

The Fox as a Dying Hero: An Edition and Translation of the Late Medieval Icelandic Poem Skaufalabálkur

Le renard, héros mourant : une édition et une traduction du poème islandais de la fin du Moyen Âge Skaufalabálkur

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Article abstract

The late-medieval Icelandic poem Skaufalabálkur describes the final hunting trip of an old fox in a style mimicking heroic epic. The work is traditionally connected with poets working at or near Skarð in Western-Iceland in the 15th century and we argue here that the language of the poem is consistent with that dating. This new edition presents a text of the poem based on the oldest manuscript with some advances in the reading and interpretation of certain words. The translation aims to accurately transmit the poem's rich vocabulary pertaining to the life of foxes and medieval farming in the subarctic and to accessibly convey a satiric gem to a modern audience.

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The Fox as a Dying Hero: An Edition and Translation of the Late Medieval Icelandic Poem *Skaufalabálkur*

HAUKUR ÞORGEIRSSON
WILLIAM SAYERS

ABSTRACT: The late-medieval Icelandic poem *Skaufalabálkur* describes the final hunting trip of an old fox in a style mimicking heroic epic. The work is traditionally connected with poets working at or near *Skarð* in Western-Iceland in the 15th century and we argue here that the language of the poem is consistent with that dating. This new edition presents a text of the poem based on the oldest manuscript with some advances in the reading and interpretation of certain words. The translation aims to accurately transmit the poem's rich vocabulary pertaining to the life of foxes and medieval farming in the subarctic and to accessibly convey a satiric gem to a modern audience.

RÉSUMÉ: Le poème islandais de la fin du Moyen Âge *Skaufalabálkur* décrit la dernière chasse d'un vieux renard dans un style imitant l'épopée héroïque. L'œuvre est traditionnellement liée à des poètes travaillant à *Skarð* ou dans ses environs, dans l'ouest de l'Islande, au XVe siècle, et nous soutenons ici que la langue du poème est cohérente avec cette datation. Cette nouvelle édition présente un texte du poème basé sur le plus ancien manuscrit, avec quelques avancées dans la lecture et l'interprétation de certains mots. La traduction vise à transmettre avec précision le riche vocabulaire du poème relatif à la vie des renards et à l'agriculture médiévale dans le subarctique, et à transmettre de manière accessible un joyau satirique à un public moderne.

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Introduction

The late medieval Icelandic *Skaufalabálkur* [The Poem of Sheaf-Tail] has long been appreciated for its humour and flair. The poem describes the final hunting trip of an old fox, in the process offering some details about contemporary Icelandic farmsteads. While it prompts comparisons with medieval European animal fables and epics, its satiric thrust is directed more to northern literary conventions than to human social behaviour. Sheaf-Tail's interaction with his vixen and his account of his adventures with sheep, sheep-dogs, shepherds, and farmers recall both the incitation scenes of the sagas of Icelanders and the Old Norse life poem [ævidrápa], typically extemporized by a hero at death's door. The author also pokes fun at Icelanders' penchant for old saws, forebodings, and fatalism. The worst is always just around the corner of the byre.

The aims of this new edition are to render the poem more accessible and to make progress on the philological and semantic challenges of the text. We have done our best to find the most accurate English equivalents of the poem's semi-technical terms associated with medieval subarctic farm life and vulpine ethology. To enable a seamless reading of the poem as a whole, we have opted against interrupting the flow of the text with critical commentary, instead relegating textual notes to the end. Our translation aims to provide a pleasant reading experience and to capture as much as possible of the charm and mock-seriousness of the original work.

Authorship and Dating

The authorship of the poem is a surprisingly confusing question. According to Jón lærði [the learned] Guðmundsson (1574–1658), a poet named Einar fóstri [the fosterer / fostered] composed both *Skaufalabálkur* and *Skíðaríma* [the *ríma* of Skíði] – another poem which takes a humorous look at Old Norse heroes and heroic conventions. There is little reliable information to be had about Einar fóstri. Jón reports that he was the poet of Björn Einarsson Jórsalafari [Jerusalem-Traveler] (d. 1415) but it is clear that there has been some confusion between Björn Einarsson and the later magnate Björn Þorleifsson (c. 1408–1467). Firstly, Jón reports that the wife of his Björn was Ólöf, but this is not true of Björn Einarsson, whose wife was Solveig. It is, however, true of Björn Þorleifsson whose wife was Ólöf Loftsdóttir (c. 1410–1479). Secondly, Jón tells a story involving Björn, Ólöf, Greenland, and some trolls (Ólafur Halldórsson 44–45) but a very similar story is found in an older source, *Byskupsannálar* [Bishop Annals] by Jón Egilsson (1548 – c. 1636), and in that case it is about Björn Þorleifsson and Ólöf Loftsdóttir (Ólafur Halldórsson 242–243).

