The CAHD Papers – Issue 4 (2009)
www.akademia.is/CAHD

The Revered Outlaw

Gísli Súrsson and the Sturlungs

Axel Kristinsson

Some time in the 10th century a man murdered his brother-in-law in the west of Iceland.[1] The murderer was Gísli Súrsson and the murdered was Þorgrímur Þorsteinsson, a chieftain or *goði* who was married to Gísli's sister, Þórdís. Gísli was outlawed for his crime but, according to legend, still managed to survive for 14 years.

Stories about Gísli were still floating around in the 13th century when they were collected and used to produce a 'Family saga'; *Gísla saga Súrssonar*.[2] This saga was one of many written down in the 13th century and formed a part of an extensive corpus of literature created in Iceland in the Middle Ages. Scholars have long been puzzled as to why the Icelanders were such prolific writers at this time and why they wrote so much more than, e.g. their Scandinavian cousins did. The author of this article has attempted to solve this problem by reference to the Icelandic political system which was very unusual.[3]

Iceland was divided into a large number of political units, chieftaincies and principalities, that were in practice autonomous and not subject to any higher authority. The *Commonwealth* system of government was far to weak to count as a 'state' and in fact was nothing more than a loose federation of tiny polities, each with a population of a few thousands at most. As all autonomous political units, including the larger European kingdoms, these had a need to build a sense of common identity among its members and literature was one way of achieving this. All Icelandic polities needed to enhance the solidarity of their populations and to build a sense of common identity, especially during the 13th century when most of them were involved in the civil war that ravaged the island. Iceland, therefore, produced so much literature because of its extreme political fragmentation at a time when it had acquired the tools of literacy. This conclusion is not based on interpretations of individual sagas but on a quantitative approach which shows that family sagas, written in the Commonwealth period (before1262) were apparently limited to the areas in Iceland which had the greatest need to increase their internal cohesion. Conversely, the four old and established principalities (see below), who presumably had already acquired this internal cohesion through tradition, produced no family sagas in this period as far as we know. The political fragmentation, which in Iceland was so conductive to literature, was not common in Europe at the time or at any time in literate societies although quite commonplace in pre-literate ones.

Feudalism, as one might suppose, does not constitute political fragmentation of this kind as the feudal lords derived their authority from the king but did not have to justify their power directly to the population. Only in extreme cases did such lordships approach becoming truly autonomous and then they often did

produce chronicles glorifying the ruling dynasty such as the one Dudo of St. Quentin wrote for the dukes of Normandy.[4]

It is important to note that this is not a 'total' explanation of why the sagas were written. Many other factors were at work as well, such as the obvious influence of Christian learning, but solidarity enhancement was in a sense the most important one as it tipped the scales when Iceland is compared with e.g. Sweden which shared most or all the other factors with Iceland. Sweden was a unified kingdom at least from the latter half of the Viking period and did not experience the political fragmentation Iceland did at a time when letters and learning had become widespread. This was the one ingredient that was missing in Sweden and as a result it did not produce sagas as Iceland did.

In this article I shall take a closer look at Gísla saga Súrssonar and the principality that apparently produced it, originally ruled by members of the Seldælir family but later acquired by the Sturlungs. This is an exercise in using the general theory to interpret a particular saga. Needless to say, a story always follows its own artistic rules and often combines several different motives.[5] Only one aspect of the saga is considered here, albeit an important one as it may explain why the saga was written in the first place.

The Saga of Gísli Súrsson was written in the middle of the 13th century or a little earlier.[6] There are two preserved main versions of the saga; a shorter one, usually called 'M', and a longer one called 'S'. The traditional view was that M is older and 'better' and the S version is younger and corrupted by various additions. This opinion was turned on its head by Guðni Kolbeinsson and Jónas Kristjánsson who showed that S is in fact closer to the original and M had been shortened and considerably altered in the process.[7] The distinction between S and M is important because of the alterations as will become clear below. Here, I shall mostly consider the S version as a closer representative of the original although M's alterations are sometimes interesting.

Except for the parts that take place abroad, the action of the saga is mostly confined to the area that belonged in the 13th century to the Seldælir principality. For this reason it seems likely that the creation of the saga is in some way connected to this political unit.

