



## Skaldic Poetry across Borders Sigvatr Þórðarson's *Austrfararvísur*

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### *Abstract*

The *Austrfararvísur* (Verses on a Journey to the East) could be defined as a poem of borders: in these *vísur* Sigvatr Þórðarson, the skald of Óláfr the Saint, narrates his crossing of various geographical, political, and religious borders. *Austrfararvísur* are preserved in Snorri Sturluson's *Óláfs saga helga* and concern the famous episode of Sigvatr's visit to Västergötland, where he attempted to mediate a peace deal between King Óláfr Haraldsson of Norway and the king of Sweden. The text describes dramatic moments and inhospitable places that Sigvatr experienced in his travel from Norway to Sweden, where an immense forest still serves as a natural border today. This was also the natural border that the Norwegian dynasty traversed when, in prehistoric times, Swedish kings moved from Sweden to Norway. Now Sigvatr follows the same path, but in the opposite direction.

**Keywords:** Across Borders Sigvatr Þórðarson Poetry

Sigvatr Þórðarson, one of King Óláfr Haraldsson's most famous poets, crossed many borders in his lifetime, a life filled with travels and with diplomatic and political missions at the service of his king. Sigvatr was brought up by his step-father at Apavatn in south-west Iceland. Later, he sailed to what is now Trondheim, where he met his father, Þórðr Sigvaldaskáld, a skald at King Óláfr's court. His ability as a poet derived from family tradition and his personal skills as an adviser and a politician are testified not only by his poems where he tells of sea battles, strategic plans and war expeditions but also by the numerous excellent offers received from other sovereigns, such as the Danish King Knútr, to pass to their service. But his loyalty, another of Sigvatr's qualities, made him refuse all of them, as evidenced by the verses of this *lausavísa* (loose stanza) recited before his King Óláfr Haraldsson:

Hlýð mínum brag, meiðir  
myrklás, þvít kannk yrkja,  
alltíginn — mátt eiga

eitt skald — drasils tjalda,  
þótt ǫllungis allra,  
allvaldr, lofun skalda  
— þér fæk hróðrs at hvöru  
hlít — annarra nítið.<sup>1</sup>

Sigvatr's position as a *höfuðskáld* (chief skald) was recognised in the twelfth century (Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga Helga*, 1941 ÍF 27, 92-94; The Separate version, *Óláfs saga Helga*, 1941, 81-83, 134-36, 197-208). His versatility as a poet has clearly inspired a number of anecdotes focusing on the composition of poetry and, apart from two fragments preserved in Snorri's *Edda* (Sigv. Frag. III 1-2), Sigvatr's poetry is transmitted in a wide range of texts pertaining to the tradition of the kings' sagas.

In his narratives, Sigvatr usually asserts his status as an eye-witness, primarily addressing the king's followers (Fidjestøl 1982, 228), thus providing precious information quoted as reliable historical sources by Snorri in his *Heimskringla* (*Kings'sagas*, 1941, ÍF 27).

Besides famous poems devoted to battle accounts and to King Óláfr's enterprises (see the numerous *lausavísur* (loose stanzas) or the famous *Bersöglivísur* (Plain-speaking *Vísur*), and *Nesjavísur* (*Vísur* about Nesjar), Sigvatr composed two poems with similar titles: *Vestrfararvísur* (Verses on a Journey to the West) and *Austrfararvísur* (Verses on a Journey to the East), deriving from personal travel experiences. Indeed while the first one is a political commentary rather than a description of a voyage, the second is a sort of "skaldic journal" (a very particular one). It is recorded in Snorri's *Óláfs saga helga* in *Heimskringla* (92-94, 134-35) and in chapter 75 of the so-called *Separate Version* (1941, I, 134-36, 197-208).

The poem contains twenty-one stanzas, composed in *dróttkvætt* (the chieftain's meter), generally dated to ca. 1019, describing a visit by Sigvatr to the Swedish royal court (which would have taken place in 1018 or in 1017) in order to make King Óláfr Haraldsson of Norway and King Óláfr Skötkonung of Sweden reach a peace deal and to visit the powerful Røgnvaldr jarl Úlfsson in Skarar (in Västergötland, south of Lake Vänern) for the purpose of verifying his good intentions towards Norway. In fact, tension between the Swedish and the Norwegian kings was mounting. However, (e.g., in chapters 75-91), Snorri reveals a second purpose of the journey, namely a project of marriage of Óláfr Haraldsson to Ingigerðr, daughter of the Swedish King Óláfr.

