



SAGA-BOOK

VOL. XXV
PART 3

VIKING SOCIETY FOR NORTHERN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON
2000

Saga-Book: Editors of Articles

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ISSN: 0305-9219

Printed by Short Run Press Limited, Exeter

DRENGS AND THEGNS AGAIN

BY MARTIN SYRETT

IT HAS LONG BEEN RECOGNISED that Anglo-Danish relations played a significant role in the development of various administrative institutions in both England and Denmark during the second half of the Viking Age (c.900–1050). That the Scandinavian settlers in the Danelaw brought with them their own customs and exerted a major influence on local administrative units is clear from vocabulary alone. The judicial unit known as the ‘wapentake’ (Old English *wapengetæc*) derives its name from Old Norse *vápnatak*, probably referring to the flourishing of weapons as part of the proceedings of the Scandinavian ‘thing’ assemblies. Scandinavian influence has also been mooted in the case of the ‘soke’, although here less of a consensus has been reached since the Scandinavian evidence for the existence of the defined *sókn* unit is unclear (Jørgensen 1980, 33–34). Nevertheless, the scale of the Norse settlement in England clearly had huge ramifications for the development of legal and administrative institutions in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Any influence working in the opposite direction from England to Scandinavia is less easy to define before the end of the tenth century. It is natural to imagine that there must have been some flow of ideas east across the North Sea, but most of the indicators left to us point to the introduction of religious rather than secular impulses (Abrams 1995). Not until the first half of the eleventh century, and especially the reign of Cnut (1016–35), do we find the clearest evidence of English secular institutions making an impact on Scandinavian society. However, while it would be possible to argue that Cnut’s joint reign over both England and Denmark gave rise to the most obvious mechanisms whereby organs of royal government could have been transplanted into Scandinavia, there are factors which argue against this notion.

Firstly, it is only really in the realms of coinage and the church that serious innovations derived from English models can be picked out in Cnut’s Denmark (Lund 1994), although it seems likely that English culture was borrowed in epistolary usage as well (Harmer 1946–53). Secondly, it is probable that other aspects of institutional loans from England entered Scandinavia not through Denmark but by different routes. Of all the

Scandinavian countries English missionary work and ecclesiastical influence were strongest in Norway, and the loanword *hirð* 'king's retinue', (later) 'royal court' from Old English *hired* is earliest and most convincingly attested in Norwegian contexts (Lindow 1976, 63–69). The preference of the mediaeval western Norse lawcodes for antecedent clauses in *ef* 'if' has also been ascribed to English legal usage, albeit not wholly convincingly (Ståhle 1958, 148–68, but cf. Norseng 1991). However, most aspects of royal government, administrative divisions and institutional proceedings in late Viking-Age Scandinavia remain obscure due to the relative lack of primary documentary sources to tell us about them. To return to Denmark, it is for example possible that the division into the units known as the *herreder*, probably military in origin to judge from the etymology of the term, may have been complete in some parts of the kingdom at least already by the tenth century, but their existence cannot be directly demonstrated before the appearance of the cadastres and diplomas of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (cf. Christensen 1969, 69–90).

There is, however, one body of native evidence from the late tenth and early eleventh centuries which can be investigated to shed light on Danish society and institutions: the corpus of runic inscriptions found for the most part, in this period at least, on runestones raised as memorials to the dead. Although these objects and texts have always been the subject of intense interest, it is only recently that work has begun to make full use of the range of information they carry for the social history of Scandinavia in the later Viking Age. Such approaches, relying on the analysis of the body of runestones as a totality and using above all sponsorship patterns to illuminate matters such as inheritance laws or the position of women, are largely tied to the name of Birgit Sawyer, who has undertaken groundbreaking work in a series of articles (B. Sawyer 1991; cf. Page 1993). In this paper, however, I intend to bring this epigraphic material to bear on an older chestnut: the status and position of the *drengs* (Old Norse *drengr*) and thegns (Old Norse *þegn*) who appear in these inscriptions, the possible influence of Anglo-Saxon terminology and institutions which may manifest itself in the semantic range of these terms, and the question of the development of the Danish state with accompanying aristocracy and royal officers.

There are various ways to approach the concept of 'state' within the context of later Viking-Age Scandinavia. According to Löfving, 'a necessary qualification for a state society is, at least theoretically, a monopoly on violence in order to exercise justice', while 'state formation . . . requires a homogeneous ideology of society, and the rulers must have sufficient

knowledge and resources in order to exercise government' (1991, 149). Alternatively, we might follow the economic approach taken by Randsborg of a 'large, stable political unit with a high level of production' (1980, 7). While it is clear that state-formation in late Viking-Age Scandinavia went hand in hand with the development of the notion of kingship, it is less obvious exactly what rights and privileges were enjoyed by Scandinavian kings in this period. The question of their role in legislation is still a vexed one, and the clearest manifestations of royal power are possibly to be found rather in military affairs. For a state to function the centralisation of authority is also a prerequisite, with the development of a network of administrators directly under the king's jurisdiction scattered throughout the kingdom in towns and royal estates. In this context it is now widely, if not generally, accepted that the foundations of the mediaeval state of Denmark were laid in the later tenth and early eleventh centuries, a key period which saw the official acceptance of Christianity and the first serious moves towards the development of politically unified kingdoms across much of Scandinavia.

However, documentary sources charting the progress of this centralised web of Danish royal officers are naturally hard to come by, and Svend Aakjær was the first to combine evidence from the runic inscriptions and from England to try to establish a picture of this development in late Viking-Age Denmark (1927–28). Aakjær argued that the terms 'thegn' and 'dreng' used in the Danish runic inscriptions did not simply carry the general sense of '(worthy) free man' as assumed by most previous commentators, but rather that they represented a social class holding a particular rank as the king's men, whose role developed from that of military service as members of the king's household (Old Norse *hirð*) to that of landowners functioning as royal agents. Although Aakjær did not specifically invoke the idea of English linguistic or institutional influence upon Scandinavia, he was nevertheless forced to rely heavily on the analogy of the English terms *þegn* and *dreng*, the latter itself a Scandinavian loanword, since there was little cogent contemporary Scandinavian evidence for such a focused interpretation (Aakjær 1927–28, 20–28). Nevertheless, in the light of the close connections between Denmark and England during the early eleventh century in particular, Aakjær's arguments have won a fair amount of acceptance, even if there have been some dissenting voices raising reservations. Christensen (1969, 218–22), for example, concludes that the terms 'thegn' and 'dreng' are best seen as indicators of rank, referring to members of prominent families who were also often active in Viking activities abroad.

Even from the English viewpoint, it is difficult to swallow fully Aakjær's assumptions concerning the status of thegns and drengs in late Anglo-Saxon England. The loanword *dreng* is very rare in pre-Conquest English sources given that its earliest occurrence is in the poem composed on the battle of Maldon of 991 (Scragg 1981, lines 149–51):

Forlet þa drenga sum daroð of handa,
fleogan of folman, þæt se to forð gewat
þurh ðone æþelan Æþelredes þegen.

Then a certain dreng released a spear from his hand
flying from his palm, so that it shot forward too far
through the noble thegn of Ethelred.

Here the reference is clearly to a Scandinavian, but the sense seems to be nothing more than that of 'warrior, man'. Like the majority of Scandinavian loanwords into English, *dreng* is better attested in documents of the Anglo-Norman period, but it does also occur in the north-western charter of Gospatrick, the original of which probably dates from the middle of the eleventh century (Harmer 1952, 423, 532; cf. Phythian-Adams 1996, 174–81). In the protocol Gospatrick addresses the text to his *ðrenge* and 'free men', and Harmer notes that 'the *dreng* held his land by military and other services'. Certainly, by the Anglo-Norman period the term *dreng* seems to have taken on a semantic life of its own in the northern counties of England, where both drengs and thegns are attested as minor landowners 'with a strange mixture of knightly and servile services' (Poole 1955, 38). However, this position was not only fairly restricted in terms of its geographical spread, but also seems to have been a fairly minor rank heavily involved with the administration of estates (Stenton 1961, 146–49). It seems largely out of key with the sense discernible in Scandinavian sources, and it cannot be concluded that the term when first borrowed already implied an individual holding lands as a vassal from the king.

For Old English *þegn* there is more plentiful contemporary evidence from late Anglo-Saxon England, but here Aakjær's case rests to a large extent on the faulty assumption that *þegn* was generally a term for a vassal specifically of the king (cf. Lund 1986, 111, n. 30). However, the term carried a far wider semantic range than this, even if in prose at least it did contain an overriding connotation of 'service'. According to the *Rectitudines Singularum Personarum*, regarded as dating from the middle of the eleventh century, thegns were obliged to perform three services in respect of their land, military service (*expeditio*) and work on bridges and fortifications (Liebermann 1960, I, 444; EHD II, 875–89). These three duties

comprised the classic *trimoda necessitas* (Loyn 1984, 32–34), and it would be tempting, if undemonstrable, to assume that landowners in eleventh-century Denmark might have been under a similar range of burdens. However, the rank of thegn in Anglo-Saxon England was not a closely bounded one, and to a certain extent can be classified only with respect to the wergild it carried rather than any level of opulence or social status. According to Wulfstan's *Compilation on Status* from the beginning of the eleventh century, a *ceorl* 'free man' could rise to the rank of thegn if he prospered sufficiently (Liebermann 1960, I, 456 under *Gepyncðo*; EHD I, 468–69). It is also observed that a king's thegn (*cyninges þegn*) could have other thegns under him, and diplomatic evidence makes it clear that this was the case for other leading secular and ecclesiastical figures. Of some incidental interest also is the fact that the Northumbrian code known as the *Norðleoda Laga* gives the thegn a wergild only half as high as that of the *hold*, with the latter equated to the (king's) high reeve (Liebermann 1960, I, 460; EHD I, 469). It is clear that in these areas of significant Scandinavian influence the imported position of the *hǫlðr* was held to be far more significant than the relatively lowly thegn. On the whole, Barlow's summary is apt (1988, 6): 'Among the thegns, at one end of the scale, were men who possessed estates in many shires acquired through generations of royal service, and, at the other, were men indistinguishable from landholding freemen except by their rank.'

However suggestive the English evidence might be, only a study of the Norse usage of *drengr* and *þegn* can confirm (or deny) any putative semantic influence east across the North Sea. However, in the Scandinavian languages our understanding of these terms is to a large extent coloured by mediaeval usage in the manuscripts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and it is not always easy to establish which semantic overtones would have been present in the tenth and eleventh. Fritzner gives several definitions of the range of meanings carried by Old Norse *drengr*, the most basic of which is 'a man who is as he should be' (Fritzner 1883–96, I, 264). However, the most explicit formulation comes from the *Skáldskaparmál* section of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (Finnur Jónsson 1931, 186–87):

Drengir heita ungir menn búlausir, meðan þeir afla sér fjár eða orðstír, þeir fardrengir, er milli landa fara, þeir konungs drengir, er hofðingjum þjóna, þeir ok drengir, er þjóna ríkum mönnum eða bóndum; drengir heita vaskir menn ok batnandi.

Young men without their own farms are called drengs while they are acquiring wealth or fame for themselves; those who travel between lands are called drengs on the move (*fardrengir*), those in the service of chieftains are called

king's drengs (*konungs drengir*), and they are also called drengs who serve powerful men or landowners; men who are manly and promising are called drengs.

Here we find the classic statement of the position of a dreng: a young, often unmarried, man without a permanent residence of his own who makes his way in the world by serving social superiors. The youth of the dreng is confirmed by other evidence, such as the use of the word to gloss Latin *tiro* and the distinction drawn in law between the unmarried *drengmaðr* and the settled *bóndi*. However, being in the service of the king is just one of the options open to the plucky dreng, and when talking about the retinues of great men Snorri also notes (Finnur Jónsson 1931, 162) that *konungar ok jarlar hafa til fylgðar með sér þá menn, er hirðmenn heita ok húskarlar* 'kings and earls have in their retinue those men who are called *hirðmenn* and *húskarlar*', with more specific terms applied to the king's retainers. Nielsen's conclusion that there is no clear West Norse evidence for a specific sense of *drengr* as 'armed retainer' remains reasonable (1945, 111–12), and elsewhere in Scandinavia the term 'dreng' is also used with a wide semantic range. In the Swedish kings' list appended to the *Äldre Västgötalagen*, for example, it is said of King Ingi the Younger that *han styrðhi Sweriki með drænskap*, while the second King Sverkir is described as a *sniællar mann oc goðþær ðrængær* (Noreen 1962, 15).

Unlike *drengr*, which is a specifically Scandinavian form, the term *þegn* has cognates in the other Germanic languages which can be used for comparative purposes. Unfortunately, the question is complicated by the fact that both English and German vocabulary seem to have exerted influence upon the Old Norse lexicon before the period of our earliest texts. A basic definition of *þegn* seems to be 'free man (especially those entitled to attend assemblies)', and it is equated by Fritzner with other similar terms such as *sveinn* or *karl* (1883–96, III, 1012). It is in this context that we must view the frequent alliterative couplet *þegn ok þræll* found in the Scandinavian lawcodes in which *þegn* and *þræll* are contrasted, and in a similar vein Snorri notes in *Skáldskaparmál* (Finnur Jónsson 1931, 187) that *þegnar ok hǫlðar, svá eru bændr kallaðir* 'thegns and *hǫlðar*, landowners are called so'. However, there is also evidence that a thegn could be expected to occupy a position of service under a king. This sense is implied in a passage from *Óláfs saga helga* in which Olaf's emissary tells the Icelanders that *hann vill vera yðarr dróttinn, ef þér vilið vera hans þegnar* 'he [the king] will be your lord, if you will be his thegns' (Johnsen and Helgason 1941, 327). It is interesting that MS AM 75a fol. has *þjónar* 'servants' for *þegnar*, probably more because the two terms were felt to be

synonymous in this context than because the notion of 'liegeman' needed to be brought out more clearly. The implicit notion of 'fealty to the king' also appears in the concept *þegnildi* (Old Danish *thægnægild*), whereby a fine was owed to the king for the slaying of one of his thegns (Aakjær 1927–28, 11–12). However, without wishing to indulge in romantic speculation concerning the independent status of the late Viking-Age freeman, it does seem plausible that this usage of *þegn* could stem from the conditions of the mediaeval Scandinavian states with an ever greater centralisation of royal authority. While Fritznér's sense of *þegn* as 'servant' is very convincingly attested by the use of the word to gloss terms such as *servus*, this is very possibly a semantic development introduced by foreign missionaries. Certainly such influence can be detected in related verb-formations such as *þéna* 'to serve' alongside *þjóna*, where the rare by-form *þegna* recorded in *Stjórn* (Unger 1862, 560 line 5) seems either to point to Old English *þegnian* or to be a newly coined denominative formation from *þegn*.

Aakjær's interpretation of the status of these thegns and drengs has prompted several more recent studies which have sought to develop further an understanding of their role in the formation of the Danish state and growth of royal authority. While Birgit Sawyer (1991) has concentrated on the distribution of late Viking-Age runestones, Randsborg (1980) and Christophersen (1981–82) have made use of a combination of archaeological and documentary material to stress the proto-feudal aspect of Scandinavia, especially Denmark, in this period. Central to much of this work is the notion that even as early as the later Viking Age kings were binding their vassals to them by the granting of land in return for various, especially military, services, and that these land-grants are reflected in the inscriptions on the runestones which were erected in Denmark in large numbers in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries.

In general, it is notable that while historians have tended to favour such approaches, those scholars undertaking semantic and philological studies have preferred to point out the lack of reliable indicators in the documentary sources for the vassalage interpretation. The reasons for this disparity are easy to understand; from a historical viewpoint it is necessary to posit some mechanisms for explaining the apparent growth of the Danish state in the late tenth century and the temptation to link these developments with the scattered remnants of archaeological and documentary material is inevitably strong. Linguistic arguments, with a more concentrated scope, equally inevitably bring a micro- as opposed to macroscopic slant to the subject, and reveal the limitations both of the evidence and what may be

inferred from it. However, this does not mean that any such objections can be dismissed out of hand as missing the wood for the trees. Many of the points raised by Nielsen (1945) in the first serious opposition to Aakjær remain unanswered, and the problems and ambiguities inherent in the written evidence are confirmed in later surveys such as those by Ruprecht (1958, especially 62–67), Düwel (1975), Strid (1987), and particularly Lindow (1976, especially 106–12). According to Christophersen (1981–82, 130) it is the growing realisation that Viking-Age society contained ‘aristocratic and anti-democratic institutions’ that has led to Aakjær’s views being favoured over Nielsen’s, but such an approach does not negate Nielsen’s semantic conclusions based on the available written evidence, a body of material which has not significantly increased in the fifty years since his article was published.

Since the runic evidence has played the major role in the debate it is necessary to dip into this body of material more deeply. There are some twenty runestones from within the bounds of mediaeval Denmark which mention drengs, and a further seventeen that refer to thegns (see DR 643 under **drængr**, 730–31 under **pægn**); the most recent example to be discovered, from Borup in north Jutland, is presented by Stoklund (1996, 6–8). A few of the attestations are not wholly secure given the fragmentary nature of the preserved texts, but on the whole these stones fall into a moderately well defined group. The majority are of the Jelling or post-Jelling types, generally dated to the second half of the tenth and the early eleventh centuries, with a good proportion of the exceptions coming from the island of Bornholm and datable to the early mediaeval period. On the whole, the inscriptions seem to support the long-cherished view that there was a contrast between the drengs, who were younger men often without wives or permanent estates of their own, and the older more settled thegns. Of the stones commemorating the former, around half seem to have been raised by individuals who we can posit were roughly equal in age and/or status to the person commemorated, either by one or more comrades or partners (Old Norse *félagi*), as in DR 1, 68, 127, 262, 339 and probably 330, or by brothers (Old Norse *bróðir*), as in DR 77, 268, 276 and 288. There are also a few examples where the father stood as sponsor, such as DR 78, 94 and 380. In addition, drengs appear as the sponsors in DR 295, which reads:

**askil sati stin þansi ift tuka kurms sun sar hulan trutin sar flu aiki at
ub salum satu trikar iftir sin bruþr stin o biarki stuþan runum þir
kurms tuka kiku nist**

Áskell set this stone in memory of his gracious lord Tóki Gormsson, who did not flee at Uppsala. The drengs set the stone standing firm with runes on the mound in memory of their ‘brother’; they walked nearest to Gormr’s Tóki.

This above all suggests that *bróðir* could take the sense ‘comrade, fellow’ rather than blood-relation, although it is of course possible that Tóki Gormsson had numerous brothers who happened also to be drengs. Many of the other inscriptions raised by ‘brothers’ could also reflect this usage, where the dreng was commemorated not by his kin but by fellow members of a group or business partnership, as presumably often in the case of *félagi*.

On the other hand, the general trend seems to indicate that thegns were somewhat older and more settled, since a higher proportion of their inscriptions were sponsored either by their spouses or by a younger generation. Six examples reveal sons standing as sponsors, in DR 123, 130, 213, 294, 343 and the Borup stone, while a further four were raised by the wives of the deceased thegn, in DR 98, 99, 277 and 293. DR 209 was sponsored by both the wife and the sons, while DR 143, raised after a *mágr* ‘kinsman (by marriage)’, seems from the context also to refer to a parental commemoration. However, there are only a few possible examples of a stone raised for a thegn by a brother, such as DR 86, 121 and 278, and no certain instance of a father standing sponsor. This picture corresponds nicely with that gained from later Old Norse literary material, and is also confirmed by the runic inscriptions from Sweden. Of the thirty-plus Swedish dreng-stones the majority were raised by brothers or parents as against only one (U 289) where a younger generation stood sponsor. For thegns, on the other hand, there are over fifteen examples of sons standing sponsor and a handful of others where either wives or brothers were responsible for the stone’s erection, but there are no instances of fathers, although VG 158 was set up by an uncle. The inscription VG 157 appears to sum the distribution up, in which one Þórðr raised a stone over his father Fundinn, a thegn, and his brother Ásbjörn, a dreng.

As might be expected from this, the inscriptions also show drengs as more active in military and trading activities than thegns. For example, DR 68 was raised by three sponsors in memory of their *félagi* Qzurr who had owned a part share in a ship, while DR 330 tells of drengs away *í víkingu* ‘on a Viking expedition’. Such aspects of drengly activity are more fully attested in Sweden, where there can be found numerous inscriptions referring to drengs belonging to a *lið* ‘warband’, including armies of the Danish kings. Strid’s conclusion that the word **drængr** ‘could be used to denote a member of an army unit, a fighting ship or a merchant fraternity’

(1987, 308) seems to hold good for both the Danish and Swedish material. On the other hand, there is generally less information given in the inscriptions about the thegns' exploits, perhaps because they were less spectacular. A tentative hint as to their status may be discerned in examples like DR 143:

**tuki raisþi stini þoisi auk karþi kubl þausi aft aba mak sin þaikn
kuþan auk tufu muþur sino þau lika baþi i þaum hauki abi uni tuka
fiar sins aft sik**

Tóki raised this stone and made these monuments in memory of his kinsman Abbi, a good thegn, and of Tófa his mother; they both lie in this mound. Abbi left his property to Tóki after him.

While this inscription may confirm the idea that thegns held landed property it tells us nothing about how such wealth was accrued, if it was not simply inherited, and perhaps contrasts with Swedish inscriptions such as U 792 relating how individuals made their money in the lucrative east, journeys more suggestive of the activities of drengs than thegns.

The most revealing single document is the Glavendrup stone (DR 209), raised in memory of one Alli by his wife and sons. Although the exact interpretation of sections of this inscription has often been debated, the description of the deceased as both *goði* 'priest' and thegn indicates that he held both religious and secular positions, a distribution of responsibility which seems perfectly reasonable given the status of the *goðar* in Viking-Age Iceland where they are best attested. Alli's implied position as the head of a large household is also suggested by the fact that the Sóti who was responsible for carving the runes called him his *dróttinn* 'lord'. However, while the Glavendrup inscription has played a major role in the arguments concerning the status and role of thegns, it is not a justified conclusion that Alli owed his position to royal sanction or functioned as any form of royal official on Fyn (cf. Randsborg 1980, 31; Christophersen 1981–82, 129–30). Rather, it may well be a rare (and welcome) example of a ninth- or early tenth-century leader of a private *lið*, corresponding to those known from eleventh-century Swedish inscriptions. While the arguments raised by Nielsen (1945, 113–15) may well rely too heavily on possibly outdated notions of a free independent class of farmer-chieftains, he is nevertheless right to observe that no connection with the royal *hirð* can be inferred from this inscription. In addition, this early runestone is both temporally and distributionally distinct from the other dreng- and thegn-stones, which tend to cluster in north Jutland and Skåne and date from the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. Since the latter clearly seem to form

a homogeneous and well-defined group, it is more logical to analyse them as a bounded phenomenon with which the Glavendrup stone has no intimate connection.

Even in this later group there is no clear consensus that the drengs and thegns commemorated had any particularly close relationship to the king or served in a royal *lið* or *hirð*. To be sure, there are examples where drengs can be linked explicitly to a royal retinue. One of the stones from Skåne (DR 345) appears to mention a dreng of Cnut, if this plausible interpretation of the sequence **triks knus** is accepted, but inscriptions referring to the conquest of England are better attested in Sweden, such as ÖG 111, SÖ 14, U 194 and U 344. Although naturally different conditions may have prevailed in Denmark and Sweden, U 344 is still particularly interesting in revealing that the Úlfr commemorated had participated in three different attacks on England led by three different men. This confirms what we know from other documentary sources, that the raids of the late tenth and early eleventh centuries were largely organised privately rather than nationally, and that great men other than the king could raise warbands in which drengs could, and did, serve. While it is possible that this relative lack of Danish Cnut-stones is due to the chronological disparity between the Danish and Swedish runestone traditions, the uncertain example of DR 345 nevertheless provides the only Danish inscription referring to a dreng directly serving a king. If, however, we look for a term which implies membership of a magnate's household, then the word most clearly employed is not *drengr* or *þegn* but *heimþegi* 'member of a household'. This form occurs in two inscriptions from Hedeby connected (most plausibly) to King Sveinn Forkbeard, and moreover in contexts which suggest that the *heimþegi* too had active military duties. DR 3 notes that:

suin kunukr sati stin uftir skarþa sin himþiga ias uas farin uestr ion nu uarþ tauþr at hiþa bu

King Sveinn set the stone in memory of Skarði his *heimþegi*, who had gone west and now died at Hedeby.

Even more suggestive is DR 1:

þurlf risþi stin þonsi himþigi suins eftir erik filaga sin ias uarþ tauþr þo trekiar satu um haiþa bu ian han uas sturi matr tregr harþa kuþr

Þórólfr, Sveinn's *heimþegi*, raised this stone in memory of his *félagi* Erik, who died when drengs besieged Hedeby, and he was the ship's pilot, a very good dreng.

It has proved difficult to pin down exactly which military action gave rise to these deaths and runestones, even assuming they are both from the

same one. However, the fact that the *heimþegi* Þórólfr regarded the *drengr* and *stýrimaðr* Erik as his *félagi* may indicate that they were on the same social level, and it would be plausible to assume that Þórólfr too would have been considered a *dreng*.

Further light is provided by the three runestones from Hällestad in Skåne, all of which refer to retainers of the magnate Tóki Gormsson. DR 295 was raised by one Áskell to his *hollr dróttinn* Tóki, and a number of *drengs* also participated in memory of their *bróðir*. Both DR 296 and 297 also mention a *heimþegi* of Tóki, although neither of them receives any other title. The term *heimþegi* also occurs in DR 154 and 155; the first example is particularly interesting in that, although Skonvig's text there is partially corrupt, it suggests that the *heimþegi* was also described as 'good', and it is such terminology rather than direct evidence that has been taken as the clearest sign that *drengr* and *þegn* had a particularly specific sense in the inscriptions.

