

The Supernatural in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and the Fate of its Hero

1 Introduction

The inevitability of fate plays an immense role in the sagas of Icelanders. But the fate drives the lives of the heroes by means of different agents, more or less abstract or personified. The heroes are forced to “choose” the predetermined way because of the contemporary rules of conduct, dominated by the personal (and kin-related) honor which is more important to them than their life. So do their opponents and the conflicts are inevitable even if both sides try their best. Hidden emotions and passions force them to make mistakes that they often cannot atone for, because it would harm their reputation and honor.

One of the most evident factors disturbing the illusion of realism in the sagas of Icelanders are fantastic motives and supernatural elements. They appear more or less sporadically in the particular sagas, but seldom they have such an important influence on the fate of the hero as in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*. In this paper I would like to make an overview of the supernatural elements in *Gísla saga* and show how they assist in shaping the fate of the hero.

2 Grásíða

2.1 *The origin of the weapon and influence on the fate of the family*

The most prominent role in the first part of the story plays the magical weapon called Grásíða. The short version¹ of the saga actually does not dwell on the weapon more than really necessary. Here it plays a rather passive role of a plain tool, even though it already initiates a conflict because of its outstanding potency.

According to the Norwegian prelude to the saga, Grásíða was originally a magical sword.² It

1 The “short” and the “long” versions refer here (as usually) to the two main versions of the saga preserved mainly in the manuscripts AM 556 4to and AM 149 fol. / NkS 1181 fol. respectively. The main difference is in the first half of the first part of the story, especially the so-called “Norwegian prelude” to the main story of Gísli Súrsson.

2 This possibility is vehemently denied by scholars expecting the saga to be (in every detail) a realistic record of historical events. The main argument is that on a list of 176 ancient sword names there are only two more feminine names, which the author “rightly declares to be dubious” (Holtmark 1951, 14). On the other hand, the existence of a “real” spear Grásíða, attributed to Gísli Súrsson, seems to be well enough proven by its description in Sturlunga

was property of a thrall called Kolr. The sword was used by the older Gísli to kill a berserk that endangered the family by requiring their property and Ingibjörg, the wife of Gísli's brother Ari, whom the berserk killed first in a *holmganga* duel.³ When Kolr wants him to return the sword, Gísli denies and in the following conflict Gísli and Kolr kill each other. In addition, the sword breaks when hitting the head of its original owner.

Many questions immediately arise and the different versions of the text give us slightly different answers:

1. What is so special about the sword?

In the short version of the saga Ingibjörg tells Gísli that the sword guarantees victory in a battle: “þat fylgir því sverði, at sá skal sigr hafa, er þat hefir til orrostu.”⁴

In the longer version Kolr explicitly tells Gísli about the potency of the sword: “sverðit mun bíta þat, sem því er höggvit, hvárt sem er járn eða annat; má þat ok ekki deyfa, því at þat er dvergasmíði”.⁵

2. Where did a thrall get a magic sword?⁶

The shorter version gives no answer to this question.

The longer version reveals a little bit more about Kol's background: “hann var mikill at kyni. Hann hafði hertekinn verit ok var kallaðr þræll;”⁷

3. Why did the sword break on the head of Kolr, if it was supposed to cut everything?

The saga gives no answer to this question in either version. But the connection of magical

saga, corresponding well to the design of spears in the 9th century, according to Holtsmark.

3 Correspondence of the berserk Björn to a traditional monster in fairy-tales, medieval epic and romances is suggested by Anne Holtsmark (1951, 7).

4 *Gísli saga Súrssonar*, 5 (chapter 1)

5 *ib.*, 9 (the long version: chapter 2)

6 “...weapons are inevitably a commonplace in all saga narratives; at the most concrete level, physical possession was an indication of social status.” (Lethbridge 2006, 565)

7 *Gísli saga Súrssonar*, 5 (the long version: chapter 2)

weapons and their owners had been suggested by Anne Holtmark as Riti Kroesen shortly summarized:

I am inclined to agree with Holtmark that the thrall can well be a – more or less – realistic substitute for a dwarf. And if we see him as a dwarf, we can well imagine him to be the forger as well as the owner of the weapon. When it is used against him, it causes his death, but it is shattered at the same time. This reminds us of the monster that can only be killed by a weapon in its own possession.⁸

In the saga, Kolr is no dwarf, of course, but the longer version mentions that the sword is *dvergasmíði*, a product of dwarves. The speciality of Kolr is already enough implied by the facts that he is of “great” (but unknown and therefore more or less mysterious) origin and he is owner of a magical weapon whose potency does not fully apply when used against himself (at least according to the longer version).

