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# Áns saga bogsveigis

## A Counterfactual *Egils saga* and yet Another Twist on the Myth of Þórr's Visit to Útgarða-Loki

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ABSTRACT
This article argues that the Icelandic legendary saga *Áns saga bogsveigis* was written as a complementary *Egils saga* with an alternative outcome, one in which it is not the aggressive tyrant who wins, but the farmers. To achieve this, the author uses an option that Egill's family did not have, because it was humiliating: The hero plays the wretched fool; consequently, he is not taken seriously, and therefore he can build up power in secret until he is able to defeat the king. At the same time, *Áns saga* seems to be a twist on *Þorsteins þáttr bójarmagns*, which seems to be a twist on the myth of Þórr's visit to Útgarða-Loki. In the myth, the superhumanly strong hero is unexpectedly humiliated, because his opponent controls what he sees. In *Þorsteins þáttr*, the hero turns the tables, because *he* controls what his opponent sees. In *Áns saga*, the herculean hero *chooses* to be humiliated, and this is why he unexpectedly wins.

Keywords
Áns saga bogsveigis, Legendary Sagas, Sagas of Icelanders, Egils Saga, Þorsteins þáttr bójarmagns, Old Norse Mythology

## INTRODUCTION

The Icelandic *Áns saga bogsveigis*, "the saga of Án the archer", probably written in the 14th century, is regarded as belonging to the genre of *fornaldarsǫgur*, since it concerns events in Norway before King Haraldr's unification of the country and the emigration to Iceland. But the saga does not narrate tales about superheroes encountering monsters and other supernatural warriors in exotic countries, as legendary sagas commonly do. Instead, the saga is rela-

tively realistic and is structured around feuds, like the sagas of Icelanders / *Íslendingasǫgur* / family sagas. Heusler calls *Áns saga* a "Norðmanna saga" (1934, 33), and Ashman Rowe calls it a "Norwegian family saga" (1993, 539, similarly Simek and Hermann Pálsson 2007, 15).

The main character of the saga is the herculean Án Björnsson from Hrafnista, now Ramsta, on the coast of Namdalen, central Norway. Án's brother, Þórir, belongs to the court of Óláfr, King of Namdalen. Þórir has the byname *þegn* after the sword Þegn, which he has received from Óláfr. When Ingjaldr Óláfsson takes over as king, Án joins his retinue and receives the byname *bogsveigir* from the king; but he does not fit in and, after a while, the king declares him an outlaw. Þórir stays in the king's retinue, but is ultimately killed by him. Án remains on the edge of the king's sphere of power and, after some time, manages to build up a force strong enough for his son, Þórir, to kill the king.

Earlier research on this saga has focused on the strophes it features (Heusler and Ranisch 1903, 97, 104; Läffler 1912, Schorn 2015), to what degree it overlaps with older sagas, which text elements are borrowed from other texts (Hughes 1976, Righter-Gould 1979, Ashman Rowe 1989, 87 ff., 1993; Hughes 2005), and how well the traditions about Án were anchored in earlier sagas about Ramsta (Hughes 1976, Righter-Gould 1979, 265–66, Hermann Pálsson 2002, 3132, Leslie 2010).

## MY INTENTION

I shall try instead to provide a literary interpretation of the whole saga in its extant form. I refer to Rafn's edition (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829), but normalise as in Guðni Jónsson's edition (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1954); a modern, scholarly edition of the saga does not yet exist.[1]

The saga falls into four parts:

1. Án grows up at home at Ramsta while the good king Óláfr rules (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 325–29).
2. Án is a retainer of King Ingjaldr (ibid, 330–39).
3. Án is an outlaw (ibid, 340–57).
4. Revenge and the restoration of the society from before the tyranny (ibid, 358–62).

The peak of tension lies towards the end of the third section, in King Ingjaldr's last attack on Án's farm, where Án barely escapes (ibid, 354–56). Immediately after, Án's son Þórir arrives, and the revenge phase starts.

My point of departure is that, even if the author may have borrowed material from all quarters, he has nevertheless chosen his material in order to create an interesting and entertaining story. He has not felt constricted by tradition, but has creatively used material that his audience knew, combining it with material he invented. I would like to examine what associations the borrowed elements bring into the story, how the various elements work together, and what themes and messages they construct together – also taking into account the background against which the saga was written.

1. This is the long version of the saga; the short version is, as far as we can discern, based on *Áns rímur bogsveigis*, which builds on the long version of the saga (Hughes 1976, 197, Schach 1976).

As far as we can tell, the saga is primarily fiction. Admittedly, there was a tradition of an Án bogsveigir before *Áns saga*. He is mentioned at Ramsta in a version of *Landnámabók* from 1275–80 (*Landnámabók* 1968, 176–77, 217), and, around 1200, Saxo narrates an episode about *Ano* with the byname *Sagittarius*, "archer"; the point of the episode is that Ano is an unequalled archer (*Saxo* 2015 bok IV, 9–11). Many elements in the story surrounding this episode are also found in *Áns saga* (Hughes 1976). This, however, simply shows that in the 1200s, Án bogsveigir was understood as an historical person and that tales about him existed. Saxo's Ano is fundamentally different to Án, Ashman Rowe points out (1993, 552). Ano is wholeheartedly the king's man and is never outlawed. In addition, he is linked to the Danish court, not Namdalen. Moreover, Ano is a secondary character in Saxo, and the characters that Hughes (1976) identifies in both stories largely play different roles in Saxo and in *Áns saga*. I cannot find a basis for the theory that a considerable part of *Áns saga* is historical and that an older, more "primitive" (written) saga about Án once existed (Hughes 1976, 222).

