

E. Paul Durrenburger and
Dorothy Durrenburger:

*The Saga of Hávarður of
Ísafjörður*. With an essay on
the political, economic and
cultural background of the
saga.

Enfield, 1996, 100pp., £14.95.

The extant version of *Hávarður saga Ísfirðings* has long been classified as a poor literary effort.¹ It is badly written and highly unreliable as a historical source. Many of its sentences are sadly lacking in clarity and pith, characterizations tend to be too vague for recognition, descriptions of events are sometimes so incoherent that it is difficult to know what is going on. What aggravates the situation is the fact that the unknown author, whose anonymity is thoroughly merited, had the temerity to grab narrative material from earlier and superior sagas, including *Bandamanna saga*, *Grettis saga*, *Heiðarvíga saga*, *Hrafnkels saga*, *Njáls saga* and *Þorsteins þátrr stangarhöggs*. The original stuff is very good as long as it stays in its

proper places, but the fumbler did not know what to do with it, and the result is deplorable.

Hávarðar saga and *Hrafnkels saga* are unique in so far that both present a helpless old man whose only son, an innocent shepherd, is killed by a wealthy and powerful chieftain. In *Hrafnkels saga* the brutality of the killing is compounded by the fact that the shepherd is a member of the chieftain's own household. The shepherd is never avenged but the chieftain is severely punished for his crime; he is humiliated, tortured and forced to leave the valley of which he was the first settler. This delicate matter is handled superbly in *Hrafnkels saga*, but what follows the shepherd's death in *Hávarðar saga* is both incredible and clumsily described. The old father spends a whole year in bed mourning his son's death and then, egged on by his wife, he goes twice to the chieftain asking for compensation. Borrowing well-known incidents from *Heiðarvíga saga* and *Njáls saga*, the chieftain insults the old man on both occasions, who now takes to his bed again

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and stays there for another year. However, in the end old Hávarðr is rewarded for his patience. He takes his revenge on the chieftain, killing him on a rock out at sea, after swimming a long distance in the chilly waters of Ísafjörður.

The reputation of *Hávarðar saga* will not be greatly enhanced by the handsomely produced book under review. I found it a painful experience to compare this new translation to the original, which is only partly to blame for my suffering, and the essay gives a blurred picture of the human condition in early Iceland. The Durrenburgers (hereafter their translation will be abbreviated as SHÍ) refer to two previous translations of the saga: William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, *The Story of Howard the Halt*, in THE SAGA LIBRARY I (London, 1891), and Gudbrand Vigfusson and F. York Powell, *Havardz Saga*, in ORIGINES ISLANDICAE (Oxford, 1905). But they ignore the most recent translation: Alan Boucher, *The Saga of Havard the Halt* (Reykjavík, 1986).

The Durrenburgers

criticise the first translation of *Hávarðs saga* (hereafter abbreviated as HS) for being 'only loosely related to the Icelandic text', and then proceed to quote their own earlier argument 'that close translations such as ours best preserve the integrity of the sagas as cultural artifacts' (p. 39). While it is true that the present translators often follow the original word for word, their unfamiliarity with the Icelandic language causes numerous errors and infelicities in their English version. The Icelandic term *bóndi* 'a farmer' was originally the present participle of the verb *búa* 'to run a farm'. The Durrenburgers, however, disregard the normal meaning of the term and translate *bóndi* as 'landowner'. This is doubly misleading. Some farmers in early Iceland were tenants, and people could own land without running a farm. HS presents several unmitigated scoundrels who wielded some undefined local power and are therefore called *hofðingjar* 'chieftains', which in SHÍ becomes 'aristocrats'; the Durrenbugers contrast them misleadingly to 'commoners' (p. 22). The most

valuable piece of land belonging to a typical farm or croft was (and still is) known as *tún* 'the manured hayfield close to the farmhouse.'

Previous translators have used such terms as 'the home meadow', but in SHÍ *tún* is called 'farm-yard'. The simple sentence *Garður stóð í túninu*, literally 'A haystack stood in the home field', which describes a common feature on early Icelandic farms, becomes in SHÍ 'There was a hay-yard in the farm-yard.'

In the Icelandic sagas, various relationships between the sexes are an important concern, but the Durrenburgers have their own ideas about such matters. Proposals of marriage were always a formal affair, certain standard phrases were used on such occasions, as in HS, ch. 4: *Þorbjörn [...] hóf bónorð sitt ok bað systur Gestis Oddleifssonar*: 'Þorbjörn made a proposal of marriage and asked for the hand of Gestir Oddleifsson's sister'. In SHÍ things proceed quite differently: 'Þ. began his courtship and asked a sister of Gestir (sic!) Oddleifur's son.' Later in the saga there is a reference to Atli who was married to Steinþórr's sister.

In SHÍ there is no mention of their marital status, but somewhat unexpectedly we learn that Atli 'had the sister of Steinþórr'.

The threat 'we will kill every man's child one after the other' (SHÍ, p. 74) will probably encourage the notion among anthropologists that the killing of children was normal practice in early Iceland, but here as elsewhere the Durrenburgers have deviated from the original, in which Hávarður's threat to kill everyone evidently refers to the adult male population only. The meaning of the expression *verða manni at skaða* 'to kill a man' must have eluded the translators who state that 'two young men have done damage to such a champion as Ljótur was' (p. 82). The phrase *koma út* 'to return to Iceland from abroad' is feebly rendered as 'to come out' (p. 63). The term *siðr* means both 'religion' and 'custom'; in ch. 11 it alludes to Christian faith, but the translators render it as 'custom' (p. 71). The verb *reka* with a genitive object means 'to take revenge for something', but in SHÍ it is translated with the verb 'to

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tell'. In Icelandic, passive impersonal constructions are quite common and they seem to have impressed the Durrenburgers: 'And before assembly was ridden to' (p. 89), 'Their trip is not told of.

Hermann Pálsson

1. Sturla Þórðarson (1214-1284) used in his *Landnámabók* an earlier version of *Hávarðar saga* which is now lost.