

**A**nthony Faulkes and Richard Perkins, editors. *Viking Revaluations: Viking Society Centenary Symposium, 14–15 May 1992*. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1993. 204 pages.

Although ostensibly the reassessments of a century of scholarship, these fourteen, generally brief, articles better illustrate the ongoing adjustments and occasional new directions that contribute to the incremental growth in knowledge in the various disciplines that can, more or less adequately, be subsumed under the heading Viking Studies. The volume has three main sections, “Centenary Revaluations,” “Current Problems (1): Pagan Beliefs and Christian Impact,” and “Current Problems (2): Scandinavian Society 800–1100.” Guidance from the Viking Society for Northern Research in the interests of a balanced volume seems to have determined the subjects for consideration, with several of the contributors, particularly those not resident in Great Britain, having their topics designed for, as Gunnar Karlsson recalls it, “a sweepingly authoritative review” (23). Other, British members of the Society may well have worked within the constraints of a similar invitation. Thus, not all readers and perhaps not all writers would prefer to see studies of the Icelandic family sagas the object of a retrospective, while eddic studies enjoy the slightly more prestigious situation of “problem area,” albeit chiefly as concerns the less than straightforward advance from heathendom to Christendom.

Centenary celebrations are by nature self-congratulatory, but to the credit of the contributors the first section — with the most explicit revaluations — does not succumb to an easy condescension toward past scholarly achievements nor does it exhibit too great a respect, in terms of either temporal or topical parameters, for the “Viking” qualifier of the volume’s title. Throughout we find less concern for weaknesses of earlier methodology or erroneous conclusions on the basis of inadequate evidence than a desire to identify the ideological positions from which such scholarship was undertaken. But for this reviewer at least, retrospectives gen-

erally have something of the after-dinner speech about them: informed, witty, entertaining, and thankfully without the compulsion to take notes. Knut Helle opens the section with “Norway, 800–1200” (1–14). His summary observation applies equally well to the volume’s broader range of subjects: “Medieval society has increasingly been studied as a totality in which there is a functional connection between all occurrences — including economic and social as well as political and cultural phenomena. At the same time there has been a movement away from the study of political events to research into structural and institutional aspects of society” (4). Helle reviews various explanations of the Viking phenomenon but chooses to emphasize the consequences for domestic society, the opening of Norway to the greater European world. Helle’s review leads him to conclude that “it is difficult today to maintain the view that the starting point of Norwegian social history was a society of more or less equal freeholders” (9), although only in the thirteenth century was there sufficient social and political organization, and the associated ideology, to bind the kingdom of Norway together. In this the lay magnates are to be seen as furthering more than checking royal aspirations. While ecclesiastical organization also served monarchical ends, functional royal authority could not be maintained without the well-being and support of the agrarian population. Here, a word on the media of communication among these groups, e.g., via royal functionaries, residence at court, the judicial process, would have been a welcome complement. Despite the king’s assumption of the judicial power apparatus and his ideological position as source and enforcer of justice, Helle generally concurs with Ernst Sars’ position of a century ago that Norway until 1200 was “a not particularly aristocratic society” (13).

Gunnar Karlsson’s “A Century of Research on Early Icelandic Society” (15–25) deals with the dissociation, after the nationalist period, of literary and historical studies with the bookprose theory as chief culprit (17), although blame also attaches to historians reluctant to approach the sagas in innovative ways, ways that have now resulted in the vogue for social history. With reference

to the fathers of such history, Karl Polanyi's seven years as professor of economics at Columbia University hardly qualify him as an "American anthropologist" (20). Nor do the University of Iceland and, more recently, contemporary scholars indifferent to research in Icelandic escape Karlsson's critical eye. He does, however, give full credit to the novelty of recent, broadly speaking, anthropological scholarship on Iceland, while stating reservations as to some of its theoretical base. Optimistically he claims that the sagas and lawbooks "are far from exhausted as sources for history" (24). This is a diplomat's paper, ostensibly observing all proprieties but not devoid, I suspect, of delicious touches for the informed insider.

