



## The Life of an Icelandic Outlaw: A Comparative Analysis of *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga*

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The title of this essay contains something that is close to an oxymoron. An outlaw is someone who is basically doomed to die, so every day of his life can be interpreted as protraction of death. The life of an outlaw is, however, also entirely unnatural for other reasons. It is a commonplace since Aristotle to refer to a human being as a ζῷον πολιτικόν – yet the term ‘outlaw’ comes very close in meaning to a ζῷον ἀπολιτικόν.<sup>1</sup> There are two interrelated results of the sentence of outlawry on the individual that justify such an interpretation: (i) the prohibition of the continuation of social relations and (ii) the deterioration of the individual psyche due to exclusion from society. It is these aspects of outlawry that I will consider most closely in my interpretation of two literary representations of an outlaw. Additional topics that will be addressed because they are vital for the understanding of these texts and their treatment of outlawry are the reason why the respective hero becomes outlawed, his struggle for survival, the episodic nature of his adventures, the influence of the supernatural, and his poetry.

This essay discusses two texts which are commonly cited as the main ‘outlaw sagas’:<sup>2</sup> *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*.<sup>3</sup> I will compare them with the focus on the above outlined perspective, which is particularly fruitful as the two sagas differ in several respects, offering two complementary angles from which the life of an outlaw can be seen and interpreted. To provide the required framework for reading the sagas, I will start with a brief discussion of the legal, the historical, and the literary situation of an Icelandic outlaw in the tenth century.

The early Icelandic jurisdiction in the so-called Commonwealth period (c. 930-1260) knew very few methods for the punishment of convicts. There were of course no prisons, but there was no executive power either that could, for instance, inflict the death penalty. The main two options of punishment were fines and outlawry. The latter sentence consisted in the exclusion of the convict from society and from the protection offered by its laws; furthermore, people within the law were forbidden to help, feed, or harbour outlaws. The penalty existed in two versions: ‘lesser outlawry’, which had a limited duration of three years, and ‘full outlawry’, which did not terminate unless the outlaw managed to kill three other outlaws.<sup>4</sup> As I said above, full outlawry effectively meant either banishment from Iceland or death. Outlaws were not merely constantly struggling for survival – a major factor inciting them to further crimes such as thieving – but were also often hunted down by a revenging party, who could kill them with impunity.

The real situation of outlaws was of course a bit different. The law could not effectively prevent the family and kin of an outlaw from supporting him, offering him food,

<sup>1</sup> cf. Hastrup 292

<sup>2</sup> e.g. cf. Ólason (1998): 75; I include the year of publication in the short citation only when my bibliography contains more than one work by the same author.

<sup>3</sup> Henceforth abbreviated as *Gísla* and *Grettis*; all references are to chapter rather than page numbers.

<sup>4</sup> There was no restriction to the duration of 20 years as stated in *Grettis*, cf. chapter 77.

shelter, and – most importantly – human company. However, it was not only an outlaw's family and friends who protected him but very often also local chieftains (*góðar*) or rich farmers, who, in return, used him to carry out farmwork or – more sinisterly – to kill off their enemies. It can thus be seen that the legal institution of outlawry, arising more out of necessity than judicial consideration, was actually neither observed to the point nor did it protect society from dangerous criminals – quite to the contrary, no-one had better reasons to commit crimes than an outlaw.

Such a precarious *sui generis* form of human life of course attracted the attention of the saga writers, not least because it tied in with heroic and tragic motifs that lent themselves to literary exploitation. In contrast with the bulk of sagas that deal with the fate of a whole family (perhaps over several generations) often involving feuds, outlaw sagas centre on one main hero. In both *Grettis* and *Gísla*, this character is rendered very complex and has both positive and negative character traits. He is not entirely likeable, but the peculiar circumstances of his life encourage the reader to sympathise with him.<sup>5</sup> It goes without saying that the bulk of the saga narrates the life of the hero while he is outlawed, but the careful build-up of the action until that point and a resolution in the end after the catastrophe are integral parts of the saga as well. The inevitability of the hero's death adds a fatalistic touch to the whole story, which influences the psyche of the protagonist considerably and will be discussed at length with regard to the two texts. Finally, the required existence of an avenging party that tries to kill the hero ensures the dramatic build-up of the action between the protagonist and his antagonist(s). Thus the death of the hero becomes a necessity also from the point of view of the internal logic of the narrative structure.

