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An Icelandic Unferð in *Illuga Saga Gríðarfóstra*

Tom Grant 

In a recent article, Leonard Neidorf demonstrated that the obscure character portraits sketched by the *Beowulf* poet can be illuminated by appealing to related Germanic material.¹ Perhaps the most difficult of the poem's characters is Unferð. Unraveling the personality of Hroðgar's belligerent counselor has proven one of the great critical challenges in *Beowulf* studies. The chief difficulty stems from his ambiguity: Unferð is neither straightforwardly good nor evil, being at once jealous and generous, treacherous and loyal, cowardly and a skilled warrior.² It is little surprise, therefore, that this figure has permitted a broad and ever-growing range of interpretations.³ Neidorf argues that the character of Unferð closely parallels that of Hagen in the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*. The similarities between Unferð and Hagen are many and suggestive: both figures are champions and royal advisors; both quarrel with a newcomer to the king's hall; and both are to some degree transgressive or morally dubious.⁴ Neidorf accounts for these similarities by suggesting that both Unferð and Hagen are related reflexes of a "warrior-counselor" archetype that existed in Germanic oral tradition and surfaced in both *Beowulf* and the *Nibelungenlied*.⁵

Support for these findings is furnished in the Icelandic *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra* ("the saga of Illugi, Gríður's foster-son"). This late *fornaldarsaga* ("saga of ancient time") is extant from the early sixteenth century, though the material it contains has deeper roots in Scandinavian legendary tradition.⁶ *Illuga saga* concerns a man named Illugi, the son of a couple who live on the outskirts of Denmark. This Illugi becomes a sworn brother of Sigurður, the son of the Danish king Hringur. A close parallel to the "warrior-counselor" archetype is found in Björn, a figure who is introduced at the beginning of *Illuga saga*. It is worth quoting the relevant passages in full.

Björn hét maður. Hann var ráðgjafi kongs. Honum var allt illa gefið. Honum var eigi sjálfrátt. Hann var lyginn og lymskur að öllu, en eigi því síður var hann hinn mesti kappi og varði land kongs fyrir víkingum, og því mat kongur hann mikils. Björn öfundaði það mjög að Illugi var svo kær Sigurði kongssyni. Og svo kom að hann rægði hann við þá feðga og sagði Illuga vera ótrúan kongssyni. Kongur hlýddi á þetta, en Sigurður trúði því ekki.⁷

There was a man named Björn. He was the king's counselor. He was ill-fated, but that was no fault of his. He was false and cunning in all respects, but nonetheless he was a great champion and protected the king's land from raiders. For that reason, the king held him in high esteem. Björn greatly begrudged the fact that Illugi was so dear to Prince Sigurður. So it happened that he slandered him to both father and son and said that Illugi was untrue to the prince. The king listened to that, but Sigurður did not believe it.⁸

The narrative proceeds with Sigurður preparing to set out on an adventure to achieve fame and riches. He wishes to take Illugi as a traveling companion, but King Hringur insists that Björn go with him instead:

Kongur sagði Björn skyldi fylgja honum, "því hann er hverjum kappa meiri og bilar allrei í stríði. Hann mun þér vera hollur og trúr, sem hann hefur mér verið," sagði kongur, og skilja þeir nú tal sitt.⁹

The king said that Björn should go with him, "because he is the greatest of all champions and never falters in battle. He will be loyal and true to you, as he has been to me," said the king, and they then ended their conversation.

Sigurður then takes this matter up with Illugi's mother, Hilldur:

Eptir þetta gengur kongsson til Sviða og segir Hilldi tal þeirra feðga. Hún segir son sinn ungan vera og eigi í hernað fara mega. "Er hann og ekki reyndur," segir hún. "Villda ég og ekki helldur að Björn brygði honum þviat hann þyrði ekki að berjast með þér í orrustu."¹⁰

After that the prince went to Sviði and told Hilldur about his conversation with his father. She said that her son was young and could not go raiding. "He is also untried," she said. "I would also not wish for Björn to reproach him should he not dare to fight with you in battle."

There are a number of salient parallels here between Björn's character portrait and the "warrior-counselor" archetype identified by Neidorf. Like Unferð and Hagen, Björn is held in high esteem at court on account of his martial ability. He is twice exalted in superlative terms as a great warrior – once by the king himself – and is also said to be an effective defender of the land. Björn is also understood to be loyal. The king appears wholly convinced of Björn's good faith, and readily believes his slanderous lies about Illugi. Björn nowhere has the magnanimity of Unferð, but this quality may be disguised in his offering Illugi a gold ring later in the saga on the condition that he find fire for their party.

As with the other two "warrior-counselors," Björn's positive qualities also have a darker side. His intelligence is implied by his position as the king's *ráðgjafi* "counselor," but this also manifests as craftiness: he is *lyginn* "false" and *lymskur* "cunning." Much like Unferð Björn's loyalty to the king and his line breeds jealousy of the newcomer who finds favor at court.¹¹ This jealousy has Björn attempt to undermine Illugi's position. That Björn achieves this by spreading falsehoods about Illugi is clear, but it is also suggested in the saga that he may also ridicule his character. Illugi's mother Hilldur entertains the possibility of Björn mocking her son for his conduct in battle – a suggestion which only makes sense if Björn were known for such behavior. This would seem to be related to Unferð's sneering at Beowulf for his foolhardy swimming match with Breca and Hagen's relating the deeds of Siegfried.¹²

The character portrait of Björn offered in *Illuga saga* qualify him as a third reflex of the "warrior-counselor" archetype identified by Neidorf. In this capacity Björn matches Unferð more closely than Hagen. This closer resemblance to Unferð is underpinned by other similarities between *Illuga saga* and *Beowulf*. It is clearly significant that both Björn and Unferð are counselors to the king of Denmark. Remarkably, both kings are Scyldings: Hroðgar is the great-grandson of Scyld Scefing, and Hringur is the son of Skjöldur.¹³ Both texts are therefore situated in precisely the same legendary environment.

