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ONOMASTICS AND DESTINY: ÓLÁFR *PÁI* HǪSKULDSSON AND FAMILY (*LAXDÆLA SAGA*)

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Abstract

The Icelandic chieftain Óláfr Hǫskuldsson of *Laxdæla saga* is the son of an enslaved Irish princess, Melkorka, yet is still judged a candidate to succeed her father as an Irish king. His choice to return to Iceland is validated by his subsequent success as a stockman and community leader. Yet he fails to recognize that the source of his prosperity and material plenty lies in his maternal inheritance, in which Melkorka ('Smooth-Oat') may be identified as a Celtic sovereignty figure, the source of his irrecusable election to a rich somatic life and chieftaincy, complemented by the attention of his paternal family's tutelary spirit or *fylgja*. By slaughtering his totemic ox, Harri, he calls down the vengeance of the Icelandic tutelary figure representing his father's family's fortunes which had concurrently assured his success. Retribution follows later in the saga with the death of his favourite son, Kjartan. From the perspective of the thirteenth century, when Iceland yielded to Norwegian hegemony, the arc of Óláfr's career is paralleled on a greater scale by Iceland's early medieval history.

Introduction

The early medieval Scandinavians were very familiar with Ireland, the Hebrides, and Man as a consequence of trading, raiding, slaving, even royal rule in Dublin, on Man and the Isles. One witness is the material plunder that was brought back and then circulated in various ways, as prestigious gifts, jewellery, hack silver, and the like. Another transfer was in the form of human resources, be they well-born settlers to

Iceland, who had previously been resident in the West, or their Irish concubines and other enslaved household members. Less tangible cultural exchanges were in the form of story-telling motifs, such as the *ech uisce* or water-horse that comes up out of the sea to assist the ploughing of a Norse settler fortunate enough to have been wed to an Irish princess. This testimony raises questions as to other Celtic influence on the formation of the Icelandic polity in the late ninth and early tenth centuries Law, for example, would be an inviting field of such inquiry, although the antecedents of such as legal treatise as *Grágás* seem to lie squarely in Norway. Social organization and modes and methods of governance are another large but amorphous field – how the Icelandic chieftain might compare with a petty Irish king. With the exception of limited investigations of narrative matter and recognition of the scant lexical evidence in the form of a very limited number of loan words, the influence of Celtic and Hiberno-Norse culture on the Iceland of the sagas is largely an uncharted scholarly field.[1] The present study singles out the saga of Icelanders that contains the most Irish-related matter, *Laxdæla saga*, and seeks to analyze just how this imported but familiar cultural goods was accommodated and assimilated in the Iceland of the tenth century.

An Irish claim

Laxdæla saga presents the life trajectory of one of Iceland's many exceptional sons, Óláfr Hǫskuldsson, from birth to chieftainship, with a coda of family tragedy. Óláfr is best seen as a literary product, rather than a historical character, despite the implicit historicist statements of this and other sagas, and *Landnámabók* (Benediktsson 1986: 123, 143, 199). Through Óláfr's decisions and actions, his life in the Icelandic community, the saga author addresses tensions of the post-settlement century as these relate to ethnogenesis, models of effective rule, political and artistic patronage, material affluence, personal relations, and interaction with the non-Icelandic world, even with the supernatural. In most of these dealings, Óláfr appears a fully autonomous agent, even a self-realized paragon.[2] Yet how much of his pre-eminence is the expression of a unique destiny, assigned in the early Scandinavian conception at birth by supernatural forces, the most readily identified of which are the Norns? In what way is human potential inevitably qualified by prior conditions over which the individual has little control, conditions that may prove a matrix beyond whose parameters he lacks the capacity to develop?

Óláfr is the illegitimate son of an Irish slave, Melkorka, by Hǫskuldr Kollsson. But his mother is also the daughter of an Irish king, Mýrkjartan. In a practical manumission as met in other sagas of the early years of the settlement of Iceland, Melkorka is accorded considerable personal freedom and her own household, where she raises

[1] See the ground-breaking work by Sigurðsson (1988).

