

ARNÓRR, EARLS' PROPAGANDIST? ON THE TECHNIQUES AND SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF SKALDIC EULOGY

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The Northern and Western Isles, with their strategic place on the Viking sea-roads between Norway, Ireland and Iceland, also came to have a place in the history of skaldic poetry, that intricate brand of early Nordic verse which specialises in praise, blame and bragging.¹ Orkney in the twelfth century, for instance, produced two skalds of outstanding gifts: the earl Rognvaldr kali (d. 1158) and Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson (d. 1223), and the poetry they produced was no debased, colonial imitation, but innovative and confident, linking Nordic traditions with the learning and literature of the South.

The skald with whom this paper is principally concerned, however, lived in the eleventh century and must have helped prepare the ground for his Orcadian successors. Arnórr Þórðarson was born in western Iceland in or soon after 1011 and was still alive in the 1070s. He owes his nickname *jarlaskáld* 'Earls' poet' to his service of the Orkney earls, Rognvaldr Brúsason and his uncle Þorfinnr Sigurðarson.² The two men co-ruled the Northern Isles in an increasingly uneasy partition for some ten years until Rognvaldr perished c. 1046, allegedly at the hand of Þorfinnr's henchman Þorkell Ámundason (*Orkneyinga saga*, henceforth *Orkn*, ch. 29).

Þorfinnr's unchallenged position in Orkney from c. 1046 until his death in 1065 may well account for the pattern of survival of Arnórr's poetry.³ Ten lines remain from the poem commemorating Rognvaldr (*Rognvaldsdrápa*, henceforth *Rdr*), while 148 lines seem to belong to the *Þorfinnsdrápa* (henceforth *Þdr*). Arnórr also visited and composed for another uncle-and-nephew pair, the Norwegian kings (and overlords of the Orkney earls) Magnús Ólafsson inn góði ('the Good', d. 1046/7) and Haraldr Sigurðarson, later *harðráði* ('Hard-Ruler', d. 1066). Large fragments of two poems for Magnús and one for Haraldr survive, together with a handful of *lausavísur* or freestanding occasional verses.⁴

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1. For a brief introduction and bibliography, see Fijdestøl 1993.
 2. Icelandic forms of names are used throughout, though 'earl' is used in preference to *jarl*. The character 'Ð, þ' can be transcribed as 'Th, th' and represents the initial sound of English 'thin', while 'ð' represents the initial sound of 'those'.
 3. Medieval and modern reconstructions of Þorfinnr's career include *Orkn*. chs 13-32, Crawford 1987: 71-91, and Thomson 1987: 43-53.
 4. Arnórr's poetry is edited in *Skjaldedigtning* (henceforth *Skj*) AI: 332-54, BI: 305-27, and Whaley 1998. *Þdr* is at *Skj* AI: 343-48, BI: 316-21, and Whaley 1998: 123-28 and 220-68; *Rdr* is at *Skj* AI: 332, BI: 305-6, and Whaley 1998:

Arnórr's own words show that his contact with Orkney and its earls was long and intense. He occupied a seat of honour opposite Þorfinnr (*Pdr* 1), fought for the earls on at least two occasions (*Pdr* 12, and below, p. 28), and was evidently married to a kinswoman of theirs (*Rdr* 2). Anecdotal evidence suggests that he irritated King Haraldr by including references to the Orkney earls in the opening of a poem in praise of Magnús (*Morkinskinna* p. 116). His deep grief at Þorfinnr's death was shared by his two young sons (*Pdr* 4 and the textually difficult *Pdr* 3, = *Pdr* 4 in Whaley 1998: 225-28).

Like most poetry of its kind, Arnórr's verse must have been preserved orally for well over a century before being incorporated in prose texts written mainly in the thirteenth century, though extant manuscripts are often still later. Manuscript texts for particular verses can be numerous and of variable quality, and relations between them are complex. *Pdr* has a relatively straightforward transmission history, being preserved principally in *Orkn*, but it still presents local textual difficulties, and overall problems of reconstruction.

In focusing on Arnórr jarlaskáld's verses about Þorfinnr in the present paper, my aim is to examine the social purpose of skaldic eulogy, by addressing four specific questions, the discussion of which will be integrated rather than consecutive: what exactly is it that this poetry seeks to persuade its audience to think; by what technical means does it do so; does it constitute propaganda; and is there any room for criticism or for diplomatically delicate subjects among the sycophantic praises? Many of the observations made will apply to skaldic eulogy at large, as well as to Arnórr's verses, though space does not permit full comparisons to be made.

