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## BUREAUCRACY AND ALIENATION: SOME CASE STUDIES FROM *HÁKONAR SAGA HÁKONARSONAR*

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SCENES FROM *HÁKONAR SAGA HÁKONARSONAR* have not traditionally been approached as meditations on bureaucracy: its powers, its cruelties and its absurdity. This missed opportunity might be attributed to the debate over how much bureaucracy there really was in medieval Norway, where the saga is largely set. Hans Jacob Orning (2008, 310) speaks of ‘the absence of a fixed bureaucratic framework’ in Norway during the middle of the thirteenth century. Sverre Bagge endorses the validity of the term ‘bureaucracy’ in a medieval Norwegian context, but notes that compared to contemporary non-Scandinavian countries, Norway’s bureaucratic culture remained rudimentary (Bagge 2014, 141–42; Bagge 2010, 155, cf. Barber 2004, 360–61). The recent survey of Norwegian epistolary ecology provided by David Brégaint (2016, 70–74, 347–49) confirms this view in further detail.

A related, but distinct, question in Norwegian historiography has been that of state formation (e.g. Helle 1974, Bagge 2012, Helle 2009 vs. Orning 2010). The very title of Knut Helle’s influential textbook, *Norge blir en stat* [‘Norway becomes a state’] 1130–1319, reflects the long-standing Norwegian preoccupation with locating sources of organisation and authority in the nation’s imagined past. While state formation is clearly concomitant to the discussion of bureaucracy, the two concerns are not identical. First, bureaucracy is by no means the preserve of the state—to-day much bureaucracy is generated by private enterprise (Weber 2015, 97–98; Graeber 2015, 9–44), and in medieval Norway the most advanced bureaucratic structures were to be found in the church rather than under the crown (Bagge 2014, 82–90).

Second, in the present study, the emergence of bureaucracy is not treated as a historical process in the way that one thinks of state formation. From Aristotle (1967, 5–15) to Hobbes (1997, 95–97) to Bentham (1948, 52–56), the state is treated as something which emerges with the definite article attached. It is a transitive actor: the state does things to/for certain portions of society, even though, as Steinar Imsen (2012, 192–210) well illustrates in the case of Norway, the state’s personnel is

paradoxically composed of its own subjects. But in the account offered here bureaucracy is a more imminent phenomenon; it is a way of thinking or behaving rather than a set of institutions, and sometimes a literary invention more than a historically falsifiable reality. At most the present study can hope to approach the Norwegian state-formation problem as a Gordian knot. I am more concerned with how our understanding of Old Norse literature is enriched by thinking with bureaucracy, and also how our understanding of bureaucracy is enriched by thinking with Old Norse literature. To pursue these concerns, we will ask what role bureaucratic behaviour plays in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*—and how bureaucracy should be defined in the first place.

### *A Letter Ignored*

Our story begins in the way that tales of bureaucratic woe often do: with a man who makes a bad decision. In the spring of 1239, a group of Icelanders in Norway were anxiously wondering whether they would see their homeland again. In the midst of increasing tension between the Norwegian King Hákon and Duke Skúli, the king issued an order which was tantamount to the establishment of a basic exit-visa system. Sturla Þórðarson wrote in his *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar (Hák)* that

Íslenzka menn, þá sem með hertuga váru, það konungr ekki út fara fyrir en þeir hefði ráð fyrir gert með hverjum erendum þeir skyldu fara, því at áðr um haustit hafði spurzk at þeir höfðu barizk í Skagafirði, Kolbeinn ungi ok Gizurr, við Sturlunga ok Sturlungar höfðu fallit.

The king ordered the Icelanders who were with the duke [Skúli] that they must not leave until they had made it clear on what business they were going, because in the previous autumn it had been discovered that Kolbeinn the Young and Gizurr had fought at Skagafjörður [in Iceland] against the Sturlungar, and some Sturlungar had been killed. (*Hák*, II 43)

Whether the skirmish at Skagafjörður was really why the King wished to control the movements of Icelanders in Norway is doubtful. It can be readily interpreted as an attempt to undermine Skúli's authority, and to normalise the situation of a Norwegian monarch exercising suzerainty over Icelanders. Regardless of Hákon's motivations, the edict presented a problem for the party of Icelanders abroad. Their leader was the polymath Snorri Sturluson. He was at Trondheim, at the court of Skúli the pretender. His son, Órækja, was also present. So was his cousin, Þorleifr Þórðarson, eager to return to Iceland after being an exile in Norway. However, his nephew, Þórðr kakali 'The Stammerer' was in Bergen, at the court of

King Hákon. Should Snorri and his companions apply for permission from King Hákon to return to their homeland? Were they not rather under Skúli's jurisdiction? Although, if so, surely the same could not be argued for Þórðr? In any case, Snorri was not best liked by the king, having failed to win Iceland for the Norwegian crown and then having thrown in his lot with Skúli. Why bother to seek the king's permission at all? Sturla, himself also a nephew of Snorri, records that

Tók konungr þá fréttir bæði norðan ór landi ok sunnan. Hann frétti at hertugi hafði gefit orlof Snorra Sturlusyni ok Órækju syni hans ok Þorleifi til Íslands ok fengit skip þat er hann átti hálf en hálf Guðleikr af Skartastöðum. Þegar sem konungr frétti þetta þá gerði hann norðr bréf ok bannaði at þeir færi. Þessi bréf kómu til þeira er þeir lágu við haf, ok fóru þeir eigi at síðr í banni konungs.

Then King [Hákon] received news both from the north of the country and the south. He discovered that the duke [Skúli] had given Snorri Sturluson and his son Órækja and Þorleifr permission to go to Iceland, and they had got a ship which was half-owned by him and half by one Guðleikr of Skarstad. As soon as the king discovered that, he sent letters north and prohibited them from going. These letters reached them as they were putting out to sea, and they went anyway despite the king's prohibition. (*Hák* II, 43)

But Sturla also wrote another, fuller account. *Hák* had been written at the Norwegian court, probably around 1264–65. It would be dismissive to describe it as cringingly loyal to Norwegian royal interests, but it is very clearly designed to please and not to offend the son of King Hákon (Sverrir Tómasson 2006, 120–21, Ármann Jakobsson 2015, 17–19). Sturla's *Íslendinga saga*, on the other hand, was written in Iceland in the 1270s, and tells many of the same stories as *Hák* with more colour. Here, Snorri's flight from Norway is described (*Ísl*, I 540):

Enn vm uaarit fennu þeir skip, er átti Guðleikr á Skarta-stauðum, vinr Snorra, ok biöggu þat til hafs með raáði hertugans. Enn er þeir voro búnir ok haufðu lagt út unðir hólum, þa kómv menn sunnan fra konungi ok með brefum, ok stoð þat áá, at konungr bannaði þeim aullum Íslendingvm at fara út aa því sumri. Þeir synndu Snorra brefin, ok suarar hann sua: 'út vil ek.' Ok þa er þeir uóru bunir, hafði hertuginn þa i boði sinu, aðr þeir tókv orlof. Voro þa faáir menn við tal þeira hertugans ok Snorra.

In the spring they got a ship, which was owned by Guðleikr of Skarstad, a friend of Snorri's, and they prepared to go to sea with the permission of the duke. But when they were ready and they had set off, having reached Munkeholmen [an islet in the bay of Trondheim], then men came from the south, from the king, bringing with them letters, and there it stood that the king prohibited all Icelanders from leaving that summer. They showed Snorri the letters, and he

replies thus: ‘I mean to go to Iceland.’<sup>1</sup> And then when they were ready, the duke invited them to a meeting before they took their leave. Few people were there at the conversation of the duke and Snorri.

In the version above, it is stressed that the ship had already departed—even if it had only made it as far as Munkeholmen. The king’s men must have pursued the Icelanders, boarded, and presented Snorri with the letters personally (as will be seen, the presentation of letters in person, often with additional oral information delivered by the bearer, was common in contemporary correspondence culture). Snorri replied, either with desperation or nonchalance depending on how one interprets his voice. He returned to shore, had a discussion with the duke, presumably seeking his reassurance—though Sturla is keen to dispel the notion that the conversation involved the bestowal of any feudal rank<sup>2</sup>—and then set out again. It was a decision that would prove fateful. Snorri would not return to Norway, and had no chance to assuage the king’s wrath. On the 23rd September 1241 he was assassinated in his cellar, begging for his life with the sadly undignified last words: ‘*Eigi skal hauggva*’ ‘Don’t strike!’ (*Ísl*, I 553). (Both these, Snorri’s most pleading recorded words, and ‘*Út vil ek*’, his most defiant, have passed into the proverbial store of modern Icelanders. See Halink 2019, 216–17).

How instrumental the Norwegian king was in the murder has been disputed. Local Icelandic grudges played a major role, as the Icelander who arranged the attack was Gizurr Þorvaldsson, Snorri’s estranged son-in-law. Indeed, as Ármann Jakobsson (2015, 14–16) has pointed out, there was

<sup>1</sup> Translators have differed on how to render this: ‘Nevertheless, I will go home’ (McGrew 1974, 349); ‘I will sail out’ (Wanner 2008, 24); ‘hjem vil jeg’ (Kålund 1904, 481); ‘I want to leave’ (Ármann Jakobsson 2015, 11). Each suggestion supplies words which are absent in the Old Norse and gives Snorri a different tone, from Kålund’s poetic—even vulnerable—timbre to McGrew’s defiance. I am much tempted by one of two translations suggested by Simon Halink (2019, 216): ‘I want out’, which reflects the degree of claustrophobia and panic I read into Snorri’s mental state at this moment in his life. However, I agree with the advice of reviewers that this does not reflect the geographical connotations of *út* in the context of the medieval Icelandic–Norwegian relationship.

<sup>2</sup> *Ok var þat saugn Arnfinnz, at hertuginn géfi Snorra iarls nafn, ok sua hefir Styrmir hinn fróði ritað ‘aártíð Snorra folsnar-jarls’; enn enngi þeirra Íslenðinganna lét þat aa sannaz* ‘And it was the story of Arnfinnr, that the duke gave Snorri the title of earl, and thus Styrmir the Learned has written of “the anniversary of the death of Snorri the Fraudulent [Secret?] Earl”, but none of those Icelanders have confirmed this’ (*Ísl*, I 540). Snorri did have a feudal rank from King Hákon, being his *lendr maðr* ‘landed man’.

also some mindless thuggery on the part of the underlings who landed the first blows. But as Sturla made clear, and as Ármann acknowledges, the king's letter to Gizurr was a deciding factor: *þat mundi miök vera fyrir sakir máala Snora Sturlu sonar, er láat hans hafði nakkvat afkonunginum leitt* 'it was probably mostly because of the matter of Snorri Sturluson, whose death had been caused in part by the king' (*Ísl*, II 100).<sup>3</sup>

Why did Snorri feel able to ignore the king's letters that day? There are, of course, inherent difficulties in ascertaining the workings of a man's mind on a particular occasion, over seven centuries ago, on the basis of two sources. But the question is also challenging because Snorri was probably conflicted. Contributing factors might well have included his allegiance to Duke Skúli, his faith that Skúli would ultimately defeat Hákon, perhaps a sense that his relationship with the king was irreparably damaged, or that in Iceland, on home turf, he could evade the king's grasp. But none of these factors can have been overwhelming, because Snorri still turned back at first, and it appears that he conferred with the duke before making his move.

I would contend that at least part of Snorri's defiance was because he had not noticed the bureaucratic web which had been woven around him. The part of Snorri's miscalculation which concerns us here is, in essence, identical with the error of ignoring a council-tax bill or cramming parking tickets into one's glove-box. Snorri failed to recognise the dramatic mental revolution which had turned letters from fragile physical ephemera into effective death warrants. Before we tell the medieval Norwegian chapter of that story, we must first paint a portrait of bureaucracy in broad strokes. Here, it will be necessary briefly to step away from *Hákonar saga*, and explore the universal features of bureaucratic behaviour from a theoretical perspective. A digression is required because the synthesis of bureaucracy upon which this study is built has not been advanced before by others, as far as I am aware.

### *Excursus: A Definition of Bureaucracy*

Asking what really constitutes bureaucracy is, as Neil Garston points out, not unlike the fabled exercise of the blind sages, each of whom attempted to describe an elephant while grasping a different part of the animal (1994, 20–21). Is it the physical paperwork itself? Is it people in suits and offices? Is it any kind of managerial labour? Max Weber's definition, being the

<sup>3</sup> 'It' (*þat*) here refers to the discord between King Hákon and Gizurr Þorvaldsson (d. 1268), who had arranged Snorri's murder after supplanting him as the main agent of Iceland's transition to Norwegian rule.

oldest and the broadest, warrants special attention. In modern English translation it weighs in at fifty-two pages, and there is scarcely any variant of bureaucratic organisation which it does not describe, from Ancient Egypt, to the Byzantine Empire, to the modern capitalist corporation. Nonetheless, it can be reduced to three contentions. Bureaucracies, according to Weber, are organisations where 1) given offices carry authority, 2) the offices exist independently of their holders, 3) the offices are increasingly specialised to treat different issues. The strength and the weakness of this model is its inclusivity. It explains why universities, police forces and armies exhibit features which we recognise as bureaucratic. There was another strand to Weber's definition, which we will need to fortify. Almost in passing, Weber (2015, 97–98) observed that

A fully developed bureaucracy embodies very specifically the principle of *sine ira ac studio* ['without anger or frustration']. This specific character of bureaucracy means the complete eradication of love, hate, and all purely personal sentiments that are irrational and incalculable . . . the more bureaucracy implements this principle of 'dehumanizing' its tasks, the more perfect it becomes.

As Kathy Ferguson (1984, 12–16) notes, this is the soul of bureaucratic thinking: the requirement to participate in a decision-making process as though one were indifferent to the outcome. Weber phrases this requirement like a moral virtue, akin to being fair. But the psychological process at work is more complicated. Striving to take a decision with a sense of cool objectivity is in fact a position which betrays personal involvement, in so far as one is thereby invested in making the *best* decision. The model bureaucrat, on the other hand, is wholly uninterested in the best or worst decision, but wishes only to make *the* decision.

The ability to be completely uninvested in a decision's outcome is a quite revolutionary psychological breakthrough. To withhold the judgement of things as 'good' or 'bad' is to mute the instinct to evaluate our surroundings. The ideal bureaucrat is not lying when he/she says: 'I don't make the rules, I only follow them' or 'It's more than my job's worth'. Karl Marx (1975, 109) proposed that 'for the bureaucrat the world is no more than an object on which he acts'. It ought to be acknowledged that he was speaking in a metaphysical rather than literal sense, but a revision is still due. The ideal bureaucrat has withdrawn from the world as experienced by a human being. It is the bureaucrats themselves who become passive objects, governed by forces they consider external to their sense of self.

Later Marxist thinkers interested in bureaucracy (e.g. Mandel n.d. [1973], Mandel 1992) generally focused on the *practical* question of why self-professed socialist states or trade unions tended to develop considerable

bureaucratic apparatus. The fact that Marx had provided a perfect *theoretical* description of the necessary psychological apparatus to become a bureaucrat was largely missed, apart from asides from non-Marxist commentators (Bonjean and Grimes 1970, 365; Smith 1971, 659). I am thinking of Marx's rendition of alienation (*Entfremdung*). He was not the first German philosopher to tackle the issue (see Swain 2012, 11–24), but he was the first to provide a comprehensive account of how we can become profoundly uninvolved in our own activity, and how colossal coercive systems can be constructed atop this cognitive cleavage (on the study of alienation by Old Norse scholars, see Cole 2018, 117–20).

The key difference between Marx's intention and how we shall use his work is that he was describing a prototypical manual labourer. For example, in a time before labour was coerced under feudalism or capitalism, a toy-maker may have enjoyed crafting a toy duck for the children of his/her community. Under capitalism, on the other hand, a toymaker on a factory production line probably did not look at the cohorts of ducks passing below his/her weary hands with anything like pleasure. How could it be that a person who loved an activity done in their own time could feel completely indifferent to it at work? The problem, in Marx's view, was that the worker had become alienated not only from *what they produced*, but also from *themselves*. Two minds came to inhabit one body. One was the alienated self, and one was what Marx called the 'species-being' (*Gattungswesen*): the thoughts and desires which would occur to us if we were not under the compulsion of authority (e.g. Marx 1975, 220). Let us picture the toy duck maker on his/her production line (Marx 1975, 324–25, 330–31):

the object that labour produces, its product, stands opposed to it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer . . . For it is clear that, according to this premise, the more the worker exerts himself in his work, the more powerful the alien, objective world becomes which he brings into being over against himself, the poorer he and his inner world become, and the less they belong to him . . . [Alienated labour] replaces labour by machines, but it casts some of the workers back into barbarous forms of labour and turns others into machines. It produces intelligence, but it produces idiocy and cretinism for the worker . . . If the product of labour does not belong to the worker, and if it confronts him as an alien power, this is only possible because it belongs to *a man other than the worker*. If his activity is a torment for him, it must provide *pleasure* and enjoyment for someone else. Not the gods, not nature, but only man himself can be this alien power over men. [Emphasis in original]

What if it were not a manual labourer being described here, but a bureaucrat; not toy ducks on an assembly line, but application forms across a desk, or rulings on eligibility for a position? The description would still

hold true. In principle, a bureaucrat discharging their office ought to be as alienated as a factory worker. A bureaucrat who issues parking permits should be completely indifferent to the rights and wrongs of whether the applicant deserves a parking permit, and should instead only judge whether their forms are in order. Whether the bureaucrat personally believes that the parking permit should be issued is as irrelevant as whether the toy-duck maker has any real interest in making toy ducks. The only difference is that in Marx's accounts the workers alienated from their factories are being used to generate capital, while in the case of bureaucrats it is debatable whether their work generates capital, shepherds it or is perhaps wholly indifferent to it (Marx 1976, esp. 716, 1054).

Moreover, it is not only the bureaucrat who becomes alienated from their species-being, but also those ruled by bureaucratic regimes. A case in point is the artefacts of paperwork themselves. Why do we (ideally) respond to a letter arriving through the door, telling us to pay for a particular transgression, as though it were an official turning up in person and demanding the money? The heart skips, the mouth dries, a moment of nausea gives way to indignation, as though we were having a conflict with a human being, not a piece of paper. The answer is that we have become alienated too. Unlike Snorri, we are alienated from the immediate reality that an order delivered on paper or vellum is not equivalent to an order delivered by someone carrying a weapon with which they intend to harm you. One might explain this as David Graeber (2015, 66–74) does, by noting that all bureaucratic systems rely on the eventual threat of state violence—and, increasingly, state violence generously lent to capitalist bodies (cf. Weber 2015, 89–90). Regardless, a psychological revolution is required to make everybody aware that an interaction with a written artefact is equal to an interaction with a living, breathing human being—or to make them unaware that, in the present moment, the two things are qualitatively not equal.

*Archbishop Guthormr: An Alienated Bureaucrat in Norway, 1218*

Bagge who, as we have noted, has been the chief proponent of bureaucracy studies in an Old Norse context, recognises the importance of idealised bureaucratic indifference. One chapter of a working paper he published in 2003 is entitled *Den upersonlige makt: etableringen av et 'byråkrati'* 'Impersonal power: the establishment of a "bureaucracy"' (2003, 38). This clearly did not give scope for much theoretical clarification on the psychology of impersonal power, but provides a survey of official privileges, the use of administrative formulae and church hierarchy (2003, 38–53, esp.

43). Happily, a scene in *Hák* provides the perfect opportunity to do so. Chapter 42, describing events from April 1218, reports a meeting between the young King Hákon and the Archbishop of Niðaróss, Guthormr. The archbishop came from the same faction to which the king belonged, the Birkibeinar ‘Birch-legs’, whose name was a sort of populist affectation, implying that their means were so humble that they could afford no shoes better than birch-bark bindings (Nygaard Brekke 1956, 600–01; Bagge 1996, 41). Guthormr’s brother, Hallvarðr skyggna ‘The Observant’, had been killed, fighting for the Birkibeinar during a surprise attack by their enemies in the year 1200.

King Hákon had been formally acknowledged as king by the Gulaping assembly, and the narrative voice of *Hák* assumes that this should have been the end of the matter. But other regional assemblies, many of the nobility and, crucially, the Church establishment were far from convinced; Hákon’s mother, Inga, had been the concubine of Hákon Sverrisson (r. 1202–04), not his lawful wife, rendering Hákon Hákonarson illegitimate. Under these circumstances, should not the young king have been able to turn to Archbishop Guthormr for support? The archbishop was, after all, a trusted Birkibeinn. But as Sturla notes, Guthormr’s treatment of Hákon was in fact frosty. Moreover, preferential treatment appeared to be given to Skúli (*Hák*, I 214–15):

Hákon konungr ok Skúli jarl bjoggu ferð sína, er vára tók, norðr í Þrándheim ok kómu til bæjarins hálfum mánaði fyrir páska. Ekki var hringt í móti þeim, ok enga *processionem* vildi erkibyskup gera í móti konungi, ok þó at þeir mættisk þá veitti byskup konungi enga blíðu. En jarl ok erkibyskup fundusk hversdagliga, ok var þar hinn mesti blíðskapr. Þann dag er jarl var einn í Kristskirkju þá var honum veitt höfðinglig tígn. Pálmsunnudag váru þeir báðir í Kristskirkju, konungr ok jarl, ok sátu í háseti, ok var konungi engi tígn veitt ok hvárigum þeira. Ok er þeir váru leiddir til altaris at offra þá vildi erkibyskup eigi snúask í móti konungi né við hans offri taka.

As spring came on, King Hákon and Earl Skúli prepared their journey northward to Trondheim, and they arrived in the city half a month before Easter. No bells were rung for them, and the archbishop offered no procession for the king, and when they met the [arch?]bishop showed the king no warmth. But the earl and the archbishop met every day, and then there was the greatest warmth. One day when the earl was alone at Christchurch, he was given the honour due to a ruler. On Palm Sunday both the king and the earl were at Christchurch, and they sat on thrones, and the king was given no honour, nor was either of them. And when they were brought to the altar to make offerings the archbishop would not turn to face the king nor accept his offering.

The story lurking between the lines here is straightforward: the church has treasonously favoured Skúli, and snubbed Hákon. This may well have been the historical reality, and it would be in accord with the wider typological project of *Hák*, which seeks to present Hákon as a modern incarnation of his grandfather, King Sverrir (r. 1177–1202). Sverrir had a difficult relationship with the church, being excommunicated in 1194. His speech against the bishops (*Ræða gegn biskupum* or *Oratio contra clericum Norvegiae*) is a classic of pro-monarchical, anti-clerical literature.<sup>4</sup> Sturla had a perfect opportunity, then, to hammer home the Hákon–Sverrir parallel.<sup>5</sup> Sturla leaves this straightforward reading open, should the sceptic wish to adopt it. But it is striking that he also offers an explanation for Archbishop Guthormr’s behaviour which is more complex (*Hák*, I 215):

Litlu síðarr höfðu þeir stefnu í erkibyskupsgarði, ok spurði konungr erkibyskup hverja sök hann gæfi honum er hann vildi eigi veita honum konungliga tígn. Erkibyskup svaraði svá: ‘Þetta er eigi míns eins ráð, því at allir vér byskupar erum í þessu ráði ok þeir sumir er innan hirðar eru með yðr. Ok finnum vér þat til at vér höfum heyrnt ymt nökkurn á hvárt þú ert sannr son Hákonar konungs eða eigi’ . . . Dagfinnr bóndi var þá næst konungi um allar ráðagerðir. Erkibyskup lét gera Dagfinni orð leyniliga eftir stefnuna ok sagði honum svá: ‘Guði er þat kunnigt at ek vil gjarna vera vin konungs, ok eigi væri þessir hlutir sumir talaðir er nú eru ef ek réða.’

A little later they had a meeting in the archbishop’s residence, and the king asked the archbishop for what reason he would not endorse him for the royal rank. The archbishop replied thus: ‘It is not my own doing, because all of us bishops are involved in this decision and even some of your retainers. And we find that we have heard a certain rumour about whether you are the true son of King Hákon or not’ . . . Dagfinnr the Farmer was at that time closest to the king in all matters of counsel. The archbishop secretly had a word with Dagfinnr after the meeting and said this to him: ‘God knows that I would very much like to be a friend of the king, and some of the aforementioned things would not be happening if it were up to me.’

<sup>4</sup> For a recent reevaluation of its exact ideological position, see Þorleifur Hauksson (2015).

<sup>5</sup> Sverrir’s legacy is evoked at several key points in the saga. A farmer, who is said to have fought alongside Sverrir in the Baglar wars urges his social equals to pledge the same loyalty to Hákon as they would have done to Sverrir (*Hák*, II 8–81). Before a key battle against Skúli outside Oslo, Hákon recites an *exemplum* which Sverrir also used to read before combat (*Hák*, II 91). Hákon is also said to resemble Sverrir physically (*Hák*, II 265). When Hákon is on his deathbed, he has *Sverris saga* read to him (*Hák*, II 262).

The same Guthormr who has been so rude to Hákon in his capacity as archbishop steps out from his office in order to confide in the king's friend that 'if it were up to him' things would be different. This is the sort of psychological disassociation described by Marx. There are two Guthormar: Guthormr the man, who is in favour of Hákon's rule, and Guthormr the archbishop, who must take into account that there are serious doubts over Hákon's legitimacy. He represents the views of what is in effect a sort of committee (*allir vér byskupar*). In doing so, Guthormr has not been a bad Birkibeinn, but a good bureaucrat.

A less generous reading would be that Guthormr favours the king personally, but is afraid to antagonise the king's enemies. However, as Guthormr opts to explain his public position in terms of 'the rules', i.e., the supposed constraints of officialdom, the issue of bureaucracy remains pertinent: even if Guthormr is more cowardly than conscientious, his aim is to exercise power impersonally rather than to involve himself in factions. Whether there is any historical reality to Guthormr's secret meeting with Dagfinnr is a question for another time. It could be a plot device included by Sturla to allow Guthormr's relatives to save face, by pretending that he was really on the right side of history all along. Indeed, Bagge (2003, 44–45) has pointed out that bishops in medieval Norway tended not to be constrained by their office, like ideal Weberian bureaucrats, but rather to gain personal agency and enrichment from their position. Nonetheless, later in the saga, Guthormr is given a chance to make amends for his earlier bureaucratic intransigence. King Hákon is now eighteen years old, and meets the archbishop in Trondheim (*Hák*, I 248):

Guthormr erkibyskup var þá í bænum. Hann fagnaði konungi í öllum hlutum sem sæmiligast. Þeir höfðu oft tal sín í milli. Konungr spurði erkibyskup eitt sinn hví hann sneri svá mikilli óvináttu til hans meðan hann var í bernsku sinni. Erkibyskup sagði at annarra manna völd gengu eigi miðr til þess en sjálfs hans illvili. Fór þá upp allt hit sanna fyrir konungi. Hét erkibyskup þá því at hann skyldi koma annat sumar til Björgynjar ok gera þá sæmð hans því öllu meiri sem honum þætti áðr áfátt.

Archbishop Guthormr was in town [Trondheim] at the time. He celebrated the king in all things as honourably as possible. They often had conversations together. The king once asked the bishop why he had directed such unfriendliness towards him during his childhood. The archbishop said that the powers of other people did not equate to his own ill-feeling. The truth of it all then struck the king. Then the archbishop promised that he would come next summer to Bergen and give to him all the honour which he had previously thought to be lacking.

The scene is framed as a cathartic rapprochement. If Guthormr, in his role as archbishop, had accepted the young Hákon's claim on the throne from the outset, Hákon would not have had to watch his own mother undergo ordeal by hot iron in order to prove his claim (*Hák*, I 218–20; for commentary see Brégaïnt 2016, 67–69). Guthormr's inaction fuelled the doubts surrounding Hákon's legitimacy, and those doubts would eventually contribute to Skúli's justification for rising against him in 1239 (Helle 1974, 106–07). Despite these grievances, Hákon accepts Guthormr's friendship. Indeed, Guthormr is depicted as a slightly grovelling figure, promising to make the journey from Trondheim (the seat of ecclesiastical power at this point) to Bergen (then the seat of Hákon's court). One might interpret the scene as pragmatic politics: both parties realise that the king's power is ascendant but each requires the other. However, we should note that Sturla portrays the moment as an epiphany, rather than a calculation: *Fór þá upp allt hit sanna fyrir konungi* 'The truth of it all then struck the king.'

Given this sense of sudden realisation, it would be appropriate if Guthormr had added some new information to explain why he acted the way he did four years earlier. But really his explanation is similar, if not exactly the same. The 'powers of other men' (*annarra manna völd*) are to blame rather than 'his own ill-feeling' (*sjálfs hans illvili*). There is the same ambiguity over whether Guthormr had purely disassociated his responsibilities as archbishop from his personality as a Birkibeinn, or whether he had cringed before the king's enemies. Had he internalised the *annarra manna völd*, so that he felt nothing as he discharged their orders? Or was he afraid that these *völd* would reach out and crush him if he acted otherwise? Bagge (2003, 22–23) notes that the word *vald* (singular of *völd*) *kan bety vold i vår forstand og herredøme eller myndighet* 'can mean "violence" in our [modern] understanding and [also] "dominion" or "authority".' Sturla does not make his meaning clear.

Perhaps the reason that Hákon is said to have experienced a revelation, even though he has not received any new information, is that his own perspective has changed. When Guthormr first claimed that he was acting according to his office rather than his species-being, Hákon was a child claimant to the throne. The second time, he has become a king. As will be seen, this made Hákon himself an office-holder of a sort, though Sturla writes nothing that would prompt the audience to think that Hákon has become genuinely sympathetic to Guthormr: the archbishop appears contrite, but Hákon makes no magnanimous gesture to reassure him that all is truly forgiven. (Here I follow the paradigm that, in an honour-minded

culture, to accept the prostration of one who has caused offence is not proper forgiveness. Actual forgiveness would be the declaration that such prostration is not necessary.)

Rather, the difference may be that Hákon has now attained a position at the top of a bureaucracy. In Sturla's story, Hákon begins as a weak victim of bureaucratic church pedants allied with a corrupt secular élite. However, he rises to power not by destroying Norwegian bureaucracy, but by expanding it under his own aegis (Bagge 1996, 148–50; Bréginat 2016, 174). In the internal logic of *Hák*, it would make sense if the truth which strikes the king is not that Guthormr was innocent, but instead that to be served by people like Guthormr is the source of real power, whether they do so out of duty, spinelessness or alienation.

Regardless of the Guthormr scenes' historicity, it is telling that Sturla felt it to be plausible for one of his Norwegian characters to exhibit such alienated, bureaucratic psychology—especially when one compares historical developments in Norway with those of Iceland, around the time the conversation supposedly happened. The 'archbishop' is the holder of an office—a classic *Beamter* in Weberian terms. Contemporary Iceland had certain *Beamte* too. There was, for example, the position of *lögsgumaðr* 'Law-speaker', whose job it was to recite the Icelandic law corpus at the meeting of the Alþingi—though as Magnús Már Lárusson (1981, 137) notes, *uden for Altinget havde l[ögsgumaðr] ingen administrativ virksomhed* 'outside of the Alþingi the *lögsgumaðr* had no administrative function', so it must be made clear that the bureaucratic character of the Icelandic position was not as advanced as that of a Norwegian bishop. Sturla himself had occupied the office in 1251. Snorri held it 1215–18, and then again 1222–31. Yet I know of no case where a *lögsgumaðr* recuses himself from a particular lawsuit because he does not want to compromise the neutrality of his office. It is not known whether holding a chieftainship in one region (being a participant in the Alþingi) would disqualify a candidate from being the *lögsgumaðr* (presiding over the Alþingi) (Jón Jóhannesson 1974, 48). That is to say, occupying an office in Iceland does not appear to have entailed the same degree of professional alienation as that exhibited by Guthormr in Norway.

### *Norway Becomes a Machine: Imagining the Means of Communication*

As previously mentioned, the alienation–bureaucracy complex does not only alienate the bureaucrat from themselves. It also alienates non-bureaucrats from immediate reality by bestowing personal power on impersonal means of communication. This is at once sensible and

ludicrous: sensible because the harm these documents can do us is very real, but ludicrous because we are responding to an inanimate object, weighing just a few grams, as though it were a present human being. In a similar vein, Weber (2015, 95) pointed out that bureaucracies thrive on means of communication: the more available, and the faster those means are, the more bureaucracy can proliferate. It finds new matters to regulate, and new ways to discover dissent or to malfunction. Anybody with access to a university e-mail account will not need to consult Weber to appreciate the truth of this.

Communication in *Hák* is a subject which has been extensively treated (Bjørge 1967; Brégaint 2016, esp. 5–18; Nedkvitne 2004, 74, Orning 2008, 197–98, and Lena Rohrbach’s particularly thorough recent study (2017)).<sup>6</sup> From official edicts to intelligence reports, instances of written communication are omnipresent in *Hák*. Bjørge (1967, 197–201) counts ninety-nine discrete letters in the saga, and by my count there are at least 150 instances of the word *bréf* ‘letter’. Rohrbach analyses the differing senders and recipients, and finds that the most heavily used channel is that between Duke Skúli and King Hákon, with at least thirty-four letters exchanged.

Moreover, Rohrbach notes that Skúli is often to be found sending letters behind the king’s back, and in one case tampering with the wax seal. She points out that this is an effective narrative strategy on Sturla’s part: ‘Skúli’s violations of the authority and authenticity of the written word, and of the accompanying authorizing mechanisms . . . depict him as a reckless and ruthless man’ (2017, 103–04). This is part of Sturla’s general strategy, to turn ‘references to literacy into structural devices of his narratives . . . it might be said that he modernized the narrative repertoire of the sagas according to recent trends [in] European historiography and literature’ (106).

*Hák* is a story where the plot is advanced not so much by face-to-face interactions as by the sending and receiving of letters, the blowing of trumpets, and once by the ringing of bells. Trumpet-calls are used in a particularly multivalent manner, e.g. to summon regional assemblies (*Hák*, II 79), call the king’s guard together (*Hák*, I 250), to evacuate a town (*Hák*, I 238), to give the alert that there has been a supposed intruder in the palace (*Hák*, II 37), to give disembarkation orders (*Hák*, II 80) and, as we shall see, to advance troops in battle. At least some of Sturla’s polysemy of tooting almost certainly reflects historical reality, as evinced in sources such

<sup>6</sup> Although it is not strictly about Hákon, see also Helle (1974, 228–29).

as the Norwegian *Hirðskrá* (1270s). The text is a code of conduct for the royal court, albeit probably more normative than descriptive, compiled during the early reign of King Hákon's son, Magnús. While it postdates the rule of Hákon himself, the trumpet-culture of Magnús's court can hardly have emerged *ex nihilo*. Furthermore, the resemblances between the *Hirðskrá* and *Hák* suggest that courtly communication systems had much in common between the reigns of father and son. Here the author recommends what should be done when the trumpet is blown at the court, and the signal is misinterpreted (*Hirðskrá*, 152):

Þæim sinnum sem luðr konongs kuedr við þa eigu men vanlega at at[-]spyria. huerir lutir til þess ganga. oc þegar menn vitu satt af. þa eigu aller til at koma nauðsynia laust huart sem til er blaset ollu forvnøyti konongs eða hirð æinni. Þa eigu þær eigi at firi nemazt. En sa sem eigi kómær nauðsynalaust. er sæckr öyri silfers vætir þat þrysur hinum sama þa er hann sialfsagðr or logunøyti sinu . . . Þat skulu menn oc vita oc varazt at eigi gange þær inn sem eigi ero nefnðir. eigi þa hirðmen, er gestom eða kertisuæinum æinum er blaset. oc eigi þa gester eða kertisuæinar. er hirðinni er blaset. þui at þat er mikill vkurteisi.

On occasions when the king's trumpet calls, people have to pay close attention to why this might be happening, and when people know the truth then they all have to come without delay to wherever the call is made, whether the summons is for all the retainers of the king or the retinue alone. There are to be no exceptions. And he who does not come without delay must pay a mark of silver [as a fine], and upon the third time he has made himself ineligible for being in the retinue . . . People must also know and be wary that those who are not required [lit. 'named' or 'mentioned'] must not go in, [i.e.] not the retinue when only the *gestar* or the candle-bearers are called for, and not the *gestar* or the candle-bearers when the retinue is called for, because that is a great rudeness.

That provisions were to be made for different trumpet-blasts to be misunderstood is confirmation that the system was used for a variety of purposes. However, the *Hirðskrá* allows for the inevitable confusion attendant on the fact that one trumpet-blast can easily be mistaken for another. The propensity for signals to be misrecognised increases every time a new signal is added—if there are two types of blast, say, one long and one punctuated, signalling two messages, there will be few misunderstandings. A system involving five, ten or even more different trumpet-calls will quickly become error-prone. Context helps here: trumpet-calls to advance in battle would not have been misinterpreted as the summoning of an impromptu assembly. Nonetheless, the *Hirðskrá* strongly suggests that different parts of the civil service seem to have occasionally misunderstood the trumpet and turned up to the wrong meetings.

Sturla's *Hák*, on the other hand, depicts the polysemous trumpet as a system which virtually never fails. By my count there are at least forty-eight instances of trumpet-calls in the saga, but there are only two cases throughout where any dissatisfaction can be apprehended concerning the functioning of Norwegian parp-culture. One is when a trumpet signal is ambiguous. In chapter 230 of the saga Pétur Pálsson of Giske (d. 1254) has been dispatched by Hákon to hunt the Várbelgir 'Spring Skins', which was the name given by the Birkibeinar to the faction who sided with Duke Skúli. Originally stationed at Borgund, he hears that Várbelgir are encamped on the island of Herøy, not far from his ancestral lands on the island of Giske (*Hák*, II 60):<sup>7</sup>

Hann hafði mikla tvítugsessu ok skútu með. Sneri hann þá suðr sem skjótast, ok er hann kom norðan at Hereyjum var honum sagt at Várbelgir lágu þar fyrir í höfninni á þrim skútum. Ok er þeir Pétr kómu fyrir höfnina lét hann blása í lúðr, ok þegar sem Várbelgir heyrðu þat ráku þeir af sér tjöldin ok reru í brot. Var þetta misjafnt virt fyrir Pétri. Sumir sögðu at því léti hann blása at hann vildi gera njósn Várbelgjum ok vildi engan ófrið hefja við hertuga. Sögðu þat sumir at þar fyrir heldi hann heilum híbýlum sínum í Gizka.

He had a large twenty-oared vessel and a balinger with him. He then turned southwards as quickly as possible, and when he arrived from the north at Herøy he was told that the Várbelgir were lying in port with three balingers. And as Pétr and his men approached the harbour he ordered the trumpet to be blown, and as soon as the Várbelgir heard that they broke camp and rowed away. There were varying accounts of Pétr's honour in this. Some said that he gave the order for a trumpet-call because he wanted to warn the Várbelgir and did not wish to get into conflict with the duke. Some said that it was because he wished to protect his property in Giske.

Ambiguities such as these presumably occurred more than once during Hákon's reign, but this is the only one that Sturla mentions in his saga. Pétur goes on to appear at multiple points after this, and never with any further aspersions cast on his character. It may be that there were doubts over Pétur's loyalty at the time the event occurred, as prior to the rebellion Pétur had previously been given a feudal rank by Skúli. Nonetheless, on first appearances, this scene seems to be a needless sideswipe at a formerly important magnate, who had died nearly two decades before the saga's composition (*Hák*, I 233).

<sup>7</sup> Following the river Lærdalselvi, it would not be too arduous a journey to travel between the two points, although in the passage below Sturla seems somewhat confused geographically, as he mixes up north and south.

But what if we consider the possibility that Sturla is aiming to tell the story of Norwegian bureaucratic culture—in fact, two stories? One faces King Magnús, glorifying the smooth running of his father's kingdom. The other, more subversive, faces the audience who are open to a critique of Norwegian bureaucracy. I would submit that the point is not really to criticise Pétur Pálsson. That is only the pretext which permits Sturla to puncture the fiction of Norway as a smoothly operating society. Indeed, I have found no evidence of trumpet communication in Iceland from this period.<sup>8</sup> Viewing the system as an outsider may have given Sturla an opportunity to reflect on both its potential and its flaws.

The second example of trumpet failure again comes during confrontation with the Várbelgir. Here, however, the problem is not that the signal is ambiguous, but rather that it is too faint. In the heat of battle, King Hákon gives an order to advance but is disappointed with his trumpeter's efforts (*Hák*, II 95):

Ok áðr en saman kvæmi fylkingar bað Hákon konungr lúðrsvéinn blása. Hann blés tysvar ok heldr lágt. Konungr mælti: 'Betr blés bikkjuhvelprinn þinn á Björgynjarbryggjum, er þú tókt silfr af mönnum.' Síðan blés hann, ok var þá miklu betr.

And before the formations came together King Hákon ordered the trumpeter to blow. He blew twice but rather softly. The King said: 'You little bitch! You blew better on the quay at Bergen when men were giving you money.' Then he blew, and it was much better.

The episode is a rare moment of comic relief in the saga, though the exact mechanics of the joke perhaps need some clarification. It is obvious that the king is decrying his trumpeter's efforts, but is the insult supposed to imply that he had previously been a sort of dilettante or busker? This was apparently the interpretation of W. P. Ker, who offered the comparison that 'the King spoke to him like one of Marryat's boatswains' (1906, 22). The phrasing *er þú tókt silfr af mönnum* is slightly ambiguous, literally 'when you received silver from people/men'. Anne Holtsmark's translation has simply '*du bláste bedre i Bergen da du fikk penger for det!*' 'you blew better in Bergen when you got money for it' (Holtsmark 1964, 206). *Mönnum* is the dative of *menn*, which might mean 'people' in a gender-neutral sense. The word *karlmenn* is more usual for expressly male groups,

<sup>8</sup> The inventory of the church of St John at Flatey from 1397 includes one trumpet, but this is certainly for liturgical use (*DI* 4, 152). The association in Icelanders' minds between trumpets and continental chivalric courts is suggested by their frequent appearance in the *riddarasögur*.

though *menn* in a masculine sense is not unheard-of (Cleasby and Vigfússon 1874, 407).<sup>9</sup>

The ‘bluer’ interpretation is that the king is implying that his faltering trumpeter once offered oral sex for a price at the quay in Bergen. The use of ‘to blow’ in a sexual sense in English does not precede the twentieth century, but the humorous possibilities of comparing the fellative act to playing wind instruments can otherwise be found in Ancient Greek, Renaissance French and other pre-modern contexts (Ferguson 1988, 143–44; Winkler 1990, 215). It is not an overly sophisticated simile, and therefore we should not be surprised if it had occurred to Sturla or Hákon. The connection between docks and prostitution appears to have been as pronounced in the Middle Ages as it has been in modern maritime culture. In Bergen during the glory days of the Hanseatic league the red-light district was in fact directly adjacent to Bryggen (Burkhardt 2015, 151–52). Before the league’s proper foundation, *Hák* features far-wandering merchants, seemingly not fully integrated into the Haconian realm and at least in some cases identified as *Lýbikumenn* ‘Lübeckers’ (*Hák*, II 135, 158, 160). Was there a particular spice to Hákon’s comment, implying that his trumpeter had taken both the coin and the manhood of Low German-speaking merchants who were not always particularly welcome?

Regardless of the joke’s precise implications, it is unusual in the context of the saga in two ways: first, it is a rare moment where the audience are shown a glitch in Haconian communication culture, and second, it is a rare moment where the king is permitted to show something of his personality. Bagge (1996, 92) notes that ‘*Hákonar saga* is usually considered fairly dull and impersonal in contrast to the earlier sagas’, and this perception must largely be attributed to Hákon’s inscrutability and frequent tight-lippedness as a character. By contrast, King Sverrir, Hákon’s grandfather

<sup>9</sup> Certain High Medieval Norwegian runic inscriptions in particular seem to indicate that in colloquial speech *maðr* could be gendered, even if in Latin script texts the term is normally neutral: e.g. N B265, N B552, N B496. N B628 is especially indicative of the occasional connection between possessing a phallus and being a *maðr*: N B644 is worth noting but less clear, given that we do not know whether the name at the end, *Ása [PPS (?)]*, is masculine, i.e. *Ási P[hilli] ps[son (?)]* or feminine *Ása*, with the **PPS** being an unknown element. Indeed, if we did know the gender, we would not know whether the name is that of the carver, the envied husband or the beloved woman, though it ought to be noted that female *Ása* is far more common than male *Ási* (Lind 1905–15, 60–61, 72–73). The danger with any readings of such graffiti would be to assume that desire is automatically heterosexual.

and role-model, is depicted in *Sverris saga* (early 1200s) as dashing and dramatic. Bagge (1996, 92–93) explains this difference thus:

As for Hákon himself, he cannot have been less ‘saga-worthy’ than many of his predecessors . . . Then why does not Sturla describe him as such? I believe that the main explanation to this question is the new Christian and authoritarian concept of the royal office, which, although occurring in the sources, including the saga literature, long before *Hákonar saga*, for the first time really determines the content and arrangement of a saga . . . Thus the royal office largely replaces the individual person in *Hákonar saga*.

This is a very serviceable explanation, and one that is pertinent to the Weberian/Marxian distinction between ‘office’/‘alienation’ and ‘person’/‘species-being’. There are, however, two slight modifications that ought to be made. If we were to prioritise the Christian dimension of this argument, it could be that Hákon’s lack of personality stresses his divine right. He does not need Sverrir’s charisma because God has mandated a law of succession which means that he deserves to be on the throne.<sup>10</sup> (Given the authorial choice to depict Archbishop Guthormr’s earlier reservations, of course, Sturla’s own faith in this argument is questionable.)

On the other hand, if we were to prioritise the bureaucratic dimension, it might be said not only that Hákon is an office-holder in Weberian terms, but that he is also the operator of a social machine. Norway is imagined as a system of messengers and soldiers made obedient by the mental magic of alienation. The man who operates the levers of this machine does not require a personality to do so. Here, Sturla’s imagery is consonant both with Weber and Hannah Arendt; Weber (2015, 77) pointed out that bureaucratic machines tend to develop a ‘monocrat’ at the top who is really in charge. Arendt (1969, 13) later supplemented Weber’s observation by noting that bureaucracies quickly make fictions of the idea of people ‘with whom the buck stops’. The true seat of power becomes concealed and the supposed monocrats are just as alienated as their subordinates: ‘[this can] be properly called the rule by Nobody . . . [but] rule by Nobody is not no-rule, and where all are equally powerless we have a tyranny without a tyrant’. That is to say, wielders of power encourage a view that they are themselves impersonally playing out a role handed to them—like their subordinates, they are also constrained by an externally imposed role with its attendant strictures. In thirteenth-century Norway, the role

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Haki Antonsson for suggesting this to me. See also Bagge (1996, 103–04); Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir (1988, 25–26); Oberlin (2011, esp. 316–27).

of monocrat had not evolved into Nobody-rule in the way that it has in a modern corporation or state, but it is still fair to identify Hákon's lack of personality with his position atop an increasingly governmentally-mechanised kingdom. But when the machine falters for a moment, the real human being at its helm can glance at the audience, and flash them a smile in the glow of uninhibited species-being.

Crude humour and rare confusion aside, the general impression one gets in *Hák* is that Norway has become a network of communication systems which are highly reliable. Written messages, orders and intelligence flow in tremendous volume between the king and his subjects, and between the king and other rulers (Bagge 1996, 152). It is as though Norway is becoming a kind of machine, where information follows predictable, strictly governed channels. Even when letters are being tampered with, as Rohrbach (2017, 104) points out, the culprit is quickly discovered and normally caught red-handed. *Hák* often seems keen to stress how advanced the country has become in this regard—particularly in the levels of alienation it claims have been reached between message and messenger. Hákon's messengers tend not to be named. Occasionally they are said to be clerics, but normally they are simply anonymous *sendimenn*. Without any information to the contrary, the impression given is that Hákon's messengers do nothing but relay messages; they do not evaluate the information they receive, they do not personally attack those for whom their messages are intended, even if the recipient is hostile. They are, in other words, properly alienated from their labour.

In stark contrast, in Chapter 225 of the saga there is a gory depiction of Skúli's so-called *bréfasveinar* 'letter lads' defiling a church with the blood of a man they have been sent to assassinate (*Hák*, II 54–55). It is worth noting that the word *bréfasveinn* is unique to *Hák*, and then to Skúli's men (Degnbol et al. 1989–, s.v. *bréfa·sveinn*). One wonders if Sturla is implying that Skúli's administrative system barely had messengers at all compared to Hákon's disciplined bureaucrats. Nonetheless, Sturla goes to some lengths to show that when the king captures Skúli's envoys, he does not kill them—rather, he only needs to confiscate their letters (*Hák*, II 69–70):

Sigurðr erkibyskup varð reiðr Birni ábóta í Hólmi um haustit þá er hertugi hafði látit gefa sér konungsnafn, ok bæði fyrir þær sakir er hann hafði sjálf gert ok svá fyrir þat er hann var í ráði með hertuga um hans tiltæki. Ok fyrir þetta allt saman bannsetti erkibyskup ábóta. Honum líkaði þetta stórilla, ok fyrir því appellaði hann erkibyskup til páfa. Þeir báru þá saman ráð sín, hertugi ok ábóti. Tók ábóti fê af hertuga ok setti staðinn Hólmi at veði. Tók ábóti við

erendum hertuga ok bréfum til annarra landa, Danmerkr ok Þýðersku ok þeira landa er þar eru nær, ok svá út í *curiam*.

Fór ábóti ór Niðarósi um vetrinn fyrir jól, ok er hann kom upp um fjall þá fór hann tómliga, sem hann hefði enga þá hluti með at fara er varðaði. Ok er hann kom í Hamar kaupang var þar fyrir Munán byskupsson. Lét ábóti allblítt við hann ok gerði engin grun á sér. En Munán hafði spurt áðr um ferð hans, ok fyrir því tók hann ábóta ok allt þat er hann fór með ok fekk til fjóra hirðmenn ok fjóra aðra menn at fara með ábóta ofan í Sogn ok svá til Björgynjar.

In the autumn, Archbishop Sigurðr [r. 1232–52] became angry at Abbot Björn of Munkeholmen, when the duke [Skúli] had himself given the rank of king, both because of the things he [Björn] had done on his own and also because he was in league with the duke in his dealings. And because of all this the archbishop excommunicated the abbot. He did not take this overly well, and this is why he appealed the archbishop's decision to the pope. Then the duke and the abbot drew their plans together. The abbot received money from the duke and put the monastery of Munkeholm down as a surety. The abbot accepted the duke's mission and [received] letters for other countries, such as Denmark and Germany and those lands which are close by, and also for the papal curia.

The abbot left Trondheim in the winter before Christmas, and when he reached the mountains he took his time, as though he were not carrying anything which warranted attention. And when he came to the town of Hamar, Munán the bishop's son was waiting for him. The abbot acted most warmly towards him and did not bring any suspicion upon himself. But Munán had already found out about his journey, and this is why he seized the abbot and everything he was carrying and assigned four retainers and four other men to escort the abbot down to Sogn and then onwards to Bergen.

Later in the saga, Sturla notes that many people thought that Abbot Björn should have been killed for working for the duke, but the king gives him *grið* expressly because he has already got hold of all of his letters (*Hák*, II 81). This obviously suggests flatteringly that the king is merciful, but it also presents the impression that an oral message alone is useless. This is a world in which the document is the supreme authority. The slight degree of pretence in Sturla's writing about communication is made particularly evident in the saga's description of a less fortunate messenger than Abbot Björn (*Hák*, II 70):

Skúli hertugi hafði gert austr í Jamtaland með bréfum Játgeir skáld ok svá í Helsingjaland ok þaðan í Svíþjóð. Ok þegar er konungr spurði þetta gerði hann Gunnar frænda sinn eftir honum, ok fór hann sem ákafligast ok hafði mikla nauð í þessi ferð. Gunnarr hafði eigi meirr en fimmtán menn. Hann drap þann mann í Jamtalandi er Þórir hrísbítr hét. Hann hafði haft þar sýslu af hertuga hendi. Síðan fór hann austr eftir Játgeiri, ok stóð hann í Helsingjalandi ok tók

þar öll bréf þau er hann hafði af hertuga hendi ok gersimar þær er hann hafði sent vinum sínum. Játgeirr komsk undan sem nauðugligast. Fekk Gunnarr í þessi ferð allmikinn heiðr. Kom hann fyrr aftr til Niðaróss en konungr væri brot búinn.

Duke Skúli had sent Játgeirr [Torfason] the Poet with letters eastwards to Jämtland and also into Hälsingland and from there into Sweden. And as soon as the king found out about this he sent his kinsman Gunnarr after him, and he [Gunnarr] went as determinedly as possible and suffered great hardship on this journey. Gunnarr had no more than fifteen men with him. In Jämtland he killed the man who was known as Þórir hrísbitr ‘Thicket-biter’. He [Þórir] had been given a sheriffdom there by the duke. Then he [Gunnarr] went east after Játgeirr, and stopped him in Hälsingland and there took from him all the letters and treasures which the duke had given him and which he had sent to his friends. Játgeirr got away with great difficulty. Gunnarr received tremendous glory from this journey. He returned back to Trondheim before the king was prepared to leave.

The use of skalds as messengers has a precedent in sagas covering earlier ages. *Morkinskinna* (c.1220) presents Einarr Skúlason (fl. 1100s) as a messenger or perhaps scout in the service of King Sverrir (*Morkinskinna*, II 124–25; Chase 1993, 159). Þjóðólfr Árnórsson (fl. 1030s) is represented as a messenger for King Haraldr harðráði in *Brands þáttur orva* (c.1250–1300) (*Brands þáttur*, 189–91). Hjalti Skeggjason (fl. late 900s) takes part in the diplomatic envoy headed by Björn stallari ‘The Marshal’ in Snorri’s version of *Óláfs saga helga* (Snorri Sturluson 1949, 86–87). Most famously, perhaps, Sigvatr Þórðarson (d. 1045) is supposed to have composed his *Austrfararvísur* while relaying messages between King Óláfr and Jarl Rognvaldr (Snorri Sturluson 1979, 134–43; Evans 2014). Similarly, Sigvatr and another skald, Bersi Skáld-Torfuson (fl. c.1000), are used to convey messages between King Óláfr and King Knútr inn ríki of England–Denmark (Snorri Sturluson 1979, 223–26). This practice stands to reason, not only because acting as an envoy would have been a good way for an Icelandic skald to ingratiate himself with a Norwegian monarch, but also because in an age when letters had an oral component (Gelrich 1995, 26–28; Cotts 2009, 52–53), or some messages were transmitted entirely orally, a professional poet could be relied upon to remember details accurately.

Játgeirr the Poet remaining at large after Gunnarr’s mission ought therefore to constitute a problem. Abbot Björn might be harmless without his letters, but Játgeirr could remember what he was supposed to communicate. Moreover, unlike Björn, he was not going abroad or to the papal curia, but to Sweden. According to Nedkvitne (2004, 25–28, 71–74), communication

between the Scandinavian thrones continued to rely on oral messages throughout the High Middle Ages, while communication with England, the Continent and especially the Papacy adopted a more stringently chirographic mode. (That is to say, Játgeirr's orally delivered message would presumably be taken seriously even if he lacked the original documents.) But Sturla downplays the threat. It is presented as inconsequential that Játgeirr got away. What is important is that his letters were seized, and so Gunnarr receives a hero's welcome upon his return. It is only later in the saga, in Chapter 284, that it is reported without any fanfare that Játgeirr was subsequently assassinated in Copenhagen by one of Hákon's men (*Hák*, II 118).

The theme of the especial dependability of Haconian epistolary culture is also seen in the way that Sturla treats messages written in runes. As far as I know, letters written in runes are mentioned only twice in Sturla's *oeuvre*, and these are the only two instances in the *samtíðarsögur* as a whole. One is in *Hák*, where the king receives a message from one of the Ribbungar, a particularly rustic rebel faction. At one point their leader, Sigurðr Ribbungr Erlingsson, seeks the hand of Skúli's daughter, Ragnfríðr, in marriage. Skúli replies cuttingly: '*er . . . engi ván at ek gífta dóttur mínu út í skóga*' 'It's . . . not likely that I would marry my daughter out to the woods' (*Hák*, I 255). The saga audience would presumably not have been surprised to hear that such backwoodsmen were still using runes on wood rather than Latin script on parchment/vellum (*Hák*, I 313):

Þá er Hákon konungr bjósk ór Björgyn reið hann upp til Álreksstaða einn sunnudag, sem vanði hans var til. Þá kom þar í móti honum einn hlaupandi maðr mjök ákaflika ofan ór fjallinu. Konungi þótti undarligt er þessi maðr fór svá ákaflika, því at konungr kenndi manninn at hann var einn af Ribbungum. Hann hafði rúnakefli í hendi, þat er einn Ribbungr hafði sent konunginum, ok sagði svá at Sigurðr Ribbungakonungr var andaðr ok bað konunginn gera nökkut skjótt ráð fyrir at eigi kvæmi junkherra Knútr, frændi hans, at styrkja Ribbunga í annat sinn.