It has long been recognised that the runestones commemorating *drengs* and *þegns* show a marked preference for a particular formula within their inscriptions whereby the deceased is described as 'good'. This frequently involves simply the description *góðr*, but can have variations upon the theme with *mjök góðr*, *algóðr* and particularly commonly *harða góðr* also appearing (B. Sawyer 1994). While this formula appears on a high proportion of such stones, it is far less frequent in inscriptions commemorating individuals other than *þegns* or *drengs*, although there are scattered examples (such as DR 298 and 338). This distribution certainly appears to imply that there was something particular to *drengs* and *þegns* which marked them out as 'good', but exactly what it was, and exactly how to interpret the laconic adjective, has proved a matter of much debate. While earlier commentators tended to assume that the formula referred only to the personal character or qualities of the individual involved (Aakjær 1927–28, 4), others have read a more precise sense such as 'of noble birth' (DR 655; B. Sawyer 1991, 110). Certainly in mediaeval Old Norse prose the collocation *góðir menn* 'good men' had come to take on a specialised sense of the king's closest advisers, but it might be questioned whether such usage could be applied to the runic inscriptions of the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Examples such as DR 1, where Erik, the *stýrimaðr* in King Sveinn's fleet, is described as a *drengr harða góðr*, may well suggest that a translation 'a very good man' is too imprecise and woolly. On the other hand, there are texts which apply other terms of approbation to the deceased which cannot reasonably be interpreted as anything other than statements of respect

for the individual's posthumous reputation (cf. Stoklund 1991, 295–96). On one occasion we are told that a good dreng died *manna mest óníðingr* with effective use of litotes (DR 68). Significantly, there are also examples which use the superlative form of the adjective, such as DR 277 where one Sveinn is described as *þegn fyrstr*, or the Borup stone which calls one Þorgotr *beztan þegn*. In DR 133 the deceased is praised as the *landmanna beztr í Danmörku ok fyrstr* with the tricky term *landmaðr* (see Düwel 1975, 195–99). If it is assumed, plausibly but uncertainly, that *góðr* and *beztr* are used here with the same semantic implications, then it is difficult to see how (*harða*) *góðr* can be translated as 'of noble birth' with a technical social implication, since superlatives make little sense in such a context. This impression is strengthened by a consideration of the Swedish material, even if we have to reckon with the possibility that it might represent a different picture from the Danish. As has long been recognised, the inscriptions of Västergötland in particular show a marked similarity to those of Denmark in many respects, including the formulaic appearance of good drengs and thegns. However, the greater body of evidence shows that 'good' was a term which could be applied to a *bóndi* 'landowner' or related family member quite freely, especially in central Sweden, and other terms of approbation such as *nýtr*, *hæfr* and *frækn* also appear; cf. ÖG 81, U 166, U 289. Södermanland in particular shows a taste for individual formulae, with drengs described three times as *snjallr* (SÖ 155, 163 and 320) and thegns seven times with a dependent genitive *þróttar* (SÖ 90, 112, 151, 158, 170, 367 and Jansson 1948, 295).

The idea cannot be ruled out that these formulaic distributions observable in Viking-Age runic inscriptions depended more upon local epigraphic traditions and (mostly irrecoverable) semantic peculiarities of individual dialects than on the status of those commemorated. The importance of regional variation has been stressed by various commentators (Nielsen 1945, 120; Stoklund 1991; Palm 1992), but raises difficult questions of methodology in its application since it inevitably tends to lead to circular argumentation. Nevertheless, this approach can also be applied to the other aspect of the case that the drengs and thegns of Danish runic inscriptions represent a specific class of men who had given oaths of fealty to the king, or who in a more explicit sense might have functioned as royal officials. This depends upon the distribution of the runestones, since the vast majority of the Danish dreng- and thegn-stones occur in two geographical clusters, around northern Jutland and in Skåne, and date from the second half of the tenth to early eleventh centuries. From northern Jutland, with a particularly heavy concentration around Randers, DR

68, 77, 78, 94, 127 and 150 commemorate drengs while thegns are represented in DR 86, 98, 99, 106, 115, 121, 123, 130, 143 and the Borup stone. In Skåne dreng-stones are widely distributed, as in DR 262, 268, 276, 288, 289, 295, 330, 339 and 345, while thegn-stones are more limited to the southern coast, i. e. DR 277, 293, 294 and 343. The most notable chronological exceptions are the early Glavendrup stone on Fyn (DR 209) and a few mediaeval examples from Bornholm, but DR 213 from Lolland-Falster and the two Hedeby-stones DR 1 and 2 are the only runestones from outside these two areas which are contemporary with the main group. However, this distribution to a large extent merely corresponds with the general spread of runestones in Viking-Age Denmark (Palm 1992, 84–88) and so in that respect reveals nothing particularly significant about the role of these thegns and drengs.

This curious distribution has nevertheless proved the keystone for interesting theories about the motives behind the development of the runestone tradition. Sawyer has put forward the theory that runestones were erected as ‘crisis symptoms’ in a period of encroaching royal authority over the traditional landed classes (B. Sawyer 1991). According to Randsborg’s interpretation the runestones reflect the establishment of royal power by virtue of land-grants in return for military service (Randsborg 1980, especially 25–44). Although these theories pose interesting questions, they have not gone without criticism, and with some justification Stoklund (1991, 295–96) finds them too narrow in their approach. Whether we view the runestones (especially those raised in honour of thegns and drengs) as either statements of independence in the face of the expansion of royal authority, or statements of that authority in the form of royal officials and liegemen, their curious distribution remains awkward. Birgit Sawyer has suggested (1991, 106–07) ‘that the reason south Jutland and Fyn have very few inscriptions is because they were already under royal control’, whereas ‘mid- and northern Jutland, Sjælland and Skåne, where most Danish inscriptions are to be found, were the areas that were most affected by the extension of direct royal authority’. However, there are few other reasons for assuming that the tenth- and eleventh-century kings of the Jelling dynasty had greater authority in south Jutland than elsewhere in the peninsula, and the argument suffers from circularity. In addition, it is misleading to include Sjælland with northern Jutland and Skåne as a region heavily represented by runestones; there are only a scattered handful from the island from the later Viking Age, and none involving thegns or drengs. Randsborg’s laudable attempt to make use of the distribution of the runestones within individual provinces is also flawed by some

dubious conclusions from distribution maps with only a few tokens on them (Christophersen 1981–82, 131).

On the whole, it seems reasonable to assume that the distribution pattern of the Danish runestones must to some extent reflect the original state of affairs, even if some stones were moved and re-used for secondary purposes, such as building churches. The clustering then seems to point more to local fashions and customs within a couple of generations than to royal policies of national significance. If the latter view were correct, we would expect to find the runestones in newly conquered territories, and quite probably around the forts constructed by Harald Bluetooth. In such a context, the scarcity of runestones from Sjælland would be particularly surprising. However, when developing the notion of a vassal aristocracy in late Viking-Age Denmark, Randsborg proposes that ‘in the tenth century the system of vassalage was expanding, as is shown by the runestones, which demonstrated publicly the new rights of land’ (1980, 168), and links this view to two main groups of archaeological evidence. Firstly, there is the large number of prestigious graves in tenth-century Denmark, as attested above all by the male equestrian and weapon-graves and the female waggon-graves, which seem to reflect the growth of new burial customs (Randsborg 1980, 121–35; Näsman 1991). Secondly, there are the excavated farm-sites such as Vorbasse in Jutland, which seem to reveal a development of large fenced-off ‘magnate farms’ in the later Viking Age (Hvass 1979).

To a certain degree the distribution of the rich graves does agree with that of the runestones with a slight concentration in northern Jutland, while the relative paucity of equestrian graves in Skåne is probably due to chronological factors (see the maps in Näsman 1991, 166–67). It is also certainly tempting to link these burials to a rising local aristocracy, and Näsman notes of the individual in the rich Mammen grave, for example, that there is scarcely any doubt that he was the king’s man (1991, 172). On the other hand, Roesdahl has argued that the change in burial customs reflects religious as much as social developments (1983; Nielsen 1991), and even if they were status markers they tell us nothing more than that there may have been a growing self-awareness among the Danish upper classes in this period. In addition, the runestones commemorating thegns and drengs are generally not notably larger or more elaborate than others from the same period. Those from Jutland in particular show a tendency to average out at about one and a half metres high, and although there are some whose size stands out, others such as DR 115 are relatively small. There are admittedly none so tiny as DR 155 raised over a *heimþegi*, but

this must be seen as a rare and isolated case; on the whole the dreng- and thegn-stones do not diverge from the runestone tradition but fit neatly within it. Although it may be reasonable to follow Lund when he notes that the English campaigns of conquest conducted by Sveinn Forkbeard and his son Cnut demand that we recognize 'some form of public obligation to serve the state' at the beginning of the eleventh century (1986, 106), the arguments in favour of analysing these runestones and graves as markers of a new vassal class, however appealing, remain fairly circumstantial.

Similar arguments concerning the formulae and distribution of the runestone inscriptions also inform Löfving's essay on the relations between Denmark and south-western Sweden towards the end of the Viking Age (1991). While I have no quarrel with Löfving's contention that due to the demographics of late Viking-Age Sweden any political influence upon the provinces of Bohuslän and Västergötland is more likely to have roots in Denmark than Svealand, his case seems to depend upon equally tenuous connections drawn between points on distribution maps. Two main points are raised: the similarity between the runic inscriptions of Denmark (specifically Jutland) and Västergötland on the one hand, and on the other the appearance of several place-names in *Tegneby* 'the *by* of the thegns' along the coastline bordering the Kattegat and Skagerrak to the east. From this he contends 'that Danish kings living in the tenth century, perhaps Gorm or Harald Bluetooth, tried to maintain their influence in overseas regions by royal representatives, living in settlements named Tegneby' (1991, 153). In this context, then, the thegns are to be interpreted as the Danish king's men looking after his interests in newly-conquered or hostile territory, which fits well with the analysis proposed by Randsborg. However, it is unclear exactly when these thegns may have adopted these duties, and Löfving also appears to be proposing English influence when suggesting that 'because Cnut was king of both Denmark and England the term thegn of the Danish stones and of the English documents seems to denote the same dependent relationship' (1991, 154), a dependent relationship which is then extended to the thegns of Västergötland on the basis of the similarity between the Danish and south-west Swedish runic inscriptions.

Such a chronological ambiguity is prompted in the first instance by the recognition that the runic traditions of Jutland and Västergötland seem to a certain degree not to be exactly contemporaneous but rather separated by a generation or two. As a result it may be questioned whether it is reasonable to assume that similarity of formulae and execution demand a corresponding similarity in semantic content or social function. A more

serious objection to Löfving's case is perhaps that the distribution maps do not match up; there are no thegn-stones in Bohuslän and the Tegneby-names are under-represented in Västergötland. As regards the first point, I have noted already that thegns appear in Swedish runestones outside Västergötland and in some cases, such as in Södermanland, in an equally formulaic manner although with different precise wording. Although it might be possible to argue that these men had also served Danish kings in some capacity, particularly as hired troops, it cannot be deduced that those kings also exercised any degree of political authority throughout Sweden. While Cnut certainly seems to have titled himself *rex partis Suanorum* (Liebermann 1960, I, 276; EHD I, 476), his supposed coins minted at Sigtuna with the legend CNVT REX SW can no longer be reliably considered as genuine, as they derive from only one die, and his claims might well have extended no further than the coastal regions such as Blekinge which were subsequently part of the mediaeval Danish kingdom (see Jonsson 1994, 228–29).

Secondly, place-names in *Tegneby* are not restricted to Bohuslän or other provinces near to Denmark, even if there is a relatively high number of examples there. There are about a dozen such Swedish names, scattered for the most part throughout southern Sweden (Strid 1987, 303–06); that they do not appear in Uppland tallies well with the fact that the term *þegn* is recorded in Upplandic runic inscriptions only as a personal name. It is interesting, however, that the regions of central Sweden reveal a cluster of place-names in *Rinkaby* containing the Old Swedish form of *rekkr* rather than *þegn*, and that it has been argued that these and the *Tegneby* names reflect kings, this time of the Svear, sending out their agents to govern for them. This is an intriguing speculation which would correspond well with Löfving's arguments, but it can only be verified with reference to the semantic content of names such as *Tegneby* (Old Norse *Þegnabýr* 'the by of the thegns'), and this sense has proved elusive. Strid makes a valid point when observing that the appearance of *þegn* in the genitive plural is striking enough to cast doubt on the interpretation of the term as simply denoting a farmer or landowner, but the same point could equally be raised in opposition to viewing the thegn as a royal official appointed to oversee a settlement or village and the surrounding agrarian district.

To determine the semantics of forms such as *Þegnabýr*, in the hope of thereby getting to grips with the function of the settlements they named, it seems a fruitful approach to link them with a class of place-names which all contain first elements indicating social rank or class followed by the generic *-by*. There are scattered examples of this group throughout Sweden,

such as *Karlaby* (with *karl*) and *Svenaby* (with *sveinn*) alongside *Thægnaby* and *Rinkaby*, all of which contain a genitive plural form as their first element (Hellquist 1918, 72–82). Similar formations are also attested from Denmark itself, although apparently not with *þegn* as the first element (Hald 1965, 107). Although it is difficult to pin down exactly what such formations might indicate, it is equally difficult not to have sympathy with Hellquist's observation that they might well reflect some form of co-operative settlement by various social classes (1918, 77, 80). On this basis, a natural interpretation would be that *þegn* means 'free man', much as *karl* does in *Karlaby*, although if it referred to an upper class of free man, we might expect the sites accordingly to have some form of elevated status within the district.

Aside from runic inscriptions, the other main area of contemporary Scandinavian evidence which can be tapped for an insight into the semantics of the terms *þegn* and *dreng* is the body of skaldic verse from the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. On the one hand, we are fortunate that from this exact period a relatively large amount of such verse has come down to us composed in honour of various kings and war-leaders. On the other hand, however, there are numerous, often insurmountable, problems of interpretation which confront us and render much of the corpus rather less useful for historical work than might be hoped. There is the nature of the poetry itself: highly formulaic and stereotypical, and frequently composed in metres so complicated that the actual freedom left to the poet for semantic precision must have been curtailed. To what extent many of the verses ascribed to the tenth- and eleventh-century poets actually reflect genuine compositions of the era is also difficult to evaluate. However, on this point at least there seems to be a consensus that the corpus of longer lays or *drápur* in honour of princes and kings (as defined in Fidjestøl 1982) is more likely to have been transmitted accurately, and less likely to originate from the hands of mediaeval antiquaries, than the single stanzas or *lausavísur* which punctuate the Icelandic saga-material.

Both *drengr* and *þegn* are frequently used in skaldic verse with a general sense of 'man', especially in martial contexts as 'warrior', where they fit in to a wide range of fairly colourless terms with much the same meaning used to construct kennings or participate in the intricate patterns of rhyme and alliteration typical of complex metres such as *dróttkvætt*. In an attempt to draw out finer shades of meaning Hans Kuhn (1944) picked out and analysed examples of the usage of such terms with a governing genitive referring to a king or other (usually military) leader. Such cases, where the construction implied that the individual referred to by the word *drengr* or

other such term was in a subordinate position to a social superior, Kuhn classed as *Rangbezeichnungen*, and here above all it might be possible to find support for the notion that drengs or thegns held rank or office in a hierarchical system.

The use of *drengr* as just such a designation of rank is well attested from the late tenth century onwards. In Einarr skálaglamm's *Vellekla* we find drengs linked to Earl Hákon of Hlaðir, where it is noted that *glaðar þengill her drengja* 'the lord gladdens the army of drengs' (Skj, BI, 123, st. 33:2). Halldórr ókristni's *Eiríksdrápa* (Skj, BI, 194, st. 7:7), composed around 1010, refers to Hákon's successor Earl Erik as the *drengja stjóri* 'the ruler of drengs', and further examples throughout the eleventh century crop up from the circles of the Norwegian kings, as in Sigvatr's *Austrfararvísur* (Skj, BI, 224, st. 18:7) or Arnórr's *Magnússdrápa* (Skj, BI, 312, st. 7:3). Such expressions seem exactly analogous to individual Danish runic inscriptions of the same period, and confirm the notion that the title of dreng could be applied to one serving in the armed forces of the king or some other magnate. Although some such drengs were surely mercenaries, it is equally likely that others held some form of personal contract or bond with their patron. However, the verse left to us provides few opportunities for investigating these relationships more closely, and the emphasis on drengs in martial contexts does not allow for a secure identification of their social position or their functions and duties outside the sphere of military service.

The sense of the title *þegn* is more elusive, but at the same time probably more significant for a study of royal officers. As noted by Kuhn (1944), there are early examples of *þegn* apparently used as a designation of rank in the context of the pagan religion, but in a secular sense such a development cannot be identified before the early eleventh century. The single stanza preserved of Egill Skallagrímsson's *Berudrápa* (Skj, BI, 42) gives a possible example, but unfortunately the text is hideously corrupt as it stands in the only manuscript which contains it. The first *helmingr* reads (Skj, AI, 48):

Heyri feyrs aforsa
fallhaddz vinar stalla
hyggi þegn til þagnar
þinn eiðr konungr minna.

Finnur Jónsson emended to *Heyri fúss á forsa fallhadds vinar stalla, hyggi, þegn, til þagnar þinn lýðr, konungs, mína* 'Let the eager king's thegn hear my waterfalls of the long-haired friend of altars [i. e. poem]; may your people think of silence'. In this interpretation *þegn konungs* is the

vocative object of the appeal for attention for the verse's recital. However, this involves several fairly radical steps, most notably *fúss* for *feysr* and *lýðr* for *eiðr* alongside the suggested genitive singular *konungs* for *konungr*. Kock (NN §1043) also noted that taking *heyri þegn konungs* as a single clause gave a very awkward syntactic division, although controversy still reigns over the extent to which such sentence patterns were possible, or preferred, in *dróttkvætt* verses (Gade 1995, 12–17). Kock's own reading is not without its own difficulties (see also NN §2729), but it might be equally plausible to identify a collocation *þegn þinn* referring to the *konungr*, which would again provide an example of a designation of rank. However, on the whole the corruption of this stanza renders its interpretation very dubious, and it is also worth noting that in the context of the saga the verse refers to a shield given to Egill in Iceland by a Norwegian magnate, where a reference to a king is wholly out of place (Nordal 1933, 275). Since the verse is only preserved in a single manuscript it seems likely that it has been placed in the wrong literary context, and Kuhn was surely right to omit this from his examples of *þegn* used with a governing genitive.

A further example which purports to be from the tenth century is found in a *lausavísa* attributed to King Olaf Tryggvason (Skj, BI, 144–45), but this verse is scarcely likely to be genuine. The most significant evidence for the semantic range and development of the term *þegn* is to be found in verse of the early eleventh century, in particular that composed for Saint Olaf Haraldsson. In his *Höfuðlausn*, composed for Olaf, Óttarr svarti observed that *eru þér at þegnum Hjaltlendingar kendir* 'the Shetlanders are recognised as your thegns', and this has frequently been interpreted as the earliest clear example of *þegn* with the sense of 'vassal, servant' (Skj, BI, 272, st. 19:1–4; cf. Malmros 1985, 122–23). However, while this is a plausible contextual reading, it might be suggested that the choice of *þegn* may have been conditioned not simply by its semantic content but also by the necessity of finding a term to alliterate with *þér*. It is tempting to suggest that had the verse been composed in either the first or third person rather than the second, then phrases such as **mér at mǫnnum* or **honum at hǫldum* might have been equally acceptable with an equivalent semantic force; both *maðr* and *hǫlðr* are attested as designations of rank from much the same period.

The large body of verse by Sigvatr Þórðarson provides some particularly interesting evidence for the question of the appropriate terminology for the king's retainers or officers. In his *Austrfararvísur* (Skj, BI, 220–25), composed early in Olaf's reign concerning an arduous diplomatic mission to Västergötland, the emissaries are described both as the king's 'men' (st.

3:8 *konungs mǫnnum*) and as ‘drengs’ (st. 14:1 *drengjum*, st. 18:7 *þinna drengja*). Little can be read into these descriptions, but if the absence of *þegn* is not simply coincidental it may imply that the term was not particularly suited to the situation at hand, which would fit in with the notion that being a thegn referred primarily to the sedentary holding of land. It is however interesting that Earl Rǫgnvaldr is called Olaf’s *heiðmaðr*, apparently denoting his position as a vassal of the Norwegian king (st. 17:8), while the earl’s men are referred to as *hvern húskarl* (st. 18:3–4); these are exactly the sort of contexts in which it would have been useful to find the term *þegn*.

The relationship between the king and his subjects is also the subject of the most revealing composition of Sigvatr’s, his sequence of stanzas addressed to Olaf’s son Magnus known as the *Bersǫglisvísur* (Skj, BI, 234–39), in which the poet admonished the young king for his overbearing behaviour. In the verses ascribed to this poem *þegn* is used on several occasions where a translation ‘vassal’ might be appropriate. The statement that *nú eru þegnar frið fegnir* ‘now thegns are glad of peace’ (st. 2:3) might be taken simply to indicate that the thegns were relieved at the political stability after the strife of Olaf’s reign, but a more pregnant interpretation is suggested by the lines (st. 5:1–4):

Rétt hykk kjósa knóttu
karlfolk ok svá jarla
af þvít eignum lofða
Áláfar frið gófu.

I think both the free and leading men
knew rightly how to choose,
given that the Olafs gave security
to men’s possessions.

Here we see the poet not only differentiating the ranks of Norwegian society into two classes, the commonalty (*karlfolk*) and the aristocracy (*jarla*), but also observing that the two Olafs gave *friðr* ‘peace’ to, i. e. ‘had respect for’, the possessions of their subjects (Page 1995, 163). The rights of freemen to their land in the face of royal aggression is taken up again later, when Sigvatr notes that *minn dróttinn leggir sína eign á óðal þegna* ‘my lord claims the thegns’ ancestral lands as his property’ (st. 14:2–3). There are two further examples where thegns are referred to in similar contexts, when Sigvatr asks *hverr eggjar þik hǫggva, hjaldrgegnir, bú þegna* ‘who urges you, warrior, to slay thegns’ livestock’ (st. 11:1–2), and then observes that *slegit hefr þǫgn á þegna* ‘silence has fallen upon

the thegns' (st. 12:7). None of these attestations necessarily gives any indication of a thegn's separate social status from the common free landowner, the *bóndi*, although it is made clear that thegns were considered entitled to inalienable *óðal*-land and the distinction drawn between the thegns and the *þingmenn* might possibly suggest that the former group held a more personal relationship with the king than the latter (st. 12:5–8).

However, it is also notable that the examples of *þegn* are used in contexts where the form plays a role in the rhyming, and also sometimes the alliterative, structure of the stanza. In other metrical environments different terms are applied with, on the face of it, equivalent semantic overtones. For example, Sigvatr observes of the king's confiscation of estates and property that *rán hykk rekkum þínum leiðask* 'I think your men are tired of this theft' (st. 11:7–8), where *rekkr* is used as a designation of rank to fit the demands of the metre. The more colourless term *bóndi* also appears in the archaic plural *búendr* but again in contexts where such a disyllable with a short root was required to fit the metrical constraints of Craigie's law, according to which a long-rooted disyllable such as *þegnar* 'thegns' was not tolerated in the middle of certain types of even-numbered half-line (st. 4:7–8, 8:6). Finally, there is the striking reference to the *konungs greifum* (st. 14:8), where a loanword is used specifically to refer to the king's officers (cf. Hofmann 1955, 82). If thegns did hold an administrative role in Scandinavian society at this time it would be nice to find such an explicit reference using the term *þegn*, but the question is left open as to exactly who these *greifar* were and how their roles functioned.

While it might be possible to argue that words like *rekkr*, *þegn* and *bóndi* were to Sigvatr's mind largely interchangeable and could be selected at will to fit the current metrical requirements, this would be to deny the poet any expertise in his craft to an intolerable extent. The frequent appearance of *þegn* may well suggest that the term referred to a group or class of landowners whose rights were held to be at risk and who were particularly vociferous in voicing their disapproval, and although there is nothing specific linking the thegns to the king by any level of personal commitment beyond that vouchsafed by the population at large, it is plausible to analyse Sigvatr's verses as early expressions of the collocation *lond ok þegna* 'lands and thegns' found in Þjóðólfr Arnórsson's *Sexstefja* and in later prose (Skj, BI, 341).

The evidence of skaldic verse, then, goes some way towards supporting the idea that by the early eleventh century, in some contexts at least, the term *þegn* had developed, in addition to the sense of 'free landholding man', the notion of holding those lands from a higher authority,

specifically the king. This can be tied in with the quasi-feudal notion of ‘vassalage’, but to judge from later Norse sources not bindingly so, since it seems clear that *þegn* could continue to be used in the more general sense. Assessing the importance of this evidence in terms of state formation is tricky in at least two respects: firstly, the identification of those instances where *þegn* is used to denote a legally and functionally defined social class, and secondly the chronological disparity between tenth-century Denmark and eleventh-century Norway. This danger of anachronism may simply be a reflection of the distribution of the evidence; runic inscriptions are notably scarce in Viking-Age Norway compared to its Scandinavian neighbours, while if praise-poetry was being composed in large quantities for kings Gormr, Harald and Sveinn, then only possible fragments have survived (e. g. Fidjestøl 1982, 96, 101–02). Notwithstanding this reservation, however, some qualms remain. The most likely period in which we might expect to identify serious English influence on Scandinavian institutional vocabulary is still the first decades of the eleventh century during the reigns of the Anglo-Danish kings, and perhaps of others such as Olaf Tryggvason of Norway who stood under English patronage (cf. Hofmann 1955, 77–78).

This impression is strengthened by considering the Old Norse loan *hirð* ‘court, royal household’ from Old English *hired*, a borrowing which quite probably brought with it the introduction of more sophisticated methods of royal administration. Already by the middle of the tenth century *hired* seems to have adopted the sense of ‘royal household’, although it could still be used as a term for any household, or even a religious community (Lindow 1976, 42–49). Old Norse *hirð* makes its first appearance in court poetry of the early eleventh century with reference to the personal retinues of great men, especially the kings of Norway. The earliest attestation appears to be in a verse of Gunnlaugr ormstunga, which refers to a *hirð-maðr* of Earl Erik of Hlaðir (Foote and Quirk 1957, 13). Although we might posit here a direct loan from Old English *hiredmann*, it does most reasonably presuppose that *hirð* (and any concomitant institutional reforms) were current at the time. However, the authenticity of this four-line stanza, as a *lausavísa*, must be open to some suspicion, especially as it has no importance to the plot and contains nothing linking it explicitly to Erik’s court. In addition, it is easy to sympathise with suggestions that the use of the truncated rhyming *runhent*-metre fits better with the context of an English court than a Norwegian one (Hofmann 1955, 56–58).

However, *hirð* is convincingly attested in the following decades with reference to the courts of the Norwegian kings. In his *Nesjavísur* composed

around 1016 Sigvatr uses *hirð* twice (Skj, BI, 217–20, st. 2:3–4 and 14:1–2) referring to troops of Olaf Haraldsson, and throughout the rest of the eleventh century it is common in such contexts. On the other hand, even while Old Norse *hirð* betrays the influence of English vocabulary, it is difficult to establish how the *hirð* in the eleventh century may have differed in function and composition from the older *drótt* or *verðung*. It is generally accepted that membership of the *hirð*, as an inherited institution, involved a voluntary contract between the individual and the king (or other magnate), whereby protection, support, prestige and gifts were received in return for (particularly military) service. It seems likely that the *hirðmenn* were originally actual members of the king's personal household, which is supported also by the loan of the term *húskarl* into Old English, and in this context the term *heimþegi* recorded in Viking-Age runic inscriptions would fit admirably the sense of 'member of the (royal) household or *hirð*'. By the mediaeval period, at least, the *hirð* could also number among its members men who were not resident at the court but who had sworn themselves to the king's service on their own estates (Hamre 1961; Nielsen 1961). This shift in the composition and function of the *hirð* was quite probably a gradual process, but it may well be anachronistic to view the landowners, thegns and drengs attested on the runestones as the king's *hirðmenn* already functioning not as members of his household but as royal officers (DR 819 for *Hird*; Christophersen 1981–82, 129–33). This objection is confirmed by the fact that the terms *þegn* and *drengr* are nowhere linked explicitly to membership of the *hirð*. Although Norwegian lawcodes do contain the term *hirðdrengr*, Hødnebo (1972, 153) notes that this is a borrowing from Swedish. In the mediaeval Swedish by-laws the term *hirdhvrænger* is recorded with a fairly low status and seems to reflect the development of the sense 'servant' or even 'labourer' attested both for Old Swedish *drænger* and also particularly in compounds like *leghodvrænger* (Söderwall 1884–1918, I, 202, 747, also supplement, 123).