[2] On what might be called "mainstream" characters in the saga, see Dronke (1989) and Cook (1992).

her son, who is fully recognized by his father. In this, the foreign, Irish element appears successfully assimilated into the Icelandic polity, despite the communal memory of extra-marital personal origins. But this admixture of Celtic culture is acceptable only within a limited historical time frame. While Óláfr's mother's feigns to be mute for her own purposes but teaches the Irish language to her son, by the mid-tenth century Irish culture within the thematic dimensions of the saga has nothing more to offer Iceland. When later in Óláfr's career a family of Hebridean sorcerers begins predations in the Laxárdalr district, they are all killed.

Óláfr is a precocious child and very handsome. His concern over appearance and prominence wins him the nickname *pái* 'peacock' from his father. He clearly has a talent for ingratiating himself and brings prosperity to his foster-father, Þórðr, not otherwise the most attractive of characters. Óláfr hopes to have his descent recognized in Ireland and for this voyage his mother Melkorka marries so as to have the means to provide him with trade goods. The exceptional individual must be tried early in his career in order to establish his credentials, both for hearers of the tale and for its characters. For Óláfr the first of such trial situations is met in the larger but saga-typical reception of a young Icelander at the Norwegian royal court. But here Óláfr wins by default. There is no test of wits or martial valour, only, apparently, the recognition of his courtly appearance, manners, and taste. This is sufficient for King Haraldr and Queen Mother Gunnhildr to hail him as a superior individual, a status often ascribed by the sagas to the Icelander abroad on *utanferð* (Sayers 2006; Morawiec 2017; Tirosh 2018; Poilvez 2019). In fact, his father Hǫskuldr had been received at the Norwegian court in rather similar fashion. Essentially, it is Óláfr's promise that is being recognized. Thus, the queen inquires as to his plans and, learning of the intended trip to Ireland, provides him with a ship. Óláfr does not wish to appear as a merchant but wants a ship with 60 fighting men. This has substantial implications for ship type and size, and entails the provision of a long ship rather than a dumpier trading vessel or *knǫrr*. Óláfr also receives from his mother a gold arm ring, a knife, and belt. On the purely narrative level these are identified as a gift from her father, the king, and personal effects given her by her old nurse. They are also suggestive of Celtic royal inaugural insignia.

Óláfr's voyage to Ireland has numerous parallels in other sailing scenes in the sagas. They share the motifs of 1) the overriding contingency of work at, and travel by, sea, 2) the legal and judicial consequences of marine activity, e.g. shipwrecks, 3) land-based conceptions of property and jurisdiction, and 4) the effective use of executive power ("managing things"). The spatial framework and exact locality are important in all these respects. The first of the maritime episodes in *Laxdæla saga* is only tangential to the youth of Óláfr but has implications for his future. It offers a negative image of many of the features of Óláfr's trip to Ireland, in the characteristic saga mode of prolepsis with subsequent variations, even reversals. To escape the likely economic pressure from his contentious kinsmen, a man named Þórarinn *surtr* ("the Black") plans to move across Breiðarfjǫrdr to re-establish his home at the now deserted farm of Hrappr in the Laxárdalr (*Laxdæla saga* 1934: 40–41). A ship-wreck with supernatural overtones and a questionable sequence of passenger drownings

that determines the ultimate heir to the property prepares the saga public for Óláfr's voyage to Ireland and to the contingent nature of maritime activity and of matters of succession.

Óláfr's departure from Norway is a decisive moment in the saga, with Norway almost behind him and Ireland before. Like Þórarinn *surtr*, Óláfr, his skipper Ǫrn, and the numerous crew/troop encounter poor sailing weather in the North Sea but this is in the opposite form: dense fog and little fair wind, which impedes navigation. Óláfr displays the consensual approach that will characterize his later career in Icelandic politics but also looks for the best advice. This is provided by his experienced skipper, Ǫrn, who then sets a course until land is sighted. At daybreak they recognize that they have reached Ireland, in fact, are now stranded on a clay beach, since the tide has ebbed. Ǫrn quickly assesses the situation in a passage worth citing in full.[3]

