VIKING SOCIETY
STUDENT CONFERENCE
2024 PROGRAMME

University of Nottingham

April 27th 2024

Special thanks to the conference organisers:

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April 27, 2024
University of Nottingham
Senate Chamber, Trent Building,
University Park Campus
Nottingham NG7 2RD

Viking Society Student Conference 2024

Keynote speaker:

Dr Keith Ruiter,
University of Suffolk

Analogical Environments: Indigenous Law and Viking Studies?

11:00 Panel 1 – Life in the Viking Age
Chair: Tom Fairfax, University of Nottingham

Negotiating Private Love and Public Demands in Strengleikar
Mary Catherine O'Connor, University of Oxford

Viking Hydrarchies: Assessing the power of island settlements and maritime networks during the Viking Age
Suzanne Collyer, University of the Highlands and Islands

13:00 Panel 2 – Religion in the Viking Age
Chair: Francesca Squitieri, University of Nottingham

The Pilgrim King: The Analysis of Eiríkr the Good's Pilgrimage to Jerusalem
Dilan Dogar, Bilkent University

A Crisis of Fate: Paganism and Christianity in Eiríksmál and Hákonarmál
Muriël de Kroon, University of York

Human and Inhuman: Dogs, Slavs and Humanity
Natalia Radziwillowicz, University of Nottingham

14:45 Panel 3 – Death and Life in the Viking Age
Chair: Harriet Clark, University of Nottingham

The Many Faces of the Travelling Norse Sorceress
Tara Athanasiou, University of the Highlands and Islands

'What now avails the form that Frea lov'd?': Frank Sayers' reimagining of the death of Balder in 'The Descent of Frea'
Sarah McAllister, Durham University

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10:00 – 10:55	**Registration**
10:55 – 11:00	**Opening Comments**
11:00 – 12:00	**Panel 1 - Life in the Viking Age**
12:00 – 13:00	**Lunch**
13:00 – 14:30	**Panel 2 - Christian Religion in the Viking Age**
14:30 – 14:45	**Break**
14:45 – 15:45	**Panel 3 - Death and Life in the Viking Age**
15:45 – 16:00	**Break**
16:00 – 17:00	**Keynote Speaker Keith Ruiter - Analogical Environments: Indigenous Law and Viking Studies?**

Negotiating Private Love and Public Demands in *Strengleikar*

Mary Catherine O'Connor – University of Oxford

Strengleikar is a collection of twenty-one Old French *lais* which were translated into Old Norse during the reign of Hákon Hákonarson. This collection, which contains eleven of Marie de France's *lais* are extant in a single manuscript (Uppala Library, De la Gardie 4-7) dating from c.1270 from Norway. This makes this collection a vital witness to early translation practices in Norway in the thirteenth century and offers a window into the reception of courtly love and its literary settings in thirteenth-century Norway.

This paper will examine the representation of the conflict between private love and the public performance of chivalry through analysing the translation of private spaces in *Strengleikar*. Focusing private spaces will centre my discussion on male protagonists', behaviours and the motivations for their conduct, outside of the public arenas of the court and tournament. This discussion will thereby examine how the tension between public and private space was interpreted in an Old Norse context and, specifically at the court of King Hákon Hákonarson in the thirteenth century. Furthermore, by inflecting my analysis through the discussion of the love versus chivalry conflict, this paper will consider the reception of this fundamental literary theme from the romance tradition into a Scandinavian context and consider how it was adapted and modified for audiences and perhaps also for royal agendas. Demonstrating an increased concern for the demands of the public domain and the performance of public spectacles of chivalry and idealised behaviours, this paper will argue that the role of private space in *Strengleikar* is diminished and the role of love as motivating principle for chivalry is subordinated in favour of male homosocial bonds and feudal relationships which structure the world of the *lais* and focus on the public performance of relationships and a male organised world.

