

CHAPTER 7

Warrior Poets in the Northwest

In the critical literature on the sagas there has been a certain prioritizing of the western sagas, notably *Egils saga*. To some extent this preference is a question of quality because *Egils saga* and *Laxdæla saga* have a particular claim to excellence, but there has been a tendency to give the western sagas pride of place in the chronology as well. It might therefore be logical to turn our attention to the Borgarfjörður group, *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa*, *Egils saga*, and *Gunnlaugs saga ormsstungu*. The first two have normally been considered early and *Gunnlaugs saga* late, but Bjarni Guðnason thought that *Bjarnar saga* was late, and I have suggested that *Gunnlaugs saga* was the earliest of the three.¹ It can be argued that the author of *Bjarnar saga* borrowed the motif of the procrastinating groom from *Gunnlaugs saga* to structure his plot and that the author of *Egils saga* borrowed material on Egill's son Þorsteinn and other ancestral lore from *Gunnlaugs saga*. If we posit that *Bjarnar saga* is after all early and that *Egils saga* was composed not too long after 1220, that would place *Gunnlaugs saga* and *Bjarnar saga* a few years earlier, at about the same time that saga writing may have begun in Eyjafjörður. On the other hand, although there could have been borrowing among the sagas of the Borgarfjörður region, I can find no evidence of the ideological debate that seems to have left traces in the northern sagas. I will therefore focus on two sagas from northwestern Iceland that perhaps lend themselves more readily to such analysis, *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Gísla saga Súrssonar*.

I take the view that *Fóstbræðra saga* was written at the beginning of the thirteenth century and *Gísla saga* closer to the middle of the century, but the dating of both sagas is open to doubt, and the dating of *Fóstbræðra saga* in particular is an unresolved issue. A hundred years ago Sigurður Nordal argued for a date not much later than 1200. His view was generally accepted until 1972, when Jónas Kristjánsson published a detailed investigation in which he advocated a date toward the end of the thirteenth century.² The question turns to a large extent on the relationship of *Fóstbræðra saga* to the various versions of *Óláfs saga helga*. Nordal argued that the finale of *Fóstbræðra saga* (describing the role of Þormóður Bersason in the Battle of Stiklarstaðir) and the *Oldest Saga of Saint Olaf* converged in a lost text that he named the *Middle Saga. In turn the *Middle Saga afforded the basis for the *Legendary Saga* and Styrmir Kárason's largely lost version of the work; this last in turn served as the source for the version of the saga included in *Heimskringla*. The reader will grasp immediately that we are confronted by too many lost sources. We have only six fragments of the *Oldest Saga*, none of the hypothetical *Middle Saga, and a few random sentences from Styrmir's version.

In such a partially documented transmission there is a good deal of latitude for alternative explanations, and Jónas Kristjánsson construed the material quite differently. He assumed that the *Oldest Saga* was the source of both the *Legendary Saga* and Styrmir's book, and that all three of these versions, the *Oldest Saga*, the *Legendary Saga*, and Styrmir's version, fed into the finale of *Fóstbræðra saga*. I have dealt with the main objections to this construction elsewhere and will summarize them only very briefly here.³

Perhaps the greatest stumbling block is the derivation of Þormóður's last stand in *Fóstbræðra saga* from the *Legendary Saga* (or the equivalent passage in the *Oldest Saga*) despite the fact that there are virtually no verbal correspondences.⁴ When one saga copies another, the match is generally very close and the act of copying is obvious. In this case there is no evidence of copying. It therefore seems most likely that the accounts of Þormóður's last stand in the *Oldest Saga/Legendary Saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga* are independent of each other and represent different recordings of the same story. If the source of the story is oral rather than textual, that is perhaps indicative of an early date.

A second problem in Jónas's construction of the evidence is the supposition that a saga author in the late thirteenth century would have based his account on the earliest versions of *Óláfs saga helga*. If *Fóstbrœðra saga* dates from the end of the century, these versions would have been sixty or seventy years old and would long since have been replaced by the fuller and much superior version in *Heimskringla*. It is surely *Heimskringla* that such a late author would have turned to.

