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Notes and Documents

Viking atrocity and Skaldic verse: The Rite of the Blood-Eagle

THE rehabilitation of the viking begun by Peter Sawyer over thirty years ago has recently taken a curious turn.[1] New studies of the Scandinavian invaders of England seem determined to stress their demonic side, to expose the dark virulence and fanaticism of Norse paganism. Vikings in these works behave for the most part like rational political beings. They are committed to career advancement, territorial aggrandizement, and the latest technology; they trade, they farm, and they sculpt stone – whenever they are not carving up conquered enemies according to the Odinic rite of the blood-eagle. This peculiar method of execution, lovingly described by a chain of authors from the end of the twelfth century to the present, is prominent in current discussions of whether or not vikings were more sinister than 'groups of long-haired tourists who occasionally roughed up the natives'.[2] The significance of the blood-eagle was heralded in the 1974 Stenton Lecture when J. M. Wallace-Hadrill made available the then-unpublished observations of Alfred Smyth: 'Examples of this practice may have included: King Ælla of Northumbria, Halfdan son of King Haraldr Harfagri of Norway, King Edmund (a victim, like Ælla, of the great Danish Viking Ívarr), King Maelgualai of Munster, and just possibly Archbishop Ælfheah. . . . It happened in Scandinavia, in Ireland and in England. I am presuming that Francia was not exempt.'[3] The historical reality of this 'ferocious sacrificial ritual' is accepted by both Patrick Wormald and Eric John in their distinguished contributions to *The Anglo-Saxons*,[4] as it had been sixty years earlier by Allen Mawer in *The Cambridge Medieval History*.[5] Even the pro-viking opposition has been forced to concede that the torture 'was unhappily no fiction'.[6] 'Blood-eagle' did not make the 1933 *Oxford English Dictionary*, but is now – along with 'radical chic' and 'Rubik's Cube' – in the *Supplement*,

1. P. H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings* (London, 1962); 2nd edn (London, 1971).
2. J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Vikings in Francia*, Stenton Lecture (Reading, 1974); reprinted in and here cited from Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Medieval History* (Oxford, 1975), p. 220.
3. *The Vikings in Francia*, pp. 224–5.
4. *The Anglo-Saxons*, ed. James Campbell (Oxford, 1982), pp. 148–9, 206.
5. (Cambridge, 1922), III, xiii, 329.
6. Gwyn Jones, *A History of the Vikings* (Oxford, 1968), p. 219.

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defined as 'a Viking method of killing someone, usually the slayer of a man's father, by cutting out the ribs in the shape of an eagle'.[1]

Descriptions of the sacrifice start only in the late twelfth century. In the course of the next two hundred years Scandinavian authors associate the blood-eagle with four individuals. Two of the victims are historical figures from the ninth century: Ella (Saxo, *Gesta Danorum*, IX. v; *Ragnars saga Loðbrókar*, ch. 17; *Þáttr af Ragnars sonum*, ch. 3) and Halfdan (*Orkneyinga saga*, ch. 8; *Heimskringla*, *Haralds saga hárfagra*, chs. 30–31);[2] in both cases, the accounts of Saxo and the sagas are contradicted – sometimes flagrantly – by contemporary sources.[3] The remaining two victims are from the world of legend: Lyngvi (*Reginsmál*, st. 26; *Nornagests þáttr*, ch. 6) and the giant Brusi (*Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar*, ch. 9).[4] The blood-eagling procedure varies from text to text, becoming more lurid, pagan, and time-consuming with each passing century. Saxo and the compiler of *Ragnars saga* in NKS 1824b 4to merely envisage someone scratching, as deeply as possible, a picture of an eagle upon Ella's back. For a touch of colour, the saga reddens the outline sketch with the victim's blood, while Saxo's version pours salt on the wound. *Orkneyinga saga* describes the tearing out of ribs and lungs and provides the information that the rite was intended as an offering to Óðinn; Snorri Sturluson, relating the same incident in *Haralds saga hárfagra*, eliminates all reference to the god of battle. The late *Þáttr af Ragnars sonum* gives a full, sensational report of the event: an eagle is carved, then ribs are torn from the spine and

1. *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. R. W. Burchfield (Oxford, 1972), I. 296.

2. *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*, ed. C. Knabe and Paul Herrmann, rev. Jørgen Olrik and Hans Raeder (Copenhagen, 1931), I. 263; *Ragnars saga* in *Vǫlsunga saga ok Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, ed. Magnus Olsen, Skrifter udgivet af Samfund til udgivelse af gammel nordisk litteratur, XXXVI (Copenhagen, 1906–8); the *þáttr* in Eiríkr Jónsson and Finnur Jónsson (eds), *Hauksbók* . . . (Copenhagen, 1892–6), pp. 458–67; both texts may be consulted in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, 4 vols., ed. Guðni Jónsson (Akureyri, 1953), I. 219–303; *Orkneyinga saga*, ed. Finnbogi Guðmundsson, Íslenzk fornrit, XXVI (Reykjavík, 1941), 131–3.

