



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Gestr the Wise

Prophetic Characterization in the Íslendingasögur

Ritgerð til M.A.-prófs

Alita Putnam

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Leiðbeinandi: Ásdís Egilsdóttir, Torfi Tulinius

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Introduction

Traditionally, character analysis in the *Íslendingasögur* or Icelandic family sagas has focused on those larger-than-life heroes and outlaws who dominate their own, often eponymous, sagas such as Egill, Grettir, Njáll, or Gísli. Less prominent characters tend to be examined collectively, such as the intricate relationships of *Laxdæla saga*, or in regards to a certain aspect or ability; they are known as magicians, inciters, farmers, lovers, travelers, or prophets. Despite their marginal presence, however, these characters often play vital roles in saga events.

This thesis endeavors to explore one such supporting character. Gestr the Wise, son of Oddleif, son of the Icelandic settler Geirleif appears in no less than five of the *Íslendingasögur*, as well as *Landnámabok* and *Kristnisaga*. Although his character seldom plays a large role in these narratives—particularly the earlier ones—he usually plays a crucial one, wielding both prophetic influence and political power. It is Gestr, after all, who interprets Guðrún's marital dreams and predicts the fates of Kjartan and Bolli in *Laxdæla saga*; foresees the brewing trouble between brothers and kinsmen in *Gísla saga*; and counsels Þangbrandr concerning his missionary efforts in *Njáls saga*. His appearances within multiple sagas allow us to trace the growth and adaptations of a singular character—along with the narrative concept of wisdom—according to time, narrative purpose and textual aesthetic. To this end, this thesis will be primarily concerned with Gestr as a literary character and the narrative interpretation of his historical personage. Finally, this thesis will also explore Gestr as a model of the wise or prophetic character through lexical and semantic analysis and other literary analogues.

To provide a context for this study, our first chapter will be concerned with the construction of character within the sagas as well as current and traditional methods of scholarly interpretation. It will examine what distinguishes an individual character

from both historical persona and narrative trope and, in doing so, hopefully create a template for evaluating Gestr Oddleifsson.

The second chapter will turn to the sagas themselves, tracing the character of Gestr through his appearances in *Landnámabók*, *Gísla saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Njáls saga*, *Kristni saga*, *Króka-Refs saga*, and *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*. This chapter forms the primary text of this thesis; from this examination, I hope to illuminate character adaptations and developments particular to the aesthetic and narrative impetus of each saga. For each text, I will provide a short analysis of the saga in question, along with current thought on its provenance, composition and purpose. Gestr's character and behavior in each saga will be examined and compared to the other texts in terms of lexical identifiers, locale, language and action.

Character variations between the texts will provide some small space to investigate relevant facets of saga characterization, from historicity in *Landnámabók*, the significance of genre and relationship in *Gísla saga*, and the role of prophecy as a narrative impetus in *Laxdæla saga*, to the changing face of wisdom during conversion in *Njála*. The post-classical sagas, *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* and *Króka-Refs saga*, will allow us to explore parody and the impact of the *fornaldasögur* upon saga characterization.

Our final chapter will explore Gestr Oddleifsson as an example of the wise or prophetic character in a broader literary context. It will provide a lexical analysis of Gestr's name and identifiers, particularly as they interlace with varying notions of wisdom and prophetic ability, and will reflect upon the greater religious implications of his name with reference to Óðinn and the potential 'otherness' of prophetic ability. Other early medieval analogues will be considered as well.

Overall, this thesis seeks to examine the significance of a recurring, marginal character within the Íslendingasögur. As such, it will consider methods of characterization, individual saga variations of a character template, and the early medieval literary context of prophetic characters.

Chapter 1: Characterization in the Icelandic Family Sagas

“Gestr Oddleifsson bjó vestr á Barðaströnd, í Haga. Han var höfðingi mikill ok spekingr at viti, framsýnn um marga hluti, vel vingaðr við alla ina stærri menn, ok margir sóttu ráð at honum.”¹

A man called Gest Oddleifsson lived at Hagi on the Barðaströnd coast of the West Fjords. He was an important chieftain and especially wise man, who could foretell many events of the future.

Most of the foremost men of the country were on good terms with him and many sought his advice.²

Laxdæla saga, ch. 33

This epigraph, the first mention of Gestr Oddleifsson within *Laxdæla saga*, provides us with a basic model for a traditional *Íslendingasögur* character introduction. In a few short lines, we learn the location of his home, his occupation, specific identifiers, and his social standing or relationship within the community. For the saga audience, this information is enough to introduce a known character into an unknown setting or construct a new character within a particular narrative. Such a sparse introduction is not meant to encapsulate the character and his internal motivations or psyche, but rather provide a basis for considering and evaluating externalities: actions,

¹ *Laxdæla saga*, Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Íslenzk fornrit V. Reykjavík: Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1934. 87. Unless otherwise noted, all primary sources are taken from the Íslenzk fornrit editions.

² Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of the *Íslendingasögur* are taken from Viðar Hreinsson, ed. *The Complete Sagas of the Icelanders Including 49 Tales*. Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Leifur Eiríksson, 1997. Translations of *Landnámabók* are taken from Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, trans. *The Book of Settlements: Landnámabók*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 1972.

reactions, and sparse dialogue or judgments by others rather than the narrator.³ As such, the phrase “vel vingaðr við alla ína stærri menn” indicates the general social consensus concerning Gestr, not the narrator’s own opinion.

In considering characterization within the Icelandic family sagas, a few residual controversies must first be acknowledged: the rather arbitrary delineation of genre within the corpus of Old Icelandic literature, the continuing struggle with free-prose and book-prose theories, and thus the inherent consideration of history versus art. These issues are relevant as we are concerned with the construction of character within the *Íslendingasögur*, examining how individual character is built from both historical persona and narrative trope. In exploring this delineation, we hope to create a template for evaluating Gestr Oddleifsson as he appears in various of the family sagas.

In order to parse the narrative constructions of character, let us first distinguish the *Íslendingasögur*, or Family Sagas, from other genres of medieval Icelandic literature, such as the *Konungasögur*, *Byskupasögur*, *Riddarasögur*, and *Fornaldarsögur*: the King’s Sagas, Bishop’s Sagas, Chivalric or Romance Sagas and the Legendary Sagas. Although the generic distinctions between these categories are somewhat permeable, they are traditionally grouped in this way based on subject matter. The family sagas--the generic basis for this study--include some 40 extended prose narratives primarily based in and around Iceland and concerned with the lives, livelihoods and feuds of the early settlers. In this thesis we will be examining the five family sagas in which Gestr Oddleifsson appears as well as the encyclopedic *Landnámabók* and the religiously-oriented *Kristni saga*. The majority of the *Íslendingasögur* are anonymously authored, and were written during the 13th and 14th centuries. For the most part, these sagas purport to record historical events and narratives that occurred between the settlement of Iceland in approximately 872 CE and post-conversion efforts in the early to mid-11th century. They traditionally reveal an emphasis on community and the familial structure, and attempt to convey realistic portraits of the early Icelanders. The prose style is noticeably laconic and straightforward, and an emphasis is placed on genealogy (*ættvísi*) and understanding kinship

³ Hallberg, Peter. *The Icelandic Saga*. Trans. Paul Schach. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962. 76

and legal ties.⁴ Their focus on lay persons, rather than kings or bishops, in a historic setting not heavily influenced by continental literature distinguishes them from other saga genres. Within the *Íslendingasögur*, there are further genre distinctions: outlaw sagas, post-classical sagas, and so forth. While these distinctions are less crucial to our overall argument, we will return to them and the more subtle shifts of characterization in later sections of this thesis.

The intricacies of these genre denotations make the investigation of character within the family sagas intriguing and at times difficult, if also rewarding. Critical analysis rubs the uneasy shoulders of folkloric, communal history of Icelandic settlement with authorial intent and generic conventions while the spare prose of the sagas resists internal introspective contemplation by the characters. The characters however, are endlessly fascinating, perhaps because of their elusive quality: their personalities are, for the most part, sketched by those attributes noted in the first paragraph and only compounded by the actions they undertake over the course of the saga. These characters resist romanticization, and although protagonist and antagonist are distinctly noted, they rarely appear as either paragons of virtue or intrinsically evil villains.

How we consider these characterizations draws directly from the Freeprose vs. Bookprose dispute which has, in more recent years, reached a sort of impasse. Freeprose theory, developed before the Second World War (WWII), “maintained that the *Íslendingasögur* originated essentially in the Viking period and then circulated in oral tradition for a couple hundred years until they were finally written in the Sturlung Age.”⁵ Freeprose theory depends on historic and accurate oral transmission of information and narrative as a form of folklore, while the Bookprose theory, developed after WWII by Sigurður Nordal, Einar Ól. Sveinsson and others, and forming one of the cores of the “Icelandic school,” purports that the *Íslendingasögur* “originated originally in the Sturlung Age as individual written literary compositions by prominent authors such as, for example, Snorri Sturluson.”⁶ These two theories, functioning as the ends of

⁴ For an extended discussion of this, please see Hallberg 71

⁵ Gísli Sigurðsson. *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method*. Trans. Nicholas Jones. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004. xiii

⁶ Sigurðsson xiii

the pendulum swing of composition theory, have more recently settled into a more middle ground. Neither folkloric nor late written composition has been able to be proved; and so, having reached an impasse, the two theories have moved forward by informing each other.

The macro analysis of character has been troubled and to some extent fragmented by the above-noted disagreements. This is due, to some extent, with the difficulty of working with saga characters: the literary personalities that inhabit a text, those individual creatures that may draw on historical reality, generic convention and fictional composition, but ultimately exist as a separate entity. Studies of such characterizations have existed in a subset of Icelandic literary studies, and primarily drawn on larger-than-life protagonists.

A. Margaret Arent Madelung, in her 1972 analysis of *Laxdæla saga*, notes that the saga author “worked with a selected number of personality traits....The character types are not infinitely varied....despite the patterning, the psychological inner workings of the characters are conveyed by the author with remarkable sensitivity”⁷. She continues by arguing that the author’s “main aim is not character study”⁸ but bringing “balance, symmetry and symbolic imagery to his composition.”⁹ In this way, she paves the way for Lars Lönnroth’s examination of *Njála* by attributing greater latitude of creation to the saga author, while still arguing that composition is more plot- and event-oriented than character-based.

In 1976, Lönnroth published his critical introduction to *Njáls saga*, with a much stronger emphasis on the examination of saga character. Where Madelung considered the larger *Laxdæla* cast as different variations upon the protagonists Guðrun and Kjartan, Lönnroth classified personality types using saga narrative conventions. Overall, he identified ten stock character types within saga feuds, ranging from the Hero and Prima Donna to the Villain’s Helper and Wise Counselor¹⁰. This stereotyping allows for the quick categorization of characters within umbrella-roles that at times

⁷ Madelung, Margaret Arent. *The Laxdæla saga: Its Structural Patterns*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1972. 162

⁸ Madelung 163

⁹ Madelung 163

¹⁰ Lönnroth, Lars. *Njáls Saga: A Critical Introduction*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976. 61

overlap. Lönnroth notes the permeability of these classifications, allowing characters to take on or shed aspects of other dramatic roles, with their flexibility existing in an inverse relationship to their own prominence¹¹. This categorization, obviously, draws primarily on early structural analysis of feuds, foregoing individual analysis of historical, folkloric, or other generic conventions. This isn't to say that Lönnroth's insight is not helpful. In identifying typical roles, he aligns the character of Gestr Oddleifsson with that of the Wise Counselor:

The Wise Counselor is an important father figure, often a chieftain, some one with great authority in the community. In some sagas, he may be more important than any young hero, and he often takes an active part in the feuds through his own counsels and cunning manipulations. He may or may not have supernatural powers, but there is always something slightly mysterious about him. On the mythical plane his equivalent is Odin himself.... Occasionally we learn about earlier stages in his career, when he appeared as a Young Hero, but in most cases he seems to have been born old and wise.¹²

While Gestr undoubtedly transcends this generalization with his own individuality, Lönnroth's work provides a literary template that transcends his particular focus on *Njála*. This description allows us a character type from which to measure specific deviations.

Diverging slightly from these structural approaches, Theodore M. Andersson has devoted parts of three of his books to the development of the saga, considering the elements of character and the compositional thrust of the saga. While his primary focus, particularly in his early work, *Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading* has been the structural elements and rhetorical patterns of narrative plot, he devotes a chapter in his more recent book, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180-1280)*, to the creation of personalities. In this investigation of saga portraiture, wherein "the actions of the protagonists are consistently viewed as expressions of their personalities,"¹³

¹¹ Lönnroth 67

¹² Lönnroth 63

¹³ Andersson, T.M. *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas, 1180-1280*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. 60

Andersson posits that, “at some point in early saga writing the art of characterization came to the fore, a development that is most likely to have been promoted by native storytelling conventions.”¹⁴ Andersson spends the rest of the chapter investigating the protagonists of five early sagas, reading the actions of characters as revelations of their individual personalities.

In 1998, Vésteinn Ólason advanced the conversation of character in his *Dialogues with the Viking Age*. While he concedes the “relatively limited number of roles in sagas,”¹⁵ he also notes that “[v]ery different types of individuals can perform similar roles in a saga, and individuals can conform to type in very different ways.”¹⁶ He identifies positive character traits traditionally found in heroes--courage, ambition, moderation--and notes that saga writers “all seem to strike the same note of cool objectivity when describing their principal characters, so that an individual’s positive and negative qualities tend to balance each other out.”¹⁷ This is in contrast to more minor characters, in which “we often find more down-to-earth types of character.”¹⁸

In his investigation of characterization within the sagas, Ólason discusses character traits as noted by narrative descriptions as much as by actions, and provides a sense for how these traits are perceived within the saga-world: heroism, for example, “works best when linked to moderation.”¹⁹ In this way, “[c]haracterisation is inextricably linked to morality,”²⁰ with the caveat of obscuring objectivity thrown over the saga world: “[t]here is good reason to be wary about applying to the sagas the insights of modern psychology, which would have seemed quite alien to people during the Middle Ages.”²¹ He sketches out traditional figures for heroes and villains, female

¹⁴ Andersson, *Growth*, 61

¹⁵ Vésteinn Ólason. *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of the Icelanders*. Trans. Andrew Wawn. Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1998. 136

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ólason, *Dialogues*, 139

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ólason, *Dialogues*, 144

²⁰ Ólason, *Dialogues*, 165

²¹ Ibid.

characters, and caricatures, but notes that “minor characters are rarely individualized and are defined in terms of a single function”²² thus agreeing with earlier analyses.

Counterbalancing these approaches is Gísli Sigurðsson’s *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method* in 2002 (published in English in 2004). Building upon the concept of the immanent saga, first introduced by Carol Clover in 1986 and expounded upon by John Miles Foley in his *Immanent Art* (1991), Sigurðsson argues for communal oral sources for saga characters, determined on the basis of salient characteristics, similarly recorded genealogies, appearance in the ‘same’ incidents, and whether there is any way of “deducing from the texts whether the writer is assuming a common and shared knowledge of the particular character and his or her fate.”²³ His argument gains traction through its ability to explain similarities between narratives and characters, particularly more minor characters, as they appear in multiple texts.

While Sigurðsson has primarily looked at uncovering the narrative threads that transcend individual sagas, I believe a similar methodology can be applied to singular characters, such as Gestr, that appear in multiple sagas. Sigurðsson does engage this aspect of his methodology in ch. 4, and takes a particular look at *Vápnfirðinga Saga*, but his primary evaluation still appears in response to common incidents. The assumption, then, of a consistent, underlying character--whether literary or historical--allows for the examination of deviations of representation.

By questioning characters in this way, we are able to learn whether saga persons are “the imaginative creations of authors working with books and book learning mediated through their own powers of observation, or creations of a tradition shaped by story tellers and their audiences over many years.”²⁴ Sigurðsson notes that either way, these methodologies uncover a truth “entirely independent of the historical value of the sagas,”²⁵ and allow characters to adapt “in accordance with the overall objectives and tendencies of that particular saga.”²⁶ The use of querying sagas, and saga characters

²² Ibid.

²³ Sigurðsson 130

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

then, is to examine the entity behind the literary character; as a shift from structural approaches it allows for less prominent characters to be examined beyond their dramatic type.

