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

Although he is the best known Icelandic writer of the thirteenth century, it has to be kept in mind that the twentieth-century estimation of Snorri Sturluson relies heavily on his representation in the narrative attributed to his nephew Sturla Þórdarson (1214–84), the second best known author of the period. Snorri’s death can be said to be well documented in contemporary sources, particularly Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar (c.1265) and Íslendinga saga (c.1280). Each of these sagas, however, is attributed to Sturla, who can hardly be regarded as a neutral observer when it comes to his uncle Snorri, and this provides an opportunity to explore a multifaceted narrative relating the circumstances of Snorri’s death. The aim of the investigation that follows is not, however, to discover ‘the truth’ of the event, but to cast some light on how the historical literature of thirteenth-century Iceland functions, with particular focus, on the one hand, on the apparent contradictions between the two narratives and, on the other, on the question of authorship in medieval Iceland.
In many ways, Sturla Þórðarson’s Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar and Íslendinga saga lie at the heart of the problem of saga authorship. The anonymity of the sagas in general has frustrated scholars for centuries and many have sought to ‘solve’ this problem by attributing certain texts to probable known authors (and Sturla Þórðarson is a popular candidate, see e.g. Einar Káraason 2012). At the same time we are faced with other and perhaps far more arduous obstacles such as determining precisely what an author is and how they are responsible for their own texts.

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

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

Sturla and Snorri

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

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

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

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

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

2 Gunnar argues that Sturla admired both Snorri and Sturla Sighvatsson, but nevertheless distanced himself from both men (see also Gunnar Benediktsson 1961; cf. Ciklaminí 1988).
Porvaldsson and later fell into disfavour with the king, although he managed to turn the tables and become not only the king’s official historian but also the highest-ranking royal official in Iceland, the lögmaðr.3 And, last but not least, there was the old Sturla Þórðarson, a high-ranking but low-key official and a diligent historian, who spent his final years transforming the events of his life into the narrative of Íslendinga saga.4 The fact that these different versions of Sturla demand differentiation can indeed be illustrated with a comparison of the two different versions of Snorri’s death recounted in sagas that are nevertheless attributed to the same man.

**Hákonar saga: Blaming Gizurr**

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

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

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

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

6 On the incidents that led to Sturla being summoned abroad in 1263, see Magnús Stefánsson 1988.
yet the king said that he deserved to die rather than his father, ‘and his father would not have died, if he had come to me’.

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

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

The difference might rather reflect just who Gizurr was when Sturla Þórðarson was composing Hákonar saga: the most powerful man in Iceland, having been made earl of Iceland and its sole ruler under the king. This was the result of an acrid power game in which Gizurr had outlasted some and outwitted other magnates of Iceland (such as Þórdur kakali, Þorgils skarði and others) and ended up ruling the country alone until his death in 1268. Sturla’s hostility towards Gizurr is evident in the later suggestion that after 1263 Sturla never left the king’s service, and was in fact working on Magnúss saga lagabætis during his final years.

If, as there is reason to believe, Sturla only began composing Íslendinga saga in the 1270s, the situation in Iceland was much transformed from the time in which he had written Hákonar saga. If in 1268 Earl Gizurr died, and it is not unlikely that the best part of Sturla’s ill-will towards Gizurr died with him. After all, a living rival is easier to hate than a dead settled man with no unfulfilled political ambitions. The narrative of Snorri Sturluson’s death in Íslendinga saga becomes more nuanced but also much more complex, and no longer is the culprit behind the act clearly identifiable, the blame rather ending up shared among several individuals.

The narrative begins when the king forbids Snorri, Órækja and Þorleifr from sailing to Iceland. Snorri again here defies the ban, but this time he voices his dissent: Út vil ek ‘I want to leave’. The passage is supplemented by a comment that Skúli Bárðarson, duke of Norway and King Hákon’s claims about the king’s promises were false and yet they kept faith with him and King Hákon. Many things are related about the relations between Earl [Gizurr] and the Icelanders that we do not find it necessary to write here.

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

Sturla’s depiction of Gizurr in Hákonar saga could also be informed by hurt feelings. Later, in Íslendinga saga, Sturla relates how Gizurr gave him BORGARFJORÐ to rule but later took the region from him and presented it to Hrafn Oddsson: Þötti Sturlu þá eigi efnd við sik af Gízuri jarli þau í fögru heit, er fram váru melt við hann ‘Sturla then felt that Earl Gizurr had not kept the fair promises that he had made to him’ (Sturlunga saga, I. 152). When Sturla was writing Hákonar saga a few years later this betrayal may still have weighed heavily on his mind, resulting in the palpable animosity towards Gizurr that colours his depiction in the narrative.

Íslendinga saga: Murky Truths

Sturla Þórðarson and the Murder in the Cellar

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

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7 Three of the most influential Íslendinga saga scholars agree that Sturla Pórðarson composed the saga during the final years of his life (Björn M. Ólafsson 1893, 432–35; Ólafur Sigurðsson 1933–35, 151–54; Jón Jóhannesson 1946, xxxix).
father-in-law, who was at the time rebelling against Hákon, held a secret meeting with Snorri, and that one of those present, Arnfinn Þjóðsson, claimed that at this meeting Skúli had secretly bestowed upon Snorri the title of earl (Sturlunga saga, I 444). The reference to Arnfinn as a source might seem curious, considering that apart from Duke Skúli, everyone else present at the meeting is a close relation of the author himself: besides his cousin Órækja and their kinsman Porleif, his own brother, Ólafr hvítaskáld (d. 1259), is also in attendance. And yet Sturla quotes the only man with whom he shares no apparent connection, which perhaps reflects a kind of double allegiance. At the time of the meeting Sturla was a close relation and an ally, even a follower, of Snorri and Órækja. The old Sturla, however, by the time that the saga was being written, had entered the service of King Hákon, against whom Skúli had rebelled. Furthermore, Sturla was now serving Hákon’s son, King Magnús, whose view of the rebellion may have been similarly ambivalent, since Skúli was his grandfather.

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

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


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

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

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

8 Sverrir Jakobsson argues that Gizurr would have been in a precarious position as the king’s retainer at the time after having killed Sturla Sighvatsson, another retainer, in 1238 (Sverrir Jakobsson 2013, iv). While this is certainly true, this predicament is not explained in Íslendinga saga itself.
later seems willing to bargain for his life. Also of note is the fact that Gizurr involves in the plan Snorri’s stepsons, currently engaged in a legal dispute with Snorri over their mother’s inheritance. One of the stepsons, also one of Gizurr’s nephews, declines all involvement, which suggests that he sees the whole plan as somewhat disreputable.

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

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

Símon knútr bað Árna höggva hann.

‘Eigi skal höggva,’ sagði Snorri.

‘Högg þú,’ sagði Símon.

‘Eigi skal höggva,’ sagði Snorri.

Eftir þat veitti Árni honum banasár, ok háðir þeir þorsteinn unnu á honum.

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

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

In this account the direct responsibility for Snorri’s death thus seems to be shared among his social inferiors. Árni the Acerbic has just been introduced into the saga as a troublemaker and as the wealthy Kolr Árnason’s killer, a typical henchman whose role is to keep his master Gizurr’s hands unsoiled by dirty work (453), and henceforth he remains one of Gizurr’s loyal followers (see e.g. 476). When Gizurr comes under attack at Flugumýri in 1253, Árni tries to run out of a burning building but, being old, he trips and falls. This narrative, also by Sturla Póðarson, presents Árni in a new light: ageing and wobbly on his feet. When Árni falls, he is denied clemency on account of his role in Snorri’s death. He is still lying on the ground when he is promptly hacked to pieces by several men, some of whom are Snorri’s relatives (Sturlunga saga, I 491).9 Snorri is also avenged by the death of Klæng Bjarnarson, Gizurr’s nephew and Snorri’s stepson (see Table I), who had accompanied his uncle when he came to kill Snorri and was killed by Órækja during the Christmas of 1241 (Sturlunga saga, I 456–57).10

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

Gizurr Þorvaldsson himself escapes revenge, although he does contend with Órækja over Snorri’s inheritance, which Gizurr had tried to usurp (458–65). Gizurr remains the man who must have decided that Snorri Sturluson will die, but the responsibility for Snorri’s death does not rest on his shoulders alone. Although Sturla is still loyal to his king and places the lion’s share of the blame on several Icelanders, King Hákon Hákonarson must shoulder some responsibility. In Íslendinga saga he clearly gives one of his vassals, Gizurr, permission to kill another vassal, Snorri, without fear of reprisal. Indeed, in Póðar saga kakala he accepts responsibility for Snorri’s death when he asks Póðr kakali to turn to him as the responsible party rather than to Gizurr. The narrator himself states that the king was not blameless: lát hans hafði nökkut...
af konunginum leitt ‘his death was partly caused by the king’, although Gizurr is still presented as the leading culprit (Sturlunga saga, II 82).

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

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

An Investigation of an Investigation

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

The two accounts of the death of Snorri Sturluson attributed to his nephew Sturla Póðarson demonstrate how even contemporary narratives have to be carefully gauged to determine their source value. The bare facts are clear enough: Snorri Sturluson was killed in Reykjaholt in the autumn of 1241. Everything else is subject to interpretation and the accounts become more complicated as time passes; with a more rigorous interpretation comes less banality but perhaps greater nuance. The earlier version, in Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar, is coloured by a strong resentment towards Gizurr, the earl of Iceland at the time. On the other hand, Íslendinga saga does not present us with a single individual to blame for Snorri’s death. Instead it offers us several culprits: the king who allows the killing to happen, the stepson whose dispute with Snorri triggers the event, the brutal ally who never advises against bad deeds, the manipulative chieftain who plots and plans the murder, his faithful henchman who takes it upon himself to give the order, and finally, the ageing troublemaker who is given and accepts the task of killing Snorri. This diverse cast all play their part in a detailed account in which ‘truth’ becomes an increasingly obscured notion.

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

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

13 This idea has given great impetus to the ‘cultural memory’ movement prominent in recent years (see e.g. Hermann and Mitchell 2013, 263).
of scholars who simply sided with Gizurr or Snorri or Sturla Sighvatsson and imagined that the thirteenth-century sources were all consistent in siding with one party against another. There is indeed no way of avoiding the personal when interpreting either of Sturla Pórðarson’s accounts of his uncle’s killing at the hands of his former son-in-law. The conflicts of the Sturlung Age were deeply personal, and ignoring the personal and subjective aspects of these conflicts will not help us to evaluate them, nor indeed the narratives that relate them.

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

Sturla Pórðarson was not a professional author in the modern sense, but he was still a writer of considerable training and skill. It would be folly to consider him entirely disinterested when recording the events of his own life, but that does not mean that his views on Snorri Sturluson and Gizurr Þórðarson were either simple or unchanging, and the variations in his accounts of Snorri’s death seem to bear witness to this complexity, and at times to inconsistency. While these accounts are deeply personal, the political also plays a role, as it must when a politician writes about his colleagues and adversaries. Sturla Pórðarson, the recently rehabilitated political also plays a role, as it must when a politician writes about his own life, it makes little sense to assume that Sturla’s views were as simple or one-sided as the views of those with whom he was much less familiar.

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

there will be found discrepancies and contradictions in the thirty-four-year progress of this particular chronicle ... contradictions and discrepancies due to the fact that the author has learned, he believes, more about the human heart and its dilemma than he knew thirty-four years ago; and is sure that, having lived with them that long time, he knows the characters in this chronicle better than he did then.

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

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

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

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

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

¹ Linnaeus 1758, 20–23. Incidentally, Linnaeus’s schema also has medieval roots, being at least partially based on the Four Temperaments theory. Thus Americanus is rufus, cholericus, rectus. Europeanus is albus, sanguineous, torosus. Asiaticus is luridus, melancholicus, rigidus. Africanus is niger, phlegmaticus, laxus. The descriptions of Monstrosus, although obviously based on experiences of real peoples such as the Khoikhoi (Hottentotti) would not look out of place amongst medieval tropes like the cynocephali or anthropophagi.
race rooted in a study of contemporary terminology. Thus, he identified gens and natio as terms which often implied descent groups, while populus did not. But he also observed a strong tradition of cultural delineation: more than being matters of breeding, language and law were just as important as inheritable features such as skin colour. Naturally, the question of inherited rather than environmental forces is complicated by the modern Russian-doll style of organisation of collective identities: the ‘cultural’ nation being subordinate to the supposedly ‘biological’ race. In the same volume William Chester Jordan made a bid to employ race as a key to unlock the complex stratification of personal identity. Jordan acknowledged that the formation of human identity is extremely complex and multi-layered, and that, moreover, the relative importance of its shaping forces is highly subjective. For some, race will be the most important personal identifier, for others less so; for many it will not be considered a relevant identity at all. On account of this idiosyncrasy, Jordan found it expedient to reduce racial thinking to its essence: the explanation of a person’s characteristics by recourse to the values projected on to the collective(s) to which they belong. In his own words: ‘We should not substitute ethnic identity for race . . . They mean the same thing in [this] formulation, but it would . . . be a kind of cowardice to hide behind six syllables when we could speak the language of truth with one’ (2001, 39–56; cf. Bartlett 2001, 39–56).

In dialogue with Jordan and Bartlett—and indeed in the same journal issue—Jeffrey Jerome Cohen stressed the importance of bodily markers for the medieval notion of race, work which was later fleshed out in his Medieval Identity Machines. Bartlett acknowledged the role of descent and climate, but highlighted language as the most widely attested racial signifier. For example, Bartlett cites John of Fordun (d. 1384) separating the natio of the Scots into two gens based on their linguae, being Theutonica and Scotica. In a reply to Bartlett, Cohen urges a focus on bodily characteristics, describing medieval race as ‘at once wholly artificial and insistently somatic’ (2003, 192). In truth, both critics are correct and both tendencies are observable. Their dissonance is really caused by focuses on two different types of sources. Bartlett was largely discussing works written by chroniclers and administrators. These were people for whom race was a useful way to understand and manipulate the geopolitical landscape, but who could not rely on physical differences to separate Europeans who very obviously looked much alike. Conversely, Cohen is mostly discussing the chansons de geste, popular texts where the need for race and Realpolitik to be aligned was not so pronounced. The enmity of the Saracens in chivalric romance is a narrative fixture. There the abstract concept of an inimical belief system, Islam, is given corporeal expression through a racial enemy, perhaps a dark-skinned Sarrazine, or Açopart. (On discerning the abstract-theological from the physical-somatic in Old Norse depictions of Muslims, see Cole 2014.) Old Norse literature features a heterogeneity in audiences and registers similar to that of the material examined by Bartlett and Cohen, so here we will bear both their views in mind and let them complement rather than contradict each other.

