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Abstract

THE LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE OF CLOTHING IN THE ICELANDIC FAMILY SAGAS

Jane Christine Roscoe

This thesis examines the occurrences of clothes and the particular ways in which they are used in some of the Icelandic family sagas in order to assess their literary significance.

In a genre where few superfluous details are given by the writers, it seems reasonable to suppose that even a seemingly unimportant detail such as a comment regarding a man's cloak is present for a reason.

The thesis is divided into three sections. Section One deals with the use of colour in dress, beginning with a general chapter on coloured clothes but continuing with an examination of specific colours such as red, blue, green and white. In the second section two contrasting items, head-dress and footwear, have been grouped together. The third section concentrates on major items of body clothing and is divided into three parts. The first five chapters concern individual and generally unrelated issues, whereas in the following three chapters clothing is associated in one way or another with the supernatural. Finally there is an examination of certain literary strategies used by the writer of *Laxdoela saga*.

At times a motif involving clothes can be seen to have a recognised received meaning, especially if it can be found in another saga or literary form. On the other hand certain incidents have been analysed specifically within the context of the saga in which they occur.

During this study various likely influences on the medieval Icelandic saga writer have been taken into consideration - influences which may be derived from pagan and Christian mythology, cultural traditions, heroic sagas and romantic European literature.

An awareness of any possible literary significance of clothes within the sagas can aid a clearer understanding of the text and of the motives of the authors.

Declaration

None of the material contained in this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree in this or any other university.

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THE LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE OF CLOTHING
IN THE ICELANDIC FAMILY SAGAS

JANE CHRISTINE ROSCOE

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Thesis submitted for the degree of M.A.

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CONTENTS

Preface

INTRODUCTION 2

SECTION ONE: Coloured Clothing

Introduction 8

Chapter 1 Litklæði 9

Chapter 2 Blue Clothes 29

Chapter 3 Red Clothes 50

Chapter 4 Green Clothes 69

Chapter 5 White Clothes 88

Chapter 6 Tvískiptir klæði 104

Conclusion 117

SECTION TWO: Head-dress and Footwear

Chapter 7 Head-dress 120

a) Woman's head-dress worn by a man 122

b) Lín - Bridal head-dress 128

c) Laxdoela saga - Motr 129

d) Laxdoela saga - Guðrún's Dream 133

e) Orkneyinga saga 135

f) Head-dress - men: Síðir hettir 137
Girzkir hattir 141

Chapter 8 Skópvengir 147

Conclusion 159

SECTION THREE: Major items of body clothing

(i) Unusual Use of Body Clothing

Chapter 9	A Sign of Grief?	162
Chapter 10	Bloodstained Garments	170
Chapter 11	Hólmgöngur	189
Chapter 12	A Gift of Friendship?	197
Chapter 13	Sewing a Shirt	226

(ii) Clothing and the Supernatural

Chapter 14	Witchcraft	239
Chapter 15	Breiða feld á höfuð sér	252
Chapter 16	The Greenland Prophetess	272

(iii) Literary Strategies

Chapter 17	Laxdoela saga:	287
	1) Melkorka	287
	2) Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir and Þórðr Ingunnarson	290
	3) Guðrún and the killing of Bolli Þorleiksson	296
	4) Helgi Harðbeinsson identifies his attackers	303

CONCLUSION	313
Appendix	316
Bibliography	319

PREFACE

I am grateful to several people for their assistance and encouragement during the writing of this thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

Descriptions of characters occur frequently in the family sagas either when the person is introduced or further on in the narrative. Physical attributes are commented on - a man may be described as tall or fair; aspects of temperament are given - courageous, magnanimous etc. Yet despite this we do not often hear about what the character is wearing - and when we do it can be difficult to discern why clothes are being mentioned at this particular point and why only in relation to a certain character.

The saga writers are known for their laconic style. They do not provide extraneous descriptive detail. Any such apparent details which do occur then must, if their full significance is recognised, contribute to the progression of events or to the portrayal of a character.

Characters are central to the sagas yet as in drama they are always portrayed externally, the audience must learn about them from their actions and dialogue. Physical descriptions provide further information, especially if some element of dress is included which has particular associations immediately understood by a contemporary audience.

At times however, it is not so much what is worn but how garments can be used in other ways, often symbolically, to evoke a certain response or to function as part of a specific procedure.

In this work a number of phenomena drawn from the *Íslendingasögur* have been examined and analysed in order to determine what effect or particular significance they might have within the texts in which they occur.

The first section examines the use of colour in clothing. Chapter One deals with coloured clothes in general and the following five chapters look at various colours which occur in the *Íslendingasögur* in connection with garments. The analysis attempts to discern whether the significance of colour is connected to events within the text or whether it relates more to the character of the wearer.

Head-dress and footwear have been grouped together in Section Two. Regarding head-dress there is a distinction between the significance of head-wear worn by women and that worn by men. As far as foot-wear is concerned the motif discussed in this chapter is associated only with men, and how they react to an unfortunate accident.

In Section Three the use of major items of body clothing has been dealt with - this includes garments such as tunics, shirts and cloaks. On the whole it is when these appear in unusual situations that they seem to have a particular literary significance. This section has been divided into three sub-sections. The first five chapters concern various different issues which are not on the whole related to each other. For that reason they have been grouped together under a general heading of 'Unusual Use of Body Clothing'. However the following group of three

chapters all relate to the supernatural in some way. Finally in the third part, the literary strategies used by the author of *Laxdoela saga* have been examined.

Although the main focus is on the *Íslendingasögur*, other sources have been studied in an attempt to elucidate the literary symbolism which may be present in the texts. Parallel motifs and incidents found elsewhere have been discussed in order to assess possible influences upon the saga writers. The *fornaldarsögur*, although probably not written down until the middle of the thirteenth century, would have been present in oral form from a much older period. They provide evidence of traditions which were familiar to the medieval Icelandic audience. The *Poetic* and *Prose Edda* are invaluable as a source of pagan mythology; material from these texts has been used to examine the degree of pagan influence on the symbolic use of dress. On the other hand Christian analogies have also been considered wherever these appeared to provide illuminating comparisons. Medieval romantic literature from Europe exerted an influence on the Icelandic saga writers from about 1250 onwards. To assess the effect of this with regard to dress in the *Íslendingasögur*, parallel motifs found in the *riddara sögur* have been investigated.

Occasionally non-Icelandic sources which are less obviously related to the sagas have been taken into consideration, various ballads for instance. On the whole this is only in an attempt to take into account any possible traditional symbolism behind certain motifs; it is of course difficult to ascertain just how influential such

traditions may have been on the saga writers.

Most of the major family sagas have been studied in this work but it was impossible, in the time available for an MA thesis, to cover all the *Íslendingasögur*. The bibliography lists the Icelandic texts used; it provides a guide to those which have been included in this study and, conversely, also indicates those which have not been dealt with.

Incidents involving dress have been analysed primarily from a literary point of view - the main issue being how the writer has used clothes either symbolically or otherwise as part of his narrative technique. The precise outward appearance of a garment is not always of importance, but wherever it is necessary to be aware of the particular form of an item of dress, details have been given in the relevant chapters. Much of this information has been derived from Hjalmar Falk's *Altwestnordische Kleiderkunde*, which is itself based a great deal on evidence from literary sources and as such may not be totally reliable concerning the kind of dress worn in medieval Iceland. Occasionally the sagas themselves give some extra details about a garment or the way it was worn. This can also be misleading as, although the narratives are set in the saga age (930-1030), descriptions of clothes may be more representative of what was worn at the time of writing, the thirteenth century. Alternatively it may be a thirteenth century view, probably not always accurate, of tenth century dress and customs. However whether the particular outfit is typical of either period is not

generally the main consideration when attempting to determine the literary interpretation intended by the author.

SECTION ONE

COLOURED CLOTHING

COLOURED CLOTHING

Introduction

The six chapters in this section examine the use of colour in clothing. It is not always easy to determine any particularly consistent reason for the colour to be mentioned or any uniform symbolism which can be applied conclusively to every instance in which that colour is worn. Certain hypotheses have been looked at with varying success - but in the end it is perhaps still a matter of subjective opinion as to which one is the most appropriate in the specific contexts.

Chapter One

LITKLÆÐI

During the medieval period undyed homespun - *vaðmál* - seems to have been the material generally used for clothes in Iceland. Garments coloured by any form of dye would have been more expensive, more of a luxury item. Because of this such clothes would be worn only by those who could afford them, by people higher up the social scale, and even then the finest robes may have been worn only on special occasions. Quite often in the *Íslendingasögur* the author remarks that either one person or many were *í litklæðum*. Usually this brief formulaic statement is meant to imply rather more than that the character is colourfully dressed. It can provide further information about the character or situation, or confirm aspects we are already aware of.

Social status can be emphasised through dress. When Bolli Bollason travels to Norway, it is his ambition *vera fyrir öðrum mönnum*. To achieve this he ensures that his men are *betr búnir at klæðum ok vápnum en annat boejarfólk* (Laxd.s. ch.73 p.212). Their splendid attire reflects on him as their leader, a wealthy man apparently, to be able to provide so well for his following. Not only status through wealth may be suggested but also a natural superiority. The *Landnámabók* mentions a group of people arriving at an Assembly who were *svá vel búnir, at menn hugðu, at Æsir væri (par) komnir* (1). Though this effect may have had much to do with their armour, it is quite

likely that the actual clothes they wore would have been of good quality and therefore not the ordinary undyed homespun. Earl Hákon, in *Færeyinga saga*, takes Sigmundur to visit a priestess, she sits in her house *og var hún veglega búin* (2). Þorbjörg, the Greenland prophetess is also a richly adorned representative of the gods - although in this case the description of her dress is mainly of importance for its supernatural symbolism rather than as an indication of her social status. (Eiríks s.r. ch.4 p.206).

Wearing coloured or fine clothes can be associated with foreigners or with travel abroad. Men returning from Europe had often been influenced by continental fashions. When Björn Ásbrandsson returns to Iceland, he dresses himself well *pví at hann hafði samit sik eptir síð útlenzkra höfðingja* (Eyrb.s. ch.40 p.107). Possessing valuable items of dress implied a successful trip either through trade or viking raids, or through royal favour where garments had been given to an Icelander by a king or earl.

Special occasions - Assembly, wedding, feast - required a better form of dress for respectable people. Unnr and her women were *vel búnar* when they attended the Alþingi; Hallgerðr with her friends were similarly *vel búnar* at the Assembly where she meets Gunnarr. When Ásdís Styrsdóttir walks past the two berserks in *sinn bezta búnað*, they are puzzled as to the reason for such a fine outfit when there is no obvious occasion for it. Þorgunna, the Hebridean, declares that she needs her fine

clothes *svá at hon væri óneist at boðum eða öðrum mannfundum* (3). In the case of two of these women, there is also an awareness of sexual attraction. Hallgerðr attracts the attention of Gunnarr and the outfit of Ásdís may be designed to encourage the berserks who are employed in hard physical labour which they hope will be rewarded by one of them, Halli, obtaining Ásdís as his wife.

Depending on the context in which it is used, the phrase *í litklæðum* can evoke any of these various associations.

1. Status

It is particularly on special occasions that the wearer has the opportunity to demonstrate his social standing and wealth through his or her outfit.

a) Laxdoela saga

- (i) Allir menn hans váru í litklæðum.
Peir váru alls á þriðja tigi manna.
(ch.44 p.135)

Persuaded by his father to attend an autumn feast, Kjartan not only puts on his own finery but ensures that his company, over twenty men, are also well dressed. It is bound to enhance his status, particularly important to him at this time as his self-esteem is somewhat bruised by the loss of Guðrún to Bolli, a man he has been accustomed to regard as slightly inferior to himself.

- (ii) ok höfðu þeir nær sex tigu manna, ok var þat lið mjök valit, því at flestir allir menn váru í litklæðum.
(ch.68 p.201)

Snorri goði and Þorkell Eyjólfsson meet together prior to riding to Helgafell for the wedding of Guðrún and Þorkell.

Their combined retinues make an impressive sight - nearly sixty men, most of whom wear coloured clothing. An indication of the high social standing of Snorri and the bridegroom, it also reflects on Guðrún, the bride and hostess. Her future kinsmen and her wedding guests are drawn from the upper echelons of Icelandic society.

b) Gísla saga.

Þeir fara nú til várþings eitt vár með
fjóra tígu manna, ok váru allir í
litklæðum.

(ch.5 p.19)

Gísli, Þorkell and their brother-in-law, Þorgrímr, travel together to an assembly accompanied by Vésteinn. Their following of forty are all well outfitted - evidence of the wealth and prosperity of the family. At this point in the narrative there is some emphasis on their prosperity as a group, an emphasis on their unity. It contrasts with subsequent events when the kinsmen create their own divisions through their acts of violence. It is at this local assembly that their bonds of friendship begin to disintegrate.

c) Grettis saga.

'Nú skulu vér ríða í litklæðum í dag
ok látum skógarmanninn þat sjá, at vér
erum eigi sem aðrir förumenn, er hér
rekask dagliga.'

(ch.59 p.190)

Gísli, an ostentatious man, boasts that he can easily deal with the outlaw Grettir. He intends to attract Grettir's attention by his bright raiment and armour, obviously not the usual attire for travellers in Iceland. Grettir has no difficulty in overcoming this showy group. Gísli's

subsequent humiliation points to the irony in the use of the phrase *í litklæðum*; any status this man aspired to was founded on empty boasts and vanity.

2. Foreigners

In *Eyrbyggja saga*, a group of merchants ride to a local assembly and they are *allir í litklæðum*; they are traders from Norway (Eyrb.s. ch.40 p.107). In the Faroes, Sigurður and his companions watch some men approach - *þeir sá að menn voru í litklæðum og með vopnum*. Unsure of the identity of these strangers, Sigurður guesses correctly by their outfits that they must be the Norwegian merchants led by Arnljótr (4). Unrecognised, Skúta enters his enemy's camp. He is curious about one of the men and is told - *þann heita Vestmann, er fyrir þeim var ok í litklæðunum var*: Skúta kills this man (Reyk.s. Ch.29 p.239). A *Vestmaðr* is 'a man from the West, one from the British Isles especially the Irish' (CV) - a foreigner, who in his bright dress is unfortunately a little too prominent for his own good on this occasion.

3. Icelanders returning from abroad

In *Hrafnkels saga*, Eyvindr returns after several years abroad; he rides to his brother's farm with three *farmenn - váru þeir ok allir í litklæðum ok riðu við fagra skjöldu* (ch.8 p.126). Coloured clothes reflect his status and for Eyvindr, his true worth as a man of standing and courage. Barði of *Heiðarvíga saga* rides with his followers through Víðidalr where they encounter *þrír menn í litklæðum* (ch.21 p.274). These three have just landed in Iceland after a winter spent abroad. As kinsmen of

Barði the status implied by their clothes adds to his own family honour and pride. The case of Bergr inn rakki of *Vatnsdoela saga* is slightly different. He returns to Iceland in the summer and rides with his company; they are *allir í litklæðum* (ch.31 p.84). But Bergr is a worthless character, conceited and full of his own self-importance. Thus the claim to status, represented by the *litklæði* that a returning Icelander wears, can be a façade.

4. Recognition

At times characters are identified (often by their enemies) through the coloured clothes that they wear. Occasionally *í litklæðum* is the only indication given and identity is deduced from this alone.

The farmers who have captured Grettir see three people approaching and *var einn í litklæðum* (5). They assume, correctly, that this is Þorbjörg, the mistress of Vatnsfjörðr (Gret.s. ch.52 p.168). When Gunnarr's shepherd warns him about the riders he has seen he mentions that four of them were *í litklæðum*. Gunnarr then knows that *þar mun vera Otkell* (Njáls s. ch.54 p.136). Sigmundur is out searching for a stallion when he is noticed and recognised by Skarpheðinn - *því at Sigmundur var í litklæðum*. True the actual colour is then mentioned when Skarpheðinn refers to that *rauðálfinn*, but the first term refers merely to coloured clothes in general (Njáls s. ch.45 p.115).

Obviously more detailed descriptions of clothes can often fit into these categories and where this is the case

it may have been pointed out when individual instances have been discussed throughout this thesis. If these aspects are not emphasised at such times, this is not generally because they have not been recognised, but because a more relevant symbolic interpretation seems appropriate to the context in which they appear.

Influence of the *Riddara sögur*

King Hákon Hákonarson reigned in Norway from 1217 to 1263. It was during his reign that the Icelandic commonwealth came to an end and the country became subservient to the Norwegian king. Hákon encouraged and promoted in Norway a more European style of life based on chivalry and courtly ideals. Under his patronage romance literature such as the French *chansons de geste* were translated into Norse. Magnús, Hákon's son, continued the policies of his father up to his death in 1280. This culture and these 'sagas of chivalry' began to exert an influence on Icelandic writers; it is evident in the later *Íslendingasögur*, those written from around 1250 onwards (6).

Descriptions of dress become more elaborate and splendid, more in keeping with the appearances of European knights and their ladies. The writer of *Laxdoela saga* was one of the first to succumb to the new fashion. Chapter Sixty-three with its detailed accounts of Helgi's attackers, of each individual outfit, owes much to romantic literature (7). Descriptions of three major characters occur at intervals in this saga; they become

progressively more ornate from generation to generation. Chapter Twenty-three describes Óláfr pái at the Alþingi:

hann var í skarlatasklæðum, er Haraldr konungr hafði gefit honum; hann hafði á höfði hjálm gullroðinn ok sverð búið í hendi, er Mýrkjartan konungr hafði gefit honum.

(ch.23 p.64)

When we come to his son, Kjartan, in Chapter Forty-four more details have been added. This young hero wears *skarlatasklæði*, a gift from King Óláfr Tryggvason. His sword is also a royal gift and he too wears a gilded helmet. But added to his accoutrements are a gold-adorned spear and a *skjöld á hlið rauðan, ok dreginn á með gulli krossinn helgi* (p.134). Yet it is in the portrayal of Bolli Bollason when he returns from abroad that the writer clearly displays his attachment to courtly splendour. Bolli is the epitome of the fashionable European in his insistence on silk garments embroidered with gold - an Icelandic version of the handsome and courtly knight.

Bolli var svá mikill skartsmaðr, er hann kom út ór för þessi, at hann vildi engi klæði bera nema skarlatasklæði ok pellsklæði, ok öll vápn hafði hann gullbúin. Hann var kallaðr Bolli inn príði. Hann var í pellsklæðum, er Garðskonungr hafði gefit honum; hann hafði ýzta skarlataskápu rauða; hann var gyrðr Fótbít, ok váru at honum hjölt gullbúin ok meðalkaflinn gulli vafiðr; hann hafði gyldan hjálm á höfði ok rauðan skjöld á hlið, ok á dreginn riddari með gulli; hann hafði glaðel á hendi, sem títt er í útlondum, ok hvar sem þeir tóku gistingar, þá gáðu konur engis annars en horfa á Bolla ok skart hans ok þeira féлага. Með slíkri kurteisi ríðr Bolli vestr í sveitir
.....

(ch.77 p.224-225)

Riddari is specifically mentioned, although in

connection with the shield; but the implication is surely there that Bolli himself is a most knightly figure. He carries a *glaðel* (8) not the usual Icelandic *spjót*. This is apparently according to foreign custom - *sem títt er í útlöndum*; the phrase echoes Bolli's complete outfit - it is all according to foreign custom. The terms *skarlat*, *pell* and *kurteisi* are also of foreign origin and appropriate in this romantic context (9). As befits the overall image of a handsome knight, the Icelandic women are completely overcome with his magnificent appearance. (Note that Bolli's robes are not a gift from any minor royalty but from such an exalted figure as the Byzantine Emperor!)

Kári, in *Njáls saga*, belongs to a similar tradition. With his fleet of ten ships, he makes a grand entrance into the narrative standing at the mast of the leading ship as he sails to the rescue of the *Njálssynir*:

En á því skipi, er fyrst fór, stóð
maðr við siglu; sá var í silkitreyju
ok hafði gyldan hjálm, en hárit bæði
mikit ok fagrt; sjá maðr hafði spjót
gullrekit í hendi.

(ch.84 p.203)

Later, in Iceland, he wears his *silkitreyja* when he accompanies the *Njálssynir* in their attack on *Þráinn*:

Næst honum gekk Kári; hann hafði
silkitreyju ok hjálm gyldan, skjöld ok
var dreginn á leó.

(ch.92 p.231)

The lion on his shield, a symbol of bravery, adds a finishing touch to this romantic hero (10). It is perhaps significant that later in the saga when Kári is involved in the serious business of revenge killings after the

burning of Njáll, there is no indication of any splendid, romantic outfit. Such light-hearted, chivalric descriptions would not easily accord with the particularly grave issues of vengeance and honour which followed this momentous event - issues which could have far-reaching effects on society and must in the end, for the sake of social stability, be resolved by some form of reconciliation.

Skarlat

It should be made clear before further discussing colour that in the medieval period scarlet did not necessarily refer to a colour as such but to a kind of cloth - a woven wool cloth of good quality. *Skarlat* as a word seems to have come into the Norse language from either French or English: Old French - *escarlate*, Middle English - *scarlat* and the medieval Latin term is *scarlatum* (11).

Clothes, and cloth, of *skarlat* would have come from abroad; it was not manufactured in Iceland. At the court in Norway, Óláfr pái receives from King Haraldr at Yule, *klæði skorin af skarlati* - clothes cut from scarlet cloth. (Laxd.s. ch.22 p.60) Kjartan receives a similar gift when he visits King Óláfr - *ölli klæði nýskorin af skarlati* (Laxd.s. ch.41 p.124). The colour may not have been the red shade we have come to accept as represented by 'scarlet'. Chapter Thirteen in *Njáls saga* has Hallgerðr dressed *í rauðum skarlatskyrtli* (p.44); the addition of 'red' would be irrelevant if this was implied by the term

skarlat. Falk comments that the colour was not the main issue denoted by this term, that scarlet could be found in brown, blue, green and even white shades (12).

It was without doubt a fine and expensive cloth. The fastidious Bolli Bollason, the *mikill skartsmáðr*, would wear no other clothes but those made of *skarlat* or *pell*, (*pell* being also a superior type of material) (13). Falk points out that *skikkjur* were considered luxury garments, they were long, generally lined with fur and, because of their splendour, were often favoured as gifts (14). The material frequently associated with this garment is *skarlat*.

Another argument has been presented however, which while it differs somewhat in its content, still leads to a similar conclusion regarding this textile: i.e. an expensive and particularly splendid cloth. John J. Munro is of the opinion that medieval scarlet was generally a red shade of colour, or at least contained some element of red dye. (15) The word 'scarlet' apparently suggests that it may have originated from either the Flemish *scarlaken* or Old High German *scarlachen*; terms which translated as 'shorn cloth'. In other words this was woollen cloth which had been finely finished, the surface of the wool shorn maybe three or four times to produce a fine wool cloth with no trace of the weave. This would seem to suggest an extensive, and thus expensive, process adding to the value of the finished cloth. However other textiles were also subjected to similar finishing techniques, such methods were not exclusive to scarlet.

What was unique to scarlet though was the particular kind of dye used.

The red colouring was obtained not from the more usual madder but from an insect, a parasite which lived on the kermes oak. To extract the dye these insects were killed, dried and crushed. The dyestuff itself acquired the name kermes; it produced a rich, bright shade of red. It kept well and could be transported to wherever required. But it was an expensive dye, and when applied to textiles of particularly high quality the overall worth of the finished article would ensure that its use was restricted to the wealthier members of society.

Munro explains the terms found in medieval texts which refer to scarlet cloth of various colours ie. blue or brown, as being textiles either in the process of being dyed and not yet completed by the use of kermes, or the result of a mixed dying with the kermes dye being applied at some point, whatever the ultimate colour might be. Presumably those fabrics dyed exclusively with the kermes dye, those of the bright red synonymous with our modern scarlat, would be the more valuable (16).

Munro's association of scarlet with the presence of a red dye might, on the surface, indicate that garments described in the sagas as *skarlat* ought to be classified and analysed with those specified as *rauðr*. But this is not really the case - *rauðr* could indicate any kind of cloth which is dyed red, a more valuable cloth than natural homespun perhaps, but not necessarily of the same

standard as scarlet. *Skarlat* still has to be considered separately as an indication of social standing and wealth, especially in the light of Munro's argument which concludes that such 'sartorial splendour' was strictly limited to the wealthier classes, to royalty and others of aristocratic rank.

This in itself raises certain questions, another dimension. Would many Icelanders have 'qualified', have accumulated so much wealth as to be able to obtain these prestigious garments? Where the garment was a royal gift, the recipient must have been particularly favoured, elevated to a pedestal almost, to receive such an exclusive present. The mention of *skarlatsskikkja*, of other garments of *skarlat*, begins to assume a fairytale quality. Knowing the actual value of such garments, the restriction of them to a select few, the descriptions in the texts appear almost as wishful thinking, they become to some extent unreal - a fantasy portrayal. It is not the actual splendour of the tenth and eleventh centuries that they reflect, rather a certain wish-fulfillment of the thirteenth century: a time when the Icelandic commonwealth was crumbling and the country was in the process of losing its independence.

Where *rauðr* had been specifically mentioned in relation to a *skarlat* garment i.e. *rauðr skarlatsskikkja*, it may suggest that this garment is made from the best quality of scarlet cloth - cloth dyed solely with kermes. On the other hand a different interpretation may be

intended, a symbolism or significance which attaches to *rauðr* itself.

'A Possible Saga Convention'

This is the title used by G.I. Hughes for a paper in which he discusses the symbolism of coloured clothes in the *Íslendingasögur* (17). He believes, albeit 'tentatively', that:

there is a definite association
between the description of bright
clothes or armour and impending danger
or crisis for the wearer.

Hughes draws most of his evidence from *Njáls saga* though he does include one or two instances from other texts. The actual colour itself is not important, it is the fact that the clothes are brighter, out of the ordinary, that they are described at all which warns of 'impending danger'. Overall his theory seems to have a reasonably firm basis as in each case he refers to, the description is followed by some form of violence or crisis which involves the wearer. But at times the garment described can be seen to belong to another, more significant issue. Hughes divides the various examples he uses into three categories but these are not always properly substantiated by the examples he has given.

Hughes begins with clothes which are worn by a man 'who is on the warpath' and cites certain examples. Skarpheðinn, Helgi and Kári are dressed respectively in *blár stakkr*, *rauðr kyrtil*, *silkitreyja* when they set out to search for and attack Þráinn (Njáls s. ch.92 p.231).

Hrafnkell is *í blám klæðum* as he prepares to attack and kill firstly Einarr and some time later Eyvindr (Hrafn.s. ch.3 p.104; ch.8 p.128). Gísli from *Grettis saga* wears *litklæði* when he foolishly sets out to meet and, he hopes, vanquish the outlaw (ch.59 p.190). All these episodes fit easily within this division, as do many others discussed elsewhere in this section on colour (18).

In the second group the clothes are worn by the victim, who is to undergo 'an unexpected crisis' which is 'brought about by a person not yet regarded by the victim as an enemy'. As a separate grouping this definition could probably be discounted altogether. Hughes gives the following instances:

a) Gunnarr and Otkell. We are told that Gunnarr laid down his *guðvefjarskikkja* prior to being attacked by Otkell. But these two were already adversaries and while Gunnarr might not have been expecting an attack at that precise moment he is well aware that Otkell is an enemy. (Njáls s. ch.53 p.134)

b) Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði and the Njálssynir. Höskuldr puts on his cloak before he goes to the cornfield where he is found and killed by Kári and the Njálssynir. Quite possibly, though aware of Mördur's devious slanders, Höskuldr would not be expecting an imminent attack by the family of his foster father. But in this case, while the cloak may presage a crisis for the wearer, it plays a far more important part in the narrative - in the relationship between Höskuldr, Hildigunnr and Flosi (19). (Njáls s. ch.111 p.280)

c) Práinn is described as habitually wearing a *blár kápa* in the chapter before he is killed by the Njálssynir. Práinn may have only 'indirectly antagonized' his prospective killers but his actions have been quite enough for him to regard them as possible enemies. (Njáls s. ch.91 p.227)

d) On the other hand Eyvindr, dressed in *litklæði*, as he rides home is not expecting any kind of violence on his journey. But he is aware of the happenings involving his brother Sámr, and on learning that it is Hrafnkell following, is naïve if he does not suspect some antagonism from an enemy of his kinsman. (Hrafn.s. ch.8 p.126)

Clothes are worn by a 'known enemy' in the third group. Attention is drawn to the wearer due to his bright clothes and this generally leads to his death. Sigmundur and later Otkell are both betrayed by their *litklæði* which is seen by Gunnarr who subsequently kills them both. Þorgrímr is also killed by Gunnarr; in this case it is a *rauðr kyrtil* which betrays the victim to his killer (20). These characters know who their enemy is and inadvertently attract his attention.

Hughes' main hypothesis is quite sound but to qualify it further with distinct groupings can lead to difficulties. For instance Sigmundur in *Færeyinga saga* would seem to fit the third category - washed up on an island, he is betrayed by his *rauðr klæði* which a *bóndi* notices through the seaweed on the beach (21). The unconscious man is obviously a person of wealth and the unscrupulous farmer kills him, robbing the body of the clothes and a gold armring. But until this point in the narrative neither character has met the other, so Sigmundur could not be labelled a 'known enemy' of the farmer.

It is possible to conclude that a description of coloured clothes, any colour, while representing status may often foreshadow a crisis or a dangerous event for the wearer. However in many ways this is a somewhat simplistic conclusion. Although the writer may be aware that his audience could make this association, at times his descriptions fulfil a different function, symbolic or

otherwise, one which is of more relevance in a particular context.

In a thesis of this length, it is difficult to cover every colour mentioned in the *Íslendingasögur*. Blue and red are the colours most consistently used by the saga writers with others being mentioned now and again, often quite infrequently. These two major colours have been discussed in detail in the following chapters where individual characters and events have been taken into account as much as possible. Green and white both have separate chapters where the few cases and their possible symbolism have been examined.

NOTES

1. Jakob Benediktsson ed. Landnámabók. ÍF 1 ch.207 p.238.
2. Ólafur Halldórsson ed. Færeyinga saga. ch.23 p.44. Where quotes and names from *Færeyinga saga* occur in this thesis, they have been taken from the above edition. The editor has modernised the medieval Icelandic text thus these quotes will be at variance with those from other family sagas where the *Íslenzk fornrit* edition has been used.
3. (i) Njáls s. ch.2 p.8 (ii) Njáls s. ch.33 p.85
(iii) Eyrb.s. ch.28 p.73 (iv) Eyrb.s. ch.50 p.138
4. Ólafur Halldórsson ed. op cit. ch.54 p.107.
5. ... einn í litklæðum. The masculine form of pronoun could mean that the observers do not immediately recognise the rider as a woman. However the preceding noun which it refers to is *maðr* which is a masculine noun. While *maðr* can represent a 'man' as opposed to a woman (*kona*), it can also refer to 'man' as a human being or to people in general as in *þeir ungu menn* - the young people (CV) (See also ch.2 Blue Clothes p.40.)
6. Jónas Kristjánsson. Eddas and Sagas. p.219; 311-319.
7. See ch.17 Laxdoela saga p.303-308.
8. *glædel* - [from Latin *gladiolus*] a kind of sword (CV).
9. *skarlat* - see below, p.18-21.
pell - [Latin: *pallium*] costly expensive stuff (CV).
kurteiss - [French: *courtois*] of chivalrous, stately appearance (CV).
10. (i) *Þiðrekr konungr hafði skiollð a þessa lund steindr rauðum steini oc amarkat með gulli leon En þetta mark hævir hann af því at sua sem leon er allra dyra mestr at virðingu. oc at hug. oc við hann eru oll dyr rædd er i verolldunni eru. Sva var oc Þiðrekr konungr uræðin oc yvir maðr allra manna. En allir voru við hann ræddir. oc firir hans uapnum*
(Henrik Bertelsen (ed). *Þiðriks saga af Bern*. ch.278 (172) vol I, p.326-327.

(ii) A description of a device on a shield is often an indication of foreign influence. Lars Lönnroth points out that the description of Kári and the Njálssynir is anachronistic, that it is highly unlikely that Icelandic farmers of the tenth century would be dressed and equipped in such a way even when preparing to attack an enemy. He doubts whether the author of *Njáls saga* would have ever seen men arrayed like this himself. (Lönnroth. Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction. p.117.) Such medieval chivalric accoutrements did not reach Scandinavia until the thirteenth century. An obvious source for such a portrayal is *Piðreks saga* where personal descriptions can be found which include details of the shields carried by each man (ch. 278-292 p.326-347).

Various kinds of insignia had been used prior to the twelfth century by for instance the Ancient Greeks, the Romans and the Teutonic tribes. However the widespread use in western Europe of heraldic devices on shields dates from the 'second quarter of the twelfth century' (Brooke-Little p.4). Tournaments appear to have been a major contributory factor. These military meetings where knights of different countries assembled together became popular during the early twelfth century. The introduction of the closed helmet meant that the face of the combatant could not be seen and therefore some other means of identification was necessary. Another influence would have been the Crusades, especially the Third Crusade (1189-1192) where armies from England, France and Germany fought together. Soldiers would need a means of recognising their well armoured leaders.

Devices on shields became less haphazard and more individualised and consistent: if a knight had performed well under a certain insignia during a tournament he would be inclined to retain it as his personal emblem. Heraldic devices became hereditary at this time. When choosing a device, knights were often influenced by symbolism. Brooke-Little notes that 'the lion ... is the earliest device known to have appeared on a shield of arms'; it represented 'strength or valour'. (J.P. Brooke-Little (rev). Boutell's Heraldry. ch.1 p.1-12; John Woodward. Woodward's Treatise on Heraldry: British and Foreign. ch.2 p.19-52.)

11. Bugge, Alexander. 'Costumes, Jewels and Furniture in Viking Times'. Saga Book, vol. VII, 1911-1912, p.148.

12. Hjalmar Falk. Altwestnordische Kleiderkunde. p.54.

13. The grandeur of garments made with *skarkat* and *pell* is illustrated by an episode in *Óláfs saga helga*. Sigurðr sýr is occupied on his land, supervising the harvest, when he receives a message from his wife, Ásta. It tells him of the impending visit of King Óláfr. Ásta is concerned that everyone should be dressed in their best clothes for

this important guest. She sends to her husband his *tígnaklæði*, his 'robes of state' to change into. For his work in the fields Sigurðr *hafði kyrtil blán ok grá kápu*. In preparation for his royal visitor he takes these off and: *klæddi sik með pellsklæðum ok yzt skarlatskápu*. His outfit is completed with a sword and gilded helmet; the horse he rides has a gilded saddle and a fine ornate bridle. Sigurðr's appearance is now appropriate for his role as an under-king as he officially welcomes King Óláfr to his house. (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (ed). Óláfs saga helga. Heimskringla. ÍF 27 ch.32-34 p. 40-43.)

14. H. Falk. op cit. p.184-185.

15. John H. Munro. 'The Medieval Scarlet and the Economics of Sartorial Splendour.' In Cloth and Clothing in Medieval Europe. Edited by N.B. Harte and K.G. Ponting, p.13-70.

16. The following record of purchases for the wardrobe of Henry VI (1438-39) gives some idea of the value of scarlet cloth:

	<u>30 ells</u>	<u>1 ell</u>
pannis scarletis [cheapest]	£14 - 2s - 6d	9s - 5d
pannis scarletis [dearest]	£28 - 10s - 0d	19s - 0d

Munro tells us that: 'A master mason, then earning 6d a day, would have had to spend his his full wages for 565 workdays (about 2 years 9 months)' to buy a length of the cheapest scarlet (£14 - 2s - 6d). (John Munro. *ibid.* p.66).

17. G.I. Hughes. 'A Possible Saga Convention.' English Studies in Africa. 1971 vol 12 p.167-73.

18. See ch.2 Blue Clothes p.29-47; ch.3 Red Clothes p.50-66.

19. See ch.10 Bloodstained Garments p.170-185.

20. a) Njáls s. ch.45 p.115
 b) Njáls s. ch.54 p.136
 c) Njáls s. ch.77 p.187

21. Ólafur Halldórsson. op cit. ch.39 p.76.

Chapter Two

BLUE CLOTHES

Translations tend to differ with their interpretation of the Icelandic word *blár*, some preferring to translate it as 'blue', others as 'black'. Apparently the term could denote all shades of blue but Cleasby/Vigfússon give it the sense of 'dark blue'. It is however used in the phrase *blár sem hel* - black as death, and in words such as *kolblár* - coal black, *blámenn* - black men.

Various theories have been put forward as to the reason why blue clothes are worn by characters in the sagas. Hermann Pálsson's view has been particularly influential:

for in the sagas blue clothing is
conventionally worn by killers (1)

Snorri sets out to kill Bjorn, dressed
in the blue cloak characteristically
worn by the killer in the sagas. (2)

Joseph Harris qualifies this to some extent. He considers that the wearing of a 'blue cloak' implied:

leaders dressed for a special occasion
such as a journey or a killing (3)

This definition would also involve *blár* as a sign of rank, of social status. In this context it can be worn by those who aspire to a high social standing - whether based on actual merit or merely vanity.

Marina Mundt is not happy about blue being especially indictive of prospective killers and believes that *Piðreks saga* offers another and more plausible reason: (4)

Oc merkir blar litr kallt briost oc
grimt hiarta. (5)

This explanation occurs when the coat of arms belonging to Heimir is described. And Marina Mundt feels that if it was a widely held belief it would not have been necessary to repeat it when blue clothes were mentioned in the sagas.

Finn Hansen advances a similar theory to that of G.I. Hughes (6) when he suggests that the mention of a particular colour such as *blár* is associated with subsequent violent events. He bases this on the observation that the saga writers often provided a sign, a warning to the audience of imminent violence and death. These portents also operated as a means of creating suspense in the narrative. In his paper, Hansen examines how *blár* clothing has been used for this literary technique particularly in the form of a *blá kápa*. Hughes has not specified *blár* clothes in particular but does include them in his term 'bright clothes' - though dark blue might not be considered a 'bright' colour, it is still a dyed colour and distinct from undyed *vaðmál*. Hansen does not appear to limit the prospective violence solely to the wearer of the garment as does Hughes, he takes a more general approach; the danger could involve others with whom the wearer comes into contact.

On the surface *Valla-Ljóts saga* appears to bear out Hermann Pálsson's argument as it tells us exactly why and when Ljótr wears either his blue kirtle or his brown one.

Þat var til marks, hversu honum
líkaði: Hann átti tvennan búnað, blán
kyrtíl stuttan ok öxi snaghyrnda, ok
var vafit járn skaptit; þá var hann

svá buinn, er víghugr var á honum. En þá er honum líkaði vel, hafði hann þá brúnan kyrtil ok bryntröll rekit í hendi.

(ch.2 p.240)

Thus the colour of his dress indicates his feelings, presumably towards others. This description is reiterated in *Bolla þáttr* when Ljótr is introduced into the narrative:

Ljótr hét maðr. Þat var búningr hans hversdagliga, at hann hafði svartan kyrtil ok refði í hendi, en ef hann bjósk til víga, þá hafði hann blán kyrtil ok öxi snaghyrnda; var hann þá heldr ófrýnligr.

(Laxd. s. ch.87 p.245)

Here, the ordinary *svartr* kirtle is described as his general, everyday garment. Although there is the variation of *brúnn* and *svartr*, this is probably not too significant as there appears to be some relationship between the two colours. In Cleasby/Vigfússon, *brún klæði* can refer to the 'black dress of a divine' and a black horse is not described as *svartr* but as *brúnn*. In any event they would denote a more commonplace utility kirtle than one specifically dyed blue. The writer is obviously distinguishing here between *svartr* and *blár* - terms which can both be used for 'black': this strengthens further the argument that in a context such as this *blár* is to be interpreted as 'blue'.

Ljótr wears his *brúnn* kirtle when he goes out to tend to the sheep, not expecting the attack which Guðmundr is preparing. At this point Ljótr evades Guðmundr and his companions (Valla-Ljóts s. ch.8 p.256). However in Chapter Four when Ljótr waits for Halli, he is distinctive among his men in his *blár kyrtil*, carrying his sharp pointed axe

(p.245); his intention to kill clear, and successful. The circumstances of the case and the warning by Þórir that Halli could encounter danger from Ljótr alert the reader and Ljótr's blue clothes confirm the likely events.

Yet they do this to a great extent not because it is a saga convention but because the writer has already explained Ljótr's reasons for wearing blue. If it was such an accepted custom in saga literature for killers to wear blue, there surely would be no need to be so explicit about it in this case. It would only be necessary to state, as the saga does in Chapter Four:

þeir váru tólf saman ok einn í blám
kyrtli ok hefir öxi snaghyrnda í hendi
(p.245)

and the meaning would be quite clear without any other previous explanation. In trying to determine the date of *Valla-Ljóts saga*, Jónas Kristjánsson feels that the description of Ljótr's dress in the saga has definitely influenced the writer of *Bolla þáttr* (7). The slight discrepancy between the colours of the ordinary kirtle occurred, so Jónas suggests, because the later writer had read the saga but did not have a copy to hand when writing his short story. He dates *Valla-Ljótr* to around 1220-1240, but of course *Bolla þáttr* is a composition from the last quarter of the thirteenth century - late in the saga writing period. Yet still the writer felt he had to explain why Ljótr wore blue at certain times, he could not rely on an established tradition to relay this information. It would seem that this choice of blue for a particular purpose could have been due to an idiosyncrasy of Ljótr's

instead of an indication of a commonplace practice or widespread literary motif.

Hrafnkels saga also seems to contain classic examples of blue being worn by a man when he intends to kill. *Hann ríðr í blám klæðum* (ch.3 p.104) is the way Hrafnkell is described as he sets out to find Einarr and to kill him in fulfilment of his vow regarding Freyfaxi. Later when Hrafnkell pursues Eyvindr he is again dressed *í blám klæðum* (ch.8 p.128). Goaded by the woman servant, Hrafnkell's intention is clearly to kill Eyvindr in vengeance for the treatment he previously suffered at the hands of Sámr. On these two occasions Hrafnkell is successful; Einarr and Eyvindr are both killed. Taken from a different perspective we can also see that Hrafnkell is a man of rank, that his presence in blue precedes the death of his victims and that each of these events precipitates a crisis in his own life.

At night when Gísli prepares for his journey of vengeance against Þorgrímr, his saga tells us:

Hann tekr spjóttit Grásíðu ór örkinni
ok er í kápu blári ok í skyrtu ok í
línbrókum

(Gísla s. ch.15 p.52)

There is no doubt here of Gísli's intention to kill Þorgrímr. This is partly indicated by the weapon he takes - the same one which was used by the killer of Vésteinn - and is confirmed by Gísli's subsequent actions. The mention of a blue cloak in this context would seem to fit the pattern of the expected dress in preparation for a slaying. But this example is not quite so straightforward

as later on we learn:

þat var vándi Gísla, at hann var í
kápu blári ok vel búinn
(ch.20 p.64)

It was not then so unusual for Gísli to put on this cloak - it was a garment and colour which he often wore and not a specific indication of his intentions.

Vésteinn was also *í blári kápu* (ch.12 p.41) when he returns to Iceland and rides to Gísli's farmstead. Although he carries a spear, he does not appear to be going out of his way to attack anyone. Geirmundr sees him pass by Þorgrímr's homestead and when later questioned by Þorgrímr, he attempts to conceal the identity of the rider. He tells Þorgrímr that it was a house carl wearing Gísli's cloak. However likely or unlikely it may be that a house carl would be wearing his leader's clothes, it does illustrate some kind of general association between Gísli and a blue cloak. In Chapter Twenty, when Gísli is being pursued by Börkr, he exchanges cloaks with a slave. Börkr and his companions focus their attention on the man in the *blá kápa*, the slave, who is chased and killed before they realise their mistake (p.64-65).

It may well be Gísli's custom to wear this blue garment, perhaps because he is a man of some social standing. But it is surely significant that we are only told about it prior to moments of danger and crisis in his life. The killing of Þorgrímr affects the rest of Gísli's life; the cloak exchange later facilitates Gísli's escape at that point (and brings violence to another). Even Vésteinn's blue cloak is ominous. It could be said to presage his

death; it is talked about to Þorgrímr who will be his slayer. It produces a note of tension at this point in the narrative; the killing of Vésteinn will set in action the whole chain of events leading to Gísli's outlawry. However as not every man of high social rank wears blue at these moments of crisis, it may be that the *Þiðreks saga* interpretation is more apt in Gísli's case. Gísli does commit murder in a cold and calculated manner (8).

Apart from *Gísla saga* there are other references which connect blue clothes with those who dress well. In *Njáls saga*, a blue cloak appears to be part of Þráinn Sigfússon's grand outfit:

Þráin var skrautmenni mikit ok reið
jafnan í blári kápu ok hafði gyldan
hjálm ok spjótit jarlsnaut ok fagan
skjöld ok sverði gyrðr.

(ch.91 p.227)

Due to his recent altercation with Njáll's sons, it is quite probable that at this point in the saga Þráinn is expecting an attack from them. In this description the *blá kápa* itself seems to relate more to Þráinn's vanity than to any intention to kill someone, but again we are specifically told about his affectation just before his dealings with his opponents are about to reach a climax. Although Þráinn could be termed a leader, in that he has followers, his pretension to high rank is not well founded. In his case the wearing of blue takes on an ironic aspect - as a sign of rank it is not deserved but it is sadly appropriate as an omen of his death; here is a man whose ill-judged pretensions will bring him up against those of real social consequence, with fatal results.

A similar argument could be applied to Grani, a character in *Króka-Refs saga* who is known for being a man who *barst á mikit at vápnum ok klæðum* (ch.16 p.151). When Refr is absent at a local assembly, Grani attempts to take advantage of Helga, Refr's wife:

... kemr maðr í skemmuna, sá var í
blám klæðum ok lét mikit yfir sér
(ch.16 p.152)

Again in blue clothes, but hardly intending to kill, he is far more concerned about his fine appearance. A few sentences later he is killed by Refr. This in itself adds another complication for Refr is also in blue, a *blár kufl*, but he has assumed this dress as a disguise in order to appear as an old man, presumably one of little importance - there is no mention of any fine clothes and the *kufl* is tied on with rope of walrus hide (ch.16 p.151). For both men this encounter is a crisis: following Grani's death, Refr has to leave the country in a hurry to avoid King Haraldr's anger over the loss of a *hirðmaðr*.

On a few occasions the garment described as *blár* is a *möttull* and these do appear to be associated with presenting a fine appearance. When Hallgerðr is sent for to discuss Glúmr's offer of marriage at the Alþingi she makes a striking entrance:

hon hafði yfir sér vefjarmöttul blán
ok var undir í rauðum skarlatskyrtli
ok silfrbelti um sik.
(Njáls s. ch.13 p.44)

A *vefjarmöttull* was a particularly fine mantle, appropriate for meeting a prospective husband at the annual assembly. In *Færeyinga saga* there is an episode where two people, a

man and a woman, both wear blue mantles at a time when they have good reasons to appear to best advantage (9).

Sigurður who *var í rauðum kyrtli og hafði tuglamöttul blán á herðum sér* is ostensibly trying to persuade Þuríður to accept his brother Þórður as a husband, but Sigurður is not slow to consider Þuríður as a future wife for himself. Þuríður, the widow of Sigmundur, has actually laid a trap for Sigurður but her *rauðr kyrtill* and *blár möttull*, as suitable clothes for a woman who is being courted would help to lull any suspicions on Sigurður's part. In these contexts the blue *möttull* is obviously associated with a form of sexual display - this is the underlying motive behind the wearer's fine appearance.

But this may be only the surface meaning; closer examination reveals other issues. Sigurður is about to be killed by Leifur. Þuríður is intent on vengeance for the death of her husband, Sigmundur; she may also be considered a 'leader' in that she has the title *meginekkja* (10). Hallgerðr's fine outfit with its item of blue clothing could be considered as an indication of her role as a dangerous woman, one who will be instrumental in the death of Glúmr (11). However this theory has to be qualified by the fact that later it is Gunnarr who notices her at an Alþingi, this time her dress, though colourful, contains no blue (ch.33 p.85). Yet she is going to be the cause of great misery and trouble for Gunnarr, associated with violence and crisis in his life, and eventually with his death, when she refuses him two locks of hair for his bow. There is some inconsistency here which throws us back onto

Hughes's argument that it is 'bright' colour of any kind that is significant. However in this context, since the danger will affect others rather than the wearer, Finn Hansen's definition of a more general warning seems appropriate.

In the case of *Víga-Glúms saga* the status represented by Glúmr's blue cloak could be inherited rank. One morning after his return to Iceland, he dresses and *hann tók þá feldinn blá ok spjótit gullrekna í hönd sér* (ch.8 p.27). Glúmr then rides to the field which is the cause of a dispute and subsequently kills Sigmundur who had refused to return the field to Glúmr's mother. The cloak, the *feldr*, that Glúmr wears, as with the spear he carries (and uses), has been given to him by his grandfather in Norway. Both these items are 'special treasures' (12) important to the family. In this respect it is fitting that Glúmr should then be wearing the cloak (whatever the colour) when he goes out to uphold the family honour. It is symbolic of his taking on the responsibility of his position within his family. This in itself could be seen as a turning point in his life; the point at which he begins to assert his authority, eventually becoming a prominent landowner in the district. There is also no doubt here of his intention to kill Sigmundur.

In Chapter Eighty-one of *Egils saga*, it is authority and power that Egill is intending to convey when he appears wearing blue. A dispute is taking place at the Assembly when Egill arrives with eighty men. All are armed and prepared as if for battle. Egill rides in front of the

men:

í blári kápu, hafði hjálm á höfði
gullroðinn, en skjöld á hlið gullbúinn
í hendi krókaspjót, var þar gullrekinn
falrinn; hann var sverði gyrðr.
(p.284)

His move is effective and his son Þorsteinn comes off best in the lawsuit. The blue cloak may have been an element in his outfit which suggested his readiness to kill, but it seems appropriate given the situation that he would ride in coloured clothes, his good clothes, in order to enhance his appearance and emphasise his position and status.

Certainly his action leads to trouble for Þorsteinn's opponent, Steinarr, and his family.

