THE NINE SKILLS OF

EARL RÖGNVALDR OF ORKNEY

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Cover photograph of Maeshowe and all other photographs by Judith Jesch

One of the great pleasures of professing Viking Studies is the chance it gives me to follow in the footsteps of the Vikings themselves. Even here in Nottingham we are in one of the Five Boroughs of the Danelaw, briefly ruled by Vikings in the ninth and tenth centuries. So when I walk down Barker Gate, or go to the garden centre in Toton, or the country pub in Old Dalby, or stroll along the river at Gunthorpe, these places help to keep the Viking settlers who gave them their names constantly in mind. But the Vikings travelled far beyond Nottinghamshire, and I too have followed in their wake to many different lands at high latitudes, islands in northern seas, and countries of mountain and moor. I actually feel a strong affinity with the Shipping Forecast: it starts with 'Viking', of course, and then the names of North and South Utsire, Humber, Irish Sea, Shannon, Hebrides, Fair Isle, Faeroes and Southeast Iceland all evoke, for me, my research and teaching interests (though 'Bailey' is, I think, a bit too far out at sea to provide any useful evidence for Viking Studies).[1] I have been to places as exciting, and congenial, as Estonia in the east and Newfoundland in the west, and most of the countries in between. Indeed, I entirely sympathise with the eleventh-century Swede Ásgautr, whose son erected a rune stone in his memory which says 'He was in the west and in the east. May God help his soul'. My nearest and dearest sometimes calls these trips 'holidays', but however pleasant, they do always have an academic purpose, whether that is to go to a conference, or to do some field research, and often I manage both. Many of these jaunts have been subsidised over the years by my department, now the School of English Studies, by outside funding bodies such as the British Academy and the Leverhulme Trust, and by the Overseas Conference Fund of the University of Nottingham, recently defunct, though happily reinvented in a new guise at the HRC. To all of these funders I am very grateful.

However, the Overseas Conference Fund, in its day, could not always help with the places I wanted to go to. Take the case of the Northern Isles, which became a part of the Kingdom of Scotland in the mid-fifteenth century, and are as a result of subsequent history nowadays not counted as 'overseas'. So unfortunately my trips to Orkney and Shetland did not qualify for OCF support, even though you have to cross water to get there, and the travel costs three or four times as much as going to a conference in 'overseas' places like Paris or Rome. But I made it there anyway.

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[1] My thanks go to Professor Stephen Bailey, School of Law, for his expert chairing of the lecture. This booklet reproduces the lecture as given, without any significant alterations.

While I love all of the places I have visited on my Viking jaunts and would gladly return as often as possible to any of them, my all-time favourite is the group of islands usually known as the Orkneys. This name is the modern English version of Old Norse *Orkneyjar*, which contains the plural noun *-eyjar* 'islands'. Modern pride in their county has led the current inhabitants to prefer the singular form 'Orkney', so I mostly use this form in deference to those who actually live there. But secretly I like the plural version because it links back to the Old Norse form, and reminds me of the individuality of Orkney's 70 or so islands, 16 of them inhabited – so far I have only managed to visit half of those! Orkney is a beautiful and gentle place in its own right. It has a fascinating history of ever-changing populations, whose impressive monuments going right back to the Neolithic can still be seen all over the landscape. Orkney is probably also the only place in the British Isles where the name of the main airport is picked out in runes – its name is Grimsetter, a good Old Norse name meaning 'Grim's shieling'. Despite the congeniality of Orkney, its fascination for me is primarily academic. It provides me with an opportunity to combine my scholarly interests in sagas, skaldic poetry and runic inscriptions, all within a landscape

Figure 1 : Grimsetter Airport

where most of the place-names form a guidebook to its Viking and Norse past. Orkney also has one of my favourite buildings, the Cathedral of St Magnus in Kirkwall. It seems appropriate somehow that this cathedral was built by some of the same masons who built the Cathedral in Durham, where my academic career began.

Figure 2: St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall

At the University of Durham I did a BA degree in English Language and Medieval Literature. The like of it does not exist now, and it was unusual even then, but it turned out to be the ideal training for my subsequent research path.

