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## HRÓLFS SAGA KRAKA AND SÁMI BEAR RITES

BY CLIVE TOLLEY

**I**N THE MIDST OF THE ONSLAUGHT by Hjørvarðr against the Danish palace of Hleiðargarðr, *Hrólfs saga kraka* informs us, a large bear was seen leading the Danish defence (ch. 50):

Þat sjá þeir Hjørvarðr ok menn hans, at björn einn mikill ferr fyrir Hrólfs konungs mǫnnum ok jafnan þar næst, sem konungrinn var. Hann drepr fleiri menn með sínum hrammi en fimm aðrir kappar konungs. Hróta af honum högg ok skotvápn, en hann brýtr undir sik bæði menn ok hesta af liði Hjørvarðs konungs, ok allt þat, sem í nánd er, mylr hann með sínum tǫnnum, svá at illr kurr kǫmr í lið Hjørvarðs konungs.

Hjørvarðr and his men saw that a huge bear was advancing in the van of King Hrólfr's men, and always he was nearest to where the king was. He slew more men with his paw than any five of the king's champions; blows and missiles glanced aside from him, and he trampled underfoot both men and horses of King Hjørvarðr's host, and he crunched everything near him between his teeth, so that murmurs of dismay arose in King Hjørvarðr's host.

Hjalti wondered where his comrade, the great hero Bǫðvarr bjarki ('little bear') could be, and although the king told him that Bǫðvarr would be wherever he was most needed, and to mind his own part, he rushed back to his quarters, where he found his companion sitting motionless through the battle. Disturbed at being interrupted by Hjalti railing at him for not fighting, Bǫðvarr heaved a sigh and said he would join the fray, but that the battle had almost been decided in their favour before the disturbance, and *ek segi þér at sonnu, at nú má ek mǫrgum hlutum minna lið veita konunginum en áðr þú kallaðir mik upp heðan* 'I tell you truly that I can give the king far less help now than before you called me away from here'. While the bear had been defending the king, Queen Skuld on the enemy side had been able to work no sorcery from her tent, but now things changed, and a monstrous boar appeared in the host, and laid the Danish forces low. However many of the enemy were killed, their host seemed not to lessen in the slightest, for the dead were raised up again. The battle concluded with the slaughter of nearly everyone on both sides, and so fell the glorious King Hrólfr kraki and his companions, chief among whom was Bǫðvarr bjarki.

*Hrólfs saga* exists in manuscripts from the seventeenth century, but is believed to have assumed its extant form in the late fourteenth or fifteenth century; elements in the narrative are found earlier, for example in Snorri's *Edda* and *Ynglingasaga*.<sup>1</sup> The great fight at Hleiðargarðr was the subject of *Bjarkamál* (composed possibly in the tenth century, doubtless with more ancient antecedents), perhaps the most renowned heroic poem of the North, but one which has, bar a few fragments, been lost to us. The appearance of Bǫðvarr's free soul (for so we must interpret it) as a bear in the fray is one of the most memorable scenes of the battle as recounted in *Hrólfs saga*, yet Saxo's rendition of *Bjarkamál*, made in the twelfth century, has nothing resembling it, and, given Saxo's general propensity for such florid elaboration as this episode would afford, the likelihood is that it was absent from the poem. In any event, we have no evidence to suggest that it was ascribed to Bǫðvarr by anyone other than the composer of *Hrólfs saga*; it is a folktale motif, like many others in *Hrólfs saga*—a sort of 'hyperrealisation' of the concept of the *berserkr*.

I shall not engage in a long discussion of *berserkir* here, but a few points are relevant to the present subject. The *berserkir* have sometimes been seen as evidence for a sort of shamanism among the Scandinavians; however, it would be dangerous to draw too close a parallel between *berserksgangr* and shamanism: the sources concerning *berserkir* do not allow us to postulate that their frenzy was technically ecstatic, and, whereas shamanic ritual is controlled, we do not find any ritual element associated with *berserksgangr*, which indeed appears to have been a wholly uncontrolled release of individual strength. Above all, we have no other evidence within Germanic tradition for the notion that a warrior's free soul could assume the form of a bear in battle whilst his body remained in trance elsewhere, as indicated by *Hrólfs saga*. Comparable notions do, of course, exist elsewhere, particularly among shamanic societies, and it is more likely to have been adapted from a wandering motif derived ultimately from such a society (the nearest of which was the Sámi, or Lapps). The vagueness of the motif precludes anything but a tentative conclusion; however, I turn now to an episode from the saga of a somewhat more specific nature, for which I believe it is feasible to suggest sources, one indeed being pagan practices documented among the

<sup>1</sup> See Simek and Hermann Pálsson 1987, s.v. 'Hrólfs saga kraka', where further references to discussions of the saga's date and provenance are given.

Sámi.<sup>2</sup> I see no reason, however, for ascribing any great antiquity to the *borrowing* of this motif, even if the motif itself is likely to be of great antiquity within the tradition from which it is derived (the Sámi).

### The bear mate

Bøðvarr's parents were Bjørn and Bera ('Bear' and 'She-bear'); this ancestry has no doubt been ascribed to him on the basis of his nickname *bjarki* ('little bear'), which, however, is more likely originally to have pointed to his *berserkr* character than his parentage. In summary, the tale runs (chs 24–30):

King Hringr has a son Bjørn, but later weds Hvít, the daughter of the king of the Sámi (*Finnakonungr*). Bjørn is in love with Bera. While the king is away, Hvít tries to seduce Bjørn, who scorns her; she puts a curse on him, turning him into a bear. The king's cattle begin to be attacked by a great bear. The bear one evening comes up to Bera, who recognises the eyes of Bjørn and follows the animal to a cave, where he turns into Bjørn: he is a bear by day, but a man by night. They stay together in the cave for a while. Hringr returns, and Hvít urges him to hunt the bear. Bjørn says to Bera that he will be killed the next day. He gives her the ring he has under his left arm: when he is killed, she is to go to the king and ask him for what is found under the shoulder on the left. The queen will give her bear meat to eat, but she must refuse, as it would affect the three sons she is carrying, whom he names and to whom he assigns certain treasures in the cave. He takes on bear form, leaves the cave, and is hunted: the hunters encircle him so that he cannot escape. Bera retrieves the ring as promised as the bear is skinned. Hvít lays on a celebratory bear feast to welcome the hunters, and Bera is with her. She forces Bera to partake of the bear flesh. Bera returns to her father and gives birth to three sons, the first, Elg-Fróði, partially elk in form, the second, Þórir, partially hound, and the third, Bøðvarr, fully human in bodily appearance, but with an ursine nature, whom she loves most. The physical 'deformities' of the first two were caused by Bera consuming some of her mate's flesh. Fróði leaves to become a murderer, and Þórir becomes king of Gautaland, while Bøðvarr remains at home. When he is eighteen, he goes with Bera to the king and shows him the ring, whereupon the king realises what has happened. Bøðvarr kills Hvít, and Hringr dies soon after.

<sup>2</sup> The relevance of the Sámi bear rites to the interpretation of *Hrólfs saga* was noted by Edsman (1994, 85), who does not, however, devote detailed attention to the parallels in the way I aim to do here.

The folktale motif of the bear as mate, and the descent of a royal family from the union, is widespread; a tale of this type is told in typically prolix form by Saxo Grammaticus (X.xv):<sup>3</sup>

Cuiusdam patrisfamilias in agro Suetico filiam, liberalis formae, cum ancillulis lusum egressam, eximiae granditatis ursus, deturbatis comitibus, complexus rapuit exceptamque unguibus prae se leniter ferens ad notam nemoris latebram deportavit. Cuius egregios artus novo genere cupiditatis aggressus, amplectendi magis quam absumendi studium egit petitamque laniatui praedam in usum nefariae libidinis vertit. Continuo enim ex raptore amator effectus, famem concubitu solvit ardoremque gulae Veneris satietate pensavit. Quoque eam indulgentius aleret, crebris incursionibus vicinum acrius incessebat armentum nec nisi lautioribus ante vesci solitam sparsis sanguine dapibus assuefecit. Adeo enim captivae species efferatam raptoris saevitiam fregit, ut, quem sanguinis sui cupidum extimescebat, amoris avidum experiretur pastumque ab eo perciperet, cui se fore protinus alimoniae metuebat. Quo non penetrat aut quid non excavat amor? cuius ductu etiam apud efferatam beluarum rabiem gulae irritamentum libidinis imperio cedit. Tandem gregis possessor, exhausti pecoris inopia provocatus, observatione adhibita, circumventam canibus beluam cursu ac clamore vehementius urgere perstitit fugacemque sectatus eo forte loci, quo puella servabatur, accessit. Siquidem domicilium eius, in viis paludibus clausum, perplexa ramorum series continenti frondium umbraculo texerat. Ubi mox fera a retiariis circumventa ac venabulis occupata confoditur. Ut ergo duplicis materiae benigna artifex natura nuptiarum deformitatem seminis aptitudine coloraret, generationis monstrum usitato partu edidit silvestremque sanguinem humani corporis lineamentis exceptit. Nato itaque filio paternum a necessariis nomen imponitur. Qui tandem, agnita suae veritate propaginis, a patris interfectoribus funesta supplicia exegit. Cuius filius Thrugillus, cognomine Sprakeleg, nullo probitatis vestigio a paternae virtutis imitatione defecit. A quo Ulfo genitus originem ingenio declaravit, avitum animo sanguinem repraesentans.

There was once in Sweden the father of a certain household, whose daughter, a girl of noble beauty, went out to play with her maid-servants. A gigantic bear drove away her companions and, clasping the young woman, swept her off. Taking her in his paws and treating her gently, he carried her away to a den he knew of in the forest, and approached those lovely limbs with a new kind of craving, bent on embracing rather than consuming them. Whereas he had sought his prey in order to tear her to pieces, he now altered his designs on her to purposes of wicked lust. He immediately turned from robber to lover, and dispelled his hunger in intercourse, compensating for a raging appetite with the satisfaction of his desires. To nourish her with greater tenderness he made frequent raids on

<sup>3</sup> Saxo's text is quoted by Olaus Magnus (bk 18, ch. 30); I cite the translation of Olaus Magnus by Peter Foote, with slight alterations to accommodate the minor differences from the published version of Saxo's text.

a herd in the neighbourhood, which he attacked more fiercely than ever, and although she had previously been used to eating delicacies, he accustomed her to feasts spattered with blood. So effectively did the captive girl's beauty tame her abductor's ruthless savagery that, where before she was terrified that he thirsted for her blood, she now found him eager in affection, and accepted food from one she had feared would quickly make a meal of herself. Where will love not penetrate, what will it not uncover? At last the owner of the herd, provoked by the helplessness of his run-down cattle, took careful note and applied himself to pushing on more forcefully with speed and shouting against the wild beast, surrounding it with hounds. Following it in flight, he by chance came to the place where the girl was kept. Her dwelling, shut in by pathless marshes, was covered by a mesh of branches knit together into a leafy arbour. Eventually the wild animal was surrounded by a ring of dogs and huntsmen with nets, assaulted with spears, and pierced to death. Since kindly Nature, working with two different materials, palliated the unseemliness of the union by making the bear's seed suitable, the girl gave birth normally, but to a marvel among offspring, lending human features to this wild stock. After her son was born, the relatives gave him a name from his father, and when the boy at last came to know the truth of his parentage, he wreaked deadly punishment on his father's murderers. His own child, Thorgils Sprakeleg, who lacked not an ounce of his father's valour, himself got a son, Ulf. His son proclaimed his origin in his natural disposition, showing the blood of his forefathers in his spirit.

Among the Germanic peoples the bear has one clear association, namely with the warrior, as is seen in the *berserkir* and as is testified in linguistic usages, such as in *björn* being used as a common man's name in Norse and in *beorn* having shifted its meaning in Old English from 'bear' to 'warrior' (accepting that *björn* and *beorn* are indeed cognates, which some have doubted). The symbolising of the warrior as a bear could possibly have given rise to tales of the type found in *Hrólfs saga* and Saxo, yet they would seem to be most at home among tribes where the bear was an object of cult, which was not the case in the Germanic area (though it has to be conceded that the bear's son tale is so widespread that it is difficult to assign a particular origin to it). By contrast, across much of northern Eurasia from the Sámi in the west to the Nivkh in the far east, and on into America, the bear has been the object of a cult and the subject of a series of myths, which usually involve the descent of the bear, a child of the high god, from heaven in primordial time. The bear becomes the totem animal of some tribes, which trace their descent from this divine progenitor; among the Ob-Ugrians, for example, there is a tale of how a bear gave birth to a woman, who became the primordial mother

of the *por* moiety (the moiety most given to bear celebrations) (Honko et al. 1993, 126).

An example of a bear-hunting society's tale of the type under discussion is afforded by the Tlingit of Alaska (Norman 1990, 293–301). In summary:

A young woman is abducted by a bear in the guise of her husband. They live together, and she has two sons, half bear, half human in nature. Her four brothers come hunting; the bear tells his bride that he will be killed, and instructs her to ensure that when this happens she gets hold of his head and casts it into the fire. The bear sees off the elder brothers, but the youngest he allows to slay him. The young woman returns to the village, and the brothers decide to have fun by asking her and her boys to dress in bear pelts. The brothers said they would shoot at them with spruce-bark arrows, but the skins fitted so well that all three became bears for real, and the youngest brother, changing the bark arrow head for a bone one, 'a strong one, too', shot his sister dead, as she was a true bear now. The elder brothers were killed by the bear cubs, who fled into the wilderness never to return.

More pertinent, however, are the Sámi, the Norsemen's neighbours. One of the classic accounts of Sámi bear rites is Pehr Fjellström's *Kort berättelse om Lapparnas björna-fänge*, based on first-hand familiarity with the still-living customs, and published in 1755. Fjellström grew up in northern Sweden close to the Sámi, and after studying in Stockholm and Uppsala devoted himself to work among them; he knew the local language well, and even devised a standardised orthography which he hoped would be used for all Sámi languages (though the considerable differences between them doomed this attempt to failure). He is a critical writer, noting when others have mentioned matters he has found no evidence for himself, and, whilst it is conceivable that he read *Hrólfs saga* while in Stockholm or Uppsala, his account of Sámi bear rites has the hallmark of first-hand understanding derived from experience rather than literary tradition (other than where he explicitly says otherwise). Fjellström relates the following aetiological legend about Sámi bear rites (14–17):

Tre bröder hade en enda syster, hvilken hatades af sina bröder, at hon nödsakades taga sin tillflykt i vilda marken; då hon uttröttad, änteligen råkar på ett Björnhide, dit hon ingår at hvila: til samma hide kommer ock en Björn; som efter närmare bekantskap tager henne til hustru, och aflar med henne en Son. Efter någon tid, sedan björnen blifvit gammal, och sonen upväxt, skal björn hafva sagt til sin hustru, at han för ålderdom skul nu ej längre kunde lefva, ville derföre gå ut på första snö om hösten,

at hennes tre bröder kunde se sporr efter honom, och således ringa och döda honom. Ehuruval hans hustru sökte detta på det högsta at hindra, lät björnen sig doch ej öfvertala; utan gjorde som han sagt: at de tre bröder kunde af hans sporr honom omringa. Här på befaller björnen at et stycke mässing skulle fästas i hans panna, til ett teckn at han både kunde igenkännas ifrån andra björnar; såsom ock at hans egen son, som ock nu var gången ifrån honom, ej måtte honom döda. Sedan nu djup snö fallen var, följas de 3 Bröder at fälla denna björnen, som de tilförne ringat. Då frågar björn sin hustru om alla 3 bröderne hade varit henne lika hätske? Hvertil hon svarade, at de 2:ne äldre varit emot henne svårare, men den yngste något mildare. När då desse bröder komma til björnhidet, springer björn ut, och öfverfaller den äldsta brodern, biter och sårar honom ganska illa, då björnen oskadd går straxt derpå in i sit hide igen. När den andra brodern kommer, löper björnen ock honom emot, och skadar honom på lika sätt som den förra, och går så in i sitt hide igen.

Sedan befaller han sin hustru, at fatta sig om lifvet. Sedan hon det gjordt, går han på två fötter, bärandes henne ut ur hide; hon befäller då sin yngsta broder skiuta honom, hvilket ock skiedde. Den omtalte hustrun sätter sig nu et stycke der ifrån, öfvertäcker sit ansikte, såsom den der ej hade hjerta at se, det björn blef skuten, och skulle nu flås: skyttar doch med ena ögat der på. Här af skal sedan den seden vara kommen at intet qvinfolk får se björnen eller björnkarlarna, utan allenast med förtäkt ansikte, och genom en mässings ring; Hvar om nedanföre berättas skal.

Sedan nu de 3 bröderne hade fält Björnen, samt alt köttet var lagt i kittelen at kokas, Kommer Sonen, för hvilken de 3 bröder berätta, at de skutit et underligt djur, som haft ett stycke mässing i pannan. Denne säger, at det är hans fader, som med en sådan mässing blifvit teknad, och påstår derföre lika lott i Björn med dem. När de ständigt der til neka, hotar sonen dem, om de ej ville gifva honom lott, skulle han väcka up sin fader, tager så ett spö, med hvilket han slår på huden, säjandes, min fader stat up! min fader stat up! deraf begynner köttet i kättelen så häftigt kokas, at det syntes såsom ville det springa up, hvaraf de nödsakades at gifva honom lika lott med sig. Här af lären den seden vara kommen; om så skier som Schefferus berättar. *När björn är fäld, draga de honom straxt utur sit läger, och slå honom med ris eller mjuka spö: der af ordspråket: slå björn med ris:* Af den i björns panna fundna mässing skal dock det haft sit ursprung, at så väl björnkarlarna sielfva, som alt redskap, som vid björnfänge brukas, måste med mässing käd och ringar beprydas.

Three brothers had a sole sister, who was hated by her brothers, so that she was forced to flee into the wilderness; she became exhausted, and finally she came upon a bear's den and went into it to rest; to the same den there also came a bear, who after a closer acquaintance took her as his mate, and begat a son with her. After some time, when the bear became old and the son had grown up, the bear is supposed to have said to his wife that he could live no longer because of age, and wanted therefore to go out at the first snow of autumn so that her three brothers could find his

tracks, and thus surround and kill him. However much his wife sought to prevent this at any cost, the bear would not let himself be persuaded, but did as he had said so that the three brothers could follow his tracks and surround him. At this point the bear asked for a piece of brass to be fastened on his brow as a sign to distinguish him from other bears, and so that his own son, who had left, would not kill him. So, when deep snow was fallen, the three brothers set out to slay this bear, whom they had previously ringed in. Then the bear asked his wife if all three brothers had been equally hateful towards her. She answered that the two elder brothers had been harsher, but the youngest somewhat milder. When these brothers came to the bear's den, the bear leapt out, and attacked the eldest brother, biting and wounding him very badly, and thereupon the bear returned immediately to his den unscathed. When the second brother came, the bear leapt against him as well, and injured him just like the first, and returned to his den.

Then he told his wife to grasp him round the waist. She did this, and he walked on two feet, carrying her out of the den; she then ordered the youngest brother to shoot him, which he did. The wife placed herself some distance away, and covered her face, as she hadn't the heart to watch, and the bear was shot, and next had to be flayed: she shot a glance at it, however. From this must the custom have derived thereafter that no women may see the bear or the bear hunters, other than with hidden face, and through a ring of brass, which will be discussed below.

When the three brothers had felled the bear, and all the flesh was put in the kettle to cook, the son arrived, and the three brothers recounted in front of him how they had shot an astonishing animal, which had a piece of brass on its brow. He said that this was his father, who had been distinguishable by such a piece of brass, and therefore asked them for a share in the bear with them. When they continually refused this, the son threatened that if they wouldn't give him a share, he would awaken his father, and he took up a twig and struck upon the hide with it, saying 'My father, arise! My father, arise!', whereupon the kettle began to seethe so forcefully that it looked as if it would leap up, so they were forced to give him an equal share. From this, it is said, comes the custom mentioned by Scheffer: 'When a bear is felled, they drag it straight from the camp and strike it with brushwood or a soft twig, and hence the expression: strike a bear with brushwood.' From the brass found on the bear's brow must have arisen the custom that the bear hunters and all the equipment used in the hunt must be adorned with brass chains and rings.

All the details of the story match Sámi practices, as recorded in other sources. Just a few examples will suffice here. Fjellström reiterates throughout his overall account how vital it is that something of brass is attached to everything to do with the hunt, and all the more so where women are concerned, who for example had to behold the goings-on through a brass ring. The chance find of a group of hunters

with a newly felled bear is a topic of folktales in Finland/Lapland, which relate primarily to the *mores* of the hunt, as the point made is that someone chancing upon the catch has the right to a share in it unless the animal has already been skinned and prepared. The son's threat to the hunters reflects the notion of the conjured bear, roused up to do harm to one's enemies, and also the belief that the hunted bear returned to its heavenly home to be reborn again later. Even the carrying out of the bear's bride from the den relates to the fact that women were only allowed to consume bear flesh from lower down the animal than where they would be able to clasp it around the waist. Overall, it is clear that tales of this nature must have been widespread in Sámi society, where bear hunting was a central social and cult activity.<sup>4</sup>

Fjellström gives a long description of the hunt and the subsequent feast, and the background to the cult may be further filled in from other sources. Honko (Honko et al. 1993, 133) writes on the Skolt Sámi:

Features of a totemistic bear belief system appear to have survived among the eastern Lapps, especially the Skolts. The latter did not, for example, eat bear meat; their oral tradition includes various metamorphosis rites and stories about men and women who change into bears; they recognise a 'man-bear' creature and preserve a tribal origin myth about the descent of the Skolts from a marriage between a bear and a Skolt woman.

In other areas, the handling and consumption of the slain animal forms a central part of the rite. It appears that women were limited in their participation in the rituals, being kept away from the shelter erected to receive the bear and from cooking the meat, yet their part was important: for example, they were the main participants in the dialogue with the bear and the hunters.

### ***Hrólfs saga***

The author of *Hrólfs saga* hints at a Sámi influence when he makes the instigator of the were-bear episode and the bear hunt a Sámi, Hvít: the saga account in fact may be seen to constitute, in part, a garbled form of a Sámi bear-hunt ritual and its associated tales, such as Fjellström recounts.<sup>5</sup> As Norwegians lived in contact with the

<sup>4</sup> Analogues such as those mentioned here are presented and discussed in Pentikäinen 2007.

<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the name Hvít identifies the princess as a protagonist of the 'winter princess' tale type. Other notable examples include Drífa in *Ynglinga*

Sámi, they would certainly have been familiar with some of their rituals, and occasional more factual accounts such as that of Sámi shamanism found in the *Historia Norwegiae* from around 1200 indicate this knowledge could be fairly precise.<sup>6</sup> The first historical Norwegian mention of Sámi bear rites dates from 1606 (the Norwegian Royal Chronicle),<sup>7</sup> though familiarity with the practices no doubt antedates this by a long way.

The existence of tales similar to that of Fjellström among the Tlingit and others (including the Ob-Ugrians, who have some of the most complex rites connected with the bear), and the precise manner in which they mirror the customs and beliefs of the peoples that told them, are indications that the tale was the reflection of deeply rooted indigenous rites, and not the invention of Fjellström or a borrowing from outside.<sup>8</sup> Even so, such tales change over time and place, of course, which must act as a caveat in making comparisons with the Norse tale. Nonetheless, the bear rites recorded from northern Siberia are remarkably homogeneous, suggesting that aetiological tales recognisably similar to each other will have existed over a wide span of time and space.

*Hrólfs saga* is a very different type of document. It is Icelandic, and thus removed from the direct contact with the Sámi which the Norwegians would have had, and there is clearly no direct relationship between the fictional events and motifs and the precise concerns of the society for which it was produced, in the way there is

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*saga* ch. 13 and Skjálfr Frostadóttir in *Ynglinga saga* ch. 19 (see McKinnell 2005, 70–85). Whilst the princess is typically identified as Sámi, the tale type itself is not Sámi in origin, but represents Norse notions of contact, through marriage, with the perilous ‘other’, of which the Sámi were representatives. I am not primarily concerned with the ‘winter princess’ motif, but with the other Sámi elements that this well-known tale type has enabled the writer to bring in.

<sup>6</sup> I consider this passage in more detail in Tolley 1994 and 1995 (and in a revised form in the paper presented to the 13th International Saga Conference, available at <http://www.dur.ac.uk/medieval.www/sagaconf/tolley.htm>).

<sup>7</sup> The text and Swedish translation are quoted in Edsman 1994, 51–52, from Gunnarsson 1870, 22.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed presentation and discussion of Ob-Ugrian bear rites, see Honko et al. 1993, 120–32. Honko (1993, 120) describes the Ob-Ugrian ceremony as ‘an elaborate accumulation of songs, pantomime, drama, feasting, sacrifice and prayer lasting several days . . . In their entirety, the ceremonies allowed the community to see the coherence of its central economic, social and religious values and to reaffirm their significance.’

for the Sámi bear tale: in short, the author is concerned with telling a good story rather than ethnographic accuracy. Nonetheless, even though all we are left with is a series of events emptied of their original ritual significance, there is enough in the *Hrólfs saga* account to suggest an origin in Sámi rites, however derived (presumably through knowledge among northern Norwegians of such rites).

The Skolt ‘man-bear’ creature is surely comparable to Bjørn, alternately man and bear; he originates, by mating with a local woman, a dynasty of lords described in the saga, just as the union of a bear and local woman engendered the Skolts. The position of the women in the saga is intriguing: in consuming the forbidden bear meat, which Hvít does with relish (emphasising her evil nature), and Bera does unwillingly, they break an injunction comparable to the tabu against Sámi women—or, following the Skolt practice, anyone—doing so; at the same time, the importance of the women in the episode coincides (though the precise roles differ) with the Sámi practice. The general festivities after Bjørn is slain mirror the typical bear feast of Sámi and other tribes.

The ring is particularly interesting. The stressing by the bear, just before he is hunted, of the importance of the ring as an indication of his identity for his son is particularly close to Bjørn’s similar actions, though it is his father in this case that the action is directed towards. A Swedish South Sámi poem contains the following lines (Honko et al. 1993, 183, Poem 42: 13–14):

Gállie-suorbmasav dân akta bálien guddi áj  
ja náhkátjav dân bárdnáj árbvien viddih áj.

You wore a gold ring once as well  
and you passed your skin on to your son.

This celebrates the bear’s erstwhile glorious condition, and the continuance of his existence in his kin, just as Bjørn’s ring shows the king who the slain bear really was, namely his son, and his (metaphorical) ‘skin’ is passed on to his son, who is transformed into a bear himself at the final battle. Yet the ring played a more central part in Sámi bear rites; Samuel Rheen (reported by Karsten 1955, 116–17) relates how the man who has ‘ringed in’ the bear, that is, located it for the others to surround, leads the way with a staff onto which a brass ring has been attached; after him come the man who has prognosticated, and the one who is to shoot. The man with the ring has to begin the bear song. The ring is intended

as a protection against the fierce power of the bear. Fjellström (1981, 27–28) gives details about further ‘rings’. A switch was twisted into a ring and attached to the slain bear’s lower jaw, and the belt of the principal slayer was tied to it, marking him out as the bear’s master. This ring would be taken home and preserved by the housewife until after the ceremonial meal, when it would have a brass ring along with the bear’s tail attached to it by the women and children; it was subsequently buried, but the brass ring was removed and hung on the drum used for bear-hunting divination, as it brought luck. Fjellström mentions brass rings frequently, particularly in connection with women, whose contact with the bear and the hunt had to be conducted through a ring at all turns (even to the extent of having to consume the bear flesh through one). The ring, then, is prophylactic against the bear’s power, but also channels power and gives mastery over the bear, and over the success of the hunt; it passes, interestingly, into the hands of the women and children for a while. In similar vein, Bera’s acquisition of the bear’s ring marks a female garnering of the bear’s power and her legacy of it to the next generation.

The precise place where the ring is found on Bjørn’s body does not correspond to the ring of the Sámi rites, but it matches exactly the position in which a purse is discovered in a different type of bear folktale found among the Sámi and Finns. Here, a hunter kills a bear (or else finds a dead bear), and upon skinning it discovers a purse with money in: this is a sure sign that this was a conjured bear, a person transformed by witchcraft into a bear (see Pentikäinen 2007, 112–14 for examples of such tales).

Finally, the odd birthgiving that Bera undergoes, in which a half-elk and half-dog, and a sort of bear-man are born, finds a parallel in certain oral Finnish poems; for example, *Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot* I, 4.1191 (recorded in 1888 in Viena Karelia),<sup>9</sup> a charm directed, it would seem, against clawed animals of the wild, begins by relating how the Mistress of Pohjola gives birth to a bear, a wolf and a lynx:

|                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| Pohjan akka, harva hammas, | Old woman of the north, gap-toothed,   |
| Kävelevi kässehtivi        | walked around, ambled around,          |
| Varjossa vaskisen vaaran,  | in the shade of the copper mountain,   |
| Kipuvaaran kinterillä,     | on the heels of the mountain of pains, |

<sup>9</sup> As firmly oral poetry, Finnish traditional (*Kalevala*-metre) verse was subject to reformulation at each performance; nonetheless, many of the motifs are recognised as being very ancient, often predating Christianity, which was

Lapin laajassa salossa,  
Luona tulisen kosken,  
Pahan virran partahalla.

Tunsipa kohtunsa kovaksi,  
Vatsansa pahoin pakoksi,  
Jopa tuli tuskan soutu,  
Vaivuttipa vaiva suuri  
Juurelle nyry närehen,  
Alle kuusen kukka latvan.

Siinä laativi lapsiansa,  
Synnytti sikijöitänsä,  
Saip' on poikoa kolme,  
Kakarata karvallista  
Katselevi, kääntelevi,  
Miettielevi, mittelevi:  
Mipä noistaki tulisi,  
Kasvaneisi karvasista?

Siinä hän risti riimijänsä,  
Opetteli omijansa,  
Tunnusteli tuomijansa.  
Yhen se risti ilvekseksi,  
Toisen suveksi sukasi.  
Kolmannen korven kontijoksi.  
Salon karhuksi karasi.

in the broad backwoods of Lapland,  
beside the fiery rapids,  
on the edge of the evil river.

She knew her womb was swollen,  
her belly in dire straits,  
the waves of pain already coming:  
a great trouble afflicted her,  
at the foot of a fresh young pine,  
beneath the flowery crown of a spruce tree.

There she bore her children,  
gave birth to her offspring,  
got three boys,  
hairy brats.

She looked, she turned them over,  
she thought, she considered:  
What will come of these,  
what will these hairy things grow into?

There she christened her wild ones,  
figured out her own,  
learned about her offspring.  
One she christened a lynx,  
the second a wolf,  
the third a bear of the woods,  
hardened it into a wolf of the forest.

Variation, both of content and purpose, is characteristic of Finnish oral poetry, and the particular animals mentioned here may have been subject to such variation; it is interesting to note that the three animals of the far earlier Norse saga seem to represent a more precise reflection of ancient Finnish/Sámi animal cosmography: the dog is the animal used for hunting, and the elk and the bear are the two great animals whose pursuit is celebrated in sacred rites and poems (and which become constellations).<sup>10</sup> Given that the age or even provenance of the motifs of the Finnish poem cannot be demonstrated, it would be unwise to build too much upon it, but it would be consistent with the general argument put forward in this article to suggest at least the possibility that the saga may have been influenced by the Finnish/Sámi tradition in this respect, and that the Finnish poem represents a later, indigenous form of that tradition.

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introduced from about the twelfth century on: see, for example, Siikala 2002 for a detailed discussion of such ancient themes.

<sup>10</sup> On the elk, see Hautala 1947; Kuusi et al. 1977, Poems 53 and 54 and commentary; Pentikäinen 1999, 196–99.

## Conclusion

*Hrólfs saga* recounts the tale of Bǫðvarr from his birth to his death. The tale has been analysed by Schjødt (2003, 273–76) as a narrative based on initiation rites, which here would mean initiation into the status of a *berserkr* warrior. He is undoubtedly correct, both to bring the initiatory aspect to readers' attention, and to emphasise that the saga does not constitute an account of an initiation *per se*, but is a narrative based on the elements of such an initiation. The problem with this approach is the potential confusion between two separate aims of analysis: uncovering a pattern of initiation is quite a different matter from demonstrating that such a pattern goes back beyond the particular literary monument in question (for example, to pagan times). Schjødt states (275):

when the stated criteria are included and realized, we can say quite a lot about the semantics which have also been in play in the rituals, because it can be argued plausibly that the sequence of certain narratives must have a source in old rituals,

even though the concrete events described may be later realisations of meanings which are inherited from earlier times. Yet there is no reason whatever why any initiatory narrative sequence *must* reflect old rituals—the existence of which must be corroborated by evidence from outside the particular narrative sequence in question if the argument is to hold any water; it would appear far more plausible to argue that initiation is a general motif occurring the world over, including in modern literature, and we need look no further than the particular context in which it occurs in order to understand it. In the case of *Hrólfs saga*, it should not be forgotten that the saga is late, almost certainly too late to have preserved anything as complex as a procedure of *berserkr* initiation from the pre-Christian period—for which initiation there is, moreover, no external evidence. What we encounter here, surely, is a purely *literary* type of initiation which tells us nothing about surmised real initiations into the status of *berserkr*.

