



Sigurðar Þáttur Slepu

Translated by
Lyonel Perabo, Ann Sheffield,
Denise Vast, & Danielle Cudmore

HarperCollins

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EDITORIAL PREFACE

Apardjón Journal for Scandinavian Studies is pleased to present the first English translation of *Sigurðar þáttr slefu* ‘The Tale of Sigurðr Slobberer’. The tale was translated by a team of scholars, composed of Lyonel Perabo, Ann Sheffield, Denise Vast, and Danielle Cudmore. The editorial board received this translation in response to our call for translations announced after the successful publication of *Grettis rímur*, translated by Lee Colwill in 2021. This translation of *Sigurðar þáttr slefu* has been subjected to a rigorous blind peer-review process and subsequently edited multiple times by members of the editorial board. Editors who have contributed to the present publication are as follows: Hannah Booth, Cassidy Croci, Jennifer Hemphill, Rosemary Kelly, Blake Middleton, Simon Nygaard, Ségdæ Richardson-Read, Solveig Marie Wang, and Jessie Yusek. *Apardjón* would not exist without all these scholars’ commitment to creating an accessible platform for interdisciplinary research on the Viking and medieval North.

We extend thanks to the readers who have supported *Apardjón* since its inception as well as those who have recently been introduced to us through this translation. The third volume of the journal is in its early stages of production and will be published sometime in 2024. As always, we encourage submissions of new translations, editions, and transcriptions of medieval Scandinavian literature, and the call for translations and editions can be found at the end of the present publication. In the meantime, we sincerely hope you enjoy this translation of *Sigurðar þáttr slefu*.

On behalf of the editors,
Cassidy Croci

TRANSLATORS' PREFACE

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single king in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of his retainer's wife¹ — or so it seems in ‘The Tale of Sigurðr Slobberer’² (*Sigurðar þáttr slefu*), a short, self-contained narrative that survives only in the fourteenth-century manuscript GKS 1005 fol., better known as *Flateyjarbók*. To the best of our knowledge, no translation of *Sigurðar þáttr* into English has previously been published, and the tale has received little critical attention. Though versions of the basic narrative appear in several other texts, *Sigurðar þáttr slefu* is unique in the prominence it gives to the main female character, Ólǫf. In contrast to the other accounts, where Ólǫf's main function is to serve as the cause of conflict between men, *Sigurðar þáttr slefu* depicts her as a woman who acts effectively to protect herself and her daughter from royal malice. We believe her story deserves a wider audience, and we offer here a translation of the *þáttr* along with a brief discussion of its context and significance.³

Introduction

Flateyjarbók was produced in Iceland between 1387 and 1394 at the instigation of Jón Hákonarson, a prominent Icelander living at Víðidalstunga in the north of the island.⁴ Unusual for a medieval Icelandic manuscript, the identities of the two main compilers of *Flateyjarbók*, both of them Icelandic priests, are known: Jón Þórðarson worked on the manuscript from 1387 until 1388, when he left the country and Magnús Þórhallsson took over the project until its completion in 1394. Jón Þórðarson was responsible for *Eiríks saga víðförla* (‘The Saga of Eiríkr the Far-Traveler’) as well as the *Flateyjarbók* versions of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (‘The Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason’) and most of *Óláfs saga helga* (‘The Saga of St Óláfr’), into both of which he incorporated new material not found in his presumed exempla. Magnús completed *Óláfs saga helga* and added additional texts to the end of the document. He also added additional quires to the front of the work and placed new material, including *Sigurðar þáttr slefu*, at the beginning of the manuscript. Three additional quires were added to the end of the manuscript in the fifteenth century at the behest of Þorleifur Björnsson, who owned it at the time (Rowe 2005: 405).

¹ With apologies to Jane Austen.

² Sigurðr's nickname *slefa* (‘drooler, slobberer’) is sometimes translated ‘serpent’ on the grounds that it can have this meaning in poetry (Rowe 2005: 313), but we see no reason not to take it literally.

³ The authors would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewer for helpful suggestions and William Sayers for the specific feedback on the skaldic verse.

⁴ The summary of *Flateyjarbók*'s creation in this paper is based on the discussion in Elizabeth Ashman Rowe's *Development of Flateyjarbók* (2005: 11–12).

Sigurðar þáttr slefu amplifies a political episode recorded in multiple texts, which are summarized in Table 1. The incident occurred when the sons of Eiríkr *blóðæx* ('blood-axe') and Queen Gunnhildr, led by the brother named Haraldr *gráfeldr* ('grey-cloak'), ruled Norway. The earliest surviving version in the vernacular appears in *Ágrip af Noregskonunga sögum*, and its brief account serves to introduce the essential features of the story (Bjarni Einarsson 1985: 13):

[D]rap Sigurð maðr sá, er hét Þorkell kleypr, er Sigurðr hafði tekit konu hans nauðga, lagði hann Sigurð gegnum með sverði, ok hefndi hans þegar hirðmaðr hans, sá er hét Erlingr gamli.