In "The Sagas of Icelanders" (26–42), Vésteinn Ólason selects the concepts of "appreciation" and "interpretation" in his review of a century's study of individual saga voices and the voice of the genre as a whole. Succinct analyses are offered of the ideological vantage points of Ker, Heusler, and the lesser known Vilhelm Grønbech, whose historical and philosophical interests enjoy the author's critical sympathy. A consideration of the Icelandic school (Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Sigurður Nordal) leads abroad again to the work of contributors such as Liestøl, Andersson, Lönnroth, Harris, Byock, Miller, and approaches variously termed European, formalist, and sociological. After the description of a century's scholarship, Vésteinn turns prescriptive with regard to the welcome addition of audience and reception to saga studies. Consideration here must include "(1) the forming of tradition in the centuries prior to saga writing and its nature in that early society, (2) the development of a literary tradition from the introduction of Christianity onwards, (3) the rise and development of the writing of Íslendingasögur in the 13th century, and (4) the conditions of reception at the time of writing" (38).

A rather different approach to the task of survey is taken by Diana Whaley in her consideration of the "The Kings' Sagas" (43–64). A synthesis of accumulated knowledge is provided in sections dealing rewardingly with definition, the place of *Heimskringla* in the corpus, and five aspects central to past and likely future research:

earliness, Norwegian connections, clerical influences, literary affiliations, and historical basis. This article, too, closes with a look to the future and the promise of further investigations of the ideology of the *konungasögur* and their place in the development of saga-writing generally.

The volume turns to certain of the Viking Society's founders in Michael Barnes' "Norse in the British Isles" (65–84). Here, too, the requisite survey of past achievement has not kept the author from providing a most useful overview of the many contested questions — definitional, methodological, quantitative, especially demographical — that still figure prominently in efforts to assess the impact of Norse on the languages of the British Isles. The discussion, which Barnes characterizes as "from a Scandinavian point of view" (81), moves through mutual intelligibility, pidgins and creoles, the status of native and imported languages in given communities, the modes of language fusion, and the pathology of language death. The discussion of Norse and Irish is particularly welcome in this context, providing a further vantage point from which to address the more vigorously debated question of the role of Norse and Anglo-Norse in the development of English. The retreat of Norse, more exactly *Norn*, in Orkney and Shetland in the face of Scots turns the tables yet again, to the article's profit. In this last context, it would be useful in the discussion of language eclipse to consider not just phonology, morphology, and lexicon, but also language functions and the shrinking of occasions when one language might be pertinently used, in the case of Norn to the fishing boat, the rural farm, and its elderly inhabitants. In Barnes' view, the scanty nature of the evidence makes even more desirable clear definitions and rigorous adherence to them, and the judicious, even sceptical, application of theories and models.

Christine Fell's "Norse Studies: Then, Now, and Hereafter" (85–99) is perhaps the contribution that best recalls, to my mind, its possible original oral presentation. And, to judge from the title, this contributor may have been given the freest hand. Here we find equal parts: fact, scholarly opinion, and personal tastes — and no little hint of

cliquishness. Following Barnes' article, this presentation continues with an insular focus as a survey of the British contribution to Norse studies, and not just that of the last hundred years. Like several other contributors Fell calls attention to continuing imbalances in what we would hope were interdisciplinary studies and in international scholarly cooperation. She includes cautionary words on the temptation to cross other frontiers into the world of the "coffee-table book" and, with even greater seriousness in this era of financial constraint, on the image of the scholar: "The media image of our profession is deeply injurious to us . . . We must not only be committed to being professionals but to being seen as professionals" (98).

Part Two, one of a pair on the problematics of the Christian impact on pagan belief, is opened by Bjarne Fidjestøl with "The Contribution of Scaldic Studies" (100–20). As might be expected, this is a solidly based study on the level of the difficult detail of skaldic verse composed in honour of princes, with the probe here intended to reach "the more unconscious level of [the skalds'] poetic diction" (100), specifically in the occurrence of names of divine beings (including the Christian God) in kennings in the period from about 950 to 1274. The rewarding insights are many, e.g., "These [expressions with *sem goð*] are the earliest examples of the idea of something like 'king by the grace of God' in Old Norse literature, and it is worthwhile noticing that, with one relatively untypical exception . . . all refer to English or Dano-English kings, namely Ethelred and Canute" (106). The author is sensitive to the compositional constraints of the skalds, the fact that a highly stylized, formal language cannot be changed overnight. Fidjestøl notes restraint in the skalds' use of religious motifs for political purposes, but nonetheless traces the emergence of the representation of King Óláfr as Norway's eternal king as "one of the most salient ideological themes in the medieval history of the Norwegian monarchy" (108). Closer examination of two representatives of the transitional period, Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld and Sigvatr Þórðarson, closes the article. Conclusions, briefly, are that the court skalds took to the new religion

quickly, perhaps as a dimension of their allegiance to their lord, and that real syncretism is hard to detect.