In applying these various methodologies to Gestr Oddleifsson, we are provided with a way in which to evaluate him as a reflection of a generic type and stock figure, and as an immanent individual with a core identity adapted to fit literary needs and motifs. Thus, over the past 50 years, the analysis of Icelandic saga characters has developed from a primarily structural argument based on genre conventions to the literary creation of individual saga authors to a communal, possibly historical, folklore tradition. In investigating Gestr Oddleifsson, we will draw on these various approaches, considering his historical and genealogical folkloric roots, his narrative function as a prophet and Wise Counselor, and shifts in character influenced by the saga author's focus. The freedom of narrowing our examination to a single, minor character allows for otherwise overlooked elements of personality and subtle changes in character to be explored fully.

Chapter 2: Gestr Oddleifsson in the Sagas

Bearing in mind the history of character analysis within the Icelandic family sagas, we return to our examination of the prophetic Gestr Oddleifsson. Gestr appears in a total of five of the Icelandic family sagas, as well as *Landnámabók* and *Kristnisaga*. These multiple appearances allow for a layered interpretation of his person, contextually filtered by those elements we have recently explored: historic and folkloric identity, generic convention, and literary license by authors. As such, we'll be using each of his individual appearances in the various texts to examine a variety of influences. The historic and genealogical focus of *Landnámabók* lends itself to a historic analysis of who Gestr may have been; *Gísla saga* and *Laxdæla saga* will let us explore the narrative impact of prophecy and the importance of familial structures. The incident noted in both *Njal's Saga* and *Kristnisaga* prefaces a discussion about the function of pre-Christian prophecy in the conversion of Iceland, while the later glimpses of Gestr in the post-classical sagas *Króka-Refs saga* and *Hávarðar Saga Ísfirðings* prompt examinations of genre conventions, the structural space of the prophetic character, and how the distancing of time affects the composition of characters in the later sagas.

The methodology of these examinations will begin with a brief textual background of the text in question and provide the generally-accepted consensus about its composition and narrative focus. From there, we will examine the individual appearances of Gestr in turn, with particular attention paid to lexical identifiers and salient characteristics, given genealogies and other descriptions of his character. At this point, we will analyze his appearance and activities in accordance with the narrative thrust of the saga and draw available conclusions about his inclusion.

The following appearances of Gestr within the sagas are ordered roughly according to chronology of writing, while following apparent internal genre distinctions.

When a definite chronology can't be made, as the date of writing overlaps;²⁷ I've arranged these according to my own whim, beginning with *Landnámabók*, connecting *Gísli* and *Laxdæla*, touching on the religious elements of Gestr's appearance in *Njála*, and then turning to the later, post-classical sagas, *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* and *Króka-Refs saga*.

***Landnámabók* and Historical Reliability**

The earliest known references to Gestr Oddleifsson appear in *Landnámabók* or the Book of Settlements. Originally compiled in the early 12th century, this text records the settlement of Iceland by some 420 original emigrants with their families and lists their various land-claims²⁸. Descriptions of Gestr Oddleifsson, as the grandson of the original settler Geirleif, survive in the three primary manuscripts *Sturlubók* (AM 107 fol, c. 1275-1280), *Hauksbók* (AM 371 4to, c. 1306-1308) and *Melabók* (AM 445, c. 1300-1310). Of these, *Sturlubók* gives the most extensive coverage; *Hauksbók* draws on *Sturlubók* to note his genealogy while *Melabók* introduces his aunt Gróa the Christian and her great-granddaughter Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir.

Landnámabók, along with *Íslendingabók*, are considered the earliest and most historically reliable texts within the medieval Icelandic corpus. The epilogue of *Hauksbók* references two earlier versions of the same narrative, one evidently being Sturla Þordarson's edition, and another by Stymir Kárasen (d. 1245). Although *Styrmisbók* has since been lost, it built on an even earlier version, composed by Ari Þorgilsson (1068-1148) with Kolskeggr Ásbjarnarson the Wise in the early 12th century. Specifically, it is likely that the first version of *Landnámabók* was composed between c. 1097 and c. 1125, or before Ari wrote *Íslendingabók*²⁹. Despite the fact that it was written roughly two centuries after the first events it relates, the authors' contemporaries were likely no more than sixth or seventh generation Icelanders, and belonged to a culture where familial and genealogical knowledge was paramount for determining

²⁷ For discussions of saga dating, please see Andersson, *Growth*, 1, and Ólason, *Dialogues*, 21

²⁸ Pálsson 7

²⁹ Pálsson 5

matters such as “inheritance, maintenance of the poor, and payment of wergild”³⁰ as well as marital dispensations. This emphasis on accuracy is highlighted by Hermann Pálsson, who considers the possible correlation between Ari and Kolskegg’s investigation of settlements and the national tax census conducted by the Bishop Gizur Ísleifsson likely in regards to the tithe law of 1097 in his *Oral Tradition and Saga Writing*.³¹

In *Íslendingabók*, Ari the Learned is careful to mark his sources, as well as request correction should his facts prove wrong.³² While no such disclaimer exists in *Landnámabók*, we may assume that the Book of Settlements was composed with similar care, making it “safe to assume that the original text of *Landnámabók* gave a coherent overall picture of the settlement, even though it may have been erroneous in detail”.³³ Like *Íslendingabók*, it appears to have been written for the “purpose of recording fact rather than entertainment”³⁴ and lacks the overarching narrative plot found in other sagas. Although this lends to a encyclopedic prose style, it also strengthens the argument for historical credibility. Simply put, no authorial narrative voice appears to intrude into the text in order to manipulate events for a climactic, novelesque conclusion.

As such, the perspective that we gain from *Landnámabók* into the character of Gestr Oddleifsson may be our closest glimpse of Gestr as a historical figure. Certainly, let us distinguish character as different than, although perhaps derived from, historical persona. As this is our most historical version of him and as his actions in

³⁰ Jón Jóhannesson. *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth: Íslendinga Saga*. Trans. Haraldur Bessason. Winnipeg; University of Manitoba Press, 1974. 12

³¹ Pálsson 8

³² ÍF I:3 “Íslendingabók gerðá ek fyrst byskupum órum, Þorláki ok Katli, ok sýndak bæði þeim ok Sæmundi presti. En með því at þeim líkaði svá at hafa eða þar við auka, þá skrifaða ek þessa of it sama far fyr utan áttartölu ok konunga ævi, ok jókk því, er mér varð síðan kunnara ok nú er gerr sagt á þessi en á þeir” (Prologue) and “at ætlun ok tölu þeira Teits, föstra míns, þess manns, er ek kunna spakastan, sonar Ísleifs byskups, ok Þorkels, föðurbróður míns, Gellissonar, er langt munði fram, ok Þuríðar Snorradóttur goða, er bæði var margspök ok óljúgfróð, er Ívarr Ragnarssonr loðbrókar lét drepa Eadmund inn helga Englakonung.”

“I first composed *Íslendingabók* for our bishops Þorlákr and Ketill, and I presented it both to them and to Sæmundr the priest. And when it pleased them to have it thus or to add something, I wrote it in the same fashion, without genealogies and biographies of kings, and added what become known to me later and which now is more fully declared in this one than that one. But whatever is incorrect in this scholarship, one should consider better what is proven to be truer.” *Íslendingabók Kristni Saga*. Trans. Siân Grønlie. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006.

³³ Jóhannesson 12

³⁴ Jóhannesson 12

Landnámabók prefigure many of his interactions in other sagas, it might be considered a folkloric control basis for his personality; the beginning from which to measure deviation. We are given three distinct glimpses of Gestr Oddleifsson within *Landnámabók*. The first is significant in providing the most extensive genealogy, the second reveals Gestr as a wise and prophetic man, and includes our single instance of Gestr as poet, while the final reference is oblique and appears to reveal Gestr's fallibility.

The genealogy appears in *Sturlubók* 129, wherein Gestr is introduced in context of family and geography. His grandfather Geirleif, son of Eirik, son of Hogni the White, settled the area of Barðaströnd, between Vatnsfjarðar and Berghlíða, in the West Fjords, sometime before the year 930. Gestr is noted as having two siblings, Þorsteinn and Æsa and three children, Þorðr, Halla and Þórey. Their subsequent lines of descendants are also given. His aunt Gróa is not mentioned in this version but does appear in *Melabók* 42; his sister Þorgerðr, who appears in *Hávarðar Saga Ísfirðings* and *Króka-Refs Saga* is not mentioned in either *Sturlubók* or *Melabók*. His wife is not named here or elsewhere in the sagas. This embedding of genealogy provides a context for many of Gestr's later encounters in other sagas as he prophesies over or defends various relatives. Moreover, if we consider Sigurðsson's concept of the immanent saga, this also provides a reference of perhaps unwritten narratives by which to identify various characters; knowing Gestr's relationship to Gróa the Christian can illuminate familial characteristics that may influence other actions.

Although this is perhaps our most historically and contextually-rich reference to Gestr, our latent introduction to him appears to come when he has reached full maturity. No reference is made to his childhood; we are provided with no early stories of youth typical in narratives of more heroic or prominent characters. Rather, he has already assumed the identifiers *spakr* (in *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók*) and *fróðr* (in *Melabók*), and his place in an extensive genealogy spanning both his forefathers and descendants. This corresponds with one of Lönnroth's classifications of the Wise Counselor, in that "he seems to have been born old and wise."³⁵ Beyond this cognomen, no further narrative information is given in this brief introduction; Gestr is simply one in a litany of names.

³⁵ Lönnroth 63

Gestr is more fully characterized in his next appearance, in *Sturlubók* 142. Here, he attends an autumn feast at Ljótr the Wise's farm at Ingjaldssandur³⁶. Geographically, this is further north in the Westfjörds. Contextually, we are told that Ljótr is the great-grandson of the settler Ingjaldr Brunason, and Ljótr's sister, Ásdis, was abducted or seduced by Óspakr Ósvífrsson, brother to Guðrún and great-grandson of Gestr's aunt Gróa³⁷. From this, it's tempting to infer that Gestr is a generation—or possibly two—older than Ljótr. This may also reflect a distinction in their sobriquets: although Ljótr is described as *spakr* in this chapter and hosts the autumnal feast, he repeatedly seeks the prophetic insight of Gestr. While this might be analogous to a professional seeking a second opinion from a qualified colleague, or reflect the possible difference in age, it seems also to indicate gradations of wisdom or prophetic insight. Despite Ljótr's wisdom, he appears unable to foresee the futures of persons near him.

Although most of the relevant chapter concerns the interaction between Gestr and Ljótr, his first action in this anecdote is to compose the beginning of a poem—Ögmundardrápu—in order to help a father assuage his grief over the loss of his son³⁸. It is inferred that the father will compose the rest of the poem as an apparent grieving mechanism. Although this is the only episode in which Gestr shows poetic ability or skill, there is a strong correlation between wisdom or prophecy with poetry, embodied by such characters as Egill Skallagrímsson who composed *Sonnatorrek* upon the death of his own sons.

During the rest of the autumn feast, Ljótr questions Gestr twice concerning the future of his son, Þorgrím gagarr³⁹. Richard Harris has worked specifically on this interaction, particularly Gestr's confusing proverbial answers with their allusions to

³⁶ Ljótr is the son of Rannveig, daughter of Earl Grjotgarð of Lade (S 140; an Earl Grjotgarð is noted within *Heimskringla* (grandfather and son), although I'm not sure that they are one and the same. If they are, however, that familial background might explain some of Ljótr's prominence within the Westfjords. See: *Heimskringla*, ch. 9, 11 (Harald Fairhair), or *Harald Graycloak*, ch. 4-5.

³⁷ Cf. *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 50. The child from this union was named Úlfr and was fostered by Ljótr at Ingjaldssand. Here, as in other sagas, Ljótr is given the sobriquet 'the Dueller' rather than 'the Wise.'

³⁸ Ögmund is killed in S 118 in a court case over stolen sheep.

³⁹ Zoega, in *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, defines gagarr as 'dog', but notes that it is a rare term.

tongues twisting about necks.⁴⁰ The first time Ljótr asks, Gestr replies that Ljótr's fosterson Þorarinn would become more famous, but that Þorarinn should be careful that "eigi vefðisk hár þat um höfuð honum, er lá á tungu hans."⁴¹ Although it's not entirely sure who Ljótr's fosterson Þorarinn was, it has been suggested that it could be Þorarinn loftunga, a poet in the court of King Knútr inn ríki,⁴² referenced in *Ólafs Saga Helga*, ch. 166.

Ljótr finds this response *óvirðing*, or disgraceful, and waits until the next morning to again inquire about his son's future. Once again, Gestr ducks the question, this time by answering that Úlfr, Ljótr's nephew and Gestr's own cousin thrice removed, would also be more famous than Ljótr's son⁴³. This second dodging angers Ljótr, but he remains cordial while bidding Gestr farewell. At their parting, Ljótr asks a final question concerning how his own death will occur. Once again, Gestr avoids a direct answer, saying instead that he could not foresee Ljótr's death, but bidding him to be kind to his neighbors: "bað hann vel við nábúa sína."⁴⁴ Their following exchange, in which Ljótr refers to the sons of a hostile neighbor as earth-lice, has likewise been examined for semantic analogues by Richard Harris;⁴⁵ important to this discussion is that the referenced sons do kill Ljótr on a spring day, on the same path that Gestr rode. The prophecies, obliquely given, are yet fulfilled.

The narrative framing of such an incident, with the host questioning a prophetic guest during an autumnal feast shows some similarities to accounts of formal seers and seeresses (*völva*) practicing pre-Christian divination or *seiðr*. Variations of this practice are recorded in *Eiríks saga Rauða*, *Örvar-Odds saga*, and *Vatsndæla saga*. In such accounts, divination appears to function as a contractual exchange; the seeress

⁴⁰ Richard L. Harris. "On the paroemiological conundrums of Sturlubók chapter 142: earth-lice and hair on the tongue!" A paper given at Norsestock 2009, The Fiske Conference of Medieval Icelandic Studies, Ithaca, May 30, 2009.

⁴¹ S 142. Harris translates this warning as: "he bade that [he] take care, lest the hair that lay on his tongue should coil about his head." Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards translate this more simply as: "not to let his smooth tongue get twisted round his neck."

⁴² Cf. *Ólafs saga Helga*; this suggestion was made by Guðni Jónsson and repeated by Richard Harris.

⁴³ This is borne out by Úlfr's appointment at the court of Haraldr Harðráði, as a marshall or stallari. Cf. Harris, 2009

⁴⁴ ÍF I:185. "advised him to be kind to his neighbors." Pálsson 69

⁴⁵ Harris 4

(predominantly female) is foreign to the gathering, brought in from beyond the traditional boundaries of the community. In exchange for her prophecies, she receives a special meal and housing for the night. In *Örvar-Odds Saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga*, the seeress is specifically questioned. While the formal aspects of this divination ritual are not apparent in this narrative, Ljótr's questioning of Gestr may somewhat align the guest with the role of the *völva* and thus potentially complicate his reticence. These elements do, in any case, align Gestr's prophetic ability with a sort of supernatural, divinatory or even religious significance beyond secular insight.

Gestr's final prophecy within this chapter is given to a visiting Norwegian who has fallen in love with Ljótr's sister, Ásdis. The Norwegian rode with Gestr from Ingjaldssandr; both characters are guests of Ljótr and it is unknown why the Norwegian accompanied Gestr, perhaps as a friend or companion or perhaps as a suppliant. When Gestr's horse stumbles, the Norwegian steadies him in his saddle; Gestr responds by saying this is good luck for him, but to be wary. Subsequently, the Norwegian finds buried silver, but is punished when Ljótr catches him searching for it again. While Gestr's prediction is certainly fulfilled, the nebulous quality of this prognostication: "Happ sótti þik nú, en brátt mun annat; gættu, at þér verði þat eigi at óhappi"⁴⁶ provides for any number of potential outcomes while the prophecy itself seems to be given in exchange for the Norwegian's aid. When the Norwegian steadies Gestr, the balance of narrative power appears to shift in his favor; Gestr owes him a debt which he repays with prophecy. It's unclear whether Gestr's warning to "take good care" was not heeded, or if such an outcome could have been avoided in any case, particularly as Gestr's prophecies do not appear to acknowledge future options but future facts.