The later influence of the magical weapon on the fate of the family arises clearly from the final sentences of the third chapter of the longer version, where dying Kolr explicitly states: “ok mun þó endir einn leystur vera um þá ógiptu, er yðr frændum mun þar af standa.”⁹ Here the weapon is explicitly cursed by its original owner (if we accept that he might be a person with mysterious capabilities), or at least its influence is predicted.

The short version reveals no direct influence on the following events, but as Riti Kroesen argues: “the association between dwarfs and curses must have been a rather common one,”¹⁰ Even though the short version does not even declare the sword to be a dwarf product, the connection of powerful magical artefacts and dwarfs, as well as their connection to the danger that those artefacts bring to their owners as some kind of compensation for their extraordinary power, is likely obvious too.¹¹ The longer version presents this connection even explicitly and in a rather rational way – Kolr

8 Kroesen 1982, 570; Lethbridge (2006, 570) also mentions the “implicit suggestion that Kolr himself possesses considerable supernatural powers”.

9 *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, 13 (the long version: chapter 3)

10 Kroesen 1982, 571

11 Dwarf curses, broken swords and/or cursed weapons appear in some other sagas too, as well as other cursed artefacts. Usually in *fornaldarsögur*, but sometimes also in the sagas of Icelanders. Sigurð's sword Grámr is not cursed, but the dragon's treasure is, and particularly the ring. (More on this in Kroesen 1982, 571) These motives

is afraid that Gísli will be unwilling to return the weapon¹² and he warns him of the consequences of not returning it to him, in advance:

“Þá mun þér fara sem ǫðrum um þá gripi, er gersemar eru undir, ok nennið þá eigi at láta af höndum. [...] En svá máttu til ætla, at mér mun illa hugnask, ef ek nái eigi þá sverðinu, er ek vil við taka.”¹³

Another narrative parallel between the Norwegian prelude and the main story of the saga, the motif of adulterous love, is only indirectly connected to the sword and appears only in the short version. Here Ingibjörg reveals to Gísli her feelings: “Eigi var ek af því Ara gipt, at ek vilda þik eigi heldr átt hafa.”¹⁴ This sentence is interpreted by both Anne Holtmark and Riti Kroesen outright as the fact “that she loved Gísli more than her husband Ari”,¹⁵ and that “she had wilfully sent Ari to his death.”¹⁶ However daring their statements are, it is evident that here we have a (more or less hidden) motif of possible adulterous love, which makes both protagonists partially guilty of the murder, and connects the prelude to the main story of the saga. This is of course no direct causal connection like the curse on the sword, but it is still a narrative anticipation of the main story, where adulterous love causes the central conflict. Riti Kroesen sees here the fulfillment of the “dwarf’s curse”.¹⁷ Anyway, this motif of an “initial sin” in the shorter version could possibly compensate for the motif of the curse on the weapon in the longer version.

2.2 The reforged weapon in the main story

There is no such a big difference between the short and the long version in the main part of the story anymore. Still, there are small discrepancies between them. The process of reforging the weapon is described in chapter 11 (according to the short version):

Maðr hét Þorgrímr ok var kallaðr nef. Hann bjó á Nefsstoðum fyrir innan Haukadalsá. Hann var fullr af gørningum ok fjölkynngi ok var seiðskratti, sem mestr mátti verða. Honum bjóða þeir Þorgrímr ok

appear again in the modern fantastic literature – first revived by Richard Wagner and eventually by J.R.R. Tolkien.

12 Like others who borrowed it before. But we do not know who borrowed the sword before and what happened to them.

13 *Gísli saga Súrssonar*, 9 (the long version: chapter 2). More on this topic in Lethbridge 2006, 568.

14 *Gísli saga Súrssonar*, 5 (chapter 1)

15 Holtmark 1951, 10

16 Kroesen 1982, 572

17 *ib.*

Þorkell til sín, því at þeir höfðu þar ok boð inni. Þorgrímr var hagr á járn, ok er þess við getit, at þeir ganga til smiðju, báðir Þorgrímarnir ok Þorkell, ok síðan byrgja þeir smiðjuna. Nú eru tekin Grásíðubrot, er Þorkell hafði hlotit ór skiptinu þeira bræðra, ok gerir Þorgrímr þar af spjót, ok var þat algørt at kveldi; mál varu í ok fært í hepti spannar langt. Nú verðr þar at hvílask.¹⁸