3. On Ella's death in battle see Gustav Storm, 'Ragnar Lodbrok og Lodbrokssönnerne. Studie i dansk Oldhistorie og nordisk Sagnhistorie', (*Norsk*) *Historisk Tidesskrift*, II. i (1877), 435–7; reprinted in Storm, *Kritiske Bidrag til Vikingetidens Historie, I. Ragnar Lodbrok og Gange-Rolv* (Oslo, 1878), pp. 89–90. On Halfdan's fall in battle see also Klaus von See, 'Der Skalde Torf-Einar Jarl', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* (Tübingen), lxxxii (1960), 31–43, and Felix Genzmer, 'Sage und Wirklichkeit in der Geschichte von den ersten Orkadenjarlen', *Historische Zeitschrift*, clxviii (1943), 516. Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* (2nd edn rev.), Grundriss der germanischen Philologie, 12 (Berlin, 1956–7), I. 411–12, argued that rejection of historical instances of the rite does not mean that this kind of rite never existed: 'Denn auch eine Sage hat einen realen Untergrund.'

4. The *Reginsmál* stanza may be consulted in *Edda: die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. Gustav Neckel, 4th rev. edn by Hans Kuhn (Heidelberg, 1962), I. 179, and in *Nornagests þáttr, Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, I. 305–35. *Nornagests þáttr* and *Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar* (along with one of the five redactions of *Orkneyinga saga*) are in *Flateyjarbók*, ed. Vilhjálmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmundsson and Sigurður Nordal, 4 vols. (Akranes, 1944–5).

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lungs pulled out so that the corpse might resemble a spread-eagle. The existence of different versions of the rite was noted before 1645 by the Danish scholar Stephanius in his running commentary to Saxo.[1] By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the various saga motifs – eagle sketch, rib division, lung surgery, and 'saline stimulant' – were combined in inventive sequences designed for maximum horror.[2] The past decade, apparently in order to include Kings Edmund and Maelguala among the blood-eagled, has expanded the basic torture to include foreplay (initial piercing with javelins or arrows), positioning (the victim lies face-downwards over a stone), and climax (beheading and death).[3] The ceremony swells, accumulating preludes and sequels. History begins to acquire the narrative inclusiveness and brachiate structure of cyclic romance.

Historians have long ceased to treat Icelandic sagas as reliable sources for the viking age. If, in the case of the blood-eagle, late saga accounts are still credited with documenting genuine ninth-century practice it is because two manuscripts cite as confirmation an earlier authority; their version of the torture is accompanied by a skaldic stanza stated to be by the early eleventh-century poet Sighvatr, to have formed part of his *Knútsdrápa*, and to establish that Ívarr carved the blood-eagle on Ella. It is solely on the strength of this half-stanza, twelve words in all, composed sometime between the late 1020s and 1038 and cited in one manuscript (AM 147 4to) of *Ragnars saga* and in the *Hauksbók* redaction known as the *Þáttr af Ragnars sonum*, that the blood-eagle sacrifice of the sagas has kept our credence:[4] 'The story of the great vengeance must have existed as early as 1027, since there is an obvious reference to it in a stave of that date which told of the blood-eagle carved by Inguar (Ivar) on the body of Ælle';[5] 'The *þáttr* is late and untrustworthy, but allusion was made to this tradition already in the *Knútsdrápa* (st. 1) composed by Sighvat about 1038';[6] 'The stanza shows that by 1038 the tradition that Ívarr had personally carved the blood-eagle on Ælla was enjoying wide circulation

1. Stephanus Johannes Stephanius, *Notæ Uberiores in Historiam Danicam Saxonis Grammatici* (Sorø, 1645); facsimile edn with intro. by H. D. Schepelern, Danish Humanist Texts and Studies, II (Copenhagen, 1978), 193.

2. Among numerous examples: Sharon Turner, *The History of the Anglo-Saxons* (London, 1799–1805; 7th edn, 1852), I. 439, who adds 'saline stimulant' only after the ribs have been spread; Benjamin Thorpe (trans.), J. M. Lappenberg, *History of England under the Anglo-Saxon Kings* (Hamburg, 1834; London, 1845), II. 40, who inserts salt after detaching the ribs but before extracting the lungs.

3. *The Vikings in Francia*, p. 224.

4. On the prose accompanying the stanza in saga and *þáttr*, see Rory W. McTurk, 'The Extant Icelandic Manifestations of Ragnars Saga Loðbrókar', *Gripla*, I (Reykjavík, 1975), 74–75.

5. Robert H. Hodgkin, *A History of the Anglo-Saxons* (Oxford, 1935), 3rd edn (Oxford, 1952), II. 527.

6. E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North. The Religions of Ancient Scandinavia* (London, 1964), pp. 254–5.

