The Historical Worth of Rígsþula

The worth of Rígsþula to historians of medieval Scandinavia, such as Aaron Gurevich (1982, 270–71, 321), Ruth Mazo Karras (1988, 60–63, 208–10, and passim), or Helgi Guðmundsson (1997, 315–18), is necessarily bound up with the dating of this poem, a long disputed matter which we must take up again in greater detail. Mercifully, in the secondary literature on the matter, there seem to be but roughly two epochal alternatives, either the Viking Age, from the tenth century to ca. 1100, or the High Middle Ages, ca. 1200–1250. Finer chronological demarcations are distinguishable in one alternative or the other, but it is tacitly agreed that the earliest date cannot be pushed back much beyond the tenth century,¹ and that the latest should stand as a terminus ad quem in the thirteenth century. Whichever alternative is chosen, as we shall see, commits the historian or literary scholar to an appropriate conjunction of historical persons and events for a context of the poem. Yet there is one large component of Rígsþula which, despite attempts to date it, will always be undateable—viz., the “timeless” etiological folktale motifs (dimly discerned in the secondary literature)² which purport to “explain” the origin of the three social estates in medieval Scandinavia, and to characterize their chief representatives.³ This component may have been eventually reworked as a mythus philosophicus⁴ by a learned hand at the High Middle Ages, but fundamentally it embodied popular curiosity about the causes or origins of society and social divisions.

Though many analogies have been drawn far and wide from the Indo-European world (Dumézil 1968, 183–90; 1973a,c) and from the Bible (see Hill 1986 on

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¹. Folklorists and Georges Dumézil and his Scandinavianist followers will overstep the boundaries of time to explore the ahistorical backgrounds of Rígsþula.


Genesis 9.18–27 and medieval glosses of this text), the exact tale-type of the fable of Rígr’s perambulatory procreations has not as yet been established, the closest analogue being an Irish interpolation in Solinus’ geographical compilation of the third century a.d., which tells of a nameless king of the Hebrides, without a queen and without progeny, whom his subjects allow to cohabit with any woman to his liking, “per vicissitudines” [“one after another”],5 a rather aimless promiscuity in comparison with Rígr’s purposeful philandering. Nevertheless, not only the etiological conception of the origin of the three social estates but also the repetitive and schematic stylization of the Old Norse fable stamp it unmistakably as a folktale in its own right,6 and as such, the fable need not be stretched to approximate either the Hebridean king’s round of liaisons or the commoner custom of the Celtic kings of sleeping with the wives of their vassals by droit de seigneur.7 Helgi Guðmundsson’s guess that Rígr’s dissemination of the three-tiered social system of medieval Scandinavia was “native lore” [innlend þekking] of Old Norse culture may prove right (1997, 317).

In toto, the proposed datings for the composition of Rígsþula split along national lines, German, Dutch, and Swiss scholars tending toward the twelfth or thirteenth century,8 the Scandinavian holding to the tenth or eleventh century,9 and the English and American vacillating between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.10 Almost all scholars seem to acquiesce at least in the ascription of Icelandic authorship to the poem,11 but there is no firm consensus about the place of composition (Northumbria, Ireland, Norway, or Iceland?), even though it is gener-

6. On the style of the European folktales see Lüthi 1976, “Abstrakter Stil,” 25–36, esp. 33–34. The most obvious folkloric touches to Rígsþula are the opening lines of the poem (“Once upon a time,” etc.) and the description in Rígsþula 29 of Móðir, whose breast and throat gleam whiter than the driven snow. (References here and elsewhere to Rígsþula are to the new edition by Ursula Dronke [1997, 162–73].) The schemata and repetitions of the European folktales harmonize with the form and style of a þula.
7. See on this not peculiarly Celtic custom Young 1933, 101–2, and Sveinsson 1957, 6.
11. Dronke 1997, 207; “We have no evidence that [the poet] was not an Icelander.” De Vries, however, is for a Norwegian poet (1967, 127).
ally believed that the tripartite society constructed in the poem must be an artistic projection of Scandinavian society in Norway, at one stage or another in Norwegian history during the Middle Ages.

This scholarly belief, which has much to recommend it in the poem, governs a string of possible historical contexts for Rígsþula. We begin with the contextualizations of Andreas Heusler and Klaus von See, the alpha and omega of Germanic scholarship. By a thirteenth-century date a royal Norwegian context can be extrapolated, wherein, under the reign of Hákon Hákonarson (1217–63), his chief councilor, Earl Skúli Bárðarson, and the king’s son, Hákon ungi (d. 1257), correspond in their contention for the kingship respectively to Jarl and his youngest son, Konr ungr, in the poem.12 In the broader social structure of thirteenth-century Norway, with its amplified hierarchy of ranks or estates, the remove between the noble and free farmers on the one hand and the farm laborers and/or slaves on the other became ever greater, and this socioeconomic separation of noble and free-holding estates from the landless, laboring, and enslaved peasantry is likewise strongly implied in the poem by the contrasts between the physically repulsive drudge, Þræll, and his “betters,” the ruddy yeoman, Karl, and the idle aristocrat, Jarl, whose sole occupations are raiding, hunting, and swimming.13 But notwithstanding the warlike aspect of Jarl and his sons, the Old Norse society in Rígsþula breathes an air of contentment and peace that is most unusual in the eddic corpus. The peaceful domestic atmosphere in which each couple of three generations awaits the visit of a god would seem artificial for the Viking Age and more natural in a Norwegian setting of the thirteenth century after the last of the civil wars (1202–27). Hunting, not fighting, is the passion of Jarl’s youngest son, Konr ungr, as it was of Hákon ungi, the heir to the Norwegian throne, and farmer Karl in the poem is unarmed and unprepared for war service, as if he had been dispensed from leîð-angr—ship duty—by payment of a tax, according to thirteenth-century practice (von See 1981c, 516; 1981d, 96–97).

