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## SAINT'S LIFE AND SAGA NARRATIVE

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SAINT'S LIFE and saga narrative is often framed in terms of origins. To what extent did the translation of foreign hagiographical literature from the mid-twelfth century on contribute to the emergence of the native Icelandic saga at the beginning of the thirteenth century? The classic formulation of this relationship is, of course, the often-quoted statement in Gabriel Turville-Petre's *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, and it remains the starting point for discussion (1953, 142):

In a word, the learned literature did not teach the Icelanders what to think or what to say, but it taught them how to say it. It is unlikely that the sagas of kings and of Icelanders, or even the sagas of ancient heroes, would have developed as they did unless several generations of Icelanders had first been trained in hagiographical literature.

This comment has since been refined and challenged by a number of other scholars, including Peter Foote (1994) and Theodore Andersson, who has argued for the origin of at least one school of saga-writing in secular historical narrative (1993). Nevertheless, the idea that early translations of saints' lives did indeed provide 'an excellent training in literary composition' (Bekker-Nielsen 1962, 323–24) continues to prove influential. Even scholars who are critical of the genre see some sort of continuity: Régis Boyer describes the rise of the Icelandic sagas as a process of 'emancipation and elaboration', a gradual disengagement from the narrow purpose and rigid generic constraints of the European saint's life (1981, 36).

No doubt the coming together of early translated literature with a living oral tradition provided a powerful stimulus for the writing down of the first sagas, but the relationship between saint's life and saga is not just about origins. The translation of saints' lives may have preceded the writing down of the first native sagas chronologically, but it did not cease with their emergence: saints' lives continued to be written, translated, expanded and read throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and native Icelandic sagas inevitably had to compete with this major medieval genre. This is not a relationship that ends with the Family Saga flying the nest, but a relationship that is ongoing, and it is only to be expected that the two genres would interact with each other, even approach each other, in the

same way that we see with saint's life and romance (see Cormack 1994). The influence no doubt goes both ways—native taste and narrative conventions must also have had an effect on the Icelandic saints' lives—but here I want to look at the 'commutation' of episodes and motifs from saint's life to saga narrative, for this has much to tell us, I believe, about how the saga authors understood their own literary endeavours in relation to the more established genres of medieval Europe.<sup>1</sup> I will focus on how three Icelandic sagas in particular construct themselves in relation to the saint's life: Oddr Snorrason's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, from c.1190; *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, usually placed in the early thirteenth century, and *Flóamanna saga*, which was probably composed between 1290 and 1330 (Andersson 2003, 4; *Egils saga*, lviii; Perkins 1978, 29). The reason for this choice is not just that these sagas were composed at different times in the saga-writing period, but also that they all borrow at least one episode from the same work, Gregory's *Dialogues*, which was first translated in twelfth-century Norway and survives in Icelandic manuscripts from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Boyer 1973; Wolf 2001). This allows us to see how three saga authors in turn respond to the same hagiographical material, and what a saga hero might have in common with the figure of the saint.

Oddr Snorrason's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason now seems to be regarded as the 'first' Icelandic saga (Andersson 2004; 2006, 25), but in fact it was originally written in Latin, and survives only in two related versions of an early translation, plus a short fragment.<sup>2</sup> Generically, it is certainly mixed, with affiliations to saint's life and to secular historical

<sup>1</sup> The issue of genre in the Middle Ages is, of course, a tricky one, and the current terminology for different genres of saga is particularly problematic. Even hagiography is a much more amorphous genre than is sometimes recognised, with 'ill-defined edges' that overlap, for example, with chronicle and romance (see Woodcock 2006). Recent studies (e.g. Hiatt 2007) suggest that generic mixes are particularly characteristic of medieval literature; in Old Norse scholarship, Clunies Ross (1997, 449) has suggested that sagas are defined by their 'multiple modalities' and Phelpsstead (2007) draws on Bakhtinian concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia to analyse the form taken by saints' lives in the Old Norse Kings' Sagas. Assuming that the terms 'saint's life' and 'Saga of Icelanders' are still useful, however, the 'commutation' (Jauss 1982, 82) of episodes from one to the other provides an important way of exploring generic expectations.

<sup>2</sup> The manuscripts in which these three versions are found are Stockh. Perg. 4to 18 (S), dating from c.1300; AM 310, 4to (A), no younger than c.1250, and Uppsala de la Gardie 4–7 (U), dating from c.1270. On the relationship between these, see Ólafur Halldórsson (2005, clxvi–clxxxiii) and Andersson (2003, 26–27). In what follows, I will quote from the A-text as the fullest of the three, unless otherwise noted.

narrative: Andersson describes it as a 'bipolar composition with a split religious and political identity' (2003, 25) and Lönnroth has commented on its curious mixture of 'hagiography and heroic story-telling', its imperfectly coordinated assortment of secular and exemplary anecdotes (1975, 38; 2000, 263). Some of this hybridity may be the result of successive layers of translation and copying: according to Ólafur Halldórsson, at least some of the secular historical material, for example on the Jomsvikings and the battle of Svǫldr, may have been added at a later stage (2006, cxv–cxlii). There is still plenty, however, that sits uncomfortably in a saint's life, like the account of how Óláfr hacked down the killer of his foster-father at the age of nine (*Óláfs saga Odds*, 150). A central issue has been whether Oddr actually intended to promote Óláfr Tryggvason as a saint, but although Sverrir Tómasson (1988, 261–79) has argued persuasively on the basis of the prologue that this was his purpose, there is no evidence for any cult of Óláfr Tryggvason in Iceland and (without a body, relics or attested posthumous miracles) it is difficult to see how Oddr could possibly have been successful (cf. Zernack 1998, 82).<sup>3</sup> Ólafur Halldórsson has suggested that Oddr may have set out to collect evidence of Óláfr's sanctity, but gave this up because of the fixed oral traditions about the extreme violence of his reign (2006, lxxxii). Whether or not this is true, Oddr is quite open from the beginning of his saga about the absence of any 'clear signs' of Óláfr's sanctity and he seems to me to draw a clear distinction in several passages between *enn helgi* 'the holy' Óláfr Haraldsson, who has powers of intercession, and *enn frægsti* 'the most famous' Óláfr Tryggvason, for whose soul our prayers are requested (*Óláfs saga Odds*, 125–26, 272–73, 358). It looks as if Oddr has consciously chosen to use the form of a saint's life to write about a great Christian hero who is not an established saint (cf. *Óláfs saga Odds*, lxxx), and the tension thus created between the saint's life as narrative form and Óláfr's imperfect fit contributes much to what is distinctive about the saga.

There can be no doubt that Oddr turns continually to the Bible and to hagiography to help him structure his account of Óláfr's life. It is clear from

<sup>3</sup> Lönnroth (1963) had argued that Óláfr Tryggvason was set up as a rival saint to Óláfr Haraldsson, and Sverrir Tómasson (1988, 279) suggested that incidents from the life of St Óláfr were transferred to his namesake according to the doctrine of the 'communion of saints'. This has recently been contested by both Zernack (1998) and Ólafur Halldórsson (1984; *Óláfs saga Odds*, lxxx); while studies by Bagge (1995) and Andersson (1995) agree that there is no evidence that Oddr borrowed from sagas of Saint Óláfr (see also Jónas Kristjánsson 1976); it is possible, in fact, that any borrowing may have gone in the opposite direction.

the prologue that he sees Óláfr through the lens of biblical history, for he draws a typological analogy between John the Baptist as the precursor of Christ, and Óláfr Tryggvason as a precursor of St Óláfr (*Óláfs saga Odds*, 125–26). This also allows him to explain why God did not honour the first Óláfr through any miracles: this was to the greater glory of his later namesake (Zernack 1998, 86–88). He bases Óláfr's birth and childhood on that of Christ; he compares his exile in Russia to Joseph's time in Egypt; and he models his personal conversion on those of St Paul and Constantine, as well as including a dream vision (Indrebø 1917, 159–62; Lönnroth 1963, 67–72; *Óláfs saga Odds*, lxxxi–lxxxii, lxxxv–lxxxviii). Óláfr's missionary work, which is Oddr's main interest, is modelled on that of the great evangelist St Martin of Tours, who appears to Óláfr in the second dream vision of the saga and promises to empower his words (*Óláfs saga Odds*, 212–13, 231). Oddr describes how Óláfr (like St Martin) was visited by both angels and devils, how the devil stirred up opposition to him, and how God finally allowed him to be *svikinn ok tældr fyrst fyrir illgjarnan ok lyginn anda* 'deceived and ensnared first by the evil and lying spirit' in the form of his political enemies (*Óláfs saga Odds*, 310). Óláfr disappears, like St John the Evangelist, in a blinding flash of light (Cormack 1994, 39–40) and although Oddr admits the possibility that he drowned, he himself believes that Óláfr escaped to the East to enter into a life of penance (*Óláfs saga Odds*, 356–58). Most striking is Oddr's account of how Óláfr, like Christ (and, again, St Martin) was transfigured when he left his ship to pray alone: this miracle, Oddr tells us, was witnessed by his retainer Þorkell dyðrill, and transmitted by him to King Haraldr Sigurðarson, who attested that Þorkell was *hinn sannsöglasta mann* 'the most truthful of men' (*Óláfs saga Odds*, 268–70). Oddr handles this miracle exactly as a hagiographer would, and he clearly sees Óláfr's life as running parallel to that of a saint.

More striking, though, are Oddr's various depictions of the devil—that essential generic component of the saint's life. Oddr's devils appear as shape-shifting humans, as pagan gods and as trolls; and it is sometimes pointed out that this idea of the devil as essentially a 'trickster' may come from the Life of St Martin, although it is shared by Gregory's *Dialogues* and by the *Vitae Patrum*. Oddr's devil is not just a master of disguises, however, but also a masterful story-teller, whose eloquence and charisma threaten to match Óláfr's own. This may well be Oddr's own idea. One Christmas Eve, the devil turns up in Óláfr's court in the guise of an old, one-eyed, hooded man, and he keeps Óláfr entertained long into the night by telling tales of ancient kings and their battles (*Óláfs saga Odds*, 249–54, cf. also 288–90). Óláfr, Oddr tells us, *girntisk* 'yearned' for more speech



with his guest, and it is only when he wakes up the next day to find his guest disappeared that it occurs to him it might have been Óðinn—the devil. This is confirmed by the slab of poisoned meat that the guest has left for Óláfr's midday meal. The whole functions as a short exemplum, which Oddr (or, in the S-text, Óláfr) then interprets for us (*Óláfs saga Odds*, 253–54):

Ok hafði óvinr alls mannkyns svá fyrir búit tálsamligar snörur vélarinnar, at fyrst færi hann öndunum, en síðan líkþunum.

And the enemy of all mankind had prepared deceitful snares of trickery for him, so that he might first destroy the spirit and then the body.

It is, in other words, a two-pronged attack: the devil aims first to poison Óláfr's soul by feeding him pagan tales, and then to poison his body through the contaminated meat.<sup>4</sup> And particularly dangerous, according to Oddr, is the fact that some of Óðinn's tales turn out to be true: the body of one of his pagan kings is later discovered in a nearby mound. Oddr gives a strong warning, through this exemplum, about the dangers of listening to pagan and heroic tales, and he presents his own tales—of a missionary king doing battle with the devil—not only in contrast, but also as a pious substitute: in the prologue, Oddr insists that his narrative is more entertaining than the 'step-mother tales' told about the king by shepherd boys (*Óláfs saga Odds*, 126).

The relationship between Oddr's hagiography and native traditions of tale-telling is explored further in a fascinating story entitled *trolla þáttir* in the A-version (*Óláfs saga Odds*, 290–94). It comes immediately after the devil's second appearance to Óláfr, this time in the shape of a red-bearded visitor to his ship, clearly identifiable as Þórr. Þórr tells Óláfr how the land was once inhabited by giants and how the human settlers called upon him to kill them with his hammer. He then leaps dramatically from gunwhale to prow, dives into the sea and disappears from sight, in a manner uncannily like Óláfr's last dive at the battle of Svölðr.<sup>5</sup> Oddr then tells us that Óláfr moors off Namsdal in northern Norway, an area reportedly

<sup>4</sup> Rowe (2005, 200), discussing the version of this story in Flateyjarbók, cites 'Augustine's comparison of even metaphorical references to pagan gods to food fit for swine' (*De doctrina Christiana* III.7).

<sup>5</sup> This is one of a number of similarities between Óláfr Tryggvason and Þórr, also noted by Kaplan (2006), in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*. Óláfr wrestles with trolls and engages in impressive feats of swimming and diving (as does Þórr in the above scene); he has control over the sea-winds (*Óláfs saga Odds*, 267; cf. Perkins 2001, 6–7), and his eyes are mentioned on numerous occasions as being particularly distinctive (*Óláfs saga Odds* 151, 155, 179, 277). The idea that Óláfr is replacing Þórr as heroic protector of the land is no doubt paramount in this comparison (cf. Kaplan 2006, 483).

plagued by *trolllagangr* ‘troll-haunting’, and two of his retainers travel to the mountains at night to ascertain whether this is true. They see a fire in a mountain cave and, creeping closer, discover a group of trolls lamenting Óláfr’s arrival in their domain. The first describes how, invisibly, he joined Óláfr’s men in wrestling, throwing two to the ground and breaking their arms and legs. When he tried his strength against the king, however, Óláfr’s grip burned him like hot iron, and he barely escaped with his life. The second describes how he took the shape of a beautiful woman and offered the king a horn of poisoned mead: Óláfr accepted the horn, and dashed it in his face. The third also tempted the king in the shape of a woman, causing itching in his foot, which Óláfr asked him to scratch. But as he prepared to destroy the king, Óláfr hit him hard on the head with a book and, like his fellows, he was put to flight. He left on the king’s foot a blister so poisonous that the attending bishop had to cut it away from the flesh. The men return quickly to Óláfr to tell him what they have heard, and he confirms the truth of these reports. The next morning, Óláfr and his bishop sprinkle holy water over the area and *frelstu fólkit af djöfuligum vélum* ‘redeemed folk from these devilish tricks’.

This anecdote is based on a story from book iii of Gregory’s *Dialogues* (Gregory the Great 1978–80, II 278–85; *Hms*, I 222–24), in which a Jew staying overnight in a heathen temple overhears a group of devils discussing their attempts to lure a bishop, Andrew of Fondi, into sin. One boasts of how he persuaded Andrew to give a certain holy woman in his household a licentious pat on the back, and when the Jew goes to Andrew with this report, the bishop is led first to repent and then to convert the Jew; the temple is destroyed and a church built in its place. For Gregory, it is a story about human weakness and divine providence: in the Norse translation, he concludes that *Sva bvriar oss at viso, at ver sem avalt hredir af ostvrch varri, en trevstimsö gyps miscunn* ‘It certainly befits us that we should constantly be afraid of our weakness, but trust God’s mercy’.

Oddr carefully reproduces the narrative structure of Gregory’s story, but both context and content are radically changed. Most obvious is the move from Roman temple to the rocky and desolate landscape of the North, which Oddr seems to imagine much as early hagiographers did the deserts and wastelands of saints like Anthony and Guthlac: devil-infested regions that must be reclaimed for Christ. Yet native and foreign elements are closely intertwined in this tale. The first troll’s account of his wrestling match with Óláfr could come straight out of folktale: like Grendel, he is aroused to anger by *háreysti ok glaum* ‘noise and cheer’ from the kings’ retinue, and he competes with Óláfr physically, finding his hand-grip more than he had bargained for. Yet the

burning inflicted by the king's grip is a motif found in many lives of saints, whose prayers and physical presence often cause devils to burn (cf. *Postola sögur* 1874, 515, 745). The second and third troll fit better into the pattern of monastic temptations, where devils appear to monks in the shape of women, as the devil in Gregory's *Dialogues* manipulates the nun. The lady with the mead-cup looks like a native motif, but may also be influenced by a story earlier in the *Dialogues*, where St Benedict is offered a cup of poisoned wine (Gregory the Great 1978–80, II 140–43; *Hms*, I 160–61, 203). Although Benedict does not dash the cup in the face of the evil-doers, Óláfr's violence recalls the reaction of many a desert saint to sexual temptation: Apelles, for example, thrusts hot iron in the face of a female visitor, believing her to be the devil (*Hms*, II 437). Finally, there is the odd detail of the itching foot, perhaps a distant echo of Gregory's pat on the back, at least in as much as it comes closest to doing Óláfr harm: his bishop's help is required to eradicate the damage, and in the S-text it is the bishop, not Óláfr, who dispatches the troll. It seems fitting that he puts to flight this creature of oral tradition by whacking him over the head with a book.

It is not only the devils that are transformed in Oddr's narrative, however, but also the moral of the story. Despite the fact that two of the trolls take the shape of women, Oddr shows little interest in the theme of sexual temptation. Given that, by this stage in the saga, Óláfr has married three times and had at least one extra-marital relationship, this was probably a wise decision. The female trolls do not tempt Óláfr sexually but work to destroy him physically: any hope that their feminine wiles will aid their cause is bitterly disappointed. Unlike Bishop Andrew, Óláfr shows little sign of weakness, and his impressive physical strength is surely related to Oddr's conception of his spiritual powers: one cannot easily separate 'secular' tales about Óláfr's climbing and swimming feats from the depiction of his spiritual pre-eminence.<sup>6</sup> For Oddr, this is a story about Óláfr's conversion of the

<sup>6</sup>There is an interesting contrast here with Bede's *Life of St Cuthbert* (1969, 156–59), which Clunies Ross cites in relation to Egill Skalla-Grímsson, linking his superior strength in games to that of the Christian saint (1978, 7). But Cuthbert's pre-eminence in sports is a youthful immaturity (they are *ludendi vanitate* 'idle games') which he must move beyond in order to mature spiritually. For Oddr, Óláfr's physical exploits are a constant feature of his heroics, from the great blow that avenges his foster-father, to the swimming competition that brings about Kjartan's conversion, to the dive from his ship at the Battle of Svöldr. A couple of anecdotes (chapters A51–52) are included expressly to illustrate this physical prowess and they merge seamlessly with accounts of his spiritual powers (*Óláfs saga Odds*, 266–77).

northern landscape and it works on two levels: from a Christian point of view, Óláfr drives out devils and withstands temptation, and from a heroic point of view, he fulfils the role of many a northern hero—thrashing trolls.

Gregory's *Dialogues* not only provided the framework for this particular anecdote, but may also have inspired Oddr's overall conception of his hero: he must have been interested by Gregory's insistence that holiness is not restricted to those who perform miracles, and by the human limitations of many of Gregory's saints (Straw 1988, 104; O'Donnell 1995, 68). He certainly seems to have been influenced by Gregory's thematic grouping of exempla, and it seems likely that the allegedly 'chaotic' and 'ill-assorted' middle section of his saga (Bagge 2006, 493; Andersson 2006, 40) was intended, at least in theory, to be structured thematically: the S-text calls his tales of the devil *dæmisögur*, and the A-text describes them as *blandat . . . við frásögn Óláfs konungs* 'mixed with the narrative of King Óláfr' (*Óláfs saga Odds*, 259). At the same time, Oddr's understanding of holiness is clearly very different from Gregory's: he may adopt Gregory's story as a moral exemplum, but what immediately strikes the reader is not the likeness but the difference between the saintly Andrew and the heroic Óláfr, the contrast between that seemingly insignificant pat on the back that imperils Andrew's soul, and Óláfr's violent response to the trolls' lively attacks on his body. This is one of Oddr's most successful stories precisely because of the way he has moulded it into his own native tradition of tale-telling—and this at the very earliest stage of saga writing.

Not all of Oddr's material lent itself equally well to this kind of reading, and his occasional difficulty is well illustrated by the relationship between another anecdote in the saga and the Life of St Martin. Martin, after all, was not only a missionary who destroyed pagan shrines, but also a former soldier who had rejected violence, whose only attested use of his sword was, famously, to cut his cloak in two so he could give half to a beggar (*Hms*, I 555–56). The awkwardness of choosing such a saint as a model for Óláfr has been little commented on. In an isolated series of anecdotes towards the end of his saga, Oddr tells us how Óláfr was challenged by a man *máttugr ok málsnjallr* 'powerful and eloquent' (*Óláfs saga Odds*, 282–83): he has him seized and tries to force a snake down his throat, but when it shies away, Óláfr has hot iron bound to it, so that it crawls through the mouth into the belly, and emerges with the man's heart in its fangs. Oddr does not record whether he approves of this gruesome death, but it recalls two episodes from the Life of St Martin, one in which Martin cures a boy from a snake bite by drawing the poison out of the boy's swollen body into his own finger; another in which he confronts a

demon-possessed man by placing his finger into his mouth and ordering him to bite it (*Hms*, I 561, 565). The finger burns like *heito iarni* 'hot iron', and the evil spirit, unable to exit through the mouth, comes out the other end with the man's excrement. Martin heals both men, but Óláfr does not even offer his adversary the choice of conversion. Oddr follows this story with one in which Óláfr has an Icелander bitten to death by dogs to avenge the killing of a courtier, an action which is explicitly condemned. Óláfr's violence seems to spiral out of control here—perhaps there is an element of heroic overreaching—and it seems possible that Oddr has isolated these scenes from others not because he failed to include them earlier (cf. Andersson 2006, 35) but because of the difficulty of assimilating them to his hagiographic model, even as examples of Óláfr's encounters with demonic opponents. After the battle of Svǫldr, the S-text ascribes to Óláfr the comment that *vera mega at Guði hefði eigi í alla staði hugnat hans ríki ok áburð* 'it may be that God was not pleased in every respect with his rule and his splendour' (*Óláfs saga Odds*, 357). King and hero fall short of the saint's perfection.

Oddr has a real interest in the relationship between hero and saint, and in the extent to which heroic narrative and saint's life go together: in refashioning the framed narrative from Gregory's *Dialogues* as a troll story, he urges a moral and exemplary reading of traditional heroic tales. Other saga authors, however, use episodes from saints' lives in ways that are less obviously related to saintliness and more doubtfully serve exemplary ends. Few, I think, would want to argue that the author of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* saw Egill as a saint, or even (overall, at least) as particularly saint-like. His interests lie elsewhere. Yet here too, we find a cluster of motifs from saints' lives at some of the key points in Egill's career, and it is worth thinking about why these incidents are included and what they contribute to the character of Egill.

The first, well-known, borrowing occurs during Egill's initial disastrous encounter with King Eiríkr and Queen Gunnhildr, when he accidentally intrudes on a royal feast hosted by a man called Bárðr, a great friend of the king and queen (*Egils saga*, 106–11). Bárðr lodges his unexpected guests in an outlying building and serves them bowls of whey on the pretence that he has no beer; but, when Eiríkr becomes aware of the newcomers, he invites them to join his party. Bárðr, for unexplained reasons, now forces so much drink on them that everyone except Egill becomes quite incapable; he then complains to Queen Gunnhildr, and the two of them hatch a plot:

Dróttning ok Bárðr blönduðu þá drykkinn ólyfjani ok báru þá inn; signdi Bárðr fullit, fekk síðan ǫlseljunni; færði hon Agli ok bað hann drekka. Egill brá þá knífi sínum ok stakk í lófa sér; hann tók við horninu ok reist á rúnar ok reið á blóðinu.

The queen and Bárðr then mixed the drink with poison and carried it in; Bárðr marked the cup, then gave it to the cup-bearer; she took it to Egill and asked him to drink. Egill pulled out his knife and cut his palm; he took the horn and carved runes on it and smeared them with blood.<sup>7</sup>

Egill then recites a verse, with instant supernatural effect: *Hornit sprakk í sundr, en drykkinn fór niðr í hálm* 'The horn burst apart, and the drink spilt on the hay'. Egill gets up to leave, but Bárðr intercepts him with yet another drink, which Egill downs before reciting a second verse and, suddenly, killing Bárðr. The poisoning itself is a fairly common motif: a similar act on the part of a queen is recorded in *Morkinskinna* (2000, 111, 422–23) and may be based on a real incident. The shattering of the cup, however, comes from the Life of St Benedict in Gregory's *Dialogues* (Gregory the Great 1978–80, II 141–43; *Hms*, I 161, 203; cf. Bjarni Einarsson 1975, 176), where Benedict is offered a pitcher of poisoned wine by some unruly monks. Unaware of the poison, Benedict causes it to shatter by making the sign of the cross over it, but unlike Egill, he responds calmly to what this reveals and asks God's forgiveness for the monks.

The second incident marks Egill's last encounter with Eiríkr and Gunnhildr, after he has killed their son Rognvaldr and laid a curse on them to drive them from the land. Egill is shipwrecked off the coast of Northumbria, where Eiríkr now reigns, and this of course is the context for one of his most famous poems, *Höfuðlausn*, for which he receives his head from Eiríkr. Egill spends the night trying to compose this poem, but when his friend Arinbjörn stops by to see how it is going, he finds Egill at a loss (*Egils saga*, 182–83): *Hefir hér setit svala ein við glugginn ok klakat í alla nótt, svá at ek hefí aldregi beðit ró fyrir* 'A swallow has perched by the window and chattered all night, so that I haven't had any peace'. When Arinbjörn goes to sit by the window, *hann sá hvar hamhleyypa nokkur fór annan veg af húsinu* 'he saw where a certain shape-shifter left the house by another way'. Although it is not made explicit, this must surely be Gunnhildr, whose associations with *seiðr* are well known. Towards the

<sup>7</sup> The verb *signa* can mean 'to mark with the sign of Þórr's hammer, to consecrate (to a pagan god)' or 'to make the sign of the cross, to bless'; presumably the first is meant by the saga author here. There is a neat variation on the motif of the poisoned chalice in *Helga þáttur Þórissonar* (*Flateyjarbok* I 1860, 360–61), where Óláfr Tryggvason is presented with two horns by the pagan emissaries of Guðmundr of Glæsisvellir. He fills the horns with drink, has them blessed, and sends them back to the emissaries, who cannot drink from the horns because they are not baptised. Rather than protecting the Christian from poison, the sign of the cross makes the drink effectively poisonous to the pagans.

beginning of Benedict's life a similar small black bird disturbs him at prayer in the wilderness, and is quickly followed by the appearance of a woman's form (Gregory the Great 1978–80, II 136–39; *Hms*, I 160, 202). Again, Benedict uses the sign of the cross to put this devil to flight.

The last incident occurs during Egill's trip to Vermaland to collect taxes for King Hákon, while he lodges at the house of a man called Porfinnr (*Egils saga*, 229–30, 238). Egill notices that Porfinnr's daughter, Helga, is sick, and enquires into the cause; he is told that a neighbour's son has carved runes to heal her, but these have only made her worse. Egill takes a look at these runes, which are under the bed-sheets, and discovers that they have been badly carved: he orders clean sheets, erases the runes and carves new ones, and places them under the girl's pillow. The saga author tells us that *henni þótti sem hon vaknaði ór svefni* 'it seemed to her as if she awoke from sleep'. Later we are told, with slight inconsistency, that the neighbour's son had carved love-runes in an attempt to seduce Helga, but, lacking the skill, he caused her illness instead.

This has been compared to Christ's healing of Jairus's daughter (Bjarni Einarsson 1975, 260–61; Tulinius 2004, 67), and there are some striking similarities: the saga prose echoes Christ's assurance that the sick girl 'is not dead but sleeping', and her weakness upon waking (she is described as *mátt-lítill*) perhaps recalls Christ's suggestion that the girl may need something to eat. The function of the runes, however, has close parallels in saint's lives, as well as suggesting, paradoxically, an affinity with Óðinn (cf. Finlay 2000, 93–94). In Jerome's *Life of St Hilarion* (1998, 99–100), a young lovesick man buries magic spells and strange figures under the threshold of a virgin's house, causing her to go mad from desire. Hilarion exorcises the demon, however, before he removes the magic charms, being unwilling to admit that they have any real power. There is no evidence that the *Life of St Hilarion* was known in Iceland, although other works by Jerome were; but there is a closer parallel in the *Life of St Martin*, where the daughter of a man named Arborius is bedridden with a fever (*Hms*, I 562). He places a letter written by Martin on her chest and she immediately recovers. And many other saints' lives affirm the power of letters written by a saint: in Gregory's *Dialogues*, for example, Bishop Sabinus arrests the course of a flooding river by casting into it a written document, commanding it to return to its proper channel (Gregory the Great 1978–80, II 136–39; *Hms*, I 160, 202; Gregory the Great 1978–80, II 290–91; *Hms*, I 225).

All three of these scenes, then, use motifs recognisable from saints' lives, but there are also clear and significant differences. In the case of the feast at Bárðr's, the setting and moral implications of the poisoning could

hardly be more different—not only because of the excessive drinking and Egill's unsaintly aggression, but also because of the complex and partly unexplained motives that converge in such a violent outcome. Bárðr is described on his first appearance as *sýslumaðr mikill ok starfsmaðr góðr* 'a very diligent and hard-working man', which hardly prepares us for his duplicitous behaviour (although perhaps his closeness to Gunnhildr does), and Eiríkr's magnanimous gesture in including these uninvited guests at his feast scarcely deserves the travesty of hospitality it occasions. Nor can the incident be explained—logically at least—as a result of former hostility between kings and members of Egill's family, since Eiríkr does not appear to know who Egill is: he refers to him after the killing as 'that big man who drank most'. The possibility that Gunnhildr is aware of Egill is left open, however, and both she and Egill have motives for wanting to stir up trouble, motives that have much to do with what is happening simultaneously: the marriage of Egill's brother Þórólfr to Ásgerðr (cf. Tulinius 2000, 51). Morally, this tale is far from transparent, as is well captured in a later judgment (*Egils saga*, 113):

Pat mun vera mál manna at Bárðr hefði verðleika til þess, at hann væri drepinn, en þó er Agli of mjök ættgengt at sjásk of lítt fyrir at verða fyrir reiði konungs.

People will say that Bárðr deserved to be killed; but you, Egill, take the family tradition too far, in thinking too little of the king's anger.

Saga morality defines itself differently here from the clear-cut imperatives of hagiography.

Interesting too is the way that the saga author replaces the sign of the cross with the blood-stained 'ale' runes, converting hagiographic motif into pagan ritual. Egill's mastery of runes goes hand in hand with his poetic skills, but it is striking that the saga author envisages this as giving him a power akin to the Christian supernatural: like Benedict, he discerns Bárðr's treachery and thwarts it through privileged access to special powers. As Benedict is opposed by the devil, so the forces that oppose Egill's practice of poetry are portrayed as demonic: Gunnhildr shape-shifts like the devil to break the intense concentration that Egill, like a saint at prayer, requires to work his own linguistic miracle of poetic composition. In the scene with the sick girl, Egill employs his skills in language to heal an innocent child, cancelling the effect of the destructive magic that made her ill, and substituting his own life-giving characters. Yet this scene, where we see Egill at his best, follows immediately after a scene where he is clearly at his worst and at his most Odinic—the famous scene at the house of Ármóðr, where Egill vomits into his host's face and, before leaving, cuts off his beard and gouges out one eye (de Looze 1989, 133–34; Finlay 2000, 92). This



scene of maiming ought to contrast with the scene of healing that follows, and yet both lead equally to the composition of poetry, just as the verses composed in the earlier scene with Bárðr, where Egill supposedly plays the saint, make a worryingly unsaintly link between intoxication, poetry and violence (*Egils saga*, 110).<sup>8</sup> We are constantly forced to weigh the redemptive qualities of Egill's language against those less savoury aspects of the poetic temperament: his extravagant drinking, his instability of mood, his violence and his aggression (cf. Clunies Ross 1978; Finlay 2000). Egill is a character of extremes: in these scenes, the saga author constructs him as both recognisably like a saint and at the same time, profoundly different.

Where the hagiographer uses miracles to authenticate his subject's sanctity, the saga author traces the contours of a power exercised through language that saint and poet have in common. Gregory says of St Benedict that

Hugr hans vas hafíðr til crapta heðar, oc motto af því orð hans verða eigi tóm. Ef hann melti ognarmol of necqvern hlut, þa varð sva micill motr at mali hans, sem þat veri doms atqvepi fullt, oc varð þegar framgengt.

His mind was raised to a powerful height, and his words could not therefore be empty. If he spoke threatening words about anything, his speech had such great power as if it were a final judgment, and the threat was immediately carried out. (*Hms*, I 216)

His words have power over the dead: when two nuns he has excommunicated die and are buried in the church, they rise from their graves and walk out whenever mass is said (*Hms*, I 216). Gregory even warns that saints should be wary of how they wield their powers of cursing: he tells how one saint cursed his enemy unthinkingly and was horrified to discover that his words took immediate effect (Gregory the Great 1978–80, II 318–21). St Martin's everyday speech is described as *full anlegrar speke* 'full of spiritual discernment'; his spoken command can halt his adversaries in their tracks and force rulers to act against their will; his prayers destroy pagan shrines (*Hms*, I 559, 568, 570–71). There is much here to interest a saga author fascinated by the relationship between language and power. And both Benedict and Martin exercise their verbal powers in particular defiance of royal authority, in scenes that recall Egill's own antagonistic

<sup>8</sup> Liquid metaphors are used for beer (*atgeira ýrar ýring* 'liquid of the spears of the auroch'), the warrior (*oddkýs regnbjóðr* 'he who offers the shield's rain') and poetry (*regn Hárs þegna* 'the rain of the servants of Óðinn'; translations from *Egils saga* 2003, 60). Clover notes how Egill 'transmutes' the liquid of the beer in the first helming into the liquid of poetic mead in the following helming (1978, 73–74), while the metaphor of 'rain' is also used both for battle and for poetry.

encounters with kings (*Hms*, I 211–12, 562–63). Whereas the saint's power derives explicitly from his virtue and intimacy with God, however, Egill's is rather more amoral. Runes carved badly inflict harm, those carved well bring healing: the contrast is between clumsiness and skill, not between vice and virtue (cf. de Looze 1989, 135–36).

Other aspects of Egill's life, such as his childhood precocity, could also be modelled on the saint, but most striking is the scene at the end of the saga (*Egils saga*, 298–99), when Egill's stepdaughter Þórdís, newly converted to Christianity, has his bones buried in the newly-built church. The saga author tells us that when this was taken down and a new church built, the huge bones of a man believed to be Egill were dug up under the altar and reburied on the outer edge of the churchyard, the site used for children who had not been fully baptised (Tulinius 2004, 74, 83). The translation of a saga hero's bones is a motif found in many other sagas, including *Flóamanna saga*, but what is significant here is the direction in which Egill's bones go—from under the altar, where the relics of saints were kept, to the outer edge of the churchyard. The indestructibility of his thick and heavy skull, confirmed by no less an authority than Skapti Þórarinnsson, may even parody the incorruptibility of the saint's body. Egill was prime-signed in England, but never baptised, and there is nothing saintly about how he prepares for his death, by burying silver and (by his own claim) killing two slaves. Egill's relationship to the saint is one of analogy, not metonymy: Þórdís's attempt to convert her father misfires.

The author of *Flóamanna saga* probably knew both *Egils saga* and Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, and he was widely read in hagiographic and visionary literature (Perkins 1972, 281–83, 292, 359).<sup>9</sup> He uses all of these to tell the story of Þorgils Þórðarson, one of the first converts to Christianity in Iceland. At the centre of the saga lies Þorgils's ordeal in the frozen wastes of Greenland, where he is persecuted by the very god he had previously worshipped, Þórr. This ordeal begins with one of the few scenes in saga narrative generally acknowledged to be based on biblical narrative, Christ's temptation by Satan in the wilderness (Matthew 4. 8–10; *Flóamanna saga*, 278–79):

<sup>9</sup> *Flóamanna saga* survives in two versions, the longer (which is fragmentary) in AM 445b 4to (M), dated to c.1400, and the paper manuscript AM 515 fol.; the shorter in a number of younger paper manuscripts. Perkins thinks that the longer version is more original and notes that the shorter version has reduced what he calls the 'Christian element' (Perkins 1978, 14–15; cf. also *Flóamanna saga*, cxxxiv–cxlii). In what follows, I will quote from the shorter version, which is the basis for the text in *Flóamanna saga*, unless otherwise stated.

Síðan þótti honum Þórr leiða sik á hamra nökkura, þar sem sjóvarstraumur brast í björgum; 'í slíkum bylgjum skaltu vera ok aldri ór komast, utan þú hverfir til mín.' 'Nei,' sagði Þorgils, 'far á burt, inn leiði fjandi! Sá mun mér hjálpa, sem alla leysti með sínum dreyra.'

Then it seemed to him that Þórr led him onto a certain crag, where the ocean tide crashed against the rocks; 'you will be in such waves and never get away, unless you turn to me.' 'No,' said Þorgils, 'go away, you hateful devil! He who redeemed everyone with his blood will save me.'

Like Christ, Þorgils is led by the devil to a rocky precipice, but instead of overlooking 'all the kingdoms of the world', it overlooks the sea, on which Þorgils is soon to set sail on his trip to Greenland. This seascape is crucial, for as Perkins has shown, Þórr is a god who has command of the sea-winds (Perkins 2001), and many conversion accounts, including Oddr's own, pit Þórr against the Christian God in precisely this arena. The saga author could be thinking of Helgi the Lean, who believed in Christ but called upon Þórr during sea journeys (*Landnámabók*, 250), or he may have known Steinunn's triumphant verses crediting the shipwreck of the missionary Þangbrandr to Þórr (*Kristni saga*, 24), or perhaps he recalled how Óláfr Tryggvason prevailed over the waves raised by Hróaldr or, in Snorri's retelling, Rauðr (*Óláfs saga Odds*, 235–36; *Heimskringla* I 1941, 325–28). Þorgils has every reason to fear Þórr's threats and this is, indeed, only the first stage in a long temptation by the devil.

Þorgils's loyalty to Christ costs him dearly on this journey: his ship is battered by storms, he is stranded long in the uninhabited wastes of Greenland, his companions fall prey to sickness and his wife is murdered by his slaves. Even on his journey home, he suffers a great loss when his young and dearly-loved son dies in a storm at sea. Þorgils is temporarily stripped of wealth, status and family and this has a close parallel in the life of another well-known new convert: Plácíðus (or Eustace), who is himself modelled on the biblical Job. God warns Plácíðus immediately after his conversion that the devil will set *allar velar í gegn þer* 'all snares against you' and exhorts him that: *Byriar þer annarr Job at synaz fyrir freistni ok bera sigr af diofli fyrir þolinmæði* 'It befits you, a second Job, to bear up under temptation and triumph over the devil through patience' (*Hms*, II 95–97; cf. *Homílu-bók* 1872, 94–98, 153–54). Plácíðus's slaves and livestock die of sickness; he loses first his position and wealth, then his wife and two young boys (they are later reunited), and in all he spends fifteen years in exile. Þorgils is required to bear up under the same hardships and temptations; and, like Plácíðus, he remains firm.

The climax to Þorgils's temptations comes when he and his crew run out of water and, in a scene partly borrowed from *Landnámabók* (Perkins

1975, 316–17), the men adopt desperate measures to alleviate their thirst (*Flóamanna saga*, 297–98):

Peir taka nú auskerit ok míga í ok blönduðu við sjó ok báðu Þorgils leyfis at drekka. Hann kvað várkunn á, en kvaðst þó hvárki banna né lofa. En er þeir ætluðu at drekka, bað Þorgils þá fá sér ok kvaðst skyldu mæla fyrir minni. Hann tók við ok mælti svá: ‘Þú, it argasta dýr, er ferð vára dvelr, skalt eigi því ráða, at ek né aðrir drekki sinn þarfagang.’ Í því fló fugl, því líkastr sem álkuungi, burt frá skipinu ok skrækti við. Þorgils hellti síðan útbyrðis ór auskerinu.

They take the bailing scoop and urinate in it and mixed it with sea-water and asked Þorgils to give them leave to drink it. He said there was reason enough, but he would neither forbid nor permit it. But as they were about to drink, Þorgils asked them to pass it to him, and said he would propose a toast. He took it and said: ‘Most pernicious creature, impeder of our journey, you shall not cause me or anyone else to drink their own urine.’ At that moment, a bird most like a young razorbill flew away from the ship and screeched. Þorgils poured the mixture out of the scoop.

The saga author combines here the motifs of poisoned cup and black bird from Gregory’s *Dialogues*, with the seabird identifiable as Þórr and the devil. Its departure, as for Benedict, marks the end of the temptation, as Þorgils reaches inhabited land. Although Þorgils is not deceived as to the contents of the cup, he is, unwittingly, deceived by his men as to its benefits: the mixture would bring death to the soul without saving the body, and only his discernment of the devil’s wiles saves him. Unlike Egill, Þorgils has a genuine claim to saintliness here: he has been tried and tested in the wastelands of the North, he holds to his faith in adversity, he denounces and puts to flight the devil itself. It is no coincidence that we later find him to be the ancestor of the first Icelandic saint, church reformer Þorlákr Þórhallsson (*Flóamanna saga*, 295, 326): his saintliness surely prefigures Þorlákr’s sanctity, just as the first Óláfr prefigures the second.

Yet the saga goes further in showing how Þorgils is transformed by his years in the wasteland, just as Benedict is perfected by his life in the desert. One might expect the saga author to depict the wasteland as Oddr did, an abode of trolls and evil spirits that must be driven out, but in fact there is very little of this. The closest parallel comes before Þorgils sets out to Greenland, in a night-time encounter with Þórr that leaves him *víða blár* ‘bruised all over’. As Perkins has pointed out, Þórr is imagined as a revenant here (1975, 293), but the event also recalls how devils assaulted desert saints like Anthony, often inflicting physical bruising and injury (*Hms*, I 56, II 62–63, 432). In Greenland, Þorgils sees only a few trolls and does not cleanse any devil-infested areas.

Instead, the saga author focuses on Þorgils’s patient endurance of hardship: *Hann stóðst vel margar mannraunir, er hann hlaut at bera*

'He endured many trials which it fell to him to bear' (*Flóamanna saga*, 251–52). He is described as *inn hraustasti í öllum mannraunum* 'most valiant in all trials' and as suffering *vel ok karlmannliga* 'well and manfully' (*Flóamanna saga*, 326); but this emphasis on passive endurance rather than aggressive action marks a change from the first part of the saga, in which Þorgils is set up as a killer of evildoers and a man of political power. At the heart of the Greenland interlude is a scene unique in saga literature: Þorgils, upon discovering his wife murdered in her bed, saves the life of their infant son by miraculously breastfeeding him (*Flóamanna saga*, 288–89):

Um nóttina vill Þorgils vaka yfir sveininum ok kvaðst eigi sjá, at hann mætti álangdar lifa, 'ok þykki mér mikit, ef ek má eigi honum hjálpa; skal þat nú fyrst taka til bragða at skera á geirvörtuna'—ok svá var gert. Fór fyrst út blóð, síðan blanda, ok lét eigi fyrr af en ór fór mjólk, ok þar fæddist sveinninn upp við þat.

During the night Þorgils wishes to watch over the boy and said he did not see how he could live much longer, 'and it will be of great importance to me if I can save him; now the first step will be to cut my nipple'—and this was done. First blood came out, then a mixed fluid, but he did not stop until milk came out, and the boy was fed with it.

This is unusual not only in saga narrative but also in western hagiography, where miracles involving breast milk are performed by women and not men (Loomis 1948, 22, 24, 43, 79. 85; cf. Perkins 1975, 323–24). The wounds of both female and male martyrs, however, can bleed milk instead of blood (cf. *Hms*, I 264) and perhaps there is something Christ-like about the blood, then mixed fluid, then milk that flows from the gash in Þorgils's nipple. The wound in Christ's side was often associated with a breast and even with a nipple in late medieval devotional writings: according to medieval physiology, it was the mother's blood that fed the child in the womb and was later transmuted into breast milk, so that there was a close connection between the bleeding Christ and the breastfeeding woman (Bynum 1982, 132–33). Yet Þorgils's decision to breastfeed his son is not just a miracle, in imitation of Christ, it is also a striking image of gender reversal; it is tempting to read it as a 'liminal' moment, a stage in the 'social drama' that Bynum perceives in many lives of male saints written from the twelfth century on, with the moment of conversion expressed through female imagery (Bynum 1991, 34–35).<sup>10</sup> How difficult a moment it is in a saga narrative can be seen clearly from the longer

<sup>10</sup> Maternal imagery, including breastfeeding, is also used of abbots in Cistercian writings from the twelfth century, especially those of St Bernard of Clairvaux (Bynum 1982, 110–69); it is always a metaphor, however, and is specifically associated with the nurturing role of religious leaders.

version, where it is preceded by the anxious comment that Þorgils *minnist þá drengliga á karlmennsku* ‘bravely called to mind his manhood’ (*Flóamanna saga*, 288–89).

It is a moment, however, that can be understood not only in the context of late medieval devotional literature, but also in terms of other saga narratives about the Conversion. It seems unlikely to be a coincidence that, whereas Þorgils here openly embraces a nurturing maternal role, the first missionary to Iceland, Þorvaldr, killed the poets who composed a verse to the effect that he had fathered children on Bishop Friðrekr. Friðrekr, significantly, had a different response (*Kristni saga*, 79–80): *vel mætta ek bera börn þín ef þú ættir nokkur* ‘I might well have borne your children if you’d had any’, he tells Þorvaldr, perhaps recalling how St Paul describes himself in Galatians 4. 19 as ‘in the pain of childbirth’ over his new converts. By openly breastfeeding his son, even outside of Iceland, Þorgils lays himself open to serious charges of effeminacy and, when he later arrives at the home of Eiríkr the Red, one of Eiríkr’s servants, Hallr, does indeed compare Þorgils unfavourably with his own, still pagan, master (*Flóamanna saga*, 305):

Eiríkr er höfðingi mikill ok frægr, en Þorgils þessi hefir verit í vesöld ok ánauð, ok óvist er mér, hvárt hann er heldr karlmaðr en kona.

Eiríkr is a powerful and famous chieftain, while this Þorgils has suffered misery and hardship, and it’s unclear to me whether he’s a man or a woman.

