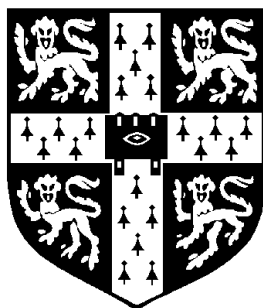


H. M. CHADWICK MEMORIAL LECTURES 30

JUDITH JESCH

**THE POETRY OF ORKNEYINGA SAGA**



DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE AND CELTIC

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Hector Munro Chadwick (1870–1947) was Elrington and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon in the University of Cambridge from 1912 to 1941. Through the immense range of his scholarly publications, and through the vigorous enthusiasm which he brought to all aspects of Anglo-Saxon studies — philological and literary, historical and archaeological — he helped to define the field and to give it the interdisciplinary orientation which characterizes it still. The Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, which owes its existence and its own interdisciplinary outlook to H. M. Chadwick, has wished to commemorate his enduring contribution to Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic studies by establishing an annual series of lectures in his name.

## The Poetry of Orkneyinga Saga

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Fig. 1: Cubbie Roo's Castle, Wyre, Orkney. Photo © Judith Jesch

# THE POETRY OF *ORKNEYINGA SAGA*

Judith Jesch

## Introduction

The name of the medieval ruin known as Cubbie Roo's Castle (fig. 1) on the small island of Wyre, in Orkney, appears to derive from a certain Kolbeinn hrúga, probably originally a Norwegian, of whom it is said in chapter 84 of *Orkneyinga saga*:

Í þann tíma bjó sá maðr í Vígr í Orkneyjum, er Kolbeinn hrúga hét ok var it mesta afarmenni. Hann lét þar gera steinkastala góðan; var þat ʒruggt vígi.

At that time, a man called Kolbeinn hrúga lived at Wyre in the Orkneys and he was a truly outstanding person. He had a good stone castle built there; it was a secure fortification.<sup>1</sup>

It goes on to say that Kolbeinn was the father of Bjarni, who later became bishop of Orkney and is also mentioned several times in the saga. In chapter 84 he is called *Bjarni skáld*. Although none of his poetry is cited in the saga, scholars are generally agreed that he was the author of a long narrative poem on the Jómsvíkingar, the *Jómsvíkingadrápa*, though it is not clear if this was before or during his long tenure as bishop (1185-1223).<sup>2</sup> The case of Bjarni Kolbeinsson suggests some of the questions to be addressed in this lecture, to do with the inspiration for and composition of poetry in medieval Orkney or by people associated with Orkney, and what *Orkneyinga saga*, generally agreed to be an Icelandic text in its present form, can tell us about these things. In particular I would like to complicate H. Munro Chadwick's rather simplistic view of skaldic poetry:

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<sup>1</sup> Finnogi Guðmundsson, ed., *Orkneyinga saga*, Íslenzk fornrit 34 (Reykjavík, 1965), p. 192. All translations from the saga prose are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Emily Lethbridge, ed., 'Bjarni byskup Kolbeinsson, *Jómsvíkingadrápa*', in Diana Whaley, ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages I (Turnhout, 2012), pp. 954-97.

From this time onwards [i.e. the late tenth century] the cultivation of poetry seems to have been almost entirely limited to Icelanders, many of whom resided largely at the courts of various Scandinavian kings.<sup>3</sup>

But then, as far as I can tell from his writings, Chadwick possibly did not know, and certainly did not care, about most of the poetry to be discussed here.

Despite a long fascination with *Orkneyinga saga*, I would never claim that it is a ‘good read’. It lacks much of the subtle characterisation, careful plotting and structure, and wonderful combination of humour and seriousness that we find in much of Old Icelandic literature. It does have its moments, set-piece episodes that stick in the mind or colourful characters like Sveinn Ásleifarson, but overall the saga resembles nothing so much as my work-in-progress folder, where everything that might be relevant has been gathered in one place. Despite the efforts of some scholars to see some kind of thematic coherence in the saga,<sup>4</sup> the only coherence I can see is that of chronology – the narrative trawls chronologically through the rulers of Orkney, rather in the manner of a king’s saga. Along the way, there is a bewildering variety of modes of narration, from origin legends to hagiography via saga-like feuds and straightforward history, which are occasionally, but very unevenly, augmented by citations of skaldic poetry. Previously I have characterised the saga narrative as a ‘work in progress’, and I continue to think the structuring of the saga is relevant to understanding where the poetry is coming from.<sup>5</sup> However, that is not my focus here, where I will instead take a fairly global look at the poetry in the saga. Much (though not all) of this poetry has been discussed in detail by previous scholars, but no one has provided the kind of overview I attempt here.

One thing that is rarely commented on is just how varied the poetry in *Orkneyinga saga* is. It has the chronological range, spanning some 300 years, of kings’ sagas like *Heimskringla*, but it has a wider range of types of poem than the kings’ sagas, including many more individual *lausavísur*, as well as sets of related *lausavísur*, in addition to the expected extracts from long praise poems. It also has a wider range of types of poet who composed these poems. Pursuing

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<sup>3</sup> H. Munro Chadwick and N. Kershaw Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature I* (Cambridge, 1932), p. 330.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Melissa Berman, ‘The political sagas’, *Scandinavian Studies* 57 (1985), 113-29.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Jesch, ‘*Orkneyinga saga*: a work in progress?’ in Judy Quinn and Emily Lethbridge, eds, *Creating the Medieval Saga: Versions, Variability and Editorial Interpretations of Old Norse Saga Literature*, The Viking Collection 18 (Odense, 2010), pp. 153-73.

this idea of variety, I will explore what it might indicate in a general sense, both about the poetry cited in the saga, and about the origins of that poetry.