Towards the missing ending of the poem, however, a judgmental crow up in a tree admonishes Konr ungr at his hunting that he would do himself and the birds a favor by killing men instead of the feathered folk; for in nearby Denmark dwell the royal princes Danr and Danpr in stately halls, with a longer pedigree than he can boast; these should be foemen worthy of his steel, or else he might ally himself with one of them, Danpr, through marriage to his daughter (Dana).14 In either case, a Viking expedition is in the offing as the poem breaks off. The croakings of the crow have been taken for prophecies of the wars between the Danes and Norwegians in

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the mid-thirteenth century (von See 1981a, 94–95), but they should rather remind us that the pacific details of Rígsþula do not obviate a Viking Age date for the poem.

Rudolf Meißner (1933, 128), dissenting from Heusler, moved the poem tentatively to the end of the Viking Age, but only one scholar, Birger Nerman, though dismissed or simply ignored by others, has had the archaeological expertise to evaluate the material Viking culture in Rígsþula and come up with a definite date for it around the year 1000. 15 This dating is calculated on the average age of the luxury objects in the household or on the persons of the noble couple, Faðir and Móðir, to whom Jarl was born after Rígr shared their bed. The wealthy farmer’s wife, Amma, is also graced with a pair of these objects (Rígsþula 16.8). Of course the artefacts could have been much older in themselves than the composition date of the poem, but even sophisticated later poets would hardly have gone to the archaic lengths of recreating so faithfully the material culture of leading Vikings and their ladies. Most Old Norse poets, skaldic or eddic, were, if anything, historically naive (by saga standards) and dealt historically in the here and now as well as a timeless past. Hence it is not out of the question that a Viking-Age Icelandic poet should have bestowed on the upper estates in Rígsþula all the material appurtenances pertaining to them that were in his immediate purview.

At the millennium the gradations of Norwegian society were four- or five-fold—not more—and the ties between freemen of different stations in life were tighter. 16 At the top of society were two grades of nobility, the hersar and jarlar, both figuring in the poem; then follow two grades of yeomanry, the bœndr and holdar, either of which Karl, his parents, and his family may typify in the poem; and finally, segregated from the rest by their servile status but not without hope of gaining their freedom, the þrælar were down at the bottom. These last are prejudicially profiled in the poem as Þræll and his gawky wife, Þír (Bondmaid), and their misshapen brood.

The labors and the prospects of thralls in eleventh-century Norway are more objectively reported by Snorri Sturluson in Óláfs saga helga chap. 23 of Heimskringla (Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, 2:30) when he records how the foremost landowner in the country, Erlingr Skjálgsson, revolved his labor force of thirty thralls, 17 who according to the price he put on their heads could buy their way to freedom in two or three years, and even count on his assistance thereafter to go into the herring fisheries or clear land of their own of forests. Then Erlingr would buy new slave-workers with


16. See Heusler again on tenth-century Norwegian social structure (1969, 191) and Brøndsted on the ties between freemen (1965, 241). It would be too much to say, however, with Karras that “the class of jarls was not socially distinct from that of the most prosperous bønder—yeoman farmers—in the tenth and eleventh centuries” (1988, 62). The king-makers, the Hlaðajarlar, were not in a class with “the most prosperous bønder.”

the proceeds from the old, and so on. The profit motive is not wanting to this recycling of his slave-labor force, but the quasi-altruism of Erlingr is best accounted for by the economic fact that manumission and land-clearance went hand in hand at the end of Viking period in Norway (Karras 1988, 146). The country was apparently behind Sweden in the clearing off of forests for agriculture (Hansen 1931, 101), and there was a desire for free workers with a stake in the land who would perform more readily the back-breaking labor of clearing it.

In this eleventh-century context of Norwegian slavery, Þræll of the poem stands ambiguously between servitude and freedom. By the fable of Rígsþula he was created first from the oldest generation of Edda and Ái (Great-Grandmother and Great-Grandfather) to be an example for all time of the slavishness and repulsiveness of theirs, already before there were any masters like Karl and Jarl to dominate him. He appears to be a true primitive, a “masterless man” in medieval terms. Appearances aside, however, his aged parents and he and his family live together as tenants of one farmhouse, and his most onerous chore is keeping the household in firewood (hrís), which he carries home from the woods “through the wearisome day” in cords of bast (Rígsþula 9). The field work of his sons, especially the cutting of turf (st. 12), is more like the kind of services that slaves would render to a master in the Old Norse world. If Þræll too were actually a slave to someone, he might have been allowed leisure time, such as Erlingr granted to his slaves, to cultivate a plot of land and do some household chores about the cottage; but otherwise in the poem he works hard for himself and his family as if he were a freed man, gleaning faggots from clearings in the woods. His working status is unhappily indeterminate.