Þorgils’s servant responds to this by killing Hallr, but Þorgils himself has little to say. Later, when his small son dies in a storm at sea, his grief is so overwhelming that he has to be tricked into allowing the burial, and he openly admits that he can understand why women love *brjóstbörnunum* ‘the children they have breastfed’ more than anyone else (*Flóamanna saga*, 312). Þorgils and Eiríkr were great friends in their youth (*Flóamanna saga*, 258), so the tension between them here is a measure of how the wasteland has changed Þorgils, taking him beyond the traditional bounds of masculinity and transforming the concept of the saga hero.

Although the ‘Christian element’ (Perkins 1978, 11) in the saga is concentrated in scenes set in Greenland, it is not confined to this part of the saga. Þorgils is from the beginning set up as a ‘noble heathen’, a killer of revenants, berserks and thieves; Þórr comments in the long text that he has always been a nuisance *þóttú værir heiðinn maðr* ‘even as a heathen man’ (*Flóamanna saga*, 278). There is a tale from Þorgils’s childhood about how he caught and dragged home a large fish, the only fish caught on that particular trip (*Flóamanna saga*, 252). This is not developed in the short text, but in the long text it corresponds to a later episode in Greenland, in which Þorgils always ends up with more fish than his pagan companion, Jósteinn,

even when the two agree to swap their catches (*Flóamanna saga*, 282). This, of course, recalls the miraculous fishing abilities of many Celtic saints (Loomis 1948, 70; cf. *Landnámabók*, 62–64). Yet Þorgils, like Egill and Óláfr, is also far from perfect. Before his conversion, he is embroiled in feuds with Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson, and is not always obviously right; upon his return to Iceland, he resumes these activities, as well as clashing with his excellent son-in-law Bjarni inn spaki 'the Wise'. His last killing is noteworthy. Þorgils, now seventy years of age, rides bent heavily over his horse and a Norwegian, Helgi, scoffs at him: it can hardly be seen, he comments, that Þorgils was once such a great hero. Þorgils challenges him to a duel and kills him on the spot. This is something many saga heroes would be proud of, a fine example of vigorous old age, but Þorgils describes it as *it mesta glappaverk* 'a great mishap' and, in the long text, *bráðræði* 'very rash' (*Flóamanna saga*, 323). Conventional saga exploits no longer sit easily with him.

These three sagas do not support any theory of gradual emancipation from hagiographic influence; rather, the interaction between saga and saint's life varies from work to work. Indeed, in some ways *Flóamanna saga* is more like Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* than any other saga and both, interestingly, have been described as 'idiosyncratic' or 'eccentric' (Perkins 1975, 291; Andersson 2005, 213), although this may have less to do with the fact that they use hagiographical motifs than the scale on which they do so. Oddr, it seems to me, seizes enthusiastically on Gregory's loophole concerning saints and miracles, and he draws a picture of Óláfr as both a great hero, capable from an early age of impressive physical feats, and a man of extraordinary charisma and holiness, whose flaws are balanced by his spectacular clashes with the devil. He combines traditional heroic narrative with the conventions of the saint's life, sometimes successfully, as in his tale of the trolls, sometimes more awkwardly, by juxtaposing secular-historical and exemplary tales. Egill's likeness to the saint resides in the power he exercises through poetic language; but this is only one aspect of his complex characterisation, and the saga seems to opens up a space here between the polarities of good and evil found in hagiography, for good and evil coexist in Egill in a shifting balance of power. *Flóamanna saga*, on the other hand, approaches the saint's life (Perkins 1975, 385–88) while exploring what might be distinctively saintly about the hero of a Family Saga: how exactly the Christian inversion of worldly values might be translated into the saga world. It draws on the Christian associations of the wasteland as a place of demonic temptation, but shows Þorgils's transformation there from the stereotypical saga hero of the early chapters into something quite different, something many saga

heroes would kill to avoid. Each of these sagas realises its relationship to the saint's life differently, and it is fruitful to think about this not just in terms of origins, but as an ongoing and creative process of generic interaction and change.

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# FANTASY AND HISTORY. THE LIMITS OF PLAUSIBILITY IN ODDR SNORRASON'S *ÓLÁFS SAGA TRYGGVASONAR*

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CRITICS OF OLD NORSE–ICELANDIC LITERATURE work with a number of different understandings of ‘fantasy’ and ‘the fantastic’, but most such understandings rely at some point on a sense of what is implausible or impossible. This essay subjects that sense of implausibility to scrutiny so as to approach the fantastic in Old Norse literature in a way that is properly sensitive to historical difference. There are certainly occasions when it is appropriate to read medieval texts with a modern rather than a medieval sense of what is plausible: for example, when reading sagas as sources for reconstructing medieval history. An attempt to understand the meanings Old Norse texts may have had for their medieval readers must, however, try to appreciate where the limits of plausibility were felt to lie in the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup>

Given the variety of understandings of ‘fantasy’ and ‘the fantastic’ espoused by critics, it is necessary to clarify the sense in which the terms are used here. The most widely influential modern theory of ‘the fantastic’, that of Tzvetan Todorov (1975), has had some currency in studies of Old Norse literature and it is therefore necessary to point out that its application is problematic in a number of ways. Building on the work of earlier theorists, Todorov defines ‘the fantastic’ as ‘that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event’ (1975, 25); the fantastic in this sense depends for its effect on the appearance of an initially inexplicable phenomenon in an otherwise realistic context, but the fantastic lasts only as long as uncertainty about that phenomenon: once we have decided that it is an illusion or that it has taken place despite the laws of nature ‘we leave the fantastic for a

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Thirteenth International Saga Conference, Durham and York, August 2006. In this revised and expanded version I have been able to take account of valuable comments made on that occasion by Sverre Bagge, Lars Lönnroth, Margaret Clunies Ross and Christopher Sanders; I am also very grateful to Siân Grønlie for comments on the preprint text of my conference paper.

neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous' (1975, 25). This definition is narrower than, and somewhat at odds with, the everyday sense of the term; Todorov's fantastic is not simply the improbable or impossible: that would be what he calls 'the marvelous'. Moreover, Todorov is not concerned with the genre of popular 'fantasy fiction' either. Despite the subtitle given to his book in translation, Todorov's 'fantastic' is more a mode than a genre: 'It seems to be located on the frontier of two genres, the marvelous and the uncanny, rather than to be an autonomous genre' (1975, 41; cf. the distinction between genre and mode made in Clunies Ross 2002, 448).

This terminology can lead to some confusion (the last thing a useful critical idiom should produce) when critics using the term 'fantastic' in Todorov's sense, or something like it, are led astray by the everyday sense of the word. Margaret Clunies Ross's stimulating article on 'Realism and the Fantastic in the Old Icelandic Sagas' (2002) follows Todorov in maintaining that the fantastic characteristically places the inexplicable in a realistic context (2002, 448):

The hallmark of the fantastic as a literary mode is that it juxtaposes elements of both the realistic and the marvelous or improbable, often without comment, and thereby problematizes both.

However, at the end of her article Clunies Ross claims that the episodes she has analysed

show how the literary modes of the realistic and the fantastic are often juxtaposed in the medieval Icelandic textual representation of human experience (2002, 453).

If 'the fantastic' in the second of these quotations means what 'the fantastic' is said to mean in the first, then what is being claimed is that the sagas juxtapose the realistic with the juxtaposition of elements of the realistic and the marvellous. Given the difficulty of juxtaposing something with elements of itself, it seems that in the second quotation 'the fantastic' is in fact being used in a 'commonsense' way (equivalent to 'the marvelous or improbable' of the first quotation), and no longer in the special sense inspired by Todorov.

Todorov explicitly rejects the idea of the fantastic that he says 'comes to mind straight off', the idea that in the fantastic 'the author describes events which are not likely to occur in everyday life' (1975, 34). His rejection of this commonsense definition is made on the grounds that 'We might indeed characterize such [unlikely] events as supernatural' (1975, 34), but 'the supernatural' is too broad a concept to be useful. Such an

equation of the improbable with the supernatural is nonsense to believers in the supernatural, and at this point Todorov reveals his position's post-Enlightenment historical limitations. It is above all because it takes for granted that the supernatural is improbable that Todorov's approach seems to me ill-suited to the discussion of medieval texts which take for granted the reality of the supernatural. Most of his examples of 'the fantastic' are from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries and it is notable that it is almost exclusively in his discussion of what he calls 'the marvelous' (and regards as improbable) that he refers to pre-modern texts (1975, 54–57).

Given that Todorov's use of the term 'fantastic' is counter-intuitive, liable to cause confusion with the everyday sense of the word, and inseparable from a worldview alien to medieval writers, critics would be well advised to look elsewhere for theorisations of 'fantasy' and 'the fantastic' that are better suited for discussion of medieval texts. In what follows I use the terms 'fantasy' and 'the fantastic' in precisely the commonsense way rejected by Todorov, following instead Kathryn Hume's assertion that 'By fantasy I mean the deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real' (Hume 1984, xii).<sup>2</sup> Whereas the distinction between history and fiction in a narrative depends primarily on whether something did or did not happen, not whether it could happen, it is possible to make a further distinction *within* fiction (that which has not happened) between realism (that which could happen) and fantasy (that which could not happen or is extremely improbable). In order to judge whether a given text or episode is fantastic in this sense, one needs to assess its plausibility.

Understanding fantasy as 'any departure from consensus reality' highlights the historical contingency of its definition, for as Hume points out, "'consensus" immediately refers us both to the world of the author and that of the audience' (Hume 1984, 21, 23). It is thus necessary to resist the tendency to categorise as fantastic those things which a reader today (more specifically, a certain sort of reader today) is likely to find implausible, and to try instead to identify those things which a medieval reader might have thought improbable. It is, of course, difficult to determine what a medieval Icelander would have found plausible, but in what follows I examine

<sup>2</sup> I am here indebted to Ásdís Egilsdóttir's advocacy of Hume's work in her plenary paper at the Thirteenth International Saga Conference (Ásdís Egilsdóttir 2006) and in subsequent discussion. I take 'fantastic' and 'fantasy' to relate to one another in the way that the modal term 'tragic' is related to the generic term 'tragedy', though I recognise the force of Hume's argument that treating so ubiquitous a feature of literary texts as fantasy as either a genre or a mode is too narrowly exclusive (cf. Hume 1984, xii, 8, 20–23).

some of the kinds of evidence that might enable us to do so.<sup>3</sup> This essay considers what the vernacular versions of Oddr Snorrason's life of Óláfr Tryggvason can reveal about Icelandic perceptions of plausibility at the time of its writing. I believe that the conclusions drawn from this single text have wider relevance, but Oddr's saga offers a particularly interesting case study because of its early date, its connections with multiple literary traditions (Latin and Norse, history and hagiography, narrative prose and skaldic verse), and the manuscript attribution to the same author of *Yngvars saga víðförla*, a text that has been categorised as a *fornaldarsaga* (on the generic classification of this text see further Phelpstead 2009).

A number of strategies are employed in Oddr's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason to anticipate and forestall disbelief, and in so far as these indicate what the writer thought his audience might have difficulty believing they provide evidence on which we may build a sense of the plausible, and so of the implausible or fantastic, in medieval Iceland. The strategies employed are of different kinds. At the highest, or least specific, level there are strategies designed to validate the narrative as a whole, to make clear that this is history rather than fiction. At a more specific level there are a few notable points in the saga where the narrator goes out of his way to anticipate objections to the veracity or plausibility of his narrative. There is also 'negative' evidence provided by episodes in which disbelief is apparently not anticipated by the narrator, though of course arguments *ex silentio* have necessarily to be treated with some caution.

The variant texts that I follow convention in calling Oddr Snorrason's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason are not, of course, Oddr's own writings, but versions of a translation into Norse made c.1200 of the life he composed in Latin perhaps a decade or so earlier. For an analysis of the strategies employed to forestall the audience's disbelief this is an important point, as the surviving vernacular versions of the text are able to claim the authority of the (now lost) Latin source. Oddr is named as the author of the source text in the fullest saga manuscript (AM 310 4to, from the second half of the thirteenth century) and in the fragmentary mid-thirteenth-century Uppsala manuscript (de la Gardie 4–7 fol.); Royal Library Stockholm MS 18 4to (from c.1300 or slightly later) provides in addition an account of

<sup>3</sup> Ralph O'Connor (2005) provides a painstaking and richly documented analysis of the closely related issue of 'truth-claims and defensive narrators' in the 'romance-sagas' (i.e. *riddarasögur*, *fornaldarsögur* and post-classical *Íslendingasögur*), focusing especially on the evidence provided by narratorial *apologiae*. See also O'Connor 2009.

Oddr's vision of King Óláfr: this claims (whether justifiably or not) to add the authority of authorial supernatural vision to that of Latin biography.<sup>4</sup>

Attention is also drawn to the status of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* as translation at three other places in the text, points where remnants of the Latin text survive. The Latin phrase *Pro sustentacione racio assumunt* appears in chapter 30. In Chapter 53 the Latin name (actually two alternatives) of Óláfr's ship is preserved alongside its Norse equivalent (*Ormr inn langi, en á látínutungu heitir hann Longus draco eða serpens* 'The Long Serpent, and in Latin it is called *Longus draco* or *serpens*'). In Chapter 65 a verse is quoted in Latin and then in Norse, though there has been debate as to whether the Latin is a composition by Oddr or a translation by him of the following Norse stanza attributed in the Stockholm manuscript to an Iclander called Stefnir (see Andersson 2003, 147). The reasons for these remnants surviving in the vernacular context are not always clear, but they have the effect of conferring a certain learned authority on the vernacular versions.

Much previous study of Oddr's saga has been devoted to the identification of his sources and the relation of his work to traditions about Óláfr's saintly namesake, Óláfr Haraldsson.<sup>5</sup> Here, however, I am concerned with the narratorial strategies that seem designed to authenticate the narrative or to forestall the audience's disbelief, and whether or not what is said in order to try to do this is accurate is not at issue. It is therefore much more important for the present enquiry to note that Oddr refers to the historians Sæmundr Sigfússon and Ari Þorgilsson, and invokes their authority, than

<sup>4</sup> Since Finnur Jónsson's critical edition of both texts (Finnur Jónsson 1932), there has been a consensus that the Stockholm manuscript preserves a highly abbreviated redaction of the same archetype as is reflected more faithfully in AM 310 4to. However, in his recent edition of the saga Ólafur Halldórsson proposes that the Arnarnagnæan text augments the common archetype and he gives priority to the Stockholm text by printing it above AM 310 4to and in larger type, providing only the first lines of verse quotations in the AM text where they are given in full in the Stockholm text (cf. Ólafur Halldórsson 2006, vi, clxvi–clxx). My discussion below is primarily of the Arnarnagnæan version supplemented, where material is missing, by the Stockholm manuscript; it has therefore proved most convenient to cite the normalised edition by Guðni Jónsson (1957). Translations are my own, though I have profited from consulting Andersson 2003.

<sup>5</sup> For recent discussions of Oddr's use of his sources see Andersson 2006, ch. 1, and Ólafur Halldórsson 2006, lxxxiii–cxliii; on connections between the traditions about Óláfr Tryggvason and St Óláfr Haraldsson see Lönnroth 1963 and 2000, Zernack 1998.

to try to ascertain whether or not he actually used their texts as sources. My concern is with what the text can tell us about where the lines were drawn between history and realistic fiction on the one hand and fantasy on the other. Whether the text is *actually* (in our terms) history, realistic fiction or fantasy is a different issue.

Oddr's saga frequently invokes sources for its narrative, and this is an important strategy at the general level of encouraging belief in the narrative and its historicity. However, such invocations usually take the form of vague references to what 'people say' (though what people are said to say is then usually reported as if it were straightforwardly what actually happened). Phrases such as *Pat segja menn . . .* or *Pat er sagt . . .* occur in the following chapters: 1, 5, 9, 14, 17, 19, 20, 24, 30, 32, 39, 40, 45, 49, 71, 73, 74. It is notable that many of these references to what 'people say' or what 'we are told' occur at the beginnings of chapters, fulfilling a structural function as well as authenticating the narrative. Some uses of these phrases deserve further comment. Doubts are expressed about what 'people say', or alternative versions are mentioned, in chapters 1, 5, 39, 49, 73; while they may cast some doubt on the accuracy of the narrative, such comments also construct the writer as a careful and discriminating historian. In chapter 9 the people whose authority is invoked are specified as *vítrir menn ok fróðir* 'wise and learned men'. In chapter 32 the authority of general report is invoked to support an assertion about King Eiríkr of Sweden that many today would find implausible (Guðni Jónsson 1957, 90):

En svá segja menn, at svá mikill djöfulskrafr fylgdi, at tvá hluti liðs hans felldi Eiríkr konungr með fjölkynngi, en at lyktum fell allt lið hans ok svá sjálfr Styrbjörn.

But people say that King Eiríkr possessed such great devil's power that he killed two-thirds of his [Styrbjörn's] army by sorcery, and finally all his army were killed as well as Styrbjörn himself.

Modern scholarship has shown that whereas Oddr frequently refers to what people say, he actually made use of a number of written sources that he never mentions by name—for the very understandable reason that they were about other kings and saints, not about Óláfr Tryggvason. Such texts include St Gregory's *Dialogues* and Pseudo-Turpin's *Historia Karoli Magni et Rotholandi* (cf. e.g. Lönnroth 1963). What matters for the present investigation, however, is that the narrative claims authenticity by invoking general report, not that it is misleading or disingenuous when it does so. There are also some more specific allusions to Oddr's sources in the saga. Apart from Hjalti Skeggjason's famously blasphemous lines (ch. 41), skaldic verse becomes a prominent feature of the narrative only in



the account of the end of Óláfr's reign, with verses quoted in chapters 65, 66, 68, 71, 73 and 74. It is perhaps unlikely these verses were preserved (or translated?) in Oddr's Latin life, but as Andersson suggests, it is not unreasonable to assume that Oddr knew them (Andersson 2006, 41). Oddr also refers to the prose histories of Ari and Sæmundr. In chapter 25 Oddr cites Ari and anonymous 'others' on Óláfr's age when he began to rule in Norway. He goes on, however, to explain an alternative view that *sumir menn fróðir* 'some learned men' maintain. Later in the chapter both Ari and Sæmundr are enlisted in support of the calculation that Jarl Hákon ruled for thirty-three years after Haraldr gráfeldr. Chapter 36 includes what appears to be a quotation from Sæmundr.

The Arnarnagnæan manuscript of the saga appends a passage at the end of the text which apparently describes Oddr's informants and claims that the text was submitted to Gizurr Hallsson for approval (Finnur Jónsson 1932, 247; Guðni Jónsson 1957, 199). The same list of informants is also associated with Oddr's fellow monk, Gunnlaugr Leifsson, in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (Ólafur Halldórsson 1958–2000, III 66), and the list has generally been thought to have belonged originally to Gunnlaugr's life of the king. However, Andersson has pointed out that 'it is inherently plausible that two monks in the same monastery at Þingeyrar, writing on the same historical figure, would have used more or less the same informants' (2003, 2). Whatever the source of the passage, and whether or not it is historically true, it functions in the Arnarnagnæan version as further authority for the veracity of the text's account of Óláfr's life.

Before we turn to passages in which Oddr's anxiety about the possibility of disbelief is most clearly evident we should consider those episodes in the saga which modern readers—or, more accurately, certain modern readers—would regard as implausible, or even impossible, and so fantastic, but which are recounted matter-of-factly as if there were no reason to doubt their veracity. These are episodes in which the narrator makes no attempt to anticipate or forestall disbelief, even though many modern readers would regard the events as inherently unlikely. A list of these episodes would include the following (accounts of prophetic dreams and similar phenomena are considered separately below):

Ch. 3: Gunnhildr knows through sorcery where Ástríðr is (but this is told in reported speech and the opening of Ch. 4 perhaps implies that Gunnhildr did not use magic, although her later words *nú sé ek* do suggest the use of sorcery then).

Ch. 12: Óláfr and his men hide and miraculously become invisible.

Ch. 16: Description of the unusual abilities of the dog Vígi.

Ch. 28: The discovery of a holy head from Selja.

Ch. 29: A similar story of Selja relics, featuring bones of sweet fragrance.

Ch. 30: Miracles at Selja.

Ch. 32: Eiríkr of Sweden's magic powers.

Ch. 35: Óláfr's eloquence is said to be a gift of St Martin.

Ch. 36: Óláfr's conflict with sorcerers, featuring a matter-of-fact acceptance of magic, as in Eyvindr's escape *með vélum djöfulligrar íþróttir* 'with the tricks of devilish arts'.

Ch. 37: 'Gods' (i.e. the devil) respond to a man's sacrifices. Óláfr and his bishop are victorious through prayer and divine assistance.

Ch. 43: The devil is referred to matter-of-factly as a participant in Norwegian history. He appears to Óláfr as a one-eyed man, reveals information about the past, and then supernaturally provides 'better' meat for the king, which Óláfr orders thrown into the sea as it is poisonous.

Ch. 44: Eyvindr and other sorcerers are blinded when they see a church.

Ch. 50: Óláfr's superhuman abilities are described.

Ch. 52: Further description of Óláfr's superhuman abilities.

Ch. 55: Hróaldr is said to be a great sorcerer and his sorcery is seen to be effective.

Ch. 59: Óláfr meets Þórr, who can tell much about the distant past. Óláfr says later that it was the devil.

Ch. 60: Óláfr's retainers encounter several demons.

Ch. 73: A heavenly light envelops Óláfr when all is lost. He disappears.

Ch. 77: The dog Vígi understands speech and starves himself on hearing of Óláfr's death (fulfilling a prophecy recorded in ch. 64).

From this extensive list of episodes that are recounted matter-of-factly, it appears that for the writer or narrator and for his implied audience there was nothing inherently implausible, and so nothing necessarily fantastic, about such things as: the (successful) practice of sorcery, miraculous invisibility, miracles associated with the saints, supernaturally inspired eloquence, devils responding to a man's sacrifices, the devil's taking on the appearance of a one-eyed man (Óðinn) or of the god Þórr, the appearance of a heavenly light, or a dog that understands human speech and commits suicide. It is, however, notable that many of the occurrences in the above list are explained as the work of the devil or of demons: what might otherwise seem, if not implausible, at least inexplicable is made sense of by attributing it to diabolical agency (which for many modern readers would in itself be implausible, of course).

It is worth pointing out that although all these incidents will appear fantastic to a certain kind of modern reader, other modern readers may be

prepared to accept the possibility that at least some of them could happen. Scholarship on Old Norse–Icelandic literature is often implicitly (more rarely explicitly) informed by a secular rationalist worldview that discounts the very possibility of the magical, the supernatural or the miraculous. Although scholars may assume that the miraculous or the supernatural is inherently ‘fantastic’, for the vast majority of the human race, in the past and still today, this is simply not the case: categorising all accounts of the supernatural or the miraculous as by definition ‘fantastic’ is historically very much a minority viewpoint and, moreover, one arrived at on grounds that have little or nothing to do with literary criticism.

We should pause at this point to consider the importance of generic expectations. Many a modern fantasy novel tells of such things as dragons, sorcery or magic weapons in a matter-of-fact manner that does not anticipate disbelief, and on this basis a (very) naïve reader might assume that the author and his or her implied audience do not regard such things as implausible. But in such cases the question of plausibility has, of course, been ‘bracketed off’ by expectations of the genre. Knowing we are reading a fantasy novel rather than a history conditions us to suspend disbelief and accept the matter-of-fact account of events whose veracity we would question or deny if presented in an equally matter-of-fact way as history. This raises the question of what kind of meanings readers expect from Oddr’s saga, and why they expect them: what kind of truth claims does the text make? I shall return to this question when I consider below the passages in which Oddr engages most explicitly with the issue. For the moment it may be pointed out that it is precisely because Oddr does engage elsewhere in the text with the question of plausibility that his not doing so in relation to the episodes listed above suggests that *their* plausibility was not felt to need special defence and that disbelief was not anticipated there. It is likely that in these episodes Oddr often relies on his audience’s understanding of the generic conventions of hagiography, in which the sanctity of the protagonist renders plausible phenomena that would be thought improbable in the life-story of a less saintly person. This in turn means, however, that Oddr must depend on his audience accepting that Óláfr was a saintly figure, and we shall see below that he (understandably) betrays some anxiety about this at certain points in his narrative.

Further ‘negative’ evidence of the limits of plausibility is provided by episodes involving foreseeing the future. There are several occurrences of this in the saga:

Ch. 1: King Tryggvi’s wife Ástríðr has a dream foreboding ill; Tryggvi is subsequently killed.

Ch. 8: It is noted that there were many prophets (*spámenn*) in Russia at that time (but this statement does not necessarily commit Oddr to the belief that they could actually foresee the future).

Ch. 13: Óláfr himself experiences dreams and visions. He goes to Greece as requested in a vision and is converted to Christianity there.

Ch. 14: A 'clairvoyant abbot on the Scilly Isles' (Andersson 2004, 149).

Ch. 19: An account of a prescient Lapp; everything turns out as he predicts.

Ch. 21: The slave hiding with Jarl Hákon has four prophetic dreams.

Ch. 27: Óláfr has a vision of St Martin. Óláfr's opponents are miraculously unable to speak.

Ch. 64: A blind man has a prophetic gift; he foresees Óláfr's passing.

Like the episodes already discussed, these are recounted matter-of-factly, with no attempt to anticipate and forestall disbelief, and this again suggests that these episodes—not just the dreams or prophecies themselves but also the fact that they are always accurate—were not thought to be inherently implausible. However, the way these prophecies endow the narrative with a certain inevitability might also itself be regarded as a strategy for forestalling disbelief: a narrative that proceeds inevitably is perhaps more difficult to doubt.

In one further instance of prophecy some anticipation of disbelief may be implied in Oddr's appealing to written authority: in chapter 6 the mother of King Valdimarr in Russia is said to be a prophetess (she correctly prophesies Óláfr's future), and unspecified 'books' are invoked to define or categorise her as a 'Pythian spirit' (*ok er þat kallat í bókum fítonsandi*). The authority for belief in such a phenomenon includes the Bible (Acts 16:16; see Andersson 2003, 138).

One may observe that several of these dreams and prophecies occur outside Scandinavia (e.g. Russia, the Scilly Isles) or involve non-Scandinavians (Russians, Lapps). Did prophetic dreams and visions appear more plausible when they took place outside Scandinavia or happened to non-Scandinavians? This is a question to which we shall return towards the end of this essay.

Before considering the passages in which Oddr deals explicitly with the issue of plausibility there are a couple of further episodes to note briefly. In chapter 51 the authority of Þorkell, *inn sannsöglasta mann* 'a most truthful man', is invoked as the source for a story of Óláfr's exceptional powers; there appears to be some anxiety here about the plausibility of the story (its likelihood, at least, even if not its possibility). A similar anxiety may underlie the statement in chapter 75 that *skal ek segja sem ek veit sannast* 'I shall narrate what I know to be most true'.

In the Stockholm version, Oddr's saga is introduced by a Prologue explaining his reasons for writing about Óláfr.<sup>6</sup> Among other things, the Prologue states that it is better to hear praise of a good king than to listen to *stjúpmæðrasögur, er hjardarsveinar segja* 'step-mothers' tales, which shepherd boys tell', though what is objectionable about such step-mothers' tales seems primarily to be that they are insufficiently deferential to kings. As O'Connor puts it, 'The negative truth-value which the narrator assigns to such stories is subordinated to a larger argument about social acceptability and propriety' (2005, 140). Oddr continues (Guðni Jónsson 1957, 4):

Bið ek góða eigi fyrirliða þessa frásögn ok gruni eigi framar eða ifi sögnina en hófi gegni, því at vitrir menn hafa oss frá sagt nokkura hluti hans stórvirkja . . . ok oft kann þat at at berast, at fals er blandit sönnu, ok megu vér því eigi mikinn af taka, en ætlum þó, at eigi muni rjúfast þessir, en kunna þökk þeim, er um má bæta.

I ask good people not to despise this narrative and not to mistrust or doubt the saga more than is appropriate, because wise men have told us some part of his great deeds . . . And it can often happen that falsity is mixed with truth, and we cannot say much about that, but we think nevertheless that these [informants] will not be discredited, though we will be thankful to those who can make improvements.

After asking those who know better to suggest improvements (a convention followed in other medieval historical writing), he attacks those who would criticise without offering a better alternative, *því at vitrum mönnum þykkir hver saga heimsliga ónýtt, ef hann kallar þat lygi, er sagt er, en hann má engar sönnur á finna* (Guðni Jónsson 1957, 4) 'for it seems to wise men that a story is foolishly discredited if a man calls that which is narrated a lie, but he cannot offer a true account'.

One of the main concerns of the Prologue, clearly, is to establish the truth claims of the following narrative by setting up expectations about the kind of text that the reader is encountering. Critical debate about the genre of Oddr's saga has shifted from counting it a King's Saga, to regarding it as hagiography (see especially Sverrir Tómasson 1988, 261–79), to Andersson's more recent characterisation of the text as 'a bipolar composition' (2003, 25). In the context of the present discussion the distinction between hagiography and history is less significant than might

<sup>6</sup> The Arnamagnæan manuscript lacks the opening of the text. On the textual status of the Prologue see further Ólafur Halldórsson 2006, clxx–clxxi. For further analysis of the contents of the Prologue see Sverrir Tómasson 1988, 261–79 and Lönnroth 2000, 259–63.

be expected. Regardless of the historicity of particular miracle stories, hagiography depends on a belief in the plausibility of the miraculous, so reading Oddr's text (or any given episode within it) as either history or hagiography depends upon a sense of the possibility of the events having happened, whereas reading it as fantasy does not. However, as was noted above, in so far as hagiography recounts the deeds of saints who are believed to be able to perform miracles, the reader's perception of a text's genre may condition what he or she will accept as plausible: because the protagonist is a saint, hagiography sanctions belief in the historicity of phenomena that would otherwise be thought improbable. Thus the anxieties Oddr betrays in the Prologue to his saga are at least as much about the saintly status of Óláfr (who, after all, lacks posthumous miracles) as about the probability of events of the kind recounted actually happening: the reader's opinion of Óláfr's sanctity will in part determine what can plausibly be said about events in his life.

Chapter 45 of the saga tells how Eyvindr kinnrifa reveals under torture and just before his death that he is an unclean spirit incarnated by Lappish magicians. A battle then takes place in Hálogaland against another pagan there, Þórir hjörtr. He is shot by an arrow and falls, but then *einn mikill hjörtr* 'a great hart', obviously a metamorphosed Þórir, springs up in his place. The hart is pursued and killed by Óláfr's dog, Vígi, who has to be sent to a Lapp to be magically cured of his wounds. These two episodes are recounted as matter-of-factly as any other in the saga, but at the end of the chapter Oddr reveals an anxiety about their plausibility when he explains these events as the work of the devil (Guðni Jónsson 1957, 118):

En þó at þvílíkir hlutir sé sagðir frá slíkum skrímslum ok undrum sem nú var sagt, þá má slíkt víst ótrúligt þykkja. En allir menn vita þat, at fjandinn er jafnan gagnstaðligr almáttkum guði ok þeir inir aumu menn, er guði hafna . . . En þessa hluti, er vér segjum frá slíkum hlutum ok dæmisögum, þá dæmum vér þat eigi sannleik, at svá hafi verit, heldr hyggjum vér, at svá hafi sýnz, því at fjandinn er fullr upp flærðar ok illsku.

Those things which are recounted about such prodigies and wonders as have just been related must certainly seem incredible. But everyone knows that the devil is always in opposition to Almighty God, together with those wretched people who reject God . . . But these things that we have recounted in such tales and exempla we do not judge to be true in the sense that they happened, but rather we believe that they seemed to happen because the devil is full of falsehood and wickedness.

As elsewhere, this explanation of unlikely stories as the work of the devil removes them from the realm of fantasy into that of the possible for a

medieval audience, but does not do so for modern readers for whom the devil is himself fantasy. There is clearly considerable unease about the narrative's plausibility here, despite the involvement of Lapps (and the relatively exotic setting in Hálogaland), which elsewhere makes the possibly marvellous more plausible. Andersson suggests that this narratorial intrusion distances Oddr from his informants: by suggesting that they are more credulous than he is, Oddr is able to construct himself as a 'passive recipient' of historical traditions rather than an author of fiction (Andersson 2006, 30–31). But Oddr also emphasises that this episode was an illusion, that it *sýnz* 'seemed' to be real, and in doing so he maintains the historicity of his narrative at the same time as making a theological point about the illusory power of the devil. Our sense that Oddr is here drawing attention to the limits of plausibility is confirmed when we compare his account with Snorri Sturluson's version in *Heimskringla*. Snorri abbreviates and somewhat tones down Eyvindr's confession, and removes entirely the marvellous elements from the fight with Þórir (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941, chs 76, 78).

Snorri also justifies Oddr's anxieties about the plausibility of his account of Óláfr's escape from the battle of Svölðr. At this point in his narrative Oddr is the heir to traditions in which there was already uncertainty as to what actually happened and he may here be less concerned to anticipate disbelief of the improbable than to forestall scepticism on the grounds of insufficient evidence. Chapter 78 of the Arnarnagænan text of Oddr's saga begins by acknowledging that 'some people' find the story doubtful (*nokkut ifanligr*), and when he has told the story Oddr feels the need to assert that although many doubt it *þó ætla ek at vísu, at þetta myndi satt vera* (Guðni Jónsson 1957, 191) 'nevertheless, I indeed think that this must be true'.<sup>7</sup> This defensiveness seems justified in the light of Snorri Sturluson's later verdict on stories of Óláfr's survival: *En hvernug sem þat hefir verit, þá kom Óláfr konungr Tryggvason aldri síðan til ríkis í Nóregi* (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941, 368) 'But however that might have been, King Óláfr Tryggvason never came back to his kingdom in Norway'.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> John McKinnell points out to me that Oddr may have been concerned that some of his readership might know Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld's comments on the belief that Óláfr survived the battle in his *Óláfsdrápa*, st. 20 (Finnur Jónsson 1912–15, B I, 154).

<sup>8</sup> The Uppsala manuscript of Oddr's saga gives a different, equally unlikely, version of Óláfr's life after Svölðr, but any anxiety about its plausibility is indicated only by the reference to its being told by a *vitr maðr* 'wise man' called Söti skáld (Finnur Jónsson 1932, 259–61).

One of the particular attractions of Oddr's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason as a test case for investigating the limits of plausibility in early Iceland is that Oddr is also claimed as the author of (or the source for) *Yngvars saga víðförla*, a text which, though not without a historical kernel, appears almost wholly fantastic to most modern readers, and has been classified as a *fornaldarsaga* (Phelpstead 2009). At the end of *Yngvars saga* its narrator claims (Guðni Jónsson 1954, 459):

En þessu sögu höfum vér heyrt ok ritat eftir forsögn þeirar bækr, at Oddr munk inn fróði hafði gera látit at forsögn fróðra manna, þeira er hann segir sjálfir í bréfi sínu, því er hann sendi Jóni Loftssyni ok Gizuri Hallssyni.

We have heard this saga read from, and written it down from, the account in a book composed by the learned monk Oddr on the authority of well-informed people whom he mentions in his letter to Jón Loftsson and Gizurr Hallsson.

It was long assumed by scholars that this reference to a book by Oddr must either be a mistake, or else a deliberate deception, perhaps designed to give *Yngvars saga* a spurious authority (Olson, for example, writes that it is 'uppenbart oriktig' ('obviously incorrect'; 1912, xcviij)). But in an article published in 1981 Dietrich Hofmann argues in favour of accepting the statement at face value; he attributes a lost life of Yngvarr to Oddr, and proposes that *Yngvars saga* is a translation of that life made c.1200.

After an initially cool reception (to which he responded in Hofmann 1984), Hofmann's views have more recently been treated as if they were established fact. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards provide a title for Oddr's lost text, *\*Vita Yngvari* (1989, 2).<sup>9</sup> This is not the place to consider the issue in detail, but I have argued elsewhere that even if *Yngvars saga* is based on a Latin life by Oddr, there are good grounds for doubting that Oddr's version can have been the kind of saint's *vita* that Hofmann and his followers have suggested it was (Phelpstead 2009, 338–40).

What is more important in the present context is what the allusion to Oddr in *Yngvars saga* might be saying about the truth claims of that saga and what it might imply about Oddr's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason. Like the Arnarnagnæan manuscript of Oddr's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason, the passage at the end of *Yngvars saga* claims that Oddr submitted his work to Gizurr Hallsson for approval. In both vernacular texts Oddr's name (and Gizurr's) seems to be used, whether justifiably or not, to lend authority to the narrative and to forestall disbelief. Could medieval Icelanders have regarded these two

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Cormack (2000, 307–08) refers to Oddr's Latin life of Yngvarr as if there were nothing problematic or disputed about Hofmann's views, though without there using the title *Vita Yngvari* as claimed in Phelpstead 2009, 338.



sagas as equally plausible, one no more fantastic than the other? *Yngvars saga* is set mainly in 'Russia', to the east of Scandinavia, and we have seen that many (though admittedly not all) of the potentially 'fantastic' elements in Oddr's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason are also located outside Scandinavia. There are grounds for thinking, therefore, that what a medieval Icelandic would find implausible (fantastic) in a Scandinavian context might be much more plausible when located elsewhere (cf. the similar point made in Rowe 2003). To this extent, plausibility turns out to be contingent on geographical setting, something that is no longer the case for Westerners accustomed to believing that the laws of nature are everywhere the same.

It is to precisely this kind of historical difference that the attempt to historicise plausibility ought to sensitise us. It is clear that the limits of plausibility were not the same in medieval Iceland as they are for most Western readers today (and it is quite possible they did not remain the same through the whole medieval period in Iceland either). While there are certainly occasions on which it is appropriate to apply our sense of plausibility to medieval texts, an appreciation of what the texts might have meant to a medieval audience depends upon recovering an historically appropriate sense of the (im)possible. By examining those passages of Oddr Snorrason's saga of Óláfr Tryggvason that reveal an anxiety about plausibility and by identifying narrative strategies employed in order to try to forestall disbelief, I have sought to refine awareness of medieval Icelandic perceptions of plausibility and so historicise our understanding of fantasy in Old Norse literature. Such an approach recognises the desirability of reflecting on one's own ideological positioning in order to be sensitive to the alterity of the past.

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GOSSIPS, BEGGARS, ASSASSINS AND TRAMPS:  
VAGRANTS AND OTHER ITINERANTS  
IN THE SAGAS OF ICELANDERS

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Pat er ómennska ef maðr gengr með húsum fyrir nenningarleysis sakir eða ókosta annarra þeira er góðir menn vilja fyrir þeim sökum eigi hafa þau.<sup>1</sup>

(*Grágás: Konungsbók*)

THE SOCIETY DEPICTED IN THE *ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR* is one made up of links, of social bonds, between individuals and groups. Slaves are tied by a bond of ownership to farmers. Workers are also tied to farmers by year-long terms of service. Farmers in turn declare themselves in *þing* with a *goði*.<sup>2</sup> Groups are also linked by kinship bonds, or bonds created by marriage. Although these bonds can occasionally be changed or adjusted, people do not vacillate between social groups. What then of saga characters who have no social bonds: no support structure, but also no loyalties or responsibilities? In this article I will look at some examples of vagrants in these sagas and, in particular, at how such characters seek

<sup>1</sup> Finsen 1974, II 28, §143 (normalised). ‘It is perversity if a man or woman goes as a vagrant from house to house because of indolence or such other failings as make good men unwilling to have them’ (Dennis et al., trans, 2000, 52).

<sup>2</sup> On the relationship between farmers (*bændur*) and chieftains (*goðar*) and more generally the creation of bonds or semi-fixed links between individuals or social groups in saga society, see Jón Jóhannesson 1974, 60–61; Byock 1988, 103–24; Helgi Þorláksson 2005, 139–44 and Gunnar Karlsson 2005, 514–15. Overall there is a minimal amount of secondary material dealing with vagrants, either as literary characters, literary devices or anthropologically as evidence of an underclass in the society of either the Saga Age or the saga-writing age. Beyond the encyclopaedia articles dealing with beggars (Rindal 1974 and Beck 1976), a couple of articles on trade and economy contain useful information about those vagabonds supporting themselves as pedlars (Ebel 1977 and Helgi Þorláksson 1992). Jón Jónsson’s unpublished MA thesis focuses on vagrancy in Icelandic farming communities in post-medieval history, but as part of the background he discusses a number of instances of saga vagrants drawing parallels with Icelandic vagrancy in the nineteenth century (2006, esp. 29–40; I am grateful to Jón for providing me with a copy of this thesis). One of the most useful discussions, though not specifically about vagrancy, is Helga Kress’s discussion of gossip in the sagas (Kress 1991).

to use their position on the fringes of saga society and their lack of social bonds to their advantage. Vagrants—*göngumenn*, *einhleypingar*, *stafkarlar*—are portrayed in an almost exclusively negative light in the sagas.<sup>3</sup> They are depicted as scurrilous, mercenary, treacherous and manipulative, and rarely have social or kinship links of significance. For the saga narrator, however, they proved vital agents for moving saga plots along, escalating feuds and transferring information across the social and geographical landscape of Iceland, that was impassable for other saga characters.

I shall look at both the way vagrants are used as plot devices in the Sagas of Icelanders, and the apparent attitudes of the narrators (and, one assumes, the original readership or audience) towards these characters.<sup>4</sup> Even with central, eponymous saga heroes, differentiating between historical fact and saga fiction can be problematic. It is even more difficult to draw any positive conclusion about real historical vagrants, who by their very nature lack significant family connections or inherited land. We must bear in mind that the saga-writing age is some two to four centuries distant from the society of the Sagas of Icelanders, depending on the action and composition of any particular saga. It is therefore dangerous to assume that depictions of vagrants within the sagas are accurate historical representations of Saga-Age attitudes towards vagrancy. Given their usefulness as plot devices, which I will show, many were probably included in sagas for exactly this reason and not as any matter of historical fact. Therefore, although I will touch briefly below on provisions for (and against) vagrancy in the law codes, the emphasis of this article is on considering the presentation of vagrants in saga society in its semi-fictional form as preserved in the sagas. As such, the attitudes towards vagrancy that I will discuss will be those which the narrator wished to portray and the audience was happy to listen to.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this article I will treat the *Íslendingasögur* as a single genre. This is for the sake of convenience, rather than implying that a thirteenth-century audience might have categorised sagas in such a way. The *Íslendingasögur* show tremendous consistency of reference, particularly regarding characters and their interrelationships. This consistency (despite some exceptions) is extended to the portrayal of society in Iceland from the late ninth to the eleventh centuries. That society, while not necessarily always portrayed with complete historical accuracy, can therefore be tentatively treated as a homogeneous whole reflecting a thirteenth-century understanding of the Saga Age.

<sup>4</sup> The usefulness of vagrants for both plot and artistic effect within sagas is touched upon by Vésteinn Ólason (1998, 123–24) and (less explicitly) Bouman (1962, 111–12).

Nonetheless some of the historical circumstances which had an impact upon the creation of saga society are documented; for example, the laws of the Icelandic commonwealth form part of the fabric of the sagas of Icelanders. Even with regard to the laws, however, we must be circumspect as to how we relate them to saga society. The laws of the commonwealth, referred to as *Grágás*, are preserved in two main codices, *Konungsbók* and *Staðarhólsbók* (written c.1250 and c.1260–70 respectively, thus considerably after the Saga Age itself).<sup>5</sup> The two codices differ considerably. The law itself developed over the years of the commonwealth, most noticeably owing to the adoption of Christianity in 999, the foundation of the fifth court c.1005 and the introduction of tithes c.1097, but also through the refinements agreed by the *Lögretta* (Sandvik and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2005, 224–27). There are instances of inconsistencies between the laws as preserved in extant manuscripts, and there is no reason to assume that every saga writer, teller or reader was a fully versed legal expert. We therefore find many instances where society as depicted in the sagas does not conform to what we might expect from reading the laws.

The treatment of vagrants is one of the areas where we find a dichotomy between the laws and sagas (although I will argue that the two actually exhibit the same attitude). The quotation with which I began this article (*Konungsbók* §143) differentiates between those legal vagrants whose circumstances had left them homeless and unable to find a position within a household—such a person might be judged itinerant and become the shared responsibility of the households in the district—and those for whom there were no such mitigating factors.<sup>6</sup> The *hreppr* (‘rape’, i.e. ‘municipality’ or ‘parish’) provided support for the poor, either farmers who had fallen on hard times or other members of society who found themselves destitute (see *Grágás*, *Konungsbók* §§234–35, Finsen 1974, II 171–79; Jón Jóhannesson 1974, 83–85). On the other hand, the vagrant who travels on account of *ómennska* (‘unmanliness’, ‘sloth’ or even ‘inhumanity’) is doing so illegally, and to him harsh sanctions can be applied. The society as we can understand it from *Grágás* (and on this point the sagas tend to agree with the law-book) is one where a person’s social position, employment and geographical location were all fixed. What might be referred to as a ‘work ethic’ prevails throughout the law-book, prescribing that a good Icelanders will have a fixed role and be attached to a specific farm. The

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise stated, manuscript dates are based on the *Registre* volume in Degnbol et al. 1989–present.

<sup>6</sup> A useful list of references to vagrancy in *Grágás* can be found in Dennis et al. 2000, 399. On the distinction between legal and illegal vagrants see Rindal 1974.

*fardagar* ‘moving days’, a period of four established days at the end of May, provided an opportunity for people to move around the countryside, perhaps looking for a more satisfactory occupation or position. At the end of the moving days the expectation was that a person would be attached to a farm and have a designated role to fulfil on that farm (*Grágás*, *Konungsbók* §78, Finsen 1974, I 128–29). A man arriving at a farmstead at other times of the year, looking for work or indeed merely expecting to be sheltered, would therefore seem suspicious (to the saga audience at least).<sup>7</sup>

The word *ómennska* is the opposite of the adjective *mennska* (ultimately derived from *maðr*) meaning ‘human’ or ‘belonging to a man’ as opposed to trolls and giants. *Ómennska* therefore implies that such inhumanity was associated with illegal vagrants. Farmers who had fallen into misfortune were to be protected by society, as they were still very much part of that society. But vagrants of the other sort had chosen their own lifestyle and had more in common with the trolls and creatures roaming the landscape than with humans.