The Principality

The term *principality* is here used as a translation of the Icelandic *ríki* or *héraðsríki*, a form of political organization that spread rapidly around the country in the opening years of the 13th century. The principalities replaced the older organization of chieftaincies or *goðorð* which did not have fixed boundaries but were based on personal ties between the chieftain and his followers. This change signifies a shift to a much more active form of control and the introduction of territorial lordships with established borders. Two competing principalities emerged in the Westfjords at this time, one ruled by a man called Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson of the Seldælir family and the other by Þorvaldur Snorrason of Vatnsfjörður. These two soon came into open conflict and in 1213 Þorvaldur had Hrafn killed. In the settlement afterwards Þorvaldur had to back off and the boundaries between the two principalities were fixed (see fig. 1).[8] This was not the end of the conflict and Þorvaldur gradually gained the upper hand until the Seldælir — Hrafn's sons

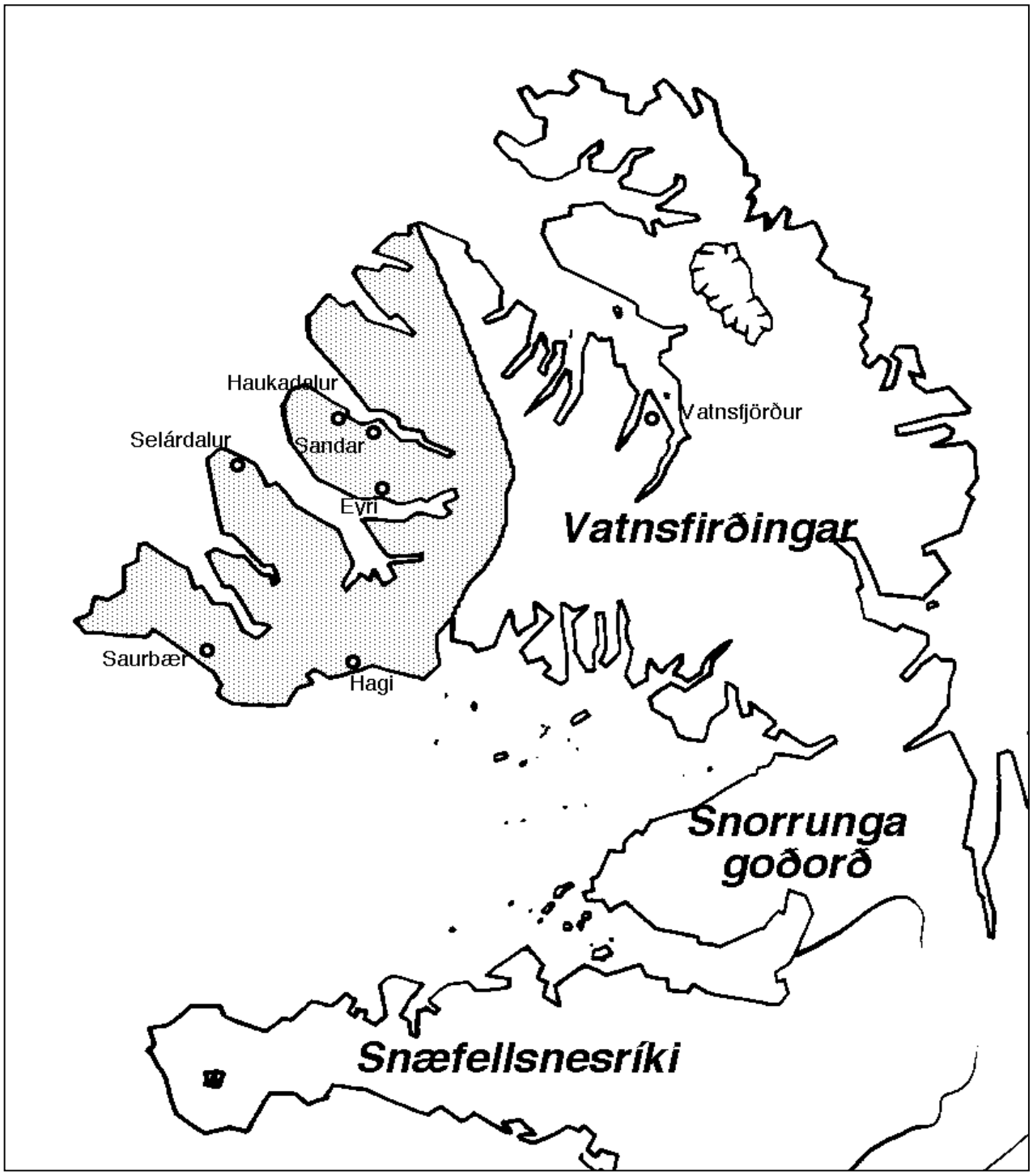

Figure 1. The Principality of the Seldælir as defined in 1214 (shaded).
Also shown are the important neighboring political units of the Vatnsfirðingar, Snorrungagoðorð and Snæfellsnesríki.