A third difficulty is that the author of *Fóstbrœðra saga*, who made no obvious use of written sources, should, at the very end of his saga, have suddenly consulted no fewer than three different texts to cobble together his finale.⁵ For these reasons I find Nordal's early dating more convincing. If it is in fact correct, *Fóstbrœðra saga* may have a claim to being the earliest of the sagas devoted to the lives of Saga Age Icelanders. The saga may not be quite as early as Nordal thought because he dated the *Oldest Saga* around 1180 rather than around 1200, as is now more commonly done, but a date close to 1210 for *Fóstbrœðra saga* would be entirely reasonable.

The action of *Fóstbrœðra saga* is straightforward and singularly unembellished. It might be divided into the following stages:

1. Þorgeirr Hávarsson and Þormóðr Bersason engage in a series of youthful adventures that culminate in the separation of the two close companions and Þorgeirr's outlawing for a killing, his exile, and his service with King Óláfr Haraldsson in Norway (ÍF 6:121–60).
2. Left to his own devices, Þormóðr pursues two amorous adventures, more out of boredom than affection (ÍF 6:161–77).
3. Þorgeirr returns to Iceland, where he avenges one of King Óláfr's retainers and kills a certain Gautr Sleituson (ÍF 6:177–201).
4. Þorgrímr Einarsson and Þórarinn ofsi Þorvaldsson avenge Gautr and kill Þorgeirr after a notable defense (ÍF 6:201–12).
5. Þormóðr takes service with King Óláfr in Norway, then experiences a series of extravagant adventures in Greenland in the course of avenging Þorgeirr against Þorgrímr Einarsson (ÍF 6:213–60).
6. Þormóðr participates in the Battle of Stiklarstaðir and falls (ÍF 6:261–76).

This rough outline is sufficient to show that the saga is a tale of unvarnished vengeance and bloodshed. The tone is set in the first section, as each adventure concludes with a killing. Both aggressors and victims seem equally endowed with sanguinary instincts. Indeed, this proclivity is established even for the previous generation, because Þorgeirr's father is no better disposed (ÍF 6:123): “Hávarr var kynjaðr sunnan af Akranesi ok hafði farit þaðan fyrir víga sakar, því at hann var mikill vígamaðr ok hávaðamaðr ok ódæll” [Hávarr was a native of Akranes to the south and had moved away because of killings, for he was a notable warrior [or killer] and an arrogant and quarrelsome fellow]. Þormóðr does not have the same family history, but he shares Þorgeirr's inherited disposition (ÍF 6:124):

Snimmendis sagði þeim svá hugr um, sem síðar bar raun á, at þeir myndi vápnbitnir verða, því at þeir váru ráðnir til at láta sinn hlut hvergi eða undir leggja, við hverja menn sem þeir ætti málum at skipta. Meir hugðu þeir jafnan at fremð þessa heims lífs en at dýrð annars heims fagnaðar.

[There was an early intimation, as was later confirmed, that they would succumb to weapons, for they were not inclined to defer or submit in any way, no matter who they were dealing with. They always thought more about promoting their welfare in this world than about [gaining] the glory of joy in the next.]

They become constant companions, but their activities in the district are sufficiently unedifying that they arouse universal disapproval (ÍF 6:125): “[F]ara þeir víða um heruð ok váru eigi vinsælir, tölðu margir þá ekki vera jafnaðarmenn” [they roamed far and wide in the districts and were not popular; many people thought they were not equitable men]. The chieftain and neighbors therefore confront their fathers, and Hávarr is obliged to move south to Borgarfjörður, although Þorgeirr's conduct does not improve. Such is the initial recommendation that the author provides for his protagonists.

Hávarr returns to the scene just long enough to lend a horse to a certain Jǫðurr. When the horse is not returned at the agreed time, Hávarr tries to seize it by force, and Jǫðurr promptly kills him. Þorgeirr does not react visibly on learning of his father's death, but the

author provides some comments on his character (ÍF 6:128): he is not much interested in women, is not given to laughing, and is generally unpleasant to people. He also has a broad ax that procures death for quite a few people.⁶ It is unclear whether that remark applies to killings we learn about in the narrative or to others we are not told about; in a later stanza (ÍF 6:210) Þorgeirr appears to be credited with a total of thirteen killings. On this occasion, despite his impassive reaction to the news of his father's death, Þorgeirr, at the age of fifteen, shows up at Jǫðurr's front door and runs him through with his spear, then reports the killing to his mother in demonstratively laconic terms. People in the district betoken admiration for such a feat at such an early age, though Þorgeirr and Þormóðr continue in their unpopular ways.