The techniques of skaldic eulogy

The large skaldic corpus to which Arnórr's poetry belongs embraces spirited travelogue, expressions of love-longing or malice, descriptions of mythological scenes and, from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, devotional and hagiographical compositions. However, the skalds' favourite topic was battle, and their special forte was eulogising the military achievements of Nordic rulers. They were paid with hospitality, weapons, gold rings or cash to do so, and their persons and poems doubtless acquired kudos at home in Iceland (from where most court poets originated after c. 1000). Such poetry may also have had an enhanced survival rate, being cherished for its historical interest.

Fundamental to skaldic verse is its chief metre, the *dróttkvætt*, whose magnificent complexity is well suited to praise and persuasion — a classic case of

113 and 137-41. Text is cited from Whaley 1998, while verse numbers follow *Skj*; differences between the reconstructions of *Pdr* in *Skj* and Whaley are tabulated in Whaley 1998: 328.

the medium being the message. Its very name, often translated as ‘court metre’, speaks of élitism, since the *drótt* is a ruler’s chosen band of fighting men. *Dróttkvætt*, despite its clear kinship with the alliterative metre of the Old English *Beowulf*, the Old High German *Hildebrandslied*, or the Norse poems of the *Edda*, is distinguished by a longer, syllable-counting line which carries internal rhyme (*hendingar*) as well as alliteration; the placing of both is carefully regulated (see Gade 1995, *passim* or, summarily, Whaley 1993). The lines are arranged in eight-line strophes, though the half-strophe or helming (ON *helmingr*) is usually syntactically independent.

The main features of metre and style in the service of eulogy may be illustrated by a single helming: v. 5a of *Þdr*, here with a gloss which is intentionally pedantic. Alliterating sounds are shown in bold, while underlining marks the internal rhyme — *skothendingar* affecting consonants only in odd lines, and *aðalhendingar* of whole syllables in even lines. Italics in ll. 3-4 indicate the splitting of two clauses into discontinuous parts (discussed, together with the distinctive diction, below):

Hil mir rauð í hjal ma	Prince reddened in helmets’
hreggi skelkings eggjar.	storm sword’s edges.
Fór, <i>áðr fimmtán væri</i>	Went forth, <i>before fifteen [he] was,</i>
fetrjóðr hugins, <i>vetra.</i>	foot-reddener of raven, <i>winters.</i>

The elaboration and metrical discipline of the *dróttkvætt* mark compositions as utterly remote from the everyday, and syntax and style, partly determined by the metre and partly cultivated in their own right, have the same exclusive effect. The order of words within clauses and the placing of clauses within the helming can seem flexible to the point of anarchy, though again there are restrictions (Gade 1995: 12-21). In the first half of this helming, the syntax is only mildly convoluted, but the two clauses *fetrjóðr hugins fór* ‘foot-reddener of the raven went forth’ and *áðr fimmtán vetra væri* ‘before he was fifteen winters/years’ are split and intertwined, with the phrase *fimmtán vetra* distributed between the two clause-parts.

Nouns dominate the lexical filling of the metrical lines, and much of the skalds’ virtuosity goes into expressing culturally vital concepts such as ‘ruler, sword, battle, ship, sea’ or ‘gold’ using a colourful poetic thesaurus. Simplest are the poetic appellations known as *heiti*—nouns which are rare or non-occurring in prose, or which occur there with a different meaning. Examples in the sample helming are *hilmir* ‘ruler, prince’ and *hugins* ‘raven’ (see n. 5), and *skelkings* ‘sword’. The other main resource is the kenning, a stereotyped figurative periphrasis consisting of at least two elements, which may themselves be *heiti*. Examples here are *hjalma hreggi* ‘storm of helmets’, hence ‘battle’, and *fetrjóðr hugins* ‘foot-reddener of the raven’, hence ‘warrior, the one who makes carrion of his enemies’, while an alternative morphological

type, with the two elements compounded, is illustrated by *skýraáni* (v. 5b) ‘cloud-hall’, hence ‘sky’. The techniques of skaldic poetry, then, exhibitionist and self-consciously different from everyday speech, declared its élitism and potency and reinforced the prestige of those who possessed it. Whether or not it evolved in response to the visual arts, mimicking Viking-Age painted shields as suggested by Hallvard Lie (1952), or matching the interlaced ribbon or animal ornament of the Borre or Oseberg style, its carefully arranged syllables form a dense and almost plastic verbal artefact. Declaimed out loud in a royal hall to a noble and drink-flushed audience, its patterns of stress and assonance would produce a powerful sonic texture, although a sung delivery or instrumental accompaniment seem unlikely (Gade 1994). Even skaldic cognoscenti would have found a first performance intellectually challenging, though also rewarding. Subsequent memorisation and slow contemplation would have revealed intra- and inter-textual resonances, and the *heiti* and kennings would probably have released specific images suggested by etymological, mythological or historical associations, going beyond their basic semantic content.⁵

