THE VIKING MIND (*VÍKINGAHUGR*)
OR
IN PURSUIT OF THE VIKING

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

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

Definition

There is a problem about the definition of the Viking. The word itself seems not to have been used in modern English prose before the nineteenth century, when one of its first appearances is in Scott's novel *The Pirate* (Scott 1821, 319: 'Vi-king'; see Fell 1987, 117). Originally the word meant a member of a raiding force travelling by sea. It is found as a personal name in Old High German and in the early Old English poem about the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, *sæwicingas* is used of the tribe of Reuben crossing the Red Sea (*Exodus* 1977, line 333). In scaldic verse it is used of Scandinavians engaged in warfare, often with no pejorative force, as in Sighvatr's *Víkingarvísur* (*ÍF* XXVII 11, 18, 23), and in an Eddic poem of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani (*PE* 221). As late as *c*. 1140 it is used in a complimentary sense of Sigurðr Slembi (Ívarr Ingimundarson, *Sigurðarbálkr* st. 43, in *Skj* A I 502, B I 475). But it never seems to refer to a regular army and comes more and more to be associated with hostile attacks of freebooters, and becomes more and more pejorative, often being used by foreigners to mean 'Scandinavian pagans'—though the Viking Age in fact continues into the Christian period, when most Vikings were Christians (thus it is customary to think of the Vikings as heathens and of the Viking religion as worship of the Æsir, even though many Vikings adopted Christianity quite

early on). *Víking* (f.) is actually a term describing an activity, that is raiding by sea, and *vikingr* m. is one who goes a-viking. Modern historians have widened the term and use it to refer to Scandinavians in general in the Viking Age, whatever activity they were engaged on, so that the term has ceased to be a mere activity word and has become almost an ethnic term. Thus Foote and Wilson's *The Viking Achievement* (1970) has the sub-title *The society and culture of early medieval Scandinavia*. Hence the concern to emphasise that Vikings in this sense were not just violent plunderers, though to describe the settlers of Iceland in general as Vikings is really a contradiction in terms: in the narrowest sense of the word, as soon as they became settlers they stopped being Vikings. But it is the in the broader sense that I am going to be using the word, so as to consider the way that Scandinavians in general, including Icelanders, were regarded both in their own time and in later centuries. I am concerned with representations of Vikings in literature from the Middle Ages to the present day. One might therefore begin by pointing out that most of the characters in *Njáls saga* would not have called themselves Vikings, and nor would the inhabitants of Jórvík, though historians now describe them as such.

It is also evident that writers in the Middle Ages did not have a concept of the Viking Age as we do. They were not aware of a new age beginning towards the end of the eighth century, though they were perhaps aware of important changes that took place in the eleventh century, when the Viking expansion came to an end. Thus in Eddic poetry and *fornaldarsögur* no distinction is made between heroes of the Viking Age and those of earlier times, for instance the period now still often referred to as the Migration Age from the second to fifth centuries AD. Atli, Jǫrmunrekkr, Hrólfr kraki appear side by side with Ragnarr loðbrók and Ívarr beinlausi in defiance of chronology without any clear distinction being made between Viking heroes and those who lived before the beginning of the Viking Age.

Contemporary historians

There are contemporary accounts of the Vikings by English, Irish and other chroniclers. These, being written by monks and priests whose institutions had suffered much from Viking raids, cannot be expected to be sympathetic or even fair to the Vikings. One thing to note is the various animals with which the Vikings are compared. Characteristic is Alcuin, a monk writing near the end of the eighth century, who saw the Viking raids as god's judgement on sinful Christians: 'Lo, it is nearly 350 years that we and our fathers have inhabited this most lovely land, and never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race . . . foxes pillage the chosen vine' (*EHD* 842–43). The Welsh bishop Asser in King Alfred's reign says that 'the pagans, acting like foxes, secretly broke out of camp by night, tore the agreement [they had made] to shreds, rejected the offer of money (for they knew they would get hold of more from loot than by peace) and devastated the whole region of eastern Kent' (Page 1987, 10). The poet of *The Battle of Maldon*, at the end of the tenth century, describes the Vikings as *wælwulfas* 'wolves of slaughter' and says *ongunnon lytegian þa laðe gystas* 'the hateful strangers betook themselves to guile' (*ASPR* VI 9, *EHD* 321). Byrhtferð of Ramsey in the same period wrote of 'the abominable Danes glorying in flashing blades and poisoned arrows' (*EHD* 916). The Anglo-Saxon chronicler writes in the year 1011 (*ASC* I 141, *EHD* 244): *þonne hi mæst to yfele gedon hæfdon. þonne nam man grið. 7 frið wið hi. 7 naðe læs for eallum þisum griðe 7 friðe 7 gafole. hi ferdon æghwider folcmælum. 7*

hergodon. 7 ure earme folc ræpton 7 slogon 'when they had done most to our injury, peace and truce were made with them; and for all this truce and tribute they journeyed none the less in bands everywhere, and harried our wretched people and plundered and killed them'. Later (1012) he describes how they martyred the archbishop of Canterbury in London: *wæron hi eac swyðe druncene. forþam þær wæs gebroht win suðan. genamon þa þone biscop . . . hine þa þær oftorfodon mid banum. 7 mid hryðere heafdum. 7 sloh hine þa an heora mid anre æxe yre on þet heafod. þet he mid þam dynte niðer asah. 7 his halige blod on þa eorðan feoll. 7 his þa haligan sawle to Godes rice asende*. 'They were also very drunk, for wine from the south had been brought there. They seized the bishop . . . they pelted him with bones and with ox-heads, and one of them struck him on the head with the back of an axe, that he sank down with the blow, and his holy blood fell on the ground, and so he sent his holy soul to God's kingdom' (*ASC* I 142, *EHD* 245). It is interesting that the Vikings' habit of throwing bones about when they ate is confirmed in Snorri's account of Þórr's journey to Útgarðaloki (Snorri Sturluson 2005, 37) and in *Hrólfs saga kraka* (*NION* II, 4–12). When the same event in London is described by Thietmar of Merseburg, the Viking leader is described as 'the voracious Charybdis of thieving magpies', but the bishop is described as a lamb (*EHD* 349). Vikings in these sources are characteristically depicted as violent, heathen and unreliable—using deceit and failing to keep their promises. The latter may be true: the cult of Óðinn, which may have been adhered to by many of the Viking attackers of Britain, seems to have actually celebrated Óðinn as being an oath-breaker. Thus *Hávamál* (110, 91; though this part of the poem may well reflect post-Viking-Age views about the cult of Óðinn): *Baugeið Óðinn hygg ek at unnit hafi, hvat skal hans trygðum trúa?* 'A ring-oath I believe Óðinn has sworn, how can his word be believed?' and *þá vér fegrst mælum er vér flást hyggjum* 'when we speak most fair, then our thoughts are falsest'. What more natural when being required to swear oaths by their highest god than that the Vikings should imitate Óðinn and break them? The attitude of medieva1 English writers to the Vikings can be summed up in Ray Page's translation of the words of the Englishman Æðelweard from the late tenth century (Page 1987, 3; Campbell 1962, 42, 44): 'A most vile people . . . that filthy race' (*plebs spurcissima . . . plebs immunda*).

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

> They are the filthiest of god's creatures. They do not wash after discharging their natural functions, neither do they wash their hands after meals. They are as stray donkeys . . . Ten or twenty of them may live together in one house, and each of them has a couch of his own where he sits and diverts himself with the pretty slave-girls whom he has brought along to offer for sale. He will make love with one of them in the presence of his comrades, sometimes this develops into a communal orgy, and, if a customer should turn up to buy a girl, the Rus will not let her go till he has finished with her.

The rituals described in connection with funerals are very strange indeed; we in fact lack reliable accounts of such things in Scandinavian sources, but the unexpected nature of the rituals described by Ibn Fadlan has suggested that the Vikings had acquired some strange

habits from the outlandish people they had been associating with east of the Baltic. They include accounts of ritual prostitution, suttee and odd things done to cockerels. Some things in this account, such as the practice of suttee, do correspond, not with historical accounts from Scandinavia, but with elements of early legends in Eddic poems, such as the death of Brynhildr, and there is also support from the evidence of archaeology, for in some ancient burials a woman is found buried alongside a man (or, in some cases, another woman, as at Oseberg).