In the sequel they confront a father and son named Ingólfr and Þorbrandr, who are notorious evildoers in the district but are under the protection of the chieftain Vermundr. A woman named Sigrfljóð goads Þorgeirr and Þormóðr into action against these malefactors, and they duly kill them in a pitched combat. Sigrfljóð settles the matter with Vermundr, pointing out that the victims got no more than their just deserts. Thus, the matter seems to be passed off as justified in the interest of maintaining law and order.

Þorgeirr next faces a certain Butraldi, who seems to share some of his own characteristics (ÍF 6:142–43):

Hann var einhleypingr, mikill maðr vexti, rammr at afli, ljótr í ásjónu,
hardfengr í skaplyndi, vígamaðr mikill, nasbráðr ok heiptúðigr.

[He was a loner, a big man, strong, ugly, of a tough disposition, a great warrior (or “killer”), unrestrained and aggressive.]

The two of them happen to share the same lodging, and their silent antagonism is vividly described. It culminates when Þorgeirr pitches down a snowy slope and dispatches Butraldi with spear and ax. No aftermath is reported, and there is no judgment against Þorgeirr.

Together Þorgeirr and Þormóðr become involved in a dispute over the ownership of a beached whale. This time their antagonist, a certain Þorgils Másson, is not described as a local predator; though big and tough, he is credited with being a worthy farmer. As a result, when Þorgeirr defeats and kills him, he suffers the consequences and

is outlawed, though without comment on the author's part. More important is what follows. It is noted that, given their success, the companions had become very arrogant, and Þorgeirr wonders aloud who could possibly be their superiors, and who would emerge victorious if the two of them tested their strength against each other. That tacit challenge alienates Þormóðr, who now elects to go his own separate way.

Undeterred, Þorgeirr continues his aggressive behavior along the northeast coast of the Westfjords. He kills two more men over the borrowing of his horse and failure to return it on demand. Since he is already outlawed, there seems not to be much recourse. He now sets sail for Norway on a Norwegian ship. Aboard the same ship is a man named Gautr Sleituson, a kinsman of the Þorgils Másson Þorgeirr had killed in the dispute over a whale. The Norwegians think it best not to foster dissension on their ship and discharge Gautr. Once in Norway, Þorgeirr takes service with King Óláfr and is not slow to gain fame. He subsequently divides his time between Norway and Iceland, but there is no further comment on his outlawry.

What is remarkable about this sequence of adventures is not so much Þorgeirr's callousness as the author's silence. In the course of the action Þorgeirr kills six men without prompting a word of disapproval. The killing of Jǫðurr may be justified as revenge for a father, and the slaying of Þorbrandr may be viewed as good riddance of a ne'er-do-well, but Butraldi falls only because he is disagreeable and challenging, while Þorgils Másson succumbs in a quarrel in which he may be defending a just cause. The two men who fall in the last encounter, Bjarni and Skúfr, pay a high price in a trivial matter; Bjarni borrows a horse without leave and is provocative in not returning it promptly, but it is questionable whether two deaths in reprisal are really proportionate.

The judgment here and elsewhere is left up to the reader because the author makes no pronouncements and offers no hint of reproach in any of the cases, direct or indirect. Nor is anything said in defense of the victims, some of whom (Jǫðurr, Þorbrandr, and Butraldi) seem to be ruffians on the same level as Þorgeirr. It is as if we are witnessing an internecine feud among bandits. The author simply tabulates the killings and leaves it in the reader's purview to decide whether Þorgeirr is a serial killer or merely overzealous in asserting his claims. Although

the sagas are famous for their dispassionate style, the neutrality in *Fóstbrœðra saga* may seem exaggerated, and we may wonder whether it is an oversight or intended for special effect.

A short interlude on Þormóðr's amours is relatively bloodless, though in an encounter with an attacker dispatched by an indignant mother Þormóðr does lose the use of his right arm. He proves to be an unreliable lover and switches his affections from one woman, Kolbrún, to another, Þorbjörg, at the same time recasting his verse in honor of the former in order to celebrate the latter. This poetic infidelity is punished by sorcery, and Þormóðr must publicly restore his verses to their original recipient. But these amorous misdemeanors seem tame in comparison to the earlier killing spree.