## *ÁNS SAGA* AND *EGILS SAGA*

More specifically, my starting point is that *Áns saga*, as Reuschel (1933) and Righter-Gould (1979) have shown, is "a close legendary analogue of *Egils saga*" regarding "structure, theme, ethics, and aspects of narrative style" (Righter-Gould 1979, 265). In *Egils saga*, Egill and Skallagrímr, his father, are equivalent to Án, while the two Þórolfrs, who are brothers of Skallagrímr and Egill, correspond to Þórir þegn.

> [T]he heroes [in the two sagas] are unlike brothers [...] Þórólfr and Þórir, are handsome, popular, and courtly, while the younger siblings are ugly and intractable, and have violent dispositions and poetic ability. Þórólfr and Þórir are shown as highly esteemed royal retainers" (ibid, 266).

In *Áns saga*, this is emphasised by Þórir receiving from the king a sword with the name *Þegn*, which means "king's man" (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 326). Egill and Án, on the other hand, never get on with the king. Many episodes are very alike in the two sagas, for example when Án threatens his brother into taking him to the king (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 328–29), just as Egill does in *Egils saga* (Righter-Gould 1979, 266–67, *Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 328–29), and a significant part of the storyline is similar. The overlap between the sagas is so great that *Áns saga* clearly was written with *Egils saga* in mind, with the intention of the audience recognising it as "a close […] analogue of *Egils saga*" – an easy task since *Egils saga* was popular in the 14th century (Bjarni Einarsson 1993), when *Áns saga* was written.[2] But why did the author have this intention? *Áns saga* is well written, so he was well aware of what he was doing. It looks to me like the author wished to write a version of *Egils saga* with an alternative outcome – and consequently a saga of the unification of Norway with an alternative outcome, because *Áns saga* especially reshapes the first part of *Egils saga*.

The central argument here is that, even if the two sagas show great similarities, their outcomes are opposite. In *Egils saga*, the king wins, forcing Egill's family to emigrate. In *Áns saga*,

2. Most scholars date the saga to the 14th century: Hughes 2005, 292, Ashman Rowe 1993, Righter-Gould 1979, 266. Simek and Hermann Pálsson 2007, 15, argue that *Áns saga* was written in the 15th century.

Án manages to stay in the country, and in the end, he and his son overcome the king. The reversed parallelism of this is, in *Áns saga*, indicated with the triumph over the king being achieved in a scene very like the one in which Egill's family had to give in to King Haraldr: The king took an army to Þórolfr's estate, prevented him and his men from exiting the house, and set fire to it. They managed to break out, but in the ensuing battle, the king himself killed Þórolfr (*Egils saga* 1933, 15–54). This is exactly what happens in *Áns saga*, only in reverse: Þórir kills King Ingjaldr (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 361). As we shall see, much else in *Áns saga* is likewise parallel to and opposite to motifs in *Egils saga*, as well as other sagas and tales.

## THE OPTIONS

Most interesting is how the author of *Áns saga* contrives to make the opposite outcome possible: he has thought of an option that Egill's family did not have. In *Egils saga*, the farmers have these options when they face the tyrant Haraldr:

a. to fight and try to stop the king.
b. to lie low.
c. to enter the service of the king.
d. to leave the country.

Kveldulfr, the head of the clan, tries or considers all of these options. The other chieftains band together and fight against Haraldr, but Kveldulfr stays at home, realising that this is useless (*Egils saga* 1933, 9). Instead, he tries to lie low at home in the hope of being left in peace. But the new king interprets this as opposition (*Egils saga* 1933, 11 ff.). So Kveldulfr's son, Þórolfr, enters the king's service, but it ends tragically (*Egils saga* 1933, 15-54). There is then no other option than to flee to another country (*Egils saga* 1933, 65 ff.).

In *Áns saga*, there is one option more: Án behaves like a wretch and a fool, and when he consequently is not taken seriously, option b) becomes realistic. Án has "neither wit nor courtesy, and he dresses with complete disregard for fashion. Even when he is given new clothes, he wears them so badly that his appearance is not improved. He avoids using a sword preferring his bow or his bare hands", comments Ashman Rowe (1993, 551). Án "does not mind being mocked or being accused of having homosexual tendencies or of being a coward", she points out (1993, 551).

With this conduct, Án manages to play for time while the king seriously and permanently underestimates him. When he has to take to the forests and other remote areas after killing the king's half-brothers (who were enemies of the king), the king searches only half-heartedly for him, apparently because of the impression Án has given. Meanwhile, Án builds up sufficient wealth and manpower to threaten the king. Playing the halfwit accordingly makes option b) accessible, in combination with option c), and as a result, option a) also becomes realistic in the end.