By contrast, the second creation of Rígr, the free farmer Karl, is prosperous enough to be a stórbóndi and óðalsmaðr, i.e., a landed proprietor or inheritor of the family farm. His elderly parents, Amma and Afi (Grandmother and Grandfather), are freeholders who own the farm building on their place (Rígsþula 16), and among his sons is one named Høldr (Franklin, st. 24), an appellation for the highest bracket of farmers. His mother, Amma, wears on her outer dress to pin up its straps two stylish shoulder ornaments called “dwarves” (st. 16) because of the shortness of their pins; such jewels of the Viking Age once adorned a rich lady buried in a grave of Gotland (Nerman 1954, 213, fig. 6). A further show of wealth and status by this family of farmers occurs at the wedding of Karl and his bride Snør (Daughter-in-Law), who distribute gold rings to the guests with the liberality of a Viking chieftain or an earl (Rígsþula 23; cf. st. 39). Their daughters may be the mothers of the run-of-the-mill race of bœndr (st. 25), but they themselves and Karl’s parents seem to have been idealized with one son of theirs as høldar at the head of their estate.

Since the poem pretends to retrace, after a folktale, not only the mythical origins of old Scandinavian society but also the very birth of the first Norwegian king from the preeminent estate of the earls, the composition date of Rígsþula has not

illogically been set back in the Viking Age by several Scandinavian scholars (e.g., Bugge 1905, 212; Jónsson 1920, 193; Hansen 1931, 89–90) as far as the beginning of the tenth century, when Harald Fair-Hair had unified Norway into one kingdom (ca. 872–92), driven the opposition out to Iceland, and then ruled over the kingdom (with the Orkneys) as “ættfaðir Noregs”—i.e., the first in a hereditary line of Norwegian kings. Thereby Konr ungr, Jarl’s youngest son, in the poem could pass for the pagan Harald at this date, and just as in Haralds saga ins hárfgara chap. 3 (Aðalbjarnarson 1941–51, 1:96–97) the daughter of King Eiríkr of Hǫrðaland spurns Harald as a lover until he has once possessed himself of all of Norway, the way Gormr gamli had Denmark and Eiríkr Eymundarson Uppsala, so the crow in Rígsþula 48–49 belittles the bird-hunting of Konr ungr in order to spur his territorial ambition towards Denmark (so Hansen 1931, 97–98). If the latter in the missing ending of the poem did in fact go on a bridal quest to the halls of the Danish prince, Danpr, and marry his daughter, it would have been a fitting tribute to Harald and his Danish consort, Ragnhildr Eiríksdóttir.

The tenth century is a terminus ab quo and about as far back as anyone has cared to date Rígsþula. In this century, however, “when Scandinavian and Westerner were about to blend” (Olrik 1930, 115–16), other historical vistas on the poem open up. Inasmuch as the all-fathering god of the fable in Rígsþula bears an Irish name for “king” (OIr. ri; inflected, ríg), and the word karta in the text (Rígsþula 22.7) may be an Irish calque (< OIr. cairt), some scholars have localized the poem in a Norse-Irish milieu, as in Viking Dublin. There perhaps the poem’s Norwegian setting was colored by linguistic, literary, and mythological influences from Irish sources. The closest Hebridean analogue to the Rígsþula fable has already been cited above (4), and more than enough has been made of the so-called sex-hospitality of the medieval Irish to visiting royalty; but sexual licence of this official kind is not the only Celtic parallelism to the procreativity of Rígr.

Einar Ólafur Sveinsson cites also a poorly preserved Irish tale of the ninth century, “The Wooing of Étain” [Tochmarc Étaine], concerning an amorous god,
the Dagda, or “the great father” (ollathair), who resembles Rígr somewhat, e.g., in Rígr’s (controversial) twofold character of Irish “king” and patriarchal Old Norse god (Heimdallr). Like Rígr with the high-born lady, Móðir, the Dagda has an affair with the wife of another man—a formidable elf who must be circumvented by a trick. Unbeknownst to either the elf man or the Dagda, the elf woman bears the god a son named Oengus Mac Óc, or Mac Óc for short, with the meaning “the young boy,” a sobriquet which matches semantically the name of Konr ungr in the second generation of earls. This Irish boy is brought up by a foster father, but being taunted by someone for having no real parents, the boy demands to know of his foster father who or where they are, and is taken by him to the Dagda. Once father and son are informed of their relationship, the foster father (or Mac Óc himself) declares that it would not be just for the Dagda, the true father, to deprive his son of his inheritance in the hill property (síd) of his elfin stepfather. The Dagda, compliant, advises the boy how to overcome the elf by confronting him at a feast (of Samain, November 1), when he is weaponless, and forcing him at sword’s point to surrender his property, if only for “a day and a night.” This property transfer is slyly accomplished in perpetuum by Mac Óc with a verbal quibble on the duration of his ownership, and then the wooing of the beautiful Étain Echraide can commence in earnest, though it seems to get nowhere in the telling. No matter! As at the end of Rígsþula, a lofty lineage and the acquisition of land by force or fraud are preconditions for the hand of a fair lady, whether it is ever given to the hero or not.