We read lots of Old and Middle English literature, and were taught Old, Middle and Modern English Philology, Gothic, and much else. Virtually the only option we were given was a choice of either Old French or Old Norse. Thinking, with the arrogance of youth, that Old French was too easy, I perversely chose the more difficult language – and was introduced to the Icelandic sagas and to Eddic poetry. On graduating, I had no very clear career path in mind, but I did know that I wanted to know more. So after Durham, I studied first for a while at the University of Oslo, while working as an au pair, and then went on to do a PhD at University College London. At this point it is appropriate to thank the two people who guided me in these early stages of my career and who put up with some of my more wayward attempts to forge an academic path: John McKinnell who first taught me Old Norse at Durham, and my PhD supervisor at UCL, Richard Perkins. There were others whose advice and support, though more occasional, were also influential at crucial moments, and who must bear some responsibility for my presence here today: the late Geoffrey Smithers, the late Victor Watts, and Peter Foote. My first female mentor, and a very significant one, was the late Christine Fell, Professor of Early English Studies in this University. She gave me my first and, until now, only, permanent job, and turned me gently but firmly from my rather uninspired interest in obscure Old Icelandic texts to the brave new world of interdisciplinary Viking Studies.

Since arriving at Nottingham over two decades ago, I have met with much encouragement and support from colleagues in my subject area all over the country and indeed the world. Equally important over the years has been the micro-environment in which I work, the School of English Studies. This hotbed of English language, literature and drama has always been immensely tolerant, and usually even encouraging, of the Viking cuckoo in its nest. I thank every one of them for their support. I would particularly like to thank my colleagues in the 'medieval section' of the School, who as well as being most congenial company, also provide invaluable academic support with their expertise in areas as diverse as maxims, onomastics, manuscript studies, medieval Scotland, Anglo-Saxon burials, Bible translations and much more. Students are the life-blood of any institution, and it is a great pleasure to see several of my former and prospective PhD students here, as well as little clumps of current undergraduates and MA students.

My career at Nottingham hasn't all been about Viking voyages: it won't surprise other academics that quite a lot of administration has also been involved. One of the jobs politely but firmly given to me by my then Head of

School was as Key Skills Coordinator at a time when 'Key Skills' were perceived to be the latest pedagogical panacea. Nowadays these appear under the guise of 'transferable skills' in our module submission documents, but seven years ago they were 'key' – the all-important elements our students would take from their learning of English, or even of Old Icelandic and Viking Studies, and use in their subsequent, non-academic careers. My job was to help the School to define and identify the 'key skills' which we thought undergraduates got from our course. Eventually we came up with three: 'Learning to Learn', 'Communication Skills (Oral)', and 'Communication Skills (Written)'. The most important outcome of the Key Skills project in English Studies was a 'Student Self-Report Form' on which students would identify their progress in acquiring these key skills.

Those of us who study the past often observe that nothing changes much. In twelfth-century Orkney, a well-educated young man about to embark on a glorious career composed just such a self-report. This particular young man identified a rather different set of key skills, and his education seems to have been much more effective than that of the University of Nottingham, as he had acquired nine, rather than just three, of them. He tells us about them in verse:

> Tafl em ek örr at efla,
> íþróttir kannk níu,
> týnik trauðla rúnum,
> tíð er mér bók ok smíðir.
> Skríða kannk á skíðum,
> skýtk ok rœ'k, svát nýtir,
> hvárt tveggja kannk hyggja
> harpslátt ok bragþáttu.
>
> I am quick at playing chess, I have nine skills, I hardly forget runes, I am often at either a book or craftsmanship. I am able to glide on skis, I shoot and row so it makes a difference, I understand both the playing of the harp and poetry.

You will notice that Rögnvaldr has both oral and written communication skills (poetry and runes), and I think that his reference to being 'often at a book' indicates that he had mastered the skill of 'learning to learn'. But he also has physical skills (skiing and rowing), which he probably practised on a Wednesday afternoon. He also very sensibly used his extracurricular time to acquire other

skills, by joining the University Orchestra and its Chess Society. I'm not sure, however, if he acquired practical skills like craftsmanship and hunting at university, but perhaps he did a more vocational postgraduate conversion course later on.

