

# Medieval Self-Fashioning: Rǫgnvaldr Kali Kolsson and *Orkneyinga saga*

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## Abstract

This article investigates the process of self-fashioning depicted in the medieval Icelandic text *Orkneyinga saga*, the ‘Saga of the Orkney Islanders’. It argues that the character of Rǫgnvaldr Kali Kolsson, Earl of Orkney, is shown to fashion himself in the model of previous Scandinavian rulers as a means of asserting his right to govern, and that the relationship between poetry and prose is key to this process. Through the composition and recitation of verse, the character of Rǫgnvaldr asserts the power to craft his own story and thus to fashion his own identity and that of his subjects. In particular, the article demonstrates that Rǫgnvaldr’s expedition to Jerusalem is central to the construction of the earl’s story and of his self. It concludes by suggesting that such a depiction of self-fashioning may have been particularly resonant in medieval Iceland, itself a site of hybrid and shifting identities following Norwegian colonisation.

## Keywords

*Orkneyinga saga*, Orkney Islands, skaldic verse, Iceland, Rǫgnvaldr Kali Kolsson

The Icelandic saga of the Orkney Islanders, *Orkneyinga saga*, introduces the young nobleman Kali Kolsson with a description typical of many a saga hero: ‘Kali [...] var inn efniligsti maður, meðalmaður á vöxt, kominn vel á sik, límaður manna bezt, ljósjarpr á hár; manna var hann vinsælastr ok atgørvimaður meiri en velflestir menn aðrir’ (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 129-30) (Kali was the most promising man, average in stature, well-proportioned, with longer limbs than most, with light chestnut hair; he was the most popular of men and more accomplished than many others).<sup>1</sup> In this instance, however, third-person narration alone does not suffice, and Kali’s voice bursts into the saga prose declaiming a verse of his own composition:

Tafl emk qrr at efla;  
 ípróttir kannk níu;  
 týnik trauðla rúnum;  
 tíðs mér bók ok smíðir.  
 Skríða kannk á skíðum;  
 skýtk ok ræk, svát nýtir;  
 hvártveggja kannk hyggja:  
 harpslött ok bragþóttu. (Jesch 2009c: 576 [st. 1])

(I have nine accomplishments: I am swift at playing board-games; I forget runes slowly; the book captivates me, as does craftsmanship. I can glide on skis; I shoot and I row advantageously; I understand both harp-playing and verse-making.)<sup>2</sup>

Kali, who was later to become Rognvaldr, Earl of Orkney (r. 1137-58/59), proclaims himself a Renaissance man of the twelfth century.<sup>3</sup> The nine accomplishments he boasts of encompass a range of intellectual and physical abilities, impressive even for a well-educated aristocrat. However, the citation of Kali’s verse confirms more than the young man’s skill; it demonstrates the soon-to-be-earl’s talent for display and self-promotion in a way that affects the very structure of the saga itself. Kali appears to write his own character description the moment his

story begins, and the verse asserts both poetic and political ambitions only hinted at in the prose: although seemingly focused on the abilities of the first-person speaking subject, the final four lines are identical to a half-stanza attributed to Haraldr harðráði, king of Norway nearly a century before (r.1046-66).<sup>4</sup> Famous for his poetic skill as well as his kingly status, Haraldr provides an illustrious model for the ambitious Kali, who adds one further skill to Haraldr's list of eight. Through his verse, Kali – or at least, the character depicted in *Orkneyinga saga* – demonstrates that royal identity may be appropriated and re-deployed in his own self-fashioning.

The term 'self-fashioning' was used by Stephen Greenblatt in 1980 to describe a phenomenon he traced to the sixteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Greenblatt argues that the early modern period saw a change in the way identity was perceived, and that writers such as More, Wyatt and Shakespeare demonstrate 'an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process' (1980: 2). Although focused on the early modern period, Greenblatt's study blurs the boundaries between life and art in a manner that speaks directly to the quasi-historical figures described in the Icelandic sagas.<sup>6</sup> Although it is perhaps easier to trace the distinction between lived experience and literary posturing in the case of a Thomas More than an Earl Rǫgnvaldr – the comparative wealth of historical information about More's life stands in sharp distinction to many saga characters – Greenblatt's study usefully emphasises the importance of literary texts in the representation of the self:

[W]ith representation we return to literature, or rather we may grasp that self-fashioning derives its interest precisely from the fact that it functions without regard for a sharp distinction between literature and social life. It invariably crosses the boundaries between the creation of literary characters, the shaping of one's own identity, the experience of being molded by forces outside one's control, the attempt to fashion other selves. (1980: 3)

Although not without its detractors (eg. Waller 1987, Pechter 1987), Greenblatt's study has been applied to a wide range of literary and historical contexts, including, for the medieval period, subjects as diverse as the writings of Chaucer (Cooper 2001), liturgical textiles (Vogt 2010), Islamic wall-paintings (Robinson 2008) and Arthurian romance (Mills 2004). Miri Rubin has also offered a useful rebuttal to the unfortunately common perception that medieval people had no or little sense of the 'self', and discusses the role of self-fashioning in the period (2006). In the context of medieval Scandinavia, the blurring of boundaries between literature and social life is particularly resonant in the case of Røgnvaldr Kali even though, apart from *Orkneyinga saga*, he appears in few other documents from the time.<sup>7</sup> *Orkneyinga saga* provides the fullest account of Røgnvaldr's life and yet it does so as a literary text that blurs the lines between fact and fancy, history and folklore, oral and written traditions. The historical accuracy of this text can never be fully known, but the *character* of Earl Røgnvaldr – the man portrayed in *Orkneyinga saga* – is shown to take an active role in the crafting of his own narrative, and thus of the history of the Orkney Islands. Through the combination of verse and prose, the saga-author<sup>8</sup> depicts a man who is both a poet and a prince; as such, the character of Røgnvaldr appears able to direct the actions of men even as he records those actions in verse. *Orkneyinga saga* demonstrates that, for Røgnvaldr and the Orkney Islanders he leads, the construction of one's identity is indeed a manipulable, artful process.

### **'Difficult middles'**

During the medieval period, the Orkney Islands occupied an ambiguous position between the kingdom of Norway, Scandinavian settlements in Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands, and the Scottish and English realms to the south. Nominally subject to the kings of Norway, the Orkney earls did not always acknowledge this relationship; they tended to turn to Norway only when in difficulty or when a dispute arose between rival pretenders to the earldom. They also cultivated their connections with Britain, having claimed the region of Caithness in north-eastern Scotland since the ninth century. They married into

