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THE LEGENDARY LEGACY

Transmission and reception of the
Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda

Edited by

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Starkaður across the centuries: Strategies of rewriting and manuscript variation in *Starkaðar saga gamla*

MASSIMILIANO BAMPI

Reception of the *Gesta Danorum* and *Gautreks saga* and the making of *Starkaðar saga*

The story of the legendary hero Starkaður survives in a number of medieval accounts; indeed, references to him and his deeds are spread throughout the whole corpus of Nordic literature in the Middle Ages, from *Snorra Edda* and the sagas to Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*. The fullest accounts of Starkaður are given by the *Gesta Danorum* (Books 6–8) and the longer redaction of *Gautreks saga*.¹ These two works differ first and foremost in the way they cover the story of the hero: whereas the *Gesta Danorum* chronicles the whole life of Starkaður, *Gautreks saga* focuses primarily on his youth. A comparison between these and other sources related to Starkaður reveals some significant discrepancies as to major aspects of the hero's life, as has been demonstrated in previous scholarship.² Such differences pertain, for example, to the origins of the hero, his relationship with Óðinn and Þór, and the number of murders he commits in his long life.³

- 1 The shorter (and probably older) redaction of *Gautreks saga* does not contain any reference to Starkaður and his life. Both redactions are available in the edition by Wilhelm Ranisch, *Die Gautrekssaga in zwei Fassungen* (Berlin, 1901).
- 2 On Starkaður in Old Norse literature see especially Marlene Ciklamini, 'The problem of Starkaðr', *Scandinavian studies* 43 (1971), pp. 169–88. On Starcatherus in Saxo's work see Axel Olrik, *Danmarks heltedigtning: En oldtidsstudie I–II* (København, 1903–1910), II (*Starkad den gamle og den yngre Skjoldungerække*), and Russell Poole, 'Some southern perspectives on Starcatherus', *Viking and medieval Scandinavia* 2 (2006), pp. 141–66.
- 3 On this see especially Marlene Ciklamini's article mentioned above.

The multifaceted story of Starkaður found in the medieval accounts continued to be reshaped and adapted after the end of the Middle Ages. In fact, manuscript evidence suggests that the life of the legendary hero and his memorable deeds became even more popular in post-medieval times. This was made possible thanks to a remarkable textual investment in the form of manuscript copies of older works (mainly *Gautreks saga*), translations (i. e. of *Gesta Danorum*) and new works based on previous accounts (*Starkaðar saga gamla*). Given the limited space available here, the aim of the present article is to make some observations on how the story of Starkaður, and especially the account in *Gautreks saga*, has been remoulded in *Starkaðar saga gamla*.⁴

In order to investigate *Starkaðar saga*'s main characteristics, some background information is required, so that the text can be approached as a reworking of earlier narratives. Indeed, this eighteenth-century work is based primarily on *Gautreks saga* and on the account of Starkaður's life in the *Gesta Danorum*. Before moving on to the analysis, we therefore need to sketch the main stages of the reception of both hypotexts⁵ in post-medieval times in Iceland.

The first printed editions of the *Gesta Danorum* appeared in Denmark in the early sixteenth century. As Rosemary Power points out, 'the version that probably reached Iceland first was the shortened and frequently paraphrased rendering into Danish by Anders Sørensen Vedel.⁶ This was printed in Copenhagen in 1575, and must have reached Iceland shortly afterwards, as there are sixteenth-century references based on Vedel's

4 This article is the first step in a wider project, the aim of which is to discuss in book-length form the reception of narrative material related to Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* in post-medieval Icelandic manuscripts. Given the wealth of manuscripts that need to be examined, the present analysis merely touches upon some of the questions that can only be discussed in detail as part of a more thorough investigation of the material.

5 Gérard Genette coined the term *hypotext* to refer to an earlier text that is used as a starting point for the creation of a new text, called *hypertext*. See Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the second degree* (Lincoln, 1997), p. 5.

6 Anders Sørensen Vedel (1542–1616) was one of the key personalities of the Danish cultural scene of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In addition to translating the *Gesta Danorum*, he compiled an anthology of Danish *folkeviser* (*It Hundrede vduualde Danske Viser*, better known as *Hundredvisebogen*), published in 1591 in Ribe, which marked a turning point in the history of dissemination of ballads in Denmark.

translation in the *Oddaverja annáll*.⁷ Vedel's abridged translation omitted the numerous verse sections that appear in Saxo.