The man whose wife Sigurðr had taken by force, and who killed Sigurðr, was named Þorkell *kleypr*;⁵ he ran Sigurðr through with a sword, and his [Sigurðr's] retainer, who was named Erlingr *gamli* ('the old'), avenged him at once.⁶

As shown in Table 1, the name of the wronged husband, his wife, her assailant, and (especially) the rapist's avenger vary among the texts. So too do other details (not shown), such as the location of the killing and the wife's ancestry. In particular, the protagonist is known variously as Þorkell *klyppr*, Þorkell *kleypr*, and simply Klyppr. Common to all versions of the story, however, is the idea that a member of Norway's ruling family has sex with the wife of Þorkell/Klyppr. According to all sources except *Þórðar saga hreðu*, which is silent on the point, she is taken against her will: the texts describe the encounter as *nauðga* ('forcible') and *óvilja* ('unwilling').⁷ Her husband kills the rapist in revenge and is then struck down himself.

In the earliest account, *Ágrip*,⁸ and also in *Historia norwegiae*,⁹ the killing occurs in the context of an armed uprising of the people of Vǫrs against Gunnhildr's sons; the killing of Sigurðr is mentioned almost in passing.¹⁰ In *Fagrskinna*, however, the idea of a political uprising is absent. The same is true of three versions of the tale that resemble each other closely and are preserved in the following texts: Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*; *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* ('The Longest Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason'); and the revised and expanded version of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* included in *Flateyjarbók* as *Óláfs*

⁵ The meaning of *kleypr* (elsewhere *klyppr*) is unclear. Driscoll suggests 'squarely-built' (2008: 91), or possibly the name is related to *klippa/klýpa* 'to clip'.

⁶ All translations of Old Norse-Icelandic in this paper are the author's.

⁷ *nauðga*: *Ágrip* 13, *Fagrskinna* 103; *óvilja*: *Heimskringla* 218, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* 65, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar (Flateyjarbók)* 73. See Table 1 for the editions used.

⁸ See Table 1 for the editions cited in this paper for all versions of Þorkell/Klyppr's story.

⁹ The date of *Historia norwegiae* is highly uncertain (Phelpstead 2008: xvi).

¹⁰ In *Historia norwegiae*, the man Þorkell kills is not Sigurðr but Gunnrøðr, another son of Gunnhildr.

saga Tryggvasonar ('The Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason'). In all three of these accounts, the leader of the attack in *Ágrip*, Vémundr *vǫlubrjótr* ('knuckle-breaker'), remains, but he is now depicted as the captain of a party of Klyppr's supporters rather than a rebel against the ruling dynasty. In these later accounts, the focus has shifted from the political situation to Klyppr's personal vengeance on King Sigurðr. For a man to lie with another man's wife was a deadly insult to the husband, who 'according to the code of honor' was required 'to exact revenge at any cost, regardless of the consequences' (Ljungqvist 2015: 438; see also Meulengracht Sørensen 1983: 45–52). Klyppr does precisely this: in all extant versions of the story, Porkell/Klyppr pays the ultimate price and is slain by one of the king's retainers immediately after killing the king.

The two remaining texts that describe Porkell/Klyppr's killing of Sigurðr, *Sigurðar þáttur slefu* and *Þórðar saga hreðu*, differ significantly from each other and from the other versions of the tale discussed above. *Þórðar saga hreðu* is classified among the *Íslendingasögur* ('sagas of Icelanders') and is considered relatively late (Vésteinn Ólason 2005: 115). Régis Boyer notes that this saga 'completely lacks any historical basis' and relies heavily on earlier works for its characters and motifs (1993: 669). Jenny Jochens mentions the episode in *Þórðar saga* in the context of her discussion of 'the illicit love visit' (1991: 377); Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist, more bluntly, calls it 'probably the most well-known sexual assault in [...] Old Norse literature' (2015: 437). *Þórðar saga* emphasizes the role of its eponymous protagonist, who is identified in the saga as Klyppr's brother. Þórðr goads a strangely passive Klyppr into action by haranguing him at length about the shamefulness of failing to take revenge on Sigurðr. Klyppr is persuaded, and he and Þórðr along with their other brothers attack the king. As in other versions of the story, Klyppr kills King Sigurðr and is then killed himself (here, by Hróaldr Ǫgmundarson), but Þórðr at once takes centre stage again: he dispatches Hróaldr on the spot, kills several more of the king's men, and heroically escapes with the rest of the brothers. On his return home, Þórðr speaks a verse boasting about the escapade. To escape the royal enmity caused by their attack on Norway's ruling dynasty, Þórðr and his kin immigrate to Iceland. Thus, the entire episode is reframed in *Þórðar saga* to showcase Þórðr as a man quick to defend the family honour and formidable in battle; in addition; it provides an explanation for the family's removal to Iceland.

