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# VIEWS TO A KILL. STURLA ÞÓRÐARSON AND THE MURDER IN THE CELLAR

BY ÁRMANN JAKOBSSON  
*University of Iceland*

Pilate said to him: 'What is truth?'  
(John 18: 38)

## *Event and Narrative*

**S**NORRI STURLUSON WAS KILLED on the 23rd of September 1241. As both the author of sagas, including possibly the whole of *Heimskringla*, and also a former lawspeaker and a courtier of King Hákon Hákonarson (1204–63), Snorri had been not only a purveyor of history but also an active participant in it. Thus his death was a significant political event. Snorri was the first Icelandic notable of the thirteenth century to use his formal status at the court of Norway to try to promote his position within the internal politics of Iceland, and was for years a key player in many an Icelandic power plot. At the age of 62, having been temporarily defeated and pushed to the political margins by his nephew Sturla Sighvatsson (1199–1238), Snorri had recently been staging a comeback (*Sturlunga saga*, I 444–47), one that was brought to a grinding halt during the autumn of 1241, during a raid at Reykjaholt.

Although he is the best known Icelandic writer of the thirteenth century, it has to be kept in mind that the twentieth-century estimation of Snorri Sturluson relies heavily on his representation in the narrative attributed to his nephew Sturla Þórðarson (1214–84), the second best known author of the period. Snorri's death can be said to be well documented in contemporary sources, particularly *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* (c.1265) and *Íslendinga saga* (c.1280). Each of these sagas, however, is attributed to Sturla, who can hardly be regarded as a neutral observer when it comes to his uncle Snorri, and this provides an opportunity to explore a multi-faceted narrative relating the circumstances of Snorri's death. The aim of the investigation that follows is not, however, to discover 'the truth' of the event, but to cast some light on how the historical literature of thirteenth-century Iceland functions, with particular focus, on the one hand, on the apparent contradictions between the two narratives and, on the other, on the question of authorship in medieval Iceland.

In many ways, Sturla Þórðarson's *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* and *Íslendinga saga* lie at the heart of the problem of saga authorship. The anonymity of the sagas in general has frustrated scholars for centuries and many have sought to 'solve' this problem by attributing certain texts to probable known authors (and Sturla Þórðarson is a popular candidate, see e.g. Einar Kárason 2012). At the same time we are faced with other and perhaps far more arduous obstacles such as determining precisely what an author is and how they are responsible for their own texts.

This second issue is often ignored in the process of attributing a given saga to a named author, but in the few cases where there is a medieval attribution, it comes to the fore. For example, contemporary accounts attribute *Hákonar saga* to Sturla Þórðarson, having him composing the saga at the behest of the king in 1263–65. In this case, then, where there is an established author, a date and a context, there should be no ambiguity. And yet the issue refuses to go away. One might still ask whether any retainer of a king is ever independent of his liege? And precisely who is the Sturla that wrote this text?

The present study will attempt to engage with these questions and use the attribution and redistribution of guilt for Snorri Sturluson's death to illuminate the circumstances in which Sturla Þórðarson found himself as an author and historian dealing with events so close to his own life. On a wider scale the study will also highlight some of the problems associated with historical accounts that are at the same time more reliable and yet more subjective than most of saga literature.

### *Sturla and Snorri*

Each of Sturla Þórðarson's two versions of the death of his uncle Snorri can be regarded as a contemporary account, both having been composed only a few decades after the actual event. Of the two, *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, the biography of King Hákon, is the older narrative (composed c.1265), whereas *Íslendinga saga*, the longest saga in the *Sturlunga saga* collection, was probably composed later (c.1280).<sup>1</sup> One of the most interesting issues when examining the complex relationship between this event and the narratives that describe it is the intimacy between the two men, Snorri and Sturla, which indeed has been the focus of some scholarly scrutiny.

<sup>1</sup> *Íslendinga saga* is, of course, preserved not as an independent narrative but as a part of the compilation *Sturlunga saga*, along with other sagas (such as *Þórðar saga kakala*, which also figures below). It seems likely, however, that the chapters analysed in this study were a part of Sturla Þórðarson's *Íslendinga saga* (see esp. Jón Jóhannesson 1946, xxxiv–xli).

Even though Sturla was Snorri's nephew, this does not necessarily mean that he was favourably disposed towards him, a situation of which scholars have long been aware. In fact, the historian Árni Pálsson argued that Sturla depicted his uncle in a less than favourable light in *Íslendinga saga* and explained this by the fact that relations between Snorri and his brother, Sturla's father Þórðr, were never ideal (Árni Pálsson 1947). On the other hand, Árni regarded Sturla as having idolised his cousin Sturla Sighvatsson, and contended that these considerations were reflected in Sturla's depictions of both Snorri and Sturla in *Íslendinga saga*. While Árni convincingly demonstrated that Sturla Þórðarson's depiction of his uncle Snorri is ambiguous, it may be argued that both the depiction of Snorri in the saga and Sturla's feelings towards him were even more complicated, as one might expect from a close family relationship.

While Sturla Þórðarson was a member of his cousin Sturla Sighvatsson's entourage as a youngster and is likely to have admired him, he was also fostered and perhaps educated by Snorri (*Sturlunga saga*, I 315). At the time of Snorri's death, Sturla Þórðarson was indeed being promoted for chieftaincy by Snorri and his followers (*Sturlunga saga*, I 446–47). Sturla consequently allied himself with another cousin, Snorri's son Órækja (c.1210–45), and the two later made a somewhat botched attempt to avenge Snorri's death. Sturla went on to follow conscientiously in his uncle's footsteps, as a law-speaker, a skaldic court poet, a retainer of the Norwegian king and a historian (see e.g. Ármann Jakobsson 1994, 72). While other chieftains are indeed depicted in Sturla's works in a more valorous light than Snorri, Sturla himself, like his uncle, was not renowned for his combat skills (see Gunnar Benediktsson 1954, 127–31).<sup>2</sup> In fact, any criticism of the old man's lack of soldierly prowess might be construed as thinly disguised self-criticism as well, and it could also be argued that both Snorri and Sturla regarded diplomatic skill as more important than fighting ability.

Furthermore, it should not be assumed that Sturla Þórðarson retained the same attitudes throughout his life (on his triple role as a historian/artist, narrator and character in his own saga, see e.g. Úlfar Bragason 1994b). From his own and from other contemporary sagas we know the young Sturla who takes part in the events later related in his *Íslendinga saga* and was involved in the political intrigues of both Snorri and Sturla Sighvatsson during the 1230s and 1240s. In addition there was the middle-aged Sturla who became a law-speaker and sought power, married off his daughter to the son of Gizurr

<sup>2</sup> Gunnar argues that Sturla admired both Snorri and Sturla Sighvatsson, but nevertheless distanced himself from both men (see also Gunnar Benediktsson 1961; cf. Ciklamini 1988).

Porvaldsson and later fell into disfavour with the king, although he managed to turn the tables and become not only the king's official historian but also the highest-ranking royal official in Iceland, the *lögmaðr*.<sup>3</sup> And, last but not least, there was the old Sturla Þórðarson, a high-ranking but low-key official and a diligent historian, who spent his final years transforming the events of his life into the narrative of *Íslendinga saga*.<sup>4</sup> The fact that these different versions of Sturla demand differentiation can indeed be illustrated with a comparison of the two different versions of Snorri's death recounted in sagas that are nevertheless attributed to the same man.

#### *Hákonar saga: Blaming Gizurr*

In the twentieth century, Snorri Sturluson's death was seen as a major crime of the Sturlung Age, and Icelandic scholars assigned moral culpability for the misdeed to two 'prime suspects'. The first is King Hákon, later accused by the bishop and historian Jón Helgason of being morally culpable for this foul deed (Jón Helgason 1925, 132, see also Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 1940). The second is Gizurr Þorvaldsson, who suffered the opprobrium of various twentieth-century scholars for having ordered the killing, and for subsequently betraying Iceland and becoming a royal vassal (e.g. Jón Jóhannesson 1956, 301).<sup>5</sup> The burden of guilt need not fall on just one man, however, and indeed a number of scholars have depicted the killing as a conspiracy between these two prime suspects. All of this debate was grounded on Sturla Þórðarson's narratives in *Hákonar saga* and *Íslendinga saga* in which, while we should take due note of Pilate's exasperated question concerning the elusiveness of truth, it is at least possible to discern how Sturla Þórðarson wished to present it in his historical works at the time.

<sup>3</sup> Early twentieth-century scholars tended to regard Sturla as an opponent of royal rule in Iceland, but this view has been largely refuted, e.g. by Helgi Þorláksson (1988).

<sup>4</sup> *Árna saga biskups* has it that as *lögmaðr* Sturla was *ógreiðr ok skaut flestum málum undir biskups dóm ok annarra manna er sýndiz* 'slow and referred most cases to the judgement of the bishop or others who wanted (to decide) them' (*Árna saga biskups*, 63). Later the bishop complains that Sturla was not very useful (65). All translations in this article are my own.

<sup>5</sup> Gunnar Benediktsson goes so far as to dispute the content of the letter from the king (discussed below) and any direct or indirect order to kill Snorri (Gunnar Benediktsson 1954, 68), although most scholars note that Gizurr seems to seize upon an equivocal order (e.g. Ciklamini 1978, 32; Gunnar Karlsson 1979, 47). Those more kindly disposed towards Gizurr have resorted to the defence, somewhat irrelevant in moral terms, that Snorri's authorial greatness would not have been as evident to his contemporaries as to later generations (see Ólafur Hansson 1966, 46–47).

*Hákonar saga*, containing Sturla's earlier version of Snorri Sturluson's death, dates from around 1263–65.<sup>6</sup> The fourteenth-century narrative known as *Sturlu þáttur*, contained in the Reykjarfjarðarbók redaction of *Sturlunga saga*, describes how 'Sturla skáld Þórðarson' manages to impress King Magnús, King Hákon Hákonarson's son, to such a degree that he is given the task of composing the saga of King Hákon and later that of King Magnús himself (*Sturlunga saga*, II 227–36). *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* is thus a royally-commissioned work and must be read in the light that, as a royal historian, Sturla had limited scope when it came to any criticism of King Hákon, whose son was his benefactor (see e.g. Andersson 2015). However, this does not necessarily mean that he should not be regarded as the author responsible for the saga. Indeed, King Hákon cannot have had any direct say in its composition, as he had died before its writing had commenced, at least according to *Sturlu þáttur* (*Sturlunga saga*, II 234).

The events leading to Snorri's death included in *Hákonar saga* are related as follows: King Hákon learns that Skúli has given Snorri, Snorri's son Órækja and his cousin Þorleifr Þórðarson leave to go to Iceland. Hákon instantly sends letters to Niðaróss and forbids them to leave. The saga relates that they received these letters when already ready to set sail and *fóru þeir eigi at síðr í banni konungs* 'yet they left, against the king's prohibition' (*Hákonar saga*, II 43). No further mention is made of Snorri until the following passage a good while later: *Þetta haust hit sama tók Gizurr Þorvaldsson af lífi Snorra Sturluson í Reykjaholti á Íslandi* 'That same autumn Gizurr Þorvaldsson executed Snorri Sturluson in Reykjaholt in Iceland' (II 119). There is no further explanation or any mention of a letter from the king to Gizurr, and in fact, in this version, only Gizurr is held responsible for killing Snorri.

The connection between the relatively distant passages is implied in the next chapter, when it is related that Órækja Snorrason came to Norway after having been captured by Gizurr Þorvaldsson and his ally, Kolbeinn the Young (*Hákonar saga*, II 119):

Hann kom á vald Hákonar í Björgyn, ok gaf hann honum skjótt upp reiði sína er hann hafði á honum fyrir þat er hann fór út í banni hans. En þó sagði konungr at hann væri betr til fallinn at deyja fyrir þá sök en faðir hans,—'ok eigi mundi faðir hans dáit hafa ef hann hefði komit á minn fund.'

He arrived in Bergen and was at the mercy of King Hákon, and the king quickly absolved him from his anger for having left Norway against his command, and

<sup>6</sup> On the incidents that led to Sturla being summoned abroad in 1263, see Magnús Stefánsson 1988.

yet the king said that he deserved to die rather than his father, ‘and his father would not have died, if he had come to me’.

King Hákon explicitly states that Snorri would have been forgiven if he had thrown himself on his mercy, as Órækja now has, and would not have been killed. Thus, in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, King Hákon is depicted almost as a victim of Snorri’s stubborn refusal to obey him. There is no mention either of any underlings, and thus the responsibility for Snorri’s death falls upon Gizurr alone.

The version of events in this particular narrative cannot be explained merely by the fact, which admittedly has to be considered, that Sturla was now a commissioned royal biographer, although that may certainly have played a part in the apparent exculpation of King Hákon. We have to keep in mind, however, that he was later made into a high-ranking royal official, and held office while he composed *Íslendinga saga*. Any attempts to explain the difference by claiming that Sturla composed *Hákonar saga* as a servant of the king and *Íslendinga saga* as his own man misses the point that after 1263 Sturla never left the king’s service, and was in fact working on *Magnúss saga lagabætis* during his final years.

The difference might rather reflect just who Gizurr was when Sturla Þórðarson was composing *Hákonar saga*: the most powerful man in Iceland, having been made earl of Iceland and its sole ruler under the king. This was the result of an acrid power game in which Gizurr had outlasted some and outwitted other magnates of Iceland (such as Þórðr kakali, Þorgils skarði and others) and ended up ruling the country alone until his death in 1268. Sturla’s hostility towards Gizurr is evident in the later suggestion that Gizurr was disloyal to the king and deceived the Icelanders (*Hákonar saga*, II 204; see also 171 and 207):

Þat lét hann ok fylgja at Hákon konungr hafði svá gefit honum þessa nafnbót at hann skyldi þat engan penning kosta, ok engi skattr skyldi við þat leggjask á landit. Sagði hann ok um þá menn er honum gerðusk handgengnir, hirðmenn eða skutilsveinar, at þeir skyldu þvílíkar nafnbætr hafa í Nóregi af Hákonu konungi. Urðu við þetta margir góðir menn til at gerask honum handgengnir ok sóru honum eið en Hákonu konungi trúnað. Brátt urðu menn þess varir at þat var fals er hann sagði frá orðum konungsins. En allt at einu heldu menn trúnaði við hann ok Hákonu konung. Eru frá viðskiptum þeira jarls ok Íslendinga margar frásagnir, þær sem oss þykkir eigi nauðsynligt at rita í þessa frásögn.

He also claimed that King Hákon had given him this title without its costing him any money, and that no new taxes would be imposed on the country in return. He also said that those who became his retainers in Iceland as courtiers or squires would hold the same titles in Norway with King Hákon. This made many a good man swear allegiance to him and to King Hákon. But soon they learned that his

claims about the king’s promises were false and yet they kept faith with him and King Hákon. Many things are related about the relations between Earl [Gizurr] and the Icelanders that we do not find it necessary to write here.

Does the acrimony of this depiction perhaps owe something to the fact that Sturla is now the king’s official historian while Gizurr is his foremost vassal in Iceland? It might be tempting to conclude that the power game of Iceland’s magnates did not end when they all became subject to the king of Norway in the 1260s—perhaps it even intensified—and that it is spelled out in this saga.

Sturla’s depiction of Gizurr in *Hákonar saga* could also be informed by hurt feelings. Later, in *Íslendinga saga*, Sturla relates how Gizurr gave him Borgarfjörðr to rule but later took the region from him and presented it to Hrafn Oddsson: *Þótti Sturlu þá eigi efnd við sik af Gizuri jarli þau in fögru heit, er fram váru mælt við hann* ‘Sturla then felt that Earl Gizurr had not kept the fair promises that he had made to him’ (*Sturlunga saga*, I 528). When Sturla was writing *Hákonar saga* a few years later this betrayal may still have weighed heavily on his mind, resulting in the palpable animosity towards Gizurr that colours his depiction in the narrative.

#### *Íslendinga saga: Murky Truths*

If, as there is reason to believe, Sturla only began composing *Íslendinga saga* in the 1270s, the situation in Iceland was much transformed from the time in which he had written *Hákonar saga*.<sup>7</sup> In 1268 Earl Gizurr died, and it is not unlikely that the best part of Sturla’s ill-will towards Gizurr died with him. After all, a living rival is easier to hate than a dead contemporary with whom you have shared both good and bad relations. Soon after Gizurr’s death, Sturla returned to Iceland holding the new office of *lögmaðr*, which at that time was the highest royal office in Iceland. When he began writing his history of Iceland Sturla was an older and more settled man with no unfulfilled political ambitions. The narrative of Snorri Sturluson’s death in *Íslendinga saga* becomes more nuanced but also much more complex, and no longer is the culprit behind the act clearly identifiable, the blame rather ending up shared among several individuals.

The narrative begins when the king forbids Snorri, Órækja and Þorleifr from sailing to Iceland. Snorri again here defies the ban, but this time he vocalises his dissent: *Út vil ek* ‘I want to leave’. The passage is supplemented by a comment that Skúli Bárðarson, duke of Norway and King Hákon’s

<sup>7</sup> Three of the most influential *Íslendinga saga* scholars agree that Sturla Þórðarson composed the saga during the final years of his life (Björn M. Ólsen 1893, 432–35; Pétur Sigurðsson 1933–35, 151–54; Jón Jóhannesson 1946, xxxix).



father-in-law, who was at the time rebelling against Hákon, held a secret meeting with Snorri, and that one of those present, Arnfinnr Þjófsson, claimed that at this meeting Skúli had secretly bestowed upon Snorri the title of earl (*Sturlunga saga*, I 444). The reference to Arnfinnr as a source might seem curious, considering that apart from Duke Skúli, everyone else present at the meeting is a close relation of the author himself: besides his cousin Órækja and their kinsman Þorleifr, his own brother, Óláfr hvítaskáld (d. 1259), is also in attendance. And yet Sturla quotes the only man with whom he shares no apparent connection, which perhaps reflects a kind of double allegiance. At the time of the meeting Sturla was a close relation and an ally, even a follower, of Snorri and Órækja. The old Sturla, however, by the time that the saga was being written, had entered the service of King Hákon, against whom Skúli had rebelled. Furthermore, Sturla was now serving Hákon's son, King Magnús, whose view of the rebellion may have been similarly ambivalent, since Skúli was his grandfather.

Thus the narrative in *Íslendinga saga* contains from the outset more ambiguities than its counterpart in *Hákonar saga*, and the trend continues when Eyvindr brattr 'Steep' and Árne óreiða 'Chaos', the latter one of Snorri Sturluson's numerous ex-sons-in-law, arrive in Iceland in 1240 with King Hákon's letters, *ok var þeim lítt upp haldit* 'and they were little on display' (*Sturlunga saga*, I 447). The following spring Snorri makes an arrangement with Gizurr to bring the slain Sturla Sighvatsson's teenage son to parliament and discuss compensation. But Gizurr's ally Kolbeinn the Young (1209–45) arrives with an army and Snorri and the youngster then flee to church, and when Gizurr visits Snorri in the church the two share a peaceful exchange (*Sturlunga saga*, I 450). There is at that moment nothing to suggest that Gizurr intends to kill Snorri later that same year, although it seems probable that he has seen King Hákon's letters.

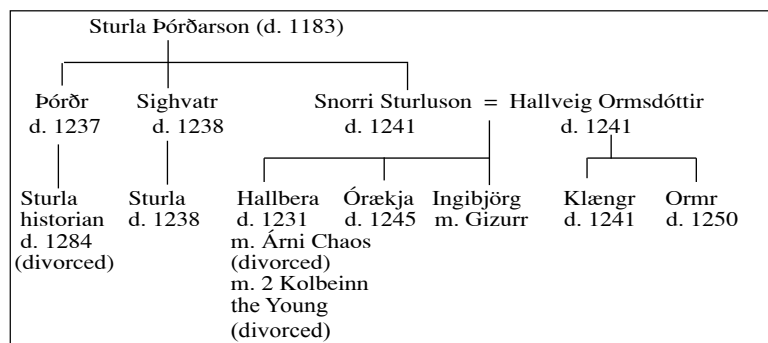


Table 1.

Later that summer Snorri's wife Hallveig Ormsdóttir dies. She had previously been married to Gizurr's brother Björn (d. 1221) and had two sons by him (Table I). Predictably, there is a dispute between Snorri and his stepsons, who were also Gizurr's nephews, on how to split the inheritance, and it is seemingly inevitable that Gizurr is drawn into the quarrel (452). Whether or not this quarrel affects the ensuing events is unclear. However, soon afterward, Gizurr and Kolbeinn hold a secret meeting in the mountains of Kjölr and after that Gizurr produces the king's letters (453):

Þá er Gizurr kom af Kili, stefndi hann mönnum at sér. Váru þar fyrir þeir bræðr, Klængur ok Ormr, Loftr biskupsson, Árne óreiða. Helt hann þá upp bréfum þeim, er þeir Eyvindr ok Árne höfðu út haft. Var þar á, at Gizurr skyldi Snorra láta útan fara, hvárt er honum þætti ljúft eða leitt, eða drepa hann at öðrum kosti fyrir þat, er hann hafði farit út í banni konungs. Kallaði Hákon konungur Snorra landráðamann við sik. Sagði Gizurr at hann vildi með engu móti brjóta bréf konungs, en kveðst vita, at Snorri myndi eigi ónauðigr útan fara. Kveðst Gizurr þá vildu til fara ok taka Snorra.

When Gizurr came back from Kjölr, he summoned men to him. There were before him the brothers Klængur and Ormr, Loftr the bishop's son, Árne Chaos. Then he held up the letters that Eyvindr and Árne had brought with them from abroad. There it said that Gizurr was to make Snorri go abroad, whether he was willing or not, or, if that was not possible, to kill him, since he had left against the king's prohibition. King Hákon called Snorri a traitor to himself. Gizurr explained that he was anxious not to go against the king's wishes but he said that he knew that Snorri would never go abroad of his own free will. Gizurr said he wanted to go and seize Snorri.

This is the clearest statement of the apparent content of the king's letters and it may be regarded as exonerating the king of responsibility for what happens next, but also perhaps landing him with his share of the blame.<sup>8</sup> He seems to provide Gizurr with three options: first to ask Snorri to go to Norway, or, if he refuses, to force him to leave. Only then, as a last alternative, does he grant Gizurr permission to kill Snorri, but he also provides him with much latitude not to.

Gizurr precludes the first of the king's three options, making no attempt to ask Snorri to go abroad voluntarily but simply claiming to know that he would refuse to do so—without giving any reason why it would be so implausible. His claim appears spurious in light of the fact that Snorri

<sup>8</sup> Sverrir Jakobsson argues that Gizurr would have been in a precarious position as the king's retainer at the time after having killed Sturla Sighvatsson, another retainer, in 1238 (Sverrir Jakobsson 2013, lv). While this is certainly true, this predicament is not explained in *Íslendinga saga* itself.

later seems willing to bargain for his life. Also of note is the fact that Gizurr involves in the plan Snorri's stepsons, currently engaged in a legal dispute with Snorri over their mother's inheritance. One of the stepsons, also one of Gizurr's nephews, declines all involvement, which suggests that he sees the whole plan as somewhat disreputable.

Nevertheless, it is not clearly stated at this point in *Íslendinga saga* that the plan is now to kill Snorri. That only becomes apparent later, after Snorri has been found in the cellar. Gizurr has asked Arnbjörn the priest where to find Snorri and has declared that a settlement can only be possible if they meet. The priest is suspicious and asks if Snorri was promised clemency. But when they find Snorri themselves, there is no talk of settlement or mercy (454):

Eftir þat urðu þeir varir við, hvar Snorri var. Ok gengu þeir í kjallarann Markús Marðarson, Símon knútr, Árni beiskr, Þorsteinn Guðinason, Þórarinn Ásgrímsson.

Símon knútr bað Árna höggva hann.

'Eigi skal höggva,' sagði Snorri.

'Högg þú,' sagði Símon.

'Eigi skal höggva,' sagði Snorri.

Eftir þat veitti Árni honum banasár, ok báðir þeir Þorsteinn unnu á honum.

Then they found out where Snorri was. And they walked into the cellar: Markús Marðarson, Símon the Knot, Árni the Acerbic, Þorsteinn Guðinason, Þórarinn Ásgrímsson. Símon told Árni to strike him. 'Don't strike,' said Snorri. Simon said: 'Strike.' 'Don't strike,' said Snorri. Then Árni dealt him a mortal wound and Þorsteinn also wounded / attacked him.

The king had only suggested killing Snorri as a last resort, and Gizurr had not mentioned killing him at all. In this scene it is Gizurr's henchman Símon knútr who first instructs Árni to kill Snorri.

In this account the direct responsibility for Snorri's death thus seems to be shared among his social inferiors. Árni the Acerbic has just been introduced into the saga as a troublemaker and as the wealthy Kolr Árnason's killer, a typical henchman whose role is to keep his master Gizurr's hands unsoiled by dirty work (453), and henceforth he remains one of Gizurr's loyal followers (see e.g. 476). When Gizurr comes under attack at Flugumýri in 1253, Árni tries to run out of a burning building but, being old, he trips and falls. This narrative, also by Sturla Þórðarson, presents Árni in a new light: ageing and wobbly on his feet. When Árni falls, he is denied clemency on account of his role in Snorri's death. He is still lying on the ground when he is promptly hacked to pieces by several men, some of whom are Snorri's relatives (*Sturlunga saga*, I

491).<sup>9</sup> Snorri is also avenged by the death of Klængur Bjarnarson, Gizurr's nephew and Snorri's stepson (see Table I), who had accompanied his uncle when he came to kill Snorri and was killed by Órækja during the Christmas of 1241 (*Sturlunga saga*, I 456–57).<sup>10</sup>

The fate of the other assassins is revealed in *Þórðar saga kakala*, which is not attributed to Sturla but is contemporary with *Íslendinga saga*. Símon the Knot and Þorsteinn Guðinason are introduced there as Snorri's killers (*Sturlunga saga*, II 33–34). The latter is said to have struck the fatal blow while Símon only wounded Snorri. When both men are captured in 1243, however, Símon is killed but Þorsteinn only maimed, and so their respective roles in the killing do not seem to be an important point of distinction for Snorri's friends.<sup>11</sup> But just who is this Símon the Knot, who in this version is the first to mention killing Snorri? According to *Íslendinga saga*, Símon is in Gizurr's service as early as 1230 (*Sturlunga saga*, I 342), and in *Þórðar saga kakala* he is said to have served Gizurr *frá blautu barnsbeini* 'from early childhood' (*Sturlunga saga*, II 33).<sup>12</sup> There is perhaps a suggestion here that the hand does its master's bidding.

Gizurr Þorvaldsson himself escapes revenge, although he does contend with Órækja over Snorri's inheritance, which Gizurr had tried to usurp (458–65). Gizurr remains the man who must have decided that Snorri Sturluson will die, but the responsibility for Snorri's death does not rest on his shoulders alone. Although Sturla is still loyal to his king and places the lion's share of the blame on several Icelanders, King Hákon Hákonarson must shoulder some responsibility. In *Íslendinga saga* he clearly gives one of his vassals, Gizurr, permission to kill another vassal, Snorri, without fear of reprisal. Indeed, in *Þórðar saga kakala* he accepts responsibility for Snorri's death when he asks Þórðr kakali to turn to him as the responsible party rather than to Gizurr. The narrator himself states that the king was not blameless: *lát hans hafði nökkut*

<sup>9</sup> In *Íslendinga saga* the narrator's sympathy tends to shift from character to character but lies very consistently with whichever is the victim (Ármann Jakobsson 2003). In the narrative of the burning at Flugumýri, it thus aligns itself with Snorri's killers.

<sup>10</sup> The killing of Klængur is brutal, as Órækja denies him *gríð* 'clemency' although some of his own people request it; as Guðrún Nordal has noted, this is because the killing is a token vengeance, in case Órækja is unable to reach Gizurr (Nordal 1998, 196–97).

<sup>11</sup> Possibly rank is seen as more important. Símon is killed because he gave the order to kill Snorri, but Þorsteinn maimed because he was only obeying orders.

<sup>12</sup> On the composition of *Þórðar saga kakala*, see Úlfar Bragason 1994a; Úlfar Bragason 2010, 98–104.

*af konunginum leitt* ‘his death was partly caused by the king’, although Gizurr is still presented as the leading culprit (*Sturlunga saga*, II 82).

*Íslendinga saga* does not provide Gizurr with the same excuse. Instead it describes the content of the king’s letter and depicts Gizurr leaping at the chance to use the opportunity for his own ends, not immediately but when it suits him. There are, however, other culprits. Kolbeinn the Young is apparently involved in the plan, and Gizurr’s nephew, Klængr Bjarnarson, is also involved and has his own selfish reasons for wanting his stepfather dead. And finally, there are Símon the Knot, who gives the order, Þorsteinn Guðinason, who may or may not be the actual killer, and Árni the Acerbic, who strikes the first blow. In the end the death is avenged on all of these men, except Gizurr.

While Sturla seems no longer content to present such an unambiguous truth about Gizurr’s culpability as he did in *Hákonar saga*, Gizurr is far from absolved in *Íslendinga saga*. It could be argued that the primary difference between the two accounts lies in the task Sturla hands out to the audiences of the two sagas. The *Hákonar saga* audience is expected to blame Gizurr and only Gizurr for the death of Snorri. The audience of *Íslendinga saga* is meant to work out the meaning for themselves, and the most natural conclusion would seem to be that several parties were to blame for Snorri’s death, although Gizurr was certainly one of them, and perhaps even the leading culprit.

#### *An Investigation of an Investigation*

Over the last two centuries or so, perhaps ever since it became a serious field, Old Norse scholarship has been replete with statements such as the following: Sturla Þórðarson liked his cousin Sturla Sighvatsson and disliked his uncle Snorri Sturluson. Though this was argued using Sturla Þórðarson’s own texts I have argued here that such a statement is unlikely to be true, as it is too banal; emotions and emotional attachments within families tend to be complicated and multifaceted. People do not simply like or dislike their siblings or parents but have complex and often contradictory relationships with them. Indeed, the closer the relationship is, the less likely that it can be captured in a single, unambiguous statement.

The two accounts of the death of Snorri Sturluson attributed to his nephew Sturla Þórðarson demonstrate how even contemporary narratives have to be carefully gauged to determine their source value. The bare facts are clear enough: Snorri Sturluson was killed in Reykjaholt in the autumn of 1241. Everything else is subject to interpretation and the accounts become more complicated as time passes; with a more rigorous interpretation comes

less banality but perhaps greater nuance. The earlier version, in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, is coloured by a strong resentment towards Gizurr, the earl of Iceland at the time. On the other hand, *Íslendinga saga* does not present us with a single individual to blame for Snorri’s death. Instead it offers us several culprits: the king who allows the killing to happen, the stepson whose dispute with Snorri triggers the event, the brutal ally who never advises against bad deeds, the manipulative chieftain who plots and plans the murder, his faithful henchman who takes it upon himself to give the order, and finally, the ageing troublemaker who is given and accepts the task of killing Snorri. This diverse cast all play their part in a detailed account in which ‘truth’ becomes an increasingly obscured notion.

The long-standing debate concerning the ‘historical validity’ of the Icelandic sagas led to an increased emphasis on the literary value of the sagas during the last century (although scholars often continued to pay scant attention to their formal attributes) and even on the notion that they were predominantly fictional works, within a paradigm wherein history and fiction were deemed distinct and opposing categories. However, the sagas can just as well be regarded as examples of narrative history, paying close attention to the formal attributes of history as a literary genre rather than its faithfulness to so-called historical facts. The false opposition between history and fiction can be replaced by more helpful terms.<sup>13</sup> When an ‘event’ becomes a part of a written history it acquires a form shaped not only by the experiences and the cognitive processes of the individuals that experience it but also by language, by the linguistic expression of the event, which is something fundamentally distinct from the event itself (see e.g. Spiegel 1997). Any saga is thus primarily a linguistic expression of the past, shaped by, first, experience, then memory and eventually a re-examination and reinterpretation of the events that it purports to describe, with each stage in this process functioning as an intermediary between lived affairs and history. While the word ‘historical’ is perfectly applicable to sagas like *Hákonar saga* and *Íslendinga saga*, historiographers are in essence engaged in a creative task, the interpretation of the past rather than its singular reanimation. As such, the two different depictions of the death of Snorri Sturluson outlined above provide telling examples of the creative and interpretative aspects of historical writing.

For a long time scholars were drawn to the personal when interpreting the sagas, and in the twentieth century one certainly encountered a number

<sup>13</sup> This idea has given great impetus to the ‘cultural memory’ movement prominent in recent years (see e.g. Hermann and Mitchell 2013, 263).

of scholars who simply sided with Gizurr or Snorri or Sturla Sighvatsson and imagined that the thirteenth-century sources were all consistent in siding with one party against another. There is indeed no way of avoiding the personal when interpreting either of Sturla Þórðarson's accounts of his uncle's killing at the hands of his former son-in-law. The conflicts of the Sturlung Age were deeply personal, and ignoring the personal and subjective aspects of these conflicts will not help us to evaluate them, nor indeed the narratives that relate them.

Modern scholars may sometimes have been too unimaginative, however, in believing that historians like Sturla consistently sided with one party against another. We have to keep in mind that there is no single Sturla Þórðarson to be drawn from his various texts, but that the man aged and evolved and perhaps changed or modified his views on this and other matters. When it comes to close relatives and people that he had known all his life, it makes little sense to assume that Sturla's views were as simple or one-sided as the views of those with whom he was much less familiar. There is good reason why people are often not asked to write obituaries for their close relatives: they are never going to be neutral, and even more importantly, it requires trained professionals to encapsulate the lives of one's nearest and dearest in such short texts.

Sturla Þórðarson was not a professional author in the modern sense, but he was still a writer of considerable training and skill. It would be folly to consider him entirely disinterested when recording the events of his own life, but that does not mean that his views on Snorri Sturluson and Gizurr Þorvaldsson were either simple or unchanging, and the variations in his accounts of Snorri's death seem to bear witness to this complexity, and at times to inconsistency. While these accounts are deeply personal, the political also plays a role, as it must when a politician writes about his colleagues and adversaries. Sturla Þórðarson, the recently rehabilitated magnate who wrote about a beloved uncle and a hated rival in 1265, is not the same man as the aged *lögmaðr* a decade and a half later who was attempting to evaluate two dead men with each of whom he had shared a long and intimate relationship, and thus whom he had observed from various angles.

In a brief foreword to one of his later novels, revisiting for the final time a cast of characters that he had intermittently explored over more than thirty years in many stories and novels, William Faulkner alerted the reader to the following fundamental character of the collected work (1961, 9):

there will be found discrepancies and contradictions in the thirty-four-year progress of this particular chronicle . . . contradictions and discrepancies due to the fact that

the author has learned, he believes, more about the human heart and its dilemma than he knew thirty-four years ago; and is sure that, having lived with them that long time, he knows the characters in this chronicle better than he did then.

Though Sturla Þórðarson believed himself to be writing history rather than the kind of modern fiction that Faulkner produced, it is not difficult to imagine him nodding in sympathy with Faulkner's words and feeling himself to be in much the same position at the end of his life, when composing *Íslendinga saga*. Scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth century may have preferred to imagine an author who stuck to his guns and never changed his mind, but Sturla's own work belies such a view. Sturla does not let sleeping dogs lie or stick to the simple truth as he had previously narrated it. Instead he continues to think and to probe and indeed to retell, and the end result proves to provide not more clarity but increased moral ambiguity. The more facts are considered, the harder it becomes to stick to the simple truths of *Hákonar saga*.

As the varying depictions of Snorri's death demonstrate, even the most reliable narrative sources from late medieval Iceland fail to present a single cohesive version of the truth but offer, rather, several truths about a single, relatively straightforward contemporary event. Even a lone witness from that age can change his mind and shift the blame as he writes the death of his uncle for the second time. The reliability of such accounts are no greater than that of any chronicler trying to make sense of his world, hampered not only by a lack of omniscience but also by his own subjectivity and a tendency to re-evaluate everything in the face of new information and experience. The past is thus constantly invented and reinvented to suit the needs of the present.

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RACIAL THINKING IN OLD NORSE LITERATURE:  
THE CASE OF THE *BLÁMAÐR*

BY RICHARD COLE  
*Harvard University*

THERE ARE NOT MANY KIND WORDS to be said about the notion of ‘race’. In the last century alone, it has shown itself to be a way of thinking that both lacks any basis in empirical reality (Montagu 1997, 121–44), and is liable to cause a great deal of human misery. But like a lot of bad ideas, it has been around for a long time. However erroneous or dangerous the notion of race may be, it is at least a highly *convenient* way to think about the world. Concepts which we would today label ‘racial’ existed long before Enlightenment figures such as Linnæus set about dividing humanity into the clades of *Americanus*, *Asiaticus*, *Africanus*, *Europeanus* and *Monstrosus*.<sup>1</sup> Prior to these scientific endeavours, and the tendency beginning around the same time to deploy the word ‘race’ itself in an ethnic sense (*OED* 2014, s.v. *race*), the intellectual mechanisms that inspired racial schemas were at work. As will be seen, groups were still being rendered ‘Other’ on account of their lineage, their supposed hereditary characteristics and/or the shaping environments of their ancestral homelands. Individuals were presumed to exhibit certain qualities (physical, intellectual, moral) on the basis of their affiliation with these groups. Skin colour and geographical setting were used to amplify the alterity of fictional characters, forming recognisable tropes that enjoyed literary currency. These psychological developments constitute ‘race’ in all but name. The purpose of this article is to excavate their presence and function in Old Norse literature.

