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Strengleikar in Iceland

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The *Strengleikar* are a collection of chivalric romances that were translated from one or more collections of French poems (*lais*) at the instigation of King Hákon gamli Hákonarson (King Hákon the Old) of Norway, who reigned from 1217 to 1263. King Hákon commissioned the translation of works that would give his subjects an insight into the magnificent world of chivalry and show them the proper way for knights to behave in the courts of kings. The first chivalric romance to be translated at King Hákon's order was probably *Tristrams saga og Ísöndar*, the prologue to which states that Brother Robert translated it (“efnaði og uppskrifaði”) in 1226.¹ Other romances translated at the order of King Hákon include, at least, *Elis saga og Rósamundu* (which according to the epilogue was translated by Robert the abbot), *Ívens saga* and *Möttuls saga*, and he also commissioned the writing of *Konungs skuggsjá*, which could be described as a sort of textbook of courtly conduct. It is possible that Brother Robert, the translator of *Tristrams saga*, and Robert the abbot, the translator of *Elis saga and Rósamundu*, are in fact one and the same man, and that he also translated the *Strengleikar*, as aspects of the content, style and language of the translations are similar.² However, this should not be stated as a fact, not least because it is possible that more than one translator was involved in the *Strengleikar*.³

King Hákon's son, Hákon ungi (1232–57), seems to have continued his father's work and had *Barlaams saga og Jósafats* translated, and other translations followed in its wake.⁴ These Norwegian translations then made their way to Iceland, where they were copied – and in fact most Old Norse chivalric romances are preserved only in Icelandic manuscripts.⁵

Unlike most other Norwegian translations the *Strengleikar* are mainly preserved in a Norwegian manuscript. This raises some interesting questions about this work's audience in medieval times, including the question dealt with in this paper: were the

¹ *Saga af Tristram og Ísönd*. 1987. Ed. by Vésteinn Ólason. Reykjavík, 7.

² Peter Hallberg investigated the language and style of *Tristrams saga*, *Strengleikar*, *Elis saga og Rósamundu*, *Ívens saga*, *Parcevals saga*, *Möttuls saga* and *Valvers þáttr*, all translated at King Hákon's court, and considered it possible that the same translator was at work in all cases. These sagas are often called the “Tristram group”. See Hallberg, Peter. 1971. “Norröna riddarsagor. Några språkdrag.” *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 86, 114–138 and Hallberg, Peter. 1973. “Broder Robert, Tristrams saga och Duggals leizla.” *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 88, 55–71.

³ Cook, Robert and Tveitane, Mattias (ed.). 1979. *Strengleikar. An Old Norse Translation of Twenty-one Old French Lais*. *Norrøne tekster* nr. 3. Oslo, xxvi.

⁴ Venås, Kjell (ed.). 1962. *Strengleikar eller Songbok*. Transl. Henrik Rytter. Oslo, 17.

⁵ Sverrir Tómasson. 1977. “Hvenær var Tristrams sögu snúið?” *Gripla* II, 67.

Strengleikar known in Iceland? Finnur Jónsson, who answered this question firmly and concisely in his literary history in 1923, stated: “På Island har disse sange aldrig været kendte”.⁶ However, seventeen years later, in his writings about the hidden people (*huldufólk*) in Iceland, Einar Ól. Sveinsson did not rule out the possibility, saying “... if anyone in Iceland knew *Strengleikar* ... this must rather have raised the status of the hidden people than the contrary”.⁷ In this article we will focus on the *if*.

Manuscripts

The *Strengleikar* are preserved in a Norwegian manuscript, De la Gardie (DG) 4–7 in the Library of the University of Uppsala. This is one of the oldest and most important compendia of Old Norse translations of courtly literature. The manuscript, which also contains part of *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar*, comprises four main works: a) a translation of a Latin love-poem (known as *Pamphilus saga*), b) a dialogue between “Courage” and “Fear” (or *Viðræða hugrekkis og æðru* of which only 13 lines are preserved), c) *Elis saga og Rósamundu*, which is a translation of a French *chanson de geste* and d) the *Strengleikar*. It dates from about 1270, and was therefore probably written during the reign of King Magnús *lagabætir*, the son of Hákon *gamli*.

DG 4–7 originally consisted of 56 leaves, 14 of which are now missing, including 6 at the end of the *Strengleikar*. Most of the manuscript is in good condition, so this is a great loss, but there is some consolation in the fact that the manuscript collector Árni Magnússon found four of the missing leaves in 1703, in poor condition, cut to shape and sewn inside a bishop’s mitre in Skálholt, Iceland. They are now at the Arnamagnaean Institute in Copenhagen, catalogued as AM 666 b 4to.⁸

For a long time it was thought that DG 4–7 preserved the original Old Norse translation of *Strengleikar*, though Eugen Kölbing voiced doubts about this as early as the late nineteenth century. The American scholar Marianne Kalinke has now demonstrated beyond dispute that DG 4–7 is in fact a copy of an older manuscript. This can be seen, for example, by comparing its text of *Guíamars ljóð*, one of the tales from the collection, with a copy in Lbs. 840 4to (*Gvímars saga*), discovered in the 1970s.⁹ This late Icelandic manuscript (dating from 1737) sheds new light on the translation, since in some places it preserves readings not found in DG 4–7 but backed up by the French source, *Guigemar*.¹⁰ In some cases the readings of Lbs. 840 4to are better and more original than those of DG 4–7 and show that the text of DG

⁶ Finnur Jónsson. 1923. *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie* II. København, 957.