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throughout the Scandinavian world.'[1] Since pagans did not write their memoirs, and victims of the atrocity no longer could, 'it is not clear what better evidence one is entitled to expect'.[2]

The notion that skalds were the historians of the North arose early and is very much with us. Around 1180 Theodoricus wrote a Latin history of Norway in which he declared that much of his information came from Icelanders, 'among whom memory of past events lives, cultivated in their ancient poems';[3] by 1220 Saxo had attested to their authority in Denmark.[4] In the early seventeenth century Thormod Torfaeus stressed the historical importance of the skaldic verse imbedded in the sagas, and quoted Snorri's prologue to *Heimskringla* in support of his view.[5] Torfaeus' model of skaldic transmission envisaged each stanza being provided at the moment of composition or shortly afterwards with an oral anecdote, an explanation in prose which he believed formed the invisible bedrock of the saga account.[6] Another model, gaining in favour today, postpones the joining of verse and prose until the written period; towards the end of the twelfth century, saga-authors are thought to have dismantled extended poems such as *Knútsdrápa*, inserted individual stanzas into their texts, and devised a narrative context for them as literary need and imagination dictated.[7] The second model of transmission, like the first, regards skaldic verse of the early period as an invaluable primary source, transmitting a more authentic pagan tradition than anything in the rest of Germanic literature; but it also recognizes that the conventions and workings of this difficult poetry were not always perfectly understood, not even in the twelfth century.

Skaldicists are becoming more aware that saga-authors did not always correctly interpret the early verses from which they quarried their historical information. Their misreadings have occasionally

1. Alfred P. Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings in the British Isles, 850–880* (Oxford, 1977), p. 194.

2. Patrick Wormald, 'Year of the Viking', *London Review of Books* (17 July–6 Aug. 1980), p. 10.

3. Theodoricus, *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium* in Gustav Storm (ed.), *Monumenta Historica Norvegiae* (Oslo, 1880), p. 3, lines 7–11.

4. *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*, p. 5.

5. Thormod Torfaeus, *Series Dynastarum et Regum Daniae* ... (Copenhagen, 1702), pp. 50–57. Jacob Langebek (see *infra*, p. 336, n. 4) cites Torfaeus, *Historia Norvegicarum* (Copenhagen, 1711), I. 501, as an authority on the blood-eagle.

6. Prominent among scholars promoting the concept of 'Begleitprosa' are Siegfried Beyschlag, 'Möglichkeiten mündlicher Überlieferung in der Königssaga', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, lxviii (1953), 109–39, and Dietrich Hofmann, 'Sagaprosa als Partner von Skaldenstrophen', *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, xi (1978–9), 68–81.

7. Recent studies supporting this model are: Alistair Campbell, *Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History*, The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies, University College (London, 1971); Russell Poole, 'Skaldic Poetry in the Sagas: The Origins, Authorship, Genre, and Style of Some Saga *Lausavísur*', unpub. PhD dissertation (Toronto, 1975), DAI 38: 5489A–90A, and Klaus von See, 'Skaldenstrophe und Sagaprosa. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der mündlicher Überlieferung in der altnordischen Literatur', *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, x (1977), 58–82.

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continued unchallenged into the modern period, with new errors added from time to time. Southey did his bit for the blood-eagle sacrifice in his preface to Cottle's *Icelandic Poetry*:

> And when his sons
> Avenged their father's fate, and like the wings
> Of some huge eagle spread the severed ribs
> Of Ella in the shield-roof'd hall, they thought
> One day from Ella's skull to quaff the mead,
> Their valour's guerdon.[1]

Yet his vision of vikings in their cups sipping out of skulls derives not from ninth-century reality but from Magnús Óláfsson's seventeenth-century misunderstanding of a thirteenth-century skaldic kenning.[2] A similar mistranslation in the course of the twelfth century is likely to have inaugurated the chain of learned guesses that by the thirteenth put the blood-eagle rite on the map.

Sighvatr's stanza is cryptic, knotty, and allusive, qualities prized and consciously sought after by viking-age skalds. The verse is not immediately transparent in Old Norse, and when translated word for word into English the result is as follows:[3]

Ok Ellu bak,	And Ella's back,
at lét hinn's sat,	at had the one who dwelt,
Ívarr, ara,	Ívarr, with eagle,
Iorvík, skorit.	York, cut.

Jón Óláfsson's Latin translation, published in 1773, provided numerical guidance for readers unfamiliar with the skewed syntax of Old Norse poetry:[4]

> 1 10 11
> Et Ellæ dorsum
> 9 2 4 5
> Fecit ille qui sedit
> 3 7
> Ivarus aquila
> 6 8
> Jorvikæ sectum.

1. 'Epistle from Robert Southey' in Amos S. Cottle, *Icelandic Poetry or the Edda of Sæmund* (Bristol, 1797), pp. xxxiv–xxxv.