When Hákon was about to leave Bergen he rode up to Alrekstad one Sunday, as was his custom. Then a man came running up to him, most urgently, out from the mountains. The king thought it was strange that this man was coming so urgently because he recognised the man as one of the Ribbungar. He was carrying a rune-stick which one of the Ribbungar had sent to the king, and [he / it?] said that Sigurðr, king of the Ribbungar, had died, and asked the king to make a plan quickly so that Junker Knútr, his kinsman, could not reinforce the Ribbungar again.

The message is 'time-critical', but luckily it is understood, either because Hákon or someone in his entourage or administration can read the runes,

or because the messenger is able to explain orally. The second time where a runic message is used is in *Íslendinga saga*. Here, again, the message is ‘time-critical’. It seems to have been a message to warn Snorri that he would be attacked the next day. But pre-union-with-the-Norwegian-crown, Icelandic epistolary culture is painted as rather more louche and ineffective (*Ísl*, I 551):

Riðu þeir þa suðr þannig, ok var Snorri hinn kaatazzi, ok tauluðu þeir i litlustofu Snorri ok Vrakia ok Sturla, enn Tumi skenkti þeim. Þar var biorr heim kominn fra skipinu. Snorri sagdi fra skiptum þeira sona Hallueigar; hann hafði þar ok bref, er Oddr Sueinbiarnar son hafði sennt honum af Alfta-nesi; var þar aa stafkarla-letr, ok fengu þeir eigi lesit, enn sva þotti þeim, sem uaurun naukur mundi aá vera.

They then rode southwards, and Snorri was most cheery, and Órækja and Sturla<sup>11</sup> and Snorri talked in the parlour while Túmi poured their drinks. The beer had been brought home from the ship. Snorri described the dealings between himself and his sons with Hallveig. He also had a letter there which Oddr Sveinbjarnarson had sent him from Alftanes. There were ‘hobo-letters’ on it, and they couldn’t read them, but it did seem to them that there must be some kind of warning in them.

Hákon acts quickly and with purpose, deploying the necessary knowledge to prevent a disaster. By way of contrast, Snorri and Sturla might well be drunk, having just had their Norwegian beer unloaded. Snorri is said to be very *kátr*, a word which means ‘merry, cheerful, in good spirits’ but also sometimes has an association with intoxication (Cleasby and Vigfússon 1874, 763; Jochens 1995, 109). The only person to whom each of them can refer their runic message is the other. In Norway, Hákon has an impersonalised network of knowledge to which he turns if he receives a letter he cannot read. In Iceland, Snorri and Sturla are probably the two greatest living minds in the country, but if they cannot work it out between them, the matter ends there.

As Rohrbach (2017, 98) observes, Sturla offers rich aesthetic associations in this scene. There may be an allusion to the Eddic poem *Atlamál in grænlenzku*, where the otherwise learned Kostbera fails to read a runic letter. Rohrbach (2017, 98) further notes the dismal symmetry of the role played by means of communication in Snorri’s life as told by Sturla: he ‘falls into royal disgrace after ignoring an authoritative written royal order, he is unable to read a warning that could have saved his life, and his death is finally ordered by royal letters’. If these are the scene’s aesthetics, its

<sup>11</sup> This must be Sturla Þórðarson himself, as Sturla Sighvatsson, another nephew of Snorri, had died in 1238.

didactic purpose is that, for better or for worse, alienation offers powers which exceed the capabilities of gifted individuals. Hákon's anonymous scribes and *sendimenn* may be an ocean of mediocrity compared to Snorri and Sturla's teardrop of genius. But the ocean will always swallow the teardrop.

*Conclusion: Did Sturla Þórðarson Dream of Bureaucracy?*

I have suggested that Sturla sometimes pretends that bureaucracy in Haconian Norway ran more smoothly than it probably did in reality. The case of Játgeirr suggests that oral messages still had currency, despite the saga's general implication that Norway now runs on documents. The trumpet system only fails once, when the *Hirðskrá* and straightforward logic suggest it must have malfunctioned fairly regularly. Archbishop Guthormr twice implies that he has acted out of virtuous bureaucratic alienation, when in fact cowardice or antipathy are equally plausible explanations. If Sturla sometimes gives the impression that Norway was more ordered than it really was, it is also worth noting that on one topic he magnifies the impression of disorder. The civil war between King Hákon and Duke Skúli was doubtless chaotic, and must have had a traumatising effect on Hákon given the merits of Skúli's claim. At least sixty-one chapters of *Hák* are devoted to it, and most of the saga's more exciting moments belong to this section. Yet if *Hák* is read somewhat against the grain of the drama, one will note that the war actually only lasted for one year, and was mostly confined to raids and skulduggery. In fact, the decisive series of engagements between pitched forces takes place over just four days, 18th–22nd April, 1240.

The inference I draw is that Sturla is portraying Hákon as a king who governs by modern methods. His rule makes Norway a well-ordered society, where government agents act efficiently and without prejudice. When Skúli rebels, then, these social advances are put at risk. The basic theme of such a reading would be that the alienation–bureaucracy complex represents progress, and that only Hákon (and his heir) can deliver it. In this sense, the discrepancies mentioned here between narrative and reality give *Hák* an aspirational quality. This hopeful attitude towards social and technological developments which did not yet exist can be found elsewhere in Haconian and pre-Haconian Old Norwegian literature. The *Old Norwegian Homily Book* is the earliest extant work in Old Norwegian, probably from *c.* 1200 but containing some sermons which may be as old as the eleventh century. In four different texts in the manuscript there are exhortations against *múta* and *mítufé*, both being



acted outside the moral bounds of his role, while a bureaucrat who is personally enriched by providing permits almost certainly would be. As far as the Norwegian audiences of these sermons could transpose the principles laid down for judges to other types of official, they would have encountered the ideal that a bureaucrat should be impartial *before* they encountered bureaucracy for themselves.

An analogy can be drawn with the fantastic, hi-tech war machines in *Konungs skuggsjá*, a text which King Hákon supposedly intended for the education of his son, the man who commissioned *Hák*. The technologies in the section on siege engines are those of machines which were mostly unknown in Norway, intended to break down stone castles which were equally few and far between. In fact, thirteenth-century sources contain no accounts at all of siege engines being used in Norway (Bruhn Hoffmeyer 1956, 434). One of the machines described, an apparently anthropoid fire-breathing ‘mecha’ called the *skjaldjötunn* ‘shield giant’, probably did not exist anywhere in the world: *En allra þeirra lista er nu hofum þer um rætt þa er þo hofuð þapn biugr skialldiatunn rypþanðe mæðr ælligum loga* ‘And of all the artifices which we have discussed, the greatest weapon is the *skjaldjötunn*, which bends over, spewing burning fire’ (*Konungs skuggsjá*, 63). The *Konungs skuggsjá* author sought to edify his audience with tales of military technologies that did not exist, *but should*. Sturla did something similar for administrative technologies—that is to say, bureaucracy. Reading *Hák* alongside *Konungs skuggsjá*, one gets the impression of a period where people are developing aspirations for how they want society to work.<sup>13</sup>

Although the reading of bureaucracy as aspirational in *Hák* can be accepted in part, Sturla clearly did not think of bureaucracy as an unmitigated good. In the examples examined above, while King Hákon is presented favourably as the man who makes the machine work, Sturla frequently gestures towards the victims of bureaucratic apparatus. The alienated Archbishop Guthormr snivels and cringes—the sort of man that Haconian Norway needs, perhaps, but not a man one would wish to become. Sturla admires the efficiency of Hákon’s communications system, but his own uncle, Snorri, ends up on the list of people that system kills. Snorri’s name is included in a muted necrologium alongside a murdered

<sup>13</sup> A forthcoming study identifies a comparable desire for bureaucracy (*bureaurationambition*, *centraliseringsambition*, *embeds-ambition*) before the realisation of proper Weberian bureaucracy in Late Medieval Denmark (Lyngse Vognsen, forthcoming).

poet-messenger, whose real cause of death has been obscured in order to make Norwegian bureaucracy look more sophisticated than it really was. How should one account for this ambiguity in Sturla's treatment of bureaucracy?

Ármann Jakobsson has pointed out that Sturla was, in a sense, an office-holder in his role as the commissioned author of *Hák* (and that he was certainly an office-holder when he later wrote *Íslendinga saga*, being the *lögmaðr* of Iceland at the time). Although Ármann does not deploy a Marxist critical idiom here, the issue of alienation is hinted at by his question: 'Is Sturla always Sturla?' (2017, 192). One might suggest that the moments in *Hák* which glorify Hákon and his administration belong to the alienated Sturla, and the occasional, understated moments of scepticism belong to the 'real' Sturla. But this suggestion would not escape the hermeneutic referred to critically by Roberta Frank (2017, 134) thus: '[Sturla as] a hired-hand composing mechanically for the son of a ruler he never met and whom he had reason to fear and dislike'.

The notion of Sturla writing *Hák* under duress will surely never be dislodged entirely, but there is such subtlety and artistry in the saga that I would rather recommend a reading which allows for a part of Sturla to be genuinely excited by Haconian rule and its pretensions. The film-maker Werner Herzog recently posed a provocative—perhaps deliberately unanswerable—question: 'Does the internet sometimes dream of itself?' (Spitz 2016, AR10). If we were to commandeer this question and ask, 'Does bureaucracy sometimes dream of itself?', then *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* might be said to be an example demonstrating that it can. Sturla is capable of writing from the vantage-point of an alienated soul, subsumed in the bureaucratic project. His excitement is authentic when he witnesses bureaucracy's expansion, celebrates its smooth working or when he marvels at the dream of what it could be. But so is his dread when he shudders at its blind violence.

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## DISABILITY AND DREAMS IN THE MEDIEVAL ICELANDIC SAGAS

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ACCOUNTS OF, REFERENCES TO or descriptions of dreams or the experience of dreaming appear throughout medieval Icelandic saga writing. Wilhelm Henzen (1890, 74) counted a total of nearly 250 dreams in the medieval sagas, while E. C. Ehrensperger (1931, 80) claimed to have compiled a list of more than 530 references to dreams or the experience of dreaming in Old Norse literature (see also Kelchner 1935, 3), which he could not list in full but offered to supply to any interested readers. Matthías Jónasson (1986, 472) reckoned that there are 274 such references in the *Íslendingasögur* (sagas about early Icelanders), the *Sturlunga saga* compilation, the *biskupasögur* (Icelandic bishops' sagas) and *Heimskringla*, collectively, while Alexander Argüelles (1994, 232) counts 140 and James Cochrane (2004, 254–57) 111 such references in the *Íslendingasögur* and *Íslendingaþættir* (tales about early Icelanders) alone. Margarete Haeckel (1934, 7) estimated that there are about three or four dreams referred to or described in the average saga in her study of dreams in the *Íslendingasögur*, allowing that some sagas (e.g. *Brennu-Njáls saga* and *Gísla saga Súrsonar*) contain many more references to or descriptions of dreams, while others (e.g. *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*) contain none (see also Hallberg 1962, 81).

Regardless of their precise number, the myriad accounts of, references to and descriptions of dreams or the experience of dreaming in the medieval Icelandic sagas suggest considerable interest in this aspect of human experience. Dreams in the sagas are indeed commonly distinguished from the normal or expected experience of reality while they generally maintain profound, though sometimes nebulous connections to the events of waking life. Thus, dreams and the experience of dreaming in the sagas are characterised by the porous nature of the boundary that simultaneously separates them from and also connects them to the events of waking life (Crocker 2016, 17–18). Distinguished thus from the normal, usual or expected experience of reality, such dreams can be regarded as essentially paranormal experiences (Crocker 2016; Ármann Jakobsson 2017, 21–23). While certain parallels or recurring elements may be located across different

sources, the contents of, perceived meanings of and responses to dreams and the experience of dreaming depicted in the sagas can demonstrate considerable and sometimes overlooked variance (Crocker 2018).

Paranormal dreams in the sagas are most often noted for their apparent prophetic value, where they are ‘predominantly tragic in spirit . . . foreboding adversity and disaster’ (Schach 1971, 52). Such dreams are typically connected to impending violent conflicts and the injury, impairment or subsequent death of the dreamer themselves or other members of their community. However, some dreams in the sagas seem to have connections with injuries or impairments arising not from fierce battles taking place during the ensuing events of the dreamer’s waking life but as a direct consequence of the very events of the dreams themselves. Such instances provide an interesting opportunity to examine the nature of the apparent connection between the paranormal experience of dreaming and the ‘rich cultural response to the premise of disability’ (Sexton 2010, 163) that can be found in medieval saga writing. Such an examination will contribute to a deeper understanding of both the hypothetical discourse of disability in medieval Icelandic society and culture, and the paranormal nature of dreams and the experience of dreaming in medieval saga writing.

### *Disability studies and the medieval sagas*

Distinguishing between the terms ‘disability’ and ‘impairment’ has been an important but not an easy task for modern scholars. The foundations of the modern discourse of disability are rooted in the notion that mental, physical or sensory impairments, perceived as instances of embodied abnormality, should be equated with decreased social value (Snyder and Mitchell 2006, 18). The simultaneous act of normalising the non-impaired body confined the ‘problem’ of disability to a primarily bio-medical discourse. Spurred on by the work of activist groups in the second half of the twentieth century, however, the development of disability studies as an academic discipline has allowed scholars to move beyond the simplistic bio-medical approach to the subject towards an understanding of disability as something that is always culturally and historically contingent. Rather than an individual sensory or physical deficit requiring either a cure or institutionalisation, disability has been redefined in the context of those social barriers put in place that prevent others from fully engaging in society. This ‘social model of disability’, thus conceptualises ‘impairment’ as a kind of embodied, functional limitation and ‘disability’ as a socially generated system of discrimination and exclusion against those with impairments (Snyder and Mitchell 2006, 6–7; Metzler 2006, 20–24; Shakespeare 2017, 197–98;

Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2017, 177, 186). Scholars working with this model were less interested in studying instances of impairment than their broader social environment, focusing on the way societies and their social practices—including exclusionary systemic barriers and negative attitudes towards functional limitations—contributed towards disabling people. While such a model was a vast improvement over the earlier bio-medical approach to disability, it has also drawn criticism for its own perceived shortcomings. Much criticism, for example, has focused on the binary opposition that the ‘social model’ seems to generate between the supposed fact of embodied ‘impairment’ and socially imposed ‘disability’. Thus, in examining the phenomenon of disability, the individual experience of embodied impairment itself is often considered both ahistorical and ‘a-cultural’, or is sometimes disregarded altogether, despite the fact that ‘even if social barriers are removed as far as practically possible, it will remain disadvantageous to have many forms of impairment’ (Shakespeare 2017, 199–202; see also Snyder and Mitchell 2006, 6–7; Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2017, 177–78, 182–83). Moreover, such disadvantages will inevitably vary across both cultures and history.

Alternative approaches to the subject have emerged in recent years in an attempt to overcome some of the perceived shortcomings of the ‘social model’ of disability and impairment. A ‘cultural model’, for example, has been proposed to examine the ‘interactional space between embodiment and social ideology’, incorporating ‘both the outer and inner reaches of culture and experience as a combination of profoundly social and biological forces’ (Snyder and Mitchell 2006, 7; see also Waldschmidt 2014). The term ‘critical disability studies’ has also been applied in recent years to those approaches to the study of disability simultaneously incorporating the application of the methods of critical cultural and social theory and a disciplinary self-reflexive examination of disability enquiry itself. This ‘critical’ turn in disability studies has seen an increasing focus on the intersectionality of age, class, gender, race and disability, and also encourages the exploration of the impact of colonialism and postcolonialism on the social and cultural understanding of disability and on disability experience. Fundamentally, ‘critical disability studies’ promotes the idea that ‘disabling social relations and cultural meanings can be critiqued from diverse theoretical perspectives’ through which ‘a wide range of issues and discourses will become more visible’ (Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2017, 190). These alternative approaches recognise the value of the ‘social model of disability’, particularly in the context of ‘disability activism and civil rights’ (Shakespeare 2017, 198), while also criticising certain of its

shortcomings and endeavouring to provide more inclusive and nuanced ways to theorise disability and impairment.

The kind of difficulties inherent in attempting to unify or simply clarify a common disability discourse in a modern or contemporary context may prove even more daunting when attempting to locate a corresponding discourse in the pre-modern past, including in the context of early Icelandic society. Of course, many of these difficulties arise from the limits inevitably imposed by the source material to which the modern scholar has recourse. The *Íslendingasögur*, for example, are a large body of texts purporting to describe the ninth-, tenth- and eleventh-century history of early Icelandic society, which can perhaps be complemented by archaeological work and other material histories. Though probably rooted in oral traditions dating to the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries, the written sagas were composed during the later thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and cannot be regarded as reliable documentary sources of the earlier period. Even if they would probably have been considered ‘historical’ rather than ‘fictional’ by their medieval audience, their ‘authors’ did not apply the standards of modern historiography. However, these sagas, and other forms of medieval saga writing, may have historical or source value that is entirely separate from the degree of accuracy with which they depict the earlier period regardless of their original historical purpose (see, e.g., Ármann Jakobsson 1998, Torfi H. Tulinius 2000, Cormack 2007, O’Connor 2017). Indeed, they are particularly rich in certain types of detail that are absent from other kinds of medieval historical writing and can, for example, shed considerable light on the social and cultural attitudes and the representation of impairment and disability in the context of medieval Icelandic society and culture.

The subject of impairment and disability in early Icelandic society has captured the interest of a number of scholars over the past few decades. Many of the earliest such studies followed closely the ‘bio-medical model of disability’, commonly resulting in medical assessments of perceived instances of non-normative, embodied difference described in the sagas according to modern diagnostic criteria (see, e.g., Þórður Harðarson 1984, Byock 1993, Whaley and Eliot 1994, Sigurður Samúelsson 1998 and Høyersten 1998, 2001 and 2007). Edna Edith Sayers adopted an approach closely akin to the ‘social model of disability’ in her seminal studies on ‘aberrant bodies’ in the context of medieval Icelandic culture and society. Though groundbreaking, her work was not always explicitly situated within the wider field of disability studies (published as Bragg 1994, 1997, 2000, 2004a, 2004b, and 2005; see also Brynhildsvoll 1993,

Lassen 2001 and 2003). Some scholars have also assumed an intersectional approach, exploring, for example, the ways gender roles and expectations may have influenced the social and cultural construction of disability in medieval Iceland (see, e.g., Clover 1993, Sayers 1994, Ármann Jakobsson 2005, Phelpstead 2007 and 2013). Others have more recently considered the interconnectedness of the experience of impairment and disability and the expression of emotions in the medieval sagas (see Kanerva 2013, 2014, and 2015, Miller 2014). Following Irina Metzler's important work on disability in the Middle Ages (2006 and 2013), scholars exploring this subject in the context of medieval Icelandic culture and society have begun, in more recent years, consciously to situate their work within the wider field of disability studies, whether focusing on medieval saga writing, early Icelandic law codes or Old Norse mythology (see, e.g., Sexton 2010, Ármann Jakobsson 2013, Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir 2013, Lawing 2013 and 2016, Michelson-Ambelang 2015, Anderson 2016, Ármann Jakobsson et al. 2019).<sup>1</sup>

Though perhaps not as deeply rooted in the history of saga scholarship as some other concerns that scholars have long wrestled with, the enquiry into the social and cultural construction of disability in medieval Iceland has prompted growing interest in recent years. Although much of this work has only recently been situated within the wider context of disability studies, many such enquiries have variously employed the same models or approaches, as discussed above, that have come to define disability studies. Of course, as mentioned above, the case of medieval Iceland presents its own unique challenges, including those arising from the nature of the primary source material. The sagas are, on the other hand, uniquely rich in their ways of reflecting different kinds of ideas and ideologies, including those relating to the medieval Icelandic social and cultural construction of the physical body, impairment and perhaps even disability. The most recent studies on this subject matter, like their counterparts in the wider field of disability studies, have sought to provide more inclusive and nuanced ways to theorise disability and impairment in the context of medieval Iceland. In this light, the remainder of this study will focus on considering how the experience of dreams and the experience of dreaming sometimes intersect

<sup>1</sup> Like many other mythologies, Norse mythology has proven particularly fertile ground for the study of disability, whether the focus is on self-inflicted (such as Óðinn sacrificing one of his eyes at Mímir's well) or otherwise imposed impairments or injuries (see e.g. Lassen 2003, 60–115; Bragg 1997 and 2004b, 52–134; Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir 2013). On Óðinn's self-impairment, also see Tolley 2009, I 427–34.

in medieval saga writing with the onset of injury or impairment and how an exploration of the connection between the two may contribute towards the broader understanding of the hypothetical discourse of impairment or disability and the paranormal nature of dreams and the experience of dreaming in the context of medieval Icelandic society and culture.

### *Dreaming Disability?*

Among the dreams referred to, described and discussed in the sagas that have a direct link, even a causal connection, to the dreamer's subsequent injury or impairment, those dreams preceding the onset of severe eye-pain may be the most familiar, such as that experienced by the poet Þormóðr Bersason in the thirteenth-century *Fóstbræðra saga*. Shortly after Þormóðr has modified a poem, the so-called *Kolbrúnarvísur* 'Coal-brow verses', which he had originally composed for a woman named Þorbjörg kolbrún 'coal-brow' and rededicated it to another woman called Þórdís Grímudóttir, he experiences the following remarkable dream (*Vestfirðinga saga* 1943, 174–75):

hann dreymir, at Þorbjörg kolbrún kœmr at honum ok spurði hann, hvárt hann vekði eða svæfi. Hann kvazk vaka. Hon mælti: 'Þér er svefns, en þat eitt berr fyrir þik, at svá mun eptir ganga, sem þetta beri fyrir þik vakanda. Eða hvat er nú, hvárt hefir þú gefit annarri konu kvæði þat, er þú ortir um mik?' Þormóðr svarar: 'Eigi er þat satt.' Þorbjörg mælti: 'Satt er, at þú hefir mitt lofkvæði gefit Þórdísi Grímudóttur ok snúit þeim ørendum, er mest váru ákveðin orð, at þú hefðir um mik ort kvæðit, því at þú þorðir eigi, lítill karl, at segja satt til, um hverja konu þú hefðir ort kvæðit. Nú mun ek launa þér því lausung þína ok lygi, at þú skalt nú taka augnaverik mikinn ok strangan, svá at bæði augu skulu springa ór höfði þér, nema þú lýsir fyrir alþýðu klækisskap þínum, þeim er þú tókt frá mér mitt lofkvæði ok gefit annarri konu. Muntu aldregi heill verða, nema þú fellir niðr þær vísur, er þú hefir snúit til lofs við Þórdísi, en takir þær upp, er þú hefir um mik kveðit, ok kenna eigi þetta kvæði oðrum en þeim, sem ort var í oñdverðu.' Þormóði sýndisk Þorbjörg vera reiðulig ok mikilúðlig; þykkisk nú sjá svipinn hennar, er hon gengr út.

he dreamed that Þorbjörg kolbrún came to him and asked him whether he was awake or sleeping. He answered, awake. She said: 'You are asleep, but that which you experience will come to be as though it happened while you are awake. And now what's this, have you given to another woman the poem, which you composed about me?' Þormóðr answered: 'That's not true.' Þorbjörg said: 'It's true that you have given my praise-poem to Þórdís Grímudóttir and changed those stanzas, which were most expressive, that you composed about me, since you didn't have the courage, little man, to say truthfully about which woman you had composed the poem. Now I will repay you for your deceit and lies, so that you will now experience great and severe eye-pain, so

that both eyes will spring out of your head unless you proclaim to everyone your disgraceful behaviour, that you took my praise-poem from me and have given it to another woman. You will never be healthy unless you drop those verses that you have changed into praise of Þórdís, and return those that you composed about me, and dedicate this poem to no one other than the one for whom it was originally composed.’ It seemed to Þormóðr that Þorbjörg was angry and imposing; he seemed to see a glimpse of her when she left.

The dream seems to blur the lines between sleep and the events of Þormóðr’s waking life, not least by employing the conventional trope of a figure in a dream asking the dreamer the leading question whether they are awake or asleep (McKinnell 2001, 252; Cochrane 2004, 97–98; Crocker 2016, 99–103). Nevertheless, when Þormóðr wakes from his dream, he experiences *svá mikinn augnaverð, at hann mátti varla þola óþepandi ok mátti eigi sofa, þat sem eptir var nætrinnar* ‘such great eye-pain that he could hardly keep from crying out, and was not able to sleep for the rest of the night’ (*Vestfirðinga saga* 1943, 175).

Þormóðr subsequently fails to rise from his bed, leading his father Bersi to ask whether he is *sjúkr* ‘sick’, which prompts the poet to recite a verse wherein he recognises and regrets his error. In the Hauksbók version of the saga, prior to reciting the same verse, Þormóðr tells his father that he is *illt í augum* ‘ill in the eyes’, to which Bersi aphoristically replies: ‘*Eigi er sá heill, er í augun verkir*’ ‘He is not healthy who has pain in his eyes’. Þormóðr finally provides an account of his dream, following which Bersi tells his son, ‘*Óþarfar unnustur áttu, hlaut af annarri ørkuml þau, er þú verðr aldri heill maðr; en nú er eigi minni ván, at bæði augu springi ór hofði þér*’ ‘These sweethearts you have are harmful, you’ve got such a wound from one of them that you will never again be a healthy man, and now it’s no less likely that both your eyes will burst out of your head’.<sup>2</sup> He advises Þormóðr to return the verses to their original form, as Þorbjörg had demanded in the poet’s dream, and to rededicate the poem to her. He follows his father’s (and Þorbjörg’s) advice and the saga reports that *Þormóði batnaði þá skjótt augnaverðjarins, ok verðr hann þá alheill þess*

<sup>2</sup> The *ørkuml* ‘bad wound’ on account of which his father claims Þormóðr *verðr aldri heill maðr* ‘will never again be a healthy man’ is a reference to an arm injury he had previously suffered at the hands of the slave Kolbakk, who had been acting at the behest of Þórdís’s mother Gríma after Þormóðr had seduced but refused to marry her daughter (*Vestfirðinga saga* 1943, 161–69). His father Bersi, who is said to be *læknir góðr* ‘a good healer’, binds the wound, yet it is said that *sár Þormóðar hafðisk illa, ok lá hann lengi ok var jafnan ørvendr síðan, meðan hann lifði* ‘Þormóðr’s wound was doing poorly, and he lay for a long time and was always left-handed after that, for the rest of his life’ (*Vestfirðinga saga* 1943, 165, 167).

*meins* ‘the eye pain quickly got better for Þormóðr then, and he then fully recovered from this trouble’ (*Vestfirðinga saga* 1943, 175–77). Þorbjörg is never mentioned again in the saga, though she is alluded to several times in the form of the nickname *Kolbrúnarskáld* ‘Coal-brow’s poet’, which Þormóðr acquires from this affair, a legacy that endures well beyond the injury she inflicts upon the poet.

A somewhat similar episode appears near the end of the late-fourteenth-century *Barðar saga Snæfellsáss*, which tells the story of the eponymous Bárðr and his son Gestr. By this point in the saga Bárðr has already acquired the nickname *Snæfellsáss* ‘Snæfell’s god’ since people *trúðu á hann nálíga þar um nesit* ‘nearly worshipped him there on the (Snæfell) peninsula’. Gestr, on the other hand, had only recently been baptised after receiving King Óláfr Tryggvason’s help in defeating the pagan King Raknarr. Gestr experiences the following remarkable dream the evening after he is baptised (*Harðar saga* 1991, 170):

dreymdi hann, at Bárðr, faðir sinn, kæmi til hans ok mælti: ‘Illa hefir þú gert, er þú hefir látit trú þína, þá er langfeðgar þínir hafa haft, ok látit kúga þik til siðaskiptis sakir lítilmennsku, ok fyrir þat skaltu missa bæði augu þín.’ Tók hann þá at augum hans heldr óþyrniliga ok hvarf síðan.

he dreamed that Bárðr, his father, came to him and said: ‘You’ve behaved badly, in that you’ve given up your faith, which your forefathers had, and allowed yourself to be bullied into changing your faith for the sake of your cowardice, and for that you shall lose both your eyes.’ Then he touched his eyes rather roughly and disappeared after that.

Gestr awakens from the dream with *augnaverkr svá strangan, at inn sama dag sprung þau út bæði* ‘such severe eye-pain that the same day both his eyes sprang out’ (170). He dies a short time later, still dressed in his baptismal clothes, and the saga ends soon thereafter. Gestr’s *augnaverkr* proves swiftly fatal. He neither seizes upon nor is he seemingly afforded an opportunity to make recompense for the perceived wrongdoing that he has committed, which seems to have provoked his father Bárðr to inflict this severe injury and eventual death upon his son.

Though the ultimate consequences for Þormóðr and Gestr are significantly different, the two episodes nevertheless share several remarkable similarities. The most obvious parallel between the two is the onset of *augnaverkr* that both men experience upon waking from their respective dreams. Beyond the sensation of pain, its most conspicuous effect is certainly the threat, realised in Gestr’s case, that *augnaverkr* will lead to visual impairment, physical disfigurement or even death. However, during Þormóðr’s exchange with his father, neither suggests that his death

would be imminent if he failed to return his verses to their original form and rededicate them publicly to Þorbjörg. The loss of his eyes, however, would certainly lead to a total loss of vision. This is the case, for example, for Þorgils Dálksson who, in the fourteenth-century *Selkollu þáttur*, loses both of his eyes one night after an encounter with the so-called *Selkolla* ‘Seal-head’. The bishop Guðmundar Arason (1161–1237) is eventually employed to drive this malicious creature away, and it is said that Þorgils *lifði leingi síðan, ok var sjónlauss meðan hann lifði* ‘lived a long time afterwards, and was blind (lit. sight-less) while he lived’ (*Biskupa sögur* 1858–78, I 605, 608). The onset of vision loss or blindness is a consequence of *augnaverkr* in several other instances in medieval saga writing, though not necessarily connected to dreams. For example, in *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappi* the eponymous Björn experiences *augnaverkr*, which gradually went away, although *hann var síðan þungeygr nokkut ok eigi jafnskyggn sem áður* ‘afterwards he was rather dim-sighted (lit. heavy-eyed) and not as sharp-sighted as before’ (*Borgfirðinga sögur* 1938, 191–92). Interestingly, it is said that Björn experiences several noteworthy (*verðr*) dreams some time before the onset of *augnaverkr*, though the saga makes no explicit connection between the two events (*Borgfirðinga sögur* 1938, 178–79; Kanerva 2013, 22). In the late-thirteenth- or early-fourteenth-century *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, the ageing Þorsteinn hvíti similarly endures an onset of *augnaverkr* following the death of his wife after which *missti hann sjónina* ‘he lost his sight’ (*Austfirðinga sögur* 1950, 5–6), but this event does not seem to hasten his death.

In fact, unlike several other figures in medieval saga writing who seem actively to resist, become embittered or lose their dignity owing to the effects of ageing, such as vision loss (e.g. *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, *Víga-Glums saga*, *Þorsteins þáttur stangarhöggs*; see Ármann Jakobsson 2005), Þorsteinn’s blindness eventually becomes a crucial component in his choosing an unconventional and seemingly merciful means for his son’s killer to compensate him for his loss, and his social status is never diminished (*Austfirðinga sögur* 1950, 16–17). In *Ljósvetninga saga*, on the other hand, a saga that features a number of significant references to powerful dreams, after hearing the news of his brother Þórarinn’s death, the ageing Þorvarðr Høskuldsson, while returning from a pilgrimage to Rome, suggests that he does not want to seek vengeance for the killing, following which *fáar mílur gekk hann þaðan frá, áður hann missti auga síns af verk, en andaðisk síðan* ‘he went only a few miles further from there, before he lost his eyes from pain, and died afterwards’ (*Ljósvetninga saga* 1940, 103). The consequences of the onset of *augnaverkr* in medieval

saga writing are always significant, though not homogeneous, and may include temporary or lasting visual impairment, physical disfigurement and even imminent death.

It remains unknowable whether the poet Þormóðr would have experienced the same fate as Gestr if he had refused the demands Þorbjörg had made of him in his dream. However, there is an interesting parallel in the respective motives Þorbjörg and Bárðr, Gestr's father, claim to justify their actions. Indeed, Kirsi Kanerva explains that both Þormóðr and Gestr, as well as Þorvarðr in *Ljósvetninga saga*, 'have transgressed norms and expectations, as Þormóðr has dedicated a love poem to two different women, and Gestr has chosen to convert to Christianity and neglect the strongly held faith of his father' (2013, 20; see also Lassen 2003, 52–53). Expanding also upon some of the other examples mentioned above, she suggests that

like some medieval illnesses, eye pain was also considered a moral disease.

The physical symptoms connected to the eyes informed the saga readers of the conflicting emotions of the saga protagonists who were recognised as flouting certain social norms (2013, 10).

Furthermore, *augnaverkr* and its consequences may 'be interpreted as confession and acknowledgment of the deed done and submission to the power of the accuser, which could be construed as admittance of one's guilt' (2013, 20). She concludes that 'whatever its emotional aspects, eye pain was also a disease, and a moral one, that affected the well-being of the individual and suggested inferiority of character in the sufferer' (2013, 25; see also Lassen 2003, 55). This may seem to be the case for Þormóðr, who makes a clear attempt to atone for his misdeed, and in several of the other examples mentioned above. However, while the onset of Þorsteinn hvíti's *augnaverkr* and eventual loss of vision may have a connection to the grief he experiences following the death of his wife, Þorsteinn is able, by enlisting the help of his son Þorgils, to maintain his position as the head of the farmstead. He fails to become another of those 'nasty old men' in the sagas who 'lash out in fury against their destiny' (Ármann Jakobsson 2005, 325) and is not depicted as a morally inferior person. In fact, later in the saga, he seems to exhibit some relative degree of moral superiority when he shows perhaps unexpected mercy to the man who has killed his son by allowing him to take on the role once filled by Þorgils, a need that is contingent upon the elder Þorsteinn's loss of vision.

The *augnaverkr* and eventual death that Gestr suffers as a result of his dream is ostensibly a rebuke for the perceived moral failing of giving up his pagan beliefs. Indeed, the deliberate act of blinding was also sometimes regarded as a symbolic equivalent to the act of castration in the medieval

North (Lawing 2016, 164–66; Lassen 2003, 43–52). However, Kanerva argues that Gestr’s death also has some general similarities to the deaths of many Christian martyrs, ‘as Gestr dies of an illness inflicted upon him by a heathen power [his father] after his baptism, remaining true to his new faith until death’ (Kanerva 2013, 12). Injuries or impairments, including loss of vision, were sometimes associated with sinfulness or spiritual transgressions in the Middle Ages, but they also acted as sites where saints or holy figures were able to prove their holiness by providing miraculous cures (Metzler 2006, 47, 146–49; Wheatley 2010, 64–65). Such ideas are, of course, rooted in scriptural writings where, for example, the persecutor and later apostle Saul (or Paul) experiences temporary vision loss after being overcome by a light from heaven on the road to Damascus. His sight is restored by God through the touch of the disciple Ananias, after which he is baptised (Acts 9: 1–19). Irina Metzler notes that Saul’s conversion follows the familiar ‘Turnerian’ pattern of an initiation ritual, including a liminal phase that is here ‘manifested not in a spatial, temporal or other separation, but in physical difference’ (Metzler 2013, 8). In medieval Iceland, similar traditions were associated with the bishop and saint Þorlákr helgi (1133–93), who is successfully invoked numerous times after his death in the saga bearing his name, and sometimes appears in dreams, to alleviate the onset of *augnaverkr*, among many other hardships or physical afflictions (*Biskupa sögur* 1858–78, I 116–18, 120–21).

In the right circumstances, however, sickness or impairment, which may include the sudden onset of a loss of vision that is never restored, ‘could . . . sometimes connote holiness’ (Metzler 2006, 47). This is, indeed, the case for at least one Christian martyr whose legend was known and preserved in medieval Iceland, namely St Lucy of Syracuse, who was deliberately mutilated and blinded by her persecutors shortly before her death (*Heilagra manna sögur* 1877, I 433–46). On the one hand, Gestr’s vision is never restored by divine intervention prior to his death. On the other hand, occurring closely in the wake of his conversion, his visual impairment and physical disfiguration, like those injuries inflicted on martyred saints, may symbolise the kind of suffering that must be ‘sustained in pursuit of a righteous life’ (Metzler 2006, 56). Gestr’s dream, indeed, imparts a powerful image of the often troubling collision and conflict between pagan and Christian beliefs, a familiar theme in the wider context of medieval saga writing, and may reflect the profound emotions that such a conflict gives rise to, including perhaps Gestr’s feeling of guilt stemming from his father’s reprimand. Yet the *augnaverkr* he experiences, the loss of his eyes, and his subsequent

death, while still dressed in his white baptismal clothes and thus apparently with all his sins forgiven, also seems to echo certain elements from Christian scriptural and martyr traditions. Interestingly, the motif of dying in one's baptismal clothes appears in a number of other sagas (e.g. *Eyfirðinga saga* 1956, 97–98, *Flateyjarbók* 1860–68, II 138, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* 1958–2000, II 102 and *Vatnsdæla saga* 1939, 126) and variations of the phrase *dauðr í hvítaváðum* also appear in a number of Swedish runic inscriptions (*Upplands runinskrifter* 1940–58, I 405–09). Gestr himself had, indeed, also previously alluded to the danger he might face if he were to renounce the *trú* 'beliefs', or 'faith' of his kinsmen. When King Óláfr Tryggvason first attempts to convert him to Christianity, Gestr expresses reluctance and remarks *Er þat hugboð mitt, ef ek læt þann sið, at ek muna ekki lengi lifa* 'It's my feeling, if I give up the faith [of my kinsmen], that I won't have long to live'. As in several other examples discussed above, Gestr's *augnaverkr* crucially arises from his encounter with a potent anti-Christian force, like Þorgils Dálksson's encounter with the malicious Selkolla and perhaps also Þorbjörg's use of magic or sorcery against the poet Þormóðr. In *Ljósvetninga saga*, in particular, Þorvarðr's *augnaverkr* commences only after he has placed himself under the guidance of St Peter and remarks that he thinks it would better not to return to Iceland to seek vengeance for his brother (*Ljósvetninga saga* 1940, 103). Both this and the episode concerning Gestr's *augnaverkr* may ultimately be viewed as depictions of a kind of moral test taking on a rather positive aspect wherein one's determined suffering against the effective threat of anti-Christian forces, to which the sufferer refuses to bend, may signal an ultimate victory for Christianity through the offering of eternal salvation.<sup>3</sup>

Another positive aspect of injury or impairment resulting from a dream may find its way into medieval saga writing in a different and rather remarkable way in an episode appearing in *Vatnsdæla saga*, which recounts the story of the settler Ingimundr Þorsteinsson and his descendants in the Vatnsdalr region of Iceland. In the latter part of the saga, Þorsteinn Ingimundarson assists two sisters named Þórey and Gróa who arrive in the region in finding a place to live. Gróa, whose *ffjolkynngi* 'sorcery' seems to pique Þorsteinn's curiosity, arranges to

<sup>3</sup> There may also be a subtle irony present here in the fact that Gestr and Gestumblindi are also names (*heiti*) or identities used by Óðinn who, as mentioned above, sacrificed one of his eyes to gain wisdom at Mímir's well (*Flateyjarbók* 1860–68, II 134–35; *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* 1956, 36–51; see also Lassen 2003, 85–88).

hold a feast and invites Þorsteinn, his brothers and many other important figures in the region to attend. However, three nights before Þorsteinn is due to leave, it is said that

dreyndi hann, at kona sú, er fylgt hafði þeim frændum, kom at honum ok bað hann hvergi fara; hann kvazk heitit hafa. Hon mælti: ‘Þat lízk mér óvarligra, ok þú munt ok illt af hljóta;’—ok svá fór þrjár nætr, at hon kom ok ávitaði hann ok kvað honum eigi hlýða mundu ok tók á augum hans.

he dreamed that the woman who had followed him and his kinsmen came to him and asked him not to go; he said he had promised. She said: ‘It seems to me incautious, and you will be harmed from this’—and it happened for three nights that she came and rebuked him and told him he should not agree to go and touched his eyes. (*Vatnsdæla saga* 1939, 95)

When his kinsmen and friends then come to fetch Þorsteinn to ride to the feast, the saga states that he *bað þá heim fara; hann kvazk vera sjúkr* ‘told them to go home; he said he was sick’. Later, during the feast, Gróa appears to employ her sorcerous abilities by causing a rockslide that kills all those attending the feast, including Gróa herself. Þorsteinn and his brothers next drive Þórey away from the area and the place where Gróa had lived is said to have been *reimt* ‘haunted’ ever since (*Vatnsdæla saga* 1939, 96). Þorsteinn recovers quickly from his purported illness, which seems to carry no lasting effects.

It may be worth noting that, unlike the physical descriptions found in *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Bárðar saga*, no external evidence is given to support Þorsteinn’s own report of the onset of his purported illness. Thus, perhaps he is simply making an excuse to avoid the ill-fated feast, although the saga’s narrator equally fails to corroborate such a reading. However, this hesitation or ambiguity may be an instance of the saga’s author seeking ‘to involve their audience in the creation of the saga text’, a not uncommon feature of medieval saga writing (Ármann Jakobsson 2004, 50–51; see also Torfi H. Tulinius 2000). Indeed, although the term *augnaverkr* is never used of Þorsteinn’s purported illness, the suggested connection between its apparent onset and the particular detail of the woman in his dream touching his eyes (*tók á augum hans*) may indicate that he is suffering from an affliction similar to the one suffered by both Gestr and Þormóðr (*Vatnsdæla saga* 1939, 95 n. 3; Lassen 2003, 53–54; Kanerva 2013, 33 n. 55, 34 n. 68). Moreover, her appearance to him not once but on three successive nights may suggest that such an intervention is necessary to overcome Þorsteinn’s reluctance to heed the woman’s warning and to break his promise to Gróa to attend her feast. If this is the case, Þorsteinn, like both Gestr and Þormóðr, is first warned and then ostensibly reproved

by the woman in his dream for something he has done, namely promising to attend Gróa's feast. The injury or illness that the woman subsequently appears to inflict upon him is seemingly not meant to convince him to change his mind but to incapacitate him altogether and thus prevent him from being able to attend the feast. However, rather than punishing him, by preventing Þorsteinn from attending Gróa's feast, the woman in his dreams appears to protect him, somewhat paradoxically, by inflicting an injury or illness upon him.<sup>4</sup>

A brief episode in *Laxdæla saga* may share some noteworthy parallels with the episode concerning Þorsteinn's dream. In the saga, Án svarti 'the Black' is among a group of men travelling on what turns out to be Kjartan Ólafsson's final journey. One evening when Án is restless in his sleep (*lét illa í svefni*) the others wake him up and ask what he had dreamed. Án answers:

Kona kom at mér, óþekkilig, ok kippði mér á stökk fram. Hon hafði í hendi skálm ok trog í annarri; hon setti fyrir brjóst mér skálmina ok reist á mér kviðinn allan ok tók á brott innnyflin ok lét koma í staðinn hris; eptir þat gekk hon út.

An unattractive woman came to me and pulled me to the edge of the bed. She had a sword in one hand and a trough in the other; she placed the sword against my breast and cut my belly open and took away the entrails and put twigs in their place; after that she left. (*Laxdæla saga* 1934, 149)

Kjartan and the other men laugh at Án's account and give him the new nickname *hrísmagi* 'twig-belly'. Though they are warned against it, they choose to continue on their journey despite Án's ominous dream, which seems to anticipate his own unpromising fortune in some way amidst a wider brutal conflict, and it is not long before the men are ambushed.

During the encounter, Kjartan is killed by his foster-brother Bolli and Án is struck down so that *úti lágu iðrin* '[his] entrails were coming out'. However, during the night after the battle it is said that *Án settisk upp, er allir hugðu, at dauðr væri* 'Án sat up, whom everyone thought was dead'. He explains to the frightened bystanders,

Ek hefi lifat ok haft vit mitt allt til þessarar stundar, at rann á mik ómeginshöfgi; þá dreymði mik in sama kona ok fyrr, ok þótti mér hon nú taka hrisit ór maganum, en lét koma innnyflin í staðinn, ok varð mér gott við þat skipti.

<sup>4</sup> The woman in Þorsteinn's dream who, it is said, *fylgt hafði þeim frændum* 'had followed him and his kinsmen' may be regarded as a *fylgja* (or perhaps a *dis* or *hamingja*), a kind of attendant spirit often connected to a particular family line that sometimes appears in dreams in the form of a woman in medieval saga writing (*Vatnsdæla saga* 1939, 95 n. 3; see also Mundal 1974, 63–128 and Stankovitsová 2015).

I was alive and had my wits all this time, until a powerful sleep came over me; then I dreamed of the same woman as before, and I thought she now took the twigs from my belly and put my entrails back in their place, and I felt good with this change. (*Laxdæla saga* 1934, 155)

Án's wounds are dressed and he becomes *heill* 'healthy' quickly enough to be killed just a short time after he joins the party seeking vengeance for the killing of Kjartan. Despite her ominous and perhaps disturbing nature and his eventual death at the hands of Bolli, the woman who appears in Án's dreams, like the woman in Þorsteinn's dream, seems to allow him to avoid an untimely death, at least for a short time. However, unlike the injury or illness Þorsteinn experiences as a result of his dream, the precise nature of the intervention of the woman in Án's dreams and the motivation behind her actions are somewhat unclear and may remain irretrievably elusive.<sup>5</sup> Þorsteinn's and Án's dreams, like both Gestr's and Þormóðr's dreams, nevertheless emphasise a profound if somewhat nebulous connection between the experience of dreaming and the dreamer's physical well-being.

The most common association between dreams and the events of waking life in the medieval sagas, as mentioned above, remains their apparent prophetic value, where dreams commonly forebode violent conflicts that often result in serious injuries or impairments and even death. However, other dreams in the sagas involve a more direct and even causal connection to the subsequent injury, impairment or even death of the dreamers themselves. In such instances, the experience of dreaming seems to have a remarkable connection with the physical body, one that always seems to be imbued with some kind of meaning. Indeed, Irina Metlzer explains that 'the physical body in medieval thought is a vessel conveying meanings beyond the purely anatomical, since it also embodies spiritual, theological and philosophical connotations' (2006, 62). Bodies in the medieval sagas are no different. Moreover, as demonstrated in the examples discussed above, the dreams in medieval saga writing that seem to have a direct, effective connection with the physical body and its injury or impairment operate as an additional, remarkable medium through which numerous such meanings can be filtered.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas D. Hill (2007) discusses certain possible analogues between the woman in Án's dreams and the figure Perchta (or Berhta) found in later German folk traditions. While such a comparison is compelling, it does not convincingly contribute to a deeper understanding of the episode concerning Án's dreams. James Cochrane also discusses the possible parallels between the woman in Án's dreams and women, including troll-women, appearing in dreams in other sagas (2004, 123–25; see also note 4 above).

### Conclusion

A final example from the early-thirteenth-century Kings' Saga *Morkin-skinna* (2011, 147) offers a slightly different perspective on the effective connection between the experience of dreaming and the dreamer's well-being. Here, a noblewoman seeks out the help of the Norwegian King Haraldr harðráði after her son *missti minnis, sem hann væri hamstoli* 'lost his memory, as if he were crazed'. The king reasons that the boy's condition is a result of him being *draumstoli* 'unable to dream' and further claims that '*þat hlýðir öngum manni, ok er ekki øðli til þess at menn dreymi ekki ok at þat megi hlýða*' 'it is not good for anyone, and it is unnatural for people not to dream, and that can cause harm'. He next offers advice that allows the boy to regain his ability to dream, which is quickly put to use when the boy dreams of both Haraldr and King Magnús góði. In the dream the two kings offer him encouraging words, following which it is said that *þessi sveinn varð síðan merkiligr maðr, ok dugði honum sjá lækning er Haraldr hafði til gefit* 'this boy later became a distinguished man, and the cure that Haraldr had given helped him'. Although, as shown above, dreams can bring about the onset of injury or impairment in medieval saga writing, in this case, remarkably, an inability to dream seems to prove no less transformative. Moreover, this example shares a close parallel with other instances found in medieval saga writing in which a figure—like Þorlákr helgi, as mentioned above—appears in a dream and seems to contribute not to the onset but to the alleviation of the dreamer's affliction. The episode, nevertheless, conveys its most profound meaning within its broader narrative context on account of the opportunity it provides for the two kings to demonstrate their generosity, power and wisdom.

Paranormal dreams in medieval saga writing are complex phenomena that commonly draw on a range of traditions, inviting a multiplicity of meanings and fulfilling a variety of functions within their respective narrative contexts (Cochrane 2004; Crocker 2018). Beyond their familiar prophetic value or the profound psychological or emotional insight they might provide, such instances as those discussed above seem to emphasise an effective connection between dreams and the dreamer's physical body. Moreover, such a connection always seems to bear significance beyond the purely anatomical. To borrow the words of Caroline Walker Bynum (1995, 15), the experience of dreaming (or indeed its absence) becomes another situation among many others in medieval saga writing for 'the cultivation of bodily experience as a place for encounter with meaning'. Such meanings, as in the examples discussed above, continue to be variable. However, as Bynum continues, situating the body in this way 'is not "flight from"

the body', but rather signals deep interest in the nature of embodiment itself. Indeed, although the moral, spiritual, theological, philosophical or other connotations conveyed through these episodes may seem to take precedence over the personal or even broader social experience of injury or impairment, they nevertheless hinge upon embodied experience and the transformative nature of the physical body.

It might be noted that many of the examples discussed above concern temporary or short-lived illnesses, injuries or impairments concluded by either recovery or death. Such experiences may not correspond to typical modern conceptions of disability, although even today the relationship between illness and disability remains contested, including whether those experiencing temporary or chronic illnesses can or should identify with disabled people or be viewed by others as disabled (Wendell 2013). The *augnaverkr* experienced by the poet Þormóðr and referred to as a sickness, for example, is immediately debilitating but quickly alleviated after only a short time. Yet, it is from the apparent threat of more severe or perhaps longer-lasting and even permanent impairment, specifically alluded to in his father's reminder of a previous wound from which his son *verðr aldri heill maðr* 'will never again be a healthy man', that the episode derives its deeper significance. Within a hypothetical discourse of disability, such instances may indeed underline the fact that it is rather able-bodied status that remains fundamentally temporary with 'disability being the one identity category that all people will embody if they live long enough' (McRuer 2013, 374). In any case, like many other examples of injuries or impairments found in medieval saga writing, the changes wrought by the dreams that Þormóðr, Gestr and several others mentioned above experience in the sagas suggest 'a richly complex world within which the maimed and marked became sites of contingent meaning' (Sexton 2010, 163). Yet the medieval sagas do not seem to attest to a wide or profound interest in the individual experience of injury or impairment, whether temporary or long lasting, and its potentially disabling effects (Ármann Jakobsson et al. 2019; cf. Sexton 2010, 151–57). Rather, they are typically used to convey various wider social and cultural meanings. Indeed, atypical 'bodily configurations' in the medieval sagas typically 'operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability's cultural resonance', as they do in so many other literatures (Thomson 1997, 9). Thus, while several of the examples discussed above suggest an interesting and explicit connection between the experience of dreams and changes to the physical body, they nevertheless shed notable but perhaps only limited light on the hypothetical discourse of disability found in medieval saga writing.

On the other hand, though relatively few in number, these examples seem to reveal a remarkable facet of the porous boundary that simultaneously separates but also connects paranormal dreams to the events of waking life in the medieval sagas, beyond their typical prophetic value. Thus, such dreams—which are fundamentally private and personal experiences, though their scope might broaden through retelling and interpretation—may yet function as a subtle but striking acknowledgment of the individual element in the hypothetical discourse of disability in medieval saga writing. Indeed, the sense of vulnerability and the lack of control that inevitably accompanies the experience of paranormal dreams, perhaps exemplified in the typical verbal construction *dreymdi mik* (lit.) ‘(it) dreamed me’ (Crocker 2016, 87–92), may serve as a profound analogue to the sudden onset of injury, chronic illness or impairment, which may have seemed inexplicable in other terms to the sagas’ medieval audience. The dreams experienced by Þormóðr, Gestr and several others mentioned above constitute paranormal encounters from which the dreamer awakens to a reality that is at once familiar yet essentially different. Their new realities materialise not on account of environmental or wider social changes but owing to the sudden, embodied transformations experienced by the dreamer themselves, whether temporary or long lasting. Nevertheless, locating a comprehensive discourse of disability in the context of medieval saga writing comparable to its modern counterparts is a difficult and perhaps impossible task. However, navigating and finding meaning in embodied differences, including those sudden physical transformations connected to the experience of paranormal dreams was a significant concern for medieval saga writers.

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## REASSESSING THE CAREER OF ÓLÁFR TRYGGVASON IN THE INSULAR WORLD

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**D**ESPITE HIS SHORT REIGN OVER NORWAY (995–1000), Óláfr Tryggvason looms large both in medieval sources and in contemporary scholarship. This article focuses on his career in the Insular world (that is, Britain, Ireland and the associated islands), as presented in the twelfth-century synoptic histories (*Historia Norwegiae*, Theodoricus monachus and *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum*) and in the late twelfth- and thirteenth-century sagas, particularly Oddr Snorrason's saga and Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*.<sup>1</sup> It has long been noted that the depiction of Óláfr Tryggvason in these sources is as 'a crossbreed between a Christian martyr and a Germanic folk hero' (Lönnroth 1975, 36). This combination presented a literary challenge for his biographers, as is recognised by recent work on these texts, particularly Oddr's semi-hagiographical biography (Phelpstead 2012; Grønlie 2017, x, 39–78, 76; Haki Antonsson 2017, 2, 64–82). These works have not, though, dealt with the Insular sections pertaining to Óláfr at any great length. It is illuminating to look at these particular sections of the synoptics and sagas as they have the potential to be corroborated by other historical sources, both written and archaeological, from the Insular world. Óláfr's presence in the Insular world, or at least in England, is indeed apparently corroborated by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which records an Anlaf. In particular, his likely involvement in the Battle of Maldon in 991 is generally accepted (*ASC* A 991; see Whitelock 1979, 234, n. 1; Roach 2016, 121). He was certainly in England in 994. The Scandinavian and Icelandic accounts also relate that Óláfr raided extensively abroad before he returned to Norway to claim the throne. They presumably drew on the skaldic poem *Óláfsdrápa* by Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld, which lists the future king's campaigns against various groups of people.

This article will examine the three main, comparatively lengthy episodes in the prose sources concerning Óláfr which are set in the Insular world:

<sup>1</sup> The author would particularly like to thank Alex Woolf for discussion of the Gyða episode and Jon Wright for his palaeographical insights, and is also grateful to Sián Grønlie, Paul Gazzoli, Elizabeth Ashman Rowe and Andy Woods.

his baptism in the Scilly Isles, his marriage to Gyða and his activities in the earldom of Orkney. An up-to-date interdisciplinary approach to these episodes will include information about the late-tenth-century Insular world that may not be well-known to scholars of Scandinavian and Icelandic history and literature. While there is a kernel of historical plausibility in all three episodes, it will be argued that the extant narratives elaborate these kernels according to a combination of literary, political and hagiographical concerns. Therefore, in addition to exploring historical evidence for these accounts of Óláfr, this article will consider the literary dimension and narrative function of these Insular episodes. It is suggested that these Insular sections also serve as preparatory material for the account of Óláfr's kingship of Norway, with his deeds confirming his personal qualities.

### *The King and the Hermit: Baptism(s)*

Given Óláfr Tryggvason's Christian reputation for having converted Norway and many other lands, it is no surprise that his own personal conversion to Christianity is an important point in the narratives. The earliest version is from *Historia Norwegiae*,<sup>2</sup> which relates that after his harrying of many countries Óláfr found a godly hermit *penes Britanniam* 'at the edge of Britain' (*HN*, 92), who correctly identifies the king, despite an attempt at subterfuge, and predicts his taking of the Norwegian throne. Theodoricus relates that while in England Óláfr visited *quendam heremitam* 'a certain hermit' (Theodoricus, 26 (ch. 15)) who foretold his life and death. In addition to this Theodoricus separately relates that Óláfr went on from there *in Sullingas insulas, quæ adjacent Britannicæ majori, ibique baptizatus est cum omnibus suis a viro venerabili Bernardo abbate* 'to the Scilly Isles, which lie next to Greater Britain, and there he was baptised with all his men by a venerable man, the abbot Bernard' (Theodoricus, 14 (ch. 7)). Oddr's saga, which was first written in Latin around 1190 and translated into Norse not long after (Grønlie 2017, 39),<sup>3</sup> follows this latter version but

<sup>2</sup> The three synoptic histories (*Historia Norwegiae*, Theodoricus monachus's *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium*, *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum*) are interrelated and all date to the latter half of the twelfth century. It is believed that *Historia Norwegiae* is the earliest, dating from c.1150–75, followed by Theodoricus's composition in c.1180 and *Ágrip* in c.1190 (Ekrem and Mortensen in *HN*, 8, 11, 16).