⁷ Einar Ól. Sveinsson. 2003. *The Folk-stories of Iceland*. Revised by Einar G. Pétursson, transl. by Benedikt Benediktz, ed. by Anthony Faulkes. London, 175.

⁸ Tveitane, Mattias. 1972. *Elis saga, Strengleikar and other texts: Uppsala University Library Delagardieska samlingen Nos. 4–7 folio and AM 666b quarto*. Ed. by Eyvind Fjeld Halvorsen et al. *Corpus Codicum Norvegicorum Medii aevi, Quarto serie* IV. Oslo, 9–10.

⁹ The story of how it came to light is interesting: in the title in the library’s manuscript catalogue, the *v* had been written as *r*, producing ‘*Grímars saga*’ – to which no one had ever given any further attention (see Kalinke, Marianne 1979. “*Gvímars saga*.” *Opuscula* VII, 113).

¹⁰ Warnke, Karl. 1925. *Die Lais der Marie de France*. Halle.

4–7 is shortened and garbled in some places.¹¹ They also show that the original translation was closer to the French than DG 4–7 would suggest, and indicate that the Old Norse translator did his job even better than had previously been thought.¹² In some ways, *Gvímars saga* in Lbs. 840 4to shows the translation in a more favourable light, but in other ways the two manuscripts complement each other.¹³

It is clear that Lbs. 840 4to was not the first copy of *Gvímars saga* made in Iceland. Árni Magnússon says he acquired *Gvímars saga* in a paper manuscript or manuscripts,¹⁴ and the catalogue that Jón Ólafsson Grunnvíkingur compiled in 1730 states that the saga existed in two copies in AM 588 4to, a compendium of *riddarasögur* in seventeenth-century copies: “Gvimars Saga, 2 exemplaria” (Thott 1046 fol.). However, these copies were no longer in AM 588 4to when Kristian Kålund compiled the Arnamagnæan Institute’s catalogue in 1889–94.¹⁵ Furthermore, it is also quite probable that in the list of sagas made by Jón Eggertsson (1643–1689), the entry “Girimars s” actually refers to *Gvímars saga*. This shows that *Gvímars saga* existed in Iceland in the seventeenth century. Furthermore, the saga is mentioned in some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century lists covering saga literature in manuscripts.¹⁶

DG 4–7 (with the fragment in AM 666 b 4to) is often referred to as the only surviving copy of the *Strengleikar*, but in fact the *Strengleikar* also exist, entire or in part, in four paper manuscripts of more recent date (i.e. apart from the aforementioned *Gvímars saga*). Sometime between 1658 and 1679 Jón Rúgmann, amanuensis of the Swedish scholar Olof Verelius, copied “nockra þætti or Bretta Strengleikum” in a manuscript now preserved in the Royal Library in Stockholm as Papp. 4:o nr 34. According to Vilhelm Gödel, this consists of “Utdrag ur Strengleikar eða ljóðabók” on fol. 3 and the following folios.¹⁷ There are certain differences between Jón

¹¹ Kalinke, Marianne 1980. “Stalking the elusive translator: A prototype of Guimars ljóð.” *Scandinavian Studies* 52, 153.

¹² Kalinke, “Stalking the elusive translator: A prototype of Guimars ljóð”, 143–144 and 161, and Kalinke, Marianne 1981. *King Arthur North-by-Northwest. The matière de Bretagne in Old Norse-Icelandic Romances*. Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana, vol XXXVII. Copenhagen, 49–52.

¹³ The variants in Lbs. 840 4to are mainly stylistic and affect the aesthetics of the text rather than the basic narrative material. Marianne Kalinke announced her discovery of the Lbs. 840 4to text in her article “Stalking the elusive translator: A prototype of Guimars ljóð”, where she describes the main differences between this text and that of DG 4–7. She has also edited the Lbs. 840 4to text diplomatically: “Gvímars saga”.

¹⁴ Árni Magnússon. 1909. *Arne Magnussons i AM. 435 a–b, 4to indeholdte håndskriftfortegnelser med to tillæg*. København, 54.

¹⁵ Kålund, Kr. (ed.). 1889–94. *Katalog over den Arnamagnæanske håndskriftsamling*. København, 753.

¹⁶ Jón Eggertsson’s list is preserved in the ms. SKB U 89, cf. Jucknies, Regina. 2009. *Der Horizont eines Schreibers. Jón Eggertsson (1643–89) und seine Handschriften*. Frankfurt am Main, 298. On the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century lists, see Kalinke, “Gvímars saga”, 108.

