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The Voyage to Byzantium: the Evidence of the Sagas*

The treatment of the journey to Byzantium topos is not as elaborately presented in other family sagas, where the narrative focus is limited to the objective end of the journey. *Hrafnkels Saga* contains two characters who travelled to the East around 950 for wealth and fame[1]. The first is Þorkell Þjóstarsson, who identifies himself as a «wanderer» (in service with the Emperor for six years (chap. 9), and who comes to the aid of Þorbjǫrn when neighboring chieftains decline because of their fear of Hrafnkel. The second is Eyvindr Bjarnason, Samr's brother, who returns home laden with goods after having won high favor with the Emperor (chap. 17–18). As does *Laxdæla Saga*, this work also depicts the hero's progress from the ship to the homestead. But in *Hrafnkels Saga*, Eyvindr is not admired by the homesteaders. Rather, he is spied upon by the servant woman, and he is cut down en route by Hrafnkel as an act of revenge. Ironically, it is his goods — the riches he has brought from Byzantium — that slow down his progress across the bog and allow Hranfkel to catch up with him. Another early seeker of fame was Grís Sæmingsson of *Hallfreðar Saga*, who in his youth had served the Emperor (ca. 976), and who in his decline — still brave and open-handed — carries the mournful memory of the death of his lord, the Emperor, and cherishes the Emperor's gift of a spear[2].

But there were other motivations besides the search for fame and fortune. One of the earliest journeys (ca. 990) — that of Finnbogi the Strong in *Finnboga saga ramma* — was to collect a debt from a merchant for Jarl Hákon, an episode Blöndal suggests is fictitious[3]. Those who were outlaws — Kolskeggr Hámundarson of Njáls Saga (chap. 81), Þorgestr Þorhallarson of Heiðarvíga Saga (chap. 11), and Þorbjǫrn ǫngul of *Grettis Saga* (chap. 85) saw the road to Byzantium as an escape route[4]. Kolskeggr took it to avoid having to avenge his brother Gunnarr's death. Þorgestr and Þorbjǫrn, on the other hand, took it to place themselves as far out of reach of avenging kin as possible, a futile action, for both men eventually were hunted down. For them, Byzantium became a place of retribution.

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* Окончание. Начало см.: ВВ., 1995, т. 56 (81), с. 107–117.

1 *Hrafnkels saga* in vol. 10 of Íslendinga Sogur.

2 *Hallfreðar saga* in vol. 7 of Íslendinga Sögur.

3 Chap. 18 and 19 in *Finnboga saga ramma*, vol. 9, Íslendinga Sögur; see Blöndal-Benedikz 196.

4 *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk Fornrit 12 (1954); *Heiðarvíga saga* in vol. 7 of Íslendinga Sögur; *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk Fornrit 7 (1936).

The pursued and the pursuers of both sagas became members of the Varangian guard, and in both works it was during exercises of the guard that the outlaws were discovered. In *Heiðarvíga Saga*, the discovery scene takes place during a wrestling match (chap. 11), while in *Grettis Saga* it occurs during an inspection of weapons (chap. 86). Þorgestr was not slain by his pursuer (he had been provoked to kill Víga-Styrr, and, hence, not really guilty) and a settlement was reached; but Þorbjǫrn justly fell for his murder of Grettir at the hands of Þorsteinn drómundr, Grettir's brother. Þorsteinn had followed Þorbjǫrn along the Russian route expressly to avenge his brother Grettir. According to the saga, Grettir was the only Icelander who had been avenged in Byzantium, and it was one of the three attributes that made him a unique character in Icelandic history.

Varangians had been in the service of the emperor from as early as the eighth and ninth centuries, but apparently Icelanders did not join their ranks until the tenth[5]. In general, those Icelanders in the sagas who undertook the journey were successful in their enterprise and, on their return, became men of sophistication and importance. Despite this historical note, however, the repetition of narrative motifs cited in the above sagas suggests we are dealing with literary set-pieces rather than historical events.