> Ǫrn mælti þá: 'Þat hygg ek, at vér hafim ekki góða atkvámu, því at þetta er fjarri hǫfnum þeim eða kaupstǫðum, er útlendir menn skulu hafa frið, því at vér erum nú fjaraðir uppi svá sem hornsíl; ok nær ætla ek þat lǫgum Íra, þótt þeir kalli fé þetta, er vér hǫfum með at fara, með sinum fǫngum, því at heita láta þeir þat vágrek, er minnr er fjarat frá skutstafni.' (*Laxdæla saga* 1934: 54)
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> [Then Ǫrn said: 'I'm of the opinion that this will not prove a good landing, because it is far from those harbours or merchant towns where foreigners would be received in peace, and we are now stranded up on the foreshore just like a stickleback. I think it is consistent with Irish law that, while they call the trade goods that we have on board with us "property", it will be subject to seizure, because they classify it as flotsam when the tide has ebbed from a ship's stern even less (than is now the case).'] (Author's transl.; for the Irish legal situation, see the Appendix)

Óláfr finesses the situation by moving his ship to the mouth of a nearby river where the water is sufficiently deep even at low tide that the ship cannot be deemed stranded or wrecked – nor easily boarded. Óláfr is also sufficiently familiar with Irish maritime law that he knows his ability to speak Irish should preclude seizure of the ship and its goods by the Irish in the absence of an interpreter. The king is summoned to rule in the matter. Óláfr's situation is liminal in multiple ways, topographical, linguistic (straddling two languages), legal, biographical (on the threshold of adulthood), and in terms of social ranking (chieftain's son from an informal sexual union, king's grandson but slave's son). This liminality is conditioned by the shifting boundaries in the saga: natural, human, social. At this critical, indeed pivotal, moment, Óláfr is accorded a physical description by the sagaman:

> Óláfr gekk þá fram í stafninn ok var svá búinn, at hann var í brynju ok hafði hjálm á hǫfði gullroðinn; hann var gyrðr sverði, ok váru gullrekin hjǫltin; hann hafði

[3] The account of the trip finds numerous parallels in Egill Skallagrímsson's unwilled landfall near York in the run-up to the *Hǫfuðlausn* (*Head-ransom*) episode (Nordal 1933: Ch. 59–60): poor sailing weather, forced coming ashore; the urgency of immediate decision-making, questionable status both within the royal jurisdiction and before its king; interpersonal transactions with far-reaching consequences.

> krókaspjót í hendi hǫggtekit og allgóð mál í; rauðan skjǫld hafði hann fyrir sér, ok var dregit á leó með gulli. (*Laxdæla saga* 1934: 55)
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> [Óláfr went forward to the stem of the ship and was outfitted as follows: he wore a coat of mail and had a gilded helmet on his head; he was girded with a sword and its hilt was inlaid with gold; in his hand a finely ornamented halberd at the ready; he held a red shield before him and it bore the figure of a lion in gold.]

Situated at this juncture, this image of wealth and martial power fixes the character in our minds.[4] The vignette comes at the most important moment of Óláfr's young life but he will not be seen again in such martial splendour. The portrait is soon followed by Óláfr's return to Iceland and the assumption of land-owning authority. The saga also shifts at this moment from the realistic practicalities of maritime law to the world of romance, in which Óláfr wins recognition and trust from the king, assists him in his local warring (with no detail on Óláfr as a fighter), and is offered the succession to the kingship, the implications of which are never detailed. The son from an extra-legal sexual union in Iceland is about to become a royal heir in a distant land. The absence of information on just what would be expected of a new king tends to diminish the prestige of royal rule in Ireland and prepares for Óláfr's courteous refusal to succeed his grandfather. His rationale is instructive:

> … en kvazk þó eigi mundu á hætta, hversu synir hans þylði þat, þá er Mýrkjartans missti við, kvað betra vera at fá skjóta sœmð en langa svívirðing (*Laxdæla saga* 1934: 59)
>
> [… [he] said that he was not minded to risk how Mýrkjartan's sons would take it after his death. He said that it was better to have a brief honour than a lasting shame.]

