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## **Abstract**

Nicola Alexandra Ibbott

### The Witch-Queen of Avaldsnes: An Analysis of the Portrayals of Gunnhildr *konungamóðir*

Gunnhildr *konungamóðir* is described in much of the extant source material as a sorceress noted for her brazen sexuality and ruthlessly cruel character. She was queen of Norway, York and Orkney as King Eiríkr *blóðǫx*'s consort and subsequently wielded influence in the courts of her sons. However, much of her life is shrouded in mystery and her image is twisted by texts, which owe more to the time in which they were written than they do a tenth-century queen. This research draws attention to the life of a woman who may have been subject to infamy in her own time but was certainly vilified in the Middle Ages and has been somewhat neglected by modern historians. Its aim is to explore Gunnhildr's portrayals in the extant primary source material, thereby seeking an explanation for why she was so maligned. This will be facilitated by answering questions about what the texts say about her; how they differ; how the date and origin of the sources affect the portrayals; and to what extent do the sources provide a realistic description of a tenth-century queen? The analysis is organised chronologically, starting with the earliest portrayals in the 'Norwegian Synoptics' and ending with *Íslendingasögur*. The research found that Gunnhildr's portrayals are for the most part negative and contain themes such as cruelty, sorcery, and her active role in government which span time, genre and origin. It is likely that the descriptions of Gunnhildr do not truly represent the life of a tenth-century queen but medieval attitudes. Further research placing Gunnhildr into tenth-century and medieval contexts and exploring more source material would be beneficial.

**THE UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM**

**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY**

Thesis submitted for the Degree of Master of Arts

**The Witch-Queen of Avaldsnes: An Analysis of the Portrayals of Gunnhildr  
*konungamóðir***

Nicola Alexandra Ibbott  
2019



Gunnhildr persuades Eiríkr's men to kill the Finnish wizards. From an illustration by Christian Krohg, in *Harald Hårfagres saga*, (*Heimskringla*), (ed. G. Storm).

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	- 1 -
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	- 4 -
<b>List of Abbreviations</b> .....	- 6 -
<b>Glossary</b> .....	- 8 -
<b>Introduction</b> .....	- 11 -
Background .....	- 11 -
Research Focus .....	- 14 -
Research Value .....	- 15 -
Research Aim and Questions .....	- 16 -
Literature Review .....	- 16 -
Methodology .....	- 29 -
<b>'Norwegian Synoptics'</b> .....	- 31 -
<i>Historia Norwegiae</i> .....	- 31 -
<i>Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium</i> .....	- 38 -
<i>Ágrip af Noregskonungasögum</i> .....	- 45 -
Conclusion .....	- 54 -
<b>Gesta Danorum</b> .....	- 56 -
Conclusion .....	- 63 -
<b>Konungasögur</b> .....	- 65 -
<i>Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar</i> .....	- 65 -
<i>Orkneyinga saga</i> .....	- 70 -
<i>Fagrskinna</i> .....	- 77 -
<i>Heimskringla</i> .....	- 91 -
<i>Jómsvíkinga saga</i> .....	- 105 -
<i>Ólaf's saga Tryggvasonar en Mesta</i> .....	- 114 -
Conclusion .....	- 121 -
<b>Íslendingasögur</b> .....	- 123 -
<i>Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds</i> .....	- 123 -
<i>Egils saga Skallagrímssonar</i> .....	- 125 -
<i>Laxdæla saga</i> .....	- 137 -
<i>Njáls saga</i> .....	- 145 -
<i>Flóamanna saga</i> .....	- 156 -

<i>Bórðar saga hreðu</i> .....	- 159 -
<i>Harðar saga ok Hólmverja</i> .....	- 161 -
Conclusion .....	- 163 -
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	- 165 -
<b>Appendix I</b> .....	- 170 -
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	- 171 -
Primary Sources.....	- 171 -
Secondary Sources .....	- 174 -

## **List of Abbreviations**

<b>Abbreviation:</b>	<b>Full Title:</b>
<i>HN</i>	<i>Historia Norwegiae</i>
<i>HarN</i>	<i>Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium</i>
<i>Ágrip</i>	<i>Ágrip af Noregskonungasögum</i>
<i>ÓsT</i>	<i>Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar</i>
<i>Orkneyinga</i>	<i>Orkneyinga saga</i>
<i>Egla</i>	<i>Egils saga</i>
<i>Njála</i>	<i>Njáls saga</i>
<i>GD</i>	<i>Gesta Danorum</i>
<i>GH</i>	<i>Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificium</i>
<i>Knýtlinga</i>	<i>Knýtlinga saga</i>
<i>Skjöldunga</i>	<i>Skjöldunga saga</i>
<i>A-SC</i>	<i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i>
<i>Íslendinga</i>	<i>Íslendinga saga</i>
<i>Haralds</i>	<i>Haralds saga ins hárfagra</i>
<i>Hákonar</i>	<i>Hákonar saga góða</i>
<i>Gráfeldr</i>	<i>Haralds saga gráfeldr</i>
<i>Óláfs</i>	<i>Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar</i>
<i>Laxdæla</i>	<i>Laxdæla saga</i>
<i>Völsunga</i>	<i>Völsunga saga</i>
<i>Jómsvíkinga</i>	<i>Jómsvíkinga saga</i>
<i>Føreyinga</i>	<i>Føreyinga saga</i>
<i>Mesta</i>	<i>Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en Mesta</i>
<i>Hallfreðar</i>	<i>Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds</i>

<i>Flóamanna</i>	<i>Flóamanna saga</i>
<i>Þórðar</i>	<i>Þórðar saga hreðu</i>
<i>Kormáks</i>	<i>Kormáks saga</i>
<i>Hrólf</i>	<i>Hrólf</i> <i>saga Gautrekssonar</i>
<i>Flores</i>	<i>Flores Historiarum</i>
<i>Harðar</i>	<i>Harðar saga ok Hólmverja</i>

## **Glossary**

<i>Íslendingasaga</i> (pl. <i>Íslendingasögur</i> )	Icelandic family saga(s)
<i>konungasaga</i> (pl. <i>konungasögur</i> )	kings' saga(s)
<i>fornaldarsaga</i> (pl. <i>fornaldarsögur</i> )	legendary saga(s)
<i>riddarasaga</i> (pl. <i>riddarasögur</i> )	romance saga(s)
<i>skáldsaga</i> (pl. <i>skáldsögur</i> )	subsection of <i>Íslendingasögur</i> that represents the poets' sagas
<i>konungamóðir</i>	king's mother
<i>blóðøx</i>	bloodaxe
<i>blátǫnn</i>	bluetooth
<i>gráfeldr</i>	greycloak
<i>hárfagri</i>	fairhair
<i>lafskegg</i>	dangling beard (a Norwegian term)
<i>toti</i>	protuberance/snout (an Icelandic term)
<i>Fagrskinna</i>	fair parchment (seventeenth-century title given to the manuscript)

*“The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.”*

For Leo, my light in dark places. Many thanks for the assistance with proof-reading.

Thank you also to my Icelandic friend Hrólfur Árnason for his kind help and advice translating the Nordal article. Any mistakes herein are my own.

## Introduction

### Background

This thesis seeks to explore the portrayals of Gunnhildr, tenth-century queen of Norway, York, and Orkney and King Eiríkr *blóðøx*'s consort, across the extant source material, which ranges from twelfth-century Norwegian synoptic histories to fourteenth-century *Íslendingasögur*, seeking credible explanations for the differences between them. This research is significant and enhances the field of early-medieval historiography because it draws attention to the life of a woman who may have been subject to infamy in her own time, but was certainly vilified in the Middle Ages by becoming a focus for men's fears, and has been somewhat neglected by modern historians. This thesis is intended to draw Gunnhildr out of the shadows of androcentric medieval literature into the light of a more balanced analysis. Previous studies of her have been limited to short descriptions in generic works on the Viking Age, except in articles by William Sayers and Jóna Torfadóttir.<sup>1</sup> The exception to this rule is Siguður Nordal's seminal monograph concerning Gunnhildr, which although an extremely welcome addition to scholarship, is now some eighty years old and written in Icelandic, therefore inaccessible to those non-fluent in the language, and in places borders on the impenetrable even for native-speakers.<sup>2</sup> This research, therefore, will bring the scholarship on Gunnhildr up to date and will be accessible to a wider audience. It represents original research, as it will analyse all extant source material in which she features across the Old Norse corpus of history and literature, a task not previously undertaken. This will elucidate the story of a woman known in the sources as a sorceress who was denigrated for her

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<sup>1</sup> Sayers, 'Power'; Jóna Torfadóttir, 'Gunnhildur'.

<sup>2</sup> Nordal, 'Gunnhildur'.

'flagrant sexuality' and apparently possessed 'an utterly wicked and ruthless character'.<sup>3</sup> Sayers has argued that in, the Icelandic sources at least, Gunnhildr represents a metaphor for the threat posed by Norway to Iceland in the thirteenth century. Thus, Gunnhildr and Norway are conflated into a picture of a medieval *femme fatale*, whose sexual power is by equal measure alluring and dangerous to Icelanders seeking their fortune at the Norwegian court. Jóna Torfadóttir argues that these fortune-seeking Icelanders are responsible for their own fate because they fell prey to Gunnhildr's web of sex, magic and power by virtue of their own greed. Nordal himself described her as a *stórbrotin kona* and posits that Gunnhildr was a magnificent woman who nevertheless became a misfortune for both herself and others, a contradiction that lies at the heart of her characterisations; she was admired for her generosity and beauty, but feared and vilified for her magical power and sexuality.<sup>4</sup> These opinions are thought-provoking and it will be interesting to see how they resonate with the conclusions reached by this research.

The written sources used in this thesis were not generated concurrent with Gunnhildr's life, and their validity for discussing the period has been challenged by scholars.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, they form the core of this discussion, which offers a chronological examination of the evidential sources from literature and history. Much of Gunnhildr's life is shrouded in mystery and her image is 'consistently distorted' by the written sources.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the sources offer an intriguing window of how later generations formed and re-formed the memory of Gunnhildr in reflection of their own concerns. Eiríkr *blóðøx* succeeded his father Haraldr *hárfagri*, who had ruled as

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<sup>3</sup> Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir, *Women*, p.83.

<sup>4</sup> Nordal, 'Gunnhildur', p.292.

<sup>5</sup> Price, *Secrets*.

<sup>6</sup> Jones, *Vikings*, p.121.

the 'first over-king of a unified Norway', in c.931 but acquired a reputation as a violent tyrant who committed fratricide in order to secure his hold on the throne.<sup>7</sup> His reputation of cruelty and bad rule was blamed in some of the sources on his queen Gunnhildr and resulted in him being driven out of Norway by his younger brother Hákon, seeking refuge first in Orkney and then in Northumbria.<sup>8</sup> Despite Æthelstan's victory in 937 at the Battle of *Brunanburh*, West Saxon hegemony in Northumbria was far from assured, and the volatile political situation there resulted in a fast turnaround of rulers, both Norse and Anglo-Saxon.<sup>9</sup> Eiríkr eventually gained control over Northumbria and was indeed the last Viking king of York. It is difficult to talk in definite terms about Eiríkr as the dates of his reigns (he seems to have ruled over two separate periods) and even his actual identity are both in dispute.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, Norse sagas and histories agree that when Eiríkr was ejected from Norway he went to England, and several contain accounts of his reign in York.<sup>11</sup> It is not known why Eiríkr lost his grip on the throne of York, although one central-medieval chronicle blames Gunnhildr's fury and says that the Northumbrians overthrew their rule. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* account is perhaps the most plausible: it tells of increasing pressure from West Saxons determined to continue

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<sup>7</sup> Townend, *Yorkshire*, p.75.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Higham and Ryan, *Anglo-Saxon*, p.303.

<sup>10</sup> Townend, *Yorkshire*, p.75. The *A-SC* states that he had two reigns, (one that ended in 948 and the second 950-54) but this is problematic. Sawyer, on the strength of charter evidence, has argued that Eiríkr only ruled once (950-52) and saga evidence claims that he ruled as a sub-king of Æthelstan (d.939). This is further complicated by the late-tenth-century *Life of St Cathroe*, which states that Cathroe met a King Eiríkr of York, which must have occurred c.939-46, and that Cathroe, a royal cleric from Strathclyde, was related to Eiríkr's wife. This, of course, is contentious, as it represents contemporary evidence that an Eiríkr of York was married to someone who was not Gunnhildr. This is the crux of Downham's argument that Cathroe's Eiríkr of York and Eiríkr *blóððøx* were not one in the same. However, for the purposes of this thesis, it will be accepted that Eiríkr *blóððøx* ruled York and was married to Gunnhildr. Furthermore, that he ruled twice as demonstrated by the *A-SC* and numismatic evidence, which shows that coins fall into two distinct groups, thus supporting the hypothesis that he had two separate reigns in York. See also Woolf, 'Bloodaxe'; Sawyer, 'Scandinavian'; Downham, 'Mystery'; Rollason, *Sources*; Blunt *et al.*, *Coinage*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Æthelstan's policy of regaining the north.<sup>12</sup> Eiríkr's death is reported in the 'Norwegian synoptics', the Icelandic sources and also in *Flores* by Roger of Wendover (a thirteenth-century English chronicler), whose description for the year 950: *rex Eilricus... interrempti sunt*, seems to lend a certain sense of pathos, in that he is killed *fraudulenter* ('treacherously'), *in quadam solitudine quae 'Steinmor' dicitur*.<sup>13</sup> So, it can be said that facts concerning Eiríkr's life are contradictory and somewhat nebulous. The same and more can be said for Gunnhildr. Her historicity has been doubted and disputed by scholars, and the sources that describe her are a veritable tangle of paradoxical information. This is one of the reasons behind this thesis: it focuses attention on a figure in need of re-evaluation.

### Research Focus

The focus of this thesis is Gunnhildr's portrayal in the written sources. This involves a cross-genre analysis of source material spanning three centuries. The sources include Norwegian synoptic histories, Saxo Grammaticus' Danish history, Icelandic *konungasögur* and *Íslendingasögur*. Previous research has generally been directed upon Icelandic sources, so increasing the scope and analysing a greater range of sources will alter the angle of focus and provide original research that spans conventions of genre, location and time.

The sources can be summarised as follows. The 'Norwegian synoptics', written between the late-twelfth and early-thirteenth centuries, represent three early examples of *konungasögur*, which supply brief synopses of Norway's history from legendary times to the twelfth century. Saxo's *GD*, from c.1200, links Viking Age Danish kings with myths and legends of its gods and heroes. A major category of

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<sup>12</sup> Townend, *Yorkshire*, p.75.

<sup>13</sup> *Flores* (ed. Coxe, p.402-3). 'King Eiríkr...was killed', 'in a certain lonely place which is called Stainmore'. *Flowers*, (ed. Whitelock, p.257). Whitelock notes that 950 is too early, it should actually be 954.

Old Norse texts is the sagas, which include *konungasögur* and *Íslendingasögur*, that generally date from 1200 onwards.<sup>14</sup> *Konungasögur* relate the history and stories associated with Norway's early kings. *Íslendingasögur* describe events from the Icelandic settlement c.870 to c.1030, corresponding to the Viking Age, when women were 'strong and independent'.<sup>15</sup> This description encompasses characters like Gunnhildr.

### Research Value

It can be difficult to study early-medieval women, not just because of the general paucity of contemporary written material, but because what does exist was written by men, hence it is not unpredictable that what was written tends to be androcentric. It is, therefore, unsurprising that study devoted to a tenth-century woman, whose historicity has been called in to question, is somewhat lacking. A recent upsurge in the interest in gender history, however, has resulted in many more works devoted to women of the early-medieval period including the Viking Age. The work of Judith Jesch, Jenny Jochens, Pauline Stafford, and Christine Fell amongst others are invaluable to an enhanced understanding of the female role in early-medieval Europe. The subject of Gunnhildr lacks an up-to-date critical investigation, which this research will provide. Furthermore, this thesis will examine all the extant source material, not just the Icelandic. This unique approach will offer a different angle to what has been written hitherto, thereby adding value to the previous scholarship. The research contained herein is important because it brings to the fore the life of a woman who fell afoul of medieval historiographers and who has for the most part been neglected by modern scholarship, excepting Nordal, and offers a

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<sup>14</sup> Præstgaard Andersen, 'Valkyries'.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.304.

fresh interpretation of the facts. Moreover, it will be a significant contribution to the growing corpus of work focussed upon understanding Viking Age women.

### Research Aim and Questions

The aim of this thesis is to explore the primary source material that contains portrayals of Gunnhildr, and to seek an explanation for why she was so maligned. As part of this exploration, the research will be focused upon seeking thematic patterns between the texts, necessitating an understanding of their textual relationships.

The research questions are as follows:

- What do the written sources say about Gunnhildr and how do they differ?
- How do the date and origin of the sources affect the portrayals?
- To what extent do the sources portray a realistic description of a tenth-century queen and is it possible to pinpoint the derivation of the negativity directed towards her?

### Literature Review

The study of women in history, particularly the Viking Age, is fraught with problems as in earlier historiography there is a tendency to ignore women altogether, or to consign them as footnotes to the achievements of men. This is frustrating because Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon, and Continental European medieval sources are replete with examples of women: queens, wives, abbesses, mothers, goddesses, monsters, sorceresses, and shield-maidens, albeit not in the same quantities as their male counterparts. Nevertheless, modern scholarship has attempted to redress the balance with much now written about early-medieval women, of which considerations of Gunnhildr form a part. Medieval historiography was not kind to Gunnhildr and not all of the more recent writing about her has changed from this

received view. Turville-Petre commented, fairly, that she was one of the most notorious women in Scandinavian history, but then goes on to say that she was not just known for her cruelty, licentiousness, and treachery but also for her sorcery.<sup>16</sup> His statement seemingly repeats uncritically all that was written about her in the medieval sources without question, and it is this acceptance that this thesis seeks to challenge by offering a more nuanced interpretation. In addition to previous scholarship devoted to Gunnhildr, the research contained here will also need to engage with surveys of the historicity of the sagas, an issue which impacts upon their value as sources and therefore their validity in portraying her. The following review of the pertinent literature will begin with a selection of the broader surveys of female history in which Gunnhildr features, move on to articles which are centred upon her, and end with a brief but broad overview of the literature that discusses the historical value of the sagas.

Jochens has written extensively on the subject of women in the Old Norse world, and her book entitled *Women in Old Norse Society*, although written in 1995, remains an invaluable source for those seeking to understand women in the Viking Age. She states that Gunnhildr is represented as a 'consummate politician' in *Heimskringla* and a 'femme fatale' in *Íslendingasögur*, but that she fits into the group of politically powerful women found in tenth-century European royal circles.<sup>17</sup> Jochens goes on to assert that despite Gunnhildr's life being rooted in the reality of tenth-century politics, her furthestmost fully-formed feature is that of the female inciter, and because of this she will discuss her in her book *Old Norse Images of Women*.<sup>18</sup> This is significant because this volume focusses not on historical women,

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<sup>16</sup> Turville-Petre, *Heroic*.

<sup>17</sup> Jochens, *Society*, p.174.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*. The German term preferred by scholars for a whetter/inciter is *hetzerin*.

but on images of women formed in men's imaginations, women who she categorised as 'divine, mythic and heroic', which means that Jochens has essentially assigned Gunnhildr a non-historical role.<sup>19</sup> She is careful to note that the boundary between the two groups is 'permeable' but nevertheless she has relegated Gunnhildr to the realms of fiction.<sup>20</sup> This seems somewhat arbitrary considering that Gunnhildr is attested in the 'Norwegian synoptics', *GD*, and *konungasögur*, all of which have a reasonably firm basis in historical fact. It is evident that Jochens believes that descriptions of Gunnhildr, specifically those contained within *Heimskringla* and *ÓsT*, were coloured by their authors' own Christianity and desire to align themselves with the prevalent attitude of misogyny in Christian clerical writing of the period.<sup>21</sup> She describes Gunnhildr as the 'prototype of evil and revenging women in the Old Norse corpus' and that her grim temperament was what first caught the attention, and that although she knew infamy in her own lifetime, 'part of her image was due in no small measure to the economic crisis brought on by bad weather and crop failure', which is also referenced by Nordal.<sup>22</sup> Jochens' hypotheses are interesting, as she highlights the likelihood that Gunnhildr's portrayal owes more to central-medieval attitudes than those held in the tenth century, and that the negativity associated with her could have stemmed from economic problems not excessive cruelty on her part. Thus, she paints a picture of twelfth- and thirteenth-century writers who combined lost written sources and oral tradition, thereby fabricating an ever more extravagant portrait of Gunnhildr.<sup>23</sup> An attractive conclusion, but one that is problematic due to Jochens' neglect of the non-Icelandic sources.

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<sup>19</sup> Jochens, *Images*, p.xiii.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

Jesch's seminal *Women in the Viking Age* only mentions Gunnhildr in passing, in the context of her supposed interest in poetry. Jesch stresses that Gunnhildr was a 'favourite hate-figure' of the *Íslendingasögur* and that even the more historical *konungasögur* showed her as an arrogant, malevolent schemer.<sup>24</sup> More importantly, Jesch also draws attention to the difficulty of penetrating this medieval misogynistic façade to discover any truth about the tenth-century life of Gunnhildr, including her parentage and origins. Jesch, therefore, offers the generally accepted viewpoint of modern scholarship, that she was vilified by the Icelandic sources, and that it is difficult to discover any irrefutable facts about Gunnhildr from the evidence available. This thesis does not necessarily seek to challenge this viewpoint, merely to offer a more nuanced analysis, one that traverses the genre of sources.

Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir's more recent work of 2013, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, refers to Gunnhildr as, 'one of the most notorious female characters in Old Norse literature', and it is hard to refute this assertion.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, she states that when Gunnhildr appears in *Íslendingasögur*, she can be grouped together with characters such as Hallgerðr and Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir who cause the maximum amount of trouble for the male protagonists.<sup>26</sup> Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir continues that in *Íslendingasögur* Gunnhildr is portrayed as both beautiful and sexually attractive, generous to those who seek her patronage, but dangerous if thwarted.<sup>27</sup> This is again an accurate summary of Gunnhildr's character in *Íslendingasögur*, although it must be noted that, at no point in those sagas is her beauty explicitly described (except *Egla*), such descriptions are contained in some of the 'Norwegian synoptics'

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<sup>24</sup> Jesch, *Women*, p.162.

<sup>25</sup> Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir, *Women*, p.82.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* She echoes Nordal's sentiment that Gunnhildr was 'aðsópsmest og torráðnust' ('most absorbed and unwavering'). Nordal, 'Gunnhildur', p.277.

and *konungasögur*. Indeed, her portrayal in *Njála* is more in keeping with that of an ageing woman desperately pursuing a man many years her junior, without mention of her beauty. This relatively minor mistake is understandable considering that the book is not focussed solely upon Gunnhildr but serves to demonstrate that errors are possible. This research aims to expand existing scholarship by providing an accurate analysis of her divergent portrayals. She also describes the differing depictions of Gunnhildr across the *Íslendingasögur* and finds Sayers' conclusion that Gunnhildr could be read as a literary construct, one that is a metaphor for the threat posed to Iceland by Norway in the thirteenth century, 'convincing'.<sup>28</sup> She goes on to assert that the historiographical sources that mention Gunnhildr, *i.e.* the 'Norwegian synoptics' and *konungasögur*, are 'generally considered untrustworthy and negatively biased' and quotes Jones' sentiment that 'there is no evidence that Eiríkr, Gunnhildr, and their royal brood were greedier, crueller, more devious or ambitious than their fellow contenders for rank and riches in Norway'.<sup>29</sup> Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir also discusses that not all of the portrayals of Gunnhildr are negative, mentioning the more sympathetic version in *Laxdæla* and the more neutral one in *Heimskringla*, although she adds the caveat that, in the latter, every positive attribute of the queen is followed by a negative.<sup>30</sup> She concludes that Gunnhildr's active role in government made her unique within *Heimskringla* and the accounts of her that involved witchcraft and sexual deviance must be seen in terms of fictionalisation by their authors, for whatever reason.<sup>31</sup> Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir's conclusion is persuasive and as the aim of this research is to ascertain why Gunnhildr was

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<sup>28</sup> Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir, *Women*, p.83; Sayers, 'Power'.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*; Jones, *Vikings*, p.122.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

maligned in the overwhelming majority of the sources, it forms an integral part of the argument contained within, that her powerful position made her different and open to vilification by medieval writers.

Jóna Torfadóttir's paper aims to explore how medieval writers treated Gunnhildr by examining the sources, with particular interest in her relationships with Icelandic farmers. That said, she devotes most of attention to the Icelandic sources and draws attention to her belief that Gunnhildr is treated as a *troll* and is reminiscent of the 'troll women in the Icelandic fairy tales, especially the evil stepmother'.<sup>32</sup> Gunnhildr did not have stepchildren, but Jóna Torfadóttir emphasises the similarity between the 'evil stepmother' who lusts after her stepson and hates him when he is not willing to have sexual relations with her and Gunnhildr who seduced young men, contemporaries of her sons.<sup>33</sup> An interesting idea, but not one that will be pursued here. Of greater interest is her argument that Gunnhildr is treated unfairly because she was a strong and powerful woman, not bowing to male authority, thus a 'provocation to the heroes' manliness'.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, she expresses her belief that Gunnhildr's portrayals in *Íslendingasögur* as sexually voracious were 'roused out of Icelandic farmers' sexual fantasies', leading to her conclusion that Icelandic men sold themselves to the Norwegian queen in order to boost their chances of gaining fame and fortune in Norway.<sup>35</sup> Jóna Torfadóttir's ideas are thought-provoking but are derived, for the most part, from her concentration upon *Íslendingasögur*, and do not necessarily reflect a balanced consideration of all the sources, including Norwegian

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<sup>32</sup> Jóna Torfadóttir, 'Gunnhildur', p.2. *Troll* in Old Icelandic means a 'monstrous, evil-disposed being, not belonging to the human race', or alternatively a human having the nature of a troll. The word also has associations with witchcraft in its form *trolldómr*. Zoëga, *Dictionary*, p.442. According to Orel, *troll* developed from the Proto-Germanic *\*trullan* and the Old Icelandic verb *trylla* 'to enchant' or 'to turn into a troll' developed from the Proto-Germanic *\*trulljanan*, a derivative of *\*trullan*. Orel, *Etymology*, p.410-11.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

and Danish. If her portrayals in *Íslendingasögur* can be attributed to the sexual fantasies of Icelandic farmers, it begs the question, what does it say about the Norwegian sources?

Sayers, on the other hand, sees Gunnhildr's negative portrayals in the light of her representing a female-gendered threat that the 'expansive Norwegian kingdom posed to conflict-torn thirteenth-century Iceland', a consequence of them being a product of sources rooted centuries after she lived.<sup>36</sup> He highlights that many *Íslendingasögur* were composed during the turbulent Age of the Sturlungs, and that although they tell tales of a much earlier period, they reflect the disquiet that went with Iceland's decision to submit to Norway's rule.<sup>37</sup> He goes on to state that in *Íslendingasögur* Norway is customarily gendered male, but that in Gunnhildr, 'Norway is gendered female and represents a different but equally compelling and seductive threat to vulnerable, susceptible Icelandic masculinity'.<sup>38</sup> This statement finds common ground with Jóna Torfadóttir, who also opined that Gunnhildr with her power and strength represented a threat to Icelanders' masculinity. Like Jóna Torfadóttir, Sayers concentrates on *Íslendingasögur*, but does refer to the earlier Norwegian histories, although erroneously asserts that the Latin histories of early-Norwegian kings present Gunnhildr as a Danish princess, when in fact only *HN* states this.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, he then ascribes her 'exotic and far-northern ancestry', *i.e.* her identification as a Hálogalander in Icelandic sources, to the xenophobia of early Norse texts, in which Finnic peoples were maligned, and that 'the frequent attribution of sorcery to foreign women is a means to feminize the portraits of these

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<sup>36</sup> Sayers, 'Power', p.57.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* The Age of the Sturlungs refers to a period in Iceland's history that saw the country debilitated by factional fighting between chieftains, resulting in submission to the Norwegian crown being seen as the only solution.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.59.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

cultures'.<sup>40</sup> So, he believes that in describing Gunnhildr negatively, the medieval writers/compiler of *Íslendingasögur* were both seeking to provide a metaphor for Norway's dominance over Iceland and to denigrate a culture on the periphery of the Norse world. Thus, Gunnhildr is transformed from an influential, strong Danish princess to an evil seductress with magical powers from the far north.

Sayers' hypothesis is interesting, but again, is focussed upon *Íslendingasögur*, and so cannot offer all-encompassing answers to the questions posed by this thesis. He states that, 'Gunnhildr's historical role as royal wife and mother, and fictional role as polyandrous sorceress are kept separate' in *konungasögur* and *Íslendingasögur* respectively but does not account for the reasons they are different, *i.e.* why is Norway's threat to Iceland personified by Gunnhildr in one but not in the other?<sup>41</sup> Through an exploration of all of the available source material, not just *Íslendingasögur*, this thesis aims to explore if there any other possible explanations for Gunnhildr's treatment.

Nordal's article of 1941 was actually started much earlier on a trip he made to York in 1928, when he was inspired to write about Gunnhildr with more truth than had medieval Icelandic historians.<sup>42</sup> His search for the truth is laudable, and his is the first attempt at such a feat. He states that she is widely mentioned in the ancient sources and that they mostly agree on her description, which although true, does not delve into the intricacies of the differences that the sources also display, a gap in the article's scope that this research will fill. Interestingly, Nordal believes that the most spiteful texts about her are the Latin chronicles of the Norwegians, although he does opine that much of the Norwegian content ultimately derives from Icelandic

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<sup>40</sup> Sayers, 'Power', p.59.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.71.

<sup>42</sup> Nordal, 'Gunnhildur'.

sources.<sup>43</sup> This is significant because it means that Nordal believed that the Norwegians gained their historical knowledge from Iceland, meaning that there was no early school of historiography in Norway and that the negativity regarding Gunnhildr perhaps had its roots in Iceland, or it may represent nationalistic rivalry between Nordal, an Icelander, and Norway.<sup>44</sup>

Nordal starts his search for the truth by referring to the records that, although written centuries after her life, contain verses of skaldic poetry from her contemporaries. The first of these is Eyvindr Skáldaspillir (c.915-990) who composed some of his poetry during the reigns of Gunnhildr's sons and described their greed during hardship and famine in Norway.<sup>45</sup> This may, according to Nordal, represent one of the reasons for Gunnhildr and her sons' unpopularity, that they did not provide for their people at a time when it was required that a ruler be plentiful.<sup>46</sup> Hence Nordal asserts that because of the famine, Gunnhildr and her sons may have had to increase taxes, never a popular move, and these two factors together could well have contributed to bad feeling against them in the tenth century, which then became the root of the later unfavourable portrayals.<sup>47</sup> This is a strong argument and difficult to refute. Nordal goes on to explore the accusations of promiscuity and sorcery levelled at her by medieval historians, drawing attention to the sources' unreliability on the count of the former, but allowing, nevertheless, that they may

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<sup>43</sup> Nordal, 'Gunnhildur'.

<sup>44</sup> Nordal was writing at a time when Icelanders were beginning to feel a growing sense of national identity during their struggle for independence from Denmark and sought to show the world that medieval Icelandic literature was the product of the creativity and literacy of their forebears, which had flourished long before their submission to Norway in 1262. Gísli Sigurðsson, *Medieval Icelandic*.

<sup>45</sup> Nordal, 'Gunnhildur', p.79. Eyvindr's maternal grandmother was a one of Haraldr *hárfagri*'s daughters and he appears to have been close to his uncle Hákon *góði*, and he served at his court as a skald. After Hákon's death, Eyvindr attended Haraldr *gráfeldr*, but their relationship soured quickly, which is demonstrated by his *lausavísur* and he ended his days with Hákon *jarl*, who was also an enemy of Gunnhildr and her sons. Marold, 'Eyvindr'.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

have some basis in fact.<sup>48</sup> Regarding the allegations of witchcraft, Nordal believes that they originate as an explanation for the amount of power that Gunnhildr had accrued and serve as a way of medieval people coming to terms with a woman wielding real power and influence, and that this then becomes fused with the legends of her originating from Hálogaland, a people who were best situated out of all the Norwegians to learn magic from the Finns.<sup>49</sup> He goes on to effectively demonstrate that Gunnhildr really was a Danish princess and that it is her identity as a Dane that has implications for her later portrayals. Denmark had for many years embraced the custom of having a single king, but in Norway this concept was undeveloped and had only come to the fore in the reign of Haraldr *hárfagri*, who then undid his greatest achievement of the unification of Norway into a single kingdom by making his sons sub-rulers. So, when Gunnhildr arrived as a new bride in Norway, she had a far grander vision of a monarchy than both her husband and father-in-law had ever had, and she understood that dividing the country between many kings was nonsensical.<sup>50</sup> She realised that there was no way to end this situation peacefully and the only solution was to destroy the other kings. The crux of Nordal's understanding of the negative descriptions of Gunnhildr is that the stories of her are moulded by opposites, on one hand she had her vision of monarchy, of her husband and sons having the same kind of authority as was familiar from her native Denmark and on the other, was a country unable to accept or understand her demands.<sup>51</sup>

Ultimately, Nordal thinks of Gunnhildr as a woman who was ahead of her time but vilified for it in later sources, and that despite all the errors in the Icelandic

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<sup>48</sup> Nordal, 'Gunnhildur'.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

sources, they still contain core elements of truth, namely her greatness and that she was not a product of her time. He draws attention to the fact that no Norwegian queen had shared so much power with her husband and that no other woman gets a title as grand as *drottning alls Noregsveldis*.<sup>52</sup> Nordal's article is excellent and the ideas that he expresses are invaluable when undertaking an exploration of the sources that portray Gunnhildr. It can, however, be built upon. Nordal does not engage with all of the sources on an in-depth basis and that is why the research in this thesis will prove so valuable, because it will offer an up-to-date analysis of the source material. Nordal's hypotheses offer real insight into the tenth-century woman and why she fell afoul of the later historians, but he was writing nearly a century ago and his ideas may benefit from fresh scrutiny.

The majority of secondary literature which focusses on Gunnhildr is limited to her portrayals in *Íslendingasögur* and therefore does not reflect a wholly balanced view. Nordal and Sayers offer the most compelling reasons for the negative stories about her that appear in the later sources, *i.e.* that she was a powerful Norwegian woman, later used by resentful Icelanders as a metaphor for the rapacious desire of Norway and who ruled at a time of famine, resulting in the making of tough decisions, which she was later blamed for. Jóna Torfadóttir's acceptance of the stories about Gunnhildr's sexual voraciousness and promiscuity in *Íslendingasögur* and her willingness to attribute them to the sexual fantasies of Icelandic farmers demonstrates that this element of her character was a later addition by medieval storytellers and highlights the problem of the historicity of the sagas. It is impossible to discuss Gunnhildr's portrayals without briefly engaging with this knotty problem, as if one believes that the sagas represent true facts about the time in which they were

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<sup>52</sup> Nordal, 'Gunnhildur', p.292. 'The queen of all Norway'.

written, then the stories about Gunnhildr will, in all likelihood, have truthful elements to them. If, however, one believes they are born from the imaginations of medieval writers, then it can be said that the descriptions of Gunnhildr are pure fabrications, only loosely based on fact. This of course represents a binary argument, and the reality is unlikely to be so simple. Nevertheless, a short evaluation of the different viewpoints contained in the scholarship may facilitate understanding the contentions and their connection to the descriptions of Gunnhildr.

The value of medieval Icelandic texts as historical sources has long been the subject of scholarly debate, which has evolved considerably over the years. As is so often the case in historiography the debate has its roots in the rise of nationalism, in this case in nineteenth-century Iceland.<sup>53</sup> Scholars were seduced by the realistic style of *Íslendingasögur* and believed that they were accurate historical sources for the Viking Age that had been transmitted orally in the intervening centuries and represented accurate transcriptions of oral accounts. This is known as freeprose theory.<sup>54</sup> However, some scholars, in particular patriotic Icelandic ones, sought to distance themselves and the sagas from what they saw as a primitive, unsophisticated oral culture and root them in a learned written culture.<sup>55</sup> They noticed that not all of the aspects of the sagas were characteristic of the Viking Age and concluded that they were not the product of an oral tradition, but a written one; a concept known as bookprose theory.<sup>56</sup> During the 1980s, the latter theory gained in popularity, resulting in the belief that the sagas may have had their basis in an oral tradition, but they were medieval constructs by authors who created characters,

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<sup>53</sup> Byock, 'Nationalism'.

<sup>54</sup> O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic*.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

dialogue, situations, and interpretations that pertained to contemporary issues, even if the story itself originated in the Viking Age.<sup>57</sup> This hypothesis is particularly pertinent to answering the research questions of this thesis, as one's understanding of Gunnhildr's character depends on to what extent the historicity of the sagas is believed. If relying on bookprose theory, a likely conclusion would be that Gunnhildr's portrayal was a result of the thirteenth-century author's attitudes to her. Conversely, if the freeprose theory is to be believed then Gunnhildr was always considered a dangerous *femme fatale*.

The debate has turned full circle, as scholars such as Byock and Miller argue that the sagas should be treated as reliable sources of social and cultural history, albeit not political history. More recently, the Icelandic historians Gísli Sigurðsson and Helgi Þorláksson have added their opinions to the debate, which roughly coincide with Byock and Miller's. Furthermore, the importance of cultural memory should not be underestimated, scholars such as Erll and Rigney have both written on its significance, stating that its basis is communication through media such as historiography and that literature is key to its production.<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, the old argument has two sides: the belief that the sagas were rooted in oral tradition and should be viewed as reliable sources for the Viking Age, at least on a social and cultural basis, or that they are products of medieval authors' imaginations and have very little to connect them reliably to the Viking Age. However, there is a more nuanced response to the argument, and some scholars take this approach, that it is too facile to believe entirely in one theory or the other. This approach will be used here, *i.e.* the sagas contain kernels of truth about the Viking Age and the characters

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<sup>57</sup> Rowe, 'Icelandic Narratives'.

<sup>58</sup> Erll, 'Literature'; Rigney, 'Dynamics'.

included therein, but they were for the most part constructed and shaped by medieval writers who had their own ideas and agenda. It is beyond this thesis' scope to become embroiled in the debate and to state which theory is correct, but it is necessary to appreciate it and understand how it affects the historiography written about the subject and interpretation of the primary source material.<sup>59</sup> To that end, there is robust literature available concerning the historicity of the sagas, although it should be noted that it is hard to investigate the phenomenon of historicity without also considering other areas of research. Notable works include Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins*; Clover, 'Icelandic Family Sagas'; and Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition*.

### Methodology

The aim of this thesis is to explore the portrayals of Gunnhildr in the extant primary source material, thereby seeking an explanation for why she was so maligned. This will be facilitated by answering questions about what the written sources say about Gunnhildr; how they differ; how the date and origin of the sources affect the portrayals; and to what extent do the sources portray a realistic description of a tenth-century queen and how possible it is to pinpoint the derivation of the negativity directed towards her? In the previous scholarship devoted to the sources' portrayals of Gunnhildr, focus has usually been on *Íslendingasögur*, with relatively little said about the 'Norwegian synoptics', *konungasögur*, and Saxo. This research will bridge this gap, by exploring the sources across the genres, in the original languages where appropriate.<sup>60</sup> The analysis undertaken will be organised chronologically, starting with the earliest portrayals in the 'Norwegian synoptics' and

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<sup>59</sup> For excellent summaries of the debate see Driscoll, 'Truth'; Miller, 'Bloody?'

<sup>60</sup> Translations, unless otherwise stated, are author's own.

ending with *Íslendingasögur*, the only exception is the purported tenth-century verse, which will be considered with the prose in which it is embedded. The decision to organise the analysis chronologically was conscious, one that eschews thematic ordering. That said, the research will seek thematic patterns between the texts. This chronological collation has not been without its problems, as many of the sources are not easily dateable and defy rigid organisation. Moreover, often the texts themselves complicate matters, as they do not survive in original manuscripts and later copies have to be relied upon, resulting in more difficulties with dating as later copyists could be influenced by texts that had not existed when the originals were written.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, analysing the sources in chronological order has paid dividends and it has been possible to see patterns forming in the portrayals which echo the intertextual relationship of the sources themselves. This has been facilitated by the creation of a chart (see Appendix I) which highlights the thematic connections across the source material.

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<sup>61</sup> Quinn, 'Orality'.

## **'Norwegian Synoptics'**

### *Historia Norwegiae*

The first extant appearance of Gunnhildr (excepting skaldic poetry) is in the Latin narrative *HN*, a source that has confounded scholars since its first publication in 1850, despite intense scrutiny it 'remains to be established when, why, for whom and by whom it was written'.<sup>62</sup> Most recently Ekrem has argued for a date of 1140 to 1152-54, suggesting the most likely as 1150, thus making *HN* the earliest known Norwegian national history.<sup>63</sup> Only one manuscript survives, in paper form, dated to c.1500-10.<sup>64</sup> However, it is clear that *HN*'s composition was 'certainly earlier', although there is considerable disagreement between scholars concerning how much earlier, a question tightly connected to its relationship with the other early Norwegian and Icelandic histories.<sup>65</sup> *HN* belongs to a trio of medieval histories, dubbed the 'Norwegian synoptics' because of their fairly brief overviews of substantial periods of Norwegian history.<sup>66</sup> The relationship between the 'Norwegian synoptics' and other *konungasögur* is exceedingly complex, leading Jón Helgason to declare that 'the history of Icelandic literature contains no more intricate problem than that of the relationship between the various sagas about the Norwegian kings'.<sup>67</sup> It is known that the earliest histories of Norwegian kings form two brief epitomes written by Icelandic historians in the early-twelfth century, although neither text has survived.<sup>68</sup> The anonymous poem *Nóregs konungatal*, c.1190, claims to

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<sup>62</sup> Ekrem, 'Historia Norwegie', p.65.

