

From Iceland to Norway: Essential Rites of Passage for an Early Icelandic Skald*

It is common knowledge that Iceland was established as a largely Norwegian settlement in the last decades of the ninth and the first decades of the tenth century. Modern studies of the settlement of Iceland and its relations with Norway during the early Middle Ages have sometimes stressed continuities, sometimes discontinuities, between the two communities. From a modern, empirical perspective, the two societies' similarities in terms of language, beliefs, and social customs are striking, and yet as we know, Iceland very quickly differentiated itself from its parent society in a number of important respects, in land ownership and the transmission of property, in law, in political organization, in language, and in many other ways. In much Old Icelandic literature an ideology of difference from the Norwegian parent society is clearly articulated, and is conveyed through a number of frequently used themes, some of which betray a highly ambivalent attitude on the part of Icelanders to Norwegian culture. Not surprisingly, given that Iceland was unique in medieval Europe in not being ruled by kings, representations of monarchy and courtly society in Old Icelandic literature, especially the Norwegian examples of these institutions, are of phenomena that are fundamentally foreign and un-Icelandic (Sørensen 1993, 122). However, the extant literature also reveals an intense fascination with courts and kings (Jakobsson 1994) as well as a strong suspicion of them, especially when Icelanders themselves try to act like kings or on behalf of kings (Taylor 1997).

Although a negative view of Norwegian courtly culture is entirely understandable in the context of the very real political threat of a Norwegian take-over of the Icelandic commonwealth in the first half of the thirteenth century, when a

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large number of Icelandic literary works were taking shape, there is a greater complexity to the Icelandic attitude to Norway, as revealed in the extant literature, than the political situation alone can explain. In a number of important respects, Icelandic identity — what it was to be an Icelander — was measured and defined against what are projected as Norwegian values and customs. In Icelandic writings the worth of Icelanders and Icelandic culture is often measured by the extent to which Icelanders are shown to be able to cope with Norwegian society on terms that the Icelanders themselves are able to lay down, even as strangers at court, where they are frequently depicted as beating the Norwegians at their own game because they play by different, Icelandic rules. Indeed Old Icelandic literature inscribes conflicting and contradictory attitudes to Icelandic-Norwegian cultural relations of a kind that colonial societies often express towards a parent culture.

The main purpose of this article is to investigate the Icelandic cultural attitudes that underlie the representation of the relationship between Iceland and Norway in a medieval narrative which presents a rite of passage undergone by an Icelander who made the transition from Iceland to Norway to further his career. The Icelander in question is the young skald Sighvatr Þórðarson. A second topic that emerges in the investigation is the cultural status and importance of poets and poetry in medieval Iceland. The two topics intersect and are personalized in the narrative through the figure of Sighvatr himself, a young Icelander who succeeds in becoming the chief court poet of Norway's great Christian missionary king and royal saint Óláfr Haraldsson. The explicit focus of the story is upon Sighvatr, not upon King Óláfr, but all extant versions of it form part of a much longer saga, whose focus is upon the king, Christian conversion, and Norwegian polity, and there are several underlying concerns of the narrative that mesh with the saga's main themes and cannot be ignored in our reading of the Sighvatr story.

The figure of the young, upwardly mobile Icelandic man who wants to venture into the big, wide world, with Norway usually his first port of call, is commonplace in Icelandic sagas and forms the standard plot type of many examples of the Icelandic genre of the *páttr* (Harris 1976; Lindow 1993). Typically, the journey from Iceland to Norway involves risk, but, if it pays off, it tends to do so handsomely. Sometimes, it is true, there are problems for young Icelanders when they return home, particularly if they have behaved badly while they were in Norway, from the point of view of their women back in Iceland, by becoming sexually involved with foreigners. The protagonist of the narrative analysed here is a skald, a young man whose profession more or less requires him to travel to Norway to make his reputation. In terms of the values attached to the concepts "Iceland" and "Norway" in Old Icelandic literature, as we shall see, the professional Icelandic poet occupied a paradoxical position, which this story explores. The paradox turns on that fact that Icelanders appear to have become acknowledged specialists in the courtly and elitist art of skaldic poetry, yet they did not grow up in a courtly environment. On the contrary, Iceland was, from the perspective of Norwegian

courtly values, provincial and retarded, and it is the Norwegian perspective that dominates this narrative when we see it in its full context.

The two topics of Icelandic-Norwegian relations and the superior cultural status of Icelandic poets convey opposed messages in the *Sighvatr* narrative, and they are partly resolved, as they are typically in Icelandic *þættir*, and in some sagas, by an argument of individual exception to a rule. The rule, as enunciated by the first topic, Icelandic-Norwegian relations, is one of what modern Australians call “cultural cringe.” It presumes that the colonial periphery (Iceland in this case) is inferior to the cultural centre (Norway), just as in Australia many people felt in the past that local culture had to be inferior to that of the British “motherland” from which Australia’s dominant culture historically derived. A similar presumption can be found in much Old Icelandic writing, where Norway is conceded to be superior to Iceland in political power and closeness to the centres of medieval European religious and intellectual movements. However, individual Icelanders, especially upwardly mobile young Icelandic men, are, on a case-by-case basis, represented as better, cleverer, and more gifted than any individual Norwegian, except perhaps the Norwegian king, against whom they frequently measure themselves. Their special talent thus enables them as individuals to be successful in Norwegian society, even though they come from the cultural margin.