who had succeeded him jointly — decided in 1225 to give their principality to the young and ambitious ruler of the Dalir-principality, Sturla Sighvatsson.[9] Sturla was a member of the prominent Sturlung-family, which ruled several principalities in Iceland. Sturla's father and two uncles were important princelings in the West and North of the country. With his strong power-base,

Sturla gradually managed to rebuild the Seldælir principality and realize his authority in the area. Þorvaldur was killed in 1228 by the Seldælir but was succeeded by his oldest sons whom Sturla, in turn, had executed in 1232.[10]

A contemporary saga was written about Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson after his death in 1213 and during the struggle against the rulers of Vatnsfjörður.[11] Hrafn's saga is very biased against Þorvaldur and this is practically acknowledged in its opening words:

> The memory of many events, as they happened, often passes from men's minds, and sometimes they are told differently from the way they occurred so that lies are believed while the truth is doubted. And because "lies are put to flight when meeting truth," we are here undertaking to write about some events which took place in our lifetime among men known to us, and which we know are true.[12]

Thus, the saga wants to put straight the 'lies' put forward by the opposing party. This is rather interesting as it acknowledges the existence of two opposing versions of what actually happened. The purpose of the saga is explicitly to advance the version told by the Seldælir — an obvious example of history writing with a political agenda. Unfortunately the 'lies' or rather the version told by the Vatnsfirðingar has not survived and Hrafn's saga is now our sole source of information about the conflict between Hrafn and Þorvaldur. The saga did a very good job at promoting the Seldælir's version of the story and to this day Hrafn is generally considered a saintly character but Þorvaldur one of the worst villains of a villainous age. Both of these assessments are probably undeserved.

It seems clear that Hrafn's saga was intended to strengthen the cause of the Seldælir against the Vatnsfirðingar (Þorvaldur's family). The saga seeks to unify the people of the principality behind the near-martyr Hrafn and his sons against a common enemy. It is obviously written (in part at least) to enhance the power of the Seldælir in their principality and to strengthen the solidarity of their subjects.

Hrafn's saga would have served this purpose for the Seldælir but in 1225 the situation changed when Sturla Sighvatsson took over the principality to rule it until his death in the battle at Örlygsstaðir in 1238, when he made a bid for supremacy in Iceland. The defeat at Örlygsstaðir was a serious setback for the Sturlung family but in 1242 Sturla's younger brother, Þórður kakali, raised their flag again and this he did first in the Seldælir principality. This area became his principal power-base which he managed to gradually strengthen over the next few years. Unlike his brother, Þórður resided in the area until 1245 when, after a breakthrough, he moved to his father's resurrected principality in the North. Þórður went on to briefly become the most powerful man in Iceland before he left for Norway in 1250, never to return.[13]

For the Sturlungs, Sturla Sighvatsson and Þórður kakali, Hrafns saga was not very convenient. It was to closely connected with the earlier dynasty which they had replaced. The solidarity the saga generated would therefore focus on the Seldælir rather than the Sturlungs. It is true that the remaining Seldælir were their friends and allies but having the identity of the principality focused on them was potentially dangerous and not suited to bind the population to the Sturlungs specifically. Their solution was to try and shift the focus of their subject's identity

from Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson to the outlaw Gísli Súrsson. Gísli was probably already a local hero in the area or parts of it but the Sturlungs attempted to make him a unifying symbol and there is evidence that that they supported his hero-worship and probably were behind the writing of his saga. The connection between Gísli and the Sturlungs can clearly be seen in their dynastic history and the curious fate of Gísli's weapon *Grásíða*.

The Dynasty

According to the saga, Gísli's sister was married to Þorgrímur goði and their son was Snorri goði, a famous man in many sagas, and ancestor to the Sturlungs (fig. 2). The connection is not merely one of decent - a large number of Icelanders could claim decent from Snorri goði - but more importantly, of a dynastic relationship. Snorri's chieftaincy, which for subsequent generations took its name from him and was called Snorrungagoðorð ('the chieftaincy of Snorri's descendants'), was inherited from his father and grandfather and was eventually passed on to the Sturlungs. It was precisely this chieftaincy that Sturla Sighvatsson acquired and formed the basis of his principality in the Dalir. Sturla was not merely Snorri's descendant, he was his heir. He had inherited his authority directly from Snorri goði and his father, Gísli's brother-in-law.[14] He was, of course, also descendent from the Sýrdælir (Gísli's family) through Snorri's mother.