Egill carries a spear, as does Víga-Glúmr - a weapon which is associated with Óðinn. Both are known as Odinic characters: for Glúmr it is part of his heritage from his Norwegian grandfather; Egill as a warrior and a poet accepts Óðinn as his god (13). Other men in blue cloaks have also been armed with spears: Vésteinn carries one; Gísli kills Þorgrímr with the spear Grásíða; Refr has a short spear. Refr's blue garment is part of a false identity - Óðinn was a master of disguise. Yet Refr's assumed name, Narfi, while it has mythological connections, is not one usually associated with Óðinn; in *Gylfaginning*, Snorri mentions that Narfi was the name of one of Loki's children (14). And although Óðinn makes various appearances in the *Íslendingasögur*, often with a spear or something similar in his hand and frequently wearing a cloak - the cloak itself can be of various colours, it is not consistently described as *blár* (15). If there is

Odinic symbolism in the wearing of blue cloaks, it does not appear to be of major importance in all the cases where these are worn, and in some instances is hardly applicable at all.

Having said this, it is known for those involved with the supernatural, with magic heathen practices, to wear blue in the family sagas. Þorbjörg, the Greenland prophetess wears a blue mantle and her costume has been examined in detail in Chapter Sixteen. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, Geirríðr, a sorceress has a *blá skikkju yfir sér* when she accompanies the men who go to find Oddr who is being concealed by his mother, Katla (ch.20 p.53). It is Geirríðr who knows exactly where to find Oddr and he is subsequently hanged. The men had previously been unsuccessful due to Katla's own witchcraft. When Geirríðr and her companions are observed riding to the farm. Katla is told there was *einn í litklæðum* (16). She seems immediately to know that this is Geirríðr. Blue is not mentioned by the observer, only the fact that the clothes are coloured. Although it is the men, Þórarinn and Arnkel with their followers, who do the actual killing, it appears to be only the one person, Geirríðr, who wears distinctive clothing.

Geirríðr, though a sorceress, is of good family. She may not appear to be the leader of this party, but she is the one who takes the initiative against Katla, who knows how to deal with her. The blue she wears foretells danger and death to her adversaries, Oddr and Katla, and perhaps a crisis for her in repaying them for their aggression

towards her son.

In *Eyrbyggja saga* blue is again worn by someone who appears intent on killing another man. Snorri goði sets out to take action against Björn Ásbrandsson who has been visiting Snorri's sister, a married woman. Snorri *var í blári kápu ok reið fyrstr* (ch.47 p.134). On this occasion however the intended victim, Björn, manages to outwit Snorri who is then forced to come to some agreement with him. Snorri, as a chieftain and in this particular case as the leader of a party, may be wearing blue as a sign of his rank. There is not a great deal of violence here though Björn certainly threatens Snorri's life. It could be viewed as a not-too-pleasant crisis for Snorri; dressed in his fine clothes to emphasise his social position, accompanied by armed followers, he is yet somewhat humiliated by Björn's quick thinking - an unusual situation for Snorri goði.

Njáls saga describes the dress of Njáll's sons and Kári when they set out to attack Práinn Sigfússon. Helgi wears a red kirtle, Kári a silk *treyja* but Skarpheðinn is *í blám stakki*. All are well armed and prepared for battle. It is Skarpheðinn who attacks first and kills Práinn. Helgi, dressed in red, does not actually appear to slay anyone, though he does assist the others in wounding men. This seems straightforward; the man in blue leads; he kills the enemy; violence and death follow the mention of coloured clothes.

Later at the Assembly, after the killing of Höskuldr

Hvítanessgoði, Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson and the sons of Njáll visit several booths to try to gain support. Skarpheðinn again wears blue - *hann var í blám kyrtli* (ch.120 p.304) and carrying an axe and shield, does not appear to be in a placatory mood. He is aggressive and insulting to the owners of the booths. At this Alþingi Skarpheðinn is no longer in the lead, he is preceded in the booths by all his brothers. If blue represents rank, then here it seems to highlight lost status; if it is an omen of future violence, then it presages the burning and the death of the wearer and his family.

Blue can also it seems be worn by those who are intent on peace and mediation. Ingimundr of *Vatnsdoela saga* rides out dressed *í blári kápu* in an attempt to prevent a fight between his sons and Hrolleifr. He is successful in this but is fatally wounded by Hrolleifr and dies later. At no point does he appear to want to kill Hrolleifr, indeed he does his best to protect him from the vengeance his sons will exact at the death of their father. Ingimundr is a prosperous landowner, a respected man in the district, well known for his goodwill, his sagacity and his inclination towards peace. He has it appears every right to wear blue as a sign of rank. There is a certain poignancy involved in the description of him as he prepares to leave:

Hann var þá gamall ok nær blindr.
 Hafði hann ok þá af höndum látit öll
 fjárforráð ok svá bú. Sveinn var
 honum fenginn til fylgðar. Ingimundr
 var í blári kápu.

(ch.22 p.60)

To end the description with the symbol of his rank, reflects sadly on the old man, no longer in charge of his

household, dependent upon a young boy for mobility. But it underlines the fact that despite his age and disability he is still a leader, though this is the last time he will assert his authority and it will lead to his death. Status and omen of crisis - the symbolism of blue is double-edged in this episode.

In Chapter 118 of *Njáls saga*, after the killing of Höskuldr, Njáll and his companions ride to the home of Ásgrímr Elliðá-Grímsson at Tunga before all going on together to the Alþingi. As Njáll rides into the home meadow we are told that he:

var í blári kápu ok hafði þófahött á
höfði ok taparöxi í hendi
(ch.118 p.296)

This may of course be in preparation for any hostilities he might well encounter at the Alþingi but in Njáll's case it could hardly imply a 'warlike mood' (17). He is chiefly concerned with trying to effect a peaceful settlement and reconciliation. He certainly has no hostile intentions towards Ásgrímr who is outside his house, ready to welcome Njáll.

But it is Hallr of Síða's appearance in blue which would seem to completely contradict any literary convention of using it as an indication of a man about to kill. After the burning of Njáll and his family and the taking of blood vengeance by Þorgeir skorargeir and Kári, it is Hallr who goes to visit these two in pursuit of peace. As in the case of Ásgrímr and Njáll, Þorgeirr and Kári are outside when Hallr arrives:

ok kenndu Hall: hann reið í blári kápu
 ok hafði litla öxi í hendi silfrrekna.
 (ch.147 p.421)

They give him a warm welcome. Hallr's visit is to a great extent successful and he obtains a promise of a truce from Þorgeirr though not from Kári. Still, both men show their respect for Hallr, giving him gifts when he leaves.

Hallr is generally presented as a man of peace in *Njáls saga*. He accepts Christianity early on and is instrumental in Iceland's conversion. At the Alþingi after the burnings when the lawsuit collapses into violence, his son Ljótr is killed. Yet Hallr announces that he is prepared to forego compensation for his son if that would help to achieve a reconciliation between the two factions. In medieval Icelandic society, suitable compensation for a killing was extremely important to the honour of the family and remaining kinsmen. For a man of Hallr's status to renounce his claim to it was no small matter and must surely indicate his dedication to peaceful settlements.

Both Hallr and Njáll are prominent chieftains, influential leaders of society. There are certain parallels in these two incidents which seem suggestive of a kind of ceremony. Both men carry small axes (ie. not aggressive weapons) and when they arrive, in each case, the host is outside to greet the visitor who is then given assistance in dismounting and shown to the high seat in the house. These actions are indicative of the great respect which men have for Njáll and Hallr.

But if blue is being considered as a portent of danger

then this must be looked for later in the narrative rather than in the immediate text following the description. Njáll will progress to the Alþingi where for once his mediations and cunning fail him, the case collapses, events move towards the death of him and his family. When Hallr persuades Þorgeirr to accept his terms, Kári is effectively isolated. He is forced to carry on his vendetta alone in a more dangerous and vulnerable position than when he had the support of friends and allies (18). Despite a certain similarity regarding the descriptions of Njáll and Hallr, the use of blue as an omen is not consistent; in one instance it would seem to apply to the wearer and in the second to another character who is affected by the wearer's actions.

It may be difficult to tell conclusively why blue is particularly mentioned in the family sagas. *Valla-Ljóts saga* could be an indication of a literary motif but this seems unlikely. If blue was characteristic of killers or represented an omen of danger then it was not always used. As Marina Mundt points out in her article, there is no mention of blue clothing in *Heiðarvíga saga*, *Kormáks saga* or *Hallfreðar saga* (19).

Perhaps it was meant to represent a *kallt briost oc grimt hiarta* - 'a cold heart and a grim nature' (20). Certainly some of the characters mentioned in these incidents could qualify for part, if not all, of this description: Hallgerðr is known to be *skaparðr* (ch.8 p.29); Sigurður's treatment of Þorhallur could be called cruel (21); Skarphedinn can display a grim nature and

Egill's actions are often merciless.

On the other hand not all could be definitely described in these terms. Hallr's humane disposition has already been discussed and though Njáll may be regarded as calculating at times, he is still a man of compassion and mercy. Ingimundr is a wise and peaceful man; Snorri could be harsh with his enemies but is not generally noted for a cold and grim nature. On the whole most people in this society who found themselves in the position of enforcing the law for their own or society's benefit would have to be ruthless to some extent and at some point. But every saga has its share of these characters and by no means do they all wear blue.

Joseph Harris' suggestion that it is the leaders who are often in a blue garment when going on an important journey applies to many of these situations. Njáll and Hallr, honoured chieftains, are accompanied by their men; Ljótr and Snorri goði lead their followers in acts of vengeance; Egill rides at the head of eighty men to support his son. Þorgils Hölluson of *Laxdoela saga* in his *blár kápa* leads a band against Helgi Harðbeinsson (ch.63 p.187).

In general with all the incidents discussed in this chapter there would appear to be some obvious reason for the participants to be wearing their best clothes - clothes which reflected their status. This of course gives the writer the opportunity to introduce blue with whatever further literary symbolism it may imply. Finn Hansen's theory seems to have a some foundation - blue clothes could

be interpreted as a warning to the reader of danger or violence and as such fulfil a useful literary role in generating tension and expectation. Perhaps in some instances Hughes' term 'crisis' seems a more apt description for the events which follow - whether in regard to the wearer or the other participants. A crisis need not necessarily involve violence or death, at least not immediately following the description - in the interim there may be one or more personal crises for those concerned.

On the other hand considering the ubiquity of crisis in saga literature, this hypothesis should be viewed with some caution. The following chapters on other colours seem to point to a symbolism which increasingly attaches itself more to the actual nature of the wearer than to external events.

NOTES

1. Hermann Pálsson (trans). Hrafnkels Saga. p.25.
2. Hermann Pálsson & Paul Edwards (trans). Eyrbyggja Saga. p.18.
3. Joseph Harris. 'Ögmundar þáttur dytts ok Gunnars helmings: Unity and Literary Relations.' ANF 90, 1975, p.169.
4. Marina Mundt. 'Observations on the Influence of *Þiðreks saga* on Icelandic saga writing.' In Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference. Ed. Peter Foote, Hermann Pálsson and Desmond Slay. p.357-358.
5. Henrik Bertelsen (ed). Þiðriks saga af Bern. ch.280 (174) vol I, p.328.
6. Finn Hansen. 'Benbrud og bane i blat.' Scripta Islandica 30, p.13-24.
7. Jónas Kristjánsson (ed). Valla-Ljóts saga. ÍF 9 p.CV-CVII.
8. 'Several scholars dealing with *Gísli saga* describe Gísli Súrsson as a man of honour, though the saga presents him as a cold-blooded murderer who stabs his brother-in-law to death, when he is sleeping peacefully beside his wife, the murderer's sister.' (Hermann Pálsson. 'Icelandic Sagas and Medieval Ethics.' Medieval Scandinavia 7, 1974, p.64.)
9. Ólafur Halldórsson (ed). Færeyinga saga. ch.57 p.113.
10. *ibid.* ch.40 p.77.
11. Finn Hansen. *op cit.* p.19-20.
12. John McKinnell (trans). Viga-Glums Saga. ch.8 p.62.
13. Egill's association with Óðinn is particularly evident in the poem, *Sonatorrek*, which he composes after the death of his son. (Egils s. ch.78 p.246-256.)

14. Anthony Faulkes (trans). Edda. Snorri Sturluson. p.52.
15. See ch.4 Green Clothes p.76-79.
16. See ch.1 Litklæði p.26 n.5
17. Jón Jóhannesson (ed). Hrafnkels saga. ÍF 11 ch.3 p.104 fn.3.
18. Finn Hansen. op cit. p.19-20.
19. Marina Mundt. op cit. p.357.
20. John McKinnell. op cit. p.59.
21. Ólafur Halldórsson. op cit. ch.49,50 p.99-103.

Chapter Three

RED CLOTHES

All the cases detailed here contain the descriptive term - *rauðr*, representing the colour 'red'. *Skarlat* is only included if there is additional evidence that some shade of red is present. As mentioned in the chapter on *litklæði*, *skarlat* was a kind of cloth, and even if by the thirteenth century it was predominantly red in colour, it was primarily used in the sagas in connection with its original definition - i.e. a fine quality, expensive material. For any literary symbolism expressed by red as a colour, it is safer to restrict analysis to instances where the word *rauðr* is actually used. The following survey of the use of *rauðr* in relation to garments within the sagas, is based on twenty-seven examples taken from the texts studied for this thesis.

There is a possibility that a description of someone wearing red clothes, as with those of other colours, is associated with a forthcoming crisis, whatever that crisis or danger may be and whoever it concerns, either the wearer or another character. In twelve of the cases examined, a description which included a red garment preceded the wearer's death, or the death of another, or some involvement in a conflict. This usually takes place either in the same chapter or the one following. Þorgrímr Austmaðr is killed by Gunnarr immediately after we are told about his *rauðr kyrtil*; Ljótr inn bleiki wears red when he is attacked and killed by Þorsteinn. Eyjólfur Guðmundarson is í *skarlat*-

kyrtli rauðum during the Battle of Kakalahóll where he kills Ótryggr; Sigmundur Brestisson returns to the Faroes; wearing red clothes he attacks and kills Özurr. Helgi Njálsson puts on a red garment before taking part in the attack on Þráinn, and Steinþórr Þorláksson is described in red prior to his involvement in the battle at Alftafjörður (1).

But there are the times when the wearing of a red garment does not appear to be specifically connected to subsequent conflict. In *Flóamanna saga* a red tunic is worn by Þorsteinn inn hvíti when he meets Þorgils in a fjord in Greenland (2). Immediately after this encounter Þorgils visits Eiríkr enn rauði but he is not welcomed as warmly as he had hoped and a dispute arises between them. Yet this is one dispute in a whole sequence of dangers and crises both before and after Þorsteinn appears on the scene; it is not definite evidence of a relationship between *rauður* and impending crisis.

In fact given the nature of the *Íslendingasögur* as a whole - narratives which usually involve conflict, death and violence - it is difficult to state absolutely that the wearing of a red garment is an augury of a crisis of some kind; crises occur all the time, to those who wear coloured clothes and to those whose dress is never mentioned.

It may be that the explanation for red provided by *Þiðreks saga* was also well known in medieval Iceland, perhaps as part of an older belief and mythology. Ekka and his brother Fasold are described in detail, they both carry

shields decorated with red lions and the account concludes with: *En rauðr litr þeira vapna mercir capp oc ufrið* (3). Certainly one or the other aspect of this definition - *capp* or *ufrið* could be applied to many of those who wear a red garment in the twenty-seven cases examined. This includes the women - Hallgerðr is without doubt a hostile woman (Njáls s.); Þuríður, the Færoese widow, is a woman of valour (Fær.s.).

There would appear to be no doubt however that red was a colour worn with the intention of presenting a fine appearance. It was often accompanied by some other coloured or ornate item. Hallgerðr for instance makes a particularly grand appearance when she meets Glúmr at the Alþingi:

hon hafði yfir sér vefjarmöttul blán
ok var undir í rauðum skarlatskyrtli
ok silfrbelti um sik, en hárit tók
ofan á bringuna tveim megin, ok drap
hon undir beltí sér.

(Njáls s. ch.13 p.44)

Þuríður, the widow of Sigmundur in the *Færeyinga saga*, comes to meet a prospective suitor *í rauðum kyrtli og blán möttul á herðum*. The suitor himself is similarly attired - *í rauðum kyrtli og hafði tuglamöttul blán á herðum sér*. (4)

Guðrúnarkviða II describes visitors who come to see Guðrún, they are compared to princes as they arrive in their armour and red fur cloaks:

Valdarr Dönom	með Iarizleifi,
Eymóðr þriði	með Iarizscári;
inn gengo þá,	iðfrom líkir,
Langbarðz liðar,	höfðu loða rauða,
screyttar brynior,	steypa hiálma,
scálmom girðir,	höfðu scarar iarpar.

(5)

Once the twenty-seven examples of red garments were collected together, certain points became immediately obvious:

1. in twenty-three cases the red garment is a *kyrtill* (five of these specifically mention a *skarlatskyrtill*)
2. in the following number of cases the red garment is worn with:

a) blue garment (<i>blár</i>)	4
b) silver belt	4
c) armour/weapons	9
d) another garment other than blue	4

Much of this would seem to substantiate the argument that a red garment was worn as a status symbol, through a desire to impress. The description is generally accompanied by further details which emphasise the physical, social or personal stature of the wearer. These details can be either other objects of value or something in the person's conduct or personality. Or we may previously have been told (i.e. when the character is introduced into the saga), that this is an outstanding person in some way.

In a few cases, although counted as separate instances, the red garment is actually being worn by the same person but is mentioned twice in the narrative at different points. This in itself would seem to indicate that red is being associated with the nature of the wearer rather than being used as some form of omen of future events.

Assuming that red clothes of whatever kind represent those who have a claim to eminence, to a certain

superiority, there are some obvious cases where the wearer's assumption of high social status seems completely justified. Yet in other places this 'status' may be assumed or conferred without, it appears, adequate foundation in the known social standing of the wearer. This may be an indication of the arrogance of the individual concerned, or the red garment may play a part in creating stature for the character during a specific scene or encounter. At times it is used as a device to contrast with and thus emphasise the wearer's subsequent fate.

Gunnarr of *Njáls saga* is an exceptional man physically and also highly respected in society; he is twice described as wearing red. When he appears in disguise as the disreputable character Kaupa-Heðinn he retains the symbols of his true status. Worn under the cloak and tunic of a pedlar, these finer items are noticed by one of Höskuldr's men:

'pat sá ek, at fram undan erminni kom
eitt gullhlað ok rautt klæði; á hoegri
hendi hafði hann gullhring.'
(ch.23 p.64)

Gunnarr, while a guest in Hrútr's house, deceives his host, manoeuvring him almost into serving a summons on himself. That Gunnarr should be wearing his red kirtle during this seems to assert that he is still an honourable man despite having to resort to such underhand methods. Some time later a horse fight takes place between stallions owned by Gunnarr and by Starkaðr. Gunnarr is *í rauðum kyrtli ok hafði um sik breitt silfrbelti* (ch.59 p.150). He is severely provoked by his opponents and his horse is injured. Yet Gunnarr remains calm and in control of

himself - as would be expected from a man of superior character. Skarphedinn openly taunts him, but obtains no heated response: *Gunnarr var kyrr, svá at honum helt einn maðr, ok mælti ekki orð, þat er áfátt væri* (ch.59 p.151). We know, of course, that *einn maðr* could never have restrained Gunnarr if he had intentions to fight. The mention of his dress, the inclusion of the *rauðr kyrtill*, is a reminder of the greatness of this man and this is maintained throughout the scene by his conduct as he tries to remain aloof from the petty squabbling around him.

Steinþórr is introduced as *framast barna Þorláks* (Eyrb.s. ch.12 p.21). Physically well-built, he is an accomplished fighter but known as a quiet man. When he comes to pay compensation for the death of a slave his appearance is given in detail:

ok er svá frá sagt, at hann væri í
 rauðum kyrtli ok hafði drepit upp
 fyrirblöðunum undir belti; hann hafði
 fagran skjöld ok hjálm ok gyrðr
 sverði; þat var forkunnliga búit;
 hjöltin váru hvít fyrir silfri ok
 vafiðr silfri meðalkaflinn ok gyldar
 listur á.

(Eyrb.s. ch.44 p.120-121)

An air of authority surrounds his conduct as he proceeds with the legal requirements calmly and peacefully, nailing the purse to the door and appointing witnesses. In his manner of fulfilling this obligation he demonstrates his refusal to be humiliated in any way by this payment. He is acting according to his own will, and his own social standing is not compromised or affected by having to pay for a slave. He approaches his adversary, Snorri, on at least equal terms. Snorri himself had previously expressed

respect for Steinþórr: '... hann mun vitrliga ok spakliga fara með sínu máli' (ch.44 p.120). Steinþórr attempts to do this, but his fine outfit and confident manner, his refusal to be demeaned in any way provokes the Þorbrandssynir who rush out to attack. And as in the case of Gunnarr, such open and uncontrolled aggression only emphasises the calm dignity of the man in red. Eventually the whole dispute is settled by arbitration, the permanence of the settlement apparently due mainly to the influence of Snorri and Steinþórr.

Barði Guðmundarson plays a very minor role in *Grettis saga*, yet his authority is evident from his first appearance. He arrives at a house where Grettir and Auðun are fighting in a fairly undignified way. Grettir hearing a noise looks up and

sér hann, at maðr gengr inn þrifligr,
í rauðum kyrtli ok hafði hjálm á
höfði.

(ch.28 p.96)

Barði enters the scene with an impression of command, he negotiates calmly between the two men and is not provoked by Grettir's insinuations that he lacks courage and honour because he has not avenged the death of his own brother. Similarly later when Barði rides home after a battle, with his exhausted and wounded men, he is again taunted by Grettir but can shrug off these accusations as not worth his attention. If a red garment is accepted as a sign of prestige, it is being used here as one element in the characterisation of Barði, presenting, as with the previous cases, an outward appearance of superiority which is reinforced by the conduct of the wearer.

Barðr may only appear briefly in *Grettis saga* but his distinguished character would be known to a contemporary audience from *Heiðarvíga saga*, where he is a major participant. However in *Orkneyinga saga* we have another man who appears only twice in the narrative (the second time wearing red), yet he is a relatively ordinary person with no particular pretensions to great social standing. Earl Þorfinnr of the Orkneys has approached King Magnús aboard his ship and a temporary truce has been agreed between them. Then one day when the King and the Earl are seated together:

Maðr gekk í lyptingina í rauðum
kyrtli, mikill ok vaskligr; sá kvaddi
konung. Konungr tók blíðliga kveðju
hans.

(ch.30 p.76)

The newcomer is one of the King's retainers whose brother and companions were killed by Þorfinnr in the Orkneys. Now he confronts the Earl and demands compensation, he also reproaches the King for forgetting how his own men have been treated. Throughout the encounter, from his outward appearance and his pressing of justified legal demands, the retainer shows a certain restraint and superiority. This contrasts much to the disadvantage of the Orkney Earl who, to escape the King's anger, has to leave the ship hastily and somewhat ignominiously:

Jarl spratt pá upp ok gekk ofan ór
lyptingunni ok á skip sitt;

(ch.30 p.77)

It is not only the Earl but also the King who appears at a moral disadvantage in the light of the retainer's conduct. If dignity or superiority are implied by the colour red,

they are obviously not restricted solely to those of highest social rank.

Three women are described as wearing red kirtles, in each case accompanied by other items of dress. Fríðr, the daughter of King Dofri in *Kjalnesinga saga*, greets Búi who has come to visit her father. She is a beautiful, elegant woman with long fair hair and well dressed:

í rauðum kyrtli ok allr hlöðum búinn,
ok digrt silfrbelti um sik.
(ch.13 p.29)

The red garment is a part of her magnificent outfit which is all evidence of her social position as a daughter of a king. Þuríður, the widow in the Faroes, wears a red kirtle and blue cloak. Her claim to distinction could be grounded in her title of *meginekkja* (6), though her appearance at this point in fine clothes is no doubt to impress or entice Sigurður Þorláksson. Hallgerður is another woman who dresses to attract suitors. She appears twice in red, the first time when she meets Glúmr, the second when it is Gunnarr who is drawn to her (*Njáls s. ch.33 p.85*). In both cases her dress is given in detail; physically she is without doubt an impressive woman whatever her true character. It would seem however, knowing the kind of person she is, that her claim to the prestige, the social status of red, would be presumptuous, yet in both scenes she has an air of command and the wearing of red seems to enhance this.

In Chapter Thirteen, meeting Glúmr, Hallgerður speaks confidently to the men: *hon kvaddi þá alla góðum orðum ok mælti vel ok sköruliga ...* (p.44). When the marriage is

agreed there is a reminder that she is a wealthy woman: *Síðan váru virð fé Hallgerðar* (p.45). Her husband must provide an equal amount and Hallgerðr was to have an equal share of the whole estate. When Gunnarr sees her at the Alþingi, Hallgerðr is leading a group of women; she is the best dressed of them all. Again she behaves with self-assurance: *Hon mælti til hans djarfliga* (ch.33 p.85). And when Gunnarr's proposal is accepted, Hallgerðr *festi sik sjálf* (ch.33 p.87). Apart from red being worn here for vanity, it also has a presence which helps to portray her as a woman of some prominence during these encounters. We are aware though that this is a facade (very early in the saga her *þjófsaugu* have been commented on (ch.1 p.7)); there is no justification for a position of prestige based on any inner worth or superiority. But because of our awareness of this it is possible to appreciate the dramatic contrast between the outer and inner character and to see Gunnarr as susceptible to human failings when, blinded by her magnificence, he lacks rational judgment.

There are times when red is being worn by men who have a reputation not as heroes of the socially responsible type often admired in the family sagas, but whose claim to notability is based more on warlike prowess. These men are great vikings. In *Svarfdoela saga*, Þorsteinn goes out to confront such a man. Ljótr inn bleiki is a formidable warrior who commands fifteen ships including one strengthened with iron. When Þorsteinn approaches him Ljótr is on board his ship and

sá var í rauðum skarlatskyrtli ok
 heklu blá yfir sér, hlaðbúna húfu á
 höfði.

(ch.5 p.136)

Þorsteinn offers him a choice - either he leaves his ship with only his clothes and weapons or he fights. Ljótr obviously chooses to fight and is subsequently killed. To have been forced to abandon his ships with only his clothes, the external evidence of a lost status, would have been a humiliating defeat - even to be offered such an alternative was an insult. It was of course necessary to build up Ljótr's reputation and emphasise his position as a viking of renown in order that Þorsteinn, as his killer, should be credited with a particularly great achievement.

Karl Mærski, who *hafði verið víkingur og hinn mesti ránsmaður* (7), appears before Óláfr Tryggvason. The red he wears contributes to the presence he acquires in his first scene. Óláfr has failed to force any of his men to undertake the task of collecting tribute in the Faroes. They have all given excuses. Then Karl stands up:

mikill og allvörpulegur; sá hafði
 rauðan kyrtil, hjálm á höfði, gyrdur
 sverði; höggspjót mikið í hendi.
 (8)

Red is a part of his contrasting appearance when, compared to the reluctance of the retainers, he boldly offers to take on the voyage. It seems he may also be entitled to the symbolism of this colour through his family (*var maður ættstór*) and through his enterprising character and remarkable physical ability (9). But *rauðr* in this case is more of a temporary assumption than in the case of such as Gunnarr or Steinþórr, an assumption in order to effectively

enhance his stature at a certain point. There is perhaps a certain arrogance involved as well, as the manner of his subsequent death in the Faroes serves to deflate his eminent image.

Geirmundr gnýr is another *víkingr mikill* whose end is not quite in keeping with his image. Described as a *ríkr maðr ok auðigr* (Laxd.s. ch.29 p.77), he accompanies Óláfr pái back to Iceland and marries his daughter, Þuríðr.

Geirmundr has a particular habit of dress:

hann hafði skarlatskyrtil rauðan ok
gráfeld yztan ok bjarnskinnshúfu á
höfði,

(Laxd.s. ch.29 p.79)

He carries with him the sword Fótbitr, a splendid weapon with a hilt of walrus ivory. He is not popular and eventually decides to abandon his wife and child and return to Norway. This does not suit Þuríðr who manages to take his fine sword leaving him with the female child he did not want to support. Though the sword is cursed and brings destruction to Óláfr's family, yet Geirmundr's own predicament as a victim of a woman's cunning and ruthlessness is humiliating for a great viking. It suggests that his claim to prominence is based on his own presumption.

Arrogance can be seen as the motivating force behind many who wear *rauðr*, and even though there is always some indication of an exceptional feature or ability, these can often be seen as tenuous claims to prestige. Sigurður Þorláksson of *Færeyinga saga*, is described as a well built and handsome man, one of the most accomplished in the

islands (10). He appears twice in red, the first time leading a party of men in a successful attempt to intimidate his unarmed opponents and change a legal ruling (11). The second time is when he is courting Þuríður and even his own brother feels that this is beyond the family's social aspirations: *ekki ætla eg mér svo hátt* (12). Through his own presumption Sigurður walks into the trap which leads to his death.

Kjartan Ólafsson would seem to be a character with definite claims to distinction, a natural right to dress in garments representing high social status. Yet at the points in *Laxdoela saga* when he is mentioned as wearing red (and this occurs twice), there is an element of arrogance present. After the swimming contest with Óláfr Tryggvason, Kjartan's response to the king elicits the remark from Óláfr - *enda lætr þú allstórliga* (ch.40 p.118). As Kjartan turns away from the king we learn that he is *í skarlatskyrtli rauðum*. Later in Iceland Guðrún and Bolli attend a feast at Hjarðarholt. Guðrún had always been allotted the high seat but this time there is a dispute about it. Kjartan hears this:

Kjartan var þá at ok klæddisk ok steypði yfir sik skarlatskyrtli rauðum. Þá mælti Kjartan til konu þeirrar, er um kvenna skipunina hafði roett, - því at engi var annarr skjótari til at svara - : 'Hrefna skal sitja í ondvegi ok vera mest metin at görvöllu, á meðan ek em á lífi.'

(ch.46 p.139)

It may be quite natural for Kjartan to insist on the first place among the women for his wife, but his tone here is peremptory. He is overbearing, dictatorial in his attitude

which no doubt does much to add to Guðrún's embarrassment and her resentment of Hrefna and the whole situation. The mention of the red garment in both instances implies an assumption of social standing, a status which Kjartan wishes to impress on others.

There are other characters who appear to assume this prestigious image prior to suffering a fate which is somewhat at odds with it. Þorgils Hölluson is a *mikill maðr ok vænn ok inn mesti oflátí; engi var hann kallaðr jafnaðarmaðr* (Laxd.s. ch.57 p.170). He hopes to marry Guðrún when he has helped her to avenge Bolli's death. He returns from the successful expedition and goes to tell her about it and he:

var í rauðbrúnum kyrtli ok hafði um
sik breitt silfrbelti
(ch.65 p.194)

His outfit enhances the dramatic irony of the situation. He wears the finery of a man of distinction, a man who is about to claim as his wife one of the most prominent women in the country, but as the audience is well aware he is going to be humiliated, his pride and arrogance deflated when Guðrún reveals her deception. To some extent though this elicits a certain sympathy for a character who acted in good faith but being so full of his own self-esteem was unable to perceive how he had been duped.

The juxtaposition of a red garment and an ignominious fate also occurs in *Færeyinga saga*. Sigmundur Brestisson arrives back in the Faroes and leads a successful attack on Özurr during which he was:

svo búinn, að hann hafði hjálm á höfði og gyrdur sverði, öx í hendi silfurrekin og snaghyrnd og hið bezta vopn, og vafið skaftið. Hann var í rauðum kyrtli og brynstakkur léttur um utan og var það mál vina og óvina að eigi hefði slíkur maður komið í Færeyjar sem hann var.

(13)

He has been presented throughout the saga as an heroic figure, performing many exploits for Earl Hákon in Norway. The next mention of his red tunic is just prior to his death. Escaping from Þrándur, he and two others try to swim from one island to another. Sigmundur displays great courage and physical strength in his attempts to save his companions but he does not succeed and he is the only survivor. Exhausted, he lies helpless on the beach where his red clothes attract the attention of Þorgrímur illa. In this respect he is doubly betrayed by his fine outfit which reveals him to the *bóndi* who, tempted by a gold ring, kills Sigmundur and strips him of clothes and jewellery. A sad end for a hero as the author implies in his comment: *og lætur Sigmundur svo líf sitt, hinn vaskasti maður fyrir flestra hluta sakir* (14).

There is a similar juxtaposition in *Njáls saga*: a prestigious red garment symbolising superiority combined with a humiliating position at the time of attack - and the actual symbol, the red tunic, contributing to the victim's death. Þorgrímr Austmaðr goes to investigate Gunnarr's house to see if Gunnarr himself is there. As he climbs past a window his clothes draw Gunnarr's attention: *Gunnarr sér, at rauðan kyrtli berr við glugginum* (ch.77 p.187). Gunnarr strikes Þorgrímr with his axe, wounding him in the

stomach. Þorgrímr falls from the roof and dies from the wound, yet not before he has displayed the courage and humour so admired in saga literature. Although badly wounded he *gengr síðan at þeim Gizuri, þar er þeir sátu á vellinum*; they ask if Gunnarr is at home and Þorgrímr replies:

‘Vitið þér þat, en hitt víska ek, at
atgeirr hans var heima.’ Síðan fell
hann niðr dauðr.

(ch.77 p.187)

A humorous incident and perhaps the red tunic is being used here to highlight a slightly ludicrous death; but Þorgrímr has heroic traits and his words and conduct appear almost to reproach the others who sit immobile while a foreigner (*Austmaðr*) risks his life for their cause.

In Chapter 134 of *Njáls saga*, Yngvild, the mother of Þorvaldr has a premonition of his death. In a dream she sees her son in a red tunic which appears so tight that it might have been sewn onto him, he is also *í rauðum hosum undir ok vafit at vándum dreglum* and his whole situation *var svá óhoegt* (p.351-352) (15). Here there is the juxtaposition of red which could equal status, superiority, grandeur (and therefore, one would assume, ease and comfort) with ragged ribbons and extreme discomfort and restriction. Red may also be associated with blood in this context. The whole combination has a nightmarish quality; it invokes an atmosphere of unease and can be readily seen as an omen of disaster.

Red garments could be interpreted as representing the worth or social standing of the wearer though it can be

seen that this assertion is not always wholly justified by the person's character. But this observation in itself is based on certain judgements as to what formulates the desired social status implied by red: does it imply the solid, well respected characters of men such as Steinþórr and Gunnarr or is it for anyone who is outstanding, even if his claim to respect and status is based on a reputation as *hinn mesti ránsmaður* (16). Many of these wearers show some merit or superiority though it may only be for the duration of one scene - and at times the merit may be perceived only by the wearer. As a symbol denoting prestige and stature, writers have used red garments effectively, and in certain cases ironically to underline the incongruity of a wearer's subsequent fate. (17)

NOTES

1. a. Njáls saga. ch.77 p.187
 b. Svarfdoela saga. ch.5 p.136
 c. Ljósvetninga saga. ch.14 p.79
 d. Færeyinga saga. ch.24 p.47
 e. Njáls saga. ch.92 p.231
 f. Eyrbyggja saga. ch.44 p.120
2. Guðni Jónsson (ed). Flóamanna saga. Íslendinga sögur. vol.12. ch.24 p.47.
3. Henrik Bertelsen (ed) Piðriks saga af Bern. ch.285 (179) vol I p.337.
4. Ólafur Halldórsson (ed). Færeyinga saga. ch.57 p.113.
5. Gustav Neckel (ed). Edda. Rev. by H. Kuhn. st.19 p.227.
6. Ólafur Halldórsson (ed). op cit. ch.40 p.77.
7. ibid. ch.47 p.90.
8. ibid. ch.46 p.89.
9. ibid. ch.47 p.90-91.
10. ibid. ch.36 p.68.
11. ibid. ch.48 p.97-98.
12. ibid. ch.55 p.108.
13. ibid. ch.24 p.47.
14. ibid. ch.39 p.77.
15. See ch.9 A Sign of Grief p.165-166.
16. Ólafur Halldórsson. op cit. ch.47 p.90.

17. Svarfdoela saga. ch.20 p.184.

Ögmundr and his companions are searching the farm at Hof for the two sons of Ásgeirr. A red kirtle is found, wet and hanging on a beam outside. Ögmundr tests it and discovers the moisture is salty - it is thought that the two men had waded ashore from their wrecked boat. He then kills a *tík* and wraps the headless body in the tunic, showing it to the women in the house in an attempt to deceive them into believing that Skíðri has betrayed the brothers. Skíðri is then tortured but refuses to divulge any information.

Since the garment is not being worn by anyone it is difficult to ascertain any symbolism. It has a specific function in this chapter as it is being used to disguise the body of an animal which is supposed to represent a dead man. In this context it could then be said to be deceptive in its indication of the nature of the wearer - an interpretation which would fit in some ways with the concept of red as representative of social position and grandeur, but which not all the wearers of it can justify by the nature of their character.

Chapter Four

GREEN CLOTHES

As a colour for clothes this is rarely mentioned in the *Íslendingasögur*. In the texts covered only the following six instances have occurred though these really only amount to five examples as the episodes in *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Reykdoela saga* are actually the same story which has been incorporated into both texts.

1. Færeyinga saga. In Chapter Forty-seven (1), Karl mærski and Leifur are examining the silver paid by Þrándur towards the tribute exacted by King Óláfur Haraldsson. Karl is acting as the King's agent in this. As the two men weigh the silver outside Þrándur's booth, we are suddenly and without introduction told of a man coming towards them. His dress is described in detail and he carries a 'club'. He does not stay but places his club on the ground and leaves with a cryptic warning for Karl.

þeir sá mann ganga hjá sér og hafði
refði í hendi og hött síðan á höfði,
heklu græna, berfættur, knytt
línbrókum að beini. Hann setti niður
refðið í völl og gekk frá og mælti.

'Sé þú við, Mæra-Karl, að þér verði
eigi mein að refði mínu.'

(p.95)

Soon afterwards Leifur is called away as a man has been slain in another booth. Karl is left outside Þrándur's booth and it is then that Þrándur's nephew, Gautur rauði, strikes Karl with a hand axe. Karl is wounded in the head but not fatally. However Þórður lági takes up the club left by the mysterious stranger; he strikes the back of the

axe, forcing it into Karl's brain and thus killing him.

2. Víga-Glúms saga. Bárðr is collecting timber in his wood when he is seen by a shepherd who works for Vigfúss.

Later, when talking with his master, the shepherd mentions the two men he has seen, remarking that:

'ok var annarr í groenum kyrtli ok
hafði skjöld á hlið.'

(ch.19 p.64)

This man is identified by the shepherd as Bárðr, and Vigfúss, accompanied by two Norwegian guests, sets off to settle a long-term dispute with him. Bárðr's companion goes ahead to get help; Bárðr and Vigfúss fight together; the Norwegians step in and kill Bárðr when it appears that their host is in danger of losing the duel.

3. Víga-Glúms saga. Skúta has set up a trap for Glúmr, a meeting at an isolated shieling. As Glúmr rides up from the river, Skúta recognises him by his stature and the coloured cloak he wears:

at maðr reið upp frá Þverá, mikill ok
í kápu groenni, ok kennir, at þar ríðr
Glúmr.

(ch.16 p.52)

Later after an initial skirmish between the two men, Glúmr deceives his attacker by throwing his cloak into the river where Skúta stabs at it, believing the man, his victim, is still wearing it. Glúmr taunts Skúta from a ledge, out of harm's way and then is able to escape.

4. Reykdoela saga. (ch.26 p.233) The circumstances are the same as the above episode with Skúta recognising Glúmr by his green *kápa* which is subsequently used in the same way, with Glúmr eluding his adversary.

5. Laxdoela saga. Þorgils Hölluson leads his group of men to the shieling of Helgi Harðbeinsson. On the way they rest, Helgi's shepherd observes them, returns to his master and describes their dress. The third man is portrayed in this manner:

þá sat maðr í smeltum söðli; sá var í
gulgroenum kyrtli; hann hafði mikit
fingrgull á hendi. Sá maðr var inn
fríðasti synum ok mun enn vera á ungum
aldri, jarpr á hárlit, ok ferr allvel
hárit, ok at öllu var hann inn
kurteisasti maðr.

(ch.63 p.188)

Helgi identifies him as Þorleikr Bollason. In the ensuing fight Þorleikr kills Eyjólfur, one of Helgi's men.

6. Hrafnkels saga. At the Alþingi, Sámur is despairing of being successful in his case against Hrafnkell. Early in the morning he walks with Þorbjörn discussing the way matters stand. They notice a man on the other side of the river:

Sá var hár maðr ok ekki þrekligr, er
fyrstr gekk, í laufgroenum kyrtli ok
hafði búit sverð í hendi, réttleitr
maðr ok rauðlitaðr ok vel í
yfirbragði, ljósjarpr á hár ok mjök
hærðr. Sjá maðr var auðkenniligr, því
at hann hafði ljósan lepp í hári sínu
inum vinstra megin.

(ch.4 p.111)

Sámur approaches him - Þorkell Þjóstarsson - and enlists his support in the legal case. It is through the help of Þorkell and his brother, Þorgeirr that Hrafnkell is defeated in the court.

Why so few instances of green clothing? As a colour it does not even begin to compare with red and blue, which are mentioned so many times. Maybe it was not a colour

worn much in medieval Icelandic society. The vikings, it seems, were acquainted in various places with the materials for producing a green dye, but perhaps such items, or one particular ingredient, were not easily to hand in Iceland. But this would hardly apply, one would think, to Europe as a whole, and since many of the coloured, expensive finery was obtained abroad surely some returning Icelanders would be wearing it. Of course the general term *litklæði* may include some garments of green, it is impossible to say. On the other hand green may, in Icelandic society, have been an unpopular colour, one not immediately chosen for dress. Whether this has anything to do with its appearance (or non-appearance) in the literature, depends on how much the writer was influenced by the social circumstances surrounding him.

Green as a colour generally has extremely favourable connotations in Old Norse tradition. Cleasby and Vigfússon include a metaphorical definition in their entry for *grænn*: 'hopeful, good', and cite texts to substantiate this: (2)

flyt þú mik aptr til eyjar minnar, ok
mun sá grænstr,
(and that will be the best thou canst do)

sá mun nú grænstr at segja satt
(the most hopeful choice to tell the truth)

Chapter Fifteen in *Vatnsdoela saga* has Ingimundr undecided where to settle. He sends men up to the top of a hill, they come back and report on land which lies to the north where already at this time of spring there is no snow lying. The choice of land would be better there. Ingimundr answers:

'Þá er hóf at, ok væntum enn, at
nökkut groent mun fyrir liggja; svá
mun hlut til draga.'

(ch.15 p.40,41)

Green is equated with a good, favourable place to be. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, in the footnote to this excerpt, explains that green is related to *gróa* (to grow); it was a colour particularly dear to the settlers. Eiríkr enn rauði gave his new country the name *Groenland*, believing that that would encourage settlement there. Green in this context obviously implies fertility, which would of course be extremely important to a society of new settlers and farmers. However in a pagan society it would go rather deeper since the gods, and in particular Freyr, played an essential role in determining the outcome of the seasons and the productivity of the land.

Völuspá emphasises the green of the newly created world:

sól skein sunnan
á salar steina,
þá var grund gróin
groenum lauki. (3)

After Ragnarök the re-newed, re-created earth rises from the sea - *iðjagroena* - evergreen (4).

Green as a colour should have been well liked by the Icelanders; in terms of dress however they may have been influenced by other traditions imported from medieval Europe. Medieval literature, and various ballads, present a different view of green especially when worn in some form of dress. Green is often associated with the supernatural and through this can be seen as an omen of ill-luck. The Green Knight is attired all in the one colour which as

Robert Garret comments 'connects the Knight with the Celtic underworld' (5). The Summoner in Chaucer's *Friar's Tale* meets in the forest another rider:

A gay yeman, under a forest syde.
A bowe he bar, and arwes brighte and kene;
He hadde upon a courtepy of grene,
An hat upon his heed with frenges blake.
(6)

A 'bailly' is how this rider represents himself and the two ride together for a while. Then the truth is revealed:

'I am a feend; my dwellyng is in helle,'

The tale ends with the devil carrying off the dishonest summoner, at the express wish of one of the man's victims, a poor widow. In this case the wearing of green should apparently have alerted the Summoner, making him suspicious of the man's identity. However it should also be taken into account that the description is somewhat similar to that of the yeoman in the *Prologue* who was clad in *cote and hood of grene*, and who also carried *arwes, bright and kene* and a *myghty bowe* (7). There does not appear to be any particularly supernatural significance here.

William Dunbar, in *The Golden Targe*, describes Pluto, the god of the Underworld:

There was Pluto, the elrich incubus
In cloke of grene; his court usit no sable.
(8)

The poem as a whole contains much green imagery. Dunbar uses 'green' to describe nature: trees, banks, woods. He uses it metaphorically when referring to youth or innocence; and the ladies in his poem are dressed in *kirtillis grene* which is apparently in honour of the season, of May. Green is a part of the celebration of

spring with all its associations of verdant land, fertility, and new-growing things, fresh and untouched. Since all this hardly seems to apply to Pluto and his dark underworld, for him also to appear dressed in green seems something of an anomaly. It would appear to suggest that another form of symbolism is attached to green in his case, one which is connected to Chaucer's *feend* and to the Green Knight.

Tam Lin, in the ballad of that name, is under a fairy enchantment. He instructs his lover on how to rescue him and restore him to human form. At a certain moment she must pull him from his white horse and hold fast to him no matter what shape he assumes; she is then to cover him with her green mantle or kirtle.

A: 35 'And then I'll be your ain true-love,
 I'll turn a naked knight;
 Then cover me wi your green mantle,
 And cover me out o sight.

B: 37 She hied her to the milk-white steed,
 And pu'd him quickly down;
 She cast her green kirtle ovr him,
 To keep him frae the rain;

I: 51 They shaped him in her arms at last
 A mother-naked man,
 She wrapt him in her green mantle,
 And soe her true love wan.

(9)

Although Janet may in general be covering the nakedness of Tam Lin, the emphasis on green, and on the act of covering, does suggest that this is part of the process needed to break the spell. In this context the green garment brings good fortune to Tam Lin. But the fertility aspect is also present as Janet is pregnant by Tam Lin. In another ballad, *The King's Tochter Lady Jean*, green is worn by Lady

Jean; she is raped by a man who turns out to be her own brother. The colour of her robe is stressed:

D: ... 'My mantle is o gude green silk'

He's taen her by the milk-white hand,
And by the grass-green sleeve,
(10)

Green has a strong tradition as an unlucky, ill-omened colour for dress; an indication perhaps of how far back over the centuries this belief originated and took root. Opie and Tatem in their *Dictionary of Superstitions* cite many examples of people's aversion to green clothes, of their conviction that to wear green would bring bad luck - may even as a result necessitate the wearing of black afterwards (i.e. as mourning) (11).

Many of these interpretations or associations are derived from non-Icelandic sources and the extent of their influence on the sagas is obviously questionable. In the sphere of medieval courtly traditions there are even further possibilities of symbolism i.e. green as representative of joy, frivolity, inconstancy (12). Although it is perhaps necessary to be aware of this European symbolism, in the light of the few examples from Icelandic texts it would be difficult to determine how relevant all these traditions are to the family sagas. Taking some of these possible associations with green into account how do the excerpts from the *Íslendingasögur* appear, in relation to them?

1. Færeyinga saga. Here there is a definite relationship with the supernatural, with a pagan god. The stranger who

wears green has been instrumental in the death of Karl. His warning shows that he had fore-knowledge of the coming events and of the part he himself would play in the execution of Karl's fate. Various points suggest that this man, who is never named, is actually Óðinn.

In Chapter Three of *Völsunga saga*, an unknown man enters the hall of King Völsungr. He drives a sword into the tree called *Barnstokk* and, in similar fashion to the tale of Arthur, the sword belongs to the man who can subsequently pull it out (13). Though he is not named it appears (according to the footnote) that there is no doubt that this is Óðinn: besides his dress we are also told he has one eye (14). He later re-appears on the battle field holding a spear, a weapon particularly associated with Óðinn (15).

The following similarities occur in the descriptions of Óðinn in *Völsunga saga* and the man in *Færeyinga saga*:

berfættur	Fær.
berfoettr	Völ.
hött síðan á höfði	Fær. + Völ.
hafði knytt línbrókum a beini	Fær.
hafði knytt línbrókum at beini	Völ.
hekla græna	Fær.
heklu flekkótta	Völ.

According to Cleasby/Vigfússon, a *hekla* is 'a kind of cowled or hooded frock'. The main difference between these two descriptions is the kind of *hekla*, one green and the other flecked/spotted. When Óðinn is mentioned later on the battle field in *Völsunga saga*, he is again wearing a *hekla* but this time a blue/black one (*blár*) (16). It may

be that it is the type of garment - *hekla*, which is associated with Óðinn rather than a specific colour or pattern (17).

On the other hand *Norna-gests þáttr* has a similar appearance by this god wearing a green cloak. Sigurðr and his companions are sailing their ship along the coast when they see a man on a crag:

Hann var í heklu grænni ok blám brókum
ok knepptu skó á fótum uppháva ok
spjót í hendi.

(18)

He calls himself Hnikarr which according to *Gylfaginning* was one of Óðinn's assumed names (19). He goes aboard the ship and offers Sigurðr advice. On the morning following Sigurðr's victory in the battle against the sons of Hundingr, the stranger disappears and: *Hyggja menn, at þat hafi Óðinn verit.*

In each of these incidents the newcomer wears a *hekla*, either green or some other kind of colour. In the *Færeyinga saga* the man leaves a *refði* which Muriel Press has translated as 'club' (20). But the word could also mean a 'staff', 'rod' (CV), which may then be seen as more symbolic of Óðinn's spear.

The background to the characters involved in the incident in *Færeyinga saga* seems to confirm the theory that this stranger is Óðinn. Karl is an emissary of King Óláfr Haraldsson - St Óláfr, a king known for his devout Christianity. Þrándur on the other hand is without doubt a follower of heathen gods. When Sigmundur arrived in the Faroes with a command from Óláfr Tryggvason to convert the

islanders, it was Þrándur who influenced their decision to refuse the new faith (21). Eventually Þrándur is physically forced to accept baptism but later the saga states that he reverted back to the old religion (22). He possesses certain supernatural powers - demonstrated by his ability to influence the natural elements and his skill in necromancy - which would seem to suggest a strong relationship with his heathen gods (23).