### Textual history

Before looking in some detail at the poetry in the saga, a few words are needed about the textual basis of any such investigation. Like much medieval Icelandic literature, especially that dealing with indigenous themes, *Orkneyinga saga* is best described as prosimetrum.<sup>6</sup> It also seems largely to be the type of prosimetrum in which a prose narrative is either crafted around pre-existing poetry, or in which pre-existing poetry is added to the narrative, rather than a narrative in which the poetry and the prose are produced during the same act of composition, as has sometimes been suggested for other sagas.<sup>7</sup> The effect of using pre-existing poetry in a narrative is to make the textual history of such a saga potentially quite fluid, as there is always the possibility of other pre-existing poetry that is considered relevant being either added to the narrative or replacing poems already in the narrative. Certainly there are plenty of examples where different manuscripts of a saga have a different selection of poems, a classic case of this being *Egils saga*.<sup>8</sup> This is also true of *Orkneyinga saga*, which is in any case textually complex since there is no surviving medieval manuscript that contains the whole of the saga. The one that comes nearest, *Flateyjarbók*, notoriously chops the saga up into different sections that are interwoven with the other texts in that manuscript, with some resulting mixing up of the poetry. The poems included in editions of the saga thus have varied manuscript provenance. Although this is an aspect that deserves further investigation, I would argue that it is not an obstacle to the present discussion if we accept the generally additive nature of the text as it develops in the manuscript tradition, and the pre-existence of the poetry. Such an ‘additive’ model assumes that all of the poems included in the editions were once known to, and thought by, a range of scribes to have a connection to the saga, or to other poems cited in the saga. This justifies their inclusion on the grounds that they seem to belong to a corpus of poetry that is related in some way. In the case of *Orkneyinga saga*, the relationships in this sub-corpus are based on the fact that either the poems or the poets have some connection with Orkney.

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph Harris, ‘The prosimetrum of Icelandic saga and some relatives’, in Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl, eds, *Prosimetrum: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose and Verse* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 131-63.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Harris, ‘The prosimetrum of Icelandic saga and some relatives’, pp. 152, 157.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, ‘Verse and prose in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*’ in Judy Quinn and Emily Lethbridge, eds, *Creating the Medieval Saga*, pp. 191-211.



In this context it is worth noting that the saga, in addition to citing a variety of poetry, shows awareness, in chapter 46, of other poems that might have been included but were not:

Svá er sagt í kvæði því [*var. kvæðum þeim*], er ort um þá [*sc. Magnús Erlendsson and Hákon Pálsson*], at þeir hafi barizk við þann höfðingja, er Dufníall hét ok var manni firnari en brœðrungr jarla, ok fell hann fyrir þeim. Þorbjörn hét gofugr maðr, er þeir tóku af lífi í Borgarfirði á Hjaltlandi. Fleiri eru þau tíðendi, er kvæðit (*var. kvæðin*) vísar á, at þeir hafi báðir samt at verit, þó at hér sé eigi greiniliga frá sagt.

It is said in the poem/poems composed about them [i.e. Magnús and Hákon] that they had fought against a chieftain called Dufníall and he was the jarls' second cousin, and he died at their hands. Þorbjörn was the name of a noble man whom they killed in Burrafirth in Shetland. There are more events which the poem/poems allude/s to, at which they were both present, even though no more is said about them here.<sup>9</sup>

It is a very interesting question whether or not there was more than one poem. The wording of the saga indicates that the two jarls did things together, which might suggest just one poem, though parallels for such a poem in honour of two men are scarce, whereas the variant readings suggest that an original prose text referred to more than one poem. If there were two poems, were they just about different events, or did each ruler have his own poem? The implications in either case are potentially interesting, but unfortunately impossible to work out. These poems do not survive, but clearly they were well enough known for the author of the prose to give this precis of them.

In chapter 81, there is however a reference to a poem which does survive, though it is not cited in the saga:

... ok var hann [*sc. Hallr Þórarinsson*] lengi síðan með Rognvaldi jarli. Þeir ortu báðir saman *Háttalykill inn forna* ok létu vera fimm vísur með hverjum hætti. En þá þótti of langt kveðir, ok eru nú tvær kveðnar með hverjum hætti.

... and he [Hallr Þórarinsson] was with Rognvaldr jarl for a long time. Together they composed *Háttalykill inn forni* and they let there be five

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<sup>9</sup> Finnboði Guðmundsson, ed., *Orkneyinga saga*, pp. 104-05. For the variant readings, see note 2 on p. 104.

stanzas for each metre. But then it was thought to be too long to recite and now two [stanzas] are recited for each metre.<sup>10</sup>

This poem, with two stanzas per metre, survives in a difficult and late manuscript, but which both the most recent editor and previous scholars have accepted is the poem referred to in *Orkneyinga saga*.<sup>11</sup>

Also perhaps implying a poem or poems known to the prose author is the reference to Bjarni *skáld* in chapter 84, already mentioned. Once again, the poem that most scholars attribute to this poet, namely *Jómsvíkingadrápa*, survives not in *Orkneyinga saga* but in another manuscript, though this time it is largely preserved in a good, medieval manuscript, namely the Codex Regius of Snorri's *Edda*.<sup>12</sup>