This stereotype, or myth, as I see it, is in large part a salve to Icelandic self-respect. It is also a literary device of some power, which enabled medieval Icelandic authors to write about their own culture in relation to that of their politically more powerful neighbour, Norway, without too great a denigration of self-image. Indeed, the stereotype of the successful Icelander abroad enabled Icelandic writers to maintain the ambivalence of a general cultural positioning that in most respects valued the special characteristics of indigenous Icelandic culture more highly than those of Norwegian culture, but, in respect of their role as historians of the whole of medieval Scandinavia, compelled them to concede Norway’s more central and significant status to Iceland’s in matters of general politics and religion. The stereotype is particularly frequently attached to poet biographies in saga literature and reflects the high intellectual value associated with the art of poetry in medieval Iceland. It doubtless also relates to what we might term the historical reality that Icelanders seem to have cornered the market in skaldic specialization in medieval Scandinavia.

Some versions of the story examined here differ from the pattern outlined above in one important respect: they ascribe the success of a young Icelandic poet in Norway to supernatural help and inspiration and, without being precise about it, imply that the supernatural assistance comes from the Christian deity. The narrative represents it as a miraculous event that the most sophisticated, the most talented, and most courtly of the entourage of the Norwegian king, St. Óláfr, should emerge from the Icelandic backwoods in the person of the skald *Sighvatr Þórðarson*. The narrative of how young *Sighvatr* became a fine poet through

catching and eating a magnificent fish offers a mythic “explanation” of how an unpromising and inexperienced Icelandic lad turns into the principal court poet, companion, and advisor to the Norwegian king. And as we shall see, the myth is a plastic one, capable of both traditional interpretation in terms of the myth of the poetic mead and Óðinn’s gift to human skalds and of interpretation in a fully Christian context of divine inspiration.

Although the events this story purports to describe must be attributed to the period shortly after King Óláfr Haraldsson came to the throne in 1015, when Sighvatr first joined his entourage, none of the manuscripts in which the narrative has been preserved are older than the late fourteenth century. This in itself is not an unusual state of affairs in medieval Scandinavian studies (Thorsson 1990), but I mention it in order to draw attention to the fact that the texts we deal with are often best considered as cultural history, rather than the strictly accurate record of past events. Some, like the narrative that is the subject of this article, are rather more obviously exploratory of cultural attitudes and beliefs than others, but all have been shaped to some extent by cultural traditions, attitudes, and expectations over a period of several hundred years. That being so, they often involve what I have elsewhere called “mythic schemas” (Clunies Ross 1998, 22–43) and can thus reveal to us a number of quite conventional but highly significant ways of thinking that conditioned medieval Scandinavians’ views of the world.

The narrative of Sighvatr and the fish is found among the short narratives or *articuli* attributed to the priest Styrmir Kárason the Wise in his version of the saga of St. Óláfr according to Flateyjarbók (Vigfússon and Unger 1860–68, 3:237–48). Most of the *articuli* consist of short, self-contained tales about Saint Óláfr himself or about his poets, and include other stories about Sighvatr. These *articuli* are printed in Oscar A. Johnsen’s and Jón Helgason’s edition of Snorri Sturluson’s separate saga of King Óláfr the Saint, where the tale of Sighvatr and the fish is number 12 (Johnsen and Helgason 1941, 2:683–95; no. 12 is on pages 689–90). Parallel texts to Styrmir’s *articulus* of the fish story are found inserted in several manuscripts of the separate saga of St. Óláfr, and these give a slightly varying version of the Sighvatr story (Johnsen and Helgason 1941, 2:706–7). One variant is inserted into chapter 38 of the saga, and the other into chapter 44, this latter extant in several manuscripts deriving from the version of *Óláfs saga helga* in Bøejarbók, the manuscript which Árni Magnússon was given by Guðrún Eggertsdóttir (1636–1724; see Johnsen and Helgason 1941, 2:978–1005).

The location of these insertions and their relationship to the main narrative of the separate saga of St. Óláfr are significant for our analysis. Chapter 38 tells how Sighvatr, son of Þórðr Sígvaldaskáld, himself a court poet, came from Iceland to King Óláfr’s court, not long after the latter’s rise to power:

Þórðr Sígvallda scald var með Olafi konungi þa er hann var i hernaði. Sighvatr het son Þórðar hann var at fostri með Þorcatli at Apavatni. en er Sighvatr com í Noreg a fund Olafs konungs. oc bauð at fœra honom kveði. konungr sagði at hann vill ecki lyþa kveþi hans. oc hann vill ecki lata yrkia um sec . . . [Sighvatr nevertheless utters a verse in

which he confidently asserts and demonstrates his credentials] . . . *Olafr konungr gaf Sigvati at bragarlaunum gullhring er stoð halfa morc. Sigvatr gerðiz hirðmaðr Olafs konungs.* (Johnsen and Helagson 1941, 1:81.13–82.8)

[Þórðr Sigvaldaskáld was with King Óláfr when he was out raiding. Sighvatr was the name of Þórðr's son. He was fostered by Þorkell in Apavatn. And when Sighvatr came to Norway to meet King Óláfr and offered to recite a poem in his honour, the king said that he did not want to listen to his poem and that he would not give (Sighvatr) permission to compose poetry about him . . . King Óláfr gave Sighvatr a gold ring that weighed half a mark as a reward for his verse. Sighvatr became King Óláfr's retainer.]