Race has not been ignored in medieval Scandinavian studies. Jenny Jochens takes the concept at face value and attempts to define the actual skin colours of the Norwegians, Icelanders and their Celtic slaves, but along the way she also provides a noteworthy example of how the well known light/dark dichotomy might be applied to groups as well as individual saga characters (1997, 313–14). For instance, the genealogy of the Myramenn exhibits a number of binary pairs, darkness being aligned with descent from trolls and ugliness, lightness being aligned with humanity, beauty and possibly being ðargr. Norwegianness, according to Jochens, was a category that could tolerate all of these traits. Ian McDougall and Sverrir Jakobsson in their respective surveys of Icelandic perceptions of other nations do not describe their focus as racial, but their methods certainly conform to the Bartlett-Jordan definition referred to above. Sverrir acknowledges the presence of ‘model immigrants’ in Icelandic sagas, but he also notes that non-Icelanders are also often marginal characters, given to violence or magic, lacking in agency. They are not unique in this respect. To quote: ‘The important factor is unfamiliarity, not nationality’ (Sverrir Jakobsson 2007, 154). McDougall highlights the adaptation by Old Norse speakers of Latin barbarismus, the denigration of non-Latin speakers as possessing a meaningless language, most likely suggestive of their impaired mental faculties. According to McDougall, there was an observable tendency amongst medieval Icelandic authors to differentiate Norse speakers from the weird and wonderful Others imagined to be on the fringes of the known world on the basis of their linguistic alterity. He also examines the role of the interpreter (túlkr) in narratives where Scandinavians interact with their northern and eastern neighbours (1986–89, 207–09). Germane to this theme, a great deal of attention has been given to the treatment of the Finnar in Old Norse, much of which touches on racial themes. Intriguing work by Sandra Ballif Straubhaar explores the overlapping categories of male/female, Norse/Finnic, human/troll in the formaldarsögur (2001, 105–23). Jeremy DeAngelo has recently noted some of the parallels between Classical natural philosophy and Norse conceptions of the Finnar, which perhaps result from direct influence. He also draws special attention to another important opposition, namely the
theme of Finnic peoples being technologically incapable compared with the relative sophistication of Norwegians (2010, 257–81). An important article by John Lindow covers a number of these topics, and also sketches some of the racial archetypes of Old Norse literature (1997, 8–28).

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

When organising these terms, we may note that the aforementioned ‘Russian-doll’ hierarchy of identities which we know from modern thought also seems to have existed in Old Norse. Today we might see units of personal identity increasing in scale from an individual level: an individual belongs to a family, which maybe belongs to a social class, which perhaps belongs to a tribe, which perhaps belongs to a nation, which belongs to a race (which units are considered applicable will, of course, vary from person to person). For example, Jane Bloggs of the Bloggs family, a supporter of Crystal Palace Football Club, an Englishwoman, a white person, etc. Naturally, this hierarchy is completely subjective, with every individual placing different value on the various collectives, possibly disregarding or adding their own layers of identity (such as subculture, religion, political party, region), and perhaps accepting that the strata of their personal identity will sometimes bring about conflicts of interest. Similarly, in the Old Icelandic homily on the Nativity we find the following stratification (HomIsl, 47):3

![Image of a page from a book](image_url)

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

4  cf. Hávamál 63: þjóð veit, ef þriri. It has been suggested that there was an oral proverb: þjóð veit, þat er þriri vitu, parallel to Quod tribus est notum, raro solet esse secretum. For a summary of theories, see Evans 1986, 103–04. Whether the poem Snorri cited was circulating folk poetry or his own composition is thus hard to say.
Skáldskaparmál appears to have been intended as an instructional text. It is not unreasonable to adduce that Snorri believed future skalds would be correct to consider a þjóð smaller than a fólk. On the other hand, perhaps Snorri did not intend this at all, and he was merely citing a piece of folk poetry whose alliterative content he found pleasing. In this latter train of hypothetical thought, we can observe the persistent idiosyncrasy of racial thinking, i.e. that Snorri might not have agreed with or perhaps not even cared about the supremacy of one stratum of identity over another. Indeed, he may very well have entertained a number of half-formed, unarticulated, mutually exclusive perceptions about the formation of ethnic identity. Perhaps he accepted that, then just as now, there would have been plenty of different personal opinions concerning race, and was happy to present an example he did not particularly endorse for the purpose of poetic pedagogy.

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

Although he is sometimes viewed as purely fantastical or demonic, particularly when appearing in vision literature (Battista 2006, 113–22), there are plenty of moments in Old Norse literature where the blámaðr appears to be conceived of in ethnic terms. Indeed, the roles of demon, monster and racial Other were not mutually exclusive. As John Lindow observes, ‘from the very first, notions of ethnicity and social boundaries have been associated with the supernatural’ (1997, 11). That is to say, the blámaðr’s fantastic or wondrous qualities did not necessarily preclude the idea that he was also a real being, located in real space and the product of ‘real’ natural principles. This distinctly racial apprehension of the blámaðr is often highlighted by his juxtaposition with another ‘Other’, the Serkr ‘Saracen’. In crusader narratives, Serkir represent a clear understanding that Islam is a belief system. These Saracens derive their oppositional intent from their religion, not from their race. Like the pre-Christian Norsemen of the Íslendinga- and konungasögur, they are not shown to have any differences in language or in body from the Christian saga audience. In Orkneyinga saga Rognvaldr and his men engage a shipload of Maumets villumenn ‘Mohammed’s heretics’. The saga author remarks that Þar var mart blámann, ok veittu þeir ina hröðustu möttoku ‘There were many bláman, and they offered the hardest resistance’ (Orkn, 225). The Orcadians simply kill them, but they take pains to capture the enemy captain alive. He is no blámaðr, but an qðlingr af Serklandi ‘nobleman from Serkland’. In a way reminiscent of the chivalrous relationship of Saladin and Richard the Lionheart, the captive is apparently able to say farewell to Rognvaldr without the need for an interpreter: ‘Pér skuluð nú frá þess mest njóta, er þér gafið mér líf ok leituðuð mér sömp sem þér máttuð. En gjarna vil ek, at vér sæimsk aldri síðan, ok lifið nú heilir ok vel.’ ‘You will now profit greatly from me because you gave me life and showed me such honour as you could. But I would really like it if we never see each other again. Live well and in health’ (Orkn, 228).5 Nor do Serkir seem to have any substantial physical differences. It is their religion, rather than any inherited intellectual or physical deficiencies, which means that they are always ultimately overcome. For instance, in Mírmanns saga, when the eponymous hero is standing over the dead body of the Muslim champion Lucidarius, he remarks: ‘ef þv værer kristinn madur værer þv godur riddari ’if you had been a Christian, you would have

5 The crew do have Bishop Vilhjálmr of Orkney with them as a tákkr—an authorial conceit which allows the Norse-speakers to communicate freely with the other Europeans—but if the Serkir were imagined as having an exotic language of their own then it would surely test the audience’s credibility were Vilhjálmr to speak it without further comment.
been a good knight’ (92–96). The strictly theological, nonsomatic Serkr is probably best explicated in the fragmentary Ræða gegn biskupum from c. 200 (Mírmanns saga 1997, 298):

En þó a vêr hafim þessa talda eru margir önefnir, þeir sem þá váru villumenn ok mikill stóð skáði af þeira villu. En svá var einn verstr er mestr stóð skáði af er Nicholas advena var kallaðr er var laesarveinn Dröttrins sjálfis ok síðan var biskup á Serklandi ok er nú kallaðr Mahomet, ok stendr sú villa hátt er hann boðaði í sínnum biskupsdómi at náliga annarr helningr heims trúir á hann, ok kalla han guð vera.

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

Whatever is objectionable about the Serkr, it can be converted away—indeed, sometimes it is, as in the case of the Serkr Balam who is baptised and becomes the Christian Vitalcin in Karlamagnus saga (Karlamagnus saga, 204). But the blámenn constitutes the darker side of the Norse conception of Otherness, be it Islamic, Finnic or demonic: a being who does not believe something unnatural, but is something unnatural. He is a creature shaped not by his beliefs, but by the baseness of his blood.

Whether his environment has conditioned him into this state is not always made clear, but there are some hints that Snorri considered the þjóð of the blámenn intrinsic to their geographical position. Blámenn make several appearance in Snorri’s Heimskringla. On one occasion they represent the forces of Islam. In Magníssona saga, King Sigurðr Jórsalafari (r. 1103–30) and his men confront a troop of blámenn on the Balearic island of Formentera. The Moors æppu á þá ok eggjúðu þá ok frýðu þeim hugar ‘screeched at them, incited them and questioned their courage’ (Heimskringla, III 245–46). But in Ænglinga saga, the prologue to his opus, Snorri also places blámenn in the frozen Finnic north (Heimskringla, I 9–10):

6 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the similarity here with a line in La Chanson de Roland concerning the Emir of Balaguet: De vasselage est-il ben alosez; ‘Fust chrestiens, asez austarnet’ (36) ‘And for his courage he’s famous far and near ; ’Were he but Christian, right knightly he’d appear’ (La Chanson de Roland, 36; Sayers 1957, 87).
Pá maðir Pröði: ‘Fyrst var þó þá heimr í suðrhálfu er Muspell heitir. Hann er ljóss ok heitir. Sú átt er logandi ok brennandi, er hann ok ófær þeim er þar eru útlendir ok eigi eigu þar Óutil. Sá er Surtr nefndir er þar sitir á lands enda til landvarnar. Hann hefir loganda sverð, ok í enda vefaldar mun hann fara ok herja ok sigra òl í göðin ok brenna allan heim með eld.’

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

Snorri’s Muspell may profitably be compared with his description of Africa, given in the Prologue to the Edda: Frá suðri í vestr ok inn á Miðjarðarsjá, så hlutr var kallaðr Affrica. Hinn syðri hlutr þeirar deildar er heitr ok brunninn af sólu ’From the south to the west and down to the Mediterranean, this part is called Africa. The more southerly part of that region is hot and burnt by the closeness of its heat’ (NH, 306).

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

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

ogorlegr blamaðr biki svartari, harðlundlegr oc hvassnefiaðr, súðskeggiað oc svart skeggit oc illilict, harit svart oc sitt, sva at tooc a þær honum, augun sem elldr væri i at sia, oc flugu gneistar or sem af vellandi iami. Or munnin oc nausunum for ut sva sem brennusteins logi.

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

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

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

Hár segir: ‘Margir staðr eru þar gofugligir. Sá er einn staðr er kallaðr er Óllheimir. Par byggvir fólk þat er ljósfar heita, en dókkálfar búa niðri í jörðu, ok eru þeir ólíkir þeim sýnum en myklu ólíkar reyndum. Ljósfar eru fegrí en sól sýnum, en dókkálfar eru svartari en bík.’
Hár says: ‘There are many excellent places there. One is a place called Álfheim. The people who are called the Light-Elves live there, but the Dark-Elves live down in the earth, and they are most unlike them in appearance, and much more different in behaviour. The Light-Elves are fairer than the sun, but the Dark-Elves are blacker than pitch.’

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

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

Í þeim flokkjí sáu þeir mann, er nokkur var undarligr . . . Auga hans var annat blátt ok svart, ok at òllu vel fallit, en annat augu var mórautt sem í kettó, ok at òllu illilligt. Önnur kinn hans var hvít sem snjór, og hafði fagar roða; hálft hans nef ok enni ok haka hafði fagar hörundslit. Önnur hans kinn ok allr óðrum megin var hann móraðr, og svo þeir got í sveiða, at þeim megin var hans andlit ljótt ok leiðiligt, ok allr hans likamr, en óðrum megin var hann ljóss ok fagar, sem kjósa mátti . . . [Konungur] spurði hann at nafni. Hann svarar: ‘Auðsét er nafn mitt, ek heiti Hálfliti-maðr; hefi ek aldri annat nafn haft á þeim megin var hans andlit ljótt ok leiðiligt, ok allr hans likamr, en óðrum megin var hann ljóss ok fagar, sem kjósa mátti . . . [Konungur] spurði hann at nafni. Hann svarar: ‘Auðsét er nafn mitt, ek heiti Hálfliti-maðr; hefi ek aldri annat nafn haft á æfi minni; en skjót eru vár erindi til yðar: ek vil, herra, biðja þyð hirðvistar, ok dveljast með þyð nokra stund.’ . . . Konungur tók því heldr selinga: ‘Hafa mér ill gefið allir kynjamenn.’ Enn Hálfliti-maðr svarar: ‘Lengi skapar sikh sjálfir; eru mér úsjafræði mín yfirlit, ok má þá ekki kyn kalla, því at nálíga er engi óðrum líkir í ásjónu, en prófa megir þér mín ættíreh, hvárt yðr sýnist þat með nokkrum kynjum.’

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

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

‘Hvar lánda ertu feðingr?’ segir keisara. Hann mællt: ‘Ek em barnfeddr a Blálandi. Enn blámaðr var farið minn, enn móðir mín var þutuð norðan yfir haf, ok því em ek blár óðrum megin, at mer bregðir þu til féðr mins; ok margi megir þefar a Blálanndi sva þorna, sem ek em; ok mikki endilligri, ok sva òsthíða himni Micklu.’

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

It is tempting to see some kind of word-play here between kyn and kynjamenn. However, kynjamenn is derived from a false friend of the word kyn in the racial sense. This alternative sense of kyn as ‘a wonder, miracle’ derives etymologically from kien and kunna, while the racial sense is cognate with Old English cyn.

(Cleasby–Vigfússon 1874, 366; de Vries 1961, 340).
This is very clearly a mode of thought which we would today consider racial, perhaps even post-racial. The author believes that skin tone is genetically inherited, and imagines what the progeny of an African father and a Scandinavian mother might look like. This scene is taking place in Saxland, so when the mother is said to be eittuð norðan yfir haf the inference must be that she is from Scandinavia. It is interesting to note that the author appears to be deploying a binary opposition here; the blámaðr being the epitome of blackness, the Scandinavian the epitome of whiteness. The king makes judgements based on his hue, but the Hálfíti-maðr begs to be judged only on his personal merit. In the course of this exchange, the Hálfíti-maðr demonstrates a sound understanding of the king’s conception of kyn. For King Karl, a kyn is a collective under which people can be categorised according to their appearance; that is why the argument ‘má þá ekki kyn kalla, því at náliga er engi öðrum líkr í ásjónu’ is effective. Surely this is a mode of thought which is instantly recognisable to anyone acquainted with modern conceptions of race.

There is also a certain double meaning in the Hálfíti-maðr’s deployment of the proverb ‘engi skapar sik sjálfr’. When the words ‘nobody creates himself’ come out of Mágu’s mouth, they are laced with a teasing sense of irony. Mágu actually has created himself by donning his disguise. In fact, he regularly does so by adopting his various personae, namely the Skeljakarl, who as his name suggests is entirely bedecked in shells, and the wizened-but-self-rejuvenating Óinn pastiche, Viðförull (for more on these aliases, see Cole, forthcoming). This is why his assurance that ‘I have never had any other name in my life’ must surely have been intended as a knowing wink at the audience who have already seen him with two different monikers. However, just as Mágu and the Hálfíti-maðr are two sides of the same figure, his statement has two different aspects. The words can also be interpreted as coming directly out of the mouth of the avatar rather than the man behind it. The Hálfíti-maðr is a marginalised, freakish hybrid, the product of a taboo liaison. Even without the information from the younger recension of the saga, his one feline eye and dark-skinned side evoke the image of the blámaðr (we shall see another example of catlike eyes in just a moment). Taken at face value (literally), the invoking of the phrase engi skapar sik sjálfr by the Hálfíti-maðr is simple anti-racist reasoning. It may be cynically and ironically deployed by Mágu to win over the king, but seen in the context of the Hálfíti-maðr’s back story it is entirely sensible. How many times have victims of racism felt in frustration that they have no power over the racial identity projected upon them?

