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THE PATH TO BLOOD: A CONSIDERATION OF TWO SYMBOLS  
IN *GÍSLA SAGA SÚRSSONAR*

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AMONG THE MORE MEMORABLE LAST STANDS to be found in the *Íslendingasögur* is certainly that of Gísli in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*. Outnumbered fifteen to one, surrounded atop a crag and disembowelled by a spear-thrust, he uses a rope to cinch his entrails back into his shirt. During the reprieve that follows, he composes his final verse, requesting that a ‘fair-faced Fulla of the rain of the spear-socket’s hall [i.e. ‘goddess of gold’]’ hear of his bravery (*Gísla saga*, 114). She is one of the two women he has seen in his dreams, supernatural figures who—appearing in turn amid tokens of carnage and sorrow—have prophesied this bloody end for the last seven years of Gísli’s life. It is upon commemorating their prediction that Gísli leaps from the bluff with his sword, splitting one last foe from crown to mid-section, and collapsing dead on top of him. ‘There ended the life of Gísli,’ the narrator reports, ‘a man said by all to have been most valiant, though he may not have been altogether lucky’ (*Lýkr þar nú ævi Gísla, ok er þat alsagt, at hann hefir inn mesti hreystimaðr verit, þó at hann væri eigi í þllum hlutum gæfumadr* (*Gísla saga*, 115)). There is *litotes* in this assessment, but it is subtle and pathetic, devoid of the gallows humour that so often governs the understatements of heroic dialogue. This is because, while spectacular, moving and certainly graphic, Gísli’s killing cannot at all be called unexpected. From the beginning, his dreams and premonitions—combined with narrative predictions and the generic expectations created by his outlawry—promise no happy ending. Like many saga heroes with comparable death scenes, he is a doomed man for much of his story, and his demise brings the audience of *Gísla saga* the satisfaction and clarification of a completed design.

As is frequently the case with the *Íslendingasögur*, the literary forces responsible for creating and maintaining this anticipation are many and ambiguous. Analyses have suggested that Gísli’s downfall is ensured and foretold in many ways, none of which seems to predominate. Focuses on the saga’s natural, supernatural and generic elements have offered varying conclusions, finding that social obligations, magic and tragic convention all seem to play a role in Gísli’s ruin (see respectively Andersson

1968, Ármann Jakobsson 2008, Hermann Pálsson 1973). Despite these treatments and the consensus among their authors that Gísli's downfall affords one of the richest veins for interpretation of the saga, the role of symbols has been explored only indirectly. Due attention has been given to the dream women and their correspondence to the saga's female personages (see Grønseth 1979 and Olsen 1996), as well as to Gísli's 'broken token', the two-part coin he splits with his sworn brother Vésteinn (see Clover 1977). Little, however, has been done to unify their symbolism in terms of a single agency, nor has anything been made of the salient details of Gísli's last trek to his hideout. When Eyjólfur Þórðarson and his retinue finally locate Gísli and kill him, they follow a trail composed of two things: the fallen shavings (*spænnir*) from Gísli's rune-carving, and a path in the dew (*doggslóð*) left by the trailing of his wife and foster-daughter's gowns. Each of these two components symbolises a crucial element of Gísli's downfall, not simply amounting to his discovery and death, but also revealing the pervasive and fatal involvement of their agents in Gísli's doomed life.

In presenting evidence, this paper speaks of appearances rather than certainties, asserting only as much proof as the topic can afford. Mentions of symbolism are not rare among commentaries on the Old Norse–Icelandic sagas, but less attention has been paid to the function of symbols within the specific literary tradition. In literature, 'symbol' has been described as applying 'to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in turn signifies something, or has a range of reference beyond itself' (Abrams 1993, *s.v.* 'symbol'). It is a description that can make anything a potential symbol—an object, an action, even a single word. This potentiality, combined with the naturalistic mode of saga narrative, stands to put symbolism among the most capricious of literary analyses. The rigidly exteriorised narrative style of the Family Sagas means that physical objects and actions often suggest what the dialogue may not; objectivity, in this sense, tends to emphasise objects. Where thoughts, forces and other metaphysical affairs go unstated, the things done, built or otherwise manipulated by characters provide interpretive material for those characters' wills, conflicts and fates. George Johnston has spoken of symbolic items in the sagas as being 'charged', like batteries emanating causal energy. Referring to Sigmundur Brestisson's ring in *Færeyinga saga* specifically, however, he admits that even the most powerful of these symbols preserves its ambiguity (Johnston 2002, 10). This fugitive arrangement might be considered the essence of saga symbolism, where singular items and actions suggest pivotal agency, but where the narrative flow has, as Heather O'Donoghue

puts it, ‘the effect of reinforcing the fundamental causality of any course of events’ (O’Donoghue 2004, 44). It is yet another example of the striking modernity of medieval Norse storytelling, where, ever felt but never confirmed, humanistic meanings are given to haunt an otherwise cold and impersonal edifice. For this reason, the validity or usefulness of any symbolical interpretation of an *Íslendingasaga* must ultimately be left to the taste of its assessor, and must therefore be more dependent than usual upon the argument that extends it.

The following analysis is divided into three sections. The first considers the circumstances surrounding Gísli’s killing and emphasises the two-part trail by which his enemies finally track him down. The second and third sections treat these two parts independently, arguing that each possesses a distinct symbolism in terms of Gísli’s fate.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Death of Gísli*

The time between the laying of the trail and its discovery by Eyjólfur is brief, as is described in this excerpt (*Gísli saga*, 109–11):

Nú er Gísli heima þat sumar, ok er nú kyrrt. Síðan kemr sumarnótt síðasta. Þá er þess getit, at Gísli mátti ekki sofa ok ekki þeira þriggja. Veðri var þann veg farit, at var á logn mikit; hélufall var ok mikit. Þá kvezk Gísli vilja fara frá húsum ok til fylgnsis síns suðr undir kleifarnar ok vita, ef hann mætti sofna. Nú fara þau öll, ok eru þær í kyrtlum, ok draga kyrtlarnir döggslóðina. Gísli hafði kefli ok reist á rúnar, ok falla niðr spænirnir. Þau koma til fylgnsisins. Hann leggsk niðr ok vill vita, ef hann gæti sofit, en þær vaka. Rennr á hann svefnhöfgi, ok dreymir hann, at fuglar kæmi í húsit, er læmingar heita, þeir eru meiri en rjúpkerar ok létu illiliga ok höfðu válkazk í röðru ok blóði. Þá spurði Auðr, hvat hann hafði dreymt. ‘Nú váru enn eigi svefnfarar góðar.’ Gísli kvað vísu . . .

Ok er þetta er tíðenda, heyra þau mannamál, ok er Eyjólfur þar kominn við inn fimmtánda mann, ok hafa áðr komit til húss ok sjá döggslóðina sem vísat væri til.

Gísli is at home that summer then, and it is quiet. Then comes the last night of summer. It is then told that Gísli could not sleep, and neither could the other

<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own. In an attempt to facilitate understanding of Gísli’s skaldic poetry, I have italicised kennings and most *heiti* (as well as one figurative expression) where they appear, and identified their corresponding referents in a column to the right of the verse. In translating kennings, I have adhered to the practice of the *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* project, which is to identify the *final* referent first, and work backwards (e.g. *Gefn of the serpent-field* is glossed as GOLD > WOMAN = Auðr).

two [Auðr and Guðríðr]. The weather had gone dead calm; there was a hard frost, and a great one. Gísli then says he wants to head out from the farm, south to his hideout under the cliffs, to see if he can get some sleep. And so they all head out, the women in their gowns, and the gowns drag a path in the dew. Gísli had a piece of wood and carved runes into it, and down the shavings fall. They arrive at the hideout. He lays himself down to see if he might fall asleep, but the women stay awake. Drowsiness overcomes him, and he dreams that birds enter the house—loons, they are called; they are larger than male ptarmigans. They made a dreadful noise, and had wallowed in ruddiness and gore. Auðr then asked what he had dreamt. ‘Now as before, my dreams were not good.’ Gísli spoke a verse . . .

And when that happens, they hear people’s voices. Eyjólfur has come there among fifteen men, and had already been to the house and saw the trail in the dew, as though it pointed the way.

The subjunctive mood of the final clause—*sem vísat væri til*—is striking, and the failure of Gísli to cover or even to observe the trail seems highly uncharacteristic of the saga’s resourceful protagonist.

Both the rune-shavings and the path in the dew can be read as symbols, each implicating a different party in Gísli’s inescapable fate. That Gísli is doomed seems clear, and has been thoroughly investigated by previous analyses; the serviceability of these two symbols is not simply that they reveal another (partial) cause of Gísli’s ruin, but rather that they divulge that downward force openly, like flags indicating a breeze. The *spænnir*, as a result of Gísli’s industriousness, may be analysed in a more literal—that is, non-figurative—fashion than the *doggslóð*; their manufacture, as well as the circumstances surrounding it, appear to implicate Gísli’s own productivity in his downfall. Ever busy on some project or other, he is, in effect, labouring on his own casket. The *doggslóð* is more complicated; the involvement of dew in the disclosure of Gísli to his enemies is magnified both by the restricted use of the word *dogg* in *Gísli saga*, as well as by its applications in the kennings of Gísli’s poetry. The *doggslóð* left by Auðr and Guðríðr is as responsible for revealing his whereabouts as the shavings he leaves himself, and the recurrence of *dogg* throughout the narrative is always connected in one way or another to the hero’s devoted wife.

### *The Rune-shavings: Gísli’s Compulsive Productivity*

It is not revealed what runes Gísli carves as he heads to his hideout for the last time, and it probably does not matter. Clearly, the more important message is spelt on the ground by their by-products. The significance of the *spænnir* to Gísli’s fate is nevertheless controversial, in particular because Gísli leaves the trail himself, unlike the *doggslóð*. By the time he does so,



he is exhausted from flight and haunted by prophetic dreams; he believes his end is near, as he tells his enemies shortly after.<sup>2</sup> Gísli's oft-repeated faith in Fate is by no means unique among the pagan-age characters of the Christian-age Family Sagas, but the weariness with which he enters his final years suggests a kind of surrender uncommon to his ilk. Peter Foote puts it best when, observing the hero's final day, he remarks that

Gísli's courage does not fail him, but there is something self-resigning and passive in the way he faces the hopelessness, very different from the defiant courage of the doomed heroes we meet in Germanic lay and epic and in the other sagas of Icelanders (1963, 112).

Self-resigning, but perhaps not so passive—Gísli's truly heroic last stand shows that he is not actively suicidal, but one has to wonder how much his belief in Fate contributed to his apparent carelessness when he left the rune-shavings behind him. He may have known that he could postpone but not avoid being killed, and simply saw an opportunity to receive his end as bravely as possible—'downward to darkness on extended wings', indeed.<sup>3</sup> Deliberate, subconscious or accidental, the *spænicir* in Gísli's trail remain an apt symbol of his fate. The products of his own hand and the debris of an unknown inscription, they represent both art and praxis, material and intellectual, evidence of a text and a text themselves. They are, in other words, altogether suitable for a man who was both a builder and a poet—a craftsman in every respect. Even as they stand as testament to Gísli's handiness and creativity, however, they represent the very means by which he is tracked down and killed by his enemies. This fatal correspondence, as symbolised by the *spænicir*, is the focus of this section.

It is easy to admire Gísli's gumption. His initiative, skilfulness and accomplishments are demonstrated consistently throughout the saga, and his activity, alongside Þorkell's indolence, portrays him as a true *gǫrvismaðr*—a man of action or a doer, even—from the beginning. At the same time, this ostensible virtue is quick to cause problems. Of the farm, Sæból, that the Súrssynir brothers share for a time, it is written that *Þorkell var óflati mikill ok vann ekki fyrir búi þeira, en Gísli vann nótt með degi* 'Þorkell was a big show-off and did no work on their farm, but

<sup>2</sup> *Munu þér nú hafa þau málalok, sem þér vilduð* 'you will have the conclusion you wanted' (*Gísli saga*, 114). The significance of this passage for Auðr and Gísli's respective views on Fate is also considered below.

<sup>3</sup> The quotation from Wallace Stevens's poem 'Sunday Morning' pertains to epic, particularly pagan heroism; it is cited with reference to Beowulf in Irving 1997, 187.

Gísli worked night and day' (*Gísla saga*, 29–30). So shameful is this distinction between the siblings that Þorkell cites it as a reason—clearly a pretext—for ultimately wanting to divide their property (*Gísla saga*, 34–35). Though Gísli is also a poet and inventor, it is his manual labour that predominates; throughout the saga, he constructs and repairs numerous things that aid or repay his family and supporters. His inventiveness is best attested in an expanded episode in the probably younger Y-text, where the family of Þorbjörn súrr escapes through a false wall which Gísli has built ahead of time (*Gísla saga*, 29, 31). The possible addition of this episode to an earlier text confirms the canonicity of Gísli's productiveness to *Gísla saga's* historical audiences and redactors, as well as the understanding of his abilities as something beneficial.<sup>4</sup> It is true that many of Gísli's accomplishments—including his construction and management of four farmsteads—cannot be denigrated in themselves, but a broader consideration of some of his enterprises reveals some uniform results. Besides affording Þorkell material for his grievance, Gísli's productive nature proves destructive in at least three ways, all of which are consolidated in the rune-shavings that reveal him to his enemies.

The first is that the results of Gísli's initiatives—the products of his products, so to speak—are nowhere very positive, and are often immediately injurious. Though not a material object, the sworn brotherhood between Gísli, Þorkell, Þorgrímr and Vésteinn is a clear example; the bond is Gísli's idea, brought about in order to forestall the prophecy of Gestr Oddleifsson that *Eigi munu þeir allir samþykkir it þriðja sumar, er þar eru nú í þeim flokki* 'Not all of those [Haukadalers] who are now in that group will be at peace with each other the third summer from now' (*Gísla saga*, 21). The paradoxical element of the sworn brotherhood lies in the fact that the grief foretold by the prophesy is, in true folk-tale fashion, brought about by the knowledge of and attempt to subvert it. This devious causality is further corroborated by Gísli's coin (*penningr*), which resembles the notorious weapon Grásíða in several ways. A comparison of the forging scenes that yield the two objects suggests that their roles and the motivation for their fabrication are equally destructive (see *Gísla saga*, 28, 37–38). In terms of their fabrication, the *penningr* and the *spjótr*

<sup>4</sup> The debate about which text is more original has not been settled. Björn Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson clearly believe that the Y-text is younger (*Gísla saga*, xliv–xlv). Riti Kroesen also remarks that 'the prevailing opinion among scholars is that the shorter version [the E-text in *Íslensk fornrit* VI] is the more original one, and that the longer version [the Y-text] is an elaboration of the shorter one' (1993, 227–28).

seem to reflect the light and dark sides of the same agency; the coin is transformed by the saga's hero from one piece to two, while the spear is transformed by the saga's villains from many pieces to one. The very roles of the two objects are co-dependent, however, and in strikingly the same way as is the sworn brotherhood with the prophecy it ends up ensuring. Gísli's coin, shared between its maker and his sworn brother Vésteinn, is made in anticipation of the peril that Grásíða fulfils rather than as insurance against it. As Gísli says, '*En mér segir svá hugr um, at vit munim þurfa at sendask á milli, þó at vit hittimsk eigi sjálfir*' 'Something tells me that we may need to send them to each other, even though the two of us may not meet' (*Gísli saga*, 28–29). The idea that the coin is introduced into an irresistible course of events is reinforced by Vésteinn's words upon receiving Gísli's half in Iceland and refusing to turn back: '*nú falla vötn öll til Dýrafjarðar, ok mun ek þangat ríða, enda em ek þess fúss*' 'now all rivers flow towards Dýrafjörður, and I will ride there; what's more, I am eager for this' (*Gísli saga*, 40). Here, as in many other places, Gísli's projects serve as the pylons of his oncoming fate.

Gísli seems compelled to seek out projects and exhibit his abilities, often despite perils in doing so. Though it is the carving of runes that gives Gísli away in the end, the episode in Chapter XXXIV is not the first where his message-carving proves hapless. Neither is it the first time that his verbal compositions demonstrate his improvidence and get him into trouble. The prime example is the verse he composes while repairing Þorsteinn Þorkelsson's bat during one of the ball games after Þorgrímr's murder. The poem effectively admits his responsibility for Þorgrímr's death, and is so ill-timed that the narrator himself cannot but remark on it: *Gísli sezk niðr ok gerir at trénu, horfir á hauginn Þorgríms; snær var á jörðu, en konur sátu upp í brekkuna, Þórdís systir hans ok margar aðrar. Gísli kvað þá vísu, er æva skyldi* 'Gísli sets himself down and works on the bat, and he turns to Þorgrímr's mound; snow was on the earth, and women—including Þórdís his sister, and many others—sat up on the slope. Gísli then spoke a verse he never should have' (*Gísli saga*, 58). Þórdís hears the verse and works out its meaning; aside from adding more solvent to the Súrr family's disintegration, her disclosure of this leads directly to Gísli's outlawry and Þorkr's untiring pursuit of his death. That Gísli is working with his hands when he takes to composing this verse seems to indict his skill doubly. Another example occurs in the final meeting between Gísli and Þorkell, the second such meeting where Gísli requests help from his brother. Þorkell does not answer his brother's knocking, and Gísli is forced to toss a piece of writing in through the window in order to goad his brother into seeing

him (*Gísla saga*, 77–78). As with the runes Gísli makes on his final trek to his hideout, the audience is never told what exactly is carved, though the fact that Þorkell is motivated to answer the door upon reading them may give an idea. Whether the writing composes a threat, supplication, or neutral request, however, its creation is an expedient based on negative circumstances, and is met with a negative response. Gísli, having been outlawed and cursed, is forced to seek the help of a brother who refuses it. Nothing can be done to aid him in the country, as Þórgrímur Nose's magic has ensured.<sup>5</sup> Introduced into this downfall like so much attendant debris, Gísli's products can only work to illustrate it further.

Even after Gísli is outlawed and his survival becomes dependent on the secrecy of his whereabouts, he effectively reveals his presence to others by displaying his abilities. The first example comes after Gísli has exploited Þórðr the Gutless in order to escape from Þorkr's initial foray against him, and must relocate to Húsanes. Immediately upon coming ashore there, he finds an opportunity to demonstrate his confused priorities (*Gísla saga*, 66):

Gísli gengr þar upp til bæjarins ok hittir þar mann, ok spyr sá, hvern hann væri, en Gísli sagði til slíkt, er honum sýndisk, en ekki þat, sem var. Gísli tekr upp stein einn ok kastar út í hólmi þann, er þar var fyrir landi, ok bað þar bóndason eptir gera, þá er hann kæmi heim, ok kvað hann þá víta mundu, hvern maðrinn þar hefði komit. En þat var einskis manns at inna, ok kom þar þá enn þat fram, at Gísli var betr at íþróttum búinn en flestir menn aðrir.

Gísli goes up to the farm and meets there a man who asks him who he was, and Gísli replied as seemed best to him, not as it truly was. Gísli then picks up a certain stone and throws it out to the islet that was offshore, invited the farmer's son to duplicate the feat when he came home, and said he would then know who had arrived there. But it was in no man's power to do it, and there it was demonstrated yet again that Gísli was more equipped with skills than most other men.

There is no report that Gísli's feat in Húsanes leads to his enemies' discovery of his whereabouts, but the gratuitous nature of the exhibition itself sets a dangerous standard. Gísli is not foolish enough to reveal his name, and yet he cannot resist showing off, baiting Fate in a way that can only end tragically.

The consummate example occurs about seven years later, when Gísli is hunted by Þorkr, cursed by Þórgrímur Nose and haunted by prophetic dreams. He rigs a boat in order to make it appear as though he had drowned at sea, and hides out at the stead of his kinsman Ingjaldr on Hergilsey. The

<sup>5</sup> *Gísla saga*, 56. See Ármann Jakobsson (2008) for a thorough recent analysis of Þórgrímur Nose's magic in *Gísla saga*.

islander Ingjaldr, unlike everyone else Gísli seeks support from, is able to help the outlaw for an extended period of time because, as the narrator reports, *þá er Þorgrímr nef gerði seiðinn . . . hann mælti svá fyrir, at Gísla skyldi ekki at gagni verða, þó at menn byrgi honum hér á landi; en þat kom honum eigi í hug at silja til um úteyjar* ‘when Þorgrímr Nose performed his sorcery, he declared that even though people here in the country might help Gísli, it should not avail him; but it did not occur to him to stipulate about the outlying islands’ (*Gísla saga*, 84). This announcement comes after Gísli has been flushed from the hideaway, and is followed by a remark about the inexorable fate that Ingjaldr’s help could only postpone. Even here, beyond the reach of Þorgrímr’s magic, it is Gísli’s productivity that ensures his doom (*Gísla saga*, 79):

Gísli er þar þann vetr ok smíðar skip Ingjaldr ok marga hluti aðra. En allt þat, sem hann smíðaði, þá var þat auðkennt, því at hann var hagari en flestir menn aðrir. Menn undruðusk, hví þat var svá vel smíðat margt, sem Ingjaldr átti, því at hann var ekki hagr. Gísli er avallt á sumrum í Geirþjófsfirði; ferr nú svá fram þrjá vetr, frá því er hann hafði dreymt, ok verðr honum þetta at mestu trausti, er Ingjaldr veitir honum. Pykkir monnum nú grunsamligt um þetta allt jafnsaman ok hyggja nú, at Gísli muni lifa ok hafa verit með Ingjaldr, en eigi druknaðr, sem sagt hafði verit. Leggja menn nú ræðu á. Ingjaldr á nú þrjú skip ok ǫll vel gǫr. Kemr þessi kvittr fyrir Eyjólf inn grá, ok hlýtr Helgi enn at fara, ok kemr hann í Hergilsey.

Gísli is there that winter and builds a ship for Ingjaldr, as well as many other things. Everything he built was easily recognised, for he was handier than most other men. People wondered why much of what Ingjaldr owned was so well built, for he was not handy. Gísli was always in Geirþjófsfjörðr during the summers, and in this way three years proceed from when he had dreamed, and this aid Ingjaldr gives him becomes the greatest comfort for him. People now find all these things suspicious and now suspect that Gísli must be alive and have been living with Ingjaldr, and not drowned, as had been said. People now begin to talk about it. Ingjaldr now has three ships, all well made. This rumour reaches Eyjólf the Grey, and Helgi has to travel again, and he arrives at Hergilsey.

No commercial need for Gísli’s handiwork is reported; it is simply said that he does it. Were it not for the tokens that he himself builds, his presence on Hergilsey might not have been noted. The narrator makes it explicit that Gísli is fated to be without help in the end, and when one compares the ultimate means by which that fate is realised—as embodied by the trail of rune-shavings—and compares it with the means by which his enemies track him to Hergilsey, one is able to mark the character’s compulsive need to compose, build or otherwise physically manipulate something.

To consider why exactly Gísli behaves in this way is tempting, but it is a question for which there can be only one answer. A tragic figure, he does what he does because he is fated to do it. The products of his deeds are the vehicles of Fate, however subtle and multifarious that force might be. Ascribing character traits to (medicable) psychological disorders has become a modern fixation in both medicine and literary studies; today, we might diagnose Gísli as workaholic or even obsessive-compulsive. His identity as an enterprising, skilled and hard-working man indeed seems attributable to internal rather than external incentives; no explicit obligation compels Gísli to build Ingjaldr boats and other things, and it is another endorsement of the self-motivated and self-rewarding nature of Gísli's workmanship that he does not fault Porkell for his indolence on the farm (*Gísla saga*, 35). When considered in the light of Gísli's final rune-carving, however, this behaviour assumes a more neurotic aspect; much like the cigarette smokers that chew their nails, Gísli's whittling away of the *kefli* may seem the compensatory tic of an addict isolated or forbidden his fix. After all, when he carves runes on his last trip to his hideout, it is the first act of physical production he has engaged in since Hergilsey. While no doubt worsened by bad dreams and lack of sleep, Gísli's exhaustion might very well be due to his inability as a cornered outlaw to feed his habit. For a fugitive so careful as to build hideouts in various places, use false names, move frequently, cover his tracks, and even fake his own death, Gísli's activities in Húsanes and on Hergilsey, as well as in front of Þorgrímr's gravemound, attest to a fateful compulsion with doing and making things openly. The *spæni*r that lead to Gísli's death—or, rather, lead his death to him—impute his tragic fate to the very industriousness and accomplishment that distinguish him from the common man.

#### *The Path in the Dew: Gísli and Auðr*

This leaves the second component of the trail that allows Gísli's enemies to find him: the *døggslóð* left behind by Auðr and Guðríðr. Though the gowns (*kyrtlar*) of the two women are physically responsible for disturbing the frozen dew in their path, the restricted usage of the word *døgg* in *Gísla saga* appears as a motif long before Gísli is finally hunted down. The word *døgg*, both alone and in compounds, is not uncommon in skaldic poetry as one of many words signifying 'liquid', often in kennings for blood (for examples, see Finnur Jónsson 1931, 95), but its two appearances in the verses of *Gísla saga* are given special emphasis by its two appearances in prose. Each time *døgg* appears, it

is at a crucial moment in the plot, and is always associable with the fatal consequences of Gísli's killing of Þórgrímr. More important, however, is its constant pertinence to Auðr. Initially, the word appears in a kenning for her tears in a verse Gísli is said to compose about her response to the killing of her brother Vésteinn. The second and fourth appearances of *dogg* are the prose mentions of the *doggslóð* itself, when it is laid and then when it is spotted by Eyjólfur (*Gísli saga*, 109, 111). Guðrífur shares Auðr's responsibility for leaving the trail, but Auðr is responsible for her presence. The third example of *dogg*—occurring between the prose examples—occurs in a kenning in a poem that Gísli is said to compose for Auðr, describing his prophetic dreams for the last time. Here, *dogg* is used in a reference to Gísli's imminent and bloody death, the ultimate consequence for his avenging Vésteinn. Altogether, this symbolic consistency appears to implicate Auðr in Gísli's fate, especially as the kennings involving *dogg* bound the course of his outlawry.

Auðr and Þórdís Súrsdóttir are usually perceived as contrasting figures (see, for example, Grønstøl 1979, 192–94). Both are bereft by the killings in Haukadalr, however—Auðr by Vésteinn's and Þórdís by Þórgrímr's—and each plays a role in prompting retaliation. The difference in the way each does so corresponds well to the difference in the women's characters, and Auðr's response carries a symbolic token that recurs shortly before Gísli's death. Þórdís is an active vengeance-seeker, as is illustrated not only by her part in Gísli's outlawry, but also by her attempt to kill Eyjólfur once Gísli is dead (*Gísli saga*, 116). The ever-constant Auðr is easily the more sympathetic of the two, though the different relationship each has with Gísli makes comparisons of their loyalty to him disproportionate. Auðr nevertheless has her own part to play in condemning Gísli to death, and it may consist in so simple a matter as being a wife whom he loves above all else.

When he contemplates Vésteinn's killing openly with Þorkell, Gísli is clearly preoccupied with Auðr's grief. Initially, it is Þorkell who seems engrossed—twice asking Gísli how she is taking the death—but after revealing his dreams about a snake and then a wolf issuing forth from a certain farm to kill Vésteinn, Gísli turns firmly to the subject of Auðr. To answer Þorkell's question about her sadness he composes two full stanzas, something he does only for the most momentous and prophetic events of his life. More important is the language and imagery Gísli employs, establishing the motif of tears, and employing the word *dogg* for the first time (*Gísli saga*, 47–48):

Hylr á laun und líni  
 linnvengis skap kvinna,  
 gríðar leggs ór góðum,  
 Gefn, ǫlkera svefni;  
 eik berr angri lauka,  
 eirreks, bráa geira,  
 bróður, dǫgg á bæði  
 blíð ǫndugi síðan.