Some further details about the poet are found in eighteenth-century sources. Erlendur Ólafsson (1706–1772) reports that Einar fóstri accompanied Ólöf Loftsdóttir to Denmark in 1468 when she went before King Christian to seek justice for her slain husband. According to this source, Einar fóstri composed *Skíðaríma* on the way back to Iceland that same year (Björn K. Þórólfsson 380). Adding to the confusion, some other eighteenth-century sources report that the author was not Einar fóstri but Sigurður fóstri (d. c. 1449). Jón Ólafsson (1705–1779) relates that Sigurður fóstri composed *Skíðaríma* on a return trip from Jerusalem to Iceland with Ólöf Loftsdóttir in c. 1440 (Björn K. Þórólfsson 381). According to some nineteenth-century source, Sigurður fóstri composed both *Skaufalabálkur* and *Skíðaríma* (Homan 115–116, 126).

A third candidate for the name of our author is Svartur at Hofstaðir. This is the authorial attribution of *Skaufalabálkur* in the final stanza of the poem in the eighteenth-century manuscript Rask 87. Since this attribution is a part of the poem itself it is, at first glance, more credible than most. However, Rask 87 is a late manuscript and its version of *Skaufalabálkur* has several stanzas not found in the earlier sixteenth-century *Hólsbók* (AM 603 4to; for more detail see the next section). We do not know if *Hólsbók* had this final stanza since a leaf has been lost from the manuscript. Confusingly, the text by Jón “the learned” which attributes *Skaufalabálkur* to Einar fóstri contains an alternative version of this final strophe which, indeed, attributes the poem to Einar. Possibly, one version is the original and the other is a later attempt to correct it. Or possibly there were two poems with the name *Skaufalabálkur*, one by Svartur, which is preserved, and one by Einar, of which we only have the final strophe.

According to Jón lærði, Svartur at Hofstaðir was a poet who composed for, yet again, Ólöf Loftsdóttir (Jón Þorkelsson 1899, 244). The name Svartur is rare and as pointed out by Jón Þorkelsson (1899) this Svartur at Hofstaðir must be the same man as Svartur Þórðarson who sold the farm Hofstaðir in the Westfjords in 1477 as attested in a contemporary document written at Skarð in northwest Iceland (245). The location is highly significant since Skarð was the home of Ólöf Loftsdóttir and Björn Þorleifsson, the supposed patrons of the poet. Finally, there is one manuscript of *Skíðaríma* which attributes it, with some doubt, to Svartur at Hofstaðir (Björn K. Þórólfsson 382; Jón Samsonarson 431).

To summarize the previous paragraphs, the sources on the authorship of *Skaufalabálkur* are late and contradictory but there are two common themes. One is that the same author composed *Skaufalabálkur* and *Skíðaríma*. The other is that this author worked for Björn Þorleifsson (c. 1408–1467) and Ólöf Loftsdóttir (c. 1410–1479) at Skarð, the wealthiest and most powerful people in Iceland at that time. The question for the textual scholar is whether these two claims are plausible and our answer is that they are very plausible indeed. *Skíðaríma* tells of the travels of the vagrant Skíði and its descriptions reveal that the author is especially familiar with the Dalir area in Iceland – where Skarð is

located. *Skaufalabálkur* and *Skíðaríma* are both unusually creative and interesting works and it is not difficult to imagine that they are the product of the same mind. A recent stylistic analysis by Haukur Þorgeirsson (2022) concludes that *Skaufalabálkur*, *Skíðaríma*, and *Bjarkarímur* [the *rímur* of Bjarki] have so much commonality in vocabulary, style, and themes that common authorship is the best explanation.