### Survey of the poetry

These three allusions to poems not cited show that there was in medieval Iceland knowledge of poetry that could have been, but was not, included in the saga. The poems implied by these references are therefore also included in this table (in *italic*) which surveys the chronology and authorship of the poems cited in the saga, and which also reveals their uneven distribution in the saga:<sup>13</sup>

Century	Numbered stanzas in <i>Orkneyinga saga</i> (and chapters)	Poet	Number of stanzas
10th	1-6 (chs 7-8)	Anon.	1
		Torf-Einarr, jarl of Orkney	5
Early 11th	7 (ch. 19)	[Óttarr svartí, Icelandic poet]	1
Mid-11th	8-29, 33 (chs 20-22, 24, 26, 32, 56)	Arnórr jarlaskáld, Icelandic poet	20
		[Haraldr harðráði, king of Norway]	1
		[Bjarni Gullbrárskáld, Icelandic poet]	1

<sup>10</sup> Finnbogi Guðmundsson, ed., *Orkneyinga saga*, p. 185.

<sup>11</sup> Kari Ellen Gade, ed., 'Rognvaldr jarl and Hallr Þórarinnsson, *Háttalykill*' in Kari Ellen Gade and Edith Marold, eds, *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics*, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages III (Turnhout, 2017), pp. 1001-93.

<sup>12</sup> See note 2, above.

<sup>13</sup> All the information in this table, and in the discussion of the individual poets below, is taken from Diana Whaley, ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages I (Turnhout, 2012) and Karin Ellen Gade, ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2: From c. 1035 to c. 1300*, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages II (Turnhout, 2009).

Late 11th	30-32 (chs 39, 41)	Anon. <sup>14</sup>	1
		Kali Sæbjarnarson, Norwegian	1
		[Magnús berfœttr, king of Norway]	1
Early 12th	(ch. 46) <sup>15</sup>	<i>Poem(s) about Magnús and Hákon</i>	
Mid-12th	34-82 (chs 58-94)	Rognvaldr Kali Kolsson, jarl of Orkney	31
		[Ingimarr, a Norwegian]	1
		Anon., a poet, presumably Orcadian	1
		Eiríkr, Icelandic poet	1
		Hallr Þórarinsson, Icelandic poet	1
		<i>Rognvaldr Kali Kolsson and Hallr Þórarinsson</i> <sup>16</sup>	
		Ármóðr, Icelandic poet	3
		Oddi inn litli, Icelandic poet	6
		Sigmundur ǫngull	2
		Þorbjörn svartí	2
		Bótólfr, Icelandic poet	1
Late 12th / Early 13th	(ch. 84) <sup>17</sup>	<i>Bjarni skáld</i>	

The 82 stanzas cited in the saga plus the implied poems are distributed across approximately 300 years, and are by seventeen named poets plus at least four separate anonymous poets. The poets in square brackets in the table above are those in which neither the poet nor the quoted stanza have any discernible Orcadian connections and are therefore not immediately relevant to the current topic. Removing those leaves a corpus of 77 stanzas and twelve named poets plus four anonymous ones.

This brief survey of the range and variety of poetry associated with *Orkneyinga saga*, and a recognition of the additive nature of the various texts which preserve or mention this poetry, indicate that a substantial amount of

<sup>14</sup> This stanza is elsewhere attributed to Þorkell hamarskáld, see Kari Ellen Gade, ed., 'Þorkell hamarskáld, *Magnússdrápa 3*' in Kari Ellen Gade, ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2*, pp. 411-12.

<sup>15</sup> See discussion of ch. 46, above.

<sup>16</sup> See also discussion of ch. 81, above.

<sup>17</sup> See discussion of ch. 84, above.

poetry associated with Orkney or Orcadians was known or known of, and circulated, in Iceland when the prose texts were composed and the manuscripts written. But can we use this evidence to drill down to an earlier stage? In particular, what can this collection tell us about the literary history of poetry in Orkney? Was all, or any, of this poetry composed either in Orkney, or by Orcadians, subsequently to be transmitted to Iceland through various family and other connections? And if it was, how and when did the practice of composing skaldic poetry come to Orkney, and how was it maintained there? For at least the eleventh and the twelfth centuries, there is ample archaeological and other evidence for the kinds of elite contexts which would facilitate the production and consumption of skaldic poetry.<sup>18</sup> There is also obviously much to be gleaned from the prose contexts of the poems, and the varying narrative modes mentioned above. But here I will concentrate as much as possible on the evidence of the poems themselves, to explore the following questions:

- What do the poems suggest about the Orcadian origins or connections of the poets themselves? How closely were they tied to the islands and is this connection an important part of their poetry?
- Is there anything particularly ‘Orcadian’ about any of the poetry – is it somehow rooted in that distinct landscape and culture?
- What literary contexts and impulses encouraged the composition of the poetry?

Some of these questions have been addressed before, but mostly by scholars commenting on individual poems or poets. Here, a more global approach will be used to see what, if any, continuities there are in the poetry that a variety of medieval scribes and modern editors have wanted to associate with the narrative of events known as *Orkneyinga saga*. With 82 stanzas included in editions of the saga, not to mention the poems alluded to but not cited, it is not possible to do a comprehensive survey here, so I will concentrate on some significant examples, ignoring those stanzas which are extracts of poems by or for Norwegian rulers, and which are mostly also known from other sources. Also, relatively little will be said about the poems emanating from jarl Rognvaldr’s very famous expedition to the Holy Land in the mid-twelfth century, but then quite a lot has been written about those, and much less about the poems that

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<sup>18</sup> Judith Jesch, ‘Literature in medieval Orkney’, in Olwyn Owen, ed., *The World of Orkneyinga Saga* (Kirkwall, 2005), pp. 11-24.

shed light on his years in the Northern Isles.<sup>19</sup> In what follows, it will not be possible to avoid some reference to the saga, since so much of what we understand about the poetry comes from the contextual information in the narrative, although the focus will be as much as possible on what the poems themselves say or suggest.