2. Óláfsson mistranslated *ór bjúgviðum hausa* 'from curved branches of (animal) skulls' [= from drinking horns] as *ex craniis eorum quos ceciderunt* in his Latin rendition of *Krákumál*, stanza 25: 'Appendix,' Ole Worm, *Runir seu Danica Literatura Antiquissima* . . . (Copenhagen, 1636).

3. Citations of skaldic verse are, unless otherwise stated, from the first volume of *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, B. *Rettet tekst*, I–II (Copenhagen, 1912–15). The surviving fragments of *Knútsdrápa* occupy pp. 232–4.

4. Jón Óláfsson from Svefneyjar was responsible for the translation of both stanza and *þáttr* in Jacob Langebek (ed.), *Scriptores Rerum Danicarum Medii Ævi* (Copenhagen, 1773), II. 279.

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The syntax, in addition to being skewed, is ambiguous; yet every trace of ambiguity has disappeared from the interpretation of the stanza accepted by modern editors of the corpus. Finnur Jónsson took *ara* as the indirect and *bak* as the direct object of *skorit*, but his Danish translation did the opposite: 'And Ívarr, who dwelt at York, cut an eagle on Ella's back' (p. 232). Because *ara* is both the dative and accusative form of *ari* 'eagle', Ernst Kock was able to reverse Jónsson's order and to claim that *bak* is a shortened form of dative *baki*: 'And Ívarr, who dwelt at York, had an eagle cut on Ella's back.'[1] Both editors, despite their syntactic differences, agree with the saga-author that the stanza describes the carving of an eagle on Ella's back; neither explores the possibility – still reflected in Óláfsson's ablative *aquila* – that *ara* has instrumental force: 'And Ívarr, who dwelt at York, had Ella's back cut by an eagle.' Ella's back may have been incised with the picture of an eagle, but it also could have been lacerated by a real one. Instrumentals without preposition and expressing an external agent are frequent in Old English and Old Norse verse, though not in prose; eddic poetry provides such parallels as *Iormunrekkr ykra systor jóm of traddi* 'Eormenric trampled your sister with horses' or *ætt ara oddum saddak* 'the race of eagles I sated with spears'.[2] Yet there is no hint of an instrumental in any of the Englishings of Sighvatr's stanza from that of Vigfússon and Powell ('And Iwar that ruled at York cut an Eagle on the back of Ælla')[3] to those of Turville-Petre and Whitelock, which present-day historians take as their text: 'And Ivar, who dwelt at York, carved the eagle on Ælla's back.'[4] Each succeeding translation, down to the switch from indefinite to definite article in the last two, makes it easier for us to read the blood-eagle rite into the stanza. There is a clear consensus from the twelfth century to the twentieth as to how the quatrain should be read, but this consensus may be no more than 'a conspiracy of romantic hopes.'[5]

Medieval men of letters, like their modern counterparts, could sometimes be over-eager to recover the colourful rites and leafy folk beliefs of their pagan ancestors. An experienced reader of skaldic poetry, looking at Sighvatr's stanza in isolation from its saga context,

1. Ernst A. Kock, *Notationes Norrœnae: Anteckningar till Edda och skaldediktning*. Lunds Universitets Årsskrift N. F. Avd. 1 (Lund, 1923–44), §3224.

2. *Guðrúnarhvǫt*, st. 2; *Helgakviða Hundingsbana ǫnnur*, st. 8; both in *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn, pp. 264, 152.

3. Guðbrandur Vigfússon and F. York Powell (eds), *Corpus Poeticum Boreale: The Poetry of the Old Northern Tongue from the Earliest Times to the Thirteenth Century* (Oxford, 1883), II. 135.

4. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, p. 254; Dorothy Whitelock (ed.), *English Historical Documents c.500–1042* (2nd edn) (London, 1979), p. 337.

5. The phrase is from E. G. Stanley's preliminary statement to the Dating of *Beowulf* Conference, held in Toronto 20–23 April 1980: 'It is methodologically unsound to begin with some idea of scholarly consensus of an early date; in medieval studies such consensus need be no more than a conspiracy of romantic hopes.' See further *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. Colin Chase (Toronto, 1981), pp. 197–211.

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would have trouble seeing it as anything but a conventional utterance, an allusion to the eagle as carrion beast, the pale bird with red claws perched on and slashing the backs of the slain: 'Ívarr had Ella's back scored by an eagle.' The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reported that the English king fell in battle against the vikings at York;[1] the skald says the same and more through his metaphoric shorthand, which scornfully demotes the king slain by Ívarr to the rank of prey, to a mutilated carcass. The effect is not unlike Shakespeare's:

> Let us score their backs,
> And snatch 'em up, as we take hares, behind,
> 'Tis sport to maul a runner.
>
> *Antony and Cleopatra*, IV. vii. 12.