Ok enn kvað hann:

Hrynja lætr af hvítum  
 hvarmskógi Gnó bógar  
 hrönn fylvingum hyljar  
 hlátrbann í kné svanna;  
 hnetr less, en þreyr þessum,  
 Þǫgn, at mærdar Rǫgni,  
 snáka túns af sínu  
 sjónhesli bǫlgrónu.

*Gefn of the serpent-field* hides a woman's disposition in secret under linen; (tears) flow (?) from the good *ale-casks of sleep*;<sup>6</sup> then *the oak of leeks* conveys the dew of the peace-banisher in grief for her brother, onto both gentle high seats of the spears of the brows.

[GOLD > WOMAN = Auðr]  
 [EYES]  
 [WOMAN = Auðr]  
 [SORROW > TEARS]  
 [EYELASHES > CHEEKS]

And again he spoke:

*The ban of laughter* causes *Gná of the arm* to let flow a wave with nuts of water from the fair, white eyelid-forest onto the knee of the woman. *Þǫgn of the snakes' field* picks nuts from her bale-swollen *hazel-wood of sight*, and yearns for *this Óðinn of praise*.

[SORROW] [WOMAN = Auðr]  
 [TEARS]  
 [EYELASHES]  
 [GOLD > WOMAN = Auðr]  
 [TEARS]  
 [EYELASHES]  
 [POET = Gísli]

Several times Gísli refers to Auðr's tears (*gríðar leggs*, *eirreks dǫgg*, *fylvingum hyljar*, *hnetr af bǫlgrónu sjónhelsi*). As skaldic constructs, they each offer their own challenges and possibilities, particularly *gríðar*

<sup>6</sup> The text of this half of the stanza is problematic. The translation depends on the emendation, proposed by Kock (1923–44), of *leggs* to *leggsk*, which the editors of *Gísli saga* object to on the grounds that this form cannot be used with an understood subject as Kock's interpretation requires.



*leggs* (see *Gísla saga*, 47–48 n., as well as Kock 1923–44, §1938); particularly notable is the kenning for tears in the first stanza, which is the first appearance of the word *dogg* in the saga. The kenning may be assembled in at least two ways, but refers to tears in either case. My choice of *eirreks dogg* ‘dew of the peace-banisher’, i.e. ‘sorrow’ (lit. ‘that which drives away peace’) follows the interpretation of Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson. Both Finnur Jónsson (1931, s.v. *dogg*) and Ernst A. Kock (1923–44, §348) read the stanza as affording *dogg bráa* ‘dew of the brows’, and arrange *eirreks* each according to his own interpretation.<sup>7</sup> Kock emends (*eir-)**reks* to *rekr*, which affords the third-person active indicative of both *reka* ‘to drive’ and *rekja* ‘to spread out’; opting for *rekja*, he then interprets the lines as providing an even more precise description of weeping, with Auðr’s eyelashes spreading tears out onto her cheeks. This emphasis on physical detail seems less suited to the first stanza, however, which is more dedicated to emotion than imagery. Though perhaps more innovative, Björn and Guðni’s *eirreks dogg* seems more applicable to the stanza’s own theme, as well as to the context in which it is composed. *Eirreks* may be interpreted in the psychological sense of driving away inner peace (hence ‘sorrow’), as well as applying to the social context of Vésteinn’s murder. The peace being driven away by Auðr’s tears is not just her own, nor Gísli’s, but that of the residents of Haukadalr in general, whose households now stand gripped by feud. Furthermore, the description of Auðr’s tears as ‘dew of the peace-banisher’ carries the implication that the peace-banisher is Auðr herself. As with the *spæmir*, this symbolism need not be seen as causal, but rather as emblematic of Fate; the killing has already begun, and passions will be found to continue it. The echoes of this initial association with Auðr’s grief may nevertheless be heard when *dogg* recurs in the saga, and recall the circumstances under which Gísli acted when he killed the man he thought culpable for Vésteinn’s death.

In their own ways, Auðr and Þórdís are both responsible for compelling men to vengeance, and while the women’s relationships with the victims and killers differ, for Gísli their influences are tributaries of the same fate. Unlike Þórdís, Auðr does not ask nor need to ask her husband to avenge her loss; both know the obligation is his. Anne Holtmark traces the point nicely (1951, 50):

After the burial he [Porkell] asks twice about Auðr, how much she is affected by the death of her brother. Is she crying much? It might look like sympathy.

<sup>7</sup> Finnur Jónsson emends *eirek(k)s* to *eir reksk* (1931, s.v. *eir*); Kock reads *Eir reks* and emends to *eir rekr*.

But it is fear, really. In the sagas, it is often the women who raise the question of revenge. . . . Gísli answers with the two famous verses in which he refers to his wife's tears as nuts that she is picking from the fair hazel-woods of her eyes. It is pretty, but not without its sharp point: hard tears clamour for revenge.

Holtmark's wording is conveniently poetic; hard tears clamour for revenge, and hard dew is precisely what discloses Gísli to his enemies. Gísli makes it clear in the second stanza that he sees himself as the consolator of Auðr's sorrow, and though her yearning (*þreyr*) for his comfort has tender-hearted connotations, the narrative suggests that her own thoughts are of revenge when, the moment she discovers Vésteinn's body, she orders Þórðr the Gutless to remove the spear and thereby take on the duty of retaliation (*Gísla saga*, 33). Through this foresight she is directly comparable to Þórdís, who does not even pause to bewail Þorgrímr's killing before calling for the blood of the killer (*Gísla saga*, 54), and though it is certainly possible that she tells Þórðr to remove the weapon in order to prevent Gísli from getting to it first, Gísli is nevertheless there to hear the immediate demand. His verses suggest that, in his mind, Auðr's devastation over her brother's killing outweighs everything else.

Vésteinn is Gísli's sworn brother as well, which carries its own demand for vengeance (*Gísla saga*, 22). Never after the failed attempt to create sworn brotherhood among Vésteinn, Þorkell, Þorgrímr and himself does Gísli mention this mutual obligation, however, nor does he honour it again after Vésteinn has been avenged. Much has been made of the role of Gísli's sworn brotherhood in his downfall; Theodore Andersson assigns it absolute culpability (1968, 40–41) while Hermann Pálsson is only a little less categorical (1973, 12). At least two considerations challenge their position, and suggest that Auðr provides a crucial incentive to Gísli's retaliation for Vésteinn's death. The first, aforementioned, is that the brotherhood was attempted *in reaction to* a doom, and thus cannot be blamed unequivocally for bringing it about. The second is that Auðr later dissuades Gísli from killing Vésteinn's sons when the young men have killed Þorkell and are seeking food and shelter in Geirþjófsfjörðr. Her revelation to Gísli that Þorkell's killers are in the area is preceded by the only openly manipulative words she speaks: '*Nú skiptir mik miklu, hversu þú vill til snúa at gera minn sóma meira en ek em verð*' 'Now it concerns me greatly how you will react to this and [whether you will] do me more honour than I am worth' (*Gísla saga*, 93). Þorkell is Gísli's sworn brother but also his true brother; the fact that Gísli leaves his killing unavenged attests to a less-than-iron

commitment to any sense of brotherhood. Gísli may speak of the importance of filial devotion, but, ultimately, Auðr's feelings seem more important to him than anything else.<sup>8</sup> Vésteinn Ólason supports this idea when he writes that, by chasing down and killing Vésteinn's sons, Gísli 'would have severed his last links with humanity by irreparably damaging his relationship with his wife' (1999, 172). In the end, Auðr and their fosterling are all that remain to him, but this companionship, represented by the *dogglóð*, proves as fatal as his own creative ventures.

It is notable that the two appearances of *dogg* in prose—both occurring in the word *dogglóð*—enclose its final appearance in verse. Also remarkable is the function of this final appearance, within a kenning that signifies Gísli's bloody death. Gísli is said to compose the stanza between the laying of the trail to his hideout and its discovery by Eyjólfur, and describes in it the matter of his last dream (*Gísla saga*, 110):

Mér bar hljóm í heimi,  
 hǫr-Bil, þás vit skilðumk,  
 skekkik dverga drykkju,  
 dreyra sals fyr eyru.  
 Ok hjǫrraddar hlýddi  
 heggr rjúpkera tveggja,  
 koma mun dals á drengi  
 dogg, læmingja hǫggvi.

A sound came to my ears in  
*the realm of the hall of blood* [HEART > MIND/DREAMSCAPE]  
 when we parted, *flax-Bil*; [WOMAN = Auðr]  
 I pour the drink of dwarves. [MAKE POETRY]  
 And the tree of the sword-din [WARRIOR = Gísli]  
 listened to the fight of the loons,  
 (of the two cock-ptarmigans); the dew  
 of the bow\* will come upon the warrior. [\*see below] [Gísli]

Though the essence remains homicidal, *dogg dals* 'dew of the bow' affords two primary meanings, one suggested by the poetic conventions of each of its component words. The usual signification of kennings with words for 'bow' in the determinant is 'arrows' (which can then be a synecdoche for 'battle') but the most frequent (and logical) base words are *regn* 'rain',

<sup>8</sup> In the end, and despite Gísli's feelings that she has betrayed him, Þórdís alone among the members of the Súrr family attempts to avenge a sibling's killing (*Gísla saga*, 116).

and *hagl* ‘hail’.<sup>9</sup> The glosses for *ðogg dals*, as contained in Kock (1923–44, §2436) and Finnur Jónsson (1931, *s.v. dalr*), partake of this convention, offering *pilregn* ‘arrow-rain’ and *pile el. kamp* ‘arrows or battle’, respectively. What gives *ðogg dals* a unique character is the fact that dew is not precipitation like rain and hail, but wells or accumulates on the spot. Perhaps because of this, *ðogg*, despite its serene and passive overtones, is more frequent as a skaldic figure for ‘blood’, specifically blood shed in battle; its attestations are numerous, appearing in both skaldic and eddic verse, particularly alongside words for wounds.<sup>10</sup> The interpretation of *ðogg dals* as ‘blood’ is also attractive because it confines all meanings of *ðogg* in *Gísla saga* to some fluid or other. Because arrows draw blood, there is no real conflict between the two possibilities, but together they suggest that the connotations of *ðogg dals* ‘dew of the bow’ are layered, and perhaps intended to signify both passive and active aspects. Gísli’s use of *ðogg dals* therefore serves to emblematised the bloody ends of his fate, just as *eirreks ðogg* ‘dew of the peace-banisher’ helped drive him toward it. Together, the two uses of *ðogg* in verse establish a teleology which the two appearances in prose seem to illuminate. The dew that yields the path responsible for revealing Gísli to Eyjólfur and his men symbolises both the tears that compelled Gísli’s tragic course of action and the killing that begins his outlawry and ends his life.

Despite the many factors involved in Gísli’s outlawry and death, all occurrences of the word *ðogg* share a reference to Auðr. This alone seems significant. Her connection to Gísli’s fate is further corroborated, however, by the image of her as a weeping woman. Gísli first describes his wife’s tears in the verses composed after Vésteinn’s burial, but as the saga progresses, Auðr’s tears recur in different forms, and suggest different motivations. When next the saga mentions weeping, it does so twice in the same episode: once with reference to Guðríðr, and once again referring to Auðr as portrayed in one of Gísli’s verses. This time, however, Auðr’s tears do not concern vengeance, but rather suggest an inner sadness on her husband’s behalf. The famous episode in which the verses appear occurs

<sup>9</sup> See ‘Kennings for Arrows’ at *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* (<http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/db.php?table=kenning&val=ARROWS>), as well as ‘Arrow-kennings of Skaldic Poetry’ at *Lexicon of Kennings* (<http://notendur.hi.is/eybjorn/ugm/kennings/nu.html>).

<sup>10</sup> See Finnur Jónsson 1931, *s.v. ðogg*, which cites the examples *ðogg hræva*, *ðogg benja*, *ðogg sára* and *dauðs manns ðogg*, as well as the compounds *fleindogg*, *hjórdogg*, *harmdogg*, *valdogg* and *vápnðogg*.

towards the end of Gísli's life, when Eyjólfur, desperate to apprehend the outlaw, is attempting for the second time to bribe Auðr into revealing his whereabouts. She has ostensibly agreed to betray Gísli, and wants to see the colour of Eyjólfur's money (*Gísli saga*, 99–100):

Hann steypir nú fénu í kné henni, ok hefir hon hønd í, en hann telr ok tjár fyrir henni. Guðríðr, fóstura hennar, tekr at gráta.

Síðan gengr hon út ok til móts við Gísli ok segir honum: 'Fóstura mín er nú vitlaus orðin ok vill svíkja þik.' Gísli mælti: 'Ger þú þér gott í hug, því at eigi mun mér þat at fjörlesti verða, at Auðr blekki mik,' ok kvað vísu:

Segja menn, at manni  
mjöð-Hlín hafi sínum,  
fjarðar elgs, of folgit  
fleyvangs hugi ranga.  
En grjótlungrátna  
golffit vitum sitja;  
hykkat hœlibrekku  
hrannlogs at því sanna.

He [Eyjólfur] now pours the money onto her lap, and she takes it in her hand, and he counts it and displays it before her. Guðríðr, her fosterling, begins to cry.

She then goes out to a meeting with Gísli and says to him: 'My foster-mother has lost her mind and wants to betray you.' Gísli said: 'Think good thoughts, for it will never come about that I lose my life on account of Auðr deceiving me,' and spoke a verse:

The men of the elk of the fjord	[BOAT > SEAMEN > PEOPLE]
say that mead-Hlín has hidden a	[WOMAN = Auðr]
sea-deep and crooked	
mind from her man.	
But I know the gold-land of the	
gravel-mackerel to sit tearful;	[SNAKE > WOMAN = Auðr]
I do not think this is true of	
the praise-cliff of the wave-flame.	[GOLD > WOMAN = Auðr]

Guðríðr's tears are understandable enough, but Auðr's, particularly as the verse represents them, carry no immediate indication as to why the woman should be *grátna* 'tearful' (lit. 'having wept'). Karin Olsen suggests that Gísli 'knows that his loyal wife, rather than betraying him, sits at home weeping about his fate' (1996, 271). The immediate impression is that Auðr weeps because she loves and pities him, but the image is confined to the verse, and is never corroborated by a narrative description of Auðr actually weeping (here, or anywhere else). Nor is it said whether Gísli hears how Auðr's calculated and vindictive meeting with Eyjólfur actually

unfolded; the verse speaks of tears, but in truth Auðr sheds blood. When she takes up the bag of coins and strikes her husband's enemy, she demonstrates fidelity, anger and cunning, but by no means sorrow. Afterwards, she gloats over her victim with rehearsed eloquence, chiding him for his gullibility and reminding him that he'll never forget that a woman hit him. The plot exhibits Auðr's violent participation in Gísli's affairs, just as her words attest to a defiance of the Fate her husband believes in so fervently. Compare Gísli's last remark to Eyjólfur: *munu þér nú hafa þau málalok, sem þér vilduð* 'you will have the conclusion you wanted' (*Gísli saga*, 114) with that of Auðr: *þú munt ekki at heldr fá þat, er þú vildir* 'on the contrary, you will not get what you want' (*Gísli saga*, 101). Even if she is referring only to Eyjólfur's attempt to bribe her—in which case she means, 'you will not get what you want by me'—she is fatally mistaken. In the end, and irrespective of their attitudes, both spouses are responsible for leaving the trail that allows Eyjólfur to find Gísli. Auðr never deceives her husband, nor does she do anything deliberately to harm him. Her company, it seems, is all it takes.

It is upon the heels of Auðr's encounter with Eyjólfur that Gísli's dream women begin to visit him much more frequently—one benevolent and tearful, the other malignant and bloody—and the twelve stanzas he composes about them and his dreams continue, thematically unbroken, until his death. The corresponding imagery between the kennings involving *dogg* and these female figures is remarkable, with the women's alternating appearances suggesting an increasingly sanguinary mixture of tears and blood. The first woman, a committed healer and homemaker who remains sorrowful despite giving reassurances of Gísli's prosperity, is more immediately comparable with Auðr. She is represented by *eirreks dogg*, and, as Gísli's penultimate verse about her describes, her tears are wept even as she endeavours to heal him (*Gísli saga*, 109). The second dream-woman corresponds to the battle-kennung *dogg dals*; she is a valkyrie-like figure who drenches everything in blood and promises she will part Gísli from the good dream-woman (*Gísli saga*, 102). Though not physically represented in Gísli's last dream and penultimate verse, her associations with battle and gore have become unmistakable by that point. Given that *Gísli saga* has only two prominent female characters, it may seem tidiest to relate this dread-woman and her tokens to Þórdís, but the constant relevance of *dogg* to Auðr suggests a corresponding analogy. When seen as alter egos of the same woman whose influence caused Gísli to risk outlawry in the first place, the two dream figures become fatal rather than dialectic, representing one inevitable progression. Alternating

rather than duelling as they appear in Gísli's dreams, they reinforce the sense of fatalism confirmed by the saga's own events, and which the hero himself knows is inescapable. Such a reading seems appropriate in light of Auðr's own weeping as considered above; by herself, the good dream-woman seems to weep for Gísli, as if from compassion or pity, but when the dread-woman is seen as an alternative aspect of the same woman, her tears become at least partially reflexive. Though she may indeed lament Gísli's fate, she must know she is at least partly responsible for ensuring it—if only because she is ever at his side.

### *Conclusion*

The conclusion of *Gísli saga Súrssonar* yields not simply the long-foretold demise of its eponymous hero, but also the interpretive riches of a completed pattern of Fate. With the saga at an end, the literary elements that support this pattern may best be distinguished and retraced, helping the reader better to understand tragic design in Old Norse–Icelandic storytelling. Scholars seem to agree that Gísli's downfall is decided for him in one way or another, and whether it be due to supernatural or existentialist forces—as Ármann Jakobsson has neatly divided them (2008, 39)—this paper has added a symbolic consideration to the mix.

Nothing is superfluous in the spartan prose of the *Íslendingasögur*, so when Gísli and his household travel to his hideout for the last time, the detail resonates. There was a hard frost overnight; the three people headed across it. The narrative might just as soon report that Eyjólfur and his men saw their tracks and discovered Gísli's whereabouts by following them. It seems significant, then, that the narrator particularises the two contents of the trail, and assigns one part each to Gísli and his companions. This analysis has argued that the rune-shavings (*spænnir*) and the path in the dew (*doggslóðin*) can be read as symbols of Gísli's own tragic fate, and, what is more, that these symbols appear to implicate two of Gísli's only apparent boons in that ruin: his own industriousness and his faithful and loving wife. The very nature of literary symbolism precludes historical certainty, but it is nevertheless hoped that, aside from offering its own position, this examination has also promoted the opportunities that symbolic analyses of the *Íslendingasögur* still present for close readings.

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## TROUBLE WITH THE NEIGHBOURS: THE PROBLEM OF ÁNABREKKA IN SKALLA-GRÍMR'S LAND CLAIM

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THE FAMOUS PASSAGE IN *EGILS SAGA* describing Skalla-Grímr's land claim has long been of interest to scholars. This interest has generally been of two types: discussion of the extent of the claim, and the related discussion of the importance of the Mýrar chieftaincy in the context of both the *landnám* of the ninth to tenth centuries and the era of saga composition from the twelfth to the fourteenth century. Analysis of the sagas and the various versions of *Landnámabók* can be used to support both maximalist and minimalist views of the settlers' land claims in general, and Skalla-Grímr's in particular. However, few scholars have taken the texts in conjunction with known ecological factors to look at the challenges faced by Skalla-Grímr and his descendants in seeking both to preserve control over the region's resources and to maintain the status of the Mýrar chieftaincy. By examining the relationship between Skalla-Grímr's farm at Borg and the neighbouring farm at Ánabrekka as represented geographically, as well as in the sagas and *Landnámabók*, one can see what may be a representative example of the complex of political and environmental challenges facing the chieftains and farmers of the settlement era.

For obvious reasons, most scholarship on *Egils saga* tends to centre around the person and career of the eponymous hero. Gigantic in both stature and accomplishments, Egill dominates the saga through his words and deeds, and the scope of his adventures leads the reader on a grand tour of much of the Viking world of the tenth century. He fights battles, treats with kings, has narrow escapes, composes verse for all occasions and can drink any man under the table. Even in his old age, Egill is a force to be reckoned with, and the saga author takes evident delight in describing the old warrior's arrival at the spring Thing in support of his son Þorsteinn:

Menn sá af þinginu, at flokkur manna reið neðan með Gljúfrá, ok blikuðu þar skildir við; ok er þeir riðu á þingit, þá reið þar maðr fyrir í blári kápu, hafði hjálm á höfði gullroðinn, en skjöld á hlið gullbúinn, í hendi krókaspjót, var þar gullrekinn falrinn; hann var sverði gyrðr. Þar var kominn Egill Skalla-Grímsson

með átta tigu manna, alla vel vápnaða, svá sem til bardaga væri búinir; þat lið var valit mjök; hafði Egill haft með sér ina beztu bóndasonu af Nesjum sunnan, þá er honum þóttu vígligstir. Egill reið með flokkinn til búðar þeirar, er Þorsteinn hafði tjalda látit ok áðr var auð; stigu þeir af hestum sínum. Ok er Þorsteinn kenndi ferð fǫður síns, þá gekk hann í móti honum með allan flokk sinn ok fagnaði honum vel. (*Egils saga*, 283–84)

Then the people at the assembly saw a group of men come riding up by Gljufur River, their shields glinting in the sun, and as they rode into the assembly the man who led them was seen to be wearing a blue cloak. On his head was a gilded helmet, a gold-adorned shield was at his side, a barbed spear in his hand, its socket incised with gold, and about his waist a sword. This was Egil Skallagrímsson who had come with eighty men all fully armed as if ready for battle, a choice company, for Egil had taken with him all the best farmer's sons in the Nesses, those whom he thought most warrior-like. Egil rode with his men to the booth which Thorstein had erected and which was still empty. There they dismounted, and when Thorstein learned that his father had come he went to meet him with all his men and give him a welcome. (*Egil's saga* 1976, 226)

It is clear that the author intends us to view this scene as a dramatic final flourish for Egill in the political arena, and it is Egill who is placed centre-stage during the subsequent court proceedings.

It is not Egill's intervention itself, however, but the background and circumstances of the court case that is the focus of this paper. The case involves a land dispute between the adjacent farms of Borg, owned by Egill's son Þorsteinn, and Ánabrekka, owned by Qnundr sjóni Ánason and his son Steinarr. The initial conflict occurs when Steinarr has his farmhands graze his cattle on the pasture at Stakksmýrr, across Háflslækr (brook) on land traditionally claimed by the farmers at Borg. Despite complaints from Þorsteinn's hands, and later from Þorsteinn himself, Steinarr continues to have his cattle grazed on this pasture, which is, according to the saga, 'so good that people judge it equal to a stack of hay' (*svá góð . . . at þat var kallat jafnt ok stakkr tǫðu*) (*Egil's Saga* 1976, 220; *Egils saga*, 277). This vision of fertility stands in contrast to the author's comment on the rest of the neighbourhood, that, by the end of the summer, 'all the grazing to the east of the Hafs Brook had been completely used up' (*beittusk þá upp allar engjar fyrir sunnan Háflslæk*) (*Egil's Saga* 1976, 221; *Egils saga*, 278). As the stakes grow higher, the conflict escalates accordingly. Þorsteinn kills two of Steinarr's slaves who he finds grazing cattle on the Stakksmýrr pasture, and Steinarr then gathers support preparatory to initiating legal proceedings against Þorsteinn for the killings.

The men Steinarr turns to for support are the chieftans Einarr of Stafaholt and Tungu-Oddr of Reykjadalr. Initially hesitant, Einarr is persuaded to

support the case by the presence of Tungu-Oddr, who is described elsewhere in the saga as 'the leading chieftain [in Borgarfjord] to the south of the Hvit River' (*hofðingi í Borgarfirði fyrir sunnan Hvítá (Egil's Saga* 1976, 234; *Egils saga*, 293)). With this support Steinarr summonses Þorsteinn for the killing of the slaves, and arrives at the Thing confident of success. It is only the arrival and intervention of Egill that saves Þorsteinn from a sentence of outlawry, as he takes over the proceedings and declares the terms of the settlement. Not surprisingly, he finds in favour of his son, Einarr and Tungu-Oddr beat a hasty retreat, and Egill banishes Steinarr and Qunodr from the farm at Ánabrekka in a stirring example of legal bullying.

Egill's verdict in the case is based on his interpretation of the land claim of his father Skalla-Grímr, and it is to a discussion of this claim that I now propose to turn. Three full chapters of *Egils saga* are devoted to describing the location, extent and disposition of Skalla-Grímr's land claim, including an extensive catalogue of settlers, all of whom are described as receiving their lands from Skalla-Grímr directly. In the saga's version, the land encompassed by the claim is vast:

Þá nam Skalla-Grímr land milli fjalls ok fjöru, Mýrar allar út til Selalóns ok it efra til Borgarhrauns, en suðr til Hafnarfjalla, ok allt þat land, er vatnföll deila til sjóvar. (*Egils saga*, 73)

Skallagrim took possession of everything between the mountains and the sea, all of Myrar to the west as far as Selalon, north up to Borgarhraun and south to Hafnarfells, all the land bounded by the rivers right down to the sea. (*Egil's Saga* 1976, 73)

A look at the map will show that this area includes the whole of Borgarfjörður, both northern and southern shores, as well as the Mýrar marshlands and the estuaries of the Norðrá and Hvítá rivers. In his explorations of the district Skalla-Grímr is described as journeying along the west bank of the Hvítá, and then along the Norðrá as far as the Gljúfrá. Crossing the Norðrá at that point, he continues along the Hvítá as far as the Pverá before returning to the head of the fjord (*Egils saga*, 74–75; *Egil's Saga* 1976, 74–75). The saga does not describe him ever exploring any other part of his claim, and indeed, even prior to this exploration he appears to have ceded the south side of the fjord to his fellow *landnámsmaðr* Grímr enn háleyski (the Halogalander), who actually seems to have been the first of the party to arrive in Borgarfjörður, along with the coffin of Skalla-Grímr's father Kveld-Úlfr (*Egils saga*, 71; *Egil's Saga* 1976, 73). Of Grímr we will have more to say later.

Apart from the arrangement with Grímr, the first land granted by Skalla-Grímr in the saga is to Áni, who is described as part of the crew. 'Áni got

land between Lang River and Hafs Brook and made his home at Anabrekka. He was the father of Onund Sjoni' (*Ána gaf hann land milli Langár ok Háfslækjar, ok bjó hann at Ánabrekku; sonr hans var Qnundr sjóni*) (*Egil's Saga* 1976, 74; *Egils saga*, 73). Five more specific grants follow in the saga, all of which are either north of the fjord, and thus within the neighbourhood of Skalla-Grímr's main farm at Borg, or are at the head of the fjord, in the estuary of the Hvítá. Along with the subsidiary settlements overseen directly by Skalla-Grímr, these farms form a roughly contiguous unit, and would seem to reflect what Jesse Byock has called 'the attempt by the first settlers to install a system of territorial control' (Byock 2001, 31). Significantly, when Skalla-Grímr's father-in-law Yngvarr arrives, he and his people are integrated into Skalla-Grímr's territorial holdings by the grant of the farm at Álptaness, while the party led by Óleifr hjalti, with whom Skalla-Grímr has no family connection, is given land at Varmalækur, on the other side of the fjord (*Egils saga*, 76; *Egil's Saga* 1976, 76–77). On the basis of the saga itself, then, it appears that, while Skalla-Grímr's initial claim may have sought to include the entirety of Borgarfjörður, in reality his effective control from the start was limited to the area north of the fjord and that bounded by the Norðrá/Hvítá estuary.