Prior to the attack Karl had disagreed with Þrándur over the quality of the silver which was presented as tribute for King Óláfr. That this was regarded as an insult is shown in the indignation of Þrándur's nephews, Gautur and Þórður. It is not unlikely that in Chapter Forty-seven, the man in the green *hekla* was Óðinn, who in this case acts on Þrándur's behalf against the agent of a Christian king. There seems a general struggle in this saga between Þrándur and the family of Sigmundur; a struggle which is not only power based but also involves a conflict between the two faiths.

Perhaps Mæra-Karl should have realised, as with the Summoner, that this was no ordinary stranger. The man in the green *hekla* certainly brought misfortune to Karl, misfortune that actually favoured Þrándur's case. The wearer of the colour himself suffered no ill effects from it.

2. Víga-Glúms saga. There is no evidence of the supernatural here, nor of good fortune. In fact green proves more of an omen of danger and crisis for the wearer,

Bárðr, and also for Vigfúss who is subsequently outlawed for his part in the killing. The episode is reminiscent of other descriptions given by a shepherd to his master which occur in *Laxdoela saga* and *Njáls saga* (24). There is a difference in *Víga-Glúms saga* in that it is the shepherd who identifies the man in green not the master. And this is a very mild version of the motif as found in *Laxdoela*.

There seems to be some romantic echo in the green kirtle and the shield yet *Víga-Glúms saga* is apparently dated a little before the influence of the *riddara sögur* became evident in the *Íslendingasögur* (25). Could such a small and mainly irrelevant detail have been added by a later scribe? The surviving text dates from the middle of the fourteenth century. Bárðr does not on the surface seem the romantic hero type, he is described as self-assertive, overbearing, abusive. But he has honourable expectations of Vigfúss, believing that his opponent will not take advantage of superior numbers but will fight only on a one to one basis. And this is how events proceed for a while - until it looks likely that Bárðr will be the victor. Perhaps the shepherd's description of Bárðr emphasises the wearer's heroic and honourable stand, his courageous fight against unequal odds and, in contrast, reflects unfavourably on Vigfúss' conduct.

3 and 4. *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Reykdoela saga*. Skúta's plans fail and he narrowly escapes detection by Glúmr's men. Yet the green cloak proves reasonably lucky for the wearer, it does assist his escape. Again there is a possible

association here with the supernatural through Glúmr's connection with Óðinn (26).

5. Laxdoela saga. In the subsequent hostilities, Þorleikr, the wearer emerges without any injury but he has brought misfortune to Eyjólfur when his sword thrust strikes off the man's leg. However Þorleikr is a young man, an inexperienced warrior, as such green may be appropriate here in the context of 'youth' or 'immaturity'.

6. Hrafnkels saga. The wearer of green brings good fortune to Sámur but he is certainly an omen of ill-luck for Hrafnkell. In all the following events, Þorkell is unscathed by any mis-adventure.

There seems to be a balance between good and bad fortune, though on the whole green is a lucky talisman for those who are actually wearing it. Certain similarities are apparent in the descriptions of Þorleikr and Þorkell; apart from their green tunics, both men have chestnut hair, fine heads of hair in fact. Some romantic influence seems to be at work here. The description of the whole group in *Laxdoela saga* has been discussed elsewhere (Chapter Seventeen) with the conclusion that it owes much to the European chivalric tradition. *Hrafnkels saga* is dated around 1290 well after the introduction of *riddara sögur*. Þorkell, an *einhleypingr*, a wanderer, from Byzantium, is a romantic figure; he comes to the aid of Sámur, a man with a just cause but no power or influence. They fight against Hrafnkell, a man powerful but unjust who refuses to conform

to society's laws (i.e. will not pay any compensation for those he has killed).

Sistram in *Þiðreks saga* is arrayed all in green:

.... hans skiolldr oc oll hærnæskia er
 groen sem gras ... hans hinn groeni
 vapna litr þionar þar til er hit bæzta
 suerð, er hann atti hafði groenan lit
 (27)

A typical chivalric description, though green is still not mentioned often even in this saga of colourful appearances. We briefly learn of a green standard, *æinn grænan gunnfana* which the margrave and his lady give to Þiðrekr, it has apparently brought death to many Huns (28).

In two of the cases from the family sagas the characters wearing green are connected in some way with Óðinn. There is the stranger who appears in *Færeyinga saga* and Glúmr of *Víga-Glúms saga* is an Odinic hero. Green as a colour associated with the demonic may be appropriate in these texts. After the introduction of Christianity, as the new faith grew and developed, the old gods began to be represented as increasingly evil in character (29).

Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar (Heimskringla) portrays Óðinn as an evil figure, a person who is not to be trusted. A stranger visits Óláfr during a feast; he is an old man with one eye and *hafði hött síðan*. They talk late into the night. When this guest later disappears Óláfr says: '... ok þar myndi verit hafa Óðinn ...'. He orders some meat that the stranger had left, to be burnt and declares that they will not be deceived by Óðinn. The version of this

episode in the 'great' *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* specifically refers to the old man as *sjálfr fjandinn* (30).

Óðinn appears in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, one of the *fornaldar sögur*. There is no doubt that when he is identified by Hrólfr he is viewed as an influence for evil. Hrólfr and his men encounter him in the guise of a *bóndi*. They refuse his offer of help in the form of certain arms. Later as they ride away Böðvarr bjarki questions the wisdom of their action. Hrólfr agrees, aware now that the farmer must have been Óðinn particularly as he was a man with only one eye. They turn back but are unable to find either the farm or the man:

'Eigi stoðar hans at leita,' segir
Hrólfr konungr, 'því at þat er illr
andi.'

(31)

A relationship between green and the supernatural, a tradition of ill-luck for those wearing it or who came into contact with it, would explain why it may not have been popular as a colour for cloth in medieval Europe. If it was not widely available then Icelanders who travelled abroad would be unlikely to bring such clothes back with them. Writers may then avoid describing apparel which would be largely unfamiliar to their audience. Or were they using green to represent those aspects of its symbolism which would have been understood by their contemporaries? The present evidence from the texts is not sufficient to make any definite conclusions, only tentative theories.

NOTES

1. Ólafur Halldórsson (ed). Færeyinga saga. ch.47 p.90-96.
 2. Cleasby and Vigfússon. Icelandic-English Dictionary. p.218.

<i>flyt þú mik</i>	Finnboga saga	258
<i>sá mun nú</i>	Finnboga saga	226
 3. Sigurður Nordal (ed). Völuspá. st.4 p.14.
 4. *ibid.* st.59 p.111.
 5. Robert Max Garret. 'The Lay of Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight.' Journal of English and Germanic Philology. vol 24 No 1. Jan 1925 p.129.
 6. Larry D. Benson (ed). The Riverside Chaucer. The Friar's Tale. p.123-128, L.1380-1383; 1448.
 7. *ibid.* General Prologue. p.25 L.103-108.
 8. Dunbar, William. Poems. Edited by James Kinsley. p.28 L.125-6.
 9. Francis James Child (ed). English and Scottish Popular Ballads. vol I p.335-358.
- A ballad concerning Tam Lin 'is spoken of as told among a company of shepherds, in Vedderburn's *Complaint of Scotland*, 1549, p.63 of Dr James A.H. Murray's edition for the Early English Text Society.' (p.336).
10. *ibid.* vol I p.453.
 11. Iona Opie and Moira Tatem (ed). A Dictionary of Superstitions. p.181. The following are all quotes taken from the entry for 'green':

1826 R. Chambers: *Popular Rhymes of Scotland* 286:
In Morayshire, there is a saying - 'Green, Is love deen.' That is done or abandoned;

ibid. 1842 edition, 35:
'They that marry in green, Their sorrow is soon seen.'
To this day, in the north of Scotland, no young woman

would wear such attire on her wedding day.

1883 Burne: *Shropshire Folk-Lore*, 289:

A lady about to put on mourning said to me, 'I knew how it would be when I bought that green dress this summer. I never bought a green dress that I did not have to get a black one directly afterwards..'

1922 Lynd: *Solomon*, 162-3:

Parnell was eminent for moral courage, but he believed that green was an unlucky colour and was horror-stricken ... when he was presented with a green smoking cap by a too patriotic lady.

12. In *The Testament of Cresseid*, Jupiter is wearing green: *His garmound and his gyte full gay of grene*, which contrasts with the previous description of Saturn who wears gray. Denton Fox explains in a footnote that the green 'is opposed to Saturn's deadly grey and indicates vitality and life'. Further on in the poem Venus appears *clad in ane nyce array/The ane half grene, the vther half sabill blak*. Here the symbolism suggested is one of 'hope and joy'. Yet it appears that Venus herself is an inconstant and changeable creature: *Bot in hir face semit greit variance* and the description culminates with: *Now hait, now cauld, now blyith, now full of wo/Now grene as leif, now widderit and ago*. Fox comments on the colour in the context of Venus as being 'ambiguous, since green was commonly associated with frivolity and inconstancy'. *The Floure and the Leafe* reinforces these latter aspects. Those who follow the flower are arrayed in green: *And every knight of greene ware mantels on*. The editor elaborates in the introduction - 'but in general it is clear that green came to be associated more and more closely with frivolity and pleasure, and further, with inconstancy'.

Denton Fox (ed). The Poems of Robert Henryson. The Testament of Cresseid. p.116 l.178; p.354; p.118 l.221-238; p.358-359.

D.A. Pearsall (ed). The Floure and the Leafe. p.94 l.329; p.36-37.

13. R.G. Finch (ed & trans). The Saga of the Volsungs. ch.3 p.4.

14. Óðinn traded one of his eyes for a drink from Mimir's Well - the well which contained 'wisdom and intelligence'. (Anthony Faulkes (trans). Edda. Snorri Sturluson. p.17).

15. R.G. Finch. op cit. ch.11 p.20.

16. R.G. Finch. ibid. ch.11 p.20.

17. *Laxdoela saga* mentions this kind of cloak in connection with the supernatural. Þorgils Hölluson attends the Alþingi and one day when clothes are spread out to dry, Þorgils hangs his cloak, a *blár hekla*, upon the wall. It is heard to speak, warning him of imminent danger. The next day Þorgils is killed by Au gisl. Whether this is some form of intervention by Óðinn is impossible to say, but there may be some connection. Certainly this phenomenon was considered out of the ordinary; even the people at the assembly are surprised at the strange event. (ch.67 p.198-199).

18. Guðni Jónsson (ed). Norna-Gests þáttr. FAS vol.I ch.6 p.317-322.

19. Anthony Faulkes (trans). Edda. Snorri Sturluson. p.21.

20. Muriel Press (trans). The Saga of the Faroe Islanders. p.91.

21. Ólafur Halldórsson. op cit. ch.30 p.60-61.

22. Ólafur Halldórsson. op cit. ch.36 p.67-68.

23. When Sigmundur intended to take the newly baptised Þrándur with him to Norway, Þrándur was very reluctant to go. Twice they set out but were driven back by storms or winds and Þrándur said: *að svo mundi faru hversu oft sem þeir leita i til svo að þeir flytta hann nauðigan með sér*. (Ólafur Halldórsson. op cit. ch.31 p.64)

Sorcerers are mentioned in other texts as influencing the elements in this way. For instance in *Norna-gests þáttr*, in the same chapter where Óðinn appears, we are told that when Sigurður set sail he encountered storms which had been induced by sorcery - *gerningaveðr stór* (Guðni Jónsson. op cit. ch.6 p.317).

Þrándur's skill in necromancy is demonstrated when he and Leifur go to Suðurey to determine the cause of Sigmundur's death. They question Þórgrímur illi, who firmly denies any involvement. Þrándur then performs a ritual which results in the three dead men entering the hall one at a time. The hall is carefully arranged according to Þrándur's instructions and he sits alone in a set place. One by one the dead men appear: Einarr, who is dripping wet; Þórir, who has no wound; and finally Sigmundur, bloodstained and carrying his head in his hands illustrating that he was killed by violent means. (Ólafur Halldórsson. op cit. ch.41 p.79-82).

24. Laxd. s. ch.63
Njáls s. ch.54
25. John McKinnell (trans). Viga-Glums Saga. p.9-13.
26. See ch.2 Blue Clothes p.38-40.
27. Henrik Bertelsen (ed). Þiðriks saga af Bern. ch.284
(178) vol.I p.335.
28. ibid. ch.415 (398) vol.II p.334.
29. Georgia Dunham Kelchner. Dreams: In Old Norse Literature and their affinities in Folklore. p.47-49.
30. (a) Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (ed). Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar. Heimskringla. ÍF 26 ch.64 p.312-314.
- (b) The 'great' Óláfs saga Tryggvason^{ar}. Flateyjarbók.
vol 1 ch.305 p.417-418.
31. Guðni Jónsson (ed). Hrólf's saga kraka. FAS vol.I
ch.46 p.92.

Chapter Five

WHITE CLOTHES

Síðan var Óláfr skírðr ok andaðisk í hvítaváðum - he died in white clothes. Those who were newly baptised wore white garments for the week following the baptism; these were referred to as *hvítaváðir*. Kjartan wears these robes in Norway; his allegiance to King Óláfr is dated from the time *er hann var foerðr ór hvítaváðum*. The church in which Kjartan's body was laid had been recently consecrated, it was still hung with white - *í hvítaváðum*. Víga-Glúmr received baptism when Christianity was accepted in Iceland. He dies three years later. Before his death, while he is ill, he is confirmed *ok andaðisk í hvítaváðum* (1). Obviously the white robes could be worn after confirmation as well as baptism. Swedish runic stones refer at times to men who died as Christians at home and abroad: *hann var dauðr a Danmarku i hvitavaðum; sum dó i hvitavaðum; þæiR dou i hvitavaðum* (2). *Hvítaváðir* - they were a 'symbol of purification' (3) which could apply to both people and buildings.

'The new white garments gave rise to new words and phrases amongst the first generation of northern Christians' (4). Terms such as *Hvíta-Kristr* - White Christ; *Hvíta-dagar* - the White days (Whitsun-week) (5). White as a colour associated with Christ has its roots in the Old Testament. In one of his visions, Daniel sees a figure dressed in white:

9. ... et antiquus dierum sedit:
 vestimentum eius candidum quasi nix,
 et capilli capitis eius quasi lana
 munda:

(6)

Revelations clarifies this, reiterating aspects of Daniel's vision in a portrayal of the Son of God:

13. Et in medio septum candelabrorum
 aureorum similem filio hominis,
 vestitum podére, et praecinctum ad
 mamillas zona aurea:
 14. Caput autem eius, et capilli erant
 candidi tamquam lana alba, et tamquam
 nix, ...

(7)

Even in *Völuspá* we find white referred to as holy. In stanza nineteen *Yggdrasill*, the sacred ash tree, is sprinkled with white mud - *hvíta auri*. Nordal explains that 'muddy water' would have been known as an effective fertiliser, present in this case to 'keep the ash evergreen', and in this context 'the mud itself would, of course, be white and holy' (8). Christian influence may be present here. The writer, though probably pagan, has incorporated certain ideas from the new faith elsewhere in this poem.

As with green, white is not a colour regularly worn by characters in the *Íslendingasögur*. There are those times when *hvítaváðir* are worn after baptism, but as a colour descriptive of specific garments it occurs infrequently. We have however two examples from the *Orkneyinga saga* and one from *Færeyinga saga* where a white cloak is worn in what seems to be a definite Christian context.

Orkneyinga saga.

a) Earl Þorfinnr has killed his nephew and rival earl,

Rögnvaldr Brusason. King Magnús of Norway has sworn to avenge this death but is at present involved in a conflict with the king of Denmark. Magnús and his men are on their ships waiting for reinforcements before they attack Denmark. Two strange ships approach Magnús' vessel and:

Gekk maðr af langskipinu í hvítum
kuflí ok aptr eptir skipinu ok svá upp
í lyptingina; konungr sat yfir mat.
Þessi maðr kvaddi konung ok laut
honum, tók til brauðsins ok braut ok
át af.

(ch.30 p.75)

Þorfinnr's greeting is acknowledged by the King who also offers him the cup to drink. The Earl accepts it and then asks for a truce between them: *Grið viljum vér, mötunautr.* Þorfinnr now identifies himself. He offers his support in the expedition against Denmark and, using Christian terms, puts himself in the king's hands: *en allt mitt mál skal á guðs valdi ok yðru, herra.* King Magnús falls silent. When he speaks, he admits that it had been his intention to kill Þorfinnr if they had ever encountered each other but it appears that this is not so easy now:

'En nú er svá við látit, at eigi
byrjar minni tign at láta drepa þik.
Skaltu nú fara með mér, en sætt okkra
mun ek upp segja í tómi.'

They remain friends for a while, during the time the ships are waiting, but soon the old animosity of the King re-appears when he is reminded of Þorfinnr's role in the death of his retainers. Þorfinnr leaves the king's fleet and returns, unscathed, to Orkney.

In wearing a white *kufl*, Þorfinnr presents himself in the role of penitent, of suppliant. He breaks bread with

Magnús and accepts drink, an act reminiscent of the Last Supper and an expression of fellowship in the new religion. Magnús' comment after this that 'as things are, it would never do for a man in my position to have you killed ...' (9) imply that as a Christian king and leader, which Magnús is, he cannot now betray the concept behind the Christian ritual they have just performed. Porfinnr's own commitment to the new faith is also illustrated. He later travels on a pilgrimage to Rome where the Pope absolves him from all his sins. On his return home, he becomes a responsible ruler in the Orkneys and builds a church where he is finally buried.

b) Another Orkney earl, Rögnvaldr Kali Kolsson, returns from a visit to Norway and is forced ashore in the Shetlands. One day he finds himself on a shore with a *bóndi* whose fishing companion has not turned up. The Earl is *í hvítum kufli*. The farmer does not recognise this man who offers to accompany him out in the boat. They set out with the Earl being warned to keep away from the dangerous currents. Rögnvaldr appears to ignore this advice, letting the boat drift into the current to the absolute terror of the poor *bóndi*. The Earl reassures him:

'Ver kátr, bóndi, ok grát eigi, því at
sá mun okkr ór draga röstinni, er okkr
lét í koma.'

(ch.85 p.199)

And Rögnvaldr brings the boat out of the current, away from danger and safely to the beach. The *bóndi* offers first choice of the catch to his strange companion but this is refused, only the third of the catch to which he is entitled is to be given to the mysterious rower. Then the

Earl takes his fish and gives them all to the poorer people who stand around the shore. He turns to leave, but while climbing the slope, slips and tumbles down again. One of the women begins to laugh, the others join in. Rögnvaldr replies with a verse, referring to the mockery of his dress, it ends with:

Fár kann jarl, en árla
örlyndr, at sjá görla,
hlunns drók eik af unnum
áðr, í fiskiváðum.

He leaves the scene and it is only later that the people discover that it was the Earl. This conduct was apparently not unusual in Rögnvaldr who appears to have gone about performing many charitable acts which

er bæði váru hjálpsamlig fyrir guði ok
skemmtilig fyrir mönnum. Menn kenndu
ok orðskvið þann, er stóð í vísunni,
at fár kennir jarl í fiskiváðum.
(ch.85 p.200)

There is an analogy here between this fishing incident and the Biblical account in *Luke*, Chapter Five, where Jesus urges Simon to put out into deep water and drop the nets. Simon is reluctant, he has fished all night already and caught nothing. Still he obeys and the catch is so great the boat almost capsizes. And the distribution of fish, while it does not occur at this point is associated with Christ through the loaves and fishes tale (10). At any rate fishermen and fish have a special role in the Christian faith. 'Not many people know an earl when he's dressed as a fisherman' (11) may be extended beyond its literal meaning, it could be interpreted on a more symbolic plane - that not many would recognise an earl in the guise of a devout Christian.

As Paul Bibire has pointed out, this episode in *Orkneyinga saga* has many similarities with the story of Þórr going fishing for the World Serpent (12). Snorri gives an account of this in *Gylfaginning* (13). Þórr has persuaded the giant Hymir to take him out to sea in his boat. As bait, Þórr has an ox's head and with this manages to catch the serpent. There is a violent struggle; Hymir, terrified, cuts the line and the serpent sinks back into the sea. Þórr is furious, knocks the giant overboard and wades back to land. Certain parallels can be found between *Orkneyinga saga* and *Gylfaginning*: the stranger is in disguise (in Snorri's case as a young boy); precise details are given of the seating arrangements in the boat; the stranger rows; the journey falls into 'two stages' - firstly to the usual place for fishing, secondly into a dangerous area. Another version of Þórr's expedition can be found in *Hymiskviða* and here the two return to land together and a share of the catch is offered to the stranger (14).

If this heathen story is being suggested through the anecdote about Rögnvaldr, then it is expected that the reader would interpret it in a Christian context (Bibire p.96). Bibire tells us that a serpent has been used in the Bible to represent the devil. In *Orkneyinga saga* we have Rögnvaldr, representing Christ, struggling with the devil in the form of the serpent. This is not however explicitly stated as, even symbolically, this central part of the Þórr story is omitted in *Orkneyinga*. But if it were present in the reader's mind then it may suggest other

Christian elements. The testing of the *bóndi* has a certain prominence. He has no faith in his companion and has to be reassured. Rögnvaldr's words: *sá mun okkr ór draga röstinni, er okkr lét í koma*, are ambiguous, *sá* could refer to the Earl but it could also mean God. If one accepts the tenet that 'Christians must be tested by Christ in order to grow in faith' then this could be considered as a parable of Christ testing his followers by taking them 'into peril in the seas of life' (15). If Rögnvaldr is to be actually seen as the image of Christ, then it also emphasises the virtue of charity when he gives away all his catch to those on shore who are strangers to him. The *bóndi*'s primary concern had been with himself and his immediate family; his first reaction to danger was to blame his own misfortune and lament his own death and the effect on his family - very human emotions, but perhaps a more elevated and wider concern for humanity (i.e. one's companion in danger) would be expected from a Christian, and certainly greater faith in the guidance of God when in trouble. On the whole this analysis provides a firmer foundation for linking Rögnvaldr's white cloak with Christian symbolism.

Rögnvaldr's piety is beyond question by the end of his part in this saga. He makes a journey to the Holy Land and when he is ruthlessly killed in Caithness, his body is taken back to Kirkwall and buried in St Magnus' Cathedral. Miracles are attributed to him after his death which are considered to be God's way of expressing the holiness of the Earl. Both these Orkney incidents reflect favourably on the ruling family of the Orkneys as firmly Christian,

despite whatever other acts of violence they may have performed in the course of their lives.

Færeyinga saga.

The two brothers Brestir and Beinir have been attacked and killed. Þrándur may have avoided an active part in this but was instrumental in urging the others to finish the brothers off. He also wanted the two boys, Sigmundur and Þórir, sons of the dead men, killed as well. Björn prevents this and Þrándur, saying he will foster the boys, takes them away. Later Þrándur tries to sell them to Hrafn, a Norwegian merchant:

Þrándur leiðir þar fram sveina tvo
kollótta í hvítum kuflum. Þeir voru
fríðir sjónum, en þrútnir í andliti af
harmi.

(16)

But the Norwegian recognises these 'slaves' and refuses to be involved in such a transaction. In the end Þrándur has to pay Hrafn two silver marks to take the boys away from the Faroes. Hrafn looks after the boys well during the winter; in the spring he gives them the silver, saying they are free to go where they please.

Sigmundur and Þórir appear in their white robes as innocent victims; there is an air of martyrdom about them. The issue of pagan versus Christian is highlighted. Þrándur is a loyal supporter of the old pagan religion whereas Sigmundur is later responsible for bringing the Christian faith to the Faroes, forcing even Þrándur to accept baptism. Their lives and religions seem strangely intertwined; Þrándur contributes to the situation which leads to Sigmundur's death, yet he also, through sorcery,

discovers the man who actually murdered his Christian adversary.

In the *Íslendingasögur*, 'white' as an epithet could denote cowardice; it could also refer to someone with fair hair. *Fóstbroeðra saga* substantiates this when describing Helgi:

Hann átti þat kenningarnafn, at hann
er kallaðr Helgi inn hvíti, því at
hann var vænn maðr ok vel hærðr, hvítr
á hárslit.

(ch.12 p.181)

The man with whom Helgi is having a dispute about some land is Þorsteinn Egilsson who is also known for his blond hair. *Egils saga* tell us more about him. During a skirmish, Þorsteinn finds his son Grímr badly wounded, he mounts his horse, preparing to leave with the boy. Steinarr, who has led the attack against him, taunts Þorsteinn: '*Rennr þú nú, Þorsteinn hvíti?*' (ch.84 p.291). It proves an empty insult: by the end of the chapter, Þorsteinn has asserted his superior authority and power to the extent that Steinarr has to move his household out of the district for his own safety. *Gunnlaugs saga* includes a verse, composed by Gunnlaugr, which associates Þorsteinn again with 'white':

lítt sá höldr inn hvíti,
hjörpeys, fa ir meyjar,
gefin vas Eir til aura
ung, við minni tungu.

(ch.11 p.90)

We know that Þorsteinn was a particularly good-looking man - ... *var allra manna fríðastr synum, hvítr á hár ok bjartr álitum* (*Egils s.* ch.79 p.274). He would have

qualified for the nickname 'white' on his colouring alone. But in the context of these quotes the label of cowardice is obviously being hinted at - perhaps more so in the first excerpt than in the verse. Though Gunnlaugr's bitterness does express itself in anger directed at Helga's father; he may well have wanted to imply an insult here even though in veiled terms.

Þorsteinn's nephew, Kjartan, is also labelled as 'white'. It happens after his death. Þorkell of Hafratindar has little respect for Kjartan and:

... því at hann mælti jafnan illa til
hans ok kvað hann verit hafa hvítan
mann ok huglausan ...

(Laxd.s. ch.52 p.160)

Hvítr in this context is obviously meant to be interpreted as a synonym of *huglausan* - fainthearted, cowardly. Though again the word can be double-sided; Kjartan was known for his handsome appearance, he was *ljóslitaðr* (ch.28 p.77). A.C. Bouman believes that *hvítr*, as it is used in relation to Kjartan, may reflect the pagan and new Christian attitudes:

.. the connotation being not exactly
what we would call 'afraid', but more
like Kjartan's innate quality of
humility.

(17)

Such humility is not quite understood by the pagans, who would interpret it as close to cowardice. This wider definition brings *hvítr* closer in meaning to the way it has been used in describing the dress in the extracts discussed earlier, those which show a more obvious Christian influence.

Romantic influence on the term 'white' cannot be discounted either. Similes such as '*hvitr sem dvfa*' are applied to men in *Piðreks saga*. Alibrandr has a shield as *hvitur sem miöll*; 'no man in the Amlungland is his equal'. The famous King Gunnarr wore armour as *hvita sem silfr*; he stood out among others *sua er han kvrteis oc hoever skr* (18). Despite Þorkell's contempt for Kjartan, his insulting use of *hvítr*, the audience would be quite aware of Kjartan's role as shining hero and, in an ironic way, the suitability of this description of the dead man.

A strange character enters *Fóstbroeðra saga* in Chapter Fourteen. Illugi and his men are tending their horses when:

kom þar maðr einn ríðandi á áifanga.
Sá var í hvítri heklu.

(ch.14 p.194-195)

He gives his name as Helgi selseista and asks for a passage to Norway in the spring. He cannot pay, he explains, but he is a useful man to have around, and an exceptionally strong runner. Such an attribute, Illugi remarks, would be useful should Helgi ever be frightened for some reason. Helgi refutes what appears to be an implication of cowardice and arrangements are made for him to accompany Illugi on the ship.

Chapter Sixteen details the events which lead up to the killing of Þorgeirr Hávarsson. Before the final conflict there is an initial skirmish which involves Helgi. He is among a group of men who are attacked as they beach their boat, the others are all killed, but Helgi takes to his heels, easily outrunning his pursuers. Before he does

this however, he has managed to kill one of the attackers and it is difficult to see how he could have survived or even been very effective if he had not run away. He does not stop until he reaches the Alþingi where he relates the happenings to Illugi and Þorgils. It makes no difference to the fate of Þorgeirr, who is killed soon afterwards. And Helgi is not mentioned again in the saga.

The presence of Helgi at this point is rather perplexing. There is the obvious association of fear or cowardice but this does not seem an adequate explanation. Why bring him in at all? Is he only there to function as a messenger? If so why describe his garment - was it only a device to introduce the colour *hvítr*? Helgi's conduct does however demonstrate a very positive side of so-called 'cowardice'. By running away, he eludes his opponents and retains his life, whereas if he had stayed he would doubtless have been killed, to no purpose, in a conflict that did not really concern him. His fear in this case is quite a reasonable emotion, possibly reflecting on those such as Þorgeirr who are immune from it and will thus progress from one conflict to another, justified or not, until finally killed.

Turning to *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, another character appears in white - Atli:

Atli var svá búinn, at hann var í hvítum stakki, stuttum ok þröngum; var maðrinn ekki skjótligr á fótum; var hann bæði vesalmannligr ok ljótr at sjá, sköllóttr ok inneygðr.

(ch.15 p.343)

Atli does not immediately strike one as a brave, honourable man; he hides himself away rather than face or offer hospitality to Steinþórr, his kinsman. Later Steinþórr hides behind some hangings in the house, eavesdropping on Atli and his wife in bed; Atli is complaining vociferously about the loss of his goods to the visitors, but gradually, warmed by Þórdís, he begins to regard his brother-in-law in a more favourable light. Steinþórr reveals himself and before leaving remarks that Atli's meanness is merely a fault of his temperament. When certain conflicts occur soon afterwards, Atli responds fearlessly, taking his part in killing their opponents.

The version of this saga which has survived was written sometime in the fourteenth century. Although based on an earlier text, probably dated pre-1280, this existing version 'is full of typical fourteenth century fantasy' (19). The *riddara sögur* and other romantic literature would be well established during this time; they may shed some light on this episode. There is something ludicrous about Atli and his circumstances: his ridiculous concealment in a mound of hay, his kinsman lurking behind the wall hangings, Steinþórr's subsequent remark which could be taken as sarcasm. When involved in battle, Atli pins his adversary down and bites him in the throat. In many ways he presents a figure the complete opposite of the chivalric hero. If *hvítr* suggests to an audience, an element of romance, a reminder of the noble *riddari*, then the author is giving us Atli as a travesty of the romantic hero. He is mocking the exaggerated, grand knightly

figures with the undignified, rather absurd character of Atli whose short, tight jacket is in keeping with his mean nature.

This chapter has concentrated on the use of *hvítr* when applied to outer clothes where its occurrence is unusual. It may be assumed that many linen garments could have been white, though this is not often stated. The linen shirt that the scheming sisters make for Earl Páll in *Orkneyinga saga* is described as *hvítt sem fönn*, however it was also *víðá gullsaumat* (ch.55 p.118). In this context the emphasis on the whiteness adds to the impression of a beautiful and fine garment. Linen of this quality was probably used in the *motr* of *Laxdoela saga* which we are told is *hvítan, gullofinn* (ch.43 p.131).

On the whole when a man's cloak is described as *hvítr*, the writer would appear to be often influenced by Christian symbolism. On occasion continental romance can be detected - in some ways these influences could be fused together in the concept of 'nobility' as associated with the colour white. If an element of cowardice is meant by *hvítr*, then it is possibly present in the sense of humility, a Christian virtue.



NOTES

1. (a) Vatns. s. ch.46 p.126
 (b) Laxd.s. ch.40 p.123
 (c) Laxd.s. ch.51 p.158
 (d) Víga-Glúms s. ch.28 p.98

2. Runic inscriptions: (a) Anmö stone
 (b) Torsätra stone
 (c) Molnby stone
 (Sven B.F. Jansson. The Runes of Sweden. Trans. by Peter G. Foote. p.93.)

3. Gabriel Turville-Petre (ed). Víga-Glúms Saga. p.86.

4. Cleasby and Vigfússon. p.302-303.

5. *ibid.*

6. Biblia Sacra. Vvlgatae Editionis. Book of Daniel.
 ch.7 v.9 p.569.

and one that was ancient of days took his seat;
 his raiment was white as snow,
 and the hair of his head like pure wool;

(The Holy Bible. Revised Standard Version. p.927.)

7. *ibid.* Revelations. ch.1 v.13-14 p.805.

'... and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast; his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow ...' (The Holy Bible. Revised Standard Version. p.276).

8. Sigurður Nordal (ed). Völuspá. p.37.

9. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (trans). Orkneyinga Saga. ch.30 p.72.

10. The Holy Bible. John ch.6 v.1-14 p.110.

11. Pálsson and Edwards. *op cit.* p.160.

12. Paul Bibire. 'Few know an earl in fishing clothes'.
In Orkneyinga Saga: Essays in Shetland History. Ed.
Barbara E. Crawford. p.82-98.
13. Anthony Faulkes (trans). Edda. Snorri Sturluson.
p.46-47.
14. Gustav Neckel (ed). Edda. Rev. by Hans Kuhn. p.88-95.
15. Paul Bibire. op cit. p.94.
16. Ólafur Halldórsson (ed). Færeyinga saga. ch.8 p.16.
17. A.C. Bouman. Patterns in Old English and Old Icelandic Literature. p.150.
18. Henrik Bertelsen (ed). Þiðriks saga af Bern.
 (i) hvitr sem dvfa ch.212 (117) Vol I p.223
 (ii) hvitur sem miöll ch.419 (406) Vol II p.347
 (iii) hvita sem silfr ch.289 (183) Vol I p.342-343
 (iv) '... no man in Amlungland ...'. Edward R.
 Haymes (trans). The Saga of Thidrek of Bern.
 ch.406 p.248.
19. Jónas Kristjánsson. Eddas and Sagas. Trans. Peter
 Foote. p.187.

Chapter Six

TVÍSKIPTR KLÆÐI

Joseph Harris has suggested that the saga writers used *tvískiptr* or particoloured garments to symbolise 'potential ambiguity' within certain characters (1). This theory appears to be based on *tví*, *hálftr*, and *helmingr* being interconnected and associated with derogatory connotations. *Tvískiptr* itself in the context of clothes would, on the surface, translate as 'of two colours', but it also has other meanings - 'divided', 'uncertain' (CV). Aware of the additional interpretations of this term, saga writers may well be using it as a method of indirect characterisation, exploiting both the sense of 'uncertainty' and 'double'. It is perhaps the double, two-sided aspect which becomes most evident in the characters which are examined here: they are all to some extent involved in deceit and duplicity.

The following four texts all include variations of the *tvískiptr* motif and despite their differences two points are common to all:

1. the character has some connection with particoloured clothing
2. a false name or identity is assumed by the character.

The theme of disguise accompanies this motif; a disguise or deception which is not always used for honourable purposes. Referring to Skúta in *Reykdoela saga*, Harris has described him as having a 'tricky nature' (2) and this description could be applied to all the following characters who

generally in one way or another make effective use of their particoloured clothing.

Reykdoela saga ch.26 p.231-236

Víga-Glúms saga ch.16 p.50-56

This episode concerning Skúta occurs in both these sagas with more or less the same content. The quotes are all from *Reykdoela saga* mainly because Skúta figures more prominently in this text, but the excerpts are also present in the *Víga-Glúmr* version.

Under false pretences Skúta lures Glúmr to an isolated bothy and an unexpected ambush. Matters do not go quite as Skúta planned and Glúmr escapes, goes home, collects his men and returns to the area. Skúta sees the large company of men approaching and being alone without support realises he has no chance against this force. We have previously been told that Skúta is wearing:

vesl yfir sér tvískipt, svart ok hvítt

He wears it with the black side out but now that danger is imminent, Skúta *snyr veslinu*; he turns his cloak round so that the white side is outside. He breaks his spear into a staff and pretends to be a shepherd. Glúmr's men encounter him and challenge him. Skúta gives an enigmatic reply. He does not admit his name but it is contained within his answer:

'Ek heiti Margr at Mývatni, en Fár í Fiskiloekjarhverfi.'

Though the men think he is mocking them Skúta insists that he could not give them a truer answer. They report this to Glúmr who realises what has happened and interprets Skúta's

name game which hinges on the word *skúti* meaning 'cave':

'Því at í Myvatnshverfi er hverr skúti
við annan, en í Fiskiloekjarhverfi
hittir hvergi skúta.'

Skúta's inclinations toward trickery have already been demonstrated in the methods he used to lure Glúmr into a trap. He persuaded an outlaw, a disreputable character, to approach Glúmr and request a meeting; and this is the person Glúmr is expecting to meet at the bothy.

In Chapter Twenty-one of *Reykdoela saga* Skúta avoids being harmed by an assassin due to the byrnie he is wearing when the man strikes him. Considering that they are going on a fishing trip, Skúta's precautions seem excessive, but are probably an indication of his suspicious nature. Later in the saga, Skúta again employs underhand means when he quietly gains access to where his enemy's men are resting. Unrecognised he questions one of the men and before leaving he attacks and kills another (ch.29 p.239). He is a man with his wits about him who is not reluctant to use whatever means may be necessary to ensure his own safety.

Fóstbroeðra saga. ch.23 p.231-233

Þormóðr attends an assembly in Greenland. Also present is Þorgrímr who appears to be holding court in his booth, regaling a rapt audience with an account of his heroic part in the killing of Þorgeirr, Þormóðr's foster-brother. Þormóðr approaches the booth and he is wearing:

... feld tvíloðinn, er hann átti;
feldrinn var öðrum megin svartr en
öðrum megin hvítr.

He wears it with the black on the outside, he puts on the hood and is armed with an axe. When Þorgrímr's audience is distracted by a heavy shower of rain, Þormóðr goes unrecognised into the booth and up to where Þorgrímr is sitting. Þorgrímr, curious about this man, asks his name and family. Þormóðr answers:

'Ótryggr heiti ek'
'Hvers son ertu?' sagði Þorgrímr.
'Ek em Tortryggsson'.

This brief conversation ends as Þormóðr lifts his axe and strikes Þorgrímr a violent death blow. Though the names he gives his enemy are false yet as with Skúta's reply the content could not be more true:

Ótryggr - faithless, not to be trusted
tortryggr - doubtful, incredulous

Ótryggr in this context applies to Þormóðr who with this word play is warning Þorgrímr; and it is Þorgrímr who should have been *tortryggr*. Or perhaps a more appropriate interpretation for *tortryggr* might be 'hard to trust', where *tor* as an adverbial prefix meaning 'difficult', 'hard', has been added to *tryggr* - 'trusty', 'true', as in the compound *torsýnn* - 'hard to see' (hard + visible) (CV).

Þormóðr boldly draws attention to the death; he calls for someone to hold the dead man and for others to pursue the killer. In the ensuing commotion he manages to leave the booth still unrecognised and without suspicion. He walks down to the shore and once round a headland:

Hann snýr þá feldinum ok lét þá horfa
út it hvíta.

Later he encounters men who are looking for the killer, they ask him for his name and: *Hann nefndist Vígfúss*.

'Eager for battle' is how Cleasby/Vigfússon translate this and again though on the surface a direct lie it contains an element of truth. But the men are successfully deceived and Þormóðr escapes.

Tvíloðinn is represented in Cleasby and Vigfússon as 'double hairy, thick, of fur'. But as Harris points out this term must indicate a fur cloak which is reversible (3). The important aspect of the garment is that it is of two colours, black one side and white the other in a similar fashion to the one Skúta wore.

Þormóðr's 'tricky nature' is well illustrated during his time in Greenland. He is by no means a man to be entirely trusted to behave honourably. Even in Iceland he gained renown, and his nickname of Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld, by composing verses to Þorbjörg kolbrún. Yet it appears this practice was forbidden by Icelandic law as it could compromise the honour of the woman and jeopardise her chance of marriage (4). Þormóðr also lies to Þórdís when, in order to allay her jealousy, he pretends the verses were really written for her. In *Grettis saga*, Þormóðr and his companions are described as *ekki miklir jafnaðarmenn* and his conduct in a dispute over a whale is not that of a fair and honourable man (ch.25 p.88-89).

Two incidents which occur in *Fóstbroeðra saga* before and after the reversal motif particularly emphasise Þormóðr's capacity for deception. He craftily makes use of the slave Egill as a decoy. When Egill hears a commotion in Þorgrímr's booth, he is to run away as fast as he can.

This of course makes him appear as the guilty party to those who are looking for the killer. They chase him giving Þormóðr the opportunity to escape. Once they discover Egill's identity, they soon realise their mistake. After the cloak reversal incident, when Þormóðr is in hiding, he meets Lúsa-Oddi. He persuades this vagrant to exchange cloaks with him and in this unpleasant disguise Þormóðr is able to get close enough to the sons of Þorgrímr to attack with great effect. They do not realise their danger until too late because when the figure approaches:
... þykkjask þeir þar kenna Lúsa-Odda (ch.23 p.239).

Ögmundar þáttr dytts. p.99-115

In this text the characters of both Ögmundr and Gunnarr are illustrated by their associations with particoloured clothing, although not this time through the reversal trick.

Ögmundr has returned to Norway presumably to regain his honour which was compromised during an earlier visit when, after inadvertently wrecking a ship, he was involved in a dispute with its owner, Hallvarðr. When Ögmundr arrives at Niðarhólm he has put on:

feld hálfskiptan ok hlöðum búinn um
handvegin

Hálfskiptan according to the footnote (ÍF) indicates that the cloak was of two colours, a different colour on each side. Gunnarr later refers to this garment as *vel litan, er tvískipt er*. Ögmundr meets Gunnarr by the river. They greet each other and Gunnarr explains himself:

'Ek heiti Gunnarr helmingr; en ek em því svá kallaðr, at mér þykkir gaman at hafa háflit klæði.'

Gunnarr's nickname *helmingr* - 'half', his fondness for particoloured clothing, his desire to have Ögmundr's *feldr* all connect him with clothing which is *tvískiptr* and thus with its symbolism as well.

In this þáttur the *tvískiptr* motif is again linked with transferred blame and killing under a false identity. Ögmundr, after exchanging cloaks with Gunnarr goes up into the town to look for Hallvarðr. He arrives at the inn where Hallvarðr is staying and asks to speak to him. Hallvarðr and his friends suspect nothing as: *þóttusk allir þar kenna Gunnar helming*.

Ögmundr's deception is successful, Hallvarðr comes out and is swiftly killed. This action in itself shows Ögmundr resorting to trickery to gain his objective, giving himself a distinctly unfair advantage over his opponent. Hallvarðr has himself not been unreasonable in his dealings with Ögmundr, a fact which emphasises Ögmundr's underhand nature. Again we have a transferral of blame as it is Gunnarr who is initially accused of killing Hallvarðr, Ögmundr having escaped immediately after the act.

Ögmundr's ambiguity may be suggested by his reversal of attitude on his first visit to Norway. After he has carelessly rammed Hallvarðr's ship, Ögmundr's response is: *at hvárir urðu sín at geyma* and he raises difficulties in regard to paying compensation whereas after Hallvarðr's attack, Ögmundr excuses his reluctance to seek vengeance

for his humiliating blow by saying that he had not wanted to endanger Vigfúss. It is possible that this could be explained by the fact that Hallvarðr is a stranger to Ögmundr but Vigfúss is a kinsman for whom he may feel some responsibility, not wishing to implicate him out of regard for his father, Glúmr. However Ögmundr's whole demeanour has changed: before the blow he was arrogant and overbearing; afterwards conciliatory and tolerant (5). When he returns to Iceland, he swaggers about like a great hero but it is a false image for he has, as Glúmr points out, brought dishonour upon his family. The double-sided theme is even evident in Ögmundr's parentage: his mother was well-born, his father a freed slave.

The theme of ambiguity could be carried further in that although the text appears, through Glúmr, to be emphasising the necessity of behaving heroically by achieving blood vengeance, the facts themselves undermine the heroic ethic. Attention is focused on Ögmundr's honour, detracting from the reality - that to achieve it an innocent and respected man is killed. Hallvarðr became involved with this Icelfander through no fault of his own. Ögmundr, the perpetrator of the original and unjustified offence, appears to emerge with the respect of his kinsmen, yet he is a foolish and arrogant man. On the surface this *páttr* seems to concentrate on the pursuit of honour by the hero, the desirability of attaining this regardless of the means, but the actual events, and the characters of the men involved, serve as an indictment of this Germanic concept.

Gunnarr belongs to the second half of the *páttr*. He also follows the pattern of assumed identity which is associated with *tvískiptr*. Accused of the killing of Hallvarðr, he refuses to explain and leaves the district. He is subsequently given refuge by a woman who serves the god, Freyr. Gunnarr pretends to be a man of poor family (unlikely as his brother is close to King Óláfr Tryggvason). The woman is not entirely deceived by this but allows him to stay with her. Gunnarr later assumes the identity of Freyr himself, putting on the god's clothes and allowing the people to pay tribute to him. When news of this influential god figure reaches King Óláfr, he connects it with Gunnarr. This would appear to suggest that such conduct might be in keeping with Gunnarr's character. Certainly in regard to his religion he appears to change or waver according to his own convenience. He accepts the shelter offered by the 'wife' of Freyr but he calls on the god of the 'true faith' when he needs assistance to overcome the devil inside the idol. He subsequently impersonates Freyr and while he forbids sacrifices he appears to willingly accept valuable items as offerings. Finally, at the invitation of King Óláfr, he returns to Norway and reaffirms his Christianity.

Tvískiptr as symbolic of 'ambiguity of character' and of duplicity, could derive partly from the various meanings of compounds which include *tví*. Cleasby and Vigfússon cite several examples where the meaning could be considered derogatory:

tvídrægr	-	ambiguous
tvíbenda	-	a complicity, entanglement
tvísýni	-	uncertainty, doubt
tvískipta	-	to divide into two parts, to waver

On the other hand there are more instances of the term which simply translate as one would expect with a prefix of 'two':

tvídyrðr	-	double doored
tvífalda	-	to fold, double
tvíkostr	-	a choice between two, an alternative
tvíkveða	-	to repeat
tvíkvangaðr	-	twice married

However given the examples in the texts of the kind of character who is associated with *tvískiptr* clothing, it is not unlikely that such a motif could have been used as a method of characterisation. *Tvískiptr* is accompanied in each of the sagas with some form of disguise which in itself implies duplicity, or in Gunnarr's case inconsistency. And in *Fóstbroeðra saga* and *Ögmundar þáttur dytts* it is part of a pattern of deception. In *Fóstbroeðra saga* the incidents appear almost disconnected, they happen sequentially:

1. Transferral of blame
2. *Tvískiptr* - cloak reversal
3. Killing under cover of a false identity

Tvískiptr here is part of the reversal trick, it is straightforward and similar to Skúta's action ie. black/white, evasion of confrontation, use of a cryptic name. In *Ögmundar þáttur dytts* the reversal trick does not occur and the particoloured clothing is interwoven with the other motifs.

Hálfr, which is associated with Gunnarr through his

nickname, does not, according to Cleasby/Vigfússon, carry quite the same connotations as *tví*. It usually retains the literal meaning as in:

<i>hálfmörk</i>	-	half a mark
<i>hálfklæddr</i>	-	half dressed
<i>hálfrosinn</i>	-	half frozen

Occasionally it assumes a derogatory tone when it is interpreted in the context of 'smaller' - eg. *hálf-neitt*: 'half naught, trifling' (6). In this case perhaps Gunnarr helmingr should not be so readily accused of ambiguity and duplicity - these traits may be only temporarily acquired (transferred from the donor) when he accepts Ögmundr's *tvískiptr* garment.

According to certain scholars, the episode concerning Skúta in both *Reykdoela saga* and *Víga-Glúms saga* is not particularly relevant to either saga. Gabriel Turville-Petre has examined the 'stylistic content' of this chapter in both the sagas and suggests that this episode:

originally existed independently of both sagas and was, with some modification, inserted into both texts in the course of their individual histories. (7)

It is difficult to see why it was subsequently included in *Víga-Glúms saga* where Skúta appears only briefly in the narrative, but it could have been included in *Reykdoela saga* in order to further illustrate Skúta's character. He plays the major part in it and we can assume that the audience would be familiar with the connotations of the *tvískiptr* motif. In fact this motif with the reversal of the cloak and Skúta's enigmatic response form the main elements of the episode; without them there is no point in

it at all.

It should be noted that *Víga-Glúms saga*, *Reykdoela saga* and *Ögmundar þáttr* are all from the same area of Iceland. It is quite possible that *Víga-Glúms saga*, in a form which included Chapter Sixteen, exerted a considerable influence upon *Ögmundar þáttr*: a version of the *þáttr* is present in the Pseudo-Vatnshyrna text of this saga (8). *Fóstbroeðra saga* originates from a different area, the north-west, but there may have been some form of cross-influence. In any case as the motif of *tvískiptr/* ambiguity/duplicity appears to be limited to these four texts it would seem to indicate that it was not a particularly widespread one.

It is true that to a great extent we learn about the saga characters:

.... from the way they appear, from
what they do and say (9)

And this motif fulfils all three functions: an appearance in the symbolic particoloured clothing combined with deceitful action and ambiguous words.

NOTES

1. Joseph Harris. 'Ögmundar þáttur dytts ok Gunnars helmings: Unity and Literary Relations.' ANF 90, 1975, p.156-182.
2. *ibid.* p.175.
3. *ibid.* p.175.
4. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (trans). Laxdæla Saga. ch.16 p.75-76 fn.1.
5. Joseph Harris. *op cit.* p.165.
6. *hálfur* - 'with the notion of brief, scant, little'
hálf stund - a little while (CV).
7. Gabriel Turville-Petre (ed). Víga Glúms saga. p.xxiv-xxv.
8. John McKinnell (trans). Víga-Glúms Saga. p.9-10.
9. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Njáls Saga: A Literary Masterpiece. p.94.

Conclusion

There are obvious reasons why a character would wear coloured (i.e. fine) clothes - to indicate social rank, to impress or to attract attention - but opinions vary regarding any further significance of colour in the sagas.

It cannot be stated definitely that colour acts as an omen of crisis. As already mentioned crisis, death and violence occur regularly in most texts and these events are not usually preceded by a description of coloured garments. Still as a literary technique, as part of a brief description of the character at a certain point in the narrative, colour can be said to effectively focus the reader's attention prior to a character's (not necessarily the wearer's) involvement in crisis.

On the other hand some of the colours - *rauðr*, *hvítr*, *tvískiptr* - appear much more definitely associated with some aspect of the personality of the wearer. *Rauðr* can illustrate a character's superiority in some way; *hvítr* seems to portray a Christian aspect of the wearer; *tvískiptr* represents a devious or inconstant nature. Green is somewhat problematic but on occasion could indicate character i.e. demonic, youthful.