The past twenty years has produced some interesting research into racial thinking during the Middle Ages. A special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* in 2001 dedicated to the topic is particularly worthy of note. There Robert Bartlett elucidated a conception of medieval

<sup>1</sup> Linnæus 1758, 20–23. Incidentally, Linnæus’s schema also has medieval roots, being at least partially based on the Four Temperaments theory. Thus *Americanus* is *rufus*, *cholericus*, *rectus*. *Europeanus* is *albus*, *sanguineus*, *torosus*. *Asiaticus* is *luridus*, *melancholicus*, *rigidus*. *Africanus* is *niger*, *phlegmaticus*, *laxus*. The descriptions of *Monstrosus*, although obviously based on experiences of real peoples such as the Khoikhoi (*Hottentotti*) would not look out of place amongst medieval tropes like the *cynocephali* or *anthropophagi*.

race rooted in a study of contemporary terminology. Thus, he identified *gens* and *natio* as terms which often implied descent groups, while *populus* did not. But he also observed a strong tradition of cultural delineation: more than being matters of breeding, language and law were just as important as inheritable features such as skin colour. Naturally, the question of inherited rather than environmental forces is complicated by the modern Russian-doll style of organisation of collective identities: the ‘cultural’ nation being subordinate to the supposedly ‘biological’ race. In the same volume William Chester Jordan made a bid to employ race as a key to unlock the complex stratification of personal identity. Jordan acknowledged that the formation of human identity is extremely complex and multi-layered, and that, moreover, the relative importance of its shaping forces is highly subjective. For some, race will be the most important personal identifier, for others less so; for many it will not be considered a relevant identity at all. On account of this idiosyncrasy, Jordan found it expedient to reduce racial thinking to its essence: the explanation of a person’s characteristics by recourse to the values projected on to the collective(s) to which they belong. In his own words: ‘We should not substitute ethnic identity for race . . . They mean the same thing in [this] formulation, but it would . . . be a kind of cowardice to hide behind six syllables when we could speak the language of truth with one’ (2001, 39–56; cf. Bartlett 2001, 39–56).

In dialogue with Jordan and Bartlett—and indeed in the same journal issue—Jeffrey Jerome Cohen stressed the importance of bodily markers for the medieval notion of race, work which was later fleshed out in his *Medieval Identity Machines*. Bartlett acknowledged the role of descent and climate, but highlighted language as the most widely attested racial signifier. For example, Bartlett cites John of Fordun (d. c. 1384) separating the *natio* of the Scots into two *gens* based on their *linguae*, being *Theutonica* and *Scotica*. In a reply to Bartlett, Cohen urges a focus on bodily characteristics, describing medieval race as ‘at once wholly artificial and insistently somatic’ (2003, 192). In truth, both critics are correct and both tendencies are observable. Their dissonance is really caused by focuses on two different types of sources. Bartlett was largely discussing works written by chroniclers and administrators. These were people for whom race was a useful way to understand and manipulate the geopolitical landscape, but who could not rely on physical differences to separate Europeans who very obviously looked much alike. Conversely, Cohen is mostly discussing the *chansons de geste*, popular texts where the need for race and *Realpolitik* to be aligned was not so pronounced. The enmity of the Saracens in chivalric romance is a narrative fixture. There

the abstract concept of an inimical belief system, Islam, is given corporeal expression through a racial enemy, perhaps a dark-skinned *Sarrazine*, or *Açopart*. (On discerning the abstract-theological from the physical-somatic in Old Norse depictions of Muslims, see Cole 2014.) Old Norse literature features a heterogeneity in audiences and registers similar to that of the material examined by Bartlett and Cohen, so here we will bear both their views in mind and let them complement rather than contradict each other.

Race has not been ignored in medieval Scandinavian studies. Jenny Jochens takes the concept at face value and attempts to define the actual skin colours of the Norwegians, Icelanders and their Celtic slaves, but along the way she also provides a noteworthy example of how the well known light/dark dichotomy might be applied to groups as well as individual saga characters (1997, 313–14). For instance, the genealogy of the *Mýramenn* exhibits a number of binary pairs, darkness being aligned with descent from trolls and ugliness, lightness being aligned with humanity, beauty and possibly being *ðargr*. Norwegianness, according to Jochens, was a category that could tolerate all of these traits. Ian McDougall and Sverrir Jakobsson in their respective surveys of Icelandic perceptions of other nations do not describe their focus as racial, but their methods certainly conform to the Bartlett-Jordan definition referred to above. Sverrir acknowledges the presence of ‘model immigrants’ in Icelandic sagas, but he also notes that non-Icelanders are also often marginal characters, given to violence or magic, lacking in agency. They are not unique in this respect. To quote: ‘The important factor is unfamiliarity, not nationality’ (Sverrir Jakobsson 2007, 154). McDougall highlights the adaptation by Old Norse speakers of Latin *barbarismus*, the denigration of non-Latin speakers as possessing a meaningless language, most likely suggestive of their impaired mental faculties. According to McDougall, there was an observable tendency amongst medieval Icelandic authors to differentiate Norse speakers from the weird and wonderful Others imagined to be on the fringes of the known world on the basis of their linguistic alterity. He also examines the role of the interpreter (*túlkr*) in narratives where Scandinavians interact with their northern and eastern neighbours (1986–89, 207–09). Germane to this theme, a great deal of attention has been given to the treatment of the *Finnar* in Old Norse, much of which touches on racial themes. Intriguing work by Sandra Ballif Straubhaar explores the overlapping categories of male/female, Norse/Finnic, human/troll in the *formaldarsögur* (2001, 105–23). Jeremy DeAngelo has recently noted some of the parallels between Classical natural philosophy and Norse conceptions of the *Finnar*, which perhaps result from direct influence. He also draws special attention to another important opposition, namely the

theme of Finnic peoples being technologically incapable compared with the relative sophistication of Norwegians (2010, 257–81). An important article by John Lindow covers a number of these topics, and also sketches some of the racial archetypes of Old Norse literature (1997, 8–28).

We can begin by noting some of the terminology which Old Norse speakers employed to articulate a mode of thought which we might today call racial. Old Norse had a variety of words, like the Latin terms studied by Bartlett (*gens, natio, populus*), all of which had domestic meanings in addition to their occasional use to denote race. Naturally, it is these second definitions which we focus on here. *Kyn* conveys the idea of genetic extraction, but also of type or species. Thus Cleasby and Vigfússon suggest the Latin translation *genus*, or modern English ‘kin, kindred . . . a kind, sort, species’. *Ætt*, being cognate with Old English *æhte*, is defined as ‘what is inborn, native, one’s own, Lat. *proprium*; one’s family, extraction, kindred, pedigree’. *Fólk* is a rather semantically narrow term, quite possibly equivalent to Medieval Latin *populus*, defined in the *Icelandic–English Dictionary* as ‘folk, people’.<sup>2</sup> The word *þjóð* probably corresponds to Bartlett’s *natio*: ‘a people, a nation’ (Cleasby–Vigfússon 1874, 336, 760, 161, 739). Incidentally, it is also a descendant of the Common Germanic designator for the ‘Self group’. The root *\*Peudō* is thought to have been used to refer to the Germanic-speaking ‘us’, with *\*Walhaz* denoting the Romance- or Celtic-speaking ‘them’ (de Vries 1961, 613).

When organising these terms, we may note that the aforementioned ‘Russian-doll’ hierarchy of identities which we know from modern thought also seems to have existed in Old Norse. Today we might see units of personal identity increasing in scale from an individual level: an individual belongs to a family, which maybe belongs to a social class, which perhaps belongs to a tribe, which perhaps belongs to a nation, which belongs to a race (which units are considered applicable will, of course, vary from person to person). For example, Jane Bloggs of the Bloggs family, a supporter of Crystal Palace Football Club, an Englishwoman, a white person, etc. Naturally, this hierarchy is completely subjective, with every individual placing different value on the various collectives, possibly disregarding or adding their own layers of identity (such as subculture, religion, political party, region), and perhaps accepting that the strata of their personal identity will sometimes bring about conflicts

<sup>2</sup> The spelling of *fólk* with an *ó* rather than *o* follows the orthographies of Michael Barnes and Geir T. Zoëga, and is intended here to avoid confusion with modern English. Cleasby–Vigfússon and the *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog* prefer *folk*.

of interest. Similarly, in the Old Icelandic homily on the Nativity we find the following stratification (*HomIsl*, 47):<sup>3</sup>

Asía heiter austrhálfá heimens. Affrica en syðre hlutr. Európa en norðre hlutr. þáþan af talþe [keisari Augustus] hversó margar þjóðer hafþe hverhlutr heimsens. oc hversó mǫrg kyn hafþe hversem ein þjóþ. oc hversó margar borger hvertsem eitt kynet hafþe. oc hversó marger men voro i hverre borg.

Asia is the name of the eastern half of the world, and Africa the southern part. Europe is the northern part. [Emperor Augustus] counted thereof how many races [*þjóðir*] each part of the world had, and how many nations [*kyn*] went into one race, and how many settlements a race had, and how many people there were in each settlement.

We can debate how best to translate *kyn* and *þjóð*, but whatever the homilist would have said if he could speak modern English, it is clear that he had a conception of a greater ethnic identity which could incorporate lesser ethnic identities. Similarly, in *Skáldskaparmál* Snorri Sturluson cites a piece of poetry which appears to stratify identity in a manner very reminiscent of the Jane Bloggs model outlined here (*Skáldskaparmál*, I 106–07):<sup>4</sup>

Maðr heitir einn hverr,	‘Man’ is the name of each one,
tá ef tveir ró,	‘a jaunt’ if there are two,
þorp ef þrír ró,	‘a village’ if there are three,
fjórir ró foruneyti,	‘four’ makes company,
flokk eru fimm menn,	‘a party’ are five men,
sveit ef sex eru,	‘a troop’ if there are six,
...	...
þjóð eru þrír tigur,	‘a nation’ [ <i>þjóð</i> ] are thirty,
fólk eru fjórir tigur.	‘a race’ [ <i>fólk</i> ] are forty.

These two sources constitute a sadly limited corpus for reconstructing the stratified bisections of identity. Not only do they belong to radically different genres, but the second piece is clearly designed to fit with conventions of alliteration, ‘þjóð eru þrír tigur . . . fólk eru fjórir tigur’. Is a *fólk* larger than a *þjóð* here only for this reason? Poets of any calibre tend not to say things that they believe are completely untrue just because they rhyme, and any poet that would do so is unlikely to have been cited by a poetic connoisseur like Snorri Sturluson. We should remember that

<sup>3</sup> I suspect that this passage has a Latin source, but if so I have not been able to locate it.

<sup>4</sup> cf. *Hávamál* 63: *þjóð veit, ef þríro*. It has been suggested that there was an oral proverb: *þjóð veit, þat er þrír vitu*, parallel to *Quod tribus est notum, raro solet esse secretum*. For a summary of theories, see Evans 1986, 103–04. Whether the poem Snorri cited was circulating folk poetry or his own composition is thus hard to say.



*Skáldskaparmál* appears to have been intended as an instructional text. It is not unreasonable to adduce that Snorri believed future skalds would be correct to consider a *þjóð* smaller than a *fólk*. On the other hand, perhaps Snorri did not intend this at all, and he was merely citing a piece of folk poetry whose alliterative content he found pleasing. In this latter train of hypothetical thought, we can observe the persistent idiosyncrasy of racial thinking, i.e. that Snorri might not have agreed with or perhaps not even cared about the supremacy of one stratum of identity over another. Indeed, he may very well have entertained a number of half-formed, unarticulated, mutually exclusive perceptions about the formation of ethnic identity. Perhaps he accepted that, then just as now, there would have been plenty of different personal opinions concerning race, and was happy to present an example he did not particularly endorse for the purpose of poetic pedagogy.

The fact that these two excerpts belong to both homily and secular poetry is not necessarily a handicap for this investigation; if anything, it is a further suggestion of how widespread, if hugely subjective, such classifications were. Despite the limitations of our sources, the differences between them are still telling. The poem cited by Snorri makes *þjóð* a subordinate identity, the homilist makes it the highest. Snorri's poem does not mention *kyn*; other sources, as we shall see, consider it crucial. There seems to have been considerable heterodoxy amongst Norse speakers as to which terms they deemed appropriate and how they ranked their importance. Indeed, when we examine attestations of *fólk*, *kyn*, *ætt* and *þjóð* elsewhere in Old Norse literature, it becomes clear that their meanings are always idiosyncratic. This diversity precludes a study organised neatly by terminology. Rather, here we will briefly examine some of the ways these terms are used to describe one particular Old Norse racial type, and how these words represent various proto-racial notions. *Skrælingar* (Frakes 2001, 157–99) and *Finnar* have been extensively discussed elsewhere, thus the focus here is on a somewhat less discussed figure, the *blámaðr* 'black man'. It should be noted at the outset, however, that the focus is really on the ideas represented by *fólk*, *kyn* etc., and not on the *blámaðr* himself. Doubtless, comparative reading exposes some common elements between various appearances of *blámenn*, but I am not suggesting that the *blámaðr* was a discrete 'stock character' whose appearance performed precisely the same function in every context.

Although he is sometimes viewed as purely fantastical or demonic, particularly when appearing in vision literature (Battista 2006, 113–22), there are plenty of moments in Old Norse literature where the *blámaðr*

appears to be conceived of in ethnic terms. Indeed, the roles of demon, monster and racial Other were not mutually exclusive. As John Lindow observes, 'from the very first, notions of ethnicity and social boundaries have been associated with the supernatural' (1997, 11). That is to say, the *blámaðr*'s fantastic or wondrous qualities did not necessarily preclude the idea that he was also a real being, located in real space and the product of 'real' natural principles. This distinctly racial apprehension of the *blámaðr* is often highlighted by his juxtaposition with another 'Other', the *Serkr* 'Saracen'. In crusader narratives, *Serkir* represent a clear understanding that Islam is a belief system. These Saracens derive their oppositional intent from their religion, not from their race. Like the pre-Christian Norsemen of the *Íslendinga-* and *konungasögur*, they are not shown to have any differences in language or in body from the Christian saga audience. In *Orkneyinga saga* Rognvaldr and his men engage a shipload of *Maumets villumenn* 'Mohammed's heretics'. The saga author remarks that *Þar var mart blámanna, ok veittu þeir ina hørðustu móttöku* 'There were many *blámenn*, and they offered the hardest resistance' (*Orkn*, 225). The Orcadians simply kill them, but they take pains to capture the enemy captain alive. He is no *blámaðr*, but an *oðlingr af Serklandi* 'nobleman from Serkland'. In a way reminiscent of the chivalrous relationship of Saladin and Richard the Lionheart, the captive is apparently able to say farewell to Rognvaldr without the need for an interpreter: '*Þér skuluð nú frá mér þess mest njóta, er þér gáfuð mér líf ok leituðuð mér slikrar sæmðar sem þér máttuð. En gjarna vil ek, at vér sæimsk aldri síðan, ok lifið nú heilir ok vel.*' 'You will now profit greatly from me because you gave me life and showed me such honour as you could. But I would really like it if we never see each other again. Live well and in health' (*Orkn*, 228).<sup>5</sup> Nor do *Serkir* seem to have any substantial physical differences. It is their religion, rather than any inherited intellectual or physical deficiencies, which means that they are always ultimately overcome. For instance, in *Mírmanns saga*, when the eponymous hero is standing over the dead body of the Muslim champion Lucidarius, he remarks: '*ef þv værer kristinn madur værer þv godur riddari*' 'if you had been a Christian, you would have

<sup>5</sup> The crew do have Bishop Vilhjálmr of Orkney with them as a *túlkr*—an authorial conceit which allows the Norse-speakers to communicate freely with the other Europeans—but if the *Serkir* were imagined as having an exotic language of their own then it would surely test the audience's credulity were Vilhjálmr to speak it without further comment.

been a good knight' (92–96).<sup>6</sup> The strictly theological, nonsomatic *Serkr* is probably best explicated in the fragmentary *Ræða gegn biskupum* from c. 200 (*Mírmanns saga* 1997, 298):

En þó at vér hafim þessa talda eru margir ónefndir, þeir sem þá váru villumenn ok mikill stóð skaði af þeira villu. En svá var einn verstr er mestr stóð skaði af er Nicholas advena var kallaðr er var lærisveinn Dróttins sjálfs ok síðan var byskup á Serklandi ok er nú kallaðr Mahomet, ok stendr sú villa hátt er hann boðaði í sínum byskupsdómi at nálíga annarr helfningr heims trúir á hann, ok kalla han guð vera.

Although we have made this little reckoning there are many unnamed who were heretics and much damage arose from their heresy. But there was one who was the worst and who caused the most damage, who was called Nicholas Advena, who was a disciple of the Lord Himself and then became a bishop in Serkland and is now called Mahomet, and this heresy which he preached in his bishopric remains so strong that virtually one half of the world believes in it, and declares him to be a god.

Whatever is objectionable about the *Serkir*, it can be converted away—indeed, sometimes it is, as in the case of the *Serkr* Balam who is baptised and becomes the Christian Vitaclin in *Karlamagnus saga* (*Karlamagnus saga*, 204). But the *blámaðr* constitutes the darker side of the Norse conception of Otherness, be it Islamic, Finnic or demonic: a being who does not *believe* something unnatural, but *is* something unnatural. He is a creature shaped not by his beliefs, but by the baseness of his blood. Whether his environment has conditioned him into this state is not always made clear, but there are some hints that Snorri considered the *þjóð* of the *blámenn* intrinsic to their geographical position. *Blámenn* make several appearance in Snorri's *Heimskringla*. On one occasion they represent the forces of Islam. In *Magnússona saga*, King Sigurðr Jórsalafari (r. 1103–30) and his men confront a troop of *blámenn* on the Balearic island of Formentera. The Moors *æpðu á þá ok eggjuðu þá ok frýðu þeim hugar* 'screached at them, incited them and questioned their courage' (*Heimskringla*, III 245–46). But in *Ynglinga saga*, the prologue to his opus, Snorri also places *blámenn* in the frozen Finnic north (*Heimskringla*, I 9–10):

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the similarity here with a line in *La Chanson de Roland* concerning the Emir of Balaguet: *De vasselage est-il ben alosez; / Fust chrestiens, asez aüst barnet* (36) 'And for his courage he's famous far and near; / Were he but Christian, right knightly he'd appear' (*La Chanson de Roland*, 36; Sayers 1957, 87).

En norðan at Svartahafi gengr Svíþjóð in mikla eða in kalda. Svíþjóð ina miklu kalla sumir menn eigi minni en Serkland it mikla, sumir jafna henni við Bláland it mikla. Inn nørðri hlutr Svíþjóðar liggir óbyggðr af frosti ok kulda, svá sem inn syðri hlutr Blálands er auðr af sólbruna. Í Svíþjóð eru stórheruð mǫrg. Þar eru ok margs konar þjóðir ok margar tungur. Þar eru risar, ok þar eru dvergar, þar eru blámenn, ok þar eru margs konar undarligar þjóðir.

And north from the Black Sea runs Greater Sweden or Sweden the Cold. Some men reckon Greater Sweden to be no smaller than Greater Serkland, some compare it to Great Bláland. The northerly part of Sweden remains unsettled because of ice and cold, just as the southerly part of Bláland is because of the burning of the sun. There are many vast regions in Sweden. There are also many kinds of races [*þjóðir*] and many languages. There are giants, and there are dwarves, there are *blámenn*, and there are many kinds of bizarre races.

For Snorri, as for many others from Antiquity onwards, extreme climates produce extreme physicalities. There is something coolly scientific about his mode of thought: he does not seem to treat the exotic beings of the North as purely fantastic. They may live alongside *drekar furðuliga stórir* 'terribly large dragons' (10), but they are also a *þjóð*, the same word used to denote historical groups such as the Goths in *Veraldar saga*, the men of Gwynedd in *Breta saga* and the native Greenlanders in Ari Þorgilsson's uniquely sober account in *Íslendingabók* (*ONP*, s.v. *þjóð*). There is nothing to say that Snorri's focus on environment was not simply the result of his own ponderings, but it should be noted that a similar concept is found in Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, and other ancient geographers widely read during the Middle Ages (DeAngelo 2010, 267–71, cf. 274) e.g. *Aethiopsis vicini sideris vapore torreri adustisque similes gigni barba et capillo vibrato non est dubium* 'Doubtless, the Ethiopians are scorched by their closeness to the heat of the sun, they are born like those who have been burnt, with crimped beard and hair' (*NH*, 320). Snorri also seems to be applying thirteenth-century racial thought in his *Edda*, again with echoes of Pliny. In *Völuspá*, the giant Surtr, whose name obviously derives from *svartr* 'black', carries a flaming sword and departs from Muspell (or somewhere *sunnan* at any rate) during Ragnarøk (de Vries 1961, 562). But in the poem, the audience is not given any further information about what this homeland is really like. In the *Prose Edda*, Snorri who was surely able to recognise the etymology of Surtr's name, is the first to describe Muspell much like a worldly geographical entity. It is a place to which one can be *útlendir* 'foreign', or which one can call an *óðul* 'native land'. Moreover, it bears a suspicious resemblance to his own description of Africa and to Pliny's 'torrid zone' (*Gylfaginning*, 9):

Pá mælir Þriði: ‘Fyrst var þó sá heimr í suðrhálfu er Muspell heitir. Hann er ljóss ok heitr. Sú átt er logandi ok brennandi, er hann ok ófœrr þeim er þar eru útlendir ok eigi eigu þar óðul. Sá er Surtr nefndr er þar sitr á lands enda til landvarnar. Hann hefir loganda sverð, ok í enda veraldar mun hann fara ok herja ok sigra ǫll goðin ok brenna allan heim með eldi.’

Then Third says: ‘The first world was in the southern region and is called Muspell. It is bright and hot. This part is on fire and burning, and it is impassible to those who are foreign to it and do not have their native land there. He who is named Surtr sits at the land’s end to defend it. He carries a flaming sword, and at the end of the world he will go and attack and defeat all the gods and burn all the world with fire.’

Snorri’s Muspell may profitably be compared with his description of Africa, given in the Prologue to the *Edda: Frá suðri í vestr ok inn at Miðjarðarsjá, sá hlutr var kallaðr Affrica. Hinn syðri hlutr þeirar deildar er heitr ok brunninn af sólu* ‘From the south to the west and down to the Mediterranean, this part was called Africa. The more southerly part of that region is hot and burnt by the sun’ (*Gylfaginning*, 4).

Both of Snorri’s accounts appear to have some affinity with Pliny’s *Naturalis Historia* concerning the torrid zone: *media vero terrarum, qua solis orbita est, exusta flammis et cremata comminus vapore torretur* ‘Truly, in the middle of the two lands, wherein there is the orbit of the sun, it is scorched and burned by the closeness of its heat’ (*NH*, 306). I am not suggesting that Snorri had first-hand knowledge of the *Naturalis Historia*. However, it seems plausible that either during his time studying at Oddi, visiting the Augustinian monks at Viðeyjarklaustur, or in the cultured milieu of King Hákon Hákonarson’s court, he could have encountered some of the classically derived racial theories that were then popular (Ptolemy, Origen, Isidore of Seville). At Hákon’s court, he might well have been exposed to the voguish chivalric material which the young monarch was keen to have translated into the vernacular. Although the earliest ‘Hakonian’ translation is dated to 1226, the appetite for French and English literature at Hákon’s court was considerable (Sif Ríkharrðsdóttir 2012, 27–28), and I see no reason for assuming a total absence of such material during Snorri’s visit in 1220. This would have been the very same material in which, as we have seen, Cohen identifies somatically oriented racism. We might note as an aside that there were even real *blámenn* at Hákon’s court in the year of Snorri’s death. According to *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, in the summer of 1241, *Pá kom til Hákonar konungs sendimaðr Fríðreks keisara er Mattheus hét með mǫrgum ágætum gjöfum. Með honum komu útan fimm Blámenn* (my normalisation) ‘Then the emissary of Emperor Frederick, who was called Mattheus, came to King Hákon with many excellent gifts.

Five *blámenn* arrived with him’ (*Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, 136). Snorri would not have been present to see them for himself, but we may speculate whether Frederick chose his company (were they part of the *ágætar gjöf* themselves?) knowing the curiosity with which Hákon and his court would receive them, newly exposed as they were to exotic French tales of derring-do and eastern enemies.

Regardless of how Snorri came to the conclusion, it is obvious that by his logic Surtr, ‘the black one’, should most naturally live in Muspell/Africa. Although he never calls Surtr a *blámaðr* explicitly, he would have had plenty of *blámenn* to turn to as models if he were looking to describe a dark creature with a special affinity with fire. Consider for example this vivid description from *Bartholomeus saga postola*. When St. Bartholomew exorcises a pagan idol, the following comes running out (*Bartholomeus saga postola*, 763):

ogorlegr blamaþr biki svartari, harðlundlegr oc hvassnefiaðr, siðskeggiaðr oc svart skeggit oc illilict, harit svart oc sitt, sva at toc a tær honum, augun sem elldr væri i at sia, oc flugu gneistar or sem af vellandi iarni. Or munnum oc nausunum for ut sva sem brennusteins logi.

a terrible *blámaðr*, blacker than pitch, proud and pointy-nosed, long-whiskered and with a black beard, ugly, with black hair that went down to his toes, and with eyes that were like looking into fire, and sparks flew from him as from molten iron. Flames of brimstone came from his mouth and nose.

Further associations of *blámenn* with fire are to be found in Marian miracles. An Old Norse translation identified as part of the *Geirardus i Cluny og Altumiugum* tradition (Widding 1996, 95) contains a *blámaðr* apparition who appears to the miracle’s protagonist thus: *Hann retti ut or sinum mvnni elldliga tungu, med huerri hann sagdi sik skylldu sleikia brott allt kiot af hans beinum* ‘He extended out of his mouth a fiery tongue, with which he said he wished to lick away all the meat from his bones’ (*MaS*, 810). A translation of the *Mouth of Hell* type of Marian tale features *two blamenn logandi sem elldr* ‘two *blámenn*, flaming like fire’ (*MaS*, 905–06; Widding 1996, 96).

Snorri does seem to have known the account from *Bartholomeus saga postola*, as the only other attestation of the simile *biki svartari* ‘blacker than pitch’ in West Norse is found in his description of the *Dökkálfar* ‘Dark Elves’ (*Gylfaginning*, 19):

Hár segir: ‘Margir staðir eru þar göfugligir. Sá er einn staðr er kallaðr er Álfheimr. Þar byggvir fólk þat er ljósálfar heita, en dökkálfar búa niðri í jörðu, ok eru þeir ólíkir þeim sýnum en myklu ólíkari reyndum. Ljósálfar eru fegri en sól sýnum, en dökkálfar eru svartari en bik.’

Hár says: ‘There are many excellent places there. One is a place called Álfheimr. The people who are called the Light-Elves live there, but the Dark-Elves live down in the earth, and they are most unlike them in appearance, and much more different in behaviour. The Light-Elves are fairer than the sun, but the Dark-Elves are blacker than pitch.’

Incidentally, the phrase also recalls the trope *neirs cume peiz* ‘blacker than pitch/ink’ that describes Saracens or Ethiopians in the *chansons de geste* (Cohen 2003, 201).

For Snorri, the *blámannahjód* had an environmental dimension. Elsewhere in Old Norse literature the focus is decidedly genetic. In the fourteenth-century *Bragða-Mágus saga* (alias *Mágus saga jarls*) the author imagines how the child of a Scandinavian woman and a *blámaðr* might look. The result is the *Hálfliti-maðr* ‘Two-Tone man’. He is not technically a character in his own right. Instead he is one of many alter egos adopted by the saga’s eponymous hero. Split down the middle from his head to his toe, one side of his body is black and one is white. In the following scene, we are introduced to Mágus in his ‘Two-Tone Man’ persona for the first time. In the process, he makes an unlikely plea against racial discrimination (*BMs*, 114–15):

Í þeim flokki sáu þeir mann, er nokkut var undarligr . . . Auga hans var annat blátt ok svart, ok at öllu vel fallit, en annat augu var mórætt sem í ketti, ok at öllu illiligt. Önnur kinn hans var hvít sem snjór, og hafði fagran roða; hálf hans nef ok enni ok haka hafði fagran hörundslit. Önnur hans kinn ok allr öðrum megin var hann móræuð, ok svo mátti at kveða, at þeim megin var hans andlit ljótt ok leiðiligt, ok allr hans líkamr, en öðrum megin var hann ljóss ok fagr, sem kjósa mátti . . . [Konungr] spurði hann at nafni. Hann svarar: ‘Auðsæt er nafn mitt, ek heiti Hálfliti-maðr; hefi ek aldri annat nafn haft á æfi minni; en skjót eru vár erindi til yðar: ek vil, herra, biðja yðr hirðvistar, ok dveljast með yðr nokra stund.’ . . . Konungr tók því heldr seinliga: ‘Hafa mæð illa gefizt allir kynjamenn.’<sup>7</sup> Enn Hálfliti-maðr svarar: ‘Lengi skapar sik sjálfr; eru mæð úsjálfráð mín yfirlit, ok má þá ekki kyn kalla, því at nálíga er engi öðrum líkr í ásjónu, en prófa megit þær mitt athæfi, hvárt yðr sýnist þat með nokkrum kynjum.’

In that group they saw a man who was rather strange . . . One of his eyes was black and dark, and in all ways becoming, but the other eye was yellowish brown as in a cat, and in all ways ugly. One of his cheeks was white as snow

<sup>7</sup> It is tempting to see some kind of word-play here between *kyn* and *kynjamenn*. However, *kynjamenn* is derived from a false friend of the word *kyn* in the racial sense. This alternative sense of *kyn* as ‘a wonder, miracle’ derives etymologically from *kænn* and *kunna*, while the racial sense is cognate with Old English *cyn*. (Cleasby–Vigfússon 1874, 366; de Vries 1961, 340).

and had a fair flush. Half his nose, forehead and neck had a beautiful skin colour. On his other cheek and on the other side he was yellowish brown, and so one would say that on that side his face was ugly and loathsome, and all his body too, but on the other side he was light and beautiful as one could wish to be . . . [The king] asked his name. He replies: ‘My name is obvious. I am called the Two-Tone Man. I have never had another name in my life, but my errand to you can be briefly stated. Sire, I ask for the shelter of your retinue, and to stay with you a while.’ . . . The king responded rather reluctantly: ‘I have always been given trouble by weirdos.’ The Two-Tone man replies: ‘Nobody creates himself. My appearance was not decided by me, and one cannot call it a race, because there is virtually no other like me in appearance, and you may appraise my actions and see whether I seem to you some sort of weirdo.’

There are obvious nods to the figure of Hel here, herself in a sense biracial, or at least the product of a liaison between two sharply delineated and inimical kinship groups, having a *gýgr* mother and an *áss* father. Another interesting analogue is the case of Feirefiz from Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* (c. 1200–05). He is the half-brother of the titular hero; his father was white and his mother was Moorish, the opposite of the arrangement in *Bragða-Mágus saga*. As a result, Feirefiz’s skin is *als ein geschriben permint / swarz und blanc her und dá* (2: 278) ‘like a written parchment / black and white here and there’ and his colouring is also compared to an *agelster* ‘magpie’ (1: 102).<sup>8</sup> As shown elsewhere, the author of *Bragða-Mágus saga* was one of the most eclectically informed personalities in Old Norse literature (Cole, forthcoming). While space precludes a study of the *Hálfliti-maðr*’s sources, it is far from unthinkable that he was intended to allude to both traditions. In the slightly younger version of the saga (c. 1350) the author adds the following exchange, where we are reminded of Snorri’s positioning of *blámenn* both in Serkland and Svíþjóð in *mikla* (*Msj*, 34–35):

‘Hvar lannda ertu feðingr?’ segir keisara. Hann mælti: ‘Ek em barnfeðdr a Blálandi. Enn blamaðr var faðir minn, enn moðir mín var ettuð norðan yfir haf; ok því em ek blár oððrum megin, at mer bregðr þui til feðr mins; ok marga megi þer þar seá aBlálandi sva vorðna, sem ek em, ok micklu endimligri, ok sva aSithia hinni Micklu.’

‘Of which country are you a native?’ says the emperor. He said: ‘I was born in Bláland. My father was a *blámaðr*, but my mother was descended [ættuð] from the north over the sea, and thus I am black on one side, which I get from my father, and you can see many in Bláland who look like me, and much more hideous besides, and also in Greater Scythia.’

<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to Joel Anderson for bringing this parallel to my attention.

This is very clearly a mode of thought which we would today consider racial, perhaps even post-racial. The author believes that skin tone is genetically inherited, and imagines what the progeny of an African father and a Scandinavian mother might look like. This scene is taking place in Saxland, so when the mother is said to be *ættuð norðan yfir haf* the inference must be that she is from Scandinavia. It is interesting to note that the author appears to be deploying a binary opposition here; the *blámaðr* being the epitome of blackness, the Scandinavian the epitome of whiteness.<sup>9</sup> The king makes judgements based on his hue, but the *Hálfliti-maðr* begs to be judged only on his personal merit. In the course of this exchange, the *Hálfliti-maðr* demonstrates a sound understanding of the king's conception of *kyn*. For King Karl, a *kyn* is a collective under which people can be categorised according to their appearance; that is why the argument '*má þá ekki kyn kalla, því at nálíga er engi öðrum líkr í ásjónu*' is effective. Surely this is a mode of thought which is instantly recognisable to anyone acquainted with modern conceptions of race.

There is also a certain double meaning in the *Hálfliti-maðr*'s deployment of the proverb '*engi skapar sik sjálf*'. When the words 'nobody creates himself' come out of Mágus's mouth, they are laced with a teasing sense of irony. Mágus actually *has* created himself by donning his disguise. In fact, he regularly does so by adopting his various personae, namely the *Skeljakarl*, who as his name suggests is entirely bedecked in shells, and the wizened-but-self-rejuvenating Óðinn pastiche, *Víðförull* (for more on these aliases, see Cole, forthcoming). This is why his assurance that 'I have never had any other name in my life' must surely have been intended as a knowing wink at the audience who have already seen him with two different monikers. However, just as Mágus and the *Hálfliti-maðr* are two sides of the same figure, his statement has two different aspects. The words can also be interpreted as coming directly out of the mouth of the avatar rather than the man behind it. The *Hálfliti-maðr* is a marginalised, freakish hybrid, the product of a taboo liaison. Even without the information from the younger recension of the saga, his one feline eye and dark-skinned side evoke the image of the *blámaðr* (we shall see another example of catlike eyes in just a moment). Taken at face value (literally), the invoking of the phrase *engi skapar sik sjálf* by the *Hálfliti-maðr* is simple anti-racist reasoning. It may be cynically and ironically deployed by Mágus to win over the king, but seen in the context of the *Hálfliti-maðr*'s back story it is

<sup>9</sup> cf. Cohen on Bartholomaeus Anglicus (fl. 1240): 'cold for Bartholomaeus is the "modir of whitenesse", and the white skin of northerners is the outward marker of their inner valiance' (2003, 197). See also Bartlett 2001, 46.

entirely sensible. How many times have victims of racism felt in frustration that they have no power over the racial identity projected upon them?

Besides drawing an analogy with contemporary racism, we can also note some connotations specific to an Old Norse *Weltanschauung* in the intellectual position represented by King Karl. There is a degree of ambiguity in the king's reluctance to accept the *Hálfliti-maðr* because he is a *kynjamaðr*. His distaste for unusual-looking people also applies to the last two personae with which Mágus tricked him, the *Skeljakarl* and *Víðförull*. But it is not the appearance alone which concerns him, rather what that appearance might mean. The king's hesitancy is probably representative of a widely held position in the Old-Norse-speaking world. Dark complexions in general were often distrusted by Icelandic authors, being seen as ugly or suggestive of loutishness, impudence or malevolence. It is a common trope in the *Íslendingasögur* that of two brothers the one with a darker complexion will be a troublemaker (for instance, Grímr and Þórólfr Kveld-Úlfsson, then Egill and Þórólfr Skalla-Grímsson in *Egils saga*). The sociologist Christian T. Jonassen went so far as to claim that this eulogising of fair features at the expense of the dark was part of 'a rather complete racist theory which was integrated with . . . mythology and [the Scandinavian] total value system, and which in most respects paralleled the myths of modern racist dogma' (1951, 157; cf. Jochens 1997, 313–14). The proposition that dark skin had universally negative connotations in Old Norse does seem to accord with the image of the *blámaðr*. A survey of Old Norse–Icelandic literature reveals none who is particularly pleasant. A classic account of these unappealing qualities which is largely representative of the presentations of *blámenn* in the *fornaldarsögur* can be found in *Sörla saga sterka*. Having set out from Norway, Prince Sörli and his men sail for days before landing in Africa (*Sörla saga sterka*, 313):

Í þessu bili sjá þeir tólf menn stefna á móti sér, forkunnar stóra ok ólíka öðrum menskum mönnum; svartir vóru þeir ok illilegir ásýndum, ekkert hár á höfði, brýrnar hengu allt á nef niðr, augun gul sem í ketti, en tennrnar sem kalt járn . . . Ok er þeir litu konungsson ok hans menn, tóku þeir allir at hrína mjök grimmilega, ok eggjandi hvórr annan . . . sóttu þá blámenn at honum með mikilli eggjan ok ólmlegum hljóðum ok öskri.

At that moment they saw twelve men heading towards them, exceptionally large and unlike other human beings. They were black and ugly in appearance, with no hair upon their heads. Their brows hung down all the way to their noses. Their eyes were yellow like a cat's, and their teeth were like cold iron . . . And when they saw the prince and his men they all began to squeal most fiercely, and egg each other on . . . then the *blámenn* descended on him with great excitement and savage noises and bellowing.