The story now reverts to Þorgeirr, who picks up where he left off. He rides by the farm of a certain Hækils-Snorri, whose description is almost identical to the unflattering one bestowed on Butraldi earlier in the saga.⁷ Þorgeirr's horses elect to graze on Snorri's inner yard, and Snorri, not unreasonably, tries to drive them off. Þorgeirr responds by attacking and eventually killing both Snorri and two of his farmhands, thus increasing the number of his known killings in Iceland to nine. He also takes aim at a certain Þórir, who had wounded one of King Óláfr's retainers, and eliminates him with the same dispassion that characterizes his earlier killings. The author once more withholds comment. In a curious reversal of his customary murderous role, Þorgeirr unaccountably takes the part of a thief named Veglág, saves him from hanging, and transports him to Orkney. Veglág ends up in Scotland, where he renews his thievery and is eventually killed.

In the harbor at Slétta Þorgeirr has a further encounter with Gautr Sleituson. Initially each provokes the other by using his spear and shield as firewood. Þorgeirr, exhibiting his usual bland indifference, enters Gautr's tent one night, awakens him, and delivers a fatal ax blow. Sometime later he sees a ship approaching, which turns out to be under the command of Þorgrímr Einarsson and Þórarinn ofsi Þorvaldsson. As the nickname "ofsi" [arrogance] suggests, these are tough characters in their own right. Þorgeirr negotiates a truce with them, withholding the news of Gautr's death, but it emerges that Þórarinn is a kinsman of Gautr's. When Þórarinn learns of the killing, he therefore conspires with Þorgrímr to take revenge. They manage to pick off some of Þorgeirr's men and gain a numerical advantage for

a head-on assault. Þorgeirr mounts a memorable defense, kills two more men, but succumbs in the end. Þorgrímr and Þórarinn mistreat the corpse, then go their separate ways; Þórarinn is killed in a separate incident and Þorgrímr settles in Greenland.

The rest of the story is devoted to Þormóðr. Although it is the most entertaining, as well as extravagant, part of the saga, we need not recapitulate in detail. Þormóðr, like Þorgeirr before him, takes service with King Óláfr, then asks for permission to go to Greenland. Óláfr, surmising that it is for the purpose of avenging his retainer Þorgeirr, grants permission, and the killing recommences. When Þormóðr returns to King Óláfr, he modestly claims five victims in a stanza, but in reality there were four other victims.⁸

It would be pedantic to tally up the killings in individual sagas, and *Fóstbrœðra saga* may not have the greatest number, but the indifference with which they are treated is striking. The known killings add up to twenty-five (prior to the Battle of Stiklarstaðir), and they are uniformly unlamented. The one exception may be Þorgeirr himself, to whom Þormóðr, even after their parting, remains faithful. The proof is that he undertakes such disproportionate vengeance, although he never gives voice to his sense of loss. That Þormóðr is no stranger to sentiment is suggested not only by his short-lived love affairs but also by his great devotion to King Óláfr, which is conveyed both by his verse and by the words of the saga. But on the whole, even up to the day of his death, the saga is dominated by unrelenting reticence.

Although the sagas are famous for being emotionally undemonstrative, this reputation is not always or everywhere deserved. There are highly charged moments of love and grief in *Gunnlaugs saga*, *Bjarnar saga*, and *Egils saga*, and *Laxdœla saga* is saturated with repressed sentiment. The best contrast to *Fóstbrœðra saga* may, however, be *Gísla saga Súrssonar* because it comes from the same region, the West Fjords, and centers on another famous warrior-poet. If *Fóstbrœðra saga* is a tale of hard-bitten blood revenge, *Gísla saga* is a tale of competing sentiments, often disguised but always close to the surface.

A palpable difference between the two sagas is that one is quite devoid of family attachments whereas the other is organized precisely around family interactions. Þorgeirr's father enters the story briefly, then dies. Þormóðr's parents are barely mentioned and have no part in the action. Neither of the companions seems to have brothers or

sisters. Neither of them marries, and there is no mention that either has children. They are close friends for a time, but as far as the reader can tell, it is a wordless friendship. On the other hand, *Gísla saga* traces Gísli's family back to the previous generation in Norway and has much to say about all the family members in both generations. The story of the first generation and the beginning of the second generation is transmitted in two manuscript versions so that, as in the case of *Ljósvetninga saga*, there are questions about which version has priority, at least down to the time of the family's settlement in Iceland.⁹ Fortunately, the story of family tensions does not begin in earnest until this point. We can therefore dispense with the disputed prelude in Norway to a large extent.