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed account see Ólafur Halldórsson 2006, particularly clxxxiii–clxxiv, clxxxiii on the saga's authorship, lxxxiv on its sources and lxxxvi onwards for its affinity with other texts, particularly the synoptics. Andersson (2012, 64–65) prefers a date for the saga closer to 1180.

the abbot in his, otherwise fuller, account is unnamed. Oddr does specify the Scilly Isles, described as *skammt frá Írlandi* ‘a short distance from Ireland’ (Oddr, 166 (ch. 14)), and explicitly refers to baptism.<sup>4</sup> *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum*, the only synoptic history in Old Norse, sets the hermit episode rather vaguely *i einum stað i Englandi* ‘in a certain place in England’ (*Ágrip*, 28 (ch. 19)), but follows *Historia Norwegiae* in having the hermit recognise the king, despite him sending one of his men in his place, and predicting his future Christian kingship. All of this, in turn, is followed in the thirteenth-century *Heimskringla*, but there, unlike in *Ágrip*, baptism and the Scilly Isles are explicitly mentioned.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that this episode appears in so many narratives may indicate that the story was appreciated and prized (Bergan 2009, 53), but these accounts apparently disagree with other sources for Óláfr’s baptism. Adam of Bremen in his *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, written between 1073 and 1076, indicates that there are several traditions already in his time. The version he prefers is that Óláfr was baptised by ecclesiastical personnel associated with Hamburg–Bremen. He discusses Odinkar the Elder and the Younger, bishops of Ribe, then refers to *aliis qui adhuc supervixerant a diebus Adaldagi* ‘others who yet survived from the days of Adaldag’ (Adam, II.36, 97), who was archbishop of Hamburg–Bremen until his death in 988. It is presumably these ‘others’ who are referred to in the following statement: *A quibus traditur Olaph Trucconis filius, qui tunc Nortmannis imperavit, baptizatus ex ea gente primus fuisse christianus* ‘according to tradition they baptised Olaph, son of Trucco, who then ruled the Northmen [Norwegians], from which people he was the first Christian’ (II.36, 97). Óláfr cannot have been the first Norwegian to be Christian, which may undermine the rest of this account. Adam has an ulterior political motive and consistently exaggerates the role of the archdiocese

<sup>4</sup> The locating of the Scilly Isles near Ireland might derive from Pliny’s *Natural History* which describes several islands, included *Silumnus* which presumably refers to Scilly, as lying *inter Hiberniam ac Britanniam* ‘between Ireland and Britain’ (Rackham 1947, 198 (Pliny, *Natural History*, IV.103)). Ólafur Halldórsson (2006, c) suggests that Oddr may have taken *Syllingar* to refer to the Skellig Islands, which are indeed off the southwest coast of Ireland, since there was a monastery on Skellig Michael.

<sup>5</sup> These two versions are integrated in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* which describes Óláfr’s meeting with the hermit and subsequent baptism at a nearby monastery on the islands (Ólafur Halldórsson 1958, 161–65 (chs 78–79)). For the dating, manuscript transmission and reception of Oddr’s saga, *Heimskringla* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, see Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 2005, 15–120 and 225–67.

of Hamburg–Bremen and the bishops who were under its authority, leading him to downplay other influences on the conversion of Scandinavia. Adam’s portrayal of Óláfr Tryggvason is markedly negative, however, even questioning his Christian status, claiming that he was interested in divination and committed suicide (II.40, 100–01). This decreases the likelihood that Adam wished to give the credit for his conversion erroneously to Hamburg–Bremen; if that were his intention he might also have furnished the vague account with more specifics, particularly the name of the converter. Adam notes in the preceding sentence that the missionaries travelled to Norway and Sweden and converted people there, which suggests that he believes Óláfr’s baptism to have taken place in Norway. Being baptised only during his reign rather goes against the saga tradition of Óláfr’s Christian efforts before he gains the throne. However, the following sentence in Adam’s *Gesta*, although not present in the oldest group of manuscripts, adds that Óláfr *suscepit christianitatem* ‘took up Christianity’ (II.36, 97) when he was in England and that he was *primus in patriam revexit* ‘first to bring it back to his country’ (II.36, 97). The latter part of this statement is, once more, clearly inaccurate. This embracing of the faith in England is not specified to have included baptism so was still compatible with the attribution to Hamburg–Bremen missionaries. However, Adam does admit that there are alternative traditions, noting vaguely that others relate that bishops and priests from England went abroad for missionary work and they *Olaph baptizatum et ceteros* ‘baptised Olaph and others’ (II.37, 98).

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that Anlaf and Swegen, that is, Óláfr Tryggvason and the Danish king Sveinn tjúguskegg ‘Forkbeard’, attacked London in 994 (*ASC* C, 87; *ASC* E, 61). They were offered tribute by the king and his councillors. We also have the text of the treaty made between Æthelred and the Viking leaders, known as II Æthelred (Liebermann 1903, 220–24). As part of this settlement, the *Chronicle* relates that Ælfheah, archbishop of Canterbury, had Óláfr brought to Andover. The choice of Óláfr rather than Sveinn might have been based on the fact that the latter was already Christian. King Æthelred personally *his onfeng at bisceopes handa* ‘received him at the bishop’s hands’ (*ASC* C, 87; *ASC* E, 62 (994)). It has usually been assumed that this means that Æthelred acted as Óláfr’s sponsor or godfather for his baptism (Swanton 1998, 128, n. 5). Dorothy Whitelock, though, translated this phrase as ‘stood sponsor to him at confirmation’ (1979, 236) rather than ‘at baptism’; in her assumption that Óláfr was confirmed not baptised, she was presumably influenced by the accounts of a pre-existing baptism. Levi Roach (2016, 176) states this

reasoning plainly in opting for confirmation. It is also conceivable that a not particularly pious Scandinavian might end up being baptised more than once if it suited his own ends.<sup>6</sup>

Why do the Scandinavian and Icelandic accounts present a different version of events, in which Óláfr's baptism is at the hands of a nameless hermit rather than the king of England? In this context it is worth noting that the person standing as sponsor, or godfather, to the person being baptised is usually thought to be of higher social or political standing, as seen, for example, with Louis the Pious and Harald klak and with Alfred and Guthrum. Instead, Óláfr's biographers chose to place the focus on Óláfr himself, rather than attributing his conversion to another ruler who might be seen as superior. While according to his own saga the poet Gunnlaugr ormstunga composed a poem for Æthelred (*Borgfirðinga sögur* 1938, 70–74 (ch. 7)), the English king is just one of many leaders the Icelander visits and versifies as he tours various courts and receives gifts. Similarly, Egill Skallagrímsson's service under Athelstan brings him renown for his military prowess, but his status, like that of Gunnlaugr, as an Icelandic warrior-poet, rather than a would-be king of Norway, winning fame abroad through patronage changes the power dynamics. Even then, it has been argued that during the gift-giving episode (*Egils saga*, 143–47 (ch. 55)) the 'exact symmetry in the way the two men are presented' establishes Egill and Athelstan 'as equals' (Fjalldal 2005, 80). Such an equivalence could not be wrought with Æthelred as

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Notker the Stammerer's description in the late ninth-century *Gesta Karoli Magni* of a mass baptism at the court of Louis the Pious in the 800s suggests that this did occur. When the Franks run out of the traditional white baptismal robes, one of the older Northmen reacts indignantly to being presented with a less fine tunic refashioned from old clothes: *Iam vities hic lotus sum et optimis candidissimisque vestibus indutus; et ecce talis saccus non milites sed subulcos addecet. Et nisi nuditatem erubescerem, meis privatus nec a te datis contectus, amictum tuum cum Christo tuo tibi relinquerem* 'Now I have been bathed twenty times before, and then I was clothed in the finest and whitest vestments; but look, such sack-cloth befits a swineherd not a soldier. If it weren't for fear of being embarrassed by my nakedness, since you have robbed me of my clothes and not given me new ones, I'd leave you your garment along with your Christ' (Haeefele 1959, 90 (book 2, ch. 19)). Paul Kershaw comments that to the Northmen the white clothes 'had no symbolic value, nor had the baptismal rite itself, beyond providing the Vikings with an easy means of acquiring a new wardrobe' (2002, 196). While Notker's story 'may be apocryphal', as Ian Wood notes (1987, 50), those who accepted baptism as part of Frankish diplomacy did not necessarily follow Christianity when they returned home.

Óláfr's godfather. Moreover, an unspecified location or somewhere as remote as the Scilly Isles perhaps diminishes the potential threat posed by the place that could claim responsibility for Óláfr's baptism. Although it contains the hermit episode, *Ágrip* does not attribute Óláfr's baptism to the hermit, but only has him prophesy that after recovering from his wounds gained in a battle Óláfr will *við skírn taka* 'receive baptism' (*Ágrip*, 30 (ch. 19)). *Ágrip*'s relative silence on Óláfr's baptism might be due to the author having heard that Óláfr had been baptised in England but not wanting to draw attention to it. Once more, the suggestion of political subordination may have been the crucial factor in the vagueness of this account.<sup>7</sup>

In *Historia Norwegiae*, *Ágrip* and *Heimskringla*, Óláfr is persuaded to accept Christianity partly by the fact that the hermit is not fooled by the assumed identity of one of Óláfr's retainers dressed as the king. This is based on Gregory the Great's story about the Gothic king Totila and St Benedict, who was not deceived by a splendidly dressed courtier (de Vogüé 1979, 180–82 (*Dialogues* Book 2, ch. 14); Lönnroth 1963, 60–61; Jones 1968, 19; Ólafur Halldórsson 2006, xcv). Gregory's *Dialogues* was known in medieval Scandinavia: it was first translated in the twelfth century in Norway and is preserved in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelandic manuscripts (Boyer 1973; Wolf 2001). Gregory relates that, after his encounter with Benedict, Totila travelled to Sicily, which Peter Sawyer (1987, 302) suggested would explain Snorri's use of the Scilly Isles as a location. Sawyer was apparently unaware of the earlier references by Theodoricus and Oddr to Scilly. While the *Historia Norwegiae* version does not specifically refer to Scilly—only to a *parua insula* 'small island' (*HN*, 92)—it does identify the man Óláfr swaps clothes with as *armigerum suum* 'his armour-bearer' or 'his weapon-bearer', rather than a more generic *einn sinn þjónustumann* 'one of his retainers' in *Ágrip* (30 (ch. 19)). *Historia Norwegiae*'s description is closer to Totila's *spatarius* 'sword-bearer' in Gregory's original text (de Vogüé 1979, 180). This perhaps suggests that we can trace the original borrowing of the episode to *Historia Norwegiae* and as it was retold in other sources the precise role held by the king's man was less relevant in terms of Norse warrior society and to the narrative function of the episode. In addition to this inspiration, several stories which were earlier told about St Óláfr Haraldsson appear to have been transferred to Óláfr Tryggvason (Lönnroth

<sup>7</sup> Haki Antonsson (2017, 72, 94) discusses Óláfr's preliminary baptism in Greece in Oddr's account.

1975, 35).<sup>8</sup> This baptismal episode was apparently one of these (Lönnroth 1963, 61; Turville-Petre 1953, 136–37). In the *Legendary Saga* (1982, 64) Óláfr Haraldsson meets an English hermit, also after initially sending one of his servants. The thirteenth-century *Legendary Saga*, though, is believed to be closely related to the twelfth-century *Oldest Saga* (see Lindow 2008, 103), which is from around the time of the composition of *Historia Norwegiae* (1150–75). It is therefore unclear with which king this Gregorian-inspired anecdote was first associated. Regardless, these intertextual relations have significant implications for the reliability of this account of Óláfr Tryggvason's baptism.

It is possible that there is also an element of genuine historical tradition in the hermit story, since there is convincing archaeological evidence for a religious community on St. Helen's, Isles of Scilly. The island of St Helen's was originally named after Saint Lide or Elidius, who is believed to have lived there in the eighth century (Thomas 1985, 192). It is of course 'tempting to connect the hermit on St. Helen's with Óláfr Tryggvason's sojourn and meeting there' (O'Neill 1964, 45), while Radford argues that the story 'probably contains a germ of truth, and, if the monk is correctly styled a hermit, he was probably one of those dwelling on St. Helens' (1964, 42). While precise dating is difficult, it seems that an early date coinciding with Óláfr's time in the Insular world cannot be corroborated archaeologically, as the earliest pottery is from the late eleventh century or c.1100 (O'Neill 1964, 43, 53, 59). Indeed, O'Neill concluded that 'the negative evidence' of the lack of earlier pottery, which is found in other Cornish sites, is 'so strong and consistent from all parts of the site that it must be considered as conclusive that the St. Helens hermitage was not founded until some time after the 10th century' (1964, 58). Thus, we cannot be certain that it was in existence during Óláfr Tryggvason's lifetime. It certainly was by the time that Oddr was writing, though, as there is twelfth-century corroboration of a religious community on the island from written sources. A grant of Henry I to Tavistock Abbey (Devon) from c.1120 included *omnes ecclesie de Sullye* 'all the churches of Scilly' (Oliver 1864, 73), while a later grant from Reginald, earl of Cornwall, presumably dating to the 1150s, specifically listed *insula Sancti Elidii* 'the island of St Elidius' (Oliver 1864, 74) amongst the possessions of Tavistock (for the dating of these grants see Thomas 1985, 200–01). Oddr rather curiously makes the hermit the head of a community

<sup>8</sup> At least one of these stories seems to have been transferred in the opposite direction, though: Ólafur Halldórsson (2006, cvi; 1984, 109 and 111–12) asserts that the landing at Mostr episode was first associated with Óláfr Tryggvason rather than Óláfr Haraldsson (*contra* Lönnroth 1963, 60).

of monks, thus combining the much older tradition of a single hermit with the actual situation in his own time of a larger confraternity. Theodoricus attributed Óláfr's baptism to *Bernardo abbate* 'Abbot Bernard', rather than remembering the saint Elidius, while the other sources do not name the one responsible. In general there appears to have been some, but limited, Scandinavian activity in, and consequently knowledge of, the Scilly Isles.<sup>9</sup> As seen at the start of this section, the Scandinavian and Icelandic accounts of the baptism seem vague and uncertain in their locating of the Scilly Isles, with Oddr describing them as being near Ireland. While a Scilly setting for Óláfr's baptism and conversion might therefore suggest an underlying layer of half-remembered historical fact, it might also have been a convenient location at the fringes of the Norse world-view. Charles Thomas (1985, 233) asserts that the story 'contains no grain of truth in our setting' because the site at St Helen's was misidentified as 'an isolated hermitage', noting that there was no 'indigenous Scilly tradition' until the twentieth century (232).

Whatever its origins, the hermit episode extant in these sources serves to enhance Óláfr Tryggvason's reputation.<sup>10</sup> In *Historia Norwegiae* the hermit enjoins the retainer in the king's clothes *domino suo fideliter seruire* 'to serve his lord faithfully' (HN, 92); an equivalent is not present in the episode in Gregory's *Dialogues*, so it does not derive from this source material. In *Ágrip* this instruction to loyalty is heightened somewhat: the hermit declares, '*Eigi ertu konungr, en þat er ráð mitt attu sér trúr konungi þínum*' 'You are not the king, and it is my counsel that you be loyal to your king' (*Ágrip*, 30 (ch. 19)). This might serve a Norwegian political message, emphasising that God expects people to obey their king. Additionally, the king's clothes-exchanging scheme allows him to establish the hermit's holiness, reflecting his own wisdom in setting the test. With his credibility verified, the hermit also prophesies Óláfr's obtaining the Norwegian throne

<sup>9</sup> The Scilly Isles would have made a convenient navigational and stopping-off point for any Scandinavians in the area, as they did for sailors in later centuries (Gore 2015, 128, 144). The Scilly Isles account for a couple of the small number of extant Norse place names in the West Country (Agnes, Grimsby; Gore 2015, 127, 131). *Orkneyinga saga* (chs 79, 100) relates that the Orcadian Sveinn Ásleifarson was active in the Scilly Isles (*Orkneyinga saga*, 180–81, 272–74).

<sup>10</sup> In his account of the abbot, Oddr places more emphasis on the Christian instruction received by Óláfr (Oddr, 167–68 (ch. 14)), which still suggests that he will be a good Christian ruler but does not contain the same emphasis as *Ágrip* on Óláfr's cleverness and the loyalty expected from his retinue. It is also interesting that Oddr does not use the version of the scene that is indebted to Gregory's *Dialogues*, given that he knew the *Dialogues* well; since he was arguably promoting Óláfr as a saintly figure he perhaps did not want to equate him with a Gothic tyrant.

and the greatness of his rule, including his achievements in conversion. This episode thus connects Óláfr's conversion to his kingship; the former becomes necessary for him to fulfil the latter. Indeed, this link is made explicit in *Ágrip*: *kom hann svá til trúar, því næst til Nóregis* 'so he came to the faith, and next to Norway' (*Ágrip*, 30 (ch. 19)).

#### *A Hiberno-Scandinavian Bride?*

Oddr's saga and *Heimskringla* relate the marriage of Óláfr Tryggvason to a woman named Gyða, said to be the sister of Óláfr Kváran (Amlaíb Cuarán). Amlaíb was king of York on two separate occasions (941–44 and 949–52) and, more successfully, of Dublin from 945–47 and 952–80. When Dublin suffered a major military defeat at the battle of Tara in 980 he went into brief retirement on Iona. As previously noted, Óláfr Tryggvason was active in the Insular world in the early 990s and conceivably a little earlier. There is therefore a chronological disjuncture in the genealogy of this account (see Ólafur Halldórsson 2006, ci–ii): Amlaíb Cuarán's father died in 927, so he seems unlikely to have had a daughter of marriageable age half a century later. It is more likely that Gyða was the daughter of Amlaíb Cuarán (who himself died at an old age in 981) and therefore the sister of Sigtryggr or Sítric silkiskegg 'Silkenbeard', the king of Dublin who died in 1036.

Since it does not feature in the synoptics from the latter half of the twelfth century, the earliest account of the marriage is that of Oddr Snorrason's saga of Óláfr, from around 1190. In a scene set in England, Oddr describes Gyða as *systir Óláfs Skotakonungs, er kallaðr var kváran* 'the sister of Óláfr, king of the Scots, who was called Kváran' (Oddr, 179 (A; ch. 17)). This incorrect royal title might have been a case of the Norse translator not realising that Latin *Scotti* referred to the Irish too (Ólafur Halldórsson 2006, c). It is possible, though, that it was the epithet rather than the location of the kingdom that was misattributed. Alex Woolf suggests that since here it seems that the text supplies Óláfr kváran as an explanation for 'King of the Scots', it could be that Gyða was instead the sister of Amlaíb son of Ildulb who was a king of Alba when killed in 977 (personal communication).<sup>11</sup> A Scottish identification

<sup>11</sup> This applies to the A version of the text quoted above in AM 310 4to (A); the Stock. perg. 18 (S) version has *systir Óláfs Skotakonungs kvárans* (Oddr, 179 (ch. 15)). The S version is in general briefer than A. Ólafur Halldórsson summarises the existing scholarship on these two main manuscripts (2006, cxliii–cli), for instance that A has Norwegian features but that we cannot be certain if it was copied in Iceland or Norway, by an Icelander or Norwegian, and whether the exemplar was Icelandic or Norwegian (cxlviii).

might be strengthened by the fact that in the same chapter Oddr gives Óláfr's rival for Gyða's hand as *kappinn Alpin* 'the champion Alpin' (Oddr, 178 (ch. 17)), which would seem to be *Alpín*, a name peculiar to Alba. It might even have been mistakenly introduced by a scribe who had heard of *Alpín*, the father of Cináed, traditionally viewed as the founder of the Kingdom of Scots.<sup>12</sup> However, while this is true of one manuscript of the saga (the thirteenth-century AM 310 4to (A)), in the other (Stock. perg. 4to nr 18 (S), from c.1300) his name is given as *Alvini*. Since the action takes place in England, the text's editor, Ólafur Halldórsson, takes *Alvini* to be the Norse rendering of the Old English *Ælfwine* and suggests that the scribe of manuscript A misread a *wynn* as a 'p' (Oddr, 177 n. 2). In Norway *wynn* was used a great deal down to 1300 but it was lost later in Iceland (see Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson 2005, 256). A, which has *Alpin*, occasionally uses *wynn*, while S, which avoids *wynn*, has *Alvini* with a normal 'v': the exemplar perhaps normally used 'v' and used *wynn* only in the unfamiliar name *Alvin(i)*, so S normalised it to its own usage of 'v', whereas A mistook it for 'p', possibly because it was a shape of *wynn* they were not accustomed to. Finnur Jónsson (1932, viii–xix) provided detailed arguments that both S and A were copied from the same Icelandic archetype, but that S was significantly condensed in the process.<sup>13</sup> However, since the original translation is lost it is difficult to ascertain the extent of the abbreviation in S, as A has also been supplemented and expanded (Ólafur Halldórsson 2006, clxvi). While A has been viewed as closer to the original text, Ólafur Halldórsson (2006, cxliv–cli, clii–clxx) argues that S may be more accurate because its scribe copied other texts with few emendations. The *Alpin* spelling in the A version of Oddr is not followed by other sources. For example, in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* in *Heimskringla*, ch. 32, AM 39 and Fríssbók manuscripts have *Alvini*, *Kringla* has *Álfvini*, *Jöfraskinna* has *Alfini* (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (*Heimskringla*), I 268, n. 1). The last two of these provide extra support for the case that it was a rendering of Old English *Ælfwine*. Finnur Jónsson (1932, xxii) argues that Snorri had access to a manuscript of Oddr's saga that was older than the A and S versions, presumably meaning older than their exemplar. Another possibility for Gyða's identity is that she was in fact the sister of the Swedish king Óláfr Skötkonung (r. c.995–1022) and that Oddr misunderstood his epithet

<sup>12</sup> For the importance and later reputation of Cináed mac Alpín see Broun 2015, 107–09, 120, 130.

<sup>13</sup> A broadly similar assessment was made by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (1936, 57–68).

(‘Tributary-King’), rendering Gyða instead as *systir Óláfs Skotakonungs* and thus relocating events to the Insular world.

Óláfr’s winning of Gyða in *Heimskringla* is set in England, where it is claimed that she had been previously married to an English earl (Oddr having described her as a distinguished widow). *Heimskringla* correctly identifies Óláfr Kváran *er konungr var á Írlandi í Dyflinni* ‘who was king in Ireland in Dublin’ (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar (Heimskringla)*, 267 (ch. 32)) and it also seems to try to reconcile the geographical multiplicities by claiming that after their marriage Óláfr *dvalðisk á Englandi, en stundum á Írlandi* ‘lived in England but sometimes in Ireland’ (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar (Heimskringla)*, 269 (ch. 32)). Gyða’s father Amlaib was active in England, specifically York, as previously mentioned, so he could have had a child there; he ceased to be king of York in 952 (Hall 1976, 18), so if she were conceived during this time Gyða would have been aged at least forty at the time of her marriage, which presumably occurred in the 990s. Instead she might have been born later in Dublin. It is conceivable that the king of Dublin might then have sent his daughter from Dublin to England for a marriage alliance, although an Irish match might have been more obviously advantageous on a political level.

The historicity of this union has been little commented on by scholars. The claims of Oddr’s biography of Óláfr, dating to the end of the twelfth century and so written at some remove from his lifetime, should be treated cautiously. Colmán Etchingham (2001, 186) notes that the account was ‘evidently given credence’ by Donnchadh Ó Corráin (1999, 339) since he included Óláfr’s marriage to Gyða in a genealogical table of ‘later Viking rulers of Dublin’, but that at the same time he stated that Amlaib Cuarán ‘has no direct connection with Norway’ (317). It is noteworthy that all this was happening before Óláfr was actually king of Norway. In Oddr the marriage episode is followed by an account of the Jómsvíkingar at the Battle of Hjörungavágr, which occurred *c.*986 (A, ch. 18) with Óláfr not gaining the Norwegian throne until a while later (A, ch. 23); similarly in *Heimskringla* the winning of Gyða is followed by the death of Haraldr Gormsson, king of Denmark. This would put the marriage episode in the early 980s. Even if this claimed union had any veracity, therefore, it did not amount to a formal alliance or important political connection between Dublin and Norway.

Benjamin Hudson (2005, 84) claims that Óláfr took up residence in Dublin with Gyða during the early part of Sitric silkiskegg’s reign. He argues that this explains the numismatic evidence from Dublin, since Dublin coinage copied Anglo-Saxon coins from the mint at Watchet, in

the region of which Óláfr was active in the 990s. Hudson does not specify which piece of evidence points to the latter. Watchet was attacked in 988 (*ASC* 988 CDE), before we have clear evidence of Óláfr's presence in the Insular world. The 994 entry about the treaty refers to Óláfr and Sveinn having raided quite extensively, in Essex, Kent, Sussex and Hampshire, but Watchet is located on the Somerset coast. Watchet was also attacked a few years after the minting of the Dublin coinage began (*ASC* 998 CDE), an event usually dated *c.*995 but which Hudson (84) dates to 994, in the year of the treaty with Æthelred. Rather, Watchet's location on the opposite side of the Irish Sea simply made it a natural place for Dublin to trade with; the Hiberno-Scandinavian town had increasing economic ties to Bristol, not so far away from Watchet. This background of long-term economic links is more relevant for the imitative coinage than the fleeting attacks of the Viking army. While dies from Watchet were indeed used in Dublin, this was certainly not unique: dies from London, York, Worcester and Chester have all been identified (Blackburn 2008, 124). The English influence on the Dublin coinage, moreover, continued long after Óláfr's death. There was near-simultaneous minting across Scandinavia (Denmark, Norway, Sweden) and in Dublin, which is usually attributed to the sudden availability of coined silver from Anglo-Saxon gold payments and to developing ideas of Christian kingship (Williams 2011, 351; Williams 2007).<sup>14</sup> These royal coinages all imitated Anglo-Saxon coins but named their own kings. Thus, the establishment of a mint at Dublin had a wider context than the supposed appearance of a specific political actor, and can therefore not be used as evidence to corroborate the presence of Óláfr Tryggvason in the town.

Hudson (85) connects the new Dublin mint to the merchants associated with Óláfr who are mentioned in the treaty with Æthelred, arguing that Óláfr had no other territories under his control. If this was the case, one would have thought that the coinage would have been minted in Óláfr's name rather than in Sitric's. Hudson's assertion that the 'treaty specifically refers to merchants associated with Olaf' (85) does not bear up under closer examination of the text. For one thing, other Viking leaders were involved in the treaty. Instead of merchants being ascribed to a territorial origin, there could simply have been merchants with the fleet. Some trade must have been needed to support these forces, unless they were able to loot everything they needed. Presumably such trade was conducted by Óláfr's men,

<sup>14</sup> For the contemporary Anglo-Scandinavian imitative coinage of York see Woods 2015, 369.

not by merchant specialists. Given the blurred boundary between trading and raiding, perhaps Viking forces were sometimes able to claim that they were merely traders. The reference in the treaty to merchants which Hudson seizes upon is also quite vague: *ælc ceapscip frið hæbbe, ðe binnan muðan cuman, ðeh hit unfríðscyp sy, gýf hit undrifen bið* ‘Each merchant ship which enters a river-mouth is to have peace, even if it is a ship without peace [i.e. not part of the truce], as long as it has not been driven ashore’ (Liebermann 1903, 222, clause 2). The last clause could refer to being shipwrecked by the weather (as the Latin version of the treaty in *Quadripartitus* suggests, see Liebermann 1903, 222) or to being deliberately run aground by pursuers; Ryan Lavelle (2015, 132) prefers the latter, suggesting that this clause deals with the capture of crews. Thus, this clause does not seem to have primarily mercantile concerns, as one would expect if Óláfr were indeed representing the interests of such an economic powerhouse as Dublin, owing to his supposed marital ties with the ruling house.

Hudson (2005, 85) also contends that Óláfr’s presence in Dublin ‘explains the silence of the Irish records’ about Amlaíb’s sons and the rulership of Dublin. However, while the Irish annals can be rather laconic, one suspects that the longterm residence of an important Scandinavian military commander would in fact have been commented on, especially if, as Hudson claims, this ‘powerful Viking leader was an effective deterrent to Irish raids’ (2005, 85). His argument from silence rests on several assumptions. Hudson also points to the chronological coincidence that Óláfr’s return to Norway was at around the time of his supposed brother-in-law Sitric’s expulsion from Dublin in 995 by Ímar, king of Waterford (Stokes 1933, 349), who perhaps installed his own son Ragnall as king of Dublin. We cannot be sure of the precise details of the chronology of events in Dublin relative to Óláfr’s activities in the Insular world and return to Norway. Moreover, what we can reconstruct of Dublin’s rulership in this period suggests Irish influence, rather than a more unlikely Norwegian presence, in this period. Ragnall appears to have angered Máel Sechnaill II mac Domnaill, king of the Uí Néill and the most powerful king in Ireland, leading to Sitric’s restoration; indeed, Sitric’s original gaining of the throne is also likely to have been due to the backing of Máel Sechnaill, whom Howard Clarke describes as ‘the king-maker’ (2015, 257). Hudson’s speculative reconstruction is therefore not particularly in keeping with this picture of Dublin’s political situation, and does not strengthen the case for Óláfr having a relationship with Gyða in Dublin.

Oddr relates that *Pau Óláfr ok Gyða áttu son er Tryggvi hét* ‘Óláfr and Gyða had a son, who was called Tryggvi’ (Oddr, 181 (S; ch.

15)).<sup>15</sup> Tryggvi Ólafsson is known from other sources owing to his attempt to take the Norwegian throne. Tryggvi led a fleet from the west to Norway *c.* 1033, where he challenged Knútr and Ælfgifu of Northampton's son Sveinn, who had been set up as king by his father after the death of Óláfr Haraldsson (*Óláfs saga helga (Heimskringla)*, 411–14 (ch. 248)). The extant sources unfortunately give us little information on Tryggvi. He was defeated in battle by Sveinn and his challenge was therefore ultimately unsuccessful. The main source is *Heimskringla*, which relates that *Hann kallaðisk sonr Óláfs Tryggvasonar ok Gyða ensku* 'He called himself the son of Óláfr Tryggvason and the English Gyða' (*Óláfs saga helga (Heimskringla)*, 411 (ch. 248)). Incidentally, the description of Gyða as 'English' is interesting given the earlier discussion of the marriage's setting but her Irish origins. There is also one surviving stanza of *Tryggvaflokkur*, which is attributed to Sigvatr Þórðarson in one manuscript (see Jesch 2012). In addition, *Morkinskinna* takes Tryggvi's existence (and his lineage) for granted, referring to him in a *þáttur* used to demonstrate the justice of Haraldr harðráði 'Harsh-Ruler' (Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011, 288–89 (ch. 49)).<sup>16</sup> The story of Gyða might have been significant to provide the background for these episodes. Perhaps it was a retrospective way to justify the claims of Tryggvi, who appeared in Norway from the Insular world, to be the son of Óláfr.

In the saga accounts, Óláfr's relations with women contribute to his portrayal as 'the great romantic hero' (Lönnroth 1975, 39). Before Gyða he was married to another foreign princess, Geira of Wendland, whose death (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar (Heimskringla)*, 263 (ch. 29)) leads Óláfr to undertake further expeditions abroad, including into the Insular world. It has been suggested that the story of Óláfr and Geira was modelled on that of Dido and Aeneas in Virgil's *Aeneid* (Andersson 2003, 15; Grønlie 2017, 48). This increases the case that other episodes in Oddr's saga reflect literary influence rather than having a basis in fact. While Gyða's death is not explicitly mentioned, she too conveniently disappears from the saga narrative, making room for other spousal and narrative possibilities: in Oddr's saga (A) Óláfr wins her hand in chapter 17, but is free by chapter 33 when he is refused by Sigríðr in *stórráða* 'the Haughty', and in chapter 46 he marries Þyri, sister of Sveinn tjúguskegg. An Irish love affair is not unique to Óláfr Tryggvason among kings in the sagas: some of the Norse prose sources, namely *Fagrskinna* and *Morkinskinna*, portray the later Norwegian

<sup>15</sup> Manuscript A also notes that Tryggvi fought Sveinn Álfifuson.

<sup>16</sup> Andersson and Gade (2000, 255, 443) discuss this *þáttur* in the context of the retinue stories it accompanies at this point in *Morkinskinna*.

king Magnús berfœttr ‘Barelegs’ falling in love with an Irish woman, even reciting a verse about it just before his death. The historicity of Magnús’s presence in Ireland is much more secure than Óláfr’s, as he was killed there in 1103. Perhaps Magnús berfœttr’s later exploits in Ireland, both military and romantic, might have influenced the attribution of Gyða to Ireland. The origin of Óláfr’s bride in royalty from Ireland would have been seen as more prestigious than her being a non-royal English noblewoman in the style of Ælfgifu of Northampton, with whom Knútr was united.

In the chapter before Óláfr’s winning of Gyða, Oddr has Óláfr gain the extraordinary dog Vígi in Ireland, a story which adds to the literary and fantastical feel of Óláfr’s wanderings in the Insular world. A farmer asks for the return of his cows from a larger herd which the raiding Óláfr has rounded up; the farmer’s cows, which are marked, are separated from the herd by the farmer’s dog, which Óláfr purchases from him. Hudson (2005, 85) uses this episode to back up his argument that Óláfr raided around his base of Dublin, even claiming that it has a ‘factual basis’ because Irish cows really were marked or branded and Irish farmers used dogs. Of course, neither of these pastoral practices is unique to Ireland. On the other hand, Jones (1968, 20) suggested that the dog is reminiscent of a motif from a folktale. Phelpstead (2012, 33–34) includes later chapters involving Vígi, which detail his ‘unusual abilities’ and his learning of Óláfr’s death by understanding human speech, on his list of implausible or fantastic episodes in Oddr’s saga, noting that these are ‘recounted matter-of-factly’ (34). So too are the other episodes under discussion in this article.

In addition to reinforcing Óláfr’s image as a romantic hero, the marriage episode has other literary effects. Eleanor Heans-Głogowska discusses the narrative role of Gyða in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* within the text’s broader themes, but her comments are also applicable to the episode as contained in other texts. She notes (2014, 31) that Gyða’s choice of Óláfr as her husband just by looking at him suggests that he was born to kingship. This echoes the earlier correct identification of the king, based on his inherent qualities and physical stature, by the hermit in the Scilly Isles. Additionally, Óláfr’s restoration of Gyða’s lands prefigures his own reclamation of his inheritance in Norway (2014, 37). Thus, this episode demonstrates Óláfr’s suitability to be the king of Norway in several different ways.

### *Converting Orkney*

Óláfr Tryggvason is said to have dramatically demonstrated his control over the earldom of Orkney as he was on his way to take the throne of Norway. Theodoricus monachus, in roughly 1180, is the first to claim

that Óláfr had coerced Jarl Sigurðr Hlǫðvisson of Orkney into accepting the Christian faith and being baptised (c.995), partly by seizing his son (Theodoricus, 16–17). This claim is repeated in Oddr's saga, *Heimskringla* (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (*Heimskringla*), 292–93 (ch. 47)) and *Orkneyinga saga* (26 (ch. 12)).

Although *Orkneyinga saga* labels this as the moment at which *urðu ok kristnar allar Orkneyjar* 'all the Orkney islands also became Christian' (*Orkneyinga saga*, 26 (ch. 12)), it has been suggested that subsets of the Orcadian population would have been Christian before this event, possibly owing to Pictish influence (Marwick 1951, 111–12). Sigurðr's mother was said to be Irish and would therefore have been from a Christian background. Sigurðr also married the daughter of a Scottish king; this union might have necessitated at least nominal acceptance of Christianity. It seems fairly likely that these Christian women would have brought their own priests with them to the jarl's residence (Crawford 2013, 127). Moreover, the use of grave goods in furnished burials, a traditionally pagan practice, had declined in Scotland in general, and in the earldom of Orkney specifically, around 950 (see Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998, 113–54; Owen and Dalland, 1999; Norstein 2014, esp. 18). There is an additional reason to be wary of the way the conversion of Orkney is presented in the sagas. Rosalind Bonté (2015, 107–08) argues that the Icelandic redactor of *Orkneyinga saga* contrasts the free and willing conversion of Iceland, which was made in accordance with its legal system and became an integral aspect of its cultural memory, with the forced conversion of Orkney. For Sigurðr, 'baptism seemed a better choice than death—but then, so do most things' (Bonté 2015, 107). Discussing a different episode associated with Óláfr Tryggvason, Siân Grønlie (2017, 57) notes the parallel in offering heathens the choice of death or conversion with legends about Charlemagne and Saracens in both the continental *Pseudo-Turpin Chronicle* and the Norse translation *Karlamagnús saga*.<sup>17</sup> Thus, contemporary Icelandic political concerns, alongside literary resonances, may well have coloured this account of Óláfr converting Orkney.

In the saga account the king takes the jarl's son, named Hvelpr or Hundi, as a hostage to Norway to ensure his loyalty. Sigurðr's son is also baptised under the name Hlǫðvir. This was the name of the boy's grandfather; at

<sup>17</sup> In Oddr's saga, which Grønlie is discussing, Óláfr offers a man named Hróaldr the choice of death or conversion in a scene set in Norway (ch. 33/39, 236) but in Oddr's Orkney episode Jarl Sigurðr's own life is not threatened, but that of his son instead, to encourage conversion.

first glance it would seem odd for someone to be given the baptismal name of a pagan ancestor, but Hlǫðvir is the Old Norse form of Hlodovicus, Latin for Louis, and so is entirely appropriate for a Christian. Regardless of religion, rulers did often name their sons after their own fathers (as an original given name, rather than a baptismal name) and indeed this would seem more appropriate for a jarl's son than to be named Hvelpr or Hundi. *Orkneyinga saga* relates that this son *lifði . . . skamma stund* 'lived for a short time' (*Orkneyinga saga*, 27 (ch. 12)), and relates that after his death Sigurðr refused to pay homage to King Óláfr. Such a loss of leverage could well have been fatal to any direct overlordship that Óláfr had managed to exert. It is possible that Sigurðr relapsed to paganism at the same time (Crawford 2013, 127). Indeed, Sigurðr's Christian standing is doubtful (Crawford 2005, 90). The convenient death of the jarl's son may well be an attempt to provide an explanation for the lack of evidence for Sigurðr's acceptance of Norwegian overlordship and of Christianity. In Theodoricus and Oddr's earlier versions of the Orcadian conversion, Óláfr threatens the life of Sigurðr's son, rather than simply taking him to Norway as a guarantee after Sigurðr agrees to conversion; in the latter he threatens to *afhoggva hǫfuð sveinsins fyrir augum honum ef hann neitaði trúnni* 'strike off the boy's head before his eyes, if he refused the religion' (Oddr, 211–12 (ch 21)). This has perhaps been toned down in *Heimskringla* and *Orkneyinga saga* so that Óláfr threatens the life of the jarl himself rather than a child.<sup>18</sup> Forced conversion is still deemed appropriate, though, and, in *Heimskringla*'s case, is also in keeping with Óláfr's activities during his rule of Norway.

The conversion of Orkney is one of many conversions attributed to the missionary king Óláfr. For example, *Historia Norwegiae* declares *ut infra quinquennium omnes tributarios, id est Hatlendenses, Orchardenses, Fereyngenses ac Tilenses, fide preclaros, spe gaudentes, caritate feruentes redderet Christo* 'that within five years he made all the tributary lands, that is, the Shetland islands, the Orkney islands, the Faeroes and Iceland, remarkable in their faithfulness, rejoicing in their hope and glowing in their love for Christ' (*HN*, 94 (ch. 17)). *Historia Norwegiae* does not provide details of these listed conversions. Perhaps the need was felt to

<sup>18</sup> The removal of Sigurðr's son to Norway is reminiscent of Magnús berfœttr's seizing of the jarls Páll and Erlendr at the end of the eleventh century and sending them to Norway where they both died (*Orkneyinga saga*, 101 (ch. 42)). Theodoricus's account of the conversion episode differs from the others in naming Sigurðr's son as *Thorfin* or *Porfinnr*, who lived to succeed his father as jarl, rather than Hvelpr or Hundi (Theodoricus, 17).

provide a long and impressive list of converted territories to bolster Óláfr's reputation, but fuller stories were later needed to account for the actual circumstances of these conversions.

The saga account of Orkney's forced conversion suggests that the king of Norway was able to exert power over the jarl personally, and it might be seen to demonstrate that he had power over the region more generally. As already discussed in the case of Æthelred and Óláfr, the person accepting baptism usually was in an inferior position to their sponsor, which would reinforce the jarl of Orkney's subordinate status. According to Crawford (2013, 126),

we do not have to believe that it all took place exactly as described. But there is no reason to doubt that such an incident did take place, and that it was part of the process of the Norwegian king's assertion of his authority over the earl.

It is worth questioning, though, whether Óláfr would have been in a position to assert such authority in reality. *Historia Norwegiae* implies that Óláfr's conversion of the North Atlantic islands occurred during his reign, by introducing the information after he has gained the kingship of Norway and by referring to the length of his reign (*HN*, 94 (ch. 17)). Oddr states that a year into Óláfr's reign he sailed to England and, after returning to Norway, he then set off for Orkney where he brought about the earldom's conversion (Oddr, 210–11 (chs 21–26)). Theodoricus, though, places it as a stepping-stone on Óláfr's main journey from the Insular world to Norway to claim the throne. This order of events is followed by *Heimskringla* and by *Orkneyinga saga*. However, if Óláfr stopped in Orkney on his way to Norway from the Insular world, which is conceivable on a purely logistical basis, he was not yet king of Norway. Additionally, Óláfr was not succeeding a close relative to this position, although his father is said to have been a regional petty king, so his assumption of the title of king of Norway would by no means have been taken for granted at this point.<sup>19</sup> Once he became king of Norway, it is difficult to believe that Óláfr would have had time to make an expedition to Orkney to exert his overlordship of the jarls, given the brevity of his reign and his need as an outsider who had been much abroad to prioritise the consolidation of his rule of Norway.

<sup>19</sup> It is also worth noting that at this time 'Norway' was mostly the west coast of the modern country, so Óláfr, whose father was said to be a king of Viken (the south-eastern area usually dominated by the Danes), was thus truly an outsider with no political base in that realm. Óláfr's claimed descent from Haraldr hárfagri 'Fairhair', the supposed founder of a united Norway, is not accepted by modern historians (as is also the case for the same claim made about Óláfr Haraldsson's lineage), but is seen as a later fabrication (Krag 1989; 2008, 648; Bagge 2001, 68–69).

It seems impossible to decide the truth behind the supposed forced conversion of Orkney or when it took place. It is certainly an oversimplification of the more complex religious situation in the Northern Isles; generally, the conversion of a polity was the result of longer-term processes rather than a single event. In practical terms a journey from the Insular world to Norway going via the Northern Isles makes sense and may have happened in reality. Snorri might have opted for this sequence of events in *Heimskringla* (when there was an alternative tradition available in *Historia Norvegiae* and, particularly, Oddr's saga) because it seemed a simpler, more rational schema than the to-ing and fro-ing in Oddr's version. More importantly, this choice also suited the narrative arc of Óláfr's career so that the Orkney episode does not interfere with the presentation of his time as king but instead slots in neatly among his other exploits abroad. The literary effect of the episode is thus heightened: it provides Óláfr with the chance to assert control over part of the Norse world, perhaps as a preparatory trial for the bigger challenge, and greater prize, of taking Norway and of converting it.

### Conclusions

This article raises awareness of the challenges faced when trying to extract a historical personage from a legendary figure. I would argue that because we have corroboration from non-Norse sources for Óláfr's presence in the Insular world, we have been too ready to take the specifics of his activity there, as depicted in the Norse sources, for granted. Scholars have identified literary models for several other episodes in Oddr's saga in particular, which have been discussed in this article: Virgil's *Aeneid*, the romances of Charlemagne and Gregory's *Dialogues*. Thus, when examining other episodes in the Scandinavian and Icelandic sources, it is important to consider that literary elaboration may have outweighed a genuine basis in historical fact in the extant versions of these episodes, even when a specific model cannot be identified. Admittedly, Óláfr Tryggvason was baptised or confirmed in England, someone claiming to be his son did come out of the Insular Viking zone, and he could well have visited Orkney on his way to Norway or at a later point. But the way in which these episodes are conveyed presents a larger-than-life figure, in both heroic and Christian terms.

From a literary perspective, these three episodes form important parts of the prequel to Óláfr's main career, which began in earnest when he achieved kingship. Certainly, a military leader could gain wealth and followers abroad which enabled him to take the throne; this feat would later

be repeated by two other Norwegian kings, Óláfr Haraldsson and Haraldr harðráði. But alongside the realities of Óláfr's time abroad we must also recognise the narrative needs faced by his biographers: since he was not succeeding his father as king of Norway, it was necessary to furnish him with a heroic back-story outside Norway. Discussing Oddr's saga, Phelpstead observes that 'many (though admittedly not all) of the potentially "fantastic" elements [are] located outside Scandinavia' (2012, 41). While the Insular world may not seem as exotic as the eastern travels of some saga heroes, it still provided more scope for elaboration and fabrication than a mainland Scandinavian setting.

The circumstances of Óláfr's baptism as presented in the synoptics and sagas avoid his being subordinate to a foreign ruler, and instead he is the one to subordinate another ruler into accepting baptism. *Ágrip* in particular uses the episode of Óláfr's baptism to demonstrate the respect he ought to receive from his followers and—by directly linking his Christianity to his kingship—his worthiness for the throne. Theodoricus, Oddr and *Heimskringla* clearly portray Óláfr demonstrating his might and his Christian credentials through his actions in the earldom of Orkney. Oddr and *Heimskringla* also allow Óláfr to play the role of the romantic hero, winning the hand of a foreign princess in single combat.

Óláfr's adventures in the Insular world may be being used by these writers to suggest that he was ideally suited to become the first truly Christian king of Norway. The three episodes discussed here prefigure different aspects of Óláfr's 'suitability' to be king of Norway: his Christian baptism or confirmation; his ability to father a son who would (albeit unsuccessfully) attempt to succeed him and fight for Norway's independence from Anglo-Danish rule; his practice of compulsory conversion, of which the writers doubtless approved, and supposed extension of control over other parts of the Norse world. These episodes all demonstrate his readiness to be king, and the sources are therefore influenced in their presentation of them by the retrospective knowledge that he would in fact become king.

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## DIVINE AND HUMAN, LIVING AND DEAD

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A GOOD EXAMPLE OF THE THEMES indicated by my title is found in the writings about King Óláfr the Saint usually known collectively as *Óláfs þáttur Geirstaðaálfs*. The six texts in question (for details see Heinrichs 1989) contain all or part of a story about one of Óláfr's ancestors, about Óláfr's birth and about an incident that occurred during his adulthood. Five are versions of *Óláfs saga helga*, the life of St Óláfr, while one is an independent text, rubricated in AM 75e fol., the manuscript that contains it, as *Sögu-þáttur af Olafe konge er kalladur var digurbeinn* 'the Tale of King Óláfr, who was called "Thick-legged"'. This king is also called Óláfr inn digri (Óláfr the Stout)—just as the future saint Óláfr Haraldsson was to be called more than a century later. Indeed, the connection between the two is why the earlier Óláfr is inserted into lives of St Óláfr (although not by Snorri, who, I will argue, was uncomfortable with the unreliable boundaries between divine and human and living and dead exemplified in these texts).

If we leave aside the independent *þáttur*, we can say that *Óláfs þáttur Geirstaðaálfs* has three episodes with a time span of well over a century. Although not every text has every episode, taken together these three episodes constitute the recurrent core of the tradition. They may be summarised as follows.

The first episode may be called 'Óláfr Guðrøðarson's dream'. Óláfr the son of Guðrøðr is a king at Geirstaðir in Vestfold, along the western shore of the Oslo fjord. He dreams of an impending plague and then summons his men to an assembly. There he explains that he and many others are to die soon. He instructs his followers to put him in a grave mound with lavish grave goods, but not to worship him. When he dies he is indeed interred in a mound, and in four of the five variants which have this episode, people do in fact worship him subsequently. From this he acquires the name Geirstaðaálfr. Whatever the word *álfr* may mean elsewhere, here it clearly refers to someone who was the object of cult—that is, a being who is beyond the ordinary human, stretching into the divine.

The second episode may be called 'Hrani's dream and the birth of Óláfr Haraldsson'. One Hrani—he appears in the opening pages of Snorri's version of the saga of St Óláfr, where Snorri calls him Hrani Hróason inn

víðförlri ‘the Widely-travelled’—dreams that Óláfr Guðrøðarson, calling himself in some versions Óláfr the Stout, comes to him and asks him to break open his grave mound at Geirstaðir. Óláfr gives instructions on how to do this, and tells Hrani to behead him and take from him his ring, knife and belt. He then instructs Hrani to travel to where Ásta, the wife of Haraldr grenski and the daughter of Guðbrandr kula, is having a difficult childbirth; using the belt, he will be able to make the birth happen, in repayment for which he is to ask to be allowed to name the baby. Hrani does as instructed. He goes up to Oppland and puts the belt around Ásta, who immediately delivers a baby boy. Guðbrandr, however, is determined to expose the infant, and puts him in a roofless shed. During the night, Hrani and others see a bright light shine over the shed, and finally Guðbrandr relents. Hrani raises the boy. He gives him the belt as a tooth-gift and the ring when the boy is given a name: Óláfr. These events will have taken place around 995, in the context of a pagan birth, but at the pivotal moment when the missionary king Óláfr Tryggvason’s reign is beginning.

The third episode may be called ‘Óláfr Haraldsson at Geirstaðir’. Some time after Óláfr Haraldsson has become king of Norway, he is riding past the mound in which Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr is interred. A retainer asks him whether he was once buried in that mound. The king answers him (Nordal1944–45, II 219):

‘Aldri hafði önd mín tvá líkami, ok eigi mun hon hafa, eigi nú ok eigi á upp-risudeginum, ok ef ek segða annat, þá er eigi almennilig trúa rétt í mér.’ Þá mælti hirðmaðrinn: ‘Þat hafa menn sagt, þá er þér kómuð fyrir til þessa staðar, at þér hefðið svá mælt: “Hér várum ok hér fórum.”’ Konungrinn svarar: “Þetta hefi ek aldri mælt, ok aldri mun ek þetta mæla.’ Ok komst konungrinn við mjök í haugnum ok laust þegar hestinn sporum ok flýði sem skjótast þann staðinn.

‘My soul never had two bodies and never will, not now nor on the day of resurrection, and if I were to say otherwise, the common faith would not be properly within me.’ The retainer replies: ‘People say that when you previously came to this place you said: “We were here and travelled here.”’ The king answers: ‘I have never said that and I never will.’ And the king was extremely upset with the [sight of the] mound and immediately spurred his horse and got away from that place as quickly as possible.

The text adds that it was clear that King Óláfr wished to destroy that false belief completely, because he knew that it was forbidden to inquire further into God’s hidden judgments than the will of Jesus Christ to shed light on them stands.

Thus we have a human who is worshipped after his death—that is, a human who becomes in some way divine. His afterlife in the grave mound then problematises the distinction between life and death, even if it is a common

motif in the sagas. However, the distinction between living and dead is deeply problematised by the far more unusual notion of reincarnation, and in the body of no less prominent a person than the *rex perpetuus* of Norway.

Who is Óláfr Guðrøðarson/Geirstaðaálfr? We know him from the poem *Ynglingatal*, attributed to the Norwegian poet Þjóðólfr of Hvinir and quoted in *Ynglinga saga*, the first saga in Snorri's *Heimskringla*. *Ynglingatal* usually tells us how and where the Yngling kings died, and stanza 26 (in the numbering of the edition of Edith Marold et al. (2012)) is no exception: Óláfr died of a pain in the leg on the shore of Fold (that is, the Oslo fjord). But like the previous four stanzas, this one reveals not just the circumstances of the king's death, but also his final resting place: Óláfr lies in a mound at Geirstaðir. Indication of the location of the burial is also given for the previous four kings: Hálfðan I at an unidentified place in Skíringsalr called Skæreið (st. 22), Eysteinn at the mouth of the river Vaðla (st. 23), Hálfðan II at Borre (st. 24) and Guðrøðr, Óláfr's father, presumably at Stiflusund, where he was fatally stabbed (*of stunginn vas*) (st. 25) (Marold et al. 2012, 50–55). Including Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr, these are precisely the five kings whose names and burial places *Rögnvaldr heiðumhæri*, in whose honour the poem is thought to have been composed and who is the subject of the next and final stanza, might be required to know in order to assert his *óðalréttr* (McKinnell 2009).

The mythological discourse in this last section of the poem deserves comment. In stanzas 22–24, the lives of the kings are presented as having been taken by Hel, *hallvarps hlífa-Nauma* 'the protecting goddess of the cairn' (Hálfðan I, st. 22; Marold et al. 2012, 48); *Byleists bróður mey* 'the maiden of the brother of Byleistr' (Eysteinn, st. 23; Marold et al. 2012, 50); *Hveðrungs mæri* 'the maiden of Hveðrungr' (Hálfðan II, here called the third ruler taken by Hel; Marold et al. 2012, 52). Stanza 25, which does not explicitly name the burial site, also has no mention of Hel. With stanza 26 and Óláfr Guðrúnarson (Geirstaðaálfr), however, the poet turns from Hel and Loki to the Æsir proper. It begins (Marold et al. 2012, 55):

Ok niðkvísl  
í Nóregi  
þröttar Þrós  
of þróask hafði

And the descendants of the Þrór <god> of strength had flourished in Norway.

Thus with the naming of Óláfr, the kings are again descendants of gods, not hapless men taken off by Hel (and thus not chosen for Valhøll). Þrór is an Óðinn name, but here of course it could be understood as a *heiti* for any god.

Before making the transition to Røgnvaldr, Óláfr's son, the poet ends the sixteen lines about Óláfr as follows:

Nú liggur  
gunndjarfr  
á Geirstoðum  
herkonungur  
haugi ausinn.

The war-daring king of the host now lies surrounded by a mound in Geirstaðir. The mound of Óláfr at Geirstaðir thus ends the catalogue of resting places of recent ancestors of Røgnvaldr and offers an important token in the landscape of his patriline, which extends back to gods. Although Óláfr was the most recent of the kings to die, the poet casts him as perhaps closest to the gods, as would accord with the possibility in local oral tradition that he had been or was worshipped in his mound.

In *Ynglinga saga* ch. 49 Snorri offers some information not gleaned from the poem *Ynglingatal*. *Hann [Óláfr] var ríkr maðr ok hermaðr mikill. Hann var allra manna friðastr ok mestr vexti* 'He was a man who wielded much power and was a great warrior. He was exceedingly handsome and very tall' (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941, 81, trans. Hollander 1964, 49). He divided Vestfold with his half-brother Hálfðan svarti 'the Black', who succeeded him and enlarged the realm, and would also sire Haraldr hárfagri. (Although characters with these same names, Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr and Hálfðan svarti, also occur in the historical record as sons, not uncle and father, of Haraldr hárfagri, this kind of variation is quite normal in oral tradition and need not trouble us.)

Sticking to the versions in *Óláfs þáttur Geirstaðaálfs*, we have a king who was called Óláfr the Thick-legged or Óláfr the Stout and who arranged to have the future saint (his great-great-great-grand-nephew) bear his given name. As Klaus von See (1985, 105) and Anne Heinrichs (1989, 109) have noticed, this notion actualises and legitimises the latter Óláfr as a king of Vestfold, because he could trace his patrimony back *til haugs ok til heiðni* 'to a mound and to paganism', as a fourteenth-century law put it.

Certainly it is possible to interpret the episodes through the lens of medieval Christianity, as scholars such as Anne Heinrichs (1989), Jonas Wellendorf (2003) and Elizabeth Ashman Rowe (2005, 133 n. 8) have shown. Indeed, how could it be otherwise? They occur as part of the biography of the *rex perpetuus* of Norway. Such interpretation does not, however, mean that medieval authors invented the stories (Røthe 1997, Sundquist 2015).

The omission of the explicit worship of Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr in the *Legendary Saga of St Óláfr* is noteworthy, even though the saga does use the

cognomen Geirstaðaálfr. This is the only Norwegian version of the story, and it looks as though the posthumous worship of a prehistoric king cut a bit too close to home for the cleric in Trøndelag who wrote it. Certainly the mound itself would have kept traditions about Óláfr alive; many studies have shown how features in the landscape enable narratives attached to them to endure.

Both the popular historian Vera Henriksen and the scholar Anne Heinrichs have taken the reincarnation issue at face value and have wondered what Óláfr himself thought about it; indeed, Heinrich's 1993 article attempted a psychological reading of the conflicted Óláfr, torn between his old and new faiths. Although we can hardly recover the psychological status of someone who lived a thousand years ago and whom we really know only as a worker of miracles and as a literary character, this line of reasoning highlights the difference between the pre-Christian world-view, which in all probability did allow for reincarnation, as do a great many other religions, and the Christian world-view, which definitely does not.

Some very well-known passages in the Helgi poems in the *Poetic Edda* admit the possibility of reincarnation. The prose coda to *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* is carefully neutral: Helgi and Sváva are said to have been reincarnated. On the other hand, the reference in the prose coda to the following poem, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana ǫnnur*, follows the line Óláfr Haraldsson took in part III of *Óláfs þáttr Geirstaðaálfr*:

Þat var trúa í forneskju at menn væri endrbornir, en þat er nú kǫlluð kerlingavilla. Helgi ok Sigrún er kallat at væri endrborin. Hét hann þá Helgi Haddingjaskati, en hon Kára Hálfðanardóttir, svá sem kveðit er í Kárukjóðum, ok var hon valkyrja.