Blue also could be considered more in this category rather than as some form of augury. This is partly due to a possible connection with leadership but would particularly apply if the definition of *blár* in *Piðreks saga af Bern* is interpreted in a broader sense. Instead of confining the translation of *kallt briost* to 'cold',

'cruel' heart, it could be extended in the sense of 'calm' or 'cool'. Similarly *grimt hiarta* might be seen not only as 'grim', 'ferocious', but as being stoical by nature. These interpretations could then in many ways relate to Hallr of Síða, Njáll, Ingimundr and to Snorri goði.

Conclusions can still be difficult as at times the implied symbolism can vary depending on the context in which the coloured item occurs. An interpretation which may seem particularly appropriate for one incident may not easily transfer to another text where an alternative explanation will appear more suitable. On the whole however there is the impression that colour is generally being used to give some indication of the nature of the individual character who wears it.

SECTION TWO

HEAD-DRESS AND FOOTWEAR

Chapter Seven

HEAD-DRESS

In this category it is often a woman's head-dress which provides the most interesting and intriguing material as regards literary significance or symbolism. Although the factual, detailed appearance of a woman's head-dress is not part of the primary concern of this thesis, it is helpful to have some idea of what was possibly worn by women at that time.

In the chapter on head-dress in *Altwestnordische Kleiderkunde*, Falk gives accounts of some of the items worn by women, in particular the high conical shaped *faldr*, but as most of his descriptions appear to be based on evidence from the sagas themselves it is not certain how accurate his conclusions are (1). Illustrations of women from the Viking period, on stone, tapestry, metal etc., do not portray women in elaborate or high head-dress. Many of the women appear to be bareheaded with the hair knotted in some way. On the Oseberg tapestry the female figures seem to have a kind of head covering, but it is plain and unostentatious. (See Appendix.)

The earliest illustration of more decorative head-dress would appear to be a 16th century manuscript which depicts a bride and two attendants (2). Their head-dresses are high and cylindrical. However in relation to the *Íslendingasögur*, this manuscript is from a period of about 250 years after the sagas were written and 450 years

after the saga period itself. It cannot then be considered as reliable evidence of the type of head-dress worn by the women in the sagas.

On the whole it is perhaps safest to say that the head-dress of women in the *Íslendingasögur* could vary. It is obvious (at least from the literature) that certain head-wear was more substantial in some way than others, this type probably being worn on special occasions. The head-dress was usually of linen, most likely a length of linen which was wound or wrapped round the head in some way, at times in such a way as to conceal part of the face as well. Veils could apparently be worn as a separate part of the head-dress (according to Falk), and appear to be often part of a bride's outfit. The size and shape of the head-dress could obviously vary as now and then it is pointed out that a woman is wearing a large or tall head-dress: *en sveigr mikil á höfði* (Lax. s. ch.55 p.168). In the eddaic poem *Rígsþula*, a curved *faldr* is specifically mentioned as being worn by the aristocratic *móðir*: *keisti fald* (3). (See also below, p.124 *Þrymskviða*.)

The material of the head-dress could be of fine quality and silk was used on occasions. *Vésteinn* (Gísla s. ch.12 p.42) brings home a length of *höfuðdúkr* twenty ells long (thirty feet). Though the fabric is not specifically mentioned it was an item of quality as the material itself was decorated with finely woven gold threads. Falk suggests that this could have been a present for the three women, *Auðr*, *Þórdís* and *Ásgerðr*, which would mean each having a head cloth of ten feet. This is a considerable

length to be wrapped round the head. There is however no indication of the width though the editors of the *Íslensk fornrit* edition explain in the footnote to this that the head-cloths were narrow strips of fabric (4). If the *höfuðdúkr* was intended as a single garment, for only one of the women, then the resulting head-dress could be quite a size.

Perhaps the most important point to bear in mind is the particular association of this kind of head-wear, as *faldr*, *sveigr* or *höfuðdúkr*, with women and thus with feminine symbolism (5). In some of the cases which follow it is this aspect of head-dress which is most significant.

Woman's Head-dress - Worn by a Man.

a) Víglundar saga. ch.14 p.88-90

Games are being held and amongst those participating are Hólmkell's sons, Jökull and Einarr from Foss. Víglundr and his brother, Trausti are also there. During the games, Jökull drives the ball towards Víglundr and it strikes him in the face, injuring him above his eye. Trausti binds up his brother's wound with a piece of his shirt and they go home. On arriving they are greeted by their father: '*Bæði þú heil, systkin*'. Víglundr queries his father's use of *systkin* which implies 'brother and sister' and Þorgrímr answers:

'Mér þykir', segir Þorgrímr, 'sem þú muni kona vera, sem faldinn hefir.'

Þorgrímr is mocking his son because of his appearance with a bandage wrapped round his head in a similar fashion to a

woman's head-cloth. But there is more to it than this; his remark also implies that Víglundr has assumed the behaviour of a woman in not repaying the blow immediately i.e. he is guilty of unmanly conduct.

Trausti is quick to explain the reason why Víglundr was unable to repay the blow: the Fossverjar had left by the time the wound had been seen to. Víglundr would have been extremely sensitive to his father's taunts which appear to question his courage. He takes action to regain his honour. When the next games are held, Víglundr attacks Jökull with such force that his victim is unable to walk away from the field and his companions have to carry him home.

b) Njáls saga. ch.129 p.329

At the time of the burning at Bergþorshváll, Flosi offers quarter to the women. This was a customary gesture at such times. The women prepare to leave and Ástríðr of Djúpárbakki speaks to Helgi Njálsson:

'Gakk þú út með mér, ok mun ek kasta yfir þik kvenskikkju ok falda þér við höfuðdúki.'

Helgi is reluctant to do this - *Hann talðisk undan fyrst*, but allows himself to be persuaded and the women dress him in cloak and head-dress:

Ástríðr vafði höfuðdúki at höfði honum, en Þórhildr lagði yfir hann skikkjuna,

It could be assumed that the head-cloth would be wrapped round Helgi's head in such a way as to cover his face. There are times where a head-cloth is specifically mentioned as being used in this way. In *Þiðreks saga* the

beauty of Hildir is concealed from the casual onlooker:

Oc um hentar haufuð er sueipað
silkidukum sua at ængi fær set hennar
ivirlit.

(6)

Once outside however, Helgi's larger frame is noticed and Flosi commands his men to seize him. Helgi, who is concealing a sword beneath the cloak, acts swiftly. He throws off the cloak and before he is killed himself manages to fatally injure one of Flosi's followers.

In these incidents both men are sensitive to the fact that, through various circumstances, they have taken on the physical appearance of a woman and thus by extension might also be considered to be effeminate in other ways. It is this stated or covert charge which, in this society, constituted a grave insult to a man's honour.

In the eddaic poem, *Þrymskviða*, Þórr is forced to put on female dress in order to deceive the giant, Þrymr, and thus regain his hammer, Mjöllnir. Þrymr has stipulated that Freyja must be brought to him as a bride, but Freyja herself has refused to comply. Loki persuades Þórr to impersonate her in a bride's outfit; Þórr is very reluctant to do this. He has to agree in the end however and as well as the other items of feminine dress, it is stressed that he is arrayed with a woman's head-dress:

Bundo þeir Þór þá	brúðar líni
oc ino micla	meni Brísinga,
léto und hánom	hrynja lucla
oc qvennváðir	um kné falla,
enn á briósti	breiða steina,
oc hagliga	um höfuð typpo.

(7)

The bridal veil covers his face, as can be seen from a

later stanza when Þrymr has to look beneath it to see the bride's eyes: *Laut und líno, lysti at kyssa* (8).

Though the term *faldr* is not actually used in relation to the head-dress, it is possible that the item was of some height and Richard Perkins has suggested it was the exclusively feminine, tall *faldr* that Þórr was wearing (9). To be forced to wear women's garments was demeaning enough for a man, but the wearing of this female head-dress would be particularly humiliating. When Þórr protested to Loki at this proposition, he gave as a reason:

Mic muno æsir	argan kalla,
ef ec bindaz læt	brúðar líni.
	(10)

For Þórr to take the feminine part in such a context (as partner to a giant) implied sexual subjection to a repulsive adversary. To call a man *argr*, or its related form, *ragr*, was to suggest that he assumed the female role in sexual relations. It was such a gross insult or *níð* that it was mentioned in *Grágás* as an offence which could be punished by lesser outlawry. Both words had the meaning - 'effeminate', 'unmanly' - but the more serious, implied and connected meaning was one of cowardice. Medieval Icelandic *níð* were often based on some kind of sexual context. Accusing a man of behaving like a woman contained serious and shameful charges as:

a man who subjects himself to another
in sexual affairs will do the same in
other respects.

(11)

In medieval Iceland the roles between male and female were clearly defined. The woman had her specific

responsibilities which centred around the household itself, i.e. childcare, food, weaving etc. The man's duties were outside the house, involving livestock, fishing, trade, legal obligations and at times warfare. It is in a society such as this where:

any representation of femininity must
be equated with unmanliness when
attached to a man.

(12)

In *Lokasenna* Óðinn makes explicit reference to this when he addresses Loki:

átta vetr vartu fyr iörð neðan,
kýr mólcanði oc kona,
oc hefir þú þar born borit,
oc hug a ec þat args aðal.

(13)

Within this kind of male dominated society, where the men were in control through cultural, legal and violent means, the woman has to take a subordinate, inferior position on the whole. This contributes to the associations of insult in using the term 'woman', or feminine symbolism, towards a man when charging him with cowardice. It is a form of insult not confined to medieval Iceland; it can be found in the Bible:

13. Ecce populus tuus mulieres in
medio tui: inimicis tuis adapertione
pandentur portae terrae tuae,
devorabit ignis vectes tuos.

(14)

The implications of cowardly behaviour are obvious. *The Iliad* also contains examples of this concept. Hector issues a challenge to the men of Achaia, a challenge to a duel between himself and any one of them who is willing to fight him. Through fear and shame, they do not respond. Menelaos stands up and rebukes the men:

'Ah me, vain threateners, ye women of
Achaia and no more men, surely all
this shall be a shame, evil of evil,
if no-one of the Danaans now goeth to
meet Hector.'

(15)

The characters in the sagas, Víglundr and Helgi, would be well aware of the gravity of their situations and their possible humiliation. Þorgrímr, goading his son, knows that Víglundr will now be forced to redeem himself (and thus the family honour) as soon as possible. Helgi, once charged with being a man in woman's dress, and attempting to escape under such a disguise, must immediately react courageously to regain his honour.

There is however an incident in *Vatnsdoela saga* where a man escapes death through a feminine disguise without any indication of a slur on his honour. Hermundr Ávaldason kills Galti at a local assembly; he then takes refuge in his father's booth. Þorkell krafla, the *goði* responsible for settling the case, goes to Ávaldi's in search of the killer. He is confronted by Hildir, Hermundr's mother, who reminds Þorkell of a past obligation to her and Þorkell agrees, apparently on account of this, to allow her and her women to depart so that she is spared the pain of seeing her son killed. Hildir then disguises Hermundr:

ok tók hon síðan búnaðinn af höfði sér
ok bjó hann með

(ch.45 p.123)

She takes his place inside the booth so that only the appropriate number of women are seen to leave. The trick works with, it appears, the collusion of Þorkell who urges the women away from the scene and then pacifies the men

with him who are eager to enter and kill Hermundr. Þorkell manages in the end to obtain a peaceful settlement between the parties involved.

There is no hint at any time of an overt insult to Hermundr due to his temporary assumption of feminine dress; he is not mentioned again. The whole device of disguise seems to be a tacit agreement between Þorkell and Hildir to de-fuse the situation. Þorkell's prestige is much enhanced by his management of this issue. A similar incident is found in *Hallfreðar saga* though the names vary. Ávaldi's son is called Brandr in this text:

Brandr var faldinn, ok komsk hann svá
út, ok hittisk hann eigi.
(ch.10 p.190)

Hallfreðar saga is the earlier text and is possibly the source of this episode in *Vatnsdoela* (16). On the whole these incidents use the motif as a delaying device and the association of a man in woman's dress with cowardice does not seem to apply. Although of course to be sheltered and protected by one's mother is hardly an heroic move, the central issue is really Þorkell's tactical skill in resolving the dispute peacefully.

Lín - bridal head-dress

The long *höfuðdúkr* was usually made of white linen. And since it was exclusively worn by women, this is probably the reason why women can be specifically associated with the fabric linen. The use of such terms as *lín* or *ripti* on their own can be found in connection with a bridal veil as in *Rígsþula*:

settiz undir ripti

gecc hon und líni

(17)

Here the phrase implies that a marriage is taking place. There is no such description of *Præll*'s wedding, suggesting that in their case formal marriage contracts were dispensed with. In *Þrymskviða*, the woman's garments that Þórr has to wear specifically include the *brúðar lín*; this is given special emphasis, being mentioned several times in the poem.

Towards the end of *Laxdoela saga*, Guðrún takes a fourth husband, Þorkell Eyjólfsson. Chapter Sixty-nine describes Guðrún and her female companions:

En Guðrún sat innar á þverpalli ok þar
konur hjá henni ok höfðu lín á höfði;
(p.202)

The phrase tells us that Guðrún and the women with her were prepared for a wedding, in this case Guðrún's wedding. She is later mentioned as rising from the *brúðbekkr*. Falk suggests that this emphasis on linen as part of the bride's outfit has led to the term *lín-fé* (linen-fee) - 'a bridal gift, given on the wedding day' by the bridegroom (CV). Thus certain linen head-dresses can have particular associations with bridal dress and marriage.

Laxdoela saga - Motr.

This must be the most famous head-dress in the *Íslendingasögur*. Kjartan brings home to Iceland a *motr*, a particularly fine and valuable item:

... motr hvítan, gullofinn ... var þat
inn ágætasti gripr
(ch.43 p.131)

The word *motr* itself does not occur in any of the other family sagas, which might imply that it was a garment rarely seen in Iceland, thus making its owner especially enviable. It may have had eastern origins. Falk suggests the word is related to the Greek *mitra* - a woman's head-cloth or scarf.

But the controversy surrounding the *motr* within *Laxdoela saga* is probably due as much, if not more, to its symbolism than to its actual material worth. Though the kind of fabric is not given it is quite possible that it was linen; any other material e.g. silk, would probably have been mentioned. This fine, gold-decorated linen head-dress represents the adornment of a man's chosen bride and is also associated with the ritual gift, *lín-fé*, given by the groom to his new wife. In all respects it is no ordinary gift to be merely handed over by the owner to a woman; it has all the connotations of obligation and formal marriage ceremony. It is this aspect which is so wounding to Guðrún. She may covet the head-dress for its value and beauty but it seems likely that her extreme actions regarding it, including the crime of theft, are more deeply motivated.

Its associations with an intended bride are obvious from the start even if it was not a garment which was connected with weddings. When Kjartan's mistress, Ingibjörg, gives it to him, she states who it is meant to be given to:

... ok kvað Guðrúnu Ósvífrsdóttur
 hölzti gott at vefja honum at höfði
 sér, - 'ok muntu henni gefa motrinn at
 bekkjargjöf;...'

(ch.43 p.131)

Kjartan arrives in Iceland with this intention but then learns of Guðrún's marriage to Bolli. When Hrefna tries on the head-dress, references to a wife and marriage are made when Kjartan comments:

'Vel þykki mér þér sama motrinn
 Hrefna', segir hann; 'ætla ek ok, at
 þat sé bezt fallit, at ek eiga allt
 saman, motr ok mey.'

'... sé ek, at þessi búnaðr berr þér
 vel, ok er sannligt, at þú verðir mín
 kona.'

(ch.44 p.133)

It is tempting to say that Hrefna 'innocently' tries on the *motr*, but there is a possibility that, given the symbolism of such an item and since Hrefna and Þuríðr are well aware of the unavailability of Guðrún, some kind of women's machinations are at work. Perhaps there is a deliberate intention to bring Hrefna to Kjartan's notice as a future wife. Certainly the idea is present in Þuríðr's mind later in the winter when she speaks to Kjartan about his reserved manner since arriving home. His kinsmen, she tells him, feel he should look for a bride. Þuríðr reminds him of Hrefna, who though not perhaps an equal match is still a good choice for a wife:

'Þat er minn vili, at þú takir tal við
 Hrefnu, ok væntir mik, at þér þykki
 þar fara vit eptir vænleik.'

(ch.45 p.137)

Kjartan and Hrefna do marry and the *motr* is given to Hrefna as *lín-fé*. When Ingibjörg gives it to Kjartan, she uses the term *bekkjargjöf* - bench gift - which was offered

'to the bride whilst she sate on the bride's bench at the wedding festival' (CV). The *motr* has become a symbol of Kjartan's betrothal since Ingibjörg's obvious intention was for the garment to pass to Kjartan's wife (18). For one woman to give a head-dress with bridal associations to her lover with instructions to then pass it on to her rival (whoever that may be), would seem to give the *motr* particular significance. Ingibjörg appears to be withdrawing her claims to Kjartan and passing them on to the next owner of the head-dress.

A.C. Bouman seems to believe that Guðrún may not have known the history of the *motr* before it appeared in Iceland (19). However such a fine treasure would most likely have been admired and discussed; it is difficult to believe that at least rumours of its original owner were not a matter for public speculation. There is in the text no indication that the *motr* and its provenance were a secret. It seems reasonable to assume it was general knowledge and that therefore Guðrún would have been well aware of the head-dress, and its implications as a gift for Kjartan's bride.

For Guðrún then, the *motr*, given to Hrefna, symbolises her loss, it represents the relationship and marriage to Kjartan which she herself forfeited when she married Bolli. Getting hold of it and destroying it is part of her frustration, part of her determination to destroy the marriage between Kjartan and Hrefna even if Kjartan's death is the only way to do this (20).

After Kjartan's action against the people of Laugar, forcing them to remain indoors for three days, he returns home and Hrefna taunts him about Guðrún. Hrefna says she has heard that he talked with Guðrún and that Guðrún was looking well in the stolen *motr*. Kjartan angrily denies this but goes on to mention Guðrún:

'... myndi Guðrún ekki purfa at falda sér motri til þess at sama betr en allar konur aðrar.'

(ch.47 p.145)

Kjartan could be implying here that despite Hrefna's assured and legal status as his wife, he still retains affection or love for Guðrún, a woman who is not legally tied to him. A binding marriage contract, represented by the *motr*, does not necessarily also bind his love exclusively to his wife.

Laxdoela saga - Guðrún's Dream. ch.33 p.88-90

Guðrún relates her four dreams to Gestr hoping that he will be able to interpret them. The first dream involves a head-dress, a *krókfaldr*.

'Uti þóttúmk ek vera stödd við loek nökkurn, ok hafða ek krókfald a höfði ok þótti mér illa sama, ok var ek fúsari at breyta faldinum, en margir tölðu um, at ek skylda þat eigi gera. En ek hlýdda ekki á þat, ok greip ek af höfði mér faldinn, ok kastaða ek út á loekinn,'

Gestr explains this dream as being related to Guðrún's first husband:

'Þar er þú þóttisk hafa mikinn fald á höfði, ok þótti þér illa sama, þar muntu lítit unna honum, ok þar er þú tókt af höfði þér faldinn ok kastaðir á vatnit, þar muntu ganga frá honum.'

Því kalla menn á sæ kastat, er maðr lætr eigu sína ok tekr ekki í mót.'

Apart from Gestr's interpretation that since the head-dress does not become Guðrún this means she will not love her husband, the *krókfaldr* itself could have other connotations. As Gestr refers to a *mikinn fald* in relation to Guðrún's mention of a *krókfaldr*, this would imply that such a head-dress was a fairly large object. There are certain possible implications here. The *krókfaldr* was most probably worn on special occasions and could have been a sign of status. In her marriage to Þorvaldr, one of the conditions was that he should buy and give to Guðrún such fine jewellery that his wife would not be outdone regarding these valuable possessions by any other women of similar wealth. Thus Guðrún as Þorvaldr's wife was to have the outer trappings of status as a *krókfaldr* would give a woman a respectable external appearance. Guðrún is particularly covetous and grasping, desiring to own all the most costly jewels in the area. But these can only contribute to the façade; Guðrún has married a man of lower status than herself. Þorvaldr may have been a rich man but he was also *engi hetja*. Ósvífr's response to the request for his daughter as a wife makes it plain that he does not regard Þorvaldr as entirely worthy of Guðrún:

Því máli var eigi fjarri tekit, en þó sagði Ósvífr, at þat myndi á kostum finna, at þau Guðrún váru eigi jafnmenni.

(ch.34 p.93)

The *krókfaldr* in the dream could represent the false, external appearance of social standing which is created in Guðrún's marriage. When she throws away the head-dress,

Guðrún is repudiating not only a husband she does not love but also the creation of false status. Guðrún does not display such avarice with her subsequent husbands, which confirms that it was not really a part of her nature. It was simply a means of compensating, through the accumulation of wealth, for a lack of status and love.

Orkneyinga saga. ch.81 p.182-185

Ragna lives in the Orkney islands, a prosperous and respected woman who owns property on two of the islands. In Chapter Eighty-one when Ragna goes to see Earl Rögnvaldr her head wear is particularly mentioned:

Hon var svá búin, at hon hafði gaddan
rautt á hofði, gört af hrossahári.

The earl finds this amusing and composes a verse about it:

Aldr hefð frétt þats feldu
framstalls konur allar,
verðrat menja myrðir
mjúkorðr, hofuðdúkum.
Nú tér Hlökk um hnakka
haukstrindar sér binda,
skrýðisk brúðr við bræði
bengagls, merar tagli.

Ragna replies to this:

Hér kemr nú at því, sem mælt er, at
fár er svá vitr, at allt sjái sem er,
því at þetta er af hesti, en eigi af
meri.

Ragna then replaces her head-dress with one of silk:

Hon tók þá silkidúk ok faldaði sér með
ok talaði eigi at síðr mál sitt.

Finnbogi Guðmundsson explains in his footnote that a *gaddan* was a kind of head-dress and that the word is probably of Celtic origin (21). The word is not found in other Icelandic texts.

On the whole it seems a strange episode but the following may be a possible explanation. Ragna appears to be a widow; there is a son but no mention of a husband. She is represented as head of the household, so she would in many ways have to assume a masculine role, the role of a *bóndi*. Ragna had previously sent her son, Þorsteinn, to ask Earl Rögnvaldr to accept Hallr into his household, but this request was refused. Ragna then goes herself and this is when she is wearing the head-dress made from a stallion's hair. It could be considered symbolic of Ragna assuming a male role and approaching the earl as such. In her reply to Rögnvaldr after his verse, she may be reproaching him for not recognising that, as a widow, she has had to take a man's place and address him on those grounds. On the other hand Rögnvaldr could be quite aware of it and is trying to put Ragna back into what he considers is her proper place.

Ragna's subsequent replacing of the stallion's hair head-dress with one which is undoubtedly feminine - *silkidúkr*, symbolises her resumption of her female role. This is emphasised in the way she continues to talk to the Earl while binding the cloth round her head. She is firmly accepting her position as a woman and now approaching him on those terms. Silk, however, would be a reminder to him that she is still a woman of consequence. As a woman, Ragna is successful and the Earl finally agrees to her request, accepting Hallr into his following.

Head-dress: MenSíðir Hettir

The wearing of long or wide hoods which partly cover the face is a fairly widespread motif in the *Íslendingasögur*. They are worn by men who are attempting to conceal their identity for one reason or another. The wearer is usually involved in some kind of subterfuge; he often gives a false name or false information when confronted.

The term for hood appears to vary. *Höttr* (hood) is used but so is the word *hattr*, which though it can mean 'hat', can also be interpreted as *höttr*. In the following examples, it would appear more likely that a hood of some description is being worn as this would be more effective in keeping the face hidden.

a) Fóstbroeðra saga. ch.20 p.220-221

A man arrives at Skúfr's ship and asks for passage:

Sá hefir síðan hatt, ok máttu
þeir eigi sjá hans ásjánu.

He calls himself Gestr and is taken on board. Tensions develop between him and Þormóðr who is also on this voyage. The stranger later turns out to be Steinarr and he is travelling to Greenland, with the same intention as Þormóðr - to avenge Þorgeirr. Odinic connections can be found here. Óðinn refers to himself as Gestumblindi in *Hervarar saga*, and in an encounter with St Óláfr he uses the assumed name, Gestr (22). A parallel to the above incident is seen in *Reginismál* where Óðinn, in disguise and using the name of Hníkarr, claims a passage on a ship. His fellow

passengers are bound on a journey of revenge (23).

b) Grettis saga. ch.54 p.175

Hallmundr encounters Grettir who intends to rob this prosperous looking rider. Hallmundr:

hafði síðan hatt á höfði ok sá óglögg
í andlit honum.

When challenged, Hallmundr gives a false name, Loptr. He refuses to yield to Grettir and because of his great strength is able to shake the outlaw off. Later in Chapter Fifty-seven he assists Grettir in overcoming an attack and takes him home, giving him help and friendship.

c) Grettis saga. ch.63 p.207

Þórir and his men are out searching for Grettir. They are approached by a man who *hafði síðan hött niðr fyrir andlitit ...*. This is of course Grettir himself, but they do not recognise him. He tells them the man they are looking for has gone in a certain direction. They ride off as directed and end up in some marshes.

d) Gunnars þáttur Þiðrandabana. ch.7 p.210

After the killing of Þiðrandi, Gunnarr is protected by Guðrún who has taken him in and intends to help him. At the time of her wedding to Þorkell Eyjólfsson, Gunnarr takes water to the guests: *ok hefir hatt síðan á höfði*. Þorkell becomes suspicious and asks Gunnarr his name. Gunnarr is evasive and does not give his real name.

e) Egils saga. ch.59 p.178

Egill and his companions have been shipwrecked in the Humber estuary. King Eiríkr Blóðöx controls this area from

York; he and Egill are enemies from a previous encounter. However Egill travels to York and seeks out his friend Arinbjörn who is a favourite of the king's. In the town Egill has *síðan hatt yfir hjálmi*. He is understandably trying to conceal his identity for the time being. Although no false name is used here, the poem Egill subsequently composes in praise of Eiríkr contains much false flattery and quite probably an element of sarcasm as well (24).

f) Egils saga. ch.57 p.167

Egill is planning an attack on Berg-Önundr with whom he has had a dispute over land and property. Egill goes onto the island where his adversary lives, intending to find out what is happening. He is well armed and *hann hafði dregit hött síðan yfir hjálm*. Egill gives misleading information about a bear to men watching their livestock. Through this he manages to lure Berg-Önundr and his friends away from the house and into the woods where he can attack and kill them. Egill himself is linked with Óðinn. A viking and a poet, he worships this god. In the lament he composes for his son, Egill's words acknowledge that Óðinn is the source of both his grief and his comfort: the god of death has taken a son but as the master of poetry has also bestowed the means of alleviating sorrow.

All the men in these incidents wear a *síðan hött* or *hatt*. They are all attempting to disguise their real identity and often some other form of deception is also present. This connection of an enveloping hood and deceitfulness suggests associations with the god Óðinn.

Óðinn is well known for journeying around incognito and one of his disguises involves a hood. *Síðhöttir* is one of his many names. When he appears in *Örvar-Odds saga* as *Rauðgrani*, the writer tells us: *hann lét síga höttinn fyrir andlitit* (25). Though free with advice and often keen for the men to attack various adversaries, *Rauðgrani* is never to be seen when there is action. When he finally disappears we are told:

Pykkir mönnum sem Óðinn muni þat verit
hafa reyndar.

(26)

In *Völsunga saga*, *Sigmundur* is fighting a battle and proving fairly successful when a man approaches him: *þá kom maðr í bardagann með síðan hött ...* (27). There is no doubt that this is Óðinn, he is described as having one eye and carrying a spear. He causes *Sigmundur* to break his sword and from then on the battle goes all against *Sigmundur* who is finally killed. Thus although Óðinn was known as the god of battle, he could obviously not always be relied upon: brave warriors were after all needed by the gods to prepare for *Ragnarök*. It was known that the berserks, who were supposed to obtain their fantastic strength and frenzy from Óðinn, could still be defeated and killed or maimed. Óðinn's tendency to treachery was well known and H. Ellis Davidson cites these examples from texts: (28)

Balder's father has broken faith - it
is unsafe to trust him

Ketils saga Hoengs

I suspect indeed that it is Odin who
comes against us here, the foul and
untrue.

Hrólfs saga kraka

To a modern reader a description of a man wearing a long hood and obviously intent on concealing his identity does suggest some form of secrecy, however to a contemporary audience this would be extended to associations with Óðinn, leading them to expect further deception and possibly treachery. This side of Óðinn's character may easily have been exaggerated by Christian writers who would be inclined to emphasise the less admirable aspects of the old pagan gods (29).

Gerzkir Hattir

These are mentioned at times in the sagas and appear to be Russian hats or bonnets of fur. They may possibly have been an expensive or ostentatious form of head wear which appealed to the vanity of certain men.

a) Gísla saga. ch. 28 p.90

Þorkell haf i girzkan hatt á höfði ok
feld grán ok gulldálk um öxl, en sverð
í hendi.

This is the description of Þorkell at the spring assembly when he is approached by the sons of Vésteinn. He does not recognise the two boys who openly flatter him, appealing to his vanity. Through this they deceive him into handing over his sword with which they then kill him. Þorkell appears to have accepted their exaggerated compliments without any suspicion, obviously believing them implicitly.

b) Laxdoela saga. ch. 12 p.22-23

Höskuldr is at an assembly in Norway when he notices a particularly splendid tent. It belongs to Gilli inn

gerzki whom Höskuldr meets when he goes inside:

... ok sat þar maðr fyrir í
guðvefjarklæðum ok hafði gerzkan hatt
á höfði.

Gilli obviously takes a pride in himself and his reputation as a merchant. Most people, he tells Höskuldr, have heard of his nickname. And it is of course inconceivable that he should not have any commodity which a man might require; to Höskuldr's request for a slave girl, Gilli replies:

'Þar þykkizk þér leita mér meinfanga
um þetta, er þér falið þá hluti, er
þér ætlið mik eigi til hafa, en þat er
þó eigi ráðit, hvárt svá berr til.'

It is some reflection on Melkorka that even the man who sells her as a slave is a prestigious character. From her very introduction into the narrative she seems to be exceptional.

c) Ljósvetninga saga. ch.2 p.6

Earl Hákon sends gifts to Guðmundr and to Þorgeirr goði in order to obtain their help and support for Sölmundr who has been outlawed.

Hann sendi út hatt girzkan ok taparöxi
þeim Guðmundi ok Þorgeiri goða til
trausts.

Neither really want to co-operate but both agree reluctantly even though in Þorgeirr's case this involves antagonism between himself and his sons. This would seem to imply that the hat was a particularly valuable treasure, as such it could well appeal to the vanity of the prospective owner. But it is quite likely that, as a king's gift, it was also symbolic of royal favour, another factor which would be attractive to men sensitive of their pride and status.

Russian hats, though a relatively minor motif, could have a particular function in suggesting to the audience or reader that the men involved are fond of their self-esteem and susceptible to flattery.

Regarding head-dress overall there appears to be quite a contrast between its relationship to women or to men, at least as far as the family sagas are concerned. For men any comment on their head-wear seems to have unfavourable connotations. If connected with a woman's head-dress a man can be suspected of cowardice, if wearing a man's long hood the implication may possibly be deception, and an association with Russian hats could perhaps indicate excessive vanity. In relation to women however the mention of head-dress generally has a positive aspect; it is often a part of their role and can be present to underline their status or their sexuality, usually without any element of personal criticism.

NOTES

1. H. Falk. Altwestnordische Kleiderkunde. p.98-109.
2. Elsa E. Guðjónsson. 'The National Costume of Women in Iceland.' American-Scandinavian Review LVII:IV. 1969, p.361-369. An illustration from a vellum manuscript of *Jónsbók* from the end of the sixteenth century AM 345 fol.; fol. 19v. (See Appendix.)
3. Gustav Neckel (ed). Edda. Rev. by Hans Kuhn. st.29 p.284.
4. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson (ed). Gísla saga. ÍF 6 p.42.
5. Cleasby and Vigfússon give the following definitions for Icelandic terms which refer to a woman's head-dress.:

<i>höfuðdúkr</i>	a head-kerchief, hood
<i>faldr</i>	a white linen hood
<i>lín</i>	linen, linen gear, especially the head-gear worn by ladies on the bridal day
<i>ripti</i>	a kind of cloth or linen jerkin (under the entry for <i>lín</i> , CV refer to <i>ripti</i> as - 'of less costly stuff' in relation to <i>lín</i>).
<i>sveigr</i>	a head-dress or snood, a kerchief wound round the head.
6. Henrik Bertelsen (ed). Þiðriks saga af Bern. ch.322 (236) vol. II p.51.
7. Neckel. op cit. st.19 p.113. *Typþo* would appear to suggest a pointed head-dress.

<i>typpa</i>	- to tip, top
<i>ok hagliga um höfuð typpum</i>	
	- 'and we shall skilfully tip (it)(round) his head'.
8. Neckel. op cit. st.27 p.115.
9. Richard Perkins. 'Þrymskviða, Stanza 20 and a Passage from *Víglundar saga*.' Saga-Book vol. XXII, part 5, 1988, p.279-284.

10. Neckel. op cit. st.17 p.113.

11. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen. The Unmanly Man: Concepts of sexual defamation in early Northern Society. Trans. by Joan Turville-Petre. p.20.

12. ibid. p.20.

13. Neckel. op cit. st.23 p.101.

14. Biblia Sacra. Vvlgatae Editionis. Nahum ch.3 v.13 p.592.

Behold your troops
are women in your midst.
The gates of your land
are wide open to your foes;
fire has devoured your bars.

(The Holy Bible. Rev. Standard Version. p.974.)

15. Andrew Lang, Walter Leaf and Ernest Myers (trans). The Iliad of Homer. Book 7 p.100.

16. (a) Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed). Vatnsdoela saga. ÍF 8 p.XLI.

(b) 'Of these incidents the last two [includes Hermundr and disguise] are suspect of being prompted by *Hallfreðar saga*, to which *Vatnsdoela saga* refers.' (Theodore M. Andersson. The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading.) p.221.

(c) Theodore M. Andersson. The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins: A Historical Survey. p.167.

17. Neckel. op cit. st.23 p.283; st.40 p.286.

18. Ingibjörg's gift and behaviour show her in a more favourable light than Queen Gunnhildr of *Njáls saga*. When Hrútr leaves Gunnhildr to return to Iceland, his royal mistress lays a curse on him which ruins his subsequent marriage (ch.6 p.21).

19. A.C. Bouman. Patterns in Old English and Old Icelandic Literature. p.144.

20. Guðrún's vindictiveness is particularly emphasised when contrasted with Ingibjörg's previous magnanimity.

21. Finnbogi Guðmundsson (ed). Orkneyinga saga. ÍF 34 p.184.

22. Guðni Jónsson (ed). Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs. FAS vol.II ch.10 p.36-51.

Óðinn, in disguise and using the name Gestumblindi, exchanges riddles with Heiðrekr. 'This name no doubt derives from Gestr inn blindi "the blind stranger", Odin as the wandering disguised old man, with one eye and a hat drawn down over his face. He bore the name Gestr when he appeared to St Ólaf (Flateyjarbók II 134 f.).' (Christopher Tolkien (trans). The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise. ch.9 p.32.)

23. Neckel. op cit. p.177-179.

24. Christine Fell (trans). Egils Saga. p.190-192.

25. Guðni Jónsson (ed). Örvar-Odds saga. FAS vol.II ch.19 p.279.

26. ibid. ch.23 p.297.

27. R.G. Finch (ed & trans). The Saga of the Volsungs. ch.11 p.20.

28. (a) H. Ellis Davidson. Gods and Myths of Northern Europe. p.50.

(b) *Brást nú Baldrs faðir/brigt er at trúa honum.* (Guðni Jónsson (ed). Ketils saga Hoengs. FAS vol III ch.5 p.266.)

(c) *'... en Óðin kann ek ekki at kenna hér enn. Mér er þó mesti grunr á, at hann muni hér sveima í móti oss, herjans sonrinn inn fúli ok inn ótrú ...'*. (Guðni Jónsson (ed). Hrólfs saga kraka. FAS vol II ch.51 p.91.)

The use of the expression *herjans sonrinn* is unusual for Óðinn, in general it would be simply *Herjann* - Lord of hosts. But it seems quite likely that Óðinn is being referred to here as he has already appeared in this saga (ch.46 p.91-92) and in such a way that Böðvarr may well be expecting to encounter him as an adversary. (See ch.4 Green Clothes p.82-83.)

29. See ch.4 Green Clothes p.82-83.

Chapter Eight

SKÓPVENGIR

The shoes of the medieval Icелander were usually fastened on with thongs of varying length. Occasionally buttons of some kind were used instead. Archæological sites in Hedeby, York, Oseberg and Lund have produced shoes of very similar type which would have been tied on with a 'lace round the top or by a small toggle' (1). But as Falk points out there is evidence within the sagas of longer thongs being used, at times with some kind of ornamentation on the ends (2). The prophetess in *Eiríks saga rauða* has:

á fótum kalfskinnskúa loðna ok í
pvengi langa, ok á tinknapp miklir á
endunum.

(ch.4 p.206-207)

Sigurðr sýr appears to have laces long enough to bind round his legs: *hann hafði ... háva skúa ok bundna at legg* (3).

In *Eyrbyggja saga*, Egill's thongs with tassels are apparently in accordance with the custom of the period:

Egill hafi skúfaða skópvengi, sem þá
var siðr til

(ch.43 p.117)

although it is debatable how accurate this comment is (4). How reliable is the writer's knowledge of the customs of this period? Is he relying on tradition or is he merely reinforcing his description of Egill's thongs in order to add verisimilitude to the anecdote concerning the slave's mishap? Falk mentions it being the custom of the Franks to adorn their shoe straps with some kind of decoration and this fashion was also followed in Northern regions.

The saga writers though were not usually concerned with the length of the shoe thongs when they mention them in the texts. It is often the possibility of these straps coming loose at inconvenient moments that has been exploited in literature. A shoe strap coming undone seems quite an undignified thing to happen to a man, especially when involved in an important errand. This aspect has been developed by the writer of *Eyrbyggja saga* in the episode involving the slave, Egill.

In an attempt to obtain his freedom Egill agrees to the request of the Þorbrandssynir that he should secretly visit the Breiðavík men and find out how one of them could be killed. Egill creeps into their shed and is unnoticed in the darkness. But as he moves around his shoelace comes undone:

... ok hafði losnat annarr þvengrinn,
ok dragna i skúfrinn;

... Ok er hann vildi stíga yfir
presköldinn, þá sté hann á
þvengjarskúfinn, þann er dragnaði; ok
er hann vildi hinum foetinum fram
stíga, þá var skúfrinn fastr, ok af
því reiddi til falls, ok fell hann
innar á gólfit; varð þat svá mikill
dynkr, sem nautsbúk flegnum væri
kastat niðr á gólfit. Þórðr hljóp upp
ok spurði, hvat fjánda þar foeri.
Björn hljóp ok upp ok at honum ok fekk
tekit hann, áðr hann komsk á foetr, ok
spyr, hverr hann væri.

(ch.43 p.117)

Egill is made to appear ridiculous, incompetent and something of a clown. The simile used to describe the noise of his fall reinforces the comic element.

In *Njáls saga* another slave, Melkólfr, is also betrayed by a loose skóþvengr. Hallgerðr has sent him to Otkell's

farm to steal food. He is successful in this and in setting fire to the storehouse. However as he leaves - *pá slitnar skópvengr hans* (ch.48 p.123). He stops to repair the damage with his knife (5). When he has done this, he hurries home, realising too late that he has left the knife and belt behind. He is afraid to return to collect them even though, as Otkell's gift to him, the objects could not fail to identify him as the thief. And this is what happens when they are found later by Skamkell.

Although Melkólfr had been reluctant to carry out the theft, he is not a reputable man and, as with Egill, the mishap due to an insignificant loose shoe thong seems in keeping with his status and character. In both sagas these incidents, trivial though they may seem, lead to further and more important events as they reveal the men, the perpetrators, behind the clandestine actions of the slaves.

The position a man is inevitably placed in when tying his *skópvengir* has also been used to advantage by the saga writers.

1. Reykdoela saga. ch.21 p.217

Grímr, an outlaw and another disreputable character, has been persuaded by Þorgeirr to attempt to kill Skúta. Grímr approaches Skúta, asking for hospitality. Skúta takes him in and treats him well. This good reception seems to delay Grímr's desire to execute his errand. Later, in the spring, Grímr accompanies Skúta to the fishing nets. Skúta's shoe strap comes loose and he bends to tie it up. It is perhaps Skúta's vulnerable position that suddenly

prompts Grímr into action:

Ok er þeir hafa farit um hríð, þá
losnar skóþvengr Skútu, ok dvalðisk
hann at ok batt þvenginn. Ok þá
veitti Grímr honum tilræði ok hjó til
Skútu.

But fortunately Skúta is wearing a coat of mail under his *kufi* and this protects him. The striking of a man who appears unprepared for battle as regards weapons and posture, who is in a very weak position, is not the action of an honourable man. It is however what one would expect of such as Grímr who has already behaved in an underhand and deceiving manner. This episode also illustrates Skúta's cunning and wariness. He may appear to be vulnerable but in fact is well prepared; obviously he does not wholly trust his dubious companion.

2. Egils saga. ch.81 p.280-281

There has been a dispute over the grazing of cattle between Steinarr and Þorsteinn, Egill's son. Steinarr hires a slave, Þrándr, to look after his cattle, instructing him to let them graze on the best land regardless of who it belongs to. Early one morning Þorsteinn sees the cattle on his land and goes to confront the slave in charge of them. When he comes up to the cattle, Þrándr is asleep. Þorsteinn wakes him and he is quickly on his feet:

hann spratt upp skjótt ok hart ok
greip tveim höndum öxina ok reiddi upp

Þorsteinn tells Þrándr to remove the animals which the slave refuses to do. Instead he appears to taunt Þorsteinn:

'Nú skaltu sjá, Þorsteinn, hvárt ek
hræðumk nökkut hót þín.' Síðan
settisk Þrándr niðr ok batt skó sinn,

en Þorsteinn reiddi upp öxina hart ok
hjó á háls Þrándi svá at höfuðit fell
á bringuna;

The action of Þorsteinn appears almost cowardly and contrasts with his earlier gesture of arousing the sleeping man, giving him an opportunity to arm and defend himself. And this despite considerable discrepancy in the size and strength of their respective weapons - the slave has a large axe *nær álnar fyrir munn, ok var hon hárhvöss*, while Þorsteinn has an *öxi í hendi ekki mikla ok engi fleiri vápn*. Þorsteinn does not seem to be presented as a particularly dishonourable person. He is described in Chapter Seventy-nine:

Hann var mikill ok sterkr ok þó ekki
eftir því sem faðir hans. Þorsteinn
var vitr maðr ok kyrrláttr, hógværr,
stilltr mann bezt.

(p.274)

He has been provoked into this method of killing by the slave's defiant and open taunt. Þrándr recklessly insults Þorsteinn's courage when he shows that he is not afraid to deliberately place himself in a weak position while being threatened by Þorsteinn. And even a moderate and peaceful man, it seems, cannot help but react to such extreme provocation.

3. Þorsteins þáttr stangarhöggs. p.69-79

The loose *skópvengr* in this *þáttr* is part of the accumulation of detail in the fight between Þorsteinn and Bjarni which illustrates the character of both participants. It also contributes to the questioning of the writer's intentions. Why does Bjarni delay the fight? Is it because he is physically at a disadvantage as T.M.

Andersson believes (6), is it because of his general reluctance to fight or kill a man he respects, or is it a means of testing Þorsteinn?

Þorsteinn has killed three of Bjarni's housecarls after they have insulted him. Bjarni chooses to ignore this and it is only when goaded by his wife that he arrives at Sunnudalur and tells Þorsteinn that they must fight. During the duel, Bjarni requests a pause while he has a drink. Later he finds:

'Margt hendir mik nú í dag,' sagði
Bjarni. 'Lauss er nú skópvengr minn.'
'Bind þú hann þá,' kvað Þorsteinn.
(p.75)

Both these actions place Bjarni in a very vulnerable position - bending down, weapons even laid down. On the first occasion Þorsteinn picks up his opponent's sword, to examine it, the second time Þorsteinn goes indoors to fetch a more effective weapon. It appears that Bjarni is fighting with a blunt sword. There is no question about Bjarni's courage; his participation in the battle at Böðvarsdalur (Vápn.s. ch.18) is alluded to. But there appears a mutual respect for each other between these two men and neither is eager to be the cause of the other's death. Bjarni's actions during the duel enable him to test Þorsteinn's honour and when later Bjarni asks if he will be true to him, Þorsteinn is able to reply:

'Orðit hafa mér svá foeri í dag á þér,
at ek mætta svíkja þik, ef ógæfa mín
gengi ríkara en lukka þín, ok mun ek
eigi svíkja þik,' sagði Þorsteinn.
'Sé ek, at þú ert afbragðsmaðr,' sagði
Bjarni.

(p.76)

The duel has emphasised the honourable nature of Þorsteinn.

There is a sharp contrast between this incident and the one in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*. When Gunnlaugr and Hrafn fight their duel, the maimed Hrafn requests a drink which Gunnlaugr brings in his own helmet. Hrafn then strikes Gunnlaugr, severely wounding him on the head. This is not, as Gunnlaugr remarks, an honourable action:

'Illa sveiktu mik nú, ok ódrengiliga
fór þér, þar sem ek trúða þér.
(ch.12 p.102)

The action of Bjarni, bending to tie his shoe, conveys his courage, and his confidence in his judgement of Þorsteinn and the situation. It demonstrates his reluctance to be involved in an act of vengeance which would result in a good and industrious man being killed in order to avenge housecarls who had provoked their own death. Bjarni is able to see beyond the narrow confines of death and vengeance and appreciate the futility of such a vendetta which would do nothing for the greater welfare of society.

4. Njáls saga. ch.157 p.452

Þorsteinn, son of Hallr of Siða, becomes involved in the Battle of Clontarf. After fierce fighting, the Irish, led by King Brian, gain victory over Earl Sigurðr's opposing army. The Norsemen are forced to abandon the battle field and in the subsequent flight, Þorsteinn notices his shoe thong has come undone. He bends to tie it and at that moment Kerþjálfaðr, King Brian's foster son, comes upon him:

þá spurði Kerþjálfaðr, hví hann rynni
eigi. 'Því' sagði Þorsteinn, 'at ek
tek eigi heim í kveld, þar sem ek á

heima út á Íslandi.' Kerþjálfaðr gaf honum grið.

It is a marvellous instance of saga humour and well quoted by various critics. It would hardly have been the same if Þorsteinn had told the truth. It is indicative of courage, and quick-wittedness, in the face of death. These qualities were greatly admired by the Icelanders and the writer of *Njáls saga* has made the most of this incident.

There is another incident in *Njáls saga* which involves a broken shoelace, though in this case it is not the wearer who is in danger of being attacked. Skarpheðinn, with his brothers and Kári, sets out to find Þráinn Sigfússon and his companions in order to take vengeance for previous insults and difficulties. They see Þráinn's party riding along the river bank and rush towards them. But Skarpheðinn has to stop:

þat varð Skarpheðni, þá er þeir hljópu ofan með fljótinu, at stökk í sundr skópvengr hans, ok dvalðisk hann eptir.
 'Hví hvikask þér svá, Skarpheðinn?' segir Grímr.
 'Bind ek skó minn,' segir Skarpheðinn.
 'Föru vér fyrir,' segir Kári, 'svá lízk mér sem eigi muni hann verða seinni en vér.'

(ch.92 p.233)

Grímr appears to chide Skarpheðinn, when he asks why he delays but Kári has no doubt that Skarpheðinn will catch them up and urges them to continue on. When Skarpheðinn has tied his shoe on, he races after them, ending with a spectacular slide on the ice. He comes swiftly and unexpectedly upon Þráinn; he kills him with one blow before Þráinn or any of his companions have time to prevent him.

Kári remarks: *Karlmannliga er at farit* (7).

This incident seems unimportant but it contributes to the build up of the character of Skarpheðinn. It illustrates his touchiness and sensitivity: he would have found it unbearable to have been thought slow to attack. Because of the delay, he needed to take dramatic action to prove his valour and superiority to other men. In the introduction to the Penguin translation, Skarpheðinn is described as a 'frustrated viking' (8) and elements of this appear here. Lacking famous exploits abroad, he has to prove his worth here at home in Iceland and to do that he has to stand out above other men in his actions and courage.

To stop to tie a shoelace could imply tardiness in physical action; such imputations must be vigorously refuted. This may be one reason why Þorsteinn at Clontarf would not dream of admitting the real reason for his delay. That Bjarni is not afraid of such accusations being aimed at him further reinforces his confident character.

These incidents involving broken things are minor events within the sagas themselves but they play their part either in the development of narrative or of character. Sometimes providing humour, comic or sardonic, illustrating courage or deviousness, the action itself also provides a very human touch, helping to bring contact between the saga characters and reality.

A shoelace which breaks or comes undone can be embarrassing but since it could happen to anyone would

probably not be viewed as any reflection on a man's personal honour. But it is the dishonourable man - a slave or outlaw - who will take advantage of the situation should his adversary suffer this mishap. The honourable man, on the other hand, would not usually exploit another's unavoidable moment of vulnerability. Incompetence, as seen in the behaviour of some of the less respectable characters, is emphasised by their situation. Egill is clumsy and inept at subterfuge, tripping over his own lace; Melkólfr is careless about repairing his; Þrándr foolishly mis-reads the situation, blind to his own imminent danger.

NOTES

1. J. Graham-Campbell and D. Kidd. The Vikings. p.113.

2. H. Falk. Altwestnordisch Kleiderkunde. p.131.

3. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (ed). Oláfs saga helga.
Heimskringla, ÍF 27 ch.33 p.41.

4. The author of *Eyrbyggja saga* is known for his antiquarian interests but he is not always accurate in his accounts. A detailed description of a heathen temple is given in Chapter Four for example but it cannot be relied upon for authenticity and is thought to be 'largely invented'. (Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (trans). Eyrbyggja Saga. p.11, 24-25; p.40 fn.3.)

5. Using a knife seems an odd way to repair a broken shoelace but no further details are given. It is however important that the knife is used as it is this object which betrays Egill.

