

Skaldic Saints and Stories of Miracles: Christianity and Vernacular Literary Culture in Trondheim and Kirkwall

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THERE is a striking incongruity between the acclamation of the late twelfth-century Earl Rognvaldr Kali Kolsson of Orkney as a saint and the subject matter of very nearly all his surviving skaldic poetry.¹ The incongruity is at its sharpest in a verse preserved in chapter 72 of *Orkneyinga saga*, when Rognvaldr and his men attend Mass one Sunday on the Orkney island of Westray:

Þá sá þeir, hvar gengu sextán menn, slyppir ok kollóttir; þeim þóttu þeir undarlíga búinir. Jarlsmenn ræddu um, hverir vera myndi. Þá kvað jarl vísu:

Sextán hefik sénar
senn ok topp í enni
jarðar elli firrðar
ormvangs saman ganga.
Þat bǫrum vér vitni,
vestr at hér sé flestar,
sjá liggir út við élum
ey, kollóttar meyjjar.²

‘Then they saw where sixteen men were walking, unarmed and bald. They seemed to them strangely equipped. The earl’s men discussed who they might be. Then the earl spoke a verse:

1 An earlier version of this essay was presented at an international workshop on ‘Conversion and Christian Identity across the Medieval Northern Periphery’ at University College, London, on 26 September 2009. I am grateful to Christopher Abram, Ildar Garipzanov, and Haki Antonsson for inviting me to participate in that event.

2 *Orkneyinga saga*, ed. Finnbogi Guðmundsson in *Orkneyinga Saga, Legenda de sancto Magno, Magnúss saga skemmri, Magnúss saga lengri, Helga þáttir ok Úlfs*, 163. Further references to this text are given parenthetically in the form (OS 163).

I've seen sixteen [women] at once walk together, with fringe on forehead, stripped of the old age of the serpent-field's land [*i.e.* shaven of (GOLD>WOMAN>) FACIAL HAIR]. We bear witness that most maidens here – this island lies out west against the storms – are bald.³

Feminine plural adjectives in the verse suggest that the figures are women, but they are in fact tonsured monks. In this verse, then, the saint subjects a group of monks to merciless ridicule. Rognvaldr's verse reflects the impact of conversion insofar as without Christianity there would be no monks on Westray, but to what extent can it be said to be part of a Christian literary tradition? In what follows, I take this verse as the starting point from which to reflect on the relationship between Christianity and vernacular literary culture in two centres within the north European periphery: Kirkwall in Orkney and Trondheim in Norway. These two places, one the seat of a bishop and the other of an archbishop, were associated both with rulers' courts and, most importantly, with royal or aristocratic saints' cults (St Magnús and St Rognvaldr of Orkney and St Óláfr Haraldsson of Norway); miracle collections were assembled in both places and skaldic poetry is associated with both (including poetry attributed to ruler-saints); the vernacular literature of both places also ended up being preserved primarily in Icelandic rather than Orcadian or Norwegian manuscripts. There are, however, also interesting differences alongside these similarities: the relationship between Latin and vernacular is one area of discrepancy; another is the lack of Christian devotional verse honouring Orkney's saintly earls in contrast to the poems in honour of St Óláfr, including pre-eminently Einarr Skúlason's *Geisli* (on the poems celebrating Óláfr's sanctity see 'Miracles in Verse and Prose at Trondheim' below). So while Christianisation, and especially the cult of native saints, was profoundly important to the development of literary culture in both places, local contexts and characters coloured that development in distinctive ways. Comparison of the relationship between Christianity and literary production in these two centres associated with native saints who were ruler-poets offers the possibility of extending and refining previous scholarly discussion which has tended either to examine the two literary centres in isolation or to compare

3 My translation; cf. Judith Jesch ed. and trans., 'Rognvaldr jarl Kali Kolsson', 579. For further discussion of this anecdote and verse from a different perspective, see Phelpstead, 'Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow: Hair Loss, the Tonsure, and Masculinity in Medieval Iceland'.

Trondheim with other Scandinavian archiepiscopal sees rather than with the bishopric in Orkney.⁴

St Rognvaldr's Skaldic Verse: Christian Poetry?