The nature of the *hirð* of the early eleventh century is most accessible through the study of the Anglo-Danish kings, and in particular the activities of the retainers of Cnut. Of particular interest is the claim made in the *Vederlov* or *Lex castrensis* (from the late twelfth century), the code governing the duties and behaviour of the Danish kings' household, that its earliest form was put together by Cnut for his retinue in England, the *þingalið* (Kroman 1971, 2; Christiansen 1992, 32–33, 44). In his fundamental study Larson (1904, 152–71) suggested that Anglo-Saxon evidence could be used to demonstrate the existence of such a regulated military body in Cnut's reign, even to the extent of forming a specific guild, but Hooper

(1985) has argued convincingly that the case is too weak to support such a conclusion (Christiansen 1992, 7–12), and the assertion that the *Vederlov* as we know it corresponds to a code of Cnut the Great's must be considered uncertain. On the other hand, it is certainly conceivable that Cnut's standing military force may have had some form of body of law (or custom) regulating the status and duties of its members, and if so it is even possible that this may have been codified in England. However, there is little that we know from English sources that can be applied to Denmark without major reservations, and little that supports the identification of the Danish thegns and drengs as members of the royal *hirð*. That Cnut's charters and lawcodes refer to his *þegnas* must reflect more English than Norse vocabulary, and even here the use of *þegn* is often so general that it seems to refer to any freeman under the king rather than a royal servant in particular.

One of the most significant semantic collocations stems from the opening clause of the *Vederlov*, which notes *thet kunung oc andre hætwarthæ men, ther hird skulde hafwa skulde wæra sina men hollæ oc blithæ oc rætta them rætheliga male therra* 'that the king, and other honourable men who might have a *hird*, should stand by their men and be kindly towards them and be prompt in giving them their pay' (Kroman 1971, 2; translation from Christiansen 1992, 44). The phrase *hætwarthæ men* seems to have a direct analogue in the description of Alli as a **haiþuiarþan þiakn** on the Glavendrup runestone (DR 209), which has led to interpretations that *heiðverðr* carried a technical sense relating to membership of the *hirð*. However, while the form *heiðverðr* is indeed extremely rare, it is a wholly transparent compound of *heiðr* 'honour, value' and *-verðr* 'worth' which could have been coined and re-coined at any time. It does not seem justified, therefore, to draw a link between two attestations separated by around three centuries and to posit any sense more explicit than 'honourable', referring, most probably, to simple qualities of prestige and social status.

Any links between thegns and drengs on the one hand and the *hirð* on the other are therefore fairly tenuous. Rather, the terms which can be reconstructed to denote members of the king's household or retinue contain more explicit semantic reference to this fact, as expressed in forms such as *heimþegi*, *húskarl* and the later *hirðmaðr*. While the evidence of the runic inscriptions and skaldic verse shows that both *drengr* and *þegn* were terms that *could* be applied to describe such men it seems equally clear that they carried a wider semantic range, and that these words reflected rather the social status of those involved.

Aakjær summed up his article with the conclusion that ‘the Nordic thegns and drengs were once such royal servants [as in England], members of the king’s attendant nobility and of his hird or bodyguard’ (1927–28, 28). However, his further remark that ‘in the 9th and 10th centuries, we find *konungs drengir ok þegnar* [king’s drengs and thegns]’ is scarcely justified for Scandinavia, and by contrast Nielsen (1945, 121) preferred the more traditional interpretation that the term *þegn* denoted the free landworking class but *drengr* their sons. While this latter view may seem slightly simplistic, an examination of the primary source materials reveals that it nevertheless has much to recommend it. That historical approaches have tended to link the thegns and drengs of the runic inscriptions with the growth of a royally sanctioned aristocracy derives largely from the necessity of positing *some* royal officers somewhere to account for the development of the Danish state in the tenth and eleventh centuries. As Peter Sawyer put it, ‘kings must have had agents . . . not only to lead local defences but also to gather royal resources’ (1991, 284). While these agents may well have been recruited from the upper landowning classes, the argument remains somewhat circumstantial, since the linguistic evidence provides little sign that the terms thegn and dreng were used specifically, or even particularly commonly, for these royal officials. The use of *drengr* seems likely only to refer to members of warbands or Viking expeditions without much regard for the status of their employers (if indeed there were any); it could even be suggested that the word would be the closest Old Norse approximation to English ‘viking’ in its more positive aspects. On the other hand, there is little sign that *þegn* meant anything more than ‘free man, landowner’ before the influence of English terminology in the eleventh century. The extent to which their lands and positions were held sub-feudally from the king in this period is open to debate, and it equally cannot be disproved that some form of *homagium* was involved, but at any rate there can be no talk of the thegns forming the backbone of the king’s *hird*. According to Birgit Sawyer, ‘it can safely be assumed that the thegns and drengs named in Danish inscriptions were in the service of the Danish king and there are reasons to think that some of the thegns and drengs named in Swedish inscriptions also served a Danish king’ (1994, 23). However, this must be too narrow an approach; some thegns may have been in the active service of Scandinavian kings but not necessarily all of them, and the ‘rank’ was probably far more general in application.

Note: My thanks are due to Ray Page and Simon Keynes for reading a draft of this paper and providing helpful comments and corrections.

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BLEIKIR AKRAR—SNARES OF THE DEVIL? THE SIGNIFICANCE
OF THE PALE CORNFIELDS IN *ALEXANDERS SAGA*

BY DAVID ASHURST

A *ALEXANDERS SAGA* IS CURRENTLY a very unfamiliar work in the English-speaking world, so that most people are likely to know its substance, if at all, chiefly through the discussion of it contained in Lars Lönnroth's book on that most popular of Icelandic writings, *Njáls saga*. According to Lönnroth (1976, 159), *Alexanders saga* quite possibly provides the overall framework for the story of Gunnarr Hámundarson, for the basic pattern is the same:

A young hero gains honor as long as he follows the advice of his Wise Counselor (Njáll, Aristotle), but is beset by misfortune when he forgets the advice in his desire for the alluring beauties of this world.

At a crucial and defining moment in the career of both Gunnarr and Alexander, alluring beauty comes in the form of rural scenery by which both heroes are seduced and fall into error. Both men

seem motivated by excessive pride and by a foolish desire for what they should not desire. Both of them trust their own fortune too much for their own good (Lönnroth 1976, 154).

Both sagas, it is argued, are the product, to a greater or lesser extent, of that ecclesiastically trained sensibility which Lönnroth calls the 'clerical mind', and it is in the light of this that we should interpret the episodes in which the heroes gaze upon attractive farmlands:

To a clerical mind in the Middle Ages, the beautiful landscapes seen by Gunnarr and Alexander must have represented a dangerous worldly temptation, snares of the devil. Such an interpretation is clearly intended in *Alexanders saga*, and it also fits well in *Njála* (Lönnroth 1976, 154).

Peter Foote, reviewing Lönnroth's book, noted that in emphasising the clerical stamp of *Njáls saga* Lönnroth played down considerations such as the words which Gunnarr utters after his death when he appears to Skarpheðinn Njálsson and Hogni Gunnarsson, in which he declares that he would rather die than yield, and which suggest obedience to the dictates of simple honour in traditional terms rather than the overweening arrogance attributed to Alexander (Foote 1979, 57). There is room to doubt, Foote continued, whether the author of *Njáls saga* actually regarded

Gunnarr as the victim of his own arrogant folly rather than as a nonpareil, the victim of mankind's vicious pettiness. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (1993, 306–08) has similarly criticised the attempt to align Gunnarr with specifically Christian clerical values drawn from *Alexanders saga*, on the grounds that *Njáls saga* itself presents Gunnarr's dilemma in terms of honour, and of war versus peace. My purpose in this article, by contrast, is to show that Lönnroth's interpretation of the episode in *Alexanders saga* is in any case quite wrong, and incidentally that the internal evidence of *Alexanders saga*, such as it is, stands against the likelihood of a direct and relevant literary borrowing. The landscape seen by the Macedonian king certainly does have a Christian significance, but one which is as far removed as possible from that of a dangerous worldly temptation.

Evidence of literary borrowing from Alexanders saga to Njáls saga

The possible point of contact between Alexander and Gunnarr, noted by Einar Ól. Sveinsson in his edition of *Brennu-Njáls saga* (1954, xxxvi), is in the passage where Alexander, newly arrived in Asia, climbs a hill from which he sees the continent's pale cornfields and the other features of its rich and beautiful land (AS 14²⁶–15²):

Þar mátti hann alla vega sjá frá sér fagra völlu, bleika akra, stóra skóga, blómgaða víngarða, sterkar borgir. Ok er konungr sér yfir þessa fegrð alla, þá mælir hann svá til vildarliðs síns: 'Þetta ríki, er nú lít ek yfir, ætla ek mér sjálfum. En Grikkland, fōðurleifð mína, vil ek nú gefa yðr upp,' segir hann til hofðingjanna. Ok svá treystisk hann nú sinni gæfu, at honum þykkir sem þetta liggi laust fyrir.

There he was able to see, in all directions from him, fair meadows, pale cornfields, great forests, blossom-covered vineyards, strong cities. And when the king surveys all this beauty, he says to his chosen men: 'This realm, which I now survey, I intend for myself. But Greece, my patrimony, will I now give up to you,' says he to the generals. And now he trusts to his luck so much that it seems to him as if this is easy to achieve.

The phrase 'pale cornfields', as the nominative *bleikir akrar*, also occurs in *Njáls saga* at the moment when Gunnarr decides not to go into exile but to turn back and face death, citing the beauty of the slope near his home as his reason for this (*Brennu-Njáls saga* 1954, 182):

Fōgr er hlíðin, svá at mér hefir hon aldri jafnfōgr sýnzik, bleikir akrar ok slegin tún, ok mun ek ríða heim aprtr ok fara hvergi.

Fair is the slope, so that it has never seemed to me so fair—pale cornfields and mown enclosures—and I will ride back home and go nowhere.

The occurrence in both texts of the phrase ‘pale cornfields’, which is not attested anywhere else in saga literature, is what prompts speculation that there might have been a direct and significant literary borrowing into *Njáls saga* from the older work, particularly since appreciative references to natural beauty, common enough in the romance genre, do not appear to be typical of the family sagas, the group to which *Njáls saga* belongs. In addition, Gunnarr’s unexpected words have an enigmatic quality demanding explanation and suggesting that the original audiences responded to them on the basis of some ready knowledge which we now lack.

The sharing of a rarely recorded phrase by no means proves that there was a direct borrowing, or that the borrowing need have been significant if there was any. Lönnroth does not claim otherwise. He suggests it is conceivable, in fact, that the Icelandic translator of *Alexanders saga* took the phrase

from his native ‘language of tradition’, perhaps even from an oral tale about Gunnarr’s return to Hlíðarendi. But the absence of such descriptive phrases in earlier sagas speaks against this interpretation (1976, 154, note 69).

It appears more likely, he continues, that the translator of *Alexanders saga* invented the phrase himself in a successful attempt to make the poetic language of the Latin original more succinct and effective.

The likelihood that the phrase was merely standard, however, is greatly increased by analysis of the compositional technique of *Alexanders saga* as compared with its source, Walter of Châtillon’s twelfth-century *Alexandreis*, a Latin epic whose quibbling and rhetorically packed hexameters present us with a much more solid and fixed literary artefact than is the case with the source of any other translated saga. As was to be expected, the translator very regularly deviates from the Latin wording if there is a native idiom to hand. This is his stock-in-trade and examples of it are legion: they permeate the linguistic texture of *Alexanders saga*, whether as substitutions or as outright additions, as single words, short phrases or entire sayings. Full analysis of these deviations from the source—their types, functions and consistent application—could form the topic of a long article revealing much about the saga-writer’s literary-critical awareness, which is impressive; but here a few illustrations must suffice to indicate their range.

In the first place, and readiest to hand, are turns of phrase such as the fair/false dichotomy found in *Hávamál* (1986, stanza 45) as well as many

other works. It is used in Book X when Treason speaks of the general who is about to murder the king, and says (AS 148¹¹⁻¹⁴):

Minn fóstrson, er Antipater heitir, einn höfðingi í her Alexandri, sá er þat skaplyndi hefir er mér líkar, kann láta fagrt, þó at hann hyggi flátt, ætlar á fund hans.

My foster-son, who is called Antipater, a general in Alexander's army, who has the disposition which I like, knowing how to act fair though he may think false, means to visit him.

This neatly replaces, with economy quite typical of the translation, the following sentence in the Latin source (Walter 1978, X 150–53):

Nam meus Antipater, Macedum prefectus, ab ipsis
Cunarum lacrimis pretendere doctus amorem
Voce sed occultis odium celare medullis,
Ad regem ire parat.

For Antipater, Governor of Macedonia and my own favourite, who from the very tears of the cradle has shown skill in feigning love in speech whilst concealing hatred in the recesses of his heart, is even now preparing to come to the king (trans. Pritchard, Walter 1986, 222).

At the other extreme, the readiness to employ native idioms occasionally results in the addition of material not found in the Latin. The Scythian ambassador's speech, for example, contains a list of proverbs on the mutability of fortune which, in the saga, includes the remark: *Optlīga veltir lítill þúfa miklu hlasi* (AS 126²⁸), 'Often a little hillock overturns a great cartload.' This saying, which also occurs in *Sturlunga saga* (1906–11, I 394), has no correlative in the epic (see Walter 1978, VIII 391–403).

Examining those deviations from the Latin text which involve substitutions or additions provides a good way, in fact, of pinpointing sayings likely to have been current at the time but which are not attested elsewhere. An example of this can be found in Aristotle's warning against the promotion of low-class servants: *Þat er ok órunum næst, er veslu[m] batnar* (AS 4²⁵), 'That which advances the poor is also next to madness.' Obscure and problematical though it is, this remark certainly looks like an adage. There is no parallel to it in any of the four Latin glosses reproduced in Colker's edition of the *Alexandreis* (Walter 1978, pp. 278, 307, 360 and 496), and it deviates markedly from the poem (Walter 1978, I 89–91):

Sic partis opibus et honoris culmine seruus
In dominum surgens, truculentior aspide surda,
Obturat precibus aures, mansuescere nescit.

Even so a servitor, gaining power and the height of honour and rising against his master more savagely than a deaf viper, shuts his ears to entreaties and knows not how to relent (trans. Pritchard, Walter 1986, 38).

It is possible, also, to detect Old Norse sayings behind some smaller changes to the text, as in the substitution of *konurnar* 'women' in place of *amor* 'love' when Aristotle inveighs against dangerous pleasures. In the Latin this reads (Walter 1978, I 165–66):

nec fortia pectora frangat
Mentis morbus amor.

Nor let love, the mind's disease, break your stout heart (trans. Pritchard, Walter 1986, 40).

In the Old Norse text, the philosopher says *Lát ok eigi heimskliga konurnar hugsýkja eða vanmegna sterkan hug* (AS 7⁵⁻⁶), 'And do not stupidly allow women to distress or weaken your strong mind.' This change need not stem directly from a more virulent misogyny on the part of the translator, but could well come from the wish to make use of an aphorism of the type attested in *Völsunga saga* (1965, 40):

Lát eigi tæla þik fagar konur, þótt þú sjáir at veizlum, svá at þat standi þér fyrir svefni eða þú fáir af því hugarekka.

Do not let beautiful women ensnare you, though you see them at feasts, so that it obstructs your sleep or you get heartache from it.

See also *Sigrdrífumál* (*Edda* 1983, 195, stanza 28).

It is against the background of such deviations from the detail of its source that we must approach the passage in *Alexanders saga* where the Macedonian king surveys Asia from the hill-top. Here we find that the pale (ripe) cornfields do not correspond exactly to the (green) corn of the poem (Walter 1978, I 436–40):

Hinc ubi uernantes Cereali gramine campos,
Tot nemorum saltus, tot prata uirentibus herbis
Lasciuire uidet tot cinctas menibus urbes,
Tot Bachi frutices, tot nuptas uitibus ulmos,
'Iam satis est,' inquit.

When he saw from here the plains growing green with the Cerean herb (i. e. corn), so many forest pastures, so many meadows luxuriant with verdant grasses, so many cities girt with walls, so many grape-vines and so many elms wedded to the vine, he shouted, 'It is now enough, my friends!' (trans. Pritchard, Walter 1986, 49, modified).

Clearly this is a vernal scene, as is implied by the word *uernantes* (although Pritchard's translation actually renders this as 'blooming'), which is

related to *ver*, ‘spring’, and to *vernus*, ‘spring-like’, and comes from *verno*, which Lewis and Short (1879) give as ‘to appear like spring, to flourish, be verdant’. There are also connotations of spring in the word *uirentibus*, from *vireo*, which means ‘to be green’ and also ‘to be fresh’, according to Lewis and Short (1879).

Lönnroth’s suggestion (1976, 154) that the translator of *Alexanders saga* himself invented the phrase *bleikir akrar* to make Walter’s poetic language more succinct and effective is not compelling. Why should ripe corn be more succinct and effective than springing corn? Certainly the translator could have made up a phrase for the sake of fancy, but it is not clear why he should have transmuted into harvest time what is a vernal scene emphasising the potential of Alexander’s new land. In the absence of a clear aesthetic motive for this change, the stronger possibility must be that the translator was merely following his frequent practice of substituting, perhaps automatically, an Old Norse phrase which was common property and ready to hand. The likelihood that a substitution of this kind was made is greatly strengthened, furthermore, by the fact that the translator, who is normally subtle in perceiving the drift of his source and careful in following his own literary objectives, has here made what could be a mistake: he has ripe corn side by side with *blómgaðir víngarðar*, ‘blossom-covered vineyards’. The last phrase shows that he was well aware of the springtime setting of Walter’s scene, and yet ‘pale cornfields’ came to his pen and slipped into the text.

The chances are, therefore, that the expression was pre-existent and familiar when *Alexanders saga* was being composed and that, consequently, it would have been available to the writer of *Njáls saga* independently of the translated work. This is entirely plausible since the phrase corresponds to an easily observed reality: fields of grain do turn very pale when the crop is ripe. The coupling of ideas, furthermore, is implicit in a text which must have been widely known in the thirteenth century, John 4: 35: *levate oculos vestros et videte regiones quia albae sunt iam ad messem* (Biblia 1969), ‘Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest.’¹ Here the word *albus* corresponds to *bleikr*; it signifies ‘pale’ or, more commonly, ‘dead white’ as opposed to *candidus*, ‘dazzling white’ (Lewis and Short 1879, under *albus*). We do not, then, have an expression which exactly parallels ‘pale cornfields’ but, as Peter Foote (1979, 56) points

¹ Biblical citations follow the modern division into chapter and verse, and English quotations are from the Authorised Version.

out, given the Gospel phrase it is hard to think that an association of 'white' and 'harvest fields' was a medieval rarity.

Suppose, however, that the writer of *Alexanders saga* did invent the term 'pale cornfields', and that the author of *Njáls saga* took it as a literary loan. The phrase is a pretty one which could easily have been borrowed for its own sake, and it by no means follows that its context was borrowed along with it. For the borrowing to be significant there must be clear parallels between the two contexts in which the phrase is used. It therefore matters a great deal, contrary to what Lönnroth (1976, 154) implies, that Alexander, who is young, vigorous and at the start of his career, claims the pale cornfields as part of his new realm, for the sake of which he gives away his own homeland, whereas Gunnarr, who is doom-laden and near the end of his life, cannot relinquish the pale cornfields and his home meadow. Set forth in this way, the situations correspond as opposites rather than parallels; but in reality all they have in common is that the two men, like any men in a position of ownership, see the pale cornfields as beautiful, as well as valuable, real estate.

Despite the above, Lönnroth (1976, 154) sees a parallel between the two episodes, on the basis that 'both their choices represent a clear violation of the advice given by their respective Wise Counselors (Aristotle and Njáll).' The first objection to this statement must be that the pairing together of Aristotle and Njáll in this way under the single appellation 'Wise Counselors' itself suggests a greater correspondence between the two figures than is actually the case. Whereas Njáll fulfils a complex role as friend, adviser and prophet throughout Gunnarr's career, Aristotle appears only as a bit-player in *Alexanders saga*, and only in the first of its ten books. We catch a glimpse of him as chief of Alexander's scribes at the king's coronation (*AS* 9¹⁸⁻²⁰), and apart from this there is only the one scene (3¹⁸⁻⁸²) in which, as schoolmaster to the boy Alexander, he delivers platitudinous instruction in a long set speech (4¹³⁻⁷²⁶).

But if the two counsellors do not really correspond, in what parallel ways do Gunnarr and Alexander fail to heed the advice which each has been given? Lönnroth (1976, 154) gives the explanation, quoted above, that both heroes seem motivated by excessive pride and by a foolish desire for what they should not desire, and both of them trust their own fortune too much for their own good. In other words, the question of parallels and borrowings comes down to the interpretation of the hill-top episode in *Alexanders saga*; and it is to this matter that I now turn.

The episode on the hill-top

There is little need to speculate about what the beautiful landscape in *Alexanders saga* might have represented to ‘a clerical mind in the Middle Ages’ as Lönnroth does (1976, 154), for the passage itself indicates what is going on in the hero’s thoughts.

The loveliness of Asia is presented in terms of the land’s rich resources: even more than in the Latin, in the Old Norse version, with its productive cornfields, great forests and blossom-covered vineyards which are to be guarded and enjoyed by strong cities, the usefulness and profitability of the land are integral parts of its aesthetic appeal. Alexander surveys all this beauty, claims everything for himself and offers to compensate his generals for his confiscation of the riches they would otherwise have won, by giving them his own lands in Greece (AS 14²⁶–15¹, quoted above).

His offer is no empty rhetoric, for Alexander proceeds to do exactly what he has said (AS 15^{3–4}):

En hann skiptir nú Grikklandi með þeim af stórmenninu er honum þóttu þess mækligstir.

But now he divides Greece between those men of the nobility who seemed to him the most deserving of it.

In the preceding two lines it is made clear that he is able to offer this astonishing gift because of his confidence that the Asian kingdom will fall to him (15^{1–2}):

Ok svá treystisk hann nú sinni gæfu, at honum þykkir sem þetta liggi laust fyrir.

And now he trusts to his luck so much that it seems to him as if this is easy to achieve.

On the basis of the same confidence he immediately sets about looking after his new realm as a good king should. The Latin text, in fact, makes this sense of responsibility the reason why he claimed everything for himself in the first place, since it remarks of the whole episode (Walter 1978, I 445–46):

sic a populantibus agros

Liberat et pecorum raptus auertit ab hoste.

In this way he freed the fields from plunderers and saved the enemy from cattle-rustling by his men (trans. Pritchard, Walter 1986, 49).

The saga version somewhat blunts the logic here by suppressing the word *sic*, and consequently leaves Alexander slightly more exposed to possible accusations of greed (AS 15⁴⁻⁷):

Hann bannaði nú ok sínum mǫnnum at taka þar strandhogg, eða gera annat óspakligt, jafnt sem hann ætti sjálf hvatvetna þat er fyrir var.

Now he also forbade his men to take plunder there, or do anything else unruly, just as if he owned everything which was there.

The more generalised reference to public order, on the other hand, emphasises his serious kingly intent.

Examination of Walter's own sources confirms that the passage has been assembled carefully to create this dramatic moment in the Latin epic. There is no corresponding episode in the major source, the *History of Alexander* by Quintus Curtius; if there ever was, then it would have been in the missing Book II which had been lost long before Walter's time. The hill-top panorama, in fact, is Walter's free fantasy on the basis of miscellaneous classical motifs (cf. Colker's *apparatus fontium* for Walter 1978, I 436–40); but Alexander's instruction to his men not to lay waste Asia comes from Justinus (1935, XI 6.1). The division of Greece between the worthiest generals, however, has been culled from Justinus XI 5.5, where it happens before the fleet leaves home. That would have been at least as rational a place for it, but its position here, at the moment when Alexander sees Asia for the first time and claims it as his own, clearly makes the episode much more striking, which is always a prime consideration for Walter. At the same time, and more important for the present discussion, the giving away of his patrimony absolves Alexander of unmitigated greed, underlines his confidence, and highlights the fact that there is good and sober statesmanship even in his apparent impetuosity. The last point is further emphasised by the ban on plundering.

The confidence underlying Alexander's actions in this episode is what Lönnroth construed as excessive pride, and also as a turning away from the lesson which Aristotle had taught in his role as the boy Alexander's schoolmaster (Lönnroth 1976, 154):

Here Alexander is about to forget his tutor's good advice and become far too ambitious.

In fact, however, the statement that Alexander trusts his luck so much that the conquest of Asia seems easy to achieve, far from suggesting a rejection of Aristotle's advice, merely repeats what the immediate effects of that advice had originally been (AS 7²⁶–8⁵):

Þvílík ráð kenndi Aristotiles Alexandro sem nú er sagt, ok öll varðveitti hann þau virkuliga sér í brjósti. Nú girnisk hann engis annars en ryðja sér til ríkis með oddi ok eggju; ok þat gerir hann sér þegar í hug, at ekki vætta myndi við honum rønd reisa.

Aristotle taught Alexander such counsels as have now been recounted, and he kept them all carefully in his heart. Now he wants nothing else but to clear his way to power with point and edge; and he imagines forthwith that no one would raise a shield against him.

Nor does the fact that Alexander must seize his new realm by bloody conquest go against Aristotle's advice in any way. The philosopher makes allowance for precisely this at the point where he warns his young charge to be especially generous towards his own men after they have taken enemy strongholds (*AS* 6¹¹⁻¹⁵):

Nú kemr þar at borgirnar gefask upp í þitt vald, eða þú hefir at jörðu lagt þá er eigi vildu sjálfkrafa upp gefask, þá skaltu upplúka féhirzlum þínum ok gefa á tvær hendr riddurunum ok smyrja svá sár þeirra með gjöfunum.

Now when it happens that the cities give themselves up to your power or you have brought down those which would not surrender voluntarily, you must open your treasury and give to the knights right and left, and thus anoint their wounds with gifts.

The immediate and explicit purpose of Aristotle's long speech (*AS* 4¹³⁻⁷²⁶) is in fact to inform and direct, and not at all to stifle, the twelve-year-old Alexander's rage against Persian tyranny. Finding the boy visibly moved to anger, the philosopher begins his instruction by saying (4¹³⁻¹⁵),

Með því at þér sé stórt í hug, þá prýddu þik fyrst með ráðspekinni en tak síðan til vápna þinna eptir fýst þinni.

Since you are great at heart, adorn yourself first with wisdom and then take up your weapons according to your wish.

The wish to take up weapons against Persia makes the young Alexander regret his inevitable weakness during childhood (*AS* 2¹⁶⁻¹⁷):

‘Mikit mein er þat,’ sagði hann, ‘at maðrinn skal svá seint taka sitt afl.’

‘It is a great pity,’ said he, ‘that a man must reach his full strength so slowly.’

His eagerness to be about the work of vengeance, for which merely defending the land against the Great King would not be sufficient, is stressed repeatedly in the early part of the saga (2¹⁶⁻³¹⁷, 3²⁵⁻⁴¹¹ and 8¹⁵⁻¹⁹); and this culminates in a statement that Alexander never looked back when the time came for his army to embark against Asia. Since this has a bearing on what Alexander says on the hill-top, and since Gunnarr, for his part, does look

back when he is about to leave Iceland, the significance of this statement will now be looked at in some detail.