Still another point of contact between Irish mythological or heroic tales and the Old Norse poem is the expedient for hunting birds of stunning them with a blunted arrow or a stone, rather than killing them outright. Konr ungr out hunting “let fly his bolt,/quelled the birds” [kólfi fléygði, / kyrði fugla] (Rígsþula 47.3–4), and Cúchulainn as a boy brought down a flock of swans alive with his “stunning-shot” of stones. The Norse crow might disapprove the expedient, but Cúchulainn’s charioteer applauded it: “The quickest and the most expert [hunters] take them [the birds] alive” (Táin Bó Cúailnge [The Cattle-Raid of Cuailnge]; trans. Kinsella 1969, 91; text and another translation in O’Rahilly 1976, 24, 147).

Although there is no Irish tale of a wandering god who engenders the estates of medieval society in Rígr’s manner (so Thurneysen in Meißner 1933, 116 n. 1), it has not gone unnoticed that the ancient laws of Ireland expatiatate on questions of status and fosterage in “minute descriptions of appearance, dress and milieu” (Young 1933, 100) and thus avow a preoccupation with social distinctions on a
par with that of the *Rígsþula* poet. Fosterage was a family institution common to medieval Scandinavia and Ireland, and among the Irish, children of both sexes were fostered up to a marriageable age—fourteen years for the girls, seventeen years for the boys—in strict conformity with the social status of their parents.

Under the post-tenth-century articles on fosterage of the Senchus Már law code [The Great Tradition], boys of humble birth are to be taught herding of livestock, kiln-drying, combing wool, and their sisters instructed in grinding corn in querns, kneading dough, and the use of a sieve; whereas chieftains’ sons and boys of noble birth are to be exercised in horsemanship, shooting of arrows, chess-playing, and swimming, and well-bred girls practiced in sewing, cutting of cloth, and embroidery (Hancock, Neilson, and O’Mahony 1869, 152–59). The *Rígsþula* poet similarly enumerates the status-bound activities of the three Norse estates from the lowest condition of the laborer (free or unfree) and his children to the highest of the leisured lord and his. Through all the slight discrepancies of detail, due to local circumstances, between the education of the Irish foster children and the upbringing of the Norse youth, one thing stands out in bold relief: the identicalness of the Irish and Norse programs for the formation of the male nobility (cf. *Rígsþula* 36, 42–43). This is the more noteworthy on the Norse side for the main focus of *Rígsþula* being on the nobility, the jardom that gave rise to the kingship in early medieval Norway.

A whole law-book with a shorter sequel—the oft-cited Críth Gabhlach [Law of Status]—was devoted by the Irish jurists (the *brehon*) to the niceties of social standing in a well-ordered society, but the codification is overdone, an intellectual excess of the legal mind, and so proliferous of rules and regulations as to leave doubt of their real relevance to the Irish way of life at any time in the Middle Ages. Under its articles, social prestige is measured by such tangibles as a man’s “honor price” (*eneclann* = wergeld), the validity of his oath and evidence as a witness, the feasts he should expect from his hosts, the number of his tenants, size of his house, etc. And Irish society itself, in which these measurements obtain, is stratified by the jurists in twenty-six groups and/or individuals, of whom seventeen are free people and nine unfree (slaves, robbers, cowards, and other marginalized men).

Some of the Irish and Norse “points of honor” might have been more or less equivalent (e.g., *eneclann* and wergeld), but the twenty-sixfold stratification of Irish society exceeds altogether the social hierarchies of medieval Norway, even in the thirteenth century. The old nineteenth-century editor of the Críth Gabhlach has, however, simplified the jurists’ stratification for us from twenty-six to five catch-all ones: (1) three grades of kingship plus the royal entourages, (2) four grades

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27. See Alexander G. Richey in Richey, O’Mahony, and Hennessy 1879, clxxx.
28. See Richey’s analytical summary of Críth Gabhlach passim (Richey, O’Mahony, and Hennessy 1879, clxxxii).
29. Sequel to Críth Gabhlach, as in Richey, O’Mahony, and Hennessy 1879, 344–69.
of nobility, (3) freemen of property (bó-aire chieftains), (4) landless freemen (fir midboth), and (5) the unfree populace (Richey, O’Mahony, and Hennessy 1879, cxcix). This telescoping of the structure of medieval Irish society brings it a good deal nearer to the elementary tripartition of Old Norse society in Rígsþula; but no further than that can the two societies be merged because of their Indo-European unlikeness, the Irish having once had a priestly caste (the druids), which the Norse never did.

