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Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls and Icelandic Identity: The Rewriting of History for a Peripheral European Community

Roberto Luigi Pagani

The story of Gunnar *Keldugnúpsfífl* ('the idiot of Keldugnúpur') has received very little scholarly attention.¹ It was first edited in 1866 by Þorvaldur Bjarnarson, then later in a popular edition by Guðni Jónsson in 1947, and eventually in the scholarly *Íslenzk fornrit* edition by Jóhannes Halldórsson from 1959. Aside from being briefly mentioned in articles focusing on other subjects,² this saga has been substantially neglected, and it remains one of the least known. A combination of factors has contributed to this neglect, including its young age, as one of the latest *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of the Icelanders) to have been composed (Cf. Callow 2017: 26), and the fact that it differs quite significantly from those sagas that have been traditionally considered canonical by earlier scholars. Perhaps a more determining factor, however, has been what may be interpreted as a lack of originality in the text: Jóhannes Halldórsson (1959: lxxi-lxxvi) has noted how '[h]öfundur dregur til sögunnar efni úr ýmsum áttum' (in the saga, the author employs elements from different sources). Several motifs and other elements are borrowed from earlier sagas, particularly *Kjalnesinga saga*, *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, *Hjálmþés saga* and others.³ Ferrari (2020: 124) notes that:

Le avventure di Gunnar con gigantesse e troll [...] riprendono descrizioni e schemi narrativi dalla Saga di Sigurðr il Silenzioso e dalla Saga di Egill il Monco, mentre il codice d'onore vichingo esposto nel capitolo 14 della versione contenuta nel codice AM 554 i 4to [...] ripete quanto esposto nella Saga di Friðþjófr il Forte e nella Saga di Oddr l'Arciere.

The adventures of Gunnar with giantesses and trolls [...] borrow descriptions and narrative schemes from the *Saga of Sigurðr the Silent* and the *Saga of Egill One-Hand*, while the viking code of honour, as presented in chapter 14 of the version contained in the code AM 554 i 4to [...], repeats the above in the *Saga of Friðþjófr the strong* and in the *Saga of Örvar-Oddr*.

It is thus evident that this saga owes many of its elements to other texts, another characteristic which may explain the minimal scholarly interest it aroused in the past. In fact, earlier saga scholarship was politically motivated by Icelandic nationalism and the Icelandic sought to demonstrate what peaks Icelandic literary culture could reach when it was free from foreign control.⁴ All of these factors help to explain why this saga has been so neglected in earlier scholarship. However, Pagani (2020: 29–30) suggests that the saga should be analysed in the light of its literary and social function, while Ferrari (2020: 124) adds that:

Una tale strategia di estrapolazione e ricomposizione ha contribuito, in passato, a far ritenere poco interessante questa saga in quanto poco originale, e tuttavia credo che proprio questo metodo di composizione meriti una nuova attenzione.

Such history of extrapolation and recomposition has contributed, in the past, to the notion that this saga would be uninteresting as it is not very original, and yet I believe that this very method of composition deserves a new attention.

In light of the abovementioned, the purpose of this paper is to bring new attention to this text as an eminently fictional product and particularly to the way it rewrites and reinterprets the past to suit present needs, which were considerably different from those characterising the time of composition of the classical *Íslendingasögur*. Clunies-Ross (2002: 443) maintains that '[t]here is no doubt that saga literature was central to the development of an independent self-image among medieval Icelanders, and it continues to constitute a significant part of contemporary Icelanders' sense of national identity', and *Gunnars saga* lends itself to an analysis which aims to explore how this self-image could be expressed and articulated through the literary medium. In the light of these considerations, the present discussion will analyse *Gunnars saga*. The first section, 'Rewriting the Past', introduces the saga and its main themes, while the following one, 'The Text and its Literary Essence', explores how the composition of the saga was highly informed by the tradition preceding and surrounding it. The third

section, 'The Creation of a Past', discusses how *Gunnars saga* generates meaning by shaping an alternative literary past for the people of a remote area of Iceland. The section titled 'Gunnar as an Embodiment of Iceland' addresses the way that Icelandic history and the desires and aspirations of the Icelandic people are projected through the literary medium. 'The saga and its Legacy', the last section, showcases examples of how the literary creation of the saga has impacted the relationship between the people of the area in which the story takes place, their past and the landscape around them.

Rewriting the Past

What is of interest for the present discussion is the idea that a text may be able to serve as some kind of literary origin story without the pretence of making such myth historically plausible. A comparison may be drawn with the medieval tradition of Arthurian legends, or even the universe of *Arda*, the imaginary world created by J.R.R. Tolkien. This kind of literary product consists of a work of fantasy that reflects and problematises aspects of the contemporary reality of the audiences for which it is conceived, and which may also touch and engage with universal themes of the human experience. *Gunnars saga*, as it will be seen, seems to act in this spirit. It offers itself as a kind of literary recreation of the past which turns into an occasion to shape a fictional story not only for the entertainment of its readers, but also to project and discuss moral values with the literary codes of the time in which it was composed.