It might be countered that the sources relating to Sámi practices are of a similarly late relative date. Ultimately, it cannot be demonstrated with absolute certainty that the rituals discussed here, and particularly their more detailed aspects, did indeed exist at earlier periods of Sámi history, since the evidence simply does not exist. There are compelling differences from the Norse sources, however. The first is that the earliest sources relating to Sámi practices date

from a time before they were Christianised (or at least when the conversion was only in its initial stages), whereas a source such as *Hrólf's saga* postdates its society's conversion by centuries. The *a priori* assumption must therefore be that the Sámi practices recorded are the direct development of long-standing rituals from the (unbroken) pagan past; the ancient roots, in a hunting society, of the practices under consideration are confirmed by widespread parallels, even down to the detailed structure of the bear rite, found in other circumpolar societies with comparable social make-up to the Sámi.<sup>11</sup> The Sámi were, of course, subject to influence from outside, which was primarily from Scandinavians, and such influence can often be demonstrated in their belief systems. But whereas for example the figure of Þórr karl offered the opportunity for the Sámi to create or reformulate a god and name him *Hora galles* after his Norse counterpart, there is no evidence that the Scandinavians had anything by way of bear rites to lend to the Sámi (who, on the contrary, had a detailed and integral system of such rites of great antiquity). The ancient Sámi traditions gradually underwent a process of attrition in the face of outside influence, and also as a result of their shift to a reindeer-herding society (which took place over many centuries but was well under way by the medieval period);<sup>12</sup> however, the time gap between *Hrólf's saga* and the early records considered here is not great within this overall process, given that there were no major disturbances such as wholesale conversion to Christianity in addition.<sup>13</sup> The contrast with a source such as *Hrólf's saga* is stark: not only had the society in question undergone enormous changes since the pre-Christian period (when the *berserkr* rite must presumably be placed), but there is also no external evidence for such a rite, as there is in abundance for the Sámi bear rites.

My own assessment of *Hrólf's saga* is rather more circumspect than Schjødt's. The impression that the saga may reflect large-scale rituals deriving from pre-Christian times arises in part from the success

<sup>11</sup> It is outside the scope of this article to consider these parallels in detail; they are dealt with more thoroughly in Edsman 1994, Honko et al. 1993, Pentikäinen 2007.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the *Historia Norwegiae* account of Sámi shamanism, from around 1200, hints at aspects of the ritual which have disappeared by the time of our main records of such practices, several centuries later; see Tolley 1994.

<sup>13</sup> Again, the overall consistency (despite the partial attrition noted) of the *Historia Norwegiae* with the later sources exemplifies this continuity.

with which the narrator has made use of the general motif of initiation in his creation (or, in short, his literary artifice), but also in part from the antiquity of some of the individual motifs. The bear hunt is such a motif, with roots in decidedly pagan practices of great antiquity and geographical extent—but roots which did not grow in Norse soil.

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# HAUKSBÓK AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN ICELANDIC WORLD VIEW

BY SVERRIR JAKOBSSON

## **I What is Hauksbók?**

Ideas about the shape of the world, its inhabitants and their belief structures constitute a world view. One emerges at particular times with specific groups of people, it evolves and may become obsolete. For instance, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment and Darwinism are central to the modern scientific world view. A world view is often regarded as a set of true notions describing the world and its population. Yet a world view frequently varies within a period or culture and need be neither monolithic nor free from contradictions. Identifying the dominant world view within a culture may be highly rewarding, for it may illuminate the presuppositions in that culture, which shaped people's ideas about their environment, themselves and others.

The term 'world view' has often been used in a very broad sense, as synonymous with the dominant mentality or ideology in a particular culture, such as that of a Native American tribe, or in a particular period, for example 'the medieval world view'. It can also be interpreted more narrowly as ideas about the cosmos and celestial bodies or as a system of theology (for different viewpoints see Pedersen 1962; Greene 1981, 1–8; Kearney 1984; cf. also Sverrir Jakobsson 2001; 2005, 23–39). In this article, I shall adopt the middle ground in order to make good use of both aspects of the term, its temporal-spatial aspect and its relevance to the studies of mentalities. A world view can thus be regarded as conscious and subconscious ideas about the world and its inhabitants, including the self, in a historical and geographical perspective. It is also an integral and inseparable part of the general discourse of a period. It characterises groups—social or cultural—rather than individuals.

The aim of this paper is to identify and analyse the dominant Icelandic world view around 1300. The object to be analysed will be the text Hauksbók. I will argue that its redactor can be regarded as 'an interpreter and teacher of a world view', a description that Anna Dorothee von den Brinken (1969, 43) suggests should be applied to medieval chroniclers who wrote on universal history:

Wenn Universalgeschichtsschreibung ihrem Wesen nach versucht, den Menschen in Raum und Zeit zu erfassen und im Zusammenspiel dieser Größen zu deuten, ist der Verfasser einer Weltgeschichte nicht im landläufigen Sinne Geschichtsschreiber—das kann er nebenbei auch sein, aber dieser Aspekt soll hier ausgeklammert bleiben—, sondern Deuter und Lehrer des Weltbildes.

When the writing of universal history seeks, in accordance with its nature, to define mankind in space and time in order to interpret the whole in interaction, the compiler of a world history is not a historian in the ordinary sense—he may be that as well, but this aspect must here remain excluded—but an interpreter and teacher of the world view.

This raises another question: What are the peculiarities of this world view? More generally, how does Hauksbók relate to other Icelandic medieval texts in its interpretation and teaching of a world view? This paper will be devoted to analysing some peculiarities of Hauksbók and placing it within a historical perspective. This should shed light on the development of the Icelandic world view from the beginning of Icelandic literary culture around 1100 to its flowering in the fourteenth century.

I shall begin by looking at Hauksbók, how it was constructed and by whom, before exploring the world view manifest in it. I shall argue that Hauksbók provides rich insight into the world view of the intellectual élite of medieval Iceland. This was a hegemonic, Catholic world view which bore indelible marks of Iceland's peripheral status in Europe at the time of its composition. Although a large aggregate of learned works written in medieval Iceland bears testimony to this world view, the size of Hauksbók and the wide scope of material in it make it an especially rewarding starting-point for such an analysis. Approaching the text from a structural point of view, instead of emphasising authorship and chronology as has been customary in earlier studies of this text, may also add to and enrich current understanding of the nature of Hauksbók.

Hauksbók is a codex in the Arnamagnæan collection of Icelandic medieval and early modern manuscripts in Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi (divided into AM 371, 544 and 675 4to), of which 141 of about 210 leaves are preserved. It is intimately connected with the royal official Haukr Erlendsson (c.1265–1334), who held offices in both Norway and Iceland, and parts of it are assumed to be in his own hand. It has been argued that the bulk of the manuscript was written within a relatively short period, 1302–10 (Stefán Karlsson 1964). Although a large portion of the material in Hauksbók was written either by Haukr himself or by scribes working in close cooperation with him, a few parts of the manuscript may be later additions (e.g. *Elucidarius* in AM 675 4to) and some

were even added after Haukr's death (e.g. *Völuspá* in AM 544 4to). In order to focus more sharply on the text as a product of the first decade of the fourteenth century, the content of these later sections of Hauksbók will not be considered further.

Hauksbók comprises several texts and is written in several different hands. However, the bulk of it was undoubtedly put together under the supervision of Haukr Erlendsson and redacted by him. Some uncertainty on the question of authorship applies to most medieval Icelandic texts, but usually one does not have the luxury of being able to identify a redactor who actually had a hand in writing and redacting a text that is mostly preserved in the original manuscript. The name Haukr Erlendsson is probably a closer approximation to the identity of the redactor of Hauksbók than the name Snorri Sturluson is to the redactor of *Heimskringla* (cf. Boulhosa 2005, 6–21). As a matter of fact, both Hauksbók and *Heimskringla* can just as well be seen as products of a collective textual culture. That assumption is the basic approach taken in this article. Therefore I shall refer to the redactor as Haukr for the sake of convenience, without wanting to deny any input by other members of a team of scribes.

It thus turns out that what could be a formidable difficulty in the tradition of close textual analysis makes it possible to approach Hauksbók in a new way without being enslaved by deeply entrenched concepts of authorship. Hauksbók can be read as a collective product of Icelandic culture dispersed in space and time. It makes feasible a close analysis of the dominant world view in Iceland from 1100 to 1400 and the belief systems which shaped this world view.

This study marks a departure from earlier studies of Hauksbók, which have focused on the question of authorship of individual texts within the work, such as *Landnámabók*. Hauksbók has been seen as a collection of texts, and scholars interested in the creative processes of medieval 'authors' have often been at a loss what to make of it. This harks back to the traditional view of textual criticism 'that existing manuscripts are no more than bad transcripts of an ideal and perfect original text' (Boulhosa 2005, 25). In the introduction to the only existing critical edition of Hauksbók, made over a century ago, Finnur Jónsson (1892–96, cxxxvi–vii) claimed that Haukr could not have contributed anything worthwhile to Hauksbók. This was the prevailing view until Sven Jansson, in his research into *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Fóstbræðra saga* (1944, 169–70, 261), came to the opposite conclusion. He argued that Haukr's method in condensing his texts resulted from a 'conscious effort' (*medveten strävan*) by Haukr.

What plan did the redactor of Hauksbók have for the work which he compiled? In *Medieval Scandinavia* we find contrasting assessments of the nature of Hauksbók. According to Gunnar Harðarson and Stefán Karlsson (1993), the work is ‘an entire private library’, whereas Margaret Clunies Ross and Rudolf Simek (1993) list it among medieval encyclopedias. Neither definition is entirely satisfactory. On the one hand, Gunnar Harðarson and Stefán Karlsson do not suggest any principle according to which Haukr might have selected the texts included in Hauksbók. On the other hand, the term ‘encyclopedia’ is vague and in its most common modern usage (i.e. as a work of reference, usually arranged as items in alphabetical order) dates from the eighteenth century. It was not in general use in the Middle Ages (cf. Le Goff 1994, 25; Fowler 1997, 27–29). In an Icelandic context, the plural term *alfræði* has usually been applied to texts much smaller in scope than Hauksbók, in the sense of ‘encyclopedic writings’, and Clunies Ross and Simek do not apply the term to Hauksbók in its entirety.

Nevertheless, the term ‘encyclopedia’ may offer some guidance for exploring the mentality of Haukr Erlendsson and his contemporaries, and provide heuristic guidelines for analysing Hauksbók. The word is derived from the Greek *enkyklios paideia* which in antiquity referred to the all-round education of aristocratic youth. This education had two characteristics, it was elementary in nature and it was reserved for an élite (cf. Fowler 1997, 15). In a medieval context this might be applied to clerical learning in general, but it often seems to be used in a narrower sense, referring specifically to the part of clerical education dealing with world view. A systematic representation of the clerical world view is to be found in textbooks such as the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville (c.560–636) or the *Imago mundi* of Honorius Augustodunensis (c.1070–1140), rather than in instruction in the *artes liberales* of clerical education. An ambitious effort of this kind was the *Speculum majus* of Vincent of Beauvais (c.1190–1264). The writings of Isidore, Honorius and Vincent were known in medieval Iceland and are quoted in works which were central to the construction of a world view. The word ‘cleric’ is now understood to relate more to literacy in general than to specifically ecclesiastical education (cf. Clanchy 1979, 177–81). In practice, the two usually went together. An educated royal official from an aristocratic background, such as Haukr Erlendsson, probably received an education similar to that of those who pursued a career within the Church.

There are various sections in Hauksbók which are indicative of such an education, similar to tidbits of information found in other Icelandic

texts of clerical miscellanea, such as AM 415 4to (written between 1290 and 1313), AM 194 8vo (written around 1380) or even the lost manuscript Codex Resenianus (written 1250–83) believed to have been in the possession of the Icelandic lawman Sturla Þórðarson (1214–84; for an overview of its contents cf. Stefán Karlsson 1988, 38–39). None of these works, however, comes close to Hauksbók in scope and variety. As a systematic presentation of the medieval Icelandic world view it is unique.

In Hauksbók there is a version of the Old Icelandic *Elucidarius*, a popular theological work attributed to Honorius Augustodunensis, and a collection of miscellanea known as *Heimslýsing ok helgifræði* (Description of the world and sacred learning, i.e. theology). This includes, for example, a geographical description of the world dealing mostly with the names of countries and cities connected with prominent saints. In addition there are treatises on ecclesiastical and philosophical matters, a translation of Bede's *Prognostica temporum*, a list of holy days in the calendar (*Cisiojanus*) and a section on Arabic mathematics (*Algorismus*). The last item demonstrates the redactor's interest in recent trends in European learning. Hauksbók also contains information about precious stones and several lists of geographical material, lists of ecclesiastical dignitaries, royal genealogies etc. This is an indication of the clerical learning of the redactor but also forms a background to the main part of Hauksbók, which is made up of historical narratives of great variety in length and subject matter. In incorporating such narratives, Hauksbók marks a departure from the medieval encyclopedic tradition, which was more concerned with the statement and definition of facts than narrative (cf. Ribémont 1997, 52).

## II The history of Hauksbók

The bulk of the material in Hauksbók is general, Scandinavian or Icelandic history. *Trójumanna saga* and *Breta sögur* belong to the realm of world history, whereas Scandinavian history is represented by *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (though until the last part of the saga the action mostly takes place in southern Europe), *Ragnarssona þáttur*, *Þáttur af Upplendinga konungum*, *Skáldasaga* and *Hemings þáttur*. It is remarkable that most of these narratives (all except the last two) deal with the period before the settlement of Iceland—ancient history in Nordic terms. This indicates a perspective that can be termed genealogical or translational, concerned with the origins and movements of genealogies through time and space. Haukr seems to have been interested in Scandinavian history in so far as it dealt with the Nordic ancestors of the Icelanders,

but developments in Scandinavia after the settlement of Iceland seem to have held less interest for him.

Scandinavia may have been at the centre of the world for Icelandic aristocrats, but within the hegemonic world view mediated through clerical education there was a widespread notion that the Near East was the centre of the world. This idea was often articulated by Icelandic clerics and can be seen in works as diverse as *Leiðarvísir* by the abbot Nikulás at Munkaþverá (d. 1159) and the B-version of *Guðmundar saga*, composed around 1330. It was adopted by laymen such as Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) in his *Edda* and *Heimskringla* and included in various accounts of how the ancestors of Scandinavian kings had emigrated from Asia Minor in a distant past, usually around the time of the birth of Christ.

The narratives of *Trójumanna saga* and *Breta sögur* suggest that Haukr shared this vision of history as a movement of genealogies from East to West. This assumption is confirmed if one looks at the genealogical material, in which the ancestry of the Scandinavian royal houses as well as that of Haukr himself is traced back to the Trojans and through them to persons from the Bible, with Adam put down as his earliest ancestor. Incidentally, in the geographical description in *Hauksbók*, the settlement of the Scandinavian countries is related immediately after the narrative has taken the reader to Byzantium and Turkey, whence this process of migration is followed to Sweden, Norway, Iceland and Greenland.

In the so-called encyclopedic section of *Hauksbók*, *Heimslýsing ok helgifræði*, the redactor presents a theory of historiography which was evidently his own. In a short note, he acknowledges Moses as the first historian. He then goes on to claim that for matters that are not useful to know (from a Christian perspective) but may nevertheless offer information and entertainment, Dares Phrygius was the first historian, as he wrote about a war between Greeks and Trojans (*Hauksbók* 1892–96, 152):

Þat er sagt at Moyses tæki þat rað fystr. at skrifa a bokum at burð tíðenda þeira er verit hafa fyrir i heiminum. oc vm þat er guð skop þenna heim. oc sagðe þat er mestum stormerkium setír. oc hinn helgi ande kendi honum. oc hafa þar eftír mynt þeir er helgar bokr hafa gort síðan. En þau tíðendi er eigi fylgir nytsemí. oc er þo froðleikr i oc gaman. at vita. þa gerði sa // maðr er sagt er at Daríus frígíus het. Hann sagðe sogu fra sameign Gírkia oc Troea manna. oc ritaðe viðar laufe.

It is said that Moses was the first to undertake the writing in books about events in the earlier history of the world, and about how God created this world, and he told of things that are of the greatest significance, and he was instructed by

the Holy Spirit. And those who have made holy books since then have followed his narrative. But those events that have no utility, but the knowledge of which provides learning and entertainment, are narrated by a man who is said to have been called Dares Phrygius. He told the story of the conflict between the Greeks and Trojans, and he wrote on the leaves of trees.

This distinction between *nytsemi* (utility) and *fróðleikr* (learning) stems from Isidore of Seville, though the passage in its entirety is somewhat more elaborate than the corresponding passage in Isidore's work. It probably indicates the dominant view among educated Icelanders of the time (cf. Finnur Jónsson 1892–96, cxvi–cxvii). By the inclusion of this passage, Haukr defends an aristocratic interest in Graeco-Roman history, while not questioning the primacy of the Christian tradition. He goes on to include *Trójumanna saga* in Hauksbók but very little of the Biblical history that was related in *Stjórn*, which incidentally was completed around the same time as Hauksbók. *Elucidarius*, however, was added to Hauksbók in Haukr's old age, perhaps because the Christian framework of world history was lacking.

Apart from *Hemings þáttur*, which takes place before and during the failed Norwegian attempt to conquer England in 1066, no accounts of Continental Scandinavian history after the settlement of Iceland are included in Hauksbók (*Skáldasaga* relates to the time of Haraldr hárfagri, during which the settlement took place). But the outline of Icelandic history in *Landnámabók* (The Book of Settlements) and its sequel, *Kristni saga* (The History of Christianity, an account of the Conversion of Iceland), extends as far as the early twelfth century, while *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Fóstbræðra saga*, which take place in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, seem to have been selected for redaction because of their value as sources for the history of Greenland.

On the basis of the selection of material one may draw two inferences: first, that the redactor was occupied with tracing the course of history in a spatial as well as a temporal sense, from the origins in the Near East towards the settlement of Iceland and Greenland. The history of the displacement of the aristocratic ancestors in new lands resembles an exercise in giving new value to a place, the creation of a 'space of emplacement' (cf. Foucault 1986, 22). If, as Friedrich Nietzsche claimed (1972, 253), history is always in the service of some unhistorical force, the historical narrative in Hauksbók seems shaped by two principal concepts, that the centre of the world was in the East and that the Icelandic and Scandinavian élite was connected to that centre through historical migrations. These concepts were probably also active in other works exploring similar themes to those in Hauksbók.

Secondly, it is reasonable to assume that Haukr tried to condense his material in the way that has been noted by Jansson and others because his interest in the texts he assembled was historical rather than aesthetic. In other words, Haukr did not condense *Eiríks saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga* because he was trying to imitate ‘classical saga style’, as Sven Jansson suggested (1944, 261–62), but because he was interested in these texts for their historical content rather than for their value as artistic narrative.

As its contents are not arranged chronologically, Hauksbók seems like history in the making rather than a finished work. In the first half of the seventeenth century, Hauksbók became an important source for historians studying the history of Iceland and Greenland in the spirit of Renaissance humanism. Arngrímur Jónsson (1568–1648) quotes Haukr as a source in his *Specimen Islandiæ historicum*, and he was also used by historians writing in vernacular Icelandic, such as Jón Guðmundsson lærði (1574–1658) and Björn Jónsson of Skarðsá (1574–1655). Hauksbók could thus be taken as the basis for an outline of secular history of the type composed by these authors, though Haukr himself did not write such a narrative and we cannot assume that he had anything of that sort in mind.

Is it fair to look at Hauksbók as a draft, a collection of material which then became useful to later generations of historians? This does not seem to do justice to the work as it has been preserved, its sheer volume and the wealth of detailed knowledge about the world it contains. Rather, it is more profitable to regard Haukr as ‘an interpreter and teacher of a world view’ as has been suggested above. From Hauksbók we learn what sort of facts about the world an educated Icelander of Haukr’s social standing and generation thought worth writing down and preserving. An interest in the world’s geographical structure and its history is manifest in Hauksbók, and, more importantly, Scandinavia, Iceland and Greenland are placed in a specific context within the universal or Catholic world. The course of history is related in accordance with the redactor’s understanding of that spatial position, as a translation of peoples and learning from East to West. Hauksbók manifests a world view that Haukr and his contemporaries regarded as a faithful and true description of the world.

### III Hauksbók and the Icelandic world view

In the medieval Catholic world historical writing was primarily of two kinds, chronological and genealogical. The former view of history can be broadly interpreted as clerical, the latter as aristocratic (cf. Spiegel 1997, 99–110). A work of history could also be a mixture of the two. For

instance, *Íslendingabók* (The Book of the Icelanders) of Ari fróði (the Learned, c.1067–1148), the earliest surviving Icelandic work of history in the vernacular, is broadly chronological in shape, but ends with a genealogical table where the line of Ari is traced back to Yngvi, ‘king of the Turks’ (*Íslendingabók, Landnámabók* 1968, 27).

Two points are striking, if one studies Hauksbók in this light. First, the history in Hauksbók is not a chronicle. Second, the texts in Hauksbók do not fit a chronological framework, even if one had been intended. This is not surprising, given Haukr’s aristocratic background, but it cannot be explained by a general lack of interest in numbers and order. Haukr seems to have been interested in mathematics (as seen by his inclusion of *Algorismus* in the book) and he also seems to have taken a general interest in natural philosophy. Hauksbók is, for instance, the earliest known Icelandic book in which the lode-stone is mentioned.

Despite the clerical nature of some sections in Hauksbók, the history told in the book has little in common with the chronologically precise *Íslendingabók* and is more akin to traditional saga literature, apart from being vastly more extensive in scope. Hauksbók was shaped by these two traditions, and in its narrative part the influence of the saga tradition seems to have been predominant.

This indicates that Hauksbók is a book of a different nature from a chronicle or a simple historical narrative. The main contribution of Hauksbók to the textual legacy of medieval Iceland is that it incorporates traditional Icelandic histories into a larger whole, placing them in a context which included also the history and geography of places both remote from and central to the Catholic world view.

In its version of the genealogical origin of the Icelandic nobility, Hauksbók offers a new version of a familiar theme. In *Íslendingabók* the original ancestor of the kings of Norway (and of Ari himself) is a ‘king of the Turks’. As the narrative in *Íslendingabók* is brief, it is far from clear who these Turks are, yet one might note that in fact, the Turks only came to rule Asia Minor from 1071 onwards, when Ari was already four years old. Nevertheless, in works of history from the early thirteenth century such as Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*, the ancestors of the Scandinavian nobility are depicted as stemming from Asia Minor, and Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum* (Book 3) says that the Norse gods once ruled in Byzantium. Their story takes the shape of a euhemeristic tale of the origin of the kings of Norway, where they appear as descendants of Óðinn who had emigrated to the North from Byzantium or the Near East. In the prologue to Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*, these emigrants from Asia

Minor are said to be descendants of the Trojans. This is in itself not surprising. In medieval historical tradition, a connection was often made between Trojans and Turks (cf. Beaune 1985, 49), and it is notable that this had become a commonplace in the thirteenth century in works such as Snorri's *Edda* and various *fornaldarsögur*. This explains the importance of *Trójumanna saga*, and was probably the main reason why the oldest extant version of the saga was included in Hauksbók.

The prologue to *Trójumanna saga* in Hauksbók is not to be found in other manuscripts of the saga, and in this prologue we find a variation on some of the central themes of the origin of the Norse nobility. For instance, in it the historical outline from Troy to Scandinavia is traced through Britain rather than having the traditional emphasis on Scythia as an intermediary, though the genealogical list in Hauksbók demonstrates that the redactor also knew that version (cf. Faulkes 1978–79, 103, 118). The idea that Icelandic noblemen had Asian ancestry was a dynamic one, as it was constantly being rewritten and reinvented, and several different versions of it survive. This translation of power (if not empire) also made it possible for the secular aristocracy to adopt their own version of the hegemonic, clerical idea that the Near East was the centre of the world. In introducing Troy, writers catering for the interests of the secular nobility had invented an important secular *lieu de mémoire* which could also become the subject of a pilgrimage during the Crusades (cf. Beaune 1985, 61–62). The idea of Troy as a locus for a worldly pilgrimage was current in Icelandic romances from the fourteenth century onwards, if not earlier (cf. *Kirialax saga* 1917, 25–27, 64–68).

The prologue to *Trójumanna saga* in Hauksbók is also interesting in its relatively matter-of-fact depiction of pagan deities in the guise of human ancestors. This prologue is thematically connected to a section in *Heimslýsing ok helgifræði* where Ælfric's warning against the pagan deities appears in translation (see Taylor 1969). It is interesting to note that on both occasions the names of the Graeco-Roman deities have Scandinavian counterparts and are thus connected to the indigenous pagan tradition; Saturn becomes Freyr, Jove Þórr and Venus Freyja. The difference is that the Ælfric translation is very polemical, while in the prologue to *Trójumanna saga* the antics of the pagan gods are portrayed more neutrally. This illustrates that an aristocrat such as Haukr could adapt some of the themes of the clerical anti-pagan discourse to a new setting while shedding its polemical nature. The theme of the Graeco-Roman gods occurs as well in *Breta sögur* where the invasion of Britain

by the Saxons occasions a reference to their religion. The reappearance of the pagan deities in several different contexts in the same work is hardly coincidental, and constitutes a link between Eastern, Western and Northern history through a similar group of pagan and semi-divine ancestors.

Haukr's interest in pagan customs was not limited to the Graeco-Roman tradition. In *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* there is a reference to the ancient Scandinavian belief in *Óðáinsakr* and the worship of Freyr. In *Landnámabók* there is a section about the pagan laws, known as *Útljósloð*, which seems to have been introduced by Haukr, at least in the context of the settlement, as it is not found in the other medieval redactions. In *Eiríks saga rauða* there is a lively description of the prophecies of a Scandinavian seeress, the *völva*. This interest in pagan customs seems to have been largely antiquarian, as there are very few references in Hauksbók to contemporary pagan enemies (such as the Saracens). It is, however, apparent that curiosity about the old pagan religion is an integral feature of Hauksbók, though it is usually presented in the habitual antiquarian or euhemeristic manner.

Haukr's attention to past events was not confined to the lost world of pagan myth. A recurrent theme in Hauksbók is the discovery of new lands and the settlement of Iceland, Greenland and Vinland in the ninth and tenth centuries. In several sections of Hauksbók there are references to it, in *Landnámabók*, *Kristni saga*, *Eiríks saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga*. Taking into account other versions of *Landnámabók*, such as those preserved in *Sturlubók* and *Melabók*, it is clear that interest in the settlement of Iceland was in vogue during the period between 1260 and 1320. In this period, old myths concerning the origins of the Icelandic élite were given their final literary form, which was probably different from that of the original *Landnámabók*. The emphasis on the Vinland journeys is, however, peculiar to Haukr, compared to other compilers of *Landnámabók* texts. Hauksbók contains the oldest extant manuscript of a Vinland saga, although scholars have claimed that such sagas must have been written down earlier (cf. Ólafur Halldórsson 1978, 398–400).

Haukr probably did not have access to *Grænlandinga saga*, of which the oldest surviving version is in *Flateyjarbók* from the 1380s, since he is unlikely to have ignored such a valuable source, given his interest in Greenland. His choice of *Eiríks saga* to include in his compilation can also be seen in the context of his general world view. In *Eiríks saga*, Vinland is placed within the field of medieval Christian cosmology. One finds there mentions of the *einfaetingar* (unipeds) which also appear

in Icelandic lists of ‘peoples of various kinds’ (*Hauksbók* 1892–96, 165–67; *Cod. mbr. AM. 194, 8vo* 1908, 34–36). Such lists are based on Latin works on wondrous nations of the type that were current in Europe at the time, whose translation into vernacular languages signals a growing interest in wondrous things (Roy 1975, 72–74; Daston and Park 1998, 21–39). It is hardly a coincidence that the same manuscript contains two of the main sources from medieval Iceland about unipeds.

In a manuscript from around 1300 (AM 736 I 4to), it is argued that Vinland might be a peninsula in Africa. The episode of the uniped in *Eiríks saga* does not confirm this, but the location of Vinland in Africa in AM 736 I 4to demonstrates that Icelanders who wanted to know where Vinland was were not expecting it to be ‘a new world’, but a previously unknown part of the old world. For medieval Icelanders, Vinland may have been a previously undiscovered territory but hardly a part of a new continent which could not be reconciled with the traditional Catholic world view.

It is somewhat puzzling that Icelanders apparently did not write about their journeys to Vinland until the thirteenth century, though there is mention of the place in *Íslendingabók*. One reason might be that there was some confusion at first about how Vinland and the other islands described in the Vinland sagas could be fitted into the known Catholic world view. By Haukr’s lifetime it seems that this problem had been solved, and the wondrous lands had been integrated into the topography of the known world.

#### IV The development of the Icelandic world view

*Hauksbók* is a unique source for the world view of a medieval Icelandic, a work of comprehensive learning written in part by the compiler’s own hand. In this article I have argued that *Hauksbók* in its extraordinary scope and breadth represents the world view of Haukr’s contemporaries among the Icelandic *literati*. On the basis of this study of *Hauksbók*, the following observations can be made about the Icelandic world view and its development from 1100 to about 1400.

The world view manifest in *Hauksbók*, and shared by most Icelandic medieval texts, is representative of the attitudes of the Icelandic literary élite and it is reasonable to suppose that these ideas that were common among the élite were shared by the population in general (cf. Burke 1978, 28). This world view was ‘Catholic’ in nature. The world was seen as a unity, as it is in the Biblical claim (Mark 24: 14) that the Gospel will be preached in all the world. In *Hauksbók* we find a world-description of

this sort in the section about ‘hversu lǫnd liggja í veröldinni’ (*Hauksbók* 1892–96, 153–56).

This was predominantly a literate world view, a construction that would hardly have taken this particular form in a predominantly oral culture. The Catholic world view is predominant in Icelandic texts from the twelfth century onwards, but it cannot be ascertained whether there was an overlap between it and views held before the advent of literacy. In all likelihood the introduction of book culture in Iceland made a crucial difference in the formation of a new world view, akin to that dominant within the literate culture of the Catholic world. A new paradigm or dimension was introduced, that of Biblical history, which formed a grand narrative which all other narratives had to acknowledge. The role of the clergy or the *literati* was vital in this transition. Translations of passages from Latin works, such as *Elucidarius*, *Imago mundi*, *Historia scholastica* and *Speculum historiale*, provided an important framework which Icelanders used. This textual tradition stems from the twelfth century but reached maturity during the life of Haukr Erlendsson.

In *Oddaverja þáttur* one notes how the chieftain Jón Loftsson (1124–97) rejected the idea of the authority of the apostolic succession by reference to native tradition, albeit a clerical one (cf. Hermann 2002, 112–15). This suggests that friction between the hegemonic world view and a native tradition was possible. It is not certain to what extent Icelandic laymen were literate in the twelfth century. One problem is that there are hardly any texts available with which to contrast the image of the dominant twelfth-century world view of the Icelandic clergy. The main components of the Catholic world view were present from the beginning of literacy, and this enabled its hegemony among European *literati* (cf. Gramsci 1949, 9). Nevertheless it is far from certain that it was always dominant among lay people in this period, and unknown to what extent literary culture was available to lay people then.

In accordance with the general paradigm introduced by clerics and other literates, world history was the history of the Bible and of the apostolic succession. Soon, however, traces of another dimension were being integrated into this structure, Graeco-Roman history, which was already present in the twelfth-century *Veraldar saga* (History of the World). In *Hauksbók* this dimension appears in the section where it is stated that Moses was the world’s first historian, though Dares Phrygius is given pre-eminence within a more worldly tradition.

In the thirteenth century chieftains gained an important position among the literary *élite* in Iceland and their inclusion among the *literati*

facilitated the spread of the Catholic world view in the larger community of literate people. At the same time, the lay aristocracy began to use this new medium to promote their own traditions (cf. Hermann 2002, 103–04). The office of law-speaker seems to have been crucial in that development. Among highly literate law-speakers of the thirteenth century were the cleric Styrmir fróði Kárason (c.1170–1245) and aristocrats such as Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241), Óláfr hvítaskáld Þórðarson (1212–59) and Sturla Þórðarson. This mantle of learning was inherited by the office of lawman which replaced the law-speaker in 1271. Among the incumbents were men active in the pursuit of historical learning around 1300, such as Snorri Markússon (d. 1313), Þórðr Narfason (d. 1308) and, notably, Haukr Erlendsson.

Although still confined to the élite around 1300, the Catholic world view will probably have made important advances among the population in the fourteenth century. At that time there was a vast increase in the production of manuscripts in Iceland. More than 60% of existing Icelandic medieval manuscripts are from the fourteenth century. Linguistic evidence shows that literacy was becoming more widespread, as linguistic deviations begin to appear more frequently in manuscripts than before (Haraldur Bernharðsson 2002, 188–93; cf. Lönnroth 1964, 43–77). Furthermore, in this period it was not uncommon for scribes to lament the fact that books were becoming more common among the general public.