Before taking up the question of how effectively Skalla-Grímr and his immediate descendants were able to exercise political control within this area, the issue of the reliability of the saga's description must be addressed. For this we turn first to *Landnámabók*, whose variant redactions contain two distinct, yet not, I would argue, inherently contradictory descriptions of Skalla-Grímr's land claim. In the Sturlubók version, the story of the arrival of Skalla-Grímr and the extent of the claim is virtually the same in outline as that in the saga. So much so, in fact, that many have taken this as evidence that Sturla Þórðarson was promoting his family's interests by inserting an inflated and maximalist claim that represented, as Sveinbjörn Rafnsson put it, a 'thirteenth-century political statement', rather than a reflection of the tenth-century reality (Sveinbjörn Rafnsson in Smith 1995, 322). Further evidence for this view has been seen in the variant description of Skalla-Grímr's claim given in the Melabók version of *Landnámabók*, in which an author with no connection to the Borgarfjörður area or the Sturlung family writes: *Skalla-Grímr kom skipi sínu í Gufárós ok nam land á milli Norðrá ok Hítará allt á milli fjalls ok fjöru ok bjó at Björg* (*Landnámabók* 1921, 46)<sup>1</sup> 'Skallagrím sailed to the mouth of the Gufa River and took land between the Norður and Hítará

<sup>1</sup> This text has been normalised.

rivers, all between fells and foreshore, and lived at Borg' (*Landnámabók* 1968 in Ashwell and Jackson 1970, 160). This rather laconic description makes no mention of land on the south side of the fjord, confining itself to the area north of the fjord and that mentioned specifically in *Egils saga* as having been explored by Skalla-Grímr. It has been suggested that this account is inherently more reliable than Sturlubók, since the latter would seem to reflect the aspirations of the Sturlung family in the thirteenth century (Axel Kristinsson 2004, 5). However, a similar argument could be used to point out that the Melabók account comes from the neighbouring Melar region south of Borgarfjörður (*Landnámabók* 1972, 4), and the author could thus have had his own reasons for minimising the claim put forth by Skalla-Grímr to both sides of the fjord.

Are we then to agree with the general descriptions in *Egils saga* and Sturlubók that give Skalla-Grímr dominion over such a vast area? As already noted, *Egils saga* contains hints that other settlers in the region exercised authority independent of Skalla-Grímr, and, despite its own lofty claim to the contrary, a close look at Sturlubók demonstrates that Skalla-Grímr was not the only settler handing out land in the Borgarfjörður region. The chronology of the settlement is notoriously unclear, the model of the process being 'defined more in terms of social actions than fixed chronology' (Smith 1995, 321). In terms of defining the extent of Skalla-Grímr's actual land claim, however, it does make sense that Hafnar-Ormr, for example, is described in the section of Sturlubók immediately preceding the arrival of Skalla-Grímr's family as the first settler in the Melar district, with his principal residence at Höfn, on the south side of Borgarfjörður and outside of Skalla-Grímr's claim (*Landnámabók* 1968, 66; *Landnámabók* 1972, 26). Within the subsequent thirty-eight chapters that begin with the arrival of Skalla-Grímr and end with the author's pronouncement that *Nú eru þeir menn talðir, er lönd hafa byggt í landnámi Skalla-Gríms* 'Now we've listed all those who settled within Skallagrim's land claim' (*Landnámabók* 1968, 94; *Landnámabók* 1972, 37), one may see Hafnar-Ormr selling land to Þorbjörn svartir (the Black) on the south side of Borgarfjörður and within the bounds of Skalla-Grímr's claim as defined only one chapter before (*Landnámabók* 1968, 71; *Landnámabók* 1972, 28). In other words, whether he arrived first or not, Hafnar-Ormr clearly does not need Skalla-Grímr's permission to dispose of land south of the fjord.

An even more pronounced example of the limits of Skalla-Grímr's claim may be found in the person of the previously mentioned Grímr enn háleyski. Said in *Egils saga* to have taken charge of Kveld-Úlfr's ship after

the latter's death (*Egils saga*, 71, *Egil's Saga* 1976, 72), he is promoted to co-Captain in Sturlubók (*Landnámabók* 1968, 68; *Landnámabók* 1972, 27). Both sources seem to acknowledge that his arrival in Borgarfjörður preceded Skalla-Grímr's, yet both also state that he received his land, anchored by the farm at Hvanneyr, from Skalla-Grímr (*Egils saga*, 73, *Egil's Saga* 1976, 74; *Landnámabók* 1968, 71, *Landnámabók* 1972, 28). Yet the circumstances surrounding the discovery and initial settlement of Borgarfjörður, with Skalla-Grímr and Grímr's parties described as camping separately for the winter, suggest that Skalla-Grímr's authority over Grímr and his ship was limited at best. Grímr's brother Hrómundr, absent from *Egils saga*, is described in Sturlubók as arriving separately, and settling in the Þverárdalr region, northeast of Skalla-Grímr's claim (*Landnámabók* 1968, 84–85; *Landnámabók* 1972, 34). Sturla Þórðarson was obviously interested in the family, as he attaches a genealogy that links Grímr's descendants directly to himself (*Landnámabók* 1968, 77–78; *Landnámabók* 1972, 31). These descendants are portrayed as settling the Reykjadalr area and having dealings, not always pleasant, with Tungu-Oddr.

A somewhat different and more extensive view of Grímr's settlement of the area is to be found in *Vatnsdæla saga*. In this version, Grímr and Hrómundr set out for Iceland on their own account, with no mention whatsoever of Skalla-Grímr or his family:

Grímr sigldi út um sumarit ok báðir þeir bræðr, kómu í Borgarfjörð ok lögðu inn at Hvanneyri. Grímr kvazk ætla, at þat land myndi hann nema sér til ábúðar. Hann tók sér landnám svá mikít, at þar eru nú bæir margir í hans landeign. Hrómundr kvazk mundu leita upp til fjalla ok kvazk þar mundu ynði nema í fjallaendum. Grímr kvað þat vel efnat, at þeir hefði bæði jarðkost fjallana ok þó neyti af sjónum. Hrómundr nam Þverárhlíð ok þótti vera merkismaðr ok kynsæll. Frá honum er kominn Illugi svarti. (*Vatnsdæla saga*, 31)

Grim set sail that summer along with his brother; they reached Borgarfjord and put in at Hvanneyri. Grim said that he thought he would take that land as his own and settle on it. He claimed so much land that many farms now occupy what was once his estate. Hromund said that he would head for the hills and settle happily on the mountain ends. Grim said that things had worked out well, in that they would have the best of the high ground but also the benefits of the sea. Hromund settled at Thverarhlid and was considered a remarkable man, blessed with good offspring; Illugi the Black was descended from him. (*The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal* 1997, 15)

Grímr is here presented as second to none in the area, and this image is reinforced a few pages later when his foster-brother Ingimundr arrives in Borgarfjörður. Grímr welcomes the party, takes them in for the winter, and offers Ingimundr as much land as he cares to have. He behaves, in short,

like a chieftain with independent political authority (*Vatnsdæla saga*, 38; *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal* 1997, 18). When the account in this saga is taken in conjunction with the limited description of Skalla-Grímr's exploration of his claim in *Egils saga*, the description in *Melabók* of his whole claim being limited to the area between the Norðrá and Hítará rivers, and the examples in *Sturlubók* that show settlers on the south shore of Borgarfjörður behaving independently, the picture of the claim as being effectively limited to the north side of the fjord and the area west of the Hvítá south of Þverárdalur begins to clarify.

But it is within the seemingly agreed-upon area of Skalla-Grímr's claim that we come to the problem of Ánabrekka. Assuming that one accepts the statement of Kristján Eldjárn regarding the position of Icelandic farms that 'most of them are in exactly the same places where they have always been' (Kristján Eldjárn, in Ashwell and Jackson 1970, n. 166), then Ánabrekka was, and still is, literally next-door to Borg, occupying a tongue of marshland bounded by the Langá and the Háflsloekr. As mentioned previously, the grant to Áni is the first identified in *Egils saga* as a grant from Skalla-Grímr to a member of his crew. Its prominent position in the text may reflect the author's intention that the reader remember it for the later dispute. Áni is identified as the father of Önundur sjóni, and earlier in the saga had been part of the deputation that accompanied Skalla-Grímr when he went to seek compensation for the death of his brother Þórólfr from King Haraldr hárfagri (*Egils saga*, 62; *Egil's Saga* 1976, 65). In *Sturlubók* Án is described simply as 'a man' (*einn maðr*), and the grant of Ánabrekka appears as one of a series of grants from Skalla-Grímr that appear to be given in ascending order of importance to settlers within the Mýrar district. Immediately prior to the grant of Ánabrekka, Skalla-Grímr grants land to Þorbjörn krumr, Þórðr beigaldi, Þórir þurs and Þorgeirr jarðlangr (*Landnámabók* 1968, 90; *Landnámabók* 1972, 36). These men are also identified in *Egils saga* as being among Skalla-Grímr's companions when he goes to see King Haraldr (*Egils saga*, 62; *Egil's Saga* 1976, 65–66). Prior to this, Rauða-Björn is described as purchasing land from Skalla-Grímr, and this is preceded by several grants to people described as Skalla-Grímr's *leysingjar* 'freedmen' (*Landnámabók* 1968, 88; *Landnámabók* 1972, 36). Immediately following the grant to Án are grants to Þorfinnr enn strangi, a friend of the family who marries Skalla-Grímr's daughter, and Skalla-Grímr's father-in-law Yngvarr (*Landnámabók* 1968, 91–92; *Landnámabók* 1972, 36–37). Án, therefore, seems to have been a free farmer and a friend of Skalla-Grímr's from Norway, but of a lesser social status than Skalla-Grímr's own family.

The question, then, is why the descendants of Án(i), less than two generations after the initial settlement, feel able to challenge the descendants of Skalla-Grímr in so public a manner over land usage rights. Two possible answers suggest themselves, one political, and one environmental and ecological. The political answer has to do with the position of the Mýrar chieftaincy in the Borgarfjörðr region. This is, of course, very difficult to determine for the settlement period since, as has often been pointed out, the thirteenth-century provenance of the sources tends to colour the political relationships they describe (Smith 1995, 321; Axel Kristinsson 2004, 5). A principal argument that has been used in this context is that *Egils saga*, *Sturlubók* and other sagas associated with the Borgarfjörðr region tend to reflect the interests of the Sturlung family, due to their involvement in saga authorship and their association with the Mýrar chieftaincy in the thirteenth century (Ashwell and Jackson 1970, 159–61; Smith 1995, 321–22; Axel Kristinsson 2004, 5).

By this argument, one would expect to see the Mýramenn gaining in stature and importance in the saga depictions of them following the settlement. However, this does not appear to be the case. We have already noted how Grímr enn háleyski acts as an independent chieftain in both *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Egils saga*, although not to the detriment of Skalla-Grímr's family. Other figures, though, both within *Egils saga* and elsewhere, are shown to pose formidable challenges to the status and authority of the Mýrar chieftaincy and its allies.

Foremost among these is Tungu-Oddr. As already noted, he is described in *Egils saga* as the most important chieftain south of the Hvítá, and it is his promise of support that enables Steinarr to pursue his legal action against Þorsteinn Egilsson. The land claim of his family is described in *Landnámabók* as encompassing 'the whole tongue of land between Hvít River and Reykjadale River' (*tungu alla milli Hvítár ok Reykjadalsár*) and follows immediately after the description of the land claim of his neighbour, Ketill blundr (*Landnámabók* 1968, 74; *Landnámabók* 1972, 30). Ketill blundr's claim is represented as having been approved by Skalla-Grímr, and his son Geirr enn auðgi is married to Skalla-Grímr's daughter Þórunn (*Landnámabók* 1968, 73; *Landnámabók* 1972, 29). There would thus seem to be a strong bond between the families of Skalla-Grímr and Ketill blundr, leading to the expectation of mutual support in the face of a challenge to either party.

Just such a challenge to the family of Ketill blundr is described in both Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* and *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, in which Ketill blundr's grandson Blund-Ketill is burned in his home by a party led by



Tungu-Oddr's son Þorvaldr (*Íslendingabók* 1968, 12; *Íslendingabók* 2006, 7; *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, 24; *Hen-Thorir's Saga* 1997, 248).<sup>2</sup> Tungu-Oddr then takes advantage of the situation to seize the property owned by Blund-Ketill, leaving the latter's family seeking support in order to prosecute those responsible for the burning (*Hænsa-Þóris saga*, 25; *Hen-Thorir's Saga* 1997, 249). Significantly, they turn not to Þorsteinn Egilsson, but to a more distant chieftain, Þórðr gellir, to lead the prosecution. According to Ari, it was this case which led directly to the creation of the Quarter Courts (*Íslendingabók* 1968, 12; *Íslendingabók* 2006, 7). Such a prominent case would seem likely to involve all the most important men of the district, particularly those with family connections, but there is no mention of Þorsteinn Egilsson as participant or supporter in either text. Further, in *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, it is Tungu-Oddr who appears to have the right to negotiate prices with foreign merchants entering Borgarfjörðr, a right which geography would seem to associate with the Mýrar chieftains:

Oddr frétti skipkvámuna; hann var vanr í fyrra lagi í kaupstefnur at koma ok leggja lag á varning manna, því at hann hafði heraðsstjórn; þótti engum dælt fyrr at kaupa en vissi, hvat hann vildi at gera. (*Hænsa-Þóris saga*, 8)

Odd heard about the ship's arrival; he was accustomed to being the first to arrive at the market and setting prices for people's goods because he was the leader of the district. No one thought it proper to buy before knowing what Odd wanted to do. (*Hen-Thorir's Saga* 1997, 240)

Could this mean that the author of *Hænsa-Þóris saga* was simply unaware of the prominence of the Mýrar chieftaincy, and of Þorsteinn Egilsson in particular? The answer would appear to be no, as Þorsteinn is mentioned at the end of the saga as marrying Jófríðr, the widow of Tungu-Oddr's elder son Þóroddr (*Hænsa-Þóris saga*, 47; *Hen-Thorir's Saga* 1997, 259). This is consistent with the account given in *Egils saga*, although in this case Þorsteinn and Jófríðr's marriage seems to precede the death of Tungu-Oddr, while in *Hænsa-Þóris saga* it does not occur until after Tungu-Oddr's death (*Egils saga*, 275; *Egil's Saga* 1976, 219). In any case, it seems clear that the prominence given to Tungu-Oddr in the affairs of Borgarfjörðr in *Hænsa-Þóris saga* is deliberate, and one may read in this a diminution of the importance of the Mýrar chieftaincy by the time of Þorsteinn Egilsson.

Before proceeding any farther down this path, however, we should note that other sagas offer a more mixed view of the importance of

<sup>2</sup> See *Íslendingabók* 2006, 21, note 45, for a discussion of the various possible relatives of Ketill blundr burned in this attack.

Skalla-Grímr's descendants. In *Laxdæla saga*, for example, the prospect of marriage to Egill's daughter Þorgerðr is urged upon Óláfr pái by his father Høskuldr because 'your position would be greatly strengthened by a marriage-alliance with the men of Myrar' (*er þat . . . vænna, at þér yrði þá efling at mægðum við þá Mýramenn*) (*Laxdæla Saga* 1969, 97; *Laxdæla saga* 1934, 62). It should however be emphasised that this takes place during the chieftaincy of Egill, not Þorsteinn, and even so, when the wedding does occur, it takes place at Høskuldsstaðir, not Borg: *Var þeim þá unnt af metorða Laxdælum, því at þeim skyldi færa heim konuna* 'In deference to the men of Laxriverdale it was conceded that the bride should be brought to them' (*Laxdæla saga* 1934, 65; *Laxdæla Saga* 1969, 100). Why this deference should be necessary is unclear, but it suggests that, even under Egill, the Mýrar chieftaincy enjoyed no special prominence.

Apart from its place in *Egils saga*, and the brief mention already noted in *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, Þorsteinn Egilsson's chieftaincy is also discussed in *Gunnlaugs saga ormsungu*. At the opening of the saga, he is described as follows:

Hann var auðigr at fé ok hofðingi mikill, vitr maðr ok hógværr ok hófsmaðr um alla hluti. Engi var hann afreksmaðr um vöxt eða afl sem Egill, faðir hans, því at svá er sagt af fróðum mönnum, at Egill hafí mestr kappi verit á Íslandi ok holmgöngumaðr, ok mest ætlat af bóndasonum; fræðimaðr var hann ok mikill ok manna vitrasta. Þorsteinn var ok it mesta afarmenni ok vinsæll af allri alþýðu. (*Gunnlaugs saga ormsungu*, 51 n. 2)

He was rich and a powerful chieftain, wise, tolerant and just in all things. He was not outstanding in either size or strength, as his father, Egil, had been. Learned men say that Egil was the greatest champion and duellist Iceland has ever known and the most promising of all the farmers' sons, as well as a great scholar and the wisest of men. Thorstein, too, was a great man and was popular with everyone. (*The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue* 1997, 305–06)

If there is such a thing as damning with faint praise in the sagas, then this is surely it, as Þorsteinn's wisdom, justice and popularity are represented as standing in meek contrast to the towering accomplishments of his father. This is further emphasised later in the saga, during the contentious negotiations surrounding the potential betrothal of Þorsteinn's daughter Helga to Gunnlaugr, son of the chieftain Illugi inn svartí:

Gunnlaugr svarar: 'Hvárgi þeira Qnundar né Þorfinns er jafnmenni fōður míns, því at þik skortir sýnt við hann. Eða hvat hefir þú í móti því, er hann deildi kappi við Þorgrím goða Kjallaksson á Þórnessþingi ok við sonu hans ok hafði einn þat, er við lá?' Þorsteinn svarar: 'Ek stökkða í brott Steinari, syni Qnundar sjóna, ok þótti þat heldr mikilræði.' Gunnlaugr svarar: 'Egils

nauztu at því, fōður þíns, enda mun þat fám bóndum vel endask, at synja mér mægðar.' (*Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, 66)

'Neither Onund nor Thorfinn can compare with my father,' Gunnlaug answered, 'considering that even you clearly fall short of his mark. What have you done to compare with the time when he took on Thorgrim Kjallaksson the godi and his sons at the Thorsnes Assembly by himself and came away with everything there was to be had?'

'I drove away Steinar, the son of Onund Sjoni—and that was considered quite an achievement,' Thorstein replied.

'You had your father, Egil, to help you then,' Gunnlaug retorted. 'Even so, there aren't many farmers who would be safe to turn down a marriage bond with me.' (*The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue* 1997, 313)

Gunnlaugr's message here is clear; Þorsteinn is neither the man nor the chieftain that his father Egill had been.

Such a perceived diminution of strength and influence may account for Steinarr's decision in *Egils saga* to challenge Þorsteinn for control of the Stakksmýrr pasture. Aware of the rising power of Tungu-Oddr in Reykjadalr, Steinarr may well have decided that the time was right to detach Ánabrekka from allegiance to Þorsteinn at Borg and throw in his lot with a more prominent and ambitious chieftain. Icelandic farmers always had the right to choose their chieftains during the Free-State period, and one may read in Steinarr's actions a calculation, although proved wrong in the subsequent court proceedings, that Þorsteinn lacked the nerve to stand up to Tungu-Oddr.

On the material level, environmental and ecological factors may also have played a role in Steinarr's decision to attempt a seizure of the Stakksmýrr pasture. Orri Vésteinsson has written that

Icelandic settlement patterns are characterized by relatively few large units occupying the very best land and often centrally located vis-à-vis a larger number of much smaller but evenly sized and regularly spaced units (Orri Vésteinsson 2005, 19).

Within such a settlement pattern, Orri points out that the differential access to resources would have naturally favoured the owners of the larger units. This helps to explain why Stakksmýrr, despite its close proximity to Ánabrekka, would nevertheless have been part of the holdings of Borg.

Concerning Stakksmýrr itself, this type of pasture would have been of crucial importance to the early settlers, due to the necessity of winter fodder for cows, as Orri points out:

The only alternative to hay from improved fields, as fodder for milch-cows, is hay from meadows which are permanently or periodically submerged by

water, usually in spring flooding . . . Access to flooded wetlands was a valued resource in the late Middle Ages and a high proportion of the major estates based their economy partly on flooded meadows (Orri Vésteinsson 1998, 7–8).

This description, based on his investigations in Borgarfjörðr, tallies very well with the description of Stakksmýrr given in *Egils saga: standa þar yfir vötn á vetrinn* ‘in winter it lies under water’ (*Egils saga*, 277; *Egil’s Saga* 1976, 220), as well as with the element *mýrr* ‘wetlands’ in the name. The importance of hay as a resource and potential source of conflict is also well attested in the sagas, serving as the root cause for the burning of Blund-Ketill in *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, for example (*Hænsa-Þóris saga*, 13–16; *Hen-Thorir’s Saga* 1997, 243–44).

In addition to the monopolisation of this critical resource by its neighbour, it seems likely that changes to the landscape were having a negative impact on the productivity of the farm at Ánabrekka in the generations following the initial settlement. The rapid deforestation of Iceland in the settlement period has been well documented, one result being erosion, as Kevin Smith writes: ‘paleobotanical and geological evidence indicates that erosion on a massive scale began within a century of initial settlement and land clearance’ (Smith 1995, 337). Erosion from upland clearances would have been carried down rivers to lowland farms, resulting in a decrease in lowland productivity. In *Egils saga*, we see Þorsteinn at one point engaged in the type of project that would have followed an upland clearance: *Þorsteinn lét gera garð um þvera Grísartungu milli Langavatns ok Gljúfrár, lét hann þar at vera marga menn um várit* ‘Thorstein had a fence built right across Grisar Tongue from Langavatn to Gljúfur River, and employed a number of men at this task throughout the spring’ (*Egils saga*, 289; *Egil’s Saga* 1976, 231). This area lies up the Langá river from Ánabrekka, and one can thus expect that erosion from such an alteration would have a negative impact on Ánabrekka’s home fields.

One further example from *Egils saga* helps to underscore this point. Following the expulsion of Steinarr and his family from Ánabrekka, the farm is turned over to Egill’s nephew (and thus Þorsteinn’s cousin) Þorgeirr blundr. Settling a near relative on the neighbouring farm would seem to tie the affair up neatly, as Þorsteinn would have every reason to expect Þorgeirr blundr’s dutiful support. However, as the saga notes, *Þorgeirr blundr . . . veitti Þorsteini illar búsifjar í öllu því, er hann mátti* ‘Thorgerir Blund . . . was a bad neighbour to Thorstein in every way that he could be’ (*Egils saga*, 293). The reasons for this go unspecified. Indeed, as Egill himself comments in a verse on the subject, *máttit þols of bindask / Blundr; ek slíkt of undrumk* ‘Why he sought to cause suffering/ I’ll never

understand' (*Egils saga* 293; *Egil's Saga* 1976, 234). Þorgeirr subsequently leaves Ánabrekka, and no more is heard of the farm in the saga. With no other explanation offered, it seems reasonable to assume that Þorgeirr had encountered the same problems with productivity as those experienced by Steinarr, and that the trouble he caused may have taken the form of trying to gain access to resources controlled by his neighbour at Borg.

To conclude, then, it seems clear that the prominence and authority of the Mýrar chieftaincy was challenged on a number of fronts almost from the start. From the size of the territory claimed by Skalla-Grímr to the reach and status of his descendants, the sagas and *Landnámabók* present a picture that is more complex and nuanced than that created by a thirteenth-century authorial family promoting its own interests. In the example provided by the conflict between Borg and Ánabrekka, we may see both a real political challenge to Egill and his son Þorsteinn, and a reflection of the environmental and ecological realities of the period following the initial settlement.

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OK DULÐA EK ÞANN INN ALSVINNA JÖTUN:  
SOME LINGUISTIC AND METRICAL ASPECTS OF ÓÐINN'S  
WIN OVER VAFÞRÚÐNIR

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**1. Eddaic metres and their functions: the cases of *Völuspá*, *Grímnismál* and *Vafþrúðnismál***

IN HIS 1972 ARTICLE ON *GRÍMNISMÁL*, Bo Ralf wrote (1972, 116):  
I believe . . . that the mythological material presented in the great majority of the stanzas is the most essential part of the *Grm*. However, I do not believe that it is a means of attaining another goal—I think it is the goal in itself.

Commenting on his approach in a *Grm* article of her own and comparing it with the ideas of Magnus Olsen (1933) and Franz Schröder (1958), who preferred to see the lay as a compositional unity and so as a dramatic act involving Óðinn, Agnarr and Geirrþóðr, Olga Smirnitckaya says (1993, 258):<sup>1</sup>

I would like to think one can as well learn the lesson Bo Ralph is trying to teach us. The *høiere tekstkritikk* of the lay will doubtless make a significant step forward if we can but find some internal means of the text's *self-actualisation*, *its self-execution*. It appears that this self-execution tool is quite simply the metre of the lay, that is, *ljóðahátt*.

The problem with *Grm* as a drama is that, at first sight, there is no connection between the plight of Óðinn-Grímnir as we see him between the fires, and the effusion of mythological knowledge he utters; the listeners, that is, we and the young Agnarr, are grateful for this priceless information, but how does it help Óðinn to escape? Indeed, the *völva* in *Völuspá* provides her listeners with the same kind of mythological information, also in monologue, and, having finished her speeches, remains where she was—dead and buried, and only temporarily resurrected by the power of Óðinn. The difference, it can be argued, is the metre: *Vsp* is in *fornyrðislag* while *Grm* is in *ljóðahátt*. If this is so, these two basic metres of Eddaic poetry differ in their functions both from metres of modern poetry and from each other.

<sup>1</sup> A complete translation of this article into English by the present author is awaiting publication.

To summarise Smirnitskaya's argument, whereas the metres of modern poetry only have a meaning thanks to arbitrary literary associations between the texts written in them (Gasparov 1979), the Eddaic metres have an inherent meaning of their own, derived from their communicative perspective as different types of formal speech (Smirnitskaya 1993, 259):

Eddaic metres are used for lays of specific genres not because of some arbitrary literary consensus, but rather because of their nature . . . Eddaic metres have a proper internal meaning of their own, that is, they each possess a particular communicative function inherited from the natural language itself.