*Gísla saga* has unanimously been praised for its elegant structure, which is reflected in the equally symmetrical familial relations of the main characters resulting in what I would call a perfect and necessarily disastrous dilemma.<sup>6</sup> I want to emphasise in particular the parallel obligation that Gísli has towards the victim Vésteinn and the alleged murderer Þorgrímr:<sup>7</sup> both are brothers-in-law to him, and despite his duty towards Vésteinn as his blood-brother, the decision he has to make between them is essentially also one between his sister Þórdís and his wife Auðr. Yet both these women will find themselves in exactly the same predicament in the course of the saga: Þórdís will have to decide between her brother and her (dead) husband and Auðr between her husband and the sons of her brother. In one of his verses,<sup>8</sup> Gísli addresses this problem by referring to Guðrún of heroic legend, who even killed her children to avenge her brothers.<sup>9</sup> All three characters in *Gísla*, however, choose their spouses.<sup>10</sup> Yet Gísli not only reproaches his sister but also realises his own inability to escape from evil fate as early as Þorgrímr's refusal to join the blood-brotherhood.<sup>11</sup> Gísli's doom is from the very beginning marked as both fatal and fatalistic.

In *Grettis*, the situation is a bit different. Grettir is not merely the victim of ill chance and an inescapable conflict of opposing obligations.<sup>12</sup> The reader can foresee his becoming an outlaw from very early on because several of his character traits are simply not fit for society: even as a child, he is said to be 'mjög ódæll [...], fátalaður og óþýður' (*Grettis* chapter 14); consequently, his killings for negligible reasons start very early (cf. chapter 16), he is cruel to animals (cf. chapter 14), and he is very revengeful. Grettir is more like the protagonist of a tale from the heroic age; he has no place in post-Christianised society. The sentence of

<sup>5</sup> Note that the sagas therefore implicitly question the law by inviting a positive attitude towards a convict.

<sup>6</sup> cf. Meulengracht Sørensen 235-237, 242-245

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the problematic status of Þorgrímr as a murderer who basically has no personal motive, cf. Kroesen 386-389.

<sup>8</sup> cf. *Gísla* chapter 19

<sup>9</sup> cf. Ólason (1999): 167

<sup>10</sup> However, cf. Þórdís' divorce from her second husband Börkr as an exception from this rule.

<sup>11</sup> cf. *Gísla* chapter 6

<sup>12</sup> cf. Ólason (1998): 186-190

outlawry seems not really disastrous for him because it rather provides a possibility for this character, who is so awkwardly out of place in the society he lives in, to become a tragic hero of great renown. It is, then, an ironic touch that Grettir is denied such a fateful situation as the one that Gísli finds himself in: his one deed that actually leads to his becoming an outlaw is unintentional and rather the by-product of a great feat of strength that belongs to a different thread of the story.<sup>13</sup> He does not even know the people whom he accidentally burns to death.