This development was followed by a subtle shift in emphasis in the production of literary works. New material such as the legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*) became a part of literate culture. In this respect, Hauksbók marks a turning-point, as it reflects an interest in Icelandic pre-history more characteristic of the fourteenth century than earlier periods. Whereas in the twelfth century the transmission of such material seems to have been predominantly oral, the writing of legendary sagas became common in the fourteenth century. Moreover, there was much writing of Icelandic history in the period 1260–1320. The three medieval versions of *Landnámabók* that have survived date from this time, one of them in Hauksbók. Other important works such as *Kristni saga*, *Sturlunga saga* and many noteworthy family sagas (including *Njáls saga* and *Hrafnkels saga*) were probably first recorded in this period. The lifetime of Haukr Erlendsson was an age of groundbreaking changes in Icelandic literary culture. It is improbable that a book of this scope could have been compiled before that time, though the roots of Hauksbók lie within long-established tradition.

## V Conclusion

From the beginning of literate culture, Icelandic aristocrats tried to position themselves within the scope of the Catholic world. In works such as Snorri's *Edda* and *Heimskringla* Scandinavians and Icelanders were provided with Trojan ancestry through Óðinn's migration from the Near East. The heathen past, Graeco-Roman and Norse, was slowly becoming acceptable through euhemerism; stories about pagan deities could now be recorded and memorised as history. Around 1300, when Hauksbók was written, this had evolved further and histories of ancestors in Norway were becoming more important, with *Landnámabók* probably providing the incentive. It is reasonable to conclude that, like other European aristocrats, Haukr Erlendsson had 'a living past' which could be related to contemporary issues (cf. Graus 1975).

In the Middle Ages communication by sea was often a more useful mode of transport than more arduous travel by land. It is often forgotten that in this period, an island could be more accessible than geographically 'central' inland regions. Similarly, genealogies and secular history could easily transcend distances both temporal and spatial that seem considerable on modern maps. This meant that the world could be apprehended within a relatively modest historical and geographical corpus of works. Thus a single codex like Hauksbók can serve as an excellent guide to the Icelandic medieval world view.

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THE IRONIES IN CARDINAL WILLIAM OF SABINA'S  
SUPPOSED PRONOUNCEMENT ON ICELANDIC  
INDEPENDENCE

BY DAVID ASHURST

STURLA ÞÓRÐARSON'S *HÁKONAR SAGA HÁKONARSONAR* has a reputation for being a somewhat dry narrative, 'full of informative details and correspondingly dull to read' (Jónas Kristjánsson 1992, 314). It has long been recognised, however, that the saga is shot through with irony (Schach 1993, 160), which makes the work a great deal more attractive than it might have been, at least for readers who have an eye and a taste for such things. The presence of this irony is hardly surprising in view of the circumstances in which the saga was composed. Sturla, one of the Icelandic chieftains most notably opposed to the establishment of Norwegian rule over Iceland, had found himself obliged, in 1263, to go to Norway and swear fealty. A little while later, King Magnús Hákonarson commissioned him to write the life of his father, King Hákon Hákonarson, who died at about this time. Sturla therefore had to find acceptably positive ways of representing Hákon despite inconvenient facts such as that he had effectively eliminated jarl Skúli, the ambitious Norwegian nobleman who was King Magnús's maternal grandfather, and that he had instigated the death of Sturla's own close kinsman, Snorri Sturluson. It seems, furthermore, that Sturla had to work under the scrutiny of Magnús, who wanted the saga to be written *eftir sjálfs hans ráði ok inna vitrustu manna forsögn* 'in accordance with his own will and the instruction of the wisest men' (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, II 234). In these difficult circumstances the skill with which Sturla manages to convey realities at odds with the apparent drift of his text is impressive and frequently entertaining. To give just one example before centring on the main text to be analysed: at a late stage in his narrative Sturla explains that Hákon set off to Denmark with armed forces at the request of the Danish king Christoforus, who needed military assistance against his enemies; while en route Hákon received news that Christoforus was already dead, but that his queen still wished for Norwegian aid; in connection with Hákon's decision to proceed with the expedition despite the altered strategic outlook, Sturla observes that *var þat eigi konungs hátr, at halda eigi orð sín* 'it was not the nature of a king (or the king) not to keep his word' (Sturla 1887, 307). By the time Hákon reached Copenhagen, we are then

told, the queen had come to terms with some of her enemies and wanted the Norwegians to go home again; an exchange of gifts took place, *en þat fannzt í orðum Hákonar konungs, at honum þóttu Danir eigi haldit hafa þat sem þeir höfðu ráðit sín í milli* ‘but it was apparent from King Hákon’s words that he thought the Danes had not kept to what he and they had decided between them’ (p. 307). This remark is obscure unless it prompts the reader to remember that there was a long-standing dispute between Hákon and the Danish rulers concerning some compensation which Hákon believed was due to him following an earlier rebuff (p. 268) and which he had tried several times to collect; in this way Sturla hints that Hákon’s military aid had in fact been bought with the promise of a settlement and that this had a bearing on his decision to continue with the expedition after the death of Christoforus—in short that, although it was not the king’s nature to break his word, in this case nature was helped out by an ulterior motive.

One of the best-known passages in the saga concerns a ruling on Icelandic independence, which was supposedly made by the papal legate, William of Sabina, when he visited Norway to crown Hákon in 1247. Sturla notes that, during the cardinal’s stay, Heinrekr Kársson was made bishop of Hólar; and he adds the following (p. 252):

Þá var ok sú skipan [gör] til Íslands með ráði kardinála, at sú þjóð, er þar bygði, þjónaði til Hákonar konungs; þvíat hann kallaði þat ósannligt, at land þat þjónaði eigi undir einhvernum konung sem öll önnur í veröldunni.

At that time also an order was made concerning Iceland, on the advice of the cardinal, that the people who lived there should pay homage to King Hákon, because he declared it improper that that land did not serve under some king like all others in the world.

The account continues by declaring that the chieftain Þórðr kakali was then sent to Iceland with Bishop Heinrekr to tell the people that they should all consent to be under the rule of King Hákon and to pay suitable taxes. It adds that another bishop was sent to Greenland with the same message.

This passage is problematical for several reasons. The first, though it may perhaps be regarded as a quibble, is that the word *ósannligt* could be taken to mean ‘unfair, unjust’, in which case William’s sentiment would be that since everyone else has to put up with a king so should the Icelanders. The negative view of kingship implicit in such a sentiment, whilst clearly not what the context suggests the cardinal had in mind, is by no means unjustifiable and, as will be discussed shortly, is not without biblical authority. The second reason is that the reference to

Greenland immediately refutes William's assumption that all lands except Iceland serve a king. More important than these issues, however, is the fact that William is unlikely to have made this statement in precisely this form. Certainly he must have supported Norwegian influence over Iceland, as is shown by the appointment of Heinrekr, a Norwegian, as bishop of Hólar; but an Italian like William, who had spent many years in Rome, must have known that there existed several kingless states in Italy and that there was no question of their having kings foisted on them by the Church. It would have been peculiarly deceitful, therefore, if he had encouraged the liquidation of the Icelandic Commonwealth on the basis of the view attributed to him by Sturla. There is, furthermore, a different account of the cardinal's ruling, which says nothing about kings or their supposed governance of all lands. *Pórðar saga kakala* declares that Þórðr kakali and his rival Gizurr Þorvaldsson, who had been struggling with each other to be dominant in Iceland, were made to submit their case to William's judgement. The cardinal favoured Þórðr (*Sturlunga saga* 1946, II 83):

Vildi hann þat eitt heyra, at Þórðr færi þá til Íslands, en Gizurr væri þar eftir—kvað þat ok ráð, at einn maðr væri skipaðr yfir landit, ef friðr skyldi vera.

He would not hear of anything but that Þórðr should then go to Iceland and Gizurr should stay behind—he also said it was advisable for one man to be put in charge of the country, if there was to be peace.

This is a much more plausible version of William's views concerning the government of Iceland, not least because it avoids the difficulties outlined above.

Given that it is unlikely the cardinal actually expressed the sentiment that Sturla attributes to him, the greatest probability must be that the sentence concerning the subjection of Iceland to a king like all other lands was included so as to give ecclesiastical authority, retrospectively, to what had actually happened in the 1260s, and consequently that it was meant to please King Magnús. There is more to the matter than this, however, because the sentence echoes a biblical passage, the context of which suggests several layers of irony in Sturla's use of the idea behind it. The passage in question is in 1 Samuel 8, which deals with events that led to the end of the period of the Judges in the history of ancient Israel. This period, *mutatis mutandis*, bears a certain resemblance to that of the Icelandic Commonwealth: for about four hundred years after fleeing to their adopted land from the oppressive rule of the Egyptian king, the Israelites maintained a society that had no centralised government but was held together with a sense of nationhood by the common observance

of a law code (in this case the religious law handed down by Moses); disputes were set before non-elected judges whose power bases were neither strictly hereditary nor territorial but depended on the prestige built up by the individual judge; towards the end of the period, however, the role of judge was showing signs of becoming a dynastic office and there was widespread dissatisfaction with the integrity of the people who held it, in particular the sons of Samuel (for the biblical source of these statements, see Judges and the early part of 1 Samuel). Samuel himself, perhaps the most prestigious of all the judges, is portrayed as a righteous man with whom God spoke and who, in turn, spoke on behalf of God. It was to him that the elders of Israel turned with a request that a new political system be established (*Biblia sacra* 1999, 1 Samuelis 8: 5): *constitue nobis regem, ut iudicet nos, sicut et universae habent nationes*, ‘Make a king for us, to judge us, even as all nations have.’ Like any educated man in his day, Sturla would doubtless have known this scripture or at least known its substance; and indeed there exists an Old Norse translation of it, which is probably Icelandic and perhaps of the mid-thirteenth century in origin (Jónas Kristjánsson 1992, 144) though it is preserved only in the later Norwegian compilation known as *Stjórn*.<sup>1</sup> As it appears in *Stjórn* (1862, 440, normalised), the demand of the elders is that Israel should have a king *sem allar aðrar þjóðir hafa*, ‘as all other nations have’.

The first irony involved in Sturla’s echoing of this passage is that whereas in *Hákonar saga* the representative of the Church invokes the idea that all nations except one have a king, and uses it as a reason for demanding that the Icelanders submit, in the biblical narrative the kingless people themselves demand a monarch on the basis of this idea and in doing so they displease both God and his spokesman. The cardinal is in effect siding with men whom God judges to be in the wrong. Further, the basis of God’s anger is that He has been rejected (*Stjórn* p. 440, 1 Sam. 8: 7–8), but the nature of the Israelites’ mistake is not only theological but also political, as is made clear when Samuel, at the Lord’s express command, gives the Israelites an account of just what it is like to serve under a king. He prophesies what a king will do to them, above all that through confiscations and taxes he will take away both their property and their freedom (*Stjórn* p. 441, 1 Sam. 8: 14–17):

Hann man ok taka vingarða yðra ok akra ok olifutré ok aldingarða, þá er þér eiguð bezta, ok gefa sínum þjónum . . . Sæði yður ok vingarða ok garða ávext

<sup>1</sup> In what follows, the scriptures will be quoted in the *Stjórn* version. It is not to be inferred, however, that Sturla actually knew this translation.

ok svá hjarðir man hann tolla ok tíunda, ok gefa geldingum þeim sem honum þjónuðu, ok oka yðr sjálfa undir þröngvan þrældóm.

He shall also take your vineyards and cornfields and olive trees and orchards—the best that you have—and give them to his servants. Your crops and vineyards and fertilised plots, and likewise your flocks, shall he toll and tithe and give to the eunuchs who have served him, and you yourselves shall he yoke under strict servitude.

The end of the whole prophecy could hardly be more emphatic in its contempt for men who surrender their liberty to the hands of a royal master (*Stjórn* p. 441, 1 Sam. 8: 18):

Á þeima degi munu þér kveina ok kalla til dróttins at hann frelsi yðr undan ánauð konungs þess er þér hafið valit yðr; ok er þá vænna at dróttinn vili eigi heyra.

On that day shall you wail and call upon the Lord to free you from under the oppression of the king whom you have chosen for yourselves, and it is then to be expected that the Lord will not hear.

For those who perceived the biblical echo, Cardinal William's words as reported by Sturla would be bound to evoke this strongly negative view of kingship, and consequently to call to mind a positive view of kingless self-government—both of which are at odds with the apparent drift of the passage in *Hákonar saga*. The full range of connotations of the cardinal's words is yet more complex, however, because of further developments in the story told in 1 Samuel. Even though God is angry with the Israelites for demanding a king, He accedes to their request; and this indeed is the *raison d'être* for Samuel's prophecy. Having a king is the punishment for wanting one. On this level, at least, kingship is consistent with the divine will from the moment the Israelites make their demand; furthermore, following the false start in royal government represented by the appointment of Saul as the first king of Israel, Samuel is soon to be found anointing God's own favourite, David (*Stjórn* pp. 459–60, 1 Sam. 16). And from the descendants of King David, in the fullness of time, comes Jesus the Messiah (Matthew 1: 1). Thus, it may be argued, kingship was not only authorised by God, despite reservations, but was subsumed into the divine plan of redemption and thus became central to world history. This too would have occurred to those in Sturla's audience who noticed the biblical allusion; or if any of the 'wisest men' who instructed him on behalf of King Magnús failed to look beyond Samuel's speech, doubtless Sturla could have pointed to these facts as evidence that the implications of his reference, whatever their incidental connotations of anti-royalist feeling, work out ultimately in the king's favour.

In conclusion it can be said that there are several levels of significance in the statement that Cardinal William declared it to be improper that Iceland did not serve under a king like all other nations. In the first place, taking the statement on its own terms, it grants high-level ecclesiastical backing to Hákon's wish to bring Iceland under royal control and to legitimise the events of 1262–64 when the Icelandic chieftains subjected themselves to the Norwegian crown. Secondly, in view of its internal contradictions and the probability that the cardinal never said precisely what Sturla attributes to him, the passage indicates that Sturla was working unscrupulously and also, on this level, a little clumsily to please his new master, King Magnús. Thirdly, however, the biblical echo prompts the recollection of Samuel's speech against kings, and hence the thought that the service of kings by its very nature is often costly and demeaning, and that once entered into by a nation it cannot easily be escaped. Along with this there is surely a hint that a day might come when the Icelanders, like the Israelites in Samuel's prophecy, would wail and cry out to be delivered from the oppression of the king whom they had chosen. But beyond this, fourthly, the biblical allusion prompts acquiescence in the face of royal power when its establishment becomes inevitable, as God himself acquiesced and drew kingship into the centre of world history. As for Sturla and his own views, none of the ideas just outlined would have been wholly alien to his mind: he was, as mentioned above, a man who had struggled hard to avoid the royal takeover of Iceland but was ultimately obliged to swear allegiance, and who wrote *Hákonar saga* in order to consolidate himself in royal favour; he then returned to Iceland as *lögmaðr*, the king's highest legal officer; at some later point (presumably) he wrote *Íslendinga saga*, which takes a much cooler view of King Hákon and his interventions in Icelandic affairs; and he was recalled to Norway on a charge of not fulfilling his legal duties with sufficient zeal, but again secured high favour from King Magnús and again turned to writing royal biography (*Magnúss saga*, of which only a small fragment survives). It is evident that Sturla accepted the new dispensation and was a willing participant who made the best of it but who also maintained an independent, by no means committedly royalist, judgement with regard to the end of the Icelandic Commonwealth. The full range of ironies to be found in the declaration put into Cardinal William's mouth, therefore, can be seen to encapsulate rather neatly the conflicting views that we might reasonably suppose were Sturla's own.

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THE VIKING MIND  
OR  
IN PURSUIT OF THE VIKING

BY ANTHONY FAULKES

**H**ISTORIANS AND ARCHAEOLOGISTS over the last two generations have changed our perceptions of the Viking Age and have drawn people's attention to less destructive and more creative activities of the Vikings than rape and pillage, such as their trading and settlements both in new countries like Iceland and in already settled countries like Britain and France, where they had a great effect on the culture, organisation, law and language of the local populations, an effect that was not always deleterious and may in many respects be seen as having been beneficial. The Viking exhibitions that were held by various museums in the second half of the twentieth century emphasised the peaceful side of the Vikings, as traders, craftsmen, shipbuilders; and archaeologists and anthropologists have radically changed our understanding of what Vikings were like, showing us that their culture was not just destructive and chaotic, but ordered and creative. Vikings are now seen as having made a positive and valuable contribution to the development of western civilisation. This view is encapsulated particularly in the title of Peter Foote and David Wilson's book, *The Viking Achievement* (1970).

Literary historians and theorists have also changed our perceptions of the Viking Age. Archaeology can only show us the objects and artefacts made and used by Vikings, and illuminating though these objects are for a proper understanding of the nature of the Vikings, it is to literary sources that we must go to find a representation of what went on in their minds. The interpretation of literary sources about the Vikings is, however, problematic; they conflict with each other and all contain various kinds of bias, so that the truth about the Vikings is difficult, probably impossible, to recover. Indeed structuralists and other literary and historical theorists warn us that there may not be a simple truth to discover about the past and about the meaning of literary sources.

*Definition*

There is a problem about the definition of the Viking. The word itself seems not to have been used in modern English prose before the

nineteenth century, when one of its first appearances is in Scott's novel *The Pirate* (Scott 1821, 319: 'Vi-king'; see Fell 1987, 117). Originally the word meant a member of a raiding force travelling by sea. It is found as a personal name in Old High German and in the early Old English poem about the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, *sæwicingas* is used of the tribe of Reuben crossing the Red Sea (*Exodus* 1977, line 333). In scaldic verse it is used of Scandinavians engaged in warfare, often with no pejorative force, as in Sighvatr's *Vikingarvísur* (*ÍF* XXVII 11, 18, 23), and in an eddic poem of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani (*PE* 221). As late as c.1140 it is used in a complimentary sense of Sigurðr slembir (Ívarr Ingimundarson, *Sigurðarbálkr* st. 43, in *Skj A* I 502, B I 475). But it never seems to refer to a regular army and comes more and more to be associated with hostile attacks of freebooters, and becomes more and more pejorative, often being used by foreigners to mean 'Scandinavian pagans'—though the Viking Age in fact continues into the Christian period, when most Vikings were Christians (thus it is customary to think of the Vikings as heathens and of the Viking religion as worship of the Æsir, even though many Vikings adopted Christianity quite early on). *Víking* (f.) is actually a term describing an activity, that is raiding by sea, and *víkingr* (m.) is one who goes a-viking. Modern historians have widened the term and use it to refer to Scandinavians in general in the Viking Age, whatever activity they were engaged on, so that the term has ceased to be a mere activity word and has become almost an ethnic term. Thus Foote and Wilson's *The Viking Achievement* (1970) has the sub-title *The society and culture of early medieval Scandinavia*. Hence the concern to emphasise that Vikings in this sense were not just violent plunderers, though to describe the settlers of Iceland in general as Vikings is really a contradiction in terms: in the narrowest sense of the word, as soon as they became settlers they stopped being Vikings. But it is in the broader sense that I am going to be using the word, so as to consider the way that Scandinavians in general, including Icelanders, were regarded both in their own time and in later centuries. I am concerned with representations of Vikings in literature from the Middle Ages to the present day. One might therefore begin by pointing out that most of the characters in *Njáls saga* would not have called themselves Vikings, and nor would the inhabitants of Jórvík, though historians now describe them as such.

It is also evident that writers in the Middle Ages did not have a concept of the Viking Age as we do. They were not aware of a new age beginning towards the end of the eighth century, though they were perhaps aware of important changes that took place in the eleventh

century, when the Viking expansion came to an end. Thus in Eddic poetry and *fornaldarsögur* no distinction is made between heroes of the Viking Age and those of earlier times, for instance the period now still often referred to as the Migration Age from the second to fifth centuries AD. Atli, Jǫrmunrekkr, Hrólfkr kraki appear side by side with Ragnar loðbrók and Ívarr beinlausi in defiance of chronology without any clear distinction being made between Viking heroes and those who lived before the beginning of the Viking Age.

### *Contemporary historians*

There are contemporary accounts of the Vikings by English, Irish and other chroniclers. These, being written by monks and priests whose institutions had suffered much from Viking raids, cannot be expected to be sympathetic or even fair to the Vikings. One thing to note is the various animals with which the Vikings are compared. Characteristic is Alcuin, a monk writing near the end of the eighth century, who saw the Viking raids as God's judgement on sinful Christians (*EHD* 842–43):

Lo, it is nearly 350 years that we and our fathers have inhabited this most lovely land, and never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race . . . foxes pillage the chosen vine.

The Welsh bishop Asser in King Alfred's reign says that

the pagans, acting like foxes, secretly broke out of camp by night, tore the agreement [they had made] to shreds, rejected the offer of money (for they knew they would get hold of more from loot than by peace) and devastated the whole region of eastern Kent (Page 1987, 10).

The poet of *The Battle of Maldon*, at the end of the tenth century, describes the Vikings as *wælwulfas* 'wolves of slaughter' and says *ongunnon lytegian þa laðe gystas* 'the hateful strangers betook themselves to guile' (*ASPR* VI 9, *EHD* 321). Byrhtferð of Ramsey in the same period wrote of 'the abominable Danes glorying in flashing blades and poisoned arrows' (*EHD* 916). The Anglo-Saxon chronicler writes in the year 1011 (*ASC* I 141, *EHD* 244):

þonne hi mæst to yfele gedon hæfdon. þonne nam man grið. 7 frið wið hi. 7 naðe læs for eallum þisum griðe 7 friðe 7 gafole. hi ferdon æghwider folcmælum 7 hergodon. 7 ure earme folc ræpton 7 slogon.

when they had done most to our injury, peace and truce were made with them; and for all this truce and tribute they journeyed none the less in bands everywhere, and harried our wretched people and plundered and killed them.

Later (1012) the Chronicle describes how they martyred the archbishop of Canterbury in London (ASC I 142, EHD 245):

wæron hi eac swyðe druncene. forþam þær wæs gebroht win suðan. genamon þa þone biscop . . . hine þa þær oftorfodon mid banum. 7 mid hryðere heafdom. 7 sloh hine þa an heora mid anre æxe yre on þet heafod. þet he mid þam dynte niðer asah. 7 his halige blod on ða eorðan feoll. 7 his þa haligan sawle to Godes rice asende.

They were also very drunk, for wine from the south had been brought there. They seized the bishop . . . they pelted him with bones and with ox-heads, and one of them struck him on the head with the back of an axe, that he sank down with the blow, and his holy blood fell on the ground, and so he sent his holy soul to God's kingdom.

It is interesting that the Vikings' habit of throwing bones about when they ate is confirmed in Snorri's account of Þórr's journey to Útgardaloki (Snorri Sturluson 2005, 37) and in *Hrólfs saga kraka* (NION II, 4–12). When the same event in London is described by Thietmar of Merseburg, the Viking leader is described as 'the voracious Charybdis of thieving magpies', but the bishop is described as a lamb (EHD 349). Vikings in these sources are characteristically depicted as violent, heathen and unreliable—using deceit and failing to keep their promises. The latter may be true: the cult of Óðinn, which may have been adhered to by many of the Viking attackers of Britain, seems to have actually celebrated Óðinn as being an oath-breaker. Thus *Hávamál* (110, 91; though this part of the poem may well reflect post-Viking-Age views about the cult of Óðinn): *Baugeið Óðinn hygg ek at unnit hafi, hvat skal hans trygðum trúa?* 'A ring-oath I believe Óðinn has sworn, how can his word be believed?' and *þá vér fegrst mælum er vér flást hyggjum* 'when we speak most fair, then our thoughts are falsest'. What more natural when being required to swear oaths by their highest god than that the Vikings should imitate Óðinn and break them? The attitude of medieval English writers to the Vikings can be summed up in Ray Page's translation of the words of the Englishman Æðelweard from the late tenth century (Page 1987, 3; Campbell 1962, 42, 44): 'A most vile people . . . that filthy race' (*plebs spurcissima . . . plebs immunda*).

A rather different picture emerges from contemporary accounts from the Arab world. Here there is emphasis on the peculiar rituals indulged in by the Vikings, and on their unusual sexual habits (rape is not mentioned) and lack of hygiene. The Arab traveller Ibn Fadlan wrote of Vikings in Russia in 922 (Brøndsted 1965, 265):

They are the filthiest of god's creatures. They do not wash after discharging their natural functions, neither do they wash their hands after meals. They are

as stray donkeys . . . Ten or twenty of them may live together in one house, and each of them has a couch of his own where he sits and diverts himself with the pretty slave-girls whom he has brought along to offer for sale. He will make love with one of them in the presence of his comrades, sometimes this develops into a communal orgy, and, if a customer should turn up to buy a girl, the Rus will not let her go till he has finished with her.

The rituals described in connection with funerals are very strange indeed; we in fact lack reliable accounts of such things in Scandinavian sources, but the unexpected nature of the rituals described by Ibn Fadlan has suggested that the Vikings had acquired some strange habits from the outlandish people they had been associating with east of the Baltic. They include accounts of ritual prostitution, suttee and odd things done to cockerels. Some things in this account, such as the practice of suttee, do correspond, not with historical accounts from Scandinavia, but with elements of early legends in Eddic poems, such as the death of Brynhildr, and there is also support from the evidence of archaeology, for in some ancient burials a woman is found buried alongside a man (or, in some cases, another woman, as at Oseberg).

A third contemporary source is the runic inscriptions, particularly those from Sweden. Here one is surprised to find quite often an emphasis on the Christianity of the Vikings, as well as confirmation that they often died by violence far from home—as victims rather than perpetrators—and that their motive was often just monetary gain. *Þæir foru drængila fiarri at gulli ok austarla ærni gafu. Dou sunnarla a Særkland* ‘They fared like men far after gold and in the east gave the eagle food. They died southward in Serkland’; *Brøðr varu þæir bæstra manna a landi ok i liði uti. Heldu sina huskarla vel. Hann fioll i orrustu austr i Gardum, liðs forungi, landmanna bæstr* ‘The brothers were best among men on land and out in the levy. They held their house-men well. He fell in action east in Gardaríke, the levy’s captain, of the land’s men the best’; *Guð hialpi sial þæira vel. En þæir liggia i Lundunum* ‘May God help their souls well. And they lie in London’; *Ragnælfr let gærva bro þessi æftir Anund, sun sinn goðan. Guð hialpi hans and ok salu bætr þæn hann gærði til* ‘Ragnálfr had this causeway made in memory of Anund, her good son. May God help his spirit and soul better than he deserved’; *Sar hafði goða tro til Guðs* ‘He had good faith in God’ (Jansson 1962, 41, 38, 51, 96–97, 99). The tone is sometimes heroic: *Hann var manna mestr oníðingr. ER a Ænglandi aldri týndi* ‘He was among men the most “un-dastard”. He in England lost his life’ reads one; *Sar flo æigi at Upsalum en va með hann vapn hafði* ‘He fled not at Uppsala but fought while he had weapons’ another. Sometimes other virtues are celebrated:

*Mildan við sinna ok matar goðan, i orðlofi allra miklu* ‘Gentle with his folk and generous with food, in great esteem with all people’ (Jansson 1962, 115, 65, 114). Epitaphs are notoriously unreliable, yet they do at least show what qualities were admired at the time, whether these individuals had them or not, and runic inscriptions do reveal a welcome human side to the Vikings which strongly contrasts with the view of them one gains from the chroniclers. King Alfred, too, unexpectedly gives an account of one Viking—or a man we should identify as being a Viking—who visited his court towards the end of the ninth century (Sweet 1967, 17–20; cf. Jones 1984, 138–39):

Ohtere sæde his hlaforde, Ælfrede cyninge, þæt he ealra Norðmonna norþmest bude. He cwæð þæt he bude on þæm lande norþweardum wiþ þa Westsæ . . . He sæde þæt he æt sumum cirre wolde fandian hu longe þæt land norþryhte læge . . . for he norþryhte be þæm lande . . . Swiþost he for ðider, toeacan þæs landes sceawunge, for þæm horshwælum . . . He wæs swyðe spedig man on þæm æhtum þe heora speda on beoð, þæt is, on wildrum. He hæfde þa gyt, ða he þone cyninge sohte, tamra deora unbebohtra syx hund . . . He wæs mid þæm fyrstum mannum on þæm lande: næfde he þeah ma ðonne twentig hryðera, and twentig sceapa, and twentig swyna; and þæt lytle þæt he erede, he erede mid horsan.

Ohthere told his lord, King Alfred, that he lived furthest north of all the northmen. He said that he lived in the northern part of the land facing the Atlantic . . . He said that he on one occasion wanted to find out how far the land extended to the north . . . He travelled northwards along the coast . . . He went there chiefly, besides for exploration of the land, for the walrus . . . He was a very wealthy man in the property that their wealth consists in, that is in reindeer. He had still, when he visited the king, six hundred tame animals unsold . . . He was among the first men in the land, though he owned no more than twenty cattle and twenty sheep and twenty swine; and the little that he ploughed he ploughed with horses.

If Ohthere was indeed the historical *Qrvar-Oddr* as R. C. Boer has argued (1892, 102–05), what a different picture from the one given of him in *Qrvar-Odds saga*!

### Poems

But one might argue that the most important contemporary sources about the Vikings are the poems they themselves composed that have survived. Many of the poems of the Elder Edda are believed to have been composed by Vikings, anonymous though they are. The subjects of the heroic lays are in many cases people who would have lived, in so far as they are historical, before the Viking Age—*Hamðir* and *Sqrli*, *Gunnarr*

and Hǫgni, Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. But it is not clear that at the time poets really distinguished the heroes of the Viking Age from those of the Migration Age as modern historians do, and it may be justifiable to see the heroes of Eddic poems as embodying either the Viking poet's views of himself or his ideal. It is in these poems that one finds the picture of the Viking laughing as he dies—*Hló þá Hǫgni, er til hjarta skáru kvikvan kumblasmið, kløkva hann sízt hugði* 'Then Hǫgni laughed when they cut the living wound-maker to the heart, the last thing he thought of doing was crying' (*Atlakviða* 24)—demanding to see his brother's heart on a plate so that he can die happy, knowing that the secret of his gold will be kept: *Hér hefi ek hjarta Hǫgna ins frækna . . . er lít bifask er á bjóði liggr, bifðisk svági mjök þá er í brjósti lá* 'Here I have the heart of Hǫgni the brave . . . which trembles little as it lies on the plate, it trembled not even as much when it lay in his breast' (*Atlakviða* 25)—making cups from the skulls of his dead enemies (like Vǫlundr in *Vǫlundarkviða* 24: *en þær skálar er und skorum váru sveip hann útan silfri, seldi Níðaði* 'and the bowls which had been under the hair he covered all over with silver, gave them to Níðaðr') and committing other terrible acts of revenge. At the end of *Hamðismál* (30) Hamðir says: *Vel hǫfum við vegit, stöndum á val Gotna, ofan, eggmóðum, sem ernir á kvisti; góðs hǫfum tírar fengit þótt skylim nú eða í gær deyja, kveld lifir maðr ekki eptir kvið norna* 'Well have we fought, we stand up on top of the corpses of Goths, (which are) wearied by sword-edges, like eagles on a bough; we have gained good fame whether we must die now or another day, a man lives not a single evening after the sentence of the Norns'. One must always bear in mind, however, that the heroes of Eddic poems are not 'real' Vikings in any sense of the term; they are a legend created by poets.

More reliable, one might think, is the picture from scaldic verse. Though this has mostly survived only as quotations in thirteenth-century prose texts, much of it is thought to be the genuine work of Viking poets, passed down orally until the age of writing. It has the great advantage over Eddic verse that it is often about Vikings as well as being by Vikings, and the subject matter is often contemporary with the poet; and not only is it not anonymous, but it characteristically contains a great deal of self-reference and evaluation of the people and events mentioned in it. It is clear from it that the values Viking poets most liked to celebrate, at any rate publicly in kings and heroes, were valour and generosity. Arnórr praises King Magnús (*Skj B I 315*): *Ungr skjöldungr stígr aldri jafnmildir á við skildan* 'As generous a young prince will never step onto ship's deck'; Sighvatr says (*Skj B I 234*): *Vask með gram þeims gumnum goll*

*baud drottinhollum—nafn fekk hann—en hrqfnum hræ þess konungs ævi* ‘I was with the ruler throughout the king’s life who offered loyal followers gold—he gained renown—and gave ravens carrion’; Egill Skalla-Grímsson in his *Hqfuðlausn* 9, 17 and 18 (*ÍF* I 185–92) praised Eiríkr blóðøx chiefly for these two virtues: *Þar var eggja at ok odda gnat; orðstir of gat Eiríkr at þat . . . glaðar flotna fjql við Fróða mjql . . . hjorleiks hvati, hann er þjóðskati* ‘There was conflict of edges and clashing of points; Eiríkr gained glory from that . . . he makes multitudes of men happy with Fróði’s meal [gold] . . . the instigator of battle, he is a most generous man’. Snorri Sturluson (*ÍF* XXVI 5) argued that scaldic verse that is well preserved and which was recited in the presence of the kings whose exploits it celebrates must be true, because to praise men to their face for deeds they had not performed would be *háð en eigi lof* ‘mockery and not praise’. I think Snorri underestimated kings’ appetites for flattery and their facility in self-deception. Scaldic verse is largely propaganda, much of it self-propaganda, and though it is valuable in showing us how Vikings wanted the world to see them, it cannot be taken at its face value as representing the truth about them. If, as the kings of England found, there was no reason to trust Vikings when they swore oaths on the sacred ring, how much less should one trust them to give a true account of themselves in their poetry? But perhaps the most significant fact about the Vikings that emerges from their poetry is their love of poetry itself. One of the most characteristic things about the Vikings seems to be this love of poetry and the high value they placed on poets. It is this aspect of them that is the best antidote to the partial view of them as vandals and men of violence; but it is this aspect of them that is most difficult to convey in an exhibition in a museum: the only way to appreciate Viking poetry is to learn to read it in the original language. It cannot be presented in a glass case. It is also this aspect of them that has been one of the major formative influences on the development of the twentieth century Icelanders’ view of themselves as a poetic and cultured nation: it was founded by poets.