So far, it seems to me, within the time frame of the thirteenth to the tenth century, the temporal indicators of archaeology, history, and literature lean preponderantly to the Viking Age rather than the High Middle Ages for a date to the Rígsþula. Contrary to the “drift” of eddic chronology, the poem has not been “towed” down the stream of time, but anchored upstream by Birger Nerman, Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, and Jean Young. Its author was probably an Icelander, and the society portrayed in it was certainly medieval Norwegian, but since the Viking Age was an epoch of ethnic blending of the Norse and the Irish in the western islands, some Irish cultural and literary attributes have shaded into their respective Norse complements in passages of Rígsþula, despite the deeper societal difference between the Celts and the Scandinavians.

In the Viking Age the most decisive event of the Norse world by which to date the poem’s composition was the unification of Norway in the last quarter of the ninth century under the rule of Harald Fair-Hair, the “ættfaðir” of a kingly line. Although the roman à clef contextualization of literature, favored by modern interpreters of Rígsþula, is admittedly a weak procedure, the historical consequences of Norway’s unification were so momentous, in fact as in fiction, that it would be strange indeed if they did not reverberate somehow in an Old Norse poem that culminates pointedly with the emergence of the first Norwegian king—Konr ungr—from the earls’ estate. Hence of the many conceivable impersonations by our hero, that of the king, Harald Fair-Hair, seems the most convincing. All these deductions from early medieval Norwegian and Irish history can be corroborated philologically by the initial reception of Rígsþula among the skalds and by their usage of the key word, konr, at the turn of the eleventh century.

For the moment it will be safe to say that sometime before this reception, but after Harald’s subjection of Norway to his rule, an oral text of the poem, not unlike the written version we have, had been composed. In the oral compositional pro-

30. Cf. the most recent regrouping of OIr. persons in three social categories of power and wealth (king and nobility), professional skills (poets, druids, law-men, etc.), and incompetence in the eyes of the law (women, slaves, the insane, etc.), as in chapters 1–3 of Kelly 1988.

31. So Dumézil (1973c, 118–19), but one may wonder whether the pagan godar of Iceland and continental Scandinavia were not relics of an Indo-Germanic priesthood.

32. Cf. Jenny Jochens’ words (1997, 113): “Although the general drift in modern Edda scholarship—to move the lays forward in time—has towed Rígsþula in its wake, historians have continued to see in it illustrations of the social conditions during the Viking age.”

33. Cf. Finnur Jónsson (1920, 194) on the time intervals.
cess that runs down to the mid-fourteenth century in the *ritöld*, other versifications of the timeless folktale of Rígr (alias Heimdallr) may have competed with this text, or improvisations and elaborations on it overlaid passages, but whatever its vicissitudes this must have been substantially the text that has survived to us in manuscript from the later Middle Ages, thanks to a monk of one of the monasteries in northern Iceland (Pingeyrar or Munka-Þverá).34

Hans Kuhn has pursued the philological clues to the date and place of composition of *Rígsþula* in the usage of the word *konr*, which, with the meaning of “scion” or “descendant,” was current in skaldic poetry from the tenth to the eleventh century (Kuhn 1971a, 95). The word penetrated the eddic corpus to our poem and the *Reginsmál* (sts. 13–14) with the same meaning; the *Reginsmál* will not occupy us here,35 but the *Rígsþula* poet mounted his folk-etymology for “king” on the name “Young Scion.” Thus these two eddic poems come within the ambit of discourse of the skaldic *vísur* of Gunnlaugr ormstunga,36 Einarr Helgason,37 and Óttarr svartí,38 poets who address their patrons under the honorific *konr*, as “descendants” of gods or kings and in one case as “royal scion”—not as ordinary mortals, mere men. Since the patrons of a couple of the skalds held court in Dublin and England, Sigtrygger silkiskegg of Dublin patronizing Gunnlaugr, and King Knútr inn ríki and Saint Óláfr Haraldsson Óttarr in England, it can be inferred with Kuhn that *Rígsþula* with its Irishisms and its wordplay on Konr ungr was another literary product of tenth-century Norse-Irish culture, in Dublin, if not in northern England somewhere.39 The initial reception of *Rígsþula* by the skalds will lend weight chronologically to this inference.

In the texts of skaldic reception assembled by Ursula Dronke,40 the most audible echo of the poem is the phrase “niðrbiúgt [er] nef” [down-bent is the nose] (*Rígsþula* 10.5) with which the Icelandic skald Stefnið Þorgilsson satirized the Danish Earl Sigvaldi of Jómsborg for having underhandedly betrayed the skald’s patron, Óláfr Tryggvason (d. 1000), and for kidnapping the king of Denmark, Sveinn Forkbeard, from Sjælland.41 When Stefnið was so foolhardy, after a pilgrimage to Rome,
as to recite his vísa in the face of the earl, who did have an ugly nose, 42 the Jómsborg chieftain, recognizing his own feature in the verse, had him killed instantly. The skald had gone too far with the line from Rígsþula by subjoining to it that a hooked nose is the mark of a níðingr; but in the eddic original the line was insulting enough to Sigvaldi, for it denoted an unattractive woman and a female slave—Dræll’s wife. Stefnir was cut down after the death in naval battle of his lord, Óláfr Tryggvason.