A third contemporary source is the runic inscriptions, particularly those from Sweden. Here one is surprised to find quite often an emphasis on the Christianity of the Vikings, as well as confirmation that they often died by violence far from home—as victims rather than perpetrators—and that their motive was often just monetary gain. *Þeir fóru drængila fiarri at gulli ok austarla ærni gafu. Dou sunnarla a Særkland* 'They fared like men far after gold and in the east gave the eagle food. They died southward in Serkland'; *Brøðr varu þæir bæstra manna a landi ok i liði uti. Heldu sina huskarla vel. Hann fioll i orrustu austr i Garðum, liðs forungi, landmanna bæstr* 'The brothers were best among men on land and out in the levy. They held their house-men well. He fell in action east in Gardarike, the levy's captain, of the land's men the best.'; *Guð hialpi sial þæira vel. En þæir liggia i Lundunum* 'May God help their souls well. And they lie in London'; *Ragnælfr let gærva bro þessi æftir Anund, sun sinn goðan. Guð hialpi hans and ok salu bætr þæn hann gærði til* 'Ragnälv had this causeway made in memory of Anund, her good son. May God help his spirit and soul better than he deserved'; *Sar hafði goða tro til Guðs* 'He had good faith in God' (Jansson 1952, 41, 38, 51, 96–97, 99). The tone is sometimes heroic: *Hann var manna mestr oniðingr. Er a Ænglandi aldri tynði* 'He was among men the most "un-dastard". He in England lost his life' reads one; *Sar flo eigi at Upsalum en va með hann vapn hafði* 'He fled not at Uppsala but fought while he had weapons' another; sometimes other virtues are celebrated: *Mildan við sinna ok matar goðan, i orðlofi allra miklu* 'Gentle with his folk and generous with food, in great esteem with all people' (Jansson 1952, 115, 65, 114). Epitaphs are notoriously unreliable, yet they do at least show what qualities were admired at the time, whether these individuals had them or not, and runic inscriptions do reveal a welcome human side to the Vikings which strongly contrasts with the view of them one gains from the chroniclers. King Alfred, too, unexpectedly gives an account of one Viking—or a man we should identify as being a Viking—who visited his court towards the end of the ninth century (Sweet 1967, 17–20; cf. Jones 1984, 138–39):

> Ohtere sæde his hlaforde, Ælfrede cyninge, þæt he ealra Norðmonna norþmest bude. He cwæð þæt he bude on þæm lande norþweardum wiþ þa Westsæ . . . He sæde þæt he æt sumum cirre wolde fandian hu longe þæt land norþryhte læge . . . for he norþryhte be þæm lande . . . Swiþost he for ðider, toeacan þæs landes sceawunge, for þæm horshwælum . . . He wæs swyðe spedig man on þæm æhtum þe heora speda on beoð, þæt is, on wildrum. He hæfde þa gyt, ða he þone cyninge sohte, tamra deora unbebohtra syx hund . . . He wæs mid þæm fyrstum mannum on þæm lande: næfde he þeah ma ðonne twentig hryðera, and twentig sceapa, and twentig swyna; and þæt lytle þæt he erede, he erede mid horsan.
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> Ohthere told his lord, King Alfred, that he lived furthest north of all the northmen. He said that he lived in the northern part of the land facing the Atlantic . . . He said that he on one occasion wanted to find out how far the land extended to the north . . . He

> travelled northwards along the coast . . . He went there chiefly, besides for exploration of the land, for the walrus . . . He was a very wealthy man in the property that their wealth consists in, that is in reindeer. He had still, when he visited the king, six hundred tame animals unsold . . . He was among the first men in the land, though he owned no more than twenty cattle and twenty sheep and twenty swine; and the little that he ploughed he ploughed with horses.

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

Poems

But one might argue that the most important contemporary sources about the Vikings are the poems they themselves composed that have survived. Many of the poems of the Elder Edda are believed to have been composed by Vikings, anonymous though they are. The subjects of the heroic lays are in many cases people who would have lived, insofar as they are historical, before the Viking age—Hamðir and Sǫrli, Gunnarr and Hǫgni, Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. But it is not clear that at the time poets really distinguished the heroes of the Viking Age from those of the Migration Age as modern historians do, and it may be justifiable to see the heroes of Eddic poems as embodying either the Viking poet's views of himself or his ideal. It is in these poems that one finds the picture of the Viking laughing as he dies—*Hló þá Hǫgni, er til hjarta skáru kvikvan kumblasmið, kløkva hann sízt hugði* 'Then Hǫgni laughed when they cut the living wound-maker to the heart, the last thing he thought of doing was crying' (*Atlakviða* 24)—demanding to see his brother's heart on a plate so that he can die happy, knowing that the secret of his gold will be kept: *Hér hefi ek hjarta Hǫgna ins frækna . . . er litt bifask er á bjóði liggr, bifðisk svági mjǫk þá er í brjósti lá* 'Here I have the heart of Hǫgni the brave . . . which trembles little as it lies on the plate, it trembled not even as much when it lay in his breast (*Atlakviða* 25)—making cups from the skulls of his dead enemies (like Vǫlundr in *Vǫlundarkviða* 24: *en þær skálar er und skǫrum váru sveip hann útan silfri, seldi Níðaði* 'and the bowls which had been under the hair he covered all over with silver, gave them to Níðaðr') and committing other terrible acts of revenge. At the end of *Hamðismál* (30) Hamðir says: *Vel hǫfum við vegit, stǫndum á val Gotna, ofan eggmóð sem ernir á kvisti; góðs hǫfum tírar fengit þótt skylim nú eða í gær deyja, kveld lifir maðr ekki eptir kvið norna* 'Well have we fought, we stand on the corpses of Goths, above, wearied by sword-edges, like eagles on a bough; we have gained good fame whether we must die now or another day, no man lives for one evening beyond the decree of the norns'. One must always bear in mind, however, that the heroes of Eddic poems are not 'real' Vikings in any sense of the term; they are a legend created by poets.

More reliable, one might think, is the picture from scaldic verse. Though this has mostly survived only as quotations in thirteenth-century prose texts, much of it is thought to be the genuine work of Viking poets, passed down orally until the age of writing. It has the great advantage over Eddic verse that it is often about Vikings as well as being by Vikings, and the subject matter is often contemporary with the poet; and not only is it not anonymous, but it characteristically contains a great deal of self-reference and evaluation of the people and events mentioned in it. It is clear from it that the values Viking poets most liked to celebrate, at any rate publicly in kings and heroes, were valour and generosity. Arnórr praises King Magnús (*Skj* B I 315): *Ungr skjǫldungr stígr aldri*

jafnmildr á við skildan 'As generous a young prince will never step onto ship's deck'; Sighvatr says (*Skj* B I 234): *Vask með gram þeims gumnum goll bauð drottinhollum—nafn fekk hann—en hrǫfnum hræ þess konungs ævi* 'I was with the ruler throughout the king's life who offered loyal followers gold—he gained renown—and gave ravens carrion'; Egill Skalla-Grímssson in his *Hǫfuðlausn* 9, 17 and 18 (*ÍF* I 185–92) praised Eiríkr blóðøx chiefly for these two virtues: *Þar var eggja at ok odda gnat; orðstir of gat Eiríkr at þat . . . glaðar flotna fjǫl við Fróða mjǫl . . . hjǫrleiks hvati, hann er þjóðskati* 'There was conflict of edges and clashing of points; Eiríkr gained glory from that . . . he makes multitudes of men happy with Fróði's meal [gold] . . . the instigator of battle, he is a most generous man'. Snorri Sturluson (*ÍF* XXVI 5) argued that scaldic verse that is well preserved and which was recited in the presence of the kings whose exploits it celebrates must be true, because to praise men to their face for deeds they had not performed would be *háð en eigi lof* 'mockery and not praise'. I think Snorri underestimated kings' appetites for flattery and their facility in self-deception. Scaldic verse is largely propaganda, much of it self-propaganda, and though it is valuable in showing us how Vikings wanted the world to see them, it cannot be taken at its face value as representing the truth about them. If, as the kings of England found, there was no reason to trust Vikings when they swore oaths on the sacred ring, how much less should one trust them to give a true account of themselves in their poetry? But perhaps the most significant fact about the Vikings that emerges from their poetry is their love of poetry itself. One of the most characteristic things about the Vikings seems to be this love of poetry and the high value they placed on poets. It is this aspect of them that is the best antidote to the partial view of them as vandals and men of violence; but it is this aspect of them that is most difficult to convey in an exhibition in a museum: the only way to appreciate Viking poetry is to learn to read it in the original language. It cannot be presented in a glass case. It is also this aspect of them that has been one of the major formative influences on the development of the twentieth century Icelanders' view of themselves as a poetic and cultured nation: it was founded by poets.