the Scottish royal family and at times pledged allegiance to the Scottish kings. As William Thomson writes in the introduction to his *History of Orkney*, the earldom ‘was never a loyal Norwegian colony, nor yet was it simply a peripheral outpost of the Kingdom of Scotland. It has always been a place apart’ (1987: xiii). The Orkney earls ruled over a liminal, culturally mixed territory, and it is perhaps fitting that *Orkneyinga saga* is itself an unstable text. In its most complete medieval redaction the saga is woven into the cycle of kings’ sagas in the Icelandic compilation *Flateyjarbók*, dating from the late fourteenth century; however, earlier, fragmentary witnesses survive, suggesting that the saga likely dates from the end of the twelfth or beginning of the thirteenth century.<sup>9</sup> It is generally assumed that the saga was written in Oddi in the south of Iceland, thanks in part to the close familial connections between the Oddaverjar and the Orcadians (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1993; cf. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1937). Their relationship with Norway also played an important role in the cultural environment of southern Iceland, as demonstrated by the poem *Nóregs konungatal*, which follows *Orkneyinga saga* in the *Flateyjarbók* manuscript. Composed in honour of the chieftain Jón Loptsson of Oddi, the poem traces his descent from the Norwegian royal dynasty of Haraldr hárfagri (r. c. 860-c. 932) (Gade 2009: 761-806; cf. Guðrún Nordal 2001: 30 and Faulkes 1978-9). Like the saga itself, Oddi was a meeting-point of Icelandic, Orcadian and Norwegian traditions. Both Iceland and the Orkneys were ‘difficult middles’, to use Jeffrey Cohen’s phrase, the medial, culturally mixed spaces left in the wake of migration and colonization (2006: 2-3; cf. also Beuermann 2011: 109-161). As Cohen demonstrates, identity emerges as a central concern in such spaces, and in the historical and literary texts produced within them. As will be discussed in more detail below, the process of self-fashioning depicted in *Orkneyinga saga* may have had particular resonance in a hybrid but culturally rich environment such as Oddi, with the character of Rognvaldr offering a particularly alluring model of how poetry – among other skills – could be employed in the enterprise of self-construction and self-promotion.

Rognvaldr’s verse, however, does not exist in a vacuum; its integration in the prose text of the saga inevitably colours our interpretation of individual stanzas, and affects the representation of the poet-earl in

the wider context of *Orkneyinga saga*.<sup>10</sup> Rather like the Islanders it describes, the saga is a hybrid product, combining not only prose and verse, but also elements of myth and folklore, hagiography and perhaps even eye-witness accounts.<sup>11</sup> It is also highly intertextual. In addition to the eighty-two skaldic stanzas cited, the saga-author makes reference to the sequence *Háttalykill inn forna* ('Old key to metres'), composed by Rognvaldr and the Icelandic poet Hallr Þórarinnsson, and to two poems which are not cited.<sup>12</sup> There are further references to the Icelandic writer Snorri Sturluson, to an *Ævi Nóregskonunga*, and to sagas about King Magnús Ólafsson of Norway (r.1035-47) and the nobleman Erlingr skakki Kyrpinga-Ormsson (d. 1179) (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 101, 56 and 237).<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Paul Bibire has argued that the saga's dependence on the *konungasögur* (sagas of the kings), 'composed on their model and with their motivation', is analogous to the earldom's relationship with the kingdom of Norway (1984: 82). Judith Jesch, however, has argued that the juxtaposition of so many different forms and approaches reveals an author who 'wants to engage his audience in dialogue about the story he presents', challenging the reader to consider the possible bias and distortion in his source materials (1992: 350; see also Jesch 1996: 83-84). As depicted in *Orkneyinga saga*, the character of Earl Rognvaldr speaks to both interpretations. Caught in the 'difficult middle', his identity is unstable, but malleable. The saga-author portrays Rognvaldr as a character who self-consciously models himself on earlier Scandinavian rulers, both Norwegian and Orcadian, in order to assert his political legitimacy. At the same time, however, the polyphonic mixing of different voices, literary forms and traditions holds that process up for scrutiny: self-fashioning is an art in *Orkneyinga saga*, and the character of Earl Rognvaldr is a master artist.

### **In the image of kings**

Born and raised in Norway, Rognvaldr's claim to the earldom of Orkney derived from his mother Gunnhildr, sister to the recently martyred earl, St Magnús Erlendsson (d. 1116/17). His right to rule was not a foregone conclusion and this is perhaps why, from the very beginning

of his reign, Røgnvaldr seems to have pursued a policy of likening himself to earlier Scandinavian rulers.<sup>14</sup> In *Orkneyinga saga*, his mother first suggests this strategy when Røgnvaldr is appointed Earl of Orkney by King Sigurðr Jórsalafari of Norway (r. 1103-30):

Hann gaf honum ok nafn Røgnvalds jarls Brúsasonar, því at Gunnhildr, móðir hans, sagði hann verit hafa gørviligastan allra Orkneyingajarla, ok þótti þat heillavænligt. Þenna hlut Orkneyja hafði átt Magnús inn helgi, móðurbróðir Kala. (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 140)

(He [Sigurðr] also gave him the name of Earl Røgnvaldr Brúsason, because Gunnhildr, his mother, said he had been the most accomplished of all the Orkney earls, and it was considered auspicious. Magnús the holy, Kali's uncle, had ruled that part of the Orkneys.)

Naming ceremonies occur with relative frequency in the Old Norse corpus. Often, such ceremonies serve to emphasise a new or close relationship between the giver of the name and the recipient, as in *Hallfreðar saga* when King Óláfr Tryggvason of Norway (r. 995-1000) baptises the poet Hallfreðr Óttarsson and gives him the ambiguous nick-name *vandræðaskáld*, 'troublesome poet' (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1939: 154-155). The choice of name also asserts political or social ambition, as demonstrated by Sigvatr Þórðarson's choice of the name Magnús (from Karla-Magnús, Charlemagne) for the son of King Óláfr Haraldsson of Norway (r. 1015-1030) (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1945: 209-210). As Carl Phelpstead observes of *Orkneyinga saga*, 'Kali's new name is both a statement of the fact that he is now an earl of Orkney, and symbolic of a wish that he might be a worthy and successful one' (2007: 97). Røgnvaldr's mother is not alone in this wish: as the new earl sets sail to assert his claim to the islands, his father advises him to build a cathedral dedicated to St Magnús and to establish a bishopric there (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965, pp. 158-9).<sup>15</sup> Røgnvaldr vows to do so if he is successful, and invokes the memory of St Magnús for a third time just before his rival, Earl Páll, is captured: 'þat hygg ek, ef

guð vill, at ek fá ríki í Orkneyjum, at hann myni gefa mér styrk til ok inn helgi Magnús jarl, frændi minn, at halda því' (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 167) (I think that if God wishes me to gain control in the Orkney Islands, he and the holy Earl Magnús, my kinsman, will give me the strength to prevail). The cult of St Magnús was already relatively organised by the time of Earl Rognvaldr's rule and the testimony of the saga cannot be taken at face value in its emphasis on the earl's role in that process (Haki Antonsson 2007: 79-80; see also Thomson 1987: xiii-xiv). In the world of the saga, however, such passages serve to emphasise the similarities between the character of Earl Rognvaldr and his ancestors, as well as the earl's ability to mould himself in their image for political gain.