¹⁷ Gödel, Vilhelm. 1897. *Katalog öfver Kongl. Bibliotekets Fornisländska och Fornnorska handskrifter*. Stockholm: Kongl. Bibliotekets Samlingar, 307. Fol. 3r–7v contain the following: 1) The first part of the *Prologue*. 2) Short passages with underlined words from a) *Pamphilus saga*, b) “Eske liod”, c) “J Eqvitans Strengleik”, d) “Desire Strengleik”, e) “Tidorel

Rúgmann's copy and DG 4–7, but none of them indicates strongly that he made his copy from a different manuscript. Nevertheless, we might ask why someone copying short passages from the text for the sake of the words they included did not copy accurately.¹⁸

About a century later, i.e. in the late eighteenth century, the fragment AM 666 b 4to was copied on paper under the heading “Fragmentum af Einu Æfintíri og Grelentz Saugu”. This copy was made for the Danish historian Peter F. Suhm, most probably by an Icelandic student in Copenhagen, and is now preserved as Nks 1832 4to.¹⁹ Icelanders in Copenhagen were also involved in making two other copies: in 1846–48, the Arnamagnaean Commission had a large number of Icelandic and other Old Norse manuscripts copied, including the whole of the *Strengleikar* from DG 4–7 (AM 948 c 4to). Guðmundur Þorláksson, who received a grant from the commission, copied the *Strengleikar* Prologue from the same manuscript about twenty-five years later (AM 391 fol.).²⁰ Three of these copies are preserved in Copenhagen and one in Stockholm. None of them has text-critical value, as they all descend from the Norwegian medieval manuscript.

The foregoing facts do not enable us to decide whether or not the *Strengleikar* were known in Iceland in the medieval period. The main manuscript is Norwegian – and at present we have only one of the tales preserved in Iceland in an eighteenth-century manuscript, although sources mention copies of the same tale, probably dating from the seventeenth century. Where does this leave us? Can we stop here and say that the *Strengleikar* were not known in Iceland until well after the Middle Ages? Before doing so, we must examine a few facts that point in the other direction

Strengleikr”, f) “Exempel strengl. Weslingr. al: Fíorfalldur harmur. harms fullr”, g) “Tueggja elskandi”, h) “Guruns Strengleikur”, i) “Elis saga”, j) “Douns strengleikr”. Furthermore, some words have been jotted down in the margin on fol. 6v from *Januals ljóð*, wrongly called “Gabelauk strengl.” (*Leikara ljóð*, or *Gumbelauc*, is the preceding text in DG 4–7), *Strandar strengleikur* and *Geitarlauf* (“Gotu laif”).

¹⁸ It is also interesting that passages from *Pamphilus saga* and *Elis saga og Rósamundu* are included with passages from the translated *lais* under the heading “Wr Bretta Streng-leikum,” with the Prologue to *Strengleikar* preceding them. As for the difference between the two copies, the following variants from the Prologue may serve as an example (line numbers from Cook and Tveitane, *Strengleikar. An Old Norse Translation of Twenty-one Old French Lais*, 4): 2 varo] ha-fa verid. 11 kunnasto] kunnattu. 13 kunnasto] kunnatto. 14 með ollum fongum at bua ok boeta sialvan sec] at búa oc bæta sialfan sig með ollum faungum. drengskapir og] dreingskapur. 19 mæirr] meira. 12 En bók] Bók.

¹⁹ Kålund, Kr. (ed.). 1900. *Katalog over de oldnorsk-islandske håndskrifter*. København, 239; *Dansk biografisk leksikon* XXIII. 1942. Grundlagt af C. F. Bricka. Redigeret af Povl Engelstoft. København, 122. The copy covers the four leaves as printed in *Strengleikar*, 262–286: *Tveggja elskanda strengleikr*, 21–42 and “Grelentz Saga”, 43–50. The leaves are copied in this order: 2, 3, 1 and 4. The copyist does not read any further than Robert Cook and Mattias Tveitane in their edition of *Strengleikar* from 1979, but several different readings may be noticed. Page 1–20 covers a copy from a fragment of *Mariu saga*, probably AM 666 a 4to, and possibly from some other fragments of that saga.

²⁰ *Antiquarisk Tidsskrift* 1846–1848. 1847. Kjöbenhavn, 157–158 and Kålund, *Katalog over den Arnamagnæanske håndskriftsamling* I, 303 and II, 273–4.

and indicate that Icelanders not only knew the *Strengleikar* but also made further use of their material in their literary production and folktales.