The provisions in the law regarding vagrants are very harsh. *Grágás* states that illegal vagrants (those travelling on account of *ómennska*) could not inherit or claim damages for personal injury (*Grágás*, *Konungsbók* §118, Finsen 1974, I 225); there was no penalty for the seduction of a vagrant woman if the man admitted it, although he might be considered liable for fathering any offspring (§156, II 48); and it was legal to castrate a vagrant (§254, II 203). In fact, the laws seem so determined to discourage vagrancy that it was illegal for people to offer food or lodgings to a vagrant (§235, II 178) and one of the defences for offering a vagrant lodging was that you had invited him in expressly for the purpose of giving him a good hiding (§235, II 179).

Although one would not necessarily expect saga literature to preserve Icelandic law in every detail, it is striking that neither the distinction between the legal and illegal vagrant nor the specific sanctions the law provided are found in the *Íslendingasögur*. The saga vagrant is quite different.

### *The Saga Vagrant*

From the list of prohibitions and sanctions in *Grágás* one would not expect to find vagrants tolerated within saga society, but this not the case. In fact, as

<sup>7</sup> This expectation may lie behind a scene at the beginning of the (probably fictional) *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*. Þorbjörn tells his son Einarr their household can no longer support him. Einarr reproaches his father for giving him so little notice, saying the best jobs will have already gone, but takes work as a shepherd for local *goði* Hrafnkell Hallfreðarson. Given the choice between a lowly position and no position at all Einarr accepts the work.

I will show shortly, the society portrayed in the *Íslendingasögur* does seem to have tolerated vagrants, allowing them free travel and lodgings. Yet, although tolerated by society, the vagrants of the *Íslendingasögur* are portrayed almost without exception in a negative light. It seems that the authors saw vagrants as a fact of life and a fact of narrative convenience. The legal status of the vagrant was of no concern to the plot of the saga, and thus the author did not concern himself with it. Throughout *Grágás* vagrants, both legal and illegal, are usually referred to either as *göngumenn* or by some circumlocution often involving the verbs *ganga* 'to walk' or *fara* 'to travel'. In contrast, saga authors have a comparatively large vocabulary at their disposal to refer to the vagrant. While these words clearly have slightly different connotations, they are used relatively freely by saga authors (see, for example, the variation in the terms across the manuscript traditions of *Þórðar saga hreðu* in the passage quoted below). The majority of these nouns refer to the vagrant's mobility. I have already mentioned *göngumaðr*,<sup>8</sup> alongside which appear *göngukona*<sup>9</sup> and *göngusveinn*.<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, related to *fara*, we find *forumaðr*.<sup>11</sup> From the noun *farandi* 'traveller', we find *farandkona*.<sup>12</sup> Related to the verb *reika* 'to stroll, walk' and the noun *reikan* 'strolling about' is *reikunarmaðr*,<sup>13</sup> and similarly from *flakka* 'to rove about as a beggar' we find *flökkunarmaðr*.<sup>14</sup> Related to *renna* 'to run' is *umrenningr* (literally 'one that runs around', although this is used to refer to pirates as well as vagrants),<sup>15</sup> and related

<sup>8</sup> For example, in *Harðar saga* (Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1991, ch. 9, p. 24), *Gísla saga* (Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson 1943, ch. 28, pp. 89 and 91) and *Fóstbræðra saga* (Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson 1943, ch. 23, p. 238). These examples, together with those in the subsequent notes, are intended to show the variety of the terms available and not as a complete catalogue of all instances. Also see Jón Jónsson 2006, 23–24.

<sup>9</sup> For example in *Reykðæla saga* (Björn Sigfússon 1940, ch. 11, p. 177), also manuscripts of *Njáls saga* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, ch. 92, p. 230 footnote).

<sup>10</sup> For example in *Kormáks saga* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1939, ch. 20, p. 277) and the Flateyjarbók version of *Hallfredar saga* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1939, ch. 1, p. 137 footnote).

<sup>11</sup> For example in *Grettis saga* (Guðni Jónsson 1936, ch. 63, p. 207).

<sup>12</sup> For example in *Njáls saga* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, ch. 44, pp. 112 and 114).

<sup>13</sup> For example in *Hænsa-Þóris saga* (Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson 1938, ch. 7, p. 19) and *Reykðæla saga* (Björn Sigfússon 1940, ch. 15, p. 196).

<sup>14</sup> For example in *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* (Jón Jóhannesson 1950, ch. 3, p. 307).

<sup>15</sup> For example in *Þórðar saga hreðu* (Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959, ch. 9, p. 208).

to *hlaupa* ‘to leap, run’ is *umhleypingr*.<sup>16</sup> The solitary nature of vagrancy is expressed in such a noun as *einhleypingr* (literally ‘one who runs alone’),<sup>17</sup> with its variants *einhleypi* and *einhleypismaðr*.<sup>18</sup> This solitariness may have been another cause of suspicion for saga society, as a solitary man in the sagas is rarely up to any good, and the only characters who regularly travel alone are vagrants, outlaws or miscreants (Miller 1990, 103). A walking stick seems also to have been closely associated with the vagrant, and thus a vagrant might be referred to as a *stafkarl* ‘staff-man’<sup>19</sup> or *stafkerling*.<sup>20</sup> The poverty of vagrants is stressed by use of an adjective such as *snauðr* ‘poor’; thus we find *snauð kona* and *snauð maðr*.<sup>21</sup> Beggary itself might be referred to as *húsgangr* ‘house-walking’<sup>22</sup> (not to be confused with *húsganga* ‘visits’), giving the noun *húsgangismaðr*.<sup>23</sup> Of course these words do not all mean the same thing. It is possible for a man to be a vagrant (e.g. a *reikanarmaðr*) without being a beggar (*húsgangismaðr*). One would not naturally refer to a vagrant travelling in a group as an *einhleypismaðr*.<sup>24</sup> Given the scope for financial opportunism, it is not even certain that a vagrant would be poor, nor would every poor man be a vagrant. These examples are by no means exhaustive, but they do begin to show the multitude of terms saga narrators had for essentially

<sup>16</sup> See Cleasby and Vigfusson 1957, 650.

<sup>17</sup> For example in *Laxdæla saga* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934, ch. 57, p. 172); *Heiðarvígá saga* (Nordal and Guðni Jónsson 1938, ch. 16, p. 266); *Harðar saga* (Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1991, ch. 26, p. 68); *Víga-Glúms saga* (Jónas Kristjánsson 1956, ch. 16, p. 50).

<sup>18</sup> See Cleasby and Vigfusson 1957, 121.

<sup>19</sup> For example in *Reykðæla saga* (Björn Sigfússon 1940, ch. 24, p. 225); *Grettis saga* (Guðni Jónsson 1936, ch. 89, p. 282); and *Harðar saga* (Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1991, ch. 9, p. 24).

<sup>20</sup> For example in *Sverris saga* (Þorleifur Hauksson 2007, ch. 4, p. 65).

<sup>21</sup> For example in *Njáls saga* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, ch. 92, p. 230; ch. 36, p. 93).

<sup>22</sup> For example in *Hávarðar saga* (Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson 1943, ch. 16, p. 344); and *Harðar saga* (Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1991, ch. 9, p. 22). The term is also used in *Grágás* (for example *Grágás*, *Konungsbók* §142, Finsen 1974, II 28).

<sup>23</sup> For example in *Grágás* (*Konungsbók* §82, Finsen 1974, I 140).

<sup>24</sup> The vagrant Butraldi in *Fóstbæðra saga* (Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson 1943, ch. 5, p. 142–43) is in fact referred to as an *einhleypingr* although he travels with two other men (Jón Jónsson 2006, 31). Either vagrants were considered of so little worth that travelling amongst vagrants was as good as being alone, or, more likely, the meaning of *einhleypingr* was more generally ‘tramp’ or ‘vagrant’.



the same concept, someone who travelled the country more or less continuously and who had no fixed abode and no specific connections to a single *bóndi*, *goði* or *hreppr*. Given the blurring between such groups, I have adopted a relatively inclusive definition of ‘vagrants’ for the purposes of this article, covering all characters who move pretty much continuously around the countryside, thereby including characters who may be odd-job men looking for work outside of the moving days, and even traders of small wares. Although all such characters are presented in a negative light within the sagas, it is possible that the depth of this dislike varies slightly.

Thus saga vagrants are not categorised according to their legality (that is, whether they travelled on account of *ómennska*),<sup>25</sup> nor are they necessarily distinguished by the particular lexical terms used to refer to them. I am therefore going to look at a number of episodes concerning vagrants and classify them not according to these considerations but instead by the vagrant’s role in the saga plot and the mechanics of the story.

### *The Chatterbox*

*Gísla saga Súrssonar* describes a *gongumaðr* named Hallbjörn.<sup>26</sup> There is no evidence that he is unable to find himself permanent work or lodgings;

<sup>25</sup> This is in contrast to that other group who carry out a number of similar functions in the sagas: the outlaws. Outlaws are, strictly speaking, beyond the scope of this article, but the similarity of their narrative function necessitates some comment. Excluding the famous named examples (Gísli Súrsson, Grettir Ásmundarson, Hörðr Grímkelsson), outlaws could be introduced by narrators with little thought of their parentage or attempt to resolve their existence with established (oral or written) shared saga knowledge, and could be dropped from the story with little ceremony. Like the vagrant, the outlaw is homeless and transient and thus can perform roles similar to those I outline below (the chatterbox, peddler of report and, most commonly, assassin). But where the vagrant is on the fringe of society, the outlaw is beyond it altogether. As we shall see, the vagrant makes use of the fact that he is able to travel between households with little difficulty and be admitted, if not actually welcomed, in each. The outlaw was specifically excluded from every household and penalties for harbouring an outlaw were harshly exacted. In the sagas, it is the very desperation of the position of the outlaw in saga society that makes them such eager blunt instruments in the conflicts between members of that society.

<sup>26</sup> *Gísla saga* is thought to date from c. 1225 (Foote 2004, 39) although based on earlier verse (see for example Krijn 1935; Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson 1943, v–xiii; Turville-Petre 1972; Foote 2004, 21–24). It is preserved in two versions: the shorter in a fifteenth-century manuscript AM 556 a 4to (c. 1475–1500), the longer in two paper copies of a lost vellum: AM 149 fol.<sup>x</sup> (c. 1700) copied by Ásgeir Jónsson and NKS 1181 fol.<sup>x</sup> (c. 1775–1800) by Jón Jónsson. There is also

quite the reverse, he seems capable and successful, if somewhat gullible (Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson 1943, ch. 28, p. 89):

Maðr er nefndr Hallbjörn; hann var gongumaðr ok fór um heruðin eigi með færi menn en tíu eða tólf, en hann tjaldaði sér búð á þinginu. Þangat fara sveinarnir ok biðja hann búðarrúms ok segjask vera gongumenn. Hann kvezk veita búðarrúm hverjum þeim, er hann vill beitt hafa. 'Hefi ek hér verit mörgr vár,' sagði hann, 'ok kenni ek alla hqfðingja ok goðorðsmenn.' Þeir sveinarnir segja, at þeir vildi hlíta hans ásjá ok fræðask af honum; 'er okkr mikil forvitni á at sjá stóreflismenn, þar er miklar sögur ganga frá.' Hallbjörn kvezk mundu fara ofan til strandar ok sagðisk mundu kenna hvert skip skjótliga, sem kæmi, ok segja þeim til. Þeir biðja hann hafa þökk fyrir léttlæti sitt.

A man is named Hallbjörn; he was a vagrant and travelled about the districts with no fewer than ten or twelve men and raised his booth at the assembly. The boys [Helgi and Bergr Vésteinssynir] went there and asked him for lodgings and said that they were vagrants. He said that he granted lodgings to anyone who would ask him for it. 'I have been here many springs,' he said, 'and I recognise all the chieftains and *goðorð*-men.' The boys said that they wanted to trust in his protection and learn from him. 'We are very curious to see the great men, those whom the great stories are about.' Hallbjörn said that he would go down to the shore and said that he would recognise each ship as soon as it arrived and tell them. They thanked him for his friendliness.<sup>27</sup>

While most male vagrants in the sagas travel alone, Hallbjörn travels with never fewer than ten to twelve men. He does not shy away from society, as he has a booth at the Þorskaþing, where lots of other vagrants stay.<sup>28</sup> Thus despite being on the fringes of society Hallbjörn is actually tolerated by it. Furthermore he seems to have created his own sub-society, a counter-culture in which he is a chieftain among tramps. It is on these terms that

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a vellum fragment in AM 445 c I 4to (c.1390–1425), comprising only four pages (not including the section where one would expect to find the episode mentioned above), which seems to preserve a third independent version. The text of Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson (1943), cited above, is most closely based on the shorter redaction. The episode is also contained in the longer version, where the vagrant has the nickname *húfa* 'cap' (Loth 1960, 60–62). The idea of the hooded or hat-wearing vagrant is picked up in those examples of saga characters who disguise themselves as vagrants.

<sup>27</sup> Translations of saga texts are all my own; however, all the Sagas of Icelanders mentioned here can be read in English translation in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* (Viðar Hreinsson 1997).

<sup>28</sup> Although Hallbjörn is somewhat exceptional in these respects, this is not as unlikely as might appear. The laws permitted vagrants to have booths at assemblies, provided they did not start begging, in which case their booths could be torn down (Finsen 1974, II 14).

the brothers Helgi and Bergr Vésteinnssynir approach him. They flatter him by saying that they too are vagrants and want to learn from him. It is this flattery that persuades him to name each of the chieftains as they approach the assembly. Among these chieftains he names Porkell Súrsson, whom the boys kill in revenge for the death of their father Vésteinn.<sup>29</sup>

The vagrant is introduced with the sentence *Maðr er nefndr Hallbjörn*. This conventional introduction would normally be accompanied by a phrase indicating the character's patronymic (e.g. *hann er Ketilsson* or *hann var sonr Þóris*); one might also expect a short account of other significant family members, whether or not they have any bearing on the present story. Even minor and unimportant characters are introduced in such a way. We are not told whose son Hallbjörn is; nor are we given any indication of his family situation or (obviously) any mention of a farmstead belonging to him. This is typical of the depiction of a vagrant within saga society; he is no one's son and is without significant connection to either people or location.

As there was no requirement for saga narrators to give background information about vagrants, they could be introduced and even invented purely for narrative convenience. The sons of Vésteinn, having recently arrived from Norway, would not have been able to identify their enemy and so the author uses the expedient of introducing an otherwise unknown vagrant to provide them with this information. Only the most pedantic saga reader or audience would have objected to a version of the story in which the boys killed Porkell on sight without the exchange with Hallbjörn. Nonetheless the exchange creates both realism and a narrative flourish, setting the scene for Porkell's execution. Thus the function of the vagrant in this saga is that of the gossip: the person whose careless chatter is the cause of the death, or at least a threat upon the life, of another saga character.

It is noticeable that Hallbjörn does not benefit from this exchange. Indeed, he loses out as his booth is ransacked by men looking for the killers.<sup>30</sup> Gossip is so entrenched in the mind-set (if one can talk about such a thing) of a saga vagrant that vagrants are almost incapable of remaining quiet. In

<sup>29</sup> The question of the identity of Vésteinn's slayer may remain unresolved. Within the fiction of the saga, however, the boys clearly feel that Þorsteinn goði's death is insufficient compensation for their father's killing and believe Porkell to be at least in part culpable.

<sup>30</sup> It seems possible that the author knew of a provision such as that found in *Grágás* for the destruction of vagrant booths (Finsen 1974, II 14), which inspired him to have the men at the assembly vent their frustration upon the unhappy Hallbjörn, whose only crime is talking too much.

*Reykðæla saga*, Glúmr Eyjólfsson (Víga-Glúmr) and his men encounter a vagrant (a *stafkarl*).<sup>31</sup> Glúmr's men begin to tease and scorn the man but Glúmr steps in to protect him. The party goes on its way and the beggar goes to stay with a farmer named Hávarðr. Hávarðr invites the vagrant in (with no apparent concern that this may be improper or illegal) and during the course of the evening the vagrant tells of his encounter with Glúmr, praising the magnanimous behaviour of the chieftain. Hávarðr then informs Glúmr's enemy Víga-Skúta Áskelsson of Glúmr's journey, allowing him to make preparations for an attack. One might expect Hávarðr to benefit from such an exchange, either financially or, more likely, by currying favour with the *goði*. It is quite clear, however, that the nameless vagrant intends nothing other than to praise Glúmr and reveals his whereabouts unthinkingly, ill-advisedly but not maliciously, and gets nothing from the exchange. In such examples of overly talkative vagrants, they do not benefit from information they pass on and it is more established members of society who take advantage of them.<sup>32</sup>

### *The Peddler of Report*

Examples of vagrants inadvertently giving away information are relatively rare. It is much more common for the vagrant to attempt to use his position on the fringe of society to his own advantage, and that is what we find in the case of *Pórðar saga hreðu*.<sup>33</sup> In chapter 9 the saga's eponymous hero is staying with his friend Þórhallr. Þórðr announces a plan to visit his favourite horse, but Þórhallr persuades him to delay his trip for three days so they might gather hay at the same time (following which there is a sharp exchange between Þórhallr and his wife, regarding his lack of bravery) (Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959, ch. 9, pp. 208–09):<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> See Björn Sigfússon 1949, ch. 24, p. 255. *Reykðæla saga* is likely to date from c. 1250 (unless otherwise stated, dates relating to the composition of sagas of Icelanders are taken from Vésteinn Ólason 2005, 114–15, which in turn follows the *Íslenzk fornrit* series) and is preserved in a vellum fragment in AM 561 4to (c.1400) and a series of paper manuscripts from the same tradition.

<sup>32</sup> Even the young Vésteinssynir have a more established position in society than Hallbjörn, as is shown by their daring appeal to their aunt Auðr (Gísli's wife) for support later in the saga.

<sup>33</sup> *Pórðar saga* is a post-classical saga dating from c.1350, preserved primarily in a fragment in AM 564 a 4to (c.1390–1425), AM 471 4to (c.1450–1500), Holm perg 8 4to (c.1450–1500), AM 152 fol. (c.1600–1700) and AM 139 fol.<sup>x</sup> (1600–1700).

<sup>34</sup> The marital squabble between Þórhallr and his wife has no function in the plot and is probably primarily for comic value (an example of a saga commonplace where a woman criticises her husband or another man for cowardice). There is,

Skildu þau nú talit. Við tal þeirra var staddr einn umrenningr.<sup>35</sup> Hann kastar fótum undir sik ok kemr um kveldit til Þverár. Qzurr spurði hann tíðinda eða hvaðan hann væri at kominn. Hann kveðst engi kunna tíðindi at segja, ‘en á Miklabæ í Óslandshlíð var ek í nátt.’ Qzurr segir: ‘Hvat hafðist Þórðr hreða at, kappinn?’ Sveinninn segir: ‘Víst máttu þat til segja, at hann sé kappi, svá sneypiliga sem þú hefir fyrir honum farit; en ekki sá [ek] hann gera, utan hann hnauð hugró á sverði sínu. En þat heyrða ek Þórhallr segja, at þeir mundi færa hey ór gørdum innan þriggja nátt.’ Qzurr segir: ‘Hversu margmennir mundu þeir vera?’ Sveinninn svarar: ‘Eigi fleiri en Þórðr ok Eyvindr ok Þórhallr.’ ‘Vel segir þú, sveinn,’ segir Qzurr. Síðan kvaddi hann til ferðar með sér tólf menn ok reið út í Óslandshlíð.

Now [Þórhallr and his wife’s] conversation ended. A vagrant was placed near to their conversation. He took to his heels and came to Þverá during the evening. Qzurr asked him for news and where he had come from. He said that he had no news to tell, ‘but I was at Miklabær in Óslandshlíð last night.’ Qzurr said: ‘What was the champion Þórðr hreða doing?’ The lad said: ‘Certainly you might say that he is a champion, since you have suffered such disgrace from him. But I saw him do nothing, except he riveted a clinch<sup>36</sup> on his sword. But I heard this: Þórhallr said that they would fetch hay from the yard within three nights.’ Qzurr said: ‘How many men will go?’ The lad answered: ‘No more than Þórðr, Eyvindr and Þórhallr.’ ‘Well spoken, lad,’ said Qzurr. Then he summoned twelve men to accompany him and rode out to Óslandshlíð.

Having acquired this information about Þórðr’s travelling plans, Qzurr attacks Þórðr and loses his own life in the process. As the vagrant is not attached to Þórhallr’s farm, he is able to move between the two farms taking news. Despite the conflict between the social groups, the vagrant is welcome in both houses. In the course of general conversation in his first location, the vagrant overhears information that he knows will be of interest elsewhere.

Several things in the scene are implicit. First, it is implied that the vagrant is already aware of the dispute between Þórðr and Qzurr. He is thus able to initiate the action himself. He leaves his comfortable place in Miklabær, expressly for the purpose of going to Þverá. Secondly, it is implicit that a financial transaction takes place between Qzurr and the vagrant, since

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however, a sense in which the saga audience is supposed to realise Þórhallr’s acute embarrassment as this private scene is played out in front of the unfriendly eyes of the tramp who he knows is shortly going to move on to another farm and perhaps relate this discussion.

<sup>35</sup> In AM 471 4to, Holm perg 8 4to and AM 152 fol. the vagrant is an *umrenningr*, whereas in AM 139 fol. he is an *umhleypisdrengr*.

<sup>36</sup> Cleasby and Vigfusson (1957, 309) define *hogg-ró* (usually spelt *hugró*) as ‘a clinch [the part of a nail or bolt hammered flat to hold it in place] on a sword’s hilt’.

there is no other immediately plausible explanation for his leaving his current location and making the journey to Þverá. That a financial transaction takes place seems inevitable if we compare the scene to two similar incidents in *Njáls saga*.<sup>37</sup> In the escalating conflict between the houses of Njáll and Gunnarr instigated by the mistresses of the households, Bergþóra and Hallgerðr, a small but important role is undertaken by some travelling women (*farandkonur*).<sup>38</sup> These women think that Bergþóra will reward them for informing her of the slander against her sons (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, ch. 44, pp. 112–14). We are not told whether this is the case, but assume it to be so. Some beggar women (*snauðar konur*) have a similar role later in the saga when they are helped over a river by Þráinn Sigfússon. They repay this good turn with bad by immediately informing Bergþóra of his whereabouts, and this time we are told that they are rewarded with gifts (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, ch. 92, pp. 230–31). Returning to *Þórðar saga*, that a financial transaction has taken place is implied by the conversation between Qzurr and the vagrant. One might expect a vagrant to approach his potential host with respect, even obsequiousness, but this is not what happens. As soon as the vagrant enters the farm at Þverá he is asked for news. The vagrant is reticent at first, in fact claiming that he knows no news, but mentioning that he has previously been to Miklabær. Qzurr takes this bait. He is unable to let the mention of Miklabær pass without sarcastically referring to Þórðr as a great champion. The vagrant further irritates this sore by intimating that he knows nothing of Þórðr being a champion while harping on about the shame that he has heaped upon Qzurr. It seems that the vagrant realises that the only way he is going to get paid is if his information is used. Therefore he is goading Qzurr, provoking him to attack Þórðr, using the information that he is supplying, thus being obliged to pay him. This conversation clearly demonstrates the place of the vagrant within saga society. While he might have hoped for shelter and sustenance at Óslandshlið, by moving to Þverá he hopes to convert a hope into genuine financial reward. Despite being a fringe

<sup>37</sup> *Njáls saga* is thought to have been composed 1275–85. Its popularity seems to date back to medieval times as there are over twenty surviving medieval manuscripts or manuscript fragments. The most important of these include AM 468 4to (c.1300–25); AM 133 fol. (c.1350); GKS 2870 4to (c.1300 / c.1500–50); AM 132 fol. (c.1330–70); GKS 2868 4o (c.1350–1400); GKS 2869 4to (c.1400) and AM 466 4to (c.1460) (see Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1953, 9–14).

<sup>38</sup> It is noticeable that vagrant women in the sagas are always unnamed, whereas vagrant men are sometimes named and sometimes unnamed (Jón Jónsson 2006, 30), and that vagrant women tend to travel in groups.

character, he is invited into the farm expressly for the purpose of obtaining news. Furthermore the vagrant realises the strength of his position and the value of the information he possesses. This is the most common function of the vagrant in the *Íslendingasögur*: that of the peddler of report. He uses his lack of social bonds and his ability to travel between rival social groups. He obtains information in one social group that will be of interest to another, and then sells it. Qzurr, however, is not without blame, as it is because of his jealous rivalry with Þórðr that he is tempted into paying the vagrant for the news.

In a number of other examples vagrant characters sell information in this way. In *Droplaugarsona saga* a hawker informs Droplaug of the slander made against her by Þorgrímr torðýfill (Jón Jóhannesson 1950, ch. 3, pp. 144–45).<sup>39</sup> In *Hænsa-Þóris saga* a *reikunarmaðr* reveals to Þórir (himself a former hawker) that Þorvaldr Tungu-Oddsson is lodging with Arngrímr goði (Nordal and Guðni Jónsson 1938, ch. 7, p. 19).<sup>40</sup> In *Reykðæla saga* two *göngukonur* take news of Steingrímur's purchase of oxen to Vémundur (Björn Sigfússon 1949, ch. 11, p. 177). In these examples the content of the information is very different, yet in all cases the vagrants realise the value of the information they have obtained and travel to the various potential buyers expressly to try and sell it. In all cases this is used to progress the saga plot by giving characters in one social context information from another social context which they could not otherwise obtain.

Some scholars have suggested that the role of the gossip in saga society was seen as a predominantly female one (see for example Vésteinn Ólason 1998, 124 and Kress 1991) and indeed in several of the examples above the gossips are women. Helga Kress suggests that gossip (*slúður*, which she distinguished from *orðrómur* 'rumour') was a potentially destabilising factor used by women within the male-dominated society. As Kress points out, gossip was as much a weapon for the powerless as for the powerful—indeed, more so, as the powerful had more to lose in a society with such an emphasis upon honour—and was hard to contain through the normal channels of physical force, threat or law. Kress's assessment of gossip can be extended to male saga characters on the fringes of society such as vagrants who use and indeed thrive on gossip.

<sup>39</sup> *Droplaugarsona saga* is thought to have been written early (1200–40) and is preserved in Möðruvallabók, AM 132 fol. (c.1330–70). A fragment is also preserved in AM 162 C fol. (c.1420–50).

<sup>40</sup> *Hænsa-Þóris saga* is thought to have been written 1250–70 and is preserved in numerous post-medieval manuscripts including AM 501 4to<sup>x</sup> (c.1700), AM 157 f fol.<sup>x</sup> (c.1700) and AM 162 G fol. (c.1400–1500).

Thus the peddler of report is an important role for vagrants in the sagas who take financial advantage from their unique position on the fringe of society, but as in the case of the chatterbox, those making use of the information are often established members of saga society.

### *The Slanderer*

If it is possible to sell genuine information, it is also possible, in the context of saga narrative, for a vagrant to make money by spreading false information or slander. In *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*,<sup>41</sup> Þórhaddr Hafljótsson pays a *flökkunarmaðr* to put about an untrue rumour about his enemy Þorsteinn Síðu-Hallsson (Jón Jóhannesson 1950, ch. 3, pp. 307–08):

Einn aptan kom þar maðr til gistingar, sá er Grímkell hét. Hann var flökkunarmaðr ok hrópstunga mikil. Þórhaddr gerði sér tíðhjalat við hann, ok dvalðisk hann þar um hríð. Þórhaddr kaupir at honum, at hann skal fara á vestanvert land ok bera þar upp ragmæli um Þorstein Hallsson með því móti, at Þorsteinn væri kona ina níundu hverja nótt ok ætti þá viðskipti við karlmenn. Ok yfir þessa flugu gein Grímkell ok fór yfir landit vestr ok hrópaði Þorstein, ok fór síðan svá vestan yfir ragmælit. Petta kom svá, at ragmælit fór nær í hvers manns hús, ok lögðu óvinir Þorsteins á hann óvirðing mikla hér fyrir, en vinir hans hǫrmuðu.

One evening a man who was called Grímkell came there for lodgings. He was a vagrant and a great slanderer. Þórhaddr often spoke with him and he remained there a while. Þórhaddr made a deal with him, that he should go to the west country and start there a slanderous rumour about Þorsteinn Hallsson with this sense, that Þorsteinn was a woman every ninth night and at that time had intercourse with men. Grímkell swallowed this bait and went to the west country and slandered Þorsteinn and thus the slanderous rumour travelled across from the west. It so happened that the report went to almost everyone's house, and Þorsteinn's enemies heaped shame on him because of it, and his friends became miserable.

This rumour is familiar to us from *Njáls saga* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, ch. 123, p. 314), a text which overlaps with *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* in a great deal of its content.<sup>42</sup> Again a financial transaction takes place between a vagrant (a fringe character) and a farmer (an established member of society). However, where the sale of news is usually initiated by the vagrant, the slander here is initiated by the farmer. Like Hallbjörn,

<sup>41</sup> *Þorsteins saga* is thought to have been composed in the mid-thirteenth century and is preserved in the paper manuscripts AM 142 fol.<sup>x</sup> (c.1700) and JS 435 4to<sup>x</sup> (c.1700–1900), both based on a lost vellum.

<sup>42</sup> The exact relationship between these two texts is unclear. They share a great deal of material regarding the battle of Clontarf, and *Þorsteins saga* even mentions a *Njáls saga* (Jón Jóhannesson 1950, ch. 1, p. 300), but there are also discrepancies in the details regarding Þorsteinn's family and its relationship with Flosi Freysgoði.



Grímkell is introduced only by a forename, without patronymic, family details or property. As in *Pórðar saga hreðu*, having the ability to move around the countryside is used to the vagrant's advantage. Grímkell is told to go west to start the slander, so that it spreads back from there to Þorsteinn's locality. Not only does this make it more difficult for Þorsteinn to prosecute Þórhaddr for slander (though there is little doubt in his mind as to the origin of the rumour), it also makes the rumour more damaging, as people do not immediately connect it with Þórhaddr. By the time the rumour has spread back to Þorsteinn the damage has already been done, as so many people are aware of it. Given the importance of honour in saga society, the mobility of the vagrant puts him in a powerful position. As he moved from farm to farm the vagrant had the opportunity to spread news, either true or untrue, about the farms he had already visited.<sup>43</sup>

There is another example of a vagrant spreading an untrue story in *Víga-Glúms saga*.<sup>44</sup> In the latter half of the saga Glúmr's son Vigfúss comes into conflict with a family living at Jórunnarstaðir. In an effort to avert the conflict Halli Þorbjarnarson, the blind patriarch of the Jórunnarstaðir household, pays a vagrant (*einhleypingr*) to spread a story about his own son, Bárðr (Jón Jóhannesson 1950, ch. 18, pp. 62–63). The exact content of the rumour and Halli's motive for spreading it are somewhat hard to understand; however, the rumour seems to involve Bárðr fleeing abroad for fear of Glúmr and his son Vigfúss, and its eventual outcome enables Bárðr's kinsmen to make a settlement on his behalf. A striking similarity with *Þorsteins saga* is that the vagrant is required to go elsewhere first to give the story additional credence, in this case to Skagafjörðr and west from there. A further example can be found in *Kormaks saga*, where Þorvaldr tinteinn pays a tramp (a *gongusveinn*) to compose an obscene verse about Steingerðr (his own wife) in order that he can implicate his rival Kormakr Ögmundarson in its composition (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1939, ch. 20, p. 277).<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> In terms of the real vagrants in the Saga Age and saga-writing age, this may go some way to explain the discrepancy between the law and portrayal in the sagas. Vagrants were considered a threat and so harsh laws were introduced to curb that threat, but concerns with appearing less generous than one's neighbours, together with a genuine desire for news, meant that vagrants often were fed and housed.

<sup>44</sup> *Víga-Glúms saga* was probably composed relatively early (1220–50) and is preserved in AM 132 fol. (Möðruvallabók, c.1330–70). Fragments of a slightly different version are preserved in AM 445c I 4to (c.1390–1425) and AM 564a 4to (c.1390–1425).

<sup>45</sup> *Kormaks saga* was probably composed before 1220 and is preserved in AM 132 fol. (Möðruvallabók, c.1330–70) and AM 162 F fol. (c.1350–1400).

In addition to the sale of slander, saga vagrants are depicted selling other types of misinformation. In *Víga-Glúms saga* an *einhleypingr* is paid by Víga-Skúta to plead to Glúmr for financial assistance and arrange to meet him where Skúta hopes to ambush him (Jónas Kristjánsson 1956, ch. 16, pp. 50–51). The same episode is narrated in *Reykðæla saga*; here, however, the man practising the deception is an outlaw rather than a vagrant.<sup>46</sup>

Thus rumour and slander and, in the final example, entrapment through misinformation seem to have been tools of the trade (so to speak) of the vagrant in saga society, and that society seems to make use of this aspect of the vagrant. While making unpleasant or obscene accusations to a rival's face seems quite in line with heroic behaviour,<sup>47</sup> to do so at a distance or in secret gave the recipient no opportunity to retaliate, and so demonstrated cowardice. Although the saga audience probably had little sympathy with the slandering vagrants as disruptive elements within the society of the *Íslendingasögur*, it is striking that in each case cited above the vagrant is in the employ of an established member of that society. Slander in the sagas, where vagrants are concerned, does not happen haphazardly but is carefully orchestrated by key figures in saga society.

### *The Mystic*

Just as it seems to have been possible for saga vagrants to subsist on the reward they could receive from true and untrue gossip, so it may have been possible to make some return on soothsaying and fortune telling. It is tempting to subsume this group within that of the peddler of report described above, the distinction being, however, that the information being sold has been obtained by supernatural means, and that the mystical process through which it is obtained is as much part of the transaction as the information itself.

<sup>46</sup> This shows the way in which, though distinct groups, vagrants and outlaws could function in identical ways in saga plots (see footnote 25 above). According to Jónas Kristjánsson (1988, 244) the most likely direction of influence in this particular case is from *Víga-Glúms saga* to *Reykðæla saga* (the ultimate source being a lost *\*Skúta þáttur*) (also see Andersson 2006, 66). Whether the outlaw or vagrant is more original scarcely matters for the present study.

<sup>47</sup> See for example Skarpheðinn's behaviour in *Njáls saga*, first in trying to enlist support from chieftains to defend his case against Flosi (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, ch. 120, pp. 304–05) and later towards Flosi himself (ch. 123, p. 314), or that of Egill Skúlason towards the banded chieftains in *Bandamanna saga* (Guðni Jónsson 1936, ch. 10, pp. 352–56). Such heroic behaviour in the sagas was no doubt influenced by mythological and legendary archetypes found in *Lokasenna* or *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*.

*Eiríks saga rauða* tells of a woman in Greenland by the name of Þorbjörg lítil-völva ‘small seeress’, who was one of nine sisters all of whom were prophetesses, although she was the only one remaining alive by the time of the events in which she participates.<sup>48</sup> It is said that it is common during winter for Þorbjörg to attend feasts *ok buðu þeir menn henni mest heim, er forvitni var á at vita forlög sín eða árferð* ‘and those people invited her to stay most, who were curious to know about their fate or the prospects’ (Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935, ch. 4, p. 206). The saga tells that during a famine it fell to a farmer named Þorkell (whose patronymic is never given) as the most significant farmer of the district to invite her to his farm to enquire when the hard times would end. There then follows a detailed description of the séance itself, in which Guðríðr Eiríksdóttir, a guest at the farm, is required to recite the *Varðlokar* (seemingly chants which called the spirits with whom Þorbjörg needed to communicate). As a Christian Guðríðr is reluctant to participate in such practices, but is eventually persuaded that it will in no way sully her character. The seeress reveals that the famine and sickness is almost over and rewards Guðríðr, if it might be called a reward, by foretelling her short-lived marriage in Greenland and the subsequent success of her descendants in Iceland.

Unlike all other saga vagrants, who are fed and lodged by farmers but rarely granted any degree of respect, Þorbjörg is treated with great ceremony (Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935, ch. 4, p. 206):

Býðr Þorkell spákonunni heim, ok er henni þar vel fagnat, sem siðr var til, þá er við þess háttar konum skyldi taka. Var henna búit hásaeti ok lagt undir hana hægindi; þar skyldi í vera hœnsafiðri.

Þorkell invited the seeress to stay, and she was well looked after there as was the custom when women of this kind should be received. A high-seat was prepared for her and a pillow set beneath her, which should have hen-feathers in it.

It seems that her uncanny abilities inspire fear in the householders (fear of her either not carrying out the séance, or worse, turning her magic against them), which gives her a level of respect not afforded to other travellers. There is a suggestion that, although those men most curious to know their future invite her to their farms, Þorkell’s invitation is based on necessity and public duty. Þorkell uses this same sense of civic responsibility to dispel Guðríðr’s reluctance to take part in the spell. The reference to *þess háttar konum* implies that Þorbjörg is not the only female soothsayer. This is underlined by the fact that the pillow ‘should be’ stuffed with hen-feathers rather than a less soft alternative.

<sup>48</sup> *Eiríks saga rauða* was probably composed between 1200 and 1230 and is preserved in AM 544 4to (Hauksbók c.1302–10) and AM 557 4to (c.1420–50).

Whether the settlements in Greenland could really have supported one or more vagrant soothsayers is uncertain, but is not beyond the realms of possibility; at its height the Greenlandic Viking settlements consisted of 300 to 400 farms (Jochens 2002, 140), although the number was likely to have been smaller in Guðríðr's day. Jenny Jochens sees the Þorbjörg episode as evidence of greater female power in Greenland as a result of the high male to female ratio there (Jochens 2002, 142). In view of the emphasis in much of *Eiríks saga* on strong female characters, it is entirely possible that the episode was modelled on occurrences elsewhere, or indeed invented entirely, because of its thematic and dramatic fit with the saga's subject. On the other hand, there are relatively few examples of soothsayers and wizards being treated with such reverence elsewhere in the corpus of the *Íslendingasögur*. Indeed, much of the friction caused by magicians results from their taking up residence in a district (see for example Kotkell in *Laxdæla saga*).<sup>49</sup> Given that sagas show a much greater propensity for the supernatural in the episodes set in Greenland and Vínland (*Eiríks saga rauða*, but also *Grænlandinga saga* and *Flóamanna saga*), it seems possible that not only were such places seen as being on the fringes of the natural world, but that the people there were more reliant on old magic than those in Iceland. At least within the semi-fictional world of the saga, the existence of a woman able to support herself by soothsaying from farm to farm is perhaps more plausible at the very edges of the known world than in established Iceland.

Unlike almost all other saga vagrants, Þorbjörg lítil-völva is not a disruptive element within the saga, which is further evidence of the narrator's somewhat different attitude towards her. She does, however, fit the pattern of a fringe character whose actions are nonetheless sponsored by society itself, and in this case one who is seen as essential in that society.

### *The Assassin*

The role of the assassin or *flugumaðr* seems to have been a particular favourite of sagas author and, along with outlaws and slaves eager to win their freedom, we find a number of vagrants acting (or attempting to act)

<sup>49</sup> Although I do not include other examples of magicians in this article, specifically because they are not peripatetic, it should be noted that they fit the overall argument made by this article that fringe social characters are an element disruptive of society, but that in more cases than not they are sponsored by elements within that society (the bewitching and killing of Kári Hróttsson by Kotkell in chapter 37 of *Laxdæla saga* is a particularly striking example).

as assassins.<sup>50</sup> With their lack of fixed social position vagrants were ideal candidates to be called upon (by the saga author, but also within the narrative by the established member of society) to seek to kill someone for money. While a killing in self-defence or even a revenge killing might be justified in the eyes of a saga audience, a killing carried out for personal gain is by its very nature ignominious.<sup>51</sup> In *Harðar saga*, chapter 39, a man named Þórólfr starri approaches Þorbjörg Grímkelsdóttir (Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1991, ch. 39, pp. 92–93):<sup>52</sup>

Þórólfr hét maðr ok kallaðr starri, hagr ok heldr auðigr, gálauss ok glensmikill, frækinn ok framgjarn ok harðgerr í hvívetna. Hann kom it sama haust til Indriðastaða ok bauðst bónda. Þorbjörg bað hann taka víst við honum, ok svá varð; dvaldist hann þar um hríð til smíða. Helga jarlsdóttir var kát við hann, ok þær Þorbjörg báðar. Hann þóttist vera í þingum við jarlsdóttur, en hon tók því ekki allfjarri. Þórólfr hafði verit með Ref um sumarit ok hafði illa þar at getizt. Hann leitar nú vetrvistar til Þorbjargar.

A man was named Þórólfr and was called Starri. He was skilful and somewhat well off, careless and spiteful, bold and eager and hardy in every respect. He arrived that same autumn at Indriðastaðir and offered his services to the farmer. Þorbjörg told her husband certainly to take him in, and so it happened. He remained there a while doing smithy work. Helga the earl's daughter was cheerful with him, indeed both she and Þorbjörg. He thought that he was having an affair with the earl's daughter, and she didn't utterly contradict this. Þórólfr had been with Refr during the summer and had caused trouble there. He now sought winter lodgings with Þorbjörg.

<sup>50</sup> The term *flugumaðr* (literally 'man of flies') is thought to derive from the flies which magicians used to send to attack their enemies (Cleasby and Vigfusson 1957, 162, citing Old Swedish law). In the sagas it meant a man paid, either financially or in kind, to try to kill another (see, for example, *Víga-Glúms saga*, Jónas Kristjánsson 1956, ch. 16, p. 50, where it describes a man also referred to as an *einhleypingr* and a *vígamaðr* 'killer'). There are, of course, many assassins in the sagas, only a handful of whom are vagrants (others include slaves or servants wishing to become freed-men, and outlaws).

<sup>51</sup> Michael Irlenbusch-Reynard discusses examples of slaves used as would-be assassins in *Eyrbyggja saga*, but sees no moral judgement made on either the assassins or their sponsors. It is possible that his view that neither Snorri goði, Vígfúss Bjarnarson nor Þórólfr bægifótr '[has] reason to fear reproach' is specific to the morally ambivalent or at least ambiguous *Eyrbyggja saga* (Irlenbusch-Reynard 2005, 86). I am grateful to Mr Irlenbusch-Reynard for providing me with a copy of his work.

<sup>52</sup> *Harðar saga*, at least in the form now preserved, is unlikely to predate the fourteenth century (Cochrane 2007). The section referred to here is preserved only in AM 556 a 4to (c.1475–1500), but a separate tradition of the beginning of the saga is also preserved in AM 564 a 4to (*Pseudo-Vatnshyrna*, c.1390–1425).

This fantastic introduction tells us much about Þórólfr. He arrives in the autumn and so, although a craftsman rather than a beggar, he is without a position in society, as he is travelling outside the moving days. His nickname *starri* ‘starling’ is the name of a migratory bird, presumably relating to his travelling.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, words for migratory birds seem appropriate nicknames for tramps, like that of a traveller named Þorbjörn rindill ‘wren’ in *Ljósvetninga saga*. The author mixes positive and negative adjectives. Þórólfr is *hagr* ‘skilful’, *frækinn* ‘valiant’ (perhaps implying ‘foolhardy’ here) and *framgjarn* ‘striving forward’, but also *gálauss* ‘careless’ and *glensmikill* ‘full of gibes’. Here we find the two sides of the vagrant, on the one hand skilled, adept and on occasion brave but on the other, marginal in status, making him less likely to hold his tongue for fear of repercussions, and his speech tends towards malicious gossip. Once inside the household Þórólfr quickly ingratiates himself with the two prominent female members of that household (or at least believes that he does so). In a *double entendre* on the part of the narrator, we are told that Þórólfr considered himself *í þing* with Helga, referred to as *jarlsdóttir* to stress her nobility and her social superiority to Þórólfr. Icelandic law declared that every bondi must declare himself *í þing* with a *goði* (*Grágás*, *Konungsbók* §81, Finsen 1974, I 136–39; Dennis et al. 1980, 132–35). A vagrant, lacking this social bond, is a potential disruptive element on the fringe of society. However, in this context, *í þing* implies a sexual liaison (see Cleasby and Vigfusson 1957, 736). The reference to what Þórólfr believes, a deliberate divergence from the normal saga style of relating such affairs from the perspective of other observers, indicates that Helga is sufficiently prudent or discreet not to compromise herself. Yet, in typically understated saga style, the narrator suggests that Helga has allowed Þórólfr to continue under this impression, leading him on in order to achieve her own ends. When Þórólfr asks for winter lodgings the women reveal their deeper purpose. Þorbjörg says that she will give him lodgings, together with the ring Sótanautr, money and the hand of Helga, provided he will kill Refr inn gamli Þorsteinsson in revenge for the killing of Hörðr Grímkelsson (Þorbjörg’s brother and Helga’s husband). Þórólfr accepts the deal, but, although he wounds Refr, he fails in his task and meets an unpleasant end when Refr’s witch-like mother tears his throat out with her teeth while he is seeking to escape.

<sup>53</sup> See Cleasby and Vigfusson 1957, 589. An alternative explanation is that *starri* is related to the nominative *starr* ‘blunt’, hence ‘unbending’ (as given in a footnote to the edition cited).

Another would-be assassin employed by a woman is Atli in *Njáls saga*. In chapter 36, he approaches Bergþórshváll looking for work as a mower while Njáll and his sons are away. Although not specifically a vagrant, Atli introduces himself as a man without lodgings or employment (*maðr vistlauss*).<sup>54</sup> This indicates that readers should be suspicious of this healthy man roaming the countryside looking for work. We immediately question why he is not in permanent employment and why he is travelling outside the moving days. There is no suggestion that he is a member of society fallen upon hard times and passed round the district as a pauper as provided for in the laws. Our prejudices are confirmed in his own summary of his character (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, ch. 36, p. 95):

Mart er mér vel hent at gera, en eigi vil ek því leyna, at ek em maðr skapharðr, ok hefir margr hlotit um sárt at binda fyrir mér.

Many tasks are appropriate for me to do, but I don't want to conceal that I am a harsh man: many have needed to bandage wounds on my account.