In the 2022 article, Haukur concluded (2022, 68) that a linguistic dating of *Skíðaríma* and *Bjarkarímur* points to the mid-fifteenth century – which fits well with composition for either Björn or Ólöf at Skarð. However, Kari Ellen Gade has argued that there are linguistic forms in *Skaufalabálkur* that indicate a dating to the fourteenth century rather than the fifteenth century. It is, then, necessary to evaluate these arguments. Gade (952) presents the case as follows:

The 603 version ... contains older linguistic forms, such as the demonstrative pronoun *sjá* (m. nom. sg.) ‘this’, which is uncommon after the fourteenth century, a clear distinction between the inflected dual possessive pronoun *okkr* ‘we two’ and the genitive of the dual *okkar* ‘of us two’, as well as the ending *a* (rather than *i*) in the 1st pers. sg. pres. and pret. indic. of weak verbs The scribe of 603 also occasionally uses the cliticised form ‘hefc’, literally ‘have-I’ (sts 30/1, 37/5), which indicates that he is copying an older exemplar which cannot date from the second half of the fifteenth century.

We will examine these linguistic traits in the order listed. Firstly, the demonstrative form *sjá* survived into the sixteenth century (Katrín Axelsdóttir, 192) and occurs often enough in fifteenth-century poetry. The fifteenth-century *rímur* cycle *Ormars rímur* [the *rímur* of Ormar] has six examples (stanzas I.16, I.18, I.21, II.7, III.3 and IV.19; Haukur Þorgeirsson 2013), and this is not unusual. Secondly, the possessive pronoun *okkarr* is still alive and well in the fifteenth century (Katrín Axelsdóttir, 416–420), and there appears to be nothing particularly archaic about its use in *Skaufalabálkur*. Thirdly, the change in the first-person ending of weak verbs from *a* to *i* is by no means a change that can be used to distinguish between fourteenth- and fifteenth-century texts. Indeed, the *a*-forms are still quite prominent even in the sixteenth century. As an example, *Þjófa rímur* [the *rímur* of the thieves], a sixteenth-century composition, has the form *vissa* [I knew] in stanza I.26 (AM 604 d 4to, 31v, line 22). Finally, there are no actual ‘hefc’ forms in the text of *Skaufalabálkur* in *Hólsbók*. The forms that are read as such by Gade are really ‘hef^c’ with a superscript ‘c’—a common way to abbreviate the pronoun *eg* and not especially archaic in this context. This spelling is not particular to *Skaufalabálkur* but rather a reoccurring aspect of the orthography of *Hólsbók*. In sum, none of the traits pointed out in

the *Skaldic* edition offer any support for a fourteenth-century dating. The linguistic evidence is consistent with the traditions which place the composition of the poem at Skarð in the mid-fifteenth century.

The Sources and the Text

The text of *Skaufalabálkur* is preserved in two sources, the earlier of which is the vellum manuscript *Hólsbók*, which has the shelfmark AM 603 4to. *Hólsbók* is a collection of secular poetry, mostly of the *rímur* genre. Björn K. Þórólfsson dated the manuscript to the middle of the sixteenth century or slightly later (5). The text of *Skaufalabálkur* in *Hólsbók* is found on the two sides of a single leaf. The text ends defectively mid-line in strophe 37. The very end of the poem was no doubt written on the following leaf, which is now lost. *Hólsbók* was in a more complete state when Jón Ólafsson (1705–1779) made the first catalogue of Árni Magnússon's manuscript collection in 1730. In Jón's days the manuscript contained not one but two fox poems and apparently neither was defective; it also contained more *rímur* texts than it now does. It is not clear when pages were lost from *Hólsbók*, but suspicion has fallen on the events of 1807, when the British bombarded Copenhagen and the Arnamagnæan manuscript collection was moved in haste to protect it (Jón Helgason 1975, 242).¹

The other source preserving the poem is Rask 87, an eighteenth-century paper manuscript. The text diverges quite a bit from the older source, most substantially in including two additional strophes after what is strophe 6 in *Hólsbók* and another two additional strophes after what is strophe 36 in *Hólsbók*. The question of the relationship between the two manuscripts has bearing on any edition of the poem. If 87 is an independent source of the medieval text, then it is natural enough for the editor to use readings from it that may seem preferable on semantic, grammatical, or metrical grounds. The four additional strophes might, then, also be the work of the original author and can be included in the edition. This is the procedure used in Gade's edition and earlier in the editions by Jón Þorkelsson (1888, 229–35; 1922–27, 154–60).