As we have seen, it is clear that Icelanders knew *Gvímars saga* in the seventeenth century, but it is conceivable that this work was known in Iceland earlier, because it seems there is a chance that *Guíamars ljóð* and the *Prologue* existed in the Icelandic manuscript known as *Ormsbók* (named after its owner Ormr Snorrason lawman, who lived at Skarð in Skarðströnd), dating from the fourteenth century. This manuscript was destroyed by fire in Stockholm in 1697, but before that, Olof Verelius had gone through it and copied words from it for his dictionary, *Index linguae veteris Scytho-Scandiae sive Gothicae*, which was published in Uppsala in 1691. This evidence rests on five of the words copied by Verelius, four from *Guíamars ljóð*/*Gvímars saga* and one from the *Prologue*. He cites the same source for all his quotations, as follows: “Cod. Orm. Guíamars S.,” “Cod. Orm. uti Guim. S.,” “Cod. Orm. in Gneamars Saga,” “Cod. Orm. Guíamars S.” and “Cod. Orm. i Gviamars S.”²¹ Scholars have argued that this was probably a mistake by Verelius, and that he meant to refer to the Norwegian manuscript, DG 4–7, from which he also took examples for his dictionary.²² But we should consider the following points.

1. Verelius cites *Ormsbók* after each example. If his attribution is a mistake, then he made the same mistake five times.
2. One of the words Verelius quotes is ‘Odalkongur’, also written as ‘Odallkongur’.²³ The reading in DG 4–7, however, is ‘Odels konongr’.²⁴ It is of course possible that Verelius misread the word;²⁵ on the other hand this could indicate that he took this reading from a different manuscript.
3. Verelius’ citation *Cod. Orm. Guíamars S.* and similar citations indicate that he copied from a text called *Guíamars saga*; DG 4–7 only refers to this *lai* as *Guíamars ljóð*.

However, the fact is that it is difficult to say with any certainty whether *Ormsbók* contained *Gvímars saga* and the *Prologue* or not. Marianne Kalinke, who discusses this in detail, thinks it more likely that Verelius took his examples from DG 4–7, among other things because they correspond with underlinings in that manuscript.²⁶

²¹ Kalinke, “Gvímars saga”, 111 and Broberg, Grén. 1908. “Ormr Snorrasons bok.” *Arkiv för nordisk Filologi* 24, 58–59.

²² Cook and Tveitane, *Strengleikar*, xi.

²³ Verelius, Olof. 1691. *Index linguae veteris Scytho-Scandicae sive Gothicae*. Uppsala, 185a.

²⁴ *Strengleikar*, 12.

²⁵ See Kalinke, “Gvímars saga”, 112.

²⁶ Kalinke, “Gvímars saga”, 112. We might also consider the fact that two of the words in question are quoted as being both in “Brett. str.” (i.e. DG 4–7) and “Cod. Orm.”. If this is a mistake, then it is a strange one. Grén Broberg, who wrote about *Ormsbók* in 1908, did not take a position for or against the possibility that the *Prologue* and *Guíamars ljóð* were in the manuscript. However, a lot of material from the lost *Ormsbók* was copied by Jón Vigfússon, and the *Prologue* and *Guíamars ljóð* are not among these (see Kalinke, “Gvímars saga”, 111–113 and *Partalopa saga*. 1983. Ed. by Lise Præstgaard Andersen. Editiones Arnarnagæanæ, Series B, vol. 28. Copenhagen, lxi–lxv).

Another possible indication that the *Strengleikar* were known in Iceland is the fragmentary manuscript AM 666 b 4to, which Árni Magnússon found in the mitre in Skálholt in 1703. This could suggest that the main part of DG 4–7 was in Iceland, possibly in the keeping of the bishop of Skálholt; admittedly it could be thought equally likely that the mitre was made in Norway and brought to Iceland.

All that is known about DG 4–7 is that it belonged to a Norwegian near Bodø in the first quarter of the seventeenth century, then to the Danish book collector Stephanus Johannis Stephanius from about 1630 to his death in 1650 and then to the Swedish count Magnus Gabriel de la Gardie from 1652 to 1669, when it was sent with the rest of his library to Uppsala.²⁷ Briefly, then, it was written in Norway in about 1270, after which there are no records of its whereabouts until the early seventeenth century, when it was also in Norway. Nothing is known of where it was between these two periods, and the only concrete indication as to its movements is the fragment that was found in Iceland.²⁸

Literature

There are indications in fields other than manuscript history that indicate that the *Strengleikar* were known in Iceland: these are of a literary nature. As Marianne Kalinke has demonstrated, it is likely that *Tíóðels saga*, an Icelandic *riddarasaga* from the fifteenth or sixteenth century, is based on an Old Norse translation of *Bisclaretz ljóð* that was different from the one preserved in DG 4–7.²⁹ Just as the Icelandic copy of *Gvímars saga* indicates the existence of an older copy of that tale in Iceland which differed from DG 4–7, so *Tíóðels saga* suggests the existence in Iceland of a copy of *Bisclaretz ljóð* that was also different from that in DG 4–7. It should also be noted that the unusual name of the hero of the Icelandic saga, Tíóðel, is reminiscent of the name of another figure from the *Strengleikar*, Tidorel. It seems that more names from the *Strengleikar* found their way into Icelandic literature in the mediaeval period (fourteenth and fifteenth centuries): *Samsonar saga fagra* and *Skíðaríma* both contain the name Grelent, which is probably a reflex of Grelent in *Strengleikar*³⁰ – and it is also probable that the name of the Scottish king Gvímar in *Flóres saga konungs og sona hans* was taken from *Guíamars ljóð*, and that the name Mílun (in the

²⁷ Tveitane, *Elis saga, Strengleikar and other texts*, 10–12 and Cook and Tveitane, *Strengleikar*, ix.