Skaldic poems of the ninth, tenth, and early eleventh century allude more than once to men falling under the eagle's talons: Þjóðólfr has an eagle with bloody foot tread Óttarr at Vendel; Torf-Einarr muses over whose 'lot it will be to stand under the eagle's claws'; Þórleifr fells a warrior 'under the eagle's claw'; Arnórr has Magnús vow that he will possess Denmark or fall under the raven's claw.[2] Rǫgnvaldr's mid twelfth-century stanza sequence supplies at least one carrion bird for each of Ella, Ragnarr, and the latter's sons:[3]

Ella var,	Ella was,
á[t gat] þar,	got eating there,
Ragnars bani,	Ragnarr's slayer,
rómu trani.	the crane of battle.

And Saxo's prose at the end of the century envisages Grep swearing to 'stretch flat with eagles' talons this line of newcomers'.[4] The ellipsis in Sighvatr's stanza – the skald's omission of talons – reflects the demands of his terse metre, a speciality of Cnut's Anglo-Scandinavian court called *tøglag*. Similar metaphoric compression and similar syntax are present in other quatrains of *Knútsdrápa*:

Let lǫnd lokit	The prince of the army
liðs gramr saman	had many lands
marbeðjum með,	along the coasts
mǫrg, nefbjǫrgum.	enclosed by nose-protections.

1. *Chronicle A (BCDE)*, s.a. 867; also *The Chronicle of Æthelweard*, ed. Alistair Campbell (London, 1962), p. 36; Geoffroi Gaimar, *L'Estoire des Engleis*, ed. Alexander Bell (Oxford, 1960), lines 2589–836; and Roger of Wendover, *Chronica sive Flores Historiarum*, ed. Henry Coxe, 5 vols. (London, 1841), I. 298.

2. References are to poem, stanza number, and page in Jónsson's edition: Þjóðólfr, 1, 19 (p. 10); Torf-Einarr, lv. 4 (p. 28); Þórleifr, lv. 2 (p. 133); Arnórr, 3, 5 (p. 312). Torf-Einarr's five stanzas contain three references to the eagle as carrion bird, a concentration that may have helped to attract the blood-eagle motif into his story.

3. Jón Helgason and Anne Holtsmark (eds), *Háttalykill enn forni*, Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana, I (Copenhagen, 1941), 35, 50; an alternate emendation for line 2 is *at gall þar* '(an eagle or raven) cried out there'.

4. *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*, I. 114; Eng. trans. by Peter Fisher, *Saxo Grammaticus: History of the Danes* (Totowa, N.J., 1979), I. 128.

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'Nose-protections' (=helmets) can stand for warriors, just as 'head' for cattle: Sighvatr does not depict Cnut dropping tubes of *Bain de Soleil* all along the beaches of Norway, any more than he turned Ívarr into a tattooer of backs.

The past participle with instrumental dative in the quatrain just cited (*lokit* . . . *nefbjǫrgum*, st. 5) is found in two subsequent stanzas of *Knútsdrápa: spanit* . . . *sǫkum* 'enticed through battles' (6) and *metinn* . . . *fetum* 'measured by feet' (11). Three occurrences of the construction in the space of eleven short verses suggest that *skorit* . . . *ara* 'scored by an eagle' in the first stanza of the poem is also likely to be a past participle with instrumental dative. This construction is common in Old English poetry; examples from the tenth-century *Battle of Brunanburh* include *garum ageted* 'fixed by spears' (18), *sweordum aswefede* 'put to sleep by swords' (30), and *wundum forgrunden* 'ground to bits by wounds' (42).[1] An almost exact parallel to Sighvatr's syntax can be found in eddic poetry: 'sá hon . . . hugborg iǫfurs hiǫrvi scorna' (she saw the prince's breast cut by a sword).[2] In contrast, Norse prose limits the use of this construction chiefly to verbs meaning 'prepared', 'decorated', 'set', or 'inlaid', an association that by itself would have encouraged a saga-author to read *ara skorit* as 'incised with an eagle (picture)'.[3] There is a significant amount of English influence on the lexicon and syntax of Sighvatr's *Knútsdrápa*. It was observed over thirty years ago that an audience unfamiliar with Old English verse or at least with the skald's strongly anglicized Norse poetic language would have had enormous difficulty in understanding the poem, even in the early eleventh century.[4]

The sense of Sighvatr's stanza would have been increasingly difficult to grasp as time went on; by the thirteenth century not only the vocabulary and syntax but also the allusive style of viking-age skalds had become major obstacles to comprehension. Literate saga-authors tended to take a skald's metaphors literally, explaining poetic allusions in an over-pictorial way. The tenth-century skald Kormakr, for example, depicts in one stanza his necklaced lady staring upon 'his Hagbarðr's neck'. The saga-author explains in excruciating detail how the woman hid in the farmhouse behind a partition adorned with a carving of Hagbarðr and peered at the poet from beneath its sculptured beard; but the poet was just associating – obliquely and ominously – his own lifelong fatal love with that of the legendary hero hanged on the gallows: Kormakr's 'Hagbarðr's neck' was his

1. In Elliott V. K. Dobbie (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, VI (New York, 1942), 16–20.

2. *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta*, st. 14, in *Edda*, ed. Neckel and Kuhn, p. 204. *Cf.* Einarr Skúlason, *Geisli*, st. 60: *Tungu vas* . . . *skorin knífi* '(his) tongue was cut by a knife' (Jónsson, p. 442).