Óláfr's decision is pragmatic, not principled or deeply analytical, characteristic of the man he will become. Now, as later, he avoids confrontation. That the king should find his sons without promise is a further criticism of Irish sovereignty, kingship, and succession practices. Nonetheless, Óláfr's voyage to Ireland is initiatory and initiations will prove irreversible, even if subsequently disregarded. Destiny is beyond the control of the individual, as Óláfr's later life will illustrate, despite his superficial success.

Óláfr's rejection of the crown is matched by the king's refusal to allow Melkorka's old nurse to rejoin her in Iceland. The symbolic meaning is that Iceland no longer needs immigration from this social stratum. After early drawing off the best of Irish and Hebridean human resources in the form of (supposedly) well-born immigrants, Iceland can reject many aspects of that culture on a more abstract level, including principles of governance, social organization, law codes, and aspects of property ownership (slavery, predominantly in the form of enslaved women, soon petered out in Iceland, for economic and social reasons).[5]

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[4] On the symbolism of fine dress, see Zanchi (2008) and D'Ettore (2009). Sauckel (2019: 37) observes that the assessment of the presence of fine clothing in the saga in Heller (2009: 169) as "glänzende Beiwerke" (decorative effects) is surely erroneous and restrictive.

[5] See Karras (1990) and Brink (2021). On the study of cultural transfers and their effects on the formation of social norms, see the "Preface" to Morawiec, Jochymek, and Bartusik (2019: ix–xiv).

Maternal heritage encapsulated in a name

Here we may leave Óláfr preparing for his return trip to Norway and Iceland, and open an excursus on Celtic onomastics in *Laxdæla saga*. It will be argued that naming and names are proleptic, with the consequence that names seem to determine destiny. We begin with the name *Melkorka*.[6] Speculation on the putative Irish origins of the name of Óláfr's mother has a long history. In the *Íslenzk fornrit* edition of the saga, Einar Ól. Sveinsson identifies the name as Irish and traces it to a hypothetical *Mael-Curcaich* 'female servant of Saint Curcach'.[7] But Irish *mael* 'shorn, cropped, etc.', when so used in an onomastic compound, refers to a tonsured monk, seen as the devotee of a specific, typically male, saint (*Máire* and *Bríd,* Mary and Brigit, exceptions). The translation 'servant' is then somewhat misleading by virtue of being too general. To admit *Mael-Curcaich* as a possibility, we should have to see *Melkorka* and its Irish antecedent as a free-floating name in the Hiberno-Norse communities, not an exclusively male one.

The second part of the name has also been referred by O'Brien (1973) to Irish *corcra* 'purple'. Other scholars have noted the resemblance of the name to Irish *corcae* 'oats' but this clue has not been pursued. Archaeological evidence from medieval Irish monastic sites establishes that two kinds of oats were cultivated in early Ireland: *Avena sativa* and *A. strigosa* (Kelly 1997: 226). The former is now called the common oat, while the latter is designated bristle oat. In Old Irish, *mael* 'shorn, hornless' was used of an awnless species of wheat in the designation *cruithnecht mael*, that is, wheat without hair- or bristle-like appendages (*Dictionary of the Irish language* 1913–1976: *s.v.*). If this distinction were also recognized for oats, we would be able to posit two names, *corcae* and **corcae mael,* bristled oats and bristleless oats, respectively. The antecedent of the name *Melkorka* (configured as **Maelchorcae*, an admissible sequencing in names) may then have had some of the affect of 'Smooth-Oat'. Although it may have been in the nature of a pet name and without ideological mass, it invites a consideration of the Irish princess as a Ceres/Demeter figure. No direct link with Graeco-Roman goddesses is, however, suggested here and no narrow association with cereals. It would rather be the greater context of agriculture (which implies property), fertility, prosperity, the family, and somatic life in general that is referenced. The Irish king was thought wedded to the earth he ruled and his exercise of justice was determinative of its fertility and his success. This ideological complex is reflected in the poem known as "The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare" (Ó hOadha 1989), pointing to the Beare peninsula in south-western Ireland.

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[6] The most recent thorough examination of Celtic or Celtic-sounding personal names in *Laxdaela saga* is Etchingham et al., "Kjarvalr *Írakonungr* and Gaelic Ancestry in Iceland", in Etchingham et al (2019: 265–363), whose objective is to account for their relative frequency and ideological purpose in *Landnámabók*. More on this below.