## ÁN'S STRATEGY

That being written off as a fool is a conscious strategy from Án's side is perhaps most obvious from a strophe Án recites in connection with the erection of a *hafnarmerki*, a con-

struction marking the location of a harbour (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 336). The strophe goes thus:

> Vel þér, selja,
> stendr þú sævi nær
> laufguð harðla vel;
> maðr skekr af þér
> morgindöggvar,
> en ek at Þegni
> þrey nátt sem dag.[3]

The literal meaning of this is approximately: "I greet you, sallow. You stand by the sea, well-covered by leaves. Morning dewdrops are shaken from you, but I long for a *þegn*, night and day". This sallow is not mentioned elsewhere in the text, so it is peculiar that Án addresses it, even if a *hafnarmerki* = *hafnarmark* could be a tree (Fritzner 1883–96 I, 687). Therefore, this situation is usually understood as Án reciting a strophe that the readers of the saga knew (but that does not survive elsewhere), namely a love-verse composed by a woman to a man (Heusler og Ranisch 1903, LXXXVIII, Läffler 1912, 7, Schorn 2015). In any case, the other members of the king's bodyguard understand the ending to mean that Án has homosexual desires and is consequently *argr*, "effeminate" (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983). This is perhaps the most contemptible thing a man could be accused of in Old Norse literature (ibid). Án must have realised that he would be understood in this way, since in the strophe he clearly says that he longs for a *þegn* night and day, and a *þegn* is "a thane, franklin, freeman, man" (Cleasby & Vigfusson 1874, 732).

An additional reason to interpret Án in this way is the occasion for the strophe, the *hafnarmerki* = *hafnarmark*. In Old Norse literature, this is known especially from *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa* 1938 (154 ff.), which mentions a *hafnarmark* containing a figure that shows two men having homosexual intercourse (cf. Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 69–71). In *Áns saga*, Án's brother Þórir jumps in and says Án means that he wants to have the sword Þegn (implied: to use it in battle). Án himself explains the strophe by saying that he is thinking about Þórir þegn, his brother, who is so naive that he does not realise the king is going to kill him (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 337). But then it is odd that Án uses the verb *þreyja*, to "desire, long for", when they are together. Taking into account that Án throughout his entire time in the bodyguard seems to be putting on an act, his strophe may mean that he longs for the sword Þegn in order to be able to use it (but has to restrain himself and wait). But at the same time, it is difficult not to think that Án is doing his best to be written off as completely round the bend. The episode has no function in the saga beyond leading to an exchange of words about the strophe (cf. Hughes 1976, 199).

It also looks like the author, wishing to highlight Án's foolish image, makes puns on the name Án and an otherwise unattested masculine **áni*, with a meaning along the lines of "fool, oaf". When the king begins to pursue him, Án comes to a farm where the king's man

3. Here, I have chosen to follow *Áns saga bogsveigis* 1954, 378, which is very close to the main manuscipt used by Finnur Jónsson 1912–15 A II, 319. Finnur's own normalisation is heavy-handed, ibid B II, 339. Compare Läffler 1912 and Heusler and Ranisch 1903, LXXXVII-LXXXVIII and 104.

Ketill has already turned up and presented himself as Án. When the real Án presents himself, he gets the answer: "Hér er mikit um ánagang", and then the comment: "Hér er ánótt mjök" (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 341). Judging by the modern Nordic languages, this can be translated: "There is great traffic of Áns here / much foolish behaviour here", and: "It is very Án-y here / very foolish here". Modern Icelandic knows the noun *áni* (m.), which means "dunce, simpleton, oaf" [4] (Sigfús Blöndal 1920, 38 / Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989, 16, 20), with the derivatives *ánalegur* (adj.) "awkward, weird, silly" (Sigfús Blöndal 1920, 35), and *ánagangur* (m.) "silly antics" (Sigfús Blöndal 1920, 35). Seen in isolation, these words could (as Cleasby & Vigfusson believe, 1874, 43) derive from *Áns saga* and Án's stupid behaviour there. But the noun – *åne* (m.) – is also known from Senja, Northern Norway, with a very similar meaning: "half-witted wretch, bumbling dawdler" (Ross 1971 [1895], 28). The adjective *ánóttr* / *ånòt*, "like an *åne*" (ibid.), is outside of *Áns saga* only known from Senja. The existence of these words on Senja is difficult to derive from the saga, because nothing indicates that the saga with this detail was known anywhere in Norway. Therefore, there is every reason to believe that *áni*, "fool, oaf", with derivations, existed in the common Old Norse language (as Hughes also seems to believe, 2005, 335).[5] Ketill seeking out the farm where Án turns up is poorly motivated in the plot; the author seems to have created the episode in order to use the words *ánagangr* and *ánóttr*.