Sagas

Many of the Icelandic sagas are about Vikings. Written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, they are an attempt to recreate the Vikings from a distance of several hundred years. The picture they give is different in different kinds of sagas—there is romanticisation in many of the *fornaldarsögur*, together with emphasis on sensational and grotesque activities such as exotic battles, voyages and encounters with the supernatural. There is a different kind of romanticisation in the Sagas of Icelanders: characters like Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi and Kári and Flosi in *Njáls saga* have considerable glamour that may owe something to European concepts of chivalry. Other characters are idealised as striving to be upright and moral in a corrupt world, like Gísli Súrsson and Hǫskuldr hvítanessgoði in *Njáls saga*. Others, strong men like Skarpheðinn, Grettir, Þorgeirr Hávarsson and Egill Skallagrímsson have grotesque qualities (the latter not free from what one might identify as poetic temperament) that express themselves in bloody-minded non-cooperation and determined rejection of civilised restraint which has to us a certain attraction as indicating independence of mind and individuality and refusal to compromise. Yet others, like Njáll himself, or Hallr of Síða, who renounced compensation for his own son in order to achieve reconciliation (cf. Andersson 1970), are

given qualities of wisdom and kindness, even before Christianity had had much time to have an effect on Icelandic morals, that are a clear attempt on the part of the thirteenth-century authors to demonstrate that Christianity did not have a monopoly of moral elevation in the Middle Ages. *Njáls saga* compares the morality of the Christian burners of Njáll unfavourably with that of the heathen attackers of Gunnarr in his house (*ÍF* XII 362). The way in which Christianity is depicted as being adopted by Vikings such as Kjartan in *Laxdœla saga* is also designed to show that Vikings were morally upright and amenable both to civilisation and to ethical teaching. Kjartan admits he has planned to burn the king in his house, and when the king forgives him he says (*ÍF* V 121–22): *'Þakka vilju vér yðr, konungr, er þér gefið oss góðan frið, ok þannig máttu oss mest teygja at taka við trúnni, at gefa oss upp stórsakar.' . . . Konungr . . . kvazk þat hyggja at margir myndi þeir kristnir er eigi myndi þeir jafnháttagóðir sem Kjartan eða sveit hans,—'ok skal slíkra manna lengi bíða.*' '"We wish to thank you, king, for having granted us kind pardon, and in this way you can best entice us to accept the faith, by pardoning us for great offences." . . . The king said he thought there must be many Christians who would not be as well-conducted as Kjartan and his company, —"and one must be patient with such men."' Later Kjartan says: *Svá leizt mér vel á konung it fyrsta sinn, er ek sá hann, at ek fekk þat þegar skilt at hann var inn mesti ágætismaðr . . . ok ǫll ætla ek oss þar við liggja vár málskipti, at vér trúim þann vera sannan guð sem konungr býðr* 'I was so impressed by the king the first time I saw him, that I immediately realised that he was a very excellent person . . . and I think our best interests lie in our believing that that is the true God whom the king is preaching'.

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

Hjǫggum vér með hjǫrvi.	We hewed with sword.
Heldum Lakkar tjǫldum	We held our shields
hátt at hildar leiki	high in the warfare
fyr Hjaðningavági;	by Hjaðningavágr;
sjá knáttu þá seggir,	men could see there
es sundruðum skjǫldu	when we split shields
at hræsildar hjaldri,	in the tumult of spears,
hjalm slitnaðan gotna;	men's torn helmets
vasat sem bjarta brúði	it was not like laying beside one
í bing hjá sér leggia . . .	a bright bride in bed . . .
Hjoggum vér með hjǫrvi.	We hewed with sword.
Hví sé drengr at feigri,	Why should warrior be more doomed
at hann í odda éli	because in the storm of spears
ǫndurðr látinn verði?	he be placed in the van?
Opt sýtir sá ævi,	He often bemoans his life
es aldrigi nistir	whom never tears
(ilt kveða, argan eggja)	(it is bad, they say, to goad a coward)
ǫrn at sverða leiki;	eagle in sword-play;
hugblauðum kømr hvergi	for a cowardly one never

hjarta sitt at gagni . . .	does his heart any good . . .
Hjoggum vér með hjǫrvi.	We hewed with sword.
Hitt sýnisk mér raunar,	This indeed seems to me right
at forlǫgum fylgjum,	that we submit to fate.
fár gengr of skǫp norna . . .	few withstand the decree of the norns . . .
Fýsumk hins at hætta,	I am eager to venture beyond,
heim bjóða mér dísir,	the spirit-maids call me home,
þær's frá Herjans hǫllu	they who Óðinn has sent me
hefr Óðinn mér sendar;	from war-god's hall;
glaðr skalk ǫl með Ásum	joyful shall I with Æsir
í ǫndvegi drekka;	drink ale on the seat of honour;
lífs eru liðnar vánir,	all hope of life is gone,
læjandi skalk deyja.	laughing shall I die.

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

Sár hefk sextán,	Wounds have I sixteen
slitna brynju,	slit is my corselet,
svart er mér fyr sjónum,	my sight is darkened.
séka ganga;	I see not my way;
hneit mér við hjarta	to my heart pierced me,
hjǫrr Angantýs,	poison-hardened,
hvass blóðrefill,	Angantýr's blade—
herðr í eitri . . .	bitter the point was . . .
Hvarfk frá fǫgrum	I went from delight
fljóða sǫngva	of women's singing
ótrauðr gamans	for joy eager
austr við Sóta;	east with Sóti;
fǫr skundaðak	sped my journey
ok fórk í lið	to join the host
hinzta sinni	left for the last time
frá hollvinum.	loyal companions.

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

Seventeenth to eighteenth centuries

It is curious that it is such sagas and poems that seem to have appealed most to the early scholars of Old Icelandic literature in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Among the earliest Icelandic prose narratives to be printed were *Gautreks saga* (1664) and *Hervarar saga* (1672), two of the most sensational of the *fornaldarsögur*, and *Snorra Edda* (1665) with its emphasis on the grotesque mythology and religion of the Vikings; more sober accounts of the Vikings followed towards the end of the century,

Landnámabók (1688) and *Heimskringla* (1697, though a version in Danish had appeared as early as 1594). The first Sagas of Icelanders had to wait until 1756 for publication. The conception of the Vikings that was thus established in the first texts that became available after the Renaissance dwelled on the sensational and melodramatic possibilities of the tradition, and one of the most influential early descriptions of them was in Bartholin's *Antiquitates Danicæ de causis contemptæ a Danis adhuc gentilibus mortis* (1689), which emphasised the supposed imperviousness to pain and indifference to death of the legendary Viking. This work quotes a good deal of eddic poetry (including *Baldrs draumar*) and sagas, including quite a lot of skaldic verse and parts of the poems *Krákumál, Bjarkamál, Hakonarmál, Darraðarljóð* and the whole of *Ásbjarnarkviða* from *Orms þáttr*, all with Latin translations and great emphasis on the heroically fighting and dying Viking. Non-Scandinavian readers were also much influenced by the publications of Thomas Percy, a characteristic product of the Romantic Age in his interest in early traditions of all kinds and his glorification of the primitiveness, as he saw it, of past ages. He published a great deal of early English poetry, including many ballads, in his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). He introduced English readers to Scandinavian mythology in his English version of Johan Gøransson's edition of *Gylfaginning* (1746) along with his translation of P. H. Mallet's *L'Introduction à l'histoire de Dannemarc* (1770). Even more influential, however, was his *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry* (1763) which included prose versions in English of *Hervararkviða* and *Krákumál*. The former reads (in the edition of 1809, 297–98): 'Are the sons of Andgrym, who delighted in mischief, now become dust and ashes? Can none of Eyvor's sons now speak with me out of the habitations of the dead?' Not very accurate, but exciting. *Hervararkviða* had already appeared with an English prose translation in Hickes' *Thesaurus* (1705), which was where Percy got it from, and in Dryden's *Miscellany Poems* VI (1716; this volume was published after Dryden's death, and he probably would not have approved). Thomas Gray also popularised the 'Gothic Ode' in his poems *The fatal sisters* and *The descent of Odin*, which were versions of *Darraðarljóð* and *Baldrs draumar* (1761). The former begins (Gray 1966, 29):

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

Gray is a skilful versifier, though the effect is different from that of the original. The terms Runic and Gothic are frequently used of Norse literature in this period, with a characteristic Romantic Age contempt for historical precision (cf. *Gentleman's Magazine* 1790, 844 (Gothic); Lewis 1801 (Runic)). It is notable that in versions of Norse poems of the eighteenth century, not only is it the more sensational (and less historical) texts that

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

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

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

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

> Argantyr, wake!—to thee I call,
> Hear from thy dark sepulchral hall!
> 'Mid the forest's inmost gloom,
> Thy daughter, circling thrice thy tomb,
> With mystic rites of thrilling power
> Disturbs thee at this midnight hour.