In contrast, *Sigurðar þáttur slefu* mentions neither Þórðr nor any of Klyppr's other kinsmen in describing the attack on the the king; instead, Porkell *klyppr* acts alone. As Elizabeth Ashman Rowe notes, *Sigurðar þáttur slefu* presents Porkell in a far more positive light than do the other versions of the story (2005: 315–16). In addition to attacking alone rather than with the support of a group, he takes his revenge as soon as possible rather than waiting for a convenient moment or needing to be goaded. Rowe suggests that Magnús included this flattering depiction in *Flateyjarbók* because the manuscript's patron, Jón

Hákonarson, was descended from Þorkell (2005: 313). In support of Rowe's argument, it is noteworthy that the *þáttr* is the only version of the story that credits Þorkell with being a *skáld*: before he attacks Sigurðr, Þorkell recites a verse describing his intentions, and the poetic performance adds to the picture of Þorkell as a heroic warrior. The *þáttr* is also unique in stating that Þorkell's weapon of choice is an axe: all of the other accounts state that he uses a sword to kill the king. In addition, *Sigurðar þáttr slefu* is the only version of the story that attributes the slaying of Þorkell to Qgmundr Hqrdar-Kárason; the fact that Qgmundr is Þorkell's paternal uncle gives the killing a tragic dimension. These variant details suggest that Mágnus may have had access to an earlier version of the *þáttr*, either in a now-lost manuscript or else preserved in cultural memory through oral tradition.

Finally, *Sigurðar þáttr slefu* is distinctive in the attention it gives to Þorkell's wife, Ólqf. Though *Sigurðar þáttr slefu* omits the genealogical information about Ólqf provided in some of the other texts, it does provide, uniquely, a brief description of her: she is praised by the saga-author as *væn ok kurteis*, 'beautiful and courteous' (Sigurður Nordal *et al.* 1944: 19). As Peter Hallberg notes, the adjective *kurteis*, in particular, is characteristic of what he calls 'the sphere of chivalry' (1982: 19). Chivalric romance typically focuses on the deeds of kings and queens, noble knights, and fine ladies — the 'beautiful people', as Margaret Clunies Ross puts it (2010: 83). Thus, the saga's description of Ólqf as *kurteis* functions to elevate her status and, by implication, that of her descendant Jón Hákonarson in the same way that Rowe suggests that the *þáttr* does for Þorkell.

Ólqf also plays a far greater part in the action of the narrative than in any other extant version of the tale. Elsewhere, we learn nothing of Ólqf beyond her lineage and the fact that she is the victim of Sigurðr Slobberer's lust; as is often the case in sagas where male desire for a woman causes a clash between men, the narratives lose interest in the woman once the conflict has been instigated. In *Sigurðar þáttr slefu*, however, Ólqf plays a significant role both before and after Þorkell takes his revenge. King Sigurðr's abuse of her (and the insult to her husband) are more dastardly in *Sigurðar þáttr slefu* than in the other versions. In *Heimskringla* and the Óláfr sagas, Sigurðr lies with Ólqf for one night at Þorkell's farm while Þorkell happens to be away. In *Sigurðar þáttr slefu*, however, the king deliberately sends Þorkell out of the country on what he hopes will be a fatal errand, has Ólqf abducted and brought to him, and forces her to be his bed-partner for the entire winter. When she first confronts him, Ólqf bravely tells the king that he is behaving dishonourably and that disaster will follow, but Sigurðr dismisses her forebodings. The saga-author implies his support for Ólqf's words by reporting that the king's behavior seemed wrong *öllum mönnum*, 'to all people' (Sigurður Nordal *et al.* 1944: 20) and that people said he would end up paying for it.

Once Þorkell is killed, the *þáttr* again turns its attention to Ólqf: she and her daughter Guðrún are now the targets of the vengeful malice of Queen Gunnhildr, Sigurðr's

mother. Ólǫf arranges passage to Iceland, where Guðrún makes a good marriage. The couple has a son, who was named Þorkell *klyppr* after his grandfather and *var hinn efniligsti maðr ok kemr víða við sögur* (‘was the most promising man and appears in many sagas’); Sigurður Nordal *et al.* 1944: 21–22). Like the heroism of his namesake noted by Rowe (2005: 315–16), this praise of the younger Þorkell reflects well on his descendant Jón Hákonarson, the sponsor of *Flateyjarbók*. As mentioned above, so too does the *Þátttr*’s depiction of Ólǫf, who is also Jón’s ancestor. After some time in Iceland, Ólǫf returns to her kin in Norway, where she is considered *hinn mesti kvenskörungur*, ‘a most outstanding woman’ (Sigurður Nordal *et al.* 1944: 22).