### The poets and Orkney

*Torf-Einarr* was an illegitimate son of the Norwegian nobleman Rognvaldr Mœrajarl who avenged the death of his father on Halfdan háleggr, one of the sons of Haraldr hárfagri. His poem explicitly contrasts his actions in carrying out this vengeance in Orkney with the failures of his legitimate half-brothers to do this, especially Þórir who sits drinking at home in Møre, as in this stanza:

Sékat Hrolfs ór hendi  
né Hrollaugi fljúga  
dǫrr á dolga mengi;  
dugir oss fǫður hefna.  
En í kveld, meðan knýjum,  
of kerstraumi, rómu,  
þegjandi sitr þetta  
Þórir jarl á Mœri.

I do not see spears flying from Hrólfr's hand nor from Hrollaugr's in the throng of enemies; it is right for us to avenge our father. Yet this evening, while we [I] press our [my] attack, Þórir jarl ignores this in silence over {his cup-stream} [DRINK] in Møre.<sup>20</sup>

*Arnórr jarlaskáld* was the son of the court poet Þórðr Kolbeinsson, about whom a lot is known, both from sagas, and from his own poetry. Arnórr was a well-known poet in his own right who composed for two kings of Norway (Magnús the Good, two poems, and Haraldr harðráði), and also for some important Icelanders. His nickname helps to distinguish him as the only eleventh-century court poet who worked for the jarls of Orkney (for two of whom, Rognvaldr Brúsason and Þorfinnr Sigurðarson, he composed praise poems). Two half-stanzas which are not preserved in the saga, but which Diana

<sup>19</sup> Though both are covered by Paul Bibire, 'The poetry of Earl Rognvald's court', in Barbara E. Crawford, ed., *St Magnus Cathedral and Orkney's Twelfth-Century Renaissance* (Aberdeen, 1988), pp. 208–40.

<sup>20</sup> Russell Poole, ed., 'Torf-Einarr Rognvaldsson, Lausavísur 1' in Diana Whaley, ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1*, p. 131.

Whaley has assigned to Arnórr's poems in praise of each of the Orkney jarls, suggest his close connections with Orkney. According to these he was related by marriage to Rognvaldr, and his sons mourned the death of Þorfinnr:

Réð Heita konr hleyti  
herþarfr við mik gerva;  
styrk lét oss of orkat  
jarls mægð af því frægðar.

{The army-beneficent descendant of Heiti} [= Rognvaldr] made [*lit.* did make] a marriage-alliance with me; the strong kinship by marriage with the jarl brought us [me] renown because of that.<sup>21</sup>

Bera sýn of mik mínir  
morðkennds taka enda  
þess of þengils sessa  
þung mein synir ungir.

My young sons begin to bear manifest, heavy sorrows for me at the death {of that battle-skilled bench-mate of the monarch} [RULER = Þorfinnr].<sup>22</sup>

Some of Arnórr's poetry is specifically about his difficult situation, torn between the two jarls. But once Rognvaldr had been killed (by Þorfinnr), Arnórr seems to have had no problem transferring his allegiance to Þorfinnr, so probably there is nothing unusual in his sons mourning the latter, despite their family relationship with Rognvaldr. This also suggests that his sons maintained their connection with Orkney, or perhaps even stayed there.

*Rognvaldr Kali Kolsson* was the son of a Norwegian nobleman, Kolr Kalason, and his wife who was the sister of St Magnús. He grew up in Agder, and also spent time in Bergen. His Norwegian identity is quite clear in several of his poems: his ability to ski can only derive from his Norwegian youth and his delight at returning to Bergen after some muddy weeks in Grimsby is clear.<sup>23</sup> But once he became jarl of Orkney, his Orcadian identity seems to have

<sup>21</sup> Diana Whaley, ed., 'Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Rognvaldsdrápa 2*' in Kari Ellen Gade, ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2*, p. 180.

<sup>22</sup> Diana Whaley, ed., 'Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Þorfinnsdrápa 4*' in Kari Ellen Gade ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2*, pp. 234-5.

<sup>23</sup> Judith Jesch, 'Earl Rognvaldr of Orkney: a poet of the Viking diaspora', in *Across the Sólundarhaf: Connections between Scotland and the Nordic World. Selected Papers from the Inaugural St. Magnus Conference 2011. Journal of the North Atlantic Special Volume 4* (2013), 154–160, at pp. 155-56.

become equally important. On the expedition to the Holy Land, he remembers Christmases in Norway while spending Christmas attacking a castle in Galicia. But it seems he is also thinking of Orkney, both in stanza 16 in which he anticipates sailing ‘home’ in autumn, and, I would argue, in his well-known stanza 15 in which he compares the Viscountess Ermingerðr of Narbonne’s locks favourably with those of northern women, which he characterises as having been like Fróði’s meal.<sup>24</sup> The story of Fróði’s mill which grinds out gold may have particular associations with Orkney, as indicated by this passage from the text known as *Litla Skálda*:

Kvern heitir Grótti, er átti Fróði konungr; hon mól hvetvetna þat er hann vildi, gull ok frið. Fenja ok Menja hétu ambáttir þær, er mólu. Þá tók Mýsingr sækonungr Gróttu ok lét mála hvítasalt á skip sín, þar til er þau sukku á Pétlandsfirði. Þar er svelgr síðan, er sær fellr í auga Gróttu. Þá gnýr sær, er hon gnýr, ok þá varð sjórinn saltr.