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

> Hark! what horrid voices ring
> Through the mansions of the dead!
> 'Tis the Valkyries who sing,

While they spin the fatal thread.
—‘Angantyr!’ I hear them say,
Sitting by their magic loom,
—‘Yield the sword, no more delay,
Let the sorceress meet her doom!’ . . .
I obey! the magic glaive
Thirty warriors’ blood hath spilt;
Lo! I reach it from my grave,
Death is in the sheath and hilt!

HERVOR.

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

ANGANTYR.

’Tis in vain your shrieks resound,
Hapless prey of strange despair!
’Tis in vain you beat the ground,
While you rend your raven hair!
They who dare the dead to wake,
still too late the crime deplore:
None shall now my silence break,
Now I sleep to wake no more!

HERVOR.

Curses! Curses! Oh! what pain!
How my melting eyeballs glow!
Curses! curses! through each vein
How do boiling torrents flow!
Scorching flames my heart devour!
Nought can cool them but the grave!
Hela! I obey thy power,
Hela! take thy willing slave.

Not all readers of 'runic' poems in this period gave them unqualified admiration. Thomas Love Peacock in his *Melincourt* (1817, 387–88), has a dialogue about the Romantic attitude to the wild North. Mr. Forester begins with a quotation from Southey:

> MR. FORESTER.
>
> Let us look back to former days, to the mountains of the North:
>
> 'Wild the Runic faith,
> And wild the realms where Scandinavian chiefs
> And Scalds arose, and hence the Scald's strong verse
> Partook the savage wildness. And methinks,
> Amid such scenes as these the poet's soul
> Might best attain full growth.'
>
> MR FAX.
>
> As to the 'Scald's strong verse,' I must say I have never seen any specimens of it, that I did not think mere trash. It is little more than a rhapsody of rejoicing in carnage, a ringing of the changes on the biting sword and the flowing of blood and the feast of the raven and the vulture, and fulsome flattery of the chieftain, of whom the said Scald was the abject slave, vassal, parasite, and laureat, interspersed with continual hints that he ought to be well paid for his lying panegyrics.
>
> MR. FORESTER.
>
> There is some justice in your observations: nevertheless, I must still contend that those who seek the mountains in a proper frame of feeling, will find in them images of energy and liberty, harmonizing most aptly with the loftiness of an unprejudiced mind, and nerving the arm of resistance to every variety of oppression and imposture, that winds the chains of power round the free-born spirit of man.

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

One of the first translators who really tried to keep close to the original, and who took the trouble to learn something of the original language, was William Herbert, whose *Select Icelandic Poetry* was published in 1804–06. His translations are well done, but even he has inevitably the attitudes of his time to the originals. 'For me,' he writes (Herbert 1804–06, I viii), 'the energetic harmony of these old poems has great charms: the most ancient are the simplest and most beautiful; for the Icelandic poetry degenerated into affectation of impenetrable obscurity and extravagant metaphors.' He evidently thought scaldic poetry later both than eddic poetry and than *eddica minora* like *Hervararkviða*. 'I conceive,' he continues (1804–06, I ix), 'that much of the value of these relicks consists in their peculiarities, and in the light, they throw on the singular manners and persuasions of the northern nations.' He still thinks of these peculiarities in terms of the accounts of their deaths (1804–06, I 57–58): 'Singular as this may now appear, it was a common affectation amongst the warriors of the North [i. e. to recite poetry as they died] whose greatest pride was to display indifference at the hour of death, and to smile and jest in their last agonies.' He then goes on to compare the dying Viking with Red Indians of North America, 'who uttered their death-song with calm intrepidity in the midst of torments too horrid to relate, recounted the exploits of their youth, boasted of their own cruelties, and suggested even to their enemies "more exquisite methods of

torture, and more sensible parts of the body to be afflicted"'. Herbert, however, did appreciate the significance of the Vikings' love of poetry in indicating their intellectual achievement, but saw even this in a remarkably romantic light (1804–06, I 58): 'Skill in poetry was an accomplishment almost indispensable to a northern warrior; and although the rules of their metre were strict and various, they were habituated to speak in verse on every important incident; and the whole of their life was like a tragic opera.' He draws attention, though, to some respects in which medieval Iceland seemed more civilised than other parts of Europe, and gives as an example the making of duels to settle disputes illegal, as is reported in *Gunnlaugs saga* (Herbert 1804–06, I 65): 'at the very time when the enlightened Icelanders cast aside this superstitious and barbarous custom, in the rest of Europe it was in its meridian glory.' He was, however, fascinated by the accounts of berserks (1804–06, I 86–87): 'Many of then are described, as mild and affable in their general demeanor, unless suddenly thwarted or contradicted. It appears to me', he says, 'that this temporary madness was merely the violent eruption of a savage disposition, amongst men undisciplined and untamed; whose limbs had been invigorated by the practice of every corporeal exertion; who from their habits of life and their religion were entirely devoid of fear, from earliest youth had been accustomed to constant warfare and pillage, and had known no controul, but their own will, no bound to their desires, but the impossibility of gratifying them.'

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

Herbert's perception of scaldic poetry as being degenerate, while he admired the older and simpler style of eddic poetry as indicating the nobility of the Vikings, is interesting. Not many modern readers like scaldic poetry as much as eddic poetry, but I see it as having the sort of complexity that reflects intellectual sophistication rather than barbarity, though it does strike some as barbaric. It can be compared to the complexity of early Irish and Welsh poetry, or that of the troubadours in medieval France and Germany, or even that of Aeschylus. All these styles have been seen by some as having barbaric adornment rather than the overdeveloped sophistication of the baroque.

The result of the limited range of sources that were available to readers in the eighteenth century, and of the repeated selection of the most melodramatic that were

known, was a characteristic interpretation of the Viking as having 'rude nobility'. Walter Savage Landor (Letter to Southey, 1811, quoted Gordon 1957, lxxii) wrote: 'What a people were the Icelanders! What divine poets! . . . Except Pindar's, no other odes are so high-toned. [After quoting *Krákumál*:] Few poets could have expressed this natural and noble sentiment.' Many nineteenth-century works of literature based on the Vikings seem in fact to us rather sentimental. Carlyle in the 1840s described Odin as a type of Viking hero; he speaks of 'strong sons of Nature; and here was not only a wild captain and Fighter; discerning with his wild flashing eyes what to do, with his wild lion-heart daring and doing it; but a Poet too, and all that we mean by a Poet, Prophet, great devout Thinker and Inventor, as the truly Great Man ever is . . . A Hero, . . . in his own rude manner; a wise, gifted, noble-hearted man . . . A great thought in the wild deep heart of him! . . . In the old Sea-kings, too, what an indomitable rugged energy! Silent, with closed lips, as I fancy them, unconscious that they were specially brave; defying the wild ocean with its monsters, and all men and all things;—progenitors of our own Blakes and Nelsons . . . There is a sublime uncomplaining melancholy traceable in these old hearts' (*Carlyle* 1841; quoted from the 1908 edition, 34–35, 38, 42).