*Fornyrðislag* is a 'remote' metre; the last metrical position, the strongest in nearly all other types of poetry (Gasparov 1996, 8–9, 49–50 etc.), is *fornyrðislag*'s weakest: the word that occupies the last lift hardly ever alliterates (Sievers 1893, 40). As it is impossible to explain this just linguistically, the explanation should lie 'rather in the peculiarities of epic poetry as a genre and a type of speech' (Smirnitskaya 1993, 261). Indeed, in *fornyrðislag* the metrical stress is deliberately removed from the typologically strongest part of the verse in order to produce an epic effect, creating a metrical embodiment for the impenetrable barrier of the absolute epic distance (Bakhtin 1981, 17), and to paint the narrated events as removed, stable and eternal, with nothing connecting them to the present of their retelling, or to the plight of the speaker. Conversely, *ljóðaháttur* possesses a special metrical element, the full line (German *Vollzeile*), with its last position, the close, reinforced in a number of ways: it is usually (in more than 75 per cent of cases) filled by a naturally marked phonetic structure, the Old Norse short disyllable, and, in stark contrast with the last lift of *fornyrðislag*, it nearly always alliterates (in 80 per cent of cases, Smirnitskaya 1993, 260–61). This feature makes *ljóðaháttur* a 'direct' or performative metre (in the same sense as the term 'performative utterance' is used in linguistics)—one that is geared towards affecting events as they happen and promoting the intentions of the speaker (Smirnitskaya 1993, 265):

All these kinds of poetry [i.e. *ljóðaháttur* and its less strictly defined varieties such as saga witticisms *à la* Grettir] target the *hic et nunc* of the current situation of the speaker, often with an intention to affect it magically, and, ultimately, are nothing but peculiar types of direct speech.

That is why Óðinn chooses *ljóðaháttur* while the *völva* narrates in *fornyrðislag*. She faces no danger and is free to say whatever she wants, as nothing can change the fact that she is already dead. The only possible outcome of her speeches for her is going back to eternal sleep once she is finished. She does not have a plight to change and the epic *fornyrðislag* is the perfect choice for her story. Grímnir, on the contrary, has a problem to solve: he



must regain his true self, to become all-powerful Óðinn again and escape King Geirrøðr's torture. He chooses *ljóðahátt*, a metre that affects events, and uses its poetic energy to resurrect himself (Smirnitckaya 1993, 267–71; Olsen 1933). It is indeed a fitting choice, as performative poetry is an art that Óðinn had gone to great lengths to acquire (*Háv* 138; *Skáldskaparmál*, 4–5, ch. G58), and is his most powerful weapon.

It seems natural to draw a third lay, *Vafþrúðnismál*, into this comparison. It is an abundant source of mythological information, as is *Vsp*, and the similarities with *Grm* are obvious: both lays are in *ljóðahátt*, both feature Óðinn speaking, in both Óðinn finds himself in mortal peril, in both Óðinn is ultimately victorious and his adversary dies (Ralf 1972, 116–17, and note 35). To add another point of similarity, in both lays the mythological information—to which scholarly tradition has paid most attention—serves as a background to the 'immediate sense' of the speeches (Smirnitckaya 1993, 258), that is, it is a backdrop to the drama that involves the speaker(s). The dramatic problems of *Vm* and *Grm* are, however, different. In *Grm* Óðinn finds himself bereft of his divine powers and a prisoner, but his gaoler is a mortal, so all Óðinn has to do is to regain these powers; once he has done that, his adversary is doomed. Óðinn succeeds using the power of *ljóðahátt*, the metre of magical chants, which helps him to merge the mythological world of the Æsir and the world of the Eddaic stage where he was bound between the fires. The dramatic effect is due to the switching between these two worlds in the stanzas (Smirnitckaya 1993, 268). In *Vm* Óðinn is a guest, not a tortured prisoner, in the hall of Vafþrúðnir the giant. He hides behind a false name but is otherwise in full possession of his divine might. Yet all this might might be to no avail. Óðinn engages in a wisdom contest with his host, and whoever loses loses his own head, but Vafþrúðnir is no mere mortal but an ancient giant who is as all-knowledgeable about the mythological world as Óðinn himself, perhaps even more so, as the race of giants predates the race of Æsir. Nor, as we know from other myths, is Óðinn in possession of a tool to kill the giant outright; somehow, he always resorts to cunning in his dealings with that race. The dramatic effect, then, is due to the fact that the lay is a dialogue and that we see Óðinn fighting a seemingly losing battle. Indeed, his plight seems hopeless, as his wife Frigg has warned him in *Vm* 2: he has neither a tool to kill his adversary, nor knowledge enough to trump him. Some, like John McKinnell, suggest Óðinn is *after* some knowledge, or confirmation thereof, which in itself precludes his chances of winning (McKinnell 1994, 102). Could the art of poetry and the particular properties of *ljóðahátt* that served Óðinn so well at Geirrøðr's help him again?

I would argue that this is indeed the case. My aim in this paper is to propose a new metrical interpretation and reading of one of Óðinn's stanzas that adds to the dramatic effect and shows how its 'well-hidden' (*Skáldskaparmál*, 3) meaning and function, camouflaged by metrical ambiguity (discussed in detail in section 3 below) and unseen by the giant, pave the way for the god's victory. Let us then first have a closer look at the words that bring that victory about.

## 2. The composition of *Vafþrúðnismál*: the rules of the game, the rule-breaking and the rule-breakers' fate

The lay begins with a dialogue between Óðinn and Frigg (*Vm* 1–4), where Óðinn declares his desire to have a contest of wisdom with Vafþrúðnir, while Frigg warns her husband of the dangers of such an endeavour and wishes him good luck. *Vm* 5 sees Óðinn move from his world to the giant world of Vafþrúðnir, and the protagonists exchange greetings in *Vm* 6–10. Then the giant decides to test the knowledge of the newcomer and does so in *Vm* 11–18, while Óðinn gives answers, so that in *Vm* 19 Vafþrúðnir expresses his satisfaction and proposes exactly the contest that Óðinn desires, with the prize for the winner being the head of the loser. Óðinn then begins, in his turn, to question the giant, and does so in two series of questions that differ in the first half-stanzas, the refrains. The refrain of the first part, *Vm* 20–42, is a slightly varying pattern with numbered questions; the refrain of the second part, *Vm* 44–54, is uniform, and questions remain unnumbered. *Vm* 54 contains the final question: what did Óðinn whisper into the ear of his son when he laid him onto the pyre? and in *Vm* 55, which concludes the lay, the giant declares he does not know the answer and pronounces himself the loser.

In my experience any lay reader of the lay immediately senses that this 'winning' question is unfair, and anyone familiar with Tolkien's *The Hobbit* immediately notices the similarity between *Vm* 54 and Bilbo's last 'riddle'. Most scholars also agree that *Vm* 54 is a 'what-have-I-got-in-my-pocket' type of question. However, this particular issue is rarely discussed in the literature in any detail. And yet it is of paramount importance for the drama of *Vm*: it is not just any question, it is Óðinn's *winning* question, but if this question is 'not fair', then why does the giant give up?

Some, like Tim Machan, take the route of explaining away the problem and claim that Óðinn 'has the power and authority to do what he pleases' (Machan 2008, 44; 1988, 30). One feels, though, that this could hardly be the case. In Old Norse tradition with its law-oriented cultural focus (Byock

2001, 73), laws apply to all, and gods, Óðinn included, have no authority even over dwarfs, let alone giants. Even against smaller dwarfs, if they are uncooperative, Æsir have to resort to brute force to have their way (*Skáldskaparmál*, 45, ch. 39), which is proof that they do not command dwarfs' obedience. Against mightier giants brute force is rarely enough: important ones succumb either to overwhelming numbers, like Þjazi (2, ch. G56), or to deceit, like Hrungnir (21, ch. 17), whereas those that Þórr kills unaided are not very serious opponents. As for Óðinn, he relies exclusively on cunning in his dealings with giants, and the fact that he often has to run for dear life after such exploits (4–5, ch. G58) is proof that mere 'power . . . to do what he pleases' is also out of his reach.

Machan, then, fails to justify his statement that 'Vafþrúðnir's resignation to his fate is understandable' (Machan 2008, 43). As we are left with no explanation of this central point in the drama, it would be instructive to examine closely both the nature of the rules in games such as that played by Óðinn and the giant, and the usual fate of Old Norse rule-breakers. Let us first attempt to pin down what exactly is wrong about *Vm* 54. The Eddaic rulebook, if it ever existed, has not survived, but we can still detect the rules by studying the question-and-answer pairs in *Vm* as well as in other sources.

It looks as if the Eddaic *Wissendichtung* game is strictly about mythological objects and their names. The questioner only asks about a mythological character or an object, and expects to get an answer that would either describe such an object or give its name. For example, the giant asks Óðinn four questions, all preceded by the same refrain (*Vm* 11–17, odd stanzas, lines 1–3):<sup>2</sup>

*Vm* 11    Segðu mér, Gagnráðr,        allz þú á gólfi vill  
    þíns um freista frama,  
    hvé sá hestr heitir        er hverjan dregr  
    dag of dróttmǫgu?  
  
    Tell me, Gagnráðr,        since on the hall-floor  
    you want to try your luck:  
    what that horse is called        who draws every  
    day to mankind?  
    (Larrington 1996, 41)

<sup>2</sup> Citations from the *Poetic Edda* throughout are from Neckel's edition of 1927, rather than the later revision by Hans Kuhn, which employs a convoluted spelling system that is neither normalised nor diplomatic, and omits two lays, *Gróagaldr* and *Fjolsvinismál*, relevant to the formulae and statistics presented in this article. Translations are cited from the published editions of Carolyn Larrington and Henry Adams Bellows, according to preference; those where no acknowledgement is made are my own.



numbering: *fróðan* in *Vm* 26 and 28 alliterates both with *it fjórða* and *it fimmta*, *æði* in *Vm* 20 and 22 alliterates with *it eina* and *þat annat*, while *svinnan*, used as part of a stock second line, also alliterates with *it sétta* and *it sjaunda* in *Vm* 30 and 32. We see that the variation pattern of this series is rather rigid too and does not tolerate any freedoms.

The questions also admit of very little variety, conforming to the pattern of *Vm* 20.4, with changes only in the object asked about: moon in *Vm* 22.4: *hvaðan máni um kom*; day in *Vm* 24.4: *hvaðan dagr um kom*; winter in *Vm* 26.4: *hvaðan vetr um kom*, and so forth. We should not be misled (despite McKinnell 1994, 94–95) by the seemingly etiological nature of these questions that literally read ‘from where did X come to the world?’. The formulae of Vafþrúðnir’s answers readily demonstrate that the one who asks *does not expect a story* but only a reference to the object in question: either its name and/or a description.

The giant replies as follows: *Vm* 21.1: *ór Ymis holdi*; *Vm* 23.1: *Mundilferi heitir*; *Vm* 25.1: *Dellingr heitir*; *Vm* 27.1: *Vindsvallr heitir* etc. The topical point of all these answers is the reference to a mythological object or character who is the progenitor of the object named by Óðinn. Especially conclusive are question/answer pairs like *Vm* 22 and *Vm* 23, where a question ‘from where did X appear?’ is first answered by ‘his name is Y’, and only then the explanation is added: this Y was actually the father of X.

There is more freedom of wording in *Vm* 28, 32, 34, 40 and 42, yet the question/answer content remains stubbornly unvaried: the talk is still about objects. Vafþrúðnir, even when the form of the question does not conform to the rigid pattern described above, is in no doubt what kind of answer he should give—and we must surmise that Óðinn is satisfied, as the game continues (otherwise it would have ended with the answer called incorrect). For example, in *Vm* 32 Óðinn asks Vafþrúðnir how the oldest giant has got children without there being a giantess to have them with; the host is unperturbed by the form of the question, replying, in *Vm* 33, that it was the feet of his ancestor that produced the offspring. This tells us that it was the feet that the question was about, not the particularities of the mysterious process of giant androgenesis. The question in *Vm* 34 deviates from the pattern even more, as Óðinn asks his adversary about his first memory, but the answer in *Vm* 35 is again a reference to a mythological object, the name of the giant Bergelmir. It is only in lines 4–6 that serve as an addendum to the main answer that Vafþrúðnir explains that Bergelmir’s funeral is his first memory (see more on *Vm* 35 in Machan 1988; Holtsmark 1946; Christiansen 1952). It is obvious that the point of the question could not have been the actual memory; the game is played until a wrong answer is



is exactly what is wrong with it. The question in *Vm* 54 simply breaks the rules of the game.

What happens to those who break the rules? The Old Norse tradition, as well as certain texts inspired by it, describes the rule-breakers' plight in detail. Let us examine two closely related instances of rule-breaking: the one in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and the one in *Hervarar saga*. The importance of the latter is clear; the former, while obviously not a medieval text, is a parallel too apparent for a modern reader to omit in a discussion, and constitutes the only indication left by Tolkien of his opinion on the nature and rules of wisdom games in Old Norse tradition.

The sequence in the relevant part of Chapter 5 of *The Hobbit*, 'The Riddles in the Dark', matches that of *Vm* point by point. After the initial meeting, the host (Gollum) first tests the guest's (Bilbo's) knowledge, then offers to play on, defining both the prize and the deadly conditions. The exchange continues, with each question a true riddle—a more or less correct description of an object given in such a way as to make guessing difficult. After five rounds Bilbo is out of riddles; he starts handling his equipment in panic and says, thinking aloud: 'What have I got in my pocket?'. Gollum cries 'Not fair!', yet Bilbo now sticks to his question. Gollum demands three guesses, works four, and fails all of them. So, at first sight, the guest wins. But here is what happens next: Bilbo

jumped at once to his feet, put his back to the nearest wall, and held out his little sword. He knew, of course, that the riddle-game was sacred and of immense antiquity, and even wicked creatures were afraid to cheat when they played at it. But he felt he could not trust this slimy thing to keep any promise at a pinch (Tolkien 2001, 88).

Is this a winner's behaviour, backing up to a wall and pulling out a sword? Surely not, and Bilbo knows he has cheated, for 'after all the last question had not been a genuine riddle according to the ancient laws'. Instead of securing a win, the guest barely escapes death—the host would have attacked immediately if not for the drawn blade, and would have killed the guest later but for the loss of his ring that made its wearer invisible. To sum up, Bilbo cheated by asking a *wrong* question, breaking the rules of the game, and had to run for his life.

The subject of riddles is also taken up in Chapter 9 of *Hervarar saga* (32–44). A certain Gestumblindi has fallen foul of King Heiðrekr, and the king summons him to his court. This person is afraid of meeting the king and calls upon Óðinn for help, who arrives, assumes Gestumblindi's appearance and travels to the king. He offers the guest two choices, either to submit to the judgement of the king's men, or to ask riddles for the

king to guess. Again, we see the host stipulating the conditions of the exchange. Gestumblindi-Óðinn chooses the latter, and proceeds to ask a total of 29 riddles. Each is a single stanza either of *ljóðaháttir* (20) or of *fornyrðislag* (7) (two stanzas are an amalgam: a *ljóðaháttir* half-stanza plus a *fornyrðislag* half-stanza) supplied with an extra long line at the end that serves as a refrain: *Heiðrekr konungr / hyggðu at gátu!* ‘O King Heiðrekr / think about this riddle!’. All of them, like Bilbo’s and Gollum’s, conform to the definition of a riddle—a more or less correct description of an object given in a flamboyant way. King Heiðrekr guesses all of them, and, even though he did not recognise Óðinn at first, correctly identifies his guest after guessing riddle number 26. Óðinn then announces that question number 30 will be his last (*Segðu þat þá hinst (Hervarar saga, 44)*) and asks the very same thing he asked Vafþrúðnir, phrased a bit differently: *Hvat mælti Óðinn / í eyra Baldri // áðr hann væri á bál hafðr?* ‘What did Óðinn say / in Baldr’s ear // before he was raised onto the pyre?’. This question is *not* a riddle—and King Heiðrekr duly becomes enraged, pulls out his sword and swings it at his guest, calling him *rog vættir*, ‘a bugger’ (the same insult is used by Þórr against Loki in *Ls* 57–61, odd stanzas). Óðinn has to flee. He turns into a falcon and flies away, but not before the sword claims the bird’s tail (according to the saga, that is the reason why a falcon’s tail is so short (*Hervarar saga, 44*)). To sum up, Gestumblindi-Óðinn cheated by asking a *wrong* question, one that breaks the rules of the game (same verdict in Ruggerini 1994, 178), is called a bugger for it and has to fly for his life. Even his shapeshifting abilities do not avail him entirely as he leaves behind a good portion of his behind—undoubtedly a humiliating experience in the eyes of the Old Norse audience.

We see that the situation in which Óðinn and Vafþrúðnir find themselves is identical to that of Bilbo and Gollum, and that of Gestumblindi and Heiðrekr, on all levels. Óðinn most certainly breaks the rules of the game by asking a question that is ruled out by them, as Bilbo and Gestumblindi do. And yet in *Vm* the rule-breaker does not have to run anywhere, even though he asks the very same question that got him into so much trouble at King Heiðrekr’s. Instead of getting enraged by presumption and attempting to kill the rule-breaker, as Heiðrekr and Gollum do, Vafþrúðnir most unexpectedly acknowledges the god’s (non-)victory, and does so of his own free will. How can this be, or, we should rather ask, what makes the giant declare himself the loser, when everything tells us he is, on the contrary, the winner?

This is the key to the lay’s composition, its dramatic conundrum. Our understanding of the lay suffers without an answer to this question:



we have somehow missed the climax, a protagonist suddenly gives up, and we do not know why. A good guess would be that we are dealing with some sort of a trick on Óðinn's part, a trick that managed to escape our attention, as well as that of the hapless giant (whether he did or did not recognise Óðinn at any stage is arguably immaterial;<sup>3</sup> King Heiðrekr did recognise Óðinn and then tried to kill him once the rules were broken). It seems worthwhile to apply to the case of *Vm* the approach of Smirnitskaya to *Grm* and to look for the solution in the performative speech of Óðinn—his poetic art, as we know, is his mightiest weapon (Smirnitskaya 1993). I would suggest that the missing immediate sense of Óðinn's questions is indeed carefully hidden in the very refrain he uses to introduce his winner: *fjqlð ek fór | fjqlð ek freistaða, // fjqlð ek reynda regin*. This refrain, also used in 6 other stanzas (*Vm* 3 and 44–52, even stanzas), is a very remarkable piece of poetry. Let us consider the metrics first.

### 3. Mistaken Identity and Metrical Illusion: the *fjqlð ek fór* refrain

#### 3.1 Alliteration pattern not belonging in a long line

A *ljóðahátt* stanza is normally made up of two half-stanzas (a few have one, and a few three), and each half-stanza is made up of a long line (the structure also used in *fornyrðislag*) and a full line. In the case of our refrain, *fjqlð ek fór | fjqlð ek freistaða* is the long line, and *fjqlð ek reynda regin* is the full line (the way they are printed by Neckel). A long line itself is made up of two short lines, each possessing two lifts, marked by alliteration, with the second lift in a short line being weaker (that is, alliterating less often) than the first. This is the distinctive feature of the long line: its ending, the strongest metrical position typologically, is its weakest, and the word occupying the last lift—No. 4 of the long line, that is, No. 2 of the second short line—never alliterates;<sup>4</sup> with its long line identical to that of *fornyrðislag*, *ljóðahátt* has to have an actualiser to be effective, and that function is taken up by the full line with its strong ending, see section 1 above.

It is, then, all the more spectacular to find *four-fold alliteration* in the long line of our refrain (hereafter, alliteration boldfaced and underlined): ***fjqlð ek***

<sup>3</sup> See McKinnell 1994 for a contrary view, and Liberman 1989 for more on mistaken identity in Old Norse literature.

<sup>4</sup> 'Lift no. 4 never alliterates' is to be understood as a rule with a poetic meaning to it, so whenever it is broken (as it is, if rarely), we should by default assume it indicates something about the metre in general (Smirnitskaya 1993, 266) and about the particular spot in the poetic text (as I argue here for *Vm*).







We also notice that the variation patterns observed in the long lines with four-fold alliteration, where the second short lines are variations on the first short lines, match those of *galdralag* full lines, especially in two cases: that of the sacred location formula (see *Ls* 3, 4, 14, 27) and that of the *fjöld ek fór* refrain; compare the former with *Grm* 45.6–7 and the latter with *Háv* 142.3–4.<sup>6</sup> It would seem that this is no coincidence, for if only we were to find these pairs of short lines in a different position in their respective stanzas, we would have had no trouble recognising them as pairs of *galdralag* full lines, as they fit the metrical bill perfectly.

Thus I suggest a metrical reinterpretation of the long lines cited above. We should see them as pairs of *galdralag* full lines, and read the respective stanzas as those of *galdralag*. The layout should change accordingly, with *Vm* 54 looking as follows:

<i>Vm</i> 54	Fjöld ek fór, fjöld ek freistaða, fjöld ek reynda regin, hvat mælti Óðinn,      áðr á bál stígi, sjálfr, í eyra syni?
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This layout—a *galdralag* stanza that starts with a full line, not a long line—may look unusual, yet I do not see anything peculiar in it as such. After all, one should not rely only on Neckel's printing conventions for identifying the full lines, for a full line is a metrical, not an editorial reality. Thus it seems proper to recognise this metre—*galdralag* with a full line first—wherever it is found. The received idea (apparently based on Snorri's treatment of the respective metres in *Háttatal*) is that a full line always follows a long line in a (half-)stanza of *ljóðahátt* and *galdralag*, and cannot start such (half-)stanzas. The majority of *ljóðahátt* and *galdralag* (half-)stanzas do conform to this rule, yet there are enough cases when a full line appears as the first line of a (half-)stanza. A comparison between *Háv* 111.9–10 and *Grm* 45.6–7 illustrates this point very well:

<i>Grm</i> 45	ǫllum ásum      þat skal inn koma, Ægis bekkí á, Ægis drekku at.
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<sup>6</sup> Both pairs of lines start with the same adverb, *fjöld* and *mjök* respectively, both are scannable as A-types (unlike *fjöld* in *Vm*, *mjök* in *Háv* 142 does not alliterate and hence may be viewed as filling a drop position), both feature double alliteration, in both only one word of the three is varied, and in both the varied word alliterates.

all the Æsir will come in because of that,  
 Ægir's benches to sit upon,  
 Ægir's drink to consume thereat.

*Háv* 111 Háva hǫllu at Háva hǫllu í,  
 heyrði ek segja svá.

At the Halls of the High, in the Halls of the High,  
 I heard the following being said.

The formulae, *Ægis bekki á* and *Háva hǫllu í*, are identical, alliteration patterns are identical, and even the syllable structures are identical, and yet editors print the respective pairs of lines as if they were in different metres, *Háv* 111.9–10 as a long line and *Grm* 45.6–7 as a pair of full lines (see more on *Háv* 111 in McKinnell 2007a, 102–03). Yet the evidence rather points to the metres being identical too, and the same would apply for *Ls* 27 (cited above), and this will yield a clear example of a *galdralag* (half-)stanza that starts with a full line (see also the discussion of *Háv* 164.1–2 and *Grm* 45.1–2 in the next section).

We also find similar examples outside the Eddaic corpus. An interesting case is Þrándr í Gøtu's creed in Chapter 57 of *Færeyinga saga* (p. 115; the layout is mine):

Gangat ek einn út,  
 fjórir mér fylgja fimm Guðs englar,  
 ber ek bæn fyrir mér,  
 bæn fyrir Kristi,  
 syng ek sálma sjau,  
 sjái Guð hluta minn.

I do not go out alone,  
 four follow me, five God's angels,  
 I possess a prayer for me,  
 prayer for Christ,  
 I sing seven psalms,  
 See to it, God, that I do well.

The best interpretation of the first three lines is that of a half-stanza of *ljóðahátt* with the usual order 'long line then full line' reversed. Lines 2 and 3 are bound together by alliteration on *f*, and they match such regular short lines as, respectively, *Vsp* 6.9 *undorn ok aptan* and *Vsp* 1.4 *mögu Heimdalar*. Line 1 has internal alliteration on vowels and its structure matches that of such full lines as *Vm* 7.3 *verpunk orði á*, *Fm* 10.6 *fara til heljar heðan*, and *Fm* 20.3 *ok rið heim heðan*. In the latter two examples even the rhythm and syntax of the formulae are identical with line 1 of Þrándr's creed.

It is no surprise to find a Christian-looking text in *ljóðahátt*-patterned form, as Þrándr is no Christian. He attempted to thwart the conversion of the Faroe Islands (*Færeyinga saga*, 72, ch. 30), and was only converted because threatened with death (p. 73, ch. 31), and as the saga narrative goes to some lengths to stress, he did not much change his ways; we can deduce the conversion was only for show. The mother of Þrándr's foster-son, who asked him to say the creed aloud, complains it does not sound at all correct to her (*þykki mér engi mynd á kredó*), to which Þrándr replies 'There are all sorts of creeds, and I have my own' (*nú hefí ek mína kreddu . . . ok eru margar kreddur*, p. 116, ch. 57)—which should mean that Þrándr uses it for his own devices, most likely as a protective spell; compare Magnus Olsen's (1962) interpretation of King Gylfi's verse in *Gylfaginning* as such. We know Þrándr is very skilled in magic; he resorts to a complicated bit of sorcery to find out the identity of his enemy's killers (*Færeyinga saga*, 88, ch. 41), and magic is obviously implicated in storms that prevent his forced deportation from the Faroe Islands (73–74, ch. 31). To conclude this subsection, the four-fold alliteration in the *ffjqlð er fór / fjqlð ek freistaða* line of the refrain warrants its reinterpretation: it is better viewed as a pair of full lines of *galdralag* that masquerades as a pair of short lines (= long line). I have shown that the refrain matches the alliteration and variation patterns of known *galdralag* stanzas, and that there are cases when full lines start stanzas. The next question to consider is what makes such metrical masquerading possible.

### 3.2. Variability of the full line and metrical positions of finite verb forms

Indeed, the above treatment of some long lines as pairs of full lines also depends on the possibility of *metrical migration* of certain lines between the role of a full line of *ljóðahátt* and *galdralag* and that of a short line of *fornyrðislag*. Examination of the Eddaic corpus shows that such migration is not only possible but actually happens.

Variations of the *ragna rök* formula are a good example. It appears as a first short line in *Vsp* 44.7, 49.7, 58.7 *um ragna rök*; as a second short line in *Vm* 38.2 *allz þú tíva rök* and 42.2 *hví þú tíva rök*; and as a full line in *Vm* 55.6 *ok um ragna rök* and *Ls* 39.6 *bíða ragna rökrs* (see more on the latter two below). The differences between these lines are confined to formulaically insignificant, non-alliterating material, and we clearly see the formula is an equally good blueprint for all three kinds of line, first short, second short, and full, with the short lines appearing in stanzas of both metres, *fornyrðislag* and *ljóðahátt*.

The same applies to the *Askr Yggdrasils* formula. Compare *Grm* 35.1, 44.1, where this formula fills the entire first short line, and *Grm* 29.6, 30.9, 32.3 *at aski Yggdrasils* and 31.3 *undan aski Yggdrasils*, where it forms the entirety of a full line except for prepositions. Again, the differences between these lines are confined to formulaically insignificant material.

Prepositional formulae are especially prone to migration. Examples with the preposition in pre-position include such first short lines as *Vm* 39.1 *í Vanaheimi* (see more in section 2 above) and such full lines as *Vm* 2.3 *í gørdum goða*, *Grm* 40.3 *enn ór sveita sær*, *Grm* 40.6 *enn ór hausi himinn*, and *Skm* 11.6 *fyr greyjum Gymis*. For examples with a preposition in post-position, see the discussion of *Ægis hǫllu í* formula in section 3.1 above. Verbal formulae can migrate too. Compare *unz þrír kvámu* in *Vsp* 8.5, 17.1 (first short line) and (*þá er/unz um*) *rjúfask regin* in *Vm* 52.6, *Grm* 4.6, *Ls* 41.3, *Sd* 19.9, *Fi* 14.6 (full line).