### Sagas

Many of the Icelandic sagas are about Vikings. Written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, they are an attempt to recreate the Vikings from a distance of several hundred years. The picture they give is different in different kinds of sagas—there is romanticisation in many of the *for-aldarsögur*, together with emphasis on sensational and grotesque activities such as exotic battles, voyages and encounters with the supernatural. There is a different kind of romanticisation in the Sagas of Icelanders:

characters like Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi and Kári and Flosi in *Njáls saga* have considerable glamour that may owe something to European concepts of chivalry. Other characters are idealised as striving to be upright and moral in a corrupt world, like Gísli Súrsson and Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði in *Njáls saga*. Others, strong men like Skarpheðinn, Grettir, Þorgeirr Hávarsson and Egill Skallagrímsson have grotesque qualities (the latter not free from what one might identify as poetic temperament) that express themselves in bloody-minded non-cooperation and determined rejection of civilised restraint which has to us a certain attraction as indicating independence of mind and individuality and refusal to compromise. Yet others, like Njáll himself, or Hallr of Síða, who renounced compensation for his own son in order to achieve reconciliation (cf. Andersson 1970), are given qualities of wisdom and kindness, even before Christianity had had much time to have an effect on Icelandic morals, that are a clear attempt on the part of the thirteenth-century authors to demonstrate that Christianity did not have a monopoly of moral elevation in the Middle Ages. *Njáls saga* compares the morality of the Christian burners of Njáll unfavourably with that of the heathen attackers of Gunnarr in his house (*ÍF* XII 362). The way in which Christianity is depicted as being adopted by Vikings such as Kjartan in *Laxdæla saga* is also designed to show that Vikings were morally upright and amenable both to civilisation and to ethical teaching. Kjartan admits he has planned to burn the king in his house, and when the king forgives him he says (*ÍF* V 121–22):

‘Þakka vilju vér yðr, konungr, er þér gefið oss góðan frið, ok þannig máttu oss mest teygja at taka við trúnni, at gefa oss upp stórsakar.’ . . . Konungr . . . kvazk þat hyggja at margir myndi þeir kristnir er eigi myndi þeir jafnháttagóðir sem Kjartan eða sveit hans, — ‘ok skal slíkra manna lengi bíða.’

‘We wish to thank you, king, for having granted us kind pardon, and in this way you can best entice us to accept the faith, by pardoning us for great offences.’ . . . The king . . . said he thought there must be many Christians who would not be as well-conducted as Kjartan and his company, — ‘and one must be patient with such men.’

Later Kjartan says:

Svá leizt mér vel á konung it fyrsta sinn, er ek sá hann, at ek fekk þat þegar skilt at hann var inn mesti ágætismaðr . . . ok öll ætla ek oss þar við liggja var málskipti, at vér trúim þann vera sannan guð sem konungr býr.

I was so impressed by the king the first time I saw him, that I immediately realised that he was a very excellent person . . . and I think our best interests lie in believing that that is the true God whom the king is preaching.

There are other depictions of Vikings by Icelandic authors of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. A number of poems were written as imaginative monologues or dialogues and attributed to legendary Vikings, in some cases as laments uttered at the point of death, such as *Krákumál* (*Skj B I* 652–56):

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Hjoggum vér með hjörvi.<br>Heldum Lakkar tjöldum<br>hátt at hildar leiki<br>fyr Hjaðningavági;<br>sjá knáttu þá seggir,<br>es sundruðum skjöldu<br>at hræsildar hjaldri,<br>hjalm slitnaðan gotna;<br>vasat sem bjarta brúði<br>í bing hjá sér leggia . . . | We hewed with sword.<br>We held our shields<br>high in the warfare<br>by Hjaðningavágr;<br>men could see there<br>when we split shields<br>in the tumult of spears,<br>men's torn helmets;<br>it was not like laying beside one<br>a bright bride in bed . . .   |
| Hjoggum vér með hjörvi.<br>Hví sé drengur at feigri,<br>at hann í odda éli<br>öndurðr látinn verði?<br>Opt sýtir sá ævi,<br>es aldriði nistir<br>(ilt kveða, argan eggja)<br>örn at sverða leiki;<br>hugblauðum kómur hvergi<br>hjarta sitt at gagni . . .  | We hewed with sword.<br>Why should warrior be more doomed<br>because in the storm of spears<br>he be placed in the van?<br>He often bemoans his life<br>whom never tears<br>(it is bad, they say, to goad a coward)<br>eagle in sword-play;<br>for a cowardly one never<br>does his heart any good . . . |
| Hjoggum vér með hjörvi.<br>Hitt sýnisk mér raunar,<br>at forlögum fylgjum,<br>fár gengur of sköð norna . . .  | We hewed with sword.<br>This indeed seems to me right<br>that we submit to fate.<br>few withstand the decree of the norms . . .  |
| Fýsumk hins at hætta,<br>heim bjóða mér dísir,<br>þær's frá Herjans höllu<br>hefr Óðinn mér sendar;<br>glaðr skalk ǫl með Ásum<br>í öndvegi drekka;<br>lífs eru liðnar vánir,<br>læjandi skalk deyja.   | I am eager to venture beyond,<br>the spirit-maids call me home,<br>they whom Óðinn has sent me<br>from war-god's hall;<br>joyful shall I with Æsir<br>drink ale on the seat of honour;<br>all hope of life is gone,<br>laughing shall I die.   |

and *Hjálmarskviða* (Tolkien 1960, 8–9):

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Sár hefk sextán,<br>slitna brynju,<br>svart er mér fyr sjónum,<br>séka ganga; | Wounds have I sixteen<br>slit is my corselet,<br>my sight is darkened.<br>I see not my way; |
|---|---|

|   |  |
|---|--|
| hneit mér við hjarta<br>hjórr Angantýs,<br>hvass blóðrefill,<br>herðr í eitri . . .   | to my heart pierced me,<br>poison-hardened,<br>Angantýr's blade—<br>bitter the point was . . .   |
| Hvarfk frá fögurum<br>fljóða songva<br>ótrauðr gamans<br>austr við Sóta;<br>fögr skundaðak<br>ok fórk í lið<br>hinzta sinni<br>frá hollvinum. | I went from delight<br>of women's singing<br>for joy eager<br>east with Sóti;<br>sped my journey<br>and joined the host<br>left for the last time<br>loyal companions. |

These introduce a note of elegiac wistfulness at the same time as they emphasise the gruesome nature of the exploits attributed to legendary heroes. Some of these poems are adopted into the narratives of *fornaldarsögur*, which similarly emphasise the melodramatic aspects of legends about the Vikings and depict them as rather simplified and indeed to us uninteresting bloodthirsty characters. As Gwyn Jones has put it, they have an 'implacable imbecility beloved of Saxo and the more strenuous Fornaldar Sögur' (Jones 1972, 47).

### *Seventeenth to eighteenth centuries*

It is curious that it is such sagas and poems that seem to have appealed most to the early scholars of Old Icelandic literature in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Among the earliest Icelandic prose narratives to be printed were *Gautreks saga* (1664) and *Hervarar saga* (1672), two of the most sensational of the *fornaldarsögur*, and *Snorra Edda* (1665) with its emphasis on the grotesque mythology and religion of the Vikings; more sober accounts of the Vikings followed towards the end of the century, *Landnámabók* (1688) and *Heimskringla* (1697, though a version in Danish had appeared as early as 1594). The first Sagas of Icelanders had to wait until 1756 for publication. The conception of the Vikings that was thus established in the first texts that became available after the Renaissance dwelled on the sensational and melodramatic possibilities of the tradition, and one of the most influential early descriptions of them was in Bartholin's *Antiquitates Danicæ de causis contemptæ a Danis adhuc gentilibus mortis* (1689), which emphasised the supposed imperviousness to pain and indifference to death of the legendary Viking. This work quotes a good deal of Eddic poetry (including *Baldurs draumar*) and sagas, including quite a lot of scaldic verse and parts of the poems *Krákumál*, *Bjarkamál*, *Hákonarmál*, *Darraðarljóð* and the whole of

*Ásbjarnarkviða* from *Orms þátr*, all with Latin translations and great emphasis on the heroically fighting and dying Viking. Non-Scandinavian readers were also much influenced by the publications of Thomas Percy, a characteristic product of the Romantic Age in his interest in early traditions of all kinds and his glorification of the primitiveness, as he saw it, of past ages. He published a great deal of early English poetry, including many ballads, in his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). He introduced English readers to Scandinavian mythology in his English version of Johan Gøransson's edition of *Gylfaginning* (1746) along with his translation of P. H. Mallet's *L'Introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarc* (1770). Even more influential, however, was his *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* (1763) which included prose versions in English of *Hervararkviða* and *Krákumál*. The former reads (in the edition of 1809, 297–98): 'Are the sons of Andgrym, who delighted in mischief, now become dust and ashes? Can none of Eyvor's sons now speak with me out of the habitations of the dead?' Not very accurate, but exciting. *Hervararkviða* had already appeared with an English prose translation in Hickeys' *Thesaurus* (1705), which was where Percy got it from, and in Dryden's *Miscellany Poems VI* (1716; this volume was published after Dryden's death, and he probably would not have approved). Thomas Gray also popularised the 'Gothic Ode' in his poems *The fatal sisters* and *The descent of Odin*, which were versions of *Darraðarljóð* and *Baldrs draumar* (1761). The former begins (Gray 1966, 29):

Now the storm begins to lower,  
 (Haste, the loom of hell prepare)  
 Iron sleet of arrow shower  
 Hurtles in the darken'd air.  
 Glitt'ring lances are the loom,  
 Where the dusky warp we strain,  
 Weaving many a Soldier's doom,  
 Orkney's woe, & Randver's bane.  
 See the griesly texture grow,  
 ('Tis of human entrails made)  
 And the weights, that play below  
 Each a gasping Warriour's head.

Gray is a skilful versifier, though the effect is different from that of the original. The terms Runic and Gothic are frequently used of Norse literature in this period, with a characteristic Romantic Age contempt for historical precision (cf. *Gentleman's Magazine* 1790, 844 (Gothic); Lewis 1801 (Runic)). It is notable that in versions of Norse

poems of the eighteenth century, not only is it the more sensational (and less historical) texts that are selected for translation, but writers are driven to improve on the originals to emphasise some of the more melodramatic aspects of Viking legend that they feel ought to be there but which are not expressed clearly enough for them in the originals. As Christopher Tolkien writes (1960, xxxiv), ‘There was a spate of Gothic Odes and Runic Odes . . . by poets who were quite unconstrained by any understanding of the original.’ Thomas James Mathias first published his *Runic odes imitated from the Norse tongue in the manner of Mr Gray* in 1781. In his version of *Hervararkviða* the heroine, approaching the graves of her father and uncles, asks (Mathias 1798, 22):

Where are the sons of Angrim fled?  
Mingled with the valiant dead.  
From under twisted roots of oak,  
Blasted by the thunder’s stroke,  
Arise, arise, ye men of blood,  
Ye who prepared the Vulture’s food;  
Give me the sword, and studded belt;  
Armies whole their force have felt:  
Or grant my pray’r, or mould’ring rot,  
Your name, your deeds alike forgot.

It is interesting that many of these authors associate the Norse poetry they are translating or adapting with early Celtic literature (Gray accompanies his Norse Odes by ones based on Welsh poems, and Mathias bases some of his poetry on Ossian; compare the title of Mallet’s second volume (1756), mostly devoted to the *Prose Edda* and some Eddic poems: *Monumens de la mythologie et de la poésie des Celtes*). Welsh and Irish have always been seen by English people as a source of grotesque, over-imaginative and absurd poetry.

Anna Seward, a popular poetess in her time, known as the swan of Lichfield, whose works were edited by Walter Scott, made a version of *Hervararkviða*, published in 1796 in *Llangollen Vale, with other poems*, which as she says, ‘is a bold Paraphrase, not a Translation’. She complains that ‘the expressions in Dr Hicks’ prose, have a vulgar familiarity, injurious to the sublimity of the original conception’ (one wonders how she knows what the original conception was). Her version begins (Seward 1810, III 90–91):

Argantyr, wake!—to thee I call,  
Hear from thy dark sepulchral hall!  
’Mid the forest’s inmost gloom,

Thy daughter, circling thrice thy tomb,  
 With mystic rites of thrilling power  
 Disturbs thee at this midnight hour.

Even more indicative of the way in which Icelandic poetry was seen by the Romantic Age is the fact that M. G. Lewis, populariser of the so-called Gothic Novel (he wrote *The Monk*, *Castle Spectre* and other sensational stories) included versions of Icelandic poems among his *Tales of Wonder* (1801). The original of his *Sword of Angantyr* is described as runic, and as Lewis states (1801, I 35), he has taken 'great liberties' with it, and the catastrophe is his own invention. Angantyr says (Lewis 1801, I 43–47):

Hark! what horrid voices ring  
 Through the mansions of the dead!  
 'Tis the Valkyries who sing,  
 While they spin the fatal thread.  
 —'Angantyr!' I hear them say,  
 Sitting by their magic loom,  
 —'Yield the sword, no more delay,  
 Let the sorceress meet her doom!' . . .  
 I obey! the magic glaive  
 Thirty warriors' blood hath spilt;  
 Lo! I reach it from my grave,  
 Death is in the sheath and hilt!

HERVOR.

Rest in peace; lamented shade!  
 Be thy slumbers soft and sweet,  
 While, obtain'd the wond'rous blade,  
 Home I bend my gladsome feet.  
 But from out the gory steel  
 Streams of fire their radiance dart!  
 Mercy! mercy! oh! I feel  
 Burning pangs invade my heart!  
 Flames amid my ringlets play,  
 Blazing torrents dim my sight!  
 Fatal weapon, hence away!  
 Woe be to thy blasting might!  
 Woe be to the night and time,  
 When the magic sword was given!  
 Woe be to the Runic rhyme,  
 which reversed the laws of Heaven! . . .

ANGANTYR.

'Tis in vain your shrieks resound,  
 Hapless prey of strange despair!



The interpretation of Icelandic poetry and of the figures described in it is indicated as much in the choice of material and the way in which it is translated as in actual comments about it. It is clear that the usual perception of Vikings as men of violence owes as much to the Romantic Age's selection of the more sensational Icelandic accounts of them as to the medieval chroniclers' presentation of them as plunderers of churches.

One of the first translators who really tried to keep close to the originals, and who took the trouble to learn something of the original language, was William Herbert, whose *Select Icelandic Poetry* was published in 1804–06. His translations are well done, but even he has inevitably the attitudes of his time to the originals. 'For me,' he writes (Herbert 1804–06, I viii),

the energetic harmony of these old poems has great charms: the most ancient are the simplest and most beautiful; for the Icelandic poetry degenerated into affectation of impenetrable obscurity and extravagant metaphors.

He evidently thought scaldic poetry later both than Eddic poetry and than *eddica minora* like *Hervararkviða*. He continues (1804–06, I ix),

I conceive that much of the value of these relicks consists in their peculiarities, and in the light, they throw on the singular manners and persuasions of the northern nations.

He still thinks of these peculiarities in terms of the accounts of their deaths (1804–06, I 57–58):

Singular as this may now appear, it was a common affectation amongst the warriors of the North [i. e. to recite poetry as they died] whose greatest pride was to display indifference at the hour of death, and to smile and jest in their last agonies.

He then goes on to compare the dying Viking with Red Indians of North America,

who uttered their death-song with calm intrepidity in the midst of torments too horrid to relate, recounted the exploits of their youth, boasted of their own cruelties, and suggested even to their enemies 'more exquisite methods of torture, and more sensible parts of the body to be afflicted'.

Herbert, however, did appreciate the significance of the Vikings' love of poetry in indicating their intellectual achievement, but saw even this in a remarkably romantic light (1804–06, I 58):

Skill in poetry was an accomplishment almost indispensable to a northern warrior; and although the rules of their metre were strict and various, they were habituated to speak in verse on every important incident; and the whole of their life was like a tragic opera.

He draws attention, though, to some respects in which medieval Iceland seemed more civilised than other parts of Europe, and gives as an example making duels to settle disputes illegal, as is reported in *Gunnlaugs saga* (Herbert 1804–06, I 65): ‘at the very time when the enlightened Icelanders cast aside this superstitious and barbarous custom, in the rest of Europe it was in its meridian glory.’ He was, however, fascinated by the accounts of berserks (1804–06, I 86–87):

Many of them are described, as mild and affable in their general demeanor, unless suddenly thwarted or contradicted. It appears to me that this temporary madness was merely the violent eruption of a savage disposition, amongst men undisciplined and untamed; whose limbs had been invigorated by the practice of every corporeal exertion; who from their habits of life and their religion were entirely devoid of fear, from earliest youth had been accustomed to constant warfare and pillage, and had known no controul, but their own will, no bound to their desires, but the impossibility of gratifying them.

Some of the attitudes of the eighteenth century to the Vikings were the result of straightforward misunderstanding of the original texts. The rendering of a kenning for drinking-horn in *Krákumál* as referring to the practice of drinking from the skulls of dead enemies was in fact due to the misunderstanding of the Icelandic interpreter Magnús Ólafsson of Laufás in his version made in 1632 and printed by Ole Worm in *Literatura runica* in 1636 (Gordon 1957, lxix–lxx); there is some excuse for this myth in the fact that *Völundarkviða* does relate that Völundr made the skulls of the sons of his enemy Níðuðr into bowls when he had killed them, and archaeologists claim to have found workshops in the Scythian area for making such bowls out of skulls, though it is not certain that the people concerned were of a Germanic race (they were certainly not Vikings; cf. von See et al. 2000, 216–18). Involuntary cannibalism is mentioned in *Atlakviða*. Another misunderstanding of a line in *Krákumál* gave rise to the splendid idea that the pleasure of battle to the Vikings ‘was like having a fair virgin placed beside one in the bed . . . like kissing a young widow at the highest seat of the table’ (Percy’s version (1763), based on Magnús Ólafsson’s mistake; see Gordon 1957, lxix–lxx). William Herbert (1804–06, I 116–17) is ironically scathing about this mistake, which was the result of failing to realise that in Old Norse a suffixed *-at* made a verb negative, so that Ragnarr loðbrók was simply saying that battle was *not* like kissing.

Herbert’s perception of scaldic poetry as being degenerate, while he admired the older and simpler style of Eddic poetry as indicating the nobility of the Vikings, is interesting. Not many modern readers like scaldic poetry as much as Eddic poetry, but I see it as having the sort of

complexity that reflects intellectual sophistication rather than barbarity, though it does strike some as barbaric. It can be compared to the complexity of early Irish and Welsh poetry, or that of the troubadours in medieval France and Germany, or even that of Aeschylus. All these styles have been seen by some as having barbaric adornment rather than the overdeveloped sophistication of the baroque.

The result of the limited range of sources that were available to readers in the eighteenth century, and of the repeated selection of the most melodramatic that were known, was a characteristic interpretation of the Viking as having 'rude nobility'. Walter Savage Landor (Letter to Southey, 1811, quoted Gordon 1957, lxxii) wrote: 'What a people were the Icelanders! What divine poets! . . . Except Pindar's, no other odes are so high-toned. [After quoting *Krákumál*:] Few poets could have expressed this natural and noble sentiment.' Many nineteenth-century works of literature based on the Vikings seem in fact to us rather sentimental. Carlyle in the 1840s described Odin as a type of Viking hero; he speaks of

strong sons of Nature; and here was not only a wild captain and Fighter; discerning with his wild flashing eyes what to do, with his wild lion-heart daring and doing it; but a Poet too, and all that we mean by a Poet, Prophet, great devout Thinker and Inventor, as the truly Great Man ever is . . . A Hero, . . . in his own rude manner; a wise, gifted, noble-hearted man . . . A great thought in the wild deep heart of him! . . . In the old Sea-kings, too, what an indomitable rugged energy! Silent, with closed lips, as I fancy them, unconscious that they were specially brave; defying the wild ocean with its monsters, and all men and all things;—progenitors of our own Blakes and Nelsons . . . There is a sublime uncomplaining melancholy traceable in these old hearts (Carlyle 1841; quoted from the 1908 edition, 34–35, 38, 42).

### *Nineteenth century*

But in the nineteenth century, as a wider range of Norse texts became known to scholars, including some of the Sagas of Icelanders and *Heimskringla*, other aspects of the Vikings came to be emphasised. Independence and love of freedom came to be identified as characteristics of the Viking; and the societies they founded, particularly that in Iceland, were seen as foreshadowing romantic nationalism (e.g. in the nineteenth-century movements in Germany and Iceland towards national unity in the one and independence in the other), socialism and even communism. This view of Iceland is particularly associated with the writings of William Morris. This perception has led to the myth about Iceland always having had a classless society (based partly on the fact that one of the most striking provisions of the law of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth,

and one that distinguished it from all other early Germanic law codes, was that the standard wergild for all free men was the same). This idea too has ancient roots. There are some anecdotes that attribute to Vikings in other countries an organisation which did not recognise differences of status. Two illustrations of this myth about the Vikings are quoted by Peter Foote and David Wilson in *The Viking Achievement* (1970, 79): Dudo of S. Quentin, well known creator of myths about the Norsemen, writing in the early eleventh century, depicted a group of Danes replying to an emissary of the Franks whom they claimed to have come to conquer when he asked them 'Under what name does your leader act?' with the statement 'Under none, for we are all of equal authority'. When asked 'Will you bow the neck to Charles, king of France, and turn to his service and receive from him all possible favours?' they reply 'We shall never submit to anyone at all, nor ever cleave to any servitude, nor accept favours from anyone. That favour pleases us best which we win for ourselves with arms and toil of battles.' When they did in fact come to pay homage to the king of the Franks, Rollo 'put his hands between the king's hands, which not his father nor his grandfather nor his great-grandfather had ever done to anybody.' The episode continues (Davis 1976, 54):

Then the bishops said, 'Anyone who receives such a gift ought to bend down and kiss the king's foot.' But Rollo said: 'Never will I bend my knees to anyone's knees, nor will I kiss anyone's foot.' But impelled by the entreaties of the Franks he ordered a certain soldier to kiss the king's foot; and he immediately took hold of the king's foot, lifted it up to his mouth and, still standing, kissed it, thus toppling the king over.

This account is reminiscent of some in the Sagas of Icelanders about men who were reluctant to submit to kings and rulers. A number of the sagas claim that the main reason for the settlement of Iceland was desire to be independent of the Norwegian throne. It is likely that many Vikings had political views, if not quite as coherent as some people have liked to imagine; desire for independence must have been one of the factors that led to the settlement of Iceland and Greenland, though economic factors are likely also to have been significant. It is also clear, however, from many of the sagas, as well as from *Landnámabók*, that there was in medieval Iceland a distinct aristocratic attitude, a valuing of noble descent and a pride in class and status. The medieval Icelandic Commonwealth was an oligarchy, not a democracy. The Eddic poem *Rígsþula* embodies a belief in the unalterable distinction between slaves and free, commoners and nobles; the three classes of mankind are there descended

from Heimdallr, but through three quite different classes of woman progenitor.

### *Twentieth century*

In the twentieth century it was the personal qualities of some of the heroes of the Sagas of Icelanders that particularly attracted the attention of many scholars in Britain and America. One of the sagas that has been most read in these countries is *Hrafnkels saga*, mainly because, being a short saga and easily accessible, it has featured as a central element in most university syllabuses. Hrafnkell has been perceived as a pragmatist and a realist, and the qualities that enabled him to be successful at the end of the saga have been identified as moderation, restraint and patience. The saga-writer uses such proverbs as *sá er svinnr er sik kann, skömm er óhófs ævi* ‘he is wise who knows himself’, ‘short is the life of immoderation’ (*ÍF* XI 106, 122), which have been taken to encapsulate the message of the saga. Restraint, moderation and self-control do seem to be qualities admired by saga-writers as well as by the poet of *Hávamál*, and are part of the way in which they idealised their Viking ancestors; there is no certainty that historically Vikings really possessed these virtues, although of course some of them may have done so, or that many of them would have admired them. A sense of humour, even under difficult circumstances, is also sometimes celebrated, such as the grim humour of Skarpheðinn or the irony expressed by many a saga character at the point of death. One of the best examples of this is the reply of the mortally wounded Norwegian who had been sent to spy out if Gunnarr was at home in *Njáls saga* (*ÍF* XII 187):

‘Vitið þér þat, en hitt víska ek at atgeirr hans var heima.’ Síðan fell hann niðr dauðr.

‘You find that out, but this I do know, that his thrusting-spear was at home.’ Then he fell down dead.

Another is Helgi Droplaugarson’s comment when he received a wound to his face: *Aldri var ek fagrleitr, en lítit hefir þú um bætt* ‘I was never handsome in the face, and you have not improved it much’ (*ÍF* XI 164). Imperturbability and refusal to indulge in emotional outbursts is celebrated in many episodes. Halldórr Snorrason is described as a man who

sízt brygði við váveifliga hluti; hvárt sem at höndum bar mannháska eða fagnaðartíðendi, þá var hann hvárki at glaðari né óglaðari; eigi neytti hann matar eða drakk eða svaf meira né minna en vanði hans var til, hvárt sem hann mætti blíðu eða stríðu (*ÍF* V 276).

least of all was taken aback by unexpected things; whether he was faced with deadly danger or welcome news, he was neither the more nor the less cheerful; he did not enjoy food or drink or sleep either more or less than his custom was, whether he met with pleasantness or adversity.

There appears to be the influence here of ideals associated with stoicism. This sort of character appeals to an age which has lost interest in emotionalism and sees it as weakness. It is a far cry from the characters celebrated in eighteenth-century poetry. Similarly imperturbable is Þorgeirr Hávarsson in *Fóstbræðra saga* (*ÍF* VI 127–28):

Er Þorgeirr spurði víg fǫður síns, þá brá honum ekki við þá tíðenda sögn. Eigi roðnaði hann, því at eigi rann honum reiði í hgrund; eigi bliknaði hann, því at honum lagði eigi heipt í brjóst; eigi blánaði hann, því at honum rann eigi í bein reiði, heldr brá hann sér engan veg við tíðenda sögnina, því at eigi var hjarta hans sem fóarn í fugli; eigi var þat blóðfullt, svá at þat skylfi af hræzlu.

When Þorgeirr heard of the killing of his father, he was not disturbed by the report of the event. He did not go red, for there ran no anger in his flesh; he did not turn pale, for there lay no hatred in his breast; he did not go livid, for there ran in his bones no anger, rather he was in no way disturbed by the report of the event, for his heart was not like the gizzard in a bird; it was not full of blood so that it would quiver with fear.

This excessive self-control and imperturbability to the point where the hero seems to lack natural human feeling was successfully satirised by Halldór Kiljan Laxness in *Gerpla*, but it has nevertheless been admired by many readers.

In the twentieth century there were various characteristic themes that recur in discussions of the sagas and the figures they portray. As with earlier accounts, it is by careful selection of the material that it is possible to demonstrate the existence of these themes and their importance. One is that of the noble heathen who has a natural morality but stands outside the Christian Church (cf. particularly Lönnroth 1969; Schach 1975, 107–08, 112, 127, 131). Medieval Christians liked to construct pictures of their heathen forebears which emphasised their natural virtues and the fact that even heathens could behave nobly and have a sense of decency and honour. The concept of the ‘noble heathen’ does seem to underlie the saga-writers’ depiction of characters like Gunnarr and Njáll (before his conversion), as indeed it does in the literature of other countries—e.g. Beowulf in Anglo-Saxon England, Cuchullain in Ireland. Some saga-writers created characters in heathen times who had a ‘natural’ morality and were more virtuous than many Christians. Thus Arnórr kerlingarnef was depicted as speaking out against the idea of letting old people die in times of famine (*Flateyjarbók* 1944–45, I 486). Áskell in

*Reykðæla saga* similarly argues against exposing children and killing old people in times of hardship (ÍF X 169–71). Such ‘righteous heathens’ are in the sagas often depicted as being devoted to him who made heaven and earth (ÍF VI 247), all things (ÍF XXIX 368) or the sun (ÍF VIII 62, 97–98, 125, ÍF I 46, 47), and thus are free from superstition and harmful pagandom. There are a number of examples of this sort of agnostic religion, akin to the idea of devotion to the unknown god in Acts 17: 23, for instance Þorsteinn gamli in *Vatnsdæla saga* (ÍF VIII 62, 97–98, 125) and Þorkell máni (ÍF I 46, 47, *Flateyjarbók* 1944–45, I 291), who

einn heiðinna manna hefir bezt verit siðaðr, at því er menn vitu dæmi til. Hann lét sik bera í sólargeisla í banasótt sinni ok fal sik í hendi þeim guði, er sólina hafði skapat; hafði hann ok lifat svá hreinliga sem þeir kristnir menn, er bezt eru siðaðir.

alone of heathen people has been most splendid in conduct, as far as people have knowledge of precedents for it. He had himself carried into the sunshine in his final sickness and committed himself into the hands of the God who had created the sun; he had also lived as pure a life as those Christians whose conduct is finest.

Other similar examples are Finn Sveinsson in *Flateyjarbók* 1944–45, I 430–37 and Haraldr hárfagri in *Heimskringla* (ÍF XXVI 97; note his dislike of necromancers, ÍF XXVI 138) and in Óláfr Tryggvason’s account of him in *Flateyjarbók* 1944–45, I 357–58. Further favourable accounts of Haraldr hárfagri’s religion and morals are found in *Fagrskinna* (ÍF XXIX 368–69) and *Kjalnesinga saga* (ÍF XIV 27, 28). The motive of the virtuous heathen is used ironically of Gríma (wife of Gamli) in *Fóstbræðra saga* (ÍF VI 247; Schach 1975, 116). It is said of Hallfreðr (ÍF VIII 156–57), who is depicted as rather reluctantly adopting Christianity, that he *lastaði ekki goðin, þó at aðrir menn hallmælti þeim, kvað eigi þurfa at ámæla þeim, þó at menn vildi eigi trúa á þau* ‘did not speak ill of the gods, though other men condemned them, said there was no need to blame them, even if people would not believe in them’ (i.e. like Haraldr hárfagri he is against blaspheming any gods).

Snorri echoes this depiction of the heathen religion as deistic in *Gylfaginning* (Snorri Sturluson 2005, 8) where Hár, Jafnhár and Þriði (High, Equally high and Third) claim belief in an Alföðr (All-father) who created heaven and earth (though he had many names). The concept of the nameless ruler of the heavens is not a native one; it is clearly based on the European commonplace of ‘him who rules all the world’ (*sá er öllum heimi ræðr*, *Fornsögur Suðrlanda* 1884, 197) that appears often

in translated romances, where it is usually a description of ‘Maumet’ (see *Fornsögur Suðrlanda* 1884, xxvi; there are 7 cases—3 in *Flóvents saga* I, a further 1 in *Flóvents saga* II, 1 in *Karlamagnus saga*, 2 in *Elis saga*—and in six of these the god ruling the world is named as ‘Maumet’ or something similar). The belief that heathen Icelanders had a morality akin to Christianity is expressed already by Adam of Bremen (1961, iv 36): *ante susceptam fidem naturali quadam lege non adeo discordabant a nostra religione* ‘even before adopting the Faith, by a kind of natural law they did not differ very much from our religion’ (cf. Weber 1981, 477 n.; Schomerus 1936, *passim*). Comparisons between the morality of heathens and Christians are sometimes made in the sagas, with the former being shown as in some cases equal to, if not superior to, the latter (*Njáls saga*, *ÍF* XII 326, 328, cf. 188; *Laxdæla saga*, *ÍF* V 42–43).