Án's strategy is not available to anyone. In the honour culture of Old Norse literature (Meulengracht Sørensen 1995), it must have been very costly to act the way Án does. His brother Þórir "continually urges him to behave in ways which […] would be honourable", Ashman Rowe comments (1993, 551). An important reason why Án can bear to behave as he does, and remain credible in the role, is that he is quite young when he begins. He of whom no one expects anything can behave thus, but not others.

In addition, however, it is clear that Án has an unusual self-control, ability to yield, swallow his pride, and wait. This is probably what lies behind the byname *bogsveigir*. As we have seen, the tradition of Án and his byname is older than *Áns saga* and, in this tradition, it was obviously understood as "(master) archer". Án in *Áns saga* is, indeed, a master of the bow, but in the saga, the byname is explained by an episode that gives it a completely different meaning. Since this breaks with tradition, we must assume that the author has invented the episode and the explanation himself, and has placed the episode early on in order to indicate Án's strategy. When Án was twelve years old, a dwarf made him an extremely large bow. This becomes Án's weapon, and when he later comes to the king, he carries it over his shoulder. The bow is so long that when Án wants to go through the door into the king's hall, the bow catches the doorframe both at the top and bottom, but Án is so strong that he simply walks on and the bow bends the other way, letting Án in with a slam. Because of this, the king gives him the byname *bogsveigir*, "bow bender / bow tenser"[6] (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 330–31) – according to the saga. Seen in isolation, this story is simply odd, but it makes perfect sense in light of the legendary saga *Þorsteins þáttr bøjarmagns*. There, the main character is given the byname *bøjarmagn*, "farm / house might", because he crushes

4. Explanations from Scandinavian dictionaries are translated into English by myself.
5. The etymology of the word is unknown (Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon 1989, 16, 20).
6. To *sveigja* is usually just to bend (Fritzner 1883–96 III, 613, cf. the closely related adjective *sveigr* "pliable, acquiescent, accommodative" ibid), but it can also be used about tensing a bow (ibid).

houses that he tries to enter: he is so big that he cannot go through the doors and so strong that nothing stops him (*Saga af Þorsteini Bæarmagni* 1827, 175, Heide In print). Án is in the same strength and weight class as Þorsteinn, we learn, since right before the episode with the door, Án tears up a large oak complete with roots (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 328). Against the *bøjarmagn* background, *bogsveigir* and the episode explaining it express that Án does *not* use a bulldozer approach, but yields, like his weapon. At the same time, Án's weapon being the bow makes it more natural that he does not want to use a sword, as Þórir tries to make him do to avenge himself on those in the court who bother him (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 334–35). *Sverð* in Old Norse meant both "sword" and "penis" (Fritzner 1883–96 III, 618-19, cf. Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 60), so when Án does not want to use a *sverð*, it invites accusations of not being a man.[7]

There is one more way in which *bogsveigir* accords with Án's tactics: to tense a bow is to store power, which can later be released. Án is a *bogsveigir* in this sense, too. During the period in which Án is pursued by the king, he systematically builds up greater and greater riches and manpower, but in secret. He kills (in self-defence) the outlaw Gáran,[8] and takes over the hoard of money and weapons that Gáran has gathered, but leaves it in the forest until the final battle with the king is imminent (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 345–46, 357). When he leaves the forest and marries the widow Jórunn, he develops four farms and becomes the leader of the farmers in the area, but in a remote region where the king has little control[9]. There, Án builds a ship – in the forest (ibid, 347). His son Þórir personifies this strategy. Immediately after Án has fled from the king, having killed the king's two half-brothers, he seeks refuge on a farm and impregnates the daughter of the household. When he travels on, he tells her to call their son Þórir (implicitly after his brother) and raise him. The son grows up as a girl to avoid the king killing him (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 344 / 359). Then, when he comes to Án as an 18 year old, this marks the end of Án being pursued by the king. As though he were clairvoyant, Án has, immediately prior to this, collected the hoard and weapons left by Gáran from the forest (ibid, 357). With these riches and an adult son on his team, Án is strong enough to go on the offensive. After Þórir has gained battle experience on a Viking expedition, he is sent against the king and kills him. In short: When Án has stored up enough power – or, to use the metaphor: tensed the bow sufficiently – he retaliates. But only then.

The author showcases Án's tactics in his name as well. The author does not invent the name,[10] but he does make it allude to a homonym (in addition to the near-homonym we saw above). In Old Norse, *án* is also a preposition, meaning "without", and, twice in the

7. As Ashman Rowe notices (Ashman Rowe 1993, 551), it is not mentioned anywhere in the saga that Án uses a sword. He breaks the back of the outlaw Gáran (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 346), the assassin Ívarr he ties up with a bowstring (ibid, 349), and in the battle at the end he uses a large club as a weapon (ibid, 355). But his son Þórir kills King Ingjaldr with the sword Þegn (ibid, 360–61).
8. In *Áns Rímur Bogsveigis* (1973), which are based on the saga and date from around 1400, the metre shows that the first syllable in this name is long. As the consonant is short, accordingly the vowel is long. The name should thus be written *Gáran* (see ibid, 192), not *Garan*, as is done in *Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829 and *Áns saga bogsveigis* 1954. Thanks to Haukur Þorgeirsson for this information.
9. The location of this area is not indicated.
10. Án bogsveigir is mentioned in older sources, as we have seen, and there are a few other Áns in Old Norse literature (Lind 1905–15, 24–26).