From this introduction to Gestr, we may infer a few characteristics. His poetic skill shows a clear link with a wisdom tradition, which is underscored by his prophetic ability. Both his prophecies about the futures of Þorarinn and Úlfr appear to have been fulfilled, while Ljótr's son Þorgrimr gagarr fades from view. His reticence to foretell bad news to his host may be understandable, but his coyness in answering impertinent questions is not intended to mislead; he is willing to anger his host with prophetic vagaries. His encounter with the Norwegian seems providential, although here his

⁴⁶ ÍF I:185. "This is a sign of luck for you, and you'll soon be lucky again. But take good care that your luck doesn't go bad on you." Pálsson 69

prophecy is likewise mixed; otherwise, he does not proffer his prophecies, but must be asked.

Finally, his prophetic sight is either imperfect--he explains that he can't foresee Ljotr's future--or he simply chooses not to answer Ljótr's question about his death. Either of these interpretations could be correct, particularly in light of Gestr's final appearance in *Landnámabók*, in *Sturlubók* ch. 152. As an instance of misplaced hospitality and an incident of presumably failed prediction, this is one of the more oblique and confusing references we have concerning Gestr. In this scene, a man named Þorkell trefill revenges himself on an enemy, Hrolfr, by sending a third man, Sveinungr to kill him. Sveinungr takes a circuitous route towards vengeance, stopping at two other farms before visiting Gestr at Hagi; Gestr then sends him on to his friend Hrolfr. After Hrolfr has been killed, Sveinungr stops back at Hagi and exchanges weapons with Gestr and borrows horses. Although Sveinungr is subsequently killed, Þorkell trefill boasts to Gestr that he tricked him into sending someone to kill his friends: “Því hældisk Trefill við Gest, þá er saman var jafnat viti þeira, at hann hefði því komit á Gest, at hann sendi sjálf mann hil höfuðs vinum sínum.”⁴⁷ No other reference is made to this small feud within the saga corpus, but it's an interesting account of Gestr's fallibility and raises questions about Gestr's prophetic ability.

Did Gestr's prophetic wisdom fail to see the outcome of sending Sveinungr to Hrolfr? Had he an ulterior motive for allowing his friend's death? Was this an incident in which foreseeing the future could not forestall events? While there are certainly a variety of possible explanations, we must accept this ambiguous element of Gestr's character, and the potential flaw of his ability. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, in his monograph on *Njal's saga* considers such awkward elements: “what sometimes seem to the casual reader to be artistic flaws and inconsistencies in the character portraits can well be the author's intentional revelation of disharmonies and incongruities in the complex natures of the characters themselves”⁴⁸. Such disharmonies cannot be explained away or

⁴⁷ ÍF I:196 “When people were comparing the intelligence of Thorkel Fringe and Gest, Thorkel boasted to Gest that he'd tricked Gest into sending someone to kill his own friends.” Pálsson 74

⁴⁸ Einar Ól. Sveinsson. *Njal's saga: A Literary Masterpiece*. Trans. Paul Schach. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971. 86

excused in order to create a cleaner character: this Gestr Oddleifsson is grounded in genealogy, considered charitable and wise, and fallible.

Gísla saga Súrssonar, and the role of family

In moving from *Landnámabók* to *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and the other sagas, we mark a shift in narrative purpose. Unlike the chronicle-esque Book of Settlements, the other sagas we will consult base themselves on some sort of plot structure or narrative scaffolding; events are selected and presented in a way to create a coherent structure. This structure, this plotted narrative, contains its own creative and folkloric aesthetic, and bears the marks of authorial crafting. Depending on the saga, these aesthetics and focus can linger on elements of disguise or outlawry, women and romance, dreams, revenge or legal proceedings. Within the majority of these, including *Gísla saga*, Gestr Oddleifsson remains a minor character and thus is not a determinant in that aesthetic; rather his character is adapted to reflect the overarching narrative interest. The subtle shifts to Gestr's portrayal, then, can function as an expression of the saga's intrinsic foci.

As an outlaw saga, *Gísla saga* is dominated by events that occur after Gísli is outlawed: the disguises, the dream women, the various escapes and escapades. These events, however, originate in disagreements over familial obligations both legal and social. This interest is borne out by the involvement of Gestr Oddleifsson, as he prophesies breakdowns within extended family structures and uses his political influence to aide distant kinsman. The question is whether a greater conclusion can be argued from the author's interest and organization of events.

Attempts to specifically date the composition of *Gísla saga* have proven inconclusive, although it's generally considered to have occurred 100-120 years after *Landnámabók*. Hreinsson and the editors at Leifur Eriksson Publishing place its composition between mid- and late-13th century⁴⁹, while, Íslenzk fornrit and T.M. Andersson's more recent analysis place it in the early middle of the 13th century⁵⁰.

⁴⁹ Hreinsson II:1

⁵⁰ Andersson, *Growth*, 78

While this discrepancy is not crucial to analysis of the saga, it does play into interpretations of the saga's prose style. Andersson notes that, compositionally, it may well be the most elegant of the saga narratives, a quality that argues against a very early date. Yet it is terse and spare, suggesting none of the broader strokes to be found in the more expansive texts such as *Laxdæla saga*.⁵¹

The saga itself is preserved in a 15th century manuscript (AM 556a 4to) along with two other outlaw sagas; a slightly longer version is also extant. The shorter version is considered the standard narrative; it retains a mystery-novel quality by remaining silent about the identity of Þorgrímr's murderer. In the longer version, which survives in an 18th century paper copy by Ásgeir Jónsson, it is made clear that Gísli killed Þorgrímr⁵². Gestr first appears in ch. 6, in a scene which does not appear in the longer version, as an attendant at the summer Alþingi: "Gestr hét maðr ok var Oddleifsson; hann var kominn til þings ok var í búð hjá Þorkatli auðga."⁵³ As seen in the accounts from *Landnámabók*, Gestr appears to hold some status in the community as a companion of Þorkell, but is ancillary to Þorkell's wealth. No lexical identifiers are attached to his name during this anecdote; he is not specifically identified as a wise man or prophet until much later, in ch. 28, where he is noted as "Gestr inn spaki" or Gestr the Wise.

Despite this, his wisdom or prophetic ability is acknowledged within the community, as Þorkell turns to him and asks, 'Hvé lengi ætlar þú, at kapp þeira Haukdæla ok yfirgangr muni vera svá mikill?'⁵⁴. The conduct of the four men in question—Gísli, Þorkell, Þorgrímr and Vésteinn—does indeed seem overbearing in that they have apparently interrupted their drinking to offer their support at the court, and are being called *skrautligir* and *sköruligir*, or magnificent and imposing. The question itself may appear rhetorical, wondering aloud how long the men will continue their arrogance,

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² This information is also given in *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 12

⁵³ ÍF VI:20. "There was a man named Gest, son of Oddleif. He arrived at the assembly and shared a booth with Thorkel the Wealthy." Hreinsson II:6.

⁵⁴ ÍF VI:21. "How long do you expect the ardour and arrogance of these people from Haukadal to last?" Hreinsson II:6.

but Gestr replies seriously, “Eigi munu þeir allir samþykkir it þriðja sumar, er þar eru nú í þeim flokki.”⁵⁵

Such a response is unique to Gestr as it includes a distinct timeline; in three years, the men from Haukdæla will no longer agree. Such a declaration might be taken as equally idle words, except for two things. First, the saga-writer chose to include this reference and ascribe it to Gestr Oddleifsson, a man known from other narratives as a prophetic character and, secondly, the Haukdæla men themselves believe Gestr’s words. In this way, Gestr’s wisdom is dually built both by saga-writer’s ascription and by the resultant belief of the other saga characters. Indeed, when he speaks, a third-party rushes from his presence to inform Gísli and the others of Gestr’s words, lending the scene a sense of urgency.

When Gestr’s comment is repeated to the men, Gísli Súrsson responds by saying “Hér mun hann mælt mál talat hafa. En vörumsk vér, at eigi verði hann sannspár”⁵⁶ and proposes swearing a blood-oath of brotherhood. Gísli does not challenge Gestr or his prediction, but simply seeks to avoid it by enacting a pre-Christian ritual, thus responding to prophetic words with a mystical action. His quick resort to this rite seems to imply that other, purely human interventions would invariably fail as too weak to withstand prophetic fate.

The men go to Eyrarhvalsoddi and cut out a long strip of turf, propping it up with a spear. They jointly draw blood and mingle it in the soil, but during this oath-taking first Þórgrímr and then Gísli himself withdraw their hands and refuse to bind themselves to the rest of the group, thus sowing the first seeds of dissension. The saga tells us that this incomplete ritual affected them deeply⁵⁷ and Gísli commented, “Nú fór sem mik grunaði, ok mun þetta fyrir ekki koma, sem nú er at gört; get ek ok, at auðna ráði nú um þetta.”⁵⁸ In this case, not even a sworn-brotherhood ritual could rescue a

⁵⁵ ÍF VI:21 “Three summers from now, the men in that party will no longer see eye to eye.” Hreinsson II: 6.

⁵⁶ ÍF VI:22. “I am sure this report is correct, but let us make certain that his prediction does not come true.” Hreinsson II:6.

⁵⁷ ÍF VI:24. “Nú þykkir mönnum um þetta mikils vert.”

⁵⁸ ÍF VI:25. ““This is what I thought would happen. What has taken place here will come to nothing. I suspect fate will take its course now.”” Hreinsson II:7

seemingly strong friendship, and Gestr's prediction may have even sped the fracturing of the relationship.

This begs a question of cause and effect that we will return to throughout our investigation of Gestr: to what extent do his prophecies trigger the events they predict, and as such what responsibility does Gestr hold in regards to those who ask his opinion? As we saw in *Landnámabók*, his prophetic sight is not infallible, and there are times he plays coy with his answers. That he does not do so in *Gísli saga* is intriguing, but may be answered by later events.

Gestr's prophecy is fulfilled within the given time frame as first Vésteinn and then Þorgrímr are murdered within the following three years. Gísli is outlawed for killing Þorgrímr in an apparent revenge for the murder of Vésteinn, but doesn't leave Iceland; Borkr, the brother of Þorgrímr, seeks to find and kill him. Although he may have prompted this falling-out, Gestr does not appear again until much later in the saga, while traveling to the local Þorskafjörðr assembly in ch. 28.

Before he embarks on the ship, he is approached by two young, poorly-dressed strangers. He speaks with them privately, and carries them on his ship part of the way to the assembly; they disembark at Hallsteinsnes. He arrives at the Þorskafjörðr assembly-site in the company of Bork and Gísli's estranged brother Þorkell; a third-party identifies each of their ships to the waiting young men, and it is here that Gestr is identified as "Gestr inn spaki." That the strangers were inquiring about the ships seems a clear bit of dissembling, particularly after having spent time on Gestr's ship, but it does allow them to pinpoint Þorkell Súrsson, who they then approach. The elder of the young men proceeds to kill Þorkell with his own sword, while the younger claims that the killing was done in revenge of their father, Vésteinn. Their names, Berg and Helgi, are given at the end of the chapter.

This incident might seem anomalous except that we are then told in ch. 29 that Bork—who as his brother-in-law had a legal responsibility to seek restitution for Þorkell's death—sought advice from Gestr, who encouraged him not to pursue action: "ok letr Gestr mjök, at sökin sé fram höfð. Þat hafa menn fyrir satt haft, at Gestr hafi verit í ráðum með sveinunum, því at hann var skyldr þeim at frændsemi."⁵⁹ If this is the

⁵⁹ ÍF VI:92. "And he discouraged Bork from pursuing the accusation. People were reasonably sure that Gest had conspired with the lads because he was a blood-relation of theirs." Hreinsson II:37

case, it appears that Gestr set Þorkell up to be killed as he had conferred with the two men earlier.

Unfortunately, we don't know, exactly, how and Vésteinn's sons were related, despite a second reference at the end of the saga, when Gestr is again noted as their *frænda*. As Vésteinn's father was a Norwegian, it is possible that their relationship was either through Vésteinn's wife, Gunnhild, or through familial connections in Norway. In either case, their relationship was significant enough for Gestr to use his power (*með ráðum sínum*)⁶⁰ to arrange and fund the men's passage to Norway, along with Gísli's wife Auðr and three others in ch. 38, near the end of the saga.

This familial connection, however, may shine some light into Gestr's early prophecy to Þorkell auðga: in predicting the dissolution of the relationship of the men at Haukadalur, he was also predicting the death of Vésteinn, his relative.

The view that we have of Gestr in this saga, then, is one of a man whose prophecies divide and possibly even predict a death within his own extended family, one who is influential and not afraid to wield his political power to benefit his family. He gives advice when asked, but this advice is not always impartial as it also reveals his primary obligation to his family.

***Laxdæla Saga* and the narrative impact of prophecy**

While *Laxdæla Saga* is also intensely family-oriented, and considered one of the few fully-fledged family sagas,⁶¹ it emphasizes Gestr's prophetic role as affecting and foreshadowing narrative events more than *Gísla saga*. Here, Gestr's prescient wisdom and dream-interpretation foreshadow the young Guðrún's four marriages and their outcomes, the death of Kjartan by Bolli, and even his own demise. In his role as a community leader, a distinction is drawn between prophecy and sorcery as he pursues and banishes the magician Kotkell. Although we investigated the impact of prophecy upon saga events and characters' choices within *Gísla saga*, here we want to focus on prophecy as both a foreshadowing and structuring technique within the regional saga.

⁶⁰ ÍF VI:117

⁶¹ Ólason, *Dialogues*, 76

As a text, *Laxdæla Saga* appears to have been written in the last years of the Icelandic commonwealth as the presence of Norway grew. Although many partial manuscripts survive, the text is preserved in its entirety in Möðruvallabók (AM 132 fol.) from the mid-14th century. Extensive study upon the text has been conducted by A. Margaret Arent Madelung, in her 1972 monograph on its structural analysis.

Unlike many of the other sagas, *Laxdæla saga* is named for a region, Laxárdal, rather than a family or individual. This geographical boundary of narrative interest circumscribes the area around the “inner reaches of Hvammsfjörð on the west coast of Iceland”⁶² and tends to skim events that occur elsewhere, including the extended period which Kjartan and Bolli spend in Norway. Although the narrative may be geographically bounded, it is historically inclusive, reaching as far back as Ketil Flatnose and his daughter, Unn the Deep-Minded, and their early settlement in Iceland, and forward through the conversion of Iceland into mid-11th century. It is traditionally paired with Bolli Bollason’s tale, the story of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir’s son. As such, we may consider this a historically deep, rather than geographically broad, saga.

Where *Laxdæla* truly becomes alive is in its sketches of humanity and the fatalistic presence of dreams, curses and prophecies. The primary cast of characters is led by the inimitable Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, and events are dictated by the rivalry that develops between two friends vying to be her third husband. The female aspect is emphasized narratively through a focus on emotional aspects of events and interpersonal relationships, even a closer description of clothes.

Within this context, Gestr appears three times, first and most notably in ch. 33. His introduction here, also included as the epigraph to this thesis, is one of the fullest descriptions that we have of him: “Gestr Oddleifsson bjó vestr á Barðaströnd, í Haga. Han var höfðingi mikill ok spekingr at viti, framsýnn um marga hluti, vel vingaðr við alla ina stærri menn, ok margir sóttu ráð at honum.”⁶³ As noted previously, this description tells us his geographical rooting, his ability to see into the future, and his social status. At the time of this introduction, he is traveling to the summer Alþing from

⁶² Andersson, *Growth*, 132

⁶³ ÍF V:87. A man called Gest Oddleifsson lived at Hagi on the Barðaströnd coast of the West Fjords. He was an important chieftain and especially wise man, who could foretell many events of the future. Most of the foremost men of the country were on good terms with him and many sought his advice. Hreinsson V: 43

his home in the Westfjords. On the way, he encounters Guðrún, his great niece⁶⁴, at the hot springs known as Sælingsdalslaug. The saga notes that Gestr “tók henni vel”⁶⁵ and their discussion was “bæði vitr ok orðig.”⁶⁶

At the end of this conversation, Guðrún invites him back to her father’s farm for the evening; after he declines, she brings up the subject of her dreams. These dreams--a sequence of four in particular--have dominated her sleep over the winter, and she seeks an interpretation of their meaning, although she doesn’t require that meaning to be favorable. Gestr responds, “Seg þú drauma þína; vera má, at vér gerim af nökkut.”⁶⁷ Gestr’s inquiry and supportive response to his niece reveals a greater agency to his prophetic interpretation than we’ve seen so far. In earlier examples, his supernatural wisdom has been demanded or requested by his hosts; this is also the first time that we’ve seen him respond prophetically towards someone of relatively lower status.