Gísli was outlawed for killing his brother-in-law, Þorgrímur goði. In spite of being slain by the saga's hero, Þorgrímur is not presented as a villain but gets a fair report in the saga. The real villains are on both sides of the family. One was Gísli's own brother, Þorkell, who along with Þorgrímur goði conspired to murder a man called Vésteinn whom he suspected of having an affair with his wife. Þorkell could not kill Vésteinn himself as they were sworn fosterbrothers and he apparently induced Þorgrímur to do it for him. But Gísli had even closer ties with Vésteinn — besides also being fosterbrothers Gísli had married Vésteinn's sister and felt compelled to avenge him. This he did by killing Þorgrímur.

Another villain of the saga was Þorgrímur's brother, Börkur, who hounded Gísli in his outlawry along with his ally Eyjólfur grái, another chieftain who eventually managed to slay him. Þorgrímur's slaying is presented as a family tragedy and was not a heroic act - in fact it was a murder - a concealed killing and therefore a cowardly act which inevitably lead to the hero's demise. But, according to the saga, Gísli would have felt that he had little choice because of the family relationships. Snorri goði and his descendants, the Sturlungs, were the products of the uneasy union of the two families who both produced their share of villains and heroes.

According to the saga Þorgrímur, who was from Snæfellsnes, had moved to the Westfjords and settled down with his brothers-in-law.[15] This is rather curious as Þorgrímur was a chieftain and his original power-base was in Snæfellsnes, across the bay of Breiðafjörður. A chieftain had to have a close relationship with his followers and moving to a rather remote settlement in the West would have made this difficult. This does not seem very plausible and one has to wonder whether Þorgrímur's removal to the West was not invented by the saga-writer, intended to strengthen the Sturlung claim to power in the Westfjords. The Sturlungs could thus be seen as returning to the home of their

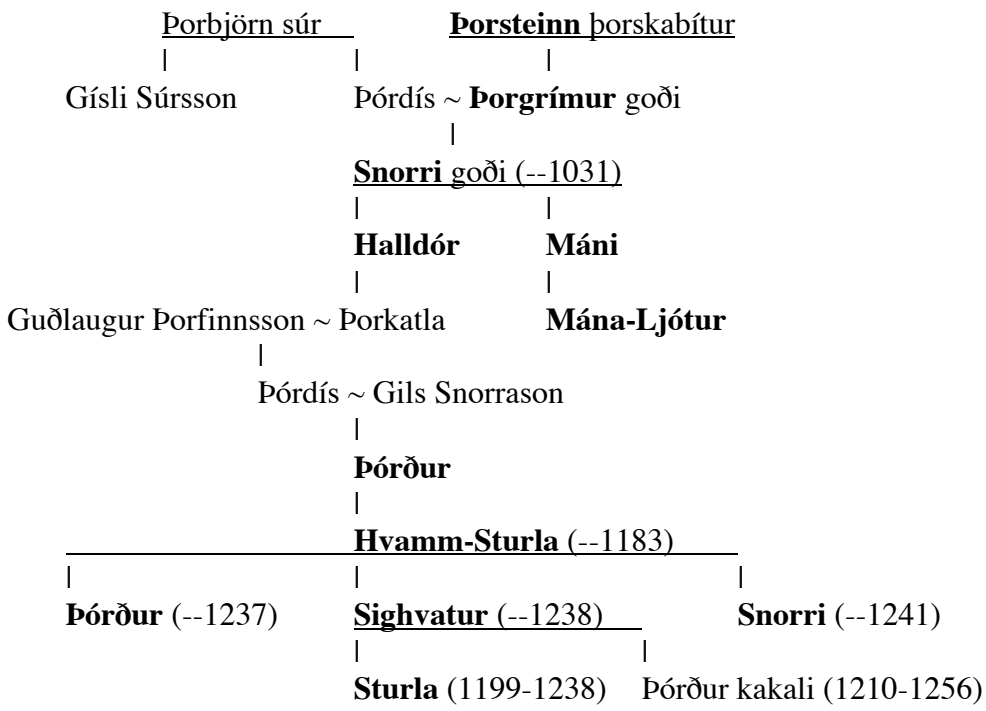

Figure 2. The Dynasty of Snorrungagoðorð.
Names in **bold** indicate men who probably or certainly held the Snorrungagoðorð (the chieftaincy of the Snorrungs. The important Sturlungs were the descendants of Hvamm-Sturla.

ancestor rather than as complete impostors and it served to strengthen their ties with the area and its people.