Nineteenth century

But in the nineteenth century, as a wider range of Norse texts became known to scholars, including some of the Sagas of Icelanders and *Heimskringla*, other aspects of the Vikings came to be emphasised. Independence and love of freedom came to be identified as characteristics of the Viking; and the societies they founded, particularly that in Iceland, were seen as foreshadowing romantic nationalism (e.g. in the nineteenth-century movements in Germany and Iceland towards national unity in the one and independence in the other), socialism and even communism. This view of Iceland is particularly associated with the writings of William Morris. This perception has led to the myth about Iceland always having had a classless society (based partly on the fact that one of the most striking provisions of the law of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth, and one that distinguished it from all other early Germanic law codes, was that the standard weregild for all free men was the same). This idea too has ancient roots. There are some anecdotes that attribute to Vikings in other countries an organisation which did not recognise differences of status. Two illustrations of this myth about the Vikings are quoted by Peter Foote and David Wilson in *The Viking Achievement* (1970, 79): Dudo of S. Quentin, well known creator of myths about the Norsemen, writing in the early eleventh century, depicted a group of Danes replying to an emissary of the Franks whom they claimed to have come to conquer when he asked them 'Under what name does your leader act?' with the statement 'Under none, for we are all of equal authority'. When asked 'Will you bow the neck to Charles, king of France, and turn to his service and receive from him all possible favours?' they reply 'We shall never submit to anyone at all, nor ever cleave to any servitude, nor accept favours from anyone. That favour pleases us best which we win for ourselves with arms and toil of battles.' When they did in fact come to pay homage to the king of the Franks, Rollo 'put his hands between the king's hands, which not his father nor his grandfather nor his great-grandfather had ever done to anybody.' The episode continues: 'Then the bishops said, "Anyone who receives such a gift ought to bend down and kiss the king's foot." But Rollo said: "Never will I bend my knees to anyone's knees, nor will I kiss anyone's foot." But impelled by the entreaties of the Franks he ordered a certain soldier to kiss the king's foot; and he immediately took hold

of the king's foot, lifted it up to his mouth and, still standing, kissed it, thus toppling the king over' (Davis 1976, 54). This account is reminiscent of some in the Sagas of Icelanders about men who were reluctant to submit to kings and rulers. A number of the sagas claim that the main reason for the settlement of Iceland was desire to be independent of the Norwegian throne. It is likely that many Vikings had political views, if not quite as coherent as some people have liked to imagine; desire for independence must have been one of the factors that led to the settlement of Iceland and Greenland, though economic factors are likely also to have been significant. It is also clear, however, from many of the sagas, as well as from *Landnámabók*, that there was in medieval Iceland a distinct aristocratic attitude, a valuing of noble descent and a pride in class and status. The medieval Icelandic commonwealth was an oligarchy, not a democracy. The Eddic poem *Rígsþula* embodies a belief in the unalterable distinction between slaves and free, commoners and nobles; the three classes of mankind are there descended from Heimdallr, but through three quite different classes of woman progenitors.

Twentieth century

In the twentieth century it is the personal qualities of some of the heroes of the Sagas of Icelanders that have particularly attracted the attention of many scholars in Britain and America. One of the sagas that has been most read in these countries, is *Hrafnkels saga*, mainly because, being a short saga and easily accessible, it has featured as a central element in most university syllabuses. Hrafnkell has been perceived as a pragmatist and a realist, and the qualities that enabled him to be successful at the end of the saga have been identified as moderation, restraint and patience. The saga-writer uses such proverbs as *sá er svinnr er sik kann*, *skǫmm er óhófs ævi* 'he is wise who knows himself', 'short is the life of immoderation' (*ÍF* XI 106, 122), which have been taken to encapsulate the message of the saga. Restraint, moderation and self-control do seem to be qualities admired by saga-writers as well as by the poet of *Hávamál*, and are part of the way in which they idealised their Viking ancestors; there is no certainty that historically Vikings really possessed these virtues, although of course some of them may have done so, or that many of them would have admired them. A sense of humour, even under difficult circumstances, is also sometimes celebrated, such as the grim humour of Skarpheðinn or the irony expressed by many a saga character at the point of death. One of the best examples of this is the reply of the mortally wounded Norwegian who had been sent to spy out if Gunnarr was at home in *Njáls saga*: *'Vitið þér þat, en hitt vissa ek at atgeirr hans var heima.' Síðan fell hann niðr dauðr* '"You find that out, but this I do know, that his thrusting-spear was at home". Then he fell down dead' (*ÍF* XII 187). Another is Helgi Droplaugarson's comment when he received a wound to his face: *Aldri var ek fagrleitr, en lítit hefir þú um bætt* 'I was never handsome in the face, and you have not improved it much' (*ÍF* XI 164). Imperturbability and refusal to indulge in emotional outbursts is celebrated in many episodes. Halldórr Snorrason is described as a man who *sízt brygði við váveifliga hluti; hvárt sem at hǫndum bar mannháska eða fagnaðartíðendi, þá var hann hvárki at glaðari né óglaðari; eigi neytti hann matar eða drakk eða svaf meira né minna en vanði hans var til, hvárt sem hann mætti blíðu eða stríðu* 'least of all was taken aback by unexpected things; whether he was faced with deadly danger or welcome news, he was neither the more nor the less cheerful; he did not enjoy food or drink or sleep either more or less than his custom was, whether he met with pleasantness or adversity'

(*ÍF* V 276). There appears to be the influence here of ideals associated with stoicism. This sort of character appeals to an age which has lost interest in emotionalism and sees it as weakness. It is a far cry from the characters celebrated in eighteenth-century poetry. Similarly imperturbable is Þorgeirr Hávarsson in *Fóstbræðra saga* (*ÍF* VI 127–28):

> Er Þorgeirr spurði víg fǫður síns, þá brá honum ekki við þá tíðenda sǫgn. Eigi roðnaði hann, því at eigi rann honum reiði í hǫrund; eigi bliknaði hann, því at honum lagði eigi heipt í brjóst; eigi blánaði hann, því at honum rann eigi í bein reiði, heldr brá hann sér engan veg við tíðenda sǫgnina, því at eigi var hjarta hans sem fóarn í fugli; eigi var þat blóðfullt, svá at þat skylfi af hræzlu.
>
> When Þorgeirr heard of the killing of his father, he was not disturbed by the report of the event. He did not go red, for there ran no anger in his flesh; he did not turn pale, for there lay no hatred in his breast; he did not go livid, for there ran in his bones no anger, rather he was in no way disturbed by the report of the event, for his heart was not like the gizzard in a bird; it was not full of blood so that it would quiver with fear.

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

In the twentieth century there are various characteristic themes that recur in discussions of the sagas and the figures they portray. As with earlier accounts, it is by careful selection of the material that it is possible to demonstrate the existence of these themes and their importance. One is that of the noble heathen who has a natural morality but stands outside the Christian church (cf. particularly Lönnroth 1969; Schach **1984, ØØØ**). Medieval Christians liked to construct pictures of their heathen forebears which emphasised their natural virtues and the fact that even heathens could behave nobly and have a sense of decency and honour. The concept of the 'noble heathen' does seem to underlie the saga-writers' depiction of characters like Gunnarr and Njáll (before his conversion), as indeed it does in the literature of other countries—e.g. Beowulf in Anglo-Saxon England, Cuchullain in Ireland. Some saga-writers created characters in heathen times who had a 'natural' morality and were more virtuous than many Christians. Thus Arnórr kerlinganef was depicted as speaking out against the idea of letting old people die in times of famine (*Flateyjarbók* 1944–45, I 486). Áskell in *Reykdœla saga* similarly argues against exposing children and killing old people in times of hardship (*ÍF* X 169–71). Such 'righteous heathens' are in the sagas often depicted as being devoted to him who made heaven and earth (*ÍF* VI 247), all things (*ÍF* XXIX 368) or the sun (*ÍF* VIII 62, 97–98, 125*, ÍF* I 46, 47), and thus are free from superstition and harmful pagandom. There are a number of examples of this sort of agnostic religion, akin to the idea of devotion to the unknown god in Acts 17:23, for instance Þorsteinn gamli in *Vatnsdœla saga* (*ÍF* VIII 62, 97–98, 125) and Þorkell máni (*ÍF* I 46, 47, *Flateyjarbók* 1944–45, I 291), who *einn heiðinna manna hefir bezt verit siðaðr, at því er menn vitu dœmi til. Hann lét sik bera í sólargeisla í banasótt sinni ok fal sik í hendi þeim guði, er sólina hafði skapat; hafði hann ok lifat svá hreinliga sem þeir kristnir menn, er bezt eru siðaðir* 'alone of heathen people has been most splendid in conduct, as far as people have knowledge of precedents for it. He had himself carried into the sunshine in his final sickness and committed himself into the hands of the God who had created the sun; he had also lived as pure a life as those Christians whose conduct is finest'. Other similar examples are Finnr Sveinsson in *Flateyjarbók* 1944–45, I 430–37 and Haraldr hárfagri in