The rich assonances and formal elaboration of skaldic poetry also made it an ideal vehicle for persuasion. Many of its stylistic features, as the medieval Icelandic authors of the so-called *Third* and *Fourth Grammatical Treatises* demonstrated, correspond to the tropes and figures of classical rhetoric — periphrasis, metaphor, parenthesis, anastrophe and others — the principal function of which was to persuade. But at what point do persuasion and partisanship amount to propaganda? Except in extreme cases, this is always difficult to establish, especially when dealing with distant and under-documented cultures. One could take, for instance, Jowett and O’Donnell’s useful dictum that propaganda is ‘always value- and ideology-laden. The means may vary from a mild slanting of information to outright deception, but the ends are always predetermined to favor the propagandist’ (1992: 15; their ‘official’ definition is on p. 4). To analyse skaldic poems in this light presents fundamental difficulties over both means and ends. Lacking, in most cases, adequate external sources for verifying the skalds’ historical claims, we cannot accurately gauge how much falsification is

5. Two terms for ‘ruler’ in the sample verse illustrate the potential richness of the diction, but also the difficulty of gauging the extent to which particular semantic nuances are in play. *Hilmir* is a common term for ‘ruler’, but as a derivative of the word it alliterates with, *hjalm-* ‘helmet’, it may or may not have been understood as having specific connotations relating to that. In *fetrijóðr hugins* ‘foot-reddener of the raven’, *huginn* might have been taken merely as a common noun, or as a reference to Huginn, in Norse mythology one of the two ravens of Óðinn, god of poetry, magic, battle and death, and hence conceivably a hint at Þorfinnr’s place in a heroic tradition stretching back into the not-so-distant Óðinn-worshipping past.

involved, and we cannot know what specific effects on audience behaviour or attitude were sought or achieved. Nevertheless, glimmerings of answers can be gained from the verses themselves, and some concepts used in propaganda studies are usefully applicable to the study of skaldic verse. One of these is the emphasis on ideology.

Affirmation of military ideology

Almost the whole fabric of skaldic praise is woven from implicit affirmations of the rightness of an élitist military ideology. The heroic qualities of energy, fearlessness and tenacity are encapsulated in compound epithets such as *flugstygg* ‘flight-shunning’ (*Pdr* 6) or *hugsterks* ‘strong of spirit’ (*Pdr* 17), and some kennings turn warriors metaphorically into gods, such as *göndlar Njörðr* ‘Njörðr of battle’ (*Rdr* 1), or *unnar Baldr* ‘Baldr of the sword’ (*Pdr* 14, though see Whaley 1998: 246-48 on textual difficulties). Warfare and its trappings are repeatedly referred to, directly or obliquely, by kennings and other devices,⁶ and battle is seen as inevitable, almost natural. Although it is *kyndóm . . . brynju*, the ‘monstrous/strange verdict of the mail-coat’ (*Pdr* 6), it is also *aldin él grafninga þélar* ‘the ancient blizzard of the file of shields [i.e. blizzard of the sword]’ (*Rdr* 1).⁷ Arnórr had a predilection for presenting battle as a raging storm, *þrumu branda* ‘thunderstorm of swords’ (*Pdr* 18) and *egghríð* ‘blade-blizzard’ (*Pdr* 15) being among the twelve examples in his extant poetry, and he frequently depicts horns sounding, missiles flying, blood flowing or buildings burning virtually without human agency (e.g. *Pdr* 7, 16, 17).

This element of detachment from the hand-to-hand violence of battle is also observable in the classic motif of the ‘beasts of battle’ (discussed in Fidjestøl 1982: 200-2). There are two basic templates: either the beasts of battle—wolf, raven and eagle—feed on or exult over enemy carrion, or the hero cheers or feeds them. The human abattoir that supplies that carrion is not usually open to view. Distance from reality is also suggested by the stereotyped nature of these images. The templates yield a seemingly endless range of syntactic and lexical realisations, from the compressed form of the kenning, as when Arnórr calls Þorfinnr *hrafns verðgjafa* ‘raven’s feast-giver’ (*Pdr* 1), to whole clauses such as *Gall . . . gunnmár of her sárum* ‘the battle-gull [raven?] shrieked over wounded

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6. Out of the corpus of kennings, a great number refer to the beasts of battle (Meissner 1921: 116-26), weapons, battle and other associated concepts (143-208); the ubiquitous kennings for ‘man’ more often than not have determinants or qualifiers relating to warfare (273-78, 308-14, 324-25, 344-46); and one of the commonest patterns of ‘head’ kennings is ‘land/ platform of the helmet’ (127).
 7. The reading *aldin* and its role in the helming are problematic (see Whaley 1998:138-39).

men' (*Þdr* 8), or *gríndi grár ulfr of ná sárum* 'the grey wolf stretched his jaws over the gashed corpse' (*Þdr* 12; the formal resemblance of the last two examples will be noted). Probably no other theme is quite so prolific as the 'beasts of battle', but a similar principle of variations on a theme applies to motifs such as the reddening of weapons or the routing of the enemy (see Whaley 1998: 55-62 for list of motifs and specimen analysis of *Þdr* 17, = v. 16 in *Skj*).