By the time the fleet sets out, Alexander's forces, collected throughout Greece as well as Macedonia, are inspired by love of their leader and by the prospect of improved status (AS 14⁴⁻⁶):

Þeir Grikkirnir váru nú fúsir til at fylgja konungi ok berjask með honum sér til fjár ok metnaðar.

Those Greeks were now eager to follow the king and fight alongside him for wealth and honour.

Even so, they feel a pang on leaving their homeland (14⁶⁻⁸):

En allir af þeim í svá miklum her, nema einn, þá settu augu sín aptr um skut meðan þeir máttu nokkurn vita sjá til fóstrjarðar sinnar.

But all of them in so great a host, except one, then fixed their eyes back across the stern while they could see any sign of their native land.

To be in line with Lönnroth's explanation of what lies behind Gunnarr's roughly similar backward glance, the 'clerical mind' should regard as morally suspect this attachment to so worldly an object as home; and suspicion of its ethical standing, in fact, is exactly what Walter (1978, I 365) does express:

O patriae natalis amor, sic allicis omnes.

O love of natal land, how you entice all men.

The word *allicis* (Classical spelling *adlicis*, literally 'you entice') here does not necessarily express censure, and the translation could have been rendered as 'how you draw all men to yourself'. But it is morally ambiguous, and its negative connotations are reinforced at I 371, where it is portrayed as something which interferes with the soldiers' *mentis acumen*, 'keenness of mind', towards their Persian enemies. The writer of *Alexanders saga*, however, makes less of the ethical ambiguities at this point and takes a more positive view of the army's backward glances, or at least a morally neutral one: *Þar mátti þá marka hversu mikit flestir unna sínu fóstrlandi* (AS 14³⁻⁴), 'There could it be observed, at that time, how greatly most men love their homeland.'

The ordinary soldiers feel this natural emotion despite their eagerness for battle and plunder. Alexander, on the other hand, is unmoved (AS 14⁹⁻¹²):

Konungr sjálfr leit aldregi aptr til landsins. Svá var honum mikil fýst á at berjask við Darium konung at hann gleymdi þegar fóstrlandi sínu—ok var þar eptir móðir hans ok systir.

The king himself never looked back to land. So keen was he to fight against King Darius that he immediately forgot his homeland—and his mother and sisters were staying behind there.

This should not be taken as a statement of Alexander's cold ruthlessness but as the sort of over-emphasis which seems unfortunate only to modern taste; it super-intensifies the point that Alexander was very keen to get on with the job.² The succession of ideas in this passage is that Alexander's troops were eager to fight the Persians despite feeling homesick, which shows just how eager they were, but Alexander was more eager still. In fact the saga has already laboured the message about what Alexander's feelings towards his homeland were (AS 4⁵⁻⁸):

‘Þungt þykki mér þat at faðir minn elligamall skal lýðskyldr rangligum kröfum Daríi konungs, ok þar með allt fóstrland mitt.’ Ok þar mátti hann þá ekki fleira um tala, því at þessu næst kom grátr upp.

‘It seems oppressive to me that my very aged father, with all my native land, must yield homage to the unjust demands of King Darius.’ And then he could speak no more about it, because next moment he burst into tears.

And his motives for the Persian campaign have been stated in a passage freely composed by the translator and inserted into the narrative, in which Alexander begins to mobilise his forces as soon as he has taken over the reins of government (AS 8¹⁶⁻¹⁹):

Því næst býr hann sik til hernaðar, eigi at eins sér til frægðar ok framkvæmdar, heldr ok til frelsis öllu fóstrlandi sínu því er áðr lá undir miklu áþjánaroki.

Next he prepares himself for war, not only for his own fame and prowess but also for the freedom of his whole native country, which before lay under a great yoke of oppression.

Paradoxically, then, love for his homeland is depicted as one of the main reasons why he so single-mindedly turns away and sets his face towards the land of his enemies.

In this context there is, of course, what must strike the modern reader as a psychological improbability about the king's sudden giving-away of his own land in favour of what he sees from the hill-top; but the saga-writer in

² Compare this with the hyperbole expressing the effects of first love on Guiamar, the much-admired knight, in *Strengleikar* (1979, 24–25): *kænnir hann nu þat er hann kændi alldri fyrr. Allu hævur hann nu glæymt fostr/lande sínu faðr ok frændom ok fostrbræðrum. ok kænner hann allzængan verk sarssins.* ‘He feels now what he never felt before. He has now forgotten his native country entirely, his father and his relatives and his foster-brothers, and he feels no pain at all from his wound.’

particular has tried to prepare for this through the hyperbolic statement that Alexander promptly forgot Greece because of his eagerness to fight Darius, whereas Walter (1978, I 375–76) attributes this emotional *volte-face* to the entire fleet. At the same time, and in contradiction to the literal meaning of the exaggeration, the saga affirms Alexander's continued sense of responsibility towards his patrimony by saying that he divided it between 'those men of the nobility who seemed to him the most deserving of it' (AS 15³⁻⁴, quoted p. 279 above), a phrase which has no correlative in the Latin (cf. Walter 1978, I 442).

By this point it should have become clear that both Walter and his translator have tried quite hard to prepare for the moment on the hill-top when Alexander claims his new realm, and to present it in the best possible light. The passage as a whole has been constructed so as to stress his confidence in his destiny, his generous care for his new land and subjects, and his careful generosity towards his own men, whom he must not alienate. It is true that the Latin and Old Norse writers have not quite managed to eradicate all suspicion of greed and heartlessness, and they have not yet explained the basis of that confidence which Lönnroth (1976, 154) perceived as excessive pride, desire for what should not be desired and too much trust in good fortune. But it turns out that they have not yet finished with the matter.

The shining visitant

A few pages later, near the end of Book I, Alexander explains to his men why he is so confident of victory. In a story adapting one which descends from the *Jewish Antiquities* of Josephus (1926–65, XI 333–44), according to which God appears to Alexander in a dream and assures him of success in the conquest of Persia, the king is made to relate how in the period immediately after his accession he lay awake at night (AS 17¹⁻²):

Ok hugsaða ek með mér hvárt ek skylda at eins verja þat ríki er faðir minn hafði átt, eða afla mér meira.

And I pondered whether I should only defend the realm which my father had possessed, or gain a bigger one for myself.

The last clause constitutes a significant change to the Latin Alexander's motivation, though one which accords well with what follows, since Walter (1978, I 509) has it that Alexander was merely *incertus sequererne hostes patriamne tuerer*, 'uncertain whether to pursue the enemy or guard the fatherland'. At this point, says Alexander, he witnessed an apparition (AS 17⁴⁻⁶):

Kom mikit ok bjart ljós yfir mik. Því ljósi fylgði einn gøfugligr maðr, ef lofat skal mann at kalla.

A great and bright light passed over me. A noble-looking man accompanied that light, if it will be permitted to call him a man.

The Latin text (Walter 1978, I 517–20) scrupulously limits Alexander to describing the man as being strangely dressed in a way suggestive of a priest whereas the saga, less realistically, has Alexander speak with an understanding which he could hardly have acquired at this point in the story (AS 17⁶⁻⁸):

Hann var harðla vel klæddr, ok því líkast sem biskupar þá er þeir eru skryðdir biskupsskrúði.

He was dressed magnificently, and most like High Priests when they are arrayed in a High Priest's vestments.

The twelve gems sewn onto the man's breastpiece show for certain that he is not dressed as a Christian bishop but as the High Priest of the Jews.³ In addition, the man has something mysterious written on his forehead; the Old Norse version interjects, in Latin/Greek, *scilicet tetragrammaton* (AS 17¹⁰), 'viz. the name of God', although Alexander hastens to add, in both the Latin and Old Norse versions, that he could not understand what was written because he did not know the language.

As Josephus tells the story, the visitor is explicitly said to be God; probably, in the Christian context of the saga and its source, we are to recognise this figure as Christ in his role as the Great High Priest, a characterisation of him which stems directly from the New Testament.⁴ Certainly he speaks with God-like authority and in terms which go far beyond the Josephan promise of help against Persia (AS 17¹⁷⁻¹⁸, corresponding to Walter 1978, I 532–33):

Farðu á braut af fóstrlandi þínu, Alexander, því at ek mun allt folk undir þik leggja.

³ See Exodus 28: 15–21. The word *biskup* is used without elaboration to signify the Jewish High Priest in *Gyðinga saga* (1995, 4, 14 and 19). Since Josephus' story was popular in European Alexander-literature, it is likely that most people listening to the saga would immediately understand *biskup* in this way; others would experience only a moment's confusion. For a discussion of whether *Gyðinga saga* is the work of the same translator as *Alexanders saga*, see Wolf 1988.

⁴ See Hebrews 4: 14, and 5: 6 which is based on Psalm 110: 4. The Melchizedek referred to in these scriptures was the priest-king of Jerusalem in the days of Abraham (see Genesis 14: 18).

Go forth from your native land, Alexander, because I will subject to you all people.

The first part of this is reminiscent of God's command to Abraham (Genesis 12: 1):

Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land which I shall shew thee.

The remainder suggests, amongst various scriptures,⁵ the account of the coming of the Son of Man in Daniel 7: 14:

And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him.

This last text comes between two biblical references to Alexander himself, in Daniel 7: 6 and Daniel 8: 5–8, the second of which is unmistakably alluded to in the *Alexandreis* (Walter 1978, VI 3) and less explicitly in the translation (AS 84^{11–13}). It appears, then, that Alexander is being addressed here as a chosen one, a 'type' of Christ, a characterisation of him which can also be found, for example, in allegorical interpretations of stories from the *Gesta Romanorum*.⁶ This idea is picked up again in the last book of the saga, and of the epic, where the Infernal Powers fear that he might, by force of arms, perform the role of Christ in a Harrowing of Hell; it is this possibility, in fact, which precipitates his death (cf. *Bearings*, pages 288–90 below). The implications of Alexander's role as a Christ-figure are complex, and it is not easy to see how far the messianic analogy can be pressed; but what is perfectly clear is that, in the episode of the shining visitant, Alexander is being given a divine promise and a mission.

There is a condition attached, one which is not overtly stated in the story as Josephus has it. Before vanishing into the air, the shining visitant adds (AS 17^{18–20}, corresponding to Walter 1978, I 534–35):

Ok ef þú sér mik nokkut sinn þvílíkan sem nú sýnumsk ek þér, þá skaltu þyrma mínum mönnum fyrir mínar sakir.

And if you see me at some time as I appear to you now, you must spare my people for my sake.

⁵ For example Psalm 72: 11, which refers to Messiah: 'Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him.'

⁶ On the other hand, he also appears as a type of the devil. For a discussion of Alexander as Christ and devil in the *Gesta Romanorum*, see Cary 1956, 156 and 301–03, note 65. Stories in which Alexander features as Christ appear in Oesterley 1872, 589–90 and 610–11; neither of these anecdotes is in Dick 1890. Alexander appears as the devil in Oesterley 1872, 589, corresponding to Dick 1890, 46.

Alexander's speech ends, and the narrator, in both the Latin and the Old Norse versions, adds that the revelation was authenticated by subsequent events: *En þessi vitran fekk sína framkvæmd litlu síðar, ok sannaðisk* (AS 17²⁷⁻²⁸, corresponding to Walter 1978, I 539), 'But this vision attained its fulfilment a little later, and proved true.' There is therefore no possibility of construing Alexander's story as fictional self-promotion. The proof, which is narrated immediately (AS 17²⁸⁻¹⁸²¹, corresponding to Walter 1978, I 539-54), comes in the form of a related anecdote also stemming from Josephus (1926-65, XI 329-39): after the sack of Tyre, Alexander with a large army approaches Jerusalem in anger, but he is met by the High Priest wearing full ceremonial robes; to everyone's surprise, the conqueror does homage to this man and shows favour to the Holy City.

After this story has been told it can be seen that the episode of the prophetic visitation fulfils a triple purpose in the narrative. In the first place it serves most immediately, as it does in Josephus, to explain Alexander's strange behaviour towards the High Priest, which was taken as historical by medieval writers. It was universally agreed that Alexander's successes were in some sense the will of God, but those Christian theologians who were hostile to him took the view that, as a pagan, he must have been the blind instrument of that will. The story of his obeisance to the High Priest therefore tended to be explained away, if it was included at all, by saying, for example, that God compelled Alexander to act this way as a sign of His own omnipotence, and that it was therefore no act of true reverence. In the writings of these theologians, the story of the dream in which God promises to help Alexander is usually ignored (cf. Cary 1956, 125-30). Walter and his translator, however, by using a version of the dream story to explain Alexander's homage as conscious obedience, were emphatically separating themselves from that theological tradition, even though they make it clear that the king remained pagan and in ignorance of God's name. By treating the material in this way they were aligning their works with popular Alexander literature, which took a much more positive view of its hero and in which the Jerusalem incident was a favourite episode.

Secondly, the fundamental moral validity of Alexander's programme of conquest is affirmed by the visitation story through the fact of the divine promise to subject all nations to Alexander, which is immediately authenticated by the meeting with the High Priest. The saga-writer indicates his understanding of this issue when, as noted above, he substitutes *afla mér meira*, 'gain a bigger one for myself', in place of *sequererne hostes*, 'pursue the enemy', as the alternative to merely defending the fatherland. This is not to say, despite the Messianic overtones, that the promise justifies

every (or indeed any) particular act on Alexander's part; but it validates the programme as something which goes beyond mere vengeance against the Persians and beyond the conquest of the Persian empire alone, which was the promise in the Josephan version.

Thirdly, and most important for this discussion, the episode of the shining visitant casts light back on Alexander's actions on the hill-top, and on the course which led him there. It serves to clarify his motivations and to overwhelm any lingering suspicions which we might have about Alexander's coldness of heart, over-confidence in his own good fortune, or greedy desire for what he should not desire. Each possible fault is made into a theological virtue. Now it can be seen that Alexander, alone of all the departing fleet, was able to avoid looking back because he alone had received God's command to go; his eagerness was joyful obedience. And the confidence of victory which allowed him to give away his father's realm now appears as an act of faith. As to the pale cornfields, they are not a temptation but a Promised Land; by claiming them Alexander is laying hold of the promise of God, with whatever new responsibilities that might entail.

A final point may be added here, although it belongs strictly to the realm of speculation. If the phrase *bleikir akrar* was in fact associated with John 4: 35, or if that scripture was in the mind of the translator of *Alexanders saga*, then it is easy to imagine how 'pale cornfields' slipped into the text, or why the translator perhaps chose to use the expression despite the awkward clash with 'blossom-covered vineyards'. The Gospel verse, as can now be seen, fits very well with the above interpretation of the passage in which Alexander claims the land which God has promised him, for in its context it is Christ's affirmation of the need to brook no delay but to see with the eyes of faith what God has given, to set immediately about God's work and to reap its reward (John 4: 34–36):

My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work. Say not ye, There are yet four months, and then cometh harvest? behold, I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest. And he that reapeth receiveth wages.

Bearings

Do these conclusions about *Alexanders saga* throw any light on the pale cornfields as they appear in *Njáls saga*? Obviously the answer is 'no'. There is no possible parallel in terms of Christian significance between Gunnarr's decision to risk death amongst the cornfields of his own homestead, and Alexander's act of laying claim to a fertile stretch of Asia Minor

as the first instalment of God's promise of world hegemony. All that the two episodes have in common for sure is an awareness that productive farmland is beautiful to its owners, expressed in a phrase which examination of *Alexanders saga* suggests was a standard figure of speech, and which may or may not have had religious overtones.

The scriptural connotations of *bleikir akrar*, if they exist, have an immediate relevance to the episode in *Alexanders saga* in which the phrase occurs, and they underline its meaning; but in the context of *Njáls saga* they bring little clarification to Gunnarr's use of the phrase or to his reasons for returning home to Hlíðarendi. If there is any kind of allusion to John 4: 35 in the *Njáls saga* passage, is it ironic, since it is Gunnarr himself who may be said to be ripe for harvest? Or does it imply that the pagan hero is somehow choosing the kingdom of God rather than long life in the world, exiled from Iceland? Or is the allusion merely prompted by the fact that Gunnarr looks up to the fields? At best these considerations serve only to increase the enigmatic quality of Gunnarr's unexpected words, which remain mysterious to the extent that they are not explained by their context as the thoughts of a man destabilised by depression, who one moment declares pettishly that he will never return to his home, and the next finds that he cannot bear to leave it. My own feeling is that there is something more than this behind the passage; but to find out what it may be, it is no use looking in *Alexanders saga*.

On the other hand, the significance of the pale cornfields in *Alexanders saga* turns out to be something well worth looking at for its own sake. In place of a cliché about greed and pride, we find something which will seem much more intriguing, not to say bizarre, to modern readers steeped in values which are predominantly democratic, anti-heroic, anti-militarist and secular. Alexander's response to the pale cornfields is not his first false step down the road which leads to tyranny punishable by death; it is his first giant leap in a career which, despite the moral failings for which Alexander is roundly criticised from time to time, ends in the fulfilment of God's promise to make him sole ruler of the whole world (*AS* 149³²–150¹⁵, corresponding to Walter 1978, X 216–48). Alexander in turn promises to govern the world with mercy and mildness towards all who willingly serve (*AS* 150²⁵–151³, corresponding to Walter 1978, X 282–98; and compare with the words of Jesus in Matt. 11: 29–30). Now at the apex of power, he declares that he would like to go raiding in the other world of the Antipodes (*AS* 151^{13–20}, corresponding to Walter 1978, X 312–19, and recapitulating *AS* 144^{3–10}, corresponding to Walter 1978, IX 563–70); and so, at this very late stage in his career, he does indeed desire what he should not desire. But he

does not live to commit the trespass. At this point he is cut down not by God but by the devil, who fears that Alexander might possibly besiege Hell and carry off the souls of the dead (AS 147¹⁻³ and 147²⁷–148⁵, corresponding to Walter 1978, X 98–100 and X 131–42). Putting it another way, Alexander is removed before his quasi-messianic role can prompt him to usurp that of the actual Christ. In this manner, Walter of Châtillon and his translator struggle with the question of how it could have come about that so much should be achieved by a man who was a pagan and certainly no saint. Their sense of wonder is palpable (AS 84⁵⁻⁷):

Vildi guð at nú væri Frakkakonungr slíkr sem Alexander var. Þá mundi skjótt allr heimr þjóna réttri trú.

Would God that there were now a French king such as Alexander was. Then all the world would soon serve the true faith.

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IN HONOUR OF ST ÓLÁFR: THE MIRACLE STORIES
IN SNORRI STURLUSON'S *ÓLÁFS SAGA HELGA*

BY CARL PHELPSTEAD

MIRACLES WERE REPORTED soon after King Óláfr Haraldsson was killed at the Battle of Stiklarstaðir on 29 July 1030. Óláfr had returned to Norway from exile in Russia in an attempt to regain his former kingdom. Control of Norway had passed to Denmark in 1029 when Knútr ríki of Denmark and England had taken advantage of an uprising against Óláfr to extend still further his North Sea empire (on Óláfr's life see Jones 1984, 374–86). After the failure of Óláfr's attempt to regain Norway he began to acquire a posthumous reputation for working miracles and became the first Scandinavian ruler to be considered a saint, a royal martyr. His relics were enshrined just over a year after his death, and disaffection with Danish rule fostered belief in his sanctity. Following Knútr's death in 1035 Óláfr's son Magnús was recalled from exile in Russia, and during his reign the cult of his father became firmly established in Norway. The cult drew on hagiographic and cultic traditions of Germanic royal sainthood originating in Merovingian Francia which came to Scandinavia from Anglo-Saxon England (see Hoffmann 1975, especially pp. 58–89). Veneration of St Óláfr spread rapidly throughout Scandinavia, the British Isles, and as far as Byzantium (Dickins 1937–45; Svahnström 1981). Icelanders (other than skalds) were initially unenthusiastic, probably because of their devotion to Óláfr Tryggvason, who had initiated the conversion of Iceland, and possibly because of anxieties about Norwegian claims to sovereignty over Iceland (Cormack 1994, 143). Eventually, however, Óláfr became one of the most popular saints in Iceland (on Óláfr's cult in Iceland see Cormack 1994, 138–44).

The Life of St Óláfr, *Óláfs saga helga*, by the great Icelandic scholar, poet and statesman, Snorri Sturluson (1178/79–1241), survives in two forms: as a *Separate Saga* (Johnsen and Jón Helgason 1941) and as the central third of Snorri's *Heimskringla* (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51).¹ Snorri

¹ Although Snorri is not named as the author of either version in any vellum manuscript the evidence for his authorship is compelling: see Whaley 1991, 13–19, with references to earlier scholarship. There was considerable debate about whether the *Separate Saga* and *Heimskringla* versions were by the same author, and if so which was the earlier, until Sigurður Nordal's full discussion of the issue, in which he concludes that both works are by Snorri

probably completed the *Separate Saga* between 1220, when he returned from his first visit to Norway, and 1230, when Sturla Sigvatsson visited him and, according to *Íslendinga saga* (Jón Jóhannesson *et al.* 1946, I 342),

lagði mikinn hug á at láta rita sögubækur eftir bókum þeim, er Snorri setti saman.

took a great interest in having saga-books copied from those books which Snorri had compiled.

Snorri went on to compose a connected series of sixteen sagas covering Norwegian history from its mythical origins to the year 1177. A modified version of his saga of Óláfr Haraldsson forms the centrepiece of this work, known today from its opening words as *Heimskringla*. *Heimskringla* was probably completed around 1235, before Snorri's second visit to Norway in 1237. The number of manuscripts of the *Separate Saga of St Óláfr* and of *Heimskringla* indicates both the popularity of these works and, when compared to the numbers of manuscripts of earlier sagas of St Óláfr, the way in which Snorri's work superseded earlier versions.²

Although Snorri's *Óláfs saga helga* is certainly about a saint, commentators on it have emphasised the ways in which it differs from hagiography. The compilers of the Handlist of Old Norse Saints' Lives reflect this scholarly consensus when they write that the work is a 'profane saga' and therefore do not list it among 'proper' Saints' Lives (Widding *et al.* 1963, 328).³ Both the authors of important recent books on *Heimskringla* agree with them: Diana Whaley's position will be discussed below; Sverre Bagge recognises a tension between religious and secular approaches in the text but believes that the secular is the more important (1990, 3; cf. Bagge 1991, 14–19). Such views reflect the fact that not every text about a saint can be called hagiographic: Delehaye, for example, writes that 'to be strictly hagiographical [a] document must be of a religious character and aim at edification' (1962, 3; other useful accounts of medieval hagiography include Aigrain 1953 and Heffernan 1988). 'Religious character' is rather vague, but this definition usefully highlights the importance of function:

and that the version in *Heimskringla* is a revision of the *Separate Saga* (Nordal 1914, 166–98).

² On the manuscripts of the *Separate Saga* and *Heimskringla* see Johnsen and Jón Helgason 1941, 871–1131; Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, III lxxxiii–cxii; Whaley 1991, 41–47. Some surviving texts of Snorri's *Óláfs saga* are hybrid versions containing elements of both the *Heimskringla* and *Separate Saga* texts.

³ For fuller discussion of the problems of generic classification of the Icelandic sagas of royal saints see Phelpstead 1998, ch. 2.

hagiography encourages the veneration of a saint in order to promote amendment of life and the worship of God.

The orthodox view that this is not Snorri's concern in his saga of St Óláfr has, however, been challenged by Sverrir Tómasson, who does read Snorri's saga as hagiography (Sverrir Tómasson 1991 and 1994; Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 1991 adopts a similar approach). Basing his argument primarily on the structure of the saga, Sverrir maintains that

markmið Snorra er hið sama og allra helgisagnaritara; hann bendir á að Ólafur lifi þótt hann deyi (1991, lxix).

Snorri's aim is the same as that of all hagiographers; he shows that Óláfr lives even though he be dead (cf. 1994, 70).⁴

Sverrir also claims that Snorri's work was read as hagiography by its medieval audience, adducing as evidence a fourteenth-century Icelandic *Legendarium* (MS AM 235 fol.) containing readings for the church year, which uses Snorri's version of the life of St Óláfr for its account of the martyr's passion (1991, lxx; cf. 1994, 71):

Slíkar viðtökur sýna að Ólafs saga helga hefur verið skilin sem helgisaga, pínslarsaga konungs, og það er ekki fyrr en á 19. öld sem menn taka lesa sögu hans á annan hátt.

Such a reception shows that *Ólafs saga helga* was understood as a Saint's Life, the *passio* of a king, and it was not until the nineteenth century that people began to read his saga in another way.

Sverrir Tómasson primarily discusses the *Separate Saga of St Óláfr*, but his comments apply equally to the substantially identical version incorporated in *Heimskringla* (indeed, the earlier of his two articles appears in the context of an edition of *Heimskringla*).

As I have argued elsewhere, my own view of Snorri's saga is that it is neither merely profane nor purely hagiographic, but that hagiographic and non-hagiographic genres are juxtaposed within the text so as to provoke reflection on the nature of Óláfr's sainthood (Phelpstead 1998, ch. 4). But given the critical consensus that Snorri's is a secular saga, it is necessary to demonstrate that the text can be read as hagiography before one can offer an analysis of the interaction between different genres which creates a portrait of the saint which in turn stimulates reflection on Óláfr's sanctity. I therefore aim in this article to show how consideration of some aspects of Snorri's treatment of the stories of Óláfr's miracles can support a reading of the saga as hagiography.

⁴ It should be noted, however, that Sverrir also compares the structure of the work to that of the *Íslendingasögur* (1991, lxv).

The *Separate Saga of St Óláfr* begins, after a Prologue, with seventeen chapters briefly outlining the history of the kings of Norway from Haraldr hárfagri to St Óláfr's predecessor, Óláfr Tryggvason. The main central part of the saga (chs 18–251) is virtually identical with the saga of St Óláfr in *Heimskringla* (Whaley 1991, 53 lists the more substantial of the minor differences between the two versions). The *Separate Saga* ends with a relatively brief account (chs 252–78) of the reigns of Óláfr's successors down to Haraldr gilli: this final section serves as a framework within which to relate Óláfr's posthumous miracles. The miracle stories appear almost unchanged and in almost the same order when *Óláfs saga helga* is incorporated into *Heimskringla*, but there they are dispersed throughout the sagas of Óláfr's successors which comprise the final third of the work. Except where stated otherwise, the following discussion refers to the *Heimskringla* version of *Óláfs saga helga*; the differences between the texts are, however, rarely relevant to the points being made here.

Almost all the miracle stories in Snorri's work occur after Óláfr's death. They include more than a dozen healings, two occasions when Óláfr grants victory to a Christian army fighting heathens, a couple of miracles involving the setting free of an unjustly held captive, and a handful of more miscellaneous miracles. Because reference will be made below to some of the sources and analogues for Snorri's miracle stories it will be useful briefly to list his likely sources. (Whaley 1987, 326 provides a useful table of the principal miracles in *Heimskringla* with their sources and analogues; see further Whaley 1987, 327–32. On Snorri's sources elsewhere in *Heimskringla* see Whaley 1991, 63–82; Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, especially I xxxi–liv; II xxi–lxxxvii; III v–lxxxiii. For a useful account of scholarship on the relations between different *konungasögur* see Andersson 1985.) We can identify three different but interrelated literary traditions which feed, directly or indirectly, into Snorri's narrative: skaldic verse; Latin hagiography and vernacular miracle collections; and sagas of St Óláfr which antedate Snorri's.