²⁸ Some theories have been advanced, however: see Tveitane, *Elis saga, Strengleikar and other texts*, 12–15, who also rightly points out that the bishop's mitre could have been made in Norway. Keyser and Unger, who first edited *Strengleikar*, point out that no marks on the manuscript itself indicate that it has ever been in Iceland (Keyser, R. and Unger, C. R. 1850. *Strengleikar eða liðabok*. Christianias Forlag, xx–xxi).

²⁹ Kalinke, Marianne 1981. "A Werewolf in Bear's Clothing." *Maal og Minne* 3–4, 139–144, Kölbing, Eugen. 1872. "Über Isländische Bearbeitungen Fremder Stoffe." *Germania* XXVII, 196 and Meissner, R. 1904. "Die geschichte vom ritter Tíodel und seiner ungetreuen frau." *Zeitschrift für Deutsches Altertum und Deutsche Litteratur* XLVII, 247–267.

³⁰ Meissner, "Die geschichte vom ritter Tíodel und seiner ungetreuen frau", 267.

Rímurnar af Mábil sterku) can be traced back to the lai of the same name in *Strengleikar*.³¹

In the same way that scholars have pointed out resemblances between *Tíóðels saga* and *Bisclaretz ljóð*, the British scholar Rosemary Power has drawn attention to some very strong points of correspondence between *Januals ljóð* and *Helga þátr Þórissonar* in *Flateyjarbók*, and argues that the author of the *þátr* used *Januals ljóð* as a model for its introduction.³² A fellow countryman of hers, Rory McTurk, has also spotted a possible connection between the lai of *Eskja* and *Geirmundar þátr heljarskinns* from the *Sturlunga* collection.³³ To this we might add an interesting resemblance between *Eskju ljóð* and *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* from the thirteenth century. Both tell of a highborn woman (*Eskja*/ *Áslaug*) who is engaged or married to a man of high social status. The man, however, does not know about the noble origin of his fiancée/ wife, and his men urge him to find himself another wife who is his equal. In the end the man is told about the woman's noble parents and decides to keep her.³⁴ Finally, one might mention Marianne Kalinke's argument that the lai of *Doun* influenced the Icelandic maiden-king romances, particularly *Gibbons saga*,³⁵ an Icelandic *riddarasaga* from the fourteenth century.

The *Strengleikar* consist of twenty-one lais and a Prologue. The only known author is Marie de France, who has been credited with writing about half of the group (11 lais) and also the latter part of the Prologue. Twelve lais in all are attributed to Marie, so one of them did not find its way into the *Strengleikar*. This lai, *Eliduc*, is longer than any of the others, and it has been considered unlikely that it

³¹ Furthermore, the words *lais* and *Strengleikar* were known and used in Iceland: a) Two characters in *Mágus saga jarls* from the thirteenth century have the extraordinary name *Lais*, like the French literary genre in question (*Riddarasögur* II. 1949. Ed. by Bjarni Vilhjálmsson. Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan – Haukadalsútgáfan, 320 and 419). The saga might be a translation (i.e. not an indigenous Icelandic saga), but scholars have not been able to prove from which medieval romance it derives, although it is related to a French *chanson de geste* called *Renaud de Montauban* (Kalinke, Marianne and P. M. Mitchell. 1985. *Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Romances*. Islandica XLIV. Ithaca and London, 77). Again, this name appears in *Vilhjálmss saga Laessonar* (Papp fol. 58 in the Royal Library in Stockholm), as indicated by the title. b) The word *strengleikar* also appears in Icelandic sources, usually referring to the playing of instruments, such as in *Þorláks saga helga* (c. 1200) (*Biskupa sögur* II. 2002. *Íslensk fornrit* XVI. Ed. by Ásdís Egilsdóttir. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 78). It is also noteworthy that in AM 1060 4to from the nineteenth century, an Icelandic tale, *Gnýrs ævintýri*, which is also preserved in seventeenth-century manuscripts, is called *Gnýrs strengleikur*.

³² Power, Rosemary. 1985. "Le Lai de Lanval and Helga þátr Þórissonar." *Opuscula* VIII, 160–161.

³³ McTurk, Rory. 1997. "Marie de France, Geirmundar þátr heljarskinns, and reader-response criticism." *Hugur: mélanges d'histoire, de littérature et de mythologie offerts à Régis Boyer pour son 65e anniversaire*. Paris, 193–209. In fact, Rory McTurk does not assume a direct connection between *Geirmundar þátr heljarskinns* and the Old Norse translation of *Eskju ljóð*, but rather an indirect relationship to *Fresne*, i.e. the original lai by Marie de France.