In using the cult of Magnús to support his claim to rule, Rognvaldr adopts a strategy used by numerous Scandinavian kings, including Magnús Ólafsson of Norway, Knútr Sveinsson of Denmark (r. 1014-1035) and Knútr's son Sveinn (r. 1030-1035), all of whom used the cult of St Óláfr Haraldsson in different ways to legitimise their own rule (Haki Antonsson 2007: 79-80, Townend 2005 and Goeres 2015: 113-20). However, *Orkneyinga saga* also includes a number of episodes in which Rognvaldr follows in the footsteps of kings for less overtly political ends. The saga describes the arrival of two Icelandic skalds at Rognvaldr's court. Rognvaldr welcomes them as warmly as any Scandinavian lord might do, giving the poet Ármóðr a golden spear and receiving a stanza of skaldic praise in return (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 200-2; cf. the many similar examples given in Fidjestøl 1997: 117-132). The earl's interaction with Ármóðr's companion Oddi, however, has more than a hint of the many playful challenges Haraldr harðráði gives to his skalds, particularly in the *þættir* of *Morkinskinna*.<sup>16</sup> Referring to a tapestry that hangs in his hall, the earl commands: 'Gerðu vísu um athöfn þess manns, er þar er á tjaldinu, ok haf eigi síðarr lokit þinni vísu en ek minni. Haf ok engi þau orð í þinni vísu, er ek hefi í minni vísu' (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 202) (Make a verse about what the man who is on the wall-hanging is doing, and don't complete your verse any later than I do mine. Also don't have any words in your verse that I have in my verse). Each of the resulting stanzas uses complex, extended kennings to describe the action depicted on the



tapestry; the many possibilities of periphrastic language are perhaps the reason Oddi's verse does differ substantially from the earl's. Bibire reads this episode as a testament to the glory of the earl's court, noting that 'there is an inherent intellectual exhilaration in the riddling and punning exuberance of this poetry, and of the two men who sport, like dolphins, in its dangerous and uncertain waters' (1988: 217). This may well be true, but it is notable that Oddi fails the challenge, as he repeats the phrase 'a tjaldi' (on the wall-hanging) as well as the verbs *munu* and *standa*, all used by Rognvaldr himself.<sup>17</sup> Strangely, the earl does not seem to notice; or if he does, his reaction to the verse is not depicted in the saga, as the narrative moves swiftly on to the next episode. The silence with which this failure is met suggests that it is the *fact* of the challenge – that there is a poetic challenge at all – rather than the outcome which is important. The challenge establishes Rognvaldr's verse as the standard by which the other is measured, just as the speed at which he is able to compose acts as the stopwatch for his poet. Unlike so many other skalds, Rognvaldr is both poet and prince, both author and actor in a dramatic set-piece he himself directs.

Echoes of the Norwegian kings may also be found in an episode in which Rognvaldr, disguised by his cloak, rows out to sea with a fisherman and divides his catch among the poor when he returns to shore (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 199-200).<sup>18</sup> Bibire has discussed the parallels between this episode and the story of Þórr fishing for the Miðgarðsormr, as well as the hagiographic resonance that compares Rognvaldr's act with the apostles 'fishing' for souls (1984: 87-97). The motif of the disguised ruler at the sea-shore is also strongly associated with the missionary king Óláfr Tryggvason of Norway. The 'Akkerisfrakki' (Anchor-fluke) episode in *Hallfreðar saga* and *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* describes how the king, disguised in a green cloak, helps to save a merchant ship after the anchor cable snaps by diving into the sea to retrieve it (eg. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1939: 151-155). Similarly, *Laxdæla saga*, *Kristni saga* and Oddr Snorrason's saga of the king all describe a swimming contest between Óláfr and the Icelander Kjartan Ólafsson; there too, Óláfr is disguised and, when his identity is revealed, gives his cloak to Kjartan (Einar Ól. Sveinsson

1934: 116-123). In both cases, the episode leads to the baptism of the Icelanders and the beginning of their close friendship with the king. The king's disguise is temporary, employed somewhat paradoxically as a means of Christian revelation. In *Orkneyinga saga*, however, disguise has a more ambiguous function. At the end of the episode, Rognvaldr comments in verse:

Fár kann jarl, en árla  
 (qrlyndr) at sjá gǫrla  
 (hlunns drók eik af unnum  
 áðr) í fiskivǫðum. (Jesch 2009c: 589 [st. 12])

(Few are able to see clearly an earl in fishing-clothes, but, generous, I dragged the oak of the roller [ship] from the waves, previously in the early morning.)

Unlike King Óláfr, Rognvaldr seems to revel in the efficacy of his disguise, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, as the saga-author notes elsewhere that the earl was a 'skartsmaðr mikill ok hafði sundrgørðir miklar' (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 132) (very flashy dresser and had ostentatious clothes). Apart from the riddling verse, however, the earl does not identify himself in this episode and the saga prose colludes in the deception: he is referred to only as 'koflmaðr' (cowled man) until the very end of the episode.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the saga-author reports only that '[s]íðan fór koflmaðr í brott, ok urðu menn þess seinna vísir, at þessi koflmaðr hafði verit Rognvaldr jarl' (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 200) (then the cowled man went away, and the people later became aware that this cowled man had been Earl Rognvaldr). Thus, the prose text provides no certainty as to the identity of the *koflmaðr*, but reports only wide-spread rumour after the fact. The verse alone hints at his noble status, with Rognvaldr himself retaining the power to conceal or reveal his identity. It is notable that as the earl meditates on this power in the verse, he weaves around it an intercalary clause that establishes a narrative of events, effectively re-telling the story from his own point of view: 'drók, qrlyndr, eik hlunns af unnum' (I dragged, generous, the oak of the roller [ship] from the waves). Indeed, the earl's

interpretation of what has happened so dominates the episode that his words are reiterated in the prose: '[m]enn kenndu ok orðskvið þann, er stóð í vísunni, at fár kennir jarl í fiskiváðum' (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 200) (people also recognised that saying which was in the verse, that few know an earl in fishing-clothes). Prose and verse combine in this episode to foreground Rǫgnvaldr's re-telling of a story in which his actions reference those of the Norwegian kings, but the earl himself appears to maintain tight control both over the narrative and his own unveiling.

### Sailing to Jerusalem

There are many such episodes in *Orkneyinga saga*, although there is unfortunately not space to discuss them all here. It is notable, however, that Rǫgnvaldr follows most closely in the footsteps of his royal predecessors when he embarks on an expedition to Jerusalem.<sup>20</sup> The saga moves away from the Orkney Islands in these chapters, leaving both Scandinavia and the British Isles behind. Somewhat paradoxically, this section demonstrates that it is the very act of leaving the Orkney Islands that allows Rǫgnvaldr the freedom to construct most fully his own identity as saga hero and Scandinavian prince. Skaldic verse plays a vital role in this process. Of the 82 stanzas cited in the various redactions of the saga, nearly two-thirds of these are attributed to Rǫgnvaldr himself or to poets associated with his rule; twenty-eight are cited during the description of the earl's expedition to Jerusalem. In this too, the account parallels the sagas of earlier Norwegian kings, particularly that of Sigurðr Jórsalafari, the king who appointed Rǫgnvaldr earl and whose route he now follows. However, the account of Sigurðr's journey provides a useful point of comparison to Rǫgnvaldr's, particularly with respect to its use of skaldic verse. In the longest account of Sigurðr's journey, now found in the Icelandic manuscript *Morkinskinna*, verse contributes to the fusion of royal and religious propaganda in the text (Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011: II, 70-100). The saga-author relies almost exclusively on a sequence by the poet Halldórr skvaldri, *Útfarardrápa* ('Poem about a Journey').<sup>22</sup> The sequence functions in what has been

called an ‘authenticating’ manner: when the prose text reports that Sigurðr fought in a particular place, one of Halldórr’s stanzas is cited as evidence (cf. Whaley 1993). Citing almost entirely from this one sequence, the saga-author asserts its pre-eminence as a historical source and the consequent reliability of his account. The sequence is woven almost seamlessly into the prose narrative, which appears to derive its structure from the numbered stanzas: ‘vált inn þriðja sigr suðr við borg, þás kalla Lizibón’ (you won the third victory south near the city they call Lisbon), Halldórr notes, and ‘frák yðr fýsask at vinna hvassan styr fjórða sinn út, þars heitir Alkasse’ (I heard that you were eager to fight a fierce battle for the fourth time, out by the place called Alcácer do Sal).<sup>23</sup> The prose text likewise enumerates Sigurðr’s many battles: ‘Þessa átti Sigurðr konungr ina fjórðu orrostu ok létti eigi fyrr atsókn en hann fekk þessar borgar ok drap þar mikit heiðit fólk’ (Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011: II, 79) (This was King Sigurðr’s fourth battle and he did not leave off the attack until he won control of this town and killed many heathen people there). This emphasis on chronology binds the stories told in prose and verse closely together, and the account is further authenticated by the implied presence of the addressee, *þú*, the king himself.<sup>24</sup>