Far from being a mere patchwork of other saga episodes and themes assembled for entertainment, *Gunnars saga* can thus be understood as a literary rewriting of the past: while being set in the distant past, it nonetheless does not have any pretence to be a faithful account of it. In this sense, the saga differs quite substantially from what we observe in other *Íslendingasögur*, particularly in the classical sagas. Given the considerations which have been made so far, a saga that has so far been neglected can arouse new interest insofar as it can be analysed not just for its literary qualities, but also for its role as a foundational myth, shaping and fostering some kind of identity for a community at the European periphery.

The fifteenth to eighteenth centuries were characterised by an economic decline in Iceland: the country moved from being a thriving and reasonably wealthy community, to an impoverished backwater of the Danish realm. In this context, a text like *Gunnars saga* acquires a new role, fostering a sense of identity and self-worth for an isolated community. Rather than being a symptom of the decline of Icelandic society, and an example of the

twilight of the saga genre as it had been earlier in the Middle Ages, this saga is the expression of a change which intervened between the so-called golden age of saga writing, in the thirteenth century, and the time of its composition. In order to better understand this saga, one must therefore analyse it in the light of the historical context in which it emerged.

Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífl is the story of a *kolbíttr*,⁵ or, as Anderson (1997: 421) phrases it, a male-Cinderella: Gunnar is a lazy and disobedient teenager, considered to be an idiot (*fífl*) by the people of his area, but he surprisingly shows himself to be something of a hero by defying and eventually killing two bullies, sons of the *bóndi* (farmer, yeoman), of the area. He then embarks on a sea journey that brings him to a mysterious land which appears to be Greenland, where he kills a polar bear and a family of trolls, befriends a giantess and obtains a magical sword. He later travels to Norway, where he causes the envy of the jarl, who tries to have him killed in a fight against a *blámaður*,⁶ whom Gunnar nonetheless defeats and kills. To escape the rage of the jarl, he embarks on a summer pillaging expedition in the Baltic, where he fights a band of aggressive Vikings,⁷ before eventually returning home rich and with a very good reputation, which will grant him the *goðorð*, a kind of chieftaincy with legal and religious duties attached to it.

Discerning any authorial intent behind a given saga is a notoriously thorny issue, complicated by the stratification of elements, which is a consequence of their transmission. However, a case can be made for *Gunnars saga* having been intended as a fictional work from its inception. Kålund (1879-82: 314), in his *Bidrag*, refers to it as ‘den opdigtede *Gunnar Keldugnupsfífls saga*’ (the invented *Gunnar Keldugnupsfífls saga*). As we shall see in the course of this discussion, its plot is linear, following one single narrative strand from beginning to end, it does not strive to fit in the larger meta-narrative of the saga-age, and it shows a high literary awareness in the form of numerous borrowings of themes, tropes, situations, etc. It is also a rather late product: Jóhannes Halldorsson (1959: lxxiii) maintains that ‘*Gunnars saga* ber unleg einkenni, miðað við aðrar Íslendingasögur’ (the saga shows a younger character, compared to other *Íslendingasögur*). He dates its composition to the fifteenth century, while Anderson (1997: 421) places it sometime between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Callow (2016: 26, n113) mentions how the saga is dated to the fifteenth century, referring to it as ‘the most recent extant *Íslendingasaga*’.

The standard *Íslensk fornrit* edition integrates a number of chapters from a version of the saga which presents a number of differences and details from the version chosen as the main one. These differences have both literary merit and narrative relevance, such as the very

cinematic episode of Gunnar's arrival at the games at Hǫrgsland, where he removes his cape and a cloud of ashes scatters in the air, or the passage on his relationship with Helga. Jóhannes Halldorsson (1959: lxx) maintains that these two versions must have originated from a common one, but that both of them must have changed somewhat in the course of the transmission. It is thus necessary to study both versions to appreciate this saga as a whole.

It is a peculiar coincidence that a saga whose protagonist can be defined as a male-Cinderella, could itself be considered a sort of 'Cinderella of the sagas'. I have previously noted the curious coincidence that this 'narratively isolated' story (meaning that its plot and characters are not linked to those of other texts, as will be discussed) also takes place in a region of Iceland that has historically been one of the most isolated (Pagani 2020: 12). It is locked between two alluvial deserts swept by glacial outbursts, cut by treacherous rivers, and lacking good natural harbours along the shallow, sandy shores, which are separated from the settlements by many miles of sandy wetland. The saga is, in a way, a standalone: genealogies act as 'world infrastructures' (cf. Wolf 2012: 170) within the saga-world, but *Gunnars saga* lacks both these and trans-narrative characters.