This migration is possible because there is an area of metrical overlap between full lines and short lines, so that certain structures may be accepted by both.

A short line has strictly two lifts; the full line is defined differently. It is a binary unit (Smirnitskaya 1993, 260–62) with a marked close, usually alliterating and filled by a short disyllable (a naturally marked structure in Old Norse, see Heusler 1889–1969, 726, Liberman 1982, 57, 181–89), and a fluid beginning, separated by a metrical boundary. This beginning may have any number of lifts: usually two, infrequently three or more, and sometimes one. If the latter is the case, we get a two-lift full line. *Ljóðaháttir* and *galdralag* see no difference between two- and three-lift full lines, as shown by stanzas where both are found, for example *Háv* 134.8–12:

*Háv* 134    opt ór skørpum belg            skilin orð koma  
   þeim er hangir með hám  
   ok skollir með skrám  
   ok váfir með vilmøgum.

often from a wrinkled bag            come judicious words  
from those who hang around with the hides  
and skulk among the skins  
and hover among the cheese-bags.

(Larrington 1996, 33)

Line 12 *ok váfir með yil-møgum* is a three-lift one with the compound ending in a short disyllable crossing into the close, while line 11 *ok skollir með skrám* is definitely two-lift. Such two-lift lines would work equally well as short lines: line 11 scans as Sievers's B-type, as does *Vm* 55.6 *ok um ragna røk*, a two-lift migrating full line mentioned a couple of



paragraphs above; compare both with *Vsp* 3.3 *vara sandr né sær*, a first short line of *fornyrðislag*. The same phenomenon may be seen in reverse in *Vsp* 3.3, which we would have read as a full line if we encountered it in a *ljóðaháttir* context: it is a match for *Ls* 39.6 *bíða ragna rǫkr*s, a three-lift full line also mentioned above, as are *Vsp* 29.5 *sá hon yfitt ok um yfitt* and other Sievers's B-type lines. The same goes, but for a difference in Sievers's type (C instead of B), for such *fornyrðislag* short lines as *Hym* 30.5 *drep við haus Hymis*.

The evolution of the full line assured the dominance of a two-lift beginning, but there are still plenty of cases of a single-lift one; these yield two-lift full lines, and it is these lines that feature in the majority of migration examples cited above. It is easiest for such lines to migrate, but even three-lift full lines can do it if the close is a short disyllable and a part of a compound—*askr Yggdrasils* is the best example. A short line scans it as D-type with equivalence in *-drasils*, whereas a full line splits the compound in two parts and has *-drasils* as a separate close lift and *Ask Ygg-* as a two-lift beginning with double alliteration.<sup>7</sup> Some full lines, apparently, cannot migrate, for example those with triple alliteration like *Háv* 160.3 *dvergr, fyr Dellings durum*—a full line scans it easily, but there is no short-line type for it to fit in.

What about the two first lines of the *fjǫlð ek fór* refrain? The second, *fjǫlð ek freistaða*, if scanned as a short line, yields A-type, with lifts filled by *fjǫlð* and *freist-* (first long, second overlong syllable) and drops filled by *ek* and *-aða*. The first, *fjǫlð ek fór*, has only three syllables, so there is no technical possibility of finding four elements (each element, drop or lift, must be filled by at least one syllable). There are clearly two lifts, filled by *fjǫlð* and *fór* (both long syllables), but only one drop, filled by *ek*. This is not a problem; such short lines, with two lifts and one drop, if lacking in such an advanced specimen of Germanic alliterative poetry as *Beowulf*, are far from being infrequent in the *Edda* (see *Háv* 3.1 *elz er þorǫf*, *Vm* 12.4 *hesta betstr*, *Grm* 1.4 *loði sviðnar*, with resolution on *loði*, and more in Sievers 1893, 68, §45.2). Could such lines work as full lines?

The Eddaic corpus yields any number of full lines that could be scanned as A-type short lines. The best example, with a two-syllable last drop, is *Háv* 132.7 *gest né ganganda*; others include *Háv* 43.3 *þeim ok þess vin*, 58.3 *fé eða fjǫr hafa*, 60.6 *mál ok misseri*, *Grm* 49.7 *Viðurr at vígum*, and

<sup>7</sup> There is a very important connection with skaldic metrics here (see structures like Glúmr Geirason's *tíðum*, *Hallinskíða* from his *Gráfeldardrápa*, where a compound is likewise metrically split and crosses into the close (*Heimskringla*, 204, *Skj* I B, 68), but it would be too much of a digression to discuss it in this paper.

so on. For *fjǫlð ek fór*, with two lifts and one drop, we find such full-line equivalents as *Háv* 1.3 *um skodask skyli* (resolution on both lifts), 3.3 *ok á kné kalinn*, 106.3 *ok um grjót gnaga*, *Fi* 36.6 *ef þat klífr kona*, with *Háv* 71.6 *nýtr mangi nás*, 138.3 *nætr allar níu*, 139.3 *nýsta ek níðr*, *Grm* 33.4 *Dáinn ok Dvalinn*, *Ls* 33.3 *hós eða hvárs*, 45.3 and 55.6 *goð ǫll ok gumar*, 65.6 *leiki yfir logi*, *Sd* 19.8 *njóttu ef þú namt*, *Gg* 14.6 *gnóga of gefit*, *Fi* 19.6 *lond ǫll limar* matching the lift-drop-lift sequence of *fjǫlð ek fór* exactly. Another close parallel is *Háv* 18.3 *ok hefir fjǫlð um farit*, readable as a B-type (compare also *Grm* 48.7 *síz ek með fólkkum fór*).

So both *fjǫlð ek fór* and *fjǫlð ek freistaða*, as other lines quoted above, fulfil the metrical conditions necessary for being able to migrate back and forth and to work both as full lines and as short lines. How do we then determine which migratory lines are full and which are short? Simply: a two-lift full line will necessarily feature double alliteration, and that is normal in the first short line but not in the second short line. So a double alliteration in a second short line is, by itself, an indication of a migratory full line (reinforced if the last word is a short disyllable). Indeed, when such two-lift full lines go one after another, it is easy to mistake them for one long line, as the demands of long-line metrics seem to be satisfied. Examples, apart from the *fjǫlð ek fór* refrain, are *Grm* 45.2, where the *sigítva synir* formula, normally a full line (see *Háv* 164.3–4, *Ls* 1.6, 2.3, *Fi* 8.3, 10.3), featuring both a double alliteration and a short disyllable as its last word, is printed by Neckel as a second short line, and *Háv* 164.1–2, where the normally three-lift sacred formula of location, in the form of *Háva hǫllu í* with double alliteration on *h*, is also printed by Neckel as a second short line.

What also eases this migration from full line to short line in some cases, and specifically in the case of the *fjǫlð ek fór* refrain, is one peculiar feature of *fornyrðislag* word order, shared on one hand by its Germanic cognates, and on the other, by *ljóðahátt*. Namely, it is the preferred position of finite forms of the verb. The finite form of the verb (underlined in the following examples) is the least frequently alliterating word-form in Old Germanic epic poetry (Sievers 1893, 41 ff., esp. 44, §24). It is that way for a reason: such forms present action as happening, that is, they actualise the narrative, which is contrary to epic poetics (see section 1 above). Accordingly, the long line relegates such forms to positions of non-prominence, that is, non-alliterating ones: the drops and the fourth lift (Sievers 1893, 40). Thus quite often a finite form of the verb is *the last word* in a long line, as in *Beo* 2 *þēod-cyninga / þrym gēfrūnon*, 3 *hū þā æpelingas / ellen fremedon*, 5 *monegum mægþum / meodosetla oftēah*, 7

*fēasceaft funden* / *Hē þæs frōfre gebād* and so on; *Hel* 1 *manega uuâron* / *the sia môd gespôn*, 4 *undar mancunnea* / *mâriða gifrumida*, 17 *thuru craft godas* / *gecorana uurðun* and so on; *Vsp* 1.7–8 *forn spjöll fira* / *þau er fremst um man*, 2.3–4 *þá er forðum mik* / *fædda hofðu*, 4.1–2 *áðr Burs synir* / *bjóðum yppu*, *Vm* 10.1–2 *óauðigr maðr* / *er til auðigs kómur*, 12.1–2 *Skinfaxi heitir* / *er inn skíra dregr* and so on.

In *ljóðaháttir*, since it is the metre of dramatic lays—texts that feature ‘striving toward the end’ (Lieberman 1990, 16)—finite verb forms are much more welcome: the metre needs actualisers to be effective. So these forms qualify as natural fillers of the strongest position in *ljóðaháttir*: the close of the full line, as in *Háv* 1.3–4 *um skoðask skyli* // *um skygnask skyli*, 9.3 *lof ok vit*, *meðan lifir*, 164.7–8 *njóti*, *sá er nám* // *heilir*, *þeirs hlýddu*, *Vm* 7.6 *nema þú inn snotrari sér*, 20.3 *ok þú Vafþrúðnir vitir*, *Grm* 14.6 *ok hálfan Óðinn á*, 19.6 *Óðinn æ lifir*, 48.7 (see above), *Skm* 6 *nema þú mér sætt segir*, 35.6 *geita hland gefi*, *Ls* 64.6 *þviát ek veit að þú vegr*, and so on.<sup>8</sup> Thus the poetics of *ljóðaháttir* and *galdralag* full lines also favour a word order with the finite verb forms *last*.

We see that both the short line and the full line like to locate the finite verb forms at their ends—the crucial difference being that while the last position of a short line is the weakest, the last position of a full line is the strongest. But word order, taken on its own, appears to be identical (if for diametrically opposed reasons), and it makes the migration of a two-lift full line even easier. Again, the alliteration pattern would indicate that we are dealing with a full line instead of a short line—any finite verb form found on the second lift and alliterating is suspect, especially if it is in the second short line, because this is contrary to *fornyrðislag* poetics.<sup>9</sup> Lines 1 and 2 of our refrain fulfil these conditions: they are both two-lift, they

<sup>8</sup> Notice that in all these examples (except for *Grm* 19.6) the finite verb forms alliterate, in stark contrast to those of the previous paragraph, where none do.

<sup>9</sup> Within epic metre poetics, if there is a need to zoom in on the action, the finite verb forms *do* alliterate, but they are *moved* from their usual place of drop and lift No. 4 to marked positions: lifts No. 3 or No. 1. Consider, respectively, *Vsp* 57.1–2 *Ǫól ter ǫortna* / *ǫígr fold í mar* (third person present of ON *síga* ‘to sink’; one of only two such cases in *Vsp*, appropriate for a key event, the sinking of the earth into the sea during Ragnarök; the other is *Vsp* 59.3–4 for the earth’s consequent resurrection) or *Beo* 217 *gewāt þā ofer wægholm* / *winde gefýsed* (third person preterite of OE *gewitan* ‘to depart’; an appropriate start for a key section in the narrative, as Beowulf makes his first move towards fighting Grendel). The difference with our refrain is not as much the alliteration of a finite verb form (although it is a warning in itself) as the *place* in the line where it happens.

both have double alliteration, they both have finite verb forms on their second lifts, and both verbs are alliterating.

Our metrical interpretation of the *ffjöld ek fór* refrain as *galdralag* would be further strengthened if the compositional function of this stanza matched that of other *galdralag* stanzas in the *Edda*, as we know well that in Eddaic poetry form and function go together.

### 3.3. Composition of Eddaic lays: *galdralag* stanzas outside *Vm*

Known *galdralag* stanzas usually mark turning points of composition of the lays they are found in; the characters that utter them intend, at that point of plot development, to add further force to their words and actions, to aid themselves by resorting to (more) magic. Let us consider the following lays with *galdralag* stanzas: *Grm*, *Ls*, *Alv*, *Skm* and *Háv*, in that order.

The case of *Grm* is thoroughly discussed by Smirnitckaya (1993); I will add only a couple of points. *Ljóðaháttir* serves Óðinn as the means of regaining his godhead. At the crucial moment, when the identity of the supreme god is finally within the reach of the tortured warlock Grímnir, soon to become Óðinn again, he reaches to grasp it with a *galdralag* stanza, *Grm* 45 (quoted above). *Grm* 45 is all spell; in addition to a repetition of the sacred formula *Ægis drekku* at we find double alliteration in the second short line. Immediately after that the warlock begins to recite the names of Óðinn—only he does so in the first person, proving that the effort represented by *Grm* 45 did, indeed, succeed. That Grímnir has already fully become Óðinn in *Grm* 46 and does not postpone his apotheosis until *Grm* 54, where he openly calls himself Óðinn (*Óðinn ek nú heiti*), is attested by *Grm* 51–52, where the warlock, no longer in pain and angrily talking to the fires as he did in *Grm* 1, curses Geirrþóðr and pronounces the king's death sentence.

Important moments are also punctuated by *galdralag* stanzas in *Lokasenna*. Loki thrusts a *galdralag* insult in the face of Bragi (*Ls* 13) immediately after the latter has tried to alleviate his own not very welcoming words to him, clearly showing his unfriendly mood and seriousness of intentions. In *Ls* 23 Óðinn nearly silences the intruder with a *galdralag* stanza, citing Loki's unmanly actions. In *Ls* 54 Loki reinforces his markedly uncivil behaviour towards the gods by uttering another *galdralag* verse and uncouthly refusing yet another placatory action, by Sif. In *Ls* 62, seeing his words unheeded by an enraged Þórr, Loki tries to raise the stakes with a *galdralag* stanza, whereas his previous talk with the thunder-god was conducted in simple *ljóðaháttir*. This does not affect Þórr, however, and Loki turns to leave, cowering before Þórr's sheer force and acknowledging



I went to the wood, and to the wet forest,  
 To win a magic wand;  
 I won a magic wand.

(Bellows 1923, 117)

The listeners must have had some clues that *Skírnir* was using magic, otherwise it is impossible to see why such an extravagant array of gibberish, including goats' piss in *Skm* 35, threats to marry *Gerðr* off to a giant in *Skm* 31 and 35 when she is a giantess herself, and the above-mentioned magic wand of *Skm* 32 that pops up out of nowhere, performs no action and is immediately forgotten, results in *Gerðr* agreeing to marry *Freyr*. It is reasonable to assume that the use of *galdralag* metre was one of those clues, and the compositional efficiency of the stanzas is obvious.

In *Háv*, the speaker frequently intersperses his predominant *ljóðaháttir* with occasional *galdralag*, especially favouring the latter in the section where he recites the spells he knows, at the same time teaching them to his supposed listener *Loddfáfnir*. Particularly interesting are *Háv* 149 and 155:

*Háv* 149 Þat kann ek it fjórða ef mér fyrðar bera  
 bönd at boglimum,  
 svá ek gel, at ek ganga má,  
 sprettr mér af fótum fjöturr,  
 en af höndum hapt.

A fourth I know, if men shall fasten  
 Bonds on my bended legs;  
 So great is the charm that forth I may go,  
 The fetters spring from my feet,  
 Broken the bonds from my hands.

(Bellows 1923, 64)

*Háv* 156 Þat kann ek it ellipta ef ek skal til orrostu  
 leiða langvini  
 und randir ek gel en þeir með ríki fara  
 heilir hildar til,  
 heilir hildi frá,  
 koma þeir heilir hvaðan.

An eleventh I know, if needs I must lead  
 To the fight my long-loved friends;  
 I sing in the shields, and in strength they go  
 Whole to the field of fight,  
 Whole from the field of fight,  
 And whole they come thence home.

(Bellows 1923, 65)

A close variation of *Háv* 149 is in *Gg* 10, and both are possibly related to the *First Merseburg Charm* (all three fetter-shattering spells sharing the words *bōnd*, *hapt* and *springa*); thus it should fall into the category of real spells (see also McKinnell 2007b, 101–03). *Háv* 156 features an unparalleled six-fold alliteration, its closest analogue being the *fjöld ek fór* refrain where *fjöld* is repeated thrice.

Finally, King Gylfi, disguised as Gangleri, when entering the palace of The High, The Equally High and The Third at the beginning of *Gylfaginning* (8, ch. 2), utters a stanza identical to *Háv* 1 but for the lack of repetition of one full line. Its function in the narrative is that of a protective spell against the unknown that awaits him inside (Olsen 1962, 4–5). Other examples of *galdralag* stanzas punctuating important moments include Hrímgæðr's attempts to lure Atli onto the shore to do battle with her in *HHv* 26 and 28, Sigurðr's reply to Reginn in *Fm* 24, magical sections in the teachings of Sigdrífa in *Sd* 13, 14, 18, 19, 25, and 35, and so on.

These examples illustrate two things. First, irrespective of whether certain *galdralag* stanzas stem from real spells or not, such stanzas *do* work as spells in the Eddaic texts; they are meant to work as magic by the characters that utter them and are understood as such by the characters that hear them. They are repetitive too, matching the key features of known magical texts in various European and non-European traditions. Second, *galdralag* stanzas invariably appear at key points in the dramatic development, particularly final climaxes (*Háv*, *Ls*, *Alv*)—thus their formal magic properties are in harmony with their compositional functions. I think it is clear that in each of the above-cited cases the protagonists shift from already performative *ljóðaháttir* to a more powerful *galdralag* in order not to spare the least effort in achieving their ends. And some of these feature four-fold alliteration, especially the two real spells of Skírnir and Hár. The evidence given above shows that the *fjöld ek fór* refrain is no different from these spells. It has the same compositional function, introducing Óðinn's winning question and punctuating the end of the lay, and it has the same formal properties, as its lines feature four-fold alliteration and are structured so as to be variations on each other. Moreover, the refrain is repeated several times (six) before it is used to headline the winning question. A piece of magic would only be made more effective with such repetition. This could hardly be a coincidence, and we can, I think, safely assume that it is, indeed, an Eddaic spell.

A bit of magic would be very appropriate at the end of *Vm*, as we know that the winning question is illegal. Why would the giant suddenly

give up when he has actually just won on Óðinn's default because of rule-breaking, if not for some foul sorcery? A *hidden* bit of magic—and we have shown the refrain is not just *galdralag* but a camouflaged one pretending to be harmless *fornyrðislag*—would be especially handy: the person to be affected would probably not notice anything until it is too late. Óðinn's strategy fits this interpretation: he repeats the refrain several times before introducing his winner, so by the time he strikes his death blow the giant is literally spellbound. His use of the same refrain in his answer to Frigg in *Vm* 3 is also explained (such refrain 'previews' are otherwise unknown in the *Edda*); he would not just be trying to reassure his wife, he would be showing her the trusty weapon he intends to use.<sup>10</sup>

The trained ear of a carrier of Old Norse tradition, attuned to repetitive magic, well-versed in Eddaic poetics, and accustomed to the idea of camouflaged spells such as the *jarlsníð* of Þorleifr Ásgeirsson (*Þorleifs þátr*, 222–23, ch. 5) and healing runes that in fact cause disease (*Egils saga*, 229–30, ch. 72) would have sensed all this—just as it would have sensed the nature of Skírnir's monologue and would not have been surprised at Gerðr's suddenly falling in love with Freyr. So far we have trained our eyes enough to see through the metrical disguise and detect the *galdralag* in the refrain, and have ascertained the metre's compositional role in the *Edda*, as an experienced Old Norse audience would have been able to do. The only missing piece of the puzzle is an appropriate meaning for the refrain. We know it is a spell, but we do not know yet what it does. So we have some additional eye-training to do.

#### 4. Grammar is Glamour: the verbs *fara*, *freista* and *reyna* in the context of the refrain

At first sight the meaning of the refrain seems to be straightforward, with nothing magical, sinister or even vague about it: *Fjqlð ek fór / fjqlð ek freistaða // fjqlð ek reynda regin*, that is *Much have I travelled / much have I asked about, // much have I tested the gods*. Óðinn seems to be simply boasting of his experience. There is, however,

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, the refrains in *Vm* 3 and the later part of the lay are slightly different, and that of the dialogue with the giant features an extra sound repetition: *Vm* 3.2 reads *fjqlð ek freistaða*, but *Vm* 44.2 reads *fjqlð ek freistaðak* (other stanzas in the manuscript have the refrain abbreviated to first letters). For what it is worth, dropping one repetition in a preview seems appropriate.



one peculiar feature that provides a hint at what the refrain's hidden meaning may be: it is a subtle grammatical defect in the *fjqlð ek freistaða* line.

*Freista* is a transitive, second class weak verb that takes a genitive object. The word *fjqlð* is an *ō*-stem feminine noun with forms in the nominative, dative and accusative singular identical, and genitive singular having the form *fjalðar*; it can also be used adverbially. If we read *fjqlð* as a noun, then it must be the object of *freista* (as *ek* is the subject), and in this case its form is wrong. If we read *fjqlð* as an adverb, then *freista* remains without an object—and a close examination of its usage reveals it is impossible in this context. In prose as in poetry *freista* only appears without an object when it takes the form of the infinitive. Even in such cases it usually has an object:

Egill segir: 'Freista skal ek þessa ráðs, er þú vill, en ekki hefi ek við því búizk, at yrkja lof um Eirík konung.' Arinbjörn bað hann freista [þessa ráðs] (*Egils saga*, 182, ch. 59)

Egill says: 'I will try that way, the one that you want [me to try], and yet I have not prepared myself for such things as composing panegyrics for King Eiríkr'. But Arinbjörn bade him to try [that way].

Egill's phrase is a construction with a modal verb, where objectless infinitives are perfectly legal, and yet there is an object (*þessa ráðs*) nonetheless. The true objectless *freista* of the list of Odinic skills in *Háv* 144.4—*veistu, hvé freista skal*—seems to be rare if not unique (although perfectly grammatical); for further cases of *freista* in the *Elder Edda* see Ruggerini 1994, 159–62. On the contrary, a finite *freista* is always accompanied by an object or a subordinate clause. The *Icelandic saga concordance* (1996) lists 27 instances of *freista*, and all of them adhere to this rule. The only exception is when the object is ellipted because it is present in a previous clause, and the only such example for finite *freista* is Egill's '*Par leikr þó minn hugr á, segir Egill, 'ef vér hefum lög at mæla, at vér freistim [at mæla lög]*' (*Egils saga*, 214, ch. 68; see Arinbjörn's remark above for a case of object ellipsis with an infinitive *freista*). In our refrain *freista* is unarguably a finite form—first person singular, preterite, and there is nothing in the previous clause that could be its object and be ellipted.

This absence of a grammatically required object is remarkable. Is it due to demands of the variation: *fjqlð ek freistaða* is positioned second to be a variation on *fjqlð ek fór*? *Fara* is an intransitive verb of movement, so no object is possible there. But then after *fjqlð ek freistaða* comes *fjqlð ek reynda regin*, and *reynda*, being transitive, has an object, and one would

argue that *freista*, also transitive, is grammatically closer to *reyna* than to *fara*.

The deciding factor in telling which clause *fjǫlð ek freistaða* is closer to—*fjǫlð ek fór* that precedes it or *fjǫlð ek reynda regin* that goes after it—must surely be the metre, as it is the driving force of the variation. If so, the answer depends exactly on the metrical interpretation of the *fjǫlð ek fór* / *fjǫlð ek freistaða* line. If it is a long line, then these two short lines are closer to each other than either of them is to the full line, *fjǫlð ek reynda regin*, and the ungrammaticality of an objectless *freista* is necessary because it works as a variation on an objectless *fara*. Yet we have concluded that the *fjǫlð ek fór* / *fjǫlð ek freistaða* line only *pretends* to look like a pair of short lines, and in reality is a pair of full lines. In this case all three lines in this half-stanza are equally close to each other and share the same structure. That would work well for *freista* and *reyna* as both are transitive, taking objects in the genitive and accusative respectively, but not for the intransitive *fara*. So we need a transitive variety of a very intransitive verb to help us out of this dead end.

Old Norse is unique among the Germanic languages in possessing such variety. Gothic and Old English *faran*, German *fahren* etc. are all stubbornly intransitive and mean only ‘to move’, but Old Norse *fara* can take an object in the dative. Even more important is its meaning of ‘to kill, to take life’ (Cleasby 1962, 143), found both in poetry (*HH* 14.7–8 *farit hafði hann allri / ætt geir-Mímis* ‘he destroyed the entire / family of the warrior’) and prose (*hon varð við stygg ok vildi fara sér* ‘she lost her composure and wanted to kill herself’, *Landnámabók*, 67, note 5). If we are dealing with this murderous *fara* here, then the objectlessness of *freista* immediately assumes a function: it helps reinforce the default reading of *fara* as an intransitive verb of movement and thus serves to hide the sinister alternative reading that would have been more readily suggested in case two verbs out of three, *freista* and *reyna*, had a manifest object (whereas in the refrain as we have it, two verbs out of three do not). Such grammatical and semantic camouflage parallels the metrical camouflage discussed above.

The specific meanings of *freista* and *reyna* solidify in this light. *Freista*, as in the example from *Egils saga* above, can be seen as a fairly neutral verb with a meaning of ‘to try’, yet neutrality is in fact on its semantic periphery. Consider *Vsp* 28:

<i>Vsp</i> 28	Ein sat hon úti, Yggjungur ása,	þá er inn aldni kom, ok í augu leit:
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'Hvers fregnið mik?      hví freistið mín?  
 Allt veit ek, Óðinn,      hvar þú auga falt—  
 í inum mæra      Mímis brunni!'

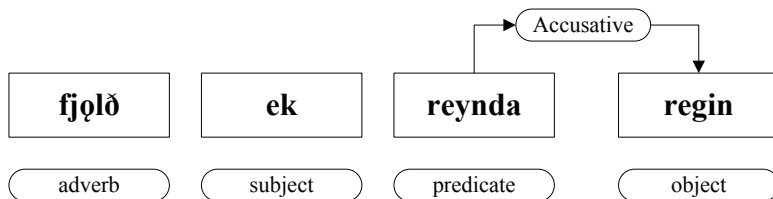
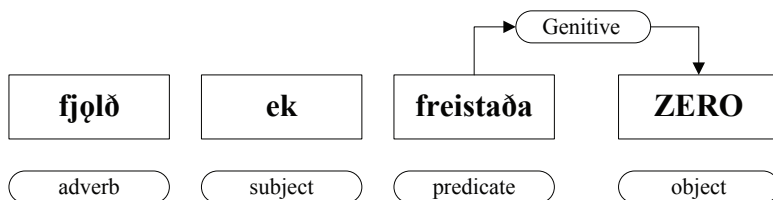
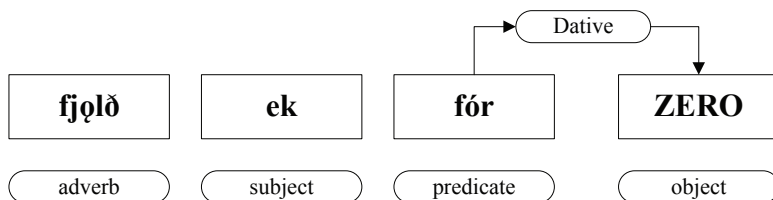
Alone she sat outside      when the Old One came,  
 Awe-wielding áss,      and into the eye he looked:  
 'What do you push me for?      what are you after with me?  
 Óðinn, I know all about      your eye and where you hid it—  
 in the mightily famous      Mimir's well!'

where *freista* means 'to torture smb. in order to obtain information'; it is not by any coincidence that it appears in *Háv* 144 in the list of Óðinn's skills that also include the carving of runes and making of bloody sacrifices. The object of *freista* is always in peril of body and soul, as its use in the following biblical context testifies: *Þá leiddi andinn Jesú út í óbyggðina, at hans yrði freistað af djöflinum* 'Then was Jesus led up of the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil' (Matthew 4.1). Although the Icelandic Bible is a later text than the *Edda*, the use is very telling: it parallels that of Wulfila who, hundreds of years before either the Icelandic Bible or *Codex Regius*, used Gothic *fraisan*, cognate of ON *freista*, in the same contexts (Luke 4.1–2 parallels Matthew 4.1):

Lukas 4.1–2 Iesus . . . tauhans was in ahmin in auþidai, dage fidwor tigus, fraisans fram diabolau.