In 1752, a new translation of the *Gesta Danorum* into Danish, made by Sejer Schousbølle, was printed in Copenhagen. Unlike Vedel's, this translation included the sections in verse.

In Iceland, the first nine books of Saxo's monumental work were translated and rewritten by Gísli Konráðsson (1787–1877) in the mid-nineteenth century. Before Gísli's work, Icelandic translations of the *Gesta Danorum* were quite short and focused on a very limited number of major heroes. We know from the preface that Gísli used Schousbølle's translation as a basis, adding various references to Icelandic versions of events recounted by Saxo. Quite interestingly, Gísli's account of Starkaður is based not on Saxo, as one might expect, but on *Starkaðar saga gamla*, which, as was mentioned, is itself an amalgamated version of earlier accounts.

If we now turn to the transmission of *Gautreks saga* in the post-medieval period, even a cursory look at the number of manuscripts copied after the Middle Ages reveals how popular the saga was. In fact, we do not have, strictly speaking, any medieval manuscript of the longer redaction of the saga, as the oldest extant witness, the first part of AM 152 fol., has been dated to the first quarter of the sixteenth century.⁸ This means that, although we know from other sources (e.g. from Saxo) that the narrative material making up the saga was already in circulation in the Middle Ages, *Gautreks saga* as we now have it is a post-medieval product. Furthermore, the fact that the saga continued to be copied throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, mainly within large saga compilations, provides further evidence of the growing interest in the story of Starkaður after the Middle Ages and contributes to explaining the genesis of *Starkaðar saga gamla*.

7 Rosemary Power, 'Saxo in Iceland', *Gripla* 6 (1984), pp. 241–58, at p. 242.

8 Stefán Karlsson, 'Ritun Reykjarfjarðarbókar: Excursus; Bókagerð bænda,' *Opuscula* 4 (1970), pp. 120–40, especially p. 138. In her recent article on AM 152 fol. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir states that the manuscript 'was most likely made in Northwest Iceland in the first decades of the sixteenth century by a pair of half-brothers belonging to the rich and powerful Skarðverjar dynasty' (Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Ideology and identity in late medieval northwest Iceland: A study of AM 152 fol.', *Gripla* XXV (2014), pp. 87–128, at p. 87).

The Icelandic *Starkaðar saga gamla* is generally held to have been written sometime before 1760, as the text seems to have been known to the author of *Brávalla rímur*, which were composed around this time.⁹ The author of *Starkaðar saga* was in all likelihood Snorri Björnsson (1710–1803), who lived at Húsafell in the west of Iceland.¹⁰ The verses contained in the saga have been attributed to Gunnar Pálsson (1714–1791), a distinguished poet of his time who composed poetry in Latin as well as Icelandic.¹¹ Thus it has been argued that he probably worked with a Latin edition of *Gesta Danorum*.¹²

As was mentioned above, *Starkaðar saga* amalgamates different medieval accounts of the story of Starkaður into a complete saga. This work, which has been handed down to us in some thirty manuscripts, is found in more than one version. An expanded version, printed in 1911 and attested in at least two manuscripts, Lbs 1492 4to and Lbs 3891 4to, contains additional material, taken mostly, but not exclusively, from *Gautreks saga*.¹³ In addition to this expanded version, a third saga has been written about Starkaður's grandfather, Starkaður Áludrengur, mentioned in both *Gautreks saga* (Ch. 3) and the U redaction of *Hervarar saga*. The oldest of the three manuscripts that contain this saga is Lbs 1504 4to, written by Magnús Jónsson í Tjaldanesi (1835–1922). According to the preface to

9 Björn K. Þórólfsson, ed., *Brávallarímur eftir Árna Böðvarsson*, Rit Rímnafélagsins 8 (Reykjavík, 1965), p. ccii. See also Power, 'Saxo in Iceland', p. 247.

10 Sr. Snorri Björnsson (1710–1803) has secured his place in the history of Icelandic literature mainly for being the author of the oldest extant play written in Icelandic, entitled *Sperðill*, which is thought to have been written sometime between 1760 and 1780. He was also a renowned author of *rímur*. On Snorri, see Þórunn Valdimarsdóttir, *Snorri á Húsafelli: Saga frá 18. öld* (Reykjavík, 1989). Another candidate for the author of *Starkaðar saga* is Halldór Jakobsson (1735–1810), who was *sýslumaður* (sheriff) of Strandasýsla in the northwest of Iceland and whose name is found in several manuscripts of the saga as well as in Gísli Konráðsson's translation of the *Gesta Danorum*. On the reasons why it is not likely that Halldór was the author of the saga see Power, 'Saxo in Iceland', p. 248.