³⁴ *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*. 1829–30. *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda* I–III. Ed. by C. C. Rafn. Kaupmannahöfn, 259.

³⁵ Kalinke, Marianne 1990. *Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland*. Islandica XLVI. Ithaca and London, 103–104 and 141.

was ever translated into Old Norse.³⁶ We cannot, however, rule out the possibility that Old Norse, or at least Old Icelandic writers knew the story, as there is very similar material in a short passage in the Icelandic *Völsunga saga*, from the thirteenth century. This tells of how one day Sigmundr sees two weasels, one of which bites the other's throat but then runs into the forest and comes back with a leaf that it puts onto the wound to heal it. Sigmundr then uses this same method of healing his son, Sinfjötli, using a leaf brought to him by a raven.³⁷ This is the same motif as appears in *Eliduc*, where the animals are also weasels.

Carol Clover, who noticed this resemblance more than 20 years ago, took it as an indication that the author of *Völsunga saga* knew *Eliduc*, either in the original or in an Old Norse translation.³⁸ We must not forget, however, that resemblances of this type could quite easily be carried between countries in oral narrative tradition, notwithstanding the fact that the motif is preserved in this particular form only in these two written sources. The motif of a person looking on while one animal heals another with a plant is recorded elsewhere and has been given the number B512 in the International *Motif Index of Folk Literature*.³⁹ More often than not, snakes appear in the role of the weasels, for example in one of Grimm's fairytales, *The Three Snake-Leaves*. In this tale, the healing item is a leaf, as in *Völsunga saga*, while in *Eliduc* it is a red flower.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the resemblance may indicate that this tale was known in Iceland, and once again, this would be evidence for different narrative material from that found in the Norwegian manuscript DG 4–7.

Folktales

While the plots of the *lais* in the *Strengleikar* are original in some ways, they also make extensive use of stock folktale motifs. Some of these motifs had been current for a long time before the composition of the *lais*, and many of them occur in folktales of later date. One of the most striking characteristics of Icelandic fairytales is how heavily influenced they are by the *riddarasögur*. These sagas were popular for

³⁶ Cook and Tveitane, *Strengleikar*, xvii.

³⁷ *Völsunga saga* in *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda I*, 131–132.

³⁸ Clover, Carol J. 1986. "Völsunga saga and the missing lai of Marie de France." *Sagnaskemmtun. Studies in Honour of Hermann Pálsson*. Ed. by Rudolf Simek, Jónas Kristjánsson and Hans Bekker-Nielsen. Wien, 79–84.

³⁹ See Thompson, Stith. 1955–58. *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* 1–6. Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 346–347. In fact this motif is recorded under two numbers: B512 "Medicine shown by animal" and D1500.1.4 "Magic healing plant". No variant corresponding exactly to the one in *Völsunga saga* and *Eliduc* is found in any other Icelandic source, see Boberg, Inger M. 1966. *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*. Bibliotheca Arnarnagæna, vol. XXVII. Hafnia, 48 and 76.

⁴⁰ Although Grimm's fairy tale is late (recorded in the early nineteenth century), the motif could easily be old. As is generally known, Marie de France used a lot of folktale material for the writing of her *lais*, and thus it is not unlikely that this particular motif was a part of the European oral tradition of the twelfth century.

centuries in Iceland and were circulated and read aloud from manuscripts, and were also adopted, whether as whole tales, individual episodes or motifs, in oral tradition.

With this in mind, it is interesting to try to see whether any of the folk material that features in the *Strengleikar* found its way into Icelandic folktales, i.e. the legends and fairytales that were recorded in later times. It seems that certain parallels do exist, though of course they do not absolutely prove a direct connection. When considering these possibilities, we must also keep in mind the long period of time between the translation of *Strengleikar* and the recorded folktales.

One of the characteristics of the *lais* in the *Strengleikar* is the Celtic element, which emerges in various forms, for example in tales in which people either travel to or find themselves in the otherworld, a realm of benevolent elves or fairies.⁴¹ The boundary between the otherworld and the world of men is very fluid: this is best seen from the fact that the otherworld is often spatially located adjacent to the world of men, and the inhabitants of the two worlds easily fall in love with each other. In many ways, the atmosphere of the tales in the *Strengleikar* is strikingly similar to that of Icelandic fairytales.⁴² *Grelent*, *Desire* and *Januals ljóð* all relate a story of love between a man and a fairy woman, while in *Tidorel* it is a handsome male from the fairy world who becomes the secret lover of a human lady. As is sometimes the case in Icelandic folktales, the otherworld in *Grelent* and *Tidorel* seems to be in, or near, water and the characters even have to go into the water to penetrate into the otherworld.⁴³ In one of the *Strengleikar*, *Januals ljóð*, the setting very closely resembles that of the Icelandic fairytales. When Janual lies down on the grass by the bank of a stream to rest, two beautiful damsels appear, carrying a ewer and a towel, and invite him to meet their mistress in a magnificent pavilion nearby. There he succumbs to the amorous advances of the fairy woman, and is given fine clothes and good food.