Despite this candid résumé, Bergþóra allows him to stay, commenting that he doesn't strike her as a *bleyðimaðr* 'coward'. Atli's character is confirmed upon the return of the men. Skarpheðinn instantly strikes up a friendship with the newcomer, which suggests that Atli is a somewhat rough, possibly libellous man (in view of Skarpheðinn's own unruly demeanour). Njáll is more circumspect, saying: *Ærit mun hann stórvirkr . . . en eigi veit ek, hvé góðvirkr hann er* 'He will be a man of sufficiently large deeds . . . but I don't know how good his deeds are' (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, ch. 36, p. 96). The linguistic pairing of *stórvirkr* and *góðvirkr* compares Atli's strength and effort with his questionable morality. As one might expect Njáll's prophecy proves true. The work that Bergþóra has in mind for Atli is avenging the killing of her servant Svartr earlier in chapter 36. In the very next chapter Bergþóra sends Atli to kill Kolr (Hallgerðr's servant). This recalls Njáll's suggestion that Atli's deeds are not good, that is, that he is an evildoer. Atli eventually meets his own end as a result of the rapidly escalating feud between Bergþóra and Hallgerðr, when he is killed by Þórðr Þórðarson leysingja.

Admittedly neither Atli nor Þórólfr is such a clear-cut example of a vagrant as those discussed earlier in the article. Certainly neither is a beggar, and both arrive offering services of work. On the other hand, despite

<sup>54</sup> Cleasby and Vigfusson define *vist* as 'an abode, dwelling . . . mostly used of the domicile of servants or labourers of any kind' or 'food, provisions, viands' (1957, 711), implying that *vistlauss* refers to a lack not merely of shelter, but of a social position that would provide accommodation and the support associated with it.

*Harðar saga*'s statement that Þórólfr is *hagr*, the only deeds we witness either man attempt are negative ones—a state of affairs specifically drawn to our attention by the word-play in Njáll's assessment of Atli. Both men seemingly want lodgings for the whole of winter, and are therefore not continuously peripatetic vagrants. Atli certainly arrives outside the legal moving days and therefore, according to law, travelling illegally, although this may be a narrative expedient allowing Bergþóra (rather than Njáll) to employ him, rather than a specific reflection of his legal status. What is clear is that both are quickly persuaded to attempt to kill men against whom they had no previous grudge, purely for personal gain. Atli undertakes the task for the promise of an unspecified, presumably financial reward from Bergþóra: *skalt þú eigi til engis vinna* 'you won't be working for nothing' (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, ch. 36, p. 97). In *Harðar saga*, as well as wealth (money and the ring Sótanautr), the traveller has the additional incentive of Helga's hand in marriage, and therefore the security of a place at the centre of the society of which Þórólfr is currently on the fringes. Thus, although they are not as peripatetic as vagrants conveying news, it is nonetheless the lack of social connection that makes Atli and Þórólfr such suitable assassins, but it is that same lack of connection that makes them vulnerable to becoming merely the tools of established society figures (albeit in these two cases female ones).<sup>55</sup>

Few paid assassins in the *Íslendingasögur* actually succeed in their task. Many fail outright. Those that succeed, such as Atli, usually only kill a minor member of the opposing household (rather than the farmer himself or a chieftain) and the event is part of a larger tit-for-tat feud, not the climactic saga episode. The role of the assassin, whether slave, paid murderer or outlaw, will only ever be that of a minor player in a saga plot. The assassin escalates the feud, increasing hostility between the two factions both by the attack itself but also by the aftermath once the attack

<sup>55</sup> It is notable that both these sponsors are women. Assassins such as Þórólfr and Atli provide one means by which women could effect vengeance which they might not otherwise be able to accomplish. But I would hesitate to push the point too far, as the sagas show us many examples of other means by which a woman might accomplish such ends (the examples are too extensive and varied to list, but could include Þórdís Súrsdóttir of *Gísla saga*, Þuríður Óláfsdóttir in *Heiðarvíga saga* and Hildiguðr Starkaðardóttir, and indeed both Bergþóra and Hallgerðr in separate incidents, in *Njáls saga*, all of whom find means to encourage men to acts of vengeance without resorting to paid assassins). Conversely, there are many examples of male members of society employing assassins (these could include Snorri goði in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Óttarr Þorvaldsson in *Vatnsdæla saga* and Jökull Ingimundarson in *Finnboga saga ramma*).



is discovered (and in most cases it is all too clear who has sponsored the attack), but specifically without bringing the two factions together in person, thereby prolonging the story.

### *Vagrants Seeking a Place Within Society*

The following striking example does not demonstrate the function of the vagrant as news-giver or assassin, but it does show his position on the fringes of society and makes use of his mobility. In *Harðar saga* the relationship between Hörðr's uncle Torfi and his brother-in-law Grímkell (Hörðr's father) is tense. Matters get worse when Grímkell's wife, Torfi's sister, dies during childbirth while staying with Torfi. Having already tried unsuccessfully to get rid of the child through exposure, Torfi hits upon the idea of fostering her upon a vagrant named Sigmundr (Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1991, ch. 9, pp. 22–23):

Sigmundr hét maðr; hann gekk yfir á húsgang ok kona hans ok sonr, er Helgi hét. Optast váru þau í gestahúsi, þar sem þau kómu, nema Sigmundr væri inni til skemmtanar. Þetta it sama haust kómu þau Sigmundr til Breiðabólstaðar. Tók Torfi vel við þeim ok mælti til þeirra: 'Ekki skulu þit í gestahúsi vera, því at mér lízt vel á þik, Sigmundr, ok heldr gæfusamliga.' Hann svarar: 'Ekki mundi þér þat missýnast, þó at þat væri, at þér sýndist svá.' Torfi kveðst mundu gera sæmd til hans, 'því at ek mun þiggja at þér barnfóstr.' Sigmundr svarar: 'Er okkar sá mannamunr, þó at ek fóstira þér barn, því at þat er talat, at sá sé minni maðr, er öðrum fóstrar barn.' Torfi mælti: 'Þú skalt færa meyna til Ölfusvatns.' Þessu játar Sigmundr. Tekr hann nú við Þorbjörgu ok bindr hana á bak sér ok ferr á burt síðan. Þetta þóttist Torfi gera allt til svívirðingar við Grímkel, en þótti þessi maðr vel fallinn til at bera meyna á rekning; vildi hann ok ekki hætta hér betra manni til en Sigmundi, því at honum þótti engis örvænt fyrir Grímkatli, ef sá maðr hefði fært honum barnit, at honum hefði nökkur hefnd í þótt.

A man was named Sigmundr. He went begging from house to house with his wife and his son, who was called Helgi. Most often they were in the guest-room<sup>56</sup> at the place where they were staying, unless Sigmundr was inside for entertainment. That same autumn Sigmundr and his family came to Breiðabólstaðir. Torfi received them well and said to them: 'You shall not be in the guest-room, because you seem pleasing to me and somewhat lucky, Sigmundr.' He answered: 'You would not be mistaken in your opinion if it were the case that that is how it seemed to you.' Torfi said that he would do him an honour, 'because I will accept child-fostering from you.' Sigmundr

<sup>56</sup> Cleasby and Vigfusson (1957, 197) merely give the gloss 'guest-room' for *gestahús*. I think the implication of this passage is that, as opposed to being a privilege, the guest-room would have been the farthest from the high-ranking members of the household and therefore a lowly lodging.

answered: 'There is a difference in status between us, although I foster a child for you, because it is said that he is the lesser man who fosters the other's child.' Torfi said: 'You shall take the little girl to Ölfusvatn.' Sigmundr agreed to this. He now accepted Þorbjörg and bound her on his back and then went away. Torfi reckoned to do this entirely to shame Grímkell, and thought this man was well suited to carry the little girl in vagrancy. He also did not want to venture a better man than Sigmundr in this, because if that man brought the child to him, it seemed in no way beyond expectation for Grímkell to consider some kind of revenge.

Leaving a young female child of high social standing in the care of a man on the very edge of social acceptability must have seemed horrific to the members of Torfi's household and to the original readership of the saga. Yet there is a great deal of humour in the scene, in particular the conversation between Torfi and Sigmundr, in which Sigmundr claims that the fosterage demonstrates the difference in their standing as the foster-parent was always considered the lower man. This notion appears in a number of other places in the *Íslendingasögur*, among them *Laxdæla saga*, where Óláfr pái offers to foster the son of his half-brother Þorleikr (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934, ch. 27, p. 75).<sup>57</sup> The scene in *Laxdæla saga* is important because through this fosterage Kjartan and Bolli become foster-brothers. Moreover, it demonstrates Óláfr's humility. Everything the saga tells us about the two half-brothers indicates that, despite his illegitimacy, Óláfr is considered the greater man in social standing, renown and accomplishments, yet he is willing to be seen by society as the lesser man in order to secure a bond with his half-brother. In *Harðar saga*, however, the theme is ironic. It would have been only too apparent, both to the assembled members of Torfi's household and to the original readership, that the vagrant was the lesser man. By comparing himself to Torfi, the vagrant is seeking to raise his position in society. As the vagrant moves from the fringes towards the centre of society, he tries to imitate the discourse of that society, by emulating what he considers to be its members' way of speaking. However, while the nameless vagrant in *Þórðar saga* was in complete

<sup>57</sup> *Laxdæla saga* is thought to have been written 1230–60 and is preserved in six vellum manuscripts or fragments. There are also several paper manuscripts probably from now lost vellums. The manuscripts form two groups: Y, which includes the short text *Bolla þáttur* directly after the saga, and Z, which does not. The oldest of these manuscripts, AM 162 D 2 fol. (part of the Z redaction), probably dates from the last quarter of the thirteenth century (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934, lxxvii). Of the Y manuscripts, the most important and most complete version of the saga is AM 132 fol. (Möðruvallabók, c.1330–70).

control of his conversation with Özurr, Sigmundr in *Harðar saga* is used as a pawn by Torfi, and his attempts at fitting in are somewhat pathetic.

Although the person receiving the child in fosterage was considered socially lower than the one who offered the child, he would expect to benefit from the association (see for example the episode from *Haensa-Póris saga* mentioned below), as a new social bond he has made. This is indeed the case in *Harðar saga*, as we are told that Sigmundr takes the long road round to Grímkell's farm at Ölfusvatn and is offered hospitality all along the way on account of his new connection. Upon arriving at Ölfusvatn there follows a further humorous scene in which Sigmundr expects to be received into society and even introduces himself as Grímkell's foster-relative (*barnfóstri*). Grímkell is suitably horrified. He recognises the plot for what it is: Torfi's attempt to make him enter into a familial bond with the lowly Sigmundr, an ignominious and potentially dangerous relationship. Grímkell refuses to accept the child and drives Sigmundr away. Sigmundr has not benefited from the fosterage in the way he had hoped, and he is once more back on the social fringe, and now with an extra mouth to feed. This scene plays with the position of the vagrant within society; the potential disruption as he is moved to the centre and offered social bonds, and the reaction of saga society and saga readership towards the vagrant, resulting in his being placed firmly back in his position on the fringe. This relationship continues to have an adverse impact later in the saga, when Helgi Sigmundarson—the son of the vagrant who has continued to have contact with Grímkell's family—fails to convey accurately the words of Indriði Þorvaldsson to Hörðr Grímkelsson, thereby causing a rift between them (Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1991, ch. 21, pp. 56–57). Thus the central tragedy of *Harðar saga* can be traced back not just to the desire of a vagrant to advance himself in society, but to an established member of society, Torfi, making use of the vagrant's vulnerability and greed.

Later in *Harðar saga*, once Hörðr has been convicted of the burning of Auðr and has fled to his island fortress, unsavoury types, outlaws and vagrants gravitate to his encampment and gradually encourage Hörðr to carry out ever worse outrages. This idea of guilt by association with vagrants can also be found in other sagas, as in *Hrafnkels saga*, when Sámr first rides to the Alþingi to raise his case against the *goði* Hrafnkell.<sup>58</sup> That Sámr's position is desperate is shown by the fact that most of the men

<sup>58</sup> *Hrafnkels saga* is thought to have been written before 1300 and is preserved only in paper manuscripts (dated from 1600 onwards) except for a single leaf preserved in AM 162 I fol. (c.1500).

accompanying him are vagrants (*einhleypingar*) (Jón Jóhannesson 1950, ch. 3, p. 109).<sup>59</sup> Similarly in *Hænsa-Póris saga*, Þórir—himself formerly a travelling hawker—persuades the established members of society Arngrímr Helgason and Þorvaldr Tungu-Oddsson to take up his case against Blund-Ketill; the unpopularity of Þórir is exposed, however, when he meets Arngrímr and Þorvaldr to serve the summons accompanied only by Arngrímr's own son and the vagrant kinsman of Þórir, Víðfari (Nordal and Guðni Jónsson 1938, ch. 8, p. 21).

Hænsa-Pórir is an example of a vagrant who has rather more success, albeit temporarily, in finding a place within society. At the opening of the saga we are told he has acquired both his name and his wealth by travelling the land selling small goods including hens (*hæns*).<sup>60</sup> In fact we never witness this vagrant lifestyle, as he then settles down to become a farmer and usurer. He is extremely successful and becomes wealthy. He seeks to form an alliance with the chieftain Arngrímr goði by fostering his son Helgi. Arngrímr is at first reluctant to create a social bond with such a lowly and unpredictable character as Þórir but agrees when Helgi is promised half of Þórir's wealth. From this connection Þórir gains a status within society that he could not hope for as a vagrant, and as a result we are told that all the money outstanding to him is paid, although he remains thoroughly unpopular (whether on account of his lowly origins or his behaviour is not at this stage made clear). Nevertheless, when Þórir enters into a dispute entirely of his own making with the popular local landowner Blund-Ketill, Arngrímr is wise enough to distance himself from the case. Only when Þórir appeals to the son of the chieftain Tungu-Oddr, Þorvaldr, who is newly returned to Iceland (and by implication unaware of Þórir's questionable character), do both Þorvaldr and Arngrímr accompany Þórir to summons Blund-Ketill. As they depart an arrow fired from Ketill's farm kills Helgi. Helgi is already dead by the time Þórir reaches him, but Þórir (still the vagrant at heart) invents his final words telling the company to burn Ketill in his house (in an episode that echoes the behaviour of Helgi Sigmundarson, the son of the vagrant in *Harðar saga* in miscommunicating the message to Hörðr).

<sup>59</sup> In the same saga Þorkell leppr Þjóstarson uses the word *einhleypingr* to refer to himself (Jón Jóhannesson 1950, ch. 4, p. 111). This, however, seems to be false modesty, referring to his travels abroad and the fact that he has lodged his share of his *goðorð* with his brother Þorgeirr. The contrast is deliberate and ironic between the *einhleypingar* who support Sámur but have no influence in society and the self-proclaimed *einhleypingr* who has considerable influence although he is not currently in possession of his family's *goðorð*.

<sup>60</sup> On trade and peddlers in Iceland see Miller 1990, 79–82 and Ebel 1977.

Despite seemingly having achieved a position within society, Þórir seems unable to adjust to this role and remains a disruptive element. In an episode in which Ketill attempts to buy hay, Þórir is deliberately obstructive, preventing Ketill from obtaining the hay either at market value or at an inflated price or, indeed, through any recourse that Ketill can think of offering.<sup>61</sup> Contrary to expectation, Þórir is not driven by avarice (as he passes up offers of more than the value of the hay), but instead by an inexplicable desire to cause havoc within society. Despite his apparent success in transcending his vagrant position, Þórir remains coloured by the characteristics of the vagrant. He is a master of words, able to talk chieftains into actions that will lead to his advantage and quite happy to lie blatantly to his advantage, but his true motive is not clear. On the other hand, established members of society are willing to deal with him by accepting loans, but refuse to offer him the respect afforded to other members of their society. Þórir himself is characterised merely as the villain. Nonetheless, the social breakdown at the centre of the saga offers some clear moral messages, presumably directed at individuals within the audience of similar social standing.<sup>62</sup> The established members of society who play into Þórir's hands should know better, and are partly to blame for the killings at the climax of the saga. Arngrímur expresses reluctance to enter into an arrangement with Þórir, but is tempted by money. Þorvaldur is warned by Arngrímur exactly what sort of man he might be dealing with, but owing to the rivalry between them, misconstrues Arngrímur's motives and agrees to support Þórir for financial gain. These decisions lead very clearly to the unnecessary burning of the benevolent farmer Ketill in his farmstead and the tension that follows. Just as with Sigmundur's desire to obtain a social connection with Grímkell in *Harðar saga*, even when vagrants seek an established place in society they remain a disruptive element, but it is elements within that society itself which are as much to blame for the resulting social breakdown as are the vagrants.

### *Characters Disguised as Vagrants*

There is one final group who take advantage of the marginal position of the vagrant, and that consists of those who disguise themselves as vagrants and other lowly travellers. Disguise and mistaken identity in general is a widespread motif in mythology (*Prymskviða* and *Vafþrúðnismál* provide

<sup>61</sup> On the dynamics of this discussion see Miller 1990, 94–106.

<sup>62</sup> On potential moral readings of *Hænsa-Þóris saga* see Andersson 2006, 166–67.

two Norse examples among many). The motif of the king or hero returning home and/or seeking refuge in a dishevelled and unrecognisable state is widespread in epic literature dating back at least as far as Homer. A religious variant is the motif of the hero having lost all his wealth on a pilgrimage and returning to court (usually to the disgust of the resident courtiers) as a vagrant (see for example *Auðunar þáttir vestfirzka*).<sup>63</sup> In the sagas of Icelanders it is not by accident that individuals are mistaken for vagrants, but through deliberate impersonation of vagrants so as to travel without arousing suspicion.<sup>64</sup> Víga-Skúta in *Reykðæla saga* disguises himself as a wood-seller (chapter 25). A more elaborate example is Gunnarr Hámundarson who dresses as a vagrant on the advice of his friend Njáll Þorgeirsson (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, ch. 22, p. 59–60):

Nú skalt þú ríða heiman við þriðja mann; skalt þú hafa vaskufl yztan klæða ok undir söluváðarkyrtíl mórendan; þar skalt þú hafa undir in góðu klæði þín ok taparøxi í hendi. Tvá hesta skal hafa hverr yðvarr, aðra feita, en aðra magra. Þú skalt hafa heðan smíði. Þér skuluð ríða þegar á morgin, ok er þér komið yfir Hvítá vestr, skaltú láta slota hatt þinn mjök. Þá mun eptir spurt, hverr sé sá inn mikli maðr. Förunautar þínir skulu segja, at þar sé Kaupa-Heðinn inn mikli, eyfirzkr maðr, ok fari með smíði; hann er maðr skapillr ok margmæltr, þykkisk einn vita allt; hann rekr aptr kaup sín optliga ok flýgr á menn, þegar eigi er allt gort sem hann vill. Þú skalt ríða vestr til Borgarfjarðar ok láta hvarvetna falt smíði ok reka aptr kaupin mjök; mun þá sá orðrómr á leggjask, at Kaupa-Heðinn sé manna verstr viðfangs ok sízt sé logit frá honum.

Now you shall ride from home with two other men. You shall have a rain-cloak over your clothes and beneath it a cowled upper garment of russet-coloured wadmal. Beneath this you shall have your good clothes and a small pointed axe in your hand. Each of you shall have two horses, one fat, the other lean. You shall bring from here some hand-made goods. You shall ride early in the morning and when you get over Hvítá to the west then you shall pull your hat low. Then people will ask who is this big man. Your companions shall say that it is Kaupa-Heðinn the Big, a man from Eyjafjörðr, travelling with wares. He is a man of ill temper who talks a lot, thinks he alone knows everything. He regularly goes back on his deals and flies off the handle at people as soon as he doesn't get his way. You shall ride west to Borgarfjörðr and trade everywhere in faulty goods and go back on your deals a great deal, then the word will be that Kaupa-Heðinn is the worst of men to deal with, which is no lie.

<sup>63</sup> Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson 1943, ch. 2, pp. 364–65. *Auðunar þáttir* is thought to have been composed in the late twelfth century and is preserved in GKS 1009 fol. (Morkinskinna, c.1275), GKS 1005 (Flatleyjarbók, c.1450–1500), AM 66 fol. (c.1350–75) and GKS 1010 fol. (c.1400–50).

<sup>64</sup> This too is a not uncommon motif in medieval and epic literature.

Njáll's advice reveals all the typical characteristics of the physical appearance of the vagrant. The coarse overcoat, a somewhat rough and ready garment, and the coarse, dull-coloured cowl (unlike the fine silk that would have been associated with expensive imported clothes) would be practical for someone who spends a great deal of time travelling and who might not always find himself shelter for the night. It has the further advantage of covering Gunnarr's own clothes.<sup>65</sup> A hat pulled low further disguises Gunnarr's identity and adds to Heðinn's mystery. The small pointed axe hidden beneath his clothes may have been for Gunnarr's own protection in case of discovery, but a concealed weapon would have been quite in keeping with the ruffian Heðinn's character.<sup>66</sup> The significance of the two horses in different states of health is less clear. It may be supposed to distinguish Heðinn and his companions from farmers, whose livestock would be all in the same state of health. Heðinn's first horse may have been acquired (perhaps stolen) recently and is therefore healthy, compared to the other horse which has been with him longer and has been maltreated. As with the scheme practised upon Þorsteinn by the vagrant Grímkell in *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, Gunnarr is to use the ability of the vagrant to travel between farms to build up a reputation. In this case it is a reputation for troublesomeness, designed to entice Hrútr into sending for him both for entertainment and also to teach him a lesson, putting a stop to his misdeeds in the region. Perhaps the saga writer knew of the law that allowed offering the vagrant lodging for the express purpose of flogging him (see p. 46 above).

Njáll's advice does not stop at prescribing what Gunnarr should wear. He predicts, through wisdom or prescience, that Hrútr will send for him, the exact course their conversation will follow and the answers Gunnarr must give. According to Njáll, Hrútr will question him about the comparative qualities of the men of Eyjafjörðr, Reykjardalr, the Austfirðir and Rangárvellir.<sup>67</sup> As part of the deception Gunnarr must slander each of these

<sup>65</sup> Despite the deception and disguise, Gunnarr is encouraged by Njáll to wear his own clothes beneath the disguise. This nearly gives him away when Hǫskuldr catches sight of his red sleeve, but thinks nothing of it until too late. This resembles the way in which he is revealed (again too late) by the appearance of his *fylgja* 'fetch' in Hǫskuldr's dream.

<sup>66</sup> *Taparøx* comes from the Anglo-Saxon *taper-æx* 'tapering axe' (Cleasby and Vigfusson 1957, 625; de Vries 1962, 582; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, ch. 22, p. 59 note).

<sup>67</sup> The detailed nature of Njáll's advice suggests prescience. Indeed, the episode is narrated in more detail in Njáll's prediction than in its actual occurrence: *Fóru orð þeira mjök sem Njáll ætlaði* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954, ch. 23, p. 63) 'Their

groups in turn as pervers, thieves and ruffians, finally saying that there are few men of quality in Rangárvellir since the death of Mörðr gígja, and thus subtly introducing the dowry suit Gunnarr is hoping to revive. Although Heðinn is supposedly a hawker rather than a begging itinerant, he shows exactly the same characteristics as the other vagrants discussed here. Slander made behind one's back and gossip is so closely associated with the vagrant character in the society depicted in the Sagas of Icelanders that Gunnarr is able to use it as just as much a part of his disguise as the rain coat and cowl. Such brash, libellous, inappropriate and inflammatory comments would clearly not be made by a respected individual such as the real Gunnarr, but were the common parlance of the saga vagrant, and so the normally shrewd Hrútr has no suspicion of the man in front of him.

In fact, Njáll's plan seems overly elaborate and was probably included in the saga for its comic value (the plan ultimately comes to nothing as Gunnarr makes an error in the legal proceedings and reverts to force to win his suit against Hrútr). Once in Hrútr's presence Gunnarr / Heðinn tricks Hrútr into explaining step-by-step how to revive the suit to reclaim the dowry of Unnr (Hrútr's former wife, whose marriage was never consummated). While Hrútr assumes that the discussion is hypothetical and in jest, Gunnarr will use his two companions as legal witnesses to every word. Hrútr reveals the legal formulae and process for his own prosecution, showing the extent to which he is taken in by Gunnarr's disguise. And by adopting the character of Heðinn, Gunnarr gains the vagrant's freedom to travel between farms without raising suspicion. For Gunnarr to be travelling in the Hvammsfjörðr district outside of moving days with no good reason might have aroused suspicion. Although he is not an enemy of Hrútr before raising the dowry suit, this action in itself could be enough to put Gunnarr at risk of attack, not only from Hrútr himself, but from his brother Hǫskuldr or even their supporters in neighbouring farms. The vagrant (here in the form of a hawker), though despised by society, seems to have been tolerated. Thus Gunnarr in disguise frees himself from society's constraints and restrictions by adopting the vagrant/travelling hawker persona.

*Fóstbræðra saga* contains a detailed description of a vagrant's attire, also in the course of a hero disguising himself.<sup>68</sup> Having killed Þorgímr

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conversation went very much as Njáll had intended', although some manuscripts include Gunnarr / Heðinn speaking a verse at this point.

<sup>68</sup> *Fóstbræðra saga* is thought to have been written during the last decades of the thirteenth century (Jónas Kristjánsson 1972, 294–307 and 326) and is preserved in AM 544 4to (Hauksbók, c.1302–10), AM 132 fol. (Möðruvallabók,



trolli in revenge for the death of his foster-brother Þorgeirr, Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld hides in a cave. When he gets bored in the cave, he ventures out one sunny day and the first man he encounters is a vagrant (Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson 1943, ch. 23, p. 238):

Sá var mikill vexti ok ósinniligr, ljótr ok eigi góðr yfirbragðs. Hann hafði yfir sér verju saumaða saman af mörpum tötum; hon var feljótt sem laki ok hōtr á upp með slíkri gōrð; hon var ǫll lúsug [því at þá er sólskin var heitt, þá gengu verkfákar frá fōðri hans hōrunds á inar yztu trefr sinna herbergja ok létu þar þá við sólu síður við blika].<sup>69</sup> Þormóðr spyr þenna mann at nafni. Hann svarar: 'Ek heiti Oddi.' Þormóðr spyr: 'Hvat manna ertu, Oddi?' Hann svarar: 'Ek em einn gongumaðr, fastr á fótum, ok em ek kallaðr Lúsa-Oddi, neinningarlauss maðr ok eigi allyginn, fróðr nokkut, ok hefi jafnan gott af góðum mōnnum, eða hvat heitir þú?'

That man was large in stature and unhelpful-looking, ugly and not of good demeanour. He had wrapped about him a cloak sewn together from a great number of rags. It was shabby as a cow's stomach and had a hood on top made in the same manner. It was totally louse-ridden [because when the sunshine was hot, those carthorses strolled from the fodder of his skin to the outermost threads of their bedrooms and then let themselves sunbathe there]. Þormóðr asked that man his name. He answered: 'I am named Oddi.' Þormóðr asked, 'Who are your folks, Oddi?' He answered, 'I am a vagrant [*gongumaðr*], firm of foot, and I am called Lousy-Oddi, a good-for-nothing type but not a complete liar, somewhat wise, and I've always been well treated by good men. What about your name?'

Þormóðr exchanges coats with Oddi and then uses this unsavoury disguise to murder several members of Þorgrímr's family. The additional material of Flateyjarbók (here supplied between square brackets), although at odds with traditional saga style, adds tremendously to the humour of the passage.<sup>70</sup>

c.1330–70), the Codex Regius or Membrana Regia (a now lost vellum manuscript preserved in paper copies) and GKS 1005 fol. (Flateyjarbók, c.1387–95). In the last of these, the saga is in three sections narrated within *Óláfs saga helga*. For further paper manuscripts and the relationship between the versions see Jónas Kristjánsson 1972, 13–96.

<sup>69</sup> The text in parentheses is supplied from Flateyjarbók.

<sup>70</sup> A satisfactory schema and hierarchy of the *Fóstbraðra saga* manuscripts is yet to be fully agreed by scholars, the process partly hampered by the fact that the complete saga cannot be reconstructed by recourse to a single redaction. On the problem see Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson 1943, lxx–lxxvii; Jónas Kristjánsson 1972; Schach 1993, 216–17. In this case, the Flateyjarbók text clearly contains a reading that does not represent what we like to think of as classical saga style. It is, as suggested above, coherent with the context, detail and theme of this episode and its position in the overall saga. It is also funny. There appears to be a pun on the word *fóðr* meaning both 'lining' and 'fodder'.

The extended metaphor describing the lice in Oddi's cloak as carthorses leaving his skin (their 'fodder') to bask in the sun alludes to the fact that it is a sunny day—the reason Þormóðr left the safety of his hideout in the first place. The wanderings of the lice remind the reader of Oddi's, and by extension Þormóðr's, travels. The striking microcosm of the world of the lice, emphasised by their comparison to carthorses, reveals how Þormóðr and his seemingly enormous problems are a small part of the much larger picture of Icelandic and Greenlandic society. Þormóðr's quest for vengeance on behalf of his foster-brother is as insignificant to that society as the lice are to him. In addition to this, it stresses how revolting it must have been for Þormóðr to put on such a coat. Unlike Gunnarr, Þormóðr's disguise is one of convenience, rather than carefully orchestrated. However, the clothes of the vagrant, in particular the lousy cloak cut from many scraps of material with its convenient hood to shadow his face, allow him to pass unnoticed among his enemies until it is too late for them. It seems that, besides being tolerated in saga society, the vagrant was able to become almost invisible, as chieftains paid heed to his word but refused to look squarely at him.

The ultimate way in which members of the society portrayed in the *Íslendingasögur* took advantage of the unique position of the vagrant was actually to impersonate vagrants. The freedom of the vagrant's passage around the countryside in the sagas (despite the supposed restrictions of the law) allows Gunnarr to travel openly without arousing suspicion. And the invisibility of the vagrant (almost as if society were deliberately averting its eyes in the face of breaches of the law-code and social convention) allows Þormóðr and Víga-Skúta to disappear in tight spots.

### *Conclusion*

For the saga narrator vagrants proved a convenient plot device. They could transfer information between two potentially hostile households which might otherwise only have contact at assemblies. They could spread malicious rumours. They could be used as agents and assassins and in some cases even be impersonated. Furthermore, a vagrant might be introduced into a saga without the need to provide background information of his family or land-ownership. In almost all of these cases it is the mobility of the vagrant, in a society otherwise so fixed and structured, that proves invaluable to the narrator. All of these things allowed narrators to move saga plots on to the next stage, often in the progress of an escalating feud. In many of the examples given above the actions of the vagrant lead, whether intentionally or not, directly to the death of a saga

character, or to the emerging conflict and social breakdown at the heart of so many sagas. The talk of the travelling chatterbox might lead to the passing on of delicate information to someone who uses it aggressively. More cynically, the carefully revealed intelligence sold by the peddler of report could reveal the location of a person vulnerable to ambush and attack. A slander could be used to escalate a saga conflict from uneasy tension to outright hostility. Furthermore, the fact that the slander has come from a vagrant makes recourse to a legal resolution all the more difficult. In the most extreme case the vagrant could be employed (like servants, slaves and outlaws) to attempt killings. In each case it is their social mobility (both literal and metaphorical), the fact that they are not bound to a farm, chieftain, specific area or family, that gives vagrants the potential to carry out such acts.

As noted at the start, there is a discrepancy between *Grágás* and the *Íslendingasögur*. In particular, the law says that it is illegal to feed and house vagrants, whereas saga characters always seem to do so. Whether such punitive laws were actually put into effect is hard to know, but their presence within the law code gave the ruling class the right to come down hard upon vagrants whenever they saw fit, an option they considered important enough to enshrine within law.<sup>71</sup> What the law and the sagas agree upon is that vagrants are a potential menace. They are a disruptive element within the society depicted in the *Íslendingasögur*. In this society which was so fixed in terms of social bonds—those of slavery, servitude, family and the *þing* system of links between farmers and chieftains—vagrants represented an anathema. Vagrants moved from farm to farm, potentially from one feuding party to another, in a way other characters could not. Moreover, they had no particular bonds or obligations to anyone other than themselves. While there is limited evidence that they sometimes offered some handiwork or items for trade (for example *Hœnsa-Þórir* in *Hœnsa-Þóris saga* and *Atli* in *Njáls saga*), in the sagas it is usually news and gossip that they use to obtain what they want. Whether it is relatively mundane information about the movements of neighbours or malicious slanders, the emphasis placed on honour in saga society left chieftains vulnerable to people who could move between social groups spreading news and gossip.

In the *Íslendingasögur* we find a society lurching ever closer to social breakdown. At the climax of most sagas is a conflict where a dispute between two factions breaks down into fighting or murder. This may

<sup>71</sup> See Jón Jónsson 2006, 33–34.

embody a concern on the part of both writers and audience with the escalation of conflicts in the thirteenth century and the eventual loss of independence of Iceland to Norway. The fear of social disintegration of the saga-writing age is reflected in the material of the sagas, although the action is set some centuries previously. The actions of vagrants contribute in small ways to the impending social breakdown in each saga in which they appear. They are portrayed (with only a few exceptions) in a negative light in the *Íslendingasögur*, partly because of their willingness to take advantage of their position on the fringes of saga society and their lack of concern about the consequences of their actions for that society. What also emerges overwhelmingly from this review of vagrancy in saga society, however, is that the society itself is complicit, and indeed in most cases actually encourages, benefits from and sponsors the very acts that it invokes sanctions against. In the society described in the sagas, despite the prohibitions found in the laws, vagrants are invited into farmhouses because their social mobility made them a medium for news and entertainment. There are a number of examples in which established members of saga society disguise themselves as vagrants and thereby free themselves from the bonds and restraints that society places upon them, allowing them to travel unnoticed or, by adopting a false persona, to escape the repercussions of their actions. More sinisterly, for each vagrant who seeks to gain a financial advantage through using his social mobility, there is at least one member of established society who is willing to pay him: for information, to set a trap, to slander an enemy, to lay an ambush or even to attempt to kill an enemy. The bonds established in saga society are stabilising factors, giving structure to that society. In the *Íslendingasögur*, however, farmers and chieftains use vagrants as means to circumvent these bonds and therefore destabilise that structure. While the *Íslendingasögur* may present a damning portrait of vagrants within saga society, they also in turn reflect back upon that society itself the same irresponsible and destructive features attributed to the social outsider.

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# NAMING THE LANDSCAPE IN THE *LANDNÁM* NARRATIVES OF THE *ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR* AND *LANDNÁMABÓK*

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## *Introduction*

MARKETED BY THE TOURIST BOARD as the ‘Land of Fire and Ice’, Iceland is an island of dramatic geographical contrasts. Its natural landscape is big business, from the geological pyrotechnics of ash-spewing volcanoes to northern lights rippling above glacial wildernesses. Yet while it might be expected that the turbulence of this physical environment would leave an obvious mark on the Old Norse–Icelandic literary corpus, it has been noted that texts with realistic Icelandic settings—particularly the *Íslendingasögur* ‘Sagas of Icelanders’ and related works such as *Landnámabók* ‘Book of Settlements’—seem to pay scant attention to such features of the landscape.<sup>1</sup> This unusual narrative feature may seem particularly striking in comparison to many other literary genres from the medieval period, which contain lyric topographies and dramatic vistas rich with metaphorical significance and socio-political undertones.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps partly as a result of this, there has been a tendency in Norse scholarship to focus on the clear-cut narrative functions of landscape and the natural world in the sagas, especially in the context of close textual analyses and discussions of the texts’ literary style (see Barraclough 2010; Damico 1986; Falk 2006; Pearsall and Salter 1973, 45–46; Wyatt 2004). Such readings

<sup>1</sup> Oren Falk draws attention to the general absence of natural hazards in the *Íslendingasögur*, noting that ‘the Family Sagas . . . show little insight when it comes to portrayals of the natural world. In fact, they are downright tight-lipped, disregarding not just subterranean combustion but natural calamities in general’ (2007, 6). This is true to some extent, but on the other hand natural calamities such as shipwrecks are mentioned in texts including *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Njáls saga*, *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Kristni saga*. For more on easy and difficult sea voyages in the sagas see Barraclough (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> See Pearsall and Salter 1973, Clarke 2006, Lees and Overing 2006, Howe and Wolfe 2002, Siewers 2003, Saunders 1993 and Benozzo 2004. Nevertheless, the sagas are not the only ‘landscapely laconic’ literary genre, as Francesco Benozzo terms it, referring to the topographical vagueness that can be observed in epic traditions from the European Middle Ages such as the Old French *chansons de geste* (2004, 144).

are certainly not inaccurate—particularly given the famously utilitarian, concise narrative style of the saga corpus—and can yield a wealth of insights into the mechanics of the sagas’ narrative designs and stylistic features. However, they can also be rather one-dimensional, masking the greater significance of landscape for the Norse–Icelandic texts and medieval Icelandic culture and identity more generally. At the other end of the scale, scholars have noted the ‘powerful sense of place’ exhibited by the sagas (Vésteinn Ólason 1998, 82), their concern for the ‘semioticization of the landscape’ (Glauser 2000, 209) and the importance of Icelandic names and topographical features in the texts (see O’Donoghue 2002, 59; Falk 2007, 3; Hermann 2010, 78). Yet these statements are also problematic, for they are not always accompanied by detailed literary engagement with the language and narrative construction of the texts themselves.

In the following discussion I aim to bridge this gap through a close literary analysis of landscape in the *landnám* ‘land-taking’ narratives of the *Íslendingasögur* and *Landnámabók*, well-attested as medieval Iceland’s ‘myth of origin’ or ‘migration myth’ (see Wellendorf 2010; Hermann 2010; for broader discussions of these myths see Bhabha 1990, 5; Lewis 1975, 11–12; Ashcroft et al. 1989, 82). I will explore the crucial role played by the Icelandic landscape in the construction of the *Íslendingasögur* and related works such as *Landnámabók*, not only in terms of narrative design but also on a more fundamental level, in the way in which the medieval Icelanders used sagas in order to explore and encode the history of their origins, their cultural identity and territorial land-claims in a politically volatile, socially insecure world.

The discussion will be couched within a wider framework of the landscape theory that has emerged over the past two decades. I take my cue particularly from scholars such as Ingold (1993), Tilley (1994) and Bender (2002), who adopt a broadly phenomenological approach to the meaning of landscape as something ‘lived in and through . . . and not just something looked at or thought about’ (Tilley 1994, 26). Rejecting the unconsidered perception of landscape as a primarily visual, literally ‘picturesque’ phenomenon,<sup>3</sup> they emphasise the temporal and cultural multiplicity of

<sup>3</sup> The etymology of the modern English ‘landscape’ derives not from the Old English ‘landscape’, an occasionally used word meaning ‘region’ or ‘quality of land’ (Howe 2006, 232) but rather from the Dutch ‘landschap’ painting tradition of the late sixteenth century onwards. This explains our modern, English-speaking preconceptions about the predominantly visual nature of landscapes: ‘what came to be seen as landscape was often recognized as such because it often reminded the viewer of a painted landscape’ (Hirsch 1995, 2). However, many scholars have argued that landscape as a ‘neutral backdrop to activity is . . . a hindrance in their conceptualization’



landscapes and the role they play in enabling cultures ‘to move towards a sense of place and belonging . . . [as] they creatively work the past in a volatile present’ (Bender 2002, 107). Place-names and the process of naming the land itself are vital parts of this creative engagement with the landscape, for, as Christopher Tilley notes (1994, 18),

by the process of naming places and things . . . they become captured in the social discourses and act as mnemonics for the historical actions of individuals and groups . . . In a fundamental way names create landscape.

In order to explore how names create landscape in the Old Norse texts, the following analysis will focus on the land-naming stage of the *landnám* narrative pattern. Viewed through the retrospective, fictionalised lens of this literary corpus, the *landnám* place-names and place-naming traditions are strongly influenced by subsequent chronological layers of social occupation and cultural memories. Nevertheless, close analysis of the place-names and place-naming stories related in the sagas and *Landnámabók* reveals that at certain points in the texts we may detect echoes of earlier chronological layers encoded in these place-naming narratives, with meaning for the *landnám* era itself up to the later medieval period of writing. Tim Ingold’s insights into the temporality of landscapes and cultures are particularly significant in this respect, for he states (1993, 159):

The present is not marked off from a past that it has replaced or a future that will, in turn, replace it; it rather gathers the past and future into itself, like refractions in a crystal ball. And just as in the landscape, we can move from place to place without crossing any boundary, since the vista that constitutes the identity of a place changes even as we move, so likewise can we move from one present to another without having to break through any chronological barrier that might be supposed to separate each present from the next in line.

This more fluid temporal approach is particularly appropriate for the chronologically complex sagas and related texts such as *Landnámabók*, written between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries but purporting to describe events from the ninth-century settlement onwards. Since the mid-twentieth century, when, as Orri Vésteinsson puts it, the ‘retreat was sounded’ and scholars began to reject the historical value of the *Íslendingasögur* and *Landnámabók* as evidence for the *landnám* period (1998, 1), the focus has been firmly on the texts’ literary merits and the cultural memories that shape them, so that

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(Tilley 1994, 23), while others have pointed out that in other languages the equivalent word has a much wider semantic meaning. For discussions of the wider meaning of Nordic landscapes see Karl Benediktsson and Lund 2010, 8; Brink 2008; Jones and Olwig 2008, xiv.

they reflect the social preoccupations and anxieties of the period in which they were constructed and written down. According to this framework, the later period of writing is emphasised as the more ‘authentic’ one, for as Pernille Hermann has noted in her discussion of this topic,

the picture of the past offered in saga literature, in spite of taking on a dialogue with the past, must to a great extent be understood in light of ideas and memories existing in the thirteenth century, when the first sagas were written (Hermann 2010, 72; see also Wellendorf 2010, 2–3).

The principle of cultural memory offers a more flexible framework for interpreting this literary corpus without resorting to polarised debates regarding the possible historicity or fictionality of the texts. Nevertheless, although for both sets of texts the twelfth-to-fourteenth-century chronological ‘lens’ must be considered to be the primary one and the actual naming process of the ninth and tenth centuries is not fully recoverable, it does not follow that these texts have no historical validity for the earlier period. They also contain oral material that may have been transmitted across the centuries, although in most cases it is impossible to separate this material from later revisions, additions and borrowings. The literary elaboration may have come later—in the case of *Landnámabók* particularly in the Hauksbók and Sturlubók redactions—for as Jonas Wellendorf suggests, ‘the oldest versions of *Landnámabók* were presumably quite terse and perhaps the various entries did not contain much more than genealogical outlines interspersed with onomastic information’ (2010, 4). Yet this is no reason to discard entirely the potential historicity of this basic *landnám* framework, particularly given the narrative-onomastic focus of the discussion.

The following analysis begins with the *Íslendingasögur* before turning to *Landnámabók*, where I will focus on the longer, more narrative-driven redactions in Sturlubók and Hauksbók. This is primarily because these versions appear to have the closest links to the *Íslendingasögur* and there are some interesting similarities and divergences between them. It is difficult to determine the exact relationship between these two textual traditions, for the generally held scholarly view of the origins and development of the *landnám* myth was formerly that the ‘factual’ foundations began with *Landnámabók*, and that the sagas were later pieced together from this and other material. Yet this has been disputed by scholars such as Gísli Sigurðsson, who believes that saga writers, particularly those in the east of Iceland, made less use of *Landnámabók* as a source than has previously been assumed. He argues instead for a broader basis of (regionally specific) oral traditions that informed both sets of texts (2004, 248–49). It is likely that the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes; Wellendorf has summarised

this complex literary interplay, stating that ‘*Landnámabók* and the Sagas of Icelanders interacted in a complicated process of cross-fertilization that in many cases is difficult if not impossible to disentangle’ (2010, 8).

With this in mind, I have chosen to begin with the *Íslendingasögur* in order to defamiliarise the generally perceived—but overly simplistic—direction of influence and chronological order of the textual tradition, before turning to the *Landnámabók* redactions.

### *Íslendingasögur*

In the saga *landnám* narratives, the important process of anchoring the settlers to their new country through land-naming strategies begins once the voyagers have reached Iceland. A pattern of place-naming soon emerges, such that the names can be divided according to whether they signify geographical/natural features of the land or the names of settlers. Such place-names can record the perceptions of the first settlers in the geographical landscape—such as Hvítá ‘White River’—but there are also names linked to the ownership of land—for instance Sökkólfssdalr ‘Sökkólf’s Valley’—with both naming strategies enabling the settlers to foster a strong identification with the topography.

The account in *Egils saga* of Skallagrímr’s land-naming is a good place to begin, for in this protracted episode he is depicted naming the natural features of the land, thus bringing it into his own frame of reference, and therefore control, by bestowing identity upon it. Andakíll ‘Ducks’ Inlet’, Andakílsá ‘Ducks’ River’ and Álptanes ‘Swans’ Ness’ are all said to be named for the ducks and swans that the settlers find there (chapter 28), while once Skallagrímr has actually settled the land, the deeper connection he forges with it by planting crops is reflected in the place-name, for

þar lét hann hafa sæði ok kalla at Ökrum. Eyjar lágu þar út fyrir, er hvalr fannsk í, ok kölluðu þeir Hvalseyjar.

he planted crops there and had it named Akrar [Fields]. Islands lay there offshore, where a whale was found, and they called them Hvalseyjar [Whale Islands]. (*EsS*, 75)

Reading this, a cynical reader might suspect that such place-names were a convenient way of claiming ownership over the fertile fields and whaling potential of the area. The linking of the narrative of Skallagrímr’s *landnám* to the place-names ensured that future generations who claimed descent from this *landnámsmaðr* would also have access to such resources. It is therefore noteworthy that a number of scholars have drawn attention to the tradition of Skallagrímr’s ‘monster land-claim’ in the literary corpus, which also occurs in the Hauksbók and Sturlubók redactions of *Landnámabók*, perhaps influenced by the inflated land-claims of *Egils saga* (Adolf Friðriksson and Orri

Vésteinsson 2003; see also Smith 1995, 321; Jesch 2005, 122). This fits with the impression given by this saga episode of a narrative-driven rationalisation and description of Skallagrímr's *landnám*, set firmly in the later period of saga composition.

