

Philip Lavender, Long Lives of Short Sagas: The Irrepressibility of Narrative and the Case of Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2020). 401 pp.

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In his book *Long Lives of Short Sagas: The Irrepressibility of Narrative and the Case of Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, Philip Lavender has made an extensive study of an Icelandic *fornaldarsaga* and defined its position within the Scandinavian ballad tradition. He also touches upon a larger issue and considers the origin and dissemination of pan-Nordic narrative materials. In this context, his thesis contributes to a long debate among scholars, past and present, including Knut Liestøl, Davíð Erlingsson, Vésteinn Ólason and Stephen Mitchell. The book is based on Lavender's PhD thesis, 'Whatever Happened to *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*? Origin, Transmission and Reception of a *Fornaldarsaga*', defended at the University of Copenhagen in 2015.

The *fornaldarsaga* examined in this research is *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, which has not been studied in depth before now, and as a result, ideas about its age and position within Icelandic literature have so far been rather superficial. In their *Lexikon der altnordischen Literatur*, Rudolf Simek and Hermann Pálsson describe *Illuga saga* as "... eine kurze Fornaldarsaga, die vermutl. im 15. Jh. entstand und zu den Märchensagas zu zählen ist" (Rudolf Simek and Hermann Pálsson. *Lexikon der altnordischen Literatur* [Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner, 2007], p. 202). Without giving an exact definition of its status, Simek and Pálsson seem to locate the saga on the

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borderline between a *fornaldarsaga* and another category of late medieval saga, sometimes referred to as *ævintýrasögur*, or “Märchensagas” in German.

It is anything but a simple task to make an exhaustive examination of a literary work like *Illuga saga*. The material of the saga enjoyed popularity for a long time and is now preserved in both prose and verse (some *rímur*-versions and ballads). In addition, it is related to other kinds of narrative material, from both earlier and more recent times. For these reasons, the material of the saga lends itself to examination by a variety of approaches, and in his research, the author seeks to combine the main ones of these. Most importantly, he compares the material as it is now preserved in different forms and sources, and accounts for the characteristics of individual saga and *rímur* manuscripts. He also examines the saga material in a broader context, from its inner kernel to its external connections. Finally, the author discusses the reception of the saga and its changing forms and explains how Icelandic *rímur* poets worked with the saga material about Illugi Gríðarfóstri.

The book is divided into six chapters, together with an introduction. These are: 1) A Question of Origin: Poetry and Sagas, 2) “Ykkar hef ég séð mestan mun”: Textual and Contextual Variation, 3) “Eigi ertu sem aðrir menn”: Characters as Intertextual Conduits, 4) “Hlæjandi með miklum ógangi”: Finding the Funny *Flagð*, 5) Fearless Syntheses: Scholarly Reception and the Development of a Genre, and 6) Poetic Cliffhangers in the Lives of Cave-Dwellers: The *Rímur* of Illugi Gríðarfóstri. It is safe to say that all the chapters are interesting, each in its own way, and there is much that could be said about each and every one of them, as well as the work as a whole. In the following, I will, however, discuss briefly the subject in general, and then Chapters 2 and 3 specifically, finishing with some notes on the relationship between some of the motifs, covered in Chapter 4, and the Icelandic narrative tradition.

The research history outlined in the beginning of the thesis is interesting in many ways and shows how scholars have up to now dealt with Nordic narrative material which is preserved in more than one form, as in this case, with the emphasis on the relationship between the Icelandic prose version and various ballads. The outline presents a certain criticism of previous scholars, especially of studies by 19th century scholars, which I consider to be both fair and necessary. However, more recent scholars are also criticized, such as the Norwegian Knut Liestøl, who tended to trace common Nordic materials, and especially those found in ballads, back to Norway. Regarding *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra* and its relationship to the Norwegian ballad *Kappen Illugjen*, Liestøl conceded that the ballad was admittedly based on a “saga” but assumed that the underlying material must originally have been Norwegian. By modern standards, Liestøl’s methodologies can be considered as questionable, not least since his ideas were influenced by the nationalism

that was for a long time a feature of research on pan-Nordic saga material. It was therefore to some extent a *premise* that scholars of the 19th and early 20th century built upon. Most of the earlier studies are nevertheless an important step towards a more detailed mapping of the distribution of saga material. Before proceeding, I would like to touch upon the discussion about the ballad material, its origin and dissemination, and there are specifically two things that caught my attention here.