This image of the *blámaðr* is obviously consistent with Snorri's geographically-minded account and the genetically-minded *Mágus saga*. As in *Heimskringla*, the *blámenn* make terrifying noises as they go into battle, and we see again the use of the verb *at eggja*. As in *Mágus saga*, they have yellow, feline eyes. It is this latter, strikingly somatic line of argument which is built upon. The author frequently enters the semantic field of the bestial: as Lindow observes, he defines the *blámenn* in opposition to [öðrum] *mennskir menn* (1995, 15–16). They have cats' eyes. Furthermore, the verb *at hrína* carries with it the connotations of 'to squeal like swine . . . of an animal in heat' (Cleasby–Vigfússon 1874, 286). But as has been postulated elsewhere these particular *blámenn* appear to be more complex than simple bipartite human-animal hybrids (Cole, 2014). The brow that descends to the nose could simply have been intended as a racial caricature based on the supposed physiognomy of a sub-Saharan face, but it also distorts the face to the point where it seems ludicrous to identify any humanity at all. The words *brýrnar*, *eggjandi*, *eggjan* seem to pun on *at brýna* 'to sharpen', and *egg* 'edge', part of a sword or spear. This, together with the teeth *sem kállt járn*, suggest a countenance which is part animal, part ogre, part weapon. Their features are disturbingly exaggerated, golden eyes against black skin, faces distorted beyond recognition. They cannot speak, they must squeal and roar. They cannot have 'some hair', they must have masses or none at all. When notions of ideological or religious difference are articulated via the body, and when geographical areas (in this case, Africa) are given a particular association with those bodies, it seems hard to deny that we are in the presence of something very much akin to a racial mode of thought. To reiterate an earlier observation concerning the *Serkir*, nothing one can *believe* makes one into such a creature. Rather, it is a question of what one 'is', *how* and *where* one was born.

By way of conclusion, we can describe the *blámaðr* as one manifestation of a racial ideology that at various times included one or more of the following theses:

- 1) that geographical location is a predictor of, or shaping force upon, physiognomy,
- 2) that these corporeal traits are inherited,
- 3) that dark skin colour is associated with negative characteristics, chiefly oppositional intent,
- 4) that characters could still be construed as ethnic Others even when they are described as not quite human, e.g. being noticeably animalistic or demonic,

5) that the body is distinct from belief system as a strategy for articulating ethnic difference.

*Þjóð*, *kyn*, *fólk* and *ætt* were far from being universally agreed labels for explicating this ideology. There was no widely accepted organisation of these terms into hierarchies, and their application to particular groups was always highly idiosyncratic. That said, Snorri and the Icelandic Homilist both explicate their own schemas for anatomising identity, where lesser collective units were seen as constituting parts of greater collective units. Similarly idiosyncratic evaluations of importance are placed on race relative to other identities in modern thought. For some individuals, race will be considered a very important predictor of personal character. Others will see it as trivial or disregard it entirely. Although no consensus emerged on the appropriateness of each term in Old Norse (*þjóð*, *kyn*, *fólk*, *ætt*), Old-Norse-speaking authors who subscribed to the ideology of race did choose from these four descriptors when seeking a vocabulary of racial difference.

In some ways, the existence of such racial or even racist thought in medieval Iceland is surprising. Until 1262, this was, as Tom Shippey famously pointed out, a country free of all the disadvantages attendant on having a state (of course, it missed out on all the advantages too) (Shippey 1989, 16–17). There were no policy-makers seeking to justify their incursions into foreign territory, and in contrast to its parent nation, Norway, there was no involvement of state figures in Crusades. Moreover, Iceland was geographically remote in the extreme from any peoples who would have had radically different skin tone. Why should such a comparatively sophisticated, if unpleasant, doctrine develop? But when considered a little more closely, the idea of race appears to be well integrated with the contours of medieval Icelandic society. From the outset, the basic principles of breeding and inherited characteristics—we may well call this a primitive genetics—would have been obvious to the Icelanders. Animal husbandry would have been crucial to the means of production for much of Icelandic history, and it can hardly have escaped the notice of the *bændr* that there were different breeds of cattle, some more suitable to certain environments than others, some breeds being admixtures of others (on animal husbandry in Iceland, see Orri Vésteinsson 1998, 1–29). These same *bændr* being the audience or patrons of saga writers, we can expect that the observations made about livestock would have sooner or later been applied to humans, and thereafter passed into the literary sphere too. We should also note that genealogy was a national pastime in medieval Iceland. Some of the earliest works in Old

Norse, *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*, are essentially genealogies, and virtually all the *Íslendingasögur* contain protracted catalogues of the breeding of their characters, often reaching back for generations (on the ubiquity of genealogy, see Callow 2006, 300–04). Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that speculation about descent groups and the role of hereditary characteristics should emerge (cf. Bibire 2003, 236). Note, for example, that the word for a ‘family resemblance’ was a *kynfylgja* (Cleasby–Vigfússon 1847, 366).

Distant races such as that of the *blámaðr* would not have been of as much political use to an Icelandic author as they might have been to a propagandist from a country more intimately connected with the Crusades or engaged in wars against other nations. But this remoteness from real confrontations with radically different peoples does not mean that Icelanders would not have been interested in them. As Jochens points out, referring to the assimilation of Celtic slaves brought to Iceland by Norwegian settlers, ‘the adaptability of the original Celts and the corresponding receptivity of the Norse eliminated racial and ethnic tension and produced in Iceland a culture remarkable for its homogeneity’ (1997, 322). Under these circumstances, tales of strange races and consideration of their nature would not have had practical applications, but they would have had exotic allure. Then, just as now, it is quite plausible to imagine that racial thought would have flourished in an environment where people were ignorant of the realities of living alongside ethnic alterity, but were aware of the wider world and eager to understand their place in it.

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# THE MEAD OF POETRY AND THE WITCH'S POTION: METHODS OF CONCEPTUALISING GENDER CONFLICT

BY DAVID H. VARLEY  
*Durham University*

## *Introduction*

THE PARTICULARS OF OLD NORSE magical practices, in both their literary and real-world applications, have long been the subject of much scholarly inquiry, including in several recent studies (e.g. Mitchell 2011 and Tolley 2009). The popularity of the topic is, in part, due to the prevalence of magical motifs in the literature and to the fact that magical practices are indivisible from the workings of the constructed literary universe. The purpose of this article is to analyse a relatively little-studied magical motif, that of the witch's potion, and to assess its impact as a narrative device. In the course of the investigation, it will be possible to demonstrate the network of associations that the literary motif of the witch's potion would have created in the minds of the readers and compilers of saga literature, and to suggest that the witch's potion is cast in an underlying thematic opposition to the recurring motif of the mead of poetry.

## *The Definition of a Potion and the Character of the Regal Witch*

It is first necessary to describe and define the characteristics of the witch's potion, and the scenarios in which the motif is employed. Though the use of magic as a whole is most typically considered a feminine activity, the theme of the magic potion in particular appears to have an exclusive association with female magic users across a wide spectrum of different saga genres, notable examples including Grímhildr of the Völsung cycle of legends, Snæfríðr in *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* and Hvít from *Hrólfs saga kraka*, all of whom will be discussed in this article. The use of potions, moreover, is predominantly configured in the context of the use and abuse of royal power, with the users being almost exclusively regal, supernaturally empowered females who have married into a royal line, and are generally characterised as wife or stepmother figures.

The criteria by which a potion is defined are not without issues, and thus consideration must be given to how much this term can encompass. The Old Norse texts themselves have no universal term to denote a potion, but employ

a number of largely interchangeable synonyms: *drykk* ‘drink’ is perhaps most common, though *mjöðr* ‘mead’, *öl* ‘ale’ and *veig* ‘strong drink’ are all used. This lack of a clear definition within the texts themselves for what exactly constitutes a magic potion raises some interesting possibilities in terms of how broadly their nature and function might be understood. For example, the most prominent potions used in the *Völsung* cycle of legends are the three associated with Guðrún’s mother, Queen Grímhildr. It is worth noting, however, that Grímhildr has an important predecessor within the *Völsunga saga* account of the story: Queen Borghildr, the wife of Sigmundr, uses poison to strike down her stepson Sinfjötli (*Völsunga saga* 1954, 133–34).

Though the Borghildr episode is brief, it has a profound impact on the narrative and serves to foreshadow Grímhildr’s actions and their consequences. Both of these women and their actions are instances of what, in the context of the saga, has been interpreted as the need constantly to renegotiate dynastic power in the face of external threat (Quinn 2009). Bearing in mind this overarching theme of the threat to dynastic unity, the distinction between potion and poison in these scenarios is rendered minimal: both are used by female agents who have married into a royal line, their effect is achieved through drinking, and they inflict short- and long-term harm upon a royal house. Borghildr, though not overtly supernaturally empowered, nonetheless serves as the most significant precursor to Grímhildr within the saga, and raises exactly the same issues. It is therefore justifiable to plead the case that potions and poisons function in a similar way, and to some extent can be treated as allied concepts. The conflation of potions and poisons seems to carry through to their real-world reception, there being some suggestion that the use of magic potions and/or poisonous substances was treated as synonymous by early Scandinavian law-codes, most notably in *Äldre Västgötalagen* (Mitchell 2011, 154).

It will be noted from examples such as Borghildr and Grímhildr from *Völsunga saga*, Snæfríðr from *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* and Hvít from *Hrólfs saga kraka* that the use of potions as a means of assault is associated not only with female figures, but specifically with regal witches who marry into royal lines. In one sense, the use of the potion as a narrative device is suited to the role of the queen within the court, a duty of that role being to oversee the provision of drink to guests (Jochens 1995, 107). The use of poisons and potions, consequently, represents an inversion of the correct behaviour of the queen, and also signifies her capacity to strike down her enemies in her husband’s court, in the very centre of patriarchal royal hegemony. The use of the potion as a motif, in essence, expresses the character of the anti-queen, an independent, active and external figure who has been unsuccessfully

internalised within the court, and who has the capacity to wield lethal power over a now vulnerable societal construct. In the case of Borghildr, and in several examples that will follow shortly, this is clearly manifested in a direct and usually fatal assault on the legitimate heir; from both a narrative and practical perspective it is the most efficient way of demonstrating and exploiting the weakness of a dynastic monarchy, while simultaneously overtly expressing the character of the regal witch as both anti-queen and anti-mother.

The connection between the potion of the regal witch and the death of princes seems deeply entrenched: Grímhildr, in *Völsunga saga*, makes for a particularly interesting study of the effect. Borghildr’s killing of Sinfjötli has already established the precedent for an interfering anti-queen figure to cripple a dynasty by use of poison; read in the light of this, Grímhildr’s triple use of potions is particularly telling. Over the course of the saga, Grímhildr brews her first potion to befuddle Sigurðr into forgetting Brynhildr and thus consequently to bring him into her family through marriage to her daughter Guðrún (*Völsunga saga* 1954, 173), her second potion is used to drive her son Guttormr into a murderous fury as a means of dispatching the now divisive figure of Sigurðr (*Völsunga saga* 1954, 189–90), and the final potion is administered to her daughter Guðrún to erase her grief over Sigurðr’s death as a means of making her a viable marriage prospect once more (*Völsunga saga* 1954, 196–98). Each use, broadly speaking, can be seen to perform a positive function, at least from the perspective of Grímhildr’s respected royal circle, and yet each potion she brews sets in motion a chain of events that leads to the annihilation of a royal house, in one case her own. In *Völsunga saga* there is a recurring result of the use of the magic potion, which is that it leads to the stunting of a royal dynasty; this consequence of potion use will be shown to be a prominent feature in other *fornaldarsögur* as well.

The literary use of the figure of the regal witch as an anti-queen, with the magic potion as her accompanying motif, can thus be read as a means of interrogating the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of kingship, particularly in terms of bringing external females into a position of intimacy within the royal circle. Marriage, in the context of royalty, requires the bringing in of an alien female: in one sense, this is a necessary process for securing and continuing one’s own royal line, and by extension society, through political alliance and the potential of furthering the dynasty. Another view, however, and one that is particularly emphasised in the narratives that deal with the early, mythical generations of dynastic formation (narratives such as *Völsunga saga*, *Ynglinga saga*, *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*), is that it exposes the royal family directly to outside influences

and powers, creating a vulnerability where an external and potentially malevolent force can gain intimate access to the king. The motif of the witch's potion can, consequently, be seen as an analogy for the regal witch herself: both are foreign and invasive objects that attack internally, one within the body of the regal figure and the other within the body of the state.

An example of the juxtaposition between the regal witch and her potion is the Snæfríðr episode in Snorri Sturluson's *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, which Neil Price has suggested may include the earliest textual appearance of a Sámi sorceress (Price 2002, 257). According to the saga, when Snæfríðr is introduced to King Haraldr, she *byrtaði konungi ker fullt mjadar, en hann tók allt saman ok hönd hennar, ok þegar var sem eldshiti kvæmi í hörund hans ok vildi þegar hafa hana á þeiri nótt* 'poured the king a full goblet of mead, and he took everything into his grasp including her hand, and at once it seemed as if fiery heat flowed through his flesh and he desired to have her straight away that night' (*Haralds saga ins hárfagra* 1941, 126).<sup>1</sup> Haraldr's sudden and powerful lust is promptly capitalised upon by Snæfríðr's father, who will only agree to the king's sexual union with his daughter on the condition that they marry immediately, which indeed happens. Haraldr's enchanted state survives Snæfríðr's death, and he is released from the effects of the potion only when her superficially incorrupt body, preserved as it is by a magic blanket, is revealed to contain *ormar ok eðlur, froskar ok þoddur ok alls kyns illyrmi* 'worms and adders, frogs and toads, and all manner of poisonous serpents' (*Haralds saga* 1941, 127).

This brief episode encapsulates several important ideas concerning the regal witch and her potion. In the first instance, Haraldr's sudden desires are presumably the product of a magical form of entrapment involving the beverage he is served. The portrayal of Haraldr in saga literature is remarkably consistent, depicting a king given over to periods of violent paranoia and casual homicide. In consequence, his behaviour here is out of character, and the immediate political machinations of Snæfríðr's father implicitly suggest the motive behind the bewitchment. The king is demonstrably weakened by the situation, Snorri explaining in no uncertain terms that *unni svá með ærslum, at ríki sitt ok allt þat, er honum byrjaði, þá fyrir lét hann* 'he loved her so madly that he neglected his kingdom and all that it befitted him to do' (*Haralds saga* 1941, 126). The great tyrant, who according to the saga is the first ruler of a unified Norway, is laid low, not by rebellion or by sedition, but by the obscure and mysterious wiles of his newly acquired wife. The brevity of the episode, furthermore, suggests

<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own, unless otherwise specified.

a correlation between the two physical symbols that open and conclude the chapter: the mead and Snæfríðr's body. Both are objects that are the production of a mixture of different elements, both appear wholesome when complete, and both are used as part of a hidden and insidious agenda. By taking the potion into his body, the king allows corruption to flourish within himself, an action which is paralleled by that of taking a foreign princess into the heart of the state. Both potion and princess are destabilising influences that work from within the structure into which they are introduced. The potion is thus an apt representative of a particularly destructive aspect of a specifically feminine and anti-monarchical supernatural force.

McKinnell (2005, 76–77) has noted that there is a political element to this story as well: Snæfríðr's use of sorcery in some sense confirms the magical nature of Rögnvaldr rettilbeini, her son by Haraldr, which forms the pretext for his killing by his half-brother Eiríkr (*Haralds saga* 1941, 138–39). A further instance in the saga in which potions are politicised can be seen when King Hálfðan svartí, another sibling competitor of Eiríkr, is allegedly poisoned on Queen Gunnhildr konungamóðir's orders (*Haralds saga* 1941, 146–47). This event, reminiscent of Borghildr's killing of Sinfjötli, promotes the idea of the potion as an object that can change or destroy the figures and functions of monarchy.

#### The Components of a Potion

Despite the relative prominence of the motif of the magic potion, there is almost no description of the components of a potion, with the one notable exception of that in *Guðrúnarkviða II*. Though fragmentary and certainly no masterpiece, the poem delivers an elaborate description of the third of Grímhildr's potions in the Völsung cycle, as voiced by its victim, Guðrún (*Guðrúnarkviða II* 1936, 221–22):

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 21. Færði mér Grímildr<br>full at drekka,<br>svalt ok sárlikt,<br>ne ek sakar myndak;<br>þat var of aukit<br>urðar magni,<br>svalköldum sæ<br>ok sonar dreyra. | Grímhildr brought to me<br>a goblet to drink,<br>cold and bitter,<br>I could not remember my strifes;<br>it was fortified with<br>the power of fate,<br>ice-cold sea<br>and sacrificial blood. |
| 22. Vóro í horni<br>hvers kyns stafir<br>ristnir ok roðnir—<br>ráða ek né máttak—  | There were in the drinking horn<br>every kind of rune,<br>scratched and reddened—<br>I could not interpret them—   |

lyngfiskr langr, lanz Haddingia ax óskorit, innleið dýra.	a long ling-fish [snake], of the land of the Haddings an uncut ear of grain, the intestines of animals.
23. Vóro þeim bíori böl mǫrg saman, urt allz viðar ok akarn brunninn, umdogg arins, iðrar blótmar, svíns lifr soðin, þvíat hon sakar deyfði.	In that brew were many harmful things gathered, roots of every sort of tree and the burnt acorn, hearth's dew [soot], sacrificial entrails, boiled pig's liver, because she soothed her grievances.

These three stanzas list a variety of ingredients for the potion, and at least initially the order in which they are listed appears haphazard. Whilst the poet does not seem to make much distinction between their natures and effects, the factors that make up the potion can be separated into three broad categories: runes, plant extracts and animal extracts. A further separate category might be imagined for the elements referred to in the first stanza, and which seem to function as the base of the magic potion. This strange mixture of fate, water and blood, elements which seem less specific than those the poet goes on to list, are in some sense suggestive of the forces present at the creation of mankind as depicted in *Völuspá* 17–18 (*Völuspá* 1936, 4–5), which might be considered another factor linking the magic potion into bodily concerns.

The focus on runes in the description of the potion's creation is interesting, and serves to recall a similar attention to runes in the poem *Sigrdrífumál* (*Sigrdrífomál* 1936, 185–92). Not only does the potion described in that poem contain runes (*Sigrdrífomál* 1936, 5), but the figure Sigrdrífa herself describes how runes might be incorporated into drinks and drinking vessels for protection (*Sigrdrífomál* 1936, 7). The potion used by Sigrdrífa, however, is very different from the potions that have been examined so far, and with its health-affirming and inspirational qualities it seems to have more in common with the mead of poetry than the witch's potion; given Sigrdrífa's valkyrie nature, her association with a substance similar to the mead of poetry is fitting. The mead of poetry will be examined in more detail later, but if Sigrdrífa's potion can be seen as analogous to the mead, then the focus on runes both here and with regard to Grímhildr's potion serves to emphasise the link between these two concepts.

Whilst the plant-based ingredients probably reflect some measure of pharmacological reality, some knowledge of which is explored for example in *Hávamál* 137 (*Hávamál* 1936, 38), more interesting perhaps is the focus

on various entrails in the three stanzas. Though the focus of this article is on the motif of the witch's potion, the presence of a body, or body parts that have been processed, as a constituent element of the potion is important, and the implications of it are significant when considered in the light of the method by which the mead of poetry is produced. Though different from a magic potion, the ways in which regal witches specifically use meat can shed light on understanding the full implications of potion use.

Two regal witches prominent in the *fornaldarsögur*, Hvít in *Hrólf's saga kraka* and Kolfrósta in *Bósa saga*, both cast spells through the medium of magically defiled meat (*Hrólf's saga kraka ok kappá hans* 1954, 51 and *Bósa saga ok Herraud's* 1950, 300). Hvít fits neatly into the figure of the regal witch described above: she is an alien princess whose marriage into the royal house of King Hringr results in his enfeeblement, which is described in almost exactly the same terms as that of Haraldr hárfagri: *Ertu svá fanginn fyrir þessum óvætti, at þú heldr varla viti þínu né réttum konungdómi* 'You are so captivated by this monster that you scarcely retain a hold of your senses or a grip on your kingdom' (*Hrólf's saga kraka ok kappá hans* 1954, 56). Hvít's presence serves to destabilise the society of the royal court, and her actions are the direct cause of the death of the legitimate prince, Björn, whom she turns into a bear and causes to be hunted down. The final magical act she undertakes is in forcing Björn's lover, Bera, to consume some of the bear's meat; the saga strongly implies that it is this action that wreaks physical and mental deformities upon Bera's future children. In this instance, Hvít's use of meat parallels the use and function of the motif of the magic potion: it is an alien element that, when introduced into the body, serves to pollute it. It is an internal and insidious process whose effect is the near termination of the royal line: it is only the third and final child, Böðvarr Bjarki, who possesses the dual qualities of normal humanity and superhuman capability and who is consequently able to restore the situation. It should be noted, however, that the saga further implies that Böðvarr's own supernatural abilities are also a consequence of his unusual heritage; they are powers that are the product of external interference, and which are conveyed through the medium of his mother's body.

Hvít's use of magically affected meat, therefore, neatly parallels the actions of Borghildr and Grímhildr in *Völsunga saga*, but her cannibalisation of Björn's body raises other issues, in particular a further parallel with *Völsunga saga* in the passage where Guðrún takes revenge against Atli by feeding him the flesh and blood of their sons (*Völsunga saga* 1954, 209–13). This is not to suggest that Guðrún fits the model of the regal witch that has been described here, but rather to point out that there is some subtle alteration in her character as it evolves whereby she

acquires some of the traits of the two anti-queen figures that preceded her in the story, and against which she must inevitably be compared. If, as has been suggested above, Grímhildr's use of potions represents an interesting adaptation of the literary motif of the magic potion by demonstrating that such use of potions leads, of necessity, to the enfeeblement or termination of a royal line—whatever the initial motivation behind it might have been—then Guðrún's actions also represent a modification or reinterpretation of the motif. In murdering her children by Atli she ensures the termination of his royal line, but since she has him consume their bodies the action is in some sense worked into the web of connections surrounding the motif of the witch's potion and the concept of the processed body. Tolley has shown that there is a long-standing association between witchcraft and cannibalism in a number of early law codes from across the Germanic world, including the *Pactus legis Salicae* and the *Leges Langobardum* amongst others; if such an association does indeed have a bearing on these sagas, as seems entirely possible, it would serve to emphasise the juxtaposition between Guðrún's actions and those of the regal witch figure (Tolley 2009, 115–16).

To return to the examples of meat-using witches mentioned above, Kolfrósta in *Bósa saga*, the mother of King Hárekr of Bjarmaland, is much less structurally important to the overarching saga narrative, and merely serves as an early, if dangerous, antagonist for the heroes to contend with. There are, however, aspects to her magical practice that are unparalleled elsewhere. She has kidnapped a princess called Hleiðr, whom she intends to transform into an entity like herself, an effect she will bring about through feeding the princess the meat of a heifer that has been mounted by a demonic bull; the saga explicitly states that the nature of the heifer's flesh is changed by this (*Bósa saga ok Herrauds* 1950, 300). This suggests, once again, the concept of corruption and infection: the heifer's meat would work internally to effect a magical change in the girl. It implies, furthermore, that the essential nature of the regal witch, she being a force for destruction and social upheaval, can be transferred into an unwilling victim. The language used of this process is particularly illuminating in the context of the present discussion of the magical: Kolfrósta intends to make Hleiðr *líka tröll, sem hofgyðjan var áðr* 'like a troll, as the priestess already was' (*Bósa saga ok Herrauds* 1950, 300).

#### *On the Magical and Anti-Social Aspects of Trolls*

The use of troll-based terminology concerning the characterisation of the figure of the regal witch is both deliberate and meaningful. Whilst the term *troll* covers a wide range of meanings and connotations (see

Ármann Jakobsson 2008, 44–55), the connection between magic and trollish characteristics is well established in modern scholarship (see, for example, Arnold 2005). The relationship, however, between the prototypical troll-women of the Eddas and the recurring figure of the regal witch of the *fornaldarsögur* can be seen as having a greater significance than simply their mutual association with magic. Their close association is demonstrably an old one; indeed, Arnold has asserted that the compound *trollkund*, which he renders as 'troll-related', in the poem *Ynglingatal*, may be the oldest extant mention of trolls (2005, 118), and it is used in connection with the figure of Huld, who functions as a hypostasis of a queen named Drífa, and who consequently fits into the pattern of the anti-queen described above. Many of these villainous, regally stationed, supernatural females, furthermore, are described using troll-related vocabulary in their respective texts; as well as the references to Drífa and Kolfrósta as trolls, Hvít is called a *mesta tröll* 'great troll' by her stepson (*Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappá hans* 1954, 49).

The application of trollish characteristics to the nature of the regal witch is in fact a standard method of denoting this type of female character, and is a common insult. This could be dismissed as an aspect of the close theoretical link between magic and trollishness as a whole, but the application of trollish qualities to these women can raise interesting possibilities for their characterisation if the use of the term *troll* can be considered as targeted rather than general.

As with the practice and depiction of magic, the qualities of trollishness are most closely associated with female figures: though male trolls do exist, their female counterparts are demonstrably stronger, more independent and more dangerous (Arnold 2005, 123). How one defines what constitutes a troll is a matter of some contemporary debate, as mentioned above. For the purposes of this discussion, one of the most useful definitions of a troll is that found in the stanza delivered by a troll-woman encountered by Bragi in *Skáldskaparmál* (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 83):

‘Tröll kalla mik tungl sjöt-Rungnis, auðsug jötuns, élsólar þöl, vilsinn völu, vörð náfjarðar, hvélsvelg himins. Hvat er tröll nema þat?’	‘They call me a troll, moon of abode-Rungnir, wealth-sucker of the giant, bale of the storm-sun, beloved companion of the <i>völva</i> , guardian of the corpse-fjord, swallower of the wheel of heaven [sun]. What is a troll, other than that?’ <sup>2</sup>
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<sup>2</sup> My translation, following Lindow (2006, 22).

Though linguistically complex, this stanza is nonetheless our best extant description of the physical and spiritual aspects of a prototypical troll-woman. It is worth noting that there is a degree of manuscript variation at this point in the text, but I follow Lindow in analysing what might be termed the fuller text, and indeed follow his lead in interpreting some of the more obscure lines (Lindow 2006, 22). What is immediately noticeable is the level of agreement between the self-definition of the troll-woman and the figure of the anti-queen outlined above. Whilst one must be circumspect about making contrasts between a ninth-century text, such as *Ynglingatal*, and a thirteenth-century text such as this, or indeed making assumptions about the ways in which contemporary audiences of these two periods would imagine troll-women, nevertheless there is an interesting overlap here. The troll-woman describes herself in terms of non-rational and destructive forces. As the *hvélsvelg himins*, the troll-woman takes on an eschatological significance that mirrors the threat posed by the regal witch: the latter threatens to destroy the fabric of society, the former the fabric of the world itself. This connection is further emphasised by the use of the term *auðsug jötuns*, one of only two terms the troll-woman employs that describe some form of social action: she is a taker of wealth, and thus a weakener of economic power, an aspect which directly reflects the concept of the regal witch's weakening of the monarch's powerbase; the other social interaction suggested by the stanza, and indeed the only positive relationship ascribed to the troll-woman, is that she is the beloved companion of a *völva*. This term is wide-ranging and can be used to describe many kinds of female magic users beside seeresses, and can thus also be seen to cover the figure of the regal witch (Orchard 1997, 183). The close correlation between the prototypical troll-woman of Eddic myth and the villainous anti-queen of *fornaldarsögur* is thus apparent.

Given the antithetical relationship between monarchy and the regal witch that seems evident in the ninth-century *Ynglingatal*, it is worth noting that the later *Skáldskaparmál* offers a different opposing figure to the troll-woman, that of the skald Bragi (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 83):

‘Skáld kalla mik  
skapsmið Viðurs,  
Gauts gjafirðuð,  
grepp óhneppan,  
Yggs qlbera,  
óðs skap-Móða,  
hagsmið bragar.  
Hvat er skáld nema þat?’

‘They call me poet,  
creating-smith of Vidurr [Óðinn],  
obtainer of the gift of Gautr [Óðinn, and hence the mead of poetry],  
the unrestrained poet,  
ale-bearer of Yggr [Óðinn, and hence the mead of poetry],  
the mind-Móði [mind-man] of poetry,  
skilled smith of verse.  
What is a poet, other than that?’<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting that the figure that Snorri, or whichever of his antecedents he is interpreting at this point, has chosen to hold up in opposition to the troll-woman is that of the poet. Given that the argument has so far defined the regal witch in her capacity as an anti-queen, the use of an opposing figure that is not inherently royal might at first appear to be an instance where the argument falls down. The terms in which Bragi describes himself, however, portray him in a highly specific social context: he characterises himself, and thus characterises the archetypal poet figure, in the position of a subservient functionary to the god Óðinn. The connection to monarchy, as the force in opposition to trollish chaos, is established through the triple reference to a god who is both poet and king; chaos, consequently, is implicitly opposed through the portrayal of the poet figure as a correctly functioning component of the societal order. This depiction of the prototypical court poet, though at odds with many of the anti-social tendencies associated with the named poets that populate the *Íslendingasögur* and compose poetry about themselves and their antagonists in Iceland, demonstrates the symbiotic and reciprocal relationship between the institution of royalty and poetic composition. Whilst the poet is as dynamic and active a figure as the troll-woman, the society that royalty represents is not a target to destroy, but rather produces the environment in which poetry can function.

Lindow has interpreted Bragi's encounter as a contest between man and troll for the control of poetry (2006, 24), and whilst this is a valid reading, the purpose of the present argument is to indicate that this exchange is used to underscore the antithetical nature of poet and troll-woman by demonstrating that they both function through the social mechanisms of the court but work towards opposing ends. For the skald, the society of the royal court represents the environment in which his poetic art can be used most effectively; the troll-woman, by contrast, as an agent of chaos and destruction, defines herself in opposition to ordered and stable society.

Some element of this complex relationship between destruction, authority and poetic composition is also evident in other sources, most notably

<sup>3</sup> My translation, following Lindow (2006, 22).

*Völuspá*. Mundal has noted that the poet posits a linguistic parallel between the figures of Óðinn and the old woman of the Ironwood (2002, 185–86); she is named *in aldna* ‘the ancient one’ (*Völuspá* 1936, 40), a description that echoes that of Óðinn as *inn aldni* earlier in the poem (*Völuspá* 1936, 28). This subtle linguistic comparison between Óðinn and the old woman invites the reader to contrast the two figures, and thus to perceive an opposition that is both suitable and multifaceted. Like Óðinn, the old woman is an isolated yet empowered figure. Much as he is the *de facto* king of the gods, so too is she cast in a position of authority and power; much as he wanders the worlds by himself, so too is she a being far beyond society’s limits. But whereas he as a king figure represents a familiar societal structure that must perforce represent order, she is the matriarch whose fertility brings forth the chaos, in wolf-shape, that will destroy all society.

The battle-lines are being drawn up, and there is a clear mirroring between the opposing sides: the socially rigid patriarchy is being set off against a powerful but chaotic group of forces overseen by a monstrous matriarch. This is a dichotomy that we have seen paralleled in the interactions of the human kings and regal witches. On a mythical level, therefore, the thematic combination of royalty and poetry is entirely suitable, and it may be seen that they are defined in opposition to the same force, namely that of a trollish and specifically feminine impulse for chaos and destruction.

#### *Aspects of the Mead of Poetry*

The blending and interacting of the elements of political and poetical power are nowhere more profound in Eddic texts than in the story of the creation and use of the mead of poetry. Given the extent to which potion-craft is, as has been demonstrated, associated with the destructive and anti-social magical manipulations of trollish anti-queens, it is entirely fitting that a comparison be made between the image of the magic potion and that of a liquid which serves as the most frequently recurring motif in poetry that refers to the poetic art (Abram 2011, 113). The use of specific beverages as a narrative topos is relatively uncommon, except for references to potions; the concept of the mead of poetry is, therefore, unusually developed and widely referenced. It is not too great a claim to assert that in Old Norse literature, the witch’s potion and the mead of poetry far outstrip, in terms of significance and frequency of reference, any other substances that may be eaten or drunk. To compare and contrast these two motifs is consequently appropriate.

There are further factors that denote the similarity of the witch’s potion and the mead of poetry, particularly with regard to details of the creation of the mead of poetry. The origin myth of the mead would seem to have

been widely understood and accepted, as is indicated by the sheer volume of references to it in kennings and metaphors: the mead is ‘undoubtedly the most common way of mentioning verse and its composition in poetry of the pagan era’ (Abram 2011, 113). As Abram further notes, however, although there are numerous references to the myth of the mead’s creation across a vast body of poetry, we are nevertheless reliant on Snorri’s ‘rather convoluted tale’ as the only full explanation of the myth. Whilst one cannot assume that Snorri’s account necessarily reflects the same social attitudes found in earlier texts, nevertheless the details of his version of events are useful in this present context (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 3):

Ok enn mælir Ægir: ‘Hvaðan af hefir hafizk sú þrött er þér kallið skáldskap?’

Bragi svarar: ‘Þat váru upphöf til þess at guðin höfðu ósætt við þat fólk er Vanir heita, en þeir lögðu með sér friðstefnu ok settu grið á þá lund at þeir gengu hvárirtveggju til eins kers ok spýttu í hráka sínum. En at skilnaði þá tóku guðin ok vildu eigi láta tynask þat griðamark ok sköpuðu þar ór mann. Sá heitir Kvasir. Hann er svá vitr at engi spyrir hann þeira hluta er eigi kann hann órlausn. Hann fór víða um heim at kenna mönnum fræði, ok þá er hann kom at heimboði til dverga nokkvorra, Fjalars ok Galars, þá kolluðu þeir hann með sér á einmæli ok drápu hann, létu renna blóð hans í tvau ker ok einn ketil, ok heitir sá Óðreyrir, en kerin heita Són ok Boðn. Þeir blendu hunangi við blóðit ok varð þar af mjöðr sá er hverr er af drekkur verðr skáld eða fræðamaðr. Dvergarnir sögðu Ásum at Kvasir hefði kafnat í mannviti fyrir því at engi var þar svá fróðr at spyrja kynni hann fróðleiks.’

And then Ægir said: ‘From where comes this art, which you call poetry?’

Bragi answered: ‘The beginning of it was that the gods had a disagreement with that tribe who are called the Vanir. And they organised a peace-talk and made a truce in this manner: both parties went up to a tub and cast their spittle into it. But at their parting the gods did not want to lose this truce-sign, and shaped a man out of it there. He was called Kvasir. He was so wise that no one could ask anything of him that he could not answer. He travelled widely through the world teaching knowledge to men, and then he came to the feast of some dwarfs, Fjalar and Galar. Then they called him into a private conference with them, and they killed him and poured his blood into two tubs and a cauldron, and that was called Óðreyrir, but the two tubs were called Són and Boðn. They blended honey with the blood, and from that it became the mead which any man, if he drinks it, will become a skald or man of learning. The dwarfs told the Æsir that Kvasir had suffocated in intelligence because there was no one present that could ask him questions.’

The first factor to note here is the method by which the mead of poetry is produced: it is manufactured out of Kvasir’s blood, a product of the corpse of a man. This unusual process recalls the emphasis placed on sacrificial blood as an ingredient in the potion described in *Guðrúnarkviða*

*II*, discussed above, and also echoes its focus on bodily materials. Though the witch's potion and the mead of poetry are alike in their material composition, however, they differ noticeably in the gendered aspects of their creation. As already mentioned, the use of the magic potion is almost exclusively the activity of females: the male characters only ever play the role of victim. The creation of the man Kvasir, on the other hand, is antithetical to the regal witch, her characteristic actions and the forces she represents on a number of levels: the impulse for Kvasir's genesis is the peace conference between the Æsir and the Vanir that marks the establishment of a united divine community, the first stable, lawful and recognisably human-like society. Kvasir thus represents the gods' ability to achieve prosperity through discussion, negotiation and compromise—concepts entirely at odds with the socially destructive and chaotic aspects of the regal witch or troll-woman. He is created from the collected spittle of the gods, and is thus the product of a process entirely within the male sphere: it is procreation without female participation, a completely masculine form of parthenogenesis. Like the art of poetry, Kvasir himself is the product of a male creative impulse. This impulse, unaffected by any female interference, is manifested in a figure who is so overflowing with knowledge that he must travel the world disseminating it.

It is also stated by Bragi that the effect of the mead, when it is consumed, is not only that of poetic inspiration but also of scholarly acumen: it is an agent of knowledge as well as of art. The associations surrounding the mead of poetry, therefore, are much the same as those surrounding Óðinn and Bragi: the concept of poetry serves as a focal point that holds together a complex interweaving of knowledge, artistry, power and society. Schjødt, indeed, has chosen to view the mead as an initiatory object through which a mastery of these attributes may be conferred (2008, 148). One could argue, therefore, that the title bestowed upon the *skáldskapar mjaðar* 'mead of poetry' is rather too restricted in scope: the origin story for it encapsulates not only artistic inspiration, but also concepts of peace, social formation, learning and understanding—all of which are characterised within a specifically male context. In brief, the mead of poetry offers a completely opposing set of concepts and connotations to those associated with the motif of the witch's potion.

A further significant aspect of the creation of Kvasir, and the subsequent manufacture of the mead of poetry, is that the story maintains a peculiar coexistence of the noble and the disgusting, and is thus problematised. Kvasir undoubtedly possesses nobility, both in terms of his temperament and also by right of his provenance as a notional son of all the gods. Many

of the details of the story, however, are scatological: he is created from the contents of what might be called a communal spittoon; the mead itself is graphically processed out of his blood; and later when Óðinn flies over Ásgarðr with the stolen mead, he vomits the portion that inspires true poetry and defecates the part that prompts doggerel (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 4–5). All in all, as a consequence of these considerations, the process that leads up to the creation and use of the mead of poetry, this powerful and beneficial symbol of art and knowledge, is distinctly troubling. Although Kvasir's female-free inception and existence are implied to have resulted in his exceptional nature, they are nonetheless unnatural. The mead of poetry consequently shares another characteristic with the witch's potion, in that both are associated with bodily organs or functions and these factors play an important part in the creation of these substances.