The central characters in the saga are Gísli, his brother Þorkell, and his sister Þórdís. Whereas in *Fóstbræðra saga*, no one has an intense relationship with anybody else until the very end, in *Gísla saga* all the main characters have one or more intense relationships. Gísli marries a woman named Auðr, and that marriage becomes the greatest love match anywhere in the sagas. At the same time Gísli forms a particularly tight friendship with Auðr's brother Vésteinn.

Gísli's brother Þorkell marries a certain Ásgerðr, but this marriage turns out to be more problematical. A little later Þórdís is wooed by the chieftain Þorgrímur Þorsteinsson, who moves into the vicinity of Gísli and Þorkell so that they all become friends and neighbors. The first sign of trouble is a prediction at a local thingmeeting that they will not always be so close. Gísli proposes to solidify their bonds by inducing them to swear oaths of blood brotherhood, but Þorgrímur, whether from instinctive apprehension or some prior knowledge of what is afoot, withdraws at the last moment and declines to swear oaths that would bind him not only to his in-laws but also to his in-laws' in-law (Vésteinn).

The actual rift in the family becomes apparent when it is revealed that Þorkell's wife Ásgerðr is amorously involved with Vésteinn. This revelation puts Þorkell at odds with his brother Gísli because Vésteinn is Gísli's close friend and sworn brother. As a consequence, Þorkell, who up until now has shared a farm with Gísli, moves away and takes up residence with Þorgrímur, although he is a somewhat irresolute fellow and cannot bring himself to abandon his marriage with Ásgerðr. The tightly knit family of four is thus split down the middle with

the brothers-in-law Þorkell and Þorgrímr on one side and Gísli and Vésteinn on the other.

Gísli does his best to keep Vésteinn out of harm's way, but Vésteinn ignores his warning and takes up residence in his house. One stormy night when almost everyone is outside trying to salvage the hay, an unidentified assassin enters the house and kills Vésteinn. There has been an interesting "whodunit" debate on the identity of the killer, but it is probably Þorgrímr.¹⁰ Gísli and Þorkell, who are after all brothers and have a close though frayed relationship, try to stay on good terms, but there is growing hostility between Gísli and Þorgrímr. It culminates when Gísli takes revenge for his sworn brother Vésteinn, enters Þorgrímr's house secretly, and kills him in the dead of night. This famous passage is fraught with emotional overtones because Þorgrímr, as he is killed in bed, is of course sleeping next to his wife, Gísli's sister Þórdís. The situation is one in which Gísli must, of necessity, alienate his sister at the same time he is avenging his sworn brother.

It is not known at first who Þorgrímr's murderer is, but Gísli, the irrepressible poet, composes a stanza acknowledging that he is the killer. He intends to recite the stanza under his breath, but Þórdís overhears it. The faultlines in the family are now multiplied; they run between Gísli and Þorkell, Þorgrímr's good friend, and between Gísli and his sister Þórdís, Þorgrímr's wife. The family that began as a model of concord is now riddled with resentments, spoken and unspoken. Gísli's secret is kept for a time, but we can imagine Þórdís's state of mind once she knows the truth. In the long run she cannot remain silent; in a memorable scene she stops in her tracks, literally puts her foot down, and reveals the secret to her brother-in-law Þorkr. That brings about Gísli's outlawry.

From this point on and for the duration of Gísli's outlawry the story is about the inner lives of the various characters. After Vésteinn's murder his sister Auðr is deeply affected. Gísli composes three stanzas, one in memory of Vésteinn (5), one about Auðr's hidden tears (6), and one about her flow of tears (7). We never see Gísli reflecting on Vésteinn, and we never see Auðr actually weeping, but the stanzas amply visualize their grief. The last two are in response to Þorkell's repeated inquiries into whether Auðr is shedding tears (ÍF 6:46–47). On the one hand, these stanzas are about Auðr's state of mind and her grief for her brother. On the other, they offer a tantalizing glimpse

into Þorkell's state of mind. Why is he so persistently interested in his sister-in-law's feelings? Is it sympathy? Is his anger over the adultery so great that he wants Auðr to suffer the consequences along with her brother? Or is he apprehensive that Auðr in her grief will foment revenge? We cannot know. The most plausible answer might be that he experiences each of these feelings in turn or in a jumble. In any event the author opens the door to the reader's imagination, even though the affected siblings never exchange words with each other, at least not in the reader's hearing. We therefore have no inkling of how they would formulate the feelings that the author is so careful to let us know that they have but are so chary in communicating.