11 Björn K. Þórólfsson points out that in the manuscript JS 273 a 4to Gísli Konráðsson names Gunnar Pálsson as the author of the verse in *Starkaðar saga*. See Björn K. Þórólfsson, *Brávallarímur*, p. cciii.

12 Power, 'Saxo in Iceland', p. 248.

13 Power, 'Saxo in Iceland', p. 247.

this manuscript, Magnús had copied the saga from a manuscript by Gísli Konráðsson that he had borrowed many years before:¹⁴

Saga af Starkaði Áludreng er skrifut eptir handriti Gísla Konráðssonar, er nafni hans Gísli Hjaltason léði mér fyrir mörgum árum, ecki man ek eptir at ek hafi sét aðra sögu af Starkaði en þessa, ok þat ætla ek at hón muni vera samsett á seinni árum.

(The Saga of Starkaður Áludrengur is copied from a manuscript of Gísli Konráðsson's that his namesake Gísli Hjaltason lent me many years ago. I do not remember having seen any other saga of Starkaður than this, and I believe it to have been compiled in recent years.)¹⁵

Structure and contents

Let us now turn back to *Starkaðar saga* in order to have a closer look at its structure and contents. The first chapter in the longer redaction – the one printed in Winnipeg in 1911 – is about Starkaður's grandfather, Starkaður Áludrengur, and acts as a prologue to the whole story. The narration follows quite closely the U redaction of *Hervarar saga*, which contains the fullest account of Starkaður Áludrengur and his descendants.¹⁶ In this case it is therefore not *Gautreks saga* that the author has used to write the prologue.

The question of the origin of Starkaður Áludrengur as presented in the 1911 edition is treated in a way that demands some attention. Whereas the text in *Hervarar saga* reads 'hann var kominn af þursum ok hann var þeim líkr at afli ok eðli; hann hafði átta hendr'¹⁷ (he was descended from giants, and he resembled them in his nature and strength; he had eight arms),¹⁸

14 P. vi. I am grateful to M. J. Driscoll for sharing with me his transcription of the preface to Lbs 1504 4to and of the incipit of *Starkaðar saga* in Lbs 1492 4to.

15 Translations from Icelandic are mine throughout the article unless otherwise specified.

16 See Christopher Tolkien, ed. & trans., *Saga Heiðreks konungs hins vitra: The saga of King Heiðrek the Wise* (London, 1960; repr. 2010), pp. 66–68.

17 Tolkien, *Saga Heiðreks konungs*, p. 67.

18 Tolkien, *Saga Heiðreks konungs*, p. 68.

in the Winnipeg edition of *Starkaðar saga* an attempt is made to explain this without any explicit reference to the giant origins:

Mikill var hann og tröllaukinn mjög, og svo sterkur, að það er mælt að hann hefði fjöggra manna megn. Það er sagt í fornum sögum að hann hefði átta hendur (má ætla að það merki afl hans).¹⁹

(He was big and extremely giant-sized, and so strong that it is said that he had the power of four men. It is told in ancient stories that he had eight arms (one may presume that this indicates his strength).)

The edited text thus reveals an attempt at rationalising and interpreting figuratively the account of Starkaður Áludrengur's descent.²⁰

Since the Winnipeg edition is not of a scholarly kind, one is led to wonder about the origin of the parenthetical comment (*má ætla að það merki afl hans*) in the above quotation. A comparison between Lbs 1492 4to and Lbs 3891 4to,²¹ the two manuscripts preserving the expanded version of *Starkaðar saga*, reveals that this comment is attested only in the latter. In Lbs 1492 4to,²² copied by Magnús Jónsson, the text reads:

[...] mikill var hann & tröllaukinn mjök, ok svo sterkr at þat er mælt at hann hefði átta hendir,²³ eða fjöggra manna megn
(he was big and extremely giant-sized, and so strong that it is said he had eight arms, or the strength of four men)

19 *Sagan af Starkaði Stórvirkssyni: Prentuð eftir gömlu handriti* (Winnipeg, 1911), p. 3.

20 In Snorri Björnsson's text, which lacks the first chapter in the edition, there is also no explicit reference to Starkaður's descent from giants. It is noteworthy, for example, that in the text Starkaður's grandfather, himself named Starkaður (Áludrengur), is said to be *stórlátur* (proud), whereas in the corresponding passage in *Gautreks saga* he is described as *hundvíss jǫtunn* (a very wise giant; Ranisch, *Die Gautreks saga*, p. 12).