A pair more of skaldic allusions from the first quarter of the eleventh century recaptures the fierce, steady gaze (as of a snake) from Jarl’s eyes in his infancy (Rígsþula 35.7: “ótul vóru augu” [baleful were his eyes]). The Icelandic skalds Björn Hítđelakappi and Björn Breiðvíkingakappi, namesakes whose verses were easily confused with one another in literary tradition, 43 both composed similar lausavisur about young male offspring of theirs, born of their mistresses, and these boys are claimed by their fathers as true sons because of the fearsomeness of their boyish gaze: “ægiligr í augum / at gliki mér” [with fearful eyes / in the image of me] or “ið glíki mér” [perfectly like me]. 44 The eddic prototype of such fierce-eyed and frightening little boys was the infant, Jarl, in the third household of Rígsþula, whose stare betokened his noble parentage and his belligerence. Whichever skald’s recasting of the male-gaze motif we choose, the intertextuality of the lausavisur with Rígsþula, in the opinion of a good American judge, “certainly gives no comfort to those who advise a late date” for the þula  (Harris 1985, 97).

The last skaldic allusion to be adduced, from the end of the tenth century, is involved in needless controversy about the secret identity of Rígr, who is designated as an áss by the poet (Rígsþula 1.4) and revealed as Heimdallr by the Icelandic redactor of the poem in the prose preface to it. If one insists with the German-Dutch contingent of scholars that the áss, Rígr, is really Odin and not Heimdallr (Meißner 1933; von See 1981a, 84; von See 1981c, 514; de Vries 1967, 125), then the epithet for Heimdallr of Úlfr Uggason in Húsdrápa 2.1, ráð gegninn ‘the helpful’ or ‘shrewd with advice’ (Jónsson 1912-15, B1:128), will have no bearing on Rígsþula; but otherwise the epithet covers throughout the poem the appointed office of Rígr as Heimdallr, which is to give marital advice to each of the couples he visits: “Rígr kunni þeim / ráð at segia” [Rígr knew how to advise them] (Rígsþula 5, 17, 30, 33).

The one truly Odinic trait in Rígr is his knowledge of runes, which he imparts to Jarl, his son (Rígsþula 37), but neither this trait nor his walking around from house to house in disguise, like Odin, can divest him of the given character of Heimdallr. For, as one of the oldest and most mysterious of gods in the Scandinavian pantheon, who had every title to be revered as the father of gods or men—his megir

43. On this traditional literary confusion, see Bjarni Einarsson (1961, 247).
44. Cf. with Björn Hítđelakappi’s lausavisa 29 in his saga, chap. 21 (Nordal and Jónsson 1938, 171–72), Björn Breiðvíkingakappi’s lausavisa 27 in Eyrbyggja saga chap. 40 (Sveinsson and Dórhárson 1935, 108). Finnur Jónsson arbitrarily combined these lausavisur in one stanza under the authorship of Björn Hítđelakappi, as lausavisa 19 (Jónsson 1912–15, B1:281).
‘sons’ as in Voluspá 1—, Heimdallr had already accrued to his character in early medieval times not only the external traits of Odin, but of Thor also; and another eddic poet even endowed him with the farsightedness of the Vanir (Þrymskviða 15.3–4). With all these alien characteristics he was still no less Heimdallr.

I think the Icelandic redactor of Rígsþula knew very well what he was talking about when he spoke of “old stories” [fornar sögur] of the wanderings of Heimdallr, who was wont to disguise himself among men under the cognomen of Rígr, his mask in the pula (Rígsþula preface). The redactor’s Heimdallr may not be the “purified” Heimdallr of Germanic scholarship, but, then, the received character of the god was thoroughly mixed by the mid-fourteenth century with Odinic and other gods’ traits. What is crucially of the essence of Heimdallr, however, is his willingness to give advice, which is reiterated through the poem, and it is to this constant advising of his that the late-tenth-century skald Úlfr Uggason alludes in Húsdrápa 2.1.

The foregoing reception of the pula by the skalds would confine its first oral version(s) to the last years of the tenth century, while at about this date the skaldic usage of konr maps out a likely place of composition for it in an Irish-Norse milieu of Dublin under the rule of Óláfr Sigtryggsson or his son, Sigtryggr silkiskegg. Of the historical data marshalled in this paper, the archaeological evidence for millennial luxury objects in the poem from the mid-Viking Age most emphatically confirms this composition date. The hypothesis of Irish influence, on the other hand, is necessarily provisory and not so positive historically, relying as it does on literary, cultural, and legal parallels between two societies basically dissimilar in social structure. But be that as it may, the few congruences between Rígsþula and the Irish myths, heroic tales, and articles of law of fosterage are therefore the more remarkable.