There was a quern called Grótti, owned by King Fróði; it ground whatever he wished, gold and peace. The slave-women who did the grinding were called Fenja and Menja. Then the sea-king Mýsingr took Gróttu [sic] and had white salt ground on his ships, until they sank in the Pentland Firth. There has since been a whirlpool there, where the sea falls into the ‘eye’ of Gróttu. The sea churns when it churns and then the sea becomes salt.<sup>25</sup>

I would argue that for this reason Røgnvaldr is thinking of Orcadian women in stanza 16. I have also floated the idea that stanza 31a is influenced by the Orcadian landscape of relatively small but fertile islands in which the juxtaposition of a field being ploughed with a ship ploughing the sea is a very common sight:<sup>26</sup>

Ríðum Ræfils Vakri!  
 Rekuma plóg af akri!  
 Erjum úrgu barði  
 út at Miklagarði!

<sup>24</sup> Judith Jesch, ed., ‘Røgnvaldr jarl Kali Kolsson, Lausavísur 15-16’ in Kari Ellen Gade, ed., *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 2*, pp. 592-94.

<sup>25</sup> Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar* (Copenhagen, 1931), p. 259.

<sup>26</sup> Judith Jesch, ‘The threatening wave: Norse poetry and the Scottish isles’, in James H. Barrett and Sarah-Jane Gibbon, eds, *Maritime Societies of the Viking and Medieval World* (Leeds: 2015), pp. 320-332, at p. 321.

Let's ride {the Vakr <horse> of Ræfill <sea-king>} [SHIP]! Let's not drive the plough from the field! Let's plough with a drenched prow out to Constantinople!<sup>27</sup>

Apart from the Djulefors rune-stone from eleventh-century Södermanland, this is as far as I know the earliest Scandinavian reference to this otherwise almost universal literary trope. I think it arises directly from Røgnvaldr's personal experience in the islands, as the visual image is just much more common there than in Norway, still less Iceland. I would also suggest that this visual experience lies behind other such images reversing and linking the sea and the land, which can be found in other stanzas by Røgnvaldr.<sup>28</sup>

*Hallr Þórarinnsson*, the co-author of *Háttalykill*, identifies himself as an Icelander by referring to himself as 'neighbour of the sausage', a form of insulting association that is also found in an anecdote from the miracles of St Þorlákr which takes place in King's Lynn in Norfolk.<sup>29</sup>

Apart from those poets with no Orcadian associations, not discussed here, the rest of those that do are a mixed bunch. Four are explicitly said to be Icelandic, though Flateyjarbók claims that Oddi and Ármóðr were from Shetland.<sup>30</sup> Though this is likely to be erroneous, it does at least reveal an Icelandic assumption that people from the Northern Isles could and did compose poetry. These two accompanied Røgnvaldr on his voyage to the Holy Land. About Bótólfr nothing is known apart from what it says in the anecdote in chapter 94 containing his stanza, that he lived on one of Røgnvaldr's farms, and so likely was a follower of his, and was a 'good poet'.<sup>31</sup> Eiríkr stands out in this context, since his solitary stanza supposedly records the deeds of Røgnvaldr's frenemy, Sveinn Ásleifarson, who is otherwise not known as a patron of poets.<sup>32</sup> However, there is a sort of connection, since Sveinn's stepson, Sigmundur, is another one of the poets who accompanied Røgnvaldr to the Holy Land, and he seems very clearly to have insular origins. He was possibly born in the Isle of Man, brought up in Orkney by his stepfather Sveinn Ásleifarson and his by-

<sup>27</sup> Judith Jesch, ed., 'Røgnvaldr jarl Kali Kolsson, Lausavísur 31' in Kari Ellen Gade, ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2*, pp. 607-08.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. Judith Jesch, ed., 'Røgnvaldr jarl Kali Kolsson, Lausavísur 2, 16' in Kari Ellen Gade (ed.), *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2*, pp. 577-78, 594; Judith Jesch, ed., 'Røgnvaldr jarl Kali Kolsson, Lausavísur 34-35' in Kari Ellen Gade and Edith Marold, eds, *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics* (Turnhout: 2017), pp. 343-46.

<sup>29</sup> Judith Jesch, ed., 'Hallr Þórarinnsson breiðmaga, Lausavísa 1' in Kari Ellen Gade, ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2*, pp. 610-11.

<sup>30</sup> Finnbogi Guðmundsson, ed., *Orkneyinga saga*, p. 200 n.2.

<sup>31</sup> Finnbogi Guðmundsson, ed., *Orkneyinga saga*, p. 257.

<sup>32</sup> Judith Jesch, ed., 'Eiríkr, Lausavísa 1' in Kari Ellen Gade, ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2*, pp. 612-13.



name *ǫngull* might suggest a connection with Anglesey (Old Norse *Ǫngulsey*). While abroad with Rǫgnvaldr, he recites a stanza in which he asks for his successes to be carried back to a woman in Orkney.<sup>33</sup> Finally, there is Þorbjörn svartí, another of Rǫgnvaldr's expedition companions, about whom nothing is known and whose ethnicity is not remarked on in the saga. His poetic reference to being in Rǫgnvaldr's retinue back in Orkney suggests that he too may have been an Icelandic visitor like Hallr, Oddi and Ármóðr.<sup>34</sup>

## Locations

As well as their personal connections with Orkney, the two poets most often cited in the saga suggest their personal knowledge of the islands through references to specific locations, perhaps reinforcing the distinction between the visiting Icelandic poets and those who had a closer connection to the islands.