*Morkinskinna* relates that, as soon as he was crowned, Sigurðr was eager to set out on pilgrimage ‘at kaupa sér Guðs miskunn ok góðan orðstír’ (Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011: II, 71) (in order to win for himself God’s mercy and a good reputation).<sup>25</sup> Halldórr’s verses further elaborate on the ideological aim of Sigurðr’s campaign, in which the king’s battles with his adversaries are explicitly framed as religious conflict. Stanza 8, for example, describes an altercation between Sigurðr and a group of marauding Arab pirates who have taken refuge in a cave on the island of Formentera, off the coast of Spain. Sigurðr’s men light a fire at the mouth of the cave and attempt to smoke the pirates out. The poet says:

Náði folk, þats flýði  
ferð skundila undan,  
— illr varð hreimr í helli —  
heiðit konungr meiða.

Lífs bautt enn, þás unnuð,  
aftíg, gamalt vígi,  
— kvǫl beið ǫld í eldi  
ósæl — djǫfuls þrælum. (Gade 2009: 489 [st. 8])

(The king managed to destroy the heathen people, who fled hastily away from that company; there was a terrible screaming in the cave. Yet again you [king] offered loss of life to the devil's slaves when you captured the ancient stronghold; the unhappy people suffered torment in the fire.)

In this stanza, Sigurðr is portrayed as a powerful, destructive figure. The imagery of fire and torment compares the death of his heathen enemy to a hell on earth. In this way, Halldórr's stanzas reinforce the power of the king and his moral obligation to conquer the religious others he encounters. They serve to glorify Sigurðr and his attempt to assert European, Christian control over the contested lands in the manner of many a crusading hero (cf. Doxey 1996: 156-159 and Tolan 2002: 171-213). The saga narrative, supported by such verses, offers a unified, linear account which serves to promote the king as a paragon of crusading Christianity and to show his inexorable advance through the ranks of the so-called heathen troops who oppose him.

Ármann Jakobsson argues that the splendour of Sigurðr's expedition to Jerusalem may be read as a calculated performance, one designed to demonstrate his equality with the rulers of the more powerful Mediterranean kingdoms. 'On this long journey', writes Ármann, 'Sigurðr is constantly staging himself; not only his own identity but also that of the whole North is at stake' (2013: 134). Rǫgnvaldr of Orkney also engages in a performance during his journey to the Holy Land; however, the saga narrative focuses not on the earl's staging of the journey, but on the staging of himself. As both a poet and a prince, Rǫgnvaldr is shown to influence the narrative of his travels in a way quite unlike the kings who preceded him. This may be in part due to the motivations ascribed to him by the saga-author. *Orkneyinga saga* describes how stories and story-telling, rather than the desire to advance Christianity, play a prominent role in Rǫgnvaldr's decision to

embark on this journey. Whilst visiting the king's court in Norway, the earl becomes friends with Eindriði ungi, a mercenary recently arrived from Constantinople. As the saga relates:

Kunni hann þeim þaðan at segja mǫrg tíðendi, ok þótti mǫnnum skemmtan at spyrja hann útan ór heimi. Jarl talaði jafnan við hann. Ok eitthvert sinn, er þeir tǫluðu, þá mælti Eindriði: 'þat þykki mér undarligt, jarl, er þú vill eigi fara út í Jórsalaheim ok hafa eigi sagnir einar til þeira tíðenda, er þaðan eru at segja. Er slíkum mǫnnum bezt hent þar sakar yðvarra lista; muntu þar bezt virðr, sem þú kemr með tignum mǫnnum.' (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 194)

(He [Eindriði] was able to relate many things about that to them, and people found it entertaining to ask him about foreign lands. The earl spoke with him often. And one time when they were talking, Eindriði said: 'It seems surprising to me, Earl, that you don't want to travel abroad to the Holy Land and gain any stories about the events which are reported from there. Over there is the most suitable place for men such as you because of your abilities; you will be greatly honoured there, when you come among noble men.')

Others join in, urging Rǫgnvaldr to lead them east. The earl's expedition thus begins when he hears a story, and is challenged to swap that story for reality. Whatever the historical reasons for his departure, in *Orkneyinga saga* Rǫgnvaldr departs for Jerusalem because he is not content to remain a member of the audience: he wishes to become the storyteller himself.<sup>26</sup>

It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, that in *Orkneyinga saga* the narrative of Rǫgnvaldr's journey is far less linear than that of Sigurðr's expedition in *Morkinskinna*. Rǫgnvaldr sails not only with his warriors, but with a small troupe of poets, and the saga narrative is punctuated by their verses as well as his own. In contrast to the orderly, unified account of Sigurðr's journey, *Orkneyinga saga* creates a polyphonic mixing of voices, poetic forms and subjective responses to the journey

south. This mixing of voices occurs, for example, when the earl and two of his poets decide to pass the time on board ship by composing verses about Ermengerðr, Vicountess of Narbonne (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 219-221).<sup>27</sup> First, the earl portrays his pilgrimage as a quest given to him by the lady:

Orð skal Ermingerðar  
ítr drengr muna lengi;  
brúðr vill røkk, at ríðim  
Ránheim til Jórðánar. (Jesch 2009c: 594 [st. 16])

(The splendid warrior will remember the words of Ermengerðr for a long time; the slender lady wishes us to ride Rán's world [the sea] to the River Jordan.)

As Phelpstead observes, this explanation as to why Røgnvaldr departed on pilgrimage directly contradicts the account given earlier in the saga prose; it is, consequently, 'an example of the way in which the inclusion of skaldic verse creates a heteroglossic text expressive of different viewpoints' (2007, 105; cf. Bakhtin 1981: 301-331). The citation of verse by Røgnvaldr's poets further develops this approach. Ármóðr, for example, expresses far earthier concerns than his lord:

Værak sæll, ef ek svæfa  
— sýn væri þat gæfa —  
— brúðr hefr allfagrt enni —  
eina nótt hjá henni. (Jesch 2009a: 622 [st. 3])

(I would be blessed if I could sleep – that would be obvious good fortune; the lady has a very beautiful brow – one night beside her.)