[7] This speculation appears to have originated with Stokes (1877) and is aired again in Thornton (1996: 98–99), where the author notes a *Maylecorcre* in an account of Welsh dynastic marriages as the queen of a Norse-Irish king. The generally accepted (but here extended) derivation is reiterated in Etchingham et al. (2019: 304–305).

The female figure, with features of a Christian nun leading a penitential existence after a sexually active life (cf. the Guðrún of our saga), is originally a sovereignty figure representing the land itself, under the rule of a king.[8] Once beautiful, the woman is now old and sere under current governance, perhaps a partisan political message linked to the topographical reference. At one point in the poem she reflects on how a young woman's hair once resembled a field of ripe grain, but is now like dry stubble. For *Laxdæla* saga, a basic question is whether, even with a substantial female Irish component among the early immigrants and their descendants, any of the original deeper signification of the name *Melkorka* still resonated in Iceland. On the literary level, the relevance of this identification of the name to Óláfr's success as the owner of extensive properties will be discussed below.

According to the saga, Óláfr was given the nickname *pái* (or *pá*) 'peacock' by his father because of his penchant for fine dress and ostentation. The saga has the only attestation of this term in Old Norse. The loan seems unlikely to have been directly from Latin *pavus*. Old High German *páwa* or Old English *páwa, péa* are possible, but trade in luxury goods or reception at foreign courts as the intermediary for this lexical loan seems implausible for Iceland. The Latin name is not reflected in Old Irish, so that this avenue is also ruled out. Some kind of folk etymologizing or other rationalizing may have been at work on earlier accounts behind the written saga. Most commentaries on Melkorka make no mention of the fact that as an Irish princess she would have undoubtedly been a Christian, since Ireland had been Christian for centuries at the time of her abduction and enslavement. The saga does not explore how individual Christian devotions might have been maintained at remote farmsteads but the Irish concubine's son might have been called *papi* '(little) monk', as were the Irish anchorites living on the south coast of Iceland and its islands at the time of settlement by emigrants from Norway (cf. the place names *Papey* 'Monk Island', *Papafjǫðr* 'Monk Fjord'). The development *papi* > *pái*, both with the non-native initial *p*-, is then plausible but still speculative.

Once back in Iceland, settled and married, Óláfr will name his first son *Kjartan*, which cannot fail to echo his grandfather's name. The saga's *Mýrkjartan* is generally thought to reflect Irish *Muirchertach*, a compound understood as 'sea-farer' or possibly 'sea-warrior'. But Óláfr's extraction of the second element of the name, leaves *Mýr*-, reminiscent of Norse *mýrr* 'bog', a telling Viking assessment of petty Irish kings. This reflects the overall Norse view of Irish royal rule and its conception of legitimate sovereignty. The story of another Irish Muirchertach, he, too, a legendary king, will be discussed below. *Kjartan* is not recorded as an Irish name but sounds plausible enough, as there are others with comparable phonology, e.g. *Ciarán* 'little dark one' and *Cearbhail*. There is also a bit of an echo of Old Irish *cert* 'right, prerogative' and Old Norse *kjarkr* '(male) vigour, energy'.

The saga deploys Irish names in significant fashion over three generations. *Melkorka* is certainly the most semantically fraught, with its link to the fertile land and material prosperity. The childhood epithet *pái* 'peacock', attached to her son Ólafr,

[8] For early Scandinavian conceptions of *hieros gamos*, see Steinsland (1991).

is more of a qualifier of personality, well substantiated in the subsequent narrative, without the principal straying into excess. *Kjartan*, as the name of Óláfr's son, is no more than an echo of the family past and its semantic charge is unclear, although a recall of royal ancestry seems intended.