There are, however, reasons to believe that the version in 87 is not independent of *Hólsbók*. Rather, it was composed pen in hand by someone who was in possession of the *Hólsbók* text and wanted to improve on it. This was the conclusion reached by Jón Helgason in a 1924 article. Jón evaluates the textual variation in 87 as secondary and points out an especially telling variant. The scribe of *Hólsbók* has an unusual orthographic quirk: from time to time, he uses an 'aa' ligature to represent short *a* rather than long *á*. Thus, he writes the word *hundsá* [doggy] as 'hunzæ'. The Rask 87 text here is *hund sá* [saw a dog]. As Jón

¹ The efforts to save the Arnamagnæan collection from British bombardment are dramatized by Arndís Þórarinsdóttir (2021), see also Katelin Marit Parsons (2022).

points out, this variant is parsimoniously explained as arising from the unusual orthography of *Hólsbók*. A reader of *Hólsbók* expecting ‘æ’ to have the normal value of á could easily misread ‘hunzæ’ as *hund sá*.

It is, thus, likely that 87 is not an independent witness to the medieval text but derivative of *Hólsbók*. Proceeding on this basis, we have chosen the *Hólsbók* text as the basis for our edition and done our best to make sense of it. Even though *Hólsbók* is clearly the better witness, it has a number of obvious misspellings and a few oddities. In our Icelandic text we note any deviation from the text of *Hólsbók* with an asterisk. They are addressed along with other textual difficulties in notes at the end.

How close the preserved sixteenth-century text is to the composition of the fifteenth-century poet is hard to say. The poem is composed in the common Germanic alliterative metre, known in Iceland as *fornyrðislag* [old word metre]. Previous editors have used metrics to assist with textual criticism but we have refrained from doing so. There is little poetry in this metre preserved from this time,² so it is hard to say what would have or would not have counted as permissible. Some of the apparent liberties in the placement of alliteration or in the patterns of long and short syllables might be authorial.

For the Icelandic text of the poem, we have used normalized modern spelling as a model. This is meant to be more accessible than a diplomatic text would be and less anachronistic than normalized Old Norse spelling would be. More or less all of the phonetic changes that are acknowledged by modern Icelandic spelling had taken place by the fifteenth century – thus it is with good conscience that we write, for example, *eg* [I] and *að* [to] and *verður* [becomes] rather than *ek* and *at* and *verðr*. We have not, however, modernized any of the authentic late medieval forms of *Hólsbók* such as *aldri* [never], *tög* [ten of something] and *leitaða* [I searched] (modern Icelandic *aldrei*, *tug* and *leitaði*).

² For a history of *fornyrðislag* in Iceland, see Haukur Þorgeirsson (2010). The metre appears to have been in continuous use, but in the late Middle Ages it was not typically used for the sort of high-status poetry that would be committed to vellum.

***Skaufalabálkur* – The Poem of Sheaf-Tail**

1. Hefir í grenjum gamall skaufali
lengi búið hjá langhölu.
Átt hafa þau sér alls upp talda
átján sonu og eina dóttur.

Old Sheaf-Tail has lived long in
dens with Long-Tail. All told, they
have had eighteen sons and one
daughter.

2. Því voru nítján niðjar skaufala,
hunds jafningja, heldur en tuttugu,
þar sannaðist fyrða fornmæli
að oft verður örgum eins vant á tög.

This is why Sheaf-Tail, the equal of
any dog, had nineteen kits rather
than twenty. The evil one often
leaves us one short in ten. Here the
people's old saying proved true.

3. Þá voru burtu börn *skaufala
flestöll farin úr föðurgarði.
Þó voru eftir þeim til fylgdar
þrír yrmlingar og þeira dóttir.

By then most of Sheaf-Tail's
children had gone off from the
family home. Three little runts
and their daughter were still left
as their company.

4. Mælti gortanni við *grenlægu,
“Hvað skulum vinna vær til þarfa?
Við erum orðin veyklenduð mjög
hryggsnauð harla en *halar rotnaðir.”