There is one little chink in the wall of silence. When Gísli learns that Þórdís has betrayed his secret to her brother-in-law Þorkr, he composes a stanza in which he reproaches her for not resembling the Guðrún Gjúkadóttir of heroic poetry, who sided with her brothers against her husband. The reproachful tone is picked up in the following prose, which is more explicit on blame than one expects in the sagas (ÍF 6:62):

Ok þóttumk ek eigi þess verðr frá henni, því at ek þykkjumk þat lýst hafa nokkurum sinnum, at mér hefir eigi hennar óvirðing betri þótt en sjálfs mín; hefi ek stundum lagt líf mitt í háska fyrir hennar sakar, en hon hefir nú gefit mér dauðaráð.

[It has not seemed to me that I deserved this of her, for I think I have shown more than once that I have thought her dishonor no less important than my own; I have on occasion risked my life for her sake, but now she has conspired in my death.]

Gísli's allusion to his sister's dishonor pertains to two episodes in the Norwegian prelude in which Gísli intervenes to kill her ostensibly unwanted suitors in order to protect her reputation.¹¹ The problem is that, although we can be certain that her father does not want the suitors, we cannot be sure, in one case at least, that Þórdís is of the same mind. She may have felt that, far from clearing her name, Gísli has interfered with her love life. From her point of view, therefore, his killing of Þorgrímr does not necessarily hark back to moments of fraternal solicitude but merely exacerbates an earlier tension. This

tension may be of many years' standing and run deep. We know in fact that Þorkell was befriended with one of the "unwanted" suitors and expressed displeasure at his killing in the longer version of the Norwegian prelude.¹²

Gísli consequently has an emotional prehistory with his brother as well as his sister.¹³ When Þorkell informs him of his sister's betrayal and Gísli has expressed his disappointment, he turns to Þorkell to ask what he may expect of him; it is as if, having lost the support of his sister, he now wonders whether he will lose the support of his brother too (ÍF 6:62). In fact, Þorkell's response is quite half-hearted; he promises to give Gísli warning of any attempt on his life but not shelter, which would make him liable to prosecution for harboring an outlaw. Þórdís marries her brother-in-law Børkr and disappears from the action until the very end of the saga, but Þorkell's half-measures to help his brother become an intermittent refrain throughout the saga. The meetings of the brothers are colored with Þorkell's self-preoccupation and Gísli's sadness at the failure of brotherly affection. After their first meeting, the author comments (ÍF 6:75): "Gísli þykkir fyrir, er þeir skiljask" [Gísli is distressed at their parting]. Given the severity of saga understatement, this is an unusually overt expression of emotion.

Gísli saga has much to say about alienation, but no less to say about closeness. Once outlawed, Gísli spends a winter with a certain Þorgerðr, who provides a temporary hideout, but he soon returns to his wife, who is now resident in Geirþjófsfjörður to the south of their previous residence. The reason for this potentially dangerous reunion is not strategic but sentimental (ÍF 6:75):

Þegar er vórar, ferr Gísli aptr í Geirþjófsfjörð ok má þá eigi lengr vera í brott frá Auði, konu sinni; svá unnask þau mikit.

[In early spring Gísli returns to Geirþjófsfjörður and cannot bear to be away from his wife Auðr any longer, so greatly do they love each other.]

The sagas are not greatly preoccupied with married love, but *Gísli saga* is a notable exception. The inability of the couple to stay apart for very long becomes thematic, and Auðr's devotion culminates, as we

will see below, in an episode in which she humiliates Gísli's pursuers beyond reprieve.

Gísli's bonds are, however, not exclusively with his family. His thirteen years of outlawry can be read as an exciting drama of narrow escapes with the help of others, but they can also be read as a record of intercessions on his behalf by devoted friends and admirers. The first of his guardian angels is the woman Þorgerðr who hides him for a winter. The author comments as follows on the quality of her reception (ÍF 6:75): “. . . ok hefir hvergi verit jafnvel gørt við hann í sekðinni sem þar” [nowhere was he treated so well as there during his outlawry]. Such words echo later in the saga.