There was a belief in pagan times, which we now reckon an old wives' tale, that people could be reincarnated. Helgi and Sigrun were thought to have been reborn. He was called Helgi Haddingia-damager, and she was Kara, Halfdan's daughter, as is told in the 'Song of Kara', and she was a valkyrie.

(*Eddukvæði* 2014, II 283; Larrington 2014, 137)

The same poem, however, may offer tantalising evidence to the effect that just being a valkyrie may logically lead to reincarnation. The prose statement between stanzas 4 and 5 is usually edited and translated following the later paper manuscripts to read thus: *Hogni hét konungr. Hans dóttir var Sigrún; hon var valkyrja ok reið lopt ok loğ; hon var Sváva endrborin* 'Hogni was the name of a king. His daughter was Sigrun; she was a valkyrie and rode through air and sea; she was Svava reincarnated' (*Eddukvæði* 2014, II 271; Larrington 2014, 129). Given what is to follow, this is not an unreasonable reading, but Sváva is not in the manuscript of the *Poetic*

*Edda*. What the *Poetic Edda* says here is *Högni hét konungr. Dóttir hans hét Sigrún; hon var valkyrja ok reið lopt ok lög; hon var svá endrborin* ‘His daughter was Sigrun; she was a valkyrie and rode through the air and over the sea; she was thus reincarnated’ (text normalised from Finnur Jónsson 1891, 48). Taken literally, this statement extends the notion of reincarnation from specific characters to the general category of valkyrie.

In any case, the valkyries of the Helgi poems are well-known for occupying a space somewhere between the divine and human: divine in carrying out the will of Óðinn, human in their willingness to subvert that will and marry into the domestic world. The heroes they choose (both named Helgi ‘holy one’) also reflect this distinction: instead of joining Óðinn as *einherjar*, they remain human. But more important here is the distinction between life and death, for they were fated to die and did not. To some degree they are therefore living dead; as Judy Quinn stressed in a 2008 article, the fate set down by the norms cannot be subverted—except in this very special case. By every indication these Helgis should be dead, and yet they live, for a while. Quinn adds a very useful point, namely that evading death enmeshes the heroes ever more deeply in the world of kinship relations, and it is these that ultimately bring on the delayed death.

Even if they get a reprieve by being chosen by a valkyrie for marriage rather than death, we can expect that when they die in battle those heroes will become *einherjar*. This class of mythological beings exemplifies even more explicitly the fuzzy boundaries between divine and human and living and dead. To begin with, they were once humans, and now they inhabit Valhøll with Óðinn. *Eiríksmál*, presumably from the later tenth century, confirms that the human heroes Sigmundur and Sinfjötli are in Valhøll and that King Eiríkr blóðøx, who has just died in the battle at Stainmore, is arriving to join the fold. Eyvindr Finnsson skáldaspillir’s *Hákonarmál*, from the same time period, mentions Hermóðr and Bragi and of course King Hákon inn góði ‘the Good’. We may justly ask: what if any is the distinction in divinity between Óðinn and these human heroes? The answer cannot come from within the mythology itself, but only from other sources that illuminate the religion. These show that there was indeed a cult of Óðinn, but we have no secure evidence of cult for the heroes (despite the presence of hero cult in the cognate Greek tradition). So, Óðinn by that measure is probably more divine than his troops at Valhøll. The point, however, is that what we see is a gradation, not a firm distinction between divine and human. I am quite sure that it was Snorri Sturluson’s inability or unwillingness to operate with a gradation that led him to separate Bragi the human poet from Bragi the god (Snorri’s word), who

according to both *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* was also present at Valhöll to welcome the human kings.

The *einherjar* also exhibit a wholly fluid boundary between life and death, assuming that the usual understanding of a line in stanza 41 of the Eddic poem *Vafþrúðnismál* is correct.

Allir einherjar  
Óðins túnnum í  
höggvask hverjan dag;  
val þeir kjósa  
ok ríða vígi frá  
sitja meirr um sáttir saman.

All the Einheriar fight in Odin's courts every day;  
they choose the slain and ride from the battle;  
then they sit the more at peace together.

(*Eddukvæði* 2014, I 363; Larrington 2014, 43)

The expression *kjósa val* 'choose the slain' reflects directly the etymology of the valkyries, literally choosers of the slain, and here it surely means that through their prowess in battle, each day some of the *einherjar* determine that some of the other *einherjar* will die. This is how Snorri may have understood the line, since several manuscripts (W, U) of *Gylfaginning* have him say when introducing this verse: *ok berjast ok fellir hvern annan* 'and fight, and they fell each other' (Heimir Pálsson and Faulkes 2012, 58, 59). R, however, the manuscript that is usually the basis of editions, says that the *einherjar berjask ok fellr hvern á annan* 'fight each other and they fall each upon the other' (Faulkes 2005, 34; Faulkes 1987, 343). In connection with this latter reading (the *lectio difficilior?*), I think it is safe to say that when warriors with this level of skill attack each other some would have to be wounded, and some wounds would be fatal, so the notion of the *einherjar* dying each day and being revived and reconciled and ready to fight again the next probably survives philological due diligence. This dying and reviving is of course the explicit premise of *Sörla þáttur*, to which I will return at the end of this essay.

It is important to note that the *einherjar* are (or in life were) heroes, that is to say, special people. As *Hávamál* sts 76 and 77 suggest, their stories live on after they die. As perhaps the most famous lines of Eddic poetry have it:

Deyr fé,  
deyja frændr,  
deyr sjálfr it sama;  
en orðstírr  
deyr aldregi  
hveim er sér góðan getr.

Deyr fé,  
 deyja frændr,  
 deyr sjálfr it sama;  
 ek veit einn  
 at aldri deyr,  
 dómr um dauðan hvern.

Cattle die, kinsmen die,  
 the self must also die;  
 but the glory of reputation never dies,  
 for the man who gets himself a good one.

Cattle die, kinsmen die,  
 the self must also die;  
 I know one thing which never dies;  
 the reputation of each dead man.

(*Eddukvæði* 2014, I 337; Larrington 2014, 22–23).

In light of the theme under discussion, one might take these stanzas literally as well as metaphorically. As early as 1853, Adalbert Kuhn juxtaposed Greek and Vedic usage that suggested a proto-Indo-European formula associated with warriors that meant: imperishable, unending fame (Watkins 1995, 173; cf. R. Schmitt 1967 and West 2007, 402–10). In more or less contemporary times, furthermore, Calvert Watkins (1995, 177) indicated that an optional addition to the formula was the notion that the fame was everlasting, or lasting for all eternity, and M. L. West pointed out that Indo-European imperishable fame was lofty or high and could reach up into the heavens (West 2007, 407–08). Both these notions, especially the latter, suggest a connection with the sphere of religion, and here again the line between the human and divine is blurred, just as is the line between living and dead. West (409) pointed out the obvious: imperishable fame confers a kind of immortality. The obverse of the coin may be grasped from a remark made by Tacitus in ch. 6 of *Germania*:

Scutum reliquisse praecipuum flagitium, nec aut sacris adesse aut concilium  
 inire ignominioso fas; multique superstites bellorum infamiam laqueo finierunt.

To have abandoned one's shield is the height of disgrace; the man so shamed cannot be present at religious rites, nor attend a council: many survivors of war have ended their infamy with a noose.

(Page 1963, 272–75)

Far from winning imperishable fame, the warrior who flees in battle is cut off from religious ritual, which is to say that he is farther from the divine than most other people. The idea that many such people kill themselves suggests that their disgrace places them to some degree closer to death than

other living people. To this we may add the information Tacitus offers in chapter 12 of *Germania* that traitors and deserters are hung from trees.

The blurring of both lines is to be seen in the career of numerous heroes. Although the term ‘divine heroes’ seems to have fallen somewhat out of favour, despite a chapter on the topic in Gabel Turville-Petre’s admirable and still useful *Myth and Religion of the North* (1964), it is clear that there were humans who fell closer in scale if not in type to the gods, such as for example Sigurðr, Starkaðr, Haraldr hilditǫnn ‘Wartooth’ and Hadingus (the Latin name-form seems preferable because Book I of the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus is our main source for his life), to mention the ones treated by Turville-Petre (and there are others). Turville-Petre operates with the kind of historical perspective typical of his time, probing questions like ‘was Sigurðr originally a god or a human?’ Today we might just say that everything in the record shows that Sigurðr and the other divine heroes (‘significant heroes’ if one prefers a less loaded term) were closer to the divine on a scale running from human to divine than were most other humans. Óðinn acted in their lives, providing advice, information and gifts. Starkaðr has an agonistic relationship with Þórr and kills kings, just as Óðinn does (for example, in the case of Haraldr hilditǫnn, or Geirrœðr in *Grímnismál*). Hadingus enacted in his own life many of the actions of the career of the god Njǫrðr, and when doubled, as *duo Hadingi* in Saxo and the Haddingjar in Old Norse–Icelandic, probably reflected a category of divine twins. If most humans could only infer through tokens and signs what the gods had to say, the heroes could hear it directly from their mouths. These noteworthy heroes shared direct access to the gods with the living-dead *einherjar*, and of course presumably all of them became *einherjar*.

And in fact the line between life and death is also blurred with the heroes. Sigurðr (I use the name for the various incarnations in Scandinavia, Germany and England) was invulnerable except for a single spot on his body, and Óðinn granted Haraldus Hyldetan, according to Saxo Grammaticus, invulnerability against swords in battle. According to *Gautreks saga*, Óðinn granted Starkaðr three lifetimes, and Haraldus Hyldetan lived for three lifetimes, which is another way of blurring the distinction between life and death. Hadingus was taken by a mysterious woman on a journey to the world of the dead and back; as Saxo put it: *in ea loca uiuus adduceretur, que morienti petenda fuerant* ‘She took a living man to those parts which he must visit when he died’ (Friis-Jensen and Fisher 2015, 64–65). Although there is obvious influence from vision literature here, this world of the dead has two strong and closely matched armies

fighting each other, which the woman explains as consisting of men who met their death by the sword.

Another character who may blur the distinction between divine and human is Þjálfi, Þórr's companion. In the poet Eilífr Goðrúnarson's *Þórsdrápa* he appears to be more or less Þórr's equal. They are stuck mid-stream in the raging river, 'until Þjálfi came hovering through the air on the strap-sky [SHIELD] of the ruler' (st. 10, following the reading of Marold et al. 2017, 96). This action somehow signals the end of the river crossing. The 'ruler' in the stanza (the skaldic term is *sjóli*, which usually refers to a mortal ruler (Marold et al. 2017, 95)), must be Þórr. In the *stef* found in stanzas 11 and 22, the poet grants Þórr and Þjálfi equal credit for bravery: *skalfa Þórs né Þjalfa / þróttar steinn við ótta* 'the stone of valour [heart] of neither Þórr nor Þjálfi shook with fear'; st. 11, Marold et al. 2017, 99). Stanzas 13–14 have Þórr and Þjálfi fighting together against *jǫtnar*, and stanza 18 uses an *offjóst* construction for Þjálfi in a kenning for Þórr that calls the god the old friend of Þjálfi. Stanza 22 juxtaposes the two in their family relationships before repeating the refrain about their fearlessness:

Vreiðr stóð Rǫsku bróðir;  
vá gagn faðir Magna;  
skelfra Þórs né Þjalfa  
þróttar steinn við ótta.

The brother of Rǫskva [Þjálfi] stood furious; the father of Magni [Þórr] won victory; the stone of valour [HEART] of neither Þórr nor Þjálfi trembles with fear.

(We might just as well translate 'will tremble with fear'.)

On the basis of this poem we might construe Þjálfi as a god, although explaining Þórr as his lord (*sjóli*) might be tricky, and there is nothing in the passing reference to Þjálfi in *Hárbarðsljóð* 39, about berserk women driving him off, that elucidates his status as divine or human. In *Skáldskaparmál*, however, Snorri lists among the kennings for Þórr *dróttinn Þjalfa ok Rǫsku* 'lord of Þjálfi and Rǫskva' (Faulkes 1998, 14), and in *Gylfaginning* he explains how this came to be. Þórr and Loki were travelling when they came to a peasant's house and took lodgings for the night. Þórr slaughtered his goats and invited the farmer's family to share the meal made from them. Thereafter, they were to throw the bones onto the goatskins. During the meal Þjálfi, the peasant's son, broke one of the bones to extract the marrow, and when Þórr revived the goats the next morning, one was lame. Þórr was enraged, and the peasants begged for their lives.

En er hann sá hræzlu þeira þá gekk af honum móðrinn ok sefaðisk hann ok tók af þeim í sætt börn þeira Þjálfa ok Røsku ok gerðusk þau þá skyldir þjónustumenn Þórs ok fylgja þau honum jafnan síðan.

And when he saw their terror then his wrath left him and he calmed down and accepted from them in settlement their children Thialfi and Roskva, and they then became Thor's bondservants and they have attended him ever since.

(Faulkes 2005, 37; Faulkes 1994, 38)

There is no plausible reason to doubt this story; indeed, it could have functioned as a kind of foundational myth for the special relationship between Þórr and humans during the later Viking Age, as exemplified, for example, in the Þórr's hammers that became ubiquitous, or invocations on rune-stones to Þórr to hallow or protect the runes. The occurrence of the related name Þielvar on Swedish rune-stones probably implies that Þjálfi was human rather than divine. Þielvar is also the name of the man who discovered Gotland, according to *Guta saga*, and put an end to its diurnal rising from and sinking into the sea, and although he is a founding father, he lies closer on the scale to human than to divine.

The etymology of Þjálfi remains uncertain. One phonologically plausible suggestion was once put forth by Eugen Mogk and revived in 1952 by Albert Morey Sturtevant, namely that the name was the weak form corresponding to an older *\*þewa-albaz* 'subservient *álfr*'. Sturtevant worries that there is nothing elfish about Þjálfi, and this objection was repeated by Jan de Vries in his etymological dictionary (1962: 611–12), but what if *-álfr* here refers, as it does for Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr, to a human elevated to some status of divinity, not after death but during his own lifetime? This etymology would presuppose that both the myth and the special semantics of the noun *álfr* are old, which can never be proved, but I do think that it may be worth considering. As Alaric Hall has shown (2007), elves have human form but stand with humans and gods against monsters and chaos beings, precisely as does Þjálfi. I would argue, then, that Þjálfi as we have him is a different kind of divine hero: connected not with Óðinn but with Þórr, and active not in the human sphere but in the divine sphere. He may therefore be closer to the divine than the other 'divine heroes', thus showing the variation within the scale. Of course it is also possible that there were two traditions in time and space: one with him as a god and the other as a human.

Possibly analogous to Þjálfi is Byggvir (and perhaps also Beyla, his wife). We know Byggvir and Beyla only from *Lokasenna*. Loki has just finished insulting Freyr with the taunt that he has given away his sword, when Byggvir speaks up (st. 43):

Veiztu, ef ek øðli ættak  
sem Ingunar-Freyr,  
ok svá sælligt setr,  
mergi smæra  
mølda ek þá meinkráku  
ok lemða alla í liðu.

You know, if I had the lineage of Freyr,  
and such a blessed dwelling,  
smaller than marrow I'd have ground that hateful crow  
and mangled all his limbs into pieces.

(*Eddukvæði* 2014, I 416–17; Larrington 2014, 88)

Loki responds (st. 44):

Hvat er þat it litla  
er ek þat löggra sék  
ok snapvist snapir?  
At eyrum Freys  
mundu æ vera  
ok und kvernum klaka.

What's that little creature  
I see wagging its tail  
and snapping things up snappily?  
At Freyr's ears you're always found  
and twittering under the grindstones.

(*Eddukvæði* 2014, I 417; Larrington 2014, 89)

To which the first speaker replies (st. 45):

Byggvir ek heiti,  
en mik bráðan kveða  
goð ǫll ok gumar;  
því em ek hér hróðugr  
at drekka Hropts megir  
allir ǫl saman.

Byggvir I'm called, and I'm said to be busy  
by all the gods and men;  
p I'm proud here that Odin's sons are  
drinking ale together.

(*Eddukvæði* 2014, I 417; Larrington 2014, 88)

Lacking Freyr's lineage and proud that he has somehow enabled the Æsir to drink beer, perhaps through the barley (*bygg*) to which his name seems to be related, Byggvir appears to be of a lower order than Freyr. This may be a mere matter of hierarchy, but it may also represent a lesser position on the scale of divinity. The same could be true of Beyla, Byggvir's wife,

whom Loki insults as a dung-splattered dairy maid. Although we do not understand these two figures, found only here, they appear to be Freyr's servants, rather like Þjálfí and Rǫskva, Þórr's bondservants. The latter two are presumably human, and Byggvir and Beyla may be reminiscent of specialised agricultural gods. However we take them, their divine status seems to be less than that of Freyr and the other major gods. In other words, there is a scale of divinity even in the purely mythological world of the gods.

In this context it may be worth thinking about Skírnir, who is called Freyr's *skósveinn* 'shoe-boy' or 'servant' in the prose header to *Skírnismál* and also by Snorri, although there is no indication in the poem itself of a hierarchical distinction between the two; indeed, Skírnir reminds Freyr in stanza 5 of the youth they spent together and the trust each can place in the other. Although a dung-splattered dairy maid in the world of the gods might not be quite as divine as a progenitor of royal houses such as Freyr, that progenitor's servant would certainly enjoy higher status. In a high-medieval courtly context the man who undertakes a suit on behalf of another would certainly be of high social status (von See et al. 1997, 61). Probably something similar would apply to Fulla, Frigg's *eskimey* 'handmaid' according to the prose header to *Grímnismál*. These examples are further evidence of a sliding scale of divinity.

Another relevant character from Eddic poetry is Vǫlundr, the avenging smith who is the subject of the eponymous Eddic poem. Although he does not act in concert with the gods, as do the other heroes considered here, and is said in the prose header to be the son of a Sámi king and a skier and hunter, the poem *Vǫlundarkviða* is set in the *Poetic Edda* among the poems about gods, albeit toward the end of that section, between the Þórr poems *Prymskviða* and *Alvissmál*. More important are the expressions *ljóði álfa* 'the prince of elves' (according to Larrington 2014, 100) in stanza 10 and the formula *vísi álfa* 'lord of elves' (sts 13 and 32; Larrington 2014, 100, 103). The exact semantics of the words *ljóði* and *vísi* are not important in this context; nor is the fact that they occur in dialogue. What is important is that Vǫlundr is aligned with the *álfar* and thus to some degree with the divine. Indeed, he seemingly possesses the ability, like other mythological beings, to transform himself into a bird.

Furthermore, he is a smith. Scholars have long recognised the special status of smiths in older Germanic text, image and the archaeological record (Marold 1973, Hauck 1977, Müller-Wille 1977, Beck 1980), and in this context we may simply note that that status positions him somewhere beyond ordinary humans. If Vǫlundr is indeed to be found in Valhöll on the picture-stone from Barhalderhed in Grötlingbo (Oehrl 2012), there

is a parallel with Bragi, Sigmundur, Sinfjötli and the other humans whose earthly lives continue after death among the gods (Lindow and Schjødtt forthcoming).

Indeed, the picture-stones provide additional ample evidence of the lack of a clear distinction between gods and heroes (always assuming that our identifications of the images will hold, as I believe they will). For example, stones such as Alskog Tjängvide and Ardre VIII display in their upper registers explicit images of a rider on Sleipnir and thus of Valhöll, the world of the Æsir and of the dead, alongside images of heroes, as on other Gotlandic picture-stones. To turn to other, albeit implicit, iconographic evidence, the skaldic *ekphrases* show us the kinds of images that were on shields, and these included both myth and heroic legend. It hardly seems that the pre-Christian imagination, which we see clearly in these cases, separated the two.

We also see a lack of separation in those cases in which humans re-enact episodes and events from the lives of the gods, or vice-versa. I have already mentioned Hadingus, who re-enacts events from the career of Njörðr. One need not follow the entire argument of Georges Dumézil on this subject to see that when Hadingus and Regnilda find it difficult to live in the mountains and the sea, respectively, and exchange verses about that topic, they echo the myth of the failed marriage of Njörðr and Skaði. The other prime example is the monster-slaying of Þórr and Sigurðr, and scholars have identified several other likely possibilities. In this context these mythic displacements, as I prefer to call them, show that the line between divine and human is permeable also when it comes to plot.

Finally, when talking about divine and human, we need to consider the concept of descent from the gods, which is to be found directly in Tacitus's *Germania* and in *Rígsþula*, and indirectly in the Learned Prehistory, from *Íslendingabók* through royal genealogies, indirectly because the Learned Prehistory operated with a medieval Christian notion of euhemerism: the gods were actually humans; thus, the line between the two categories was clear. But if we extract the euhemerism from the sources—nobody today would accept that the gods of pre-Christian religion really were originally emigrants from Asia Minor—we are left with numerous traces of descent from the gods. Jens Peter Schjødtt and I have suggested perhaps speaking of a kind of 'inverted euhemerism' (Lindow and Schjødtt forthcoming):

the pagans generally did not make gods out of historical persons, although some kings and warriors probably did come to be viewed as gods after their deaths, but the pagans, conversely, did make historical persons out of their gods in some royal genealogies.

The so-called divine heroes, or heroes who are closer to the gods than most people, will all have lived in the *fornöld*, in antiquity, outside Scandinavia. Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr, who was not a divine hero, is a rare exception, and he expressly ordered his subjects not to worship him after his death. Otherwise the historically closer dead, from the *söguöld*, seem to shade less toward divinity, although the line between life and death remains fuzzy. This is because, as is well known, some of the dead lived on in various places. In the mythological conception one can mention, alongside Valhöll and the *einherjar* mentioned above, the conception expressed in *Grímnismál* that Freyja houses half the dead in her hall Fólkvangr. These must be dead warriors, since she chooses them, as valkyries do, although when tricking her father into composing *Sonatorrek*, Egill Skallagrímsson's daughter Þorgerðr expresses her willingness to die by saying she wishes to go to Freyja. Besides these halls full of dead warriors (and women like valkyries and perhaps Þorgerðr), there are the dead in Hel the place or with Hel the female ruler of a world of the dead, in the latter case usually conceived of as in a hall. Some Iron-Age graves seem to imply halls, such as those with large stone settings (Carlsson 2015, 200–01), not to mention the 'sailing halls' of the boat graves in Vendel and Valsgärde: 'sailing halls' because the dead men are equipped with various kinds of household equipment including cauldrons and drinking glasses (Lindow and Andrén forthcoming).

Other mythological conceptions of the worlds of the dead probably included green fields or plains of the gods, as reflected in the use of cognates of Old Norse–Icelandic *vangr* 'field' in terms rendering the Christian Paradise, and also some glittering realm of the dead, reflected in Old Norse–Icelandic *Glæsisvellir*.

Like mounds and boat graves, parts of the local landscape itself were probably also conceived of as worlds of the dead. *Landnámabók* (ch. S97/H84) and *Eyrbyggja saga* (ch. 4) tell of the groups of pagan settlers who believe that they will 'die into' a specific mountain or set of hillocks (*hólar*), and ch. H56 of the Hauksbók redaction actually states that *Þeir Sel-Þórir frændr inu heiðnu dóu í Þórisbjörg* 'Sel-Þórir and his pagan kinsmen died into the mountain Þórisbjörg' (Jakob Benediktsson 1968, 99). Naturally, we cannot know whether there was any such belief in pre-Christian time, but it hardly seems unlikely. *Eyrbyggja saga* ch. 11 tells of a shepherd who sees Þórólfr's son Þorsteinn þorskabítr enter the mountain, which is lit up and festive with drink, and sit down in the seat of honour opposite his father. Soon, the news arrives that Þorsteinn has drowned while out fishing; if we take seriously the Fróðá wonders, we should take this report seriously as well. And finally, there is the trope of

the hero or great man living on in his grave mound, sometimes singing, sometimes threatening, often possessing, like Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr, a sword or other precious object which the living can attempt to obtain. Frequently this entails, as it did in the case of Hrani's obtaining the precious objects from Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr by beheading the dead king, what amounts to killing the mound dweller a second time. So what exactly does it mean to be dead and living in a mound or mountain? The answer must again be some kind of scale, which we might express as going from living alive, to living dead in the mound, to lying dead and quiet in the mound. The point is that the boundary is very fuzzy. Christianity could not tolerate such a fuzzy boundary, so both Snorri and Saxo tell us of kings, namely Freyr and Frodo III (they are probably the same) who were worshipped in their mounds after they died—but as completely dead corpses, nothing more. Their line was not fuzzy. (Here we may mention that Snorri may well have known the story of Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr, as it was probably in *Styrmir Kárasón's* lost saga of St Óláfr (Nordal 1914); as I mentioned above, it left no trace in Snorri's rendition of the life of the saint.)

But now an important point must be emphasised: as Neil Price, especially, has reminded us in recent years, not everybody got a grave (Price 2008, 259). Those who live on in the mountains or mounds are (with very few exceptions) the powerful and important, the rich and famous of their day. They may not have achieved imperishable, unfailing fame like the older heroes, but they have achieved the local equivalent. Just as the heroes shade into divinity, so the noteworthy in the Viking Age shade into some form of living on after death.

The pre-Christian line was probably fuzzy on this side of the grave as well, as another prose passage in the *Poetic Edda* suggests, this one found between stanzas 1 and 2 of *Fáfnismál*: *Sigurðr dulði nafns síns, fyrir því at þat var trúa þeira í forneskju at orð feigs manns mætti mikit, ef hann bolverði óvin sínum með nafni* 'Sigurd concealed his name, because it was an old superstition to believe that the words of a dying man had great power if he cursed his enemy by name' (*Eddukvæði*, II 303; Larrington 2014, 153). *Fáfnismál* also clearly implies that the dying had access to wisdom, especially prophecy, since Fáfnir recounts the future deeds of Sigurðr. This is consistent with Óðinn's twelfth charm in the *ljóðatal* section of *Hávamál*, which enables him to converse with a dangling corpse in a noose (st. 157), presumably to obtain wisdom and prophecy; here we are dealing with a man not just on the near side of the firm line of our axial religions between life and death, like Fáfnir, or Vafþrúðnir, who spouted wisdom *feigum munni* 'with a doomed mouth' (st. 55), but just on the far side, very recently deceased, or possibly doomed but not yet dead.

In fact, there is evidence indicating interest in what went on around that line. It centres on men who are beheaded, no doubt because in that case one sees extremely clearly when normal physical life ceases. An incident in ch. 67 in *Laxdæla saga* describes some uncanny events: Þorgils Hölluson, the slayer of Helgi Harðbeinsson, meets his fetch on the way to the *Alþingi*, and his cloak drying in the sun utters a little verse. Þorgils settles up for the killing and as he is counting out the silver, an enemy beheads him just as he has reached ten. And yet people thought they heard him say eleven as the head flew off. Where is the exact line between life and death? Is it exact at all?

The Jómsvíkingar asked themselves the same question. Toward the end of *Jómsvíkinga saga*, after Þorgerðr hǫlgabrúðr and Irpa have rallied the troops of the Norwegian jarls, the defeated Jómsvíkingar are serially beheaded. Each is seemingly braver than the next, and they have a few tricks up their sleeves, but one of them, the unnamed seventh to die, gives evidence of a curious bit of philosophical speculation that we would hardly expect among the battle-hardened Jómsvíkingar (Blake 1962, 40):

Þá er þangat leiddr inn sjaundi ok spurði Þorkell eptir vanda. ‘Ek hygg allgott til at deyja. En þú hogg mik skjótt: ek held á tygilkníf, því at vér höfum átt opt um at ræða Jómsvíkingar hvárt maðr vissi nokkut, ef hann væri allskjótt hoggvinn, þá er höfuðit væri af. En þat mun til marks at ek mun visa fram knífnum ef ek veit nokkut ella mun hann niðr falla.’ Þorkell hogg þann ok fauk af höfuðit, en knífrinn fell niðr.

Then the seventh one was led forward and Þorkell asked him as usual. ‘I’m very content to die. But deal me out a speedy blow. I have here a dagger. We Jomsvikings have often discussed whether a man knew anything after he had lost his head if it was cut off speedily. Let us make the following arrangement that I shall hold the dagger up if I know anything, otherwise it will fall down.’ Þorkell struck him and his head flew off, but the dagger fell down.

We must of course read this episode in light of the other things the Jómsvíkingar say and do to display their bravery in the face of death, but the passage does suggest an interest in the phenomenology of death: does one expire immediately, or does one possess some will or consciousness for however brief a period after death? While this may be a legitimate question in a Christian context as well, it would appear possible that it goes back to pre-Christian thinking, even if the outcome, with the dagger falling down, suggests that the victim no longer has consciousness and therefore that any such pre-Christian speculation was mistaken (John McKinnell, personal communication).

Clearly the question of the mortality of the gods connects directly with the fuzzy boundaries between life and death and divinity through

immortality. The demise first of Baldr, then of nearly all the other gods, certainly shows that divinity and immortality do not necessarily go hand in hand. I will very briefly note that the Baldr story as Snorri has it worries about the line between life and death: can Baldr be retrieved from Hel and brought back to normal life? The answer is no. This is such a common narrative pattern in mythologies from all over the world that it requires no further comment.

The death of the gods at Ragnarøk elides the connection between divinity and life, until the rebirth of the earth restores it—not completely, however. *Vafþrúðnismál* tell us that Óðinn's sons Víðarr and Váli and Þórr's sons Magni and Móði will rule over the possessions of the gods; that is, that their parents have died and they have inherited from their parents, just as happens with mortals. The *Völuspá* poet chose different second-generation gods, namely Baldr and Høðr, thus resolving via another mythic sleight of hand the grisly issue of a fratricide. Only here in *Völuspá* (st. 63) do we get a hint of divine immortality, in the person of the enigmatic Hœnir, not a second-generation god, who will preside over the casting of lots. Perhaps that cult function spared him the mortality that was the fate of the other divinities. Once again the line is fuzzy and indistinct.

I have referred several times earlier to the *einherjar*, who die in battle and are revived, as exemplars of those fuzzy lines between human and divine and between living and dead. I have also referred to the *Hjaðningavig*, an eternal battle between two armies who enact or re-enact the eternal battles in Valhøll. According to *Sörla þáttur*, inserted into the life of King Óláfr Tryggvason in *Flateyjarbók*, the battle was instigated by Freyja, thus providing an example of interaction between divine and human and obliquely hinting that the participants in the battle are some kind of divine heroes. The daily battle rages for 143 years because it can only be terminated by a Christian. Finally Ívarr ljómi, a retainer of Óláfr Tryggvason, arrives, and the troops can lay down their weapons and die. The emissary of the missionary king has drawn, at last, the firm Christian line between living and dead and between human and divine. By all accounts it did not exist in pre-Christian thinking.

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SONATORREK. EGILL SKALLAGRÍMSSON'S  
CRITIQUE OF DEATH

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FIRST, A DOUBLE-TAKE: AT FIRST SIGHT, *Sonatorrek*, the verbal monument of grief attributed to the tenth-century Icelandic poet Egill Skallagrímsson, may not resemble a 'critique', as it is described here. This long-form poem in the *kviðuhátt* metre has been characterised as a work 'of unparalleled psychological depth, poetic self-awareness and verbal complexity' among verse in Old Norse (Larrington 1992, 62), and more recently as both 'an indisputable masterpiece' and yet at the same time 'exquisitely narcissistic' and 'self-congratulatory' in its subjective focus on the poet's state of mind and artistic ability, with an implicit opposition being drawn between these two qualities (Falk 2015, 131–32). Modern readings of the work attributed to Egill must always be coloured by the fact that he appears to us both as the subject, the speaker, in his own poetry, and as the object, the main character, in the prose saga in which most of that poetry has been preserved: both the verse and the prose devised to frame it present him as a vivid, complex and flawed personality. Oren Falk suggests that the flaws in Egill's character evident in *Sonatorrek* become a hindrance to appreciation of the poem, perhaps judging it by the standards of the great majority of Old Norse memorial verse, which tends to focus on the accomplishments of the deceased rather than the thoughts of the living. A double-take is therefore required in order to discover the 'tender elegy' marred by Egill's introversion (Falk 2015, 132). The implication is that Egill is at his best at those rare times when he displays clear empathy for others; his insistent focus on himself is only so much resistance.

Perhaps, however, this resistance is inherent in *Sonatorrek*'s subject of mourning and death. 'At first sight,' as Maurice Blanchot writes in his essay *Two Versions of the Imaginary*, 'the image does not resemble a cadaver' (1981, 81). Rather than a particular image, here Blanchot is contemplating the nature of images in literature in general—in terms of the cadaver. Most readers would probably agree with Blanchot at this point; the only strange thing is that the possibility of such a resemblance should be brought up at all. He continues, 'but it could be that the strangeness of the cadaver is also the strangeness of the image.' Blanchot seems to be having trouble 'seeing' the image, and possibly the cadaver as well,

viewing only with difficulty. Or rather, though one might easily view either the one or the other, it is the ‘resemblance’ that requires a double-take. For Blanchot, it is in fact this resistance to visibility, this ‘strangeness’, that links image with corpse. The fundamentally uncanny nature of the corpse lies in the fact that it visually resembles the living person, but denies the web of social connections that constitutes that person. Blanchot’s vaguely Freudian characterisation of grief is as that moment when ‘the sense of an interhuman relationship is broken . . . our care and the prerogative of our former passions, no longer able to know their object, fall back on us’ (82). Against the backdrop of this reflexive, inward-facing trauma of mourning, one encounters the corpse as the signifier of something that can only ever be absent. It is not only ‘strange’, therefore, that the image may ‘resemble’ a cadaver; rather, the way that the cadaver ‘resembles’ at all is itself strange, uncanny. Blanchot compares the cadaver/image to a damaged utensil which, ‘no longer disappearing in its use, *appears*’ (84). In the same way, verbal art changes the seemingly instrumental language one uses in everyday life into something uncanny by placing it in the artistic frame, drawing attention to the stubborn thingliness of words. Thus, as Blanchot might argue, the ‘image’ of the poem ‘*appears*’.

In a similar spirit, we find Jacques Derrida’s claim (1994, 9) that ‘mourning . . . consists always in attempting to ontologise remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead’ (emphasis original). This is not only a claim concerning the nature of mourning, but also what Derrida sees as the mournful character of ontological thought: ‘all ontologization, all semanticization—philosophical, hermeneutical, or psychoanalytical—finds itself caught up in this work of mourning’. The ‘work of mourning’ is also a term Derrida (1973, 19) uses to describe the Kantian aesthetic encounter which requires ‘not simply the death but the entombment’ of the subject and object. Indeed, it has been noted that death, haunting, mourning and the crypt form a sort of meta-narrative throughout Derrida’s work on various subjects (Castricano 2001, 6–10), and perhaps it comes as no surprise that Derrida (1994, 63) cites Blanchot at length in the same work in which he coins the term ‘hauntology’.

Armed with Blanchot’s thoughts on the reflexivity of mourning and the resistant visibility of the corpse, then, we can come to view the resistant quality in *Sonatorrek* not as a stumbling-block to appreciation of the poem, but rather as a starting point for understanding it. Likewise, with Derrida we can come to see Egill’s work of mourning not merely as a memorialisation, but as an ‘ontologisation’, a struggle to understand

death in its own terms: indeed, a critique. *Sonatorrek* is unique and innovative among the surviving corpus of Old Norse poetry both in terms of formal virtuosity and in terms of its intensely personal, lyrical content, its 'strangely modern' 'psychological insight' as Alison Finlay puts it (2015, 115).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as we will see, Egill himself shows a remarkable ability to focus on the resistant and paradoxical nature of death. In *Sonatorrek*, his skill as a poet of drawing meanings out of and associations between words, his command over the play of signification in language, forms the basis of an ambitious and radical critique of death as a social concept, rooted in the occasion of his own grief at the loss of his sons which acts as the ostensible subject of the poem.

Egill begins what we will see is a catalogue of paradoxes in *Sonatorrek* with a deceptively complex one:

*Sonatorrek* 1 (*Egils saga*, 146):

Mjök erum tregt	It is very difficult for me [or 'I am very reluctant']
tungu at hræra	to stir the tongue
eðr loptvætt	or to raise up
ljóðþundara,	the song-measurer,
era nú vænt	there now is no expectation
um Viðurs þýfi	of Viðurr's theft [= poetry]
né hógdrægt	nor [is it] easily dragged
ór hugar fylgsni.	out of thought's hiding-place.

The contradictory conceit of this opening rhetorical gambit is that the act of composing poetry is practically impossible—in spite of the fact that this impossibility is being expressed through the medium of poetry itself. Already Egill has turned his supposedly debilitating grief into an expressive flourish. The surrounding prose of *Egils saga* in the episode detailing *Sonatorrek*'s composition both alludes to this paradoxical difficulty in terms that echo the diction of the poem, and presents the act of composition as ultimately therapeutic for Egill. Before undertaking this composition, we are told in indirect speech that *Egill segir at þat var þá óvænt at hann mundi þá yrkja mega, þótt hann leitaði við* 'Egill says that there was then little expectation that he would be able to compose a poem,

<sup>1</sup> One possible candidate for a poem of a similar nature would be *Ögmundardrápa*, supposed to have been composed by Völu-Steinn in response to the death of his own son (*Látnámabók*, S142). The only surviving verse attributed to Völu-Steinn is a pair of *helmingar* quoted in *Snorra Edda*, which are both believed to be drawn from *Ögmundardrápa*, although Snorri makes no mention of a larger poem (*Skáldskaparmál*, 13, 86). The latter of these *helmingar* features a description of a burial which evokes some of the same themes as we find in *Sonatorrek* below.

even if he tried' (*Egils saga*, 146). At this point Egill, having buried his drowned son, has locked himself up in his bedroom and attempted to starve himself, only to be deceived into drinking milk by his daughter Þorgerðr, who then suggests a memorial poem be composed. Once the composition is underway, *Egill tók at hressask svá sem fram leið at yrkja kvæðit* 'Egill began to cheer up as he progressed with composing the poem' (154). This therapeutic aspect of composition perhaps reflects the process at work in the first few stanzas of the poem: Egill is able to find his poetic voice not so much through objective description of something, but rather through an introspective dwelling upon impossibility and negativity which nonetheless relies on characteristically skaldic poetic flourishes. If this display of personal skill seems inappropriate for the tone of mourning, one should bear in mind that this is an *erfíkvæði* 'funeral poem', and that it is therefore necessary for the poet to create an aesthetic object worthy of the memory of the deceased.<sup>2</sup> One can see the emphasis Egill places on personal artistic excellence throughout the verse attributed to him, such as in the final stanza of *Arinbjarnarkviða*. However, although Egill has a few good things to say about the character of the dead sons he is ostensibly memorialising (in sts 11–12 and 20), the focus of *Sonatorrek* is, as we have noted, firmly on the inner emotional world of the poet rather than on the memory of the deceased as such. It is because of this lyric aspect that the poem is able to grasp the concept and image of death as paradox.

Just as Falk diagnoses *Sonatorrek* with 'narcissism', Larrington (1992, 51) points out that indeed all three of Egill's surviving long poems begin 'with the poet's attention firmly focused on himself'. In the case of *Sonatorrek*, however, this focus is rather more complex: Egill explores his multifaceted reaction to loss throughout the poem by exploding the interior scene of grief into a landscape that surrounds him. Indeed, one can see this already in the rhetorical figure of the first two stanzas. We are not being shown the actual difficulty caused by grief, but rather a detailed description of that grief as if it were an object viewed—paradoxically—by the one experiencing the difficulty. Though initially Egill uses the first-person plural voice common to skaldic verse to describe his near-paralysis,

<sup>2</sup> In the saga it is Þorgerðr herself who, in suggesting the composition of a poem, is the one that uses this word (146), otherwise known as applying to memorial verse composed in honour of royalty (Clunies Ross 2005a, 28, 48–54). Margaret Clunies Ross suggests that *Sonatorrek* and the similarly personal *Þorgeirsdrápa* could be considered part of a 'subgenre' of the more properly courtly *erfíkvæði*. The uniqueness of *Sonatorrek* among poems identified as *erfíkvæði* has also been noted by Bjarne Fidjestøl (1989, 485).

the image of the mead of poetry is presented in an impersonal, objective manner. This construction of distance or disinterestedness sees Egill himself disembodied, an abstract spectator to his own grief, which he can only describe with difficulty: he has trouble 'seeing' it, even as he creates images to represent its various aspects. The theme of difficulty and ease of expression is one that recurs throughout the poetry attributed to Egill. In particular, as Larrington points out (1992, 56–57), Egill's difficulty in expressing his grief in *Sonatorrek* both reflects and stands in contrast to the ease with which he praises his friend and patron Arinbjörn in the final long poem attributed to him, *Arinbjarnarkviða*:<sup>3</sup>

*Arinbjarnarkviða* 1 (*Egils saga*, 155):

Emk hraðkvæðr	I am swift to compose poetry
hilmi at mæra,	[in order] to praise a ruler,
en glapmáll	but clumsily-spoken
um glöggvinga,	concerning misers;
opinspjallr	outspoken
um jöfurs dáðum,	concerning a leader's deeds,
en þagmælskr	but taciturn
um þjóðlygi.	concerning slander.

Here Egill juxtaposes his skill in speaking well of the truly good with his distaste for even commenting on the unworthy. One could furthermore compare two related expressions in *Sonatorrek* and *Arinbjarnarkviða*:

*Sonatorrek* 2 (*Egils saga*, 147):

Era auðþeystr,	It is not easily-flowing
því at ekki veldr	—because heavy sobbing
höfugligr,	causes [it]—
ór hyggju stað	out of thought's place,
fagnafundr	the joyful meeting
Friggjar niðja	of Frigg's relative [= poetry],
ár borinn	borne long ago
ór jötunheimum.	out of <i>Jötunheimar</i> .

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that there is no way of knowing the actual chronological relationship between these two poems. Even in the saga prose, although *Arinbjarnarkviða* comes after *Sonatorrek*, no particular relationship is explicitly posited by the narrator. Rather, the episode involving the death of two of Egill's sons and the composition of *Sonatorrek* is followed by a description of the historical circumstances in Norway leading to the composition of *Arinbjarnarkviða* (154–55). These two events seem to be presented as happening around the same general period of time. Though we see clear parallels between the two poems here, the direction of influence must remain an open question.

*Arinbjarnarkviða* 15 (*Egils saga*, 159):

Erum auðskæf	It is [for me] easily-shaped
ómunlokri	[with] the voice-plane,
magar Þóris	Þórir's son [= Arinbjörn]'s
mærðar efni,	praise's material,
vinar míns,	my friend,
því at valið liggja	because the choice [material] lies
tvenn ok þrenn	abundantly
á tungu mér.	upon my tongue.

The near-identity of the respective opening half-lines of these two stanzas is the most obvious point of comparison, the primary point of divergence between them being the negative verbal suffix in the *Sonatorrek* line. The use of two *auð-* compound words (*auðþeystr* ‘easily flowing’ and *auðskæf* ‘easy to shape’) in identical positions is particularly conspicuous. In addition to these nearly identical lines and a general syntactical correlation between the two stanzas, we can also see that they are both interlinked with other recurring themes of the poetry attributed to Egill. The *Arinbjarnarkviða* stanza uses a kenning for the tongue (specifically in its capacity to compose and declaim poetry), the ‘voice-plane’, that is clearly related to the ‘song-measurer’ from the first stanza of *Sonatorrek*. A similar kenning for the tongue, *málþjónn* ‘speech-servant’, also occurs in the final stanza of *Arinbjarnarkviða*. Both of the above stanzas construct images of materialised poetry: *Sonatorrek* 2 carries on that poem’s conceit of poetry as an object that is difficult to divulge from its hiding place, whereas *Arinbjarnarkviða* 15 presents the poet as a craftsman whose material is abundantly to hand. Egill’s characterisation of himself as an outspoken poet reaches back to the second *dróttkvætt* stanza the saga attributes to him—supposedly composed at the age of three—in which he contrasts himself, *sögull Egill* ‘loquacious Egill’, with a sea-snail, *síþögull brimróta gagarr* ‘ever-quiet dog of the surf-root’, through the artificial juxtaposition of the words *sögull* and *síþögull* in the same line (44).

In its opening figures, then, Egill implicitly presents *Sonatorrek* as an inversion of the ideal poetic act: his poem is a grandiose failure, when it should be an effortless success. In these first two stanzas, we see this failure taking the form of an attempt to draw the object of poetry out of its grief-stricken and interfering container: the ‘place’ or more properly ‘hiding-place’ of ‘thought’ (apparently a kenning for the breast). These first two stanzas are linked not only in sustaining this image, but in their use of kennings referring to the mythological episode of Óðinn’s theft of the mead of poetry as a reference to poetry itself. The image of drawing poetry out of its hiding place is one we see reflected not only in the craft

metaphor of *Arinbjarnarkviða* 15, but also in an expression in the first of Egill's three long poems, *Höfuðlausn*:

*Höfuðlausn* 19 (*Egils saga*, 111):

Jøfurr hyggi at	King, think about
hvé ek yrkja fat;	how I was able to compose poetry;
gott þikjunktur þat	I consider it to be good
er ek þögn of gat.	that I got an audience.
Hrærdá ek munni	I stirred [with] the tongue
af munar grunni	from the mind's shoal [= the breast]
Óðins ægi	Óðinn's sea [= poetry]
of jöru fægi.	about the cultivator of battle.

Here we see the reference to the mead of poetry once again as *Óðins ægir*, and a similar image of drawing poetry out of its container that forms a conceptual continuity with the kenning in its aquatic imagery. One should furthermore note the use of the same verb—*hræra*—used in *Sonatorrek* 1 of 'stirring' the tongue.

The place or container of thought, then, is a recurring image in Egill's poetry. In *Sonatorrek* this container becomes a field of resistance: it makes the process of poetic composition cumbersome, and obscures the object of poetry. It is, here, not merely the 'place' (*staðr*) of the mind, but the 'hiding-place' (*fylgsni*). We are reminded here of the resistance inherent in Blanchot's cadaver-image, but a notion of deliberate obscurity is also evoked. This nexus of mind/hiddenness/poetry presents another recurring theme in the verse of *Egils saga*, curiously intertwined with scenes of grief. Consider Egill's assessment of his emotions immediately after the earlier burial of his brother Þórólfr, fallen in battle (*Egils saga*, 80; st. 17:5–8):

Jörð græcr, en vér verðum,  
 Vínu nær of mínum,  
 helnauð er þat, hylja  
 harm, ágætum barma.

The earth grows green over my renowned brother near Vína—that is a deadly tragedy—but I must hide my grief.

The verb used of this concealment, *hylja*, is comparable to *fela*, the verb of which the *fylgsni* 'hiding-place' of *Sonatorrek* 1 is the nominalised form, particularly in that both verbs carry the more material sense of 'burying' something in addition to generally 'hiding' a thing. In this case, the correlation being drawn between the physical burial of Þórólfr and the emotional concealment of Egill's grief for him is difficult to ignore.

It is not, however, grief alone that troubles Egill after the death of his brother. The theme of emotional burial and concealment recurs in a pair of

*lausavísur* on the subject of Egill's feelings for his brother's widow Ásgerðr Bjarnardóttir, whom he will shortly go on to marry. The first *vísa* illustrates his emotional state: here, in contrast to his own instructions to himself to maintain a manly concealment of his grief for his brother, Egill cannot outwardly hide the inner conflict of his emotions over Ásgerðr, and responds to this conflict by conspicuously hiding his face in his cloak. Though Egill does not directly identify the source of his discomfort, it seems reasonable to infer some amount of shame or guilt—and, indeed, sublimated grief—on his part in addition to frustrated attraction. Just as he paradoxically drew attention to the concealment of his emotions in his memorial verse for Þórólfr, here Egill makes the hiddenness of his emotions paradoxically manifest, as mirrored in the physical action of hiding his face. This scene—both in Egill's verse and in the later prose constructed as a frame for it—dwells considerably on the themes of concealment, emotion and poetry (*Egils saga*, 84–85):

Eitt hvert sinn gekk Arinbjörn til hans ok spurði hvat ógleði hans ylli.

‘Nú þó at þú hafir fengit skaða mikinn um bróður þinn, þá er þat karlmannligt at bera þat vel; skal maðr eptir mann lifa, eða hvat kveðr þú nú? Láttu mik nú heyra.’

Egill sagði at hann hefði þetta fyrir skemmstu kveðit:

23. Ókynni vensk, ennis  
ungr þorða ek vel forðum,  
haukaklifs, at hefja,  
Hlín, þvergnipur mínar.  
Verð ek í feld, þá er foldar  
faldr kemr í hug skaldi  
berg-Óneris, brúna  
brátt miðstalli hváta.

Arinbjörn spurði hver kona sú væri er hann orti mansöng um, ‘eða hefir þú fólgt nafn hennar í vísu þessi?’ Þá kvað Egill:

24. Sef-Skuldar fel ek sjaldan,  
sorg Hlés vita borgar,  
í niðerfi Narfa—  
nafn aurmýils drafnar—  
því at geir-Rótu gøtva  
gnýþings bragar fingrum  
rógs at ræsis veigum  
reifendr sumir þreifa.

One time Arinbjörn went to him and asked him what was causing his unhappiness.

‘Now even though you have been dealt a great loss concerning your brother, it is nonetheless manly to bear that well; a man shall live on after a man, or

what are you composing now? Let me hear it now.' Egill said that he had just now composed this:

23. The hawk-cliff's goddess [= woman] has become used to bad manners; formerly, when young, I well dared to raise the forehead's cross-peaks [= eyebrows]. I have to quickly stick the brows' mid-shelf [= nose] in the cloak, when mountain-Óneri's earth [= ridge]'s head-dress comes into the mind of the poet.

Arinbjörn asked what woman it was that he had composed this love poem about, 'or have you hidden her name in this verse?' Then Egill said:

24. I seldom hide an earth-mound [stone]'s relative [or 'mind, joy']-goddess [= woman]'s name in Narfi's toast [= poetry]—the grief of Hlér's fire [= gold]'s hill [= woman] lessens—because some spear-Rótu [= valkyrie]'s treasure [= weapons]'s noise-meeting [= battle]'s gladdens [= warriors, men] grasp [with] poetry's fingers at battle's instigator [= Óðinn]'s drinks [= poetry].

These two stanzas each contain a punning reference to *Ásgerðr*, punning partly in terms of phonetics and partly in terms of semantics. In the first, Egill uses a kenning and a synonym to refer to two words—*áss* (ridge) and *gerða* (a feminine headdress)—that are practically homophonous with the two elements of *Ásgerðr*'s typically Germanic dithematic name.<sup>4</sup> In the second, Egill uses the slight variant of the word *sifi* 'relative by affinity', *sefi*, also homophonous with a word that has the sense of 'mind' (in a similar sense to *munr* as seen in examples above) or metonymically 'joy', as a prefix to a kenning for a woman as a pun on the word *sifkona* 'sister-in-law.' Egill uses the verb *fela* to refer to this punning (as, in the saga prose, does Arinbjörn): Egill has 'hidden', but in a more material sense 'buried', the object of his affections—in the form of her name—in his poetry. In the second stanza in particular, there is a strong parallel between the obvious hiddenness of the pun and the use of densely layered kennings. In the first stanza, on the other hand, there is a compelling phonetic association between the structurally alliterating words *faldr* (literally 'fold' but here referring to a feminine headdress), *feldr* 'cloak', and *fold* 'earth', each of which phonetically evokes *fela*—and, in the case of *faldr* and *feldr*, we furthermore have the conceptual or semantic continuity between 'fold', 'cloak' and 'hide'. In the context of Egill's previous stanza memorialising his brother, one could take an even further associative step: it is the *fold*, the 'earth', after all, in which his brother has been 'hidden'. These subtle touches are woven into the forceful and

<sup>4</sup> In a similar case, Christopher Abram (2017) discusses the potential for poetic play involving this type of name with examples from *Beowulf* and *Völsunga saga*.

highly visible obscurity of Egill's puns and kennings, reflecting his own open display of his hidden emotions.

Throughout his verse, then, Egill shows an awareness of the inherent resistance of language, its potential to disrupt interpretation rather than—or at the same time as—it facilitates interpretation. While in his punning stanzas he shows his command over this resistance, in the conceptual basis of *Sonatorrek* resistance appears to overpower him. It is this overwhelming resistance, however, that forms the framework he uses to construct his expression of grief. The first two stanzas of *Sonatorrek* are indeed dedicated entirely to this resistance; it is not until the fourth stanza that Egill gets to the point of the poem (the corrupt and practically undecipherable third stanza notwithstanding). Even at this point, however, Egill's summary of the occasion for his poem is delivered through a purely figural image, and followed by yet another delay in the process of grieving:

*Sonatorrek* 4 (*Egils saga*, 147–48)<sup>5</sup>:

Því at ætt mín	Because my family lineage
á enda stendr,	stands at its end,
hræbarnir	like wrecked
sem hlynir marka,	forests' maples;
era karskr maðr	it is not a hale man
sá er kǫgla berr	who bears the fragments
frænda hrørs	of a relative's corpse
af fletjum niðr.	down out of the house.

*Sonatorrek* 5 (*Egils saga*, 148):

Þó mun ek mitt	Though I will my
ok móður hrør	mother's corpse also,
föður fall	father's fall,
fýrst um telja;	first recount;
þat ber ek út	I bear that out
ór orðhofi	from the word-temple:
mærðar timbr	praise's timber
máli laufgat.	leaved with speech.

<sup>5</sup> The interpretation of much of this stanza must remain conjectural; in the first place, *kǫgla* is a conjecture for the otherwise unknown *þaugla* (147–48). The above reading interprets *kǫgull* (literally a 'joint') metonymically as a small piece of something, here continuing the metaphorical image of the wrecked maples. See also Magnus Olsen's interpretation of the metaphoric scheme of these two stanzas (1936, 219–22). The poor condition in which *Sonatorrek* has been preserved has made it the target of frequent conjectural emendation. One should note Margaret Clunies Ross's criticisms (2005b, 28–29) of the conjectural emendation of skaldic poetry, which address many of Finnur Jónsson's emendations of Egill's poetry, in particular *Sonatorrek* 18:5.

As with stanzas 1 and 2, a number of intertwining elements connect these two stanzas. Most obvious is the sustained use of tree imagery, beginning with the comparison of Egill's dead relatives with wrecked maples, and continuing to the metaphorical 'timber of praise'. This first instance, arresting as it is on the surface, is in fact more subtle than it seems. Though syntactically the past participle *hræbarnir* belongs to the noun phrase *hræbarnir hlynir marka* 'wrecked maples of the forest', for metrical reasons it must be placed before the conjunction *sem*, which triggers the sense of a simile, and as such it seems to stand on its own for a moment.<sup>6</sup> This artificial placement of the word suggests a (semantic rather than syntactic) relation in which *hræbarnir* hinges between both sides of the simile. A more literal reading of this compound word, which is not attested elsewhere, would be 'wreck-beaten', that is, something smashed into the state of being in fragments, changed into a ruin. The far more common sense of the word *hræ* in poetry, however, is a human corpse. In this sense it is a common element of skaldic kennings and other rhetorical constructions referring to battle. Here Egill is deftly exploiting the range of meanings of *hræ*: just as the maples are traumatically delivered into the state of ruin, his relatives have been delivered into the state of being corpses; on the other hand, just as trees are disassembled by outside forces, Egill's family is fragmented by death. This is a metaphor that moves simultaneously in two directions: the trees are anthropomorphised by being compared to 'corpses' while the human remains become less human after death, mysteriously transformed into 'wrecks'. Here Egill refers to a metaphorical equivalence between humans and trees common in Old Norse poetry in general as well as throughout his own poetry, as Michael Bintley notes (2015, 130–32). The characterisation of death as wreckage is apparently also reflected in the poem's title, which at its most literal could be read as 'sons' difficult-wreck', combining the themes of difficulty and ruin.