Gore-Tooth said to Den-Dweller,
“What shall we do in our need?
Our loins have become weak, our
backs have become very bare, and
the hair has fallen from our
brushes.”

5.Svarar grenlægja gömul á móti,
 “Nú *eru á burtu börn okkur roskin
 en þau ung sem eftir sitja
 og enn ekki á legg komin.

The old Den-Dweller answers back,
 “Now that our oldest children
 have gone off, those who are left
 are young and not yet fully grown.

6.Þú munt heiman halda verða
 og afla bráða til bús okkars.
 Væri það til vinnu að leggja
 sem virðum má verst gegna.”

You will have to leave home to
 provide meat for our household.
 The task at hand is to do what
 serves men most ill.”

7.Mælti þanninn móðir drattala,
 “Matur er eigi meiri mér í höndum,
 hálrófubein og hryggur úr lambi,
 bóleggir þrír og banakringla.”

Drag-Tail’s mother spoke in this
 fashion, “I have no more food on
 hand: a tailbone and the spine of a
 lamb, three shoulder bones, and a
 neckbone from the death-cut.”

8.“Svo er nú liðið,” segir lágfæta,
 “loðbakur minn, langt á tíma –
 von er upp héðan veðra harðra
 en að höndum kominn haustþústur mikill.

“The year is so advanced, my
 Hairy-Back,” says Short-Leg, “we
 can expect hard storms from now
 on; a great autumn blast is
 already in the offing.

9.Betra er nú bráða að leita,
 en þá fyrðar fé sitt geyma.
 Liggja með brúnum lömb hvetvetna
 en á fjalli feitir sauðir.”

It’s better to look for meat now
 than later when men are tending
 to their stock. Lambs can be found
 everywhere along the brows of
 hills and fat sheep in the
 mountains.”

10. "Sá er nú tími," segir rebbali,
 "sem seggir munu að sauðum ganga.
 Víst er alls staðar von um hédan,
 mun á fjöllum nú mannferð mikil.'

"This is the time," says Fox-Brush,
 "when men will be going up to
 round up their sheep. You can
 certainly expect that from now on
 there will be a lot of coming and
 going everywhere in the
 mountains."

11. "Vissa eg eigi víst," segir tófa,
 "að þú huglaust hjarta bærir.
 Þú vilt bölvður til bana svelta
 afkvæmi þitt og okkur bæði."

"As if I didn't know," says the
 vixen, "you have the heart of a
 coward. Cursed as you are, you
 want to starve your offspring and
 the two of us to death."

12. "Þú skalt ráða," segir rebbali,
 "við mun eg leita vista að afla.
 Þó hafa nornir þess um mig spáð
 að mér gömlum glæpast mundi."

"You'll have your way," says Fox-
 Brush, "I'll try to find a means to
 get us some food, although the
 norns foresaw that in my old age I
 would be lured out into some affair
 that would turn out badly."

13. Fór heiman þá fljótt dratthali
 og ætlar sér afla að fanga.
 Fann skjótlega fimmtán sauði
 og einn af þeim allvel feitan.

Then Drag-Tail set off quickly
 from home with a plan to find
 food. He soon located fifteen
 sheep, one of them very fat.

14. Það var geldingur gamburlega stór
grákollóttur gamall að aldri.
Vendir skolli víst að honum
og með tönnum tók í lagða.

It was a wether, as big as a
stockman's boast, grey and
hornless, advanced in age. Foxie,
sure enough, turns on him and
seizes flocks of fleece in his teeth.

15. Svo lauk skiptum skolla og sauðar,
að grákollur gekk frá lífi.
Bjóst dratthali burtu heim þaðan;
hafði sauð fengið sér til vista.

The contest between Foxie and the
sheep then ended with Grey-Pate
leaving this life. Drag-Tail makes
ready to set off from there for
home; he had caught a sheep for
his stores.

16. Nú skal segja nokkuð fleira
frá ferðum hans fyrst að sinni.
Heim kom síðla sauðbítur gamall
svangur og sópinn svo til grenja.

Now, for a while, I'll have a bit
more to say about his excursion.
Old Sheep-Biter came back late to
the den, ravenous with an empty
stomach.