6. T.M. Andersson. The Icelandic Family Saga. p.4.

7. A description in the Bible of the Assyrian army prepared for war illustrates how each soldier is well equipped and ready for the coming conflict:

27. Non est deficiens, neque laborans
in eo: non dormitabit, neque dormiet,
neque solvetur cingulum renum eius,
nec rumpetur corrigia calceamenti
eius.

28. Sagittae eius acutae, et omnes
arcus eius extenti. Ungulae equorum
eius ut silex, et rotae eius quasi
impetus tempestatis.

(Biblia Sacra. Vvlgatae Editionis. Isaiah I. ch.5
v.27-28 p.453.)

None is weary, none stumbles,
none slumbers or sleeps,
not a waistcloth is loose,
not a sandal-thong broken;

their arrows are sharp,
all their bows bent,
their horses' hoofs seem like flint,
and their wheels like the whirlwind.

(The Holy Bible. Rev. Standard Version. p.714-715.)

8. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (trans). Njals Saga. p.29.

HEAD-DRESS AND FOOTWEAR

Conclusion

In the light of these two preceding chapters certain specific differences can be seen between head-dress and footwear. Obviously there is the fact that anything worn on the head is conspicuous whereas footwear is not always immediately noticeable.

On the whole in this study of occurrences from the family sagas the actual presence of a head-dress appears to indicate some aspect of the nature of a character or his/her status. At times it is part of a deliberate strategy aimed at deception.

However with *skópvengir* sheer chance or luck plays a major role. What we discover about the characters occurs after shoelaces have broken when those involved reveal by their behaviour, competent or otherwise, the kind of person they are.

SECTION THREE

MAJOR ITEMS OF BODY CLOTHING

(i) Unusual Use of Body Clothing

Chapter Nine

A SIGN OF GRIEF

Böðvarr was the son of Egill Skallagrímsson, a fine, strong and promising young man. Egill loved his son very much and Böðvarr was extremely fond of his father. During the summer Egill bought some timber and his servants were to take it home by boat. Böðvarr persuaded them to let him go too. A storm arose, the ship was wrecked and all the crew drowned including Egill's son. When Egill heard the news, he set out to search for the bodies. He found his son's body. He lifted it up and carried it to the mound where Skalla-Grímr was buried, and placed Böðvarr inside the mound with his grandfather. And it is said:

þá er þeir settu Böðvar niðr, at Egill
var búinn: hosan var strengð fast at
beini; hann hafði fustanskyrtíl
rauðan, þröngvan upphlutinn ok láz at
síðu; en þat er sögn manna, at hann
þrútnaði svá, at kyrtillinn rifnaði af
honum ok svá hosurnar.

(Egils s. ch.78 p.243,244)

Egill was so overcome with grief that he shut himself up in the bed closet and seemed prepared to die. Only his daughter's ingenuity prevented this; she encouraged him to compose a poem dedicated to his lost sons. This poem, *Sonatorrek*, provided consolation for Egill who was then able to cope with his loss.

Cleasby and Vigfússon translate *þrúttinn* as 'swollen, oppressed'. It would seem clear from this incident that the swelling of Egill's body, to the extent of tearing his clothes, was due to the great emotion he was experiencing.

The physical swelling is the external manifestation of the emotional, internal oppression a character feels when undergoing extreme suffering.

Sigurður Nordal in the *Íslenzk fornrit* edition compares this description to that in *Völsunga saga* where Sigurðr Fáfnisbani shows his grief in a similar manner (1). Brynhildr tells Sigurðr of her great sorrow on learning the truth about her marriage to Gunnarr. She feels this will all end in her death and refuses Sigurðr's offer to divorce Guðrún and marry her. She appears to be rejecting him altogether: *Eigi vil ek þik*. Sigurðr leaves her:

Ut gekk Sigurðr
andspjalli frá,
hollvinr löfða,
ok hnipnaði,
svá at ganga nam
gunnarfúsum
sundr of síður
serkr járnofinn. (2)

Though it is not specifically mentioned that Sigurðr's body was 'swollen' yet the implication is there; it would explain why the byrnie tears apart at the sides. On the other hand since the physical reason for the garment splitting is not specified, only the emotional reason, it could indicate that the association of deep sorrow with physical swelling was a familiar concept: the audience would naturally assume that Sigurðr's grief was being expressed in this way, resulting in his torn shirt of mail.

The author of *Egils saga* has described Egill's kirtle as being laced at the sides. Perhaps it seemed to him that the idea of the kirtle splitting due to the laces breaking was more acceptable than the actual body of the garment

tearing apart as seems to be the case with Sigurðr.

When Helgi's shepherd in *Laxdoela saga* describes the group of men he has seen, he ends his detailed account of Bolli Bollason with: *sýnðisk mér, sem þrúttinn mundi vera af trega* (ch.63 p.187). Though possibly a figurative expression in the way it is used here, still intense emotion and the imagery of swelling/bursting are clearly associated.

Egils saga is not the only family saga to contain this motif in connection with clothing. It is also found in *Ljósvetninga saga* when a man grieves for his brother. Koðrán is severely wounded in the battle at Kakalahóll, but his brother, Eyjólfur, does not wish to find a physician in that area. He wants to take Koðrán back home to be attended to by the physician, Þorvarður. When Þorvarður examines the wounded man, he tells Eyjólfur that if Koðrán had not been moved there may have been some hope for him but now there is nothing to be done. Eyjólfur takes this badly and when the men come to take off their clothes, Eyjólfur cannot remove his tunic:

Eyjólfur mátti eigi komask af kyrtli
þeim, er hann var í; svá var hann
þrúttinn.

(ch.14 p.82)

There is no explanation of why his body should have swollen to this extent; he was not wounded in any way in the battle. But if the connection between the swelling of the body and emotional distress is accepted then it is clear that the saga writer is using this motif to express Eyjólfur's grief. His sorrow at his brother's imminent

death would be increased by his knowledge that he was himself largely to blame for it.

Þorhallr Ásgrímsson was the foster-son of Njáll. They appear to have been close, Njáll passing on to the boy his extensive knowledge of the law. Later after the attack on Bergþórshváll, the news of his foster-father's death is brought to Þorhallr and he hears that Njáll died inside the burning house. His anguish is evident in his reaction:

hann þrútnaði allr ok blóðbogi stóð ór
hvarri-tveggju hlustinni, ok varð eigi
stöðvat, ok fell hann í óvit, ok þá
stöðvaðisk.

(Njáls s. ch.132 p.344)

No mention is made of his clothes, but the swelling of his body is plainly associated with the pain and suffering which suddenly overwhelm him. He is perhaps slightly ashamed that the force of his emotions caused him to fall unconscious for when he recovers he *kvað sér lítilmannliga verða*. He is now determined to take revenge on those who burned his foster-father and who through that action caused him such painful distress.

This motif occurs a second time in *Njáls saga* when Flosi and his companions are visiting various chieftains to ask for support in their case. They visit two brothers, Þorkell and Þorvaldr, sons of Ketill þrymr. The brothers agree to help when Flosi promises them a financial reward. When their mother, Yngvildr, hears of this involvement she becomes upset and begins to cry. She explains to Þorkell the reasons for her reaction:

'Mik dreymði, at Þorvaldr, bróðir
þinn, væri í rauðum kyrtli, ok þótti
mér svá þrongr vera sem saumaðr væri

at honum; mér þótti hann ok vera í
rauðum hosum undir ok vafit at vándum
dreglum. Mér þótti illt á at sjá, at
honum var svá óhoegt, en ek máttu ekki
at gera.'

(ch.134 p.351, 352)

She is laughed at by the men who dismiss her dream as *loklausa* (nonsense). Yet at the subsequent battle at the Alþingi, Þorvaldr is killed by Þorgeir skorargeir. Yngvildr's dream was prophetic, a foreboding of sorrow. Though the body is not specified as having swollen still the kirtle is tight and there is an impression of extreme discomfort. And perhaps the specific colour mentioned - red - plays a part here as an augury of blood and thus of injury and death. This is a mother's dream; it is a premonition of the grief she is to suffer at the violent death of her son.

The manner of Þorvaldr's death is particularly described later; he was killed by a blow to the chest with the very axe that had belonged to Skarpheðinn (ch.145 p.403). There is a parallel here with the case of Þorhallr where the details of Njáll's death are explained to him. In *Ljósvetninga saga* Eyjólfur is unhappily well aware of the circumstances of his brother's death and Koðrán's injury is described earlier in the battle: *Ok í því hjó Hallr í höfuð honum* (ch.14 p.81). When this happens another man expresses regret at this death, at the loss of *einn bezti maðr ór Eyjafirði*. Böðvarr's drowning was a quirk of fate; there was no real need for him to even be on that boat. In each incident the writer has given some details concerning the deaths, he has enlarged upon the events. By providing information which underlines how tragic these deaths were

he has emphasised the effect on the bereaved kinsmen (and woman).

The idea of the body swelling under extreme sorrow may be connected with the medieval confusion of the heart and mind. The heart was considered to be the seat of the emotions. There is some ambiguity in the translating of the word *hugr*, depending on the context the word could represent 'mind' or 'heart' (CV):

- hugr 1. mind
koma e-m í hug - to come into one's mind
2. mood, heart, feeling
góðr hugr - a good, kind heart
hugir þeirra fóru saman
 - they loved each other
3. desire, wish
leggja hug á konu - to love a woman

Similarly with the term *hjarta* which though it could be translated as 'heart', could also represent 'mind' or 'feeling'. It was used as a symbol of courage as in *Hárbarðslióð* - *Þórr á afl oerit, enn ekki hjarta* (3). But other emotions were also expressed by *hjarta*:

blóðugt er hjarta
 þeim er biðja skal
 sér í mál hvert matar. (4)

Thus the oppression and misery felt in the mind would be thought to be concentrated in the heart, in the breast of the body. The swelling of the body may then be seen as a result of the swelling of a heart overloaded with heavy sorrow.

In *Laxdoela saga*, Þorgerðr aggressively reminds her sons that the death of their brother Kjartan has not been properly avenged. As they ride past Bolli's farm, she

accuses them of cowardice. Halldórr curtly replies to her goading but otherwise says little, yet: *prútnaði honum mjök móðr til Bolla* (ch.53 p.162). His hatred would of course be fuelled by grief for his dead brother, shame due to his own slighted honour and anger directed towards the woman who now urges violent retribution. The phrase vividly evokes the fierce emotion he can barely control.

In medieval Iceland the motif discussed appears to have been a literary technique, used when the writer wished to 'describe' his character's emotions. Combined with information on the circumstances of death, and in some cases an idea of the character of the dead person, the swelling of the body vividly expresses the weight of sorrow felt by the relative.

In the Iceland of the sagas, where society revolved around the heroic ethic, it is often regarded as a sign of weakness to express intense emotion openly; this motif seems a suitable way to illustrate suffering. The character does not typically reveal his grief with outward lamentations but contains it within himself - and it is through the physical signs of such containment that we can understand what he is going through.

NOTES

1. Sigurður Nordal (ed). Egils saga. ÍF 2. p.244 fn.2.
2. R.G. Finch (ed & trans). The Saga of the Volsungs. ch.31 p.56.
3. G. Neckel (ed). Edda. Rev. by Hans Kuhn. st.26 p.82.
4. David A.H. Evans (ed). Hávamál. st.37 p.46.

Chapter Ten

BLOOD-STAINED GARMENTS

The blood of a man who had been killed but not avenged could be a powerful and emotional reminder of unfulfilled obligations. It was a device used by women in attempts to force kinsmen to take up a case, or to goad them into more extreme and violent action. It was impossible for a man to disregard this kind of challenge without incurring dishonour and shame. In some cases the garments of a dead man, stained with the blood of his death wounds, were presented to the prospective avenger by a kinswoman.

1. Njáls saga. ch.116 p.290-292

Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði is killed in his cornfield by the sons of Njáll. At the time Höskuldr is wearing a cloak which had been given to him by his wife's uncle, Flosi - a *skarlatsskikkju*. When his body is discovered, his wife Hildigunnr wipes the blood up with the cloak and puts it away in a chest. Flosi visits her later, having already made preparations for taking up the case at the Alþingi. Hildigunnr appears to be paying him special attention, offering him the high seat. Flosi for his part responds coolly at first (*Hér skulu vér eta dagverð ok ríða síðan*) and then angrily when he sees the place prepared for him. He insists that atonement for Höskuldr's death will be legal and honourable. However he is obviously not acting strongly enough for Hildigunnr who claims that if the roles were reversed her husband would have accepted nothing less than blood vengeance - though this seems highly unlikely,

Höskuldr being a moderate and calm man who called on God to forgive his own killers. It is also true that Hildigunnr did not appear to be so devoted to her husband when he was alive.

When the meal is finished, Hildigunnr takes out Höskuldr's cloak and flings it around Flosi's shoulders; the dried blood falls all around him. Her challenge to him is almost in the form of an incantation:

'Þessa skikkju gaft þú, Flosi,
Höskuldi, ok gef ek þér nú aptr. Var
hann ok í þessi veginn. Skýt ek því
til guðs ok góðra manna, at ek soeri
þik fyrir alla krapta Krists þíns ok
fyrir manndóm ok karlmennsku þína, at
þú hefnir allra sára þeira, er hann
hafði á sér dauðum, eða heit hvers
manns níðingr ella.'

She has not failed to remind him of his manhood; she has invoked the name of the dead man and re-iterated the obligation through mention of the gift. Hildigunnr ends with something of a curse on him - if he does not fulfil her challenge he will deserve the condemnation of all men.

Flosi reacts angrily, throwing the garment back and abusing her (*Þú ert it mesta forað*). His emotional reaction is vividly described (p.292). Perhaps his anger partly stems from the way she has deceived him with her initial excessive hospitality. Yet whatever he thinks of her actions, he is now deeply involved and committed to the case; he cannot forget or ignore Hildigunnr's demand for the ultimate vengeance. Later at the Alþingi when arbitration is in progress, it may well be Flosi's recollection of this painful taunt to his honour which

contributes to the downfall of negotiations (ch.123 p.313) (1).

2. Vápnfirðinga saga. ch.14 p.51-54

This saga presents a similar situation, though without so much dramatic detail as in *Njáls saga*. The surviving manuscript is partly illegible at this point, but certain events can still be deduced. Brodd-Helgi has been slain in battle whilst fighting against Geitir. The issue was — settled peacefully and Bjarni, Brodd-Helgi's son, received compensation. Geitir is now on good terms with Bjarni who is his foster son and nephew as Brodd-Helgi's first wife was Geitir's sister.

Some time after the killing, Bjarni is getting ready to attend a meeting. He is wondering what to wear. Þorgerðr silfra, Brodd-Helgi's second wife, brings out a bundle and gives it to him. Bjarni unfolds it. It would appear to be his dead father's cloak with the dried blood still on it. Þorgerðr reminds him of the grief which is not only hers but his too: *Ekki var minni minn harmr(?) en þinn*. Bjarni, as with Flosi, gives back the cloak:

'Sel þú allra kvenna örm[ust] ... ok
var ... gengr út skyndiliga.'

His view of her is illustrated later when after committing the killing she wanted, he drives her away from the house.

Þorgerðr has put Bjarni in an intolerable position. She has made it difficult for him to ignore her gesture without bringing shame upon himself, yet for him to kill Geitir is also a violation of his moral code. Geitir is a close kinsman as well as a friend. Bjarni goes to the

meeting and does kill Geitir. His remorse is immediate and he cradles the head of the dying man, regretting his action. It is an episode paralleling Bolli's reaction after the killing of Kjartan (Laxd. s. ch.49).

Many parts of this incident are missing. The editor of the *Íslenzk fornrit* edition has suggested, and it seems probable, that though a cloak is not specifically mentioned, the feminine third person pronoun could imply that a *yfirhöfn* or *skikkja* was the item used: ... *ok var hon blóði drifin* (p.52 fn.1).

The similarities with *Njáls saga* suggest that one saga has influenced the other. Although *Vápnfirðinga saga* is set in east Iceland, Jónas Kristjánsson has pointed out that the writer appears to be quite ignorant of the topography of that region (2). He suggests that the genealogy given at the end may indicate the region of origin. It traces a connection from Geitir down to Ragnheiðr Þorhallsdóttir and her three sons, a family which was located in the south of Iceland and therefore closer to the area of *Njáls saga*. This would make some kind of borrowing of motifs more likely. *Vápnfirðinga saga* is an early text, probably dating from the first half of the thirteenth century. If borrowing has occurred, it was the scribe of *Njáls saga* who transferred and developed this incident.

3. Laxdoela saga. ch.60 p.179-181

Bolli Þorleiksson, the third husband of Guðrún, was slain in retaliation for the death of Kjartan. No compensation

was paid though Snorri goði was willing to take up the case. Guðrún seemed reluctant to have her son Þorleikr bound by any peaceful settlement. Some years later Guðrún produces Bolli's blood-stained clothes. They are personal garments - *línklæði, skyrti ok línbroekr*. She shows these to her sons Bolli and Þorleikr and reproaches them for their inaction:

'Þessi sömu klæði, er þit sjáið hér,
frýja ykkur föðurhefnda; nú mun ek ekki
hafa hér um mörg orð, því at ekki er
ván, at þit skipið af framhvöt orða,
ef þit íhugið ekki við slíkar
bendingar ok áminningar.

The victim is referred to by relationship - father - emphasising family obligations. In her invocation Guðrún stresses that it is the clothes which challenge them to avenge their father. By personifying these objects, which have such a close association with the dead man, they become, as she intended, powerful 'tokens and reminders' (3). Bolli and Þorleikr are acutely aware of an attack on their honour. It is shown by their haste to excuse themselves on the grounds of being, up to this point, too young to take action and without a leader. Though deeply moved by their mother's act they do not as in the previous illustrations show anger or reproach towards the woman. Guðrún's challenge hits home. When Bolli then speaks to Þorgils about the matter, he is particularly concerned with his prestige and reputation:

'vilju vér til hefnda leita,' sagði
Bolli, 'ok höfu vit broedr nú þann
þroska, at menn munu mjök á leita við
okkr, ef vit hefjum eigi handa'.

According to the saga, Bolli Bollason is twelve years old

at this time, an age which was considered legally as the beginning of manhood, of maturity (4). Guðrún obviously considers him old enough now to shoulder responsibility for the family honour. With Þorgils Hölluson as a leader, the brothers set out to seek blood vengeance. It is not quite the vengeance Guðrún had in mind, as Snorri goði diverts it towards Helgi Harðbeinsson. Helgi's death will not provoke the succession of revenge killings which might be expected if any of the Ólafssynir were slain (ch.59 p.177-178). There is a similarity here with the case of Hildigunnr as Guðrún is also a widow who had not shown great devotion to her husband during his life.

4. Njáls saga. ch.124 p.319

This incident is somewhat different in that the woman, Hróðný, produces bloodstained garments in order to persuade Ingjaldr, her brother, to abstain from violence or involvement in a certain case:

Flosi is trying to obtain Ingjaldr's support in the case against Njáll's sons for the killing of Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði. Hróðný had been Njáll's mistress and had had a son by him who has since been killed. She goes to see Ingjaldr and brings out a linen cap stained with her son Höskuldr's blood. She uses it to remind her brother of his obligations to her and the father of her son:

'lifa muntú allt at einu ok heita þá góðr maðr, ef þú svíkr þann eigi, er þú átt bezt at launa.' Hon tók þá línúfu ór þússi sínum alblóðga ok raufótta ok mælti: 'þessa húfu hafði Höskuldr Njálsson á höfði sér, þá er þeir vágú hann. Þykki mér þér því verr sama at veita þeim, er þaðan standa at'.

The victim is named, responsibility emphasised, and future prestige promised. Ingjaldr exhibits no anger, he seems to accept the implications of the linen cap and does not abuse Hróðný. He does agree to withdraw from the case, though not to the extent of divulging any of Flosi's plans. And in this context fear of contempt enters the transaction as Ingjaldr realises:

því at þá em ek hvers manns níðingr,
ef ek segi þat, er þeir trúðu mér til.

This would happen if he were to completely betray Flosi, whereas due to the pressure of his ties of kinship it appears that he can decline active support without any dishonour - although Flosi is subsequently scathing in his remarks about Ingjaldr's change of loyalty (5).

It is possible that this incident is a counterbalance to the previous one in *Njáls saga* involving Hildigunnr and Flosi. The name of the victim is the same. The implication may be that this kind of pressure can be used not only to incite violence but also to deter someone from taking part in such revenge.

There are many cases in the *Íslendingasögur* of women urging men into action; minor female characters can even be introduced solely to fulfil this role. After several years of relative calm Hrafnkell is goaded into retaliation by a washer woman (Hrafn. s. ch.8 p.126-127). He might chastise her for her words but he then takes immediate action against Sámr's brother.

The women of this society were particularly dependent

upon the men to take up a case on their behalf and prosecute it, by peaceful means or otherwise. Women were not allowed to assume any legal responsibilities in this way; they could not present a case in the court. Þorgerðr in *Eyrbyggja saga* finds that this presents her with a problem and to get round it she is forced into the role of female inciter. The reminder of the victim in this case is not a garment and it illustrates that the blood stained garment motif is part of a wider pattern of incitement where various tokens may be produced - the point in common being blood, or evidence of the victim's violent death.

Vigfúss, Þorgerðr's husband, has been killed by Snorri goði and his men, but Þorgerðr is having difficulty getting any of her kinsmen to act on behalf of her and the family. Eventually, acting on Vermundr's advice, she digs up her husband's body, removes the head and takes it to Arnkell, her uncle. In her indictment against him she invokes the ties between the two men by implying that Vigfúss would not have been so inactive had the situations been reversed (ch.27 p.69). Arnkell is extremely affected by this gesture and reacts angrily towards her but he obviously now feels compelled to act for her and takes up the case, eventually bringing it to arbitration and peaceful settlement.

The head of a dead man is a powerful, and very tangible, symbol of his violent death and as an element in the process of incitement might be expected to force even the most moderate of men into action. In *Njáls saga*, Skarpheðinn and his brothers kill Sigmundr Lambason, a

kinsman of Gunnarr's. After this slaying, Skarpheðinn's intention was to send the head of the dead man to Hallgerðr but the shepherd entrusted with this errand failed to carry it out. When Hallgerðr hears about this, she is annoyed with the shepherd:

'pat var illa, er þú gerðir þat eigi,'
 segir hon, 'ek skylda foera Gunnari,
 ok myndi hann þá hefna frænda síns eða
 sitja fyrir hvers manns ámæli'.
 (ch.45 p.117)

Gunnarr has been reluctant to let Hallgerðr's intrigues provoke any ill feeling between him and Njáll and his family. Evidently Hallgerðr feels that producing the head of a dead man would have put such pressure upon Gunnarr that even he would have been unable to avoid taking some kind of action. Skarpheðinn and Hallgerðr, ostensibly enemies, appear in this episode almost in the light of accomplices - the severed head would have served the purposes of both.

The action of a woman confronting a man with the blood of a dead kinsman, whether on a garment or as part of the body, enables the writer of a saga to emphasise the working of the code of honour in the society of the saga age. As a literary device, it is particularly effective when it illustrates the dilemmas that would have faced many people.

It is the women who have to take this drastic action, implying that despite the ethics in the society of the sagas, they could not always rely on their kinsmen to fulfil their obligations without some prompting. The saga writers do though, at times, present these women as being

particularly harsh and relentless. The phrasing and rhythm present in the challenges of some of the women, the feeling of an incantation, a casting of a spell, gives a certain power to their indictments. They have placed the men in situations where they may be torn between conflicting loyalties.

The men, often in contrast to a ruthless woman, seem unable to resist the demands placed upon them. They show themselves sadly vulnerable to any slur upon their honour. Their anger reflects their frustration; they have to accept the challenge and become involved in an issue which they would have done much to avoid. In some cases they repudiate the woman, reflecting their desire to reject the responsibility thrust upon them. But they must know that this gesture is futile as the woman has, by her method, no doubt of achieving her object. The men are constrained by the concept of honour to take action however abhorrent it may be to them. Compromise appears to be difficult to effect.

Even where the men (or boys) are eager to fulfil the woman's challenge, as in the case of Guðrún and her sons, Guðrún's use of this device to remind the brothers of their father's death, exaggerates her reproach. A woman, a father's blood-stained linen garments, a formal challenge - all serve to imply that the sons have been tardy and reluctant about their obligations despite having had little previous opportunity to act.

Though the presence of the dead man's blood is common

to all these incidents and would appear to be the most significant element, it is not generally mentioned by the women. In the cases where the garments are used there is specific reference to them in three instances: Hildigunnr speaks of the cloak; Guðrún issues her charge through the clothes; Hróðný tells Ingjaldr 'this is the cap ...'. In *Vápnfirðinga saga* the garment is not mentioned. In view of the state of the manuscript, it is difficult to judge whether it would have conformed to the pattern or not. It would seem that it is enough to produce the blood, the physical evidence and reminder of the death; this has sufficient impact, leaving the challenger free to concentrate her verbal attack on the issues of honour and obligation.

Carol Clover feels that the motif of the woman inciting the man into action was not confined to the literary world of the sagas, but actually reflected a 'social reality' (6). Concentrating on the scene involving Hildigunnr and Flosi, Clover links the incitement, the whetting, to a ritual of lament which has parallels in many literatures and societies. Five elements are present in this scene and they are all linked, all part of the procedure - the high seat, the torn towel, Hildigunnr's weeping, the cloak with Höskuldr's blood, the speech. All form a whole which can be viewed as not only 'an angry woman's demand for revenge' but also 'a grieving widow's lamentations over her dead husband'.

The vacant high seat offered to Flosi emphasises Hildigunnr's position in the world, a woman bereaved and

alone. It is, as Clover points out, equivalent to the 'woe is me' lament. Hildigunnr openly weeps before Flosi, an unusual action in an Icelandic saga but common to many traditions of grieving. Her hair appears to be loose as she has to push it back from her face. Part of the process of ritual mourning is often to reverse the normal everyday customs i.e. discarding coloured clothes in favour of black. Hair that would usually be bound in some way may be pulled down and worn loose (7). Cloth or garments are often torn or rent by those who are overcome with grief and emotion - and this could be the significance of the towel, torn and full of holes.

In *The Iliad*, Hektor's female relations bewail their fate after his death (8). Their lamentations include praise of the dead man, anger towards the perpetrators of the death and an expression of satisfaction for all Hektor had managed to achieve against his adversaries, and they declare their own sorrow. In the case of Andromache his wife, this is expressed partly through a lament for her now bereft and solitary situation (9). Queen Erka in *Piðreks saga*, deserted by Piðrekr Valdimarson, weeps and tears her clothing (10). She turns to King Piðrekr, appealing to him for aid. She praises the king's valour; she laments her fate - *Væi verði mer* and emphasises her isolation - *nu a ek engan mann i minu riki þann er mer hialpi við*. As Erka repeats her desperate appeal, she *væinar oc rífr sin klæði oc sit har oc bærr a sitt briost*.

Hildigunnr's speech and the way she produces the bloody cloak would appear to be pure incitement. But

Clover believes that though these words appear to be aimed 'forward to the man to be killed next' yet at the same time attention is also focused 'backward' on the one who has already been killed thus combining the *hvöt* (instigation) with a lament. Certain examples can be found in Norse literature to confirm this kind of combination. Clover cites *Heiðarvíga saga* where Þuríðr goads her sons with a stanza centred on the act of vengeance (11). But in *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja*, the stanza spoken by Þorbjörg concentrates on her brother's courageous defence against his opponents (12). However, though it may seem to be a lament for a brave man, Indriði, Þorbjörg's husband, appears to be well aware that his wife also requires some action to be taken. Similar parallels can be found in the *Poetic Edda*. In *Hamðismál* where Guðrún mourns the death of Svanhildr (13), it would seem to be 'pure lament'; she grieves for the effect on the family and for her own solitary position. But at the same time this can be seen as part of an incitement: Guðrún is also urging her sons to take action and after her 'lament' they leave to attack Jörmunrekkr. *Guðrúnarhvöt*, on the other hand, focuses at first mainly on a reproach to the brothers who should be avenging their sister (14). It is when the men leave that Guðrún lapses into a lament on woes she has suffered.

It seems likely that within Norse literature the lament and the *hvöt* can be combined, can be 'two sides of the same coin'. Lamentation rituals are fairly widespread in various societies and can incorporate at least one, often more, of the five elements of the scene in *Njáls*

saga. Excessive displays of grief by bereaved women serve a purpose in a blood feud society - they keep the issue alive, they remind those responsible that vengeance has to be achieved. Clover bases her theory of 'social reality' on similar practices found in Greece and also in Albania where apparently such customs have quite a recent history (15).

But there is a different approach to the female inciter in the sagas. Fifty one instances of this 'female instigator' have been found in the *Íslendingasögur*, and Jenny Jochens has questioned the power and influence these women appear to have over the men in a society where men and women are not of equal status (16). To try to find an historical basis for this female figure in the thirteenth century, Jochens has turned to *Sturlunga saga*. Although she admits that this is not entirely reliable, it is at least more likely to reflect reality than the *Íslendingasögur*. The world of *Sturlunga saga* is apparently 'very much a man's world'; women occur less frequently than in the family sagas and in the whole corpus only four cases can be found of a woman goading a man into action (17). The 'female instigator' would thus appear to be a literary motif more often than a reflection of reality.

A possible reason behind this adverse portrayal of women may, Jochens believes, be found in the attitude of many churchmen. The writers of the sagas would have been closely associated with clerical institutions and teachings and may have absorbed some of the misogyny which was prevalent during the medieval period, leading them to

express traditional male attitudes to Eve through the vindictive figure of the *hetzerin* (18)

... the image of the evil, cunning woman who goaded men to barbarous deeds of revenge, thereby destroying the male order of society, did have resonance with the long-established ecclesiastical view of Eve, the first woman and the vehicle for the entrance of sin and misfortune into the world.
(19)

However *Hamðismál* seems to portray Guðrún's incitement as destructive, and as the poem apparently dates from the ninth century (20) it would probably indicate that this motif is pre-christian in origin.

Laments can be easily accepted as part of social reality and as far as the incidents involving garments fit into this custom, then perhaps there is some basis for historical counterparts. But Jochens' examination of *Sturlunga saga* with its lack of the female inciter raises questions about the goading element being paralleled in the world of thirteenth century Iceland. In the end the main concern here is with this feminine role as a literary motif.

Whether due to the influence of Christianity or not, the use of this motif clearly illustrates the predicament of the men involved. As men they had sole responsibility for the legal processes at least in cases which involved a slaying. Since women could not participate in these matters when they turned to the men involved the pressure they could bring to bear would be enormous. The man became responsible not only for his own honour and reputation, but also for that of someone to whom he was particularly

obligated, someone whose social role made her dependent on his actions.

The male/female contrast in most of the incidents discussed here emphasises the moral dilemma. On the whole the men are known to be moderate, responsible members of society, not anxious to disrupt peace and stability. However the women often appear vindictive and aggressive, careless of the consequences. At the moment of the incitement the effect is to alienate the audience from the woman, the disruptive element in the social fabric of society. At times the female character never really has the sympathy of the writer or audience - Hallgerðr has always been an unpleasant character; Þorger r silfra too rapidly replaced her predecessor (Vápn.s. ch.6 p.36). However it can be seen from the other texts that for some of these women the audience alienation is only meant to be temporary. The writer will at some point show admiration for these characters: Hildigunnr, when introduced, is described as *skörungr mikill ok kvenna fríðust synum* (Njáls s. ch.95 p.238); Guðrún was *kvenna vænst ... bæði at ásjánu ok vitsmunum* (Laxd.s. ch.32 p.86).

For a man to be under pressure from someone blatantly evil and cunning is one thing - they may possibly be repudiated with honour - but to be pressurised by, and obligated to, a person who is on the whole admirable and to be respected involves a more painful predicament, one which can be difficult to resolve.

NOTES

1. See ch.12 A Gift of Friendship? p.213-216.
2. Jónas Kristjánsson. Eddas and Sagas. Trans. by Peter Foote. p.247.
3. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (trans). Laxdæla Saga. p.197.
4. Twelve was the age when a man could be held legally responsible for a killing he had committed and when a son could 'prosecute a killing case' over a slain father. At twelve a man was also expected to assume religious responsibilities: 'Everyone is required to keep established fasts who has reached the age of twelve winters'. Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás. Trans. by Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote and Richard Perkins. p.155 K 91; p.166
p.157 K 94
p.49 K 16
5. 'Þar er sá maðr', segir Flosi, 'er rofit hefir eiða á oss ok allan trúnað'.

Flosi mælti til hans: 'Þú hefir rofit sætt á oss, ok hefir þú fyrirgört fé ok fjörvi. ... En mér þykkir þú við vant um kominn, ok mun ek gefa þér líf, ef þú vill selja mér sjálfdoemi'.

(Njáls s. ch.130 p.337-338)
6. Carol J. Clover. 'Hildigunnr's Lament'. In Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature. Ed. by John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth and Gerd Wolfgang Weber. p.141-183.
7. a) See ch.7 Head-dress p.120.

b) *Orkneyinga saga* has an example of women pulling down their hair due to emotional distress. Helga and her sister Frakökk make a poisoned shirt as part of their plan to kill Earl Páll. When Earl Haraldr, Helga's son, insists on putting the garment on the sisters desperately try to dissuade him: *þá hnykkðu þær af sér faldinum ok reyttu sik ok kváðu líf hans við liggja, ef hann foeri í klæðit;* (ch.55 p.118).
8. Andrew Lang, Walter Leaf and Ernest Myers (trans). The Iliad of Homer. Book 24 p.349-350.

9. *ibid.* 'Husband, thou art gone young from life, and leavest me a widow in thy halls. And the child is yet but a little one, child of ill-fated parents, thee and me; ...' (p.349).

10. Henrik Bertelsen (ed). Piðriks saga af Bern. ch.354 (302) vol.II p.197-198.

11. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (ed). Heiðarvíga saga. ÍF 3 ch.22 p.277-278.

Brátt munu Barða frýja
beiðendr primu seiða;
Ullr, munt ættar spillir,
undlinns, taliðr þinnar,
nema lybrautar látir
láðs valdandi falda,
lýðr nemi ljóð, sem kvóðum,
lauðrhysr boða rauðu.

Soon will Barði's courage be challenged
by cravers of the fish of battle.
Ullr of the wound-serpent, you will be
reckoned the spoiler of your kin unless
you cause the offerers of the sea fire
to be swathed in red, possessor of the
road of the land fish. Let the people
hear the poem I have spoken.

(Trans. by Carol J. Clover. *op cit.* p.149)

12. Guðni Jónsson (ed). Harðar saga ok Hólmverja.
Íslendinga sögur. vol.12 ch.38 p.283-284.

Varð í hreggi hörðu
Hörður felldr at jörðu,
hann hefr átta unnit,
Unns, ok fimm at gunni.
Heldr nam grimmra galdra
galdr rammliga at halda.
Mundi bitra branda
brandr elligar standa.

Hörður was felled to earth in the hard
storm of Óðinn. He vanquished eight and
five in the battle. The spell of grim
spells [the 'war fetter'] gripped him
powerfully; otherwise the stave of the
blade would still be standing.

(Trans. by Carol J. Clover *op cit.* p.147)

13. Ursula Dronke (ed). The Poetic Edda. Vol.1: Heroic
Poems. Hamðismál. st.3-5 p.161-162.

14. *ibid.* Guðrúnarhvöt. st.2-3 p.146.

15. Carol J. Clover. *op cit.* p.169-173.

16. Jenny Jochens. 'The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction?' In Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays. Ed. John Tucker. p.99-125.

17. Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn (ed). Sturlunga saga. 2 vols.

1. vol 2. p.6, 15
2. vol 1. p.371
3. vol 1. p.195
4. vol 1. p.481

18. Jenny Jochens. *op cit.* p.106.

'The German scholar Rolf Heller has used the word *Hetzerin* to designate the role of the female instigator, who by goading and nagging forced an often reluctant husband to evil deeds of crime and revenge.' Jochens is referring to Rolf Heller: *Die literarische Darstellung der Frau in den Isländersagas*.

19. *ibid.* p.124.

20. Ursula Dronke. *op cit.* p.214-217.

Chapter Eleven

HOLMGÖNGUR

The *hólmganga* was a duel, fought in general on an island. Cleasby/Vigfússon give the meaning of *hólmr* as 'islet' but it had obviously become synonymous with 'duel' as can be seen by the following phrases:

<i>falla á hólmi</i>	to fall in a duel
<i>skora e-m á hólmi</i>	to challenge one
<i>leysa sik af hólmi</i>	to release oneself off the duel

Fighting on an island could have been a means of ensuring that only the actual combatants and their immediate supporters would be involved. The most detailed description of this type of duel is given in *Kormáks saga* but usually the rules, if any applied for that occasion, are only vaguely referred to. The challenger may even simply issue his challenge as: *Gakk á hólmi við mik ...* (1).

A *hólmganga* occurs in many sagas, it was a set ritual, a means of obtaining an objective, either one's rights by law, redress for an injury or even (mostly located in Norway) attempting to force a man to give up a kinswoman to the challenger. Refusing to accept or to turn up for such a trial by arms meant dishonour and shame. A cloak is mentioned in a few of the texts but it is particularly specified in *Kormáks saga*, even to the actual size. However whether, on this basis, we can assume that all *hólmgöngur* were fought on cloaks is debateable.

Kormákr challenges Bersi to a *hólmganga* on the island called *Leiðhólmi*. The name of this island has later been

changed to *Orrostuhólmr* and being on an island does not seem to deter people from turning up as spectators. This writer assumes no familiarity with the ritual as he clearly states the rules:

Þat váru hólmgöngulög, at feldr skal vera fimm alna í skaut ok lykkjur í hornum; skyldi þar setja niðr hæla þá, er höfuð var á öðrum enda; þat hétu tjösnur; sá er um bjó, skyldi ganga at tjösnunum, svá at sæi himin milli fóta sér ok heldi í eyrasnepla með þeim formála, sem síðan er eptir hafðr í blóti því, at kallat er tjösnuþlót. Þrír reitar skulu umhverfis feldinn, fets breiðir; út frá reitum skulu vera strengir fjórir, ok heita þat höslur; þat er völlr haslaðr, er svá er gört. Maðr skal hafa þrjá skjöldu, en er þeir eru farnir, þá skal ganga á feld, þó at áðr hafi af hörfat; þá skal hlífask með vápnum þaðan frá. Sá skal höggva, er á er skorat. Ef annarr verðr sárr, svá at blóð komi á feld, er eigi skylt at berjask lengr. Ef maðr stígr öðrum foeti út um höslur, 'ferr hann á hæl', en 'rennr', ef báðum stígr. Sinn maðr skal halda skildi fyrir hvárum þeim, er bersk. Sá skal gjalda hólmlausn, er meir verðr sárr, þrjár merkr silfrs í hólmlausn.

(ch.10 p.237-238) (2)

The shields are not held by the combatants: Þorgils holds the shield for Kormákr and Þórðr Arndísarson for Bersi. Blows are exchanged in turn, with Bersi, the man being challenged having the first opportunity. The three shields are destroyed and finally Kormákr is wounded when the broken-off point of Bersi's sword flies against his hand and cuts his thumb. Only a minor wound but blood runs onto the cloak and *eptir þat gengu menn á milli þeira ok vildu eigi, at þeir berðisk lengr*. Kormákr is not pleased but the men part now.

There are other *hólmgöngur* in *Kormáks saga* between various men but only here is the *feldr* specifically mentioned. It is not certain either whether all the elaborate rules of this duel in *Kormáks saga* would always apply to a *hólmganga*. In *Kjalnesinga saga* when Búi and Kolfiðr fight a duel we are told that it was the custom to *kasta feldi undir fætr* (ch.9 p.23). But in *Svarfdæla saga* where the fight takes place in Norway, the use of the cloak is slightly different in that two are used and each combatant stands on his own *feldr* - *Sínum feldi skal hvárr okkar kasta undir fætr sér* (ch.9 p.146). In each of these cases the necessity of remaining on the cloak(s) is stressed. Otherwise a man can be viewed as yielding and he would be considered the loser and would leave himself open to the charge of dishonourable conduct.

In his article on the *hólmganga* published in 1933, Gwyn Jones states that the cloak represented the 'island' of a *hólmganga* (3). But this seems an unnecessary symbol when in many cases the duel was taking place on an island anyway. The theory would have a firmer foundation if *hólmgöngur*, especially those which mention a cloak, were no longer being fought on an island when there may then be some need to represent it in some way. Those duels which were fought near the Alþingi took place on a designated island. Both *Svarfdæla saga* and *Kjalnesinga saga* specify an island as the location for the duel and in *Kormáks saga* it is even named.

Gwyn Jones believes that the *hólmganga* became more controlled and regulated as society became more conscious

of the need to settle disputes by law, and not by violent means wasteful of human life and damaging to society in general. At one time the *hólmganga* was probably fought to the death and the loser forfeited all his possessions (4).

Gradually this method of dueling developed into a 'tribunal of wounds' (5), became a 'gentler' method of combat. Compensation could not be claimed nor was pursuit of vengeance legal for a kinsman killed during a *hólmganga*. A limited payment of three marks guaranteed that the loser did not further suffer by being made destitute (6). A cloak would place great limitations on the contestants; it cannot have been an easy matter to keep one's place in a confined area while fending off blows and attempting to overcome an opponent (7). Bersi seems to be acknowledging this when he offers Kormákr *einvígi* instead on the grounds that for a young, inexperienced man the *hólmganga* may be too difficult:

'þú, Kormákr, skoraðir á mik til
hólmgöngu, en þar í mót býð ek þér
einvígi; þú ert maðr ungr ok lítt
reyndr, en á hólmgöngu er vandhoefi,
en alls ekki á einvígi.'

(ch.10 p.236)

Jones points out that part of the skill would be the ability to destroy the shields of your opponent and thus leave him undefended. The right of the man who has been challenged to strike the first blow may well have deterred many from issuing a challenge unless they felt confident of their own strength and ability.

Six *hólmgöngur* occur in *Kormáks saga*; only one proves fatal to the loser, the others are settled as soon as one

of the men is injured. This was a way of settling cases by combat, a way of curtailing the tendency to open feud, of adapting it to a more lawful, more rational procedure. Men were obviously eager to break up the fight immediately a conclusion was reached; death was not the object nor the expected outcome (8). In *Kjalnesinga saga* Kolfiðr is wounded in the hand, this was sufficient to consider him vanquished and the men are immediately separated (ch.9 p.23).

The rules of the *hólmanga* as present in *Kormáks saga*, are distinct and explicit, the cloak being only a part of the whole layout of a well controlled method of fighting. Over a period of time between the saga age and the time of writing, much would have been forgotten or misrepresented about this and other ancient rituals. Yet the writer sounds so sure of his facts and the clear presentation of the details gives an air of authority to the text. But these are also the points that so strongly suggest that this could be in large part fiction, a part of his imagination.

Kormáks saga was written at the beginning of the thirteenth century and circumstances were considerably different for those who lived in Iceland at that time. It was a period of civil unrest and upheaval with little moderation or regulation in the affairs of the few dominant chieftains; they were mainly concerned with increasing their own power and influence not with governing justly and in accordance with the law (9). It would be difficult to visualise many of the prominent men in the country being

bound by such strict rules as those of the *hólmganga* in *Kormáks saga*.

There is about this particular *hólmganga* a certain nostalgia - a looking back and dwelling on a regulated form of battle. It has the impression of being carefully staged - a precisely detailed account of fighting according to set rules, a decision reached without undue bloodshed by men who conformed to the law even in physical combat. Written early in the thirteenth century, could this scene be intended by the writer as an indictment of the increasingly lawless society in which he lived? We know that about 1217 Snorri Sturluson, the lawspeaker, ignored the law in order to achieve an objective (10). If the lawspeaker could disregard the law with impunity then other men would rapidly lose respect for it. A standardised system for a ritual of battle echoes a feeling of security, of operating within well defined boundaries with a respect for law. Perhaps this is one explanation for the trouble the writer takes in *Kormáks saga*. After all such specific detail does not contribute much to the actual development of the narrative.

NOTES

1. Guðni Jónsson (ed). Flóamanna saga. Íslendinga sögur. vol.12 ch.15 p.24.

2. A translation of this quote is provided as the passage presents certain technical difficulties.

These were the rules for a *hólmanga*, that a cloak shall be five ells square with loops at the corners; there those pegs should be driven down, which had a head at one end; those were called *tjösnur*; he who prepared this, should approach/fit the *tjösnur*, so that he may see the sky between his legs as he grasps his ear lobes along with that prayer, which is repeated afterwards during the sacrifice; it is called the *tjösnuþlót*. Three spaces shall be all around the cloak, a foot broad; out from the spaces shall be four cords, and they are called *höslur* (poles of hazelwood); the ground is hazelled/marked out, when it is done in this way.

A man shall have three shields, and when they are gone, then he shall step onto the cloak, even though he may have turned away from it before; then he shall protect himself with his weapons from then on. He shall strike who was challenged. If one of the two is wounded, so that blood falls onto the cloak, he is not obliged to fight any longer. If a man steps with one foot out beyond the *höslur*, 'he retreats', and 'runs' if he steps with both. His man/second shall hold a shield in front of each of those who are fighting. He who is more severely wounded shall pay a ransom, three marks of silver in ransom.

3. Gwyn Jones. 'Some Characteristics of the Icelandic *Hólmanga*.' Journal of English and Germanic Philology. vol. 32 1933 p.203-222.

4. *Flóamanna saga* states that when Svartr was killed in a *hólmanga* all his goods went to the man who had slain him - Þorgils. (Guðni Jónsson (ed). op cit. ch.16 p.26). *Egils saga* gives a similar occurrence. Chapter Sixty-four explains that if the challenger was killed, all that he owned went to his adversary (p.205).

5. Gwyn Jones. op cit. p.221.

6. In *Svarfdæla saga* and in *Kjalnesinga saga* a payment of three marks of silver is to be paid by the loser of the duel, although it seems from *Svarfdæla saga* that this can be negotiable: Þorsteinn raises the ransom to six marks as that seems to him to be the more profitable (ch.9 p.146). In one *hólmanga* in *Kormáks saga* Þorvar r, the loser, buys himself off with a ring (ch.23 p.289).

7. *Kormáks saga* states the exact size of the *feldr* - five ells square - which, since one ell equals one and a half feet (CV), would make the cloak seven and a half feet square. It is not a large area for two men to fight against each other and it is difficult to see how they could manage to wield their swords effectively - possibly further evidence that this detail at least is a literary hypothesis.

8. *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* gives an account of a duel which has much in common with that of Kormákr and Bersi, although no cloak is mentioned. Gunnlaugr challenges Hrafn to *hólmanga*: '*... nú fyrir þat vil ek bjó a þér hólmöngu hér á þinginu á þriggja náttu fresti í Öxarárhólmi.*' (ch.11 p.92). The usual points of *hólmöngulög* are made: supporters holding shields, three marks ransom, challenged man to strike first, the fight to end with a wound. Gunnlaugr is almost immediately wounded on the cheek by the broken point of Hrafn's sword and as soon as this happens: *þá hljópu feðr þeira þegar í millim ok margir aðrir menn* (ch.11 p.95). Technically Gunnlaugr is the vanquished, being the first wounded, however slightly. Jones believes the writer of *Gunnlaugs saga* has borrowed material from *Kormáks saga* and the similarity in the wounding could substantiate this. On the other hand if it was a well known narrative pattern, borrowing would not be necessary. The point is though that the fight is terminated as soon as blood is drawn.

9. Jón Jóhannesson. Íslendinga saga. A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth. Trans. by Haraldur Bessason. p.222-287.

10. *ibid.* p.229-230.

Chapter Twelve

A GIFT OF FRIENDSHIP?

Gellir, the son of Guðrún, is only twelve years old when he travels to Norway with his father Þorkell Eyjólfsson. Despite his youth, he must have made a favourable impression on King Óláfr Haraldsson for: *Konungr gaf Gelli at jólum skikkju, ok var þat in mesta gersemi ok ágætr gripr* (Lax.s. ch.74 p.216). Though Gellir is beginning his 'career-abroad' (1) early in life, one element of it has already been fulfilled - a fine or valuable gift from a foreign king or earl. This is part of the standard pattern for many of the travellers in the *Íslendingasögur* and indeed often necessary to enhance their prestige and status on their return to Iceland. The gift may be given to honour a person, to gain his support, or in reward for some service rendered. Icelandic poets abroad were often rewarded for their poems with expensive gifts.

Clothes of fine scarlet cloth, perhaps decorated with embroidery, were frequently given to Icelanders at foreign courts. It is one of the few contexts in which such items are mentioned in the *Íslendingasögur*. Honour itself may be rarely mentioned in this context but it is without doubt associated with many of these presents. In *Njáls saga*, Flosi is given a ship by Earl Eiríkr and the following phrase *ok margir aðrir gerðu soemiliga til hans*, implies that the gift from the Earl was definitely in order to honour the Icelander (ch.158 p.462). These presents may be offered at Yule or at the time the visitor is about to

leave the court. A reward for a poem was generally received by the skald after the performance. The following examples of this motif all include garments of some kind but should really be considered as part of the whole pattern of gifts obtained while abroad, gifts which may constitute any valuable item such as the ship already mentioned, or weapons - swords, spears, axes - which were popular as presents.

1. Laxdoela saga.

a) King Haraldr Gunnhildarson and Óláfr pái:

Haraldr konungr gaf Óláfi at jólum öll
klæði skorin af skarlati.

(ch.22 p.60)

Skarlat in relation to garments did not, in the medieval period, necessarily indicate colour. It was wool cloth of good quality and could be of various colours (2). Óláfr has already presented to the king valuable treasures which he brought from Ireland. The text stresses that the King and Queen treated Óláfr with the greatest of honour.

b) King Óláfr Tryggvason and Kjartan:

Konungr gaf Kjartani öll klæði
nýskorin af skarlati.