The Text and its Literary Essence

A rather compelling and, perhaps, paradoxical fact is that, despite its isolation in the cosmos of the *Íslendingasögur*, this saga clearly does not spring up from nowhere, but it is the result of a creative effort which included a synthesis of a vast body of material inherited from the saga tradition. Particularly interesting is the notion of how this saga, if it was indeed one of the last – if not the very last – *Íslendingasaga* to be written,⁸ condenses several elements from the tradition which preceded it; in a manner that makes this text almost an ultimate compendium of the previous saga tradition, as we shall see. Far from being a mere fairy-tale with little artistic merit and a witness to the decline of the saga genre(s), *Gunnars saga* shows how the saga-tradition could be interpreted, manipulated and re-shaped to adapt to the changing tastes of later times and fit different roles for the community in which it circulated. Different tastes and different political and social motivations may lie behind the composition of different sagas and, in this sense, the narrative elements and choices which are traceable in *Gunnars saga* may reveal important details of the society in which the saga was transmitted and read.

Rather than a lack of creativity, *Gunnars saga* is evidence of a remarkable degree of knowledge of typical literary motifs from the saga tradition, which the writer was able to

borrow, adapt and combine in a new coherent narrative that is also fast-paced and thrilling. It was mentioned in the introduction of this article how this saga is heavily indebted to other texts for a number of elements: in addition to the examples of literary borrowing provided above, it may be added that the episode of the giantesses from chapter five (chapters five and six of the main version) is very similar to that of *Sigurðar saga þögla*, where we also find a gift of weapons in exchange for sparing the giantess(es)' life (Cf. Driscoll 1992: 11-17), and where one of the two giant sisters is also named Fála, as in *Gunnars saga*. Also, in both sagas, the giantesses have a mighty father who lives in a luxurious mountain hall and, with some details differing between the two stories, the hero is presented with a sumptuous meal, while he is a guest of the supernatural beings. Furthermore, the motif of the sword's blade becoming stuck in wood after a violent strike can be found in a few other sagas, including *Njáls saga*.⁹ In the latter, we read 'Snækólfur hjó í slána svo að fal báða eggteina sverðsins' (Snækólfur hit the wooden bar so [hard] that both edges of the sword disappeared in it)¹⁰, while in *Gunnars saga*, the same motif is worded as such: 'Gunnar bar af sér höggið og kom það í bitann svo að fal báða eggteinana.' (Gunnar avoided the hit which landed in the crossbeam so that both edges of the blade disappeared [in it]).¹¹

Concerning the matter of originality and borrowing of themes and motifs, it is interesting to read this quote from Ármann Jakobsson (2001: 58), in which he explains the value and function of such borrowings in another post-classical family saga, *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, particularly when they are taken from older and authoritative historical works:

It is quite possible that 'borrowing' from other works may serve to discredit *Bárðar saga* from the perspective of modern historical criticism. But such was not the case in the fourteenth century. Borrowings from *Landnámabók* made the saga more credible, as its reconstruction corresponded to the past of *Landnámabók*. There is, therefore, a definite purpose in the saga's use of *Landnáma*.

While borrowings in *Gunnars saga* are not meant to confer historical credibility to the text, they can instead be seen as the attempt, on the part of the writer(s), to confer literary prestige to their work by means of making ample use of tropes which had become staples in the saga canon. In the same perspective, these borrowings can be seen not so much as instances of a lack of creativity and artistic value, but as an attempt, on the part of the writer, to conform to the rules and expectations of the saga tradition. Either way, searching for and identifying

the texts whence the author may have borrowed bits and pieces to compose this saga is, on its own, a philological exercise which may fail to do justice to the texts. In this regard, Shippey (2005: 388) tells us that: ‘Tolkien himself did not approve of the academic search for ‘sources’. He thought it tended to distract attention from the work of art itself, and to undervalue the artist by the suggestion that he had ‘got it all’ from someone else’. In this same spirit, it would be more interesting to look at the text of *Gunnars saga* as a coherent whole and place it into the context of its transmission.

The Creation of a Past

This saga, not unlike other post-classical *Íslendingasögur*,¹² shares some elements which may be considered more typical of a *fornaldar-* and *riddarasaga* (*legendary sagas* and *romances*),¹³ such as the vague ancient time period, the coexistence of literary characters with historical/pseudo-historical ones, the quest-like nature of Gunnar’s journeys, and particularly, the creation of a world which, while mirroring the real one in many ways (geographical, political and social) unfolds along different lines and follows different rules. As Torfi Tulinius (2002: 18–19) maintains, ‘it is fair to say that all the legendary sagas have in common what might be called a connection to reality, albeit in varying degrees. The characters develop in a world that is not altogether the same as ours. Supernatural creatures abound, and the hero is usually stronger than an ordinary man’. The world-building in the saga produces a universe which, while being based on the primary world, differs from it in a number of important points, which are best explained if we see the world of the saga not as derivative from the primary world, but as a syncretic storyworld which, despite some (mostly geographical and linguistic) points of contact with our own, appears to be a separate creation, following different laws and codes.¹⁴ As Kedwards (2020: 132) remarks:

The Icelandic landscape [...] was not an unchanging reality that existed wholly outside the *Íslendingasögur*, and to which they merely refer. The variant versions of *Landnámabók*, and the *Íslendingasögur* written in their presence, vary in their construction of the Icelandic landscape, which may have been as much created as it was remembered.