3. Marius Nygaard, *Norrøn syntax* (Oslo, 1905), pp. 107–14.

4. Dietrich Hofmann, *Nordisch-englische Lehnbeziehungen der Wikingerzeit*, Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana, XIV (Copenhagen, 1955), 93.

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Achilles' heel.[1] What in the verse is evocative and inexplicit is made concrete and specific in the prose with *Alice in Wonderland* results: 'Here one of the guinea pigs cheered, and was immediately suppressed by the officers of the court. (As that is rather a hard word, I will just explain to you how it was done. They had a large canvas bag, which tied up at the mouth with strings: into this they slipped the guinea-pig, head first, and then sat upon it.)'[2] The blood-eagle sacrifice, the most remarkable suppressive technique attributed by later centuries to the vikings in England, most likely owes its origin to a similar literalism, to a concretizing of an abstraction by authors claiming, as historians, to know about the past.

The dislocation of language in skaldic verse brings out the meaning-maker in man. Half-veiled hints of atrocity, like the suppression of a guinea-pig or the scoring of an eagle, seem particularly prone to narrative development. The four First World War newspaper clippings given below in chronological order show how a slight vagueness in a twelve-word notice (the same length as Sighvatr's verse) can be metamorphosed into a complex, barbaric ritual by journalists still citing the original text as their source:[3]

> When the fall of Antwerp got known the church bells were rung (*i.e.* at Cologne and elsewhere in Germany) (*Kölnische Zeitung*).
>
> According to the *Kölnische Zeitung*, the clergy of Antwerp were compelled to ring the church bells when the fortress was taken [*Le Matin* (Paris)].
>
> According to what *The Times* has heard from Cologne, via Paris, the unfortunate Belgian priests who refused to ring the church bells when Antwerp was taken have been sentenced to hard labour [*Corriere della Sera* (Milan)].
>
> According to information to the *Corriere della Sera* from Cologne, via London, it is confirmed that the barbaric conquerors of Antwerp punished the unfortunate Belgian priests for their heroic refusal to ring the church bells by hanging them as living clappers to the bells with their heads down [*Le Matin* (Paris)].

An objection has been made to similar twentieth-century analogies on the grounds that German newspapers during the First World War did not revel in German atrocities, while it is only in Scandinavian texts that the blood-eagle ritual is fully described; northern Europe would not confess to crimes that never happened.[4] Such reasoning, however, leaves out of account the more than three hundred years of history and Christian/European identity separating saga-authors from the vikings they were celebrating. The ultimate begetter of the

1. Klaus von See, 'Skaldenstrophe und Sagaprosa', p. 63.
2. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, ch. 11; *Alice in Wonderland*, ed. Donald J. Gray (New York, 1971), p. 90.
3. Cited by Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (New York, 1930), pp. 88–89.
4. Wormald, 'Year of the Viking', p. 10. Also C. P. Wormald, 'Viking Studies: Whence and Whither?' in *The Vikings*, ed. R. T. Farrell (London, 1982), p. 140.

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blood-eagle was not a sadistic bird-fancier but an antiquarian revival, the passion for the past that was sweeping northwestern Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries when tales about the savagery and ferocity of the Northmen were all the rage.[1]

Deprived of its skaldic stanza, the rite of the blood-eagle has no viking-age support. A neolithic skeleton with crushed rib-cage hardly counts as evidence,[2] while the carved eagle hovering menacingly above a figure on one of the Gotland stones admits at the very least of other interpretations.[3] Alfred Smyth has declared the blood-eagle allusion in stanza 26 of *Reginsmál* 'the most archaic reference, originating in the viking age itself';[4] but this eddic stanza, which contradicts the immediately preceding prose, is believed by most Nordicists to be a late addition, a reworking of saga material derived – like the stories of Ella and Halfdan – from the British Isles.[5] Dr Smyth has had surprising success in persuading the scholarly community that a simile in Abbo of Fleury's *Passio Sancti Eadmundi*, written in the 980s and describing the mutilation of another victim of the vikings, is 'the earliest reference to the ritual of the blood-eagle.'[6] King Edmund of East Anglia, having served Sebastian-style as a target for viking javelins (*in passione similis Sebastiano egregio martyri*), is wrenched from the tree to which he had been fixed, *retectis costarum latebris prae punctionibus ac si raptum eculeo aut saevis tortum ungulis* (the recesses of his ribs uncovered by frequent punctures as if he had been gripped by the rack or tortured by cruel claws).[7] Up to his removal from the tree, Edmund's sufferings had followed those of St Sebastian, even