Ólǫf’s escape to Iceland echoes the stories of Iceland’s first settlers, who were remembered with admiration and even reverence.¹¹ Like King Haraldr *hárfagri* (‘fine-hair’) before her, Queen Gunnhildr represents Norwegian royal tyranny (cf. Byock 2004: 310–311). In fleeing Gunnhildr’s *ánauð* (‘oppression’; Sigurður Nordal *et al.* 1944: 21), Ólǫf follows the example of the early settlers of Iceland who emigrated to escape from Haraldr’s despotism. In particular, Ólǫf’s story brings to mind that of Auðr *djúpúðga* (‘the deep-minded’),¹² who orchestrates the removal of her family to Iceland after her son, who ruled a large territory in the north of Britain, is killed and their home becomes unsafe for them. Auðr was remembered with particular veneration by later generations of Icelanders: for example, she is considered one of the four main regional settlers in Ari Þorgilsson’s *Íslendingabók* (Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 6). *Landnámabók* calls her a *vegskona mikill* (‘very distinguished woman’) and lists her among the nine *gøfgastir* (‘noblest’) settlers of Iceland’s West Quarter (Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 146, 209). *Laxdæla saga* describes her accomplishments in detail and concludes that (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934: 13): *þótti mönnum mikils um vert, hversu Unnr hafði haldit virðingu sinni til dauðadags* (‘it seemed very praiseworthy to people, how Unnr [=Auðr] had maintained her stature to her dying day’). Like these accounts of Auðr’s life, *Sigurðar þátttr slefu* gives prominence to an outstanding woman, Ólǫf, who acts with honour and resolution and saves her family from danger by travelling to Iceland.

Translation and Text

In preparing our translation, we worked primarily with the normalized text of *Þátttr frá Sigurði konungi slefu* in the edition of *Flateyjarbók* by Sigurður Nordal *et al.* (1944: 19–22). We checked their text against the diplomatic edition by Guðbrandur Vigfússon and C.R.

¹¹ Rowe also comments on the *Þátttr*’s debt to stories of Iceland’s settlement, but she emphasizes the light this casts on Jón Hákonarson rather than considering the implications for the characterisation of Ólǫf, to whom Rowe gives scant attention (2005: 316).

¹² Auðr’s name also appears in the variant form Unnr, notably in *Laxdæla saga* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934: 3, 5, 7–13). Her nickname appears variously as *djúpúðga* (‘deep-minded’) and *djúpauðga* (‘deeply wealthy’). For discussion of the texts in which Auðr/Unnr makes a major appearance, see Vanherpen (2013).

Unger (1860: 19–21). In the few instances where we encountered non-trivial discrepancies between the two editions, we also examined the online digitised images of GKS 1005 fol. at handrit.is (National and University Library of Iceland 2009–2021). Below, our English translation follows the Old Norse-Icelandic text on which the translation is based. Significant differences from the edition of Sigurður Nordal *et al.* are described in the notes. Our aim has been to translate the *þáttr* as literally as possible without sacrificing intelligibility; consequently, we have preserved the occasional shifts in verb tense that occur in the original. Where literal translation would be unreasonably obscure or awkward, we have translated more idiomatically but provide the literal meaning in the notes. Words in [square brackets] are not present in the original but have been added for clarity.

The skaldic verse spoken by Þorkell in the *þáttr* merits special comment. We took as our starting point the Old Norse-Icelandic text of Þorkell's *lausvísa* published by R.D. Fulk (2012: 269–70). Though the individual words are identical to those in Fulk's text, we parsed the clauses somewhat differently. Our revised reading of the stanza is as follows:

*Hygg eigi beð byggva,
bjórranns, hjá þér, Nanna,
(ek em af angri) miklu
(ófrýnn) né svá dýnu.
Ok (dauðs vallar dáðar)
dreck eigi (mér þekkja)
áðr í bragnings blóði
bengjóði nef rjóðum.*

Rearranged into a more conventional word order, the text reads:

Hygg eigi byggva beð hjá þér, Nanna bjórranns, né svá miklu dýnu. Ek em ófrýnn af angri. Ok eigi dreck áðr rjóðum nef bengjóði í blóði bragnings. Dáðar vallar dauðs þekkja mér.

[I] don't intend to inhabit a bed next to you, Nanna <goddess> of the beer-mansion [>WOMAN], nor such a big feather-bed. I am frowning from (great) anguish. And [I] won't drink before [we] redden the neb of the wound-osprey [>RAVEN] in the blood of the prince. Deeds of the field of death [>BATTLEFIELD, >KILLINGS] are agreeable to me.

As Fulk notes, the overall meaning of the stanza is clear: 'Þorkell desires no pleasures before he has taken vengeance' (2012: 269). The precise meaning of the text is murkier, however. We interpret the first *helmingr* (half-stanza) as including an allusion to Ólǫf's unfaithfulness: Þorkell imagines the bed as large because he pictures not just himself and

Ólǫf in it, but also King Sigurðr. We suggest that *miklu* ('great, large') exhibits polysemy here and can be read as modifying both *dýnu* ('feather-bed') and *angri* ('anguish'). Fulk notes that nobody has yet offered an entirely satisfactory reading of the first half of the second *helmingr*, but 'the impeccable poetic form discourages emendation' (2012: 270). We follow Fulk in emending *dáða* to the rare but extant plural *dáðar* and in assigning a sense of 'are agreeable to me' to *þekkja mér*, despite the absence of the expected middle-voice ending for *þekkja*. We considered emending to *mér þekkir* to give an impersonal construction which would make grammatical sense, but as this is otherwise unattested, we decided against it.