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

Í þessu bíl sjá þeir tólf menn stefná á móti sér, forknarr stóra ok ólíka öðrum menskum mönnum; svartir vóru þeir ok illilegir ásýndum, ekkert há á hófi, bryrnar hengu allt á nef niðr, augun gul sem í ketti, en tennar sem kalt járn . . . Ok er þeir litu konungsson ok hans menn, tóku þeir allir at hrína mjök grimmilega, ok eggjandi hvórr annan . . . sóttu þá blámenn at honum með mikilli eggjan ok ölmlegum hljóðum ok öskri.

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

9 cf. Cohen on Bartholomaeus Anglicus (fl. 1240): ‘cold for Bartholomaeus is the “modir of whitnesse”, and the white skin of northerners is the outward marker of their inner valiance’ (2003, 197). See also Bartlett 2001, 46.
This image of the blámaðr is obviously consistent with Snorri’s geographically-minded account and the genetically-minded Mágus saga. As in Heimskringla, the blámenn make terrifying noises as they go into battle, and we see again the use of the verb at eggja. As in Mágus saga, they have yellow, feline eyes. It is this latter, strikingly somatic line of argument which is built upon. The author frequently enters the semantic field of the bestial: as Lindow observes, he defines the blámenn in opposition to [jöðrun] mennskir menn (1995, 15–16). They have cats’ eyes. Furthermore, the verb at brýna carries with it the connotations of ‘to squeal like swine . . . of an animal in heat’ (Cleasby–Vigfússon 1874, 286). But as has been postulated elsewhere these particular blámenn appear to be more complex than simple bipartite human-animal hybrids (Cole, 2014). The brow that descends to the nose could simply have been intended as a racial caricature based on the supposed physiognomy of a sub-Saharan face, but it also distorts the face to the point where it seems ludicrous to identify any humanity at all. The words brýnar, eggjandi, eggjan seem to pun on at brýna ‘to sharpen’, and egg ‘edge’, part of a sword or spear. This, together with the teeth sem kállt járn, suggest a countenance which is part animal, part ogre, part weapon. Their features are disturbingly exaggerated, golden eyes against black skin, faces distorted beyond recognition. They cannot speak, they must squeal and roar. They cannot have ‘some hair’, they must have masses or none at all. When notions of ideological or religious difference are articulated via the body, and when geographical areas (in this case, Africa) are given a particular association with those bodies, it seems hard to deny that we are in the presence of something very much akin to a racial mode of thought. To reiterate an earlier observation concerning the Serkir, nothing one can believe makes one into such a creature. Rather, it is a question of what one ‘is’, how and where one was born.

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

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

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

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

In some ways, the existence of such racial or even racist thought in medieval Iceland is surprising. Until 1262, this was, as Tom Shippey famously pointed out, a country free of all the disadvantages attendant on having a state (of course, it missed out on all the advantages too) (Shippey 1989, 16–17). There were no policy-makers seeking to justify their incursions into foreign territory, and in contrast to its parent nation, Norway, there was no involvement of state figures in Crusades. Moreover, Iceland was geographically remote in the extreme from any peoples who would have had radically different skin tone. Why should such a comparatively sophisticated, if unpleasant, doctrine develop? But when considered a little more closely, the idea of race appears to be well integrated with the contours of medieval Icelandic society. From the outset, the basic principles of breeding and inherited characteristics—we may well call this a primitive genetics—would have been obvious to the Icelanders. Animal husbandry would have been crucial to the means of production for much of Icelandic history, and it can hardly have escaped the notice of the blámdr that there were different breeds of cattle, some more suitable to certain environments than others, some breeds being admixtures of others (on animal husbandry in Iceland, see Orri Vésteinsson 1998, 1–29). These same blámdr being the audience or patrons of saga writers, we can expect that the observations made about livestock would have sooner or later been applied to humans, and thereafter passed into the literary sphere too. We should also note that genealogy was a national pastime in medieval Iceland. Some of the earliest works in Old
Norse, Íslendingabók and Landnámabók, are essentially genealogies, and virtually all the Íslendingasögur contain protracted catalogues of the breeding of their characters, often reaching back for generations (on the ubiquity of genealogy, see Callow 2006, 300–04). Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that speculation about descent groups and the role of hereditary characteristics should emerge (cf. Bibire 2003, 236). Note, for example, that the word for a ‘family resemblance’ was a kynfylgja (Cleasby–Vigfússon 1847, 366).

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

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

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Introduction

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

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

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

The criteria by which a potion is defined are not without issues, and thus consideration must be given to how much this term can encompass. The Old Norse texts themselves have no universal term to denote a potion, but employ
a number of largely interchangeable synonyms: drykkur ‘drink’ is perhaps most common, though mjöðr ‘mead’, öl ‘ale’ and veig ‘strong drink’ are all used. This lack of a clear definition within the texts themselves for what exactly constitutes a magic potion raises some interesting possibilities in terms of how broadly their nature and function might be understood. For example, the most prominent potions used in the Völsung cycle of legends are the three associated with Guðrún’s mother, Queen Grímhildr. It is worth noting, however, that Grímhildr has an important predecessor within the Völsunga saga account of the story: Queen Borghildr, the wife of Sigmundr, uses poison to strike down her stepson Sinfjötli (Völsunga saga 1954, 133–34).

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

It will be noted from examples such as Borghildr and Grímhildr from Völsunga saga, Snaefrœr from Haralds saga ins hárfagra and Hvít from Hrólf’s saga kraka that the use of potions as a means of assault is associated not only with female figures, but specifically with regal witches who marry into royal lines. In one sense, the use of the potion as a narrative device is suited to the role of the queen within the court, a duty of that role being to oversee the provision of drink to guests (Jochens 1995, 107). The use of poisons and potions, consequently, represents an inversion of the correct behaviour of the queen, and also signifies her capacity to strike down her enemies in her husband’s court, in the very centre of patriarchal royal hegemony. The use of the potion as a motif, in essence, expresses the character of the anti-queen, an independent, active and external figure who has been unsuccessfully internalised within the court, and who has the capacity to wield lethal power over a now vulnerable societal construct. In the case of Borghildr, and in several examples that will follow shortly, this is clearly manifested in a direct and usually fatal assault on the legitimate heir; from both a narrative and practical perspective it is the most efficient way of demonstrating and exploiting the weakness of a dynastic monarchy, while simultaneously overtly expressing the character of the regal witch as both anti-queen and anti-mother.

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

The literary use of the figure of the regal witch as an anti-queen, with the magic potion as her accompanying motif, can thus be read as a means of interrogating the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of kingship, particularly in terms of bringing external females into a position of intimacy within the royal circle. Marriage, in the context of royalty, requires the bringing in of an alien female: in one sense, this is a necessary process for securing and continuing one’s own royal line, and by extension society, through political alliance and the potential of furthering the dynasty. Another view, however, and one that is particularly emphasised in the narratives that deal with the early, mythical generations of dynastic formation (narratives such as Völsunga saga, Ynglinga saga, Haralds saga ins hárfagra and Hrólf’s saga kraka), is that it exposes the royal family directly to outside influences
and powers, creating a vulnerability where an external and potentially malevolent force can gain intimate access to the king. The motif of the witch’s potion can, consequently, be seen as an analogy for the regal witch herself: both are foreign and invasive objects that attack internally, one within the body of the regal figure and the other within the body of the state.

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

This brief episode encapsulates several important ideas concerning the regal witch and her potion. In the first instance, Haraldr’s sudden desires are presumably the product of a magical form of entrapment involving the beverage he is served. The portrayal of Haraldr in saga literature is remarkably consistent, depicting a king given over to periods of violent paranoia and casual homicide. In consequence, his behaviour here is out of character, and the immediate political machinations of Snæfríðr’s father implicitly suggest the motive behind the bewitchment. The king is demonstrably weakened by the situation, Snorri explaining in no uncertain terms that *unni svá mód er slum, at ríki sitt ok allt þat, er honum byrlaði, þá fyrrir lét hann* ‘he loved her so madly that he neglected his kingdom and all that it befitted him to do’ (*Haralds saga* 1941, 126). The great tyrant, who according to the saga is the first ruler of a unified Norway, is laid low, not by rebellion or by sedition, but by the obscure and mysterious wiles of his newly acquired wife. The brevity of the episode, furthermore, suggests a correlation between the two physical symbols that open and conclude the chapter: the mead and Snæfríðr’s body. Both are objects that are the production of a mixture of different elements, both appear wholesome when complete, and both are used as part of a hidden and insidious agenda. By taking the potion into his body, the king allows corruption to flourish within himself, an action which is paralleled by that of taking a foreign princess into the heart of the state. Both potion and princess are destabilising influences that work from within the structure into which they are introduced. The potion is thus an apt representative of a particularly destructive aspect of a specifically feminine and anti-monarchical supernatural force.

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

### The Components of a Potion

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

21. Færði mér Grímildr full at drekkka, svalt ok sárlikt, I could not interpret them—
ne ek sakar myndóak; cold and bitter,
Þat var of aukit it was fortified with
Urðar magni, the power of fate,
Svalkóldum sæk ice-cold sea
Ok sonar dreyra.

22. Vóro í horni There were in the drinking horn
evrs kyns stafir every kind of rune,
Ristnir ok roðnir— scratched and reddened—
Ráða ek né máttak— I could not remember my strifes;
Grímhildr brought to me
A goblet to drink,
Cold and bitter;
These three stanzas list a variety of ingredients for the potion, and at least initially the order in which they are listed appears haphazard. Whilst the poet does not seem to make much distinction between their natures and effects, the factors that make up the potion can be separated into three broad categories: runes, plant extracts and animal extracts. A further separate category might be imagined for the elements referred to in the first stanza, categories: runes, plant extracts and animal extracts. A further separate category might be imagined for the elements referred to in the first stanza, and which seem to function as the base of the magic potion. This strange mixture of fate, water and blood, elements which seem less specific than those the poet goes on to list, are in some sense suggestive of the forces present at the creation of mankind as depicted in Völuspá 17–18 (Völuspá 1936, 4–5), which might be considered another factor linking the magic potion to bodily concerns.

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

Whilst the plant-based ingredients probably reflect some measure of pharmacological reality, some knowledge of which is explored for example in Hávamál 137 (Hávamál 1936, 38), more interesting perhaps is the focus on various entrails in the three stanzas. Though the focus of this article is on the motif of the witch’s potion, the presence of a body, or body parts that have been processed, as a constituent element of the potion is important, and the implications of it are significant when considered in the light of the method by which the mead of poetry is produced. Though different from a magic potion, the ways in which regal witches specifically use meat can shed light on understanding the full implications of potion use.

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

Hvít’s use of magically affected meat, therefore, neatly parallels the actions of Borghildr and Grímhildr in Völsunga saga, but her cannibalisation of Björn’s body raises other issues, in particular a further parallel with Völsunga saga in the passage where Guðrún takes revenge against Atli by feeding him the flesh and blood of their sons (Völsunga saga 1954, 209–13). This is not to suggest that Guðrún fits the model of the regal witch that has been described here, but rather to point out that there is some subtle alteration in her character as it evolves whereby she
acquires some of the traits of the two anti-queen figures that preceded her in the story, and against which which she must inevitably be compared. If, as has been suggested above, Grimhildr’s use of potions represents an interesting adaptation of the literary motif of the magic potion by demonstrating that such use of potions leads, of necessity, to the enfeeblement or termination of a royal line—whatever the initial motivation behind it might have been—then Guðrún’s actions also represent a modification or reinterpretation of the motif. In murdering her children by Atli she ensures the termination of any royal line, but since she has him consume their bodies the action is in some sense worked into the web of connections surrounding the motif of the witch’s potion and the concept of the processed body. Tolley has shown that there is a long-standing association between witchcraft and cannibalism in a number of early law codes from across the Germanic world, including the Pactus legis Sálicae and the Leges Langobardum amongst others; if such an association does indeed have a bearing on these sagas, as seems entirely possible, it would serve to emphasise the juxtaposition between Guðrún’s actions and those of the regal witch figure (Tolley 2009, 115–16).

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

On the Magical and Anti-Social Aspects of Trolls

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

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

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

‘Tröll kalla mik tugl sjótr-Rungnir, wealth-sucker of the giant, vilsinn völ, bale of the storm-sun, vérð náfjarðar, beloved companion of the völva, háls vegl himins, swallower of the wheel of heaven [sun]. Hvat er tröll nema þat?’

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

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

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

This is thus apparent. Given the antithetical relationship between monarchy and the regal witch of fornaldarsögur of prototypical troll-woman of Eddic myth and the villainous anti-queen (Orchard 1997, 183). The close correlation between the prototypical troll-woman of Eddic myth and the villainous anti-queen of fornaldarsögur is thus apparent. Given the antithetical relationship between monarchy and the regal witch of fornaldarsögur of prototypical troll-woman of Eddic myth and the villainous anti-queen (Orchard 1997, 183). The close correlation between the prototypical troll-woman of Eddic myth and the villainous anti-queen of fornaldarsögur is thus apparent.

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

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

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

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

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

Aspects of the Mead of Poetry

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

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

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

Bragi svarar: ‘Pat váru upphof til þess at guðin hÖfuði ösætt við þat fôlk er
Vanir heita, en þeir lögðu með sér fríðstefnu ok settu gríð á þá lund at þeir
gengu hváritveggi til eins kers ok spyttu í hráka sínum. En at skilnaði þá
tóku goðin ok vildu eigi láta týnas þat gríðarmark ok skópuðu þar ór mann.
Sá heitir Kvasir. Hann er svá vítr at engi spyr hann þeira hluta er eigi kann
hann órlausn. Hann fór víða um heim at kenna mœnum freði, ok þá er hann
kom at heimboði til dverga nokkvorra, Fjalars ok Galars, þá kollutu þeir hann
með sér á einnaði ok drápó hanni, létu renna blöð hann í tvau ker ok eini ketil,
ok heitir sá Óðreyrir, en kerin heita Són ok Boðn. Þeir blenda hungan við
blöðið ok varð þar af mjôðr sá er hverr er af drekkverðr sáld eda freðámaðr.
Dvergarnir sôgðu Ásum at Kvasir hefði kafmat í mannviti fyrir því at engi var þar
svá frôði at spyrja kynni hann frôðleiks.’

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

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

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

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

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

To some extent this unnaturalness is counterbalanced by Óðinn’s subsequent seduction of the giantess Gunnlöð, the guardian of the mead of poetry: it is as if the story cannot be brought to a satisfactory conclusion until ‘normal’ sexual practice has been forcefully asserted (Snorri Sturluson 1998, 4).

Some critics have even chosen to view this sexual relationship as a form of marriage, and if this reading is accurate it serves to emphasise further the idea that their relationship is indicative of normative heterosexual behaviour (Schjødt 2008, 153). Further evidence for viewing Gunnlöð’s seduction as an example of normative sexual practice might also be seen in the fact that Gunnlöð seems to have been the ancestress of kings in some sources (McKinnell 2005, 166–67). On the other hand, one could also argue that the seduction itself, with particular regard to Óðinn’s deception of the giantess, is another troubling element in the story.