The poet Oddi also speaks up, rather primly reminding his friends, 'Trautt erum vér, sem ek vætti, / verðir Ermingerðar' (Jesch 2009b: 616 [st. 2]) (We are barely worthy of Ermengerðr, in my opinion). This poetic conversation is entirely unlike the tight, linear account of Sigurðr's

travels and the saga-author's use of a single poem in *Morkinskinna*. Although no challenge is mentioned in the prose of *Orkneyinga saga*, the episode is similar to that discussed above, in which Rǫgnvaldr demanded that Oddi describe a tapestry. This exchange of poetic dialogue similarly invites the audience to compare and contrast the work of the earl and his skalds. Perhaps predictably, the two poets compose relatively similar stanzas in which they praise Ermengerðr's beauty while declaring their subservience to her. They speak in the first person about their hopes and desires for the vicountess, while imbuing that experience with an almost religious significance through such words as *sæll* (blessed) and *gæfa* (luck, good fortune).<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the somewhat uncommon end-rhyme *Ármóðr* employs further emphasises the closeness between *gæfa* (luck) and his desire to sleep, *svæfa*, with the lady. In contrast to the subjective, emotional responses of his poets, Rǫgnvaldr speaks first in the third person, exuberantly describing himself as an 'itr drengr' (splendid warrior), while his verse emphasises deeds rather than emotions. The lady herself is barely described in Rǫgnvaldr's stanza: she is merely a 'rǫkk brúðr' (slender lady), in contrast to Oddi's complex kennings – 'horsk hlaðgrund' (wise headband-ground), 'Bil bríma stalls bauga' (goddess of the flame of the seat of rings) – and *Ármóðr*'s description of her 'allfagr enni' (very beautiful brow). Through verse, Rǫgnvaldr presents himself as a gallant adventurer setting off to fulfill a lady's demands; his verse is not primarily about Ermengerðr, but about himself.

## **Battle with a Dromond**

The stanzas discussed above demonstrate that *Orkneyinga saga* is fundamentally a dialogic text, one in which different voices exist in conversation with each other. This does not mean, however, that all voices are equal; indeed, it becomes clear as the journey progresses that the character of Earl Rǫgnvaldr performs the important function of sifting through opposing viewpoints and deciding which ought to be accepted as true. This may be seen most clearly in the episode that describes Rǫgnvaldr's battle with an Arab merchant ship, called a 'drómundr' in the Old Norse. It is a moment reminiscent of



Sigurðr Jórsalafari's earlier journey and his run-in with pirates off the coast of Spain. However, this conflict too is presented in a more ambiguous manner than that of the earl's royal predecessor. Although Rognvaldr and his men overcome the ship, when the event is over, confusion reigns. It seems that the experience of fighting a foreign ship in unknown waters has led to conflicting reports of what actually happened. According to the saga:

Menn ræddu um tíðendin, þessi er þar hofðu gork; sagði þá hverr þat, er sét þóttisk hafa. Ræddu menn ok um, hverr fyrstr hafði upp gengit, ok urðu eigi á þat sáttir. Þá mæltu sumir, at þat væri ómerkiligt, at þeir hefði eigi allir eina sögu frá þeim stórtíðendum. Ok þar kom, at þeir urðu á þat sáttir, at Rognvaldr jarl skyldi ór skera; skyldi þeir þat síðan allir flytja. (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 227)

(The men began to discuss what had just happened; each said what he thought he had seen. They also discussed who had first boarded the ship but they could not agree on it. Then some said that it would be [considered] unremarkable if they didn't all have one account of that great event. And so it came to pass that they agreed that Earl Rognvaldr should settle it, and that afterwards they would all proclaim his version of events.)

The difficulty of this moment is not just that the men disagree about what has happened, but that they cannot agree on the same *narrative* of what has happened. They need to agree not because the precise order of events has any intrinsic worth, but because the value of their victory lies in its having given rise to a good story. If they all tell different versions of the event, the tale is worthless, but as long as they agree on the same version of events, a narrative can be constructed and passed on to new audiences in the future. Rognvaldr is chosen to supply this narrative because he is both the leader of the expedition and a poet in his own right: his version of events is sanctioned because of who he is in both the political and the cultural spheres. Accordingly, the verse he supplies provides a clear answer to the question of who

boarded the ship first. He says:

Gekk á drómund dökkvan,  
 — drengr réð snart til fengjar —  
 upp með ærnu kappi  
 Auðun fyrstr inn rauði.  
 Þar nóðu vér þjóðar,  
 — því hefr aldar goð valdit —  
 — bolr fellr blár á þiljur —  
 blóði vopn at rjóða. (Jesch 2009c: 603 [st. 26])

(Auðun the Red went first up onto the dark ship, with enough courage; the warrior moved quickly for plunder. There, we managed to redden weapons in men's blood; the God of men has caused it; the black plank falls to the decking.)

Rögnvaldr says that Auðun the Red boarded the ship first, and so he did: as the earl speaks, a historical narrative comes into being, a unified version of events that depends not on what each man saw, but on what one man said. It is tempting to think of Speech Act theory in this context.<sup>29</sup> On the face of it, Rögnvaldr's verse appears to fulfill John Searle's two defining characteristics of a declaration: Rögnvaldr can utter this declaration because of the political authority that comes with his status as a nobleman, and the social authority that comes with his status as a poet. Thanks to these two roles, he occupies, to use Searle's terminology, a special place within the political and cultural institutions of medieval Scandinavia, and his hearers acknowledge this (1976: 13-14; cf. Austin 1962). His verse also seems to bring about a correspondence between the propositional content (Auðun the Red boarded the ship first) and reality (that is, his version of events is accepted as true). The problem, however, is that *Orkneyinga saga* is a literary text. Rögnvaldr's verse only *appears* to effect this correspondence between content and reality, and then only retrospectively. His verse cannot change the world to fit the words; rather, his words change how the world is perceived. In the case of Rögnvaldr's crew, reality as such is not important; what is important is their ability to describe a shared

reality, whether or not that reality actually happened.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps for this reason, even as Rognvaldr provides for his crew the information they lack (Auðun the Red boarded the ship first), the riddling language and complex structure of the skaldic stanza subtly undermines the clarity it claims to give. The name Auðun is withheld until the fourth line of the stanza: until then, Rognvaldr reports only that an unnamed 'drengr' (warrior) boarded the ship first. The ship itself is described as 'døkk' (dark), as, the poet says, 'blár bolr fellr á piljur' (the black plank falls to the decking). This could be simply a description of the dark-coloured ship falling apart: *bolr* means tree or pole and is a legitimate description of a ship's planking. But *bolr* can metaphorically also mean 'man'; it refers to the 'trunk' of the body. The enemies on the ship are described as black men, *blámenn*, in the prose.<sup>31</sup> The repetition of this adjective, *blár*, in the verse, means that one can read this line either as a description of the dark-coloured ship, or of the ship's crew – or indeed as both at the same time. Such poetic ambiguity blurs the line between the ship and those who sail. It mirrors the turmoil and confusion of battling a strange ship and an unknown people. It evokes the confusion in which no one knows where their friends are, and dark falling objects all look the same. The verse reminds the saga's audience that what happens is malleable; who it happens to is up for debate. The characters of *Orkneyinga saga* look to their prince for certainty in the face of confusion. Because he is a poet, he is able to provide it. However, the means through which he does so – the utterance of a skaldic verse – insists upon the subjective, uncertain nature of the story-telling process, and its ambiguous reinterpretation in the skaldic form.<sup>32</sup>