Arnórr's poem on Þorfinnr, being a fairly conventional praise poem, has a strong focus on its subject's battles at sea and on land. Perhaps because so many of the locations in which these battles took place were new to the Icelander Arnórr, there are many place-names and place-references in this poem, many of them in Scotland and England. But several of the battles took place in Orkney, and four Orcadian locations are mentioned in this context: Dýrnes (st. 6), Sandvík (st. 8), Rauðabjörg (st. 20), and Pétlandsfjörðr (st. 21, where the poet was present at the battle).<sup>35</sup> Also, the extent of Þorfinnr's power is emphasised by referring to him as 'lord of Shetland' or 'the Shetlanders', and in Arnórr's obituary which states that he ruled all the way from Þursasker (an obscure place probably somewhere in Shetland) to Dublin.<sup>36</sup>

Rǫgnvaldr's poetry contains fewer place-names and almost none from the Northern Isles, but it records episodes that took place in a variety of Northern Isles locations, including Shetland.<sup>37</sup> For the locations of these episodes we rely on the information of the saga, but there is at least an allusion to Westray in

<sup>33</sup> Judith Jesch, ed., 'Sigmundur ǫngull, Lausavísur 1' in Kari Ellen Gade, ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2*, pp. 626-7.

<sup>34</sup> Kari Ellen Gade, ed., 'Þorbjörn svartí, Lausavísa 1' in Kari Ellen Gade, ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2*, pp. 624-5.

<sup>35</sup> Diana Whaley, ed., 'Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Þorfinnsdrápa* 6, 8, 20-21' in Kari Ellen Gade ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2*, pp. 236-40, 253-55.

<sup>36</sup> Diana Whaley, ed., 'Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Þorfinnsdrápa* 10, 12, 22-23' in Kari Ellen Gade ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2*, pp. 241-43, 255-58.

<sup>37</sup> Judith Jesch, ed., 'Rǫgnvaldr jarl Kali Kolsson, Lausavísur 4, 8-12, 14' in Kari Ellen Gade, ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2*, pp. 579-80, 585-92

stanza 4 (*hér vestr* ‘here in the west’).<sup>38</sup> Westray also provides the context for one of the rare stanzas in which Rǫgnvaldr comments on his political situation.<sup>39</sup> Given how much of the saga narrative is given over to Rǫgnvaldr’s campaign to become jarl of Orkney, and his subsequent feuding with rival candidates, it is notable that there is very little poetry about these political events, only two stanzas by Rǫgnvaldr himself, and two by other people.<sup>40</sup> It seems that poetry was not an appropriate vehicle for political discussion in twelfth-century Orkney, or perhaps it is merely that any such poetry did not survive, being of little interest to the Icelanders.

### Cultural contexts

The tenth-century cultural and historical context of Torf-Einarr’s poetry is pretty much unknowable, partly since there is relatively little other poetry from that period to compare it with, and partly because there is very little information about the cultural and political situation in Orkney at that time. It should also be noted that not every scholar is convinced that Torf-Einarr’s poetry is ‘genuine’, in the sense that it was composed when and by the person to whom it is attributed in the saga – even the most recent editor is ambivalent on this point.<sup>41</sup>

The possible contexts for Arnórr’s poetry are by contrast very interesting. Þorfinnr, although a direct descendant in the male line of Torf-Einarr, was not otherwise very obviously Scandinavian. According to the saga, Torf-Einarr’s son, Þorfinnr *hausakljúfr*, had a son Hlǫðvir who married Eðna, the daughter of an Irish king. Their son, Sigurðr *digri*, died in Ireland at the Battle of Clontarf in 1014, but not before he had married a daughter of a Scottish king who produced Þorfinnr. Thus Þorfinnr had more insular ancestors than Norse ones, including important men from both Scotland and Ireland. Yet he was given his great-grandfather’s Norse name, married Ingibjörg, the daughter of a Norwegian nobleman, and presided over a powerful earldom that looked to Norway for its

<sup>38</sup> Judith Jesch, ed., ‘Rǫgnvaldr jarl Kali Kolsson, Lausavísur 4’ in Kari Ellen Gade, ed., *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 2*, pp. 579-80.

<sup>39</sup> Judith Jesch, ed., ‘Rǫgnvaldr jarl Kali Kolsson, Lausavísur 5’ in Kari Ellen Gade, ed., *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 2*, pp. 580-81.

<sup>40</sup> Judith Jesch, ed., ‘Rǫgnvaldr jarl Kali Kolsson, Lausavísur 5, 32’ in Kari Ellen Gade, ed., *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 2*, pp. 580-81, 608-09; Judith Jesch, ed., ‘Anonymous Lausavísur, *Lausavísa* from *Orkneyinga saga 1*’ in Kari Ellen Gade, ed., *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 2*, pp. 838-9.