saga, wordplay is made of this (Hughes 2005, 335). The first time is at the turning point in the middle of the saga, when Án has fallen out with the king due to two shots of the bow, and is outlawed. It is then said, when Ketill has introduced himself as Án: "Án mættum vér hafa verit þinna skota" (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 340), "we could have done without your shots". At the end of this phase, when father and son meet, and the father calls himself Án, the son answers: "Þat mun satt vera, at margs góðs muntu án vera, ok ertu nú án sauðarins þess, er ek tók" (ibid, 358), "I guess that is true, that you are without many goods (or: much that is good), and now you are without the sheep I took" – he has unlawfully slaughtered a sheep. And this is exactly the situation: because of the strategy he has chosen, Án had to do without honour while he was at the court. As a youngster, he was barely dressed (ibid, 327, 329), and when he was pursued by the king, he had to live sparingly. This is what the son comments upon, and when they arrive at Án's farm, his wife comments: "hverr er auðgari en þykkist" (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 359), "each is richer than it seems". Án has just collected the hoard left by Gáran from the forest, and now his son arrives as a new, unexpected contribution to Án's wealth. With these events, Án no longer has to be *án* these things, and he reveals himself in his full force.

## OTHER MOTIFS

If we read *Áns saga* as I have outlined here, this can make sense of many aspects of the saga that otherwise seem conspicuous, odd or unmotivated. Not least, this reading clarifies why the author has chosen to reuse or allude to exactly those elements from older sources that he includes. I shall go through some examples of this now.

The farmer who rescues Án after his swim to the island towards the end of the saga is called *Erpr*. This name is very unusual in Old Norse literature (albeit not unique, Lind 1905–15, 244–45), so there is reason to ask whether the author chose this name to draw on specific associations. The name is known from the legend of Erpr and his brothers, Hamðir and Sǫrli. They kill him because they believe he will not be of any help, but lose a battle because of this.[11] Erpr in *Áns saga* does the opposite of Hamðir and Sǫrli, in accordance with all the other aspects that are opposite in the saga in comparison with the texts to which it alludes. Án is half dead when Erpr finds him, and his wife is reluctant to take care of him, but they realise that it will pay off: "þat mundi gott til fjár, ef við góðan dreng ætti um" (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 356), "it would be good money, if it is a good man". And it does: when Án recovers, they are given gold as well as the island that they live on, and the last thing Án says to his son is to take good care of Erpr (ibid, 361). In the legend, Erpr is thoughtlessly killed because his brothers do not see that he will be useful. In the saga, Erpr brings a man back to life whom he believes will be useful, even though he does not know him. This is the way of thinking that leads to success in the saga, and the allusion to the legend helps clarify this.[12]

The name *Ingjaldr* also conjures certain associations. In *Heimskringla*, *Ingjaldr inn illráði* ("Ingjaldr of the evil plans") is the prototype of the predatory king. In childhood, he is

11. *Hamðismál* and *Guðrúnarhvǫt* (*Eddukvæði II. Hetjukvæði* 2014, 402–06, 407–13), *Skáldskaparmál* 49 (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* 1931, 133), *Vǫlsunga saga* 2000, 232–33.

given the nature of a wolf, and he burns his guests to death in order to obtain their kingdoms (*Ynglinga saga* 1941, 63–70, cf. Hughes 1976, 210). When Ingjaldr towards the end of *Áns saga* is given the byname *inn illi*, "the evil", after having killed the innocent Þórir (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 353), the allusion becomes crystal clear: this is a man who should not be trusted; Án's assessment of him was correct all along.

King Ingjaldr's two half-brothers are both called *Ulfr* (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 325, 338–39). In *Egils saga* there are also two brothers called *Ulfr*; they are in the service of the evil Earl Arnviðr of Värmland (*Egils saga* 1933, 233, 236–37). Both pairs are killed by the hero against the will of the evil sovereign. Because of this parallelism, and because *Áns saga* seems to be written as a counterfactual *Egils saga*, there is reason to believe that the author of *Áns saga* would have us interpret the killing of the Ulfrs in *Áns saga* in light of the killing of the Ulfrs in *Egils saga*. But how we should understand this is not entirely clear, since key aspects of the episodes are contrary. In *Egils saga*, the Ulfrs are mentioned only because they are instructed by the evil sovereign, whom they serve, to kill Egill. In *Áns saga*, they are enemies of the evil sovereign, who wants to kill them. The explanation for this inversion could lie in the question that arises in *Áns saga*: why does King Ingjaldr get angry when Án kills the two Ulfrs? *This* is probably what the analogue to *Egils saga* is intended to help us understand. Schorn (2015) believes it is because Án settles the fight too quickly, making the king miss out on honour. This may be so, but the king benefits from it anyway. When Arnviðr wants to kill Egill, it is because Egill has discovered what kind of man he is. He has stashed away King Hákon's taxes many times by killing his messengers (*Egils saga* 1933, 233), thus revealing himself as false, spiteful and unscrupulous. Án, on the other hand, reveals – by killing the Ulfrs in a masterful but covert manner, before running off – that *he* has realised what a false, spiteful and unscrupulous man *Ingjaldr* is – and that he is more dangerous than the king has realised. This is the turning point in *Áns saga*: up until now, the king has thought positively of Án; after this, he tries to kill him. The fact that this turning point is both clearly analogous to and the opposite to an episode in *Egils saga* fits with the author of *Áns saga* trying to write an *Egils saga* with an inverted outcome.

