

An Introduction to Old Norse Literature - *Skáldasögur*

Four 'core' sagas with star-crossed lovers:

Kormáks saga

Komákr (an Irish name) Ögmundarson

Steingerðr ('stone-goddess')

m. Hólm-Bersi ('the dueller')

m. Þorvarðr tinteinn ('tin stake')

Hallfreðar saga

Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld ('troublesome poet')

Kolfinna ('coal-black Finna')

m. Gríss Sæmingsson

Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa

Björn Hítðælakappi ('champion of the Hítardalr people')

Oddný eykyndill ('island-candle')

m. Þórðr Kolbeinsson

Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu

Gunnlaugr ormstunga ('serpent-tongue')

Helga in fagra ('the fair')

m. Skáld-Hrafn Önundarson

m. Þorkell Hallkelsson

'Outliers' and related sagas:

Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar

Fótbreðra saga

Víglundar saga

Gísla saga

Grettis saga

Descriptions of skalds:

Komákr:

Hann var svartur á hár og sveipur í hárinu, hörundljós og nokkuð líkur móður sinni, mikill og sterkur, áhlaupamaður í skapi.

Kormákr had dark curly hair and a fair complexion and was rather like his mother; he was big and strong, and in temperament an impetuous man.

Hallfreðr:

Hann var snemma mikill og sterkur, karlmannlegur og skolbrúnn nokkuð og heldur nefljótur, jarpur á hár og fór vel. Skáld var hann gott og heldur níðskár og margbreytinn. Ekki var hann vinsæll.

He soon grew big, strong and manly, with rather heavy brows and an ugly nose, but with handsome chestnut hair. He was a good poet, though rather given to slander, and changeable. He was not popular.

Gunnlaugr:

Svo er sagt frá Gunnlaugi að hann var snemmendis bráðger, mikill og sterkur, ljósjarpur á hár og fór allvel, svarteygur og nokkuð nefljótur og skapfelligur í andliti, miðmjór og herðimikill, kominn á sig manna best, hávaðamaður mikill í öllu skaplyndi og framgjarn snemmendis og við allt óvæginn og harður og skáld mikið og heldur níðskár.

It was said that Gunnlaugr was somewhat precocious, big and strong, with light chestnut hair, which suited him, dark eyes and a rather ugly nose. He had a pleasant face, a slender waist and broad shoulders. He was very manly, an impetuous fellow by nature, ambitious even in his youth, stubborn in all situations and ruthless. He was a gifted poet, but an abusive one.

Egill:

En er hann óx upp, þá mátti brátt sjá á honum, að hann myndi verða mjög ljótur og líkur föður sínum, svartur á hár. En þá er hann var þrevetur, þá var hann mikill og sterkur, svo sem þeir sveinar aðrir, er voru sex vetra eða sjö; hann var brátt málugur og orðvís; heldur var hann illur viðureignar, er hann var í leikum með öðrum ungmennum.

As he grew up it was readily seen that he would be very ugly, like his father, and black-haired. When he was three years old he was as big and strong as other boys of six and seven. He soon learned to talk and was clever with words. He was rather unruly when playing with other children.

Kormáks saga (ch 3):

Um kveldið gekk Steingerður frá dyngju sinni og ambátt með henni. Þær heyrðu inn í skálann til ókunnra manna.

Ambáttin mælti: "Steingerður mín, sjáum við gestina."

Hún kvað þess enga þörf og gekk þó að hurðunni og sté upp á þreskjöldinn og sá fyrir ofan hlaðann. Rúm var milli hleðans og þreskjaldarins. Þar komu fram fætur hennar.

Kormákur sá það og kvað vísu:

Nú varð mér í mínu,
menreið, jötuns leiði,
réttumk ristín, snótar
rammaást fyr skömmu.
Þeir munu fætr að fári
fald-Gerðar mér verða,
alls ekki veit eg ella,
oftar en nú, svarra.

Nú finnur Steingerður að hún er sén.

In the evening Steingerður left her room, and with her was a slave-woman. They could hear the voices of the strangers in the hall.

The slave-woman said, 'Steingerður, dear, let's take a look at the visitors.'

Steingerður said there was no need for that, but nevertheless she went to the door, stepped up on the threshold, and looked over the wood stacked by the door; there was a space between the bottom of the door and the threshold, and her feet showed.

Kormákr saw that, and spoke a verse:

Mighty love has filled my mind,
my troll-woman's fair breeze,
a necklace-sleigh has just
presented her instep to me.
The feet of that headdress-goddess
will bring me to grief more often
than now, yet of this maid
I otherwise know nothing.

Steingerður now sensed that she was being observed.

Bjarnar saga (ch 20):

En þá hafði Björn eigi miklu áður ort flím um Þórð og var þá ærið heyrunkunnigt nokkurum mönnum. En þau voru þar efni í að Arnóra móðir Þórðar hefði etið þann fisk er hann kallaði grámaga og lét sem hann hefði fundist í fjöru og hefði hún af því áti hafandi orðið að Þórði og væri hann ekki dála frá mönnum kominn í báðar ættir.

Not long before, Björn had composed a satire against Þórð, and that was well known enough to some people. The substance of it was that Arnóra, Þórð's mother, had eaten a kind of fish that Björn called a 'grey-belly'; he claimed that it had been found on the shore, and that from eating it she had become pregnant with Þórð, so that he was not of wholly human descent on both sides.

Further reading

Five of the above sagas are collected together in Diana Whaley's edition *Sagas of Warrior-Poets* (London, 2002). They can all be found in translation in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* (Reykjavík, 1997). Old Norse texts will be found in the Íslenzk fornrit series, all available in the Turville-Petre room.

Clunies Ross, Margaret. *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Cambridge, 2005).

De Looze, Laurence. 'Poet, poem and poetic process in *Bjarnar saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga*'. *JEGP* 85 (1986), 479-93.

Ericksen, Janet Schrunck. 'Genre indecision in *Gunnlaugs saga ormsstungu*'. *Scandinavian Studies* 76:1 (2004), 21-32.

Finlay, Alison. 'Monstrous allegations: an exchange of *ýki* in *Bjarnar saga*'. *Alvíssmál* 10 (2001), 21-44.

—. 'Níð, adultery and feud in *Bjarnar saga*'. *Saga-book* 23 (1991), 158-78.

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Whaley, Diana. 'The "Conversion Verses" in *Hallfreðar saga*: Authentic Voice of a Reluctant Christian?' in *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, ed. Clunies Ross (Odense, 2003), 234-57.