The main narrative here presents Sighvatr's access to St. Óláfr's court as breezily straightforward. It tacitly acknowledges Sighvatr's incipient membership in the fraternity of court poets that surrounded the king by virtue of his father's prior membership in it and his own talents. What is required, according to the main narrative, is for the young poet to travel from Apavatn to Norway and persuade Óláfr of his fitness to be included in the circle of court poets by reciting a verse in the king's honour, which demonstrates both the king's need for skalds and the reason why, even if Óláfr dismissed all his other poets, he, Sighvatr, should remain in post, "þvít kank yrkja" [because I know how to compose poetry]. The insertion of the fish story occurs in one manuscript, AM 61 fol., probably from the latter part of the fourteenth century (Johnsen and Helagson 1941, 2:970–78), after the phrase "at Apavatni," and thus offers a rather more elaborate view of the genesis of Sighvatr's poetic talent.

Chapter 43 of the saga contains a description of the king's royal palace at Niðaróss, with its magnificent buildings and his entourage of spiritual and secular advisors and guests. This chapter also stresses the king's observance of Christian ritual and his establishment and keen observance of Christian law. The following chapter, 44, mentions the king's Icelandic companions in this way: "þa var þar með konungi Sigvatr scald sem fyr var sagt. oc fleire islenzcir menn" [then Sighvatr the poet was there with the king, as has been mentioned before, and more Icelandic men] (Johnsen and Helgason 1941, 1:105.3–4). Immediately after this sentence, the versions of the saga in manuscripts deriving from *Bœjarbók* have a text of the fish story. In the context of my interpretation of this story below, it is worth remembering that the main part of chapter 44 in *Óláfs saga helga* does not dwell on the Icelanders at the king's court beyond mentioning them as members of his retinue, but rather gives voice to his concern that Iceland is lagging seriously behind Norway in the timing and enthusiasm of its conversion to Christianity and is still allowing such overtly pagan practices as the eating of horse meat and the exposure of unwanted babies. In the manuscripts that add the story of Sighvatr and the fish here, the tale of the backward youth's miraculous acquisition of his poetic powers while he is still in Iceland amplifies the concept of Iceland as a backward place, unlike metropolitan Niðaróss, but (the inserted story avers) with the right kind of supernatural intervention even backward places can produce men of genius to serve the royal saint.

Yet another version of the story of Sighvatr's youth should be mentioned here, before we turn to the fish story itself. This is Snorri Sturluson's account in his saga of St. Óláfr in *Heimskringla*, which is generally accepted as having been written after the separate saga. Following his usual practice, both in the *Edda* and *Heimskringla*, of devising a story from a number of pre-existing and possibly conflicting narratives, Snorri here offers a rationalization of how Sighvatr rose to his position of poetic eminence from Icelandic obscurity. If Snorri knew the fish story, he does not mention it, offering instead a plausible rationalization of the apparent discrepancy between Sighvatr's poetic lineage and his obscure youth (both Bagge [1991, 208–15] and Whaley [1991, 130–33], among recent scholars, have commented on Snorri's frequent avoidance of the supernatural in his historical writings). Why should the son of a poet and the uncle of another, Óttarr svarti, be fostered in an out-of-the-way part of Iceland? Snorri's answer, which may of course have been realistically plausible, was that Sighvatr was not brought up by his own father, an acknowledged poet, who was away from Iceland furthering his career during his childhood, but by a foster-father, who had nothing to do with the sophisticated world of court poetry (*Heimskringla*, *Óláfs saga helga* chap. 43; Aðalbjarnarson 1945, 54).¹

Let us now turn to Styrmir's *articulus* 12, which Johnsen and Helgason, following Sigurður Nordal (1914, 90, 103), entitle "Sigvats ungdom" (1941, 2:689–90). The text in Flateyjarbók (col. 752) is as follows:

Olafur konungur hafði með sér margra íslenskska menn ok hafði þá í godu yfirlæti ok gerði þá sína hirdmenn einn af þeim var Sighuatur skald hann var Þordarson. hann var fæddur vt á Íslandi a þeim bæ er at Apavatni heitir þar bio sa madr er Þorkell heitir. hann fæddi vpp Sighuat ok fostradi. Sighuatur þotti helldr seinligr fyrst í æskunni í Apavatni var fiskueidr mikil a vetrum. þat barst at einn vetr þa er menn sautu a isi ok veiddu fiska at þeir sa einn mikinn fisk ok fagran í vatninu. þann er audkendur var fra odrum fiskum. þann fisk gætu þeir eigi veitt. Austmadr einn var a vist með Þorkeli hann mælti einnhuern dag vid Sighuat at hann skyldi fara til vatz með honum ok sitia a isi ok er þeir koma a isinn þa bio austmadrinn til veidarfæri Sighuatur síþan sautu þeir a isinum vm daginn. Sighuatur veiddi þa enn fagra fisk þann er margir villdu veitt hafa. Síþan foro þeir heim ok saudu austmadr fiskinn. þa mælti hann vid Sighuat at hann skyldi fyst eta hofudit af fiskinum kuad þar vera vit huers kuikendis í folgit. Sighuatur at þa hofudit ok sidan allann fiskinn ok þegar eftir kuad hann visu þessa.

Fiskur geck oss at oskum
eitrs sem ver hofum leitad
lysu vangs or lyngi
leygiar orm at teyia

atrennir let annan
aungul gripinn hanga
vel hæfir aurrida at egna
agn gælga mer hagnat.