To some extent this unnaturalness is counterbalanced by Óðinn's subsequent seduction of the giantess Gunnlöð, the guardian of the mead of poetry: it is as if the story cannot be brought to a satisfactory conclusion until 'normal' sexual practice has been forcefully asserted (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 4). Some critics have even chosen to view this sexual relationship as a form of marriage, and if this reading is accurate it serves to emphasise further the idea that their relationship is indicative of normative heterosexual behaviour (Schjødt 2008, 153). Further evidence for viewing Gunnlöð's seduction as an example of normative sexual practice might also be seen in the fact that Gunnlöð seems to have been the ancestress of kings in some sources (McKinnell 2005, 166–67). On the other hand, one could also argue that the seduction itself, with particular regard to Óðinn's deception of the giantess, is another troubling element in the story.

Kvasir's female-free creation, on its own terms, is thus as troubling, unnatural and paradoxical as the destruction-producing womb of the troll-woman of the Ironwood. Both symbolic items—mead and potion—ultimately represent a perversion of natural processes. It is this perversion, presumably, that gives them their power to alter the world around them. What is notable, however, is that both seem to exert their power in the context of aristocratic societies. The regal witch, through her use of her potion, is able to move society from the path of prosperity and growth to one of destruction, whilst the poet, by symbolically partaking of the mead of poetry, is able to produce the art and cultural wealth that can sustain and preserve the character of the socio-political system.

The potential close similarity between the mead of poetry and the witch's potion can be seen as a concern in *Hyndluljóð*. When the giantess Hyndla offers Óttarr *minnisql* 'memory-ale' to allow him to remember his heritage,



it would seem that this substance is something akin to the mead of poetry (*Hyndlolióð* 1936, 45). Like Sigrdrífa's potion in *Sigrdrífumál*, Hyndla's ale works to sustain and inspire its recipient. Freyja's interpretation of Hyndla's gesture, however, is markedly different: she describes the potion as being *eitri blandinn miðk, illo heilli!* 'greatly blended with poison, an evil omen!' (*Hyndlolióð* 1936, 49). Freyja's description of the effect of Hyndla's potion is the opposite of that described by the giantess herself, and it is a description that seems to have much in common with the types of potion described above, particularly in view of the negative connotations of the term *blandinn* (Borovsky 2002, 1–5). That the same object, interpreted as either a typical witch's potion or something akin to the mead of poetry, can be described in such strikingly different terms is indicative of the similarities between these two images.

#### *The Figure of the Skald as Anti-Witch*

In a further attempt to untangle the complex set of associations that surround the similar images of the witch's potion and the mead of poetry, it is necessary to examine in more detail the relationship between the symbol of the mead of poetry and the figure of the skald, and to see the extent to which it mirrors the dynamic between the regal witch and her potion. There are, of course, important differences: the presence of the mead of poetry and its consumption by skalds is metaphorical rather than literal, and hence one must also be cautious in assuming that different poets are using the symbol in similar ways. Nevertheless, there are significant parallels between witch and skald, potion and mead, that are worth exploring here. It was argued above that poetry represents a specifically male force for creation, production and order. As previously mentioned, this may seem to contradict the character of the skald as he is depicted in some saga literature, most notably the figure of the Icelandic skald depicted in the *Íslendingasögur*, where his defining characteristics are a propensity for aggression, violence and troublemaking.<sup>4</sup> Although the figures of the poet and the witch are never directly contrasted in the literature, one could imagine that saga writers might use their mutual anti-social and destructive tendencies to a similar end, and consequently suggest that these two figures might have a great deal in common.

It can, however, be argued that the actions of the troublesome skald and the witch achieve different ends. The poet might be a trouble-maker who

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the characterisations of Egill in *Egils saga*, Hallfreðr in *Hallfreðar saga*, Kormákr in *Kormáks saga* and Þormóðr in *Fóstbræðra saga*.

causes strife, but he does so within the bounds of society: unlike the regal witch he is not out to destroy society itself, but rather uses the mechanisms of society as a platform from which to express his creative energies, even if these are often inflammatory. To put this another way, the skald may be anti-social, whereas the regal witch is anti-societal. The skald, even though he may be troublesome and contrary, nonetheless propagates and enforces the social order through his typical interactions with kings: he composes immortal poetry in their honour, accepts reward for his poetic art, joins the king's followers, and overall increases the monarch's prestige.

The difference between the specific actions of the skald and the general intent of poetry can be marked, and yet the overall effect serves to highlight the extent to which the influence of poetry is opposed to the power of the regal witch. Take, for example, the following verse from *Egils saga* (*Egils saga* 2003, 98):

Borðumsk vér, ne virðak,	We battled, I did not think
vígleiþr sonar, heiptir	of the consequences.
Blóðøxar, rauð ek blóði	Lightning-like I daubed my sword with the blood
boðmíldr, ok Gunnhildar.	of the son of Blóðøx and Gunnhildr.
Þar fellu nú þollar	There thirteen trees
þrettán lagar mána,	of the moonlight of the sea [gold, hence warriors]
stendr af styrjarskyndi	fell on a single ship.
starf, á einum karfa.	The warrior is hard at work.

In the context of Egill Skallagrímsson's long and varied career, this verse serves as the culmination of what is arguably his most ethically questionable act, the killing of Prince Rögnvaldr, son of Eiríkr blóðøx and Gunnhildr konungamóðir (*Egils saga* 2003, 97). Though the author of the saga does not go into great detail, presumably out of a desire to portray Egill in the best possible light, the implications of this event are clear: with his little painted warship and his twelve constant companions, Rögnvaldr is clearly intended to be seen as a child, a little boy with his toy ship and playmates. Egill's swift, brutal and unresisted massacre of the toy ship's crew is not greeted with any sense of victory or opprobrium by the saga narrator, whereas Egill's verse carries a ghoulish hint of triumphalism. The slaughter, carried out when Egill has just escaped from immediate danger, gains him nothing except Gunnhildr's vindictive hatred, and for once she is clearly the wronged party; it is not likely that the audience of the saga would have been expected to approve of Egill's actions over this affair. *Prima facie*, this would seem to place Egill in the same position as the regal witch: his termination of a legitimate heir is a clear threat to dynastic continuation and proliferation, and is furthermore

accompanied by a magic curse that the skald places on the royal family (*Egils saga* 2003, 98).

There are, however, important distinctions between the behaviour of Egill and the typical regal witch: the killing is not part of a consistent campaign to eradicate a royal family and destroy the society that surrounds it, nor is the curse a death spell aimed at killing Eiríkr's sons but rather an invocation designed to force the king and his wife into exile. Eiríkr's family, for good or for ill, are allowed to survive, at least until their own mistakes catch up with them. Egill tries to keep his distance, clearly wanting nothing more to do with them; it is only through Gunnhildr's magical intervention that he is brought before the family again.

A further important distinction is that, in the situation of the skald, there is a division between poetry and action. The regal witch is enabled by her potion: it is the thing that allows her to achieve her unnatural end. Egill's verse, the result of his symbolic consumption of the mead of poetry, is conversely separated from the actual act of prince-slaying: it does not enable him to commit the act, but rather enables him to compose a verse after the fact that reflects on his actions. This episode may serve to demonstrate Egill's anti-royal sentiments, but poetry itself (both Egill's and that of skalds more generally) is not used in any sense as a weapon against royalty, and has nothing itself to do with the killing.

Egill's verse is significant because of the extent to which it differentiates the actions of the skald from that of the regal witch. The composition of poetry is a creative act, and the significance of this would not have been lost on Egill as a devotee of Óðinn, nor indeed on whoever composed the saga: it adds to the sum total of human expression, and by being remembered and passed through the oral continuum it would serve as a mechanism of the social order, one common thread among many that would unite and preserve the community. If the stanza has any sort of pre-history to the saga, then it stands as an example of the veracity of such a view; even if it is merely the pretence of a genuine verse, within the invented world of the saga it achieves the status of a cultural artefact. By metaphorically consuming the mead of poetry, Egill creates something from nothing, an effect entirely opposite to the confusion and contagion threatened by the typical potion of the regal witch.

The effect at point of use is the final method by which these two symbols, and the forces they represent, can be understood to be in conflict. The mead of poetry is explicitly understood, in its aforementioned origin myth, to be a substance whose effect is inspirational: to drink it is to obtain knowledge, and the power to create art from that knowledge. It

functions as an enabler, giving the men who drink or invoke it power and standing within the framework of society. The effect of the witch's potion, without exception, is to cloud the judgement, erase memory, physically disfigure, and otherwise pollute or poison the recipient; these are all factors that contribute to the breakdown of society. The witch's potion fundamentally serves as a barrier to communication and co-operation by impeding a man's ability to interact with the mechanisms of society. Both substances, ultimately, affect how men behave, but while one serves positively to emphasise and empower, the other serves to deny and prevent.

### Conclusions

What has been elucidated here is an important aspect of the complex, multilayered set of associations that lie behind a significant amount of the narrative construction of the prehistoric, mythic world. Gender conflict is clearly at the heart of the imagined world of Old Norse myth, but its centrality and pivotal importance sometimes make its precise nature difficult to pin down; it is so deeply entrenched that picking apart its links and associations can be tricky. The recurring motifs of the witch's potion and the mead of poetry, however, can be seen to function as one of the more accessible and concrete manifestations of this gendered dichotomy, and indeed can function as a convenient method for saga writers of signposting this antagonistic relationship. Each motif functions as the inverse of the other, being similar in appearance, form, social context and use, but fundamentally opposite in their effects and the forces they represent.

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KERLING / DROTTNING:  
THINKING ABOUT MEDIEVAL QUEENSHIP  
WITH *EGILS SAGA EINHENDAR OK ÁSMUNDAR*  
*BERSERKJABANA*

By CAROLYNE LARRINGTON  
*University of Oxford*

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THIS ESSAY DISCUSSES a strange, hard-to-read female figure in one of the *fornaldarsögur*; she appears in a saga which has been little studied, but which has been both edited and translated (in *Drei Lygisögur* 1927; *ES*; *Egil and Asmund* 1985). This female oscillates between narrative modes and meanings, but she may nevertheless speak to later medieval Icelandic social and political preoccupations. My focus is on Arinnefja, the giantess-heroine of *Egils saga einhendar ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, doubly portrayed as *kerling* and *drottning*, hag and queen, a figure who thus comprehends the twin faces of the well-known Sovereignty figure, the Loathly Lady—but who is, I shall argue, a Sovereignty figure that has been radically reconceptualised (see Passmore and Carter 2007 for a general introduction).

The concept of exploring ideas of Sovereignty through personification as a female seems to have originated in Ireland. There the goddess of the land, as the figure of Sovereignty (the *flaitheas na h-Eirenn*), appears to kingly candidates as a hideously unattractive *caillech*, a hag or Loathly Lady, yet she is a creature capable of transforming herself into the loveliest of women (Herbert 1992; Eichhorn-Mulligan 2006; Mulligan 2013). Thus she embodies rule: for royal authority is hard to seize hold of, but wonderful when it is firmly in your grasp, or so Irish sources, such as the eleventh-century *Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin* (*The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Muigmedóin*), tell us. The ideologically freighted concept of the sacred marriage between the land, figured as female, and the king is well attested in Norse, particularly in skaldic poetry (Steinsland 1991). There has been some discussion of Sovereignty roles for Norse giantesses in mythological poetic contexts, but the *fornaldarsaga* giantess has not featured in such analyses (McTurk 2005; Svava Jakobsdóttir 2002; Steinsland 1991). Katja Schulz has comprehensively

charted the forms and functions of giants and giantesses in Old Norse material, showing how, in the *fornaldarsögur*, the giantess can often conform to a Helper role, of the sort identified by the Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp: the giantess-helper throws in her lot with the human heroes and allies herself with them against her own giant kindred (Schulz 2004, 211–13, 295–302; McKinnell 2005, 184–85; cf. AT 313 ‘The Girl as Helper in the Hero’s Flight’). Schulz does not, however, address the question of the Sovereignty figure; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir’s recent discussion of the figure in *fornaldarsögur* draws comparisons only between the Sovereignty figure and the bewitched princess (2013, 71–72). A good while ago now, Torfi Tulinius argued persuasively that *fornaldarsögur* are not to be understood simply as escapist heroic fantasy but, like many other examples of the European romance genre, they attend keenly to contemporary social and political issues, outlining problems and exploring solutions (Tulinius 2002; also Mundal 2003). Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir succinctly draws attention to how the genre offers ‘a unique opportunity to explore how these people [late medieval Icelandic audiences] imagined and debated social organisation and its premises, and expressed their ideologies, concerns and desires’ (2013, 6; see now also Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2014). The contemporary renegotiation of gender roles underway in fourteenth-century Iceland is thus explored within many of the *fornaldarsaga* and *riddarasaga* texts produced in that period (Bagerius 2009), but equally at stake, as I will argue, were questions of power, sovereignty and possession, and of Iceland’s relationship with the changing Scandinavian monarchy. Arinnefja focuses and distils these preoccupations by embodying a paradoxical relationship between gender and power.

### The saga

*Egils saga einhenda* was a popular saga. It survives in 69 manuscripts, of which the oldest three, written down between 1450 and 1500, are Reykjavík AM 343a 4to, AM 577 4to (which contains only the conclusion to the saga) and AM 589e 4to. In both 343 and 577 the saga keeps company with a large number of other *fornaldarsögur*. In his edition of *Egils saga einhenda* Åke Lagerholm dated the saga to around 1325, but there is no very strong evidence for such an early date.<sup>1</sup> Recent evidence suggests

<sup>1</sup> *Drei Lygisögur* 1927, xlii. Lagerholm’s dating relies on broadly stylistic reasons; if it were later, he argues, it would show more influence from the style, motifs and lexis of the *riddarasögur*. His argument in part depends on his as-

that 343 was written at Möðruvellir around the middle of the fifteenth century (Orning 2009; Sanders, ed., 2000, 43). Gottskálf Jensson has speculated from his analysis of some of the tale’s learned features that its composition might profitably be dated a good few decades later than the 1320s, for the saga shows an understanding of the gods’ characteristics which is at once self-conscious, antiquarian, comic and knowledgeable (Gottskálf Jensson 2003). It also draws on Classical material—Egill employs Odysseus’s ruse for escaping a blind and furious giant—and it exhibits a highly sophisticated understanding of narratology in its focalisation of the same events through the perspectives of different characters, as Gottskálf notes. For reasons which will be seen later, I would concur with his later dating. Below, I briefly summarise the parts of the action crucial for my analysis.

The saga opens with the kidnap of two sisters, princesses of Rússía, by a pair of monstrous animals (all citations are from *ES*). The saga’s heroes, the sworn-brothers Egill and Ásmundr, journey north in search of the missing girls and get lost while searching for food. Eventually they come to a verdant valley where there is a herd of goats. They are about to slaughter one when they are interrupted by Skinnnefja, Arinnefja’s daughter, who rebukes them for their attempted theft. Though the saga has previously described her as broader than she is tall and as round as a ball (*ES*, 332), Ásmundr addresses the girl in semi-courtly fashion, describing her as *fagra ok bólfimliga* ‘beautiful and bed-agile’. Skinnnefja does not respond to his sexual overtures, but reveals that she is daughter of the queen of Jötunheimr and recommends that the men present themselves at her mother’s cave. Ásmundr offers her a gold ring as a reward; this Skinnnefja tries to refuse, for her mother will assume that it is a *hvílutollr* ‘payment for services in bed’. Unlike many *fornaldarsaga* giantesses, Skinnnefja is represented as a modest and chaste young lady; Arinnefja’s strict discipline of her daughter, training Skinnnefja in obedience and instilling in her a keenness to maintain her chastity, indicates the troll-queen’s understanding of contemporary court mores (Schulz 2004, 166–67). Mother and daughter aim to maintain a female line of succession; Skinnnefja’s virtuous resistance of Ásmundr’s blandishments points up a concern about lineage. At the cave and here, Arinnefja is introduced by the narrative voice as a *kerling* ‘old woman’. Skinnnefja, in contrast, characterises her mother as resourceful: *hun*

sumption, now challenged by Sanders, that AM 343 can be dated to just after 1400 (Sanders, ed., 2000).

*kunna grein at gera*. Arinnejfa is extremely hospitable; she offers the men food and while they wait for their porridge to cook in what seems to be a magic cauldron, they pass the time in courtly fashion in telling tales—namely, their *ævisögur* ‘life-stories’.<sup>2</sup> Ásmundr recounts various adventures, including a fight with another sworn-brother turned *draugr* ‘walking dead’; Egill relates how he came to lose his hand, and Arinnejfa tells how she and her sisters were dispossessed of their inheritance and of the quarrel between the sisters.

Arinnejfa’s parents had been king and queen of Jötunheimr, but when they died, their father’s brothers seized the territory, while Arinnejfa and her seventeen sisters inherited the chattels: a horn, a gaming-board and a ring (*ES*, 349–51). The uncle-brothers confiscated the first two treasures, but the sisters managed to retain the ring. Arinnejfa’s older sisters were unkind to her, for she was the youngest and, she claims, the prettiest. Eventually she sacrificed a goat to Þórr to persuade him to arbitrate between the sisters, and he came to visit. Þórr subsequently slept with the eldest sister; her younger siblings envied her this distinction and murdered her the next morning. Now Þórr sleeps with each of the sisters in turn; each one is murdered next day by her jealous younger sisters until only Arinnejfa is left. Sisterly loyalty is thus subordinated to rivalry in the giant world: Þórr does not need to slaughter this giant family, as is his wont, for, in a disturbing acting-out of sibling competitiveness, the women’s murderousness eliminates all but one of Arinnejfa’s rivals. Moreover, the sisters pronounce a curse on one another: that any of them who manages to conceive by Þórr will have a child who will not thrive (*hvárki vax né vel dafna*, 350). Arinnejfa, the last survivor, wins Þórr as her sexual partner and she bears Skinnejfa to him. Of the series of sisters who are Þórr’s sexual partners, Arinnejfa is demonstrably the one who maintains a lasting relationship with the god; he continues to offer Arinnejfa his support and patronage. Significantly, Arinnejfa is the one who proves fertile, a logical consequence of her participation in the murder of her older sisters, who die before any pregnancy can bear fruit.

It is Arinnejfa’s two uncles—who are also said to be her brothers at one point in the text (*ES*, 353)—the ones who seized Jötunheimr from her and her sisters, who kidnapped the princesses, the troll-queen

<sup>2</sup> This ‘tale-within-a-tale’ construction points, as Gottskálf Jenson notes, to influence from classical or continental models; the individual *ævisögur* exhibit considerable stylistic variation.

reveals. They have quarrelled over who is to rule the kingdom and the issue will be decided at a troll assembly in the winter. Whichever brother has managed to acquire the more skillful (*hagari*) princess—not in terms of housewifely accomplishments, but as possessing a more useful treasure—will win the kingdom. It is notable that in Jötunheimr, as in contemporary Scandinavia, male succession issues are not simply determined by primogeniture, but rather are negotiated with the advice of the *stormænd* or *stormän* (as the Danish and Swedish magnate councils were called) (Layher 2010, 25–26). So too the trolls, chaired by the Lawspeaker, Skróggr, will be called upon to acclaim one or other brother as monarch at the assembly. Arinnejfa now lends the sworn-brothers her material support, she restores Egill’s missing hand, and also offers her advice and strategic insights. For Arinnejfa is always—already when the text encounters her—very clearly a *drottning* as well as a *kerling*. She evinces many desirable queenly qualities: she presides over a valley of other-worldly fertility, where she exhibits hospitality and courtesy to her human guests, demonstrates healing skills in restoring Egill’s lost hand and, in her persuasion of her uncles/brothers to admit her to the wedding feast, exercises considerable rhetorical skill.

The gold ring that Arinnejfa had managed to keep back from the predatory brothers is offered to them as a wedding gift; this strategic generosity gains her and the disguised heroes an invitation to the celebration. The guests are said to be outstanding in their grasp of courtliness (*hæverska*), while the trolls indulge in *skjarkala* ‘boorish behaviour’ and *gálaskap* ‘foolishness’ (*ES*, 358). Arinnejfa puts her superior courtly understanding to good use during the feast; wielding the authority of a great lady, she sits with the brides and coaches them to behave decorously among the disorderly troll wedding-guests, a course of action which allows her secretly to impart the rescue plan to the girls. The girls are duly rescued, the trolls slaughtered and the two heroes leave Jötunheimr with the lost princesses who will become their rescuers’ brides. Before they leave, they confirm Arinnejfa in her rule over Jötunheimr, with her ally (and possible sexual partner: *fylgjumaðr*), Lawspeaker Skróggr as adviser (*ES*, 361).<sup>3</sup> Taking the Lawspeaker as

<sup>3</sup> *Fylgjukona* carries the implication of a sexual relationship (see *ONP*, s.v.); *fylgjumaðr* is a much rarer word (three instances in the *ONP* corpus) and usually means simply ‘retainer’, but in this context it may function as a male equivalent to *fylgjukona*.

her lover ensures democratic good counsel is always at hand in Arinnefja's future dominion over her realm.

Arinnefja and Skinnnefja are invited to the heroes' weddings, held in the brides' homeland located somewhere between Russia and Garðaríki. Arinnefja returns home from the festivities with unusual gifts: an exceptionally large butter-trough and a couple of enormous sides of bacon, treasures which please her more than if she had been given her own weight in gold, the saga narrator reports (*ES*, 363). Arinnefja's role in the saga thus ends with a comic opposition of nature and culture: her joy over the huge butter-trough and the bacon may suggest a failure to understand what would constitute a properly high-status and honourable present as a take-home gift from a royal marriage. Yet, although this inversion of notions of value seems to signal a trollish topsy-turvyness, the audience is assured she possesses plenty of treasure in her chests at home.

#### *A Female Rite of Passage*

Before Arinnefja demonstrates how efficacious she is in the typical Helper function, allying herself with her new human friends, she recounts a second set of adventures (*ES*, 350–53). After her liaison with Þórr ended, she succumbed to *ergi* 'nymphomania' and conceived an extraordinary passion for King Hringr of Smáland, who had wooed and won Ingibjörg of Gautland (as it transpires, these are Egill's parents). Arinnefja determined to prevent the wedding and staged three savage attacks on the couple. First she lies down in the road and is kicked by the bride: her thighs are broken. Next, in a clearly sexualised attack, she turns into a fly, aiming to sting the bride under her clothing in her *hol* 'cavity / belly' and *nara* 'groin'. Ingibjörg sticks her knife into the fly and breaks three ribs. Finally, determining that if she cannot have him, no one shall, Arinnefja carries off the bridegroom, intending to throw him over a cliff. But when she loosens her grip on him to drop him over the edge, she finds that, by magic, she has hurled him past the curtains of the bridal bed, so that he lands next to his wife. Arinnefja is seized and is only permitted to redeem her life if she will journey into the underworld to get three treasures: a cloak that will not burn, a horn which cannot be emptied and a gaming-set that plays by itself. These violent and comic adventures draw of course on folkloric patterns; Arinnefja has unwisely matched herself against a female opponent whose magic is stronger than hers, and she is overcome. Their sexual rivalry plays out in the three stages of the marriage: the bride's approach, the formal

feast and the consummation in the marriage bed itself. Arinnefja's triple defeat is matched by a demand for triple treasures, two of which echo the chattels of which her uncles despoiled her, and the flame-proof cloak. Arinnefja's truly troll-like attack on the blameless Hringr and Ingibjörg must be punished; her untamed sexuality drives her to violence against another queen, and she comes off the loser.

During her journey to the Underworld she undergoes a series of rites of passage which both educate her and transform her into a new state (McTurk 2007; 2005, 139–48). The horn is easily acquired: Arinnefja barter away a considerable number of her goats and quantities of her gold to King Snjár in the underworld to gain it, but the king also requires that she drink twelve tuns of poisoned liquor on behalf of his queen, teaching Arinnefja a long-overdue lesson about solidarity with other women. Next Arinnefja journeys to Lúkánusfjall where her attempt to steal the gaming-board from three giant women goes awry. She fights with each of the women in turn, giving and sustaining dreadful injuries in an episode of horrifying violence (see Shildrick 2002; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013, 59–77). Arinnefja's cheek and left ear are torn off, her nose is broken, she loses some teeth and two of her fingers are bitten off. One of her opponents is blinded, a second has her breasts torn off and her guts follow, while the third giantess prudently seeks *gríð* 'a truce'. She gives Arinnefja a magic mirror in addition to yielding the gaming-board. Thus the troll-queen withstands terrible physical violence and inflicts it in turn on monstrous—more monstrous—women, indeed becoming, like her former lover, a troll-killer.

To gain the cloak, Arinnefja must descend into the very depths of the underworld, to visit the *höfðingja myrkranna* (the prince of darknesses) whom she recognises as Óðinn, for he is one-eyed.<sup>4</sup> She augments her patron-protégée relationship with Þórr by becoming Óðinn's mistress, but she must also leap over a bonfire which sears the skin off her body. The skin around her genitals is burnt away, so too perhaps the genitals themselves.<sup>5</sup> By fighting fire with fire she extinguishes her excessive sexual

<sup>4</sup> This kenning for Óðinn implies a demonic dimension, perhaps suggesting that Arinnefja experiences a hellish punishment for lechery (Schulz 2004, 194).

<sup>5</sup> Compare Egill's earlier perception in the saga's frame narrative of Arinnefja's *viðrlitamikil sköp* 'enormous-looking genitals', displayed when, as an unknown giantess, she is wrestling with her uncle for possession of the magic ring (*ES*, 347). Schulz notes the difference in characterisation between the civilised Arinnefja who helps the heroes, the burlesque heroine of her own *ævisaga* and the monstrous creature whom Egill aids in the fight (Schulz 2004, 167).

longings. Arinnejfa returns with the treasures to Gautland, but it is only at her young friends' weddings that she is finally reconciled with her former rival Ingibjörg, and it is the queen who gives her the butter-trough, while Ásmundr provides the sides of bacon.

Now that she has left sexual attractiveness and, perhaps, sexual desire behind, a post-menopausal Arinnejfa is made ready for rule over Jötunheimr when the occasion to seize power is presented by the human heroes. Arinnejfa's degendered body, site of sexuality and of violence, has now been thoroughly textually explored, both inside and out; she has been tried and tested and has been physically transformed into the *kerling* which is the text's most common appellation for her. The ritual transformation of women in Norse legendary material usually functions to convert the girl into the marriageable woman; Áslaug, daughter of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, is one such figure, as Rory McTurk has argued (McTurk 2007). Rather than passing from maiden to mother, Arinnejfa passes from mother into crone, consequently transforming herself into the Loathly Lady figure of the Sovereignty myth. But, unlike the traditional Loathly Lady who endows her male partner with royal authority and who can change herself into a desirable, docile and fertile woman if the man will acknowledge her autonomy, Arinnejfa cannot return to her former loveliness nor recover the fertility which had made the giantess an attractive consort for Þórr.

Thus Arinnejfa achieves Sovereignty through her rite of passage, but, crucially, it is a Sovereignty which she can both embody and exercise, precisely because she has reshaped herself in the Loathly Lady's aspect. She has already had a strong relationship with Þórr whose child she has borne, but her initiatory adventure in the underworld culminates in the sexual encounter with Óðinn, the patron of kings, and in the successful completion of her quest. Arinnejfa's experience may be juxtaposed with Óðinn's seduction of Gunnlöð: the underworld journey she undergoes is the female version of the kingly candidate's journey to win supernatural endorsement for his rule, an initiation argued for, in different ways, by Svava Jakobsdóttir (2002) and Gro Steinsland (1991). Arinnejfa must descend into the chthonic depths, brave mortal danger and suffer hideous mutilation in order to reconfigure her sexed body into a no-longer-sexed one, to make herself ready for dominion, specifically a dominion which she exercises rather than imparts. Like any other king, Arinnejfa proves her courage and virility in her fights with the giant women, surviving terrible physical pain and learning how to negotiate with a defeated enemy: qualities which demonstrate her qualification

for sovereign authority.<sup>6</sup> For queenship, as Louise Fradenburg notes, entails a 'need to mark its difference from the subject, which so often takes the form of an extraordinary body or sexuality' (Fradenburg 1992, 2); Arinnejfa has reconfigured her female body and extinguished her troubling sexuality, making herself ready for rule.

As a reward for her co-operation with Egill and Ásmundr, Arinnejfa is confirmed in her queenship—although this is a queenship that the text has already granted her: the title *drottning* is used both by the narrative voice and by her daughter, long before she actually gains the throne of Jötunheimr with the overthrow of her uncles. The princes who apparently bestow the kingdom on her are Ásmundr of Hálogaland and Egill of Gautland, the heirs to two crucial Scandinavian earldoms, important centres both of historical significance and contemporary political power. By the end of the saga, Egill has taken over the throne of Tattará, apparently leaving Gautland to his sister and her husband Herrauðr (Ásmundr's foster-brother), while Ásmundr reigns over Hálogaland, inherited from his father in the normal patrilineal way. Both in wild Jötunheimr and in civilised Gautland then, rule is depicted as passing through the female line—Hringr moved permanently to Gautland when he married Ingibjörg, and Herrauðr gains the throne through his marriage to Egill's sister Æsa. Moreover, Ingibjörg of Gautland, Arinnejfa's most dangerous opponent and magical double, and the giver of the trough, is also the influential queen of a central Scandinavian kingdom. Female lineage, the capacity of women to transmit inheritance rights, and Sovereignty, whether a woman can lay claim to the authority which permits her to rule in her own right, lie at the centre of the saga's imaginative focus.

#### *Maiden-Kings and Hag-Queens*

'Allegorizing ideas about masculine power through the vehicle of female flesh places sovereignty in the realm of gender power politics', Susan Carter observes (2007, 83). The Icelandic *fornaldarsögur* composed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were doing a great deal of thinking about gender and power, employing different kinds of allegorisation to problematise gender roles at different life-stages. The maiden-king sagas, depicting young, beautiful and not-yet-married princesses who

<sup>6</sup> For Schulz, Arinnejfa's ordeal turns her into 'ihrer eigenen Karikatur' (her own caricature) and this transforms her into the monstrous giantess encountered by Egill in the frame narrative (Schulz 2004, 167).



assume royal authority on the death of their fathers, flourished in this period (Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013, 107–33; Hughes 2008; Kallinck 1990). The women are ‘competent if often overbearing rulers; their kingdoms seem to thrive despite the lack of a male sovereign’ (Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013, 109). Yet the story-arc of the maiden-king saga demands that, eventually, the woman must marry the suitor who has overcome many trials to win her as his bride, and, often with an air of disgruntlement, she finally yields her body and her rule to her new husband. The maiden-king polices her own sexual desire and that of her suitors, sometimes brutally, for she knows that sexual surrender effectively terminates her authority. These sagas are not intended to address issues of actual female rule, of course, for medieval Nordic royal women simply did not inherit the crown in this way (though I shall discuss an exception below). Rather, they speak to larger questions of gender: reinforcing the patriarchal requirement to bring the female under male control; problematising issues of virginity; gesturing towards the problem of female consent (Jochens 1986), increasingly foregrounded by later medieval church politics, and allowing the women in the audience to participate in a gratifying fantasy of female autonomy.

The maiden-king pattern does intersect with the Sovereignty topos, but it can be distinguished from the older motif in suggestive ways. The maiden-king behaves in a threateningly hag-like fashion, yet she does not share the Loathly Lady’s sexual voraciousness: loss of virginity would damage both her personal sense of honour and her value to her prospective suitor. The Loathly Lady, by contrast, has, as Carter notes, no need of a hymen (Carter 2007, 85); her act of bestowing herself on the worthy candidate removes her from the commodification inherent in the exchange of women (Rubin 1975). ‘The fertility implicit in youth and beauty is not privileged in the personification; instead a compelling sexuality marks her agency in mortal affairs’ (Carter 2007, 85). Her beautiful aspect carries with it the promise of fertility and (perhaps) a guarantee of succession through the bearing of heirs. Sovereignty’s supernatural appearance to endorse a new royal candidate suggests that there must have been a previous rupture in the line of succession; given the differential rate of male mortality such a break is hardly surprising, and does not necessarily point to reproductive failure in the previous dynasty.

Arinnejfa, in contrast, transforms herself permanently—under the aegis of Óðinn—into an enduring state of loathliness. She thereby removes herself from participation in the more familiar kinds of queenship, as king’s wife and as king’s mother, analysed by Peggy

McCracken (1998). In McCracken’s important account of queens in medieval romance, the queen’s body signifies always in relation to the king: in her reproductive role, in her public display of his wealth and authority, and in her unofficial capacity to influence the king through private conversation (cf. also Larrington 2009). Once the queen’s years of beauty and fertility are over, what continues to guarantee her queenship is her status as mother-of-kings, whether of the reigning king in widowhood, or as a king’s mother in waiting. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler have proposed that, historically, the ageing or childless queen could take on the quasi-maternal nurturing role of the intercessor in order to maintain ‘order and concord in the kingdom’ (Parsons and Wheeler 1996, xii; cf. also Parsons 1996). Arinnejfa does not need her former beauty and fertility, nor does she need to display her nurturing instincts in the form of intercession in order to rule the realm to which she succeeds, for there is no king from whom she must derive her authority—and she already has a daughter. Her loathliness fixes her in a Sovereignty role in which she herself embodies, performs and fulfils kingship; through her suffering and her hard-won wisdom she triumphantly demonstrates that a woman can exercise royal authority in her own right.

#### *Late-Medieval Queenship*

Can we read Arinnejfa more directly into the late fourteenth-century political landscape of Scandinavia? Torfi Tulinius (2002, 186), Else Mundal (2003, 32) and, more recently, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013; 2014) have put forward convincing arguments that the setting of the *forndaldarsögur* in the very distant and imaginary Nordic past facilitates the exploration of contemporary ideas about political authority and about the redefinition of gender roles under way in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Elizabeth Ashman Rowe too has argued for an ideological interpretation of *Porsteins saga Víkingssonar* (Rowe 2004), while, in two interesting articles, Hans Jacob Orning has also made a case for reading the *forndaldarsögur* as fully engaged with fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Nordic politics (Orning (2009; 2010).

I want tentatively to put forward a similar conjecture: namely that Arinnejfa’s claim to Jötunheimr as an inheritance from her father and her seizure of the throne by eliminating the rival claimants would have had contemporary resonance in a late fourteenth- / early fifteenth-century context, even in far-off Iceland. The rule of queen Margareta

of Denmark (1353–1412) over all three Scandinavian kingdoms would have been quite recent history at the time that *Egils saga einhenda* was copied into the oldest manuscript we possess (Orning 2009; 2010). If, as Gottskálk Jensson suggests, we were to push forward the saga's composition date to the late fourteenth century, we could posit the saga's origin around the climax of Margareta's impressive acquisition of sovereignty, perhaps just after the years 1388–89. This is when, at the invitation of the Swedish nobility, she sent Danish troops to rid the kingdom of the tyrannical Albrecht of Mecklenburg and added the Swedish crown to the Norwegian and Danish ones that she already held. Margareta was expected—in the terms of the letter which the Swedish magnates sent to her, setting out the conditions for her assuming sovereignty over the country—to act as the *fulmetich fruwæ ogh ræet husbundæ* 'the ruling lady and proper head of the household' of Sweden until such time as she might marry (again) (Layher 2010, 163–64). Margareta was thus expected to provide Sweden and her other kingdoms with a new king: her husband. Margareta was already thirty-five in 1388, however, and she moved swiftly to resolve the succession question by adopting in 1389 her seven-year-old great-nephew, Eric of Pomerania, as her son and heir. No further debate about her prospective marriage seems to have arisen after she took power in Sweden and, although Eric was crowned king of all three kingdoms in 1397 at Kalmar, Margareta remained the *de facto* ruler until her death in 1412. Hers was, as William Layher comments, 'a unique and unprecedented status, one with no foundation in Nordic law' (2010, 25).

As this summary of Margareta's political coup in Sweden suggests, the queen negotiated her symbolic and actual roles very skilfully indeed. Her authority in Denmark and Norway after her father's death in 1375 was cemented by her status as king's daughter and, until her son Olaf died at the age of 17 in 1387, the king's mother. In Norway and Sweden, her marriage at the age of ten to Haakon VI, the king of Norway (and for two years, also the king of Sweden) gave her the consort's crown until the Swedes deposed Haakon in favour of Albrecht; Haakon had died in 1380 and Olaf had thus inherited the Norwegian crown to add to the Danish one he already held from his grandfather (see Layher 2010, 23–28 for a summary of Margareta's reign). Margareta's authority, like most queens, thus derived in part from her sexual relationship with a king and from her fertility, at that earlier stage in her life when she might be more closely identified with the beautiful aspect of the Loathly Lady figure. By the time the Swedish nobility approached her, however, and certainly by 1395,

when she finally drove the last of Albrecht's supporters and his Hanseatic League allies from Stockholm, sexual desirability and fertility lay in the past. As Ellen Caldwell argues with respect to the Loathly Lady's hag-aspect, Margareta's age and experience put her 'beyond male control and [she] is sought after, not as a sexual object, but as the source of special powers' (Caldwell 2007, 236).