<sup>41</sup> Russell Poole, ‘Introduction to Torf-Einarr Rǫgnvaldsson, *Lausavísur*’ in Diana Whaley, ed., *Poetry from the Kings’ Sagas 1*, p. 130. More recently, a detailed metrical analysis suggests that Torf-Einarr’s poetry is genuinely from the early tenth century, see Klaus Johan Myrvoll, *Kronologi i skaldekvæde: Distribusjon av metriske og språklege drag i høve til tradisjonell datering og tilbuering*, PhD thesis (Oslo, 2014), *passim*, though this still does not necessarily link it to tenth-century Orkney.

legitimacy in the eleventh century. We do not know what language Þorfinnr spoke when, as a child, he lived with his maternal grandfather in Scotland, so it is of great interest that as an adult his rule in the Northern Isles encouraged skaldic verse, which required deep linguistic and cultural knowledge. His fraternal nephew Rǫgnvaldr Brúsason shared the same ancestry (though we do not know who his mother was), and is said to have spent time at the court of Óláfr Haraldsson in Norway as a child and as a young man to have fought at the battle of Stiklestad. Given that Arnórr is said to have been related to Rǫgnvaldr by marriage, it seems quite possible that the interest in skaldic poetry in fact came to Orkney from Norway with Rǫgnvaldr, and was then taken up by his uncle Þorfinnr, whose youth was spent raiding in the British Isles. The complex relationships between the Orcadian uncle and nephew are illustrated in a stanza from a poem about the Norwegian nobleman Kálfr Árnason, who was related to Þorfinnr by marriage, and whom he supports in battle against Rǫgnvaldr, against the explicit instructions of King Magnús.<sup>42</sup> Arnórr was not the only participant in Orcadian politics to have conflicted loyalties. Still, Arnórr's poetry follows the conventions of royal praise poetry of the period, with a focus on battles, sailing, generosity and treachery. More innovative perhaps are his emotional and very poetical invocations to the Christian god to protect both of his heroes in death.<sup>43</sup>

About the context that produced the no-longer extant poem(s) about St Magnús and Hákon Pálsson, it is not possible to say very much, because nothing survives of such (a) composition(s). However, there are two points worth noting. One is that, in his youth, St Magnús was made to join his namesake, the Norwegian king Magnús berfœttr, on an expedition which culminated in the Battle of the Menai Strait in 1098. Although the future saint is mostly remembered for refusing to take part in that battle (somewhat incongruously, given what the lost poems supposedly said about his activities with Hákon), it may be that this encounter sparked an interest in skaldic poetry, for Magnús was also a king with several poets in his following. One of these was Kali Sæbjarnarson of Agder, the father-in-law of Magnús' sister Gunnhildr and future grandfather of Rǫgnvaldr Kali Kolsson, our next major poetical figure. Kali's sole surviving stanza is cited in *Orkneyinga saga*, among other

<sup>42</sup> Alison Finlay, ed., 'Bjarni gullbráskáld Hallbjarnarson, *Kálfsflokkur* 8' in Diana Whaley, ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1*, pp. 889-90.

<sup>43</sup> Diana Whaley, ed., 'Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Rǫgnvaldsdrápa* 3' in Kari Ellen Gade (ed.), *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2*, p. 181; Diana Whaley, ed., 'Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson, *Þorfinnsdrápa* 24-25' in Kari Ellen Gade (ed.), *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2*, pp. 258-60.

texts.<sup>44</sup> While these links may indicate a specifically poetical tradition for these poems, it is also worth considering how any poetry about Magnús might relate to the developing hagiography about him. A possible model here is that of St Óláfr, who also had a viking youth before dying a martyr, after which his life was celebrated first of all in skaldic poetry, then in Latin hagiography, and then in vernacular prose narratives.<sup>45</sup> But that is too large and speculative a topic to pursue here.

The cultural contexts of Rögnvaldr's era are much easier to reconstruct than for any of the other poets.<sup>46</sup> The evidence is there in the twelfth-century architecture of Orkney, not least the oldest parts of St Magnus Cathedral, in the runic inscriptions of Maeshowe, in the very extensive account of his life in *Orkneyinga saga*, and in the historically-minded poems *Háttalykill* and *Jómsvíkingadrápa*. Rögnvaldr's background in Norway and his experiences in England and on the journey to the Holy Land have already been mentioned, and indeed much has already been written about these topics. Of particular interest are those aspects of his work which make clear that there is now a whole new cultural context for poetry in Orkney. Compared to the eleventh- and early twelfth-century poetry, it is no longer a case of poetry by a hired propagandist in praise of the ruler. Rather, the ruler himself is the centre of poetical activity. He has a court which people actively wish to join. And he is acutely aware of his own poetry and his persona as a poet. And, to be frank, a lot of the poetry is about himself. He certainly airs quite a lot of his elite preoccupations in his poetry.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

Two strands emerge from this investigation. One is that the Orcadian origins of the poetry discussed are clear enough; the poetry itself tells us so, and it is hard to believe that it was all made up by thirteenth-century Icelanders. If this hypothesis is accepted then the second, more interesting, question is how and when the impulses to create such poetry reached Orkney. Was the habit brought over already with the first settlements in the ninth century or thereabouts? Or was the habit of skaldic poetry introduced from a Norwegian elite context when

<sup>44</sup> Kari Ellen Gade, ed., 'Kali Sæbjarnarson, Lausavísa 1' in Kari Ellen Gade, ed., *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas* 2, pp. 393-4.

<sup>45</sup> Carl Phelpstead, *Holy Vikings. Saints' Lives in the Old Icelandic Kings' Sagas* (Tempe, 2007).

<sup>46</sup> See various contributions in Barbara E. Crawford, ed., *St Magnus Cathedral and Orkney's Twelfth-Century Renaissance* (Aberdeen, 1988) and Olwyn Owen, ed., *The World of Orkneyinga Saga* (Kirkwall, 2005).

<sup>47</sup> Judith Jesch, *The Nine Skills of Earl Rögnvaldr of Orkney* (Nottingham, 2006).

