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# The Autographical Turn in Late Medieval Icelandic Poetry

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AM 471 4to (471) is an Icelandic vellum manuscript dated to c. 1450-1500, now in the Arnamagnæan Collection in Reykjavík. It contains seven sagas, three usually classified as late sagas of Icelanders (*Þórðar saga hreðu*, *Króka-Refs saga* and *Kjalnesinga saga*), three *fornaldarsögur* and one indigenous romance, *Viktors saga ok Blávuss*. Like another late fifteenth-century manuscript that has received considerable attention in recent years, AM 343 a 4to (343a), dated to c. 1450-1475, 471 contains in sequence three *fornaldarsögur* about Hrafnistumenn, so-called because their protagonists, Ketill hœngr, Grímr loðinkinni and Qrvar-Oddr, all descend from a Norwegian family originating from the island of Hrafnista, modern Ramsta, off the coast of Namdalen. These are *Ketils saga hængs*, *Gríms saga loðinkinna* and *Qrvar-Odds saga*, to which 343a adds *Áns saga bogsveigis*. The unvarying order of the first three of these saga texts in the two manuscripts indicates that their compilers considered them to be closely connected, as indeed they are, both in subject-matter and in stylistic treatment, something that includes a wealth of poetry, much of it presented as exchanges between the protagonists themselves and the various beings they encounter on their adventures, including troll-women, Saami magicians, giants, and numerous human adversaries.

The two late manuscript compilations, 343a and 471, contain valuable pointers to the cultural tastes and interests of their times, as has been demonstrated by a number of scholars in recent years (cf. Torfi H. Tulinius, 2002: 159-64; Orning, 2012), emphasising in particular changing cultural preoccupations that can be deduced from the additions to the prose texts of *Qrvar-Odds saga* observable in the two late medieval exemplars compared with two earlier manuscript witnesses, Holm Perg 7 4to, from the beginning of the fourteenth century, and AM 344 a 4to, from c. 1350-1400. To date, though, little attention has been paid to the considerable differences between the manuscripts of this saga to be found in its associated poetry, and this is what my short contribution to this *Festschrift* for Jürg Glauser is focused on.

The accompanying image is of folio 94r of 471, and shows at line 10 a rubricated initial <H> which marks the beginning in this manuscript of the poem I designate in my forthcoming edition of the poetry from *Qrvar-Odds saga* (Clunies Ross, forthcoming) “the continuous *Ævidrápa*” to distinguish it from the scattered *lausavísur* that, I argue, form a proto-*ævidrápa* (or, more correctly, a proto-*ævikviða*, as the poems have no refrain) in the earlier manuscripts. The image, then, is a clear visual marker of the separateness of this immensely long autobiographical poem attributed to Oddr only in the fifteenth-century manuscripts and in some later witnesses



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descended from them. Manuscript 343a shows a similar separation of the continuous *Ævidrápa* from the foregoing prose text, beginning on the last line of folio 80r, but a space left there, probably for a large initial, has not been filled in, so the visual evidence in this manuscript is not as clear as it is for 471.

In 471 and 343a the continuous *Ævidrápa* begins:

*Hlýði seggir,                    en ek segja mun*  
*vígs völdunum                frá vinum mínum.*

Listen men, and I will tell causers of slaughter [warriors] about my friends.

(My translation)

And then the narrating voice of the character Oddr goes on to tell his story in no less than seventy-one continuous stanzas, beginning with his childhood and ending with the situation in which he finds himself at the end of his life, as a prophetic had once predicted, about to die from the bite of a snake that had crept out from the skull of his dead horse, Faxi, and bitten him on the leg. Whereas at this point Holm 7 has six long-lines of poetry corresponding to parts of stanzas 70 and 71 of the continuous *Ævidrápa* (see *Qrvar-Odds saga*, 195), 471 and 343a luxuriate in an array of stanzas, some of which repeat *lausavísur* cited earlier in the prose text of the saga, others of which are seemingly new creations, based often quite loosely on the saga's prose narrative. Only a small proportion of the stanzas of this long poem have counterparts as *lausavísur* in the earlier manuscripts of the saga, and these are generally connected with some of the main events of Oddr's life.

It is probable, as earlier editors have surmised, that the *Ævidrápa* of 471 and 343a shows an extensive reworking of earlier clusters of stanzas around high points of Oddr's life, like his fight with the berserks on Samsø and his *mannjafnaðr* with two men at the court of King Herraúðr of Húnaþland. Yet the scale of the reworking in these late medieval manuscripts and the necessity to transform much of the material from third-person narrative or from dialogue exchanges to first-person autobiographical verse mark out the continuous *Ævidrápa* as not simply a reworking or interpolation, as older scholars have presented it, but as a thorough-going transformation of an older poetic mode to a new one, more suited to an audience with tastes for personalised adventure.

This is why I have chosen to call this article "The autographical turn in late medieval Icelandic poetry", adopting the adjective 'autographical' rather than 'autobiographical' under the influence of the Middle English scholar A. C. Spearing's thought-provoking book *Medieval Autographies. The 'I' of the Text*. In this book he argues, mainly basing himself on late medieval English and French literature, that late medieval vernacular texts reveal a new development in literary narrative towards an exploitation of the many functions of the 'I' as a shifting textual phenomenon, not to be narrowly defined either as purely autobiographical, in a modern sense, or as a mere label of a fictional speaker or narrator. This trend towards autography, he argues, imparts a new complexity to late medieval writing and a new flexibility in its presentation of its subject-matter, such as we see in Chaucer's auto-

graphical works, including *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame* and *The Canterbury Tales*. I think we can see a similarly autographical development in late medieval Icelandic saga literature, especially in its poetry.

Although the late medieval manuscripts of *Qrvar-Odds saga* demonstrate this trend to perhaps the greatest extent, it is readily apparent in other late medieval saga prosimetra, and especially in what appears to have been a growingly popular poetic genre, the *ævikviða* ‘life-poem’ or versified autobiography. Doubtless the origins of the genre go back well before the fourteenth century, as something like it was clearly known to Saxo Grammaticus, and some of the examples below, extant in late medieval Icelandic texts, are likely to be of some antiquity in their earlier manifestations. Nevertheless, the bulk of the existing examples have been transmitted in late medieval prosimetra, and, in addition to *Qrvar-Oddr’s ævikviða*, include Hildibrandr’s death-song from *Ásmundar saga kappabana*, *Víkarsbálkr* from *Gautreks saga*, *Hallmundarkviða* and Grettir’s own *ævikviður* from *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, *Hróskviða* from *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, Hjálmarr’s death-song, recorded in manuscripts of both *Heiðreks saga* and *Qrvar-Odds saga*, *Krákumál*, recorded in at least one manuscript of *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* and Ásbjörn’s *ævikviða* from *Orms þáttr Stórolfssonar*.

Space precludes a detailed presentation in this article of the thematic and stylistic characteristics of the late medieval Icelandic *ævikviða*, but they can be summarised here:

- the ‘I’ of the poem is a heroic male character who is on the point of death;
- he gives a retrospective first-person account of his life-history, usually in an eddic metre (though *Krákumál* is exceptional here, being in a form of *dróttkvætti*);
- in two cases, *Krákumál* and Ásbjörn’s *ævikviða*, there is a refrain-like initial line in each stanza;
- the speaker lists some of the many fights he has been involved in, from which he has emerged victorious *or* he refers to a single encounter, often his last, which he won though he was mortally wounded;
- he speaks his *ævikviða* to an attentive, sometimes female, audience, enjoining them to write down his words (often on a rune-stave);
- he then dies, *or* his death is foreshadowed.



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