Sighuatur vard þadan af skyrr madr ok skald gott. (Johnsen and Helgason 1941, 2: 689.30–690.15)

1. This rationalization has commended itself to modern commentators on Sighvatr's life like Finnur Jónsson: "Sighvat blev ikke opfostret hos sin fader, der siges at have været meget på rejser, men, i hvert fald for en længere tid, på gården Apavatn i Grimsnes hos en bonde Þorkell" (Jónsson 1920, 590).

[King Óláfr had many Icelandic men with him and held them in high favour, making them his retainers. One of them was the poet Sighvatr, the son of Þórðr. He had been brought up out in Iceland on the farm called Apavatn. There lived a man named Þorkell; he raised and fostered Sighvatr. Sighvatr seemed to be rather slow in his early youth.

There was a good deal of fishing to be had in Apavatn in the winters. It happened one winter, when men were sitting out on the ice and catching fish, that they saw a large and handsome fish in the water, which could easily be distinguished from other fish. They could not catch that fish.

There was a Norwegian boarding with Þorkell. One day he suggested to Sighvatr that he should go to the water with him and sit out on the ice, and, when they came out onto the ice, the Norwegian prepared Sighvatr's fishing tackle. Then they sat out on the ice all day. Sighvatr then caught the handsome fish which many people wanted to have caught. After that they went home, and the Norwegian cooked the fish. Then he told Sighvatr that he should first eat the fish's head; he said that in it was hidden the source of wisdom of each living being. Sighvatr then ate the head and after that all the rest of the fish, and immediately afterwards he spoke this verse:

The fish went where we wished, as we sought to lure the poison snake of the water from the heather of the fish's meadow. He who plays the line caused another one, seized with a hook, to hang. I have had good luck provisioning the bait-gallows (hook) for a trout.²

From then on Sighvatr was an intelligent man and a good poet.]

This narrative is clearly on a different plane from Snorri's version of events in *Heimskringla* and from those manuscripts of the separate saga of St. Óláfr that do not include it as an insertion. Gabriel Turville-Petre classified it as "one of those mysterious stories about how the art of poetry was acquired" (1976, 77). That is so, and we will examine it in that context shortly, but it has other functions too which relate to Sighvatr's historical position as the chief skald, confidant, and ambassador of that Norwegian Christian king who did most to consolidate the work of converting both Norway and Iceland to the dominant faith and polity of medieval Europe. Icelandic skalds played an essential part in developing Óláfr's reputation as a ruler in the mainstream of medieval European Christendom, yet they were *ex origine* provincials in Norwegian eyes, as the *articulus* expresses it of Sighvatr: "hann var fæddr vt æ Islandi." His birth and upbringing were peripheral (*út*), away from the Norwegian centre.³ And the fact that Sighvatr grew up in Iceland at a time when Christianity was only shakily established there may have pro-

2. This is the first of a number of verses, according to the saga narrative, that Sighvatr composed after he had eaten the miraculous fish. It is not particularly remarkable as an example of the skaldic art. The interpretation of the stanza offered here (and there are other possible readings, using some of the manuscript variants of the Bøjarbók group or AM 61 fol.) could accord with the gist of the prose narrative, if the noun *atrennir* 'he who plays (the line), causes (the line) to run' refers to Sighvatr himself, and his good luck alludes to the help the Norwegian has given him in preparing his fishing tackle.

3. Although it is conventional in Old Icelandic literature to refer to the location of Iceland as *út* or *út hingat* 'out hither', the world-view such a geographical perspective implies is one that sees the land of Norway as central. Thus the very designation of Iceland in relation to the rest of the world acknowledges its marginality.

voked the development of a mythic narrative of how he acquired the art of poetry, predominantly in celebration of a Christian king, that both conformed to traditional Icelandic ideas of poetic inspiration and explained how he made the abrupt transition from a hardly converted Icelandic backwater to the metropolis of Niðar-óss and succeeded so brilliantly at being a correctly Christian skald at the Norwegian court.

In order to understand the story of Sighvatr and the fish, we need to consider it both as an independent tale and as part of a larger Icelandic complex of narratives about the life and acts of St. Óláfr, in which stories about his Icelandic skalds and their compositions form an important part. The narratives we are considering are Icelandic compositions, yet their focalization is equivocal, as one might expect from their role as records of the power and importance of a Norwegian ruler. Often the short narratives, such as Styrmir's *articuli*, which appear in some texts of the sagas of St. Óláfr, give voice to the equivocal positioning of the predominantly Icelandic recorders of the achievements of Norwegian kings. The tale of Sighvatr and the fish does this very effectively on several levels.

The analysis that follows sets out several interpretative schemas which medieval Scandinavian people, especially Icelanders, would have had available to them and within which they were able to make sense of the action and personae of the Sighvatr narrative. Before embarking on the analysis I should like to stress two things, which are important to our understanding of what we presume were medieval interpretative processes. First, I do not argue here that any one of the major interpretative models adduced affords an *exact* parallel to the story of how Sighvatr acquired his skill in poetry through eating a fish. The important thing is that these models were comparable to the fish story in several striking ways and thus would have suggested themselves, probably subliminally, to medieval audiences, because they formed part of their shared cultural knowledge. The paradigms I discuss are: Sighvatr and the fish as a wondertale; Sighvatr and the fish as a myth of initiation and a rite of passage; and myths of ingestion of special powers. I conclude by setting out a series of binary oppositions in terms of which we can read the movement of the narrative from Iceland to Norway and, on a personal level, from incompetence to full poetic capability. I then show how the themes of this tiny narrative complement those of the saga of St. Óláfr as a whole, in several of its versions.