The earliest evidence for the veneration of St Óláfr is provided by skaldic poetry composed soon after his death. Þórarinn loftunga's 'Glælognskviða' (c.1032) and Sigvatr Þórðarson's 'Erfidrápa' (c.1043) are among the numerous skaldic poems which Snorri quotes in *Heimskringla*. An important later skaldic poem on St Óláfr, from which Snorri quotes a single stanza in *Magnússona saga* chapter 30, is Einarr Skúlason's 'Geisli', which was recited at the celebrations marking the establishment of the archiepiscopal see at Niðaróss in 1152/53.

The Latin account of Óláfr's life and miracles attributed to Eysteinn Erlendsson (Archbishop of Niðaróss 1161–88) survives in two versions: a widely disseminated shorter version called *Acta sancti Olavi regis et martyris* in the reconstructed edition by Gustav Storm (1880, 125–44), and a later expanded version known as the *Passio et miracula beati Olavi*, which contains many more miracle stories, but is preserved in only one manuscript, originally from Fountains Abbey but now belonging to Corpus Christi College, Oxford (Metcalf 1881). Snorri is unlikely to have known either version, but may have used a text close to the vernacular version of the miracle stories from the *Acta sancti Olavi regis et martyris* which appears with a homily on St Óláfr in the *Old Norwegian Homily Book* of c. 1200 (ed. Indrebø 1931, 108–29).

For more concrete detail about names and places than was provided by poetry or hagiography, Snorri appears to have depended on a text like that preserved in fragmentary form as the first leaf of MS AM 325 IV α 4to. This leaf was once thought to belong to the so-called *Oldest Saga of St Óláfr*, but Jonna Louis-Jensen has shown that it probably comes from an otherwise now lost *Legendary of St Óláfr* (Storm 1893; Louis-Jensen 1970). The surviving fragment contains six miracle stories told in a terse saga-like manner.

The amount of material which Snorri shares with the so-called *Legendary Saga of St Óláfr* implies that he knew a similar, though not identical text (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, II ix; Jónas Kristjánsson 1976, 288). The *Legendary Saga* dates from c. 1200 but survives in a single Norwegian manuscript of c. 1250 (ed. Heinrichs *et al.* 1982). It seems to be an abbreviated version of the *Oldest Saga of St Óláfr* to which new material including stories of Óláfr's posthumous miracles has been added. For these miracle stories the *Legendary Saga* appears to draw both on the 'ecclesiastical' tradition of the *Passio et miracula beati Olavi* and *Old Norwegian Homily Book* and on the more saga-like tradition represented by the first fragment of AM 325 IV α 4to (Whaley 1987, 329).

It is likely that Snorri used the *Lífs saga Óláfs helga* written by his friend the Icelandic cleric Styrmir Kárason in the 1220s, but as it no longer survives in its original form it is impossible to be certain.⁵

⁵Excerpts (*articuli*) from Styrmir's Life are given in an appendix in *Flateyjarbók* (Vilhjálmur Bjarnar *et al.* 1944–45, IV 1–13); others are incorporated into Snorri's *Separate Saga* in *Flateyjarbók* and some other manuscripts (see Johnsen and Jón Helgason 1941, 683–95). Sigurður Nordal attempted a reconstruction of the work (1914, 69–133).

As far as Óláfr's miracles are concerned, then, it seems that in addition to skaldic verse, Snorri knew a text close to the *Old Norwegian Homily Book* and/or the final section of the *Legendary Saga* (both of which draw ultimately on the Latin hagiographic tradition) plus a text with more concrete detail, like the *Legendary* attested to by the first fragment of AM 325 IV α 4to. He may alternatively have known a single text (perhaps Styrmir's saga) in which the ecclesiastical and saga-like traditions had already been combined (cf. Whaley 1987, 329).

Discussions of the miracles in *Heimskringla* or the *Separate Saga of St Óláfr* usually draw attention to Snorri's reduction of the number of miracle stories compared with his sources. This is then taken as evidence of Snorri's rationalism and even of his 'modernity'. The supernatural is certainly less prominent in Snorri's *Óláfs saga* than in many other accounts of the royal saint. All miracles relating to the early years of Óláfr's life have been either omitted or 'rationalised' by Snorri. So, for example, the birth narratives of the *Legendary Saga*, in which parallels are drawn between Óláfr's birth and that of Christ, are omitted by Snorri (Heinrichs *et al.* 1982, chs 1–3), as are the miracles associated with the young Óláfr's viking expeditions; unlike the hero of the *Legendary Saga*, Snorri's viking Óláfr is never saved by a band of angelic warriors and never encounters an exploding mermaid (cf. Heinrichs *et al.* 1982, chs 13, 15). Some other miracle stories are adapted rather than omitted by Snorri, so that the supernatural element is removed, although without necessarily making the story more plausible. The classic example of this is the account of Óláfr's escape from the Swedes at Løgrinn (Lake Mälaren): in the *Legendary Saga* Óláfr's prayers miraculously create a channel in the Agnafit isthmus through which his ships can sail to safety (Heinrichs *et al.* 1982, ch. 16), whereas in ch. 7 of Snorri's saga Óláfr's men dig the channel themselves, a superhuman feat arguably less credible than a miracle (on this episode in various Lives of Óláfr see Evans 1981, 96–104).

This episode is important because the fact that Snorri's supposed 'rationalisation' is no more believable than the miracle it replaces indicates that his changes cannot have been motivated by a belief that miracles are inherently implausible. Snorri often prefers to explain events in terms of purely human causation but, as the miracle stories later in the work show, this does not exclude the possibility of supernatural intervention in history: anachronistic attempts to recruit Snorri as an atheist or agnostic are therefore doomed to fail (cf. Bagge 1991, 224–25). Snorri's approach in fact differs less from that of his contemporaries than is sometimes maintained; in the twelfth century, as Bagge has pointed out, there is a tendency to separate the natural and the supernatural even in the work of clerical

historians (1991, 225). Snorri is exceptional only in the degree to which he moves in this direction.

Diana Whaley, in line with the view that Snorri's is a 'profane' saga, argues that Snorri's 'rationalising' is a reinterpretation of known facts which translates hagiography into secular narrative (1991, 120). In her earlier article Whaley details some stylistic changes Snorri makes to his sources, but also notes that some stories are virtually unchanged (1987, 329–32). She suggests that comparison with other sources shows that Snorri's approach is

essentially secular. Even his lives of the two missionary kings, Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson, are very much kings' saga rather than hagiography, and his treatment of miracles illustrates this secular stance well (1991, 131).

The implication here that hagiography and Kings' Saga are mutually exclusive categories is significant: if one starts from this position it will never be possible to see Snorri's saga as hagiographic.

In arguing that Snorri's is an 'essentially secular' saga Whaley has, of course, to account for the fact that he does nevertheless recount a number of Óláfr's miracles. She suggests that

Snorri realised the importance of the cult of Óláfr helgi in Norwegian history and perhaps also the value of the miracles as a yardstick against which the unhappy events of later reigns could be measured, and accordingly he retains the posthumous miracles recorded in the *Legendary Saga* (1991, 131; cf. 1987, 334–35).

This is not entirely convincing. Other contemporary histories of Norway, such as *Morkinskinna* (ed. Finnur Jónsson 1932) and *Fagrskinna* (ed. Bjarni Einarsson 1985), include far fewer of Óláfr's posthumous miracles than does Snorri; if Snorri's approach is 'essentially secular' it is hard to see why he feels the need to include more religious subject matter than the writers of these two texts. (I concede Bagge's point that the account in *Fagrskinna* is considerably shorter than *Óláfs saga helga*, so that Snorri places *relatively* less emphasis on the miracles associated with Óláfr (1991, 299 n. 32). Yet there still seem to be more miracle stories in Snorri's work than would be necessary if he were trying to include as few of them as possible.) Mere recognition of the importance of Óláfr's cult could be achieved by other means than the recounting of miracle stories and would certainly not oblige Snorri to record the number of miracles which he does, even if it is fewer than many of his predecessors had recorded.

The fact that Snorri makes a selection from the miracle stories available to him cannot be accepted as evidence of his secularity; the writer of St John's Gospel, after all, admits to the same practice (John 20: 30–31; 21: 25):

Multa quidem et alia signa fecit Iesus in conspectu discipulorum suorum quae non sunt scripta in libro hoc. Haec autem scripta sunt ut credatis quia Iesus est Christus Filius Dei et ut credentes vitam habeatis in nomine eius . . . Sunt autem et alia multa quae fecit Iesus quae si scribantur per singula nec ipsum arbitror mundum capere eos qui scribendi sunt libros.

Many other signs also did Jesus in the sight of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written, that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in his name . . . But there are also many other things which Jesus did; which if they were written every one, the world itself, I think, would not be able to contain the books that should be written (Douai–Rheims translation).

The miracles of Óláfr embedded in the sagas of later kings in *Heimskringla* may well, as Whaley suggests, remind the reader of eternal values neglected by those rulers, but there is no *explicit* statement that the miracles should be seen as a judgement on the state of Norway. In any case, they could not have fulfilled that function in Snorri's original *Separate Saga of St Óláfr* with its 'appendix' of miracle stories: there the later history of Norway is recounted (briefly) only because it provides a framework for the miracle stories. To suggest that the miracle stories provide a commentary on the history is therefore to put the cart before the horse. Snorri may have found a new function for the miracle stories when he incorporated his *Óláfs saga* into the larger context of *Heimskringla*, but his original reason for recounting them must be sought elsewhere.

We need not, in fact, look very far, for Snorri himself provides an explanation. The end of ch. 246 of the *Heimskringla* version of *Óláfs saga helga* reads as follows (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, II 410):

Nú er sagðr nokkur hlutr sögu Óláfs konungs, frá nokkurum tíðendum þeim er gerðusk, meðan hann réð Nórgei, ok svá frá falli hans ok því, er helgi hans kom upp. En nú skal þat eigi niðri liggja, er honum er þó mest vegsemð í, at segja frá jartegnagørð hans, þótt þat sé síðar ritit í þessari bók.

Now a certain part of the saga of King Óláfr has been told, covering certain events which took place while he ruled Norway, and also about his death and how his sanctity became known. But that will not now be neglected in which is the most honour to him, namely, to tell of his performance of miracles, although that will be written later in this book.

Some of Óláfr's miracles have in fact already been recounted before this statement is made, and the remaining miracle stories in *Heimskringla*

appear not in *Óláfs saga helga* but dispersed throughout the remaining sagas of the work. In the *Separate Saga*, however, the miracles are collected together at the end of the work, and this passage leads into them by ending before the final clause (Johnsen and Jón Helgason 1941, 610). One story not in the *Separate Saga* is added to *Heimskringla*, the account of the release of Haraldr Sigurðarson from prison in Constantinople (*Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* ch. 14).

Snorri's statement that the life and death of Óláfr are only a part of Óláfr's story, and that it is the posthumous miracles performed by Óláfr which reflect most gloriously on him, is of the kind one might expect in a hagiographic account intended to edify, and to encourage veneration of the saint in question. The passage quoted above also implies that even when the miracle stories are separated from *Óláfs saga* and dispersed throughout the following sagas in *Heimskringla* they remain in some sense part of the story of St Óláfr. One may usefully compare the passage with a not dissimilar statement introducing the miracle stories in the Latin *Passio et miracula beati Olavi* (Metcalf 1881, 74):

Opere precium est de multis miraculis, que ad commendanda merita gloriosi martiris olavi dominus operari dignatus est, pauca perstringere, quatinus in laudem et reuerentiam diuine pietatis audientem excitentur animi, et quantam gratiam et gloriam dominus sancto suo dederit fidelibus innotescat.

It is fitting to make brief mention of the many miracles that the Lord has deigned to perform in order to make manifest the merits of the glorious martyr Óláfr, so that the souls of those who hear may be moved to praise and venerate the divine mercy, and that it may be revealed to the faithful what great grace and glory the Lord has bestowed upon his saint (trans. Kunin, forthcoming).

The passage from ch. 246 of *Óláfs saga* reveals a clear motive for Snorri's inclusion of miracle stories in its final sentence (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, II 410):

En nú skal þat eigi niðri liggja, er honum er þó mest vegsemð í, at segja frá jarregnagørð hans.

But now that will not be neglected in which is the most honour to him, namely, to tell of his performance of miracles.

The key term here is *vegsemð*, 'honour', this being what Peter Hallberg calls 'ethically the key concept in the world of the Icelandic saga' (1962, 99). Óláfr's miracles are worth recording, indeed should be recorded, because as signs of his sanctity they redound most to his honour.

Sverre Bagge has illuminated the nature of Óláfr's character and its development as these appear in *Óláfs saga helga* by suggesting that Snorri

belongs to what anthropologists call a 'shame culture' (1991, 170–71).⁶ In such a culture one's highest good is the enjoyment of public esteem; a person is the sum of his or her deeds: 'a man is what he appears to other men', as Bagge puts it (1991, 189). In this context one is defined by one's public reputation: one *is* what one is said to be. There is consequently something like a moral imperative to make a person's merits known. When Snorri says he will recount Óláfr's miracles because they redound most to his honour, he is obeying exactly this imperative.

The anthropologist J. G. Peristiany writes that

in all societies there is another ideal, that of saintliness, which transcends that of honour. . . The definition of saintliness might be that saintliness is above honour and that there is nothing above saintliness (1974, 17–18).

For Snorri, however, honour and saintliness are inextricably linked: the deeds which are most to Óláfr's honour *are* the proof of his sanctity. This inextricable link is reflected in the fact that the imperative to honour Óláfr which arises from the situation in which a man is what he is said to be is in complete harmony with the hagiographer's conviction, expressed in the above quotation from the *Passio et miracula beati Olavi*, that it is proper to make known a saint's miracles in order to edify the faithful.

Given Snorri's desire to make manifest those of Óláfr's deeds which are proof of his sanctity and most to his honour, what are the criteria which determine his selection from the miracle stories he knew? Snorri's critical attitude to his sources may have influenced his choice. He certainly goes to some lengths to make clear the trustworthiness of at least some of his accounts of Óláfr's miracles (although this is characteristic of Snorri's approach to historical writing, hagiographic texts also often demonstrate the trustworthiness of their accounts, often by invoking the authority of eye-witnesses). In ch. 245 Snorri quotes eight and a half strophes of Þórarinn loftunga's 'Glælognskviða', a work which bears witness to Óláfr's sanctity and which records some of his miracles. He then notes that

Þórarinn loftunga var þá með Sveini konungi ok sá ok heyrði þessi stórmerki heilagleiks Óláfs konungs (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, II 409).

Þórarinn loftunga was then with King Sveinn and saw and heard of these great wonders of the holiness of King Óláfr.

⁶ For definitions of shame and guilt cultures see Benedict 1947, 222–25. On honour and shame see Peristiany 1974, 9–18, and Pitt-Rivers 1974, 21–39. Of course, the distinction between shame and guilt cultures is relative, and the transition between them is gradual; Snorri's culture is already on its way to becoming a guilt culture.

Snorri refers specifically to the miracles mentioned in Þórarinn's poem, for which he can therefore claim eye-witness support: the sound of bells ringing, candles lighting themselves on the altar, and healings of lame, blind and other sick people. The chapter ends with the statement that

inar stærstu jarteignir Óláfs konungs, þá eru þær mest ritaðar ok greindar, ok þær, er síðar hafa görzk (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, II 409).

the greatest miracles of King Óláfr, including those which happened later, are the ones that have most been written down and recorded.

(The whole of the section following the quotation from 'Glælognskviða' to the end of the chapter is lacking in the *Separate Saga*.) Here Snorri shows an awareness of unspecified written collections of miracle stories, implies that the existence of such records authenticates the stories and, like the author of St John's Gospel, acknowledges that the stories he tells are only a selection from those in existence.

Despite such attempts to demonstrate the reliability of the miracle stories, however, Snorri's work contains too many unsourced accounts of miracles which happen to unnamed people in unspecified places for his supposed critical attitude to his sources to be the overriding criterion of selection (see, for example, the miracles in *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* chs 56–57; *Hákonar saga herðibreiðs* chs 20–21). Conversely, miracles which are sourced and have named subjects and specified locations are sometimes omitted by Snorri. Bagge is undoubtedly right to point out that Snorri is highly unlikely to have made an independent assessment of the veracity of miracle stories accepted by the Church and people and associated with the most popular of Scandinavian saints (1991, 211).

Snorri's omission of miracles from Óláfr's youth has the effect of emphasising the way in which Óláfr becomes much more saint-like towards the end of his life in Snorri's version of his Life (on this aspect of Snorri's portrait see Bagge 1991, 181–90). Robert Folz's comparative study of medieval royal saints suggests that the miracle stories which Snorri selected were of the kinds usually associated with canonised kings. Folz's work indicates, for example, that it is common for a royal saint to have few miracles attributed to the period before his death (1984, 117–21), so Snorri's omission of the miracles of Óláfr's youth in no way makes him an unusual royal saint.

Folz also shows (1984, 128–30) that healings always comprise the majority of a royal saint's miracles, as they do in *Heimskringla*. Snorri seems to have chosen healing stories which involve a representative selection of different kinds of ailment, and the locations of the healing miracles are arranged so as to shadow the spread of Óláfr's cult abroad: Denmark,

England, France and then Byzantium (Bagge 1991, 212). In this way the miracles confirm that the dream that Óláfr had before his final battle prophesied the spread of his cult (cf. *Óláfs saga helga* in *Heimskringla*, ch. 202).

On two occasions in Snorri's work St Óláfr grants miraculous assistance in battle with the result that Christian forces are victorious against pagans (*Magnúss saga góða* chs 27–28; *Hákonar saga herðibreiðs* ch. 21). This kind of miracle is, like Óláfr's healings, typical of medieval royal saints. Two other Scandinavian aristocratic saints grant assistance in battle: St Magnús of Orkney, whom late medieval traditions credit with decisive interventions in the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314 (Batho and Husbands 1936–41, II 277) and the Battle of Summerdale in 1529 (Cody and Murison 1888–95, II 218–19), and St Knútr lávarðr, who assists Valdimarr Knútsson of Denmark against the pagan Wends in a miracle modelled on Óláfr's assistance of Magnús góði at Hlýrskógsheiðr (*Knýtlinga saga*, in Bjarni Guðnason 1982, 292).

Having decided, whether he knew it or not, to follow St John in making a selection from the available sources, Snorri's decisions about which miracles to include seem to have been informed by the desire to mirror (and so draw attention to) the expansion of the king's cult, and by a feeling for the kinds of miracles (mainly healings) typically performed by royal saints, a feeling which he shares with medieval Europe in general.

Finally, it is worth considering Snorri's decision to disperse the miracle stories throughout the later sagas in *Heimskringla*. He could have chosen instead to retain them as an 'appendix' to his saga of St Óláfr, just as *Orkneyinga saga* gathers the miracles of St Magnús into a single chapter which is presented as a digression from its narrative of Orcadian history (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965, ch. 57 and the final words of ch. 56). Óláfr's miraculous assistance of his son Magnús in battle against the pagan Wends at Hlýrskógsheiðr (*Magnúss saga góða* chs 27–28) and his release of his half-brother Haraldr harðráði Sigurðarson from a Byzantine prison (*Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* ch. 14), for example, would need to be told in their historical contexts, but the various healings could easily have been collected together, and there is in fact little attempt to relate them to the surrounding narrative in the third part of *Heimskringla* (but see Whaley 1987, 337–40 on the appropriateness of some miracles to specific kings' reigns).

The dispersal of the miracles in the last third of *Heimskringla* maintains Óláfr's 'presence' in the work, thus mirroring prefigurings of Óláfr in the first third of the work such as Hálfðan svart's dream in *Hálfðanar saga svarta* ch. 7 and the typological prefiguring of Óláfr's martyrdom in the sacrificial death of Dómalði in *Ynglinga saga* ch. 15 (cf. Lönnroth 1986; on

Snorri's use of typology see Weber 1987). The maintenance of Óláfr's presence in *Heimskringla* may, as Whaley suggests, invite judgement to be passed on the deeds of Óláfr's successors. But it can also be seen as confirming a prophecy made to Óláfr before he became king of Norway. At the end of his youthful viking career Óláfr is deterred from continuing on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem by a dream of apparently divine origin (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, II 25):

til hans kom merkligr maðr ok þekkligr ok þó ógurligr ok mælti við hann, bað hann hætta ætlan þeiri, at fara út í lönd—'far aprt til óðala þinna, því at þú munt vera konungr yfir Nóregi at eilífu'.

A remarkable and handsome but nevertheless awe-inspiring man came to him and spoke to him. He told him to leave off his intention to journey to foreign lands: 'go back to your inheritance, for you shall be king over Norway for ever'.⁷

At the time Óláfr interprets this as meaning that he and his descendants will rule Norway for a long time, but after his martyrdom it comes to be seen in retrospect as prophesying that he will rule for ever as Norway's heavenly patron.⁸ Óláfr's continuing miraculous interventions during the reigns of his successors in *Heimskringla* demonstrate that he is indeed now the eternal king of Norway and her heavenly patron; they confirm his sanctity and his abiding concern for his people.

I have argued that Snorri's 'rationalisation' of some miracle stories and his act of selection from the sources available to him cannot be taken as evidence of an 'essentially secular' approach. I would also suggest that no rationalising author trying to produce a 'profane saga' would be as concerned as Snorri appears to be to demonstrate the validity of a divine prophecy, to show that the martyred king now reigns in heaven. As a whole, the portrait of King Óláfr Haraldsson in *Óláfs saga helga* is very far from being entirely positive, but Snorri's handling of the miracle stories does suggest that among his objectives in composing the saga was the hagiographer's aim of recording a saint's miracles as evidence that he lives although he died. In so doing, Snorri recounts those stories in which there is the most honour to St Óláfr.

⁷ Óláfr's title *rex perpetuus Norvegiae* ('perpetual king of Norway') first appears in *Historia Norvegiae* (Storm 1880, 109).

⁸ The promise that Óláfr will rule forever may be compared with God's promise that King David's reign (or that of his descendants) will last for ever: cf. Ps. 88: 36–38 (89: 35–37); Ps. 109 (110): 4.

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GWYN JONES

Professor Gwyn Jones, scholar, critic, translator, novelist, short-story writer and man of literary affairs, died in Aberystwyth on 6 December 1999, aged 92. He was an Honorary Life Member of the Viking Society, and its President 1950–52. For his services to our subject he was appointed Knight of the Order of the Falcon in 1963, Commander in 1987, and he was made a CBE for his vigorous chairmanship of the Welsh Committee of the Arts Council from 1957 to 1967.

A native of Monmouthshire, son of a miner and a teacher who later became a midwife, Gwyn took the educational path to a better living than cutting coal. He graduated from Cardiff with a first-class degree in English, followed by an M.A. on an Icelandic topic in 1929. He was then a schoolmaster in Wigan and Manchester for six years. They were penurious years, but books were cheap in the second-hand places, and with the indulgent help of his first wife Alice, he laid the foundation of his collection of fine books (subsequently donated towards the end of his life to the National Library of Wales, as were also his Icelandic books). He returned to Cardiff as a lecturer in the College in 1935, then was successively Professor of English at Aberystwyth 1940–64 and at Cardiff 1964–75. After Alice's death in 1979, he married Mair, the widow of his former colleague and collaborator Thomas Jones, and they settled in Aberystwyth.

Gwyn's first article, 'The religious element in the Icelandic *hólmanga*', appeared in *Modern Language Review* in 1932, and in 1935 he published both his first novel and his first translation. *Richard Savage*, a fictional biography of the eighteenth-century minor poet, put the name of Gwyn Jones as a gifted writer in the genre firmly before the reading public, and was swiftly followed by three more novels of very different kinds. One may be mentioned here: *Times Like These*, a moving novel about life in South Wales during the Depression, a setting that was part of the fabric of his being. A novella and two other novels were to follow at intervals of about a decade, and in this period, alongside other major preoccupations, he also wrote more than a score of short stories, notable for their strong form and precision of language. The book of translations already mentioned, published by Princeton University Press for the American-Scandinavian Foundation and Oxford University Press, was *Four Icelandic Sagas* (namely *Hrafnkels saga*, *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, *Vápnfirðinga saga* and *Kjalnesinga saga*). Characteristically, the Introduction provided a warm appraisal of the

sagas and an exposition of the necessary background information, and the style of the translation was vigorous and vivid. This and his *Vatnsdalers' Saga* (1944, same publishers) were the forerunners of the many translations published by others from the late 1950s onwards, and Gwyn himself continued in this line with *Egil's Saga* (1960) and *Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas* (1961). In *Egil's Saga* particularly, the compact and forcefully argued Introduction presented the current best opinion on the vexed questions associated with the saga, the translation of the prose skilfully matched the changes in the mode of the original, and the translation of the poems in the saga worthily met the challenge.

Translation also figured prominently in *The Norse Atlantic Saga* (O.U.P. 1964), the first of Gwyn's books as an historian of the North. Half of the book is a narrative and analysis of the westward sweep of Norse voyages of discovery and settlement to Iceland, Greenland and America, drawing on the latest discoveries on the ground as well as using the literature, and pleasingly written for all potential readers. The other half consists of translations of the sources, *Íslendingabók*, parts of *Landnámabók*, and the sagas. A second edition appeared in 1986, substantially expanded and revised to take account of the remarkable advances in the subject in the meanwhile.

This attractive book was followed by Gwyn's major achievement in Norse studies, *A History of the Vikings* (O.U.P. 1968), a comprehensive and exciting treatment of this huge subject. The book has been an immense success as a publishing venture, appearing in a revised edition in 1984, in Japanese translation in 1987, and as a Folio Society edition in 1997. Its base was a superb command of the great number and variety of the written sources and of the steadily increasing information available from other disciplines. Its aim was to please as well as to instruct, and to this end the author allowed himself to retell stories that he well knew to be legendary, not history but 'highly important to the history of northern history'. Readers needed to be mindful of his general critique in the Introduction and his many scattered observations on the acceptability of the sources dealt with in particular contexts. Then they could enjoy and learn from the authoritative synthesis, enthusiastically presented.

In addition to the works mentioned so far, Gwyn published some twenty lectures, papers in learned journals, chapters in reissues of others' books, and popular articles on Norse topics; a book of *Scandinavian Legends and Folktales* (O.U.P. 1956) dedicated *Til allra*

barna sem unna sögum; and also the book *Kings, Beasts and Heroes* described below. Yet his achievement in this field of study was only one strand in his life. Early on, in parallel with his own creative writing, he founded *The Welsh Review* (1939–48), providing a forum for the discussion of Welsh matters in English and publishing in it much good work by Anglo-Welsh writers, many then unknown. He edited several volumes of Welsh short stories and *The Oxford Book of Welsh Verse in English*, and was tireless in advancing the standing of the twentieth-century English language literature of Wales by lectures, broadcasts and essays. But his greatest service to Wales must be his conception of a new translation of *The Mabinogion* and the triumphant realisation of it jointly with Thomas Jones, the foremost Welsh medievalist of his day. Their collaboration resulted in a classic, an elegant and definitive translation, worthy of the original medieval Welsh masterpiece. It was published in a handsome limited edition by the Golden Cockerel Press in 1948, then by Everyman in 1949, and there have been many reprints and republications in new formats. Besides *The Mabinogion*, Gwyn wrote, translated or edited seven other volumes for the Golden Cockerel Press, fine books all of them. Mention might also be made of his *Welsh Legends and Folk-tales* (O.U.P. 1955) and the evocative King Penguin *A Prospect of Wales* (1948).