As Guðrún recites her four dreams, each centered on some loss of ornamental dress and jewelry, Gestr briefly comments after the second and third: “Era sjá draumr minni”⁶⁸ and “Ekki fara í þurrð draumarnir.”⁶⁹ When she finishes speaking, he is able to immediately offer an interpretative reply, although he notes that she may not like his answer: “Glöggfæ eg séð hvað draumar þessir eru en mjög mun þér samstaft þykja því að eg mun næsta einn veg alla ráða. Bændur muntu eiga fjóra...”⁷⁰ Gestr continues by translating the subtleties of Guðrún’s dream-actions and emotions as reflective of her future relationships: the first husband she will discard; her second, happy marriage will be abruptly truncated by his death, likely by drowning; her third husband, while perhaps worthier than the first two, will not be as preciousy regarded. Gestr notes that this husband will convert to a new religion “er vér hyggjum, at miklu sé háleitari,”⁷¹ and

⁶⁴ His sister or paternal aunt, Groa, is her great-grandmother. See: Melabók 42.

⁶⁵ ÍF V:88. “was pleased to see her.” Hreinsson V:44

⁶⁶ ÍF V:88. “was both shrewd and lengthy.” Hreinsson V:44

⁶⁷ ÍF V:88. “Tell me your dreams. I might be able to make something of them.” Hreinsson V:44

⁶⁸ ÍF V:88. “No less remarkable is this dream.” Hreinsson V:44

⁶⁹ ÍF V:89. “The source of your dreams is far from drying up.” Hreinsson V:44

⁷⁰ ÍF V:89. “I can clearly see what the dreams mean, but you may find the fare lacking in variety, as I would interpret them all in a similar way. You will have four husbands...” Hreinsson V:45

⁷¹ ÍF V:90. “which seems to be much nobler.” Hreinsson V:45

will likely die because of her own carelessness. Her fourth and final husband, he explains, will far surpass her, and will die in Hvammsfjörð.

At these revelations, Guðrún blushes furiously much like the upset Ljótr in *Landnámabók* but keeps her tongue as her uncle speaks. When he finishes, she responds, “Hitta mundir þú fegri spár í þessu máli ef svo væri í hendur þér búið af mér en haf þó þökk fyrir er þú hefir ráðið draumana. En mikið er til að hyggja ef þetta allt skal eftir ganga.”⁷² Here, the conditional quality of her response is intriguing. She requests the explanation by Gestr, a senior male relative, on the matter of the dreams she recounts to him, and she remains the primary character within his interpretation. Despite his insight, she allows doubt to color her response to him; this may be a function of receiving bad news, or that she herself doesn’t entirely agree with his reading of future events. She then repeats her invitation for Gestr to stay the night, and Gestr again decline, but passes on greetings to Ósvífr, Guðrún’s father and asks her to tell him that, “þau mín orð að koma mun þar að skemmra mun í milli bústaða okkarra Ósvífurs og mun okkur þá hægt um tal ef okkur er þá leyft að talast við.”⁷³ In the context of their conversation, this aside appears both obscure and ambiguous as it refers to their future graves. While we will explore Gestr’s death and burial more fully later on, it is worth noting that he proffers this premonition without any recorded prompting, and that he is partially cognizant of events that will happen after his death--where he will be buried--while remaining unaware whether conversation will be possible after death. The vagueness of this reference, similar to those given to Ljótr and a far cry from the concrete predictions in *Gísla saga*, may be due to the subject matter or the unprompted quality of the premonition more so than the character.

Either way, Gestr’s prescient comments begin to shape the audience’s idea of events: “Prophecy and prediction create anticipation, prepare the reader for events to come, but do not over-direct or over-inform--they rather prompt the feeling that the plot is being driven by uncontrollable force and that the outcome of events is inevitable.”⁷⁴

⁷² ÍF V:91. ““You would have made me a prettier prediction if I had given you the material for it, and I thank you for interpreting the dreams for me. I shall have plenty to think about if all of this comes to pass as you say.” Hreinsson V:45

⁷³ ÍF V:91 ““the time will come when the distance between our dwelling places will be shorter than at present. It will be easier to carry on a conversation then, if we are still allowed to talk.” Hreinsson V:45

⁷⁴ Ólason, *Dialogues*, 98

That these interpretations are made by a relatively marginal character may emphasize the fatalistic aspects of his predictions. While Gestr is able to see the future, he does not possess, or wield, the narrative clout to arrange or influence the future. His own inability to affect events is highlighted in his third prophetic vignette within the same chapter.

After leaving Guðrún, Gestr continues on his journey towards the Alþingi, and meets a servant of Óláfr Pái, who likewise invites him to pause for the evening, in this case to spend the night at his master's home at Hjardarholt. Although Gestr again declines, he does agree to detour to Óláfr's home, where "Gestr dvalðsk litla hríð og sá þó víða á bæinn ok lét vel yfir, kvað eigi þar fé til sparað bæjar þess."⁷⁵ This display appears to be a function of both Óláfr's personality--he is not nicknamed Peacock without cause--and Gestr's role as a wise counselor from whom to seek approval.

As he continues on his way, Óláfr accompanies him down the Laxa river, where Gestr is able to identify Kjartan and Bolli and which of the various young men swimming are Ólafssons. For this, Óláfr praises Gestr's cleverness or "vitsmunum" (vitsmunir), a reference to Gestr's intelligence or sagacity, but not a term that embodies any sort of prescience⁷⁶. Directly following this compliment, however, Óláfr asks him, much like Ljótr queried in *Landnámabók*, which of the fosterbrothers—Kjartan or Bolli—will be considered the most outstanding. In a display of seeming diplomacy, Gestr concurs with Óláfr's affections, saying Kjartan "mun þykkja mest vert, meðan hann er uppi."⁷⁷ Although Óláfr is able to interpret this as a long and prominent career for his favored son, the implication of his prediction is less positive. Gestr and his company part from Óláfr Peacock, and continue towards their night's lodging at Thykkvaskog; it is only after his son Þorðr inquires why he is crying that Gestr reveals Bolli's eventual killing of Kjartan:

Þarfleysa er at segja það en eigi nenni ek að þegja yfir því er á þínum
dögum mun fram koma; en ekki kemr mér at óvörum þótt Bolli standi yfir

⁷⁵ ÍF V:91. "Gestr made only a short visit, but was shown around much of the farm, which he admired, saying Olaf had obviously spared no expense." Hreinsson V:46

⁷⁶ Cleasby-Vigfusson 713

⁷⁷ ÍF V:92. "will be thought the most outstanding of them, as long as he lives." Hreinsson V:46

höfuðsvörðum Kjartans, ok hann vinni sér þá og höfuðbana, ok er þetta illt
at vita um svá mikla ágætismenn.⁷⁸

Having said this, the narrative turns away from Gestr, noting that “Síðan riðu þeir til þings, ok er kyrrt þingit.”⁷⁹ In this case, Gestr’s future predictions clearly cause him pain to the point of tears, but he finds himself unable to personally affect events. That he chooses not to tell Óláfr is significant, in that he does not provide the requisite information for others to attempt to affect predicted events. This omission may be out of acknowledged futility, or it may reflect some other fated quality to these events. What it does show is that Gestr wields independent agency over the interpretation and dissemination of his predictions; there are times when he shares prophecies he knows will upset other characters, such as Guðrún, times that he is purposefully coy and vague, such as with Ljótr, and times that he chooses to simply not inform relevant characters of apparently unavoidable outcomes.

We might be able to read this particular omission more clearly if we were able to compose a distinct timeline of Gestr’s life and predictions. Such an endeavor of dating obviously entails an unknown margin of error, as we conflate historical and literary evidence. Using the Íslensk Fornrit chronology⁸⁰, we may loosely ascribe Gestr’s various *Laxdæla* prophecies to around the year 988 CE, assuming Kjartan was born around 970 and Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir was born sometime before 974 and engaged at the age of fifteen. This would place the events of *Laxdæla saga* significantly after those of *Gísla saga*, which occurred in the early 960’s⁸¹. It is possible that these predictions were made before those of *Landnámabók*, although this remains uncertain. In *Landnámabók*, Guðrún’s brother Óspak is outlawed for kidnapping the sister of Ljótr; this outlawry is not mentioned in *Laxdæla*, although the narrative’s reticence may be a casualty of the saga-writer’s focus on other events.

⁷⁸ ÍF V:92 “‘No need to mention it, but since you ask, I won’t conceal it from you either, as you’ll live to see it happen. I wouldn’t be surprised if Bolli should one day stoop over Kjartan’s corpse and in slaying him bring about his own death, a vision all the more saddening because of the excellence of these young men.’” Hreinsson V:45

⁷⁹ ÍF V:92. “They rode on to the Althing which passed without event.” Hreinsson V:45

⁸⁰ ÍF V:LIX

⁸¹ ÍF VI:XLII

Consistent between these three examples of Gestr's prophetic ability, however, is an interest in fraternal rivalry, particularly between fosterbrothers. The subject of his final prediction in *Laxdæla* concerning the two fosterbrothers echoes his predictions of Ljótr's son and fosterson in *Landnámabók*, as well as the fractured kinship ties of Gísli, Þorkell, Þorgrímr and Vésteinn in *Gísli saga*. The recurring emphasis of this theme of fosterbrother relationships and particularly their breaks, may be incidental to the character of Gestr and his prophecies or they may hold some larger significance linking such relationships with prophecy.

Gestr's predictions concerning Guðrún, Bolli and Kjartan, like those in the other sagas, are fulfilled. Guðrún marries Þorvaldr, whom she divorces, and then Þórðr, who drowns in a storm conjured by the magician Kotkell. Kotkell and his family, who had arrived in Iceland from the Hebrides before Guðrún ever divorced Þorvaldr, were known sorcerers, "mjök fjölkunnig ok inir mestu seiðmenn."⁸² Despite this fact, Gestr did not approach their host, Hallsteinn, until after Þórðr's death. At that time, he warned Hallstein "at hann skyldi reka í brott þessa fjölkunnigu menn, ella kvazk hann mundu drepa þá, -- 'ok er þó ofseinat.'"⁸³ Gestr's specific intimation here could refer to Þórðr's death or a series of inevitable events that had already been put in motion; either way, he does not intervene until after the fact. In responding, he appears to function as a protective male relative although he does not immediately instigate a feud with Kotkell and his family; in this way, he seems to be more interested in protecting the community and enforcing peace than revenge. This could reflect some level of foreknowledge on the part of Gestr. Narratively, this incident serves to distinguish Gestr's supernatural predictions from Kotkell's variety of witchcraft. While Gestr is able to anticipate events, he has no ability to physically affect his own divinations; unlike Kotkell, he does not work magic spells for the benefit or detriment of others.

Guðrún's third marriage continues according to Gestr's prophecies: she weds Bolli Þorleiksson, on the encouragement of her father while her love, Kjartan, is still in Norway. When Kjartan returns and marries another woman, Hrefna, Guðrún is displeased and sets the men against each other. On account of her inciting, Bolli kills

⁸² ÍF V:95. "skilled in witchcraft and accomplished magicians." Hreinsson V:47

⁸³ ÍF V:95. "that he [Hallstein] would either have to get rid of these sorcerers or else Gest would kill them, 'even though its too late.'" Hreinsson V:51

Kjartan, and is later killed in revenge. For her fourth husband, Guðrún marries Þorkell Eyjólfsson who later drowns in Breiðafjörðr. After his death, Guðrún becomes very religious, builds a church at Helgafell and becomes the first woman in Iceland to learn the Psalter, thus underscoring both Gestr's opinion and prophecy concerning the conversion to Christianity⁸⁴. Near the end of her life, she describes her husbands to her son, Bolli, saying "Þorkell var maðr ríkastr ok höfðingi mestr, en engi var maðr görvilegri en Bolli ok albetr at sér. Þórðr Ingunnarson var maðr þeirra vitrastr og lagamaðr mestr. Þorvalds get ek at engu"⁸⁵. In this way, she also confirms Gestr's prophecies of both events and the emotions tied to them.

The saga narrator notes that, near the end of her life, Guðrún went blind and was buried at Helgafell after her death. As such, she was likely buried near her father and her uncle Gestr Oddleifsson, who had asked to be buried there so many years before. Gestr's death, again according to the Íslensk fornrit chronology, likely occurred in the winter of 1019-1020 AD⁸⁶, not long after the death of his friend and kinsman Ósvífr, Guðrún's father. As he had prophesied on the way to the Alþingi some 30 years previous, he was buried in the same grave as Ósvífr, at the Helgafell church which Guðrún had built.⁸⁷ The circumstances of his burial, however, are described as slightly unusual.

Gestr Oddleifsson died in Hagi from a winter illness after predicting his incipient death to his son, "[s]vá segir mér hugr um, at þessi sótt muni skilja vára samvistu,"⁸⁸ and making his burial requests "Ek vil mik láta færa til Helgafells, því at sá staðr mun verða mestr hér í sveitum; þangat hefi ek opt ljós sét."⁸⁹ This reference to the brightness of Helgafell seems a clear allusion to the church and subsequent monastery

⁸⁴ ÍF V:223

⁸⁵ ÍF V:228. "Thorkel was the most powerful of men and most outstanding chieftain, but none of them was more valiant and accomplished than Bolli. Thord Ingunnarson was the wisest of these men and the most skilled in law. Of Thorvald I make no mention." Hreinsson V:119

⁸⁶ ÍF V:XLIX

⁸⁷ ÍF V:223.

⁸⁸ F V:196. "If my suspicions are correct, this illness will make an end of our life together." Hreinsson V:102

⁸⁹ ÍF V:196. "I wish to have my body taken to Helgafell, as it will be the most prominent seat in the district. I have also often seen brightness there." Hreinsson V:102

built there; it is perhaps telling that Gestr specifically requests to be buried in a Christian setting.

Unfortunately, the ice in Breiðafjörð at the time was too thick for any ships to leave the Barðaströnd shore. The second evening after his death, however, “gerði á veðr svá hvasst, at ísinn rak allan frá landi.”⁹⁰ The next day, Gestr’s son transported his body to Helgafell and buried him next to Ósvífr; after he returned to Barðaströnd, the storm blew up again and so “[þ]óttu at þessu miki merki, at svá gaf til at fara með lík Gest, at hvárki var fært áðr né síðan”⁹¹. In this short chapter, Gestr’s prophecy concerning his burial proximity to Ósvífr and the unexpected break in weather for his burial are both acknowledged; from this we can note the saga-author’s interest and the larger communal belief in Gestr’s preternatural ability. As this is the only narrative describing his death, it is intriguing to note the alignment of Gestr’s death, his pre-Christian prediction of conversion, and the two-day break in bad winter weather, allowing for his body to be transported and buried in a Christian churchyard. Despite his prophetic abilities, previously exercised within a pagan milieu, Gestr is embraced by the community, the church and even the weather; the circumstances surrounding his interment recall similar stories of early saints. Gestr and his predictions appear transcend the divide between pagan and Christian; an aspect of his characterization that is thrown into greater relief in *Njáls saga* with a variation appearing in *Kristni Saga*.

Brennu-Njáls saga, Kristni saga, and conversion in Iceland

Despite *Laxdæla*’s interest in Gestr as a prophetic figure with perhaps some religious undertones, it makes no record of his conversion or baptism. Rather, within that narrative we jump from his early predictions to Gúðrun to the fulfillment of them at the end of his life and his burial in a Christian church. Between these two episodes, however, lies the conversion of Iceland in 1000 C.E.

⁹⁰ ÍF V:196. “storm blew up with winds so strong that the ice was driven from the shore” Hreinsson V:102

⁹¹ ÍF V:196. “That he chance to transport Gest’s body had arisen was thought to be a great omen, as all travelling was impossible both before and afterwards.” Hreinsson V:102

In some ways, *Njála* and *Laxdæla saga* approach Gestr's presence during the conversion in opposite ways. While *Laxdæla* skips over his involvement almost entirely, instead choosing to highlight his preternatural insights at other times, *Njála* reveals him as the host of Þangbrandr, one of Iceland's early and not uncontroversial missionaries, yet curtails his prophetic role, casting him in an almost purely secular light. This seems somewhat at odds with his narratorial introduction, which describes him as “manna vitrastr, svá at hann sá fyrir orlog manna.”⁹² The discrepancy between this description and his actions, which seem to depend solely on his social and political influence, may relate back to a curious geographic element of his prescience. As the relevant events occur at his home at Hagi on Barðaströnd, this lends some credence to the inverse relationship between his proximity to his homestead at Hagi and his prophetic ability.