Reinforcing the evocation of this complex metonymic sense of *hræ* is the fact that, four lines later, when Egill wishes to refer more literally to a 'corpse', he uses the closely related word *hrør*. Here there is little doubt

<sup>6</sup> Finnur Jónsson (1912, 40), Jón Helgason (1968, 34) and Turville-Petre (1976, 31) all use the word order in the manuscripts, '*sem hræbarnar / hlinnar marka*', which is metrically unsatisfactory. Bjarni Einarsson's emendation of the word-order, however, accords with the noted tendency of *kviðuháttir* a-lines to consist of nominal 'fillers' in artificially post- or prepositional relationships to the rest of the nominal concatenation to which they belong (Gade 2005, 175, 178). Compare the placement of the adjective *hofugligr* in 2:3 above.

that a corpse as an object is being referred to, albeit apparently in ‘pieces’ like a wrecked maple. The repeated use of this word forms another connection between these two stanzas, as we next hear that Egill must ‘recount’ his mother’s ‘corpse’ before moving on. In this delaying sequence, Egill refers to the deaths of both his parents metonymically: his father’s *fall* ‘fall’ or ‘demise’, his mother’s *hrør* ‘corpse’. This word for ‘corpse’ is far rarer than the ubiquitous *hræ*. Its only other attested occurrences in skaldic poetry are in two other poems in the *kviðuháttir* metre: Þjóðólfr ór Hvini’s *Ynglingatal* 7:2 (*SPI* 19), and Eyvindr skáldaspillir’s *Háleygjatal* 5:6 (*SPI* 203). These two poems are closely related, as can be seen from their titles alone: they are both ‘reckonings’ or ‘enumerations’ (*tal*) of the deaths and burial places of their respective royal lineages, both sharing a ‘catenulate’ structure (Poole 2012, 195). Though the tone of *Sonatorrek* is radically different from the impersonal and often grotesquely comical treatment of death in these two poems, all three deal with death and share a relatively uncommon metre; in the case of *Sonatorrek* 5, it is particularly striking that Egill uses the verb *telja* (of which *tal* is the nominal form) to refer to his brief memorialising of his parents. It is likely that *Sonatorrek*, at least in this stanza and possibly in the poem’s general structure, draws on a ‘genre’ of enumerative memorial poetry in *kviðuháttir* that may have been more extensive than these two extant texts suggest. Clunies Ross (2005a 51–52), for example, identifies *Ynglingatal* and *Háleygjatal* as belonging to a ‘subgenre of the courtly praise poem’ with ‘a close connection to the *erfíkvæði*’. In any case, the use of *hrør* in both *Ynglingatal* and *Háleygjatal* is highly suggestive for our example in *Sonatorrek*: in these poems that focus on the place of burial, *hrør* refers as much to the final resting-place of the corpse as to the corpse itself—and, metonymically, to death as a general phenomenon.<sup>7</sup>

In referring to his mother’s death through the metonymy of *hrør*, then, Egill makes a topographic association. Just as Derrida identifies the localising of the bodily remains as the basis of any ‘hauntology’, so Egill must establish this topography of the dead. This calls to mind his memorial verse for Þórólfr, which in its specification of the place of burial is also reminiscent of the structure of *Ynglingatal* and *Háleygjatal*. Egill’s dead relatives are, indeed, as much a part of the physical landscape as they are of the psychic landscape of *Sonatorrek*: according to *Egils saga*, by the time he composes the poem, Egill has already interred his son’s remains in his father’s burial mound at Digranes (145). With this in mind, it is

<sup>7</sup> Particularly in *Ynglingatal* 6, *Yngva hreyr*, and *Háleygjatal* 5, *fylkis hrør*.

perhaps no surprise that at the end of the poem Egill confronts Hel, the personification of death, as she stands *á nesi* 'on the headland'; it is on such a headland that the visible manifestation of Egill's dead relatives lingers, though they themselves are no longer visible, 'hidden' in the earth. The marker standing in for his father's *fall* is now the same as that which stands in for Egill's dead son; they have become the same *hrør*, as it were, in being joined in one barrow.<sup>8</sup> *Sonatorrek* forms an image of death in general, rather than focusing objectively on the deaths of Egill's sons themselves, and as such, death for Egill becomes the weight of this message from his own dead, a medium transmitting a duplicitous signal that makes impossibly manifest something that nonetheless remains hidden.

We have seen that Egill himself has a strong awareness of the potentially duplicitous nature of the sign: as a poet, he knows very well how to hide something in plain sight, how to elaborately encrypt something in language. In *Sonatorrek* as in the episode leading from Þórólfr's grave to Egill's wedding, the persistent association between 'hiding' in the earth and 'hiding' in language haunts the text. Not only does poetry itself resist being drawn out of its 'hiding-place', the poet's internal topography is marked by the sites of his own hidden dead, with the subterranean Hel herself standing forebodingly in the landscape, all of them juxtaposed (both thematically and topographically) with Egill's son's 'killer': the sea. This medium of manifest hiddenness also conveys a mysterious exchangeability: how, Egill asks, can something become *hræbarinn*, exchanged for the mortal remains of what it was? The juxtaposition of Egill's fragmented family lineage, the wrecked maples, and the *hrør* of his parent is a complex of metaphor and metonymy as parataxis. Egill's language shows the affinities between *hræ* and *hrør* more by their collocation in *Sonatorrek*'s landscape than by direct syntactic comparison. This is the same awareness of the shifting and duplicitous nature of words that we see in Egill's propensity for punning and in the chain of *fela/feldr/faldr/fold*.

The extravagant parataxis of *Sonatorrek*'s landscape resembles that of the kenning in its resistance to coherent visuality or—perhaps consequently—conceptuality; 'the visual blends of kennings', as Bergsveinn Birgisson (2012, 289) puts it, 'engender surrealistic images'. The 'hiding-place' of thought, as noted above, has a rudimentary materiality, but the description of it stops short of full visuality. The strikingly visual wrecked maples, on the other hand, blend through metonymy and metaphor into

<sup>8</sup> In addition to this, one should note that the geographical location of Borg was determined by the point where Kveld-Úlfr's coffin came ashore; Egill's family home is the site of his grandfather's corpse, also marked with a stone (38).

their counterpart in the landscape, the abstractly topographical *hrør*. Both of these images, in their resistant resemblances, bear the difficult, cadaverous quality identified by Blanchot. Finally, though Egill attempts to make the sea into a character—Rán in stanza 7 and Ægir in stanza 8—this character resists social conceptuality: it is still impossible for Egill to take revenge on the sea. Throughout this landscape that blends the internal and the external, the speaker is merely a helpless spectator. As we saw at the beginning of the poem, it is an important feature of the conceit of *Sonatorrek* that aspects of the poet's psyche, such as his capacity for composing poetry, are externalised from the 'I' that speaks. Though Egill seems to have come back to himself in the last few stanzas, this externalisation is what frames the poem's opening. It is through this explosion of Egill's person that he can claim to be unable to compose poetry, even while poetry is being composed. Just as the metaphor of the maples both anthropomorphises them and objectifies the corpse referred to in the word *hræbarinn*, this externalisation of things proper to Egill's psychic interior is also an internalisation of a topography marked by his family's graves, encircled by the hostile sea.

*Sonatorrek*'s complex of present absences and impossible spaces hints at a paradoxical quality to death and mourning in general, and repeatedly recalls Blanchot's view of the strange resembling of the image and the corpse: here, indeed, we have a highly figural image, strewn with corpses, the signs of corpses, and corpses as signs. Just as 'what we call the mortal remains evades the usual categories', so also 'death suspends relations with the place':

Where is [the cadaver]? It is not here and yet it is not elsewhere; nowhere? but the fact is that then nowhere is here. The cadaverous presence establishes a relation between here and nowhere. (Blanchot 1981, 81)

This tendency for death both to have a strong relation to place, and yet to disrupt the 'usual' relations of place through the 'cadaverous presence', is perfectly illustrated by the metonymic range of *hrør* that Egill exploits. The *hrør*-marked topography of *Sonatorrek* moreover reflects many aspects of Derrida's exploration of the 'crypt' in terms of the psychoanalytic writings of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Török: though 'carved out of nature', for Derrida a crypt (whether psychic, material, or textual) is nonetheless 'never natural through and through' but rather 'the striking history of an artifice, an *architecture*, an artifact: of a place *comprehended* within another but rigorously separate from it', which furthermore bears a 'topographical structure' (Derrida 1986, xiv, emphasis original). The crypt here is a structure of mourning, but also one of hiding, a 'safe' that

nonetheless constantly inverts notions of interiority and exteriority. The *hrør* of *Sonatorrek* is doubly a 'crypt': both in its containment of Egill's dead, and in its containment of the *hrør* that in turn must contain them or signify them. It is the impossible negation presented by death that has created this space; Egill attempts to account for death as it appears in its own terms, and the result is pure paradox.

In this corpse-strewn and impossible landscape, the speaker stands in relation—and distinction—to the dead as the survivor, the bereaved; this is the role of the poet in *Sonatorrek*. Indeed, between stanzas 4 and 5 Egill indirectly compares the generalised unhappy man who bears the corpse of his relative away for burial with the poet who, now in the first person, bears the language-leaved timber of praise out of the word-temple. This correlation reinforces the notion that *Sonatorrek* itself is, through its commemorative work, a sort of burial. The *hrør* of the relative stands in both the physical landscape and the figurative landscape of the poem as a reminder of the responsibility of the living toward the dead. Egill must 'enumerate' his father's *fall* and mother's *hrør* as part of this responsibility. The saga prose describing the composition of *Sonatorrek* also presents this responsibility toward the dead as the impetus for the poem's creation. In fact, according to the saga, the reminder of Egill's responsibility toward the dead is what prevents him from simply joining them himself. The burden of this responsibility is, therefore, considerable. As Derrida (1994, 114) puts it, 'there is no inheritance without a call to responsibility. An inheritance is always the reaffirmation of a debt'. Derrida casts living with inheritance as a sort of living with the dead, a living with the presence of the absent, a ghostly debt, so much so that 'to learn to live' is 'to learn spirits' (xvii). In the case of the spectral and cadaverous presences of *Sonatorrek*, the signs of the dead serve as reminders of this transgenerational responsibility which crosses the boundary between life and death. The death of the sons, however, reverses the proper direction of the relation between living and dead. It is telling that the anxiety Egill feels due to the weight of his responsibility toward the dead should feed into his paralysed anguish at the loss of his sons; his poem, as is increasingly evident, is as much about his relationship to death in general as it is about these particular deaths.

In *Sonatorrek* Egill grasps death as paradox not only in terms of death itself, as a sovereign entity, but also in terms of the chain of paradoxes it sets off. We have noted the place of the sea both as a topographical feature and as an anthropomorphised figure in the landscape of *Sonatorrek*. When Egill first addresses the sea, he does so through a multilayered image that focuses on the perplexingly present absence of the dead:

*Sonatorrek 6 (Egils saga, 148)*

Grimmt vǫrum hlið	Cruel [to me] was the gap
þat er hrǫnn um braut	which the wave broke
fǫður míns	in my father's
á frændgarði;	relative-fence;
veit ek ófullt	I see un-full
ok opit standa	and standing open
sonar skarð	the absence of a son
er mér sjár um vann.	which the sea caused me.

Here we see again the strange visuality of absence, the nothingness that the 'I' of *Sonatorrek* gazes at only with difficulty, the 'cadaverous presence'. Furthermore, the metonymic use of *hrǫnn* 'wave' to refer to the sea contributes to the figural image of the 'family-fence' being physically broken by the power of the sea in the form of the wave, the integrity of the family line being violated metaphorically by the death caused by the sea. This word also bears a conspicuous phonetic similarity to the *hrør* in the corresponding line of the preceding stanza. The metonymy of *hrǫnn* is taken further when the sea is anthropomorphised through the name Rán (the wife of Ægir, a mythological figure associated with the sea) in the following stanza; now the sea has been granted agency and even personality. This leads up to Egill's absurd claim:

*Sonatorrek 8 (Egils saga, 149)*

Veiztu um þá sök	You know, [if] for that crime
sverði of rækak,	I took vengeance [with] a sword,
var ǫlsmiðr	the ale-smith [= Ægir, the sea]'s
allra tíma;	time would be up;
hroða vágs bræðr	if I could strike
ef vega mættak,	waves' buffeter's brother [= the sea]
færa ek andvígr	I [would] go against
Ægis mani.	Ægir's wife [= Rán, the sea].

*Sonatorrek 9 (Egils saga, 149)*

En ek ekki	But I did not
eiga þóttumk	consider myself able to contend,
sakar afl	on account of strength,
við sonar bana,	with my son's killer,
því at alþjóð	because [to] all of society
fyrir augum verðr	it is apparent,
gamals þegns	an old man's
gengileysi.	powerlessness.

By framing the death of his son as a *sök*, a legal grievance, Egill is calling for the sea to be put on trial; the legalistic vocabulary of this stanza

has previously been noted (Markussen 2015, 171). The social world of humanity, Egill implies, has promised him this: that the death of a relative can be compensated for, either economically or by proportional vengeance. This compensation or exchange is denied him when the cause of death comes from outside the human world. Egill's metaphor of the vast and impersonal sea as a discrete agent, a person, in terms of the law could not be less appropriate, and this very inappropriateness reflects the absurdity of his aggrieved anger. Egill does not, however, characterise his grief, however absurd it may be, as invalid. Rather, he considers it right to critique the nature of this frustrated exchange. It has not come to his mind on its own, but rather has been suggested by his observation of the seemingly inexplicable exchange of the living person for the corpse. If these can be exchanged, why can he not exchange his grief for vengeance, as the tacit contract of his society promises? The propositional nature of this argument, as Larrington (1992, 59) points out, is reinforced by the past-subjunctive grammatical form of stanza 8.

This theme of exchange is extended when in stanza 17 Egill ponders the conventional wisdom (*þat er ok mælt* 'that is also said') that one can only be compensated for the death of a son by raising another one—rather than, it is implied, through vengeance. Finlay (2015, 118) notes that Egill brings up this notion 'without explicitly rejecting its potential for consolation'. However, the following stanza presents a sudden change in focus as an oblique answer to this idea of compensation:

*Sonatorrek* 18:1–4 (*Egils saga*, 152)

Erumka þekkt	I am not agreeable to
þjóða sinni,	people's company,
þótt sérhverr	even though each one
sátt um haldi.	is in agreement.

Egill's retort to common knowledge is indirect, but refers again to the idea of compensation as exchangeability. He responds to the idea of raising another son by, on the surface, pointing out his dislike of people in general. In fact, Egill realises here that he does not want to be compensated at all: what he lacks is not a son in general, but these ones he has lost. This subtly subversive element of Egill's argument has gone largely unnoticed by modern readers of the poem. What Egill is implying is that his dead relatives cannot be reduced to their social function: when they die, they can never be recovered. In this sense of irreciprocity there is a glaring disparity between what Egill experiences as an individual and the conventional social knowledge he has inherited. His experience of grief forms the basis of a subtle critique of the economy of death presented to him by his society. It is for this reason that Egill

makes failure, a subject otherwise alien to the usual concerns of skaldic poetry, the centrepiece of his poem: his failure as the head of the family to protect and account for his progeny is introduced by his ostensible failure as a poet to compose in a time of grief, and what is emphasised in both cases is the absurdity of the very notion that these should be considered ‘failures’ at all. Finlay (2015, 121) describes how, in stanza 9, in spite of his description of himself as an ‘old man’, Egill’s ‘assertion of his inability to fight against the sea, which would of course be the same for any man, young or old, modulates into an expression of the helplessness of old age’. Here *gengileysi* could be understood as ‘lacking support’ (see Turville-Petre 1976, 33). Finlay touches on the absurdity of the statement. Through the frame of an unreasonable demand for ‘support’ against the sea, Egill indicates the obverse fact: that social institutions and practices ultimately can do nothing to remedy his loss.

Egill ultimately concludes, in stanza 23, that the bestowal of poetic skill by the god Óðinn constitutes a ‘compensation’ for his ills, again using what has been identified as distinctly legal language (Goeres 2015, 82). Yet there is something in the treatment of compensation in *Sonatorrek* that remains unaddressed by this attempt at closure. Prior to his challenge of conventional wisdom in stanza 18, Egill refers directly to the notion of economic compensation for the death of a relative, using diction that is all the more striking considering everything we have seen in *Sonatorrek* so far:

*Sonatorrek* 15 (*Egils saga*, 151)

Mjök er torfyndr	It is extremely difficult to find
sá er trúa knegum	one who can be trusted
of alþjóð	among the populace
Elgjar gálga,	of Elgr’s gallows [= Yggdrasill, the world]
því at niðgóðr	because an evil
niðja steypir	destroyer of kin
bróður hrør	exchanges for rings
við baugum selr.	a brother’s corpse.

Here Egill apparently rejects the economic exchangeability of the dead with material wealth in the strongest terms possible. However, the words that he uses to express himself here are deeply haunted: though he seems to speak ambiguously of fratricide, his language also evokes the practice of compensation, implicitly equating the two. According to *Egils saga*, when Þórólfr died in the service of Æthelstan nothing could lighten Egill’s mood—that is, until the king offered him an extremely large sum of money. Most of this, as Falk notes (2015, 142), was in fact intended for Skalla-Grímr as *sonargjöld* ‘son-compensation’ (*Egils saga*, 82), yet remained in Egill’s hands until the end

of his days (86). These chests of English silver appear again at the end of the saga: first Egill announces his intention to scatter the silver among the crowd at the *þing* and watch them fight each other for it. When discouraged from this plan, he instead buries the entire treasure in a secret location (180–81).

These prose episodes all paint a consistent picture of Egill's avarice. The relationship between money and mourning in the poet's mind is emphasised in one of the stanzas Egill composes in praise of Æthelstan's generosity (*Egils saga* 82, st. 20):

Knáttu hvarms af harmi  
 hnúþgnípur mér drúpa;  
 nú fann ek þann er ennis  
 ósléttur þær rétti.  
 Gramr hefir gerðihömrum  
 grundar upp um hrundit,  
 sá er til ýgr, af augum,  
 armsíma, mér grímu.

My eyelid's downcast-peaks [= brows] drooped from grief; now I found the one who righted my forehead's unevenness. The ruler, who is vicious to arm-rings, has lifted up the cowl's ground [= face]'s girding-cliffs [= brows] from my eyes.

In Egill's own verse as in the saga, then, an exchange takes place. Moreover, this stanza yields further connections in Egill's poetry. The kennings used to describe the face bear a strong similarity to those we saw above in stanza 23, where emotional discomfort is once again the subject. Perhaps more striking in this context, however, is Egill's characterisation of the face as the 'cowl's ground': here the face is identified by its capacity for concealment, just as Egill conceals his face, his grief, and the name of the object of his desire in stanza 23. The poetic association between the word *gríma* 'cowl' (or, indeed, 'mask') and concealment or lack of clarity is illustrated by the use of this word as a *heiti*, a conventional poetic metaphor, for 'night'; for example, it is given as such in the *þula* for 'Names for 'day' and 'night'' (*SP*, III 914). This kenning in fact recurs in a stanza of *Sonatorrek*, dealing with a similar image of grief:<sup>9</sup>

*Sonatorrek* 19:5–8 (*Egils saga*, 152)

máka ek upp	I cannot
jörðu grímu,	cowl's ground,
rýnnis reið,	knowledge's vehicle [= the head],
réttri halda	hold upright

<sup>9</sup> Here *jörð grímu* is an emendation of *i áróar grímu*. The unemended text has been interpreted as 'a night of woe' (Cleasby and Vigfússon 1874, 216), but this would bear little relation to the rest of the stanza.

As we have seen in other examples, the scene of mourning in *Sonatorrek* makes impossible a process that ought to occur smoothly. Egill's various failures lead us to the rejection of exchange presented in such strong terms in stanzas 15–18, followed by this description of insurmountable grief whose poetic language strangely recalls past scenes of buried emotions. His rejection of exchange recalls nothing so much as this past exchange of loss for money. Although Æthelstan cannot be considered directly responsible for Þórólfr's death, it is nonetheless the compensation that he offers that makes that death acceptable to Egill in *vísa* 20. Likewise, in Egill's figural image in *Sonatorrek* 15, the traitor literally 'sells' the 'corpse'—as the *hrör*, the corpse itself and, as we have seen, the mark or place of the invisible corpse, death itself, a sign or token—of the brother for material wealth. The language used here has already been laden with haunting significance in the course of the poem, but Egill's apparent blindness to the ghost of the past that he conjures up makes the violence of his condemnation all the more striking. If someone else were describing Egill's own actions with these words, it would seem an unreasonable exaggeration. Egill cannot, however, be judged innocent by his own standards; whether conscious or not, this appears to be a self-incrimination. It is all the more conspicuous when one considers that Þórólfr has not been personally included in the landscape strewn with dead relatives: Egill only refers to the feeling of his brother's absence (*bróðurleysi* 'brotherlessness'), as Finlay puts it, 'as a generality' (2015, 120).

Egill's critique of the social character of death in *Sonatorrek* ultimately leads to this aporia, this moment of amnesia; it is as if the dead Þórólfr were borrowing Egill's voice for a moment, subtly reminding his brother of the guilt he should be carrying. Tempting as it may be, however, to ascribe this moment to the hypocrisy of the self-obsessed and compulsively 'self-congratulatory' Egill, the web of submerged associations centering on *Sonatorrek* suggests a more complex situation. The powerful critique Egill has assembled in his poem exceeds his own intentions and overwhelms him at the point of his blind spot, the part of his verbal 'crypt' that he cannot 'see', because it contains the corpse of his brother, and the complex of grief and guilt that that corpse represents for him. This is the crypt as a 'safe', as Derrida (1986, xiv) puts it, keeping safe a grief so hidden that even Egill himself has lost sight of it: 'the cryptic safe protects from the outside the very secret of its clandestine inclusion or its internal exclusion', encrypted 'from' the outside but also hidden 'in' the inside. As we have seen, Egill takes pride in his abilities of verbal encryption, but his burial plot becomes too complex for him to manage. He expresses his troubled feelings for Ásgerðr by drawing attention to his burying of her through

her name, but he is nonetheless unable to exorcise the oppressive absence of his brother in this scene—as Blanchot (1981, 84) says of haunting, ‘what haunts is the inaccessible which one cannot rid oneself of’. In a very real sense Egill has exchanged his brother’s *hrør* for money, and as he refuses to part with this money, the thing that stands in for Þórólfr’s corpse remains unburied, yet still hidden. In *Sonatorrek*, Egill’s tortuous relationship with death is fully exposed in all its contradictory grandeur. Falk (2015, 133, 142) emphasises the conspicuous silence in *Egils saga* surrounding the death of Ásgerðr; there is no corresponding *Konutorrek*. Rather, Falk sees Egill’s grief for his wife sublimated in the ‘belligerent widowerhood’ of his latter days as related in the text of the saga, and in his attempt to ‘become his own heir’ in his disposal of his illicit wealth (142). The burial of the treasure is indeed inextricably linked to the prior burial of the sons who should have lived to inherit that treasure.

Egill’s final cryptic act strangely resembles his poetic production, and seems to complete the grandiose crypt that he has constructed, we see in the end, around his brother’s remains. As Derrida (1986, xiv) puts it, the crypt is meant to ‘disguise and hide: something, always a body in some way’. Whether corpse, the metonymic corpse as the place of death, or the mysterious and illicit exchange represented by the silver, Þórólfr’s ‘body’ is—‘in some way’—always present. The *hrør* in the form of the silver remains buried, even as Egill’s monstrously proportioned remains are exhumed long after his own death and reinterred outside the consecrated churchyard at Mosfell. *Sonatorrek* elucidates much about its composer’s relationship with death and/in the family, but much remains hidden, as much in the narrator’s characteristic silences in *Egils saga* as in Egill’s own verbal ambiguity. After all, *eru þar margar getur á hvar Egill hafi fólgt fé sitt* ‘there are many guesses as to where Egill has “buried” his treasure’ (181).

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INCITING MIRACLE IN *NJÁLS SAGA*:  
ÁMUNDI HINN BLINDI'S GIFT OF SIGHT IN CONTEXT

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*Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum*

ACCORDING TO *NJÁLS SAGA*, three years after Iceland's official conversion to Christianity, Ámundi hinn blindi 'the blind' comes to the Þingskálur assembly with a grievance: Lýtingr has killed his father Höskuldr, Njáll's illegitimate son, and Ámundi has neither received compensation nor himself been able to take vengeance.<sup>1</sup> He goes to Lýtingr's booth seeking redress, but Lýtingr is unmoved; he explains to Ámundi that he has already paid a heavy price for the slaying: he has paid compensation as part of a settlement with Njáll and Njáll's (legitimate) sons, and his own brothers lie dead as uncompensated outlaws (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 273). Ámundi insists that these measures do nothing to console *him*—his father's only son. It does not seem just before God, he says, that he, whom Lýtingr has struck *svá nær hjarta* 'so close to my heart' (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 273), should receive nothing.<sup>2</sup> Ámundi warns Lýtingr that if only he were not blind, he would secure compensation or take blood-vengeance. Then he calls on God to settle between them. According to the narration, God chooses to grant Ámundi his sight, and Ámundi chooses to sink his axe into Lýtingr's skull, killing him instantly. Ámundi's sight is then taken away almost as soon as it is granted. As he walks away from Lýtingr's corpse, he reaches the same place where his eyes had been opened. There they are closed again, and he wanders out of the saga, blind ever after (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 273).

This article addresses the structural, legal and religious aspects of this miraculous but fleeting gift of sight, arguing that understanding this miracle and how it functions in the story is a key to understanding the religious thought of *Njáls saga*. The miracle is complex but not confused. It draws on legal, religious and mythological knowledge—as well as impeccable dramatic timing—to pull the narrative of the feud between the Njállssons and the Sigfússons forward, even as the incident implicitly censures many

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Oren Falk and Anders Winroth for their help in the preparation of this article, and the anonymous readers for their comments and corrections.

<sup>2</sup> All translations from Old Norse–Icelandic and Latin are my own except in the case of *Snorra Edda*, for which I have used Anthony Faulkes's translation.

of the participants in the conflict. What the actors in this saga cannot agree about in the aftermath of Lýtingr's violent death at Ámundi's hands is the miracle itself. Njáll's sons believe that Ámundi really was granted his sight, but their enemies the Sigfússons do not. They instead behave as if Ámundi has acted as a puppet of the Njálssons, who are thus seen to violate their earlier agreement not to harm Lýtingr. The gift of sight needs to be temporary so that it can be doubted.

Ámundi's brief appearance in *Njáls saga* has intrigued many interpreters, most of them literary critics. Judging by the answers that have been proposed, the question most frequently asked about the miracle's riddle of vengeance and holiness has been: how do we understand the saga's God, or the Christianity of this God's flock, when God's will seems to be an axe murder? There has been a temptation to interpret the scene as an authorial commentary on the religious mores of the time in which the saga is set, that is, the time of the Conversion.

Some critics adopt a typological reading of the miracle, seeing it as a tipping-point between an Old-Testament law of revenge that characterises the first half of the saga and the New-Testament law of mercy that predominates in the second half (McTurk 2015, 240–41). Other critics place more emphasis on interpreting what such a miracle could mean, certain that it was meant to convey a particular moral statement to readers. Andrew Hamer (1992, 100–01) has read the miracle as a parable: Ámundi saw but by his actions proved that he did not see correctly, so his sight was taken away. Others argue that the episode presents a Conversion that changed little but the surface of society—that the new God was thoroughly incorporated into the 'old' laws of vengeance (Miller 2014, 188; Cook 1991, 97–98). Another reading sees the miracle as a commentary on Christian legal thinking, suggesting that the author wished to show that a Christian interpretation of the laws governing compensation would not have excluded Ámundi from the original settlement, despite his disability, or ignored his subsequent appeal to Lýtingr on the grounds that the matter had already been settled (Lönnroth 1976, 145). These readings have in common that they isolate Ámundi's actions from the wider narrative in which they are entwined.<sup>3</sup>

I argue, however, that the miracle cannot be understood outside the context of the conflict in which it operates. It makes little sense as an

<sup>3</sup> Einar Ól. Sveinsson, by contrast, suggests that this could have been simply a physiological phenomenon, citing an eighteenth-century *ævisaga* in which a man temporarily regained his sight three times after having gone blind (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 273).

incident isolated from the wider saga (cf. Maxwell 1957–59, 38–39). The miracle, atypical as it may seem for a reader accustomed to the miraculous healings of saints' lives, does not display a peculiar or peculiarly pagan or vengeance-bound understanding of God on the part of either the composer of the saga or of individual characters within it. Ámundi receives his sight only to lose it, not because he makes the wrong choice, but because the ambiguity created by a miracle that may never have happened enables the conflict in which it is enmeshed to continue.

The episode is best interpreted as part of a piece of storytelling that balances legal detail and Christian tropes to create the conditions for new conflict. Ámundi's gift of sight is not an isolated statement about Iceland's Conversion but part of an intricately crafted story. William Ian Miller's reading of the incident (2014, 167) emphasises the function of the killing in the ongoing feud, arguing that Lýtingr is introduced 'solely to reveal the kind of risks that could ruin' the alliance between Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði and Njáll (see also Miller 1983, 316–44). Miller's reading, however, is essentially secular—he ignores the religious dimension of the Sigfússons' refusal to believe in the miracle and the bitter consequences for those who do (2014, 188). Theodore M. Andersson (2006, 198–203) also assesses the miracle in the wider context of the saga, but he sees the miracle itself as evidence of the failure of 'abstract morality' that the saga more generally demonstrates. In other words, although he places the miracle in the wider context of the story, his interpretation of the incident itself focuses on the amorality or unchristian nature of this supposedly Christian miracle.

In this article I will examine the miracle through three different lenses: in the first part, I present in detail the way that Ámundi's killing functions as a narrative pivot in the saga. In the second section, I address the emotional and mythological resonances that echo from the miracle and into the killings that follow from its aftermath. The final section of this article considers the position of Ámundi as a blind man and how this connects to both Christian thinking and the role of disability in feuding narratives and law.

### *1. Divine Intervention and the Central Feud*

Ámundi's slaying of Lýtingr occurs as part of the ongoing conflict between the Njálssons and the Sigfússons. Lýtingr and his brothers kill Ámundi's father Hǫskuldr Njálsson. Njáll's legitimate sons, spurred on by Ámundi's grandmother Hróðný, kill Lýtingr's brothers in revenge, but Lýtingr escapes. He immediately seeks the support of his chieftain Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði, who is Njáll's foster-son. Because of his affection for his

foster-son, Njáll reluctantly agrees to a settlement with Lýtingr. According to its terms the Njállssons will not harm Lýtingr, who is also allowed to keep his farm, but Lýtingr's slain brothers are treated as outlaws and lie uncompensated, and Lýtingr himself is not compensated for the wounds he sustained in the Njállssons' attack (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 254).

Ámundi has no part in this settlement. He receives no compensation, but nor does he offer any promises of peace. As a disabled son, who is moreover illegitimate himself, he is easy to overlook and probably not viewed as a potential threat (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 273). Njáll himself points out this weakness in the settlement that he has just made when he says that although Lýtingr may keep his land,

þykki mér þó ráðlígira, at hann seli landit ok fari í braut, en eigi fyrir því: ekki mun ek rjúfa tryggðir á honum né synir mínir, en þó þykki mér vera mega, at nokkurr rísi sá upp í sveit, at honum sé viðsjávert. En ef yðr þykkir sem ek gera hann heraðssekjan, þá leyfi ek, at hann búi hér í sveit, en hann ábyrgisk mestu til.

it would seem to me more advisable that he sell his land and go away. Not because I or my sons will violate the settlement with him, but rather because it seems to me that someone may turn up in the district of whom he should be wary. Lest you think I am outlawing him from the district, know that I permit him to live here in the area, but he does so on his own responsibility.

(*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 254)

Although he supplies no names, this unnamed *nokkurr* 'someone' is a clear reference to Ámundi, who is introduced into the saga just in time to hear of his father's death and is moreover described as *mikill vexti ok oflugr* 'big and powerful' although blind (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 248). This passage emphasises Njáll's ability to foresee (yet not prevent) events and in some sense makes Lýtingr himself responsible for his own death because he had been warned that he was taking a risk if he remained in the district.

Not only does Njáll give his firm but qualified assurance that neither he nor his sons will break the settlement, the narrator insists that *Nú er at segja frá því, at þessi sætt helzk með þeim* 'Now it should be said that this settlement between them was not broken' (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 255).<sup>4</sup>

Ámundi's presence in the saga, limited as it is, straddles the conversion to Christianity. Ámundi's father Hǫskuldr Njálsson dies before the Conversion, and Ámundi avenges his death soon after it, in one of the saga's first miracles. Ámundi has himself led to Lýtingr (it is never said by whom) and asks him what compensation he will pay for killing his

<sup>4</sup> This insistence of the narrator is emphasised in different ways by both Rory McTurk (1990, 43–44) and William Ian Miller (2014, 175).

father. Lýtingr says he will pay Ámundi none at all. In the idiom of the new religion Ámundi replies that this refusal does not seem *rétt fyrir guði* ‘just before God’ (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 273). In an extraordinary speech that wavers between inviting God to intervene and warning Lýtingr that he will pay if God chooses to hear, Ámundi insists that

‘ef ek væra heileyrgr báðum augum, at hafa skylda ek annathvárt fyrir föður minn fébœtr eða mannhefndir, enda skipti guð með okkr!’ Eptir þat gekk hann út, en er hann kom í búðardyrin, snýsk hann innar eptir búðinni; þá lukusk upp augu hans. Þá mælti hann: ‘Lofaðr sé guð, dróttinn minn! Sér nú, hvat hann vill.’ Eptir þat hleypr hann innar eptir búðinni, þar til er hann kemr fyrir Lýting, ok högrg ðxi í höfuð honum . . . Lýtingr fell áfram ok var þegar dauðr. Ámundi gengr út í búðardyrin, ok er hann kom í þau spor in sǫmu, sem upp höfðu lokizk augu hans, þá lukusk apr, ok var hann alla ævi blindr síðan.

‘If I had sight in both my eyes, I would have one or the other for my father, compensation or blood-vengeance; and may God settle between us!’ After that he went out, but when he came to the doorway he turned back into the booth; then his eyes were opened. Then he said: ‘Praised be God, my Lord! Now it is seen what he wants.’ After that he ran back into the booth until he reached Lýtingr and hewed an axe into his head . . . Lýtingr fell forward and was immediately dead. Ámundi went back to the doorway of the booth, and when he came to the spot where his eyes had been opened, they were shut again, and he was blind for the rest of his life.

(*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 273)

Verbal and spatial symmetries fill this passage. Ámundi’s sight appears and is then taken away at the same point in space—*þau spor in sǫmu*—at what could be translated as the same ‘footprints’. The verb *lukask* is used three times in quick succession with only the adverb that follows it, *upp* or *aftr*, changing. This use of language and the mention of the place where Ámundi both gains and loses his sight emphasise that Ámundi is struck sighted for a fleeting moment in space and time, not healed.

In isolation this supposedly botched healing miracle would indeed justify modern critics’ attempts to read the miracle as a pagan vestige or a symptom of a hopelessly violent culture of revenge, but such readings ignore how necessary the miracle is to the forward momentum of the saga. When Ámundi’s sight disappears, with it disappears the ability to verify that the miracle happened at all. It becomes impossible to prove that Ámundi killed Lýtingr alone, without the aid of anyone but God. Mǫrðr exploits this unprovable miracle to reignite the conflict between the Njálssons and the Sigfússons.

Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði, the man who made the settlement with Njáll to protect Lýtingr, is not actually persuaded by Mǫrðr. When Mǫrðr tries

to convince him that the Njálssons broke the agreement, Hǫskuldr quickly replies that he does not intend *þat þeim at kenna* ‘to blame them for that’ (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 277). This vague *þat* and the references to the agreement with Lýtingr circle around the killing done by Ámundi. Mǫrðr’s insinuations, which are difficult to dismiss completely, underscore the vulnerable position in which Ámundi’s activities place Njáll and his sons if Ámundi is seen as their instrument. Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði stays true to his saintly character and refuses to believe Mǫrðr. I argue that this is because he does not doubt God’s involvement in Ámundi’s temporary gift of sight, but the suggestion that the Njálssons are really responsible for Lýtingr’s death—and thus oath-breakers—proves difficult to dispel.

It is enough for Mǫrðr to tell the Njálssons the falsehood that Hǫskuldr thinks that they, and specifically Skarpheðinn, broke their agreement (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 278). At first the Njálssons do not believe Mǫrðr, but in the end they do and, sure of their own innocence, begin to scorn Hǫskuldr and kill him a short time later (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 280–81).

## 2. Myth and Affect

Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði’s death is portrayed as a particular source of grief for Njáll as well as the spark that reignites the saga’s central feud. Readings that focus on Ámundi’s loss of sight, and his failure to act in some sense as a Christian ‘should’, miss the way that Njáll himself interprets the miracle. Like Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði and the narrator, Njáll believes in the miracle. When Ámundi is brought before him after the killing, Njáll reassures Ámundi that he is not to be blamed. He explains that *slíkt er mjök á kveðit, en viðvrunarvert, ef slíkir atburðir verða, at stinga eigi af stokki við þá, er svá nær standa* ‘such things are predetermined, and when such things happen it is a warning not to deny the claims of those who are close kin’ (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 274). Njáll reads the miracle as a warning. It shows Njáll that the claims of kin cannot be safely ignored, even when that kin might be assumed to be politically impotent because of disability (and illegitimacy). He sees and seems to admit tacitly that there are painful consequences of putting his foster-child Hǫskuldr before his blood son Hǫskuldr—it is no accident that the men share the same name.<sup>5</sup>

Njáll’s reaction to the miracle bears comparison with a similar mythological story, the death of Baldr as it appears in *Snorra Edda*. In

<sup>5</sup> Hǫskuldr Þráinsson is named after Hǫskuldr Dala-Kollsson, while Hǫskuldr Njálsson is more likely named after his grandfather Hǫskuldr hvíti (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 292).

this well-known story, Baldr begins to suffer troubling prophetic dreams. To protect him his mother Frigg extracts oaths from all animate and inanimate things that they will not harm him. Baldr becomes seemingly invulnerable. The gods amuse themselves by hurling stray objects at him while he remains unscathed (Snorri Sturluson 1982, 45). Loki, however, discovers that Frigg has failed to obtain the mistletoe's oath. He presents a stalk of it to Høðr, Baldr's blind brother, and suggests that he do Baldr *sæmð* 'honour' as others do (Snorri Sturluson 1982, 46). This missile, also a blow from a blind man, kills Baldr instantly.<sup>6</sup> It is said that *En Óðinn bar þeim mun verst þenna skaða sem hann kunni mesta skyn hversu mikil aftaka ok missa Ásunum var í fráfalli Baldrs* 'Óðinn suffered most because he understood most clearly how grievous the loss and ruin Baldr's death was to the Æsir' (Snorri Sturluson 1982, 46). As with the slaying of Lýtingr, the identity of the person who dealt the fatal blow is certain, but taking vengeance on him is not an adequate solution. Høðr is clearly an instrument of Loki and killing him will solve nothing. Indeed it is not even clear toward which deed the gods' anger in the aftermath of the killing is directed—Loki's treachery or Høðr's shot. Without pressing the parallel too closely, it seems that a similar grief haunts Ámundi's miracle. Njáll, like Óðinn in the Baldr myth, takes it as a warning for the deaths and sorrow that will come, seeing more clearly than others where it will end. Høskuldr dies like a martyr, an innocent drenched in blood. Njáll grieves bitterly for his beloved foster-son, *it sætasta ljós augna minna* 'the sweetest light of my eyes', and will soon grieve more (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 309).

Myth matters in this context because it affects the way readers could understand both the miracle and the feud in which it occurs. Ámundi's blindness can be connected to Christian notions of blindness and sin, but even in Christian contexts the Baldr myth is still powerful, still exists 'off the paper' and could have informed readers of the saga and how they understood the culmination of the events Ámundi sets in motion. Indeed, Joseph Harris (2007, 158–59) has argued for the myth of Baldr as itself a model for paternal grief. It is not necessary to think of the Baldr myth as particularly pagan, especially in the writings of Snorri Sturluson, which were written in a firmly Christian world. Both Heather O'Donoghue (2003) and John Lindow (2002) have argued, in fact, that the Baldr story as it appears in *Snorra Edda* is as much indebted to the story of Christ's sacrifice as it is to the pre-Christian versions of the myth that undoubtedly existed.

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed discussion of grief in this particular myth as it relates to other sources see Kristen Mills (2014, 472–96).

### 3. *Blindness in Religion and Law*

Ámundi's blindness has resonances not only with Norse myth but also with Christian ideas that connect blindness with spiritual blindness and sin (Wheatley 2002, 352–58). One of the most famous Biblical passages on this issue is John 9. In this passage, some of Jesus's followers ask him why a man was born blind. Was it, they ask, his sins or the sins of his parents that caused this affliction? Jesus replies that it was neither his sins nor those of his parents. He was born blind *ut manifestentur opera Dei in illo* 'so that the works of God might be made manifest in him' (*Vulgate Bible*, 1675). In the verses that follow, Jesus heals the blind man, thus showing God made manifest in the world. I argue that the same dynamic is at work in Ámundi's miracle. In Ámundi's case God's work is not to heal but to show that he can intervene when and as he sees fit. It is also of note in this case that, although Ámundi's gift of sight is temporary, he is never punished for his actions. He simply disappears from the saga after Njáll has ensured his safety, making the idea that he is specially punished by the new Christian God even less convincing (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 274).

Ámundi's miracle might also be compared with the conversion of the apostle Paul, as told in the Acts of the Apostles. In this well-known story, Paul is temporarily blinded by Jesus on the road to Damascus. He is struck by a bright light and hears a voice asking him why he is persecuting 'me', i.e. Jesus. He is blind for three days until he is healed by Ananias of Damascus, who comes to lay hands on him by divine command (*Vulgate Bible*, 1712–14). This story is perhaps less relevant to Ámundi's miracle except in so far as it is not much like the healing miracles so common in saints' lives but rather involves a temporary state of blindness, the obverse of Ámundi's temporary gift of sight (and a way of making Paul's spiritual blindness before his conversion manifest).

Ámundi's blindness also puts him in a distinct political position that is exploited in the narrative. He is not included in the settlement with Lýtingr almost certainly because of his blindness, although possibly also because of his illegitimacy; no one was afraid that he could cause any harm. Having participated in an unprovable miracle, he simply disappears again. There is nothing to be gained by killing a blind man, who has been seen as too politically impotent to be included in the initial settlement that so upset him.

The earliest Icelandic laws and the sagas more generally are more interested in the disabilities induced by violence, especially maiming and castrating, than in cases like Ámundi's, where the disability was present from birth (Bragg 1994, 15–32). *Grágás* has little to say about disability

as a category.<sup>7</sup> The only instance in which ‘disability’ or ‘mental incapacity’ is discussed as a limitation on prosecution in killing cases is in cases of severe, violent insanity (*Grágás* 1852, I 167). In these cases a killing can be considered a deed of insanity if and only if the ‘insane’ man has violently harmed himself in the past. Even then, only if neighbours agree to consider the deed as the act of an insane man can such an explanation stand.

It is instructive in this context to compare Ámundi’s situation with that of Bjálfi in *Bandamanna saga*. Near the end of *Bandamanna saga* the villain Óspakr, unsuccessful in his disputes and bitter over his losses, decides that his enemies, and Már among them, should not be happy either.<sup>8</sup> Óspakr comes to Már’s farm during the evening while he is in bed, sleeping. Without attempting to wake his adversary, Óspakr runs him through with a sword. Már expires quietly in bed, but his brother Bjálfi, who is *hálfafglapi* ‘half imbecile’ but also *rammr at afli* ‘physically powerful’, is quick to respond (*Bandamanna saga* 1936, 361). He jumps up and stabs Óspakr as he turns to go. Óspakr, now perhaps with a bit of a stagger, escapes from the farmstead and is little heard of again. His body is found about a year later next to a bowl filled with blood gone black (*Bandamanna saga* 1936, 363).

The image of a dead man and his bowl of blood catches the imagination, but I would emphasise how Bjálfi’s half-wittedness shapes both the manner and timing of Óspakr’s slow expiry. Bjálfi appears in the saga only long enough to wield a blow of uncertain accuracy with a *tálguknifur* ‘whittling knife’ (*Bandamanna saga* 1936, 362). According to the narrator, Óspakr does not die of his wound but rather from starvation and want of help after being weakened by blood loss. Bjálfi is never prosecuted for his part in Óspakr’s demise; he simply disappears from the saga (*Bandamanna saga* 1936, 363). These circumstances all emphasise that what Bjálfi has done falls short of full participation in the Icelandic economy of killing and being killed. His weapon is not quite right, his victim starves rather

<sup>7</sup> Some manuscripts of *Grágás* do discuss and define fitness in terms of who is considered fit to attend assemblies and to marry, but these are complicated definitions involving a host of factors including temporary illnesses and injuries, kinship and property values (*Grágás* 1852, I 38–70; II 29–32; II 37–38). One definition of a dependent is that it is a person who cannot earn or provide food for themselves for one year given their current health (*Grágás* 1852, I 222; II 20–22).

<sup>8</sup> There are two major early manuscript versions of *Bandamanna saga* (both printed in the *Íslenzk fornrit* edition): *Möðruvallabók*, which is longer, more elaborate and earlier, and *Konungsbók*, whose version is more succinct. This analysis follows the *Möðruvallabók* version.

than bleeds to death, and he never has to answer for any of his actions. By themselves, none of these circumstances implies all that much, but read in conjunction with Bjálfi's semi-idiocy, they suggest that the saga writer is exploiting the ambiguities of Bjálfi's position.<sup>9</sup>

In much the same way Ámundi's intentions are not in doubt; he announces his desire to avenge his father to anyone who will hear. His blindness, however, makes such a threat empty until the moment a miracle sweeps him into the light and onto the political stage.

### Conclusions

Ámundi's miracle is the event that enables an old feud to flare up again and leads, however indirectly, to the burning of Njáll. The miracle, which has caught so many eyes as a strange, somehow unfitting happening, is calibrated, at a narrative level, to reopen the conflict between the Njálssons and the Sigfússons. Ámundi's miracle cannot be understood as a freakish pagan relic or failure of Christian charity. At one level Ámundi's miracle draws upon a literary and mythic past evocative of other tragedies, but at a structural level, and for Mǫrðr, it is only one of many events that can be manipulated to break Njáll's hard-won peace.

We as readers (whether medieval or modern) are privileged to know that God is on the 'right side', that saintly Hǫskuldr believes in the miracle and that Njáll's settlement with Hǫskuldr is not broken, yet the miracle that proves these truths also helps to account for the destruction of the same figures that uphold it. Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði and Njáll die, in part, because they believe in the miracle and in God's ability to intervene as he chooses. It is often remarked that Njáll and Hǫskuldr die like martyrs (Allen 1971, 110–13; Lönnroth 1976, 95–96, 113–14); I emphasise that it is what they believe in—a miracle that others refuse to or cannot see—as much as the manner of their deaths, that makes this so. The God of *Njáls saga* does not save his champions. Njáll and Hǫskuldr turn to Him in the assurance that they need only burn in one world, the only consolation that they can hope to receive within the world of the saga. The miracle not only introduces doubt about the strength of Njáll's promises and facilitates further discord, it adds another dimension to the deaths of Njáll and his foster-son, men who believe in a miracle that cannot be proven.

<sup>9</sup> In the *Konungsbók* version, Már's brother is called Qlvir, is *afglapi* 'imbecile' and stabs Óspakr *knifi miklum* 'with a big knife'. Óspakr still dies of *bjargleysi* 'starvation' or 'want of help' (*Bandamanna saga* 1936, 361–63).

Ámundi is not being punished by God, nor does he make the ‘wrong choice’ when given his sight. Indeed, he announces directly before gaining his sight exactly what he intends to do, not that he really would like his sight and will reconsider any claims for vengeance given the opportunity. He is not a beggar or an invalid in search of healing but an injured son keen for vengeance. Ámundi is introduced into the saga precisely to kill Lýtingr in a manner that cannot be verified. His blindness is not the blindness of pagan ignorance but that of a politically marginal figure, easy—although in his case perilous—to overlook.

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## REVIEWS

CORPUS OF ANGLO-SAXON STONE SCULPTURE. VOL. XIII: DERBYSHIRE AND STAFFORDSHIRE. By JANE HAWKES and PHILIP SIDEBOTTOM with MARTIN BIDDLE. *Oxford University Press for the British Academy*. Oxford, 2018. xxii + 553 pages. 50 figs, 3 tables, 666 plates. ISBN 978-0-19-726621-2.

The pairing of the historic counties of Derbyshire and Staffordshire to define the region covered in Volume XIII of the *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* is particularly significant from the perspective of Scandinavian studies. As with Cheshire and Lancashire in Volume IX, this bridges the historically uncertain boundary-line between Scandinavian-conquered territory incorporated within the ‘Danelaw’ to the north and east and an area left as the western rump of Mercia. That remaining portion of the old Mercian kingdom passed under the political control of an *ealdormann* subject to the king of Wessex, while the Midland region of the Danelaw was under Scandinavian or Viking rule for less than half a century between the expulsion of King Burgred of Mercia by 874 and the conquest and annexation of the region by Edward the Elder of Wessex in 923. Concurrently there is a marked contrast between the relatively few sites in the area examined in this volume with sculpture of the late eighth to mid-ninth centuries that can be assigned to an ‘Anglian’ (i.e. Mercian) tradition and the considerably larger number of sites with carvings of the late ninth century onwards that can be designated ‘Anglo-Scandinavian’. That difference between the periods and their cultural contexts is in fact typical of the North Midlands and northern England.

What justifies the compound descriptor ‘Anglo-Scandinavian’ in the case of the latter sculpture is not necessarily anything much in the way of hybridity between distinct Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian traditions. Stone-carving is by no means widely in evidence in Scandinavia in the centuries up to and including the ninth century, being restricted—apart from the distinct and peculiar Gotlandic picture-stones—to a limited range of rock-art motifs and inscriptions. In terms of the classic ‘Viking’ art styles, the assemblage under review in the present volume includes just one Borre-style fragment from All Saints’ Church at Bakewell in northern Derbyshire that is in fact unlikely even to have belonged there originally: this church houses an extraordinarily large collection of relatively small pieces of carved stone, in all probability gathered from a wide area. Specifically Anglo-Scandinavian sculptural forms within the region are limited to two round-headed crosses from Leek and Tatenhill in Staffordshire, and—of greater interest—two hogback tombstones (one destroyed in the early Victorian period; the other surviving only as a small fragment) from the sculpture-rich and historically prominent sites of St Wystan’s church in Repton and St Alkmund’s church in Derby respectively. The overwhelming majority of the decorative repertoire of the Anglo-Scandinavian period is formed by the continued development or preservation of motifs and styles rooted in Christian art of the Middle Anglo-Saxon period that had flourished in the eighth century. The analysis and conclusions drawn within this volume also suggest that there was a significant degree of continuity in the sites at which

sculpture was commissioned and raised. Minster churches or monasteries with pre-Viking-period sculpture at Eccleshall and Leek in Staffordshire, the churches in Repton and Derby just referred to, and those at Wirksworth and Bakewell upriver on the Derwent from Derby, also have tenth-century carvings. Of these, however, Wirksworth stands out for its large collection of high-quality Anglian-period carvings (dated to the late eighth or early ninth century) alongside only one uncertain piece of Anglo-Scandinavian date. Similarly at St Alkmund's, Derby, only a lost cross-shaft fragment, known through an illustration of the 1870s, can be dated, with reservation, as 'possibly ninth century', and all of the rest of the sculpture here could be tenth-century or later.

The runic evidence, discussed in one case by Philip Sidebottom but reviewed generally by David Parsons, is exiguous, limited to short fragments of two inscriptions now at Bakewell and Leek respectively, and yet of tantalising interest, particularly in relation to Anglo-Norse studies. Both inscriptions are unambiguously executed in the Anglo-Saxon *futhorc*, with an *ōs* rune and a double-barred *h* on Bakewell 35 and an *āc* rune at Leek. The latter, however, was inscribed in lines of text running vertically: an exceptional practice in the Anglo-Saxon tradition but better known on Scandinavian rune-stones. The former includes the sequence **helg**, a spelling which occurs extremely rarely in Old English as a variant of *hālgan* 'holy' (masculine genitive singular) or *hālgod* 'hallowed', but which, as Parsons notes, looks temptingly like the root of the Norse personal name *Helgi* or *Helga*. The otherwise undecorated Bakewell fragment is in fact no more closely datable than within the Anglo-Saxon period from the seventh century, when *āc* is first attested, to the Norman Conquest if not even later. The very badly damaged and eroded, inscribed Leek shaft can only cautiously be dated as 'probably tenth century' on the basis of the relatively neat, angular, and regular but uncomplicated interlace panels it contains.

Despite such a blurred distinction between the Anglian and Anglo-Scandinavian sculptural assemblages in this area, for the Derbyshire and Staffordshire volume they have been divided between the principal authors, Jane Hawkes and Philip Sidebottom respectively. The geology of the region is presented by C. Roger Bristow, and it appears that local stone was normally available and made use of for the carvings. There is a special chapter on St Wystan's church at Repton and its Anglo-Saxon stone carvings by Martin Biddle, who excavated the core of the site of the Viking winter camp of AD 873–74 there in the late 1970s and early 80s. The chapter on the 'Historical Background' begins with an introduction from Philip Sidebottom on the Roman period and its infrastructural consequences, followed by an informative and insightful discussion of the Anglo-Saxon historical context by Barbara Yorke, not only covering the changes in political control from the Mercian kingdom to the English kingdom via the Danelaw/Five Boroughs but also providing highly pertinent information on the development of an ecclesiastical infrastructure and church patronage. Considered in light of the study of the sculptural evidence that is such a vital source for analysis and understanding of the Scandinavian-conquered and -settled areas of the Midlands and North of England from the second half of the ninth century onwards, this volume is valuable as an

important component of the whole corpus rather than for a coherent regional story it has to tell. It reads, to be honest, rather like a patchwork, but as a reference volume it undoubtedly includes much high-quality and genuinely important scholarship.

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MANX CROSSES. A HANDBOOK OF STONE SCULPTURE 500–1040 IN THE ISLE OF MAN. By DAVID M. WILSON. *Archaeopress*. Oxford, 2018. x + 181 pp. ISBN 978-1-784917-56-2 (paperback), 978-1-784917-57-9 (hardback).

It is over 110 years since P. M. C. Kermode published his landmark book, *Manx Crosses* (1907, 2nd edition 1994) and, though still highly valuable, it has by now become badly outdated in more ways than one. Without aspiring to replace it, Sir David M. Wilson, former director of the British Museum and one of the most eminent scholars of the Viking Age in the British Isles and especially in the Isle of Man, presents a much-anticipated compendium and update on current research into the so-called Manx Crosses. This unique body of medieval sepulchral monuments on the Isle of Man comprises more than 200 grave-markers, text stones, cross slabs and crosses (and their fragments), often inscribed and/or intricately decorated in bas-relief, and dated between the sixth and the late twelfth centuries.

Unlike Kermode, who largely discussed the stones and their features as well as his interpretation of them one by one in a catalogue, Wilson has chosen to write a textbook, thus approaching his subject from a more thematic angle. Proceeding basically chronologically, he comprehensively puts the Manx stone monuments into their respective contexts regarding both ‘political, religious, economic and social circumstances’ and artistic influences from the island’s neighbours (cf. p. vii), and discusses specific topics, such as art styles and decorative elements or individual motifs as well as their origin and/or iconographic interpretation.

In Chapter 1, Wilson wisely starts at the very beginning and provides his audience with a general ‘introduction to the Island’, painting a picture of the geographical as well as cultural and historical background on which the Manx Crosses were to develop. Since all of the Manx stones are Christian monuments, Chapter 2 explores the origins of the custom of setting grave-markers against the backdrop of early Christian sites on the island. In the same vein, Chapter 3 gives special attention to Maughold, formerly the island’s most significant monastic establishment and today home of an extensive collection of Manx Crosses, investigating the characteristics and development of this site’s pre-Viking-Age stones, their inscriptions and designs.

After a sweeping overview of the early Viking Age in the British Isles, Chapter 4 relates how, during the ninth and early tenth centuries, decoration was introduced into Manx stone sculpture. It then describes these ornaments and the external influences that brought them about—one of them being Scandinavian, after the Vikings’ settlement on the island. This influence is addressed in detail in Chapter 5, which discusses Norse culture and art, highlighting many exceptional examples of stones all over the island richly decorated in the Borre, Jellinge, Mammen and

Ringerike styles, and explaining motifs taken from pagan Scandinavian mythology, such as Sigurd the dragon-slayer or the apocalyptic events of the Ragnarök. It also outlines Christian iconography and the meaning of images from both religious traditions during this period of spiritual reorientation and syncretism. The final chapter is dedicated to a thorough introduction to Scandinavian runes and the runic inscriptions of the Manx Viking-Age stones.

In the appendix a 'hand-list' provides basic details of 205 known stones, including a useful concordance table of the stones' numbering according to Kermodé 1994 and the more current Manx National Heritage inventory numbers.

The illustrations are quite numerous, but of varying quality and age (as the author is the first to admit), but this is, at worst, a minor deficit; in some way it even adds to the impression of the rich diversity of both the stones and their research history.

According to the preface, the book is for 'the general, but enquiring, reader' (p. vii), and to this group it indeed offers a well-researched and wide-ranging introduction to the Manx Crosses and a comprehensive and detailed synthesis of the subject, admirably suited for background reading and classroom use. While advanced students or academic readers will doubtless greatly benefit from this as well, they are soon going to miss the footnotes or other specific references to the author's sources and the evidence he bases his material and claims on. For this, the 'discursive bibliography' he provides at the end of the book, though quite extensive, is not a sufficient substitute. Furthermore, for anyone interested in the details of any particular stone, the textbook format is an unfortunate one; with information on various aspects such as elements of decoration or inscription scattered throughout the book and dealt with under different headings in different chapters, anyone standing in front of a stone in one of the island's churches or museums is required to hunt about to assemble the information they are looking for. While this is largely unavoidable in a textbook, it is made even more difficult here by the deficiencies of the index, which occasionally is less than reliable where references to individual stones are concerned: incomplete, faulty or incorporating stones from other sites (as in the case of Kirk Michael, where references to stones in Maughold, Marown and Cronk yn Howe have sneaked in).

Finally, instead of 'A footnote' and a question mark as an ending, a final chapter summing up the Manx Crosses' significance as well as considering questions regarding future research would perhaps have been more adequate, and would also have served as a place to explain why the author felt the need to define the date-range of his study as the surprisingly precise interval '500–1040' (especially when only very few Manx stones are dated later than the middle of the eleventh century, and some of them are in fact mentioned in the book).