Much of the battle description is thus a mosaic of pre-fabricated thoughts and images rather than an account of actual events. Despite the virtuosity with which the changes are rung, this led Guðbrandur Vigfússon to think that much skaldic verse had been subjected to a sort of literary taxidermy by later redactors — gutted of fact and stuffed with vague and repetitious praise, 'the sort of stuff that no poet would compose, no patron would pay for, no one would listen to, and surely no one remember as a piece of history' (1883: I, lxxxv, speaking of Einarr skálaglamm's *Vellekla*, but within a much wider discussion). Arnórr's *Þdr* actually contains more factual information than the average skaldic encomium, as when battles are helpfully located east of Dýrnes (*Þdr* 6), at Sandvík (*Þdr* 8), at Torfnæs, south of the Ekkjall, on a Monday (*Þdr* 9), at Vatnsfjörðr on a Friday morning (*Þdr* 12), and south of Man (*Þdr* 15). In *Þdr* 6, indeed, it is as if the poet had worked dutifully through the journalist's checklist of 'who, what, where, when', though not 'why'. Nevertheless, it is true that much of the poetry is niggardly with historical detail. *Þdr* 5, already quoted, is far from unusual in praising the hero for a youthful expedition whose scale, location, opponent and objective are completely unspecified. The next extant verse names a Scots enemy called Karl, but it is left to *Orkn* ch. 20 to explain that his patronymic was Hundason, and to modern historians to speculate—since no Karl Hundason appears outside Norse sources—about who he really was (see Whaley 1998: 231 for references). In some verses, e.g. *Þdr* 8b and 15b, statements about unspecified men falling or being wounded can only be disambiguated on the assumption that the hero's side will be winning.

Looking at skaldic verse as an art form with a social function, however, the dominance of image and ideology over fact is comprehensible, and the partial predictability curiously contributes to its success. Like many traditional media, it allows for the pleasurable recognition of the familiar but also for the appreciation of unusual twists to known conventions, or of innovations which go beyond them. More importantly, the resonances with existing poetry implicitly affirm the contemporary warlord's place in an ancient and glorious tradition, while the lapidary elegance of the strophes contains the grim chaos of combat.

Glorification of an individual hero

The military ideology is embodied above all in the person of the hero, whose public reputation the poetry exists to enhance. Arnórr chose to cast his poems

for the Orkney earls in the grandiose form of the *drápa*, a formal eulogy with refrains which was *de rigueur* for kings, and he made the best he could of the delicate task of praising them to the skies while at the same time recognising the limits to their power. Porfinnr seems to be *þengils sessa* or ‘bench-mate of the monarch’ in the textually labyrinthine *Þdr* 3— probably a rare acknowledgement of his status as vassal to the kings of Norway.⁸ Similarly, terms proper to kings are avoided and, as noted below, kennings are rarely used to make territorial claims. However, Porfinnr is described as *hæstr . . . bragna* ‘highest of heroes’ (*Þdr* 18) and *konungr jarla* ‘king of/among earls’ (*Þdr* 13). Most grandiose of all is Arnórr’s claim that there will never be an earl in the Orkneys to match Porfinnr, expressed in a wonderful cascade of eschatological imagery, reminiscent both of the Book of Revelation and of the late pagan poem *Völuspá*, which it undoubtedly echoes (*Þdr* 24).

Like all the best skalds, Arnórr has the propagandist’s eye for the compelling image. Porfinnr towers in the van of his troop, bearing a helmet and British shield, as he plunges into the tumult of spears (*Þdr* 10). He advances his standard onto English soil (*Þdr* 16). Another pitched battle is treated as a single combat with the Scottish king (*Þdr* 9). Porfinnr is utterly unflinching in the *melée*, as Arnórr conveys by a brilliant use of the ‘frame’ pattern of clause arrangement (*Þdr* 7b):

Stall drapa—strengir gullu;	No terror struck—bow-strings shrilled;
stál beit, en rann sveiti;	steel bit, and gore flowed;
broddr fló; bifðusk oddar	spear-head flew; shining sword-points
bjartir—þengils hjarta.	quivered—the ruler’s heart.

Porfinnr is equally unyielding in his battle against tempestuous seas (*Þdr* 13).