Lehmann (1986, 123) lists the following cognates of Old Norse *freista*: ahd. *freisōn* 'be in danger', mhd. *vreisen* 'bring into danger', and mhd. *vreist* 'danger'. Jan de Vries (1961, 141) adds, *inter alia*, ahd. *freista* 'Gefahr', as. *frēsa*, afr. *frēse*, mnl. *vrese*, ahd. *freisa* 'Gefahr', as. *frēsōn*, mnl. *vresen* 'in Gefahr bringen'. These describe the semantic range of *freista* in an unambiguous, if not altogether pleasing, manner: whatever the precise action denoted by the verb, the implementation of this action means nothing good for the person affected by it. The verb *reyna* is located in the same semantic field; why else would its Proto-Scandinavian predecessor have been chosen as the root for the name of a runic spear? The third-century-AD inscription on the spearhead from Øvre Stabu reads *raunijaR* and means 'one who tries something'; it looks as if it is the name of the spear, and what a spear tries is apparently to kill its target (Page 1987, 25).

Everything seems to add up—the metrics of the refrain, its compositional role, the variation pattern, and the grammar and the semantics of the verbs used. The unified grammatical structure of the refrain would now look like this:



*Freista* and *fara* are shown to have zero objects—assumed by the speaker and detectable by the listener, but only if he is very attentive. As the refrain is a triple variation, and as the objects of *freista* and *fara* in the respective meanings are persons, we should also assume that zeroes replace words that denote objects belonging to the same class as the only one present—*regin*. The zeroes should thus stand for mythological characters in general, such as gods, dwarfs, giants, and the refrain in this form would parallel a well-known Eddaic formula that we find in *Vsp* 48.1–2 *hvat er með ásum / hvat er með álfum*, *Skm* 17.1–3, 18.1–3, *Þrk* 7.1–2, 4–5, and elsewhere (for more examples, see section 3.1 above), where variation is employed to denote all the living beings in the world taken together.

The refrain should then be translated as follows: *I have contrived to destroy many [a living being], / I have tortured many [a person], // I have put to life-threatening tests many a god*. It is indeed a declaration of supreme power, the totality of which is reflected in the skilful choice of verbs that use all the three oblique cases of Old Norse grammar: accusative for *reyna*, dative for *fara* and genitive for *freista*. Óðinn leaves no loopholes: his victim has no grammatical case to hide in. The gradual increase of

the length of successive lines—*fjólð ek fór* the shortest, *fjólð ek freistaða* longer, *fjólð ek reynda regin* longest—is an effective rhetorical tool and a poetic trap: the secret may be revealed only after the third line has been uttered, so by the time the victim has reverse-engineered the grammar, its glamour has worked.

Now this does sound like a spell, but what is it supposed to be doing? The answer is obvious: Óðinn's only hope of winning on an illegal question was Vafþrúðnir failing to call his bluff, so he had to do away with the giant's morale and force him to forget the rules. I would argue that the proposed reading of the refrain is depressive enough to qualify as a spell for morale destruction. And once the giant forgot about the rules, it was easy, for truly, as Vafþrúðnir himself acknowledges, 'no man knows what [Óðinn] said in bygone days into [his] son's ear' (Larrington 1996, 49). Indeed, no man knows whether Óðinn actually said anything on that occasion.

## 5. Conclusions

So how is Óðinn's win brought about? Certainly not, to quote Bo Ralf once again, 'by the superior wisdom' (Ralf 1972, 116). In fact, not a single Eddaic wisdom contest is ever won so. It is always sheer cheek that prevails, in *Vm* as in *Alv* and in the *ljóðahátt* section of *HHv*. Óðinn wins by carefully hiding a spell in his speech, a spell that would not kill Vafþrúðnir (evidence seems to suggest Óðinn was not in possession of such a one) but would make him forget that his counterpart had broken the rules by asking an illegal question and so lost the game and was, consequently, to lose his head. The Father of Battles magically deludes Vafþrúðnir into declaring, of his own free will, his failure, when it is not the giant who has lost, but the god who has broken the rules. In doing so the supreme *áss* has recourse, as duly befits him, not to a sword, but to a word, propelling himself to victory, as he also does in *Grm* (Smirnitckaya 1993, 271), by the most powerful art at his disposal, the one that he went a long way to acquire and then offered as a gift to the skalds—the subtle art of poetry, playing on many things at the same time: the transitivity/intransitivity of *fara*, the semantics of *reynda* and *freista*, Old Norse grammar, the differences between *fornyrðislag* and *ljóðahátt* in metrics and poetics, the migratory potential of two-lift full lines, variation patterns, word order and alliteration. We see a master at play: he cheated at the rules, he cheated at the metre, he cheated at the grammar, and he cheated at the sense right under our very eyes, and but for paying attention to every

little detail *and* putting all these details together—for they work only in unison—we would have missed all that just as Vafþrúðnir did.

Thus, when Bertha Phillpotts (1920, 105) says that

it is obviously implied that the scene ends with the giant's death at the hands of Odin, and we should expect the commentator to supply us with a prose account of this, somewhat as the prose at the end of *Grímnismál* tells of Geirrøð's death—and yet the dramatic catastrophe has apparently escaped the commentator's attention,

we must disagree. The prose commentary is unnecessary as the dramatic catastrophe, by clever and purposeful subterfuge, is all there, in the verse, language and metre.

**Note:** I am grateful to John McKinnell, Stephen Harris and Alaric Hall for reading earlier drafts of this article and for their helpful comments and suggestions.

### Abbreviations

*Alv* – *Alvíssmál*

*Beo* – *Beowulf*

*Fi* – *Fjölsvinnsmál*

*Fm* – *Fáfnismál*

*Gg* – *Gróagaldr*

*Grm* – *Grímnismál*

*Háv* – *Hávamál*

*Hel* – *Heliand*

*HH* – *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri*

*HHv* – *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*

*Hym* – *Hymiskviða*

*Ls* – *Lokasenna*

*Lukas* – *Aiwaggeljo þairh Lukan anastodeiþ*

*Sd* – *Sigrdrífumál*

*Skj* – *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*

*Skm* – *För Skírnis*

*Vm* – *Vafþrúðnismál*

*Vsp* – *Völuspá*

*Prk* – *Þrymskviða*

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## REVIEWS

ALEXANDERS SAGA. AM 519a 4to IN THE ARNAMAGNÆAN COLLECTION, COPENHAGEN. Edited by ANDREA DE LEEUW VAN WEENEN. *Manuscripta Nordica 2. Museum Tusulanum*. Copenhagen, 2009. xxv + 352 pp. with CD-ROM. ISBN 978-87-635-2604-3.

As is made clear in the preface (p. ix), this book, with its accompanying CD-ROM, does not stem from a specific desire to produce an edition of *Alexanders saga* but from the wish to give a morphological and orthographical description of an Old Icelandic manuscript that is of appropriate length, exists in a suitable state of preservation and dates from about halfway between the Icelandic Homily Book and Möðruvallabók. The result remains true to its origin in that it focuses solely on MS AM 519a 4to, apart from a brief survey of other manuscripts of the saga and the traditions to which they belong (pp. 6–7), and in that it almost entirely ignores literary considerations: the Latin poem, *Alexandreis*, of which *Alexanders saga* is a paraphrase, is dealt with in a few hundred words (pp. 5–6) whilst the nature and style of the Old Norse translation are dispatched in a single paragraph of eight lines (p. 7). It is, nevertheless, a monumental work that succeeds in what it sets out to do, and it represents in almost every respect a huge advance on the edition of *Alexanders saga* by Finnur Jónsson (1925), which superseded the 1848 edition by Unger and has remained, until the appearance of van Weenen’s work, the only edition that is viable for scholarly purposes. Where Finnur’s version, likewise based on AM 519 4to, continues to have the advantage is that its *apparatus criticus* gives at least some indication, however limited, of the variant readings in other manuscripts, and that the lacuna caused by the loss of two leaves after folio 18 has been filled in with text from MS AM 226, thus providing the reader with an unbroken narrative. In all other respects, however, the new edition is vastly superior, offering a much more accurate text, which is made available in three levels of transcription (as explained below), plus digital photographs of the manuscript against which all readings can be checked. The CD-ROM, furthermore, includes a PDF file setting out the ways in which van Weenen’s editorial policies differ from Finnur’s and listing all points of divergence from Finnur’s readings.

Particularly impressive in van Weenen’s edition is the wealth of material offered. After a general introduction the book presents a chapter describing the codex, with a substantial section on palaeography, followed by two lengthy chapters on orthography and morphology. Next comes the text of *Alexanders saga* in the form of an extremely elaborate and detailed diplomatic transcription, sometimes referred to as the “‘facsimile’ print” (p. 2), which seeks to preserve the letter forms as much as possible and to reproduce all significant markings on a sign-by-sign basis. A lemmatised index of all the lexical items found in the saga text follows, giving each headword in normalised spelling and listing all instances of the word, the instances being reproduced in the forms found in the ‘facsimile’ print. A bibliography, far from complete but concentrating on codicological matters together with primary

texts, then precedes a brief but welcome guide to the use of the CD-ROM. Further guidance is available on the CD-ROM itself, which also contains a suitable font, a style file and a java script file needed for the representation of the HTML files; in addition to the list, mentioned above, of the points of divergence from Finnur's edition, further PDF files include an index of all lemmata referred to in the introduction, a list of the non-initial parts of compounds, a running commentary on matters of palaeographic interest taken line by line throughout the manuscript text, and the introduction to Jón Helgason's 1966 facsimile edition of AM 519a 4to, which remains one of the most significant essays on the manuscript and its relation to other versions of the saga. There are two further PDF files that will be of great use to the reader whose principal interest is in the saga as literature: the first contains the text in a diplomatic transcription of the more usual kind, showing expansions and employing modern letter forms (but using long s throughout); the second presents the same text in normalised spelling using the conventions of the *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*. Digital images of the entire manuscript, opening by opening, are also included as JPEG files. Most important, the normalised and diplomatic texts, together with a version of the 'facsimile' transcription (slightly modified because not all the characters can be displayed properly in electronic format), are made available as HTML files and, by using a browser, the reader can move quite easily from one version to either of the others. Each page of whatever version (not just the 'facsimile' version, as seems to be stated on p. 3), furthermore, contains a link to the digital image of the corresponding manuscript folio, whilst the normalised version allows the reader to click on any paragraph in order to be taken to the corresponding section of the *Alexandreis* in the Latin text edited by Colker (1978). Additionally, allowing the mouse pointer to hover on a word in any of the three Old Norse versions causes a pop-up window to open and display the word as it appears in the other two versions; the window also shows the relevant lemma, the word's folio and line reference, its part of speech and morphological details, and any emendation that might be involved. The electronic edition thus comprises an excellent study resource.

It is inevitable that a project of this scope and detail should have involved compromises and questionable decisions. Many of these are set out with admirable candour in the discussions, but the underlying rationale is at times left to be inferred. Despite the care lavished on the 'facsimile' print, for example, and the fact that Finnur Jónsson's approach to capitalisation is criticised as not leading to a proper representation of what appears in the manuscript (p. 12), van Weenen notes that she prints capital P, Y and Þ, standing on the line, where the manuscript uses enlarged minuscules (pp. 32–33); this causes no real problem but it is a pity, given the trouble that has been taken over representing other signs accurately. A large section of the book (pp. 81–163), furthermore, is devoted to a painstaking study of morphology, yet we are told that if a noun occurs unambiguously in a weak form as well as a strong form, e.g. nom. sg. *hluti* and *hlutr*, any ambiguous instance, such as dat. pl. *hlutum*, will always be assigned to the strong declension (p. 16); this may be convenient but it is not logical, and decisions of this kind must tend to

compromise the value of the statistics that feature prominently in the morphology chapter. The decision (p. 5) to divide up the diplomatic and normalised texts into paragraphs that correspond to those of the *Alexandreis* in the English translation by Pritchard (1986), moreover, illustrates a different kind of problem: it imposes on the saga a literary-critical judgement concerning the arrangement of ideas, and it does so by importing this judgement from a particular treatment of a related but separate literary work. A further consequence, since Colker and Pritchard differ in their understanding of the Latin, is that Colker's own paragraphing has been removed from his Latin text, to which the reader is led by clicking on any point in the Old Norse normalised version as mentioned above, and has been replaced with Pritchard's. Not only does this misrepresent Colker's editorial work but it also results in the occasional absurdity of a paragraph beginning in the middle of a sentence, as at line VI.77.

It remains to say that this edition of AM 519a 4to is a work from which one can learn a great deal about Old Icelandic palaeography, orthography and morphology. As an edition of *Alexanders saga* in this particular version, the caveats of the previous paragraph notwithstanding, it is not likely to be superseded for many decades, if at all. At the same time it leaves room for a study of aspects of the saga's language other than the morphological elements: in particular the opulent diction, which is such a striking feature of this prose, cries out for in-depth analysis of a kind not attempted by van Weenen, as does the saga writer's response to the elaborate rhetoric of his Latin source. And there is still a need for a different kind of edition, one that takes due account of the various manuscript traditions and gives due weight to the literary concerns of this most literary of sagas. If anyone attempts these tasks, however, they will not bring them to completion without owing a huge debt to van Weenen, especially for her 'facsimile' transcription, which she herself regards as the most important part of her work, the part that is 'absolutely indispensable for linguistic research', and which deserves to be printed, as it has been, on good-quality paper that can survive for centuries (p. 2).

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SKALDIC POETRY OF THE SCANDINAVIAN MIDDLE AGES. VOLUME VII: POETRY ON CHRISTIAN SUBJECTS. 1: THE TWELFTH AND THIRTEENTH CENTURIES. 2: THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY. Edited by MARGARET CLUNIES ROSS. *Brepols*. Turnhout, 2007. lxxiv + 1040 pp. ISBN 978-2-503-51893-0.

This volume, *Poetry on Christian Subjects*, was the first to appear in the beautifully designed new complete edition of skaldic poetry, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages (SkP)*. As Ármann Jakobsson has stated in his review of Volume II, the edition is 'without doubt one of the most important scholarly achievements within the field of Old Norse Studies we have yet seen in this young millennium' (*Saga-Book XXXIV* (2010), 129).

The contributors to volume VII are all experienced editors and interpreters of hagiographical and Christian religious literature. The volume includes some of the best known poems in the corpus of Old Norse-Icelandic literature, such as *Lilja*, *Geisli* and *Harmsól*, as well as less familiar poems and fragments, and the Latin *Stanzas Addressed to Fellow Ecclesiastics*, edited by Jonathan Grove.

In 1946, in a paper entitled 'Planer om en ny udgave af skjaldedigtingen', Jón Helgason addressed a group of Scandinavian scholars who met in Copenhagen to discuss *nordisk filologi*, on the need for a new edition of skaldic poetry. The proceedings of the meeting were printed in *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* 19 (1950). Decades passed, and the only 'new' edition to appear, in 1967 and 1973, was the photographic reprint of Finnur Jónsson's 1912–15 edition, *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigting*. At the Sixth International Saga Conference at Helsingør in 1985, in his paper 'On a New Edition of Scaldic Poetry', Bjarne Fidjestøl continued the discussion initiated by Jón Helgason (*The Sixth International Saga Conference, Workshop papers* (Copenhagen, 1985), 319–35). Fidjestøl pointed out that a new edition 'should resolutely take textual transmission as its point of departure' (320). He suggested that skaldic poetry should be arranged in five categories: 1) the Kings' Saga group; 2) the poetological group; 3) the Icelandic group; 4) the *fornaldarsaga* group; 5) the religious group (320–21).

The structure of *SkP*, as outlined in Volume VII, will not be very different in its thematic arrangements from Bjarni Fidjestøl's suggestions. Volumes I–II will contain Poetry from the Kings' Sagas, Volume III Poetry from Treatises on Poetics, Volume IV Poetry on Icelandic History, Volume VII Icelandic skaldic poetry with Christian devotional subject-matter. The edition of each stanza includes a) a normalised text, based on the most important manuscript; b) variants from other manuscripts; c) the text in prose word order; d) reference to other works in which the stanza appears; e) translation into English; f) commentary and discussion of the stanza, including, where appropriate, how it fits into the larger context of a poem or verse sequence. The English translations will certainly be useful to scholars who are not Old Norse specialists. The editors keep emendations to a minimum; they are clearly marked in italics and explained in the notes. This is an improvement on previous editions. Each poem is preceded by an introduction. References to Finnur Jónsson's and Ernst Albin Kock's editions are helpful when users want to compare translations and comments.

The composition of skaldic poetry on Christian subjects is a fascinating subject, which deserves much more scholarly attention than it has received in the past. Although the highlights of Christian poetry are products of the twelfth century onwards, it would be interesting to devote more study to them as a unity from the first emergence of Christian ideas in Old Norse poetry. As Fidjestøl pointed out, it is questionable whether religious poetry on the two Norwegian missionary kings, Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson, should be classified as Kings' Saga poetry or religious poetry (Fidjestøl 1985, 321). The twelfth-century poem *Geisli* by Einar Skúlason, composed in honour of Óláfr Haraldsson, is included in Volume VII of the edition, but older poems on the king are also important for

the study of the emergence of the cult of St Óláfr. These will appear in Volume I: *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas* 1, soon to be published.

The editors' aim is to provide a text which best represents the language of the period when the relevant poems were composed. This is both helpful and ambitious, but not easy. Generally the normalisation is convincing, but the reproduction of fourteenth-century spelling is not always successful, as Haukur Þorgeirsson has pointed out ('Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages – ritdómur'. In *Són. Tímarit um óðfræði* 7 (2009), 164–75). There are some inconsistencies: *fylgðarmenn* (p. 623), *skelfður* (p. 621), *sæmð* (p. 620) (spelled *sæmd* elsewhere in the same poem). The word *hvorki* is spelled variously *hvorki* (p. 586), *hvörki* (p. 642) and *hvárki* (p. 917).

There is more awareness and knowledge of hagiography and Christian ideology than in previous editions and studies of skaldic poetry. As an example, Katrina Attwood is right to interpret the *Máría* in *Harmsól* st. 52 as Mary Magdalen rather than the Virgin Mary. Mary Magdalen represents repentance, which is the theme of the stanza. The first part of volume VII contains *Geisli*, rightly described in the edition as ground-breaking. The poem clearly reveals the poet's knowledge of Christian ideology and motifs, as Martin Chase shows in his valuable annotations. St Óláfr the martyr, *váttir dýrðar* (stanza 62), and his miracles are the central theme of the poem. But it gives the poem a greater depth to emphasise that Einarr Skúlason was also a court poet, who is able also to praise the king's military exploits in a traditional way (Introduction 5–6), though the reader must turn to Volume II (*Poetry from the Kings' Sagas* 2, *From c. 1035 to c. 1300*, edited by Kari Ellen Gade (Turnhout, 2009)) for the editions of these poems. *Geisli* is also a court poem in the sense that it was delivered in a king's hall, in the presence of kings, who are addressed by the poet (stanza 8).

It can hardly be denied that *Lilja* is the most important poem in the second part of the volume and that its users are fortunate to have Martin Chase as its editor. It will certainly be much used by future scholars of Christian poetry. Therefore, it is extremely important that the text be reliable. Unfortunately, there are some inconsistencies, especially in designating the length of a vowel with an accent (a / á, o / ó). For instance, the form *dróttinn* is used in stanza 16, when rhyming with *skjótt*. Elsewhere, however, the preferred spelling *drottinn* is used even in stanza 75, where the rhyme with *ótt*- occurs again. (On the project's website the form *dróttinn* appears here, suggesting that there may have been some slippage of fonts in this initial volume of the series.) Further inconsistencies of this kind have been pointed out by Haukur Þorgeirsson (2009, 166–67). For the interpretation of stanza 87 and the parallel drawn between blood and milk, it might have been useful to refer to Caroline Walker Bynum, especially *Jesus as Mother. Studies in the Spirituality of the Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1984).

Some users may miss a diplomatic edition of the stanzas. Indeed, the participants in 'Greinir', the research project on metrics led by Professor Kristján Árnason, have come to the conclusion that although the Finnur Jónsson edition *sé barn síns tíma virðist hún enn sem komið er langbesta heimildin um texta flestra dróttkvæða* 'was a child of its time, it still seems to be by far the best source for the text of

most *dróttkvætt* poetry' (Kristján Árnason, 'Samspil máls og brags í íslenskum kveðskap'. *Són. Tímarit um óðfræði* 7 (2009), 147–60). It is to be hoped, however, that future scholars will make use of the new edition's website alongside the printed edition. The website will show a transcription and a photograph of the base manuscript of each stanza, as well as Finnur Jónsson's transcription in his A1 volume and his normalised version in B1. These future users will have the best of both worlds.

This well-produced volume is not without misprints. Giving Icelandic names the correct accentuation is a problem: *Jón Árason* (p. 558), *Jón Eiríksson* (p. 295), *Magnus Már Lárusson* (p. 908), *Kátrínardrápa* (p. 931). There are some other minor flaws. The introduction by Margaret Clunies Ross and Kari Ellen Gade, however, though brief, is clear and informative. It explains editorial principles and the general outline of the edition. *SkP* is first and foremost an edition, a handbook. Let's hope that it will inspire scholars, both of Old Norse and of European religious poetry, to pay more attention to the treasures presented in this volume. The editors deserve our praise and gratitude.

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MYTHS OF THE PAGAN NORTH. THE GODS OF THE NORSEMEN. By CHRISTOPHER ABRAM. *Continuum*. London and New York, 2011. xiii + 258 pp. ISBN 978-1-8472-5247-0.

The introduction to this book states that it is 'designed to introduce the myths to a non-specialist readership in a new way, and to encourage people who are already familiar with the Norse myths to think about them differently' (p. vii). It is as much 'about Norse paganism' as 'about *pagan* myths', if not more so, and as is conveniently summarised on its handsome dust-jacket, is primarily concerned with the 'history of myth-making', rather than with providing a catalogue of Norse mythology (p. viii).

The first full fifty pages, 'On the Sources of Norse Mythology', catalogue the nightmarish difficulties encountered when one attempts to put pen to paper and sketch out any of the gods of the pagan Norsemen. But this is a very good thing. It can only help to discourage scholars from undergraduate level upwards from writing nonsense about 'Germanic' paganism as a whole, and it will serve as a wonderfully stout stick with which to beat those who still seek to appropriate the mythological, religious and literary culture of the 'pagan north' to suit ends which are at best comically misguided, and at worst, downright abhorrent.

The following chapter, similarly, offers a balanced assessment of the potential value of the *Germania* of Tacitus to any investigation into Norse and other 'Germanic' religious cultures, and the problems and possibilities of using place names and archaeology as evidence for pagan worship, as well as those later accounts of heathen ritual (Adam of Bremen, Ibn Fadlan) that have often been cited as evidence for the practical worship of the gods. Noting that the difficulties

which arise from attempting to tease out any coherent mythologies from this sort of pre-literate evidence are insurmountably problematic, Abram doesn't attempt to, and quite rightly, given that the stated aim of this book is to offer a history of myth-making. Abram concludes that 'there is no doubt that pagan religion is the soil out of which Norse myth has grown', but that Norse mythology as we understand it was only to reach its 'fullest flowering' in Scandinavia long after the conversion to Christianity (p. 80).

The third chapter begins to get stuck into the verses composed by 'pagan poets for pagan audiences' (p. 121), in which Abram argues that the role of mythology in the poetic tradition developed over the period c.850–950, presumably thus discounting the *carminibus antiquis* 'ancient songs' with which the first century Germans apparently celebrated 'Hercules' (whom Abram aligns with Thor, p. 55),<sup>1</sup> as described in *Germania* 3. This is fair enough, I suppose, depending on whether or not one believes Tacitus knew what he was talking about. This chapter also offers some insightful commentary on the presence of mythological material in skaldic poetry, whilst cautioning us that mythological poetry and religious poetry are not one and the same thing; 'when a skald mentions a particular god in his verse, it does not mean that he was a member of that god's active cult' (p. 82). It is particularly poignant, on this note, that Abram concludes this chapter with a case study of Egill Skalla-Grímsson's *Sonatorrek*, and what this poem reveals about the troubled relationship between the 'most quintessentially Odinic skald' and his patron deity, in a fashion which suggests that Egill's 'preliminary baptism' under Athelstan may have contributed to his final break with Odin 'with no prospect of their reconciliation' (pp. 118–19).

The following, portentously headed chapter, 'The Twilight of the Gods', and the subsequent more soberly entitled 'Pagan Myths under Conversion', examine the period c.950–1000, documenting what happened to pagan myths during the 'slow, painful process' by which Christianity was introduced to Norway (p. 172). However, as noted, the sagas which discuss the process of Conversion in Iceland focus more upon religious practices and folklore than on the pre-Christian gods themselves. Abram's vision of what followed for Norse mythology was a period of 'suspended animation', in which the stories of the old gods bedded down for the next century and a half (p. 191), until their reawakening in the period c.1150–1350—the 'Rebirth of Norse Mythology' outlined in the final chapter.

Early signs of this renaissance are to be found, it is argued, 'even before 1200', in those verses of Einarr Skúlason's *Øxarflokkr*, later referred to in *Skáldskaparmál*, which make use of mythological kennings (p. 195). Saxo and Snorri are next to

<sup>1</sup> Some will be unhappy, as Abram freely acknowledges, with the appearance of 'Odin', 'Thor' and 'Valhalla', rather than Óðinn, Þórr and Valhöll, an editorial decision apparently made 'because these names are so well known in their English versions' that it is thought that introducing their standard Old Norse forms would only 'confuse matters' (p. ix). The  $\varrho$  symbol does not make an appearance either. This reviewer, accordingly, refers to these deities in the same terms.

run with the ball, with Snorri's *Edda* being represented here as an 'authorised' version of Norse mythology, with a warning note to readers against treating this work as any sort of gospel representative of the vast diversity of belief which must have existed within the sphere of pagan Norse religion (p. 221). Abram goes on to demonstrate some of the ways in which Snorri's treatment of the myths 'is in fact ambiguous, . . . subtle and loaded with meaning' (p. 208), which is argued with particular reference to both the *Prologue* and the death of Baldr in *Gylfaginning*, in view of the golden boy's obvious similarity to Christ. The chapter is end-stopped, in what Abram is quick to admit may be seen by some as a somewhat 'perverse' move, with the compiling of the *Poetic Edda* (c.1270) of the Codex Regius. Justification for this is forthcoming, as it is argued that although 'it is likely that several [poems] were composed in the pagan era', there are others which may not be much older than the manuscript (p. 223). *Lokasenna*, appearing as a final case study, is given as an example of this.

The volume concludes, briefly, on a personal note, with some thoughts on how Norse mythology has gone on, throughout the centuries, to be continually reborn and remythologised in the works of scholars, artists and writers of subsequent centuries, constantly changing to fit the needs of each generation, and being reworked and reinterpreted to suit the ends of each fresh pair of hands.