<sup>63</sup> Ekrem, *Nytt lys*. She offers new arguments about the date and authorship of *HN* which, if accepted, 'have significant implications for the question of the work's relationship to other Scandinavian and Icelandic histories'. Phelpstead, 'Introduction', p.xvi. For the full argument, see Ekrem, *Nytt lys*.

<sup>64</sup> Chesnutt, 'Dalhousie Manuscript'. Dating of the manuscript has proved contentious; earlier scholars, including Storm opine that it dated from 1443-60.

<sup>65</sup> Phelpstead, 'Introduction', p.xi.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Jón Helgason, 'Introduction', p.12.

<sup>68</sup> Phelpstead, 'Introduction', p.xi.

follow Sæmundr Sigfússon's (1056-1133) account of the kings of Norway between Haraldr *hárfagri* and Magnús *góði*.<sup>69</sup> Sæmundr's history was probably written in Latin, like *HN*. However, Ari Þorgilsson (1067/8-1148), Iceland's earliest vernacular historian, also wrote a brief history of the Norwegian kings, which he referred to in *Íslendingabók's Prologus*, stating: *fyr útan áttartölu ok konunga ævi, ok jókk því es mér varð síðan kunnara ok nú es gerr sagt á þessi en á þeiri*.<sup>70</sup> These early Icelandic histories could be 'the foundations upon which later historical writing in both Iceland and Norway was built'.<sup>71</sup> The early Norwegian and Icelandic histories were written in both Latin and Old Norse but this should not 'obscure the essential unity of the historiographical tradition, for Icelandic historians writing in the vernacular were nevertheless deeply influenced by the Latin culture of Europe'.<sup>72</sup> Medieval Scandinavian and Icelandic historical writing in both languages was influenced by Adam of Bremen's *GH* c.1068-75 and one of those most deeply indebted to Adam was *HN's* author.<sup>73</sup> The relationship between the early Icelandic and Norwegian histories has been the subject of much scholarly debate, relevant when considering Gunnhildr's portrayals, as the different hypotheses have direct bearing on where the animosity toward her may originate. The argument hinges upon two connected

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<sup>69</sup> Phelpstead, 'Introduction'.

<sup>70</sup> *Íslendingabók*, (ed. Jakob Benediktsson, p.3). 'which besides the genealogies and regnal years of kings, and I added what has since become better known to me and is now more fully reported in this book than in the other'. *Íslendingabók*, (ed. Grønlie, p.3).

<sup>71</sup> Phelpstead, 'Introduction'.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xiii.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* Adam does not mention Gunnhildr, although in Book Two, he discusses the 'exceedingly cruel' Haakon, *i.e.* Hákon *jarl* of Hlaðir, her contemporary and opponent according to other sources, so it is curious that she and her family are omitted, but his account is extremely confused and full of errors. He does state that Haraldr Gormsson was married to a Gunnhildr, so it is possible that he confused Haraldr's sister and wife, or alternatively Haraldr was both husband and brother of Gunnhildr. Ekrem and Mortensen appear to believe that Adam was referring to 'our' Gunnhildr when he said she was married to Haraldr. Ekrem and Mortensen, 'Essay'. Nevertheless, later sources (except *HN*) all ignore that Gunnhildr and Haraldr were siblings and it remains a possibility that they were influenced by Adam. This is conjecture, however, and the likeliest scenario remains that Gunnhildr was given less exalted origins by later writers who sought to discredit her. *Hamburg-Bremen* Book 2, ch.22, (ed. Tschan, p.70).

issues, summed up by Phelpstead thus: ‘the interrelationships among the so-called “Norwegian synoptics” (*HN*, *HarN* and *Ágrip*); and the connections between these three texts and Icelandic historical writing’.<sup>74</sup> The ‘Norwegian synoptics’ are related as follows: it is assumed that *Ágrip*’s author made use of *HarN* due to the similarities between the two, and that connections between *Ágrip* and *HN* are so extensive that ‘one must stand in literary debt to the other, or more likely, both derive from a common written source’.<sup>75</sup> The common source could be Sæmundr or Ari’s lost histories, or even an unknown lost Norwegian history.<sup>76</sup> It has been argued by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson that *Ágrip* and *HN* both rely on a lost Norwegian history in Latin, whereas Ellehøj states that the lost common source is Ari’s *\*konunga ævi*.<sup>77</sup> If the common source was Norwegian and not Icelandic, it becomes feasible that an independent centre for Norwegian history writing existed and that ‘the synoptics are a specifically Norwegian manifestation’.<sup>78</sup> However, if Ellehøj’s argument is to be believed, *i.e.* *Ágrip* and *HN* rely on Ari, then medieval Norwegian historical writing was indebted to Icelandic work and ideas.<sup>79</sup> This argument has bearing on this thesis, as the belief in either a Norwegian or Icelandic origin for the ‘Norwegian synoptics’ determines where these portrayals of Gunnhildr began, and may explain why she was so maligned. Lange has subsequently indicated that medieval Norwegian historiography was reliant on that of Iceland and that the ‘Norwegian synoptics’ may be indirectly connected to each other due to their debt to common

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<sup>74</sup> Phelpstead, ‘Introduction’, p.xiv.

<sup>75</sup> Andersson, ‘(*Konungasögur*)’, p.201; Phelpstead, ‘Introduction’.

<sup>76</sup> Phelpstead, ‘Introduction’.

<sup>77</sup> Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *norske kongesagaer*; Ellehøj, *norrøne historieskrivning*. See Andersson ‘(*Konungasögur*)’, p.202 for a neat summary. See also Phelpstead, ‘Introduction’ pp.xiii-xvii for a succinct summary of this complex argument.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Phelpstead, ‘Introduction’.

Icelandic sources.<sup>80</sup> She has also hypothesised that there are many points of agreement between *HN* and *ÓsT* and that 'it is not impossible, but nor is it certain, that *HN* is indebted to the Icelander's work'.<sup>81</sup>

The author of *HN* is unknown, although there is, 'ample evidence that the author must have been Norwegian', for example phrases such as 'our kings' and 'which we call Hólmgarðr'.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, it has been argued that a Norwegian either wrote *HN* in Denmark or back in Norway after travelling to Denmark, as it would appear that he used a particular manuscript located there, which contained copies of text by Adam and others that he used as sources.<sup>83</sup> Attempts to identify the author have proved fruitless although Ekrem has suggested *HN* could be an early work by the future Archbishop of Niðaróss Eysteinn Erlendsson.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, Ekrem makes a strong case for *HN* being seen as a work of propaganda for the establishment at Niðaróss of an archiepiscopal see, stating that the author had four aims which he hoped to further by writing *HN*.<sup>85</sup> One of these was to establish an ecclesiastical province based at Niðaróss, which she believes explains the text's anti-Danish bias.<sup>86</sup> This is interesting as *HN* is the only source to state Gunnhildr was a Danish princess, all other sources claim that she was the daughter of a chieftain from Hálogaland. Therefore, it could be posited that *HN* describes her as Danish and then maligns her as anti-Danish propaganda.

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<sup>80</sup> Lange, *isländisch-norwegischen*.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Phelpstead, 'Introduction', p.xix; *HN*, (ed. Phelpstead, p.10 and p.23).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Ekrem, 'Historia Norwegie'; *Nytt lys*.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* Phelpstead finds her argument, at times, 'highly speculative' although her account of *HN*'s origins is cogent and, in many ways, attractive. Phelpstead, 'Introduction', p.xxi.

Phelpstead highlights the fact that a comparison of *HN*'s content with that of other sources for the early history of Norway 'reveals many points of agreement as well as some differences'.<sup>87</sup> He also makes the persuasive point that 'the agreement of several sources cannot necessarily be taken as indicative of historical reliability since their intertextual relationships often mean they are not independent witnesses'.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, uncorroborated information found in only one text does not necessarily mean that it is incorrect.<sup>89</sup> This has significance for this thesis, as the agreement across the source material that Gunnhildr was a practitioner of dark arts does not necessarily mean that it was so.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, the information (found nowhere else) that Gunnhildr was a Danish princess may be true despite being uncorroborated.<sup>91</sup> Medieval historians had a different attitude to historical truth and were happy to invent for the purposes of an effective narrative. Indeed, 'prior to the French Revolution, historiography was conventionally regarded as literary art'.<sup>92</sup> However, 'medieval historical writing highlights its importance and great value as source material for understanding the beliefs and *mentalité* of the period of its composition, however unreliable it may be as a narrative of earlier events'.<sup>93</sup> Perhaps stories of queens committing acts of sorcery speak more of the writer's fears than they do about historical facts.

Gunnhildr is introduced when Eiríkr *blóðøx* takes the kingdom from his father; his marriage to her is described thus: *qui sibi ducens de Dania uxorem nomine*

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<sup>87</sup> Phelpstead, 'Introduction', p.xxiv.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> This is also complicated by the fact that paganism and witchcraft could easily be confused by later Christian generations. In fact, they might have just thought they were the same things.

<sup>91</sup> Anders Foss's 1592 genealogy of Danish kings also claims she was of Danish stock. Ekrem and Mortensen, 'Essay'.

<sup>92</sup> White, *Cultural Criticism*, p.123.

<sup>93</sup> Phelpstead, 'Introduction', p.xxv.

*Gunnildam quondam malificam et iniquissimam, Gorms Stultissimi Danorum regis filiam ac Thyri mulieris prudentissime.*<sup>94</sup> So, the very first extant description of Gunnhildr states that she was ‘vicious’, ‘most iniquitous’, and a Danish princess. The former characteristics are repeated, in variations, throughout the textual evidence, but this is the only instance where she is linked to Denmark. The author’s apparent antipathy towards Danes is further represented by describing their king as *stultissime* (‘notably foolish’).<sup>95</sup> Presumably Þyri escaped the author’s ire because she was Danish by marriage not birth. It is not difficult to discredit this description in the light of Ekrem’s connection between *HN* and the author’s desire to support the establishment of an archiepiscopal see at Niðaróss by promulgating anti-Danish bias. Nevertheless, by the mid-1100s, two centuries after her life, Gunnhildr is known as ‘vicious’, a description that would be repeated thereafter.<sup>96</sup> It remains most likely that this opinion was garnered from earlier sources, whether written or oral, although it is possible that it was embellished by the author purely to further his aims regarding Niðaróss. He goes on to describe that Eiríkr, having ruled for a year, *ob nimiam insolenciam uxoris nemini placuisset.*<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, following Æthelstan’s gift of the earldom of Northumbria, *eratque omnibus gratissimus, quousque improba uxor eius, scilicet Gunnilda, illo aduentasset.*<sup>98</sup> The people’s indignity at their choice of rulers is revealed: *cuius pestiferam rabiem non ferentes*

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<sup>94</sup> *HN*, ch.xii, (eds. Ekrem and Mortensen, p.80-2). ‘he took to wife a vicious and most iniquitous woman from Denmark named Gunnhildr, the daughter of the notably foolish Gormr, King of the Danes, and of the notably sagacious woman, Þyri’. *HN*, ch.xii, (ed. Phelpstead, p.15).

<sup>95</sup> *HN*, (ed. Phelpstead).

<sup>96</sup> It is interesting that the Latin adjective *malificam* is used to describe her, as it can be translated as ‘nefarious’, ‘vicious’ or ‘wicked’, but it also has associations with sorcery, a theme which appears across the sources.

<sup>97</sup> *HN*, ch.xii, (eds. Ekrem and Mortensen, p.82). ‘could please no one on account of the excessive arrogance of his wife’. *HN*, ch.xii, (ed. Phelpstead, p.15).

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* ‘and [his rule] proved most acceptable to all until his outrageous wife, Gunnhildr arrived’. *HN*, (ed. Phelpstead, p.15).

*Northimbri iugum illorum intollerabile statim a se discusserunt*.<sup>99</sup> So, during her marriage to Eiríkr and their rule over Norway and Northumbria she is described as ‘vicious’, ‘most iniquitous’, arrogant, ‘outrageous’ and suffering from ‘pestilential fury’. There is not one positive adjective to be found: even a man known as *blóðøx* is found to be ‘most acceptable’ to the Northumbrians, but not Gunnhildr. The *A-SC* does not mention Gunnhildr at all but does describe Eiríkr being evicted by the people.<sup>100</sup> In *HN*, following Eiríkr's death (apparently on a foray to Spain) Gunnhildr joins her sons in their battles against her brother-in-law Hákon, culminating in the Battle of Fitjar, where Hákon perished along with two of Gunnhildr's sons.<sup>101</sup> It is significant that Hákon's death is described but not Gunnhildr's involvement, specifically her purported sorcerous intervention mentioned in other sources: he is killed by ‘a lad in their company’.<sup>102</sup> Hákon's death is viewed in terms of divine vengeance for his deemed apostasy. This may represent further evidence that *HN*'s author used a different source or did not have access to the oral sources used by the other ‘Norwegian synoptics’, as it is likely that if he knew of information describing Gunnhildr using magic to procure the death of her rival then he would have used it to further blacken her reputation and thus the Danes as a whole. Perhaps her association with witchcraft is tied to her identity as the daughter of a Hálogalander (a place with links to the Sámi, a people long identified with liminality and the supernatural). Certainly, the first identification of her as a witch coincides with her being introduced as a Hálogalander. Afterwards, according to *HN*, *tota maritima*

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<sup>99</sup> *HN*, ch.xii, (eds. Ekrem and Mortensen, p.82). ‘as the Northumbrians would not suffer her pestilential fury and forthwith threw off her intolerable yoke’. *HN*, (ed. Phelpstead, p.15).

<sup>100</sup> *A-SC*, (ed. Whitelock). Æthelstan cannot have granted the earldom as he would have been dead by this point. Eiríkr enjoyed two brief rules in York (947-8 and 952-4), although it has been argued that Eiríkr *blóðøx* was not the same Eiríkr who ruled York. Downham, ‘Mystery’.

<sup>101</sup> *HN*, ch.xiii, (ed. Phelpstead, p.16).

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

*zona Gunnilde filiusque eius, haraldo, Siwardo et Gunrodo, XIII annis subdita erat.*<sup>103</sup> Nonetheless, as in Northumbria, the people were not happy with their rule as: *sub istorum imperio exigente nequicia prelatorum maxime oppressa est Norwegia fame ac qualibet iniuria.*<sup>104</sup>

So, in this first known example of a text describing Gunnhildr she is thought of negatively, possessing no redeeming qualities. She is not described as a witch, merely a ‘vicious’ character with a ‘pestilential fury’ and is said to be the daughter of Gormr of Denmark not Qzurr of Hálogaland. It is possible that this was knowledge contained in an earlier Norwegian/Icelandic history or that her bad character was created and embellished by an author with an anti-Danish agenda who wanted to see ecclesiastical power shift from Denmark to Norway.

#### *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium*

Gunnhildr also appears in *HarN*, a Latin account of the kings of Norway from Haraldr *hárfagri* to Sigurðr Magnússon (mid-800s to 1130).<sup>105</sup> The prologue and explicit of the work refer to the author as Theodoricus *monachus*.<sup>106</sup> The exact identity of Theodoricus remains unknown, but it has been ‘sufficiently demonstrated’ that he must have received an education in a cathedral or monastery school, due to his knowledge of Latin and the ‘biblical, Sallustian and hagiographic echoes in his prose’.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> *HN*, ch.xiv, (eds. Ekrem and Mortensen, p.84). ‘the whole seaboard region was held for fourteen years by Gunnhildr and her sons Haraldr, Sigvarðr and Gunnrøðr’. *HN*, ch.xiv, (ed. Phelpstead, p.16).

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* ‘under their rule Norway was most heavily oppressed by famine and all sorts of evils through the exceptional wickedness of its rulers’. *HN*, ch.xiv, (ed. Phelpstead, p.16).

<sup>105</sup> Foote, ‘Introduction’, p.vii.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* Theodoricus is generally believed to be the Latinised form of Þórir, and it is clear from the work that he was Norwegian. In twelfth-century Norway, *monachus* could only mean he was a Benedictine and as Theodoricus dedicates his book to Archbishop of Niðaróss Eysteinn Erlendsson (1161-88), it is assumed that he was from the monastery closest to Niðaróss, *i.e.* Niðarhólmr that Theodoricus refers to as ‘renowned’. The alternative is St Michael's monastery at Bergen, but Theodoricus does not bestow a similar accolade, making Niðarhólmr more likely.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p.x. Suggestions include Þórir, Bishop of Hamar (1189/90-1196) and Þórir Guðmundarson, Archbishop of Niðaróss (1206-14).

Theodoricus completed his book during the archiepiscopate of Eysteinn Erlendsson, who received the pallium in 1161 and died in 1188, but the timeframe has been further narrowed to ‘the years 1177 and the first half of 1178 and the time between midsummer 1183 and December 1188’ as the most plausible dates for *HarN*’s composition.<sup>108</sup> Its completion is therefore a little later than *HN*.<sup>109</sup> In his prologue, Theodoricus cites the Icelanders as his source, stating that he made ‘assiduous enquiry’ among them and that ‘they are acknowledged memorialists and have ancient poetry as their warranty’.<sup>110</sup> He also states that that he is recounting events he has learned from others, ‘things not seen but heard’, a statement reinforced by comments in his narrative, such as ‘it is said’, ‘some say’ and ‘it is believed’, all of which imply information gleaned from oral rather than written sources.<sup>111</sup> This has particular relevance here because it may indicate that information about Gunnhildr came from oral sources, which in turn may explain the differences in the details about her across the earliest texts. However, it is worth noting that the ‘phrase *audita non visa*, frequently proffered by medieval historians, by no means precludes the use of written sources’.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, Theodoricus does mention a ‘register’ of Norwegian kings, but frequently fails to cite the written works that relate to Norwegian history, in contrast to his eagerness to cite classical authors, for example Pliny and Lucan.<sup>113</sup> Often Theodoricus muddles up the information gleaned from foreign sources which could be ‘the result of hasty reading or faulty memory or jumbled notes, perhaps all three’.<sup>114</sup> An interesting observation and one

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<sup>108</sup> Foote, ‘Introduction’, p.xii.

<sup>109</sup> There is no real chronological certainty but the earlier date for *HN* will be accepted.

<sup>110</sup> *HarN*, (eds. McDougall and McDougall, p.1); Foote, ‘Introduction’, p.xiii.

<sup>111</sup> Foote, ‘Introduction’.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xiv.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xiv.

that should be considered in relation to his descriptions of Gunnhildr, in case similar error crept in. It is also evident that Theodoricus aimed for brevity when he wrote his book which led him to over-simplify and this could have affected sections describing Gunnhildr. More significantly, his own attitudes to politics and people, including misogyny, led him to take pleasure 'in attributing the miserable end of the wicked Queen Gunnhildr to the credulity and levity of females in general'.<sup>115</sup>

Evidently that Theodoricus believed his book was the first of its kind and obviously did not think that the 'register' of Norwegian kings counted as history; similarly, it would appear that he had no knowledge of *HN* or he disregarded it in the same way as the 'register'.<sup>116</sup> The writings of Sæmundr and Ari made their way to Norway fairly swiftly as, 'connections between the countries were close, family ties still existed...and clerical links were many, especially after the metropolitan see was established at Niðaróss'.<sup>117</sup> So, it is feasible that Theodoricus knew the work of Sæmundr and Ari, but if he did, he did not copy it *verbatim* and may not have held it in high regard.<sup>118</sup> It is also a possibility that Theodoricus used a source that has been lost, which would account for any similarities between passages in *HarN* and in other known Icelandic works.<sup>119</sup> Nonetheless, either Theodoricus read the Icelandic information or he was told it.<sup>120</sup> Three works in particular are discussed in conjunction with *HarN*: *Ágrip*, *ÓsT* and the *Oldest saga of St Óláfr*, all of which are believed to have been composed by 1200 and demonstrate several similarities to

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<sup>115</sup> Foote, 'Introduction', p.xv.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* This makes it unlikely that Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson had written *HN*, because if he had, then surely Theodoricus would be aware of it, as he had dedicated *HarN* to him.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xvi. The latter point is particularly relevant and important especially considering the possible connection between Theodoricus and Oddr.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

*HarN*, although their precise origin and date are unknown.<sup>121</sup> Scholars have attempted to explain these similarities and Foote succinctly summarises them thus: ‘all drew on a common stock of oral tradition; *HarN* and this or that Icelandic-Norwegian text go back to a common written source; the vernacular texts are all in debt, directly or indirectly, to *HarN*; Þórir *munkr* knew and made use of all of the others’.<sup>122</sup>

Between *HarN* and *Ágrip* there are passages that make it seem ‘undeniable that one is a translation of the other’, and it is generally accepted that *Ágrip*’s author made use of *HarN*.<sup>123</sup> It could also be said that a connection between Theodoricus and Oddr is just as likely, especially if they are thought of in terms of Þórir *munkr* and Oddr *munkr*, both Benedictines.<sup>124</sup> Theodoricus’ opinion often colours his writing, a stark contrast to the vernacular narratives of the *konungasögur* in which the author’s ego is vigorously suppressed.<sup>125</sup> His description of each ruler is ‘chiefly concerned to indicate how far a king matched given ideals’.<sup>126</sup> Eiríkr *blóðøx* and his wife Gunnhildr are therefore rejected for their cruelty, as is their son Haraldr *gráfeldr*, who followed his bloodthirsty mother’s lead, compared to the two Óláfrs who can do no wrong. Theodoricus ‘repeatedly warns of the dangers of divided rule and the misery of civil war, the perilous results of envy, greed and ambition’, all of which could be attributed to Gunnhildr.<sup>127</sup> Foote draws attention to Theodoricus adding little to knowledge of early Norwegian history, but instead his value lies in his role as a

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<sup>121</sup> Foote, ‘Introduction’. See below for *Ágrip* and *ÓsT*, the *Oldest saga* is not relevant to this thesis.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xxi.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.* The clerical traffic between Norway and Iceland is evidenced by the stay of Abbot Karl Jónsson (the abbot of Oddr’s monastery) at Niðaróss, possibly even with the monks of Niðarhólmr. His sojourn in Niðaróss confirms the possibility of bookish traffic between the two monasteries. However, it is not definitely known if Karl introduced *HarN* to Oddr, or Theodoricus to Oddr’s *ÓsT*.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xxvii.

commentator on the past and as a 'consistent upholder of a moral order' in his present.<sup>128</sup> Therefore, the information he presents informs more about attitudes to rulers in the twelfth century than what happened in the tenth.

The text of *HarN* does not survive in an original manuscript, it exists in seventeenth-century editions that themselves descend from transcriptions made in the early-seventeenth century (no longer extant) by Kirchmann, who found the medieval codex (since lost) that contained the text, amongst three others, of *HarN* in the 1620s.<sup>129</sup> It could be argued that this would render today's version of *HarN* as significantly different to the twelfth-century original, mainly due to mistakes and misinterpretations by Kirchmann when transcribing. However, Foote notes there are 'no serious grounds for thinking it was much altered in its transmission from its origin in the late-twelfth century to the copies made by Kirchmann in the 1620s'.<sup>130</sup>

Gunnhildr is introduced in Chapter Two of *HarN*. Apparently the Norwegian people could not abide the cruelty of Eiríkr but most 'especially of his wife Gunnhildr' and so they recall Hákon from his foster-father in England and make him king instead.<sup>131</sup> Subsequently, Eiríkr goes to England where he is honoured by the king and lived there until he died, a story different from *HN*, which states that he was forced out of Northumbria and died on an expedition to Spain.<sup>132</sup> *HarN*'s account of the Battle of Fitjar also differs considerably from that recounted in *HN*, stating that Hákon was killed unexpectedly by an arrow *quod quidam impuant malitiae Gunnildar, quae fuerat uxor fratris ejus Eriki*.<sup>133</sup> The word *malitia* is problematic,

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<sup>128</sup> Foote, 'Introduction', p.xxx.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xxxi.

<sup>131</sup> *HarN*, ch.2, (eds. McDougall and McDougall, p.5).

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> '*HarN*', ch.iv, (ed. Storm, p.10). 'and some impute this to the evil-doing of Gunnhildr who had been the wife of his brother Eiríkr'. *HarN*, (eds. McDougall and McDougall, p.7).

McDougall translates it as 'evil-doing', it could also be interpreted as 'sorcery'; even if the word is not changed to imply more sorcerous intent, it still reeks of a nefarious deed perpetrated by Gunnhildr and as such is the earliest instance in which she is linked to witchcraft.<sup>134</sup> This is potentially very interesting and begs the question: what accounts for the difference from *HN*? It must point to the fact that Theodoricus had access to oral sources that *HN*'s author did not. Similarly, in *HN* she is described as a Danish princess, but nothing is mentioned in *HarN*. It would seem likely that (if *HN* is accepted as earliest) Theodoricus had no knowledge of *HN* and that they possibly derived from different written and/or oral sources, one in which she was a vicious Dane and the other in which she was a cruel witch of unknown birth.

Following the death of Hákon, Haraldr *gráfeldr* and his brothers succeeded to the throne and followed the advice of their *crudelissimæ matris* and for twelve years severely afflicted the people of Norway.<sup>135</sup> *HN* also refers to the mother and son as bad rulers. There follows the story of Gunnhildr's desire to track down the infant Óláfr Tryggvason, because she was afraid he would succeed to the kingdom instead of her sons.<sup>136</sup> Theodoricus then describes the wrangling between Hákon *jarl* and Gunnhildr thus: *reverso itaque Hocon in Norwagiam diversis inter se conflictationibus et insidiis agebant ipse et Gunnilder, quia nulli eorum deerat satis ingeniosa malignitas*.<sup>137</sup> Hákon sends a message to Haraldr *blátǫnn* asking for his help with his plan to dupe Gunnhildr and cause her downfall by sending a message to her offering marriage: *asserat felicem fore Daciam, tali regina; nec ille animo appetendas*

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<sup>134</sup> McDougall and McDougall, 'Notes', p.61. Although Lewis translates it as 'ill-will, spite or malice'. Lewis, *Latin Dictionary*, p.89.

<sup>135</sup> '*HarN*', ch.iv, (ed. Storm, p.10). 'bloodthirsty mother'. *HarN*, (eds. McDougall and McDougall, p.7).

<sup>136</sup> The story is told in more detail in the later longer biographies of Óláfr.

<sup>137</sup> '*HarN*', ch.vi, (ed. Storm, p.12). 'after Hákon returned to Norway, he and Gunnhildr became embroiled in various conflicts and plots against each other, for neither of them was short of cunning malice'. *HarN*, (eds. McDougall and McDougall, p.9).

*juvenum nuptias: se quoque jam provectae esse aetatis, optime eos posse convenire.*<sup>138</sup> This bizarre appeal to Gunnhildr's vanity is not mentioned in *HN*, but this would be difficult as it would involve Gunnhildr agreeing to marry her own brother. It is further evidence of just how different these two sources are, even though they are Norwegian (possibly both from Niðaróss) and are separated by only a generation. Although both agree that Gunnhildr was 'vicious' and 'cruel', there the similarity ends. When Gunnhildr received the letter, she was apparently: *oppidoque laetata et muliebri levitate nimis credula ad Daniam tendit.*<sup>139</sup> This comment appears to indicate that Theodoricus had a misogynistic view of women in general and could perhaps account for the way in which she is portrayed, as a witch and credulous fool.<sup>140</sup> Or it could be due to the fact that Theodoricus had access to sources that also described Gunnhildr as a foolish witch that the author of *HN* did not, Theodoricus' misogyny may simply be typical for a twelfth-century monk who had little knowledge of women. Finally, Gunnhildr's death is described in terms of a miscreant getting their just desserts: *quam rex mox comprehendi fecit et in quondam paludem demergi fecit. Et hic fuit finis scelerum et maleficiorem Gunnildar.*<sup>141</sup>

According to McDougall, 'the manner of Gunnhildr's execution is in keeping with her

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<sup>138</sup> 'HarN', ch.vi, (ed. Storm, p.13). 'he was to say that Denmark would be fortunate to have such a queen, and that while she had no intention of seeking young men to marry, he was getting on in years himself, and they might well make a good match'. *HarN*, ch.6, (eds. McDougall and McDougall, p.9). In later *Íslendingasögur* she is known to be rather partial to young men, so this could either be an ironic aside or she genuinely did not want to marry a young man.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.vi, p.13. 'transported with joy, and with the credulity that is characteristic of female caprice, she hastened to Denmark'. *HarN*, ch.6, (eds. McDougall and McDougall, p.9).

<sup>140</sup> Women do not play a prominent role in *HarN*, but Theodoricus also mentions Queen Ingigerðr, Álfifa (*i.e.* Ælfgifu of Northampton) and the blessed martyr Ursula. However, it is difficult to state conclusively whether he was a misogynist as he saves his ire for Gunnhildr and Álfifa, whereas Ursula and Ingigerðr are described favourably.

<sup>141</sup> 'HarN', ch.vi, (ed. Storm, p.13). 'the king had her seized forthwith and drowned in a bog. And that was the end of the crimes and evil-deeds of Gunnhildr'. *HarN*, ch.6, (eds. McDougall and McDougall, p.9). In 1835, Petersen identified a bog body found at Haraldskjær as Gunnhildr. This fanciful idea has since been thoroughly debunked. See Glob, *Bog People*, pp.55-60.

reputation as a witch', although Nordal has highlighted the historical unreliability of this account.<sup>142</sup>

So, already, significant differences between the sources have arisen. Broadly speaking, they agree about Gunnhildr's negative characteristics as 'vicious', 'cruel' and 'bloodthirsty'; but in one she is a Danish princess, and in the other a witch who is drowned in a bog. The differences could be accounted for by them having come from different cultural memories or lost written sources, or they could be due to their authors' own artistic whims or agenda, perhaps they were embellishing a lost written source that describes her unfavourably, so that her description changes with each retelling. Also, scribal intervention could be a factor. The manuscripts are later than the texts, so scribes could have had access to later Icelandic sources that denigrate her and then been swayed by them, altering the authors' words with their own thoughts.

### *Ágrip af Noregskonungasögum*

*Ágrip*, a name imposed by modern scholars, is a relatively short vernacular text, written c.1190 that covers the period of the late-ninth century to the early-twelfth and deals with the history of the kings of Norway.<sup>143</sup> It is preserved in a single Icelandic manuscript (AM 32511<sub>4to</sub>) dating from the early-thirteenth century.<sup>144</sup> The manuscript itself is unusual because it contains a 'very large number of erasures' throughout: words, groupings of words and even whole sentences have been erased.<sup>145</sup> It has been suggested that someone went through the manuscript looking

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<sup>142</sup> McDougall and McDougall, 'Notes', p.64; Nordal, 'Gunnhildur'.

<sup>143</sup> Driscoll, 'Introduction', p.ix.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p.x.

for words that could be removed without damaging the text.<sup>146</sup> It is believed by some scholars that, even if the manuscript were complete, it would still only represent an abridged version of an older original, almost certainly Norwegian, although the extant manuscript is Icelandic.<sup>147</sup> The author was likely Norwegian or writing in Norway, suggested by factors such as the inconsistent orthography, which must be due to a Norwegian exemplar; there are also clear examples of ‘Norwegianisms’ and many of the nicknames, for example *lafskegg* differ from those found in Icelandic sources, and may be due to Norwegian traditions rather than Icelandic.<sup>148</sup> The text itself contains clues about its author, as a preoccupation with Niðaróss and the people of Þrándheimr mean that the author may have written his book there.<sup>149</sup> So, all three ‘Norwegian synoptics’ have probable connections to Niðaróss. *Ágrip* is, according to Driscoll, ‘decidedly not an aristocratic work’: the author has a tendency to side with *lýðrinn*, ‘the people’, against bad kings who hurt their people with imposed hardships and taxes.<sup>150</sup> This has implications for any descriptions of Gunnhildr, as they are bound to be tainted if the author had bad feeling towards the aristocracy.

The general consensus is that *Ágrip* was written c.1190, because the author is thought to have used *HarN*, which was certainly written before 1188.<sup>151</sup> It would appear that *Ágrip* was known to Oddr, as there are certain similarities between passages in *ÓsT* and *Ágrip* and the likely date for the former is 1180-1200, hence a

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<sup>146</sup> *Ágrip*, (ed. Bjarni Einarsson). His theory may mean that parts of Gunnhildr’s story could have been abridged, Tryggvi’s death being blamed on Gunnhildr’s son Haraldr *gráfeldr* in Chapter ix may be one such example.

<sup>147</sup> Driscoll, ‘Introduction’. See also, Guðbrandur Vigfússon, ‘Prolegomena’; Nordal, *Om Olaf*.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.* See also Finnur Jónsson, *oldnorske og oldislandske*. The argument is circular. No Norwegian is known to have written a historical text in the vernacular, so no historical text in the vernacular can possibly have been written by a Norwegian. This may account for why Qzurr changes from *lafskegg* to *toti* in later sources, as they are Icelandic not Norwegian.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xii; Indrebø, ‘Aagrip’

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*; Nordal, *Om Olaf*.

date for *Ágrip* would be between 1188 and 1200, and 1190 seems as likely as any other.<sup>152</sup> It is difficult to pinpoint the sources that influenced *Ágrip* and in particular how it relates to *HN* and *HarN*. According to Driscoll, the three works are ‘manifestly interrelated; in places *Ágrip*’s text is virtually identical with that of Theodoricus, while in others it seems to agree rather with *HN*.<sup>153</sup> It seems that their relationship indicates a written rather than an oral connection, and that perhaps their differences speak of information gleaned from different oral traditions.<sup>154</sup> The arguments concerning the three texts are complicated and there is no consensus, although as previously stated, *HarN* and *HN* appear to be unconnected, *Ágrip*’s relationship to them is less straightforward.<sup>155</sup> It is thought that *Ágrip*’s author had direct access to Theodoricus’ work as some passages are translated almost *verbatim*.<sup>156</sup> This has obvious significance for this thesis because it means that the stories about Gunnhildr in *Ágrip* could have been reproduced directly from *HarN*, so one would expect to read in *Ágrip* about her witchcraft and non-Danish ancestry. The similarities between *Ágrip* and *HN* are explained by the authors using the same source, either Latin or vernacular, and most also agree that *Ágrip* could have had direct access to *HN*.<sup>157</sup> This is again significant, as if *Ágrip*’s author had access to *HN*, he actively ignored Gunnhildr’s Danish ancestry and added the more salacious elements of accusations of witchcraft and her death. As previously discussed, this lost common source and its identity and origin is contentious. Lange argues that all three of the ‘Norwegian synoptics’ and the original Latin version of *ÓsT* could have used

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<sup>152</sup> Driscoll, ‘Introduction’.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xv; Ulset, *genetiske forholdet*.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.* Beyschlag’s theory that ‘the three synoptics independently preserve an established oral tradition’ has few adherents. See Beyschlag, *Konungasögur*.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.* See Andersson, ‘(Konungasögur)’ for an excellent summary of these arguments.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

Sæmundr and Ari, thus implying there was no independent Norwegian centre for historiography, succeeding without any input from the Icelanders.<sup>158</sup> Lange's hypothesis would therefore mean that the earliest references to Gunnhildr are Icelandic and not Norwegian in origin. The unpleasant characteristics she purportedly possesses could simply be the result of anti-Norwegian feeling in the late-eleventh and twelfth centuries. Scholars have also suggested *Ágrip's* author could have used other lost sources, Finnur Jónsson and others posited the idea that there was a lost saga of the *jarl* of Hlaðir.<sup>159</sup> While this remains pure conjecture, it raises the intriguing possibility that the negative comments about Gunnhildr derive from a saga concerning (and perhaps written for) her erstwhile enemy. However, it remains the case that little can be said about the written sources for *Ágrip* with any real certainty.<sup>160</sup> In addition to the elusive written sources, *Ágrip's* author 'clearly drew on oral sources as well', including skaldic poetry.<sup>161</sup> Moreover, it is agreed that one of *Ágrip's* major sources must have been Trøndelag local tradition, which provided anecdotal material.<sup>162</sup> This area was controlled by the *jarl* of Hlaðir, so it is expected that its anecdotes of the past would not be favourable to an enemy.

Gunnhildr is introduced as the wife of Eiríkr *blóðøx* and daughter of Qzurr, representing the common Icelandic view.<sup>163</sup> In *Ágrip* her father's nickname is *lafskegg*, although later, Snorri refers to him as *toti*. This is the first known instance of Gunnhildr being introduced as Qzurr's daughter, but it is perpetuated in *ÓsT*, *Heimskringla*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Egla*. According to Driscoll, the origin of this confusion is unclear and may be the result of Icelandic hostility towards Gunnhildr

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<sup>158</sup> Lange, *isländisch-norwegischen*; Driscoll, 'Introduction'.

<sup>159</sup> *Ágrip*, (ed. Finnur Jónsson).

<sup>160</sup> Driscoll, 'Introduction'.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xvii.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*; Indrebø, 'Aagrip'.

<sup>163</sup> *Ágrip*, (ed. Driscoll).

and a subsequent desire to give her less exalted origins than as the Danish king's daughter.<sup>164</sup> *Ágrip's* author then describes her: *allra kvenna fegrst, lítil kona sýnum en mikil røðum. Hón gørðisk svá illrøðug, en hann svá áhlýðinn til grimmeiks ok til allskyns áþjánar við lýðinn, at þungt var at bera.*<sup>165</sup> This represents both the first physical description of her and the first positive. She is described in terms of her beauty and ability to offer counsel. This has far more in common with the descriptions in the later *Íslendingasögur* of women that were difficult to handle but not lacking in beauty, such as Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and Hallgerðr, than with the earlier descriptions in the other two 'Norwegian synoptics'.<sup>166</sup> Her small stature may be the result of the author's propensity for juxtaposition (*lítil sýnum, en mikil røðum*) and not her actual height.<sup>167</sup> Nevertheless, it is difficult to ignore the picture of a tiny beautiful woman of such iron resolve that she can manipulate hardened warriors to her bloodthirsty will. Such manipulation made Eiríkr most unpopular and this was firmly blamed on Gunnhildr. Indeed, Gunnhildr is credited with Eiríkr being given his moniker: *var hann kallaðr blóðøx at maðrinn var ofstopamaðr ok greyp, ok allra mest af røðum hennar.*<sup>168</sup> Her reputation is thought to have suffered by the work of Icelandic historians, even in a history apparently written by a Norwegian in Norway 'the portrait is one of a beautiful, wicked, ambitious, treacherous and cruel woman who practised sorcery on more than a few occasions'.<sup>169</sup> This could be evidence that *Ágrip's* author, like Theodoricus, gained much of his information from Icelanders,

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<sup>164</sup> Driscoll, 'Notes'.

<sup>165</sup> *Ágrip*, ch.v, (ed. Driscoll, p.8). 'of all women the most beautiful; a woman small of stature yet great of counsel'. She became so wicked in her counsel, and he [Eiríkr] so easily led to acts cruel and oppressive to the people, that it was hard to bear'. *Ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>166</sup> *Laxdæla* (eds. Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson); *Njal's* (eds. Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson).

<sup>167</sup> Driscoll, 'Introduction', p.xix; *Ágrip*, ch.v, (ed. Driscoll, p.8).

<sup>168</sup> *Ágrip*, ch.v, (ed. Driscoll, p.8). 'he was called *blóðøx*, because he was a cruel and ruthless man, and mostly as a result of her counsel'.

<sup>169</sup> Driscoll, 'Notes', p.88.

and was happy to accept their version, or it could show that Gunnhildr was just as unpopular in Norway.<sup>170</sup> This is the very crux of the problem, with what is said and often not said raising the question of whether she was a powerful woman, resented because of that very power and vilified, or whether she genuinely was cruel and vicious.

Two years after Haraldr *hárfagri's* death, Hákon (Eiríkr's brother) is recalled to Norway at the request of some unnamed men, he became so popular that Eiríkr could not stand against them, so he and Gunnhildr fled to Denmark.<sup>171</sup> As Gunnhildr was related to the Danish king, it is possible that they went there expecting help due to their family connection, although this only fits with *HN's* description of her origin and not *Ágrip's*. It may be that this was copied from another source where Gunnhildr was Danish and that it was assimilated by *Ágrip's* author without thinking it through. If so, then *HN* did not use the same source, as it states that they went straight to England. If nothing else, it is a further example of the differences across the sources.

Hákon is described in terms of his personal struggle with paganism and Christianity and how that impacted his rule and his people. This is focussed on Trøndelag, evidenced by the author's use of local cultural memories, and anecdotes such as relating how Hákon ate horse-liver through a cloth so not to bite it directly, his apostasy results in the increase of his troubles, and in *HN*, his death.<sup>172</sup> After Hákon has ruled peacefully for many years, Eiríkr's sons return to Norway with their mother and fight the Battle of Fitjar, it is at this point that an arrow flew towards

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<sup>170</sup> Driscoll, 'Notes'.

<sup>171</sup> *Ágrip*, (ed. Driscoll). In other sources they go straight to England.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*; *HN*, (ed. Phelpstead).