As a university teacher Gwyn's particular commitment was to Old English, though he was at ease in all periods, and he combined this with his Welsh and Norse interests in *Kings, Beasts and Heroes* (O.U.P. 1972), a sustained analysis of the story-content and story-telling art of *Beowulf*, *Culhwch ac Olwen* and *Hrólfs saga kraka*. In this book his learning and critical power, his writer's art and his sheer enjoyment of literature came together with outstanding result. It brought him the Christian Gauss Award for the best work of literary criticism published in 1972.

Gwyn's life was driven by love of language and literature and a passion to communicate. He will be remembered by generations of students and countless other audiences for his handsome presence, his courteous firm manner, his rich voice, his superbly fashioned phrases, and his steadfast belief in the overwhelming worth of literature.

D. S.

NOTES

CURSING THE KING: AN IRISH CONVERSATION IN *JÓNS SAGA HELGA*

BY ROSEMARY POWER

The Icelandic saga of Bishop Jón of Hólar, *Jóns saga helga*, originally composed in Latin, survives in different forms. One is a revised vernacular version preserved in Stock. perg. fol. nr. 5, written about 1360. It includes in its text passages thought to be derived from a lost saga of Gísl Illugason composed in the early thirteenth century, which concerns events said to have taken place over a hundred years previously.

Gísl was a poet in the service of the Norwegian king Magnús Óláfsson (1093–1103), known as Magnús Barelegs, who made two expeditions to western lands and met his death in Ireland. One passage in *Jóns saga* refers to the occasion in 1102 when Magnús made an alliance with the Munster king Muircheartach Ó Briain (1086–1119), who in the saga is named Mýrkjartan, a form possibly reflecting an Irish diminutive of the name otherwise found in Old Norse literature as *Mýr(k)jartak*. We are told that Gísl led a group of hostages sent by Magnús to Muircheartach's court. Among the hostages was a Norwegian, who claimed that he spoke Irish well and offered to greet the king (*Biskupa sögur* I, 227):

Síðan mælti hann til konungs: 'Male diarik,' en þat er á vára tungu: 'Bölvaðr sér þú, konungr.'

Þá svaraði einn konungsmaðr: 'Herra,' segir hann, 'þessi maðr mun vera þræll allra Norðmanna.'

Konungr svarar: 'Olgeira ragall,' þat er á vára tungu: 'Ókunnug er myrk gata.' Konungr var vel við þá. Magnús konungr herjaði síðan á Írlandi . . .

Then he said to the king: '*Male diarik*,' which is in our language: 'Cursed be you, king.'

One of the courtiers responded: 'Lord,' he said, 'this man must be the slave of all the Norsemen.'

The king replied: '*Olgeira ragall*,' which is in our language: 'Unknown is a dark road.' The king treated them well. King Magnús later raided in Ireland . . .

The references to Magnús's activities fit in well with what we know from Irish, Scottish, Welsh, English and Manx sources as well as from such Norse sources as Theodoricus's *Historia*, *Ágrip af Nóregs*

konungasögum, Orkneyinga saga, Fagrskinna, Heimskringla and Morkinskinna.

Magnús arrived in Dublin in 1102 and entered into the formal 'peace of a year' with Muirheartach, a process that normally involved the exchange of hostages.

Muirheartach was a more formidable ally than his portrayal in Norse sources might indicate. At this period he not only controlled his native Munster, but also Leinster and Dublin, had set up a friendly dynasty to rule Connacht, engaged with ecclesiastical and secular politics (including English affairs), and was, formally, 'high-king with opposition', the opposition being provided by his northern rival, Domnall Mac Lochlainn.

Muirheartach no doubt saw Magnús's seapower as a useful supplement to his weaponry against the north, and they engaged in joint ventures, the major one being an attack on Domnall and his army early in August 1103. This was unsuccessful, and Magnús was on his way back to Norway when he was killed, probably in the Downpatrick area (Power 1986, 1994).

The passage in *Jóns saga* is unique among the sources in that it goes on to imply that Magnús had broken his word and had actually fought against Muirheartach, leaving the hostages to their fate, a fate which Muirheartach chose not to enforce. In fact, the two kings remained allies until the death of Magnús. Gísl and his companions were freed and returned to Iceland, where he lived to a ripe age. His son was called Einarr, and much was told about his life.

Jóns saga must give one of the earliest examples of a linguistic trick still current today. A common wartime version is of the young English soldier posted to a Highland regiment, who is taught a phrase in Gaelic said to mean 'Good morning', and told to greet the sergeant-major with it. The actual meaning is far cruder than the variant in *Jóns saga*, but the sergeant-major realizes that the recruit has been set up and takes no action.

It may be wondered if the version we have here is based on an account passed down in Gísl's family.

The actual wording was first considered by William Craigie, who suggested that 'male diarik' was an attempt to render Irish *Mallacht duit, a rí* (Craigie 1897, 443). Carl Marstrander followed Craigie's interpretation, but changed the form to *a rí* (Marstrander 1915, 69, note 2).

The usual expression is *Mallacht ort*, 'Curse on you'. There are, however, examples of medieval and more recent use of the preposi-

tional pronoun *duit*, 'to you'. A parallel, too, is the greeting *Dia duit*, 'God be with you'.

The vocative form is *rí*. Reidar Th. Christiansen suggested, probably because the Icelandic authors thought, incorrectly, that Muircheartach was king of Connacht, that the rendering *-rik* indicated a western Irish variant (Christiansen 1952, 12). It seems more likely, in the absence of any evidence of this western vocative, that it has been influenced by the root form, in Middle Irish *rígh*, which appears in the genitive and dative.

There remains the difficulty of why the first word should be given as *Male* rather than *Malekt*. Is it possible that the *k* has been transposed to the second word and the *t* lost in the process, just as *duit* has lost its final *t*?

An alternative possibility is that the phrase represents *Mallacht Dé*, or the later *Mallacht Dia*, 'the curse of God', but there are no other examples of this phrase.¹

The second phrase, 'Olgeira ragall', presents more difficulties than the first, not least because the Icelandic account of what it means makes no sense in the context.

Craigie could make nothing of the king's reply other than that it appeared to begin with *Olc* (bad, evil), and end with *Gall* (Foreigner). Marstrander suggested *Olc aera(dh) ra Gall*, 'It is evil to be cursed by a Norseman' (Marstrander 1915, 69, note 2). Christiansen rendered the words as 'det er stygt å høre de fremmede si slikt' ('It is nasty to hear the foreigners say that'), while Helgi Guðmundsson (1967, 105) and Jonna Louis-Jensen (1977, 119) followed Marstrander. Louis-Jensen favoured the reading 'lagall' found in the two seventeenth-century manuscripts.

The current editor, Peter Foote, prefers another possible reading, noted by Louis-Jensen, found in the only surviving medieval manuscript: 'olgeira iagall'. From this we may surmise a form *Olc a rádh, a Ghaill*, 'evil (i.e. 'it is evil') its saying, O Foreigner'. This assumes that *c* has become *g*. While it is understandable that the *dh* of *rádh* and the *gh* of the vocative *Ghaill* (the same sound by the thirteenth century, a voiced velar fricative) have not been attempted by the Icelanders, it is more difficult to explain why the diphthong *ei* is used to replace *a*. (The form *Olc é a rádh, a Ghaill*, 'Evil to say that, Foreigner', would represent too late a stage in the development of Irish.)

¹ The paper manuscripts of *Jóns saga helga* give the words as 'melia denik', which no one has tried to interpret.

While it is difficult to deduce a form from 'ragall', we cannot dismiss out of hand the paper manuscript reading, 'lagall'. From this we could surmise *Olc a rádh le Gall*, 'Evil the saying of it by a Foreigner'.

The words could have been transmitted in the early thirteenth century, when communication with Gaelic-speaking Hebrideans in Norway was apparently far from unknown. There is, however, always the possibility that the words were retained in Icelandic oral tradition from the early twelfth century.

It is possible that the translation of 'Olgeira ragall' (or its alternatives) was lost during written transmission. The response 'Unknown is a dark road' has no reference to the conversation so far, nor does the variant in the paper manuscripts, 'Ókunnug er myrk gáta', 'Unknown is a dark puzzle'. If, however, a couple of sentences have been omitted, it may be that the final phrase we have represents not an interpretation but a commentary on the episode. As such, could it be a corruption of and then an attempt to explain the Irish personal name recorded in Iceland as *Mýrkjartak* or *Mýrkjartan*?

My grateful thanks are due to Peter Foote, Kay Muhr and Erich Poppe.

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FYR KNÉ MEYIO: NOTES ON CHILDBIRTH
IN MEDIEVAL ICELAND

BY MARGARET CORMACK

Oddrúnargrátr is unique in medieval Scandinavian, if not in world, literature. The two speakers in the poem are, not a god and a giant, but a pregnant woman and a midwife. The poem is often quoted as evidence for practices associated with childbirth in the Middle Ages. It states that Oddrún, the midwife, seated herself ‘before’ or ‘in front of’ the knees of the pregnant Borgný: ‘gekk mild fyr kné meyio at sitia’ (stanza 7). The saga of King Sverrir (*Flateyjarbók* 1860–68, II 535) contains a similar example: when a woman is about to give birth, ‘her servant sat in front of her knees to receive the child’ (‘þjónustukonan hennar sat fyrir knjám henni ok skyldi taka við barninu’).

These passages have been taken as evidence that the pregnant woman was kneeling. To quote a recent work in English, ‘The normal birth position was for the woman to kneel on the floor, with helpers ready at her knees or supporting her arms. As the birth progressed, she would shift to a knee-elbow position, and the child would be received from behind’ (Jochens 1995, 80, and references there cited; Reichborn-Kjennerud 1923, 43; 1933, 60).

While nineteenth-century accounts provide evidence for a birth position on hands and knees (Weiser-Aall 1968, 112, 120), the phrases *fyr kné* and *fyrir knjám* are not evidence for its use in the Middle Ages. A survey of the occurrences of the words *fyr* or *fyrir* plus *kné* in the CD-ROM concordance to the sagas of the Icelanders produces examples which refer to people going ‘fyr[ir] kné’ with respect to individuals of higher social status, such as kings, or those from whom they hope to receive aid or reward. A well-known example is provided by Egill Skalla-Grímsson’s *Arinbjarnarkviða*: ‘. . . er mína bar höfuðlausn fyr hilmis kné’ (*Íslendinga sögur og þættir* 1987, I 498. See also *Fóstbræðra saga*, verses 19 and 31, I 816, 841; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chs 117, 140, I 263, 304). In these passages, it is natural to imagine that the owner of the knees is sitting. We should thus picture the pregnant woman seated on the edge of a bed or on someone’s lap, as described by Reichborn-Kjennerud (1923, 60).

On the other hand, *Oddrúnargrátr* also states: ‘hér *liggr* Borgný, of borin verkiom’ (stanza 4). It is generally assumed that she is lying

down from exhaustion, but takes the appropriate position to give birth. It should not be forgotten, however, that the Modern Icelandic terms related to childbirth envisage the woman not as sitting or kneeling, but lying down. The woman herself is said to lie on the floor ('*liggja á gólfi*'), and the midwife or 'yfirsetukona' is said to sit over her ('*sitja yfir*'). The existence of these terms and meanings in the Middle Ages can be ascertained by a glance at dictionaries such as Cleasby–Vigfusson and Fritzner. In recent centuries, we know that a woman giving birth was made comfortable in a pile of straw on the floor, which would have the advantage of being easy to clean out after the birth (see Jónas Jónasson 1911).

As pointed out by Kreutzer (1987, 134), who provides the most detailed discussion of the issue, there are also numerous medieval references to *childbed*, with *sæng* as the term for 'bed', especially in Norwegian texts.

The variety of positions and places where a woman could give birth would thus seem to have been as numerous in the Middle Ages as they were in the nineteenth century; a position on hands and knees, however, is not attested in medieval sources.

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BARBARIAN ATROCITIES AND HAGIOGRAPHIC MOTIFS:
A POSTSCRIPT TO SOME RECENT ARTICLES

BY MARGARET CORMACK

As recent discussion in the pages of this journal (Bjarni Einarsson 1986, Bjarni Einarsson and Roberta Frank 1990) has shown, accounts of viking atrocity (specifically, the 'blood-eagle' as a means of disposing of defeated kings) are still capable of sparking scholarly controversy. In the last issue (1999), John Frankis has shown that fascination with ingenious methods of killing transcends literary genre. Frankis traces the 'fatal walk' of the viking Bróðir (fatal because his intestines were extracted in the process) to Geffrei Gaimar's *L'estoire des engleis* via the story of the martyrdom of St. Amphibalus, transmitted to Scandinavia by the monk Matthew Paris. This origin for the motif is more convincing than the more general similarities to the deaths of Judas or the heretic Arius adduced by Hill (1981).

Gaimar's composition dates from c.1140. The motif of evisceration by circumambulation is, however, recorded almost half a century earlier, when it is described in one version of the 1095 sermon of Pope Urban II which launched the First Crusade. In it the pope ascribes the following behaviour to the infidel:

When they wish to torture people by a base death, they perforate their navels, and dragging forth the extremity of the intestines, bind it to a stake; then with flogging they lead the victim around until the viscera having gushed forth the victim falls prostrate upon the ground. Others they bind to a post and pierce with arrows. (From the version of the sermon according to Robert of Rheims in *Historia Hierosolymitana*, tr. D. C. Munro in Peters 1998, 27.)

It is interesting to note that the other form of slaughter mentioned in the passage was also known from both hagiographic and Icelandic sources, being the fate of St Stephen and St Edmund, whose iconography shows them tied to a stake and pierced by arrows. The martyrdom of St Edmund at the hands of Ívarr, son of Ragnarr loðbrók, marked the chronological opening of Icelandic history for the historian Ari fróði (*Íslendingabók*, ch. 1).

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REVIEWS

THE ORIGINS OF DRAMA IN SCANDINAVIA. By TERRY GUNNELL. *D. S. Brewer*: Cambridge, 1995. xxvi + 414 pp.

Despite its title, this book does not set out to provide an overall guide to early drama in Scandinavia, but revisits the argument of Bertha Phillpotts' *The Elder Edda and ancient Scandinavian drama* (1920) that many of the Eddic poems represent 'the actual shattered remains of ancient religious drama' (Phillpotts, p. 114). This prompted Andreas Heusler (*ANF* 1922, 347–53) to ask three sceptical questions:

- (1) Is there evidence for ritual plays in pagan Scandinavia?
- (2) Is it possible to say that the myths behind the poems about gods and heroes were based on such plays?
- (3) Could such plays help to explain the artistic form of these poems?

He supplied answers in the negative to all three questions. Since then, most scholars have maintained a discreet silence on this basic question of the medium within which eddic poetry existed. It is certainly time that the problem was considered again.

Gunnell begins with a judicious survey of existing scholarly debate about how far the mythological poems in the *Poetic Edda* should be regarded as dramatic; but any further argument requires a clear understanding of what we mean by 'drama'. Gunnell's definition requires a performer but not necessarily an audience:

In essence, the performer is engaged in the momentary living creation of an alternative world (or a section of it) *within* this one, to the extent that what he is acting is not himself but someone or something else that belongs to a different time and/or place. (p. 12)

But this might encompass not only role-playing, drama therapy and rehearsal, but even the deceits of a confidence trickster—it leads to the Platonic objection that the actor is a liar. I would suggest, rather, that drama is a collusion between performer(s) and audience (who may also be performers) to award a temporary status as 'truth' to an action which they would normally regard as a fiction (or as not the literal truth of the present time and place).

Such a definition might have been useful in Gunnell's attempt to untangle drama, myth and ritual. He makes it clear that myth can exist without ritual and vice versa, although this splits his inquiry into two separate questions:

- (1) Do the Eddic poems provide evidence for dramatic or paradramatic pre-Christian rituals?
- (2) Should they be seen as dramatic within the thirteenth-century context in which they survive?

He usefully directs our attention towards the second issue, but also re-states Heusler's three questions, which refer mainly to the first.

The shape of the book's five main chapters is determined by this argument. The first two consider archaeological evidence for pre-Christian ritual drama and whether it may have survived in folk tradition. The third concentrates on a group of eddic dialogue poems in *ljóðahátttr* which, Gunnell argues, must have been composed for

performance by more than one person. The fourth, on marginal speaker notation in the manuscripts, argues that this system is derived from a European manuscript tradition that was particular to drama. The fifth is mainly concerned with evidence for types of non-solo performance in Old Norse, and the book ends with a brief conclusion and a survey of the evidence for *leikarar* in early medieval Scandinavia, which is followed by a full bibliography.

The earliest iconographic evidence is inscrutable, and serious identification of ritual performance must begin with the Gallehus horns (c. 400 AD). Gunnell also discusses the Oseberg Tapestry, helmet plates from Sutton Hoo, Torslunda, Valsgärde and Vendel, a fresco in the cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Kiev, accounts of the Christmas *Gothikon* dance ceremony of the Varangians in Constantinople, and two animal masks excavated from the tenth-century port at Hedeby, Denmark. In the horns, tapestry and helmet plates he convincingly identifies men with horned masks or helmets or in 'animal' disguises, apparently about to fight; but his other identifications seem more doubtful. These images do suggest ritual, though they need not be seen as actors presenting sacred drama; the existence, however, between the fifth and eleventh centuries, of a ritual dance representing a fight between masked, spear-carrying warriors and men dressed as animals must be accepted. What its meaning might have been, and whether it was ritual or fictive drama, remains mysterious.

The chapter on folkloristic evidence shows how some seasonal ceremonies (the *Luciafest* and the Summer Bride, the *Halm-Staffan* figures, and the *Julebukk*) probably conceal ancient native material within a Christian pretext. Gunnell suspects three ceremonies reported from aristocratic contexts (the Battle between Winter and Summer and the sword and hoop dances) of having been imported from western Europe, but there are parallels to the first two, in the Isle of Man, and Shetland and North-East England respectively, which may suggest older origins in Scandinavia itself.

He next tests the antiquity of rituals from continental Scandinavia against comparable material from areas of Viking-Age expansion. He gives little weight to survivals in England and Ireland, discussing sword dances, but not (disappointingly) the mumming plays of the 'Wooing Ceremony' type. In Iceland, the Christmas *vikivaki* dance games include several monster- or animal-disguises which resemble the *Julebukk*, though the *hestleikur* and *hjartarleikur* may also derive some features from the British Isles. Two rituals involving men dressed as grotesque females (*Háa-Þóra* and *kerlingarleikur*) may be related to the troll-like *Lussi* figure in the *Luciafest*, and to Grýla, the legendary troll-woman who was said to search out and disembowel bad children. It seems probable that at least some traditional folk rituals do have pre-Christian Scandinavian roots.

Gunnell's discussion of the eddic poems as oral poetry (pp. 182–83) might usefully have distinguished between orally-composed poetry and the possibly more relevant model of orally learned, edited and performed ballad (see David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk* (1972), pp. 58–73). He rightly points out, however, that the forms in which the eddic poems now survive are those of the thirteenth century. He gives a useful survey of genres, which distinguishes between dialogues, monologues and narratives. The pure dialogue poems are characterised

chiefly by the use of *ljóðaháttir* and by mythological subject matter, and it is on their thirteenth-century performance that Gunnell proceeds to concentrate.

If they are to be regarded as ‘drama’, the narrative prose which is now scattered through them must be ignored. Gunnell concludes (I think rightly) that the prose represents editorial addition, based on surviving verses or designed to link the poems together, and occasionally (as in the earlier parts of the *Sigurðr* story) perhaps derived from existing prose accounts unconnected with the verse. He devotes particular attention to five poems in *ljóðaháttir* for which the Codex Regius manuscript indicates the names of speakers with initials and *q.* (for *qvad*) in the outer margins (*Vafþrúðnismál*, *Skírnismál*, *Hárbarðsljóð*, *Lokasenna* and *Fáfnismál*); the first three are also partially preserved (in reverse order) in MS AM 748 I a, 4to, where speaker initials are indicated within the body of the text until *Skírnismál* 10, but in outer margins for the rest of *Skírnismál* and the whole of *Vafþrúðnismál*. These poems may share a common manuscript history, although other poems might have shared this feature in lost source manuscripts, and had it removed from those that survive.

Gunnell then analyses each poem in this group to discover the problems involved in a solo performance of it, concluding that a solo performer would have faced serious difficulties in each case and therefore that they were probably performed by more than one actor. In the case of *Hárbarðsljóð*, it would have been difficult for a listening audience to work out who was speaking throughout the first eight stanzas—and this is not a familiar story which everyone could be expected to know beforehand. It is, however, recognisably akin to the social amusement of the *senna*, so it would not be surprising if it were performed by two men.

In *Fáfnismál*, the editor is particularly obtrusive; disparate stanzas in *ljóðaháttir* and *fornyrðislag* have been placed together, and the boundary between *Reginismál* and *Fáfnismál* may be no more than an editorial chapter division. Furthermore, all the episodes of violent action in this segment of text are narrated only in prose. Gunnell nevertheless treats the *ljóðaháttir* stanzas in *Fáfnismál* as a separate poem, excluding those in *Reginismál*, on grounds which, although carefully argued, seem slight; but in any case, the editor has probably excluded some stanzas describing action. These may all have been in *fornyrðislag*, but this cannot be assumed without circular argument. This text is therefore so problematic that it seems unsafe to analyse it as a possibly dramatic piece.

In the other three poems, Gunnell seems to me to exaggerate the difficulties for a solo performer, though real problems may remain at *Lokasenna* stt. 37 (where there must be a new speaker, but it is hard to see why it should be Týr) and 55 (where we might expect Sif to continue), and at *Skírnismál* 10, where Skírnir suddenly addresses the horse which Freyr has just given him. Gunnell concludes that solo performers of these poems would need a good array of acting techniques, and this is clearly true; but his further conclusion that they are elementary plays, involving more than one performer and employing movement, gesture and probably costume and masks, need not follow. They might have been performed in that way; but (except for *Hárbarðsljóð* and possibly *Lokasenna*) solo performance does not seem particularly unlikely. The same texts might have been performed by one performer or by more than one, depending on the available resources; and a

solo performance might fall well within an acceptable definition of drama if it included variations of voice and gesture.

In Chapter IV, Gunnell shows that the system of marginal speaker notation used for these poems in the Codex Regius is not found in other early dialogues in Old Norse, the only apparent exceptions, in a manuscript of *Konungs Skuggsjá* (see fig. 76), being no more than instructions from the scribe to the rubricator. Looking further afield, marginal speaker notation is noted as unusual in manuscripts of Terence's comedies—though Gunnell is forced to rely on a very old edition, and several northern European manuscripts do make speaker notations project into the left margin when a speech begins at the beginning of a verse line (e.g. Vatican 3868, s.ix, from Corbey; Oxford Bodley Auct. F. 2. 13, s.xii, probably from St Albans).

Marginal speaker notation is used in some manuscripts of secular dramatic texts and vernacular religious plays of the eleventh to fourteenth centuries from England and northern France (e.g. *Dame Sirith, Gilote et Johane, Babio, Le Mystère d'Adam*). Icelanders and Norwegians who studied in England or France would have had access to this tradition (though not always: a twelfth-century visitor to Fountains (p. 324) would encounter no drama if the monks there heeded their vicar-general, Ailred of Rievaulx—see K. Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church* (1933), I 548). Gunnell concludes that marginal speaker notation probably implies that the scribes of the Codex Regius and AM 748 I a thought of these poems as akin to the secular drama of other parts of northern Europe.

The illustrated Terence manuscripts, however, do not abbreviate speaker names to single letters, and those post-Terentian plays which do so may have derived the practice from gospel readings in altar missals, where the beginnings of speeches are often marked with interlinear initials. These are not indications of more than one 'actor' taking part, but signals to the single reader of where and how he should vary the pace or pitch of his delivery (Karl Young, *PMLA* 1910, especially 311–32). It is therefore not certain that the scribes of texts like *Babio* and *Dame Sirith* who abbreviated marginal speaker notations envisaged those texts as necessarily being performed by more than one actor—and the same must therefore apply to eddic scribes who derived this scribal practice from England and France. Both must, however, have envisaged performance of some kind, and to this extent, Gunnell's argument is fully vindicated.

Chapter V includes a good survey of the performance elements in *seiðr* (ritual magic), *senna/mannjafnaðr* (abuse- and boasting-contests) and *mansöngsvísur* (the exchange of erotic verses between a man and a woman in the course of a dance), and assessments of the evidence for *víxlkveðandi* (alternate speaking of verse for magic purposes) and stories in which malicious spirits *ljóða á* (lay a metrical curse which can only be averted by a witty impromptu response of the same metrical form and length). Examples of this can also be found from Scotland, Norway, Sweden and Finland; see F. J. Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882–98), I 20–22.

Except for the ritual songs in *seiðr*, these are all *impromptu* compositions, and so essentially different from the eddic dialogue poems, but they might still suggest the circumstances of their original performance. The convention of the *senna* or

mannjafnaðr was probably the assumed context of *Hárbarðsljóð* (and possibly *Lokasenna*). *Seiðr* and *mansöngsvísur* probably had less influence because both were illegal (though the allusions to *seiðr* in *Völuspá* may have lent a frisson of evil and mystery to the persona of its solo performer). Stories of evil spirits who *ljóða á* could be related to deadly wisdom- or riddle- contests like *Vaffrúðnismál*, *Alvíssmál* and *Gátur Gestumblinda*, which also have ballad parallels elsewhere (e. g. the English *Inter Diabolus et Virgo* in MS Bodley, Rawlinson D 328, c. 1450, see Child V, 283); but here there can have been no actual social context (since the agents who *ljóða á* are not human), and these folktales may present a descendant of the eddic genre rather than a social context for it.

Gunnell's conclusion suggests that *all* the eddic poems in *ljóðaháttur*, including monologues like *Grímnismál*, may have been performed in a dramatic way. This seems quite likely, but many poems in *fornyrðislag* are no less dramatic. *Helreið Brynhildar* and *Hyndluljóð* consist of dialogue between identified fictional characters; *Guðrúnarkviða II* is a monologue for a performer 'impersonating' Guðrún, within which speeches for four characters are recalled; *Baldrs draumar* is predominantly dialogue, with a brief narrative introduction—but this resembles some of the vernacular 'dramatic' works from which Gunnell derives the system of marginal speaker notation (e. g. *Dame Sirith*). When we turn to monologues, *Völuspá* has a well-defined fictive speaker, situation and addressee, and a performance of it could be enhanced with appropriate gesture and costume drawn from the traditions of *seiðr*; it seems no less dramatic than the poems which Gunnell regards as drama.

Gunnell establishes some parts of his argument beyond much doubt, and others with fair probability, but the links between these sections do not for this reviewer always carry conviction. Nonetheless, this is a valuable book, which argues its case with energy and presents a wide range of evidence in interesting and useful ways. Most eddic scholars have been too inclined to see these poems as texts to be pored over in the study, and this book does a valuable service in redirecting attention to them as publicly performed poems. It does not finally settle the question of *how* they were first performed, but it re-opens it in new and interesting ways, and this should lead to more progress in the future.