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VÅR ELDESTA BOK. SKRIFT, MILJØ OG BILETBRUK I DEN NORSKE HOMILIEBOKA. Edited by ODD EINAR HAUGEN and ÅSLAUG OMMUNDSEN. *Bibliotheca Nordica 3. Novus*. Oslo, 2010. 315pp. ISBN 978-82-7099-589-9.

The homilies of the medieval Scandinavian church are unfashionable. Although they include some of the very oldest products of Old Norse-Icelandic literary and scribal culture, few genres in the corpus are so rarely studied today. The brief golden age of modern research into early Norse homiletics—typified by the work of scholars like Hans Bekker-Nielsen, Mattias Tveitane and Gabriel Turville-Petre in the fifties and sixties—now seems a long time ago. Although a few hardy souls continue to till the unpromising soil of the homily books, they do so largely in obscurity, to the indifference of most of their peers. I would like very much to say that the book under review, a wonderfully learned and stimulating collection of essays about the *Old Norwegian Homily Book (NHB)*, will remedy this situation and mark the start of a homiletic revival in Old Norse-Icelandic studies; that it probably will not is a reflection of the predilections and prejudices of the discipline rather than of any real inadequacy on the part of this collection.

Arising from a seminar held in Oslo in 2006, the eleven papers assembled by Odd Einar Haugen and Åslaug Ommundsen for publication in the new (and praiseworthy) series, *Bibliotheca Nordica*, are remarkable above all for their



coherence. Each contributor looks at a different aspect of *NHB*—codicology, palaeography, sources and style, and so on—but, whether by design or happy accident, the sum of the individual arguments provides us with new evidence about the origins and purpose of the codex that is convincing and compelling.

According to this volume, *NHB* is the work of a single scribe, operating at the very end of the twelfth century in or around Bergen. It most likely was produced for the Bergen cathedral chapter by, or with the close involvement of, the Augustinians of the nearby church of St John. (This theory was originally proposed by Erik Gunnes, but has not been seriously tested until now.) *NHB* was probably a sort of handbook used in the instruction of clergy rather than a homiliary designed either for preaching solely *ad populum* or for systematic study in the cloister. It displays ample signs of influence from English scribal and textual culture, which may place it in an Anglo-Scandinavian milieu connected to Martin, the English bishop of Bergen between 1194 and 1216. These arguments are all neatly summarised in Kirsten M. Berg's article 'Homilieboka—for hvem og til hva?', which follows the editors' introduction. The rest of the essays each pursue one of these lines of enquiry in rigorous and illuminating detail.

It is probably unwise to declare 'case closed' on a vexatious issue like the number of scribal hands on display in *NHB*, but here three related articles by Michael Gullick, Bas Vlam and Ranveig Stokkeland really do seem to confirm once and for all that a single scribe has written everything in the manuscript. This scribe is now proven to have been more widely active in manuscript production around the beginning of the thirteenth century: Gullick identifies a list of fragments that definitely were also written by the *NHB* scribe, who drew his own initials in a style that is also found in a small group of monastic texts from roughly the same period. Vlam's article is a fascinating account of the technical aspects of this man's calligraphy, expressed in nicely practical terms and supported by extremely clear and helpful illustrations. Stokkeland comes to the same conclusion as Gullick on the basis of script-types in the manuscript, the changes between which are now seen to be too small to suggest the contribution of different scribes.

Among the fragments that may have been written by the *NHB* scribe are two liturgical texts; Åslaug Ommundsen discusses the possible connections between the Norwegian homilies and contemporary liturgy. Since the scribe's contribution to the fragments includes musical notation, Ommundsen argues that he was probably a musician himself, and may have occupied the position of *cantor* in one of the Bergen chapters. Gisela Attinger then discusses these antiphonal fragments in further detail, corroborating Ommundsen's findings.

We are halfway through the book before we hear anything at all about the Norwegian homilies as literature, or even about the content of the texts themselves, which may seem a shame but is typical of their critical reception. However, Aidan Conti and Olav Tveito's contributions to the volume are important ones: they both look beyond *NHB*'s Bergen home to the textual traditions that underlie the homilies in the codex. Both authors look towards England, which long has struck me (among others) as the most important conduit for the transmission of sources of vernacular

Christian texts into Norway (and thence to Iceland, although Iceland is hardly ever mentioned in this book). Conti reassesses possible English models for the type of collection that *NHB* represents and suggests that this type of sermon was more likely to have been preached by secular clergy than by monks, and to have had a primarily lay audience. The English Lambeth and Trinity homily collections provide near-contemporary parallels for this style of vernacular preaching. Tveito returns to Anglo-Saxon exemplars and examines the rhetoric of the Norwegian homilies alongside the preaching techniques of Wulfstan of York. Although I am prepared to go along with Tveito about the 'Wulfstanian' flavour of some of *NHB*'s *sermones ad populum*, this is one article in the volume where vagueness creeps in and leads to doubt: in particular, I am not convinced that Tveito can tell us by what mechanisms of transmission Wulfstan's sermons have come to influence Norwegian texts. His consideration of *Völuspá*'s apocalyptic tone in the light of Wulfstan's eschatological preaching is interesting, but to say that Wulfstan must have influenced missionary preaching in early eleventh-century Norway and that eleventh-century missionary preaching in Norway must have influenced *Völuspá*'s account of the end of the world places demands on the evidence that it cannot meet. But at least the mention of *Völuspá* may conjure up some interest in this book among those Edda-fixated enthusiasts for pagan tradition who otherwise would probably never pick it up.

The final article in *Vår eldste bok* is perhaps the most interesting of all; it is certainly the one which most notably transcends the conventional (if successful) philology that provides the book's dominant critical paradigm. Following the approach of Miriam Gill's work on visual art and preaching in medieval England, Kristin B. Aavitsland offers an extremely stimulating reading of the *NHB* sermons alongside contemporary iconography, as exemplified by altar frontals that survive in Norwegian churches. Aavitsland argues that the Norwegian homilies and visual art alike bespeak a highly developed sort of 'visual exegesis' in which imagery is visualised and given significance, whether it is expressed in a verbal or a pictorial medium. Historians of medieval Norwegian art will find as much of interest here as readers of *NHB*, and both groups will benefit from the splendid full-colour illustrations that are inset into the text in this article and throughout the volume. I do not recall ever seeing such a lavishly or effectively illustrated collection of essays in Old Norse-Icelandic studies, and the editors and publishers should be commended and thanked for it. The volume also includes a useful glossary, an account of the *NHB*'s contents and codicological composition, and English summaries of the articles (which are all in *bokmål*).

*Vår eldste bok*, then, is an important and almost entirely successful re-evaluation of 'Norway's oldest book' that nobody who is interested in the history of the early Norwegian church and its literature can afford to ignore. It has been edited and produced with the greatest care and does credit to all involved with it. Yet, for all its merits, I find Haugen and Ommundsen's collection slightly disappointing. The editors express the wish that this volume will act as a stimulus to further research into the Norwegian homilies (p. 33). With the notable exception of

Kristin Aavitsland's work on *NHB*'s connections to visual art, however, this book seems to provide more answers than questions. We learn an awful lot about the book itself, as a physical object, and about the scribe who wrote it and the milieu in which it likely was produced; this book simply cannot be ignored by anybody who is interested in medieval Norse homilies. What it lacks is a sufficiently robust indication of why anybody else should be interested in them. In particular, this book does not go far enough in looking at the homilies as literature, within the wider context of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. (It is a shame that the most provocative contribution to the volume, Tveito's contribution on the possible homiletic background to *Völuspá*, is the least convincing.)

As its title might suggest to an outsider, *NHB* seems to be cherishable mostly as a monument of the Norwegian cultural heritage: it is a tangible thing (*bok*); it is very ancient (*eldste*) and it is the property of Norway and Norwegians (*vår*). But little that is on offer here will do much to encourage a new readership for the *Homily Book* or to suggest to critics of more mainstream Old Norse-Icelandic literature that the homilies are worthy of their consideration alongside *Njáls saga* or *Hávamál*. By retaining so close a focus on the codex itself, by largely ignoring *NHB*'s place within the wider corpus of Old Norse, this volume—which contains so much excellent scholarship and which answers so many important questions—does too little to spread the word about the critical value of these neglected texts. The only real failing of *Vår eldste bok* is that it preaches to the converted.

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ENGLISH SAINTS IN THE MEDIEVAL LITURGIES OF SCANDINAVIAN CHURCHES. Edited by JOHN TOY. *Henry Bradshaw Society Subsidia VI. The Boydell Press*. London, 2009. xviii + 232 pp. ISBN 978-1-870252-46-1.

During the process of Christianisation in the tenth and eleventh centuries, Scandinavian missionary kings looked to England for guidance and precedent. The resulting close bonds with England lasted through the following centuries and left their mark on Christian worship in the North. Medieval English influence is visible—and tangible—today in the remnants of liturgical manuscripts which were used in Scandinavian churches: book fragments which are now kept in a number of archives and libraries in various towns. With *English Saints in the Medieval Liturgies of Scandinavia* John Toy provides a survey of English saints found in liturgical sources in Scandinavian collections. In the first chapter, 'Register of manuscripts', Toy lists manuscript material kept in the collections in Copenhagen, Helsinki, Oslo, Stockholm and Uppsala, followed by those in a few smaller institutions in Sweden and other institutions in Europe, as well as Pre-Reformation liturgical books in print. In the second part of the book, 'The Saints in the Liturgies', he provides an alphabetical list of the 74 English saints referred to in

the items listed in the register, including a large number of transcriptions of prayers and readings. Finally, the book is equipped with a liturgical and a general index.

The book you get in your hand may not be what you had expected beforehand. In his Preface Toy refers to the book as 'a record and a resource', which is what it is. There is no general introduction to the material, neither to the historical background regarding Christianisation and the contacts between England and Scandinavia, nor to the liturgical uses of the Scandinavian Churches. The phenomenon of Scandinavian book fragments, a result of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century practice of binding accounts in parchment from medieval manuscripts, is mentioned only briefly. The short Preface (slightly more than one page) and account of Editorial Procedure (just over two pages) give only the very barest bones of information, and since each entry in the alphabetical list only holds a 'minimum of comment or assessment', the book requires a considerable amount of knowledge on the part of the reader (or user, I should say, as this is not the kind of book one reads). A general introduction would have lifted the book and made it more user-friendly. More images would also have been helpful, since the codicological and palaeographical qualities of the fragments are important for the contextual interpretation of the texts they contain. As it is, the book provides just two black-and-white photographs (without scale).

A wish-list is easy to make, but does not always coincide with the author's (or editor's) intentions. In this case, John Toy has presented a 'travel guide' through Scandinavian collections, a task which in itself is challenging enough. He has been battling with a truly vast body of material: in addition to the surviving manuscripts, there are an estimated 50–60,000 single fragments from medieval manuscripts in Scandinavia (c.22,500 in Stockholm, c.10,000 in Copenhagen, c.11,000 in Helsinki, c.6000 in Oslo and c.200 in Reykjavík, plus a few thousand more in smaller libraries, archives and museums). Iceland has for some reason not been included in Toy's definition of Scandinavia. This should probably be ascribed to pure practicality. As John Toy himself points out, English saints were venerated in Iceland since the Icelandic bishoprics were part of the Norwegian archdiocese of Nidaros. Some impulses presumably reached Iceland directly from England as well. And although the state of catalogues and handlists in the Reykjavík collections is not ideal for outside scholars trying to find their bearings (without actually going there), the amount of Icelandic material is limited and to some extent available in books and online (on sites such as the Ísmús database, <http://ismus.musik.is/>).

Sweden dominates Scandinavia in John Toy's work, which is a reflection not only of Toy's own travels and interests, but also of the current state of modern Nordic fragment research. In spite of a growing awareness that the fragments constitute a significant source for many aspects of medieval cultural history, proper catalogues and databases still only cover parts of the collections. Since the MPO (Medeltida Pergamentomslag) project in the 1990s, the National Archives in Stockholm has been an important engine for the cataloguing of fragments. The database of the Swedish National Archives in Stockholm was completed in 2004 as the first larger undertaking of this kind in Scandinavia. Toy acknowledges the

importance of the Stockholm database, and lists about 260 different fragment numbers from the National Archives in Stockholm. In contrast, the collections in Copenhagen are represented in Toy's survey with only thirty-eight entries (seven from the National Archives, twenty-six from the Royal Library and five from the Arnamagnæan Institute). It would be highly surprising if the register's low number of sources from Copenhagen was representative of the material existing. The available handlists do not give details of content, and if anyone were to look through the estimated 10,000 fragments, they would probably find more fragments referring to English saints. However, when no Scandinavian scholar has gone through all the material to record the contents in detail, one can hardly expect John Toy to do it. Regarding the minor collections, only Sweden is represented, with four libraries. Norwegian collections like the University Library in Bergen are not mentioned, although two of its medieval manuscript fragments have been listed as belonging to the National Archives in Oslo (a breviary with readings from Botulph's legend and a Calendar fragment referring to Erchenwald). In other words, Toy's ambitious survey is understandably not complete, and not without error. So the statement in the Publication Secretary's otherwise useful preface that Toy has recorded 'every recoverable reference to the English saints in these [i.e. Scandinavian] books and fragments' is in need of some modification: Toy has recorded the majority of the references to English saints he could reasonably be expected to include at this stage. There is, however, more to be found.

One footnote can be added in the case of the Norwegian National Archives in Oslo, where the collection is currently being entered into a database with new fragment and codex numbers. Rather than using the current, official fragment numbers, Toy provides the new fragment numbers whenever available, in spite of the fact that they are part of an unpublished and still incomplete database. This may create some practical difficulties when relating the information to former literature, for instance the books and articles by the renowned Norwegian liturgist Lilli Gjøløw. Fortunately Toy provides Lilli Gjøløw's codex numbers, which are not indexed in her works, but at least make the fragments identifiable.

Although John Toy's book is not complete regarding the number of fragments and collections presented, and could have been more user-friendly, it was probably a wise choice to draw the line and publish the work already done. In many ways some of the shortcomings of this book should be ascribed to the Scandinavian institutions which for too long underestimated the research potential of the manuscript fragments and the relevance they have for international scholarship. In the years to come we hope for searchable databases, preferably online, for more archives and libraries, which will ensure that the medieval manuscript material of Scandinavia becomes available for scholars who want to use it as sources in their research. Until then, for those interested in the English saints and English-influenced material in Scandinavian collections, John Toy's work is no doubt a useful place to start.

Í GARDI SÆMUNDAR FRÓÐA. FYRIRLESTRAR FRÁ RÁÐSTEFNU Í ÞJÓÐMINJASAFNI 20. MAÍ 2006. Edited by GUNNAR HARÐARSON and SVERRIR TÓMASSON. *Hugvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands*. Reykjavík, 2008. 186 pp. ISBN 978-9979-9877-0-3.

The twelfth-century cleric Sæmundr fróði is one of the most important, yet most shadowy, figures in the early history of Icelandic letters. He was respected in the Middle Ages as, according to *Hungrvaka, bæði forvitri ok lærðr alla manna betzt* ‘both wise and the most learned of all men’; as Sverrir Tómasson says in the book reviewed here, he was conventionally cited as an *auctoritas*, on the model of contemporary writing in Latin (p. 53). He is widely believed to be the author of the first historical work written in Iceland, probably a history of the early Norwegian kings, the foundation on which some or all of the poem *Nóregs konunga tal* and the historical text *Fagrskinna* were based; yet how extensive this work was, and whether it was in Latin or the vernacular, remains uncertain. In the seventeenth century he was credited with either the compilation or indeed the authorship of the collection of poems now known as the *Poetic Edda*, but for which the title *Sæmundar Edda* was current well into the twentieth century; he also attracted the wilder claim that he was the first to have introduced writing to Iceland—Latin writing, that is, which he was supposed to have translated from runes. Not only does Sæmundr’s very fame as an authoritative source make it difficult to pin down what can safely be attributed to his oeuvre; he also became the focus of superstitious tales about his powers as a magician. It is clear that a stimulus for these rumours, or perhaps more accurately an example of them, is the story interpolated into the account in *Jóns saga helga*, of Bishop Jón, on his return from a pilgrimage to Rome, finding Sæmundr who had been studying abroad for so long that nothing had been heard of him, and taking him home to Iceland. The interpolation recounts the two Icelanders falling into the hands of a sorcerer, from whom they escape thanks to Sæmundr’s skill as an astrologer and magician.

This book is based on a conference held in 2006 to celebrate Sæmundr’s 950th birthday—an appropriately obscure anniversary to commemorate such an elusive figure. If the items collected here do little to retrieve Sæmundr from the shadows, they do present a lively picture of Icelandic learning in two diverse but important periods: the era of saga composition in the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, and that of its rediscovery in the seventeenth. The title of the volume, ‘In the court (or house) of Sæmundr the Learned’, is taken from one of the folktales about Sæmundr the magician, but this aspect of his reputation is touched on only allusively, the emphasis being on the nature and origins of his learning. Six papers from the original conference are presented here—in Icelandic, which required the translation of one of them from English, but abstracts in English of all the papers are included in the volume (the papers are referred to in this review by the titles given in these abstracts). The second half of the volume is taken up with a translation into Icelandic—the first, we are told, into any modern language—of Árni Magnússon’s *Vita Saemundi multiscii*, written around 1690. As its translator, Gottskálf Jensson, remarks, this is ‘not so much the biography of Sæmundr Sigfússon the learned

as Árni Magnússon's resounding and highly influential critique of seventeenth-century eddic scholarship by Icelanders' (p. 185).

The collection opens with John Marenbon's scene-setting survey, 'How Sæmundur Sigfusson became the Learned. Schools, curricula and learning at the end of the eleventh century'. This outlines both the conventional features of the European medieval curriculum of the seven liberal arts, and specific developments that were current at the end of the eleventh century, though it is non-committal as to whether Sæmundr would have been exposed to these or not—depending on his choice of school. Gunnar Harðarson's study of an individual manuscript, '*Philosophia* in the medieval manuscript GKS 1812 4to and its relation to "fróðleiksást"', complements this broad-brush approach with a more specifically Icelandic perspective—though again its relevance to Sæmundr can only be inferred. Several papers address a long-running controversy as to where Sæmundr pursued his studies abroad; in *Frakkland* according to Ari's *Íslendingabók, í Þýzkalandi* (Germany) according to the seventeenth-century Björn Jónsson of Skarðsá. Magnús Már Lárusson in 1967 and Peter Foote in 1975 both hazarded the opinion that the term *Frakkland* used by Ari probably, in the twelfth century, referred to Franconia (now in Germany) rather than France, a view for which both Edward Booth ('Sæmundur: "up in Germany"?') and Helgi Skúli Kjartansson ('When France was in Germany. A study of the different referents of the terms "Frakkland" and "Frakkar" in Old-Icelandic texts') find additional support. Garðar Gíslason, on the other hand, in 'Reflections on "Frakkland" in Ari the Learned and if Sæmundur studied canon-law', argues that Ari (and indeed Sæmundr, to whom Ari reports showing his book on its completion) would have been aware of the ambiguity of the term *Frakkland* and would have preferred the more precise *Franconia* if referring to anywhere other than France, whose schools were sought-after by clerics of the time. According to *Hungrvaka* and other texts, Sæmundr was among those credited with the introduction of tithe laws in Iceland in 1097; according to Garðar, the northern French schools of Laon or Bec were likely places for him to have acquired knowledge of canon law. All these articles emphasise how little is actually known of Sæmundr and his studies; but rather than giving the impression of an accumulation of bricks without straw, they create a useful composite picture of the intellectual climate in Europe at the time of the dawn of Icelandic literature, and a useful reminder of the danger of applying anachronistic notions to its borders and localities.

Somewhat awkwardly sandwiched between the last two papers outlined above is Sverrir Tómasson's analysis of Sæmundr's no longer extant historical work ('What Sæmundur wrote? Biographies of kings or a vernacular medieval history?'). After a valuable review of the scanty surviving references to Sæmundr in medieval texts, Sverrir suggests that Sæmundr's book took the form of a universal history along the same lines as *Veraldar saga*. This theory is supported by some of the references to Sæmundr, in contexts such as references to the stature of Adam (AM 764 4to) and the Creation (AM 624 4to), but in terms of the debate about

the extent of Sæmundr's account of the Norwegian kings, it is no great advance on the commonly accepted belief that it took the form of a brief catalogue—such as Sverrir believes must have been appended to his history of the world—of 'those Northern rulers from whom the Oddaverjar were able to trace their descent' (p. 59). Sverrir's theory does address the question why Snorri's Prologue to *Heimskringla* should not have mentioned Sæmundr alongside Ari as Snorri's forerunner in the writing of history. This is cited as evidence by those who believe that Sæmundr must have written in Latin, which would account for Snorri's omission; Sverrir argues, however, that the references to Sæmundr, all found in vernacular works, suggest that he too wrote in Icelandic, and that Snorri would not have considered a universal history relevant to the genre of historical writing he was describing.

The last word is given to Árni Magnússon. Despite his enormous influence on the study of Old Icelandic literature, we have little in the way of sustained commentary on it from him; this alone, as Gottskálk Jensson points out, would be justification enough for reproducing what Finnur Jónsson called 'hans svo að segja einasta heildarlegt frumrit' (p. 135). Árni's text is striking for its modernity, learning and commonsense, especially against the background of the bizarre theories advanced by his near-contemporaries: Runólfr Jónsson, for instance, who held that *Völuspá* was a song of the Erythrean Sibyl, brought to the north from Asia before the Trojan War (*atque hos tale carmen Erythreæ Sibyllæ ore natum ex Asia secum huc transportasse*) and that the author of *Hávamál* was Óðinn himself (p. 151). Soon departing from the meagre details of Sæmundr's biography, Árni demolishes these fantasies with vigour and scepticism. Gottskálk's translation treats the text with due caution, retaining the original Latin for key terms and phrases in parentheses, and an informed introduction negotiates the complexities of the various versions and editions—not to mention Árni's own copious marginal notes.

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TRANSMISSIONSGESCHICHTEN: UNTERSUCHUNGEN ZUR DÄNISCHEN UND SCHWEDISCHEN ERZÄHLPROSA IN DER FRÜHEN NEUZEIT. By ANNA KATHARINA RICHTER. *Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie* 41. Franke Verlag. Tübingen, 2009. x + 327 pp. ISBN 978-3-7720-8292-4.

Anna Katharina Richter's monograph is an analysis on two levels of the thematic field of love, marriage and sexuality in Danish and Swedish chapbooks of the early modern age. The first level is diachronic: on the basis of Danish and Swedish versions of the Late Antique Latin romance *Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri*, the transmission process of chapbooks is investigated. The second part, on the other hand, is a synchronic, discourse-analytical presentation of a selection of Danish and Swedish chapbooks dealing with love, marriage and family and incest.



After a theoretical introduction illustrating the new-historicist concept of the interdependence of a text with contemporary literary production, the Scandinavian translations of the *Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri* are listed: twenty-nine Danish and twenty-one Swedish editions can be identified over a time-span of three centuries (1591–1882). Despite the general stability of the plot in all European Apollonius versions, an accurate investigation of both text and paratext reveals a series of minor changes reflecting the work's mutated context and reception conditions.

Thus the Scandinavian renderings of the Latin title clearly relate to the moralising tradition deriving from the Latin *Gesta Romanorum*, while the analysis of other paratextual elements such as preface, introductory poem, dedications and addendum contributes to the identification of the specific target of the translations. The Danish introductory poem's insistence on the keywords *lycke* and *wlycke* represents a Christian warning to spouses against the illusory nature of good fortune, whereas the learned addendum to the Swedish *Apollonius*, twenty years younger, indicates an aristocratic or high-middle-class readership familiar with antique history and mythology and, therefore, able to appreciate the lay teaching such a text could give.

If in the early modern age any fictional work needed to be legitimised by emphasising its didactic value, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a different attitude towards the narration can be detected: the moral aspect is no longer relevant, the narration is set in a real, historical environment (Italy and Spain, avoiding the European South-East dominated at the time by the Ottomans). The mutated Danish cultural and social context affects not only the chapbook's paratext, but also its very plot, which—purged of any reference to incest—becomes white-bread and harmless. In Sweden the incest episode is not completely eliminated, but strongly shortened, and the protagonist's adventure becomes exemplary of positive and negative family relations.

In the chapter entitled *Vernetzungen: Historienbücher, Diskurse und Korrespondenzen im frühneuzeitlichen Skandinavien*, the author applies the approach of discourse analysis to a number of Scandinavian chapbooks dealing with love in its different forms. Following Manuel Braun's distinction in *Ehe, Liebe, Freundschaft. Semantik der Vergesellschaftung im frühneuhochdeutschen Prosaroman* (Tübingen, 2001) between two antithetical visions of love—perfection and virtue opposed to irrational passion—she points out that, to a great extent, the *Apollonius* versions reflect the former. On the other hand, other contemporary chapbooks such as the *Euriolus oc Lucretia* embody an uncontrolled sensual attraction which can endanger not only the two lovers, but also the social order. This very attitude towards love is clearly reflected in the two prefaces to the Danish translation of this *Historienbuch*.

After taking into consideration some of the most common narrative manifestations of love (the moment of the first encounter, communication between lovers, the 'Omnia vincit amor' topos, the dangers of *cupiditas*, etc.), the text moves on to investigate marriage, the legal and social counterpart to love, in order to

identify a pattern in the representation of married couples in Danish and Swedish chapbooks. In this respect, a fundamental reference point is constituted by Lutheran theological-economical household literature and by the *hustavla* tradition. These are correlated with a corpus of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts (*Melusina*, *Griseldis* / *Grisilla*, *Echtensskaps Kärleeks Ähre-Crona* / *Tvende Kiøbmænd*, *Ett lustigt Samtaal emellan tvenne vnga Hustrur* / *Ectenskabs Samtale* / *En Kortvillig Dialogus*, *Helena aff Constantinopel*, *Hildegardis och Talandus*), to construct a discursive image of marriage, marital love and family structure in early modern Scandinavia.

What emerges is the perception of family as a microcosm reflecting, *in nuce*, the ideal society. For this reason, a conflictless marriage has to be pursued not only as source of personal happiness, but also as a basis for social stability. This vision is exemplified *ex negativo* by *Melusina* and *Reymunt*, who endanger their people's peace once the woman's true nature is revealed.

If *Apollonius* and *Melusina* depict an almost egalitarian relationship between the spouses, the story of *Griseldis* yields praise of the woman's submission and obedience to her husband, aimed at teaching a feminine public patience and virtue. This didactic intention is particularly evident in the Swedish *Grisilla*, where a moralising note underlines the social importance of chastity and faithfulness. The same precepts are conveyed in a lighter tone in *Ecteskabs Samtale*, *En Kortvillig Dialogus* and *Ett lustigt Samtaal emellan tvenne vnga Hustrur*, which thus occupy an intermediate position between *Griseldis* and the texts poking fun at contemporary conceptions of marriage and virtue, such as *Echtensskaps Kärleeks Ähre-Crona* / *Tvende Kiøbmænd*.

The last two chapbooks selected by Richter—*Helena aff Constantinopel* and *Hildegardis och Talandus*—both deal with incest and show the destructive potential of love that disregards moral and social rules. *Helena* and *Hildegardis* are, here, innocent victims who, not unlike female saints in medieval hagiographical texts, accept passively the suffering inflicted on them.