For Snorri goði and his descendants the events of the saga would have been a family tragedy where his parent's respective families were involved in a bloody feud. The Sturlungs, as Snorri's descendants and heirs, had important ties with these people and could utilize them to strengthen their position in the West. It seems likely that the Sturlungs were behind the writing of the saga and intended it to present the people of their acquired principality with a unifying symbol - Gísli Súrsson - who was more suitable for them than Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson who seems to have served a similar purpose for the Seldælir.

It may seem curious to select an outlaw as the hero and unifying symbol of a ruling family, charged with upholding the law and maintaining the peace, however inept they were at these tasks. But to dismiss Gísli Súrsson, as useful to the Sturlungs, on these grounds would be very simplistic. People have always been fascinated by outlaws and they have inspired countless stories and legends from Robin Hood to Jesse James. Icelandic folklore is alive with such stories and several sagas, besides Gísla saga, have outlaws as their main characters. Two other well known Family sagas, Harðar saga and Grettis saga, are similar to Gísla saga in that their main theme is how the hero became an outlaw and his survival in this state until the inevitable tragic death. These men become outlaws through no fault of their own but rather through some unfortunate set of circumstances or a quirk of fate. The sympathy of the sagas never waver from them and they are considered true

heroes in spite of, or perhaps because of, being forced to live outside the law. They are fascinating characters that spur the imagination and, as such, ideally suited as symbols of common heritage, identity and interest.

Grásíða

The Sturlung connection to Gísli Súrsson becomes even clearer in the tales told about his spear *Grásíða*. This weapon was apparently still around in the 13th century and is first mentioned in the battle of Breiðabólsstaður in Southern Iceland in 1221. The leaders of the two opposing parties were Björn and Loftur and Guðlaugur was one of Loftur's followers. This is what *Íslendinga saga*, our main source for 13th century politics in Iceland, has to say about *Grásíða's* part in the battle:

> Guðlaug ran forward and struck at Björn with his spear, which was called Grásíða, which Gísli Súrsson was said to have owned. The point penetrated his throat and Björn turned back up to the church and sat down.
> Guðlaug went to Loft and told him that Björn was wounded. Loft asked who had wounded him.
> "Grásíða and I," he answered.
> "How badly wounded is he?" asked Loft.
> Guðlaug showed him his spear, which was bloody far up the blade; it seemed clear to them that it was a fatal wound.[16]

As indeed it was. This was the climatic event of the battle. Björn, a prominent leader from an important family was killed by Grásíða, Gísli Súrsson's spear.

The spear appears again in 1238, this time in the hands of none other than Sturla Sighvatsson, Þorgrímur's heir, as he fights his final loosing battle at Örlygsstaðir (again from *Íslendinga saga*):

> Sturla defended himself with his spear, which was named Grásíða, an ancient, inlaid, but not very strong spear. He continuously laid about him so hard with this spear that men fell before him, but the spear bent and several times he had to straighten it out under his foot.[17]

This is what we know about this weapon from 13th century contemporary sources. The picture we get of the spear is that it was Gísli Súrsson's weapon and we have no reason to believe other than it was his chief weapon and he carried it successfully for a long time. It was old and prestigious and was carried proudly by its owners and, although it was in a poor condition, it was still used by Sturla in his most important battle. This shows the emphasis he placed on his connection with Gísli Súrsson.[18] By using his weapon he was identifying with Gísli and was giving the message to his followers from the West that he was indeed Gísli's heir and their natural leader. It would be much like if a U.S. presidential candidate had somehow acquired Georges Washington's watch and took every opportunity to be seen using it, thus establishing a direct link with the nation's founding father.