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

The potential close similarity between the mead of poetry and the witch’s potion can be seen as a concern in *Hyndluljóð*. When the giantess Hyndla offers Óttarr minnisól ‘memory-ale’ to allow him to remember his heritage,
it would seem that this substance is something akin to the mead of poetry (Hyndlolióð 1936, 45). Like Sigdrífa’s potion in Sigrdrifumál, Hyndla’s ale works to sustain and inspire its recipient. Freyja’s interpretation of Hyndla’s gesture, however, is markedly different: she describes the potion as being *eitri blandinn miŋk, illo heilli!* ‘greatly blended with poison, an evil omen!’ (Hyndlolióð 1936, 49). Freyja’s description of the effect of Hyndla’s potion is the opposite of that described by the giantess herself, and it is a description that seems to have much in common with the types of potion described above, particularly in view of the negative connotations of the term *blandinn* (Borovsky 2002, 1–5). That the same object, interpreted as either a typical witch’s potion or something akin to the mead of poetry, can be described in such strikingly different terms is indicative of the similarities between these two images.

The Figure of the Skald as Anti-Witch

In a further attempt to untangle the complex set of associations that surround the similar images of the witch’s potion and the mead of poetry, it is necessary to examine in more detail the relationship between the symbol of the mead of poetry and the figure of the skald, and to see the extent to which it mirrors the dynamic between the regal witch and her potion. There are, of course, important differences: the presence of the mead of poetry and its consumption by skalds is metaphorical rather than literal, and hence one must also be cautious in assuming that different poets are using the symbol in similar ways. Nevertheless, there are significant parallels between witch and skald, potion and mead, that are worth exploring here.

It was argued above that poetry represents a specifically male force for creation, production and order. As previously mentioned, this may seem to contradict the character of the skald as he is depicted in some saga literature, most notably the figure of the Icelandic skald depicted in the *Íslendingasögur*, where his defining characteristics are a propensity for aggression, violence and troublemaking. Although the figures of the poet and the witch are never directly contrasted in the literature, one could imagine that saga writers might use their mutual anti-social and destructive tendencies to a similar end, and consequently suggest that these two figures might have a great deal in common.

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

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

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Bǫðumsk vér, ne virðak,  We battled, I did not think
vigleiptr sonar, heiptir of the consequences.
Blóððaxar, rað ek blóði Lightning-like I daubed my sword with the blood
boðmíldr, ok Gunnhildar.
Par fellu nú þóljar of the son of Blóððax and Gunnhildr.
þrettán lagar mána, There thirteen trees
stendr af styrjarskyndi of the moonlight of the sea [gold, hence warriors]
starf, á einum karfá. fell on a single ship.

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The warrior is hard at work.

In the context of Egill Skálagrimsson’s long and varied career, this verse serves as the culmination of what is arguably his most ethically questionable act, the killing of Prince Rǫgnvaldr, son of Eiríkr blóððax and Gunnhildr konungamóðir (*Egils saga* 2003, 97). Though the author of the saga does not go into great detail, presumably out of a desire to portray Egill in the best possible light, the implications of this event are clear: with his little painted warship and his twelve constant companions, Rǫgnvaldr is clearly intended to be seen as a child, a little boy with his toy ship and playmates. Egill’s swift, brutal and unresisted massacre of the toy ship’s crew is not greeted with any sense of victory or opprobrium by the saga narrator, whereas Egill’s verse carries a ghoulish hint of triumphalism. The slaughter, carried out when Egill has just escaped from immediate danger, gains him nothing except Gunnhildr’s vindictive hatred, and for once she is clearly the wronged party; it is not likely that the audience of the saga would have been expected to approve of Egill’s actions over this affair. *Prima facie*, this would seem to place Egill in the same position as the regal witch: his termination of a legitimate heir is a clear threat to dynastic continuation and proliferation, and is furthermore
functions as an enabler, giving the men who drink or invoke it power and standing within the framework of society. The effect of the witch’s potion, without exception, is to cloud the judgement, erase memory, physically disfigure, and otherwise pollute or poison the recipient; these are all factors that contribute to the breakdown of society. The witch’s potion fundamentally serves as a barrier to communication and cooperation by impeding a man’s ability to interact with the mechanisms of society. Both substances, ultimately, affect how men behave, but while one serves positively to emphasise and empower, the other serves to deny and prevent.

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

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

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

The concept of exploring ideas of Sovereignty through personification as a female seems to have originated in Ireland. There the goddess of the land, as the figure of Sovereignty (the flaitheas na h-Eirenn), appears to kingly candidates as a hideously unattractive caillech, a hag or Loathly Lady, yet she is a creature capable of transforming herself into the loveliest of women (Herbert 1992; Eichhorn-Mulligan 2006; Mulligan 2013). Thus she embodies rule: for royal authority is hard to seize hold of, but wonderful when it is firmly in your grasp, or so Irish sources, such as the eleventh-century Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin (The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Muigmedóin), tell us. The ideologically freighted concept of the sacred marriage between the land, figured as female, and the king is well attested in Norse, particularly in skaldic poetry (Steinsland 1991). There has been some discussion of Sovereignty roles for Norse giantesses in mythological poetic contexts, but the fornaldarsaga giantess has not featured in such analyses (McTurk 2005; Svava Jakobsdóttir 2002; Steinsland 1991). Katja Schulz has comprehensively
that 343 was written at Möðruvellir around the middle of the fifteenth century (Orning 2009; Sanders, ed., 2000, 43). Gottskálk Jensson has speculated from his analysis of some of the tale’s learned features that its composition might profitably be dated a good few decades later than the 1320s, for the saga shows an understanding of the gods’ characteristics which is at once self-conscious, antiquarian, comic and knowledgeable (Gottskálk Jensson 2003). It also draws on Classical material—Egill employs Odysseus’s ruse for escaping a blind and furious giant—and it exhibits a highly sophisticated understanding of narratology in its focalisation of the same events through the perspectives of different characters, as Gottskálk notes. For reasons which will be seen later, I would concur with his later dating. Below, I briefly summarise the parts of the action crucial for my analysis.

The saga opens with the kidnap of two sisters, princesses of Rússía, by a pair of monstrous animals (all citations are from ES). The saga’s heroes, the sworn-brothers Egill and Ásmundr, journey north in search of the missing girls and get lost while searching for food. Eventually they come to a verdant valley where there is a herd of goats. They are about to slaughter one when they are interrupted by Skinnefja. Her characterisation, now challenged by Sanders, that AM 343 can be dated to just after 1400 (Sanders, ed., 2000).

Drei Lygisögur 1927, xlii. Lagerholm’s dating relies on broadly stylistic reasons; if it were later, he argues, it would show more influence from the style, motifs and lexis of the riddarasaga. His argument in part depends on his assumption, now challenged by Sanders, that AM 343 can be dated to just after 1400 (Sanders, ed., 2000).
kunna grein at gera. Arinnefja is extremely hospitable; she offers the men food and while they wait for their porridge to cook in what seems to be a magic cauldron, they pass the time in courtly fashion in telling tales—namely, their ævisögur ‘life-stories’.2 Ásmundr recounts various adventures, including a fight with another sworn-brother turned draugr ‘walking dead’; Egill relates how he came to lose his hand, and Arinnefja tells how she and her sisters were dispossessed of their inheritance and of the quarrel between the sisters.

Aринnefja’s parents had been king and queen of Jötunheimr, but when they died, their father’s brothers seized the territory, while Arinnefja and her seventeen sisters inherited the chattels: a horn, a gaming-board and a ring (ES, 349–51). The uncle-brothers confiscated the first two treasures, but the sisters managed to retain the ring. Arinnefja’s older sisters were unkind to her, for she was the youngest and, she claims, the prettiest. Eventually she sacrificed a goat to Þórr to persuade him to arbitrate between the sisters, and he came to visit. Þórr subsequently slept with the eldest sister; her younger siblings envied her this distinction and murdered her the next morning. Now Þórr sleeps with each of the sisters in turn; each one is murdered next day by her jealous younger sisters until only Arinnefja is left. Sisterly loyalty is thus subordinated to rivalry in the giant world: Þórr does not need to slaughter this giant family, as is his wont, for, in a disturbing acting-out of sibling competitiveness, the women’s murderousness eliminates all but one of Arinnefja’s rivals. Moreover, the sisters pronounce a curse on one another: that any of them who proves fertile, a logical consequence of her participation in the murder of her older sisters, who die before any pregnancy can bear fruit.

It is Arinnefja’s two uncles—who are also said to be her brothers at one point in the text (ES, 353)—the ones who seized Jötunheimr from her and her sisters, who kidnapped the princesses, the troll-queen reveals. They have quarrelled over who is to rule the kingdom and the issue will be decided at a troll assembly in the winter. Whichever brother has managed to acquire the more skillful (hagari) princess—not in terms of housewifely accomplishments, but as possessing a more useful treasure—will win the kingdom. It is notable that in Jötunheimr, as in contemporary Scandinavia, male succession issues are not simply determined by primogeniture, but rather are negotiated with the advice of the stormænd or stormän (as the Danish and Swedish magnate councils were called) (Layher 2010, 25–26). So too the trolls, chaired by the Lawspeaker, Skröggr, will be called upon to acclaim one or other brother as monarch at the assembly. Arinnefja now lends the sworn-brothers her material support, she restores Egill’s missing hand, and also offers her advice and strategic insights. For Arinnefja is always—already when the text encounters her—very clearly a drottning as well as a kerling. She evinces many desirable queenly qualities: she presides over a valley of other-worldly fertility, where she exhibits hospitality and courtesy to her human guests, demonstrates healing skills in restoring Egill’s lost hand and, in her persuasion of her uncles/brothers to admit her to the wedding feast, exercises considerable rhetorical skill.

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

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2 This ‘tale-within-a-tale’ construction points, as Gottskálk Jensson notes, to influence from classical or continental models; the individual ævisögur exhibit considerable stylistic variation.

3 Fylgjukona carries the implication of a sexual relationship (see ONP, s.v.); fylgjunaðr is a much rarer word (three instances in the ONP corpus) and usually means simply ‘retainer’, but in this context it may function as a male equivalent to fylgjukona.
her lover ensures democratic good counsel is always at hand in Arinnefja’s future dominion over her realm.

A Female Rite of Passage

Before Arinnefja demonstrates how efficacious she is in the typical Helper function, allying herself with her new human friends, she recounts a second set of adventures (ES, 350–53). After her liaison with Þórr ended, she succumbed to ergi ‘nymphomania’ and conceived an extraocular passion for King Þórr’s bride, who had wooed and won Ingibjörg of Gautland (as it transpires, these are Egill’s parents). Arinnefja determined to prevent the wedding and staged three savage attacks on the couple. First she lies down in the road and is kicked by the bride: her thighs are broken. Next, in a clearly sexualised attack, she turns into a fly, aiming to sting the bride under her clothing in her nara ‘groin’. Ingibjörg sticks her knife into the fly and breaks three ribs. Finally, Arinnefja determines that if she cannot have him, no one shall, Arinnefja carries off the bridegroom, intending to throw him over a cliff. But when she loosens her grip on him to drop him over the edge, she finds that, by magic, she has hurled him past the curtains of the bridal bed, so that he lands next to her lover. Arinnefja is seized and is only permitted to redeem her life if she drink twelve tuns of poisoned liquor on behalf of his queen, teaching Arinnefja a long-overdue lesson about solidarity with other women.

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

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

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

5 Compare Egill’s earlier perception in the saga’s frame narrative of Arinnefja’s vikðlamikil skðop ‘enormous-looking genitals’, displayed when, as an unknown giantess, she is wrestling with her uncle for possession of the magic ring (ES, 347). Schulz notes the difference in characterisation between the civilised Arinnefja who helps the heroes, the burlesque heroine of her own evitaugr and the monstrous creature whom Egill aids in the fight (Schulz 2004, 167).
longings. Arinnefja returns with the treasures to Gautland, but it is only at her young friends’ weddings that she is finally reconciled with her former rival Ingibjörg, and it is the queen who gives her the butter-trough, while Ásmundr provides the sides of bacon.

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

Thus Arinnefja achieves Sovereignty through her rite of passage, but, crucially, it is a Sovereignty which she can both embody and exercise, precisely because she has reshaped herself in the Loathly Lady’s aspect. She has already had a strong relationship with Þórr whose child she has borne, but her initiatory adventure in the underworld culminates in the sexual encounter with Óðinn, the patron of kings, and in the successful completion of her quest. Arinnefja’s experience may be juxtaposed with Óðinn’s seduction of Gunnlöð: the underworld journey she undergoes is the female version of the kingly candidate’s journey to win supernatural endorsement for his rule, an initiation argued for, in different ways, by Svava Jakobsdóttir (2002) and Gro Steinsland (1991). Arinnefja must descend into the chthonic depths, brave mortal danger and suffer hideous mutilation in order to reconfigure her sexed body into a no-longer-sexed one, to make herself ready for dominion, specifically a dominion which she exercises rather than imparts. Like any other king, Arinnefja proves her courage and virility in her fights with the giant women, surviving terrible physical pain and learning how to negotiate with a defeated enemy: qualities which demonstrate her qualification for sovereign authority. For queenship, as Louise Fradenburg notes, entails a ‘need to mark its difference from the subject, which so often takes the form of an extraordinary body or sexuality’ (Fradenburg 1992, 2); Arinnefja has reconfigured her female body and extinguished her troubling sexuality, making herself ready for rule.

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

Maiden-Kings and Hag-Queens

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

6 For Schulz, Arinnefja’s ordeal turns her into ‘ihrer eigenen Karikatur’ (her own caricature) and this transforms her into the monstrous giantess encountered by Egill in the frame narrative (Schulz 2004, 167).
assume royal authority on the death of their fathers, flourished in this period (Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013, 107–33; Hughes 2008; Kalinke 1990). The women are ‘competent if often overbearing rulers; their kingdoms seem to thrive despite the lack of a male sovereign’ (Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013, 109). Yet the story-arc of the maiden-king saga demands that, eventually, the woman must marry the suitor who has overcome many trials to win her as his bride, and, often with an air of disgruntlement, she finally yields her body and her rule to her new husband. The maiden-king polices her own sexual desire and that of her suitors, sometimes brutally, for she knows that sexual surrender effectively terminates her authority. These sagas are not intended to address issues of actual female rule, of course, for medieval Nordic royal women simply did not inherit the crown in this way (though I shall discuss an exception below). Rather, they speak to larger questions of gender: reinforcing the patriarchal requirement to bring the female under male control; problematising issues of virginity; gesturing towards the problem of female consent (Jochens 1986), increasingly foregrounded by later medieval church politics, and allowing the women in the audience to participate in a gratifying fantasy of female autonomy.