Indeed, because of the placing of the action in an idealised pagan north, the universe of *Gunnars saga* unfolds in different ways from our own and revolves around different rules and

codes. There the supernatural is very much part of nature, the killing of evil individuals can be without consequence, and good and evil are clearly demarcated: Gunnar meets and interacts with a polar bear as well as with ‘giants’ and trolls, he kills frequently, but the reader is never made feel sorry for his victims, who are either monsters, pirates or abusers. His literary universe may well be partly inspired by the (imagined) past but forms a coherent and independent unit. In other words, such a world is essentially a fantastic creation freely inspired by a (factual or imagined) historical past. This is not uncommon for a late *Íslendingasaga*, a fact which reflects an evolution of the genre in a cultural landscape that had become quite different from the one in which it had originated (cf. Arnold 2003: 181-183).

While sharing this modality of world-creation with the *fornaldarsögur*, *Gunnars saga* is still framed as an *Íslendingasaga*, narrating the deeds of the supposed first settlers of a part of Iceland. It also presents one further notable element, which deserves some attention: in the saga, the creative construction of a fantastic world coexists with a foundational intent, epitomised by a concluding remark which is a variation on the theme ‘from him/her/them many great men descend’. This theme can be chiefly found in the *Íslendingasögur*: in the concluding chapter of classical ones, such as *Eiríks saga rauða*,¹⁵ *Gísla saga Súrssonar*,¹⁶ *Heiðarvíga saga*,¹⁷ and of post-classical ones such as *Hávarðar saga*, but also in some *fornaldarsögur*, such as *Orvar-Odds saga*. In *Gunnars saga*, this is epitomised in the conclusive remark: ‘Er frá þeim [bræðr] komin mikil ætt. Þóttu það allt vera miklir menn fyrir sér’ (From them [the brothers Gunnar and Helga] came a great family. All of them were considered to be great men).¹⁸

Gunnar (together with his brother Helgi) is thus not merely a larger-than-life hero nestled in a narrative which essentially serves an entertainment function, but also incorporates the role of forefather for subsequent generations of real Icelanders. However, he is not a typical forefather as exemplified in an *Íslendingasaga*. We know the name of his father, Þorbjörn, but we are not told anything about his ancestry, whence they came, who they were or what they did. Chronologically, since he is described as being contemporary with Hákon jarl Sigurðarson, Gunnar’s life may be placed in the last decades of the tenth century and possibly the very first ones of the eleventh: innumerable (*Íslendinga-*)saga episodes unfold in this timeframe, but the narrative strand of Gunnar’s life never gets tangled with that of other saga characters. Gunnar’s role as forefather can thus be interpreted as a literary trope, but one which assumes a particular meaning in the context of the rewriting of the past, which seems to be an underlying intent of this text.

The framing of the events in the saga, as I have previously noted (Pagani 2020: 11-18), differs in one important respect from what we encounter in the earlier *Íslendingasögur*, where the narration is corroborated by genealogies and a number of cross-references to characters and episodes from other texts: there is little, if any, attempt at framing the story in a coherent historical background, and no effort is made to try to embed it in the constellation of the family sagas. Direct cross references to different sagas or other sources are lacking. With one exception, the characters do not make an appearance in any other saga. This is peculiar: as Torfi Tulinius (2000: 247) notes, framing characters through genealogies was a device often employed not just in the *Íslendingasögur*, but also in some *fornaldarsögur*, as well as in the heroic poems of the Codex Regius. As already noted by Jóhannes Halldórsson (1959: lxxi-lxxvi) in his introduction, the only historical character present is the Hákon jarl Sigurðarson, whom Gunnar meets on two occasions.

Hákon Sigurðarson was in power between 962 and 995. Since Gunnar is either thirteen or eighteen when he meets the jarl, if we subtract his age at the time of the meeting from the first and last year of Hákon's reign, we obtain a date of birth between 944 and 977. This timeframe, however, clashes with the information provided in *Þiðranda þáttur ok Þórhalls*, to be found in GKS 1005 fol., *Flateyjarbók*, written at the end of the fourteenth century: 'Þórhallr hét maðr norrœnn. Hann kom til Íslands á dögum Hákonar jarls. Hann tók land í Sýrlækjarósi ok bjó á Hørgslandi' (A Norse man was named Þórhallr. He came to Iceland in the days of the Jarl Hákon. He took land at the mouth of the Sýrlæk and lived at Hørgsland.) (GKS 1005 fol., 55va22-23).

According to this *þáttur*, Þórhallr would have been the first settler (*landnámsmaður*) of Hørgsland, and was a good friend of Síðu-Hallr, one of the champions of Christianity in the conversion period in Iceland. The saga of Gunnar is set in the pagan period, and no mention is made of Christianity. If Þórhallr was indeed the first settler and lived there right up to period around the conversion, and since Jarl Hákon Sigurðarson ruled over Norway from c. 975 to 995, then Gunnar, who meets the jarl when still very young (thirteen or eighteen depending on the version), should have acquired Hørgsland at the same time in which Þórhallr still owned it according to *Þiðranda þáttur*, which is impossible. The *goði* Þorgrímur and his successor Gunnar could not also be the owners of the estate alongside Þórhallr. To complicate matters further, *Landnámabók* — while not mentioning Hørgsland — does state that the land between Fors (today's Foss á Síðu) and Geirlandsá has been claimed by a settler named Eyvindr karpi (Jakob Benediktsson 1967: 322-323).