It is characteristic of many of these accounts of ‘noble heathens’ (which are often set in the period of the conversion and in connection with stories about Óláfr Tryggvason) that they are depicted as being well disposed to Christianity and welcoming it, like Njáll in *Njáls saga* (see Schach 1975, 109). Other examples are the prophetess Þorbjörg in *Eiríks saga rauða* (*ÍF* IV 195–237), Helgi magri in *Landnámabók* (*ÍF* I 250–53), Bárðr in *Þorvalds þátrr tasalda* (*ÍF* IX, 119–26), Eindriði ilbreiðr in *Flatexjarbók* 1944–45, I 507–16, Sigmundur Brestisson in *Færeyinga saga*, Koðrán in *Þorvalds þátrr víðforla* (*ÍF* XV 51–89), Finnbogi in *Finnboga saga* (*ÍF* XIV 253–40; ch. 20); cf. also *Rimberti Vita Anskarii* 1961, 90–93 (ch. 27) and *Grænlandinga saga* ch. 6 (*ÍF* IV 259–60; cf. Schach 1975, 113–14).

One particular aspect of this manner of idealising heathens or half-heathens was particularly attractive to the twentieth century, and that is the cliché of the reply such Vikings are often said to have made when asked what they believed in: *ek trúi á mátt minn ok megin* (or *á sjálfan mik*) ‘I believe in my might and main (or in my own self)’ (*Finnboga saga*, *ÍF* XIV 253–40, ch. 19; also found in Romance sagas such as *Bærings saga*, *Mírmanns saga*; see *Fornsögur Suðrlanda* 1884, xii). This may be associated with the assertion *ek vil engis manns nauðungarmaðr vera* ‘I will not be pushed about by anyone’. Gerd Weber (1981, 496) compares *Beowulf* 669–70 *truwode modgan magnes, metodes hyldo* which he translates as ‘glaubt an sich und sein Glück’, though the true meaning there is ‘he trusted in courageous strength, God’s grace’; but *Beowulf* and other Old English texts do stress trust in one’s might and main (Weber 1981, 489–93). The cliché *ek þarf engis nauðungarmaðr at vera/engis manns nauðungarmaðr vil ek vera* is

attributed to Eindriði ilbreiðr (*Flateyjarbók* 1944–45, I 511) and Kjartan (*Laxdæla saga*, *ÍF* V 119), in both cases in the context of conversion to Christianity as put forward by Óláfr Tryggvason; it seems that as in *Íslendingabók*, it was important to Icelanders in the Middle Ages to make clear that conversion had been voluntary, not imposed (Weber 1981, 497–503). It may be that eventually most of these independently-minded heroes give in to Óláfr Tryggvason's persuasions and become Christians, often good Christians; but the idea of the Viking who trusts only in his own ability and is not going to be pushed around by anyone appealed to the secular freedom-loving twentieth-century reader, and the figure is not so common in the Middle Ages outside Norse literature.

The same attitude is idealised in Gunnarr Hámundarson of Hlíðarendi in *Njáls saga*, however, where conversion is not in question. The refusal to compromise in his case is expressed in the verse supposed to have been recited by him from the grave, in which he celebrates the attitude of the hero who *kvazk heldr vilja deyja hjálmi faldinn en vægja* 'said he would rather die with his helmet on than yield' (*ÍF* XII 193). Modern readers tend to see this as the real reason why Gunnarr refused to go abroad, but chose to stay to die when his enemies attacked, rather than his love of the Icelandic landscape. The refusal to give way even in the face of insurmountable odds has appealed to twentieth-century critics, and is embodied also in some myths about the Æsir. W. P. Ker in a memorable remark in 1904 (Ker 1955, 58) said of the Norse gods that 'they are on the right side, though it is not the side that wins . . . the gods, who are defeated, think that defeat is not refutation'. Though the idea of the Viking free from ties of religion and nationality is attractive to us, it was not of course the intention of the medieval writers to suggest that agnosticism or deism was superior to Christianity as well as to paganism.

The strong man, whether restrained or passionate, can be seen as the basis of the idealisation of many saga-characters, for instance Egill Skalla-Grímsson, Gísli Súrsson and Grettir Ásmundarson as well as Þorgeirr Hávarsson (*Fóstbræðra saga*)—all men who do not let anyone push them around. This freedom motive has of course been invoked particularly in support of the myth of the Icelandic character as embodying independence of spirit and in support of arguments about modern political independence (as already by Snorri Sturluson in *Heimskringla*, in the speech of Einarr Þveræingr (*ÍF* XXVI 216)). It has also unfortunately been used in support of less attractive ideologies such as Nazism, and has been to some extent appropriated by the National Front; see Auden and MacNeice 1937, 134.

Similarly, the concept of the Viking who refuses to sacrifice to the heathen gods can be related to medieval hagiography which idealised those who refused to sacrifice at pagan altars in the early Christian period (Weber 1981, 486). The figure is found widely in Norse literature. A striking example is *Órvar-Oddr* (Weber 1981, 480):

Aldri vildi Oddr blóta; trúði hann á mátt sinn ok megin; herfiligt kvezk honum þykkja at hokra þar fyrir stokkum eða steinum.

Never would Oddr perform heathen acts of worship; he believed in his own might and main; he thought it was contemptible to crouch down there in front of stocks or stones.

There is also a whole series of men in *Landnámabók* among the settlers of Iceland who are said to have been *goðlauss* ‘godless’. This is part of the myth of Iceland having never been subject to superstitious religion (Weber 1981, 484–85).

The fact that many Vikings clearly were subservient to kings and that to attribute agnosticism or deism to them is probably an anachronism, does not prevent many from responding positively to the saga-writers’ construction of them as such. It is historically implausible that Vikings could have been so free from the prevailing culture of their time. Writers only have available the categories that their culture and education provides them with. Medieval Christianity developed the two categories of Christian and heathen but added to them the intermediate one of the agnostic who had renounced heathendom but not yet embraced Christianity. The reform of *Hrafnkell*’s character seems to involve this; his rejection of heathen worship seems to herald his success at the end of the saga. Moreover the medieval perception of heathendom even in Iceland was clearly primarily derived from the Bible’s accounts of non-Jewish cults in both Old and New Testaments (including the religion of *Eindriði ilbreiðr*; see Weber 1981, 488–91). We actually learn rather little about real European heathendom from thirteenth-century Icelandic writings. The idea of ‘natural’ goodness and the possibility of moral uprightness outside Christianity owes much to St Paul’s account in Romans 2: 14–27:

When Gentiles who do not possess the law carry out its precepts by the light of nature, then, although they have no law, they are their own law, for they display the effect of the law inscribed on their hearts . . . If an uncircumcised man keeps the precepts of the law, will he not count as circumcised?

Another aspect of the idealisation of the heathen Viking is the idea that in his natural nobility he is the equal of kings and noblemen. This is particularly prominent in *fornaldarsögur*. *Órvar-Oddr* is represented

as being accepted as equal by kings because of his nobility of character (Weber 1981, 482). King Sveinn forkbeard says of Þorvaldr víðförli (ÍF XV 59):

Finna mun ek þann útlendan bóndason, at einn hefir með sér, ef rétt virðing er á höfð, í engan stað minna gøfugleik ok sómasemð en vér allir þrír konungar . . . Þessi maðr, er ek tala hér til, er svá vitr sem spökum konungi hæfði at vera, styrkr ok hugdjarfr sem enn øruggasti berserkr, svá siðugr ok góðháttaðr sem enn siðugasti spekingr.

I can find you a son of a foreign peasant who has in his own self, if it is regarded in the right way, by no means less honour and nobility than all we three kings put together . . . This man that I am speaking of, is as sensible as it behoves a wise king to be, strong and bold as the most trusty berserk, as well conducted and of as fine morals as the best conducted philosopher.

Friðþjófr is another example of the heathen who refuses to sacrifice to heathen gods, and is said to be as noble as a king, though he refuses higher honour than that of jarl. This is an extension of the myth of equality to embrace the idea of natural equality based on moral uprightness. The implication of Kjartan's competing physically with Óláfr Tryggvason on equal terms and refusing to be cowed by him, while the king develops great respect for him in return, is another example of the noble heathen being made the equal of a king. Much has also been made in recent times of the episode in *Eiríks saga rauða* of the death of Bjarni Grímólfsson as a sacrifice to egalitarianism (ÍF 234–35; cf. Foote 2004, 44–51) which seems to support the idea that the Vikings had egalitarian principles, also reflected in their law code in Iceland, an idea close to the heart of Icelanders who want to see continuity between the ideals of Icelandic society in the Middle Ages and those of the present.

The Vikings are not often depicted as thinkers, though Carlyle (1908 [first published 1841], 42) says,

They seem to have seen, these brave old Northmen, what Meditation has taught all men in all ages, That this world is after all but a show,—a phenomenon or appearance, no real thing. All deep souls see into that,—the Hindoo, Mythologist, the German Philosopher,—the Shakspeare, the earnest Thinker wherever he may be.

Occasionally in the sagas the troubled mind is indicated by a description of the behaviour of one of the characters, but we are rarely allowed to see what goes on in their minds (Njáll, Þorgeirr lögsgugumaðr (in *Íslendingabók*), Egill). Finnur Jónsson towards the end of his great literary history has a section headed 'Filosofi' which is almost as short as the celebrated chapter lxxii 'Concerning Snakes' in Horrebow's *The Natural History of Iceland* (1758, 91): 'No snakes of any kind are to be met with

throughout the whole island.’ Finnur begins his section (1920–24, II 945): ‘Hvad filosofi angår, eksisterer den overhovedet slet ikke i den gamle litteratur’ (As regards philosophy, on the whole it just didn’t exist in the old literature). He goes on to claim that the early Scandinavian attitudes to life could be seen in the proverbial expressions found in both prose and verse in medieval literature. But evidence of thought may also be said to be found in the early parts of *Hávamál* and in Egill’s *Sonatorrek*. Snorri depicts the cult of Óðinn as closely connected with the cult of wisdom. Moreover Óðinn’s gift of the mead of inspiration enables one to become not only a poet but also a scholar (*fræðamaðr*) according to *Skáldskaparmál* (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 3/23). The idea of the thinking Viking is one that many modern readers like to contemplate. A twentieth-century Icelandic farmer is reputed to have claimed that solutions to all the problems of the world can be found in *Njáls saga*.

It is interesting that some of Snorri’s idealised characters are notable for their rationalism as well as independence of mind, for instance Einarr Þveræingr in *Óláfs saga helga* (*ÍF* XXVI 216). Another kind of idealisation is seen in the figure of the wise old man, like Njáll (*ÍF* XII 255), or Gestr Oddleifsson in *Laxdæla* and other sagas (who looks forward to the introduction of Christianity as a future blessing for Iceland; cf. Schach 1975, 109); and wisdom is also an important concept in Eddic poems like *Völuspá*, *Hávamál*, *Sigrdrífumál* and *Fáfnismál*. Compare also Arnkell goði in *Eyrbyggja saga* (*ÍF* IV 103):

hann hefir verit allra manna bezt at sér um alla hluti í fornum sið ok manna vitrastr, vel skapi farinn, hjartaprúðr ok hverjum manni djarfari, einarðr ok allvel stilltr.

he has been of all men the best endowed in all respects in the old religion, and the wisest of men, of fine character, stout-hearted and bolder than anyone, reliable and truly moderate.

The ideal type who exemplifies wisdom and valour (*sapientia et fortitudo*) is clearly derived from classical ideology (see Gerd Weber 1981, 479); that has formed the basis of the medieval Christian concept of the perfect knight, and this has in turn obviously influenced Icelandic presentation of heroes like Hrólfr kraki, whom Snorri gives as an example of *mildi ok fræknleik ok lítillæti* ‘generosity and valour and humility’ (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 58/5).

The current desire to emphasise the morality of the Vikings and also to connect the literature about them with European literature seems to arise from a need to portray Old Icelandic narratives as developed literary

works rather than just as historical sources or folklore. We want to justify the placing of Icelandic literature in a world class of writings, to make them comparable with the great books of other countries.

Snorri Sturluson in his *Edda* and *Ynglinga saga* writes about the earlier inhabitants of Scandinavia as ancestors of his contemporaries in Scandinavia including Iceland without indicating any break at the beginning of the Viking Age; the break for him is simply between the historical period and pre-history, and the break is in the ninth century at the time of the settlement of Iceland in the reign of Haraldr hárfagri. It seems therefore permissible to include his representation of pre-historic Scandinavians in a discussion of the various representations of the Vikings, even though he was not describing Vikings as we now think of them, but rather the people from whom the Vikings originated. His description of his heathen ancestors in the prologue to his *Edda* presents them as natural philosophers, contemplating the phenomena of the universe and working out a religion to interpret it to themselves by means of their innate reason. These men are not superstitious though they lack the benefit of divine revelation (Snorri Sturluson 2005, 3):

Þat hugsuðu þeir ok undruðusk hverju þat mundi gegna at jörðin ok dýrin ok fuglarnir höfðu saman eðli í sumum hlutum ok var þó ólíkt at hætti . . . Björg ok steina þýddu þeir á móti tönnum ok beinum kvikvenda. Af þessu skilðu þeir at jörðin væri kyk ok hefði líf með nokkurum hætti . . . Þat sama spurðu þeir af gömlum frændum sínum at síðan er talið váru mǫrg hundruð vetra þá var in sama jörð, sól ok himintungl . . . Af þvílíkum hlutum grunaði þá at nokkurr mundi vera stjórnari himintunglanna sá er stilla mundi göng þeira at vilia sínum . . . alla hluti skilðu þeir jarðligri skilningu þvíat þeim var eigi gefin andlig spekðin. Svá skilðu þeir at allir hlutir væri smíðaðir af nokkuru efni.

They pondered and were amazed at what it could mean that the earth and animals and birds had common characteristics in some things, though there was a difference in quality . . . Rocks and stones they thought of as equivalent to teeth and bones of living creatures. From this they reasoned that the earth was alive and had life after a certain fashion . . . Similarly they learned from their elderly relatives that after many hundreds of years had been reckoned there was the same earth, sun and heavenly bodies . . . From such things they thought it likely that there must be some controller of the heavenly bodies who must be regulating their courses in accordance with his will . . . they understood everything with earthly understanding for they were not granted spiritual wisdom. Thus they reasoned that everything was created out of some material.

This conception of the Viking as free-thinking natural philosopher, working things out for himself without owing allegiance to any religious or philosophical system is of course analogous to the descriptions in the sagas of the agnostic noble heathens who committed their

souls into the hands of him who made the sun. But Snorri's attractive picture of the Viking philosopher also has a good deal in common with the picture that emerges from the earlier part of *Hávamál*. The lonely wanderer there is shown as lacking strong personal beliefs, sceptical and wary, trying to cope with a hostile universe with the help only of his own reason and personal skills, and without the support of a reliable ideology or religion or social organisation—i.e. an existentialist. It is also not unlike the picture that emerges of Egill Skalla-Grímsson from *Sonatorrek* (which probably is actually by Egill, and so represents genuinely pre-Christian philosophising), where the poet tries to cope with personal grief by means of argument in his own mind about the nature of life and the function of the gods. The questioning of religion that can be seen in *Sonatorrek* gives Egill an intellectual aspect that links him with depictions of the irreligious Viking like Víga-Glúmr, or the agnostic Viking such as Hrafnkell becomes, or Gísli Súrsson in Beatrice Barmby's depiction of him in her drama *Gísli Súrsson* (1900, 24–25, 40–41):

VÉSTEINN.

Oh, he that braves the Gods is overbrave.

GÍSLI.

I know not. Is there aught to brave at all?

VÉSTEINN.

That's blasphemy!

GÍSLI.

If there be Gods, my doubt—  
 Blasphemy if you will it—harms them not;  
 But he who prays to his own shadow proves  
 Nothing but his own fear.

.....  
 God, God, if there be Gods—! There are none such,  
 For who should see the blameless man cast down,  
 The shadow of unjust prosperity,  
 And all the needless miseries of the world,  
 And make no sign? But we send out our cries  
 Through the blank night and catch their echo back,  
 And call the nothing something. We look down,  
 Like children in a pool, into our souls,  
 And see our eyes look back, and cry out—God.

The lonely unattached philosopher Viking may have been a rather rare figure in reality, but there are several literary depictions of him. The

attraction of this conception to the twentieth (or twenty-first) century is that many people nowadays move during their lives from the place where they were born, many are confused by all the different religions and philosophies of the world and are sceptical about them all, many people feel lacking in roots and identity. The Vikings seem to be people who learned to cope with such a situation in the Middle Ages, going to new homes and creating from nothing a life that suited them according to their own philosophy and values, with no settled allegiance. The consequence of relativist ideology for many people is that they feel themselves to lack both ideology and identity and the world seems confused and without order.

### *The significance of different critical attitudes*

Though there is a clear historical development of attitudes towards the Vikings, there are also examples of individuals holding views seemingly quite unrelated to those current around them. W. H. Auden, in his *Letters from Iceland*, wrote (Auden and MacNeice 1937, edition of 1967, 117): ‘I love the sagas, but what a rotten society they describe, a society with only the gangster virtues.’ Similarly in 1738, Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavík described the subject-matter of the Icelandic sagas as *Bændur flugust á* ‘Peasants having a scrap’ (Sverrir Tómasson 2003, 325–26). There is no objective ‘truth’ about the Vikings and no objective meaning in the sources that describe them. All depictions of them are selective and partial. In another part of *Letters from Iceland* (1967, 210), Auden reports Uno von Troil’s sardonic expression of how different people see different things in Iceland, suggesting it was like the

clergyman and [a] fine lady who together observed the spots in the moon, which the former took for church steeples and the latter for a pair of happy lovers. I know [said von Troil] that we frequently imagine to have really found what we most think of, or most wish for.

Thus I believe that all criticism and commentary tells us about the critic or historian, not about the texts they analyse, just as the sagas themselves tell us more about the culture and values of thirteenth-century Iceland when they were written than about the Viking Age. Criticism and commentary tell us about the culture of the critic and historian, not about the culture of the writers whose works they describe or about the culture depicted by those writers. If this happens more obviously in the case of accounts of the Vikings than with other topics, it may be because descriptions of the Vikings in the sagas are

virtually ideologically indeterminate (or can appear to be), and lack authorial guidance and commentary as to how we are to perceive saga characters. All readers then read their own ideology into the sagas and reflect themselves in their accounts of them. Biblical criticism and ex-position (not to speak of Shakespeare criticism) has of course taken the same path.

Thus each age recreates or reconstructs its perception of the Vikings and creates a new myth about them, selecting different texts to justify their interpretations. It is astonishing what different pictures can be created out of the same set of sources about the same people. These reconstructions or readings of the sources are determined by the values and preoccupations of those who read the sources in each period. The Vikings themselves needed to justify themselves and represented themselves as heroic and generous. Thirteenth-century Icelanders wanted to see themselves as descended from honourable ancestors and represented the Vikings as independent lovers of freedom and justice building a community free from the tyranny of kings and without superstition or servility. In the romantic period, when Europeans constructed a vision of human nature that included the opposites of reason and emotion, mind and spirit, they wanted to see themselves as having attained a state of reason from a former barbarity, but having retained the nobility of mind and spirit of the noble savages from whom they believed themselves to be descended. The nineteenth century, as Europe became industrialised, wanted to idealise pre-industrial society as having had an organisation that valued justice and freedom and natural virtue. In the twentieth century people who saw themselves as having escaped from the intellectual tyranny of organised religion and as having to carve out for themselves values and principles in an unfriendly and confusing universe, found fellow-feeling with a Viking who rejected organised religion and held to his personal principles in a world that was continually urging conflicting claims both political and ideological on him, such as when the papal legate Cardinal William of Sabina is said to have declared in 1247 that it was unreasonable (*ósannligt*) that Iceland should not have a king like all other countries in the world (*Hákonar saga* 1887, 252; ch. 257). Each age's perception of the Vikings and the literature about them is created out of its own historical situation. We cannot claim to be getting closer and closer to the truth about the Vikings. What we have is a succession of varying myths about the Viking created out of the needs and ideologies of successive ages. Each age constructs the Vikings in its own way; though our construction may be based on a

larger body of evidence than was available in the nineteenth century, it is not necessarily superior to any of the preceding ones, to which it is not necessary to be patronising as if the Romantics had weak minds. Our perceptions are different but not necessarily more correct. They will be superseded by those of later generations. We also are historically bound, our perceptions are historically determined. Objectivity is not a possibility. Our definition of the past is part of the way we define ourselves. In order to construct ourselves as civilised and cultured and rational we need to define other cultures, such as that of the Vikings, from whom we are all partly descended, as uncivilised, uncultured and irrational; hence the emphasis on the excessive emotion of, for instance, berserks, contrasted with the restraint of characters like Hrafnkell or Njáll, who were rejected by their contemporaries and appear to have been ahead of their time. There seems also to be a need in the twentieth century to stress the positive aspects of people like the Vikings in order to demonstrate that in a violent world (which we now acknowledge we still have) people can still be civilised. Thus Haraldr harðráði, under a rough exterior and in spite of doing some terrible deeds, was a sensitive literary critic and poet (cf. *ÍF* XXVIII 188; Finnur Jónsson 1920–24, 461–62, 616–17). There is no objective truth about the Vikings, only different representations based partly on concentrating on different selections of quotations from different kinds of source—*fornaldarsögur*, Eddic poems, *eddic minora*, Sagas of Icelanders—and partly on misunderstandings of the texts; but mainly on reading into the texts what we want to see. Then, by a kind of analytical synecdoche, various particular features of the chosen texts are taken to give an insight into the whole culture. The different interpretations of the Vikings actually tell us more about the historians who interpret them than about the Vikings themselves. People not only see what they want to see in the Vikings, they also reconstruct the Vikings in their own image. Historians both now and in the past have created a series of myths about the past which correspond to their own needs.

Certainly one of the attractions of the Viking to twentieth-century readers has been what Peter Foote has called the ‘existential neutrality’ of the saga accounts of him which many people transfer to the Vikings themselves. This secular and neutral way of talking about them, whether they were Christian or heathen, of course reflects the presentation of many of them as realists and not concerned with ideology; but it tends to be with the saga-writers’ attitudes that we now identify, rather than with

the Vikings themselves. The disillusion with religion, or at any rate with the Church, that seems to have been rife in the late twelfth and thirteenth century (for instance in Jón Loptsson's opposition to Bishop Þorlákr's authority, *ÍF* XVI 166–68, 177–80), is also transferred to the Vikings and found a welcoming echo in twentieth-century attitudes. To quote Peter Foote (1984, 55):

May we not believe that the audiences of the Sagas of Icelanders in that age heard those serious and exciting stories with a kind of relief? The men and women in them act with hardly any reference to politics or religion; they are not confused by loyalties other than those naturally imposed by kinship, friendship and the free contract they freely make; they give small thought to life in the next world, the hope of heaven or the fear of hell. The people of the Sagas of Icelanders appear free and responsible in a way that the audiences of those sagas could not be. Given our knowledge of the temper of the times, we can understand something of what led the audiences to demand the presentation of a past which appeared as real as the present but which was at the same time a past ideally simplified by a reduction to individual, all human, existential terms. The first literary success of the Sagas of Icelanders depended on that. And perhaps their last.

*Die romantik herrscht* 'Romance rules', as Gerd Weber (1981, 493) said.

One can see here the influence of modern relativism on our perception of the Viking: he is perceived as lacking social and community values because he is uprooted from his community and his native soil and consequently has total detachment from any ideology or value system. All that is left him is the pragmatism of *Hávamál*. We thus tend to attribute our own relativism to the Viking, and imagine that he himself was value-free, as the saga descriptions of him sometimes appear to be. This kind of hero is attractive to an age of dissolution of values caught in the dilemma of relativism and seems to anticipate modern *angst*, summed up for many people already in the nineteenth century in Matthew Arnold's poem 'Dover Beach'.

The Sea of Faith  
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd  
 But now I only hear  
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
 Retreating, to the breath  
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
 And naked shingles of the world.

The tendency of readers to create from saga-characters figures for themselves to fulfil their own needs is exemplified in William Morris's poem about Grettir (1900, ii):

Nay, with the dead I deal not; this man lives,  
 And that which carried him through good and ill,  
 Stern against fate while his voice echoed still  
 From rock to rock, now he lies silent, strives  
 With wasting time, and through its long lapse gives  
 Another friend to me, life's void to fill.

Like all such depictions of the Viking, my preferred reconstruction is based on a selection of the evidence and is not likely to correspond to the reality, whatever it was, any more than any other, though it is possible that it reflects the nature of one or two real people in the Viking Age. I do not claim truth for it; but I find it more interesting than most. It is based largely on selected verses from *Hávamál*, which are taken to correspond to certain kinds of depiction in Sagas of Icelanders. It is of a person who does not bother himself unduly about the opinion of other people: *Hinn er sæll er sér um getr lof ok líknstafi; ódælla er við þat er maðr eiga skal annars brjóstum í* 'That one is lucky who gets for himself praise and warm regard; it is more troublesome to deal with what he has that has to be dependent on what is in another's breast', or 'It is a source of pleasure to have a good reputation and be popular, but a bad thing when one's well-being is dependent on someone else's opinion' (8). A man who values wisdom and common sense: *Byrði betri berrat maðr brautu at en sé mannvit mikit* 'A better burden bears no man on the road than a load of common sense' (10) . . . *Meðalsnotr skyli manna hverr, æva til snotr sé; þeim er fyrða fegrst at lifa er vel mart vitu* 'Moderately wise should a man be, he should never be over-wise; life is happiest for those who know just the right amount' (54). A man thoughtful and sparing of words, but always cheerful and enjoying good ale in moderation: *Pagalt ok hugalt skyli þjóðans barn ok vígdjarft vera; glaðr ok reifr skyli gumna hverr, unz sinn bíðr bana* 'Reserved and thoughtful should a ruler's child be, and bold in battle; merry and cheerful should every man be until he meets his death' (15) . . . *Heima glaðr gumi ok við gesti reifr, sviðr skal um sik vera, minnigr ok máluqr ef hann vill margfróðr vera; opt skal góðs geta* 'At home a man should be merry and cheerful towards guests, shrewd in his behaviour, mindful and affable if he wishes to be knowledgeable about many things; he should often speak of what is good' (103). A man wary of making judgements: *At kveldi skal dag leyfa, konu er brend er, mæki er reyndr er, mey er gefin er, ís er yfir kemr, ql er drukkit er* 'The day shall be praised at evening, a woman when she is cremated, a sword when it has been put to the test, a maiden after her marriage, ice once you are across it, ale when it has been drunk' (81). A man preferring independence even though it means having to put up with

few possessions: *Bú er betra þótt lítit sé, halr er heima hvern; blóðugt er hjarta þeim er biðja skal sér í mál hvert matar* 'It is better to have a home, even if it is small, everyone is a fine fellow at home; bloody is the heart of one who has to beg for food at every meal' (37) . . . *Eldr er beztr með ýta sonum ok sólar sýn, heilyndi sitt ef maðr hafa náir, án við lqst at lifa* 'A fire is the best thing for the sons of men, and the sight of the sun, his health if a man manages to keep it without living with a blemish' (68). A man who is decent in appearance, but not over-concerned about externals: *Pveginn ok mettr ríði maðr þingi at, þótt hann sét væddr til vel; skúa ok bróka skammisk engi maðr né hests in heldr, þótt hann hafit góðan* 'Washed and fed should a man ride to an assembly, even if he is not clothed too well; let no man be ashamed of shoes or breeches, or of his horse either, even if he does not have a good one' (61). A man without unreasonable ambition: *Ríki sitt skyli ráðsnotra hvern í hófi hafa; þá hann þat finnr er með fræknum kemr at engi er einna hvatastr* 'Every prudent man should keep his power within bounds; he will find when he comes among the valiant that no one is the ablest of all' (64). A man who knows how to make friends: *Vin sínum skal maðr vinr vera ok gjalda gjof við gjof* 'A man should be a friend to his friend and repay gift with gift' (42) . . . *Veiztu er þú vin átt þann er þú vel trúir ok vill þú af honum gott geta, geði skaltu við þann blanda ok gjofum skipta, fara at finna opt* 'Know that when you have a friend whom you trust well and you want to get good from him, you must share your mind with him and exchange gifts, go to see him often' (44) . . . *Vin sínum skal maðr vinr vera, þeim ok þess vin* 'A man should be a friend to his friend, to him and to his friend' (43) . . . *Ungr var ek forðum, fór ek einn saman, þá varð ek villr vega; auðigr þóttumsk er ek annan fann, maðr er manns gaman* 'Young was I once, I travelled alone, then I went wild ways; I thought myself rich when I found another, man is man's delight' (47) . . . *Mikit eitt skala manni gefa, opt kaupir sér í litlu lof; með hálfum hleif ok með hollu kerri fekk ek mér féлага* 'A man should not only give great gifts, often one purchases love with something small; with half a loaf and a tilted jug I got myself a comrade' (52) . . . *veiztu ef þú vin átt, þanns þú vel trúir, farðu at finna opt; þviat hrísi vex ok hávu grasi vegr er vætki treðr* 'Know that if you have a friend whom you trust well, go to see him often; for a way that no one treads get overgrown with brushwood and tall grass' (119). It is of a person who identifies with no nationality or religion, a wanderer without home or family, who bends the knee to neither god nor man, and bows down before neither priest nor king. He is afraid of nothing including death, has few possessions and no false hopes or unattainable desires

either for this world or the next, unaffected by any concepts of a future life or any expectation of it. He believes only in his own might and main, though he knows its limitations and that it will only last him a limited time. He refuses to be pushed around by anyone. He enjoys life to the full, its pleasures and excitements, without sentimentality, and values most of all his friendships; happiness is talking with his friends accompanied by the drinking of good ale.

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## REVIEWS

RUNES AND THEIR SECRETS. STUDIES IN RUNOLOGY. Edited by MARIE STOKLUND, MICHAEL LERCHE NIELSEN, BENTE HOLMBERG and GILLIAN FELLOWS-JENSEN. *Museum Tusulanum Press*. Copenhagen, 2006. 461 pp. ISBN 978 87 635 0428 7.

THE SCANDINAVIAN RUNIC INSCRIPTIONS OF BRITAIN. By MICHAEL P. BARNES and R. I. PAGE. *Runrön 19. Institutionen för nordiska språk*. Uppsala, 2006. 370 pp. 98 black and white photographs. ISBN 978 91 506 1853 2.

*Runes and their Secrets*, despite the rather popularist main title, is a collection of twenty-two papers (nineteen in English, two in German and one in Swedish) that were originally presented at the Fifth International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions at Brandebjerg, Denmark, in 2000. The conference itself had four themes: 'The runic artefacts with the older runes; Runic writing confronted with Latin literacy and Christianisation; The problem of runic chronology and typology versus regional variation; and Runology and runic research, methodology and new challenges at the turn of the millennium' (p. 7). Given such a broad remit, it is perhaps not surprising that the present volume lacks coherence, a problem that is worsened by ordering the papers according to the authors' surnames rather than thematically or chronologically. Having said that, the selection of papers would almost have defied any attempt at imposing thematic unity on the volume, with titles ranging from 'Rune names: the Irish connexion' (Alan Griffiths) to 'Bracteate Inscriptions through the Looking Glass: A Microscopic View of Manufacturing Techniques' (Nancy Wicker) to 'The introduction and use of runic letters on Danish coins around the year 1065' (Jørgen Steen Jensen). Even when some authors do touch upon the same material, however, the opportunity to develop these connections is lost: cross-references within the volume to help the reader compare the approaches of different scholars would have been a useful addition. More minor editorial points are the occasional proof-reading errors, the uneven quality of the English, and the lack of standardised bibliographies—for example, some authors do not provide details of publishers.

Some contributions nevertheless stand out by offering discussion of fundamental issues in runological studies, such as Michael Barnes's 'Standardised *fubarks*: A useful tool or a delusion?' This revises his views on the relationship between the 'long-branch' and 'short-twig' runes, expressed almost twenty years earlier at the very first International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions. Here he argues that our obsession with distinct *fubarks* distorts what was in reality a much more flexible system, where individual carvers chose runes from a common stock of characters. Equally important is Marie Stoklund's article, 'Chronology and Typology of the Danish Runic Inscriptions', which summarises the archaeological advances and new inscriptions that have changed significantly the chronology published in *Danmarks Runeindskrifter* over sixty years ago. She highlights the need for a new and, importantly, accessible corpus edition of the Danish inscriptions, describing a recent discussion of the development of the Scandinavian languages as 'shocking' in its 'outdated, very

sporadic knowledge' of this material (p. 377). Significant too is Terje Spurkland's article on the transition from proto-Norse to Old Norse ('From Tune to Eggja—the ontology of language change'), which warns against imposing too rigid a chronological or theoretical framework on the runic artefacts. Despite the often technical terminology, his conclusion is an extremely useful reminder that 'Variation has always been, is and will always be a universal property of any spoken language. It is only a reconstructed language taken as an abstraction that is likely to be hypothesised as variation-free' (p. 344). The final word belongs to Ray Page, whose entertaining closing speech at the conference dinner is the last article in the volume (p. 461):

But we would do well to remember that we must also strive to make our material more generally accessible, both to scholars in other fields and to the world at large. Runic study cannot survive as the preserve of professional runologists alone.