I am not arguing that *Egils saga einhenda* is intended as a satire on female rule, nor indeed that it is some kind of *roman à clef*. We should not read Arinnefja as parodying or even representing Margareta; given the fantastical and often comic inflections of the genre it is extremely hard to determine whether parodic intention is present in *fornaldarsögur* (Mundal 2003, 33–34). Rather, I suggest that this is a saga which wants to think about queenship and that Arinnefja's depiction is fundamentally ideological, speaking to contemporary ideas about the paradoxes of female rule and exploring the terms on which women might acquire and exercise the right to monarchy. Hans Jacob Orning has argued persuasively for a politics of unified Nordic identity in the *fornaldarsögur* preserved in AM 343 (Orning 2009). He notes how these sagas suppress politically motivated conflicts between Nordic magnates, preferring to narrate tales of inter-Viking skirmishes; geopolitical aggression is projected outwards onto the distant territories of Bjarmaland and Garðaríki, a move which, Orning proposes, figures external challenges to the Kalmar Union's power (2009, 732–35). The saga's geographical scope suggests that, from the distant perspective of the margin, Icelanders might see the internal politics of Jötunheimr as speaking to those of the Kalmar Union. To contend that the two territories should be identified with one another, particularly in the absence of more secure evidence for dating *Egils saga einhenda*, is to push the comparisons too far. Yet this saga is thinking interestingly about queens, as in some ways aberrant, but by no means as unimaginable. Queenship is of course constructed—and reconstructed—through the discourses of male power and authority; nevertheless Arinnefja's fantastic struggles and negotiations with patriarchal forces, but more significantly her victory over herself, over her troubling female body, fascinatingly foreground late medieval Scandinavian ideas of gender and power.

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## HISTORY AND FICTION IN THE KINGS' SAGAS: THE CASE OF HARALDR HARÐRÁÐI

By ALISON FINLAY

*Birkbeck, University of London*

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**H**ARALDR HARÐRÁÐI WAS THE OTHER INVADER of England in 1066. If he had been as successful in his confrontation with the English king Harold Godwinsson at Stamford Bridge as he had been just five days earlier when he defeated a northern English army at Fulford Gate near York, English history might have spoken of the Norwegian rather than the Norman Conquest. Alternatively, if the English Harold had not been obliged to divert his forces from the anticipated Norman invasion to put his troops through a remarkable forced march to confront Haraldr near York, the Battle of Hastings only three weeks later might have had a different outcome. The end of Haraldr's life on English soil is recorded in the Icelandic Kings' Sagas from the thirteenth century, but also in earlier texts: the contemporary *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Anglo-Norman sources from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries.

At the other end of Haraldr's life, too, he was involved in events that are also verified by historical records from outside Scandinavia. A period of exile before coming to the throne was a common experience for many Norwegian rulers whose lives are chronicled in the Kings' Sagas; thus St Óláfr's early campaigns in England are recorded, as is Óláfr Tryggvason's being sold into slavery in Estonia; Haraldr harðráði's immediate predecessor and for a short time joint ruler, Magnús inn góði, spent his childhood in Russia before being recalled at the age of eleven to be reinstated as king as the heir of his father St Óláfr. In Haraldr's case, after escaping to Russia after the Battle of Stiklastaðir, he made his way to Byzantium where he served in the Varangian guard for several years, and this is recorded in some detail in Greek sources.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The principal source is the *Consilia et Narrationes* of Kekaumenos, a composite text, from the mid- to late 1070s. For the Greek text and English translation by Charlotte Roueché see <http://www.ancientwisdoms.ac.uk/library/kekaumenos-consilia-et-narrationes/>. The relevant passage is also cited in Page 1995, 104.

In many ways, then, Haraldr is a well-attested historical figure. His representation in the Norse Kings' Sagas, however, is elaborated into a colourful biography, best known as one of the sagas in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, but found in its fullest form in the older text *Morkinskinna*, which was used as a source both by Snorri and by the author of *Fagrskinna*. In these texts, written about 160 years after Haraldr's death, his adventures in Byzantium are embellished with anecdotes many of which can be shown to derive from internationally known folktales, including an episode that seems to be a version of the ancient tale of the Trojan Horse. Additionally, Haraldr's probably relatively humble position in the Varangian guard is routinely exaggerated to that of its leader (Gísli Sigurðsson 2004, 255), just as he is said, undoubtedly falsely, to have been the leader of King Jaroslaf's army during his earlier stay in Russia, although the Norse sources themselves say that he was only fifteen years old at the time of his escape from Stiklastaðir. The account of Haraldr's getting the better of the great Byzantine general Georgios Maniakes, or Gyrgir as the Norse sources name him, evoked this comment from Benedikt Benedikz in his revision of the classic history of the Varangian guard by Sigfús Blöndal (Benedikz 1978, 66):

There is little doubt in the present reviser's mind that Haraldr as a somewhat undisciplined junior was rather frequently carpeted by the chief, and that the smart repartee and spectacular actions contained in *Haraldar saga* are much-expanded self-justifications, originally told by Haraldr and blown up by his flatterers.

One function of the Byzantium episode as it is told in *Heimskringla* and other sources is to endow Haraldr with enormous wealth, so that when he returns to the North on hearing of the restoration to the throne of the eleven-year-old Magnús, son of St Óláfr, he is able literally to buy his way into a kingdom. Blöndal considered it not improbable that Haraldr's rewards as a Varangian would have been significant (1954, 139), but the reputation of Byzantium as the locus of great wealth supports its depiction in the Kings' Sagas as a region where the fantastic is more acceptable than on more familiar northern soil.

Magnús's empty coffers, depleted by Óláfr's defeat followed by a succession of wars against the Danes, as well as his vulnerable position as a king whose reign began in his minority, obliged him to agree to joint rule with Haraldr. On the death of Magnús one year later Haraldr became sole king, and ruled, according to *Ágrip* and other sources, for a further nineteen years before his doomed expedition to Britain. Accounts of his reign include the progress of the long-standing war against King Sveinn of

Denmark, against whom Haraldr pursues his claim as Magnús's successor despite Magnús's own attempt to insist on a reconciliation, and savage reprisals against major barons such as Einarr þambarskelfir and Kálfr Arnason, who resist Haraldr's authority. Interspersed with these themes in the fullest source, *Morkinskinna*, are several digressions or *þættir*, some certainly and others probably fictional. Many of these recount Haraldr's encounters with Icelanders, some of them poets who are famous or become famous in Haraldr's service, others insignificant figures such as Auðunn from the Vestfirðir, who brought King Sveinn a bear from Greenland. *Morkinskinna* is dated to about 1220, but the original manuscript does not survive; *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* clearly used *Morkinskinna* as a source, following it extremely closely overall, but do not include the *þættir*. It has long been debated whether these stories were part of the original *Morkinskinna*, to be stripped out by the more historically critical authors of later histories, or whether they were added in the course of the text's transmission. I will return to the question in a consideration of what purpose they serve in the surviving text of *Morkinskinna*.

Thus the history of Haraldr harðráði can be neatly divided into three segments: his early exploits in Byzantium, the period of his kingship in Norway, and his invasion of England. I am going to consider some elements from each of these three segments, in view of the relationship between historical basis and fictional additions, as well as the extent to which the authors' attitude to the historicity of their material can be determined. But first, I will review the place of the history of Haraldr within the overall structure of the Kings' Sagas.

#### *From Genealogy to Biography*

In the Kings' Saga texts that survive, as well as their earlier sources that do not, a progression can be traced from a phase in which genealogy was the main concern to the biographical structuring of Snorri's *Heimskringla*, in which the material is divided into separate sagas of each individual king. Finnur Jónsson, who edited *Morkinskinna* in 1932, believed it to be put together from a collection of earlier royal biographies (1932, xxxviii). Gustav Indrebø contested this, arguing that it was constructed by a single author; in the parallel case of *Fagrskinna*, though, Indrebø's own analysis posited that its sources consisted of a series of individual sagas (Indrebø 1917). It is only after the merging of the genealogical strand of King's Saga writing with the hagiographical tradition that had developed alongside it, though, that we can demonstrate the evolution of the historical compendia from individual biographies. It is recognised that Snorri Sturluson's saga

of St Óláfr in *Heimskringla* is a fairly lightly edited version of his earlier *Separate saga of St Óláfr*. Similarly, Oddr Snorrason's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason is known to have been an early text, dated to about 1190, albeit in Latin—the surviving version being a later translation, made probably about ten years later, into Icelandic.<sup>2</sup> But there is little evidence of earlier biographical sources for the other material in *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*. The earlier texts that we either have or know of emerge rather from the genealogical tradition, supplemented by skaldic verses by earlier, often contemporary poets and the prose anecdotes that in some cases may have accompanied these.

An example of these earlier chronological works is *Nóregs konungatal*, a poem written in honour of the Icelandic chieftain Jón Loftsson, foster-father of Snorri Sturluson. Jón had a stake in Norwegian royal genealogy as a direct descendant of Haraldr harðráði himself; his mother Þóra was the daughter of King Magnús berfættr. Written in about 1190, this is not the oldest surviving genealogical poem, but it does claim, and is generally accepted, to be based on an earlier historical text, now lost, by Sæmundr inn fróði Sigfússon from the early twelfth century. Judith Jesch has identified the poem as evidence that 'one of the aims of historical research in the twelfth century was to link Haraldr harðráði with the main line of the Norwegian dynasty, descended from Haraldr hárfagri' (1996, 142). The poem catalogues the rulers of Norway, specifying their descent from Haraldr hárfagri. After recounting the death of Magnús góði, Haraldr harðráði's predecessor and, for a short time, joint ruler, the poem sums up (Gade 2009, 784):

36. Nú hefk talt  
tíu landreka,  
þás hverr vas  
frá Haraldí.  
Inntak svá  
ævi þeira,  
sem Sæmundr  
sagði inn fróði.

Now I have enumerated ten sovereigns, each of whom was descended from Haraldr [Finehair]. I recounted their lives just as Sæmundr inn fróði ('the Learned') said.

In the accounts of the earlier kings listed in *Nóregs konungatal*, there is a particular emphasis, as this stanza says in summary, on their descent

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of theories concerning the date of Oddr's saga, see Andersson 2003, 4.

from Haraldr Finehair. The poem emphasises his role as the first to rule alone over Norway (Gade 2009, 765):

6. Náði hann  
fyr Nóregi  
øllum fyrst  
einn at ráða.

He was the first to rule alone over all Norway.

and reiterates the descent of subsequent rulers from Haraldr (766):

7. Því kómr hvers  
til Haralds síðan  
skjöldungs kyn  
ins skararfagra.

Therefore the kin of each ruler since is traced to Haraldr the Fiae-haired.

These stanzas insist on the name Haraldr. Hákon góði is named as *Haralds arfi* 'Haraldr's heir' (st. 15); stanza 16 plays on the death of Haraldr gráfeldr at the hands of his *nafnar* 'namesakes' Haraldr Gormsson of Denmark and Gull-Haraldr; St Óláfr is referred to as son of Haraldr inn grenzki (st. 28) and, after his death, as *Haralds arfi* (Haraldr's heir) (st. 31), which he is in two senses—descendant of Haraldr hárfagri as well as of his own father. The poem gives little further information about each king beyond his regnal years, the place of his death and where his body is interred. To some extent this emphasis spills over into the prose histories—certainly the synoptic histories such as *Ágrip*, which says nothing about Haraldr's adventures in Byzantium other than to report his return from 'Garðr' well provided with money and treasures, but explains in some detail his entitlement to rule Norway because of his descent, and specifies the nineteen years of Haraldr's sole rule after Magnús's death (Bjarni Einarsson 1985, 36–39). Traces of this emphasis remain in the more expanded histories. Theodore Andersson identified as an authorial trait of *Morkinskinna* 'a consistent lack of interest in chronology throughout the book' (Andersson and Gade 2000, 74). But even *Morkinskinna* pauses at the point where Haraldr returns from Byzantium, to note his descent, distinct from that of Óláfr and his son Magnús, from Haraldr hárfagri (*Morkinskinna*, I 82):

Ætt Haralds er sú sögð at verit hafi at Haraldr hárfagri átti son þann er kallaðr var Sigurðr hrísi. Hann var faðir Hálfðanar, fōður Sigurðar sýrs, fōður Haralds. Þessir langfēðgar allir vāru konungar ā Hringariki i Nōregi. Sigurðr sýr ātti Ástu, dóttur Guðbrands, er āðr hafði ātta Haraldr grenski. Þau āttu fimm bōrn eða fleiri. Var Guðrōðr elztr, þā Hálfðan, þar næst var Ingibjörg, þā Gunnhildr; Haraldr var yngstr.

Haraldr's genealogy is said to have been that Haraldr hárfagri (Finehair) had a son who was named Sigurðr hrísi (Illegitimate). He was the father of Hálfðan, the father of Sigurðr sýr (Sow), the father of Haraldr. These ancestors were all kings of Hringaríki in Norway. Sigurðr sýr was married to Ásta, the daughter of Guðbrandr, who had previously been married to Haraldr grenski. They had five or more children. Guðrøðr was the oldest, then Hálfðan, then next Ingibjörg, then Gunnhildr; Haraldr was the youngest.

This asserts that Haraldr's claim to rule Norway was not that he shared the same mother as Óláfr helgi, but his descent in his own right from Haraldr hárfagri, a claim that modern historians consider to be a twelfth- and thirteenth-century construction.<sup>3</sup> In the terser *Fagrskinna* and in *Heimskringla*, these genealogical concerns fall away. In *Nóregs konungatal*, they are expressed as follows (Gade 2009, 785–87):

38. Þats mér sagt,  
at Sigurðr hrísi  
Haralds sonr  
héti forðum.  
Vas Hálfðan  
Hrísa arfi  
en Sigurðr sýrr  
sonr Hálfðanar.

I have been told that Haraldr's son was called Sigurðr hrísi ('Illegitimate') in olden times. Hálfðan was the heir of Hrísi, and Sigurðr sýrr ('Sow') the son of Hálfðan.

39. Þá gat son  
Sigurðr ok Ásta,  
þanns Haralds  
heiti átti.  
Sá réð einn  
allvitr konungr  
viðri fold  
vetr tuttugu,  
áðr herfǫr  
hilmir gerði  
til Englands  
með ofstopa.  
Felldu vestr  
í vápnþrumu  
enskir menn  
Óláfs bróður.

<sup>3</sup> See Krag 1989; Sawyer and Sawyer 1993, 61; Joan Turville-Petre 1978–81, 8–10; Jesch 1996, 139–40.

Then Sigurðr and Ásta begot a son who bore Haraldr's name. That very wise king ruled the land alone for twenty years, before the lord made a war-expedition to England with insolence. English men killed Óláfr's brother [= Haraldr] in the west in weapon-thunder [= battle].

True to the genealogical tradition, this says nothing about the events of Haraldr's reign or his adventures in Byzantium, but enumerates the number of years of his reign and the manner of his death. The reference to his *ofstopi* 'insolence' I will return to later.

*Nóregs konungatal* treats Haraldr's reign as a new beginning. At the inception of a new branch of the dynasty, this Haraldr takes on the mantle of his ancestor as he shares his name: *þanns Haralds heiti átti*. The two Haralds were confused in tradition. The nickname *harðráði* is not used in the Old Norse texts until it is added in chapter headings in thirteenth-century manuscripts of *Heimskringla*, but in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and Anglo-Norman texts the later Haraldr is regularly named as *harfager* or *arfager*; given that these sources are older than the Kings' Sagas, the earliest use of the nickname *hárfagri* refers to the later Haraldr, now called *harðráði*; and the story given in *Haralds saga hárfagra* to explain the nickname, that the king vowed never to cut or comb his hair until he had unified Norway, looks like a later romantic invention. Although not found in Norse texts, this confusion raises the possibility that Haraldr *harðráði* acquired reflected glory through an identification with his ancestor, the founding father of the dynasty; alternatively, as Jesch thinks probable, that '*hárfagri* was originally the cognomen of Haraldr Sigurðarson and that it was transferred to Haraldr Hálfðanarson at the time when historical research was establishing the latter as the ancestor of the former' (Jesch 1996, 144). I will return to the nickname *harðráði* and its connotations at the end of the lecture.

With Haraldr *harðráði*'s reign the *Nóregs konungatal* poet's attitude to his material changes. Just before the stanza introducing Haraldr's genealogy, he announces (Gade 2009, 785):

37. Þós þess máls,  
es ek mæla hygg,  
meiri hlutr  
miklu eptir.  
Nú skal þat  
þaðan af greiða  
jöfra kyns,  
es enn lifir.

Yet there is a much greater part left of the story which I intend to tell. I shall now, henceforth, present that (story) of the kin of princes which still lives.



The ‘still-living kin of princes’ is the Oddaverjar family in Iceland, directly descended from Haraldr harðráði himself. This Haraldr’s reign ends the catalogue derived from the written testimony of Sæmundr, and begins an era where information is derived from the memory of traceable informants, still living or descended from those who witnessed the events. In Snorri Sturluson’s preface to *Heimskringla* he famously puts forward his methodology for the use of skaldic stanzas as sources, but also outlines the oral informants of his source Ari Þorgilsson, who

var . . . forvitri ok svá gamall, at hann var fœddr næsta vetr eptir fall Haralds konungs Sigurðarsonar. Hann ritaði, sem hann sjálf segir, ævi Nóregskonunga eptir sögu Odds Kolssonar, Hallssonar af Síðu, en Oddr nam at Þorgeiri afráðskoll, þeim manni, er vitr var ok svá gamall, at hann bjó þá í Niðarnesi, er Hákon jarl inn ríki var drepinn . . . Því var eigi undarligt, at Ari væri sannfróðr at fornum tíðendum bæði hér ok útan lands, at hann hafði numit at gömlum mǫnnum ok vitrum, en var sjálfr nám-gjarn ok minnigr. (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, I 6–7)

. . . was very wise, and so old that he was born in the year after the death of King Haraldr Sigurðarson (Haraldr harðráði). He wrote, as he himself says, lives of the kings of Norway according to the account of Oddr son of Kolr, son of Hallr on Síða, and Oddr learned them from Þorgeirr afráðskollr (Payment-Chap), a wise man and so aged that he was living in Niðarnes when Jarl Hákon inn ríki (the Great) was killed . . . So it was not surprising that Ari was accurately informed about past events both here [in Iceland] and abroad, since he had learned from old and wise people, and was himself eager to learn and retentive.<sup>4</sup>

It is assumed that Sæmundr’s lost history, the source for *Nóregs konungatal*, must have ended with the death of Magnús góði, so that from then on the poet was forced to draw on oral report: þat’s *mér sagt* ‘I am told’ (st. 38), *frák* ‘I heard’ (sts 43, 56), *þat’s þá sagt* ‘then it is said’ (st. 45), *þat veit hverr* ‘everyone knows’ (st. 55). This confers a new note of modernity on Haraldr’s reign, as the poem enters an era of oral report, where the reliability of material is vouched for by its being traceable to named informants.

In the Kings’ Sagas as in the Sagas of Icelanders, the delineation of character is largely constructed through a form of parallelism or contrast. In *Nóregs konungatal* a structural parallel implies a similarity between Haraldr harðráði and his claimed ancestor Haraldr hárfagri. Beyond this, though, his history immediately follows that of St Óláfr and his son Magnús, nicknamed inn góði ‘the Good’ and deriving an aura of blessedness from the miracles of his father; the harshness and the determined

<sup>4</sup> Translations from *Heimskringla* are cited throughout from Finlay and Faulkes, 2011–; this quotation, 2011, 4–5.

secularism attributed to Haraldr is highlighted by the contrast with the hagiographical glow surrounding Óláfr and his son. Elizabeth Rowe has analysed in detail the use of traditional techniques of saga composition in *Heimskringla*, ‘parallelism and antithesis’ so that ‘Haraldr is both linked and contrasted with St Óláfr and Magnús’, a pattern that she argues is actually increased by the changes made by Snorri to his sources *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna* (Rowe 1994, 3–4). The *þættir* in *Morkinskinna* often act in the same comparative way: Haraldr’s harshness and unpredictability are contrasted with the greater reasonableness of his nephew Magnús in *Hreiðars þátt*, and his notorious stinginess with the generosity and piety of King Sveinn Úlfsson of Denmark in *Auðunar þátt vestfirzka* (see Miller 2008, 62–66).

### Byzantine Beginnings

We return now to Haraldr’s adventures with the Varangian guard in Byzantium. This body of élite Scandinavian warriors served as bodyguards and mercenaries to the Byzantine emperors between the tenth and the fourteenth centuries, and Constantinople is frequently invoked in the sagas as the destination of Icelandic heroes such as Bolli Bollason in *Laxdæla saga*. In Bolli’s case this may be a romantic fiction, but Haraldr’s presence there is attested by Greek sources including the late-eleventh-century ‘Advice to the Emperor’ which refers to him as Araltes, brother of Julavos, and says that he entered the service of the Emperor, bringing with him a company of five hundred men (Benedikz 1978, 57–58). He campaigned for the Emperor in Sicily and Bulgaria; being refused permission to leave he escaped in secret to return to his own country where he became king in place of his brother. This is the bare bones of the romantic tale woven in *Morkinskinna*, and followed in its essentials by *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, in which Haraldr adopts the name of Norðbrikt to conceal his noble origin; soon comes to be the leader rather than a lowly member of the Varangian guard; gets the better through a stratagem of the great general Georgios Maniakes, who is buffoonishly caricatured in the Norse texts; uses cunning ploys, clearly derived from widely occurring folktales, in besieging towns in Sicily; launches a successful attack on Jerusalem; and eventually takes the lead in blinding the Emperor, Michael V, in the course of an uprising. To this last Sigfús Blöndal, historian of the Varangians, is inclined to give credence, suggesting that the victors in the uprising had the deposed emperor and his uncle blinded, their agents in this unpleasant task being Varangians commanded by Haraldr (Blöndal 1954, 158).

The elements in this narrative, then, include garbled and exaggerated incidents with some historical basis, alongside tales of pure fantasy concerning Haraldr's adventures. An example of the latter is one of the sequence of sieges that Haraldr successfully lays against towns in Sicily. Haraldr's device is to pretend to be ill, and give detailed instructions to his men that they should adopt a dismal appearance, claim to the townspeople that he is dead, and ask permission to carry the body in a coffin through the town gate to inter it at a church in the town. They are to ask that twelve men should accompany the body as befits the funeral of a nobleman; once in the town, Haraldr says, *ek hætti til þess hvé skjótr ek verð ór kistunni* 'I will take a chance on how quickly I can get out of the coffin.'<sup>5</sup> All goes according to plan, except that Haraldr himself acts as a pall-bearer rather than occupying the coffin, perhaps because adopting such a prone position would be damaging to his warlike image, and the town is duly taken by the twelve Vikings, wearing mailcoats under their mourning garments. The story is clearly a reformulation of the Homeric story of the Trojan horse, and is dismissed by Benediktz as a 'version of an itinerant folktale' (1978, 72). The same story is told in the eleventh century by Dudo of St Quentin about a Viking by the name of Hasting who besieges the town of Luna, and is mentioned by Simon Coupland among legends used by Frankish historians to promote a stereotype of fiendish cunning attributed to the Vikings (2003, 198). This is certainly the contribution of the Sicilian siege sequence to Haraldr's legend, in which he acts with a resourcefulness offset by the claimed defeatism of the Byzantine general Gyrgir.

The attitude of the Norse sources towards this material can be gauged by the unusual number of what might be called truth claims in this part of *Morkinskinna* and the texts derived from it. Carl Phelpstead has written recently about the element of fantasy in Oddr Snorrason's *Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason*, identifying devices used by the author to validate the historicity of his narrative, which themselves give an indication of elements that the audience must have been expected to find potentially implausible (Phelpstead 2012). Relevant to this is the claim in *Yngvars saga víðfjrla* that it too was written by Oddr Snorrason. *Yngvars saga*

<sup>5</sup> *Morkinskinna*, I 104. Quotations from Kings' Saga texts are usually from *Morkinskinna*, as the fullest and earliest of the three main compendia, usually quite closely followed by *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*. Verses are cited from *Heimskringla* where possible, since the manuscripts of *Heimskringla* are older, and likely to be more reliable, than those of *Morkinskinna*.

is a text full of implausibility that has been classed as a *fornaldarsaga*, although its events take place in the early eleventh century rather than in the unspecified ancient times that the generic label assumes. Phelpstead explores the boundaries between what seems to a modern audience to be pure entertainment, and what a medieval audience would accept as historical. As he says (2012, 41),

*Yngvars saga* is set mainly in 'Russia', to the east of Scandinavia, and . . . many . . . of the potentially 'fantastic' elements in Oddr's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason are also located outside Scandinavia. There are grounds for thinking, therefore, that what a medieval Icelander would find implausible (fantastic) in a Scandinavian context might be much more plausible when located elsewhere . . . To this extent, plausibility turns out to be contingent on geographical setting.

Byzantium, as already noted, is known to be the source of enormous wealth; possibly its other attractions, too, were considered more plausible by virtue of their exotic location.

*Morkinskinna* makes clear several times that the ultimate source for Haraldr's early adventures is Haraldr himself. After his escape from Stiklastaðir we are told, *heðan frá er sú frásögn um farar Haralds er hann, Haraldr, sagði sjálf, ok þeir menn er honum fylgðu* 'from now on, the story of Haraldr's travels is what Haraldr himself, and the men who accompanied him, told' (*Morkinskinna*, I 84). It refers to the Scandinavian presence in the Varangian guard: *mikill fjöldi var þar áðr fyrir Norðmanna, er þeir kalla Væringja* 'a great multitude of Norsemen were already there, whom they call Væringjar' (88), with a curious aside about an Icelander, Már Hunróðsson, who tried without success to make contact with Haraldr, perhaps suggesting an element of factionalism among the Norsemen; but the only two followers of Haraldr who are mentioned by name, and they are mentioned several times, are the Icelanders Halldórr Snorrason and Úlfr Óspaksson. A number of incidents are supported by citations from poets, notably the prolific Þjóðólfr Árnórsson whose poem *Sexstefja* documents the whole of Haraldr's career; but there is no suggestion that these poets were eyewitnesses. In fact the text often emphasises that Haraldr's own account is the source for the verses. A verse by Þjóðólfr refers to Haraldr's capture of eighty towns in Serkland, which the author of *Morkinskinna* apparently identifies as Africa (probably because of a reference made in a second verse, preserved only in *Fagrskinna*). The preamble notes that *Þat er talt eptir fyrirsögn Haralds konungs at hann tók átta tigu borga á sitt vald* 'It is reckoned according to King Haraldr's account that he took eighty towns into his power', a number repeated in the verse itself (I 93):

Tógu má tekna segja  
 . . . á Serklandi  
 . . . átta  
 . . . borga.

It can be reported that eighty cities were captured in Serkland.

A verse by Stúfr inn blindi ‘the Blind’ about Haraldr’s expedition to Jerusalem is introduced by the statement, *Pat sannar Stúfr er heyrt hafði Harald konung frá segja þessum tíðendum* ‘This is confirmed by Stúfr, who had heard King Haraldr recount these events’ (I 107; Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, III 83; see Gade 2009, 352):

Fór ofrhugi enn øfri  
 eggdjarfr und sik leggja,  
 fold vas víga valdi  
 virk, Jórsala ór Girkjum.  
 Ok með ærnu ríki  
 óbrunnin kom gunnar  
 heimil jörð und herði.

The very bold one, prevailing,<sup>6</sup>  
 advanced from the Greeks’ country,  
 blade-brave—the land bowed to the raiser  
 of battles<sup>7</sup>—to win Jórsali.  
 And for his ample power  
 as his due to the battle-strengtheners<sup>8</sup>  
 the land unburned was delivered.

*Morkinskinna* seems to go out of its way to emphasise that Stúfr’s account is not that of an eyewitness by including, at a much later point when Haraldr is established as king in Norway, the story now called *Stúfs þáttur*. This relates the king’s first meeting with this blind Icelandic poet. According to the editors of *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, this encounter is to be dated to about 1060, just six years before the king’s death, and probably about twenty years after the journey to Jerusalem (Gade 2009, 350). The emphasis in the *þáttur* is on entertainment; the poet displays the stereotypical impudence of the visiting Icelander, laughing at the traditional insulting connotations of the nickname *sýr* ‘Sow’ of the king’s father, and proving his competence as a poet—rather unusually, by reciting *drápur* and *flokkar* by other poets rather than his own—before asking permission to compose a poem in honour of the king; it is to this

<sup>6</sup> *inn øfri*: ‘the one who had the upper hand’.

<sup>7</sup> *víga valdir*: ‘cause, controller of battles’, warrior.

<sup>8</sup> *gunnar herðir*: ‘hardener of war’, warrior.

*drápa* that the verse cited here is assumed to belong. The story lays out Stúfr’s credentials as a poet, and attributes to him the independent-mindedness of most Icelandic visitors, but clearly the truth-value of the story of Haraldr’s expedition to Jerusalem depends on the king’s own report. The verse itself confirms the claim in the prose that Haraldr subjugated Jerusalem, rather than simply visiting it as a pilgrim, or as leader of an armed guard protecting other pilgrims as Blöndal (1954, 121) considers more plausible, whether this exaggeration was the king’s own assertion or the poet’s flattering embellishment.

Haraldr’s acquisition of enormous wealth, too, has a romantic ring to it, and is also attested by the king’s own report (*Morkinskinna*, I 94):

Norðbrikt dvalði marga vetr í Affríka ok fekk þar mikit gull ok marga dýrgripi, en fé þat allt sem hann fekk, ok eigi þurfti hann at hafa til liðskostar, sendi hann með trúnaðarmönnum sínum norðr í Hólmgarð í vald ok gæzlu Jarisleifs konungs. Ok drósk þar svá mikit ógrynni fjár saman at eigi mátti morkum telja, sem líkligt má þykkja, er hann herjaði þann hlut heimsins er nær var auðgast at gulli ok dýrgripum. Svá er þó at hann hefði eigi barizk við búkarla, því at hann segir sjálfr at hann barðisk við konunginn sjálfan í Affríka ok fekk sigr ok eignask víða veldi hans.

Norðbrikt spent many years in Africa and acquired there much gold and many treasures. All the money that he did not need for his military expenditures he sent with his confidential messengers north to Kiev for safekeeping with King Jaroslaf. Such a huge amount of money was collected that it could not be weighed. That was not unlikely since he was raiding that part of the world that had virtually the greatest store of gold and treasures. It was not the case that he fought with cowherds, for he said himself that he fought against the king in Africa and won the victory, so that he took possession of a great part of the realm.

On the historically significant event of the blinding of the Byzantine emperor, *Morkinskinna* cites one half stanza by Þórarinn (Skeggjason) and a stanza by Haraldr’s chief poet Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, both referring to the blinding of the *stólpengill* ‘emperor’. *Morkinskinna* adds (I 113):

Í þessum tveimr drápum Haralds ok morkum oðrum hans kvæðum er getit þessa stórvirkis, ok eigi þarf orð at gera hjá því at sjálfan Grikkjakonung blindaði hann. Jafn vel mætti nefna til þess greifa einnhvern eða hertoga, ef þat þœtti sannara, en í öllum kvæðum Haralds konungs segir þetta eina lund.

In these two *drápur* and many others about Haraldr, there is mention of this deed, and there is no need to waste words on the fact that he blinded the Byzantine emperor himself. Some count or duke could have been named in this context if that had seemed closer to the truth, but all of the poems about Haraldr coincide on this point.

*Heimskringla* has a slightly different version of this avowal, interestingly privileging the king's report over that of his poets (Bjarni Aðalbarnarson 1941–51, III 87):

Í þessum tveimr drápum Haralds ok mörgum öðrum kvæðum hans er getit þess, at Haraldr blindaði sjálfan Grikkjakonung. Nefna mætti þeir til þess hertoga eða greifa eða annars konar tignarmenn, ef þeir vissi, at þat væri sannara, því at sjálfr Haraldr flutti þessa sögn ok þeir menn aðrir, er þar váru með honum.

In these two *drápur* about Haraldr and many other poems about him it is mentioned that Haraldr blinded the actual king of the Greeks. They could have named for this role commanders or counts or any other men of high rank if they were certain that that would be more accurate, for it was Haraldr himself that transmitted this story, together with the other men that were there with him.

It is worth pointing out here that this passage is confirming the identity of the victim of the blinding, not, as the Penguin translation of the saga has it, asserting that Haraldr himself did the blinding: this is based on a mistaken translation of 'sjálfan' (Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson 1966, 62). Blöndal argues that the evidence of Haraldr's poets, as contemporary witnesses, should be taken seriously as historical sources (Blöndal 1954, 113). But none of them offers eyewitness testimony. There is no evidence that any poet was actually with Haraldr in Byzantium. Blöndal and Benedikz's speculation that the poet Valgarðr ór Vellir 'appears to have been in Haraldr's company during his last years in Byzantine service' (Benedikz 1978, 68; Blöndal 1954, 128) is unfounded; little or nothing is known of the life of this poet. Poems such as Þjóðólfr's *Sexsteffja*, moreover, which covers the whole of Haraldr's career including his invasion of England twenty years later, must necessarily date from considerably after the event even if they were recited to Haraldr or his sons, which Snorri cites as the criterion for the most historically reliable poetry.

Considerably later in *Morkinskinna*, after the death of his co-ruler Magnús, there is an assessment of Haraldr (*Morkinskinna*, I 204–05):

Haraldr konungr var ríkr maðr ok stjórnsamr innanlands, spekingr at viti, ok þat er vitra manna mál at engi maðr hafi verit djúpvitrari á qllum Norðrlöndum en Haraldr konungr ok manna ráðsnjallastr, svá at honum varð aldri ráðfátt. Hann var sterkr maðr at afli ok vígr hverjum manni betr. Hann var fullhugi ok mikill á framkvæmð verka sinna, sem nú hefir lengi frá verit sagt, ok liggja þó niðri ósagðir miklu fleiri hlutir, þeir sem ósagðir eru af hans afreksverkum, ok kemr mest til þess ófróðleikr várr ok þat með at vér viljum eigi rita vitnisburðarlausar sögur, þótt vér höfum heyrt þær frásagnir, því at oss þykkir betra at heðan af sé við aukit heldr en þetta sama þurfi aprt at taka. Er mikil saga frá Haraldri konungi í kvæði sett, þau er honum samtíða váru um hann kveðin,

ok færðu honum sjálfum þeir sem ortu. Var Haraldr konungr því mikill vinr þeira at honum þótti gott lofit, því at hann var þessa heims höfðingi inn mesti.

King Haraldr was a powerful man and a firm ruler within the land; he had a profound intelligence, and it is the opinion of well-informed men that no one in all the northern lands was more penetrating than King Haraldr. He was the most resourceful of men so that he was never without a remedy. He was physically powerful and superior to everyone in arms. He was a valiant warrior and very successful in his accomplishments, as has been recounted at length. But by far the greatest number of his deeds have not been told. That can be explained chiefly from our lack of information and our reluctance to write down unattested tales even if we have heard some stories, for it seems better to us that our account should be supplemented in the future instead of our being obliged to retract this version. A great narrative of King Haraldr is recorded in the poems composed during his lifetime, and they were recited to him by those who composed them. King Haraldr was a great friend to them because he appreciated their praise, being, as he was, the greatest chieftain in the world.

This reference to a lack of information and reluctance to write down unattested tales may be an example of the modesty topos commonly invoked by medieval historians, so we should probably not be too dismayed to have lost the many tales that the author claims to have omitted. It shows yet again the author's marking of the reliability of his material, as he does repeatedly in Haraldr's biography. Interesting to note is the suggestion that the poems about King Haraldr in themselves comprise a saga about the king; also the assurance that 'they were recited to him by those who composed them', echoing Snorri's statement in his Prologue to *Heimskringla*, that

tókum vér þar mest dæmi af, þat er sagt er í þeim kvæðum, er kveðin váru fyrir sjálfum höfðingjunum eða sonum þeira. Tókum vér þat allt fyrir satt, er í þeim kvæðum finnsk um ferðir þeira eða orrostur. En þat er hátt skálda at lofa þann mest, er þá eru þeir fyrir, en engi myndi þat þora at segja sjálfum honum þau verk hans, er allir þeir, er heyrði, vissi, at hégómi væri ok skrök, ok svá sjálfr hann. Þat væri þá háð, en eigi lof. (Bjarni Aðalbarnarson 1941–51, I 5)

we have mostly used as evidence what is said in those poems that were recited before the rulers themselves or their sons. We regard as true everything that is found in those poems about their expeditions and battles. It is indeed the habit of poets to praise most highly the one in whose presence they are at the time, but no one would dare to tell him to his face about deeds of his which all who listened, as well as the man himself, knew were falsehoods and fictions. That would be mockery and not praise. (Finlay and Faulkes 2011, 3–4)

Snorri's reliance on the willingness of a king to reject a flattering account of his own deeds has been criticised as overly naive, as indeed it is by

a modern historian's standards. But the evidence of *Morkinskinna's* dependence on the king himself as a source for his own exploits adds some perspective to this. It suggests that the saga of a Norwegian king is always to some extent an exercise in propaganda, managed by the king himself. This was understood to be the purpose of a king's surrounding himself with poets, as Haraldr undoubtedly did; he is represented also as a poet himself, composing his own stanzas and acting as a connoisseur of the works of the poets serving him, displaying his skill in managing his own legend. Theodore Andersson suggests that 'he may have been the chief patron of his own legend and have nurtured a total narrative' (Andersson and Gade 2000, 59), but it is particularly the Byzantium episode, situated far from the experience of 'all those who listened' to the poems later composed, that throws into prominence Haraldr's management of his own biography and suggests that it was more self-conscious than that of any other king before Sverrir, who *yfir sat* 'sat over' his chosen biographer, Abbot Karl Jónsson, and *rêð fyrir hvat rita skyldi* 'decided what was to be written' in the first part of his saga (*Sverris saga* 2007, 3).

