*." *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 2013, vol. 9, pp. 173–95.

SMITH, John. *The Myſterie of Rhetorique Unveil'd*. E. Cotes for George Everſden at the Mayden-head in St. Pauls-Church-yard, 1665.

SONNE, Lasse C. A. "Leksikografiske studier I: Substantivet *fylgja*." *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, 2009, vol. 124, pp. 5–30.

SÄVBORG, Daniel. "Style." In: JAKOBSSON, Ármann and Sverrir Jakobsson (Eds.). *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*. London and New York: Routledge, 2017, pp. 111–26.

The Oxford English Dictionary, 20 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

THORNDIKE, Lynn. *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 8 vols. New York: Macmillan, 1923.

TIROSH, Yoav. "Víga-Njáll: A New Approach Toward *Njáls saga*." *Scandinavian Studies*, 2014, vol. 86, no .2, pp. 208–26.

TULINIUS, Torfi. "The *Matter of the North*: fiction and uncertain identities in thirteenth-century Iceland." In: CLUNIES ROSS, Margaret (Ed.). *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 242–65.

TURVILLE-PETRE, Gabriel. "An Icelandic Version of the "Somniale Danielis"." In: ORRICK, Allan H. (Ed.). *Nordica et Anglica: Studies in Honor of Stefán Einarsson*. The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1968, pp. 19–36.

_____. "Dreams in Icelandic Tradition." In: *Nine Norse Studies*. University College London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1972, pp. 30–51.