This episode, perhaps more than any other in *Orkneyinga saga*, exemplifies Greenblatt's understanding of self-fashioning. Greenblatt writes not only of the artistic, creative aspect of this process, but also of the threat of self-negation or the loss of identity that so frequently accompanies it. He observes that self-fashioning often involves submission to an absolute authority such as God or the state, but also that it is achieved in relation to a hostile Other, 'perceived by the authority either as that which is unformed or chaotic (the absence of order) or that which is false or negative (the demonic parody of

order)' (1980: 9). He argues that self-fashioning occurs at the point of encounter between these two elements, authority and the Other, and that any identity thus created will always contain within itself 'the signs of its own subversion or loss' (1980: 9). The seeming contradiction of this episode in *Orkneyinga saga* – in which Rognvaldr is accorded the power to write his own narrative and yet does so in a manner that subverts that very project – may be read as just such an encounter between authority and the Other. As noted above, Rognvaldr repeatedly fashions himself in the model of earlier Scandinavian rulers as a means of asserting his political and even spiritual legitimacy. The expedition to Jerusalem follows closely in the historical and literary footsteps of King Sigurðr Jónsalafari, and through this journey Rognvaldr attempts to claim a similar degree of prestige and authority. And yet, the narrative of his encounter with the Arab ship lacks the uncompromising religious dichotomy seen in the *Morkinskinna* account of Sigurðr's journey. This is evident not only in the ambiguous language of the skaldic stanza, but also more explicitly in the events which follow the capture of the ship. During the battle, a man is spotted and, as the saga prose relates, 'sá at bæði var meiri ok fríðari en aðrir' (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 226) (that man was both taller and more handsome than the others). The Orcadians capture this man and attempt to sell him as a slave when they next come into port. No one will buy him, and they allow him to leave. He returns, however, with a company of armed men and declares himself an 'qðlingr af Serklandi' (chieftain from the land of the Saracens):

'en nú á ek mikit vald á yðru máli. Þér skuluð nú frá mér þess mest njóta, er þér gáfuð mér líf ok leituðuð mér slíkrar sæmðar sem þér máttuð.' (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 228)

('but now I have great power over you. Now you will benefit most [from the fact] that you spared my life and tried to show me such honour as you were able.')

Showing Rognvaldr and his men mercy, the chieftain defies the paradigm of the Saracen as threatening Other. As so often in the

sagas, his outward appearance attests to his nobility of mind, while the term *ǫðlingr* confers on him a quintessentially Norse understanding of political power: based on the word *óðal* (ancestral land), it connotes a complex nexus of inheritance, nobility and connection to the land (cf. Gurevich 1992, 206-7; de Vries 1961: s.v. *óðal*). Underlying the chieftain's mercy, however, is not simply nobility but the acknowledgement of a debt of honour, *sæmð* (cf. Miller 1990: 29-43; but see also Vilhjálmur Árnason 2009). The Saracen acknowledges little political, religious or racial difference in his dealings with the Orcadians, but insists rather on the similarity of his actions with respect to theirs, and a shared understanding of honour and mercy. Whereas in *Morkinskinna* King Sigurðr's battles with Saracens serve to emphasise his status as Christian king and crusading hero, such categories are blurred in this episode in *Orkneyinga saga*. Thus, even as Rognvaldr attempts to tell his story in the manner of kings and to craft himself in their image, the prosimetric saga text resists that identification and subverts the categories on which it is based.

## A Pilgrim in Jerusalem

The journey continues, as does the poetic dialogue, as Rognvaldr and his troops continue to Jerusalem. Like kings Sigurðr and Haraldr before them, they bathe in the river Jordan, boasting all the while of their exploits, piety and superiority over those who have chosen to stay at home (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 231-2). It is notable, however, that the saga records only one half-stanza spoken in Jerusalem itself. In that verse, the earl makes no mention of Ermengerðr, nor of his own accomplishments in battle. Rather, the stanza represents a moment of calm and reflection as Rognvaldr portrays himself simply as a pilgrim-poet:

Kross hangir pul þessum  
— þjóst skyli lægt — fyr brjósti,  
— flykkisk fram á brekkur  
ferð — en palmr meðal herða. (Jesch 2009c: 605 [st. 29])

(A cross hangs on the breast of this poet and a palm between his shoulders – anger should be laid [aside]; the crowd presses forward on the hillsides.)

The exact meaning of the term ‘pulr’ (poet) has been much debated (cf. Liberman 1996: 71-77). It is rare in skaldic verse, although relatively common in eddic poetry, where it is associated with age and knowledge: consider the charge in *Hávamál*, ‘at hárum pul / hlæ þú aldregi’ (Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014: I, 349 [st. 134]) (never laugh at a grey-haired poet).<sup>33</sup> It is entirely different to Rǫgnvaldr’s representation of himself in other verses as a young, active warrior for whom poetry is merely one of many ‘íþróttir’ (accomplishments, as discussed above). However, the sense of timelessness and wisdom such a word connotes fits well with the earl’s performance of Christian devotion as he walks through Jerusalem, his body adorned with the visible markers of piety. It is possible that the stanza also offers a rare glimpse of interiority through the phrase ‘þjóst skyli lægt’ (anger should be laid [aside]) as the emotions in Rǫgnvaldr’s heart respond to the religious symbol he carries on his breast.<sup>34</sup> This moment may be read as one in which Rǫgnvaldr temporarily surrenders the quasi-royal identity he has worked so hard to construct over the course of his journey: having followed in the footsteps of kings to arrive in the Holy Land, he now portrays himself as one pilgrim in a crowd of many. Although he remains a poet, Rǫgnvaldr at this moment submits to a higher authority; the signs of his inclusion in the wider Christian community take precedence over his performance of Scandinavian kingship.

Such submission, however, is temporary. The moment Rǫgnvaldr and his crew sail away from Jerusalem and towards Constantinople is one of convergence between past and present, Orcadian and Norwegian experience:

þeir vönduðu þá mjök siglingina ok sigldu þá með þrís miklum,  
sem þeir vissu, at gǫrt hafði Sigurðr Jórsalafari. Ok er þeir sigldu  
norðr eptir hafinu, kvað Rǫgnvaldr jarl vísu:  
Ríðum Ræfils Vakri!

Rekuma plóg af akri!  
Erjum úrgu barði  
út at Miklagarði!  
Þiggjum þengils mála!  
Þokum framm í gný stála!  
Rjóðum gylðis góma!  
Gerum ríks konungs sóma! (prose from *Finnbogi Guðmundsson*  
1965: 235, verse from Jesch 2009c: 607 [st. 31])

(Then they made a mighty sea-voyage and sailed with great splendour, as they knew Sigurðr Jórsalafari had done. And as they sailed north over the sea, Earl Rognvaldr spoke a verse: 'Let us ride the steed of the sea-king [ship]! Let's not drive the plough from the field! Let us plough with a soaking prow out to Constantinople! Let us receive the wages of the prince! Let us go forward into the din of steel [battle]! Let us redden the wolf's gums! Let us make honour for the powerful king!')

One can hear in this stanza the beat of the oars as the men draw together through the sea, the rhyme scheme mirroring their repeated, rhythmic actions.<sup>35</sup> Plural, imperative verbs – 'ríðum' (let us ride), 'rjóðum' (let us redden) – emphasize the unity of the men's actions in a moment entirely unlike the confusion aboard the dromond, or even the playful competition of praising the lady Ermengerðr. Indeed, unlike the polyphony that characterises so much of this section of *Orkneyinga saga*, Rognvaldr alone speaks at this moment; no other stanzas are cited. Like the episode of the dromond, Rognvaldr's voice prevails, but in this instance his voice does not impose one narrative over many; rather, he gives voice to a plural identity in which polyphony has given way to the choral. The earl speaks for the group in verse, and in the prose text the saga-author depicts Rognvaldr's men as active participants in the drama of the moment, knowing full well that they are duplicating both the route and the splendour of King Sigurðr Jórsalafari himself. It is however notable that this, the strongest expression of group identity and solidarity in this part of the saga, is also one in which the actions of the Orcadians blend most smoothly into those of

the Norwegians who have gone before. Should this moment be read as the successful performance of Orcadian success and identity, or as the final subsuming of that identity into that of the old colonial power? Does Rognvaldr proclaim here his triumphal self-fashioning as lord of the Islands or his ancestral ties with the Norwegian aristocracy? Is it possible to articulate an identity of difference when one has relied so heavily upon the model of others? If the aim of the saga-author is, as discussed above, to 'engage his audience in dialogue about the story he presents' (Jesch 1992: 350), such a conflicted representation of Orcadian identity at the very apogee of Rognvaldr's journey must certainly succeed in that project.