21 Lbs 3891 4to is dated to the second half of the nineteenth century; see Páll Eggert Ólason, ed., *Skrá um handritasöfn Landsbókasafnsins I–III (+ I–IV aukabindi)* (Reykjavík 1918–1996), vol. III (aukabindi), p. 65.

22 This manuscript has been dated to 1883.

23 Reference to Starkaður Áludrengur having had eight arms is also found in MS A (AM 590 b–c 4to) of the longer redaction of *Gautreks saga*.

This example must be understood as a caveat with regard to the limited value of the edited text, which is almost inevitably the starting point for anyone wanting to approach *Starkaðar saga* as a post-medieval rewrite of medieval sources on Starkaður. The edition is indeed declaredly a reproduction of ‘an old manuscript’ (*eftir gömlu handriti*), the identity of which is left unspecified. It follows that the text alone does not offer a safe basis for the analysis. A comparison with the manuscript evidence that has come down to us is thus necessary if one wishes to make observations on the peculiarities of the text of *Starkaðar saga*, as is the case with the present essay.²⁴

Still, the printed text can be used, albeit cautiously, as a point of departure. The titles of the 26 chapters making up the long redaction of *Starkaðar saga* are indicative of the structure of the work as well as of major textual affiliations:

1. Frá Starkaði Áludreng (About Starkaður Áludrengur)
2. Frá konungum og Stórvirki Starkaðarsyni (About kings and Stórvirkur Starkaðarsonur)
3. Frá orustum Víkars og Starkaðar (About the battles of Víkar and Starkaður)
4. Bardagar Víkars konungs við Húnþjófssonu (The fights of King Víkar against Húnþjófur’s sons)
5. Dæmd örlög Starkaðar og dráp Víkars konungs (The destiny of Starkaður is established; the killing of King Víkar)
6. Starkaður drepur Skugga jötun (Starkaður kills the giant Skuggi)
7. Starkaður drepur þá Úlf og Ótrygg (Starkaður kills Úlfur and Ótryggur)
8. Frá Fróða konungi og fall Beinis (About King Fróði and the death of Beini)

24 Therefore, all the passages that will be analysed in the following sections appear not only in the printed text but also in other manuscripts preserving Snorri Björnsson’s text. The Winnipeg text has been compared to the manuscripts of *Starkaðar saga* available at www.handrit.is [accessed 1 April 2017]. For the purpose of the present work, the current dating of the manuscripts that have been taken into consideration has been accepted. For the future work on the whole corpus of post-medieval manuscripts preserving material taken from Saxo mentioned in footnote 4, a re-examination of the dating of the manuscripts will be carried out.

9. Starkaður drepur Vasalda (Starkaður kills Vasaldi)
10. Frá því er Háki feldi Hugleik konung (Háki kills King Hugleikur)
11. Orusta á Írlandi og fall Hákonar (The battle in Ireland and the death of Hákon)
12. Starkaður drepur Herleif (Starkaður kills Herleifur)
13. Starkaður drepur Ham (Starkaður kills Ham)
14. Frá Ala konungi Frækna (About King Ali the Bold)
15. Starkaður drepur Finnálf jötun (Starkaður kills the giant Finnálf)
16. Hernaður Starkaðar (Starkaður's Viking expeditions)
17. Starkaður drepur Ála konung hinn frækna (Starkaður kills King Áli the Bold)
18. Dráp Fróða konungs og frá Svertingja jarli (The killing of King Fróði; About jarl Sverting)
19. Frá Helgu Fróðadóttur (About Helga Fróðadóttir)
20. Frá Helga konungi og hólmgöngu Starkaðar (About King Helgi and Starkaður's duel)
21. Frá Ingjaldi Starkaðar fóstura (About Ingjaldur, foster-brother of Starkaður)
22. Frá Ingjaldi og Starkaði og drápu Svertings (About Ingjaldur and Starkaður and the killing of Sverting)
23. Frá Óla Sigurðarssyni (About Óli Sigurðarsson)
24. Frá Haraldi konungi Hilditönn (About King Haraldur Wartooth)
25. Brávalla bardagi (The battle at Brávellir)
26. Dauði Starkaðar og Óla (The death of Starkaður and Óli)

From Chapter 2 to Chapter 5 *Starkaðar saga* is indebted mostly to *Gautreks saga*, which has been followed quite closely with the exception of the verse sections, as will be seen below. The rest of the saga is built almost exclusively on Saxo's account, including the verse, which features most prominently in the final chapter of *Starkaðar saga*. The account of the battle at Brávellir follows that of *Sögubrot af nokkrum fornkonungum*, where the battle is described in some detail.