a) My first comment concerns the work done by Davíð Erlingsson who believed that the saga may have been based upon a ballad, and the further conclusions presented here. Although there are indications that the extant prose version of *Illuga saga* is based – at least partly – on poetry, I agree with the author that the possible traces of poetry in the preserved prose texts of the saga are not decisive enough to draw conclusions about textual connections (p. 52). Subsequently, it is considered as a sensible next step to look for repetitions, which are features of the ballad style, and which can be spotted on several occasions in the prose version as well. Fifteen examples of repetitions are listed on page 57, but their evidential value varies greatly, and in fact there are only four examples that in my opinion can be considered as particularly convincing (these are examples 10, 11 and 15, and perhaps also No. 9). But even though these examples are certainly a worthy addition to Erlingsson's arguments, it seems to me that none of them indicate very convincingly that the story is based on a ballad, and hence it is questionable whether the conclusion reached here is decisive enough for the next step, which is a consideration of the question of whether it is more likely that the saga is based on the Faroese version of the ballad, *Kappin Illhugin*, rather than the Norwegian one, as there are generally more repetitions in the Faroese version. I think the comparison clarifies the subject to a great extent, but the question remains how solid the results are; whether we can generally draw from them the conclusion that the story is based on a ballad, and whether it would have been reason to include more of the features of *rímur* than is done here, in the comparison. Admittedly, this shows just how vast and complicated the subject is – but this book is certainly the most comprehensive study that has been made and will have to be taken into consideration in any further discussion.

b) Secondly – and leading on from the previous point – I would have liked to see more options presented. I think, for example, that previous research on the dissemination and development of Icelandic narrative material from the late Middle Ages down to more recent centuries gives reason to approach the content of *Illuga saga* from the possibility that there may have been an earlier version of the story in Iceland in medieval times, which is no longer extant but was turned into *rímur*, which are also no longer extant but served as a basis for the prose version

which is now extant. Such a process of preservation is in fact typical for the evolution of narrative material in Iceland. To examine this possibility to the fullest, however, it would have been necessary to assume that potential remnants of poetry in the preserved saga could be traced to *rímur*, and not to a ballad. This would have called for an examination drawing on previous studies of the relationship between *rímur* and prose, i.e. studies of *rímur*-derived prose texts. What are the main characteristics of such texts, and what kind of traces from the *rímur* are normally found in such prose? Without making such a comparison, the author addresses the possibility, when he says: “There are strong signs to suggest that the saga-author may have mixed elements from various sources – for example ballad, *rímur*, saga and folktale – in the production of the prose narrative” (p. 70). Now, let’s move to the second section of the book, “Ykkar hef ég séð mestan mun’: Textual and Contextual Variation” (pp. 73-131).

This chapter outlines the overall preservation of *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra* in Icelandic manuscripts, and considers close to forty manuscripts, starting with general information on individual manuscripts. Comparison of the manuscripts reveals three main groups, A, B and C. The author believes that the B-Group is an example of 17th century scholarly tradition and interest in this material, associated with the episcopal see of Skálholt in southern Iceland. This activity also reached learned circles in Copenhagen and in Sweden. However, more recent manuscripts from the A- and C-Groups are not as centrally located and are less closely connected with the learned tradition.

The chapter shows how copies of *Illuga saga* were circulated and gives the reader an insight into this unique culture in which the scribes and saga enthusiasts of former centuries disseminated the material among themselves, worked with it and put it into new contexts. This is original research. The methodological approach is that of the ‘new philology’, where all preserved manuscripts are taken into consideration. The comparison, which is based on particular variant readings, is, however, characterized by the disciplined approach of old/traditional philology.