These issues do not, however, detract from the value of Wilson's book; since the publication of Kermodé's book in 1907, research on the Manx stones had mostly been published in the form of scholarly articles in journals difficult of access for non-academic readers. With its easy availability, wide range of background information and detailed insights into specialised aspects, this book is undoubtedly a welcome introduction to and synthesis of the subject which will be appreciated by anyone interested in topics such as Christian and Scandinavian stone sculpture,

art history, iconography and runology, sepulchral culture and/or Manx medieval/Viking-Age archaeology. The Manx Crosses are monuments of international significance and certainly deserve much more attention than was afforded to them in the past, and with new studies (such as a digital imaging project by Manx National Heritage and other specialist research work) complementing it, this book is well suited to raise awareness of them among locals and visitors in the Isle of Man as well as students and the general public elsewhere.

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REYKHOLT. THE CHURCH EXCAVATIONS. By GUÐRÚN SVEINBJARNARDÓTTIR. *Háskólaútgáfan*. Reykjavík, 2016. 320 pp. ISBN 978-9935-23-117-8.

This is an exciting report, not just because Reykholt was Snorri Sturluson's church, but also because it is the only multi-phase Icelandic church that has been fully excavated and published to modern standards. Demolished in 1886, its site was accessible, and as the sequence of phases was peeled back during 2002–07 they proved to be well-preserved, complex and extremely interesting.

The excavations were conducted to a high standard, and the team can be congratulated on a well-organised and finely produced report. The phase-plans are clear, detailed and informative. Vertical stratigraphy is not so adequately presented: sections must surely have been drawn, and publication of those would have made a critical reading of the evidence and the interpretations much easier. In compensation, colour photographs of the excavated structures are numerous, excellent and very well-chosen, so that a reader can 're-live' the excavation to an extent that is still unusual. There are good reports on an interesting range of finds (including preserved fabrics, coloured stone insets from wooden altars and elaborate post-medieval coffin fittings), and an exploration of liturgical practices in the building using rich documentary sources.

Eight phases are identified, starting with a small, probably one-cell structure with turf and stone wall-bases. This structure is hard to classify, and the excavators are understandably cautious about interpreting it as a church from the outset, but it is hard to think what else it could be. It was then rebuilt (phase 2.i), probably in stave construction and with an added chancel. Dating of these first phases unfortunately depends on a limited number of radiocarbon results with broad ranges, so that the structural sequence floats rather vaguely in the eleventh to twelfth centuries. Aisles were then added (phase 2.ii), perhaps around the early thirteenth century (so conceivably in Snorri's time?). A major reconstruction in the fourteenth or fifteenth century (phase 3.i–ii) employed a different kind of walling, using post-pads in a continuous wall-trench, and then a solid foundation, rather than discrete pads or post-holes. With the Reformation (phase 4) the church was rebuilt in a form familiar from extant Icelandic churches, with thick turf walls lined internally with stone and panelling. Quite a lot is known about this post-medieval church; the written and archaeological sources are very effectively combined to give a

vivid sense of how it functioned in the local community during the centuries preceding its destruction.

A notable oddity of the building is that all its medieval phases included an under-floor cavity. The first phase was completely sunken, resembling a pit-house but with no domestic features, and with the floor apparently suspended (so that its surfaces were found collapsed into the pit). When the chancel was added, it also had a sub-floor cavity, but the primary nave was rebuilt with a narrower, stone-lined central 'passage' that only underlay about half the floor area. Only with the comprehensive late medieval rebuilding did the sunken element essentially disappear, but even then a rectangular stone-lined pit or vault under the chancel floor might be seen as a last reference to it. What was the purpose of these successive under-floor cavities? They are not really explained here, and indeed they are hard to explain. No other early medieval church known in northern Europe took this form (though one late Anglo-Saxon structure, the curious timber-lined sunken building in the cathedral complex at Wells, might just possibly be relevant). Since so few churches in Iceland have been excavated fully, we are not really in a position to say that the feature was unique or even unusual there. One can at present only speculate on the range of possible functions (deposit of relics? acoustic resonance? storage?) compatible with an ecclesiastical use.

How typical, or how exceptional, was Reykholt church? The early phases are consistent (up to a point) with the broad north European landscape—including England as well as Scandinavia—of small stave-built local churches. In England these emerged from *c.* 950 onwards against the background of much older monastic centres, whereas in Scandinavia and Iceland, because of the later chronology of conversion, they represent the first wave. After *c.* 1050, England parted company by extending Romanesque stone construction to churches on this small scale. Nonetheless, the evolution of liturgical and architectural thinking, manifested in the addition of aisles and enlargement of chancels during *c.* 1150–1300, was still ubiquitous, so to that extent Reykholt conforms to the general pattern. A useful survey of the wider context (Chapter 8) shows that most early churches in Iceland were also of timber construction, and that various specific aspects of Reykholt can be paralleled in a wide range of small churches around the broad North-Atlantic zone. It was with the Lutheran conversion (perhaps slightly ironically) that the cosmopolitan 'stave-church' aspect gave way to a distinctively Icelandic building with thick turf walls.

In marked contrast to these parallels is the seemingly unique sunken-floored construction of the early phases, but many more excavations are needed before we will know how abnormal that really was. Meanwhile, the Reykholt report sets a very high standard to which future work can aspire. But it also prompts a reflection on the challenges to preserving this precious archaeological record, let alone exploring it. Well-preserved though the sequence was, it was significantly damaged, and in some respects compromised, by graves dug since the 1886 demolition. Unfortunately that pattern is ubiquitous across the whole North-Atlantic world, where so many ruined and abandoned church sites remain active cemeteries: year by year, thousands of sites like Reykholt are being eroded and

fragmented by new graves. This report has a lesson for conservationists as well as scholars.

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VIKING LAW AND ORDER. PLACES AND RITUALS OF ASSEMBLY IN THE MEDIEVAL NORTH. By ALEXANDRA SANMARK. *Edinburgh University Press*. Edinburgh, 2017. 302 pp. ISBN 978-1-4744-0229-3.

In the infancy of Icelandic archaeology, in the late nineteenth century, three goals were considered paramount. One was to investigate the site of the *Alþing* at *Þingvellir*, where the uncertainty about the exact location of key institutions, the Law-rock, the Law court and the quarter courts as well as the booths of historical personages, was felt to be intolerable. Another was to locate the regional assemblies, and the third was to identify temples, which at that time were seen to be significant not only for the study of pagan religion but also as elements in pre-Christian geo-political organisation. A massive effort was put into achieving these goals, but the results were mixed, to say the least. In the case of *Þingvellir* only individual scholars have been satisfied with their own conclusions—consensus there is none. And while initially the identification of temples seemed remarkably easy, this very ease was soon revealed to be the result of naïve optimism and blind faith in the historicity of the sagas. Before the end of the nineteenth century the foundations for these identifications were already being consigned to the academic waste-bin.

The archaeology of regional assemblies fared marginally better. Unlike temple archaeology, the archaeology of assemblies does have a leg to stand on—there really are assembly sites with distinctive archaeological remains associated with place-names that can be traced in historical sources back to medieval times. Sites like *Árnes*, *Þingskálar* and *Hegranes* are unequivocal, and uncontested as the *vorþing* ‘spring assembly’ sites of their respective assembly regions. Problems arise, however, when attempts are made to identify all thirteen supposed regional assemblies. On the one hand there are sites with likely locations and place names but underwhelming archaeological remains—as on the supposed sites of *Vaðlaþing* and *Þorskafjarðarþing*—and on the other there are regional assemblies that cannot be located at all, even roughly, such as the northernmost of the three expected assemblies in the Eastern quarter. To muddy the waters even further there is, in some parts of the country, a surfeit of potential sites—sites with the same distinctive archaeological features as the unequivocal ones, and convincing place-names to match, but which do not fit into the assembly system as reconstructed from medieval law codes and other historical evidence. These include sites like *Þingeyri* in *Dýrafjörður* and *Leiðarnes* in *Fnjóskadalur*.

Sorting this out tested the ingenuity and resourcefulness of a couple of generations of scholars, but by the early twentieth century the effort had mostly been abandoned and the problems were simply left unresolved. Not only had they proved intractable, but the methodology commonly used was increasingly seen as

inadequate, as it tends to be reliant on special pleading rather than generally applicable criteria. It seemed more scientific simply to admit that the archaeological evidence for Viking-Age political institutions was bound to be fragmented—by the vagaries of time if nothing else—and that archaeologists could spend their energies more fruitfully on hard facts concerning dwellings and artefacts rather than looking for evidence for government and religion in the twilight zone where onomastics, historical source criticism and material culture intersect. When Kristján Eldjárn wrote an overview of Icelandic Viking-Age archaeology in 1956 ('Viking Archaeology in Iceland'. *Third Viking Congress. Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags* 1958, 25–38) he had not a single word to spare for assemblies or temples. For him it was all about dwellings and burials, and the efforts of his predecessors to throw light on political organisation seemed to him so pointless that they did not even merit criticism. Ten years later, when Olaf Olsen published *Hørg, hov og kirke* (1966), his hyper-critical analysis of the temple issue, it seemed like the last nail in the coffin of saga- and Edda-inspired archaeology.

Although not as extreme in either the initial optimism or the subsequent indifference, the study of Viking-Age assemblies in Scandinavia followed much the same trajectory as in Iceland. Early students of onomastic and historical evidence for political units found plenty of material to sink their teeth into but the results were never quite convincing, and this branch of scholarship did not really become a mainstream endeavour in Scandinavia as it had been—for a while—in Iceland. One significant difference is that in Scandinavia it was pursued largely by place-name specialists and historians hoping to reconstruct territorial divisions for the late or post-Viking Age. Archaeologists on the other hand had their hands full with unequivocal central places—towns, ring-forts, royal mounds and runic monuments—so that whether they might also have served as assembly sites, or how they fitted in with potential assembly systems, could more easily be left hanging. It is fair to say that assembly archaeology in Scandinavia has been largely dormant since the middle of the twentieth century, and although assembly functions have generally been regarded as a likely component of central places, interest in which has been growing since the 1990s, there have been no serious efforts to develop a robust archaeological methodology for identifying assembly places.

This tide is now turning, thanks largely to Alexandra Sanmark and her collaborators on the Assembly Project, which has resulted in, among other things, two special volumes of the *Journal of the North Atlantic* (*Debating the Thing in the North I–II*, 2013). In her new book, *Viking Law and Order*, Sanmark presents a comprehensive take on assembly studies in the Norse world, reviewing earlier scholarship; to some extent separating the wheat from the chaff and upgrading the musty discourse of early twentieth-century assembly studies to make it fit for modern consumption. This is a very timely project, successfully demonstrating two things: first, that there is much value in the old approach of identifying and comparing patterns in place-names, distributions of archaeological sites and whatever historical information has come down to us on territorial divisions and political organisation. Renamed as landscape archaeology, and adorned with phenomenological insights, the endeavour suddenly feels less hopelessly inadequate than it

did only a few years ago. All these different strands of evidence are fascinating in their own right, and in combination they have the potential to throw light on the nature and development of socio-political structures in prehistory.

The second thing that comes out clearly from this book is that, in order for such light to be successfully thrown, an overhaul of ideas about assembly and political organisation will be needed. There is a legacy problem inherent in the very idea of assembly, which I suspect will remain an obstacle to progress until it is confronted and dissected, and a new definition is generated from the process. Like most of us who have written about assemblies, Sanmark proceeds with an open-ended definition of what 'assembly' means. It is vague enough to survive all the twisting necessary to accommodate whatever line of argument is being pursued, but leads at the same time straight back to the concerns of nineteenth-century nationalist historiography. The title of the book reflects this idea: that assemblies are places where laws are decided and put into effect, and that they are places where legitimacy is established, whether it is that of office, like kingship, or of public acts and decisions. Based on such legislative and judicial functions assemblies have been seen as places where power is both sanctioned and executed, and from this it is a short step to consider them as nodes in administrative structures. Ritual, symbolic and performative aspects are routinely seen to go hand in hand with legislative and judicial functions, but they are as a rule considered to be subordinate, not the essential reason for assemblies. This conception has its roots in a reading of the sagas and early law codes grounded on ideas from western political philosophy about the nature of power and authority. What limited firm ground is available about what really took place at assemblies relates to the period—the thirteenth century, give or take—when the Scandinavian kingdoms were asserting themselves through the writing of law codes and, as a rule, through reforms which involved changes both in administrative, legislative and judicial practices and in the territorial divisions that supported these arrangements. Very often the sources exhibit awareness, and even detailed knowledge, of earlier practices, and it is traditionally supposed that these glimpses reveal how assemblies worked, not only in the Viking Age but far back into the Iron Age as well. The ritual quoting of Tacitus's quite uninformative account—which really only tells us that he thought the Germans held meetings to make decisions (and probably mainly that he thought the leaders of Rome should listen to their councillors and clients)—supports narratives where the assembly is seen as an institution that had remained essentially unchanged for more than a millennium, up to the point when historical evidence becomes available. This sense of unchangeability connects to notions about how assemblies were an essential component of the prehistoric social order in Scandinavia, and that they were a particular characteristic of Germanic/Norse culture. This sounded like good common sense a hundred years ago, but today the problems with such assumptions are glaring. Setting aside the ideological ramifications, the factual base of these notions is simply too weak for us to carry on as if no rethink were needed.

It seems to me that theoretical advances are needed on two related fronts. One is to understand the dynamics of local communities, the detail of how people interacted within and between settlements, and how such dynamics changed through time.

For any given period there are reconstructible patterns of mobility and supra-local organisation. As the archaeological record gets more detailed, we are increasingly in a position to map where people lived at a given point in time, the scale of their settlements and the nature and intensity of their interactions with neighbouring communities and more distant centres. Armed with a grounded knowledge of such patterns it is then possible to construct hypotheses about larger-scale social organisation, which would include the places where the workings of this organisation were manifested and negotiated. From this perspective it soon becomes apparent that even if assemblies on the traditional model may have had their place in the system, they can only have been one kind of meeting-place among several, which were essential for social organisation. Feasting halls are an obvious item on such a list, but it is very likely that there were several different kinds of venue where people met on different occasions for different ends, but which were all elements in the network of connections and shared understandings that made up the society in question. A landscape archaeology, grounded in actual archaeological data and the rich pickings of local history, the place-names and the historical information that allow us to begin to unravel how communities might have been organised in prehistory, needs to be combined with the other front where advances are needed: explicit theories about political organisation and its development from one period to the next. ‘Explicit’ is the key word here—too much of the discussion about political organisation in prehistory proceeds as if it is so well understood that no qualification is necessary. Significant progress will not be made until this self-deceiving attitude is abandoned and the matter confronted head-on.

Sanmark’s book divides into two main parts. Following a general introduction, ‘Early Germanic and Norse Assembly Organisations’ (ch. 2), four chapters deal with Scandinavian assembly archaeology based on a detailed consideration of a selection of such sites in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The problems of identification and classification are reviewed (ch. 3) and emphasis placed on how the assemblies were primarily venues for the élite—in contrast to earlier notions, which saw them more as democratic institutions (chs. 3 and 4)—while at the same time evidence is found for the presence and participation of non-élites (ch. 5). A more chronologically focused discussion follows, on the changes that probably accompanied the introduction of Christianity and the emergence of towns in Scandinavia (ch. 6), framing a potentially interesting field for further investigation. The second main part (chs 7 and 8) reads like a gazetteer of assembly-site identifications in the North-Atlantic colonies and the Norse settlements in Scotland and is quite valuable as such. It comes out clearly how different the character is of the assemblies in this area compared to the sites discussed for Scandinavia. I suspect this is due, partly at least, to differences in chronology: while the Scandinavian sites tend to have Iron-Age features and at least some historical evidence tying them to the Viking Age or shortly after, the Scottish and North-Atlantic sites are mostly identified from High- to Late-Medieval and even Early-Modern evidence. It seems obvious that the sites discussed for the Faroes, for instance, are elements in the administration of an Early-Modern state and there is really no particular reason to think that they relate to earlier periods.

Alexandra Sanmark has resurrected a long-neglected subject and shown that it is, in fact, brimming with potential. Her individual identifications and interpretations can be debated, but her wide-ranging review of this field lays bare how fertile it is, paving the way for further research into the fascinating and complex subject of assemblies: a subject which is certain to progress our understanding of prehistoric political organisation and its development.

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KING CNUT AND THE VIKING CONQUEST OF ENGLAND 1016. By W. B. BARTLETT. *Amberley*. Stroud, 2017. 316 pp. ISBN 978-1-4456-7714-9.

Bartlett begins his book with the assertion that ‘a book that seeks to understand the most successful “real-life” Scandinavian king of the entire Viking epoch would seem long overdue’ (p. 11). Given the existence of several other biographies of Cnut, this claim introduces a note of hyperbole indicative of the book’s overall style. This volume has an attractive cover and features several pages of glossy photographs (although curiously the famous *Liber Vitae* frontispiece is one of the few not in colour). It also contains some useful family trees and maps, although on the map of the British Isles the location of York is too close to the Humber, while Bernicia is given a dot as if it were a precise location, like a town, rather than a kingdom. Its presentation is marred by some confusion as to whether the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle(s)* should be referred to in the singular or the plural. Overall the plural seems to be preferred, presumably in recognition of the several surviving recensions, but ‘the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*’ is also used frequently; indeed, on page 17 both appear just a few sentences apart, although the singular is followed by a ‘were’.

The book is engagingly written, with some evocative turns of phrase, such as ‘England was something of a patchwork quilt’ (p. 26). On occasion, however, this goes too far, notably in the characterisation of Byrhtwold’s words in the *Battle of Maldon* as

an evocation of that bulldog spirit for which later generations of Byrhtwold’s countrymen would be famous, an early-day appeal to the ‘Dunkirk’ spirit . . . It was a typically ‘English’ gesture one might think: a glorious defiant act in the face of certain defeat and death’ (p. 35).

While Bartlett may be trying to draw comparisons with periods of history his readers are more familiar with, this feels inappropriately anachronistic and jingoistic. Similarly, his offhand comment that ‘we would now no doubt see [the St Brice’s Day massacre] as a failed attempt at multiculturalism’ (p. 72) seems rather loaded. The third chapter opens dramatically with ‘the Greeks have a word for it: hubris. We might now more colloquially say that pride goes before a fall’ (p. 108), referring to Sven’s death. While this may simply anticipate Bartlett’s subsequent assessment that Sven would not have been a good king of England, the comment

on hubris lacks any explanatory context. Admittedly, the precise circumstances of Sven's death are unclear (although illness is most commonly assumed) and it was later attributed to the intervention of St Edmund the Martyr, who had been killed by the Viking Great Army. Bartlett does not discuss any of this, however.

The narrative, though lively, jumps back and forth in a way that can be repetitive. It can also be to the detriment of sense. Drawing on William of Malmesbury, Bartlett states the death of Sven Forkbeard's sister Gundhild in the St Brice's Day massacre as a fact (p. 70), claiming that as a result Sven's 'desire to avenge himself on England now took on something of a more personal aspect' (p. 72). Only at the beginning of the following chapter does Bartlett deign to admit to uncertainty: 'the killing of his sister in the St Brice's Day Massacre (if it actually happened)' (p. 73). This style, while misleading, is presumably designed to allow for rhetorical flourishes unencumbered by nuance, but with a belated nod to historical accuracy. Likewise Bartlett takes at face value Adam of Bremen's statement that Erik of Sweden put Sven to flight, saying that 'Sweyn was forced to leave Denmark, which then fell into the hands of Erik' (p. 49), belatedly admitting that 'not all historians are convinced that Adam's account of Sweyn's movements is reliable and at some stage Sweyn certainly reclaimed the crown of Denmark' (p. 50). This still does not go far enough: in reality it was Sven who replaced Erik as king of Sweden. Bartlett does note that Sven's wife had previously been married to Erik the Victorious (p. 51) but apparently does not realise the implications of this (or make the obvious comparison to Cnut's marriage to Emma of Normandy).

Bartlett has made an admirable effort to look at the primary sources, including Scandinavian-focused sources such as Adam of Bremen, but without enough critical engagement with scholarship on these sources. For instance, Bartlett claims that 'the acerbic commentary on his reign by the waspish Adam of Bremen makes it hard to be sure' of Sven's Christianity (p. 281). Adam's claims of Sven's apostasy have long been acknowledged to be false. Though Bartlett comments 'there were some (including Adam) who suggested that he was insincere in his [Christian] affiliations' (p. 120), these other unnamed sources are presumably those later Danish writers who drew on Adam's account. Bartlett also ignores the debate on the dating of *Beowulf*: while discussing the killing of a reeve by three Scandinavian ships recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* during the reign of Beorhtric of Wessex (786–802, *sub anno* 787 or 789), he claims that the poem 'had been written down probably not long before in Northumbria or Mercia but was almost certainly drawn from a much older tradition' (p.13). This is a thorny issue, and such an early and precise dating for a text preserved in a manuscript from c.1000 is certainly not accepted by all scholars.

This reviewer found Bartlett's vague references to sources rather frustrating, especially when combined with endnotes. For example, even the famous *Hávamál* refrain 'cattle die, kinsmen die' is simply introduced with 'as one poem put it' (pp.18–19). Indeed, the author makes a habit of introducing the quotation of a scholar with a bald 'it has been said' (in saga-like fashion perhaps!), but without consulting the endnotes it is not always clear whether a primary or secondary

source is being used. Directly after the comment on *Maldon* mentioned earlier, Bartlett quotes Stephen Pollington on the ‘ancient values of the Germanic warrior’, introducing the quotation only with ‘as one writer remarked’ (p. 35). The general reader would be forgiven for thinking that Bartlett was referring to a historical source rather than a modern author. Elsewhere acknowledgement of the contribution of, and perhaps even debt to, other scholars is lacking. For instance, there is no reference to the work of Matthew Townend in the discussion of Cnut’s skalds (p. 238). Bartlett comments that the absence of any identification in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* of the Ulf and Eilaf involved in the Battle of Svold suggests that the text’s audience was familiar with these figures (p. 187). This is reminiscent of Timothy Bolton’s assessment that the most likely candidates for their identification were active in England rather than in Scandinavia (*The Empire of Cnut the Great* (Brill, 2008), p. 235), but this is not acknowledged. Likewise, Bartlett’s point about the taking of Norway being an ‘imperialist venture for Cnut’ with little financial payback (p. 237) echoes Bolton’s argument that Norway had ideological significance but ‘was won at a substantial financial loss’ (*The Empire of Cnut the Great*, p. 288).

The book’s final chapter is stronger than its predecessors and provides a decent summary of Cnut’s reign, noting his international standing and also recognising the importance of his alliance with the Holy Roman Emperor Conrad (p. 260). While there has been a clear, and welcome, effort in this volume to emphasise Cnut’s Danish origins (for example, p. 11), rather than just focusing on his English career, little mention is made of his Polish heritage. There are just six page-numbers listed for Poland in the index. In other scholarship, there is an increasing awareness of the importance of eastern Europe and of relations with the Slavs in our understanding of Scandinavian, particularly Danish, history.

While this volume may be a valiant attempt by a non-specialist, it is difficult for the specialist not to flinch when Cnut is dubbed king of Norway without qualification (p. 38). Likewise, the statement that ‘Norway was slightly older, founded by King Harald Fairhair in the late ninth century’ (p. 16) is cringeworthy in its contradiction of the received opinion that Denmark was the first Scandinavian country to be unified, and in the credence given to the dated and teleological assumption of Harald Fairhair’s paramount role in Norway’s creation. Bartlett’s assessment that ‘Aethelred’s political judgement ... needs to be called into question’ for paying tribute to Viking forces (p. 79) ignores the fact that many other rulers, both English and Continental, had adopted the same policy. Meanwhile, in his discussion of runic inscriptions which refer to involvement in Cnut’s raids, Bartlett’s note of surprise at the lack of references in Denmark relative to Sweden (p. 180) presumably stems from lack of awareness that Swedish rune-stones vastly outnumber their Danish counterparts. Bartlett’s book may well increase interest in Cnut among the general public, but I would hesitate to recommend it to students when there are better alternatives available.

KINGS AND WARRIORS IN EARLY NORTH-WEST EUROPE. Edited by JAN ERIK REKDAL and CHARLES DOHERTY. *Four Courts Press*. Dublin, 2016. 480 pp. 6 black-and-white illustrations. ISBN 978-1-84682-501-9.

This compendium of interconnected chapters highlights the relationship between the concepts of ‘warrior’ and ‘king’, providing close textual analyses and new perspectives on a long-studied subject. The Centre for Advanced Study at the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters sponsored the project upon which it was based: ‘The representation of the warrior in relation to the king in the European Middle Ages (600–1200)’. The interdisciplinary, comparative research, albeit with a particular focus on literary works, encompasses texts from the Norse, Celtic and Anglo-Saxon worlds, written over the course of several hundred years. The book comprises an introduction and seven chapters that are presented in a logical progression, allowing the reader to navigate easily through references and ideas common to shared geographical areas. The authors all highlight how texts, and even images, encapsulate this period of transition in which Christianity was becoming more established and the conceptions of ‘warrior’ and ‘king’ were gradually being readjusted.

The first three chapters focus on texts from the Irish Sea area. In the first, Marged Haycock discusses the pervasiveness of war and warfare within different spheres of life in Wales using poetry, law books and chronicles. Haycock maintains a balance between historical and literary sources, highlighting their complementary content and showing that ‘although they [lawbooks, poetry and chronicles] all approach warfare from different angles and present it in different ways, they nevertheless share the given that warfare is part of life, a way of life for some’ (p. 45). The writings shed light on various facets of war: its benefits; its beneficiaries; the surrounding circumstances before, during and after; war and peace; and the impact of war on thinking. Charles Doherty in the second chapter analyses the conflict between the king/leader role and the warrior role and its reflection of social and military changes in Ireland. Doherty incorporates a wide-range of sources, including warrior iconography used in the *Book of Kells* (pp. 96–100), demonstrating the benefits of interdisciplinary research. In the third chapter, Jan Erik Rekdal focuses on the representation and relationship of the ‘warrior’ and the ‘king’ in Irish praise poems, considering the evolution of these roles during the transition from the pagan to the Christian belief system. Rekdal’s piece is adeptly structured, bringing the argument full circle. He begins with the *Books of Kells* figure, which Doherty had also used, discussing how it represents the influence of the pre-Christian warrior ideal in a Christian complex (pp. 149–50). He proceeds to a discussion of ‘the two sets of ideals and how praise poems seem to be adjusted to the discrepancy that these ideals present’ (p. 155), and then concludes with graves and memorial poems, thereby harking back to the juxtaposition of the warrior figure in *the Book of Kells* with poetry preserving ‘the warrior ethos with a kind of Christian framing’ (p. 179). Historical and literary texts are successfully and succinctly combined to explore the two different sets of ideals in society.

The following two chapters compare texts from throughout North-West Europe. The fourth chapter, by Ralph O’Connor, assesses and effectively counters prevalent

assumptions about the portrayal of warriors in narrative literature from Ireland and Iceland as wild or inhuman. O'Connor looks more deeply at the theoretical and historical contexts surrounding the texts, also considering details of wording and phraseology in each instance. The well-crafted argument builds on previous research, willing to go into the complexities and taking a solid stance against the predominant treatment of inhuman warriors as an invariable archetype. Rather,

by comparison with the distinctiveness, subtlety and power of the first recension of the *Táin* or the A-redaction of *Egils saga*, the static and composite résumés of wild warrior behaviour handed down to us in so many popular overviews (and some scholarly ones) are as bland and pointless as a three-course meal put into a blender (p. 234).

Thomas Davies in the fifth chapter examines the temporal experience of literary characters. The philosophy of Heidegger is applied to the treatment of time and history in *Beowulf* and *Táin Bó Cúalinge*. Davies interweaves the theoretical aspects of linguistic and literary analysis to offer a deeper understanding of how life and death are approached in these poems. Time is a construct in these works of European heroic literature, variously framed in different literary traditions under the influence of society, artistic imagery, kingship, landscape, belief systems and history.

The last three chapters deal with Old Norse texts. Ian Beuermann discusses relations between kings and warriors in *Jómsvíkinga saga*, *Færeyinga saga* and *Orkneyinga saga*. All were written in times of socio-political change outside Norway and Iceland. By focusing on warriors from the upper class, he is able to show how the qualities attributed to warriors and rulers in these sagas intersect. A systematic progression is made towards the conclusion that these should be classified as sagas of 'warriors-turned-rulers' (p. 344). Jon Gunnar Jørgensen surveys the wealth of material on the life of King Óláfr Haraldsson to determine whether earlier skaldic poetry treats him differently from later sources, particularly prose. The author effectively deconstructs the texts through analysis of linguistic structures—kennings, *heiti* and adjectives—to present a clear comparison of King Óláfr as a king, a warrior and a saint. Jørgensen also includes the textual evidence in a helpful series of tables. Finally, Stefka G. Eriksen examines the philosophy of the self. Using a methodology that applies psychology and sociology to the texts, she explores how warriors in Icelandic Family Sagas, Legendary Sagas and translated romances viewed war and warriorship in relation to other facets of identity. Characters' self-perceptions are shown to vary according to genre, but the analysis identifies images and stereotypes present in fourteenth-century Iceland. Eriksen offers an unusual perspective, attempting to reveal thought-processes of characters beyond what lies upon the surface.

The book provides a well-rounded perspective on the relationship and reconciliation of the concepts of 'warrior' and 'king'. Politics, psychology, sociology, linguistics and religion are all applied to make sense of the evolution and reassessment of these concepts during the seventh to twelfth centuries. While these concepts have been discussed since the beginning of historiography, these chapters bring new life to the topic. They uphold some previously held notions with new analyses, while

also proposing new ideas that turn more commonly held conceptions on their heads. My concerns overall are the lack of consistency in the length of chapters (from thirty pages to over seventy) and the neglect of relevant issues related to masculinity and audience, though they may have been considered beyond the scope of the volume. Nevertheless, the authors tease out information from the large corpus of early medieval texts from North-West Europe and provide a springboard for further research into the topic. *Kings and Warriors in Early North-West Europe* is a highly recommended publication for anyone interested in the concepts of ‘warrior’ and ‘king’, as well as those more broadly interested in the evolving social and political early-medieval landscape and its effects on identity, history and literature.

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HEIRS OF THE VIKINGS. HISTORY AND IDENTITY IN NORMANDY AND ENGLAND, c.950–c.1015. By KATHERINE CROSS. *York Medieval Press*. York, 2018. xiv + 262 pp. ISBN 978-1-903153-79-6.

In the middle of the tenth century, as Katherine Cross emphasises in her introduction to this book, England and Normandy were in a broadly similar position: after decades of Viking raiding and waves of Scandinavian settlement, both regions consisted of mixed populations, of partly Scandinavian descent, unified under the rule of a single leader. After this point their experiences diverged, developing into contrasting histories of acculturation and assimilation, with the result that Scandinavian identity came to mean something very different in each region. It is surprising how rarely Normandy and England are discussed from a comparative point of view, and this is the gap which Cross’s valuable book aims to fill. Her purpose is to compare the role of Viking and Scandinavian identities in these regions, exploring how they were constructed and deployed within changing contexts and the political and cultural uses to which they could be put.

As Cross argues, questions of Viking identity in England and Normandy have been subject to different approaches by modern scholarship, and historians of Viking settlement in the two regions have tended to employ dissimilar forms of evidence—material culture and place-name evidence from England, literary sources from Normandy—which are difficult to treat comparatively. Her approach is to focus on written sources from both regions, with the aim of finding clearer points of comparison and providing an insight into the mentalities of those who claimed or discussed Viking identity. In an English context, this chiefly means texts produced within the cultural sphere of the West-Saxon élites, since in this period few texts survive from formerly Viking-ruled areas of England; the key contrast, then, is between West-Saxon kings making use of the Viking past of regions they were attempting to bring within their rule, and Norman dukes deploying their own Scandinavian ancestry for political ends.

The book takes a comparative approach to the material in each chapter, which is one of its great strengths. The first two chapters explore uses of the distant

past, focusing on the inclusion of Scandinavian ancestors in genealogies and origin myths. The chief sources discussed are Dudo of St Quentin's *De moribus et actis primorum Normanniae ducum* and the *Chronicle* of Æthelweard, and it is argued that in the second half of the tenth century the West-Saxon royal genealogy was expanded to include Scandinavian ancestors such as Scaef and Scyld as an assertion of Viking identity, while Normandy saw instead the introduction of an entirely new aristocratic genealogy which claimed descent from Viking ancestors.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with hagiography in different aspects. Chapter 3 looks at how some hagiographical texts represent the recent Viking past, concentrating in England on Abbo's *Passio S. Eadmundi* and Ælfric's vernacular adaptation of that text, and in Normandy on narratives of Viking destruction and restoration of churches in Dudo, the *Fécamp Chronicle* and the hagiography of St Romanus. Chapter 4 discusses narratives of interactions between saints and rulers in the context of Viking attack: two *Translationes S. Audoeni* from early eleventh-century Normandy, which treat Rollo's conversion from Viking raider to Christian duke, are contrasted with English texts in which Saints Cuthbert and Neot aid Alfred in resisting the Vikings. Cross argues that in these texts ethnic narratives of Viking attack are strategically employed to promote West-Saxon power over areas of former Viking rule in the north and east of England, appropriating cults which had previously been adopted by Scandinavian rulers. The discussion of all these texts is thorough and persuasive, though it is a pity that Byrhtferth's *Vita S. Oswaldi* is mentioned only in passing; since it foregrounds the saint's own Viking ancestry, it would have been a useful contrast to the West-Saxon perspective.

The final chapter treats charters and diplomas, with the aim of exploring regional and territorial identities within Normandy and England. Analysing the language these texts use to refer to the regions and peoples over which rulers claim authority, Cross considers what they can reveal about these ethnic and political communities and their relationship to their Viking past. This is an especially interesting discussion of a fruitful body of material, and Cross's nuanced treatment of it leads to thought-provoking conclusions. Finally, two appendixes provide further detailed discussion of the dating of Fulbert's *Vita Romani*, the *Vita Prima Sancti Neoti* and the Old English *Life of St Neot*.

This book is an important and substantial contribution to the study of the Viking Age in England and Normandy. It thoroughly achieves its aim of bringing Norman and English sources into dialogue with each other, and the range of different genres analysed brings out very skilfully how invocations of the Viking past might function differently in varying political, regional or institutional contexts. Particularly useful is Cross's emphasis on understanding how these texts' references to Scandinavian ancestry or history construct and deploy ethnic identities, rather than simply recording them. As she rightly says, 'presenting a view on the Viking past, and its effects on ethnic relationships, was always a political act' (p. 199).

The only disappointment is that the analysis of English material ends in 1015, rather than extending to 1042 or even 1066 (some of the Norman sources discussed do belong to this later period). The stated reason for this is that Cnut's conquest opened a 'new chapter of English-Danish relations' (p. 21), which of course is

true, but it is a chapter which offers some interesting comparisons to the situation in Normandy: for instance, there are parallels to be drawn between the strategies Cross identifies in the Norman histories and the *Encomium Emmae Reginae*, as the narrative of an incoming Scandinavian dynasty using its Viking past to legitimise conquest. There is also, of course, the possibility of direct influence from Norman models on both Cnut's own deployment of identity and the literary sources which bear witness to it. Perhaps it would not have been practical to extend the analysis this far, however, and the focused chronological scope has its advantages too; this is only a drawback because the analysis is so incisive that the reader wants to prolong it a little further. This book will be of great value not only to scholars of the Viking Age, but also to the study of early medieval ethnicity and identity more broadly.

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DRAGON LORDS. THE HISTORY AND LEGENDS OF VIKING ENGLAND. By ELEANOR PARKER. *I. B. Tauris*. London and New York, 2018. xvi + 267 pp. ISBN 978-1-78453-786-9.

This unique and exciting new book offers a compelling introduction to the lasting impact of Scandinavian settlement on English literature and culture. Expertly weaving history and legend through the telling of engaging stories, both factual and fictitious, *Dragon Lords* vividly brings to life the undeservedly understudied texts and traditions of Anglo-Danish (or Anglo-Scandinavian) England—a compelling folkloric history that will surely strike a chord with a variety of audiences.

*Dragon Lords* is thoroughly well-researched, replete with enjoyable images and useful notes for further reading, and offers literary and historical analysis that is both nuanced and accessible. It investigates an impressive array of material from a range of traditions, with sources in Latin, Old Norse, Old English, Old French, Middle English and Anglo-Norman brought into inviting dialogue. While it is sometimes difficult to keep track of the various texts, characters, events and locations under discussion, the index, timeline and map of Anglo-Saxon England are somewhat helpful in this regard.

The Introduction usefully traces what is known of the history of the Viking raiders and Scandinavian settlement in different regions of England during the Anglo-Saxon period, describing its causes and effects and thus providing important context for the later legends. Vikings were not always depicted as vicious and ruthless raiders and plunderers; medieval English authors also presented Scandinavian migrants as settlers who founded towns, ruled kingdoms and engaged in trade and linguistic and cultural contact, which eventually led to the development of an Anglo-Scandinavian society: 'a fusion and intermingling of the two cultures which is reflected in the linguistic, artistic and archaeological record' (p. 7). The chapters that follow tell how Norse history and legends survived—and

even thrived—in England in the centuries following Scandinavian settlement and the Norman Conquest, especially amongst those who believed themselves to be of Danish descent.

The first chapter explores the links between the Vikings and various kings and saints, notably St Edmund and King Cnut, in texts from the tenth and eleventh centuries, demonstrating the continued significance of Danish invasion and conquest in literature and culture. The second chapter focuses on narratives of the famous Viking Ragnar Lothbrok and his sons, exploring their motives, characters and fates within the medieval English context, rather than emphasising their more well-studied Scandinavian relatives. The engaging third chapter studies the Danish warrior Siward, earl of Northumbria, as well as his heroic son Waltheof and the outlaw Hereward the Wake. It features dragon-slaying, Odinic prophets, burial mounds, raven banners and bears' sons, and suggests how legends about the Danes retained meaning and purpose for English audiences in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Moving into the world of romance, the fourth chapter examines the long-standing belief among some medieval writers that the Danes had a legitimate claim to rule England by examining another famous dragon-slayer, Guy of Warwick—the repentant pilgrim, hermit and pious Norman knight who defeated a Viking invasion through single combat against the Danish champion. Most romance narratives in Middle English tell tales of Viking aggression, and so the fifth chapter turns to an important exception: Havelok, the Danish king who is greatly beloved in medieval Lincolnshire, as well as his foster-father Grim, the fisherman who founded Grimsby. Finally, a perceptive Epilogue brings the reader into the world of post-medieval English folklore; legends continued to link the Danes with local customs, place-names and landmarks. While the Vikings are often remembered as foreign invaders—and thus those who resisted them are venerated as heroes—people in many parts of England remain proud of their Norse heritage.

The most troubling feature of this book, in the mind of this reviewer, is the way it is framed by the inside flap of the cover: 'this elegantly written narrative will surprise and enthrall all those who wonder about their own provenance and ancestry. It uncovers the quite remarkable degree to which England remains Viking to its core.' Viking studies has an exceptionally problematic history amongst those keen to celebrate Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon and Germanic ancestral heritage. 'Ancestry' is thus a potentially loaded term for scholars of medieval Norse studies, and we have a responsibility to advocate against such tendencies and the worrying mode of thinking they implicitly promote: white nationalist discourse. The notion that 'England remains Viking to its core' thus raises concerns, and an underlying suggestion can be read: those with a different 'provenance and ancestry' might not be so interested in England's Viking past—for they do not belong to it.

This cover summary may well reflect the intentions of the publisher rather than the author, but this is an area where particular caution about word choice is necessary. The first chapter of *Dragon Lords* begins at the end of the tenth century, for 'this was a moment when . . . to write about the history of the Danes in England was a politically sensitive act, an intervention in a fraught and contentious debate

about how to respond to Viking invasion' (p. 14); yet the contemporary context is similarly troubled. The Scandinavian settlement should remind us of the significant contributions of migrant peoples, and that England, and the rest of the United Kingdom, has always been a nation of immigrants.

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ATLANTIC OUTLOOKS ON BEING AT HOME. GAELIC PLACE-LORE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A SENSE OF PLACE IN MEDIEVAL ATLANTIC OUTLOOKS ON BEING AT HOME. By MATTHIAS EGELER. *FF Communications* 314. *Academia Scientiarum Fennica*. Helsinki, 2018. 324 pp. ISBN 978-951-41-1125-9.

Egeler's stated aim is to 'ask whether the medieval Icelandic sense of place, as reflected in Icelandic narrative culture, has been influenced by the close contacts that existed during the Viking Age between Iceland and the Gaelic-speaking world of Ireland and Scotland' (p. 13). He extends this to the further question, 'what was the role of Gaelic approaches to place and landscape in the genesis of an Icelandic sense of place?' (p. 30). He approaches these questions by dividing the book into three sections (referred to as chapters with sub-chapters). The first is a very useful summary of recent research and theorising on concepts of space and place. Egeler draws out the helpful distinction between 'space', denoting an area that is unmarked, empty, meaningless, and, on the other hand, 'place' as a locality or topographic feature that has been ascribed 'meaning and significance' (p. 22).

The second section is a comparative analysis of nine 'Icelandic place-narratives that seem to be borrowings or adaptations of place-stories otherwise known from medieval Irish literature or upon which Gaelic motifs and practices have at least had a formative impact' (p. 14). The third is a summary of the previous analyses, intended to highlight the 'Christian religious semantisation of the land and a pervasive focus on the creation of "home"' (p. 15). Egeler also aims to address past scholars' 'regrettably cursory presentation of the [Gaelic] material' (p. 15).

Whilst the book includes interesting comparative and speculative discussions about the flow of Gaelic and Norse narrative influences, the expectations raised by the title and foreword do not match the content. A more accurate title would have referred to it specifically as a comparative analysis of Gaelic (predominantly Old Irish) texts and *Landnámabók*. Seven of the nine Icelandic stories are taken from *Landnámabók*, one is from *Eyrbyggja saga* and the remaining example is a folktale recorded in the late seventeenth century by Thomas Barthaolin the Younger. As Eleanor Barraclough notes in 'Naming the Landscape in the Landnám Narratives of the *Íslendingasögur* and *Landnámabók*' (*Saga-Book* XXXVI (2012)), the Hauksbók redaction of *Landnámabók* 'has a particular interest in all things Irish' (p. 91). With little acknowledgment of the great breadth and depth of geographical and topographical material in Old Icelandic literature,

the *Íslendingasögur* in particular, Egeler is attempting to stretch his case from an interesting study of the Gaelic influences on *Landnámabók* to make it cover the ‘Sense of Place in Medieval Iceland’.

In addition to the reference to Bartholin, there are two further temporal diversions from medieval Iceland, both into the twentieth century. In a chapter on ‘cliffs opening’ (pp. 91–98), Egeler makes use of a twentieth-century recalling of an Irish folktale about cliffs that open in comparison with a superficially similar incident in *Njáls saga* (ch. 14). The purpose of this is to set up the Irish tale as a ‘straw-man’ against which he can illustrate his rules of correspondence to determine coincidence or interdependence (p. 97). The second Irish folktale recorded in the twentieth century is analysed in relation to the story of Auðun the Stutterer and his magical horse from Lake Hornsvatn (pp. 99–109). The purpose of this comparison is to illustrate the longevity of such tales, and thus that they could travel to Iceland over time; this digression into the continuity of folklore, however, somewhat weakens Egeler’s well-argued comparison with Cú Chulainn’s magical water horse from *Bricriu’s Feast* (pp. 104–07).

Egeler’s potentially interesting reinterpretation of Þórólfr’s settlement of Þórsnes and his regulations about Helgafell (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 4) in a section on *dritsker* and bodily matters is undermined by overstatement and omission (pp. 76–81). Relying on Cleasby and Vigfusson’s interpretation of *drit* to mean dirt, especially bird guano (*An Icelandic–English Dictionary*, 1874), Egeler concludes without further justification that *dritsker* should be understood as ‘guano skerry’ and that

there is a massive discrepancy between the toponym and the tale of human excrement associated with it . . . I would suggest that this again is a strategy to create a tension between the story’s plot and its most central place-name, a tension which suggests ironic distance and an element of the grotesque . . . in this way the whole construction of a pagan sacred landscape is given an ironic twist (p. 79).

Furthermore, he adds that the reference to bodily matter in *Eyrbyggja saga* is used to ‘mark a tongue-in-cheek approach to the landscapes of pagan antiquity [that] is not restricted to *Dritsker*, the tale’s guano-lubricated narrative pivot’ (p. 79). No Gaelic parallels are presented nor, more significantly, is there a reference to a similar place-name scene in *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss* (ch. 4) which, if taken into account, might have led Egeler to adopt a more restrained tone. Bárðr Dumbsson moors his ship in Djúpalón: *Síðan settu þeir upp skip sitt í vik einni. Þar á lóninu höfðu þeir gengit á borð at álfreka, ok þann sama vallengang rak upp í þessarrí vik, ok því heitir þat Dritvik (Íslenzk fornrit XIII (1991), 111) ‘Then they beached their ship in a small bay. Those on board had relieved themselves in the lagoon, and the same excrement washed ashore in this inlet; so it was called Dritvik [‘Shit Inlet’]’ (Trans. Sarah M. Anderson, *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* II (1997), 241).*

Egeler’s extensive knowledge of both vernacular and Latin Irish literature and Old Norse is evident throughout, enabling him to propose new interpretations on

intercultural influence. His most detailed discussions relate to Christian narratives such as that of Auðr the Deep-Minded (pp. 156–68), where he suggests that in erecting crosses in the landscape Auðr is attempting to recreate her Hebridean home. Whilst this is Egeler's sole substantive example of 'home', he is at his most interesting when discussing the Hebridean–Icelandic socio-cultural relationship; positing a Gaelic influence on Norse culture, he takes the opposite view to that argued for in Magne Oftedal's 'Norse Place-Names in Celtic Scotland' (in Brian Ó Cuív, ed., *The Impact of the Scandinavian Invasions on the Celtic-speaking Peoples c.800–1100 A.D.* (1975, repr. 1983), 43–50).

If taken as a study about *Landnámabók*, Egeler's book does show that 'what seems to be circulating between the North-West Atlantic cultures are, in a manner of speaking, not specific, identifiable texts but stock motifs' (p. 140). He also illustrates the distinction between meaningless 'space' and meaningful 'place' and, significantly, the claim that 'place-names are ideological statements of identity, marking a place (and, by implication, its inhabitants) as belonging to a certain culture' (p. 185).

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LAUGHING SHALL I DIE. LIVES AND DEATHS OF THE GREAT VIKINGS. BY TOM SHIPPEY. *Reaktion*. London, 2018. 365 pp. ISBN 978-1-78023-909-5.

In at least three different ways Tom Shippey's new and eminently readable book differs radically from all modern scholarly surveys of the Viking Age. First of all, it centres almost exclusively on the Vikings as warriors, invaders and plunderers, not on their more peaceful activities as farmers, traders, explorers, lawmakers or settlers. Second, it is primarily concerned with heroic mentality in the face of death and warfare, a subject that has not been seriously considered by academic historians since Thomas Bartholinus published his book about 'the causes of the contempt for death among the still pagan Danes' (*Antiqvitatium danicarum de causis contemptiae a danis adhuc gentilibus mortis libri tres*, Copenhagen, 1677). Third, Shippey is departing from the principles of *Quellenkritik* adhered to by most modern historians by shamelessly using Icelandic sagas, Eddic poems and other literary texts as his most important primary sources.

In doing so Shippey will undoubtedly annoy several distinguished experts on medieval history while at the same time gladdening the hearts of young Viking enthusiasts brought up on popular TV programmes and heroic fantasy literature like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones*—works that Shippey himself, in his capacity as Tolkien scholar, is fully familiar with and often refers to in the course of his very entertaining history. Should I be shocked by this as a medievalist and senior scholar? Yes, I probably should, and I am in fact irritated by several things in *Laughing Shall I Die*. I must confess, however, that I have also read Shippey's book with great pleasure, mainly for his wit and slightly provocative style, but also for some of his observations on history.

For it is indeed refreshing to read an academic book that does not try to conceal the fact that the Vikings were famous all over Europe in the Middle Ages for their violent treatment of their enemies and also for their courage, stoicism and willingness to sacrifice their lives on the battlefield. Modern historical scholarship has tended to focus on their peaceful and constructive activities to such an extent that even their most murderous Viking exploits almost look like ordinary business trips or tourist adventures. Shippey's attempt to define and explain the mentality of violent Viking warriors is therefore a commendable and interesting endeavour, even though one could wish that he had been more critical in his use of sources.

His book is divided into three parts. The first, 'Dying Hard', tries to define a 'Viking mindset' by describing a series of legendary pagan warriors who are said to have fought and sometimes died like heroes, according to the *Poetic Edda*, *Beowulf*, the *Nibelungenlied* and the Icelandic sagas: warriors like Gunnarr Gjúkason and his brother Hǫgni, Vǫlundr the smith, Hygelac, Ragnarr Loðbrók and his sons or Egill Skallagrímsson. Although several of these characters may have existed in real life, it is of course impossible to know whether the legends about them have anything at all in common with historical reality. Perhaps that does not matter very much, since the purpose here is primarily to establish a masculine ideal: the noble, tough and self-restrained hero of few but salty words (preferably expressed in alliterative verse) who does not flinch when confronted with violence, torture and death. Shippey appears to be well aware of the fact that Egill Skallagrímsson at least does not quite live up to this ideal even in his own saga, since he is often described as behaving more like a madman or a troll than a true hero. What one could have wished for, however, is a more general discussion of the relationship between proclaimed ideal and actual behaviour in Viking society. After all, heroic norms, like sexual norms, have seldom in any society been honoured as faithfully by mortal humans as priests and other moral authorities have wished them to be.

In the second part, 'Moving to the Bigger Picture', Shippey describes the historical Viking conquests and colonisations in Ireland, Normandy and Russia. The story he tells here is generally in accordance with the facts of warfare as established by modern historians and archaeologists, but it does not contain much about non-military Viking activities (such as trading, farming, shipbuilding or religious worship) and it does not present much evidence for actual heroic behaviour or 'Viking mentality'. When it does touch on these matters, the sources are literary and extremely untrustworthy: such as *Njáls saga*, the magnificent Norse poem *Darraðarljóð*, the equally magnificent poem on the Swedish Gripsholm stone about the Vikings of Ingvar the Far-Traveller who 'fed the eagle' on the Eastern way, or the *Russian Primary Chronicle* (which is evidently to some extent built on oral *fornaldarsögur*). The only reasonably trustworthy and detailed source about actual Viking behaviour abroad, the Arab Ibn Fadlan's eyewitness account of a Viking funeral in Russia around 930, does not give any examples of heroic mentality, but gives many examples of barbaric cruelty, superstition, filth and drunkenness.

The third part, 'The Tale in the North', deals with the Viking-Age history of Norway and is largely based on Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*. The focus here is on the Hlaðir Jarls, the Jómsvikingar, the two Kings Óláfr and their skalds, King

Haraldr harðráði and his adversary at Stamford Bridge, Harold Godwinson. By concentrating on legendary military leaders such as these men—some of whom undoubtedly played an important role in history—Shippey can easily give many wonderful examples of Viking heroism, and he does it in a way that is certain to make many readers happy. The only problem is, of course, that not a single one of these examples is based on trustworthy sources rather than legends. This does not necessarily mean that they are fiction in the strict sense of that term, but it certainly means that you cannot rely on them.

Shippey's very last example of a true hero facing death is Skarpheðinn Njálsson, one of the most wonderful and unforgettable characters in *Njáls saga*. In this case the example is most probably based on pure Christian fiction, inspired by religious writings of the thirteenth century. For Skarpheðinn dies in Njáll's burning house because his pious father decides that this is the only way in which he can atone for the mortal sin of killing Höskuldr. For Njáll is hoping that God will not let his sons burn 'both in this world and the next' (as he explains to anguished members of his household afraid of dying in the flames). Unlike the pagan hero Högni in the *Poetic Edda*, Skarpheðinn does not die laughing. Instead he dies repenting like a true Christian while burning symbolic crossmarks on his own body. Here as in many other Old Norse sagas a story from the Viking Age is filtered through the mind of a medieval Christian author, so that (most of) the original 'Viking mentality' disappears.

Should we trust Shippey? No, we should not. But his book is refreshing and great fun to read.

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JÓMSVÍKINGA SAGA. Edited by ÞORLEIFUR HAUSSON and MARTEINN HELGI SIGURÐSSON. *Íslensk fornrit XXXIII. Hið íslenska fornritafélag*. Reykjavík, 2018. cxvi + 322 pp. 2 maps, 12 colour plates. ISBN 978-9979-893-38-7.

There is good reason to celebrate the fact that a new edition of *Jómsvíkinga saga* is finally available. Apart from Danish and Swedish editions from the nineteenth century, the main edition available hitherto has been that produced by Ólafur Halldórsson in 1969. Although his edition is in many ways outstanding, its scope is limited, the introduction quite short and the endnotes few. Moreover, his edition is long sold out and has not been reprinted.

The *Íslensk fornrit* is an established series and even though each editor puts his or her mark on the volumes, the edition has its conventions and readers know what to expect within the volume: a thorough introduction with bibliography, the primary texts with detailed footnotes, accompanied by explanatory material such as maps, photographs and the indispensable index at the end. This volume is no exception, and the accompanying material is one of the greatest assets of the series. This book is the last volume of Kings' Sagas to be published by *Hið íslenska fornritafélag*.

The saga describes events during King Haraldr Gormsson's reign in Denmark that lead to the establishment of the legendary stronghold of the Jómsvíkingar in Jómshorg in Vindland. The Jómsvíkingar raid successfully every year until they undertake the fateful journey to Norway where they are defeated by Jarl Hákon Sigurðarson in the battle of Hjörungavágr. The narrative places entertainment value above historical accuracy, featuring characters and events well known from other sources and combining the historical kernel with fictitious material.

The textual tradition of *Jómsvíkinga saga* is somewhat complex. It is preserved in four different versions in as many medieval vellum manuscripts. Furthermore, a fifth version is preserved in a post-medieval Latin translation by Arngrímur lærði, which is presumably based on a lost medieval manuscript. The editors, Þorleifur Hauksson and Marteinn Helgi Sigurðsson, have chosen to print two versions, first the text of the oldest manuscript, AM 291 4to, and then the abridged text of Holm. Perg. 7 4to, a choice I will address below. Additionally, in line with many other *Íslensk fornrit* volumes, the editors include seven *þættir* or short tales. In contrast to those included in older volumes, these are not traditional *Íslendingaþættir* but tales from *Flateyjarbók* similar in structure to the *Íslendingaþættir*. Their main characters are, however, Norwegian rather than Icelandic, and the *þættir* have been chosen to demonstrate the variety of tales found in the Icelandic corpus where the king and his retainers are in the limelight. Following the *þættir*, two skaldic poems related to *Jómsvíkinga saga* are printed, *Jómsvíkingadrápa* and *Búadrápa*.

Naturally, the bulk of the introduction to the volume is dedicated to *Jómsvíkinga saga*, and this material is divided into ten sections. Additionally, one short section on the two poems and a brief introduction to each of the seven *þættir* are included. Because of *Jómsvíkinga saga*'s diverse preservation, a number of different theories on its origins and development have been put forward and the introduction provides a useful overview of the saga's research background. I applaud the editors for reviewing most of the older research in a particularly clear and concise way while acknowledging at the same time that some theories will never be tested, owing to the absence of source material. The textual relations between *Jómsvíkinga saga* and other sagas, mainly *Heimskringla*, *Fagrskinna* and the sagas of King Óláfr Tryggvason, have also received their fair share of scholarly attention in the past, and Þorleifur Hauksson provides the reader with an accessible comparison of the shared narrative material of those texts in the introduction's fourth section. Unlike some previous studies, his account emphasises the deviation between texts rather than focusing on the similarities, thus moving away from the tendency to attempt to pinpoint exactly the nature of the textual connection. There is obviously some relationship between the texts, but trying to trace which has borrowed from which is often a pointless task when we do not know how many pieces of the puzzle—other manuscripts of the saga, chronicles or other sagas that are not available to modern readers—are missing. This approach receives a proportionally large share of the focus in the introduction because the seventh section, *Efnisuppygging og aðaldrættir* 'Structure and Main Characteristics', relates the course of events in the saga with occasional comparison between different versions of the saga, as

well as other texts like *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna*, somewhat blurring the boundary between sections 4 and 7.

The saga has been considered one of the earliest texts that overtly combine historical events and characters with the methods of fictional composition. On the other hand, the saga is edited here as a part of the Kings' Sagas—the corpus that, of all the genres of Icelandic sagas, is most clearly identified as history and commonly treated as historical sources. On these grounds I sympathise with the editors' decision to focus mainly on the historical aspects of the saga in the introduction. Nonetheless, some discussion on the concepts of fiction and history with regard to the saga would have been appreciated. Granted, the eighth section of the introduction is entitled *Sagnfræði og skáldskapur* 'History and Fiction', but is almost entirely dedicated to the saga's historical context. There is no theoretical analysis of the concepts, and the idea that the saga might be one of the earliest examples of fiction in Icelandic literature is not addressed.