Such discrepancies between the world of the saga and the information we gather from the earlier texts, and particularly from *Landnámabók*, may well be an indication of how the saga was composed with a more markedly fictional, rather than historical, intent. The coexistence of historicity and fictionality in the sagas has been acknowledged and explored (cf. Clunies Ross 2002), but the assessment of the weight of these elements in order to explore the intent behind the creation of a given saga is not always simple to determine. Ármann Jakobsson (2001: 57), in his analysis of *Bárðar saga*, explains how, despite the numerous examples of elements which we could classify as ‘supernatural’ or ‘fictional’, the abundance of elements borrowed from earlier texts, and particularly, the reference to historical details known from authoritative sources, clashes with the notion that the author of the saga would have consciously written a work of fiction:

Not only is *Bárðar saga* full of historical information; most of that information is derived from *Landnámabók*. In a work of fiction this would be inappropriate, but in a serious work of history it is essential to use more ancient and thus more authoritative material. The function of this historical information is to link the life of Bárðr to the general history of Iceland.

All of this is missing from *Gunnars saga*, where the only historical character we encounter is the Norwegian jarl, Hákon Sigurðarson. It could be inferred that the composer of the saga may not have known of the existence of *Þiðrandi þáttur ok Þórhalls*,¹⁹ nor of *Landnámabók*, or else they may have tried to make the story fit more elegantly in the supposed historical frame. However, finding holes in the plot by trying to fit it into a historical chronology is in any case missing the point. If the intention of the composer had been to forge a convincing history of the *landnám* (i.e. ‘the settlement’) for the people of that part of Síða, we may expect them to have made different choices, such as those effected by whoever compiled *Bárðar saga*. Wolf (2012: 271) explains how:

The idea of canon, that certain things are ‘true’ for an imaginary world [...], demonstrates the desire of authenticity from the point of view of the audience, who are often concerned with demarcating what is ‘official’ for a world or franchise.

This notion can also be applied to an extent to the *Íslendingasögur*, where compilers — as the case of *Bárðar saga* illustrates — did strive to make their narratives fit with the rest of the canon. This poses the question of why such an urge for coherence did not intervene in the transmission of *Gunnars saga*, and perhaps a plausible answer resides in the fictionality of the text. Disagreement between *Gunnars saga* and other material clearly did not bother its composer(s), nor its readership, or the text would not have enjoyed such a wide circulation as the number of witnesses preserved seems to suggest. As such, it differs markedly in its intent from what Ármann Jakobsson (2001) has identified in the case of *Bárðar saga*. Given how the historical component is an essential infrastructural element holding together the cosmos of the *Íslendingasögur*, one could speculate that the saga was indeed composed and transmitted (at least initially) as a work of fiction. It must at the very least be conceded that the composer(s) did certainly not make a considerable effort or showed much preoccupation for the historical aspects of the text.

In this spirit, it is perhaps more prudent, but also more interesting, to examine this saga not so much as the possible repository of some creatively manipulated historical memory concerning the (imagined) historical reality of the period in which it is supposed to take place, or in order to identify from what texts some of its elements were borrowed. Rather, it is more fruitful to approach it in order to explore its eminently literary character. In this way, the saga can be seen as the product of a very different creative impetus from that which seems to have animated the composition of earlier *Íslendingasögur*, and it can be appreciated for its value as a witness to a literary taste that had moved away from the need for historicity and as a projection of preoccupations and aspirations of the Icelanders.

Another element of *Gunnars saga* which not only makes it appear to be a world apart, but which could also be an indication of its fictional character, is the moral code emerging from it, which differs from that typical of the *Íslendingasögur*. Similarly, the reactions of the characters to common saga events, such as murder, are different from what we would expect from a typical family saga. Jóhannes Halldorsson (1959: lxxiii) already notes how ‘fram kemur óvenjulegt háttarni manna á þeim tímum, þegar sagan á að gerast’ (there appears an unusual behaviour for the men of the time in which the saga is supposed to have happened). To give a few examples: Gunnar faces no consequence for the killing of Þorgrímur’s sons, no feud is initiated, and Þorgrímur dies heartbroken for the death of his children; no *weregild*, i.e. a financial compensation established by law for a killing, is sought, no vindication is carried out, almost as if that was how it was meant to be, given the evil nature of the victims. It may

be argued that this lack of a real connection with the historical past results in a clearer demarcation of good and evil, which would be a result of the eminently fictional intent behind the saga, showing a reflection of a different mentality in Icelandic society at the time in which this particular saga was composed and circulated. This representation of clearly demarcated and identifiable good and evil would be more easily expressed in an eminently creative work.

In depicting such a story, where good and evil are more promptly identifiable, it appears that the composer of the saga seems to have wanted to shape some kind of uplifting origin story and an alternative history for the people of the area, in the heart of the Síða region (of which they show a decent degree of geographical knowledge), and one whose morality would resonate more with the sensitivities of the contemporaries.