⁴¹ A number of studies have been published on the connection between Icelandic and Celtic folktales, and of course the folktale motifs discussed here could have reached Icelandic oral tradition through other means than the *Strengleikar* (see for example Tulinius, Torfi H. 1993. "Kynjasögur úr fortíð og framandi löndum." *Íslensk bókmenntasaga* II. Ed. by Vésteinn Ólason. Reykjavík, 173.)

⁴² The motif of a love relationship between a man and a fairy woman also occurs in the translated chivalric romance *Partalopa saga*, but the setting there is very different from that in *Strengleikar* and the Icelandic tales (*Partalopa saga*, 26–33).

⁴³ In *Tidorel* the fairy man rides into a lake, while in *Grelent* there is a fairy woman who rides into a stream (the same fairy woman had been discovered earlier by *Grelent*, bathing in a spring). For Icelandic folktales, see for example *Kötludraumur*: over a stream (Jón Árnason. 1954–61. *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* I–VI. Ed. by Árni Böðvarsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson. Reykjavík, 59–63), *Una álfkona*: into a fen, *Úlfhildur álfkona*: over a lake (Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* I, 101–105), *Snotra*: into the sea (Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* II, 109–111), *Sagan af Oddi kóngi*: into a river (Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* IV, 626–628). For love between humans and hidden people (or fairies), there is a whole category of legends in the main folktale collections (see for example Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* I, 58–100 and III, 91–162). See also *Móðars rímur* (*Móðars rímur og Móðars þáttur*. 1950. Ed. by Jón Helgason. Íslensk rit síðari alda 5. Kaupmannahöfn) from the sixteenth or seventeenth century, a sombre story in which an Icelandic woman has children with the fairy Móðar.

Similar settings occur in *Guíamars ljóð* and *Desire*. These situations are very common in Icelandic fairytales where men come across beautiful women in forest clearings, accompanied by one or two serving maidens. The reception of the hero has also echoes in Icelandic legends, where men receive fine clothing, food and erotic attentions from fairy women.⁴⁴ The fairy women of the *Strengleikar* threaten the hero with serious consequences if they tell other people about them; this is also common in Icelandic legends.⁴⁵

A good example of an Icelandic folktale that resembles *Strengleikar* is that of *Kötludraumur*, an epic poem (so-called “sagnakvæði”) from the seventeenth century; the tale is also preserved as an oral legend in Jón Árnason’s nineteenth-century collection. Some of the motifs found in this folktale are quite similar to elements for example in *Tidorel*, *Grelent*, *Douns ljóð* and *Milun*. A short summary of the poem runs as follows: The protagonist Katla is led over a stream to the world of fairies, all the way to beautiful quarters. There she is taken to a chamber, where a bath and a beautiful bed await her (“kerlaug búin og rekkja vel tjölduð”). She is offered wine, and when she has rested, is given a cloak sewn with gold, and other fine clothing. Then she is given a mantle made of the finest cloth, gold-embroidered and lined with gray skin (“og grátt skinn undir, búin brenndu gulli”), as well as head ornaments and other jewellery. The room is magnificently furnished with tables bearing silver bowls and gold drinking horns, and a rich bed belonging to a fairy named Kári, who loves Katla. Katla stays with Kári for a time, but when she wants to return to the human world, Kári says that she will have a son and that she must turn over to him some of his gifts, among other things a ring. At the end he promises her much wealth.⁴⁶ Several of these motifs will be recognized by readers of the *Strengleikar*.

Another “sagnakvæði” from the seventeenth century, *Gullkársljóð*, has striking similarities to one of the *Strengleikar*, the story of *Jonet*. A king’s daughter named Æsa sits alone in her chamber, with a troubled mind. From her window she sees a richly dressed man. This man turns out to be Gullkár, a fairy who loves her, and they begin to spend time together. An evil woman puts an end to the affair by hiding an enchanted stick in the maid’s clothing: when she embraces her lover, the stick becomes a knife which cuts him. Gullkár runs away and Æsa follows the bloody trail to an unfamiliar, prosperous village. Eventually, Æsa finds Gullkár in one of the buildings there, lying wounded in his bed.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ For Icelandic men who visit fairy women for food and sex, see for example *Hólgöngur Silunga-Bjarnar* and other legends of the category mentioned in the former footnote (Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* II, 79–80 and 58–100).

⁴⁵ See the category referred to in former footnotes.

⁴⁶ Ólafur Davíðsson. 1898. *Íslenzkar þulur og þjóðkvæði*. Kaupmannahöfn, 4–29 and Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* I, 59–63.