The poem is not a *drápa* (a poem with a refrain) since it has no refrain but, as Poole suggests, rather "a loose assemblage of verses" (1991, 6-7; Kreutzer 1977, 88-89). It is quoted in *Fagrskinna* (1985 ÍF 29, 178), where it is called a *flokkr*. The text narrates about the cold and hostile reception Sigvatr received when he and his men, while passing through the forest of Eiðr to cross the Norwegian border, arrived in Sweden at a place called Hof. There, when he asked for hospitality, a woman told him that they were having the *Álfablót* and that Christians were not welcome. She added that she and her family were pagans and feared Odin's wrath. One evening he approached three farmers, and they all turned him away because in the forest of Eiðr the protagonist crosses a religious border, passing from Christianity to Paganism.

<sup>1</sup> Trans. by Fulk 2012, 701: "Listen to my poetry, {most high-born destroyer {of the dark black steed of awnings}} [SHIP > WARRIOR], because I know how to compose – you can have one skald –, although you refuse completely the praise of all other poets, mighty ruler; I shall deliver to you nonetheless a sufficiency of praise". Here, as for the following stanzas in Sigvatr Þórðarson's text, I quote from Robert D. Fulk's edition as recommended in *Skaldic Project* <<https://skaldic.org>> (10/2023).

## Stanza 4

Réðk til Hofs at hœfa;  
 hurð vas aptr, en spurðumk  
 — inn settak nef nenninn  
 niðrlútt — fyrir útan.  
 Orð gatk fæst af fyrðum,  
 (flögð baðk) en þau sögðu  
 — hnekkðumk heiðnir rekkar —  
 heilagt (við þau deila).<sup>2</sup>

## And again

‘Gakkat inn,’ kvað ekkja, ‘armi drengr, en  
 lengra; hræðumk ek við Óðins  
 — erum heiðin vér — reiði.’  
 Rýgr kvazk inni eiga  
 óþekk, sús mér hnekkði,  
 alfablót, sem ulfi  
 ótvín, í bæ sínum.<sup>3</sup>

Scholars have different views about the contents and the order of the stanzas in relation to which stanzas are to be excluded from the poem because they were not composed on that occasion. The unity of the text has been questioned and so have been a number of details of Sigvatr’s route. While the poem regards one, or two or more journeys he undertook, the exact places he refers to are still under debate. It seems impossible to resolve them conclusively. Therefore the edition from which I quote, by Robert D. Fulk (2012), is based on the poem as conceived by Finnur Jónsson (*Skj* 1908-12) and retained by Kock (*Skald* 1946-50), not because the editor is convinced that it is correct, rather as an acknowledgement of the fact that the reasonable alternatives are too many and there are too many uncertainties.

Some objections to the unity of Sigvatr’s diplomatic enterprise have already been raised about the place name “Svíþjóð” used to indicate Sweden, in the first stanza when Sigvatr describes the Norwegian border he crosses on his journey:

Sendr vask upp af öndrum  
 austr (svafk fátt í hausti)  
 til Svíþjóðar (síðan)  
 svanvangs í fgr langa.<sup>4</sup>

## One objection reads:

<sup>2</sup>Trans. by Fulk 2012, 589: “I resolved to aim for Hof; the door was barred, but I made enquiries from outside; resolute, I stuck my down-bent nose in. I got very little response from the people, but they said [it was] holy; the heathen men drove me off; I bade the ogresses bandy words with them”.

<sup>3</sup>Trans. by Fulk 2012, 590: “‘Do not come any farther in, wretched fellow’, said the woman; ‘I fear the wrath of Óðinn; we are heathen.’ The disagreeable female, who drove me away like a wolf without hesitation, said they were holding a sacrifice to the elves inside her farmhouse”.

<sup>4</sup>Trans. by Fulk 2012, 583: “I was sent up from the skis of the swan-plain [SEA > SHIPS] on a long journey east to Sweden; I slept little after that in the autumn”.

If the journey of 1019 was to Västergötland only, it makes little sense that Sigvatr should say that he made a trip east *til Svíþjóðar* ‘to the realm of the Swedes’ (st. 1/7), since *Svíþjóð* in Sigvatr’s day did not mean ‘Sweden’ in the modern sense but the area around Lake Mälaren, therefore it did not include Götaland. (Snorri Sturluson, 1941, ÍF 27, xxxi-xxxii; see also Wellendorf 2022, 469-89)

