

## Ingimundr prestr Þorgeirsson and Icelandic Runic Literacy in the Twelfth Century

In the corpus of Icelandic texts generally known as the “contemporary sagas” there is a group of texts which chronicles the remarkable events of Bishop Guðmundr Arason’s life. The saga of Guðmundr Arason is known from different manuscript versions currently referred to as *Guðmundar sögur biskups* (see Karlsson 1983). The saga of Guðmundr also forms part of the *Sturlunga saga* compilation, i.e., the account of Guðmundr’s life until he was ordained bishop in 1203 “amesso d(egi) heilagrar meýjar Evfemie” according to *Guðmundar saga A* (Karlsson 1983, 144). This article will focus upon certain parts of the *Guðmundar sögur* and the corresponding version in *Sturlunga saga*, the so-called *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða*, both originating from an earlier separate saga of Guðmundr the Priest (PG — see below). The aim of the present study is to contribute to the discussion of the textual tradition about Guðmundr in general and to investigate the source value of these parts in particular for the study of Icelandic runic literacy.

The parts of the transmitted sagas singled out here for closer examination might with some justification be called an “Ingimundar þátr Þorgeirssonar” since, taken together, they convey a brief and condensed “Life of Ingimundr.” In the wider context of the sagas of Guðmundr, what is told about Ingimundr basically forms part of the genealogical background for the bishop-to-be. I choose the brief account of Ingimundr’s life mainly in order to reopen the case made by various nineteenth-century scholars who cited its final part as evidence for Icelandic runic literacy. The essential questions to be asked here, then, are the following: what exactly does the account of Ingimundr in these sagas say about the use of different scripts in twelfth-century Iceland, and what is the significance of the story which is told?

It is generally agreed that the story of Ingimundr Þorgeirsson as we know it from the written sources goes back to a now lost and unfinished saint’s life of Bishop Guðmundr Arason commonly thought to have covered the life of Guðmundr until he was ordained bishop, a *Prestssaga Guðmundar* (as a rule referred to as PG, see Karlsson 1983, CL–CLIII). This text is believed to have been

written before 1250 (see Kristjánsson 1988, 185, and Einarsdóttir 1964, 293–317, for further discussion). It is transmitted in an abridged form in the *Sturlunga saga* complex — and with interpolations (in A, not in B) by the *Guðmundar sögur* (on the textual relationship between the versions see Karlsson 1983, CLII–III, and Karlsson 1986). According to Jón Jóhannesson, the preserved versions of *Guðmundar sögur* derive from an original composed some time around 1300 (Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 2:xxvii). As for the recorded tradition about Ingimundr Þorgeirsson, the agreement is so extensive in the entire group of preserved texts about Guðmundr that there is no doubt that it is transmitted from a common origin — the PG. For the sake of convenience, therefore, quotations in the following discussion will be given from the *Sturlunga saga* version (Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:116–59).

The question of sources for PG in general has been dealt with to some extent, particularly its relation to annalistic material (Einarsdóttir 1964). The sources for the specific account of Ingimundr Þorgeirsson are probably all oral, an interesting aspect of which can be observed in the part of the narrative which relates the circumstances of Ingimundr’s tragic death in a desolate place in Greenland. On the basis of this account, it seems possible to discern one discrete oral tradition as the source upon which a later, written narrative was composed. It is this part of the narrative which will be used here as a case study for the purposes stated above. To this end, a brief summary of the relevant parts of what I have termed the “Ingimundar þáttur Þorgeirssonar” is needed to provide a background for its so-called “Greenlandic episode.”

The story of Ingimundr, told with utmost economy, portrays the life of a man of learning in twelfth-century Iceland and chronicles, in part, the conditions under which an Icelandic man of books and letters lived and worked at the time. The glimpses of a man of letters at work provided by the “Ingimundar þáttur” seem to convey interesting bits of information about literacy in medieval Iceland. Ingimundr is presented in chapter 1 of all the preserved texts as a “prestr ok mikit göfugmenni” [a priest and a most noble man], and he seems to have been a man imbued with a love for books and learning. His association with books is depicted as that of a student and owner of books — the saga does not reveal any scribal or authorial activities related to books.<sup>1</sup> The episode of the shipwreck at Hornstrandir (in 1180) serves to underscore his love of books in making a particular point of his feeling of distress when he discovers that he had lost his book-chest at sea: “þá þótti honum hart um höggva, því at þar var yndi hans sem bækrnar váru” [it seemed to him a hard blow, because his delight lay in his books]. Ingimundr then makes a prayer, we are told, to have his book-chest drift ashore. A few nights later, as if by divine providence, the chest is reported to have been found at

1. It should be added here that Finnbogi Guðmundsson (1965, xcvi–cviii) puts forward Ingimundr as the main candidate in his search for an author of *Orkneyinga saga*. This point of view, however, has not gained general acceptance (see, for example, Nordal, Tómasson, and Ólason 1992, 390).