Ursula Dronke's parallel piece on "The Contribution of Eddic Studies" (121–27) is brief and is devoted to the thesis that *Völuspá* and *Rígsþula* are poems "designed under Christian intellectual influence [but] . . . for pagan, not for Christian ends" (122). Yet the immediately following statement ("The poet adapted Christian genres and Christian theological subtleties to give finer articulation to pagan material" [122]) does not necessarily lead to that conclusion, since the use of pagan material and pagan ends are not necessarily coincident. This important issue recurs in Roesdahl's consideration of royal burial practices (infra). Dronke promises a fuller exposition of this argument in forthcoming editions of the two poems. The present synopsis gives little indication of what religious, social, or political ends could have been pursued in this kind of reversal of the conventional pattern of pagan-Christian syncretism.

Else Roesdahl's résumé of currently available information on the Jelling burial site illustrates advances made in interdisciplinary studies originating in archaeological evidence ("Pagan Beliefs, Christian Impact, and Archaeology—a Danish View" [128–36]). Crossing disciplines also encourages crossing borders, and the author notes that "the seemingly enormous mixture and variation in Scandinavian Viking-Age burial-customs begin to make sense when it is realized that certain burial-types mainly belong to particular regions within Scandinavia and differ from those found elsewhere and at other times . . . Moreover, in interpreting their material, archaeologists have become much more aware that the various Scandinavian regions had different external connections and were influenced by different parts of the world" (130). In the remainder of the article Roesdahl pursues selected topics related to burial customs and cult sites; of particular interest are the problematics of the relocation of Christian churches in response to growing needs, in contrast to the simplistic notion of Christian building on pagan foundations. But when a specific burial is identified as "an expression of a late pagan

*religious* and cultural revival” (132, my emphasis) it seems to me that religious motifs are too readily being taken at face value as expressions of personal belief or a realignment in state religion. Like genealogies, other trappings of the past could be exploited to provide historical depth and legitimacy to a ruling house or prominent family without entailing any resurgence of paganism or active obstruction of the advancing Christianization of an emergent state. Roesdahl speaks for several contributors in concluding that “archaeological sources, supported by written ones, also point increasingly to the tenth and eleventh centuries (the conversion period in Scandinavia) as a period of general turmoil and development, political, social, and artistic” (134). On balance, however, the transition from paganism to Christianity seems to have been relatively peaceful — unless our evidence too exclusively reflects outcome rather than process.

Peter Foote concludes this section with the important theoretical distinction for historical studies between “Historical Studies: Conversion Moment and Conversion Period” (137–44) and a profession of interest in “that obscure interim period between the time of official conversion and the age of Church consolidation” (137). Foote announces “hearty overstatements” (137), but his contribution is most useful for its acute reposing of still intractable questions concerning the adjustment of external attitudes, personal and communal, that followed conversion; the assimilation of Christian ideas in ethics; perspectives on the past and future; the mingling of past and present, of pagan and Christian, in men’s minds. Several brief case histories lead him to conclude of some “influential men of cool, unfanatical mind . . . that they represented intellectually uncommitted attitudes, ranging perhaps from well-developed cynicism to active free-thinking.” Accepting this, we may find “the obscurity of the atmosphere in which pre-Christian poetry and mythology survived the conversion . . . perceptibly lightened” (143).