A curious element in the saga is the "gifts" that Án sends to the king from his outlawry. The first time is when Án gets hold of Ketill, who is impersonating him. Án cuts off his hair, tars him, pokes out his eyes, castrates him, and sends him to the king with these words: "Þat kalla menn konungs gersimi, ef nokkut er annars afbragð. En þér er nú brugðit nokkut, ok því sendi ek þik nú svá búinn Ingjaldi konungi, ok geld ek honum þik fyrir annan bróður sinn" (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 342), "People call it royal treasure when something is unique, and that have you now become. And therefore I am sending you thus to King Ingjaldr, as compensation for one of his brothers." The second time is when Án has avoided being killed by the king's assassin Ívarr. Án has Ívarr's legs broken and then heal so that his feet point backwards. By this Ívarr also becomes unique, so Án calls him "royal treasure" and sends him to the king as compensation for the other half-brother. (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 350)

12. Perhaps the name *Litr* can be explained in similar ways. In *Áns saga*, Litr is the dwarf who makes Án's bow and five miraculous arrows (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 327). *Litr* is elsewhere the name of the dwarf who appears at Baldr's funeral pyre, and whom Þórr, unprovoked, kicks into the fire (*Gylfaginning* 33, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* 1931, 66). Án, on the other hand, ensures that he has a good relationship to Litr and gives him some silver in addition to what they have agreed (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 327). But this is less clear.

As I see it, there are three aspects of these episodes that require explanation:

i. Án's choice of exactly these mutilations.
ii. Án's mutilation and return of these men, instead of killing them.
iii. Án's reference to them as "royal treasures".

I will try to explain this on the basis of the overarching interpretation that I have proposed. I agree with Ashman Rowe (1993, 551) that Án, by doing this, "reveals his anti-royalist attitude", but this does not explain *why* he does it. As concerns point i., the strongly sexual element in the first episode must be important. Ketill is castrated, and this is symbolically repeated, since blinding in Old Norse literature functions as symbolic castration (Lassen 2003). In addition, the backdrop to the episode is that Ketill has tried to use Án's reputation as a master archer to get himself into bed with a girl – that same Ketill who was Án's worst tormentor at court and who interpreted the *hafnarmerki* strophe as Án having homosexual desires (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 337). At this point, Án can finally rid himself of the stigma as *argr*. This he does by turning the "phallic aggression" (Meulengracht Sørensen 1983, 27–28, 53, 57, 60, 94) against Ketill. The girl whom Án prevents him from sleeping with (before taking his ability to do so) is the one Án later impregnates – with the son who 18 years later kills the king. That phallic aggression is the essence of these events also emerges from what Án says to his son when he sends him against the king: "Sverðit Þegn skaltu eiga, ok ef þú kemr þessu verki fram, þá er þar systir konungs. Haf þú hana með þér ok gjalt henni son fyrir bróður" (ibid, 360), "You shall have the sword Þegn, and if you accomplish this mission, then the sister of the king is there. Take her with you and give her a son in compensation for her brother". In this way, Án obtains a virile reparation, and so does Þórir, who was brought up as a girl.

Án's dealings with the outlaw Gáran (shortly after the mutilation of Björn) should probably be interpreted in a similar way. His name (footnote 7) requires interpretation, since it is unknown elsewhere and probably invented for *Áns saga* (Lind 1905–15, 299). If we see it as a derivation of *gár* (n.), "mockery" (Fritzner 1883–96 I, 558, Sigfús Blöndal 1920, 240), the point is that while Án puts up with being mocked at court, he now makes short work of anyone who tries to mock him. When Gáran attacks Án from behind while he is bending forward on his knees, the blow is stopped by the *sverð* that Án has hanging on his back, and Án breaks Gáran's back, decapitates him and puts his head between his legs, his nose up his bottom (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 345–46). The details here concur with the idea of phallic aggression and humiliation.

The mutilation of Ívarr clearly has to do with reversal. It may indicate that Ingjaldr does things opposite of how he should, so that a back-to-front man is a suitable retainer for him. Simultaneously, it might express that Án has chosen to do things in reverse of convention. Among other things, he has gone against the people's wishes when he spares Ívarr's life; the saga says twice that people thought he ought to be killed (ibid, 348). This is valid for points i. and ii. alike.