1. Hilda Ellis Davidson has reached a similar conclusion in her commentary (1980) to Fisher's translation of Saxo (p. 338, no. 4 *supra*): II. 161. An almost identical development has been traced for the *berserkr* or heathen champion of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Scandinavian story: the figure probably derives from a misunderstanding of a stanza in the skaldic *Haraldskvæði* (*c.*900). See Klaus von See, 'Exkurs zum *Haraldskvæði*: Berserker', *Zeitschrift für deutsche Wortforschung*, xvii (1961), 129–35.

2. Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, I. 411.

3. Illustrated in Holger Arbman, *The Vikings*, trans. Alan Binns (London, 1961), pl. 1, and in Hilda R. Ellis Davidson, *Scandinavian Mythology* (London, 1969), pp. 44–45. Smyth, *Scandinavian Kings*, p. 210, n. 50, presents the options as 'either the sacrifice of King Vikarr or a blood-eagling ritual'.

4. *Scandinavian Kings*, p. 190, n. 5.

5. Hans Kuhn, 'Das Eddastück von Sigurds Jugend', *Miscellanea Academica Berolinensia: Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur Feier des 250. jährigen Bestehens der deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* (Berlin, 1950), II. i. 39–40; Jan de Vries, *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte*, Grundriss der germanischen Philologie, 15–16 (2nd rev. edn) (Berlin, 1964–7), I. 297–8. For a survey of recent opinions on Sigurðr's 'Vaterrachelied', see Theodore M. Andersson, *The Legend of Brynhild*, Islandica, 43 (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980), pp. 89–105.

6. *Scandinavian Kings*, p. 213.

7. *Abbonis Floriacensis Passio Sancti Eadmundi* in *Memorials of St Edmund's Abbey*, ed. Thomas Arnold, Rolls Series, 96, 3 vols. (London, 1890–6), I. 15. Jan de Vries suggested that Abbo's *eculeo* was somehow misread as *aquila* 'eagle' in Scandinavia, thereby inspiring Ívarr's blood-eagling of Ælla: 'Die Entwicklung der Sage von den Lodbrokssöhnen in den historischen Quellen', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, xliv (1928), 161–2.

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including the traditional 'hedgehog' comparison; but because Abbo's rack-and-claw aside has no counterpart in that early Christian martyr's passion, Smyth concludes that 'this important detail leaves us in little doubt as to the sacrificial nature of Edmund's death. . . . [It] would seem to have been derived from Dunstan's source, namely the veteran of the wars of 870. The description is sufficiently detailed to suggest that we have here an accurate account of a body subjected to the ritual of the blood-eagle.'[1] Before detecting the spoor of a blood-eagle in Abbo's simile, more humdrum possibilities deserve to be exhausted. In the legends of the martyrs, the pair *eculeus* 'rack' and *ungula* 'claw' go together like 'horse' and 'hoof'.[2] They are linked Roman instruments of torture in hundreds of texts from late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, from Cyprian of Carthage (*nunc equuleus extenderet, nunc ungula effoderet; ungula effodiens, eculeus extendens*) to the Acts of the Christian Martyrs.[3] There are at least eight examples of the rack/claw pairing in the *Martyrology* of Hrabanus Maurus, and close to that number in the martyrologies of Bede, Florus of Lyon, Ado of Vienne, and Usuard of Saint-Germain des Prés.[4] Claws, harsh and bloodied, denude the sides of flesh, uncovering – as in Abbo's *Life of Edmund* – 'the hidden recesses of the ribs', in Eusebius' account of the Antonine persecutions,[5] in the early Mozarabic hymn for St