JOHN MCKINNELL

MAXIMS IN OLD ENGLISH POETRY. By PAUL CAVILL. *D. S. Brewer*. Cambridge, 1999. x + 205 pp.

This book begins with criticisms of scholarly work to date on gnomic literature in Old English. 'Traditional literary techniques' (p. 1) have failed as tools for its analysis, and broader anthropological approaches, as exemplified by Morton Bloomfield's and Charles Dunn's *The Role of the Poet in Early Societies*, are inclined to ignore 'cultural specificities' (p. 2). The present work attempts to estimate 'the value of maxims to Anglo-Saxon society' (p. 3); it will ask 'why as well as how maxims are used' (p. 4).

Chapter I distinguishes the maxim, as a 'sententious generalization' (p. 9), from the gnome, which is a 'linkage of a thing and a characteristic', e. g. *winter byð*

cealdost, 'winter is coldest' (p. 11). Some gnomes are related to the exercise of specific roles in society (trade, profession, etc.). In verse, maxims often open or close either speeches or (as in the case of *The Wanderer*) whole texts. They categorise people and things, or (in narrative) reveal characters' motives, or mark 'emphatic and climactic junctures in the story' (p. 24).

Chapter 2 touches very lightly on the use of maxims in other early Germanic literature. Old Norse is represented only by the Eddaic poem *Hamðismál* and the prose *Hrafnkels saga*. Parallels with Old English reside mainly in the uses to which maxims are put, not in phraseology, and Cavill doubts if there are sufficient verbal parallels among the various corpora to support the idea of 'an Old Germanic gnomic tradition' (p. 25).

Chapter 3 reverts to problems of definition. A maxim or gnome (the distinction drawn between the two in Chapter 1 is not particularly regarded in the remainder of the book) has six defining features: it is (1) a sententious generalisation, which (2) links a thing with a defining characteristic in (3) a complete sentence with (4) the main verb in the present tense and (5) a subject which is not a specific person. The sentence must also (6) contain no deictic references to specify the situation of utterance (pp. 50–51). Cavill's application of Anita Riedinger's concept of the formulaic 'set' (p. 54) to Old English maxims leads to the conclusion that 'some maxims were of relatively fixed form and had closely definable functions' (p. 59).

Chapter 4 is chiefly taken up with the distinction between the maxim and the proverb. Proverbs are essentially metaphorical ('There's many a good tune played on an old fiddle' is, one imagines, rarely, if ever, applied to violins). With help from Alan Dundes's categorisations, Cavill defines proverbs as 'pre-formed sayings' (p. 80) that 'may be either literal or metaphorical or both, mapping one set of descriptive categories onto another in a paradigmatic relationship' (p. 74), though this 'paradigmatic transferability', which allows them to be used metaphorically, is not well attested in Old English. Maxims are not usually pre-formed but variable and flexible combinations of formulas; nor are they metaphorical.

Chapter 5 is concerned with the functions, contexts and sources of maxims that feature the words *wa*, *wel*, *eadig*, *earn*, *dol* and other headwords (e.g. *Beowulf* 183–88). Cavill concludes that these sets are not based on Latin models (p. 98).

Chapter 6 begins with the traditional view of the function of maxims: they are used to 'invoke a sense of order in a context where chaos threatens' (p. 107). Adapting Peter Seitel's model of proverb performance, Cavill suggests that maxims, like proverbs, 'exert control by asserting an ideal of the community against the pressures of the anxiety-creating situation' (p. 109). A crucial idea here is that maxims such as Byrhtwold's famous exhortation to the dwindling English forces in *The Battle of Maldon* 312–13 are placed in 'an analogical context of poetic performance which exists by virtue of the fact that the maxims occur in a literary work' (p. 111); the 'imaginary fictive world of the poem' is linked to the world of the audience by the maxim, so that 'by imaginatively . . . apprehending the terms of the maxim as relevant to themselves in an analogous real situation, the audience reaffirm the truth of those terms and reaffirm their social norms' (p. 112). Thus

maxims, when used in narrative at least, are more like proverbs than they might appear at first sight. The remainder of the chapter illustrates the relevance of this theory to five maxims in *The Battle of Maldon*. Two of these, 312–13 and 315b–16, both spoken by Byrhtwold, contain deictic terms (313 *ure*, ‘our’, 316 *nu*, ‘now’, and *his*, ‘this’, governing *wigplegan*, ‘battle-play’), which Cavill experimentally removes to reveal these passages as ‘applied maxims’—an editorial manoeuvre that presumably implies that they are pre-formed (and so proverbial?) in the manner described in Chapter 4.

Chapter 7 rebuts arguments for the pagan origins of various Old English maxims. Biblical source-identifications are summarised and supplemented, and the case for continuity with pagan maxims is shown to be weak.

Chapter 8 gives a broad survey of critical estimates of the Old English maxims as literature and views as to their general purpose. The modern reader expects ‘coherence’ and ‘beauty’ in literature and finds neither in the maxim poems (p. 158); but unity is to be found in the repetitive style and in certain thematic preoccupations—moral and ethical issues, the wonders of the natural world, etc. (p. 159). They also show signs of being ‘products of what Walter J. Ong calls “orally based thought and expression”’ (p. 168), encapsulate ‘an Anglo-Saxon understanding of reality’, and constitute ‘a framework for understanding’. Each maxim is ‘part of a much larger entity, the social stock of knowledge’ (p. 183).

This is a much richer book, in terms of variety of approaches and range of reference, than I have room to convey here. Cavill has contributed generously to knowledge of a still rarely-visited corner of the Old English field. The questions his work raised in the mind of this reviewer were mainly about the earlier history and origins of maxims and related genres. What is implied by the rarity of metaphorically applied proverbs in Old English (Chapter 4)? Did the Anglo-Saxons tend to avoid figurative language? If, as Cavill shows convincingly, the Old English maxims owe much more to Biblical influences than they do to paganism (Chapter 7), how are we to interpret their ‘orality’ (Chapter 8) and the fact that (as Cavill puts it) ‘there was nothing so useful as a general maxim’ to the Old Germanic races generally (Chapter 2, p. 40)? A much fuller comparison than Cavill attempts here of the Old English maxims corpus with the other Germanic corpora (especially the Old Norse) could not fail to produce interesting results.

This is a very well-written book (it contains no jargon), clearly printed, and carefully edited. The only errors I noticed were p. 24, line 23: ‘chpater’ for ‘chapter’; pp. 83–84, note 6 (p. 84): ‘Compostion’ for ‘Composition’; and p. 124, line 5: ‘259–59’ for ‘258–59’.

PETER ORTON

SELECTED PAPERS. By BJARNE FIDJESTØL. Edited by ODD EINAR HAUGEN and ELSE MUNDAL. Translated by PETER FOOTE. *The Viking Collection 9. Odense University Press*. Odense, 1997. 406 pp.

Bjarne Fidjestøl, Professor of Nordic Philology at the University of Bergen, died suddenly in 1994. His pre-eminence as a student of Old Norse poetry was firmly established by his challenging and indispensable treatment of skaldic praise-poetry,

Det norrøne fyrstediktet (1982), as well as by his sensitive and occasionally provocative monograph on *Sólarljóð* (*Sólarljóð: Tyding og tolkingsgrunnlag*, 1979); and he was working on a third book, on the dating of Eddic poetry, at the time of his death. Bjarne was also the author of some hundred articles and reviews concerning matters of linguistic, literary and historical interest, as well as translations from Old Icelandic, English (Oliver Roland's *The Dawn of African History*, 1965) and Russian (including the third volume of *War and Peace*, 1967).

Bjarne's colleagues, Odd Einar Haugen and Else Mundal, have assembled this collection of seventeen of his essays, dating from throughout his career and reflecting the breadth of his scholarly interests. The essays are divided into five groups, although there are inevitable overlaps between them. By far the longest section, the first (pp. 16–150), is devoted to five papers reflecting Bjarne's contribution to skaldic studies. The essays range from the ambitious and highly influential 'The kenning system. An attempt at a linguistic analysis' (1974, pp. 16–67), in which Fidjestøl employs the tools of structuralist analysis in an attempt to elucidate the distinction between linguistic and stylistic study, through critical studies of the work and backgrounds of individual skalds (Þjóðólfr of Kvin and Arnórr Þórðarson) to a fascinating and wide-ranging discussion of the financial affairs of court skalds and their patrons in '“Have you heard a poem worth more?” A note on the economic background of early skaldic praise-poetry' (1984, pp. 117–32), where the social realities lying behind the stock saga scene of the poet reciting an encomium for his lord and receiving a reward for it are explored. The final essay in this section, 'Skaldic poetry and the conversion' (first published in 1987), again appeals to semiological principles, coupled with sensitive readings of *Hákonarmál*, *Eiríksmál* and *Haraldskvæði*, to present a tentative argument in favour of Haraldr hárfagri's function in preparing the ground for the conversion of Norway. Haraldr's 'not heathen' status and his interest in political, as opposed to religious, power is contrasted with the heathenism of the Hlaðajarlar, which is revealed in the surviving skaldic encomia dedicated to them. Bjarne's findings are, of course, rather more tentatively expressed than I have suggested here, and the essay, indeed, bears testimony to one of the hallmarks of his scholarship, a sensible awareness of the possible limitations of his methodology.

This willingness to test the potentialities of literary theory, always aware of its possible inadequacy, is further evinced by the first essay in the second group ('Saga studies', pp. 151–227), 'Algirdas Julien Greimas and Hrafnkell Freysgoði. Semiological models applied to an Icelandic saga' (1977, pp. 151–67). Although the discussion does feel somewhat dated—even, perhaps, inconsequential—now, Fidjestøl's explanation of Greimas's 'actant' and 'logical rectangle' models is clear and precise, and his discussion of *Hrafnkatla* does much to highlight the shortcomings of less cogent criticism of this saga. Bjarne's justification of his approach on page 152, which warns against the use of technical terms to 'foster an illusion of mathematical precision' and reminds the critic that he is 'not absolved from personal engagement with the text', sounds a salutary note which many contemporary scholars would do well to heed. Elsewhere in this section, Bjarne's attention turns to Christian matters once more. In 'The legend of Þórir hundr' (1987, pp. 168–83), he takes as his starting-point the research of a Swedish art-

historian, Torkel Eriksson, concerning the iconographic parallels between representations of the passions of Christ and St Óláfr. In an exhilarating and closely-observed trawl of the various literary accounts of Óláfr's death, Fidjestøl traces a series of parallels between the Roman soldier Longinus—whose blindness was cured after Christ's blood ran down the spear Longinus used to pierce his side—and Þórir hundr, one of the slayers of King Óláfr. In 'European and native tradition in *Óláfs saga helga*' (1990, pp. 184–200), Bjarne puts an impressive breadth of learning to excellent use in demonstrating Snorri's manipulation of the European hagiographical and *rex justus* traditions in terms of the psychological realism characteristic of the sagas, and concludes that his ability to create 'a poly-phonic work of surpassing literary quality' should be attributed not simply to Snorri's own gifts as a humanist and writer, but to the orally-fostered native tradition in which he worked.

In the third section of the book (pp. 228–302), the editors have collected four essays concerning the relationship between skaldic poetry and Old Norse prose literature. 'Icelandic sagas and poems on princes. Literature and society in archaic West Norse culture' (1990, pp. 228–54) explores the social functions of skaldic panegyric and the *Íslendingasögur* within the contexts of the 'thassalocracies' (*sic*) of the Viking world and the 'pioneer society' of saga-age Iceland. As a general introduction to both genres, this paper should be required undergraduate reading. In 'Skaldic stanzas in saga-prose. Observations on the relationship between prose and verse in Snorri's *Heimskringla*' (1993, pp. 255–76), Bjarne considers the influence of poetry in shaping saga narratives. He goes beyond asserting that scribes and, by implication, writers were able to rely on their audience's recollection of entire skaldic poems when prompted by opening lines or stanzas, suggesting, on the basis of echoes of *Bjarkamál* in various saga accounts of the battle of Stiklestad, that 'a text which is not quoted was capable of influencing the saga-prose' (p. 258). This is substantiated by close readings of several scenes in *Heimskringla*, highlighting the distinction between Snorri's use of skaldic verse as sources for reportage and as direct speech in 'scenes'. 'The tale of Haraldr harðráði and Þorgils the fisherman' (1971, pp. 277–93) is the earliest article in the collection. Fidjestøl considers the two extant versions of the *þáttr* of Haraldr and Þorgils, preserved, on the one hand, in *Codex Frisianus* and, on the other, in *Morkinskinna*, *Flateyjarbók*, *Hulda* and *Hrokkinskinna*. In an exhaustive and impressive analysis of the transmission of the two versions, and particularly of the skaldic stanzas that they share in part, he demonstrates that the *þáttr* 'offers a comparatively clear example of the way in which a piece of prose built round a number of skaldic strophes has developed in oral tradition' (p. 277). The last paper in this section, '"See what happens, compose on it later." A footnote to a piece of historical criticism found in a prologue' (1980, pp. 294–302), concerns the authorship of a controversial passage in the *Flateyjarbók* version of the 'Great' Saga of St Óláfr, in which there are some important comments on the value of skaldic poetry as source-material for early Norse historians. Bjarne's clear-sighted textual analysis supports the conclusion that the passage post-dates Snorri's *Óláfs saga* and, in all likelihood, represents 'a post-classical stage' of Norse historical criticism.

The fourth section of the book is devoted to one of Bjarne's last published works, his contribution to a general history of Norwegian literature, 'Norse-Icelandic composition in the oral period' (1994, pp. 303–32). Once again, this essay, which contains admirably clear accounts of both eddic and skaldic metrics and the social context of Old Norse poetry, should be required undergraduate reading.

One of Bjarne Fidjestøl's rarest and most important gifts was his ability to communicate his enthusiasm for, and expertise in, Old Norse society and literature to non-specialist audiences. In him, the discipline has lost a remarkable ambassador. Although all of the essays in the book—notably that on 'Óláfr Tryggvason the missionary' (1993, pp. 201–27)—reveal this talent, the editors have chosen to showcase it by devoting the final section to three essays 'in lighter vein'. '“Out they will look, the lovely ladies.” Views of women in Norse literature' (1993, pp. 333–42) and 'Snorri Sturluson—European humanist and rhetorician' (1988, pp. 343–50) originated as periodical and newspaper articles, while 'Romantic reading at the court of Hákon Hákonarson' (pp. 351–65) is the published version of a radio talk Bjarne gave in his, and Hákon's, home town in 1989.

Odd Einar Haugen and Else Mundal deserve congratulation for this volume, which is a fitting tribute to the talent and diversity of a remarkable scholar. Peter Foote's translations are readable and fluent, and will do much to further the editors' aim of making this important and influential work accessible to the 'many people with interests in Old Norse-Icelandic studies, and some actively engaged in the field, who are not equally at ease when faced with a work in a modern Scandinavian language'. Given that this is the target readership, however, I do have a couple of criticisms regarding editorial policy. There are several places where, although the essay as a whole has been translated, extensive quotations from secondary sources have been left in the original languages, despite the fact that primary quotations are always rendered into English. Elsewhere, although Bjarne Fidjestøl's wry use of mainstream Norwegian cultural references to illuminate the past is one of the most delightful aspects of his pedagogical technique, these references are not always picked up by the non-Norwegian reader. The present reviewer would have welcomed brief footnotes, for example, about Petter Dass's consigning Þórir hundr to Hell (p. 168) and the contribution of Hans Nielsen Hauge to Norwegian Christianity (p. 201).

KATRINA ATTWOOD

THE COMPLETE SAGAS OF ICELANDERS INCLUDING 49 TALES. General editor, VIÐAR HREINSSON. Editorial team, ROBERT COOK, TERRY GUNNELL, KENEVA KUNZ, BERNARD SCUDDER. Introduction by ROBERT KELLOGG. 5 vols. *Leifur Eiríksson Publishing*. Reykjavík 1997. iv + 402; 466; 472; 448 pp.

One can only wonder at the organisation of this mighty project, translation of 40 sagas and 49 þættir; its five stout volumes seem to have crystallised in no time out of the electric air of e-mail communications between Viðar Hreinsson, sitting in his Icelandic command centre, and 30 native English-speaking saga scholars from all

over the globe and almost another 30 consultants (= *CSI*). The corpus translated is that of the most recent comprehensive edition for Icelandic readers, *Íslendinga sögur og þættir* published by Svart á hvítu in two (1985–86) or three (1987) volumes (= *ÍS*). Yet fewer than half the saga translations (19) are actually based on *ÍS*, while 16 are based on *Íslenzk fornrit* (= *ÍF*) and 5 on separate editions, and the variation of sources complicates working back and forth between the originals and the translations.

The translations strike me as generally excellent, and the editorial team and readers have done a fine job of harmonising styles. The resulting language is something of a mid-Atlantic compromise, suppressing most local peculiarities, but often British-tinged. The conventions adopted for place-names, personal names, and spelling inspired lively debates, and the results are compromises. I regret that a little more in the way of an Icelandic (even Old Icelandic) *Schriftbild* was not sought. This effort to systematise the language means that recurrent phrases are usually translated uniformly; but the editors provide two good statements of the limits of such standardisation (I xvii; xix). My reading impressed me principally with their success at striking a balance between individual formulations by the translators and a standardisation that really does reflect the uniformities of saga language. Another result of the effort at consistency is a useful glossary of repeated 'key terms and concepts'. The rest of the reference section in vol. V collects other information useful for the understanding of many of the texts: chronological lists of kings; some pages illustrating ships; the typical layout of a farm; diagrams of political and social structure; tables of place-name elements and time measurements; maps of the Icelandic action. A conspicuous omission is genealogy: the reader of *CSI* faces an ocean of names with no assistance of this kind.

The editors' single hardest task must have been to maintain consistency, and on the whole they succeeded. Typographical errors are relatively few, and the volumes are beautifully produced. Major aspects of the poetry are well rehearsed in the reference section and in Robert Kellogg's general Introduction; kennings are mostly retained and glossed in a uniform way, but the translators had 'a relatively free hand' in attempting 'to create an independent English-language poem', especially through rhythm and alliteration (I xix–xx). Their success varies, but to have this huge skaldic corpus in a uniform format is an unmixed blessing. *CSI* can teach much up-to-date literary history and criticism, first through Kellogg's fine essay, then through the 40 saga headnotes, the preface and apparatus. I found only a few points one might be inclined to quibble over. A unique feature of this collection is its analysis of the 89 texts into 14 subgenres determined by a combination of factors. The discussion explaining this arrangement (I xx–xxiv) and the schema itself are quite interesting; but despite the helpful repetition of a schematic overview at the beginning of each volume and traditional tables of contents at the end, this order is not the most *serviceable* possible. Yet the thematic arrangement of *CSI* may make for stimulating teaching and prove suggestive to many readers. More advanced users will wish it had been complemented by a simple alphabetical finding-list based on standard Icelandic titles.

CSI will be a valuable tool for neighbouring disciplines, but it should also prove ideal for literary students at all levels and for non-Icelandic saga scholars engaged

in broad approaches (e. g., thematic). Reading *CSI* gives an impressive sense of closely woven intertextuality within a single saga world—an impression supported by the extensive index of characters who appear in two or more stories. Yet reading through, one is also struck by the uniqueness of each text. The collection necessarily brings late and less classical sagas to greater prominence, so that it may be more difficult in future confidently to say what ‘the’ family saga actually is. Its pedagogical effectiveness is compromised by the price, which dictates that the text be consulted in a library; and the apparatus in vol. V restricts full usage to one student at a time. One might dream of a future paperback reprinting with, in a separate volume, reference section, full index of persons and places (*IS* also lacks an index), and perhaps a thematic index.

In view of the new tools available through the internet, the new electronic saga texts (the 40 sagas of *IS*) and concordance on CD-ROM, the efficient texts offered by *IS*, and now this handsome corpus of family sagas in English, the prospects for research and teaching in the saga literature have never been better. *CSI* opens, however, with a series of brief elegant tributes which emphasise rather than the family sagas, through this remarkable project, will speak clearly to the world at large of the breadth and depth of Icelandic humane letters—to which a reviewer humbled by the scope and quality of the enterprise can only add amen.

JOSEPH HARRIS

THE SAGA OF KING HROLF KRAKI. Translated with an introduction by JESSE L. BYOCK. *Penguin Books*. Harmondsworth, 1998. xxxvii + 99 pp.

There are now some half-dozen volumes in the Penguin Classics series that present Icelandic sagas in English translation with an introduction and apparatus. Most of the others are *Íslendingasögur*, but *Hrólfs saga kraka* is one of the *fornaldarsögur*, the sagas of ancient times. The connection of some of its major characters and stories with those of the English *Beowulf* has made it the most widely known of the genre, and its blending of traditional legendary history and folktale, its powerful exposition of heroic conduct and the excellence of its storytelling have made it highly esteemed. The new volume will not lack readers.

The Introduction begins by placing the saga in its Icelandic context, explaining the structure of the saga (in five parts instead of the usual six, as Professor Byock regards the Uppsala ride and the battle at Hleiðargarðr as one part rather than two), and briefly saying something about motivation and magic (on the latter the detailed Endnotes are most useful). It continues with brief sections on ‘The Sagas of Ancient Times and Heroic Lays’; ‘The Legendary Past’; ‘Archaeology and the Legendary Hleidargard’ (a welcome account of the results of 1986–88 excavations, even though the oldest of the halls discovered appears just a little too young to be identified with the Heorot of *Beowulf* or the Hleiðargarðr of *Hrólfs saga*); the relation of the saga and *Beowulf*; ‘The Bear Warriors’; ‘Berserkers’; ‘Myth in the saga’; and ‘Christian Influence’. It amounts to about twenty-three small pages of text, plus illustrations, which is not much for such an abundance of matter, and one

could wish some of the sections had been longer. There is unfortunately no guide to further reading. After the translation come seven pages of endnotes, some genealogical tables and a detailed glossary of proper names.

The goal throughout the translation 'has been to produce an accurate, readable translation'. Inevitably some closeness to the text has been lost for the gain of readability. In style, for instance, the dominant feature of the syntax of the original (a series of clauses linked by *og* or *en*) is much reduced. This may have to be accepted for the sake of readability, but it is the case that those subordinate clauses which do occur in the original are generally the latter part of a sentence and when in the translation, as often happens, the first of two or more parallel clauses has been made subordinate to what follows it, this may jar for those familiar with the style of the original. An illustration may be given from p. 1 of the translation. The text reads:

Nu er ad seigia fráá þui ad Frodi kongur situr j rijki sijnu og ofundar hann fastliga brödur sinn Haldan kong ad hann skyllði stjira einn Danmørk, en þotti sinn hluti ecki so gödur ordid hafa, og þui safnar hann samann mug og margmenni og helldur til Danmerkur og kiemur þar áá nättar þeli, brennir þar allt og brælir. (Ed. Arnam. 2:5–11)

This is one sentence, though the textual variants in the edition used by the translator show that there would be good manuscript support for beginning a new sentence with *þui* and omitting the *og* before it. The translation, however, does not do that, but nonetheless makes four sentences out of the passage, one of which begins with a subordinate clause and another (made prominent by paragraphing) begins with a participial phrase:

Now it is told that King Frodi stayed home in his kingdom. He bitterly envied his brother, King Halfdan, because Halfdan alone ruled Denmark. As King Frodi felt that he had not fared as well, he assembled a large following of armed men and set out for Denmark.

Arriving in the dead of night, Frodi burned and destroyed everything. (p. 1)

The choice of sometimes doing it this way can be defended of course, and even perhaps the frequency of it in the present translation, but it must also be said that at times main clauses that are statements of some importance to the saga lose impact in being reduced in status. Thus at the beginning of a passage of twelve lines extolling King Hrólfr for his achievements (Ed. Arnam. 50:7–18), the statements that he went raiding (a good thing in a leader of men) and that he assembled a large force, are of less significance in the translation:

Because King Hrolf was out raiding, his encounter with King Adils was delayed. With the large force he had assembled, Hrolf *etc.* (p. 33)

And the reduction has surely gone too far in the following:

Skilur hann nu ad ey mune þurfa ad dyliast vid leingur, ad öfridur sie fyrir hõndum. Hann leitar til hallarinnar og þangad sem *etc.* (Ed. Arnam. 113:15–18)

Realizing that battle was at hand, he made his way to the hall where *etc.* (p. 72).

More examples could be cited, but one must suffice:

og er þetta höfud skömm þuilykur kappe sem þu ert, ad kongurinn skule leggja sig j haska fyrir oss, *etc.* (Ed. Arnam. 118:8–10)

The clause *ad – oss* explains *þetta*, but it has been detached from its antecedent and made to introduce the next sentence, with two undesirable consequences, that *þetta* acquires a new explanation in additional words and that another sentence beginning with a subordinate clause is created:

There is dishonour in this conduct for such a champion as you. While the king endangers his life for us, *etc.* (p. 75)

(In the following main clause, *so* has in consequence to be omitted, but there is no good reason for omitting *mikla* in *þjnu mikla lofe*.)

Omission of single words and small phrases is not uncommon: *mikil þoka og hulda* (4:12–13), ‘mist and secrecy’ (p. 2); *kallinn Viffill* (4:19), ‘Vifil’ (p. 3); *miklar fylgiur og máttugar* (4:21), ‘powerful spirits’ (p. 3); *Fer kongur nu heim vid so buid* (7:6–7), ‘Then he sailed home’ (p. 4); *helldur öðælir* (7:19), ‘troublesome’ (p. 5); and so on. Most serious is the omission, surely accidental, of *Hann hefur mikid lid* (42:18, p. 29). There are also additions, presumably to enhance the readability of the translation, though one may question how necessary they are, and think that readers of the translation could have made the connection, e. g. *Kall suarar, þier eigid þad nu vndir ydur. Hafi þier þái helldur erindi ätt i eyrna* (7:3–4), ‘“That is now within your power,” replied the freeman. “Should you so decide, then you will have accomplished something on the island”’ (p. 4). But no plea of readability can be allowed for some of the departures from the text, e. g. *og finnast þeir eý* (4:4), ‘They (= the seeresses and soothsayers) found nothing’ (p. 2), but *þeir* refers to the boys, they were not found.

In conclusion, the following are some passages deserving comment as they affect the reader’s perception of details of the story:

Eggia skyldi þrisuar sinnum äi allre æfe sinni, og eij mátti bregda annad skeyd (68:16–18), ‘Only three times in its owner’s life could the weapon be urged to action. Thereafter it could never be drawn again by the same person’ (p. 44). But the text means that the limit of three urgings applies to the life of the weapon, and there would be occasions when it could not be drawn and trying to force it would be to no avail. In the context of this saga no one but Bøðvarr can be imagined to have owned and used the sword.

Elgfrödi stendur vpp, og bregdur skalminni, og skiellir síjdann vpp ad heptinu (69:9–11), ‘Elk-Frodi stood up. Then drawing his short sword, he struck downward, burying the weapon up to the hilt’ (p. 45). It is more likely that he drew the sword, either completely or partly, and then slammed it all the way back into its sheath.