Viking Hydrarchies: Assessing the power of island settlements and maritime networks during the Viking Age

Suzanne Collyer – University of the Highlands and Islands

This paper will assess the power and centrality of island settlements in the North Atlantic during the Viking Age (c. 8th to 11th centuries). Using the term hydrarchy, as coined by poet Richard Braithwaite and expanded upon by academics Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, it will argue that islands deserve to be recognised as central places amidst the wider Norse diaspora. Akin to the many-headed hydra from Greek mythology, the network of island nodes played a significant role in maritime trade and the dissemination of Norse political and religious ideologies. Often relegated to the backwaters of significance, the islands examined in this paper highlight the unique power they held over the seemingly more prestigious land based power centres. This centrality can be highlighted through an examination of a myriad of sources, including the archaeology of burials and unique artefacts, place- and personal names, *þing* sites, DNA and isotope analysis, and literary evidence. Interwoven through these sources is a story of hydrarchial power, with islands such as the Western Isles of Scotland claiming influence over surrounding political milieus from the Orkney Jarldom to the Icelandic Commonwealth, the Viking power bases in Dublin and York, and even reaching back to the Viking homelands in Scandinavia. Through their role as maritime central places these islands are often characterised by unique hybrid identities and were a melting pot of complex cultural ideas.

The Pilgrim King: The Analysis of Eirikr the Good's Pilgrimage to Jerusalem
Dilan Dogar – Bilkent University

Embedded within Viking sagas, the theme of wide-ranging long-distance journey stands as a defining motif. Spanning approximately two and a half centuries, between 793 and 1066, this proclivity saw Scandinavians emerge as conquerors, raiders and traders across Europe and the British Isles – affecting considerable spatial traversals. Although the Viking Age started to wane within the first decades of the eleventh century, the motif of long-distance journey persisted, yet transformed in character. Growing out of their roles as marauders and settlers, we find Norsemen at the court of Russian princes, as Varangian Guards at the Byzantine emperor's service, and also as pilgrims.

This paper focuses in particular on the latter and analyses this metamorphosis by following the journey of the "pilgrim" king, Eiríkr inn góði. In this regard, this paper will focus on Eiríkr inn góði (r. 1095-1103). Indeed, this paper will centre on Eiríkr to fully grasp the motivation behind his decision to abdicate his throne to undertake a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. I will delve into *Knýtlinga saga*, which Óláfr Þórðarson allegedly compiled during the 1250s, for it is the only source that mentions Eiríkr and his reign thoroughly. Additionally, the so-called *Gesta Danorum* will be used as a subsidiary of the *Knýtlinga saga* to fully comprehend Eiríkr's political and religious motivation regarding his pilgrimage. Finally, the *Historia de profectione Danorum in Hierosolymam*, probably written in the late 1190s by an anonymous author and *Leiðarvísir og Borgarskipan*, written circa 1157 by Níkulás Bergsson, who was the abbot of the monastery of Þverá in Eyjafjörður, Northern Iceland, will be used to comprehend further and, more importantly, to investigate the common motivations of a king and common Scandinavian people regarding the motivation behind undertaking such a long journey from the edges of northern Europe to the Levant's coasts.

A Crisis of Fate: Paganism and Christianity in *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*
Muriël de Kroon – University of York

Praise poetry is one of the most prevalent types of skaldic poetry in ninth century Old Norse sources. Two of such poems are the anonymously written *Eiríksmál* (c. 954) and *Hákonarmál* by Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson (c. 961). They are unique in having both skaldic and eddic characteristics (Goeres 2015; North 2011; Nygaard 2023). In addition, *Hákonarmál* is clearly inspired by *Eiríksmál* (Townend 2003). This similarity is seen in their content: a recently fallen king being brought to *Valhǫll* to become part of the *einherjar* for *ragnarök*. For these reasons the poems are often discussed together (Goeres 2015, Gunnell 2020; Larrington 2016; Nygaard 2023). However, one topic needing further examination with these poems is religion. In both *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*, Christian imagery appears in concurrence with figures from Norse mythology and pagan traditions. This reflects the transitional period of the late ninth century where both Christianity and paganism had significant impact on society (Fulk 2012). However, this paper will discuss how *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál* use these religions differently. By conducting a close reading of both poems, as well as looking at the societal context surrounding the creation of these poems, these differences become clear. While *Eiríksmál* contains much pagan imagery, it has a Christian undertone. The opposite is true for *Hákonarmál*. In this poem, even though allusions to Christianity are made, paganism seems to be reclaimed as the main religion. Hákon inn góði is even equated to a god himself (Sundqvist 2015). This makes sense in the societal context. Eiríkr blóðøx was a converted Christian (Goeres 2015; Taggart 2022) while Hákon inn góði was raised Christian but (potentially unwillingly) returned to paganism (Fulk 2012; North 2011; Ross 2022; Sundqvist 2013). In short, this paper aims to discuss how Christianity and paganism are used differently *Eiríksmál* and *Hákonarmál*.