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Sigurdar
þáttur slefu

Þáttur frá Sigurði konungi slefu, syni Gunnhildar

Þat er sagt, þá er Gunnhildarsynir réðu Noregi, sat Sigurðr konungr slefa á Hörðalandi. Hann var fjáreyðslumaðr mikill. Hann var liðmannligr maðr at sjá, marglyndr ok kvensamr ok heldr óhlutvandr um þat efni. Þorkell klyppr hét maðr, hersir ríkr á Hörðalandi. Hann var son Þórðar Hörða-Kárasonar. Hann var garmenni mikit ok hinn mesti ágætismaðr. Ólöf hét kona hans, væn ok kurteis. Þat er sagt, einn tíma, at Sigurðr konungr slefa sendi honum orð, at hann kæmi á sinn fund, ok hann gerði svá. Síðan mælti konungr: 'Svá er með vexti, at ferð liggr fyrir höndum vestr til Englands, er ek vil senda þik á fund Aðalráðs konungs ok heimta skatt at honum, ok eru slíkir menn bezt til fallnir ríkra manna erendi at bera.' Þorkell svarar: "Hafi þér eigi áðr sent yðra menn slíkra erenda, ok hafa þeir eigi tvívegis farit?" 'Satt er þat', segir konungr, 'en ekki hygg ek líka framkvæmd þína ok þeirra, er lítit kemr til'. Þorkell svarar: 'Þat mun yðr skylt þykkja, at ek fara, ok mun ek eigi undan teljast, þó hinir færi stophallt, er fyrr kómu á þá leið'.

Síðan fór Þorkell ok kom¹ vestr til Englands með góðu föruneyti ok kom á fund Aðalráðs konungs ok kvaddi hann. Konungr tók vel máli hans ok frétti, hvern sá maðr var, er fyrir þeim var. Þorkell sagði til sín. Konungr mælti: 'Spurt hefi ek til þess, at þú hefir þér aflat góðs orðróms, ok ver velkominn hér með oss'. Síðan var Þorkell með konungi um vetrinn. Ok eitthvert sinn mælti hann til konungs: 'Svá er háttat, herra, um ferð mína, at Sigurðr konungr slefa sendir mik eftir sköttum til yðar, ok vænti ek af yðr góðra órlausna'. Konungr mælti: 'Komit hafa menn til vár fyrr eftir slíkum erendum, ok virðist mér ákall þetta Sigurðar konungs meir kenna ranglætis en réttvísi, því at ek veit eigi vánir í, at mik reki nokkura skyldu til honum fé at gjalda. Var þeim ok hörðu goldit, er með slíkum erendum fóru fyrr. Er ok auðsætt, at konungr var samr um yðra ferð, hversu sem tækist. En þó mun mér sýnast at gera til þín, Þorkell, jafnt sem áðr ok hafa af þér þökk ok vináttu ok greiða þér fé nokkurt. En vinfengi sona Gunnhildar vil ek ekki kaupa'. Um várit bjó Þorkell ferð sína vestan um haf með mikit fé, ok skildu þeir konungr með hinni mestu blíðu ok bundu sitt vinfengi áðr með fastmælum.

En er Þorkell var farinn ór Noregi, þá sendi Sigurðr konungr slefa sína menn til búa Þorkels ok lét flytja þaðan í burt Ólöfu, konu hans, ok heim til sín ok lagði hana í rekkju hjá sér. Hon mælti þá: 'Herra', sagði hon, "rangt geri þér ok ómakliga við þann mann, er yðr vel trúir, ok mun hér nokkut mikit illt eftir koma. En þér munuð nú ráða verða, þó svá sé verr'. Konungr mælti: 'Bú nú við slíkt fyrst sem þér er boðit um, kenn mér engan sann'. Síðan lá Ólöf hjá konungi hverja nátt. Öllum mönnum þótti þessi tiltekja konungs bæði ill ok óráðlig ok sögðu hann sjálfan gjalda mundu. En um várit, er fréttist heimkváma Þorkels, þá sendi konungr Ólöfu heim. En er Þorkell klyppr frétti þetta allt saman, þá brá honum

¹ Sigurður Nordal *et al.* omit *ok kom* ('and came'; 1944: 19). The phrase is present both in the diplomatic edition (Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Unger 1860: 19) and the digitized image of *Flateyjarbók* (National and University Library of Iceland 2009–2021: 3v), so we believe that the omission was an error and have restored the phrase here.

mjök við ok fór þó heim á sinn búgarð ok var allfámálugr ok heldr stirðr. En er hann kom heim, var Ólöf þar fyrir ok gekk þegar á móti Þorkeli með fagnaði ok mælti: ‘Velkominn, Þorkell bóndi, ok gakk til herbergis ok hvíl þik, ok muntu frétt hafa mínar tiltekjur, þó ei sé góðar. Vil ek gjarna allt þat bæta, er ek hefi með þik brotit, ok síðan með sætt ok samhuga hjá þér hvíla’. Þá svarar Þorkell ok kvað vísu:

Hygg eigi beð byggva,
bjórranns, hjá þér, Nanna,
(ek em af angri) miklu
(ófrýnn) né svá dýnu.
Ok (dauðs vallar dáðar)
drekki eigi (mér þekkja)
áðr í bragnings blóði
bengjóði nef rjóðum.²

Hon svarar þá: ‘Bæði er nú, at mikit er af gört, enda ætlast þú nú mikit fyrir, ok er þat illa, at svá mikit illt skal af mér hljóttast’. Síðan var þings kvatt, ok kom þar Sigurðr konungr ok mikit fjölmenni.