Subsequently, Skallagrímr's naming of the river system traces the physical geography of the area through a process of semantic 'mapping', creating a visually vivid, narratively coherent impression of the topography (*EsS*, 74–75):

Skallagrímr kannaði land upp um herað; fór . . . síðan með ánni fyrir vestan, er hann kallaði Hvítá, því at þeir fõrunautar høfðu eigi sét fyrr vötn þau, er ór jökulum høfðu fallit; þótti þeim áin undarlíga lit . . . Fóru þeir yfir á þá ok enn upp með Norðrá; sá þá brátt, hvar in litla áin fell ór gljúfrum, ok kǫlluðu þá Gljúfrá . . . varð þá enn brátt á, sú er þvers varð, fyrir þeim ok fell í Hvítá; þá kǫlluðu þeir Þverá.

Skallagrímr explored the region's uplands . . . following the western bank of the river, which he named Hvítá [White River] because he and his men had never seen water from a glacier before and thought it had a strange colour . . . Then they crossed the river and continued upstream along Norðrá [North River] and soon saw that the little river flowed out of a chasm, so they called it Gljúfrá [Ravine River] . . . again they soon came across another river that crossed their path and joined Hvítá, and they named it Þverá [Cross River].

The passage demonstrates how Skallagrímr takes control over the land and brings it into his own frame of reference by naming it. Once again the actual process of naming seems to be to some extent a later rationalisation, not least because it is unlikely that colonists from western Norway would never have seen glacial melt-water before.

Elsewhere in the saga, place-names are linked to stories of other early settlers, so that the spot *nú kallat Brákarsund* 'now called Brák's Sound' is linked to the story of the servant woman Brák who is killed by Skallagrímr (*EsS*, 102). Such names are not named directly by or for the *landnámsmenn* themselves but they may still feature in the tales of how these place-names came about, which are connected vividly to the landscape once again. In the case of Brák, having deflected Skallagrímr's *berserkr* fury from his young son Egill, she is pursued by him along the outward shore of Digranes until *fóru þau svá í útanvert Digranes; þá hljóp hon út af bjarginu á sund* 'they reached the edge of Digranes; then she leapt off the edge of the cliff and swam' (*EsS*, 101–02). Not even this can save her, however, for the saga tells us that Skallagrímr throws a great stone after her, which lands between her shoulders and kills her.

Similarly, the reason for the name of the promontory Einbúanes is given, physically placing Oddr in the landscape at the foot of the mountain (*EsS*, 75):

Odd einbúa setti hann við Gljúfrá at gæta þar laxveiðar; Oddr bjó undir Einbúabrekkum; við hann er kennt Einbúanes.

He placed Oddr the Hermit beside Gljúfrá [Ravine River] to guard the salmon-fishing there; Oddr lived at the foot of Einbúabrekur [Hermit's Slopes]; Einbúanes [Hermit's Promontory] is named after him.

It is interesting to note that Skallagrímr is said to be responsible for placing Oddr by Gljúfrá to guard the salmon; although the place-names link the landscape to the hermit's presence there (and there may be a glimmer of truth in this), the narrative uses the place-name as a stepping-stone to link Skallagrímr to the land once again. Perhaps someone who claimed descent from him in the later medieval period was particularly concerned with the lucrative business of salmon fishing, and wanted to stake his claim to the river through the supposed authority of his illustrious *landnámsmaðr* ancestor.

Elsewhere in the saga corpus, *Vatnsdæla saga*'s account of Ingimundr's *landnám* is built on his role in naming the land he claims. He is depicted as anchoring himself to the topography through direct speech that legitimises his ownership of the land. To an even greater extent than in *Egils saga*, Ingimundr's discourse takes the form of performative or illocutionary speech acts, in which the action that the sentence describes is performed by the utterance of the sentence itself. This is a feature particular to the narrative style of many *Íslendingasögur*; Thomas Bredsdorff has argued that the sagas can be counted among the narrow corpora of literature that concern themselves with performative modes of expression, highlighting language and its power to make the world rather than simply report it (2007, 36). Such a narrative strategy creates the impression that Ingimundr's territory has been delineated and his claim to the land secured—across time as well as space—through his very utterance of the place-name.

Having landed in Iceland, Ingimundr sees two rams running down an uninhabited hillside and declares, *Þat mun vel fallit, at þessi fjörðr heiti Hrútafjörðr* 'It seems proper that this fjord should be called Hrútafjörðr [Rams' fjord]'. Next, upon reaching a gravel bank and finding a board newly washed ashore, he continues in the same vein (*Vs*, 39):

Þat mun ætlat, at vér skylim hér ørnefni gefa, ok mun þat haldask, ok kollum eyrina Borðeyri.

It must be intended that we should give this place a name—one that will endure—and we will call the bank Borðeyrr [Board Bank].

In both instances the naming of the landscape of his new home is something that he seems to be compelled to do by the same higher powers that directed his steps to this new land (the theme of the settler's destiny lying in Iceland is prominent in this saga), particularly in the case of Borðeyrr. Here, the

place-naming motif is combined with an echo of the widespread *landnám* trope of the high-seat pillar, which is cast overboard as the voyagers near Iceland in order to guide them to the place where they will settle. *Vatnsdæla saga*'s *landnám* narrative has a particular preoccupation with names that will last, as Ingimundr emphasises (*mun þat haldask*), and later in Húnavatnsós he *gaf þar öll örnefni, er síðan hafa haldisk* 'designated all the place-names, which have lasted since then' (*Vs*, 45).

As the *landnám* narrative unfolds, and the area is settled by Ingimundr and his companions, the land-naming process continues to be descriptive. Ingimundr chooses the name Viðidalr 'Willow Valley' because it is overgrown with willow, and names Sauðadalr 'Sheep Valley' for its ovine inhabitants. Later on, there are additional place-names that have similar stories linked to plant and animal life; although Ingimundr is not said to name these directly, the stories are vividly comic, including the men chasing a pig into Svínavatn 'Swine Lake', which then grows so tired swimming that its trotters fall off before it reaches the other side (ch. 15). As in *Egils saga*, a smaller, second layer of place-names is linked specifically to early settlers, such as Þórdísarholt, named for Ingimundr's daughter, born there on the way to their new home (chapter 15). Unlike *Vatnsdæla saga*, *Laxdæla saga* does not depict the settlers naming the land directly, even though the saga opens with the *landnám* of the matriarch Unnr in djúpúðga 'the Deep-minded', one of the most important settlers described in the saga corpus. Instead, characters are said to settle in locations that are automatically given their names, as in the account of Unnr's *landnám*, which lists many beneficiaries and the regions given to them: *Sökkólfí gaf hon Sökkólfsdal* 'to Sökkólfr she gave Sökkólfsdalr'; *Hundi hét lausingi hennar . . . honum gaf hon Hundadal* 'Her freedman was called Hundi . . . she gave him Hundadalr' (*Ls*, 10). As in this extensive list, this is generally the formula used to introduce a new character and the place they live, sometimes with additional information, for example *við hann er kenndr fjörðrinn* 'the fjord is named after him' (*Ls*, 16).

In some cases, the place-names reveal an underlying layer of narrative that clearly originates with the time period of the saga author and his audience, and which is less fictional than the more extensively developed accounts of the reasons why a particular place was given its name (such as in the cases of Brákarsund and Svínavatn). For example (*Ls*, 19),

Hrappr hét maðr, er bjó . . . gegnt Høskuldsstöðum; sá þær hét síðan á Hrappsstöðum; þær er nú auðn.

There was a man named Hrappr who lived . . . across from Høskuldsstaðir. That farm was later called Hrappsstaðir, and is now deserted.

Here, the chronological focus is on the later period, looking back to the *landnám* from later centuries, for it is said that Hrappr's farm *hét síðan*, and the shift to the present in which the saga is being recorded is made even clearer with the information that it is *nú auðn*.

Similar examples have been noted by Pernille Hermann in her analysis of cultural memory in the 'founding narratives' of the sagas—that is, descriptions of the *landnám*—where she explores what she terms the 'now/then relations' that are incorporated into the tales. These, she argues, 'demonstrate the existence of disparate time layers' in the narratives in order to establish a connection between the present and past, establishing a framework that 'creates a position from which it is possible to look back at the past' (2010, 76–77). Hermann cites the example of Bjørn and his settlement of the place *er síðan heitir í Bjarnarhofn*, noting how this passage from *Laxdæla saga* 'establishes cultural stability, in emphasizing how things have been since the settlement' (2010, 78). At other times, she notes, there is discontinuity between the present time of narration and narrated *landnám* past, with passages that describe a valley that was wooded or burial customs that took place *í þann tíð* 'in that time' (2010, 79).

While Hermann's close textual analysis of such *landnám* narratives highlights the key role of cultural memory in their construction, her identification of 'now/then relations' relies on an over-simplistic dichotomy that polarises the *landnám* past and the saga-writing present. Indeed, elsewhere in *Laxdæla saga* the place-name timeframe is not as straightforward and is less obviously grounded in the later period of saga composition. This has been noted by Chris Callow, who is also interested in how cultural memories (or 'social memories', as he terms them), shaped by the organising principles of geography and genealogy, 'act as important structures through which the past is remembered and revised in terms of the present' (2006, 300). However, while Hermann emphasises the way in which 'now/then relations' such as place-names in the narratives 'display a founding function inasmuch as they construct a situation characterized by unchangeability and cultural stability' (2010, 77), Callow's analysis of the place-names in *Laxdæla saga* and the equivalent place-names in the Contemporary Sagas points to some degree of conflict in the cultural memories contained in the narratives, making it 'likely that *Laxdæla saga* was actually written down in a period different to that in which any of the contemporary sagas were composed' (2006, 324).

Callow centres his discussion on the farm place-names of *Laxdæla saga*, noting the muddled way in which the saga tries to reconcile conflicting stories and place-names and suggesting that this is the result of the

saga trying to balance ‘enduring geo-political patterns and the specious needs of the narrative’ (2006, 314). For example, Kambsnes is ‘named by Unnr, occupied as a farm by Hrútr, but then established as a new farm by Thorleikr. It is almost as if two different places are being discussed’ (2006, 313). Callow’s suggestion is that the temporal layers revealed in the narrative’s place-names are perhaps earlier than is often suggested, and definitely earlier than the Contemporary Sagas. In the current context, therefore, this indicates that the temporal focus of the place-naming narratives—and by extension the *landnám* narratives as a whole—is not entirely with the later medieval period but extends further back in time; it is possible that the *Íslendingasögur* ‘give us a view of the past which originates earlier than is usually suggested’ (Callow 2006, 298).

In *Hrafnkels saga* the juxtaposition of the *landnám* past and authorial present is marked; at times the two chronological frames jostle for position within a single sentence. This is particularly true in the story of Hallfreðr’s settlement, for the place-name is already ‘there’, so to speak, when the story of how the valley got its name is being told (*Hs*, 97–98):

En um vátit færði Hallfreðr bú sitt norðr yfir heiði ok gerði bú þar, sem heitir í Geitdal. Ok eina nótt dreymdi hann, at maðr kom at honum ok mælti: ‘Þar ligg þú, Hallfreðr, ok heldr óvarliga. Fær þú á brott bú þitt ok vestr yfir Lagarfljót. Þar er heill þín ǫll.’ . . . En honum varð þar eptir gólr ok hafr. Ok inn sama dag, sem Hallfreðr var í brott, hljóp skriða á húsin, ok týndusk þar þessir gripir, ok því heitir þat síðan í Geitdal.

In the spring, Hallfreðr moved his farm north over the heath, and built a new farm at a place which is called Geitdalr [Goat Valley]. One night he dreamed that a man came to him and said, ‘There you lie, Hallfreðr, and rather carelessly. Move your farm away, west over Lagarfljót lake. There lies all your fortune.’ . . . [Hallfreðr] left a boar and a male goat behind him. On the same day that Hallfreðr moved away, a landslide fell onto the house, and the livestock was lost, and that is why the place has since been called Geitdalr [Goat Valley].

As in the case of *Laxdæla saga*, the naming is retrospective, for Hallfreðr could not have moved to the place when it was called Geitdalr, nor named it himself during his occupation (unlike what we see in accounts of other *landnám* procedures such as Ingimundr’s, mentioned above). Nevertheless, in the telling of this story, the saga has created a narrative structure that incorporates more than one timeframe: the *landnám* past during which Hallfreðr settled, moved and avoided the landslide, and the following period up to the time of writing, signified by the word *síðan*.

This same *síðan* is either expressed directly or implied in the other examples of place-naming that occur in the saga: *þetta er kolluð Einars-varða* ‘this is called Einarr’s Cairn’ (*Hs*, 105); *heita þar síðan Hrossageilar*



‘this place has since been called Horse Gullies’ (*Hs*, 119); [*hann*] *reisti þar reisiligan bæ, þann er síðan hét á Hrafnkelsstöðum* ‘he built a magnificent farm there, which has since been called Hrafnkell’s place’ (*Hs*, 122); *heitar þar síðan Freyfaxahamarr* ‘this place has since been called Freyfaxi’s Cliff’ (*Hs*, 124); and where Sámur builds a mound over his fallen brother and his companions, *er þar klluð Eyvindartorfa ok Eyvindarfjöll ok Eyvindardalr* ‘these places are called Eyvindr’s Knoll and Eyvindr’s Peaks and Eyvindr’s Valley’ (*Hs*, 130). Each of these place-names marks a key point in the saga plot, namely the killing of Einarr, Sámur’s humiliation of Hrafnkell, the regeneration and personal growth of Hrafnkell, his killing of Freyfaxi and his revenge on Sámur’s brother Eyvindr.

In part, it was this very tight narrative structure and attention to topographical detail that convinced earlier scholars of the saga’s authenticity for the early period of medieval Iceland; as Hermann Pálsson states, ‘this genuineness of the physical setting contributes to the illusion that the story itself must be dealing with actual events’ (1971, 33). However, such attention to scenic detail seems rather to have created ‘meaningful elements in its total design’ as part of the saga’s later literary shaping (Hermann Pálsson 1971, 33), with the narrative (and place-name explanations) firmly rooted in the later period of writing.<sup>4</sup> The case of Freyfaxahamarr is more complicated, since according to Nordal it does not actually exist on the ground (1958, 23); consequently not only the name, but also the place itself is invented. The same is probably true at least of Eyvindartorfa, which if it had ever existed would have been eroded away by the time the saga was written (see Nordal 1958, 19–20).<sup>5</sup>

This *landnám* narrative is one of the cases where the equivalent episode in *Landnámabók* does not tally entirely with the saga version (see Adolf Friðriksson and Orri Vésteinsson 2003, 144). In *Landnámabók* it is Hrafnkell Hrafnsson who arrives in Breiðdalr from Norway, is warned to leave Skriðudalr in a dream, moves his farm and loses his boar and bull when the mountain comes crashing down; in this case, he is said to be the grandfather of Hrafnkell the *goði*. In the *Landnámabók* account place-names play a relatively minor role, and, as is often the case, there is no description of the *landnámsmaðr* naming the land and no explanation for why particular places have their names. In *Landnámabók*, apart from Breiðdalr (where Hrafnkell lands and spends his first winter but which he neither claims nor names, having arrived in the later part of the *landnám* period), the only place-names mentioned are Skriðudalr (where the landslide occurs), Hrafnkelsdalir

<sup>4</sup> For more on the (in)authenticity of the topography and place-names of *Hrafnkels saga* see Hermann Pálsson 1971, 36; McCrae-Gibson 1974–77; Nordal 1958, 17–24.

<sup>5</sup> My thanks to John McKinnell for drawing my attention to this last point.

(the valley in which he settles) and Steinrøðarstaðir (where he makes his home). Rather than Geitdalr, it is Skriðudalr ‘Landslide Valley’ where the avalanche is said to have taken place, although the name is not explicitly linked with the event (unlike Geitdalr in the saga).

Skriðudalr is not mentioned in the initial *landnám* narrative in *Hrafnkels saga* but it does crop up later (in chapter 8) as part of the long list of place-names used to map the route taken by Hrafnkell and his men as they ride to the Alþingi. In the saga, it is Aðalból rather than Steinrøðarstaðir that is said to be Hrafnkell’s farmstead; the name incorporates the element *aðal* ‘noble’ and is perhaps more suited to the literary shaping of the saga narrative and its portrayal of Hrafnkell as an overly high-and-mighty leader. Hrafnkelsdalir is named on several occasions in the saga, but it is not part of the *landnám* episode as it is in *Landnámabók*. It is used to introduce characters into the narrative and situate them in the vicinity (such as Bjarni at the start of chapter 3 and Þorsteinn at the beginning of chapter 4). By comparison, in *Landnámabók* Hrafnkelsdalir is the place that Hrafnkell is said to take possession of; having situated him there, the narrative briefly mentions his immediate descendants before moving on to the next *landnámsmaðr*.

The place-names mentioned in these two narratives are not contradictory; it is simply a case of the relative weight ascribed to various locations in the context of the *landnám* narrative. *Landnámabók*’s place-names provide a general sense of the area and its topography, but they are not worked into the literary shape of the narrative as are those of *Hrafnkels saga*. There is no chronological tension between the *landnám* past and the present time of writing (*síðan* is not used), no rationalisation of the place-names is given and there is no account of the *landnámsmaðr* himself naming the land. Thus, although it is possible that a genuine avalanche—or many of them, as seems plausible from the area’s topography—might have been responsible for the basic outline of the landslide story and the valley’s name, this is not explained retrospectively in the *Landnámabók* episode as it is in the saga (*því heitir þat síðan í Geitdal*). The reasons for this will become clearer in light of the next part of this discussion, which turns to the question of *Landnámabók*’s approach to the traditions associated with the *landnám* and the role of place-names within these narratives.

### *Landnámabók*

The different redactions of *Landnámabók*, the key narrative record of the *landnám*, make it a difficult body of material with which to work. Nevertheless, *Landnámabók*’s close—albeit complicated—relationship with many of the *Íslendingasögur* provides additional angles that illuminate the

chronological complexity of the *landnám* narrative and the place-naming traditions associated with it. There is considerable variation between the five surviving redactions of *Landnámabók*, which are preserved in three medieval manuscripts and two later witnesses (see Hermann Pálsson and Edwards 2007, 4–8; Jakob Benediktsson 1968, 373–74). The oldest (non-extant) version of *Landnámabók* probably goes back to the first half of the twelfth century, judging from the epilogue in the Hauksbók redaction (probably written between 1306 and 1308), which mentions a version written by Ari and Kolskeggr and claims that the Hauksbók redaction is based on both the Sturlubók redaction (written before 1284 when Sturla died) and a non-extant version written by Styrmir Kárasen (d. 1245).

In terms of the differences between the redactions, Hauksbók and Sturlubók are the most extensive, and both Sturla and Haukr added material from other sources.<sup>6</sup> The impression the surviving witnesses give is of a work in progress that reflects the changing nature of medieval Iceland's cultural memory. As Wellendorf states, 'from a textual perspective *Landnámabók* can be described as an unstable text, which means that it changed significantly and continually during its transmission as the result of conscious reworkings' (2010, 3). Modern scholarship has access to only a sliver of this process through the various redactions and fragments that survive, with the extant manuscripts each reflecting the way in which the earliest stages of medieval Icelandic society were perceived at one particular time, in one particular location and, in the case of Haukr, by one particular person.

As with the *Íslendingasögur*, the chronological timeframes presented in *Landnámabók* are a complex blend of past and present concerns, looking back to the *landnám* past but rooted in the twelfth-to-thirteenth-century world in which they were developed and written down. As with the sagas, most of the place-names mentioned are associated with natural features in the landscape or the names of the first settlers and their stories. However, although there are plenty of place-names in *Landnámabók*, the place-naming process itself is not such a concern in these narratives as in the *Íslendingasögur*, and there are fewer narratives that show the *landnámsmenn* actively themselves naming the land (in either direct or reported speech), which may be called after them but without the same emphasis on their appropriating the physical landscape through place-naming speech acts.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Hauksbók has a particular interest in all things Irish; Gísli Sigurðsson has suggested that Haukr was tapping into alternative or additional knowledge from oral tradition, as the manuscript contains information not present in other versions (2004, 55).

In *Landnámabók* land is settled, and place-names (such as Ingólfshöfði) can be linked to settlers, while elsewhere false etymological explanations link the place-names to stories of the settlers in the landscape. For instance, in the case of Auðr: Þógvörðarnes is said to be named after the place where she had breakfast, Kambsnes for her lost comb, Auðartóptir where she settled and Krosshólar where she erected crosses (*Lnb* (S 97, H 84), 139). In other episodes names are chosen according to identifying natural features of the landscape: Helgi names Eyjafjörðr for the islands further beyond, Naddoddr and his crew go ashore on the Austfirðir ‘East Fjords’, and Breiðafjörðr ‘Broad Fjord’ is named presumably for its dimensions. Yet many of the settlers (particularly later on as the country begins to fill up) arrive in areas that have already been named, and the absence of place-naming stories—particularly in older redactions—suggests an older or at least alternative stage in the development of the *landnám* myth, in which the individuals themselves (and by extension their descendants) were the primary concern rather than the landscape and stories associated with them.

At times, the chronology of place-names is presented more straightforwardly than in many of the sagas mentioned above, simply as a process of historical land-naming that has evolved after the events described. The various time periods (the settlement itself and subsequent centuries, up to the periods in which the text was composed, copied and expanded in its different redactions) are separated by present-tense phrases along the lines of the general formula: *þar er nú heitir* ‘the place that is now called’ (my emphasis). For example, the text states, *Ingólfr tók þar land, er nú heitir Ingólfshöfði* ‘Ingólfr took land at the place now called Ingólfshöfði’ (*Lnb* (S 8, H 8), 42) and *Qrnólfr gerði þá bú upp í Kjarradal, þar er nú heita Qrnólfsstaðir* ‘Qrnólfr set up farm in Kjarradalr, in the place now called Qrnólfsstaðir’ (*Lnb* (S 45, H 33), 84).

At other points the land-naming process appears chronologically blurred, as has also been observed in saga texts such as *Laxdæla saga*. This resonates with Kevin Smith’s observation that ‘*Landnámabók*’s model of the settlement process is defined more in terms of social actions than fixed chronology’ (1995, 321). For example, the reader is told that *Hjörleifr tók land við Hjörleifshöfða* ‘Hjörleifr took land by Hjörleifshöfði’ (*Lnb* (S 8, H 8), 43). The formula ‘x took x-staðir/-höfði’ links the event to later periods in history, but as it is introduced in conjunction with the information that the *landnámsmaðr* is occupying the land, the narrative effect that is created is almost as though the place had been named for the *landnámsmaðr* before he has settled it (as in the example from *Hrafnkels saga* above). There are occasions when the original settlers and subsequent occupants of the land are both encompassed in the same sentence, as in the case of Grímr,

er nam land et syðra upp frá Giljum til Grímsgils og bjó við Grímsgil . . . Hann bjó á Stafngrímsstöðum; þar heitir nú á Sigmundarstöðum.

who took land all the way south from Gil to Grímsgil, and lived by Grímsgil [Grímr's Glen] . . . He lived at Stafngrímsstaðir, which is now called Sigmundarstaðir. (*Lnb* (S 39, H 27), 76)

Despite the lack of information given about the later occupant, Sigmundur, this fluidity is presumably due to a later inhabitant of the area with whom the geography has become associated. Elsewhere, a man is said to settle at a place named retrospectively for his son, for Hrosskell *bjó á Hallkelsstöðum ok Hallkell son hans eptir hann* 'lived at Hallkelsstaðir and his son Hallkell after him' (*Lnb* (S 43) (H 31), 83). Such topographical links between the past and the present remove the importance of the permanent associations that aforementioned settlers (such as Ingimundur in *Vatnsdæla saga*) attempt to build into their land-claim and the place-names they give to the region.

Finally, the episode describing the arrival and settlement of the Irish Christian Ørlygr is an interesting exception to the general rule that the *landnámsmenn* do not name the land directly and that the chronological timeframe is relatively straightforward. Although the actual place-naming is not put into Ørlygr's mouth or conveyed in direct speech, the narrative describes Ørlygr meeting with bad weather on his voyage and vowing to Bishop Patrekr (who is back in Ireland) that if he lands safely he will name the place after him. When the voyagers reach Iceland, the double-chronology of the narrative (Hermann's aforementioned 'then/now relations') is particularly marked in the Sturlubók redaction, for they are said to land at a place *sem heitir Ørlygshöfn, en fjörðinn inn frá kolluðu þeir Patreksfjörð*: 'which is called Ørlygshöfn, and the fjord that went into the land from there they called Patreksfjörð' (my emphasis) (*Lnb* (S 15), 54).<sup>7</sup> This interest in the place-naming part of the *landnám* is part of a broader emphasis on the physical landscape of the area, whereby Ørlygr takes consecrated earth with him to place beneath the corner posts of the church he will build in Iceland, and whereby his settlement is foreshadowed by Patrekr's prescient and detailed description of the land Ørlygr must settle and how he must navigate his way there using notable topographical features.

In the Hauksbók version this topographical navigation is even more detailed, with an extra mountain and woods; this is hardly surprising if, as Judith Jesch notes, Haukr knew this area well (1987, 21). Interestingly,

<sup>7</sup> The passage is almost identical in Hauksbók and the effect is the same, although the word structure is less temporally marked: *hann kom skipi sínu í Ørlygshöfn, ok af því kallaði hann fjörðinn Patreksfjörð* (*Lnb* (H 15), 53–55).

there are no place-names mentioned in the equivalent episode in *Kjalnes-ínga saga*, although Patrekr still describes the topography that Órlygr must recognise before he makes land (here Patrekr mentions three mountains, as in the Hauksbók version, and not the two that are described in the Sturlubók version). Nevertheless, this is an unusual case, and for the most part the place-naming process is less of a feature in the *landnám* narratives of *Landnámabók* than in many of the sagas.

This does not mean that the settlers are not depicted engaging with the landscape of their new home. Instead, there is an emphasis on additional acts that allow them to sanctify the land and mark it as their own, thus mapping a legitimising ‘sacred dimension’ onto the physical space. The term *at helga* ‘to sanctify’ is used particularly in this respect, in phrases such as *Qnundr . . . helgaði sér svá landit fyrir vestan* ‘Qnundr . . . dedicated the land from the west to himself’ (*Lnb* (S 198, H 166), 234); *Helgi . . . gerði eld mikinn við hvern vatnsós ok helgaði sér svá allt hérað* ‘Helgi . . . made a large fire at the mouth of each lake and thus dedicated the whole district to himself’ (*Lnb* (S 218), 252); *Ásbjörn helgaði landnám sitt Þór ok kallaði Þórsmörk* ‘Ásbjörn dedicated his land-taking to Þór and called the region Þórsmörk’ (*Lnb* (S 344, H 303), 346) and

Þórhaddr enn gamli var hofgoði í Þrándheimi á Mæri . . . hann kom í Stöðvarfjörð ok lagði Mæri-helgi á allan fjörðinn og lét öngu tortíma þar.

Þórhaddr the Old was temple-chieftain in Þrándheimr in Mære . . . he put in at Stöðvarfjörðr, and declared the whole fjord sacred, just as his place in Mære had been, forbidding people to take any life there. (*Lnb* (S 297, H 258), 307–08)

Consequently, physical acts are the primary means of linking the *landnámsmenn* to the topography, with less weight given to the illocutionary speech acts of land-naming that can be identified in other texts.

In the last of these examples, so great is Þorhaddr’s desire to be directed by his religion and take the consecrated land of his old country out with him to Iceland that he takes not only the high-seat pillars of his temple, but also the earth from beneath it. When he arrives in Iceland, he attempts to replicate the sacred conditions of his old home using these tokens. On a related note, it is perhaps significant that numerous gold foil figures (*guldgubbar*) have been found in the postholes and foundations of early Scandinavian pagan cult sites such as those at Uppåkra in Sweden (see Watt 2004) and Mære in Norway (see Lidén 1969). Their precise function is not known, but it is highly likely that they were connected to religious, political, social and economic activities in the region. Although there is no firm evidence to support this, it is easy to imagine how the action of a would-be *landnámsmaðr* digging out the *guldgubbar* from his old foundations to take with

him to Iceland might have turned into the more prosaic literary tradition of digging out some earth to take with him—as Þorhaddr does—the original action having been forgotten.<sup>8</sup> However, this must remain pure speculation, not least because no *guldgubbar* have yet been found in Iceland.

In comparison to the aforementioned example of the Christian Irishman Ørlygr, it is noteworthy that his use of consecrated earth is almost identical to that of Þorhaddr, yet translated into a Christian context. Elsewhere in *Landnámabók* Christian variants of other parts of the *landnám* narrative have been identified, suggesting that the settlement rituals were considered to be applicable to a Christian as well as a pagan setting by those who constructed these narratives (see Wellendorf 2010, 11–12; Clunies Ross 2002; Jesch 1987). Returning to the *guldgubbar*, it is perhaps significant that these deposits are often found in the postholes of pre-Christian cult buildings located beneath early medieval church sites, as in the cases of Mære and Uppåkra. It is interesting that this early Scandinavian cult site continuity is also reflected in the later Icelandic *landnám* narratives, where the same religiously motivated transfer of land is incorporated into the settlement stories of both pagan and Christian *landnámsmenn*.

Elsewhere the *landnámsmenn* go one step further than this, bestowing place-names in order to imbue the topography with additional dimensions of religious meaning. For example, in the case of narratives linked to Helgafell ‘Holy Mountain’, which features in both *Landnámabók* and sagas such as *Eyrbyggja saga*, the place-naming story functions as a tool with which to create what might be termed ‘social myths’ associated with this prominent topographical feature. These are ostensibly connected to beliefs about the supernatural inhabitants of the mountain, but equally concerned with the establishment of territorial power couched within narratives about the transfer, relocation and re-conceptualisation of religious customs, social norms and legal conventions associated with the mountain (*Lnb* (S 85) (H 73), 125):

Peir lendu þar inn frá í váginn, er Þórólfr kallaði Hofsvág; þar reisti hann bæ sinn ok gerði þar hof mikit ok helgaði Þór . . . Þórólfr nam land frá Stafá inn til Þórsár ok kallaði þat allt Þórsnes. Hann hafði svá mikinn átrúnað á fjall þat, er stóð í nesinu, er hann kallaði Helgafell, at þangat skyldi engi maðr óþveginn líta, ok þar var svá mikil friðhelgi, at öngu skyldi granda í fjallinu, hvárki fé né mönnum, nema sjálft gengi á braut. Þat var trúa þeira Þórólfs frænda, at þeir doi allir í fjallit.

They landed at the creek, which Þórólfr called Hofsvágr [Temple Creek]; there he built his farm and a big temple which he dedicated to Þórr . . . Þórólfr

<sup>8</sup> My thanks to Elizabeth Ashman Rowe for drawing my attention to this potential historical parallel.



took possession of land from Stafá [Staff River] as far inland as Þórsá [Þórr's River], and called it all Þórsnes [Þórr's Headland]. He held the mountain that stood on the headland so sacred that he called it Helgafell [Holy Mountain] and no one was allowed even to look at it unless he had washed himself first. So great was the mountain's inviolability that nothing must be harmed there, neither animal nor man, until they left it of their own accord. Þórólfr and his kinsmen all believed that they would go into the mountain when they died.

On a narrative level, naming the mountain 'Helgafell' enables Þórólfr and his men to form religious and culturally meaningful associations with the physical landscape of their new country, which ultimately leads to a deadly feud that signals their strength of feeling despite the nascent nature of these beliefs. However, this passage may also have a broader cultural and historical significance that spans the period from the *landnám* itself to the time of saga writing. Stefan Brink amongst others has shown that Viking-Age Scandinavians do seem to have made cultic spaces out of various features of the topography, which he terms a "mythical landscape" built up from the physical landscape with its characteristics and the oral myths and legends that explained an elusive supernatural omnipresence' (2001, 88). When it is also taken into account that the new society in Iceland offered little opportunity for men to die in battle and go to Valhalla, it seems plausible that alternative notions of the afterlife would have been developed. Indeed, Brink focuses on the Þórólfr/Helgafell episode in order to suggest that

there was a knowledge or supposition by the authors of the sagas that certain lands and particular physical features in the landscape were charged with metaphysical energy or godly power or that god(s) were supposed to dwell there; in this case a mountain was therefore given the epithet *heilagr* (*Helgafell*) (2001, 88).

Whether this narrative tradition has any direct historical validity as evidence for religious activity in early Icelandic society is debatable, and it is even less certain whether the land-naming process described in the narrative has any meaning for the *landnám* period itself. However, the story and the topography at the heart of it still play a significant role in cementing early Icelandic society—from the earliest period up to the later Saga Age—to the physical landscape in which it was formed, for the underlying importance of the landscape was not lost, even if its meaning altered over the centuries and was crystallised in a literary form. Brink emphasises the 'astonishingly long continuity of some sacred areas and cult sites in the Scandinavian landscape' which he suggests is the result of a combination of 'a metaphysical investment in the landscape and the passage of numinous knowledge between generations' (Brink 2001, 106, 107). Helgafell is a good example of the way in which this works, for, 'in



a topological perspective, we can see that there have been beliefs among people in mythological phenomena, preserved in place-names, which are not to be seen in a strictly religious–eschatological context’ (2001, 79).

Helgafell as a regional territory—named after a prominent natural feature and therefore closely bound up with it—continued to have political, social and religious significance for the subsequent period of saga development and writing, perhaps particularly in the late twelfth century when the monastery on Flatey was transferred to Helgafell. The possibility that such religious developments and political concerns might be reflected in saga literature has been explored by Chris Callow, who suggests that *Laxdæla saga*’s account of Guðrún and Snorri exchanging their farmsteads at Helgafell and in Hvammssveit, and so switching the centre of political power in the region, ‘seems to parallel that which might have occurred when Helgafell became a religious institution in the 1180s just as Sturla Thórðarson and his sons were establishing their dominance in Hvammssveit’ (2006, 323). Thus, it is possible that through the ‘foundation myth’ narrative associated with Helgafell and the recounting of its place-naming in particular, the religious, political and cultural significance of this specific feature in the landscape (and its associated territory) continued in the cultural memory, even if the reasons for its importance altered over the centuries.

### Conclusion

Throughout history, and in many different cultures, the connection between landscape and memory has been central to the formation and maintenance of migration myths (see Howe 1989, 3; Howe and Wolfe 2002, 6). In the case of the medieval Icelandic narrative traditions associated with the ninth-century settlement of Iceland, the connections between the Icelandic landscape, the *landnám* and the subsequent development of the associated migration myth are particularly strong. While most landscapes came ‘with a history attached and signs of prior occupation’ (Howe 2002, 91), Iceland was a *terra nova*, almost entirely lacking in visible signs of previous occupation layers (save for *Íslendingabók*’s reference to the religious paraphernalia left by the Irish *papar*, which enabled Ari to show Iceland as being marked out as Christian from the outset, despite the intervening period of paganism).<sup>9</sup> Thus, this *terra nova* itself—Iceland’s physical

<sup>9</sup> Pernille Hermann suggests that *Íslendingabók*’s assertion that the *papar* left when the heathen Norse arrived ‘allows the new land to be regarded as unpeopled and makes it possible to construct the history of the Icelanders as a *creatio ex nihilo*, as a whole new culture that is built from the bottom up’ (2007, 24–25).

landscape—became a cornerstone in the construction of the medieval Icelandic migration myth, depicting the transformation from physical land to culturally meaningful landscape as part of the dialogue with the *landnám* past. A close textual analysis of how place-names operate within this narrative pattern reveals how the sagas and *Landnámabók* can differ in their narrative strategies whilst still being driven by many of the same cultural impulses and literary mechanisms.

Such an analysis also exposes the complex knot of chronologies operating within the narratives, and the way in which the medieval texts navigate the shared landscape of their past and present in order to make sense of the world and their place within it. Social and cultural identities—like landscapes—are not always specific to one timeframe, but are multifaceted constructions where the past and present elide. Sparse genealogical information and place-names were probably the focus of the earliest *landnám* narratives, with literary elaboration following later. Nevertheless, the potential veracity of this basic framework should not be dismissed out of hand. Although the chronological focus lies predominantly with the later period of saga writing, this is still a two-way dialogue between this present and the past, even if only echoes of the earlier part of the conversation remain in the textual evidence. This is perhaps most evident in episodes where the chronology becomes blurred, shifting between the past and the present from one verb or place-name to the next. Although the chronological focus lies predominantly with the later period of saga writing, this is still a two-way dialogue between this present and the past, even if only echoes of the earlier part of the conversation remain in the textual evidence.

Close analysis of the place-names and place-naming processes in the *landnám* narratives reveals them as a hybrid of cultural myth and social history, in the sense that, as Kirsten Hastrup puts it, ‘myth embeds the past in the present, while history embeds the present in the past’ (1985, 266). This is a process that continues into the modern day, for as Hastrup has noted more recently (with reference to her travels through the country), ‘there is a remarkable presence of the past tied to the landscape’ (2008, 59). Place-names remain crucial to this phenomenon, for

virtually every top and turn, every rock and cave, had a name, and on my inquiry the names could all be explained . . . In this view of the landscape, Irish monks, trolls, and hidden people belong to the same register of previous or other inhabitants; they have left their mark in legend and landscape alike. (2008, 61)

Thus, in the medieval Icelandic *landnám* narratives and up to the present day, threads of myth, history, cultural memory and physical topography are interwoven to create a culturally meaningful mapping of the country,

at the heart of which lies the Icelandic landscape and its inhabitants' interaction with it through both time and space.

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## A NEW SOURCE FOR PART OF AN OLD ICELANDIC CHRISTMAS HOMILY

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FACED WITH THE VAST AND VIBRANT CORPUS of medieval Scandinavian vernacular literature, one is liable to forget that the earliest surviving Old Norse manuscripts contain not sagas or Eddic poems, but sermons.<sup>1</sup> The two most important of these volumes—Stockholm, Kungliga Biblioteket, Cod. Holm. Perg. 15 4to, written in Iceland around the year 1200 (De Leeuw van Weenen 1993, 3–4; Hall 2000, 692–94), and Copenhagen, AM 619 4to, written probably near Bergen early in the thirteenth century (Hall 2000, 695–97)<sup>2</sup>—have been dubbed respectively the Icelandic Homily Book (IHB) and the Norwegian Homily Book (NHB). The first contains, by Thomas N. Hall's count, some forty-two sermons (not including other texts), while the second has thirty, and the two books share eleven items in common (Haugen and Ommundsen 2010a, 17–20).<sup>3</sup> Ever since the first editions of the texts appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century, the models behind them have been recognised as largely Latinate, to the extent that their earliest investigators declared the manuscripts to be made up entirely of translations.<sup>4</sup> However, as early as 1916, Karel Vrátný asserted that a great deal of independence and originality could be seen in the Norse homilies' use of patristic and earlier

<sup>1</sup> For a brief general summary and bibliography for Old West Norse homilies, see McDougall 1993.

<sup>2</sup> A more detailed account of the manuscript's production and probable origins can be found in Berg 2010.

<sup>3</sup> For a comparison of the common items, see also Indrebø 1931, 42–51. Copious references to other studies of the two manuscripts can be found in Hall 2000, 692–97 and in Conti 2008, nn. 1–3.

<sup>4</sup> In the introduction to his edition of IHB, Theodor Wisén remarked that *innehallet i membranen utgöres af homilier och hela boken är tvifvelsutän en mer eller mindre parafraserande öfversättning af latinske urskrifter* 'the contents of the manuscript consist of homilies, and the whole book is doubtless a more or less literal translation of Latin sources' (Wisén 1872, i–ii). Similarly, Eugen Mogk said that the homilies of NHB *sind durchweg Übersetzungen* 'are, without exception, translations' (1904, 896). Both authors are cited in Vrátný 1916, 32.

medieval ideas, and that even the texts in the Norse homiletic corpus which we know to be derived from earlier Latin works often treated their sources with such freedom that they should be called adaptations (*Verarbeitungen*) rather than translations (*Übersetzungen*) (Vrátný 1916, 48–49).

Vrátný's point is well taken, especially for those homilies which we can prove were based entirely on one or two known works.<sup>5</sup> We are still, however, left with many Norse homilies whose construction is not as clear, freer compositions where no particular Latin work or works are the evident sources for all or most of the text. The perceived derivative nature of medieval Scandinavian Christian literature has led many scholars to proclaim as exact sources for such homilies texts that can only have had indirect connections to them. Mattias Tveitane, for instance, proposed several Irish and Hiberno-Latin texts as possible sources for Christmas homilies in the IHB and NHB, his argument centred on common motifs also found in many other medieval works (Tveitane 1966). More recently, Olav Tveito has claimed that Wulfstan's homilies inspired several texts in the NHB, but his case hinges largely on fleeting similarities in vocabulary and an apparent common interest in eschatology and moral exhortation (Tveito 2010, 195–207).<sup>6</sup> Neither scholar, it should be stressed, was on the wrong track entirely. Hall has recently brought forth strong evidence of a Hiberno-Latin connection to the IHB Christmas homily, and scholars such as Christopher Abram have shown convincingly that Anglo-Saxon works did exercise a marked influence on early Scandinavian homiletics (Hall 2009, 89–97; Abram 2004; 2007). The problem with the works of Tveitane and Tveito is not that they see relationships where none exist, but that the evidence they adduce fails to demonstrate that these relationships are as close or as exclusive as they claim. James Marchand, who objected specifically to the overenthusiastic source-identification of Tveitane, pointed out the difficulty of finding any one source for a homiletic motif, and concluded that 'our entire enterprise might be greatly helped by replacing the word *source* everywhere by *parallel* and *analogue*' (1975, 34; emphases in the original).

If the search for Latin precursors of these Old Norse homilies is as hopeless as Marchand says, then source scholars, 'those carrion-eaters

<sup>5</sup> The works of Gregory the Great seem to have been particularly singled out for translation, and all forty of his *Homiliae in evangelia* were probably translated into Old Norse in the early twelfth century. See Seip 1949, 24–34; Hall 2000, 697; Wolf 2001, 256–66. The Icelandic versions of the Gregorian homilies have attracted surprisingly little critical attention, given their potential importance for students of early Scandinavian reception of essential Latin Christian writings.

<sup>6</sup> See Abram 2011, 82–83 for a brief critical evaluation of Tveito's article.

of scholarship' (to borrow Harold Bloom's unflattering words), are left with no bones to pick (Bloom 1975, 17, cited by Conti 2008, 224–25). However, I do not believe this to be the case. Certainly, one must be more wary in assigning sources to Norse homilies than some earlier scholars have been, and a large burden of proof must be met before claiming that any specific Latin text was used by a Norse author. At the same time, it is important that 'one [keep] in mind that translations need not always be slavish and that the term embraces a wide range of techniques employed when conveying information from one language into another' (Conti 2008, 225). In assigning a particular work as a source for part of a composite Norse homily, therefore, the scholar must provide strong evidence that the homilist can only have depended on the text in question, while at the same time remaining careful not to overlook or diminish the homilist's own style and modifications in adapting his material. Cases in which a partial source can be identified for an Old Norse homily beyond a reasonable doubt despite the changes introduced in translation may be rare, but, as this essay will show, are not nonexistent.

The sixteenth item in the Icelandic Homily Book, found on fols 22r–24r, is the first of four Christmas homilies scattered throughout the manuscript, and is fittingly titled 'Nativitas domini'. The text first describes the fallen state of man before the coming of Christ, and then summarises the circumstances of his birth. It lists many wonders that were said to have occurred throughout the Roman Empire around the time of the Nativity, and interprets them as signs of the mercy, justice and peace that Christ was about to bring to the world. Tveitane examined this section of the homily and noted many parallels in Latin, Irish and Old English texts to the miracles surrounding Christ's birth (1966). In the introduction to his translation of the text, Hall summarised (2000, 705):

Although unsourced, the sermon closely parallels a large number of early medieval sermons, including the first Christmas sermon in the Old Norwegian Homily Book and Old English Vercelli Homilies V and VI, which recount a series of miracles that occurred at Christ's birth, drawn in part from Orosius's *Historiae adversum paganos* and the Pseudo-Alcuin *De divinis officiis*.

Since then, Hall has examined the tradition in more detail, and has found even closer parallels to the IHB homily in texts from the Carolingian Homiliary of Saint-Père de Chartres and the Hiberno-Latin *Catechesis Celtica* (2009, esp. 89–97).

Towards the end of the homily, the author shifts to an eschatological tone. He decries the vanity of worldly possessions, warns of the terrors of



Doomsday and hell, and calls on his audience to seek the glory of heaven. As a part of this conclusion, the author exhorts his listeners (or, as was likely the case with the IHB, readers)<sup>7</sup> to visit the graves of the wealthy and consider their state:

Huat stopar nú þeim er lifþo imonþ holdséns oc i epterlife þessa lífs. alt til dauða dags. Forom vér til grafa þeirra oc þeckiom hvárt vér megem fina þar necquert marc hreosne þeirra eða lostaseme eða auþéofa. hvar ero klépe góp eða mioc vandapar fópior eða marger men þeir es þeim þionþo. Liþen er óstiltr hlátr oc léicr. Alitille stundo hverfa þeser aller hluter a bráut sem réycr. oc es þar ecke efter nema bein éin oc macþka dáuñ þeirra er óto hold þeirra. (De Leeuw van Weenen 1993, 23v26–24r4)

What now does it avail those who lived in luxury of the flesh and in the indulgence of this life until the day of their death? Let us go to their graves, and consider whether we might find there any sign of their boasting or their lust or their riches. Where are their fine clothes, or their very choice food, or the many men who ministered to them? Gone is their unruly laughter and sport. In a short time all these things pass away like smoke, and there is nothing left but bones alone, and the stench of the maggots who ate their flesh.<sup>8</sup>

No source has ever been suggested for this passage. However, the theme will be familiar to anyone acquainted with the Old English anonymous homilies, as it is employed frequently in this genre. Most Old English iterations of the motif—including Vercelli Homily XIII (Scragg 1992, 234–35), Blickling Homily X (Morris 1880, 112–15), and Irvine Homily VII (Irvine 1993, 197–98)<sup>9</sup>—can be traced to *Sermo* 31 of Caesarius of Arles, as James Cross discovered more than half a century ago (Cross 1957). David McDougall, in the only critical assessment of the Norse passage hitherto ventured, has adduced Caesarius's work as a parallel and possible ultimate source, but does not claim the text to have influenced the homilist directly (1995, 108).

