

SCOTT PROBST

the storied landscape

THE GISLI SAGA SIGNAGE

Birkimelur - In His Hour of Need, Women Stood by Gisli

Gisli went to Vanðall, where Þorgerður, Gestur Oddleifsson's mother, lived. She had given shelter to many outlaws and at her farm there was a subterranean cabin with one entrance into the kitchen and another into a nearby stream. Þorgerður warmly welcomed Gisli, saying: "I will allow you to stay here for a while but I do not know whether it is anything more than female wiles." Gisli accepted the offer and replied that his experience of male good deeds made him believe that in real need he was better off relying on the women. Gisli stayed the winter with Þorgerður and during all his years as an outlaw he was never better off.

With the arrival of autumn Gisli travelled to his brother and told him that this would be the last time he asked him for his assistance. "I will reward you with never asking you for anything again," he said. Þorkell offered Gisli a boat and together they pushed it from the shore. Gisli remarked: "Now you think yourself well off acquainted with many powerful men, while I am an outlaw with numerous enemies. But I can tell you that you will be killed before my days are counted. But know that I would not have treated you the same way as you have done to me."

"I do not care for your prophecies," answered Þorkell.

Ytri Lambadalur - At Hvalseyri, Meeting Place of the Local Thing

A wise man had prophesied that hostilities would arise within the family at Haukadalur. Consequently, it was advised that the menfolk should become sworn foster-brothers. The saga describes the proceedings as follows: "They walked to the headland and cut a strip of turf leaving the ends uncut. An ornamental spear was placed under the turf with the socket at shoulder height. The four men, Þorgrímur, Gisli, Þorkell, and Vésteinn, stepped under the turf, let their blood flow together and mixed it with the earth underneath the turf. They all knelt and swore that they would avenge each other and named all the gods as witnesses. When all were supposed to join hands Þorgrímur drew his back saying that doing this with his brothers-in-law. Gisli and Þorkell, could cause trouble enough, but he had no obligation towards Vésteinn. All those attending thought this a remarkable turn of events."

Gemlufallsa - Vésteinn's last Journey

Gisli Súrsson honoured the old custom of holding a feast at the beginning of winter and invited all the influential people. A more or less open enmity existed between Vésteinn on the one hand and Gisli's brother and brother-in-law on the other, both of whom lived like Gisli in Haukadalur. Gisli wanted to prevent that Vésteinn, his sworn blood-brother and brother-in-law, attended the feast. He sent two of his labourers to stop Vésteinn from coming to Dýrafjörður. They rowed across the fjord to Lækjarós, borrowed horses at a nearby farm and rode over the mountain to Hestur, Vésteinn's farm under the mountain of the same name. Vésteinn, who had seen no reason not to go to Haukadalur, had already set off. The labourers had missed him for he had taken a detour to settle a dispute between two farm-hands who had begun to fight with their scythes. Having settled the dispute, Vésteinn rode on towards Dýrafjörður.

Gemlufall - "From here all waters flow towards Dýrafjörður"

When the labourers who missed Vésteinn at his farm heard that he had already set off to attend the feast in Haukadalur, they immediately turned back and rode as fast as they could after him. Their horses eventually became completely exhausted and they continued on foot, running and shouting. Finally Vésteinn heard their shouts and waited for them. When they met they related Gisli's message and as proof they showed him half a coin Gisli had made earlier in the saga, broken in two and given Vésteinn one half of it. This was to be used as a token when either one thought that their lives were at stake. Vésteinn took out his half-coin, fitted the two parts together, but all the same he decided to continue to the feast. He had already crossed the watershed and decided that his destiny was clear with the words: "from here all waters flow towards Dýrafjörður."

Geirþjófsfjörður - Gisli's last stand

During his last night, Gisli went to his hiding-place, accompanied by his wife and his foster-daughter. But the women's long overcoats left a trail in the hoar-frost on the ground. Some time later they heard voices, for Eyjólfur the Gray and his men had followed the trail. Gisli challenged them saying he would not run away. The cowardly Eyjólfur pushed Helgi the Spy forward and Gisli killed him. Eyjólfur then tried to climb up the cliff in a different place, but Auður struck his arm with a club which caused him to fall down again, unable to fight further. Gisli remarked: "I have known for a long time that I had a good wife, but not this good."

Gisli moved to the top of a large rock to defend himself. In the end Eyjólfur's men were able to cut his stomach open with their spears so his innards fell out. Gisli wrapped his shirt around his stomach and tied his girdle then leapt down. As he landed he hewed one of his enemies in two from head to waist before ending his life. His badly wounded adversaries reported that the last stroke of his sword was no weaker than he first. All agreed that Gisli had been a brave man though good luck had not always been his fate.



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