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

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

Late-Medieval Queenship

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

I want tentatively to put forward a similar conjecture: namely that Arinnefja’s claim to Jötunheimr as an inheritance from her father and her seizure of the throne by eliminating the rival claimants would have had contemporary resonance in a late fourteenth- / early fifteenth-century context, even in far-off Iceland. The rule of queen Margareta
As this summary of Margareta’s political coup in Sweden suggests, the ‘a unique and unprecedented status, one with no foundation in Nordic ruler until her death in 1412. Hers was, as William Layher comments, all three kingdoms in 1397 at Kalmar, Margareta remained the de facto after she took power in Sweden and, although Eric was crowned king of No further debate about her prospective marriage seems to have arisen she moved swiftly to resolve the succession question by adopting in 1389 her husband. Margareta was already thirty-five in 1388, however, and expected—in the terms of the letter which the Swedish magnates sent to her, setting out the conditions for her assuming sovereignty over the country—to act as the futmetich fruwæ ogh raet husbunde ‘the ruling lady and proper head of the household’ of Sweden until such time as she might marry (again) (Layher 2010, 163–64). Margareta was thus expected to provide Sweden and her other kingdoms with a new king: her husband. Margareta was already thirty-five in 1388, however, and she moved swiftly to resolve the succession question by adopting in 1389 her seven-year-old great-nephew, Eric of Pomerania, as her son and heir.

No further debate about her prospective marriage seems to have arisen after she took power in Sweden and, although Eric was crowned king of all three kingdoms in 1397 at Kalmar, Margareta remained the de facto ruler until her death in 1412. Hers was, as William Layher comments, ‘a unique and unprecedented status, one with no foundation in Nordic law’ (2010, 25).

As this summary of Margareta’s political coup in Sweden suggests, the queen negotiated her symbolic and actual roles very skilfully indeed. Her authority in Denmark and Norway after her father’s death in 1375 was cemented by her status as king’s daughter and, until her son Olaf died at the age of 17 in 1387, the king’s mother. In Norway and Sweden, her marriage at the age of ten to Haakon VI, the king of Norway (and for two years, also the king of Sweden) gave her the consort’s crown until the Swedes deposed Haakon in favour of Albrecht; Haakon had died in 1380 and Olaf had thus inherited the Norwegian crown to add to the Danish one he already held from his grandfather (see Layher 2010, 23–28 for a summary of Margareta’s reign). Margareta’s authority, like most queens, thus derived in part from her sexual relationship with a king and from her fertility, at that earlier stage in her life when she might be more closely identified with the beautiful aspect of the Loathly Lady figure. By the time the Swedish nobility approached her, however, and certainly by 1395, when she finally drove the last of Albrecht’s supporters and his Hanseatic League allies from Stockholm, sexual desirability and fertility lay in the past. As Ellen Caldwell argues with respect to the Loathly Lady’s hag-aspect, Margareta’s age and experience put her ‘beyond male control and [she] is sought after, not as a sexual object, but as the source of special powers’ (Caldwell 2007, 236).

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

Note: I should like to thank the editors of Saga-Book for helpful suggestions in reworking this lecture for publication, and Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir for sight of her now-published article.


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

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

¹ The principal source is the Consilia et Narrationes of Kekaumenos, a composite text, from the mid- to late 1070s. For the Greek text and English translation by Charlotte Roueché see http://www.ancientwisdoms.ac.uk/library/kekaumenos-consilia-et-narrationes/. The relevant passage is also cited in Page 1995, 104.
In many ways, then, Haraldr is a well-attested historical figure. His representation in the Norse Kings’ Sagas, however, is elaborated into a colourful biography, best known as one of the sagas in Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla, but found in its fullest form in the older text Morkinskinna, which was used as a source both by Snorri and by the author of Fagrskinna. These texts, written about 160 years after Haraldr’s death, his adventures in Byzantium are embellished with anecdotes many of which can be shown to derive from internationally known folktales, including an episode that seems to be a version of the ancient tale of the Trojan Horse. Additionally, Haraldr’s probably relatively humble position in the Varangian guard is routinely exaggerated to that of its leader (Gíslí Sigurðsson 2004, 255), just as he is said, undoubtedly falsely, to have been the leader of King Jaroslaf’s army during his earlier stay in Russia, although the Norse sources themselves say that he was only fifteen years old at the time of his escape from Stiklastaðir. The account of Haraldr’s getting the better of the great Byzantine general Georgios Maniakes, or Gyrgir as the Norse sources name him, evoked this comment from Benedikt Benedikz in his revision of the classic history of the Varangian guard by Sigfús Blöndal (Benedikz 1978, 66):

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

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

Magnús’s empty coffers, depleted by Óláfr’s defeat followed by a succession of wars against the Danes, as well as his vulnerable position as a king whose reign began in his minority, obliged him to agree to joint rule with Haraldr. On the death of Magnús one year later Haraldr became sole king, and ruled, according to Ágrip and other sources, for a further nineteen years before his doomed expedition to Britain. Accounts of his reign include the progress of the long-standing war against King Sveinn of Denmark, against whom Haraldr pursues his claim as Magnús’s successor despite Magnús’s own attempt to insist on a reconciliation, and savage reprisals against major barons such as Einarr þambarskelfir and Kálfr Árnason, who resist Haraldr’s authority. Interspersed with these themes in the fullest source, Morkinskinna, are several digressions or þættir, some certainly and others probably fictional. Many of these recount Haraldr’s encounters with Icelanders, some of them poets who are famous or become famous in Haraldr’s service, others insignificant figures such as Auðunn from the Vestfirdir, who brought King Sveinn a bear from Greenland. Morkinskinna is dated to about 1220, but the original manuscript does not survive; Fagrskinna and Heimskringla clearly used Morkinskinna as a source, following it extremely closely overall, but do not include the þættir. It has long been debated whether these stories were part of the original Morkinskinna, to be stripped out by the more historically critical authors of later histories, or whether they were added in the course of the text’s transmission. I will return to the question in a consideration of what purpose they serve in the surviving text of Morkinskinna.

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

From Genealogy to Biography

In the Kings’ Saga texts that survive, as well as their earlier sources that do not, a progression can be traced from a phase in which genealogy was the main concern to the biographical structuring of Snorri’s Heimskringla, in which the material is divided into separate sagas of each individual king. Finnur Jónsson, who edited Morkinskinna in 1932, believed it to be put together from a collection of earlier royal biographies (1932, xxxviii). Þórarinn Índrebóðarson contested this, arguing that it was constructed by a single author; in the parallel case of Fagrskinna, though, Índrebóðarson’s own analysis posited that its sources consisted of a series of individual sagas (Indrebóðarson 1917). It is only after the merging of the genealogical strand of King’s Saga writing with the hagiographical tradition that had developed alongside it, though, that we can demonstrate the evolution of the historical compendia from individual biographies. It is recognised that Snorri Sturluson’s saga
of St Óláfr in *Heimskringla* is a fairly lightly edited version of his earlier *Separate saga of St Óláfr*. Similarly, Oddr Snorrason’s saga of Óláfr Tryggvason is known to have been an early text, dated to about 1190, albeit in Latin—the surviving version being a later translation, made probably about ten years later, into Icelandic. But there is little evidence of earlier biographical sources for the other material in *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*. The earlier texts that we either have or know of emerge rather from the genealogical tradition, supplemented by skaldic verses by earlier, often contemporary poets and the prose anecdotes that in some cases may have accompanied these.

An example of these earlier chronological works is *Nóregs konungatal*, a poem written in honour of the Icelandic chieftain Jón Loftsson, foster-father of Snorri Sturluson. Jón had a stake in Norwegian royal genealogy as a direct descendant of Haraldr harðráði himself; his mother Þóra was the daughter of King Magnús berfœttr. Written in about 1190, this is not the oldest surviving genealogical poem, but it does claim, and is generally accepted, to be based on an earlier historical text, now lost, by Sæmundr inn fróði Sigfússon from the early twelfth century. Judith Jesch has identified the poem as evidence that ‘one of the aims of historical research in the twelfth century was to link Haraldr harðráði with the main line of the Norwegian dynasty, descended from Haraldr hárfagri’ (1996, 142).

The poem catalogues the rulers of Norway, specifying their descent from Haraldr hárfagri. After recounting the death of Magnús góði, Haraldr harðráði’s predecessor and, for a short time, joint ruler, the poem sums up (Gade 2009, 784):

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

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

In the accounts of the earlier kings listed in *Nóregs konungatal*, there is a particular emphasis, as this stanza says in summary, on their descent from Haraldr Finehair. The poem emphasises his role as the first to rule alone over Norway (Gade 2009, 765):

6. Náði hann
fyr Nóregi
þoll um fyrst
einn at rása.

He was the first to rule alone over all Norway.

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

7. Þvi komr hvers
tíl Haralds súðan
skjöldungs kyn
ins skararfagra.

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

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

But even *Morkinskinna* pauses at the point where Haraldr returns from Byzantium, to note his descent, distinct from that of Óláfr and his son Magnús, from Haraldr hárfagri (*Morkinskinna*, I 82):

Ætt Haralds er sú sogð at verit hafi at Haraldr hárfagri ætti son þann er kallaðr var Sigurðr hrísi. Hann var faðir Hálfdanar, þóður Sigurðar sýrs, þóður Haralds. Þessir langfæðgar allir váru konungar á Hringariki í Nóregi. Sigurðr sýr ætti Ástu, döttur Guðbrands, er áðr haði ætti Haraldr grenski. Þau ætti fimm þorn eða fleiri. Var Guðrøðr elztr, þá Hálfdan, þar næst var Ingibjörg, þá Gunnhildr; Haraldr var yngstr.
Haraldr’s genealogy is said to have been that Haraldr hárfagri (Finehair) had a son who was named Sigurðr hrísi (Illegitimate). He was the father of Hálfadan, the father of Sigurðr sýr (Sow), the father of Haraldr. These ancestors were all kings of Hringaríki in Norway. Sigurðr sýr was married to Ásta, the daughter of Guðbrandr, who had previously been married to Haraldr grenski. They had five or more children. Guðrøðr was the oldest, then Hálfdan, then next Ingibjörg, then Gunnhildr; Haraldr was the youngest.

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

38. þats mér sagt,
at Sigurðr hrísi
Haralds sonr
héti forðum.
Vas Hálfdan
Hrísa arfi
en Sigurðr sýr
sonr Hálfdanar.

I have been told that Haraldr’s son was called Sigurðr hrísi (‘Illegitimate’) in olden times. Hálfdan was the heir of Hrísi, and Sigurðr sýr (‘Sow’) the son of Hálfdan.

39. þá gat son
Sigurðr ok Ásta,
þanns Haralds
heiti átti.
Sá rð einn
allvir konungr
viðr fold
vetr tuttugu,
áðr herfur
hilmir gerði
til Englands
með ofstopa.
Felldu vestr
i váþþrumu
enskr menn
Óláfs bróður.

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

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

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

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

37. þós þess móls,
es ek meða hygg,
meiri hlut
miklu epit.
Nú skal þat
þaðan af greiða
jofra kyns,
es enn lifir.

Yet there is a much greater part left of the story which I intend to tell. I shall now, henceforth, present that (story) of the kin of princes which still lives.
The ‘still-living kin of princes’ is the Oddaverjar family in Iceland, directly descended from Haraldr harðráði himself. This Haraldr’s reign ends the catalogue derived from the written testimony of Sæmundr, and begins an era where information is derived from the memory of traceable informants, still living or descended from those who witnessed the events. In Snorri Sturluson’s preface to Heimskringla he famously puts forward his methodology for the use of skaldic stanzas as sources, but also outlines the oral informants of his source Ari Porgilsson, who

var . . . forvirtri ok svá gamall, at hann var feódr næsta vetr eptir fall Haralds konungs Sigurðarsonar. Hann ritaði, sem hann sjálfr segir, ævi Noregskonunge eptir sögu Odds Kolssonar, Hallssonar af Síðu, en Oddr nam at Porgeiri af-ráðskoll, þeim maðri, en viter var ok svá gamall, at hann bjó þá í Niðarnesi, er Hákon jarl inn ríki var dreippin . . . Því var eigi undarlitg, at Ari væri samfröður at fornum tóðendum þeir hér ok útan lands, at hann hjal þum at gömlum þrýnum ok vitrum, en var sjálfr námjarn ok minnigr. (Bjarni Æðalbjarnarson 1941–51, I 6–7)

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

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

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

4 Translations from Heimskringla are cited throughout from Finlay and Faulkes, 2011–; this quotation, 2011, 4–5.
The elements in this narrative, then, include garbled and exaggerated incidents with some historical basis, alongside tales of pure fantasy concerning Haraldr’s adventures. An example of the latter is one of the sequence of sieges that Haraldr successfully lays against towns in Sicily. Haraldr’s device is to pretend to be ill, and give detailed instructions to his men that they should adopt a dismal appearance, claim to the townspeople that he is dead, and ask permission to carry the body in a coffin through the town gate to inter it at a church in the town. They are to ask that twelve men should accompany the body as befits the funeral of a nobleman; once in the town, Haraldr says, ek hætti til þess hvé skjótr ek verð ór kistunni ‘I will take a chance on how quickly I can get out of the coffin.’ All goes according to plan, except that Haraldr himself acts as a pall-bearer rather than occupying the coffin, perhaps because adopting such a prone position would be damaging to his warlike image, and the town is duly taken by the twelve Vikings, wearing mailcoats under their mourning garments. The story is clearly a reformulation of the Homeric story of the Trojan horse, and is dismissed by Benedikz as a ‘version of an itinerant folktale’ (1978, 72). The same story is told in the eleventh century by Dudo of St Quentin about a Viking by the name of Hasting who besieges the town of Luna, and is mentioned by Simon Coupland among legends used by Frankish historians to promote a stereotype of fiendish cunning attributed to the Vikings (2003, 198). This is certainly the contribution of the Sicilian siege sequence to Haraldr’s legend, in which he acts with a resourcefulness offset by the claimed defeatism of the Byzantine general Gyrgir.

The attitude of the Norse sources towards this material can be gauged by the unusual number of what might be called truth claims in this part of Morkinskinna and the texts derived from it. Carl Phelpstead has written recently about the element of fantasy in Oddr Snorrason’s Saga of Óláfr Tryggvason, identifying devices used by the author to validate the historicity of his narrative, which themselves give an indication of elements that the audience must have been expected to find potentially implausible (Phelpstead 2012). Relevant to this is the claim in Yngvars saga víðförla that it too was written by Oddr Snorrason. Yngvars saga is a text full of implausibility that has been classed as a fornaldarsaga, although its events take place in the early eleventh century rather than in the unspecified ancient times that the generic label assumes. Phelpstead explores the boundaries between what seems to a modern audience to be pure entertainment, and what a medieval audience would accept as historical. As he says (2012, 41),

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

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

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

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5 Morkinskinna, I 104. Quotations from Kings’ Saga texts are usually from Morkinskinna, as the fullest and earliest of the three main compendia, usually quite closely followed by Fagrskinna and Heimskringla. Verses are cited from Heimskringla where possible, since the manuscripts of Heimskringla are older, and likely to be more reliable, than those of Morkinskinna.
It can be reported that eighty cities were captured in Serkland.