Ancestors and antecedents

An important narrative feature of the sagas of Icelanders is how introductory chapters not only identify ancestors but, through their deeds, establish motifs that will later be developed to thematic status in the saga proper that follows, albeit in new combinations, with inversions, negations, etc. This is strikingly true of *Laxdæla saga*, chapters 1–7. Here one of the principal characters is Óláfr's great-great-grandmother, a matriarchal figure from the settler generation. She is known in the saga world under two names, *Auðr* and *Unnr*, and with two (perhaps variant) epithets, *hin djúpúðga* and *hin djúpauðga*. *Auðr* means 'prosperity' and this same meaning attaches to the adjective *auðigr*. *Unnr* is a term for 'wave, sea', often seen as the repository of gold, and as a woman's name suggests 'love'. *Úðigr* relates to qualities of mind, thus 'minded' (*Dictionary of Old Norse prose* 1995: *s.vv.*). The semantic centre of the matriarch's name lies in wealth and its well-considered use, as will be illustrated in episodes that follow. Unnr is the descendant of the legendary Bjǫrn *buna* and Ketill *flatnefr*, and the widow of Óláfr *hvíti*, who ruled in Ireland and was known to the Irish as *Amhlaibh conung* 'King Olaf' (last quarter of ninth century). Unnr's son is Þorsteinn *rauðr*, who briefly ruled in Scotland but was killed there. Other Irish-derived names also figure in Óláfr's paternal ancestry. Óláfr *pái* is then descended from rulers in the Celtic realms on both his paternal and maternal sides. Unnr's departure represents the abandon of this cultural sphere and foreshadows Óláfr's decision to reject the kingship. She also introduces motifs of kingship, wealth, sea travel, settlement, social mobility, social relations and alliances, fertility and prosperity, this last as evidenced by her handsome farmstead at Hvammr and the lavish marriage feast for Kollr and Þorgerðr that concludes her own seemingly well-planned ('deep-minded') death. Unnr's story is further elaborated on in the saga as a whole as well as in the career of her great-great-grandson.

Before examining Óláfr's further career in Iceland, it will be useful to invoke a paradigm that encompasses cosmic order, justice, war, and the life on the land. It is fully illustrated in extant medieval Irish legal and literary texts, and is also reflected in less thorough-going fashion in early Scandinavian sources (Steinsland 1991). In interlocking homological sets, the cosmos is organized as three zones: sky, the earth's surface, and the subterranean and submarine regions. These correspond to the estates of king, warrior, and stockmen, farmers, and the like; the head, arms and torso, lower body and legs of a human, and further into such detail as colours, insignia, and so on (Sayers 1993). Óláfr's life in Iceland will be seen to be firmly anchored in the somatic and material dimension, with relatively little activity recounted in the

spheres of religion and law, or arms, despite his status as a consensus-seeking chieftain. The consequences of this concentration will not all be positive.[9]

Prosperity in Iceland

Óláfr departs for Norway with rich gifts. Although such gift-giving was among the conventions of hospitality, it underlines Óláfr's mounting material acquisitions. In Norway, he is again received by the king, turns down the opportunity to become a retainer, and leaves for Iceland with a load of timber. Curiously, this will be used for trading purposes, not for the construction of a lavish new manor-house at a freshly cleared site, Hjarðarholt ('Herd's Wood'), for which he cuts local wood and uses driftwood. This does, however, stamp the structure as fundamentally Icelandic. The farm site is chosen on the basis of his herd's natural congregation there. Óláfr's unprecedented success as a stockman is highlighted by the description of the caravan of animals and goods that marks his transit to the new homestead farther up the Laxárdalr (even farther from the contingent sea and its memories of the Irish shore). In the itemized description of the stock and their sequence by species, the scene is reminiscent of the opening scene of the Irish epic tale *The cattleraid of Fróech* (*Táin bó Froích* 1967). Plentiful livestock is also a feature of the courts of Otherworld kings as in *The wasting-sickness of Cú Chulainn* (*Serglige Con Culaind* 1953). In the following, comparable scenes from medieval Celtic literature suggest themselves but do not imply conscious direct borrowing or anything like a deep prehistory in oral traditions drawing on Norse and Celtic mythology. Rather, they show how great a number of common story-telling elements were in circulation in the North Sea zone, at Hiberno-Norse courts in Ireland in particular, and quite possibly in the mind of the author.[10] At this juncture we also do well to recall that Óláfr is largely a purposeful literary construct.