According to Lethbridge (2006, 572), the longer version mentions explicitly Þorgrímr 'Freysgoði' as the smith, while in the (here cited) short version the role of the smith is ambiguous. In any case, the presence of a wizard and the fact that a short 'haft' is fitted to the blade,¹⁹ not a usual long shaft used for spears, shows that the weapon is being reforged for some unusual and rather sinister purpose,²⁰ even more supported by the statement (not included in the long version²¹) that the three men *locked* (or *covered*) themselves into the smithy. The short version also mentions that the spear was *ornamented* (“*mál varu í ok fært í hepti*”), but nothing else is said about the meaning of this ornaments. According to Anne Holtsmark (1951, 16), “[t]he exact meaning of ON *mál*, n.pl., Ags. *mæl*, in weapons i[s] not quite clear. According to Hj. Falk they were ornaments which in swords were placed on the hilts, in spears on the socket, and they were supposed to give magic forces to the weapon.”²² Everything seems to suggest the sinister role of the weapon in the following story.

Grásíða is used in both the secret murder of Vésteinn and in Gísli's (secret) revenge on Þorgrímr. The more or less mysterious identity of Þorgrímr as Vésteinn's murderer is only presented by a chapter-heading in the shorter version, but explicitly given in the text in the longer version²³ and also mentioned in Eyrbyggja saga. However, the situation in the saga suggests that the murderer

18 Gísla saga Súrssonar, 37 (chapter 11)

19 See also Gísla saga Súrssonar, 38: footnote 2.

20 However, Anne Holtsmark (1951, 12-13) argues that the information about the length of the shaft suggests rather that the *author* of Gísla saga might had seen (and measured) the “real” weapon presented in Sturlunga saga as Grásíða (see footnote no. 2 on page 1). She also reminds us that “*málaspiót ekki mikit*” was used in the battle of Stiklastaðir in the Saga of St. Olave (Holtsmark 1951, 46-47).

21 Lethbridge 2006, 572

22 Somehow, she also comes to the conclusion that this means that the ornaments were present already in the *sword*, and only *preserved* while reforging the weapon, which is almost an impossible task and therefore another argument against the whole fable of a sword reforged into a spear. A more detailed explanation of the problematic term *mál* is presented in the edition of Íslensk fornrit (Gísla saga Súrssonar, 38: footnote 1).

23 Lethbridge 2006, 573

should be Þorkell rather than Þorgrímr.²⁴ The whole story between the murder and the revenge points nevertheless clearly to Þorgrímr. Grásíða, as the heirloom of the brothers Gísli and Þorkell, does not explicitly reveal the identity of the murderer, but keeps the responsibility inside the family. Gísli obviously cannot avenge Vésteinn by killing his own brother, anyway. The collective responsibility for the misdeed is already implied by the sinister act of reforging the weapon, where both Þorkell and Þorgrímr are present together with the wizard. In the murder of Þorgrímr, the weapon is again a clear proof that it is a deed of revenge. The weapon used and let in the wound also compensates partly for the explicit public declaration of the classical manslaughter (*víg*).²⁵ But no special sign of any further magical potency is given anymore.

3 The wizards

3.1 Þorgrímr nef

Þorgrímr nef is first presented in connection with the reforging of Grásíða. His role in this act is not closer specified though. He is then often present at Sæból, the farm of Þorgrímr goði, and he is also armed like Þorgrímr and Þorkell just after the first murder happens. This makes him a necessary companion in this group of the three responsible for the murder.

In the longer version of the saga, Þorgrímr nef is also explicitly made responsible for the storm on the night of Vésteinn's murder, drawing Gísli out of the house as consequence and giving the murderer the possibility to kill Vésteinn, who stays back in the house unguarded.²⁶

The third and most detailed description of the wizard's activity follows the murder of Þorgrímr:

Þat er næst til tíðenda, at Þorkr kaupir at Þorgrími nef, at hann seiddi seið, at þeim manni yrði ekki at björg, er Þorgrím hefði vegit, þó at menn vildi duga honum. Oxi níu vetra gamall var honum gefinn til

24 See the more detailed discussion in Holtmark 1951, 45-54.

25 In his notes to the English translation of *Gísli saga*, Peter Foote denies this in the case of the first murder, because (he thinks) the weapon in its new shape (i.e. as a spear) was unknown (*The Saga of Gísli* 1987, 74-75). This is in contrast to Anne Holtmark (1951, 45) who argues that Gísli hid the weapon as soon as possible, so that other people could not associate the murder with his brother Þorkell.