## **Towards a Conclusion**

During the medieval period, the Orkney Islands were a place in between, a 'difficult middle' with historical and cultural ties to Scandinavia, Britain and beyond. *Orkneyinga saga* reflects this liminal position in the person of Earl Rognvaldr, a character who, similarly, has a shifting and malleable identity. From his first introduction in the saga, he is explicitly and continually depicted in the act of constructing both his own character and his own story. He does so through a combination of poetry, travel and acts which mimic those of earlier Scandinavian rulers, in particular King Sigurðr Jónsalafari of Norway. It is perhaps no surprise that Rognvaldr aspires to such models: as Greenblatt notes, despite the apparent freedom of the act of self-fashioning, 'the human subject itself [seems] remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society' (1980: 256). Rognvaldr is creative, but he is not free: the process of his self-fashioning is necessarily shaped by existing paradigms of power and royal identity. Nevertheless, the saga-author's juxtaposition of multiple poetic voices and potentially conflicting narrative traditions serves to hold this process up for scrutiny, perhaps even interrogation. Above all, Rognvaldr's status as a poet emerges as a defining force in this project. One wonders if the saga's probable authorship in Iceland – and at Oddi in particular – may be responsible for such a focus. Rognvaldr is one of the few Norwegian poets from the twelfth century whose work is



recorded; the centre of skaldic production had shifted to Iceland by this point, and Icelandic, rather than Norwegian skalds, are credited with the majority of courtly verse from the year 1000 onwards (Whaley 2007: 479-480). Iceland too was a middle ground, its history and culture shaped by the combination of Norwegian colonisation, migration from Britain and Ireland and a keen interest in European scholarly traditions. Did the model of Earl Rǫgnvaldr provide an example of how one might use skaldic verse to exploit such hybridities and fashion oneself in the image of those more powerful? Greenblatt observes that mobility, particularly upward social mobility, characterises the life of each of his Renaissance examples (1980: 7). This is also true of Rǫgnvaldr Kali, whose self-fashioning takes place against the backdrop of his rise to earl and his consolidation of power in the Orkneys. Whilst the Icelandic audience of the saga may not have expected to rise to the status of earl, the tale of a poet who was able to do so may have proved irresistible in a such a culturally informed environment as Oddi, where at least one chieftain could, like Rǫgnvaldr, trace his ancestry to the Norwegian kings.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Cf. similar descriptions of the Norwegian kings Óláfr Tryggvason (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1941: 232) and Óláfr Haraldsson (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1945: 4), or saga-heroes such as Gunnarr Hámundarson að Hlíðarenda (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954: 52-53) and Kjartan Ólafsson (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934: 76-77).

<sup>2</sup> All translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup> The term is meant here primarily in the colloquial sense, but it is notable that the concept of the 'twelfth-century renaissance' has long been an object of study: see Haskins 1927 for one of the earliest (and most coherent) examinations of the concept, as well as Swanson 1999 for a good overview of subsequent work. Siemek 2009 discusses the degree to which Icelanders participated in the cultural and intellectual life of Western Europe during this period.

<sup>4</sup> The stanza is part of the *Gamanvísur* sequence, said to have been composed by Haraldr while travelling from Byzantium to Russia after having served as a mercenary in the Varangian guard. In the first *helmingr*, Haraldr lists his skills as composing poetry, horse-back riding, and swimming (Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011: I, 114-17 [stanza 61]).

<sup>5</sup> Greenblatt in turn drew on earlier works such as Burckhardt 1990, first published in 1860, and studies of Renaissance behaviour manuals (as discussed in Greenblatt 1980: 161-165).

<sup>6</sup> The debate as to whether the sagas should be read as literature, history

or a combination of the two is, however, beyond the scope of this article (Meulengracht Sørensen 1992 is a useful discussion of this vexed issue). The question of saga origins is likewise too complex to be treated fully here (on this, see Clunies Ross 2010: 37-51 for a useful summary). This article approaches *Orkneyinga saga* primarily as a literary text, while acknowledging its close relationship with the so-called ‘historical sagas’, as well as its probable (albeit somewhat obscure) roots in the history of medieval Scandinavia, Orkney and Iceland.

<sup>7</sup> Snorri Sturluson’s thirteenth-century chronicle of the Norwegian kings, *Heimskringla*, contains a condensed account of the earl’s expedition to Jerusalem (Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson 1951: 324-325), as does the chronicle *Morkinskinna* (Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011: II, 214-215). Rognvaldr is also mentioned briefly in the Icelandic annals (Storm 1888, see for example pp. 20-21 and 321-322).

<sup>8</sup> The term ‘saga-author’ will be used for convenience in this article, but it is of course likely that the extant text represents the work of multiple authors, scribes and compilers. On the authorship of *Orkneyinga saga* see especially Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1993.

<sup>9</sup> A Danish copy of the saga was also made c.1570 from an Icelandic exemplar. This version does not include the final four chapters now found in *Flateyjarbók* – likely later additions to the saga – but does present a relatively complete text in a form separate from the kings’ sagas and perhaps not unlike modern reconstructions. The provenance and complex manuscript history of the saga has been extensively discussed both by its editors (Sigurður Nordal 1913-16, x-liv and Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965, cviii-cxxvi) and by later scholars (e.g. Jesch 2010:154-159, Phelpstead 2007: 12-16).

<sup>10</sup> The relationship between verse and prose in the sagas has been much discussed. On this, see especially O’Donoghue 2005 and the many chapters devoted to this question in Poole 2001.

<sup>11</sup> So unusual is this combination that Melissa Berman has suggested the term ‘political saga’ to describe what she sees as a sub-genre of the *konungasögur*, incorporating *Orkneyinga saga*, *Jómsvíkinga saga* and *Færeyinga saga* (1985: 113-129; but see Jesch 1993 and Torfi Tulinius 2002: 197-200). On the mythological and legendary material in the saga, see Beuermann (2011: 113-119). Sigurður Nordal first suggested that episodes dealing with Sveinn Ásleifarson may have derived from an Orcadian eye-witness tradition, perhaps begun with Sveinn himself (1913-16: iii-v). Paul Bibire, on the other hand, argues that the saga-author may have had access to a collection of verses associated with Rognvaldr, perhaps maintained either orally or in written form by one of the Icelandic poets who travelled with him (1984: 83, 1988: 211). Recent scholars have also been interested in the mixing of hagiographic and historical traditions in the saga (Phelpstead 2007, 77-115, Waugh 2003: 163-187).

<sup>12</sup> These are a lost *drápa* about Earl Hákon Pálsson and one about both Hákon and St Magnús Erlendsson (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 102 and 104).

<sup>13</sup> Judith Jesch observes that these references to the sagas are removed from the text in *Flateyjarbók* and that there may well have been more such comments in versions of the saga that are no longer extant (1992: 348).

<sup>14</sup> In this, he is analogous to one of the earliest Earls of Orkney, Torf-Einarr

Rognvaldsson, son of the Norwegian Earl of Møre. Although not his father's first choice to assume lordship over the Islands, Einarr ruled successfully for many years. In *Orkneyinga saga* his rise to power is similarly punctuated by skaldic verse, in which the young earl exults over his killing of King Haraldr hárfagri's son, who had briefly invaded the Islands (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965: 12-16).