There are also narrative connections between the two texts. *Illuga saga* contains a dim reflex of the "Bear's Son" folktale which formed the foundation of *Beowulf* and a range of Scandinavian sagas.¹⁴ A brief summary of the wider narrative will serve to illustrate this point. Illugi, a visitor to the Danish court and opponent of the king's counselor, heads abroad with Sigurður on his adventure. The party is blown off course. After rejecting Björn's offer of a gold ring Illugi crosses a body of water in search for fire and finds himself at the mouth of a cave. There he finds a giantess, Gríðr, and her beautiful daughter. Three times Gríðr grabs Illugi and makes as if to slay him with her *sax* "short-sword," and three times she lets him go. In showing no fear Illugi breaks a curse placed on Gríður, which she explains at some length. At this, seven troll-women enter the cave with short-swords and Illugi kills them all. He then takes gold from the cave. There are clear similarities here with the first half of the *Beowulf* narrative, particularly in terms of Beowulf's flyting with Unferð and his journey to the watery abode of Grendel's mother.

The evidence adduced here strengthens Neidorf's arguments for the existence of a "warrior-counselor" archetype in Germanic tradition. That this archetype survives not only in an ancient Old English epic and a thirteenth-century German verse romance but also in a *fornaldarsaga* from the end of the medieval period is testament not only to the extreme durability of this character type in Germanic tradition, but to its wide distribution.¹⁵ It appears to have been active for almost a millennium, and to have spread from the Continent to the northwest extreme of Europe. It is also clear that this character archetype could either circulate freely or travel within a broader narrative complex. The "warrior-counselor" type was attached to Hagen in the *Nibelungenlied* independent of any wider narrative pattern. The parallels between the careers of Unferð and Björn suggest, instead,

that the “Bear’s Son” ancestor of both *Beowulf* and *Illuga saga* called for a “warrior counselor” to test the newcomer before his monster-slaying.¹⁶ In this connection it is unclear what, if anything, can be made of the fact that Björn and Unferð both reproach a monster-killer who visits a Danish king descended from Scyld/Skjöldur. Could *Illuga saga* and *Beowulf* have a common ancestor in a version of the “Bear’s Son” folktale localized at the Scylding court?¹⁷

Notes

1. Neidorf, “*Beowulf* and the *Nibelungenlied*.”
2. Neidorf, “*Beowulf* and the *Nibelungenlied*” (659).
3. Neidorf, “*Beowulf* and the *Nibelungenlied*” (657–9).
4. These points are discussed at length in Neidorf, “*Beowulf* and the *Nibelungenlied*” (660–5).
5. That motifs and character types can be shared by stylistically different texts and retained in Germanic tradition across great lengths of time and space is readily indicated by the parallels between *Beowulf* and Icelandic romance literature. See, for instance, Schlauch; Lawrence; Grant, “*Hrólfs saga*”; “Beow in Scandinavia”; “Beowulfian Echoes”. For studies which treat the conservatism of the *Nibelungenlied* see Neidorf, “*Beowulf* and the *Nibelungenlied*” (657, n. 9).
6. On the date of *Illuga saga*, see Lavender (v, xxxiv). The development of the text is treated at xi–xxviii; see also Davíð Erlingsson.
7. Lavender (2).
8. Translations in this paper are my own.
9. Lavender (4).
10. Lavender (4).
11. A figure also called Björn appears as a jealous opponent of the monster-slayer Grettir in chapters 21–2 of *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*. This figure is no counselor and is neither intelligent nor skilled in battle, but his function in the saga resembles that of Unferð in some important respects (Taylor (16–17); Wachsler (383–90); Orchard (147–8)).
12. Neidorf, “*Beowulf* and the *Nibelungenlied*” (660–2).
13. On Hringur’s ancestors see Lavender (x–xi).
14. On the folktale heritage of *Beowulf* and its saga analogues see Grant, “Beowulfian Echoes.” To the author’s knowledge, this Scandinavian reflex of the “Bear’s Son” folktale has not been previously identified. The only appearance of *Illuga saga* in the analogue debate is an article by Peter Jorgensen, in which he compares Illugi’s crossing to the cave to Grettir’s feats of swimming (55–6).
15. *Beowulf* has recently been dated to around the year 700; see Neidorf, *The Dating of Beowulf*. On the date of the *Nibelungenlied* see Salvini-Plawen.
16. The appearance of Björn in Grettir’s slaying of the bear (see n. 11) might similarly be seen as a half-buried instance of this archetype woven into the “Bear’s Son” pattern.
17. Such a folktale ancestor is proposed in Grant, “*Hrólfs saga* (18–19)”

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