Drangar, undamaged and with the books intact. Ingimundr goes there to dry his books, the saga tells us (Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:128–29). Elsewhere we learn that his serious attitude toward reading and studying books came to serve his nephew, the bishop-to-be Guðmundr Arason, rather badly. Guðmundr had to be beaten to the books, the saga reports with a tinge of good-humored malice, when Ingimundr undertook to educate him after the boy's father had died [hann var barðr til bækr]. This was Guðmundr's only inheritance from his father as he was an illegitimate child (Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:123). So when Guðmundr was ordained a priest at the age of twenty-four, his uncle Ingimundr gave to him the best and most learned books he owned [gaf honum bækr þær allar, er hann átti beztar ok fróðastar] (Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:133).

Later Ingimundr traveled abroad. In the summer of 1189 he departed from Bergen bound for Iceland on board the ship *Stangarfoli* (*Stangarbolli* according to one manuscript variant):

Skip þeira kom í óbygg[ð]ir á Grænlandi, ok týndust menn allir. En þess varð svá víst, at fjórtán vetrum síðar fannst skip þeira, ok þá fundust sjau menn í hellisskúta einum. Þar var Ingimundr prestr. Hann var heill ok ófúinn ok svá klæði hans, en sex manna bein váru þar hjá honum. Vax var ok þar hjá honum ok rúnar þær, er sögðu atburð um líflát þeira. (*Prestssaga Guðmundar góða* chap. 13; Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:138)

[Their ship was driven ashore in the barrens of Greenland, and all the men perished. This was known because their ship was found fourteen winters later, and the remains of seven men were discovered in a cave, one of whom was Ingimundr the Priest. He was whole and undecayed, as was his clothing also. Beside him lay the skeletons of six men and also wax and runes relating the story of their fate.]

The salient point of this rather well-known account is that Ingimundr, when using script, is explicitly said to have used runes. (Presumably the runes were incised in wax tablets or directly into a slab of wax.) What is the significance of the report that in the dire situation in which he found himself, Ingimundr's "unmarked" choice of script was that of runes? Given his intimate acquaintance with books, there is every reason to assume, as do Björn Magnússon Ólsen and others, that he also knew how to write with Roman letters. Thus the þáttr depicts, albeit indirectly, a literate man possessing what is known in modern terms as digraphic competence. The explicitness of the texts regarding the use of runic script probably derives from an oral tradition about the dramatic incident, which must have been given its preserved literary form less than half a century after the remains of Ingimundr were found, in 1203 or 1207 according to the manuscripts of the sagas, in 1200, according to Icelandic annals (see Karlsson 1983, 68; Storm 1888, 121–181, 477; Einarsson 1964, 311; Magerøy 1993, 55). The dramatic circumstances of Ingimundr's death and the story of how posterity came to learn the particulars of his tragic fate are such that the specific information concerning the script could well be remembered and kept alive for a long time.

It seems possible though to reconstruct a more complete version of an oral tradition about the events than what can be deduced from the brief account quoted above. As commented upon by Björn Magnússon Ólsen (1883, 106), the different versions of *Guðmundar saga* have all kept a Greenlandic episode of a similar kind at two different places in the narrative — chapters 1 and 13 in the prestssaga version from *Sturlunga saga*, chapters 1 and 29 in the A-version of the bishop's saga. The first episode relates in rather elaborate detail how Einarr Þorgeirsson, a brother of Ingimundr, lost his life in Greenland, “á Grænlandi í óbyggðum.” Almost the same phrasing is used about Ingimundr: his ship came “í óbyggðir á Grænlandi.” The source for Einarr's *líflát* is reportedly oral, well attested in all versions of the saga. The circumstances of Einarr's death are said to be based on the account of a certain Styrkárr Sigmundarson who came from Greenland. Styrkárr, it is added, was a reliable source [sagnamaðr mikill ok sannfróðr]. According to the *Sturlunga saga*-version of the episode, Einarr was found one winter after the shipwreck. The A-version of the bishop's saga adds: “eða .ij.” [or two]. The texts all refer to an additional tradition about Einarr's death (“eru tvennar frásagnir”), the report ascribed to Styrkárr being one of them, the texts state, without making explicit what the second tradition had to tell (“Sú var sögn Styrkárs”). In my opinion, the other version should be seen as anticipating what is going to be told later in the texts about Ingimundr. In none of the texts is Einarr ever mentioned as a member of Ingimundr's crew. His presence in the saga serves, it seems, no function in the narrative other than being part of the usual genealogy. He is out of the story once the intriguing circumstances of his death have been related, more or less as one of several asides to give color to the narrative, it appears.