For information about the life of the saint and skald with whom I began, Rognvaldr Kali Kolsson, we are indebted, as we are for most aspects of the early history of Orkney, to the early thirteenth-century Icelandic history of the islands, *Orkneyinga saga*. Chapters 58–104 cover events during the earldom of Rognvaldr. There is little, if anything, that is saintly about the life of Rognvaldr as it is presented in the saga.⁵ Nor, for that matter, is there anything very saintly about the manner in which he dies: Rognvaldr and his co-earl go hunting in Caithness one summer and are attacked by one Þorbjörn klerkr, whom Rognvaldr had recently outlawed. Rognvaldr's foot sticks in his stirrup at the fatal moment and he is killed. The chapter that follows, however, describes how Rognvaldr's body was buried in the cathedral he had founded, where *guð birti hans verðleika með mörpum ok stórum jarsteinum* (OS 282: 'God made manifest his worthiness with many great miracles'). Like other northern royal saints, the violent manner of Rognvaldr's death was paramount in securing his canonisation; his familial relationship to the Orcadian proto-martyr, St Magnús, must also have informed perceptions of his sanctity at a time when royal sainthood often ran in families.⁶

There are no known hagiographic or liturgical texts relating to Rognvaldr. It is clearly his own skaldic poetry and that of his court, possibly embedded in explanatory anecdotes, that provides source material for the writer of *Orkneyinga saga*. The composition of skaldic poetry is a literary tradition attested

4 The role of archiepiscopal sees in the development of literary culture in Scandinavia is examined in Lars Boje Mortensen, 'The Nordic Archbishoprics as Literary Centres Around 1200'. The Danish archbishopric of Lund was established in 1103/4 and became a centre of Latin historical writing because of Sven Aggesen and Saxo Grammaticus; a Swedish archbishopric was established at Uppsala in 1164, but nothing is known of literary production there in the period before 1200. The Norwegian province of Trondheim (Niðaróss) was established in 1152/3: on literary production there, see also Lars Boje Mortensen and Else Mundal, 'Erkebispesetet i Nidaros – arnestad og verkstad for Olavslitteraturen'. Though Kirkwall was a bishopric rather than an archbishopric, it seems to have functioned as a literary centre in a not entirely dissimilar manner. A recent survey of the role of saints in medieval Scandinavian cathedral culture is provided by Anna Minara Ciardi, 'Saints and Cathedral Culture in Scandinavia c.1000–c.1200'.

5 See further my discussion of Rognvaldr in Phepstead, *Holy Vikings: Saints' Lives in the Old Icelandic Kings' Sagas*, 95–111.

6 Two recent studies by Haki Antonsson illuminate canonization patterns in medieval Scandinavia (including Orkney): Haki Antonsson, 'Some Observations on Martyrdom in Post-Conversion Scandinavia'; Haki Antonsson, 'Traditions of Conversion in Medieval Scandinavia. A Synthesis'.

in Norway from well before the conversion to Christianity, but we have little evidence that it was practised in Orkney before the mid-eleventh century, by which time the islands were already at least nominally Christian (and skaldic poetry in Norway was becoming a monopoly of Icelandic poets). The Icelander Arnórr Þorðarson *jarlaskáld* (after 1011–after 1073), the second most prominent skald in *Orkneyinga saga* after Rognvaldr himself, is the only known court poet in Orkney in the eleventh century. He spent his early adulthood as poet to the earls of Orkney in the 1030s and early 1040s and composed poetry in praise of earls Rognvaldr Brúsason and Þorfinnr Sigurðarson. Arnórr’s career in Orkney predated the life and cult of Rognvaldr’s uncle, St Magnús, and the development of Kirkwall as a cultic centre, but his work shows Christian traditions already influencing Orcadian textual production; although he was not the first skald to include prayers and other clearly Christian material in his praise poems, ‘yet’ in Diana Whaley’s words, ‘the quantity and range of Arnórr’s Christian allusions make them a notable feature of his poetry’.⁷ Some of Arnórr’s fullest and most interesting Christian allusions (including references to St Michael and the angels) are in his non-Orcadian poetry, but prayers for the soul of the hero being praised occur in Arnórr’s poems for the earls of Orkney. The following lines, for example, appear in *Rognvaldsdrápa* (see the first example) and *Þorfinnsdrápa* (see the second example):

Sannr stillir, hjalp snjollum,
sóltjalda, Rognvaldi.

‘True ruler of the sun’s awnings [clouds/sky>God], help the prudent Rognvaldr.’⁸

Ættbæti firr ítran
allríks – en bið’k líkna
trúra tyggja dýrum –
Torf-Einars goð meinum.

‘God, keep the splendid ennobler of sovereign Torf-Einarr’s kin far from harms; and I pray for the precious prince true mercies.’⁹

Arnórr also freely employed traditional skaldic diction relying on knowledge of pagan mythology, but the amount of Christian allusion in his verse contrasts strongly with its almost total absence from the later verse of Earl St Rognvaldr.

7 Diana Whaley, *The Poetry of Arnórr jarlaskáld: An Edition and Study*, 62. For a full discussion of this aspect of Arnórr’s work, see Diana Edwards [Whaley], ‘Christian and Pagan References in Eleventh-Century Norse Poetry: The Case of Arnórr Jarlaskáld’.

8 *Rognvaldsdrápa*, stanza 3, ed. and trans. Whaley, *Poetry of Arnórr*, 141.