If we compare the Grásíða in the contemporary sources to the one of Gísla saga there are some remarkable differences. To begin with, it can hardly be said that the spear belonged to Gísli according to the saga. It was a family heirloom that, after their father's death, went not to Gísli but to his brother Þorkell. It was also an ominous murder-weapon, first used to kill Vésteinn, Gísli's foster-brother and then Gísli used it to avenge his death. This is the only instance

in the saga where Gísli uses it. There is a great emphasis on the ill-fated nature of Grásíða and this is explained by it originally coming into the family by unlawful means - by robbing and killing its original rightful owner who predicts that the weapon will bring bad fortune to the Sýrdælir - Gísli's family.[19] In the saga, Grásíða becomes the nemesis of the Sýrdælir, the source of their ill fortune. This is in marked contrast to the weapon as presented in contemporary 13th century sources where men were proud to carry it.

On the other hand, Grásíða didn't bring Sturla Sighvatsson and the Sturlungs any luck at Örlygsstaðir in 1238. This was a major bloodletting for the Sturlungs as Sturla was killed along with four of his brothers and their father and it was the most catastrophic setback they suffered during this period of civil war. Their leader carried Grásíða in this battle and it served him badly. It would be hard for the Sturlungs and their followers not to think of Grásíða as ill-fated after Örlygsstaðir. We can therefore suggest that the weapon's hapless nature for the Sýrdælir and their descendants, the Sturlungs, was first 'discovered' after Örlygsstaðir. Sturla and his family were then seen only as the last victims.

In the Saga of Gísli Súrsson this perceived ill-fated nature of Grásíða becomes a major theme and in this context the saga is partly an attempt to explain the Sturlung defeat at Örlygsstaðir. Grásíða, which had (so the saga says) always proved ill-fated to the family, struck again. The Sturlung defeat would therefore appear as part of the family fate as determined by Grásíða and gains a dramatic rise in the eyes of the Sturlung faction. In this context we can say that Örlygsstaðir elevates the Sturlungs in spite of their defeat just as e.g. King Arthur's last stand elevated the king and sealed his fate and legend. Thus, they acquired a legendary or even mythical quality so important for any dynasty, strengthening their claim to power and authority. Sagas, legends and stories were not just entertainment – they were an integrated part of the political battle.

This also means that Gísla saga was written after the battle of Örlygsstaðir. The most likely date is between 1242 and 1245. At this time Sturla's brother, Þórður kakali, ruled the Seldælir principality, fighting to revive the Sturlung cause. Gísla saga would have served his political purpose to unite the people of the area behind him. After 1245 his power-base was much wider and attempts to strengthen the resolve of his followers would probably not focus on such a small part of the country. After 1245 a similar purpose may indeed have been served by the writing of the Saga of Þórður kakali.[20]

It is interesting to note that in the younger M version of Gísla saga the sinister role of Grásíða is considerably downplayed. For example, it omits the ominous prediction of Grásíða's original owner lessening the tie between the crime and the fateful role of the weapon. This could indicate that the shortening of the saga, represented by the M version, was from a time when Grásíða's connection with the Sturlungs was no longer of importance and the saga had ceased functioning as a morale builder for the Sturlungs in the Westfjords.

The writing of sagas in the 13th century was not just some antiquarian pastime but a matter of life and death for many of the political leaders of the time. It was crucial for them to ensure the support of their followers and subjects and the writing of sagas could be an effective way to achieve this. Unfortunately we have little information on how exactly the sagas

were distributed except that they were apparently used as entertainment at banquets frequently held by lords and chieftains.[21] But telling tales at banquets did not require the written word and so the very fact that the sagas were written down indicates their distribution away from the lordly manors and to the dispersed settlements within their principalities or chieftaincies. It only required the presence of the written book and one literate man, such as a priest, to be able to entertain with written sagas at festive occasions and gatherings all around the lord's sphere of influence. By distributing written sagas the lord could also ensure that the version pleasing to him was being told. It is hard to prove that distribution of this sort took place but if the sagas were used in the way assumed here, some such dissemination to the politically important section of the population was essential.

Gísla saga, like most other Family sagas, is a complex composition with various themes and motives.[22] It should not be seen as blatant propaganda for the Sturlung faction — propaganda only works if it is sown in fertile ground, a place where there is already cohesion and a sense of common identity. It should rather be considered as the result of many different inputs, amongst them genuine antiquarian interest and the love of a good story. However, the lord's need for solidarity amongst his followers is a crucial ingredient and the one that probably explains why politically fragmented Iceland produced so much more literature than the rest of Scandinavia which had an almost identical cultural background.[23]

Sources

Aðalgeir Kristjánsson, "Gísla saga og samtíð höfundar." *Skírnir; tímarit hins ísenzka bókmenntafélags* 139 (1965), pp. 148-58.