Human and Inhuman: Dogs, Slavs and Humanity
Natalia Radziwillowicz – University of Nottingham

The physical body is perhaps at the core of human identity, providing each person with their own unique vessel, while also firmly establishing them as part of a wider, complex community. This paper will explore the ways in which medieval authors could alienate and dehumanise others – in this case Slavs – by referring to them as dogs. This research is undertaken as part of a PhD project focusing on the interactions between Scandinavians and the populations on the southern Baltic coast. As part of this research, I examine the ways in which different people were conceived of and portrayed in the literature written about them.

In this paper I will assess how the Saxon authors Thietmar of Merseburg and Helmold of Bosau wrote of the neighbouring Slavs, and in particular focus on the instances where they are conflated with dogs. This terminology – levied by Christian authors against their pagan neighbours – highlights the perceived divide between the two groups – faithful versus faithless, controlled versus chaotic, human and civilised versus animal and uncultured.

Writing in the eleventh and twelfth centuries respectively, the authors were both aware and involved with the keen interest the Church had in the conversion of the Slavs to Christianity. From a Christian perspective, while the body was certainly perishable and somewhat weak, it was an important symbol of belonging, and of propriety, with mankind being made in God's image. To have one's humanity mutated into a dog is to lose all one's rights, connections, respect and awareness – to be feral and shunned. The question then becomes: if such creatures were so abject, then why was it considered so important for them to be converted? There is, perhaps, still humanity in the dog Slav.

The Many Faces of the Travelling Norse Sorceress
Tara Athanasiou – University of the Highlands and Islands

The Old Norse saga corpus and mythology contain many references to Viking Age *vǫlur* (sorceresses) who played a specialised and peripatetic role in which they travelled to different places to provide their ritual services. In this presentation I will examine the evidence for the mobility of female magic practitioners in the Viking Age archaeological record and later literary sources to highlight common themes and discrepancies within the sources and explore some of the reasons behind this. I will also explore some of the challenges of identifying a person's mobility from the mortuary context and will propose three proxy indicators that may, when applied to the broad context of burials, infer that the buried person was geographically, ritually, or symbolically mobile.

A comparison of the Viking Age mortuary context and later literary sources suggests that the role, social position, and experience of the *vǫlur* was one that evolved considerably over time and in different geo-political contexts. What appears to have been a high-status role that served an important social, economic, and martial purpose in tenth century Scandinavia, had a very different depiction in later Icelandic sources. The Christian lens through which the thirteenth century sagas were written can partially explain this marked difference, but sociopolitical context was also likely a factor. With no kings, towns, or organised military in Iceland (or Greenland), the function and social requirement of magic practitioners would have been very different. I will argue that the depictions of travelling *vǫlur* in later written sources may therefore reflect both an echo of social memory from pre-Christian times and a real role in the saga period in which some vagrant women scraped an existence telling fortunes and spreading gossip.

'What now avails the form that Frea lov'd?': Frank Sayers' reimagining of the death of
Balder in 'The Descent of Frea'

Sarah McAllister, Durham University

Frank Sayers' masque 'The Descent of Frea' was first published as part of the collection *The Dramatic Sketches of the Ancient Northern Mythology* in 1790. The work depicted a reimagined version of Balder's death, in which Frea plays a central role as the grieving wife of Balder.

Before the middle of the eighteenth century, knowledge of Old Norse literature had been largely limited to small scholarly and antiquarian circles. However, in the second half of the eighteenth century, writers and artists in Britain began to use the mythology as a new visual medium to express their ideas. As Heather O'Donoghue has noted this entrance of Norse imagery into British culture was largely due to the work of 'a historian, a translator, and a poet', referring to Paul Henri-Mallet, Thomas Percy and Thomas Gray. While the work of these men has been commended, many of the subsequent works produced in the second half of the eighteenth century have often been considered inaccurate or poorly written retellings of Norse mythology. Yet, Frank Sayers was well regarded amongst his peers, as William Taylor stated that 'The Descent of Frea' with the exception 'of Milton's Comus, [is] the finest Masque extant in the English language'. *The Dramatic Sketches of Ancient Northern Mythology* also had a successful print run with multiple editions published in both Britain and Germany. Despite his contemporary success, Sayers has been largely ignored by scholars of the post-medieval reception of Old Norse mythology.

This paper will therefore argue that Sayers work warrants inclusion and attention in discussions of reception of Norse mythology. Evidently his work was influential amongst his contemporaries, but more significantly 'The Descent of Frea' illustrates how writers began to adapt Norse mythology into more unique poetic works rather than merely retelling the same myths.