(ch.41 p.124)

This took place after Kjartan had refused to go back to Iceland when the only way to get leave to depart was to promise to convert his countrymen. Since the King was keen for Kjartan to stay in Norway, this decision pleased him. The gift would appear to be an expression of gratitude for Kjartan's prolonged stay, a gesture of respect for his decision, and quite probably a form of reward for Kjartan complying with the King's wishes and converting to

Christianity.

c) King Óláfr inn helgi and Gellir. This has already been mentioned above. The honour being conferred could largely be due to the position of Gellir's father, Þorkell, who was greatly respected by King Óláfr. (ch.74 p.216)

d) Byzantine Emperor and Bolli Bollason. When Bolli returns from his trip abroad, his outfit is particularly spectacular:

Hann var í pelssklæðum, er
Garðskonungr hafði gefit honum; hann
hafði ýzta skarlatskápa rauða.
(ch.77 p.225)

2. Njáls saga.

a) King Haraldr Gormsson and Gunnarr:

Konungr gaf honum tignarklæði sín ok
glófa gullfjallaða ok skarband, ok
gullknútar á, ok hatt gerzkan.
(ch.31 p.82-83)

The King and his court have a high opinion of Gunnarr and are reluctant to take leave of him. Gunnarr himself gives the King a long ship and other treasures. Thus these items of clothing may be a reciprocal gift but given the praise heaped on Gunnarr previously, it seems quite probable that honour and the hope of friendship and support were also linked to the gifts from King Haraldr.

b) Earl Sigurðr, the Njálssynir and Kári.

... ok at þeirri veizlu gaf jarl Kári
sverð gott ok spjót gullrekit, en
Helga gullhring ok skikkju, en Grími
skjöld ok sverð.
(ch.86 p.207-208)

Kári and the two sons of Njáll had supported Earl Sigurðr in Scotland when he fought to regain his land there. A

feast is held on their return and the Earl rewards them for their help. This excerpt illustrates a common pattern of gifts where an item of clothing is included amongst various other treasures, especially weapons.

Icelandic skalds were popular figures at foreign courts, their talents sought after, praised and well rewarded. In King Haraldr hárfagri's court, an Icelandic poet describes the many tokens of favour received by his colleagues and the status such objects represented:

Á gerðum sér þeira
 auk á gollbaugum
 at eru í kunnleikum við konung.
 Feldum ráða rauðum
 auk fúðum röndum,
 sverðum silfrvöfðum,
 serkjum hringofnum,
 gyltum andfetlum
 auk gröfnum hjölmum,
 hringum handbærum
 es þeim Haraldr valði. (3)

Two famous poets in the *Íslendingasögur* - Egill Skalla-Grímsson and Gunnlaugr ormstunga - receive payment for their skill in the form of fine garments.

1. Egils saga.

Aðalsteinn gaf þá enn Agli at
 bragarlaunum gullhringa tvá, ok stóð
 hvárr mörk, ok þar fylgði skikkja dýr,
 er konungr sjálfr hafði áðr borit.
 (ch.55 p.147)

2. Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu.

a) King Ethelred of England and Gunnlaugr.

Konungr þakkaði honum kvæðit ok gaf
 honum at bragarlaunum skarlatsskikkju
 skinndregna inum beztum skinnum ok
 hlaðbúna í skaut niðr
 (ch.7 p.71)

b) King Sigtryggr of Dublin and Gunnlaugr.

Konungr gaf honum klæði sín af nýju skarlati, kyrtil hlaðbúinn ok skikkju með ágætum skinum ok gullhring, er stóð mörk.

(ch.8 p.76)

In many cases when an Icelander has returned home with such expensive and prestigious gifts, a saga will mention an occasion when they are worn - a public occasion:

a) Óláfr var búinn á þá leið, at hann var í skarlati, kyrtil hlaðbúinn ok skikkju með ágætum skinum ok gullhring, er stóð mörk.

(Lax. s. ch.23 p.64)

b) Kjartan is persuaded by his father to attend the autumn feast:

... ok tekr hann nú upp skarlati sín, þau er Óláfr konungr gaf honum at skilnaði, ok bjó sik við skart....

(Lax. s. ch.44 p.134)

c) Gunnarr is present at the Alþingi and he

var í tignarklæðum þeim, er Haraldr konungr Gormsson gaf honum...

(Njáls s. ch.33 p.85)

d) Gunnlaugr is reluctant to go to a wedding but when he does so, he makes sure he will not go unnoticed:

Gunnlaugr var þá vel búinn ok hafði þá klæðin þau in góðu, er Sigtryggr konungr gaf honum

(Gunnl. s. ch.11 p.89)

This aspect of 'gift-bestowal' - from a foreign lord to an Icelander - occurs many times in the *Íslendingasögur*. It is a regular part of the 'career-abroad' theme. It reflects the honour and respect shown to Icelanders by those in authority in other countries. It occurs so often that it begins to take on the air of a set formula, something to be expected to prove the superior worth of a character. The question is inevitably raised as to how much can this favour shown to Icelanders be based on fact -

were they really so prominent in foreign courts? Is this an inflated image? It is of course all good stuff for a literary narrative and would surely be popular with an Icelandic audience who could bask in the prestige of their own countrymen.

By the thirteenth century, the Icelandic Commonwealth was breaking apart. Perhaps these accounts of gifts given in the saga age show a regret for the time when an Icelander could accept a present from a ruler but still retain his integrity; he would not be called on to compromise the independence of his own country. A gift from a king need not be interpreted as evidence of his intention or plan to subdue a country as a whole.

It is interesting to note that many of these royal donors could be labelled missionary kings: Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr inn helgi in Norway; Ethelred of England who arranged the confirmation of Óláfr Tryggvason; Haraldr Gormsson, whose memorial stone to his parents (Greater Jelling Stone) proclaims that he, Haraldr, 'made the Danes Christians' (4). Perhaps a gift from a king who was known as a staunch and influential Christian, enhanced the prestige of the Icelandic recipient. For those who were descendants of such fortunate men, reading or hearing of this Christian favour shown to their kinsmen may have been particularly satisfying.

It was not only from one's lord that one looked for gifts in Germanic society, friends must also give and, hopefully, receive presents. It was a form of social

transaction which would cement relationships and commit people to helping one another. *Hávamál* illustrates many of the ethics which are believed to have existed in medieval Iceland. Friends and gifts are very definitely linked in the following strophe which also specifies garments as acceptable presents:

Vápnum ok váðum
 skulu vinir gleðjask:
 þat er á sjálfum sýnst;
 viðrgefendr ok endrgefendr
 erusk lengst vinir
 ef þat bíðr at verða vel.
 (5)

Gifts of friendship are a common feature of the *Íslendingasögur*. Again the occasion is often Yule or a time of parting, and the object is often some form of garment.

a) Egils saga. Egill is spending the winter with Arinbjörn in Norway. He has given his host a sail for a longship along with other gifts.

Arinbjörn gaf Agli alklæðnað,
 nýskorinn, at jólum; váru þar skorin í
 ensk klæði með mörgum litum.
 (ch.67 p.213)

b) Flóamanna saga. Þorgils Þórðarson moves onto his inheritance in Norway. His neighbour is Þorsteinn inn hvíti. The two men become friends:

þeir lögðu mikla vingan saman ok váru
 með jarli báðir. Þorgils gaf
 Þorsteini kyrtlinn Auðunarnaut. Hann
 var af nýju skarlati.
 (6)

c) Njáls saga. Gunnarr visits Óláfr pái, he is well received there and on his departure accepts gifts from his

host:

'Ek [Óláfr] vil gefa þér þrjá gripi:
gullhring ok skikkju, er átt hefir
Mýrkjartan Írakonungr, ok hund, er mér
var gefinn á Írlandi.

(ch.70 p.173)

Mentioning the origin of the cloak and ring reflects their value as regards the honour conferred on Óláfr himself while emphasising how much weight he must place on friendship with Gunnarr if he is giving gifts valuable, not only materially, but also symbolically. As this occurs at a time when Gunnarr is becoming increasingly in need of loyal friends, it could be seen as Óláfr's way of confirming his support for Gunnarr.

d) Njáls saga. Höskuldr attends a feast at the home of his new kinsman, Flosi. Flosi suggests a possible solution to the problems between Höskuldr and the Njálssynir but Höskuldr rejects this. When Höskuldr prepares to return home he receives a gift:

... en Flosi gaf honum
skarlatsskikkju, ok váru á hlöð í
skaut ofan.

(ch.109 p.279)

Flosi is well aware of the trouble which is imminent and as with Óláfr pái appears to be pledging his support to his kinsman.

e) Njáls saga. Hallr of Síða visits Þorgeirr and Kári in his efforts to obtain a truce after the burning of Njáll and his family. They welcome him warmly and he is to some extent successful in his mission. As Hallr leaves, he receives gifts from his hosts. Þorgeirr gives him a gold armring and a *skarlatsskikkju*; Kári's gift is a silver and

gold necklace. Hallr thanks them for these things and *reidð í braut við ina mesta soemð* (ch.147 p.422). The last phrase sums up the significance of these gifts: they were given not only in friendship but also to honour Hallr for his attempt to mediate between the two factions.

These are only a few examples from texts, chosen because they included clothing. But such transactions are commonplace throughout the family sagas. 'Gift-bestowal', with all its implications, was an essential component of the social framework: relationships were established with it.

When the *Njálssynir* and Kári return from a feast held at the farm of *Mörðr Valgarðsson*, they proudly display to their father the gifts they have received from their host; fine gifts - including a gold brooch and a silver belt. But *Njáll* is not happy with the situation, realising that these are not solely gifts of friendship or tokens of honour. He warns his sons and Kári:

hann segir, at þeir mundu fullu verði
keypt hafa; -- 'ok hyggið at því, at
þér launið eigi því, sem hann mun
vilja'.

(ch.108 p.276)

The 'principle of gift-compensation' could have far-reaching effects and *Njáll* is aware that *Mörðr* gives with an ulterior motive in mind. The recipients of these gifts are now in debt to *Mörðr*, at some time he will claim 'repayment'; but it will not be a simple return of similarly valuable objects.

Through the medium of gifts, honour and friendship

were bestowed and loyalty and friendship received in exchange. But beyond this, the act of giving presents to another may encompass a more dangerous and deeper commitment. The donor expected a return and the recipient must fulfil this obligation or forfeit his honour. Dangers inherent in this system are explained by A. Ya. Gurevich:

.... was the notion that a gift which was not compensated for by another of equal value would make the recipient dependent on the donor and that this dependence would humiliate and endanger his honour, freedom, and even his life.

(7)

'A gift always looks for a recompense' is Martin Clarke's translation of *ey sér til gildis gjöf*, in stanza 145 of *Hávamál* (8). This is echoed in *Gísla saga* when Gísli is persuading Geirmundr to leave the doors of Þorgrímr's house unlatched. Gísli has helped Geirmundr to complete his errand and is now demanding a favour in return (ch.15 p.52). Aware of the commitment, some may be reluctant to be involved in this social interaction:

en ósnjallr maðr
uggir hotvetna,
sýtir æ glöggr við gjöfum.

(9)

But the coward is apprehensive of everything, and a miser is always groaning over gifts.

(10)

The miser groans because he may be obliged to part with some of his own possessions in exchange. But the parallel of coward and miser in this stanza implies that repayment may involve courage rather than wealth.

Bergþóra telling Njáll and her sons of the insults of

Hallgerðr, uses 'gifts' metaphorically:

'Gjafir eru yðr gefnar feðgum, ok
verðið þér litlir drengir af, nema þér
launið.'

(Njáls s. ch.44 p.114)

It was a matter of honour to avenge any personal insult but in this case Bergþóra is emphasising the question of return or reaction by alluding to the 'gift-compensation' concept. Later in *Njáls saga*, Flosi is building up support for his case. He visits Hallbjörn and gives him a purse of money. Hallbjörn's response indicates that such a gift, given without any obvious reason, had to be viewed with caution:

hann tók við fénu, en kvezk þó ekki
eiga gjafir at Flosi, -- 'en þó vil ek
vita, hverju þú vill, at ek launa'.
(ch.134 p.350)

Flosi replies that it is not money he is expecting in return but support at the next Alþingi; Hallbjörn promises this.

When Vésteinn returns from abroad he brings gifts for his kinsmen and friends and wishes to include Þorkell in this gesture. Þorkell refuses to accept anything:

... ok vil ek eigi þiggja gripina;
eigi eru launin sýnni en svá.
(Gísla saga ch.12 p.42)

Because of the friction between them Þorkell is unwilling to place himself under any kind of obligation to Vésteinn.

As Gurevich points out 'gift-compensation' was not just a part of the ethics of this society, it also had a legal basis. It was stated in the Norwegian *Gulatingslov* that:

engi (giöf) er launað, nema iammikit
kome igegn, sem gevet var

(11)

The laws for the newly established country of Iceland were compiled by Úlfljótr. He went to Norway and composed a system of laws based mainly on that of the Gulathing district where many of the Icelandic settlers had come from (12). Steinuðr en gamla came to Iceland with the early settlers. Ingólfr offered her land as a gift but this made her uneasy. Steinuðr did not want to regard the land as a gift so she paid for it with a *heklur flekkótta*. However valuable this cloak may have been it is hard to imagine that it covered the value of the land. More likely it was a token payment and though not of 'equal value' may have been sufficient to fulfil a debt to a kinsman. At any rate Steinuðr felt safer as by calling the transaction a *kaup* - 'bargain', 'agreement' (CV): *henni þótti þat óhættara við ríptingum* (13).

Acceptance of gifts was not something to be done lightly in medieval Icelandic society; one must always bear in mind the possible 'recompense' - and this is reflected in the literature of the period. While there are many of these transactions within the *Íslendingasögur*, the authors of the following examples have all used garments in their illustration of the 'principle of gift-compensation'.

1. Laxdoela saga. ch.40 p.118

Kjartan and his companions go swimming one day during their stay in Norway. Kjartan wrestles with another swimmer in the water, who turns out to be King Óláfr Tryggvason. The King subdues his opponent and when they both get out, he notices that Kjartan has no cloak:

Þá tekr konungr af herðum sér skikkju
góða ok gaf Kjartani ..

Despite his previous arrogance towards the King, Kjartan accepts this garment. He shows it to his Icelandic friends but they are not pleased:

þóttu Kjartan mjök hafa gengit á
konungs vald

Obviously they do not look upon this gift as merely an expression of respect for Kjartan; at some point Óláfr will be expecting repayment for it. Kjartan is now 'dependent' upon the King until the debt is discharged. An impossible situation perhaps when the two participants are of such unequal status - when the donor, a king, may not wish to end this 'relationship'.

2. Brands þáttur örva. p.189-191

This short story is centred around the act of giving. Brandr is famous for his generosity and King Haraldr harðráði decides to test it. Haraldr sends Þjóðólfr to Brandr three times to demand certain possessions from the Icelander. Brandr hands over his cloak and his axe without a word. When Þjóðólfr comes a third time for the kirtle, Brandr silently tears out one sleeve which he retains, sending the rest of the garment to the King. It is a complete reversal of the usual giving-receiving relationship between a lord and a foreigner. Þjóðólfr is aware of the impropriety of the King's conduct. After fetching the cloak and axe, he protests at being sent again on this shameful errand: '*Ekki samir þat, herra, at ek fara optar.*' But Haraldr insists. Brandr hands over his possessions in silence, almost with an air of contempt, of

disdain towards a man who could violate the code of 'gift-compensation' in this way. He ends with a tacit but effective rebuke to this aggressive recipient. The King has no trouble interpreting his message:

Auðsét er mér, hví hann hefir erminni
af sprett; honum þykkir sem ek eiga
eina höndina, ok þá þó, at þiggja
ávallt, en veita aldri, ...

For anyone to demand gift after gift with no offer of recompense would be considered extremely dishonourable conduct. But it is a serious insult for a King to be accused of miserliness, of not giving generously but always to be taking from others. The whole *þáttr* illustrates the implications behind giving and receiving.

It is interesting that the king involved, Haraldr harðráði, had acquired a reputation for greed in his pursuit of treasure to finance his ambition for power in Norway. He was known to be brave but ruthless and shrewd, usually displaying generosity only to well-liked friends (14). The conferring of favour by a king well known for treachery could have enhanced Brandr's prestige. The Icelander was treading a dangerous path in his involvement with this particular king.

3. Ljósvetninga saga.

Guðmundr and Einarr are two brothers who are not on the most cordial of terms. The object which goes between them is a cloak. According to manuscript A, a Norwegian merchant had given Guðmundr this costly garment as payment for his winter lodgings. Manuscript C describes the merchant's gift:

Þat var skikkja, þell dregin yfir
skinnin ok gullbönd á tyglinum, ok var
in mesta görsemi.

(ch.13 p.22)

Guðmundr knows he is soon to enter into a dispute with a man who is a friend of his brother, Einarr. The manuscripts A and C differ as to when Guðmundr pays his first visit to Einarr. The version in C seems more logical, as the visit takes place before any events occur which may have made Einarr suspicious of friendly gestures from his brother (15). It would be best then to follow C at this point in the narrative. Guðmundr rides to Einarr's farm and talks with him. It is a pity, Guðmundr says, that their relationship is not more brotherly, and he himself would like to remedy that. He offers his friendship and as a token of their new alliance he gives Einarr the cloak:

'... skal ek nökkut í millum leggja
til vinganar þinnar.'

(ch.14 p.27)

Einarr feels he has done well in this transaction. The two brothers join in promising each other mutual support when necessary. Einarr must have had some suspicions concerning Guðmundr's sudden change of heart as he subsequently tells his shepherd to keep alert and watch for any unusual activity.

Guðmundr's trick has worked however and in the following disputes and legal wranglings, Einarr feels that he cannot give Þórir Helgason, his friend, wholehearted support while he is also bound to his brother who is on the opposite side. He realises how he has been duped:

'Svá mæli ek um, at troll hafi þá
skikkju. En komit hefir Guðmundr á

vitsmuni við mik, ok hefir slíkt eigi
fyrir orðit.'

(ch.15 p.35)

Finally, in disgust, Einarr tries to return the cloak, the emblem of his obligation to Guðmundr. He takes it to Guðmundr, reproaches him for his craftiness and flings down the garment. Guðmundr refuses to accept it. After exchanging angry words, Einarr has to ride home with the garment. It is not, it appears, so easy to relinquish a debt; acceptance of a gift can involve a permanent moral commitment. As Einarr has acquired a reputation for being wary and devious himself (16), it indicates how insidious the gift relationship could be if even he could be deceived by it. As in the case of Mörðr in *Njáls saga*, the motives of the donor should be carefully examined before accepting.

Gurevich, in his examination of 'gift-bestowal' amongst 'tribal groups' notes that it can often be deliberately carried to extremes:

But cordiality of this kind was not far removed from aggressiveness: at times the natives were not in the least endeavouring to please the recipients of their gifts and favours - on the contrary, they spared no efforts to humiliate them, to overcome them with their generosity.

(17)

In Ireland Gunnlaugr entertains King Sigtryggr with a poem of praise. When it is finished, Sigtryggr wishes to reward the Icelander. He suggests to his treasurer that a gift of two merchant ships may be suitable. The treasurer disagrees, explaining to his master the correct return for

such a poem:

'Of mikit er þat, herra,' segir hann;
'aðrir konungar gefa at bragarlaunum
gripi góða, sverð góð eða gullhringa
góða.'

(Gunnl. s. ch.8 p.76)

Gunnlaugr receives instead a set of the king's own clothes:

... af nýju skarlati, kyrtil hlaðbúinn
ok skikkju með ágætum skinnum ok
gullhring, er stóð mörk.

This is more in keeping with the 'value' of his poem.

There is a scene in *Njáls saga* where compensation is being paid at the Alþingi for the death of Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði (ch.123 p.312-314). The money has been collected and Njáll has added two objects to the pile: *silkisloeður ok bóta*. Flosi, as the prosecutor of the case, is brought forward to accept this payment. He examines it and then demands to know who included the garment and the boots. No-one answers. Flosi correctly guesses that it is Njáll's doing. It obviously upsets him as he angrily abuses Njáll. No clear indication is given in the text as to why Flosi reacts so violently to what appears, on the surface, to be an act of friendship. The usual explanation is on the lines of that supplied by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson:

In all probability a silk cloak was a highly decorative and expensive garment that could be worn by a man or a woman. It was not unusual for a gift to be added to the required sum, to set a seal of friendship on a settlement. The cloak's dual purpose must have suggested an insult to Flosi

(18)

On the whole though, this is only supposition.

sloedur is translated here as 'cloak' which fits conveniently with this theory. However Cleasby and Vigfússon give its meaning as 'a gown that trails along the ground'. Sigurður Nordal, in a footnote to the text of *Egils saga*, further elaborates:

Slæðurnar hafa verið dragsíðar og að
 sama skapi víðar, auðsjáanlega
 viðhafnarklæði mikil. Líklegast hafa
 þær verið hnepptar að framan. Þær
 voru ekki yfirhafnarklæði frekar en
 kyrtlar, enda er sagt í Vatnsdælu, at
 maður væri í skinnólpu utan yfir
 slæðum.

(19)

A gown may be a long flowing garment but is not quite the same as a cloak; why then should it particularly remind Flosi of Höskuldr's cloak? An assumption has been made that this is a feminine garment and, true, it does appear in *Rígsþula* worn by the *Móðir*:

Keisti fald,	kinga var á bringo,
síðar sloedor,	serc bláfán;
	(20)

But on the other hand Egill Skalla-Grímsson receives a *sloedur* from Arinbjörn as a gift in a situation where there is definitely no insult intended.

Sjalfráði lét sloedur
 silki drengr of fengit
 gollknappaðar greppi,
 getk aldri vin betra;

(ch.67 p.213)

Egill is not a character who is open to insults of effeminacy, he is most definitely masculine and his courage is never in doubt. Egill's son is so eager to be seen in this robe at the Alþingi that he takes it without his father's knowledge. Bergr of *Vatnsdoela saga* also wears a *sloedur* (ch.31 p.84). In his extreme vanity and showiness,

he may display some feminine traits but not necessarily; there are many men in the sagas who are fond of fine clothes but they are not usually accused of effeminacy (and thus cowardice) merely because of their grand outfit. Taking this all into account, why should Flosi interpret the *sloedur* as an attack on his manhood and his honour?

Snorri goði decided the amount of compensation to be paid for Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði - and it was certainly not miserly. The normal compensation should have been two hundred ounces of silver but in this case six hundred ounces were collected, not all it must be pointed out by Njáll and his family. Snorri goði himself had intended this compensation to be:

... svá mikla, at engi maðr hafi dýrri
verit á landinu en Höskuldr.
(ch.123 p.311)

which would surely indicate that this payment could be termed 'excessive'.

Prior to the scene described, Flosi had been quite reasonable in his attitude to Njáll, had spoken of him with respect. Suddenly, seeing this heap of coins, crowned with a rich silk garment, he turns to Njáll with insults. Flosi's words to Skarpheðinn (21) do bring in the offensive charge of effeminacy, but this is not an unusual method of abuse and need not necessarily be connected with any similarly implied insult to Flosi himself.

If however, we take the view that the *fésekt svá mikla* would in itself be more than adequate to pay for the death of Höskuldr, then the addition of an extra 'recompense',

particularly one unlooked for and unasked for, may have unfavourable connotations. It was one thing for Hrútr to include a cloak as a gift of friendship with the standard payment of two hundred ounces of silver compensation paid to Ósvífr for the death of his son (ch.12 p.40), but expensive gifts added to an already excessive payment could be interpreted as an attempt to overwhelm another with generosity. Flosi may have seen it as a subtle method of humiliating him, of leaving him after all dependent even in a small way on Njáll and his family. His honour has to some extent been compromised, and the slur on his honour in this context could call to mind Hildigunnr's gesture.

A further aspect of gifts is their personal association with the original donor, a connection which can endow an object with particular significance. Certain tribes, Gurevich tells us, held the view:

that the objects bestowed were not regarded as inert and inanimate - they were supposed to contain a part of the person who bestowed them.

(22)

In Icelandic literature we can find evidence of objects displaying a certain 'life' of their own. Kormákr borrows the sword Sköfnungr, a weapon which has to be treated with respect. When he fails to follow Skeggi's instructions regarding its use, the sword reacts and *þat gekk grenjanda ór slíðrum* (Kormáks s. ch.9 p.236). At an assembly in *Laxdoela saga*, a cloak, hung up to dry on the wall of a booth, speaks a verse of warning to its owner (ch.67 p.198). This being the case it is not unlikely that the objects passed from one person to another may be viewed as

embodying some element of the donor.

Gifts could be referred to and identified by association with the original owner. The term *nautr* means 'gift' when 'following the genitive of the person from whom it comes' (Zoëga), ie. *konungsnautr* - the 'king's gift'. As the name for the gift can incorporate that of the donor then quite possibly the object itself could incorporate 'part of the person' who had given it. This theory is particularly applicable in the case where the donor, usually a ruler, has given his own clothes to another i.e. King Óláfr and Kjartan, King Sigtryggr and Gunnlaugr.

Nautr plus the name of the donor can be used effectively at certain critical points in the narrative. Höskuldr puts on *skikkjuna Flosanaut* when he goes out to the cornfield where he is attacked and killed (Njáls s. ch.111 p.280). Although Helga leans against her husband Þorkell when she is dying - it is the *skikkjuna Gunnlaugsnaut* which has her attention (Gunnl. s. ch.13 p.106-107). The audience is reminded of the original owner, of the act of bestowal and thus of the relationship and obligations between the two parties.

In the case of Helga and Gunnlaugr, where the gift is between a man and a woman, Helga has in fact been sexually compromised by her acceptance of the cloak from a man who is not her husband. Helga's marriage to Hrafn is ruined from the time she receives this garment - even in her second marriage her attention is focused on the cloak, as her emotions have always been centred on Gunnlaugr. The

skikkja symbolises their love - and their relationship.

Robert G. Cook maintains that Gunnlaugr's

ambition has no definite goals. He
does not want Helga for himself as
much as he wants to know that he can
have her, should he want to.

(23)

His gift ensures that Helga (and Hrafn) will have a constant reminder of his presence within their household and that he himself can be reassured that Helga will not thus be able to forget their relationship. For Helga it is an irony that this object on which she lavishes so much emotion was achieved by Gunnlaugr as a reward for prowess from a foreign king; it is representative only of Gunnlaugr's pride and vanity - and his indecisiveness, his wavering between his ambition for foreign prestige and for marriage to Helga. On the surface this transaction between Gunnlaugr and Helga appears to involve simply a gift of friendship but underneath can be seen a more subtle and unpleasant symbolism.

There is a case in *Víga-Glúms saga* where the obligation placed on the receiver of a gift is that of assuming or taking over a personal responsibility from the donor. Glúmr travels abroad to Norway to visit his maternal grandfather Vigfúss. When he arrives, he recognises his relative by his appearance:

mann mikinn ok vegligan í öndvegi í
skautfeldi blám, ok lék sér at spjóti
gullreknu

(ch.6 p.16)

Vigfúss greets the visitor but is not immediately convinced of their relationship and does not show Glúmr any particular honour. During a feast, a berserk Björn, arrives

and challenges the men present. Vigfúss replies that while in his youth he could have faced up to Björn now, when he is *gamall ok örvasi*, he cannot consider it. Eventually it is Glúmr who tackles Björn, injuring him so severely that the berserk dies the next day. Vigfúss' attitude to his grandson changes now that Glúmr has, through his courage, proved his kinship. Vigfúss wants the young man to inherit his position in Norway:

Vigfúss bauð Glúmi at taka ríki eptir
sik ok virðing ..

(ch.6 p.19)

But Glúmr wishes to return home to Iceland. Vigfúss prepares a ship for him in the summer and before his grandson departs, he gives him three family treasures:

.. en einkagripi vil ek þér gefa, feld
ok spjót ok sverð, er vér höfum mikinn
trúnað á haft frændr; ok meðan þú átt
gripina, vænti ek, at þú týnir eigi
virðingu, en þá em ek hræddr um, ef þú
lógar þeim.

(ch.6 p.19)

As he passes these objects on to his young kinsman, Vigfúss stresses their importance as emblems of the *gæfa* - good fortune, of their family. It is not clearly stated that this cloak is the one worn by Vigfúss at the beginning of the chapter but it does seem a safe assumption; it is later described as a 'blue' cloak. The spear also is surely the gold-adorned weapon that Vigfúss was playing with when Glúmr first saw him.

Obviously Vigfúss is passing on the responsibility for the family *gæfa* and honour to his successor. On his own admission Vigfúss is now old and decrepit; he has expressed a wish for Glúmr to take over *eptir sik*. Not long after

Glúmr has returned to Iceland, he has a dream which he interprets as representing the death of his grandfather and the transference to himself of Vigfúss' *hamingja* - 'personal spirit'.

When Glúmr goes out to uphold the family honour by attacking the man who has appropriated a field belonging to his mother, he wears the cloak and carries the spear. After this killing, Glúmr rides to his brother's place. Þorsteinn, his brother, appears to realise by Glúmr's appearance that something momentous has taken place. It is Glúmr's 'equipment' which first arouses Þorsteinn's suspicions which are then confirmed by the blood on the spear. Nothing more is heard of these two items until Chapter Twenty-five when Glúmr gives them away to two chieftains, Gizurr hvíti and Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson. They are given in gratitude for the support of the chieftains. We are reminded though of their significance by Einarr who now agrees to come out against Glúmr on the grounds that by parting with the cloak and spear, Glúmr has also parted with, renounced responsibility for, the family *gæfa* and honour:

Glúmr hefir nú lógat þeim hlutum,
feldi ok spjóti, er Vigfúss,
móðurfaðir hans, gaf honum ok það hann
eiga, ef hann vildi halda virðingu
sinni, en kvað þaðan frá þverra mundu.
Nú mun ek taka við málinu ok fylgja.
(ch.25 p.87)

Using a garment symbolically to represent the passing on of responsibility or office, especially in the sense of priesthood, can be found in Christian mythology. In *Kings I*, Chapter Nineteen, Elijah is instructed by the Lord to

find and consecrate his successor, Elisha. Elisha is ploughing in his field when the prophet comes up to him and:

19. ... misit pallium suum super illum.
 20. Qui statim relictis bobus cucurrit post Eliam et ait: Osculer, oro, patrem meum, et matrem meam et sic sequar te.

(24)

Later when Elijah is nearing the end of his life, Elisha is with him. After the prophet is carried by a whirlwind up to heaven Elisha tears off his own clothes *et levavit pallium Eliae, quod ceciderat ei* (25). Peake explains that the initial 'casting of the prophetic mantle upon Elisha' was 'a sign of his call to prophetic office, and, probably, of the transference to him of prophetic power' (26).

When the gifts are bestowed on Glúmr, a sword is mentioned which does not appear again and could apparently be considered a 'scribal interpolation' (27). This leaves the cloak and spear - items which are frequently connected with Óðinn. In accepting these, Glúmr took on the responsibility for maintaining the family honour and power through the care of the family luck or good fortune. When he parts with the objects he becomes vulnerable to his enemies who succeed in driving him from his family lands. If viewed as a 'clash between religious cults' (28), then the relinquishing of the Odinic symbols and thus of the protection of Óðinn lays Glúmr open to the vengeance of Freyr. Glúmr had committed three 'crimes' against Freyr: the defiling of the field Vitazgjafi, whose abundant

harvests were ensured by Freyr; the hiding of an outlaw, his son, in an area consecrated to this god; and the swearing of a false oath in the temple of Freyr. Before his death, Glúmr accepts the new faith and dies in the *hvítaváðir* of the convert to Christianity - a complete repudiation of any Odinic associations inherent in the blue cloak.

Gifts and the process of bestowing and receiving them would seem at times to be a complex issue in the *Íslendingasögur*. On one level a gift can be quite straightforward, implying honour, friendship, loyalty, but underlying this may be other factors which should also be taken into account. The act of giving may well indicate some ulterior motive on the part of the donor; it may be illustrating certain aspects of a relationship; or it may represent obligations and responsibilities which the recipient must take upon himself.

NOTES

1. A. Margaret Arent Madelung. The Laxdoela Saga: Its Structural Patterns. p.138.
2. See ch.1 Litklæði p.18-21.
3. Ernst A. Kock (ed). Den Norsk-Isländska Skaldediktningen. vol 1 Haraldskvæði/Hrafnsmál. st.19 p.15.
4. Erik Moltke. Runes and Their Origin, Denmark and Elsewhere. Trans. by P.G. Foote. p.206-220.
5. D.A.H. Evans (ed). Hávamál. st.41 p.47.
6. Guðni Jónsson (editor). Flóamanna saga. Íslendinga sögur. vol.12 ch.15 p.23.
7. A. Ya. Gurevich. 'Wealth and Gift-Bestowal among the Ancient Scandinavians.' Scandinavica vol.7 No.2 Nov. 1968. p.126-139.
8. D.A.H. Evans. op cit. p.70.
9. ibid. st.48 p.48.
10. D.E. Martin Clarke (ed & trans). The Hávamál. st.48 p.55.
11. A. Ya. Gurevich. op cit. p.129 fn.10. Gulathingslov, title 129.
12. Jón Jóhannesson. Íslendinga Saga. A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth. Trans. by Haraldur Bessason. p.38.
13. Jakob Benediktsson (ed). Landnámabók. ÍF 1. (Sturlubók ch.394). p.392.
14. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (ed). Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar. Heimskringla. ÍF 28. ch.99 p.198-200.

15. 'There are two redactions of *Ljósvetninga saga*. One is contained in AM 561, 4to, a fragmentary vellum from around 1400 (A). The other is preserved fully only in paper manuscripts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They all derive from a lost fifteenth-century manuscript, of which only a few leaves are extant in AM 162c, fol. (C).' (Theodore M. Andersson. The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins: A Historical Survey. p.159-165. Also - Björn Sigfússon (ed). Ljósvetninga saga. p.LVII-LX.)

16. Jónas Kristjánsson (ed). Víga-Glúms saga. ÍF 9. ch.17-27 p.56-96.

17. A. Ya. Gurevich. op cit. p.128.

18. Hermann Pálsson and Magnus Magnusson (trans). Njal's Saga. ch.123 p.255.

19. Sigurður Nordal (ed). Egils saga. ÍF 2. ch.67 p.213 fn.1.

20. Gustav Neckel (ed). Edda. Rev. by Hans Kuhn. st.29 p.284.

21. '*Þat er mín ætlan, at til hafi gefit faðir þinn, karl inn skegglausí -- því at margir vitu eigi, er hann sjá, hvárt hann er karlmaðr eða kona*'. (Njáls s. ch.123 p.314.)

22. A. Ya. Gurevich. op cit. p.128.

23. Robert G. Cook. 'The Character of Gunnlaugr Serpent-tongue.' Scandinavian Studies 43, 1971 p.12.

24. Biblia Sacra. Vvlgatae Editionis. Kings I ch.19 v.19-20 p.217.

'.... cast his mantle upon him. And he left the oxen, and ran after Elijah, and said, "Let me kiss my father and mother, and then I will follow you." ' (The Holy Bible. Revised Standard Version. p.379.)

25. Biblia Sacra. op cit. Kings II ch.2 v.13 p.222.

'... and he took up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him'. (The Holy Bible. Revised Standard Version. p.387.)

26. Matthew Black and H.H. Rowley (ed). Peake's Commentary on the Bible. p.346.

27. John McKinnell (trans). Víga-Glúms Saga. p.35.

28. Gabriel Turville-Petre (trans & ed). Víga-Glúms Saga. p.xiv.

Chapter Thirteen

SEWING A SHIRT

As Auðr and Ásgerðr sit at their sewing in a small room off the main hall, they begin a conversation which has grave consequences for their family and alters completely the course of Gísli's life. This is a well known episode in *Gísla saga*; it is centred around the motif of a woman demonstrating her affection or involvement with a man by making a shirt for him. In this saga such an action does not actually take place but the implications of it are present in the dialogue between the two women.

'Veittu mér þat, at þú sker mér skyrtu, Auðr, Þorkatli bónda mínum.'
 'Þat kann ek eigi betr en þú,' sagði Auðr, 'ok myndir þú eigi mik til biðja, ef þú skyldir skera Vésteini bróður mínum skyrtuna.'
 'Eitt er þat sér', segir Ásgerðr, 'ok svá mun mér þykkja nökkura stund.'
 'Löngu vissa ek þat,' segir Auðr, 'hvat við sik var, ok roeðum ekki um fleira.'
 'Þat þykki mér eigi brigzl,' sagði Ásgerðr, 'þótt mér þykki Vésteinn góðr. Hitt var mér sagt, at þit Þorgrímr hittizk mjök opt, áðr en þú værir Gísla gefin.'
 'Því fylgðu engir mannestir,' segir Auðr, 'því at ek tók engan mann undir Gísla, at því fylgði neinn mannlöstr; ok munu vit nú hætta þessi roeðu.'

(ch.9 p.30-31)

Both women are aware of the significance of their words, they do not need, and neither would the writer's audience, any further explanation. Ásgerðr knows exactly what Auðr is implying by suggesting that her sister-in-law would be far more willing to make a shirt for Vésteinn than for Þorkell.

In his translation of *Gísla saga*, George Johnston illustrates the symbolism of this motif through the Danish ballad, *Marsk Stig*. Two verses tell us clearly how it would be interpreted within a medieval society:

Here sit you, fair lady Ingeborg;
if you will be loyal to me,
then sew for me a shirt
with gold embroidery.

Should I sew a shirt for you
with gold embroidery
then men would know, Danish king,
I was disloyal to lord Marsti.
(1)

Sewing a shirt for a man appears also to belong to a widespread folk tradition of setting impossible tasks for a woman who then has to prove herself clever enough to either overcome the conditions or to retaliate by giving the man equally impossible assignments to fulfil. If a woman satisfied the man by her ingenuity then she proved herself worthy to be his wife. The male figure in these ballads or tales is usually a romantic hero type, a king or prince, whereas the woman is of lower station. In *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Francis Child gives examples of the riddle theme from various sources: Gaelic, German, Siberian, Tibetan (2). These have in common enigmatic questions which are solved or returned in kind by a woman, the man generally relenting and acknowledging her superior wisdom.

Child provides different versions of the ballad *The Elfin Knight* where the making of a shirt is the first task asked of the woman (3):

- A. 7. 'Married with me if thou wouldst be,
A courtesie thou must do to me.
8. 'For thou must shape a sark to me,
Without any cut or heme,' quoth he.
9. 'Thou must shape it knife-and-sheerlesse,
And also sue it needle-threedlesse.'

The maid usually retaliates with her own riddles which the Elfin Knight or male character must solve in order to claim his shirt:

- A. 10. 'If that piece of courtesie I do to thee,
Another thou must do to me.
11. 'I have an aiker of good ley-land,
Which lyeth low by yon sea-strand.
12. 'For thou must eare it with thy horn,
So thou must sow it with thy corn.

So the stanzas continue until the man qualifies for his reward:

17. 'When thou hast gotten thy turns well done,
Then come to me and get thy sark then.'

Making the shirt and marriage appear to be interconnected: marriage often being the reward for the completed task.

When Örvar-Oddr goes raiding in Ireland, his blood brother, Ásmundr, is killed. Oddr attacks and kills the Irish men he believes responsible for this death. He then discovers the women of the family and drags away the fairest of them, Ölvör. But she bargains with him for her life. She will provide him with a magic shirt (4) if he lets her go and returns to the same spot in a year's time. Oddr arrives back at the designated time to claim this enchanted garment. Ölvör presents it to him, giving details of its construction:

'Serk of frák ór silki
ok í sex stöðum gervan:
ermr á Íralandi,

önnur norðr með Finnum,
slógu Saxa meyjar,
en su reyskar spunnu,
váfu valskar brúðir,
varp Óþjóðans móðir.'

(5)

We are told very specifically how, with what, and by whom the shirt is made, which contrasts with *The Elfin Knight* where the shirt was to be seamless, made without needles - *maun be free o woman's wark* (6). Yet the making of Oddr's shirt sounds so fantastic and impossible, so much a part of fairy tale that it stands comparison with the Elfin Knight's request which could only be completed by magic. In gratitude for his enchanted shirt Oddr, at Ölvör's request, remains with her for three years but only on condition that she becomes his wife.

Further on in *Örvar-Odds saga* another shirt is being made by a woman for the man she loves. When Oddr returns to Sweden with Hjálmar's body, he goes into the hall to break the news to the King and to Ingibjörg, the king's daughter with whom Hjálmar had been emotionally involved. Ingibjörg sits on her stool and: *Hún saumaði Hjálmari skyrtu* (7). On hearing of the death of her lover, she leans back and dies. The two bodies are buried together, thus the act of making the shirt is succeeded by a 'marriage'; the couple lying in each other's arms in the burial mound. Ingibjörg is involved in an act which demonstrates her feelings towards Hjálmar at the very moment when she receives his last message to her and his gift of a bracelet. This emphasises the emotional involvement of the two, giving the scene a certain poignancy.

Piðreks saga uses this motif in a similar way. Sifka has been sent by King Erminrekr on an errand away from the town. Once he has left, Erminrekr visits Sifka's wife Odila, who is alone *i husi nockvrv*, and rapes her. When Sifka returns home his wife, upset and humiliated, tells him what has happened. Although no mention was made at the time of Odila's occupation when Erminrekr forced himself on her, when she relates her injury to her husband she specifically says:

'... þat var i sinn, er þv vart i
brottu farinn er ec sat iminni litilli
stofu oc saumaða ec þina silki skyrtu.
en þar kom erminrikr konungr. oc aðr
hann foeri þaðan ibrottu munttu
aldregi honum fa golldit með illu þa
vsoemð er han gerði mer. ...'
(8)

This has the effect of reinforcing the rape as a violation of her loyalty to her husband, thus compounding the terrible wrong done to her and to Sifka. The revenge Sifka exacts for this crime has a devastating effect on Erminrekr and his family.

With the obvious presence of this motif, it is not surprising that it is found in the *Íslendingasögur*. There is little doubt that the medieval Icelandic audience would be aware of all the connotations involved. In *Kormáks saga* it occurs as a figure of speech, an indirect way of ascertaining a woman's feelings. Kormákr and Steingerðr have had an on/off relationship fraught with difficulties. After Steingerðr's second marriage Kormákr visits her, talks with her and: ... *biðr hana gera sér skyrtu* (ch.17 p.264). It does not seem as if Kormákr is actually

expecting her to take up this task as such, rather he wants to know if she still cares for him. Steingerðr does not answer the question directly but does repudiate Kormákr and implies that he has insulted her husband with his conduct:

Hon kvað enga þörf kvámu hans, kvað
 Þorvald eigi mundu pola hefndalaust
 eða frændr hans.

To return to *Gísla saga*, the two women Ásgerðr and Auðr are actually involved in sewing at the time of their conversation. It seems quite likely that Ásgerðr's initial request was meant quite literally, though given the traditional symbolism behind the task the fact that she is prepared to share it with her sister-in-law would appear to indicate that she does not care much for her husband. Auðr's response moves the conversation on to a figurative level, she is using the symbolic sense when she suggests that Ásgerðr would not be so keen to share the task if the shirt was intended for Vésteinn. Ásgerðr's response: *Eitt er þat sér* - 'that is another story' (9) could imply that her private affairs are nothing to do with the practical task in hand.

Why does Ásgerðr begin a dialogue with her kinswoman with such a provocative question? Considering that her own fidelity is questionable she places herself in a precarious position by using terminology which could so easily be misinterpreted and associated with sexual liaisons.

There is about Ásgerðr an aura of recklessness. We know from the introduction to this chapter that Þorkell does not participate in the work on the farm, so he must

often remain at home. Despite the size of the hall (and we are given the specific measurements) (10) there would still be a fairly good chance that he may be wandering around close enough to overhear the women. Perhaps the writer tells us how large the hall is to convey how confident the women felt about their privacy. But there is an element of risk and this being the case it is almost as if Ásgerðr, opening the conversation as she does, is trying to provoke her husband.

Ásgerðr's frustration with her own emotional relationships may have induced a fit of devilment. It leads her to attack her kinswoman who appears to have a far more stable marriage and to provoke Þorkell, a husband for whom she appears to have little respect. There is a sense of heightened awareness with the risk of Þorkell overhearing his wife plainly admitting to a relationship he may only have half suspected up to now. It is almost as though Ásgerðr is covertly challenging him: 'Look this is the situation. What are you going to do about it?' She is not at all worried when they hear Þorkell's verse, she knows how to deal with him:

'Hugaþ hefi ek mér ráð,' segir
 Ásgerðr, 'þat er hlýða mun,...'
 'Hvert er þat?' kvað Auðr.
 'Leggja upp hendr um háls Þorkatli, er
 vit komum í rekkju, ok mun hann þetta
 fyrirgefa mér, ok segja þá lygi.'
 (ch.9 p.31)

Ásgerðr shows no discomposure when Þorkell subsequently refuses to allow her into his bed at night. Instead she gives him an ultimatum, either Þorkell drops the matter and lets her sleep with him or she will divorce him and claim

back her dowry and bride price. Þorkell acquiesces and they appear to be reconciled. Yet Ásgerðr must know that her confession will lead to further action - perhaps this is what she intended: to repay Vésteinn for his possibly less willing involvement with her, or to incite Þorkell to prove himself in some way.

Gísli comments to Auðr on the same night:

'Eigi sé ek hér ráð til, sagði hann,
'þat sem duga mun. En þó mun ek ekki
kunna þik um þetta, því at mæla verðr
einnhverr skapanna málum, ok þat mun
fram koma, sem auðit verðr.'

(ch.9 p.33-34)

This seems to be meant in the context of not blaming Auðr for her part in the conversation. Ásgerðr broached the subject with her first ill-fated question but it was Auðr's response, overheard by Þorkell, which will be the source of trouble.

Vatnsdoela saga and *Grettis saga* also contain this motif, but in these texts the making or sewing of shirts or clothes does take place. Again it is in connection with an association between a man and a woman.

Vatnsdoela saga ch.38 p.101

Ingólfr begins a liason with Valgerðr despite the protests of her father, who objects so strongly that he prosecutes Ingólfr, though without success. This relationship continues even after Ingólfr's marriage to another woman:

Ingólfr kom at finna Valgerði jafnan,
er hann fór til þings eða frá. Þat
líkaði Óttari illa; hon gerði honum ok
klæði öll, þau er mest skyldi vanda.

Although a shirt is not specifically mentioned, it could easily be included within the term *klæði*. Valgerðr's action indicates that she is a willing participant in this relationship: the attentions of Ingólfr, even as a married man, are welcome to her.

Grettis saga. ch.17 p.53-54

Grettir is travelling abroad to Norway for the first time; he takes a passage on a ship captained by Hafliði. Grettir proves to be an intransigent passenger, unwilling to help in any way or, according to custom, to buy himself out of shipboard duties. Resentment grows in the crew, fuelled by Grettir's habit of composing satirical verses about them. Hafliði works hard to keep the peace aboard his boat. There are, it appears, several women on this voyage including the beautiful young wife of the steersman. This lady is obviously taken with Grettir:

Stýrimannskona sú in unga var því
jafnan vön, at sauma at höndum Gretti,
ok höfðu skipverjar þat mjök í
fleymingi við hann.

This is not quite the same version of the shirt sewing motif as discussed above, but would surely carry much the same sexual implications, as the teasing of the men seems to confirm. According to the footnote in the *Íslenzk fornrit* edition, shirts and kirtles often had wide sleeves which had to be sewn up or somehow fastened at the wrists after they had been put on. Plainly this would have to be done by someone other than the wearer.

It is through the attentions and affection of this woman for Grettir that Hafliði is at last able to persuade

Grettir to work. The men are exhausted by the long voyage and the ship, having sprung a leak, is in danger of sinking, Haflíði turns to Grettir, reciting a verse:

Stattu upp ór gröf, Grettir,
 grefr knörr hola vörru;
 minnsktu á möl við svanna
 meginkátr enn glaðláta;
 fast hefir hrund at höndum,
 hör-Nauma, þér saumat;
 skörð vill, at vel verðir
 viðr, meðan lönd eru niðri.

Appealed to in this way, Grettir seems eager to co-operate. Has the woman had a softening influence on Grettir? Or does he feel that to co-operate at her express request would still maintain his advantage over the rest of the crew; to have acquiesced to the men's demands would not have accorded with his pride? In the end Grettir is able to maintain his feeling of superiority: he did not deign to participate in the physical work at first, but when he finally did so his great physical strength ensured the admiration of everyone. And it is through his belated efforts that the ship is at least kept afloat until it is closer to land.

Where this shirt sewing motif is present it plays a part in emphasising or intensifying emotions or atmosphere. In *Piðreks saga*, the vision of his wife sewing his own shirt at the time of her rape would increase Sifka's sense of outrage, of his own honour being violated. For Ingibjörg, working on Hjálmar's shirt while hearing of his death would deepen her sense of grief. Kormákr's method of questioning Steingerðr emphasises his desire to be still loved by her. In *Gísla saga* there is an impression of

tension building up as what appears to be an innocent request rapidly turns into a dangerous dialogue. Grettir's acceptance of the attentions of the steersman's wife in a confined and tense situation conveys his contempt for the husband and the rest of the crew.

NOTES

1. George Johnston (trans). The Saga of Gisli. p.72.
2. Francis James Child. English and Scottish Popular Ballads. vol. 1 p.6-20.
3. *ibid.* A. p.15.
4. Guðni Jónsson (ed). Örvar-Odds saga. FAS vol.II ch.11 p.236-241. (See also ch.14 Witchcraft p.240.)
5. Guðni Jónsson. *op cit.* ch.12 p.242-243.
6. F.J. Child. *op cit.* I. p.19.
7. Guðni Jónsson. *op cit.* ch.15 p.263.
8. Henrik Bertelsen (ed). Þiðriks saga af Bern. vol.II ch.342 (275-277) p.156-160.
9. George Johnston. *op cit.* p.11.
10. *Eldhúsit var tíroett at lengð, en tíu faðma breitt ...* (p.30) Johnston gives an explanation of these measurements: 'the Icelandic translated says that the hall was '100 long and 10 fathoms wide'; and the '100' has been taken to mean fathoms, ie. 600 feet! It is better to assume the measurement was meant to be in ells, which gives 150 feet.' (G. Johnston. *op cit.* p.71)

(ii) Clothing and the Supernatural

Chapter Fourteen

WITCHCRAFT

a) Garments with Magical Powers.

Within saga literature it is not so unusual to come across garments with magical qualities. These have usually been made by elfin people, or in the case of the *Íslendingasögur*, by sorceresses.

Certain aspects of this tradition are present in medieval European literature and through translations encouraged by Hákon IV in Norway some of these texts would have been available to Icelanders in their own language. Perhaps the most obvious is *Möttuls saga* (1) which was translated during Hákon's reign (1217-1263). The source text is *Cort Mantel* and concerns an event at the court of King Arthur. During a feast when Arthur is dining with his knights, someone arrives with a mantle which all the ladies present are persuaded to try on. The mantle shrinks according to the lady's lack of chastity or her infidelity to her husband. It causes some embarrassment as only one lady proves worthy of the garment and her loyalty to her knight beyond question. Francis Child (2) cites several examples of this theme and gives the text of one ballad, where the mantle changes colour as a way of indicating the wearer's chastity. In general this garment has been produced by fairy folk of some description.