<sup>15</sup> As Bibire observes, the cathedral acts as a physical expression of the power and legitimacy of Rognvaldr's rule, just as court poetry provides a verbal expression of it (1988: 216-217). See also Thomson (1987: 60-67) and Haki Antonsson (2007:73-84) on Rognvaldr's role in establishing the cult of St Magnús in Orkney.

<sup>16</sup> Compare, for example, *Sneglu-Halla þátrr* and *Stúfs þátrr inn skemmri* (Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011: II, 270-284 and 290-293). See further Turville-Petre 1966.

<sup>17</sup> See Jesch 2009c: 590-591 and Jesch 2009a: 614-616 for the verses. See also Russell Poole's discussion of these verses and the suggestion that the wall-hanging might depict a scene from the legend of Starkaðr (2006).

<sup>18</sup> This episode is not included in *Flateyjarbók*, but rather in Uppsala University Library, MS Upps Bibl. Isl. R 702. R 702 is a paper manuscript dating from the first half of the seventeenth century, copied from older material. See Bibire 1984: 85-86 for a full discussion of the manuscript and its relationship to the other versions of *Orkneyinga saga*.

<sup>19</sup> Note the similarities between this term and Óðinn's disguise as Grímnir (perhaps related to *gríma*, also meaning 'hood' or 'cowl') in *Grímnismál* (Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014: I, 367-379).

<sup>20</sup> This expedition is generally dated to 1151-1153.

<sup>21</sup> A good overview of Sigurðr's expedition may be found in Doxey 1996: 139-160; see also Ármann Jakobsson 2013: 121-140 for a discussion of its portrayal in the *konungasögur*. Haraldr harðráði also travelled east, although he did so before becoming king. He too is said to have bathed in the River Jordan and to have subdued a number of heathen cities along the way. The sagas similarly emphasise the importance of Haraldr's own account of his adventures: for example, the text of *Morkinskinna* notes, 'En heðan frá er sú frásögn um farar Haralds er hann, Haraldr, sagði sjálf, ok þeir menn er honum fylgðu' (Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011: I, 84) (but from now on the story of Haraldr's travels is the one which he, Haraldr, told himself, as well as the men who accompanied him). However, Haraldr's journey differs from Rognvaldr's and Sigurðr's in a number of ways, most notably in his insistence on hiding his true identity. Unlike Rognvaldr and Sigurðr, who extravagantly perform the role of Scandinavian lord, Haraldr adopts the pseudonym Norðbrikt and forbids his followers from revealing his royal status (Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011: I, 106-114, but see Ármann 2013: 137-139).

<sup>22</sup> The exceptions are three stanzas cited just as Sigurðr sets off, one attributed to Þórarinn Stutfeldr about the gathering of the fleet and two to Þorvaldr blönduskáld, also about the fleet gathering and then setting off. There is one further stanza attributed to Einarr Skúlason, cited as Sigurðr rides to the River Jordan. In comparison, nine stanzas of *Útfarardrápa* are cited during this episode.

<sup>23</sup> These extracts from the verse are given in prose word order (Gade 2009: 486-7 [sts. 3-4]).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Snorri's comments in his prologue to the *Separate Saga of Saint Óláfr* that, 'þat væri þá háð, en eigi lof' (it would then be mockery and not praise) for a medieval court poet to eulogize a ruler for deeds that the ruler did not accomplish (Bjarni Aðalbarnarson 1945: 422, but see further Goeres 2015: 5-7).

<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the saga reports that Haraldr harðráði travels to Jerusalem because he 'vill bæta sínar afgørðir við Guð' (Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011: I, 106) (wishes to atone for his transgressions against God). See, however, Ármann's discussion of the secular, political benefits of the expedition (2013: 130-131).

<sup>26</sup> Bibire discusses the possible historical reasons Rognvaldr may have gone to Jerusalem, as well as the literary parallels with other episodes in the saga (1988: 218-219).

<sup>27</sup> The degree to which these verses may have been influenced by troubadour poetry and the courtly love tradition has been much discussed (cf. Finlay 1995). On Ermengerðr and her patronage of troubadours and other poets, see Cheyette 2001.

<sup>28</sup> *Gæfa* appears in explicitly religious contexts in such poems as *Liknarbraut* (st. 36) and Sturla Þórðarson's *Drápa about Magnús lagabætir* (st. 2). *Sæll* is even more common, occurring multiple times in, among others, *Liknarbraut* (sts. 7, 14) and *Harmsól* (sts. 27, 58).

<sup>29</sup> Such theories have been applied to Old Norse texts with relative frequency and great success, as in Amory 1991, Bredsdorff 1997 and 2007 and, most recently, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013.

<sup>30</sup> As Ole Bruhn notes of this episode, '[t]he fact that the whole course of events was written down so soon after their occurrence should in itself be sufficient to arouse suspicion' that the account bears little similarity to the actual events. He points out that there were at least two people on board the ships (the earl and the bishop) who would have been able to write down what happened, and that a skaldic stanza was therefore unnecessary to record the battle (1993: 240-241).

<sup>31</sup> John Lindow notes that the adjective *blár* seems to mark an ethnic or racial difference in Old Norse texts, as opposed to the epithet *inn svarti*, used to describe Nordic people with dark hair or complexions. The term was also used of men with supernatural or unusual abilities (1995: 13-18; see also Fritzner 1867: s.v. *blámaðr* and, most recently, Cole 2015).

<sup>32</sup> It is notable that this focus on the role of the earl's verse in constructing the narrative appears only in *Orkneyinga saga*. The texts of both *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* describe the episode in a similar fashion, but do not cite the verse. *Morkinskinna* relates simply that 'Auðun rauði er sá nefndr er fyrst gekk upp á drómundinn, stafnbúi Erlings. Þat var kallat frægðarverk' (Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson 2011: II, 215) (Auðun the Red, Erlingr's forecastle-man, was the name of the one who went up first onto the dromond. That was considered a splendid deed). In *Heimskringla*, 'Auðin rauði hét sá maðr, stafnbúi Erlings, er fyrst gekk upp á drómundinn' (Bjarni Aðalbarnarson 1951: 325) (the man who went up first onto the dromond was called Auðun the Red, the forecastle-man).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. also references to ‘inn hári þulr’ (the grey-haired poet) in *Fáfnismál* and ‘inn gamli þulr’ (the old poet) in *Vafþrúðnismál* (Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason 2014: II, 309 [st. 34] and I, 357 [st. 9]). The possible cultic resonances of *þulr* (Vogt 1927: 76-78) seem unlikely in this context, however.

<sup>34</sup> It should be noted that the phrase ‘þjóst skyli lægt’ has been read in various ways, with the most recent editor preferring ‘the tumult ought to be lessened’, with the implication that ‘Rognvaldr is urging his men to behave respectfully as they approach the holy places’ (Jesch 2009c: 605-606). The word *þjóst* is elsewhere found in the masculine form (rather than the neuter, as it may be here) and it is therefore possible that its use in this stanza differs somewhat from other texts; however, the sense of anger in one’s heart has parallels in the (admittedly later) devotional context of poems such as *Líknarbraut* (st. 30), *Lilja* (st. 48) and *Pétursdrápa* (st. 6).

<sup>35</sup> One might compare this to Richard Perkins’ examination of ‘bailing chants’ in *Eiríks saga rauða* and elsewhere (2011).

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