9 *Þorfinnsdrápa*, stanza 23, ed. and trans. Whaley, *Poetry of Arnórr*, 267.

Skaldic verse continued to be composed in Orkney until the mid-thirteenth century but the skalds Judith Jesch calls ‘The two main poets of medieval Orkney’ are a saint and a bishop: Earl Rognvaldr and Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson (bishop from 1188–1223).¹⁰ Bjarni’s episcopal calling seems, to judge from the surviving evidence, not to have inclined him towards specifically Christian subject matter: his *Jómsvíkingadrápa* tells of heroic deeds by Baltic Vikings; the collection of proverbial wisdom in *Málsháttakvæði* is at least learned, with connections to mainstream European literature, but is only very shakily attributed to Bishop Bjarni.¹¹

As the verse with which this essay began has already suggested, there is nothing very saintly about Rognvaldr’s poetic subject matter. Indeed, his most famous verses are those praising Ermingerðr (Viscountess Ermengarda) of Narbonne after his stay at her court en route to the Holy Land. The account of Rognvaldr’s stay in the south of France, together with the verses later composed by the earl and his poets, has become a *locus classicus* for discussion of the possible influence of troubadour poetry on that of the skalds.¹² The sentiments to which these verses give expression may, as some scholars think, echo those of poets with whom the Orcadians came into contact in Narbonne, perhaps mediated by the French- (if not Occitan-) speaking Bishop Vilhjálmr in Rognvaldr’s party.¹³ On the other hand, there may be no need to posit such influence; Peter Dronke, among others, has shown that what some have held to be innovations of late eleventh-century Occitania appear in many times and places, including tenth-century Iceland.¹⁴ In any case, Rognvaldr’s love verses certainly draw on northern rather than southern European traditions when he employs the pagan poetic vocabulary characteristic of skaldic verse, as in this example (where Rognvaldr characteristically juxtaposes praise of Ermingerðr’s beauty with gory battle imagery):

Víst’r at frá berr flestu
Fróða meldrs at góðu
vel skúfaðra vífa
vöxtr þinn, konan svinna.
Skorð lætr hár á herðar

10 Judith Jesch, ‘Literature in Medieval Orkney’, 11.

11 Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning*, 4 vols, A I–II Tekst efter håndskrifterne, B I–II Rettet tekst (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1912–1915); A II: 1–10 and B II: 1–10 for *Jómsvíkingadrápa*, and A II: 130–36 and B II: 138–45 for *Málsháttakvæði*. For a study and English translation of the latter poem see Roberta Frank, *Sex, Lies and Málsháttakvæði: A Norse Poem from Medieval Orkney*.

12 For a thorough discussion of this issue and the scholarship devoted to it, see Alison Finlay, ‘Skalds, Troubadours and Sagas’.

13 See OS 204 for Vilhjálmr’s having been educated in Paris and Rognvaldr’s inviting him to join the pilgrimage as interpreter.

14 Peter Dronke, *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric*.

haukvallar sér falla,
 átgjörnum rauðk erni
 ilka, gult sem silki. (OS 210)

‘Wise woman, it is certain that your [hair]-growth surpasses in beauty [that of] pretty much most women with locks [like] the meal of Fróði [GOLD]. The prop of the hawk-field [ARM>WOMAN] lets her hair, yellow like silk, fall onto her shoulders; I reddened the claws of the food-hungry eagle.’¹⁵

Here Rognvaldr alludes to the myth of giantesses milling gold for the Danish king Fróði. In other verses referring to Ermingerðr he constructs kennings (metaphorical poetic compounds) using two goddess names and the name of a valkyrie.¹⁶ Again we are faced with incongruity: much of the verse which Rognvaldr and his court-poets compose while on their pilgrimage to the Holy Land is love poetry, or at least poetry dedicated to or in praise of a woman, and it depends upon a knowledge of pagan mythology. This is not what one would expect of a future saint, especially while on a pilgrimage. However, while Christianity makes little impression on the subject matter of Rognvaldr’s verse, it is nevertheless the case that he and his men would not have had the easy intercourse with Ermingerðr’s court that they do if they had not, like her, belonged to Christendom. And *if* there is any influence of troubadour poetry or ideology on the verse composed during and after the pilgrims’ visit to Narbonne it would constitute an example of what I have elsewhere called a ‘conversion to Europe’, a process of cultural change inextricably linked to, though distinct from, the process of religious conversion.¹⁷ If Orcadian love poetry exudes any perfume of the south of France, it is because the islands had begun, since their conversion, to participate in a larger European culture of which *le pays de langue d’oc* was also part. To that extent, Christianity would be an important, if indirect, source of Orcadian vernacular culture.