This volume certainly demonstrates the existence of links between runology and other disciplines—there are articles by archaeologists and historical linguists, as well as an art historian and a numismatist—and the range of topics discussed also clearly illustrates the relevance of runes to the study of North European societies and cultures between the first and the sixteenth centuries.

The second book reviewed here, *The Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions of Britain*, is the long-awaited corpus edition of Scandinavian runic inscriptions in Britain, the culmination of 'the work of a number of years' by its authors. The bulk of the book (pp. 117–352) consists of a detailed examination of 56 inscriptions from Shetland, Orkney (excluding Maeshowe), mainland Scotland, the Western Isles and England, discussing their individual provenance, content and significance. The authors discuss earlier interpretations but are rightly cautious in offering readings for the more problematic and fragmentary inscriptions. Ninety-eight good-quality black and white photographs at the end of the book provide excellent illustrations of each inscription, the objects on which they are found and, in some cases, their present location, as well as magnified images that show uncertain sections of the runic texts. These photographs are absolutely invaluable and make it much easier for the reader to follow the relevant discussions.

The decision not to include Maeshowe and the Irish inscriptions in the corpus of Scandinavian runes is unsurprising given the recent publication of scholarly editions: *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, Runrön 9 (Uppsala, 1994) by Michael Barnes, and *The Runic Inscriptions of Viking Age Dublin* (Dublin, 1997) by Michael Barnes, Jan Ragnar Hagland and R. I. Page. The omission of the Manx corpus of over thirty inscriptions is disappointing, however, especially as this is the only place in the British Isles where there was a tradition of raising runic memorials similar to that in Viking-Age Scandinavia. Of course, there are good reasons for this: the addition of these inscriptions would have made the book at least as long again, and the coherence of the Manx corpus naturally invites its own edition. But the reader looking for an overall picture of the use of Scandinavian runes in the British Isles will need to look elsewhere. Perhaps a survey chapter

and a list of the inscriptions and their texts (such as that found in Page's article 'The Manx rune-stones' in *The Viking Age in the Isle of Man*, edited by Christine Fell et al. (London, 1983, pp. 225–44) might have gone some way to filling this important gap.

Barnes and Page are clear about the audience that they are aiming their work at: 'runologists, historical linguists and phonologists'. However, any scholar studying the impact of Scandinavians in the British Isles will find this book helps 'to understand the variant nature of Viking and later Scandinavian influence on British activities and institutions' (dust jacket) over a period stretching from around AD 850 to the thirteenth or early fourteenth century. I am rather puzzled, however, by the list of questions on p. 44 that, it is claimed, archaeologists and historians are not interested in asking of runic inscriptions. These include: 'How, why and by whom were the runes carved?'; 'What information may the inscription imply beyond the simple sense of its words?'; 'Is there any interplay between wording and layout or artistic design?'; and 'Is there in the monument any clue to the social, linguistic or political milieu?'. These are exactly the sorts of question that I, as a historian, am interested in, and I am not alone: for example, Anne-Sofie Gräslund, in *Runes and their Secrets*, begins her discussion of Swedish Viking-Age rune stones with a series of questions: 'who ordered them, who carved them, for what purpose were they raised and in which connections?' (p. 117).

As well as the catalogue of inscriptions, there are eight introductory chapters dealing with questions (but not necessarily answers), principles and problems. Among other things, these discuss how the corpus of 56 inscriptions is established, a task made more difficult by the occasional appearance of fakes, unreliable reports and Orcadian twig-rune inscriptions, of which at least ten are known. Given the small size of the corpus, these form a potentially significant part of the total and are discussed in their own chapter. Five are excluded from the final catalogue and five are retained, accompanied with the warning that 'we would be surprised if many existed before 1861' (p. 43). An important chapter discusses the often bewildering variety of rune-forms found in the inscriptions, which have been linked with East and West Norse influence and used for dating inscriptions. The conclusion that 'Standard patterns of choice may have developed at different times and places . . . But . . . choices may have been determined by other factors than geography and chronology' (p. 60) echoes that of Barnes's article in *Runes and their Secrets*, and is perhaps particularly important to bear in mind when dealing with colonies that may have been more conservative or more open to innovation than the Scandinavian homelands. For this reviewer, the most interesting chapters are probably chapter 6 'Language' and chapter 7 'Literacy', which bring us closer to the cultural context in which the inscriptions were produced. Particularly intriguing are those inscriptions and artefacts that suggest interaction with the native populations of the British Isles. This book will prove a necessary work of reference for scholars of Scandinavian Britain, as well as providing a model for future editions of runic inscriptions.

VIKING CLOTHING. By THOR EWING. *Tempus*. Stroud, 2006. 208 pp. ISBN 978 0 7524 3587 9.

In his highly informative volume *Viking Clothing*, Thor Ewing ventures into the thorny field of Viking-Age dress and textile history, an area that has been 'somewhat neglected by scholars' (p. 18), as he notes in the introduction to the study. Not only is the evidence of archaeology often too scarce—and that of art and literature too unreliable—to allow clear-cut conclusions on the *habitus* of Old Norse men and women, but there has also been a tendency, within the scholarly world, to 'simply accept each new contribution as a step forwards in our understanding, rather than to rigorously test new ideas through academic debate' (p. 18). Ewing seeks to challenge any such consensus, drawing on evidence from all available sources. The author's approach is, in this respect, quite original, as is his further objective of devoting as much space to men's dress as to women's.

The necessity of taking a fresh look at the history of Viking-Age costume and the motivation that underlies Ewing's study are clearly stated at the beginning of the book: 'We judge people by the clothes they wear. If we misrepresent the clothes of a historical culture, it will colour our judgements about that whole culture' (p. 9). This is particularly true of popular belief about the appearance of Viking-Age men and women, which is by and large 'still founded on a false picture of what they looked like' (p. 9). Disproving once and for all the outdated notion of Vikings donning horned helmets, sackcloth and sheepskins, Ewing highlights the Norsemen's attention to detail and love of splendour, noting the varied range of fabrics, both native and foreign, available in northern Europe from the ninth to the twelfth centuries, as well as the elaborate fashions and decorative elements in vogue at that time. There follows a preliminary but accurate overview of the available sources of information for Viking-Age costume and textiles, ranging from contemporary Arabic accounts of the Rus to the evidence of eddic poetry and the medieval Icelandic sagas, from the archaeological finds in Scandinavia to pictorial rune stones and the artistic evidence of medieval tapestries, as well as the contribution of Scandinavian and English manuscript illumination (pp. 13–18). Ewing aptly concludes his introductory note with the comment that 'the more stones one turns, the more one finds to turn' (p. 20) and the hope that his research will serve as a 'catalyst for further debate' (p. 18).

The first chapter (pp. 21–70), dealing with women's clothing, begins with a description of the Greek and Roman evidence for female garments and accessories of the Germanic Iron Age, and continues with a brief but accurate overview of the major published works on Scandinavian textile history by textile archaeologists Agnes Gejer, Inga Hägg and Flemming Bau. Particular attention is paid to the lengthy dispute over the female 'apron', or suspended overdress, to which Ewing contributes his own—and in my opinion correct—interpretation and reconstruction of this particular garment, namely that it should be regarded as a closed dress rather than a *peplos*-styled one. Also worth noting are Ewing's observations on female oval brooches as indicators of rank and marital status, and on belted skirts as typical attire of unmarried women. Among other items of dress

considered are over- and undergarments, headwear and footwear, as well as jewellery, with the author drawing a vivid and easily comprehensible picture of Viking-Age female fashions.

Men's clothing is treated at length in the following chapter (pp. 71–130). As in Chapter 1, Latin sources and Iron-Age textile finds from northern Europe are analysed at the outset, and are subsequently evaluated with reference to Norse attire. Particular attention is given to the *skyrta* 'shirt' and *kyrtill* 'kirtle', which are, in my opinion correctly, identified as a linen undergarment and a woollen overgarment respectively, and to the variations in their use and constituent materials from the early Viking Age to medieval times. Old Norse terms for the different styles of coats and breeches in fashion at that time are also explored in detail, and I found Ewing's similar study of the vocabulary for male headwear and footwear a remarkably enlightening and original piece of research. Worth noting, for instance, is the differentiation between the conical hats with trailing tails as they appear on the tenth-century Gotlandic picture stones and the liripipe hoods of thirteenth-century Scandinavia (p. 118). On the other hand, Ewing's observation on the *kolhetta* of *Kjalnesinga saga* (1959, 17), which he interprets as 'skullcap', is misleading. The 'coal-biter' Kolfiðr's humble outfit includes such a garment: it is said that he *var í kolhettu ok hafði kneppt blöðum milli fóta sér* 'wore a *kolhetta* and had tied its two laps between his legs'. Hjalmar Falk interprets this very rare term, in my opinion correctly, as indicating a round, close-fitting hood, devoid of the long 'tail' often associated with medieval hoods (Falk 1919, 96). Like that of the *skauthetta*, or *skauthekla* (see Helgi Guðmundsson 1967, 13–14), the head-piece also comprised a front and a back skirt, which, as Jóhannes Halldórsson also notes (*Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 18 n. 1), is reminiscent of the *kjafal* described in *Eiríks saga rauða* (1935, 223).

The third chapter of Ewing's work (pp. 131–60) offers a fairly technical yet accessible analysis of Viking-Age spinning and weaving techniques, as well as of textile fibres, types of weave and cloth, and the dyeing processes. Sewing and embroidery are also considered, as is the use of skins, furs and luxurious foreign fabrics in the Norse era. The author's identification and definition of the ambiguous term *guðvefr* (cf. OE *godweb*) as 'almost certainly' indicating samite cloth (p. 152), however, seems to me a little rash; the assumption should perhaps have been more fully substantiated.

The purpose of 'Clothes, Cloth and Viking Society', the study's concluding chapter (pp. 161–72), is somewhat obscure. It aims to highlight 'just a few aspects of the function and meaning of clothing in Viking-Age Scandinavian society'; pit houses and textile production in Germanic and Scandinavian tradition are described, as are northern European textile workshops and the 'Birka-type' cloth; the analysis then shifts to the significance of coloured clothing and wedding garments as illustrated in medieval Icelandic literature, and to the literary use of items of clothing as gifts in the same corpus. Perhaps it would have been more coherent in the context of the work as a whole to have included the sections on textile production and workshops in an earlier chapter—perhaps Chapter 3—and to have reserved the rather too brief observations on narrative motifs for a separate study.

All in all, *Viking Clothing* represents the most up-to-date work available on Viking-Age and medieval Scandinavian dress, synthesising, scrutinising, expanding and upgrading previously published research. The analysis is generously illustrated and accessible to both scholarly and general readerships. The work may prove particularly useful to re-enactors, costume designers and—of concern to scholars of Old Norse literature—those who wish to understand better the creation and function of a specific outfit or item of clothing as described in Viking-Age poetry or medieval Icelandic prose.

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ANNA ZANCHI

THE VIKINGS. CULTURE AND CONQUEST. By MARTIN ARNOLD. *Continuum*. London, 2006. x + 244 pp. ISBN 978 1 85285 476 8.

Scholarly books about Vikings have tended in recent years to have titles other than simply ‘The Vikings’, reflecting a contemporary uneasiness with the monolithic conception of these people as the national, racial or cultural unity that the definite article might imply. I recall Andrew Wawn’s tongue-in-cheek apology for retaining the article in his title *The Vikings and Victorians* (Cambridge, 2000), in which he recognises that his book should have been called ‘Some Vikings (Not real ones, mind you, but romantic reconstructions based on philologically primitive sources)’ (xi). Wawn, of course, means to poke fun at the political correctness of (post)modern academic discourse, but it seems that for a decade or more, other authors have been swayed by such considerations when choosing what to call their work. General histories are now likely to speak of the ‘Viking Age’ or ‘Viking Pirates’ (Benjamin Hudson. *Viking Pirates and Christian Princes. Dynasty, Religion, and Empire in the North Atlantic* (Oxford, 2005)), or even ‘Viking Empires’ (Cambridge, 2005; reviewed in *Saga-Book XXX* (2006), 110–12)—anything but ‘The Vikings’. Martin Arnold’s new book—despite its weak, tacked-on subtitle, ‘Culture and Conquest’—is unapologetically called just that, and this choice of title reflects what seems to me the strikingly conservative, anti-revisionist position that it takes up.

Arnold, however, is by no means unaware of the conflicting connotations of the word ‘Viking’; he judiciously reviews its possible etymologies, its use in medieval sources and its fate at the hands of modern interpreters, coming up with a working definition: a Viking is ‘one who sailed out of Scandinavia in order to gain wealth by all necessary and available means’ (p. 7). This neatly sidesteps the

hoary ‘raiders or traders’ question, but it is perhaps too broad: it makes the settlers of Iceland and explorers of the North Atlantic ‘Vikings’ as much as the raiders of Lindisfarne, and draws an equivalence between Scandinavian trader-colonists (the likes of the Rus’, for example) and the leaders and men of the Danish ‘Great Army’ in ninth-century England. Would all these groups have thought of themselves as *vikingar*? Would their neighbours, trading partners, enemies and victims have recognised them as such? I agree with Arnold that ‘Viking’ is a matter of doing rather than being, of activity rather than identity—or rather, that ‘Viking’ identity proceeds from ‘Viking’ activity—but to make the definition of what constitutes this activity so all-encompassing seems almost as problematic as its uncritical bandying as an ethnographical term.

Such a broad definition does on the other hand admit the whole of the Viking world to Arnold’s overview. After a fairly brief chapter on ‘society and religion’—with the description of ‘society’ being centred around *Rígsþula*, whose popularity with historians shows no signs of abating, despite the many and obvious problems attending its use (Arnold’s conjecture that ‘it was composed in Denmark in the first half of the tenth century’ (p. 27) is no less plausible than many such theories, but that isn’t saying very much)—and a discussion of ‘battle on land and sea’, *The Vikings. Culture and Conquest* takes up the grand narratives of Viking-Age history, arranged geographically. In line with Arnold’s definition of ‘Vikings’, only the history of Scandinavian presence beyond the homelands is considered, and ‘conquest’ takes precedence over ‘culture’.

Throughout this book Vikings are represented, like Sellar and Yeatman’s Cavaliers, as Wrong but Romantic. Their precise degree of wrongness rises in proportion to their proximity to England, where they ‘achieved little and destroyed much’ (p. 129), causing real harm to Anglo-Saxon politics and cultures both as itinerant raiders and then as colonists and conquerors. Arnold has a somewhat teleological view of the inevitable development of the English state, and sees the Viking presence as an impediment to that development. It did, on the other hand, enable the greatness of King Alfred and his descendants (for whom the author is a fairly unapologetic cheer-leader) to be established. At the other end of the spectrum, the otherwise ‘cruelly violent and uncongenial’ Vikings demonstrated an ‘indomitable spirit that . . . is hard not to admire’ (p. 214) in their voyages of discovery across the North Atlantic. The activity of Vikings on the European continent and in Scotland falls between these two stools: undoubtedly violent and opportunistic, they nevertheless receive considerable credit for the ease and completeness with which they muscled their way into the politico-cultural establishment in Normandy, Russia, and the Northern Isles. The success of these Vikings in their various spheres of activity is undoubted; Arnold suggests that success is not always admirable for its own sake, and I think he is right to stress the violence and turbulence caused by the Scandinavian peoples’ outreach programme as the defining characteristic of the Viking Age. Sometimes he beats the drum too loudly for the opposing team, however; I rather imagined that I could hear the strains of *Land of Hope and Glory* welling behind his characterisation of the heroic protagonists of *The Battle of Maldon* as ‘plain-speaking Christian English, who see noble sacrifice and fair play as moral absolutes’ (p. 117).

In general this book is a worthy, if conventional, new introduction to the period. Its narratives are compelling and engagingly told, and based upon an intelligent reading of primary sources. I was slightly concerned to see skaldic verse being quoted in the English of Hollander's *Heimskringla*, even when a more reliable translation is available (as is the case with Arnórr jarlaskáld (p. 76), whose work is accessible in Diana Whaley's excellent edition (Turnhout, 1998)), but otherwise the range of texts offered is broad and well handled. The appearance of the *Burghal Hildage* (sic) on p. 94 and in the index threw me for a moment, and the plural of *þula* is incorrectly given as *þular* on p. 43, but otherwise the text is clean, attractively presented, and embellished with useful photographs and line drawings.

*The Vikings. Culture and Conquest* is undoubtedly aimed at the non-specialist, and it is certainly fit to be recommended to students and the 'general reader' as an up-to-date and coherent survey of this perennially attractive period. But while more conservatively-minded scholars may find Arnold's preference for straightforward narrative, reliance upon written sources and the absence of any explicit revisionist angle refreshing in this iconoclastic and theory-driven age of ours, its conclusions are perhaps, like its title, just a little too conventional, and—unlike those rotten but romantic Vikings—a little too risk-averse.

CHRISTOPHER ABRAM

KOMMENTAR ZU DEN LIEDERN DER EDDA. 3: GÖTTERLIEDER. By KLAUS VON SEE, BEATRICE LA FARGE, EVE PICARD and KATJA SCHULZ. *Universitätsverlag C. Winter*. Heidelberg, 2000. 964 pp. ISBN 978 3 8253 1136 0.

This volume continues the great task of providing a comprehensive commentary on all the poems of the *Poetic Edda*, covering the 'semi-mythological' lays in the Codex Regius (*Völundarkviða*, *Alvíssmál*) and four mythological lays (*Baldurs draumar*, *Rígsþula*, *Hyndluljóð*, *Grottasöngur*) which are only preserved in other medieval manuscripts. It is perhaps a pity that two very late poems which survive only in seventeenth-century manuscripts, *Svipdagsmál* and *Hrafnagaldur Óðins*, were not also included, but the writers might reasonably object that their labours have been monumental enough without these late stragglers in the corpus.

One of the main aims of this project is clearly to provide a complete survey of the scholarly bibliography associated with each poem, and in this it succeeds to a remarkable degree: it is hard to think of anything relevant that is not included either in the general bibliography at the beginning of the volume or in the more specific ones that form the first section of the introductory *Einleitungskommentar* for each poem. This is an extremely valuable resource, but one whose completeness must inevitably decline with time; it would therefore be very useful if, after the whole project is completed, a supplementary volume of annotated bibliography on the whole *Poetic Edda* could be added to it every ten years or so, either in print or on line.

Each *Einleitungskommentar* also has nine other sections: § 2 *Überlieferungszustand* (manuscript preservation), § 3 *Forschungsgeschichte* (a scrupulous

summary of previous critical scholarship and opinion), § 4 *Stoffgeschichte und literarisches Nachleben* (including post-medieval works in Scandinavian languages, German or English that have been inspired by the poems, so that, for example, Gray's 'The Descent of Odin' and Arnold's 'Balder Dead' both appear in the *Einleitungskommentar* on *Baldurs draumar*, pp. 385–87), § 5 *Gedankliche Konzeption*, § 6 *Komposition* (i.e. structure), § 7 *Strophen- und Versform*, § 8 *Wortschatz und stilistische Eigentümlichkeiten*, § 9 *Literaturgeschichtliche Standortbestimmung*, § 10 *Datierung*. This has the great virtue of making the body of scholarly work on any particular aspect of each poem very easy to find.

Each introduction is followed by a *Stellenkommentar*, which offers a detailed commentary on the text of each poem. Very helpfully, the commentary on each stanza begins with its text and a translation into German, in bold type and inside a box. This makes it easy to distinguish, not only between the text and the commentary, but also between the stanzas of the poems and the prose sentences inserted by the writer of the Codex Reginus, although occasionally (e.g. in the opening prose before *Völundarkviða*) it might have been made clearer where the prose editor has misunderstood the poems (e.g. over the names of the swan maidens).

Each *Stellenkommentar* presents the text as it stands in the manuscripts, with only minimal emendation, and discusses the problems rather than trying to remove them. This is particularly useful in the case of *Rígsþula*, whose last major edition (in *Poetic Edda II. Mythological Poems*. Ed. Ursula Dronke (Oxford, 1997)) carried out major surgery to make the poem appear more consistent and complete than it really is in the manuscript, even composing extra lines to fill probable gaps in the text. This commentary, by contrast, allows one to see the problems clearly and form one's own judgements (compare Dronke's stt. 4, 7, 8, 17, 18, 19, 26, 32, 33, 35, 40). The careful comparative and etymological method of the *Stellenkommentar* also comes into its own in the consideration of the poetic names which, according to the dwarf *Alvíss*, are given to natural phenomena by the various mythological races; I found the notes on *hlýrnir* (*Alv.* 12,2), *mýlinn* (*Alv.* 14,2), *hviðoð* (*Alv.* 20,6), *lagastaf* (*Alv.* 24,5 and 32,5), *vág* (*Alv.* 26,3) and *draumnisrun* (*Alv.* 30,6) particularly helpful. Even so, not all mysteries in this poem are solved—the note on *Dvalins leika* (*Alv.* 16,3, pp. 336–40) strikes me as providing a less than complete answer when it suggests that the description of the sun as the dwarf's plaything is ironic. But we must expect that some expressions in eddic poetry will always seem obscure or bizarre to a modern audience who did not grow up in the same cultural surroundings as the poets.

The authors generally treat contentious questions cautiously, with a slight leaning towards traditional opinions. This approach has its virtues, but it sometimes leads to inconsistencies. Thus the *Völundr* scenes on Ardre stone VIII (and less certainly on Klinte Hunninge stone I) are accepted, while the same iconography on the Leeds Cross and three other Yorkshire stones is regarded as doubtful (p. 97).

Some lines of argument are not fully carried through; for example, Kuhn's observation that *Vkv.* 28,4 *um sofnæði* 'fell asleep' contains a West Germanic metrical pattern is noted (p. 89), but it is not realised that this can hardly be the result of transliteration from Old English (where the corresponding verb *swefnian*

has a different meaning, ‘to dream something’, and the verb *swefan* is strong, and so would not scan at all), or from Old Saxon, where the weak verb *swebb(i)an* means ‘to put (someone else) to sleep’. This line must therefore have been originally composed in Old Norse, but by a poet who had been influenced by West Germanic verse patterns. Similarly, Edith Marold’s 1996 article in *Skandinavistik* is included in the bibliography for *Vǫlundarkviða*, but the introduction (p. 86) and commentary (pp. 148–49) both miss her observation that the appearance of the names *Egill* and *Qlrún* together in the runes on the Pforzen belt buckle suggests that the swan-maidens episode had probably already been attached to *Vǫlundr* and his brothers in Germany by the late sixth century.

Occasionally a point is laboured unnecessarily; thus the statement in *Vkv.* 2 that all three swan maidens are sisters seems to conflict with *Vkv.* 15, which appears to give them two different fathers (*Hlǫðvér* and *Kjár*), and the commentary goes to some lengths to show that *systir* in *Vkv.* 2 means ‘female companion’ (pp. 139–40). But the other supposed examples of this meaning in verse refer either to valkyries (who may have been thought of as actually sisters) or to Freyja and Hyndla (*Hyndluljóð* 1, where the comparison with Þorgerðr Hǫlgabrúðr and her dark sister Irpa again suggests that the relationship should be taken literally, though the editors ignore this possibility in their commentary on *Hyndluljóð*, pp. 690–92), while most examples in prose seem to reflect the widespread Christian practice of addressing fellow Christians as ‘brother’ or ‘sister’. The alternative possibility suggested by Jón Helgason in 1962—that the swan-maidens are indeed all sisters, and the poet knew that *Kjár* (= *Cæsar*) was a title that could be correctly applied to *Hlǫðvér* (= the Merovingian emperor’s name *Chlodoweh*, *Clodovicus* or *Ludwig*)—is ignored (pp. 184–88). But such lapses are few; both introductions and commentary are for the most part full, accurate and careful, and few reasonable interpretations are omitted. More typical is the discussion of Óðinn’s last question to the *vǫlva* in *Baldur’s draumar* 12 (pp. 449–55), which includes every possible meaning and answer for it, even Uhland’s suggestion, made in 1866 at the height of the fashion for ‘solar mythology’, that the answer is ‘clouds’, while remaining sensible and beautifully lucid throughout.

The one exception to this generally cautious approach is in the sections of the introductory commentaries that deal with the dating of individual poems. The editors try to be as objective as possible in their method, which is to seek specific evidence for *termini post* and *ante quem*; this is undoubtedly better than relying on subjective impressions, as has sometimes been done in the past, but some of the evidence cited is less satisfactory. The name *Hlǫðvér* (*Vkv.* 10, 15) for a rich foreign chieftain (ignoring any possible application to emperors) is adjudged to have been borrowed from *Guðrúnarkviða II* 25, and the date of this poem (? twelfth century) is then taken as a *terminus post quem* for *Vǫlundarkviða* (pp. 116–17). But the name also appears, used in a similar way, in Arnórr jarlaskáld’s *Porfinnsdrápa* 10 (1064 or earlier), and it was probably traditional; no reliable link can be drawn with the occurrence in *Gkv. II*, and even if it could, there would be no way of telling which poem borrowed from the other. Similarly, it is argued that there is a direct link between *Rígsþula* and *Ynglinga saga* ch. 17,

which names Rígr as the first person to be called *konungr* ‘in the Danish tongue’, and that since the idea is more developed in *Rígsþula* than in *Ynglinga saga*, the poem must be the later text, which would give *Rígsþula* a *terminus post quem* of about 1230 (p. 513). But, again, this may well be a traditional piece of lore, and even if there were a link between the two texts, *Ynglinga saga* might just as easily be summarising from *Rígsþula* as *Rígsþula* elaborating on *Ynglinga saga*. The section on the date of *Hyndluljóð* (p. 689) is more careful, but it still relies rather heavily on the assumption that *Völuspá* 65 (Hauksbók only), which has clearly influenced *Hyndluljóð* 44, is interpolated into *Vsp*. It may be so, since this stanza does not appear in the Codex Regius, but there is one reason for thinking that it may be original, namely that it borrows from the ‘little Apocalypse’ in Mark chapter 13 (see verse 26), a chapter which is also drawn on in several other stanzas of *Vsp*. whose authenticity is not in doubt. There was a time when eddic poems were often ascribed to very early dates without sufficient evidence; here, the pendulum has perhaps swung too far in the other direction.

Overall, however, this volume represents an impressive achievement, and it will for many years remain an essential tool for all who study these six poems. The book is well proof-read and handsomely produced, and the authors deserve both admiration and gratitude for their work.

JOHN MCKINNELL

KOMMENTAR ZU DEN LIEDERN DER EDDA. 5: HELDENLIEDER. By KLAUS VON SEE, BEATRICE LA FARGE, WOLFGANG GERHOLD, EVE PICARD and KATJA SCHULZ. *Universitätsverlag C. Winter*. Heidelberg, 2006. 620 pp. ISBN 978 3 8253 5180 9.

Like the preceding volumes in the series *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, Volume 5 (hereafter *Kommentar* 5) provides an exhaustive account of eddic poetry and prose. It comprises commentary on the texts from the prose fragment *Frá dauða Sinfjötla* to *Sigrdrífumál*: the so-called ‘Jung-Sigurd-Liedern’ or ‘Poems of Sigurðr’s Youth’. This volume begins with the welcome news that there are now indices to grammatical and phonological features and to motifs available at [www.skandinavistik.uni-frankfurt.de/edda/download](http://www.skandinavistik.uni-frankfurt.de/edda/download), and with the information that Julia Zernack is directing an investigation into the reception of the heroic material, and proceeds to the general bibliography, broadly common to all volumes, but updated with recent publications to 2004. The dedicated bibliographies for the ‘Jung-Sigurd-Liedern’ surprise both by their inclusiveness, in the case of works which deal with the poems to some extent, ranging from Andersson to Würth, but also by the relatively small size of the section listing those works which deal exclusively with the four poems. Indeed, throughout the *Kommentar* it is the same few works engaging with the literary interpretation of the poems as a whole which are cited. Issue is taken in places (pp. 136–37, for example) with the important contribution of Edgar Haimelr in 1993; in the discussion of *Fáfnismál* we are reminded that some of the most interesting writing on these poems has focussed

on that text (Haimel 1993, Kragerud 1981, Quinn 1992). Otherwise the *Kommentar* signals very clearly that there is still scope for further interpretative analysis of these varied and lively poems.

Questions familiar from earlier volumes appear once again. Are the prose fragments based on lost poems, or on some kind of \**Sigurðar saga*? What kind of unity can be ascribed to poems containing sequences of verses in different metres? How do the accounts given in the different poems square with the other major Norse redactions in *Völsunga saga*, *Norna-Gests þáttur*, *Skáldskaparmál* and *Þiðreks saga*, not to mention texts in other languages, not just German, but also the Faroese *Brynhilds táttur*, usefully summarised here (pp. 513–14)? There are, as in the other volumes, valuable and clearly laid-out tables showing the different features of the story of the awakening of the valkyrie across the various versions, or the linguistic identity of the passages describing Sigurðr's first encounter with Reginn in the four Norse versions. As ever, metrical features and grammatical difficulties are assiduously noted, and there is a thorough account of the evidence contained on picture-stones, where the distinctive features of the Sigurðr story (killing the dragon from below, roasting Fáfnir's heart) aid identification of the narrative.

*Frá dauða Sinfjötla* inaugurates the *neuen Helden-Ära* 'era of a new hero' after the death of Helgi. Short though it is, much of interest is said about it. Close comparison is made with *Völsunga saga*, which incorporates more tension in its narrative than we find here; the immunity of father and son to poison evokes a reference to Rasputin's legendary tolerance of the most noxious substances. Sinfjötli's death clears the way for Sigurðr, whose childhood is very briefly narrated in the *Edda* in comparison with *Völsunga saga*. *Grípisspá* gets more credit for poetic effect than is usually the case, oscillating between prophecy and retrospection and emphasising the importance of oaths, the making and breaking of which will be crucial in Sigurðr's later career. Since many of the most important incidents of Sigurðr's life are first alluded to in Grípir's prophecies, the notes here repay reading in detail, for they contain accounts of the habits of dragons, the name and function of Grímhildr, and the importance of shape-changing and its implications in connection with the rather different account of Sigurðr and Gunnarr's exchange in *Þiðreks saga*. The frequent references to the quite divergent material this text contains suggest that a new edition of *Þiðreks saga* would be highly desirable.

Earlier volumes have contained a number of impressive excursions, such as those on valkyries, Vikings and beasts of battle in *Kommentar* 4. These excursions are less frequent in this volume, partly because reference is often made to earlier discussion in connection with the Helgi poems. Nevertheless the treatment of *Reginismál* has a substantial account of the 'blood-eagle'. Like the preceding volume, *Kommentar* 5 notes the continuities between mythological and heroic poetry; the history of Sigurðr and his line is inaugurated by an impulsive negative action stemming from the divine world (Loki's tossing of the stone at Otr), the ramifications of which will be felt to the very end of the Codex Regius. Readings of individual stanzas pay attention to linguistic patterning such as the artfully constructed st. 7 and to larger themes: Lyngheiðr's refusal to respond to her dying

father's demand for vengeance is almost unparalleled in the poems which will follow.

*Fáfnismál* opens up further questions of unity, based on the variousness of the metre. The poet of *Fáfnismál* likes to play on the different meanings of *ráð* and *ráða*, in the sense of advice, counsel, concepts comprehending all the subtypes of wisdom in the poems, from warning, to mythological information, to proverbs, gnomes, runes and prophecy. The other wise speakers in the poem, the prophetic birds, are now identified as some kind of tit (possibly the Marsh Tit), rather than the string of possibilities ('titmouse, tit, nuthatch, wagtail') mooted in the *Glossary to the Poetic Edda* (La Farge and Tucker 1992, s.v. *igða*). Incidental topics, such as common features between the death of Fáfnir and the killing of the Miðgarðsormr (p. 397), are investigated along with the verdict on possible interpretations of Sigurðr's riddling (or nonsense) identification of himself as 'Göfugt dýr' in st. 2. Another of the *Edda*'s most baffling cruces, st. 5<sup>6</sup>, is thoroughly explored. Though none of the previously suggested interpretations for *á burno skiór á skeið* is satisfactory, a plausible working solution based on context is suggested: the line must have the import of 'like father, like son' or some similar proverbial expression. Important accounts of the *Ægishjálmr* and of Surtr and the contexts in which he appears in the *Edda* are also found here.

*Sigrdrífumál* again is characterised by problems of internal unity; the authors sensibly conclude that the predominance of wisdom-content in the 'Jung-Sigurd-Liedern'—given such material's tendency to attract more and disparate wisdom to itself—accounts for the lack of metrical coherence across the poems. A start is made on establishing the poem's fit with the later appearance of Brynhildr in the cycle, in particular noting the similarities between Brynhildr's autobiographical speech in *Helreið Brynhildar* and the awakening of Sigdrífa; more on this can be expected in the next volume. Researchers into the literary conceptualisation of runes will also find a great deal to think about here.

*Kommentar 5* is immaculately produced; a non-native speaker of German is likely to note only a few typographical errors in the Bibliography (two, as it happens, in the entry for Elizabeth Jackson). The reference to 'The Icelandic Rune-Poem' on p. 557 would lead the reader who did not know that this text is edited by Ray Page to search in vain for it in the section on Norse and Icelandic texts in the bibliography. According to the plan on the project's website the remaining heroic poems will be the subject of vol. 6. The not inconsiderable challenges of *Völuspá* and *Hávamál* are still to come, of course, but with this volume the culmination of this indispensable, impressive project is finally coming into view.