Hákon: *sú er engi vissi hvern skaut*, and he was fatally wounded.<sup>173</sup> Furthermore: *þat er sagt at með gøringum Gunnhildar snørisk matsveinn einn aftr með skeyti ok varð þetta á munni: "Gefit rúm konungsþana!" ok lét fara skeytit í flokkin er at móti fór, ok særði konunginn.*<sup>174</sup> This is key because firstly the author states that no one knew who shot the arrow but then firmly blames it on Gunnhildr and her witchcraft, and secondly the phrase *þat er sagt* ('it is said') indicates that it is anecdotal material obtained from the memories of the people of Trøndelag, thus its reliability is questionable. It explicitly blames Hákon's death on Gunnhildr's sorcery, building on the account in *HarN*. This shows that *Ágrip's* author was capable of embellishing details known from the other 'Norwegian synoptics' or their common source with oral anecdotes gleaned from the Trøndelag area.

*Ágrip's* author then backtracks, stating that when Eiríkr had fled he went to England (not Denmark as previously stated) where he received from King Æthelstan *jarlsríki á Norðimbralandi*, and: *með roðum Gunnhildar konu sinnar svá grimmr ok greypr við lýð sinn at hann þóttisk varla bera mega.*<sup>175</sup> Gunnhildr is associated with acts of cruelty and is blamed for Eiríkr's savagery. After his death on a raid in Spain, Gunnhildr returns to Denmark to Haraldr *blátǫnn* with her sons, fitting with her identity as the Danish king's sister rather than the Norwegian king's widow.<sup>176</sup> The author then explains how Haraldr *gráfeldr* was betrayed by Hákon *jarl* and Haraldr *blátǫnn* and how: *hann hafði enn at nýfengnu ríki gagnstøðu í fyrstunni af Gunnhildi*

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<sup>173</sup> *Ágrip*, ch.vi, (ed. Driscoll, p.14). 'shot by no one knows whom'.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.vi, p.14. 'it is said that through the sorcery of Gunnhildr a kitchen boy wheeled around crying: "Make room for the king's banesman!" and let fly the arrow into the group coming toward him and wounding the king'. *Ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.vii, p.16. 'an earldom in Northumbria'; 'through the advice of his wife Gunnhildr he became once again so cruel and savage in his dealings with people that they could scarcely endure it'. *Ibid.*, p.17. This is confusing as Æthelstan died in the autumn of 939 and it is unlikely that Eiríkr would have been in England much before 947. It is also information not found in *HN* or *HarN*. Driscoll, 'Notes'.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.* There is confusion over where Eiríkr died.

*konungamóður, ok lá hvárt umb annat með illum prettum, þvíat þat skorti hvárki þeira.*<sup>177</sup> Gunnhildr and Hákon are described as being as bad as each other, as if she has finally met her match in nastiness and deviousness. Hákon *jarl* of Hlaðir is introduced as: *manni vænstr sýnum, ekki hǫr, virðiligr. Hann var spekingr mikill í vizku sinni, ok varð hann fyr því slægri en Gunnhildr í sínum rǫðum.*<sup>178</sup> Beauty is again coupled with wisdom, as with Gunnhildr, and he is described as ‘not tall’ just as she is ‘short of stature’, leaving the impression of two beautiful short enemies, not lacking cunning and malice. That the *jarl* of Hlaðir is described in so favourable terms and as an equal, if not the superior of Gunnhildr, could again be due to the author’s use of anecdotal material from Trøndelag or a lost saga of the *jarl* of Hlaðir. *Ágrip* is very similar to *HarN* in the story of how Gunnhildr is tricked by Hákon and Haraldr. Hákon asked Haraldr to trick Gunnhildr into leaving the country by sending her a message offering marriage, saying it would be fitting that she in her old age marry an old king, which she agreed to do.<sup>179</sup> Presumably *Ágrip* and *HarN* had the same common source, or *Ágrip* directly used *HarN*. Both end Gunnhildr’s story ignominiously in a bog, although Haraldr’s romantic proposal is not greeted with the same level of excitement as in *HarN* and Gunnhildr is not shown in the same terms of foolish feminine credulity. *Ágrip*’s author demonstrates his partiality to antithesis by describing her end thus: *var hennar fǫr ger þryðiliga til óprúðar, þvíat þegar hún kom til Danmarkar þá var hún tekin ok sökkt í mýri einni, ok lauk svá hún sínum*

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<sup>177</sup> *Ágrip*, ch.xi, (ed. Driscoll, p.20). ‘in the early days of his reign [as the Danish king’s vassal], ‘Hákon had opposition from Gunnhildr *konungamóðir*, and they were often engaged in nasty trickery each against the other, for neither of them was lacking in that’. *Ibid.*, p.21. In the later histories Gunnhildr is known as *konungamóðir* because so many of her sons are proclaimed kings. Driscoll, ‘Notes’.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.xi, p.21. ‘the handsomest of men, not tall, but imposing. He was a man of great wisdom and therefore more cunning than Gunnhildr in his machinations’. *Ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

*dǫgum, at því sem margir segja*.<sup>180</sup> The phrase ‘according to many’ implies this was either oral commonly known gossip or the story was known across more than one written source.

Gunnhildr’s involvement in Óláfr Tryggvason’s father’s death is then explained. Apparently, the story of how he was killed is told by different people in different ways, with some blaming the farmers and others saying that he was about to be reconciled with his cousins, but they killed him through the treachery and wicked counsel of Gunnhildr *konungamóðir*, which most believe.<sup>181</sup> This is similar to the description in *HN*, which states that: *huius dolosam necem multi aliter accidisse astruunt. denique cum ipsi prouinciales, scilicet Reni, eius imperialem rigorem minime ferre ualarent, indicto consilio quasi pro communi utilitate regni, in quo ipsum regem per manus quorundam tironum*, although no mention is made of Gunnhildr’s involvement.<sup>182</sup> However, earlier in *Ágrip*, it is stated that Haraldr *gráfeldr* fought and killed his cousin Tryggvi.<sup>183</sup> In *Ágrip*, Gunnhildr is responsible for Tryggvi’s death, although in *HN* the story is similar and it looks as if *Ágrip*’s author either referred directly to *HN* or their common source, but in *HarN*, it merely states that Tryggvi was slain and that Gunnhildr and her sons searched extensively for his infant son Óláfr.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> *Ágrip*, ch.xi, (ed. Driscoll, p.21). ‘her journey, which began in splendour, ended in disgrace, for when she arrived in Denmark she was taken and sunk in a bog, and, according to many, so ended her days’. *Ibid.*, p.20. Driscoll sees the bog story in the light of a ‘medieval smear campaign against her’. Driscoll, ‘Notes’, p.92

<sup>181</sup> *Ágrip*, (ed. Driscoll).

<sup>182</sup> *HN*, ch.xv, (eds. Ekrem and Mortensen, p.88). ‘many people maintain that Tryggvi’s death came about in this different way: when the local people, that is the men of Ranríki, had no stomach to tolerate the harshness of his rule, an assembly was summoned, as if for the public weal, at which they had the king deceitfully killed’. *HN*, (ed. Phepstead, p.18). It is also stated that ‘Tryggvi was cunningly led astray and treacherously killed by his cousins, namely the sons of Eiríkr’. Gunnhildr is not explicitly named and there is obvious confusion over what happened.

<sup>183</sup> *Ágrip*, (ed. Driscoll, p.19). It is important to note that this is one of the sentences in the manuscript where someone has perhaps attempted to rub it out. If the reading is correct, then it agrees with *HarN* that Haraldr killed Tryggvi. Driscoll, ‘Notes’, p.91. See also *Ágrip*, (ed. Bjarni Einarsson).

<sup>184</sup> *HarN*, (eds. McDougall and McDougall, p.7).

Finally, this tale of a mother and son ruling Norway during a period of famine and civil unrest and being despised for their supposed acts of cruelty finds parallels with how the rule of Knútr's first wife, Ælfgifu of Northampton and their son Sveinn is narrated as it is described how: *en þá tók landsfólkit eftir fall konungs fulliga við vesöld þangat út Sveinn var ok Álfifa*.<sup>185</sup> Indeed, it is tempting to view the rule of these queens regent in terms of them being blamed as scapegoats for bad harvests rather than their bad rule causing them.

*Ágrip*, broadly speaking, is most like *HarN* in its treatment of Gunnhildr. For the most part, it follows *HarN* in believing that she was a woman who manipulated her menfolk using devious cunning and witchcraft to achieve the goal of seeing them in power. There are some similarities with *HN*, but it would seem likely that they had the same source or that *Ágrip*'s author relied directly on *HarN* and supplemented it with information from oral sources. In both she is betrayed by Hákon *jarl* and Haraldr (who according to *HN* is her brother) and ends her days in a bog.

### Conclusion

The 'Norwegian synoptics' all describe Gunnhildr slightly differently and a brief summary will be useful. None of the Norwegian sources describe her as a man-eater, or state that she befriended young men, was involved in Icelanders' Norwegian property claims or in the government of Norway. Nor do they refer to her father as Qzurr *toti*, a title used in later Icelandic sources. *HN* states she was a Danish princess, *HarN* does not name her father or origins and *Ágrip* claims she was Hálogalander Qzurr *lafskegg*'s daughter. All the 'Norwegian synoptics' describe her

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<sup>185</sup> *Ágrip*, ch.xxxii, (ed. Driscoll, p.45). 'after the death of the king, the people's misery became complete under Sveinn and Ælfgifu'. *Ibid.*, p.45. She has existed on the periphery of scholars' interests and the few sources that mention her often do so in contexts which are intriguing and 'suggest a powerful and ruthless Anglo-Saxon noblewoman who played a number of significant roles in the English and Scandinavian political scenes'. Bolton, 'Ælfgifu', p.247.

as vicious and cruel and blame her for the bad rule of her husband and sons. There are also marked similarities between *HarN* and *Ágrip*, unsurprising considering the connections between the two texts, both imply or explicitly state that she was a witch, blame her for Hákon's death and she drowned in a Danish bog. *Ágrip* is most like the later Icelandic sources, containing recurring themes from *konungasögur*, including describing Gunnhildr as a beautiful witch and being responsible for her menfolk's bad rule. Thus, it can be said that Gunnhildr's portrayals in the 'Norwegian synoptics' are generally negative (*Ágrip* alone mentions her beauty) and that the texts were clearly interrelated, especially *HarN* and *Ágrip* and that they went on to influence the later *konungasögur* and *Íslendingasögur*. It is likely that they do not represent a true tenth-century description, but a twelfth-century one, perhaps influenced by local bad-feeling from the Niðaróss area, the heartland of the old *jarls* of Hlaðir, erstwhile enemies of Gunnhildr.

### ***Gesta Danorum***

*GD* is a narrative chronological account, written in Latin by Saxo Grammaticus, of the history of Denmark, beginning with Dan, its legendary first ruler and ending in 1185 in the reign of King Cnut VI.<sup>186</sup> It has been estimated that 'Saxo had already begun to write the *GD* c.1188 and did not finish it until 1208 or even later.'<sup>187</sup> This means that they were composed at about the same time or slightly later as the 'Norwegian synoptics'. Saxo was employed by Absalon, Archbishop of Lund (1177-1201), and is listed in Absalon's will as *clericus*, 'secretary', and is requested to return to Sorø abbey two books he has borrowed.<sup>188</sup> This is important because it demonstrates that Saxo had sufficient standing to borrow valuable books from other ecclesiastical establishments thus suggesting he would have had plenty of source material for writing his own book.<sup>189</sup> Saxo's ability to garner useful information was facilitated by Absalon's court being the ecclesiastical centre of Denmark and a *locus* of secular power due to his role as a trusted royal advisor.<sup>190</sup> Furthermore, in the late-twelfth century, the archbishop of Niðaróss and his entourage spent several years exiled in Lund, due to a disagreement with the Norwegian king, and it is likely that 'men well versed in vernacular oral traditions from many areas including Iceland and Norway' would have been present.<sup>191</sup> As previously stated, it is possible the negative descriptions of Gunnhildr originated in Niðaróss, so Saxo had access to those who were well-versed in local history. He

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<sup>186</sup> Friis-Jensen, 'Introduction'.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xxxv.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> It is not known what specific manuscripts were held in the library at Lund, 'but there is enough evidence of a more indirect nature to show that it was well stocked according to the standards of the time, particularly in regard to historiographical works'. However, it is known which books Saxo borrowed, and one is still extant. See also Kristensen, *Danmarks ældste*.

<sup>190</sup> Friis-Jensen, 'Introduction'.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xxxi.

would also have had information from secular sources, that may have included different varieties of oral tradition, including military anecdotes and family history.<sup>192</sup>

Friis-Jensen has drawn attention to the fact that 'it was a firm belief among medieval historians that the main purpose of history-writing consists in moral education'.<sup>193</sup> This belief had its roots in ancient Rome, as demonstrated by Cicero's maxim, *historia vero testis temporum, lux veritatis, vita memoriae, magistra vitae, nuntia vetustatis*.<sup>194</sup> This concept, although implicit, permeates Saxo's work, 'in the choice of his narrative material, in the frequent authorial comments, and in his extensive use of (unacknowledged) verbal borrowings from moralising classical authors'.<sup>195</sup> Saxo's moral code is not solely Christian, he also engaged with the Graeco-Roman virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude; seeing no major conflict of interest between Christian and pagan moralities.<sup>196</sup> It could perhaps be surmised that this attitude would lead Saxo to portray Gunnhildr negatively, having been potentially exposed to oral memories from Niðaróss whose recollections of Gunnhildr would directly oppose those classical ideals that he admired. Additionally, the main idea behind the inception of *GD* was glorification of the Danish fatherland and this, coupled with Saxo's goal of imitating, amongst others, the *Aeneid* and *Facta et dicta memorabilia*, meant that he desired to create a national history of Denmark which was as glorious as those of his Roman models.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Friis-Jensen, 'Introduction'.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xl.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*; *De oratore*, II ix l.36 (eds. Sutton and Rackham, p.225). 'and as history, which bears witness to the passing of the ages, sheds light upon reality, gives life to recollection, and guidance to human existence, and brings tidings of ancient days'. Isadore of Seville similarly states, 'many wise people have imparted the past deeds of humankind in histories for the instruction of the living'. *Etymologies*, xliii (ed. Barney *et al.*, p.67).

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xl.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>197</sup> *GD*, pr.1.1, (ed. Friis-Jensen); Davidson, Introduction'.

It is not entirely clear what sources Saxo used for his historical information, although he did exploit both vernacular and Latin traditions in writing *GD*.<sup>198</sup> Danish historical writing in Latin before Saxo is limited, but he ‘probably knew all the texts which have been preserved, and utilised the information he found in an idiosyncratic way’.<sup>199</sup> This is demonstrated by his use of Sven Aggerson's *Lex castrensis* and *Brevis historia regum*, he is the less famous of the two twelfth-century Danish historians, who although considered Saxo his *contubernalis*, his work was never referred to by Saxo explicitly.<sup>200</sup> Saxo shortens or amplifies his stories, constantly rephrasing and reshaping, so that the ‘final result is always overwhelmingly Saxonian in language and style’.<sup>201</sup> While Gunnhildr is not included by Sven, Saxo's specific use of him elsewhere demonstrates his manipulation and distortion of source material, which involved him taking a very liberal attitude to historical truth, and much of his chronicle is what modern historians would simply consider invention.<sup>202</sup> It is evident that he ‘drew heavily on vernacular narrative traditions about ancient Scandinavia, in prose as well as verse’ and it is possible that he had some texts in written form, while others he knew from oral tradition.<sup>203</sup> It is important to remember that no serious investigations have been made into whether he could have used

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<sup>198</sup> Friis-Jensen, ‘Introduction’.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xlix.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.* Interestingly, considering they were contemporaries, Sven makes no mention of Gunnhildr. The bog incident from *Ágrip* and *HarN* is completely absent. Therefore, where Danish and Norwegian history intersect, *i.e.* Theodoricus and Sven, the sources are in direct opposition. In the same period, there is, according to Christiansen, ‘an elaborate celebration of “womanly astuteness” and the “cunning” of the great Queen Thyriwi’. The misogyny evident in Theodoricus and Saxo is not mirrored in Sven who admires superior female guile and its ability to outwit men. Christiansen, ‘Introduction’, p.24.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xlix.

<sup>202</sup> Christiansen, ‘Fiction’.

<sup>203</sup> Friis-Jensen, ‘Introduction’. The origins of Saxo's information is problematic; nineteenth-century Danish scholars opined that Saxo had used almost exclusively Danish narratives, while most scholars now accept that both Norse and Danish sources were used, largely due to Olrik, although this has also been criticised and is confined to the mythological section in Books i-ix. Bjarni Guðnason, ‘Icelandic Sources’. See also Olrik, *oldhistorie*.

Icelandic narratives for the historical section of his work.<sup>204</sup> Nevertheless, Saxo's accounts of Haraldr and Sveinn, 'show probable familiarity with twelfth-century Icelandic historical works' and Bjarni Guðnason concludes that Saxo used Icelandic sources in both the mythological and historical portions of *GD*, including *Jómsvíkinga* and *ÓsT* and that there is a closer connection between *GD* and Icelandic narratives than has been generally recognised.<sup>205</sup> This is particularly significant because if Saxo's description of Gunnhildr derives from these sources, then it will likely follow their negative example. Saxo himself praised the work of the Icelanders, stating that they, 'devote all their time to improving our knowledge of others' deeds', and that he claimed to use their narratives.<sup>206</sup> So, it is evident that he relied on information from Icelanders as a source, information that could influence how he related events, which will be important when assessing how he portrayed Gunnhildr.

*GD* was conceived at a time when other countries were experiencing an upsurge in interest about their collective pasts, one that the Danes wanted to emulate. It is likely that these compilations influenced Saxo, or he used common sources. This has implications for this thesis because his portrayal of Gunnhildr is shaped by information gleaned from these sources, and even though he is Danish and *GD* represents a Danish history, he still uses the Icelandic/Norwegian hearsay that denigrates her, perhaps not making the connection between the Norwegian queen and Denmark. It is feasible that Saxo gained information about Gunnhildr either orally from Norwegian and Icelandic visitors to the court at Lund, or from written narratives found in its library. However, it is important to note that, according

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<sup>204</sup> Bjarni Guðnason, 'Icelandic Sources'.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, p.89. See also Skovgaard-Petersen, 'Sven Tveskæg'.

<sup>206</sup> *GD*, pr.1.4, (ed. Friis-Jensen, p.7).

to Bjarni Guðnason, ‘no clear-cut distinction between oral and written sources existed in the minds of men at the beginning of historical writing’.<sup>207</sup>

*GD* does not survive in its entirety from earlier than the 1514 *editio princeps* of Christiern Pedersen.<sup>208</sup> This is the only complete copy of the text and, according to Pedersen’s preface, its exemplar was a manuscript procured by the Archbishop of Lund, Birger Gunnerson.<sup>209</sup> Friis-Jensen’s edition assumes that, ‘the *editio princeps* is a rather careful but by no means faultless, transcription of a single manuscript which was not far removed from Saxo’s own manuscript of the final version of the work’.<sup>210</sup> This reliance on a version that is so much later than the original is, naturally, problematic as errors have been generated by the editing and printing process, but much of Saxo’s authorial intent can still be gleaned from Pedersen’s edition.<sup>211</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to remember the edition’s limitations, as it remains possible the original descriptions of Gunnhildr were altered.

Gunnhildr’s name first appears in Book X of *GD*, where Haraldr *blátǫnn* encounters her son Haraldr, seeking help against Hákon.<sup>212</sup> Evidently either Saxo was unaware of the tradition in *HN* that Gunnhildr was Haraldr *blátǫnn*’s sister or he chose to ignore it, thus disassociating her from Denmark. The second and final time that Gunnhildr appears in *GD* is in association with King Hákon’s death and an incredible portent.<sup>213</sup> Saxo launches into a dramatic description of how: *iaculum namque uago ancipitique discursu superne inter auras oberrare conspectum non*

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<sup>207</sup> Bjarni Guðnason, ‘Icelandic Sources’, p.82.

<sup>208</sup> Friis-Jensen, ‘Introduction’.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p.li. The Angers fragment representing the oldest surviving witness is dated palaeographically to Saxo’s time and may be part of his own working copy, but it only comprises four folios and so its usefulness is somewhat limited.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> *GD*, bk.x, 1.4, (ed. Friis-Jensen, p.683).

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.7, p.685.

*minore intuentes metu quam ammiratione compleuit. Siquidem in diuersas partes dubiis reflexibus agitatum figendi uulneris locum exploratius prospicere uidebatur.*<sup>214</sup>

His description has evolved from that in *HarN* where an arrow hits Hákon, perhaps due to Gunnhildr's evil-doing, and in *Ágrip* where an arrow hits Hákon's arm 'through the sorcery of Gunnhildr'.<sup>215</sup> The wound is now caused by a bigger projectile, a spear, which hits his head rather than his arm. So, it is possible that either Saxo had a different source to the 'Norwegian synoptics', or that he deliberately changed what had happened for dramatic effect, as was his wont. Saxo elaborates, stating:

*arbitrantur quidam matrem Harildi Gunnildam procurator maleficiis spiculo uicti filii poenas a uictore sumpsisse.*<sup>216</sup> Gunnhildr's role in the portent is attributed to her ability to use witchcraft and desire to protect her son's interests, both familiar tropes from *ÓsT*. It is possible, then, that Saxo was aware of the descriptions of Gunnhildr as a fiercely protective mother with sorcerous abilities from *ÓsT*, but it remains possible that he had other sources of information, either oral or from the 'Norwegian synoptics'. By the time he wrote *GD* sources already existed that described Gunnhildr in those terms, and those are just the ones that survive.

It is evident that Saxo disapproves of Gunnhildr. The women who earn his praise are 'the modest and the self-sacrificing' and are those who have assisted men.<sup>217</sup> Even though Gunnhildr's actions are born of a desire to aid her sons, she is, according to all of the extant sources, neither modest nor self-sacrificing. Perhaps

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<sup>214</sup> *GD*, 1.7, (ed. Friis-Jensen, p.684). 'a spear was sighted, snaking about high in the air on a swerving, zigzag path, so that the spectators were overwhelmed as much with fear as wonder. Moving with unpredictable twists and turns into various regions, it seemed as if it were trying to spy out with greater accuracy the point where it should plant its wound'. *Ibid.*, p.685.

<sup>215</sup> *HN*, ch.4, (eds. McDougall and McDougall, p.7); *Ágrip*, (ed. Driscoll, p.15).

<sup>216</sup> *GD*, 1.7, (ed. Friis-Jensen, p.684). 'some reckon that Haraldr's mother, Gunnhildr, had cast a witch's spell on the dart, whereby she exacted punishment from the victor for the defeat of her son'. *Ibid.*, p.685.

<sup>217</sup> Strand, '*Gesta Danorum*', p.6.

Saxo's antipathy stems more from his opposition to the political activity of women.<sup>218</sup> Strand asserts that he 'underlines his dislike of politically-active women, especially those in positions of power, in different ways', but mainly by belittling them and treating them like an 'opponent, menacing man and society'.<sup>219</sup> He achieved this by deliberately reducing and undermining the reputation of women in authority and by generally denigrating those who held any power.<sup>220</sup> Often politically-active women were used 'to illustrate evil or vice' and in particular 'supernatural women were seen as a threat to society with their ability to perform magic'.<sup>221</sup> Given this attitude, it should come as no surprise that Saxo does not approve of Gunnhildr and her alleged sorcery and meddling in the affairs of men. *GD* differs from 'older and contemporary northern historians by giving comparatively many detailed descriptions of women', but Saxo's description of Gunnhildr is not particularly long or detailed.<sup>222</sup> However, it would seem that Saxo's description of Gunnhildr, although brief, is similar to those found in *HarN*, *ÓsT* and *Ágrip*, as she is again linked with witchcraft, apparently casting a spell that caused the spear to hit Hákon.

Saxo's use of *ÓsT* has been convincingly argued by Skovgaard-Petersen, but it is not impossible that he had knowledge of other works given his account of Hákon's death embellished upon that found in *HarN* and *Ágrip*. However, Saxo's use of the phrase, 'some reckon', makes it sound as if his information came from oral sources, made possible by his presence at Absalon's court where he would have

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<sup>218</sup> Strand, '*Gesta Danorum*', p.6. The ideal woman as presented in *GD* is quite different to that found in the Church's teachings and in earlier historical works. It reflects, according to Strand, 'the man-like virago-ideal of classical Roman writers', in which Saxo was closer to the ideas expressed by Icelandic writers rather than to European ones. However, unlike the Icelanders, Saxo had limits on the type of female activity that was allowed, and in political affairs, it was certainly not welcome.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>222</sup> Strand, '*Women in Gesta*', p.135.

met visitors from Norway and Iceland who could easily have regaled him with tales of the past. Saxo's flowery, overly dramatic description of the projectile's journey evokes the witchcraft of Gunnhildr and how she directed it by magic but is not a description that fits with a purely factual historical account. Also, if Saxo did not recognise Gunnhildr as King Haraldr Gormsson's sister then it is likely his information did not derive from *HN*, unless he deliberately disassociated her from the Danish élite. If his aim was to glorify Denmark's past, then the king's sister being a witch would be counterproductive. Using Saxo as a source to the tenth-century is problematic, as his stories are 'told in complex, pompous Latin' and often get mixed up, repeated, and suffer from Christian moralizing, but nevertheless they are a fascinating witness to the attitudes of his day and form a piece of the historiographical puzzle of Gunnhildr's story.<sup>223</sup>

### Conclusion

Saxo's description of Gunnhildr is limited to her causing Hákon's death using magic, a fact also pinpointed by Nordal, who states that Saxo's *eitt* ('only') story of her describes how she killed Hákon with her sorcery.<sup>224</sup> Considering the only sources earlier than *GD* that mention both Gunnhildr's witchcraft and role in Hákon's death are *HarN* and *Ágrip*, it remains likely that Saxo consulted either them or common sources. Skovgaard-Petersen has argued that Saxo used *ÓsT*, but his description of Gunnhildr is markedly different to Oddr's, which makes it feasible that Saxo derived his information from elsewhere. One possibility is that Saxo heard oral stories from the Archbishop of Niðaróss's court, which had been exiled to Lund

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<sup>223</sup> Davidson, *Gods*, p.46.

<sup>224</sup> Nordal, 'Gunnhildur', p.281.

during his tenure there, serving its archbishop.<sup>225</sup> Saxo disliked women who meddled in politics and it is probable that hearing about Gunnhildr's position of power provoked his ire and lead him to repeat the stories of her witchcraft, which he would have seen as a threat to society. Thus, it can be said that Saxo's portrayal of Gunnhildr is brief and focussed solely on her bad traits, evidently reliant on the 'Norwegian synoptics', their sources, or Norwegian gossip, despite being a Danish history and is significantly different to the sources that both precede and follow it.

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<sup>225</sup> Niðaróss has been successfully linked to the 'Norwegian synoptics' and the negative stories of Gunnhildr, perhaps influenced by her well-documented enmity with the *jarl* of Hlaðir.

## *Konungasögur*

### *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*

In addition to the broad surveys of 'Norwegian synoptics', 'another strand in the writing of early histories of Norway was developing in the form of biographies of individual kings'.<sup>226</sup> This largely had its origins in the hagiographical records of Óláfr *inn helgi* Haraldsson (d.1030) and Óláfr Tryggvason (d.1000). *ÓsT*, written by Oddr Snorrason, although not one of the 'Norwegian synoptics', is part of the group of twelfth-century histories that may have shared common sources and is particularly linked with *HarN* and *Ágrip*. According to Andersson, 'exactly how early Oddr could have written his saga has been a matter of dispute'.<sup>227</sup> It is the first full-length saga in Iceland, originally written in Latin but quickly translated into Icelandic and 'clearly well known in Iceland and Norway through the thirteenth into the fourteenth century'.<sup>228</sup> The original Latin version is not extant and there is no complete manuscript, therefore its modern editors have pieced the text together from three manuscripts.<sup>229</sup> Unusually for an Icelandic saga, the author is known, and in AM 310<sup>4to</sup> the narrative concludes, 'thus wrote the monk Oddr, who was at Þingeyrar'.<sup>230</sup> The similarities between *ÓsT* and *HarN* suggest that one relied on the other for information and prevailing scholarly opinion believes that Theodoricus was first.<sup>231</sup> The period for *ÓsT*'s composition is complicated but has been narrowed to c.1180-

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<sup>226</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction', p.8.

<sup>227</sup> Andersson, 'Introduction', p.4.

<sup>228</sup> Andersson, 'Preface', p.vii. It was translated into the vernacular within 20-30 years.

<sup>229</sup> Andersson, 'Introduction', p.26. The most complete is AM 310<sup>4to</sup>, although the first three leaves are missing so the story does not begin until partway through Chapter ix in Andersson's edition.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1. Another monk from Þingeyrar, Gunnlaugr Leifsson, also wrote a Latin saga of Óláfr Tryggvason which has not survived but is believed to be an expansion of Oddr's *ÓsT*. Sections are included in *Mesta* and were also used by Snorri when composing *Heimskringla*.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

1200, nevertheless, scholars have generally split the difference and date *ÓsT* to c.1190 but this may represent ‘no better than a guess’.<sup>232</sup>

It remains likely that Oddr used *HarN* as a source, and the specific parallels have been studied in detail by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson.<sup>233</sup> However, Andersson remains convinced, ‘that the similarities between Theodoricus and Oddr can be explained by common sources rather than direct borrowing’.<sup>234</sup> Either way, it is expected that *ÓsT*’s accounts of Gunnhildr will follow those of *HarN*, such as the veiled reference to her sorcerous abilities. Extensive comparison of the ‘Norwegian synoptics’ and *ÓsT* by Andersson has left him confident ‘that Oddr is more clearly aligned with Theodoricus than with the other two synoptics or their common source’.<sup>235</sup> Indeed, he concludes that the first forty-one chapters of *ÓsT* are shaped by a written source(s) also used by Theodoricus, but in later chapters Oddr supplements from oral narratives.<sup>236</sup>

Interestingly, considering that *ÓsT*’s early chapters so closely follow *HarN*, Gunnhildr is introduced as: *dottir gafvgs manz Azorar tota norðan af Haloga landi*.<sup>237</sup> In *HarN* her origin is not mentioned, in *Ágrip* she is the daughter of Qzurr *lafskegg*, although it is not indicated that he is a Hálogalander. So, this information is new, perhaps deriving from a source different to the common one for *HarN* and *ÓsT*. At the time of Gunnhildr’s sons’ rule there was ‘a great famine and bad harvests’, *per*

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<sup>232</sup> Andersson, ‘Introduction’. Lange has argued to reverse the sequence of events, stating that Theodoricus used Oddr’s saga. She assigned *ÓsT* to the period 1177-88 (thus making it contemporary with *HarN*, earlier than *Ágrip*). This runs against the general supposition that the brief historical epitomes, *i.e.* *Ágrip* and *HarN* were written before the longer biographies, based perhaps only on typological instinct. Dating is further complicated by Andersson’s argument ‘that there may be no direct connection between Theodoricus and Oddr and that the common phrasing may derive from Ari Þorgilsson’s lost *konunga ævi*’. Lange, *isländisch-norwegischen*; Andersson, ‘Introduction’, p.4; Nordal, *Om Olaf*.

<sup>233</sup> Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *norske kongesagaer*.

<sup>234</sup> Andersson, ‘Introduction’, p.7.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> *ÓsT*, ch.1, (ed. Finnur Jónsson, p.3). ‘the daughter of a distinguished man from the north in Hálogaland, Qzurr *toti*’. *ÓsT*, ch.1, (ed. Andersson, p.36).

*HN* but not *HarN*, thus making it more likely that Oddr had access to information that Theodoricus did not.<sup>238</sup> This source could have been written or oral, although he used the latter to supplement the written sources in the later part of *ÓsT*. It may be significant that these differences occur in the first chapter, which would have been on one of the missing leaves from AM 310<sup>4to</sup> so the information must originate from Stockholm 18<sup>4to</sup>.<sup>239</sup> Therefore, it is possible that the manuscripts differ as textual variance is not uncommon due to scribal intervention, and the scribe may have had other texts available that named *Qzurr toti*.<sup>240</sup>

Gunnhildr is informed that four chieftains are meeting secretly and is troubled, as she thinks it likely that their discussions will involve her sons.<sup>241</sup> Oddr draws attention to her paganism, describing how she sacrificed to the gods and was given the information that the chieftains' machinations were as she feared.<sup>242</sup> This is the first explicit reference to her faith. Her sorcery implies that she is not a Christian in *HarN* and *Ágrip*, but here she is actually performing a pagan rite.<sup>243</sup> Oddr qualifies his statement by drawing attention to the fact that this was only what people had asserted, and that it is unknown whether the accusations were justified.<sup>244</sup> His use of 'this is what people assert' implies he acquired his information from hearsay rather than a written source. Clearly Gunnhildr was an influential woman, as in *ÓsT* and the 'Norwegian synoptics' she is shown offering her sons counsel, informing them of what the gods revealed, so that 'they planned their course of action with great

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<sup>238</sup> *ÓsT*, ch.1, (ed. Andersson, p.36).

<sup>239</sup> Andersson, 'Introduction'.

<sup>240</sup> AM 310<sup>4to</sup> was judged to be from 1250-1275, copied from an Icelandic exemplar and Stockholm 18<sup>4to</sup> to be an Icelandic manuscript from c.1300. Finnur Jónsson, *Saga Óláfs*.

<sup>241</sup> *ÓsT*, ch.1, (ed. Andersson, p.36).

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>243</sup> Her sons had accepted baptism in England but were not outwardly Christian and 'they allowed everyone to be whatever they wanted, Christian or pagan'.

<sup>244</sup> *ÓsT*, ch.1, (ed. Andersson, p.36).

cunning'.<sup>245</sup> Later, she is obliged to mediate a dispute between her sons, she agrees with the proviso that they abide by her decision. She says her decision is that Haraldr will have the rule over the Norwegian realm because she judges him to be first among the brothers.<sup>246</sup> Following her judgement, the brothers were easily reconciled and promised to obey her.<sup>247</sup> This further demonstrates her power and influence, that a woman could get grown warriors to listen to her, accept her judgement and then obey; even when she is setting one son above the others. This seems remarkable, yet, according to Oddr, that is exactly what happened. Guðrøðr approaches King Tryggvi to propose a partnership, whose wife Ástríðr states that she does not have a good feeling about it, dreaming that she had a gold ring on her arm that then broke in two, with blood dripping from both parts, and that she senses he is going to be betrayed.<sup>248</sup> This seems to have more in common with some of the heroic poetry in the *Poetic Edda*, with heroes' wives warning against actions having seen the consequences in dreams, then being ignored resulting in their husbands' doom, than with a sober historiographical account.<sup>249</sup> Certainly, dreams are an expected feature of sagas, and 'where there are dreams, there are women'.<sup>250</sup> Ástríðr is ultimately proved right as Guðrøðr and his men massacre Tryggvi and his

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<sup>245</sup> *ÓsT*, ch.1, (ed. Andersson, p.36).

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.1.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>249</sup> For example, in *Atlamál in grænlensku*, stanza 10:

*Særing fóro síðan sína þau Hogni  
dreymsði dróttláta, dulði þess vætki,  
sagði horsc hilmí, þegars hón réð vacna:*

*Edda*, (ed. Neckel, p.235).

They went to bed then, Hogni and his wife:

The courtly lady had a dream, not at all did she conceal it,

The wise one told it to the prince as soon as she awoke.

*Edda*, (ed. Larrington, p.219). It is interesting to note that *konungasögur* do occasionally deviate from more sober narrative modes, and always at salient points.

<sup>250</sup> Morris, *Sorceress*, p.49.

men.<sup>251</sup> This differs from the accounts in the ‘Norwegian synoptics’, as covered previously.

Following Tryggvi’s murder, Gunnhildr and her sons are determined to locate Ástriðr, because she is concerned that if Ástriðr were indeed pregnant then it could harm her and her sons.<sup>252</sup> Gunnhildr is portrayed as a woman so hungry for power and worried for her sons that she sees an unborn child as a threat. To deal with the implied danger she ‘summoned Hákon Sigurðarson and spoke harsh words to him’.<sup>253</sup> This is the same cunning Hákon *jarl* who, in *HarN* and *Ágrip*, constantly opposes Gunnhildr and ultimately causes her death. Yet in *ÓsT*, Oddr fails to explain the animosity between them and when ‘Hákon saw that his life and prosperity were in their power, he wanted to save himself from their hostility’, his self-interest wins out and he meekly surrenders to Gunnhildr’s threats.<sup>254</sup> Only *HarN* and *ÓsT* identify Gunnhildr’s messenger Hákon with Hákon *jarl* and Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson notes that Hákon ‘friend of Gunnhildr’ sent to look for Óláfr in *Heimskringla* is a ‘kind of double’ of Hákon *jarl* Sigurðarson.<sup>255</sup> Hákon searches for Ástriðr and her baby without success and then meets Gunnhildr, who tells him to hurry because she can see their destination.<sup>256</sup> Here, Gunnhildr’s ability to use sorcery is implied as she is able to determine Ástriðr’s location, perhaps scrying for the knowledge. It is after this section that the main manuscript AM 310<sub>4to</sub> replaces Stockholm 18<sub>4to</sub> and it is possible that all the aforementioned differences stem from textual variance.

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<sup>251</sup> *ÓsT*, ch.1, (ed. Andersson, p.36).

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.1, p.36.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.4, p.39.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>255</sup> McDougall and McDougall ‘Notes’, p.62; *Heimskringla*, (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson).

<sup>256</sup> *ÓsT*, ch.4, (ed. Andersson).

Gunnhildr threatens Hákon with outlawry unless he does everything that she commands.<sup>257</sup> However, Hákon remains unsuccessful and seeks refuge with King Haraldr Gormsson in Denmark, of which, ‘there is much to tell about’.<sup>258</sup> According to Andersson, ‘this could be a reference to oral or written accounts’, as it is unlikely that Oddr had access to many written sources when he composed his Latin original, but twenty or thirty years later, the translator into the vernacular could have used *Ágrip* or the lost \**Hlaðarjarla saga*.<sup>259</sup> This could refer to the plot between Hákon and Haraldr described in *Ágrip* and *HarN* to kill Gunnhildr.

Although Oddr may have either directly used *HarN* or Theodoricus' written source, there are differences from how they portray Gunnhildr. Her demise at the hands of Hákon and Haraldr is not described, it is not stated that she performed witchcraft, only that she practised pagan rites. Nevertheless, her influence and cunning and the troubled times in which she and her sons rule are all included. This is the first time she is introduced as the daughter of Qzurr *toti*, a distinguished Hálogalander. As most information relating to her is contained in the section that is missing from AM 310<sub>4to</sub>, it is possible that the discrepancies are because the two manuscripts contain slightly different versions that rely on variant information, be that written exemplars or oral gossip. It is also possible that ÓsT's translator added information that Oddr did not have. The extent to how much the Latin original was copied faithfully into Icelandic is not known.

### *Orkneyinga saga*

*Orkneyinga* is a ‘unique historical document’, without it much of what is known about the Northern Isles and Caithness would be lost, including information about

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<sup>257</sup> ÓsT, ch.5, (ed. Andersson).

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, p.44.

<sup>259</sup> Andersson, ‘Notes’, p.138.

Gunnhildr and her family.<sup>260</sup> *Orkneyinga* describes the history of the Norse *jarldom* in Shetland, Orkney, and Caithness from c.900 to c.1200, 'but its record impinges upon the history of other lands, in particular Norway and Scotland'.<sup>261</sup> The saga itself is problematic, and such scholars as Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Finnur Jónsson have noted that it stands somewhat apart from other saga literature.<sup>262</sup> More recently, Berman has attempted to categorise *Orkneyinga* alongside *Færeyinga* and *Jómsvíkinga* in a genre she has dubbed 'political sagas'.<sup>263</sup> Finlay finds this 'altogether unconvincing' but does concur that it demonstrates that these sagas all have something in common, 'their anomalous status outside the major generic groups that developed with the burgeoning of saga writing later in the thirteenth century'.<sup>264</sup> This is certainly the case with *Orkneyinga*, although in its structure and intention, the saga as a whole seems more closely aligned to *kounungasögur* than to *Íslendingasögur*.<sup>265</sup>

Certainly, *Orkneyinga* was not written by an Orkneyman but by an Icelander, probably c.1200.<sup>266</sup> It is likely that the author, although unknown, was associated with the intellectual centre at Oddi in southern Iceland.<sup>267</sup> Oddi not only had connections with Orkney during the late-twelfth and early-thirteenth century but more significantly for this thesis, it was at there that Icelandic historiography began, with the work of Sæmundr.<sup>268</sup> As previously noted Sæmundr's writings may have

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<sup>260</sup> Herman Pálsson and Edwards, 'Introduction', p.9.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9; Taylor, 'Preface'.

<sup>262</sup> Taylor, 'Introduction', p.4. See also Guðbrandur Vigfússon, 'Prolegomena'; Finnur Jónsson, *oldnorske og oldislandske*.

<sup>263</sup> Berman, 'Political Sagas'.

<sup>264</sup> Finlay, '*Jómsvíkinga*', p.63.