There is every reason to believe that these two accounts refer as *fabula*, so to speak, to the same set of events. Putting them together gives us a more complete picture of what the tradition knew about *Stangarfoli*'s fate. The account of Einarr's death conveys a tradition that the crew split into two groups, and after having fought each other over the remaining supplies, Einarr and two other men made off onto the inland ice to try to find a settlement. But they were overtaken by death only a day's march from the settlement at Herjólfssnes. That part of the tradition also knows that the ship had been found “í óbyggðum” — “heilt” [undamaged] according to the bishop's saga version only. Einarr's body is said to have been whole and undamaged (“heilt ok ósakat”), and he is reported to have been buried at Herjólfssnes (“ok hvílir hann á Herjólfssnesi” [Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:116]). These details all accord well with what is told later in the texts about Ingimundr, where no reference is made to the condition of the ship, and only the skeletons of six men are reported to have been found together with Ingimundr's body. This number seems to jibe with the previous account of the crew splitting into two groups. The seven men, then, would have been one of the groups which fought over the provisions, as related in the begin-

ning of the saga. The texts refer to the runes as the only source of what is told about Ingimundr's fate. If we consider the text in its totality, this gives retrospectively a rational explanation for the elaborate details concerning Einarr's death reported in the beginning of the story. Probably the tradition had it that the brothers were found at different times, Einarr after one or two winters, Ingmundr after fourteen, alternatively eleven or eighteen. The tradition about these events, however, seems to have been one and the same. Only after finding the wax and the runes would it have been possible to reconstruct the whole set of events, including the time of the shipwreck and Einarr's death. In the texts, then, the "atburð um líflát þeira" [the circumstances of their death] revealed by the runes on Ingimundr's wax tablets are indeed told explicitly at the very beginning of the saga(s), suggesting also that the message left on the tablets was a text of some length. In addition, the explicit reference to the written record of the events has the purpose of lending credibility to the account — in this particular case to an oral version preceding the written one which acquired its literary form first in PG.

These dimly visible traces of what looks like an oral tradition need to be held up against the information of Ingimundr's fate provided by other sources — in this case some of the written annals (Storm 1888, 22, 120–21, 180–81). The sagas, after having related the tragic fate of Ingimundr, all agree on a short statement about something which happened during the same summer in which the *Stangarfoli* was lost: "Þat sumar, er Stangarfolinn týndist, kom af Grænlandi Ásmundr kastanrassi" [In the summer when the *Stangarfoli* disappeared, Ásmundr kastanrassi came from Greenland] (Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946, 1:138). This has the true appearance of an annalistic record, as has been observed by Einarsdóttir (1964, 311). The same piece of information is given in *Høyersannáll* (Storm 1888, 61) and in *Annales regii* (Storm 1888, 22). None of these have references to the shipwreck and the discovery of Ingimundr's body. References to the disappearance of the *Stangarfoli* are given in *Annales Reseniani* ("Forz Stangarfoli" [Storm 1888, 22]), in *Annales regii* ("Týndiz Stangarfoli" [Storm 1888, 120]), and in *Skálholtsannáll* ("Forst Stangar foli" [Storm 1888, 180]). Furthermore the *Annales regii* together with the *Skálholtsannáll* give congruent testimony that the body of Ingimundr the priest was found undecayed in some desolate part of Greenland according to the former ("ófvinn i vbyggð á Grönlannði" [Storm 1888, 121]), undecayed in a desolate place according to the latter ("Fannz Ingimundr prestr Þorgeirs son ófvinn i obygðvm" [Storm 1888, 181]). None of the preserved annals provides sufficient material to support the idea that the author of PG did base his account of Ingimundr's shipwreck on annalistic sources. Thus there is good reason to accept Ólafía Einarsdóttir's claim that the annalistic records build upon PG which in its turn did contain annalistic pieces of information such as the remark about Ásmundr kastanrassi.