The third section, “Scandinavian Society 800–1100,” while purporting to pick up the thread from Karlsson and Helle, is in truth more of a mixed bag. R. I. Page’s “The Contribution of Runic Studies” (145–59)

offers a retrospective of its own, albeit a dark one. Then, turning from historians who dismissed rune-stones because patrons and those honoured could not be identified to contemporary scholarship, he states: “Questions of land ownership and inheritance of wealth are central in any study of the runic evidence for Viking society” (149) and invites consideration of some stones as legal documents. He also anticipates Jesch’s contribution (infra) in questioning accepted definitions of terms such as *drengr*, *þegn*, *búmaðr* on memorial stones. Reviewing the most recent finds from Bergen and Dublin, Page offers for the latter a welcome complement to Barnes’ exposition on language contact in Ireland and sounds a cautionary note on the assumption of widespread use of the runic alphabet for commercial purposes. Lastly, identified as current problems are the credibility of runic inscriptions for historical purposes, the statistical background of our scant evidence, comparative studies (e.g., the relevance of Swedish evidence for the Norwegian situation), the validity and usefulness of a concept of palaeography, the hermeneutics of this elliptical discourse (my phrasing).

Judith Jesch, in her introduction to “Skaldic Verse and Viking Semantics” (160–71), also usefully provides a set of methodological desiderata. However sound these appear, I must take odds with the statement regarding the special problems of skaldic diction: “The skalds needed many synonyms for and variations on terms for men of high rank and warrior status, and the exigencies of skaldic metre would not have allowed them to be too fastidious about their choice of word” (162). I would hazard the speculation that the skalds would find this a rather mean-spirited description of the metonymical movement between function- or status-specific words (e.g., *ekkja* ‘widow’) and universalized meaning (“woman”), when the very thrust of encomiastic skaldic verse is to raise the particular to the archetypal and to exploit the tension between the topical and the universal. Jesch turns then to an examination of skaldic meanings for *drengr* and *þegn*. These are revealed to “belong to a semantic sphere that demonstrates the workings of the society that produced and consumed skaldic verse” rather than “technical

terms of rank” or “general terms of approbation” (164).

Preben Meulengracht Sørensen returns to the concerns of section one of the volume in “Historical Reality and Literary Form” (172–81), although his review is mostly of contemporary saga scholarship as illustrated in the work of Hastrup, Miller, Bagge, and Steinsland. Deploring most of the past century’s lack of a “firm hermeneutic base” (173) on which to found studies of saga ethics or historicity, for example, Meulengracht Sørensen’s concern for the “revaluations” of the collection’s title turns out to be an agenda for future work, rather than a new synthesis of work to date. The merit of his essay is to recall forcefully how much remains to be done with the sagas as essentially *literary* texts.

In terms of evidence reviewed, Bjørn Myhre’s “The Beginning of the Viking Age — Some Current Archaeological Problems” (182–204 plus 12 pages of illustrations) is the richest contribution to the collection and a fitting close. His “main hypothesis is that the archaeological material from the 8th and 9th centuries should be read and interpreted as a corpus of symbolic expressions of economic, ideological and political negotiation” and not simply “as functional and thus as an objective source that could be used to state quite directly what the Viking Period involved” (198). The importance of the notion of human dynamics introduced by the term “negotiation” should not be minimized, especially as this applies to the economic and political network that developed around the southern shores of the North Sea about 700. Norwegian rulers’ keen awareness of Anglo-Saxon and Carolingian expansionist aspirations was the stimulus, and supplied in part a model, for strengthening Norwegian polity. The Church’s missionary activity accompanied this increasing pressure on southern Norway. What we see as Viking raids, supplanting the earlier trading venture, is in part a response to this political, economical, religious, and cultural encroachment. This essay, too, ties into Barnes’ concerns when Myhre writes of Norse activity beyond Scandinavia proper: “Only during the stressed and competitive phase of the 8th century was a distinct ethnic identity

symbolically expressed by the Norse on the islands [Northern and Western Isles], principally in burial practice, costume, jewellery and art-styles. As the Scandinavians gradually took political control in the North [of the British Isles] the situation reversed, and many of the local population adjusted their material culture to the Norse, symbolically becoming Norse” (197). Intended or not, this neatly closes the circle whose inscription started in the volume’s opening pages with the foundation of the Viking Society for Northern Research, whose centenary is celebrated well, if at times a bit quirkily and repetitiously, in this collection.

William Sayers