I would like to point out that the main source of the poem is Snorri’s *Óláfs saga helga* in *Heimskringla*. *Heimskringla* starts with *Ynglingasaga* based on *Ynglingatal*, a genealogical poem composed by Þjóðólfr or Hvínir, one of Harald Hárfagri’s skalds. Snorri introduces the poem and uses the term *Svíþjóð* to designate the Eastern part of Scandinavia from which the Norwegian royal dynasty came from. Those kings came through the forest of Eiðaskógr, which is a natural border between Sweden and Norway. It is precisely the same path taken by Sigvatr but in the opposite direction. The old kings passed through that wood in order to reach the land (Norway) where, according to Sigvatr’s ideology, they would have found a solid and modern monarchy and, first of all, where they would become Christian. Sigvatr certainly knew the old poem by Þjóðólfr about the Norwegian dynasty, being *Ynglingatal* the poetic genealogy of his patron. According to the *First Grammatical Treatise*, genealogies were among the first genres written in Iceland as well as precious historical sources not only for Snorri, but also for all other Scandinavian historians (Theodericus Monachus, Saxo Grammaticus, Ari Þorgilsson). Here I wish to emphasize the crucial role *Ynglingatal* played in fixing principles and values to create a national identity for the Norwegians, based also on ancient rituals and magic as well as on heathen practices and sacrifices which the first kings brought with them in their travel by land from *Svíþjóð* (an Old West Norse compound meaning “the Svear people”). The corresponding Old East Norse term *Sweþiuð* appears on a number of runestones (in the locative *i suiþiuþu*) situated along the *Eriksgata*, the traditional journey of the newly elected Medieval Swedish kings through the important provinces, in order to have their election confirmed by the local assemblies, for example, the runstone in Aspa (Runestones Sö Fv 1948; 289), which was the place of the local assembly called the Tingshögen, reads:

Aspa, Södermanland (Latin transliteration):

ostriþ : lit : -ira : ku(m) ... usi = at : anunt = auk : raknualt : sun : sin =: urþu : ta ... r : - (t)an...  
- ... (k)u : ua-u : rikir : o rauniki : ak : snialastir : i : suiþiuþu. (Jansson 1948, 289)

Old Norse transcription:

*Astrið let gæra kumbl þausi at Anund ok Ragnvald, sun sinn. Urðu dauðir [i] Danmarku, varu rikir a Rauningi ok sniallastir i Sveþiuðu. (Ibidem)*<sup>5</sup>

or Simris runstone D344 in Scania (11<sup>th</sup> century):

\* *biarngair* × *lit* (\*) *raisa* \* *stain* \* *þina* \* *eftir* \* *rafn* \* *broþur* \* *sin* \* *su(i)n* \* *kun(u)--s* \* *a suiþiuþu*. (Nielsen 2000, 129)<sup>6</sup>

The earliest instance of the name, however, appears to be *Suetidi* in Jordanes’s *Getica* (6<sup>th</sup> century): namely, *Swethiuth* and its different forms gave rise to the Latin names for Sweden, *Suethia*, *Suetia* and *Suecia* as well as to the modern English name for the country (Thunberg 2012, 23-24).

<sup>5</sup> Trans. retrieved from *Sammordisk runtextdatabas*: “Astrid had this memorial made after Anund and Ragnvald, her son. (They) died in Denmark, were powerful in Rauningi and the ablest in Sweden”.

<sup>6</sup> Trans. *ibidem*: “Björngeirr had this stone raised in memory of Hrafn, his brother, Gunnulfr’s lad in Sweden”.

Thus Svíþjóð, carved on runstones spread in various regions of Sweden, and often connected to important political ceremonies (such as the royal route Eriksgata) and to significant legal moments (the assembly of Tingshöden), seems to have possessed ancient mythic and traditional connotations, which could have made Sigvatr adopt this toponym to generally indicate all the territories beyond the Norwegian border inhabited by pagans and not ruled by a Christian King.

Therefore in Sigvatr's text, Eiðrskog, the forest of Eiðr, which divides Norway from Sweden, represents a crucial border that he himself crosses in the opposite direction with respect to the path taken by the Ynglingar kings, symbolizing a sort of return into the heathen world, into a barbarian past where even hospitality and welcome were unknown. Perhaps it was on purpose that he called the geographical, social, and religious area outside Norway by the ancient name of *Svíþjóð*, a meaningful name, which expresses the dark old universe where even human sacrifices were used in order to propitiate crops or battles, as *Ynglingatal* witnesses:

Hitt vas fyrr,  
at fold ruðu  
sverðberendr  
sínnum dróttni.  
Ok landherr  
af lífsvönum  
dreyrug vöpn  
Dómalda bar,  
þás árgjörn  
Jóta dolgi  
Svía kind  
of sóa skyldi.<sup>7</sup>

In this way Sigvatr, as the chief skald of the Christianizer king of Norway, underlines Norway's religious, cultural and social progress and simultaneously praises his patron. He wants to portray his route as a kind of *descension ad inferos*, not only a full immersion into an uncivilized land from which he is continuously driven out by those *heiðnir* "heathens", but also a way back to the pagan pre-history Norwegians had been freed from by his sovereign. Thus, besides geographical, political and religious borders, he also crosses a deeper kind of border, the one between pre-history and history.