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In the kings' sagas, there is likewise an impulse for migration. The lure of treasure and renown, and the seductive quality of the tales of the enchanted and opulent city recounted by those who had been there, served as impetus for both King Sigurðr Magnússon of Norway and Earl Rǫgnvaldr of Orkney on their pilgrimages to Jerusalem and Constantinople. The combined travel-sequences in *Fagrskinna* (chap. 72–77), and in *Morkinskinna* (chap. 47–48) are almost identical in narrative structure with Rǫgnvaldr's journey in *Orkneyinga Saga* (chap. 88), with variances occurring in minor details. Both travel episodes open with a hub of activity in Norway as a returning traveller tales of wonderous entertainments, of adventures experienced in the Varangian guard, of wealth and fortune that awaited any Northerner who would make the journey to the East. In both Sigurðr's and Rǫgnvaldr's sequences, likewise, the hero is responsive to the urgings of his companions and consents to lead a company of men — the elite landowners and office holders — on a sea voyage to the East.

Historically, the two voyages are some forty years apart, with Sigurðr's being the earlier of the two, having taken place between 1107–1110. Of the two, Sigurðr's is more expansively represented. In her analysis of *Sigurðar saga Jórsalafara*, Marianne Kalinke rightly posits that the redactor, seeing the «intrinsically dramatic potential of certain historical givens», merged art and history to produce a work «replete with brilliant characterization, well-constructed dialogue... and dramatic confrontation»[6]. Sigurðr's pilgrimage, for example, is not a journey to the Holy Land as such, but rather the stately

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[5] *H. R. E. Davidson.* The Viking Road to Byzantium. London, 1976, p. 232.

[6] *M. E. Kalinke.* Sigurðar saga Jór salafara: The Fictionalization of Facts in Morkinskinna // Scandinavian Studies, 1984, 56, 2, p. 153.

progress of a king whose every port of call is a triumph to his person. Setting sail along the western route, Sigurðr is entertained in England over the winter by Henry, William the Conqueror's son. In France, where he is unjustly treated, he lays siege to a castle and forcibly takes foodstuffs and war-booty. In Spain, Lisbon and Gibraltar, he battles vikings (by which the sagaman means pirates) and Arabs for booty. And, in the Balearic Islands, he gains much wealth by fighting the heathen and ransacking a cave full of treasure. He emerges victorious from eight battles before he reaches Sicily where he is to be entertained by Duke Roger. Sigurðr's power and prestige are emphasized in Sicily, as well, since — at the end of his stay — Sigurðr leads Roger to the high seat and confers on him the title of King of Sicily, with the right to rule the realm as king (*Fagrskinna*, chap. 73). The sagaman's treatment of Sigurðr's accomplishments exemplifies the chief characteristic of saga art — to embellish reality and enhance the hero's status. At mid-point in his journey to the East, Sigurðr emerges as a Norwegian prince who will be equal to the potentates of Byzantium.

From Sicily, Sigurðr sails across the Mediterranean Sea, docks in Acre, and begins his march to Palestine to meet Baldwin, the ruler of the Crusaders' state. Here again, we see rhetorical embellishment. Sigurðr's entry into Jerusalem has multiple allusions, and each allusion is meant to enhance the hero's stature. Sigurðr's entry into Jerusalem has been anticipated and planned for by Baldwin who has commanded that the ground be covered with costly fabric as a tribute to and as a test of the Northern king and his army. The ride itself recalls Christ's entry into Jerusalem over a carpet of palms, and it prefigures Sigurðr's entry into Constantinople later in the saga where similar preparations are made to welcome the King. Sigurðr's sojourn in Jerusalem is handled with narrative swiftness. He rides to the Jordan with Baldwin, receives holy relics as banquet gifts — among which is a chip of the holy cross — sets out with Baldwin and captures Sidon (or *Sætt* as it is called in the saga)[7] and, then, in boats heavy with goods and treasure, he sails on to Constantinople, stopping off at Cyprus and Engilsness[8]. As the ships approach Constantinople, Sigurðr sails close to land as did Haraldr — past villages, castles, and strongholds. The people run to the banks and gaze at the sails — covered with pall cloth on both sides and spread so tightly and closely that they form an enclosure — and marvel at the sight. Sigurðr's progress from Engilsness to Constantinople is the final and what may be called the aquatic version of the «parade of the hero and his troops» motif, which has been already noted in its terrestrial guise in Óðinn's exodus from Turkland and Bolli Bollason's homecoming. The sagaman has used the «parade» motif twice previously in the saga to anticipate and, hence, to emphasize Sigurðr's triumphant entry into Constantinople.