Heimskringla (*ÍF* XXVI 97; note his dislike of necromancers, *ÍF* XXVI 138) and in Óláfr Tryggvason's account of him in *Flateyjarbók* 1944–45, I 357–58. Further favourable accounts of Haraldr hárfagri's religion and morals are found in *Fagrskinna* (*ÍF* XXIX 368–69) and *Kjalnesinga saga* (*ÍF* XIV 27, 28). The motive of the virtuous heathen is used ironically of Gríma (wife of Gamli) in *Fóstbræðra saga* (*ÍF* VI 247; **Schach 1984, 116**). It is said of Hallfreðr (*ÍF* VIII 156–57), who is depicted as rather reluctantly adopting Christianity, that he *lastaði ekki goðin, þó at aðrir menn hallmælti þeim, kvað eigi þurfa at ámæla þeim, þó at menn vildi eigi trúa á þau* 'did not speak ill of the gods, though other men condemned them, said there was no need to blame them, even if people would not believe in them' (i.e. like Haraldr hárfagri he is against blaspheming any gods).

Snorri echoes this depiction of the heathen religion as deistic in *Gylfaginning* (Snorri Sturluson 2005, 8) where Hár, Jafnhár and Þriði (High, Equally high and Third) claim belief in an Alfǫðr (All-father) who created heaven and earth (though he had many names). The concept of the nameless ruler of the heavens is not a native one; it is clearly based on the European commonplace of 'him who rules all the world' (*sá er öllum heimi ræðr*, *Fornsögur Suðrlanda* 1884*,* 197) that appears often in translated romances, where it is usually a description of 'Maumet' (see *Fornsögur Suðrlanda* 1884*,* xxvi; there are 7 cases—3 in *Flóvents saga* I, a further 1 in *Flóvents saga* II, 1 in *Karlamagnus saga*, 2 in *Elis saga*—and in six of these the god ruling the world is named as 'Maumet' or something similar). The belief that heathen Icelanders had a morality akin to Christianity is expressed already by Adam of Bremen (1961, IV 36): *ante susceptam fidem naturali quadam lege non adeo discordabant a nostra religione* 'even before adopting the Faith, by a kind of natural law they did not differ very much from our religion' (cf. Weber 1981, 477 n.; Schomerus 1936, *passim*). Comparisons between the morality of heathens and Christians are sometimes made in the sagas, with the former being shown as in some cases equal to, if not superior to, the latter (*Njáls saga*, *ÍF* XII 326, 328, cf. 188; *Laxdœla saga*, *ÍF* V 42–43).

It is characteristic of many of these accounts of 'noble heathens' (which are often set in the period of the conversion and in connection with stories about Óláfr Tryggvason) that they are depicted as being well-disposed to Christianity and welcoming it, like Njáll in *Njáls saga* (see **Schach 1984, 109**). Other examples are the prophetess Þorbjǫrg in *Eiríks saga rauða* (*ÍF* IV 195–237), Helgi magri in *Landnámabók* (*ÍF* I 250–53), Bárðr in *Þorvalds þáttr tasalda* (*ÍF* IX, 119–26), Eindriði ilbreiðr in *Flateyjarbók* 1944–45, I 507–16, Sigmundr Brestisson in *Færeyinga saga*, Koðrán in *Þorvalds þáttr víðfǫrla* (*ÍF* XV 51–89), Finnbogi in *Finnboga saga* (*ÍF* XIV 253–40; ch. 20); cf. also *Rimberti Vita Anskarii* 1961, 90–93 (ch. 27) and ***Grœnlendinga saga* ch. 6** (*ÍF* X 259–60).

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

meaning there is ‘he trusted in courageous strength, God’s grace’; but *Beowulf* and other Old English texts do stress trust in one’s might and main (Weber 1981, 489–93). The cliché *ek þarf engis nauðungarmaðr at vera/engis manns nauðungarmaðr vil ek vera* is attributed to Eindriði ilbreiðr (*Flateyjarbók* 1944–45, I 511) and Kjartan (*Laxdœla saga*, *ÍF* V 119), in both cases in the context of conversion to Christianity as put forward by Óláfr Tryggvason; it seems that as in *Íslendingabók*, it was important to Icelanders in the Middle Ages to make clear that conversion had been voluntary, not imposed (Weber 1981, 497–503). It may be that eventually most of these independently-minded heroes give in to Óláfr Tryggvason’s persuasions and become Christians, often good Christians; but the idea of the Viking who trusts only in his own ability and is not going to be pushed around by anyone appealed to the secular freedom-loving twentieth-century reader, and the figure is not so common in the Middle Ages outside Norse literature.

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

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

Similarly, the concept of the Viking who refuses to sacrifice to the heathen gods can be related to medieval hagiography which idealised those who refused to sacrifice at pagan altars in the early Christian period (Weber 1981, 486). The figure is found widely in Norse literature. A striking example is Qrvar-Oddr: *Aldri vildi Oddr blóta; trúði hann á mátt sinn ok megin; herfiligt kvezk honum þykkja at hokra þar fyrir stokkum eða steinum* ‘Never would Oddr perform heathen acts of worship; he believed in his own might and main; he thought it was contemptible to crouch down there in front of stocks or stones’ (Weber 1981, 480). There is also a whole series of men in *Landnámabók* among the settlers of Iceland who are said to have been *goðlauss* ‘godless’. This is part of the myth of Iceland having never been subject to superstitious religion (Weber 1981, 484–85).

The fact that many Vikings clearly were subservient to kings and that to attribute agnosticism or deism to them is probably an anachronism, does not prevent many from responding positively to the saga-writers' construction of them as such. It is historically implausible that Vikings could have been so free from the prevailing culture of their time. Writers only have available the categories that their culture and education provides them with. Medieval Christianity developed the two categories of Christian and heathen but added to them the intermediate one of the agnostic who had renounced heathendom but not yet embraced Christianity. The reform of Hrafnkell's character seems to involve this; his rejection of heathen worship seems to herald his success at the end of the saga. Moreover the medieval perception of heathendom even in Iceland was clearly primarily derived from the Bible's accounts of non-Jewish cults in both Old and New Testaments (including the religion of Eindriði ilbreiðr; see Weber 1981, 488–91). We actually learn rather little about real European heathendom from thirteenth-century Icelandic writings. The idea of 'natural' goodness and the possibility of moral uprightness outside Christianity owes much to St Paul's account in Romans 2: 14–27: 'When Gentiles who do not possess the law carry out its precepts by the light of nature, then, although they have no law, they are their own law, for they display the effect of the law inscribed on their hearts . . . If an uncircumcised man keeps the precepts of the law, will he not count as circumcised?'

Another aspect of the idealisation of the heathen Viking is the idea that in his natural nobility he is the equal of kings and noblemen. This is particularly prominent in *fornaldarsögur*. Qrvar-Oddr is represented as being accepted as equal by kings because of his nobility of character (Weber 1981, 482). King Sveinn forkbeard says of Þorvaldr víðfǫrli (*ÍF* XV 59): *Finna mun ek þann útlendan bóndason, at einn hefir með sér, ef rétt virðing er á hǫfð, í engan stað minna gǫfugleik ok sómasemð en vér allir þrír konungar . . . Þessi maðr, er ek tala hér til, er svá vitr sem spǫkum konungi hœfði at vera, styrkr ok hugdjarfr sem enn øruggasti berserkr, svá siðugr ok góðháttaðr sem enn siðugasti spekingr* 'I can find you a son of a foreign peasant who has in his own self, if it is regarded in the right way, by no means less honour and nobility than all we three kings put together . . . This man that I am speaking of, is as sensible as it behoves a wise king to be, strong and bold as the most trusty berserk, as well conducted and of as fine morals as the best conducted philosopher.' Friðþjófr is another example of the heathen who refuses to sacrifice to heathen gods, and is said to be as noble as a king, though he refuses higher honour than that of jarl. This is an extension of the myth of equality to embrace the idea of natural equality based on moral uprightness. The implication of Kjartan's competing physically with Óláfr Tryggvason on equal terms and refusing to be cowed by him, while the king develops great respect for him in return, is another example of the noble heathen being made the equal of a king. Much has also been made in recent times of the episode in *Eiríks saga rauða* of the death of Bjarni Grímólfsson as a sacrifice to egalitarianism (*ÍF* 234–35; cf. Foote 2004, 44–51) which seems to support the idea that the Vikings had egalitarian principles, also reflected in their law code in Iceland, an idea close to the heart of Icelanders who want to see continuity between the ideals of Icelandic society in the Middle Ages and those of the present.