Gísli now acquires a boat from his, as always reluctant, brother, capsizes it so as to make it appear that he has drowned, and takes refuge with a certain Ingjaldr on the island of Hergilsey. He is ultimately tracked down by his enemies, and Ingjaldr is willing to give up his life in defense of the fugitive. But Gísli is ready with a handsome rejoinder (ÍF 6:81):

“Nú fór sem mik varði,” sagði Gísli, “at þú myndir hitta þat ráðit, at þú mættir drengrinn af verða sem beztr; en verri laun sel ek þér þá fyrir liðveizluna en ek hafða ætlat, ef þú skalt fyrir mínar sakar lífit láta.”

[“Now it has come about as I suspected,” said Gísli, “namely that you would choose the option of being the most outstanding man, but I would give you a worse reward for your help than I intended if you are to lose your life for my sake.”]

Accordingly Ingjaldr gets the same authorial praise that Þorgerðr got before him (ÍF 6:84): “Ok þat hafa menn mælt, at Ingjaldr hafi Gísla mest veitt ok þat at mestu gagni orðit” [and people said that Ingjaldr had given Gísli the greatest help and afforded him the greatest benefit]. Rather than risking Ingjaldr's life, Gísli conceives a trick to allow his escape.

Once on land and seriously wounded, Gísli takes shelter with a certain Refr and his notorious harridan of a wife, Álfdí. It is unclear whether Refr even knows Gísli, but he is instantly ready to help and devises the remedy of hiding Gísli in his wife's bedclothes while she sits atop him. The pursuers arrive and ransack the house, but Álfdí

treats them to such a barrage of ridicule and abuse that they do not search as carefully as they might otherwise have done. This sequence of rescues suggests that Gísli makes immediate friends wherever he goes, whereas his enemies harvest nothing but contempt.

The disparagement of the opposition reaches its climax in a scene that gathers together several emotional threads. The leader of the trackers, Eyjólfur Þórðarson, who has been paid by Bǫrkr to locate and kill Gísli, approaches Auður and attempts to bribe her to betray Gísli (ÍF 6:99–100). She pretends to agree and actually starts to count up the money. Her foster daughter, Guðríður, bursts into tears and runs out of the house to inform Gísli, who is in hiding nearby, that he is about to be surrendered. Gísli is completely unmoved and replies calmly (ÍF 6:99): “Ger þú þér gott í hug, því at eigi mun mér þat at fjórlesti verða, at Auður blekki mik” [cheer up because the cause of my death will not be that Auður betrays me]. To this he adds a stanza in which he says that he knows that Auður (scil. in her heart of hearts) is weeping. What she in fact does is to put the proffered silver in a pouch, with which she bloodies Eyjólfur’s nose, denouncing his gullibility and telling him to bear in mind that he has been beaten by a woman. This moment combines the lowpoint in the fortunes of Gísli’s enemies with the highpoint of marital trust. At one extreme there is a complete incomprehension of emotional bonds and Eyjólfur’s belief that Auður is as venal as he is himself; at the other extreme is the security of perfect certitude.

Much of the remaining saga is given over to the alternating apparitions of a good and a bad dream woman who haunt Gísli’s dwindling days. The authenticity of the stanzas inspired by these visions has been challenged on the ground that they are too Christian for a tenth-century poet.¹⁴ But, aside from the fact that the early sagas do not seem to be given to the fabrication of stanzas, the gentle tonality is quite in line with the spirit of the prose. We might easily imagine that the tone of the stanzas contributed to the emotional preoccupations of the narrative as a whole.

After Gísli, vastly outnumbered, falls in an onslaught by Eyjólfur and his followers, the news is brought to Bǫrkr, who, as we may remember, is now married to Gísli’s sister Þórdís. Bǫrkr is well pleased with the long deferred revenge for his brother and bids Þórdís make the avengers welcome. Þórdís has at this point been silent for fifty-five

pages, but she responds with a famous retort (ÍF 6:116), also quoted in *Eyrbyggja saga* (ÍF 4:24): “Gráta mun ek Gísli, bróður minn . . . en mun eigi vel fagnat Gíslabana, ef grautr er gørr ok gefinn?” [“I will weep for my brother Gísli . . . but will it not be sufficient welcome for Gísli’s killer if gruel is made and served?”]. Once again the tears are more metaphorical than real, but Þórdís is not content with mere words. As she serves Eyjólfur, she tries to plunge a sword through him under the table, but the hilt catches on the edge of the table, the thrust is deflected, and she inflicts only a serious leg wound. Eyjólfur is once more bested by a woman.