In general, Sigvatr uses fewer complex poetic circumlocutions than many of his predecessors, and, as a Christian poet, he tries to avoid allusions to pagan mythology. Nevertheless here he mentions *alfar* once and *Óðinn* twice to underline the threatening situation in which he found himself. Moreover, specifically for *Austfararvísur* it has been noted that the style varies from those stanzas with present-tense verbs, deictic adverbs, and a focus on the poet himself with his comic irony, e.g. the expressions where he mentions his anger and contempt such as the "aside" "vér stiltum svá" (2, 3)<sup>8</sup> and "Taki hlægiskip hauga / herr; sákat far verra" (2, 5-6)<sup>9</sup>, while in the third stanza he openly names his feelings by using the adjective *reiðr* (angry): "Vasa fý\*st, es rannk rastir reiðr of skóg frá Eiðum" (3, 1-2).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Trans. by Foulks in Marold 2012, 16: "It happened earlier that the sword-bearers [WARRIORS] reddened the ground with [the blood of] their leader. And the army of the land bore bloody weapons away from the lifeless Dómaldi when the race of the Swedes, eager for good harvests, had to sacrifice the enemy of the Jótar [= DÓMALDI]."

<sup>8</sup> Trans. by Fulk 2012, 585: "we had managed so badly in the boat".

<sup>9</sup> Trans. *ibidem*: "May the host of burial mounds [TROLLS] take the laughable ship".

<sup>10</sup> Trans. by Fulk 2012, 587: "[...] when I ran, angry, twelve leagues and one through the forest".

Even the change of transport means, by leaving the ship and continuing the journey riding on horseback, reminds of the ancient Ynglingar kings while moving from East to North-West by land through Eiðr forest. And of course it is presented as a negative experience.

Hykka fót án flekkum  
— fell sár á il hvára —  
— hvast gengum þó þingat  
þann dag — konungsmönnum. (3, 5-8)<sup>11</sup>

In this regard, as far as the objection against the unity of the journey is concerned: “it might be objected that the journeys differ in as much as Sigvatr is on foot in ch. 75 (see st. 3) while he is on horseback in ch. 53 (see st. 11)” (Fulk 2012, 578) it can easily be argued that a long journey by land had to necessarily be covered partly on horseback and partly on foot.

Already in the first stanzas Sigvatr had expressed his disappointment in “asides” containing emotions and information on his personal status such as: “þolðak vás” (1, 3)<sup>12</sup> or *svafk fátt í hausti* (1, 6).<sup>13</sup> These verses sharply differ from later stanzas which instead show Sigvatr’s laudatory epithets for his patron and his pride in his diplomatic skills, as in the following one:

Létk við yðr, es ítran,  
Óleifr, hugat mólum  
rétt, es ríkan hittak  
Rognvald, konungr, haldit.  
Deildak mól ins milda,  
malma vörðr, í gørðum  
harða mǫrg; né heyrðak  
heiðmanns tǫlur greiðri. (17, 1-8)<sup>14</sup>

Despite the different views in favour of or against the description of one or two missions in the text, a unifying aspect is given by a topic imprinting the whole narrative: crossing borders. The poem seems to be conceived as a succession of crossings between different situations, uses and customs, also reflected in language and style. The theme of crossing borders may therefore help us to unify its structure and guess its message. This way its scattered stanzas, certainly difficult to order and understand, appear to follow a pattern repeated throughout the text. Through comparisons between a land governed by a “rex justus” and another still fragmented and still tied to outdated beliefs, the superiority of Norway and its king is reaffirmed and celebrated.

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<sup>11</sup> Trans. by Fulk 2012, 587: “I think not a foot of the king’s men was without sores; a wound landed on each sole”.

<sup>12</sup> Trans. by Fulk 2012, 583: “I endured hardship”.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*: “I slept little after that in the autumn”.

<sup>14</sup> Trans. by Fulk 2012, 606: “I kept conscientiously, precisely, to the arrangements with you, King Óláfr, when [I met with] the excellent, when I met with the powerful Rognvaldr. I dealt with very many arrangements in the courts of the generous one, guardian of metal weapons [WARRIOR = Óláfr]; I have not heard more loyal speeches of a tributary [ROGNVALDR]”.



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