*Þættir: The King and his History*

The function of *Stúfs þáttur* as a validation of that poet's competence to vouch for Haraldr's reputation, and the way it is placed long after the first of his verses to be cited, has a parallel in the more striking case of Halldórr Snorrason, one of the two Icelanders said to have shared Haraldr's adventures in Byzantium. Halldórr is explicitly said to have brought back reports of events there, and *Morkinskinna* goes to some lengths to validate him as a reliable witness in elements widely distributed over the chronological expanse of the text, in the form of two of the *þættir* about the king's relations with Icelanders. The first is *Halldórs þáttur Snorrasonar*, which is placed after Haraldr has returned to Norway and is established as sole king after the death of Magnús. The *þáttur* shows a deterioration in relations between the king and the Icelander, from the *mikil sæmð ok virðing* 'great honour and recognition' initially bestowed on Halldórr by Haraldr (*Morkinskinna*, I 178) to Halldórr's later refusal to show deference to the king, in the tradition of the independent Icelander, even insisting on his own equal status by a comparison of their two fathers when the king has forced him to drink a penalty drink (*Morkinskinna*, I 182):

Vera má þat, konungr', segir Halldórr, 'at þú komir því á leið at ek drekka, en þat kann ek þó segja þér at eigi myndi Sigurðr sýr fá naugðgat Snorra goða til.'

'It may be, sire, that you can get me to drink, but I can tell you that Sigurðr sýr (Sow) could not have forced Snorri goði.'

Snorri goði was Halldórr's own father and is a notable figure in several Sagas of Icelanders; Haraldr, as ever, is angered by the allusion to his father's embarrassing nickname. The crux of the story is Halldórr's exasperation at the king's failure to pay his men their due; he first sweeps the proffered adulterated coinage contemptuously away, and then, angered further by Haraldr's refusal to follow his advice when he tries to prevent the king's ship being driven onto rocks, insists on leaving the king's service. Halldórr ends by holding the king and queen at knife-point in order to get the money owing to him before leaving for Iceland; we are told that the two never meet again. The story paints a far from flattering picture of the king's tight-fistedness and capriciousness. But since Halldórr, as eyewitness to events in Byzantium, is one of the chief guardians of the king's reputation, his lack of deference and refusal to play the courtly game suggests an independence of mind that reassures the reader that his report of Haraldr's exploits will not be sycophantic.

Several chapters later another *þáttur* tells the story of a less well-known, indeed anonymous, Icelander who comes to the court claiming to be able to tell stories. This he does to provide entertainment to the retainers until he only has one story left, a story he is too nervous to tell as it is that of King Haraldr's own adventures abroad. With the king's encouragement he tells it in episodes over the thirteen days of the Christmas feast, arousing some controversy in the court (*Morkinskinna*, I 236):

ræða margir um at þó sé djörfung í þessu er hann, Íslendingr, segir þessa sögu, eða hversu konungi muni virðask. Sumum þykkir hann vel segja, en sumir vinnask minna at . . . Mælti konungr, 'Er þér eigi forvitni á, Íslendingr,' segir hann, 'hversu mér líkar sagan? . . . Mér þykkir allvel ok hvergi verr en efni eru til, eða hverr kenndi þér söguna?' Hann svarar: 'Þat var vanði minn út á landinu at ek fór hvert sumar til þings, ok namk hvert sumar af sögunni nokkvat at Halldóri Snorrasynti.'

many commented that it was an impertinence that he, an Icelander, should tell this story, and wondered how the king would like it. Some thought that he told the story well, but some set less store by it . . . The king said, 'Are you not curious, Icelander, about how I like the story? I am very pleased with it, and it is in no way worse than the substance of it, and who taught you the story?' He answers, 'It was my custom out in Iceland to go to the Assembly each summer, and each summer I learned something of the story from Halldórr Snorrason.'

This *þáttur* has aroused interest as evidence of the oral performance of narrative, suggesting how the raw materials of saga composition might

have been put together, performed and received.<sup>9</sup> As a thirteenth-century reconstruction it may not be of much historical value, beyond demonstrating that some thirteenth-century writers believed, possibly rightly, that earlier models of prose composition differed from their own, and did their best to reconstruct them. Within the structure of *Morkinskinna*, however, it brings us full circle, with Halldórr Snorrason taking to Iceland independent witness of the king's adventures abroad, there presumably to be fashioned into written form as *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*. It is the king himself, however, who provides the verdict on the reliability of Halldórr's account.

This sequence of tales suggests a rationale for the function of some of the *þættir* within *Morkinskinna*. Similar explanations could be given for some of the episodes featuring Haraldr's poets, though these are more to do with asserting Haraldr's own skill and discrimination in the art of poetry than with the issue of truthfulness itself. The question whether the *þættir* are original to *Morkinskinna* or added in later tradition remains unresolved, but the latest scholars to work closely on the text, Theodore Andersson in the introduction to his translation and Ármann Jakobsson in his introduction to the new *Íslenzk fornrit* edition, both put up a strong defence of the text in its existing form (Andersson 2000, 13, 22–24; *Morkinskinna* I, xl–l). Ármann makes the point that the attempt to break texts down into their constituent sources is a mode of analysis from which scholarly assessment of the Sagas of Icelanders has largely moved on, whereas less attention has so far been paid to the literary qualities of the Kings' Sagas. Comparison of kings is revealed, in Ármann's analysis, as a key theme in *Morkinskinna*, with the central role of Haraldr harðráði establishing him as the model against which all other monarchs are measured in one way or another; this is instanced by *Hreiðars þáttur heimiska* 'the story of Hreiðarr the Foolish', which is placed within the period of joint rule of Haraldr and his nephew Magnús inn góði, and tells the story of the 'wise fool' Hreiðarr, who encounters and assesses both kings from the innocent viewpoint of one who has never experienced kingship—together with other things, such as the emotion of anger, to which he is provoked by the arrogant behaviour of Haraldr's retainers. Without demurring from the general view that *Hreiðars þáttur* is very likely to have existed in an

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Andersson 2012, 41: 'At the very least the episode suggests that such stories were formally composed with enough detail so that they had to be learned, that they were formally recited to a large group, and that they were long enough to be presented for two weeks. They were formal stories, not just random accounts.'

earlier form before its incorporation in *Morkinskinna*, Ármann uses it to provide an image that encapsulates his view of the role of the *þættir* in the text: Hreiðarr is used to compare the stature and qualities of the joint and rival kings Magnús inn góði and Haraldr harðráði. The *þáttur* includes a puzzling scene in which Hreiðarr insists on walking around King Magnús and inspecting him from every angle; a metaphor, Ármann argues, for the manner in which the *þættir* encircle the kings that figure in them, assessing them from different angles, and often from the perspective of an outsider, most often a simple Icelander (*Morkinskinna*, I liv–lix).

### English Endings

The concluding episode of Haraldr's biography, his ill-fated expedition to England, can be measured against independent and earlier sources, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*,<sup>10</sup> and Norman texts written in both Latin and French, of which the earliest is a *Life of St Edward the Confessor*, written as early as 1067.<sup>11</sup> Some of these texts seem to have influenced the accounts in *Morkinskinna* and *Fagrskinna*, and some of the alterations to these made by Snorri in *Heimskringla* follow the twelfth-century account of William of Malmesbury (Rowe 1994, 10–12). As reliable history the Norse texts have generally been found wanting, particularly in respect of their account of Haraldr's last battle, the Battle of Stamford Bridge. Historians have generally dismissed the saga accounts because of their lateness, and consider elements such as the English use of cavalry charges, and Haraldr's death after being struck by an arrow in the throat, to be modelled on accounts of the Battle of Hastings. In his history of the battle and of Haraldr's invasion, Kelly de Vries attempts to integrate the Norse sources with the English and Norman ones, but rather inconclusively, dismissing the intercalated skaldic verses, for instance, as 'later literary flourishes' (1999, 287). This is true in the sense that we may not now accept that the verses were declaimed *in situ* during the battle, as two verses attributed to Haraldr himself, and two *lausavísur* by his poet Þjóðólfr are claimed to

<sup>10</sup> Three versions of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, A, C and E, include contemporary accounts of the Norwegian invasion. That of the C version is the fullest (Earle and Plummer, 1892, I 194–98).

<sup>11</sup> *Vita Æduuardi Regis qui apud Westmonasterium requiescit*, dated to 1066–75. Several Lives of Edward the Confessor survive, the most influential being that of Aelred of Rievaulx, written to celebrate the canonisation of Edward in 1161. This is the indirect or direct source of later French versions, and of the Icelandic *Játvarðar saga* preserved in fourteenth-century manuscripts (Fell 1972; Rogers 1956–57, 255–62).

be in the texts. But there is no reason to doubt that Þjóðólfr was actually present at the battle; and verses by Árnórr jarlaskáld seem to be from a memorial poem in honour of Haraldr, while those by Steinn Herdísarson are said to be from a poem in honour of Haraldr's son Óláfr, who took part in the first, successful encounter at Fulford Gate. They are therefore close contemporary sources. It may be because of the acknowledged presence of eyewitnesses, some of whom at least survived the expedition, that the episode is told without the constant reference to the sources, and assurances of their veracity, that we see in earlier parts of Haraldr's history. It can be admitted, however, that the account of Haraldr's invasion and last battle serve generally literary rather than historical functions in the Norse texts. The sagacity and cunning for which the king is famous seem to have deserted him; the venture is presented as doomed from the start. The technique of comparison of kings comes into play in the initial account of the attempt of Jarl Tostig to win support, first from King Sveinn of Denmark and then from Haraldr, for his bid to claim his share of English rule. Sveinn's refusal emphasises his moderation, disclaiming the strength of his famous forebear Knútr the Old (*Morkinskinna* I, 300–01):

Svá miklu em ek minni maðr fyrir mér en várr frændi gamli Knútr at varla fæ ek haldit mínu ríki fyr Norðmönnum . . . Nú kunnum vér at ætla oss hóf ok meirr eptir váru lítilræði en framkvæmð várs frænda gamla Knúts.

I am so much less of a man than my kinsman Knútr the Old that I can scarcely withhold my kingdom from the Norwegians . . . Now we can choose moderation for ourselves, more according to our insignificance than to the success of our kinsman Knútr the Old.

Haraldr's agreement to enter into alliance with Tostig stands in contrast to this, and although no comment is made on Haraldr's rashness at this point, it is clearly referred to in the verses recording the expedition. Even the brief account in *Nóregs konunga tal* alludes to Haraldr's *ofstopi* 'insolence', as we have seen. And a verse by Þjóðólfr, said to be spoken in a lull in the battle after Haraldr has fallen, is openly critical of the expedition (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, III 190):<sup>12</sup>

Old hefr afráð goldit  
illt, nú kveðk her stilltan.  
Bauð þessa for þjóðum  
þarflaust Haraldr austan.

<sup>12</sup> The verse appears in *Morkinskinna* and in *Fagrskinna* with slight variations (*Morkinskinna* I, 190). See the edition by Diana Whaley in Gade 2009, 175 for prose translation and full discussion of variants.

Svá lauk siklings ævi  
snjalls, at vér róm allir,  
lofðungur beið inn leyfði  
lífs grand, í stað vöndum.

People have paid a heavy  
penalty; now defeated  
I declare the host. Haraldr  
had men fare west needlessly.  
The bold leader's life ended  
leaving us all in an awkward  
place; the praised ruler  
experienced life-harm.

This rhetoric could be considered wisdom after the event: Haraldr's expedition was undertaken *þarflaust* 'needlessly' in the sense that it achieved nothing. The same ambiguity is found in the Old English *Battle of Maldon*, in which the hero Byrhtnoð allows *landes to fela* 'too much land' to the Viking aggressors when he allows them to cross the causeway (*Battle of Maldon*, l. 90; Scragg 1991, 20). This is generally interpreted as a condemnation of Byrhtnoð's judgement, but it could be seen, simply, as an expression of regret—too much, as it turns out, in view of the grievous consequences for the hero's life.<sup>13</sup> The comparison with Maldon is made advisedly, however. The Norse account of Haraldr's end at Stamford Bridge includes many of the same classic heroic elements as does the Old English poem. As well as the condemnation of the hero's rashness, a verse by Árnórr jarlaskáld records the refusal of his followers to accept a truce, preferring to die with their lord like the celebrated followers of Byrhtnoð (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, III 191; see Gade 2009, 274):

Heldr kuru meir ens mæra  
mildings an grið vildi  
of folksnaran fylki  
falla liðsmenn allir.

All the liberal king's liegemen  
elected much rather  
to fall with the king, fierce  
in fight, than want quarter.

The support with a verse for the Norwegians' determination not to accept a truce shows how early the attribution of heroic motifs to Haraldr's death must have developed.

<sup>13</sup> For reference to the critical debate about Byrhtnoð's *ofermod*, see Abels 1991, 147–48.

Haraldr's fall is foreshadowed by numerous omens and ominous prophecies, including an appearance in a dream of his brother St Óláfr, who speaks a verse comparing his own holy death with the one unblessed by God that awaits Haraldr. This resurgence of the theme of comparison of kings can also be seen, rather obscurely, behind one of the most distinctive elements in the battle, the report that Haraldr and his men fight without their coats of mail. In the sagas this is used to account for the fact that the Norwegians were taken by surprise by Haraldr Godwinsson, having left their armour behind them at the ships; and this is alluded to in one, and possibly both, of the two last verses attributed to Haraldr. He expresses his poetic self-consciousness for the last time, composing first a simple *fornyrðislag* stanza and then improving on it with an impeccably composed stanza in *dróttkvætt*. The second could also be referring to lack of armour, since it declares that *krjúpum vér eigi í bug skjaldar fyr vápna brokun at hjaldri* 'we do not hide from the crash of weapons in the hollow of the shield in battle'; the first, simpler verse declares more plainly,

Framm gongum vér  
í fylkingu  
brynjulausir  
und blár eggjar.  
Hjalmar skína.  
Hefkat ek mína.  
Nú liggj skrud vart  
at skipum niðri.

(Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, III 187–88;  
see Gade 2009, 54)

We go forward  
in formation  
without byrnies  
under dark blades.  
Helmets shine.  
I have not mine.<sup>14</sup>  
Now lies our armour  
at the ships below.

According to the saga accounts, the Norwegians were without their armour because the weather was unseasonably warm, and were taken unawares by Harold Godwinsson's army while on their way to collect hostages from the English they had defeated the previous day at Fulford Gate.

<sup>14</sup> 'Mine' here refers apparently to the mailcoat rather than the helmet, since *mína* 'mine' is feminine, agreeing with *brynja* 'mailcoat'.

Whether or not this is a factual account of the conditions of the day, this is certainly how the sagas want us to read the verse; the armourless state of Haraldr's army is an index of his misjudgement, just like the initial decision to undertake the invasion. There is an unemphatic parallel here, though, with a more heroic usage of the same motif: Haraldr's nephew Magnús inn góði, fighting against the Wends at the Battle of Hlýrskógsheiðr, had also fought *brynjulauss*, but here it is a sign of heroism, and of the miraculous protection of his father the saint (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, III 43; see Gade 2009, 219):

Óð með øxi breiða  
ódæssinn framm ræsir,  
varð um hilmi Hǫrða  
hjördynr, ok varp brynju.

With broad axe, unwearied,  
went forth the ruler—  
sword-clash happened round the Hǫrðar's  
head<sup>15</sup>—and threw off his mailcoat.

The king chose to expose himself to the weapons of the pagans without armour, and no one dared to attack him, protected as he was by God's mercy and his father's intercession.

#### *Haraldr the Resolute*

Gabriel Turville-Petre chose Haraldr harðráði and his poets as the subject of his 1966 Dorothea Coke lecture, which commemorated the nine-hundredth anniversary of Haraldr's fall. He began by reflecting on the nickname *harðráði* and how it should be translated. I will finish my lecture by returning briefly to this subject. Turville-Petre decided that "tyrant" or "hard-ruler" was as near as I could get' (1968, 3), and other translators have settled for something similar; Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson called him Harald the Ruthless, linking this with the negative representation of Haraldr put forward by Adam of Bremen and other 'Danish-inspired' historians (1966, 29). Ray Page proposed 'savage in counsel, tough, tyrannical' (1995, 23). Judith Jesch, after a swipe at the form *Harðrada*, 'a bastard Anglicisation of the original epithet in an oblique case', recommended 'the Severe' (1996, 139 n. 62). As I have said, the nickname does not appear in the texts themselves. In the form *harðráðr*, the adjective is used of other rulers: in *Nóregs konungatal* it describes Eiríkr blóðøx and Jarl Hákon, certainly two individuals who

<sup>15</sup> *Hǫrða hilmir*: 'ruler of the Hǫrðar', king of Norway (Magnús)



shared Haraldr's reputation for harsh rule. The mid-twelfth-century *Hátta-lykill* uses it of Haraldr himself. But it is also used in *Jómsvíkinga drápa* of Búi dígrí, a leader but hardly a ruler, and of Barði Guðmundsson in a verse attributed to Eiríkr víðsjá in *Heiðarvíga saga* (*Borgfirðinga sögur*, 299), where it could be translated as 'firm in counsel'. The element *-ráðr* in other compounds has the sense 'plan, counsel' rather than 'rule', as in *snarráðr* and *hvatráðr*, both meaning 'quick-witted, resourceful'; *heilráðr* 'wise in counsel'; and *stórráðr* and *framráðr*, meaning 'ambitious'. This would give *harðráðr*, and the related nickname *harðráði*, the sense 'strong-minded', or 'resolute', which is in keeping with the emphasis, in the sagas' evaluations of Haraldr, on his mental qualities, the quick-wittedness and shrewdness that powered his Byzantine adventures but which are also reflected in the humour and wit of his exchanges with Icelandic poets in the *þættir*. The parallel formation *harðgeðr* is used by Arnórr jarlaskáld in his memorial poem for Haraldr, cited in *Morkinskinna*, and I will finish this lecture by repeating this stanza (*Morkinskinna*, I 323; Gade 2009, 278):

Haraldr vissi sik hverjum  
harðgeðr und Miðgarði  
—döglingr réð til dauða  
dýrð slíkri—gram ríkra.  
Hefr afreka in øfra  
(ættstýrðum dýrri  
hnígrat hilmir frægri)  
heilög fold (til moldar).

Resolute Haraldr knew himself mightier than any lord under Miðgarðr; the monarch commanded such glory till death. The higher, holy land has the hero; no king more famous, dearer than that ruler of men, will sink to the soil.

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## JOHN TOWNSEND

With the death of John Townsend the Viking Society has lost one of its longest-standing and most dedicated members. John suffered a stroke in February 2014, the severity of which gave no hope of recovery. He died in St Leonards-on-Sea on 27 September 2014.

John Anthony Benson Townsend was born on 15 April 1932 in Shanghai where his father was stationed as an officer in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps. But he and his brother Michael, who survives him, grew up mainly in London at the Royal Hospital Chelsea, where in 1936 his father was appointed a Captain of Invalids with responsibility for the welfare of one of the four companies of pensioners. John attended Shrewsbury School, and then after two years' national service in the Royal Signals went up to Oriel College, Oxford. He may have been admitted to read Classics or even read part of the Classics course—his Latin was always sound—but he eventually opted for a course in English which gave him the chance to concentrate on Old English and Old Icelandic. After Oxford he joined in 1957 the library at University College London as a student assistant and worked for a Diploma in Librarianship for which he submitted a thesis *The ancient laws of Norway and Iceland: a bibliographical supplement to . . . Islandica 4* (1961). From UCL he moved on to positions outside London, at the University of Leeds, where he worked on the Melsteð collection in the Brotherton Library, and at the University of Sheffield. In 1966 he joined the Department of Printed Books at the British Museum as Assistant Keeper and there stayed for some four years, during which time he published his highly informative 'Old Norse bibliography' in *Bibliography of Old Norse studies 1967* (1968). In 1970 he returned to UCL to become Assistant Librarian with special responsibility for the Scandinavian collection. He retired in September 1984 but remained active in the UCL library in an honorary capacity for many years.

John's contribution to the Society and its activities was multiform. As early as 1962 he was Honorary Assistant Secretary and after that Treasurer for many years. He was President of the Society from 1988 to 1990. Subsequently he was a Vice-President in Council up to the time of his death. For a number of years he was joint editor of the review section of *Saga-Book*. And in 1999 he produced his *Index to Saga-Book volumes 1–23* which covered all of the Society's publications almost to the end of the twentieth century. He also assumed the role of unofficial historian of the Society and this found expression in, for example, his substantial and detailed history of 1992 ('The Viking Society: a centenary history' in *Saga-Book* XXIII:4, 180–212).

As a librarian colleague John was all one could wish for, informed, up-to-date and extremely helpful. He always followed up requests and queries and never left loose ends untied or stones unturned. He only rarely failed to find the item one was looking for, however abstruse or sequestered. The admirable state of the Society's library at the time of its centenary in 1992 owed a great deal to him. But John did not necessarily find his work as a librarian stimulating and sometimes complained of what (by analogy with 'housemaid's knee') he diagnosed as 'librarian's yawn'. And there was indeed much more to his life than books and libraries and John had many interests. Shrewsbury was a football school and this must have given him his enduring enthusiasm for the game. He was not only in his time an adept player himself (at inside right), but also a committed supporter of Chelsea at Stamford Bridge. (He especially rejoiced in having witnessed Tommy Lawton score a famous header in a 3-3 draw against Moscow Dynamo in November, 1945.) He had a particular fondness for cats and had several as pets over the years. He was something of a gardener and a regular visitor to the Chelsea Flower Show. He had a strong interest in Irish culture and made frequent visits to Ireland.

John's personal qualities won him a wide circle of friends. He was always sociable and good company and had a quick and ready wit. His time as President of the Society was memorable. In 1988 the Society welcomed as guest of honour the then President of Iceland, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, to a thronged dinner in the University of London's Senate House. John introduced Vigdís with an eloquent and witty speech delivered without notes to which the guest of honour self-effacingly began her reply: 'I am afraid not all presidents are as eloquent as the President of the Viking Society and I am going to be using notes for what I have to say.' Later in his term of office John returned to an earlier haunt, the University of Leeds, to give a lively presidential address on the theme of 'Vikings take tea'.

John's generosity with both his time and treasure was notable, albeit always exercised unobtrusively and without fuss. After retirement, for example, he matched all he had done for the Viking Society by much valuable work for the library, and that on an entirely voluntary basis. He made substantial donations to the library, one in memory of a prematurely deceased colleague, another consisting of a large collection of books in Irish. And perhaps his most significant contribution to the Society was the funding in 1976 of the Townsend Viking Society Prize 'to mark the long association of the Society with University College London'. This is awarded each session to an undergraduate student in the Department of Scandinavian Studies at UCL. And alongside the generosity there was

kindness and thoughtfulness. In another obituary, John's brother Michael describes him as 'a very good friend to his friends' and he was certainly that. But John also had a benevolence which reached well beyond close friends and family. He had real and sincere concern for others and their well-being. His sympathy for the less exalted and the underprivileged may have had something to do with left-wing principles; or with a culture of caring in his family background. But his solicitude for others was in any case strong and warm and selfless. Things in the Society will never be quite the same as they were before John's passing. He will be sorely missed by all who had the pleasure of knowing him.

RICHARD PERKINS

## REVIEWS

VIKING ARCHAEOLOGY IN ICELAND. MOSFELL ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT. Edited by DAVIDE ZORI and JESSE BYOCK. *Brepols*, 2014. 254 pp. ISBN 978-2-503-54400-7.

For a long time archaeologists in Iceland have been faced with the problem of how to deal with the non-contemporaneous written sources which describe the earliest period of settlement in the country. They have gone from believing in them as historical sources, so that the aim of the earliest projects undertaken in the nineteenth century was to find the dwelling of Njáll and the grave-mound of someone mentioned in the sagas, to dismissing them totally as fiction. The latter approach goes hand in hand with the bookprose theory (*bókfestukenning*) of literary saga interpretation which emphasises that the sagas are fictional rather than fact. These voices in Icelandic archaeology became particularly loud in the 1990s (e.g. Bjarni F. Einarsson, 'Íslenskar fornleifar', *Skírnir* 168 (1994), 377–402), although at that time there were also those who advocated cooperation between archaeology and literary studies (e.g. Adolf Friðriksson, 'Sannfræði íslenskra fornleifa' *Skírnir* 168 (1994), 346–76). On the whole archaeologists working in Iceland now continue to dismiss the sagas as fiction, although to different degrees.

The Mosfell Archaeological Project (MAP), which is the topic of the collection of papers in the volume reviewed here, is very much the product of information given in the sagas and relies heavily on this all the way through. It was indeed an account in *Egils saga* which raised interest in the Hrísbú site which is at the centre of the investigations discussed here. No remains were evident on the surface. It was through place-names, oral tradition, geophysical surveying and test excavations that an early church with cemetery and a longhouse dating to the Viking period were discovered, each a particularly splendid examples of its type. One of the goals of MAP was to explore the possible historicity of the sagas through excavations. The cultural and environmental landscape of the whole Mosfell valley is also being analysed in a truly interdisciplinary manner.

The book is divided into sixteen chapters, written by twenty-four authors. It becomes apparent that it is the product of a conference, although this is not mentioned in the introduction. Each chapter is completely independent, sometimes with a certain amount of repetition of information, which might have been avoided with more editing.

The central place of *Egils saga* in the investigation culminates in the alleged discovery of Egill's empty grave underneath the chancel of the church, the discussion of which is given a whole chapter. The relocation of the grave seems to be directly supported by *Egils saga*. Here Egill is said to have moved from Borg to live with his daughter Þórdís at Mosfell, where he died and was buried, first in a heathen mound, then in Christian graveyards, first at Hrísbú, then at Mosfell. The grave-cut extends underneath the east gable of the church chancel, explained by the excavators by its having been made before the chancel was added. The description in *Egils saga* of a large skeleton having been found under the altar in the church at Hrísbú, believed to belong to Egill (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslensk fornrit II

(Reykjavík, 1933), 298–99) does make sense in view of the proposed date of writing of the saga in the early thirteenth century, when the church had been abandoned. Whether it was that of Egill is another matter and cannot be proved by archaeology.

The study of the whole Mosfell valley (Chapter Five) included the use of place-names and test excavations to obtain a picture of the development of settlement, using the description in *Egils saga* of Skalla-Grímr's settlement process as a model to test. The conclusion is that the distribution of early farms—four in total, which is three more than are listed in *Landnámabók*—fits the Skalla-Grímr model. According to *Landnámabók* Skeggjastaðir is the earliest farm in the area, whereas place-name evidence—and, not least, the archaeology—points to Hrísbú. This is explained by the suggestion that the memory of the first settler's farmstead was lost, and that the author of *Landnámabók* derived the farm-name from his name, Þórðr skeggi. Palaeoenvironmental work formed part of the study (Chapter Thirteen), involving pollen and lithological analysis of samples from Hrísbú and the site close by of an alleged summer farm (*sel*), to throw light on landscape change, land use and occupation patterns. The results point to human activity at Hrísbú shortly before the deposition of the Landnám tephra (871±2), and to a change in land use or abandonment by the end of the twelfth century when, according to the saga, the farm was moved to Mosfell. The valley-wide study also includes a survey of routes in the Viking period, based on an interpretation of the written sources (Chapter Fourteen).

Three chapters deal with the skeletal material. One (Chapter Six) is almost entirely taken up by descriptions of infectious disease in the saga literature, with a brief mention of tuberculosis as the only one found in the Hrísbú material. In this connection Hrísbú was no different from other contemporary communities in Iceland. Chapter Seven, a bioarchaeological study, shows that the inhabitants lived in rather poor conditions and experienced much environmental stress. This is particularly evident in the stature data compared to that for other Nordic populations. In Chapter Eight the diet and origins of people and animals at Hrísbú are sought in carbon, nitrogen and strontium isotope analysis of bones and teeth. The results suggest that the people had their origins in Iceland, and that the diet was rich in meat. The latter finding is in agreement with the high proportion of cattle bone found (Chapter Twelve), although there is a problem here because of the fragmentation, and small size of the collection as a result of the lack of middens, where bone material is normally found. Much is made of what the meat diet says about the high status of the farm, although this is in agreement with analysis from other sites showing a high proportion of cattle to sheep during the Viking period, something which was later reversed.

Two chapters (Nine and Ten) deal specifically with the artefacts found during the excavation. In the main chapter we are led from room to room and told what artefacts were found in them, throwing light on specific activities. This is an unusual approach and pleasantly visual. A very complete and detailed programme of analysis of all the floors (micromorphological analysis, covered in Chapter Eleven) adds to the information on activity areas within the building. There is not much in the assemblage which points to high status, as is also the case at the chieftain's farm-site Hofstaðir in the north, although the number of imported glass beads at Hrísbú is larger than at

any other Viking-period domestic site in Iceland. These goods, coupled with references in the sagas and other material evidence of contact, prompts a chapter on the trading centre Hedeby as being a crucial trade contact for the site (Chapter Sixteen).

The results presented in this book do undeniably seem to support some aspects of the historicity of the sagas. Although the project is, perhaps, too much led by the narrative of the non-contemporary sources, and in that sense does not undertake historical archaeology, as the authors claim that it does, it has demonstrated that the best results are obtained by applying all strands of evidence, while using them critically.

GUÐRÚN SVEINBJARNARDÓTTIR

*Institute of Archaeology, University College London*

THE PARTISAN MUSE IN THE EARLY ICELANDIC SAGAS (1200–1250). BY THEODORE M. ANDERSSON. *Islandica LV. Cornell University Library*. Ithaca, 2012. x + 227 pp. ISBN 978-0-935995-14-5.

This book includes a preface, seven chapters and an epilogue. Five of the chapters are modified versions of Theodore Andersson's earlier pieces, such as Chapter Four, 'The First Written Sagas of Kings and Chieftains', which expands on an article published in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* in 2004. The sixth and seventh chapters, which focus on the development of early saga writing in northern Iceland, are new offerings. Nevertheless, from the outset the author presents the *The Partisan Muse* as a single entity that should be judged on its own merit rather than a collection of articles on kindred themes. The book's main investigative thread is the emergence of the narrative mode that distinguishes the 'classical sagas' of the mid- to late thirteenth century, most notably *Njáls saga*, *Gísla saga* and *Laxdæla saga*. How is their assured style and structure to be explained if saga-writing only began around the turn of the thirteenth century? Andersson confronts this question by postulating an evolutionary model that, *inter alia*, presupposes cross-fertilisation between the Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*) and the Kings' Sagas (*konungasögur*). He further highlights the oral hinterland of these texts which, he contends, was a pivotal factor in honing the style that he considers the hallmark of the so-called 'classical sagas'. Finally, Andersson attempts to illuminate how the political context within Iceland and, in particular, the shifting relations between Icelanders and the Norwegian crown, influenced and inspired saga production in its formative stage.

Following an illuminating survey of oral theory and saga studies, Andersson analyses how oral transmission may have shaped three of the earliest sagas. *Guðmundar saga dýra*, which centres on the career of a powerful northern chieftain, is generally believed to have been composed not long after the eponymous hero's death in 1212 by an author who, according to Andersson, 'gives the impression of being very close to the events but has not been able to abstract them into a drama and personality to the same degree as in the classical sagas' (p. 19). A similar judgment is made on *Sturlu saga* which relates the political dealings of Sturla Þórðarson, another ambitious northern chieftain of the late twelfth century. As with *Guðmundar saga dýra*, the first-time reader of *Sturlu saga* is likely to

become somewhat disoriented by its plethora of apparently irrelevant details and, in general, the absence of narrative strategies that 'have made the sagas famous, the economy of detail designed to focus on a particular outcome, the escalation of tensions, the creation of memorable personalities, and the tantalizing deferral of the finale' (pp. 15–16). Such narrative techniques are, however, present in *Porgils saga ok Hafliða* which is set in northern Iceland around 1120. The key to the contrast between this saga on the one hand, and *Sturlu saga* and *Guðmundar saga dýra* on the other, Andersson argues, is the difference in the time-span between the events they describe and the time of their recording. The near-century between the dispute of Hafliði Másson and Porgils Oddason and the saga's composition allowed for 'oral refinement that presupposes the telling of a long prose form that provided the necessary latitude for practicing those larger rhetorical patterns and strategies, which define the style that ultimately emerged in the written sagas' (p. 34).

Though this line of argument is persuasive and probably correct in the main, it should be noted that these stylistic features also feature in 'contemporary' or 'near-contemporary' sagas. A case in point is *Hrafn saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, which focuses on the career and eventual killing in 1213 of a pious chieftain from Vestfirðir. *Hrafn saga* is preserved in two versions, in a separate saga which emphasises the saint-like quality of the protagonist, and in *Sturlunga saga* where the more hagiographical elements are toned down. The saga is mostly set in the first decade of the thirteenth century, while the date of composition is likely to have been around 1230 or not long thereafter. This saga contains few of the seemingly marginal characters and confusing sub-plots that characterise *Guðmundar saga dýra* and *Sturlu saga*. Rather, it focuses on the escalating feud that culminates in a memorable set-piece at Hrafn's farmstead. *Hrafn saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* includes subtle character descriptions of the kind that Andersson sees as typical of the 'classical sagas'. Þorvaldr Snorrason, Hrafn's foe who eventually orders his execution, is no one-dimensional villain. Hrafn's relationship with Þorvaldr is initially warm as he brings his eventual nemesis under his protection, but when Þorvaldr assumes authority in the region he plays out the persona of ruthless chieftain to the hilt. In turn, Hrafn is more than a passive, peace-loving, saint-like character. Although Hrafn shows exemplary justice in his dealings with his underlings, he also displays a determination to protect his own followers, and this eventually leads to his demise. Further, Hrafn's killing is preceded by omens and visions of the kind that feature in *Njáls saga* and *Gísla saga*.

Thus *Hrafn saga* is a contemporary saga or, in Andersson's words, a saga that relies on 'short term tradition' (p. 8), but still one in which the author presents his material in a manner that recalls the *Íslendingasögur* of the mid- to late thirteenth century. Though *Hrafn saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* may have played only a minor role (if any) in the development of saga writing, it still shows that the composer of a contemporary saga could apply, if he so desired, narrative devices traditionally associated with the classical sagas. Whether the author chose to do so in any particular case depended, I would argue, on what he wished to achieve. The writer of *Hrafn saga* had a controlling concept—the antagonism between two very different characters—which required the streamlining of the narrative. In *Guðmundar saga dýra*, however, the complex and (for the modern reader at least) convoluted plot is

the text's central concept, and there would be no saga without it. The outstanding impression the reader takes from the text is of the tangled web of social relations that defeats even the mightiest of chieftains, such as Guðmundr dýri.

The three central chapters analyse the Kings' Sagas in more or less chronological order. Chapter Three, 'The First Written Sagas of Kings and Chieftains', convincingly argues that Oddr Snorrason's saga about Óláfr Tryggvason influenced the so-called 'Oldest Saga' and the *Legendary saga (Helgisaga)* of King Óláfr Haraldsson, rather than the reverse as some have assumed. Considering Abbot Karl Jónsson's commissioned biography of King Sverrir and Gunnlaugr Leifsson's (largely lost) saga of Óláfr Tryggvason, Andersson emphasises the primacy of this 'Þingeyrar School' in the early development of saga writing. Oddr's saga would then not be 'viewed as an Icelandic response to the Norwegian celebration of Saint Ólafr, as has sometimes happened, but rather as the true inception of King's saga writing in Iceland (p. 65)'. This chapter also introduces a theme that resonates through the rest of the book, namely sagas that were composed in response to, or under the influence of earlier Kings' Sagas. Andersson highlights the lost (or partially lost) *\*Hlaðajarla saga*, a saga about the Norwegian earls of Lade (Hlaðir), which seems to have emphasised, even celebrated, local independence against the power of centralising kingship. This quality may suggest that these texts were composed in response to pro-royal sagas about the two Óláfrs.

In the following chapter Andersson identifies four episodes in the *Óláfs saga Haraldssonar* in *Heimskringla* that likely had oral antecedents. One is the story of the rancorous and regicidal King Hrærekr, while another is the episode of King Óláfr's encounter with Þórarinn Eyjólfsson and his ugly feet. These, Andersson suggests, originate with Icelandic storytellers and their focus is on the interaction and even opposition between Icelanders (or, in the case of Hrærekr, characters with Icelandic connections) and the king. This leads Andersson to an interesting and original hypothesis, namely that the antagonism between the king and his magnates in these sagas reflects the conflict between royal authority and the Icelanders in oral accounts. So, when the composers of *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* depicted Óláfr Haraldsson and the resistance against his reign they were (whether consciously or not) somewhat conditioned by oral tales of Icelanders engaging with Norwegian kings. Andersson supports his thesis by observing that hardly any of the 178 skaldic stanzas in the saga of Óláfr Haraldsson in *Heimskringla* relate the king's struggle with the magnates, whereas the so-called 'Norwegian synoptics' of the late twelfth century focus on Knútr's opposition to St Óláfr. This is true, although it is worth remembering that skalds were presumably more interested in kings' youthful Viking adventures and conflicts with foreign rulers than their disputes with regional bigwigs. Further, the historical interpretation of the 'Norwegian synoptics' must take account of their proper political framework. Thus it is not surprising that Theodoricus monachus's *History of the Ancient Kings of Norway* and the anonymous *Ágrip* focus on the struggle between the Danish and Norwegian kings in the eleventh century, while highlighting the independence of the latter in relation to the former. One would also expect them to be less concerned with conflicts within the kingdom of Norway.