The hero may be outnumbered (*Þdr* 6 and 8) but, like the good guy in a western, he totally dominates the scene, the grammar and the poetic lines (*Þdr* 6b):

Fimm snekkjum réð frammi	Five long-ships he steered forth,
<i>flugstygg</i> við hug dyggvan	<i>flight-shunning</i> , with doughty heart,
<i>rausnarmannr</i> at ræsis,	<i>the man of splendour</i> , against the lord’s
<i>reiðr</i> , ellifu skeiðum.	— <i>angry</i> —eleven galleys.

The nominal phrases italicised, together with the adverbial phrase *við hug dyggvan*, all refer to the magnificent valour of Porfinnr, giving him a large share of the words and asserting his position as grammatical subject in each of lines 2-4. Line 1, the predicate, denotes his dynamic action. The Scottish

8. The alternative explanation is that this is a reference to a sojourn at the English court, probably during the reign of Knútr inn ríki, as leader of the royal body-guard or *þingmannalið* (cf. *Orkn* ch. 31).

opposition is driven into the margins, with a mere three words in the oblique cases of genitive and dative (*ræsis . . . ellifu skeiðum*).

This typifies the disdain with which the enemy side are treated in skaldic encomia. Some of Þorfinnr's enemies are little more than the faceless object of the hero's action. The Scots are taught lessons in battle, routed and defeated (*Þdr* 6-11). Indeed, according to Arnórr, Þorfinnr was victorious every single time (*Þdr* 18), and we are shown nothing but victory. When the enemy are allowed into the position of grammatical subject, it is only to be humiliated (*á sumri einu / fengu þeir við þengil / þrimr sinnum hlut minna* 'in a single summer they received defeat [lit. the poorer deal] three times from the ruler', *Þdr* 11), or killed (*irsk fell drótt* 'the Irish troop fell', *Þdr* 14). On the other hand, the skalds avoid the extreme vilification or demonisation of the enemy associated with so-called 'black propaganda', and *Þdr* even lacks fairly standard skaldic descriptions of the enemy as wicked, treacherous or cowardly, as found in Arnórr's own depiction of the Wends as an 'evil tribe, heathen host' (*óþjóð/. . . heiðit folk*, *Hrynhenda* 12) and 'wrongdoers' (*illvirki*, *Magnússdrápa* 8), or his picture of the English earls beating a thunderous retreat in his memorial poem for Haraldr, v. 11.

Justification of specific causes and conflicts

A main function of propaganda is to assert the justice of a particular cause, and, at least implicitly, this is the continual concern of so partisan a genre as the skaldic encomium. However, justification of specific campaigns or claims tends to be vague and/or brief. One extremely economical ploy is to make specific territorial claims by means of kennings referring to lordship, and this is common in poems about Norwegian kings, who are designated as 'lord' (*gramr*, *dróttinn* etc.) or 'friend' (*vinr*) of the peoples of various regions of Norway (the *Hǫrðar*, *Mærir*, *Raumar*, *Sygnir* etc.; see *Lexicon Poeticum* and Meissner 1921: 355-56). Whether because tradition did not sanction it, or whether for metrical or political reasons, however, Arnórr does not refer to Þorfinnr as lord of Caithness, or of the Hebrides or the Irish, and *Skotlands harra* 'Scotland's sovereign' (*Þdr* 9) is the enemy, Karl Hundason. Þorfinnr is, however, twice called lord of Shetland or Shetlanders—*harri . . . Hjaltlands* (*Þdr* 18) and *Hjalta dróttinn* (*Þdr* 10), the latter being a phrase also applied to Rǫgnvaldr Brúsason,⁹ after whose much-lamented murder Þorfinnr gained the whole of Orkney (*Orkn* ch. 30). Shetland's status in this period is obscure, but it may well be the case that Shetland, nominally under Norwegian rule, was effectively in the earls' control, and was a power base for Rǫgnvaldr before his death (Crawford 1987: 75-76). It is there-

9. In the verse printed as *Þdr* 22 in *Skj*, but Fragment 3 in Whaley 1998: 306-8.

fore tantalising to wonder whether this phrase would have provoked triumph or disquiet in an Orcadian audience.