Only one verse in *Orkneyinga saga*’s account of Rognvaldr’s expedition to the Holy Land has a religious theme:

Kross hangir þul þessum,
 þjóst skyli lægt, fyr brjósti,
 flykkisk fram á brekkur
 ferð, en palmr meðal herða. (OS 233)

‘A cross hangs on the breast of this poet [Rognvaldr], and a palm between his shoulders; the tumult ought to be lessened; the group crowds forward on the slopes.’¹⁸

15 Jesch, trans., ‘Rognvaldr jarl’, 592.

16 Jesch, ‘Medieval Literature of Orkney’, 17–18.

17 Carl Phelpstead, ‘Converting to Europe: Christian Themes in *Knýtlinga saga*’.

18 Jesch, trans., ‘Rognvaldr jarl’, 605.

This is verse that is clearly influenced by Christianity in both its subject matter (pilgrimage and Christian morality) and in some of its diction (*kross* and *palmr* are both obviously loanwords in Old Norse). This is one extreme point on the spectrum of possible Christian influence on literature, a solitary clear-cut case to set alongside more dubious indirect influence through a shared participation in the culture of Christendom exemplified in the love poetry produced on the pilgrimage. Even more striking than the paucity of devotional poetry associated with Rognvaldr's pilgrimage is the complete lack of any reference to St Magnús in Rognvaldr's surviving verse, despite the key role that Rognvaldr played in promoting his uncle's cult.

In assessing the impact of Christianity on vernacular literary culture in Orkney, it is worth recalling the lack of interest in the conversion in *Orkneyinga saga*. Earl Sigurðr *digri* is converted (on pain of death) by King Óláfr Tryggvason of Norway in chapter twelve of the saga, but unlike Kings' Sagas about Norway or Denmark, or several of the Sagas of Icelanders, the conversion is not a prominent part of the narrative. If only by its reticence, the saga, whether deliberately or not, gives the impression of continuity, or at least of little change, across the period during which Orkney took its place in Christendom. Such continuity is echoed in the skaldic tradition in the islands. In terms of subject matter and diction Christianity makes little difference to skaldic verse in Orkney. Where it does, of course, make a huge difference is in providing the means by which the verse can be recorded in writing through the introduction of the Roman alphabet and the technology of manuscript production.

Cult in Kirkwall: Collecting Miracles

As I suggested above, Rognvaldr's sanctity is inextricably bound up with that of his uncle, St Magnús, who was killed by his cousin and rival for the earldom, Hákon Pálsson. The surviving sources provide more evidence of conventionally saintly behaviour by Magnús than they do for Rognvaldr, but as W. L. Thomson writes, 'in part, Magnus the Saint was the creation of Rognvald the would-be earl,'¹⁹ and one can read *Orkneyinga saga* in a way that suggests that Rognvaldr promoted the cult of St Magnús for political purposes.²⁰ Whether this was the case or not, Rognvaldr did begin construction of St Magnús Cathedral after winning the earldom, in fulfilment, so the saga claims, of a promise to do so if the saint's patronage ensured he was successful

19 William P. L. Thomson, *History of Orkney*, 61.

20 Phelpstead, *Holy Vikings*, 96–100; Haki Antonsson, *St Magnús*, 69–99. The Church also benefitted from the cult.

in his political ambitions. The cathedral was begun in 1137, twenty years after Magnús's death, and the episcopal see was transferred to Kirkwall from Christ Church, Birsay.

Three inter-related vernacular lives of St Magnús survive in Old Icelandic: *Orkneyinga saga*, *Magnúss saga skemmri* and *Magnúss saga lengri*; they all seem ultimately to depend upon a Latin *Vita sancti Magni* that survives now in abbreviated form (in an Icelandic manuscript) and partly in translation in quoted extracts in *Magnúss saga lengri*. Though the *vita* was probably not by an Orcadian, it may well have been addressed originally to a Kirkwall audience and it must depend ultimately on Orcadian traditions, perhaps even written materials.²¹

Didrik Arup Seip has argued that the compiler of *Orkneyinga saga* knew the *Vita sancti Magni* in a translation into Norn (Orcadian Norse). Seip analyses the palaeographical and linguistic features of the oldest surviving manuscript fragment of *Orkneyinga saga* (AM 325 I 4to) and concludes that:

the Icelander who composed the *Orkneyinga saga* must have had written sources on which to base his work, *viz.*, a translation of the *Vita Sancti Magni* and probably other material. These prototypes must have been written in the Orkneys. The mixture of Norwegian and Norn that occurs could easily be explained if Rognvald Kale or one of his scribes had been responsible for the translation.²²

Haki Antonsson has recently made the important observation that Seip's examples are not from the main narrative of Magnús's life, but all from the miracle stories.²³ So, while a Norn miracle collection remains a possibility, no evidence has in fact yet been adduced to support the idea that the *vita* was written in or translated into Orcadian Norse.