Icelandic attitudes towards the Norwegian crown, as reflected in the early Kings' Sagas, is a continuing theme in Chapter Five. Andersson compares *Morkinskinna*

with the third part of *Heimskringla* and finds the former more critical, even antagonistic, towards the Norwegian rulers. More specifically, *Morkinskinna* presents bellicose 'expansionist' kings like Haraldr harðráði, Magnus berfœttr and Sigurðr Jórsalafari in a comparatively negative manner, whereas *Heimskringla* emphasises the more positive attributes of the 'stay-at-home' kings such as Eysteinn Magnússon and Magnús góði. *Morkinskinna* crystallises this contrast in scenes in which kings engage with crafty Icelandic visitors, scenes of conflict that are largely absent from *Heimskringla*, in which the kings' characters are generally painted in more muted colours. This notable difference between the two Kings' Saga compilations, Andersson suggests, may reflect shifting Norwegian–Icelandic relations in the first half of the thirteenth century. Between 1215 and 1220 contacts between Iceland and Norway were not always on an amiable footing owing to a 'trade war' that had begun as an altercation between Icelandic chieftains and Norwegian merchants. These developments probably made the Icelanders sensitive to any encroachment on their independence by the Norwegian crown, as well as sharpening their own identity in relation to the 'mother country'. Such is the context for the composition of *Morkinskinna*, whereas the later *Heimskringla*, perhaps dating to around 1230, was compiled when relations had improved, and when Snorri Sturluson had one eye on the personal prestige to be gained from the Norwegian court.

While continuing some of the themes of earlier chapters, Chapter Five nevertheless highlights the difficulty of integrating relatively lightly edited articles into a fully convincing whole. For instance, as noted, Chapter Four focuses on the independent episodes in Snorri's *Óláfs saga Haraldssonar* which, according to Andersson, reflect tensions between king and Icelanders or Norwegian magnates. The question left largely unanswered is how this tendency in the 'second part' of *Heimskringla* squares with Snorri Sturluson's apparent phasing out of antagonistic elements in the 'third part' of the same work. Although Andersson does recognise this problem, the format of the book does not allow the necessary in-depth engagement with it.

The principal merit of Andersson's approach is that he seeks to place the sagas within their Icelandic and Norwegian historical context; he recognises that most Kings' Sagas and Sagas of Icelanders were probably written by members of a narrow circle of textual communities that, moreover, are likely to have been closely connected with monastic and episcopal institutions. In Chapter Six Andersson identifies a textual community in northern Iceland which in the early thirteenth century produced *Víga-Glúms Saga*, *Ljósvetninga saga* and *Reykdalea saga*. The inclusion of the last-named among these oldest *Íslendingasögur* has, however, been doubted, and this prompts Andersson to present a useful, although perhaps unnecessarily exhaustive, reprise of the scholarly debate regarding the dating of this text (pp. 148–60). Andersson identifies two principal trends in these three sagas, namely their expression of regional identity where the author's sympathy lies with one particular local grouping. Sentiments of this kind, Andersson notes, distinguish *Orkneyinga Saga* and *Færeyinga saga*, and *\*Hlaðajarla saga* would also have focused on the relationship between regional chieftains or rulers and the Norwegian crown. This is a valuable insight, to which can be added two further observations. Andersson argues that 'these larger-scale conflicts were translated onto a more limited local

scene, but with no loss of vigour' (p. 170) (referring specifically to *Ljósvetninga saga*). The dating of all these sagas is, however, so uncertain that it may be more prudent to postulate a parallel expression of the tendencies that Andersson has identified. Further, the period c.1180–1220 saw a marked acceleration in the formation of lordships in northern and western Iceland which is likely to have heightened awareness of regional identities, while around the same time the Norwegian kings (and indeed archbishops) became increasingly concerned with Icelandic affairs. Andersson correctly emphasises the latter point but a greater focus on the former would have provided this section with a better balance.

The last chapter offers a penetrating analysis of two sagas, *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Gísla saga Sírssonar*, that, although very different in theme and texture, both have poets as their principal characters. *Fóstbræðra saga*, which Andersson dates to around 1210, is interpreted as a dispassionate tale of action in which the author's neutrality is so marked that 'we may wonder whether it is an oversight or intended for special effect' (p. 177). This contrasts with *Gísla saga*, assigned here to the middle of the thirteenth century, with its focus on the interior life of the eponymous hero. Anderson sees the difference between the two sagas encapsulated in the way the poetry in *Gísla saga* reflects Gíslí's progressive isolation, while the stanzas in *Fóstbræðra saga* figure more as a record of events. *Gísla saga* is arguably the first saga to explore the emotional relationship of an individual with wider society and, in this particular case, with his own family. Andersson argues, albeit tentatively, that the author of *Gísla saga* is reacting or responding to the emotional barrenness of *Fóstbræðra saga*. The two sagas are certainly contrasting, and few would dispute the emotional depth of *Gísla saga*. Of course it is impossible to establish what the author of *Gísla saga* thought of *Fóstbræðra saga*, and the supposition that it 'may have appeared to him to be mere killing chronicles' (p. 186) reflects a modern judgment that not everyone would be willing to underwrite.

Although the reader may not always agree with Andersson, the analysis in *The Partisan Muse* is always grounded in textual detail as well as a keen sense of both the continuity and the interconnectedness of the saga corpus within the context of medieval Icelandic history. The volume is also most welcome as an accessible introduction to some of the major themes that have occupied Professor Andersson for much of the last half-century.

HAKI ANTONSSON  
University College London

THE LEGENDARY SAGAS. ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT. Edited by ANNETTE LASSEN, AGNETA NEY and ÁRMANN JAKOBSSON. *University of Iceland Press*. Reykjavík, 2012. 455 pp. ISBN 978-9979-54-968-0.

The turn of the century has brought good times for the *fornaldarsögur*. In addition to Torfi H. Tulinius's *La 'Matière du Nord'* (1995), published in English in 2002 as *The Matter of the North* (reviewed in *Saga-Book* 27 (2003), 126–29),

we now have several collections of essays. The book under review is the third in a sequence of three such collections edited by the same three editors, the first (*Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi* (Uppsala 2003, reviewed in *Saga-Book* 30 (2006), 128–31) with Ármann Jakobsson's name in first place, the second (*Fornaldarsagaerne: myter og virkelighed*, Copenhagen 2009) with Agneta Ney heading the team. Each of the three volumes arises out of a conference held by the editors at its place of publication, though the one under review includes papers not given at the Reykjavík conference. Another conference-based volume, from Hull, entitled *Making history: essays on the fornaldarsögur*, and edited by Martin Arnold and Alison Finlay, was published by the Viking Society in 2010. Also worthy of mention is the *Festschrift* for Galina Glazyrina, *Skemmtiligastar lygisögur*, edited by Tatjana N. Jackson and Elena A. Melnikova and published in Moscow in 2012. The ongoing bibliography of manuscripts, editions, translations and studies of the *fornaldarsögur*, compiled by M. J. Driscoll and Silvia Hufnagel and currently accessible on the internet under the title *Stories for all time*, includes these and many other related items. The present volume, which contains twenty articles, has an eight-page Prologue by the three editors and is divided into three sections.

In the first section, entitled 'Origins', Ármann Jakobsson advocates close study of fifteenth-century manuscripts of *fornaldarsögur*, implying that the sagas now so categorised came to be recognised in that century as a distinctive group. (It is emphasised in the Prologue that the term *fornaldarsögur* is a modern one, coined by C. C. Rafn in the nineteenth century.) Annette Lassen finds the origins of the *fornaldarsögur* in the learned Latin literature of the Middle Ages, arguing (with more confidence than either Sigurður Nordal in *Nordisk kultur* VIII:B (1953), 206, or Bjarni Guðnason in *Um Skjöldunga sögu* (1963), 282, cf. Íslenzk fornrit XXXV (1982), xvii) for the influence of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* (c.1200) on Icelandic narratives of *origo gentis* type. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir and Agneta Ney write on *Völsunga saga*, the former in relation to German, Frankish and Anglo-Saxon tradition, the latter in relation to Snorri's *Edda*. Sandra Ballif Straubhaar emphasises exogamy as a recurring motif in the *fornaldarsögur*, notably *Völsunga saga*, while Margaret Clunies Ross, Guðrún Nordal and J. S. Love write on poetry in the *fornaldarsögur*. Clunies Ross focuses on the autobiographical monologue or *ævikviða* (another modern term); Guðrún distinguishes between a group of *fornaldarsögur* with links to twelfth-century poetry, notably *Háttalykill*, and a later group with links to the *Íslendingasögur*; and Love shows how verses contribute to the narrative unity of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*.

In the second section, which has the somewhat awkward title 'Development and generic considerations' (its two parts belonging to different categories of ideas), Terje Spurkland finds *skröksögur* better attested than either *lygisögur* or *stjúpmæðrasögur* as an Old Norse term for narratives thought to be untrue. Massimiliano Bampi views in a context of polysystem theory the interaction of the *fornaldarsögur*, in the course of their development as a genre, with the *riddarasögur* and *Íslendingasögur*. Marianne Kalinke takes the maiden-king *þættir* in *Hrólf's saga Gautrekssonar* and *Hrólf's saga kraka*, and the 'otherworld-journey' *þáttur* of Helgi Þórisson in *Flatøyjarbók*, as examples of the adaptive and eclectic tendency



of *fornaldarsaga*-type narratives. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir finds *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* at least as influential as *Clári saga* in giving rise to the indigenous romance genre of maiden-king saga, viewing this genre's recurrent motif of ultimate female submission to male rule in the light of changing social conditions in late medieval Iceland. Carolyne Larrington argues that the effect of joining *Ragnars saga* to *Völsunga saga* as a sequel, as reflected in MS NKS 1824b 4to, is to tone down the courtly elements of the second half of *Völsunga saga* and to reassert the decidedly northern, non-courtly concerns of the first half. Fulvio Ferrari examines the different ways in which authors of *fornaldarsögur*, notably those of *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Orvar-Odds saga*, negotiate the constraints imposed on them by Christianity in creating their fictional worlds. Hans Jacob Orning argues for the use of *fornaldarsögur* as historical sources for the times at which their surviving manuscripts were written, suggesting that the later version of *Orvar-Odds saga*, as preserved in the fifteenth-century MS AM 343a 4to, may, with its increased emphasis on Oddr's invincible enemy Ögmundur Eyþjófsbani, reflect the diminishing power of the Scandinavian nobility in the face of kingly rule. Orning further stresses the need to study individual sagas in relation to other sagas preserved in the same manuscript. Daniel Sävborg argues against the accepted view that the *fornaldarsögur* are older than the so-called 'post-classical' *Íslendingasögur* and have influenced them. He shows that, in the case of *Porskfirðinga saga* and *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar*, at least, the former saga, counted among the 'post-classical' *Íslendingasögur*, is likely to have influenced the latter, a *fornaldarsaga*, rather than the other way round. Orning and Sävborg, interestingly, differ in their generic placing of *Jómsvíkinga saga*. Whereas Torfi Tulinius, in the book mentioned above (2002, p. 29), had placed it somewhere between the *fornaldarsögur* and the *konungasögur*, Orning (p. 310) assigns it to the former group, Sävborg (p. 328) to the latter. Finally in this section, Karl G. Johansson questions whether such terms as 'work' and 'genre' are appropriate in studying what we call the *fornaldarsögur*, showing that sagas may change from one surviving version to another depending on their manuscript context, may use the same descriptive techniques in what we would regard as different genres, and may adopt new narrative strategies over time, notably in the fifteenth century. His examples include *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* and *Ans saga bogsveigis*.

In the third and final section, entitled 'Late development', Emily Lethbridge gives a close analysis of Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar as preserved in the late fifteenth-century 'Eggersbók' (AM 556 a-b 4to), arguing that appreciation of its 'multi-modal' character is enhanced by reading it alongside the six other sagas contained in this manuscript: three *Íslendingasögur* (the outlaw sagas) and three *riddarasögur*. Tereza Lansing surveys the surviving manuscripts of *Hrólfs saga kraka* (the earliest from the seventeenth century), showing that their physical characteristics and written styles are indicative of the ways in which this saga has been perceived (whether as history, chivalric romance or legend) by different kinds of audience. Silvia Hufnagel, finally, shows that two manuscripts of *Sörla saga sterka*, both written by Magnús Jónsson of Tjaldanes (1835–1922), reflect different stages in the development of the Icelandic language, in that the later manuscript

(written in 1904–05) adapts the style of the earlier one to suit the demands for linguistic purism that arose in Iceland in the nineteenth century.

The articles are all in English apart from those by Ney and Sävborg, which are in Swedish, and Orning's, which is in Norwegian. Each of the twenty articles is followed by an 'abstract' in English and an *útdráttur* in Icelandic; the Prologue also gives an indication of the argument of each article. This adds greatly to the volume's user-friendliness. Its editing seems at times to have been somewhat rushed, however. The English occasionally reads strangely: does Terje Spurkland really mean, on p. 175, that King Sverrir found *lygisögur* 'most amusing'? I think he means that he found them 'the most amusing' of the different kinds of narrative known to him. In at least one case, that of Orning's article, the Icelandic *útdráttur* makes better sense than the English abstract: readers who are puzzled by the phrase 'remnants to contemporary conditions' on p. 321 will find that the Icelandic makes the meaning clear. Tereza Lansing's phrase "'freely handed" texts' on p. 418 also makes an odd impression. It is noted in the Prologue that some of the articles in the volume originated as conference papers, but it was surely not necessary for Fulvio Ferrari to give away, on p. 271, the fact that 'the time available' for a comprehensive treatment of his subject was limited; 'space' was the word needed here. Bibliographies are supplied at the end of each contribution, and this is in general helpful, but it is confusing to find, on p. 364 of Johansson's article, a reference to two articles by Ralph O'Connor (published in 2005 and 2009) which are not listed in Johansson's bibliography. Both articles are, as it happens, referred to elsewhere in the volume and are listed on p. 183 in Spurkland's bibliography, but finding them seems to be purely a matter of luck; an overall bibliography would have been helpful here. Inspection of O'Connor's 2009 article reveals, moreover, that the page reference given to it on p. 365 of Johansson's article should be 363, not 263.

These are quibbles, however, which hardly detract from the pleasure and profit of reading this admirable volume. All I would say in conclusion is that I should like to know Guðrún Nördal's authority for claiming, on p. 146, that *Háttalykill* 'name[s] Sigurðr Fáfnisbani as Ragnarr loðbrók's father-in-law'!

RORY MCTURK  
University of Leeds

THE BOOKISH RIDDARASÖGUR. WRITING ROMANCE IN LATE MEDIEVAL ICELAND. BY GERALDINE BARNES. *The Viking Collection* 21. University Press of southern Denmark. Odense, 2014. 274 pp. ISBN 978-87-7674-791-6.

Geraldine Barnes's book on the so-called native or indigenous Icelandic romances, the *riddarasögur*, brings a very welcome and much-needed scholarly attention to a neglected corpus of works. While there are some excellent studies on the *riddarasögur*, most of these have been aimed at a particular story or a group of works, but not the corpus in totality. Barnes's goal is to establish a critical foundation that is applicable to the *riddarasögur* in general and while the volume makes no effort to be comprehensive across the entire corpus (an impossible task within the

scope of a single book) it does address many works that are relatively unknown and have hitherto not received much detailed analysis. The volume is thoroughly researched and reveals Barnes's extensive knowledge of medieval Icelandic learning and literature as well as her insight into the world of romance as it developed in late medieval Iceland.

Barnes's study aims to address the aforementioned neglect by shedding light on the textual context of the *riddarasögur*, situating them within a reading community composed of authors and audiences she claims were 'familiar with both learned tradition and traditional lore and accustomed to moving back and forth between them in creative literary composition' (pp. 10-11). This particular socio-cultural context of writing is evinced, she argues, in the texts themselves through an underlying subtext of booklore that informs the narrative framing and engages the audience in an intellectual and 'creative engagement with the world of books and learning' (p. 17). While scholars have noted the impact of book-lore on many of the *riddarasögur*, Barnes aims to show that not only does this learned background shape the literary understanding of both authors and audiences, but that it also has a specific narrative function within the stories. As Barnes notes: 'The narrative framework of the "bookish" *riddarasögur* is nothing less than the sweep of world history and geography, from the division of the globe into its three parts—Europe, Africa, Asia—by the sons of Noah, to the Trojan War and the course of the Macedonian, Roman and Byzantine empires' (p. 27).

The first chapter stages the critical framework by focusing on the narrative conception of the North and Iceland's role in the world geography in *Nitida saga*, *Victors saga ok Blávus* and *Vilhjálm's saga sjóðs*. Barnes argues that the *riddarasögur* evince a rehabilitation of the North, suggesting that the final scene in *Nitida saga*—where the various princes and kings representing the three parts of the world woo Nitida of France—'redraws the geopolitical boundaries' (p. 35), offering a vision in which 'the British Isles and Scandinavia become the centre of the world' (p. 38). Thus, geographical conventions are refigured to address questions of *loci*, centrality and marginality.

Chapter Two continues with a discussion of the learned tradition and cosmographical awareness, although the emphasis is on narrative evidence of knowledge and learning. Barnes argues that *Dínus saga drambláta* consciously draws on encyclopaedic paradigms to foreground the saga's underlying 'preoccupation with learning' and that such paradigms moreover have an intrinsic narrative function in the story that reveals a 'model of the Augustinian ideal of learning' (p. 55). She points out that both protagonists, Dínus and Philotemia, receive an extensive education, both studying the *quadrivium* and *trivium* in addition to learning about herbs, sorcery and magic. Barnes's analysis draws attention to the underlying subtext of the inherent dangers of the abuse of knowledge as well as that of arcane knowledge in general. She relates the texts' supposed warning against unbridled curiosity to the patristic tradition, particularly to Augustinian thought. According to Barnes the playful interaction between cognitive capacity and material or fleshly desire in *Dínus saga* falls squarely within Augustine's definition of the temptations of the senses.

The desire for knowledge and understanding also informs the second story of the chapter, *Kirialax saga*. Unlike that of the previous story, the quest for knowledge in *Kirialax saga* remains, however, firmly focused on the realm of Christendom and is devoid of the magic, sorcery and the supernatural found in *Dínus saga*. Barnes situates the final story of the chapter, *Clári saga*, in the early stages of the development of native romance in Iceland and conceives its possible author (or translator), Jón Halldórsson, Bishop of Skálholt, as a potential 'key figure in the development of Icelandic romance' (p. 74). She compares the pictorial representations in the bedchambers of Serena (in *Clári saga*) and Philotemia (in *Dínus saga*) respectively to reveal the different function of the encyclopaedic material in each saga, suggesting that *Clári saga* 'provides the scaffolding from which *Dínus saga drambláta* emerges as the fully-fledged Icelandic romance' (p. 76).

While Chapters One and Two are interlinked in their focus on learned sources, encyclopaedic material and cosmography, the stage shifts in the remaining three chapters. Chapter Three focuses on the transmission and mediation of history through the trope of *translation studii* from the ancient world, Chapter Four on Christendom, and the fifth chapter in some sense returns to the notion of world geography in its emphasis on socio-political images of Constantinople in the *riddarasögur*. The chapters deal with a variety of texts, some fairly unknown, such as *Sigrgrarðs saga ok Valbrands* and *Adonias saga*.

Chapter Three focuses on cultural memory and its materialisation through ekphrastic imagery. Barnes points out that ekphrastic shield descriptions depicting world history or scenes from classical literature serve varying purposes, from the commentary on human frailty in *Saulus saga ok Nikanors* to comic irony in *Vilhjálm's saga sjóðs*. The sub-theme of Trojan diaspora informs all the texts addressed in Chapter Three and contributes to the argument of cosmographic rearrangement. Barnes notes for instance that the dispersal of the Trojan ancestors in *Ectors saga* has an 'eastward trajectory' (p. 91) that directly contradicts the conventional westward Trojan diaspora memorialised in continental sources, suggesting both an awareness of and a conscious manipulation of sources. Chapter Four continues with the focus on the historical past and cultural memory as depicted through Trojan inheritance and the defence of Christendom, returning in the end to encyclopaedic geography. The thread of cosmography is then taken up in the final chapter in its focus on the depiction of Constantinople as a sacred site of churches and holy relics that deviates from the more politically and ideologically fraught images of Constantinople in the late medieval continental romance tradition.

The conclusion is a stand-alone chapter that seeks to situate the *riddarasögur* in a particular textual culture of specific authorial derivation, noting that each text reveals the knowledge base and ideological framework of an educated author. Moreover, the significant intertextual connections between the works indicate, according to Barnes, a 'coterie of writers, familiar with each other's work and likely to be writing as much for their peers as for their anonymous patrons' (p. 183). By situating their works within the textual culture of the learned tradition and drawing on encyclopaedic material and romance writing, those authors thus

invite their audiences to join them in what Barnes so amply depicts as an ‘elaborate minuet of intertextuality’ (p. 190).

SIF RIKHARDSDOTTIR  
University of Iceland

ESSAYS ON EDDIC POETRY. By JOHN MCKINNELL. Edited by DONATA KICK and JOHN D. SHAFER. *Toronto Old Norse and Icelandic Series 7*. University of Toronto Press. Toronto, Buffalo and London, 2014. xviii + 373 pp. ISBN 978-1-4426-1588-5.

John McKinnell is well-known to anyone working within the field of Old Norse literature, and especially Eddic mythology. This collection of twelve essays represents the fruit of many years of scholarship and reflection on a range of mythological and legendary topics and, as such, it will be a most welcome addition to the bookshelves of any Old Norse scholar. As the Acknowledgements page and the editors’ introduction note, although all these essays have been published elsewhere, McKinnell has extensively revised much of the material, sometimes shortening, sometimes extending and developing, in order to take account of subsequent insights: to some extent, therefore, it represents a *summa* of his views on Eddic poetry. The essays that have been most altered have been assigned slightly different titles from those of their original publication to avoid problems with citation. (Thus, for instance, ‘The Context of *Völundarkviða*’ becomes ‘*Völundarkviða*: Origins and Interpretation’.) The six-page introduction summarises McKinnell’s arguments in the various chapters, but it would have been intriguing to have more detail on what the changes were and what motivated them: the collection would then have become, in addition, an intellectual biography (there is a biographical paragraph at the start of the introduction which traces McKinnell’s geographical trajectory from the east coast of Scotland via Oxford and Copenhagen to Durham, where he has taught and researched since 1965).

The chapters are arranged broadly according to the order in the Codex Regius manuscript of the Eddic poems at their centre. Thus we start with two essays on *Völuspá*, three on *Hávamál*, followed by one each on *Vaffbrúðnismál*, *Lokasenna*, *Prymskviða* and *Völundarkviða*, culminating with studies of female characters in the Sigurðr poems, and of (the non-Codex Regius) *Hyndluljóð* and *Hervararkviða*.

The first essay concerns the authorship of *Völuspá* and argues that we owe the poem to a heathen poet who knew of Christianity via vernacular versions of parts of Genesis, Mark and Revelation: all texts used in the Easter services which the poet might have attended as part of the process of being prime-signed. Next, McKinnell elucidates the role of the thrice-burnt seeress in *Völuspá*, uncovering the possible meanings and associations of the names Gullveig and Heiðr. In the essays on *Hávamál*, structural, lexical and metrical analyses of the text allow McKinnell to reconstruct the developmental stages which may have led to the extant text, arguing for a quadriform origin. ‘The Gnostic Poem’ (A) and ‘Loddfáfnismál’ (C) represent two collections of practical advice, whereas ‘The Poem of Sexual Intrigue’ (B) combines Ovidian sexual advice

with two cynical mythological episodes, and ‘Ljóðatál’ (D) offers a heathen version of the Crucifixion in which occult wisdom rather than human salvation is Óðinn’s aim.

The essay on *Vaffbrúðnismál* reclaims the poem for literary scholarship and argues that, far from being formless as previous scholars had thought, the text reveals a four-part structure comprising a Prologue and tripartite Debate, and the poet evinces an amoral heathen ideology of survivalism. *Lokasenna* emerges from the seventh essay as an indictment of the gods. Loki’s allegations of immorality and injustice are justified and his attacks are motivated by more than hatred: he wants to provoke the gods to a final breach with him and hasten Ragnarök. The eighth chapter considers the dating of *Prymskviða* and argues that the apparently Christian features stem from the influence of Anglo-Norse poetry on an early heathen myth. The poem has the therapeutic function of resolving fear, which McKinnell examines through a gender studies and then a Jungian lens, before arguing for the compatibility and viability of these approaches.

The essay on *Völundarkviða* considers the provenance and dating of the text, concluding that it most likely originated within a Norse-speaking community in England in the tenth or early eleventh century, before analysing the ways the poet transforms the two archetypal story-elements on which the text is based. The tenth essay explores the poetic representation of female reactions to Sigurðr’s death, arguing through an analysis of direct speech that the poems demonstrate a shift in ideals of femininity from an early emphasis on the heroic woman to a later valuation of the passive, devoted wife and widow, with an increasing emphasis on emotional expression. In the eleventh chapter McKinnell argues that representations of Þorg-erðr Hølgabrúðr and Freyja may reflect survivals of local fertility goddesses in Norway and offers some tentative conclusions on how *Hyndluljóð* may illuminate these cults. The final essay analyses the way in which the author of *Hervararkviða* reworks traditional story patterns and conventions of male-female encounters with the Other World, finishing with a consideration of otherness between parent and child (Angantýr and Hervör), but also of Hervör’s own potential sense of otherness in her internal response to taking on a masculine identity to protect her family’s honour.

The book is attractively presented, and a spot check revealed no noticeable typographical errors, though the author follows the common error of pluralising the Biblical book of Revelation throughout. There is a convenient combined Bibliography at the end and the generously cross-referenced Index is a useful aid in comparing McKinnell’s thoughts on a specific topic across the essays.

McKinnell is a meticulous, generous and humane scholar, and a sensitive interpreter of the poetic text. These essays will endure as a valuable and learned guide to the material they cover, but, as a body of work that took shape over twenty years or more, they will also stand as a reminder of the potential and possibilities of scholarship within an academic world less dominated than that of today by agendas of impact, outputs and cash-flow metrics, and by conceptions of research as an end-stopped, short-termist product.

DAVID CLARK  
University of Leicester

SKRIVAREN OCH FÖRLAGAN: NORM OCH NORMBROTT I CODEX UPSALIENSIS AV SNORRA EDDA. By LASSE MÅRTENSSON. *Bibliotheca Nordica 6. Novus Forlag*. Oslo, 2013. 332 pp. ISBN 978-82-7099-747-3.

Few would continue to argue today that the early fourteenth-century Codex Upsaliensis DG 11 (henceforth DG 11), containing *Snorra Edda* and the *Second Grammatical Treatise*, does not merit attention. Where editors such as Finnur Jónsson and Jón Helgason could dismiss the codex as simply the confused work of an incompetent scribe, growing scholarly interest in individual manuscripts has made possible perspectives other than the purely editorial.

Lasse Mårtensson's monograph on the scribal norm and deviations from it in DG 11 is a clear example of such a perspective. While the main debate about DG 11 has long been whether or not it represents an earlier version of *Snorra Edda* than that found in the other main manuscripts, the author makes it clear that his aim is different. Drawing exclusively on evidence internal to the manuscript, this study aims to understand DG 11's exemplar as well as shed further light on the codex itself. To this end, Mårtensson analyses the scribal norm in DG 11, which is written by one hand throughout. The term *norm* (or *standard*, as the English summary has it) is defined as the scribe's ideal way of writing. This includes choices in letter forms, orthography and abbreviations. The *usage* (*bruk*) is the actual realisation of the norm in the physical manuscript.

Establishing this particular scribe's norm enables Mårtensson subsequently to examine those instances where the scribe appears to go against his or her norm. In these cases, it is probable that we can see the scribal usage in the exemplar shine through; there is no reason for a scribe to deviate from his or her norm unless it is in conflict with the exemplar. Such conflicts usually arise when the scribe is unable to interpret the usage in the exemplar. Most of the time, a scribe working from an exemplar will simply reinterpret the exemplar's usage into his or her own norm.

This reinterpretation can be based on four different orthographical principles, according to Mårtensson. The phonological principle bases the orthography on the scribe's own pronunciation and does not appear to be followed very frequently. With the morphological principle, the scribe analyses a word through its morphemes. A standard of writing certain morphemes may then trump the scribe's actual pronunciation. This is for instance the case when the pronunciation of the ending *-r* becomes *-ur* (e.g. *hestr* > *hestur*); the morphological spelling remains for longer than it would have had Icelandic orthography been purely phonological. The third principle is the lexical principle, where entire words, regardless of the number of morphemes involved, are standardised. In the medieval material, Mårtensson states, this principle mainly applies to abbreviations of common words, such as *.s.* for different forms of *segja*. Finally, a scribe can follow the orthographical principle to write *sign by sign* (*tecken för tecken*). Spelling sign by sign occurs when a scribe chooses to copy a word exactly as it stands in the exemplar. The main reason for using this principle is that the scribe is unable to analyse a word using the preceding principles. It may be a word he or she does not know, or one with a grammatical ending he or she does not recognise. In DG 11, there is also the very particular use of certain letters in the *Second Grammatical*

*Treatise* which would be rendered pointless if replaced by the scribe's own norm, as they are used as suggestions for how to spell a specific phoneme.

In general, the scribe of DG 11 follows a strict norm that leaves little room for his or her individual phonological analysis. It is through the *sign by sign* spellings that Mårtensson can glimpse the exemplar's norm, and the bulk of his book is devoted to analysing instances that can be presumed to be the result of this principle. In order to be included in his material, the examined palaeographical and orthographical features can not occur more than 25 times in the entire manuscript. The collected features are then analysed in order to determine whether they are in fact copied sign by sign, or whether they are the result of another of the orthographical principles described above being used in the scribe's interpretation. Mårtensson finds that the scribe's choice to copy sign by sign occurs under certain conditions, primarily when copying names, verse quotations, and lists of *heiti*. These are all instances where the language is likely to be archaic or otherwise obscure to the scribe, and he or she appears to be aware of this. It is likely, based on Mårtensson's analysis, that norms from the early thirteenth century as well as from some time after 1250 shine through in DG 11. He also concludes that the poetry appears to come from a different exemplar from that of the prose, as the scribal norms are different. (It may be of interest that I reached a similar conclusion, based on a different analysis, in my dissertation on the Eddic quotations in DG 11: *Skriva fel och läsa rätt? Eddiska dikter i Uppsalaeddans ur ett avsändar- och mottagarperspektiv*. Institutionen för nordiska språk, Uppsala University, 2013. The two books went to press at the same time.)

In accordance with his manuscript-centred method, Mårtensson does not assume that a variant is the result of scribal error, but takes it at face value. An example of this is the discussion of the fact that what would normally be edited as *Níðhoggs* (gen.) and *Níðhoggi* (dat.) are spelled (with Mårtensson's notation) `\niphavgs\` and `\niphavgi\` (p. 131). Based on the scribe's well-established norm, Mårtensson concludes that the scribe must have understood the last element of the name as *-haugr* rather than *-hoggr*. Where Finnur Jónsson calls such variation in DG 11 'arbitrary' (*tilfældig*), Mårtensson shows that it is quite the opposite.

Mårtensson's book is very thorough and rationally argued, and a good starting point for those interested in either DG 11 or medieval scribal practices. His methods should be used on other manuscripts; it could very well mean a shift in how we consider exemplars and manuscript transmission.

MAJA BÄCKVALL  
Uppsala University

THE RECEPTION OF *HERVARAR SAGA OK HEIDREKS* FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY. BY JEFFREY SCOTT LOVE. *Münchener Nordistische Studien 14*. Herbert Utz Verlag. Munich, 2013. 333 pp. ISBN 978-3-8316-4225-0.

As Jeffrey Scott Love makes clear in the introduction to this stimulating study, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, while a perennial favourite of saga audiences, has not always been the most highly-regarded object of intellectual attention among

scholars. Nevertheless, and in spite of the dip in ‘academic interest in Heiðrekr’s exploits . . . some time during the early twentieth century’ (p. 13), the gothic sensibility aroused by ‘The Waking of Angantýr’, the potential migration-age echoes of ‘The Battle of the Goths and the Huns’ and the unique collection of Nordic riddles in the ‘Getspeki Gestumblinda’ seem to be as popular now among a broad range of readers as they ever have been. Recent years have yielded fascinating contributions to the existing scholarship on the saga, and Love’s work is clearly positioned to be an invaluable guide and companion to anybody wishing to build upon the ever-growing corpus.

Love, choosing to take up a thread left dangling by Stephen Mitchell in *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (1991), sets out to explore ‘how audiences interacted with medieval legendary texts’ (p. 12) and rightly asserts the novelty of his particular approach. The reception-studies angle of the work is focused through three main lenses. First Love considers the context of the saga in its manuscript witnesses, and an attempt is made to show how apparent compilatory principles (or lack thereof, for example where the saga appears as a single item) can reveal the mind-set of scribes, commissioners or readers. This in turn embraces assessments of individual manuscripts at key points within the time period surveyed, as well as a synchronic overview of trends, such as the presence of ‘frequent followers’, across the range of manuscripts. Secondly, the author looks at macro-level narrative variation, leading to considerations of how changes to the *materia* (taken for the most part scene by scene) reflect changing attitudes to the function of the saga. The riddles, in this respect, are given an entire chapter of their own due to the increased textual volatility which they bear witness to. Thirdly, the reception is gauged through a survey of the various responses to the saga, intellectual commentary as well as poetic reworkings, which are extant from the period under review. While further methods could be adopted to deepen our understanding of the saga’s readership (for example, investigations of scribes and scribal networks or a quantitative codicological analysis of the manuscript witnesses in order to gain understanding of the socio-economic contexts of production), these three chosen approaches result in a broad and revealing assessment of the saga’s shifting potential. If work remains to be done, it can only be significantly bolstered by Love’s study, which will most likely serve as its immediate jumping-off point.

In order to make the task manageable, limits have been set (the proliferation of texts in the eighteenth century is given as the reason for consideration only of pre-1700 scribal activity). Yet, within this scope, the seventeenth century in particular, a time of fevered scribal work in Iceland and nationalist diligence in mainland Scandinavia, proves to be fertile ground for the author’s aims. It is to Love’s credit that he does this period justice by circumscribing his attention, and his new-philological justifications are clear and defensible, yet one can hope that further work will be forthcoming to show how these currents stretched into the eighteenth century and beyond. Even given a limited array of textual witnesses, it is a natural consequence of the material surveyed that the analysis at times becomes somewhat atomised into lists. This means that some readers may prefer a piecemeal reading approach. Where the staunch philologist may revel in all the

thorough descriptions of various individual manuscript witnesses’ makeup and macro-level variation, others will find the work useful when dipped into in search of specific literary (or folktale) motifs.

The conclusions reached, not the least of which is the assertion of a siglum-worthy mixed-source branch (B) of texts, will nevertheless be of interest to all. Love, admitting the potential objections to such a division, separates the reception of the saga into historical and diversionary strands. While the entertainment / education dichotomy can of course be challenged, it serves here to focus Love’s findings in a comprehensible format. The Hauksbók (H) redaction is revealed to focus more on certain details appropriate to its original encyclopaedic context; the R-recension tones down pagan elements (perhaps owing to clerical involvement); the U-redaction, with its inclusions and added gore, seems to have experienced greater popularity among adventure-hungry audiences. Quite simply we learn that in a context of *variance* one and the same text can be pushed towards meaning many things to many people.

While not reproducing images of the manuscripts referred to (with the exception of the cover design), the work is attractive and handy. Minor typographical errors are present on occasion, but do not detract overly from the concise and welcoming prose in which the book is written. A more significant issue, which may cause frustration to the casual reader, is the lack of synchronisation between the index references and the occurrence of the material referred to. Based on a random sampling, one would do well to subtract between three and six pages (the number increases as the book progresses) from the page number actually referenced in order to find the desired information. A number of appendices, on the other hand, will be useful reference tools for philologists old and young: Appendix C in particular bravely attempts to represent networks of influence without insisting on determining causality. Until further work is done this is perhaps the most reasonable way to approach the knotty questions of textual relationship with regard to the saga, even if by the time one reaches the diagram representing the R-group the ensuing spiderweb is enough to make even the hardest of stemmatologists giddy. Ultimately, however, this book represents a bold step in the right direction for the study of *fornaldarsögur* in general and will be obligatory reading for anyone wishing to work on *Hervarar saga* in the future.

PHILIP LAVENDER

*The Arnamagnæan Institute, Copenhagen*

MINNI AND MUNINN. MEMORY IN MEDIEVAL NORDIC CULTURE. Edited by PERNILLE HERMANN, STEPHEN A. MITCHELL and AGNES S. ARNÓRSDÓTTIR. *Acta Scandinavica* 4. *Brepols*. Turnhout, 2014. x + 241 pp. ISBN 978-2-50354910-1.

All the articles contained in *Minni and Muninn: Memory in Medieval Nordic Culture* are welcome additions to memory studies, offering together an overview on memory, remembering and forgetting in the North. This collection of ten essays is

divided into two sections, 'Memory and Narration' and 'Memory and History', a division that the editors consider 'to a certain extent arbitrary and overlapping' (p. 5), which may be the reason why the second section is less exciting and original than the first in dealing with memory and remembrance in Old Norse–Icelandic literature. Jürg Glauser, in his foreword, highlights the fact that the Nordic civilisations are fully aware of the function and construction of memory, arguing that 'the *Poetic Edda* is to an extraordinary degree a theory of memory; indeed, there is, in fact, barely a text in the whole body of Old Norse–Icelandic literature which does not in one way or another deal with memory' (p. x), an argument reprised throughout the collection.