<sup>265</sup> Taylor, 'Saga Literature'. For the full argument see Taylor, pp.1-9. He states that *Orkneyinga's* compiler 'seems to be trying to do for the Earls of the Orkneys what Snorri did for the Kings of Norway and what the unknown author of *Knýtlinga* did later for the royal house of Denmark'.

<sup>266</sup> Herman Pálsson and Edwards, 'Introduction'.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*

influenced the 'Norwegian synoptics' and it is eminently possible that they displayed the negativity connected with Gunnhildr, and as *Orkneyinga* was written at Oddi, it is possible that these lost works also influenced its author. It should also be noted that *Orkneyinga* was one of Snorri's sources for *Heimskringla*, which contains a negative portrayal of Gunnhildr.<sup>269</sup>

It is useful to consider *Orkneyinga* in its literary context: by the end of the twelfth century, Icelanders had compiled numerous works on the history of both Iceland and Norway.<sup>270</sup> Unfortunately, many are lost, but those that survive, including *ÓsT*, appear in their aims and techniques 'to have been similar to *Orkneyinga*, to give literary form to oral tradition about national leaders, with the emphasis on personalities rather than politics'.<sup>271</sup> To that end, *Orkneyinga* can be compared with *Knýtlinga* (c.1240-50) and *Heimskringla* (c.1230), two slightly later Icelandic chronicles.<sup>272</sup> All three rely on skaldic poetry quoted as source material, in addition to oral tradition and written sources, although 'the relationship between *Orkneyinga* and *Heimskringla* is complicated by the fact that Snorri made use of the original version of *Orkneyinga*, but then the reviser of the saga in turn made use of *Heimskringla*'.<sup>273</sup> Significantly for this thesis, Herman Pálsson and Edwards note that *Orkneyinga* also 'shares certain features with fictive narratives about Icelandic heroes' such as *Egla* and *Njála*, which also feature Gunnhildr.<sup>274</sup> All three are 'characterised by a strong sense of the dramatic moment' and have a talent for 'inventive narrative skill'.<sup>275</sup> This has direct bearing on how stories of Gunnhildr have

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<sup>269</sup> Herman Pálsson and Edwards, 'Introduction'.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*

been told by writers of both sagas and early historiography. However, *Orkneyinga* 'claims implicitly to be history rather than art' and that it contains frequent references to sources of information, skaldic poetry, eye-witness and written sources.<sup>276</sup>

*Orkneyinga* survives in multiple manuscripts, from the oldest extant version, c.1275, which exists only as one leaf (AM 325 IIIβ<sub>4to</sub>) to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century paper copies of *Flateyjarbók*.<sup>277</sup> The *Íslensk Fornrit* edition largely follows the *Flateyjarbók* codex c.1390, but the second part of Chapter Eight (and the start of Chapter Twelve) relies on the late-sixteenth-century Danish version.<sup>278</sup> This is significant because Gunnhildr is introduced towards the end of Chapter Eight and is therefore information supplemented from a much later manuscript. This demonstrates the difficulty in piecing together information about Gunnhildr and its significance, when it is so far removed from her life. She lived and died in the tenth century, and the majority of *Orkneyinga* was written in the early-thirteenth, but evidence of this only exists in much later copies, some from the sixteenth century.

In Chapter Eight of *Orkneyinga*, it is described how Eiríkr *blóðøx* briefly ruled in Norway but had to flee when his brother Hákon took power and how he was given charge of Northumbria by King Æthelstan.<sup>279</sup> Due to Eiríkr's shortage of money, he spent the summers plundering and overwintered in Northumbria, but Æthelstan's death upset the *status quo*, as he was succeeded by his brother Eadmund 'who was less friendly towards the Norwegians, not liking King Eiríkr's rule over

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<sup>276</sup> Taylor, 'Saga Literature', p.7.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.* For a full descriptive list see Nordal, 'Introduction'.

<sup>278</sup> Herman Pálsson and Edwards, 'Introduction'. *Flateyjarbók* contains almost all *Orkneyinga* and is therefore valuable due to its completeness, but it is frequently inaccurate in detail. The Danish manuscript (Cod. Isl. Paper 39 fol.) is a 1615 copy of a Danish translation (c.1570) of the same text that was used for AM 332<sup>4to</sup> which was lost in a fire; although only a translation, its accuracy and completeness give it great value in supporting the text. In Nordal's 1913-16 edition 'the text follows whichever of the available manuscripts gives - on the basis of the genealogy of manuscripts worked out in the Introduction - what is nearest to the earliest version of *Orkneyinga*; and all other reputable variants are given in footnotes'. Taylor, 'Manuscripts', p.13.

<sup>279</sup> *Orkneyinga* (ed. Herman Pálsson and Edwards); *Orkneyinga* (ed. Taylor).

Northumbria'.<sup>280</sup> King Eadmund's dislike resulted in a fierce battle between his and Eiríkr's forces, in which Eiríkr fell.<sup>281</sup> This differs from earlier sources, as there is no mention of Eiríkr being despised by the Northumbrian people and driven out, nor either his or Gunnhildr's cruelty, and finally Eiríkr dies in England, not Spain.<sup>282</sup> This is significant because every other source cites Gunnhildr's cruelty, and as *Orkneyinga* likely originated where Sæmundr wrote his histories, which likely influenced the 'Norwegian synoptics' and Oddr, it would be expected that she would be described similarly. It is difficult to account for this difference, especially considering that *Heimskringla* used *Orkneyinga* as a source. It would seem unlikely that *Orkneyinga*'s author was unaware of the earlier descriptions of her and the potential gossip/oral memories that were probably still circulating, thus indicating it was a conscious decision to not describe Gunnhildr as a viciously cruel sorceress. This also raises the question of how much authorial intent can be expressed in a manuscript postdating the author's work by nearly 400 years.

After Eiríkr's death, Gunnhildr and her sons uncertain of their safety, departed hastily and sailed north to Orkney, where *jarl Þorfinnr hausakljúfr* ruled.<sup>283</sup> From then on, 'Gunnhildr's sons took over power in the islands and used them as their base in winter, spending the summers on viking expeditions'.<sup>284</sup> Again, there is no mention of Gunnhildr's cruelty or manipulation of her sons. It is interesting though,

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<sup>280</sup> *Orkneyinga* ch.8, (ed. Herman Pálsson and Edwards, p.32); *Orkneyinga* (ed. Taylor).

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*; *Orkneyinga* (ed. Taylor). Eiríkr was not killed during Eadmund's reign (939-46) but in Eadred's (946-55), probably in 950. Although the A-SC states, he was driven from Northumbria twice, the last being 954. Taylor, 'Notes'.

<sup>282</sup> Only *HN* and *Ágrip* state Eiríkr died in Spain, other Norse sources (and Roger's *Flores*) agree that he died in battle at Stainmoor in Northumbria. Phelpstead, 'Notes'. *Span-* may be a corruption of *Stan-*. Finnur Jónsson, *oldnorske og oldislandske*.

<sup>283</sup> *Orkneyinga* ch.8, (ed. Herman Pálsson and Edwards); *Orkneyinga* (ed. Taylor).

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*

that they are referred to as *Gunnhildarsynir*.<sup>285</sup> During their sojourn on Orkney, they hear about war between Hákon of Norway and Haraldr Gormsson of Denmark, and so they visit King Haraldr with the expectation that he will help them against their common enemy.<sup>286</sup> These expectations may be due to Gunnhildr being Haraldr's sister, although Gunnhildr's Danish ancestry is only referred to in *HN*.<sup>287</sup> Before they leave Orkney, Gunnhildr and Eiríkr's daughter Ragnhildr is given in marriage to Arnfinnr, *jarl Þorfinnr's* son.<sup>288</sup>

It is noteworthy that, 'the *King's Saga* from which the latter part of Chapter Eight is taken may have been a separate \**Saga of Eric Bloody-axe*, or merely the \**Saga of Hakon the Good* in which Eiríkr's story is embedded in extant historical sources'.<sup>289</sup> Indeed, this part of Chapter Eight appears in full in Cod.Isl.Paper 39 fol. only.<sup>290</sup> Taylor also notes that the passage from it 'seems like a translation of parts of four chapters in *Heimskringla* (*Hakon G.S.* Chapters Three-Five, Ten)' and that Nordal believed that this was, in fact, the case.<sup>291</sup> It is therefore possible that *Heimskringla* and *Orkneyinga* had a common original source, a \**Saga of Eric Bloody-axe*, although other points of contact can also be noted.<sup>292</sup> This would explain the more positive descriptions of Eiríkr and Gunnhildr found in *Orkneyinga*,

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<sup>285</sup> *Orkneyinga*, ch.8, (ed. Finnbogi Guðmundsson, p.19). 'the sons of Gunnhildr'. Per Driscoll, 'a child would take a metronymic rather than the more common patronymic when the father was unknown, deceased or less prominent than the mother'. Driscoll, 'Notes', p.89. See also Hødnebo, 'Tilnavne'. So, in this context, Gunnhildr and Eiríkr's children take their mother's name either because Eiríkr is dead or arguably because she is more prominent.

<sup>286</sup> *Orkneyinga* ch.8, (ed. Herman Pálsson and Edwards, p.32); *Orkneyinga* (ed. Taylor).

<sup>287</sup> It is pure speculation whether their visit to Denmark is because of familial ties as opposed to the mentality that the enemy of my enemy is a friend. Also, note the slightly different translation in Taylor that makes it sound like their action is a response to the enmity between Hákon and Haraldr not because Haraldr is related to Gunnhildr.

<sup>288</sup> *Orkneyinga* (ed. Herman Pálsson and Edwards); *Orkneyinga* (ed. Taylor).

<sup>289</sup> Taylor, 'Sources', p.50.

<sup>290</sup> Note that 'in *Flateyjarbók*, it is summarised in three sentences because it had already been copied by the scribe'.

<sup>291</sup> Taylor, 'Sources', p.51.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*

as if they derived from a lost saga of Eiríkr *blóðøx* it is less likely that they would be denigrated.

So, to summarise, *Orkneyinga* is the first source to not negatively portray Gunnhildr. According to Taylor, who undertook a detailed study, there is a list of sources that may have contributed material to its composition, some proven and others probable, including written sagas of the kings and chiefs of Norway (\**Saga of Harald Fair-hair* and \**Saga of Eric Bloody-axe* are both relevant for their connections to Gunnhildr), skaldic poetry and oral tradition.<sup>293</sup> Furthermore, Taylor also lists sources that have points of contact with *Orkneyinga*, i.e. those that 'have been found of material significance in the study of the sources of *Orkneyinga*', including the 'Norwegian synoptics' and *ÓsT*.<sup>294</sup> It is likely that *Orkneyinga*'s author had knowledge of the 'Norwegian synoptics' and Oddr, sources containing very negative appraisals of Gunnhildr. Interestingly, *Orkneyinga* describes Ragnhildr's life in Orkney, including plotting her husband's murder, marrying his brother and then plotting with his nephew, 'she prodded him on, and Einarr swayed too by his greed, let her influence him'.<sup>295</sup> This seems more in keeping with what is known of her mother's personality according to the 'Norwegian synoptics' and *ÓsT*. Indeed, it also brings to mind *hetzerin* from *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*.<sup>296</sup> Ragnhildr is introduced as *Eiríksdóttir* ('Eiríkr's daughter'), unlike her brothers, who are described as *Gunnhildarsynir*, if the author had wanted to draw a negative comparison between mother and daughter, then it would follow that she would have been introduced as *Gunnhildardóttir* ('Gunnhildr's daughter'). The episodes in Chapter Nine

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<sup>293</sup> Taylor, 'Sources'. For full list, see Taylor, pp.33-41.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>295</sup> *Orkneyinga* ch.9, (ed. Herman Pálsson and Edwards, p.34); *Orkneyinga* (ed. Taylor). Ragnhildr's exploits are also recounted in *Mesta*.

<sup>296</sup> For example, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and Brynhildr among others.

demonstrate that the author of *Orkneyinga* did not shy away from presenting the women associated with the jarldom of Orkney in a bad light and that, in places, he was content to base his narrative directly on oral tradition, which makes his treatment of Gunnhildr seem all the more unexpected.<sup>297</sup>

### *Fagrskinna*

*Fagrskinna* is the seventeenth-century title given to the manuscript, which was seemingly known as *Nóregs konunga tal* in the Middle Ages.<sup>298</sup> It comprises a history of the kings of Norway from Hálfðan *svarti* to the Battle of Ré in 1177.<sup>299</sup> It has been dated to the early-thirteenth century, Indrebø suggesting c.1225 specifically.<sup>300</sup> *Fagrskinna* is a survey 'built on the superstructure of the earliest chronological outlines enumerating the rulers within the context of their descent from Haraldr *hárfagr*'.<sup>301</sup> Therefore, its structure is more like that of the 'Norwegian synoptics' than *ÓsT*, a biography of an individual ruler. Thus, *Fagrskinna*'s primary significance 'is the position it occupies in this literary evolution'.<sup>302</sup> In relation to other *konungasögur*, *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*, scholars generally accept that *Fagrskinna*'s author was a 'conservative arranger of earlier written sources'.<sup>303</sup> Indrebø, who in 1917 wrote a 'magisterial treatise that addressed most of the important questions' concerning *Fagrskinna*, stated that, 'we can establish this as a critical rule: only as much as is absolutely necessary of the content of *Fagrskinna* is

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<sup>297</sup> Taylor, 'Sources', p.51.

<sup>298</sup> Bjarni Einarsson, '*Fagrskinna*'.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*; Indrebø, *Fagrskinna*.

<sup>301</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction', p.2.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.* Snorri was more radical with his sources and it has been convincingly argued that *Morkinskinna* relied heavily on oral material. *Morkinskinna* begins just after 1030, covering the same span as *Heimskringla III*. Andersson, *Norwegian Kings*. Its scope is therefore later than Gunnhildr's life, so its influence on *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* will not be discussed here and likewise, the sections of *Fagrskinna* that are influenced by *Jómsvíkinga*.

to be traced back to oral tradition; that is to say only what cannot reasonably be traced back to written narratives or skaldic poems'.<sup>304</sup>

Indrebrø stated that it is a narrative based on written sources with only an occasional recourse to oral traditions.<sup>305</sup> Additionally, *Fagrskinna* evidently relied on immediate vernacular sources, but of those, only *Ágrip* survives in a supposedly reasonable representation of its original; however, its beginning and end are not complete, and the extant version has some discrepancies from those known to Snorri and *Fagrskinna*'s author.<sup>306</sup> *Fagrskinna* also relied on *ÓsT*, which although originally written c.1190 in Latin, now only survives in Icelandic translations.<sup>307</sup> As *Fagrskinna*'s author relied so heavily on these two sources, it is likely that its description of Gunnhildr will follow their negative example. The input and influence of the lost works of the Icelandic twelfth-century historians Sæmundr and Ari on the 'Norwegian synoptics' is a hotly-debated topic which has not evaded a degree of national bias.<sup>308</sup> *Fagrskinna* has also been linked to Sæmundr's lost history, firstly by Gjessing, and subsequently by Indrebø.<sup>309</sup> This has implications here, as it could potentially mean that many, if not all, of the sources that describe Gunnhildr negatively used the lost Icelandic histories as sources. Put simply, the side taken in the scholarly debate about Sæmundr and Ari's influence on the early Norwegian histories dictates whether it is believed that the sources containing negative descriptions of Gunnhildr originated in Iceland or Norway. It is, of course, possible

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<sup>304</sup> Andersson, *Norwegian Kings*, p.65; Indrebø, *Fagrskinna*, p.111; Finlay, 'Introduction', p.2.

<sup>305</sup> Indrebø, *Fagrskinna*.

<sup>306</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction', p.3.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.* Scholars like Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson have argued for the existence of a Norwegian school of historical writing, independent of Icelandic sources, whereas others, such as Ellehøj, Bjarni Guðnason and Lange have argued against. See Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *norske kongesagaer*; Ellehøj, *norrøne historieskrivning*; Bjarni Guðnason, 'Theodoricus'; Lange, *isländisch-norwegischen*.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.* See also Gjessing, 'Sæmund'; Indrebø, *Fagrskinna*.

that these ‘Gunnhildr sources’ used earlier written sources from either Norway or Iceland and then supplemented them with local oral gossip about her, which in turn was embellished and altered by subsequent writers of history, who had their own agenda. Certainly, *Ágrip*’s author made use of Trøndelag local tradition for some parts of his narrative, for example Haraldr *hárfagri*’s infatuation with Snjófriðr, which Snorri repeated almost *verbatim* in *Heimskringla*.<sup>310</sup> *Fagrskinna* does not include this particular episode, but its author seems, nonetheless, to have used *Ágrip* as a source.<sup>311</sup> Almost certainly he used a superior version to that of the single surviving incomplete manuscript, but ‘it is often difficult to distinguish between direct literary influence and derivation from a common source’.<sup>312</sup> Thus *Fagrskinna*’s description of Gunnhildr is likely to follow the one found in *Ágrip*, that she was an evil witch who met her end in a Danish bog. Indeed, Indrebø concluded that *Fagrskinna* used *Ágrip* (alongside other sources) as the framework for the sagas of Hálfðan *svarti*, Haraldr *hárfagri* and Haraldr *gráfeldr*.<sup>313</sup>

According to Finlay, ‘*Fagrskinna* relies almost exclusively on Oddr’s saga as a source for its account of Óláfr Tryggvason’, but without the ‘fantastic elements and inflationary rhetoric’.<sup>314</sup> It has also been demonstrated by Indrebø that *Fagrskinna*’s author did not use *ÓsT*’s Latin original, but a version of the Icelandic translation similar to Stockholm 184to.<sup>315</sup> As the author of *Fagrskinna* used *ÓsT*, it is expected that Gunnhildr’s involvement in Óláfr’s story will be described in similarly negative

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<sup>310</sup> Finlay, ‘Introduction’. There are parallels between the portrayals of Snjófriðr and Gunnhildr, as both are described as possessing Lappish magic in some of the saga material.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8. *i.e.* *Fagrskinna*’s author could have used *Ágrip*, or a different version of it or the source that *Ágrip* used.

<sup>313</sup> Indrebø, *Fagrskinna*; Finlay, ‘Introduction’.

<sup>314</sup> Finlay, ‘Introduction’, p.10.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*; Indrebø, *Fagrskinna*. See also Morgenstern, *altnordischen*.

terms, but if he removed any 'fantastic elements', the description may reflect this and her alleged use of witchcraft may not be evident.

In addition to *Ágrip* and *ÓsT*, along with the more nebulous probability of Sæmundr's lost history, it also remains possible that individual biographies of other kings of Norway, whose existence 'has been postulated at one time or another as sources for the compilations and historical surveys' were also used, although there is little hard evidence.<sup>316</sup> Andersson has written a sceptical rebuttal of these postulations, which he claims are due to the reluctance by philologists to confront the nature of oral sources.<sup>317</sup> Finlay opines the only suggestion with any merit for such a source influencing *Fagrskinna*, 'is that of an independent \**Hákonar saga góða*'.<sup>318</sup> This was suggested by Indrebø to explain the comparatively full description in *Fagrskinna* of Hákon's reign, one which diverges somewhat from *Ágrip*'s version.<sup>319</sup> This is supported by *Egla*, where it is said that: *Hákon konungr fór í þeiri ferð víða um Gautland...svá sem sagt er í sögu hans*.<sup>320</sup> Although scholars have argued against this, including Indrebø himself, the most recent editor, Bjarni Einarsson, has reaffirmed his belief in this saga's existence.<sup>321</sup> He has also suggested that one of *Fagrskinna*'s sources may have been the \**Hlaðajarla saga*, which has already been connected with some of the other sources.<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction', p.11.

<sup>317</sup> Andersson, '(Konungasögur)'.

<sup>318</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction', p.11.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*; Indrebø, *Fagrskinna*. The saga may also have extended to Hákon's brother Eiríkr *blóðøx*.

<sup>320</sup> *Egils*, (ed. Nordal, p.239). 'On that journey King Hákon travelled widely around Gautland...as it is told in his saga'. It should also be noted that, if Jónas Kristjánsson's theory is correct that *Egla* was written after *Heimskringla*, the reference could be to *Hákonar* in *Heimskringla*. Finlay, 'Introduction'; Jónas Kristjánsson, 'Egils'.

<sup>321</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction'; Indrebø, 'Aagrip'; *Fagrskinna*, (ed. Bjarni Einarsson). See also Andersson, '(Konungasögur)'.

<sup>322</sup> Bjarni Einarsson, '*Fagrskinna*'.

That Theodoricus and Saxo used Icelandic sources, and that the 'Norwegian synoptics' may have done so as well, has already been discussed, as has the difficulty in locating the source of antipathy to Gunnhildr, it cannot be known with absolute certainty whether it was due to Icelandic or Norwegian antipathy, or indeed a mixture of them both.<sup>323</sup> *Fagrskinna* is similarly difficult to locate. Andersson finds Indrebø's compromise that the author was Icelandic, but working in the Trøndelag region of Norway, as the 'most plausible solution'.<sup>324</sup> However, Finlay points out that, 'its general orientation suggests its origin in Norway and the only surviving medieval manuscript fragment of the earlier two versions has been located in Niðaróss on palaeographical grounds'.<sup>325</sup> So, *Fagrskinna* was likely written in Norway, possibly in Niðaróss and Andersson has no doubt that the text betrays a strong Norwegian royalist perspective.<sup>326</sup> It is more problematic to identify the author's nationality, the suggestion that he was an Icelander has resulted in the circular argument that Driscoll mocked referring to Finnur Jónsson's outdated insistence that *Ágrip* must have been written by an Icelander.<sup>327</sup> Certainly, the manuscript contains many Norwegian word forms, but as the original text is not extant this is not a definite indication of Norwegian authorship.<sup>328</sup> The debate has continued with no consensus having been reached, although Ármann Jakobsson has more recently taken it to a

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<sup>323</sup> Moreover, if it cannot be ascertained where the source in general originates, it is even harder to know from where the sections that denigrate Gunnhildr derive. They may come from oral sources, in the same way that *Ágrip*'s author included the colourful story about Snjófriðr. This would at least account for the variation between the sources.

<sup>324</sup> Andersson, *Norwegian Kings*, p.66; Indrebø, *Fagrskinna*.

<sup>325</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction', p.15.

<sup>326</sup> Andersson, *Norwegian Kings*. So, the Niðaróss connection is strengthened by another source possibly having originated there.

<sup>327</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction', p.15; Driscoll, 'Introduction'. Much of this argument is centred upon whether non-Icelanders could have interpreted skaldic verse. It has been presumed to have been largely an Icelandic accomplishment, yet Jakobsen has drawn attention to *dróttkvætt* verses carved onto rune sticks found in Bergen as evidence that Norwegians at the time of Hákon Hákonarson collected skaldic poetry and could therefore interpret it and maybe use it in their own narratives. Jakobsen, '*Fagrskinna*-forfatteren'.

<sup>328</sup> Bjarni Einarsson, '*Fagrskinna*'.

new level by questioning the widely held belief that *Fagrskinna*'s author was an apologist for the Norwegian crown, who described hated characters such as Eiríkr *blóðøx* in comparatively flattering terms because they had descended from Haraldr *hárfagri*, a figure whom the author wanted to venerate.<sup>329</sup> This has implications for this thesis, as if the author of *Fagrskinna* wanted to smooth over the bad behaviour of kings descended from Haraldr *hárfagri*, then the treatment of Gunnhildr may reflect this, and be diluted from *Ágrip*'s version. However, the nationality of the author and location of the manuscript can be rendered relatively unimportant when the insight that this selection of closely related texts, all written within a relatively close period, is considered.<sup>330</sup> Turville-Petre draws attention to the lively cross fertilisation of ideas across the two cultures, stating that relations between Iceland and Norway were closer after the foundation of the archbishopric of Niðaróss in 1152, and that books were exchanged between the countries, which were then copied and sometimes revised.<sup>331</sup>

No contemporary manuscript of *Fagrskinna* exists. The manuscript, which was referred to by Þormóður Torfason in the seventeenth century as *Fagrskinna*, was destroyed in the fire of 1728, along with a similar codex.<sup>332</sup> However, copies had been made of both versions in the late-seventeenth century, the longer of which was found in *Fagrskinna*, and a shorter version in the other unnamed codex, the two redactions are now referred to as A and B respectively.<sup>333</sup> Version A exists in three manuscripts and was probably written in south-eastern Norway in the early-

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<sup>329</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, *konungasagna*. Bjarni Einarsson asserts that 'only *Fagrskinna* clearly does its best to smooth over the kings' faults. The guiding principle of the man who compiled the history was admiration of the line of Haraldr *hárfagri*'. *Fagrskinna*, (ed. Bjarni Einarsson, p.cxxii); Finlay, 'Introduction', p.16.

<sup>330</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction'.

<sup>331</sup> Turville-Petre, *Origins*.

<sup>332</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction'.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid*.

fourteenth century; version B has been dated to the mid-thirteenth century.<sup>334</sup> Furthermore, B, although older, has several *lacunae*, which has meant that early editions of the text tended to use A, although Bjarni Einarsson's uses B as the primary copy (UB 371 fol.) due to the exemplar's 'greater antiquity' and fills the *lacunae* using the text from A.<sup>335</sup> Nevertheless, A is an important witness, especially in the sections where NRA 51 and its later copies had *lacunae*.<sup>336</sup> This, of course, has significance for this thesis, as the text all derives from much later copies and some is missing, which means that the information could have been corrupted, but as this is the same for many of the sources, there is little that can be done, but it must be remembered nonetheless.

Gunnhildr is introduced thus: *Eiríkr konungr átti Gunnhildi, er kǫlluð var konungamóðir, dóttir Qzurar (tota eða) lafskeggs norðaf Hálogalandi*.<sup>337</sup> This is interesting because the author uses the Hálogaland connection but furthermore he gives both the Norwegian nickname for her father found in *Ágrip* and the Icelandic one found in *ÓsT*. This signifies the author's (or scribe's) probable reliance on both sources but does not clarify his nationality. Nevertheless, it is further evidence that 'Icelandic sources invariably share *Fagrskinna*'s account of her parentage and negative portrayal of her personality'.<sup>338</sup> The author goes on to state that she: *var fǫgr sjónum ok tígurlig, (ekki mikil kona), djúphuguð, margmálug ok grimmlunduð,*

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<sup>334</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction'. The manuscripts of A are: AM 52 fol., AM 301<sup>4to</sup> and AM 303<sup>4to</sup>. B survives in: UB 371 fol., AM 51 fol. and AM 302<sup>4to</sup>. B also survives in a single vellum leaf from the original exemplar (NRA 51) that had been removed before the fire and it has been suggested on palaeographical grounds that this book was written in or near Trondheim (Niðaróss).

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*; Gade, *Fagrskinna*.

<sup>336</sup> Gade, *Fagrskinna*.

<sup>337</sup> *Fagrskinna*, ch.5, (ed. Bjarni Einarsson, p.74). 'King Eiríkr was married to Gunnhildr, who was called *konungamóðir*, daughter of Qzurr *toti* or *lafskeggr* from Hálogaland in the north'. *Fagrskinna*, ch.5, (ed. Finlay, p.54).

<sup>338</sup> Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, p.54. See also Nordal, 'Gunnhildur'.

*eigi vinholl ærit gjørn til fjár ok landa.*<sup>339</sup> This description is remarkably similar to the one found in *Ágrip*. Both describe her beauty, short stature, and wisdom, which again seems to demonstrate that *Fagrskinna*'s author used *Ágrip* in the sections containing the stories of Haraldr *hárfagri* and Haraldr *gráfeldr*. The author then narrates their rule, stating that although it was short it seemed long enough for the people: *fyrir því at þeir kǫlluðu konung áhlyðrinn, en dróttningu illgjarna.*<sup>340</sup> This description is akin to the other sources. In *Ágrip*, her advice is said to be wicked and that she easily leads her husband to acts of cruelty and oppression and that when he kills his brothers it is: *allra mest af roðum hennar.*<sup>341</sup> The two accounts are alarmingly similar, except that in *Fagrskinna*, Gunnhildr's counsel is not blamed for Eiríkr's murder of his brothers; thus it can be surmised that *Ágrip* (or its source) was used for her description.

In Chapter Seven, a bravura half-stanza appears, apparently in Gunnhildr's own voice.<sup>342</sup> This is fascinating as it represents the only contemporary tenth-century evidence relating to Gunnhildr in existence.<sup>343</sup> The recital of her words either seems to demonstrate that her personality was of a contrary nature, or she had a dry sense of humour; Eiríkr hears news that his brother Hákon drowned at sea on his way back to Norway, causing him to believe that things 'had turned out well, so that

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<sup>339</sup> *Fagrskinna*, ch.5, (ed. Bjarni Einarsson, p.74). 'was a fine-looking and highborn woman, not tall, with a profound mind, talkative and of grim temper, not steadfast in friendship, rather eager for money and lands'. *Fagrskinna*, ch.5, (ed. Finlay, p.55).

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, p.74. 'for they considered that the king was persuadable, and the queen malicious'. *Fagrskinna*, ch.5, (ed. Finlay, p.55).

<sup>341</sup> *Ágrip*, ch.v (ed. Driscoll, p.8). 'mostly as a result of her counsel'. *Ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>342</sup> Straubhaar, *Female Skalds*.

<sup>343</sup> This naturally depends on whether one believes that the verse is in her own voice, as this would presuppose that a Norwegian queen could have knowledge of the complicated *dróttkvætt* metre that was usually the domain of Icelanders. According to Straubhaar, Gunnhildr was not alone, as of the eight earliest pre-Christian *skáldkonur*, three were Norwegian. It should also be remembered that all the surviving skaldic poetry represents a fragmentary portion of the total poetry composed in Scandinavia during the Middle Ages.

he had no need to fear Hákon as a threat to his kingdom'.<sup>344</sup> He presents his information to his queen who responds thus:

*Hq-reið á bak bǫru*  
*borðhesti komn vestan;*  
*skǫrungr léta brim bíta*  
*bǫrð es gramr hefr Fjǫrðu.*<sup>345</sup>

This is undoubtedly bad news for Eiríkr and presumably for Gunnhildr too, yet, according to Straubhaar, she 'seems to delight in delivering in it', although it also should be considered that the author situates the stanza within two possible and very different emotional contexts.<sup>346</sup> Furthermore, Gunnhildr's mind-set is not explicitly described and the verse remains objective, merely relating the facts. However, according to *Fagrskinna*, Gunnhildr knows that Hákon still lives, *af vísendum sínum vissi hón*, so not only is she disloyally delighting in bad news for her husband, she is also capable of using magic.<sup>347</sup> In both *Ágrip* and *ÓsT*, she is described as being able to use magic, so it is likely that *Fagrskinna*'s author used them, or their sources.<sup>348</sup> It is also significant that the verse and surrounding prose appears only in Version A, as there is a *lacuna* in B, thus Eiríkr's reaction and her reply may have been added to A at a later date unless it was originally present in B before the *lacuna* existed.<sup>349</sup> It also remains a possibility that Gunnhildr's words were originally

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<sup>344</sup> *Fagrskinna*, (ed. Finlay, p.56).

<sup>345</sup> *Fagrskinna*, (ed. Bjarni Einarsson, p.75).

Hákon rode the plank-horse from the west,  
on the back of the wave.  
The bold one did not let the tide  
bite his prow when he reached Firðir.

Straubhaar, *Female Skalds*, p.16.

<sup>346</sup> Straubhaar, *Female Skalds*, p.16.

<sup>347</sup> *Fagrskinna*, (ed. Bjarni Einarsson, p.75). 'because of her magic arts'. *Fagrskinna*, (ed. Finlay, p.56).

<sup>348</sup> It is also mentioned in *HarN* and *GD*.

<sup>349</sup> Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, p.56. The *lacuna* starts at the beginning of Chapter 6 and continues until partway through Chapter 12.

expressed with genuine dismay that Hákon survived, and that subsequent writers and opinions towards her have resulted in them being warped to her showing pleasure. Most sources describe her as fiercely protecting the interests of her sons in Norway, so it seems unlikely that she would express genuine pleasure that a rival to her husband has survived and so perhaps her apparent pleasure was due to the contrariness of her nature.

The author then relates how the people of Norway: *óttuðdusk ofríki ok ólög, er á lögðusk við landsbúit, ok kenndu allir Gunnhildi, en sá finnsk engi, er í móti mæli, at hón væri þess valdandi.*<sup>350</sup> This is similar to the other sources, in which she is described as being responsible for Norway's calamities. According to *Fagrskinna*, the *bændr* then turned against Eiríkr and would no longer endure *illræði Gunnhildar*.<sup>351</sup> Yet again, she is described as wicked and blamed for Eiríkr's bad rule and as a result they flee, in this case straight to England to see King Æthelstan, unlike *Ágrip* when they go first to Denmark. Eiríkr is then given 'asylum and authority in Northumbria' by Æthelstan, where he also 'accepted baptism and the true faith'.<sup>352</sup> Gunnhildr's conversion is not mentioned, thus it can be assumed that she remained resolutely pagan. Chapter Eight describes how Eiríkr went raiding and met his death fighting Óláfr, a tributary king of King Játmundr.<sup>353</sup> It is interesting that *Fagrskinna* does not state where Eiríkr fell, but as he was fighting Óláfr, presumably Óláfr Sigtryggson who had ruled in York before Eiríkr and displaced him briefly in 949, it

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<sup>350</sup> *Fagrskinna*, (ed. Bjarni Einarsson, p.76). 'feared the tyranny and lawlessness which had set in among the inhabitants of the land, and they all blamed Gunnhildr; there was no one who argued against her being responsible for that'. *Fagrskinna*, ch.7, (ed. Finlay, p.56).

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.* 'Gunnhildr's wickedness'. *Fagrskinna*, ch.7, (ed. Finlay, p.56).

<sup>352</sup> *Fagrskinna*, (ed. Finlay, p.57). As previously mentioned, A-SC states that the Northumbrians adopted Eiríkr as their ruler in 948, nine years after Æthelstan's death.

<sup>353</sup> *Fagrskinna* erroneously states that Játmundr (Eadmund) is Æthelstan's son, in reality they were brothers.

can be supposed that it was not in Spain as stated in *HN* and *Ágrip*.<sup>354</sup> This is significant, because although *Fagrskinna*'s author relied on *Ágrip*, he chose not to copy its information where Eiríkr died. He instead chose to rely on *Eiríksmál* (of which he quotes nine stanzas), a poem that Gunnhildr had composed about her husband after his death.<sup>355</sup> The author also refers to an unknown poem by Glúmr Geirason, in which Eiríkr's extensive raids were described, including a raid north to Finnmörk, where: *Í þeiri ferð sá hann frysta sinn Gunnhildi. Þá var hún á fóstri ok at námi með Mottul Finnakonungi; sá var allra fjölkunnigastr*.<sup>356</sup> This is interesting, because this information is inserted here, seemingly at an inappropriate point as the author had been describing the events prior to Eiríkr's death, but then backtracks by reporting about Eiríkr's raids in the years before his father died and how he first met Gunnhildr. Here, he apparently uses information from an unknown poem of the court poet Glúmr Geirason, which he does not directly quote. This episode in *Fagrskinna* is part of the *lacuna* in B, where text from A is inserted, therefore it is possible that the scribe of Version A (*i.e.* the later version) could have included it from another source, perhaps even *Heimskringla*, and added it to the text of *Fagrskinna*, and Version B, which is earlier, remained more faithful to the \*original archetype; however, it is also possible that the scribe of NRA 51 deliberately omitted the section from the exemplar he was using and that it was in the original composed in 1225.<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>354</sup> *Fagrskinna*, ch.8, (ed. Finlay, p.58). Only *HN* and *Ágrip* cite Spain. The other Scandinavian historians rely on the authority of *Eiríksmál*, quoted in *Fagrskinna*, which states he died with five other kings on Stainmoor in Westmoreland.

<sup>355</sup> *Fagrskinna*, (ed. Finlay). It is also possible that *Fagrskinna*'s author had a different witness of *Ágrip* to the one that has survived, which contained a slightly different version of events, including place of death of Eiríkr.

<sup>356</sup> *Fagrskinna*, ch.8, (ed. Bjarni Einarsson, p.79). 'on this expedition he saw Gunnhildr for the first time. She was being fostered and educated then with Mottull, king of the Finns (Lapps); he was very skilled in magic'. *Fagrskinna*, ch.8, (ed. Finlay, p.60). Finlay highlights the fact that according to *Skáldatal*, Glúmr Geirason composed for both Eiríkr and his son Haraldr *gráfeldr*, but nothing is known of the poem referred to here.

<sup>357</sup> All of this depends on the *lacunae*, whether they are deliberate omissions on the part of NRA 51's scribe or deliberate additions by the scribe of *Fagrskinna* manuscript, perhaps influenced by *Heimskringla*.

Most importantly, it is the first time that the story of Gunnhildr being fostered by a Lappish king, who is skilled in magic is mentioned in the source material, as this is not cited in *Ágrip*, *ÓsT*, or any of the surviving earlier sources. It could be argued that the author had access to a source that has subsequently been lost, but if this is the case it would seem likely that the story would have been found in the earlier sources, therefore it is probably a later interpolation. There has been an inherent suspicion and fear of the magic and otherness of the far North and Gunnhildr being fostered there is not insignificant.<sup>358</sup>

After Eiríkr's death Játmundr 'became hostile to Gunnhildr and Eiríkr's sons' and subsequently Gunnhildr leaves for Denmark with them and 'got asylum there with Haraldr Gormsson'.<sup>359</sup> The author describes the Battle of Fitjar and how Hákon was 'struck in the arm by an arrow'.<sup>360</sup> Significantly, Gunnhildr's involvement is not mentioned, her witchcraft is explicitly blamed in *Ágrip* and *GD*, and implied in *HarN*. So, even though *Fagrskinna*'s author is not slow to criticise Gunnhildr and refers to her knowledge of witchcraft more than once, he does not take this opportunity to blame Hákon's death on her sorcery; as this occurs in the text in a part that relies on Version A of *Fagrskinna*, it is tempting to postulate that the more negative descriptions of her were added to the text by a later scribe and that the parts from B are more faithful to the \*original archetype, or alternatively that they were deliberately excised from the text by the scribe of B, and therefore that A represents a truer representation of the original. Either way, it is difficult to understand why one text

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<sup>358</sup> This fear of the North is well-attested, see Barraclough, *Northlands*, pp. 42-53 for an excellent analysis.

<sup>359</sup> *Fagrskinna*, ch.8, (ed. Finlay, p.60). In *HN*, Haraldr is her brother, it is possible that her going to him for protection is a hangover from other source material that makes her a Danish princess, but it is included anyway, even though it makes less sense for her identity as a dowager Norwegian queen. The direction of Játmundr's hostility is also ambiguous, as it is difficult to understand whether he was hostile to Gunnhildr and to Eiríkr's sons or whether it means he was hostile just to their sons and not her.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.13, p.72.

with two redactions can have descriptions of her that, both do and do not follow what was written in *Ágrip* and contain an entirely fresh description of being fostered by a Lappish king that is only found in later sources, if they were not subject to scribal interference at some point. The author goes on to describe Gunnhildr's sons' rule: *gørði hallæri mikit um þeira daga, fyrir því at af tók síldfiski ok allt sjófang, korn spilltisk*.<sup>361</sup> This is remarkably similar to *ÓsT*, another of *Fagrskinna*'s sources which states 'there was a great famine and bad harvests'.<sup>362</sup> Both sources also describe, in similar terms, how the sons received baptism in England, but allowed people to be whatever they wanted, Christian or pagan; although *Fagrskinna* states that they 'demolished temples and abolished sacrifice' and that the country dwellers believed that this had angered the gods and caused the famine.<sup>363</sup> In *Ágrip*, the *sultr ok seyra ok hverskyns illr yfirgangr* during the rule of the sons of Gunnhildr are roundly blamed on their mother's counsel, but in *ÓsT* and *Fagrskinna*, the famine is blamed on the sons with no mention of her involvement.<sup>364</sup> Thus, this reflects the likelihood that the author used both *Ágrip* and *ÓsT* for information about Gunnhildr, and that which source he used reflects her portrayal, along with the complicated possibilities of later scribal intervention. Gunnhildr and her sons are forced, twice, to flee from the combined forces of Haraldr Gormsson and Hákon *jarl* to Scotland, which is presumably how *Orkneyinga* fits in with their story.<sup>365</sup> After the Battle of Sogn, which was won by Hákon *jarl*, Gunnhildr and her remaining sons flee for the last time westwards to Scotland and this represents the final time she is mentioned in

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<sup>361</sup> *Fagrskinna*, ch.14, (ed. Bjarni Einarsson, p.98). 'they caused great famine in those times, because herring fishing and all kinds of sea catch ceased, and the grain was spoiled'. *Fagrskinna*, ch.14, (ed. Finlay, p.75-6).

<sup>362</sup> *ÓsT*, ch.1, (ed. Andersson, p.36).

<sup>363</sup> *Fagrskinna*, ch.14, (ed. Finlay, p.75); *ÓsT*, ch.1, (ed. Andersson).

<sup>364</sup> *Ágrip*, (ed. Driscoll, p.19). 'hunger and starvation and injustices of every kind'. *Ibid.*, p.19; *ÓsT*, ch.1, (ed. Andersson); *Fagrskinna*, (ed. Finlay).

<sup>365</sup> *Fagrskinna*, ch.16, (ed. Finlay).