⁴⁷ Ólafur Davíðsson, *Íslenzkar þulur og þjóðkvæði*, 76–84; see also Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *The Folk-stories of Iceland*, 87–88. It should be mentioned that these “sagnakvæði”, which often relate stories of relationships between fairies and humans, usually have a title similar to that of the *Strengleikar*, combining the name of a character and the word *ljóð*: *Gullkársljóð*, *Vambarljóð*, *Hyndluljóð*, *Bryngerðarljóð* and *Þóruljóð* (all printed in Ólafur Davíðsson, *Íslenzkar þulur og*

The following is a list of further motifs that are found in strikingly similar form in the *Strengleikar* and Icelandic folktales.

1. A hind or stag that lures the hero deep into the forest.⁴⁸
2. A spell put on the hero, making him seek out the woman who is intended to be his wife.⁴⁹
3. A child of noble birth taken from its mother and exposed under a tree.⁵⁰
4. A damsel or damsels who appear in the service of their mistress carrying a ewer and a towel.⁵¹
5. Young wives married to old husbands. They therefore turn their attention to younger and more attractive men.⁵²
6. A girl whose nose is bitten off by a dog (admittedly, a wolf in the *Strengleikar*).⁵³

þjóðkvæði). The present author gave a paper on the relationship between Gullkársljóð and Jonet at the conference From Lais to Strengleikar, held in Oslo, 24th–25th Nov. 2006. The papers of the conference will be published.

⁴⁸ *Strengleikar*: *Guíamars ljóð* and *Grelent*. Folktales: very common, and already in *Hjálmþérs saga og Ölvis* from the fourteenth century (*Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda* III, 471).

⁴⁹ *Strengleikar*: *Guíamars ljóð*. This is related to the motif M455.1, which is common in Icelandic romances from the fourteenth century and onward and is sometimes called “Magical quest” (Boberg, *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, 198). See further examples in Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir. 1995. “Stjúpur í vondu skapi.” *Tímarit Máls og menningar* 3, 25–36.

⁵⁰ *Strengleikar*: *Eskju ljóð*. For example in *Ála flekks saga* (c. 1400) (*Riddarasögur* V, 127).

⁵¹ *Strengleikar*: *Desire, Janualls ljóð* (and *Grelent*). Desire finds a lady dressed in splendid clothing in a clearing in the forest, attended by two maidens with ewers. The staging is similar to that of some Icelandic folktales, where the king’s men have been sent to find the king a new bride and come across a beautiful woman in a forest clearing, who has a servant maid/ maidens with her. Sometimes these women are in a tent, as in *Strengleikar*, and sometimes they play the harp, like the maiden in the *Strengleikar* tale *Rícar hinn gamli*. For Icelandic folktales, see for example *Sagan af Mjadhveigu Mánadóttur* (Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* II, 299–305). A lady is also found in a tent in a forest clearing in *Helga þáttur Þórissonar* in *Flateyjarbók*. The motif of the damsel who plays the harp is common in the so-called “stepmother tales” (see Jón Árnason’s collection II and IV: *Stjúpusögur*, for example *Sagan af Mjadhveigu Mánadóttur* (Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* II, 299–305)).

⁵² *Strengleikar*: *Guíamars ljóð* and *Jonet*. In *Jonet*, the heroine is married to an old husband with a “cold body” (“kaldan líkama”); the fact that the old husband is impotent is common in Icelandic “stepmother tales”. In *Guíamars ljóð*, the man is said to be pale and bloodless and coldly deprived of all bodily longings (“bleikur og blóðlaus, kaldur og kólnaður úr öllum líkamslosta”) Cook and Tveitane, *Strengleikar*, 18. See for example *Hjálmþérs saga og Ölvis* (*Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda* III, 470; see further Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, “Stjúpur í vondu skapi”, 29).

⁵³ See for example the following tales: *Olbogabarnið* (Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* II, 427–428), *Missagnir um olbogabarnið* (Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* II, 429–430), *Kiðuvaldi* (Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* II, 430–432), *Botrún, Kotrún og Rósa* (Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* V, 120–122), and two more variants where a man bites off the nose, *Haga-Lalli* (Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* V, 114–116), and where an ogre does so, *Karlsdæturnar þrjár* (Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og ævintýri* V, 117–119). In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, from the fourteenth century, Hjalti bites his concubine’s nose off (*Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda* I, 99).

Various other motifs are shared by the *Strengleikar* and the Icelandic tales, but they are also so common in other courtly romances that they have no special value as evidence in this context. Of course there are difficulties in using folktale motifs as evidence for a relationship between tales, and the motifs I have mentioned are nothing more than suggestions; in fact, it is impossible to say where they came from, but the *Strengleikar* must be considered as a possible provider. More certain is the fact that these motifs deserve further attention. Detailed studies of folk motifs can be time-consuming, but in return they can also tell us much about the development and dissemination of tales.

My feeling is that not all the evidence has yet come to light. There are various indications that people in Iceland read and knew the *Strengleikar* and used motifs or episodes from them in creating sagas and tales of their own. We must hope that someone will have the opportunity to spend time on this interesting question and study these motifs in the context of other courtly literature.

Translated by Jeffrey Cosser

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