It is likely that Rognvaldr encouraged the collection of stories of Magnús's posthumous miracles as part of his promotion of the saint's cult and such a 'Miracle Book', whether in Latin or the vernacular, is likely to have formed the basis for the collection of miracle stories preserved in chapter 57 of *Orkneyinga saga*. It is in the collecting and preservation of these miracle stories that we can see the clearest influence of the conversion of Orkney to

21 For further discussion, see Phelpstead, *Holy Vikings*, 11–15; Haki Antonsson, *St Magnús*, 5–23 (especially 14–17).

22 Didrik Arup Seip, 'Some Remarks on the Language of the Magnús Legend in the *Orkneyinga saga*,' 96. O. D. Macrae-Gibson also suggests that parts of *Orkneyinga saga* may be based on written Orcadian sources, but offers little if any evidence in support of this claim: Macrae-Gibson, 'The Other Scottish Language – *Orkneyinga saga*,' 427.

23 Haki Antonsson, *St Magnús*, 9.

Christianity on the development of a vernacular literary culture in the islands. With the major exception that the introduction of Christianity brought with it the technology of manuscript production and made possible the extensive written recording of formerly oral poetry, the traditions of skaldic poetry in Orkney seem largely to have been unaffected by Christianization. Indeed, we have no certain evidence that skaldic verse was written down in Orkney itself, though it is likely that at least some was. What survives does so in Icelandic contexts and though Icelandic scribes and saga-writers may well have used written texts from Orkney in some cases, it is quite possible that the lines of oral transmission first met parchment in Iceland. In Orkney itself, however, the need for evidence of Magnús's sanctity, in the form of stories of the miracles performed by his intercession, led to the compilation of a miracle story collection that seems either to have been translated into the vernacular quite early, or was possibly first assembled in that language. In terms of subject matter, and, as the earliest known written prose narratives from the islands, also in terms of formal innovation, this constitutes the most significant direct contribution of Christianity to the development of vernacular literary culture in the islands.

St Óláfr's Skaldic Verse

Norway's proto-martyr, St Óláfr Haraldsson, was killed in battle on the 29th of July 1030 trying to win back the kingdom he had won in 1015 and had been forced to flee in 1029. After his death at the battle of Stiklastaðir, near his eventual shrine at Trondheim, he quickly acquired a reputation for sanctity, though like Earl Rognvaldr and other northern royal saints, there was much about his life that might seem unsaintly to the modern reader. Like his royal predecessors and successors, Óláfr maintained a number of skaldic poets at his court. It is not always remembered, however, that historiographical tradition attributes a number of verses to the king himself. His verse is scarcely comparable with that of his fellow saintly ruler, Rognvaldr of Orkney, in terms of either technical accomplishment or originality (or quantity, there are just nine *lausavísur* attributed to him in the Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages online database).²⁴ The unsaintly subject matter of the verses is, however, something they have in common with almost all of Rognvaldr's poetry: John Lindow has recently pointed out that 'None of [St Óláfr's] stanzas

24 See <http://abdn.ac.uk/skaldic/db.php?if=default&table=skalds&id=156>. Russell Poole's edition of these verses will appear in volume 1 of *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages: Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*, ed. Diana Whaley. Finnur Jónsson attributed eleven stanzas to Óláfr in his edition of the skaldic corpus: Finnur Jónsson, *Skjaldeightning*, B I: 210–12.

exhibits even a whiff of sanctity'.²⁵ Moreover, like Rognvaldr, Óláfr composes verses in praise of a woman, in his case of Ingigerðr, a saint herself in the Orthodox tradition and the wife of King Yaroslav, with whom Óláfr lived while an exile in Russia near the end of his life.²⁶ Like Rognvaldr, Óláfr shows no compunction in employing traditional skaldic diction that depends on a knowledge of pagan mythology; he refers to his host's wife with kennings based on names of the goddess Freyja:

Fagr, stóðk, meðan bar brúði
blakkr, ok sák á sprakka
(oss lét ynðis missa
augfögr kona) á haugi;
keyrði Gefn ór garði
góðlöt vala slóðar
eyk, en ein glöþ sækir
jarl hvern, kona snarlig.²⁷

'While the fair steed carried the [bride], I stood on a mound and looked at the woman; the fair-eyed woman made me lose my peace of mind. The good-looking Gefn of the path of hawks [path of hawks = arm; Gefn a woman with attractive arms] drove a carriage from the castle, the impetuous woman; one flaw strikes each man.'²⁸

Ár stóð eik en dýra,
jarladóms, með blómi
harðla græn, sem hirðar,
hvert misseri, vissu;
nú hefr (bekkjar) tré bliknat
brátt (Mardallar gráti
lind hefr) laufi (bundit
línu-jörð) í Gørðum.²⁹

'Early stood the precious oak each season fully green with flower, as the retinues of the earldom knew; now the tree has quickly grown pale of leaf in Garðar. The linden of the bench [woman] has bound the earth of the headdress [hair] with the tears of Mardöll [gold].'³⁰

25 John Lindow, 'St Olaf and the Skalds,' 109.

26 On Ingigerðr and her veneration see Rune Edberg, trans. Theodosia Tomkinson, *Viking Princess, Christian Saint: Ingegerd, a Woman in the 11th Century*.