Unlike his appearances in other sagas, Gestr's actions in *Njála* can be confidently dated to 999 AD, relatively late during Þangbrandr's mission to Iceland. The saga narrative itself spans events from 960-1020 CE and lacks the traditional prehistory or genealogies common to the earlier sagas, while the saga's composition is usually dated between 1275-1290, on a basis of legal references postdating 1271⁹³. *Njála* survives in its entirety in five medieval manuscripts: Reykjabók, (AM 468 4to, c. 1300), Möðruvallabók, (AM 132 fol., c. 1350), Kálfalækjarbók (AM 133 4to., c. 1300), Gráskinna (Gl. kgl. Saml. 2870 4to, c. 1300), and (Gl. kgl. Saml. 2868 4to, c. 1400), and in partial form in nearly 15 other medieval manuscripts, the earliest dating from around 1280⁹⁴. This multiplicity of medieval copies gestures towards the saga's enduring popularity, while the relatively late composition allows for a greater incorporation of literary influences⁹⁵. *Brennu-Njáls Saga* is the longest of the Icelandic family sagas and features four intertwined narratives focused upon Njáll and Gunnar. The saga has attracted much critical attention, including monographs by Éinar Ól. Sveinsson and Lars Lönnroth's 1976 *Njal's Saga: A Critical Introduction*.

⁹² ÍF XII:267. “so very wise a man that he foretold people's fates.” Hreinsson III:125

⁹³ Ólason, *Medieval Scandinavia*, 434

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Lönnroth 210

In considering these complementary accounts of Gestr's place in the Christianization of Iceland, *Njála* tends to take some precedence. It should be noted, however, the conversion episode tends to be considered a digression⁹⁶ from the larger narrative of *Njála* as it diverges from Andersson's structural analysis of feudal saga narratives, and as the rhetoric itself tends toward a clerical dryness.⁹⁷ Thus, the scenes concerning Christianization in Iceland stand out from the narrative and secular background; similarly, Gestr stands out as a householder and political but not spiritual leader. In *Njála*, Gestr makes his brief appearance in ch. 103, when he hosts a feast to welcome the missionary Þangbrandr, sent from Norway to proselytize to the Icelanders. By the time that Þangbrandr arrives with his retinue of 60 men, however, 200 staunch pagans are already there, and fearfully expecting the imminent arrival of Ótrygg, a berserker.⁹⁸

The inclusion of a berserker in this episode is telling. Within the saga corpus, these characters appear as both pagan and wholly Other, selected by Oðinn and purposed to his will. They are described in *Ynglinga saga* as Oðinn's "own men [who] went into battle without coats of mail and acted like mad dogs or wolves. They bit their shields and were as strong as bears or bulls. They killed people, and neither fire nor iron affected them."⁹⁹ Their appearance in this episode is clearly divisive, a violent element of paganism that frightens Gestr and his pagan guests. This exaggeration of heathenism in form of the berserker creates a stronger dichotomy between the two religions for both the characters and, potentially, the saga audience.

Þangbrandr, when faced with their resistance to his message of conversion, uses the incipient arrival of the berserker to prove the preeminence of his religion. He proposes building three fires, one blessed by him, one blessed by the pagans, and a final one that would remain unblessed: "En ef berserkrinn hræðisk þann, er ek vígða, en vaði yðvard eld, þá skuluð þér taka við trú."¹⁰⁰ As berserkers are otherwise considered

⁹⁶ Lönnroth 19, referencing Andersson

⁹⁷ Lönnroth 220, referencing Sveinsson

⁹⁸ A genealogy is given for Ótrygg Oblaudsson in *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 2

⁹⁹ *Ynglinga saga*, ch. 6

¹⁰⁰ ÍF XII:267. "If the berserk fears the one which I blessed but walks through your fire, then you must accept the faith." Hreinsson III:126

impervious to fire, Ótrygg's's fearful avoidance of the fire blessed by Þangbrandr would imply that Christianity supersedes paganism.

Gestr agrees to Þangbrandr's test, calling it "ver mælt"¹⁰¹ and wagers his and his household's conversion on the outcome. This is the only time that we see Gestr gambling on an outcome; whether he can foresee what will happen or not, he does not elsewhere bet on future events. The three fires are built and when the berserker enters, he walks through the pagan-blessed fire only to burn "allr" in the Christian fire. Þangbrandr uses a crucifix to force the berserker to drop the sword, "jartegn svá mikill"¹⁰² and stabs him in the chest with a sword while others of the household help finish him off.

Ótrygg's sudden vulnerability to fire and iron and Þangbrandr's victory seem purposed to reveal Christianity's authority and power over paganism; intriguingly, the saga notes that Þangbrandr inquires a second time whether Gestr will convert. Gestr replies "þat eitt hafa um mælt, er hann ætlaði at efna."¹⁰³ and so he and all his household are baptized. Gestr's conversion and baptism function almost as the fulfillment of a contract; the saga does not particularly note any deeper change of belief structure.

Indeed, despite the formal religious aspects of this episode, Gestr appears almost purely as a secular host and leader within this narrative, a pagan who bets his belief on a test involving a fire and a berserker. While he leads his household into baptism, no reference is yet made to his preternatural insights. Perhaps because of this lack of explication, however, he is able to advise Þangbrandr on his future missionary endeavors. When Þangbrandr questions him about whether he should continue traveling into the fjords as a missionary, Gestr dissuades him, saying that "menn harða and illa viðreignar" lived there.¹⁰⁴ Gestr continues, saying "en ef þat er ætlat fyrir, at trúa þessi skuli við gangask, þá mun á Alþingii við gangsk, ok munu þar þá vera allir höfðingjar ór hverju heraði."¹⁰⁵ While this first piece of advice draws on Gestr's social

¹⁰¹ ÍF XII:267. "Well spoken." Hreinsson III:126

¹⁰² ÍF XII:267

¹⁰³ ÍF XII:268. "will keep what he had promised." Hreinsson III:126

¹⁰⁴ ÍF XII:268. "rough and vicious." Hreinsson III:126

¹⁰⁵ ÍF XII:268. "but if this faith is destined to take hold it will take hold at the Althing, where all the chieftains from each district will be." Hreinsson III:126

knowledge of the area, the second appears prescient except for the inclusion of “ef.” This conditional element seems unnecessary as Gestr has previously predicted the acceptance of Christianity within Iceland. At the same time, this advice is not at all coy or vague: Gestr specifically predicts where (and thus when) the conversion will occur, and he mollifies his guest: “Þú hefir þó mest at gört...þó at öðrum verði auðit í lög at leiða. En þat er sem mælt er, at eigi fellr tré við it fyrsta högg.”¹⁰⁶ Gestr’s language makes it clear that Þangbrandr will not be a part of this legalization of Christianity and yet he couches his reply by referring to a general trope of wisdom, thus displacing the responsibility and preternatural quality of his prediction. This diplomacy and displacement is intriguing, as is the curious parity between the primary antagonists.

If the saga-writer’s intended goal is to record early incidences of conversion and the subsequent endorsement of societal leaders, Gestr’s early baptism and advice seems to bridge the pagan and Christian worlds. Although his counsel is phrased more circumspectly in this encounter, the fact that he continues to accurately predicts events indicates that Gestr’s prophetic ability transcends religion and is not based in a pagan tradition. As that Gestr’s predictions require supernatural insight and are not based on a solely secular insight, this transcendence also infers a continuance of and endorsement by the known wisdom tradition. The difference, then, is how this wisdom is mediated for a new, Christian audience.

Unfortunately, Þangbrandr’s response to Gestr is not recorded; rather, it is noted that he accepted gifts from Gestr and took his leave traveling south and east, thus following Gestr’s advice. Þangbrandr repaired his ship and returned to Norway without attending the Alþingi that summer. Since this is similar to what Gestr predicted--that Þangbrandr would not be the one to see Christianity--we don’t know whether Gestr’s insight prompted Þangbrandr to avoid the Alþingi or whether he was working through his own agency, or if he was even aware of the prescience of his new convert’s wisdom.

*Kristni saga*¹⁰⁷ includes an abbreviated account of the same scene. Likely composed between 1250-1284 (according to Jón Jóhanesson, 1941 and Siân Duke), it survives as a medieval manuscript only in *Hauksbók*, which is believed to have been

¹⁰⁶F XII:268. “[Y]ou’ve done most of the work...even though others may be destined to make the faith law. As they say, a tree doesn’t fall at the first blow.” Hreinnsson III:126

¹⁰⁷ Duke, Siân. “Kristni Saga and its Sources: Some Revaluations,” *Saga-Book* 25 (2001) 345-450.

written in 1306-1308¹⁰⁸. The beginning and ending leaves are missing from the manuscript, and thus are supplied from a paper copy made by Jón Erlendsson in the 17th century. Jóhanesson posits that the saga “never existed in independent form, but was put together by Sturla himself from a number of different sources in the third quarter of the thirteenth century” (Duke 348). Duke, in her consideration of the saga, compares an early chapter (ch. 2) to a similar account in *Vatnsdæla saga*, which also involves uninvited berserkers crashing at feast, with fires built to prove the strength of Christianity. In some ways, this vignette more closely resembles the Njála feast at Hagi, although the characters and setting have been changed.

In ch. 5 of *Kristni saga*, however, we are given the parallel version of Þangbrandr’s visit to Gestr’s home. In this account, there is no mention of a feast, but Þangbrandr has traveled north specifically to meet “Gest enn spaka.”¹⁰⁹ While there, he is challenged to single combat by an unnamed Norwegian berserker: “Eige muntú þora at berjaz við mik, ef þú sér íþrotter mínar. Ek geng berom fótum um eld brennandaæ ok ek læt fallaz berr á saxöodd mínna ok sakar mik hvárke.”¹¹⁰ In order to intimidate the missionary further, he walks through the fire and falls on the sword, but Þangbrandr has already blessed both flame and blade, and so the berserker died, ostensibly through his own pagan hubris. At this, the saga notes, “Þesso fögnoðo marger góðer menn þó at heiðner väre. Þá lét Gestr prim-signaz; ok nockerer viner hans.”¹¹¹ In this version, Gestr never speaks and certainly never advises Þangbrandr, nor does he become baptized. In comparison, prime-signing is much less definitive than baptism, referring to “the cross-mark which was the catechumen’s first rite of initiation and technically necessary for commerce between Christian and pagan.”¹¹² Thus, being prime-signed allowed Gestr a greater latitude of interaction with Christians, but did not preclude him from pagan rites or rituals.

¹⁰⁸ Duke 346

¹⁰⁹ *Cristne Saga* 391

¹¹⁰ *Cristne Saga* 391. “Thou wilt not dare to fight with me, if thou see my feats; I can go barefoot over a burning fire, and I can let myself fall naked on my knife-edge, and neither does me any harm.” Translation from same source, *Christne Saga* 391

¹¹¹ *Cristne Saga* 391. At which thing many good men rejoiced, albeit they were heathen. Then Guest and certain of his friends were had themselves prime-signed.” *Christne Saga* 391.

¹¹² Foote, *The Viking Achievement*, 415

What is significant about Gestr's appearance in these sagas are his interactions with Þangbrandr and his presence at early conversions. Whether he was baptized or merely prime-signed, this acceptance of Christianity is an event that he had predicted previously in the case of Bolli and Helgafell, and his own conversion shows a clear endorsement of the new faith. He and his prophetic ability seem to be primarily used as a sort of political and social endorsement of the conversion to Christianity.

Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings and parody

The classical narratological appearance of Gestr as prophet or a political figure tapers off dramatically in the final sagas in which he appears. These two, *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* and *Króka-Refs saga* traditionally belong to a subset of the *Íslendingasögur* identified as the post-classical sagas. These are generally typified by their late composition and the mingling of romantic elements borrowed from the *riddarasögur* and *fornaldasögur*.¹¹³ Because of this, scholars have tended to judge the post-classical sagas negatively, considering these generic adoptions as indications of declining literary standards¹¹⁴. This value judgment, widely cast over these late sagas, is largely a function of literary taste wherein

[t]he hallmark of quality according to the traditional standards of saga scholarship is largely signified by a sensitivity to historical probability on the part of the saga author and hence also by the subordination of romance influences to a realist or credible presentation of narrative events.¹¹⁵

What this means for character studies is a much looser adaptation of historical or oral traditions, with characters appearing as more constructed studies. The fictionalization that occurs in post-classical sagas reveals known, immanent saga characters as persons more decidedly adapted for particular narrative purposes. While Gestr Oddleifsson never entirely leaves the realistic world, his character shifts sometimes dramatically according to various other entertainment and political appearances. While we have seen

¹¹³ Cardew, Phil. "The Question of Genre in the late *Íslendinga sögur*: a Case Study of *Þorskfirðinga saga*." *Sagas, Saints and Settlements*. Gareth Williams and Paul Bibire, eds. Brill: Leiden, 2004. 18

¹¹⁴ Cf. Gordon, E.V. *An Introduction to Old Norse*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956.

¹¹⁵ Arnold 143

various aspects of his personality highlighted in earlier sagas, these deviations at times seem to detach almost entirely from his traditional character.

With this in mind, we return to our examination of these post-classical sagas. Of the two, *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, known for its satirical tone and archetypal parodies, appears to be the earlier and does not indulge in quite the same fantastical elements. Stéfan Einarsson, in his *A History of Icelandic Literature*, separates these two sagas into different subgroups because of *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*' "tendency to rewrite and embellish older sagas" (qtd. in Arnold 146). Specifically, the saga pulls from information found in the *Sturlubók* manuscript of *Landnámabók*, chs. 117, 142 and 150, which it may derive from other sagas (*Saga þeirra Þorbjarnar ok Hávarðar ins halta*, and *Saga Ísfirðinga*) now lost. Because of this, T. M. Andersson notes, the saga "enjoys a particular disrepute among scholars"¹¹⁶ both for its narrative reconstruction and its "demonstrable historical errors and unprepossessing stanzas."¹¹⁷ These historical errors, presumably the cause of a saga writer working from memory, include the misidentification of the character Ljótr, here identified as the Dueller, or "Hólmgöngu-Ljótr"¹¹⁸. In *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, Bernadine McCreesh observes that the saga-writer has divvied up the traditional character of Ljótr from *Landnámabók* into three characters, of which Gestr Oddleifsson is one manifestation¹¹⁹.

This disruption in character is no doubt due to both narrative purpose and composition date. Provenance for *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* has been traced by internal evidence to around the year 1330 CE.¹²⁰ E. Paul and Dorothy Durrenberger likewise place its composition between 1300 and 1350¹²¹ although the Hreinsson translation claims it was written during the 15th century.¹²² The manuscript itself is preserved only in paper copies, the earliest of which dates from the seventeenth century (AM 160 fol.

¹¹⁶ Andersson, *Analytic Reading*, 196

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ ÍF VI:336

¹¹⁹ McCreesh, *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, 273. The others are Hólmgöngu-Ljótr and Ljótr Þjoðreksson.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Durrenberger, E. Paul and Dorothy Durrenberger. *The Saga of Hávarður of Ísafjörður*. Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1996. 15

¹²² Hreinsson V:313

and AM 502 4to). As the events of this tale are purported to have happened in the early years of the eleventh century near Ísafjörður,¹²³ the writing of this saga occurred at least 300 years after its content, and perhaps 60 years after the advent of Norwegian rule. While we have been examining texts written up to the late 13th century, the 40 or so years separating *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* from earlier texts such as *Njála* are crucial in terms of literary exchange and the composition of the legendary and romance sagas as influenced by continental writings. Both the late adaptations in literary craft and content, as well as the muddling of character identity, are likely to have affected the portrayal of Gestr Oddleifsson within *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*.

These shifts in character, however, have not undone the basic structure of Gestr's character. He still lives at Hagi on Barðaströnd; his introduction in ch. 4 describes him as “spekingr mikill, vitr ok vinsæll ok manna framsýnastr ok hafði mart mannaforráð.”¹²⁴ These are, we can imagine, the identifying characteristics that would continue to carry orally despite literary influences; it is unlikely to see Gestr completely change residences or social standing. Yet how the character of Gestr works within these structural parameters in this reworked narrative is significantly different from his earlier depictions.