Sá maðr hét Ögmundr ok var Hörða-Kárason, er í för var með konunginum. Hann stóð hjá honum ok hafði mikit spjót í hendi. Síðan gekk Þorkell að stólinum ok mælti: ‘Herra, nú er at sjá fjárhlut þann, er ek hefi flutt af Englandi, ok lítið nú á, konungr, hversu þetta er af höndum greitt’. Konungr leit á ok sá marga góða gripi ok mælti: ‘Hví mun þetta eigi sköruliga leyst ok vel greitt?’ Þorkell svarar: ‘Leyst er þá sumt vandkvæði.’ Hann var svá búinn, at hann hafði möttul yfir sér með tyglum, búinn mjök í skart. Síðan brá hann öxi undan skikkjunni ok hjó til konungs ok veitti honum bana. En er Þorkell sneri frá verkinu, þá hleypr Ögmundr Kárason at honum ok lagði í gegnum hann spjóti því, er hann hélt á. En frændr Þorkels kunnu því svá illa, at þeir gerðu til Ögmundar ok brenndu hann inni, því at þeim þótti mikill málefnamunr vera með þeim konungi ok Þorkeli.

En er Gunnhildr vissi andlát sonar síns, þá þóttist hon stórum illt hafa hlotit af Ólöfu ok ætlaði at gera til hennar ok gera til hennar³ ósæmiliga. Hon varð þess vör ok fréttir, at Íslandsfar var búit, ok kom á fund þess manns, er átti. Sá hét Böðvarr ok var Þorsteinsson, bróður Halls á Síðu. Hon tekr svá til orða: ‘Ek hefi’, sagði hon, ‘í vandræði hitt, ok vil ek biðja þik, at þú flytir mik til þíns lands undan ánauð Gunnhildar’. Hann svarar: ‘Ek ætla, at þér beri ærin nauðsyn til, ok skal svá vera, en þykkja ok at skyldra, at þú gerir eftir mínum mun’. Hon kvað svá vera skyldu. Síðan fór hon til skips ok Guðrún, dóttir hennar. Eftir þat fór hon, ok koma þau til Íslands ok koma austr í Álftafjörð. Þar átti Böðvarr bú mjök

² The text of Þorkell’s verse is based on that edited by R.D. Fulk (2012: 269); see discussion above.

³ The diplomatic edition omits *ok gera til hennar* (‘and acted against her’) but states in a footnote that the phrase is present in the manuscript (Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Unger 1860: 21). The digitized image confirms its presence (National and University Library of Iceland 2009–2021: 3v), and we, like Sigurður Nordal *et al.* (1944: 21), have retained the redundant phrase.

virðuligt. En er þau kómu heim, er þess getit, at Böðvarr mælti: 'Nú mun ek til þeirra mála taka, er ek skilda í Noregi, ok mæli ek til ráðahags við þik'. Hon svarar: 'Veit ek þat, at þat mun mælt, at ek taka minna gjaforð nú en fyrr, en makligr ertu til at njóta þessa ráðs'. Ok síðan fór þat ráð fram, ok fékk Böðvarr Ólöfar, en samför þeirra var eigi löng, ok andaðist hann á þeim misserum. Síðan frétti Einarr Eyjólfsson norðan frá Þverá, at sá ráðakostr var virðuligr at eiga Guðrúnu Klyppsdóttur, ok fékk hann hennar ok átti við henni mörg börn. Þorkell klyppr hét son þeirra Einars ok Guðrúnar, ok var hann heitinn eftir móðurfeðr sínum ok var hinn efniligsti maðr ok kemr víða við sögur. Nokkurum vetrum síðar fór Ólöf utan til Noregs til frænda sinna ok þótti hinn mesti kvenskörungr.

A Tale About King Sigurðr Slobberer, Gunnhildr's Son

It is said that when the sons of Gunnhildr ruled Norway, King Sigurðr *slefa* resided in Hǫrðaland. He was a lavish spender.¹ He was perceived to be a capable man, fickle and a lover of women and quite dishonest about it. A man was called Þorkell *klyppr*, a powerful chieftain in Hǫrðaland. He was the son of Þórðr, the son of Hǫrða-Kári. He was a very bold man and a most renowned person. His wife, beautiful and courteous, was called Ólof.

It is said that once, King Sigurðr *slefa* sent word to him [Þorkell] that he should come to an audience with him [Sigurðr *slefa*], and he did so. Then the king spoke: 'The situation is this: that travel is at hand west to England, and I want to send you to meet King Aðalráðr² to get tribute from him, and such men [as you] are best suited to carry out the errands of powerful men.'