The legitimacy of the hero's descent and claim to rule are easier to assert than territorial rights, and these are often encapsulated in kennings. Þorfinnr as *Rögnvalds niðr* 'Rögnvaldr's descendant' (*Þdr* 2) and *Rögnvalds kind . . . ens gamla* 'offspring of Rögnvaldr the old' (*Þdr* 15) descends from another Rögnvaldr, Mœrajarl, traditionally the first Norse ruler of the islands (*Orkn* ch. 4), while *ættbæti . . . allriks . . . Torf-Einars* 'splendid ennobler of sovereign Turf-Einarr's kin' (*Þdr* 25) refers to Rögnvaldr's son, who achieved greatness despite his father's contempt (*Orkn* chs 6-8). The distinction of these people would not have been lost on a genealogically aware audience, and phrases of this kind would have placed the onus on the present generation to emulate the glories of their ancestors (cf. Bloomfield and Dunn 1989: 8).¹⁰ This category also, however, contains an allusion that, like 'Shetland's lord', risked stirring dark memories, for Þorfinnr in *Þdr* 5 is *Einars hlýra* 'brother of Einarr' (Einarr rangmuðr 'Crooked-mouth', his half-brother). Einarr's death in 1020 was significant enough to be entered in the *Icelandic Annals* (pp. 16, 57, 106, 316, and 468), and although Þorfinnr himself seems not to have been implicated in it, the killer was his foster-father and liegeman Þorkell (*Orkn* ch. 16), credited also with the later assassination of Rögnvaldr Brúsason.

The justice of a cause is sometimes hinted at by implying that the subject of the poem is favoured by divine or supernatural powers, pagan or Christian.¹¹ Arnórr does this rather beautifully and subtly in his poem *Hrynhenda* addressed to Magnús the Good (Edwards 1982-83: 43), but his posthumous praises of Haraldr and the two Orkney earls only contain prayers for the souls of the deceased heroes. In *Rdr* 3 and *Þdr* 24 he merely asks God to 'help' Rögnvaldr and Þorfinnr, while *Þdr* 25 more explicitly asks for 'true mercies' (*líkna trúra*) for the ruler, and that God should keep him far from harm. It could be that verses now lost invoked some kind of divine favour for the earls and their deeds during their lifetimes.

10. Also in this category are the rather general *lofðungs kundar* 'ruler's son' (*Þdr* 6) and *Hlǫðvis frændi* 'Hlǫðvir's kinsman' (*Þdr* 10), a reference—to judge from *Orkn* ch. 11—to Þorfinnr's paternal grandfather, a 'great chieftain' about whom the saga has next to nothing to say. Rögnvaldr Brúsason is *Heita konr* 'Heiti's descendant' (*Rdr* 2), although nothing is known about this ancestor except that he features in *Orkn*'s dubious genealogical prelude as great-great-great-grandfather of Rögnvaldr Mœrajarl (ch. 3).

11. Glúmr Geirason, for instance, portrayed King Haraldr gráfeldr ('Grey-cloak') as not just directed by the gods but possessed or occupied by Óðinn (*Gráfeldardrápa* 12, *Skj* AI: 78, BI: 68), while Christian poets depict their heroes as bearing the *gipta* (luck or grace) of God or Christ.

Apart from these devices, reflections on the specific political or moral motivation of conflicts are seldom found in *Þdr*, and where present they are inexact. The triumphs of the fourteen-year-old Þorfinnr are presented as an angry defence of territory (*land vasat lofðungs kundar laust* ‘the land of the ruler’s son was not vacant’, *Þdr* 6; and cf. *Þdr* 5), and one of the few verses to acknowledge attacks on civilians and to stand back and give a wider picture portrays the burning of Scottish homes as justified retribution (*Þdr* 11). Still more sweeping is the claim that Þorfinnr commanded obedience from Þursaker to Dublin (*Þdr* 23), which is the closest we get to an explanation for most of the attacks on Scots, Irish and English.¹² Especially given the complete absence of Þorfinnr’s name from Scottish and Irish sources, this is clearly symptomatic of the propagandist hyperbole which elevates plundering trips and protection rackets into conquests. On the other hand, Arnórr’s claim that Irish troops and some elusive ‘British’ ones seem to have allied with the Scots against Þorfinnr in defence of Scottish territory (*Þdr* 14) would suggest that there was a genuine fear of westward expansion by Þorfinnr (cf. Crawford 1987: 74).

Function of the memorial poem

Like all of Arnórr’s surviving poems except the resounding *Hrynhenda* for Magnús góði, *Þdr* was composed in honour of a ruler no longer present to appreciate and reward it. It is an *erfidrápa* ‘memorial/funeral poem’, cf. ON *erfi* ‘funeral feast’, and, although there is no direct evidence about the circumstances of its composition or performance, it is fair to assume that Þorfinnr’s sons Páll and Erlendr, together with the *drótt*, were its primary intended audience and possibly its sponsors.¹³ The two were fine, fully grown men at the time of the

12. Although Thursaker, which would translate as ‘Giants’ Skerries’, cannot be located, the coupling with Dublin suggests that this must have been a landmark at the opposite extremity of Þorfinnr’s territory, in the north-east of the Northern Isles. For specific suggestions, see, e.g., Finnboði Guðmundsson in *Orkn* 1965: 81-82n. and Crawford 1987: 75 (following Jakobsen).