At first glance, some of the characters are familiar derivations from *Landnámabók*. A man named Þorbjörn Þjóðreksson, identified here as Ljótr's brother,¹²⁵ petitions Gestr to marry his sister, Þorgerðr. This sister remains unidentified within previous genealogies of Gestr, and is not signified within *Landnámabók*.¹²⁶ Although Gestr disapproves of Þorbjörn because of “ójönuð hans ok ofbeldi”¹²⁷, community support for the match convinces Gestr to agree to the engagement and

¹²³ *Iceland Review Saga Series*, 9

¹²⁴ ÍF VI:303. “[A] great sage, wise and popular, and a very prophetic man, and he had a position of authority.” Hreinsson V:319

¹²⁵ In *Landnámabók*, Þorbjörn Þjóðreksson is Ljótr's brother in law, married to Ljótr's sister Halldís.

¹²⁶ Intriguingly, in *Gísla saga*, Gestr's mother is identified as Þorgerd. As such, this may indicate a conflation of generations or a simple likelihood that a proposed sister to Gestr may be named after their mother.

¹²⁷ ÍF VI:303. “[H]is unjust acts and violent behaviour.” Hreinsson V:319

wedding, on the condition that “Þorbjörn héti honum því með hantaki at láta of ójönuði ok rengendum, bjóða hverjum manni þat, er á, ok halda lög ok rétt.”¹²⁸

These stipulations are promptly broken by Þorbjörn’s subsequent treatment of Hávarðr, the father of Óláfr, a young sheep driver whom Þorbjörn kills unjustly. When Hávarðr seeks out Þorbjörn at the Alþingi to ask for restitution for his son’s death, Þorbjörn rebuffs him. When Gestr encounters him leaving the booth, he asks Þorbjörn about him, and sends his servant out to fetch Hávarðr back, while questioning his brother-in-law, “Hversu þykkisk þú hafa efnt þat, er þú lofaðir mér, þá er ek gipta þér systur mína?”¹²⁹ Þorbjörn’s answer is not recorded, and the question takes on a rhetorical tone. Even without supernatural insight, Þorbjörn’s behavior indicates a failure to fulfill his promise. Hávarðr returns and tells his story; when Gestr has heard the full case, he quickly responds, “Hefir nökkurr heyrtr slíkan ójafnað? Eru hér tveir kostit til, sá annarr, at ek rýf öll kaup, ella lát mik ein skera ok skipta um ykkur mál.”¹³⁰

Here, then, we have a clear shift in how Gestr approaches and wields his political and prophetic power. Despite his own misgivings, he allows his opinion to be swayed and his sister married to a man he considers both violent and unjust; against his personal judgment, he appears to accept and believe Þorbjörn’s promise to change. While we’ve seen Gestr claim limits to his own prescience and give supplicants coy answers in the past, he has only misread or misinterpreted the future once before, in the odd, final appearance in *Stúrlubók* 152, when he sends an assassin on to his friend. His inability to foretell the outcome of his sister’s marriage must then be interpreted as a normal failure of his foresight--which the classical sagas obscured--or an insertion or (perhaps inadvertent) twisting of his traditional character by the writer of *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*.

Perhaps more surprising than his lack of prescience, however, is his immediate response to Hávarðr’s case against Þorbjörn. In the previously examined sagas, we have seen Gestr queried and sought out for his advice; we have not seen him assert himself or

¹²⁸ ÍF VI:303. “Thorbjorn promised with a handshake to leave off his unjust acts and wrongdoing, give everyone his due, and abide by law and order.” Hreinsson V:319

¹²⁹ ÍF VI:312. “How well do you think you have kept to what you promised me when you married my sister?” Hreinsson V:324

¹³⁰ ÍF VI:312. “Has anyone ever heard of such injustice? There are now two choices: either I cancel our agreements, or you allow me to arbitrate in the matter involving the two of you.” Hreinsson V:324

his opinion without instigation. Here, however, he not only asserts but demands his right to arbitrate, with the hefty ‘or else’ of annulling his sister’s marriage otherwise. Even his speech patterns have changed.¹³¹ Compare, for example, his responses to earlier statements from *Laxdæla saga*: “Seg þú drauma þína vera má, at vér gerim af nökkut”¹³² and *Gísla saga*: “Kunna mynda ek mér ráð, ef ek hefða vígit vegit, at hafa þat undanbragð at málit mætti ónýtt verða, ef á mér yrði haft, at nefnask annan veg en ek hétu.”¹³³ In both of these, Gestr appears to invite confidence and dispense advice, but does not demand either information or power. His speech pattern is couched in modesty and takes a slight conditional tone: he will interpret if he is able, and if the information is beneficial to his companion.¹³⁴ Comparatively, the rhetoric in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* has been expanded; the traditionally reticent Gestr speaks quickly and definitively and yet with less insight. He claims a legal right, and uses threats both to modify behavior and ensure compliance. In his arbitration, he inserts himself into the conflict, both by announcing Þorbjörn’s inability to pay an appropriate fine and by offering to host Hávarðr and his family annually. This mediation, while apparently fair to Hávarðr, also carries an undertone of aggressive and perhaps self-aggrandizing behavior as Gestr publicly assumes Þorbjörn’s debt.

Thus, despite his agreement to the terms, the settlement fails when Þorbjörn is unable to contribute a second wergild for his crime and instead throws the collected teeth of the murdered Óláfr into the face of the father of his victim. The description here is ambiguous: it is possible that Þorbjörn truly did not have the appropriate funds on him; or, as Gestr intimates, he is simply stalling (“Gestr bað han þá ekki undan draga.”¹³⁵) Either way, Gestr seem unprepared for Þorbjörn’s violent response, saying

¹³¹ Compare, for example, a sample from *Laxdæla Saga*: “It was in your fourth dream that you bore a gold helmet set with gems on your head, which was a heavy weight for you. This signifies that you will marry a fourth time and this husband will far surpass you. The helmet seemed to fall into the waters of Hvammsfjord, with indicates that this fourth husband will have an encounter with that same fjord on the final day of his life. I can make no more of this dream.” Hreinsson V:45

¹³² ÍF V:88. “Tell me your dreams. I might be able to make something of them.” Hreinsson V:44

¹³³ ÍF VI:92. “I’d know what I’d do if I had done the killing. I’d use the trick of changing my name, so that any case brought against me would come to nothing.” Hreinsson II:37

¹³⁴ Consider, for example, that he does not dispense his entire knowledge to Ólafr Páir.

¹³⁵ ÍF VI:314. “Gestr told him to stop stalling.” Hreinsson V:325.

“[e]ngum manni ertu líkr at illmennsku of ójafnaðiæ kann ek ok eigi at sjá á manni, ef eigi iðrask þú þessa nökkurt senn eða þínir frændr.”¹³⁶ The pairing of Gestr’s judgement of people with assumed retribution against Þorbjörn loses some of its narrative gravity here, as Gestr has previously accepted and thus implicitly approved Þorbjörn, despite his negative attributes. Nor does Þorbjörn seem at all disturbed by Gestr’s comments--such a different response than that of Gísli or Guðrún--but only by his annulment of Þorbjörn and Þorgerðr’s marriage. Þorbjörn’s blatant disregard for Gestr may reflect his own status as *goði* of the Ísafjörður district, but it also severely undermines Gestr’s political and social standing.

After this, Gestr briefly leaves the narrative. Chapter 14 of *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* is intriguing in that it provides a second account of the death of Ljótr, (predicted by Gestr in *Landnámabók*, and described in *Sturlubók* 142) but, as it doesn’t reference Gestr particularly, we will look instead at Gestr’s judgment of these and subsequent events in ch. 22. Unlike the previous legal case, here Gestr is proposed as the arbitrator by another, because he “kunnugast um málit.”¹³⁷ At that prompting, Gestr sifts through the layers of feudal killing to declare his judgment and settlement over nearly twenty deaths, which were accepted by both parties. At the conclusion of this, however, two more earless victims of the feud appear at the Alþingi, thus unbalancing the previous agreement and again raising questions about his foresight. Unable to see through their deceptions, he chides the disputants--“hví varð þér þetta fyrir, Þórarinn, at láta sem þú skyldir sættask, en fara með slíka prettvísi?”¹³⁸--but declares that his previous settlement will stand. His only method of displaying his disapproval is the rather impotent stand that “ek skal aldri at ykkrum málum veita.”¹³⁹ Despite the subsequent deference of Steinþor, these statements are largely disregarded by the others; Gestr’s political and social prowess and power appear ineffective.

¹³⁶ ÍF VI:314. “You are like no other man for malice and injustice. I am no judge of men if you or your kinsmen do not live to regret this.” Hreinsson V:325.

¹³⁷ ÍF VI:353. Gestr is considered the “best informed about the case.” Hreinsson V:345

¹³⁸ ÍF VI:354. “It can truly be said that you kinsmen have no equals in the nasty and dishonourable behaviour, for how could you have pretended to have settled the dispute and practised such deception?” Hreinsson V:345

¹³⁹ ÍF VI: 355. “I shall never again support any of your lawsuits.” Hreinsson V:345

In short, the Gestr whose predictions once took on a hallowed quality is now hollowed instead, his prophecies and political advice carrying a certain empty quality. The formidable prophet has become somewhat of a caricature of his former self; while more assertive, his actions and predictions carry less social weight, and his only method of censuring those he disapproves of is by removing himself from the situation. While he ostensibly fills his traditional role, his language and actions appear to parody of the influence he once wielded. Thus *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* draws on the events and persons of *Landnámabók*, it reveals deep shifts in the continuing characterization of Gestr Oddleifsson.

Króka-Refs saga and the narrative foil

Like *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, *Króka-Refs saga* is considered a post-classical saga; where *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* reinterprets events from previous sagas, however, the saga of Refr the Sly has “very little connection with historical traditions.”¹⁴⁰ Martin Arnold refers to it as a classical and picaresque parody wherein the hero, Refr Steinsson, “seems to court excess at every turn.”¹⁴¹ Written in the mid-fourteenth century, it is preserved in entirety in a single fifteenth century manuscript (AM 471 4to), with fragments found in two other fifteenth century manuscripts (Stockholm Perg. 4to no. 8, AM 586 4to)¹⁴².

The plot of the saga follows Gestr Oddleifsson’s *kolbíttr* nephew, Refr Steinsson, from his unassuming origins lazing next to a hearth in Breiðafjörðr through various revenge killings that propel him out of Iceland to Greenland and then to Denmark, and finally even to Rome on a pilgrimage. As an adult, Refr is portrayed as “superlative, without restraint, showing no sign of tragic potential, beyond parochial argument and fated only by his self-determination”¹⁴³ while his various escapes and escapades have

¹⁴⁰ Rowe, Elizabeth Ashman. “*Króka-Refs saga*.” *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, 369

¹⁴¹ Arnold 183

¹⁴² Arnold 183

¹⁴³ Arnold 184

been ascribed to a James Bond-like mastery of technology.¹⁴⁴ In his youth, however, Refr was far from impressive. In a series of vignettes that borrow heavily from other saga narratives,¹⁴⁵ Refr is incited by his mother Þorgerðr to avenge the murder of their farmhand, Bardi, upon the perpetrator, Þorbjörn. After his killing of Þorbjörn, Þorgerðr urges him to go to her brother¹⁴⁶ Gestr's home at Hagi until the killings are settled.

When he arrives, Gestr gives him a “góðar viðtökur”¹⁴⁷. While this narrative contains the most extensive view we have of Gestr at his home at Hagi in Barðaströnd, it is also clear that Gestr's character is playing the foil to that of his nephew. If Gestr ineffectively asserted his own opinions in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, here he actively seeks the opinion and thoughts of his adolescent kinsman: “spyr Gestr, ef hann segði nokkur tíðindi. Refr lézt engi segja. ‘Veiztu þó nokkur?’¹⁴⁸” After Refr has told his uncle of his recent activities, Gestr agrees to shelter him and asks, “‘ef hann væri nokkur íþróttamaðr.’ Refr kvað þat fjarri fara. Gestr mælti: ‘Ek sé á þér, at þú ert inn mesti íþróttamaðr at nokkurum hlut, en þat mun ek sjá brátt, hvat þat er.’”¹⁴⁹ This conversation is distinctly contrary to Gestr's other conversations with, and about, his young friends and kinsmen. In *Landnámabók* and *Laxdæla saga*, Gestr was immediately able to identify someone's future prominence or which fosterbrother would succeed further; here, however, he is clearly the inquisitor and rather ignorant about his nephew. As elsewhere, his comparative reticence appears to indicate relative power in the relationship; Gestr's immediate enthusiasm and naive querying reveal his primary narrative position as a facilitator, rather than counselor, to the hero.

¹⁴⁴ Willson, Kendra. “Króka-Refs saga as science fiction: Technology, magic and the materialist hero.” *The Fantastic in Old Norse / Icelandic Literature; Sagas and the British Isles*. 2 vols. Preprint papers of the 13th International Saga Conference. Ed. John McKinnell, David Ashurst and Donata Kick. Durham: Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006.

¹⁴⁵ *Hrafnkels saga*, *Víga-glúms saga*, *Gísla saga* and *Egils saga*. These allusions are described in more detail by Martin Arnold 203-206.

¹⁴⁶ This sibling relationship, absent in *Landnámabók*, is known to us from *Hávarðar Saga Ísfirðings*. In attempting to align these accounts, it is possible that Þorgerðr remarried Steinr after her annulment from Þorbjörn.

¹⁴⁷ ÍF XIV:127. “hearty welcome.” Hreinsson III: 401

¹⁴⁸ ÍF XIV:126. “Gestr asked if he had any news to report. Ref said he had not. ‘But do you know any?’ Gestr asked.” Hreinsson III: 401

¹⁴⁹ ÍF XIV:127. “[I]f he were a master in some skill. Ref said that was not the case at all. Gestr said, ‘I can see you are potentially a master of something and I’ll soon see what it is.’” Hreinsson III: 402

This role is emphasized in his subsequent actions. After watching Refr carve a yarn-bobbin, Gestr declares that his nephew must have a knack for building, and requests that he build a sealing boat as a test of Refr's apparently innate ability. While this may be a wild surmise, it does not appear to be prophetic and Gestr does not appear consistently confident in his assumption. When presented with this request, Refr attaches various stipulations to his involvement, again controlling the situation:

‘Fá þú mér svá efni til ok smíðartól at þat sé allt meir en nógt, því at þat er margra manna háttur at þeir kenna því um, ef eigi verður vel, at latliga sé til fengit. Eg vil ok, að engi maður forvitnist þessa smíð því at þat er mælt, ef vel verður, at sá nökkurr muni til hafa komit, er mér muni kennt hafa.¹⁵⁰

Gestr agrees, fetching the supplies Refr requests, until Refr himself tells him that “hann ekki meira mega at gera, hvern veg sem til tækist.”¹⁵¹ Three months after Refr has begun work on the boat, Gestr finally sends a servant to check on the progress; when the report is favorable, he requests that the man say nothing, and another two months pass. This checking up on Refr seems to indicate some level of skepticism on the part of Gestr. Gestr allows his nephew to fully dictate the materials and conditions of the endeavor without oversight but without knowing the outcome, either. When Refr finishes, Gestr is careful to take only a small handful of people with him to view the completed boat “því at hann vildi eigi, at alþýða vissi, ef ófímligt væri.”¹⁵²

The ship, however, is excellently crafted, as befits a reformed *kolbíttr* hero, and to repay Refr for his work, Gestr chooses to give the boat to him: “vil ek því nú launa þér, at ek vil þetta skip þér gefa.”¹⁵³ While this decision may make little logical sense, it does confirm Gestr's role as a facilitating sidekick and vaguely recalls Gestr's support of Vésteinn's sons at the end of *Gísla saga*. This allusion is heightened in the next chapter, when Refr kills a man for insulting him with glancing blows, and Gestr

¹⁵⁰ ÍF XIV:127. ““Get enough and more of tools and material because lots of people, when a project doesn't turn out well, blame the outcome on inadequate supplies. Moreover, I don't want anyone to know about this project because if it turns out well people will probably say that somebody came and taught me how to do it.” Hreinsson III:402

¹⁵¹ ÍF XIV:128. “Gestr could do no more however the project turned out.” Hreinsson III: 403.