In her study of the reception of Saxo in Iceland, Rosemary Power points out that 'the subject-matter of this saga [i.e. *Starkaðar saga*] has little intrinsic interest as it consists of very little that is not derived from the medieval sources, and what additional material there is consists mainly

of fights with Vikings and similar stock episodes'.²⁵ Power's observation points to the relatively high degree of stability of the subject-matter that was associated with *Starkaður* in the major medieval sources. His story was indeed obviously so well known even after the Middle Ages that any major change to it would hardly have been possible. From the viewpoint of reception studies, this is just as interesting as when, in the case of other narrative materials, the rewriting process takes more liberties with the hypotext(s).

Narrative innovations

If *Starkaðar saga* follows its main sources quite closely, it nevertheless contains a number of innovations which deserve some attention. The majority of them consist of new episodes inserted into the story, mainly in the form of adventures undertaken by the hero. One such adventure is recounted, for example, in Chapter 6, where *Starkaður* is said to have killed a giant named *Skuggi*. The episode is reminiscent of numerous similar episodes in the *fornaldarsögur* involving fights with giants.²⁶

Overall the narrative additions that can be detected throughout the text are mostly in the form of stock episodes recounting battles or adventures that follow, for example, a sudden storm, another recurrent motif in the saga.²⁷ Seen from this viewpoint, *Starkaðar saga* appears to follow the generic conventions that characterise the *Abenteuersagas* and the indigenous *riddarasögur*, thus repeating a widespread pattern that Matthew Driscoll has observed in most post-medieval *lygisögur*.²⁸

25 Power, 'Saxo in Iceland', p. 247.

26 It is the so-called Polyphemus motif that one finds, for example, in *Egils saga einhenda og Ásmundar berserkjabana*.

27 See, for example, p. 19 and p. 26. The shipwreck is sometimes used in this saga as a narrative device to move the action into another kind of fictional world, where encounters with supernatural beings are frequent. In the first of the two examples mentioned here, while exploring the fjord where the ship has wrecked, *Starkaður* finds the abode of the giant *Skuggi* and engages in a fight with him.

28 M.J. Driscoll, 'Traditionality and antiquarianism in the lost-Reformation *lygisaga*', *Northern antiquity: The post-medieval reception of Edda and saga*, ed. Andrew Wawn (Enfield Lock, 1994), pp. 83–99, esp. 85–89.

Another kind of intervention on the part of the author of *Starkaðar saga* regards the connection established between some of the events in Starkaður's life and the author's own time.²⁹ Various passages do indeed provide the reader with references to the present, as is most interestingly shown in the following example:

Sá haugur er út frá Hleiðrargarði þar er hét Bolungarheiði,
og sjást hans merki enn í dag³⁰

(That mound is off Hleiðrargarður at a place called Bolungarheiði, and traces of it can still be seen today.)

The broader context of the pericope of which this passage is part reveals another motif of interest in *Starkaðar saga*. The mound where the body of Starkaður is buried is said to have been built at the behest of Ragnar loðbrók, the legendary Danish king whose adventures and feats are recounted in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, one of the *fornaldarsögur* that rework ancient material:

En er Ragnar loðbrók, er þá var konungur í Danmörku,
frá líflát Starkaðar, lét hann gjöra haug mikinn, og lagði
Starkað í hann þar er hann hafði fallið.³¹

(And when Ragnar loðbrók, who at that time was king of Denmark, came to know of Starkaður's passing, he had a large mound built, and placed Starkaður in it there where he had died.)

Since there is no mention in other known sources of Ragnar having the mound erected for Starkaður, the addition is in all likelihood an innovation of *Starkaðar saga*, and is obviously meant to enhance the heroic dimension that permeates the whole narrative: a legendary king, known

29 In the same vein, sometimes new episodes are meant to explain the origin of certain place names, as is the case with Skuggafjörður (Ch. 6), named after Skuggi, a giant killed by Starkaður during a fight. See, for example, f. 76r in Lbs 360 4to, and f. 40v in Lbs 678 4to.

30 *Sagan af Starkaði Stórvirkssyni*, p. 102.

31 *Sagan af Starkaði Stórvirkssyni*, pp. 101–02.

to all people in the North, pays tribute to the death of a renowned hero. The mound thus bears testament to Starkaður's heroic stature and makes his legacy present in the time in which the saga was written.