*Fagrskinna*.<sup>366</sup> In *ÓsT*, Gunnhildr's death is not described, and *Fagrskinna* appears to follow that example, rather than *Ágrip* (and *HarN*), which state she was drowned in a Danish bog due to the machinations of Haraldr Gormsson and Hákon jarl.

The findings of the analysis of *Fagrskinna* lead to the conclusion that its author followed the examples set in *Ágrip* and *ÓsT* when describing Gunnhildr. However, it is unclear whether the author used those sources directly, or whether he supplemented them with other sources or indeed the sources that they used. According to scholarly consensus, the author of *Fagrskinna* was less likely to use oral tradition than other Scandinavian historians had, hence much of the information about Gunnhildr must have come from other written sources. The issue is further complicated by the two redactions of the text, both of which are contained in manuscripts no earlier than seventeenth-century copies. Version B, the older of the two, has many *lacunae*, one of which coincides with an entry about Gunnhildr, and so it is possible that this is a factor and that the description of her being fostered by a Lappish king is a later interpolation, perhaps influenced by the similar story in *Heimskringla*. Certainly, for the most part the description of Gunnhildr in *Fagrskinna* follows the precedent set in earlier manuscripts, she is described as an evil, wicked woman who dabbles in witchcraft. However, there are differences, her ignominious end in a bog is not repeated, neither is her direct involvement in the misery of the Norwegian people due to famine, nor her relentless hunt for the infant Óláfr Tryggvason. On a final note, it is interesting that later in *Fagrskinna*, the reign of Queen Álfifa (Ælfgifu of Northampton) and her son Sveinn, is compared directly to that of Gunnhildr and is described similarly: *hón réð mest með konunginum, ok mæltu þat allir, at hón spillti í hvern stað ok fór fyrir þá sök stjórnin illa við landsfólkit,*

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<sup>366</sup> *Fagrskinna*, ch.16, (ed. Finlay).

*ok svá margt stóð af hennar ráðum í Nórøgi, at menn jønuðu þessu ríki við Gunnhildar ǫld, er verst hafði verit áðr í Nórøgi.*<sup>367</sup> So, in 1225, when *Fagrskinna* was composed there had been two particularly terrible times in Norwegian history, and both of them had been during the reigns of young men and their mothers, surely this cannot be a coincidence.

### *Heimskringla*

*Heimskringla* is 'one of the greatest literary achievements of medieval Iceland', covering Norway's history from its legendary beginnings up to the year 1177.<sup>368</sup> It is structured as a series of sixteen sagas, mostly biographical in their focus on a single ruler and constitutes to some extent a compilation from various sources, rather than a wholly new work.<sup>369</sup> The authorship of *Heimskringla* is not referred to in any extant manuscript or within the text itself, but is usually attributed to Snorri.<sup>370</sup> This thesis will follow the example of Whaley and Finlay, and take Snorri as the author, not least because 'he seems better equipped for it than any of his contemporaries by education, background and political experience'.<sup>371</sup>

Snorri made two visits to Norway and was clearly keen to engage the favour of the royal court there.<sup>372</sup> The first visit in 1218 resulted in him being, according to *Íslendinga*, 'unusually honoured by being made a *lendr maðr* at the king's court', he also assisted in averting a Norwegian invasion of Iceland, by promising to persuade

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<sup>367</sup> *Fagrskinna*, ch.35, (ed. Bjarni Einarsson, p.201). 'she decided most things for the king, and everyone said that she did damage in every situation, and for that reason the government was unpopular with the people of the land, and so much ill resulted from her counsels in Norway that people compared this reign with the time of Gunnhildr, which was the worst there had ever been in Norway before that'. *Fagrskinna*, ch.35, (ed. Finlay, p.161). The author seems to have revised his early opinion that the famine was due to the sons of Gunnhildr not Gunnhildr herself.

<sup>368</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction', p.vii.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*; Whaley, *Heimskringla*.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.* This has been questioned by scholars, see Cormack and Boulhosa.

<sup>371</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction', p.viii; Whaley, *Heimskringla*. For an in-depth analysis of Snorri's credentials as author, see Whaley.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*

his countrymen to peacefully accept Norwegian rule.<sup>373</sup> Snorri returned to Norway in 1237 and became embroiled in a rebellion with *jarl* Skúli against the Norwegian king, his involvement eventually ended with his own death, killed by a king's agent in Reykjaholt in 1241.<sup>374</sup> If the reference to *sögubækr* in *Íslendinga* correctly refers to *Heimskringla*, then Snorri must have composed it during the years preceding 1230, when Sturla instigated the making of copies.<sup>375</sup> According to Finlay, 'it is usually assumed that Snorri's first visit to Norway furnished the stimulus for him to begin the work', thus, its composition is generally dated to 1220-1230.<sup>376</sup> Therefore *Heimskringla* was written at approximately the same time as *Fagrskinna*, but the latter is 'conventionally dated a few years earlier, mainly on the grounds of the belief that Snorri made use of *Fagrskinna* for at least part of his work'.<sup>377</sup> Certainly, the two texts hold much in common.<sup>378</sup>

Despite the 'reader's impression of a critical intelligence shaping *Heimskringla*' it is also the result of an established tradition of historical writing in Iceland.<sup>379</sup> Snorri was a wealthy, influential man, who had connections with places of learning like Oddi, facilitating his ability to collect and compare already extant accounts from written sources.<sup>380</sup> This would enable him to compile his history from them, in addition to any snippets he gleaned from oral narratives, including poetry.<sup>381</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction', p.ix.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.* The closest thing to a contemporary reference to *Heimskringla* is in *Íslendinga* when Snorri's nephew Sturla stayed with him at Reykjaholt, where it is stated, that Sturla 'set great store by having *sögubækr* copied out from the books which Snorri had put together', *Icelanders*, ch.79, (ed. Thomas). The word *sögubækr* could be translated as 'saga-books', 'story-books' or 'history-books' and could well refer to *Heimskringla*. Whaley, *Heimskringla*.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, p.ix.

<sup>377</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction' (*Fagrskinna*), p.17. Furthermore, if Snorri was not aware of *Fagrskinna* itself, then it is possible that he used the same sources as *Fagrskinna*'s author.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>379</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction', p.ix.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*

This has led to Andersson's assertion that, '*Heimskringla* is by no means a first formulation, but a final fusion. It is a synthesis in a very narrow, almost editorial sense'.<sup>382</sup> It is important to study *Heimskringla* within its literary context, but this is 'complicated by the fact that some of the sources probably used by Snorri are now lost wholly or in part, and those that survive do so in a form other than that known to Snorri himself'.<sup>383</sup>

Snorri, frustratingly, explicitly acknowledges few prose sources, but in his Prologue he refers to oral reports, 'old stories about those rulers who have held power in the Northern lands and have spoken the Scandinavian language, as I have heard them told by learned men'; and then to genealogies, which may have included Ari's *konunga ævi*.<sup>384</sup> It is noteworthy that Snorri credits Ari with importance, as the first Icelander to write history in the vernacular.<sup>385</sup> Furthermore, he regarded Ari's role 'as the link to events he was recording, through a chain of oral informants whose memory may well have reached back over three generations; the Prologue, therefore, may be attempting, by citing Ari as a source, to sanction the role of oral reports in Snorri's own history'.<sup>386</sup> Indeed, Andersson has recently argued for the importance of oral narratives as a source for *Heimskringla*.<sup>387</sup> Snorri's reliance on Ari is significant because many of the other sources were possibly also reliant on his

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<sup>382</sup> Andersson, 'Snorri', p.12. Hence, Snorri was carefully selecting and editing what he added to his compilation; a process based on at least a century of historical writing in Iceland and before that the preservation of memories through an oral medium.

<sup>383</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction', p.x. This is a common trope for the sources analysed here, and it should be acknowledged that the corpus of Icelandic historical texts continued to evolve after the time in which they were written.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*; *Heimskringla*, Prologue, (ed. Finlay, p.3).

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.* It is possible that Ari's oral informants gave him information about Gunnhildr, passed from generation to generation, down the intervening years.

<sup>387</sup> Andersson, 'Oral Sources'. However, it must be borne in mind that *Heimskringla* was written c.300 years after Gunnhildr lived, and thus there is scope for error and the reports being coloured by personal dislike and rancour. Nonetheless, the importance of cultural memory in a society reliant on the oral *milieu* (before Iceland's conversion in 1000 and the accompanying technology of writing) for the preservation of information should not be underestimated.

lost works, and so the negative portrayals of Gunnhildr may stem back to them. Snorri also acknowledges poetry in his Prologue, and its importance as a source is visible throughout.<sup>388</sup>

Snorri also mentions other sources in the main body of *Heimskringla*, the ones potentially relevant here are: *Skjöldunga*, a legendary history of the earliest kings of Denmark, and *jarlasögurnar*, which resembles a version of *Orkneyinga*, and mentions Gunnhildr.<sup>389</sup> Snorri also used, but did not acknowledge, other works, which fall into two main groups: historical surveys that cover several reigns, and individual biographies of rulers, that are generally hagiographical.<sup>390</sup> The 'Norwegian synoptics' fall into the former category, but the only one of which Snorri made extensive use was the vernacular summary *Ágrip*.<sup>391</sup> This is significant because *Ágrip* contains a particularly negative description of Gunnhildr, so this should also be seen in *Heimskringla*. Snorri's use of *Ágrip* is demonstrated by his adoption 'almost *verbatim* [of] its account of the episode of Haraldr *hárfagri*'s infatuation with the Lappish Snæfríðr'.<sup>392</sup> He also 'clearly knew and used' *ÓsT*, but in a version that differs from those that survive.<sup>393</sup> Snorri also used *Fagrskinna* and *Morkinskinna*.<sup>394</sup> According to Finlay, *Fagrskinna*'s date of composition (c.1225) is so close to that of *Heimskringla* that, 'it has been argued that only the latter parts of *Heimskringla* draw

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<sup>388</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction'. Snorri's technique of relating an event, then substantiating it by citing the skaldic verse of a contemporary poet was not an innovation, as the practice is found in the same form in the earliest of the sources. O'Donoghue, *Skaldic*.

<sup>389</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction'.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xii. This story of a Norwegian king falling under the spell of a Lappish woman, possessed of magical powers has parallels with Gunnhildr's.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xiii. Gunnlaugr Leifsson's Latin life of Óláfr Tryggvason was probably less influential on Snorri, due to its 'overtly hagiographical treatment of Óláfr'.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.* *Morkinskinna* was Snorri's main source for the period 1030-1177, thus irrelevant here.

upon it, but the dependence of both texts on *Morkinskinna* make this difficult to establish'.<sup>395</sup>

*Fagrskinna* evidently does preserve some elements, particularly skaldic verses, that Snorri was either unaware of or chose to exclude, such as *Eiríksmál*.<sup>396</sup> Moreover, Finlay highlights the salient point that, 'material in *Fagrskinna* which is changed or omitted in *Heimskringla* may give us insight into the different tastes or priorities of the two authors, though it sometimes does no more than testify to Snorri's more assured control of his material'.<sup>397</sup> Therefore, it may prove possible, through comparison of the two works' descriptions of Gunnhildr, to ascertain the underlying attitudes of the authors. Despite *Fagrskinna*'s author's royalist sympathies, he still records Gunnhildr's negative aspects: her sorcery and that her rule represented one of the worst times in recorded Norwegian history, but he does not blame her for causing Hákon's death and hounding Óláfr Tryggvason, nor does he mention her death in a bog. In comparison, Snorri's attitude of 'conditional admiration towards the Norwegian monarchy', found in *Heimskringla*, is perhaps a reflection of the ambivalence of his career, in which 'the Norwegian court was both a glamorous magnet and a threat to Iceland's independence'.<sup>398</sup> This could be a metaphor for Gunnhildr herself, a beautiful glamorous woman, who could charm if she wished, but was equally capable of causing death and destruction.

Significantly, the quantity of verse preserved in the narratives of Haraldr *hárfagri* and Hákon *góði* not in *Heimskringla*, but in *Fagrskinna* suggest that Snorri did not make use of this section of *Fagrskinna* for his corresponding sagas in

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<sup>395</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction', p.xii.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*; *Fagrskinna*, ch.8, (ed. Finlay, p.58-9).

<sup>397</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction', p.19.

<sup>398</sup> Whaley, *Heimskringla*, p.39.

*Heimskringla*.<sup>399</sup> This could mean that the episode in *Fagrskinna* that relates Gunnhildr's fostering by the Lappish king, was potentially not a source for Snorri, and that its inclusion in Version A of *Fagrskinna* was a later interpolation by a scribe familiar with the story told in *Heimskringla*. Alternatively, they independently used a common source, which is suggested by differences in their narrative styles.<sup>400</sup> However, the story has not been told in any of the earlier sources that survive, so Snorri and *Fagrskinna*'s author would have had to have access to a different source that has not survived, or an oral narrative. It is worth noting that this inclusion of the Lappish king story and *Eiríksmál* both occur only in Version A, as they coincide with a *lacuna* in B, so it is feasible that Snorri had access to a version that reflects the text from B and not A; *i.e.* both were later interpolations by the scribe who copied A from the \*original archetype. This of course depends on the nature of the *lacunae*, as previously discussed. However, Snorri does include a version of the Lappish king story, so he must have attained this information from elsewhere, perhaps from the common source both works' authors had access to. This would mean that the story was possibly a late interpolation, unless the scribe of B deliberately did not include it in his version, in which case Snorri perhaps did have a text from the A redaction and simply chose not to include *Eiríksmál* and to embellish the Lappish king story for his own reasons.

*Heimskringla*'s earliest surviving manuscript, known as *Kringla*, dates from c.1270 and survives only in a single leaf, but the whole is preserved in seventeenth-century transcripts, there are also incomplete medieval manuscripts.<sup>401</sup> According to

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<sup>399</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction'.

<sup>400</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.* The fourteenth-century manuscripts are AM 39 fol. and *Codex Frisianus*, which are comparatively close to *Kringla*, but another branch of manuscripts comprises those associated with *Jöfraskinna*, a manuscript now lost that is only preserved in paper copies.

Finlay, 'textual agreement among the versions is generally quite close', meaning that later interpolations, *lacunae* and scribal intervention are lesser factors than in *Fagrskinna*, and that many of the manuscripts had associations with Norway.<sup>402</sup> Ásgeir Jónsson's seventeenth-century transcript of *Kringla* is valuable because it represents a manuscript that is relatively close in date to *Heimskringla*'s composition. This presupposes that scribes between the original and *Kringla* did not do much in the way of editing and adding. Nevertheless, it cannot be known with any certainty how much *Kringla* differs from Snorri's authorial intention, but this is a conundrum often posed by manuscripts of this period.

*Heimskringla* introduces Gunnhildr in *Haralds* (she also appears in *Hákonar*, *Gráfeldr*, and *Óláfs*), a section that it has been suggested did not use *Fagrskinna*, but that the two authors may have used a common source, although used independently due to the differences in narrative style.<sup>403</sup> When Eiríkr was returning to Finnmark from a raid: *þá fundu menn hans í gamma einum konu þá, er þeir höfðu enga sét jafnvæna. Hon nefndisk fyrir þeim Gunnhildr ok sagði, at faðir hennar bjó á Hálogalandi, er hét Qzurr toti.*<sup>404</sup> She goes on to say that she has been staying there: "*at nema kunnostu at Finnum tveim, er hér eru fróðastir á morkinni*".<sup>405</sup> This story differs from *Fagrskinna*, where it states that: *í þeiri ferð sá hann frysta sinn Gunnhildi. Þá var hón á fóstri ok at námi með Mottul Finnakonungi; sá var allra fjölkunnigastr.*<sup>406</sup> In *Heimskringla*, her beauty is described in superlative terms, she

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<sup>402</sup> Finlay, 'Introduction', p.xiii.

<sup>403</sup> It is also in this saga that the Snæfríðr story is told, copied from *Ágrip*.

<sup>404</sup> *Haralds*, ch.32, (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, p.135). 'his men found in a Lappish hut a woman whose equal in beauty they had never seen. She told them her name was Gunnhildr and said that her father lived in Hálogaland and was called Qzurr toti (Stub)'. *Haralds*, (*Heimskringla*) ch.32, (ed. Finlay, p.78).

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.* "'in order to learn witchcraft from two Lapps who are the wisest in these forests". *Haralds*, (*Heimskringla*) ch.32, (ed. Finlay, p.78).

<sup>406</sup> *Fagrskinna*, ch.8, (ed. Bjarni Einarsson, p.79). 'on this expedition he saw Gunnhildr for the first time. She was being fostered and educated then with Mottull, king of the Finns (Lapps); he was very skilled in magic'. *Fagrskinna*, ch.8, (ed. Finlay, p.60).

meets Eiríkr's men before she meets Eiríkr himself and her father is named as a Hálogalander called Qzurr *toti* and she is in Finnmörk to learn witchcraft from two Lappish wizards, desirous to marry her. In contrast, *Fagrskinna* makes no mention of her beauty or her father at this point and says she is in Finnmörk to be educated by the king of the Finns, who happens to be skilled in magic. Therefore, her instruction in the magical arts is insinuated not stated as it is in *Heimskringla*. It is possible that Snorri was influenced by *Ágrip*, which describes her beauty, and by *ÓsT* which says that she is Qzurr *toti*'s daughter. In Chapter Five of *Fagrskinna*, her beauty is described, and that she is the daughter of either Qzurr *toti* or *lafskegg* from Hálogaland, and in *Ágrip* she is a beauty and the daughter of Qzurr *lafskegg*. *Fagrskinna* appears to bridge the Norwegian sources that refer to her father as *lafskegg* and the Icelanders who called him *toti*. Essentially the stories in *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna* are similar and their differences in narrative style thus indicate that their authors used the same source but independently. *Heimskringla* contains more detail that is, however, referred to elsewhere in *Fagrskinna*, so it is possible that Snorri used it as a basis and then added extra detail, or that he used their common source which contained more detail that *Fagrskinna*'s author eschewed.<sup>407</sup> However, it is also possible that the story was not in the \*original archetype of *Fagrskinna*, or the version that Snorri had, and that when the scribe of Version A copied the text, he added a shortened version of this story into *Fagrskinna* because he was familiar with it from Snorri and influenced by the trend of supplementing histories with extra information *per* Whaley's theory. The story

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<sup>407</sup> It has been noted that *Fagrskinna* was composed in haste, for further details see Finlay, 'Introduction'; Indrebø, *Fagrskinna*.

appears out of place in *Fagrskinna*, as it is not in chronological sequence, whereas in *Heimskringla* it forms the introduction to Gunnhildr, which seems more natural.<sup>408</sup>

Snorri's tale of Eiríkr's men's first meeting with Gunnhildr does not end there. She tells them that the Lappish wizards are very dangerous and that they must not get in their path; they must instead hide in her hut and then they can all try and kill them.<sup>409</sup> Through equal parts cunning and seduction, Gunnhildr succeeds in persuading the wizards to relax their guard, by enticing them to lie on either side of her with her arms around their necks. Then, using her magical abilities (although only implied) she manages to trap them in two large sealskin sacks, and thereby signals to Eiríkr's men so that they can come and kill the immobilised Lapps.<sup>410</sup> The men then take Gunnhildr to Eiríkr, and they travel south to Hálogaland so that he can ask Qzurr for permission to marry her, to which he assents; then Eiríkr marries Gunnhildr and takes her south.<sup>411</sup> This is a far cry from the sober account in *HN*, and represents instead, medieval antipathy to her, which was driven by Icelandic historians.<sup>412</sup> The detail in Snorri's story is unparalleled in any of the sources examined so far. Either Snorri had access to an incredibly detailed oral narrative, unknown to anyone else, or he used a source that was not known to all but perhaps *Fagrskinna*'s author, or it is his own creation. Both Gunnhildr's beauty and witchcraft are included, but thus far, her cruelty and wickedness are not. Her readiness to help

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<sup>408</sup> This is not the first time in *Fagrskinna* that sections relating to Gunnhildr and her family are inserted seemingly randomly. Cormack draws attention to the sentence: *Þeir eru synir Torf-Einars jarls Arnkell, Erlendr, Þorfinnr hausakljúfr. Sonr Þorfinns, Hávarðr, fekk Ragnhildar, dóttur Eiríks konungs. Fagrskinna*, (ed. Bjarni Einarsson, p.77). 'the sons of Earl Torf-Einarr are Arnkell, Erlendr, Þorfinnr hausakljúfr. Hávarðr, a son of Torf-Einarr, married Ragnhildr, the daughter of King Eiríkr'. This is inserted abruptly and without any introduction. Since both the preceding and following sentences describe the military activities of Eiríkr, it must be assumed that either an account which introduced the *jarl's* family has been omitted, or that the quoted sentence has been interpolated. Cormack, '*Heimskringla*', p.63.

<sup>409</sup> *Haralds, (Heimskringla)*, (ed. Finlay). This implies that Gunnhildr has not been totally corrupted by the wizards and their magic as she has no loyalty to them.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.32.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>412</sup> Driscoll, 'Notes'.

Eiríkr's men suggests that she was perhaps not a willing pupil or that she sought more entertainment than the company of two wizards vying for her hand in marriage and was trapped; which is suggested by her words that the wizards 'have destroyed everyone that has approached here'.<sup>413</sup>

Snorri then goes on to describe how Hálfðan *svarti*, (Eiríkr's brother), met his death: *var þat mál manna, at Gunnhildr konungamóðir hefði keypt at fjölkunnigri konu at gera honum banadrykk*.<sup>414</sup> This poisoned drink motif is common in Old Norse literature, and 'Scandinavian mythology is replete with examples of women preparing poisonous...beverages'.<sup>415</sup> It is interesting that considering Gunnhildr was supposed to possess magical powers and had been learning witchcraft from two powerful Lappish wizards she did not make the poisonous drink herself. It is also significant that Snorri says, 'it is rumoured' which means that the story may not be true, and he may have received the information from an oral source, which affects its reliability.

In the last description of Gunnhildr in *Haralds* it is said that: *Eiríkr var mikill maðr ok fríðr, sterkr ok hreystimaðr mikill, hermaðr mikill ok sigrsæll, ákafamaðr í skapi, grimmr, óþýðr ok fálátr. Gunnhildr, kona hans, var kvinna fegrst, vitr ok margkunnig, glaðmælt ok undirhyggjumaðr mikill ok in grimmasta*.<sup>416</sup> This is remarkably similar to the descriptions in *Fagrskinna* and *Ágrip*, all three sources describe Eiríkr as tall and handsome and Gunnhildr as beautiful, and also list their

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<sup>413</sup> *Haralds*, (*Heimskringla*), ch.32, (ed. Finlay, p.78).

<sup>414</sup> *Haralds*, ch.41, (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, p.149). 'it was rumoured that Gunnhildr *konungamóðir* had bribed a woman skilled in magic to make him a poisoned drink'. *Haralds*, (*Heimskringla*), ch.41, (ed. Finlay, p.86).

<sup>415</sup> Morris, *Sorceress*, p.67.

<sup>416</sup> *Haralds*, ch.43, (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, p.147). 'Eiríkr was a big man and handsome, strong and a very valiant man in temper, fierce, unsociable and reserved. His wife Gunnhildr was the fairest of women, intelligent and of wide knowledge, cheerful in speech and a very deceitful person and the fiercest'. *Haralds*, ch.43, (*Heimskringla*), (ed. Finlay, p.87).

faults as well as their qualities; although *Ágrip* blames his faults on her.<sup>417</sup> Therefore it would seem likely that Snorri received his information from either *Ágrip* or *Fagrskinna* or their sources. Due to the more extensive similarities between *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, but with subtle differences in narrative style, the most likely scenario is that Snorri referenced the same source as *Fagrskinna*'s author but interpreted it slightly differently.

In *Hákonar*, Snorri relates how King Æthelstan granted Eiríkr rule of Northumberland on the proviso that he, Gunnhildr, their children, and all his accompanying men would accept baptism, an offer that he duly accepted.<sup>418</sup> This version is, again, slightly different to that in other sources. It has been said that Eiríkr and his sons received baptism in England, and although it makes sense for her to be included, this is the first time it is explicitly said that Gunnhildr had to be baptised. In other sources her paganism is implied by her association with witchcraft and in *ÓsT* it is recounted that she sacrificed to the gods in order to receive information. This may indicate that Snorri used a different source, or simply that the other sources chose not to include her baptism because it did not tally with their stories of a wicked pagan witch. Snorri relates how Eiríkr met his death in a battle against Englishmen with five other kings, much as is described in *Fagrskinna*, although Snorri does not include *Eiríksmál*. On hearing the news, Gunnhildr and her sons decide they should head north to Orkney, and: 'they gave Eiríkr's daughter Ragnhildr in marriage to Þorfiðr *hausakljúfr*'s son Arnfinnr'.<sup>419</sup> Ragnhildr's marriage is mentioned in *Orkneyinga*, *Mesta*, and briefly in *Fagrskinna* where it states that

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<sup>417</sup> *Ágrip*, (ed. Driscoll); *Fagrskinna*, (ed. Finlay).

<sup>418</sup> *Hákonar*, (*Heimskringla*), ch.3, (ed. Finlay, p.89).

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.10, p.95.

'Ragnhildr was their daughter, who was married in Orkney'.<sup>420</sup> This means that, according to Cormack, '*Fagrskinna* is the only Norwegian work which is aware of the existence and Orkney marriage of Ragnhildr Eiríksdóttir, and it presents this information in isolation from any narrative which might date or locate the event it describes'.<sup>421</sup> In any case it presents the possibility that Snorri had the information from *Fagrskinna*, or its source, or possible from *jarlasögurnar*.

Snorri relates the events of the Battle of Fitjar where Hákon is killed, which in previous sources, except *Fagrskinna*, blamed Gunnhildr's magic. In *Heimskringla*, Snorri says that Hákon was shot in the arm by an arrow: *ok er þat margra manna sagn, at skosveinn Gunnhildar, sá er Kíspingr er nefndr, hljóp fram í bysinum ok kallaði: "gefi rúm konunsbananum" – ok skaut fleininum til Hákonar konungs. En sumir segja, at engi viti, hverr skaut. Má þat vel ok vera, því at orvar ok spjót ok alls konar skotvápn flugu svá þykkt sem drífa*.<sup>422</sup> This makes an interesting point of comparison with the sources that Snorri potentially used for his composition. *ÓsT* does not mention the battle; *Fagrskinna* says that Hákon was struck in the arm by an arrow; and *Ágrip* says that he was hit in the arm by an arrow that no one knows who shot, but then that it was through the sorcery of Gunnhildr that a kitchen boy shouted "make room for the king's banesman" and shot him.<sup>423</sup> It appears that Snorri had

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<sup>420</sup> *Orkneyinga*, (ed. Herman Pálsson and Edwards); *Orkneyinga* (ed. Taylor); *Fagrskinna*, ch.5, (ed. Finlay, p.55). Interestingly, Cormack indicates that the phrase *gíptisk í Orkneyjar* means that Ragnhildr ended up in Orkney, but says nothing about where the wedding actually took place, because the name of the islands is in the accusative, if it had occurred on Orkney itself, the dative rather than the accusative would have been used. Cormack, '*Heimskringla*'; *Fagrskinna*, ch.5, (ed. Bjarni Einarsson, p.74).

<sup>421</sup> Cormack, '*Heimskringla*', p.64-5.

<sup>422</sup> *Hákonar*, ch.31, (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, p.190-191). 'and it was reported by many people that one of Gunnhildr's servants called Kíspingr, ran forward in the turmoil and shouted: "make room for the king's slayer" – and shot the long shaft at King Hákon. But some say that no one knows who shot it. And that may well be, for arrows and spears and all kinds of missiles were flying as thick as snow'. *Hákonar*, ch.31, (*Heimskringla*), (ed. Finlay, p.113-4).

<sup>423</sup> *ÓsT*, (ed. Andersson); *Fagrskinna*, ch.13, (ed. Finlay, p.72); *Ágrip*, ch.vi, (ed. Driscoll, p.15).

his description of events from *Ágrip* (or a version of it that no longer survives) as it is most similar. However, there are differences, meaning that either Snorri made his own editorial decisions and did not include the accusations of witchcraft or that the version of *Ágrip* to which he referred also did not include them. From Snorri's phraseology, it is equally likely that he supplemented his use of written sources with oral narratives, as he narrates that: *er þat margra manna sǫgn* and *sumir segja*. The similarity of Gunnhildr's servant in *Heimskringla* and Gunnhildr's kitchen boy in *Ágrip* is particularly striking, and surely must point to them having the same source in common. It is also noteworthy that Snorri's description of Gunnhildr thus far is not as negative as previous sources.

In *Gráfeldar*, it is said that: *Gunnhildr, móðir þeira, hafði mjök landráð með þeim. Hon var þá kǫlluð konungamóðir.*<sup>424</sup> This is significant because it seems to agree, at least in part, with the earlier sources that say she was responsible for counselling her husband and sons, and thus had a position of power. Clearly, Snorri, like other Icelanders, did not have an issue with powerful women who actively engaged in the affairs of their menfolk, to him 'it seems quite acceptable and natural that a woman can be a dangerous enemy and she is allowed to operate on the same footing with men'.<sup>425</sup> Unlike in *Ágrip*, Gunnhildr is not blamed for the harsh rule of her sons and husband. Her active role is mentioned again thus: *Gunnhildr konungamóðir ok synir hennar váru opt á tali ok málstefnum ok réðu landráðum.*<sup>426</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> *Gráfeldar*, ch.1, (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, p.198). 'their mother Gunnhildr shared a large part of the government of the country with them. She was now called Mother of Kings'. *Gráfeldar*, (*Heimskringla*), ch.1, (ed. Finlay, p.120). It is likely that Snorri knew this title of *konungamóðir* from *Ágrip* and *Fagrskinna*.

<sup>425</sup> Strand, '*Gesta Danorum*'; Strand, 'Women in *Gesta*', p.141. It is in the works of Snorri that active women like those from *GD* are found, they influence events and are given considerable historical significance. Snorri seems to find nothing remarkable about the independence, will-power and energy of his female characters.

<sup>426</sup> *Gráfeldar*, ch.3, (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, p.204). 'Gunnhildr Mother of Kings and her sons often held conversations and conferences and managed the government of the country'. *Gráfeldar*, (*Heimskringla*), ch.3, (ed. Finlay, p.124).

Her ambition for her sons is demonstrated by her wondering why they go abroad raiding, but let a *jarl* within the country take their patrimony.<sup>427</sup> In this, Gunnhildr seems to follow the traditional role of a *hetzerin*, inciting her men to action. Haraldr *gráfeldr*'s response is cautious and persuades his mother to adopt a different course of action, a 'smaller enterprise', on which she will accompany him, so that they can 'all together try what can be done'.<sup>428</sup> This further demonstrates her active role in her son's rule and that they worked together, but ultimately he made the final decision. It is then described how through the machinations of Haraldr and Gunnhildr, *jarl* Sigurðr's brother Grijótgarðr is persuaded to spy on him and tell them when would be the best time to attack.<sup>429</sup> Finally, Snorri relates Gunnhildr's relationship with *jarl* Hákon, that: *gerðisk kærleikr mikill með þeim Hákonni jarli ok Gunnhildi, en stundum beittusk þau vélræðum*.<sup>430</sup> This is interesting because this is the first time it is insinuated that she pursues intimate relationships with men, which is a more common feature in the later sagas, such as *Njála*, although her difficult relationship with Hákon is mentioned in *Ágrip*.<sup>431</sup> So it would appear that Snorri was influenced by *Ágrip*, but he adds a new twist, that the two shared intimacies. The latter is possibly influenced by *Jómsvíkinga*, but this is complicated by variations between manuscripts and its dating.<sup>432</sup>

In *Óláfs*, Gunnhildr is determined to find Ástríðr and her son Óláfr, and she sends men out to find them, led by Hákon who was an influential friend of

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<sup>427</sup> *Gráfeldar*, (*Heimskringla*), ch.3, (ed. Finlay).

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.3, p.125.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>430</sup> *Gráfeldar*, ch.6, (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, p.211). 'there developed great intimacy between *jarl* Hákon and Gunnhildr, though sometimes they schemed deceitfully against each other'. *Gráfeldar*, (*Heimskringla*), ch.6, (ed. Finlay, p.129).

<sup>431</sup> *Ágrip*, (ed. Driscoll).

<sup>432</sup> See section on *Jómsvíkinga*.

Gunnhildr.<sup>433</sup> Hákon looks everywhere for Ástríðr and her son, following them as far as Sweden but is unable to bring Óláfr back to Gunnhildr, which is how the story is also told in *ÓsT* and it is likely that Snorri used it as a source for *Óláfs*. In the remainder of the saga, Snorri describes how Gunnhildr and her sons were defeated by Hákon *jarl* and Haraldr Gormsson, concluding with the statement that: 'now all Eiríkr and Gunnhildr's sons were dead'.<sup>434</sup> Interestingly, Snorri decides not to include the story of Gunnhildr's death from *Ágrip*, in fact, he follows the example of *Fagrskinna*, which simply does not mention her death at all.

Snorri's portrayal of Gunnhildr is based to a certain extent on information gleaned from *Ágrip* and *ÓsT*, or versions that no longer survive. However, he also used *Fagrskinna* and seems to follow the portrayal favoured by its author. Snorri does not describe her death, nor does he blame the bad rule of her sons and husband on her and he omits the accusations that she killed King Hákon with witchcraft and sacrificed to the gods and scryed to find Óláfr's whereabouts. His description appears more balanced, and less negative; although does include new elements, such as her amorous relationship with Hákon *jarl* and her sojourn with Lappish wizards.

### *Jómsvíkinga saga*

Gunnhildr is mentioned in *Jómsvíkinga*, a saga that has invited criticism of its historicity by scholars. Blake has stated that the 'saga is of no historical worth' and is 'the culmination of imaginative story-telling based on the minimum of historical

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<sup>433</sup> *Óláfs*, (*Heimskringla*), ch.3, (ed. Finlay, p.138). In *ÓsT* and *HarN*, this Hákon is none other than Hákon *jarl* Sigurðarson.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.87, p.209.

fact'.<sup>435</sup> Furthermore, Andersson has described it as a hybrid of a *konungasaga* and a *fornaldarsaga*.<sup>436</sup> Finlay and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir, in the latest translation of *Jómsvíkinga*, are less scathing, stating that it 'occupies contested generic ground between history and fiction; it contains material relevant to, and used as a source in, early historical texts, but is full of lively fictional motifs'.<sup>437</sup> Indeed, many of *Jómsvíkinga*'s characters are historical and are found in other sources which are usually accepted as histories.<sup>438</sup> It was written in the early-thirteenth century, perhaps as early as 1200, making it one of the oldest saga texts.<sup>439</sup> According to Finlay, 'discussions of genre in Old Norse literature have largely passed *Jómsvíkinga* by'; however, the concept of genre in Old Norse texts is a modern one, and it is increasingly apparent that the categories of saga are fluid.<sup>440</sup> Hence, *konungasögur*, contain not only historical material, but also legendary and hagiographical elements; similarly *Íslendingasögur*, although usually consigned to the realms of fiction, do intersect with information contained in *konungasögur*.<sup>441</sup> As such, O'Connor has stated that the medieval idea of history was all encompassing, and it was 'acceptable for a historian to take a bare narrative and fill it out with dramatic details'.<sup>442</sup> This is a salient point as many of the so-called historical sagas that contain references to Gunnhildr fit O'Connor's description, a narrative padded out to fit the author's requirements.

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<sup>435</sup> Blake, 'Introduction', p.vii.

<sup>436</sup> Andersson, '(*Konungasögur*)', p.215.

<sup>437</sup> Finlay and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir, 'Introduction', p.1. This is common to many early texts.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1. These include the 'Norwegian synoptics', *Fagrskinna*, and *Heimskringla*.

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1. In this thesis it is placed chronologically after *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* because of its complicated textual transmission but it should be considered as an earlier text.

<sup>440</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>442</sup> O'Connor, 'Truth', p.366.

*Jómsvíkinga* itself 'has an intricate two-way relationship with the *konungasögur*', a version of it existed by 1200 and narrative sections from it were added into both *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna*.<sup>443</sup> This is further complicated by later extant versions of *Jómsvíkinga* being themselves influenced by *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna*.<sup>444</sup> *Jómsvíkinga*'s relationship with these two *konungasögur* suggests that descriptions of Gunnhildr in it would be closely connected to those in the others, however, 'the story of Gunnhildr in *Jómsvíkinga* also contradicts other sources'.<sup>445</sup> Before a full analysis of her involvement in *Jómsvíkinga* can be undertaken, it is first necessary to appreciate the complicated textual transmission of the saga, as this affects how Gunnhildr fits into the different versions of it and how the saga fits into the wider context of the other relevant sources.

The saga survives in four vellum medieval manuscripts and in a seventeenth-century Latin translation by Arngrímur *lærði* Jónsson that had probably been made from a lost medieval manuscript.<sup>446</sup> The four manuscripts are: AM 291<sup>4to</sup>, Holm.Perg.7<sup>4to</sup>, *Flateyjarbók* and AM 510<sup>4to</sup>; for the purposes of this thesis, focus will be directed to the first two.<sup>447</sup> AM 291<sup>4to</sup> is the oldest of the extant manuscripts and was written c.1300, although Foote believes that it could be a copy of an exemplar written c.1220-30.<sup>448</sup> The manuscript was definitely written in Iceland, but little else is known of it; it contains *lacunae*, which are usually filled by corresponding sections

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<sup>443</sup> Finlay, '*Jómsvíkinga*', p.65.

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>445</sup> Finlay and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir, 'Introduction', p.8.

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>447</sup> *Ibid.* For full details of the manuscripts see Blake, 'Introduction'; Finlay and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir, 'Introduction'.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.* See also Foote, who studied the manuscript's linguistic features, basing his conclusions on archaic features found within it. Foote, 'Notes'.

from *Flateyjarbók*, which has the text closest to AM 291<sup>4to</sup>.<sup>449</sup> Finlay's translation of 2018 is the only English translation of the version found in AM 291<sup>4to</sup>, previous translations by Hollander and Blake have translated the version of the saga found in the shortened text from Holm.Perg.7<sup>4to</sup>. The latter is also an Icelandic vellum manuscript, but written later, in the early-fourteenth century, it 'represents the same redaction of the saga as AM 291<sup>4to</sup> but has been compressed; although considerably shorter, it also contains interpolations from a lost source'.<sup>450</sup> These two manuscripts are important here because they contain different versions of the same saga, particularly relevant because the stories about Gunnhildr differ considerably. This represents the difficulty in studying texts and manuscripts of the period, not only because of the unevenness of preservation, but because often there are different versions of stories as they were fluid and dynamic; and were open to different interpretations each time they were copied and retold. So, one version of a saga containing Gunnhildr could survive, but others may have been written or told containing different truths that have not. This is reflected by the two different stories of Gunnhildr in the two versions of *Jómsvíkinga*; if AM 291<sup>4to</sup> had not survived it would have significantly altered modern understanding of her involvement.

In Holm.Perg.7<sup>4to</sup>, Gunnhildr is barely mentioned, it is said that: *réð fyrir Nóregi Haraldr gráfeldr ok Gunnhildr móðir hans*.<sup>451</sup> Again, there seems to be no distinction between them, both rule, demonstrating that she was a powerful woman.<sup>452</sup> Then, finally, the author describes the plot between Haraldr Gormsson

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<sup>449</sup> Finlay and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir, 'Introduction'. No copies of AM 291<sup>4to</sup> exist, only the original. It has been edited three times and translated into English once.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>451</sup> *Jómsvíkinga*, ch.6, (ed. Blake, p.7). 'Norway was ruled by Haraldr *gráfeldr* and Gunnhildr, his mother'. *Jomsvikings*, ch.6, (ed. Blake, p.7).

<sup>452</sup> Use of the plural form of the Old Norse strong verb *ráða* indicates that they both ruled, not just Haraldr.

and Hákon *jarl* to overthrow Haraldr *gráfeldr*. *þenna vetr settu þeir Haraldr konugr Gormsson ok Hákon jarl vélræði um Harald, Nóregs konung, ok móður Haralds, Gunnhildi*.<sup>453</sup> These two snippets represent the only references to her in the saga, and they could almost be overlooked. This version of events is told in a manuscript from the early-fourteenth century, so c.100 years after the saga was originally composed, and it clearly demonstrates the different transmission of the saga. The scribe of Holm.Perg.7<sup>4to</sup> would have had access to sources not extant when *Jómsvíkinga* was first composed, as noted by Finlay who has charted the complexities of *Jómsvíkinga*'s relationship with *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, but here the scribe decided to compress Gunnhildr's involvement to just two lines. The scribe's access to later texts is evidenced by the reference to *Konungabók*, which could be a version of *Heimskringla* or *Mesta*, both of which were known to and used by the scribe of Holm.Perg.7<sup>4to</sup>.<sup>454</sup>

Scholars have argued which version of the saga represents the oldest text and is hence closest to the original, and their conclusions usually assume that the oldest is also the best text.<sup>455</sup> The variation in arguments reflects the complexity of the saga's textual tradition, which of course, affects the dating of the saga.<sup>456</sup> Finlay

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<sup>453</sup> *Jómsvíkinga*, ch.6, (ed. Blake, p.8). 'during the winter King Haraldr Gormsson and Earl Hákon planned treachery against Haraldr, king of Norway, and his mother Gunnhildr'. *Jomsvikings*, ch.6, (ed. Blake, p.8).