There are, indeed, significant similarities between the Norse text and Caesarius's sermon, which justify citing the relevant portion of the Latin text below (Morin 1953, 135):

Rogo vos fratres, aspiciate ad sepulchra divitum, et quotiens iuxta illa transititis, considerate et diligenter inspiciate, ubi sunt illorum divitiae, ubi ornamenta, ubi

<sup>7</sup> Hall notes that 'the random order of the sermonic texts, together with the addition of . . . non-sermonic works, has led some scholars to describe the collection as a manual or handbook rather than a homiliary, and has led to the idea that the Old Icelandic Homily Book may have been meant for private devotion rather than liturgical use' (Hall 2000, 671).

<sup>8</sup> Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>9</sup> For a similar passage in an early Middle English homily, see Morris 1868, 34–35.

anuli vel inanes, ubi diademata pretiosa, ubi honorum vanitas, ubi luxoriae voluptas, ubi spectacula vel furiosa vel cruenta vel turpia. Certe transierunt omnia tamquam umbra; et si paenitentia non subvenerit, sola in perpetuum obprobria et crimina remanserunt. Considerate diligentius et videte superbiorum sepulchra, et agnoscite quia nihil in eis aliud nisi soli cineres et foetidae vermium reliquiae remanserunt. . .<sup>10</sup>

I beseech you, brothers, look at the tombs of the wealthy, and as often as you pass by them, consider and carefully inspect where their riches are, where their ornaments, where their rings or earrings, where their costly crowns, where the vanity of their honours, where the pleasure of their luxury, where their wrathful or cruel or sordid spectacles. Indeed, all these have passed like a shadow; and if penance did not remedy them, they remain as reproaches and crimes forever. Look closer and see the tombs of the proud, and realise that nothing remains in them except ashes and the stinking leavings of worms. . .

Certain elements of the Norse homily seem quite close to Caesarius's text. The concluding remarks on the legacy of the wealthy consisting only of bones and the leavings of worms are so close that the Norse could easily be a translation of the Latin, and the overall content and style are similar enough that, if one did not know the wider history of the motif, he might be fooled into considering Caesarius the direct source. However, Cross noted the existence of several other 'Visit to the Tomb' passages extant in early medieval homiletic and devotional literature, many of which contain striking similarities in wording and tone to Caesarius's text (Cross 1957, 434 n. 1). Among these are the pseudo-Augustinian *Sermo* 58 *ad fratres in eremo* (PL 40, cols 1341–42) and a passage from Prosper of Aquitaine's *Sententiae ex Augustino delibatae* (PL 45, col. 1898). Both texts were known in Anglo-Saxon England,<sup>11</sup> and in theory could have been brought to Scandinavia by English missionaries and ultimately found their way into our homily.

Faced with such a picture, one might well despair of finding the actual source of the Norse text. However, another 'Visit to the Tomb' passage noted by Cross solves the puzzle (1957, 434 n. 1). This occurs in another pseudo-Augustinian work, called by Migne

<sup>10</sup> Caesarius then develops a long conceit in which the bones of the dead rebuke the living, about which see Cross 1957.

<sup>11</sup> The pseudo-Augustinian sermon was a source for part of Blickling Homily VIII (Morris 1880, 98–101). Prosper of Aquitaine's *Sententiae* are present in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 448 (s. x), about which see Gneuss 2001, 38, item 114. In addition, the passage in question was incorporated into a text appearing on pp. 94–96 of CCCC 190, a version of the so-called 'Commonplace Book' of Wulfstan of York. See Di Sciacca 2007.

a *Sermo de symbolo* (PL 40, cols 1189–1202, at 1200). Migne provided little information regarding the source of this text, and, as far as I can tell, the manuscript which he used has not been identified. As we shall see, the version of the motif appearing in this text was the source of the IHB version. However, Cross did not recognise (or at least did not note) that the author of the *Sermo de symbolo* took this section of his work nearly word for word from a Latin translation of John Chrysostom's *Ad Theodorum lapsum I*. In fact, given the unknown date, provenance and circulation of the pseudo-Augustinian sermon, it is much more likely that the Latin version of Chrysostom's work, a popular text with a large number of surviving manuscripts, was the Icelandic homily's immediate source.

Before comparing the relevant Old Norse passage with its source, we must briefly describe the history of Chrysostom's text and how it came to be transmitted to and popularised in Western Europe. John Chrysostom (d. 407) wrote the Greek original of *Ad Theodorum lapsum I*<sup>12</sup> in the late fourth century 'to an unnamed lapsed Christian, urging him to flee despair, repent, and return to his former life of virtue' (Hall and Norris 2011, 165). Not long after it was written, the treatise was translated into Latin, probably by the Pelagian deacon Anianus of Celeda, a mysterious figure who translated many of Chrysostom's works in the early fifth century (Dumortier 1966, 30–34).<sup>13</sup> The translation, usually titled *De reparatione lapsi* in the manuscripts, became quite popular, and circulated both on its own and as an addendum to a collection of genuine and spurious Latin sermons of Chrysostom described by André Wilmart (Wilmart 1918, 326–27; Dumortier 1966, 40–42; Hall and Norris 2011, 165–66). Over a century ago, a survey by Baur turned up forty-seven manuscripts of the Latin *De reparatione lapsi*, and Wilmart called it *l'un des textes qui ont été le plus lus d'un bout à l'autre du moyen âge* 'one of the most read texts from the beginning to the end of the Middle Ages' (Baur 1907, 65; Wilmart 1918, 326).

The passage in which we are interested occurs in §9 of Chrysostom's work (as edited in Dumortier 1966), during a plea to the lapsed Christian to cut himself off from worldly vice. In the table below, I give the relevant sections of the Greek original, Anianus's translation, and the IHB Christmas homily. I have taken the Latin directly from Dumortier's critical text, as he does not list in his apparatus any variants that seem relevant to

<sup>12</sup> So named despite the fact that no one in particular is addressed. For background on this confusing development, see Hall (forthcoming); Dumortier 1966, 14. The Greek and Latin texts are edited by Dumortier in this volume.

<sup>13</sup> For more information on Anianus, see Cooper 1993.

the Norse homily. I have assigned letters to the various parts of the latter two excerpts to aid the reader in comparison. **Boldface** type indicates literal or nearly literal correspondences. Underlining denotes parallels in which notable differences in vocabulary or grammatical structure have been introduced. *Italics* mark passages in the Latin not found in the Norse and vice-versa.

<i>Greek original (Dumortier 1966, 124, ll. 13–26)</i>	<i>Latin translation of Anianus of Celeda (Dumortier 1966, 278, ll. 17–28)</i>	<i>IHB homily ‘Nativitas domini’ (De Leeuw van Weenen 1993, 23v26–24r4)</i>
<p>Οὐχ ἑόρακας τοὺς ἐν τρυφῇ καὶ μέθῃ καὶ ἀδωφάγια, καὶ τῇ λουπῇ τελευτήσαντας χλευασία τοῦ βίου ; Ποῦ νῦν εἰσιν οἱ μετὰ πολλοῦ μὲν τοῦ τύφου, πολλῶν δὲ ἀκολούθων σοβοῦντες ἐπὶ τῆς ἀγορᾶς, οἱ τὰ σηρικὰ ἐνδεδυμένοι καὶ μύρου πνέοντες καὶ παρασίτους τρέφοντες καὶ τῇ σκηνῇ προσηλωμένοι διὰ παντός, ποῦ τούτων ἡ φαντασία ἐκείνη νῦν ; Οἷχεται. Ἡ τῶν δεῖπνων πολυτέλεια, ἡ τῶν μουσικῶν πληθύς, ἡ τῶν κολάκων θεραπεία, ὁ γέλως ὁ πολὺς, ἡ τῆς ψυχῆς ἄνεσις, ἡ τῆς διανοίας διάχυσις, ὁ βίος ὁ ὑγρὸς καὶ ἀνεμμένος καὶ περιττός, ποῦ νῦν ; Ἀπέπτη πάντα ἐκεῖνα. Τί γέγονε τὸ τοσαύτης θεραπείας ἀπολαύον σῶμα καὶ καθαρότητος; Ἄπιθι πρὸς τὴν σορόν, θέασαι τὴν κόνιν, τὴν τέφραν, τοὺς σκώληκας, τοῦ λοιποῦ τὸ εἰδεχθές, θέασαι καὶ στέναξον πικρόν.</p>	<p>(a) <b>Quid profuit illis qui in luxuria corporis et praesentis vitae voluptatibus usque ad diem ultimum permanserunt?</b> (b) <u>Intuere nunc sepulcra eorum et vide si est aliquod in eis iactantiae suae vestigium, si aliqua divitiarum vel luxuriae signa cognoveris.</u> (c) <i>Require ubi nunc vestes et odoramenta peregrina, ubi speculaculorum voluptas, ubi asseclorum turmae et conviviorum.</i> (d) <i>Cessit opulencia, risus et iocus et immoderata atque effrenata laetitia, quo abiit? Quo abscessit? Ubi illa nunc et ubi ipsi? Qui finis utrorumque?</i> (e) <i>Intuere diligentius et accede propius ad singulorum sepulcra et vide cineres solos et foetidas vermium reliquias . . .</i></p>	<p>(a) <b>Huat stopar nú þeim er lifþö imonöþ holdséns oc i epterlífe þessa lífs. alt til dauða dags.</b> (b) <b>Forom vér til grafa þeirra oc þeckiom hvárt vér megem fina þar necquert marc hreosne þeirra eþa lostase-me eþa auþéofa.</b> (c) <b>hvar ero kléþe góþ eþa mioc vandaþar fþþlor eþa marger men þeir es þeim þionöþo.</b> (d) <b>Lipen er óstiltr hlátr oc léicr. Alitille stundo hverfa þeser aller hluter a bráut sem réycr.</b> (e) <i>oc es þar ecke efter nema bein éin oc macþka dáun þeirra er óto hold þeirra.</i></p>

<i>Translation of Chrysostom's Greek (Stephens 1889, 97–98)</i>	<i>Translation of Anianus's Latin</i>	<i>Translation of IHB excerpt</i>
<p>Have you not seen those who have died in the midst of luxury and drunkenness, and sport and all the other folly of this life? Where are they now who used to strut through the market place with much pomp, and a crowd of attendants? Who were clothed in silk and redolent with perfumes, and kept a table for their parasites, and were in constant attendance at the theatre? What has now become of all that parade of theirs? It is all gone—the costly splendour of their banquets, the throng of musicians, the attentions of flatterers, the loud laughter, the relaxation of spirit, the enervation of mind, the voluptuous, abandoned, extravagant manner of life—it has all come to an end. Where now have all these things taken their flight? What has become of the body which enjoyed so much attention, and cleanliness? Go your way to the coffin, behold the dust, the ashes, the worms, behold the loathsomeness of the place, and groan bitterly.</p>	<p>(a) <b>What did it avail those who persisted in the luxury of the body and the pleasures of the present life until their last day?</b></p> <p>(b) <u>Look at their tombs now, and see if there is in them any trace of their boasting; see if you can discern any signs of their luxury or their riches.</u></p> <p>(c) <u>Look now at where their clothing and exotic perfumes, where the luxury of their spectacles, where the throngs of attendants and dinner guests have gone.</u></p> <p>(d) <u>Their opulence has ended. Their laughter, their sport, and their immoderate and unbri-dled delight—where has it gone? Whither has it withdrawn? Where now are these things, and where are the men themselves? What is the end of them both?</u></p> <p>(e) <u>Look harder, and come closer to the tombs of each of them, and see only ashes and the stinking leavings of worms. . .</u></p>	<p>(a) <b>What now does it avail those who lived in luxury of the flesh and in the indulgence of this life until the day of their death?</b></p> <p>(b) <u>Let us go to their graves and consider whether we might find there any sign of their boasting or their lust or their riches.</u></p> <p>(c) <u>Where are their fine clothes, or their very choice food, or the many men who ministered to them?</u></p> <p>(d) <b>Gone is their unruly laughter and sport. In a short time all these things pass away like smoke,</b></p> <p>(e) <b>and there is nothing left but bones alone, and the stench of the mag-gots who ate their flesh.</b></p>

The correspondence between Anianus's Latin and the Norse homily starts out very close, and is nearly literal in section **a**. The two versions also contain verbal similarities in section **b** significant enough to make one certain of the influence (*aliquod in eis iactantiae suae vestigium . . . aliqua divitiarum vel luxuriae signa ≈ necquert marc hreosne þeirra eþa lostaseme eþa auþéofa*), but one will notice that the homilist has rendered the second person singular imperative of the Latin with a first person plural indicative. A notable change in structure also occurs in section **c**, where the Norse author transforms the imperative (i.e. to try to find where the clothes, perfumes, etc. of the wealthy have gone) into a direct question—a rhetorical tactic that would have worked well in a homiletic context. The correspondences to the Latin start to grow less literal here, as the Norse homilist begins to abbreviate his source. This abbreviation is more pronounced in section **d**, though enough verbal parallels are still present (*Cessit . . . risus et iocus ≈ Lipen er . . . hlátr oc léicr*) to prove that the author has not moved away from his source. Also in this section, the Norse author introduces a simile completely lacking in the Latin, namely that all worldly pleasures disappear like smoke. One is reminded of the similar assertion in Caesarius's *Sermo* 31 that all worldly delights *transierunt . . . tamquam umbra*, 'have passed like a shadow'. Finally, section **e** is also shortened, and the structure changed from imperative to declarative. Furthermore, the Norse homily's description of the dead man's remains and their attendant maggots (*es þar ecke efter nema bein ein oc macþka dáuN*) is grammatically more similar to that in Caesarius's sermon (*nihil in eis aliud nisi soli cineres et foetidae vermium reliquiae remanserunt*) than to Anianus's text (*vide cineres solos et foetidas vermium reliquias*).

It is clear that the Norse homilist was drawing on the Latin translation of Chrysostom's treatise, and, while he was not slavish in his dependence on the Latin, his modifications to Anianus's work were not much more extensive than Anianus's own changes to Chrysostom's. That does not mean, however, that these changes were insignificant. In addition to frequent differences in verbal mood and person that affect the tone of the admonition, there have been some significant deletions and additions. In the last two sections, one must take seriously the possibility of secondary influence from Caesarius's version of the motif, since certain constructions in these sections seem more reminiscent of his style than Anianus's.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, given the similarities between the Anianus and Caesarius excerpts themselves, and the apparent popularity of the former from an early date, one cannot rule out that Chrysostom, as mediated by his translator, exercised some influence on Caesarius. The possible relationship of the *ubi sunt* passage in Chrysostom's

Caesarius's works were known in Scandinavia, and many other early Norse homilies (including no fewer than seven in the IHB)<sup>15</sup> reflect his influence to some degree (Bekker-Nielsen 1961; Hall 2000, 668–69; Conti 2008, 216–17). One must nonetheless be wary in suggesting direct knowledge of Caesarius on the part of this homilist. The parallels with his sermon are, in the end, not substantial or exclusive enough to prove that the Norse author was consciously imitating him. One may, for instance, find comparisons of success or wealth to smoke and other transient natural phenomena in the Bible (esp. Wisdom 5:15), in Isidore's *Synonyma*, and in Insular sources, such as Irvine Homily VII and letters by Boniface and Aldhelm.<sup>16</sup>

Even more significantly, such comparisons also appear in one of the other pieces in the Wilmart collection, with which, as was mentioned above, Anianus's *De reparatione lapsi* often circulated. Chrysostom begins his address *Ad Eutropium* (Wilmart *Sermo* 28)<sup>17</sup> with an impressive *ubi sunt* passage, during which he says the following of the trappings of worldly wealth and power (Accolti 1522, 48<sup>18</sup>) (**emphases mine**):

Nox erant omnia illa, & somnium, & die exorto nusquam comparuerunt. Vmbra erat, & pertransiit; **fumus fuit, et dissolutus est**; bullae aquarum fuerunt, & disruptae sunt; araneae telae erant, & discissae sunt.

All these things were night and a dream, and at daybreak they could be found nowhere. It was a shadow, and it has passed; **it was smoke, and it has dissipated**; they were bubbles of water, and they have burst; they were spiders' webs, and they have been torn asunder.

Here again, though, the wording is not close to the IHB text. Regarding possible secondary influences, therefore, one is safest in concluding that the Norse author need not have been personally acquainted with Caesarius's *Sermo* 31 or any other particular work to add to his source a simile based on the natural world describing the fleetingness of material wealth, since this was a common element of the *ubi sunt* tradition in which writers like Caesarius, Isidore and others participated. The Norse author's addition of the smoke simile to his piece is, therefore, a case in which we are justified in speaking of analogues rather than

work to the development of the motif in the West deserves further investigation. See Hall (forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> The items in question are 6, 12, 21, 29, 47, 54 and 61. See the description of the manuscript's contents in de Leeuw van Weenen 1993, 7–15.

<sup>16</sup> For references and a thorough discussion of the theme, see Di Sciacca 2008, 105–59.

<sup>17</sup> Discussed in Wilmart 1918, 321.

<sup>18</sup> Note that Wilmart cites the edition of Sigismund Gelenius (1547, 1325–30), to which I do not have access.

sources, since here, unlike in the rest of this section of the text, the language is not close enough to any one Latin work to exclude others from consideration.

Although the popularity of Anianus's *De reparatione lapsi* elsewhere in Europe suggests that many copies of it circulated in medieval Scandinavia, I have not yet found direct evidence of the existence in Norway or Iceland of a manuscript of this or any work attributed to Chrysostom.<sup>19</sup> At present, therefore, one can only speculate on how the Norse homilist might have come across his source. As mentioned above, the text was a very popular one, and could have been brought to Norway or Iceland from nearly anywhere in Europe.<sup>20</sup> Anglo-Saxon missionaries, who influenced early Norse homiletics in many other ways, certainly represent one possible avenue. *De reparatione lapsi* and some of the sermons that travelled with it were, in fact, some of the only genuine Chrysostom texts known and attributed to him by the Anglo-Saxons (Hall and Norris 2011, 168–75; Zacher 2009). However, since the text was popular elsewhere, and since German ecclesiastics also played a significant role in the Christianisation of Iceland,<sup>21</sup> we cannot dismiss the Continent as a route by which Chrysostom's work may have come to influence a Norse homilist. A further investigation into the knowledge of *De reparatione lapsi* in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Scandinavia is warranted, and might begin with an attempt to identify any contemporary manuscripts of the Wilmart collection of sermons in Scandinavian libraries and determine their places of origin.

One must also consider the possibility that the author of the Icelandic homily did not have access to the entirety of the Latin text, but rather came across the relevant passage from Chrysostom in a florilegium or some other compilation. We have seen that at least one medieval writer—namely, the author of the pseudo-Augustinian *Sermo de symbolo* mentioned above—lifted these sentences of *De reparatione lapsi* nearly verbatim for use in his own work. The tenth-century abbot Odo of Cluny also borrowed from this section of the text in the third book of his *Collationes* (PL 133, col. 614A; verbal parallels to Anianus in **boldface**):

<sup>19</sup> The impressive summaries of medieval Icelandic book-lists made by Tryggvi J. Oleson do not reveal any works of Chrysostom (Oleson 1957; 1959; 1960). As Hall notes, however, very little work on the holdings of medieval Norwegian libraries has been published (2000, 699 n. 10).

<sup>20</sup> See also the discussion of the manuscript tradition in Dumortier 1966, 40–42.

<sup>21</sup> In addition to the general studies of the Christianisation of Iceland in Jochens 1999 and Strömbäck 1975, see the useful summary of the role of Anglo-Saxon and German ecclesiastics in Szurszewski 1997, 21–25. A fuller collection of references can be found in Hall 2000, 663 n. 4.



Fuerunt ante nos et potentes, et superbi, et voluptuosi. Sed **quid illis profuit immoderata laetitia, vestes et odorama** diversae voluptatis, et rerum opulentia? **ubi illa nunc** sunt, vel **ubi ipsi? accedamus ad eorum sepulcra**, et quid ibi **videbimus? fetidas vermium reliquias**. Probabimus verum esse quod de impiis dicitur: *Transiet ut nocturna visio* (Job 20:8).

Before us, also, there lived the powerful, the proud, the pleasure-seekers. But **what did their immoderate happiness avail them, their clothes and perfumes** of varied luxury and their material wealth? **Where now are these things, or where are they themselves? Let us go to their tombs**, and what shall we see there? **The stinking leavings of worms**. We shall prove true that which is said of the impious: ‘It will pass as a vision in the night’.<sup>22</sup>

Odo’s work itself could not have been the source of the Icelandic homily, since it omits material from Anianus which the Norse author includes. Still, this version of the passage is relevant to the present study in that it demonstrates a precedent for several elements of the Norse homilist’s own modifications. Apart from an even more severe abbreviation of the passage than in the IHB version, we also see comparable rhetorical tactics such as the replacement of imperatives with hortatory verbs (*accede* → *accedamus*) or direct questions (*vide* → *quid ibi videbimus*), as well as the introduction of a simile to describe the transitory nature of worldly delights (*Transiet ut nocturna visio*).

However, despite the recycling of the relevant portion of *De reparatione lapsi* by other medieval authors, the popularity of the original piece, especially among the Anglo-Saxon and Continental churchmen whom we know to have evangelised Scandinavia, obviates any need to posit an additional step between Anianus’s translation and the first IHB Christmas homily. This conclusion would, of course, need to be reevaluated if someone were to discover in a Scandinavian library a contemporary florilegium drawing on *De reparatione lapsi* or the Wilmart sermons.

The discovery of the use of *De reparatione lapsi* by the author of the IHB homily is significant in that, to my knowledge, no other Norse homilies have been found to depend on any work (whether genuine or spurious) commonly ascribed to John Chrysostom. It is, however, possible that other works by Chrysostom were introduced to Scandinavia around the same time, since *De reparatione lapsi* was often found appended to the Wilmart collection of sermons attributed to the saint. Scholars, therefore, may be able to find other sources and parallels for early Norse homilies in the Wilmart

<sup>22</sup> This debt of Odo to Chrysostom’s work has not, to my knowledge, been previously discussed, but I admit I am not familiar enough with scholarship on Odo’s works to state securely that it has never been noticed.

sermons. Finally, I hope that the present study has demonstrated two other important facts: first, that the continued hunt for sources—not just ‘analogues’ or ‘parallels’—of Old Norse homilies is not in vain, provided that such research is conducted carefully; and second, that the discovery of such sources need not lessen our opinion of the skill or erudition of those authors who used them. Indeed, the present identification of a source in a Latin translation of one of Chrysostom’s treatises proves that the Norse homilist, though living on the very fringe of Christendom, was not only familiar with the most popular and important theological works of his day, but also able to engage with and adapt these works in an effective and original way.

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## URSULA DRONKE

A sad spring for the Viking Society brought the loss of Ursula Dronke and Ray Page, two inspirational scholars and energetic members of the Society. Ursula nurtured several generations of graduate students, and many of them, along with other old friends, were present at a ninetieth-birthday celebration in Cambridge in November 2010.

Ursula Brown was born on 3rd November 1920 in Sunderland and moved with her family to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where her father held a post at the university, when she was four years old. She remained proud of her north-eastern identity and could slip into a Geordie accent or adduce Norse words in her native dialect. She went to Church High School in Newcastle and then to the University of Tours as a visiting student in French language and literature. Her love of France was undimmed throughout her life and later she and her husband Peter would escape to their house in Brittany whenever they could. Her studies in France were, however, interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War, and so she returned to England, taking up the Mary Ewart Scholarship to study English at Somerville College, Oxford; the philosopher Iris Murdoch was a fellow student. Here she heard lectures from J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, among other distinguished medievalists, and first encountered Old Norse. After taking her degree Ursula worked at the Board of Trade for the remainder of the war.

Returning to Oxford after the war, Ursula was appointed to a College Lectureship at Somerville. Here she worked on her B. Litt. thesis, first under J. R. R. Tolkien and later with Gabriel Turville-Petre who was the first Vigfusson Reader in Ancient Icelandic Literature and Antiquities at the University. Her work bore its first fruits in *Saga-Book* 1947/48, in a still significant article on Hrómundr Gripsson and *Porgils saga ok Hafliða*. Ursula's thesis on the saga was published in 1953 by Oxford University Press. As Marina Warner notes in her obituary of Ursula, published in *The Independent*, this edition was unusual in including in the introduction, in addition to the usual codicological and philological discussion, a thoughtful and sensitive literary analysis. Although the *Poetic Edda* was to absorb most of her energies over her long working life, Ursula remained interested in sagas, skaldic poetry and other aspects of Norse culture, as often as not investigated from a comparative perspective. Important articles on sagas included three published around the end of the seventies, 'Narrative insight in *Laxdæla saga*', 'The Poet's Persona in the Skalds' sagas' and her 1980 Dorothea Coke Lecture, published in 1981 as *The Role of Sexual Themes in Njáls saga*.

Ursula remained as Fellow and Tutor in medieval English language and literature at Somerville until 1961. It was here that she first met Peter Dronke

at a Medieval Society meeting in 1959 and they married in 1960. Ursula moved to Cambridge with Peter in 1961, where their daughter Cressida was born the following year. While Ursula was bringing up Cressida she was working intensively on Eddic poetry; articles on *Skirnismál* and the first work on Atli were published in the early sixties, while her immensely detailed and learned edition of the last four poems of the Codex Regius appeared in 1969 as *Poetic Edda I: Heroic Poems* from Oxford University Press. The edition epitomised Ursula's scholarship: philologically informed, confident in its comparisons with related and analogous material, bold in its treatment of the text, emending and transposing with a vigour which editors would be cautious in unleashing nowadays. Most inspiring for scholars in generations to come were her thoughtful and persuasive literary readings of these difficult poems, and her supple, suggestive translations which, printed opposite her edited text, mediated something of the artistry as well as the meaning of these intricate and allusive poems.

After the publication of the first volume of the *Poetic Edda*, Ursula spent some years in the early 1970s as professor and acting head of Scandinavian studies at Munich. Here she cemented some of the warm relationships with other Norse scholars which would benefit the graduate students whom she gathered about her later in Oxford. Ursula returned to Oxford to take up the Vigfusson Readership in 1976, and she became a professorial Fellow at Linacre College, Oxford, to which the Readership was now attached. Here Ursula occupied a small but cosy office in the then Territorial Army building at the back of the English Faculty, in which tutorials would be pervaded by the smell of boiled cabbage from the canteen downstairs. Ursula always had some cheese and fruit, and some bottles of excellent red wine in the back room and would arrange impromptu feasts whenever circumstances—a seminar, a viva, the end of term—demanded it.

As Reader and latterly Professor, Ursula taught a good number of Norse scholars. Some would attend her lectures in the Turville-Petre Room as undergraduates, listening to her talk with her customary vivacity and knowledge about the *Edda*, and acting as guinea-pigs for the latest versions of her translations for the next volume; many went on to graduate work at other universities. Some remained in Oxford as graduate students, a community augmented by students from Canada, Iceland, the United States and Australia, as well as from elsewhere in the United Kingdom. All were overseen by an incisive and critical eye which would pounce on mistranslations or on vagueness of expression, yet her mentoring was always tempered with warmth, understanding and encouragement. Despite commuting from Cambridge to Oxford and the intensive days spent lecturing and supervising, Ursula found time in these years to produce a range

of articles which pointed towards the next volume of the edition. Work on 'Völuspá and the satiric tradition' (1979), and the revolutionary 'War of the Æsir and the Vanir in Völuspá', written for Klaus von See's Festschrift (1988), heralded her revelatory reading of Völuspá in *Poetic Edda II: Mythological Poems* (1997). The insightful 'Sem jarlar forðum' (1981) anticipated the version of Rígsþula in *Poetic Edda II*, while 'Óminnis hegri' (1984) on an obscure passage in *Hávamál* was part of the groundwork for the poems which finally appeared in *Poetic Edda III* (2011).

Ursula and Peter occasionally published jointly, mutually informing one another's scholarship and strengthening, if it needed strengthening, the argument for reading Norse literature in comparative contexts. They wrote together the groundbreaking article on the Latin traditions behind the Prologue to the *Prose Edda* in the Festschrift for Jakob Benediktsson, in 1977, while their final joint publication was the H. M. Chadwick Memorial Lecture, given in 1997 at the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic at Cambridge, entitled 'Growth of Literature: the Sea and the God of the Sea'. In the eighties Ursula became interested in the history of Old Norse study in England, writing on Marx, Engels and Norse Mythology in an issue of *Leeds Studies in English* in honour of H. L. (Leslie) Rogers. She also wrote illuminatingly about Gudbrand Vigfusson's work in Oxford a hundred years earlier in 'The Scope of the *Corpus Poeticum Boreale*' in the collection *Úr Dölum til Dala*, edited by Rory McTurk and Andrew Wawn (1989); her reading of Gudbrand's letters in the Bodleian yielded more details about his hardships than she could accommodate in the final article and she would speak sympathetically of the impoverished Iclander's plight.

Ursula retired from the Readership in 1988 and devoted herself thereafter to work on the *Poetic Edda* volumes, ably assisted for a good while by her former student, Clive Tolley. Before she left Oxford, however, she was indefatigable in soliciting support for a renewed funding drive to make sure that the study of Old Norse would continue at Oxford despite the depleted state of the Vigfusson endowment, and it was chiefly through her energies and persuasiveness that the Rausing family decided to offer a donation sufficient to secure the Readership's future in perpetuity. She was awarded the Order of the White Falcon in 1988 by the Icelandic government, though she could not in the event visit Iceland to collect it.

In 1996 she published her collected essays as *Myth and Fiction in Early Norse Lands*. Although there had been talk of editing a Festschrift for her, it was Peter Foote's view that she would not welcome such a publication, however well-meant, and thus she followed her old friend's path in bringing out her own collection instead. *Myth and Fiction* brings together almost all of her essays, highlighting the range of her interests

from the classical learning imported into Iceland after the Conversion to startling analogues of mythic motifs garnered from other mythologies, via a deep understanding of and sympathy for the Norse texts and authors whom she always kept firmly in view. The nineties saw the long-awaited publication of the second volume of the *Poetic Edda*; here the fruits of Ursula's long years of thinking about the five poems presented in that book, not only *Völuspá*, but the other poems, each throwing up particular interpretive challenges, are argued for with undiminished energy. Although editorial fashions had moved on by this time, Ursula's justifications for emendations are always worth considering, while her commentaries, holistic readings and skilful translations of these complex poems will certainly stand the test of time. Those who were at her ninetieth birthday party were very glad to see an early proof of the third volume on display beside the cake, and it was a great joy that Ursula lived to see its publication.

Ursula enjoyed life tremendously and communicated that enjoyment to her friends and pupils. Despite her later problems of mobility, having had her hips replaced at quite a young age, she never seemed to lose heart. She was rarely seen in Oxford after retirement had released her from commuting, but she and Peter always welcomed visitors to their home in Cambridge, where delicious food, good wine and lively conversation could be counted on. The continuing work on the *Edda* meant that she was less often seen in London at the Viking Society, and it is a shame that a generation of younger scholars did not benefit so much from her insights and her good company in her last decades. When Ursula was not at home in Cambridge, she and Peter would retreat to Brittany where she could concentrate on her work and enjoy the music performed in the nearby villages, and she was also able to spend time with her two much-loved grandchildren, of whom she was very proud. Ursula was indomitable; fierce in her opposition to poor scholarship, to small-mindedness and opportunism. She never lost her radical political sympathies, nor her interest in other people's thinking, nor above all did she ever think it was time to stop thinking, reading and writing about the literature which was so important to her. 'Make sure it sharpens your mind', was the advice she would give to anyone unsure of the value of their scholarly activities, whether these directly pertained to Old Norse or ranged more widely; intellectual curiosity was the governing principle which kept her own mind sharp. Ursula's work shaped the study of Eddic poetry for those who follow in her footsteps, while her warmth, enthusiasm and her sheer delight in Old Norse culture touched the lives of her students, her fellow scholars and all who knew her.



## RAYMOND IAN PAGE

Ray Page—or R. I. Page as he styled himself in his publications—was an outstanding interpreter of Anglo-Saxon history and culture, a distinguished Old Norse scholar and an innovative manuscript curator. Above all, however, he will be remembered for his contributions to runic studies. In the view of one reviewer, the study of English runes without Ray Page is ‘simply inconceivable’. But Page did not write exclusively on the English variety. He was almost equally at home in the Scandinavian tradition. He made contributions to Frisian runic studies as well, and attempted to penetrate the murk out of which English runic writing emerged in the fifth and sixth centuries.

Raymond Ian Page was born in Sheffield on 25th September 1924. He attended the King Edward VII School in that city, but had to leave at the age of sixteen because his family lacked the funds to support him through his education. He studied for a time at Rotherham Technical College and during the latter part of the Second World War served in the Navy. His wartime service entitled him to a university education and he was able to enrol as an undergraduate at the University of Sheffield where he read English. Following his first degree he spent a year in Copenhagen working on an MA, and in 1951 was offered an assistant lectureship in English in Nottingham. There he progressed to Lecturer, and in 1959 gained his doctorate with the thesis *The Inscriptions of the Anglo-Saxon Rune-Stones*. In 1962 Page moved from Nottingham to Cambridge. He was first Lecturer and subsequently Reader in the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, and in 1984 was made Elrington and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon in the University of Cambridge. In addition to his University post, he was in 1965 appointed Fellow Librarian of Corpus Christi College’s Parker Library, where he safeguarded the important collection of manuscripts and early printed books assembled by the sixteenth-century Archbishop of Canterbury and Master of Corpus, Matthew Parker. Page retired from both prestigious positions in 1991, but continued to be an active academic and a dedicated Fellow of Corpus until ultimately succumbing to ill health. As late as 2008–09 he could be seen making his way to and from the College on a motorised buggy under the watchful eye of his wife Elin.

Ray Page’s scholarship was broad, as the titles of his publications indicate. The topic of his doctoral thesis continued to occupy him, and in 1973 he published *An Introduction to English Runes* as a preliminary to a scholarly edition of the whole corpus, on which he had been working for some years. Although he went on to produce a second edition of the

*Introduction* (1999), and wrote numerous articles on Anglo-Saxon and other runic topics, he failed to complete the great corpus of the English runic inscriptions. When asked why, he would sometimes reply that such an edition could never be definitive since new inscriptions were constantly being discovered. It is to be hoped that his successors—if such can be found—will one day see the work to its conclusion. Page made many other important contributions to runic research, several of them in the Norse field. In the early 1980s he published three important articles on the Manx runic crosses (also preliminaries to a corpus edition), of which ‘The Manx rune-stones’ (1983) provides the only modern critical survey of the material. These were followed by *The Runic Inscriptions of Viking Age Dublin* (1997) and *The Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions of Britain* (2006), both jointly authored (the excellent drawings in the latter are all his, a reflection of the practical skills he learnt at Rotherham Tech). Many of Page’s runic studies were gathered together in the volume *Runes and Runic Inscriptions* (1995), edited by David Parsons and with postscripts by the author bringing the discussions up-to-date (this book also includes a list of Page’s publications up to 1994). For the general reader interested in things runic there was the introductory work *Runes* (first published 1987) in the British Museum series *Reading the Past*. Other topics with which Page engaged included the Norse myths, Anglo-Saxon glosses and manuscript conservation. Among his contributions to these fields may be mentioned the incisive and refreshingly critical 1978–79 article ‘Dumézil revisited’ and the important 1993 paper ‘On the feasibility of a corpus of Old English glosses: the view from the library’. His interest in manuscripts as material relics of the past, kindled by his role as Parker Librarian, led to the development of innovative conservation techniques, and ultimately to the establishment of the Cambridge Colleges Conservation Consortium. As Parker Librarian he undertook research into Matthew Parker and his collection, work which culminated in the monograph *Matthew Parker and his Books* (1993), based on lectures he gave as Sandars Reader in Bibliography 1989–90.

Several of Page’s initial studies foreshadow interests, methods and attitudes that would come to characterise his research. The 1959 article ‘An early drawing of the Ruthwell Cross’ reveals an appreciation of the important role early accounts can play in the reading and interpretation of worn or damaged runic inscriptions. His 1960 study of the Bewcastle Cross is a forensic examination of the now largely illegible runes on this notoriously problematic monument. The contribution was criticised in its day for being ‘negative’, a rebuke which Page notes in a postscript to

the reprint in *Runes and Runic Inscriptions* ‘showed unusual perceptivity’ on the part of the critics. The article, he points out, was designed to be negative, one of its main purposes being to undermine the breezy and careless confidence evinced by many of his contemporaries. The postscript continues,

Modern scholarship seems to judge it worthier to make an indicative statement, however inaccurate or unsupported by fact, than to utter a tentative subjunctive or to warn against relying on evidence that is untrustworthy or observation that is partial.

In two other key articles, widely spaced in time (1962, 1984), Page explains and justifies the system devised for transliterating English runes, a system which differs markedly from that used in the transliteration of other varieties of runic script. His attitude is pragmatic, and he shows by example the difficulties of adopting a highly theoretical and purist approach to the subject. The postscript is again revealing. His critics, he observes, appear to have had little practical experience of transliteration. It seems thus not to have occurred to them to ponder its essential purpose, which must be to make runic texts accessible to a readership with no experience of the script. Those who regard it more as an art form than a practical expedient, he concludes, will have to content themselves with a fairly restricted audience.

As will already be clear, Page did not suffer woolly thinking or pretentiousness gladly. Against such foibles he deployed plain English prose to good effect. In the course of a series of altercations arising from two reviews in *Saga-Book* XXI:3–4 (1984–85), he explained to one furious complainant that he always sought to express himself with ‘wit and elegance’, though, he went on, ‘I am the first to concede that one man’s rapier is another man’s bludgeon’. As a reviewer Page gained a fearsome reputation. He was certainly unwilling to nod through what he considered third-rate scholarship. Some seem to have been uneasy about the humorous way in which he could approach his task: often he appeared to be poking fun at the objects of his criticism. But as he himself averred on numerous occasions: ‘You don’t have to be solemn to be serious.’ Rational and carefully considered ideas based on firm evidence were what Ray Page expected from his fellow academics. Where instead he found flights of fancy, sloppiness, affectation and outright charlatanism, he felt he had a right to be annoyed and a duty to speak out plainly. One of his more trenchant reviews (1984–85, see above) concluded: ‘This book is a disgrace to its editor, to Cornell University and to its publishers. It costs £20.’ Anyone who has come across the volume concerned

and who values the good name of scholarship will find it hard to dissent from this verdict.

Perhaps because of his unwillingness to compromise and ‘play the game’, Ray Page did not receive as much official recognition as some. Beyond honorary doctorates from the universities of Sheffield and Trondheim, and the Dag Strömbäck prize from the Royal Gustav Adolfs Akademi, Uppsala, there is little to report. He was, though, President of the Viking Society 1978–80, and a Vice-President in Council of many years standing. His relations with the powers that be in Corpus Christi, Cambridge, were by no means always harmonious. Seated next to the Master in the College chapel on one occasion and exhorted to offer ‘a sign of peace’ he instead felt compelled to murmur: ‘The best we can hope for is a truce, Master.’ Some claimed that the room he was given in Corpus after his retirement, up several steep flights of stairs, was an act of banishment on the part of the College authorities. Undaunted, however—in spite of the increased difficulty he found in walking—Page christened this inaccessible sanctuary ‘Paradise’. There he would often take down a wooden box of a kind suitable for housing a medieval manuscript; emblazoned on its spine was the title ‘The Runes of Jura’. Inside nestled a bottle of malt whisky, the label appropriately confirming the liquor’s Jura provenance.

People who encountered Ray Page in person found him anything but fearsome. Indeed, many will affirm that he was friendliness and kindness itself. In my experience what marked out his dealings with his fellow humans was an innate courtesy and a deep-seated sense of equality, the latter stemming perhaps from his humble origins. More than any other academic I have known he treated all alike, regardless of rank or status. The porters of Corpus held him in the highest regard: ‘he’s the only one of the Fellows who comes in and shares a drink and a chat with us’, they pointed out to me on more than one occasion. Certainly when it came to buying a round, Ray was the first to put his hand in his pocket—though as a real-ale enthusiast he might utter a terse comment about having to pay for gassy lager.

As my travelling companion on many runic field trips, I found Ray considerate, convivial and consistently entertaining. He and I, often together with our wives, Elin and Kirsten, travelled the length and breadth of the British Isles in order to document the Scandinavian runic inscriptions of the region. Once, stranded on Holy Island off the east coast of Arran in atrocious weather, we were offered shelter by two Buddhist novices. They were undertaking basic repairs to the only house on the island, which was in a fairly tumbledown state. Bread, cheese and tea were provided, damp

blankets for the night and a solid meal the next day. It was Ray who expressed the deep appreciation we all felt for the efforts of these two young men, and he who put the largest sum of money into their kitty. During the many pub lunches we enjoyed on our travels, Ray would often lean back, a joyous expression on his face, and exclaim: 'This is living! They don't know what they're missing, *de skrivebordsrunologer*' (a reference to the Moltkean distinction between proper, field runologists and their *ersatz*, desk-bound colleagues). In Shetland, one inscription we examined exhibited unusually deep and even lines. 'What about "deep, crisp and even" as a description?', suggested Ray. 'Go on, I dare you!' And so it was.

Like Peter Foote, whose obituary appeared in *Saga-Book* XXXIV (2010), Ray Page was a private man. According to an account of his life in *The Times*, he 'often used humour to hold the world at arm's length'. He rarely spoke of his early existence, of his marriage to Elin, a Norwegian student whom he had met at Sheffield University after the War, or of his family affairs. Certainly he gave little indication of the devastating blow inflicted on him and Elin by the untimely death of their son. To colleagues he always remained his cheerful, quizzical self.

Writing in 1996 of the collection of Ray Page's runic articles reprinted in *Runes and Runic Inscriptions* I concluded as follows:

The essays in this volume should appeal to the layperson as well as the specialist. Granted, readers will face detailed argumentation at every turn, but they will find Page's style refreshingly free of the kind of jargon that disfigures much modern research in the humanities. Uncluttered, witty and elegant, the prose reflects the mind that produced it. For Page is a meticulous scholar, the enemy of imprecision and complicated nonsense alike, a ceaseless questioner of the unsubstantiated assertion and hasty generalisation, a castigator of the half-learned. We need more like him.

I see no reason today to amend this judgement.

M. P. B.

## REVIEWS

CORPUS OF ANGLO-SAXON STONE SCULPTURE. VOL. IX: CHESHIRE AND LANCASHIRE. By RICHARD N. BAILEY. *Oxford University Press for the British Academy*, 2010. xiv + 522 pages. 20 figs, 4 tables, 743 plates. ISBN 978-0-19-726462-1.

The production, to exactly thorough standards, of a complete corpus of Anglo-Saxon stone sculpture was a Herculean undertaking from the outset, complicated in its course by radical changes in the funding and administration of research in the Humanities since the first volume of this series appeared in 1984. A particularly serious problem arose in 2009 when AHRC support for the project was ended. That delayed the appearance of Volume IX by some eighteen months, and it is thanks to the generosity and commitment of certain individuals and institutions that it has now been published, and that the British Academy committee for the project can still speak with confidence of completing the series. This volume is an especially important part of the whole in several respects. It completes the survey of Northumbrian sculpture (except for those items across the modern border in what is now Scotland), and it engages directly and substantially for the first time with the Mercian sculptural tradition. The coverage provided by the *Corpus* now in fact excludes only a Midland band, south of the Mersey-Humber line and north of one from the mouth of the Severn to the Stour. Every effort is called for, to fill that properly and consistently.

As the author of the present volume, Richard Bailey, points out, the historical (pre-1974) counties of Cheshire and Lancashire form a region that was quite thoroughly divided, both politically and culturally, across the period of nearly four centuries represented by the sculpture considered here. Cheshire was aligned with the north-west Midlands and Mercia while Lancashire was originally part of Northumbria. A chapter summarising the historical 'background' is particularly good—though would it be even more appropriate and positive to conceive of this aspect rather in terms of 'context'? This geographical division is sharply embodied in the 'Anglian-period' (i.e. pre-Viking, in effect tenth- and eleventh-century) sculpture, which falls into two quite separate groups: a cluster in the Lune Valley in the north of Lancashire, and a scatter of Mercian outliers at just three sites in Cheshire. The latter includes the exceptional monuments at Sandbach, located on a Roman road running from Staffordshire to the north. Scholarly emphasis has traditionally been focused on the artistic, iconographic and intellectual character of the sculpture—and with good reason, as it is very rich in these respects. Bailey rightly stresses the strongly ecclesiastical character of the earlier Lune Valley carvings, noting John Blair's suggestion that they may represent some form of monastic colonisation from Ripon, rooted in the remarkable ambitions of the seventh-century Bishop Wilfrid. Especially noteworthy in that regard is some potentially very early architectural carved stonework at Heysham. The situation was quite different in Cheshire, however, where centres and routes of production and trade appear to offer a more obvious framework for the distribution of the known examples of sculpture of the pre-Viking phase.

The situation after these areas were drawn into the spheres of Hiberno-Norse and Anglo-Scandinavian culture as a result of settlement, and of economic and demographic growth, in the Viking Period, involves some striking contrasts. Sculpture dated to the tenth and earlier eleventh centuries is much more widespread. It is found at more than five times as many locations, and these have a reasonably general distribution across the whole region although certain geographical clusters can be recognised. One such concentration is in the Wirral, the peninsula whose history of Viking-period settlement has been much discussed and so is well known. Lest one should too simply correlate Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture with known Norse settlement, the same situation does not especially pertain in Amounderness. Bailey notes that differences between the northern and southern areas continue in this period, and that the Viking-period sculptures are consistently associated with relatively high-status locations. One might add that almost all these sites also have names of purely English derivation rather than Norse, and include two sites with *Eccles*(-) names.