27 Finnur Jónsson, *Skjaldedigtning*, B I: 212.

28 Lindow, trans., 'St Olaf', 109–10, but substituting 'bride' for his 'babe' in line 1.

29 Finnur Jónsson, *Skjaldedigtning*, B I: 212, stanza 11.

30 Lindow, 'St Olaf', 110.

As Lindow points out, while interpretation of the first of these verses requires only that the audience know Gefn is a goddess's name (for Freyja), the second depends on knowledge not only that Mardöll is another name for Freyja but also that she wept golden tears when her husband was absent from her. Perhaps because of their compromising content (fair-eyed women are not supposed to make saints lose their peace of mind), these verses are not recorded in any sagas of St Óláfr before that contained in the late fourteenth-century Icelandic Flateyjarbók.³¹ If these two late-attested verses by Óláfr are genuine, they must date from the last year of Óláfr's life, when – if ever – one might expect him to have had other matters on his mind. Their authenticity might be doubted on the grounds that other evidence suggests that Óláfr encouraged skalds at his court not to indulge in pagan diction, but on the other hand it seems unlikely that verses of this kind would become attached to Óláfr only *after* he had been recognised as a saint. If genuine, these verses strikingly echo the incongruities between Earl Rognvaldr's sanctity and his poetic subject matter. Christianity appears to have little impact on the poetry produced by saintly skalds.

Miracles in Verse and Prose at Trondheim

As Óláfr's posthumous cult developed around his shrine in Trondheim, it became both necessary and desirable to collect stories of the miracles accomplished through his heavenly intercession. As in Kirkwall, the collection of miracle stories in written form constitutes the most obvious way in which Christianity gave impetus to the development of literary culture in Trondheim. Textual production in the service of the cult of St Óláfr does, however, differ from that at Kirkwall. Insofar as we can judge from surviving texts, in Trondheim textual production in Latin was more prominent than it was in Kirkwall, though this was alongside, rather than simply instead of, vernacular composition.

Two histories, a saint's life, and a miracle collection in Latin are associated with Trondheim.³² The dating of the anonymous *Historia Norwegie* has been much debated, but recent scholarship has tended towards a consensus that it dates from the second half of the twelfth century, perhaps the period 1160–75.³³

31 Both are also in a paper manuscript from around 1700. The first is also in two other late medieval manuscripts from the fourteenth century and the second half of the fifteenth.

32 There is also a vernacular history, *Ágrip*, from around the same area and period: see M. J. Driscoll, ed. and trans., *Ágrip af Noregskonungasögum: A Twelfth-century Synoptic History of the Kings of Norway*.

33 See Devra Kunin, trans., and Carl Phelepstead, ed., *A History of Norway and The Passion and Miracles of the Blessed Óláfr*, xvi–xvii; Inger Ekrem and Lars Boje Mortensen, eds, Peter Fisher, trans, *Historia Norwegie*, 11–16.

It has been linked with the see at Trondheim and even, controversially, seen by Inger Ekrem as propaganda for the elevation of that see to archiepiscopal status.³⁴ The roughly contemporary Latin history of Norway by Theodoricus the monk (composed 1177x88, probably early in that period) is dedicated to Eysteinn (Øystein), Archbishop of Trondheim, and refers (ch. 20) to existing accounts of Óláfr's miracles, though exactly what form these accounts took is unclear and has been the subject of recent debate.³⁵ Archbishop Eysteinn himself was involved in the production of a Latin *Passio et miracula beati Olavi*. The early history of that work is complicated, though it must be connected with the collection of miracle stories at the Trondheim shrine.³⁶ The longest surviving version of the text (preserved only in Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 209) contains a large number of additional miracle stories, the recording of at least some of which is attributed to Archbishop Eysteinn, perhaps while he was in exile in England in 1180–3.

Even in Norway, Latin seems to have given way to the vernacular fairly quickly. A vernacular version of the shorter redaction of *Passio et miracula Olavi* appears in the *Old Norwegian Homily Book* in a manuscript of c.1200.³⁷ At about the same time Óláfr's life and miracles are treated more extensively in the vernacular in the so-called *Legendary Saga of St Óláfr*, quite probably, as Jónas Kristjánsson argues, a redaction of the so-called *Oldest Saga of St Óláfr*, of which only brief fragments survive.³⁸ The *Legendary Saga* has been associated with the Trøndelag area around Trondheim, and probably dates from the first quarter of the thirteenth century; it includes a collection of miracle stories very similar, but not quite identical, to those in the *Old Norwegian Homily Book*.