Probably the most interesting innovation in *Starkaðar saga* as compared to the medieval accounts is as regards the verse sections. A considerable part of the verses in *Víkarsbálkur*, which represents the core section of Starkaður's story in *Gautreks saga*, is omitted in the eighteenth-century saga. But what exactly is omitted? Either Gunnar Pálsson, who is thought to have composed the verses, or Snorri Björnsson, the purported author, seem to have been inclined to omit those verses which do not contain any element that may serve to recount the life of Starkaður. Hence, the poetic sections that in *Gautreks saga* appear in Ch. 5 are omitted, either because they are about *jarl Neri* – a character who does not play any further role in *Starkaðar saga*, while he has a prominent one in the longer redaction of *Gautreks saga* – or because they do not contain any elements which add something to what is already recounted in the prose. The verses about battles are retained, however, an interest in combat being one major trait of the saga, as was mentioned above. The overall tendency to leave out unnecessary verses does not apply to the verse sections taken from Saxo, which are for the most part preserved in the transition to saga, probably because the information provided in them was deemed to be of importance in order to draw a complete picture of Starkaður, since the poetry attributed to Starcatherus that appears in the *Gesta Danorum* does indeed add a lot to what is told in the narrative prose sections.

Manuscript variation

The question of the presence of verse in *Starkaðar saga* leads us to the question of manuscript variation. As was mentioned above, *Starkaðar saga* is extant in two major versions. The one printed in Winnipeg in 1911 contains the longer redaction, which represents an expansion of Snorri Björnsson's original version. For example, Chapter 1 is transmitted only in the long redaction, and is therefore not included in most of the manuscripts of *Starkaðar saga*, which preserve texts of Snorri's version. The problems connected with the overall unreliability of the edition mentioned above become even more obvious when one compares the edited text with

the extant manuscript witnesses. Even a preliminary comparison involving the major codices preserving *Starkaðar saga* makes it clear that the edited text is largely unsatisfactory when it comes to investigating the modalities and forms of transmission of *Starkaðar saga* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed if one looks both at the form in which the saga has been transmitted and at the codicological context(s) in which it is preserved, one becomes aware of how varied the transmission of this saga was. The richness in variation that a comparison of the manuscript witnesses reveals is, hardly surprisingly, obscured in the Winnipeg edition, which is based on a single manuscript. Thus in the following sections it will be shown that it is necessary to return to the materiality of manuscript transmission in order to get an idea of the *mouvance* of the text.³²

On a general note one observes that *Starkaðar saga* appears almost exclusively³³ in manuscript compilations alongside texts belonging to a broad palette of saga genres (*fornaldarsögur*, *riddarasögur*, *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*). Each single manuscript would in principle demand attention as the variety of codicological contexts in which the text is placed is indicative of various ways of reading and interpreting *Starkaðar saga*. However, in the following I will confine myself to illustrating a few relevant examples.

The text of *Starkaðar saga* appears in a strongly abridged version in a number of manuscripts. In Lbs 360 4to, dated to 1750–1814, what is narrated in Chapters 13 to 21 in the edition is not preserved at all. The text omitted includes, among other things, the killing of King Ali, i.e. one of the three *níðingsverk* (heinous deeds) committed by Starkaður according to the medieval sources (in particular Saxo). The collection of texts in this manuscript consists of a number of *Íslendingasögur* (e.g. *Vopnfirðinga saga*, *Flóamanna saga*), a *fornaldarsaga* (*Áns saga bogsveigis*) and some *þættir*. Of particular interest is the addition to be found on f. 118r, where the interested reader is instructed about where to find more of Starkaður's poetry:

32 For the purpose of the present analysis, I have chosen to focus on those manuscripts that enable us to illustrate the kinds of variation that the treatment of the material related to Starkaður displays.

33 The manuscript AM 941 4to contains only *Starkaðar saga*.

Peir sem vilja verða fróðari í ljóðmælum Starkaðar geta lesið Víkarsþáttur í Hrólfs Gautrekssonar³⁴ sögu frá 3ja til 8da kapitula.

(Those who want to learn more about Starkaður's collection of poetry can read *Víkars þáttur* in *Hrólfr saga Gautrekssonar* from Ch. 3 to Ch. 8.)