17. Kallar kámleitur á konu sína,
heldur hvasseygður, hunds jafningi:
“Má eg segja þér frá ferðum mínum,
heldur hraklega, sem mér hugur sagði.

Grime-Face, quite keen-eyed, the
match of any dog, calls to his wife,
“Let me tell you about my travels,
all rather terrible to my way of
thinking.

18. Það var í morgun, þá eg heiman fór;
 hafða eg fengið mér feitar bráðir,
 bundið bagga og á bak mér lagðan.
 Hugðumst heim flytja hann til byggða.

It happened this morning when I
 left home, I had got some fat meat
 for myself, tied it up in a sack, and
 slung it over my shoulder. I was
 intending to bring it home to the
 settlement.

19. Þá var mér litið í lág eina,
 hvar að háfættur maður hljóp kallandi.
 Fór með honum ferlíki mikið,
 kolsvart að lit, kennda eg hundsá.

Then, in a dell I happened to see
 where a long-legged man was
 running and shouting. Sprinting
 with him was a huge monster,
 coal-black in colour. I recognized
 it as his 'doggy.'

20. Rétti hann trýni en rekur upp sjónir
 og þekkti þegar hvar eg keifaða.
 Mér kom heldur í hug hvað hann mundi vilja.
 Vatt eg af mér vænni byrði.

He stretched out his snout,
 opened his eyes wide, and
 immediately discovered where I
 was skulking along. I had a pretty
 good idea of what was on his
 mind. I threw off my fine burden.

21. Hann tók á skeiði skjótt eftir mér;
 skundar hvatlega og skrefaði stórum.
 Hljóp eg frálega heldur undan;
 leitaða eg við lífi að forða.

He promptly began to run after
 me; he rushed rapidly, with great
 bounds. I ran off in a great hurry; I
 was trying to save my life.

22.Fóru við lengi um fjallshlíð eina,
 upp og ofan, svo undrum gegndi.
 Hitta eg *hamarskarð og holu eina.
 Hlaut eg í hana hræddur að smjúga.

We ran a long way along the side
 of a mountain, up and down, so
 much that it was a wonder. I
 found a crevice in a crag and in it,
 a hole. Terrified, I managed to
 squeeze in there.

23.Var gren þetta grjóti um hvorfíð.
 Mátti hundur þar hvergi inn komast.
 Gó hann grimmlega þá hann gat ekki,
 garpur ginmikill, gripið mig tönnum.

This den was ringed about with
 stones. The dog could nowhere
 find a way in. He barked fiercely,
 that mighty-mawed champion,
 when he was not able to seize me
 in his teeth.

24.Þar húkta eg þó mér illt þætta,
 heldur hundeygður, og hræddumst dauða.
 Hljóp hinn háfætti fyrir holu munna,
 hafði staf stóran og stakk inn til mín.

I hunkered down there, although I
 seemed to be in a bad fix; dejected,
 my eyes downcast, I was afraid of
 dying. The long-legs ran up to the
 opening toward the hole. He had a
 big staff that he jabbed in at me.

25.Mér kom á síðu mikill stafs endir.
 Máttu eg hvergi undan hliða.
 Þá brotnuðu þegns fyrir skafti
 um þvert þunglega þrjú rifin í mér.

The thick end of the crook hit my
 side; I couldn't get away from it
 anywhere in there; three ribs were
 painfully broken right in two
 inside me by the staff of that
 fellow.

26. Víða er eg þó sár orðinn
 stráks af stingjum og stafs enda.
 Hér kom þó að lyktum að hann heim leitaði
 og hafði bagga minn burt gjörvallen.

All in all, I was badly injured in
 many places by that vagrant's
 pokes and the butt of his crook.
 The upshot was that he headed
 home and took away with him my
 whole bag.

27. Svo hafa aldri, síð eg leitaða við,
 mér svo tekist mínar ferðir.
 Það er hugboð mitt, að héðan mun eg eiga
 skjótt skaplega skammt ólifað.

My travels, ever since I set out on
 them, had never turned out so
 badly. I have a foreboding that
 from now on, very soon, and in
 due course, I'll have but a short
 time to live.