Earl Rögnvaldr of Orkney was actually born as plain Kali Kolsson in Norway, probably in the first decade of the twelfth century, and some of his skills, such as skiing, were undoubtedly acquired there. At that time, the King of Norway also claimed overlordship over most of the Norse colonies in the west, which had been established in the Viking Age: the Northern and Western Isles, the Isle of Man, the Faroes, and later on also Iceland. Under the Norwegian king, the Earls of Orkney ruled over both Orkney and Shetland, and often Caithness as well. Accession to the Earldom was almost always accompanied by the bloody infighting that is inevitable in a system which awards success to the strongest and not necessarily the eldest. The twelfth century saw many violent conflicts between contenders for the Earldom, most notably the brutal murder of Magnús Erlendsson on the island of Egilsay in around 1116. Magnús was killed by his cousin Hákon Pálsson, who then became sole earl as a result.

This political murder meant martyrdom and subsequent sainthood for Magnús. His relics were preserved and venerated both in Orkney and elsewhere, and some of them appear to have survived to the present day. A damaged skull was found, along with some other bones, in a pillar in the cathedral in Kirkwall, in the 1920s. Those who studied the remains at the time of their discovery pronounced them confidently to be those of Magnús. Modern scholars are often suspicious of medieval relics, and this identification has since been questioned. Apart from the usual doubt over such relics, the identification has been questioned on the grounds that the medieval sources that tell us about the martyrdom of Magnús are mainly Icelandic literary texts which are therefore unreliable. However, since no one had really looked at the question in detail since the 1920s, it seemed a good idea to re-examine the evidence now. It was thus a great pleasure for me to collaborate with the palaeopathologist Theya Molleson of the Natural History Museum, for an article which has just been published.[2] Combining Theya's expertise in the study of human skeletal remains with my own predilection for the close reading of medieval texts, we have demonstrated, to our own satisfaction at least, that the damage to the skull is

[2]'The death of Magnus Erlendsson and the relics of St Magnus', *The World of Orkneyinga Saga*, ed. Olwyn Owen, Kirkwall, 2005, pp. 127-44.

entirely consistent with the narrative descriptions of the killing of St Magnús. We have tried to show that the two types of evidence, the textual and the skeletal, are in close agreement and, when brought together, allow us to reconstruct the manner of the saint's death, which was almost certainly by two axe blows to the head, delivered by a right-handed person facing him.

Figure 3: Statuette of St Magnus

So what has the death of Magnús to do with Earl Rögnvaldr? Well, although Rögnvaldr was Norwegian, he had an Orcadian mother, and in fact he was the nephew, the sister's son, of Magnús. The vicissitudes of Orcadian politics eventually brought Rögnvaldr to the Earldom of Orkney, though not without some of the usual killings and other shenanigans first. One of his first official acts as earl was therefore to thank God for his success by commissioning the building of an appropriate monument to his sainted uncle in the form of a cathedral, which would also be a splendid house for his relics – and this is presumably when Magnús's bones were translated there. Rögnvaldr died in 1192

and was himself later venerated locally as a saint. Another set of bones found in the cathedral have been attributed to him, and Theya and I also looked at these. The evidence is much less clear-cut than in the case of Magnús, but we concluded that this skull and its associated bones were at the very least consistent with the saga descriptions of Earl Rögnvaldr. We even indulged in a little speculation about the remains. For instance, the right femur or thigh bone of this individual showed signs of an injury of the type that can be sustained in a fall or wrench by horse-riders, hikers, footballers, or even skiers – perhaps providing evidence for one of Rögnvaldr's nine skills. And then the skull has a curious depression in it, which had previously been explained as the result of pressure from a badly-fitting helmet. However, we prefer an alternative explanation: there is both osteological and textual evidence for the extensive practice of cauterisation of the head, with a hot iron, as a cure for a variety of illnesses in the northern world at just this time. We concluded that, rather than a painful helmet, Rögnvaldr may have had such treatment, perhaps for a headache brought on by too much studying?