Sigurðr's parade through Constantinople was that of a victorious emperor returned from battle. Alexius I Komnenos (1081–1118) had operated the *gullvarta* 'the golden portals' of the city to be opened and had the streets from the golden portal to the palace covered with silken cloth. Singers and musicians accompanied the Northerners to the palace, and Sigurðr rode over the silk on a golden-shod

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7 Sidon was conquered by Baldwin on December 19, 1110.

8 The location for Engilsness has not been established, although Cape Malea in the Peloponnesus has been tentatively designated as the site; but this hardly seems likely, for the route would have taken the Orkneynians out into the Mediterranean again rather than have kept them close to the Turkish coast.

horse, having made arrangements previously that one horse-shoe should retrieve it. The pomp and splendour of the procession to the palace were matched only by the series of gifts the Emperor's messengers brought to the Northern prince once he had arrived at his palatial lodgings. Each was increasingly more valuable. First, purses of gold which Sigurðr immediately gave over to his men; these were followed by coffers of gold, which Sigurðr again dispensed without a pause even to acknowledge their arrival. Finally, the last gift — a garment of costly purple silk and chests full of gold holding two rings — moved the recalcitrant Northern prince to acknowledge the receipt of, and to thank the Emperor for the gifts. And the *language Sigurðr and the messenger conversed in, of course, was Greek.*

Sigurðr's stay in Constantinople was filled with events that were meant to enhance the magnanimity and power of Norway's king. The narrative sequences which relate the Emperor's anticipation of Sigurðr's arrival, the procession, and the welcoming gifts suggest an exaggeration which is close to political propaganda. When Sigurðr was offered the choice of six ship-pounds in weight of gold or an evening's entertainment at the *Paðreimr* 'Hippodrome', he chose the latter. When, during the preparations for a feast to honor Kyrialax (the name for Alexius), he was told that ordinary firewood could not be obtained, he sent his servants to purchase walnuts for use as fuel for the banquet. And, when the Norwegian king departed from Byzantium, he gave the Emperor all his ships as a parting gift, and their golden figure-heads were set atop St. Peter's Church (*Morkinskinna*, chap. 48). How much of the narrative is true? Scorn for gold and silver, using walnuts for firewood, and riding upon a golden-shod horse over silk are events found in stories told about Olga of Kiev, King Haraldr, and Robert of Normandy as well. And some years before, the choice between gold or entertainment had been offered to Eiríkr of Denmark but the Danish King, who had been more destitute than his Norwegian neighbour, chose the gold. Nonetheless, despite the formulaic and folk-tale nature of the incidents, such stories — as Ellis Davidson recently has observed — «whatever their origin, were clearly inspired by the awe and envy felt by the Scandinavians for the riches and luxuries of the Byzantine world, and a desire not to fall short of the standards of this new and bewildering city»[9]. Nor do these stories diminish the historicity of Sigurðr's voyage, since there is external evidence for Sigurðr's expedition to Jerusalem. In his *History of the Expedition to Jerusalem*, Fulcher of Chartres notes the importance of Sigurðr's military activities in the defeat of the infidel. Sigurðr's arrival in Joppa with his fleet of fifty-five ships (so Fulcher states) came at a time when Baldwin was in the most extreme danger of defeat. His campaign to win the Holy Land had suffered setbacks, and, at the time of Sigurðr's landing, the Saracens had placed Acre under siege. Sigurðr's arrival, if nothing more, was well-timed. Fulcher describes the leader of the Norwegians as handsome, youthful, and of royal ancestry — a kinsman to the King of Norway[10]. What we have in *Sigurðar saga Jórsalafara* is history mythologized.

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[9] Ellis Davidson 196–198, 216–217, 261–263; Blöndal-Benedikz 137–141.

