



## *Laity, Religion and Literature in the Medieval North*

Conference organized by the University of Iceland and  
Snorrastofa

Reykholt  
November 29-30 2024

# Program

## *Friday November 29th*

10:00 - 12:00	<b><i>Travel to Reykholt</i></b>	Departure from Edda, Arngrimgata 5, 107 Reykjavík.
	<b><i>Lunch</i></b>	
13:00 - 13:30	The organizers	Opening remarks
13:30 - 14:00	Richard North	Seeing things in Grettis saga: Grettir and Oddr munkr Snorrason
14:00 - 14:30	Natalie Van Deusen	Mirrors of Virtue: The Lives of the Saints in Late Medieval and Early Modern Icelandic Poetry.
14:30 - 15:00	Haraldur Hreinsson	The 'Religious' and the 'Secular' in Literary Historical Scholarship on Medieval Iceland
15:00 - 15:30	<b><i>Coffee Break</i></b>	
15:30 - 16:00	Piergiorgio Consagra	Two medieval Icelandic exempla and their secular sources
16:00 - 16:30	Brooklyn Arnot	A Story of Redemption: Parallels between Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks and Old Testament Narrative
16:30 - 17:00	Emily Cremins	Somewhere Beyond the Sea: a reading of Egill's lausavísa 43
19:00 - 21:00	<b><i>Dinner</i></b>	

## *November 30th*

9:00 - 9:30	Síán Grønlie	The cutting edge: Translating Samson for lay Icelanders
9:30 - 10:00	Haki Antonsson	Lay and Ecclesiastical Law in Njáls saga
10:00 - 10:30	Gregorz Bartusik	Biblical conceptual metaphors and the building of a Christian community in medieval Iceland
10:30 - 11:00	<b><i>Coffee Break</i></b>	
11:00 - 11:30	Tiffany White	Hagioscaping Kjalnesinga saga
11:30 - 12:00	Jan van Nahl	Old Norse mythology, thirteenth-century theology, and twentieth-century scholarship
12:00 - 13:00	<b><i>Lunch</i></b>	
13:00 - 13:30	Jonas Wellendorf	The Tale of the Duke's Son in Iceland, Denmark and Elsewhere
13:30 - 14:00	Torfi H. Tulinius	Exegesis, skaldic poetry, and saga writing.
14.30 - 15.30		Discussion: The future of our project.
16:00 - 18:00	<b><i>Return to Reykjavík</i></b>	

## Abstracts

Richard North

### **Seeing things in Grettis saga: Grettir and Oddr munkr Snorrason**

One of the most interesting things to see in or read into *Grettis saga* is the character of Grettir Ásmundarson, a hero afraid of the dark. On what medieval basis could this character have been developed? My paper will suggest that the sin of *acedia*, listlessness or ‘sloth’, informs the characterisation of Grettir from his childhood onwards to his encounter with Glámr and from there to his outlawry in the wilds of Iceland and to his death on Drangey. Starting with an argument for placing the saga in the abbey of Þingeyrar in the late twelfth century, I shall suggest that the saga’s first author was Oddr munkr Snorrason, and then that he shaped the inner life of Grettir on the basis of his own. Styling himself as a restless victim of visions, Oddr would have put his own monastic *óyndi* into the secular character of Grettir.

Natalie Van Deusen

### **Mirrors of Virtue: The Lives of the Saints in Late Medieval and Early Modern Icelandic Poetry.**

The paper explores how hagiographic legends were rendered into poetry in the late medieval and early modern periods in Iceland, after which point the laity and women especially engaged directly with these stories in new ways. It looks at how specific hagiographic texts came to serve as a kind of conduct literature by way of these poetic renderings, specifically for female audiences, which helps to explain the popularity of certain hagiographic legends in post-Reformation Iceland.

Haraldur Hreinsson

### **The ‘Religious’ and the ‘Secular’ in Literary Historical Scholarship on Medieval Iceland**

Inspired by recent theorising on historical secularities, this paper will explore how literary historical scholarship on medieval Iceland has distinguished between the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’. It will begin by introducing theoretical approaches to medieval secularities as found in the works of e.g. Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, Christoph Kleine, Philip Gorski, Sita Steckel, and Rushain Abbasi. This body of writings will furthermore provide the theoretical backdrop for the paper’s main concern, i.e. an analysis of 19th and 20th century scholarly discourse on literary activities in medieval Iceland. Central to the paper’s course of inquiry are questions relating to continuities and ruptures in how the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ have been defined in the scholarly discourse under inspection.