<sup>454</sup> *Jomsvikings*, (ed. Blake). It is noteworthy that when Haraldr succumbed to their plot and was slain *sem segir í Konungabók* ('as is told in the *Konungabók*'), it bears a remarkable similarity to how the same story is recounted in *Knýtlinga*, as both unequivocally state he was killed as a result of treachery at Limafjörðr and that it was recorded in the *Konungabók*. *Knýtlinga*, ch.1 (ed. Edwards and Hermann Pálsson, p.23). This highlights the way in which authors/scribes used information from other manuscripts and assimilated it into their work.

<sup>455</sup> Finlay and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir, 'Introduction'. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Blake and Ólafur Halldórsson all reach the same conclusion that AM 291<sup>4to</sup>, the oldest manuscript also contains the oldest version. However, Hollander and Finnur Jónsson maintain that Holm.Perg.7<sup>4to</sup> contains the oldest and best version, despite its lateness. Others believe that Arngrímur's Latin translation is a good representation of the oldest version. See also Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, *norske kongesagaer*; Blake, 'Introduction'; Ólafur Halldórsson, 'Inngangur'; Hollander, '*Jómsvíkingasaga*'; Finnur Jónsson, *oldnorske og oldislandske*; Gjessing, 'Forord'; Storm, '*Jómsvíkingasaga*'.

<sup>456</sup> *Ibid.*

and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir state that by combining all arguments it can be concluded that 'the saga existed in the first decades of the thirteenth century, but that characters and events had already made their mark on written tradition in the twelfth century', and this can certainly be said of Gunnhildr.<sup>457</sup> Nonetheless, it is likely that the author of *Jómsvíkinga*, or indeed the scribes of AM 291<sup>4to</sup> and Holm.Perg.7<sup>4to</sup> were not averse to changing details to fit their own requirements. This could potentially mean that accounts of Gunnhildr will follow the examples set in the 'Norwegian synoptics', *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, but with scope for the author/scribe's own spin; this has already been seen with Holm.Perg.7<sup>4to</sup>. So, focus will be directed towards AM 291<sup>4to</sup>, because although later, it represents a fuller account of Gunnhildr.

At the beginning of Chapter Four of *Jómsvíkinga* as told in AM 291<sup>4to</sup>, it is said that: *Í þenna tíma réð fyrir Noregi Haraldur gráfeldur og móðir hans, Gunnhildur, er kölluð var konungamóðir.*<sup>458</sup> The saga's account of Gunnhildr and her son commences after she has been widowed and again refers to mother and son ruling together, very similar to the version in Holm.Perg.7<sup>4to</sup>, with the addition of Gunnhildr's title of *konungamóðir*. It then goes on to describe Haraldr Gormsson and Hákon jarl's plot to overthrow Haraldr gráfeldr, but with the added detail of their treacherous plot to marry Gunnhildr to Haraldr Gormsson.<sup>459</sup> Hákon says to Haraldr: "*attú ætlar að biðja Gunnhildar móður hans, en eg kann skaplyndi hennar að því, þótt hún sé nakkvað aldri orpin, að hún mun þá mesta stund á leggja að fýsa son sinn fararinnar,*

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<sup>457</sup> Finlay and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir, 'Introduction', p.29.

<sup>458</sup> *Jómsvíkinga*, (ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, p.31). Note this version uses modern spelling not normalized Old Norse. 'at that time there ruled over Norway Haraldr gráfeldr and his mother Gunnhildr, who was called *konungamóðir*'. *Jómsvíkinga*, (ed. Finlay and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir, p.77).

<sup>459</sup> *Jómsvíkinga*, (ed. Finlay and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir, p.79).

*ef þetta liggur við, þvíáð lengi hefir hún þótt nökkvat vergjörn*".<sup>460</sup> This is significant for several reasons, firstly there is an assumption that Haraldr will do as his mother urges, tacitly admitting that she is an influential and powerful woman; secondly because this plan of marriage is only mentioned in two other sources, *HarN* and *Ágrip*, and thirdly because there is also an insinuation that Hákon and Gunnhildr have a history, which is alluded to in *Heimskringla*. However, of the three sources that describe Haraldr and Hákon's treachery, only this version of *Jómsvíkinga* describes Gunnhildr as *vergjörn* ('a man-eater'). In contrast, *HarN* states that 'she had no intention of seeking young men to marry', the opposite of her being *vergjörn*.<sup>461</sup> The later *Íslendingasögur* also describe her relationships with men, in varying degrees of salaciousness, but along with *Jómsvíkinga*, they represent the only sources that do. Indeed, her sexuality is downplayed in Norwegian and Icelandic historiography 'while her political role is foregrounded, indicating that her lustfulness is a fictional trope'.<sup>462</sup> This is complicated, and it is difficult to ascertain which source relied on which for information. Chronologically, *Jómsvíkinga* was composed before the *Íslendingasögur*, but the extant manuscripts that preserve it, were all written after them. So, it is possible that the author of *Jómsvíkinga* (if AM 291<sub>4to</sub> represents the original) had knowledge of *HarN* and/or *Ágrip*, but then the scribe of AM 291<sub>4to</sub> was aware of her later incarnation as a nymphomaniac and decided to add it to his version. However, it is also possible that Gunnhildr's reputation as *vergjörn* predated *Íslendingasögur* and that the author of *Jómsvíkinga* was already aware of it, although this would mean that the authors of *Fagrskinna*

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<sup>460</sup> *Jómsvíkinga*, (ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, p.35). "'you must also have alongside the message, that you intend to ask to marry his mother Gunnhildr, but I know her temperament in these matters, that though she is somewhat advanced in age, she will go to great lengths to urge her son to the journey if this depends on it, for she has long appeared something of a man-eater'". *Jómsvíkinga*, (ed. Finlay and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir, p.79).

<sup>461</sup> *HarN*, ch.6, (eds. McDougall and McDougall, p.9).

<sup>462</sup> Larrington, 'Queens', p.509.

and *Heimskringla* either had no knowledge of the reputation or deliberately omitted it. As the later *Íslendingasögur* all include variations on a theme of her being *vergjörn* and *Jómsvíkinga* is the only other extant source that mentions it, it seems more likely that AM 291<sup>4to</sup> was influenced by *Íslendingasögur*, rather than it featuring in the original version of the saga and then omitted from intervening texts. Finlay and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir draw attention to the improbability of the marriage proposal, as according to *HN*, she was actually Haraldr's sister and they state that 'it is hard to say how this discrepancy came about and which source is more accurate'.<sup>463</sup>

Haraldr Gormsson's messengers relate the proposal to Haraldr *gráfeldr* and: *og gátu fyrir Gunnhildi um bónorðið, að Haraldur konungur Gormsson mundi biðja hennar.*<sup>464</sup> As Hákon predicted, she eagerly accepts it, stating: "*að dvala ekki því að eg mun hafa landráð meðan*".<sup>465</sup> So, not only does Gunnhildr fall for their treachery, but it is clear from the text that she will rule in her son's place while he is away, further evidence of her power and influence. The narrative then describes how Haraldr fell in battle at Háls on Limafjörður and that Hákon travelled to see Gunnhildr to break the news, duplicitly telling her that by killing Gull-Haraldr, he has avenged her son's death.<sup>466</sup> Hákon then tells her that Haraldr Gormsson wants her to have an honourable attendance when she leaves the country, but this is part of their heinous plan to immediately kill her after she falls into their trap.<sup>467</sup> The author then calls her *vergjörn* for a second time, clearly interpreting her eagerness to travel to

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<sup>463</sup> Finlay and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir, 'Introduction', p.8.

<sup>464</sup> *Jómsvíkinga*, ch.4, (ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, p.37). 'spoke before Gunnhildr of the proposal that King Haraldr Gormsson meant to ask to marry her'. *Jómsvíkinga*, ch.4, (ed. Finlay and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir, p.80).

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.4, p.37. "'that the journey should not be delayed, because I will have rule of the land meanwhile'". *Jómsvíkinga*, (ed. Finlay and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir, p.80). The use of the personal pronoun *ég* (Old Norse *ek*) 'I' is key as it definitively states that Gunnhildr will rule in place of her son.

<sup>466</sup> *Jómsvíkinga*, (ed. Finlay and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir). In *Ágrip*, Haraldr is killed before the plot to marry her to Haraldr Gormsson is mentioned.

<sup>467</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.5.

Denmark as evidence of her nymphomania.<sup>468</sup> When she reaches Denmark: *lætur Haraldur aka vögnum í mót henni og liði hennar, og er hún þegar sett í einn virðilegan vagn, og sögðu menn henni, að dýrleg veizla var búin í móti henni að konungs.*<sup>469</sup> This is clearly an attempt to lull her into a false sense of security, it also throws into relief their treachery, by juxtaposing her comfort next to the wickedness of their plan. It is also interesting because it bears comparison with the account in *Ágrip*, in which she started her journey in luxury.<sup>470</sup> The climax of the plot is recounted thus: *þá komu þeir eigi að höll konungs, heldur var hitt, að eitt fen mikið varð fyrir þeim, og tóku þeir Gunnhildi höndum og hófu hana úr vagninum og breyttu nokkuð...stóran að hálsi...að höfði henni, köstuðu síðan út á fenið og drekktu henni þar, og lét hún svo líf sitt, - og heitir þar síðan Gunnhildarmýrr.*<sup>471</sup> This harrowing story of betrayal is also recounted in *HarN* and *Ágrip*, but with less detail.<sup>472</sup>

So, AM 291<sup>4to</sup>'s version of *Jómsvíkinga*, *HarN* and *Ágrip* all describe the treacherous plot and her murder in a bog, but only *Jómsvíkinga* contains references to her being *vergjörn* and describes her death in relative detail. *Jómsvíkinga* also neglects to mention any of the adjectives associated with Gunnhildr from the other sources; her beauty, witchiness and cruelty. It is possible that the original version of

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<sup>468</sup> *Jómsvíkinga*, (ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, p.42). Zoëga translates *vergjörn* as 'mad after men'. Zoëga, *Dictionary*, p.484. The use of the word is interesting, it also appears in two eddic poems (*Lokasenna* and *Þrymskviða*) in which it is used to derogatorily describe goddesses Frigg and Freyja. *Edda*, (ed. Neckel). *Vergjörn* literally means 'willing slip/case/cover', which is perhaps similar to how in Latin *vagina* 'sheath' comes to mean female genitalia.

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.5, p.42. 'Haraldr has wagons driven to meet her and her company, and she is at once set in an imposing wagon, and people told her that a fine feast was prepared for her at the king's house'. *Jómsvíkinga*, (ed. Finlay and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir, p.82).

<sup>470</sup> *Ágrip*. ch.xi, (ed. Driscoll, p.21).

<sup>471</sup> *Jómsvíkinga*, ch.5, (ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, p.42). 'they did not come to the king's hall; it was rather that a great bog appeared before them, and they laid hands on Gunnhildr and dragged her out of the wagon and behaved somewhat...large [to the neck]...[to her head, cast] then out into the fen and drowned her there, and so she lost her life – and that has since been called *Gunnhildarmýrr* (Gunnhildr's marsh)'. *Jómsvíkinga*, ch.5, (ed. Finlay and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir, p.82). The editors note that 'the text at this point is difficult to read, and a line and a half is missing'. Finlay and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir, 'Notes', p.161.

<sup>472</sup> *HarN*, (eds. McDougall and McDougall, p.9); *Ágrip*, ch.xi, (ed. Driscoll, p.21).

*Jómsvíkinga* described the plots and her death *per* the 'Norwegian synoptics' and then the scribe of AM 291<sub>4to</sub>, influenced by her portrayals in *Íslendingasögur*, decided to embellish his version with her being *vergjörn*. This hypothesis, however, is debatable, as it is also possible that *Íslendingasögur* were influenced by an earlier version of the saga, which already described Gunnhildr's sexual proclivities, although if this is the case, it does not account for why the texts in between, *i.e.* *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, ignore it. Whatever the answer to this complex and challenging question, it is evident that Gunnhildr, if the account has any veracity or historicity, was a powerful woman who influenced her son and was capable of ruling in his absence. *Jómsvíkinga* also highlights the fluidity of the sagas, one original version may exist, but it can be revised by subsequent scribes and the texts that survive may represent only one version, hence Holm.Perg.7<sub>4to</sub> is a much shorter version than perhaps originally existed, and if it had been the only version to survive then the modern reader would have a different perception of the saga.<sup>473</sup>

### *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar en Mesta*

*Mesta* was probably composed in the early-fourteenth century, it survives in many manuscript copies, none of which are earlier than c.1400.<sup>474</sup> The compiler, according to Ólafur Halldórsson, 'gathered by far the greatest part of the text from written works, sometimes copying them word for word, apart from common copyist's errors, sometimes changing the wording, sometimes adding to it, sometimes shortening or merely summarising it, but there is precious little which appears to

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<sup>473</sup> When the term "author" is used in the context of medieval literature it is worth noting that the concept of authorship has changed since the Middle Ages. Most medieval Icelandic texts' authors are unknown, so the "author" of a text may not be one specific individual. The copyright of texts is a modern notion, and medieval texts were constantly in flux. Finlay and Þordís Jóhannesdóttir, 'Notes'.

<sup>474</sup> Abram, 'Religious Experience'. For a full discussion on *Mesta*'s textual tradition see Ólafur Halldórsson, *Mesta*, vol.3, pp.xvii-cccl.

have been original writing'.<sup>475</sup> It is indebted to the first third of *Heimskringla*, but this theory has been challenged by Sveinbjörn Rafnsson who argues that Snorri's influence upon *Mesta* has been exaggerated and the similarities between the text reflect their shared use of older sources.<sup>476</sup> Snorri used *ÓsT* and to a lesser extent Gunnlaugr Leifsson's lost biography, so it is possible that *Mesta*'s compiler had access to these texts, as well as others. *Mesta* is included with *konungasögur*, yet it is to some extent 'generically ambiguous', it is neither *Íslendingasaga* nor *konungasaga*: as it 'includes material drawn from sources that are conventionally assigned to both categories'.<sup>477</sup> This fluidity of genre is exemplified by the saga's inclusion of excerpts from *Íslendingasögur*, such as parts of *Laxdæla* and a redaction of *Hallfreðar*, both discussed later. So, it can be assumed that as *Mesta*'s compiler made extensive use of *Heimskringla*, or at least the same sources as Snorri had used, its portrayal of Gunnhildr should be like those already found in the previous sources.

Gunnhildr is introduced in *Mesta* in much the same way as she is in *Heimskringla*, although not *verbatim*, how Eiríkr returned to Finnmörk and: *menn hans igamma einum konu þa er þeir hófðu enga sieð iafn friða. Hun nefndiz fyrir þeim Gunnhilldr*.<sup>478</sup> She goes on to describe herself as the daughter of Hálogalander Qzurr *toti*, and that she was there to learn sorcery from two Finnish wizards who were both in love with her.<sup>479</sup> What follows is the story of how Gunnhildr outwits

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<sup>475</sup> Ólafur Halldórsson, *Snorri*, p.v.

<sup>476</sup> Abram, 'Religious Experience'. See Ólafur Halldórsson, *Snorri*; Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, *Óláfs sögur* for more details. Ólafur Halldórsson states that *Mesta*'s main source was *Heimskringla* in a manuscript closely related to *Jöfraskinna*. Ólafur Halldórsson, 'Óláfs'.

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*, p.116.

<sup>478</sup> *Mesta*, ch.3, (ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, p.8). 'his men found in a Finnish dwelling a woman more beautiful than any they had ever before seen. She called herself Gunnhildr'. *Mesta*, ch.3, (ed. Sephton, p.6).

<sup>479</sup> *Mesta*, ch.3, (ed. Sephton).

those wizards, told in more detail, but essentially in the same way as in *Heimskringla*. Gunnhildr is taken to Eiríkr and just as in *Heimskringla*, they travel to Hálogaland, where she is given in marriage to him after Qzurr's permission had been sought, and then they travel south.<sup>480</sup> Thus far, the description of Gunnhildr remains faithful to the one in *Heimskringla*, which is unsurprising given the connection between the two texts. Halfdan *svarti*'s death is recounted thus: *ok var þat mal manna at G(unnhilldr) konunga mopir hefði keypt at fiolkunnigri kono. at gera honum bana drykk.*<sup>481</sup> This is again strikingly like the story from *Heimskringla*. Snorri uses the phrase 'it is rumoured' to introduce the anecdote, whereas *Mesta*'s compiler chooses to say, 'common report said', thus both acknowledge that the story may be fictitious.

Gunnhildr, as in other sources, is described in terms of her physical appearance, saying that she: *var kvena uænst. vitr ok marg kunnigh. gladmælt ok undir hygiu maðr mikill ok hin grimmazta.*<sup>482</sup> She is a contrary character, possessing both good and bad traits, a description echoed in *Heimskringla*. Gunnhildr and her sons hear of Eiríkr's death, 'after plundering the territory of King Eadmund', and decide that because of this they will receive no peace in Northumberland and so depart for Orkney.<sup>483</sup> Upon their arrival, Gunnhildr's sons (although interestingly they

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<sup>480</sup> *Mesta*, ch.3, (ed. Sephton).

<sup>481</sup> *Mesta*, ch.10, (ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, p.8). 'and common report said that Gunnhildr kings'-mother had bargained with a woman that was a witch to poison his drink'. *Mesta*, ch.10, (ed. Sephton, p.13).

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.12, p.19. 'was a most beautiful woman, wise and learned, gladsome of speech, but very guileful and stern in disposition'. *Mesta*, ch.12, (ed. Sephton, p.14). This description of Gunnhildr is also similar to the *meykongr* Þornbjörg from *Hrólfs* (fourteenth-century *riddarasaga*). She is described as: *hverri mey fegri ok fríðari ok kurteisari, svá at engi fannst jafnfríð í norðrálfu heimsins. Hún var vitr ok vinsæl, málsnjöll ok spakráðug ok ríkynd. Hrólfs*, (eds. Bjarni Vilhjálmson and Guðni Jónsson). 'The loveliest, most polished and courteous woman in the whole of Europe, intelligent, popular, eloquent and the best of advisers, but imperious too.' *Hrolf*, (eds. Hermann Pálsson and Edwards, p.68).

<sup>483</sup> *Mesta*, ch.16, (ed. Sephton, p.18).

are referred to as the sons of Eiríkr) assume rule and receive tribute.<sup>484</sup> During their Orcadian sojourn Gunnhildr and her sons hear about trouble between King Hákon of Norway and King Haraldr of Denmark and decide to sail east, but first they married Ragnhildr, Eiríkr and Gunnhildr's daughter, to Arnfinnr, son of *jarl* Þorfinnr *hausakljúfa*.<sup>485</sup> Ragnhildr's marriage is not recounted in *Heimskringla*, so *Mesta's* compiler must have sourced his information from elsewhere, possibly *Orkneyinga*. When they met Haraldr of Denmark, they were greeted with a 'hearty welcome' and were granted revenues so that they 'could maintain themselves and their followers honourably'.<sup>486</sup>

Hákon's death at the Battle of Fitjar is recounted: *er þat margra manna sagn at skosueinn Gunnhilldar sa er Kisingr er nefndr liop fram i þysinum ok kallaði. Gefi rum konungs bananum. ok skaut þa fleinum til konungs. en sumir segia at engi uissi huerr skaut. ma þat ok uel uera fyrir því at qruar ok spiot ok qnur skot uapn flugu sva þykkt sem drifa*.<sup>487</sup> This is strikingly similar (ignoring orthographic differences) to the description in *Heimskringla*, Gunnhildr is blamed, but it is again based on hearsay, and there is no mention of her magic. Following Hákon's demise, Gunnhildr's sons ruled in Norway and: *Gunnhilldr mǫþir þeira hafði miok land rað með þeim. hon var þa kǫllut konunga mǫþir*.<sup>488</sup> Her role in the government of Norway is reiterated by the compiler, who says that: *Gunnhilldr konunga mǫþir ok*

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<sup>484</sup> *Mesta*, ch.16, (ed. Sephton).

<sup>485</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.19.

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>487</sup> *Mesta*, ch.28, (ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, p.44). 'there is a common story that Gunnhildr's page-boy, whose name was Kisingr, ran forward into the midst of the crowd, and shouting, "room for the king's slayer", threw the dart at the king. But others say that no one knows who threw it, and that that may be the truth, for arrows, spears, and missiles of all sorts were flying thick, like flakes in a snowstorm'. *Mesta*, ch.28, (ed. Sephton, p.31).

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.30, p.46-7. 'their mother Gunnhildr, had a chief share in the government of the country, and was therefore called kings'-mother'. *Mesta*, ch.30, (ed. Sephton, p.33).

*synir hennar voro opt aa tali ok malstefnu. ok reðu land raðum.*<sup>489</sup> This is significant because in other sources her role as joint ruler has been alluded to, but has not been expressed explicitly, this is the only source apart from *Heimskringla* in which her involvement is actually given name. It is also interesting that in *Mesta* she is named *konungamóðir* because she had a share in rule, whereas in other sources, she is so named because she is mother to numerous men that laid claim to Norway. There then follows a discussion in which she goads them into action, concerning how her sons rule only a small part of the country despite them all being named king, and that she cannot believe they are content to allow Sigurðr *jarl* of Hlaðir to rule such a large part of their Kingdom. Haraldr replies that it is difficult to kill a man such as Sigurðr and advises a more cautious approach, resulting in Gunnhildr stating that they should proceed in a different way, and the chapter concludes; 'and they did so'.<sup>490</sup> This is important because it demonstrates that the compiler believed that Gunnhildr and her sons ruled together, discussing problems and solving them together. This is perhaps evidence that in the thirteenth century onwards (when Snorri wrote *Heimskringla*), it was believed her role in government was not passive, and that her sons followed her advice, ultimately resulting in their downfall, (if they had not plotted to kill Sigurðr, then they would not have feuded with his son Hákon, which ultimately caused their deaths). Thus, is it possible that the explicit references to Gunnhildr's co-rule in *Heimskringla* and *Mesta* sought to blame the trouble her sons encounter on her political interference.

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<sup>489</sup> *Mesta*, ch.32, (ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, p.54). 'Gunnhildr kings'-mother and her sons frequently met and conversed on matters that concerned the government of the country'. *Mesta*, ch.32, (ed. Sephton, p.36).

<sup>490</sup> *Mesta*, ch.32, (ed. Sephton).

Gunnhildr's attempts to find the infant Óláfr are described. Apparently, she 'had a very dear friend, an influential man named Hákon', who she sent to find and bring him to her.<sup>491</sup> This, according to *ÓsT and HarN*, is none other than Hákon *jarl* and the words 'very dear friend' could allude to their supposed affair, mentioned in *Heimskringla*. Hákon eventually travelled to Sweden and met his namesake Hákon *gamli* who had been sheltering Óláfr and his mother. Hákon told him that Gunnhildr was seeking the baby in order to foster him and bring him up with honour as reparation for her sons killing his father Tryggvi. This offer is graciously received but cannot be accepted because Óláfr's mother puts no faith in Gunnhildr's *glysligum fagr mælum*, because she is: *full af flærdum ok suiksamligum undir hyggium*, a conversation that appears in *ÓsT* but strangely not *Heimskringla*.<sup>492</sup> This description of her as deceitful and treacherous spans the source material, hardly surprising considering that *Mesta* is a compilation based on *Heimskringla* with additions from *Íslendingasögur*, none of which were particularly favourable towards her, with the possible exceptions of *Orkneyinga* and *Laxdæla*.

Hákon returns empty-handed to Gunnhildr, causing her to be 'much annoyed'.<sup>493</sup> Then the story of Haraldr *gráfeldr's* death is told: how he is killed by Gull-Haraldr at Hals, as is recounted in other sources, but there is no mention of Hákon *jarl* and Haraldr Gormsson's plot to kill Gunnhildr. Following his death, Gunnhildr and her two remaining sons flee to Orkney, presumably because of Ragnhildr's marriages to the *jarls* there. Later in *Mesta*, the section of *Hallfreðar* pertaining to Gunnhildr is included. Here it is narrated that, after the Battle of Fitjar,

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<sup>491</sup> *Mesta*, ch.44, (ed. Sephton, p.48).

<sup>492</sup> *Mesta*, ch.45, (ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, p.77). 'smooth words and fair speech'. *Mesta*, ch.45, (ed. Sephton, p.51); *Mesta*, ch.45, (ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, p.77). 'full of deceit and treacherous cunning'. *Mesta*, ch.45, (ed. Sephton, p.51).

<sup>493</sup> *Mesta*, ch.45, (ed. Sephton, p.52).

Gunnhildr ruled alongside her sons, although this differs from an independent version of the saga found in *Möðruvallabók*. *Mesta's* version of *Hallfreðar* describes how Sokki the viking was: 'a great friend [of Gunnhildr's sons], like many another bad man'.<sup>494</sup> This description is also found in *Möðruvallabók*, although it appears earlier in the narrative. These differences are explored in the following chapter and may be due to the scribe's desire to put a different emphasis on the story. The episode from *Hallfreðar* forms the last part played by Gunnhildr in *Mesta*, the story of her death is neglected.

*Mesta* is a biography of Óláfr, broadly based on *Heimskringla*, which in turn is indebted to *ÓsT*, and this is mirrored in its portrayal of Gunnhildr, which is for the most part similar to *Heimskringla*, although Hákon's conversation with his namesake about Óláfr is not recorded, and it must be presumed that the compiler gleaned his information from elsewhere. Any differences can be accounted for by the compiler taking his information from other sources. Furthermore, the majority of passages *Mesta's* compiler borrowed from written sources can still be found preserved in manuscripts, therefore where there is a difference between the text of *Mesta* and corresponding texts it can indicate, 'either that the compiler had access to a text different from the one which has been preserved in other manuscripts, or that he has rewritten the text to some extent'.<sup>495</sup> However, the manuscripts which he used are no longer extant, meaning it can be difficult to work out exactly what he changed. This is the only source apart from *Heimskringla* in which Gunnhildr's role in government is fully explained, which may owe more to thirteenth/fourteenth-century attitudes than a desire to truthfully recount how Norway had been ruled in the tenth

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<sup>494</sup> *Mesta*, ch.151, (ed. Sephton, p.211).

<sup>495</sup> Ólafur Halldórsson, *Snorri*, p.v.

century. Hence, medieval writers were keen to associate her involvement in government with the failure of her sons to rule successfully.<sup>496</sup>

## Conclusion

The *konungasögur*'s portrayals of Gunnhildr contain themes which are for the most part familiar from the 'Norwegian synoptics' and *GD*. The only texts which do not fit this pattern are *Orkneyinga* and *Jómsvíkinga*. *Orkneyinga* neglects to mention any of the themes from the other sources and limits itself to a 'factual' account of Eiríkr blóðøx's movements, failing to describe Gunnhildr as vicious or cruel, whereas one version of *Jómsvíkinga* portrays her as a man-eater (the only source to use this expression) and is the only Icelandic source to include the bog-plot. The fact that these sources are so different could be due to them not being true *konungasögur* and having more in common with elements from *Íslendingasögur*. Nevertheless, the remainder of *konungasögur* are broadly speaking similar, although *ÓsT*, being earlier, is more aligned to portrayals in the 'Norwegian synoptics'. This is unsurprising considering Oddr's use of *HarN*, he also fails to include Gunnhildr's intelligence and wise counsel, which are more positive facets of her personality described in *Fagrskinna*, *Heimskringla* and *Mesta*. *Fagrskinna* appears to follow the 'Norwegian synoptics' by blaming her for her husband's bad rule and neglecting her role in Norwegian government, indicating its author's use of *Ágrip*. It would appear that *konungasögur* used the 'Norwegian synoptics' for inspiration, or their sources, which then evolved, adding information about Gunnhildr's involvement in

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<sup>496</sup> There are very interesting comparisons to be drawn here with other mothers co-ruling with their sons, or ruling in their stead, e.g. Lampert of Hersfeld on Agnes of Poitou following Henry III's death in 1056. *Annals*, (ed. Robinson). It is connected to *Ecclesiastes*, 10:16: "'woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child...'" *Bible*, (ed. Carroll and Prickett, p.759). See Ward, 'Child Kingship' for a broader perspective.

government. The differences between the descriptions found in *konungasögur* could also be accounted for by their authors' manipulation of information and different interpretations of oral material.

## *Íslendingasögur*

### *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*

*Hallfreðar* is a *skáldsaga* written in the early-thirteenth century.<sup>497</sup> As Clover notes, it is 'not one of the better composed *Íslendingasögur*' but nevertheless is interesting because of the insight it offers into the conversion to Christianity in the North and its romantic interests, in the form of Hallfreðr's relationship with Kolfinna, which bears close resemblance to the story in *Kormáks*.<sup>498</sup> The saga's significance for this thesis rests on its albeit brief inclusion of Gunnhildr as one of the stock characters who bolster the main protagonists.<sup>499</sup> The saga exists in two redactions, the relatively condensed version in *Möðruvallabók* and a fuller one, told in discontinuous sections in *Mesta*.<sup>500</sup> Although related to the independent *Hallfreðar*, *Mesta*'s text is slightly longer, and there are a 'few significant differences in emphasis between the versions'.<sup>501</sup> The saga in its original form is thought to be one of the oldest *Íslendingasögur*, meaning it chronologically coincides with some of the *konungasögur* material.<sup>502</sup> Gunnhildr's brief appearance does not follow the detailed descriptions found in the other sources. It is, nevertheless, important because it demonstrates that she was sufficiently well-known to be included as a character in

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<sup>497</sup> Clover, '*Hallfreðar*'; Whaley, '*Hallfred*'.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*, p.263. Gunnhildr is mentioned once in *Kormáks*, which says that: *Qgmundr vingaðdisk ekki við þau Eirík ok Gunnhildi. Kormáks*, ch.2, (ed. Einar Sveinsson, p.204). 'Qgmundr, who did not become friendly with Eiríkr or his queen Gunnhildr'. *Kormak's*, ch.2, (ed. Örnólfur Thorsson, p.6). This mention, although brief, agrees with the other sources, as it appears that the royal couple are difficult to get on with.

<sup>499</sup> Whaley, '*Hallfred*'.

<sup>500</sup> Clover, '*Hallfreðar*'. The version contained in *Flateyjarbók* (also told in discontinuous sections) appears to be a conflation of the two. The time line is as follows:

*Hallfreðar*: early-thirteenth century

*Mesta*: c.1300

*Möðruvallabók*: 1350s

*Flateyjarbók*: c.1394.

<sup>501</sup> Abram, 'Religious Experience', p.117. See *Hallfreðar*, (ed. Bjarni Einarsson), pp.vii-cxxx for details of the relationships between the redactions. These differences relate mainly to *Mesta*'s version having been revised to make it more appropriate for inclusion in the hagiographical history of Óláfr Tryggvason, and that the ending has been rewritten; neither of which have bearing on descriptions of Gunnhildr.

<sup>502</sup> *Ibid.*

*Íslendingasögur*, before her larger role in *Egla*. It can hardly be doubted that *Hallfreðar's* author knew of the sagas concerning Óláfr Tryggvason, hence Gunnhildr's description is unlikely to be favourable.<sup>503</sup>

In the *Möðruvallabók* version it states that Sokki, a big and vicious viking: *var vinr Gunnhildarsona, því at þeir váru þá yfir Nóregi*.<sup>504</sup> This shows that Gunnhildr's sons were the sort who easily befriended scoundrels. It is interesting that there is no mention of Gunnhildr ruling with her sons unlike the later *Íslendingasögur*. This description is in keeping with the earlier sources that state that her sons were not good rulers and were inclined to acts of cruelty. Sokki is killed by Ottarr and when Gunnhildr heard about it: *kvað þat mein, at hon hafði eigi þá menn augum leitt, er vini hennar hofðu drepit ok skammt*.<sup>505</sup> However, she goes on to say that she knows who has committed the gross act, but it is not stated how she has come by this knowledge.<sup>506</sup> It is likely that she knows it was Ottarr because he was avenging his father's death at the hands of Sokki, but it is also possible that this is an unspoken allusion to her supposed magical abilities.<sup>507</sup> The version in *Mesta* broadly agrees with *Möðruvallabók*, although there are interesting discrepancies. The earlier *Mesta* version states that after the Battle of Fitjar: *tók þá ríki í Noregi Gunnhildr ok synir hennar*, whereas the later *Möðruvallabók* says that after the battle: *Gunnhildarsynir tóku ríki*, without any mention of their mother.<sup>508</sup> Furthermore, as

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<sup>503</sup> Einar Sveinsson, *Dating*.

<sup>504</sup> *Hallfreðar*, ch.1, (ed. Einar Sveinsson, p.135). 'was a friend of the sons of Gunnhildr who ruled Norway at that time'. *Hallfred*, ch.1, (ed. Viðar Hreinsson, p.225). The *Mesta* version also states they were friends of Sokki. *Mesta*, ch.151, (ed. Sephton, p.211).

<sup>505</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.1, p.140. 'she said it was a blow that she had not laid eyes upon the men who had slain and shamed her friends'. *Hallfred*, (ed. Viðar Hreinsson, p.227).

<sup>506</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>507</sup> In *ÓsT* she scrys for information regarding Óláfr's whereabouts.

<sup>508</sup> *Ólafs konúngs*, ch.151, (ed. Sveinbjörn Egilsson, p.4). 'Gunnhildr and her sons then took rule in Norway'; *Hallfreðar*, ch.1, (ed. Benedikt Sveinsson, p.3). 'the sons of Gunnhildr took power'. *Hallfred*, ch.1, (ed. Viðar Hreinsson, p.226).

previously mentioned, in *Möðruvallabók*, Gunnhildr claims that she knows who killed Sokki, but in *Mesta*, it is said: *en er Gunnhildr konúnga móðir spur þessi tíði mælti hún; þat er ill vordit, er ek leiddi ekki þá menn augum, er vini vara drepit ok skammt, en ek veit eigi hverir gjört hafa, ok verðr þó nú svá at standa.*<sup>509</sup> So, the earlier version narrates that she did not know who killed her friend, but in the later it says she did. In the later sources, Gunnhildr is described as ruling with her sons, so it would be expected for the *Möðruvallabók* version to follow their example, but it does not. However, the earlier *Mesta* version describes mother and sons ruling together. It is difficult to account for these differences. They may simply reflect the scribe's preference or copying errors. Nevertheless, it is evident that in both versions of *Hallfreðar* Gunnhildr is portrayed as woman who is a patron of villainous vikings, which is not unlike the descriptions of her that precede and follow this saga, in which she is herself described as cruel and vicious.

### *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*

*Egla* was composed in the second quarter of the thirteenth century and is possibly one of the first *Íslendingasögur* to have been written down.<sup>510</sup> It is generally attributed on stylistic grounds to Iceland's greatest medieval historian, Snorri, a descendent of Egill.<sup>511</sup> However, *Egla* does not identify its author and the surviving manuscripts do not mention his name.<sup>512</sup> Nevertheless, this thesis will accept the view that Snorri composed *Egla*.

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<sup>509</sup> *Ólafs konúngs*, ch.152, (ed. Sveinbjörn Egilsson, p.6). 'but when Gunnhildr *konungamóðir* was informed what had happened, she said: "It is unfortunate not to have seen the men who slew and shamed our friends; but I do not know who has done this and so they may go unpunished"'.  
<sup>510</sup> Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, 'Introduction', p.xii.  
<sup>511</sup> Örnólfur Thorsson, 'Introduction to *Egill's*'.  
<sup>512</sup> Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, 'Introduction', p.xiii.

In creating the saga, the author used information preserved in other sources such as *Landnámabók*, and he may have relied on oral narratives for some events.<sup>513</sup> Indeed, according to Bjarni Einarsson, 'it has been customary to assume that *Egla* is primarily based upon extensive oral traditions concerning the family at Borg'.<sup>514</sup> This assumption relies on the tradition that the verse was Egill's own composition.<sup>515</sup> Whether the stanzas embedded in *Egla* are genuine ninth- and tenth-century poems has aroused scholarly debate, but none has been willing to accept that all of the stanzas are genuine.<sup>516</sup> Indeed, Bjarni Einarsson has opined that, 'probably most of it never existed before the saga was written'.<sup>517</sup> This is relevant because some of the skaldic verse relates to Gunnhildr, and so may be a literary invention of the author and not originate in the tenth-century; so Egill's *lausavísa* describing her as *greypt* ('cruel') may simply reflect thirteenth-century attitudes.<sup>518</sup> Although, Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir points out that the verses included in *Egla* would have been considered trustworthy sources by his medieval audience.<sup>519</sup>

Regarding the author's use of oral material, his use of *svá*, *sagt etc.* shows that he wanted his audience to believe that his story was based upon what he had

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<sup>513</sup> Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, 'Introduction'. It is also possible that he drew on the information he used in composing *Heimskringla*. According to Bjarni Einarsson, 'all the passages from the history of Norway have their parallels, some of them even *verbatim*, in *Heimskringla*', proving there is some literary relationship between *Egla* and *Heimskringla*. Bjarni Einarsson, 'Afterword', p.184.

<sup>514</sup> Bjarni Einarsson, 'Afterword', p.185. This reflects Icelanders' attitudes, who for centuries have regarded the sagas as true stories, passed down by faithful story-tellers for around three centuries until they were written by conscientious scribes. This viewpoint derived from the deceptive nature of the sagas, which generally do not show the hand of an author and seem like truthful and objective accounts. This theory has, in recent years, fallen out of favour with scholars who cannot believe this naïve idea of how such great literature was formed, although there is an increasing interest in the possible oral origins of *Íslendingasögur*.

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.* Even the 'diehard Finnur Jónsson' had to dismiss some of them.

<sup>517</sup> *Ibid.*, p.186.

<sup>518</sup> *Egils*, (ed. Nordal, p.165). Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir chooses the translation 'grim-tempered' which is perhaps more in the alliterative keeping of the original. *Egill's*, ch.58, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, p.114).

<sup>519</sup> Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, 'Introduction'.

heard told.<sup>520</sup> Bjarni Einarsson notes that, 'it is impossible to know how truthful the author was in these references to tradition; in some cases it seems to be an effort to strengthen the credibility of an improbable story', such as Gunnhildr's incantation to force Egill to leave Iceland and visit her.<sup>521</sup> This has significance because it means that any description of Gunnhildr may have been derived from oral narratives and then altered by the author's own creative mastery. In order to understand the nature of *Egla*, it is helpful to recognise the important similarities and differences between it and *konungasögur*.<sup>522</sup> The latter have their roots in the works of Sæmundr and Ari, both of whom were priests with access to historical writings in Latin from other countries.<sup>523</sup> Additionally, 'Ari had second-hand oral information from Norway in the late-tenth century', which may be whence the portrayals of Gunnhildr already encountered all stem; if it can, indeed, be proved that this was the origin of her portrayals, *i.e.* their source zero and Ari did not alter what he had heard in his writing.<sup>524</sup> Various sections of *Egla* are 'based upon written historical sources', but despite the author's use of historical narratives, what makes *Egla* different to *konungasögur* is that significant parts of it appear to have relied on the author's imagination, inspired by earlier literature, rather than on history.<sup>525</sup> Furthermore, if *Egla* and other *Íslendingasögur* are based on authors' imaginations and are not true stories handed down by centuries' worth of 'faithful story tellers', it is likely that Gunnhildr's character will not be a truthful representation but a caricature, only loosely based on fact.

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<sup>520</sup> Bjarni Einarsson, 'Afterword'.

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*; *Egill's*, ch.61, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir).

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>524</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>525</sup> *Ibid.*, p.186.

The overarching theme of *Egla* is the struggle of independent farmers against overbearing kings, and Egill often spars with royalty, his main adversaries are Eiríkr and Gunnhildr.<sup>526</sup> On his first trip to Norway he falls foul of them and when he seeks to claim his wife's inheritance in Norway, Gunnhildr endeavours to thwart him.<sup>527</sup> Clearly she cannot expect a favourable description when she is the enemy of the saga's eponymous hero. This is interesting because if the argument that Snorri wrote both *Egla* and *Heimskringla* is accepted, then, as Cormack notes, scholars 'must account for the fact that the two works evince opposite attitudes towards the kings of Norway, who are the heroes in *Heimskringla* and the villains in *Egla*'.<sup>528</sup> While Gunnhildr could by no means be described as a hero in *Heimskringla*, her description is certainly more flattering than in *Egla*. Textual critics have debated the question of why *Egla* and *Heimskringla* have so many differences, despite some passages being similar.<sup>529</sup> Discussions about *Egla*'s relationship with *Heimskringla* cannot avoid the issue of dating. This thesis has followed an approximate chronology for the primary sources, but as previously discussed there are few absolutes. Therefore, it is taken that *Egla* was written after *Heimskringla*, possibly after a 'disillusioned Snorri returned from Norway to Iceland in 1239'.<sup>530</sup> *Egla* and *Heimskringla*'s differing attitudes to the Norwegian kings can be explained by the aims and interests of Snorri, and his increased antipathy to the kings of Norway could be explained by his feeling of disillusionment following his second visit. However, Jónas Kristjánsson has plausibly hypothesised that the two works were

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<sup>526</sup> Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, 'Introduction', p.viii.

<sup>527</sup> *Egils*, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir).

<sup>528</sup> Cormack, '*Heimskringla*', p.62.

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.* See Berman, '*Egils*'; Jónas Kristjánsson, '*Egils*'; and Gjessing, *kongesagaens* for the relevant arguments.