As for the account of the circumstances surrounding Ingimundr's death, the writer of the oldest version of the saga did not, of course, have access to the runic

source to which he refers. Nor does he make any claim to that effect. Indirectly, however, the narrative brings to light the emerging of an oral tradition from the very moment when the shipwreck had been discovered and the fate of the men on board figured out from the script on the wax tablets. However convinced we may be of the historicity of the tradition which can thus be reconstructed — that is to say the *fabula* — we must, nevertheless, keep in mind that we have it in no other form than as *sjúžet* of the narrative about Ingimundr. Therefore, when adduced as evidence, e.g., of runic literacy, the reported incident should be treated as such.

Ever since Peter Erasmus Müller expressed his opinion on it, this matter in the sagas of Guðmundr has occupied scholars and been adduced in support of nearly every conceivable position on the question of runic literacy in twelfth-century Iceland. Nobody, it seems to me, has been prepared to reject Ingimundr's reported use of runes as a historic fact. Müller assumed that the learned Ingimundr would not have resorted to using runes had he not known that any persons who happened to arrive at such a desolate spot would be more likely to understand runes than Roman characters: “Quid vero induxisset sacerdotem, quem doctiorem fuisse scimus, ut runis uteretur, nisi illi constitisset, cives huc forte venientes facilius runas quam litteras Romanas intellecturos esse?” (Müller and Velschow 1858, 9; cf. Thorsen 1877, 25 n25).

Björn Magnússon Ólsen concurs with Müller and adds that Ingimundr might have found it easier to use runes than to use Roman characters when writing in the mother tongue (1883, 105–17). This, of course, accords well with Björn Magnússon Ólsen's own views on the status of runic script in Iceland in the late twelfth century. In evaluating the truthworthiness of the Greenlandic episode he is slightly uncomfortable with the reported fact that Ingimundr was found “heill ok ófúinn” [whole and undecayed] after fourteen years. Bearing in mind the latitude and the possibility that the body might have been covered with snow or ice, this should not, however, writes Björn Magnússon Ólsen, lead us to question the authenticity of what is told. He also points out that Einarr is said in the saga to have suffered the same fate as his brother Ingimundr, dying in Greenland under similar circumstances. Einarr, too, was reported to have been *ófúinn* when he was found after having been missing for one year. Björn Magnússon Ólsen apparently ignores or forgets the fact that it is explicitly stated in the texts that the only body which was *ófúinn* when the crew of the *Stangarfoli* was found was the corpse of Ingimundr. Beside him, as we know already, were the skeletons of six other men (“sex manna bein váru þar hjá honum”).

Even Bæksted believes in the authenticity of what is told about Ingimundr's use of runes. It must be admitted, however, that the reasons he states for doing so are not particularly well-founded and are, in part, circular to his own hypothesis concerning the chronology of runic usage in Iceland. His main argument is that the detail about runes having been carved in wax is very specific and should for that reason be considered as trustworthy. If merely a folktale motif, the runes

would probably have been carved on a piece of wood, a feature which Bæksted claims would have been part of a more conventional stock of narrative units relating to runic script. The remaining part of the account he disregards by referring to the detail about the runes as constituting the only true part of it (“fortællingens delvise troværdighed” [Bæksted 1942, 30]). His argument that Ingimundr can be seen as a representative of the type of learned Icelandic traveler to Norway who at this particular point in time took an interest in the use of runes depends on Bæksted’s own arguments for a chronology of runic usage in Iceland and need not be elaborated on here.

There is an obvious touch of hagiographic style to the Greenlandic episode of what I have termed the Ingimundar þátr, suggesting that *jarteikn* of a quasi-divine nature are to be associated with Ingimundr, similar to what we have observed in the account of the book-chest recovered at Drangar (see also Cormack 1993, 195, 202). Reading the saga of Guðmundr today in its multiple versions, we should keep in mind the entire text and its probable time of composition, rather than removing its narrative elements from their context and assuming that these integral parts are either historically true or false. Seen as a whole, then, there are elements in the “Vita Ingimundi” — if I may venture to use such a term to indicate a function of what is told about Ingimundr in the saga — which are there to anticipate or foreshadow a claim of sanctity made on Guðmundr’s behalf by the saga. This despite the fact that some readers, e.g., Finnur Jónsson, have regarded the episodes dealing with the brothers of Guðmundr’s father as superfluous additions to the saga as such (“slet ikke vedkommer sagaen som saadan” [Jónsson 1901, 573]). Enhancing Guðmundr Arason’s sanctity is, of course, an important aspect of the saga, the priest’s saga version as well as the bishop’s saga version — an aspect which never earned him canonization, but which undoubtedly contributed to the popular cult of him as a saint for several hundred years after his death in 1237 (see Lárusson 1960).