Brooklyn Arnot

### **A Story of Redemption: Parallels between Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks and Old Testament Narrative**

Medieval Icelandic texts set in the ancient past were forced to balance a complex paradox. In one hand, the veneration of pagan ancestors was central to Icelandic identity and history; on the other, the conversion to Christianity in ca. 1000 AD necessitated a condemnation of pagan practices. The fornaldarsögur, in particular, are able to employ the legendary past as a removed, discursive space in which the paradoxes of ancestral paganism and the Christian present can be safely encountered. This paper argues that “Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks” uses this discursive space to create parallels to the Old Testament story of Jacob, the patriarch of Israel. The paper will also consider how we might apply a typological framework to understanding how connections between Heiðrekr’s son and Joseph prefigure the salvation of Christ, taking my cue

from observations made by Torfi Tulinius in his "Matter of the North". These parallels graft Nordic prehistory onto salvation history. However, aspects of Jacob's life are also subverted by Heiðrekr, emphasising Heiðrekr's immorality in comparison to the biblical patriarch. Thus, through establishing parallels, the saga author is able to subvert the biblical narrative, demonstrating how medieval Scandinavia is part of Biblical salvation history, yet in a fractured mirror.

Emily Cremins

### **Somewhere Beyond the Sea: a Reading of Egill's Lausavísa 43**

This paper will present a reading of a lausavísa preserved in Egils saga, focusing on its potential inclusion of the biblical ubi sunt 'where are...' topos. It will consider particularly the adoption of this tradition in an Old English poetic context, exploring similarities between this stanza of Egill Skallagrímsson's and the Old English poem "The Wanderer" and questioning whether these indicate points of contact and dialogue between the two poetic traditions. It will note how Egill's stanza is unprecedented in its use of the ubi sunt topos in a skaldic context and demonstrate how this poetic medium might translate and transform established biblical topoi in a way that is unique and singular to Old Norse-Icelandic literature. To conclude, the paper will briefly offer potential implications of the employment of this topos, and how it might have a bearing not only upon the likely tenth-century context of the poem's composition but also the thirteenth-century narrative context in which the stanza is preserved.

Síân Grönlie

### **The cutting edge: Translating Samson for lay Icelanders**

Contrary to popular misconception, bible translation for the laity was flourishing in the later Middle Age, including in Iceland. The translation of passages from the Old and New Testaments can be found in homilies, in the lives of biblical saints, and in world histories, but the only continuous biblical translations are in the composite work known as Stjórn. This paper argues that Stjórn III, a translation that runs from Joshua to 2 Kings, was written for a lay audience who were familiar with the Icelandic sagas. We can see this not only in direct loans from sagas like Egils saga and Laxdœla saga, but also in the way biblical scenes are reimagined by the translator from the inside out. This paper will look in particular at the story of Samson, and how through the use of irony and play of perspectives the translation undercuts the standard interpretation of Samson as exemplary hero and figure of Christ.

Haki Antonsson

### **Lay and Ecclesiastical Law in Njáls saga**

The significance of law in *Njáls saga* has long been recognised. The saga frequently refers, both directly and indirectly, to legal provisions from the Icelandic Commonwealth's laws (*Grágás*) and to the later law codes established after the *Gamli Sáttmáli* (*Járnsíða* and *Jónsbók*). Indeed, the commonly accepted dating of *Njáls saga* to the 1280s largely depends on its references to these laws and legal terms. The saga's use of Church law has, however, received relatively little attention. This presentation will explore one significant application of Church law and consider what it may reveal about the authorship of *Njáls saga* and the motivations underlying its creation.

Gregorz Bartusik

## **Biblical conceptual metaphors and the building of a Christian community in medieval Iceland**

Since the settlement of Iceland, medieval Icelandic society had been built of direct-contact, personal communities. The nuclei of the new community were the household, family, kin, friendship, neighbourhood, fraternity, and other personal bonds and alliances created by *gríð*, *fóstr*, *fóstbræðralag*, *félag*, *goðorð*, and *höfðingjadómr*. During Christianization, the Church had to work for the building of a community of Christians, a greater social community extending beyond familial networks or personal alliance systems, but anything that went beyond these basic social nuclei could only be an 'imagined community.' Benedict Anderson (2006: 6) defines an 'imagined community,' explaining that 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.' To awaken the sense of 'communion' in a society such as medieval Iceland, the church had to restructure the existing social networks, the web of social relationships, by changing the worldview related to it. The use of language and metaphors was crucial to achieve the change of mentality. This paper aims to analyse the use of the Biblical conceptual metaphors of God's people as a herd of sheep, a family, and a body, as a tool helping to imagine, understand, and explain the Christian sense of belonging, and to propagate it among the Icelandic society. I also examine the correlation between the metaphorical discourse and practices through which the church's imagined community became real to believers, the social/welfare services the church offered, and the paternalism of law influenced by Christianity.