Another important characteristic of the parallels adduced is that they are plastic in nature, by which I mean that, although they are all quite traditional in Old Norse literature and were probably formed in pre-Christian times, they were capable of Christian resonance and Christian usage.⁴ That is why they were able to be incorporated into a saga which had a strongly Christian evangelical narrative agenda, a saga in which the Norwegian king Óláfr is represented as pushing back

4. Hallvard Lie (1982) has adduced additional parallels in the form of modern Norwegian folk-tales about humans who catch or eat supernatural fish and then assume their special characteristics.

the frontiers of paganism and political opposition in combination to establish a modern European centralist Christian monarchy. It is this enterprise for which the young Icelander Sighvatr Þórðarson has been miraculously recruited from his rural surroundings by an unspecified supernatural agency, acting through an unnamed Norwegian mediator. And it is his ingestion of the marvellous fish which furnishes him with the supernaturally provided source of his poetic powers. The fish is, of course, a Christian symbol of considerable antiquity, though it was originally a motif of pagan antique convention, which was subjected to Christian re-interpretation (Chadwick 1967, 278–79). It stands for Christ himself, both in his role as sufferer for human sins and in the form of the Eucharist. Eating a symbol of the deity in the form of consecrated bread and wine is at the centre of Christian ritual, just as, in the narrative of Sighvatr's acquisition of the art of poetry, eating the supernaturally provided fish is crucial to his transformation into a great skald. The Christian symbolism of fish and fishing would have been well known in Iceland from many scriptural sources, including the parables of the New Testament, with their frequent use of fishing imagery in the context of evangelism. Lie (1982, 322–24) has assembled references to a number of early Christian and medieval texts which show how commonly the identification between Christ and the fish symbol was made. He also draws attention to the common equation between the cooked fish and the suffering Christ, as demonstrated by the Augustinian proverb “piscis assus, Christus est passus.”

Sighvatr and the Fish as Wondertale

The story of Sighvatr and the fish has some characteristics of the European wondertale, as analysed by Vladimir Propp (Propp 1968), though there is one crucial and significant difference from the wondertale format in that the young hero, after he has made good abroad, does not return home with an enhanced reputation as most wondertale heroes do. By virtue of his profession, Sighvatr must stay away from Iceland indefinitely and follow his patron St. Óláfr. However, like some other promising Icelanders of saga literature and heroes of *fornaldarsögur*, the Sighvatr of the fish story is rather slow (*seinligr*) in his youth at Apavatn, in south-west Iceland, and has something of the coal-biter about him.⁵ Interpreted in this framework, the role of the *austmaðr*⁶ conforms to that of the Donor of the

5. The version of the story in *Bœjarbók* and its derivatives has elaborated this feature of the narrative: “Sighuatr þotti helldr obradgiörr i vppruna sinum ok sæinlighr i öllum þroska . . . hann [austmaðrinn] var til Sighuatz miklu betr enn adrir menn. þuiat flestum þotti hann sæingörr ok ecki miok sinnughr” [Sighvatr was considered to be rather dull during his youth and slow to mature . . . he (the Norwegian) treated Sighvatr much better than the others did, since most people thought him to be slow-growing and not very sensible] (Johnsen and Helgason 1941, 2:706.29–37).

6. It is significant for the semiotics of this tale, and for our understanding of the representation of Icelandic-Norwegian relations generally, that Norwegians are generally referred to as *austmenn* in Old Icelandic literature, that is, described in terms of Iceland's geographical relationship to Norway.

wondertale, who provides the hero with a magic object or gives him special knowledge so he can undertake his quest of discovery and adventure successfully.

In this case the visiting Norwegian prepares Sighvatr's fishing tackle and takes him out onto the ice, after which the youth is able to hook the mysterious fish of great size and beauty, so distinct from other fish, which no one else could catch, though they all wanted to. Afterwards they go home, and the Norwegian cooks it [*ok saud austmaðr fiskinn*]. Then he gives Sighvatr advice on what he must do next: “þa mælti hann við Sighuat at hann skyldi fyst eta hofudit af fiskinum kuad þar vera vit huers kuikendis i folgit.” After he had eaten the head, the source of the wisdom of each living being, Sighvatr proceeded to eat all the rest of the fish, following which he was immediately able to compose a *dróttkvætt* verse celebrating the event. The narrative concludes with the statement that Sighvatr thereafter became a clever man [*skyr r maðr*] and a good poet [*skalld gott*], a transformation that Lie understands as the consequence of his ingestion of the fish's own qualities of wisdom (1982, 321–22).

There are many interesting dimensions to this narrative, but, in the context of the *austmaðr*'s role as supernatural Donor, it is important to note both his function as instructor and his facilitating role in cooking the fish, that is, his transmission of cultural knowledge. The poet-to-be must himself catch the fish in its raw state and must later eat it, ingesting its powers, but the Donor as mediator must evidently transform the supernaturally provided food from its raw to its cooked state, after which it becomes available to the poet in the form of intellectual nourishment as the source of his poetic powers.