Óláfr marries well, no less a person than Þorgerðr, the daughter of Egill Skallagrímsson, but, in keeping with the consensual approach he will take to the function of chieftain, this is after an afternoon's conversation with the young woman, not through a contract with her father. It is reminiscent of Cú Chulainn's wooing of Emer with words in the Irish tale *Tochmarc Emire* (1933). His son Kjartan will later follow suite with Guðrún, even though Óláfr might have more forcefully dissuaded him. Óláfr's new hall is lavishly decorated with carved wooden panels illustrating scenes from Norse mythology, further celebrated by being the object of

[9] Brady (2016) has analyzed how neatly Óláfr's adventure in Ireland parallels the testing of a legendary Irish king, Níall Noígeallach, prior to the latter's recognition by the incarnation of sovereignty, who first has the form of a hideous hag and then that of a radiant maiden, when Níall accepts the dare to kiss her. Relevant bibliography in Brady (2016), to which add Sayers (2009) and Norman (2017).

[10] Prime among these is the "fair unknown" motif, in which an untried young man appears before an older kinsman, seeking recognition: Culhwch before Arthur (*Culhwch ac Olwen* 1992), Cú Chulainn before Conchobar in *The cattleraid of Cooley* (*Táin bó Cúailgne* 1976), farther afield, Perceval before Arthur in the Grail romance of Chrétien de Troyes.

ekphrasis in the form of Úlfr Uggason's celebratory poem *Húsdrápa* that describes the panels. Descriptions of the interior of opulent buildings, with an emphasis on rare woods, metals, and crystals, are a noteworthy feature of Irish literature, as exemplified in *The Feast of Bricriu* (*Fled Bricrend* 1897), but even more tellingly in descriptions of Otherworld palaces, as in *Serglige Con Culaind*.[11] In this ostentatious multimedia display, Óláfr's childhood epithet "peacock" is fully realized. Óláfr's marriage is blessed with many children, again consistent with the fertility and increase that everywhere marks his life back in Iceland. He acquires additional wealth through a paternal inheritance by playing along with Hǫskuldr's ruse to reduce the inheritance of Óláfr's half-brothers, Þorleikr and Bárðr, in favour of Óláfr (cf. the issue of inheritance that follows the ship-wreck early in the saga). Aware that he is exposing himself to the same kind of jealousy that he anticipated from Mýrkjartan's sons in Ireland, Óláfr co-opts his brother Þorleikr by offering to foster his son Bolli, since such an arrangement flatters Þorleikr's social image, as both acknowledge. But this wheeling and dealing begins to set the stage for future tragedy. Further in this vein, Óláfr's governing as a local chieftain is characterized by a non-confrontational approach, rather than by recourse to law or arms. "Var Óláfr manna vinsælstr, því at þat er hann skipti sér af um mál manna, þá unðu allir vel við sinn hlut" (*Laxdæla saga* 1934: 68) [Óláfr was the most popular of men, for, whenever he engaged in people's causes, everyone was satisfied with his intervention].

Nonetheless, Óláfr can be quite firm on occasion, in thematically relevant ways. After moving to Hjarðarholt, with the abandoned Hrappsstaðir in the district, he confronts the *draugr* or revenant Hrappr, originally from Scotland, who had been terrorizing his shepherd. In a first encounter, the *draugr* snaps off the head of the fine spear Mýrkjartan had given Óláfr. Óláfr returns with a spade to dig up the undecayed carcass of the fractious farmer, and to burn it and scatter the ashes at sea (symbolic deportation). Thus the royal Irish weapon fails in the circumstances of Iceland, and recourse must be had to the agriculturalist's tool to lay the revenant. Óláfr also disposes of the malevolent supernatural in the form of mixed-race Hebridean sorcerers, Kotkell and family.