However in the *fornaldar sögur*, texts far more closely related to Norse tradition, physical protection is the

power often required of enchanted clothes; protection against iron, fire or any other potentially fatal element. In *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, Arinnejfa is forced to travel to the underworld to obtain three treasures, one of which is: ... *skikkju þá, sem eigi mætti í eldi brenna* (3). Óðinn appears here in connection with the cloak, almost a kind of guardian. Cloaks are often associated with Óðinn, who generally wore this garment. The belief in the presence of supernatural powers in an item which was closely connected with a god would probably be quite natural. But this saga later mentions a shirt which also has protective powers. In Chapter Fifteen, two sisters have to prove their skill by making certain objects and one of them, Bekkhildr:

hafði gert eina skyrtu, ok festi ekki
vápni á, ok eigi máttu sá á sundi
mæðast, er í henni var.

(4)

This is similar to the shirt given by the Irish woman to Oddr in *Örvar-Odds saga*. Ölvör negotiates with Oddr for her life and promises to provide him with an unusual shirt, such as he has not seen before:

'Þik skal aldri kala í henni, hvárki á
sjó né á landi. Þik skal eigi sund
mæða, ok eigi skal þér eldr granda ok
eigi skal þik hungur sækja, ok eigi
skulu þik járn bíta ...'

(5)

When he returns a year later to collect this, Ölvör tells him how it was made, by Irish, Finnish, Saxon, Hebridean and French women in such a fantastic way that no doubt supernatural elements were involved. Oddr puts on the new silk shirt, sewn with gold, which protects him in many of his following adventures (6).

Sorceresses in some of the *Íslendingasögur* attempt to aid men, usually their sons, with either a shirt or tunic which they have endowed with magical powers of protection.

1. Eyrbyggja saga. ch.18 p.34-37

Katla, the mother of Oddr, clearly proves herself a witch by the end of her time in this saga. Oddr is about to join a party which is going to confront Þórarinn. Katla provides a new tunic for her son:

... foerði hon Odd, son sinn, í kyrtil móbrúnan, er hon hafði þá nýgört.

It is twice mentioned later that when wearing this garment Oddr becomes invulnerable:

Ekki festa vápn á Oddi Kötlusyni.

... hann var eigi sárr, því at eigi festi vápn á kyrtli hans.

His enemies do finally manage to catch up with him and kill him by hanging.

2. Vatnsdoela saga. ch.19 p.52-54

Ljót and her son, Hrolleifr, are troublemakers and unpopular wherever they settle. When Hrolleifr's kirtle is first mentioned, his mother's knowledge of witchcraft is commented on:

Oddr kvað eigi hógligt við heljarmann þann, en við fjölkyngi móður hans; - 'segja menn, at hann hafi kyrtil þann, er eigi bíta vápn á; nú mun ek hitta Hrolleif fyrst,'

Hrolleifr anticipates trouble from Oddr, and Ljót tells him to:

'... far í kyrtil þinn, þegar þú vill, ok vit, hversu dugir.'

Later when Oddr and Hrolleifr are fighting, the kirtle is

again mentioned together with its maker:

hann hafði ok kyrtil þann, er móðir
hans hafði gört honum ok eigi festi
járn á.

Oddr manages to get round this *görningastakka* (enchanted jacket) to some extent by striking at Hrolleifr's legs, wounding him. But it is not enough; it is the man protected by witchcraft who is victorious, who gives Oddr his death blow. Hrolleifr is finally killed at a time when he is unprotected by the magic shirt, ironically when he appears to have changed it for clothes worn especially for a heathen sacrifice - *blótklæði*.

3. Kjalsnesinga saga.

Búi's fostermother, Esja, is the sorceress in this case. Chapter Two tells us: ... *at Esja væri forn í brög um* (p.5). Búi becomes involved with Ólof in *væna*, a situation which seems likely to get him into trouble, there being two other men also competing for her affections. Esja goes to Búi:

'nú vil ek, at þú breytir búnaði
þínum; hefi ek hér nú loðkápa, er ek
vil at þú berir; skyrta er hér annat
klæði; þat þykki mér líkara, at hon
slitni ekki skjótt, hvárki fyrir
vápnum né fyrnsku;

(ch.8 p.21)

She refers to these items as valuable treasures - *gripir*. In this instance however there is no mention of the actual making of the clothes. In Chapter Eleven Búi wears these clothes when he successfully defends himself against an attack by Helgi and Vakr:

hann hafði öll góð vörn ok skyrtu þá,
er fóstura hans hafði gefit honum.

(p.26)

Later Búi is visiting Norway when King Haraldr arranges a fight between him and a *blámaðr*. Haraldr fully expects Búi to be killed and thus removed without any further trouble, but Búi is well prepared. He is protected not only by his foster mother's gift but also by a *fangastakkr* (wrestling jerkin) given to him by Rauðr, a *bóndi* who is well aware of the strength of the *blámaðr*.

Búi returns to Iceland and comes up against his old enemy Kolfriðr. Again Búi is *í skyrtu sinni Esjunaut*; however Kolfriðr uses similar methods to Oddr (Vatn. s.) and wounds Búi:

... bæði á höndum ok fótum, þar sem
eigi hafði skyrtan hlíft
(ch.16 p.39)

As with Oddr this does not do him much good and it is Kolfriðr who loses his life. In contrast to the previous examples, the owner of the magic garment in this case is cast in the role of hero. And neither he nor his fostermother suffer a violent fate.

Landnámabók records two instances of an enchanted shirt/tunic, lending a note of historical authority to this motif. Ljót and Hrolleifr are mentioned, Ljót with her *kunnusta* (magical lore); Hrolleifr with *kyrtil hans bitu eigi járn* (7). Earlier in *Landnámabók* another woman, Hildigunnr, is summoned *um fjölkyngi* by Lón-Einarr. Her son, Einar, returns home and Hildigunnr:

sagði honum þessi tíðindi ok foerði
honum kyrtil nýgörvan.
(8)

Einarr fights with Lón-Einarr and though there is no specific reference to the tunic protecting the wearer, it

is quite likely that this conforms to the previous pattern; it would be part of this story-motif and otherwise why mention the garment at all? Einarr gains the upper hand until Lón-Einarr's belt breaks and Einarr, taking advantage of his adversary's awkward predicament, kills him (9).

Rituals which were practised by people with supernatural powers, both men and women, occur fairly frequently in the *Íslendingasögur* along with other strange events e.g. walking dead. Carol Clover has described the family sagas as being 'rooted in reality' (10). This impression of ordinary people leading very human lives albeit in a different age is particularly strong. They go about their daily affairs against a rural, agrarian background of tending crops and livestock, visiting neighbours, managing households. Yet when these supernatural phenomena appear in their lives, they tend to accept them as natural, as part of their everyday life. This juxtaposition of the supernatural with what we can accept as realism illustrates the precariousness of life as depicted in the sagas. For a twentieth century reader it creates an element of tension, of unpredictability in the narrative. However for the writer and his contemporaries (as with the literary characters) supernatural occurrences were not particularly unlikely or wholly unexpected. Overall an impression is created of a society living on unstable ground, unable totally to rely on what might reasonably be expected from human beings. They have to cope with powers or influences beyond the control of even the most powerful chieftains. But it appears these elements can be overcome.

The Vatnsdoela men triumph over Ljót due to the *gæfa* (good luck) which is inherent in their family, in itself a characteristic bordering on the abnormal. Arnkell and his companions are not afraid of returning to Katla's farm in their attempts to foil her witchcraft and finally, accompanied by another sorceress, they tackle her successfully.

b) Veifa hédni um höfuð. (Vefja hédin at höfði e-m).

Cleasby and Vigfússon translate *hédinn* as: 'a jacket of fur or skin'. *Veifa* translates as 'to wave, swing'; *vefja* - 'to wrap, fold'. These verbs appear to be interchangeable in the use of this phrase, so whether the garment is wrapped round the head or swung round is not always clear. Under the entry for *hédinn* in Cleasby and Vigfússon the phrase *veifa hédni at höfði e-m* is given as meaning 'to wrap a skin round one's head, to hoodwink one'.

With a slight variation this phrase appears in *Ynglinga saga* in connection with control or power over the natural elements. Skjöldr, king of Varna, arrives in his ship to confront Eysteinn who is raiding the coasts of his kingdom. Skjöldr is a man who *var allmjök fjölkunnigr* and we are told: *pá tók hann möttul sinn ok veifði ok blés við* ... (11). This action causes the sea to swell and as the ships pass near each other a sailyard swings towards Eysteinn, sweeping him overboard, leading to his death.

This motif is found in the following five *Íslendingasögur*, though not always in association with

witchcraft.

1. Njáls saga. ch.12 p.37-38

Ósvífr and his companions ride to Svanshóll to find Þjóstólfr who has killed Ósvífr's son (Hallgerðr's first husband). Svanr has warning of their imminent arrival; he senses their presence, he yawns and says that Ósvífr's fetches are about to attack. Svanr goes outside and:

... tók geitskinn eitt ok veifði um
höfuð sér ok mælti:

Verði þoka
ok verði skrípi
ok undr öllum þeim,
er eptir þér soekja.

Fog and darkness overcome Ósvífr and his men and despite several attempts to continue they are forced to turn back.

2. Vatnsdoela saga. ch.36 p.96

Gróa, a sorceress, is thwarted in an attempt to entice Þorsteinn to her house. She comes out of the house and:

Hon horfði upp í fjallit ok veifði
gizka eða dúki, þeim er hon hafði
knytt í gull mikit, er hon átti, ...

'*Fari nú hvat sem búit er*', she says as she turns back inside. A landslide falls from the hill onto the house and all the occupants are killed.

3. Eyrbyggja saga. ch.20 p.51

Here we have an example of the phrase used in connection with a sorceress but in a figurative manner; Katla has not physically performed this particular rite although she has used her witchcraft to deceive the men and conceal her son, Oddr.

Arnkell and his followers are searching for Oddr at

the farm but are unable to find him. As they ride away Arnkell wonders:

Hvárt mun Katla eigi hafa héðni veift
um höfuð oss?

As the footnote in *Íslensk fornrit* suggests, Arnkell does not mean that she has actually done this but that she has fooled them with devices produced by spells. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards have translated this phrase as: 'Did Katla use her witchcraft to make fools of us' (12).

4. Grettis saga. ch.63 p.209

This time the phrase occurs with no mention or suggestion of sorcery. Þórir and his men are looking for Grettir who comes towards them, hood over his face, unrecognised, and directs them into a swamp. Later when the unsuccessful and much delayed party arrive home:

... þótti mörgum Grettir hafa vafit
héðin at höfði þeim.

which Fox and Pálsson translate as 'many people thought that Grettir had made a fool of them' (13).

5. Bandamanna saga.

At the end of his successful court case against men of rank, Ófeigr utters a triumphant verse part of which mentions wrapping cloths around the heads of chieftains:

gat ek höfðingjum hringa
hattar land, en sandi
oest í augun kastat,
óríkr vafit flíkum. (14)

Ófeigr is intimating that he has been successful in getting the better of them and though the actual words used differ to the above examples yet it is the same concept.

What appears to have at first been associated with a ritual practised by sorcerers and witches, a device to raise supernatural forces against enemies, seems to have developed into a figure of speech which no longer contains any indication of witchcraft. The term has come to mean merely 'to deceive, to hoodwink'; it does however echo the cunning, wiliness and unpredictability that may often have been associated with those possessed of special powers.

c) Summary.

This chapter has been divided into two parts. In the first part it is a specific article which contains magic powers. In the illustrations from the *fornaldar sögur*, the protective garments have sexual associations. Arinnefja is sent on her mission as a punishment for her maliciousness towards the man she desires after he has married another woman. Bekkhildr is involved in a competition where the winner will be given in marriage to Gautr; Örvar-Oddr stays with Ölvör as her husband for three years. The enchanted clothes in the *Íslendingasögur* are usually part of another kind of male/female relationship; in these instances the garments are given to the man by his mother or foster-mother, often when some particular danger or crisis appears imminent.

In the second part, it is not so much the garment itself which is important but the way the owner, often a sorcerer, makes use of it for his/her own ends. It is worth considering here that if the phrase *vefja/veifa hédinn at höfði e-m* is translated in terms of 'to wrap a

skin round one's head' rather than 'to wave, swing', then the figurative use of it suggests a misunderstanding. In the literal sense the magician or sorceress would appear to wrap the garment round his/her own head, whereas the figurative expression implies that the cloak should be wrapped round the heads of those who are being deceived. It is always possible that the development of this phrase has operated in reverse. Perhaps the expression had always been a figurative one and when it occurs in the texts as a definite action this is really an attempt on the part of antiquarians to explain the origin of it.

NOTES

1. Marianne E. Kalinke (ed). Möttuls saga. (With an Editon of *Le Lai du cort mantel* by Philip E. Bennett.)

2. Francis James Child. English and Scottish Popular Ballads. vol.1 No. 29 p.257-274.

3. Guðni Jónsson (ed). Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana. FAS vol. III ch.12-13 p.351-353.

4. *ibid.* ch.15 p.356.

5. Guðni Jónsson (ed). Örvar-Odds saga. FAS vol. II ch.11 p.239.

6. Oddr's putting on of new clothes and Ölvör's incantation detailing the specific ways that Oddr will be protected in this shirt have some similarities with this extract from *The Bhagavadgita*:

22. Just as a person casts off worn-out garments and puts on others that are new, even so does the embodied soul cast off worn-out bodies and take on others that are new.

23. Weapons do not cleave this self; fire does not burn him; waters do not make him wet; nor does the wind make him dry.

(Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore (ed). A Source Book in Indian Philosophy. p.108.)

Though clothes are being used metaphorically in relation to the larger issues of life and death some parallel can be discerned which may suggest a more widespread tradition of this concept of invulnerability.

7. Jakob Benediktsson (ed). Landnámabók. ÍF 1 ch.S180, H147 p.220-222.

8. *ibid.* ch.S75, H63 p.106.

9. A man's death being due to his belt breaking is also found in *Fóstbroeðra saga*. After the killing of Þórdís, Þormóðr, who is wounded, grapples with Falgeirr (Þórdís' son) and both fall into the sea. They struggle together but Þormóðr being badly wounded and losing blood begins to feel weaker: *finnr Þormóðr, at hann moeddist af miklu sári ok blóðras. En fyrir því at Þormóði varð eigi dauði*

ætlaðr, þá slitna i bróklindi Falgeirs; rak Þormóðr þá ofan um hann broekrnar. Falgeiri daprask þá sundit. Good fortune and fate on the side of Þormóðr leads to a humiliating death for Falgeirr. (ch.23 p.240).

10. Carol J. Clover. 'Icelandic Family Sagas'. In Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide. Ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow. p.239-294.

11. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (ed). Ynglinga saga. Heimskringla. IF 26 ch.46 p.77.

12. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (trans). Eyrbyggja Saga. ch.20 p.77.

13. Denton Fox and Hermann Pálsson (trans). Grettir's Saga. ch.63 p.135.

Another figurative term involving clothes occurs at the end of this chapter when Grettir *fór upp til fjalla ok var í dularkufl* ok fór svá norðr þar öndverðan vetr, svá at hann kenndisk ekki (ch.63 p.209).

Cleasby/Vigfússon describe *dularkufl* as 'a cloak used for disguise'. It seems quite possible in this context that the writer is not referring specifically to the *kufl* worn by Grettir but rather to the fact that Grettir has disguised himself in some way. Fox and Pálsson have translated the phrase as: '... and he himself went up into the mountains in disguise' (p.135).

14. Hallvard Mageröy (ed). Bandamanna Saga. ch.10 p.33. Wherever *Bandamanna saga* has been referred to, this edition has been used in preference to *Íslenzk fornrit* as it is a more up to date version of the saga.

Chapter Fifteen

BREIÐA FELD A HÖFUÐ SER

Wrapping one's head, or oneself, in a cloak can have varying implications. It can also be described in slightly different terms ie. *breiða feld á höfuð sér, hafði höfuðit í feldi sínum, drap höfðinu niðr í feld sinn*. On the whole these phrases appear to be portraying the same physical action. But the reasons behind this gesture are not necessarily the same; they must be interpreted according to the literary context.

Cleasby and Vigfússon have translated *breiða feld á höfuð sér* as 'a token of deep thinking' yet on many occasions this does not seem to be an adequate explanation. Falk tells us that covering one's face (or nose) in a cloak can be an attempt 'to conceal an agitated state of mind' (1). The most interesting theory has been put forward by Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson. Basing his argument around the case of Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði, the lawspeaker, Jón believes that those who performed this isolating activity were involved in communication with supernatural elements (2).

Jón is of the opinion that Þorgeirr 'did not stay under the cloak to think but to carry out an ancient soothsaying ritual' (3), that he was in contact with 'spirits or other representatives of the supernatural' (4). All those at the Alþingi, heathen and Christian, knew what Þorgeirr was doing in his attempts to resolve the

situation. When he came to speak to them at the Lawrock it was not to give his own personal decision but to tell them the outcome of his supernatural communication. He was not pronouncing on the basis of his own judgement but on the conclusions reached after performing a ritual where he sought the help and advice of those beings/spirits who would be able to see far beyond his world and his time. This gave him the authority to proclaim Christianity as the faith for the country, an authority which even the heathens accepted with little sign of hostility.

Njáls saga has six chapters dealing with the conversion of the Icelanders to the Christian faith - a section which has been labelled the *Kristni pátttr*. The original source for this, and the various other texts on this subject, would have been the *Íslendingabók* written by Ari Þorgilsson in about 1122-33. Chapter 105 relates the happenings at the Alþingi in 1000 and includes Þorgeirr's activities. The two factions at the Assembly, heathen and Christian, *sögðusk hvárir ór lögum annarra*. Both parties are now considering their next move and a violent outcome seems not unlikely. Hallr of Síða, a prominent Christian, has been nominated by his following to decide the law for them, but he goes to Þorgeirr, a heathen, and appears to enter into a transaction with him - Hallr gives Þorgeirr three marks of silver. We are then told that:

Þorgeirr lá svá dag allan, at hann
breiddi feld á höfuð sér, ok mælti
engi maðr við hann.

(ch.105 p.271)

He lies isolated a day and a night then goes to the Lawrock and speaks to the assembly with the result that

Christianity is accepted for the whole country, although it is of course not quite that straightforward. There is in the brief mention of the cloak, no indication of anything out of the ordinary happening; it would seem a perfect example of Cleasby and Vigfússon's understanding of the phrase - a man goes under his cloak to think deeply about a serious issue. Yet it is the very seriousness of the situation itself which makes this explanation sound incomplete. Actually mentioning the cloak seems almost trivial at this point. It may of course have been simply a means of obtaining privacy in order to meditate on the matter; a chieftain's booth at the Alþingi must have been a fairly public place.

But some thought should be given to Jón's theory and the following episodes provide a certain foundation.

1. Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings. ch.19-21 p.348-350

Þorgrímr and his men set out to attack Atli's farmstead.

On the way there Þorgrímr stops his companions and:

... kvað sik svá syfja, at hann mátti
engan veg upp sitja. Þeir gera nú
svá, létu hestana bíta, en Þorgrímr
sofnaði ok breiddi feld á höfuð sér ok
lét illa í svefni.

When he wakes up, *var honum orðit heitt*; he tells the others:

'Heima hefi ek verit um hríð á boenum,
ok er svá villt fyrir mér at ek veit
eigi frá mér, en þó munum vér heim
ganga at boenum.'

Þorgrímr has obviously lain down, wrapped in his cloak, in order that his mind may leave his body to investigate the farm and the situation.

2. Njáls saga. ch.62 p.155

Gunnarr and his brothers are on their way home from a visit to Tunga. Gunnarr suddenly becomes very sleepy and they are forced to stop:

.. syfjaði hann mjök, ok bað hann pá æja; þeir gerðu svá. Hann sofnaði fast ok lét illa í svefni.
 Kolskeggr mælti: 'Dreymir Gunnar nú.'
 Hjörtr mælti: 'Vekja vilda ek hann.'
 'Eigi skal þat,' segir Kolskeggr;
 'njóta skal hann draums síns.'
 Gunnarr lá mjök langa hríð ok varp síðan af sér skikkjunni, ok var honum varmt mjök.

When Gunnarr wakes, Kolskeggr asks about his dream. It is a foreboding of an attack and the subsequent death of Hjörtr. These presentiments which occurred during sleep are taken seriously. Gunnarr wants his brother to ride back to Tunga to avoid the attack. Hjörtr refuses, he accepts what he views as his fate - *þótt ek vita vísan bana minn, pá vil ek þér fylgja* (p.156).

Admittedly we are not specifically told here that Gunnarr *breiddi feld á höfuð sér*, but it is clear he has been covered by a cloak by his casting it off later. And there are obvious parallels with the previous example: extreme drowsiness, restlessness, sleeper becoming hot; activity during sleep, either metamorphosis or prophetic dream. The phrase *njóta skal hann draums síns* has been translated in the Penguin edition as 'let him dream his dream out' (5). But *njóta* implies more than this; it can also be interpreted as 'to get advantage from' (CV). Kolskeggr is reluctant to wake or disturb Gunnarr, he knows that through his dreams, Gunnarr will receive information

by way of some supernatural force, information which will be of use to him (6).

A cloak may be associated with the supernatural through the figure of Óðinn, who often appears in this garment (7), although this in itself is not sufficient to endow the actual object with particular qualities for prophecy. This hypothesis of supernatural contact can however be further reinforced by certain related elements and cultural aspects.

As Jón Aðalsteinsson points out the phrase *þylja í feld sinn* - 'to murmur into one's cloak' carries implications of the extraordinary (8). He reinforces his argument with certain examples:

a) Geirmundar þáttur heljarskinns (9). Bragi, a poet, visits King Hjör. The King goes out hunting but Bragi remains in the house and:

sat í öndvegi ok hafði reyrspota einn
í hendi sér ok leikr at ok puldi í
feld sinn.

The Queen is laid down, covered in such a way that she cannot be seen by anyone who does not already know her whereabouts. At this point the two boys, Geirmundr and Hámundr, attack a third boy. Bragi walks over to the Queen and reciting a poem reveals that he is aware of the true parentage of the three boys (at birth, the queen had exchanged her two sons for one belonging to a slave woman - the boy who is attacked in this episode). Bragi's sudden insight into the lineage of the boys and his ability to detect where the queen lay may be attributed to knowledge

revealed to him while he murmured into his cloak. An Odinic connection cannot be overlooked here. Óðinn was the god of poetry and the *reyrsprotta* which Bragi holds is surely associated with Óðinn's spear. In *Gautreks saga*, a *reyrsprotta* is used during a mock sacrifice, it suddenly changes into a spear, the sacrifice to Óðinn becomes real and King Víkarr is unintentionally killed (10).

b) Þáttur Þorsteins uxafóts (11).

At Krossavík, Geitir, the father of the *bóndi* sits: ... *á palli ok puldi í feld sinn*. Þorsteinn, a young boy, runs into the hall and falls onto the floor. Geitir laughs and when the boy questions this, Geitir explains that he was able to see Þorsteinn's fetch, a polar bear cub, which ran in front of the boy and tripped him up. The boy is being reared by simple folk but Geitir sees the cub as being the fetch of one of noble birth. The combination of murmuring into a cloak and divination appears interconnected.

The verb *þylja* on its own can be translated as - 'to chant or murmur in a low voice, as one saying charms, prayers or the like' (CV). When Christianity begins to make itself felt in Iceland, Njáll expresses an opinion about this new faith:

'Svá lízk mér sem inn nýi átrúnaðr
muni vera miklu betri, ok sá mun sæll,
er þann fær heldr. Ok ef þeir menn
koma út hingat, er þann sið bjóða, þá
skal ek þat vel flytja.' Hann mælti
þat opt. Hann fór opt frá öðrum
mönnum ok puldi einn saman.

(Njáls s. ch.100 p.255)

This behaviour of avoiding contact and possibly murmuring prayers suggests that he is pondering on the future and the

implications of Christianity.

Eiríks saga rauða cites an instance of this murmuring in isolation but in connection with a pagan god. In Vinland, Karlsefni and his companions are having trouble providing food for themselves. Þórhallr veiðimaðr leaves the group for awhile. They go to look for him and find him on a cliff:

hann lá þar ok horfði í lopt upp ok
gapði bæði munni ok nösum ok puldi
nökkut

(ch.8 p.224)

His murmuring or incantations to the god Þórr subsequently produce food in the form of a whale - though it does turn out to be largely inedible.

These illustrations of the use of *þylja* confirm to some extent an association with the supernatural when a person murmurs into their cloak. Common to *Njáll* and to Þórhallr, is that they move away from people, they isolate themselves. This may be an essential factor in the ritual (12).

To go back to the instances mentioned earlier we find Kolskeggr preventing Hjörtr from disturbing Gunnarr when he lies under his cloak. In the case of Þorgeirr, the lawspeaker, it is specifically stated that: *ok mælti engi maðr við hann*. This phrase is slightly different to that found in *Íslendingabók* where it states: [Þorgeirr] *kvað ekki orð* (13). But on the whole both expressions still imply solitude, a detachment from society and any human communication or distraction.

Wrapping one's cloak around the head would have the effect of covering the eyes. A mask is sometimes a part of the costume of a shaman and apart from the outward effect - transforming his appearance - it can have an internal effect upon the shaman himself. The Samoyed shamans apparently believed that it could 'aid concentration' (14). Instead of a mask, a kerchief could be used which would have the effect of covering the eyes:

.... among the Tadibei Samoyed, a kerchief, with which the shaman blindfolds his eyes so that he can enter the spirit world by his own inner light.

(15)

Incantations, isolation, covering the eyes, all suggest some form of ritual which will lead to a supernatural contact or activity. Taking this into account there surely seems to be some basis for Jón Aðalsteinsson's hypothesis regarding Þorgeirr's action. He feels that the interpretations given by many scholars to this incident do not answer some of the questions raised by the conversion, given the circumstances in Iceland at that time. Most are of the opinion that Þorgeirr was meditating upon his decision and his speech to the assembly.

Paul Schach: 'After a day and a night of solitary cogitation' (16).

Jón Jóhannesson: ... 'He spent the latter part of a day and the following night in his booth, where, in solitude, he thought over the entire situation (17).

When Þorgeirr announces his decision, no-one appears to question him. However reluctant, they leave relatively peacefully and have themselves baptised either at Þingvellir or more comfortably in warm springs on the way

home.

As a heathen himself, Þorgeirr must have gravely disappointed the heathen party and *Njáls saga* does briefly comment: *þóttisk heiðnir menn mjök sviknir vera* (ch.105 p.272). But even this fairly mild reaction does not occur in *Íslendingabók*. All accept Þorgeirr's proclamation.

Jón Aðalsteinsson's suggestion that Þorgeirr had not been merely meditating under his cloak but actively seeking spiritual guidance provides some solution to the problem. Those gathered at the assembly would have been responsive to, and inclined to conform with, a decision which they believed had been communicated to Þorgeirr by supernatural beings able to judge the present situation by consulting both past and future.

An acceptance of fate is frequently expressed in saga literature. Warned of his imminent death, Hjørtr does not struggle against his destiny. Ingimundr, acting on advice obtained by witchcraft (18), gathers his friends together to tell them of his decision to settle in Iceland, admitting that this move is:

meir af forlögum ok atkvæði rammra
hluta en fýsi ...
(Vatns. s. ch.12 p.36)

Gods were also subject to fate:

Ek sá Baldri,
blóðgum tívur,
Óðins barni,
örlög folgin; (19)

So it would not seem incredible to the medieval Icelanders that the gods or agents of the pagan gods may

instruct their followers to turn from them to a superior deity. Jón quotes a parallel case in the conversion of Sweden. When the missionary, Ansgar invites the Swedish King to a banquet and urges conversion, the gods are referred to for a decision. They tell the people to turn to the new faith (20). It is the fact that they are consulted, that they have a part in deciding the outcome, that has a bearing on the Icelandic conversion.

Ari gives no hint of whether this is happening in his *Íslendingabók*, though Jón firmly believes that Ari would have known all about it (21). Ari was writing his history under the patronage of the Icelandic bishops at Skálholt and Hólar, in circumstances where details of paganism would not be welcome particularly if they played a key role in the conversion. But Ari was concerned to be as accurate as he could be and if this motif does have deeper significance, he does not hide any of the relevant facts i.e. isolation, covering with cloak, no-one disturbing the truth-seeker.

Prior to this Alþingi, Christianity had had some influence in Iceland, a few of the early settlers had been Christians and many of the Icelanders who travelled had come into contact with this religion and had even been prime-signed when abroad. Iceland may at this time have been reasonably ready to accept a new faith, heathenism proving unsatisfactory for many of the more intellectual of the population. The strength of adherence to the old religion varied among the heathens - some were openly sceptical. But on the other hand missionaries such as Þangbrandr had met with fierce opposition as many

Icelanders had demonstrated a strong attachment to the pagan gods.

Though there had been many conversions, some involving chieftains and prominent men, yet at the Alþingi in 1000 the heathens were still very much in the majority. And they were prepared to fight, as were the Christians, in order to keep their faith. There was also present a third party - those whose main interest was in keeping the peace and preventing civil strife from dividing and destroying Iceland: Þorgeirr Ljósvetningagoði was one of these. But they were not strong enough on their own to control matters entirely.

The political aspect has always been stressed as a reason for the lack of conflict after Þorgeirr's announcement. King Óláfr Tryggvason had his eyes on Iceland and would no doubt have given armed support to the Icelandic Christians; he also had as hostages the sons of prominent heathen chieftains. By preventing the movement of ships, it would have quite easy for him to disrupt the trade between Norway and Iceland - a trade which was extremely important to Iceland's survival.

Þorgeirr's emphasis on the one law for all which his audience appear to agree to before knowing which law he is referring to, underlines more the political necessity to follow whatever course will be best for the country rather than a concern for the principles of each religion. The issue of law in fact was of major importance. Certain men who held the position of *goði* had been baptised by

Þangbrandr and this put them in a very difficult position in regard to the Icelandic law. They could no longer take the heathen oaths or be involved in the associated ceremonies. But participation in these rites was essential as a preliminary to judicial proceedings at an assembly. There was a possibility that if Christians could not conform to the necessary rites of the old law, they may split away from the established law and hold their own assemblies and legal procedures (22). On the other hand Halldór Hermannsson suggests that since many of the Christians were not chieftains or of high rank, they saw the new religion as a means of disrupting the *goði* system and thus obtaining some political power for themselves (23). So for many of the more prudent and discerning men gathered at the Alþingi that year, it was the preservation of the whole legal system that was of paramount importance; this was what the clash of religions appeared to threaten in various ways.

On the surface Þorgeirr satisfied the Christians by proclaiming their religion as the one to be accepted by the country, and by stipulating that all should be baptised. Concessions were made to the heathens, not least that they could continue to worship their own gods discreetly (24). The confirmation that the old law should continue and be accepted by all would reassure the heathen *goði* - and the Christian chieftains, who surely stood to lose much of their influence and power if forced to dissociate themselves from the prevailing judicial system. Bearing in mind the political and legal situation, events in 1000

would appear to have been mainly influenced by 'common sense' and 'practical wisdom' (25).

It is worth noting that if many of the Christians had adopted the new faith mainly for political reasons then they would still be relatively heathen in their outlook and so easily disposed to accept a decision reached by divination.

Once one is aware of Jón Aðalsteinsson's theory regarding the cloak, it becomes pervasive and raises questions about other incidents which, on the surface, might initially appear to belong to the 'agitated mind' or meditative categories suggested by Falk and by Cleasby and Vigfússon. The supernatural element casts an unavoidable shadow even though it is at times only faint. Once cast upon most of these episodes it throws up into relief even the slightest hint of the supernatural; this in turn reflects back on to the case of Þorgeirr, strengthening the basis to some extent for Jón's theory in the context of the conversion.

It is certainly not easy at times to confine the following instances of this motif strictly within any one category. There is a tendency for some confusion, some overlap, making it difficult to state with any certainty exactly what the phrase may be implying.

1. Laxdoela saga. ch.19 p.44

During his stay in Norway, Hrútr is held in high regard by Queen Gunnhildr, the mother of King Haraldr. When Hrútr is about to leave for Iceland, the queen gives him a gold

bracelet and:

bað hann vel fara; brá síðan
skikkjunni at höfði sér ok gekk
snúðigt heim til boejar

Gunnhildr could quite possibly be covering her head to hide her grief at this parting from a man for whom she has much admiration. Generally in this type of phrase the cloak is referred to as a *feldr*, but here *skikkja* is used. This is unusual but could be explained here by the fact that *feldar* were only worn by men, never by women (26).

This incident can be found, with more detail but without the cloak motif, in *Njáls saga* where the relationship between Hrútr and the queen is quite definitely of a close and romantic character. As Gunnhildr takes her leave of Hrútr in this saga she lays a curse upon him:

'Ef ek á svá mikit vald á þér sem ek
ætla, þá legg ek þat á við þik, at þú
megir engri munúð fram koma við kona
þá, er þú ætlar þér á Íslandi, ...'
(ch.6 p.21)

Her sorcery succeeds and Hrútr's marriage to Unnr fails because he is unable to consummate it.

There is no obvious hint of witchcraft in the *Laxdoela* version - unless one reads more into her action of drawing the cloak around her head than just an attempt to conceal her grief. The writer may have been using this gesture to suggest that Gunnhildr was occupied with some form of sorcery after her parting from Hrútr. In *Egils saga*, Egill has to compose a poem in praise of King Eiríkr if he wishes to save his life. A swallow continually disturbs Egill, preventing him from composing. Arinbjörn drives the bird

away - it is a shape-changer (ch.59 p.182-183). Eiríkr's wife, Queen Gunnhildr is anxious to see Egill dead. She has used her witchcraft to transform herself into a swallow in order to distract him. Gunnhildr's dubious reputation would have been well known to a contemporary saga audience; simply using the cloak motif could then be enough to imply some form of sorcery on her part.

2. Laxdoela saga. ch. 57-58 p.170-175

Grímr has been outlawed for a killing but instead of leaving Iceland, has gone up into the mountains. It falls to Þorkell Eyjólfsson to pursue him in order to enforce the sentence or kill him. Þorkell rides over the moors to where Grímr is hiding and as he comes up to a hut beside a lake:

sér hann þá hvar maðr sitr við vatnit
við einn loekjarós ok dró fiska; sá
hafði feld á höfði.

(p.173)

Þorkell leaves his horse and approaches Grímr, getting quite close before his shadow on the lake warns the outlaw of his presence. Although wounded by Þorkell's sword, Grímr's superior strength enables him to overcome his attacker.

This would seem to be a classic example of a man being deep in thought - but Óðinn occasionally went by the name of Grímr in one of his many disguises. So to find a man by this name wrapped in a *feldr* raises certain doubts about the possible significance of this incident. Grímr only appears in these two chapters, and appears to have little to do with the main narrative, though he does contribute to

the character of Þorkell Eyjólfsson. Grímr spares Þorkell's life and at the end of the chapter the outlaw settles in Norway and *hann þótti mikill maðr fyrir sér*. Although wrapping his cloak round his head did nothing to warn Grímr of an impending attack, there are still enough queries about this whole episode to make the reader suspect the presence of something out of the ordinary.

3. Egils saga. ch.56 p.148

After the death of his brother Þórólfr, Egill arrives in Norway and goes to stay with Arinbjörn:

Ok er á leið haustit, tók Egill ógleði
mikla, sat opt ok drap höfðinu niðr í
feld sinn.

Arinbjörn, assuming from Egill's conduct that he is grieving for his brother, tries to console him:

'... nú þó at þú hafir fengit skaða
mikinn um bróður þinn, þá er þat
karlmannligt, at bera þat vel ...'

Egill reveals a further reason for his unhappiness - he loves Ásgerðr, Þórólfr's widow and Arinbjörn's cousin.

Ókynni vensk, ennis
ungr þorðak vel forðum,
haukaklifs, at hefja,
Hlín, þvergnípur mínar;
verðk í feld, þás foldar
faldr kömr í hug skaldi
berg-Óneris, brúna
brátt miðstalli hváta.

On the other hand, Jón Aðalsteinsson thinks that Egill's manner of wrapping the cloak around his head is part of the process of composing poetry (27). Arinbjörn does not see Egill's posture as a sign of grief but as proof of the poet being involved in his craft; this is why he asks: '*... eða hvat kveðr þú nú? Láttu mik nú heyra*' - to which Egill replies that: *hann hefði þetta fyrir skemmstu kveðit ...*,

and proceeds to recite his poem. The argument is that poets followed a similar practice to those engaged in necromancy and prophecy.

4. Liósvetninga saga. ch.17 p.41

Guðmundr and his brother Einarr are on opposite sides in a dispute. Guðmundr has been challenged to a duel and in the opinion of Vigfúss Víga-Glúmsson, things are not looking well for him. Vigfúss devises a plan which will help Guðmundr to obtain what he wants without having to fight. To prevent Einarr from suspecting anything Guðmundr is to keep up an outward appearance of being worried about the case. When people go to prayers:

Guðmundr var hljóðr ok mælti ekki or
ok hafði höfuðit í feldi sínum.

Though Einarr is not deceived, his friend Þórir is:

'... ok þótti mér hann eigi hefja
höfuðit hátt. Ok mun hann vera því
hryggvari er meir dregr at óvirðing
hans, þeiri er hann á fyrir höndum.'

It would appear that Guðmundr is simply behaving as he would be expected to if he was seriously troubled or unhappy in his mind about his predicament.

Although Jón's arguments are persuasive, it is still difficult to state definitely that covering oneself with a cloak, especially the head, can be interpreted as some form of supernatural communication. Perhaps on the whole one can only say that it is a theory that could be taken into consideration depending on the context in which this motif occurs.

NOTES

1. H. Falk. Altwestnordische Kleiderkunde. p.177.
2. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson. Under the Cloak: The Acceptance of Christianity in Iceland with Particular Reference to the Religious Attitudes Prevailing at the Time. Studia Ethnologica Upsaliensia 4. 1978.
3. *ibid.* p.123.
4. *ibid.* p.122.
5. Hermann Pálsson and Magnus Magnusson (trans). Njal's Saga. Penguin ch.62 p.147.
6. In Gunnarr's dream he is attacked by wolves. With the help of Kolskeggr he manages to fight them off but not before Hjörtr is savaged and killed. The previous incident from *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* contains much the same warning of attack, although in this incident it is not the man under the cloak who experiences it. Þorgrím's attempt, through supernatural means, to find out how things are at the farm is frustrated due to Atli's mind being similarly active. Asleep, Atli dreams of a pack of wolves. A vixen leads the pack, a terrifying creature who is searching everywhere. Atli is aware of the significance of the the wolves in his dream: '*... ok veit ek víst, at þat er manna hugir; skulum vér þegar upp standa*'. (ch.20 p.349, 350)
7. See ch.2 Blue Clothes p.38-40; ch.4 Green Clothes p.76-79.
8. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson. *op cit.* p.110.
9. a) Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson. *op. cit.* p.110.
b) Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn (editors). Sturlunga Saga. vol.1 p.6.
10. Guðni Jónsson (ed). Gautreks saga. FAS vol.IV ch.7 p.28-34.
11. a) Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson. *op cit.* p.111.
b) Flateyjarbók. 1944, 4 vols p.279 vol.1.

12. The following instances all appear to stipulate isolation, being undisturbed, as a condition necessary in order to conduct investigation involving the supernatural:

a) Vatnsdoela saga. Ingimundr, doubtful about Iceland, asks three Lapps to find out more about the country. They do this by witchcraft, 'travelling' to Iceland by a process of metamorphosis. In order to carry this out they specifically request not to be disturbed: '*Nú skal oss byrgja eina saman í húsi, ok nefni oss engi maðr,*' ok svá var gört (ch.12 p.35). They are in isolation for three nights and having surveyed Ingimundr's future home, are then able to give him the information he seeks.

b) Færeyinga saga. Þrandur and his companions are trying to discover the fate of Sigmundur. They believe he must have swum to the island, Su urey but the *bóndi* there, Þorgrímr illi denies all knowledge of him. Þrandur prepares to discover the truth through the practice of necromancy. He has the room specially prepared and then: *hann sezt á stól milli elds og grindanna. Hann biður þá nú ekki við sig tala, og þeir gera svo.* The dead Sigmundur and his two friends walk through the room each indicating how he died. Sigmundur was plainly killed by violence, not by drowning. (Ólafur Halldórsson (ed). Færeyinga saga. ch.41 p.80.)

c) Njáls saga. Earl Hákon's men are hunting for Hrappr but are unable to find him. The Earl takes matters into his own hands: *Jarl gekk einn saman frá öllum mönnum ok bað engan mann með sér ganga ok dvalðisk þar um stund. Hann fell á kné bæði, ok helt fyrir augu sér* (ch.88 p.215). When he returns to his men he directs them to Hrappr's hiding place. Unfortunately Hrappr, being a fast runner, is still able to escape. But there is no doubt that the earl was seeking supernatural help in his pursuit of this man.

13. Jakob Benediktsson (ed). Íslendingabók. ÍF 1 ch.7 p.16.

14. Mircea Eliade. Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy. p.167.

15. *ibid.* p.148.

16. Paul Schach. 'The Theme of the Reluctant Christian in the Icelandic Sagas'. Journal of English and Germanic Philology. Vol. 81, No.2. April 1982. p.189.

17. Jón Jóhannesson. Íslendinga Saga. A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth. p.135.

18. See above Note no.12.

19. Sigurður Nordal (ed). Völuspá. st.31 p.65.

20. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson. op cit. p.127-129.

'Antea tamen hic', inquit, 'fuerunt clerici, qui populari hinc seditione, non regio iussu, eiecti sunt. Qua propter et ego hanc legationem vestram confirmare nec possum nec audeo, priusquam sortibus deos nostros consulam et populi quoque super hoc voluntatem interrogem.' (Vita Anskarii. Auctore Rimberton. Hannoverae 1884.)

'"There were here", the king said, "earlier priests who were expelled in a public riot, not by royal ordinance. Therefore I neither can nor dare give a positive answer to your request before I have consulted our gods by casting lots and asked the public what their wish is in the matter".' (Trans. by Aðalsteinsson)

21. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson. op cit. p.130-131.

22. Jón Jóhannesson. op cit. p.131.

23. Halldór Hermannsson (ed & trans). The Book of the Icelanders. (Íslendingabók). p.14-15.

24. *Skyldu menn blóta á laun, ef vildu, en varða fjörbaugsgarðr, ef váttum of kvæmi við.* (Jacob Benediktsson (ed). Íslendingabók. ch.7 p.17). But as Jón Jóhannesson points out such witnesses 'were difficult to obtain'. (Íslendinga Saga. p.136)

25. Jón Jóhannesson. op cit. p.136-138.

26. H. Falk. op cit. p.174.

27. Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson. op cit. p.113.

Chapter Sixteen

THE GREENLAND PROPHETESS

Sorceresses are a regular feature of the *Íslendingasögur*. In one way or another they occur in many of the major sagas, but the most detailed external description belongs to Þorbjörg lítil-völva, the prophetess in *Eiríks saga rauða*. Her elaborate costume is described in great detail, with good reason as it represents in itself a unit of religious symbolism.

It is a time of famine in Greenland and men are having little success with hunting expeditions. Þorbjörg is one of a family of nine sisters who were all *spákonur*; she is the only surviving member. In winter it is her custom to visit whoever has need of her ability to foretell the future. As Þorkell is the leading *bóndi* in the district it is considered to be his responsibility to receive Þorbjörg and find out the prospects for the season. He invites her to his farmstead:

... ok er henni þar vel fagnat, sem siðr var til, þá er við þess háttar konum skyldi taka. Var henni búit há sæti ok lagt undir hana hoegindi; þar skyldi í vera hoensafiðri. En er hon kom um kveldit ok sá maðr, er móti henni var sendr, þá var hon svá búin, at hon hafði yfir sér tuglamöttul blán, ok var settr steinum allt í skaut ofan; hon hafði á hálsi sér glertölur, lambskinnskofra svartan á höfði ok við innan kattskinn hvít; ok hon hafði staf í hendi, ok var á knappr; hann var búinn með messingu ok settr steinum ofan um knappinn; hon hafði um sik hnjóskulinda, ok var þar á skjóðupungr mikill, ok varðveitti hon þar í töfr sín, þau er hon þurfti til fróðleiks at hafa. Hon hafði á

fótum kálfsskinnskúa loðna ok í þvengi
 langa, ok á tinknappar miklir á
 endunum. Hon hafði á höndum sér
 kattskinnsglófa, ok váru hvítir innan
 ok loðnir.

(ch.4 p.206-207)

The most readily identifiable symbolism is to be found in the catskin which is used for her gloves and to line her hood. It illustrates her association with Freyja, a goddess of the Vanir. According to Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning*, Freyja travelled in a chariot drawn by two cats (1). Þorbjörg wears a necklace which also links her to Freyja: the goddess was the owner of the necklace *Brísingamen*. A kenning representing Freyja refers to her as the *eigandi Brísingamens* (2).

Seiðr is the form of ritual which Þorbjörg practises:

... var henni veittr sá umbúningr, sem
 hon þurfti at hafa til at fremja
 seiðinn.

(ch.4 p.207)

It is translated as: 'spell, charm, enchantment, incantation' (CV). Of all the gods and goddesses, it is Freyja who is especially associated with this craft. Snorri tells us in *Ynglinga saga* that it was Freyja who taught *seiðr* to the Æsir (3). Although later, in Chapter Seven, Óðinn is mentioned as accomplished in this skill yet we also learn of the debilitating effect that it has on those who practise it. Because of this it seems, the performance of *seiðr* was considered not suitable for men; it was restricted to women, to the priestesses.

Þorbjörg is being called on to help the people to discover how long the present famine will continue, a matter which comes well within the realm of Freyja; the

Vanir were the gods associated with 'good seasons' (4). Freyja often travelled under various other names, one of which was *Gefn*. Gabriel Turville-Petre relates this to the verb *gefa* - to give. He believes this 'implies that the goddess is the giver of riches, fertility, wellbeing' (5). Through Snorri it appears that Freyja was the one to appeal to 'concerning love affairs' (6). *Hlin*, another of Freyja's alternative names, is associated with protection. Thus on the occasion of famine or uncertainty about the future, Freyja would be the obvious figure to invoke for help. And since this was often the reason for consulting a *spákona* or *völva*, their links with the goddess who represented fertility and community welfare must have been generally recognised. Þorbjörg wears a hood of lambskin and her shoes are of calfskin: these skins are linked with fertility as they represent young animals of the kind which would have been particularly important to Norse agriculture.

Freyja had two daughters - *Hnoss* and *Gersemi*. They were 'so very beautiful, that afterwards the most precious jewels were called by their names' (7). Þorbjörg's mantle is adorned with stones down to the hem, presumably semi-precious stones. It is possible that this represents an indirect link with Freyja through her daughters.

In many ways Þorbjörg can be linked to the cult of shamanism and it is particularly by her dress that we begin to see these connections. Although it does not provide close parallels with many of the costumes worn by shamans there are still some similarities. The ritual which she

performs later has certain attributes in common with traditional shamanism, though Mircea Eliade does not class *seidr* as a shamanistic ritual, relegating it to the category of 'minor magic' (8).

Dealing with shamanism raises the difficulty of settling on a precise definition for 'shaman' as opinions about this vary. Spencer L. Rogers suggests that 'a professional in the field of the supernatural is commonly called a shaman' (9); Mircea Eliade defines shamanism as a 'technique of ecstasy' (10). Peter Buchholz, while acknowledging the importance of ecstasy, feels that more than this is necessary for an accurate definition. He adds three extra criteria: (a) 'concept of auxiliary spirits', (b) 'journey to the other world', (c) 'ideology of transformation'. It is his opinion that aspects of North Germanic religion would have encouraged shamanism (11). Jere Fleck maintains that there is 'no shamanism present in primitive Germanic religion'. Fleck does not think that by adding up all the shamanistic elements which may be present in various different individuals that this will then equal shamanism. If all are not present in even one single person in Germanic tradition then 'no shaman = no shamanism' as 'the presence of unrelated bits of evidence does not prove the presence of a religious type' (12).

These diverse opinions obviously cause certain problems. However even Fleck concedes that some people in Germanic culture can have a 'shamanistic aura' (13). The best approach would be to look at various aspects of Þorbjörg's outfit and examine the links, however tenuous,

with those of the shamans in North and Central Asia. Shamanism in this area has been closely documented by Mircea Eliade and it includes Siberia where the term 'shaman' originated.

Since the state of ecstasy is an indispensable component of Eliade's definition it would be useful to see if Þorbjörg's ritual merits this description. It is not entirely clear in *Eiríks saga rauða* whether she operates in a trance or not, but it is quite possible. Apparently an essential item of a shaman's equipment was a drum. It is used for rhythmic sound which aids concentration and helps to induce a trance. Þorbjörg has no instrument of any kind but she has insisted on the need for someone to sing *varðlökur* (a kind of magic song or charms) (14). Great trouble is taken to persuade Guðríður, who is the only one with this knowledge, to take part in the *seiðr*. So the element of music is present even though drums are not used. A set ritual appears necessary to enable Þorbjörg to communicate with the spirits:

Slógu þá konur hring um hjallinn, en
 Þorbjörg sat á uppi. Kvað Guðríður þá
 kvæðit svá fagrt ok vel, at engi
 þóttisk heyrt hafa með fegri rödd
 kvæði kveðit, sá er þar var hjá.
 (p.208)

Þorbjörg thanks Guðríður for her songs, saying that many spirits, delighted by the music, are now co-operating. The information the *völva* seeks is now revealed to her. It seems to be accepted by Eliade (15) and Sigurður Nordal (16) that Þorbjörg has been in a trance. This state of being is connected with *völvur* and *seiðr*:

Heiði hána hétu
 hvars til húsa kom,
 völu velspá,
 vitti hon ganda;
 seið hon hvars hon kunni,
 seið hon hugleikin,
 æ var hon angan
 illrar brúðar.

(17)

Lines five and six of this strophe are those found in *Hauksbók*; a variation favoured by Nordal who believes that this *völva* was 'in an ecstasy'. It is not all that unlikely that Þorbjörg, performing *seiðr* in order to forecast the season, was in a trance during the rite, a state of ecstasy similar to that of a shaman.