The Vikings are not often depicted as thinkers (though Carlyle (1908 [first published 1841], 42) says 'they seem to have seen, these brave old Northemen, what Meditation has taught all men in all ages, That this world is after all but a show,—a phenomenon or appearance, no real thing. All deep souls see into that,—the Hindoo, Mythologist, the

German Philosopher,—the Shakspeare, the earnest Thinker wherever he may be)'. Occasionally in the sagas the troubled mind is indicated by a description of the behaviour of one of the characters, but we are rarely allowed to see what goes on in their minds (Njáll, Þorgeirr lǫgsǫgumaðr (in *Íslendingabók*), Egill). Finnur Jónsson towards the end of his great literary history has a section headed 'Filosofi' which is almost as short as the celebrated chapter lxxii 'Concerning Snakes' in Horrebow's *The Natural History of Iceland* (1758, 91): 'No snakes of any kind are to be met with throughout the whole island.' Finnur begins his section (1920–24, II 945): 'Hvad filosofi angår, ecksisterer den overhovedet slet ikke i den gamle litteratur' (As regards philosophy, on the whole it just didn't exist in the old literature). He goes on to claim that the early Scandinavian attitudes to life could be found in the proverbial expressions found in both prose and verse in medieval literature. But evidence of thought may also be said to be found in the early parts of *Hávamál* and in Egill's *Sonatorrek*. Snorri depicts the cult of Óðinn as closely connected with the cult of wisdom. Moreover Óðinn's gift of the mead of inspiration enables one to become not only a poet but also a scholar (*fræðamaðr*) according to *Skáldskaparmál* (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 3/23). The idea of the thinking Viking is one that many modern readers like to contemplate. A twentieth-century Icelandic farmer is reputed to have claimed that solutions to all the problems of the world can be found in *Njáls saga*.

It is interesting that some of Snorri's idealised characters are notable for their rationalism as well as independence of mind, for instance Einarr Þveræingr in *Óláfs saga helga* (*ÍF* XXVI 216). Another kind of idealisation is seen in the figure of the wise old man, like Njáll, or Gestr Oddleifsson in *Laxdœla* and other sagas (who looks forward to the introduction of Christianity as a future blessing for Iceland; cf. **Schach 1984, ØØØ**); and wisdom is also an important concept in eddic poems like *Vǫluspá*, *Hávamál*, *Sigrdrífumál* and *Fáfnismál*. Compare also Arnkell goði in *Eyrbyggja saga* (*ÍF* IV 103): *hann hefir verit allra manna bezt at sér um alla hluti í fornum sið ok manna vitrastr, vel skapi farinn, hjartaprúðr ok hverjum manni djarfari, einarðr ok allvel stilltr* 'he has been of all men the best endowed in all respects in the old religion, and the wisest of men, of fine character, stouthearted and bolder than anyone, reliable and truly moderate.' The ideal type who exemplifies wisdom and valour (*sapientia et fortitudo*) is clearly derived from classical ideology (see Gerd Weber 1981, 479); that has formed the basis of the medieval Christian concept of the perfect knight, and this has in turn obviously influenced Icelandic presentation of heroes like Hrólfr kraki, whom Snorri gives as an example of *mildi ok frœknleik ok litillæti* 'generosity and valour and humility (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 58/5).

The current desire to emphasise the morality of the Vikings and also to connect the literature about them with European literature seems to arise from a need to portray Old Icelandic narratives as developed literary works rather than just as historical sources or folklore. We want to justify the placing of Icelandic literature in a world class of writings, to make them comparable with the great books of other countries.

Snorri Sturluson in his *Edda* and *Ynglinga saga* writes about the earlier inhabitants of Scandinavia as ancestors of his contemporaries in Scandinavia including Iceland without indicating any break at the beginning of the Viking Age; the break for him is simply between the historical period and pre-history, and the break is in the ninth century at the time of the settlement of Iceland in the reign of Haraldr hárfagri. It seems therefore

permissible to include his representation of pre-historic Scandinavians in a discussion of the various representations of the Vikings, even though he was not describing Vikings as we now think of them, but rather the people from whom the Vikings originated. His description of his heathen ancestors in the prologue to his *Edda* presents them as natural philosophers, contemplating the phenomena of the universe and working out a religion to interpret it to themselves by means of their innate reason. These men are not superstitious though they lack the benefit of divine revelation (Snorri Sturluson 2005, 3):

> Þat hugsuðu þeir ok undruðusk hverju þat mundi gegna at jǫrðin ok dýrin ok fuglarnir hǫfðu saman eðli í sumum hlutum ok var þó ólíkt at hætti . . . Bjǫrg ok steina þýddu þeir á móti tǫnnum ok beinum kvikvenda. Af þessu skilðu þeir at jǫrðin væri kyk ok hefði líf með nǫkkurum hætti . . . Þat sama spurðu þeir af gǫmlum frændum sínum at síðan er talið váru mǫrg hundruð vetra þá var in sama jǫrð, sól ok himintungl . . . Af þvílikum hlutum grunaði þá at nǫkkurr mundi vera stjórnari himintunglanna sá er stilla mundi gǫng þeira at vilia sinum . . . alla hluti skilðu þeir jarðligri skilningu þvíat þeim var eigi gefin andlig spekðin. Svá skilðu þeir at allir hlutir væri smíðaðir af nǫkkuru efni.
>
> They pondered and were amazed at what it could mean that the earth and animals and birds had common characteristics in some things, though there was a difference in quality . . . Rocks and stones they thought of as equivalent to teeth and bones of living creatures. From this they reasoned that the earth was alive and had life after a certain fashion . . . Similarly they learned from their elderly relatives that after many hundreds of years had been reckoned there was the same earth, sun and heavenly bodies . . . From such things they thought it likely that there must be some controller of the heavenly bodies who must be regulating their courses in accordance with his will . . . they understood everything with earthly understanding for they were not granted spiritual wisdom. Thus they reasoned that everything was created out of some material.

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

> VÉSTEINN.
>
> Oh, he that braves the Gods is overbrave.
>
> GÍSLI.

I know not. Is there aught to brave at all?
VÉSTEINN.
That's blasphemy!
GÍSLI.
If there be Gods, my doubt—
Blasphemy if you will it—harms them not;
But he who prays to his own shadow proves
Nothing but his own fear.
. . . . . .
God, God, if there be Gods—! There are none such,
For who should see the blameless man cast down,
The shadow of unjust prosperity,
And all the needless miseries of the world,
And make no sign? But we send out our cries
Through the blank night and catch their echo back,
And call the nothing something. We look down,
Like children in a pool, into our souls,
And see our eyes look back, and cry out—God.

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

The significance of different critical attitudes

Though there is a clear historical development of attitudes towards the Vikings, there are also examples of individuals holding views seemingly quite unrelated to those current around them. W. H. Auden, in his *Letters from Iceland* (1937) wrote (edition of 1967, 117): 'I love the sagas, but what a rotten society they describe, a society with only the gangster virtues.' Similarly in 1738, Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavík described the subject-matter of the Icelandic sagas as *Bændur flugust á* 'Peasants having a scrap' (Sverrir Tómasson 2003, 325–26). There is no objective 'truth' about the Vikings and no objective meaning in the sources that describe them. All depictions of them are selective and partial. In another part of *Letters from Iceland* (1967, 210), Auden reports Uno von Troil's sardonic expression of how different people see different things in Iceland, suggesting it was like the 'clergyman and [a] fine lady who together observed the spots in the moon, which the former took for church steeples and the latter for a pair of happy lovers. I know [said von Troil] that we frequently imagine to have really found what we most think of, or most wish for.' Thus I believe that all criticism and commentary tells us about the critic or historian, not about the texts they analyse, just as the sagas themselves tell us more about the culture and values of thirteenth-century Iceland when they were

written than about the Viking Age. Criticism and commentary tell us about the culture of the critic and historian, not about the culture of the writers whose works they describe or about the culture depicted by those writers. If this happens more obviously in the case of accounts of the Vikings than with other topics, it may be because descriptions of the Vikings in the sagas are virtually ideologically indeterminate (or can appear to be), and lack authorial guidance and commentary as to how we are to perceive saga-characters. All readers then read their own ideology into the sagas and reflect themselves in their accounts of them. Biblical criticism and exposition (not to speak of Shakespeare criticism) has of course taken the same path.