26 Lethbridge 2006, 573

þess. Nú flytr Þorgrímr fram seiðinn ok veitir sér umbúð eptir venju sinni ok gerir sér hjall, ok fremr hann þetta fjölkynngiliga með allri ergi ok skelmiskap.²⁷

The necessary attributes of performing magic are listed as well as evaluated according to the traditional point of view of the sagas of Icelanders: a nine-year-old ox and a scaffold (*umbúð*) are needed and the performance is done with all obscenity (*ergi*) and devilry (*skelmiskap*). However difficult it is to interpret these words, especially the last two, both of them have only the worst associations and are clearly offensive. Even though people in the sagas probably thought of the magic and wizards only in the worst, obviously it did not stop them asking the wizards for help.

The spell seems to be really effective or at least this is said in the saga:

Svá er sagt, at Gísli var þrjá vetr í Geirþjófsfirði, en stundum með Þorkatli Eiríkssyni, en aðra þrjá vetr ferr hann um allt Ísland ok hittir höfðingja ok biðr sér liðs. En sakar þess trollskapar, er Þorgrímr nef hafði haft í seiðinum, ok atkvæða, þá verðr þess eigi auðit, at höfðingjar tæki við honum, ok þó at stundum þætti þeim eigi svá ólíkliga horfa, þá bar þó alls staðar nokkuð við.²⁸

Wherever Gísli asks for help, there is always something that gets in the way, even though the chieftains “seem sometimes not so unlikely” to be willing to take up with him. But even the spells can be imperfect if declared imperfectly and so it is later explained why Gísli received most help from Ingjaldr in the Hergilsey island:

Ok þat hafa menn mælt, at Ingjaldr hafi Gísla mest veitt ok þat at mestu gagni orðit; ok þat er sagt, at þá er Þorgrímr nef gerði seiðinn, at hann mælti svá fyrir, at Gísla skyldi ekki at gagni verða, þó at menn byrgi honum hér á landi; en þat kom honum eigi í hug at skilja til um úteyjar, ok endisk því þetta hóti lengst, þótt eigi yrði þess á lengðar auðit.²⁹

Þorgrímr nef obviously forgot to include the islands and islets into his spell, when he cursed the murderer of Þorgrímr goði so that he should be unable to benefit from any help offered to him “here on the (main)land”. Somehow, this still does not mean that Gísli can be safe on the islands either, he just can hide himself there for a longer time than usually. Eventually, he must escape even from there and back to the mainland again.

27 Gísla saga Súrssonar, 56 (chapter 18)

28 Gísla saga Súrssonar, 69 (chapter 21)

29 ib. 84 (chapter 26)

3.2 Auðbjörg

Auðbjörg is presented in chapter 18 as sister of Þorgrímr nef. This already implies some consequences which are not explicitly presented yet. Her son gets into a quarrel with a man called Berg who hits him, but he cannot take revenge. The following is then told of his mother:

Kerling fær ekki sofnað um nóttina, svá var henni bimbult. Veðr var kalt úti ok logn ok heiðrikt. Hon gengr nokkurum sinnum andsælis um húsin ok viðrar í allar ættir ok setr upp nasarnar. En við þessa hennar meðferð þá tók veðrit at skipask, ok gerir á fjúk mikit ok eptir þat þey, ok brestr flóð í hlíðinni, ok hleypr snæskriða á bæ Bergs, ok fá þar tólf menn bana, ok sér enn merki jarðfallsins í dag.³⁰

Auðbjörg avenges for her son by invoking an avalanche (*snæskriða*, but in the last sentence a rock-fall – *jarðfall* – is mentioned!) which destroys Berg's house and kills 12 men inside. It is not said how people actually realize that this was caused by Auðbjörg's magic, but as consequence, Gísli must give shelter to Auðbjörg's son, while Börkr seizes Auðbjörg and stones her to death. Then Gísli does exactly the same with Þorgrímr nef, without any other explanation. Auðbjörg has no other influence on his fate, but obviously she plays some kind of symbolic counterbalance to her brother Þorgrímr nef in the conflict between Gísli and his enemies. This clash escalates the whole tension between both sides even further.

4 Prophetic dreams

Unlike the external supernatural factors in the first part of the story, the second part is dominated by Gísli's own prophetic dreams. The first dreams appear in connection with the murder of Vésteinn. At this time Gísli does not want to reveal them in advance, because he believes that he could avoid bad things to happen by not telling the dreams. But Vésteinn is murdered nevertheless and then Gísli reveals them.