Among other sources, the *Legendary Saga* and later (Icelandic) saga lives of St Óláfr drew on skaldic verse in praise of the king. Such verse can be roughly divided into two kinds: on the one hand conventional praise poetry in which the then living Óláfr is celebrated in terms that might have been used

34 Inger Ekrem, *Nytt lys over Historia Norvegie. Mot en løsning i debatten om dens alder?*. However, Mortensen argues in favour of a more eastern Norwegian provenance for the text in Ekrem and Mortensen, *Historia Norvegie*, 20–3.

35 David McDougall and Ian McDougall, ed. and trans., Theodoricus monachus: *An Account of the Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings*, with an introduction by Peter Foote, xi–xxiii, 92 n. 213.

36 For a summary of scholarship to 2001, see my account in Kunin and Phelpstead, *History of Norway*, xxvi–xxxix, but important recent and on-going work on the manuscript tradition is significantly modifying (and indeed further complicating) the account given there: see Lenka Jiroušková, 'Textual Evidence for the Transmission of the *Passio Olavi* Prior to 1200 and its Later Literary Transformations'.

37 Gustav Indrebø, ed., *Gamla norsk homiliebok. cod. AM 619 4to*, 108–29. The *Homily Book* is associated with Bergen, but the Life of Óláfr it contains links it with Trondheim: cf. Jiroušková, 'Textual Evidence', 235 n. 48.

38 Jónas Kristjánsson, 'The *Legendary Saga*'.

for many of his royal predecessors, and on the other hagiographic verse that celebrates the dead king's posthumous miracles. It is, clearly, in the second group of texts that the difference Christianity makes to vernacular culture is most obvious. Two poems stand out: one is Þorarinn loftunga's *Glælognskviða*, a poem from the early 1030s and the earliest hagiographic poem on Óláfr in Norse, celebrates the king's miracles in a text that has an interestingly strong sense of place, so that Trondheim, the site of Óláfr's shrine and the place in which the poem's addressee, King Sveinn, is envisaged as reigning, thereby becomes explicitly connected with the production of vernacular literature. Stanzas five to seven of the surviving poem contain the earliest record of Óláfr's miracles: his body is uncorrupted and his hair and nails continue to grow; bells ring by themselves; and blind people are cured.³⁹

The other poem, Einarr Skúlason's *Geisli*, is even more strongly connected than Þorarinn's *Glælognskviða* with the centre of St Óláfr's cult.⁴⁰ John Lindow has recently emphasised the importance of skaldic verse in legitimating Óláfr's cult, writing that 'a miracle presented in skaldic language was to some ears a more powerful miracle than one recounted in prose or in the language of the church'.⁴¹ He suggests, however, that in time the relationship came also to work the other way. When the see of Trondheim was elevated to archiepiscopal status in 1152/3, the Icelandic skald and priest Einarr Skúlason was commissioned to compose and perform for the occasion his poem in honour of the see's own saint Óláfr, *Geisli* ('sunbeam'). The Icelandic history *Morkinskinna* records how 'great miracles' attended the recitation of the poem at the king's shrine, so that, as Lindow says, 'where once the skaldic tradition had affirmed miracles, now miracles affirmed the skaldic tradition'.⁴²

Geisli, the *Old Norwegian Homily Book* and the shorter redaction of the *Passio et miracula Olavi* have in common a body of seven miracle stories: these must represent the kernel from which larger collections of such stories grew. This in turn suggests that by 1152/53, the date of *Geisli*, a prose collection of Olavian miracle stories that would later appear in the first part of the *miracula Olavi* and in the *Old Norwegian Homily Book* was already in existence at Trondheim and had already found its way into the vernacular in the poem marking the establishment of the archiepiscopal see. It may be that a vernacular prose translation like that preserved in the *Homily Book* had already been produced in the 1060s before the shorter redaction of the *Passio et miracula Olavi* was made.

39 Þorarinn loftunga, 'Glælognskviða,' ed. Finnur Jónsson, *Skjaldeðigtning*, A I: 324–7, B I: 300–1.

40 See Martin Chase, ed., *Geisli: A Critical Edition*.

41 Lindow, 'St Olaf', 120.

42 *Ibid.*, 120; cf. Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade, trans., *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030–1157)*, 393.

The shrine of St Óláfr at Trondheim was, then, a centre of literary production in Latin and the miracle story traditions associated with the shrine also soon appeared in the vernacular, in both prose and verse.