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

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Fór ofrhugi emn ofrí} \\
&\text{eggdjarfr und sik leggia,} \\
&\text{fold vas víga valdi} \\
&\text{virk, Jórsala ór Girkjum.} \\
&\text{Ok með òrenu ríki} \\
&\text{ðbrunnin kom gunnar} \\
&\text{heimil þröð und herði.}
\end{align*}
\]

The very bold one, prevailing,\(^6\) advanced from the Greeks’ country, blade-brave—the land bowed to the raider of battles\(^7\)—to win Jórsali. And for his ample power as his due to the battle-strengthener\(^8\) the land unburned was delivered.

*Morkinskinna* seems to go out of its way to emphasise that Stúfr’s account is not that of an eyewitness by including, at a much later point when Haraldr is established as king in Norway, the story now called *Stúfs þáttr*. This relates the king’s first meeting with this blind Icelandic poet. According to the editors of *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, this encounter is to be dated to about 1060, just six years before the king’s death, and probably about twenty years after the journey to Jerusalem (Gade 2009, 350). The emphasis in the þáttr is on entertainment; the poet displays the stereotypical impudence of the visiting Icelander, laughing at the traditional insulting connotations of the nickname *sýr* ‘Sow’ of the king’s father, and proving his competence as a poet—rather unusually, by reciting *drápur* and *flokkar* by other poets rather than his own—before asking permission to compose a poem in honour of the king; it is to this *drápa* that the verse cited here is assumed to belong. The story lays out Stúfr’s credentials as a poet, and attributes to him the independent-mindedness of most Icelandic visitors, but clearly the truth-value of the story of Haraldr’s expedition to Jerusalem depends on the king’s own report. The verse itself confirms the claim in the prose that Haraldr subjugated Jerusalem, rather than simply visiting it as a pilgrim, or as leader of an armed guard protecting other pilgrims as Blöndal (1954, 121) considers more plausible, whether this exaggeration was the king’s own assertion or the poet’s flattering embellishment.

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

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Norðbrikt dvalði marga vetr í Affríka ok fekk þar mikit gull ok marga dýrgrip,} \\
&\text{en þe þat allt sem hann fekk, ok eigi þurði hann at hafa til líðskostar, sendi} \\
&\text{hann með trúndararmönnum sínum norðr í Hólmgarð í vald ok gezlu Jorizlifs} \\
&\text{konungs. Ok drósk þar svá mikit ógrynni fjár saman at eigi másþi morkum telja,} \\
&\text{sem líkligt má ýkkyja, er hann herjaði þann hlut heimsins er nær var auðgastr} \\
&\text{at gulli ok dýgrícupum. Svá er þó at hann hefði eigi barizk við búkarla, því at} \\
&\text{hann segir sjálfr at hann báðisk við konunginn sjálfr í Affríka ok fekk sigr} \\
&\text{ok eignask viða veldi hans.}
\end{align*}
\]

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

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

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Í þessum tveimir drápur Haralds ok mórgum þórum hans kvaðum er getit} \\
&\text{þessa stórvirkis, ok eigi þarf orð at gera hjá því at sjálfran Gríkkjakonung} \\
&\text{blindaði hann. Jafn vel meðti nefna til þess greifa innhvern eða hertoga, ef} \\
&\text{þat þeitri sannara, en í þilum kvaðum Haralds konungs segir þetta eina lund.}
\end{align*}
\]

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

\(^6\) *inn ofrí*: ‘the one who had the upper hand’.

\(^7\) *víga valdr*: ‘cause, controller of battles’, warrior.

\(^8\) *gunnar herðir*: ‘hardener of war’, warrior.
Heimskringla has a slightly different version of this avowal, interestingly privileging the king’s report over that of his poets (Bjarni Áðalbjarnarson 1941–51, I 87):

Í þessum tveim drápur Haralds ok þorgum þörum kvæðum hans er geti þess, at Haraldr blindaði sjálfan Gríkjakonung. Nefna mætti þeir til þess hertoga eða greifa eða annars konon tignarmenn, ef þeir vissi, at þat varí sannara, því at sjálf Haraldr flutti þessa sogn ok þeir menn aðrir, er þar váru með honum.

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

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

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

Haraldr konungr var ríkr maðr ok stjórnarman innanlands, speknægt at viti, ok þat er vitra manna mál at engi maðr hafi verit djúpviðir á öldum Norðrlondum en Haraldr konungr ok manna ráðsnjallastr, svá at honum varð aldri ráðfátt. Hann var sterkt maðr at afli ok vígr hverjum manni betr. Hann var fullhugi ok mikill á framkvædim verka sinna, sem nú hefir lengi frá verit sagt, ok liggja þó níðri ösagöri miklu fleiri hlutur, þeir sem ösagöri eru af hans afreksverkum, ok kemr mest til þess öfðuleikr vár ok þat með at vör viljum eigi rita vitið-burðarlausar sogur, þót vör hófum heyrð þar frásgnir, því at oss þykkr betra at hæðan af sér við aukur heldr en þetta sama þurði apr tr at taka. Er mikil saga frá Haraldr konungi í kvæði sett, þau er honum samtíða váru um hann kveðin,

tökum vör þar mest dømi af, þat er sagt er í þeim kvæðum, er kveðin váru fyrir sjálfum hófingjumum eða sonum þeira. Tökum vör þat allt fyrir satt, er í þeim kvæðum finnuk um ferðir þeira eða orrostur. En þat er hálft skálda at lofa þann mest, er þá eru þeir fyrir, en engi myndi þat þora at segja sjálfum honum þau verk hans, er allir þeir, er heyrði, vissi, at hégömi væri ok skrøk, ok svá sjálfr hann. Þat væri þá háð, en eigi lof. (Bjarni Áðalbjarnarson 1941–51, I 5)

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

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

Pëttir: The King and his History

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

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

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

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

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

rœða margir um at þó sé djörfung í þessu er hann, Íslandræg, segir þessa sögu, eða hveru konungi munu víðask. Sumum þykkir hann vel segja, en sumir vinnask minna at . . . Melti konungr, ‘Er þér eigi forvitni á, Íslandræg,’ segir hann, ’hversu mér líkar sagan? . . . Mér þykkir allvæl ok hveri verr en efni eru til, eða hver kennið þer söguna?’ Hann svarar: ’Pat var vanði minn út á landinu at ek för hvert sumar til þings, ok namk hvert sumar af sögunni nökkvat at Halldóri Snorrasyni.’

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

This pëttir has aroused interest as evidence of the oral performance of narrative, suggesting how the raw materials of saga composition might
have been put together, performed and received.⁹ As a thirteenth-century reconstruction it may not be of much historical value, beyond demonstrating that some thirteenth-century writers believed, possibly rightly, that earlier models of prose composition differed from their own, and did their best to reconstruct them. Within the structure of Morkinskinna, however, it brings us full circle, with Halldór Snorrasón taking to Iceland independent witness of the king’s adventures abroad, there presumably to be fashioned into written form as Morkinskinna and Heimskringla. It is the king himself, however, who provides the verdict on the reliability of Halldór’s account.

This sequence of tales suggests a rationale for the function of some of the þættir within Morkinskinna. Similar explanations could be given for some of the episodes featuring Haraldr’s poets, though these are more to do with asserting Haraldr’s own skill and discrimination in the art of poetry than with the issue of truthfulness itself. The question whether the þættir are original to Morkinskinna or added in later tradition remains unresolved, but the latest scholars to work closely on the text, Theodore Andersson in the introduction to his translation and Ármann Jakobsson in his introduction to the new Íslensk fornrit edition, both put up a strong defence of the text in its existing form (Andersson 2000, 13, 22–24; Morkinskinna I, xi–l). Ármann makes the point that the attempt to break texts down into their constituent sources is a mode of analysis from which scholarly assessment of the Sagas of Icelanders has largely moved on, whereas less attention has so far been paid to the literary qualities of the Kings’ Sagas. Comparison of kings is revealed, in Ármann’s analysis, as a key theme in Morkinskinna, with the central role of Haraldr harbræðri establishing him as the model against which all other monarchs are measured in one way or another; this is instanced by Hreiðarr’s account of the ‘wise fool’ Hreiðarr, who encounters and assesses both kings from the innocent viewpoint of one who has never experienced kingship—together with other things, such as the emotion of anger, to which he is provoked by the arrogant behaviour of Haraldr’s retainers. Without demurring from the general view that Hreiðars þátr is very likely to have existed in an earlier form before its incorporation in Morkinskinna, Ármann uses it to provide an image that encapsulates his view of the role of the þættir in the text: Hreiðarr is used to compare the stature and qualities of the joint and rival kings Magnús inn góði and Haraldr harbræðri. The þátr includes a puzzling scene in which Hreiðarr insists on walking around King Magnús and inspecting him from every angle; a metaphor, Ármann argues, for the manner in which the þættir encircle the kings that figure in them, assessing them from different angles, and often from the perspective of an outsider, most often a simple Icelander (Morkinskinna, I liv–lix).

**English Endings**

The concluding episode of Haraldr’s biography, his ill-fated expedition to England, can be measured against independent and earlier sources, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,¹⁰ and Norman texts written in both Latin and French, of which the earliest is a Life of St Edward the Confessor, written as early as 1067.¹¹ Some of these texts seem to have influenced the accounts in Morkinskinna and Fagrskinna, and some of the alterations to these made by Snorri in Heimskringla follow the twelfth-century account of William of Malmesbury (Rowe 1994, 10–12). As reliable history the Norse texts have generally been found wanting, particularly in respect of their account of Haraldr’s last battle, the Battle of Stamford Bridge. Historians have generally dismissed the saga accounts because of their lateness, and consider elements such as the English use of cavalry charges, and Haraldr’s death after being struck by an arrow in the throat, to be modelled on accounts of the Battle of Hastings. In his history of the battle and of Haraldr’s invasion, Kelly de Vries attempts to integrate the Norse sources with the English and Norman ones, but rather inconclusively, dismissing the intercalated skaldic verses, for instance, as ‘later literary flourishes’ (1999, 287). This is true in the sense that we may not now accept that the verses were declaimed in situ during the battle, as two verses attributed to Haraldr himself, and two lausavísur by his poet Þjóðólfr are claimed to

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

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

¹¹ Vita Æduuardi Regis qui apud Westmonasterium requiescit, dated to 1066–75. Several Lives of Edward the Confessor survive, the most influential being that of Aelred of Rievaulx, written to celebrate the canonisation of Edward in 1161. This is the indirect or direct source of later French versions, and of the Icelandic Jávarðar saga preserved in fourteenth-century manuscripts (Fell 1972; Rogers 1956–57, 255–62).
be in the texts. But there is no reason to doubt that Þjóðólfr was actually present at the battle; and verses by Árnórr jarlaskáld seem to be from a memorial poem in honour of Haraldr, while those by Steinn Herðísarson are said to be from a poem in honour of Haraldr’s son Óláfr, who took part in the first, successful encounter at Fulford Gate. They are therefore close contemporary sources. It may be because of the acknowledged presence of eyewitnesses, some of whom at least survived the expedition, that the episode is told without the constant reference to the sources, and assurances of their veracity, that we see in earlier parts of Haraldr’s history.

It can be admitted, however, that the account of Haraldr’s invasion and last battle serve generally literary rather than historical functions in the Norse texts. The sagacity and cunning for which the king is famous seem to have deserted him; the venture is presented as doomed from the start. The technique of comparison of kings comes into play in the initial account of the attempt of Jarl Tostig to win support, first from King Sveinn of Denmark and then from Haraldr, for his bid to claim his share of English rule. Sveinn’s refusal emphasises his moderation, disclaiming the strength of his famous forebear Knútr the Old (Morkinskinna I, 300–01):

Svá lauk siklings ævi
snjalls, at vёр róm allir,
loðungr beþi inn leyði
lífis grand, ístað vœndum.

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

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

Heldr kuru meir ens mæra
mildings an grið vildi
of folksnar fylki
falla lóðsmenn allir.

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

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

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

13 For reference to the critical debate about Byrhtnoð’s ofermod, see Abels 1991, 147–48.
Haraldr’s fall is foreshadowed by numerous omens and ominous prophecies, including an appearance in a dream of his brother St Óláf, who speaks a verse comparing his own holy death with the one unblessed by God that awaits Haraldr. This resurgence of the theme of comparison of kings can also be seen, rather obscurely, behind one of the most distinctive elements in the battle, the report that Haraldr and his men fight without their coats of mail. In the sagas this is used to account for the fact that the Norwegians were taken by surprise by Haraldr Godwinsson, having left their armour behind them at the ships; and this is alluded to in one, and possibly both, of the two last verses attributed to Haraldr. He expresses his poetic self-consciousness for the last time, composing first a simple fornyrðislag stanza and then improving on it with an impeccably composed stanza in dróttkvætt. The second could also be referring to lack of armour, since it declares that krjúpum vér eigi í bug skjaldar fyr vápna brokun at hjaldri ‘we do not hide from the crash of weapons in the hollow of the shield in battle’; the first, simpler verse declares more plainly,

Framm göngum vēr
i fylkingu
brynjulasir
und blár eggjar.
Hjalmar skína.
Hefkat ek mín.
Nú liggr skrud várt
at skipum niðri.

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

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

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

14 ‘Mine’ here refers apparently to the mailcoat rather than the helmet, since mín ‘mine’ is feminine, agreeing with brynjja ‘mailcoat’.

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

Óð með øxi breidða
ðøessinn framm væsir,
varð um hilmi Hǫrða
hjørdynr, ok varp brynju.

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

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

Haraldr the Resolute

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

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

Haraldr vissi sik hverjum
harðgeðr und Miðgarði
—döglingr reð til dauða
dýrð sílkrí—gram ríkra.
Hefr afreka in ofra
(aettstyrðum dýrri
hnigrat hilimir frægrí)
heilög fold (til moldar).

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

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JOHN TOWNSEND

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

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

John’s contribution to the Society and its activities was multiform. As early as 1962 he was Honorary Assistant Secretary and after that Treasurer for many years. He was President of the Society from 1988 to 1990. Subsequently he was a Vice-President in Council up to the time of his death. For a number of years he was joint editor of the review section of Saga-Book. And in 1999 he produced his Index to Saga-Book volumes 1–23 which covered all of the Society’s publications almost to the end of the twentieth century. He also assumed the role of unofficial historian of the Society and this found expression in, for example, his substantial and detailed history of 1992 (‘The Viking Society: a centenary history’ in Saga-Book XXIII:4, 180–212).
As a librarian colleague John was all one could wish for, informed, up-to-date and extremely helpful. He always followed up requests and queries and never left loose ends untied or stones unturned. He only rarely failed to find the item one was looking for, however abstruse or sequestered. The admirable state of the Society’s library at the time of its centenary in 1992 owed a great deal to him. But John did not necessarily find his work as a librarian stimulating and sometimes complained of what (by analogy with ‘housemaid’s knee’) he diagnosed as ‘librarian’s yawn’. And there was indeed much more to his life than books and libraries and John had many interests. Shrewsbury was a football school and this must have given him his enduring enthusiasm for the game. He was not only in his time an adept player himself (at inside right), but also a committed supporter of Chelsea at Stamford Bridge. (He especially rejoiced in having witnessed Tommy Lawton score a famous header in a 3-3 draw against Moscow Dynamo in November, 1945.) He had a particular fondness for cats and had several as pets over the years. He was something of a gardener and a regular visitor to the Chelsea Flower Show. He had a strong interest in Irish culture and made frequent visits to Ireland.