Torf-Einarr, the son of Rǫgnvaldr Mœrajarl, became jarl of Orkney in the early tenth century? Unfortunately, there is little evidence to back up either of these possibilities, or to make a link between either of them and the next heyday of Orcadian skaldic poetry in the middle of the eleventh century. That is when I think it more likely that the first real flowering of skaldic poetry in Orkney occurred, in the context of two upwardly-mobile jarls, Þorfinnr and his nephew Rǫgnvaldr Brúsason, both milking their Norwegian connections at a time when the Norwegian monarchy was establishing itself with the propaganda value of having the first Scandinavian saint, and exerting its influence on a wider stage. Assisting the jarls of Orkney in emulating their Norwegian overlords, Arnórr jarlaskáld was the right man in the right place at the right time, with both his family connections to Orkney, and his CV showing his work for two powerful kings of Norway.

The century between Arnórr and jarl Rǫgnvaldr Kali Kolsson is obscure, but the evidence of chapter 46 suggests that the political ambitions which required the rulers of Orkney to have skaldic poets was also felt by the rulers of the early eleventh century, although no such poetry survives. What would be interesting to know, but we cannot say, is whether they could draw on local poets who had perhaps learned their craft in the time of Arnórr, or whether they once again had to import knowledgeable and poetical Icelanders or possibly even Norwegians.

The court of Rǫgnvaldr jarl represents a whole new period of cultural infusion. The poetry of his time represents a departure from earlier conventions, and there is little evidence that it harks back to any specifically Orcadian traditions, although as the nephew of St Magnús, Rǫgnvaldr must have been aware of any poems about him. It is significant that Rǫgnvaldr was born in Norway, and spent time in Bergen, Trondheim and Tønsberg, according to the saga. All of these places are possible sources of his runic knowledge, whereas his knowledge of poetry could have come from his grandfather Kali Sæbjarnarson, but also very likely from people he met in those towns, including Icelanders.<sup>48</sup> The presence of Icelanders at Rǫgnvaldr's court is significant, not only because they would then be the tradition-bearers that would ensure the preservation of Orcadian poetry in the prose narratives, but even more so because it was the conjunction of Norwegian ruler, Icelandic poets, an

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<sup>48</sup> Judith Jesch, 'Earl Rǫgnvaldr of Orkney: a poet of the Viking diaspora', pp. 156-57.

upwardly-mobile court in Kirkwall, and foreign expeditions that provided the catalyst for this whole new corpus of poetry.

Both the eleventh and the twelfth centuries are times of transition in Scandinavian culture. The eleventh century saw the consolidation of Christianity and the rise of national monarchies. The twelfth century saw the rise of both historiography and sagas within the development of a literate culture. These involved different kinds of encounters with the outside world and, in particular, the world of Western Europe, a world that the Vikings began to experience in a new way, no longer simply as destinations for raiding and trading, but as destinations for spiritual and cultural activities.<sup>49</sup> These encounters are faithfully recorded in their poetry, which was particularly prolific in these two centuries. Norse poetry achieved the unusual feat of continuing its traditional modes while also being highly receptive to new concepts. In fact, it has been argued that it is particularly this encounter with other cultural traditions that brought about an assertive revival of poetic traditions in the twelfth century. Ole Bruhn has argued that the story of Rognvaldr ‘gives ... the impression of a setting ... in which a devotion to the past, including the skaldic art, has become both a passion and fashionable.’<sup>50</sup> He goes further to suggest that it was precisely Rognvaldr’s cosmopolitan life which stimulated an interest in the old poetry. In the twelfth century, Norse culture derives its value and its new energy precisely from this process of interaction with other cultures.

For both Arnórr and Rognvaldr, the new impulses for Orcadian poetry came from Norway and Iceland in their own time, rather than from a continuous tradition going back to the earliest settlement of Orkney. In both cases it is notable that the cultural and linguistic impulses are Norse, at the same time as there were many other influences from further south. In the case of Þorfinnr, his family tree, his raiding in Scotland and England, and his promotion of Christianity later in life all speak of his southern connections, yet when it came to poetry he looked north and east to Norway and Iceland. Similarly, Rognvaldr’s youthful experiences in England, his journey south and the architecture of St Magnus Cathedral all point to cultural infusions from non-

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<sup>49</sup> Judith Jesch, ‘Christian Vikings: Norsemen in Western Europe in the 12th Century’, in Pierre Bauduin and Alexander Musin, eds, *Vers l’Orient et vers l’Occident: Regards croisés sur les dynamiques et les transferts culturels des Vikings à la Rous ancienne*, ed. Pierre Bauduin and Alexander Musin (Caen, 2014), pp. 55-60.

<sup>50</sup> Ole Bruhn, ‘Earl Rognvald and the rise of saga literature’, in Colleen E. Batey et al., eds, *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic* (Edinburgh, 1993), pp. 240-47, at p. 241.

Nordic cultures, yet much of these new interests are expressed in the traditional language of Old Norse poetry. The poetry of Orkney is thus a classic example of the Viking and medieval Scandinavian talent for absorbing new ideas and expressing them in traditional ways. Like the runic inscriptions, the poetry of the Northern Isles is not a continuous tradition going back to the earliest Scandinavian settlers, but the product of a triangulation of the political, family and cultural connections between Norway, Iceland and northern Scotland, where both people and ideas were constantly on the move and in contact, refreshing their old traditions and developing new ones. I have previously called this phenomenon the Viking diaspora, and still find that the most convincing model to explain how it all came about.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Judith Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora* (London, 2015).

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