Þorkell answers, 'Have you not sent your men on such errands before, and have they not travelled there and back again?'

'That is true,' says the king, 'but I do not think that your success will be like theirs, of which little came.'

Þorkell answers, 'It must seem urgent to you that I go, and I will not refuse, even if those who first undertook that journey met with mischance.'

Then Þorkell set out and travelled west to England with a fine crew and went to meet King Aðalráðr and greeted him. The king received his address well and asked who that man in front of them was. Þorkell gave his name. The king said, 'I have heard that you have earned a good reputation; be welcome here with us.'

Þorkell was then with the king for the winter. And one time, he said to the king, 'It is the nature, Lord, of my journey, that King Sigurðr *slefa* sends me to you after tribute, and I expect a good outcome from you.'

The king said, 'Men have come to us before on such errands, and I think I recognise more unrighteousness than justice in this claim of King Sigurðr's, because I see no likelihood that I have any obligation to pay him money.³ And those who ventured on such errands before were harshly paid. It is also clear that the king will be just as satisfied with your journey, however it turns out. But I will think it fitting, Þorkell, to treat you the same as before and have thanks and friendship from you, and pay some money to you. But I do not want to buy the friendship of Gunnhildr's sons.' In the spring, Þorkell prepared for his journey from the west over the sea with a lot of money, and he and the king parted with the greatest good will and bound their friendship beforehand with pledges.

¹ Literally: 'great expender of wealth'.

² King Aðalráðr is better known in English as Æðelred Unræd ('the unadvised', or more popularly 'the unready'). He was remembered as a singularly ineffective king of England during the Viking Age.

³ Literally: 'I know no expectations that might compel me into some obligation to him to pay out money.'

But when Þorkell had travelled out of Norway, then King Sigurðr *slefa* sent his men to Þorkell's farm and had Ólof, his wife, abducted from there and to his home and laid her in bed beside him. Then she spoke: 'Lord,' she said, 'it would be wrong for you, and unworthy, to act against that man who trusts you well, and some great evil will come [of this] hereafter. But you will now have your way, though it may be the worse.'

The king said, 'Now do as you've been told; don't tell me what's fitting.' After this, Ólof lay with the king every night. This undertaking of the king's seemed both bad and ill-advised to everyone and [they] said that he himself would pay.

And in the spring, when there was word of Þorkell's homecoming, then the king sent Ólof home. But when Þorkell *klyppr* heard about all this, then he reacted strongly against it but still went home to his farmstead and was very taciturn and rather stern. And when he arrived home, Ólof was already there and at once went to meet Þorkell with joy and said, 'Be welcome, husband Þorkell, and go to [our] room and rest yourself, but you will have heard about my circumstances, though they may not be good. I earnestly want to amend all my transgressions against you,⁴ and afterwards to lie with you in agreement and harmony.'

Then Þorkell answers and spoke a verse:

[I] don't intend to inhabit a bed next to you, Nanna <goddess> of the beer-mansion [$>$ WOMAN], nor such a big feather-bed. I am frowning from (great) anguish. And [I] won't drink before [we] redden the neb of the wound-osprey [$>$ RAVEN] in the blood of the prince. Deeds of the field of death [$>$ BATTLEFIELD, $>$ KILLINGS] are agreeable to me.

She answers then, 'Now both are [the case]: that much is done, and that you now intend a substantial response. And it is ill that so much harm will proceed from me.'

Then an assembly was called, and King Sigurðr came there and a great crowd. A man who was in the king's company was called Qgmundr Hqrða-Kári's son.⁵ He stood by him and had a large spear in hand. Then Þorkell went before the throne and spoke: 'Lord, now the amount of money that I have conveyed from England can be seen, and consider now, king, how this is to be paid out.'

The king looked and saw many fine treasures and spoke: 'Why should this not be expeditiously paid out and well settled?'

Þorkell answers, "'Paid out" is some trouble, then.' He was so attired that he had a mantle over him with straps adorned with much finery. Then he drew an axe from under the cloak and hewed at the king and gave him his death-blow. When Þorkell turned from the deed, then Qgmundr Kárason leaps at him and ran him through with the spear that he was holding. But Þorkell's relatives took this so badly that they moved against Qgmundr

⁴ Literally: 'atone for all that I have broken with you'.

⁵ Qgmundr is Þorkell's uncle on his father's side.

and burned him in his house,⁶ because to them it seemed a serious matter between the king and Þorkell.

But when Gunnhildr learned of the death of her son, then she thought to herself that great evil had resulted from Ólǫf and intended to act against her⁷ and to behave disgracefully toward her. She became aware of this and got word that a vessel to Iceland was ready and went to a meeting with the man who owned it. That man was called Bǫðvarr and was the son of Þorsteinn, the brother of Hallr of Síða. She begins to speak thus: ‘I have,’ she said, ‘encountered a difficulty, and I want to ask you to convey me to your country, out from under Gunnhildr’s oppression.’

