

place and the nature of the people.

Some interesting themes emerge. The range of occupations – and hence purposes for travel – is considerable. Apart from the seafaring occupations already mentioned, the professions are perhaps not surprisingly well represented; no doubt because such travellers tended to write down their experiences; included are surveyors, preachers, naturalists and relief inspectors. The long quoted passages graphically illustrate the atmosphere of people and place. In Shetland many visits have become part of the historical landscape, as well known as the local individuals and events which are also part of that landscape, and lend a timeless quality to the importance of people in such a close-knit community.

The usefulness of the book is enhanced by ample contemporary illustrations (with notes), and indexes of people, ships, Shetland place-names, dates and subjects. The sources are organised by chapter. It is an excellent work, and worthwhile undertaking. As the author says: "Their accounts bring the history of Shetland to life and enable the present day reader to understand better Shetland and the Shetlanders."

Hance D Smith

***Vikings in Russia. Yngvar's Saga and Eymund's Saga.* Translated and introduced by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, EUP, 1989. 102pp. £15.00**

A great event at home may leave no mark abroad: that seems to have been the fate of Yngvar the Far-Traveller and his companions who, in the first half of the 11th century, set out from the region around Mälaren and disappeared into the vastnesses of Russia without leaving any ascertainable traces of their activities there. At home, however, their failure to return is commemorated in 26 or so rune-stones whose inscriptions range from the pious ("Klint and Bleik erected this stone in memory of their father Gunnvid. He went away with Yngvar. God the Lord save the souls of all Christians. Thorir trana carved the runes.") to poetically phrased but brutally blunt statements of intention and result ("Tola had this stone erected in memory of her son Harald, Yngvar's brother. They travelled boldly away for gold, and in the east they fed the eagle. They died south in Särkland."). Yngvar, then, at least has this much history on his side though, as Pálsson and Edwards state, were it not for such corroborative evidence "scholars and other historians would certainly have rejected the whole account as sheer invention by the saga author" (p.11). Eymund's Saga, on the other hand, cannot even make that much claim to be a historical record and the translators conclude that it "is a construct of conventional material" assembled by its author "from all the sundry materials he could lay his hands on" (p.13).

The two sagas contained in this volume, both appearing in English for the first time, are short texts of a little over 20 pages each. *Yngvar's Saga*, an augmented Icelandic translation of the monk Odd Snorrason's lost Latin *Vita Yngvari* of c1180, tells of the Swedish prince Yngvar who, unable to achieve kingship at home, sets out to find himself a kingdom in the east. The journey develops into both a romantic quest for the source of a great river and into a Christian mission. His adventures involve him with dragons, giants, sorcerers and pagan seductresses, and he dies of disease in 1041 while returning from the river source to marry Queen Silkisif who has promised him her realm when he partially converted her on his outward journey. In an

epilogue, Yngvar's son Svein undertakes a repeat of the journey, has much the same adventures, marries Queen Silkisif, who builds a great minster "to the glory of God and all His saints, including Yngvar" (p.67). *Eymund's Saga* lacks any element either of the fantastic or missionary interest. It is a straightforward adventure story of a band of Norwegian mercenaries (with, of course, some reliable Icelanders among them) whose bravery and cunning ensure the victory of whichever side they support. Much effort goes into equipping its hero with suitably prestigious kin and there is some humour in the stinginess of the Russian king Jarisleif, in the repeated haggles about the mercenaries' pay and in the occasional good one-liner: "We'll treat you well, queen," replied Eymund, "but I don't think you'll be kissing the king for a while yet" (p.87).

In their thorough introduction Pálsson and Edwards discuss and assess the relevance of their two stories to events in Russian history and come to the conclusion that little more can be said than that they "show the persistent involvement of Scandinavian warrior-bands in the region of Georgia and the Caspian during the early to mid-eleventh century" (p.14). From the literary point of view, the two sagas are seen as romances, having a good deal more in common with folktales with their stereotyped characters and recurrent themes than with the subtleties of character and action to be found in the family sagas. But the introduction offers us much more than this: its aim is "to explore the intellectual background of the two sagas" (p.1). In five sections, headed respectively; 1. Icelandic Narrative and Centres of Learning, 2. The Narratives, 3. Characterisation and Literary Roles, 4. Scholars and Travellers, 5. Approaches to Russia, the authors take the opportunities offered by these texts with their mixture of the learned and popular traditions to range at large over the intellectual history of medieval Iceland. It is in every way a stimulating essay, too allusive perhaps for the very general reader, but rousing a strong desire in this reader to go at once to a library and follow up their leads with the help of the useful glossary of sagas and other Icelandic texts they provide.

As one has come to expect from these translators, the translations themselves are skilfully rendered into unstilted English that contains just enough phrases of the "Now, next to tell is that ..." type (p.70) to remind the reader of the narrative flavour of the Icelandic; for the most part, however, the style is modern and made agreeably snappy by judicious use of idiomatic phrases such as "rich pickings" (p.50), "you're making a big mistake" (p.79) or "a few tricks up their sleeves" (p.78). The book is nicely produced, well-bound and of neat appearance – as, indeed, it should be in view of the price for a relatively slim volume. Certain sections, however, though not the saga texts themselves, are riddled with typographical errors: *Heimskringla* appears as *Heimskringia* at least three times (pp.96-99), *Wessén* as *Wissen* (p.102), *Flateyjarbók* as *Fateyjarbók* (dustjacket) and these are just few among many. The acute accent on Icelandic á, in particular, migrates or vanishes as frequently as Yngvar himself; so much so that it appears from the title page that one of the translators is called Hermann Pálsson.

Peter Graves

Glenys Davies (ed): *Polytheistic Systems* Cosmos Vol 5. Edinburgh 1989. 245pp. Illus.

The editor writes in her introduction: "By looking at various non-monotheistic religious systems we gain an overview that enriches our understanding of polytheistic structures: I hope, therefore that readers of this volume will find its entire contents rewarding and eye-opening,