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*, p.62. See also Berman, '*Egils*' and Jónas Kristjánsson, '*Egils*'. This is the minority theory, the traditional ordering of the three works attributed to Snorri is: *Egla*, *Separate Saga of St Óláfr* and *Heimskringla*. Despite this theory's unpopularity, it makes most sense here given Snorri's differing attitudes, *i.e.* he is pro-Norway in *Heimskringla* and anti-Norway in *Egla*.

composed with different audiences in mind, *Heimskringla* for a Norwegian and *Egla* for an Icelandic one.<sup>531</sup> It is, of course, a possibility that *Egla* and *Heimskringla* were not both written by Snorri, in which case the problem concerning how the kings of Norway were portrayed loses its importance.<sup>532</sup> For this thesis, it will be assumed that Snorri wrote both and that the differing portrayals result from his fluctuating attitude at the times of composition.<sup>533</sup> It is, therefore, likely that Gunnhildr's portrayal will follow the previously witnessed negative form, especially in the light of the saga's increased antipathy towards Norway.

*Egla* is a saga in which women 'take a direct part in the action and show themselves to be the equals of the men', and Gunnhildr is Egill's most formidable opponent, 'his only match in cunning and ruthlessness'.<sup>534</sup> The ongoing strife between them lasts for nearly thirty chapters, comprising approximately a third of the whole saga. According to Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, 'the tension between Egill and Gunnhildr turns on the fact that they are two of a kind'; both possess magical powers and can shape-shift.<sup>535</sup> It would seem Gunnhildr's character, although based on previous portrayals, has been rewritten for a good story, making a villain worthy of the hero.

*Egla* is preserved in a number of vellum manuscripts and fragments that date from the late-thirteenth century onwards, the most important is the Icelandic manuscript, *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol.), which is the principal and largest

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<sup>531</sup> Jónas Kristjánsson, '*Egils*', p.471-472. Hence *Egla* which was intended for an Icelandic audience is negative towards Gunnhildr and *Heimskringla*, which was intended for a Norwegian one, less so.

<sup>532</sup> Cormack, '*Heimskringla*', p.67. Cormack believes that 'neither the assumption of common authorship of *Egla* and *Heimskringla* nor the identification with Snorri should be taken for granted'.

<sup>533</sup> This is to some extent a facile argument, for full details, see Cormack, '*Heimskringla*'.

<sup>534</sup> Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, 'Introduction', p.xxvii-xxviii. These are often deemed masculine traits and could account for the problem that medieval males have with her.

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xxviii.

manuscript of *Íslendingasögur*.<sup>536</sup> It has been dated by the majority of scholars to 1300-1350, although more recent scholarship by Stefán Karlsson has suggested the slightly later period of 1330-1370, a theory based upon relationships between *Möðruvallabók*'s and other fourteenth-century scribes.<sup>537</sup> Sections of the saga are preserved in some parchment fragments and in complete, partially conflated, texts in later paper manuscripts.<sup>538</sup> Of special interest are several seventeenth-century paper manuscripts because they contain copies of the *Egla* text taken from *Möðruvallabók* before two folios were lost from it.<sup>539</sup>

Gunnhildr is introduced as: *allra kvenna vænst ok vitrust ok fjölkunnig mjök* and Eiríkr married her: *dóttur Qzurar tóta, ok hafði hana heim með sér*.<sup>540</sup> Here, Gunnhildr's father is again named in the Icelandic manner as Qzurr *toti*, and there is no mention of her Danish origins.<sup>541</sup> The description of her beauty is similar to *Ágrip*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Heimskringla*, although it is the first time the two adjectives of beauty and magical prowess are juxtaposed in her introduction. Then the author goes on to state that Þórofr (Egill's brother) and Gunnhildr had a *kærleikar miklir*.<sup>542</sup> This is a loaded sentence, as she is often portrayed as man-obsessed in *Íslendingasögur* and one version of *Jómsvíkinga*. Sagas are usually written in

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<sup>536</sup> Örnólfur Thorsson, 'Introduction'; Bjarni Einarsson, 'Foreword'; Stefán Karlsson, '*Möðruvallabók*'; Jónas Kristjánsson, *Icelandic Manuscripts*.

<sup>537</sup> de Leeuw van Weenen, *Möðruvallabók*; Sverrir Tómasson, 'Old Icelandic'.

<sup>538</sup> Bjarni Einarsson, 'Foreword'. Among the former is AM 162 A 0 fol. (1240-60), the oldest manuscript and thus, closest to the time of composition, which seems to represent an 'early, verbose, text of the M-class'. Örnólfur Thorsson, 'Introduction'.

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>540</sup> *Egils*, ch.37, (ed. Nordal, p.94). 'outstandingly attractive and wise, and well-versed in the magic arts'; 'the daughter of Qzurr snout and brought her back home with him'. *Egils*, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, p.64).

<sup>541</sup> *Egils*, (ed. Bjarni Einarsson, p.51).

<sup>542</sup> *Egils*, ch.37, (ed. Nordal, p.94). 'close friendship'. *Egils*, ch.37, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, p.64).

laconic style, so this understated statement, although seemingly benign to the modern ear, may have been less so to a medieval audience.

Gunnhildr and Eiríkr arrive at a farm on Atley, owned by Eiríkr but run by Bárðr, a faithful and industrious retainer, who was also entertaining Egill and Qlvirr.<sup>543</sup> Bárðr felt that Egill was mocking him and so he went to Gunnhildr and told her that Egill was shaming them, consequently: *dróttning ok Bárðr blönduðu þá drygkin ólyfjani ok báru þá inn.*<sup>544</sup> This is not the first time that Gunnhildr has been linked to poisoning a beverage, in *Heimskringla* she is accused of being involved in killing Eiríkr's brother thus. Egill foils the plot using his own magic and stabs Bárðr, resulting in Eiríkr's desire to find and kill Egill.<sup>545</sup> Þórir *hersir* allows Egill to overwinter with him, mainly thanks to his son Arinbjörn's entreaties, but is uneasy, not wanting to incur Eiríkr's wrath for harbouring a hated fugitive; so he goes to the king and begs him to not take offence. Eiríkr is friendly, but Gunnhildr is unhappy, saying that she thinks Eiríkr is too easily mollified and quick to forget a wrong, and she does not think Bárðr's murder is insignificant even if he does.<sup>546</sup> Eiríkr rebuts: *"meir frýr þú mér, Gunnhildr, grimmeiks en aðrir menn; en verit hefir kærra við Þórolf af þinni hendi en nú er".*<sup>547</sup> This is typical female behaviour in Old Norse literature, goading men until they do what is required, usually kill someone who has wronged them.<sup>548</sup> Indeed, Jochens states that although Gunnhildr is rooted in the reality of

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<sup>543</sup> *Egil's*, ch.43, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir).

<sup>544</sup> *Egils*, ch.44, (ed. Nordal, p.109). 'the queen and Bárðr mixed poison into the drink and brought it in'. *Egil's*, ch.44, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, p.74).

<sup>545</sup> *Egil's*, ch.44, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, p.76).

<sup>546</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.48.

<sup>547</sup> *Egils*, ch.48, (ed. Nordal, p.123). "'more than anyone else, Gunnhildr you doubt my ferocity, and you used to be fonder of Þórolfr than you are now'". *Egil's*, ch.48, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, p.85).

<sup>548</sup> This form of inciting can be seen across Old Norse literature, although particularly memorable examples are Brynhildr (*Völsunga*) and Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir (*Laxdæla*).

tenth-century politics, her 'most fully developed feature' is that of the *hetzerin*.<sup>549</sup> Eiríkr's words also draw attention to her friendship with Þórolfr, a relationship that has not gone unnoticed by her husband, but has obviously soured, as she no longer welcomes him because of his brother's actions.<sup>550</sup> This demonstrates that the author thought that she was by nature fickle and capable of holding a grudge, one she could prioritise over her earlier feelings.<sup>551</sup> After failing with her husband, Gunnhildr is forced to turn to her brothers for help, telling them she wants them to kill one or both of Skallagrímr's sons.<sup>552</sup> Þórir is aware of the danger to the brothers and refers explicitly to Gunnhildr's *ræðum*.<sup>553</sup> The audience is left in no doubt what sort of woman she is, one who plots and will have a friend killed whose only crime is being related to her enemy. She is portrayed as single-minded and bent on revenge, and although her feud with Egill is not mentioned in the earlier sources, her strength of will and cruelty are; so, this description is in keeping with previous ones but is more detailed and more personal. Interestingly, when she tasks her brothers, they immediately spring to do her bidding, having no problem following her orders, either morally or because she is a woman, and do not feel the need for validation from Eiríkr. Gunnhildr's brothers fail in killing either brother, so she tells them to kill one of their men instead, an act as petty as it is vindictive.

Egill is advised: *at stað festask ekki í Nóregi, meðan ríki Gunnhildar væri svá mikít*, as she is 'very ill-disposed' towards him.<sup>554</sup> This echoes the other sources that

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<sup>549</sup> Jochens, *Women*, p.174.

<sup>550</sup> In *Egla* her infidelity to her husband is implied, whereas in *Laxdæla* and *Njála* her alleged affairs with men occur after his death, it is not mentioned if she had male friendships before Eiríkr died.

<sup>551</sup> Her behaviour is comparable with Brynhildr, whose love affair with Sigurðr turns to hatred.

<sup>552</sup> *Egil's*, ch.49, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, p.86).

<sup>553</sup> *Egils*, ch.49, (ed. Nordal, p.124). Translation is problematic, Nordal compares it to *fortölum* ('persuasion') in Modern Icelandic and Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir translates it as 'conniving'.

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.56, p.150. 'not to stay in Norway while queen Gunnhildr held such power'. *Egil's*, ch.56, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, p.104).

state that Gunnhildr was powerful, if not in her own right, then in her capacity to influence her husband. Egill stays in Iceland and after many years, learns that Berg-Ǫnundr has taken all the wealth of his father-in-law and wants to know who put him up to it. The reply is that Berg-Ǫnundr: *var kominn í vináttu mikla Eirík konung, ok við Gunnhildi þó miklu kærri.*<sup>555</sup> Again, the innuendo is clear, that Gunnhildr is the close friend of man who is not her husband. The remainder of the chapter is consumed with the inheritance claim and ongoing antipathy between Gunnhildr and Egill, and highlights that the royal couple have clear favourites, as Berg-Ǫnundr claims they have promised they will rule in his favour in every claim he cares to make.<sup>556</sup> Gunnhildr proves herself to be a sterner judge than her husband and attempts to incite him again by making a speech which implies that Eiríkr is indecisive and weak and Gunnhildr, the power behind the throne. However, in the 'Norwegian synoptics', Eiríkr is not described in such weak terms, although her bad counsel is blamed for the defects in his reign. Perhaps the author sought to discredit Eiríkr as king of Norway by making him look weak and dominated by his overbearing wife, although it is also possible that she really was formidable, manipulative, and her portrayal in *Egla* is based on truth. Gunnhildr's cunning and ability to manipulate have been alluded to in other sources, but this is the first time in such detail. Egill is declared an outlaw and speaks this verse:

*Lögbrigðir hefr lagða,  
landalfr, fyr mér sjölfum,  
blekkir bræðra sökva*

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<sup>555</sup> *Egils*, (ed. Nordal, p.152). 'was a good friend of king Eiríkr, and even closer to queen Gunnhildr'. *Egill's*, ch.57, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, p.105).

<sup>556</sup> *Egill's*, ch.57, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir).

*brúðfang, vega langa;  
Gunnhildi ák gjalda,  
greypt's hemmar skap, þenna,  
ungr gatk ok læ launat,  
landrekstr, bili grandat.<sup>557</sup>*

Depending on the side taken in the debate about the dating of the poetry in *Egla*, this either represents a tenth-century reference to Gunnhildr and her cruelty and blaming her for Egill's outlawry, or it is further evidence of the thirteenth-century author's dislike of her, cleverly crafted into skaldic poetry. Egill then commits the ultimate act of revenge by killing Eiríkr and Gunnhildr's young son Rognvaldr.<sup>558</sup> He follows up his murder by making a curse-pole, which was a horse's head affixed atop a post, upon which he invoked the nature spirits of the land to drive Eiríkr and Gunnhildr from Norway.<sup>559</sup> His spell bears fruit, as they have to flee the country because of Hákon's arrival. Then on their visit to Orkney Eiríkr married his daughter Ragnhildr to *jarl* Arnfinnr.<sup>560</sup> This is also mentioned in *Orkneyinga* and *Heimskringla*, but the marriage occurs after Eiríkr's death. Following Eiríkr's raids on England, he met King Æthelstan and was appointed by him to rule Northumbria from York and protect against Scottish and Irish raids.<sup>561</sup> The author then writes that: *svá er sagt, at*

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<sup>557</sup> *Egils*, ch.57, (ed. Nordal, p.165).

Land spirit, the law-breaker  
far and wide; his bride deceives  
the man who slew his brothers.  
Grim-tempered Gunnhildr must pay.

*Egil's*, ch.58, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, p.114). Presumably Egill's accusation of deceiving her husband refers to her relationships with other men; although it should be remembered that Egill is not, according to Perkins, 'the most impartial of witnesses'! Perkins, '*Flóamanna*', p.247.

<sup>558</sup> *Egil's*, ch.58, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir).

<sup>559</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.58, p.119. 'Then he thrust the pole into a cleft in the rock and left it to stand there. He turned the head towards the land and carved the whole invocation in runes on the pole'.

<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.60.

<sup>561</sup> *Ibid.*

*Gunnhildr lét seið efla ok lét þat seiða, at Egill Skalla-Grímsson skyldi aldri ró bíða á Íslandi, fyrr en hon sæi hann.*<sup>562</sup> This is significant because the author firstly uses the phrase *svá er sagt*, indicating it was information he had heard, and secondly *lét seið efla*, not that she herself performed it. A relatively minor difference, but one between her performing magic and needing someone else to do it for her, *i.e.* maybe she was not actually a witch capable of practising magic at all.

When Eiríkr and Gunnhildr are staying in York, Egill's arrival provokes more goading from her: "*hví skal eigi þegar drepar Egil, eða mantu eigi nú, konungr, hvat Egill hefir gort, drepit vini þína ok frændr ok þar á ofan son þinn, en nítt sjálfan þik, eða hvar viti menn slíku bellt við konungmann?*".<sup>563</sup> Egla builds upon her ability to goad, seen in earlier sources, making it manifestly clear that Gunnhildr is capricious and cruel. She then argues with Arinbjörn who believes that Eiríkr will not be manipulated to do her *níðingsverk*, which seems to suggest that of the two, he can be reasoned with.<sup>564</sup> This bears comparison with the royal pair's earlier portrayals. Here Eiríkr is shown as being just, refusing to listen to her outspoken desire for revenge. Arinbjörn advises Egill that Eiríkr was angry, although he calmed down a little towards the end, but: *Gunnhildr mun allan hug á leggja at spilla þínu [Egill] máli.*<sup>565</sup> Egill spends the night composing praise poetry in honour of Eiríkr but is almost thwarted by a bird 'sitting at the window twittering all night'.<sup>566</sup> Arinbjörn sat

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<sup>562</sup> *Egils*, ch.59, (ed. Nordal, p.176). 'it is said that Gunnhildr had a magic rite performed to curse Egill Skallagrímsson from ever finding peace in Iceland until she had seen him'. *Egil's*, ch.60, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, p.122).

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.59, p.180. "'why not have Egill killed at once? Don't you remember, King, what Egill has done to you: killed your friends and kinsmen and even your own son, and heaped scorn upon your own person. Where would anyone dare to treat royalty in such a way?'" *Egil's*, ch.60, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, p.125).

<sup>564</sup> *Ibid.*, p.181. 'scornful biddings'. *Egil's*, ch.60, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, p.125).

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid.*, p.182. 'Gunnhildr will do her utmost to spoil things for you [Egill]'. *Egil's*, ch.60, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, p.126).

<sup>566</sup> *Egil's*, ch.60, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, p.126).

by the attic window where the bird had been, and: *hann sá, hvar hamhleypa nökkur fór annan veg af húsinu*.<sup>567</sup> It is implied that this shape-shifter is none other than Gunnhildr, and her magical proficiency is in no doubt here.<sup>568</sup> Her magic is to no avail and Egill is able to present his poem to the king after more squabbling between Gunnhildr and Arinbjörn. Ultimately Eiríkr listens to Egill and praises his delivery, promising that he will be able to leave safe and unharmed. Egill then attempts to seek justice from Hákon because he claims that he had not received it due to Eiríkr's severity and *eggjan Gunnhildar*.<sup>569</sup> Wisely, Hákon refuses to become involved despite his enmity with Eiríkr, leaving Egill's only recourse to announce that he has intuited that Hákon will fall out with Eiríkr again and that he will come to feel that 'Gunnhildr has rather too many ambitious sons'.<sup>570</sup> This comes to pass, as at the Battle of Fitjar Hákon is fatally wounded facing the forces of Gunnhildr and her sons. Gunnhildr's role is not mentioned, which seems strange considering the author's antipathy towards her, it could be expected that he would use this as another opportunity to denigrate her and associate her with witchcraft. *Egla* also neglects to recount Gunnhildr's death; Eiríkr's death on a raid in Britain is mentioned and her subsequent flight to Denmark with her sons, but nowhere is it said how or when she died.<sup>571</sup> This is interesting because at the time of *Egla*'s composition there existed a version of *Jómsvíkinga*, which described her death in great detail, although

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<sup>567</sup> *Egils*, ch.59, (ed. Nordal, p.183). 'he saw a shape-shifter in the form of a bird leaving the other side of the house'. *Egil's*, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, p.126).

<sup>568</sup> Of the many names for people who had the capacity to change their shape, said to be able to let their *hugr* 'thought' flow into another *hamr* 'guise', *hamleypa* is the term used here. It is impossible to distinguish between literal and metaphorical transformations; thus, it is difficult to say with certainty whether the author believed that she really had assumed the shape of a bird or whether it was simply an easily accessible metaphor for a strong-minded woman. Raudvere, 'Trolldómr'. It should also be noted that in Icelandic folklore of recent centuries, she is credited with the ability to shape-shift into the body of various animals so that she was able to enjoy sexual intercourse with males of the species. Jónas Jónasson, *Íslenzkir þjóðhættir*.

<sup>569</sup> *Egils*, ch.63, (ed. Nordal, p.197). 'Gunnhildr's incitements'. *Egil's*, ch.64, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, p.136). This is a classic example of Gunnhildr being a *hetzerin*.

<sup>570</sup> *Egil's*, ch.64, (ed. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, p.136).

<sup>571</sup> *Ibid.*

it is possible that this was added by a later redactor. It is possible that the author did not possess the information about her death, despite it being included in the 'Norwegian synoptics' or simply, that he did not want to include it, although this seems odd as one can imagine Egill gloating over the demise of his erstwhile foe. Regardless, *Egla's* last account of her is her heading to Denmark with her sons following her husband's death.

### *Laxdæla saga*

Gunnhildr features in *Laxdæla*, a saga written c.1245 by an unknown author, 'at a time when the Age of Chivalry was at its fullest flower in continental Europe'.<sup>572</sup> It reflects a European outlook and attitude more than any of the major thirteenth-century sagas; yet it is also quintessentially Icelandic.<sup>573</sup> Its narrative is linked to that of *Egla*, as Hǫskuldr plans to marry his son Óláfr *pái* into the family of Egill Skallagrímsson.<sup>574</sup> Most of its major characters are 'undoubtedly historic personages', who are referenced in *The Icelandic Annals* and *Landnámabók*.<sup>575</sup> *Laxdæla* cites Ari twice as a historical source, but this is not an unusual occurrence in the sagas.<sup>576</sup> Other than Ari it is difficult to assert with authority the specific sources *Laxdæla's* author used; histories, annals, other saga material, genealogies and oral sources are all feasible, and it is clear that many of the saga's key events are not invented, but authentic.<sup>577</sup> Madelung asserts that *Laxdæla* is a compilation of various written works and that the author probably wanted to make the saga seem

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<sup>572</sup> Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson, 'Introduction', p.9.

<sup>573</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>574</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>575</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>576</sup> *Ibid.*; *Laxdæla*, chs.4 and 78, (eds. Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson).

<sup>577</sup> *Ibid.*

like a work of historical veracity rather than fiction.<sup>578</sup> Moreover, she sees the saga in terms of a 'brilliant literary achievement' and does not associate it with an oral tradition at all.<sup>579</sup> This has particular significance for this thesis because if true it potentially means that Gunnhildr's portrayal is a thirteenth-century author's and not derived from longstanding oral tradition. The recurrent phrases 'it is generally agreed', 'people say that', and 'it is common knowledge' imply the author had the information orally or perhaps had copied it from a written source that had itself used oral sources.<sup>580</sup> Despite the saga's flirtation with historicity, there are some serious chronological discrepancies.<sup>581</sup> Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson believe that Helgi wiping his bloodied sword on Guðrún's cloak was inspired by the contemporary *Sturlunga*, and that this is not the only instance where *Laxdæla*'s narrative echoes contemporary events, which points to a 'deliberate manipulation of material for artistic ends'.<sup>582</sup> This is a familiar trope, often the sagas reveal more about thirteenth-century attitudes than they do about the real historicity of the events described therein.<sup>583</sup> Perhaps it is more helpful to think, as Clover does, of *Íslendingasögur* as syncretic and not about their origins in terms of either/or.<sup>584</sup> This is key, with implications for this thesis, because Gunnhildr's portrayals could either stem from thirteenth-century attitudes, tenth-century sentiments, or syncretism, reflecting a combination of the two. Moreover, considering the author's possible use of Ari, oral and other written sources, it is likely that *Laxdæla*'s portrayal of Gunnhildr

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<sup>578</sup> Madelung, *Structural*.

<sup>579</sup> *Ibid.*, p.147. Beck sees *Laxdæla* in terms of 'art that has been consciously inserted into the struggles of the thirteenth century'. Beck, 'Structural', p.401.

<sup>580</sup> Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson, 'Introduction', p.24.

<sup>581</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

<sup>583</sup> The scope of this thesis does not allow for an in-depth consideration of what period and cultural concerns are actually reflected in the sagas, for excellent analyses see Clover, 'Icelandic'; Andersson, *Problem*.

<sup>584</sup> Clover, 'Icelandic'.

will potentially follow the pattern of previous sources, saying she was a man-obsessed, cruel witch. However, there is one factor that may have a bearing on her description, and that is the identity of its author.

*Laxdæla*'s exact authorship is uncertain, but Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson assert that from the saga itself he must have been from Breiðafjörður, possibly descended from the Laxriverdale dynasty.<sup>585</sup> They unequivocally assert the author's masculinity, although other scholars have questioned this, pointing out that the saga's women are far more complex and memorable than their menfolk and that this could indicate female authorship. Örnólfur Thorsson highlights the arguments for a female author, which are based on the saga's focus on women as instigators and leaders, its close attention to the details of women's routines, and grasp of female psychology amongst other things.<sup>586</sup> Ármann Jakobsson also refers to *Laxdæla* as being 'regarded as an unusually feminine and female-centred saga, reflecting a more feminine point of view, and perhaps even composed by a woman'.<sup>587</sup> However, he does then assert that the men of the saga are described in far greater detail than the women, and for the most part 'the women and men of *Laxdæla* are gazing at beautiful men'.<sup>588</sup> Auerbach disagrees, describing the men as 'one-dimensional' and stating that 'they are stereotypes, almost caricatures, compared to the complexity of the women. The descriptions of male characters are of their exteriors: their appearance, their attractiveness, their clothes, their prowess'.<sup>589</sup> Furthermore, she describes *Laxdæla* as 'not the story of two men, but

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<sup>585</sup> Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson, 'Introduction'.

<sup>586</sup> Örnólfur Thorsson, 'Introduction to *Laxardal*'.

<sup>587</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, '*Laxdæla* Dreaming', p.43. See also: Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, 'Formáli'; Cook, 'Women and Men'; Kress, 'samstaft þykkja'; Auerbach, 'Female Experience'.

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*, p.44. However, descriptions of handsome men do not necessarily rule out female authorship, they may in fact strengthen the argument!

<sup>589</sup> Auerbach, 'Female Experience', p.43.

of one woman', and believes that it could easily be named *Guðrúns saga*.<sup>590</sup> According to Kellogg, referring to an authoress of *Laxdæla* is tempting but it is better 'to suggest that women played a part in preserving the stories on which it is based'.<sup>591</sup> He refers to the literature of the court and church, which describes women in terms of their sins or their saintliness, reflected in the descriptions of Gunnhildr; usually penned by male clerics, they depict her as a sinner who brought sorrow to men.<sup>592</sup> So, it can be said that *Laxdæla*, if not composed by a woman, was perhaps produced by a society that prior to ecclesiastical control allowed women a greater cultural role, involving passing on of language and stories.<sup>593</sup> This is significant, because it may mean that Gunnhildr will be portrayed differently in *Laxdæla*, if the author was more receptive to the cultural role of women.

Guðrún Nordal has suggested the saga was perhaps sponsored or inspired by a woman or women and that it was written, 'within a distinct cultural *milieu* in Iceland in the thirteenth century, where we find women who travelled to Norway and stayed at the royal court'.<sup>594</sup> This, too, is interesting because it means that Icelandic women, as well as men, travelled to the Norwegian court where they could easily have collected gossip about Gunnhildr or brought back written sources. The lively exchange of ideas, books, and people suggests that *Laxdæla*'s author may have had access to different information about Gunnhildr from court gossip than perhaps other

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<sup>590</sup> Auerbach, 'Female Experience', p.30. Her whole argument is focussed, not only on the probability that the saga was composed by a woman, but that the author 'was actively trying to deal with the concept of the ability of women to function in society on an equal level to men', neatly exemplified by Jónas Kristjánsson who states that 'if she had been born a man, the saga would probably be named after her', but the author seems to want to ask why should she have to be male. Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas*, p.276.

<sup>591</sup> Kellogg, 'Sex', p.254. See his article for full details of his complex and engaging argument.

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.* Kellogg eloquently reinforces his point thus: 'who had taught the saga writers their language and their stories while the monks were teaching them to write'?

<sup>594</sup> Nordal, 'text', p.133.

writers had, or the author shied away from the usual negative descriptions of Gunnhildr deliberately. Whatever the author's identity or gender, the saga is, 'above all, the product of a sophisticated, keenly-trained European mind'.<sup>595</sup>

The saga survives in a large number of textual witnesses, eighty-eight in total.<sup>596</sup> Despite the preservation of many manuscripts, the version found in *Möðruvallabók* is the only intact vellum one, upon which all printed versions have been based with variant readings and minor changes made from other manuscripts.<sup>597</sup>

Gunnhildr is introduced in *Laxdæla*, in terms of her relationship with Hrútr, who 'was a retainer of king Haraldr Gunnhildarson, who held him in high esteem'.<sup>598</sup> The author then writes that: *Gunnhildr dróttning lagði svá miklar mætur á hann, at hon helt engi hans jafningja innan hirðar, hvárki í orðum né qðrum hlutum; en þó at mannjafanaðr væri hafðr ok til ágætis manna talat, þá var þat qllum mǫnnum auðsætt, at Gunnhildi þótti hyggjuleysi til ganga eða qfund, ef nǫkkurum manni var til Hrúts jafnat.*<sup>599</sup> So, Gunnhildr had an attachment to one of her son's retainers, another reference to her friendships with men. However, she is a widow and therefore not committing an infidelity, unlike the insinuations in *Egla*, but it can be presumed that female promiscuity was frowned upon. On Hrútr's departure, she tells him that it is no secret that she finds him to be 'a man of great distinction, of equal

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<sup>595</sup> Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson, 'Introduction', p.35.

<sup>596</sup> Vanherpen, 'Letters'.

<sup>597</sup> Örnólfur Thorsson, 'Introduction to *Laxardal*'. *Möðruvallabók* dates to c.100 years after *Laxdæla*'s composition.

<sup>598</sup> *Laxdæla*, ch.19, (eds. Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson, p.82). Haraldr *gráfeldr* is described with his metronymic, presumably because Eiríkr is dead by this point.

<sup>599</sup> *Laxdæla*, ch.19, (ed. Einar Sveinsson, p.44). 'queen Gunnhildr has so great a regard for him that she considered no one at court his equal in converse or anything else. Whenever comparisons were made and men's merits discussed, it was obvious to everyone that Gunnhildr thought it mere stupidity or envy for any other man to be compared with Hrútr'. *Laxdæla*, ch.19, (eds. Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson, p.82).

prowess to the best in the land and much their superior in intelligence'.<sup>600</sup> She then gifts him a gold bracelet, bids him farewell, and: *brá síðan skikkjunní at hofði sér ok gekk snúðigt heim til bæjar*.<sup>601</sup> In true saga style, this is the ultimate in laconic descriptions, describing what must have been heart-breakingly emotional for Gunnhildr, but all the more powerful because of the economy of style, the reader is left to imagine the swallowed-back tears as she walks quickly away. Indeed, anyone who has ever had to say farewell to a loved one, knows all too well the symptoms and this short sentence speaks more of her attachment to Hrútr than could a paragraph of gushing sentiment. Any witness of the scene would be left in no doubt of her feelings, this episode is a human response to her emotions, showing that she was capable of more than cruelty and spite. Auerbach alludes to this, stating that the female characters in *Laxdæla* are given emotions and motivation and that there is far more insight into their feelings than usual in saga writing.<sup>602</sup> Indeed, there is a distinct sense that the author innately understands the workings of the female mind.<sup>603</sup> The author relates, 'Hrútr married a woman called Unnr, the daughter of Mǫrðr *gígja*; but Unnr left him, and that was the cause of the conflict between the men of Laxriverdale and the men of Fljótshlið'.<sup>604</sup> Gunnhildr's involvement is not mentioned in *Laxdæla*, although it is in *Njála*.<sup>605</sup>

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<sup>600</sup> *Laxdæla*, ch.19, (eds. Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson, p.82).

<sup>601</sup> *Laxdæla*, ch.19, (ed. Einar Sveinsson, p.44). 'drew her mantle over her head and walked quickly back to her residence'. *Laxdæla*, ch.19, (eds. Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson, p.82). Kunz translates the sentence slightly differently as she, 'hid her face in her shawl and walked stiffly and rapidly towards town'. *Laxardal*, ch.19, (ed. Örnólfur Thorsson, p.301). This is a better translation, as the stiff walk and covered face is exactly what comes to mind when thinking of how she would want to escape the scene without anyone seeing her tears.

<sup>602</sup> Auerbach, 'Female Experience'.

<sup>603</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>604</sup> *Laxdæla*, ch.19, (eds. Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson, p.85).

<sup>605</sup> *Njáls*, (eds. Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson).

Gunnhildr also *lagði mikil mæti* on Óláfr pái when she realised that he was Hrútr's nephew.<sup>606</sup> It is not said what these favours are, although the sexual implication is difficult to ignore; Kunz translates it slightly differently as she 'took a great liking to', which sounds slightly more innocent.<sup>607</sup> The author claims, *sumir men kǫlluðu þat, at henni þætti þó skemmtan at tala við Ólaf, þótt hann nyti ekki annarra et*, which sounds as if they had heard the information, perhaps as gossip or from another saga.<sup>608</sup> The author then describes Óláfr's warm greeting to Gunnhildr, hinting that his feelings were reciprocal, or simply the polite response of a man with an eye for opportunity, not shy of manipulating the feelings of a desperate older lady.<sup>609</sup> On hearing Óláfr's desire to find his grandfather, Gunnhildr offers to finance his voyage and when it is time for him to leave, both she and her son Haraldr 'accompanied Óláfr to the ship, and said they would add their own good luck to the friendship they had already bestowed on him'.<sup>610</sup> This is markedly different to Hrútr's departure, when Haraldr bestows the gift of a ship and she scuttles away, hiding her tears. This time the gift of a ship is hers to give and mother and son bid Óláfr a dignified farewell, as he goes to find his mother's family in Ireland.<sup>611</sup> Óláfr triumphs there and returns to Norway: *tók konungr honum vel, en Gunnhildr miklu betr*.<sup>612</sup> Again, the innuendo is clear, that she is enamoured of young Óláfr as she was his

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<sup>606</sup> *Laxdæla*, ch.21, (ed. Einar Sveinsson, p.52). 'bestowed many favours'. *Laxdæla*, ch.21, (eds. Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson, p.89).

<sup>607</sup> *Laxardal*, ch.21, (ed. Örnólfur Thorsson, p.305). Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson's translation is a more literal one, whereas Kunz's is more nuanced and idiomatic. *Zoëga, Dictionary*, p.306. This demonstrates the difficulty with translations, as they can vary greatly in quality, and slight differences in translation can totally alter the intended meaning of the original. See Auerbach, 'Female Experience' for more details.

<sup>608</sup> *Laxdæla*, ch.21, (ed. Einar Sveinsson, p.52). 'there were some who said that she would have enjoyed talking to Óláfr no matter who he was related to'. *Laxdæla*, ch.21, (eds. Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson, p.89).

<sup>609</sup> *Laxdæla*, ch.21, (eds. Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson, p.89).

<sup>610</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>611</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>612</sup> *Laxdæla*, ch.22, (ed. Einar Sveinsson, p.60). 'where the king gave him a good welcome, and Gunnhildr an even better one'. *Laxdæla*, ch.22, (eds. Magnus Magnusson and Herman Pálsson, p.95).

uncle. Technically there is nothing wrong with this, although it demonstrates her fickle tendencies.

Gunnhildr plays a minor role in *Laxdæla*, as the story is centred on the loves and losses of Guðrún, and so references to her are relatively few, but they are not insignificant. Her portrayal is more favourable than in other sources, she is not described as a non-Christian, witch or evil manipulator of her sons, nor is her extreme beauty mentioned, perhaps so as not to detract from Guðrún. Gunnhildr is described in terms, not necessarily of power, but of having independent financial means; she equips Óláfr's voyage, involving the not inconsiderable cost of the ship, provisions, and sixty crewmen, and yet she is able to do so without needing to seek permission from a man, suggesting a degree of autonomy. Her love and loss of a man is described in an empathetic and sympathetic way, which imparts a dignity to the affair, unlike in *Njála*. Nevertheless, it is also implied that she moves on and bestows her affections on her erstwhile lover's young nephew. Her involvement in Hrútr's divorce is not mentioned or even implied. Thus, this can be said to be the most neutral description of Gunnhildr to be found so far in the extant source material (apart from *Orkneyinga*) and shows her in a human light, not the more usual ogre-like *persona*. This is also alluded to by Jóna Torfadóttir, who notes that there are no mentions in *Laxdæla* of Gunnhildr's evil mind, and that this is unsurprising if the sagas was indeed authored by a woman.<sup>613</sup> It is tempting to connect this with the idea championed by Auerbach that the saga was, if not written by a woman, written by someone who was trying to show that women were able to perform societal roles equal to men. Thus, the emotional complexities of Gunnhildr's portrayal in *Laxdæla*

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<sup>613</sup> Jóna Torfadóttir, 'Gunnhildur', p.6.

are a result of an author more sympathetic to her predicament. Interestingly, *Laxdæla* makes no mention of Gunnhildr's power and role in government, unlike the later *Íslendingasögur* and earlier *konungasögur*, which also describe her negatively. This seems to point to a correlation between her power and her unpopularity.

### *Njáls saga*

Gunnhildr receives a different treatment in *Njála*, one that is more in keeping with her portrayal in *Egla*, and other sources describing her as variations on a theme of cruel witch. Indeed, *Njála*'s treatment of women generally 'follows a more typical saga pattern in that the women, though important, are merely cogs in the machinery of the plot'.<sup>614</sup> *Njála* has been described as the mightiest of the *Íslendingasögur*, and was written in Iceland by an unknown author (c.1280).<sup>615</sup> Its early popularity is demonstrated by more vellum manuscripts of *Njála* surviving than any other saga.<sup>616</sup> Unfortunately, the original manuscript has not survived, the earliest extant copy dates from c.1300.<sup>617</sup> *Njála* 'was written at a crucial period of Iceland's early history, both literary and political, which had an important effect on its composition', and this may well have influenced how characters, including Norwegian royals, were portrayed.<sup>618</sup> Interestingly and significantly for this thesis, Vésteinn Ólason sees *Íslendingasögur* and hence *Njála* as not the work of one author, but as the product of numerous contributors spanning generations as part of a prolonged and developing narrative tradition.<sup>619</sup>

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<sup>614</sup> Auerbach, 'Female Experience', p.44.

<sup>615</sup> Vésteinn Ólason, '*Njáls*'.

<sup>616</sup> Miller, '*Bloody?*'.

<sup>617</sup> Lethbridge, '*Observations*'.

<sup>618</sup> Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, '*Introduction (Njáls)*'.

<sup>619</sup> Vésteinn Ólason, '*Dialogues*'.

The saga's historicity has been questioned by scholars, but the Burning of Bergthorsknoll is historical fact, recorded in earlier written sources such as *Landnámabók* and also possibly corroborated by archaeological evidence.<sup>620</sup> It is evident that *Njála*'s author made use of a number of written sources and that he was particularly influenced by *Laxdæla*, which has interesting implications here as Gunnhildr's portrayal in *Laxdæla* is very different to that in *Njála*, meaning that the author deliberately altered his description of her, modelling it on another source.<sup>621</sup> Interestingly the information in the verses sometimes conflicts with that in the main narrative, which suggests that he used his sources with considerable freedom and sometimes made mistakes, which can be accounted for by 'both garbled oral traditions and the natural tendency of an author to manipulate material for aesthetic purposes'.<sup>622</sup> There are some similarities to thirteenth-century events, just as in *Laxdæla*, and it has been suggested that the 'whole pattern of dispute is unmistakably thirteenth-century'.<sup>623</sup> The author's lack of accuracy would not necessarily have concerned a thirteenth-century audience, who would have been aware of how the passing of time can distort memories, and *Njála* makes no claim to historical truth.<sup>624</sup> This would mean that *Njála*'s author could have read other saga material both extant and otherwise that described Gunnhildr, and then written his own version, which he may have decided to change to fit his own requirements. Hence Gunnhildr's portrayal as a nymphomaniac witch who ruins Hrútr's marriage; a good stolid Icelandic man brought low by a Norwegian sorceress. It is hard to resist

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<sup>620</sup> Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, 'Introduction (*Njáls*)', p.22. Excavations at the modern farm at Bergthorsknoll have shown that buildings were burned there hundreds of years ago, but it has not been possible to accurately date the event.

<sup>621</sup> Andersson, *Problem*.

<sup>622</sup> Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, 'Introduction (*Njáls*)', p.23.

<sup>623</sup> *Ibid.*, p.24.

<sup>624</sup> *Ibid.*

the temptation to see this in terms of a metaphor for Iceland being overwhelmed and taken over by Norway, a situation being played out contemporaneously. *Njála* is, first and foremost, not the work of a historian but of an author, 'it was not the author's purpose to write a work of history, but rather to use an historical subject for an epic in prose'.<sup>625</sup> Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson see the saga as a homily, as it is, in essence, a battle between good and evil, and the latter is usually engendered by the desire to achieve self-aggrandisement through the pursuit of wealth and power.<sup>626</sup> This can be seen in Hrútr's journey to Norway to claim an inheritance and how he goes about gaining his fortune, by becoming the 'elderly' Queen Mother's 'lover', whose witchcraft leads to the end of his promising marriage to Unnr, which results in much conflict and turmoil.<sup>627</sup> It is significant that this lust for power and greed for riches were 'potent causes of the civil disruption that racked Iceland in the thirteenth century and led to her loss of independence in 1262'.<sup>628</sup>

The women of *Njála* have no less significance than the men, and the first eighteen chapters are dominated by the will of three women, Gunnhildr, Hallgerðr and Unnr.<sup>629</sup> Furthermore, Allen notes that much of *Njála*'s narrative is shaped by the yielding of men to the will of women, which is certainly the case with Gunnhildr and Hrútr.<sup>630</sup> Ármann Jakobsson believes the saga is 'subversive in its treatment of gender', and this appears to be so with Gunnhildr, who although female was well-equipped with power and riches.<sup>631</sup> According to O'Donoghue, Gunnhildr is

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<sup>625</sup> Turville-Petre, 'Introduction'.

<sup>626</sup> Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, 'Introduction (*Njáls*)'.

<sup>627</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

<sup>628</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>629</sup> Unlike *Laxdæla*, there have been no attempts to suggest a female authorship, perhaps because their role is more traditional and less prominent.

<sup>630</sup> Allen, *Fire and Iron*.

<sup>631</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, 'Masculinity', p.214.

extremely powerful, not just by virtue of her social rank as Queen Mother, but because of her 'sexual and domestic independence'.<sup>632</sup> It has been shown by Duby that in medieval Western Europe, daughters would be considered property of their fathers and wives of their husbands, but widows could achieve a degree of financial and sexual independence, which perhaps represented a threat for male authors.<sup>633</sup> This often resulted in them being portrayed 'as sinister and sexually rapacious power wielders'.<sup>634</sup> Gunnhildr, according to *Laxdæla* and *Njála*, was a widow who enjoyed relationships with her son's retainers and it is likely that her sexual autonomy was considered threatening, resulting in her denigration and description as a predatory witch. This had the bonus of simultaneously vilifying Norway, which may have been a popular choice for Icelandic audiences. The authors of sagas usually purport to describe what happened, to relate a plausible reconstruction of an actual world, but *Njála*'s author goes further and uses 'his narrative to explore and exemplify certain themes; among them, the power struggle between the two genders', and this can perhaps be seen in his portrayal of Gunnhildr as a widow, no longer constrained by the social bonds of marriage.<sup>635</sup> Gunnhildr's power over Hrútr is thrown into relief by the relative passivity and helplessness of her rival for his affections, Unnr; it is shown as excessively 'sinister and magical, and is ultimately malevolent'.<sup>636</sup> Dronke has remarked upon the 'witch-like powers of queen Gunnhildr and her traditional licentiousness' and her role as a 'Circe, who traps men'.<sup>637</sup> However, her portrayal is more nuanced and Dronke goes on to explore a subtle difference in the way in which

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<sup>632</sup> O'Donoghue, 'Women', p.84.