28. Hef eg margan heldur þhælað feitan
 sauð sérlega sviptan lífi,
 tínt kiðlinga, en týnt lambgymbrum,
 gripið geldinga og gamalrollur.

I've taken for myself the life of
 many a fat sheep, plucked out
 lambs, killed ewe yearlings, seized
 wethers and worn-out old ewes.

29. Hef eg með ströndu strokið jafnlega
 og heima um hauga jafnan snuðrað.
 Bitið hef eg álar, bellt klyppingum,
 rífið af þönum rétt húð hverja.

I've made a habit of roaming the
 shores and always snuffled around
 the refuse piles of homesteads. I've
 bitten through leather thongs,
 damaged fleeces, ripped every
 hide right off the drying rack.

30. Hef eg oftlega óþarfur verið
 bændafólki í byggð þessi,
 skoðað jafnlega skreið í hjöllum,
 riklinga rár og rafabelti.

I have always done harm to the
 farmers of this settlement, have
 regularly checked out the drying
 fish on the flakes, the stakes with
 split halibut and their belts of fat.

31. Hef eg hentað mér hákarlslykkjur
 og hoggið mér hvinnasnepla.
 Eiga mér allir, ef eg dyl einskis,
 ýtar oftlega illt að launa.

I've taken loops of shark meat for
 myself and nipped off thieves'
 tidbits. To be quite honest, they all
 have many reasons to repay me for
 my ill deeds.

32. Forðast kunna eg vélar gjörvallar
 þótt fyrðar þær fyrir mig setti.
 Þurfti engi þess að leita
 því að eg vissi vélar gjörvallar.

I knew how to avoid every single
 snare, even though people set
 them for me. No one need have
 tried that, because I knew all about
 such tricks.

33. Fannst sá engi, fyrr né síðar,
 hundur háfættur eða hestur í byggðum
 að mig á hlaupi hefði uppi.
 Var eg frára dýr en flestöll önnur.

No long-legged dog or horse that
 could catch up with me in a race
 was to be found, then or ever, in
 the settlements. I was a faster
 critter than almost all the others.

34. Nú tekur elli að mér sækja.

Má eg alls ekki á mig treysta;
farinn fráleikur, *fitskór troðnir,
tenn sljóggaðar en toppur úr enni.

Now old age begins to attack me; I
have no faith in myself at all any
more; my speedy running is gone,
my foot-pads worn down, my teeth
dulled, and the tuft has fallen from
my forehead.

35. Mun eg til rekkju reika verða;

mér tekur verkur að vaxa í síðu.
Svo hef eg ætlað, sjá mun dagur koma
mér yfir höfuð minn inn síðasti.

I'll have to totter to bed; the pain
in my side is getting worse. This is
what I expected: this day, my last,
will come down around my head.

36. Það hlægir mig, þó mun hér koma
úr ætt minni annar verri.

Hann mun mann gjöra margan sauðlausan
og aldri upp gefa illt að vinna.

One thing cheers me: another fox,
one even worse, will come forward
from my family here. He will make
many a man sheepless and will
never give up from doing damage.

37. Bjóst þá skolli í ból sitt fara.

Beit hann helstingi hart til bana.
Þar mun hann verða þjófur afgamall
líf að *láta. [Lokið er kvæði.

Then Foxie got ready to go into his
den. The stroke of Hel pierced him
sharply and fatally. There he has
to leave this life, the old thief. The
poem is complete.

38. Hefur bálk þennan og barngælu
 sett og samið Svartur á Hofstöðum
 mér til gamans og mannþurðar
 mengi ófróðu mun eg nú þagna.]

I, Svartur from Hofstaðir, have
 composed and assembled this
 poem, an amusement for children,
 for my lazy pleasure and for the
 unlettered crowd. Now I will be
 quiet.

Textual Notes

Where the text in *Hólsbók* appears unintelligible, we have resorted to emendation. In most cases a letter has been accidentally left out and is easily restored. Eugen Kölbing, the first editor of the poem, was unaware of the version in Rask 87, but in several cases his conjectures resulted in the same text as preserved there. We have also noted when our emendations agree with those in *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* (CPB). Guðbrandur was likewise unaware of Rask 87.

We use brackets to enclose the final lines of the text which we obtain from Rask 87 rather than *Hólsbók*. In one case we use the *crux desperationis* (†) to signal that we are keeping the manuscript spelling of a word which we are uncertain how to normalize or understand.