Tracing the patterns of influence and dependency reflected in the tenth century is an illuminating exercise. Bailey stresses that there is relatively little that is distinctively Scandinavian in the art of the Viking-period sculpture, although one Jelling-Style-derived profile animal on a fragmentary grave-marker from Chester is a conspicuous exception. The sculpture of this phase is otherwise distinguished by forms inherited and developed from Insular, pre-Viking traditions, supplemented by examples of the figural, allusively narrative depictions that are a persistent feature of Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture. A Sigurðr scene from St Wilfrid's Church at Halton (Lancs) is the most prominent case; tantalisingly elusive is the figure grappling with a serpentine beast on a hogback-fragment from Bolton-le-Sands (Lancs).

Even if contrasts between Cheshire and Lancashire in sculptural output persist from the Anglian into the Viking period, they are reconstituted in significant ways. Bailey observes, for instance, that particular influences on the sculpture of the Wirral can be traced specifically to Cumbria, implying important scope for the exploration of relatively local relationships and interactions in this corner of Scandinavian-settled England. It is good to see further recognition of the strength of specifically Irish influence on the sculpture produced around the Mersey. The 'circle-head cross' is identified as a peculiar development of north-west England, but with local variants from Cheshire to Cumbria, and examples also from north-east Wales and Ireland.

It remains open to discussion whether a little too much reliance is generally placed on 'degeneracy' of classically Anglian designs to assign sculpture to the ninth century in neighbouring West Yorkshire, and to the historical narrative of Ingimundr's expulsion from Dublin in 902 and settlement in the Wirral to divide Anglian- and Viking-period sculpture around the turn of the ninth to the tenth century. All the same, continuity between these two phases, which certainly covers these two centuries and beyond, is a historically vital characteristic of this regional assemblage. 'Round-shaft' columns (presumably normally with cross-heads) are

a particularly important aspect of continuity from the Anglian period into the Viking period, and one for which eastern Cheshire apparently drew substantially on models from the Peak District. Bailey makes brief but thoughtful reference to Phil Sidebottom's work on the Derbyshire sculptures, and to his arguments concerning the interpretation of the sites there. Bailey argues that the associations of those monuments with estates and their boundaries might indeed be an original feature.

The Anglian-period sculpture in both Cheshire and Lancashire is rich both in iconography and in epigraphy. There are two Old English runic inscriptions, thoroughly presented and discussed by David Parsons. Both pose teasing problems, and there will always be wide scope for alternative views. It may, though, be worth suggesting that in the case of the Overchurch inscription, near Meols on the Wirral, in particular, the form *folcæ* could bear more attention: not only, perhaps, as a true dative (this cross being raised *for* the 'folc'), but also in terms of the semantics of *folc* itself. Who exactly could the 'folc' have been here when the monument was raised? Professor Fred Orton's recent emphatically secular interpretation of the Bewcastle (Cumbria) cross and its inscription heightens awareness of a topic that ought to be considered more determinedly in such contexts. There is admittedly only a small amount of evidence to build upon, but one difference between the Anglian and Viking Periods in this area seems to be a reduction in epigraphic expression on the sculpture while the iconographic range is maintained, and indeed supplemented from Norse tradition. Once again, both comparison and contrast suggest significant patterns.

The progress of the British Academy Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture has been rather slow: nine volumes now published in twenty-seven years. And of course, its systematic presentation of the evidence, however thorough, will positively encourage alternative readings, interpretations and even identifications—as indeed it should. At a time when we can increasingly see how vulnerable digital databases actually are, and as 'sustainability' is becoming a key watchword, in respect of heritage and scholarly resources as much as anywhere else under political control, the need to secure a firm and comprehensive plan to complete this major series appears ever more urgent.

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VIKING WARFARE. BY I. P. STEPHENSON. *Amberley*. Stroud, 2012. 144pp. 46 colour and black-and-white illustrations. ISBN 978-1-84868-690-8.

This book presents itself as 'groundbreaking . . . the first comprehensive survey of Viking warfare in all its forms' (back cover), and it is true enough that there is no comparable work on the subject that seeks to make a general survey of the practice, history and technology of Viking-Age Scandinavian warfare. Judged against this mighty claim, it is perhaps inevitable that this slim book should be found somewhat wanting; it runs to only 113 pages of text and provides next to



nothing on the subject of Viking warfare beyond Anglo-Saxon England, or on the enormously significant relationships between religion, ideology and violence in the Iron-Age/early medieval North, the subject of much recent and ground-breaking study (see especially Price 2002, Jørgensen et al. 2003, Andrén 2006). It also skates remarkably lightly over the crucial subjects of naval technology, organisation and tactics (only seven pages relate directly to this subject: pp. 94–101). Ryan Lavelle's recent volume on the subject of late Anglo-Saxon warfare sets the benchmark for the level of detail and subtlety that an overview of this kind can achieve (Lavelle 2011; see also T. J. T. Williams 2011), and those hoping for something comparable to Lavelle's book would be advised to hold out for Gareth Williams' long-anticipated volume (G. Williams forthcoming).

However, the absence of critical apparatus implies that this book is intended primarily for the educated general reader, and it should therefore perhaps be judged not by its failure to plug a serious gap in the scholarly literature, but rather by what it adds to the corpus of popular publications treating early medieval warfare—so often written with the re-enactor or war-gaming enthusiast in mind. By those standards the book is far more successful, and Stephenson should be commended for engaging robustly with some of the written sources; he writes off sagas as direct evidence for the Viking Age early on (Chapter 2, 'Lies, Damn Lies and Sagas'), explodes the berserker as a myth ('no reality beyond the story or the chessboard', p.23), problematises the term 'Viking' (Chapter 1, 'Vikings!'), and so on. All of this is light years ahead of most popular literature on the subject and is important stuff; the casual misrepresentation of the Scandinavian past—especially in popular culture—has provided and continues to provide the dominant stock images for nationalist and far-right fantasy.

It is a shame then that these early chapters throw up their own problems, many of them needlessly caused by the overbearing tone with which the author communicates his views. Subtle and important discussions about the transmission of cultural knowledge or the impact of shamanic and magico-religious practices in northern warfare are thus swiftly dispensed with, the reader instead being vigorously directed to consider the 'real' evidence. To his great credit, Stephenson includes archaeological and art-historical material in this category alongside the major Frankish and Anglo-Saxon documentary sources (with a nod to Irish annals and skaldic verse; Arab and Byzantine evidence is not mentioned). Nevertheless, by his own admission, it is with the Anglo-Saxon material that the author is most concerned and many of the sources he mentions are barely referred to in subsequent chapters. Thus Chapter 3, 'The Wrath of God', exclusively describes the campaigns of Anglo-Saxon kings against Viking armies as reconstructed primarily from the major Anglo-Saxon narrative sources for the period 789 to 1016. There is almost nothing in the way of source criticism in the presentation of this material, a surprise after the author's sensitivity to historical texts in the preceding chapters.

Chapter 4, 'Bright Wargear', surveys the military equipment of Viking armies. Here the reader is introduced to the persistent and problematic idea that Anglo-

Saxon and Scandinavian warriors used essentially identical tactics and equipment and that, therefore, observations made about the former must apply equally to the latter. This approach, it must be said, does help to undermine the sort of cultural-historical assumptions made about archaeological material that still bedevils much popular literature on the subject; the interconnectedness of northern Europe with the rest of the continent—as well as with the Islamic east and the Byzantine world—is consistently stressed. However, blunt statements such as ‘The Vikings were no different in respect of armour provision than their enemies’ (p. 51) are not backed up by the author with sufficient evidence. Indeed, suspicion builds that this argument is employed as a methodological sleight of hand that enables Stephenson to avoid gaps in his research by basing broad-brush conclusions on the pan-European (and especially Anglo-Saxon) evidence with which he is more familiar. Thus the effects of a tenth-century ‘military equipment revolution’ (the fashion for conical helmets) are taken for granted as applying to Viking equipment, despite the admission in the previous sentence that only a single example of a Viking helmet has ever been found (the Gjermundbu helmet). Although the same issues recur in Stephenson’s discussion of weapons, here they are less pronounced, and the author does a good job of contextualising Viking weaponry in the light of late Iron-Age, Roman, eastern and Anglo-Saxon examples. References to other works are included here—albeit unsystematically: references are implied (e.g. ‘Christiansen argues’, p. 102) which do not appear subsequently in the bibliography (presumably Eric Christiansen is meant), and books are included in the bibliography which have signally failed to make any discernible impact on the author (Neil Price’s *The Viking Way* (Uppsala, 2002) being one)—and the representational evidence is also made subject to criticism. More illustrations would have been helpful, especially in the description of sword lengths and pommel shapes. Some specialist terms are also left unexplained and un-illustrated (e.g., ‘lenticular’; ‘mid-ribbed and fullered examples’, p. 64).

Chapter 5, ‘Hold Their Shields Aright’, is where the flaws in this book become most apparent. It begins with a strange paragraph in which Stephenson lays his ideological cards on the table: ‘why was the Viking and Anglo-Saxon way of war the same? . . . The short answer is that Viking warfare begins within Western warfare’ (p. 76). Ultimately, this view is derived from and justified by Stephenson’s conviction, articulated most forcefully in his previous book (*The Late Anglo-Saxon Army*), that ‘the single most defining ideological event in Anglo-Saxon warfare came at Marathon in 490 B.C.’ (Stephenson 2007, p.28). There is not the space here fully to criticise Stephenson’s view of cultural and technological hyper-diffusion or his assumptions about the inherent superiority of ‘the Western way of war’. Suffice it to say that these ideas are far less accepted (or acceptable) than his presentation of them implies. These prejudices subsequently justify a reliance on evidence for Anglo-Saxon military tactics, alongside assumptions based on technological and historical reconstructions of archaic and classical Hoplite warfare, to interpret the battlefield behaviour of Viking warriors. Given Stephenson’s prior wholesale rejection (rightly or wrongly) of

later medieval Scandinavian texts, it is curious, to say the least, that he chooses instead to rely on comparison with events of the fifth century B.C. Nor does he have any qualms about using Old English poems (with all their attendant dating and compositional uncertainties) that present fictional and biblical stories (e.g., *Beowulf* and *Judith*) to elucidate Viking military practice. The final chapter, 'The Place of Slaughter', addresses battles and focuses on Maldon and Brunanburh, the former battle also extensively covered in his previous book (Stephenson 2007).

There are, it must be said, flashes of insightful and original thought throughout this volume. The notion put forward on page 94 that the raid on Lindisfarne functioned (and functions) as a *leitmotif* for the way in which the Vikings and Viking warfare in general have been remembered and characterised is an interesting one. Points made in Chapter 4 about the power and significance of outward display also make a valuable contribution (p. 71), as do comparative observations about the survival of military equipment in the archaeological record (pp. 40–41). The author also deserves credit for choosing to take a thoroughly interdisciplinary approach to the subject, as well as stressing the centrality of warfare to the period and to the way that Vikings were, and are, perceived (and, indeed, how the term 'Viking' itself should be understood). Unfortunately, however, these qualities are undermined by substantial problems. Some, such as inconsistent referencing and undefined terms, can be ascribed to editorial failings on the part of the publishers. However, the most significant issue for this reviewer is the author's flawed ideological agenda, an aspect of the work which results in strident conclusions being made on the back of prejudiced and dubious cross-cultural and cross-chronological analogy.

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THE FUNCTION OF KINSHIP IN MEDIEVAL NORDIC LEGISLATION. By HELLE VOGT. *Medieval Law and its Practice* 9. Brill. Leiden, 2010. 304 pp. ISBN 9789004189225.

The doctoral dissertation of which this is a revised translation had the stated aim of raising new questions about the Nordic provincial laws and in particular the ideological and political motivations that lay behind the concept of kinship exhibited in them. From this seemingly narrow starting point the author has developed a wide-ranging and absorbing study that covers far more ground than the title might suggest. This is both a strength and a weakness: a strength in that we learn much more about the background of the medieval Nordic laws than we would expect, and a very slight weakness in that more than a third of the book has passed before the main subject is treated in detail.

The first part of the book, 'The ideological and practical background for the legislation of the provincial laws', introduces the subject of kinship and its two forms: alliance-based and canonical. The subject is set in its historical context and European conditions are compared to those in the Nordic countries. The author then discusses the legal sources, social background, origins and dating of the Nordic provincial laws and how far they might be regarded as customary or newly-developed. The author presents the contrasting views of Ole Fenger and Elsa Sjöholm together with the later developments of the latter's arguments by Lars Ivar Hansen and Michael H. Gelting. The conclusion that she reaches is that the main aims of the laws were to introduce an ideology rooted in canonical kinship but also to enhance the position of the king and create a foundation of legal norms. She concludes therefore that the authors of the laws took the existing norms and customs as a point of departure and combined them with the (new) ideological concepts.

The second half of this section introduces the Peace Ideology and the role of the king in legislation and philosophy of the laws. The historical background of kinship in particular and European legislation in general is discussed and the philosophical basis of what became the King's Peace is also presented. The conclusions reached are that much depended on the strength of the individual king, and that in Sweden the relatively late unification of the kingdom meant that the king's influence was less than elsewhere in Scandinavia. Finally the author investigates whether the laws themselves were functional or merely ideological. Here she contrasts the views of Ole Fenger and David Gaunt, who contend that the laws were removed from practicality, and those of Elsa Sjöholm and Per Norberg who argue that the law codes were practical. Vogt considers that there was an accommodation between ideology and practice and that the laws as drawn up were influenced by custom, even if there was a conflicting ideology behind them.

The second part of the book, 'The function of canonical kinship in the provincial laws', presents various aspects of canonical kinship and how it was applied to different areas of legislation: collective sanction, inheritance, property transfer, allodial rights, elder care and marriage. Much of the matter is comparative, with the Danish, Norwegian and Swedish legislation being presented in series and the differences and similarities then discussed, together with possible reasons

for the more fundamental disparities. This is a useful methodology, but it does result in a certain amount of repetition, and some of the arguments presented are contradictory, such as that on page 216 discussing the rights of relatives to first refusal in land sale. Tabulation of the main points of contrast and similarity might have offered the information to the reader in a more easily absorbed form and rendered comparison easier to view in broad. Nonetheless, this section of the book is thorough and well-furnished with illustrative examples from the law texts themselves, particularly those of Denmark and Norway.

It appears that the author is less comfortable with the laws of provincial Sweden than with those of Norway and in particular Denmark. There is a certain inconsistency in the naming convention (*Dala Law* or *Dalar Law*, for example) and at one point, on page 138, she appears to indicate that *Hälsinge Law* and *Dala Law* are versions of the *Västgöta Law*. There is also no consistency in the choice between quotations from Schlyter's editions of the original text and Holmbäck-Wessén's modern Swedish translation. The translation into English of the Swedish text is at times inaccurate, for example on page 203 (footnote 68) where *tuem punctum* is translated 'three points' and *þæne tu* as 'these point (*sic*)'. These lapses are unfortunate because they are distracting and make the work of less value to the reader seeking knowledge of the subject matter in relation to the Swedish provincial laws.

The book concludes with a chapter summarising the investigation followed by comprehensive bibliographies and indexes. The conclusion that the author reaches is that the legislation in the Scandinavian (or Nordic, her terminology is again inconsistent) kingdoms aimed not merely to set out the legal rules that applied but also to introduce the notion of canonical kinship. This latter, she argues, led to a reduction of strife within families but also to the development of a nobility based on blood, rather than merit, that persisted at least until the mid-seventeenth century in Norway and Denmark.

This is an attractively presented book, so it is unfortunate that the author is not well-served by a poor translation, presumably by a non-native English speaker, and by a less than diligent editor. There is an unacceptably high number of typographical and grammatical errors. Three examples will serve to illustrate the problem: on page 46 'lose ends' for 'loose ends', on page 280 'forster kins' for 'foster kin' and on page 237 'consumed' for 'consummated', but these are by no means isolated examples. The English is also in many places unidiomatic and at times disturbingly so. In particular, the translation of the deadly sin *superbia* as 'haughtiness' instead of 'pride' is grating and 'unchastity' instead of 'lust' seems weak and merely prudish.

The translator and language editor cannot, however, be blamed for the omission of Gotland from the map of Sweden (although Öland finds its place, albeit unnamed) or for the failure of the author to mention the law of the Gotlanders at all, even if only to discount it from discussion, as she (perhaps with reason) does the Icelandic laws. Comparisons between the laws relating to kinship, inheritance and marriage exhibited in the Gutnish text and in the Swedish mainland provincial

laws would have been of interest, especially since that law remained in force in Gotland until 1645.

Despite the criticisms that have been laid against a number of details in it, many of them not of the author's making, this is a thoughtful and thorough examination of the subject matter and in presenting the arguments for the first time in English can only be of positive value to the discussion of medieval laws, both Nordic and in the wider European context. Much of the footnote matter refers to previous scholarship on the subject and Vogt gives arguments both in support of her reading and against it. This means that the book presents a balanced view of the topic and introduces the reader to other works on this and related matters. Since these are on the whole well-referenced, they provide a means for readers to refer directly to the source material and make their own decisions on the arguments presented.

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WITCHCRAFT AND MAGIC IN THE NORDIC MIDDLE AGES. By STEPHEN A. MITCHELL. *University of Pennsylvania Press*. Philadelphia, 2011. xiv + 368 pp. ISBN 978-0-8122-4290-4.

Stephen Mitchell's study follows, and is in part based on, a long series of previous articles on the topic of medieval Scandinavian magic. It is divided into six chapters (along with an introduction and conclusion), on witchcraft and the past; daily life; narration of magic; mythologies; the law; and gender. There is, of course, considerable overlap between the topics, and a number of sources are considered from different angles. The period covered is roughly 1100 to 1500.

The book upon opening initially has a clean and uncluttered appearance. Unfortunately, this proves a deceptive boon, the removal of the notes—of which there are many, giving much-needed background information and references—to the end of the book being a constant source of inconvenience for anyone wishing to get to grips with the points under discussion. Given the equally unfortunate decision to cite sources only in translation in the main text (with very few exceptions), and the tendency for arguments to be presented only in broad strokes, with any detail or dissenting views generally consigned to the notes, we are left with something that appears to be aimed at a popular market more than a scholarly one.

In the opening chapters Mitchell emphasises some important matters of approach, even if they are in themselves well established, such as the cultural diversity within the Scandinavian area, even for example within Church law; the growing influence of Germany; the problems of thinking in terms of an élite/non-élite dichotomy; the divergence between evidence from different disciplines (the predominance of Óðinn in recorded myths, but not in place names, for example).

A plethora of sources is presented, or alluded to, throughout the book, and this is one of its strengths. We have some informative and important, but rather obscure, materials presented, such as the Norwegian sex charm '*Rannveig rauðu*

*skaltu streða*', along with materials from outside the West Norse canon, such as the Old Swedish poem 'The Philosopher's Stone', and archaeological finds such as the Dømmestrup amulet, inscribed 'against harm'. We also have a good many very well-known sources presented, like *Skírnismál* or *Eiríks saga rauða*. Here I feel Mitchell is at his weakest: most of these sources have been discussed at much greater length, and depth, elsewhere, and little new is added.

The length of the study is clearly a problem (as Mitchell acknowledges, p. 116). Even a succinctly written work four times this length would struggle to cover the broad topic of magic and witchcraft with any thoroughness; the result of the brevity is that the discussion can feel rather desultory, a stream of examples mentioned almost *en passant*, rather than anything approaching a full survey of the subject. Textual cruxes tend to be left undiscussed, and regrettably the brevity extends also to the notes, where, despite the useful richness of references given, many important studies which discuss the texts under consideration are all too often simply not mentioned (several studies of *Volsa þáttur*, for example, are left out—regrettably, considering the importance Mitchell places on the use of folklore materials—while the rather unsatisfactory article of Steinsland and Vogt from 1981 is the main reference; missing too, in discussing the meaning of *troll*, is Ármann Jakobsson's important work appearing in *Saga-Book XXXII* (2008), 39–68).

However, Mitchell's mastery of the wide range of sources he cites certainly adds fundamentally to our understanding. One example is his discussion of Óðinn (p. 99). He notes, as has been established by earlier scholarship, that the 'contemporary' Icelandic sagas (*samtíðarsögur*) appear to eschew any mention of magic or the supernatural, but offers a somewhat revisionist view of this observation, by noting how certain dream characters in *Hrafn's saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* are Odinic, though demonised: and this demonisation of Óðinn is part of an ongoing tradition, which reaches a new height in a late medieval Swedish source, where the 'god' appears all in black, with black carriage, horse, dogs etc. It is regrettable that, perhaps owing again to lack of space, this insight is not elaborated and refined by investigating other sources. Surely, for example, in *Njáls saga* ch. 156 the Viking Bróðir's portentous vision of ravens before the Battle of Clontarf, which his companion Óspakr interprets as the black devils that will drag him down to hell for his heathen beliefs, represents a subtle reference to a demonic Óðinn (through the metonymy of his birds of battle: the god himself is never mentioned)?

It is in the two last chapters, on the interconnected topics of law and gender, that Mitchell clearly excels, and has most to offer by way of discussion of hitherto little-mentioned materials and the offering of new interpretations. The discussion, and the confrontation with the problems the sources raise, are conducted here on a higher level than in earlier parts of the book. Mitchell offers what to my knowledge is the most thorough analysis of witchcraft as it appears in the Scandinavian laws, and he traces the development of its classification, from primarily something concerned with manipulating sexual desires, into something rather more serious, classed alongside heresy and other forces that undermined society, in step with the increasing continental influence. He also traces how women associated with

witchcraft were mainly concerned with the more private area of sex charms and other homely matters, whereas men were involved in more direct threats to authority. The chapter on gender is particularly interesting, as one of Mitchell's main sources is medieval wall-paintings, depicting matters such as milk-theft by witches. He also offers a penetrating analysis of how the murals, particularly in the vestibule (*vapenhus*), represented the antithesis of the ideal of womanly behaviour, a mode of living that was policed not simply by the male-dominated Church, but by female members of society in general. Whilst these matters would certainly benefit from further study, Mitchell is able to conclude, in a statement reflecting the topic's complexity—adumbrated in this chapter rather more plainly than, *mutatis mutandis*, it has been in all parts of the book—that 'the relationship between gender and Nordic witchcraft in the later Middle Ages is exceedingly complex exactly because it does not seem to follow any simple rules about how witches are portrayed or treated in literature, law, and legal documents' (p. 200).

A few small editorial matters are irritating, such as the constantly inept hyphenation: *tröllap-ings*, *Óðin-skarl*, etc., and there are occasional mistakes: thus, while the thought of a 'leafy-haired' (*löfharæþ*) witch is enticing, it is an illusion, a misreading of *l* as *f* in *lösharæþ* 'loose-haired' (pp. 135, 272)—the result, presumably, of using the ancient edition of Schlyter for the Västergötland laws (instead of the more recent Wessén edition). References have not always been checked; for example, Sands 2009 is not in the bibliography.

Mitchell's work forms an important landmark in the study of Scandinavian witchcraft, with provocative intimations of areas that cry out for continued research.

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SAINTS AND THEIR LIVES ON THE PERIPHERY: VENERATION OF SAINTS IN SCANDINAVIA AND EASTERN EUROPE (c. 1000–1200). Edited by HAKI ANTONSSON AND ILДАР H. GARIPZANOV. *Cursor Mundi* 9. Brepols. Turnhout, 2010. viii + 319 pp. ISBN 978-2-53033-8.

The twelve papers assembled here on saints' cults and hagiography in Scandinavia and Kievan Rus' in the eleventh and twelfth centuries derive from a conference convened in 2008 at the Centre for Medieval Studies in Bergen. The editors, Haki Antonsson and Ildar Garipzanov, add to the accumulating set of multi-authored volumes adopting a broadly comparative view of state-formation, religious conversion and early Christian textual culture across Northern, Central and Eastern Europe in the early and central Middle Ages. The closest correspondences are with the three parallel volumes originating in further conferences held at Bergen since 2003—*The Making of Christian Myths in the Periphery of Latin Christendom*, edited by Lars Bøje Mortensen (Museum Tusculaneum Press, 2006); and *Franks, Northmen, and Slavs and Historical Narratives and Christian Identity on a European Periphery*, both edited by Ildar Garipzanov (Brepols, 2008



and 2011)—but also with the more systematically co-ordinated historical surveys in *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c.900–1200*, edited by Nora Berend (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

The collection encompasses a diverse range of approaches to historical and textual questions connected with the veneration of saints across its geographical span. The editors make a commendable effort to establish cohesion, aided by Gabor Klaniczay, who places his imprimatur at the end in a summary that sets out some parallels and differences between the early Scandinavian and Rus' cults and those emerging at the same time in Central Europe. The editors' introduction concisely articulates the importance of early saints' cults in Scandinavia and Rus' as potential markers of formative interactions in the eleventh and twelfth centuries between secular and ecclesiastical communities in these recently Christianised regions, and their changing relationships with cultural centres in the Latin West and Byzantium to which they were connected. Yet few of the contributors have much to say about patterns of cultural interaction between different regions in the periphery, or specific avenues of cultural traffic from 'core' centres elsewhere in Europe. Regional comparisons are likewise implicit for the most part, arising from the simple juxtaposition of papers with discrete, nationally bounded interests. Unexpectedly, therefore, the contribution of *Saints and their Lives on the Periphery* does not really lie in its interregional scope, which produces few new insights.

Previous scholarship on the early cults in Scandinavia and Rus' has been more exclusive than the medieval evidence recommends in its devotion to the martyred rulers and other native dynastic saints. Principal reference-points like Haki's back-catalogue on northern princely martyrs—notably his comparative study *St Magnús of Orkney* (Brill, 2007)—and Klaniczay's *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princes* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) substantially revised the extant historiography on medieval western European dynastic saints and their hagiography. The clear step forward in the present volume lies in the readiness of both editors and some of their authors to pay attention to saints' cults of all sorts: foreign and native, universal and local, dynastic and non-dynastic. This need not quell the appetites of Scandinavianists happy with the regular *kjöttboller*. St Olaf maintains a reassuring presence. We are in good hands as Lars Bøje Mortensen reworks his revisionist account of the transformative effect of the foundation of the archiepiscopal see of Nidaros in 1152/3 in the history of Olaf's cult in Norway and its early textualisation. One of the most important contributions in this volume is Lenka Jirouskova's account of her investigations of the transmission history of the *Passio Olavi* and the associated miracle collections. Her forthcoming edition will make major corrections to the conventional wisdom on the development of the Latin legend in the twelfth century. The summary she presents here demonstrates much greater variation among the manuscripts than has previously been recognised, and she supplies the outline of her argument that the Fountains manuscript, upon which current knowledge is founded, represents the final elaboration, in c.1170, of a protean tradition whose earliest knowable form is that transmitted in the Helsinki breviary fragment.

It is the contributors writing on Rus' who show most interest in the evidence for intercultural exchange across national or supra-regional boundaries, although the results are mixed. The only paper centrally concerned with contact between Rus' and Scandinavia is Tatjana Jackson's exploration of the evidence for the veneration of St Olaf in twelfth-century Novgorod. She and Ildar Garipzanov both demonstrate the importance of this trading centre as a meeting point between Latin and Greek Christianity, at which Scandinavians were frequent visitors. Ildar Garipzanov's account of the role of local princely patronage of cults in Novgorod comprises a scintillating interrogation of the whole range of textual and material evidence for the veneration of saints in eleventh-century Novgorod. The dynamism of the wider cultural networks focused on Novgorod is amply demonstrated by the indications that Eastern saints like Clement and Nicholas reached Russia from the west, at the same time as they were becoming important in Scandinavia. A complementary piece by Monica White assesses the impact of Byzantine monastic influences in Rus' channelled through the Kievan Caves monastery, and suggests that the cult of the Rurikid dynastic martyrs Boris and Gleb may have emulated the cults of the Eastern military saints George and Demetrios.

An altogether different tone is set by Marina Paramonova, who mounts a committed nativist defence of the Rus' princely martyr-cult of Boris and Gleb against the hypothetical influence of the 'Bohemian' Wenceslas tradition. She concludes that 'the formation of the cult . . . was conditioned by internal developments in early Russian society' (p. 282). Paramonova is most likely right about Bohemian influence—although it is disorienting that she is happy to entertain suggestions that the cults of Olaf of Norway and Stephen of Hungary were influenced by the Rus' martyrs, on the strength of analogies similar to those deemed too weak to support dependence of the Russian tradition on the Wenceslas texts. The problem here arises from the assumption that early hagiographical writings on dynastic saints must embody a national ecclesiastical identity. It is worth noting that the early Wenceslas tradition is arguably connected as closely to Saxony as to Bohemia; but the early texts were no more 'national' in outlook than, say, Abbo of Fleury's *Passio Eadmundi* (a text concerning an East Anglian royal martyr produced, very likely for an élite audience in Lorraine, by a native of the Orléanais, following his stay at a Fenland abbey). Early Wenceslas texts were connected with specific ecclesiastical centres outside Bohemia—places like Regensburg, a key stepping stone in the communication network between Latin Christendom and Rus'. The only paper here expressly concerned with the veneration of saints at a specific foreign centre outside Scandinavia or Rus' is James Palmer's on the ninth-century hagiographical writings of Anskar and Rimbert of Bremen. Palmer's argument is that these texts were designed to serve the formation of local loyalties and alliances. Palmer's piece is not concerned with Hamburg-Bremen's role in the Christianisation of Scandinavia, but it is an exemplary reminder of the dominance of finite institutional interests in the promotion of saints' cults.

The papers concentrating on Scandinavia are only marginally concerned with the origins and nature of outside influences. Haki Antonsson's paper deals with variation in the models of sanctity associated with the Conversion period in

mainland Scandinavia and Iceland. Although he shows that the characteristics of different patterns of veneration owed much to the time and place in which a cult was promoted, often long after the missionary period, he also attributes patterns of variation distinguished at the national level to historical conditions at the time of the Conversion. So, for instance, he attributes the promotion of foreign missionary saints at episcopal centres in Sweden in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to the lack of royal authority in Sweden in the tenth and eleventh centuries rather than, say, the circumstances and identities of the institutions concerned in the later period.

Two of the contributors on Scandinavian subjects attend more closely to the importance of institutional identities and practices. Anna Maria Ciardi looks at the role of the cathedral chapters that first began to appear in the late eleventh century in creating and mediating the cults of saints through liturgy and textual production. Åslaug Ommundsen focuses on diocesan variation in the culting of saints in twelfth-century Norway. A survey of evidence from ordinals, the early Norwegian law-codes and church dedications allows her to build up a picture of the local and universal saints venerated. Her survey indicates that French and German models were important as well as English influences.

The two remaining papers, on narrative writing in Denmark and Iceland, both argue for the role of texts in national myth-making or as an expression of nationally delimited literary tendencies. Aidan Conti addresses Ælnoth of Canterbury's combined Danish dynastic chronicle and hagiography of the martyr St Knud of Odense (a text dated to the years 1110 x 1117 in more recent investigations, but most likely composed by 1113). His argument is that Ælnoth stepped beyond hagiographical conventions in order to construct a place for the Danish people in the broader framework of Christian history. Jonas Wellendorf reviews Icelandic vernacular saints' lives of 1150 x 1250. He identifies a group of texts on late antique martyrs in which their Arian persecutors are transformed by the Icelandic writers into pagan idolaters. These writers nativise their accounts in various ways, but their invented descriptions of pagan activities were clearly informed by scriptural rather than native paganism. Wellendorf's suggestion is that memories of Icelandic paganism may already have been effectively suppressed. This in turn, he suggests, may offer further reason to suspect the reliability of reconstructions of native paganism elsewhere in the sagas. The point is well taken; but without wanting to suggest that medieval Icelandic accounts of pre-Christian religion are anywhere reliable, one does wonder whether it is safe to calibrate memories of the past on the basis of one particular set of authorial choices.

*Saints and their Lives on the Periphery* contains much to chew on: *kjøttboller*, *blini* and a smattering of *nouvelle cuisine*, if you like. It amply demonstrates the continuing vitality of scholarship in the study of medieval saints in Northern and Eastern Europe, which Haki Antonsson has done much to stimulate. The interests of the contributors may coincide imperfectly with the aspirations of the editors; but few scholars have the capacity to pursue interdisciplinary medieval research from Nidaros to Kiev. We cannot all be Ildar Garipzanov. Yet there is an interesting commonality through many of these papers that might bear closer reflection. Here as elsewhere, the adoption of core and periphery models in the study of regionalism

in medieval Europe tends to privilege agency in the periphery. As Klaniczay puts it, 'the new Christian cultures of the peripheries, far from being passive recipients of a cultural or institutional transfer, developed their own versions of the cults and the ecclesiastical models they received from the various religious centres after their conversion' (p. 304). It is a curious fact that the use of this model, despite its emphases on regionality, institutions, networks and mobility, often seems to end up perpetuating and legitimating national distinctions, and nationally delimited historiographical projects. What, I wonder, does this tell us?

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KINGS' SAGAS AND NORWEGIAN HISTORY. PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES. By SHAMI GHOSH. *The Northern World* 54. Brill. Leiden and Boston, 2011. 253 pp. ISBN 978-90-04-20989-3.

The book under review has a threefold aim, according to its author: it gives a critical overview of recent research concerning the Kings' Sagas, highlights some of the problems posed by the source material and suggests new insights for further research. As the author points out, previous research has concentrated on finding out the relationships between the texts and identifying their sources. Only in the past twenty years or so have scholars cast light on the social, historical and literary context of the Kings' Sagas.

Apart from the introduction the book has three main chapters that deal with the relationship between skaldic verse and saga prose, the non-native sources of the Kings' Sagas and their meaning as historical texts. The chapter concerning the non-native sources of the Kings' Sagas in fact concentrates on possible Anglo-Norman sources and influences, although at the end of the chapter the author also discusses the broader context of historical writing in Iceland and Norway. Skaldic verse and Anglo-Norman influence are given emphasis, but to the credit of the author it has to be said that these themes reveal that more remains to be said about the Kings' Sagas.

The book distills some essential questions for the study of the sagas and their relationship to historiography: what is the distinction between fact and fiction in the sagas? How do our conceptions affect the way we *believe* medieval Icelanders viewed the past? Ghosh questions genre divisions and reminds us that such works as the *Íslendingasögur* as a whole, *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* should be taken into account when considering the medieval (Norse-)Icelandic concept of history (pp. 195, 198). According to the author, all these sagas can be seen as reflections of the past. This promotion of a holistic view of the past is related to the question of genres in saga literature in general, and Ghosh urges the posing of questions across genres. The author confronts others with his views and is not afraid to challenge eminent scholars if he disagrees with them (e.g. pp. 83 and 135).

The book touches upon the very delicate theme of the 'nationality' of the Kings' Sagas and Norwegian and Icelandic identities (pp. 42–46). Both Icelanders and

Norwegians drew inspiration from the sagas when building their national identities in the nineteenth century, but the sagas may already have served the purpose of creating 'a national identity' when they were first written down, as Diana Whaley has suggested (*Heimskringla. An Introduction* (London, 1991), p. 40). In my opinion, though, it is not possible to refer to 'national identity' in the thirteenth century without anachronism. Perhaps it would be more correct to refer to group identities. It could be argued that by the beginning of the thirteenth century Icelanders had become a group that saw itself as different from Norwegians, but had difficulties in constructing a group identity. Even though Icelanders already stood out as a group on the ground of their isolated geographical position, they still had to prove that they were different from the Norwegians. The problem of Icelandic group identity was that the group had to find its own definitions. Seeing the (Kings') Sagas as an expression of Icelanders' attempts to define themselves as a group is one way of defining their significance.

The relationship between verse and prose is the subject of the greater part of the book. Ghosh calls into question the source value of skaldic verses, because according to him they were not usually eyewitness accounts but were composed later than the events they describe. His hypothesis is that the poems were meant for courtly performance and were not preserved from the start with any prose narrative (p. 83). The problematic relationship of verse and prose is well illuminated by one of Ghosh's examples, dealing with the concept of 'king of Norway'. The verse about Haraldr hárfagri in *Heimskringla* (*Haraldskvæði*) does not identify him as a ruler of 'Norway' or 'Norwegians', but the prose refers to him as king of Norway. Does this mean that the author of the prose is projecting concepts back in time and making his own interpretations? (p. 44). Are the poems then worthless as sources? Ghosh suggests that only through examination of the textual transmission could the oldest poems be traced and their reliability evaluated.

Medieval Icelandic society has long been seen as an exception in the European context and its saga literature has traditionally been praised as something unique. Only lately has the existence of Icelandic *Sonderkultur* been questioned, for example by Margaret Clunies Ross, Rudolf Simek and Torfi Tulinius, and the author clearly shares this scepticism. It is a challenge to establish how the *konungasögur*, or sagas in general, relate to other medieval historiography. Ghosh answers the challenge by showing possible connections between Anglo-Norman and Old Norse historiography (pp. 119–29). Ghosh reminds us that *Historia Norwegiae* may have been influenced by Danish and German histories and Theodoricus' *Historia* by French tradition. He therefore suggests that at the end of the twelfth century there must have been mutual interaction, and that influence is perceptible in these historiographies (p. 129). Ghosh suggests further that the relations between Old Norse historiography and other European historiography should be a focus of future research (p. 134). This view has not been totally neglected by scholars, but it is true that studies have concentrated mostly on Latin texts. We still lack a comparative analysis that would cast light on what is common ground for Old Norse and other European traditions as well as the differences between them.

The title of this book implies a very broad theme, but the author manages to concentrate on the essentials: the aims of the book are fulfilled. The text is provided with thorough footnotes in which detailed discussion is continued without detracting from the experience of reading. The appendices attached to the main chapters are useful and support the text. The book leaves open more questions than it answers, but its specific merit is that it points out inadequacies in the present state of research and what could be done in future to make them good.

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MORKINSKINNA. Edited by ÁRMANN JAKOBSSON and ÞÓRÐUR INGI GUÐJÓNSSON. *Íslenzk fornrit XXIII–XXIV. Hið íslenska fornritafélag*. Reykjavík, 2011. lxviii + 332, cxv + 270 pp. 12 maps, 20 colour and black-and-white plates. ISBN 978-9979-893-97-4.

The long-awaited edition of *Morkinskinna* in the *Íslenzk fornrit* series has now appeared in two handsome volumes. As explained in the Introduction, the edition was undertaken by Ármann Jakobsson in 2003; in 2008 Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson was drafted in to assist with what, the editors remind us, is the longest text to have appeared in the series since Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson's edition of *Heimskringla* was completed in 1951. This essential text in the Kings' Saga genre probably originally covered the span of Norwegian history from the death of St Óláfr in 1030 to the same end point as is reached in *Ágrip*, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*: the beginning of the reign of King Sverrir in 1177, although this can only be deduced, as the text of *Morkinskinna* is now defective at the beginning and entirely absent at the end. The two volumes of the new edition are arranged so that the first encompasses the reigns of Magnús inn góði and his uncle Haraldr harðráði, of course including the one year of their joint rule; the second includes the reigns of the subsequent ten rulers of Norway, most of them sharing or contesting the kingdom with one or even two co-regents for at least some part of their reign. Each volume includes a detailed introduction, almost entirely the work of Ármann, while Þórður Ingi provides an account of the manuscripts and procedures used in the edition.

This arrangement serves to highlight the difference in scale between the treatment of the reigns of Magnús and, especially, Haraldr harðráði, and those of their successors; it is striking that the thirty-year reign of Haraldr's son Óláfr kyrrri 'the Peaceful' occupies a mere fourteen pages. The clue may be in the name: Ármann remarks, as did Theodore Andersson before him, that peaceful kings seem not to have roused as much interest in saga writers as those that engaged in warfare and hostilities (p. I vi). Presumably, also, this unevenness results from unknowable discrepancies between the sources, now mostly vanished, that were available to the author for the different parts of

his history. Whatever the origins of the structure of the text, this unevenness has been largely perpetuated in the Kings' Sagas overall, since *Morkinskinna* was an important source for later historians. Those best acquainted with the treatment of this material in *Heimskringla*—as most readers are—may be surprised to find how closely the text of *Morkinskinna* is followed in the latter part of *Heimskringla* and, indeed, in *Fagrskinna*. The dominance of Haraldr harðráði in *Morkinskinna* is compounded by the number of *þættir*, often but not exclusively anecdotes relating encounters of the king with an Icelander, who may or may not be a poet, that cluster about this king. Many of these *þættir* have, of course, customarily been treated as self-contained texts, edited far more often than *Morkinskinna* itself (not least in the *Íslenzk fornrit* series), anthologised, and analysed as a distinct literary genre, though one that is generally not acknowledged in medieval sources. It is an important corrective to experience them reinserted in their original context.

The status of the *þættir* has been a lynch-pin in the long-standing debate about the relationship between the existing manuscript, from about 1275, and the putative original version, reckoned to date from about 1220. Scholars such as Finnur Jónsson and Gustav Indrebø argued that most of the *þættir* were not in the original *Morkinskinna*; passages clearly derived from *Ágrip* were also thought to be later insertions. Ármann rehearses these arguments summarily, but dismisses this mode of analysis as the product of an epoch when saga texts of all kinds were dismembered in an attempt to reconstruct their lost original forms. He points out that, whereas scholarly assessment of the *Íslendingasögur* has largely moved on from this viewpoint, less attention has been paid to the literary qualities of the Kings' Sagas. He makes a strong case, on New Philological principles, for evaluating the existing text on its own merits. He refers the inclusion of *þættir* and other digressions in *Morkinskinna* to the medieval practice of *amplificatio*, and finds a parallel in the multi-stranded structures of medieval romances, already put forward by Carol Clover as a model for the construction of some Icelandic narratives (*The Icelandic Saga*, 1982). This argument would benefit from more detailed development; in particular the question arises how the kind of expansion found in *Morkinskinna* differs from that in a text of comparable scope, such as *Heimskringla*, by comparison with the spare narrative of *Ágrip*, and what these differences tell us about their different authors and audiences. But the literary emphasis of Ármann's analysis makes for a sympathetic and detailed account of the text. The *þættir*, according to Ármann, have an important function in rendering the text more multi-faceted than the generality of Kings' Sagas, with a strong emphasis on Norwegian society, the common man and the role of the individual—both regal and subordinate—underlying the foreground narrative of high politics and royal affairs.

Ármann instances two *þættir* that demonstrate the function of these stories in revealing aspects of the kings they feature. The first is that of the Icelander Ívarr Ingimundarson, who is cured of lovesickness by the sympathetic attention

of King Eysteinn Magnússon. Frequently edited (and translated) as a free-standing story under the title *Ívars þáttur*, it has attracted most attention for sharing the love-triangle narrative also found in *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa* and *Gunnlaugs saga*. But it is preserved only in *Morkinskinna*, where it is introduced as ‘*frá Eysteini konungi ok Ívari*’, and is explicitly offered as an example of the king’s generosity and thoughtfulness to his followers; it is immediately followed by a description of Eysteinn and an appraisal of his success as king, in which he stands in overt contrast to his brother Sigurðr Jörðsalafari. Comparison of kings, both within the *þættir* and more generally, is revealed, in Ármann’s analysis, as a key theme in *Morkinskinna*, with the central role of Haraldr harðráði establishing him as the model against which all other monarchs are measured in one way or another. The theme is further explored in *Hreiðars þáttur heimiska*. Without demurring from the consensus that *Hreiðars þáttur* is very likely to have existed in an earlier form before its incorporation in *Morkinskinna*, Ármann uses it to provide an image that encapsulates his view of the role of the *þættir* in the text: the ‘wise fool’ Hreiðarr is used to compare the stature and qualities of the joint and rival kings Magnús inn góði and Haraldr harðráði. The *þáttur* includes a puzzling scene in which Hreiðarr insists on walking around King Magnús and inspecting him from every angle; a metaphor, Ármann suggests, for the manner in which the *þættir* encircle the kings that figure in them, assessing them from different angles, and often from the perspective of an outsider, most often a simple Icelandic: ‘*þættir Morkinskinnu eru hringsól um konunga*’ (p. I lviii). This perception and much else in his analysis derive from Ármann’s monograph on *Morkinskinna*, *Staður í nýjum heimi. Konungasagan Morkinskinnu* (2002), and a wealth of other articles. But other scholars are amply referred to, and an exceptionally full bibliography is provided, including many studies of the *konungasögur* previously unknown to this reviewer. It must be said that this edition is more outward-looking than previous *Íslenzk fornrit* volumes, Ármann supporting his aim to situate *Morkinskinna* as an innovative product of the thirteenth century with reference to works as diverse as Vinaver’s *The Rise of Romance* (1971) and Propp’s *Mythology of the Folktale*.

The name *Morkinskinna* ‘rotten parchment’, acquired by the manuscript in the seventeenth century, is apparently undeserved; compared with other Icelandic manuscripts, the editors tell us, the script is legible and well preserved. The problem for the editing of *Morkinskinna* has always been the large lacunae in the only surviving manuscript. Here, as in earlier editions, these have been filled from younger *Morkinskinnu*-derived manuscripts: for the sagas of Magnús inn góði and Haraldr harðráði, a copy of this part of the text added to Flateyjarbók in the late fifteenth century; for later portions of the text the related manuscripts Hulda and Hrokkinskinna have been used. In one case where no closely related text exists, the missing narrative is supplied from Fríssbók, the manuscript of *Heimskringla* whose text is closest to that of the main *Morkinskinna* manuscript. Fríssbók is also used to round off the end of the text to the end of the reign of Eysteinn Haraldsson in 1160 (though the



original is believed to have extended to 1177). Since this text is not directly derived from *Morkinskinna*, it is printed in a smaller font. The text filling the lacunae is differentiated from the main text by abbreviations in the margins: M (*Morkinskinna*), F (Flateyjarbók), H (Hulda), Fr (Fríssbók), with smaller substitutions placed between square brackets. This makes the state of the text transparent (though the use of abbreviations throughout the edition is annoyingly inconsistent. The bibliography promises also the listing of abbreviations, but many are not included; Flateyjarbók is F in the marginal indications but Flat. elsewhere, a usage explained only in the footnotes; perhaps no explanation is needed for such standard abbreviations as Fsk for *Fagrskinna* and Hsk for *Heimskringla*, but the latter is easily confused with Hrsk, which the reader is left to guess stands for Hrokkinskinna). It is noted that the edition is the first to appear in normalised spelling, which brings its own challenges for editors working with manuscripts of different ages. These practices are fully explained in Þórður Ingi's account of the edition.