Sest Suipdagur jnst, þái Hiallti (94:13), ‘Svipdag sat closest to the wall, next to Hjalti’ (p. 60). But *jnst* means farthest from the door and nearest to the centre of one of the long walls of the hall. Hjalti went second and sat next to him.

In the fighting at Uppsala, Hrólfir’s hawk came flying from the stronghold and settled on his shoulder *so látandi sem hann eigi micklum sigri ad hrosa* (102:3–4),

'and from there, filled with pride, it acted as though assisting in a glorious victory' (p. 65). The hawk was behaving as though it already had a particular victory of its own to boast of, which indeed it had, namely the killing of all Aðils's hawks.

DESMOND SLAY

THE ICELANDIC LEGEND OF SAINT DOROTHY. Edited by KIRSTEN WOLF. *Studies and Texts* 130. Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies. Toronto 1997. vii + 132 pp.

This challenging and fascinating study represents the first edition of the *Dorotheu saga* since Unger's *Heilagra manna sögur* of 1877. The edition itself (pp. 87–103) comprises a diplomatic transcript of the unique manuscript, AM 429 12mo, fols. 49r–57r, with a facing-page Latin text, *De sancta Dorothea*, reprinted from the collection of 'legendae superadditae' appended to Graesse's *Legenda aurea* edition of 1890 (*BHL* 2324). Wolf's text is exemplary: it is careful to a fault, with brief but thorough documentation of the legend's manuscript preservation, and is at once more reliable and more user-friendly than Unger's version.

Perhaps more interesting than the Icelandic text itself, however, is Wolf's contextual introduction, a thorough analysis of the history and development of Dorothy's *vita*, from the earliest mention of her death in the fifth-century *Martyrologium Hieronymianum* to modern artistic and dramatic adaptations. Section 1.0 (pp. 1–19) considers the surviving Latin versions, paying particular attention to their complex relationship with the evolving *Legenda aurea* text, to which Dorothy's life seems to have been added during the later Middle Ages. Detailed comparisons with the lives of other virgin saints are used to demonstrate the often formulaic structure of Dorothy's legend. Two principal Latin versions of the legend are postulated (see p. 19), the longer and earlier text (*BHL* 2323) and a later, abridged version (*BHL* 2324). Wolf's painstaking attention to detail is much in evidence here, as throughout the book, and her footnotes, in particular, are a real joy, gently leading the reader into the mysteries of medieval theology and modern gender studies with, for example, an explanation of the Aristotelian origins of patristic theories of female corporeality (note 20, p. 11) and a spirited defence of the lives of virgin saints against accusations of pornography (note 27, pp. 16–17). Having established the Latin origins of the legend, Wolf turns her attention to vernacular versions in German, French and English. Section 1.1 (pp. 19–45) is an exhaustive catalogue of verse and prose accounts, interspersed with careful discussions of the inter-relationships between the texts and brief accounts of their literary qualities. Particular attention is paid to the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century versions in German and Middle English verse. Wolf's discussion indicates the divergences these texts share from their apparent source, the *Legenda aurea* version (*BHL* 2324), and highlights their similarities to the *BHL* 2325d recension, a representative text of which (from the mid fifteenth-century Bologna, Bibliotheca Universitaria Codex 2800) is edited in the appendix (pp. 104–07).

In section 2 (pp. 47–63), Wolf assembles the evidence for devotion to Saint Dorothy in Scandinavia, and advances the thesis that the cult most probably had

its origins in Dorothy's popular veneration in Germany. She supports her argument with an account of the historical and literary evidence for the cult, including a *knittel* mystery play *Dorothea Komodie*, translated in 1531 from a German Latin source by 'Christiernus Johannis', principal of Vor Frue Skole, Odense, probably for performance by his pupils (pp. 53–55), and the Danish ballad *Den hellige Dorothea*, which also appears to be translated from a German original (pp. 55–56). By contrast with the Danish and Swedish material, evidence for Dorothy's veneration in Iceland (discussed on pp. 58–63) is scanty and almost exclusively literary. In addition to the prose legend itself, three poetic versions are recorded. Wolf gives a full summary of the fourteenth- or fifteenth-century *Dorotheudiktur*, which is preserved alongside the prose legend in AM 429 12mo, and briefly discusses the relationship between two seventeenth-century *Dorotheukvæði*, loosely based on *Den hellige Dorothea*.

The final part of the introduction (pp. 64–86) is devoted to *Dorotheu saga* itself. The sole manuscript witness, the fifteenth-century anthology AM 429 12mo, is discussed at length, and Wolf speculates, on the basis of its contents, which relate exclusively to female saints, and of evidence of past ownership, that it may have been written for the Benedictine convent at Kirkjubær in Síða (pp. 64–65; see also pp. 59–60). There follows a detailed description of the palaeography and orthography of the legend (pp. 66–74), though the usefulness of this is perhaps somewhat restricted, since the edition contains no facsimile text page; and an extremely self-assured analysis of the literary features of the translation (pp. 76–86). The sources of the saga are discussed in section 3.2 (pp. 74–76), where Wolf takes issue with the standard view, expressed by Unger and adopted by all subsequent scholars, that it is based on the *Legenda aurea* version of the legend. She demonstrates that *Dorotheu saga* shares divergences from this version with the German and Middle English poetic versions and with the Latin recension represented by the Bologna Codex (*BHL* 2325d), and postulates a now-lost common source.

Kirsten Wolf has done Saint Dorothy proud with this extremely detailed, self-consciously scholarly monograph, which does much to illuminate the nature of late medieval devotion in Scandinavia and the complex and fascinating interplay between hagiographical texts in the German language area. My only concern is that Wolf's erudition might create something of a barrier for non-specialist readers; in addition to the diplomatic transcripts in Icelandic and Latin, the book quotes extensively from texts in several historical dialects of German, French, English and Danish without normalisation or paraphrase. While this does not present problems for most readers of *Saga-Book*, I fear that Saint Dorothy and her saga might not find the wider academic readership they so clearly deserve.

KATRINA ATTWOOD

ORDBOG OVER DET NORRØNE PROSASPROG. A DICTIONARY OF OLD NORSE PROSE. 1: A–BAM. Edited by HELLE DEGNBOL, BENT CHR. JACOBSEN, EVA RODE, CHRISTOPHER SANDERS, ÞORBJÖRG HELGADÓTTIR. *The Arnarnagnaean Commission*. Copenhagen, 1995. 906 columns.

Accompanying volume: ONP 1: NØGLE//KEY. 122 pp.

This dictionary of Old Norse prose, published in 1995, is the first of eleven long-awaited volumes planned by the Arnarnagnaean Commission. A volume of indices was published in 1989. The next volume (BAN–DAV) will be published in December and available in the New Year (2001), so it will almost certainly be a generation or two before the dictionary in its complete form will have been tried and tested by scholars and students alike. A dictionary is in many ways similar to a car, in that it has to be used for some time and in all sorts of conditions before you can really tell just how reliable it is. However, even the hastiest of perusals reveals what a treasure the *ONP* is and what we have to look forward to in the coming years.

The booklet which accompanies volume 1 (*ONP 1: Nøgle//Key*) comprises the following sections in Danish and English:

- User's Guide
- Sigla: corrigenda & addenda
- Medieval Manuscripts: corrigenda
- Bibliography
- ONP 1: bibliography
- ONP 1: corrigenda
- Abbreviations & Symbols

The User's Guide is exhaustively detailed in its explanation of the editorial considerations and guidelines used by the compilers. The arrangement of the entries and their organisation is painstakingly presented over nineteen pages. All this information can be baffling at a first reading, but whilst it may be difficult to read as an introduction, it works very well as a reference tool used in conjunction with the dictionary, thanks to its detailed contents pages and the lists of abbreviations.

Entries in the dictionary have been normalised to represent the language of Norway and Iceland *c.* 1200–1250, although if there are two deviating forms the more conservative (usually Icelandic) is used. The order of the alphabet differs from some dictionaries with accented and unaccented vowels being treated as the same letter, as are **ḁ** and **ð**. Thus, *áfýsi* precedes *afþokka*, and *aðaltunglkváma* precedes *adamassteinn* in the dictionary. Another striking feature is the use of the graphemes **æ** and **ø** instead of **ǣ** and **œ** respectively. The compilers justify this deviation from normal practice by saying that it better reflects the spelling of the older manuscripts as well as being practically and pedagogically more sound. The treatment of **ḁ** and **ð** as the same letter in the alphabetical sequence, however, is potentially confusing. Although the two graphemes are frequently used interchangeably in manuscripts, they are kept as separate letters in most other dictionaries' normalised forms. These deviations from traditional practice may initially cause the beginner some difficulties. The sequence at the end of the alphabet is **þ, æ, ø/ó, ø**.

As the name of the dictionary clearly indicates, it covers the prose corpus of Old Norse. Words from runic inscriptions as well as poetry are not included. The corpus includes every type of saga: *islendingasögur*, *konungasögur*, *fornaldarsögur*, *byskupa- og samtíðarsögur*, *helgi- og postulasögur*. Scientific works, annals, theological treatises, law texts and charters are also used. Place-names and personal names are not included in the dictionary.

The dictionary's greatest strength lies not so much in a greatly expanded number of entries, but rather its fullness of description for each entry. Each entry is accompanied by grammatical information, definitions in Danish and English, supportive quotations (sometimes with their own translations), editorial comments, sigla and other references to glossaries and secondary literature. The dictionary will probably be of limited use to the absolute beginner, as the user must have a knowledge of Old Norse morphology and orthography, as well as the ability to recognise variants. The example below illustrates the format of the new dictionary and compares this to other dictionaries often used by students of Old Norse, viz. Cleasby–Vigfusson, Fritzner, Zoëga and Heggstad.

Degnbol *et al.*, 1 col. 185

á·góði *sb. m.* [-a]

1) *udbytte // gain, profit: sé ek ykkur engan ágóða, þótt þér reynið með yðr jafnbúnum Kjaln 42¹; Aldri gekk Lais svo á torg eðr kaupstaði, at eigi hefði hann helming ágóða. Varð hann nú svo auðigr ... Mág² 113¹⁴*

2) *alt af værdi fra strandet hval som ikke bliver vejjet (ll: ben, indvolde, tran, etc., cf. Lúðvík Kristjánsson 1986 33–34) // everything of value that is not weighed from a stranded whale (ll: bone, gut, oil, etc.): (Helgafellskirkja á) fiordvng j ollvm hualreka oc fiordvng j ollvm agoda. ad afteknv þuerste oc beinvm med halfvm fiordvngi DI III (*[1377–1378]>AM 263^x) 327²³; þriðivngv hvalreka ok halfr viðreki ok lanð halft. Ynder iðra felli þriði vngv hvalreka ok likt i agoda •MáldReyk⁴ 19¹⁹; fiordung j reka ollum bæde hualreka og vidreka. suo j renningum og agoda og flutningum a reykianese DI III (*[1367]>JS 143^x) 230²⁷; item: DI II (*[1327]>apogr^x) 620¹⁰; DI II (*[1327>Bps A II I^x) 633²⁹; DI II (*[1344]>Bps A II I^x) 785²¹; DI II (*[1344]>Bps A II I^x) 785²⁵*

Gloss.: CIV; Fr; LL; AJ; Fr4; NO; (BI)

Litt.: Lúðvík Kristjánsson 1986 33–34

Cleasby–Vigfusson, p. 40

á·góði, a. m. *gain, profit, benefit*, D. I. i. 476, Ísl. ii. 432 (freq.) **COMPD:** **ágóða-hlutr**, ar. m. *a profitable share*, Grág. ii. 359.

Fritzner, I 20

ágóði, *m.* Fordel, Udbytte af noget, = ávöxtr 4, góði 2. *Mag.* 113; *HE.* II, 120; *DI.* I, 476.

Zoëga, p. 32

á-góði *m.* gain, profit, benefit.

Heggstad, p. 9

á-góði *m.* bate, utvinning.

As well as offering much more background information than previous dictionaries, *ONP* often has revised definitions. For example, *askraki* is described as ‘pelsværk (uvist af hvilken art) // fur (of unknown type)’, whereas in other dictionaries ‘marten’ is usually suggested. Similarly, the editors did not hazard a definite definition of *bali* given as ‘?brink (ved havet) // ?(elevated sand-)bank (at the shore)’. The reader feels confident that definitions are reliable and supported by the evidence of the manuscripts. The editors’ reluctance to suggest (what can often be dubious) etymologies for the entries is also to be admired.

The *ONP* is an excellent subject for the old adage, that we should never judge a book by its cover. The poor volume has the misfortune of being covered in what looks like beige hessian. Yet despite its grim appearance this dictionary is set to become the standard reference work for Old Norse Studies. It will be of most use to academics and scholars, whilst those tackling Old Norse for the first time may prefer to use a more manageable (and cheaper) alternative. However, if you have the spare cash and the patience to wait for the next ten volumes, this dictionary comes very highly recommended.

JON ADAMS

THE OXFORD ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF THE VIKINGS. Edited by PETER SAWYER. *Oxford University Press*. Oxford 1997. xvii + 298 pp.

Those who expect a history to present a sequential narrative will not find it here. This is, rather, a compilation of histories, collecting nine specialist essays on aspects of Viking history, flanked by introductory and concluding remarks by Peter Sawyer. Handsome illustrations and maps decorate almost every page, with captions in wide margins functioning as a parallel account rather than specific amplification of the text.

Superficially, the *leitmotif* is investigation of the questions posed on the dust-jacket: ‘Were the Vikings . . . a “valiant, wrathful, foreign, purely pagan people” who swept in from the sea to plunder and slaughter? Or in the words of a Manx folksong, “war-wolves keen in hungry quest”, who lived and died by the sea and the sword? Or were they unusually successful merchants, extortionists, and pioneer explorers?’ The contributors engage variously with these questions, from Janet Nelson’s assurance that the Northmen ‘were not notorious rapists’ (p. 47)

to Lars Lönnroth tracing, in his lively essay 'The Vikings in History and Legend', the descent from the genteel eighteenth-century myth of the Viking as a 'delightfully wild and romantic person' (p. 234) to the workaday modern scholarly characterisation of Vikings as 'competent but fairly unglamorous tradesmen, colonists, shipbuilders, craftsmen, mercenaries or (alas) plunderers' (p. 247). The strategy of this book, in assembling analyses of Viking activity in a variety of arenas, offers an effective range of perspectives on the question. A more fundamental uncertainty is whether to apply the term 'Viking' only to Scandinavians of a more outgoing persuasion; Peter Sawyer distinguishes between 'The Vikings' and 'traders, missionaries and royal envoys' (p. 257), and Thomas Noonan finds it best to discard the term altogether in his valuable account of 'Scandinavians in European Russia': 'the meaning of "Viking" has been shaped mainly by events in the west, so to avoid endless debates about what constitutes a "real" Viking it is preferable to use the term "Scandinavian" when discussing the east' (p. 134).

The book's organisation at first privileges an external, victims'-eye view. Janet Nelson's 'The Frankish Empire', Simon Keynes's 'Vikings in England c.790–1016', and Donnchadh Ó Corráin's 'Ireland, Wales, Man and the Hebrides' all document Scandinavian aggression. All are in many ways rehabilitatory, stressing that the warlike techniques of the Vikings were no more and no less savage than those of their Dark Age targets; that their objective was usually straightforward financial gain, rather than mindless violence or lust for power or land; and that their offences were inevitably magnified by the rhetoric of Christian reportage. Both Nelson and Ó Corráin choose to begin by deconstructing ecclesiastical interpretations of early Viking raids as fulfilments of biblical prophecy.

Later chapters progress to a more interior view of Nordic culture. Sveinbjörn Rafnsson's account of 'The Atlantic Islands' gives a contrasting picture of Viking enterprise unhampered by the competing claims of incumbent residents, detailing the political and cultural development of these colonies. Iceland in particular comes across in this comparative context as both a rich mine of natural resources and unexpectedly cosmopolitan: 'Thanks to the sea-routes the scattered societies of the islands were more accessible to the outside world than the traditional societies in Scandinavia, some of them far inland. This partly explains why the Icelanders accepted Christianity before some of the landlocked communities in Norway and Sweden' (p. 114). Niels Lund in 'The Danish Empire and the End of the Viking Age' discusses relationships between Viking ventures abroad and power politics back in Scandinavia, which were often disrupted by the return of successful and wealthy Vikings; raiding, as the sagas suggest, was a way of improving status at home. Jan Bill's 'Ships and Seamanship' is a detailed but not over-technical analysis of Viking ship-building. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen in 'Religions Old and New' offers an anthropological analysis not only of the pagan religion, emphasising the 'use of cosmic contrasts . . . fundamental to the Nordic world view' (p. 216), but of the long period of transition in which pagans in contact with and receptive to Christian culture borrowed and transmuted its themes and were themselves subjected to its interpretations.

There are inevitably repetitions. Stories such as that of the conversion of Harald Bluetooth are retold in different contexts—an ironical example, since it is used to illustrate the different perspectives of its two chroniclers, Widukind and Adam of Bremen. Despite apparent untidiness, the offering of different perspectives is usually constructive. What emerges most powerfully from the book is the contrast of the different contexts in which similar military operations—in some cases, such as those in England and among the Franks, in the hands of the same individuals—were carried out. In the comparative isolation of Britain, the defenders achieved a common front at times, prompting ‘the emergence of a sense of common identity among the English peoples’ (p. 62), whereas the situation of the Franks, compromised by the need to maintain relations with Danes on the Frisian border and Abodrites to the east, can be summed up by Nelson’s section heading, ‘Franks divided, Vikings ascendant’. In Ireland, still more isolated, ‘the Vikings were enablers of communication’ (p. 109), mediating contact with England and the continent and stimulating commercial and military developments.

Although the scholarly argument presented here is detailed and up to date, it is inevitably summary; earlier scholarship is paraphrased without specific reference. Bibliographical suggestions are given for each chapter but with varying degrees of annotation. The decision to render names in anglicised form is perhaps wise, eliminating some of the potential for blunders such as ‘Olaf Trygvasson’ (p. 78) or again, ‘Tryggvasson’ (p. 106); there are other typographical lapses, especially in the names, but they are few. Reasonably in a volume of this range and accessibility, texts are generally cited only in English translation; still, it is a pity that the exemption mysteriously granted to the chapter ‘Ireland, Wales, Man and the Hebrides’, which quotes extensively in Irish, did not extend to a few lines of Old Norse.

ALISON FINLAY

THE REWRITING OF NJÁLS SAGA: TRANSLATION, IDEOLOGY AND ICELANDIC SAGAS. By JÓN KARL HELGASON. *Topics in Translation* 16. *Multilingual Matters*. Clevedon 1999. vi + 175 pp.

The Rewriting of Njáls Saga brings together seven case studies dealing with the creation and development of the *Njáls saga* we have today in Icelandic; and the history of its translation, publishing and the significance of its reception in England, Germany, the United States, Denmark and Norway. Two chapters were published in English versions in 1994. Chapter 4, ‘On Danish Borders: Rewriting and Censorship’, first appeared as ‘On Danish Borders: Icelandic Sagas in German Occupied Denmark’ in *Contemporary Sagas*, Preprints for The Ninth International Saga Conference (Reykjavík: The Ninth International Saga Conference, pp. 408–22). Chapter 6, ‘Icelandic Saga Laws: Patronage and Politics’ first appeared as ‘“We who cherish *Njáls saga*”: The Alþingi as Literary Patron’ in *Northern Antiquity: The Post-Medieval Reception of Edda and Saga* (ed. Andrew Wawn,

Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, pp. 143–61). This charts the debates and political machinations that lay behind the 1944 edition of *Njáls saga* sponsored by the Alþingi. On the one hand the saga is presented as an object of purity and value. Behind the scenes, however, was a concerted attempt to discredit Halldór Laxness's proposed edition (which appeared in 1945) as something profane, even bestial, because of his intention to modernise spelling and modify the text. This chapter is what Robert Kellogg describes as 'obligatory reading' about 'cultural warfare in the trenches' (review in *Saga-Book* XXIV: 5, 1997, 378). The final—and fascinating—chapter, 'Intersections: *Njáls Saga* and Urban Development', which charts the use of the names both of early settlers and of characters from *Njáls saga* in the naming of Reykjavík streets as the growing city spread to the east in the 1930s (Skeggjagata, Vífilsgata, Njálsgata, Gunnarsbraut, etc.) is drawn from the chapter 'Snorrabraut – Kjarvalsstaðir' in Jón Karl's own *Hetjan og höfundurinn: brot úr íslenskri menningu* (1998).

The book is number 16 in the Topics in Translation series. The only real criticism I have of the volume is that the essays it contains reflect upon so much more than translation, and that errors in presentation seem to be editorial, rather than authorial. One glaring slip is that the subtitle on the cover differs from that on the title page (on the cover we have *Translation, Politics and Icelandic Sagas*, on the title page *Translation, Ideology and Icelandic Sagas*). The introduction, perhaps inevitably, pays a rather perfunctory lip-service to recent translation theories. This strikes me as a bit of a red herring; although certain aspects of translation are touched upon the bulk of the quite wonderful exposition has much more to do with Jorge Luis Borges's metaphor of the forking path in the labyrinthine garden of Chinese author Ts'ui Pên. During the course of the seven chapters we watch *Njáls saga* as a text in motion, travelling through time and space. Motivations for translation and realities of reception are often social and political. For Victorian England it was a combination of the Viking fascination and an affirmation of Empire. For nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany it was an affirmation of the racial superiority of the Aryan. For Denmark during the Nazi occupation it was an affirmation of the Scandinavian (as distinct from the Germanic). For Norway, Sommerfelt's 1871 translation as *Njaals Saga* was an attempt to reassert (or reinvent) a Norwegian language as distinct from Danish. In each case study, if the politics of the motivation for translation and publication is different, the result is another fork in the labyrinthine path of *Njáls saga*'s trajectory through time and history.

The differences in intention and effect are especially telling in the comparison of the English and United States reception of the saga. George Webbe Dasent is the first English translator (and introducer) both of the saga itself and Iceland in the late tenth century (the 1861 title in full is *The Story of Burnt Njal or Life in Iceland at the end of the Tenth Century*). Dasent's political agenda extended to demonstrate that the Vikings and the British Victorians were of the same cultural and racial origin. The scholarly and critical apparatus of *The Story of Burnt Njal* remains useful in its own right—as well as a fascinating example of mid nineteenth-century cultural transmission and reception. Allen French's efforts in the early twentieth-century United States can hardly be considered translation at all. His 1905 *Heroes of Iceland* is a rewriting and abridgement of Dasent's own introduction and trans-

lation. His 1908 *Grettir the Strong* is an abridgement of the translation by William Morris and Eiríkur Magnússon. French's aesthetic agenda was to introduce *Njáls saga* as 'great epic'. In his abridgements he stripped his sources of anything that might detract from continuity of narrative. 'Only so much of genealogy has been retained as is of direct interest. Irrelevant episodes . . . , as well as many minor incidents, have been omitted; many of the verses (mostly regarded as spurious) have been cut out; and little beside the main narrative has been retained. Most of the accounts of trials, and much of the legal phrasing in the great suit for the Burning, have also been omitted.' (French, 1905, p. xxxvi; Jón Karl Helgason, p. 68). This is not translation so much as directed simplification—perhaps an early example of the United States' 'dumbing down' that has become such a force for stupidity in recent decades.

The Rewriting of Njáls Saga is a most welcome set of contributions both to the study of *Njáls saga* itself, and to the field of reception studies. The seven chapters offer a wealth of information and insight that clearly demonstrate the many and various forkings of this seminal text through the labyrinths of time, place and media. At the end we are left with the image from Friðrik Þór Friðriksson's 1980 *Brennu Njáls saga* (filmstrip, 20 minutes). We see two hands turning the pages of Laxness's 1945 edition of *Njáls saga*. After about eight minutes, at the chapter concerning the burning of Bergþórshvoll, the music stops and the reader in the film strikes a match and sets the book alight. It burns for the following eight minutes accompanied by the sounds of drums and screams, with bells, finally, in the distance. For the last four minutes no more sound is heard and the burning book fades away.

JOE ALLARD

DENMARK. Compiled by LEEANN IOVANNI. *World Bibliographical Series* 83. *Clio Press*. Oxford, England; Santa Barbara, California; Denver, Colorado. Revised edition, 1999. xxxvii + 281pp.

It is twenty-five years since the first volume in the World Bibliographical Series was commissioned; it says much for the staying power of the series that it is still going strong. Its volumes now cover virtually every country in the world (including those countries created during that period) and many of them have been updated with second editions, as is now the case with this volume on Denmark, which is a solid and worthy representative of the series.

It is perhaps somewhat unfair to review in a specialised journal a volume which is generalist in intent and coverage; it is important to stress that this is not a work directed at the scholar-practitioner in mediaeval history or culture, nor indeed in any one area of Danish studies, but rather one which seeks to introduce the informed reader to sources of information on all major aspects of Denmark and its people from early times to the present day.

This bibliographical aid contains 682 main items, virtually all in the English language, consistently and substantially annotated, and is arranged in sections from prehistoric research to contemporary issues: geography, tourism, flora and

fauna, archaeology, history, biography, demography, religion, social services, women and gender issues, politics, government, law, foreign relations, economy, science and technology, employment, statistics, environment, education, language, literature, the arts, customs and folklore, cuisine, sport and recreation, mass media, etc. There are also sections on libraries and museums, reference works and directories, professional periodicals, and selected bibliographies. Cross-referencing between sections is helpful.

Subscribers to *Saga-Book* are unlikely to be introduced to any item unfamiliar to them in the historical sections—the period up to the eighteenth century includes around eighty items (fifteen standard items on the Viking age and a further ten on pre-Christian religion), and the literature section makes no pretensions to cover the early period; but for those wishing to follow through the potential influences on current Danish culture or society this volume is a good starting-point from a variety of angles.

The entries are commendably up to date, a high proportion of the sources treated, both books and periodical articles, bearing publication dates in the 1990s. Indeed, a comparison with the first edition of this volume (by a different compiler) which appeared in 1987, suggests that little more than ten per cent has been retained. The annotations, typically of around 150 words, are informative and objective. A combined alphabetical index of authors, titles and subjects allows for specific searching.

The compiler, a criminological researcher based in Denmark and affiliated to the University at Aalborg also contributes a digestible introductory historical essay of over twenty pages designed to contextualise for the general reader the numerous themes and topics covered in the volume. This might usefully have been supplemented by the sort of chronological table which is a feature of some other volumes in the series, and the appended map would benefit from rather more detail, perhaps indicating main lines of communication or other features linked to the text.

A brief section of fifteen items on the Faroe Islands is appended; Greenland is not treated, having been allotted its own volume (135, 1991) in the same series; the Danish period of rule in Iceland is covered in the Iceland volume (37, rev. ed. 1996).

Overall, therefore, the volume will not significantly enhance the historical or literary research activity of readers of this journal, but it will be genuinely helpful in guiding them towards recommended reading at a serious level on many other aspects of Denmark and its study which they may wish to pursue; furthermore, this reviewer in his professional capacity can testify to the considerable use made of volumes in this series by undergraduate and postgraduate students. In addition to being a significant work of reference this volume is also very browsable, clearly presented and easy to handle. At a price of £54 it is probably an institutional rather than individual purchase, but for anyone personally tempted it should prove a worth-while and trusty companion.

JOHN HORTON

PUBLICATIONS LIST 2000

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