The present chapter is about poets and warriors; Þorgeirr, Þormóður, and Gísli are all famous outlaws and great warriors. Þormóður kills nine during his mission of vengeance for Þorgeirr, and Gísli kills eight attackers in his epic last stand. But we may ask whether it is of any importance in Gísli’s saga that he is a great warrior. The answer must be that it adds to his legendary status but that it is clearly not the focus of the saga. The focus is on his unique relationship with his wife and his profoundly troubled relationship with his brother and sister. The stories about Saga Age Icelanders are often referred to as family sagas, but *Gísli saga* is perhaps the first in which family is the true subject. There were intimations of family dynamics in *Ljósvetninga saga*, especially between the brothers Guðmundr and Einarr, but family dynamics efface all other concerns in *Gísli saga*. The emotional life of the individuals claims the reader’s attention, and the actions, however well told, are important only to the extent that they shed light on the characters.

Fóstbræðra saga, on the other hand, is most assuredly a tale of action, and the action does not share the stage with family or social concerns. Þorgeirr and Þormóður appear to have no family or personal connections, apart from Þormóður’s fleeting love affairs, inspired by boredom, and his last-minute attachment to King Óláfr. We have posed the question whether it is important that Gísli is a warrior, but we may also ask whether it is important that Þormóður is a poet. In *Gísli saga* the stanzas are important because they are mood pieces and tell us something about Gísli’s experience and inner life. In *Fóstbræðra saga* they are more archival; they serve as a record of Þorgeirr’s exploits and Þormóður’s service with King Óláfr. The author could have altered the tone substantially by setting down the love stanzas, but he chose not

to. As a consequence there is no delineation of Þormóðr's personality or state of mind.

By refocusing on the individuals, *Gísla saga* marks a real revolution in saga writing. Individuals and personalities were conspicuously not central in the kings' sagas, in which neither Óláfr really comes to life. The breakthrough came with the cantankerous protagonist of *Egils saga*, and here too the poetry must have been a crucial factor in the development of character study. There were surely traditions about the kings, but there was not much of the personal verse that gave life to the poets who figure in the purely Icelandic sagas.

I have suggested in earlier chapters that there may have been a kind of chain reaction in the succession of sagas, with each saga responding to previous sagas in confirmation or rebuttal. *Egils saga* could be a response to *Morkinskinna*, *Reykðæla saga* to *Víga-Glúms saga*, and *Ljósvetninga saga* to all three of these. In the western group a case can be made that *Gunnlaugs saga* influenced both *Bjarnar saga* and *Egils saga*. The question in this chapter is whether there is any interplay between our two northwestern sagas. In the light of deep differences in outlook and the absence of any telltale echoes, it is difficult to make such a case. On the other hand, if *Fóstbræðra saga* was composed around 1210 and *Gísla saga* at a best guess between 1230 and 1250, it seems unlikely that the author of the latter would not have known about his predecessor in the same region.¹⁵ If there was saga writing in Eyjafjörður in the 1220s, it seems equally unlikely that he did not know about this tradition. But if he was aware of one or more of these texts, it must have been a deliberate choice to reject what may have appeared to him to be mere killing chronicles in favor of a more ambitious form.

The author of *Gísla saga* in effect redefined what a saga was. He abandoned the epic of armed confrontation and substituted a study of psychological conflict. In part his project is taken over from the tradition of heroic poetry, as Gísli's unfavorable comparison of Þórdís to Guðrún Gjúkadóttir suggests. Immutable love, silent grief, and repressed tears were also the gist of this tradition, but the author of *Gísla saga* makes the family relationships more complex. The contradictions in Gísli's relationship to both his sister and brother are unresolved; the principals are bound to each other by equally demanding accesses of love and disaffection.

With this problematizing of emotions, the author contrives a new narrative style designed to probe the inner workings of his characters. His experiment opened the way in particular for *Laxdæla saga*, which drew even more explicitly on heroic legend, and later for *Njáls saga*, both stories of dark interiors. The action tales lost ground and were replaced by psychological dramas in the latter part of the thirteenth century. *Gísla saga* was the turning point and set the scene for a significant intensification of the saga form.