¹⁵² ÍF XIV:128. “[B]ecause he did not want it generally known if the project was bungled.” Hreinsson III: 403.

¹⁵³ ÍF XIV:128. ““Now I want to pay you for the ship by giving it to you.”” Hreinsson III: 403.

supports his violent actions, saying they are “manna heilastr.”¹⁵⁴ In this particular exchange, their conversation is again inverted: Gestr asks what Refr will do next, rather than Refr soliciting for his elder’s advice. Only when Refr announces his intention to sail to Greenland does Gestr agree--“Nú kaus þú þat, sem ek vilda”¹⁵⁵--and promise to help him. Once again, Gestr’s traditional role is undercut.

This sublimation of Gestr’s usual wisdom and influence appears to serve dual purposes in the saga. This inversion of the traditional power structures highlights Refr’s own talents, while the choice of a known, prophetic figure as facilitator and even supplicant contextualizes an otherwise unknown character.¹⁵⁶ If the immanent saga does not include an ahistorical character like Refr, then, the saga writer gains historical traction by embedding him in the trappings of a family saga. Intriguingly, Gestr briefly breaks from this role as he bids his nephew adieu, saying:

Ef þér verðr eigi útkvámu auðit, þá vil ek, at þú látir skrifa frásögn um ferð þína því at hún mun nökkurum merkileg þykkja, því at ek hygg at þú sér annarr spekingr mestri í várri ætt. Mun ok nökkut gott af þér verða. Mæli ek nú ok svá fyrir at sá inn sami, er sólina hefir skapat efli þik til góðra hluta¹⁵⁷.

As the last thing that Gestr says in this saga, or in the *Íslendingasögur* corpus, this final statement is telling. Once again, it is not as strong as his other statements, and is slightly more sweeping; this is Gestr’s blessing on a kinsman and friend he is unlikely to see again. He doesn’t reference his own ability to foresee, or not foresee, but rather offers up his advice to Refr to have someone chronicle his adventures. As Refr does not return to Iceland, the implication is that he fulfilled his uncle’s request and thus was responsible for producing this text. Gestr’s insistence on this, of course, is because he believes Refr to be a sort of heir to his own wisdom or prescience, the second Wise

¹⁵⁴ ÍF XIV:131. “Very well done.” Hreinsson III: 404

¹⁵⁵ ÍF XIV:131. ““You’ve chosen to do as I would wish.”” Hreinsson III:404

¹⁵⁶ Refr Steinsson is not otherwise referenced within the *Íslendingasögur*, while his mother Þorgerðr--Gestr’s supposed sister--is unknown beyond the post-classical sagas.

¹⁵⁷ ÍF XIV:131. ““If it turns you are not destined to come back to Iceland, I wish that you would have a story written about your journey, because it will seem noteworthy to some people since I think you are the second wise man to appear in our family. And surely you are destined for great achievements. And I call on the One Who Made the Sun to strengthen you for good ends now and in the future.”” Hreinsson III: 404.

Counselor that their family has produced. The reasoning for this is far from sound: despite building an impressive ocean-going boat, we have seen little display of this wisdom and the larger community continues to view him rather negatively. As a blessing, however, it works quite well, particularly as Gestr reaffirms Refr's future studded with great achievements.

In his final sentence, Gestr calls down divine protection from the One Who Made the Sun. Despite Gestr's concessions--primesigning or baptism--to Christianity in Njála, he tends not to reference deities; even in predicting Bolli's conversion in Norway, and the conversion of Iceland as a whole, he makes no direct reference or call upon God. Thus, this final speech, with its allusions to both literacy and religion, seems to reveal a rather late and reflective view. This is the last time that Gestr Oddleifsson is mentioned in the *Íslendingasögur*. The change in Gestr's character from his early appearances in *Landnámabók* and the classical *Íslendingasögur* is substantial.

Chapter 3: Sobriquets and Literary Analogues

In the previous chapters, we considered traditional methods of saga characterization and applied them to Gestr Oddleifsson as he appears within the *Íslendingasögur*. The purpose of this final chapter is to delve both more deeply into the specific appellations used to describe him as a prophetic character and to situate him in a larger literary context. As such, this chapter will analyze his sobriquets and related analogues in order to consider their narrative purpose.

The most evident of these are a small collection of cognomens that consistently denote Gestr as a wise man, e.g. Gestr the Wise, although these do not specifically allude to prophetic ability. These are typically added to his name as an identifying sobriquet during saga introductions, thus distinguishing Gestr Oddleifsson from other saga characters with the same first name, such as Gestr Þorhallason, who appears in *Eyrbyggja* and *Heiðarvíga saga*, or the Gestr Barðarsson of *Bandamanna saga* and *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*.

From Gestr's first appearance, embedded in his grandfather Geirleifr's genealogy in *Landnámabók*, he is identified as "Gestr inn spaki."¹⁵⁸ This adjective, *spakr*, is defined by Cleasby-Vigfusson as "wise,"¹⁵⁹ with a possible etymological root in the Latin *sapiens*, a word used "by the ancients...with the notion of prophetic vision or second sight."¹⁶⁰ Zoëga draws on this specific interpretation in his definition,¹⁶¹ although this supernatural nuance does not appear to apply in every case. While Gestr is unequivocally prophetic, other saga characters known for their insight or intellectual abilities and identified as "inn spaki" show no signs of prescience. This is evident from Gestr's interaction with Ljótr in *Lnd.* 142; although Ljótr is introduced as "Ljótr inn

¹⁵⁸ ÍF I:172

¹⁵⁹ Cleasby-Vigfusson 580

¹⁶⁰ Cleasby-Vigfusson 580

¹⁶¹ Zoëga 397

spaki” at the beginning of the chapter, he continually turns to Gestr for his prophetic insight concerning his sons and his own death. The implication of this is that Ljótr’s own particular brand of wisdom does not extend to prophecy, or that Gestr’s ability is somehow superior to that his host. The flexibility of this term allows it to work equally well within narratives where Gestr’s prognostications are not foregrounded; for instance, he is also described as “inn spaki” in *Kristni saga* (ch. 5) and *Gísla saga* (ch. 28). In both of these particular instances, however, his immediate influence permeates the social or secular realm: in the abbreviated *Kristni saga* he is prime-signed by Þangbrandr but does not engage in prophecy while at this point in *Gísla saga*, he is advising the young sons of Vésteinn in their quest for vengeance. While these instances surely underscore his societal influence and wisdom, they do not highlight his prescient abilities. This distinction between wisdom and prophecy is heightened within *Melabók*, where *fróðr* is substituted for *spakr*¹⁶². Even more so than *spakr*, the sobriquet *fróðr* appears to depend on intellect and knowledge with no reference to prophetic ability. Cleasby-Vigfusson defines *fróðr* as “knowing, learned, well-instructed”¹⁶³ and primarily based upon historical knowledge; thus it was used as a cognomen for Old Icelandic chroniclers, such as Ari fróði. The usage here then seems to indicate the intersection of language ability and wisdom, and as such, may relate to Gestr’s poetic composition referenced in S 142, although this incident is not similarly recorded in *Melabók*.

The noun *spekingr*, used to describe Gestr in *Laxdæla saga* (ch. 33), *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* (ch. 4), *Landnámabók* (ch. 122), and *Króka-Refs saga* (ch. 6) appears to be related to *spakr*, and refer to Gestr as a sage or counselor. In this case, this descriptive noun is applied by the narrator, thus implying a general social opinion meant to be adopted by the audience and while not being specifically tied to any action by Gestr. *Spekingr* does not appear to carry any specific prophetic element but rather indicates only his role as adviser; intriguingly, this is the only reference to Gestr’s wisdom in *Króka-Refs saga* and it is made by Gestr in reference to his nephew Refr; he

¹⁶² ÍF I:173

¹⁶³ Cleasby-Vigfusson 75

notes that “þú sér annarr spekingr mestr í várri ætt.”¹⁶⁴ This is also the strongest reference Gestr ever makes concerning his own abilities.

In the case of *Laxdæla saga* and *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, this descriptor is paired with the term *framsýn*: Gestr “var höfðingi mikill ok spekingr at viti, framsýnn um marga hluti”¹⁶⁵ and “var hann spekingr mikill, vitr ok vinsæll ok framsýnastr.”¹⁶⁶ Unlike *spakr* and *spekingr*, *framsýn* is a clear reference to prophecy, literally translating as forward-sight or vision, or visibly seeing the future.¹⁶⁷ While in *Laxdæla* this term serves as a precursor to Gestr’s prophecies concerning Gúðrun, Kjartan, and Bolli, and informs the audience of the regard with which they should anticipate his prophecies, in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* it appears to function as a parody. The use of the term indicates to the audience how they ought to view his character--as a traditional, possibly anachronistic, prophet--while his actions within the narrative consistently undercut this description, apparently for entertainment value.

The similarities of these given introductions, first considered in the introduction to this thesis, should be strongly evident by now. *Spekingr*, *framsýn* and *vitr* appear in both *Laxdæla saga* and *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*; *vitr* also appears in *Njáls saga*, where he is described as “hann var manna vitrastr, svá at hann sá fyrir örlög manna.”¹⁶⁸ *Vitr* and the superlative *vitrastr* likewise indicate wisdom, in this case to the point of distinct prescience.

What we see from these appellations, then, is a curious consistency of description, a larger motif of wisdom within which prophecy functions as one manifestation. In many ways, this reflects Gestr’s own characterization as a sagacious social leader with an unequivocal prophetic bent that is not always emphasized within the individual sagas. These appellations describe singular facets of Gestr’s character. Indeed, while *spakr*, *vitr*, and *fróðr* are used by the saga writers to interpret aspects of Gestr Oddleifsson for the larger saga audience, his name inherently inhabits his

¹⁶⁴ ÍF XIV:131 “[Y]ou are the second wise man to appear in our family.” Hreinsson III:404

¹⁶⁵ ÍF V:87. “He was an important chieftain and especially wise man, who could foretell many events of the future.” Hreinsson V:43

¹⁶⁶ ÍF VI:303. “He was a great sage, wise and popular, and a very prophetic man, and he had a position of authority.” Hreinsson V:319

¹⁶⁷ Zoëga 148, Cleasby-Vigfusson 330, 615

¹⁶⁸ ÍF XII:267. “He was so very wise a man that he foretold people’s fates.” Hreinsson III:125

character and vice versa. As a cognomen, the forename Gestr is both used for identification and as an implicit characterization of the word's explicit lexical meanings.

In order to consider Gestr's forename as a method of literary characterization, we must, to some extent, divorce it from its historical roots. On a literal, genealogical level, the name 'Gestr' identifies this particular character as the son of Oddleif, grandson of Geirleif and father of Þordr, Halla, and Þórey; a prominent man who lives at Hagi on the Barðaströnd coast. As a cognomen, however, it defines Gestr as guest or outsider, a stranger in relation to the known. According to Cleasby-Vigfusson, the original meaning of "gest" is stranger or alien, from the Latin *hostis* or *hospes*. This second Latin derivation denotes "the old notion of a stranger, prop. *an accidental guest, chance comer...*distinguished from *boðs-maðr, an invited guest*, or the like."¹⁶⁹ This connotation draws us back to the liminality of Gestr's character. He appears at his home only briefly in *Landnámabók*, *Njáls saga* and *Króka-Refs saga* and never in conjunction with his prognostications, giving a sort of credence to the proverb that a prophet goes unrecognized in his homeland. Indeed, the further he is removed from his farm in the Westfjörds, the grander his predictions become, ranging from Ljótr's warning to be kind to the neighbor-boys, to interpreting Gúðrun's dreams, to the specific timeline of the dissolution of Gísli's friendships.

As Gestr moves away from Hagi, he enters a physically liminal state as a guest, which reflects how his wisdom and prescience separate him from others. Indeed, each of these previous examples occurred as Gestr was being hosted by another: Ljótr, Gúðrun, Ólafr, even Þorkell auðga at the Alþingi. Even when the predictions are not given or explained until Gestr has left the hospitality and protection of his host, it is apparent that his insight was stimulated while he was in the role of a guest. In the case of *Laxdæla saga*, for example, Gestr doesn't explain his vision of Kjartan's death until he and his son have continued on toward the Alþingi; Gestr's language--"Þarfleysa er at segja þat"¹⁷⁰--intimates that he has previously seen this future but simply didn't see the need to share his prophetic vision until asked. The one deviation to this motif of hospitality appears to be Gestr's encounter with the Norwegian in *Sturlubók 142*,

¹⁶⁹ Cleasby-Vigfusson 197. Their emphasis.

¹⁷⁰ ÍF V:92. "No need to mention it." Hreinsson V:46

wherein Gestr's vague reference to luck is a direct response to the Norwegian's help:

“Happ sótti þik nú, en brátt mun annat; gættu, at þér verði þat eigi at óhappi.”¹⁷¹

On a basic level, the very act of being a guest displaces a person within a particular household. Cleasby-Vigfusson note that the term “gestr” is used interchangeably with *válaðr*, or vagrant, in *Hávamál* 132; and was often paired with *gangandi* (“gestr ok gangandi”) as an alliterative phrase referring to the itinerant poor.¹⁷² While Gestr Oddleifsson of the sagas is certainly not considered vagrant, his movements around Iceland do ally him with an itinerant segment of Icelandic society that has a flexible social standing; as a guest, he is both welcomed and Other. As we've discussed earlier, this transience can ally him with the divinatory element of the *völva* or traditional seeress figure brought from outside the boundaries of the community; he is respected and encouraged to visit, and yet his purpose and ability separates him from the inviting community. He is indeed a liminal being.

Intriguingly, Gestr fulfills each of the maxims of hospitality required of guests in the *Gestapáttir*, the first 79 stanzas of the eddic lay *Hávamál*, which are devoted to maxims and advice concerning hospitality. Four stanzas in particular use the term ‘gest’. For the most part, these are didactic proverbs, intended to inform the actions and reciprocations of social conduct and relevant to this consideration of Gestr Oddleifsson because they reflect, to a large extent, how he behaves as a liminal element within social interactions. The first of these, st. 2, emphasizes the joyful and welcome reception a guest should receive:

Gefendr heilir! Gestr er inn kominn,
hvar skal sitja sjá?
Mjök er bráðr, sá er á bröndum skal
síns of freista frama.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ ÍF I:185. “This is a sign of luck for you, and you'll soon be lucky again. But take good care that your luck doesn't go bad on you.” Pálsson 69

¹⁷² Cleasby-Vigfusson 197

¹⁷³ “Hávamál.” *Eddukvæði*. Ed. Guðni Jónsson. 8 Sept. 2010. <http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/Hávamál>. St. 2.

“All hail to the givers! | A guest hath come
say where shall he sit?
In haste is he | to the hall who cometh
to find a place by the fire.” Hollander 15

This invitation is borne out by the welcome that Gestr consistently receives. Despite his sometimes unpleasant prophecies, his presence is appreciated: Ljótr does not turn him away after Gestr's coy replies, Gúðrun and Óláfr petition him to visit their homes, and he appears as an honored guest of Þorkell auðga at the Alþingi. The stanza above indicates that how a host approaches a guest preempts any action of the guest him or herself, requiring the host to consider how best to be hospitable to the invited guest.

This social contract between host and guest is balanced by the corresponding duties of a guest; in this case, to listen:

Inn vari gestr, er til verðar kemr,
þunnu hljóði þegir,
eyrum hlýðir, en augum skoðar;
svá nýsisk fróðra hverr fyrir.¹⁷⁴

The intriguing implication of this stanza is the clear correlation between the listening guest and wisdom. While this wisdom--*fróðra*--does not allude specifically to prescience, it does encapsulate Gestr's approach to interpersonal relationships and how he manages his wisdom. We've already seen that he is somewhat reticent and even modest in making his prophecies; he listens to all of Gúðrun's dreams before positing an interpretation and he also listens to the carrying-ons of the likely-intoxicated Gísli and friends and waits to be asked before surmising their eventual falling-out. Indeed, the only time that this is not repeated is in the post-classical and clearly parodic *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*; as this text also undermines Gestr's inherent wisdom, the proverb holds.