1. *Scandinavian Kings*, pp. 211–12.
2. G. Wissowa et al., *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (Stuttgart and Munich, 1893–1972), V. 1931–2, s. v. *eculeus* (art. by Hitzig): 'Damit kann weitere Folterung durch Feuer und Krallen (*ungulae*) verbunden werden.' Charles Daremberg and Edmond Saglio, *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines* (Paris, 1877–1919), II. 794, s. v. *equuleus* (art. by E. Saglio), and V. 598, s. v. *ungula* (art. by G. Lafaye): 'Le patient était d'abord suspendu par les mains à la potence appellée equuleus, puis le bourreau lui déchirait les chairs avec cette sorte de griffe acérée.' See also Charles Du Cange, *Glossarium Mediae et Infimae Latinitatis*, ed. G. A. L. Henschel, editio nova a L. Favre, 10 vols. (Niort, 1883–7), s. v. *equuleus, ungula; Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, 10 vols. (1900–1958), s.v. *equoleus*.
3. *De Lapsis*, 13, ed. M. Bévenot in *Sancti Cypriani Episcopi Opera*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, III, pars I (Turnholt, 1972), p. 227; *Ad Donatum*, 10, ed. M. Simonetti in the preceding, IIIA, pars II (Turnholt, 1976), p. 9. The texts in Herbert Musurillo (ed.), *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford, 1972), contain several references to rack and claw; the most relevant for the Edmund passage occurs in Rufinus' version of 'The Letter of Phileas': *iam vero ungulis exarari uetus et leue ducebatur* (indeed, to be lacerated by claws was considered a traditional and trifling penalty, p. 324).
4. I am indebted to Walter Goffart for the following references and for much else in this paper. Rack-and-claw pairs occur in *Rabani Mauri Martyrologium*, ed. John McCulloh, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaeualis, XLIV (Turnholt, 1979), 7 (4 Jan.), 15 (20 Jan.), 38 (22 Apr.), 42 (3 May), 67 (13 July), 118 (21 Nov.), 120 (24 Nov.), and 126 (7 Dec.). *Cf.* entries for the same days in Jacques Dubois and Geneviève Renaud, *Edition pratique des martyrologes de Bède, de l'Anonyme lyonnais et de Florus*, Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (Paris, 1976); Jacques Dubois, *Le Martyrologe d'Usuard, Texte et Commentaire*, Subsidia Hagiographica, XL (Brussels, 1965); and, in Ado, Henri Quentin, *Les Martyrologes historiques du Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1908).
5. Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, ed. Eduard Schwartz, Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte, II. 1 (Berlin, 1903–9), 337 (Bk. IV, ch. 15).

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Christopher,[1] and in the letters of Jerome.[2] Abbo's exact words – *retectis costarum latebris* – could have been taken from Prudentius' hymn on the passion of St Vincent, whose torture on the rack included the customary *ungulae*: 'Lay bare the hidden parts of his ribs so that his uncovered entrails might palpitate in the recesses of the wounds.'[3] The claws are described as *acervissimis* 'most harsh' (*cf.* Abbo's *saevis*) in Hrabanus' narration of St Margaret's martyrdom.[4] St Sebastian is entered under 20 January in the martyrologies of Bede and his successors. Right after him, on the same day, there appears a brief notice of the passion of Marius and Martha, whose bodies were torn by rack and claw. The monk of Fleury did not have to search very far for his inspiration. Abbo's comparison of Edmund's wounds to those made by traditional Roman instruments of torture would have reassured his readers that the rough, homespun javelin-play used to prepare this new saint for execution conferred upon him an end comparable in drawn-out suffering to that of the most professionally-tortured early Christian martyr. Edmund was spared the blood-eagle.

Thirteenth-century Scandinavians were just doing what came naturally when they painted their ancestors bloodier-minded than they were. Early Christian writers had invented complex atrocities for their pagan forebears to commit, while the emerging peoples of Western Europe shivered deliciously at the barbarism of their founders, at Alboin drinking wine out of the skull of his father-in-law. The persistence to our own time of an error going back to the twelfth century may evoke scholarly *frissons* of horror, but it also teaches humility; even sober erudition can bear witness to the power of the great god Wish, whom Jacob Grimm was the first to name.[5] The blood-eagle is conspicuous in the current debate over whether the Scandinavian invaders of England were a 'good thing' or a 'bad thing'. Banishing this bird that never was may help to divert discussion into more productive channels.

University of Toronto ROBERTA FRANK

1. 'O beate mundi auctor' (Hymn 101) in Clemens Blume (ed.), *Hymnodia Gotica: Die Mozarabischen Hymnen des alt-spanischen Ritus*, Analecta Hymnica Medii Aevi, XXVII (Leipzig, 1897), p. 144; see also Josef Szövérffy, *Die Annalen der lateinischen Hymnendichtung: Die lateinischen Hymnen bis zum Ende des 11. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1964), I. 181.

2. *Hieronymus ad Innocentium Presbyterum De Septies Percussa*, 1, 3, 3, in *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae*, ed. Isidor Hilberg, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, LIV, sect. I, pars I (Vienna, 1910), p. 2.

3. Prudentius, *Peristephanon liber*, ed. H. J. Thomson, Loeb Classical Library (London, 1953), II. 176 (Hymn V, lines 114–16): 'Nudate costarum abdita/ut per latebras vulnerum/iecur retectum palpitet.' *Ungulae* are mentioned in *Peristephanon* 1.44, 3.133, 4.138, 5.61, 5.120, 5.337, 5.551, 10.73, 10.484, 10.557, 10.695, and 11.57.

4. *Rabani Mauri Martyrologium*, p. 67 (13 July).

5. Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie* (Göttingen, 1835), p. 99.

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