The counterarguments for an initial composition date in the High Middle Ages, to which I have tried to do justice, cannot muster the array of evidence that the pro–Viking Age arguments afford, and are often reduced to the one procedure of historically contextualizing Rígsþula as if it were a roman à clef—a weak approach to history, as I have said (11). On the pro–Viking Age side of the argumentation, to be sure, the great historical consequences of the kingship of Harald Fair-Hair for

45. Whether the Sibyl’s words of Voluspá 1, “allar helgar kindir, / meiri ok minni mögu Heimdalar” [all holy beings, (and?) sons high and low of Heimdallr] (Nordal 1952, 45), are addressed only to the gods or to gods and men, the addressees are not just “Genossen” of Heimdallr, as von See would have it (1981c, 515), but rather “sons,” real or symbolic. Mógr, not unlike konr, means either “son” or “man,” without intermediate senses (see Jónsson 1913–16, s.v. “mógr,” “konr”). If, as Meißner thought (1933, 112–14), the obscure stanza 43 of Hyndluljóð (as in Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 295) refers to Heimdallr, then the lines, “þann qveða stilli stórauðgastan, / sif sifjaðan siðum gørv gollum” [him they pronounce the most powerful ruler, related by blood to each and every nation (lit., “seat of people”)], will testify further to Heimdallr’s all-inclusive paternity. Von See, however, mistranslates “sif sifjaðan” after Kuhn as if it were a substrate Gothicism meaning “in Frieden lebend,” so as to turn the unknown god in Hyndluljóð 43 into a Christian deity (von See 1981c, 515; cf. Kuhn 1971c, 419). For the rest, on the position of Heimdallr in Rígsþula, see Johansson 1998, 78–81, and on the many-sidedness of this god, Turville-Petre 1964, chap. 6, along with the line from Þrymskviða 15, “vissi hann vel fram, sem vanir aðrir” [he (Heimdallr) foresaw clearly, like the other Vanir] (Neckel and Kuhn 1983, 113).
Norsemen everywhere may certify him as the best candidate for the literary role of Konr ungr, but it is rather the kingship itself, as the first of its kind in medieval Norway, that dictates the climax of the poem, particularly the lines stating Konr ungr’s superiority in runes to his father, “Þá qóðaðiz / ok þá eiga gat / Rígr at heita” [Then he prevailed (over Jarl) and got the right to be called Rígr] (Rígsþula 46.5–7), which signal the “Young Scion’s” eligibility to become king as Rígr konungr by the criterion of runic knowledge. At all events, the late-tenth-century dating of Rígsþula does not rest solely on a literary impersonation of Harald Fair-Hair.

The dating problem is complicated, however, by the very process of oral transmission, which, if it is long, as with Rígsþula, entails, strictly speaking, a continuum of dates, or as many dates as there were recitative performances, in the course of the evolution and ultimate fixation of a text. As against those literary-minded scholars who shy away from orality and “illiterature” (Friedman 1956, ix–x) and cling to single dates as near as possible to the written record, the English editor of the Rígsþula text envisions its transmission from age to age thus:

the tight network of ideas behind the many scenes of the poem must have begun to be woven before the latest poet caught hold of its threads and perfected it as he wished. A poem such as Rígsþula, and its antecedents, would have been a social possession, frequently adapted and augmented to fit prevailing politics—and fashions—by the spontaneous genius of the oral poets and their critical, participating, audiences. (Dronke 1997, 204)

In this long perspective any of the later datings reviewed above might be valid with more cogent argumentation or documentation, and then our early date towards the end of the tenth century would merely be one among many dates, equally valid, for the continuous composition of the poem; but at present, so far as I can tell, there remain but two assured dates of interest, the end-of-tenth-century date for the oral text of Rígsþula and the mid-fourteenth-century date for the written text.

How the poem might have passed from the oral medium to script in the Codex Wormianus is a vexed question to which the oral-formulaic theory has had no good answers until very recently, in the domains of the Homeric and Indic epics. In its canonical form the theory was staunchly individualist, stressing within the epic tradition the uniqueness or individuality of each oral composition in perform-
mance,\textsuperscript{49} which, whenever the ancient or medieval epic was written down, diversified the text in marked variations or even separate recensions. The drawbacks to this theoretical stance were twofold: the ever evolving oral text was practically undateable at any point in its recomposition,\textsuperscript{50} and the gap between the unstable oral text and the fixed literary one was unbridgeable except by such makeshifts as dictation.\textsuperscript{51} Of late, however, the Hellenist Gregory Nagy has modified the theory with some useful correctives applicable to the textual derivation of \textit{Rígsþula}.

Over long periods of recomposition of an epic text one hitherto neglected factor will be operative—namely, diffusion of the epic tradition—which facilitates the transition from oral performance to written recording by stabilizing and fixing the oral text and thus impeding its innovative recomposition (Nagy 1995, 165; 1996, 38–42). These are constraints on composition in performance that would not have been countenanced by the theory in its canonical form, which relegated the fixation of the oral text exclusively to the written record. As with the Homeric epics, so with \textit{Rígsþula} and the eddic poems, the diffusion of authoritative epic and folk traditions radiated from feasts, festivals, or prestigious courts, wherever an appreciative or a wider audience could be secured; and the farther these traditions spread in the Norse world, the more the eddic texts solidified formulaically, before they were recorded on durable parchment. Hence a prerequisite for the faithful recording of any of those texts is a longer rather than a shorter oral gestation period of recomposition, diffusion, and stabilization. The chronological trend to the thirteenth century in the dating of the eddic corpus shortens the time-span of oral composition unconscionably for its poems.