Tiffany White

### **Hagioscaping Kjalnesinga saga**

This paper focuses on placing the building and destruction of the pagan temple in *Kjalnesinga saga* in its literary context. I show that through the use of typology, the pagan temple plays an important role in the composer's desire to place the pre-Christian past of Kjalarnes on par with the pre-Christian past found in the Old Testament. The destruction of the temple thus serves as a foil to the Christian church built in the same area; it was built before the pagan temple and still stands after its destruction. The composer's deliberate "hagioscaping" (a term coined by Marianne Ritsema van Eck) thus creates a landscape that provides not only a didactic story but an origin story for Kjalarnes, placing its history firmly within the history of salvation.

Jonas Wellendorf

### **The Tale of the Duke's Son in Iceland, Denmark and Elsewhere**

Bishop Jón Halldórsson made it his habit to delight those around him with "exquisite exempla that he had acquired abroad, both through reading and from his own experience (at *gleðja nærverandismenn meðr fáheyrðum dæmisögum, er hann hafði tekit í útlöndum, bæði með lettrum ok eiginni raun*, ed. Gering 1882, 84)." In my presentation, I wish to examine one of these tales attributed to Jón Halldórsson, *Af þrimr kumpánum*, and explore its background. I will identify other versions of the same basic story in Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, in *Egils saga einhenda* as well as more distantly related parallels in the *Arabian Nights* and elsewhere, ultimately tracing the story back to a 10th cent. collection by al-Tanūkhī.

While it is not surprising that stories move from one region to another, ripening along the way, medieval scholarship has recently, under the banner of the Global Middle Ages paradigm, become more attentive to these movements. Scholars have studied not only how distant locations are connected through the stories they share, but also how the tales are adapted to fit local circumstances and expectations. These adaptations may cater to demands for exoticism, adherence to local narrative patterns, or a combination of both. While Jón Halldórsson's *ævintýri* may appear unicelandic in form, content, and mode of expression, they were

nevertheless immensely impactful vectors for the transmission of international stories to lay and learned in Iceland.

Jan Alexander van Nahl

### **Old Norse mythology, thirteenth-century theology, and twentieth-century scholarship**

Old Norse mythology has been a key topic of scholarly debate in Scandinavian Studies since the 19th century. Most scholars today agree on a significant impact of learned Christian thought on this mythology in its recorded shape, but the exact nature and scope of this theological impact is far from clear. In the second half of the 20th century, three influential attempts at an answer were introduced: demonology, euhemerism, and analogy, showing overlapping and contradictions. While most scholars today opt for one of these concepts in approaching Old Norse mythology, few scholars have scrutinized the conditions under which relevant research was conducted in postwar decades, and they have neither investigated the theological discourse at the time of composition of, for example, the Prose Edda. Current scholarly opinions on the subject are thus often shaped by older discourse without the necessary reevaluation of learned developments both in the thirteenth and the twentieth century. In this lecture, I am going to introduce several case studies to illustrate strong and weak points of interpretations of Old Norse mythology based on demonology, euhemerism and analogy.

Piergiorgio Consagra

### **Two medieval Icelandic exempla and their secular sources**

Óláfr Tryggvason was considered as the “Apostle of the North” by the Icelanders, who started a long tradition of saga writing about the first missionary king of Norway from as early as the 12th century. In the Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta (c. 14th century) the eponymous king is often depicted fighting against heathens while carrying out his missionary endeavour. In particular, in two þættir interpolated in this saga, Norna-Gests þátr and Helga þátr Þórissonar, Óláfr Tryggvason has the chance to reconcile with his pagan ancestry on one hand and, on the other, to confront himself with the pagan present of his country.

In this paper, I aim first to provide a reading of these two þættir as exempla, as they both seem to function as such. This will be more evident when the two texts are read in tandem and in the context of the royal biography of the king who was in part responsible for Iceland’s conversion. Second, I will highlight how the literary practices of medieval Christian Iceland interacted with literary forms generally considered as “secular”. As previous scholars have briefly pointed out, in fact, the two þættir are evidently written drawing upon Eddic poetry, fornaldarsögur, and continental romance as source material. Lastly, I will elaborate on how medieval Icelanders perceived and represented their own pagan past in the literature they created and how this process of creation was often carried out by using material which was not originally religious, as the two þættir examined here suggest.

Torfi H. Tulinius

### **Exegesis, skaldic poetry and saga writing**

This paper will explore the evidence for the influence of Biblical exegesis on the practice of lay skaldic poetry as well as saga-writing. Taking examples from religious poetry, as well as that attributed to Egill Skalla-Grímsson, it will argue that practitioners of skaldic poetry recognized similarities between their work and that of exegetes, f.ex. by referring to elements of narrative from the Bible in the same way they refer to Norse myths. Furthermore, individual chapters from Egils saga will be shown to use similar techniques to give meaning to the events and characters portrayed in the saga.