Sighvatr and the Fish as a Myth of Initiation and a Rite of Passage

An audience used to Old Norse myths and heroic legends would have had no difficulty in aligning this tale with a number of heroic poems and myths of the Norse gods that are initiatory in kind and, whether subconsciously or overtly, would have understood it in this light. These myths often involve a rite of passage from youth to adulthood, frequently in the course of an expedition into unfamiliar territory. Some of these mythic parallels include the theme of the hero's ingestion of a substance that increases his intellectual or spiritual powers, and this is also part of the Sighvatr story.

One mythic parallel which reveals the significance of the Sighvatr story as a rite of passage, in this case between his youthful ineptitude in Iceland and his adult brilliance at the Norwegian court, is that of the god Þórr's fishing expedition, on which he catches (but in some versions fails to kill) the World Serpent, Miðgarðsormr. Some versions of this myth, particularly the one told in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, depict Þórr as a youth, and the fishing expedition therefore has a clearly initiatory aspect, with the giant Hymir as the somewhat equivocal figure

who accompanies the god outside his own territory and further and further onto the element of water, which is not Þórr's natural milieu (Sørensen 1986). As we know, in some versions of the myth the god catches and kills the World Serpent, while in others Miðgarðsormr escapes and survives to battle against Þórr again at Ragnarøk. The *austmaðr* of the Sighvatr story plays a similar role to Hymir, though it is not an equivocal one; he removes the poet-to-be from his childhood environment by taking him out onto the ice, he teaches him new skills (how to catch the mysterious fish), and he brings him back to his old environment and provides him with the wherewithal to change himself from slow youth to gifted adult poet and so make a successful transition between Iceland and Norway.

Another compelling parallel for an audience familiar with the poems of the Elder Edda is the complex of myths concerning the youth of the hero Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. Like Sighvatr and the *austmaðr*, Sigurðr is also under instruction, first by Reginn, his deceptive foster-father, and then, after he has killed the dragon Fáfnir, eaten his roasted heart, and drunk his blood, by the wise valkyrie Sigrdrífa.⁷ In Sigurðr's case, he is led into the unfamiliar territory of Gnitahéiðr and later ascends the mountain Hindarfjall. As importantly, he gains wisdom and knowledge by eating the cooked heart (rather than the head) and drinking the blood of the supernatural creature he has caught and killed, in this case the man-turned-dragon Fáfnir. It is after these initiatory adventures that he is able to embark on his adult life.

Myths of Ingestion of Special Powers

There is a well-known group of myths or myth fragments in Old Norse literature that attribute a god's or a man's special powers to his having eaten or drunk a particular foodstuff. Sometimes that food is a fish or something else associated with a watery environment, sometimes, as in the Sigurðr myth, it is a heart.⁸ This is the dimension to the story of Sighvatr and the fish which has attracted previous scholars and caused them to see parallels with myths in early Irish literature, particularly in the cycle of stories concerning the hero Fionn Mac Cumhail, which associate the gift of wisdom and poetry with the eating of a fish, especially a salmon (Bugge 1897; Sveinsson 1932, 112–13). There is no doubt that the Sighvatr tale

7. Again, the parallels are not exact, but I think their general outlines are similar. In Sigurðr's case, Fáfnir's roasted heart was intended for Reginn, who wanted to manipulate the neophyte to cook Fáfnir's heart for his own consumption. The plan went wrong, however, when Sigurðr burned his finger on the cooking juices from the heart and sucked it to assuage the pain. Thereafter he, and not Reginn, was possessed of supernatural wisdom and understood the speech of the birds, who instruct him to kill Reginn, take Fáfnir's hoard, and make his way to Sigrdrífa.

8. Both the head and the heart in such narratives seem to signify the concentration of intellectual and spiritual powers. A parallel but different idea, that a person's soul may take the form of a fish, especially (in Irish analogues) a salmon, and that vomiting it up may presage or bring about the individual's death, is found in both Irish and Icelandic literature (Almqvist 1991).

belongs within this interpretative framework, but it is also important to recognize that this is only one of the interpretative frameworks in which we need to understand it, whether we consider it as a free-standing narrative or as part of the complex of narratives that grew up around Sighvatr Þórðarson and his life as a poet and counsellor of King Óláfr the Saint.

The notion that eating an unusual or supernaturally powerful substance will give the eater special powers is exemplified in two places in the eddic poem *Hyndluljóð*, first in connection with the strange fertilization of a god, probably Heimdallr, at the sea's margin by ingestion of the strength of earth, the ice-cold sea, and the blood of a boar (*Hyndluljóð* 35–38; Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 294), and then with reference to the god Loki's eating the half-cooked heart of an evil woman, from which he became pregnant and gave birth to all the ogresses on earth (*Hyndluljóð* 41; Dronke 1981, 70–71). These ideas appear to be parodied in Björn Hítðœlakappi's satirical poem *Grámagafliím*, which, as Joseph Harris has shown (1981), ridicules certain standard motifs in the life history of a hero, including this one, when it suggests that the poet's rival Þórðr was conceived when his mother ate a disgusting, slimy fish that she had found on the sea-shore. We note that all the myths in this group relate to and explain unusual circumstances of conception and birth as contributing to the special character of the hero.⁹

Another myth which associates ingestion of a food-stuff with the acquisition of special mental powers is of course the myth of the god Óðinn's acquisition of the art of poetry by drinking the mead made from the fermented blood of the wise being Kvasir. The fullest account of this myth occurs in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (Jónsson 1931, 82–85). The story of Sighvatr and the fish has some similarities to the myth of Óðinn's acquisition of the mead of poetry, but the formal parallel is not as close, I believe, as that between the Sighvatr story and the initiatory myths of the young Sigurðr in Old Norse or the Irish hero Fionn Mac Cumhail. Nevertheless, the myth of how Óðinn acquired the poetic mead by ingesting it and then passed it on to select human poets acts as the most important traditional Norse prototype for the Christian inspirational paradigm which has influenced the Sighvatr story.