Against the backdrop of this hagiographic ideology, it strikes me as interesting that the Greenlandic epilogue to Ingimundr’s vita makes a point of the kind of script used in the wax found with Ingimundr’s corpse. The story in itself does not obviously require a statement about what script was used. That is probably also why this particular piece of information has been regarded as recording a historical fact (in addition to those scholars already mentioned, see Musset 1965, 298). Nonetheless, however convinced we may be of the authenticity of the tradition about Ingimundr’s use of runes, we should probably restrict ourselves to treating it as a mid-thirteenth-century view on what kind of script would have been used in a particular situation about half a century earlier. It is, all the same, an interesting piece of evidence about Icelandic literacy towards the end of the twelfth century. Even if considered as purely hagiographic ornament, and whatever the truth might be about Ingimundr and his use of wax and runes in the last decade of the twelfth century, it is a fact that a mid-thirteenth-century narrator did think of runic script

and writing tablets as the most likely way in which information about the tragic events could have been conveyed at the time. It clearly demonstrates that runes were not viewed as an exotic script for the esoteric few. The realities on which such a view rested cannot have changed drastically in merely five or six decades. If, as Bæksted suggests, the use of runes was a novelty and an activity restricted to the learned section of the populace around the turn of the thirteenth century, the story would have made no sense to a mid-thirteenth-century audience.

Here it is pertinent also to draw attention to evidence provided by archaeological excavations in recent years. A substantial number of finds unambiguously connect the use of runes to writing tablets and wax. Tablets, in part with runic inscriptions, from Trondheim, Bergen, and Oslo in Norway, Lödöse in Sweden, and Stóraborg in Iceland dated from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries connect in various ways, directly and indirectly, the use of runes to “wax,” as in the *Ingimundar þátr*, which implies that Scandinavian users of runic script by the twelfth century were well acquainted with the old Roman technique of using tablets filled with wax as materials on which to write. The *Ingimundar þátr* together with the somewhat younger find from Stóraborg of a wax tablet with a rune-inscribed stylus may be taken as evidence that this applied also to Iceland (cf. Tómasson 1982, 103–7). The evidence thus provided by these archaeological finds apparently lends historical support to the narrative detail given in the sagas about Ingimundr Þorgeirsson’s ultimate choice of script. It should be stressed that finds of writing tablets are not in themselves evidence for the use of runic script in Scandinavia and Iceland. But there is ample evidence to show that both scripts were used on writing tablets in the late Middle Ages. Best known are perhaps the tablets from Hopperstad stave church in Sogn, Norway, dated to the late thirteenth century and inscribed with Roman letters (Hødnebø 1960, 110), as is the recent find at Viðey, Iceland, dated to the fifteenth century (Hallgrímsdóttir 1990, 102–29).

Apart from all this, the *Ingimundar þátr* provides an excellent illustration of what Stefán Karlsson has pointed out with regard to *Guðmundar saga*: “that there was continual cross-fertilization between oral and literary tradition in Iceland in the Middle Ages” (Karlsson 1986, 286). A nice example of how this process continued into post-medieval times is furnished by the *Grænlandsannáll* compiled by Björn Jónsson á Skarðsá († 1655), mentioning a “Tosta þátr” which explains how a certain Líka-Loðinn (cf. Magerøy 1993, 30) acquired his nickname:

j þeðum nordur hafs botna ís, hafa flest skip forgeingid alltíð forðum, sem margt seigir af í Tosta þætti, þviat Lijka-Lodin. tók þar af auknefni sitt, ad hann kannadi opt á Sumrum nordur öbygdur, og flutti lijk manna til kirkiu er hann fann í hellum og skütum, þar sem þeir höfðu af ísum edur skipbrotum komid, Enn hiä þeim läu jafnann ristnar Rúner um alla atburdi þeirra ófara og kvalninga. (AM 115 8<sup>o</sup>, fol. 37v12–22, my transcription; cf. Magnusen and Rafn 1838, 656)



[It is in this drift ice of the Northern Ocean that most ships were lost always in old times, about which much is reported in the þáttur of Tosti, since Líka-Loðinn (“Corpse-Loðinn”) got his nickname for often searching the northern barrens in the summers and transporting men’s bodies to the church which he found in caves and crannies, where they had come due to ice floes or shipwrecks, and beside them there always lay inscribed runes relating all the circumstances of their misfortunes and sufferings.]

The phrasing of Björn’s story betrays the provenience of this particular passage. It is also interesting to observe how Björn á Skarðsá restructures the different pieces of the Greenland episodes of the *Guðmundar sögur* into a coherent story, probably much in line with an original oral tradition about Ingimundr’s shipwreck.

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