The attempt to demarcate unambiguously good and evil in in the world of the saga produces some interesting results. While Gunnar's opponents do not ever behave ethically, it is interesting to observe the length to which the writer went to find a convoluted way in which he could frame Gunnar's summer raiding as noble activity, as opposed to that of his opponents. In the episode by the Baltic island, Gunnar's opponents are portrayed as evil *víkingar* (here clearly a derogatory term), and their names, Svartur and Jökull, parallel those of the bullies of the district whom Gunnar had killed earlier in the saga: Þorgrím's sons Grímur ('Masked one') and Jökull ('Glacier'), and the slave whom Gunnar kills during the games, Svartur ('Black'). According to Ferrari (2020: 123-124), these names are used symbolically to trace the boundary between good and evil, describing the negative role of these characters. There is thus a lack of ambiguity, which is perhaps another consequence of the different and later origin of the saga, which was most likely not written to embellish (let alone record) events passed down through popular memory, but as an original work with the authorial intent of representing the protagonist under a specifically positive light. This does not imply, however, that there is a lack of nuance in the saga. While the characters are generally either clearly good or clearly bad at any given time, their characterisation can change in the course of the story: Gunnar himself does not start out in the most positive light, being presented as lazy and disobedient, before his heroic character emerge; the giantess Fála, while entering the story as a life-threat, becomes a friend to Gunnar and a helping character; the evil bóndi Þorgrímur dies heartbroken, showing himself capable of very humane feelings; the jarl Hákon, despite being presented (this is true for the second version of the saga) as '*öfundsjúkr, kappsamr og yfrið harðr*' (jealous, confrontational and extremely inflexible) and

living up to this description in the following chapters, eventually forgives Gunnar and allows for reconciliation.

Gunnar as an Embodiment of Iceland

Writing about the function of the *Íslendingasögur* in thirteenth-century Iceland, Torfi Tulinius (2000: 242) explains how: ‘these seem to deal more than others with uncertain identities, a feature which is of particular importance in understanding the relationship between literary development and social change in medieval Iceland’. It would thus be fascinating to attempt an explanation of what kind of societal and cultural developments may be reflected in *Gunnars saga*, and perhaps in its *kolbíttr* protagonist. The fact that this saga survives in around fifty manuscripts from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries may be an indication of how something in it resonated particularly with the Icelanders during that period. These were difficult centuries for the country, which had gone through a plague, become an impoverished part of the Danish realm, lost wealth and prestige, and struggled with poverty and natural calamities, not to mention the establishment of a severe and economically detrimental Danish trade monopoly.

Arngrímur Jónsson’s work, *Brevis commentarius de Islandia*, published in 1593, was specifically aimed to dispel the prejudices and the misconceptions surrounding Iceland at the time. The frontispiece recites that the book is a:

Brevis commentarius de islandia: quo scriptorum de hac insula errores deteguntur, & extraneorum quorundam conviciis, ac calumniis, quibus Islandis liberius insultare solent, occurritur (Jakob Benediktsson 1968).²⁰

Brief commentary on Iceland: where the mistakes of writers about this island are revealed, and where the injuries and lies of certain foreigners, with which they freely insult Iceland, are refuted.

A parallel to this can be found in the AM 106 fol., *Þórðarbók* version of *Landnámabók* (35v33–35), a clear indication that the image that they were projecting to the outside world was a real preoccupation for some Icelanders:

Það er margra manna mál, að það sé óskyldur fróðleikur að rita landnám, en vér þykjumst heldur svara kunna útlendum mönnum, þá er þeir bregða oss því,

að vér séum komnir af þrælum eða illmennum, ef vér vitum víst vorar kynferðir sannar [...]

It is the opinion of many that it is unnecessary knowledge to write on the settlement [of Iceland], but we rather claim to be able to answer back to foreigners, when they say we are descended from slaves or miscreants if we know for certain the truth of our origin.

It would be strange to presume that this was intended directly for foreign readers. It was most likely conceived as a tool for Icelanders to protect and nurture their sense of identity and self-esteem as a people, a preoccupation which seems to have accompanied them for a good part of their history – somewhat unsurprisingly, for such a small nation, surviving throughout the centuries at the European periphery. Torfi Tulinius (2006: 226) suggest that:

Ef til vill voru Íslendingar svona uppteknir af kolbítum vegna þess að samband þeirra sjálfra við konungsvald var ávallt flókið og einkenndist í senn af hrifningu og sjáfstæðisvilja, eins og lesa má úr sögu landsins.

Icelanders were so fond of *kólbitar* because the relationship between themselves and the kingly power was ever so complicated and was always characterised by a fascination and desire for independence, as one may read in the history of the country.