In his overall discussion about the most important manuscripts of *Illuga saga*, the author has chosen to move away from the thorough textual-critical comparison of the PhD-thesis. Instead, he focuses on the individual characteristics of each manuscript and its scribe(s), if known. I think this is a wise move, given that the textual variants have already been published, and that the discussion in the present book is less about methods, and more about conclusions. This new emphasis shows how a new philological study can successfully provide the basis for a further research into the reception of the text in various periods. The chapter is well and conscientiously presented; it demonstrates the author’s knowledge of

philological methods and different approaches and skills in working with them. Generally speaking, this chapter is of high quality.

The main manuscript of *Illuga saga* – and the oldest one – is AM 123 8vo. Previous scholars do not agree on its date but most of them have proposed a date between the end of the 15th century and 1610, except for Tove Hovn Ohlson, who dates the manuscript to between 1500 and 1550; the dating given at [handrit.is](#) is 1590–1610. With a very insightful discussion on the nature of the text collection in AM 123 8vo, the author concludes that the manuscript is in many ways characteristic for the 16th century (p. 90).

In Chapter 3, “Eigi ertu sem aðrir menn”: Characters as Intertextual Conduits (133–166), the author compares the material of *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra* to late Icelandic romance-sagas which have similar titles and plots. These are *Illuga saga Tagldarbana* and *Illuga rímur eldhúsgoða* (also with consideration of texts such as *Illuga Surtarbana saga* and *Illuga kerlingafífls saga*). A folktale about Illugi Tagldarbani is also mentioned. The kernel of the stories in question concerns a hero who fights a troll-woman. In particular, there seems to be a strong resemblance between *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra* and *Illuga saga Tagldarbana*; Illugi Tagldarbani is also mentioned in *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar hin mesta*, which shows that the Illugi-material was known in Iceland in a wider context in the fourteenth century. The various narratives relate to the materials found in *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra* in different ways, but they all provide information that sheds light on the overall *Illuga saga* tradition. The comparison also shows how Icelanders kept their storytelling tradition alive and moulded different stories from identical material in the spirit of the *fornaldarsögur*, *Íslendingasögur* and *riddarasögur*.

The entire discussion presented here of all these different sagas about a certain Illugi is commendable and shows how the narrative tradition of past centuries was passed on from person to person across the generations. On p. 138, the author claims that there were oral legends of Illugi Tagldarbani, and that one such is printed in the folklore collection of Jón Þorkelsson. Oral tales such as this one are only loosely related to the Illugi-tradition; nevertheless they constitute manifestations of it and I think it would have been valuable to know the title of such variants and the sources from which they were recorded. On closer enquiry it appears that this legend (cf. *Tagldarhellir* and *Þáttur af Illuga Tagldarbana*) was recorded from more than one informant, and it is stated that it was “eftir almennum sögnum vestra” – that is, the legend was well known in the West Fjords region of Iceland. Furthermore, the stanza which follows the legend, and is said to be old, was also attributed to different poets, though only one of them is referred to here. On both, the legend and the stanza, we have accessible sources, such as [sagnagrunnur.com](#) and [bragi.arnastofnun.is](#).

In the same chapter, the author seeks to shed light on the lost **Hrings saga og Hermanns* (or *Skjaldar saga og Hermanns*), which is referred to at the beginning of *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*. Skjöldur and Hermann are an interesting pair of names that features in *Úlfhams saga* and suggest ‘the one who defends’ and ‘the one who attacks’, and it is extremely intriguing to study the underlying tradition, a discussion, that can be said to be initiated by the author in his book. As in other cases this discussion hints at a potential oral tradition and how the material which surrounds and underlies the story of Illugi Gríðarfóstri must have circulated in oral tradition and then taken more permanent form in written works.