13. On the *hirð* (a near-synonym of *drótt*) of the Orkney earls, see Crawford 1987: 192-95. There are numerous examples of skalds appealing to the deceased ruler’s successors and followers. Glúmr Geirason opened his *Gráfeldardrápa* asking rulers (*mildingar*) to hear a poem occasioned by a death which he refers to as *þegna tjón* ‘thanes’ loss/damage’ (v. 1, *Skj* AI: 75, BI: 66). With disarming directness, he mentions the fact that his financial prospects are halved by the death of Haraldr gráfeldr, but takes comfort in promises of bounty from the king’s brothers (v. 11, *Skj* AI: 77-78, BI: 68). Similarly Óttarr svartí, addressing a living prince in his *Höfuðlausn* 2, explicitly says that he needs the goodwill of the prince’s close followers (*inndrótt*, *Skj* AI: 290, BI: 268).

earl's death in 1065, and they fought with a substantial Orcadian force for the Norwegian Haraldr at Stamford Bridge only the next year (*Orkn* ch. 34). The performance of such a poem must have served, like many funerary or memorial customs, not only to salute the dead but to mark the status of the living successors and voice communal expectations of them. As for the *drótt*, the noble company of liegemen, *Þdr* 13 begins, *Nemi drótt* 'let liegemen hear', and the men occasionally receive an honourable mention. They are portrayed as 'worthy ships' crews' (*góðar . . . skipa sagnir*, *Þdr* 1), steering decisively into battle (*Þdr* 7; see Whaley 1998: 233 for this interpretation). They carry their wall of shields eagerly from their ships at Vatnsfjörðr (*Þdr* 12), and in a battle on English soil the men (*verðung*, *herdrótt*) reddened the eagle's tongue and put the enemy to flight (*Þdr* 16). Not a flicker of fear is betrayed by the grim warband (*her greypum*, *Þdr* 17). Thus the men are given a share, albeit a relatively meagre one, of the military glory, and hence in the immortality that the poetry offers. This must have fired corporate pride, loyalty, and the will for further action under Þorfinnr's successors, especially when reinforced by pointed reminders of his munificence or *rausn*,¹⁴ and his role as protector to his élite followers (*inndróttar geymi*, *Þdr* 24) and their generous patron (*hringdrifr* 'ring-hurler', *Þdr* 15, *hringstriði* 'ring-destroyer', *Þdr* 23). This was also doubtless the desired effect of the recital of the deceased lord's triumphs which is at the heart of the poem. Perhaps, too, the verbal feast enabled the men to share in the charisma or *numen* of the hero without resorting to its primitive counterpart, of eating him, which Bloomfield and Dunn report as a practice among early societies. As they point out, a poetic performance 'has the advantage in that it may be repeated without difficulty' (1989: 23).

Rauðabjörg

The role of functionary skald carried its routine dangers—of giving offence, of falling in battle—but where skalds served two masters they had an especially difficult task, as the great poet Sigvatr Þórðarson found when he met with anger and suspicion from his patron Óláfr Haraldsson after a visit to the court of Knútr inn ríki (Canute the Great) in England (*Heimskringla* II, 292-93). Arnórr jarlaskáld, c.1044, faced the excruciating dilemma of fighting in a sea-battle between two beloved patrons, the earls of Orkney, at the place he calls Rauðabjörg in the Pentland Firth, sometimes identified with Roberry (Taylor 1931:43-44). Although neither earl was killed on that occasion, the pain of torn loyalty is registered in the verses he composed about it. Five of these survive, and although certainty

14. *Þdr* 2, which *Orkn* ch. 20 plausibly interprets as meaning that Þorfinnr, unusually, kept his men right through the winter.

is impossible, three of them may be *lausavísur*,¹⁵ while two belong to the *Þdr*. If so, it is curious that such a painful topic, which must have continued to inspire very mixed feelings in Orkney, should be included in the survey of the earl's triumphs. Arnórr describes it in *Þdr* 20 as *óskepna*, something unnatural and monstrous, and depicts his 'dear friends' (*ástmenn*) in combat, almost destroying one another (if this is the meaning of the elusive *nær réðusk*). The line *öld fekk mein en milda / mǫrg* 'the gracious troop took many a gash' confounds the usual audience expectation that anything good, heroic and victorious belongs to their side, while death and defeat belong to the enemy. The second verse, *Þdr* 21, faces brutal reality:

Hvártveggja sá'k hoggva
 hirðá Pétlandsfirði
 —ór þrifusk mein at meiri—
 minn auðgjafa sína.
 Sær blezk, en dreif dreyri
 dǫkkur á saumfǫr klökkva;
 skaut á skjaldrim sveita;
 skokkur vas blóði stokkinn.