When Gísli becomes outlawed, a special kind of prophetic dreams accompany all the rest of his life. He describes them in chapter 22:

„Ek á draumkonur tvær,“ sagði hann, „og er önnur vel við mik, en önnur segir mér þat nokkut jafnan, er mér þykkir verr en áðr, ok spár mér illt eina. En þat dreyndi mik nú, at ek þóttumk ganga at húsi einu eða skála, ok inn þóttumk ek ganga í húsit, ok þar kennda ek marga inni frændr mína og vini. Þeir sátu við elda ok drukku, ok váru sjau eldarnir, sumir váru mjök brunnir, en sumir sem bjartastir. Þá kom inn

30 Gísli saga Súrssonar, 59 (chapter 18)

draumkona mín in betri ok sagði, at þat merkði aldr minn, hvat ek ætta eptir ólifat, ok hon réð mér þat, meðan ek lifða, at láta leiðask forna sið ok nema enga galdra né forneskju ok vera vel við daufan og haltan ok fátœka ok fáráða. Eigi var draumrinn lengri.³¹

This dream incorporates a few quite diverse features: two women, one good and one bad, who become his dream-guides for the rest of his life and tell him what is going to happen; the prophecy telling him that he has still (or only) seven years of life in front of him; in addition, the good wife asks him to “give up the old faith, and not to have anything to do with magic or witchcraft, and deal kindly with the deaf and the halt and the poor and the helpless”.

The commandment of a new, obviously christian moral turns Gísli into the new kind of hero, not unlike some heroes of other sagas (Brennu-Njáls saga, Laxdæla saga,...) who are also influenced (and possibly changed) by the new faith in the middle of their own stories. The change of faith happens quite often at (or just behind) the peak of their life path. This makes a lot of sense for Gísli too: he is now outlawed and doomed to only defend himself against his furious enemies, until his unavoidable death. The inevitable compassion of the reader is a good opportunity to make him a kind of “martyr”, the new christian type of hero.

The other attributes of a christian hero are however less meaningful. He is told to avoid any magic or witchcraft, which has been already – more or less – in disfavour even in the pagan society.³² But he has had actually never before anything to do with any of the supernatural elements in the saga himself.³³ Somehow, all these magical elements still disappear from the rest of the saga in favour of the passive prophetic dreams. Gísli has actually no special dealings with any deaf or poor people, neither before nor after this moment.

The two women keep visiting Gísli in his dreams – the good one comforting him, the bad one torturing him with visions of blood. As the time of his death approaches, the good woman disappears and the bad visions intensify so much that he cannot sleep and one night he escapes with his wife and daughter, but they are easily traced by his enemies and Gísli is killed.

31 Gísli saga Súrssonar, 70 (chapter 22)

32 At least as long as we can trust to the christian narrators of these sagas.

33 Except of using the spear Grásíða in his revenge, but there it stands out as “the weapon used to commit the original murder” rather than a magical weapon.

Although the dreams reveal to Gísli his fate, they do not affect it themselves in any essential way nor do they help him to avoid it. Even though he escapes (together with his wife and daughter) to his hiding-place for the last night, they leave clear traces in the grass. The dreams are only visions of the fate, no active agents in the realization of the fate. According to Emily Lethbridge, there is also “hardly any variation at all in the versions' treatment of the two supernatural women...”.³⁴

5 Conclusion

There is a clear difference between the first and the second part of the saga even with regard to the supernatural elements. The second part is almost a single-threaded story (the killing of Gísli's brother Þorkell being the most important excursion), it is more compact and there are just insignificant variations between the versions, compared to the first part. The supernatural is reduced to relatively passive dreams which make the narration more colourful and thrilling but do not affect the fate of the hero in any significant way. Therefore the second part has attracted much less attention in the secondary literature as well.

On the other hand, the first part of the story is much more complex. The supernatural elements here are integral and active part of the *plot* itself – they are agents in the plot and affect more or less directly the fate of Gísli. Maybe, they are less outstanding in the narrative *form* of the story, on the other hand. The first part is also much more affected by the variability of the text:

The more frequent and pointed references to fate that are found in the shorter version particularly alert us to this dynamic, structural principle, whilst the longer version explicitly highlights the link between Grásiða and the doomed fate of the Súr family through the expression of Kolr's curse.³⁵

The long version also boosts the role of the supernatural factors and especially the *curse*, while the short version concentrates more on the inevitability of the fate. Still, even Kolr's “curse” is pronounced in a way virtually identical to a common prophecy. In a world where the destiny is given in advance it is hard to make a difference between active agents and passive predictions anyway.

34 Lethbridge 2006, 572

35 Lethbridge 2006, 573

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