Both saga heroes survive exceptionally long as outlaws. About Grettir the saga even tells us that ‘hann hefir verðið lengst í sekt einnhver manna’ (*Grettis* chapter 93). Gísli spends thirteen years as an outlaw, of which only the last seven years are narrated in detail. From this time onwards he starts having prophesying dreams. This period is characterised by an alternation of ‘action sequences’, in which he travels around Iceland trying to escape Eyjólfur’s men, and his stays with Auður, where he is comparatively safe but haunted by his dreams. The description of Grettir’s life as an outlaw is of course much longer – simply because the saga itself is much longer – but not dissimilar in its structure. Grettir becomes a traveller through Iceland and never stays long in one place, not even in the almost Arcadian Þórisðalr. He still accomplishes heroic deeds, such as the killing of the Troll-woman at Bárðardalr, but his fear of the dark incurred through Glámr’s curse grows worse – as do Gísli’s dreams – and he is overcome in the end more by magic than by his pursuer Þorbjörn öngull.

The Bárðardalr-scene is exceptional because it is perfectly dispensable with regard to the main plot; it could easily be taken out of the saga altogether. It adds three elements: (i) the supernatural encounter with trolls, (ii) another opportunity for Grettir to prove that ‘hann var sterkastur á landinu’ (*Grettis* chapter 93), and (iii) his only son, whose premature death underlines that Grettir and his like are not part of the world they are living in any more. All these three aspects belong rather to the older heroic age, and it may well be that they were inserted into the saga to reflect the older oral tradition.<sup>14</sup> In particular, Grettir’s fight with the troll-woman is reminiscent of the encounter between Beowulf and Grendel’s mother in the much older Anglo-Saxon epic.<sup>15</sup>

On the whole, there is a great variety in the individual episodes between high seriousness of tone and characterisation and burlesque comedy. The stark contrast between the Ingjaldr-episode and the immediately following Refur-Álfdis-scene in *Gísli* has been discussed critically because of the harsh fall from a situation that allows Ingjaldr to say, ‘Eg hef vond klæði og hryggir mig ekki þó að eg sliti þeim eigi gerr’ (*Gísli* chapter 26), which belongs to the repertoire of high tragedy,<sup>16</sup> to the entirely comic camouflage in Refur’s hut with the stock motif of the quarrelsome wife. In *Grettis*, there is no place for high tragedy because especially in his poetry Grettir always has a slightly sarcastic attitude towards the situation he encounters but also to his life in general. There are several episodes which, despite the dangerous experience they narrate, tend more towards the ironic, such as Grettir’s stay with the sworn brothers (cf. *Grettis* chapter 50) or his rape of the servant-woman (cf. chapter 75).

Yet despite the ironic undertones, both sagas manage to convey the bitterness of the heroes’ struggle for survival. There is poignancy in the statement that Gísli ‘hefur hvergi verið jafnvel gert við hann í sektinni sem þar’ (*Gísli* chapter 23), referring to Thorgerdr, who is neither of his kin nor a wealthy woman. In *Grettis*, on the other hand, the author expands on the cruel law that outlaws are received back into society only when they kill three other outlaws. Grettir, who can no longer bear solitude, spends three successive winters with fellow

<sup>13</sup> cf. *Grettis* chapter 38

<sup>14</sup> I argue here in analogy to *Gísli*, of which it has been said that some of its episodes reflect folk tradition, cf. Foote 18.

<sup>15</sup> cf. de Looze 88

<sup>16</sup> cf. Foote 18

outlaws who betray him (cf. chapters. 55-56); yet despite their artful treachery, they do not come across merely as base villains because the very wretchedness of Grettir's existence makes their attempt to escape from outlawry very understandable to the reader. An outlaw who is on his own is truly forlorn.