Lee Hollander takes some liberty in his translation of the last line: "thus wards him the wise man 'gainst harm." As there is no definite harm referenced in the Old Norse; a more accurate translation would be, "the wise man searches about himself" with only a contextual implication that danger or harm may be present. Thus, while this translation of implication may not be literally accurate, it does introduce the potential for conflict between guests and hosts, and the circumspection required of an outsider. This is referenced in st. 31:

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., St. 7

"The wary guest | to wassail who comes
listens that he may learn
opens his ears, | casts his ears about
thus wards him the wise man 'gainst harm" Hollander 16

Fróðr þykkisk, sá er flótta tekr,
 gestr at gest hæðinn;
 veit-a görla, sá er of verði glissir,
 þótt hann með grömum glami.¹⁷⁵

While this stanza seems to primarily deal with the relationship between guests, the implication can extend further. In this way, we see Gestr avoiding Ljótr's queries or answering coyly; not telling Óláfr pai everything about Bolli and Kjartan, and being diplomatic in his advice to the missionary Þangbrandr. In this stanza, the guest who avoids such mocking compatriots is again referred to as *fróðr*. While this primarily serves a didactic purpose in order to instruct guests how to behave wisely--thus the use of the term *fróðr*, which implies a wisdom that can be learned--the consistent alignment of such adjectives with the liminality of the guest, appears to validate their association. This association is further substantiated in other narratives, to which we will turn shortly.

First, however, a final *Hávamál* stanza provides insight into Gestr's comportment. In st. 35, guests are advised to avoid overstaying their welcome.

Ganga skal, skal-a gestr vera
 ey í einum stað;
 ljúfr verðr leiðr, ef lengi sitr
 annars fletjum á.¹⁷⁶

In this case, we have a precedent for Gestr's continual sojourning. As a guest, it is inherent that Gestr would be transient, but this stanza appears to offer some insight into his literary movement: in both *Landnámabók* and *Laxdæla saga*, his presence is concerned with moving away from the site of his prophecies. Respectively, his extended appearances in the sagas focus upon his leaving Ljótr's and his deferment of

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., St. 31

“A wise man he | who hies him betimes
 from the man who likes to mock;
 for at table who teases | can never tell
 what foe he might have to fight.” Hollander 19

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., St. 35

“Get thee gone betimes; | a guest should not
 stay too long in one stead;
 lief grows loath | if too long one sits
 on bench, though in he was bidden.” Hollander 19-20

Guðrún and Óláfr's invitations. In *Gísla saga*, his role is likewise characterized by movement. The Alþing occurs only for a proscribed amount of time, as does the regional Þing he attends at the end of the saga. While we may consider his movement as traveling towards a location, it is just as evident that his prophecies mark an end to his presence. While the overall purpose of the proverb heralds the much later aphorism that both fish and visitors smell after three days, it seems to also indicate a time-sensitive element of the role of the prophet-as-guest, or guest-as-prophet. As noted previously, the prescient character avoids prophesying in a local or home environment; the flip-side to such an argument is that the prognosticating character, while valued for his insight, is unwelcome as a near neighbor.

These eddic references provide insight into Gestr's behavior as a literal guest, while other analogues, particularly those concerning characters who adopt his forename as part of a disguise, give a literary interpretation of the role of the guest. These analogues obviously do not speak directly to the character of Gestr Oddleifsson, but rather paint a literary background upon which to view Gestr. The adoption of the literal descriptor, Gestr, as a proper address by characters hoping to obfuscate their own personality and adopt the innate qualities of a guest, is common enough to be considered a motif. In doing so, characters create an opaque identity and emphasize the liminal aspects of their otherness. Often within this disguise, these characters also wield supernatural abilities. We shall examine three examples of characters assuming the cognomen Gestr.

The most evident of these is the disguise of Óðinn, who appears as Gestumblindi, or blind guest, when concealing his identity in *Hervarar saga*. In this particular case, the human character Gestumblindi sacrifices to Óðinn for aid in dealing with the King Heiðrek, who has challenged him to a contest of riddles. Responding to his sacrifice, Óðinn assumes the guise of Gestumblindi, exchanges clothes with him, and approaches the king. They engage in a battle of wits, with the disguised deity posing nearly 50 riddles, each of which Heiðrik is able to answer correctly. At the end, Óðinn-Gestumblindi asks what was whispered in Baldr's ear, before he was laid on his funeral pyre. In this way, Óðinn reveals himself, as he was the one to whisper in Baldr's ear and Heiðrik responds angrily: "I am sure it was something scandalous and cowardly and thoroughly contemptible. You are the only person who knows the words

which you spoke, you evil and wretched creature.”¹⁷⁷ King Heiðrek then draws his sword and strikes out at Óðinn-Gestumblindi, who escapes by transforming himself into a falcon and flying out the window. In parable form, the falcon’s shortened tail supposedly confirms the story.

As a legendary saga from the 13th century, *Hervarar saga* obviously deviates rather dramatically from the more realistically-grounded *Íslendingasögur*. Óðinn’s disguise as the one-eyed guest is a clear allusion to his mythical exchange of an eye for a drink from Mímir’s well of wisdom; thus his assumed name conjoins a reference to divine wisdom with the personage of a guest. He similarly appears in *Vafþrúðnismál*, where he refers to himself as a guest in st. 8 and, while his presence goes unnamed in *Volsunga saga*, he appears in a similar guise:

...um kveldit, at maðr einn gekk inn í höllina. Sá maðr er mönnum ókunnr at sýn. Sjá maðr hefir þess háttar búning, at hann hefir heklu flekkótta yfir sér. Sá maðr var berfætt ok hafði knýtt línbrókum at beini. Sá maðr hafði sverð í hendi ok gengr at barnstokkinum ok hött síðan á höfði. Hann var hár mjök ok eldiligr ok einsýnn.¹⁷⁸

This description, obviously, focuses on the external presence of the disguised Óðinn figure, using telltale features--such as the single eye--to intimate his identity. What this does for the characterization of the role of the guest, and Gestr in particular, is to align the power and wisdom of the disguised deity with the unknown guest. Thus, this sharing of a cognomen allows an intuitive connection between the two; as Óðinn is the more powerful figure, we ascribe certain Óðinic qualities to Gestr. Once again, Gestr’s otherness within the society takes on a vaguely supernatural quality.

This transcendence is emphasized in *Norna-Gests þáttur*, a short story that appears within *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* in various manuscripts, including *Flateyjarbók* and AM 62, as well as a 15th century paper manuscript in which it stands

¹⁷⁷ *Stories and Ballads of the Far Past*. Trans. N. Kershaw. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921. 126

¹⁷⁸ *Völsunga saga*. Ed. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson. Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda. 8 Sept. 2010. http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/Völsunga_saga. ch. 3. “...in the evening a man came into the hall. He was not known to the men by sight. He was dressed in this way: he wore a mottled cape that was hooded; he was barefoot and had linen breeches tied around his legs. As he walked up to Barnstock he held a sword in his hand while over his head was a low-hanging hood. He was very tall and gray with age, and he had only one eye.” *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*. Trans. Jesse Byock. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. 38

alone.¹⁷⁹ The tale--for it primarily appears as folktale, with large inclusions of eddic poetry and references to *Volsunga saga*--recounts a story within a story. The frame narrative is that of the mysterious Gestr, or Norna-gestr, as he appears in the court of King Óláfr Tryggvason. He introduces himself as Gestr, and the king appears to consider him purposefully equivocal. He replies, “Gestr muntu hér vera, hversu sem þú heitir.”¹⁸⁰

At this, Gestr demures, protesting that “[s]att segi ek til nafns míns”¹⁸¹ and that he will gladly accept the king’s hospitality. The tale continues, splitting between the current setting, wherein Gestr is a prime-signed pagan with a fine gold saddle-buckle and the distant, mythical past of which Gestr provides first-hand accounts: “Ek var ok þar, ok kölluðu þeir mik þá Norna-Gest.”¹⁸² This appellation is not explained, however, until near the end of the tale, when Gestr tells the king, “Nú má ek segja yðr, hví at ek em Norna-Gestr kallaðr.”¹⁸³ When the king expresses his interest in the story, Gestr relates a Sleeping Beauty-esque narrative, in which his birth was attended by three *spákonur*, or sibyls. The first two prophesied grandeur and fortune but the disgruntled youngest *spákona* decreed that Gestr would live no longer than the candle burning near his cradle. One of the other prophetesses extinguished the candle, and Gestr--his life now abnormally prolonged--had carried the unlit candle with him for the past 300 years. After accepting Christian baptism and the king’s favor, he lights the candle and allows it to burn down:

Pat fundu menn þá, at leið at Gesti. Var þat ok jafnskjótt, at brunnit var kertit ok Gestr andaðist, ok þótti öllum merkiligt hans andlát. Þótti konungi ok mikit mark at sögum hans, ok þótti sannast um lífdaga hans, sem hann sagði.¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁹ Kershaw 11

¹⁸⁰ Norna-Gests þátr. Ed. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Villhjálmsson. Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda. 4 Sept. 2010. http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/Norna-Gests_þátr ch. 1. “You shall be guest here, whatever you are called.” Kershaw 15

¹⁸¹ Ibid., ch. 1. “I have told you my name truly.” Kershaw 15

¹⁸² Ibid., ch. 5. “I was present too, and they called me Nornagest.” Kershaw 23.

¹⁸³ Ibid., ch. 8 “Now I must tell you why I am called Norna-gest.” Kershaw 35.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., ch 12. “Then it became clear that Guest was drawing near to his end, and his spirit passed just as the torch flickered out; and they all marveled at his passing. The King also set great store by his stories and held that the account which he had given of his life was perfectly true.” Kershaw 37

In this way, Norna-Gestr and his eponymous *páttr* bridge both religions and literary genres, embedding a mythical past in the court of a historical king, and in doing so claiming the authority, and approval, of Óláfr Tryggvason. Norna-Gestr's prime-signed pagan past, and thus the elvish spirit that his presence allowed to enter the king's hall, balance with the ostensible Christian milieu. The legendary, *fornaldasögur*, elements of the story combine with the *konungasögur* frame, both within the *páttr* itself and as an embedded section of the longer *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*. In this case, the narratological liminality of the character Norna-Gestr is mirrored by its textual occurrence.

Norna-Gestr's liminality, however, appears in an inverse manner to that of Gestr Oddleifsson. Whereas Gestr prophetically anticipates a Christian future from a pagan perspective and indeed, helps to usher that future into being, Norna-Gestr looks back toward heathen times. He turns the legendary past into an accepted and acceptable reality for his listeners, and thus, perhaps, to his larger audience. Despite this difference in vision, both characters show a keen sense of time and interpretation and behave somewhat similarly. Like Gestr, Norna-Gestr is unassuming in his wisdom; the king himself notes that, "Gestr inn komni mun fleira vita en þér munuð ætla, ok skal hann koma til mín í morgin ok segja mér nokkura sögu."¹⁸⁵ Norna-Gestr does not proffer his insight easily, but waits to be asked. At the same time, he does not shirk the bet made while intoxicated, but shows his fine gold saddle-buckle as evidence of his wider knowledge and past. In this way, their revelations of knowledge and wisdom seem similar.

So far, we've primarily considered analogues of the Gestr character as they draw on the mythical aspects of Icelandic sagas, particularly with the Eddic and *fornaldasögur* subgenres. However, the adopted-persona of Gestr is certainly not limited to such, and appears within the main corpus of Icelandic family sagas as well. This is most visible during a brief episode of *Grettis saga*, in which the outlaw Grettir disguises himself on Christmas Eve in order to save a farm from its annual Yuletide troll-hauntings, "með því at honum var mjök lagið at koma af reimleikum eða

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., ch. 2. "The new-comer [Gestr] probably knows more than you think: he must come to me in the morning and tell me a story." Kershaw 18

aptrgöngum.”¹⁸⁶ Calling himself Gestr, Grettir approaches Sandhaugar and asks to stay the night while the farmwife goes to midnight mass. Although at first reluctant, she finally agrees, saying “Mér þykkir þú hraustr ef þú þorir heima at vera.”¹⁸⁷ The disguised Grettir carries her and her daughter across the swollen river, and returns to sleep, fully-dressed, in the haunted Sandhaugar hall.

Here, the character of Gestr is portrayed as much more physically active than prescient. As they cross the river, the women are surprised at his strength, wondering if he himself is partially troll. That evening, in a scene analogous to the attack of Grendel’s dam upon Heorot in the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, a troll-woman enters the home and wrestles the disguised Grettir the whole night. Finally freeing himself, he chops off her right arm at the shoulder and watches her fall back into an opened chasm. A bruised and exhausted Grettir explains the full story to the farmwife when she returns, including telling her his true name and asking for the priest, who likewise recognizes him as the disguised outlaw.

Grettir differs from our other examples in the manner of his abilities, the preternatural strength rather than the prescient insight. He does, however, inform our composite figure of the Gestr figure in his adoption of the pseudonym and his purpose in visiting Sandlaugar. As Gestr, he is able to request hospitality which he does in order to render his hostess a supernatural service, in this case defeating a troll. This premeditated intent to use his ability deviates from both Gestr Oddleifsson and Norna-Gestr, who are much more circumspect about their preternatural knowledge. Rather, Grettir appears to parlay his ability into a human connection--while recuperating, he stays many days at Sandlaugar--from which he is largely divorced as an outlaw. Their acknowledged use of transcendent abilities, then, occurs for very disparate reasons.

These semantic elements and various analogues to Gestr Oddleifsson provide a broader context for considering the *Íslendingasögur* character. The varied use of discrete sobriquets during his appearances reveals both his inherent and immanent character and indicates through which guise the saga writer prefers to evaluate him.

¹⁸⁶ *Grettis saga Asmundarsonar*. Ed. Eugen Kölbing. Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek, v. 5. Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1896. 234 “[B]ecause he was particularly skilful at putting an end to hauntings and ghosts.” Hreinsson II:151

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. “You must be a brave man to dare to stay here.” Hreinsson II:151

Transposing his proper name into a descriptive cognomen allows the denotation of the term “gestr” and the literary personages that adopt such an alias to inform his character as well. Thus, as a literary construction, Gestr both draws upon and feeds into a minor early medieval trope.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to explore the prophetic *Íslendingasögur* character Gestr Oddleifsson and his narratological permutations between various appearances. As a minor prophetic character, Gestr draws upon character archetypes, such as those proposed by Lars Lönnroth, but also transcends them as he balances narratological themes and purposes, shifting his persona to fulfill various needs. Investigating Gestr in this detail has relied upon the immanent saga theories of Gísli Sigurðsson, Carol Clover and John Miles Foley. While rooted in historical reality, the portrayal of Gestr within the Icelandic family sagas has depended deeply on the purpose and interest of individual saga writers. Our historical view of him from *Landnámabók* shows a man embedded in a place, a people and a time; he is wise with both poetic insight and prophecy and yet his character is coy, ungraspable. Here, he is fallible. In the later *Gísla saga* and *Laxdæla saga*, Gestr approaches an almost mythic quality; his prophetic comments are immediately considered implacable truth, and have their own consequences as characters attempt to reckon with them. He reflects a keen interest in family and his prophecies are used to foreshadow later events, thus propelling the narrative forward. In *Njáls saga* and *Kristni saga*, his character appears more political than prophetic, both internal to the narrative and almost as an example of religious propaganda. As a prominent community leader, Gestr gives his endorsement of the coming conversion through his own baptism/prime-signing, while Þangbrandr's request for advice indicates that traditional conduits of wisdom would not be interrupted. Gestr's advice, both prescient and political, is couched in diplomatic language that appeals to both a pagan and Christian audience.

Within the post-classical sagas, Gestr's larger-than-life prophetic persona becomes over-extended and farcical. In *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, he inspires humor through his insistence in taking a flawed charge of events; his character fails prophetically, not in an allusion to the limits of human capability, but for entertainment

purposes. In *Króka-Refs saga*, his character shifts once again, becoming a prophetic foil and lending the narrative weight of saga tradition to Refr's bildungsroman. Within this tale, he carries little or no inherent power himself, instead providing a known and respected immanent background upon which to build Refr's own exploits.

Analyzing the semantic connotations and denotations of Gestr's name and various soubriquets has allowed for a deeper and more subtle view of the underlying and immanent literary figure. This reveals the construction and particularities of Gestr's identity as it interacts with a larger literary trope of the wise guest, modified for specific purposes. Analogous characters in other Old Norse texts show the variety of adaptations and how they inform, and are informed by, each other.

This thesis has endeavored to examine narratological impulses as they interact with underlying literary tropes and historical reality. Gestr Oddleifsson, as a single, minor *Íslendingasögur* personality, reveals the intricacies of characterization within the sagas.

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