Point iii. also seems to concern reversal. In the outlaw section, it looks as if the author wants to place Án in a reversed or caricatured version of the role that Þorsteinn has in *Þorsteins þáttr bójarmagns* and that Þórolfr has in *Egils saga*. As we have seen, there are reasons

to believe that Án's tactics should be regarded as a twist on Þorsteinn's tactics in *Þorsteins þáttr*, and central to his role there is his travelling to countries beyond civilisation, returning with *gersemar* to the king, Óláfr Tryggvason (*Saga af Þorsteini Bæarmagni* 1827, ch. 1, 2, 8 / 12). On one of these journeys, when he is about to entertain a court with *his* magic weapon, Þorsteinn is referred to as "konungs gersemi" (ibid, 192). At the same time, the peripheries that Án occupies during his outlawry may be analogous to Þórolfr's Northern Norwegian fief in *Egils saga*, from where he sends the Saami taxes to the king. The author has included details that bring this to mind. The girl Án meets and has a child with at the beginning of the outlaw section is called *Drífa*. Elsewhere, *Drífa*, which means "snowdrift", is most known as the daughter of the mytho-historical King *Snjár* / *Snær*, "Snow", in Finland, who is a kind of winter god of a semi-human people skilled in magic (*Hversu Noregr byggðist* 1954, 75; *Ynglinga saga* 1941, 28–29). The Drífa in Finland has a son with the main character, who leaves her, and the son is later sent to him – details that are all matched in the case of Án. The byname *háleggr* ("long-leg") of Án and Drífa's son points in the same direction. The byname is very unusual, but *Halfdan háleggr* is the son of Haraldr hárfagri and *Snæfríðr*, "Snow-beautiful", the daughter of the Saami King Svási of Dovrefjell (*Haralds saga ins hárfagra* 1941, 125–26). Both *Drífa* and *háleggr* in this section of the saga create associations to snow-covered wildernesses and Finno-Ugric areas. These associations are strengthened by Án having a daughter called *Mjöll* when he comes back home to Ramsta. This is another word for snow (*mjǫll*, f.), and in *Hversu Noregr byggðist* (1954, 75) it is the name of *Drífa*'s sister. The name *Mjöll* links the Saami lands of the north to the land of Án's outlawry, as Mjöll's mother is Jórunn, whom Án married when he was an outlaw (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 362. The author places Ramsta in the *norðr*. *Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 326, 328).[13] Against this background and the reversals elsewhere in the saga, the *konungsgersemar* that Án sends to the king can be regarded as a reversed, caricatured variant of the taxes that Þórolfr in *Egils saga* so dutifully sends King Haraldr from the outskirts, where the king has placed *him*.

I do not argue that all personal names in *Áns saga* are keys to interpretation, only those that are conspicuous in some way. Many of the names in the saga are completely normal, like Björn, Ketill, Ívarr, Grímr, Ása, Jórunn. Many are also found in Saxo's (very different) version of the story – Án, Bjǫrn, Jórunn (Iuritha), Óláfr, Ása, Ingjaldr (Hughes 1976, 203, 205, 227–28, 233) – so they clearly come from the tradition that predates the *Áns saga* that we know.

## *ÁNS SAGA BOGSVEIGIS* AND *ÞORSTEINS ÞÁTTR BØJARMAGNS*

In "The Literary Re-Use of Myths in Þorsteins þáttr bøjarmagns" (Heide In print), I argue that *Þorsteins þáttr bøjarmagns* was written as a twist on the myth of Þórr's visit to the giant Útgarða-Loki (*Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* 1931, 48–61) – which in itself is a twist on the myths about the macho god Þórr. Killing giants is typical for him, but in the Útgarða-Loki myth, the giants control what he sees and therefore he appears in the surprising role of

13. It must be a mistake that the king's army, from Namdalen, goes *norðr* to *Firðafylki* (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 336), i.e. Sunnfjord and Nordfjord.

weakling and wimp – as *argr*, so to speak. Þórr and his companions appear so small that they simply slip between the bars of Útgarða-Loki's locked gate (*þá smugu þeir milli spalanna*, *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* 1931, 53). *Þorsteins þáttr* seems to be directly linked to this myth through the byname *bøjarmagn*, which the herculean Þorsteinn receives because he makes houses collapse when trying to enter them (above). But Þorsteinn too, appears tiny amongst the giants (*Saga af Þorsteini Bæarmagni* 1827, 182). This time, however, the Þórr hero nevertheless wins because he has means by which *he* controls what his opponents see. So the giants lose, in a sexually symbolic way, and the hero takes over his main opponent's farm and marries his daughter (*Saga af Þorsteini Bæarmagni* 1827, 185–98). As mentioned, the byname *bogsveigir* seems to relate to the byname *bøjarmagn*, and the main characters in the two sagas have important features in common. Both are or should have been members of the court of a king named Óláfr (Án did not know before he reached the court that Ingjaldr had taken over); they are linked to Þórr-names (**Þor**steinn. Án's siblings are **Þór**ir and **Þór**dís, his mother **Þor**gerðr); they obtain the magical weapon that is the key to their success from a dwarf early on; and they are much larger and stronger than all others, but despite this seem weak against their opponents. Using cunning, they win nonetheless, and the triumph is marked sexually by the hero / son of the hero taking the opponent's daughter / sister as his wife (*Saga af Þorsteini Bæarmagni* 1827, 197 / *Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 362), thus rendering his opponent *argr*. But while vision control is Þorsteinn's trick, Án's trick is acting the idiot and tolerating humiliation now, while gathering strength for later. *Áns saga* thus seems to be a twist also on *Þorsteins þáttr* – making it a twist on a twist on a twist. The entertainment value is great anyway, whether the macho hero is unexpectedly humiliated as (more or less) *argr* (the Útgarða-Loki myth), whether he uses vision control to win in spite of appearing as *argr* (*Þorsteins þáttr bøjarmagns*), or whether he wins *by* appearing *argr* (*Áns saga bogsveigis*).