Thus each age recreates or reconstructs its perception of the Vikings and creates a new myth about them, selecting different texts to justify their interpretations. It is astonishing what different pictures can be created out of the same set of sources about the same people. These reconstructions or readings of the sources are determined by the values and preoccupations of those who read the sources in each period. The Vikings themselves needed to justify themselves and represented themselves as heroic and generous. Thirteenth-century Icelanders wanted to see themselves as descended from honourable ancestors and represented the Vikings as independent lovers of freedom and justice building a community free from the tyranny of kings and without superstition or servility. In the romantic period, when Europeans constructed a vision of human nature that included the opposites of reason and emotion, mind and spirit, they wanted to see themselves as having attained a state of reason from a former barbarity, but having retained the nobility of mind and spirit of the noble savages from whom they believed themselves to be descended. The nineteenth century, as Europe became industrialised, wanted to idealise pre-industrial society as having had an organisation that valued justice and freedom and natural virtue. In the twentieth century people who see themselves as having escaped from the intellectual tyranny of organised religion and as having to carve out for themselves values and principles in an unfriendly and confusing universe, find fellow-feeling with a Viking who rejected organised religion and held to his personal principles in a world that was continually urging conflicting claims both political and ideological on him, such as when the papal legate Cardinal William of Sabena declared in 1247 that it was unreasonable (*ósannligt*) that Iceland should not have a king like all other countries in the world (*Hákonar saga* 1887, 252; ch. 257). Each age's perception of the Vikings and the literature about them is created out of its own historical situation. We cannot claim to be getting closer and closer to the truth about the Vikings. What we have is a succession of varying myths about the Viking created out of the needs and ideologies of successive ages. Each age constructs the Vikings in its own way; though our construction may be based on a larger body of evidence than was available in the nineteenth century, it is not necessarily superior to any of the preceding ones, to which it is not necessary to be patronising as if the Romantics had weak minds. Our perceptions are different but not necessarily more correct. They will be superseded by those of later generations. We also are historically bound, our perceptions are historically determined. Objectivity is not a possibility. Our definition of the past is part of the way we define ourselves. In order to construct ourselves as civilised and cultured and rational we need to define other cultures, such as that of the Vikings, from whom we are all partly descended, as uncivilised, uncultured and irrational; hence the emphasis on the excessive emotion of, for instance, berserks, contrasted with the restraint of characters like Hrafnkell or Njáll (who were rejected by their contemporaries) and seem to have been ahead of their time.

There seems also to be a need in the twentieth century to stress the positive aspects of people like the Vikings in order to demonstrate that in a violent world (which we now acknowledge we still have) people can still be civilised. Thus Haraldr harðráði, under a rough exterior and in spite of doing some terrible deeds, was a sensitive literary critic and poet (cf. *ÍF* XXVIII 188; Finnur Jónsson, 1920–24, 461–62, 616–17). There is no objective truth about the Vikings, only different representations based partly on concentrating on different selections of quotations from different kinds of source—*fornaldarsögur*, Eddic poems, Eddica minora, Sagas of Icelanders—and partly on misunderstandings of the texts; but mainly from reading into the texts what we want to see. Then, by a kind of analytical synecdoche, various particular features of the chosen texts are taken to give an insight into the whole culture. The different interpretations of the Vikings actually tell us more about the historians who interpret them than about the Vikings themselves. People not only see what they want to see in the Vikings, they also reconstruct the Vikings in their own image. Historians both now and in the past have created a series of myths about the past which correspond to their own needs.

Certainly one of the attractions of the Viking to twentieth-century readers has been what Peter Foote has called the 'existential neutrality' of the saga accounts of him which many people transfer to the Vikings themselves. This secular and neutral way of talking about them, whether they were Christian or heathen, of course reflects the presentation of many of them as realists and not concerned with ideology; but it tends to be with the saga-writers' attitudes that we now identify, rather than with the Vikings themselves. The disillusion with religion, or at any rate with the church, that seems to have been rife in the late twelfth and thirteenth century (for instance in Jón Loptsson's opposition to Bishop Þorlákr's authority, *ÍF* XVI 166–68, 177–80), is also transferred to the Vikings and finds a welcoming echo in twentieth-century attitudes. To quote Peter Foote (1984, 55):

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

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

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

modern *angst*, summed up for many people already in the nineteenth century in Matthew Arnold's poem 'Dover Beach'.

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

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

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

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

marriage, ice once you are across it, ale when it has been drunk' (81). A man preferring independence even though it means having to put up with few possessions: *Bú er betra þótt lítit sé, halr er heima hverr; blóðugt er hjarta þeim er biðja skal sér í mál hvert matar* 'It is better to have a home, even if it is small, eveyone is a fine fellow at home; bloody is the heart of one who has to beg for food at every meal' (37) . . . *Eldr er beztr með ýta sonum ok sólar sýn, heilyndi sitt ef maðr hafa náir, án við lǫst at lifa* 'A fire is the best thing for the sons of men, and the sight of the sun, his health if a man manages to keep it without living with a blemish' (68). A man who is decent in appearance, but not over-concerned about externals: *Þveginn ok mettr ríði maðr þingi at, þótt hann sét væddr til vel; skúa ok bróka skammisk engi maðr né hests in heldr, þótt hann hafit góðan* 'Washed and fed should a man ride to an assembly, even if he is not clothed too well; let no man be ashamed of shoes or breeches, or of his horse either, even if he does not have a good one' (61). A man without unreasonable ambition: *Ríki sitt skyli ráðsnotra hverr í hófi hafa; þá hann þat finnr er með frœknum kemr at engi er einna hvatastr* 'Every prudent man should keep his power within bounds; he will find when he comes among the valiant that no one is the ablest of all' (64). A man who knows how to make friends: *Vin sínum skal maðr vinr vera ok gjalda gjǫf við gjǫf* 'A man should be a friend to his friend and repay gift with gift' (42) . . . *Veiztu er þú vin átt þann er þú vel trúir ok vill þú af honum gott geta, geði skaltu við þann blanda ok gjǫfum skipta, fara at finna opt* 'Know that when you have a friend whom you trust well and you want to get good from him, you must share your mind with him and exchange gifts, go to see him often' (44) . . . *Vin sinum skal maðr vin vera, þeim ok þess vin* 'A man should be a friend to his friend, to him and to his friend' (43) . . . *Ungr var ek forðum, fór ek einn saman, þá varð ek villr vega; auðigr þóttumsk er ek annan fann, maðr er manns gaman* 'Young was I once, I travelled alone, then I went wild ways; I thought myself rich when I found another, man is man's delight' (47) . . . *Mikit eitt skala manni gefa, opt kaupir sér í litlu lof; með hálfum hleif ok með hǫllu keri fekk ek mér félaga* 'A man should not only give great gifts, often one purchases love with something small; with half a loaf and a tilted jug I got myself a comrade' (52) . . . *veiztu ef þú vin átt, þanns þú vel trúir, farðu at finna opt; þvíat hrísi vex ok hávu grasi vegr er vætki treðr* 'Know that if you have friend whom you trust well, go to see him often; for a way that no one treads get overgrown with brushwood and tall grass' (119). It is of a person who identifies with no nationality or religion, a wanderer without home or family, who bends the knee to neither god nor man, and bows down before neither priest nor king. He is afraid of nothing including death, has few possessions and no false hopes or unattainable desires either for this world or the next, unaffected by any concepts of a future life or any expectation of it. He believes only in his own might and main, though he knows its limitations and that it will only last him a limited time. He refuses to be pushed around by anyone. He enjoys life to the full, its pleasures and excitements, without sentimentality, and values most of all his friendships; happiness is talking with his friends accompanied by the drinking of good ale.

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NB Schach, Paul 1984. *The Icelandic Sagas*, 109, 116 (NB *Grœnl. þ.*?) [pp. 16–17, 20]
SH Germanic 5th floor XYE Sch; Taylorian ICE 2.D. SAGA.A.29.