Axel Kristinsson: "Íslenskar ríkisættir á 12. og 13. öld. Lóðréttar ættarhugmyndir héraðshöfðingja og staðarhaldara." *Íslenska söguþingið 28. -31 mai 1997. Ráðstefnurit* I (Reykjavík 1998), pp. 70-82.

Axel Kristinsson: "Lords and Literature: The Icelandic sagas as Political and Social Instruments." *Scandinavian Journal of History* vol. 28, No. 1, 2003, pp. 1-17.

Biskupa sögur I (Copenhagen 1858).

Björn M. Óslen, "Um Sturlungu." *Safn til sögu Íslands og íslenzkra bókmennta að fornu og nýju* III (Copenhagen 1902).

Complete Sagas of Icelanders, The. Including 49 Tales I-V. General Editor Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík 1997).

Dudo of St. Quentin: *De moribus et actis primorum Normanniae ducum. History of the Normans* by Dudo of St. Quentin; translated into English by Eric Christiansen, with introduction and notes (Woodbridge 1998).

Gísli Sigurðsson, *Túlkun Íslendingasagna í ljósi munnlegrar hefðar. Tilgáta um aðferð* (Reykjavík 2002).

Guðni Kolbeinsson & Jónas Kristjánsson: "Gerðir Gísla sögu." *Gripla* III (1979), pp. 128-162.

Helgi Þorláksson: "Sauðafell. Um leiðir og völd í Dölum við lok þjóðveldis." *Yfir Íslandsála: Afmælisrit til heiðurs Magnúsi Stefánssyni sextugum 25. desember 1991* (Reykjavík 1991), pp. 95-109.

Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar. Edited by Guðrún P. Helgadóttir (Oxford 1987).

Íslensk bókmenntasaga 2. Edited by Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavík 1993).
Íslenzk fornrit VI. Vestfirðinga sögur. Eds. Björn K. Þórólfsson & Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavik 1943).
Lúðvík Ingvarsson, *Goðorð og goðorðsmenn* I-III (Egilsstöðum 1986-1987).
Reynolds, Susan: *Fiefs and Vassals. The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford 1994).
Saga of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, The. The Life of an Icelandic Physician of the Thirteenth Century. Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Anne Tjomsland (Ithaca 1951).
Sturlunga saga I-II. Edited by Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn (Reykjavík 1946).
Sturlunga saga I-II, translated from the Old Icelandic by Julia H. McGrew; introduction by R. George Thomas (New York 1970-1974).
Úlfar Bragason: "The structure and meaning of "Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar." *Scandinavian studies*, volume 60 ; number 2, Spring, 1988, pp. 267-292.
Vésteinn Ólason: "Gísli Súrsson – a flawless or flawed hero?" *Die Aktualität der Saga: Festschrift für Hans Schottmann*. 1999 pp. 163-175.
Vésteinn Ólason: *Dialogues with the Viking Age. Narration and Representation in the Sagas of the Icelanders* (Reykjavík 1998).

References

[1] The year may have been 963 or 964. *Íslenzk fornrit VI,* p. xliii. As a key event in the legend it is likely that this actually happened although sources are late and not really trustworthy.

[2] The edition of Gísla saga used here is the standard Icelandic edition (*Íslenzk fornrit VI,* pp. 1-118. The saga has been translated into English by M.S. Regal ("Gísli Súrsson's Saga", *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* II, pp. 1-48) but only the shorter version which, although many find it artistically more pleasing, is probably younger than the longer version which is mostly under consideration here (below).

[3] Axel Kristinsson (2003).

[4] Dudo, *De moribus et actis primorum Normanniae ducum*. For a recent re-evaluation of feudalism see Susan Reynolds: *Fiefs and Vassals*.

[5] See e.g. Vésteinn Ólason (1999), pp. 167-173.

[6] *Íslensk bókmentasaga* 2. (Reykjavík 1993), p. 128.

[7] Guðni Kolbeinsson & Jónas Kristjánsson (1979).

[8] The source for these events is "Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar" (*Biskupa sögur* I, pp. 639-676). The saga is discussed below.

[9] The Dalir-principality was based on the Snorrungagoðorð (a chieftaincy) but was emerging, at this time, as a principality with fixed boundaries. Helgi Þorláksson (1991), p. 96.