An abridged version of the saga appears also in Lbs 678 4to (ff. 36v–56r), where the story breaks off at the end of Ch. 16 in the edited text. In Lbs 513 4to, *Starkaðar saga* is condensed into a very short text (ff. 173r–176v) which follows closely what is recounted in *Víkars þáttur* in *Gautreks saga*.³⁵ Lbs 513 4to is interesting also with regard to the context in which the saga appears. This manuscript, which is known to have been compiled by Tyrfingur Finnsson, is a compilation of various sagas, mostly *Íslendingasögur* (e.g. *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Kjalnesinga saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Hrafnkels saga* and *Víglundar saga*) and a number of *þættir*. The manuscript contains also some texts about legendary heroes. *Starkaðar saga* appears straight after *Hrólfs saga kraka* (including *Bjarkamál*) and closes the collection. Another text preserved here which builds up a dialogue with *Starkaðar saga* is *Sögubrot af nokkrum fornkonungum*, in which the description of the battle at Brávellir is given considerable space. As was mentioned above, the *Starkaðar saga* in Lbs 513 4to is a strongly abridged version of Snorri's text, a version in which the poetry contained in the longer redaction is reduced to a minimum. In fact, here the story is cut straight after the killing of Víkar (i.e. at the end of *Víkars þáttur*), so that the poetry derived from Saxo is not preserved at all. Furthermore, only some verse sections about Starkaður's youth are retained. Hence, Starkaður's role as a poet is made much less prominent here, whereas his skills as a warrior are brought to the fore. All this makes the text in Lbs 513 4to into a different version, both from that authored by Snorri Björnsson and from the longer redaction as printed in 1911.

34 This is quite obviously a mistake as *Víkars þáttur* is preserved in *Gautreks saga*, not in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*.

35 In the manuscript the title given to this *þáttur* is the same as the whole saga (*Sagan af Starkaði gamla Stórvirkssyni*).

It is interesting to note that a high degree of variation with regard to the presence of verse can also be found in the manuscript witnesses of *Gautreks saga*. A survey of the manuscripts preserving the long redaction reveals indeed that the number of verse sections varies considerably. Let us take, for example, the three main manuscripts used by Wilhelm Ranisch in his edition:

- AM 590 b–c 4to (1600–1700, MS A)
- Holm. papp. 8vo nr 11 (ca. 1650, MS b)
- AM 152 fol. (1500–1525, MS C)

MS A contains 39 *vísur*, MS b 11, and MS C 25. As I have argued elsewhere,³⁶ if we are to trust Ranisch's opinion of a deliberate omission of some *vísur* on the part of the scribes, it would be interesting to approach such divergences as clues to the attitude of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scribes and readers of *Gautreks saga* to the interplay between prose and verse, which is so central to the construction of many *fornaldarsögur*.³⁷

Verse of various kinds figures prominently in ÍBR 187 4to, another manuscript in which *Starkaðar saga* is preserved. In this codex, which dates from the second half of the eighteenth century, some works attributed to Snorri Björnsson have been put together. Here *Starkaðar saga* is indeed followed by *Rímur af Hálfðáni Brönufóstra*, a collection of 17 *rímur* based on *Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra*, a *fornaldarsaga* written

- 36 Massimiliano Bampi, 'What's in a variant? On editing the longer redaction of *Gautreks saga*', in Fulvio Ferrari & Massimiliano Bampi, ed., *On editing Old Scandinavian texts: Problems and perspectives* (Trento, 2009), pp. 57–69.
- 37 On the importance of verse (especially of heroic poetry) in the rise of the *fornaldarsaga* genre see especially Anne Holtsmark, 'Heroic poetry and legendary sagas', *Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic studies 1965* (Copenhagen, 1966), pp. 9–21. On the role of verse in the *fornaldarsögur* see Margaret Clunies Ross, 'Poetry in *Fornaldarsögur*: Origins, nature and purpose', in *The legendary sagas: Origins and development*, ed. Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney & Ármann Jakobsson (Reykjavík, 2012), pp. 121–38, and Davíð Erlingsson, 'Prose and verse in Icelandic legendary fiction', in *The heroic process: Form, function and fantasy in folk epic; The proceedings of the International Folk Epic Conference University College Dublin 2–6 September 1985*, ed. Bo Almqvist, Séamus Ó Catháin & Pádraig Ó Héalaí (Dun Laoghaire, 1987), pp. 371–93.

around 1300. Furthermore, ÍB 187 includes a number of *vísur* by Snorri that are placed at the end of the manuscript, after a copy of *Brávalla rímur*.