The Norse mead of poetry myth is dependent, like the Sighvatr story, on alimentary imagery for its explanation of how human poets are inspired by gods to compose poems. Óðinn gives his poets their poems in the form of a swallowed and regurgitated alcoholic liquid (cf. Gurevich 1996 [1998], 66–69), while Sighvatr eats a mysterious fish that has been cooked for him by a probable avatar of the Christian God in the shape of an unnamed Norwegian. In a Lévi-Straussian sense, the almost universally occurring binary opposition between the raw and the cooked signifies the transformation of nature into culture. Alcoholic fermentation and partial digestion, in the case of the mead myth, fulfill the same function as the

9. I have investigated the pseudo-procreative ideas behind this complex of myths in Clunies Ross 1994, 179–84.

Norwegian's cooking of the fish in the Sighvatr story. The fact that Christ's human suffering was often equated with the cooking of a fish and the frequent association of the symbol of a cooked fish with the Eucharist in all probability strengthened the christological significance of this narrative. In the first case, of Odinic inspiration, the product is skaldic poetry whose world-view is informed by the pre-Christian religion of Scandinavia; in the second, the product is Christian poetry fit for a Norwegian Christian king and his court. It was necessary, in the Christian era, to generate new myths of poetic inspiration to replace the old, and the existence of this story, as well as others, like the tale of how Hallbjørn hali was inspired to compose by falling asleep on a poet's grave mound, with its echoes of Bede's account of the Anglo-Saxon Caedmon's acquisition of poetic ability, indicate the direction of change (cf. Clunies Ross 1998, 179–82 and references given there).

Sighvatr and the Fish — a Window on Icelandic-Norwegian Relations

The art of reading medieval narratives involves us in understanding them in their context of preservation, for that gives us closest access to their lost context of production. In this case, one cannot simply point to a number of mythic and folkloric paradigms the Sighvatr story relates to and leave it at that. As I indicated at the beginning of this discussion, the story of Sighvatr and the fish belongs in the context of a range of narratives about King Óláfr the Saint and his Icelandic poets, among whom Sighvatr held pride of place. Certain themes and the significance of a set of antithetical pairs of terms, which are present in the narrative, can only be understood in that narrative and cultural context.

A set of binary oppositions pervades in this short narrative and gives us a clue to the way in which we should read it. They may be summed up in the following list:

west	east
Iceland	Norway
country	court
youth	maturity
slowness	cleverness
raw	cooked
nature	culture
lack of (poetic) skill	poetic skill
Sighvatr	St. Óláfr

The group of terms on the left are, in the course of the story, brought to or transformed into those on the right. The dull young Sighvatr is located in a remote corner of south-western Iceland when the story opens. His mentor, the unnamed Norwegian, rescues him from his country seclusion and ineptitude and, by taking him out of his usual environment (their fishing on the ice), instructing him, and causing him to eat the fish (which is found in Icelandic waters though it will allow

him to succeed as a poet in Norway), he brings about Sighvatr's personal transformation from dullard to clever man and good poet and effects his geographical transition immediately afterwards from Iceland straight to the court of King Óláfr.

The *austmaðr* and the fish itself are the agents of Sighvatr's transformation, and the narrative's construction of their mediatory role deserves careful attention and helps us to understand its Christian significance.¹⁰ An important feature of this story in contrast to a number of its near analogues from pagan myth or heroic legend is the identity of the being who brings the poet into contact with the source of his powers. Whereas in the myth of Sigurðr's youth, which I think provides the closest indigenous analogue to the story of Sighvatr and the fish, the young hero's mentors are firmly located in the Old Norse mythological world, the *austmaðr* appears to be an ordinary Norwegian, enjoying the hospitality of Sighvatr's foster-father over the Icelandic winter. Yet his sureness of purpose, his ability to cause Sighvatr to catch the fish that no one else could catch, his authoritative plan for Sighvatr's supernatural transformation, and his role as cook all require us to identify him with the paranormal rather than the normal world. His identity remains indeterminate, however, even if his country of origin — the direction in which Sighvatr must go — is revealed.

This lack of clarity is presumably deliberate — the *austmaðr* is an apparently neutral figure in terms of both Christianity and paganism and could be claimed by either. His role in the story could lead us to Reginn and Sigrdrífa, or it could lead to the Christian God. However, as the story is set during the reign of the evangelist king Óláfr Haraldsson, we must presume a medieval Icelandic audience would have chosen a Christian over a pagan interpretation of the *austmaðr*'s role and would have inclined to believe the Christian God responsible for Sighvatr's miraculous catch which inspired him to become a great poet in the service of a Norwegian king who was to become a saint. Appropriately, the story speaks to the old and to the new, to paganism and to Christianity, to recently converted Iceland, out of which the poet came, and to Norway, where he was to go. It could be included or excluded from versions of the saga of St. Óláfr, depending in part on whether compilers thought it more or less appropriate to the history of a great Christian Norwegian king and his chief court poet.