3.2 skaufala (so Rask 87, Kölbing, CPB), ‘skaufila’ 603

4.2 grænlægju (so Rask 87, CPB), ‘grænlægu’ 603

4.6 veyklenduð: The adjective *lendaður* is also known from a seventeenth-century poem by Stefán Ólafsson (80), and in that case too the word *hryggur* occurs in the next line.

4.6 mjög (so Rask 87, Kölbing, CPB), ‘miug’ 603

4.8 halar (so Kölbing, CPB; ‘hala’ Rask 87), ‘halir’ 603

5.3 eru (so Rask 87, Kölbing, CPB), ‘er’ 603

7.5 hálrófubein: The word *hálrófa* is a hapax but presumably a variant of *hælrófa* (Jón Helgason 1924, 312) or conceivably *halarófa*. The cuts of meat listed here match well with Icelandic descriptions compiled in the twentieth century (see e.g., Soffía Gísladóttir 1960).

16.7 sópinn: Misread as *sofinn* by previous editors, but the *p* is clear. The same phrase occurs once in an 18th-century medical text (“þeir sem í er nálgr, eru sísvángir og sópnir,” Sveinn Pálsson 216). The Norwegian word *sopen* means “ravenous” and we assume, with Jón Helgason (1924, 312), that this was also the sense of its Icelandic counterpart.

24.2 þætta: We would expect third person *þætti* rather than first person *þætta*. By the time of Hólsbók, the shift from *a*-endings to *i*-endings in weak verbs was underway, and *þætta* may be a hypercorrection.

28.2 þhalaþ feitan: This is a difficult verse. Gade (1975–76) takes *hála* to be the adverb “highly,” but we are not aware of any examples of that word postdating 1300. Another possibility might be to connect the word with *hálrófubein* (verse 7.5) in which *hál-* is otherwise attested as *hæl-*. However, **hælafeitan* would be equally unattested and obscure. Some previous editors venture **halafeitan*, [with a fat tail], but this is also unattested, and the tail of Icelandic sheep are rather unimpressive. Conceivably there is some mistake in the line. An emendation to **hálsfeitan* [neck-fat] is conceivable and would have the virtue that a fox kills a sheep by attacking the neck. Due to the uncertainty, we have left the word in the manuscript spelling and not attempted to translate it.

31.1 hef eg hentað: The left part of the ‘g’ is faint in the manuscript, leading previous editors to misread it as ‘j’ and to construct the pseudoword **ihenta*. See Jón Helgason (1924, 313).

31.4 hvinnasnepill: This is presumably the same thing as *þjófasnepill*, a certain part of the head of a fish (Lúðvík Kristjánsson 1985, 408, 426; Valdimar Össurason). There was a belief or superstition that cutting the ear off a sheep’s head would make one a thief (Soffía Gísladóttir 1960). The idea may have arisen from the ears of sheep being used for ownership marks and then, perhaps, it was transferred by some analogy to a part of a fish’s head.

34.6 fitskór (so Kölbing, CPB), ‘fitkor’ 603: It is difficult to make any sense of ‘fitkor’ and the following word *troðnir* calls for it to be a masculine noun in the plural. Kölbing’s emendation to *fitskór* seems like the best solution. The word *fit* can refer to the skin of an animal’s feet.

37.7 láta (so Kölbing, CPB): The page in 603 ends with the letter ‘l’ and the following page is lost from the manuscript. We have supplied the final verse of this strophe as well as all the final strophe from Rask 87.

38.6 *mannþurðar*: Literally “man-decrease” and probably a self-deprecating reference, since composing light-hearted poems for children might be seen as an unmanly waste of time, compare words like *mannleysa* [coward, wretch] and *ómennska* [indolence].

38.7–8: The seventeenth-century *Grænlands annáll* by Jón Guðmundsson names the author of *Skaufalabálkur* as a certain Einar fóstri and gives this version of the end of the poem: “Hefur bálk þenna / og barngælur / ort ófimlegur / Einar fóstri” (Ólafur Halldórsson, 46, 252–53); “This poem, an amusement for children, was composed by the less-than-nimble Einar fóstri.”

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