He answers, ‘I believe sufficient need brings you to this, and it shall be so, but I also think it due that you act according to my desire.’ She said that it would be so. Afterwards she went to the ship, and her daughter Guðrún with her. After that, she set out, and they come to Iceland and arrive in the east at Álftafjörðr.

Bǫðvarr had a very impressive farm there. But when they came home, then it is said that Bǫðvarr said, ‘Now I will bring up what I stipulated in Norway, and I claim marriage with you.’

She answers, ‘I know that it will be said that I now accept a lesser match than before, but you are deserving of benefit from this agreement.’ And then the arrangement went forward, and Bǫðvarr took Ólǫf to wife, but their life together was not long, and he died in a year. Afterwards, Einarr Eyjólfsson from Þverá in the north heard that to marry Klyppr’s daughter Guðrún would be a worthy match, and he took her to wife and had many children with her. Guðrún and Einarr’s son was called Þorkell *klyppr*, and he was named after his maternal grandfather and was a most promising man and appears in many sagas.⁸ A few years afterwards, Ólǫf travelled abroad to Norway to her kinsmen and was thought a most outstanding woman.

⁶ Literally: ‘burned him inside’.

⁷ The verb *gera*, translated ‘to act’ here, has a wide range of meanings, but it is interesting to note that a noun derived from it, *gerning*, refers specifically to magical action (Meylan 2014: 32–33). Queen Gunnhildr was a famous (or notorious) magic practitioner (cf. Perabo 2020 and references therein), and it is tempting to interpret the use of *gera* here as suggesting that Gunnhildr plans to use magic against Ólǫf.

⁸ Literally: ‘comes widely into sagas’.

TABLE 1.
COMPARISON OF NARRATIVES INVOLVING
ÞORKELL/KLYPPER



<i>Text</i>	<i>Date of composition</i>	<i>Edition used / page range</i>	<i>Protagonist</i>	<i>His wife</i>	<i>Antagonist</i>	<i>Antagonist avenged by</i>
<i>Historia norwegiae</i>	c. 1150-c. 1300 (Phelpstead 2008: xvi)	Kunin 2008: 16-17	Þorkell <i>klyppr</i>	not named	Gunnrøðr	Erling the Old
<i>Ágrip</i>	c. 1190 (Driscoll 2008: xii-xiii)	Bjarni Einarsson 1985: 13	Þorkell <i>kleypr</i>	not named	Sigurðr <i>slefa</i>	Erlingr <i>gamli</i>
<i>Fagrskinna</i>	early 13th c. (Bjarni Einarsson 1993: 177)	Bjarni Einarsson 1985: 102-103	Klyppr	not named	Sigurðr <i>slefa</i>	Sigurðr <i>enn gamli</i>
<i>Haralds saga gráfeldar (Heimskringla)</i>	1220-1230 (Finlay and Faulkes 2017: ix)	Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 2002: 218-19	Klyppr	Álof	Sigurðr <i>slefa</i>	Erlingr <i>gamli</i>
<i>Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta</i>	early 14th c. (Ólafur Halldórsson 1993: 449)	Ólafur Halldórsson 1958: 64-65	Klyppr	Ólof	Sigurðr <i>slefa</i>	not named
<i>Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar (Flateyjarbók)</i>	1387-1394 (Rowe 2005: 11-12)	Sigurður Nordal <i>et al.</i> 1944: 73	Klyppr	Ólof	Sigurðr <i>slefa</i>	not named
<i>Sigurðar þáttur slefu</i>	1388-1394 (Rowe 2005: 11-12)	Sigurður Nordal <i>et al.</i> 1944: 19-22; Guðbrandur Vigfússon and C.R. Unger 1860: 19-21	Þorkell <i>klyppr</i>	Ólof	Sigurðr <i>slefa</i>	Þgmundr Hǫrða-Kárason
<i>Þórðar saga hreðu</i>	c. 1300-c.1450 (Vésteinn Ólason 2005: 115)	Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959: 165-67	Klyppr	Ólof	Sigurðr <i>slefa</i>	Þgmundr Hǫrða-Kárason's son Hróaldr

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● 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single king in possession of a
● good fortune, must be in want of his retainer's wife'—or so it seems in 'The
● Tale of Sigurðr Slobber' (*Sigurðar þáttur slefu*), a story of lust, rape, and
● revenge in medieval Scandinavia. Preserved in the sprawling fourteenth-
● century manuscript known as *Flateyjarbók*, the tale tells how King Sigurðr
● sends his retainer Þorkell klyppr out of the country on an errand Sigurðr
● hopes will prove his death. During Þorkell's absence, the king abducts and
● rapes Ólof, Þorkell's wife. Unluckily for Sigurðr, Þorkell survives and
● returns home to wreak bloody vengeance on the dastardly king at the cost of
● his own life. Though various versions of the story are recorded in other
● manuscripts, *Sigurðar þáttur slefu* is unique in the attention it devotes to its
● resourceful and principled heroine, Ólof, who bravely upbraids her rapist
● and later contrives to escape the clutches of the king's vengeful mother,
● Queen Gunnhildr.