Rögnvaldr was thus poet and athlete, ruler and politician, patron of the arts and intellectual. He somehow also found the time to lead a motley crew of Norwegians, Orcadians and Icelanders on a crusade to the Holy Land. The rollicking narrative of this protracted expedition forms the liveliest part of *Orkneyinga saga*, which also shows that the trip was productive of much of Rögnvaldr's best poetry. The crusaders had such a good time that they were, I am afraid to say, also responsible for some bad behaviour when they got back home. One of the most fascinating monuments in Orkney is the prehistoric chambered cairn at Maeshowe.[3] The inside of this Neolithic monument is covered in graffiti written in Norse runes. The frequent references in the inscriptions to *Jórsalamenn* 'Jerusalem-farers, pilgrims' indicate that the perpetrating vandals were the very same men who had followed Rögnvaldr to the Holy Land and therefore suggest a probable dating to the 1150s. Some of the graffiti are no better than those found in the average toilet, and those who want to know the Old Norse equivalent of the 'f-word' need look no further than here. But other inscriptions reveal a sophisticated knowledge and use of various forms of runes. Several of the inscriptions refer allusively to the literature, lore and legends of Iceland and the remoter Scandinavian past. So, while they are hardly literary texts in themselves, the Maeshowe inscriptions do

[3]Also pictured on the cover of this booklet.

serve to indicate the broader intellectual climate in which the poetry of Rögnvaldr and his associates and successors was produced. Unfortunately, it is impossible to tell which, if any, of the inscriptions were cut by Rögnvaldr himself, using his vaunted runic skills.

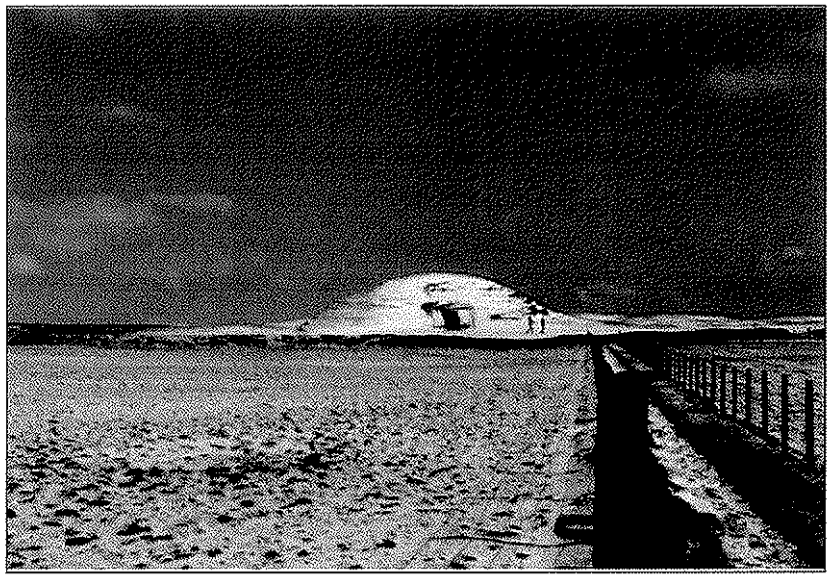

Figure 4: Maeshowe

Rögnvaldr was thus significant on several different levels, but it is his poetry I am mainly interested in, not least because I am in the process of editing it for an international collaborative editing project.[4] Rögnvaldr lived at a time when the Viking Age and its well-known habits of trading, raiding and settlement had faded away. The old Viking world was experiencing religious, cultural and even political integration with the shiny new world of medieval Christian Europe. His poetry is a perfect expression of this exciting and transitional time.

[4]See http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/

Rögnvaldr's 'Nine Skills' stanza shows him in boasting mode. Although boasting is not new in Old Norse literature, it usually occurs in highly specific contexts, and this general presentation of the poet is innovative, in the context of Old Norse poetry, in its focus on the lyric self. The accomplishments, or skills, listed by Rögnvaldr are very much those of a twelfth-century gentleman, rather than one of his Viking ancestors. Those ancestors would have boasted of how many battles they had won or how many warriors they had killed, or how skilled they were at sailing ships, or rather they would have had their professional poets boast about these things for them. But Rögnvaldr does his own boasting in his own poem. Moreover, the reference to books as well as runes shows that Rögnvaldr had an interest in different kinds of literacy. This has led some, such as Paul Bibire, to suggest that he was in fact responsible for the initial preservation of his own oral poetry in manuscript form. This is unprovable, but, if true, would make him an innovator in applying the new technology of writing in books to the recording of vernacular poetry. The earliest writing of prose in a Scandinavian vernacular cannot have been before 1100, and there is otherwise little evidence for the recording of poetry in manuscripts before about 1200. Rögnvaldr lived and composed right in the middle of this period of developing literacy, and contributed to the important change of poetic medium from the oral to the written.