[10] Fulcher of Chartres. A History of the Expedition to Jerusalem: 1095–1127, trans. Frances Rita Ryan (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1969) II, 44, 199–200; see Blöndal-Benedikz 137–141 for further references to Sigurðr's voyages in other medieval chronicles.

The last Northerner recorded in the sagas to have made a trip to Jerusalem and then on to Miklagarðr was Rǫgnvaldr, Earl of Orkney. In addition to the description of the journey in *Orkneyinga Saga* (chap. 85–88), mention of it is made in *Haraldssona Saga* (Hkr III). In this latter work, the journey is summarily recounted as an encomium to Erlingr Skakki (chap. 17), one of Rǫgnvaldr's captains, with special reference to the defection of Eindriði ungi, another of Rǫgnvaldr's men on the expedition East. Unlike Sigurðr, Rǫgnvaldr was in his middle years when he set out for the Holy Land, but, nonetheless, he was a leader of merit and courage. He was sensitive to his renown as a military personage and the saga depicts him as cool under fire: when others panicked, he composed poetry.

Much is made in the saga of the preparation for the expedition. After two years planning, and after some unnecessary delays caused by Eindriði, the soon-to-be defector, they set out in 1151 with fifteen large ships captained by an elite company of men and five poets — including Rǫgnvaldr himself — who were to record the events in song for posterity. The route they followed was Sigurðr's, stopping off at Orkney, Scotland, the east coast of England, and then sailing down to Narbonne and Galicia. Rǫgnvaldr's journey has a romantic interlude that was lacking in Sigurðr's. Whereas Sigurðr was lavishly entertained by Roger in Sicily, Rǫgnvaldr's host is Princess Ermingerd of Narbonne, who is drawn to the Earl, and whose people admire him.

The narrative units contained in the Sigurðr journey find their place here as well. The attack on a castle by means of fire to obtain food and the retrieval of treasure by means of a descent on a rope recall Sigurðr's exploits. The route takes the Orkneyans first along the western and then the southern coast of Spain through the straits of Gibraltar and into the Mediterranean where they fight and are victorious in a sea-battle with the Saracen *drómundr* 'war-ship' (the sea-battle is not present in Sigurðr's journey). After a short port-of-call in a Saracen town, they move on to Crete, where they (like St. Paul) wait for a fair wind, so they may complete the voyage. Once in Acre, they disembark *með þrís miklum ok farar-blóma þeim, er þar var sialdsénn* «in great state and pomp as was seldom seen there» (chap. 88). But there are no silk cloths spread for the Orkneyans.

Orkneyinga Saga is plainer in tone and lacks the marvels and exaggerations contained in *Fagrskinna* and *Morkinskinna*. There are Edenic descriptions of palaces, no gifts of gold chests and purple silks, no golden-shod horses to ride in state upon. The saga concentrates on the perils of the journey. Disease strikes the company in Acre, for example, and there is a night attack on one of the men by someone unknown and unseen. From Acre, Rǫgnvaldr travels to Jerusalem, where, along with one of his men, he swims across the Jordan. When he reaches the shore on the other side, he emerges from the water and comes upon a certain copsewood where he ties some knots as a sign that he completed the journey: *Kemk móðr í stað góðan... þessa hafranzmessu* 'Weary I brought myself to this good place on St. Lawrence's Day', the Earl chants; *En hykk, at þó þykki / þangat langt atganga, / blóð fellr varmt á víðan / vǫll, heimdrǫgum ǫllum* 'I do not think laggards will travel the distance to Jordan; blood falls warm on the wide plain' (chap. 88). The fame the Earl achieved by journeying to Jerusalem was heavily bought.

Rǫgnvaldr's route to Byzantium follows that travelled by Sigurðr, except that the Orkneyans make a lengthy stopover at a port called *Imbólar* (dative, *Imbólum*).