A Legacy in Iceland

The Christian vernacular cultures given birth in Kirkwall and Trondheim grew to maturity neither in Norway nor in Orkney. No vernacular manuscripts survive from medieval Orkney, and few from Norway. The two traditions of skaldic verse and hagiographic narrative whose emergence we have witnessed at cultic and (archi)episcopal centres in Trondheim and Kirkwall both nourished the development of literary culture in Iceland. It is striking that *Geisli*, a skaldic poem associated with Óláfr's shrine at Trondheim, and *Orkneyinga saga*, our main source for the lives of Saints Magnús and Rognvaldr, are both best preserved in an Icelandic manuscript of the late fourteenth century, *Flateyjarbók*. The manuscript is a compilation of sagas of the Norwegian kings interlaced with much other material.⁴³ Modern editions of *Orkneyinga saga* reconstruct that text by reconnecting five sections which have been inserted at different points in the sagas of Óláfr Tryggvason and St Óláfr in *Flateyjarbók*.⁴⁴ *Geisli* has a special status in the manuscript, for, although the historical texts in the compilation begin with the period before St Óláfr, the manuscript prefaces this history with two poems in honour of the Norwegian proto-martyr: the ballad *Óláfs ríma Haraldssonar* and before that, at the very beginning of the manuscript, Einarr Skúlason's *Geisli*.⁴⁵

The preservation of *Geisli* and *Orkneyinga saga* together in *Flateyjarbók* neatly symbolises the way in which the early vernacular literary cultures of both Trondheim and Kirkwall were preserved primarily in the Norse-speaking land that produced the richest and best preserved of medieval vernacular literatures, Iceland.

Conclusions

Literary production is an essential part of the cult of saints: new cults require liturgical texts, saints' lives, and collections of miracle stories providing

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- 43 On the compilation and arrangement of the manuscript see Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, *The Development of Flateyjarbók: Iceland and the Norwegian Dynastic Crisis of 1389*. The stories of Óláfr's miracles first collected in Trondheim also, of course, find their way into various Icelandic sagas of St Óláfr.
 - 44 Three manuscript fragments date from c.1300. A translation of the saga into Danish was made from an Icelandic text c.1570.
 - 45 *Flateyjarbók* provides one of only two complete texts of this poem; the other, in *Bergsbók*, is of the same period or a little later.

evidence of the saints' intercessory powers; and cults may also attract other kinds of text, such as devotional poetry or hymns. The promotion of native saints' cults in northern Europe therefore necessarily stimulated literary production and, as elsewhere, much of this production centred on the centres of those cults, the martyrs' shrines. While such production characteristically employed Latin in its early stages, the vernacular presented itself as a medium with greater reach. The strength of 'native' vernacular traditions such as skaldic verse (practised even by two of the native saints themselves) may help explain the speed and thoroughness with which the vernacular came to be preferred to Latin, in comparison with parts of mainland Europe, for example.

In neither Orkney nor Norway did vernacular literary culture thrive as one might expect it to have done on the basis of its earliest stages. The reasons for this are to some extent unclear and insofar as they *can* be described are complex and beyond the scope of this essay. The increasing cultural dominance of neighbouring countries must be partly to blame, especially in Orkney, where Norse literary culture effectively comes to an end in the mid-thirteenth century. In Norway skaldic verse more or less became an Icelandic monopoly from as early as the beginning of the eleventh century. The contribution of Christianity to the forging of a vernacular literary culture in Kirkwall and Trondheim was ultimately most influential in the (even) more peripheral Iceland, where these streams contributed to an exceptionally rich vernacular literature in which Christian European literary and native oral traditions met in fruitful dialogue.

It is striking that in both Norway and Orkney rulers regarded as martyrs, Óláfr and Rognvaldr, composed skaldic verse. It is all the more striking that in neither case is this verse notably religious; in both cases the saint praises a woman to whom he is not married; and in both cases he does so by means of traditional skaldic diction depending on a knowledge of pagan mythology. Alongside such similarities there are also, however, some differences. A significant corpus of hagiographic verse is associated with Óláfr's shrine at Trondheim, including *Glælognskviða* and *Geisli*, whereas no such verse honouring either of Orkney's saints, Magnús or Rognvaldr, survives.

In both cultic centres prose miracle stories were collected as proof of the ruler's sanctity. That these were first written in Latin is very probable in Trondheim and likely in Kirkwall. However, it is possible that they were originally written in Norn in Orkney and the earliest collection in Trondheim was soon translated into the vernacular. Both collections end up in vernacular versions, preserved more or less intact in Icelandic sagas.

The amount of overtly Christian vernacular literature from Trondheim and Kirkwall is admittedly small, though as we have seen in the case of

Rognvaldr's skaldic verse, some other texts are in part shaped by access to the wider literary culture of Christendom. Few though the texts may be, they nevertheless witness that Kirkwall and Trondheim became part of Christendom not only by conversion but also by a process of Christianization involving the promotion of native cults and the development of vernacular literary culture in connection with the centres of those cults.

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