[10] The main source for events towards the close of the Commonwealth period is Sturlunga saga especially its chief component: Íslendinga saga. English translation: *Sturlunga saga* I-II (New York 1970-1974).

[11] For a good discussion on the saga see: Úlfar Bragason (1988).

[12] *Atburðir margir, þeir er varða, falla mönnum opt or minni, en sumir eru annan veg sagðir en verit hafa, ok trúa því margir, er logit er, en tortryggja þat satt er. En fyrir því, - at aptr hverfr lygi þá er sönnu mætir, þá ætlu vær at rita nökkura*

atburði, þá er gerzt hafa á vorum dögum, á meðal vor kunnra manna, sem vér vitum sannleik til. (*Biskupa sögur* I, p. 639). English translation: *The Saga of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson*. p. 1.

[13] The main source for Þórður's life is Þórðar saga kakala, a part of the Sturlunga saga compilation (Sturlunga saga II (Reykjavík), pp. 1-86; Sturlunga saga II (New York), pp. 227-322), but it is Íslendinga saga which tells of his death (Sturlunga saga I (Reykjavík), pp. 523-24; Sturlunga saga I (New York), pp. 435-36).

[14] The importance of dynasties in the Icelandic Commonwealth has often been overlooked. For a discussion on dynastic strategies in the period, see: Axel Kristinsson (1998).

[15] *Íslenzk fornrit VI*, pp 18-19. Although the literature maintains that Þorgrímur came from Snæfellsnes his son, Snorri goði, was a chieftain in the Dalir. The sagas seem to indicate a translocation of the family's chieftaincy from Snæfellsnes to Dalir, even if this is never clearly stated, and a corresponding translocation of another family of chieftains, the Hvammverjar, in the opposite direction. See: Lúðvík Ingvarsson (1986-1987), pp. 98 and 136.

[16] Sturlunga saga I (New York), p 176.
Hljóp Guðlaugr fram ok lagði til Bjarnar með spjóti því, er þeir kölluðu Grásíðu ok sögðu átt hafa Gísla Súrsson. Lagit kom í óstinn, ok snerist Björn upp at kirkjunni ok settist niðr.
Guðlaugr gekk til Lofts ok sagði honum, at Björn var sárr orðinn.
Loftr spyrr, hverr því olli.
„Vit Grásíða," svarar hann.
„Hvé mjök mun hann sárr?" sagði Loftr.
Guðlaugr sýndi honum spjótit, ok var feitin ofarliga á fjöðrinni. Þóttust þeir þá vita, at þat var banasár.
(Sturlunga saga I (Reykjavík), p. 282. Whether this was truly Gísli's spear is, of course, beside the point. The important thing being that it was said to have been his spear although the words in this passage indicate that there was in fact some room for doubt.

[17] Sturlunga saga I (New York), pp. 339-340.
Sturla varðist með spjóti því, er Grásíða hét, fornt ok ekki vel stinnt málaspjót. Hann lagði svá hart með því jafnan, at menn fellu fyrir en spjótit lagðist, ok brá hann því undir fót sér nökkrum sinnum. Sturlunga saga I (Reykjavík), pp. 435.

[18] One of Sturla's opponents in this battle, Gissur, was the younger half-brother, on their father's side, of Björn who was slain by Grásíða in 1221. It may been suggested that this was the main reason for Sturla choosing this weapon; that he was provoking Gissur or showing that he was not afraid of him. If so, it was hardly for Gissur's benefit since he would probably not have known that Sturla was using the spear that killed his brother. If it was for the benefit of Sturla's own followers, it would seem a little strange and could be interpreted as the foolish act of a fey man. Still, it can not be ruled out that this played some part in Sturla's decision.

[19] *Íslenzk fornrit VI*, pp. 9-14, 37, 43-44 and 52-54.

[20] Þórðar saga kakala is usually assumed to have been written some time after Þórður's death in 1256 (Björn M. Óslen 1902, pp. 466-67) but in my view there is good reason to think that most of it was in fact written before his death. But this is a matter for a separate investigation.

[21] For example *Sturlunga saga* II (New York), p. 43. See also Gísli Sigurðsson (2002), pp. 36-39.

[22] It is, for example, often maintained that Gísli's exploits are, to some extent, based on the life of Aron Hjörleifsson, a 13th century outlaw and an enemy of Sturla Sighvatsson. Aðalgeir Kristjánsson (1965).
[23] Further discussed in: Axel Kristinsson (2003).