*Morkinskinna* includes 328 verses, reflecting the author's particular interest in verse and in the Icelanders who, for the most part, composed and diffused it; in its original state there were probably more, since the texts such as Flateyjarbók used to fill the missing portions tended not to include all the verses. The editors have benefited from the recent edition of the verses by Kari Ellen Gade and others in *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages II: Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2* (2009), which is frequently referred to; but the edition reviewed here, of course, focuses on the verse as it stands in *Morkinskinna*, even where a better or older version is preserved in *Fagrskinna* or *Heimskringla*. Other *Íslenzk fornrit* volumes in which these verses are edited are cross-referenced in the footnotes; references are also supplied to editions of the *þættir* that appear elsewhere in the *Íslenzk fornrit* series, but there is no signalling of other *þættir* that have been edited or discussed elsewhere (perhaps a reasonable decision in light of continuing scholarly disagreement as to what qualifies as a *þáttur*).

More than any other Kings' Saga text, *Morkinskinna* reveals an interest in Icelanders and the foregrounding of an Icelandic point of view. The publishers stress that this edition makes the text available to the general Icelandic public for the first time. It is a production Iceland can take pride in; along with the useful maps, charts and genealogies included in Volume II, the whole work is adorned with numerous illustrations, many in colour. Some are more relevant than others: the well-known line drawings that originally decorated Gustav Storm's 1899 edition of *Heimskringla* seem rather out of place in *Morkinskinna*. But it is to be hoped that this lavish edition will succeed in raising its profile with the general public; in addition it will be a central resource for scholars, Icelandic and otherwise, for many years to come.

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO THE OLD NORSE–ICELANDIC SAGA. By MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS. *Cambridge University Press*. Cambridge, 2010. xiv + 193 pp. ISBN 978-0-521-73520-9.

It is surprising that a book like *The Cambridge Companion to the Old Norse–Icelandic Saga* did not already exist; it is highly encouraging that a leading university press has now thought it worthwhile to publish such a thing and their choice of author is a happy and appropriate one. Margaret Clunies Ross—who, among her many and varied achievements, has already produced a fine overview of one segment of Old Norse–Icelandic literary activity in her *History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005)—has written a timely and necessary book. With refreshing brevity, Clunies Ross manages to provide just the sort of introduction to the sagas that any teacher of Old Norse (among those whose interest in the subject transcends the merely linguistic, at least) would wish their students to read, in a compact, accessible and attractively-priced volume. I anticipate that many references to this book will appear in subsequent undergraduate coursework—and those essays will be all the better for it. The *Cambridge Companion* will also be of great interest to non-academic readers of the sagas who wish to understand what it is they are reading, and scholars will certainly benefit from Clunies Ross's handy conspectus of contemporary trends in saga criticism.

The *Cambridge Companion* has a straightforward structure. Clunies Ross provides a sketch of the world that produced the sagas before discussing the nature of the sagas, their origins and their place in Old Norse–Icelandic literary history. On the question of saga origins, Clunies Ross comes down on the side of 'oral priority', giving precedence to the circulation and development of these stories in pre-textual form but acknowledging that the role of individual saga authors or compilers was crucial in shaping the versions that have come down to us. She rehearses Heusler's *Buchprosa* versus *Freiprosa* debate (celebrating its centenary in 2013), which can still frame the question helpfully, even if we can now be sure that neither of these venerable positions provides a satisfactory answer. Clunies Ross's engagement with academic controversies is welcome. The study of the sagas has often been politically charged, with issues of national cultural patrimony at stake. Clunies Ross navigates the ideological concerns of medieval Iceland and the ideological concerns of those who have desired to make the sagas fit into their own worldview. As such, the final chapter is devoted to 'Changing understandings of the sagas', a section on post-medieval reception that is nowadays pretty much *de rigueur* in books like this, reflecting a broad change in our discipline's praxis.

Clunies Ross makes full use of the conventional genre terms for different types of saga, but is quick to problematise them, tracing the origins and history of each coinage and relating the modern terms to what little we know about medieval attitudes to genre. She provides a most useful handlist of the extant saga corpus, divided according to generic conventions (pp. 31–36). My only quibble with this list—and with the range of material that Clunies Ross has chosen to cover in the book as a whole—is that saints' lives and other translated Christian texts that were called 'sagas' in medieval Iceland (what we know as *heilagra manna sögur*) are

excluded. She is thus taking an implicitly 'nativist' stance, preferring texts that conform to preconceptions about the nature of sagas that take 'Icelandic-ness' as a major criterion for inclusion in the canon. It is refreshing to read an introduction to the subject that gives so much attention to texts outlying the *Íslendingasögur* and one or two of the more famous Kings' Sagas and *fornaldarsögur*, but the exclusion of certain types of prose narratives from the *Cambridge Companion* might have the effect of slightly skewing its representation of medieval Icelandic literary history.

The three central chapters deal with the sagas' literary characteristics—subject, style and structure. Restrictions of space mean that different sub-genres of saga receive varying amounts of attention here, and the sections on mode, style and point of view, and on structure, mostly take the *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur* for their examples. We do not hear much about the literary qualities, such as they are, of the *Biskupa sögur*, for example, although Clunies Ross is careful to describe the subject-matter of the less well known genres. Her choice of texts for closer analysis, however, again raises a question of canonicity, as the *Cambridge Companion* pays attention to those texts that belong to categories that are deemed to have a higher literary merit, a place closer to the centre of the canon. Clunies Ross does manage to avoid eliding the classics of the most popular genres into a homogenous conception of 'the (literary) Icelandic saga', but we still get the feeling that some sagas are more equal than others. There are very good, pragmatic reasons for focusing on the sorts of texts that students mostly will be reading, but it would have been salutary to hear something about the modality and point of view of a King's Saga, or a Contemporary Saga, perhaps. The less 'literary' sagas are precisely those which would benefit most from the attentions of the best literary critics, in my view.

Within its limitations, however, I can hardly think how this book could be improved as a primer on the sagas. Professor Clunies Ross has distilled the most cogent approaches to the most important topics in saga criticism with characteristic wisdom and clarity. *The Cambridge Companion to the Old Norse–Icelandic Saga* can safely be recommended as a first step or a refresher course in the study of this literature. It is pleasing that Cambridge University Press has issued a paperback version simultaneously with the casebound edition destined for libraries, although the paperback (under review here) feels notably cheap, with unpleasantly semi-shiny coated paper and (ironically named) perfect binding that inspires no confidence in its longevity. To my surprise, too, one of our leading University Presses seems unable to handle Icelandic special characters: þ, ð and ǫ are all in a different type-face to the other characters, which looks particularly strange in the inserted texts that are presented in a sans-serif font. These symbols are all to be found in the Unicode standard now, and it should not be hard to render them accurately for digital printing: a minor irritation for the typographically-inclined, which does not detract from the success of this otherwise splendid volume.

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ÆTT OG SAGA. UM FRÁSAGNARFRÆÐI STURLUNGU EÐA ÍSLENDINGA SÖGU HINNAR MIKLU. By ÚLFAR BRAGASON. *Háskólaútgáfan*. Reykjavík, 2010. 321 pp. ISBN 978-9979-54-892-8.

*Ætt og saga* offers the fruits of Úlfar Bragason's lifelong passion for *Sturlunga saga*, its world in general and its literary qualities in particular. The harvest is a rich one. It is a *summa*, bringing together the author's prolonged research into the poetics of this difficult text and the authorial and/or editorial intentions guiding its composition. An immediate and obvious value lies in finally being able to consult a single-volume grand statement by Úlfar, one of *Sturlunga's* foremost students in recent years, notwithstanding the familiarity of much of the volume's content to the readers of his numerous articles on the subject.

The outcome is not seamless. Rather than advocating a clearly delimited thesis which is systematically argued for in consecutive chapters, the book comprises a string of interrelated and somewhat overlapping studies (broken into eight chapters of uneven length) on *Sturlunga's* textual and rhetorical elements broadly defined. These studies are framed by a substantial introductory chapter ('Flestar allar sögur voru ritaðar' 'Almost all sagas were written') and a condensed conclusion (pointedly entitled 'Margir ganga duldur hins sanna' 'Many remain blind to the truth'). This arrangement results in a varied, yet sharply focused, survey of a wide range of themes and topics that can be brought under the rubric of poetics, most prominently how the *Sturlunga* compiler (and individual authors before him) employed standard rhetorical and narrative tools for achieving desired objectives of presentation. These range from the uses of dreams, omens and presaging, to the crafting of individual scenes using various stock-types, to the application of larger organisational principles and interpretive guidelines. Boiling down the complex of arguments to be found in the book as a whole would, however, surely fail to preserve the flavour of Úlfar's meticulous close readings, his evident fondness for the nuanced and the particular, or his unfailing insistence on properly contextualising each of his chosen samples before probing its possible purpose and meaning. While its text flows effortlessly in graceful and lucid style, the book is not meant to be browsed.

Like Stephen Tranter before him, Úlfar recognises a creative compiler. The raw ingredients of his creation, the individual sagas and other original components brought to the compiler's desk, are consequently of rather limited interest to Úlfar beyond the reworking process itself (including the compiler's frequent adoptions of previously crafted material that served his agenda). *Sturlunga* thus emerges, in Úlfar's analytical reading, not as a roughly joined set of otherwise disparate texts but as a carefully crafted, retrospective and moralising post-Commonwealth compilation that advocates peace, moderation and political wisdom in the face of overweening ambition, greed, and other seeds of conflict and social disruption. Equally, the larger drama and ultimate tragedy of the saga as a whole is seen to play out in two main acts, the first reaching a climax of conflict in the battle of Örlygsstaðir and the second a climax of revenge in the burning at Flugumýri. We have, therefore, left far

behind earlier *Sturlunga* critics' insistence on breaking up and reassembling the surviving text as a prerequisite for reaching a proper appreciation.

The foundation of the book is Úlfar's University of California at Berkeley dissertation from 1986, 'On the Poetics of *Sturlunga*', revised and translated after years on ice. Its original theoretical background—by no means lost in the present work—was the structuralist debate among saga students from the 1960s to the early 1980s, which switched its focus to the medieval saga's textuality and narratological properties. Studies in this vein were mostly carried out, however, with reference to the *Íslendingasögur*, a sub-genre that the Icelandic School had already striven to elevate to the realm of literature proper, thus leaving the so-called *samtíðarsögur* either largely ignored in this context, or simply separate, on grounds of their traditional classification as historical documents. The latter viewpoint was enshrined in Jón Jóhannesson's seminal essay that prefaced the classic 1946 edition of *Sturlunga*—its logic can ultimately be traced to Guðbrandur Vigfússon and other nineteenth-century saga critics—and served to distinguish quite sharply, even categorically, between a honed literary saga and a supposedly raw historical synthesis (a key argument for *Sturlunga*'s general trustworthiness and accuracy as a historical source). Úlfar's ambitious task is to argue the opposite, namely that *Sturlunga* exhibits every literary trait a saga narrative generally carries and that it should therefore be properly analysed as a *saga*. The hero of Úlfar's narrative, if one is allowed the phrase, is W. P. Ker who, more than a century ago, astutely observed that the narrative art of *Sturlunga* can only be understood within the framework of traditional saga poetics as they appear most visibly in the sagas of Icelanders. Úlfar's predilection for quoting Ker's *Epic and Romance* is not easily missed.

The basic implication of Úlfar's argument is that *Sturlunga*'s historical value cannot be separated from its narrative art: gaining access to *Sturlunga*'s 'history' thereby must involve identifying and disentangling the narrative strategies adopted for its promotion. Obviously, the book is of great value to saga scholars in general—its navigation through *Sturlunga*'s scholarship alone is admirable—but the author does not hide his hope that it will be read by historians in particular. For saga students of all denominations coming to *Sturlunga*, however, the book will prove a logical point of departure for years to come.

VIÐAR PÁLSSON

*Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum*

THE ELDER EDDA. A BOOK OF VIKING LORE. Translated and edited by ANDY ORCHARD. *Penguin Classics*. London, 2011. xlv + 384 pp. ISBN 978-0-140-43585-6.

There will never be one English translation of the *Poetic Edda* which satisfies every reader and every purpose. Some readers will want a poetic translation with an aesthetically pleasing and evocative choice of words. Such readers may enjoy the translation by W. H. Auden and Paul B. Taylor (1981), and not be overly concerned with the liberties it takes. Others will be interested in a poetic translation

that attempts to copy the metrical form of the originals to the extent possible in English. Such readers may appreciate Lee M. Hollander's translation (1962) and forgive—or even delight in—its clunky and archaic style. Readers who prefer a lighter touch but still want an alliterative translation can derive benefit from Henry A. Bellows's work (1936).

In my experience the most common preference expressed by people interested in a translation of the *Poetic Edda* is that it be accurate. Another common preference is that it be in readable English. The new translation by Andy Orchard is aimed squarely at fulfilling these preferences. It is logical that a translation aiming principally at accuracy will not attempt to reproduce the poetic metre. While Orchard takes advantage of such opportunities for alliteration as present themselves to him, his translation is effectively a prose translation and should be judged as such. It is most closely comparable to the non-alliterative translations of Carolyne Larrington (1996) and Benjamin Thorpe (1866).

In my view, Orchard is mostly successful in his effort to produce a readable and accessible book. While remaining a one-volume work, it gives the beginning student a good amount of useful background information to help in understanding and appreciating the poems. The style adopted in the translation is generally clear and flows well.

Estimating the accuracy of the translation is a more difficult issue and will be the subject of the remainder of this review. It first needs to be stated that the *Poetic Edda* has many verses that are obscure, senseless, defective, displaced, metrically suspicious or otherwise questionable. There are many *hapax legomena* and other difficult words. No translator could be expected to handle every problematic verse in a satisfying way and it would be out of place for a reviewer to pick fights over the interpretation of obscure verses.

But the *Poetic Edda* also has a vast number of clear and straightforward passages over whose meaning no informed disagreement can exist. In such cases, a translation aiming at accuracy can justly be criticised when it fails to deliver. I would like to discuss some examples where it seems to me that Orchard's translation runs into problems of this kind.

In *Guðrúnarkviða* III 6.3–4 we read *hann kann helga / hver vellanda* which Orchard renders as 'he knows about the sacred boiling pot!'. The existence of such a special pot may well pique a reader's interest and perhaps invite comparison with the quest for the great cauldron in *Hymiskviða*. But Orchard's translation here is inaccurate: the word *helga* cannot be the adjective meaning 'holy' and must be the verb meaning 'to sanctify'. It is worth looking at previous translators:

Larrington: He knows about the sacred, boiling cauldron.

Bellows: For he the boiling / kettle can hallow.

Hollander: for he can bless / the boiling kettle.

Thorpe: he can hallow / the boiling cauldron.

Orchard and Larrington make the same mistake here while the older translations have correct renderings.

In *Guðrúnarkviða* II 39.8 we have the words *þótt mér leiðr sér* as something Guðrún says to Atli. Orchard renders this, along with its context, as 'I'll come

and cauterise your wounds, / soothe and heal, though it's loathsome to me'. This is somewhat ambiguous and we could wonder if Guðrún is squeamish about cauterising wounds—is that, perhaps, inappropriate work for a noble woman? But the original is quite clear; it means, as in Thorpe's rendering, 'although to me thou art hateful'. Orchard translates the verb *sér* as if it were a third-person form, but it is unambiguously second-person. In the rest of the exchange Guðrún is speaking in riddles, but here she tells Atli to his face that she hates him—an important point which should not be muddled in a translation. Larrington makes the same mistake ('though it pains me to do it').

In *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* 42.3–4 we have Sigrún saying *bá er mér Helgi / hringa valði*, which Orchard renders as 'when Helgi picked me with rings'. The use of rings to pick a bride sounds like intriguing anthropological data but all we really have here is a mistranslation. The line means 'when for me Helgi / rings selected', as Thorpe translates it. Orchard renders it as if *mér* were accusative and *hringa* dative rather than the reverse. Larrington has 'when Helgi chose me, gave me rings', which is equally confused.

In *Grípisspá* 33.3–4 we have *mundu Grímhildar / gjalda ráða* which Orchard and Larrington both render as 'Grímhild's counsels will prevail'. This would be correct if *ráða* were nominative rather than genitive, if *mundu* were third-person plural rather than second-person singular and if *gjalda* meant 'prevail', which it does not. Thorpe's 'thou wilt pay the penalty / of Grímhild's craft' shows the correct way to parse this.

Orchard's translation frequently renders singular as plural and plural as singular. This is sometimes defensible and often more or less harmless. For example, Orchard translates *stóðo geislar í skipin* (*Helgakviða Hundingsbana* II, prose passage) as 'beams of light hit the ship'. The original has *skipin* 'the ships' but nothing really rides on the plural and the reader is not seriously misled. A more disappointing example is when *svört verða sólskin / of sumor eptir* (*Völuspá* 41.5–6) is rendered 'the sun beams turn black the following summer'. All manuscripts of the original have a plural *sumor* 'summers'. This is a mythological detail which there is no reason not to relay correctly.

Even simple prose passages have a regrettable number of errors. The following example is from *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*: *Þat kvað Helgi, því at hann grunaði um feigð sína ok þat, at fylgjur hans hefðo vitjat Hedins, þá er hann sá konona ríða varginom*. Orchard offers: 'Helgi said, that he suspected that he was doomed, and that it was his fetch that had visited Hedin, when he saw the woman riding the wolf.'

But the text isn't telling us what Helgi is saying but explaining what he has already said. And the plural *fylgjur* shouldn't be rendered with a singular 'fetch'. It is a significant cultural detail that a person can have more than one *fylgja*—the implication seems to be that the rider is a *fylgja* and the wolf is another *fylgja*. There is no reason not to relay this accurately. Bellows is much closer to the mark: 'Helgi spoke thus because he foresaw his death, for his following-spirits had met Hethin when he saw the woman riding on the wolf.'

The preceding examples will suffice to show why I cannot without reservation call Orchard's *Edda* an accurate translation. But a relative estimation is also in

order. Orchard's version is certainly more accurate than the poetic translations of Hollander, Bellows and Auden. And while the translation further propagates many of Larrington's errors, Orchard's version is, on the whole, somewhat more accurate. In particular, I find that Orchard's version of *Völuspá* compares favourably with that of Larrington. Thorpe's translation is woefully obsolete but tends to have different errors from the modern translations and is a valuable comparative tool. Ursula Dronke's partial translation (1969–2011) is quite accurate but priced out of the reach of most students. Readers of German have some good options.

In summary, I know of no complete English translation of the *Poetic Edda* which is more accurate than Orchard's. I would, therefore, recommend it—but I wish I could do so more wholeheartedly.

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OLD NORSE WOMEN'S POETRY: THE VOICES OF FEMALE SKALDS. By SANDRA BALLIF STRAUBHAAR. *Library of Medieval Women. D. S. Brewer.* Cambridge, 2011. 145 pp. ISBN 978-1-84384-271-2.

*Old Norse Women's Poetry* offers a lively and accessible introduction to the work of female poets in medieval Scandinavian texts. Sandra Ballif Straubhaar seeks to give voice to the impressive range of women's poetry found within the corpus of Old Norse–Icelandic literature, not only focusing on named skalds but also including verses attributed in the sagas to seeresses, shield-maidens and even troll-women. As the most recent addition to the Library of Medieval Women series, the volume is admirable in its focus on female poets who have traditionally claimed less scholarly attention than their male counterparts; the publication of their work in this series places Jörunn skáldmær, Jóriðr Hermundardóttir and Brynhildr Buðladóttir in the company of such famous medieval women as Christine de Pizan, Birgitta of Sweden and Margery Kempe. As Straubhaar's volume reveals, such a library can only be enhanced by the addition of these female voices from the north.

Straubhaar's book is primarily aimed at readers unfamiliar with Old Norse–Icelandic literature, and she therefore gives a brief but useful introduction to each poetic sequence and suggests further reading for those who might be encouraged by her book to seek out the verses in their original saga contexts. A short time-line of the literature cited and a glossary of personal names are included at the end of the book. Straubhaar does not seem to have consulted any manuscripts in the preparation of the Old Norse text; rather, she draws on the work of many different editors, notably Finnur Jónsson, Ernst Albin Kock, Andreas Heusler, Anthony Faulkes, and Gustav Neckel and Hans Kuhn. She gives each stanza in normalised Old Norse, accompanied by her own translations in both prose and verse. Although loose at times, the prose translations are generally more faithful to the sense of the verse and better reflect the complexity of Old Norse poetic discourse than the poetic renditions, which too often sacrifice intricate *kenningar* and *heiti* in favour of alliteration and readability. Accessibility to the non-specialist reader is clearly



an important factor in the presentation of the stanzas, with manuscript variants, uncertain vocabulary and difficult poetic circumlocutions smoothed over with little explanation. While specialists will no doubt prefer to use the more scholarly editions Straubhaar draws on—and, notably, the currently appearing volumes of the newly re-edited *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, which Straubhaar cites but has apparently made no use of—the book certainly offers the novice reader a collection of verses that is both engaging and informative.

The volume is divided into six sections. Section I, 'Real People, Real Poetry', contains verses by named women poets found within the *konungasögur*, *Íslendingasögur* and *samtíðarsögur*. Section II, 'Quasi-Historical People and Poetry', draws mainly on material from the *Íslendingasögur* which the editor considers less historically verifiable. While the division of verses between the two sections is therefore somewhat subjective, verses are placed in the second section either when they exhibit linguistic or metrical anachronisms or when the events related in the saga seem improbable. There is thus a danger here in over-emphasising the historicity of the women cited in the first section, but a consideration of the degree to which the sagas might be considered literary or historical in nature is clearly beyond the scope of this volume. Section III, 'Visionary Women: Women's Dream-Verse', showcases the visions described by women in *Sturlunga saga*. It is perhaps due to the unity of themes and source-material in this section that the eerie enchantment of the verse is particularly effective, as nightmarish images of slaughter, torture and inclement weather emphasise the almost cinematic quality of such poetry. The final three sections draw mainly upon poetry taken from the *fornaldarsögur*, supplemented by such well-known poems as *Helreið Brynhildar* of the *Poetic Edda* and *Darraðarljóð* of *Njáls saga*. These sections are divided according to the nature of the female speaker. Section IV is devoted to verses spoken by 'Legendary Heroines', section V to those of 'Magic-Workers, Prophetesses, and Alien Maidens', and section VI to 'Trollwomen'. Although the speakers in these chapters are not usually characterised as 'skalds', as the title of the volume would suggest, the poetry of these sections introduces the reader to a series of strong female characters of varying degrees of humanity and monstrosity who speak in verse in order to advise, deceive, insult, seduce and bully the men around them, often with the help of preternatural knowledge.

The importance of these men, however, cannot be concealed even in a book devoted to the voices of women. Laudable as the aim of this series is, there is a danger that when the gender of a poet is foregrounded, as it inevitably is in this volume, other aspects of that poet's work run the risk of being lost. The poetry cited in this volume rarely stands on its own in the sagas, and indeed much of the force of the female characters' verses stems directly from their engagement with the verses of their male counterparts. There is little in Jórunn skáldmær's *Sendibítr* that differentiates it from the work of her fellow (male) court poets; indeed, as Straubhaar herself observes, there are close verbal parallels between Jórunn's work and that of another court poet, Þorbjörn hornklofi, while in the sequence cited Jórunn herself praises the work of her skaldic colleague, Guðormr sindri (pp. 13–15). Jórunn evidently played an active role in both the politics and the poetry

of the early medieval court and her separation from her male colleagues in this volume forces a division based on gender that is not supported by the text itself. It is a problem that recurs frequently in Straubhaar's book: the verse spoken by Ásdís, mother of Grettir Ásmundarson (p. 31), is all the more biting in the context of the saga because it is shown to be a clever response to the insulting verse spoken by her son's killer; likewise, the presentation of verses spoken by troll-women in *Ketils saga hængs* (pp. 102–04) and in *Gríms saga loðinkinna* (p. 105) allows the reader access to one side only of what in the saga is a lively dialogue between male and female characters. This silencing of the male voice is all the more surprising given Straubhaar's willingness to devote much of Section IV to two extended dialogues, the first consisting of Brynhildr's argument with the giantess in *Helreið Brynhildar* (pp. 50–54) and that between Hervör and her dead father Angantýr in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs* (pp. 56–69). Such dialogues demonstrate that women's poetry does not exist in a vacuum, and that women's voices only gain in strength when they engage with characters of different genders and species.

The inclusion of *Helreið Brynhildar* further draws attention to the surprising absence of eddic poetry spoken by women. As Straubhaar freely admits, the decision to include only one full poem from the Codex Regius is capricious (p. 6), and it is certainly true that these poems are well known and much edited. However, if gender, rather than subject matter or poetic style, is the lens through which we are invited to read these texts, it would surely be fruitful to place all of the female voices of the *Poetic Edda* in direct conversation with their skaldic counterparts. The community of female voices represented in *Guðrúnarkviða I* would provide a stimulating contrast to the animosity of the female speakers in *Helreið Brynhildar*; along with Brynhildr it would be useful to hear more in this volume from Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, especially as Guðrún is said to speak in a dream to Jóreiðr Hermundardóttir in *Sturlunga saga* (*Íslendinga saga*), and this sequence is cited in Section III (pp. 43–47). Similarly, one representative stanza from the Eddic poem *Völuspá* (p. 72), a sequence in which the ambiguity and potential multiplicity of female voices is fundamental to its artistic construction, does little justice to its context and the artistic power of the female voice(s) found there.

It may be that no volume in which poetry is extracted from its original context can ever capture the full complexity of the verse. If, as Straubhaar hopes, her book succeeds in encouraging readers new to Old Norse–Icelandic literature to seek out the verses in their original contexts, then it will certainly be a welcome addition to any library; if it encourages readers to look more closely at the corpus of women's poetry, this too is a significant achievement. The aim of giving voice to women skalds is a laudable one, and, within the objectives of the series, well executed. The uneasy way in which Old Norse poetry fits within the confines of a Library of Medieval Women is perhaps less the fault of the editor and more a testament to the complexity and variety of Old Norse women's poetry, and to the women whose voices problematise the very project which aims to give them a hearing.

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ROMANCE AND LOVE IN LATE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN ICELAND. ESSAYS IN HONOR OF MARIANNE KALINKE. Edited by KIRSTEN WOLF and JOHANNA DENZIN. *Islandica LIV*. Cornell University Press. Ithaca and London, 2008. xii + 341 pp. ISBN 978-0-935995-15-2.

Marianne Kalinke's research has largely concerned the Old Norse literature usually referred to as 'romances'. *Riddarasögur*, *fornaldarsögur* and hybrids of these have been in focus in several of her works. She has also examined Norse translations of religious literature. In the Festschrift *Romance and Love in Late Medieval and Early Modern Iceland* her colleagues deal with all these genres.

'Romance' is a concept that does not exist in languages other than English. Many languages indeed have the term—*romans*, *romanz* etc.—but then it signifies specific phenomena, for example a certain type of song, a certain type of medieval poem or simply an erotic affair. The English notion, on the other hand, implies a literary phenomenon of a universal character, existing in different cultures independently of each other, in different times and places. It is, however, not obvious how the concept should be defined or how useful it is in the description of the peculiarities of a literary work.

The title of this Festschrift mentions 'love' alongside 'romance', which relates to one aspect of the concept. The authors in the book interpret the theme quite differently, leading to a significantly disparate focus of the articles. For Robert Cook, Theodore Andersson and Jenny Jochens 'romance' simply seems to denote love stories; all three of them have the word 'romance' in the title of their articles, which in all three cases are about classical *Íslendingasögur*, a type of literature not usually described as 'romance'. The term 'romance' is thus used here about a specific literary theme. Shaun Hughes and Ármann Jakobsson use 'romance' in a rather uncomplicated way as an established genre term for those sagas traditionally called *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*, although Ármann also touches on the denotation 'love'. But some of the authors seem to use the term in its specific English meaning. I will return later to the question of the usefulness of the concept.

In 'Gunnarr and Hallgerðr: A Failed Romance', Robert Cook examines some aspects of the relationship between Gunnarr and Hallgerðr in *Njáls saga*, showing how the saga in several ways marks their relationship as doomed from the very beginning. In 'Romance, Marriage, and Social Class in the Saga World', Jenny Jochens focuses on the couples Ingólfr–Valgerðr and Hallfreðr–Kolfinna in *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Hallfreðar saga*. The main idea is to draw attention to social differences as the explanation for the possible success of an 'illicit love visit': it is because of the higher social status of his family that Ingólfr is so much more successful than Hallfreðr.

In 'The Native Romance of Gunnlaugr and Helga the Fair', Theodore M. Andersson argues against those scholars who claim strong influence from courtly literature in *Gunnlaugs saga*. Instead, Andersson convincingly points to the native tradition of depicting love in Eddic poetry. More problematic is Andersson's attempt to reverse the relative chronology of *Gunnlaugs saga* and those *Íslendingasögur* to which it has a relation. *Gunnlaugs saga* shares with *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*

the theme 'failure of the groom to appear at the appointed time'. According to Andersson *Gunnlaugs saga* treats the theme 'more logically', and therefore he concludes that *Gunnlaugs saga* is the primary text and *Bjarnar saga* the borrower (p. 49). This is a common type of argument, but it is fundamentally flawed. The argument can with equally good reason be reversed; it may be claimed that if a motif is handled more awkwardly in one text, a borrower would be more likely to make it more, not less, logical. In fact, arguments of this kind are almost useless. The scholars hardly ever agree which version is more logical, and it is not clear anyway whether this is a sign of primacy or revision.

Margrét Eggertsdóttir argues in her article 'The Anomalous Pursuit of Love in *Kormaks saga*' for the hypothesis that *Kormaks saga* is fundamentally different in several ways from other *Íslendingasögur*. She claims that one of its anomalies is that honour and prestige certainly are important here, as in most *Íslendingasögur*, but that the protagonist of *Kormaks saga* behaves in a way that is in conflict with the ideals of honour. She examines this aspect in an excellent analysis, where she underlines the two perspectives of the saga: the perspective of love, where the actions of the lover are justified, and the perspective of society, where honour and order are dominant ideals. Margrét is undoubtedly right here. But *Kormaks saga* is hardly an anomaly in this regard. Gunnlaugr, Þormóðr, Egill and Hallfreðr—whose nickname *vandræðaskáld* is significant—all act as provocateurs in their sagas, at times even as disgusting troublemakers, even though they are also the heroes of these sagas. If they are excused for their troubleseomeness, it is not as lovers, but as skalds. To the role of the skald belonged a mode of behaviour that was not acceptable for other members of society. *Kormaks saga* and its protagonist are in fact typical examples of this general tendency.

'Sturla Þórðarson on Love', by Úlfar Bragason, concerns *Íslendinga saga's* depiction of the women in its author's life. Shaun F. D. Hughes argues in '*Klári saga* as an Indigenous Romance' that *Klári saga*, which in the preface of the saga itself is described as a translation from Latin, is in fact an original Icelandic work. In 'When Skaði chose Njörðr', John Lindow interprets a well-known scene from *Snorra Edda* in the light of *Kormaks saga* and *Skírnismál*. In all three cases, Lindow shows, an unhappy and destructive relationship follows. In 'Enabling Love: Dwarfs in Old Norse-Icelandic Romances', Ármann Jakobsson discusses the dwarfs in both earlier Eddic tradition and later *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*. In '"The Best Medicine in the Bitterest of Herbs": An Eighteenth-Century Moral Tale' M. J. Driscoll investigates the differences between two Icelandic versions of the eighteenth-century *Saga af Lucian og Gedula*.

Interesting philological matters are discussed in Kirsten Wolf's 'On the Transmission of the Old Norse-Icelandic Legend of Saints Faith, Hope, and Charity'. She demonstrates convincingly that Unger's edition of *Fíðesar saga, Spesar ok Karítasar* from 1877 is not based on the best manuscripts. However, her alternative solution is not obviously the best one, although it is certainly based on the best manuscripts. She recommends that a new edition should be based on a conflation of AM 235 fol. and the fragment AM 429 12mo for the first part of

the saga and on the fragment Stock. Perg. 2 fol. for the second part (p. 271). This solution is chosen although AM 235 fol., which Wolf considers to be one of the best manuscripts, has a complete text. Wolf does not discuss the methodological problem of using a conflation and thus constructing a textual unity that never existed before the edition. The matter is of methodological importance and has parallels, for instance, in the situation of *Fóstbreðra saga*, where editions are usually based on a mixture of the fragmentary texts of Hauksbók and Möðruvallabók, instead of using the complete text of Flateyjarbók as the basis.

In 'Arctic Garden of Delights: The Purpose of the Book of Reynistaður', Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir emphasises the focus on women in Reynistaðarbók and explains it by the book's connection with the nunnery in Reynistaður. In 'Love in a Cold Climate—With the Virgin Mary', Margaret Clunies Ross examines how love is depicted in skaldic poetry about the Virgin Mary. In 'Mírmanns saga: The First Old Norse–Icelandic Hagiographical Romance?' Sverrir Tómasson discusses this saga, and not least its religious elements.

Johanna Denzin's article is entitled '*Hrólfs saga kraka*: A Tragedy, Comedy, History, Pastoral, Pastoral-Comical, Historical-Pastoral, Tragical-Historical, Tragical-Comical-Historical-Pastoral . . . Romance'. The starting point of the article is Hermann Pálsson's claim that the *fornaldarsaga* works as 'secular romance' and 'legendary fiction' at the same time. Denzin's purpose is to examine how this double classification influences the interpretation of *Hrólfs saga kraka* and to analyse how it works as a 'romance' (p. 208). At the end of the article Denzin points primarily to the 'contradictions' and tensions following from the combination of 'romance elements' and 'the older legendary material', e.g. the descriptions of Þoðvarr and Hrólf (p. 228). The question is then what Denzin means by 'romance'.

Early in her investigation Denzin connects her argument with Hermann Pálsson's division of the *fornaldarsögur* into 'heroic legends' and 'adventure tales', where the tragic end of the former is seen as a distinctive feature (p. 208). Here it is suggested that the notion of 'adventure tales' has a connection with 'romance', but it is not made clear whether the two are synonymous. Denzin soon returns to Hermann Pálsson's division, but now the same two groups are called 'heroic legends' and 'Viking romances' (p. 209). It thus seems that 'adventure tale' and 'romance' are almost the same thing. But Denzin also gives three criteria for 'romance', borrowed from Hermann Pálsson. First, a romance has a hero who is superior in degree, not in kind, to his environment (p. 208). This distinction distinguishes entirely mythological heroes from others. It does not, however, demarcate any of the human protagonists from each other, since all of them share this alleged characteristic of a 'romance' hero. Further, folkloric elements are mentioned as a criterion for 'romance' (p. 209). But this is a traditional feature in Germanic heroic poetry too, well-known from poems like *Beowulf*, *Völundarkviða* and *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*. If such poems also are considered 'romances', or influenced by 'romances', we have to conclude that the fusion of heroic legend and romance mentioned by Denzin is a traditional feature in Germanic–Norse narrative art and that consequently they should not be seen as different phenomena

with different origins. Finally Denzin mentions influences from courtly romances as a part of her 'romance' definition (p. 208). In this case 'romance' is a specific genre phenomenon, and this criterion is the most substantial one.

These are her three criteria. But Denzin's article contains more meanings of the word 'romance'. She analyses the 'five failed romances' of *Hrólfs saga kraka* (p. 209), and here it is obvious that the term is used in its modern meaning 'love affair'/'sexual relationship'. It is, though, not clear to what extent this sense of the word affects her overall research problem.

Which of her 'romance' criteria does Denzin actually use in her examination? She notes some possible influences from courtly literature, mainly in the descriptions of people and courts (pp. 220–21, 224). These observations are however not new (cf. Ármann Jakobsson 1999), and Denzin does not demonstrate how these features are supposed to contrast with a native tradition. She is very concerned with folkloric motifs (for example pp. 209, 215–17, 222, 225), but such elements are, as mentioned, not foreign to native heroic tradition. Her entire conclusion seems similar to her starting point, namely that *Hrólfs saga kraka* combines Hermann Pálsson's two proposed types, 'heroic legend' and 'adventure tale', of which the latter simply seems to be identical with 'romance'. It would, however, have been much more surprising if it had been possible to distinguish 'pure' sub-genres from each other. But the main problem lies elsewhere. It concerns the very premise of the study and its conclusions: the idea that the concept of romance is useable in the study of Old Norse texts.

The word 'romance' stands in English for a system of connotations which the native speaker just 'feels', and thus 'knows' the meaning of the term without the need for a definition. But for non-native speakers the concept is not obvious at all; it is absent in all other languages. There is no clear and distinctive definition of 'romance' in Old Norse scholarship, although the term has become so common there. A native speaker of English seems to feel instinctively that something connects Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain*, a fairy tale, a sexual affair between two colleagues, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and a Harlequin paperback. I do not. And, more important, I see no reason to believe that a medieval Icelander did either. It seems to me that the concept 'romance' is not useful in the Old Norse context, and the problems of Denzin's article confirm that conclusion.

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ILLA FENGINN MJÖÐUR. LESIÐ Í MIÐALDATEXTA. By ÁRMANN JAKOBSSON. *Fræðirit Bókmenntafræðistofnunar Háskóla Íslands 14. Bókmenntafræðistofnun: Háskóla-útgáfan*. Reykjavík, 2009. 220 pp. ISBN 978-9979-54-845-4.

In this book, with its title, 'Ill-Gotten Mead', alluding to Óðinn's theft of the mead of poetry, Ármann sets out to introduce Icelandic university students, and Icelandic schoolteachers at the secondary and higher elementary levels, to the study of

medieval texts. An unnumbered introductory chapter precedes fourteen numbered chapters, each devoted to a particular text or type of text, all of them from Old Norse–Icelandic literature. Eddic poetry is represented by *Lokasenna* (ch. 1); skaldic poetry by *Haraldskvæði* (*Hrafnsmál*) (ch. 5) and *Lilja* (ch. 12); saints' lives by *Martinus saga* (ch. 2); Bishops' Sagas by Arngrímur Brandsson's *Guðmundar saga Arasonar* (ch. 11); the prose *Edda* by *Gylfaginning* (ch. 6); sagas of contemporary history by *Sturlu saga* (ch. 8); the *fornaldarsögur* by *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* (ch. 10); and translated and indigenous *riddara sögur* by *Mottuls saga* (ch. 7) and *Nítíða saga* (ch. 13) respectively. No King's Saga in the strictest sense of the term is separately represented, but chapters on *Færeyinga saga* (ch. 3), *Þorsteins þátrr skelks* (ch. 14) and the *þættir* in *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* (ch. 4) include discussion of the functioning of these narratives in the Kings' Sagas of which they form parts. Nor does any Family Saga receive a chapter to itself, though a chapter on *Þorsteins þátrr stangarhöggs* (ch. 9) emphasises strongly the connection of this narrative with Family Sagas from eastern Iceland, most especially *Vápnfirðinga saga* (pp. 125–26).

The book is full of valuable observations. If some of them may strike some readers of *Saga-Book* as obvious, it should be remembered that the book is chiefly intended for relative beginners in the study and teaching of medieval texts. In the introductory chapter Ármann first distinguishes between literary history and literary analysis, placing the book under review firmly in the latter category (p. 8). After advocating a police-like concentration on evidence in the study of medieval texts, he finds fault with the term *oftúlkun* 'over-interpretation' on the grounds that it implies that interpretation should be undertaken only in moderation; he prefers the term *röng túlkun* 'misinterpretation' or, where appropriate, *vantúlkun* 'under-interpretation', for cases of flawed interpretation, without impugning the act of interpretation itself (pp. 9–10). He emphasises that in most cases surviving medieval texts differ from modern ones in being removed at several stages from their author's originals, and that the term 'original' (*frumrit*) is in any case questionable in cases where a written work in its earliest form has been influenced by oral tradition (pp. 11–13). He notes that a manuscript is one thing, a text another, and an edition something else again (pp. 13–15; here Gérard Genette's *Paratexts*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge, 1997) might have been helpful to him), and stresses the importance in studying medieval texts of a knowledge of historical background, of reading widely in medieval literature (not exclusively in Old Norse–Icelandic literature), and of a willingness to suspend disbelief in appropriate cases (pp. 15–17). He warns against the danger of assuming that a text is implying more than it actually says, and counsels caution in looking for examples of irony and humour in medieval texts: we are entitled to look for them, but must be sure that they are really there before claiming to have found them (pp. 18–21). Further pertinent observations come up later in the book, e.g., that dictionary definitions should not always be taken at face value (p. 31), and that study at university level, whether of medieval texts or otherwise, involves the reinvestigation of received knowledge (p. 89), not least because received opinions can very easily come to be presented as dogma (as in the case of *Lilja*'s attribution to Eysteinn Ásgrímsson, for which there is no evidence in any medieval source, pp. 159–60).



Each of the fourteen numbered chapters is for the most part self-contained in its treatment of its topic, but an indication of the links between some of them, which are not in all cases made explicit, will help to give an idea of the book's coverage. The chapter on *Lokasenna*, with its discussion of Loki as an ambivalent figure (pp. 33–36), looks forward to the discussion of Óðinn's double nature in the chapters on *Gylfaginning* (pp. 95–98) and *Sturlu saga* (pp. 119–20). The brief discussion in the chapter on *Martinus saga* of that saga's reference to the pagan cult of a tree (pp. 49–50) is followed up in the discussion of Yggdrasill, Askr and Embla in the chapter on *Gylfaginning* (pp. 99–101) and in that of the *trémaðr* in the chapter on *Ragnars saga* (pp. 143–44). The chapter on *Færeyinga saga*, a saga preserved only as parts of other sagas, initiates a discussion, continued in the three chapters on *þættir*, of the nature of the relationship of narratives that are so preserved to the larger narratives of which they form parts (pp. 54–55, 66, 125–26, 180–81). (One wonders if Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia might have been helpful to Ármann in discussing the question of how far *Færeyinga saga*, preserved as parts of sagas about kings Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson, can appropriately be seen as an attack on kingly rule, pp. 60–62). The *Færeyinga saga* chapter also looks forward to those on *Ragnars saga* and *Nítíða saga*, in mentioning, like each of them, the Kalmar Union as a factor to be reckoned with in investigating the origins of the saga in question (pp. 60, 146, 178). The chapter on the *þættir* in *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* anticipates those on *Sturlu saga* and *Ragnars saga* in raising the question how far passages in medieval texts that give modern readers an impression of tongue-in-cheek would have done so to their original audiences (pp. 76–77, 123, 142), while the chapter on *Haraldskvæði*, with its mention of the predominantly non-narrative character of skaldic (as opposed to Eddic) poetry (pp. 86–87), helps to explain the tendency for French verse romances to be translated into Old Norse prose, as discussed in the chapter on *Móttuls saga* (p. 105). Non-Icelandic readers will find it encouraging that Ármann acknowledges, in the chapter on *Gylfaginning*, the tendency, presumably among Icelanders as much as others, to confuse with each other the Codex Regius manuscripts of the Poetic and Prose *Eddas* (2365 4to and 2367 4to respectively) (p. 91), and also, as he shows in the chapter on *Þorsteins þáttur stangarhöggs*, to find bewildering the (not so) many characters in that narrative whose names begin with *Þ* (p. 127). The discussion in the *Gylfaginning* chapter of the idea of man as a microcosm of the universe (pp. 94, 100) is paralleled by the discussion of the same idea in the chapter on *Lilja* (p. 170), and echoed in the chapter on *Þorsteins þáttur stangarhöggs*, where the society portrayed in that narrative is presented as a microcosm of Icelandic society (p. 126). The discussion of the courtly style (*hefðarstíll*) in the chapter on *Móttuls saga* (pp. 109–10) is developed in that of the florid style (*skrúðstíll*) in the chapter on Arngrímur's *Guðmundar saga Arasonar* (pp. 151–52), while the discussion of typology in the latter chapter (pp. 153–55) is taken further in the chapter on *Lilja* (p. 163).

The book is supplied near the end with over twenty pages of notes and references (pp. 190–213); there is also an index. The notes refer back to the text, indicating by number the pages to which they are relevant, but there are no indications in



the text itself of reference forward to the notes. The reader may thus be forgiven, perhaps, for not noticing until reaching p. 190 that this book has a companion volume (*systurrit*), also by Ármann, namely *Bókmenntir í nýju landi. Íslensk bókmenntasaga frá landnámi til siðaskipta* (Reykjavík: Bjartur, 2009). The existence of this book, and the fact that Ármann expects his readers to be familiar with its contents before embarking on the book under review, may partly explain the surprising fact that the latter has no chapter on any of the Family Sagas; in *Bókmenntir í nýju landi* fourteen out of a total of 134 pages are devoted to the Family Sagas. *Bókmenntir* is a work of literary history, however, and its approach is descriptive rather than analytical; it hardly makes up for the absence from *Illla fenginn mjöður* of a chapter dealing analytically with one of the Family Sagas, a chapter that its intended readers would surely like to have had.

This is my only serious criticism of Ármann's book, which is full, I repeat, of valuable observations, by no means all of which I have been able to indicate here. There is one, however, that I cannot resist singling out in conclusion, and which may be compared interestingly with Ármann's discussion of trolls in his article in *Saga-Book XXXII* (2008), 39–68 (see pp. 40–55), not referred to in his notes. This is his contention, in his chapter on *Gylfaginning* (p. 97), that the giants of Old Norse mythology, at least as portrayed in Snorri's *Edda*, where they are referred to as *tröll* as well as *jötnar*, are hardly less civilised and no bigger than the gods (however civilised or whatever size they may have been), and are very different from the large, ugly, wild trolls of the Icelandic folktales. Does this mean that the glossing of *tröll* and *tröllkona* as 'troll', 'monster', 'troll-wife' in the Viking Society's editions of Snorri's *Edda* should be modified?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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