In the introduction the editors underline the importance of the Old Norse words used in dealing with memory and its function, forgetfulness and the concepts involved when dealing with memory studies: *minni* 'memory', *muna* 'to remember', *forn minni* 'ancient memories', Óðinn's two ravens *Muninn* and *Huginn* 'memory' and 'mind', ómínnis hegri 'heron of forgetfulness' and *minnunga men* (Old Swedish) 'men with good memory', but also cultural, social and biographical memory, 'transmission and media, preservation and storage, forgetting and erasure, and authenticity and falsity' (p. 1). All the articles indeed explore some of these aspects, dealing with texts and authors particularly aware of the past or the deep past, and the way this past is preserved, remembered, transmitted but also forgotten. The first section, 'Memory and Narration', opens with Pernille Hermann's brilliant chapter, which functions as a guideline for all the following articles, 'Key Aspects of Memory and Remembering in Old Norse–Icelandic Literature', skillfully combining classical texts dealing with *ars memoria* in Old Norse–Icelandic literature in order to explain how memory was shaped in the North, not only through oral culture, but also through some rhetorical training. Hermann's reading of both mythological and historical texts through the partial overlapping of the notions of knowledge and memory (pp. 15–24) is soon contrasted with the fading of memory (leaks in the storehouse/archive (p. 25)), and thus the need to create mnemonic devices to remember the past: mnemonic places, as well as cultural and communal memory.

The following four articles further explore these topics. In 'Memory and Old Norse Mythology' John Lindow argues that cultural memory is complexly maintained through four techniques: discussion, objects as sites of memory, places as sites of memory, and ritual (see especially *Völuspá* 60–63), and Margaret Clunies Ross's 'Authentication of Poetic Memory in Old Norse Skaldic Verse' explores how memory is preserved in this skaldic poetry and how the skalds authenticated their poems, witnesses and sources. In one of the most original articles in the collection, Kate Heslop's '*Minni* and the Rhetoric of Memory in Eddic, Skaldic, and Runic Texts' offers an overview of the Old Norse words for memory and remembrance during the transitional period from oral and inscriptional culture to the literate one. Beginning her study with the 'memory dependent' skaldic poetry (p. 78), she defines kennings as mnemonic devices that, interestingly, rarely contain any references to memory—the word *minni* occurs in only one kenning in the whole corpus of skaldic poetry: *minnis garðr* (p. 80)—whereas in

Eddic poetry memory and forgetfulness are very often mentioned and associated with the act of drinking. If cultural and communicative memory are preserved in skaldic and Eddic verse, rune stones represent durable places of memory, where the individual's commemoration offers an implicit reference to memory (p. 95). Russell Poole concludes the first section with 'Autobiographical Memory in Medieval Scandinavia and among the Kievan Rus', providing a bridge between the two sections. Poole argues that even though this type of memory principally stems from an individual experience, it then develops and is maintained in social interactions.

The second part of the collection offers studies on memory and history in Normandy, Sicily and Gotland, the border region between Sweden on the one hand and Norway and Iceland on the other. Rudolf Simek's 'Memoria Normannica' compares and contrasts, at times superficially, how Normans both in Sicily and in Normandy remembered and preserved their Scandinavian traditions. Similarly, Stephen Mitchell discusses how memorabilia and textual production are constructed and manipulated in order to mould a community over time, arguing that the Gotlandic history that synergy has bequeathed to us provides a valuable lesson in how 'memory studies' may in time finally lead to a realization of 'tradition studies' (p. 171). Gísli Sigurðson in 'Constructing a Past to Suit the Present: Sturla Þórðarson on Conflicts and Alliances with King Haraldr *hárfagri*' further elaborates on textual production in discussing Sturla's version of *Landnámabók* (with interesting references also to Haukr's version) and how the different relationships between King Haraldr and the families that emigrated to Iceland in the ninth century were manipulated in order to shape contemporary political legitimacies. The penultimate article in the collection, Stefan Brink's '*Minnunga mæn*—The Usage of Old Knowledgeable Men in Legal Cases' should probably have been placed at the beginning of the second part of the volume, as it argues that for centuries boundary markers were preserved orally in lists, and hence that memory would function as a living human archive, where, in contrast to other genres, witness chants and lists of boundaries employed 'a word-for-word memorization, where the stereotypical structure of the chants is used as an obvious mnemonic device' (p. 206). Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir's 'Legal Culture and Historical Memory in Medieval and Early Modern Iceland' concludes the collection, considering the oral and written modes of transmission of memorial culture, namely the law codes which were first recited orally in law courts, a space of legal remembrance and historical writing, and later coexisted with the written documents.

One can only welcome this collection. The wide and rich array of topics provided will certainly offer a solid platform for those approaching memory studies for the first time, but also for those scholars that have already been bitten by the memory bug. This volume shows that memories in medieval Nordic cultures, both constructed and reconstructed, true or false, are what make Eddic and skaldic poetry, sagas, legal and historical documents such captivating and malleable texts for the twenty-first-century scholar.

THE PERFORMANCE OF CHRISTIAN AND PAGAN STORY WORLDS. NON-CANONICAL CHAPTERS OF THE HISTORY OF NORDIC MEDIEVAL LITERATURE. Edited by LARS BOJE MORTENSEN and TUOMAS M. S. LEHTONEN with ALEXANDRA BERGHOLM. *Medieval Identities: Socio-Cultural Spaces 3. Brepols*. Turnhout, 2013. x + 448 pp. ISBN 978-2-503-54236-2.

This substantial volume contains thirteen articles and an introduction. It covers two interlinked medieval and early-modern cultural areas: those of the North Sea and the Baltic. Hence, unlike many other Nordic studies or collections, it encompasses, besides Scandinavia, both areas such as England, and Finland and the countries around the Baltic. The thematic focus—if there can be said to be one—is on ‘non-canonical’ traditions, a stated aim being to afford greater attention to some lesser-known products of the interface between the oral and literary worlds, and a particular concern is ‘lived literature’ or performativity. The Introduction also mentions the need to redress the current bias against paying much attention to literature in Latin.

There are some problems with the overarching framework of the book. Talking about a ‘canon’ raises not particularly useful questions over whether any canon is, or ever has been, held to exist; the issue is not, in fact, widely discussed in the book (other than by Slavica Ranković in her article, ‘The Performative Non-Canonicity of the Canonical: *Islendingasögur* and their Traditional Referentiality’). Similarly, while performance, or performativity, is in itself an interesting aspect of medieval culture to investigate, in practice it sometimes merely devolves into a look at the overall cultural or literary significance of a piece under discussion. The ostensible thematic structure of the book thus seems to act mainly as a holder to contain a series of disparate articles covering a wide range of topics from markedly varying viewpoints, with differing underlying scholarly concerns. It is to be hoped that the book will offer the opportunity for some cross-fertilisation between disciplines, but the book’s scope is perhaps too wide to be likely to appeal to most researchers other than selectively.

Given this scope, each individual chapter really needs its own review, but only a few selective remarks can be made here; it is to be borne in mind, given the book’s breadth and disparity, that what appeals to one reviewer is likely to be quite different from what another may find of use. A general point, however: the cultural scope that the book aspires to is presumably the reason for a great deal of basic explanatory material being presented on most topics. This does, rather too often, make for a very plodding text for anyone familiar with the topic under discussion. More interesting would have been to see the implications of considering this Baltic-North Sea area as a cultural continuum drawn out more; some articles do this, but, to pick one example, Else Mundal’s discussion—well presented in itself—of possible, but tenuously evidenced, Old Norse laments, ‘Female Mourning Songs and Other Lost Oral Poetry in Pre-Christian Nordic Culture’, does not draw on the richly documented Finnish tradition of *itkuvirret*. Despite any shortcomings, however, there are some interesting articles here, ranging from liturgical or para-liturgical texts in Finland and Norway, a comparison of Finnish and English thirteenth-century ballads on the evangelising bishop of Finland and Judas Iscariot,

St Óláfr in Finland, Henry of Livonia’s Chronicle, the Virgin Mary and her legendary mother Anne in Finnish-Karelian folk tradition and poetry, the possibility of broadening the compass of Old Norse poetry to include lost laments and obscene verses, the workings of (oral) interrelationships between Icelandic family sagas, and the implications of the different versions of the Prologue to *Snorra Edda*. The quality naturally varies, but some, such as ‘“She was fulfilled, she was filled by it . . .”’: A Karelian Popular Song of St Mary and the Conception of Christ’, Senni Timonen’s masterful but succinct presentation of the Finnish-Karelian Mary cycle in oral tradition, are paradigms of research and its presentation. Many of the observations made throughout the book could gain further importance when placed in a comparative light: for example, the presentation of how in the Livonian chronicles writers updated, varied, even invented (pagan) rituals in order to historicise their frontier experience surely has implications for how we view the presentation of pagan rituals in Norse sources too.

It is regrettable that Brepols, a company that aspires to academic publishing excellence, did not consider it worthwhile to employ a native English-speaking copy-editor to correct the innumerable linguistic infelicities to be found in the volume.

CLIVE TOLLEY  
University of Turku

ARNAS MAGNÆUS PHILOLOGUS (1663–1730). By MÁR JÓNSSON. *The Viking Collection 20*. University Press of Southern Denmark. Odense, 2012. 274 pp. ISBN 978-87-7674-646-9.

As the most prominent collector of early Nordic manuscripts, Árni Magnússon has been the subject of several biographies, most notably Finnur Jónsson’s two-volume *Árni Magnússons levned og skrifter* (1930). While some of his contemporaries, such as Humfrey Wanley in Oxford, acquired medieval manuscripts with a zeal that rivalled his own, Árni enjoys the special distinction of having safeguarded the history of an entire culture. His continuing importance to the study of medieval Scandinavian society is reflected in the naming of the research institutes in Reykjavík and Copenhagen in his honour.

Although the current volume is largely an abridged translation of the author’s *Árni Magnússon: Ævisaga* (Reykjavík, 1998), it distinguishes itself from this and other earlier biographical treatments in its emphasis on Árni’s professional career as a collector, librarian and scholar. Árni’s dedication to scholarship is evident throughout, despite the attention drawn to his lack of publications, which then, as now, served as an imperfect metric for scholarly achievement (e.g. pp. 131, 201, 215). Readers seeking details of Árni’s personal and political life are referred to the 1998 biography (p. 19). This is the second monograph-length biography on Árni Magnússon in English following the publication in 1972 of *Arne Magnusson: The Manuscript Collector* by Hans Bekker-Nielsen and Ole Widding (Odense).

As justification for the focus on Árni's collecting habits the author cites the crucial (and often overlooked) responsibility of students and scholars to understand the preservation history of the texts they study (p. 10). Details concerning seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Scandinavian and Continental antiquarianism provide a framework for Árni's career. Several pages are devoted to a synopsis of the career of Thomas Bartholin the Younger (e.g. pp. 47–53), and Árni's philological methods are frequently compared to those of contemporary European men of letters, such as Wanley and Jean Mabillon. These asides are somewhat tangential to Árni's story, but they form an illuminating backdrop of the academic environment in which he operated.

After some remarks on the state of septentrional studies up to the late seventeenth century, the history begins in 1684 with the appointment of Bartholin as Danish royal antiquarian under King Christian V and Árni's subsequent involvement in Bartholin's research. Chapter Four outlines Árni's principles for transcribing and editing older texts, some of which can be observed in his unfinished edition of *Íslendingabók*. Following this is a description of how Árni was introduced to Þormóður Torfason (Torfaeus) and Matthias Moth, whose influence enabled him to spend three years in Leipzig (1694–96) and subsequently receive appointments as secretary to the Royal Archives and professor at the University of Copenhagen back in Denmark (ch. 5). The sixth chapter is devoted to the royal commission to Iceland (1702–12), in which Árni was given the task of investigating the living conditions of the relatively poor inhabitants of his native land. This trip resulted in the creation of an official land registry and granted Árni the opportunity to acquire numerous manuscripts, most of which were presented to him as gifts in exchange for his assistance with legal or administrative matters (p. 143). The final two chapters trace Árni's activities back in Copenhagen from 1712 until his death in 1730, including further manuscript acquisitions and brief descriptions of Árni's duties at the university and Royal Archives as determined from the sparse information available for that time.

Particularly welcome is the extended discussion of how Árni obtained diplomatic manuscripts and had them transcribed to build his collection of Icelandic legal documents (pp. 153–61). However, the current holdings are more fragmented than the author's statements suggest (p. 215). Numerous Icelandic charters were sent back to Iceland already in 1927, long before a substantial amount of the Arnarnagnæan Collection was returned in 1971–97, and more than a thousand other documents previously held in Copenhagen were returned to Mecklenburg-Schwerin (1817) and Norway (1937) or transferred through various means to the Danish Royal Archives. The author points out that there are still numerous avenues for future research into the diplomatic manuscripts, such as a study of the scribes who worked for Árni during the winters at Skálholt.

Parenthetical citations enable quick access to underlying primary sources (generally correspondence and notes Árni left on paper slips with his manuscripts; cf. pp. 14–16). Modern shelfmarks of the manuscripts mentioned in Árni's letters are also given in parentheses, though their frequency occasionally results in cluttered pages (e.g. pp. 67, 144). This is a small price to pay for the convenience of having a single resource for attributions appearing in numerous secondary sources

and unpublished notes. Scattered references to lost manuscripts (e.g. pp. 146, 205–09) will also be of interest to some readers. At times the author cites his own biography in Icelandic as a source. This is understandable for details out of the scope of the current work, but in a few instances the original sources would have been preferable, such as on p. 173 concerning manuscripts belonging to Torfaeus which ended up in Árni's hands after the former's death.

Academic audiences interested in any aspect of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, antiquarianism, the Early Modern manuscript and book trade or political rivalries between Danish and Swedish scholars will benefit from reading this account of Árni's life. The occasional amusing anecdote—such as Torfaeus's request for his deerskin underpants (p. 82) and Árni's wig expenses (p. 178)—coupled with a fluent narrative make it accessible to a general audience as well.

The pithy quotations which begin each chapter and the fifteen figures which supplement the text are carried over from the author's biography in Icelandic, where curious readers can locate many more of both. An extensive bibliography is included, along with two helpful indices of manuscripts and names, though a change in font between the manuscript shelfmarks and page citations would increase the legibility of the former. The book is bound in the standard, sturdy blue cloth familiar to readers of The Viking Collection series, and it is reasonably priced at 300 DKK.

JEFFREY LOVE  
*University of Stockholm*

W. G. COLLINGWOOD'S LETTERS FROM ICELAND. TRAVELS IN ICELAND 1897. By W. G. COLLINGWOOD and JÓN STEFÁNSSON. Edited by MIKE and KATE LEA. *R. G. Collingwood Society*. Cardiff, 2013. 150 pp. 200 plates (colour, black and white). ISBN 978-0-9546740-1-4.

This new edition of the sixteen letters written by W. G. Collingwood to his family during his 1897 'pilgrimage to the saga-steeds of Iceland' serves several worthwhile purposes. With its additional introduction, documentary 'interludes' and appendices and its wide range of illustrations, the volume usefully augments Janet Gnosspelius's 1996 edition published in the journal of the R. G. Collingwood Society. It also complements Matthew Townend's definitive study *The Vikings and Victorian Lakeland: The Norse Medievalism of W. G. Collingwood and His Contemporaries* (Cumberland and Westmoreland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society, Kendal, 2009). Moreover, in reproducing previously unpublished Collingwood drawings, watercolours and photographs, the edition supplements the richly illustrated volumes by Haraldur Hannesson (*Fegurð Íslands og fornir sögustaðir*, Bókaútgáfan Örn og Örlygur, Reykjavík, 1988), and Einar Falur Ingólfsson (*Sögustaðir: Ífótspor W. G. Collingwoods*, Crymogeia, Reykjavík, 2010), with the latter's photographic evidence revealing strikingly the artistic licence that the artist sometimes allowed himself in landscape representation. Lastly, the new volume represents an appropriate souvenir



from the 'Collingwood Icelandic Pilgrimage 2012', organised by the Cumberland and Westmoreland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society.

Collingwood's letters, many of them charmingly adjusted in register and range of reference to win the attention of more youthful members of his family, retain their power to inform and illuminate, move and amuse, charm and shock. Understandably, a recurring theme is Collingwood's sketching and painting (he eventually produced over 300 pictures): there are concerns over the over-ambitious itinerary; over the limited opportunities for 'overhauling' rough sketches; over uncertain supplies of paints; over endless requests from the locals for 'selfies'; over the valedictory exhibition in Reykjavík; and, not least, over the need to finance publication of the *Pilgrimage to the Sagasteads of Iceland* (1899) travelogue back in England. The editors' inclusion of a translated section from the autobiography of Collingwood's travelling companion Dr Jón Stefánsson helps to remind us that the illustrations in the *Pilgrimage* volume had to be redrawn in black and white from watercolour originals owing to cost constraints.

The new edition's generous range of illustrations (some 200 in all) encourages fresh comparative perspectives on Collingwood's art: multiple images of the same scene, watercolour vs black and white, sketches vs photographs (courtesy of a pioneering portable Kodak camera), Victorian vs contemporary (images of Collingwood's steamship SS *Laura* on modern Icelandic and Faroese stamps), known and unpublished (from Abbot Hall Art Gallery in Kendal and the R. G. Collingwood Society archive) vs previously unknown (several fine watercolours, owned by Copenhagen-based descendants of Jón Stefánsson). With Collingwood presenting sketches en route in recognition of friendship and favours, the possibility of further pictorial finds cannot be discounted.

Three of the editors' appendices locate and cross-index the 1897 Icelandic paintings. However, and alas, there is still no word on the whereabouts of 'Kjartan finds Hrefna wearing the Coif', Collingwood's watercolour presented in June 1905 by the Viking Club to HRH Princess Margaret of Connaught on the occasion of her marriage to HRH Prince Gustaf Adolf of Sweden and Norway. More than sixty subscribers each received a reproduction, but the trail has gone cold.

Away from concerns about artistic priorities and other daily practicalities—sea-sickness, homesickness, injured horses, finance, the local food, primitive sleeping arrangements and other 'health and safety issues'—Collingwood's letters remind us of his delight with the idea of medieval Iceland, 'home of the heroes', and his disillusion with modern realities. The solemn saga landscapes, notably those of *Laxdæla saga*, inspire awe at every turn. The craving for even more direct contact with the fabled past even prompted the artist to excavate (after a fashion) the alleged grave of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir at Helgafell, an initiative indicative of his growing interest in archaeology. Elsewhere he is able to embrace geological change (the *Njáls saga* district much altered), record human foibles with Hogarthian relish ('we were received by a very handsome girl with whom I was rapidly falling in love, when in the middle of the conversation she turned her head and hawked and spat, and then went on talking'), and strike a prescient note when suggesting to local journalists that Iceland's future lay in tourism (more native infrastructural

investment required). But there are darker undertones in the letters, with repeated references to 'bleakness and neglect', to 'dirt, disorder, unfinishedness', to the 'folly and filth of this land', not to mention frustration at apparent local indifference to antiquities, agrarian 'improvement' and (even) domestic plumbing, the latter deemed to be 'more degenerate' than that of the Sturlung Age. As for the late nineteenth-century Icelandic mindset, Collingwood inveighs against 'muddleheadedness . . . entire absence of definite training to observe and deal with facts: nobody seems to have any idea of the scientific fact, or the business facts, or the political fact—or any other fact. It's all what they fancy' (final letter, 15 August 1897). Restored to hearth and home in the Lake District, distance lent Collingwood no enchantment. His September/October 1897 letters (Lbs [Landsbókasafn–Haskólabókasafn Íslands] 2186 4to) to Eiríkur Magnússon in Cambridge reflect even more sternly on the same Icelandic illusions and realities; those few items might have made an illuminating additional appendix to the new edition.

*W. G. Collingwood's Letters from Iceland* is a pleasing volume that wears its learning lightly. An earlier handbook version for the 2012 'pilgrimage' was published by the Cumberland and Westmoreland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society, as if to confirm that the activities of such regional associations can be as enterprising today as they were during their own (and W. G. Collingwood's) mid-nineteenth-century formative years.

ANDREW WAWN  
*University of Leeds*

DEN SVARTE VIKINGEN. By BERGSVEINN BIRGISSON. *Spartacus Forlag*. Oslo, 2013. 386 pp. ISBN 978-82-430-0789-5.

Does fiction have a role to play in academic research and writing? As poet, novelist and academic, Bergsveinn Birgisson is in a better position to answer than most. He starts his book on Geirmundr heljarskinn, the 'black Viking' of the title, by observing that the academic demand for objectivity produces 'descriptive' but not 'engaging' writing: why not combine the literary qualities of a novel with the truth claims of historical biography, why not write as both novelist and historian? A model for this, he suggests, can be found in the Icelandic sagas themselves: like a saga author, he aims to piece together the loose fragments of Geirmundr's life, filling in the many gaps by means of careful intuition and through the exercise of a 'kunnskapsbasertfantasi' ('well-informed imagination', p. 22). In one important respect, however, he diverges from the saga authors: he is determined to lay bare his methods of working. In some ways, then, this book is a literary version of the historical documentary, interweaving narrative voice-overs and interviews with experts in the field with rather colourful (perhaps occasionally lurid) visual reconstructions.

This is more, however, than a 'hybrid' of novel and historical biography: it is also a personal history, the story of Bergsveinn's ancestor in the thirtieth generation. He describes how, as a child, he heard an oral anecdote about Geirmundr's slaves from a family friend; it caught his imagination and prompted his first en-

quiries. Bergsveinn draws liberally on the reflections and reminiscences of family members and acquaintances: to reconstruct the life of Geirmundr, he delves deep into his own past, into the ‘Ginnungagap’ between history and prehistory (p. 15).

The narrative that emerges is a fascinating one, taking us from Rogaland, up to Siberia, back to Ireland and on to Iceland, as we follow in the tracks of Geirmundr’s imagined life course. Bergsveinn is anxious to avoid what he calls ‘vikingfiksering’ (‘a fixation on Vikings’, p. 33): this is a story not about raiding, but about trade routes, resources, slaves and economic profit, in which Geirmundr proves an expert player. Bergsveinn traces Geirmundr’s origins to a vanished people of Mongolian extraction, who lived on the coast of the Barents sea. This was the end of a trade route, he suggests, which supplied the Vikings in Ireland with essential raw material from walrus, used to make oil and rope for shipping. After Haraldr the Fine-Haired monopolised the trade route along the Norwegian coast, Geirmundr set out in search of new supplies in Iceland, where he built up an empire based on Irish slave labour with networks across the West fjords. We follow his travels from Siberia to Iceland from a variety of perspectives, not least those of his unfortunate slaves. Although he claims to be wary of the sensational, Bergsveinn has a novelist’s eye for graphic detail, as when he describes the fair locks of Óláfr the White dripping with crimson blood (p. 187), or imagines a beautiful slavewoman in Geirmundr’s harem (p. 226). Indeed, he makes good use of the more exotic stories from the sagas: the description of paganism in *Eyrbyggja saga*, the fortune-telling of the *völva* in *Eiríks saga rauða* (both transposed to Norway), the murder of Hjörleifr by his Irish slaves in *Landnámabók*. The aim is to tell not so much a true story, as one in which ‘man kan tro’ (‘one can believe’), a fiction perhaps, but one that could have happened (p. 78).

Perhaps the most important question this book raises is why there is no saga of Geirmundr, who is described in *Landnámabók* as the most noble (*gofgastr*) of settlers. The written sources on Geirmundr are indeed rather scanty: a few paragraphs in *Landnámabók*, the *þáttur* that opens *Sturlunga saga*, a chapter in *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*. This, Bergsveinn suggests, is not due merely to the vagaries of fate; it is the result of a ‘meningsfyllt fortíelse’ (‘a meaningful silence’, p. 212). Geirmundr does not fit with the Icelandic ‘myth of origins’; he is a victim of purposeful oblivion. His small empire in the Westfjords challenges the view of Iceland as a society of equals, who fled there to escape from Norwegian tyranny. Instead, it shows the settlement to be built on ‘profittbegjær, rovfangst og slaveri’ (‘desire for profit, overhunting and slavery’, p. 211). Geirmundr is neither a great warrior, nor a peaceful farmer: he is an aristocrat, an opportunist, and a canny businessman, who ruthlessly exploits the maritime resources of the new land, eventually running them dry. His story has not been forgotten so much as deliberately covered up: painstakingly, Bergsveinn attempts to excavate it. Yet, in a moment of irony, the book ends with a failed excavation: the possible site of Geirmundr’s burial under the church at Skarð. Anxious to finish the day’s work and get home, an irritable farmer literally ‘covers up’ what may have been Geirmundr’s remains before the archaeologists can arrive on the scene (pp. 293–96). Such tantalising suggestions, always drawing back from final certainty, are characteristic of Bergsveinn’s historical detective work.

Indeed, one of the most endearing aspects of this book is the humour and self-doubt of its narrator, so disarmingly placed in full view. Early in the work, Bergsveinn imagines himself putting through a call to Hel, to ask his ancestor a few burning questions. Geirmundr, showing little sympathy for his project once he finds out there is no money or fame in it, eventually hangs up on him (p. 104). Bergsveinn brings alive not only a tiny sliver of the past, but also the disappointments and excitement of his own journey. He describes himself as sustained, in what sometimes seems a thankless and futile search, by tiny moments of revelation: the discovery of a Norwegian brooch from c.900 at the mouth of the river Ob in western Siberia (p. 136); the realisation that Geirmundr’s nickname *heljarskinn* means the same thing as ‘sikhirtya’, the Nenets’ name for the walrus hunters who lived on the coast of the Barents sea (p. 123). Nor is he unwilling to put his theories to the test: while researching Geirmundr’s love life at Kvenhóll, he tries out ‘den usømmelige magnetismen’ (‘the indecent magnetism’) of the grassy slopes in nearby Snorraskjól, which are reliably said to induce erections (pp. 229–32).

Hailed as a ‘stroke of genius’ and a ‘masterpiece’ in Norway, this book is worth reading not only for the compelling story it tells, but also for the way in which it uses literary narrative to ask historical questions, to give a voice to those who have been silenced in the official historical record. Not everyone, perhaps, will enjoy its novelistic flavour, but it would be difficult to argue with Bergsveinn’s breadth of learning or with the generosity of his historical imagination.

SIÂN GRØNLIE

*St Anne’s College, University of Oxford*

THE DATING OF BEOWULF. A REASSESSMENT. Edited by LEONARD NEIDORF. *D. S. Brewer*. Cambridge, 2014. x + 250 pp. ISBN 978-1-84384-387-0.

To those to whom it matters, the dating of *Beowulf* matters very much indeed. But, as the editor of the volume under review remarks in his introduction, ‘scholarship on the dating of *Beowulf* is markedly uneven in quality: alongside sober and thoughtful argumentation, there has been a great deal of improbable hypothesizing about the author of the poem or the milieu in which it was composed’ (p. 1). The ‘reassessment’ of this crucial scholarly issue that Neidorf advocates and to which the essays gathered together here contribute is presumably meant to be an example of such ‘sober and thoughtful argumentation’. The implication that previous work on the dating of *Beowulf* has been the result of actual or metaphorical inebriation is typical of Neidorf’s polemical and high-handed rhetoric: those who agree with him are sober and thoughtful arguers; those who disagree are dissolute fantasists.

Accordingly, Neidorf has marshalled an impressive array of scholars who agree with him. This book results from a conference at Harvard in 2011 at which, so far as one can tell from the proceedings, everybody argued that *Beowulf* is an early poem—certainly pre-Alfredian, probably eighth-century, perhaps even earlier—and rejoiced in their consensus. One wonders whether this consensus truly

represents the present *communis opinio* or if it is merely shared within a highly selective list of participants. No advocates of a later *Beowulf* contribute to these pages; nor do those who are sceptical about the possibility or even necessity of arriving at a secure dating for the poem. Such views are frequently derided here as indefensible: 'when the evidence is examined,' writes Neidorf, 'one hypothesis will be found to possess more explanatory power than others; its superior claims to probability must be acknowledged' (p. 56). The early dating agreed upon by the contributors to this volume is to be taken as such a hypothesis.

In which case, I can confirm that the evidence presented in this volume makes a coherent case for an earlier *Beowulf* that many scholars will find compelling. Contributions by Thomas A. Bredehoft, Megan E. Hartman and George Clark present a consistent view of the metrical evidence; Kaluza's law is invoked and found to hold true. R. D. Fulk, whose work is something of a touchstone for these early daters, rehearses the linguistic arguments that, he claims, confound those who would make the poem the product of the ninth or tenth century; this forensic work complements Michael Lapidge's important intervention on the palaeographical archetype of the extant text of *Beowulf*. These studies of (relatively) 'hard' evidence all seem to point to the existence of a version of *Beowulf* before about 750.

Other studies collected here offer readings that are contextualised by an early date for the poem. Dennis Cronan revisits the parallels between *Beowulf*'s opening lines and the West Saxon royal genealogy, using the poem's treatment of Scyld to argue against a connection between the Scyldings' lineage and that of the house of Wessex. Frederick M. Biggs offers a nuanced reading of *Beowulf*'s 'Frisian Raid' episode (ll. 2354b–68) that does not depend upon an early date—Biggs is more cautious about the date than many of the contributors—but is congruent with what we know about the transition from Germanic to Christian models of royal succession. Joseph Harris brings to our attention a fascinating and mysteriously overlooked second Heorot in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*, where the monastery at Hartlepool is called 'Heruteu'. A dating of the poem to around Bede's time, together with our knowledge of a monk named 'Biuulf' in the Durham *Liber Vitae*, gives Harris's argument its impetus. Thomas D. Hill suggests that 'if *Beowulf* were composed in the tenth century, the poet was for whatever reason writing about theological concerns appropriate to an earlier age' (p. 201). Hill argues that the poem's religious attitudes are more easily explicable in a context closer to the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons than farther away from it, which seems an eminently reasonable inference, if one hardly susceptible of proof. Rafael Pascual's contribution straddles the forensic and circumstantial modes of analysis that we see elsewhere in the volume. He examines the semantic shifts undergone over time by the words *Beowulf* uses for its monsters, tracing their transformation from physical into spiritual creatures, a process which took place, Pascual states, over the course of the eighth century. *Beowulf* must have been composed when monsters were still *really* monsters.

There is much to be gained from consulting many of the individual essays in this volume. Nonetheless, I regard the book, taken as a whole, with dismay. We normally praise edited collections when their contents are linked by a common

thread, but here the insistence on an early date for *Beowulf*, as asserted by the editor, gives a false impression of the state of scholarship on this vexed subject. It attempts to impose a consensus on a field where no consensus can be reached, nor needs to be reached. Agnosticism about the poem's date is not an indefensible position; it is a position that does not need to be defended. Readings that contextualise the poem in the era that produced its sole textual manifestation—the early eleventh century—have the benefit of at least attempting to explain the poem as it existed for a known audience, even if that audience comprised only the two scribes involved in copying Cotton Vitellius A.xv. And readings that come down in favour of any other date at all are merely readings that either illuminate the poem usefully for us or don't. The problem with Neidorf's approach, and that of a handful of the other contributors, is not that it produces bad readings of *Beowulf*, but that it seeks to police what sort of readings are permissible. It is an act of gate-keeping that seeks to narrow down the range of possible interpretations of *Beowulf*, when the goal of much recent Old English scholarship has been to open the poem up to new theories, new concerns and new readerships.

Some of the work in this reassessment of *Beowulf*'s dating is explicitly reactionary. Tom Shippey uses an essay with the innocuous-sounding title 'Names in *Beowulf* and Anglo-Saxon England' to take aim at that great icon of twentieth-century criticism, Tolkien's '*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics'. Shippey argues that Tolkien's 'plea for the autonomy of fantasy' in *Beowulf* 'had a strong, undeclared personal motive' in presenting 'the *Beowulf*-poet as a kind of proto-Tolkien, creating a personal fantasy world from antiquarian materials' (p. 62). This is strong, iconoclastic stuff, though arguably all amateurs of the Middle Ages create their own 'fantasy versions' of the period on the basis of their readings. Shippey wishes us to return to the days when *Beowulf* was regarded as a fundamentally traditional work, closer to the historical facts that underlie it than most modern scholars are prepared to admit: a repository of inherited lore more than an individual work of literature. This retro-Victorian positivism is as much a scholarly fantasy as any of Tolkien's, and it is one that has implications for disciplinary politics: what would we gain from a retreat from literary approaches to *Beowulf*? I feel sure that we would gain a good deal less than we would lose. And why would we wish to take *Beowulf* out of literary critics' hands? The implied answer to this latter question is that literary critics are the wrong people to study a poem that should be the province of philologists and/or historians.

In a slightly disturbing piece of rhetoric, Allen Frantzen in his afterword to this volume illustrates what is at stake in this debate. Frantzen complains about the 'ahistoricizing, formalist approaches' of 'much feminist, gender, and post-colonial criticism, which bulks large relative to its modest contributions to knowledge of the text, its language, or its contexts' (p. 242). It is noteworthy, and should be viewed as extremely problematic, that Frantzen's dismissal of post-structuralist schools of criticism, including feminist criticism, occurs at the end of a volume to which only one woman has contributed. To dismiss gender theory is to disregard the genderedness of the work we do and the institutional contexts in which we do it. To dismiss feminism and post-colonial studies wholesale is to implicate oneself

in the continued marginalisation of women and subaltern communities in the study of medieval literature. And if some of this sort of criticism is, as Frantzen claims, 'hostile to the heroic ethos' of *Beowulf* and 'regards masculinity as toxic'—good. There is plenty in the poem to support the idea that *Beowulf* itself is 'hostile to the heroic ethos'. Indeed, we might ask whether the whole concept of, the whole *desire* for, a monolithic heroic ethos is not the product of a certain masculinist tendency in some strains of Anglo-Saxon studies. In any case, there are no impermissible readings of *Beowulf*, and we should be very wary of claims that there are.

Several of the contributors to this volume refer, always disparagingly, to the last major collection of essays on this topic, *The Dating of Beowulf*, edited by Colin Chase, which resulted from a notorious conference held at the University of Toronto in 1980 (Toronto University Press, 1981; second edition, 1997). The Toronto proceedings represented a break with the prevailing consensus by giving much greater attention than hitherto to the possibility that *Beowulf* was a late composition. Neidorf's collection is in its turn a strongly negative reaction to this later dating and to what can be viewed as its predominance in scholarship over the past thirty years. It is good to challenge orthodoxies. But in the poorest of the essays in this volume, Michael Drout takes the stance that Chase and his contributors not only were incorrect in their late dating, but acted mendaciously in promulgating it. Drout's article is based on hearsay—rumours that he heard on the conference circuit as a graduate student are its starting point—and proceeds mostly by innuendo: without naming names or providing instances, he claims that the Toronto volume is the product of some sort of cabal, and that in the eighties and nineties dissenters were 'marginalized not because they had lost an intellectual debate on its merits, but through the application of institutional and personal power' (p. 158). This accusation is not supported by the evidence that Drout offers. The meat of his argument is that the 1980 conference did not produce dates for *Beowulf* in line with the prevailing consensus; nor did subsequent work across the next decade reflect the Toronto party line. Therefore, there must have been something underhand about the selection of papers for Chase's volume. Drout offers charts in support of this theory, which presumably make his method 'scientific'.

But Chase's collection made no pretence of being representative of broader trends in the field. It brought together more or less like-minded critics who felt that the *status quo* on the subject of *Beowulf* needed challenging. Scholars tend to collaborate with people they know and whose work they find congenial; conferences are rarely able to offer the whole conspectus of opinion, nor do they claim to. And of course Drout's methods could just as easily be used to cast doubt on the probity of the volume under review, which could certainly be regarded as cliqueish: Drout did his Ph.D. under Frantzen's direction; Leonard Neidorf is a colleague of Joseph Harris, a longstanding admirer of R. D. Fulk and a close collaborator with Raphael Pascual; Fulk directed Megan Hartman's dissertation; Fred Biggs studied with Tom Hill at Cornell. There is nothing sinister about these connections, but they illustrate that the selection of papers for a conference or an edited volume is never a blind, disinterested representation of a discipline. The simple fact that twelve out of thirteen contributors are men is quite enough to show that

we would be foolish to expect this volume to represent Anglo-Saxon studies as they are practised today. Drout's insinuation of impropriety is inappropriate, and I am surprised that his essay survived peer review. I am also surprised at how close several of these essays come to making *ad hominem* attacks on other scholars, especially Roberta Frank, who is made the scapegoat for the sins of the Toronto contributors again and again.

Despite the strength of several of the essays published here, this volume is weakened—I fear fatally—by the overbearing dogmatism of its editor and a few of its contributors. For even if *Beowulf* was composed before 750, it is dogma to assert that any reading based upon an alternative dating, or upon no date at all, is invalid—*Beowulf* cannot be explained with reference solely to a single moment of origin, without considering questions surrounding (for example) its oral-traditional heritage, textual transmission or subsequent reception. It is dogma to deny the value of contemporary literary criticism, in all its variety, to our understanding of *Beowulf*. Philological and historical studies of *Beowulf* are crucial to expanding our conceptions of what *Beowulf* is, was, when, and for whom. But *Beowulf* defies our desire for fixed boundaries and categorical interpretations; it always will defy them.

It seems likely that *Beowulf* existed in some form before the arrival of the Vikings in England at the end of the eighth century—perhaps long before. The essays in this volume certainly add weight to the hypothesis of an early date for the poem, and those who are interested in the dating of *Beowulf* will profit from reading most of them. But the reactionary insistence on the primacy of certain methodologies over others, the desire to restrict interpretations to those which accord with an early date, and the sometimes intemperate rhetoric of this book are dispiriting and at times politically problematic. If Neidorf has succeeded in pushing back the date of *Beowulf*, he may have done so only at the cost of setting back Anglo-Saxon studies by decades.

CHRISTOPHER ABRAM  
University of Notre Dame

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— 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: *iðradist Bolli þegar verksins ok lýsti vígi á hendi sér* (*Laxdæla saga* 1934, 154).

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

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

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