Whether written or not, Rögnvaldr's poetry marked a new departure for the old poetic form of *dróttkvætt*, or 'court metre', which goes back to the beginning of the Viking Age, or at least 300 years before Rögnvaldr. This literary genre is also rather loosely known as 'skaldic poetry', in contrast to 'Eddic' poetry, which is found in the *Edda*. The heyday of skaldic poetry was in the century before Rögnvaldr, the eleventh. Had he lived then, Rögnvaldr, as an aristocrat and ruler, would more likely have been on the receiving end of such poems than producing them. Although there were some kings and rulers in the eleventh century who composed poetry, and may have provided Rögnvaldr with a model, his poetry is both more extensive and innovative than theirs, and he also differs from them in not employing professional poets to sing his praises. He seems just to have liked hanging out with other poets. In his compositions he kept the highly structured eight-line stanza required by the form, but abandoned the long praise poem or *drápa* in which many such stanzas were strung together with a refrain. Although there was a tradition before Rögnvaldr of individual stanzas (*lausavísur*) in which the poet comments on events as they happen, or just after they have happened, Rögnvaldr's use of this form departs

from the tradition substantially. His poetry is remarkable both for the number of such occasional verses and for their frequent light-heartedness and wit, all of which move them well beyond more traditional lausavísur. Among his thirty-eight surviving stanzas, we find a subtle variety of tone, register and subject-matter, and his poetry makes good use of obscenity and *double-entendre*, as well as more traditional skaldic word-play. In his lively and colourful stanzas, Rögnvaldr jokes, for instance, about the endless mud of Grimsby, an unattractive prospect to the Jerusalem-farers arriving there by sea; he laughs at Orcadian clerics whose habits and beardlessness make them look like women; he teases a frozen serving-maid in Shetland about her chattering teeth; and he presents a gleeful picture of a drunken friend falling over after a good night out in Byzantium. But he can also show a more serious side in a very pious stanza declaimed as he approaches Jerusalem with his pilgrim's palm on his back and a crucifix on his breast. His surviving stanzas don't tell us much about his private life, except for one beautiful and sorrowful stanza composed at his wife's sickbed.

Most remarkable of Rögnvaldr's stanzas are those associated with a visit that his expedition, on their way to the Holy Land, made to the court of the Viscountess Ermengard of Narbonne, in Provence. Verses by both Rögnvaldr and some of his followers show them assimilating the latest European courtly love motifs to traditional Norse poetic diction. Their stanzas reveal a frank, physical admiration for the high-ranking and unattainable lady, who is presented as having sent them on a knightly quest to the Holy Land. In the literary manner of the time, the poets suffer sorrow and grief when absent from her, yet their stanzas are also spiced with imagery and diction drawn from their traditional pagan Norse mythology. Thus the poets call Ermengard Bíl (a moon-goddess), Skögull (a valkyrie), and Hlín (a protective goddess). In best twelfth-century fashion, they say that her forehead is fair and her hair is like silk, but in one stanza Rögnvaldr also associates her golden tresses with an old Norse story:

> Víst 'r at frá berr flestu
> Fróða meldrs at góðu
> vel skúfaðra vífa
> vöxtr þinn, konan svinna.
> Skorð lætr hár á herðar
> haukvallar sér falla,
> átgjörnum rauðk erni
> ilka, gult sem silki.

> It is sure, wise lady, that your (hair)growth surpasses that of most Fróði's-meal-haired women. The prop of the hawk-field (woman) has hair falling on her shoulders, which is yellow like silk; I redden the claws of the greedy eagle.

The allusion in this stanza is to an old story of a magic quern, or hand-mill, that grinds gold for the legendary Danish king Fróði. The story explaining why the kenning 'Fróði's meal' means 'gold' is told in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, a thirteenth-century Icelandic treatise on poetry and mythology, but it has more ancient roots than that, and there is other evidence that it was well-known in medieval Orkney. In his brief allusion to this familiar tale, Rögnvaldr manages not only to say that Ermengard's hair is like gold, but by implication to compare her southern beauty rather favourably to that of the northern women he has known. At the same time, he makes use of a traditional Norse poetic device, in which a stark contrast is drawn between the manly world of feeding the eagle, or killing, and the softer and sexualised feminine sphere. In traditional skaldic poetry, the implication of this contrast was usually that the warrior preferred to be doing heroic things in battle than lolling about with women. Rögnvaldr's stanza, however, pays only rather perfunctory homage to heroic behaviour and seems to prefer to gaze at the female.

