

# Exploring memory spaces of the sagas' formulaic patterns : the case of Grettir's temper management

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# Exploring Memory Spaces of the Sagas' Formulaic Patterns

## The Case of Grettir's Temper Management

SLAVICA RANKOVIĆ (LEEDS)

The present article celebrates our dedicatee by engaging with memory and space, two topics that have long been preoccupying Jürg Glauser and on which he is both contributing (e.g. Glauser, 2000, and Glauser, forthcoming; also: Glauser and Schneeberger, 2015) and facilitating groundbreaking work (the latter as a founding member of the international research network *Memory and the Pre-Modern North*).

Figure 1 is an attempt to visualise the research I have conducted, in collaboration with Miloš Ranković, on Grettir the Strong's temper management. In particular, its aim is to highlight the imaginative way in which *Grettis saga* draws on traditional heritage (conceived as communal memory) regarding the heroic restraint, or the 'no reaction' formula. In my recent work (e.g. Ranković, 2014, and Ranković, forthcoming in 2017) I argue that this formulaic pattern is employed so as to counterbalance the overt pronouncements about Grettir's unbridled temper (whether narratorial, other characters' or, indeed, the hero's own) by having him ignore an offence in the first instance, and hence firmly aligning him with so many worthy saga heroes capable of mastery over their emotions.

I have identified some 41 instances in which the hero's temper is challenged in the saga, and have evaluated each according to a number of criteria/dimensions of which I set a few in advance, but most of which have either evolved from this initial set, or emerged as a result of the evaluation process itself, with the narrative resisting certain categorisations and opening up to others. In the end, I have settled on 13 dimensions, some of which pertain to the nature of the offence and its perpetrator ('offence type/weight/impact'; 'offender status'; 'number of previous offences'), some to the action that Grettir undertakes ('acting on anger/self-defence'; 'action type/force/effect'), and some to the 'restraint exercised' by him, including its 'type' and 'rationale' (i.e. the hero's motivation for it). Of course, such a highly dimensional set of data is exceptionally difficult to understand as a whole (let alone represent), which is why it was processed by a number of dimension reduction algorithms whose purpose was to identify principal components that afford the most informative and wieldy, yet the least violent view of the complex system of relationships that constitute what can be conceived of (at least according to my criteria) as the memory space of Grettir's temper management (cf. Fig. 1a and 1c).

Fig. 1b shows the top two principal components (X and Y axes of this space), with each listing my dimensions in the order of their contribution and overall im-

# Grettir's Temper Management



Grettir's Temper Management, figures 1a-1e  
(Image by Miloš Ranković, produced in Tableau)



pact (expressed through greyscale) on the component in question. Thus the instances plotted to the right of the most influential principal component, the X axis (37% of the overall influence), are those where Grettir exercises restraint of the strongest and noblest kind, and where, though to a significantly lesser extent, the offender's social status is the highest, the offence the gravest and preceded by the largest number of previous ones. Conversely, to the left of the X axis we find instances where Grettir is at his angriest, takes the most severe and forceful action, with the gravest consequences for the perpetrator. The next most influential principal component, the Y axis (21%), divides the instances almost solely according to the extent to which the hero is forced to act in self-defence (down), or, conversely, because he is driven by anger (up). A few other dimensions add further considerations into the mixture, but to almost negligible a degree.

While this method has certainly reduced some of the data complexity on one level, it has facilitated more of it on another, effectively empowering the narrative to use the vocabulary of my criteria merely as a starting point in deriving subtler terms to describe the ethic/aesthetic tangents along which Grettir's behaviour can be considered most fruitfully.

Crossing the X and Y coordinates (using the free online visualisation tool, Tableau) delineates my research space of Grettir's temper management (Fig. 1a and 1c), with the instances plotted towards the bottom right being the ones where the hero reacts most wisely/nobly, despite being most intensely provoked (as when, out of deference for the cunning Snorri *goði*, he spares the life of his son who had tried to kill him), and the exact opposite pertaining to the instances in the upper left corner (e.g. the infamous killing of the goslings).

Fig. 1a in addition highlights Grettir's anger-restraint ratio, with the shapes indicating the social status of the offender with respect to the hero. Thus the 27 instances coloured blue are those where he does not react immediately upon provocation, with 21 forming a particularly tight cluster (cf. Fig. 1d) and indicating the most stable/predictable behaviour. That these instances should constitute such a vast majority comes as a surprise, considering the overt assertions about the hero's hotheadedness. The two black instances are those where Grettir acts without any restraint (if only as a ten-year-old), while the two orange ones are the cases of self-defence where he neither restrains himself nor acts on anger. The nine red instances are perhaps the most interesting as there he indeed acts on anger but still employs some form of restraint – be it to throw a barbed verse rather than a barbed spear at his opponent, or to deflect his fury by hacking at a log instead of at his impudent thrall.

Fig. 1c highlights the gravity of the offence (size) and the offender status (shape) while adding the 14th dimension into the mix, namely, the consequence (if any) of the hero's action in a given instance. What the graph makes immediately apparent (though not less surprising) is that it is not the dealings with his peers that breed fatal consequences for Grettir, but rather those with the socially inferior. Thus his killing of the farmhand Skeggi leads to a lesser outlawry, boxing the insolent boy on the ear in the Trondheim church deprives Grettir of a chance to clear his name and



effectively leads to full outlawry, while breaking the witch's thighbone and hacking at her enchanted log while being blindly enraged by his servant leads to the self-inflicted wound that will be the death of him.

The irony of the hero being laid low by such unworthy opponents adds to the overwhelming sense of *ógæfa* ("misfortune") that is said to plague him, yet there is something more down to earth to conclude from all this too, namely, that the hero is simply better trained within his tradition to handle conflicts with peers. While he invariably shows some form of restraint towards them, this is not always the case with his social inferiors (or even superiors), where the behaviour seems to be less regulated and socially codified. Thus, as Fig. 1e shows, the 'no reaction' formulaic expressions are exclusively applied in the context of the hero's dealings with peers, whereas the strongest terms relating to his loss of temper are applied in connection to the people of lower social strata.

In conclusion, what excites me about the methodology behind these graphs ('distributed reading') is not the promise of some scientific objectivity (after all, these remain my own readings of Grettir's temper management), but the possibility it opens for laying bare and rendering communicable the decisions that go on in any reading, but normally remain hidden. When we engage in someone's interpretation of a text, we get all their overt reasoning (the rhetoric of persuasion), but not necessarily the expert intuition that underpins both their reasoning and their reading. What the methodology proposed here offers is to enable us to document, reflect on, share and compare, and so learn from each other's reading practices. For now, colleagues are welcome to browse my data, notes and interactive visualisations of Grettir's temper at: <https://github.com/distributedreading/grettir>.

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