Although the port has been identified both as Neochori (a harbour in Macedonia) and the island of Imbros, neither of these seems likely, for neither has the necessary archaeological and topographical characteristics that are mentioned in the saga[11]. Rather, the more appropriate port for Rǫgnvaldr and his men to pass the winter would be the natural harbour of Embolas (now Vathi) on the Eastern coast of Kalymnos. In addition to the similarity in name, Embolas contains all the topographical features found in the saga — muddy port, the production of wine, a city wall dating from the fourth century and a market area from the twelfth, a Byzantine church of the Archangel Michael, and a prevalence of graves from the Byzantine period. Embolas (the term itself means «a narrow pathway») was the name of the port until the latter part of the eighteenth century. The port is long and narrow, and its opening to the sea is wide enough to allow the passage of one ship at a time. Herodotus tells the reader that the town was situated between two rivers at the base of steep mountains. The most apt description for the port is that it looks like an actual fjord[12]. From *Imbólar*, the Orkneyans sailed to Engilsness, then through the Sea of Marmora to Byzantium.

Rǫgnvaldr's stay in Constantinople is treated cursorily by the sagaman. There is no elaborate description of a welcoming scene. The sagaman plainly states that the Northmen were given a magnificent reception by the Emperor and the Varangians, and they spent the winter there as members of the guard, *í allgóðum fagnaði* 'in excellent hospitable entertainment' (chap. 89). There are no embellishments — no walnuts for firewood or games at the Hippodrome. Their journey back to Norway was handled with similar brevity. They followed the usual pilgrim route, first to Rome and then north to Denmark. *Ok varð þessi ferð in frægsta, ok þóttu þeir allir miklu meira háttar menn síðan, er farit hǫfðu.* 'This journey' [the sagaman states] 'became the most famous, and everyone considered all who made it men of greater importance after that' (chap. 89). That is, everyone who went back alive.

There is little doubt that the journey to Constantinople was hazardous. Even with well-outfitted fleets like Sigurðr's and Rǫgnvaldr's, the perils of the seà voyage, the outbreak of disease, and the consistent fear of treachery made the chances of survival quite slim. Eiríkr of Denmark was one of those who failed to return. Eiríkr's journey, an actual pilgrimage rather than an expedition to gain glory and gold, was earlier than Sigurðr's and Rǫgnvaldr's (c. 1102–1103). The extant narratives in *Knytlinga Saga*, Markús Skeggason's *Eiríksdrápa*, and in Saxo, portray the King as saintly, pious, good, prudent, and certainly not like the arrogant young Sigurðr[13]. Yet the narrative details of Eiríkr's meeting with the Emperor are similar to those which appear in the Sigurðr story, except for Eiríkr's reception. In *Knytlinga Saga* (and in Saxo), Alexius I at first denies Eiríkr entrance into Constantinople, for fear that the Varangians will defect and join with the northern king. But after Eiríkr's loyalty

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[11] For discussion of Neochori and Imbros, see Blondal-Benedikz 155–157. The identification of Imbolar as Imbros was made by Dawkins, «Greeks and Northmen» 47.

[12] Indeed, «fjord» was the term used by Mikes Alachouzos, curator of the Museum of Kalymnos, to desribe Embolas as we drove along the steep mountains to inspect the site of the port. See my forthcoming article «Imbólar and Embolas: Orkneyinga saga's Port in the Aegean».

[13] Knytlinga saga in Danakonunga Sogur, ed. Bjarni Guðnason, Íslenzk Fornrit 35 (1982) 93–321; Saxo, Gesta Danorum, ed. J. Olrik, H. Raeder, and F. Blatt (Copenhagen, 1931–1957), I, 338–341; Skjaldedigtning A I, 444–452; B I, 414–420; see also Blöndal-Benedikz 130–137; Ellis Davidson 257–260.

is tested, the Emperor relents and (as might be expected) Alexius receives him splendidly. Alexius offers Eiríkr the choice of accepting a sum of gold or of being entertained by games at the Hippodrome, a choice that was later made to Sigurðr as has already been noted. But Eiríkr had come to Byzantium as a pilgrim, overland through Russia, and he was in need of supplies. He chooses the gold. Eiríkr likewise accepts Byzantine silks and fourteen warships. It is on these that he and his men sail to Jerusalem. Eiríkr never reached the Holy City. He died at Paphos in Cyprus, of the fever (*Knytlinga Saga* 81).