While many of Rögnvaldr's stanzas are purely entertaining, he also took a more serious, we might even say academic, interest in poetry and its forms. *Orkneyinga saga* explains that he collaborated with an Icelander called Hallr Þórarinsson on a long poem designed to illustrate different metrical forms. This poem was called *Háttalykill* 'Key of Metres' and the saga says that it originally had five stanzas in each separate metre. However, the saga-writer admits that this was thought too long and notes that 'now there are only two stanzas in each metre' … The poem is not well preserved, but we still have eighty-four stanzas of it, in a very poor copy, illustrating forty-two different metres. As far as we can tell, *Háttalykill* is not the most exciting Old Norse poem, and it rarely figures on university syllabuses today. Yet it is significant in three respects.

Firstly, it is a systematic treatment of Norse metrics, adapting the learned idea of the *clavis metrica* to an exposition of native forms. In the Viking Age Norse poets were trained and schooled orally, but this changed gradually with the advent of literacy. *Háttalykill* is the first recorded attempt to adapt that traditional oral schooling to literate and latinate modes learned from the

continent. As such it was a model for Snorri Sturluson's much more famous *Edda*. In this book, Snorri's section on metrics consists of the exposition of his own poem *Háttatal* 'List of Metres', which is designed to illustrate 102 metrical variations and which was clearly and explicitly modelled on *Háttalykill*.

Secondly, although *Háttalykill* claims to be a 'key to metres', many of the variants on the basic skaldic metre that it names and illustrates are not in fact known from any earlier or contemporary Norse poetry. It is clear that the two poets actually aimed to extend the skaldic art by devising new metres, rather than just listing existing ones. Moreover, their new metres are often based on foreign models and show their talent for adapting these models to native poetic traditions – the poem is thus neither completely traditional nor completely new, but a syncretic and influential experiment in combining the two.

Thirdly, the ostensible content of *Háttalykill*, announced in its opening stanza, is *forn fræði* 'ancient lore'. This too extended the boundaries of the skaldic genre. Traditionally, court poetry had a contemporary bias: the praise poems were addressed to a living, or commemorated a recently dead, ruler. While these praise poems could look back on the ruler's lifetime achievements, they rarely if ever went further back than that. *Háttalykill*, on the other hand, is a historical poem that starts with the legendary antecedents of the Danish and Norwegian royal dynasties, in the time before history. It then proceeds chronologically up to the Norwegian king Magnús Barelegs, who died in 1103. As the poem is incomplete, it is likely that it was originally intended to be fully up-to-date at the time it was composed half a century or so later. With this strong interest in chronological narrative, *Háttalykill* is again a precursor to Snorri and indeed to most Scandinavian and Icelandic historiography. The prose histories of Norway and Denmark, in Latin and Old Norse, that appear in the twelfth century build on this shift in poetical subject-matter, from the contemporary to the historical, that Rögnvaldr and Hallr were the first to implement. But most of the twelfth-century histories of Norway begin in relatively recent times, with the ninth-century rule of Haraldr Finehair. In the thirteenth century, Snorri, who was a teenager when Rögnvaldr died, was the first prose historian to take the account of the dynasty back beyond that into mythical times in his history of the kings of Norway known as *Heimskringla*, but Rögnvaldr and Hallr did it first in verse, in the previous century.

Rögnvaldr's poetry is innovative in its form, by developing the possibilities of the free-standing verse commenting on events as they happen, and by introducing a new focus on the lyric self. It is innovative in extending the

subject-matter, stylistic range and register of such poetry in a variety of entertaining, amusing and serious ways. At the same time, Rögnvaldr's innovations of style and content do not completely break away from the poetic traditions of the northern world: they are expressed in the basic metrical forms and established diction of the old court poetry, and they integrate their new subject-matter with old myths and legends. Rögnvaldr was also a great trend-setter. As we have seen, his academic collaboration with Hallr Þórarinsson in their metrical guide *Háttalykill* made possible several new scholarly genres practised most famously by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson, such as the metrical textbook, and the historiography of ancient Scandinavia.