<sup>633</sup> Duby, *Women*; O'Donoghue, 'Women'. Duby also asserts that widows were all the more powerful because they could rely on their sons, thus enabling them to fully enjoy the power allotted to them.

<sup>634</sup> O'Donoghue, 'Women', p.85.

<sup>635</sup> *Ibid.*, p.92.

<sup>636</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>637</sup> Dronke, *Sexual Themes*, p.6.

*Njála*'s author describes her affair with Hrútr. He is shown not only as 'the unwilling captive of a lustful and elderly witch', but also that he 'has been deeply moved by the queen's physical love for him'.<sup>638</sup> This equates to her power over him not being the result of external witch-craft but because of his memories, presumably of their love.<sup>639</sup> This sentiment is dangerously close to saying that Hrútr's inability to bed his new wife is not because of an actual spell cast by Gunnhildr, but a metaphorical one in which he fell in love with her and was perhaps unable to consummate his union with Unnr because of his memories of Gunnhildr. This is not impossible, a beautiful older woman with a younger lover, perhaps retold and twisted by a male author's antipathy to a widow's sexual autonomy and underlying dislike of Norway, into a tale of a man-hungry witch.

Gunnhildr is introduced as the mother of the king of Norway, Haraldr *gráfelldr*, and they resided at Konungahella, which demonstrates the opportunity she would have had to influence her son, residing together at the royal court.<sup>640</sup> A ship from the west enters Oslofjörðr and: *þegar er þetta spyr Gunnhildr, frétti hon eprir, hvat Íslenzkra manna væri á skipi*.<sup>641</sup> This implied keen interest in Icelanders has a sinister ring to it. However, it could just reflect the curiosity of a woman eager for news from abroad or a protective mother anxious of hearing anything that may impact on her son's reign. She may, indeed, have just been a nosy old woman! She is, however, exceedingly well-informed about events in Iceland (presumably due to the exchange of information and news between Iceland and Norway), immediately

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<sup>638</sup> Dronke, *Sexual Themes*, p.6.

<sup>639</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>640</sup> *Njáls*, (ed. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson).

<sup>641</sup> *Brennu-Njáls*, ch.3, (Einar Sveinsson, p.12). 'as soon as Gunnhildr heard of it she wanted to know what Icelanders were on board'. *Njáls*, ch.3, (ed. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, p.43).

knowing Hrútr's identity and that he is there to claim his inheritance from Soti.<sup>642</sup> She then orders her squire to Oslofjörðr and invite Hrútr and his uncle Qzurr to spend the winter with her and to tell them that she wants to befriend them, and if Hrútr obeys her then she will look after his claim and ensure his favour with the king.<sup>643</sup> This is interesting because it signifies that she had the power and influence to ensure his success and, therefore, it reinforces the information contained in many of the sources that she and her son ruled Norway. It also speaks of her imperious nature, she expects to be obeyed, but as a queen this is, perhaps, hardly surprising. Clearly, news of Gunnhildr's personality had reached Iceland, as Qzurr is apparently aware of her nature, declaring that if they defy her wishes they will be hounded out of Norway, penniless, but if they accept then they will be treated handsomely.<sup>644</sup> Evidently, Gunnhildr is a good friend to have, but an equally bad enemy. When she learns of their arrival, she sends her greetings saying that: *hon myndi eigi bjóða þeim, fyrr en þeir hefði fundit konung, fyrir orðs sakir: - at svá þykki, sem ek grípa gulli á við þá; en ek mun þó til leggja slíkt sem mér sýnisk.*<sup>645</sup> This seems an oddly demure act for someone who acts so brazenly later and sharply contrasts to her behaviour in *Laxdæla*, where she proclaims her love in no hushed terms. Dronke highlights the dichotomy of her reactions to Hrútr, mooting that 'the author of *Njála* has converted this proud openness into secrecy', presumably for his own reasons.<sup>646</sup>

Hrútr goes before the king and asks for his support in securing his inheritance and to be made one of his liegemen. The king makes no response and it is left to

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<sup>642</sup> *Njáls*, ch.3, (ed. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, p.43).

<sup>643</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>644</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>645</sup> *Brennu-Njáls*, ch.3, (Einar Sveinsson, p.13). 'she would not ask them to her house until they had been to see the king, in case people started saying that she was making too much fuss of them; but she would do all she could for them'. *Njáls*, ch.3, (ed. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, p.44).

<sup>646</sup> Dronke, *Sexual Themes*, p.8.

Gunnhildr to intercede on his behalf, stating that Hrútr offers him a great honour and that if there were many like him in his retinue it would be exceedingly well-manned, as he is 'both clever and enterprising'.<sup>647</sup> The king defers to his request, although it is not stated if this is because of his mother's wishes or his own desire, and he says that his mother will take care of him until he goes in front of the king again. Hrútr is shown to Gunnhildr's hall and told by her squire that he is to occupy her throne: *ok halda máttú þessu sæti, þótt hon komi sjálf til*.<sup>648</sup> This, according to Dronke, is evidence that the author wanted to show 'Gunnhildr imperiously making Hrútr her equal, even her master, for the moment', thus further demonstrating the position of power she held and perhaps the reason for her vilification.<sup>649</sup> Initially all her utterances are commands: *sit þú* and *skalt þú jafnan þessu sæti halda, þá er þú ert í boði mínu*.<sup>650</sup> Then she peremptorily informs him that: *þú skalt liggja í lopti hjá mer í nott, ok vit tvau saman*.<sup>651</sup> They go upstairs and *læsti hon þegar loptinu innan*, thus effectively locking the outside world out and trapping him inside with her, both

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<sup>647</sup> *Njáls*, (ed. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, p.44).

<sup>648</sup> *Brennu-Njáls*, ch.3, (Einar Sveinsson, p.14). 'and keep this seat even when she herself is present'. *Njáls*, (ed. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, p.45).

<sup>649</sup> Dronke, *Sexual Themes*, p.6.

<sup>650</sup> *Brennu-Njáls*, ch.3, (Einar Sveinsson, p.15). 'be seated'; 'keep that seat for as long as you are my guest'. *Njáls*, (ed. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, p.45). The use of the imperative form of the verb is key here, i.e. *skalt/sit þú*.

<sup>651</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15. 'you shall lie with me in the upper chamber tonight, with no one else present'. *Njáls*, (ed. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, p.45). The use of *vit tvau* is interesting as that exact phrase is used in *Brymskviða* when Þórr goes in disguise as a bride with Loki also decked out as a maidservant in order to trick a giant. The wordplay is emphasised by the use of the neuter which draws attention to the difference in sexes of the two; one is a man and one is a woman, but which is which? Þórr is decidedly masculine but dressed as a woman and Loki whose gender fluidity is legend, is also in feminine guise. *Edda* (ed. Neckel). This is particularly relevant in light of Roswell's article on gender roles in *Njála*, in which he draws comparisons between the saga and some of the poetry from the *Poetic Edda*, in particular *Lokasenna* and *Brymskviða*. He concludes that characters from *Njála* 'adhere to the theme of breaching gender roles' and that the main stimulus for the conflict found within the saga is the insults, especially those of a sexual nature, connected with concepts of *níð* and *ergi* which cause women to abandon their gender roles and goad their men. The insults are by their nature similar to the flyting in *Lokasenna* and show how such behaviour leads to disaster. Roswell, *Gender Roles*, p.11. Therefore, it is interesting that the author uses the phrase here as it could mean that he is questioning Hrútr's masculinity and highlighting Gunnhildr's assertiveness by ordering him to sleep with her is taking a role that is more usually associated with men, hence the word play.

physically and mentally.<sup>652</sup> They sleep together for two weeks and Gunnhildr tells her servants that they must keep silent or face the consequences. According to Allen, 'there is something sinister about these scenes which have both a ritualistic flavour to them and a slightly ludicrous touch, for Gunnhildr is considerably older than the man she keeps'.<sup>653</sup> He continues that there is a reversal of proper order implied by Hrútr taking her high seat, that would have rung alarm bells for a medieval audience and to some extent foreshadows the events to come in the saga.<sup>654</sup> Following their sojourn in her chamber, Hrútr gives her gifts and 'embraced her and thanked her'.<sup>655</sup> He is made one of the king's retainers and Haraldr says his mother will decide where he is to sit, and it is a 'place of high honour'.<sup>656</sup> This taboo of secrecy is, 'indeed appropriate to the social circumstances of a licentious Queen Mother (from the outset she has shown her concern to keep up appearances, not inviting Hrútr to her house straightaway-*fyrir orðs sakir*), but it brings with it also echoes of the taboo of the supernatural mistress'.<sup>657</sup> The author gives Hrútr and Gunnhildr's love affair the appearance of a real-life experience with solid domesticity but with undercurrents of the supernatural mistress 'who fulfils the dreams of her chosen Launval'.<sup>658</sup>

In the spring, Hrútr learns that Soti has taken his inheritance; he goes not to the king, but to Gunnhildr for help and advice. She says she will let him have two fully-manned long ships and with them, the leader of the king's spies.<sup>659</sup> Again, this

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<sup>652</sup> *Brennu-Njáls*, ch.3, (Einar Sveinsson, p.15). 'she at once locked the upper room from the inside'.

<sup>653</sup> Allen, *Fire and Iron*, p.84.

<sup>654</sup> *Ibid.* This reversal of order could also be associated with Roswell's theory that breaching or reversing gender roles in the saga spelled trouble.

<sup>655</sup> *Njáls*, (ed. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, p.45).

<sup>656</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>657</sup> Dronke, *Sexual Themes*, p.7.

<sup>658</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

<sup>659</sup> *Njáls*, (ed. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson).

demonstrates her power, able to outfit ships and order important members of her son's retinue to assist Hrútr. When the king asks and is told what help his mother offered, short of shock or annoyance, he comments that it 'is generous' and then matches the number of ships himself.<sup>660</sup> As a widowed Queen Mother, she seems to enjoy more autonomy and independence than other women could lay claim.

Hrútr becomes homesick for Iceland, and Gunnhildr quizzes him, asking him if he has a woman there. He denies it, but the queen believes that he is lying and ends the conversation. This is the author making it evident that 'her plain words seem to spring from a woman's instinct rather than a witch's'.<sup>661</sup> The author lacks consistency, and sometimes portrays her as simply a woman in love and at others with a sinister agenda. Haraldr tries to persuade Hrútr to stay, but his mother, with the foresight of someone about to be abandoned, realises that one: *við ramman mun reip at draga*.<sup>662</sup> Fate, so often a factor in the sagas, plays a part here, and, as ever, is inescapable, Hrútr must leave and be cursed with all the turmoil that follows. As in *Laxdæla*, she gives him a gold bracelet and he exclaims that she has given him many good gifts, perhaps referring to the gift of her love.<sup>663</sup> She then: *tók hendinna um háls honum ok kyssti hann*, which Dronke asserts is 'a gesture characteristic in moments when women wish to impose their will through their sexual power over them'.<sup>664</sup> However, it invites the alternative interpretation that it is less about her control and more about his traditional male role of support and protection, while she clings to him like a supplicant. Nevertheless, she then says: "*ef ek á svá mikit vald á*

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<sup>660</sup> *Njáls*, (ed. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson).

<sup>661</sup> Dronke, *Sexual Themes*, p.8.

<sup>662</sup> *Brennu-Njáls*, ch.6, (Einar Sveinsson, p.20). 'cannot pull against a force like this'. *Njáls*, ch.6, (ed. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, p.49).

<sup>663</sup> *Njáls*, (ed. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, p.49).

<sup>664</sup> *Brennu-Njáls*, ch.6, (Einar Sveinsson, p.20-21). 'put her arms around his neck and kissed him'. *Njáls*, (ed. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, p.49); Dronke, *Sexual Themes*, p.8.

*þér sem ek ætla, þá legg ek þat ávið þik, at þú megir engri munúð fram koma við konu þá, er þú ætlar þér á Íslandi, en fremja skalt þú mega vilja þinn við aðrar konur. Ok hefir nú hvárki okkat vel: þú trúðir mér eigi til málsins".*<sup>665</sup> At first, her spiteful reaction seems like nothing more than her chagrin at being thwarted and the somewhat tired trope of hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, but perhaps it is more than a woman lashing out at being rejected and it reflects her hurt because Hrútr did not trust her with the truth, if he had been more honest, she might have reacted differently; his lack of trust has ultimately fatal consequences. Similarly, Miller muses on Gunnhildr's feelings for Hrútr, believing them to be genuine and her reaction stemming from hurt that she cannot make him happy enough to stay.<sup>666</sup> Hrútr brushes off her prediction with male bravado, seemingly unconcerned. Dronke maintains that 'in Gunnhildr's prediction we can perceive again a theme from the world of romance, Tristan's all absorbing physical passion for the first Isolde makes him incapable of consummating his marriage with the second'.<sup>667</sup>

As a result of Gunnhildr's curse, Hrútr is incapable of consummating his marriage to Unnr, which is, according to Dronke, an unkind joke played on him by the queen; 'a joke invented perhaps by the author of *Njála*'.<sup>668</sup> She elaborates that, 'with his impish and satirical eye for opposites he may have devised this cause for Unnr's divorce and invested the traditional incompatibility of the couple with such physical exactitude, precisely because, according to other sources, Hrútr was renowned for the astonishing number of children he had by his two subsequent

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<sup>665</sup> *Brennu-Njáls*, (Einar Sveinsson, p.21). "if I have as much power over you as I think, the spell I now lay on you will prevent your ever enjoying the woman in Iceland on whom you have set your heart. With other women you may have your will, but never with her. And now you must suffer as well as I, since you did not trust me with the truth". *Njáls*, (ed. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, p.49).

<sup>666</sup> Miller, 'Bloody?'

<sup>667</sup> Dronke, *Sexual Themes*, p.8.

<sup>668</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

wives'.<sup>669</sup> Roswell interprets this inverted extremity of impotence as an appropriate punishment for the problem of Hrútr's sexuality; he is highly sexualised for his pursuit of various women and so he becomes too sexualised to fulfil his husbandly duty and consummate his marriage, which in O'Donoghue's opinion is almost ironic and possibly reflects Gunnhildr's own strong sexuality.<sup>670</sup> Consequently Hrútr and Unnr divorce and the final mention of Gunnhildr is that after a change of rulers in Norway, 'both Haraldr *gráfeldr* and his mother Gunnhildr were dead'.<sup>671</sup>

Gunnhildr's portrayal in *Njála* owes a lot less to history and a lot more to the author's imagination, perhaps influenced by the emerging genre of romance literature in Iceland. She is portrayed as a spiteful woman who casts a spell on her younger lover because he is leaving her to marry in Iceland. However, undercutting this is the idea that they were really in love, that it was not an entrapment on her part and that her misery and prediction that neither would be happy is a result of his lack of trust in her. The spell of his magical engorgement is the author's own joke. The portrayal in *Njála* perhaps owes something to those found in *Egla* and *Laxdæla*, but it is different. She is not portrayed as particularly evil, just wilful and in possession of a certain degree of independence and power; this was due to her status as a widow and king's mother and was perhaps frowned on by male authors who sought to denigrate her by warping her character into a caricature of a sinister succubus. If this is so, the author would potentially have had plenty of sources on which to refer if he wanted negative descriptions of her. Furthermore, the importance of thirteenth-

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<sup>669</sup> Dronke, *Sexual Themes*.

<sup>670</sup> Roswell, *Gender Roles*; O'Donoghue, 'Women'.

<sup>671</sup> *Njáls*, (ed. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, p.86).

century Icelandic politics and their role in how the story within *Njála* was shaped should not be underestimated.

### *Flóamanna saga*

*Flóamanna* was written in the early-fourteenth century, and for the first nine chapters relies heavily on Sturla Þórdarson's version of *Landnámabók*.<sup>672</sup> The saga is not aesthetically as high standard as the classical *Íslendingasögur*, as it is stylistically influenced by *riddarasögur* and its stories of revenants and trolls are more in keeping with *fornaldarsögur*.<sup>673</sup> It survives in two versions, a shorter and a longer, albeit fragmentary version.<sup>674</sup> Current scholarly opinion considers the longer version closest to the original, which probably dates from c.1290-1350.<sup>675</sup> Perkins states that *Flóamanna* relies frequently on borrowings from other sources for its 'antiquarian embellishments and period background', although these may not be historically accurate, and descriptions of stock characters such as Gunnhildr contain borrowed elements from other sagas.<sup>676</sup>

The saga describes Þorgils' trip to Norway where Haraldr *gráfeldr* ruled 'with his brothers and Gunnhildr', and that Þorgils' host Óláfr 'received the king and his mother with great honour'.<sup>677</sup> This shows that the author believed that Haraldr and Gunnhildr were wont to travel together and that both were received with honour, not just the king. There seems to be no distinction between the two. Gunnhildr appears to be powerful and ruling with her son, which is in keeping with earlier descriptions

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<sup>672</sup> Heizmann, '*Flóamanna*'; Viðar Hreinsson, '*People of Floi*'.

<sup>673</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>674</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>675</sup> *Ibid.* The saga's textual transmission is complex, and this thesis does not have the scope to cover it, see Perkins, '*Flóamanna*' for an exhaustive analysis.

<sup>676</sup> Perkins, '*Flóamanna*', p.215.

<sup>677</sup> '*People of Floi*', ch.12, (ed. Viðar Hreinsson, p.280).

from the other sources. Both mother and son are impressed by Þorgils' aristocratic appearance and he is named king's champion. Þorgils then takes the opportunity to mention his ancestral property in Norway and is advised by Haraldr: "*móðir mín hefir nú bú á jörðum þeim, ok hon hefir á þeim allt forræði*" and that he should seek her friendship, as it would do him good.<sup>678</sup> This represents further evidence of Gunnhildr's power and autonomy. She runs her own estates and has 'total control' (*allt forræði* – lit. 'all guardianship') over them, the suggestion that her friendship is beneficial implies by contrast that getting on her wrong side could have the opposite effect. It is perhaps also a veiled reference to the earlier *Íslendingasögur*, in which her friendships with young handsome men result in their good fortune, a reference that would be familiar to a contemporary audience who would know her as a character from other *Íslendingasögur*.

When Þorgils broaches the subject with Gunnhildr, she answers favourably offering him a place with the king's followers, an offer that Þorgils bluntly rebuffed, at which: *drottning varð reið ok spyrndi fæti sínum til hans ok hratt honum frá há sætinu ok vardnaði honum þá fjárins ok sagði hann eigi kunna at þiggja sóma sinn*.<sup>679</sup> The queen's fury is not matched by her son, who 'treated him well and secretly gave him silver'.<sup>680</sup> The king tells Þorgils he is welcome to visit again, especially when his mother is not there.<sup>681</sup> This is significant because it appears to show that Haraldr was in thrall to his mother and that it was easier to go behind her back than to

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<sup>678</sup> *Flóamanna*, ch.12, (eds. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmson, p.254). 'to talk to his mother, who now maintains a household on those estates, and she has total control of them'. '*People of Floi*', ch.12, (ed. Viðar Hreinsson, p.280).

<sup>679</sup> *Ibid.* 'the queen grew angry and kicked at him and pushed him out of the high seat and denied him his property, saying he did not know how to accept an honour'. '*People of Floi*', ch.12, (ed. Viðar Hreinsson, p.280).

<sup>680</sup> '*People of Floi*', ch.12, (ed. Viðar Hreinsson, p.280).

<sup>681</sup> *Ibid.*

provoke her rage at being publicly thwarted. Nevertheless, Haraldr did defy her and helped Þorgils. This episode appears to follow earlier descriptions of her, which describe her power, influence with the king, and the need to be on her good side, as her fury could result in her favour being withdrawn. This bears comparison with *Njála* and her bad reaction to Hrútr's departure. *Flóamanna* does not describe her in detail, nor does it mention her ability to practise witchcraft and her propensity to form relationships with young men is alluded to, not stated explicitly. Nevertheless, her power and influence are described in similar terms in *Njála* and other *Íslendingasögur*. Þorgils decides to leave Norway, 'to get away from the injustice of Gunnhildr'.<sup>682</sup> This is again similar to how she is portrayed in other sources, as unjust and capable of influencing her husband and sons to obey her, resulting in them being judged for ruling badly.

Gunnhildr's appearance in *Flóamanna* is brief and Perkins questions how far the Icelandic and Norwegian writings of later centuries can be trusted as historical in their accounts of her.<sup>683</sup> Nevertheless, he points out that 'it would be surprising if the bad reputation almost unanimously accorded to her by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries did not have some fairly substantial foundation in fact'.<sup>684</sup> This argument is difficult to refute, and these twelfth- and thirteenth-century descriptions were those on which *Íslendingasögur* were based and so will reflect an embellishment of earlier material, which was in turn founded to some extent on fact. It is likely that the author's inclusion of her was a deliberate ploy because he knew it would elicit an appropriate response from the audience, who would have known her story from *Egla*

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<sup>682</sup> 'People of Floi', ch.12, (ed. Viðar Hreinsson, p.280).

<sup>683</sup> Perkins, 'Flóamanna'.

<sup>684</sup> *Ibid.*, p.247.

and *Njála*. Her friendship with Þorgils is not dissimilar to that with Hrútr and Egill/Þórofr, and in the earlier *Heimskringla*, her relationship with the lecherous Hákon *jarl* is mentioned, which may well have caught the popular imagination.<sup>685</sup> It remains a distinct possibility that *Flóamanna*'s author used both *Egla* and *Njála*, as all three sagas deal with 'an Icelander who encounters Gunnhildr in connection with a claim to property in Norway'.<sup>686</sup> Thus, it would follow that her portrayal as a character in *Flóamanna* would be similar to those found in the earlier two sagas in which she plays a slightly greater role.

### *Þórðar saga hreðu*

*Þórðar*, written in the late-fourteenth century, is a minor post-classical saga which tells the tale of Þórðr, an otherwise unknown figure who was born in Norway but forced to flee to Iceland.<sup>687</sup> It exists in two versions (Complete and Fragmentary) and both have been somewhat neglected and subject to low scholarly opinion.<sup>688</sup> In spite of this negativity, the saga has been described as 'fluently written and well-structured', and was evidently popular once, as it is one of the better attested sagas.<sup>689</sup> Many of the characters are borrowed from other *Íslendingasögur* and *Landnámabók* even though the saga 'completely lacks any historical basis'.<sup>690</sup> The saga does fleetingly mention Gunnhildr and despite its lack of historicity, her description seems to follow that previously written, presumably because of the

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<sup>685</sup> Perkins, '*Flóamanna*'.

<sup>686</sup> *Ibid.*, p.251.

<sup>687</sup> Viðar Hreinsson, '*Thord Menace*'.

<sup>688</sup> Ward, 'Completing'. This opinion started in the mid-nineteenth century, when Guðbrandur Vigfússon placed it among a group of sagas he dubbed 'spurious' and stated they were partly extemporisations on 'hints in *Landnáma* and other sagas' and partly pure fabrications 'when the very dregs of tradition have been used up'. Guðbrandur Vigfússon, '*Prolegomena*', pp.lxii-lxiii, trans. Arnold, *Post-classical*, p.91. These 'spurious' sagas are in effect the post-classical *Íslendingasögur*.

<sup>689</sup> Viðar Hreinsson, '*Thord Menace*', p.361; Ward, 'Completing'; Lethbridge, 'Observations'.

<sup>690</sup> Boyer, *Þórðar*, p.669.

aforementioned borrowings from *Íslendingasögur*. This is important because it demonstrates that descriptions of Gunnhildr continued to be written into the late-1300s, 400 years after her death, and continued to be based on the earlier saga material.

Gunnhildr plays a minor role in the saga. It is stated that when Þórðr was young, Norway was ruled by the sons of Gunnhildr and that King Gamli Gunnhildarson 'was the best-loved of all the kings of Norway except for King Hákon, King Æthelstan's foster-son'.<sup>691</sup> This is interesting because the majority of extant material described the rule of Gunnhildr's sons as a blight on Norway and yet here, one of them is described in superlative terms. It is possible that this owes nothing to accurate historical recording or relating the true character of a king and owes more to the literary device of contrasting him as a paragon of virtue against Gunnhildr's other son Sigurðr *slefa*, who 'was a great troublemaker with his womanising'.<sup>692</sup> Interestingly, the author does mention a written source that he drew upon, stating that King Gamli was killed in a battle against King Hákon: *sem segir í sögum Nóregskonunga*.<sup>693</sup> This is likely a reference to *Heimskringla*, or a similar compilation, and demonstrates that the author did have access to sagas that recounted Norway's history, although these are not without their problems. Þórðr goes on to kill Sigurðr and when his brother Haraldr hears of it, he convenes an assembly and has Þórðr and his brother outlawed from Norway.<sup>694</sup> The author then describes the brothers' fear that they would not be able to remain in Norway: *fyrir ríki*

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<sup>691</sup> 'Thord Menace', ch.1, (ed. Viðar Hreinsson, p.362).

<sup>692</sup> *Ibid.* It is of course possible that the author had access to a source, now lost, that described Gamli in positive terms.

<sup>693</sup> Þórðar, ch.1, (ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, p.165). 'as it says in the *Sagas of the Norwegian kings*'.

<sup>694</sup> 'Thord Menace', ch.1, (ed. Viðar Hreinsson, p.362).

*Haralds ok Gunnhildar*.<sup>695</sup> This, then, represents evidence that Gunnhildr was considered to wield power alongside her son until the late-fourteenth century. However, it should be noted that the original Old Norse does not give her the title 'queen', but it does unequivocally state that the power was Haraldr and Gunnhildr's. Nonetheless, in the late-1300s, the author believed that both Gunnhildr and Haraldr could force Þórðr into exile. This shows that Gunnhildr continued to be portrayed as a powerful woman ruling alongside, or at the very least influencing her son, which is in keeping with her earlier descriptions. Her role in *Þórðar* is small and she is not described in the same detail, or with the same negativity, that she is in *Laxdæla*, *Egla*, and *Njála*.

#### *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*

*Harðar* is a late-fourteenth-century outlaw saga which tells the tale of the adventures of Hǫrðr and contains familiar motifs from *fornaldarsögur* as well as historical figures such as Haraldr *gráfeldr* and Gunnhildr.<sup>696</sup> The saga survives complete in only one manuscript (AM 556a 4<sup>to</sup>) which was written in the late-fifteenth century, although a version of it may have existed in the thirteenth-century, as it is mentioned in Sturla's c.1280 version of *Landnámabók*.<sup>697</sup> *Harðar*'s inclusion of Gunnhildr is further evidence that she continued to feature in material composed late in the saga writing period, testifying to the longevity of her appeal. Considering the saga likely existed in either an oral or written form much earlier than the version that

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<sup>695</sup> *Þórðar*, ch.1, (ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, p.165). 'because of King Haraldr and Queen Gunnhildr's power'.

<sup>696</sup> Viðar Hreinsson, '*Hord*'. Finnur Jónsson has stated that the version from AM 556a 4<sup>to</sup> cannot be older than 1300. See Einar Sveinsson, *Dating*, pp.105-107 for further details.

<sup>697</sup> Faulkes, '*Harðar*'.

survives today it is probable that it was influenced by descriptions of Gunnhildr found within earlier texts, such as *konungasögur*.

Gunnhildr plays a brief part in *Harðar*, nevertheless it is significant because it adds to the general picture of how she is portrayed in *Íslendingasögur*. It states that Haraldr *gráfeldr* rules Norway and Geirr (Hǫrðr's foster-brother) visits there, where he meets Arnþórr, who is: *féhirðir Gunnhildar konungamóður*.<sup>698</sup> This is interesting because it suggests that Gunnhildr wielded sufficient power and resources to require the services of a treasurer, thus adding weight to the argument that she was a considered an influential woman by medieval writers, a consideration which may have had real basis in the tenth century.<sup>699</sup> Geirr kills Arnþórr after a tussle over a cloak and the news soon reaches the king, who wants recompense for the murder of his friend and mother's treasurer.<sup>700</sup> Haraldr is persuaded to accept compensation for himself but he will not do so for his mother, which seems to suggest that he is nervous of angering her, by accepting something on her behalf. This hints at Gunnhildr having an uncertain temper, which has already been seen in *Floámanna* when she kicked Þorgils off the high seat in a fit of rage. Indeed, Geirr's friends are anxious to encourage him to leave because they cannot risk allowing him to stay, *fyrir Gunnhildi*.<sup>701</sup> Furthermore, Hǫrðr is told to travel further east, as his friend receives intelligence that Gunnhildr is inbound and he cannot protect him against her.<sup>702</sup> This again demonstrates that Gunnhildr was a force with which to be reckoned and that when one of her retainers is murdered she is quick to seek

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<sup>698</sup> *Harðar*, (eds. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, p.36). 'Gunnhildr *konungamóðir*'s treasurer'. 'Hord', (ed. Viðar Hreinsson, p.206).

<sup>699</sup> According to the editors, Arnþórr is not known from any other writing, meaning his role is possibly spurious.

<sup>700</sup> *Harðar*, (eds. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson).

<sup>701</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37. 'because of Gunnhildr'.

<sup>702</sup> *Ibid.*

revenge.<sup>703</sup> Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson also highlight that *grimmylndi gunnhildar er víða lýst*, indicating that her portrayal in *Harðar* is not extraordinary.<sup>704</sup>

Gunnhildr catches up with Geirr and: *sendir menn sína til at drepa Geir*.<sup>705</sup> Subsequently it is said that: *þykkir mönnum sem Gunnhildr hafi bannat Geir með fjölkynngi sinni til Nóregs*.<sup>706</sup> This is interesting because this is the first *Íslendingasögur* since *Njála* to link her with magic, which may be because the earlier version of *Harðar* was composed in the thirteenth century when the sources naming her as a witch were also being written. The author's use of *þykkir mönnum* ('people thought') also seems to indicate that his source may have been oral, as the use of similar phraseology in earlier sources suggests such. Ultimately Gunnhildr's lust for revenge goes unsated as Geirr escapes, leaving her displeased. Her sorcery does not cause harm in *Harðar*, unlike in *Egla*, *Njála*, and the sources that claim her magic killed Hákon. Her appearance in the saga may be short-lived, yet it demonstrates that well into the fourteenth century her reputation as a wicked witch continued to be replicated, which is perhaps a representation that medieval authors considered the only way a woman could be powerful was by supernatural means.

## Conclusion

The *Íslendingasögur* are noticeably different to the other sources. It is only *Egla* that mentions themes familiar from *konungasögur*, naming Gunnhildr's father as

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<sup>703</sup> cf. *Egla*.

<sup>704</sup> *Harðar*, (eds. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, p.37). 'Gunnhildr's cruelty is widely described'.

<sup>705</sup> *Ibid.*, ch.18, p.49. 'sent her men to kill Geirr'. The use of the reflexive possessive pronoun *sína* ('her') indicates that the men were indeed hers to command.

<sup>706</sup> *Ibid.* 'People thought that Gunnhildr had lured Geirr to Norway with witchcraft'.

Qzurr *toti* and her as a beautiful, vicious witch. This is perhaps unsurprising considering the distinct possibility that both *Egla* and *Heimskringla* were written by Snorri. The *Íslendingasögur* introduce new themes, such as Gunnhildr befriending young men and being involved in Icelanders' property claims in Norway, which perhaps makes the stories more relevant to an Icelandic audience. For the most part, with the exception of *Egla*, *Íslendingasögur* focus on the latter part of Gunnhildr's life, after Eiríkr's death, and mention the important role she had in government, ruling alongside her sons. It is interesting that the witchcraft motif continues to appear, prominently in *Egla* and *Njála*, and less so in *Harðar*, but it is less pronounced than has been seen in the 'Norwegian synoptics', *GD*, and *konungasögur*. It is difficult to account for this difference, but it may reflect her lesser role in the majority of *Íslendingasögur*, as the accusations of sorcery appear in *Egla* and *Njála* where her role is larger, *Harðar*'s inclusion of her magic could be due to its possible earlier origin. *Laxdæla* is the only *Íslendingasögur* to show any favour towards Gunnhildr, which could possibly be down to the author's gender, although this is contentious. Generally speaking, the *Íslendingasögur* continue to portray Gunnhildr in a negative light although with different emphasis, on her sexuality and her relationships with young Icelandic men. The differences between *Íslendingasögur* and the other sources are not unexpected considering they were written between 200 and 400 years after Gunnhildr's life.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis has explored the primary source material containing portrayals of Gunnhildr, while seeking an explanation for why she was so maligned. The following questions emerged during the exploration: first, how do the sources differ in their portrayal of Gunnhildr? Second, how are their portrayals affected by the time and place in which they were written? Third, to what extent do they add up to a realistic description of a tenth-century queen? And fourth, is it possible to pinpoint the origins of the negativity directed towards her? The sources were analysed chronologically and organised into chapters by genre, which made it possible to see patterns emerging across the portrayals. The findings of the analysis will be explained below by addressing each question in turn. It will also be useful to refer to the chart (Appendix I).

Previous research has established Gunnhildr's notoriety in Old Norse literature and Scandinavian history. Jóhanna Friðriksdóttir and Nordal have both highlighted her active role in government, which the latter linked with the claims of witchcraft that clung to her, believing they were attempts by medieval writers to explain how a woman could have possibly become so powerful - the only way she could was by magic. This is certainly plausible. Across the source material analysed (19 texts in total) nine mention her involvement in government, the ones that do not are the earlier Norwegian sources, *GD*, and some *Íslendingasögur*. Nearly all the *konungasögur* (apart from *Orkneyinga* and *Fagrskinna*) describe her role in government, and most of the same sources also describe her as a witch. Thus, it is likely that the reason Gunnhildr was so maligned by medieval writers was because they were not comfortable with how much power she had, and so they sought to discredit her by linking what they saw as her unnatural power of rule with

supernatural abilities. This is not unfamiliar territory as, according to Stephen Mitchell, 'the theme of evil women, especially evil women whose behaviour corrupts men and challenges male society, features prominently in the Nordic Middle Ages'.<sup>707</sup>

No two sources agree and describe Gunnhildr in exactly the same way, although it is possible to speak of general agreement within the genres. Moreover, the word *greypr* ('cruel') occurs again and again in the vernacular sources.<sup>708</sup> The 'Norwegian synoptics' all describe Gunnhildr as vicious and blame her for the bad rule of her husband and sons. The earliest of them, *HN*, contains the least information and is the only source to say that she was Danish by birth, whereas *HarN* and *Ágrip* have fuller descriptions and are more similar to each other and both link her to sorcery, blame her for Hákon's death, and say she was drowned in a bog. It is less easy to find commonality among *konungasögur*. Many agree that she was involved in government, a witch, beautiful, intelligent, and the daughter of Hálogalander Qzurr, but not all do. *Íslendingasögur* for the most part agree that Gunnhildr was partial to befriending and seducing young men and that she played an important role, ruling alongside her sons, the associations with magic also reappear in some of the texts. Saxo also follows the Norwegian sources' example, blaming her witchcraft for Hákon's death, which is unsurprising considering the likelihood that he mixed with Norwegian clergy who may have brought local gossip when they were exiled to Lund.

The differences in Gunnhildr's portrayals between the texts can be explained by the authors' personal agenda but also where they accessed their information.

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<sup>707</sup> Mitchell, *Witchcraft*, p.176.

<sup>708</sup> In the Latin texts, the word is usually a version of *malitia* or *malificam*, which has a similar meaning, although with an undertone of degeneracy and magic.

*Laxdæla* is a good example of this, as it is the only *Íslendingasögur* which portrays Gunnhildr favourably and it is eminently possible that this is due to the author's identity as a woman, who could see past misogynistic attempts to explain her *chutzpah* with supernatural abilities. In some cases, it is easy to see the bonds between texts, for example it is clear that *Ágrip* and *HarN* are linked, and the 'Norwegian synoptics' may have used Icelandic source material, but they all seem to have been written in Norway and have been linked, in particular, to Niðaróss. However, it is not always so obvious, and the textual relationships can be very difficult to understand.

Generally speaking, the portrayals of Gunnhildr are all negative, with the possible exceptions of *Laxdæla* and *Orkneyinga*. However, the sources' dates and origins do seem to affect the content of the portrayals, although the latter's influence should not be overstated, as there is tendency in medieval Scandinavian historiography to allow national paradigms to dominate thinking.<sup>709</sup> The negativity found in the Icelandic sources, as Sayers points out, is likely due to the threat posed by Norway to Iceland in the thirteenth century. Besides, the Norwegian texts display the same antipathy, suggesting that either they received their information from earlier generations of Icelanders, such as Ari and Sæmundr, or that she was equally notorious in Norway. Certainly, *Íslendingasögur* portray her as a man-hungry virago, capable of causing the downfall of young Icelandic men. The earliest sources are Norwegian and written in Latin, and they generally focus on her cruelty and responsibility for her menfolk's bad rule, whereas the vernacular texts offer a more nuanced image, describing her beauty and intelligence as well as her negative traits. Gunnhildr is described as a witch by the authors of both *HarN* and *Harðar*, even

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<sup>709</sup> Long, *Relationship*, p.19.

though they were written centuries apart. This demonstrates Gunnhildr's popularity as a character who medieval authors loved to hate and her survival in *Íslendingasögur* means that people were still aware of her notoriety in the fourteenth century and wanted to include her, even only as a metaphor for the threat posed by Norway.

Gunnhildr was a tenth-century queen and every source was written centuries after she lived. Therefore, is it really realistic to think in terms of the texts offering an accurate description of a tenth-century woman and not the prevailing attitudes of thirteenth-century men? The answer is a resounding no. However, there is a more nuanced approach. It remains distinctly likely that Gunnhildr did have a reputation in life. She was, after all, a woman who outlived her husband and sons and many of the sources agree that she had an active role in governing, which must have involved a degree of ruthlessness. Gunnhildr was not the first or last woman in history to exceed the expectations placed on her by her male-dominated environment. Indeed, not for nothing did Stafford dub the tenth century as 'the century of women'.<sup>710</sup> It is likely that Gunnhildr was ruthless, ruling at a time of famine and unrest in Norway, for which she became a scapegoat, and so these facts were embellished and altered, perhaps by local bad feeling (especially around Trøndelag) and were written down by eleventh-century Icelandic historians, who went on to influence the authors of the 'Norwegian synoptics', *konungasögur*, and *Íslendingasögur*. It is worth remembering, too, that the texts' authors were often churchmen, who, according to Jochens, had a 'mistrust of women in general and of forceful pagan women in particular'.<sup>711</sup> So, it is likely that the portrayals owe more to

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<sup>710</sup> Stafford, *Queens*, p.141.

<sup>711</sup> Jochens, *Images*, p.182.

medieval attitudes than they offer a real description of a tenth-century queen, nonetheless they may have a kernel of truth to them, *i.e.* that Gunnhildr was a capable woman, who advised and ruled alongside her husband and sons, which is altogether more likely than her being a sorcerous seductress. The research here finds common ground with Nordal, that she was a trailblazer and formidable woman, blamed for Norway's misfortunes.

This thesis was written in order to broaden understanding about this shadowy figure from Old Norse literature and history by undertaking an analysis of a broad spectrum of texts, not just *Íslendingasögur*. The subject would benefit from future research. This would entail a thorough search of *Íslendingasögur* (both translated and untranslated) for further evidence of portrayals, as it is likely, given her popularity, that there are more to discover and analyse. It might be helpful to study Gunnhildr alongside other tenth-century queens, which would provide opportunities for comparison. Similarly, analysis of similar characters from contemporary literature would also provide interesting points of comparison. Lastly, it would be very interesting to continue research into the history of how pagan queens were received and written about in the Middle Ages, which would provide Gunnhildr and others like her with a medieval context for their portrayals, which could be compared with the early-medieval contexts of their lives.

## Appendix I

	Chapter One			Ch. Two		Chapter Three					Chapter Four								
	'Norwegian synoptics'			Saxo	Konungasögur										Íslendingasögur				
	HN	HarN	Ágrip	GD	Óst	Ork	Fagr	Heims	Joms Page 291	Mesta	Hallf Mesta Mod	Egla	Lax	Níðla	Flóa	Póðar	Harðar		
Norwegian Source	*	*	*																
Icelandic Source					*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
Danish	*																		
Hálogalander			*		*		*	*	*	*	*								
Qzurr /afskegg			*				*	*	*	*	*								
Qzurr toti					*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
Beauty			*				*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
Witch			(*)	*	(*)		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
Vicious/cruel	*	*	*				*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
Intelligence/ Wisdom/Counsel			*				*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
Fury	*														*				
Man-eater								*											
Blamed for Hákon's death		*	*	*				(*)		(*)									
Blamed for bad rule	*	*	*				*												
Involved in Government					*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
Befriending young men										*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	
Bog plot		*	*					*				*							
Norwegian property claim											*			*	*				
Key		Norwegian source				Icelandic source					Danish source					Uncertain origin	(*) Implied		

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