One of the more interesting manuscripts that I have looked at in my research so far is ÍBR 8 4to, an early nineteenth-century compilation attributed to Einar Bjarnason (1782–1856), a poet and lay scholar from Skagafjörður in the north of Iceland. What makes this manuscript particularly note-worthy is the codicological context in which *Starkaðar saga* is placed. An overall interest in stories of kings is evident throughout the compilation. Most of the narratives are indeed about various royal figures of ancient time: *Hálfðanar saga gamla*, *Af Upplendinga konungum*, *Jóns saga Upplendingakonungs*. In addition, it should be mentioned that in the manuscript *Starkaðar saga* is preceded by two texts, the first of which, based on *Völsunga saga*, bears the following title in the manuscript (f. 40r): ‘Frá fornkonungum. Forfeðrum Völsunga, Buðlunga, Gjúkunga og annarra er við þeirra sögur koma’ (About ancient kings, forefathers of the Völsungs, Buðlungs, Gjúkungs and others that are dealt with in their sagas). The other text is on ff. 45r–52v: it is an interpolation of verse sections which do not appear in *Starkaðar saga*. Interestingly, the scribal additions are taken directly from *Gautreks saga* and correspond to what is customarily known as *Víkarsbálkur*, a retrospective monologue in verse in which Starkaður recounts his own life as foster-brother of King Víkar and the deeds they accomplished until the killing of Víkar, who died at the hands of Starkaður. After *Víkarsbálkur*, the scribe inserted some verses about the battle at Brávellir, which is one of the most important episodes recounted in *Starkaðar saga*. As they are placed in the manuscript, the additional verse sections work as some sort of poetic prologue to the main narrative, i.e. Snorri Björnsson’s *Starkaðar saga*. Furthermore, the presence of a text such as *Sterkra manna tal* (List of strong men, ff. 110r–119v) is surely indicative of the intertextual dialogue that the editorial project behind the collection of texts making up this manuscript contributed towards promoting. Starkaður is indeed represented in *Starkaðar saga* as a man endowed with the strength of four men, as was seen above.

The *modus operandi* that the above mentioned verse additions reveal indicates the scribe’s intention to supplement the account of Starkaður’s life as found in Snorri’s *saga* with those verse sections which are only fragmentarily transplanted into *Starkaðar saga*. Furthermore, this tells also a

great deal about the important role that the verse attributed to Starkaður plays in the view of Einar Bjarnason (himself a poet) of the heroic age, of which Starkaður and the other heroes that figure in his compilation (especially in the short narrative entitled *Þáttur af konungum og Brávalla-bardaga*, ff. 77v–95v) are outstanding representatives.

The variety of attitudes towards the Norse heroic age is a major theme in studies concerning the reception of medieval sagas in post-medieval times. Although it is certainly not possible to generalise, it seems that, as Jón Karl Helgason has pointed out in a seminal article on the tradition of the saga in Iceland (mainly *Íslendingasögur*) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,³⁸ at least until the early twentieth century the sagas, in addition to being meant to entertain, provided also role-models, especially to male members of the audience. He points out, among other things, that the heroes of ancient time were admired by modern readers for their bravery and other masculine qualities such as physical strength,³⁹ and at least part of the manuscript evidence discussed above (e.g. most notably ÍBR 8 4to) seems to point in the same direction.

The sagas, though, came to be discussed also for the moral content that they were able to convey, either directly or indirectly.⁴⁰ Although it is clear that *Starkaðar saga* was written to have a unified story of the legendary hero, and although the entertaining purpose attached to it is beyond dispute, it is tempting to assume that the kind of reading that Jón Karl Helgason discusses with regard to the *Íslendingasögur* also applied to it. The fact that *Starkaðar saga* often appears in collections alongside copies of the *Íslendingasögur*, as was briefly seen above, might argue for this kind of reading. Furthermore, it should be mentioned that stories of ancient Nordic heroes such as that of Starkaður belonged to a memorial archive to which the Nordic people would relate to, both in the Middle Ages and beyond, as part of a common cultural heritage.

The heroism of Starkaður, together with the gloomy aspects of his contradictory nature and his fate of sorrow and grief, certainly provided much

38 Jón Karl Helgason, 'Continuity? The Icelandic sagas in post-medieval times', in *A companion to Old Norse-Icelandic literature*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford, 2005), pp. 64–81.

39 Jón Karl Helgason, 'Continuity?', pp. 65–69.

40 Jón Karl Helgason, 'Continuity?', pp. 70–75.

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material to discuss to readers and listeners. How things were in reality will of course remain a matter of dispute. What is indisputable, though, is that the ways in which the story of Starkaður has been constantly reproduced and reshaped, in the Middle Ages and beyond, bears witness to the fact that this is a story for all time.