Rögnvaldr's witty poetry with its explorations of courtly love also came to influence the compositions of his somewhat younger fellow-Orcadian, Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson. Bjarni, too, had extensive contacts in Norway and Iceland, and he may have been the author of the proverb-poem *Málsháttakvæði*, about which many of you heard Roberta Frank give a fine lecture here some years ago.[5] Somewhat more secure is his authorship of *Jómsvíkingadrápa*, a jolly poem about the legendary Danish heroes known as the Jomsvikings, and their courageous but losing battle against Earl Hákon of Norway. I translated this poem some years ago and here are some snippets from that translation:[6]

I will serve Odin's ale[7]
to every man around,
though none of the noble
knights will listen to me.

(That gentleman's wife, she
robs me of all my joy.)
Eager and bold the prince
ordered the launch of ships.
(The noble lady causes
me cruel suffering.)

[5]Roberta Frank, *Sex, Lies and Málsháttakvæði*, Nottingham, 2004.

[6]*The Triumph-Tree: Scotland's Earliest Poetry AD 550-1350*, ed. Thomas Owen Clancy, Edinburgh, 1998, pp. 225-35

[7]Kennning for 'poetry'.

The troops who could create
the clash of spears embarked.

Whereas Rögnvaldr's approach to poetic traditions was to refashion them with wit and flair, Bjarni's tends more to pastiche. He makes fun of the traditional opening stanza in which the poet calls his audience to order. Bjarni doesn't care what the audience does and insists that he will recite, even if no one listens. Bjarni also made use of the new literary fashion for courtly love to lighten his battle-poem. At regular intervals the military descriptions are intertwined with a refrain in which the narrator claims to have been hard done to by someone else's wife – this refrain has led one critic to deny Bjarni's authorship of this poem on the grounds that such amorous sentiments are *óbyskupslega* or 'not worthy of a bishop'. The intercalated refrain clearly borrows from Rögnvaldr's idea of contrasting the manly activity of killing with that of loving a woman, and I think there are plenty of clues that the good bishop meant it all as a joke. In this stanza, for instance, the refrain is intercalated with a description of a family of wolves eating the carrion after the battle – clearly making fun of a very long-standing convention of Germanic heroic poetry:

(That gentleman's wife, she
robs me of all my joy.)
She-wolf trod on swollen corpse,
wolf stood in the fodder.
(The noble lady causes
me cruel suffering.)
Wolf drooled over marrow-hall,[8]
baby wolf was fattened.

Bjarni's innovation of the frame-narrative and refrain which have nothing whatsoever to do with the rest of the poem, while clearly influenced by Rögnvaldr, also in their turn inspired a whole new genre of Icelandic poetry. Known as *rímur*, these poems also have a refrain the subject of which is love, and they remained the predominant literary form in Iceland from the late Middle Ages until the nineteenth century.

The twelfth century is well-known to medievalists as a century in which

[8]Kenning for 'bone'.

there was literary and cultural innovation across Europe. It is often described as a 'Renaissance', anticipating that other, more famous period also labelled thus. Orkney, too, experienced a renaissance in the twelfth century, most visibly symbolised in the building of St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall, initiated, as we have seen, by Rögnvaldr. His other activities in numerous fields are further evidence of a time when literature, literacy and architecture flourished at a number of aristocratic, ecclesiastical and other high-status sites throughout the islands. Most of the major structures still standing in the Orcadian landscape can be assigned to three widely-spaced historical periods. Orkney's three golden ages were in the Neolithic, the Iron Age around the time when B.C. became A.D., and the twelfth century. In each of these periods there was an outburst of confidence and creativity, and I don't think it has ever quite reached such heights again since. In the twelfth century, Orkney's confident and creative culture was Norse-speaking, literate in two alphabets, both poetically and historically-minded, thoroughly Christian and southward-looking, yet conscious of an ancient Scandinavian heritage that bound Orcadians closely to their cousins in Norway and Iceland. It was also a rough and violent time, when both lives and careers could be brutish and short. It is no wonder that a young man hoping to make a success of his career in such a time needed educating in at least nine different skills.

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