In this perspective, Gunnar may be seen as an embodiment of Iceland. He acts like the symbolic representation of a country which conceals a great potential but suffers from the prejudice of others and is longing for emancipation and opportunities to prove his worth. Another saga character, Grettir Ásmundarson, the protagonist of *Grettis saga*, has been traditionally considered a literary embodiment of the country.²¹ Sigurður Nordal (1938: 4) writes that ‘Grettis saga á dýpstu ítök sín í hugum Íslendinga einmitt því að þakka, að þjóðin hefur þekkt sín egin örlög í örlögum Grettis’ (Grettis saga owes its deepest influence in the mind of the Icelanders to the fact that the nation has recognised its own destiny in that of Grettir). The symbolic role of Grettir, who becomes cursed, and thus becomes increasingly weaker, going through a series of misfortunes, only to die an outlaw on an isolated island, as Hastrup discusses in her article, changed through time. In the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, when Iceland had become embedded in the Norwegian kingdom, Grettir becomes

‘a hero, who defended the pristine society’ (Hastrup 1986: 305). Later on, in the fifteenth century (possibly the same time in which *Gunnars saga* was composed), Grettir’s role is to show ‘how ‘a real man’, an ‘Icelander’, and ‘one of us’ is able to fight the dark forces threatening the country from outside’ (Hastrup 1986: 307). Gunnar however, unlike Grettir, is not doomed: he can prove his worth under the right circumstances and complete his destiny after a journey, real or symbolic, facing his enemies and eventually obtaining through heroic deeds the prestige that is due to him. The curse inflicted on him by Þórdís is lifted with a payment, and the conclusion of the saga is positive and serene. This would make Gunnar a more hopeful and less fatalistic reflection of the same concerns that are represented in *Grettis saga*. The hero of *Gunnars saga* is not a tragic figure doomed to fail, but someone who eventually succeeds. If we believe the notion for which *Gunnars saga* was one of the latest *Íslendingasögur* ever to be composed, then we may be tempted to read a shift in the attitude of the Icelanders from the time in which *Grettis saga* was first composed and circulated. A brighter and hopeful attitude towards the fate and the future of the nation takes the place of a fatalistic and pessimist one, and perhaps provides the readers with a form of literary escapism from the harshness of reality.

At this point, parallels between Icelandic history and episodes of the sagas can be drawn: the bullying perpetrated by the *bóndi* Þórgrímur and his sons works well as a literary representation of real abuses perpetrated by powerful and overbearing local administrators. Gunnar’s journey into distant lands acquires a symbolic value too, becoming the representation of the nation’s journey from subservience and humiliation to glory. Gunnar shows an ability to interact with powerful external forces, personified by the giantesses and the trolls, by eventually befriending some of these and gaining more power, in the form of a magical sword, *Fálunautr*. Very tentatively, we may also see this as symbolic representation of the Icelanders’ future ability to partly tame a hostile and dangerous nature for their own economic advantage. The episode where Gunnar calls a polar bear, which obediently waits for him to catch up, before getting killed as a trophy, almost seems to echo the statement we find in chapter VI of *Íslendingabók* (Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 13), where Ari *fróði* makes sure it is very clear how ‘land þat es kallat es Grœnland, fannsk ok byggðisk af Íslandi’ (the land which is called Greenland was discovered and colonised by Iceland). This could reflect an ongoing concern in Iceland about receiving due credit for its role in the discovery and settlement of the new land. Having earned an impressive track record, Gunnar is invited to join a foreign court, but he is not treated fairly by the Norwegian jarl. He, however, manages

to teach the jarl a lesson, at first triggering his fury, but eventually earning his respect. Here we find an echo of foreign rule and the consequent struggle for independence, eventually earning the respect of the former rulers and becoming master at home. The glory of Gunnar and his righteousness is further manifest in his role as a force for good even in the context of an ethically dubious activity such as summer pillaging. Here, he defeats forces of evil, such as the vikings in the Baltic.

The concluding remark of the saga, in which Gunnar is presented as the forefather of great men, sounds almost like an invitation to prospective authors to pick up this narrative strand for further development, similar to what *Jökuls þáttur* does for *Kjalnesinga saga* or *Bolla þáttur* does for *Laxdæla saga*. In a sense, *Gunnars saga* is in itself a kind of spin-off, although one that does not fit very elegantly with the metanarrative that embraces the rest of the canon, as we have seen, but inconsistencies are to be found in most created worlds: from that of King Arthur to those of *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars*. The cosmos of the Icelandic sagas is a vast pool of material for the shaping of new literary ideas, as the story of Gunnar shows.

The Saga and its Legacy

The subsequent history of this text, however, shows that it must have escaped its literary boundaries to influence the way in which Icelanders from the Síða area interpreted and interacted with the local landscape. In this regard, Meulengracht Sørensen (2000: 11) argues that:

The relationship between society and literature is not so simple and operates in both directions. [...] The literature was not only a consequence of that history. The literature also contributed to the shaping of history in a self-affirming process whereby a people with a special historical recollection and mode of thought made narratives about the past a meaningful part of their present.