Neither Gísli nor Grettir are entirely forsaken, and it is vital to consider their social relations in detail. In fact, the social situation of the two characters is very different. As Campbell says, '*Gísla* certainly is the story of Gísli [sic!], but its context is his family' (Campbell 242). Gísli's relationship to his family is of course severely damaged because they are all involved in his fate. It is understandable that Þórdís does not support him, but he is still very disappointed about her behaviour when he says, 'hef eg stundum lagt líf mitt i háska fyrir hennar sakir en hún hefur nú gefið mér dauðaráð' (*Gísla* chapter 19). The crucial character, however, is Þorkell, who clearly sympathises with his brother (e.g. when he conceals his guilt by removing the frozen boots, cf. chapter 17) but lacks the courage to help him in a way that would lead himself into danger. Four times Gísli asks his brother for protection (in chapters 19, 20, 23, and 24), and four times he is sent off again with counsel or equipment. Especially at the third parting, '*Gísla þykir fyrir er*' (ch. 23), i.e. he is downcast. The saga depicts Þorkell from early on as a weak man, but his behaviour towards Gísli is not entirely unjust in light of his close friendship with Þorgrímr. Gísli's tragedy is that his enemies are within his own family.

However, he is unconditionally supported by his wife Auðr. The saga's depiction of and focus on marital love is extraordinary in Icelandic saga literature and owes much to continental romance. Although the *Gísla* is set in the early years of the Commonwealth period, Auðr acts much more in accordance with Christian ideas of womanhood than with the old motif of the wife as the inciter of revenge. This is particularly evident in her encounter with her nephews after the murder of Þorkell. She comes across as a wise woman who knows exactly how to mediate not only between her husband and her nephews but also between the various obligations of the traditional code of conduct that would lead to ever greater bloodshed. On the whole, the characters' awareness of the intrinsic problems of blood revenge is strikingly post-heroic and post-heathen.

Grettir, conversely, is on good terms with his family – especially with his mother – and even avenges his brother Atli while he is outlawed. His younger brother Illugi's support of him offers a contrasting picture of fraternal love compared to Gísli and Þorkell. However, Grettir has no long-term relationship with any woman; he is no lover, nor is he ever loved. It seems that Grettir himself has not yet acknowledged the advent of love replacing honour as the highest ideal that accompanied the conversion to Christianity – albeit only gradually. This is perhaps not surprising as Ásdís, Grettir's mother, acts very much in accordance with heroic ideals. From very early on in his life, he becomes accustomed to old values of masculinity. Thus although the saga is very much concerned with the complex character of Grettir, we get a much less emotional picture of him than of Gísli, whose profound melancholy at his dissociation from his family is mentioned frequently.<sup>17</sup>

The social relations of Grettir beyond his family reflect his importance as a hero. He enjoys the support of important chieftains and remains respected as a hero until his death. This is of course the result of his frequent feats of strength and his deeds against supernatural enemies, which seem to be unconquerable by anyone else. These heroic acts increase his honour in spite of his many petty crimes of thievery and ensure that for significant periods of his life as an outlaw he is protected by a benevolent patron (e.g. by Þorsteinn and Grímr, chapter 53). Despite the strict law, such a behaviour of important people towards particularly prestigious outlaws was certainly in agreement with the real situation in Iceland. Gísli could

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<sup>17</sup> cf. de Looze 87-88

also have counted on similar support had it not been for Þorgrímr Néfr's curse that prevented him from getting long-term assistance on the mainland.<sup>18</sup>

Overall, magic as depicted in the two sagas has mostly negative influences on the outlaws. While Néfr's spell bereaves Gísli of support from other people, Glámr's curse makes Grettir afraid of the dark. Both these intrusions of the supernatural enhance the heroism of the respective protagonist because it is implied that he cannot be overcome by mundane forces. This is particularly true of Grettir: it needs not only his unnatural fear of the dark but also the curse of Þurídr and his subsequent poisoning to weaken him sufficiently so that he can be attacked. In spite of Grettir's being a mere shadow of his former self, Þorbjörn öngull and his men have to exert the utmost of their strength to kill him. Yet through this shameful murder, Grettir's honour is infinitely increased even though he dies an outlaw; magic thus also seems a necessary device to allow the hero to achieve a glorious last stand in spite of his entirely lawful killing.<sup>19</sup>