Although this is not discussed in the book, oral characteristics of the Illugi-material are prominent. For example, the material of *Illuga saga Tagldarbana* (p. 140–141) closely resembles recorded fairy tales, i.e. stories that evolved in oral tradition before they were recorded. Who is not familiar with Icelandic fairy tales about a hero who wanders into a troll’s cave, kills the ogre and saves a princess; they are to be found in great numbers. The same can be said about *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra* itself, which is also reminiscent of oral fairy tales, both in its entirety or individual parts of it.

In his attempt to identify the original core of the story, Davíð Erlingsson believed that the episode with the curse and the wedding at the end were added by the author (p. 199). It is, however, more likely that the story developed in this way in oral tradition, as the stepmother-and-curse motif, especially where the stepmother is a troll, is one of the characteristics of Icelandic oral fairy tales and all the late medieval sagas that are closely related to oral tradition. In its entirety, however, the saga is very similar to an international folktale type, which falls under the number ATU 480, *The Kind and the Unkind Girls*, and which enjoyed considerable popularity in Iceland. Basically, this fairy tale tells of a farmer’s daughter who is sent to fetch fire. She comes to a mountain, and then to a cave, where she finds a man, or a giant (*jötunn*, *þurs*). In the cave, she must carry out certain tasks, and she also has to sleep in the corner with a dog, or to sleep in the bed of the man (the male ogre). When she does this, the cave-dweller is freed from a spell and changes into a prince, who asks the farmer’s daughter for her hand in marriage. If the cave-dweller is female, however, only the tasks are mentioned. In *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*, the cave-dweller is female, while the protagonist is a man, but otherwise it falls under the basic pattern of the given type.

The story of Illugi Gríðarfóstri, as it is preserved today, contains a number of features that suggest origins in the Icelandic storytelling tradition of the late middle ages. For example, it is closely related to *Hálfðanar saga Brönufostra*, as both stories tell of a boy who is protected by a female troll after having proven himself worthy. In both cases, the troll-woman or the “fóstra” serves to bring the youth

across the threshold to manhood, and both bear a name that attests to their role. The name Brana suggests an impulsive and uninhibited woman; in the saga she gives her protégé Hálfðan some plants that are supposed to arouse erotic passion, and the name Brana is an element in the word *Brönugras*, the name of an Icelandic orchid, which is reputed to have this same property. Gríður, on the other hand, is related to the verb *að gríðast*, which means to express sexual desire. In this way, her name, as well as that of Brana, symbolizes her role in the story. In various other ways, the motifs of *Illuga saga* not only adhere to the Icelandic storytelling tradition, but directly follow the structure and/or symbolism of the story, for example in the episode with the ‘*kveldriða*’, as the author rightly suggests. All these characteristics make one think about the origin of the saga, and the connection between it and a Faroese ballad that seems to be very loosely related to it. Somehow the Icelandic Gríður seems to be more essentially at the core of the story, than the Faroese *gíður*, whose name, or rather lack of a personal name, has no such suggestion. *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra* is much fuller and more logical than the ballad and furthermore has strong roots in the Icelandic storytelling tradition. It is sufficient here to mention *Þórsdrápa* by Eilífr Goðrúnarson (10th century) which tells among other things of the troll Gríðr, who offers Þór accommodation for the night and gives him both advice and useful objects which, for example, increase his strength. The same story is told in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of *Snorra-Edda*, in “För Þórs til Geirröðargarða”.

The overall discussion clearly shows the importance of studying each body of saga material for its own sake, and how such material cannot be reduced to an isolated text from a certain century, but is a world of its own. Of particular interest in this connection is the final Chapter on the *rímur*. It is fair to point out that the poetic language of the *rímur* is one of the hardest tasks that non-native Icelandic speakers have to deal with, and it is obvious that this chapter must have taken a lot of time and effort. The work that the author has delivered in his book is essentially good and there is no doubt that he has achieved his aim of shedding light on the complexity of the preservation process of *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*.