The special advantage to us of the modified oral-formulaic theory is that it now enables us to correlate unobjectionably bits and pieces of an oral text of \textit{Rígsþula} quoted or alluded to by the skalds with the written text of the poem in Codex Wormianus, in order to arrive at a textual \textit{terminus ab quo} towards the close of the tenth century. We are at least theoretically entitled to posit for the skalds’ reception an oral text that was already becoming fixed through diffusion of the \textit{Rígsþula} folktale and beginning to resemble the written text in Codex Wormianus. We may never learn of the final steps in the textual derivation of \textit{Rígsþula} that led in the mid-fourteenth century to the Icelandic redaction of the \textit{þula} (partly for the poetic sake of its exemplary lists of synonymous \textit{heiti}),\textsuperscript{52} but we can be nonetheless con-

\textsuperscript{49} Cf. the statements of William F. Hansen and Mary P. Coote in \textit{Heroic Epic and Saga} (Oinas 1978, 16, 275): “[the Greek rhapsode] never sings a song twice in precisely the same words, but composes anew each time he performs” (Hansen); “No two oral compositions [of Serbocroatian heroic song] are exactly the same; every performance is a unique variation on traditional material” (Coote).

\textsuperscript{50} The second principle of Preben Meulengracht Sørensen in \textit{Saga and Society} (1993, 76–77).

\textsuperscript{51} See the criticisms of Albert Lord’s advocacy of dictation by Nagy (1995, 164; 1996, 31–34) and also by von See (1981e, 174).

tent that the gap between oral and literary text in this poem has been narrowed, even if still unbridged, by Nagy’s critical modification of the oral-formulaic theory.

To conclude: with Rígsþula, in all probability, we have to do with a poem that grew out of a folktale of the origin of the Norse estates, which is to say the three Indo-Germanic social groups of nobles, freemen, and slaves. A god such as Heimdallr was made responsible for the creation of these estates by having him sleep with their ancestral progenitrices from three generations, of which the oldest gave birth to the thralls, the next older to the freeborn, and the youngest to the nobility. This sexual scenario was in brief the nonhistorical core concept of Rígsþula in its incipient, folkloric phase of development. When the folktales entered history in the tenth century as an oral-formulaic poem, to be recited to Viking audiences at royal courts or popular festivals, it must have acquired its Irish linguistic and literary coloring and assimilated to its scenario the model kingship of Harald Fair-Hair, which is refounded mythically by Rígr konungr at the fragmentary end of the poem. The pun on the name of “Young Scion” (Konr ungr = konungr) may smack of Icelandic clerical learning at the height of the Middle Ages, but it is no more than a simple-minded ofl jóst pun of skaldic inspiration in the Viking Age.

As Rígsþula was transmitted orally down the Christian centuries from poet to poet and audience to audience, other adaptations of its subject matter to historical persons and events like the political machinations of Earl Skúli and Hákon ungi were naturally always viable, but the oral text that reached the Codex Wormianus seems to have retained all the vestiges of the primary historicization of the Rígsþula folktale in the mid-Viking Age when the poem proper was under composition.

In its Irish aura and the prospective kingship of Konr ungr, in its elementary social structure of three main divisions of people with no more than five gradations of rank among them, and in the dress, ornaments, and occupations of its dramatis personae inheres the historical worth of Rígsþula, make of it what we will. In the view to which I subscribe, these things are so many facets of the life, times, and places (at home and abroad) of early medieval Norwegian society on the eve of the millennium, as seen by some Icelandic poet who frequented Norse-Irish courts. Regrettably, of the historians named at the outset of this paper perhaps Gurevich alone would wholly concur in this final assessment; Karras and Helgi Guðmundsson, who opt for a composition date to the poem in the High Middle Ages (1200–1250), would scarcely regard Rígsþula as a mirror of early medieval society. But the minority view may still be the truer one.

53. I suspect that Heusler’s dating of Rígsþula to the thirteenth century was motivated from the start by skepticism that such word-play about the name and dignity of the first Scandinavian king befitted the poetic imagination of the Viking Age, when to him it was merely an etymological game of thirteenth-century “Icelandic philology” at the revival of pagan Old Norse literature: “Einem nordischen Kopf aus Harald Schönhaars Zeit ... dürfen wir Gedankengänge dieser Art nicht zutrauen ... Es ist ein sprachliches Gedankenspiel, das ... nach isländischer Philologie riecht” (Heusler 1969, 186–87). On the modern etymology of konungr, either from Gmc. *kuniz (“höchster Ehrentitel”) or from Gmc. *kunja- (kin), see Kahl 1960, 237, 238–39 n. 212, or, better, Magnússon 1989, s.v. “konungur.”
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