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

John’s generosity with both his time and treasure was notable, albeit always exercised unobtrusively and without fuss. After retirement, for example, he matched all he had done for the Viking Society by much valuable work for the library, and that on an entirely voluntary basis. He made substantial donations to the library, one in memory of a prematurely deceased colleague, another consisting of a large collection of books in Irish. And perhaps his most significant contribution to the Society was the funding in 1976 of the Townsend Viking Society Prize ‘to mark the long association of the Society with University College London’. This is awarded each session to an undergraduate student in the Department of Scandinavian Studies at UCL. And alongside the generosity there was kindness and thoughtfulness. In another obituary, John’s brother Michael describes him as ‘a very good friend to his friends’ and he was certainly that. But John also had a benevolence which reached well beyond close friends and family. He had real and sincere concern for others and their well-being. His sympathy for the less exalted and the underprivileged may have had something to do with left-wing principles; or with a culture of caring in his family background. But his solicitude for others was in any case strong and warm and selfless. Things in the Society will never be quite the same as they were before John’s passing. He will be sorely missed by all who had the pleasure of knowing him.

Richard Perkins
The book is divided into sixteen chapters, written by twenty-four authors. It includes an account in *Egils saga* which raised interest in the Þrisbrú site which is at the centre of the investigations discussed here. No remains were evident on the surface. It was through place-names, oral tradition, geophysical surveying and test excavations that an early church with cemetery and a longhouse dating to the Viking period were discovered, each a particularly splendid example of its type. One of the goals of MAP was to explore the possible historicity of the sagas through place-names, test excavations to obtain a picture of the development of settlement, and to dismiss them totally as fiction. The latter approach goes hand in hand with the bookprose theory (bökkfestkenning) of literary saga interpretation which emphasizes that the sagas are fictional rather than fact. These voices in Icelandic archaeology became particularly loud in the 1990s (e.g., Bjarni F. Einarsson, ‘Íslenskar fornleifar’, *Skírnir* 168 (1994), 377–402), although at that time there were also those who advocated cooperation between archaeology and literary studies (e.g., Adolf Friðriksson, ‘Sannfræði íslenskra fornleifa’ *Skírnir* 168 (1994), 346–76). On the whole archaeologists working in Iceland now continue to dismiss the sagas as fiction, although to different degrees.

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

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

The central place of *Egils saga* in the investigation culminates in the alleged discovery of Egill’s empty grave underneath the chancel of the church, the discussion of which is given a whole chapter. The relocation of the grave seems to be directly supported by *Egils saga*. Here Egill is said to have moved from Borg to live with his daughter Þórdís at Mosfell, where he died and was buried, first in a heathen mound, then in Christian graveyards, first at Þrisbrú, then at Mosfell. The grave-cut extends underneath the east gable of the church chancel, explained by the excavators by its having been made before the chancel was added. The description in *Egils saga* of a large skeleton having been found under the altar in the church at Þrisbrú, believed to belong to Egill (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímsssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslensk fornrit II (Reykjavík, 1933), 298–99) does make sense in view of the proposed date of writing of the saga in the early thirteenth century, when the church had been abandoned. Whether it was that of Egill is another matter and cannot be proved by archaeology.

The study of the whole Mosfell valley (Chapter Five) included the use of place-names and test excavations to obtain a picture of the development of settlement, using the description in *Egils saga* of Skalla-Grímr’s settlement process as a model to test. The conclusion is that the distribution of early farms—four in total, which is three more than are listed in *Landsnámaðabók*—fits the Skalla-Grímr model. According to *Landsnámaðabók* Skogstastaðir is the earliest farm in the area, whereas place-name evidence—and, not least, the archaeology—points to Þrisbrú. This is explained by the suggestion that the memory of the first settler’s farmstead was lost, and that the author of *Landsnámaðabók* derived the farm-name from his name, Póðr skeggi.

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Palaeoenvironmental work formed part of the study (Chapter Thirteen), involving pollen and lithological analysis of samples from Þrisbrú and the site close by of an alleged summer farm (sel), to throw light on landscape change, land use and occupation patterns. The results point to human activity at Þrisbrú shortly before the deposition of the Landnám tephra (871±2), and to a change in land use or abandonment by the end of the twelfth century when, according to the saga, the farm was moved to Mosfell. The valley-wide study also includes a survey of routes in the Viking period, based on an interpretation of the written sources (Chapter Fourteen).

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

Two chapters (Nine and Ten) deal specifically with the artefacts found during the excavation. In the main chapter we are led from room to room and told what artefacts were found in them, throwing light on specific activities. This is an unusual approach and pleasantly visual. A very complete and detailed programme of analysis of all the floors (micromorphological analysis, covered in Chapter Eleven) adds to the information on activity areas within the building. There is not much in the assemblage which points to high status, as is also the case at the chieftain’s farm-site Hofstaðir in the north, although the number of imported glass beads at Þrisbrú is larger than at
any other Viking-period domestic site in Iceland. These goods, coupled with references in the sagas and other material evidence of contact, prompts a chapter on the trading centre Hedeby as being a crucial trade contact for the site (Chapter Sixteen).

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

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

Following an illuminating survey of oral theory and saga studies, Andersson analyses how oral transmission may have shaped three of the earliest sagas, Guðmundar saga dýra, which centres on the career of a powerful northern chieftain, is generally believed to have been composed not long after the eponymous hero’s death in 1212 by an author who, according to Andersson, ‘gives the impression of being very close to the events but has not been able to abstract them into a drama and personality to the same degree as in the classical sagas’ (p. 19). A similar judgment is made on Sturlu saga which relates the political dealings of Sturla Þórðarson, another ambitious northern chieftain of the twelfth century. As with Guðmundar saga dýra, the first-time reader of Sturlu saga is likely to become somewhat disoriented by its plethora of apparently irrelevant details and, in general, the absence of narrative strategies that ‘have made the sagas famous, the economy of detail designed to focus on a particular outcome, the escalation of tensions, the creation of memorable personalities, and the tantalizing deferral of the finale’ (pp. 15–16). Such narrative techniques are, however, present in Borgils saga ok Haflíka which is set in northern Iceland around 1120. The key to the contrast between this saga on the one hand, and Sturlu saga and Guðmundar saga dýra on the other, Andersson argues, is the difference in the time-span between the events they describe and the time of their recording. The near-century between the dispute of Haflíð Másson and Borgils Oddason and the saga’s composition allowed for ‘oral refinement that presupposes the telling of a long prose form that provided the necessary latitude for practicing those larger rhetorical patterns and strategies, which define the style that ultimately emerged in the written sagas’ (p. 34).

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

Thus Hrafnss saga is a contemporary saga or, in Andersson’s words, a saga that relies on ‘short term tradition’ (p. 8), but still one in which the author presents his material in a manner that recalls the Íslendingasögur of the mid- to late thirteenth century. Though Hrafnss saga Sveinbjarnarsonar may have played only a minor role (if any) in the development of saga writing, it still shows that the composer of a contemporary saga could apply, if he so desired, narrative devices traditionally associated with the classical sagas. Whether the author chose to do so in any particular case depended, I would argue, on what he wished to achieve. The writer of Hrafnss saga had a controlling concept—the antagonism between two very different characters—which required the streamlining of the narrative. In Guðmundar saga dýra, however, the complex and (for the modern reader at least) convoluted plot is
The text’s central concept, and there would be no saga without it. The outstanding impression the reader takes from the text is of the tangled web of social relations that defeats even the mightiest of chieftains, such as Guðmundr dyri.

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

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

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

While continuing some of the themes of earlier chapters, Chapter Five nevertheless highlights the difficulty of integrating relatively lightly edited articles into a fully convincing whole. For instance, as noted, Chapter Four focuses on the independent episodes in Snorri’s Ólafs saga Haraldssonar which, according to Andersson, reflect tensions between king and Icelanders or Norwegian magnates. The question left largely unanswered is how this tendency in the ‘second part’ of Heimskringla squares with Snorri Sturluson’s apparent phasing out of antagonistic elements in the ‘third part’ of the same work. Although Andersson does recognise this problem, the format of the book does not allow the necessary in-depth engagement with it. The principal merit of Andersson’s approach is that he seeks to place the sagas within their Icelandic and Norwegian historical context; he recognises that most Kings’ Sagas and Sagas of Icelanders were probably written by members of a narrow circle of textual communities that, moreover, are likely to have been closely connected with monastic and episcopal institutions. In Chapter Six Andersson identifies a textual community in northern Iceland which in the early thirteenth century produced Viga-Glúms Saga, Ljósvetninga saga and Reykdalea saga. The inclusion of the last-named among these oldest Íslendingasögur has, however, been doubted, and this prompts Andersson to present a useful, although perhaps unnecessarily exhaustive, reprise of the scholarly debate regarding the dating of this text (pp. 148–60). Andersson identifies two principal trends in these three sagas, namely their expression of regional identity where the author’s sympathy lies with one particular local grouping. Sentiments of this kind, Andersson notes, distinguish Orkneyinga Saga and Faerœinga saga, and *Hladaðjarla saga would also have focused on the relationship between regional chieftains or rulers and the Norwegian crown. This is a valuable insight, to which can be added two further observations. Andersson argues that ‘these larger-scale conflicts were translated onto a more limited local
The turn of the century has brought good times for the saga corpus within the context of medieval Icelandic history. The volume is also most welcome as an accessible introduction to some of the major themes that have occupied Professor Andersson for much of the last half-century.

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The turn of the century has brought good times for the fornaldarsögur. In addition to Torfi H. Tulinius’s La ‘Matière du Nord’ (1995), published in English in 2002 as The Matter of the North (reviewed in Saga-Book 27 (2003), 126–29), we now have several collections of essays. The book under review is the third in a sequence of seven such collections edited by the same three editors, the first (Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideologi (Uppsala 2003, reviewed in Saga-Book 30 (2006), 128–31) with Ármann Jakobsson’s name in first place, the second (Fornaldasagaene: myter og virkelighed. Copenhagen 2009) with Agneta Ney heading the team. Each of the three volumes arises out of a conference held by the editors at its place of publication, though the one under review includes papers not given at the Reykjavik conference. Another conference-based volume, from Hull, entitled Making history: essays on the fornaldarsögur, and edited by Martin Arnold and Alison Finlay, was published by the Viking Society in 2010. Also worthy of mention is the Festschrift for Galina Glazyrina, Skemmitigastur lygisögur, edited by Tatjana N. Jackson and Elena A. Melnikova and published in Moscow in 2012.

The ongoing bibliography of manuscripts, editions, translations and studies of the fornaldarsögur, compiled by M. J. Driscoll and Silvia Hufnagel and currently accessible on the internet under the title Stories for all time, includes these and many other related items. The present volume, which contains twenty articles, has an eight-page Prologue by the three editors and is divided into three sections.

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

In the second section, which has the somewhat awkward title ‘Development and generic considerations’ (its two parts belonging to different categories of ideas), Terje Spurkland finds skróksögur better attested than either lystisögur or stjúpmœðrasögur as an Old Norse term for narratives thought to be untrue. Massimiliano Bampi views in a context of polysemic system the interaction of the fornaldarsögur, in the course of their development as a genre, with the riddarasögur and Íslendingasögur. Marianne Kalinke takes the maiden-king þættir in Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar and Hrólfs saga kraka, and the ‘otherworld-journey’ þátr of Helgi Þórisson in Flateyjarbók, as examples of the adaptive and eclectic tendency...
of fornaldarsaga-type narratives. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir finds Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar at least as influential as Clári saga in giving rise to the indigenous romance genre of maiden-king saga, viewing this genre’s recurrent motif of ultimate female submission to male rule in the light of changing social conditions in late medieval Iceland. Carolyne Larrington argues that the effect of joining Ragnars saga to Völsunga saga as a sequel, as reflected in MS NKS 1824b 4to, is to tone down the courtly elements of the second half of Völsunga saga and to reassert the decidedly northern, non-courtly concerns of the first half. Fulvio Ferrari examines the different ways in which authors of fornaldarsögur, notably those of Hrólfs saga kraka and Órvar-Ódds saga, negotiate the constraints imposed on them by Christianity in creating their fictional worlds. Hans Jacob Orning argues for the use of fornaldarsögur as historical sources for the times at which their surviving manuscripts were written, suggesting that the later version of Órvar-Ódds saga, as preserved in the fifteenth-century MS AM 343a 4to, may, with its increased emphasis on Oddr’s invincible enemy Ógmund Eyþjófsbani, reflect the diminishing power of the Scandinavian nobility in the face of kingly rule. Orning further stresses the need to study individual sagas in relation to other sagas preserved in the same manuscript. Daniel Sävborg argues against the accepted view that the fornaldarsögur are older than the so-called ‘post-classical’ Íslendingasögur and have influenced them. He shows that, in the case of Porskríbninga saga and Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar, at least, the former saga, counted among the ‘post-classical’ Íslendingasögur, is likely to have influenced the latter, a fornaldarsaga, rather than the other way round. Oeming and Sävborg, interestingly, differ in their generic placing of Jónsvikinga saga. Whereas Torfi Tulinus, in the book mentioned above (2002, p. 29), had placed it somewhere between the fornaldarsögur and the konungasögur, Oeming (p. 310) assigns it to the former group, Sävborg (p. 328) to the latter. Finally, in this section, Karl G. Johansson questions whether such terms as ‘work’ and ‘genre’ are appropriate in studying what we call the fornaldarsögur, showing that sagas may change from one surviving version to another depending on their manuscript context, may use the same descriptive techniques in what we would regard as different genres, and may adopt new narrative strategies over time, notably in the fifteenth century. His examples include Herrrarar saga ok Heiðreks, Bósa saga ok Herrruðs og Áns saga bogsveisg.

In the third and final section, entitled ‘Late development’, Emily Lethbridge gives a close analysis of Forsteins saga Víkingssonar as preserved in the late fifteenth-century ‘Eggertsbök’ (AM 556 a-b 4to), arguing that appreciation of its ‘multi-modal’ character is enhanced by reading it alongside the six other sagas contained in this manuscript: three Íslendingasögur (the outlaw sagas) and three riddarasögur. Tereza Lansings surveys the surviving manuscripts of Hrólfs saga kraka (the earliest from the seventeenth century), showing that their physical characteristics and written styles are indicative of the ways in which this saga has been perceived (whether as history, chivalric romance or legend) by different kinds of audience. Silvia Hufnagel, finally, shows that two manuscripts of Sórla saga sterka, both written by Magnús Jónsson of Tjaldanes (1835–1922), reflect different stages in the development of the Icelandic language, in that the later manuscript (written in 1904–05) adapts the style of the earlier one to suit the demands for linguistic purism that arose in Iceland in the nineteenth century.

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

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

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

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

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

The conclusion is a stand-alone chapter that seeks to situate the riddarasögur in a particular textual culture of specific authorial derivation, noting that each text reveals the knowledge base and ideological framework of an educated author. Moreover, the significant intertextual connections between the works indicate, according to Barnes, a ‘coterie of writers, familiar with each other’s work and likely to be writing as much for their peers as for their anonymous patrons’ (p. 183). By situating their works within the textual culture of the learned tradition and drawing on encyclopaedic material and romance writing, those authors thus
invite their audiences to join them in what Barnes so amply depicts as an ‘elaborate minuet of intertextuality’ (p. 190).