Both my wealth-givers I watched
 hack down their own retainers
 —my pain grew the more—
 in the Pentland Firth.
 The sea churned, and blood dashed
 dark on the pliant nail-row;
 gore spurted on the shield-rail;
 decking was spattered with blood.

The second helming thus reverts to a rather formulaic and depersonalised account of the battle, but the focus on the spurting blood is unusually close, and hence suitably horrific. It is in a verse like this that we see the stereotyped medium of skaldic panegyric proving itself capable of accommodating painful topics and achieving emotional intensity.

Conclusion

As Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld said, 'few grow fair from wounds' (*fár verðr fagr af sárum*, *Skj* AI: 288, BI: 266), and certainly some of the images of bloodied weapons and gaping carrion beasts offered in this poetry are grisly in the extreme if fully visualised; but individual killings are practically never depicted, nor wider strategic manoeuvres, nor the looting which must have been a prime motive for much of the action. Moreover, the elevated diction and persistent stylisation distance, homogenise and glorify the grim actuality. As another poet, George Mackay Brown, put it, 'The lips of the skalds are unlocked—they put upon these corrupt fragments of time, battles and sieges, the hardness and polish of jewels' (*Magnus*, 1973:40, and cf. p. 140). The poetry has a large measure of verbal play about it. Clever, exuberant, sometimes fantastical, it is a

15. They are edited as *Lausavísa*, *Skj* AI: 354, BI: 326-27 = Frag 1, Whaley 1998: 301-2; *Þdr* 19, *Skj* AI: 347, BI: 320 = Frag 2, Whaley 1998:302-6; and *Þdr* 22, *Skj* AI: 348, BI: 321 = Frag 3, Whaley 1998: 306-8.

prestige item comparable to a fine gold arm-ring or sword. The pity of war is not the poet's concern. Although, unusually, Arnórr confronts the tragedy of internal conflict and, by alluding to the lordship of Shetland and to Þorfinnr's half-brother Einarr, risks stirring bitter memories of the ruthlessness with which Þorfinnr and his supporters won sole control of the Northern Isles, these are minor dissonances in an otherwise exultant fanfare.

Many aspects of Þorfinnr's Orkney are completely unrepresented in the verse. Despite occasional Christian allusions, there is no hint that Orkney was a bishopric, hence a community that was cosmopolitan and partially literate. Þorfinnr's great building achievements are unmentioned, and no light is shed on the legal, territorial or fiscal arrangements in the Isles. There is no acknowledgement of Þorfinnr's partly Gaelic parentage, and the lordship of Caithness and Sutherland which came with it, or of the complex familial, cultural and political relations which existed in North Britain in the eleventh century. The heroic images are instead simple and old-fashioned, constrained by the verse-form and its traditional resources, but also serving the positive purpose of drawing the audience together as a military élite in community with one another, with the rest of the Nordic world and with their Viking past.

Skaldic verse may have served as a kind of chronicle in pre-literate communities, and Norwegian and Icelandic historians from the 12th century onwards valued it highly as evidence. Snorri Sturluson famously gave the opinion that the historicity of skaldic poems could be depended upon, since to flatter with fabrication would amount to scorn, not praise (*háð, en eigi lof, Heimskringla* I, 5); and the principle that praise and blame must be true in order to fulfil their social function is confirmed by Bloomfield and Dunn from their researches into praise poetry in traditional societies (1989: 10-13). In so far as Arnórr's claims about Þorfinnr can be verified, they seem to be exaggerated rather than false. It certainly seems the case that Þorfinnr surpassed his predecessors in ambition, achievement and international standing.

But even if the skalds were producing a kind of history, it was probably like most other medieval history—produced more for the present community than for posterity; and it is more generous with idealised images than with fact. Its main function must have been to promote deeds of valour as a glorious norm, and to eulogise and justify named rulers and their military exploits in a way that would ensure the continued willingness of warriors to fight and die. It is propaganda of a mild and conservative sort—propaganda of integration rather than agitation (to use Ellul's terms, 1973: 70-79), promoting a general ideology rather than specific political objectives. Courage is half the victory (*hugr ræðr hǫlfum sigri . . . manna*, Þjóðólfr Árnason, *Sexstefja* 23, *Skj* AI: 374, BI: 344), and poetry like this would have served to maintain a culture of heroic

expectation over long periods and to whip up morale before specific battles.¹⁶ In so far as partisan selectivity, hyperbole and creative image-building are used, Arnórr is not just the earls' poet but also the earls' propagandist.

16. The anecdotal evidence that King Óláfr Haraldsson listened to a stirring performance of *Bjarkamál*, a lay of heroic incitement, before engaging in his last battle at Stiklastaðir, must surely reflect actual practice (*Heimskringla* II, 361).

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