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CAROLYNE LARRINGTON

A HISTORY OF OLD NORSE POETRY AND POETICS. BY MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS. *D. S. Brewer*: Cambridge, 2005. x + 283 pp. ISBN 978 1 84384 034 3.

The twin subjects of *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* are, as Margaret Clunies Ross explains at the outset, a natural pair: it is the very difficulty, and perhaps additionally, the self-reflexivity of Old Norse skaldic poetry which have given rise to a remarkable corpus of 'indigenous poetic theory'—the poetics. This formulation does, of course, rather sideline Eddic verse, and it is fair to say that this book's primary focus is on Old Norse skaldic poetry and poetics. Nevertheless, the problematic distinction between skaldic and Eddic is thoroughly addressed, even though Clunies Ross confesses in the Introduction that she would herself prefer, if it were possible, to 'abandon these two words as contrastive and exclusive terms' (p. 14). The skaldic corpus is held to be more or less what Finnur Jónsson included in *Skjaldedigtning*; the forthcoming new edition of the skaldic corpus (for which this book acts as a sort of flier) adopts roughly the same parameters. Clunies Ross defines the historical range of Old Norse poetry as stretching from its oral beginnings to the usually neglected skaldic productions of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. *Rímur*, though, are out, judged to be 'less medieval than modern' (p. 6).

When dating is so uncertain, the chronological promise of 'a history' is bound to create problems. Clunies Ross does not explicitly argue out the issue of the relative chronology of Eddic and skaldic verse, but makes the (perfectly reasonable) assumption that the former is older, in formulations such as '*Dróttkvætt* poets took the already formalised long line of *fornyrðislag* . . . and made it even more formalised' (p. 23). The question of where to discuss the verses of Eddic type in the *fornaldarsögur* is as tricky as possible; the question of how to date the sagas themselves is hard enough. Clunies Ross notes that some of the sagas which have conventionally been dated to the very end of our period may manifest 'the impetus to repackage heroic and legendary verse' which itself could be 'genuinely old' (p. 12), linking this to Snorri's own thirteenth-century antiquarian projects. But the elastic gap between oral origins and committal to manuscript makes any kind of chronological ordering of prose as well as verse a tentative business.

In spite of these evident difficulties, the structure of *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* is strong and cogent. From the Introduction, which both defines the whole corpus and distinguishes its two major branches, Clunies Ross moves on to set out what she calls 'an indigenous typology' (p. 29), first of technical terms used of both types of poetry, and second, of genres and sub-genres (of skaldic verse alone). As she demonstrates, elements in the titles of many Eddic poems make clear their status as speech acts: *-mál*, *-spá*, *-grátr* and so on. By contrast, terms used for different kinds of skaldic verse tend to refer to the degree

of formality or elaborateness of the composition. Clunies Ross argues, however, for an indigenous typology of genres of skaldic verse which categorises them as different kinds of speech acts, arguing that *lausavísur* should be accorded this status rather than being equated with lyric poetry. Many *lausavísur*, of course, have thoroughly misleading, mistaken or simply improbable contexts in the narratives in which they appear, and it is a difficult task indeed to categorise a speech act outside an indisputably actual context (pragmatics handbooks often make this point very humorously: my own favourite points out that the sentence ‘There is a sheepdog in the closet’ may be either a statement of fact, a warning, or a promise, depending on the unknown context; there are even more ingenious examples which demonstrate that context can overturn even apparently obvious identifications of a particular kind of speech act). Here, one must take for granted that a medieval Family Saga audience would expect prosimetrical episodes of verse recitation to reflect at least a plausible version of actuality, if not actuality itself.

Clunies Ross’s focus, throughout the volume, is on the ‘overarching medieval Norse conception of all kinds of poetry as speech acts with direct effects’ (p. 102) and hence on the likely authenticity of verse recitation as represented in saga prose, rather than on the opposite likelihood of non-naturalistic literary fictions created by saga authors or manuscript compilers. For instance, she begins the book with a reference to a verse, neatly defining what a poet is, attributed to Bragi Boddason, and she describes the verse as part of ‘an incident, doubtless mythical, recorded in the *Edda*’ in which Bragi and a troll-woman exchange verses. I would have thought that the perfunctory ‘exchange’ is simply Snorri’s way of framing the verse quotation, but the use of the verb ‘record’ carries the implication of some sort of pre-existing literary actuality, rather than fresh literary artifice. Interestingly, though, in her chapter on the transmission of skaldic verse as quotation in prose, Clunies Ross insists on what she calls a ‘second order’ distinction between verses used to authenticate the prose, and verses used as part of the narrative. She makes the important point that it is unhelpful to think of inherently ‘situational verses’, for instance, as some recent scholars have done, rather than to draw attention to how verses are used in such a way in the narrative (I have myself always used the alternative term ‘dialogue verses’ precisely because it refers to their possibly new, that is, ‘second order’, function in a saga).

The chapter on the impact of Christianity on skaldic poets is full of interest, and the three chapters on Norse poetics are excellent; as one would expect from this author, the discussion of Snorri’s *Edda* is extremely valuable. Clunies Ross is especially good not only on the obvious ‘threat’ posed by Latinity to vernacular poetry rooted in pagan mythology, but also on the difficulties facing the vernacular grammarians, whose native metrics, allegory and figurative language all failed to fit the Latin model.

Clunies Ross here calls attention to the hitherto neglected *Fourth Grammatical Treatise*. One of the strongest features of this book is its function as a uniquely authoritative guide to scholarship (and scholarly neglect) in the field. The downside of this is that old problems are alluded to but not always taken issue with. The question whether ‘ordinary’ Icelanders really could extemporise skaldic verse,

for instance, is alluded to in the statement: ‘the high level of poetic activity depicted [in the Family Sagas] does bear some relation to the importance attributed to poetry in medieval Iceland’ (p. 60). Similarly, ‘the stringent Icelandic legal prohibitions *make interesting reading* [my italics] in the context of the so-called love poetry of the . . . poets’ sagas’ (p. 44). And some old chestnuts are not revisited. Poets in sagas are not all ugly, as Clunies Ross states: the jury may be out on Kormakr (the maid says he’s ugly; Steingerðr disagrees), but Björn Hítðælakappi is simply *sæmiligr at sjá*. But these are small points. *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* is a very welcome addition to skaldic scholarship.

HEATHER O’DONOGHUE

SKALDIC VERSE AND THE POETICS OF SAGA NARRATIVE. By HEATHER O’DONOGHUE. Oxford University Press. Oxford, 2005. 295 + viii pp. ISBN 978 0 19 926732 3.

Heather O’Donoghue distances herself in her new book from the stratigraphic approach to Family Saga prosimetrum she espoused in *The Genesis of a Saga Narrative: Verse and Prose in Kormaks saga* (Oxford, 1991). Instead, the introduction to *Skaldic Verse* states that verses are ‘purposeful additions to new narratives, and exactly what these introduced verses contribute to the narrative . . . is the focus of this book’ (p. 3). Close readings aimed at uncovering what verse contributes to the narratives of *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga* occupy the three central chapters of *Skaldic Verse*, prefaced by a single chapter on verse in the Kings’ Sagas and with a contrastive reading of the verseless *Hrafnkels saga* serving as a conclusion. The close readings demonstrate three major theses: that skaldic verse represents a ‘voice from the past’; that saga characters who speak in verse are thereby distanced from other characters; and that verses offer unique access to their speakers’ emotions and inner lives. O’Donoghue’s rejection of the analytical approach to saga prosimetrum is judicious, given the considerable problems of dating sagas and their verses, even if sometimes, as in the case of *Grettis saga*, the meagre evidence that does exist could perhaps have been taken into consideration. And her perceptive close readings of verses in their prose settings offer a number of interesting observations (many verses in *Eyrbyggja* are spoken by socially marginal characters, Vermundr inn mjóvi elicits verse performances from an interlocutor in both *Eyrbyggja* and *Grettis saga*, the idea of *Grettis saga* as a ‘self-reflexive fiction’, for example), though the lists which structure the chapters on *Gísla saga* and *Grettis saga* lead to a certain repetitiveness. The book does not, however, offer a new account of the contribution of verses to saga narrative in general (nor does it claim to), and this may leave us wondering if the capacity of the New Critical approach to generate fresh ideas about these texts is not almost exhausted.

One limitation of O’Donoghue’s analysis is what she excludes from the corpus of ‘skaldic verse’—a generic term with whose considerable problems she does not engage. She mentions *fornaldarsögur* in the list of Old Norse-Icelandic prosimetric genres based on native materials (p. 1), and rightly so. But they are rapidly sidelined (the *fornaldarsögur* represent the end of a largely pre-literary tradition,

p. 2, whereas the Family Sagas are ‘new narratives’, p. 3), despite the fact that many *fornaldarsögur* include large numbers of what appear to be *lausavísur*, albeit mostly in Eddic verse forms. The idea that skaldic verse constitutes a ‘voice from the past’ (p. 5 and *passim*) in the sagas was originally argued by Alois Wolf and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen on the basis that the skaldic verse form and kennings were bearers of culturally prestigious meanings. O’Donoghue’s use of the concept is a little less specific—it is not clear what exactly makes verses voices from the past, or whether the present from which this past is viewed is that of the saga audience or the saga characters. If, as often seems to be the case, it is the latter, is it plausible to claim that skaldic verse represents ‘a voice from the past’ in the tenth-century setting? For the (presumably late medieval) saga audience, this idea is more reasonable, although people did of course continue to compose in *dróttkvætt* in Iceland well into the fifteenth century, and if medieval authors and audiences regarded any verses as ‘voices from the past’, it was probably those preserved amid stories of the legendary past in the *fornaldarsögur*.

A major contention of the central chapters of the book is that characters who speak in verse distance themselves from other saga characters (p. 107) by the ‘uncompromisingly oblique’, ‘cryptic’ (p. 86) or ‘strange and distant’ (p. 215) nature of skaldic verse, which is contrasted to verisimilar, ‘stylistically naturalistic’ (p. 203), or ‘psychological[ly] plausib[le]’ (p. 211) saga prose. The fundamental difficulties here (does ‘naturalism’ mean the same thing in the twenty-first century as in the thirteenth? Are verisimilitude, naturalism and plausibility equivalent?) are not really solved by the concept of *littéarité*, introduced in the chapter on verses in the *konungasögur* and used throughout the book. *Littéarité* is said to involve the creation of ‘a textual illusion for literary effect, rather than . . . a naturalistic event’ (p. 12). Surely ‘naturalistic’ narrative also avails itself of ‘illusions’ and ‘effects’, and statements such as ‘saga characters behave like “real” people in every respect *except* that they sometimes speak to each other—or themselves—in verse’ (p. 8) made this reader wonder how much more ‘naturalistic’ shape-changers and seven-year-old axe-murderers are, say, than an oral performance of eight lines of verse (as O’Donoghue says on p. 12, such performances almost certainly did take place). Her point that skaldic verse contrasts with saga prose, with consequences for the saga narrative as a whole, is well taken, but the claim that verse performances break a naturalistic illusion, as with the idea that verse allows the expression of characters’ inner feelings, is indebted to an anachronistic idea of saga authors as novelists, aiming at realism and well-rounded characters. It may also be unproductive to allow our own difficulties in understanding skaldic verse to influence our thinking very deeply. Many saga anecdotes suggest that, far from viewing skaldic stanzas as riddles, medieval Icelanders were impressed by the sonorities of *dróttkvætt* and the fluency and resourcefulness of its practitioners, and found it an appropriate medium for persuading audiences, for sometimes complex argumentation, and for performative speech acts—for prophecies, memorials, slanders, praise and blame.

A more fruitful approach might be both more material, and more historical. That is, it would pay more attention to the manuscript witnesses (it is nowhere noted

in O'Donoghue's meticulous discussion of the *Máhlíðingavísur* in *Eyrbyggja saga* that the sequence of verses differs substantially in the two medieval manuscripts, for instance) and to contemporary poetic and literary activity (Guðrún Nordal's *Tools of Literacy* and Gísli Sigurðsson's work on the skalds of the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, absent from a bibliography characterised by a somewhat scanty coverage of recent scholarship, would provide context on what being a poet meant in medieval Iceland). Although O'Donoghue uses the concept of the voice of the skald mainly as a metaphor, in doing so she valuably calls attention to a hitherto neglected aspect of these fascinating works: the interplay of aural patterning, or voice—if not necessarily from the past—and written textuality in saga prosimetrum.

KATE HESLOP

MEETING THE OTHER IN OLD NORSE MYTH AND LEGEND. By JOHN MCKINNELL. *D. S. Brewer*. Cambridge, 2005. 291 pp. ISBN 978 1 84394 042 5.

John McKinnell's book displays the same rare breadth of knowledge as his other books and articles on mythology and Old Norse literature, but takes a somewhat more subjective approach. Detailed etymological studies and informed literary analysis of Old Norse mythological texts are once again combined with archaeological, runic, legal and folkloric evidence and other material drawn from Old and Middle English and Latin, as well as Classical and Celtic mythology. This monograph deals essentially with the various apparently stereotypical meetings that take place between the individual gods and 'Others' of various kinds. McKinnell is interested in what produced these stereotypes, and how free individual poets were to adapt or contradict them in their work.

Chapters 2 ('Methods') and 3 ('Sources') offer a frank and concise approach to the material in question. The first contains an excellent review of the strengths and weaknesses of the various methodologies that have been applied to the analysis of Old Norse mythology in the past, ranging from the Grimms to Lacan. Especially refreshing is McKinnell's own credo, that when it comes down to it 'Students of mythology can hardly avoid becoming myth-makers, and those who fail to investigate their own subjective input risk deceiving their readers and themselves' (32).

Another key feature of these first chapters is the welcome underlining of the fact (noted earlier by McKinnell) that the body of material on Old Norse myth should be seen as representing not one system of thought or religious belief, but rather a variety of related systems that differed according to date, geographical and social conditions and even individual narrators. All of this means that we must be wary of beginning our researches with Snorri, whose works are invaluable sources, but who is nonetheless as much of a myth-maker as any of the other scholars who have succeeded him. McKinnell also warns us to beware of limiting ourselves to 'the quasi-Biblical corpus of "canonical texts" of Old Norse mythological poetry', and instead to 'note the mythological story patterns wherever they appear in Old

Norse and related literature, while not assuming that any of them is necessarily much older than the earliest example of it that we can find' (p. 49). This gives a firm foundation for the arguments presented in the following chapters, which, as McKinnell underlines, should be seen essentially as discussions rather than firm statements of fact, even though the evidence behind them is fastidiously researched. They nonetheless serve to stress not only the complexity of the extant mythological corpus, but also the range of potential levels of meaning and interpretation that it can yield.

The next four chapters deal with patterns of myth that McKinnell feels were associated originally with beliefs linked with the Vanir gods, which he considers to have been 'the most important deities in southern Scandinavia' in the first centuries after the birth of Christ, prior to their later amalgamation with the Æsir in subsequent belief systems (pp. 17–18 and 53).

Chapter 4 discusses the extant evidence of rituals connected with the Vanir, commencing with a fresh, detailed analysis of all the evidence concerning Nerthus in Germania, which is connected to archaeological finds from Dejbjerg and elsewhere. McKinnell then goes on to provide a detailed review of the evidence for the worship of Ingvi, and an excellent review of the *gullgubber*, which he believes might represent the hereditary ruler and the goddess who was seen as his lover and patroness, and formed 'a source of income for the nobleman who controlled the cult-site' (p. 60).

Chapters 5–7 pursue the ideas of the previous chapter by examining various mythical patterns in Old Norse mythology that might reflect elements of the aforementioned Vanir rituals. Chapter 5 considers recurring patterns concerning relationships between the god/ruler ('Summer King') and the 'otherworld' supernatural female ('Winter Princess'), as seen in the accounts of Njörðr and Skaði, Freyr and Gerðr, and other comparable pairs found in Saxo, *Ynglinga saga* and elsewhere. The conclusion of this comparison is that 'it is . . . impossible to separate the marriage-myths of the Vanir from the legends of their royal descendants' (p. 69).

Chapter 6 shows the concept of the marriage between the god/ruler and the otherworld female from another angle, especially in accounts concerning the cult of Þorgerðr Hǫlgabrúðr. The pattern McKinnell isolates here is again that of the ruler's power seeming to depend on the favour of a goddess/troll woman who is his bride and sometimes has a 'dark sister'. McKinnell identifies a similar pattern in *Hyndluljóð*, in the figures of Gullveig/Heiðr, and in the accounts of Helgi Hjörvarðsson and Helgi Hundingsbani. The chapter contains an excellent examination of *Hyndluljóð* and its parallels with *Völuspá*.

Chapter 7 focuses on the magic-working female, a common feature in the accounts previously discussed. The accounts of meetings with *vǫlur* are divided into three types, depending on whether they deal with the figure of the 'unjust patriarch', the 'angry young man' or the 'young protégé'. McKinnell argues that the patterns seen here show a development of a basic model in which a protagonist (a god or king descended from the Vanir) commits a crime against his two sons, and how a *vǫlva* sides with them against him. Similar developments are shown to occur in mythical accounts dealing with Þórr and Óðinn which are examined in

the remaining chapters in the book. Chapter 8 examines in detail Þórr's regular confrontations with the giants. After a useful analysis of the names of the troll-like giant women Þórr is said to encounter, the confrontations themselves are analysed. McKinnell makes a valuable comparison between the story of Baldr's funeral in *Gylfaginning* and the factual report by Ibn Fadlan, suggesting that the mythical account of the former may be reflected in the actions of the latter. More daring is McKinnell's suggestion that the narratives of Þórr's two key visits to Útgarðaloki and Geirrþøðr are actually allegorical or symbolic versions of the pattern underlying the funeral accounts—in other words, 'a pattern in which Þórr confronts and avenges the fact of death itself' in the role of a 'bereaved kinsman' (p. 125). McKinnell develops this theme in Chapter 9, where he compares similar accounts of Þórr-like humans crossing rivers to encounter giants (the 'Þórr pattern') with the famous 'Bear's Son pattern' (reflected in *Beowulf* and elsewhere). For McKinnell, these patterns are related, and 'assert the heroism of organised human society in defiance of death' (p. 146).

The next two chapters deal with Odinic strategies to deal with the Other. Chapter 10 concentrates on the evidence of Óðinn's seductions in Old Norse literature, analysing first his dealings with Jǫrð, then the accounts of his seductions of Rindr, Gríðr and Gunnlōð, and finally his failed seduction of 'Billings mæ'r'. McKinnell underlines the recurring idea of nations claiming roots from the connections between a giantess and a god. If nothing else, this serves to question the common idea that the *jotnar* were essentially seen as enemies of mankind and the gods. Chapter 11 moves from the god to the hero, showing how mythic models were adopted and echoed in later literature. McKinnell argues that in the accounts examined here, such as that of Órvar-Oddr and Hildigunnr, the god's seduction of the giantess seems to be inverted, with the Odinic protagonist being taken in by a hospitable giant, and seduced by his daughter during the winter.

Chapter 12 examines briefly another role of the giantess figure as someone who aids the hero in his task. The key models here are those of Gríðr in the story of Þórr's trip to Geirrþøðr, and Týr's mother in *Hymiskviða*, to which various parallels are shown. Chapter 13 takes yet another approach and is of particular value because of its analysis of the possible connections between figures such as the *matronae*, the *idisi*, the *ides* and the *ðisir* and the possible associations that these might have with Bede's *modranecht*, and even the concept of *útisetá*. This is the context into which McKinnell now places those ritualistic accounts of protagonists calling up dead women, and receiving spells and/or other occult information and a blessing from them in *Svipdagsmál*, *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* (Sigrdrífa being symbolically dead). McKinnell concentrates on the charms given in these works, and the possible relationships between the three poems, which he sees as manifestations of the same developing form.

Chapter 14 concentrates further on the idea of variation in narrative patterns over time. Here McKinnell focusses on the account of Sigrún meeting Helgi in his grave in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, pointing to apparent echoes of this motif/pattern in various Danish, Faroese and British ballads, and even Icelandic folktales. The suggestion that the Sigrún/Helgi account offers mythological parallels with the *suttee* motif from Ibn Fadlan's account seems especially valid.

In his 'Afterword', McKinnell returns to the reasons why these mythical story patterns continued to be used long after the acceptance of Christianity. He sees a recurring theme in them all, which centres on 'a moment of dynastic crisis' such as

the death of a ruler . . . ; his wife's bereavement . . . ; the assertion of a son's right to inherit . . . ; the defence of one's dynasty through 'just' vengeance . . . ; the threat posed by 'alien' marriages . . . and the workings of Fate, and the knowledge that all things must end (p. 234).

Overall, this is an inspiring and readable study which does not seek to hide the subjectivity of its interpretations of Old Norse mythology, developed over the course of a lifetime of careful research in the field. The range of evidence offered in support of these interpretations makes the book invaluable for anyone working in the field of Old Norse studies, and the approaches taken, whether one agrees with all the conclusions or not, cannot be ignored. Most valuable of all, to my mind, is the way that McKinnell clearly underlines a number of key differences between the mythical patterns associated with the Vanir and those more directly connected to the Æsir, differences which he logically suggests originate in the differing emphases and approaches to the landscape reflected in these two religions.

Of course, there are various points that one might argue with, not least the fact that in the treatment of eddic poems, regular mention is still made of individual 'poets', the 'composition' of poems, textual 'corruption', and of firm datings for poems on the basis of individual words or motifs. The same assumptions are implied in the case of ballads and folk tales, almost as if these were all composed with pen in hand in a library where other works and motifs could be accessed at will and deliberately altered or adapted. McKinnell implies at the start that much of the material he deals with came into being within the oral tradition, living and developing in this form sometimes for centuries before eventually being recorded in writing. Explicit acceptance of this background would offer a more logical explanation for the appearance of recurring narrative patterns and the adaptation of story motifs than the notion of intertextual borrowing. Such considerations would have been particularly relevant with regard to the discussion of 'The Bear's Son' tale, the tales of the hero being 'Seduced by the Giantess', and those tales concerning the return of dead lovers. All of these are widespread in the later Icelandic oral folk tale tradition, a tradition which effectively demonstrates how freely stories develop and change within a given framework.

Such criticisms, however, do not reduce the value of this book. There is good reason to be grateful to John McKinnell for daring to share not only his scholarship but also some of his personal suppositions about the nature and meaning of these early myths, something many scholars are too wary of doing. Work on Old Norse religion takes place in a field of fragments where it is virtually impossible to state anything for certain beyond the fact that particular words are found in a particular manuscript or that a particular object has been found in a particular piece of ground. In the midst of such comparative darkness, it is always useful to have

a torch of the kind that this book offers, especially one held in the hands of such an experienced guide.

TERRY GUNNELL

THE GROWTH OF THE MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC SAGAS (1180–1280). By THEODORE M. ANDERSSON. *Cornell University Press*. Ithaca and London, 2006. xii + 237 pp. ISBN 978 0 8014 4408 1.

In the course of a discussion of saga genre at the 13th International Saga Conference in 2006 Theodore M. Andersson jokingly announced that he would like to withdraw his 1976 book *The Icelandic Family Saga: A Structural Analysis*. This volume has had such a profound influence on Old Norse scholarship that the very idea of its withdrawal (even if this could be brought about) is, of course, unthinkable. Nevertheless, in *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180–1280)* Andersson offers an alternative to the approach taken in *The Icelandic Family Saga*. Andersson's premise is that saga writing evolved during the century covered by the new book from rudimentary narratives which, though they might exhibit some artistic skill, were heavily dependent on their sources, towards carefully structured texts written with narratorial intent, authorial bias and, in some cases, a particular message to reveal and illustrate. Over ten chapters, plus introduction and 'epilogue', Andersson discusses twelve 'sagas of early Icelanders' (his preferred term) and three Kings' Sagas in broadly chronological order, showing how each text develops ideas, techniques and motifs employed in earlier ones, while at the same time subverting and reinterpreting them.

In the introduction Andersson sets out his intentions, justifying his choice of texts and the dates he assigns to them. He summarises some of the difficulties in dating sagas and, in particular, addresses such questions as whether oral stories may prefigure the preserved written ones, with reference to recent scholarship on orality by Gísli Sigurðsson and Tommy Danielsson, with both of whom Andersson firmly aligns himself. Andersson concludes that there were seven groups of oral stories: biographical, ghost and sorcerer tales; genealogies; traditions about particular families; lawsuits; conflicts; and traditions about place-names. He then refines this list, outlining three common types or modes which would govern the general substance of a saga: biographical, regional or chronicle, and feud or conflict.

The first two chapters focus on Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and 'The Oldest'/'Legendary' versions of *Óláfs saga hins helga*. Andersson dates the former between 1180 and 1200, though probably nearer to 1180, and sees it as the first Icelandic text to have 'full saga dimensions'. Andersson dates the fragmentary *Oldest Saga* to c.1200, and assumes its content to be similar to that of the later (surviving) *Legendary Saga*. The general substance of these two chapters is that, although there are moments of literary genius within each text, the author sees his role as that of compiler bringing together source material, with occasional redundancies and discrepancies (which Andersson cites as evidence for the author's lack of literary sophistication). Occasionally one feels Andersson

may be somewhat over-critical of these earlier texts, seeing evidence of imperfectly harmonised oral traditions or sources, where he might have offered an alternative explanation for their presence in a later text. For example, on p. 29 he suggests that Oddr Snorrason may have been working from two traditions in his account of Óláfr Tryggvason's failure to wed the Swedish Queen Sigríðr. Although it is possible that these stories may have separate origins, neither contradicts the other and neither is, to my mind, redundant. This may represent an early example of a saga author building towards a single event through delineation of a number of contributory causes.

Chapter Three turns to *Víga-Glúms saga*, *Reykðæla saga*, *Heiðarvíga saga* and *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, all of which Andersson dates to between 1200 and 1220 and therefore considers to be among the oldest sagas of early Icelanders. While both the Óláfr sagas are biographies heavily influenced by hagiography, these early portraits of Icelanders tend to depict less idealised characters who still, according to Andersson, were no less worthy of being remembered than the kings or jarls of Norway. With the exception of those texts whose very existence requires some discussion of manuscript preservation (e.g. *Heiðarvíga saga*, much of which was burnt in the library fire in Copenhagen in 1728 and is preserved only as remembered by its transcriber, Jón Ólafsson), Andersson avoids all discussion of textual history. In some cases it might be argued that such an approach underplays elements relevant to his argument. For example, *Víga-Glúms saga* is preserved complete only in Möðruvallabók, but evidence from the Pseudo-Vatnshyrna fragments suggests that the surviving version is abridged from an earlier text of the saga. It is possible that many of the features that Andersson cites as evidence that *Víga-Glúms saga* is written in a rudimentary style based upon 'block composition' (i.e. episodic with only superficial cohesive factors) may result from this abridgement rather than the original composition of the saga. Similarly, Andersson devotes relatively little discussion to some of the insoluble questions of saga dating, though they underpin his assumptions about the date of composition he assigns to the sagas he discusses. For example, the argument that *Gísla saga* was influenced by *Droplaugarsona saga* on the grounds of the similarity of the nocturnal killing episodes in both texts is supported only by a citation of Andersson's own article, 'Some Ambiguities in *Gísla saga*' (*Bibliography of Old Norse-Icelandic Studies* (1968), 7–42), although a short summary of the issues here would have clarified the point.

Chapters Four and Five treat two texts which have rarely been set alongside one another before, but which Andersson represents as mirror images of one another: *Morkinskinna*, or rather the portion of it covering Magnús inn góði and Haraldr harðráði, which Andersson treats here as a free-standing text, and *Egils saga*. He argues that both texts address the same subject, namely the uneasy relationship between Iceland and Norway throughout the Middle Ages. These chapters, together with Chapter Seven on *Laxdæla saga*, reveal the merit of Andersson's decision to juxtapose Kings' Sagas and sagas of early Icelanders. Such an approach draws attention to both the *Morkinskinna* author/compiler's particular interest in Icelanders and Icelandic affairs and the emphasis on monarchy in *Egils saga*.

In Chapters Six to Nine Andersson discusses a further seven sagas of early Icelanders: *Ljósvetninga saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, *Bandamanna saga* and *Hrafnkels saga*. He details the ‘mythic patterning’ within *Laxdæla saga* and its relationship with the Sigurðr legend (hardly new material, but nonetheless usefully reviewed here). For Andersson, this saga is essentially optimistic, despite the catastrophic killing of Kjartan Ólafsson at its climax. At the end of the saga a new hero, Bolli Bollason, arises who is every bit as dashing as his predecessors. However, within some of the later sagas (such as *Hænsa-Þóris saga* and *Bandamanna saga*), Andersson notes ‘a new scepticism about governance’ and a particular interest in finance and its relationship with power. In the final full chapter he shies away from the conventional view of *Njáls saga* as the crowning achievement of a century of saga writing. Instead he sees it as a text that consciously offers a vision in contrast to the optimism of *Laxdæla saga*. For Andersson *Njáls saga* is a pessimistic work with a prevailing atmosphere of haunting disillusionment, demonstrating the failure of its characters—their intentions, wisdom and valour—and subverting many of the themes, motifs and ideals of the sagas he has previously discussed.

Although the book’s title alerts the reader to the relatively limited chronological range of the analysis, the reader is left high and dry at the end, wondering what, given Andersson’s convincing argument that saga writing has grown during the century, happens to it in the years subsequent to 1280. That said, the book is both useful and thought-provoking throughout. Its treatment of saga chronology from a thematic and stylistic point of view, rather than as an end in itself, is refreshing. Andersson’s style is succinct and engaging. He introduces a number of basic concepts which, while familiar, are clearly and usefully explained, while still finding room for some striking, original and challenging arguments. The book will undoubtedly prove popular and deservedly so.

JAMIE COCHRANE

OEDIPUS BOREALIS. THE ABERRANT BODY IN OLD ICELANDIC MYTH AND SAGA. By LOIS BRAGG. *Fairleigh Dickinson University Press*. Madison, 2004. 302 pp. 35 line illustrations. ISBN 978 0 8386 4028 9.

The book begins with an excellent introduction that provides a pithy exposition of disability studies, including the relatively unusual insight that some societies do not, or do not only, fear and scorn misfits but regard them with awe. This is the key to the whole of Bragg’s subsequent discussion, which explores the nexus of physical abnormality and other kinds of what may be seen as aberrance, with emphasis on the positive associations of these features: ‘What we call disability is found in association with various kinds of sexual deviance and foreign connections as well as artistic talent and dynasty founding’ (p. 51). Readers today are likely to see saga literature initially through the lens of their modern ‘able-ist’ prejudices, but Bragg demands a radical adjustment of their perspective and responses, as indicated by her remark that Snorri Sturluson’s works abound in ‘the sort of characters in which we are interested: the impaired, deformed, ill, aged,

sexually ambivalent, and criminal. In Snorri's narrative worlds, we find that aberrance marks the first and the best of Icelandic manhood' (p. 57).

Before settling into her discussion of Old Icelandic literature, Bragg maps out various kinds of aberrance, and the connections between them, in a chapter on Ancient Greek myths, centring on those concerned with Oedipus of Thebes. In this she makes short work of Freud's famous exposition of the Oedipal complex by noting that it plucks out just two strands, parricide and incest, from the web of motifs associated with Oedipus's lameness, and that by 'interiorising these acts as unconscious drives, Freud has deprived them of their outer sign, the Marked Foot' (p. 19). This is especially important because the topos of the so-called Marked Foot—actually any abnormality of the leg—emerges as central to Bragg's investigation throughout the book and acts as a recurrent, though not inevitable or invariable, marker for diverse forms of aberrance and excellence. The complex of motifs relating to physical abnormality, social deviance and creative power, which has been sketched out in relation to the locus classicus of Greek myth, is further discussed in a chapter on Old Norse myth as found in Snorri's *Edda*, a work that Bragg concedes is not likely to represent genuine heathen beliefs but which she considers to be 'an apposite and useful background for reading the vast and remarkable saga literature with which it is contemporary' (p. 55). Aspects of the mythic background are then brought into a chapter on Egill Skalla-Grímsson, 'the quintessential Icelandic founder-hero' whose 'aberrance is of mythic, not medical, import' (p. 138). In this context the thug-like *berserkr* who roam Iceland are discussed 'because we have already met most of the character and plot motifs associated with them in Giants' (p. 143), and because Bragg seeks to establish a dichotomy between this type of *berserkr*, with whom she associates the ugly Kveld-Úlfr, and the high-status *berserkr* in the service of Haraldr hárfagri, with whom she associates the handsome Þórólfr (p. 149). Through this dichotomy she wishes to exemplify a kind of aberrance that marked the greatest among the founders of the Icelandic people. In the next chapter Bragg widens the scope of her investigation from the poet Egill to the heroes of the poets' sagas, who indeed lack what she now calls Egill's troll associations but are marked in that several of them 'bear non-Norse, and therefore non-normative, features that were regarded as ugly deformities in the saga world' (p. 193). Since these poets display sexual aberrance, here understood as embracing the inability or unwillingness to assume the role of married patriarch, they provide an opportunity to study its associated motifs, many of which have been outlined in connection with the Oedipus myth, including 'stammering speech, left-handedness, leg injuries, marine-mammal imagery, foot fetishes, buggery, and intergenerational transgression' (p. 194). Finally Bragg seeks to correct any impression she may have created that markedness is a special characteristic of poets (although in their case it is specifically linked to their poetic productivity) by surveying a group of other marked individuals, with emphasis on Grettir Ásmundarson and Bishop Guðmundr Arason.