We do have a clear example of this in the Síða area. While on the one hand, the story clashes with the earlier accounts of *Þiðrandi þáttur ok Þórhalls* and of *Landnámabók*, there is a natural feature, not mentioned in the saga, which is linked to its protagonist. Gunnarshellir is a cave in which, according to local belief,²² Gunnar would have hidden a treasure, casting a chest into a pond in the depth of the cave.²³ Since none of this is mentioned in the saga itself, it may be deduced that the association between the hero and the cave was established following

the composition of the saga, as a way to reconnect the landscape with the storyworld. Similarly, in the plains to the south of Hørgsland, we find the placenames Gunnarstangi and Gunnarsflóð. We thus have instances of how this saga has actually affected the landscape, illustrating the role of the story in the development of local identity and historical consciousness.

Conclusion

In the course of this discussion, *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls* was analysed for its role in the community as a symbolic projection of Icelandic identity at the northern European periphery. The saga was interpreted as an interesting product, not only in the sense that it incorporates stylistic elements from different saga strands, but also in that it serves a multifunctional purpose; being on the one hand a fictional product designed for entertainment, but more interestingly a work designed to write an alternative literary past for a region of Iceland and a symbolic representation of the country. The saga does not generate meaning by fabricating a convincing set of characters and episodes with the pretence of embedding them in historical events, but by providing a legendary tale of heroism, rewriting history to serve the needs of a disadvantaged present, and possibly even providing an origin-story for a people who felt they were lacking one. The composer does not start from the scant historical information about Síða and the neighbouring areas, which can be obtained from older sources such as *Landnámabók* or *Flateyjarbók*, but by creating *ex novo* characters, and assembling creatively a number of episodes and motifs to obtain an original product. The story of Gunnar is thus turned into an occasion for Icelandic readers to engage with their own history and identity.

Notes

¹ I will use modern Icelandic orthography when dealing with this saga, given that all of the witnesses in which it is contained are post-medieval, and by that time a significant amount of phonological changes in the direction of modern Icelandic had already happened.

² The saga is cited, for example, by Callow (2016) in a general chapter on the dating of sagas, or by Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013) in a chapter on women and magic.

³ Cf. Margrét Eggertsdóttir (1993: 250).

⁴ For a detailed discussion of saga scholarship and its political undertones and motivations, see Arnold 2003.

⁵ The *kolbíttr*, an unassuming and seemingly talentless person who grows to be a hero, is a literary motif that occurs very frequently in younger sagas: Sigurðr of *Sigurðar saga þögla*, Refr of *Króka-Refs saga*, Glúmr of *Víga-Glúms saga*, Ketill Høngur of *Ketils saga Høngs*, and Starkaðr of *Gautreks saga* just to name a few. For an introduction and discussion on the motif, see Torfiu H. Tulinius 2006: 226–229, and Ásdís Egilsdóttir 2005: 87–100.

⁶ See Arngrímur Víðalín 2020 and Price 2020 for discussions on the term *blámaðr*.

⁷ Despite the current English use of capitalising this word and treating it as an ethnonym, its meaning in this saga is clearly a pejorative referring to pirates.

⁸ Cf. Callow (2017: 26).

⁹ This can be found in ch. 7 of the main version and, with different wording, ch. 14 of the second version.

¹⁰ Cf. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1954: 204).

¹¹ In *Njáls saga*, the word for ‘bar/beam’ is *slá*, in *Gunnars saga* it is *biti*, meaning ‘crossbeam’.

¹² For an in-depth discussion on the post-classical *Íslendingasögur*, see Arnold 2003.

¹³ Genre as a taxonomical tool for the study of sagas is a notoriously thorny and controversial topic, and one which cannot be entered here for reasons of space and convenience. However, of particular interest for this subject are the chapters by Bampi, Sif Ríkharðsdóttir, Rösli and Glauser in Bampi et al. 2020.

¹⁴ For an extensive treatment of the notion of *storyworld*, and its application within the fields of media studies and narratology, see Ryan, Marie-Laure, and Jan-Noël Thon 2014.

¹⁵ Cf. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson (1935: 236–237).

¹⁶ Cf. Björn K. Þórólfsson, Guðni Jónsson (1943: 118, 258).

¹⁷ Cf. Sigurður Nordal, Guðni Jónsson (1938: 328).

¹⁸ The second version of the saga has: ‘Er frá þeim [Gunnari og Helgu] kominn mikill ættingr og sá frændabálkr kallaðr Keldunúpingar, en um nöfn þeira er eigi getið í þessari sögu eðr um tilburði á þeim dögum.’ (From them (Gunnar and Helga) came a great offspring, and the family name Keldunúpingar, but their names, and the events of those days are not mentioned in this saga.).

¹⁹ Here the standardised classical Old Icelandic orthography is used, as it is more in accordance with the convention of the manuscript in which this text is contained.

²⁰ Page not numbered in the facsimile edition. It comes immediately after page xlii.

²¹ For a discussion on the role of Grettir in the Icelandic collective imagination and identity, see Hastrup 1986.

²² Ólafía Jakobsdóttir, *viva voce*.

²³ This story is mentioned in a publication attached to the newspaper *Morgunblaðið Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, 1st August 1948: 356, where it is also reported that the cave had been explored, and that no pond (let alone any treasure) had been found.

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