Accurate, exhaustive and fully convincing, Anna Katharina Richter's work has the merit of showing how complex the transmission process of chapbooks is, and how the instability of early modern texts renders them a priceless source for understanding and contrasting the specific cultural backgrounds of the different narratives both synchronically and diachronically. It is to be hoped that this monograph will help to combat the prejudice against this genre (J. P. Jacobsen's 'slet ikke fine bøger'! —*Mogens* in J. P. Jacobsen, *Samlede Værker* III, ed. Frederik Nielsen (Copenhagen, 1973), 26) and stimulate further research on the different aspects of early modern Scandinavian society mirrored in the interrelation between chapbooks and contemporary literary and non-literary texts.

THE LAST VIKINGS. THE EPIC STORY OF THE GREAT NORSE VOYAGERS. By KIRSTEN SEAVER. *I. B. Tauris*. London and New York, 2010. 304 pp. ISBN 978-1845118693.

This book aspires to shed light on one of history's most intriguing mysteries: why and how, after five hundred years, did Greenland's Norse colonies die out? Kirsten Seaver's earlier work, *The Frozen Echo. Greenland and the Exploration of North America ca. A.D. 1000–1500* (Stanford University Press, 1996), covered a slightly wider field, namely, trade, exploration and attempted settlement in the North Atlantic. Both books are the result of many years of painstaking research into medieval texts and maps, as well as more recent historical, archaeological and geographical publications. This later work is perhaps written in a slightly less scholarly tone, which it is to be hoped may attract a wider readership and perhaps increase general interest in a fascinating chapter of history.

Beginning with *Íslendingabók* and the promotion by Eiríkr rauði (the Red) of the name Greenland, Seaver builds up a credible picture of the life of the Norse colonists in Greenland from settlement in the late 980s to the early fifteenth century when the celebration of a marriage uniting a prominent family from Iceland with one from Greenland suggests that Greenlandic society was still flourishing, as does the discovery of fashionable clothes in graves dating to this time. It must be supposed that the Norse society in Greenland was very similar to those in Norway and Iceland, which are well described in saga literature, admittedly written more than two centuries after the event.

In Greenland the Norsemen encountered Thule and Dorset people whom they described as *Skræling(j)ar*, a derogatory name probably referring to their relatively small size. There are some accounts of conflict, but, as Seaver reasonably suggests, these were probably no more than one might expect of encounters between two very different cultures, both armed for hunting; the Inuit people were not numerous and have never been very warlike.

At least some of the first Norse Greenlanders were Christians, including Eiríkr's wife, who famously built a little church 'not too near' the farmstead, Brattahlíð. Around a century after the settlement the occupant of Eiríkr's farm was Sokki Þórisson, according to *Grænlendinga þáttur*. He was keen for the Church to appoint a bishop for Greenland; Seaver very believably suggests that this was at least as much for economic and commercial as for religious reasons.

The only medieval document that might be said to have originated in Greenland is the 'Description of Greenland' written by the Norwegian priest Ívarr Bárðarson, who went to Greenland in about the early 1340s, probably to collect what church 'dues' he could, and stayed for about twenty years. The Description was written or dictated to a scribe after his return to Norway in the late 1360s. Whether he was appointed as a priest, a farm manager or a tax collector is not clear from his text. Seaver favours his appointment as a tax collector and this seems by far the most likely; after all, from earliest times the Church has always been keen to collect as much revenue as possible from all of its subjects, however remote. Greenland, however, is so remote that the Curia in the Middle Ages knew little more about it than its name.

Ívarr's report survives only in manuscripts based on a Danish translation made in about 1600. It begins with several paragraphs taken straight from *Landnámabók* (or a common source), but the bulk of the text must have been written by someone who knew South Greenland well. The final paragraph, which describes exotic fruits, is pure fantasy. The main text is a realistic description of the South Greenland fjords of the Eastern Settlement, with the locations of the churches and the lands belonging to them; it seems to suggest that the Church owned virtually all of the farmland in the entire country. Seaver reminds us that the expression 'to belong to' is as vague in Old Norse as in modern English, and argues persuasively that Ívarr is simply outlining the parish boundaries; the Church had difficulty in wresting ownership of individual churches from Icelandic farmers, and would have had even less chance of doing so in a place as remote as Greenland. She suggests, interestingly, that this may account for the reluctance of the latter bishops of Greenland to take up residence in their see.

It seems likely that there were only two essentials with which Greenland could not provide the settlers: wood and iron. Greenland scrub, augmented by driftwood, could serve for fuel and wooden utensils, but the few small trees could not provide wood for shipbuilding, for which iron nails and other fittings would also have been essential. The Greenlanders must from the beginning have been extremely aware of the need to maintain their communications with the rest of the world, which probably explains their early voyages to the New World. While the grapes of Vinland will live forever in the consciousness of their descendants, Eiríkr and his contemporaries were probably far more interested in the timber and iron of Markland. There, within relatively easy reach of Greenland, they could build ships and sail them home. At present, the only concrete evidence of this interest is the Norse site in Newfoundland at l'Anse aux Meadows, which could have been used for shipbuilding. Circumstantial evidence is contained in Ívarr's account of a return voyage from Eastern to Western Settlements in a ship that could carry sufficient men to repel a Skräling attack, and with enough cargo capacity to accommodate in addition a significant number of farm animals on the return voyage. Seaver convincingly makes the case for continued voyages to the New World throughout the life of Norse Greenland.

After presenting a great deal of interesting material on North Atlantic trade up to 1500 among Greenland, Iceland, England and mainland Europe, and indifferently successful attempts to regulate and tax Greenland, the author comes to the main question: what happened to the Norse Greenlanders? The last known evidence of contact between Greenland and Iceland is a letter dated 19th April 1409. Apart from passing visits, the next known landing and settlement is that of Hans Egede, a Danish-Norwegian missionary, in 1721, more than three hundred years later; he found no Norse people, only Inuit. Ívarr Bárðarson himself had said that his expedition to the Western Settlement was undertaken to save the settlers from the Skrälings. He found only farm animals (most of which would not have survived a winter) and no humans 'either Christian or heathen'. The Greenland settlements are extremely scattered, and split up by fjords, so searching the entire settlement would have been a major task. Seaver suggests that a warlike expedition would

have been recognised from a distance as a demand for church tithes, and that the Western Settlers might have hidden themselves. I find it difficult to believe that any Greenlanders would have been intimidated by Ívarr, who (according to Seaver's *The Frozen Echo*), may have arrived there accompanied by seven men. I cannot think that he could have cowed either the Eastern or Western Greenlanders into hiding from demands for tithes, or indeed that Western Settlers could have disappeared so quickly; farms were widely scattered, and it would have taken weeks at least to determine that the settlement was deserted. The abandoning of the animals could suggest a mass exodus, but the Western Settlers would surely not have left without telling their friends and relatives in the Eastern Settlement, in which case, of course, Ívarr would have known the true story. Nevertheless, the Western Settlement seems to have come to an end around 1400, and the Eastern Settlement about 1500.

Seaver does not offer any explanation of the Western Settlement's end, but suggests that many of the Eastern Settlers were enticed by Portuguese and English exploration and fishing syndicates to migrate to the Labrador coast to hunt game and catch and dry cod, where they may have been quickly killed by the extremely low winter temperatures. But they had already built a settlement at l'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland and lived there for several years, so they must have known about the cold winters. I find it hard to believe that so large a number of Greenlanders (of course including the youngest and fittest) would so have abandoned loyalty to their families as to leave the Greenland colony unable to survive. The canny Eiríkr spent three years exploring Greenland before deciding to colonise it; surely his descendants would not have been so rash as to emigrate *en masse* at the persuasion of a shipload of foreigners who clearly had their own agenda. In any case, most researchers agree that the Norse Greenlanders must have numbered several thousand; a considerable fleet of ships would have been needed to transport (say) one quarter of this population.

The disappearance of the Norse Greenlanders, probably during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, presents a mystery that may never be solved. This book sheds a great deal of light on their history, as well as that of the countries whose seamen explored the oceans and traded on their shores, but I believe that the mystery remains.

The treatment of Old Norse terms, and personal and place names, is erratic; it varies from standard Old Norse (*hirdstjóri*) to anglicised ('Gudrid Thorbjörnsdaughter') to hybrid ('Ívar Bárðsson'), and the use of diacritics is sporadic; but this diminishes neither understanding nor enjoyment of the text. The photographs are in monochrome and of low resolution, but are not essential to appreciation of the book; many equivalents may readily be found in colour and in greater resolution on the internet.

In reading this book, I have been continually aware of the depth of the author's research; she has tracked down documents from England and mainland Europe as well as from Scandinavia. In order to present a coherent picture of everyday life, local and international politics, trade, religion, intertribal relationships, exploration and the acquisition and use of resources, she has had to undertake a great deal of

interpretation, interpolation and extrapolation of and between the scant records that are available. I believe that her instincts are good, and that she has presented us with as accurate a history of medieval Greenland as we may ever be able to obtain. But as for the final demise of the colony, we need more archaeological evidence before we can be reasonably sure what happened.

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THE VIKING AGE. IRELAND AND THE WEST. PROCEEDINGS OF THE FIFTEENTH VIKING CONGRESS. Edited by JOHN SHEEHAN and DONNCHADH Ó CORRÁIN. *Four Courts Press*. Dublin, 2010. xxviii + 569 pp. ISBN 978-1-84682-101-1.

For those interested in Scandinavian studies the publication of the proceedings of the Viking Congress is an important event. The fourteen previous published proceedings, dating back to the 1950s, have been the medium through which some of the greatest scholars in their fields have disseminated their research. The editors of the handsomely-produced proceedings of the fifteenth Congress have maintained the (now seemingly standard) Viking Congress editorial approach of including a large selection of papers, fifty in this case, which average approximately 11–12 pages in length. Undoubtedly the chief advantages of this approach lie in its inclusivity and enforced authorial concision. An admirably broad spectrum of enquiry is given space, which imbues this volume with a truly interdisciplinary character, while simultaneously requiring the contributors to present their research in readily digestible portions. Unfortunately, the desire to include so many entries may have lengthened the elephantine gestation period of these proceedings. Research has not stood still in the five years between the fifteenth Congress and the date of publication, and many of the prolific contributors have gone on to publish substantially more. While it is not possible in this short review to offer a critique of each contribution, comments on a handful of essays may prove useful for illustrating the general quality and broad interests on offer in this volume.

There are a few high-quality essays that should certainly not be passed over without mention. The opening article, ‘Conversion and the Church in Viking-Age Ireland’ by Lesley Abrams, is a brief, thoughtful exploration of the shadowy processes of conversion to Christianity, which seeks to anchor conversion in the context of the workings of Hiberno-Scandinavian society, particularly in the case of tenth-century Dublin. Kristin Bornholdt Collins’s discussion of the second Dunmore cave hoard and its place in tenth-century Hiberno-Scandinavian economy is a similarly excellent piece. For those of us who occasionally teach Viking-Age Irish economic history, it will prove a welcome addition to undergraduate reading lists. John Sheehan’s re-provenancing of the Kilkenny West hoard (from western Co. Kilkenny to the barony of Kilkenny West in Co. Westmeath) is the type of historical detective work that you cannot help but delight in reading, and significantly alters our view of the distribution of the limited number of Viking-Age

hoards in Ireland. Many other articles of note may also be found in this volume, such as Søren Sindbæk's interesting analysis of long-distance trade as an integral aspect of Viking culture, rather than simply a facet of economic life.

Other essays, however, must be treated with caution, such as Emer Purcell's 'Ninth-century Viking entries in the Irish annals: no "forty years' rest"'. The 'forty years' rest' of her title is derived from the eleventh/twelfth-century encomiastic biography of Brian Bóroma (d. 1014), *Cogadh Gáedhel re Gallaibh* (Todd, ed., *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* (1867), 26–29), which claims that the men of Ireland experienced a period of forty years' respite from Viking attacks, terminating in 915 AD. *Cogadh's* concept (though not necessarily its dating) has influenced many scholars who have located this forty-year period sometime in the mid- to late ninth century. Purcell offers a quantitative analysis of annalistic entries relating to the fifty-year period between 825 and 875, concluding that the most significant decline in Viking-related entries occurs in the late 850s (pp. 322–23). Purcell's methodology is unsatisfactory and consequently question marks must hang over her conclusions. While Purcell is quite right to point out the flaws inherent in relying solely upon the numbers of annalistic entries recorded per year as a means of gauging Viking activity (pp. 323–24), her choice of adopting a quantitative analysis based on word counts is, if anything, even more flawed. Purcell's quantitative analysis is drawn from only four sets of Irish annals: the *Annals of Ulster*, *Chronicon Scotorum*, *Annals of Inisfallen* and *Annals of the Four Masters*. No explanation is offered for the favouring of these four sources, nor the exclusion of others like the *Annals of Ros Cré* or *Annals of Boyle*. Furthermore, does the exclusion of *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* (qualified as 'saga literature') and the *Fragmentary Annals* (qualified as 'heavily interpolated annals'), which Purcell acknowledges to contain unique information, simply serve to highlight the flaws in trying to pursue this quantitative approach? At what point, in a quantitative analysis based on word counts, may sources be judged too verbose for inclusion, if ever? Even if such criteria could be established, they could not be used to justify the omission from consideration of the succinct *Annals of Ros Cré* or *Annals of Boyle*.

In considering the production and arrangement of this volume, it seems odd that the essays were arranged alphabetically by speakers' names, when the Congress sessions were arranged thematically (Congress Diary, pp. xxv–xxviii). Non-attendees and future scholars wishing to know where the speakers and organisers thought this research was located within current scholarly debates may prefer a more thematic presentation. The decision to include a five-page index, which must naturally be of limited use for such a large volume, is also somewhat puzzling. The volume is illustrated in considerable detail (147 illustrations and 22 colour plates) and a number of the articles are accompanied by useful appendices (such as archaeological find check lists and other compilatory material); fortunately each article possesses its own bibliography. Warts and all, the editors have produced an admirable volume that may stand proudly alongside its forbears in the Viking Congress series.

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THE VIKING AGE. A READER. Edited by ANGUS A. SOMERVILLE and R. ANDREW McDONALD. *Readings in Medieval Civilizations and Cultures XIV*. University of Toronto Press. Toronto, 2010. xvii + 503 pp. ISBN 978-1-4426 0148-2 (paperback), 97-8-1-4426 0147-5 (bound).

This reader consists of short excerpts in English translation from a broad variety of primary texts, intended to illustrate aspects of Scandinavian life during the Viking Age. Its five hundred pages contain a total of 103 excerpts from some 35 texts; hence the average length of a passage is just under five pages. The selection includes both canonical texts and less well-known ones (such as the accounts of Viking activity on the Iberian peninsula by Ibn al-Kutia and Ibn Adhari (pp. 269–72)), translated from a number of different languages. The passages are generally well-chosen. The decision to excerpt short fragments rather than anthologising whole texts seems appropriate in as much as choosing short reading assignments can be time-consuming for instructors, and full texts are available elsewhere (and increasingly online). Of course, the shorter the excerpts, the more filtering and implicit interpretation is introduced in the process of excerpting.

Juxtapositions highlight certain aspects of the text: for instance, the fact that *Rígsþula* (pp. 18–28) is immediately followed by early chapters from *Egils saga* (pp. 28–38) and *Laxdæla saga* (pp. 38–40) brings out class differences and the issue of marriage. Despite the editors' disclaimer that medieval Icelandic 'sources must be used with care' (p. 17), the chapter heading 'Scandinavian Society' (also on p. 17) suggests that the picture painted here held broadly.

The selection from *The Life of St. Anskar* (pp. 42–71) which comprises chapter 3, 'A glimpse of ninth-century Scandinavia', is significantly longer than the other selections in the book. The editors' statements that this is 'one of the most important ninth-century documents relating to Scandinavia' and that it 'provides valuable insights into Scandinavian society that are almost unparalleled in any other ninth-century text' (p. 41) implicitly justify the decision to include a longer text. This will, however, demand a different type of attention from students than will the shorter selections.

The reader is divided into fifteen chapters. The thematic headings (a few of which could describe the chapter contents more transparently, as indicated above) outline a possible organisation for a course on Viking culture, following the general trend away from a focus on battles, voyages and conquests toward more holistic social history. However, de-emphasising diachronic and geographic variation tends to reify the Viking Age as a uniform entity, while the period is interesting not least because it was a time of rapid transition. The selections of short passages gathered under thematic headings also present themselves as ready-made term paper topics; instructors should make sure students use these appropriately. I would also complement these short readings with an assignment in which students would read one primary text in its entirety and discuss its background and its limitations as a source.

The nature of the textual record means that non-Norse sources from the Viking Age are juxtaposed with medieval Norse texts. Some chapters naturally emphasise



early sources and others late ones. The reader includes a few runic inscriptions, for example from Maes Howe (pp. 293–94) and the Isle of Man (pp. 294–95), the Piraeus Lion (pp. 302–03) and the Jelling stone (pp. 439–40). These are well presented, with enough contextual background to make them interpretable, but with less narrative than in Page (1995).

The book's eclecticism is seen in the broad range of texts and authors excerpted to illustrate aspects of 'Early Religion and Belief' (chapter 4): *Gylfaginning*, *Völuspá*, *Eiríks saga rauða*, *Ynglinga saga*, *Eiríksmál*, *Hávamál*, *Gautreks saga*, *Hákonar saga góða*, Adam of Bremen, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar (Heimskringla)*, Ibn Fadlan, the Prologue to *Heimskringla*, *Njáls saga* and *Grettis saga*.

Scenes selected from family sagas often seem like type scenes when separated from their context in the saga narrative. This is particularly evident in the chapter on 'Women in the Viking Age', which includes sections on goading, betrothal and divorce. The juxtaposition of type scenes, and in some cases the choice of scenes, are reminiscent of some of the passages offered for translation in Valfell's and Cathey's (1981) textbook; for instance, an excerpt very similar to selection number 27 (pp. 144–45) appears in Valfell's and Cathey's (pp. 184–85). This chapter emphasises the strong Norse woman and gives the last word to *Laxdæla saga*'s Aud-in-Breeches (pp. 155–57).

The concise notes introducing each passage are generally excellent. One might quibble with a few details: Egill Skalla-Grímsson's ball-game attack (pp. 163–65) is described by the editors as a 'berserk's rage' (163); 'berserk-like' might be less controversial. The statement that 'cremation was the usual funerary practice in the early Viking Age' (p. 110) is something of an overgeneralisation.

The editors use introductory notes to some passages to point out major areas of controversy, such as the relationship between the Dubgaill and the Finngaill (p. 282), the extent to which the Rus influenced state formation in Russia (p. 301) and the calling of the Varangians in the *Russian Primary Chronicle* (p. 309). This seems a reasonable way of pointing to debated topics without attempting to provide a full bibliography.

Many of the translations are original; others are reproduced from earlier publications. Somerville is listed as the translator for twenty-five primary texts (counting the four Eddic poems together), including all the Norse texts in the collection. His translations of saga prose are clear, modern, lively, sometimes colloquial; for example, 'If you wait for Glam, you're dead' (p. 121) for *vís er dauðinn ef þú bíðr Gláms*; 'Hrut's got more going for him than I have' (p. 149) for *Framar er hann en ek*. They read well, present a fairly consistent tone and show some resourceful solutions. In a number of instances a more literal translation would not be unnatural English, but Somerville's punchy renderings seem to capture the sense if not the syntax. I wonder, however, how well these translations will age.

Somerville uses a great deal of alliteration in his verse translations but does not insist on *hendingar* in the skaldic verse. His translations of Eddic poetry stand out for their elegant, clear diction. The alliteration feels natural:

In earliest times  
 nothing existed;  
 there was no sand,  
 no sea, no chilly wave;  
 earth did not exist,  
 nor heaven overhead.

(p. 76)

In some sections of *Hávamál*, however, the use of alliteration within each line pushes the vocabulary toward Graeco-Roman polysyllables. These parts have a very different rhythm from the other Eddic translations in the book. They strike me as rather overworked, but Somerville may be responding to his own experience of the magical character of these passages:

Learn to recognize runes,  
 cleverly ordered characters,  
 signs with great significance,  
 characters of colossal power  
 woven by the wisest one,  
 made by the greatest gods,  
 engraved by Odin the god.

(p. 97)

Overall, Somerville's versions of the Eddic poems compare favourably in reading pleasure with the available translations. I would welcome his full translation of the *Poetic Edda*.

If the reader goes to a second edition, as I hope it will, a few adjustments to the apparatus might help make the book more transparent, especially to beginning readers. It would help students if the introductory comments on each passage stated clearly from what language the selection was translated as well as where and when it was written. I also wish the table of contents (pp. vii–xi) indicated the texts from which the excerpts were taken. An index to the excerpted texts (pp. 502–03) allows readers to connect excerpts from the same text; it would be convenient also to have cross-references to other excerpts from the same text in the introductory notes to each passage. In the index, titles are given in English except for Constantine Porphyrogenitus' *De administrando imperio*, where the English translation reprinted here originally appeared under the Latin title, and Ibn Fadlan's *Risala*, which may not have a standard English title. The titles of many sources (especially those in Old Norse) are translated in parentheses following the English title (for *Knýtlinga saga* this order is reversed, and the title *Orkneyinga saga* is not translated), but the original language titles are lacking for others; the principle employed is unclear. If a work does not have a standard title, it is listed by author only.

The bibliography of sources (pp. 495–97) is organised by editor/translator. All items translated by a given individual are listed in a single paragraph except for the broad range translated by Angus M. Somerville. The index of topics (pp. 499–501) is brief.

The map of the ‘Viking World’ (vi) is clear and readable, covering a broad area from Labrador to the Caspian Sea, with a modest number of important sites indicated. Most of the other black-and-white drawings in the book are taken from du Chaillu (1899), with a few from Rafn (1856).

The font is handsome and the paper decent, but the perfect binding on this trade paperback not especially durable. An electronic version of the book is also available.

This reader is a valuable addition to the available teaching materials for the Viking Age. I plan to assign it next time I teach ‘Viking Civilization’.

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THE VIKINGS AND VICTORIAN LAKELAND. THE NORSE MEDIEVALISM OF W. G. COLLINGWOOD AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES. By MATTHEW TOWNEND. *Extra Series XXXIV. Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society*. Kendal, 2009. xv + 328 pp. ISBN 978-1-873124-49-9.

For most of today’s readers of the literature and history of the nineteenth century, the name of W. G. Collingwood conjures up an indistinct figure who persistently haunts the footnotes of any Ruskin biography. William Gershom Collingwood began his association with John Ruskin as a young translator and illustrator; progressed to become one of the man’s principal biographers, editors and interpreters; took on the role of his private secretary; and ended by designing the cross which still stands by Ruskin’s grave in St Mary’s churchyard, Coniston. As Matthew Townend’s book reveals, however, Collingwood richly deserves to be drawn out from Ruskin’s shadow and studied in his own right. A true polymath, Collingwood’s achievements—away from Ruskin’s house, Brantwood, and his many roles there—ranged from translation to painting, from etymology to fiction, and from monument design to travel writing. What drew together those varied activities was a fascination with ‘the Vikings’, and in particular the Old Norse heritage of the counties of Westmoreland and Cumberland. Collingwood stood at the forefront of North-West England’s late-nineteenth-century mission to uncover and promote its shared origins with Iceland, and in this role, as revealed by Townend’s book, he is a figure of not just regional but national, and even international importance.

If Collingwood was a great polymath, then he seems to have found his ideal biographer in Matthew Townend. *The Vikings and Victorian Lakeland* acclaims Collingwood for his ‘imaginative co-ordination of radically different types of

material'—but this is praise which is equally owing to Townend himself, who works in truly interdisciplinary ways to provide a full picture of Collingwood and his world. Every part of Collingwood's varied oeuvre finds informed treatment in the book, with coloured plates providing a taste of his painting and illustration.

At the centre of the study is the long 1893 historical novel, *Thorstein of the Mere*, one of the first fruits of Collingwood's serious study of the Vikings in Lakeland. Like earlier critics of the book, Townend praises the novel's remarkably prescient message about the need to reconcile ethnic differences and establish understanding between cultures. What is important about Townend's treatment of *Thorstein* here, however, is his meticulous teasing out of the ways in which Collingwood's different expressions of Old Northern medievalism cross-fertilised each other. So, for example, the study traces the ways in which Collingwood's interest in etymology informed place and personal names in *Thorstein*, as well as the speech of his characters, while his study of Norse carvings is identified as a source of the book's illustrations, cover and decorated initial letters. Likewise, Townend reveals how Collingwood's later study, *Scandinavian Britain*—a truly interdisciplinary work which pre-empted much late-twentieth-century scholarship—was the fruit of earlier textual, archaeological, art-historical and philological study.

The genesis and development of Collingwood's Old Northernism is traced through illuminating extracts from his personal letters and diaries. From this original research, Townend pieces together a compelling case-study of how nineteenth-century local identities could be located in the medieval past, which should stand as a model for future studies of regional medievalism. He also, perhaps just as importantly, brings vividly to life one of the period's most endearing figures. Collingwood emerges as a man who, flea-bitten, saddle-sore and revolted by the food, nevertheless returned to Lakeland from Iceland with his pride in the region's Old Norse origins still intact. He is also revealed as an author of vast intellectual generosity, whose hand seems to have quietly eased the birth of many of his contemporaries' works—a man who, at midnight on New Year's Eve 1898, was still at his desk, editing the posthumous work of his friend William Calverley.

Although Collingwood is the principal focus of Townend's study, the book places him and his oeuvre firmly in the context of the other Old Northernists who were working in the North-West, and further afield, in the late nineteenth century, and with whom he communicated, collaborated and shared findings—a complex intellectual network which is revealed as every bit as interesting and interconnected as any metropolitan literary 'set'. Besides well-known figures like Ruskin, George Stephens and Beatrix Potter, a host of intriguing amateurs bob to the surface in different chapters, such as the tragic Thomas Ellwood, who published in the face of crushing criticism from his long-time mentor Eiríkr Magnússon; the playwright and poet Beatrice Barmby (not all Victorian Old Northernism was masculine, Townend reveals); and Charles Parker, one of the first interpreters of the Gosforth Cross, who raced to publish under threat that his findings would be plundered by professionals from Cambridge.

Townend deals generously and magnanimously with the inevitable errors that can be identified in the work of many of these early antiquaries, from

misinterpretations of place-names to misdatings of monuments. The result is that his study glows with a genuine appreciation of the painstaking labours of forgotten, amateur antiquarians like Henry Swainson Cowper or Mary Powley—the miles they walked, and the soakings they endured—in pursuit of evidence for Lakeland's Norse origins. Together, Townend's accounts of such figures constitute a new history of the Lake District, bringing vividly to life a period in which one might still stumble across an unrecognised tenth-century monument in a Cumbrian churchyard.

Collingwood once praised his contemporary Richard Fergusson as 'an all-round man . . . who made antiquarian study popular without vulgarising it, and brought it . . . into touch with modern life'. This was praise which was also due to Collingwood himself, but it is equally true of Townend's study—a work with real relevance to identity in North-West England today. Having lived in the Lakes, I have heard many Cumbrians proudly express a sense of their Viking origins. *The Vikings and Victorian Lakeland* should therefore appeal not only to those interested in the antiquarianism of the nineteenth century; it should also be enjoyed by those simply smitten by the Lake District and its distinctive culture today.

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

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

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

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

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

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