If a medieval audience was attuned to its Christian resonance, the Sighvatr story would have immediately reminded them of the redemptive significance of the Eucharist, and the narrative as a whole could, without straining, have been read as a Christian miracle story which underlines the Christian divine origin of that art of poetry which the skald Sighvatr used in commemorating a Norwegian king whose sainthood was very quickly asserted in Niðaróss so shortly after his death at the

10. Sophus Bugge drew attention to the stereotypical role of the prescient *austmaðr* in sagas of Icelanders, "som paa et tidligt Punkt griber ind i den islandske Hovedpersoners Skjæbne" (1897, 211 fn2), noting, for example, the visiting Norwegian who interprets Þorsteinn Egilsson's dream at the beginning of *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*.

battle of Stiklastaðir. I suggest that whoever first developed the story of Sighvatr and the fish was moved to transform narratives of wondertale format and initiatory kind, whose antecedents were myths involving the heroic prototype Sigurðr and the god of poetry, Óðinn, so that they were acceptable to a Christian audience. In so transforming it, however, its creator did not lose the story's traditional meanings, and, as in the case of much Old Icelandic literature, the narrative of Sighvatr and the fish subsumes the old paradigms of meaning within the new without rendering the old null and void.

But there is another pointer to why some versions of the story of how Sighvatr Þórðarson became a successful skald include the fish narrative and some do not. It has to do with the equivocal focalization of many Icelandic representations of Norwegian history and Icelandic-Norwegian relations. It is not difficult to detect a kind of schizophrenia or, as I termed it earlier, a “cultural cringe” in Icelandic writers' own representations of these issues, and I think my identification of the binary oppositions central to the story of Sighvatr and the fish reveals very clearly that the left-hand (western or Icelandic) side of the binary pairing carries pejorative or negative values in contrast to the positive values of the right-hand (eastern or Norwegian) side. Hence, those Icelandic writers who developed and used this narrative were implicitly accepting and promoting a general view of Iceland and Icelandic culture that was essentially negative: it was backward, provincial, and generally unenlightened in terms of the medieval mainstream. A salve to Icelandic self-respect lay in the second implicit premise of this tale, what I have earlier called individualized exceptions to a rule, that in spite of its general backwardness Iceland every now and then produced young men of genius whose talents were far greater than those of Norwegians, for all their sophistication, though they had to travel to Norway to practise their skills in the service of a great Christian king.¹¹ A Norwegian talent-spotter, such as the *austmaðr* of this story, might be able to identify such a talented person and act as an agent to bring him into contact with the source of his talent, but the talent itself was of supernatural origin. The story also seems to be suggesting that Icelanders had a special relationship with supernatural sources of poetic talent, and here one thinks of the precedent of the myth of Óðinn's mead. These underlying premises of the Sighvatr story seem to have allowed medieval Icelandic writers (and presumably their audiences) to have their cake and eat it: to write in positive terms about Norway and Norwegian politics (which they had good reason to feel equivocal about), to downplay

11. It is possible that another implicit premise of the Sighvatr story is that only a polity ruled over by a Christian king can be a truly “modern” Christian country. If so, there is also a sense in this narrative, at least in the version inserted in chapter 44 of the separate saga of St. Óláfr, that the Icelandic commonwealth was incompatible with a forward-looking Christian political system, where the interests of church and state could be focused through the rule of a strong Christian king.

The idea that Icelanders, once they get out of Iceland, show themselves to be better, smarter, and cleverer than other people (especially Norwegians!) is a cultural stereotype widespread in Old Icelandic sagas and *þættir*.

Iceland and Icelandic culture (which, as Icelanders, they should have felt positive about), and to argue a rule of exceptional, supernaturally inspired talent in the cases of eastwardly mobile young men.

It remains to comment on Snorri Sturluson's accounts of Sighvatr's early career, bearing in mind that we cannot be sure whether Snorri did or did not know the fish story, and recognizing his frequent distaste for stories with an explicitly supernatural involvement. His version of events in the separate saga of St. Óláfr, which scholars generally regard as earlier than that in *Heimskringla*, appears to subscribe not at all to the concept of Icelandic inferiority, at least as it applies to Sighvatr himself. On the contrary, as we have seen, chapter 38 presents a cocky, self-confident young man, who brushes aside even the king's initially negative response to his request to become his court poet with a practical demonstration of his poetic skills. Nor does this narrative give any indication of problems of distance, physical and cultural, between Iceland and Norway. Given Snorri's own experiences of negotiating Icelandic-Norwegian relations, and given also his own expertise as a skald and his interest in, and knowledge of, the art of poetry, this is a position one might expect from someone who presumably identified himself strongly as an Icelandic poet and politician. On the other hand, chapter 44 of the separate saga gives a strong put-down to the Icelanders as backward in accepting Christianity in contrast to the forwardness of Norway under such an enlightened Christian king as Óláfr. Here, then, we see exemplified, though in a different way, exactly the same kind of cultural schizophrenia as the fish story reveals and the same kind of exemption granted to young men of talent. The difference is that Sighvatr's excellence as a poet is not attributed here to supernatural inspiration, but, implicitly, to the fact that he comes from an Icelandic poetic family. It is in the blood. The version of *Heimskringla* lies in an intermediate position, because it gives some rein to the concept of the distance between Iceland and Norway, by mentioning more detail of Sighvatr's fosterage and the fact that his father was away from Iceland during his youth.

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