To return to the question of dress, one of the most significant and influential points is the presence of a special costume for rituals. This seems to be universal to shamans wherever they live. All have some form of ceremonial dress which is put on before performing a ritual even if, as in the case of the Inuit, it is only a belt. Such an itemised description of the *völva*'s dress (so unusual for the sagas) would suggest that her appearance is of particular importance on this occasion when she will be expected to demonstrate her skill. The shaman, it appears, often dresses in preparation for a ceremony on the eve of the day the ritual is to be performed. Þorbjörg wears her outfit as she approaches Þorkell's farm but she will not conduct her *seiðr* until the next day:

Hon kallask ekki munu segja fyrr en um
 morgininn eptir, er hon hafði áðr
 sofit um nóttina.

(ch.4 p.207)

However it must be taken into account that a

travelling prophetess can only guarantee receiving hospitality when her hosts expect to receive something from her in return; once she had delivered her prophecy there would presumably be no reason for her visit to continue. *Víga-Glúms saga* gives the impression that the fortunes a *völva* foretells may vary according to the kind of welcome shown to her (18). Oddbjörg visits Uppsálar and her predictions do not please Saldís (ch.12 p.41). As Saldís upbraids the *völva*, it becomes obvious that she believes that the prophecy of misfortune is due to Oddbjörg not being satisfied with her reception. Þorbjörg's insistence on waiting until the next day may be a practical move but there is still the possibility of it being a necessary part of her ritual.

Þorbjörg's cloak, fastened with straps, is set with stones down to the hem. Eliade notes that a fairly common adornment on a shaman's garment were quantities of metal discs. One of the functions of these metal discs was to provide sound and thus greater effect during the performance - whether the stones on the *völva*'s cloak would do this in any way, is difficult to tell. Assuming that these are semi-precious stones, then they would glisten and sparkle with the woman's movements, especially in sunlight or firelight, thus providing a magical, supernatural effect and atmosphere, albeit in a different way to metal discs. Often the metal discs were in the form of animals but in the case of Þorbjörg certain other items of her dress contain animal symbolism.

According to Eliade, caps are an essential part of the

shamanistic dress. They occur in various forms. Although Þorbjörg's *kofri* has generally been referred to as a 'hood' the term also translates as 'bonnet' (CV). Its importance in connection with Freyja has already been discussed. Extra significance could be implied by a recognised ritualistic item being lined with catskin and thus particularly related to a supernatural figure.

Feathers are usually a part of the shaman's costume but these are not present in our Greenland *völva*'s outfit. The feathers are supposed to facilitate the flight of the shaman to other worlds during a trance in order to commune with the spirits. As regards symbolism of flight, the catskin may play a part here as Freyja's mode of travel involved these animals. Before Þorbjörg's arrival, preparations are made for her including a high seat and a cushion stuffed with hen's feathers. The mention of even a cushion is extremely unusual in the *Íslendingasögur*, to then specify what it is stuffed with is so odd that surely it must have some special implication. It may be a way of supplying feathers for her. Perhaps at one point in the past they were a part of her costume but have gradually been discarded yet the writer still acknowledges that they are necessary for her ritual. Þorbjörg's relationship with Freyja may itself be sufficient to suggest 'aerial symbolism' (19); in *Skáldskaparmál* Freyja is capable of assuming the form of a falcon (20).

The kind of feathers specified for the cushion - hen's feathers - seem unusual in Greenland where a more likely stuffing would be the down of wild geese. A hen does,

however, represent a particularly domesticated fowl, of value to a farming community and therefore perhaps linked to fertility.

The Greenland prophetess carries a staff with a knob on one end. It could be a relic of the shaman's horse stick, again symbolic of travelling to the world of the spirits. A knob may be all that is left of the original horse's head. Freyja also used a horse, *Hófvarpnir*, when searching for her husband.

Bones, believed in early societies to be the source of life, are not worn, carried or represented in the dress of the *völva*. This seems at odds with the tradition especially as Norse mythology falls in line with the beliefs of other cultures that life can be recreated from bones. Þórr, when staying at a peasant's house, offers his goats for the meal stipulating that the bones be afterwards placed on the goat skins. This is done, and the next day Þórr brings the animals back to life, though one is lame due to the peasant's son having split the ham-bone to get at the marrow (21). The closest the *völva* comes to bone is her spoon of walrus tusk. Whether this is a relic of a forgotten belief is uncertain: walruses are sometimes associated with sorcerers and sorceresses in the sagas (22).

White is the colour of the cat's fur both on the headwear and in the gloves. Yet the hood or bonnet is also made of black lambskin and the cloak is blue. Blue is related to black in shamanic dress. Apparently white

symbolises the world above and black represents the world below. Shamans can be either white or black but can also be both at the same time. Eliade notes that it is not necessary to regard the underworld, the world below, as being definitely associated with evil spirits. Þorbjörg incorporates both colours and thus is presumably in contact with both worlds. This is not unusual in shamanic tradition.

Black and white may however, in this context, be indicative of the ambivalent status of *völur* or *spákonur* in Old Icelandic literature. Referring to the strophe previously quoted from the *Völuspá*, it ends with:

æ var hon angan
illrar brúðar.

implying that *seiðr* was used for evil purposes, or that it may have been inherently evil regardless of how it was used. Turville-Petre comments on 'that evil form of magic called *seiðr*', 'that disreputable magic, *seiðr*' (23). Those involved in witchcraft in the family sagas did not usually practise it for the good of society. Yet *Ynglinga saga* does not appear to condemn *seiðr* when it is being taught to the gods although as previously mentioned its after effects are not altogether desirable. *Eiríks saga rauða* presents a fairly favourable view of the *spákona* and her *seiðr*. Þorbjörg's visit appears to be successful; she foretells the end of the famine; she is happy to answer questions from individuals; and she prophesies a great future for Guðríðr and her family. The only person actively against Þorbjörg's presence at Þorkell's farm was Þorbjörn; his protest is simply stated by his absence which

we only learn about afterwards when the *völva* leaves:

þá var sent eptir Þorbirni, því at
hann vildi eigi heima vera, meðan slík
hindravitni var framið.

(ch.4 p.209)

In general, there is no overwhelming atmosphere of disapproval or condemnation in the chapter.

In their introduction to the Penguin edition of *Eiríks saga rauða*, Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson comment on the style of the original text. It 'has an air of conscious scholarship' which reveals, they feel, the hand of an 'antiquarian' (24). Such a writer would have had an historian's interest in Þorbjörg, a prophetess from the old religion. Perhaps this is why we have so much information regarding her outfit here. How accurate his description is would be difficult to determine. If she was preserved in oral literature, the form of her dress may have changed as time went on. Today, in Siberia, the costume of a shaman can bear little relation to the original elaborate and complex outfits; much of this ritualistic dress has disappeared. However this is not primarily an attempt to prove or disprove Þorbjörg's status as a shaman. The text is not being examined as a possible anthropological source but rather as a means of elucidating certain aspects which might have been recognised by a contemporary audience of the sagas.

'Shamanistic features' are without doubt present. The overall effect of the shaman's costume was to impress the audience with the authority, the mystery of his or her craft. The vivid description of the Greenland prophetess

would in its own way impress the audience of this saga, but the writer was relying to a great extent on their understanding of the religious symbolism.

NOTES

1. Anthony Faulkes (trans). Edda. Snorri Sturluson. p.24.

2. Finnur Jónsson (ed). Snorri Sturluson: Edda. Skáldskaparmál. ch.20 p.90.

3. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (ed). Ynglinga saga. Heimskringla. ÍF 26 ch.4 p.13.

4. Sigurður Nordal (ed). Völuspá. Trans. by B.S. Benedikz and John McKinnell. p.53.

5. Gabriel Turville-Petre. Myth and Religion of the North. p.178.

6. Anthony Faulkes. op cit. p.24.

7. Samuel Laing (trans). Ynglinga saga. Heimskringla: The Norse King Sagas. Snorre Sturluson. ch.13 p.15.

Doetr hennar hétu Hnoss ok Gersimi. Þær váru fagrar mjök. Af þeira nafni eru svá kallaðir inir dyrstu gripir. (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (ed). Ynglinga saga. op cit. ch.10 p.25.)

8. Mircea Eliade. Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy. ch.11 p.387.

9. Spencer L. Rogers. The Shaman: His Symbols and His Healing Power. p.ix.

10. Eliade. op cit. ch.1 p.4.

11. Peter Buchholz. 'Shamanism - The Testimony of Old Icelandic Literary Tradition.' Mediæval Scandinavia 4, 1971 p.7-20.

12. Jere Fleck. 'The "Knowledge-Criterion" in the Grímnismál: The Case against "Shamanism".' ANF 86, 1971 p.49-65.

13. *ibid.* p.57.

(iii) Literary Strategies

Chapter Seventeen

LAXDOELA SAGA

This saga contains several episodes involving dress which seem to merit closer examination. Some of these have been discussed in other chapters such as 'Head-dress', 'Gift of Friendship?'. A few instances however are not part of any kind of definable motif within the *Íslendingasögur*. They have to be interpreted solely within the context in which they occur in *Laxdoela* - there being no other likely parallel or similarity in other family sagas to shed any light on this interpretation. At times, examining some of these remaining episodes can indicate the diverse sources of material used by a saga-writer. *Laxdoela saga* was probably written soon after 1245 (1) and it is important to bear this in mind when looking at some of the following episodes.

1. Melkorka ch. 12-13 p.22-28

When Höskuldr travels abroad, he attends an assembly in Norway. He approaches a merchant who, among other things, has slaves for sale. Höskuldr is attracted by a girl, beautiful though *illa klædd*. She is more expensive than the other women but Höskuldr buys her, the merchant warning him that she appears to be completely dumb. Höskuldr sleeps with his new concubine and the following day provides her with better clothing. It was remarked when she had dressed herself that *henni semði góð klæði*.

Melkorka accompanies her owner back to Iceland,

becomes part of his household and gives birth to his son, Óláfr. But at home Höskuldr does not pay much attention to her and when his wife, Jórunn, insists that the slave pull her weight in the house, she is assigned certain duties. She has to serve her master and mistress, including waiting on Jórunn personally. One morning Höskuldr comes upon Melkorka alone with her child and he is surprised to hear his 'dumb' concubine talking to the boy. When pressed for the truth, Melkorka reveals her name, her background and how she came to be sold into slavery. She comes from a noble Irish family and her father is King Mýrkjartan in Ireland.

Margaret Arent Madelung in her study of *Laxdoela saga* (2) suggests that the purchase of a noble slave, the rescue of an unfortunate woman of high birth by the man who subsequently becomes her 'husband', could 'derive from *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*'. Chapter Fifty-two (3) of this saga relates how Loðinn, visiting a market in Eistland, recognises Ástríðr, the widow of King Tryggvi. Described as *illa klædd*, she is being sold as a slave and begs Loðinn to buy her and restore her to her family. He agrees on the condition that she consents to marry him. Though it could be said that Melkorka was not Höskuldr's wife, since he was already married, yet the role of concubine is similar, (A.C. Bouman refers to her as the 'second wife' (4)).

Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar, in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla* dates from about 1230-1236, so it is quite possible that the writer of *Laxdoela* could have been familiar with this account.

After the discovery of Melkorka's distinguished lineage, Höskuldr looks on her with more favour but Jórunn is sceptical about it all. Matters reach a head one evening when Melkorka appears to be helping her mistress to undress. Jórunn, presumably in a fit of jealousy, begins to beat her with some stockings.

... er Jórunn gekk at sofa, togaði
Melkorka af henni ok lagði skóklæðin á
gólfit. Jórunn tók sokkana ok keyrði
um höfuð henni.

(p.27-28)

Melkorka's response is to hit Jórunn hard on the nose and Höskuldr has to step in and separate the two women. The particular use of stockings appears slightly odd, though it does suggest an element of intimacy indicative of the relationship which binds the three participants together.

There is however a possible source for this incident in the eddaic poem, *Guðrúnarkviða I* (5). Herborg, the Queen of the Huns, has been made a *hafta* - 'female prisoner, bondwoman' (CV) as a result of certain wars. Like Melkorka, Herborg has to wait upon a mistress, part of her duties involving the binding on of shoes. And in a similar fashion the jealous mistress attacks the servant:

9. Þá varð ec hapta oc hernuma
sams misseris síðan verða;
skylda ec skreyta oc scúa binda
hersis qván hverian morgin.
10. Hon oegði mér af afbrýði,
oc hörðom mic höggom keyrði;
fann ec húsgruma hvergi in betra,
enn húsfreyio hvergi verri.
- (6)

Herborg's possibly closer relationship with the lord is hinted at in the second stanza when she praises him while

denigrating the mistress. Obvious links between this poem and *Laxdoela* are: the noble slave aspect; related apparel of stockings/shoes; relationship between master and slave; a wife venting her jealous rage on her rival. Both Herborg and Melkorka endure the same 'woeful service' (7).

2. Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir and Þórðr Ingunnarson.
ch. 34-35 p.93-98.

Guðrún and Þórðr are attracted to one another; Þórðr visits her often and a close friendship develops. Unfortunately both are already married - Guðrún to Þorvaldr Halldórsson, Þórðr to Auðr. On one occasion during an argument Þorvaldr hits Guðrún on the face. When she later tells Þórðr about this, he gives her some advice:

'Hér kann ek gott ráð til. Gerðu
honum skyrtu ok brautgangs höfuðsmátt
ok seg skilit við hann fyrir þessar
sakar.'

(p.94)

Brottganga (fem) translates as 'departure'; *brottgangr* (masc) appears to refer to divorce as well, though *Laxdoela* is the only source mentioned in Cleasby/Vigfússon for this additional interpretation (8). The point behind this is that Þorvaldr, wearing such a shirt, would be thus dressed in women's clothes. Men wore their shirts high up to the neck, women's were cut much lower. It appears to be considered, according to Þórðr's later comment, that a woman could divorce her husband if he wore a garment which exposed his nipples.

Guðrún goes along with Þórðr's suggestion, obtains a divorce and returns to her father's home. Some time later she travels to the assembly in the same company as Þórðr.

As they ride together, Guðrún broaches the subject of Þórðr's wife:

... þá mælti Guðrún: 'Hvárt er þat satt, Þórðr, at Auðr, kona þín, er jafnan í brókum, ok setgeiri í, en vafit spjörum mjök í skúa niðr?' Hann kvazk ekki hafa til þess fundit. 'Lítit bragð mun þá at,' segir Guðrún, 'ef þú finnr eigi, ok fyrir hvat skal hon þá heita Bróka-Auðr?' Þórðr mælti: 'Vér ætlum hana litla hríð svá hafa verit kallaða.' Guðrún svarar: 'Hitt skiptir hana enn meira, at hon eigi þetta nafn lengi síðan.' Eptir þat kómu menn til þings; er þar allt tíðendalaust. Þórðr var löngum í búð Gests ok talaði jafnan við Guðrúnu. Einn dag spurði Þórðr Ingunnarson Guðrúnu, hvat konu varðaði, ef hon væri í brókum jafnan svá sem karlar. Guðrún svarar: 'Slíkt víti á konum at skapa fyrir þat á sitt hóf sem karlmanni, ef hann hefir höfuðsmátt svá mikla, at sjái geirvörtur hans berar, brautgangssök hvárttveggja.' Þá mælti Þórðr: 'Hvárt ræðr þú mér, at ek segja skilit við Auði hér á þingi eða í heraði, ok gera ek þat við fleiri manna ráð, því at menn eru skapstórir, þeir er sér mun þykkja misboðit í þessu?' Guðrún svarar stundu síðar: 'Aptans bíðr óframs sök.' Þá spratt Þórðr þegar upp ok gekk til Lögbergs ok nefndi sér vátta, at hann segir skilit við Auði, ok fann þat til saka, at hon skarsk í setgeirabroekr sem karlkonur. Broeðrum Auðar líkar illa, ok er þó kyrrt.

(p.95-96)

Again the apparent cause of divorce is the accusation of wearing garments belonging to the opposite sex. Yet, as Einar Ól. Sveinsson observes, there is no mention in *Grágás* that such a reason could be used as a case for divorce (9). What is made clear in this body of law is that for a woman to wear men's clothing or to cut her hair in a masculine fashion is sufficient for her to be sentenced to lesser

outlawry. A similar stipulation also applied to men who put on women's dress (10).

But, as far as we can tell by the text, in neither episode does the divorced spouse actually wear the offending garments prior to the divorce. There is some evidence that these conversations between Guðrún and Þórðr involve the use of certain terms and language in a figurative rather than literal form. When Þórðr first advises Guðrún, she acquiesces with his suggestion: *Eigi mælti Guðrún í móti þessu ...* (p.94). She could be tacitly agreeing to make the shirt, or she could be responding to an underlying query about her willingness to divorce her husband thus freeing herself for marriage to another. To obtain the divorce, Guðrún appears merely to have declared her intentions:

Þat sama vár segir Guðrún skilit við
Þorvald ok fór heim til Lauga.
(p.94)

No mention of dress or of any specific grounds for this action. Although the laws regarding such legal procedures initiated by women may not be as favourable as first thought (11), in the context of the *Íslendingasögur*, there are many examples of women successfully taking the first step. Vigdís in this saga is one who:

... sagði skilit við Þórð godða, ok
fór hon til frænda sinna ok sagði þeim
þetta. Þórðr gellir tók ekki vel á
þessu, því at hann var fyrirmaðr
þeira, ok var þó kyrrt.
(ch.16 p.37)

The declaration itself appears irrevocable since the kinsmen however displeased accept the situation as final.

George Johnston's note to his translation of *Gísla saga* illustrates the procedure for divorce:

The sagas seem to agree on regarding pre-Christian divorce as a legal form, consisting of a declaration to be made by either party in the presence of witnesses.

(12)

Guðrún could well have obtained her separation by this simple method - it is quite possible that Þorvaldr may have been glad to get rid of a difficult and expensive wife!

On the road to the Alþingi Guðrún, now a free woman, raises the subject with Þórðr using parallel terms. Þórðr appears to be in total ignorance of his wife's offending dress - *hann kvazk ekki hafa til þess fundit*. This implies that Guðrún had asked a rhetorical question; it is not Auðr's clothing she is interested in; Guðrún, now a free woman, wants some kind of reciprocal commitment from Þórðr. During the assembly, Þórðr again discusses the subject with Guðrún, this time it is he who appears in need of confirmation, assurance from her. He asks her advice on legal matters but it is difficult to convince us that this man, described as a *sakamaðr mikill* in Chapter Thirty-two, now needs the assistance of a young girl of about twenty in clarifying procedures in law. It is far more likely that, before he finally commits himself to this action, Þórðr wants to be sure that it will be worth it, that Guðrún will subsequently marry him. His wife is after all of a wealthy family and his action will cause some offence to her kinsmen. This time the grounds for the divorce are actually mentioned, but that does not eliminate the impression that it is just a device, a fabrication arranged

by Guðrún and Þórðr:

Here a woman is wrongly accused of having worn breeches, ie. men's clothing, and her husband uses the accusation as a pretext for divorce.

(13)

Almost immediately afterwards Þórðr arranges to marry Guðrún; there is no objection and we are told that this union *var góð*.

As already stated a law regarding this method of divorce has not been found. However, a point has been made about the use of laws by saga-writers in order to develop a conflict:

When a saga cites a law that is not found in, or contradicts, the medieval codices, we may assume one of two things: either that the saga law was indeed old but had fallen out of use by the medieval period, or that it never existed and was fabricated by the author to explain a conflict.

(14)

Maybe the writer of *Laxdoela* is invoking an ancient but unrecorded law, but he/she could also be exaggerating or embroidering certain aspects for his own literary purposes.

Auðr's brothers are angry at the insult to their kinswoman, but appear to do little about it. Auðr takes the matter into her own hands. She discovers when Þórðr is likely to be at home with few men around him and instructs her shepherd boy to prepare horses and to accompany her:

Smalasveinn gerði, sem hon bauð, ok
nökkuru fyrir sólarfall sté Auðr á
bak, ok var hon þá at vísu í brókum.
Smalasveinn reið öðrum hesti ok gat
varla fylgt henni, svá knúði hon fast
reiðina.

(p.97)

They arrive at Laugar and Auðr goes into the house, to the

bedcloset where Þórðr is still sleeping. She wakes him up and as he turns towards her, Auðr strikes him with a short sword and *varð hann sárr á báðum geirvörtum*. She leaves him badly wounded and rides home. Ósvífr finds the injured man, binds his wounds and when Þórðr identifies his attacker as Auðr, Ósvífr offers to pursue her. But Þórðr does not wish for vengeance:

Þórðr kvað þat fjarri skuldu fara;
sagði hana slíkt hafa at gört, sem hon
átti.

(p.98)

Because of the dilatoriness of her brothers, Auðr has been forced into the male role (symbolised by the trousers), avenging the insult to herself by the physical, violent means usually performed by men.

Of course this method of revenge neatly completes the literary pattern that has been emerging. Parallels have been developed which complement each other:

Moreover, not only do the grounds for the divorces (unseemly clothing) parallel one another, but also the matching of Aud's retaliation to Thord's device develops the comparison further.

(15)

Thus we have:

Guðrún/divorce - shirt exposing nipples - Þórðr's advice
Þórðr/divorce - men's trousers - Guðrún's advice

Auðr/vengeance - trousers/nipples

As a literary device, it is entertaining, it certainly catches the reader's attention. A circular effect has been created and Guðrún and Þórðr, the major participants are bound within that circle. This emphasises their close relationship, their collusion on the divorce issue, their

affection and compatibility. Auðr, the rejected wife, though she completes the circle with her action is outside the bond of affection. She has the reader's sympathy - and respect - for her attempt to regain her own self-esteem.

3. Guðrún and the killing of Bolli Þorleiksson.
ch.55 p.165-168

Blood vengeance for the death of Kjartan has been delayed due to the conciliatory attitude of his father Óláfr pái. Óláfr dies and his wife, Þorgerðr, is by no means so peaceful; she goads her sons on to avenge their brother. They choose a time and opportunity when they know that Bolli is alone with Guðrún in the shieling, his men having been sent about their tasks on the farm. When Bolli becomes aware of the men outside, he sends Guðrún away despite her protests. Guðrún leaves the shieling and:

Hon gekk ofan fyrir brekkuna til
loekjar þess, er þar fell, ok tók at
þvá lérept sín.

Bolli faces the attack and though wounded by Lambi Þorbjörnsson, it is Helgi Harðbeinsson who gives him the fatal wound. At Þorgerðr's instigation, Bolli is decapitated - much to her delight: *Þorgerðr bað hann heilan njóta handa.* Now Guðrún returns from the stream:

Guðrún gengr þá neðan frá loeknum ok
til tals við þá Halldór ok spurði,
hvat til tíðenda hafði görzk í skiptum
þeira Bolla. Þeir segja slíkt, sem í
hafði görzk.
Guðrún var í námkyrtli, ok við
vefjar-upphlutr þröngr, en sveigr
mikill á höfði. Hon hafði knýtt um
sik blæju, ok váru í mörk blá ok tröf
fyrir enda.
Helgi Harðbeinsson gekk at Guðrúnu ok
tók blæjuendann ok þerrði blóð af
spjótinu því inu sama, er hann lagði

Bolli í gegnum með. Guðrún leit til
 hans ok brosti við.
 Þá mælti Halldórr: 'þetta er
 illmannliga gört ok grimmliga.'
 Helgi bað hann eigi þar harma, - 'því
 at ek hygg þat,' segir hann, 'at undir
 þessu blæjuhorni búi minn höfuðsbani'.

Guðrún's dress itself is unusual by saga standards. Her tight *kyrtill* is made of *námdukr* - a kind of cloth; it seems likely the garment was made according to foreign customs. Falk believes that the large head-dress was some form of *krókfaldr* (16). The marks on the *blæja* could be taken as woven colour or as embroidery; *tröf fyrir enda* indicates a kind of fringe at the ends (17). Here we have an outfit which seems singularly inappropriate for washing clothes in a stream by a shieling.

Arent Madelung has examined Guðrún's actual activity on this occasion and previously when Bolli had set out to attack Kjartan. During the killing of Kjartan, Guðrún was employed in spinning twelve ells of cloth. According to Arent 'Guðrún's spinning tells us that she was under tension', not unlikely given her relationships with the two men involved. But in this later incident, in comparison - 'overtones of tenseness are completely lacking' (18). This is true to a certain extent. An aura of controlled calm seems to envelope Guðrún and her tight, formal dress contributes to this effect. Her almost casual walk to the scene, her quiet conversation with the killers, her controlled smile, her lack of reaction to Helgi's disgraceful gesture - all combine to produce an impression of dangerous, almost sinister control. But this in itself creates an air of tension and the sedate self-possession of

Guðrún contrasts strikingly with Þorgerðr's ruthless, unremitting hunger for violent revenge. This could suggest that Guðrún accepts the death of Bolli with little emotion. Bolli had himself commented previously that his death would not be a cause of great grief to Guðrún (ch.49 p.155). The atmosphere around Guðrún in this scene implies a patient, self-controlled character, but one who is fully aware of the injury done to her - even if that sense of injury owes more to family pride than to love of her husband.

Blæja appears to be a slightly problematical word, translated variously as 'sash', 'scarf', 'apron', 'cloth', (19). Cleasby and Vigfússon give the following meanings:

- | | |
|--------------|---------------------------|
| <i>blæja</i> | - a fine coloured cloth |
| | - a burial sheet |
| | - the cover of a bed |
| | - cover of an altar table |

It is not commonly found in the *Íslendingasögur*, though one other place springs to mind. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, Þorgunna's bedding includes *enskar blæjur*. When she is about to die she instructs Þóroddr to burn all the bedclothes *því at þat mun engum manni at nytjum verða* (p.142). Despite this warning Þuríðr, his wife, persuades him to let her keep certain items:

... en hon tók til sín kult ok blæjur
ok ársalinn allan
(ch.51 p.143)

It is after this that the hauntings begin to occur at Fróðá. Many die as a result including Þóroddr. Þorgunna's *blæja* as a part of the bedding plays a role in this. It is not until Kjartan has burnt it, along with all the remaining bed-furnishings, that the house is finally free

from supernatural influences.

Obviously it is the association with the Hebridean woman which endows the *blæja* with such fatal properties in this case. On the other hand in the *Poetic Edda*, *blæja* is also mentioned in connection with death. In *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma*, Brynhildr offers this item along with other precious objects to any of her women who will accompany her in death:

'Nú skolo ganga,	þeir er gull vili
oc minna því	at mér þiggja;
ec gef hverri	um hroðit sigli,
bóc oc blæio,	biartar váðir.'
	(20)

Guðrúnarkviða I has a *blæja* in the sense of a shroud, a covering for the corpse of Sigurðr:

Svipti hon blæio	af Sigurði
oc vatt vengi	fyr vífs kniám:
	(21)

These may be very tenuous links but they do seem to point to the possibility of *blæja* having some symbolic value associated with death or misfortune, especially as the author's use of it in the context of this scene in *Laxdoela* is extremely unusual if not unique in the *Íslendingasögur*.

Whatever the interpretation of *blæja*, Helgi's action of wiping his spear on it is not approved of by his companion Halldórr Ólafsson. We are enlightened regarding Helgi's prophetic comment in the following chapter when Guðrún gives birth to Bolli's son - the one who will eventually avenge his father's death by killing Helgi. Although this may appear to be an imaginative literary

device on the part of the author, it is thought that he may have used and elaborated upon a contemporary event. In *Þórðar saga kakala* (*Sturlunga saga*), Ásbjörn Guðmundarson, an unpleasant character kills a man and:

Síðan kom at Vigdís Markússdóttir,
kona hans. Ásbjörn þerrði sverðit
blóðugt á klæðum hennar, en hon bað
þeim margra fyrirbóna ok bað guð hefna
skjótt sína mótgerð.

(22)

This is taken to be a factual event which occurred in 1244. Einar Ól. Sveinsson thinks it is quite possible that the author of *Laxdoela* had heard about this incident and since it gave him an opportunity to introduce the prophecy he used it as a model, developing the facts according to his own style and imagination (23). There is no historical basis for this whole train of events in the tenth century setting of *Laxdoela*; Helgi Harðbeinsson is an entirely fictitious character and it entails 'an impossible chronology' (24) for Bolli Bollason to be involved in avenging his father in the manner described later by the author. We have here a technique which Carol Clover refers to as a 'material projection' - 'the reassignment in masked form of contemporary events to the tenth century' (25). She cites two examples; one is the burning of Njáll, the other this scene in *Laxdoela*. Apart from the physical action, another parallel between the event and the literary scene is the prophecy which is fulfilled in both cases - Ásbjörn drowns soon after killing Vigdís' husband.

On the other hand the version of *Þórðar saga kakala* which includes the motif of drying a weapon on a woman's

clothes occurs only in the *Króksfjarðarbók* manuscript; the *Reykjarfjarðarbók* version omits this dramatic detail (26). It may be that the presence of this incident in *Króksfjarðarbók* is due to the author elaborating, in a literary manner, on a more factual account (27). If this is the case, and since the written records of this incident are dated after 1275, then the writer of *Laxdoela saga* could not have been influenced by the supposed action of Ásbjörn as recorded in *Króksfjarðarbók*. It may in fact be that the latter text was itself influenced by *Laxdoela*, but it is also possible that both authors were independently using a traditional motif.

There is a certain ambiguity in Helgi's comment: 'that under this very sash lies the one who will take my life' (28). Generally it has been taken to refer to the unborn Bolli Bollason but the cloth is also wrapped around Guðrún and it is she who engineers the expedition against Helgi. She does in fact play a similar role to Þorgerðr. Guðrún's *hvöt*, her goading of her sons using the bloodstained garments of their father, drives them into action; it also recalls the manner of Bolli's death - men driven into action by a woman.

'Such conduct as Helgi's is otherwise known only from one passage in the whole of the saga-literature', states Einar Ól. Sveinsson (29). 'One passage' refers to *Þórðar saga kakala*, but there are two other texts that contain somewhat similar gestures. *Svarfdæla saga* relates a scene where Karl, who has just killed Yngvildr's sons, then wipes his bloodstained sword on her clothes:

... gengr síðan til Yngvildar, þerrir
nú sverðit eptir miðri skyrtu hennar

....

(ch.25 p.197-198)

Since Yngvildr is the prime object of his anger, the person he blames for the death of his father, his intention is to insult her, to dishonour her. Karl has bribed her husband to desert her, he has killed her sons - those who would have defended her reputation and now, wiping off the blood of her children, the insult is the harsher to her as she has no way of repaying it and thus of regaining her honour.

Svarfdæla saga has had an uncertain history. Sturla Þórðarson alludes to it in his *Landnámabók* so a version must have been in existence in the thirteenth century, before 1284. But unfortunately:

That early version was rewritten in
the extravagant style of the
fourteenth century but has otherwise
disappeared without trace.

(30)

Now it is only found in part from a fifteenth century text and also in incomplete 'modern copies'. The chances of some writer borrowing this motif from *Laxdoela* are fairly high; it could have been incorporated into the text at any date after 1245.

Kormáks saga presents a much milder form of this incident. Steingerðr and Kormákr have had a long standing though ill-fated love affair. Steingerðr is now married to Þorvaldr tinteinn. There has been some tension between Þorvarðr, her brother-in-law and Kormákr; Þorvarðr feels that Kormákr pays too much attention to the wife of his brother. It culminates in a duel between the two men which

Kormákr wins. Steingerðr has been watching the fight and afterwards Kormákr goes up to her and:

Hann þerrir af sér sveita á
möttulskauti Steingerðar.
(ch.22 p.286)

Hollander acknowledges this as a 'gesture symbolic of familiarity' (31). Again an insult to a woman by a man who has just defeated her kinsman. Though of course Steingerðr's sympathies were most probably with her old lover, Kormákr - a fact which this intimate action also hints at. However Kormákr is not, as with the previous two incidents, wiping blood from a weapon. Although *sveiti* can represent blood, this is more of a poetic sense which does not seem to apply here where the word would appear to mean 'sweat'. There is then quite a difference between this episode and the other two.

In all three cases occurring in the *Íslendingasögur*, the woman is the cause of the violent action preceding this motif. They have been deeply involved in the events which lead up to the conflict. Guðrún, in her taunting of Bolli, drove him to kill Kjartan which was in effect his own death sentence.

Kormáks saga is thought to have been written soon after 1200, but any influence on the author of *Laxdoela* is unlikely, the parallels are really too slight.

4. Helgi Harðbeinsson identifies his attackers.
ch.63 p.186-191

Guðrún enlists Snorri goði's help in organising vengeance for Bolli. He advises her to get Þorgils Hölluson to lead

the party which will include her sons, Bolli and Þorleikr. Because the death of some of the killers will raise unpleasant repercussions, Snorri suggests that Guðrún aim her attack at Helgi Harðbeinsson, making his accomplices pay by cunningly involving them in the attack.

Þorgils sets out with the Bollasynir and gathers the party together. As they approach Helgi's sheiling, they pause for a meal. Helgi's shepherd sees them, he rushes home and reports to his master. The boy describes in detail each man in the group, their clothes eg. *í blári kápu, í svörtum brókum, hekla blá*; and their physical characteristics - *tannberr, liðr á nefi, svarteygr*. As he recounts each description, Helgi identifies them. Saddles are also mentioned, jewellery such as a gold ring, a silver bracelet and on one occasion a weapon, an axe. Such an account is obviously out of character for a shepherd boy, even in a literary rather than an historical context. It is highly unlikely that he could recall such minute details, many of which (i.e. eyes, hands) he was too far away to observe. A literary device is being used here whereby members of a group are identified through their appearance and equipment by someone on the opposing side. It is:

... essentially a highly sophisticated
literary achievement, based on a
classic technique of story-telling
that stretches all the way back to
Homer.

(32)

In Book Three of Homer's *Iliad*, King Priam is watching the Greek warriors. He asks Helen about them and for each

one he makes some comment on their physical appearance. Helen, who knows them well, accurately identifies each man (33). *Laxdoela saga* was written at a period when the effects of the *riddara sögur* were beginning to be felt (34). Margaret Arent Madelung feels that this 'classic technique' was probably 'transmitted to him [the author] via the new courtly literature' (35). Certainly the description of some of the attackers appears indebted to a courtly, romantic tradition. Take the portrait of Bolli Bollason for instance:

Þar næst sat maðr í gyldum söðli; sá
var í skarlatskyrtli rauðum ok hafði
gullhring á hendi, ok var knýtt
gullhlaði um höfuð honum; sá maðr
hafði gult hár, ok liðaðisk allt á
herðar niðr; hann var ljóslitaðr, ok
liðr á nefi, ok nökkut hafit up framan
nefit, eygðr allvel, bláeygr ok
snareygr ok nökkut skoteygr,
ennibreiðr ok fullr at vöngum; hann
hafði brúnaskurð á hári, ok hann var
vel vaxinn um herðar ok pykkir undir
hönd; hann hafði allfagra hönd ok
sterkligan handlegg, ok allt var hans
látbragð kurteisligt, ok því orði lýk
ek á, at ek hefi engan mann sét
jafnvaskligan at öllu;

Kurteisi, a word of foreign origin associated with European tales of chivalry, is used three times overall by the shepherd boy in his report; it is echoed once by Helgi.

Piðreks saga af Bern has been suggested as a possible parallel or source for the presence of this technique in *Laxdoela* (36). Compiled sometime between 1230 and 1250, this saga is composed of various legends of Germanic heroes. Chapter 304 has Sigurðr relating to King Ísungr a scene he has just observed. Outside a magnificent tent are several shields, Sigurðr carefully describes each one. In

this case it is the author who interprets the descriptions:

Oc a enum yzta skilldi er markaðr
hestr oc biorn. þar hævir hann set
hæst skiolld Heimis.

.... oc a feorða skilldi er a markað
tong oc hamaR oc steðe oc eigi er sa
litill skiolldr. þar er skiolldr
Viðga.

(37)

In content these literary portrayals vary, but the concept is the same - individual identification of men within a group through details of their appearance, whether physical attributes, clothing or accoutrements.

As with the incident involving Guðrún's clothing there is a similar relationship between the description in *Laxdoela* and that of a group to be found in *Íslendinga saga*. In 1232 the Þorvaldssynir and their followers were attacked by Sturla Sighvatsson. They defended themselves inside a stackyard. Prior to the final attack this group of eight men are described as individuals, details of their personal characteristics are given (but not of their clothing) e.g. *eygðr vel, nefljótr nökkut, ljósjarpr á hár*. One of the brothers, probably a leader of the party is presented in a way reminiscent of Bolli Bollason:

Snorri var átján vetra. Hann var vænn
maðr ok ljóss á hár ok rétthárr ok vel
vaxinn ok kurteiss í ferð, hár
meðalmaðr at jöfnum aldri ok
fræknligr, heitfastr ok fagrordr ok
kallaði mjök sinn þá er hann talaði
við, ...

(38)

The attack by Sturla on these eight men is an historical fact but it is the author of this account, Sturla Þórðarson, who possibly decided to elaborate with

descriptive detail about each individual, perhaps concentrating on Snorri and his brother as they are the ones killed at Sturla's instigation. Sturla Þórðarson could have been influenced by *Laxdoela*, or he could be merely using a traditional, probably romantic, literary device.

Chapter Sixty-three of *Laxdoela* gives the author the opportunity to 'revel in forms and colours' (39). The party is a colourful one, each man in different dress. The presence of clothing in the shepherd's report is more in keeping with saga tradition than shields; it is actually the most realistic and credible element in the descriptions, the one thing most likely to be noticed and remembered by an observer. As the boy progresses from one portrait to another with Helgi naming each man, an air of tension, of suspense develops. Though expecting imminent conflict, the reader's attention is arrested and drawn to this ill-assorted group. We are reminded that these are individuals who would not normally consort together. As Helgi remarks at one point after identifying Lambi Þorbjarnarson:

'... ok veit ek eigi, hví hann er í
förl þeira broeðra.'

and regarding Þorsteinn svartr:

'... ok víst þykki mér undarligt, er
hann er í þessi fer ...'

This unnatural association adds to the sense of impending disaster and tragedy for Helgi.

Bolli Bollason is presented very much as the romantic hero at a point just before he performs his heroic deed -

avenging his father; and subsequently displaying his *kurteisi* in his magnanimity towards Helgi's son. Bolli is the only one in a *skarlat* garment, a more glamorous garment than any of the others have. His brother Þorleikr, wears a *gulgroenn kyrtill*, a fairly unusual item and his *kurteisi* is also remarked on by the shepherd. But the rest of the party are dressed in relatively ordinary clothes as far as dress in the family sagas is concerned:

blár kápa	fellikápa grá
blár kyrtill	hekla blár
svartr broekr	

This is certainly not in the same courtly class as Bolli whose costume and appearance are enhanced by the contrast in the descriptions. The whole episode appears to be devised by the author in order to add to the prestige of Bolli Bollason.

Investigating the element of dress in *Laxdoela saga* gives us some idea of the possible influences at work on the medieval author. A closer analysis of certain incidents illustrates the use of literary techniques, often in order to manipulate the response of the saga's audience. Einar Ól. Sveinsson feels that, on the whole, this saga 'seems to show a collection of subject-matter from various sources' which the author has extensively 'remodelled' - and this reflects the 'style', the 'artistic ability' of the writer as an individual (40).

NOTES

1. Einar Ól. Sveinsson concludes: ... *að sagan muni rituð einhvern tíma á árabílinu 1230-60 (og helzt litlu eftir miðbik þess) í Breiðafirði, ...* (Laxdoela saga. p.xxxiv).
 2. A. Margaret Arent Madelung. The Laxdoela Saga: Its Structural Patterns. p.157.
 3. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (ed). Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar. Heimskringla. ÍF 26 ch.52 p.301-302.
 4. A.C. Bouman. Patterns in Old English and Old Icelandic Literature. p.115.
 5. *Guðrúnarkviða I* is a very late Eddic poem. By examining possible influences T.M. Andersson places it in a chronological order in relation to other poems. He concludes that it postdates in composition *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*, *Sigurðarkviða in meiri* and *Guðrúnarkviða II*. (T.M. Anderson. The Legend of Brynhild. ch.3 p.108-120.)
- Although the *Codex Regius* dates from the late thirteenth century it was, according to Jónas Kristjánsson, 'copied from an exemplar at least some decades older'. (Jónas Kristjánsson. Eddas and Sagas. Trans. Peter Foote. p.26.) Any poem included in this manuscript is unlikely to have been composed as late as the period in which *Laxdoela* was written.
6. Gustav Neckel. Edda. Rev. by Hans Kuhn. st.9-10 p.203.
 7. A.M. Arent Madelung. op cit. p.157.
 8. Cleasby and Vigfússon.

brottganga (f)	-	departure
brottgangr (m)	-	brottganga
	-	a law term - divorce,
		Laxd. 134
brottgangs-sök	-	a divorce-case
 9. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed). Laxdoela Saga. ÍF 5 p.94. fn.3.

10. *ibid.* p.94 fn.3

'En í Grg.(Ib 203-4) segir svo: *Ef kona klæðisk karlklæðum eða sker sér skör eða ferr með vápni fyrir breytni sakar, þat varðar fjörbaugsgar . Þat er stefnusök ok skal kveðja til búa fimm á þingi. Sá á sök er vill. Slíkt er mælt um karla, ef þeir klæðask kvenna klæðnaði.*

11. Jenny M. Jochens. 'The Medieval Icelandic Heroine: Fact or Fiction?' In Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays. John Tucker (ed). p.115-117.

Jochens gives the three cases for divorce which are cited in *Grágás*:

1. 'if one of the partners inflicts serious wounds on the other'
2. 'because of poverty'
3. 'if the husband wants to take his wife out of the country'

These apparently were the only legal grounds for divorce. If a couple wished to divorce for any other reason it was necessary to approach the bishop and obtain his permission. It seems that he could be fairly lenient in these matters and a divorce could be obtained without too much difficulty. Þorvaldr did hit Guðrún but this could hardly be construed as a 'serious wound'. Jochens has examined *Sturlunga saga* in an attempt to determine how widespread divorce was in the thirteenth century. She concludes: '... and the dense *Sturlunga saga*, teeming with more married couples than all the literary sagas combined, contains only four cases of divorce.'

12. George Johnston (trans). The Saga of Gisli. p.72.

13. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen. The Unmanly Man: Concepts of sexual defamation in early Northern Society. Trans. Joan Turville-Petre. p.22.

14. Carol J. Clover. 'Icelandic Family Sagas.' In Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide. Ed. Clover and John Lindow. p.269.

15. A.M. Arent Madelung. *op cit.* p.69.

16. H. Falk. Altwestnordische Kleiderkunde. p.100.

17. Einar Ól Sveinsson. *op cit.* p.168 fn.3.

18. A.M. Arent Madelung. *op cit.* p.109.

19. sash - Magnusson and Pálsson (trans.) Laxdæla Saga. p.188
 scarf - A.M. Arent Madelung. op cit. p.108
 apron - Carol J. Clover. op cit. p.262
 cloth - Einar Ól. Sveinsson. 'The Icelandic Family Sagas and the Period in which their Authors Lived.' Acta Philologica Scandinavica. vol.13 1937-38 p.71-90.
20. G. Neckel. op cit. st.49 p.215.
21. ibid. st.13 p.204.
22. Jón Johannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn (ed). Sturlunga Saga. vol.2 ch.21(184) p.283 (supplementary fragment).
23. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. 'The Icelandic Family Sagas ...' APS. op cit. p.78-79.
24. ibid. p.79.
25. Carol J. Clover. op cit. p.262.
26. The sagas which make up *Sturlunga saga* are found in two fourteenth century manuscripts, *Króksfjarðarbók* and *Reykjarfjarðarbók*. It seems that *Þórðar saga kakala* was one of the texts which was 'abridged and a good deal revised' when it was included in this collection. (Jónas Kristjánsson. Eddas and Sagas. p.188, 198.)
27. In the *Króksfjarðarbók* version this incident is followed by two supernatural events - the appearance of a troll and then a great fire which burns at the bottom of the fjord. These would appear to be literary embellishments.
28. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson. op cit. p.188.
29. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. 'The Icelandic Family Sagas ...' APS. p.79.
30. Jónas Kristjánsson. Eddas and Sagas. p.244.
31. Lee M. Hollander (trans). The Sagas of Kormák and the Sworn Brothers. p.203.

32. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson. op cit. p.26.
33. Andrew Lang, Walter Leaf and Ernest Myers (trans). The Iliad of Homer. p.50-52.
34. See ch.1 Litklæði p.15-18.
35. A.M. Arent Madelung. op cit. p.210 n.9.
36. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed). Laxdoela Saga. p.xxxi.
37. Henrik Bertelsen (ed). Þiðriks saga af Bern. ch.304 (200) vol II p.2.
38. Jón Johannesson, Magnús Finnbogason and Kristján Eldjárn (ed). op cit. vol I Íslendinga saga. ch.84 p.351-352.
39. Marina Mundt. 'Observations on the Influence of Þiðreks Saga on Icelandic Saga Writing.' In Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference. p.344.
40. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. 'The Icelandic Family Sagas ...' APS. p.82-83.

CONCLUSION

The authors of the *Íslendingasögur* wrote within a genre which had many fixed literary techniques easily understood by their audience. Standard descriptions are frequent; set scenes regularly occur. The audience moved in the same sphere and culture as the writers did, within a relatively small geographical area. The *Íslendingasögur* were written over a limited period. Standard motifs, concrete images which expressed abstract emotions or aspects, could become familiar, easily recognisable to a contemporary audience. The writers could be fairly confident of their audience being able to perceive any subtle symbolism without much difficulty.

The saga-writer often indicates which context, i.e. heroic, Christian or romantic, is most prominent for the interpretation of the different phenomena. He provides signals through his vocabulary, through the presence of symbols other than clothes and through incidents which bear obvious comparison with ancient myths and legends.

It would be difficult to conclude after this survey of the literary significance of dress that one influence was notably stronger than another - in many ways the individual writers have been able to exploit creatively the various resources available to them. In some instances pre-Christian religion appears to have had a surprisingly significant effect, but often the most prominent influence appears to be based in the contemporary culture regardless of its original source. There are times when an episode

may seem to be an accepted literary device employed by one or more writers. In many cases once a number of related instances were gathered from the *Íslendingasögur*, the method of their use in each individual text, when studied as a collective whole served to elucidate those which, often through lack of detail, had at first appeared obscure or of little importance.

The chapters on colour illustrate the diverse sources from which the writers have drawn their material. White is particularly connected with Christianity whereas any possible meaning linked with green has entirely different origins, and symbolism associated with red and blue appears rooted in social or literary conventions. In general, colour in dress tends to illustrate character rather than appearing as an omen of future events.

Head-dress can also be an indication of aspects of a character though at times, as with colour, certain types of head-dress can be seen as signs of status. *Skópvengir* play a part in brief unfortunate incidents which contribute to characterisation when the men involved reveal their nature by their reactions - reactions which are often in accord with their social standing.

The five chapters grouped together as various examples of the unusual use of body clothing although concentrating on individual themes can occasionally be perceived to have certain points in common. The use of dress to demonstrate a wearer's grief for instance can be related to garments stained with the wearer's blood, as both represent sorrow

or damage to the owner of the clothes. Similarly the use of bloodstained garments has a connection with clothes which are presented as gifts; in both cases the items are being used in rituals which imply social responsibility and obligation.

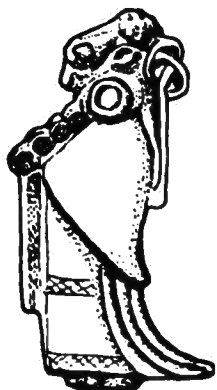
The section on clothing and the supernatural highlights the strength of influence exerted by pagan mythology on the *Íslendingasögur*. *Laxdoela saga* while demonstrating the subtlety with which a writer can use motifs involving dress, also shows how authors of the middle and late periods were increasingly influenced by romantic European literature.

Throughout this work each chapter provides its own particular conclusions according to the context and the analysis. Overall a study of this type is of value when certain incidents or descriptions, which seem on the surface to be either otiose or of little relevance to the text, can be provided with some form of interpretation or symbolism. It is by this means that their full significance within a saga can be more easily recognised by the twentieth-century reader.

APPENDIX

HEAD-DRESS

(Chapter Seven)



Silver-gilt pendant

Uppland, Sweden
8th century

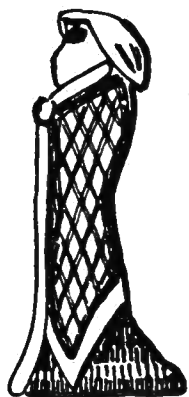
(Statens Historiska
Museum, Stockholm)



Silver figure

Klinta, Öland
8th century

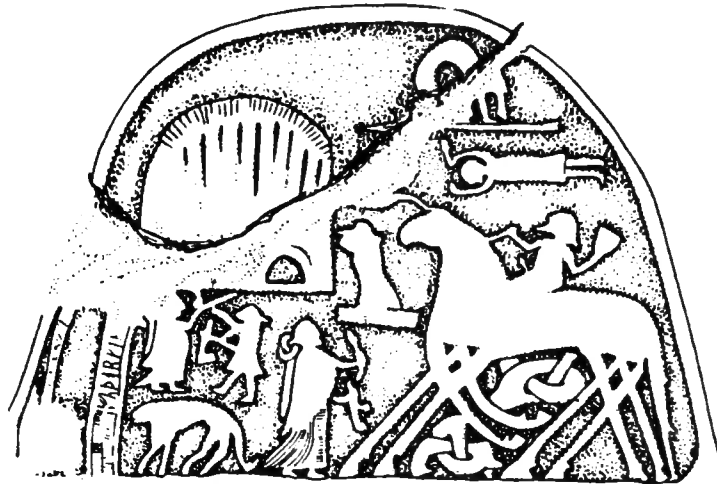
(Statens Historiska
Museum, Stockholm)



Oseberg Tapestry

Norway

(Illustrations from: 'Everyday Life in the Viking Age'
by Jacqueline Simpson. p.67, 198.)



Picture-stone. Tjangvide, Gotland, Sweden.

(Illustration from: 'Everyday Life in the Viking Age' by Jacqueline Simpson. p.195)



A bride with attendants.

From a vellum manuscript of Jónsbók dated the end of the 16th century. AM 345 fol.; fol. 19v.

(This illustration from: 'The National Costume of Women in Iceland' by Elsa E. Guðjónsson.)

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