Gísli is also afraid of the dark because of his dreams, which prophesy his death. A lot of critical debate has dwelled on these dreams because they are so exceptional.<sup>20</sup> This is obviously not to say that dreams as such were an uncommon motif in Icelandic literature; quite to the contrary, Turville-Petre points out that '[i]n no literature are dream-symbols more sophisticated, nor their interpretation more subtle and intricate' (Turville-Petre 30). It is the emphatically Christian motif of the good and the evil spirit fighting for the soul of the protagonist that seems so out of place – it is heavily influenced by medieval literature of Christianised European countries, in which this theme was extremely popular. The way the dreams are narrated is also extraordinary and offers insights into Gísli's character. First of all, he mentions his dreams only to his wife in an intrinsically private setting that is uncommon to the sagas in general. Furthermore, most of the descriptions of the dreams are cast in verse, which lends them particular emphasis. The very personal nature of the dreams has led many scholars to believe that they were composed by the historical Gísli.<sup>21</sup> It is particularly the bad dream woman who influences Gísli so heavily that he becomes more and more depressed; the certainty of his death at a given point in time together with the gory scenes shown to him by her (which seem to prefigure hell) inevitably lead to Gísli's psychic deterioration. Death appears not only as the logical result, but also as a kind of liberation.

Grettir's poetry likewise contributes to his characterisation. However, there is always a focus on eloquence and masculine boastfulness which prevents Grettir from expressing his emotions quite as frankly as Gísli does. In the two verses he speaks to the servant-woman that mocks his penis size (cf. *Grettis* chapter 75), one gets the impression that he is deeply hurt in his masculinity, but his pride rises immediately to smother his emotions and turns the poems into bragging assertions of his sexual potency while showing off his poetic skill by using five (!) kennings for the object in question: 'sverd', 'atgeirr', 'eyleggjar Freyja', 'hreðja kvistr', and 'faxi'. His last five verses (cf. *Grettis* chapter 80) – his farewell speech as a poet – recount several heroic events of his life which were not narrated in the saga itself while the last verse anticipates his death through Þurídr's magic; yet the impression he gives is that of stoic acceptance of his fate. Although he suffers terrible pain because of his leg-wound, he does not reveal his emotions. They only come through at the very end when he calls on his brother to protect him; thereby he hints at the true tragedy of his life as an outlaw, namely lack of solidarity and loneliness.

*Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga* both deal extensively with the highly problematic legal system of outlawry. Their point of view is that of the outlaw, but they are not uncritical

<sup>18</sup> The author is slightly inconsistent when he claims that Ingjaldr is exempted from this curse as he lives on an island because Gísli enjoys similar help from Þorgerdr, cf. ch. 23.

<sup>19</sup> cf. Hawes 47-48

<sup>20</sup> e.g. cf. Foote 27-31, Lönnroth 458-463, Turville-Petre 137-142

<sup>21</sup> cf. Foote 22ff, Turville-Petre 136-148

towards him. The guilt of Gísli and Grettir for their crimes is unquestioned, yet the impression that justice has been achieved through their outlawry is never conveyed. However, neither saga author invites judgement; they only try to describe. As the protagonists themselves as well as the situations leading to the pronouncement of their punishment are very different, the sagas offer two different perspectives that, taken together, draw a quite detailed picture of the life of an outlaw.

This picture is a bit brighter than the one outlined by the law. Still, both Gísli and Grettir experience severe depression as well as estrangement from their fellow human beings due to their life as outcasts. In a psycho-analytical reading of the sagas, one could abstract Gísli's dreams and Grettir's fear of the dark from their supernatural origin and interpret them as entirely understandable reactions that reveal the inhumanity of outlawry.<sup>22</sup> Both protagonists turn into tragic heroes: Gísli becomes the victim of 'ógæfa' (i.e. misfortune),<sup>23</sup> whereas Grettir becomes the victim of his own temperament.

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<sup>22</sup> cf. Poole 4ff

<sup>23</sup> cf. Ólason (1999): 168

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