## HOW DID THE IDEA FORM?

Why did the author want to write a saga that is yet another twist on Þórr's visit to Útgarða-Loki and a counterfactual *Egils saga*? As concerns the latter, it is certainly a point that "*Áns saga* uses early Norway as a mirror of fourteenth-century Iceland", as Ashman Rowe says (1993, 551). In the 1300s, some generations had passed since Iceland came under Norwegian dominion in the 1260s, and the Icelanders now experienced the tyranny of the king (ibid, 548). It would not do to criticise the king openly, but one could do so encoded in a saga about the distant past.

During the tyranny, it would be natural for the Icelanders to ask themselves whether they could have avoided becoming the king's subjects – somewhat similar to, as some scholars argue, the interest in the settlement period/Free State period as depicted in the sagas of Icelanders from the 13th century is related to the fact that the Free State during this period was in decline (e.g. Meulengracht Sørensen 1995, 89–91). In this situation, the early Free State was of interest as an alternative and an ideal. In the 14th century, it would be of interest to explore a counterfactual scenario from before the unification of Norway; given that the king's takeover of Iceland was in a sense the last phase of Norway's unification, when the king conquered even those who in the first instance had managed to flee. (At least, the view

expressed in the *Íslendingasǫgur* is that the Icelanders were those who fled from the tyrant Haraldr; e.g. Fidjestøl 1994, 113). *Egils saga* would be the obvious choice, since this is the *Íslendingasaga* that discusses to the greatest degree the antagonism between the farmers and the king.

This saga also distinguishes itself by the nature of its heroes, who are so big and strong that they are more trolls than humans (*Egils saga* 1933, especially p. 63, 80) – like Þorsteinn in *Þorsteins þáttr* and Þórr himself. But however superhumanly strong these heroes are in *Egils saga*, they lose against superior powers, as Þórr does during his visit to Utgarða-Loki.

As we can see, there is a certain overlap between *Egils saga* and *Þorsteins þáttr bójarmagns* / Þórr's visit to Útgarða-Loki, especially regarding the motif of the "hero who is superhumanly strong, but powerless", which is a central point of departure for *Áns saga*. In addition, *Áns saga* and *Egils saga* are connected by the fact that the main characters of both sagas descend from Ketill Hǿngr of Ramsta (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 326 / *Egils saga* 1933, 1). But the crux of the matter, the idea that the superhumanly strong hero will win by abstaining, yielding and being *argr*, seems to have originated in a thought-game surrounding the name *Án bogsveigir:*

> This *Án* who was related to the Kvedulfrs, those who were superhumanly strong, but lost – did he perhaps have to be *án* such honour and riches that they fought for? Was he perhaps an **áni*, "fool, oaf", who was *ánóttr* and did *ánagangr*? Or did he pretend to be like this? This **áni* used a bow, not a sword, did he not? So, typical for him was to *sveigja* the bow? Did he perhaps behave like his weapon and bend or yield? Or did he store power, as when one tenses a bow? Or did he do all of these?

Finally, there is reason to believe that other stories about a hero who plays the halfwit in order to take vengeance later on have played a role. Saxo tells such a story about *Amlethus* (*Saxo* 2015 I, Book 4), and it may have been known in Iceland in the 11th century, when the name *Amlóði* was first attested (Finnur Jónsson 1912–15 A I, 211, B I, 201).

There is no reason to read *Áns saga* as a moralising lecture about how the Icelanders in the 1200s could have conducted themselves in order to preserve their independence, or how the Norwegian chieftains could have done this 300 years earlier. The alternative presented by the saga is much too demanding and unrealistic for that. But it is an entertaining counterfactual scenario, no matter which period it is read into.

We should also note the moral that the author lets Án[14] end the saga with: "Þú girnst eigi eignir þær, sem Íngjaldr konúngr hefir átt! Því at skamt mun at bíða, at eytt mun fylkiskonúngum; ok er betra at gæta sinnar sæmdar, enn at setjast i hærra stað ok þaðan minkast" (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 361), "Do not desire the possessions that King Ingjaldr had! Because it won't be long before the petty kings come to an end, and it is better to take care of your status than to climb up only to be set back down". This seems to be the author's attitude: mind your own business and be patient, and things will rectify themselves in the end.

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14. The text is unclear, but the context shows (*Áns saga bogsveigis* 1829, 361–62) that it is Án who says this, not his son Þórir.

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