Perhaps the best way to see the strengths and weaknesses of Bragg's general approach is to look in particular at her treatment of the Marked Foot. When she identifies this motif as appearing, for example, in the famous passage found in

*Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* where the eponymous hero approaches Eiríkr jarl with a firm and manly gait despite having a boil on his instep (pp. 198 and 201), it may occur to the reader that Bragg is engaged in little more than motif-spotting; the identification becomes significant, however, when Bragg moves on to analyse the implications of the leg injury that Gunnlaugr sustains in a wrestling match. That Gunnlaugr travels to his father's house several hundred kilometres away despite the gammy leg, but is then unable to make a short extra journey to prevent Helga's marriage to Hrafn, has often been viewed as a problem in the saga narrative; it is welcome, therefore, that Bragg invokes the connection between the Marked Foot and sexual dysfunction, which she has already investigated with reference to the crippled smith Hephaestus (pp. 25–37) and which is especially relevant to poets such as Gunnlaugr since 'the poet and the smith . . . are alloforms who share a cluster of features' (p. 193). At a literal level the narrative remains illogical, but on the level of symbolism Gunnlaugr's injury has 'rendered him unable to assume the patriarchal role of householder by marrying Helga. The outer sign of this disablement is his disarticulated leg, which symbolises the disarticulation of his lineage' (pp. 200–01). In view of these symbolic implications, Bragg suggests, it is also appropriate and significant that Hrafn later dies through having his leg cut off, since Helga has for a long time refused to have sexual intercourse with him (p. 204). This is surely valid and insightful commentary. So too are the remarks made about Qnundr tréfótr as he is depicted in *Grettis saga*. Bragg notes that Qnundr achieves the status of hero despite having only one leg, although this would be all but impossible in modern culture, and she goes on to comment on the saga's evaluation of Qnundr as the bravest and nimblest one-legged man in Iceland: 'That this was a real compliment can be realized only when we acknowledge a very large number of one-legged men among the settler generation' (p. 244). This may strike the reader as too earnest; but it has the virtue of rescuing a joke from being merely a joke, and it fits well with Bragg's contention, mentioned above in connection with Kveld-Úlfr, that saga literature depicts the early Icelanders as a society of marked men. Bragg returns to this point and develops it when she compares Qnundr with the Icelander Þórarinn Nefjólffson, whose ugly feet get him into a light-hearted wager with the Norwegian king Óláfr helgi, according to Snorri in *Heimskringla*; Þórarinn (together with Snorri) appears to take pride in ugliness when he asserts that the foot with a missing toe is even more repulsive than the one that is complete, and this may well be an Icelandic trait in view of the way in which the ugliness of Egill Skalla-Grímsson, for example, is celebrated in his saga. If this is so it is not unreasonable to suggest, as Bragg does (p. 260), that Óláfr is negating this Icelandic pride and in some sense claiming Þórarinn for Norway when he wins the bet by asserting that the absence of a toe makes the foot less ugly than the one where all the repulsive toes are present. Many readers, however, will no doubt think that Bragg is here at risk of over-interpreting the material. She is surely guilty of over-interpretation in her treatment of *Bjarnar saga Hítadalakappa*, where she is faced with a hero who is handsome and unblemished but where she finds the motif of the Marked Foot in the garter that Björn receives from Óláfr helgi (p. 206) and which she declares to be 'sexually dubious' (p. 208) because it was bestowed when the two men were getting dressed after

bathing. Insults based on accusations of homosexual activity are in fact an important feature of *Bjarnar saga*, but to link this theme with an item of a saint's clothing, which has much the status of a holy relic since the narrative declares that it was buried with Björn and was undecayed when his bones were disinterred, is clearly a case of reading against the grain. Furthermore, this reading is used in support of a view of Björn's personality that prompts Bragg to explain away the existence of his wife (p. 205) in order to preserve his supposed sexual dysfunction. A similar over-interpretation can be found in Bragg's discussion of the accident at sea that fractures the lower leg of the young Guðmundr Arason in *Prestssaga Guðmundar góða* (*Sturlunga saga*): the shipmates of the future bishop face the problem of how to carry him ashore through shallow but rough water, and solve it by having two men link arms behind his shoulders while each supports one of his thighs. This might be a realistic detail—it presents a practical solution to a real difficulty—but Bragg, wishing again to link the Marked Foot to sexual aberrance, notes that Guðmundr's posture 'is that of a woman giving birth, his arms around the two shipmen midwives' (p. 272). Having thus found the link and feminised Guðmundr, she elaborates his personality as something close to a modern gay disposition, this time supplying him and other characters with motivations that are at odds with those stated in the saga: a while after the death of Bishop Brandr's son Þorgeirr, whom Guðmundr mourns as one of his best friends, Brandr lays claim to some books and vestments that Guðmundr has inherited; he says that they rightfully belong to the bishopric, and the saga declares that he takes this action at the urging of Guðmundr's enemies. Bragg, however, discerns what she regards as the true situation, which is that the bishop is offended at Guðmundr's mourning for Þorgeirr and the acts of piety associated with it, which he understands as having been motivated by homosexual love (pp. 274–75). It must be said that this reading, though Bragg argues for it quite vigorously, remains entirely speculative. It is unfortunate that examples of this kind of speculation, based in part on questionable interpretations of detail, crop up throughout the book and mar the arguments that they are designed to bolster. Another case can be found on p. 112, where Bragg notes that Saxo says of Balderus that he became so debilitated by sexy dreams that he could not even walk; she suggests that this 'may possibly be an allusion to some sort of foot anomaly' and proceeds to speculate that this may cast light on Snorri's story of how Skaði came to choose Njǫrðr rather than Baldr by looking at their feet. For readers who are familiar with Old Norse literature, therefore, Bragg's work contains much that is exasperating, though it provides a great deal more that offers insight and allows well-known texts to be seen in a new perspective. Readers, however, who approach the work from the direction of—for example—disability studies, and who have little knowledge of Snorri and the sagas, will receive several false impressions.

As for presentation, it may be noted briefly that the book is well designed and carefully produced, though the decision to retain long vowels whilst transliterating þ and ð in Icelandic names makes for some odd-looking spellings. Proof-reading is good on the whole, although we find 'Sonnatorrek' for 'Sonatorrek' on p. 136, and 'Reyholt' for 'Reykholt' in the caption to the illustration on p. 201. The

drawings, in several hands, are of variable quality, and many of them, particularly the views of Iceland, are decorative rather than adding much to the text.

DAVID ASHURST

LES AMOURS DU POÈTE. POÉSIE ET BIOGRAPHIE DANS LA LITTÉRATURE DU XIII<sup>E</sup> SIÈCLE. By DANIEL LACROIX. *Slatkine Érudition*. Geneva, 2004. 284 pp. ISBN 978 2 05 101935 4.

In 1961 Bjarni Einarsson, in his book *Skáldasögur*, took up the gauntlet thrown down by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson—‘Aðalheimild Kormáks sögu eru *vísur* Kormáks’ (*Íslensk fornrit* VIII (1938), xci)—to argue that the verses cited in the Icelandic poets’ sagas were the inventions of the thirteenth-century saga authors, and that these sagas, with their common theme of unhappy love, were modelled on the courtly literature of medieval Europe. The argument met with a generally hostile reception from scholars, but has never been wholly dismissed. As translator into French of *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* and a scholar clearly well versed in both medieval French and Norse literary traditions, Daniel Lacroix is well placed to reopen the controversy. This book reviews it, and the wider question of European influence on Old Norse literature, in a chapter bridging extensive discussions of French/Occitan and Norse material; the discussion lays out the terms of Bjarni Einarsson’s debate with Theodore M. Andersson in *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, but looks somewhat out of date, ignoring more recent contributions to the subject such as my own in *Saga-Book* (XXIV (1994), 105–53) and in *Skaldsagas* (ed. Russell Poole (Berlin, 2000), 232–71) (though this book is cited as generally relevant in the bibliography).

The question of literary influence is not the primary focus of this study, though; indeed, Lacroix’s stance on it is so sceptical as to lay his overall analysis open to the charge of arbitrariness, since the three medieval literary traditions he juxtaposes seem increasingly to be defined only by their differences. He refers approvingly to Bjarni’s project, despite his scepticism about its conclusions, for looking beyond the narrow confines of narrow saga scholarship to place the poets’ sagas in a wider perspective (p. 167):

L’intérêt du livre . . . est qu’il étudie de façon globale les sagas de scaldes et qu’il ne s’enferme pas dans le champ clos des sagas islandaises, car il prend aussi en compte toutes les traditions relatives à l’amour présentant des ressemblances avec le contenu de ces sagas (p. 167).

It is in this spirit that Lacroix discusses in turn the major medieval cultures which developed the tradition of writing biographies of poets; what binds them together, in his view, is not the direct pooling of literary influences but the awarding of high cultural prestige to the art of the poet, to the point where, largely independently in each culture, the figure of the poet himself attracted the attention of the literary biographer. Lacroix devotes substantial chapters to (1) the Occitan *razos* and

*vidas* (largely fictitious lives of troubadour poets, developed from incidents and situations alluded to in their poems), (2) romances in the northern French *langue d'oïl*, focusing particularly on the *Roman du Castelain de Couci* since, Lacroix says, despite its richness this literature yields few examples of poetic biography, and (3)—at greater length—the Icelandic sagas, including a good deal of general material about skaldic poetry and its incorporation in sagas of various genres, before addressing the particular topic of the four poets' sagas sharing the theme of adulterous love, which are analysed in some detail. The preliminary chapters on the French and Occitan traditions will be invaluable for Old Norse scholars in need of a reliable and up-to-date guide to the courtly literature which has been proposed as a model for the poets' sagas, but the book seems primarily designed to introduce a French reader to a probably unfamiliar literary culture, that of Old Norse poetry and saga, whose claims to importance Lacroix presses convincingly. Texts are cited in Icelandic with translations into French, either those of the author or cited from published translations (modern French translations are also given for the medieval French texts); the novice French reader is also aided by picturesquely translated titles of poems and sagas and bynames of saga characters (Gunnlaug Langue de serpent, Njáll le Brûlé, Sigtryggr Barbe-de-soie) and those more familiar with the texts only momentarily disconcerted by the appearance of, for example, Einarr Tinte-Plateau and his poem *Disette d'or*, since (at least at the first occurrence) the Icelandic name (*Vellekla*) is added in parenthesis.

The account of Icelandic material is not always reliable. A puzzled footnote on p. 158 confesses that the author has been unable to locate an edition of *Haraldssaga Hringsbana*; this is hardly surprising, since the saga in question is not extant, and is known only as the probable source of a set of *rímur* (*Íslenzkar miðaldarímur* I, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, 1973). On p. 216 we are told that Kormakr's *Sigurðardrápa* was composed for 'duc Sigurðr de Hlaðir, fils du roi Hákon (dans la saga consacrée a ce roi)' (Jarl Sigurðr was, of course, son of Hákon Hlaðajarl, not of King Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri, whose advisor he was). And on p. 175 it is claimed that the account of the *níð* carving in *Bjarnar saga* ('une sorte de graffiti obscène') is followed by a verse accusing the supposed producer of the carving; the verse is, in fact, a verbal reinforcement of the carved message, both attributable to Bjørn himself. On p. 205 there is a classic anachronism in the implied association of a tenth-century skald with writing ('écrire des vers'). The '*Troisième traité grammatical*' is mentioned on p. 255 without bibliographical or other explanation, though an index entry on '*Traité grammaticaux islandais*' refers erroneously to a footnote on p. 128—the note is found, in fact, on p. 186. The discussion of *Egils saga*, seen by Lacroix, accurately enough, as an exceptionally detailed analysis of the nature of the poetic consciousness and a frame for the presentation of Egill's poetry ('mais n'en soyons pas surpris, si l'œuvre est de Snorri Sturluson', (p. 200)), is marred by his apparent unawareness that Egill's long poems are not in fact cited in full in early manuscripts of the saga.

More serious than these errors of detail is the rather superficial treatment of the evolution of the use of verses in saga literature, which sketches a neat progression from the incorporation of historical poems in Kings' Sagas, through the shift of focus to the Icelandic scene in the Sagas of Icelanders (the paucity of references to

longer poems explained by the absence of a monarchy in Iceland), to the ‘late’ incorporation of poems in the *fornaldarsögur*. Few scholars would now be willing to accept such a simplistic picture. It would be difficult, however, to accommodate a more refined analysis in a book of this length and range, and paradoxically, some of its most interesting perceptions arise out of its generality. Lacroix sees the poets’ sagas as part of the same exegetical trend that led Snorri and other thirteenth-century writers to explicate the techniques of skaldic poetry and elaborate the narratives the skalds composed about in order to reconstruct their world, in what he calls a ‘double façon de commenter la poésie, par la théorie et par le roman’ (p. 186). This, rather than specific narrative or poetic themes, is what they have in common with the poetic biographies of the Occitan region, a culture contrasting with the Scandinavian in almost every respect other than the high value placed on the poets of the past and their works.

ALISON FINLAY

EIGI EINHAMR. BEITRÄGE ZUM WELTBILD DER EYRBYGGJA UND ANDERER ISLÄNDERSAGAS. By KLAUS BÖDL. *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexicon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 48. Walter Gruyter. Berlin, 2005. ix + 306 pp. ISBN 978 3 11 018582 9.

In this study Klaus Bödl focuses mainly on two themes which find expression throughout the saga corpus but which play a particularly important part in *Eyrbyggja saga*. He begins by discussing the settlement narratives in the sagas in relation to the rituals they share, and then examines the cult of the god Þórr and associated sacrificial practices (*blót*), themes which lie at the heart of his interpretation of *Eyrbyggja*.

In his methodological introduction, the author summarises the research history of *Eyrbyggja*, much of which has concentrated on making sense of the saga’s episodic structure. He twice quotes Bernadine McCreesh’s remark that ‘The structure [of the saga] remains an enigma’ (p. 17), and shows that scholars have indeed been unable to identify any unifying principle underlying the saga’s complex structure. In studying *Eyrbyggja*, therefore, since the structure of the overall saga seems not to follow any common narrative principles, we need to establish the significance of the many individual episodes, so that our sense of the overall meaning of the saga can develop from our understanding of its constituent elements.

In the second chapter the author draws on Victor W. Turner’s pioneering essay ‘An Anthropological Approach to the Icelandic Saga’ (in *The Translation of Culture: Essays to E. E. Evans-Pritchard*. Ed. T. O. Beidelman (1971), 349–74), in which he maintained that the sagas could be evaluated as ‘ethnographical documents’ (p. 31). Naturally, this perspective raises a number of questions, of which the most important may be said to be how we go about defining the sagas as ‘texts’. Bödl acknowledges (p. 32) that the sagas cannot be evaluated as anthropological field-notes. So central was the role of the authors in their creation that they must be regarded as literary works. Although Bödl’s standpoint is at heart an anthropological one he nevertheless concludes that the *Íslendingasögur* should be regarded as multidimensional literary texts. He lays particular emphasis on

their large-scale structure and concludes that a saga should also be evaluated ‘als Werk’ (p. 85). He then seeks to analyse the ritual structure of *Eyrbyggja*, which he defines as ‘eine Abfolge von religiösen Handlungen’ (p. 83). Bödl maintains that it is within this ritual structure that the text’s ‘Unbewußte’ is found, and that therein lies its ‘Bedeutungspotential’ (p. 85). In terms of methodology we may therefore say that Bödl approaches the sagas as literature, but that in analysing their ritual structure his intention is to read them as historical and anthropological documents. In chapter 3 Bödl introduces anthropological terms that can be used in the analysis of the world view of a given text. Binary opposites such as culture vs nature and cosmos vs chaos are applied to saga contexts, notably via the *Miðgarðr* vs *Útgarðr* opposition drawn from mythological texts. Bödl’s method of analysing *Eyrbyggja* is thus informed by structuralist anthropology. The advantage of using such a method—particularly as it relates to structuralism—is that it can help identify latent patterns of signification in the text. It is perspectives of this sort that inform Bödl’s analysis of *Eyrbyggja*.

Equipped with his anthropological method, the author discusses the settlement narrative in *Eyrbyggja*, which becomes the point of departure for his interpretation of the saga as a whole (chs 4 and 5). In particular Bödl focuses on rituals used in the settlement process. For instance, he discusses the use of *öndvegissúlur* and their meaning for the settlers in the establishment of a new society. Central to Bödl’s discussion is Þórólfr Mostrarskegg’s worship of Þórr and the importance to the narrative of his settlement on Snæfellsnes. It is through his worship of Þórr and the associated cult, we are led to believe, that Þórólfr acquires prominent status in the district. He becomes a *hofgoði*, a role that combines both religious and political power. Despite the fact that his role is, as Bödl points out, ‘eine Besonderheit, die in der Forschung häufig als ahistorisch betrachtet wurde’ (p. 218), I think that Bödl is right to stress that Þórólfr’s role in society is an important element for understanding the saga. Particularly significant is the author’s attempt to establish a thematic link between Þórólfr and his descendant Snorri goði. But the connections that Bödl makes between these two characters are somewhat speculative, relying heavily on mythological interpretation. Bödl connects Þórr with human sacrifices in his reading of sources such as *Hákonar saga* and *Kjalnesinga saga*, and maintains that late medieval authors interpreted the function of Þórr in that way in relation to cultic practices in pagan times. Other sources, for example Snorri’s *Ynglinga saga*, do suggest that human sacrifice was practised in pagan times to rid society of unwanted elements. In this context, Bödl interprets Þórr as the ‘Bekämpfer der útgarðr-Wesen’ (p. 228) and implies that this function of Þórr underpins the structure of *Eyrbyggja saga*, at least in the conflict between Snorri and Arnkell. Bödl then translates the mythological infrastructure of the saga into the social sphere and interprets the death of Arnkell as ‘der soziale Mechanismus des Opfers’ (p. 237). Although it might be said that Snorri had to ‘sacrifice’ Arnkell in order to become the most powerful chieftain in the district, their conflict takes place in the social world of the saga because the focus is on the different means employed by Snorri and Arnkell to build up their power, with their contrasting strategies rooted in the very different ideological backgrounds of the two protagonists. I also think

that Bödl goes too far in attempting to relate Snorri to the Þórr-worship of his ancestor. Bödl is probably right to assert that the author of *Eyrbyggja* attempts to associate the two, but that link must be made through their societal status: Snorri followed in the footsteps of his ancestor in as much as he combined religious and political power. This is indeed signalled by the so-called *Fróðár-undr* and in the last episodes of the saga. But the chronological difference between Þórólfr and Snorri spans the celebrated Heroic Age of the sagas, as represented by Arnkell. From this point of view one may agree with Bödl that the death of Arnkell could perhaps be interpreted as a symbolic ‘Opfertod [der *søguöld*]’ (p. 243).

Bödl’s *Eigi einhamr* is a well written and instructive study. As this review has sought to suggest, too much space is perhaps devoted to theoretical generalities prior to the actual analysis of *Eyrbyggja* and the other sagas, yet Bödl’s contribution to the study of *Eyrbyggja* is substantive and stimulating. He makes a persuasive case for the principles behind the saga’s complex and challenging structure.

ELÍN BÁRA MAGNÚSSDÓTTIR

ÓLAFS SÖGUR TRYGGVASONAR. UM GERDIR ÞEIRRA, HEIMILDIR OG HÖFUNDA. By SVEINBJÖRN RAFNSSON. *Háskólaútgáfan*. Reykjavík, 2005. 286 pp. ISBN 978 9979 54 642 9.

As Sveinbjörn’s title implies, there is indeed more than one saga about Óláfr Tryggvason, Norway’s first missionary king. At the monastery at Þingeyrar, Oddr Snorrason and Gunnlaugr Leifsson each wrote a life of Óláfr in Latin, but these have not been preserved. In Old Norse there are *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (derived from the translation of Oddr’s saga into Icelandic), the *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* in *Heimskringla* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*. A substantial amount of material about Óláfr is also found in *Ágrip af Nóregs konunga sögum*, *Fagrskinna*, the *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* and the *Historia Norwegiae*. Sveinbjörn’s goal is to clarify the relationships between these works, identify their main sources and gain a better understanding of their authors’ intentions.

Part One treats some of the texts and versions of the Óláfr sagas. *Ágrip* and the *Historia Norwegiae* are said to contain the Óláfr material that is closest to Oddr’s work, and Sveinbjörn argues that they rely on a common source that each augments in a different way, so that neither can be derived from the other. The three versions of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* are also not direct translations of Oddr’s work. Sveinbjörn postulates that Oddr’s work was translated into Icelandic; next, that translation was expanded with material from other sources; finally, the expanded translation was further reworked and expanded to produce the extant versions of *Óláfs saga*. After identifying influences from *Þiðreks saga af Bern*, *Jómsvíkinga saga*, *Heimskringla*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Óláfs saga helga*, *Nóregs konunga tal*, and Gunnlaugr’s life of Óláfr, Sveinbjörn concludes that the extant versions of *Óláfs saga* must also have used an old saga about Óláfr in Old Norse that was independent of the Latin compositions. Repetitions in *Fagrskinna* show it to be conflating not only material derived from Oddr with material derived from

Gunnlaugr, but also material from two different translations of Gunnlaugr's work. The skaldic verses in the material in *Fagrskinna* about Óláfr are argued to have been an early part of the expansion of the translation of Oddr's production; material from *Heimskringla* was interpolated at a later date. *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* presents a particularly complex picture. The usual view is that it draws primarily on *Heimskringla*'s *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, but Sveinbjörn argues that this formulation is misleading. Not only does the chronology of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* not agree with that of *Heimskringla*, but Snorri is not the author of the saga of Óláfr in *Heimskringla*, if by 'author' we mean 'person who composes a unique new work'. Snorri made extensive use of earlier works about Óláfr, and it is really these that we see in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*. Sveinbjörn further hypothesises that there was an older saga about Óláfr that was closer to *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* than to the *Óláfs saga* derived from Oddr and Gunnlaugr. This older saga was most likely built on the expanded translation of Oddr's Latin. Another lost *Óláfs saga* Sveinbjörn calls 'Óláfs saga predikanarmanna' (p. 87) (the preachers' *Óláfs saga*); this is used in the D redaction of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* and seems to have been older than the A redaction, for A uses an abridged version of it. It is also argued to have been older than *Heimskringla*. With respect to the ending of *Óláfs saga*, Sveinbjörn argues that in Oddr's account, Óláfr died or disappeared at the Battle of Svǫldr. In Gunnlaugr's account, Óláfr survives. The oldest version of the survival tradition is found in *Halldórs þáttur Snorrasonar I*, which has Óláfr escaping to Jutland. Gunnlaugr's account, in which Óláfr escapes to Vindland, is a later development.

Part Two treats some of the sources and *þættir* of the Óláfr sagas. Sveinbjörn argues that *Halldórs þáttur I* was composed before *Morkinskinna* and Gunnlaugr's life of Óláfr and that it drew on Oddr's life of Óláfr. *Halldórs þáttur* in turn was a source for *Gauts þáttur* (in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*) and Gunnlaugr's life of Óláfr. Influences rather than sources appear in an interesting chapter on how the Óláfr sagas reflect twelfth-century changes in Icelandic laws about marriage. A more speculative chapter deals with *Hryggjarstykki*. Text from this now lost work is claimed to have been used in Gunnlaugr's Latin life of Óláfr in such a way that the Icelandic *Óláfs saga* can be used to determine whether or not parallel passages in other texts also are derived from *Hryggjarstykki*. The major miracle-stories associated with Óláfr are argued to have been written in Latin between 1162 and 1181 and then translated into Icelandic by two authors working independently. The connections between *Játvarðar saga* and the *Óláfs saga* derived from Oddr and Gunnlaugr are also considered, as are the use in this *Óláfs saga* of other English sources such as the *Historia regum Britanniae*, legends about Harold Godwineson and West Saxon regnal lists. An analysis of the use of the legend of the saints of Selja in the Óláfr sagas rounds out Part Two.

Part Three returns to Oddr Snorrason and Gunnlaugr Leifsson. Using evidence from *Sturlunga saga*, Sveinbjörn argues that Oddr was born before 1130 and was in his prime in the middle of the twelfth century. Perhaps motivated by Adam of Bremen's negative description of Óláfr, he drew on works as disparate as

*Karlamagnús saga* and *Plácitus saga* to produce a story of a truly Christian hero. Gunnlaugr, too, drew on the legend of Charlemagne, but his inspiration was the *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle*. Other influences on Gunnlaugr's life of Óláfr include *Játvarðar saga*, the *Leiðarvísir* of Abbot Nikulás Bergsson, and the story of St Alexius.

Sveinbjörn thus eschews a systematic, chronologically organised approach in favour of a set of overlapping short studies. While the result makes for interesting reading, it does not make the volume easy to use. There is no overview that integrates all the postulated intermediate versions, and many of the topics are discussed in depth in more than one place. But these organisational shortcomings do not detract from the fundamental value of Sveinbjörn's work. *Eindriða þátr ilbreiðs*, *Halldórs þátr Snorrasonar*, *Hemings þátr*, *Karlamagnús saga*, *Sýn Brestis* and *Tveggja postula saga* come in for no less careful scrutiny than do the Óláfr sagas, and Sveinbjörn offers persuasive textual and source analysis for them all.

ELIZABETH ASHMAN ROWE

ST OSWALD OF NORTHUMBRIA. CONTINENTAL METAMORPHOSES. WITH AN EDITION AND TRANSLATION OF *ÓSVALDS SAGA* AND *VAN SUNTE OSWALDO DEME KONNINGHE*. By MARIANNE KALINKE. *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies* 297. Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. Tempe, 2005. xi + 207 pp. ISBN 978 0 86698 341 9.

In this volume Marianne Kalinke investigates the development of the legend of the Northumbrian king and martyr Oswald on the Continent, taking the Icelandic *Ósvalds saga* as starting point. In opposition to the scholarly tradition which considered the German romance in verse known as the *Münchner Oswald* to be the earliest German Oswald legend, the author argues, convincingly, that the oldest vernacular version of the legend in the German-language area could have been a long narrative containing both the biographical details of the Northumbrian king and martyr as told by Bede and some new elements and interpolations from other legends. To these new elements belong the coronation legend, probably inspired by Clovis's baptismal legend, and the bridal-quest narrative which could have been modelled on the legend of Henry and Cunegund. Despite the insertion of fictional elements, this long version of the Oswald legend remained faithful to the most relevant facts of the saint's life, as told by Bede, and, unlike the *Münchner Oswald*, still narrated his martyrdom on the battlefield. According to the author, this assumed long version of the martyr legend, while no longer extant in German, is preserved in *Ósvalds saga*, its sixteenth-century Icelandic translation, which thus becomes central in the development of the legend on the Continent.

In the first chapter the historical facts about King Oswald of Northumbria and his relics are presented in parallel to the main phases in the development of the legend on the Continent: from the comparatively realistic account of Oswald's life, death and miracles given by Bede in various chapters of Books 2 and 3 of his

*Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* (eighth century) to the Icelandic saga, through the German metrical romance (*Münchner* and *Wiener Oswald*, fifteenth century), the prose legend contained in the vernacular legendary known as *Der Heiligen Leben* (1396/1410) and its Low German translation, *Dat Passionael* (1478).

After a short account of previous research on *Ósvalds saga* in the second chapter, in the third Kalinke focuses on the relationship between the Low German and the Icelandic versions of the Oswald legend, in order to demonstrate that the Low German *Passionael* cannot have been the source of the Icelandic saga. In fact, even though there is clear influence on both lexis and syntax, the differences in the treatment of the events narrated are too significant to be ignored: as in *Der Heiligen Leben*, its High German source, in the *Passionael* the narration is drastically reduced and all the details thought to be superfluous have been eliminated. The passages quoted contrastively in this chapter (the council scene and the encounter between Gaudon and Oswald) clearly exemplify this different attitude towards the events narrated: none of the dialogues and changes of scene present in the saga are to be found in the Low German legendary, whose version of the legend thus reverts to a form similar to the Latin *Vita Oswaldi* by Drogo.

While the prose legend transmitted in *Der Heiligen Leben*/*Dat Passionael*, in the *Budapester Oswald* and in the *Berliner Oswald* is quadripartite and consists of 1) a coronation legend, 2) a bridal-quest and a conversion legend, 3) a martyr legend and 4) a miracle sequence, the metrical version of the *Münchner* and *Wiener Oswald* contains only the bridal-quest and conversion legend. Particularly interesting here is Kalinke's remark that the loss of two essential elements of the original legend, the *passio* and the miracles of the Saint, led, in the German *Spielmannsepik*, to the creation of a new, fictionalised Saint Oswald who had no relation to the historical figure of the Northumbrian king. This new Saint Oswald is no longer a martyr, but becomes a confessor embracing conjugal chastity, considered a saint because of his virginal marriage rather than for his martyrdom and his miracles. Thus the proposal of a new stemma representing the genetic relationships between the texts and summarising the evolution of the German vernacular legend is convincing: from the expansion of the original legend with the insertion of the bridal-quest and coronation motives, to the bifurcation of the tradition which led, on the one hand, to the conservation of the quadripartite legend as attested in the saga and, on the other, to the reduction to the sole bridal-quest and conversion legend, as in the German metrical tradition.

The fifth chapter is dedicated to the expansion of the original legend and to the possible models—the legends of Clovis and Clotild and Henry and Cunegund—for the new motifs which have been inserted. In the following two chapters the peculiarities of the Icelandic saga with regard to the treatment of the conversion and martyr legend and of the miracles of the Saint are investigated, with particular attention paid to the ways in which it differs from Bede's original narration.

Kalinke's argumentation, which is taken up again in the eighth chapter ('Conclusions'), is clear, exhaustive, convincing, rich in references to other texts of the hagiographic tradition of the Middle Ages and will certainly stimulate further research on the development of Saint Oswald's legend.

Some perplexity is caused, on the other hand, by the second part of the book, where the edition and the English translation of the Icelandic *Ósvalds saga* and of the Low German *Passionael* are presented. Apart from the contradiction of editing together the two texts whose direct genetic relationship has been so far strenuously denied (why only these and not also the *Münchner Oswald*?), the two editions appear quite diverse in their methodology. While the Old Norse text, following with only a few emendations the 1970 edition of *Reykjahólarbók* by Agnete Loth, is presented in normalised modern Icelandic orthography, the Low German prose account of the life of Saint Oswald, which was previously unpublished, has been reproduced diplomatically with the few editorial interventions limited to the expansion of abbreviations, the capitalisation of names, punctuation and the correction of evident typographical errors. A more consistent production than these two editions, addressed to two different readerships with different scholarly traditions, would have been desirable. Thanks to the English translations of the two texts, however, the non-specialist in either language is still able to verify directly the validity of the thesis put forward by Marianne Kalinke.

CHIARA BENATI

## ERRATA

A New Introduction to Old Norse. Part II. Reader. Edited by A. Faulkes.  
Fourth edition. 2007.

Because of a computer error, some symbols have been printed incorrectly.

p. 158, last line: the first word should read '*Volsunga*'.

p. 249, under 'line 7': the last word should read 'av'.

p. 333/23: the last symbol should be  $\epsilon$ .

p. 341/24: the phrase in italics should read '*eru einfaldat*'.

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5. References should be given in the form illustrated by the following examples:

— Other death omens of ill-luck are shared by Scandinavian, Orcadian and Gaelic tradition (cf. Almqvist 1974–76, 24, 29–30, 32–33).

— Anne Holtsmark (1939, 78) and others have already drawn attention to this fact.

— Ninth-century Irish brooches have recently been the subject of two studies by the present author (1972; 1973–74), and the bossed penannular brooches have been fully catalogued by O. S. Johansen (1973).

— This is clear from the following sentence: *iðraðist Bolli þegar verksins ok lýsti vígi á hendi sér* (*Laxdæla saga* 1934, 154).

— It is stated quite plainly in *Flateyjarbók* (1860–68, I 419): *hann tok land j Syrlækjarosi*.

— There is every reason to think that this interpretation is correct (cf. *Heilagra manna sögur*, II 107–08).

The terms *op. cit.*, *ed. cit.*, *loc. cit.*, *ibid.* should not be used. Avoid, too, the use of f. and ff.; give precise page references.

6. The bibliographical list should be in strictly alphabetical order by the surname(s) (except in the case of Icelanders with patronymics) of the author(s) or editor(s), or, where the authorship is unknown, by the title of the work or some suitable abbreviation. Neither the name of the publisher nor the place of publication is required; nor, generally, is the name of a series.

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