Of great interest is Þorleifur Hauksson's analysis of the style of AM 291 4to, which he claims has often been underestimated and overlooked. The discussion includes plenty of examples and reveals noteworthy characteristics which enrich the text: for example, the slowing down of the narrative with lengthy sentences when something amusing happens (p. lxxix) and the importance of irony as an integral part of the text (p. lxxx). Similarly, his discussion on character depiction in the following section is engaging, but might benefit from expansion.

As previously mentioned, two versions of *Jómsvíkinga saga* are printed in the volume, those of AM 291 4to and Holm. Perg. 7 4to. This is in itself a decision worth praising and is in harmony with recent trends in editorial practices, often attributed to New Philology, where different versions of the same saga are viewed as separate entities and read as such. Modern readers can therefore enjoy the texts as they have been preserved in more than one medieval manuscript and come to their own conclusions about their development. My only regret is that Holm. Perg. 7 4to was chosen as the second version rather than AM 510 4to—or that the latter was not included as well. The reason for this choice, according to the editors, is that AM 291 4to and Holm. Perg. 7 4to are considered to show two separate branches of the text and thus reveal the diversity between versions. Holm. Perg. 7 4to is from the early fourteenth century and preserves a shorter redaction than the slightly older AM 291 4to. AM 510 4to is from the sixteenth century and preserves a text related to AM 291 4to, but parts of it have been augmented in various ways and it includes skaldic poetry not found elsewhere. The main reason why this version is less well known than others is precisely that it is inaccessible. It was published in a diplomatic edition in Sweden in 1879, but I believe it would be beneficial for further studies of the saga if a useable edition of this text were available. Holm. Perg. 7 4to, on the other hand, was published in 1962 by Norman F. Blake, an edition more readily obtainable by modern readers.

The issues raised here are minor, and do not change the fact that this new edition of *Jómsvíkinga saga* is professional in every way. The dedication to detail is also remarkable, and is to be expected from *Hið íslenska fornritafélag*. Thus, the primary texts are as good as flawless, and the footnotes enrich the main text. A

slight mistake has crept into the introduction, where the order of the first edition from 1815 and second edition from 1824 is reversed (p. xcii). Overall, the volume is yet another splendid addition to the *Íslenzk fornrit* series and should spark further interest in and wider readership of this fascinating piece of literature.

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THE SAGA OF THE JÓMSVIKINGS. A TRANSLATION WITH FULL INTRODUCTION. By ALISON FINLAY and ÞÓRDÍS EDDA JÓHANNESDÓTTIR. *Medieval Institute Publications*. Kalamazoo, 2018. 177 pp. ISBN 978-158044-311-1.

The volume under review includes a translation of one of the earliest Icelandic texts, *Jómsvíkinga saga*, and a scholarly introduction to this remarkable work. The saga has been translated into English before; however, both earlier translations (by Lee M. Hollander (1955) and Norman Blake (1962)) are of the shorter version of the saga in the manuscript Holm. Perg. 7 4to. The present translation is based on the longer AM 291 4to, the oldest of the *Jómsvíkinga saga* manuscript witnesses, making this version of the saga available to the English-speaking public for the first time. In addition to the introduction and the translation, the book comprises four grayscale figures, endnotes, bibliography divided into primary texts and secondary sources and a combined index of persons and places mentioned. The choice of exemplar and the full introduction that offers an up-to-date scholarly discussion of the saga, as well as emphasising its entertainment value, indicate that the book is aimed at both the scholarly community and the general public.

Alison Finlay has translated the saga text, while the introduction is largely based on Þórdís Edda Jóhannesdóttir's doctoral thesis on *Jómsvíkinga saga* (University of Iceland, 2016). Both contributors have been actively involved with an international group of scholars engaged in studying the saga and translating it into several European languages. As a result, both introduction and translation are thoroughly researched and rooted in a lively scholarly environment. So far, two further publications have resulted from this informal scholarly cooperation: a volume of *Scripta Islandica* (2014) devoted to *Jómsvíkinga saga* and Sirpa Aalto's translation of the saga into Finnish (Nordbooks, 2019).

The introduction covers all the major issues concerning *Jómsvíkinga saga*, such as historicity, genre, the saga's manuscript witnesses and the relationships between them. Undoubtedly, one such controversial matter is the identification and location of two places featuring prominently in the saga: Jómshorg, the legendary fortress of the Jómshvikings, and Hjörungavágr, the site of the final battle of the famous Viking company and the execution of most of its surviving members. As Þórdís shows, the widespread identification of Jómshorg with the Polish town of Wolin is not without problems. Furthermore, even the foundation of the scholarly quest for the most appropriate candidate for the bay of Hjörungavágr can be questioned. Þórdís thoroughly reviews the scholarly debate, clearly distinguishing between the saga itself and its presumed legendary basis. She reaches the conclusion that

the Jónsborg and Hjórungevágr of *Jómsvíkinga saga* must pertain to the realm of fiction.

This sceptical response to the tendency in some earlier scholarship to romanticise the saga and its origins is maintained throughout the introduction. *Jómsvíkinga saga* has been considered exceptional in many respects, occupying a special position in the generic categorisation of Icelandic literature. Þórdís attempts to make sense of the saga's characteristic features by contextualising it within the body of contemporaneous Icelandic and European historical, literary and manuscript tradition. One such feature is the saga's portrayal of kings, which has not infrequently been understood as negative, a seemingly unique characteristic that led Melissa Berman to include *Jómsvíkinga saga* in the category of 'political saga' along with *Færeyinga saga* and *Orkneyinga saga*. Þórdís argues convincingly for a nuanced treatment of kings and kingship in *Jómsvíkinga saga* (p. 10) as well as a gradation in the negative attitude towards royalty between the work's different versions (p. 52). For instance, the portrayal of Sveinn tjúguskegg (Forkbeard) in the saga indicates that kings are seen as individuals rather than generally disliked representatives of a more abstract power structure.

Þórdís also finds similarity between *Jómsvíkinga saga* and a number of other sagas in terms of age, manuscript preservation, tone (including the treatment of kingship), content and style. The author adopts a dynamic view of genre, finding it most appropriate to place the saga 'at the intersection of kings' sagas, legendary sagas, and sagas of Icelanders' (p. 41). Although this handling of the traditional saga taxonomy as a general frame with fuzzy boundaries is of course not new, and this use of traditional terminology implies general conformity with the standard categorisation, the suggested classification of *Jómsvíkinga saga* does bring to the fore a combination of characteristic factors that make the saga unique. More positively, the notion of 'literary network' used metaphorically in the introduction (p. 31) offers an inductive and empirically rooted alternative to overly prescriptive categories. Placing *Jómsvíkinga saga*, or any other saga, within a network of individual works in their material setting has the potential to be a truly dynamic way of conceptualising and visualising relationships between texts in the Icelandic literary and manuscript tradition.

The choice of the exemplar for the translation apparently relies on the assumed relationship between the saga's two major manuscript versions, namely on the premise that the scribe of Holm. Perg. 7 4to shortened the text of the saga as preserved in AM 291 4to. There is a general consensus on this in earlier scholarship, and Þórdís provides several examples from both versions as evidence for the assumption (e.g. pp. 49–51). Nonetheless, her account lacks a conclusive argument against the possibility of the shorter account being expanded in the course of the saga's transmission. The case of *Jómsvíkinga saga* is one of many where the coexistence of shorter and longer versions requires an explanation. However, this aspect of the saga's tradition is not contextualised or otherwise compared with any of the other cases in the corpus of Icelandic literature. Furthermore, it remains unclear why the *Flateyjarbók* version of the saga that 'represents the same redaction as 291 and Perg. 7 but is slightly shorter than 291' (p. 26) has been left out of the discussion.

Alison Finlay is an established translator of Icelandic sagas. As with her previous projects, her aim is to offer as direct or literal a translation as possible. For this reason she chooses, for example, to retain the Icelandic sentence structure and variation in tenses. Background information on Finlay's choices regarding exemplar, translation strategy and rendering of personal names and place names is given in Notes on the Translation (pp. 61–62). She follows Ólafur Halldórsson's 1969 edition of AM 291 4to. The missing parts of the manuscript text are supplied from the *Flateyjarbók* version of the saga in the edition as well as in the translation. These passages are clearly marked in the translation by an **F** in the margin, with information on the exact beginning and the end of each such passage found in the endnotes. Although not mentioned in the Notes, square brackets are used to mark out the less legible text of AM 291 4to as well as the only sentence supplied from AM 310 4to, a manuscript of Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* (p. 127). Normalised Old Icelandic names are used throughout the translation; bynames are usually translated in parentheses when first mentioned in the saga text.

The translation follows the exemplar very closely and Finlay demonstrates an impressive attention to detail by carefully choosing both wording and sentence structure. The literal rendering of the text makes it possible to 'see' the original text behind the translator's English, which is a clear advantage of the chosen strategy. The present work is thus quite different from what has previously been offered by translators. In addition, the decision to translate the fuller version of the text in AM 291 4to offers readers a version of the saga that is almost twice as long as Blake's. The only detail to question here is the inclusion in the translation, where there is no lacuna in the original, of a sentence from the version of Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* in AM 310 4to. Finlay notes (p. 161) that this text is closely related to AM 291 4to in this context, but a fuller rationale would help to convince the reader that the 'emendation' is necessary.

It is unclear what purpose is served by the four grayscale figures on pp. 63–66, since they are not referred to in the main text. Furthermore, Figure 1 represents a reproduction of a map entitled 'Scandinavia and the Baltic in the tenth century', that was originally published in Blake's translation (p. xxix). The map includes key places from the saga narrative such as Jónsborg and Hjørungavágr without any indication of the uncertainty regarding their whereabouts, which seems at odds with the discussion of this question in the introduction. The index is functional but provides little, if any, information on the people and places mentioned. For instance, the entries for 'Jóm' and 'Jónsborg' do not include any information on their identification. The book is thoroughly proof-read; the typos are very few, e.g. 'Widukind of Corey' for Widukind av Corvey (p. 7).

*The Saga of the Jómsvikings* is a volume of great value for many reasons. First, it presents the only direct translation of the oldest and longest version of *Jómsvikinga saga* into English. Second, it makes Þórdís's full study of the saga, written in Icelandic, available to a wider English-speaking public. Third, the book will undoubtedly popularise the saga generally as well as contributing to further scholarly investigation. The translation will most likely be appreciated by both scholars and students as a natural complement to the *Íslenzk fornrit* edition of

*Jómsvíkinga saga* (reviewed above, pp. 160–63), the more so since that edition also adopts the AM 291 version as its primary text. Through the fine scholarly efforts of Finlay and Þórdís, one of the oldest Icelandic sagas has become easier to understand and evaluate without losing a sense of its originality.

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IN PRAYER AND LAUGHTER. ESSAYS ON MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIAN AND GERMANIC MYTHOLOGY, LITERATURE, AND CULTURE. By ANATOLY LIBERMAN. *Paleograph Press*. Moscow, 2016. 588 pp. ISBN 978-5-89526-027-2.

*In Prayer and Laughter* is a collection of essays by one of the leading philologists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, some of which are edited and expanded reprints of works published since 1978, whereas others appear for the first time here. As Liberman himself explains in an excellent introduction setting out his personal and professional background (and thus commendably elucidating the assumptions underlying his work), *In Prayer and Laughter* is not a handbook of pre-Christian mythology (p. 18), but a collection of studies united by the author's strenuous philological and etymological approach, and his interest in the culture and mythologies of the Germanic Iron Age. The work is not without occasional issues, but these are overwhelmingly overshadowed by the value of the book as a whole: its methodological exposition, thorough engagement with source material, wide-ranging surveys of secondary literature (particularly early scholarship no longer in common circulation), and challenging reading of familiar scenes and figures combine to make *In Prayer and Laughter* a book that deserves to be examined again and again in coming years.

*In Prayer and Laughter* contains twenty-one chapters, mostly focused on mythological figures: Óðinn, Loki and Baldr appear repeatedly, alongside less-studied individuals like Þjálfi (pp. 123–41), Lytír (pp. 261–69) and Heiðrún (pp. 337–46). Alongside this majority is a smaller number of shorter chapters exploring particular questions such as the meaning of OE *īsig* in *Beowulf*<sup>34</sup> (which Liberman argues is a poetic synonym for 'metallic', pp. 270–78), the potential reconstruction of a Germanic verb *\*sendan* 'to sacrifice [a human being]' (pp. 279–90) and the origin of *Edda* as a title for Snorri's *ars poetica* (Liberman suggests it refers to the feathers of an eider duck, similar to the aetiology of *Grágás*'s appellation; pp. 395–405). This essayistic approach frees Liberman from any requirement for a complete coverage of extant Old Norse myth, allowing his studies to be as long or short as they need to be to cover the evidence and its interpretations. *In Prayer and Laughter* is thus not something I would recommend as a whole to an undergraduate interested in mythology (though I would absolutely endorse individual chapters as reading for an essay), particularly as some key figures and themes in pre-Christian myth appear only in passing (Þórr, *ásynjur*, the *Æsir/Vanir* divide) or not at all (Ragnarøk, *álfar*). The lack of translations and transliterations in some, if not all, sections would be another barrier for such an audience.

For postgraduates and scholars from non-philological backgrounds, however, *In Prayer and Laughter* deserves to become a standard work, especially given the care and detail with which Liberman engages with and is willing to explain his critique of earlier etymologies.

Methodologically, Liberman's approach is philological, and relies heavily on etymology. While etymology is not the same as contemporary meaning, *In Prayer and Laughter's* sustained interest in the reconstruction of early forms of pre-Christian mythology makes this method ideal, and Liberman is refreshingly willing to admit that in some cases even the most experienced historical linguist cannot be sure of the origins or understandings of relevant terms (e.g. *berserkr*, p. 104; *þulr*, pp. 392–93)—at which points he typically turns to interpretive reading of textual sources with equal adroitness. Unusual in recent scholarship is the time and effort put into surveying older interpretations, even those with which the author vehemently disagrees, something contemporary publishing conventions increasingly seem to discourage. (This development can surely be traced, at least in part, to the modern academy's focus on publishing as often, and thus as briefly, as possible.) Particularly interesting is Liberman's willingness to reconsider now-discredited approaches such as Nature Mythology—which, while Liberman himself does not mention it, seems to have recently given birth to a modern descendant in the form of eco-criticism (e.g. A. Mathias Valentin Nordvig's 2013 PhD dissertation, 'The Old Norse Mythical Worldview in an Eco-Mythological Perspective' or Christopher Abram's 2019 *Ecology and Catastrophe in Old Norse Myth and Literature*), thus proving the value of such periodic reassessments. Liberman makes clear his distaste for cross-cultural comparativism repeatedly and at length (similar critiques of structuralism are perhaps no longer as necessary as they were when some chapters were first published). I think this is rather a shame, as many of the arguments advanced in *In Prayer and Laughter* would find support in the more sociologically-informed Study of Religion, such as Liberman's interest in the individualisation of early 'gods' from 'spirits' or 'demons' (p. 315, cf. Robert N. Bellah's 2011 *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Palaeolithic to the Axial Age*), or his proposal that the etymological background of the Swedish *raggen* 'demon, devil' might lie in notions of shagginess or hairiness (p. 331, cf. Terry Gunnell's 2007 edited collection, *Masks and Mummung in the Nordic Area*). Still, given Liberman's professed interest in myth as literature (p. 13), not part of a lived religion, his position is understandable and consistent.

Liberman's critiques can border on the acerbic (even when he has only had access to one-page abstracts of much larger works, e.g. p. 69), which is at odds with the humility with which he presents some of his own arguments (e.g. p. 385). I also strongly reject his assertion that 'Scandinavian mythology has been studied so well that outsiders should probably leave it to specialists' (p. 218), and believe that we should welcome, be willing to engage with, and, where necessary, offer constructive criticism to non-specialists interested in our field. Regardless of whether we agree with any individual approach, such external interest helps us and the field grow and learn.

Let us return to the (many) positives of *In Prayer and Laughter*. A review cannot do justice to the great number of lengthy, nuanced positions Liberman develops, and I will therefore briefly note only some of his conclusions that struck me as particularly challenging, useful or well-presented. Of immediate value are his exhaustive critical surveys of the etymology of a range of mythological names, particularly Óðinn (pp. 30–35), Loki (pp. 175–95), Baldr (pp. 241–60). (The occasional biographical details that emerge in such reviews can also be highly entertaining, such as the account of a plagiarised argument at the Viking Club, the venerable predecessor to the Viking Society for Northern Research, in 1895 (p. 400).) Liberman’s extensive knowledge enables him to propose a number of reconstructions of early Germanic mythology, such as his proposal that Óðinn developed out of a Wild Hunt-like mass of spirits—becoming first its leader/pursuer, then a personification of ‘active’ death (as opposed to the ‘passive’ figure of Loki as the personification of a chthonic grave, p. 191), then a war-god, then receiving layers of Sámi influence, before thus becoming the god of death, warfare, magic and poetry familiar from extant sources (pp. 23–86, esp. p. 85). I was also struck by Liberman’s attempt to rehabilitate Loki as a (more-or-less) regular member of Æsir society, who became the villain of the mythological drama later presented by Snorri only late in the pagan period (p. 162)—a suggestion that challenged my own assumptions of Loki’s inherent Otherness, and requires further reflection. Liberman’s lengthy study of the relationship between Baldr and Hǫðr also deserves mention, particularly for its challenging reassessment of how Snorri’s account may reflect only a very late, localised version of events. While Liberman’s work thus allows significant diachronic analysis, he is reassuringly keen to stress that, in a synchronic context, mythology was not seen on a coherent timeline (pp. 85, 201), and that considerable variation would have existed within a ‘single’ tradition (p. 90). This is another point that could have received support from the study of Old Norse religion, rather than just myth; e.g. Fredrik Svanberg’s *Death Rituals in South-East Scandinavia AD 800–1000: Decolonizing the Viking Age* (2003); Andreas Nordberg, ‘Continuity, Change and Regional Variation in Old Norse Religion’ in *More than Mythology: Narratives, Ritual Practices and Regional Distribution in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religions* (2012).

I am less convinced by Liberman’s apparent conviction that many Nordic deities once had theomorphic stages to their conception (Óðinn as a horse-god, pp. 61–64; Týr as a wolf-god, p. 91; Baldr as a stag-god, pp. 229–30), in the absence of a dedicated explanation of the reasoning behind this position. Also problematic is the occasional over-literal reading of our sources, such as the assertion that Óðinn must have had foot support to allow him to hang on a tree for nine nights (p. 249), which overlooks the divine nature of the hanging’s victim. Similarly, Liberman’s reading of the extant material sometimes seems, to my mind, overly rationalised: he argues that Loki’s punishment following the death of Baldr was a recent development, at least partially on the basis of the ‘inconsistent’ nature of the available sources and lack of sufficient preparation for Sigyn’s arrival on the scene (p. 167). His argument that Fensalir ‘must have been situated under water, that is, in the underworld’ (p. 217) makes no allowances for the way various mythological

protagonists seem to be able to travel freely to and from Frigg's home. I accept that the etymology of Fensalir suggests it was (once?) an underworld (and probably underwater) afterlife destination, but do not necessarily expect this to appear in any given mythological narrative. A final example occurs during Liberman's discussion of *berserkir* in *Hrafnsmál*, who he says 'must have fought without armour because they believed in their magical invulnerability or at least their immunity to "iron"' (p. 109). Liberman is clearly drawing here on Snorri's description of *berserkir* in *Ynglinga saga*, but *Hrafnsmál* makes no mention of any such invulnerability. Given the centuries between the composition of the poem and Snorri's prose account, some care is called for in the transference of such motifs between contexts.

*In Prayer and Laughter* is a challenging book in many ways, and not only to review in a few hundred words. Liberman's work is technically accomplished, wide-ranging, well presented and provocative. Reading it as a whole repays the considerable investment of time and attention that it demands. I encourage everyone with an interest in early Germanic culture, Old Norse or Anglo-Saxon philology, and particularly pre-Christian mythology, to read *In Prayer and Laughter*.

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POPULÄRE MYTHEN. DARSTELLUNG UND VERMITTLUNG NORDISCHER MYTHOLOGIE UM 1900. By JENNIFER BADEN. *Winter*. Heidelberg, 2017. 383 pp. ISBN 978-3-8253-6665-0.

The study of the reception of Old Norse–Icelandic literature and mythology has long been an important branch of the field as a whole, but it seems to have picked up speed in recent years. Various volumes dedicated to the study of the reception and/or transmission of saga literature and Eddic prose and poetry have appeared, among them anthologies like *Old Norse Made New* (ed. Carl Phepstead and David Clark, 2007), or more recently *Studies in the Transmission and Reception of Old Norse Literature. The Hyperborean Muse in European Culture* (ed. Judy Quinn and Maria Adele Cipolla, 2016; reviewed in *Saga-Book* XLI (2017), 170–73). Projects have been devoted to 'The Norse Muse in Britain' (directed by Margaret Clunies Ross and Lars Lönnroth) and the reception of the Eddas (led by Julia Zernack). Additionally, several doctoral theses such as Jessica Clare Hancock's study of the transformation of gender identity in the reception of the Völsung legend (2014), and Ian Felce's recently published study of William Morris's saga translations (2018; reviewed in this issue of *Saga-Book*, pp. 201–04), have investigated the reception of Norse literatures. Many of these studies focus on reception in the creative arts. By addressing popular academic engagements with Norse myth, Jennifer Baden's *Populäre Mythen*, the published version of her 2014 doctoral thesis, adds an important dimension to the field of reception studies.

Baden focuses on books published in Germany and Scandinavia around the year 1900 whose main purpose was to present and distribute knowledge about Norse mythology to a wide readership including students as well as interested laypeople.

In doing so she uses a decidedly interdisciplinary methodology that combines literary approaches with bibliographical and book-historical investigations of the materiality of the published object. The author also considers the socio-historical and industrial context that enabled the increased production of popular volumes and series for a largely bourgeois readership. The overall emphasis lies on the way in which (academic) knowledge is popularised, on what knowledge is included in popularised accounts of Norse myth and on the role these popular publications have within the scholarly discourse of the field. Studies of the popularisation of academic knowledge have so far focused largely on the natural sciences, and Baden's application of perspectives developed in this context to an area of the humanities is part of a recent shift within this field.

Chapters 1 and 2 both serve as introductions: after giving an overview of the research questions, the way the corpus of texts under consideration was delimited temporally and thematically and a review of general scholarship (contextualisations of specific scholarship are included in the individual chapters), the author turns to a discussion of relevant terminology. Particularly interesting is the discussion of the use and connotations of various terms applied to Norse mythology, such as German, Germanic, Teutonic, Norse and Nordic, and the way usage of these terms shifts across Germany and Scandinavia as well as over the period under consideration. Also addressed is the use of Norse mythology in the context of nationalist discourses.

Chapter 3 introduces several types of survey of Norse mythology. Starting with early examples like Magnús Ólafsson's *Laufás Edda*, Baden traces the development of such overviews, their structure, and the connections of Norse myth with other mythologies. She focuses primarily on encyclopaedias and schoolbooks in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, discussing the reasons for the increased interest in Norse myth around this time in both Germany and Scandinavia. Finally, the author offers a typology of such surveys that includes academic handbooks, schoolbooks, different types of surveys for a popular audience, and retellings.

Chapter 4 turns to trade-book series that published popular introductions to and surveys of Norse mythology. The emphasis in this chapter is on the material properties of such books, on their paratextual features as well as the way in which size, quality, advertising and price of a publication relate to the popularisation of knowledge, and to the audience this knowledge was intended for. The comparison between the German book series published by a commercial publishing house, *Sammlung Götschen*, and the Swedish series produced by a student society, *Studentföreningen Verdandis småskrifter*, often remains implicit. Baden does connect the two: for example, when exploring the context in which author affiliations are mentioned, in the context of advertising, or when she discusses the typography of the volumes. However, the implications for the different agendas behind the two series (selling knowledge to high-school students or people from bourgeois backgrounds with prior experience, and distributing knowledge to people without much of a formal education in the name of social justice) remain somewhat under-explored. Instead, the changes in the editorial practice of *Verdandis småskrifter* made in 1930, which seem to have aligned this series more closely with the aims

of *Sammlung Göschen*, are discussed in detail, as are the paratextual properties of the *Göschen* volumes in particular. This ultimately enables the author to draw conclusions about the formal conceptualisation of popular knowledge, especially in contrast with scholarly publications.

This is followed by a consideration of retellings of Norse myth and their function in the generation of (popular) knowledge in Chapter 5. Here Baden uses a narratological approach to explore the transformation of mythological knowledge in popular retellings. She concentrates specifically on the narrative strategies employed in this context, aiming to reconsider what constitutes a retelling. Popular retellings of mythology have so far mostly been studied in the context of books for children and young adults. Baden chooses one text for a younger audience, Viktor Rydberg's *Fädernas gudasaga*, but supplements her analysis with a reading of Elard Hugo Meyer's *Mythologie der Germanen*. Considering the framing and choice of material of each in turn, the author navigates the relationship between (re-)telling and the constitution and distribution of knowledge. She concludes that the communication and popularisation of knowledge is ultimately connected by the transformation of the source material by current scholarship.

The sixth and final chapter is devoted exclusively to the popularisation of mythological knowledge, and how it in turn shapes scholarly discourse. Baden situates the 'popular' as a category in the geographical and temporal context of her study, noting its contrast to the 'scholarly', and the negative connotations the term has in Germany, but not in Scandinavia. Returning to the series discussed in Chapter 4, she analyses different ways in which popular knowledge is constituted, before turning to (Norse) mythology as a particular object of knowledge. Baden draws on Starobinski's work on fable and mythology, linking it to the popularisation of Norse mythology that necessarily resorts to fable when distributing and thus constituting popular knowledge that is informed by scholarly approaches. This ultimately connects fable and mythology, resulting in a popular mythology. Finally, Baden discusses how the popularisation and constitution of knowledge operates across different genres, which also enables her to draw conclusions about the popularisation process and its participants. A short conclusion completes the study.

The volume includes twenty-three colour tables and fourteen black-and-white figures to contextualise the material aspects discussed in Chapter 4, and a comprehensive appendix of popular surveys of Norse mythology. Owing to the broad range of topics and methods employed, some questions are necessarily left unanswered, such as whether, or how, the material aspects of the books and series discussed in Chapter 4 are related to their content, and thus to the knowledge these publications are intended to present and distribute. This is a minor criticism, however, and does not detract from the fact that this volume, with its wealth of information and combination of critical approaches, will be an important resource for anyone interested in the reception and popularisation of Norse mythology in Germany and Scandinavia at the turn of the nineteenth century.

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THE SAINT AND THE SAGA HERO. HAGIOGRAPHY AND EARLY ICELANDIC LITERATURE. By SIÂN E. GRÖNLIE. *D. S. Brewer*. Cambridge, 2017. xi + 260 pp. ISBN 978-1-84384-481-5.

In her introductory chapter, 'Saints' Lives and Sagas of Icelanders', Siân E. Grønlie succinctly states the aim of this book, which is

not to reiterate nor to revisit arguments about the origins of the sagas of Icelanders, but rather to look at the ways in which sagas engaged creatively with saints' lives over the medieval period: from Oddr's experimentation with native hagiography to the large fourteenth-century compilations of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and *Óláfs saga helga*, which juxtapose saint's life and saga in such a way as to challenge the boundaries of both genres (p. 36).

Grønlie begins by examining the characteristics of hagiography as a literary genre and the development of saints' lives in Iceland with a view to their influence on the Sagas of Icelanders. Following an overview of translated and native hagiography and also a discussion of sanctity outside the saint's life, she turns to the complex and much debated issue of saga genre. She rightly argues that the sagas did not evolve out of saints' lives and proposes that the so-called polysystem theory developed by Itamar Even-Zohar best serves as a model for understanding the relationship between the saints' lives and the Sagas of Icelanders, arguing that by using this theory 'one no longer has to think of genre in terms of linear development' and that instead 'competition between genres is recognised as a creative and energising literary process' (p. 36).

Chapter 2, 'The Failed Saint: Oddr Snorrason's Óláfr Tryggvason', presents a close reading of the Icelandic translation of Oddr Snorrason's late twelfth-century Latin saga of Óláfr Tryggvason, which has been hailed as the first Icelandic saga. Grønlie demonstrates how it draws on different genres, including the Bible, heroic epic, saints' lives and folklore. Special attention is paid to Oddr's difficulties in composing this work. As Grønlie points out, 'in this early experimentation, we see the first signs of creative interplay and tension between Latin saint's life and vernacular saga' (p. 40). Grønlie concludes that even though Oddr was unable to portray Óláfr Tryggvason as a saint, he nonetheless managed to present him as a great Christian hero.

In Chapter 3, 'The Confessor, the Martyr and the Convert', Grønlie examines *Egils saga* and *Hrafnkels saga*, whose eponymous heroes are very different from royal saints, and which counter some of Oddr's assertions, especially his firm resolve to combine sanctity, missionary activities and royal power. In both sagas, she points to borrowings from hagiographical motifs. *Egils saga* is in her view the *vita* of a pagan poet, while *Hrafnkels saga* is a kind of exemplum.

The examination of the use of hagiographical narratives by the composers of the Sagas of Icelanders is taken further in Chapters 4 and 5, 'The Noble Heathen and the Missionary Saint' and 'The Outlaw, the Exile and the Desert Saint'. In the former, Grønlie examines accounts of the introduction of Christianity in Iceland and the official Conversion. More specifically, she looks at how the missions to Iceland are described in the Sagas of Icelanders, especially *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Njáls saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*. She notes that

although each saga focuses on a different aspect of mission and conversion, it is noticeable that they all share a central concern with salvation and damnation; they widen the scope of the ‘classical’ saga by integrating it into an eschatological framework, entering into the story of how human acts in this world will be rewarded or punished in the next (p. 161).

In the latter, she investigates how interaction with hagiography also made the composers of the Sagas of Icelanders explore the inner life by examining notions of sin, temptation and *peregrinatio*. More specifically, she shows how the legends of desert saints enriched the Sagas of Icelanders through concepts of the wilderness ‘as a “setting for eschatological drama”, as a “site of contest with evil” and finally as a “redemptive space” for the cultivation of interiority’ (p. 164). *Gisla saga*, *Flóamanna saga* and *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, which all take place in the wilderness of Iceland or Greenland, are at the forefront of the discussion.

In Chapter 7, ‘The Saint as Friend and Patron’, Grønlie returns to Óláfr Tryggvason, a saintly king, and Óláfr Haraldsson, a royal saint, and examines their royal and saintly interference in or influence on the lives and careers of Sigmundur Brestisson, Hallfreðr Óttarsson vandræðaskáld, Kjartan Ólafsson, Þorkell Eyjólfsson, Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld, Björn Hítðelakappi and Grettir Ásmundarson. She demonstrates that the sagas discussed (primarily *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa*, *Fóstbræðra saga*, *Færeyinga saga*, *Grettis saga*, *Hallfreðar saga* and *Laxdæla saga*)

overlap with hagiography to varying degrees from the sustained engagement that characterises *Hallfreðar saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga*, to the minor motif of the garter-as-relic in *Bjarnar saga Hítðelakappa*, to the self-consciously literary dialogue with the saint’s life in the moral psychology of *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* (p. 254).

She draws attention to the fact that the two Óláfrs have a variety of clearly defined roles in these sagas, and that these roles range from ‘proselytising hero to salvific agent, from moral authority to mediator between words’ (p. 254).

The final chapter, ‘Conclusion’, summarises the main arguments of the book. These include: 1) the Sagas of Icelanders cannot be approached in a literary vacuum (trite but true); 2) the polysystem theory is helpful for understanding the interaction between literary genres, especially in Iceland; 3) as saga writing develops, there are struggles and competitions with regard to genre; and 4) the saint’s life extends into the repertoire of the Sagas of Icelanders, yet the latter also distance themselves from the saint’s ontological certainties. The bottom line and the main conclusion is that

the saga develops and defines itself as a genre through its difference from the saint’s life; it becomes self-reflexive through the process of relating to this major literary revival. Precisely because the Sagas of Icelanders are in some sense peripheral, they are able to engage both compellingly and critically with some of the central narratives of medieval Christianity (p. 264).

*The Saint and the Saga Hero* presents a milestone in research on the influence of religious literature (hagiography) on Old Norse–Icelandic sagas. It is a product

of assured and thorough scholarship. This résumé of the book does not do it full justice, because much of the work's strength is in the observation of details, which Grønlie navigates with clarity. Her knowledge of the field of Old Norse–Icelandic literature is vast, and her arguments throughout the book, marshalled by solid evidence, are authoritative and convincing. This well-structured and beautifully written book is a pleasure to read and learn from. I have nothing but admiration for *The Saint and the Saga Hero*. It is a must-read for saga scholars.

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DAMNATION AND SALVATION IN OLD NORSE LITERATURE. By HAKI ANTONSSON. *Studies in Old Norse Literature* 3. D. S. Brewer. Cambridge, 2018. xiii + 257 pp. ISBN 978-1-84384-507-2.

This monograph provides a wide-ranging analysis of the neglected topic of soteriological themes in Old Norse poetry and prose and, in doing so, considers how anxieties about individuals' post-death destinations influence the depictions of their preceding lives. Haki Antonsson's approach in this publication is, therefore, particularly admirable in regularly grounding his analyses of depictions of the afterlife within the context of secular matters influenced by them: this work should be commended for its deft synthesis of the spiritual and the socio-political. As the third volume in *Studies in Old Norse Literature*, it continues the strong emphasis of the series on offering incisive thematic approaches to the Old Norse literary corpus.

The book is composed largely of a series of close readings of episodes from the *Íslendingasögur*, *konungasögur*, *samtíðarsögur* and a range of *þættir*, with select references to the *fornaldarsögur* and Eddic and skaldic verses. These interpretations often make productive reference to one another, providing links within the volume that span its thematic chapters. The author's proficiency as a historian is also made evident through the frequent provision of relevant context, most notably concerning the Sturlung Age, to augment the literary criticism. The decision to devote the majority of both the introduction and the conclusion to further close readings, however, does mean that the unity of the book as a whole is left to the inference of the reader. While the author professes to offer no overall theory of salvation and damnation (p. 3), and the reading of *Njáls saga* that takes the place of a conclusion is enlightening, it would have been useful to have a more purposeful structure to tie together the various strands of the text's argumentation.

The volume is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1, 'Confession and Penance', deals with these twin means by which individuals could increase their chances of salvation. The little-studied *Harmsól* and *Sólarljóð* are read as penitential poetry, while the extended reading of *Gísls þáttur Illugasonar* illuminates how *topoi* of the *þáttur* form are manipulated to fit a salvific model. Chapter 2, 'Life's Journey towards Salvation: Salvation and the Biographical Pattern', largely focuses on literary constructions of the ambiguous fates of notable deceased figures and the cases made for the relative likelihood of their damnation or salvation. The

analysis of the biographical tradition devoted to Óláfr Tryggvason and the variety of methods by which his death (or escape) at Svǫldr are interpreted is of specific note. Chapter 3, 'Betrayal', and Chapter 4, 'Outlaws and Marginal Figures', focus on the moral dichotomy produced by immoral or extra-legal action. In the former, the redemption of the betrayed is contrasted with the perdition of the betrayer, the literary model of the martyrdom of St Thomas Becket being argued, convincingly, to have influenced the structure of *Borgils saga skarða* and *Hrafn saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*. With regard to outlaws, it is suggested that the inability of such figures to ensure their redemption, both in this life and the next, unites Gísli Súrsson, Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld and Grettir Ásmundarson. The contrast subsequently established with the less well known *Arons saga Hjǫrleifssonar* is very interesting and demonstrates this text's unusual status as both an outlaw saga and a *samtíðarsaga*. Chapter 5, 'Salvation, Damnation and the Visible World', concerns the various spaces in which salvific issues come to be localised or concentrated. The significance of terrestrial, aerial and aquatic settings is considered, as are related issues as diverse as mound burial, relic culture and prophetic dreams. A fascinating analysis of the spiritual connotations of the four cardinal directions concludes the chapter. Chapter 6, 'The Hour of Death', argues that depictions of deathbed scenes are carefully structured to suggest the dying figure's likelihood of salvation. The highly politicised and evocative reading of Karl Jónsson's rendition of Sverrir Sigurðarson's dying moments argues persuasively for the scene as an apologia intended to counter religious opposition to the king. Chapter 7, 'Last Things and Judgement Day', as mentioned above, is dominated by a selection of readings from *Njáls saga*.

The author's analysis is cogent throughout and the twin themes of salvation and damnation are consistently demonstrated to be highly relevant to all the texts discussed in this monograph. The frequent references to St Óláfr, which span many of the chapters, are particularly important and rightly affirm his centrality to these themes, in having achieved certain salvation himself and in being best positioned to increase the chance of salvation for other Norse people. One might take issue, however, with the argument for a binary understanding of the characters of Magnús inn góði and Haraldr harðráði, as indicative of the differences in their hopes of salvation (pp. 184–89). While the two men certainly differ in temperament, Haraldr is depicted with considerable nuance in *Morkinskinna*, with demonstrations of his wisdom, humour and generosity intermingled with those of his irascibility. Haraldr's salvation is arguably as assured as that of Magnús as, in the *Morkinskinna* account, he comes to be buried in the monastery at Elgiset, which he founded and funded, a patronage that compels the monastic community to intercede via prayer to facilitate Haraldr's swifter relief from Purgatory.

One deficit in an otherwise comprehensive volume is that baptism is only briefly covered in the discussion of the variety of positive and negative associations of water (pp. 159–61). Considering the theological importance of the completion of the baptismal rite in ensuring an individual's salvation, one might have expected it to be discussed as extensively as confession and penance, as canon law holds that these acts of penitence only cause the soul to revert to the state initially afforded

through the sacrament of baptism. Beyond this, the only issue of note is the rather large number of typographical errors, which are particularly concentrated in the provided translations and occasionally have the unfortunate effect of partially obscuring their otherwise idiomatic and engaging style (e.g. pp. 87, 88, 107, 173). These are, however, minor points: *Damnation and Salvation in Old Norse Literature* is an important contribution to the study of Old Norse literature for its demonstration that issues that influence a character's behaviour extend beyond the body's terminal point.

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SUPERNATURAL ENCOUNTERS IN OLD NORSE LITERATURE AND TRADITION. Edited by DANIEL SÄVBORG and KAREN BEK-PEDERSEN. *Brepols*. Turnhout, 2018. viii + 266 pp. 6 black-and-white illustrations, 2 tables. ISBN 978-2-503-57531-5.

This volume contains eleven entries arising from the 2014 conference of the Old Norse Folklorists Network. It examines how the supernatural was conceptualised, expressed and/or employed artistically, didactically and politically in medieval Iceland and continental Scandinavia. Many entries refer to folklore documented in later periods, whether to illuminate the medieval texts or to identify continuities and changes across geographic and temporal divides.

Sävborg and Bek-Pedersen's introduction is commendable in many respects. It surveys the history of supernatural studies in Old Norse–Icelandic, as well as outlining some enduring and fresh debates on the topic. However, at times it seems an independent manifesto rather than an outline of principles that conceptually bind the entries of this specific volume. First, it advocates the recognition of the connection between supernatural episodes and 'real belief' as essential to the progression of this field, criticising their analysis solely as literary motifs. The editors pay little attention to the manner in which literary scholarship has developed new capacities to recognise and examine supernatural episodes through theoretical and symbolic modes, irrespective of their admittedly possible link to belief. This approach has been demonstrated prolifically by Ármann Jakobsson, for example, both elsewhere and as this volume's first contributor. Second, the editors champion the rehabilitation of reconstructive principles in Old Norse–Icelandic studies. However, only two entries employ reconstruction, one with emphatic caution, and the majority of contributors eschew such techniques, sometimes adamantly and explicitly.

Ármann Jakobsson presents the first dedicated study of *Bergþúá þáttur*. The most significant of its numerous insights is the effect of the *þáttur*'s focalisation through two characters, who serve as audience avatars. The *þáttur* thus presents two avenues for encountering the paranormal, as well as the forbidding natural world or late-medieval conceptions of paganism, with which the *bergþúá* is conceptually aligned. Because the *bergþúá* is largely undescribed, this *þáttur* is a perfect vehicle for inaugurating Ármann's ambitious re-mapping of the paranormal in Old

Norse–Icelandic literature, which turns the lens from the uncanny Other toward the human perceiver. I look forward to further exploration of this re-mapping in Ármann Jakobsson and Miriam Mayburd's forthcoming edited collection (Medieval Institute Publications, 2019).

Bettina Sommer employs references from before, during and after the medieval period to reconsider traditional interpretations of pre-Christian *jól* as a festival welcoming back deceased ancestors. Sommer suggests instead that this was a liminal period, during which adherents performatively created the new year. Her methodical scrutiny of the relative temporal and proximal frequencies of different explanations of *jól* is already persuasive, but her conclusions are made all the more incontrovertible by the admirable caution of her reconstructive practices. Unfortunately, Sommer's article is hampered somewhat by inadequate copy-editing.

This collection is invaluable to scholars interested in the figure of Selkolla—an uncanny, seal-headed female, described in numerous medieval Icelandic sagas and later legends—who dominates the next three entries. Bengt af Klintberg aims to identify consistencies between medieval Icelandic Selkolla narratives and their analogues in later Scandinavian (primarily Swedish) legends. He surmises that these parallels warrant investigation of possible oral/textual influence or 'shared belief complexes'. However, a conclusion at which he repeatedly arrives is that Selkolla (perhaps unsurprisingly) resembles the monsters of medieval Icelandic literature as much as or more than their continental, folkloric counterparts. Moreover, though excused by his self-proclaimed lack of expertise in sagas, af Klintberg raises numerous ostensible quandaries that do have instructive parallels in medieval saga literature, including the sexuality of revenants, which Cormack notes in the next entry.

Margaret Cormack's impressive contribution shares some of af Klintberg's primary aims. She first provides a more comprehensive and nuanced treatment of parallels to the Selkolla stories in Edda and saga. Contemplating the didactic potential of medieval Selkolla narratives, Cormack also considers their social commentaries regarding baptism and illicit sex. Her treatment of later folklore is also compelling. Where af Klintberg laments the absence of other part-human, part-seal entities in 'later legend', Cormack is able to identify two such instances. Their closer analogy to Selkolla is perhaps (again unsurprisingly) explained by their more proximate origins to the medieval narratives: in Icelandic, rather than Swedish, folklore. Cormack does note numerous continental parallels, including some highlighted also in af Klintberg's entry. However, her primary post-medieval analogues are nineteenth- and twentieth-century Icelandic stories, which more assuredly reveal direct oral/textual influence from the medieval Selkolla.

Mart Kuldkepp's contribution focuses on the *Selkolluvisur*, a fourteenth-century poem that imitates older skaldic and Eddic verse. Drawing on the work of Margaret Clunies Ross, Kuldkepp notes that the *Selkolluvisur* represent deliberately grandiose mediations of the folklore surrounding Guðmundr Arason, intended to support his canonisation. Kuldkepp expands Clunies Ross's statements, partially via work by Marlene Ciklamini on Guðmundr as a syncretic figure, to explain how motifs associated with pre-Christian culture could be used to elevate someone in

a Christian context. Kuldkepp's primary innovation is his demonstration that the poem reworks skaldic and Eddic tropes, specifically *kenningar* and *heiti*, to bear orthodox devotional content in a form steeped in cultural capital.

Marteinn Helgi Sigurðsson also discusses the ghost-busting exploits of Guðmundr Arason. He considers their resemblance to those of Grettir Ásmundarson, an analogy that Marteinn notes has already been signalled by Örnólfur Thorsson. Though not cited here, Marlene Ciklamini and Siân Grønlie have also observed similar connections. Marteinn undoubtedly expands upon the work of these scholars, suggesting that the narrative traditions surrounding Grettir and Guðmundr might have influenced one another, and that audiences recognised the two characters as foils for each other. He advances a compelling argument that the two could have been conceptualised typologically, with Guðmundr—the more comprehensively spiritual and successful Christian hero—serving as Grettir's 'second coming'.

Arngrímur Vídalín combines an impressive depth of research and breadth of reference to literary and learned primary source materials to discuss how medieval Icelanders coped with their marginality in relation to Mediterranean and Eastern sites of religio-cultural capital. Though his opening statement of the groundbreaking nature of this focus is over-bold—see, for example, the work of Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough, John Lindow and Sverrir Jakobsson in this area—his entry does present a cogent addition to the study of centres and peripheries in Old Norse–Icelandic. Arngrímur describes the medieval Icelandic literati's two-pronged approach to the problem. First, they employed creative genealogy and euhemerism to connect themselves to the universal histories of Classical and Christian mythology. Second, they defined themselves against even more marginal and monstrous locales, such as Vinland and Northern Scandinavia.

Jan Ragnar Hagland considers references to 'waking up trolls' in Icelandic and continental Scandinavian laws, which in some cases persisted long after the Middle Ages. Hagland's article helpfully collates and translates many relevant sources. However, beyond identifying this array of instances, Hagland makes only modest claims to analysis. His primary assertion is that such locutions were bywords for non-Christian activity. These references might also reflect 'real belief' in trollish beings, as well as validating religiously focused interpretations of their appearance in literary sources. The article is somewhat hampered by its diffuse style, perhaps reflecting its origins as a conference paper.

Miriam Mayburd's brilliant essay radically rethinks prior scholarly assumptions about *dvergar* 'dwarves'. She resists the urge to examine them as either remnants of pre-Christian belief or literary symbols of any human demographic. Rather, she proceeds from the premise that their only unifying feature is their connection to rocks and minerals. She suggests that *dvergar* reflect medieval conceptions of the power, utility and even vitality of such substances. Her points are bolstered by astute references to lapidaries and charms in other medieval contexts. Altogether, her entry is a refreshing call for a return to first principles.

Eldar Heide begins by interpreting *Þorsteins þátrr bæjarmagns* in its medieval context, drawing on prior scholarship on its re-use of myth. Heide's own, convincing, innovation is the contention that *Þorsteins þátrr* redresses the humiliation

caused by Þórr's powerlessness against Útgarða-Loki, endowing its own tiny hero with power over sight and illusion. His second argument is far more speculative. Noting that *Þorsteins þátrr's* inconsistencies might indicate clumsy accretion, Heide suggests that a nineteenth-century Icelandic legend sheds light on the *þátrr's* putative source material. Finnur Jónsson has compared the two before, though presuming influence in the opposite direction. Though Heide's hypothesis is plausible, his rhetoric is somewhat problematic. His argument comes close to treating the extant legend as an unchanged representation of a hypothetical medieval source, downplaying possible emendation throughout its own transmission history. Suggesting that both texts might draw on the same long-standing body of motifs would be more judicious without undermining Heide's point.

Philip Lavender's contribution follows his prior work in encouraging greater scholarly interest in *Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra*. Considering similar questions to those addressed by Heide, Lavender interrogates whether the saga's ostensible clumsiness indicates its imperfect redaction of earlier source materials. However, unlike previous scholars and even some early modern scribes, Lavender methodically and persuasively defends the possibility that these apparent incongruities are explicable, and even defensible from an artistic point of view, with reference to a range of other sagas.

This volume's entries are varied and stimulating; some are even groundbreaking. On the whole, it represents a valuable contribution to the burgeoning study of the supernatural in Old Norse–Icelandic.

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THE TROLL INSIDE YOU: PARANORMAL ACTIVITY IN THE MEDIEVAL NORTH. By ÁRMANN JAKOBSSON. *Punctum Books*. Goleta, 2017. xvi + 240 pp. ISBN 978-1-947447-00-4.

Ármann Jakobsson's *The Troll Inside You* is the product of the research project 'Encounters with the Paranormal in Medieval Iceland'. Despite the specific nature of the source material (primarily the Sagas of Icelanders, or *Íslendingasögur*), Ármann presents this book as an entry point to scholars of any period or place who seek to engage with the paranormal. The book comprises thirty brief chapters, each of 3–6 pages—what Ármann refers to in aggregate as a 'case study of general interest' (p. xiii). Notes are presented as endnotes; this prevents them from overwhelming the main text, and at sixty-three pages (nearly thirty percent of the book itself) they provide the reader with a wealth of nuancing detail and references. Because of the brief nature of the chapters, and because much of the material either continues from one chapter into another, or is repeated between chapters, this review will similarly approach *The Troll Inside You* in aggregate, rather than discussing each chapter individually.

In these chapters, Ármann elegantly resists the danger of drowning his reader in examples; instead, he selects particularly representative characters, figures and episodes. These are presented and discussed in detail, but while the presentation

may occupy the better part of a single chapter, the discussion is developed over multiple chapters, with Ármann drawing upon different aspects of a particular scene or character in his analysis of such diverse themes as language and its use, literary geography and spatial construction, social relationships and the nature of fear. The chapters thus overlap and interlock, and while they are occasionally repetitive this method of presentation also reinforces many of Ármann's arguments. The gendered nature of magic and its use, for example, is relevant in multiple contexts; the lack of a clear taxonomy of paranormal beings underpins their flexibility both as literary figures and as expressions of particularly human anxieties and conflicts.

Throughout the book, Ármann eschews precise terminology in favour of broadly similar related concepts. The choice is deliberate: he wants to avoid allowing readers to become distracted by present-day conceptual categories such as 'troll', 'ogre', 'vampire' or 'zombie'. As the book's title suggests, it is particularly necessary to highlight the polysemy of ON *troll* within the sagas; the semantic narrowing that has occurred over time has led to a cognate in present-day English, *troll*, which refers primarily to an ugly, usually hostile, creature (and, by extension, to a person who makes unsolicited controversial comments on the internet). However, in Old Norse *troll* could refer to an ambiguously magical paranormal being, someone who uses magic, the act of using magic, and even something or someone that has had magic done to it, or them. Thus, the limited semantic field afforded to readers by present-day English severely limits (and, indeed, as Ármann argues, has in the past greatly obstructed) a properly contextualised understanding of both paranormal beings and the state of magic in medieval Iceland. Ármann demonstrates similar issues not only with words used for paranormal beings (e.g. ON *draugr* and *alfr*), but also words used to describe 'harnessing the paranormal' (p. 63), such as ON *ffjólkyngi*, *forneskja*, *galdrar* and *trollskapr*.

Ármann makes an important point here, and his effort to circumvent the effects of semantic narrowing by means of blending related concepts in PdE is a unique one; the typical effort in scholarship, and one which Ármann explicitly reacts against, is to move in the opposite direction and attempt to pin down precise meanings or, failing that, ranges of meaning. While the innovation of such an approach is valuable, there are certain areas where greater attention to precision would have been appreciated. One particularly glaring example is the application of 'Otherness' to both paranormal and ethnic alterity. It is striking that, although Ármann discusses the historiography of the paranormal in relation to the medieval Icelandic sagas, and also has chapters on 'Cultural Hegemony' and 'Immigrant Song', he does not use either of these spaces to interrogate the problematic conflation of paranormal and ethnic 'Others'. Indeed, though the language he uses reflects that of the sagas, to a reader unfamiliar with saga literature such turns of phrase as 'other shining examples of civilization and of light also have to contend with an immigrant family' (p. 109) or 'the wickedness of these aliens is unmitigated' (p. 110) may seem somewhat jarring, and tone-deaf to present-day issues regarding the dehumanisation of ethnic 'Others' and the treatment of immigrants both culturally and within the academy. Of course it is clear from the context of the book, and from Ármann's previous scholarly output, that such wording is not meant to evoke these associations, and of course anyone familiar with

Ármann's body of research knows very well the care he usually takes in presenting such nuances. In a book intended for as broad an audience as possible, however, it is unfortunate that these nuances seem to have been subordinated, and a more explicit discussion of the relationship (and, indeed, the scholarship) on the tension between paranormal and ethnic 'Otherness' would have been desirable.

Nevertheless, this book is a valuable contribution to paranormal studies in medieval Icelandic literature, and a useful introduction for those making their initial forays into the paranormal. Ármann's prose is engaging, his presentation, while (intentionally) non-linear, makes sense to the reader and makes sense for his argument. The detailed and copious endnotes give readers not only the promised discussion but also an excellent departure point for further research in this field. Scholars more familiar with the paranormal may be better served by other elements in Ármann's extensive body of research (such as 'The Taxonomy of the Non-Existent: Some Medieval Icelandic Concepts of the Paranormal', *Fabula* 54 (2013), 199–213 or 'Beast and Man: Realism and the Occult in *Egils saga*', *Scandinavian Studies* 83 (2011), 29–44), but may also be interested in his effort to move away from technical language in his presentation. Overall this is a thoughtful and innovative analysis of a broad variety of paranormal beings, actions and relationships in medieval Icelandic saga literature.

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EMOTION IN OLD NORSE LITERATURE. TRANSLATIONS, VOICES, CONTEXTS. By SIF RIKHARDSDOTTIR. *D. S. Brewer*. Cambridge, 2017. ix + 213 pp. ISBN 978-1-84384-470-9.

In this complex and highly stimulating study, Sif Rikhardsdottir theorises the ways in which emotions are articulated and portrayed in a selection of texts that represent some of the major literary genres in Old Norse, which the author defines as genres 'whose presumed objectives lean more heavily towards a literary objective than an explicitly historiographic one' (p. 4). Thus, the Kings' Sagas, hagiographical material and the like, are excluded, as is skaldic poetry, owing to its particular 'poetic modality' (p. 5). While the author readily acknowledges that this division is problematic, she argues that medieval saga audiences would have appreciated the fundamentally different 'production goals' which underpinned different generic demarcations, and that her aim is to read the depiction of emotions in the selected texts as *literary* devices, rather than as a representation of *historical* emotions and emotional behaviour.

In this respect Rikhardsdottir's research diverges from traditional 'history of emotions' scholarship, although she expressly situates her study within the broader discipline, and her principal theoretical concepts and terminology are directly informed by pre-eminent research in the field such as Barbara Rosenwein's influential work *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Cornell, 2006) and William Reddy's *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of*

*Emotions* (Cambridge University Press, 2001). For her methodological framework, Rikhardsdóttir also draws on modern scientific theories of emotion from areas as diverse as cognitive linguistics, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, evolutionary biology and neurology, especially António Damásio's view that emotional behaviour is both biologically determined and socially conditioned (*Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (Putnam, 1994)), although she is careful to stress the limitations of applying these theories too literally in a literary context.

Each of the theoretical concepts presented in the introduction is developed in detail within the individual chapters. Building on the author's previous research, Chapter 1 centres on the way in which, in the process of translation into Old Norse, emotional behaviour in French courtly romances was modified to conform to the 'emotive script', or pre-existing expectations, of the reading community into which the texts were received. The result is usually a shortening and toning down of more effusive vocabulary, or even removal of emotive content. As an example, Laudine's enactment of grief on the death of her husband, which in Chrétien's *Yvain* runs to ten lines and includes crying, fainting and tearing at her clothes and hair, in *Ívens saga* is reduced to *hun syrgdi ok æpti sinn harm stundum fell hun j outt* 'she mourned and cried out her sorrow. At times she fell in a faint' (p. 42). Rikhardsdóttir suggests that the tendency to reduce 'emotional exuberance' in the translations may have been influenced by established literary or cultural conventions as evidenced in the famously laconic style of the Icelandic sagas. However, as she goes on to demonstrate, although explicit commentary on a character's emotional interiority or behaviour in saga narrative is indeed rare, the writers had at their disposal a range of alternative techniques to convey and generate strong emotions. Thus, in Chapter 2 we see how narrative sequencing, somatic markers and 'expressive silence' are employed to powerful effect in *Egils saga*, as in the scenes in which Egill goes through the actions of collecting and burying the body of his son Þoðvarr in total silence, but at the burial his body swells up so much (presumably owing to suppressed emotion) that his clothes burst off. Chapter 4 focuses on instances of 'narrative masking' in *Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga*, where the concealment of grief or anger by means of smiles, grins and laughter not only reflects an emotive script that favours emotional self-control and restraint (especially for male behaviour), but also functions as a literary sign, frequently indicating that the suppressed emotion will find a future outlet in the form of violent revenge. In the absence of authorial explanation, however, it falls to the saga reader or audience to decode the emotional sub-text of these non-verbal gestures, hints and tokens. They must construct their own meaning based on the knowledge available to them.

Where the emotive script of saga discourse generally eschews verbal expressions of emotion, poetic genres can provide a permissible outlet for emotional release, both in the form of *lausavísur* embedded in the prose narratives, or as longer poems. Thus, despite the earlier proviso, skaldic and Eddic texts form the basis of Chapter 3, where, focusing on the concept of 'voice', Rikhardsdóttir analyses similarities and gendered differences in the vocalisation and the 'staging' of grief with particular attention to *Sonatorrek* and *Guðrúnarkviða I*.

In the final chapter the author directs her attention once more to romance literature, specifically the native sub-genre ‘Maiden-King Romance’, represented here by *Sigurðar saga þögla*. She shows how this tale adapts, subverts and perhaps even parodies the emotive script of indigenous romance, changing its concern from traditional courtly conventions to a literary anxiety with ‘unwedded female rulers (*mey-kongr*) and their battle for autonomy’ (p. 147), as well as other perceived social transgressions.