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

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

The first essay concerns the authorship of Völsunga and argues that we owe the poem to a heathen poet who knew of Christianity via vernacular versions of parts of Genesis, Mark and Revelation: all texts used in the Easter services which the poet might have attended as part of the process of being prime-signed. Next, McKinnell elucidates the role of the thrice-burnt seeress in Völsunga, uncovering the possible meanings and associations of the names Gullveig and Heiðr. In the essays on Hávamál, structural, lexical and metrical analyses of the text allow McKinnell to reconstruct the developmental stages which may have led to the extant text, arguing for a quadriform origin.

‘The Gnomic Poem’ (A) and ‘Lóðrífáfnismál’ (C) represent two collections of practical advice, whereas ‘The Poem of Sexual Intrigue’ (B) combines Ovidian sexual advice with two cynical mythological episodes, and ‘Ljóðatál’ (D) offers a heathen version of the Crucifixion in which occult wisdom rather than human salvation is Óðinn’s aim.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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A piecemeal reading approach, where the staunch philologist may revel in all the
texts in the eighteenth century is given as the reason for consideration only of pre-1700 scribal activity). Yet, within this scope, the seventeenth century in
particular, a time of fevered scribal work in Iceland and nationalist diligence in
mainland Scandinavia, proves to be fertile ground for the author’s aims. It is to
Love’s credit that he does this period justice by circumscribing his attention, and
an attempt is made to show how apparent compilatory principles (or lack thereof,
for example where the saga appears as a single item) can reveal the mind-set of
scribes, commissioners or readers. This in turn embraces assessments of individual manuscripts at key points within the time period surveyed, as well as a synchronic
overview of trends, such as the presence of ‘frequent followers’, across the range of
manuscripts. Secondly, the author looks at macro-level narrative variation, leading to considerations of how changes to the materia (taken for the most part scene by scene) reflect changing attitudes to the function of the saga. The riddles, in this respect, are given an entire chapter of their own due to the increased textual volatility which they bear witness to. Thirdly, the reception is gauged through a
survey of the various responses to the saga, intellectual commentary as well as
poetic reworkings, which are extant from the period under review. While further methods could be adopted to deepen our understanding of the saga’s readership (for example, investigations of scribes and scribal networks or a quantitative
codiological analysis of the manuscript witnesses in order to gain understanding of the socio-economic contexts of production), these three chosen approaches
result in a broad and revealing assessment of the saga’s shifting potential. If work
remains to be done, it can only be significantly bolstered by Love’s study, which
will most likely serve as its immediate jumping-off point.

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

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

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

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MINNI AND MUNINN. MEMORY IN MEDIEVAL NORDIC CULTURE. Edited by PERNILLE HER-

All the articles contained in Minni and Muninn: Memory in Medieval Nordic Cul-
ture are welcome additions to memory studies, offering together an overview on
memory, remembering and forgetting in the North. This collection of ten essays is
divided into two sections, ‘Memory and Narration’ and ‘Memory and History’, a division that the editors consider ‘to a certain extent arbitrary and overlapping’ (p. 5), which may be the reason why the second section is less exciting and original than the first in dealing with memory and remembrance in Old Norse–Icelandic literature. Jürg Glauser, in his foreword, highlights the fact that the Nordic civilisations are fully aware of the function and construction of memory, arguing that ‘the Poetic Edda is to an extraordinary degree a theory of memory; indeed, there is, in fact, barely a text in the whole body of Old Norse–Icelandic literature which does not in one way or another deal with memory’ (p. x), an argument rephrased throughout the collection.

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

The following four articles further explore these topics. In ‘Memory and Old Norse Mythology’ John Lindow argues that cultural memory is complexly maintained through four techniques: discussion, objects as sites of memory, places as sites of memory, and ritual (see especially Voluspá 60–63), and Margaret Clunies Ross’s ‘Authentication of Poetic Memory in Old Norse Skaldic Verse’ explores how memory is preserved in this skaldic poetry and how the skalds authenticated their poems, witnesses and sources. In one of the most original articles in the collection, Kate Heslop’s ‘Minni and the Rhetoric of Memory in Eddic, Skaldic, and Runic Texts’ offers an overview of the Old Norse words for memory and remembrance during the transitional period from oral and inscriptive culture to the literate one. Beginning her study with the ‘memory dependent’ skaldic poetry (p. 78), she defines kennings as mnemonic devices that, interestingly, rarely contain any references to memory—the word minni occurs in only one kenning in the whole corpus of skaldic poetry: minnis garðr (p. 80)—whereas in Eddic poetry memory and forgetfulness are very often mentioned and associated with the act of drinking. If cultural and communicative memory are preserved in skaldic and Eddic verse, rune stones represent durable places of memory, where the individual’s commemoration offers an implicit reference to memory (p. 95). Russell Poole concludes the first section with ‘Autobiographical Memory in Medieval Scandinavia and among the Kievan Rus’, providing a bridge between the two sections. Poole argues that even though this type of memory principally stems from an individual experience, it then develops and is maintained in social interactions.

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

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

Sarah Baccianti

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

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

Given this scope, each individual chapter really needs its own review, but only a few selective remarks can be made here; it is to be borne in mind, given the book’s breadth and disparity, that what appeals to one reviewer is likely to be quite different from what another may find of use. A general point, however; the cultural scope that the book aspires to is presumably the reason for a great deal of basic explanatory material being presented on most topics. This does, rather too often, make for a very plodding text for anyone familiar with the topic under discussion. More interesting would have been to see the implications of considering this Baltic-North Sea area as a cultural continuum drawn out more; some articles do this, but, to pick one example, Else Mundal’s discussion—well presented in itself—of possible, but tenuously evidenced, Old Norse laments, ‘Female Mourning Songs and Other Lost Oral Poetry in Pre-Christian Nordic Culture’, does not draw on the richly documented Finnish tradition of itkävirret. Despite any shortcomings, however, there are some interesting articles here, ranging from liturgical or para-liturgical texts in Finland and Norway, a comparison of Finnish and English thirteenth-century ballads on the evangelising bishop of Finland and Judas Iscariot, to a few selective remarks can be made here; it is to be borne in mind, given the book’s breadth and disparity, that what appeals to one reviewer is likely to be quite different from what another may find of use. A general point, however; the cultural scope that the book aspires to is presumably the reason for a great deal of basic explanatory material being presented on most topics. This does, rather too often, make for a very plodding text for anyone familiar with the topic under discussion. More interesting would have been to see the implications of considering this Baltic-North Sea area as a cultural continuum drawn out more; some articles do this, but, to pick one example, Else Mundal’s discussion—well presented in itself—of possible, but tenuously evidenced, Old Norse laments, ‘Female Mourning Songs and Other Lost Oral Poetry in Pre-Christian Nordic Culture’, does not draw on the richly documented Finnish tradition of itkävirret. Despite any shortcomings, however, there are some interesting articles here, ranging from liturgical or para-liturgical texts in Finland and Norway, a comparison of Finnish and English thirteenth-century ballads on the evangelising bishop of Finland and Judas Iscariot.
As justification for the focus on Árni’s collecting habits the author cites the crucial (and often overlooked) responsibility of students and scholars to understand the preservation history of the texts they study (p. 10). Details concerning seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Scandinavian and Continental antiquarianism provide a framework for Árni’s career. Several pages are devoted to a synopsis of the career of Thomas Bartholin the Younger (e.g. pp. 47–53), and Árni’s philological methods are frequently compared to those of contemporary European men of letters, such as Walney and Jean Mabillon. These aside are somewhat tangential to Árni’s story, but they form an illuminating backdrop of the academic environment in which he operated.

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

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

Parenthetical citations enable quick access to underlying primary sources (generally correspondence and notes Árni left on paper slips with his manuscripts; cf. pp. 14–16). Modern shelfmarks of the manuscripts mentioned in Árni’s letters are also given in parentheses, though their frequency occasionally results in cluttered pages (e.g. pp. 67, 144). This is a small price to pay for the convenience of having a single resource for attributions appearing in numerous secondary sources and unpublished notes. Scattered references to lost manuscripts (e.g. pp. 146, 205–09) will also be of interest to some readers. At times the author cites his own biography in Icelandic as a source. This is understandable for details outside of the scope of the current work, but in a few instances the original sources would have been preferable, such as on p. 173 concerning manuscripts belonging to Torfaeus which ended up in Árni’s hands after the former’s death.

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

The pithy quotations which begin each chapter and the fifteen figures which supplement the text are carried over from the author’s biography in Icelandic, where curious readers can locate many more of both. An extensive bibliography is included, along with two helpful indices of manuscripts and names, though a change in font between the manuscript shelfmarks and page citations would have been preferable, such as on p. 173 concerning manuscripts belonging to Torfaeus which ended up in Árni’s hands after the former’s death.

This new edition of the sixteen letters written by W. G. Collingwood to his family during his 1897 ‘pilgrimage to the saga-steads of Iceland’ serves several worthwhile purposes. With its additional introduction, documentary ‘interludes’ and appendices and its wide range of illustrations, the volume usefully augments Janet Gossipelius’s 1996 edition published in the journal of the R. G. Collingwood Society. It also complements Matthew Townend’s definitive study The Vikings and Victorian Lakeland: The Norse Medievalism of W. G. Collingwood and His Contemporaries (Cumberland and Westmoreland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society, Kendal, 2009). Moreover, in reproducing previously unpublished Collingwood drawings, watercolours and photographs, the edition supplements the richly illustrated volumes by Haraldur Hannesson (Fægur Íslands og fornir sögustabír, Bókútgáfán Órn og Örlygur, Reykjavík, 1988), and Einar Falur Ingólfsson (Sögustabír: Ífötspor W. G. Collingwoods, Crymogea, Reykjavík, 2010), with the latter’s photographic evidence revealing strikingly the artistic licence that the artist sometimes allowed himself in landscape representation. Lastly, the new volume represents an appropriate souvenir.
from the ‘Collingwood Icelandic Pilgrimage 2012’, organised by the Cumberland
and Westmoreland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society.

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

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

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

Away from concerns about artistic priorities and other daily practicalities—sea-
sickness, homesickness, injured horses, finance, the local food, primitive sleeping
arrangements and other ‘health and safety issues’—Collingwood’s letters remind
us of his delight with the idea of medieval Iceland, ‘home of the heroes’, and his
disillusion with modern realities. The solemn saga landscapes, notably those of
Laxdæla saga, inspire awe at every turn. The craving for even more direct contact
with the fabled past even prompted the artist to excavate (after a fashion) the alleged
grave of Guðrún ósvífrsdóttir at Helgafell, an initiative indicative of his growing
investment required). But there are darker undertones in the letters, with repeated
references to ‘bleakness and neglect’, to ‘dirt, disorder, unfinishedness’, to the
‘folly and filth of this land’, not to mention frustration at apparent local indif-
ference to antiquities, agrarian ‘improvement’ and (even) domestic plumbing,
the latter deemed to be ‘more degenerate’ than that of the Sturlung Age. As for the
late nineteenth-century Icelandic mindset, Collingwood inveighs against
‘muddleheadedness . . . entire absence of definite training to observe and deal
with facts: nobody seems to have any idea of the scientific fact, or the business
facts, or the political fact—or any other fact. It’s all what they fancy’ (final letter,
15 August 1897). Restored to hearth and home in the Lake District, distance lent
Collingwood no enchantment. His September/October 1897 letters (Lbs [Lands-
bókasafn–Haskólabókasafn Íslands] 2186 4to) to Eiríkur Magnússon in Cambridge
reflect even more sternly on the same Icelandic illusions and realities; those few
items might have made an illuminating additional appendix to the new edition.

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

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

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

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Indeed, he makes good use of the more exotic stories from the sagas: the detail, as when he describes the fair locks of Óláfr the White dripping with crimson. Bergsveinn is anxious to avoid what he calls ‘vikingfiksering’ (‘a fixation on Vikings’, p. 33): this is a story not about raiding, but about trade routes, resources, slaves and economic profit, in which Geirmundr proves an expert player. Bergsveinn traces Geirmundr’s origins to a vanished people of Mongolian extraction, who lived on the coast of the Barents sea. This was the end of a trade route, he suggests, which supplied the Vikings in Ireland with essential raw material from walrus, used to make oil and rope for shipping. After Haraldr the Fine-Haired, who lived on the coast of the Barents sea (p. 123). Nor is he unwilling to put his theories to the test: while researching Geirmundr’s love life at Kvenhóll, he tries out ‘den usommelige magnetismen’ (‘the indecent magnetism’) of the grassy slopes in nearby Snorrrskjóll, which are reliably said to induce erections (pp. 229–32).

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

SÍAN GROULIE

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

Accordingly, Neidorf has marshalled an impressive array of scholars who agree with him. This book results from a conference at Harvard in 2011 at which, so far as one can tell from the proceedings, everybody argued that Beowulf is an early poem—certainly pre-Alfredian, probably eighth-century, perhaps even earlier—and rejoiced in their consensus. One wonders whether this consensus truly...
represents the present communis opinio or if it is merely shared within a highly selective list of participants. No advocates of a later Beowulf contribute to these pages; nor do those who are sceptical about the possibility or even necessity of arriving at a secure dating for the poem. Such views are frequently derided here as indefensible: ‘when the evidence is examined,’ writes Neidorf, ‘one hypothesis will be found to possess more explanatory power than others; its superior claims to probability must be acknowledged’ (p. 56). The early dating agreed upon by the contributors to this volume is to be taken as such a hypothesis.

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

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

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

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

In a slightly disturbing piece of rhetoric, Allen Frantzen in his afterword to this volume illustrates what is at stake in this debate. Frantzen complains about the ‘ahistoricizing, formalist approaches’ of ‘much feminist, gender, and post-colonial criticism, which bulks large relative to its modest contributions to knowledge of the text, its language, or its contexts’ (p. 242). It is noteworthy, and should be viewed as extremely problematic, that Frantzen’s dismissal of post-structuralist schools of criticism, including feminist criticism, occurs at the end of a volume to which only one woman has contributed. To dismiss gender theory is to disregard the genderedness of the work we do and the institutional contexts in which we to it. To dismiss feminism and post-colonial studies wholesale is to implicate oneself
in the continued marginalisation of women and subaltern communities in the study of medieval literature. And if some of this sort of criticism is, as Frantzen claims, ‘hostile to the heroic ethos’ of Beowulf and ‘regards masculinity as toxic’—good. There is plenty in the poem to support the idea that Beowulf itself is ‘hostile to the heroic ethos’. Indeed, we might ask whether the whole concept of, the whole desire for, a monolithic heroic ethos is not the product of a certain masculinist tendency in some strains of Anglo-Saxon studies. In any case, there are no impermissible readings of Beowulf, and we should be very wary of claims that there are.

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

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

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

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

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

— This is clear from the following sentence: iðraðist Bolli þegar verksins ok lýsti vígi á hendi sér ([Laxdæla saga](https://saga.uio.no/1934_154) 1934, 154).

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

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