Yngvarr of *Yngvars saga Víðförla* — the one extant saga with a Swedish chieftain for a hero — also died in the East[14]. It was an ill-fated enterprise, and some twenty-six runic stones — sixteen from Södermanland — commemorate the men who fell with Yngvarr in Serkland[15]. Yngvarr never reached Byzantium. The famous Gripsholm stone relates that the purpose of the expedition was to get gold, but that instead they gave their bodies to the eagle for food. *Yngvars saga*, like *Sigurðar saga*, reveals the sagaman's tendency to embellish and elaborate the narrative. But within it, there are startling realistic moments. The saga leads the reader down the Volga with the expedition and describes a Byzantine military attack by fireboats and dragon heads spitting Greek fire. Yngvarr retaliates by using firearrows and burns the fireship[16]. The scene preserves a moment in history.

The above four sagas were organized either entirely or in part around a single event, the journey east — to Byzantium and/or to Jerusalem. In most cases, there is external documentation for these events, and we cannot deny their historicity. There are some narrative details, of course, which can be seriously doubted, if not dismissed altogether as historical occurences.

But these doubts arise because of the nature of the art of the saga itself. It is formulaic; it exhibits «structural uniformity»; and it aims «to amplify and complicate received material»[17]. A saga, by definition then, contains recurrent motifs and scenes — that is, *topoi* — that appear in variation from saga to saga, as well as employing incremental repetition within each work to develop the story. A particular characteristic of a saga is also that it is rooted in history — it is a «synthesis of myth and mimesis»[18], a merging of life and art, of fact and imagination. It is this syn-

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[14] Yngvars saga vídförla, ed. Emil Olson (Copenhagen: S. L. Møllers 1912); see also Ellis Davidson 167–170; and Blöndal-Benedikz 224–230, on the Yngvarr motif on runic inscriptions; and Jonathan Shepard's «Yngvarr's Expedition to the East and a Russian Described Stone Cross», Saga-Book of the Viking Society, 21:3–4 (1984–1985): 222–292 for the introduction of new evidence into the historicity of Yngvarr's expedition.

[15] *E. Brate* and *E. Wessén.* Södermanlands Runinskrifter, Sveriges Runinskrifter (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1924–1936). See also E. *Wessén.* Upplands Runiskrifter, Sveriges Runinskrifter, vi-x (Stockholm, Wahlström & Widstrand, 1940–1958); and S. B. F. Jansson, the Runes of Sweden, trans. Peter G. Foote (London: Phoenix House, 1962); Ellis Davidson 235–239. There are, of course, many other stones that contain the Byzantine motif, over thirty-five in Uppland alone.

[16] See Ellis Davidson discussion on the genuineness of the saga, 86–89, 169–170, 277–278.

[17] See Clover's discussion of saga structure and composition in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature 272–294, quotations from 275.

[18] *E. Robert.* Scholes and Robert Kellogg, The Nature of Narrative (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), quotation from p. 45 (also quoted in Clover, Old Norse-Icelandic Literature 273).

thesis that leads us to seek for a cultural meaning in the journey to Byzantium topos, especially in its pervasiveness in the four sagas we have been examining. If we look at the journey topos in the broader cultural context of a migration myth, we see it as a reflex of the exodus pattern. The hero journeys to the paradisiacal East, back to his ancestral homeland. He thus places himself deliberately in a state of exile. Once having arrived in the East, he is at the necessary point of departure for reenacting the primary communal activity of the migrating Icelandic peoples and for participating in their destiny. Through the experience of wandering, he becomes one with the tribe. Saga literature, then, is both sound and unsound as evidence. Its form and artifice might bring it closer to being considered as evidence for understanding the cultural spirit of a nation [19].

[19] My thanks to the Swedish Consulate, the Swedish Information Service, and the University of New Mexico for their generosity in providing me with the necessary research and travel funds to prepare this article. My thanks also to Doroty A. Wonsmos and the staff of Interlibrary Loan at Zimmerman Library for their help in obtaining many of the texts.