Throughout these five chapters, Rikhardsdottir convincingly demonstrates through rigorous and systematic analysis that the range of emotions encompassed by saga narrative is far broader and more nuanced than a mere survey of emotion words would suggest, and than was traditionally assumed. But perhaps an even more important outcome of this study is the way in which an analysis of the emotional content of Old Norse literature can potentially be used as a framework to explore traditionally assigned generic parameters and narratological style.

The presentation of this volume is meticulous, with an attractive cover, clearly defined headings and an excellent index, which is very helpful in navigating the staggering number of references from many disciplines. In the entire book I noticed only one typographical error (J. L. ‘Austen’ for J. L. Austin, p. 18), although the use of certain terminology could be queried. For example, although skaldic poetry certainly has a unique mode of discourse, I am not convinced that its ‘modality’ is different from that of other literary genres. Similarly, the use of the term ‘code-switching’, which normally refers to the practice of speakers alternating between languages or language varieties, to denote switching between genres and emotive scripts (‘intra-lingual generic and emotive code-switching in the Old Norse/Icelandic adaptation *Saga af Tristram ok Ísodd*’, p. 54), is confusing. Also, if the term ‘performativity’ is used to describe performance or dramatisation, that is not the ‘conventional usage’ (p. 84), but rather indicates a lack of familiarity with the aforementioned J. L. Austin’s speech-act theory. Aside from a few such minor issues, overall this is an excellent and very welcome addition to the small but burgeoning number of studies on emotions in Old Norse literature. In many ways, it raises more questions than it answers, but this is very much to the author’s purpose; she regards her book as an invitation ‘to extend and elaborate on the emotive complexities of Old Norse verse and prose and on the multiple emotional communities . . . that the Norse literary heritage and social worlds have to offer’ (p. 24).

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REPRESENTING BEASTS IN EARLY MEDIEVAL ENGLAND AND SCANDINAVIA. Edited by MICHAEL D. J. BINTLEY and THOMAS J. T. WILLIAMS. *Anglo-Saxon Studies* 9. The Boydell Press. Woodbridge, 2015. xii + 295 pp. ISBN 978-1-78327-008-8.

Animals and humans experienced necessarily close coexistence in the early medieval period, and the chapters in this collection consider the often mutually dependent relationships between animals and humans in early medieval England and Scandinavia, and the landscapes and objects formed in this shared world.

The chapters in this volume approach the 'animal' from a variety of perspectives and definitions, and the chapter by John Baker on insect place-names in early medieval England is particularly noteworthy for its unusual subject. While the book's title emphasises its subject matter as representations of beasts, many of the chapters recognise and discuss the importance of physical and social landscapes as entangled and constituent components of these representations. Such a recognition of landscapes and space, which is often a key feature of these discussions, represents an important part of the developing field of medieval animal-human studies. A puzzling aspect of the work, however, is the decision to use the term 'beast' rather than 'animal' or 'non-human animal'. I suppose 'beast' sounds catchier in a title, but the connotations in modern English (wild, savage, dumb) might have encouraged use of an alternative. The choice of 'beast' seems especially pointed, given that *animal* studies is the most recognisable descriptor for such scholarship. The use of 'beast' is commented upon by the editors, who suggest that the term refers to figures that 'move around with life' (p. 2), of both domestic and wild kind, but separating animals from other natural figures such as trees or stones. The argument is made that the medieval understanding of 'beast' (as non-human animal in general) still stands today (p. 6), and the authors of the chapters stick fairly consistently to the term as defined in the Introduction. Nonetheless, the use of 'beast' can sometimes seem a little forced, especially given the wide-ranging scope of the animals addressed in the chapters (including wolves, ravens, eagles, snakes, dragons/worms, boars and insects) and the intelligence that some of these animals are credited with: for example, the ravens in the chapters by Marijane Osborn and Eric Lacey.

In the first chapter Noël Adams examines the evidence for classical influences on Anglo-Saxon depictions of hunters and prey and is keen to promote a continuity of iconography rather than looking backwards from later Norse-influenced interpretations of a rider with bird and canines as 'Odin'. His case is convincing and refreshing, placing these Anglo-Saxon depictions in the same context as male élite culture and hunting fellowships in mainland Europe (c.600 AD). Continental influences are also a focus of László Sándor Chardonnes's chapter on Anglo-Saxon prognostications, while Richard North takes the range even further afield to Vandal-ruled Carthage, arguing for north Germanic influences on the presence of a tame boar, immortalised in a poem by Luxorius of Carthage. This is an ambitious chapter, drawing on a wide range of sources, often disparately spread over different times and places, and while the dates of each source are mentioned, there is disappointingly little discussion of the difficulties of drawing such a range of sources together in this way. In comparison, Sue Brunning closely integrates her research with Norse textual sources in a more selective manner, utilising the poetic language of swords and snakes alongside her examination of pattern-welded swords. She suggests that animals and artefacts can be perceived as coexistent beings in early medieval Scandinavian contexts, and that swords and snakes can be considered not so distant from each other in the hand of the warrior. Brunning's chapter demonstrates the effectiveness of taking a multi-disciplinary approach to animal-artefact studies. While her comments on sword kennings and snakes might seem obvious to literary scholars who are familiar with the poetic language of the

Norse world, to archaeologists I imagine this material is much less well known, and the chapter shows the value of examining material and textual sources together. Serpentine swords also appear in the following chapter by Victoria Symons on worms and runes in Old English and Old Norse textual and material contexts. Symons's comparison of dragons as the ultimate anti-social figures and runes as markers of clarity or revelation is well executed, demonstrating the value of focusing on the materiality of the object in a text.

Ravens are the topic of the two chapters by Osborn and Lacey. While dealing with two very different sources, both are keenly aware of the importance of the material world to artefact and text alike. Osborn's chapter is heavily raven-centric, treating the ravens on the seated 'Odin' figure from Lejre as the subject of the discussion, rather than the seated figure itself; and Lacey considers the physical body of the raven as a key component of his analysis of the blithe-hearted raven from *Beowulf*. By combining this with linguistic and literary considerations of the multiple raven episodes in the poem, Lacey sets it in the two contexts of physical ravens and ravens in *Beowulf*.

While Symons's chapter on dragons and runes necessarily ventures into the landscape of serpents and rune-stones, it is not until the final four chapters of the volume that physical environments and their interactions with humans and animals become a central focus of discussion. The chapter of Williams on battlefields, and Bintley's on wild landscapes that follows it, both reinforce the importance of human action in constructing the animal-human landscape. Human action is also the subject of the last two chapters of the collection, by John Baker and Della Hooke, who consider the naming of places after animals in the early medieval landscape. However, Williams, along with Baker, also strongly emphasises the role of animals in shaping human action in, and perception of, places, while all four chapters demonstrate a recognition of the shared animal-human world shown through these narratives and names. Hooke's section on the boundary marks of Bishop's Cleeve is particularly remarkable, showing the overwhelming presence of animal names in constructing the landscape, but it is a disappointingly short section within the chapter. It provides an intimate picture of the Anglo-Saxon landscape, and future work on such topics might benefit greatly from more local, closely realised studies like this to demonstrate the entwined landscape of Anglo-Saxon England.

Overall, the chapters in this volume deal with a diverse range of source material, and their impressive scope and varied approaches make this book an encouraging addition to studies of the animal-human world of medieval England and Scandinavia. The collection certainly works to encourage closer investigation of this shared world. As Bintley and Williams remark, it is a starting-point which aims to 'set a precedent for the further exploration of [human and non-human] relationships' (p. 3), and as a collection of interesting and inspiring studies that will encourage other scholars to ask similar questions of their sources and fields, the volume is certainly effective.

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SEASONS IN THE LITERATURES OF THE MEDIEVAL NORTH. By P. S. LANGESLAG. *D. S. Brewer*. Cambridge, 2015. viii + 250 pp. ISBN 978-1-84384-425-9.

The cover of P. S. Langeslag's book, *Seasons in the Literatures of the Medieval North*, is adorned with an early fifteenth-century manuscript illumination from *Les très riches heures du Duc de Berry*, which is not only beautiful but also fitting for the theme of the book. Langeslag's ambitious aim is to identify and interpret

seasonal devices in medieval English and Scandinavian literature as evidenced primarily in Old English poetry from the eighth century to the eleventh, Old Icelandic writings from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and Middle English poetry principally from the second half of the fourteenth century (p. 3).

These corpora are chosen because medieval north-western Europe 'constitutes a loose cultural sphere with sufficient shared material to permit the detailed comparison of its constituent parts' (p. 4). The study's theoretical framework is based on a 'conceptual integration of time and space', as 'seasons commonly manifest themselves in literature as associative overlays onto geographic space' (p. 3). In particular, Langeslag sees 'the seasons as environments associated with the unfamiliar and uncanny aspects of extrasocietal space' (p. 4), and proposes that the seasonal imagery found in the surveyed texts 'serves the psychological contrast between familiar and foreign space' (p. 26).

Langeslag's introduction provides an overview of various topics relating to the seasons, including the domestication of time, the economic year and the bipartite division of the year into summer and winter. In the first chapter, he compares Nordic mythological accounts of the seasons to the Western Christian tradition. Langeslag's analysis of the seasons as a postlapsarian curse in Western Christian theology draws on various texts and is quite enlightening. The discussion of *Fundinn Noregur*, *Hversu Noregr byggðisk* and *Ynglinga saga* is similarly interesting. These texts show that the Norwegian and Orcadian ruling houses are essentially rooted in winter by connecting them to Northern ancestors who bear names such as Frosti 'frost', Snær 'snow', and Drifa 'snow'. Langeslag interprets this ancestral connection with winter as the authors' 'attempts to reconcile themselves with the realities of the harsh climate of their habitat by taking pride in their hardiness' (p. 47): a cultural trait still witnessed in modern times.

In the second chapter, Langeslag briefly presents his theoretical framework (pp. 67–69). Drawing on Bakhtin's chronotope, Langeslag employs what he calls a 'detheorized, seasonal application of chronotopicity' by replacing a 'perceived pace of time's passing' with the seasons (p. 69). Another theoretical approach introduced is psycho-geography. According to this theory we 'invest our physical surroundings with subjective meaning' and in turn, our surroundings 'inform our psyche and culture' (p. 67). Neither theoretical framework is explained in detail, leaving the reader somewhat confused on the rare occasions when these theories are referred to in the rest of the book. Langeslag then moves on to a close analysis of Old Norse–Icelandic and Old English texts with a focus on their representations of winter. This includes a stimulating discussion of Old English poetry and the winter seascape portrayed there through repeated references to cold water,

hoarfrost and rime (pp. 87–88). This imagery proves so common that it is even transplanted into translated material where no such description is found in the original text (pp. 81–85). As Langeslag's approach is comparative, one wonders why he did not take the opportunity to compare Old English poetry with skaldic poetry, a genre closer in time and form than, for example, the sagas of Icelanders, and where similar descriptions of the sea can be found.

Langeslag bases much of his analysis on associating particular traits, landscapes and beings with either summer or winter, often using questionable reasoning. For example, he posits that cold and dark always connote winter but warm and bright connote summer (p. 12). Even the mention of night, without a hint of the time of year, becomes a reference to winter, which then is used to strengthen the thesis that divination happens during winter (p. 157). This tendency is particularly evident in the second chapter where Langeslag claims, mainly on the basis of translated poetry and elegiac poetry, that 'water landscapes in the poetry tend to connote winter and winter weather regardless of the season on land' (p. 88). He builds on this assertion in his discussion of *Beowulf*, concluding that the fact that several of the monsters in the poem dwell in or near water means that monsters are associated with winter. This is tenuous at best; even if water landscapes are connected with winter in elegiac and translated poetry this cannot be used to interpret the water-dwelling monsters of heroic poetry as beings of winter. In his discussion on Old Norse–Icelandic literature in the same chapter, Langeslag argues that there is a 'deep-rooted association of hostile giants and dangerous Sami sorcerers with permanent landscapes of winter' (pp. 110–11). The giants he connects with winter on account of their supposed mythological origins in the *hrimpursar* and their habitat in the mountains, but according to Langeslag mountains are 'a landscape of perpetual or near-perpetual winter' (pp. 101–07). The assertion that mountains are identified with perpetual winter does not stand up to scrutiny, as summer certainly reaches the mountains. The connection between the Sami and winter is equally tenuous.

In the third chapter Langeslag continues his analysis of winter in Old Norse–Icelandic sagas and Old English poetry, mainly focusing on *Grettis saga* and *Beowulf*. He argues that in the sagas, winter is associated with 'the dangerous supernatural' since hauntings mainly occur in the winter (p. 158). Langeslag argues that it is unlikely that the narrative underlying *Beowulf* was a winter tale (p. 158) as there is little direct reference to the seasons. Nevertheless, Langeslag's conclusion is that winter has a central role in literary explorations of what lies beyond the human sphere in Old Norse–Icelandic and Old English literature (p. 159).

In the fourth and final chapter Langeslag moves on to the summer landscape, namely the forest. Here, Langeslag's main focus is on Middle English visions and romances. The discussion includes an interesting analysis of *Gawain and the Green Knight* where the author proposes that the real danger facing Gawain is not the wintry landscape but rather moral lapse (p. 199). According to Langeslag, who only briefly discusses Old Icelandic texts in this chapter (pp. 183–86), the two summer adventure patterns found in the Old Norse–Icelandic sagas (Sagas

of Icelanders, Kings' Sagas and Legendary Sagas specifically) are independent of European summer adventures (p. 185). These summer adventure patterns frequently feature encounters with giants and the Sami; however, no mention is made of the deep-rooted association of these beings with winter that was asserted in Chapter 2. The other journeys Langeslag discusses are summer raiding trips which, he claims, have no supernatural or other remarkable characteristics. One does not need to look far to see that this is not always the case: in *Kormáks saga*, Kormákr encounters a female troll in Scotland and in *Fljótsdæla saga*, a woman is rescued from a giant in Shetland. A larger omission, however, is that Langeslag does not discuss the Icelandic (indigenous) chivalric sagas where summer adventures abound. This genre, which would have provided Langeslag with ample comparative material to Middle English romance, is reduced to the status of 'Scandinavian retellings' (p. 178, n. 60) and 'translated romance' (p. 186), even when he is referring to original sagas such as *Ectors saga* and *Viktors saga ok Blávus*.

In the conclusion, Langeslag argues that looking at the literary tradition through seasonal imagery adds valuable insight to our understanding of the literature as well as the society that produced it (p. 212). Although I agree that the seasons should be taken into account when analysing texts, I feel that Langeslag often makes problematic associations, forcing a seasonal reading on passages where it neither fits nor adds anything to the analysis. He further concludes 'that there is some validity in the degree to which some of these vernaculars [English and Icelandic] tend to be studied in isolation from their neighbours' (p. 206). This conclusion is strongly influenced by the choice of texts. The scope of the book is broad, both in terms of geography and time. The texts that fall within these corpora are in the hundreds and surveying them all would be an insurmountable task. It is therefore understandable that Langeslag has focused on selected genres, and indeed selected texts within these genres. However, when this is done it is necessary to choose carefully and be sure to compare similar texts, and not to leave out whole genres that might show that, instead of each having a 'strong tradition of its own' (p. 206), the corpora have interesting similarities worth following up. Had the study been presented not as a comparative study but rather as case studies, many of the problems mentioned above would cease to exist. As a comparative study, however, it ultimately fails in its objective.

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BAD BOYS AND WICKED WOMEN. ANTAGONISTS AND TROUBLEMAKERS IN OLD NORSE LITERATURE. Edited by DANIELA HAHN and ANDREAS SCHMIDT. *Münchner Nordistische Studien 27*. Herbert Utz. Munich, 2016. 421 pp. ISBN 978-3-8316-4572-5.

This volume of thirteen chapters arose from a 2015 workshop in Munich, 'Bad Guys and Wicked Girls in Old Norse Literature', though both titles are misnomers to a degree (the vast majority of the analysis is squarely centred on sagas rather than Old Norse literature more broadly). The aim of the workshop and

this subsequent collection of chapters—to bring together (mainly) early-career scholars to discuss transgressive individuals in Old Norse texts—is refreshing, and on the evidence of the range of new ideas and perspectives presented here, has proved very successful.

It is in this success that the collection is perhaps most useful to readers. *Bad Boys and Wicked Women* opens a wide discussion of some uncomfortable characters very much worth discussing. The chapters often confront assumptions about broadly appealing topics like Old Norse narrative strategies and audience expectations, but they also routinely highlight the frequent ambiguity in these texts and demonstrate the multivalence of that ambiguity. In doing so, the volume challenges established readings of some canonical texts and presents a variety of methods by which difficult material such as violence, murder, theft and monstrosity might be approached. At the very least, the contributions in the volume will prove to be sources for discussion and debate. There is something to like in each, but some high points of the collection include Marion Poilvez's probing investigation of the opportunities and challenges faced by killers—and readers—in this literary landscape, Anita Saukel's reading of *Njáll* as an embodiment of the anthropological 'Figure of the Third', Daniella Hahn's expansion of the category of whetting to include theft, and Yoav Tirosch's close reading of *Guðmundr inn ríki's* 'argr [mis]management'. The collection draws on a range of disciplines including sociology, psychology, law, folkloristics, art history and anthropology, though all the chapters are rooted in literary and historical methodologies and cohesively linked in their focus on characters often read as antagonistic to some degree or another. There is, however, room for more methodological awareness at some points. For example, Matthias Teichert's treatment of snakes as universally repulsive (pp. 207–08) could have been informed by the ongoing archaeological discussion of snake amulets of the Viking Age (e.g. Miriam Koktvedgaard Zeiten's 1997 article 'Amulets and Amulet Use in Viking Age Denmark'; Signe Horn Fuglesang's 2006 article 'Gold Snake-shaped Pendant'; Anne-Sofie Gräslund's 2006 article 'Wolves, Serpents and Birds. Their Symbolic Meaning in Old Norse Belief') as well as snake motifs in contemporaneous high-status Slavic material culture (Leszek Gardela, Kamil Kajkowski and Bengt Söderberg's forthcoming (2019) article 'The Spur Goad from Skegrie in Skåne, Sweden: Evidence of Elite Interaction Between Viking Age Scandinavians and Western Slavs'). Milena Liv Jacobsen's sweeping survey of representations of St Olav perhaps takes its interdisciplinarity a little too far, attempting to cover an immense corpus of material in a rather small space, but her efforts in synthesis are notable. Overall, the interdisciplinarity of the collected chapters is highly productive and pushes their respective conclusions in novel directions.

Even potential criticisms lead to productive conversation both within and beyond the volume. Whether because of topic (*bad* boys and *wicked* women), approach or intent, there are a number of occasions where authors edge towards pathologising the past—potentially problematic from the perspective of both ethics and anachronism. Rebecca Merkelbach's chapter, for example, presents a very interesting

examination of the potential role of paternal abuse in the development and behaviour of outlaws in the *Íslendingasögur*. By its very approach, the chapter tends towards pathology, especially in its exploration of Ásmundr hærulangr, but one wonders if modern definitions of abuse can map so neatly onto medieval materials and mentalities. Nevertheless, Merkelbach's thought-provoking observations will be of interest to many. One of the counterpoints to the tendency to pathologise is Jamie Cochrane's thoughtful and careful literary analysis of the *presentation* of the much-maligned Mörðr Valgarðsson, making no judgement on the *character* of Mörðr. Cochrane's analysis strikes an admirable balance, and his conclusions are all the stronger for it. Another shining moment is Joanne Shortt Butler's exploration of *Hrafnkels saga* as a 'very deliberate, carefully constructed series of dilemmas' which 'denies us the easy identification of any morally satisfactory binaries' (p. 317). Her examination of the saga's narrative sophistication and the complex processes by which it undermines both modern and medieval audience expectations is especially sharp. However, the difference of approach between chapters helps to form a productive discussion throughout the volume on how these problematic, sometimes unsettling, characters might be best approached.

Perhaps the most serious criticism is of the frame the chapters are placed in. After the dialogue developed across the pages of the collection, it came as something of a surprise to reach the end of Georg C. Brückmann's chapter on the inherent ambiguity of taboo transgression only to find the volume itself was at an end. While this open-endedness arguably leaves readers to decide between the many avenues for further exploration, some reflection about the wider questions arising from the collection would have been welcome. This is especially desirable as a balance to the introduction to the volume which, at times, sacrifices methodological rigour and the careful establishment of definitions to opening the fields of possible investigation as broadly as possible through analogies with popular culture, some of which do not quite chime with the Old Norse material being explored. For example, the editors (and Andreas Schmidt, in his chapter on the narratological ambiguity of *Færeyinga saga*) opt to consider that evil can only be defined as the negation of good (and therefore, in their view, always tied to theological discourse or, as stated by Schmidt in his chapter, 'a strict ethically based system of values that cannot be tacitly assumed to have existed in medieval society as such' (p. 273)). However, developments in moral philosophy (e.g. Claudia Card's *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil* (2002) or Todd Calder's 2013 article 'Is Evil Just Very Wrong?'), and even Brückmann's own chapter, open a much more interesting discussion on the topic of evil that many of the chapters in the volume could have engaged with more successfully.

Despite these points for discussion, *Bad Boys and Wicked Women* will appeal to a wide variety of readers interested in the literature and culture of medieval Iceland. It makes a strong case for literary and historical transgression, alterity and otherness as fertile fields of inquiry, and I recommend it warmly.

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RE:WRITING MEDIAL PERSPECTIVES ON TEXTUAL CULTURE IN THE ICELANDIC MIDDLE AGES. Edited by KATE HESLOP and JÜRIG GLAUSER. *Medienwandel—Medienwechsel—Medienwissen* 29. *Chronos*. Zürich, 2018. 328 pp. ISBN 978-3-0340-1029-0.

Kate Heslop and Jürg Glauser venture on to methodologically untrodden paths in this edited collection. Their book is among the first publications that are exclusively dedicated to the concepts of media and mediality in medieval Icelandic literature and culture. The volume presents results from the National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) project ‘Mediality’ (2005–17), a multidisciplinary research project which concentrated on historical mediology, i.e. the analysis of media and mediality before the arrival of mass media.

Divided into three thematic parts—medium, media and mediality—the volume assembles thirteen essays, by both early-career scholars and prominent names in the field. The main focus for all contributions is the question of how mediality manifests itself in medieval Icelandic literature and how the mediality approach opens up new perspectives for future research in the field. The reader is immersed in analyses of single texts, characters, genres, manuscripts and the relationship between mainland European and Icelandic learning in the Middle Ages. Resulting from this lively discussion is not so much a handbook in the classical sense as a gateway which invites readers to explore the multifarious topic of mediality further.

The introductory chapter by Heslop and Glauser is divided into subsections which introduce the topic of (historical) mediality. Even though the Middle Ages do not offer a systematic approach to media in the modern sense, they made use of ‘objects and processes which we could call medial [nowadays]’ (p. 15). Medieval mediality goes far beyond the often revisited discourse of orality/literacy. Indeed, the examples employed in the introduction illustrate how extensively medieval Icelandic literature and culture plays around with different media and how textual, graphic and structural elements cross-reference each other (p. 27). The constant transmissions, with all kinds of media at the core, promote new combinations and development of material: ‘the medium is therefore always engaged in a process and . . . this process concerns *meaning*, its transfer, materialisation, transport, translation, expression, and so on’ (p. 20). In this way the material evades and resists fixed categorisations (p. 42). This insight is central to this publication, which traces and highlights such processes.

The tripartite arrangement of the book offers a good basic structure and means of orientation. Somewhat imbalanced in comparison to the other two sections, the first part, which is entitled ‘Mediums’, includes only two chapters. By looking at literary characters who act as mediums, both chapters move the focus away from a predefined set of material media towards a wide variety of potential medial channels. However, a more elaborate explanation for the deliberate choice of the anachronistic use of the term ‘medium’ as a methodological point would have been welcome (see p. 45). In her chapter Heslop maintains that Mimir is a medium in *Ynglinga saga* and *Sigrdrifumál*

because he not only assumes a vital role in the dissemination of knowledge but is also involved in media changes (from orality to literacy and vice versa) in medieval Icelandic culture. Judy Quinn concentrates on the function of Jóreiðr Hermundardóttir in *Sturlunga saga*. Jóreiðr, like Mímir, is of great importance because she imparts knowledge which she receives from Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, who appears to her in a dream.

The second section has the title 'Media', and gathers chapters which engage with single texts and explore how media highlight performative aspects of medieval texts. In their chapters, Karl G. Johansson and Guðvarður Már Gunnlaugsson analyse the materiality of single manuscripts. Johansson deals with the question whether Hauksbók can be considered a compilation, a collection or a composite manuscript, and Guðvarður Már estimates how long it took to write the impressive manuscript Flateyjarbók. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir focuses on Reynistaðarbók and concludes that this manuscript reflects a secularisation in medieval Icelandic society, featuring a selection of more secular texts in contrast to earlier comparable codices. The other chapters in this section revisit the discussion of the mutual influence and performance of orality and literacy. While Else Mundal presents a *Gedankenexperiment* on how skilled a narrator needed to be in memorising and retelling, or simply reading aloud, for different kinds of narrative performances, Kevin Müller offers a very nuanced terminological analysis of Old Norse verbs pertaining to reading and writing in *Sturlunga saga*. Lena Rohrbach traces how pragmatic literacy manifested itself in Iceland and how the initial scepticism towards the reliability of writing changed during the Age of the Sturlungs. Although these chapters repeatedly point out that the boundaries between orality and literacy are fairly permeable, the orality/literacy dichotomy is maintained. It would have been interesting to see, for example, how the concept of vocality (not addressed in these chapters), which is mentioned in the introduction as a helpful connecting element between orality and literacy (p. 30), could help to open up new perspectives.

The contributions in the third section, 'Mediality', discuss medial processes and show how specific texts or genres reflect literary and cultural preferences of their time. Overall this part offers, in my opinion, the richest discussions of medieval Icelandic literature by elaborating considerably on the context of textual artefacts. The chapters illustrate that a purely literary discussion does not render a complete picture of a text, manuscript or genre. For a full understanding of literary artefacts it is essential to familiarise oneself with the contemporary social, political and economic situation in Iceland. Russell Poole explores how the *Prophetia Merlini* (c. 1130–35) entered and was adapted to the medieval Icelandic literary corpus by the monk Gunnlaugr Leifsson. Indeed, Gunnlaugr not only translated the text but turned it into a political tool for promoting and manifesting Guðmundr Arason's position as bishop (to-be) in Hólar. Margaret Clunies Ross and Jonas Wellendorf discuss the *Grammatical Treatises* (in particular the fourth, *4GT*, and the third treatise, *3GT*, respectively) and demonstrate how the treatises were influenced and shaped by the socio-cultural trends of their time of origin.

Clunies Ross excellently shows how *4GT* reflects and intertwines Icelandic and European Latin learning. Wellendorf not only compares the structure and content of *3GT* to Latin works on poetics and rhetoric, but he also ponders the relationship of *3GT* and *4GT*, and whether they should be considered an entity or two independent works. While Gísli Sigurðsson discusses how vast oral medieval Icelandic culture was and how easily connotations and knowledge were triggered when listening to stories, Ellen E. Peters offers a generic analysis of *Víglundar saga*. The saga features the basic characteristics of an *Íslendingasaga* despite various obvious influences from other literary genres such as the exemplum, and the (couple) romance in particular. Reflecting thus a change of self-perception in Icelandic post-settlement society, *Víglundar saga* coins a new understanding of what constitutes an *Íslendingasaga*.

In view of the fact that the volume offers a new methodological approach to medieval Icelandic literature and culture, a more consistent use of the terminology of mediality would have been appreciated. Only a few contributors either take up the terminology introduced in the preface or develop more theoretical and methodological aspects in their chapters. It is Peters, for example, who suggests considering the concept of *söguöld* 'saga age' (the time of the Icelandic settlement and shortly after) as a medium which enabled a society's self-reflection as well as being a memory construct. It would have been useful if Peters had explored this compelling notion further.

While Heslop and Glauser's preface introduces the reader step by step to the topic of (historical) mediality and then connects it to medieval Icelandic literature and culture, the book would benefit from concluding remarks. The thirteen chapters open up an impressively wide field of historical mediality, but because of the lack of a shared terminology, the reader is somewhat at a loss as to what aspects are crucial for further research. It would, therefore, have been helpful to add an epilogue to tie up loose ends and offer future research perspectives, especially regarding theoretical and methodological approaches.

*RE: Writing Medial Perspectives* opens up an awareness of how complex and diverse the topic of mediality is with regard to medieval Icelandic literature and culture. The chapters not only illustrate that various textual elements can act as a medium, but also show how texts, manuscripts and generic classifications, as well as being mutually influential, are interrelated with social, political and economic developments. Accordingly, careful discussions of socio-cultural processes and transmissions—that is, medial processes—considerably enhance our understanding of texts and their context of production. Alongside other recent research trends which increasingly focus on diachronic developments and interdisciplinary topics which require a more holistic, socio-cultural approach, *RE: Writing* is undoubtedly a solid stepping-stone to further research on historical mediality.

THE LEGENDARY LEGACY. TRANSMISSION AND RECEPTION OF THE *FORNALDARSÖGUR NORÐURLANDA*. Edited by MATTHEW DRISCOLL, SILVIA HUFNAGEL, PHILIP LAVENDER and BEEKE STEGMANN. *The Viking Collection 24. University Press of Southern Denmark*. Odense, 2018. 457 pp. ISBN 978-87-408-3103-0.

This outstanding edited volume makes a substantial contribution to the growing amount of literature published recently on the topic of the Icelandic Legendary Sagas (*fornaldarsögur*) (such as *The Legendary Sagas, Origins and Development* (2012), reviewed in *Saga-Book XXXIX* (2015), 112–15, which refers to further literature on the subject). The volume contains thirteen contributions, most of which were presented at the conference *The Legendary Legacy: Transmission and Reception of the Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, held at the University of Copenhagen in September 2014. Contents of each of the volume's essays are outlined in the Introduction, in which Matthew Driscoll also briefly discusses the state of scholarship on the corpus of *fornaldarsögur*. The Introduction suggests that the essays 'deal with various aspects of the transmission and reception of the *fornaldarsögur*, from their earliest manifestations until the present day' (p. 12); there is, however, a clear imbalance between chapters dealing with the medieval and post-medieval traditions, with the latter dominating the volume. This makes this collection unique in the field, with the focus shifted from the origins to the transmission and reception of *fornaldarsögur*-related materials. If the reader seeks information on the medieval lives of *fornaldarsögur*, however, this is clearly not the first publication to pick.

There is no subdivision of the volume into sections, and given the broad scope of this collection each contribution needs its own review. Most of the chapters, however, share one of three methodological and theoretical frameworks—transmission history, material philology and reception studies—and will be grouped together accordingly in this discussion. The first chapter in the volume, however, belongs to none of these groups in particular but at the same time is relevant to all of them. It is Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir's study of the corpus of post-medieval poetry, which seeks evidence for the popularity of certain *fornaldarsögur* in the post-medieval period. It is a somewhat extended version of her 2014 article 'Gunnar og Göngu-Hrólfur, Brynhildur og Brana: Um sögutengdar figúrir í íslenskum þjóðkvæðum'. Aðalheiður challenges the common view that the number of manuscripts preserving a given saga informs us about the popularity of this saga. Instead she proposes a more nuanced way of evaluating the historical popularity of the Legendary Sagas, namely by examining how many manifestations of each story survived, and how often the heroes of these stories are mentioned in poetry.

Adaptation in the post-medieval period is the subject of four case studies included in the volume. Philip Lavender explores various manifestations of the story of a hero named Illugi in prose and verse and discusses the innovations introduced in the younger narratives. Similarly, Andrew Wawn examines the transmission history of the story of Jason the Bright in prose and verse. The reasons for the inclusion of this chapter in a volume devoted to *fornaldarsögur* are, however, unclear, as Wawn himself states that the saga is a 'post-medieval romance narrative' (p. 237). In light of the fluid genre boundaries of Icelandic literature in the post-medieval

period, as discussed in Lavender's contribution, we might, however, attribute this to the editors' intentional trans-generic approach to this literature. Also in the vein of transmission studies, Massimiliano Bampi investigates the tradition of rewriting the story of Starkaður, with the main focus on *Starkaðar saga gamla*, while Viðar Hreinsson studies the long tradition of reworking *Hervarar saga og Heiðreks* and related materials. By placing the poem *Hervör á haugi Angantýrs* from 1896 in the socio-political context of North America at the turn of the century, he successfully demonstrates that the transmission of a story is closely connected to the time and space of the creation of subsequent adaptations.

The historical context in which literary texts were produced is also the subject of Hans Jacob Orning's investigation of *Órvar-Odds saga* as preserved in the manuscript AM 343 a 4to. Orning illustrates the potency of an interdisciplinary approach to manuscript-transmitted literature and emphasises that a full synchronic analysis of literary texts must take into account all the texts found in a given manuscript and consider them in their broader literary and historical context. Three other chapters also put manuscripts at the centre of their investigation. Silvia Hufnagel focuses on the group of *fornaldarsaga* manuscripts from Dalasýsla and, using the case of the family of Jón Ólafsson from Grímsstaðir, demonstrates that medieval scribal traditions of manuscript production survived in Iceland well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Shaun Hughes explores the history of ownership of a single saga manuscript (Cambridge, MA, Houghton Library, MS Icel. 32) from its time of writing in the late eighteenth century to the acquisition of the manuscript by Harvard College Library in 1904. This chapter sheds light on the role that female owners, especially Ástriður Bjarnadóttir and Ragnheiður Benediktsdóttir, played in the shaping of this manuscript's history. Beeke Stegmann investigates the rearrangement of *fornaldarsaga* manuscripts by Árni Magnússon, the famous collector from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Árni Magnússon and his contemporaries are also the subject of Ralph O'Connor's examination of the approaches to the historicity of *fornaldarsögur* in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Scandinavia. Focusing on scholarly reception, O'Connor successfully demonstrates that *fornaldarsögur* were used as historical narratives in Nordic historiography continuously from the Middle Ages to the early eighteenth century. The broad reception of *fornaldarsögur* in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries is further discussed in the last three chapters of the volume. Annette Lassen investigates the history of translations of *fornaldarsögur* into Danish from C. C. Rafn's *Nordiske Kæmpe-Historier* (1821–26) to her own *Oldtidssagaerne*. Alaric Hall discusses the medievalism of Icelandic literature dealing with the financial crisis of 2008, using the example of the Icelandic novel *Mannorð* by Bjarni Bjarnason, which is partially inspired by *Gautreks saga*. T. A. Shippey examines the reception of *fornaldarsögur* in modern fantasy writing, coming to the conclusion that the direct influence of *fornaldarsögur* on this genre is marginal in comparison to general second-hand knowledge of Norse mythology and folklore, with only a few notable exceptions such as Tolkien, Grundy, Burgess, Anderson and Harrison. Shippey's argument that the lack of modern translations of these sagas is the reason behind the dearth

of modern adaptations makes a great link to Lassen's contribution, in which she emphasises the importance of translation.

The volume ends with an extensive bibliography, followed by a section containing short biographical notes on the contributors, and two very useful indices: an index of manuscripts and a general index which includes personal names, place-names and titles of literary works. The appearance of the volume, however, could easily be improved. While many chapters include references to manuscript material, only five images of manuscripts, unfortunately reproduced in black and white, are included in the volume (pp. 27, 167, 177, 221 and 312). This is a typical feature of *The Viking Collection*, the series in which the volume is published.

Overall, the collection provides an interesting insight into the transmission and reception of *fornaldarsögur* and should be on the reading wish-list of anyone with research interests in this genre in particular as well as post-medieval Icelandic literature in general. Moreover, many chapters lend themselves for classroom use, especially for courses examining the history of post-medieval Icelandic literature (see the chapters of Lavender, Wawn, Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir) and the reception of Old Norse literature (O'Connor, Shippey).

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POPULAR ROMANCE IN ICELAND. THE WOMEN, WORLDVIEWS, AND MANUSCRIPT WITNESSES OF NÍTÍÐA SAGA. By SHERYL McDONALD WERRONEN. *Amsterdam University Press*. Amsterdam, 2016. 271 pp. 5 figures. ISBN 978-90-8964-795-5.

Sheryl McDonald Werronen's *Popular Romance in Iceland* is a thorough study of *Nítíða saga* in terms of plot, characters, manuscripts and manuscript witnesses. Published in the *Crossing Boundaries* series from Turku Medieval and Early Modern Studies, it addresses a saga genre that has, until recently, often been marginalised, since many *riddarasögur* still lack proper editions or even modern translations. *Popular Romance in Iceland* is organised into two parts with three chapters each, each part dealing with the contexts and the characters and the six chapters dealing with the manuscript contexts; intertextual relationships; the settings; the characterisation of Nítíða; the other women and relationships between these women; and the narrator. This organisation is logical, since the first half sets the tone for the later character analysis. Points of discussion include the highlighting of JS 166 fol., Add. 4860 fol. and Lbs 3941 8vo as the key manuscript witnesses; how these versions of *Nítíða saga* differ from one another; and which texts are often compiled with *Nítíða saga* in the early witnesses. Appended is a very useful normalised version of *Nítíða saga*, along with McDonald Werronen's own translation, which makes the text more accessible to students and those who are not yet fluent in Old Norse.

McDonald Werronen outlines in the introduction her aim of demonstrating how *Nítíða saga* questions the typical norms and expectations of medieval Icelandic romance. She argues that it offers a unique medieval romance world-view. She

also shows how different post-medieval manuscripts offer their own contemporary views of Icelandic identity and sense of community. McDonald Werronen skilfully demonstrates the unique nature of *Nítíða saga* through close and careful examination of different manuscripts, the locations and contexts in which they were recorded, and through comparison with similar Icelandic romances. She compares motifs, settings and understandings of geography in *Nítíða saga* and other *riddarasögur*, including *Nikulás saga leikara*, *Clári saga*, *Sigurðar saga þögla* and *Dínus saga drambláta*. In doing so she situates *Nítíða saga* within the broader context of medieval Icelandic romance, using specific examples to demonstrate where and how *Nítíða saga* adheres to or challenges typical romantic expectations.

One notable example demonstrating *Nítíða saga*'s unique nature is McDonald Werronen's discussion of how *Nítíða* herself takes on the role of the saga's hero, fighting against rejected suitors positioned as her rivals, even after her marriage to Livorius. In contrast, the successful suitor Livorius is a major, active character only in the last half or even third of the romance. *Nítíða* is also given a lengthy and positive introduction at the start of the saga; although this is later mirrored when Livorius is introduced, his introduction is shorter than *Nítíða*'s. McDonald Werronen defines two criteria that distinguish a saga hero: being the character the story revolves around; and the character with whom the audience is led to sympathise. Livorius is never mentioned in the titles of surviving manuscripts. From early in the saga *Nítíða* is depicted as a hero preparing herself for later adventures, and McDonald Werronen argues that *Nítíða* is never characterised as antagonistic like the 'maiden-kings' in other bridal-quest romances. Just like other saga heroes, *Nítíða* benefits from the support of a companion or helper, and this role is filled by *Nítíða*'s brother, *Hléskjöldur*. Discussions such as this make McDonald Werronen's argument, that *Nítíða saga* is a saga that challenges typical Icelandic romance norms and expectations, particularly convincing.

This discussion of *Nítíða* as the hero of the saga paves the way for further analysis on other women in the saga, and in particular these women's relationships with *Nítíða* and each other. McDonald Werronen challenges the idea that *Nítíða saga* is yet another rehash of bridal-quest romantic themes, arguing that it instead reflects existing socio-cultural attitudes of its time and that *Nítíða* herself challenges traditional ideas of what it means to be a hero. Even seemingly minor characters, such as *Íversu* or *Ypolitus*, are worthy of consideration, and their characterisation reveals how Icelandic authors, scribes and audiences were able to question and reinvent traditional norms and expectations.

In the final chapter, in an especially fascinating discussion, McDonald Werronen calls for a reinterpretation of the narrator as another character in the saga. In a footnote she argues that she sees no reason why the narrator could not be understood as female, given the discussion in her chapters on *Nítíða* and the other female characters and the resulting female focus of the saga. This interpretation certainly could have been afforded greater prominence. Nevertheless, in discussing the narrator as a gender-neutral character McDonald Werronen provides insightful discussion on narratorial anxieties, self-consciousness and false modesty. The

representation of the narrator as a character also highlights how the saga's style and word choice, and the absence of a prologue conveying the saga author's persona, suggest an individualistic confidence and distinctive world-view.

Overall, McDonald Werronen's *Popular Romance in Iceland* provides a perceptive and enlightening study on an enjoyable Icelandic romance. Through her thorough analysis of all aspects of *Nítíða saga*'s contexts and characters McDonald Werronen draws attention to a blossoming field of study, and makes an important contribution in the field of Icelandic literature, and in particular *riddarasögur*. Not only does *Popular Romance in Iceland* cast light on *Nítíða saga* in its own right, but it provides an admirable model for similar studies on other Icelandic romances through McDonald Werronen's attention to historical, literary and manuscript traditions.

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MIRRORS OF VIRTUE. MANUSCRIPT AND PRINT IN LATE PRE-MODERN ICELAND. Edited by MARGRÉT EGGERTSDÓTTIR and MATTHEW JAMES DRISCOLL. *Bibliotheca Arnarnagæana* XLIX. *Opuscula* XV. *Museum Tusulanum Press*. Copenhagen, 2017. xix + 432 pp. ISBN 978-87-635-4555-6.

This attractive volume is a collection of essays with their origins in two separate research projects, both funded by the Icelandic Centre for Research. It represents a growing interest in the literary achievements of Iceland in the centuries after the Reformation and the arrival of printing, and right up to the final days of manuscript copying around the year 1900.

Davíð Ólafsson in many ways sets the stage for the rest of the volume. While his contribution touches only fleetingly on late pre-modern Icelandic materials, the broad overview of New Philology, sociology of texts, literacy studies and post-print manuscript studies certainly gives the reader theoretical food for thought. Davíð, moreover, provides a tantalising reading-list of studies by Anglo-American scholars, as well as of research focusing on French, Italian, Spanish and Irish sources, all of which provides useful context for the following articles which get much more up-close-and-personal with Icelandic material. The first to do so is Árni Heimir Ingólfsson's contribution, which looks at a manuscript collection of hymns accompanied by musical notation produced by one Guðmundur Högnason in 1742. By comparing this work, which goes by the name *Hymnodia sacra*, with earlier printed works, Árni reveals that it was made to supplement the Icelandic Gradual and replace the contemporary hymnals, which lacked musical notation. Moreover, it seems that the manuscript was explicitly produced to serve as the basis for a printed edition, an intention which was realised when it appeared as the first part of the new hymnal which came off the press at Hólar in 1772. The religious changes that are often taken as the watershed between medieval and early modern (or early pre-modern and late pre-modern, in terminology that this volume advocates) Iceland are taken up in Katelin Parsons's article. Looking at the

Marian poetry in the manuscript Lbs 399 4to, she asks how we are to understand it in a post-Reformation context, where Marian devotion could be seen as highly suspect. The answer is multi-pronged: Marian poetry seems to have become less taboo as the seventeenth century gave way to the eighteenth, and emphasis on theologically sound (by Lutheran standards) interpretations of Mary and a respect for antiquarian poetry meant that the ‘danger’ that such poems presented could be mitigated in the right context. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir and Katelin Parsons then co-author an article which takes as its subject the life and works of Guðmundur Runólfsson (1709–80). Guðmundur, without any formal training that we know of, produced two highly proficient manuscripts while still young and later advanced to the position of *sýslumaður* ‘sheriff’. As the authors point out, information on how a scribe like Guðmundur came to acquire and cultivate the skills that led to his success is hard to come by for the period in question, but by looking at comparable individuals for whom there is more information available, as well as at the products of Guðmundur’s talent, a likely scenario is fleshed out. Margrét Eggertsdóttir’s contribution is somewhat more loosely structured than the preceding articles, not dealing with a single scribe nor manuscript, but rather evoking a string of moments in the history of Hólar (and nearby Gröf) related to the production of manuscripts and printed texts. Examples are the heated response to the modified 1704 edition of Hallgrímur Pétursson’s *Passiús sálmar* and the similarly vigorous response when Hálfðan Einarsson included a poem of his own composition criticising the state of culture in Iceland in a collection of religious poetry in 1757. As well as such scandals, this article challenges us to see a more complex array of distinctions than merely that between literate and illiterate in the environment around Hólar and shines a light on less visible members of the reading and writing communities, both women and individuals of lower social classes. One of the last printers at the Hólar Press, Pétur Jónsson, who has already turned up in this book as the probable typesetter of a commemorative booklet produced by Guðmundur Runólfsson, is the focus of Silvia Hufnagel’s article. After an introduction which covers the history of printing in Iceland and the genesis and development of the title page, she gives a thorough analysis of the title pages produced by Pétur in his eight years (1773–80) of work, and attempts to distinguish which features we can attribute to his developing style as opposed to practical constraints and generic standards.

Guðrún Ingólfssdóttir casts a wider net by seeking to make some general observations about women’s manuscript culture in Iceland between 1600 and 1900. Throughout this period there is a clear increase in the number of books that can be associated with both women writers and readers, as well as a general shift from religious to more secular content within this material. Particularly commendable in this article is the way it calls us to acknowledge the ways in which older manuscript catalogues have minimised our awareness of female readers/owners, by giving precedence in the records to male users. Likewise, the emphasis on ownership of manuscripts is problematised when we are reminded that women could interact in many ways with books even if socio-economic power structures meant that they were not or could not be considered their owners.

Matthew Driscoll's contribution takes a leap forward to the end of the late pre-modern period. It begins as a case study of a late-nineteenth-century scribe, Guðbrandur Sturlaugsson (1820–97), placing him in the context of both the preceding and following generations of his family, but becomes a whodunnit of sorts when the recensions of *Huldar saga* are subjected to scrutiny. This lost saga, mentioned in *Sturlu þáttir* but otherwise absent from extant medieval sources, became something of an obsession for Guðbrandur and his neighbour and fellow scribe Magnús Jónsson í Tjaldanesi. Three recensions came to light in the nineteenth century, the first of which ends abruptly and thus without a satisfying ending, and the third of which is based primarily on the first but now with the missing conclusion. The origin of this ending in the third recension cannot be definitively determined, but the comments by various individuals on the matter reveal much of what was at stake for lay collectors of the time, for instance, how they assessed the historicity, literary value and authenticity of newly discovered and unfamiliar material. Seven manuscripts belonging to five of the children of the seventeenth-century power couple Jón Arason and Hólmfríður Sigurðardóttir are looked at in Þórunn Sigurðardóttir's contribution. She draws on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural and symbolic capital to show ways in which these manuscripts, mostly containing religious poetry, may serve more than just private devotional needs. In fact, through close analysis of manuscript contents and their arrangement we are shown how the learning and interests of these siblings from one important family are displayed in a variety of ways in the books they were connected with. Last but not least, Teresa Lansing's contribution can be seen as something of a companion piece to Desmond Slay's study *The Manuscripts of Hrólfs saga kraka* (1960). While he was concerned with listing variants, Lansing focuses for the most part on the accompanying materials in the manuscript witnesses, both other narratives and marginalia, and tries to see whether conscious compilatory principles are at work as well as how owners and readers inscribed their own antiquarian and literary preoccupations on the margins.

While some of the contributions will naturally appeal more to certain readers than others, one of the real strengths of this volume is its cohesion. The same names pop up time and again, but rather than leading to a sense of superfluity this promotes a sense of rich depth in the period under analysis, in particular the eighteenth century, which is most strongly represented. Conscientious editing is clearly in many ways responsible for this, as the connections between contributions are frequently pointed out in footnotes. Only rarely is a beat missed: an example is when Margrét Eggertsdóttir mentions *Höfuðgreinabók* (1772), printed under the supervision of 'Hálfðan Einarsson, and Bishop Gísli Magnússon' (p. 145), while Árni Heimir Ingólfsson discusses *Höfuðgreinabók* too in some detail but never mentions the bishop's role. One wonders how much influence, if any, institutional superiors such as the bishop may have exerted over this printed text, and how we might arrive at such information. Another strength of the volume is the way in which the various contributions seek out the connections that exist between literary and textual culture in the widest sense, be that between individuals, groups of individuals or subject matter. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir and Katelin Parsons's piece, as well as Driscoll's, home in on the production of individual scribes; Silvia Hufnagel's on the work of a single printer; Þórunn

Sigurðardóttir's on the way a family's manuscripts tell a story; Guðrún Ingólfssdóttir's on how a whole gender is represented in extant manuscripts. Elsewhere, authors choose not to use people as the structure upon which to build their analyses: Tereza Lansing picks a saga; Katelin Parsons a group of poems; Árni Heimir Ingólfsson places a manuscript at the centre of his piece; and Margrét Eggertsdóttir chooses a locale. It is worth remembering that there are various points of access to the literary culture of this period, and a pleasing array of them is presented here.

A few minor criticisms deserve comment. While discussing an anonymous note bound together with AM 284 4to and various theories as to who wrote it and sent the manuscript to Árni Magnússon, Teresa Lansing says that 'the lack of decisive evidence leaves us no choice other than to accept Páll Eggert Ólason's claim' (p. 329), namely that the manuscript was sent by Sigurður Jónsson, brother to Magnús Jónsson í Vigur. I understand the frustration at not being able to determine a chain of transmission, but I would argue that in the absence of definitive evidence one should leave the question open rather than pick an authority to hitch one's wagon to. This said, a methodological takeaway of the volume as a whole is the subtlety with which it deals with ambiguity. Perhaps connected with this is the way in which analysis on the micro-level is linked to conclusions on the macro-level. A number of the articles discuss features of manuscripts and printed texts in extreme detail, revealing a high level of philological expertise. What is not always as clear is the wider relevance of these localised features or the criteria by which it is deemed justifiable to make broader claims on the basis of small details and limited samples. For the most part the broad and the narrow perspectives are sensitively negotiated, but on a couple of occasions one worries that details may have been included simply because they were there, not because we can draw any useful conclusions from them. Future research will no doubt supply further examples upon which to base more general conclusions, and to this end this volume has the virtue of making such a wide array of information available to an English-speaking audience. A quick look at the footnotes to the majority of the contributions shows that, in addition to the primary sources, a large number of the secondary sources are in Icelandic. This is to be expected, but for scholars more at home with English, this book will certainly be a boon, and open up the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as an intriguing field for investigation.

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WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE ICELANDIC SAGAS. By IAN FELCE. *Medievalism XIII. D. S. Brewer*. Cambridge, 2018. xv + 195 pp. ISBN 978-1-84384-501-0.

The latest in the stimulating 'Medievalism' series, Ian Felce's *William Morris and The Icelandic Sagas* explores the writer, artist and political activist's impressions of the Old Norse literature of medieval Iceland. This is a subject worthy of volumes, and indeed part of Felce's impetus for undertaking the project is the sheer quantity and variety of scholarship on the artistic and political motives of Morris,

one of the great polymaths of the Victorian period (pp. 17–24). Unhappily, much of this analysis is either dismissive or overstated when it comes to considering Morris's 'Old Norse period' (a term the author uses in cautionary quotation marks throughout). In answer, Felce offers a concise but convincing reading which will form an excellent touchstone for scholars. Across themes such as the earthly grail quest, Morris's aversion to *níð*, heroic incapacity and 'deedfulness', Felce seeks to re-examine the main products of Morris's Norse medievalism.

Felce is sceptical of the cause-and-effect narrative applied to Morris's varying interests over time, and rails against the tendency to organise the writer's life into periods (pp. 10, 17, 25). While he does not entirely abandon the chronological 'blocking' model used by others, his thematic approach (loosely chronological, with particular focus on 1868–76) offers readers the opportunity to consider the radical aspects of Morris's life—the infamous entanglement with Rosetti, his connection to Socialism, and so forth—in the cold light of day. In particular, Felce deconstructs the argument that the friendship between Jane and Rosetti proved a spur for his Icelandic outputs (pp. 28, 50, 171). He is also sceptical of the reliability of Eiríkur Magnússon and Morris's own analysis of their youthful intentions regarding Old Norse (p. 11).

After his introduction, which includes useful parallel early biographies of Morris and his collaborator Eiríkur (pp. 2–9), Felce's first chapter considers 'The Lovers of Gudrun' as a work notably different from Morris's earlier writing. Avoiding the common attribution of this sudden change to problems in Morris's love life, Felce instead presents a convincing picture of his gradual artistic transition (via the works of Thomas Carlyle) from a narrative arc based on an interest in Arthurian grail quests to one formed from a more personal concept of awakening. Thus, Morris's attraction to *Laxdæla saga* stemmed from his view that the *Íslendingasaga* championed the 'endurance of the earthly' and the 'irrelevant impossibility' of transcendence (p. 36). Here the saga world is a creeping, indifferent reality, unresponsive to the pain of its characters. Indeed, Felce demonstrates that Morris's chosen approach of heightening the torment of his chief characters within an apathetic environment is the most important stylistic departure from the writer's earlier works.

The second chapter examines what Felce terms the 'transmutation of shame' in the Icelandic sagas, which is to say Morris's aversion to (or misunderstanding of) the shame culture inhabited by his Icelandic heroes. Morris's devotion to his subject and will to equate his own brand of heroism with the ideology in operation in Saga-Age Iceland led to a distortion (whether intentional or accidental) of the concept of *níð*. Morris's attempts to mitigate the violent and ungentlemanly actions of his characters, while simultaneously exaggerating their emotional reactions, has the curious effect of producing 'high-blown' and 'affected' Icelanders whose responses in no way match the crimes committed against them (p. 62). Felce suggests Morris found affinity where there was none, and disguised, ignored or misunderstood the 'alien sociologically entrenched shame culture' vital to understanding the sagas (p. 80).

Felce's third chapter concentrates on the figure of Grettir in Morris's works as a manifestation of heroic incapacity, a far cry from the able-bodied heroes of

Kingsley and Carlyle. The vulnerability of Icelandic heroes, not their brute strength, impressed Morris (p. 84). Felce compares this response to Morris's own diaries of his Icelandic travels, which include much exploration of the personal frailties of the writer. The sagas, Felce suggests, provided Morris with narratives of authentic trials of character which supported his own conception of the modern man; these formed a striking contrast to the stereotypical 'Viking' on offer in contemporary literature (p. 110).

The fourth chapter offers a detailed reading of Morris's translation style—a divisive topic in Old Norse scholarship. (If other scholars have been overly dismissive of Morris's translations, Felce at times approaches the same with the work of Victorian contemporaries: Dasent is needlessly prudish (pp. 75–76); Stephens appears overly reliant on Swedish; and Laing is beholden to Danish and Norwegian (p. 15).) Concentrating primarily on Morris's *Heimskringla* translation, Felce explores Morris's literal approach to translation, particularly in comparison to that of his co-translator Eiríkur (p. 111). He considers this approach both intentional and unsuccessful (p. 114). The irony, Felce suggests, is that Morris employed a 'fundamentally foreignising' technique with the intent of consolidating the target and host texts (p. 132).

Chapter 5 returns to Morris's concept of Old Norse heroism, as laid out in Chapters 1 through 3, and adds 'Deedfulness' to the mix. Felce's case study is *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Nibelungs* (1876). Here, Morris cultivated what Felce terms an 'ethos of action' not to be found in the source text (p. 136). Characters are categorised as either 'Deedful' or 'Deedless', the former displaying a form of heroism derived from their inner drive to 'embrace the world' and play their parts to the bitter end (p. 150). As in previous chapters, Felce posits that Morris 'redefined an ideal of heroism that was heavily influenced by his engagement with the Icelandic sagas' and in the process 'selectively altered his translations and adaptations of the literature to meet it' (p. 175).

The conciseness of Felce's writing, though necessary, can at times create a selectivity which jars with his concurrent insistence that Morris's works must not be pigeonholed. The sixth chapter may thus strike some readers as unnecessarily flippant; Felce plays down the significance of Old Norse elements in Morris's later prose romances, much as he earlier describes *The Saga Library* as merely an exercise in 'republishing' earlier work (p. 25) rather than evidence of renewed interest in the sagas. While scholars keen to read an Icelandic influence into Morris's life post-1876 will have to look elsewhere, there is much here to provoke constructive academic discussion, and Felce makes a robust argument.

Felce's chief victory with this book is that many of his conclusions seem, on reflection, glaringly obvious. This apparent simplicity disguises a detailed reading. In the face of previous scholarship's dizzying variety, Felce provides a thorough and sober assessment of the importance of Old Norse literature to William Morris. Obviously, the book is to be recommended to anyone interested in Morris's work, but those in the fields of reception, translation or medievalism will also find a wealth of interesting ideas. Felce's conclusion suggests numerous potential avenues for further research, such as examining the influence Morris and Eiríkur had on

the development of Old Norse studies in Britain; Morris's personal library and his background knowledge of Old Norse; and the exact extent of Eiríkur's influence on Morris's translation style (pp. 172–73). Detractors might argue that the writer has attempted too much—a close reading of translations, a complete literature review, a revised chronology and a personal essay on Morris's intent—in one slim volume, but realistically this breadth of investigation is essential for interpreting the scope of Morris's artistic output. It also feels like the sort of industrious 'deedfulness' that Morris himself would have appreciated. In Morris's own words, 'If a chap can't compose an epic poem while he's weaving a tapestry, he had better shut up, he'll never do any good at all.'

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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: *iðraðist 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 Syrlækjarosi.*

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

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