Analysis of the treatment of space in the sagas of Icelanders is always rewarding. The initial settlement of the uninhabited island, clearly delineated by the surrounding sea and divided by mountains, moors, lava fields, and rivers, was accompanied by the imposition of the classificatory principles of denomination, individual property holding, and law. As seen above, much in Óláfr's personal history could be put under the sign of liminality: mixed ethnicity, bilingualism, childhood spent between his mother's lodgings and the father's hall, relations in Iceland and abroad (Norway, Ireland), and is further emphasized in narrative episodes on concrete borders or thresholds, in particular in the marine scene reviewed above. This liminality has a dynamic, topical quality: the tide (sea) turns a submerged rock into a skerry (land) or moves

[11] Among the challenges to future scholarship is tracing how and when various Irish and Welsh literary or story-telling themes and motifs texts might have reached Iceland. On this interaction, see Power (2005) and Egeler (2018).

a territorial and jurisdictional boundary back and forth (we recall Ǫrn's comments on the interpretation of Irish law and the shifting Irish shoreline). All this suggests alternatives but these are not necessarily subject to human choice. Óláfr is not content to simply act from such borderline vantage points but rather, as in the proleptic scene of Þórsteinn seeking to move his household goods, family, and servants across Hvammfjǫrðr to a new homestead in Laxárdalr, he executes a number of what may be called traverses, usually of a non-legal or non-heroic nature, that explore and resituate him in newly defined space within otherwise shifting boundaries. The first is to the Norwegian court, which is given little in the way of true spatial depiction, human relations counting for all. As distinct from the regular, cosmically ordained movement of tides, which sculpts space, Óláfr's transits are ad hoc, purely physical moves, such as shifting his ship, stranded both physically and legally on the Irish shore, to the deeper and thus extra-jurisdictional water of an estuary or decisively rejecting the Irish kingship to which he might be thought to have some claim. This continues in subsequent actions in Iceland, where, as earlier in Ireland, he appears to navigate between opposing parties and negotiate extra-legal and extra-martial settlements to disputes that arise among the farms and families that recognize him as chieftain. The convoy with stock-moving between the farms is yet another traverse. The new farm, Hjarðarholt, is carved out from pristine nature farther up the valley and the name clearly reflects Óláfr's telluric orientation as a land-based stockman.

The liminal situation is always one of potential, latent dynamism as much as of semi-exclusion and must always have been accompanied by tension. Óláfr seeks to resolve this tension – often to reconstruct space – in western Iceland through conciliatory, synthesizing action which has equilibrium, fixed topographical and social coordinates, and stasis as its ultimate objectives, with himself at both the intersection of coordinates and the centre of gravity. But human reality can not always be so neatly located on a necessarily shifting grid. Óláfr's non-confrontational approach to leadership results in his not overruling his wife's willingness to have their daughter Þuríðr marry the newly arrived Norwegian, Geirmundr, portrayed as a dubious suitor. The marriage fails and the most important consequence is that the sword *Fótbítr* 'Leg-Biter' comes into the family and eventually into the hands of his foster-son Bolli. One more cog-wheel in the clockwork of tragedy. In similar fashion, Óláfr is less than forceful in discouraging his son Kjartan's attention to the widow Guðrún Ósvifrsdóttir, she, too, won by conversation.[12]

The supernatural ox

When Óláfr is fully established, materially and socially, the saga pauses for an overview of his stock that recalls the earlier drive to Hjarðarholt:

[12] Butler (2019: 246), citing Bredsdorff (1995: 38), notes "… *Laxdæla saga* 'is a saga which is exceptionally given to evaluative language', […] even when characters are explicitly commended by the saga narrator, the portrayal of their actions betrays a subtler sense of judgment".

> Óláfr pái átti marga kostgripi í ganganda fé. Hann átti uxa góðan, er Harri hét, apalgrár at lit, meiri en ǫnnur naut. Hann hafði fjǫgur horn. Váru tvau mikil og stóðu fagrt, it þriðja stóð í loft upp; it fjórða stóð ór enni ok niðr fyrir augu honum; þat var brunnvaka hans. Hann krapsaði sem hross. (*Laxdæla saga* 1934: 84)
> [Óláfr possessed many valuable assets in the form of livestock. He had a fine ox which was called Harri, with a dappled hide, bigger than other cattle. It had four horns. Two were large and stood out handsomely, the third pointed up in the air. The fourth projected from his forehead and down below his eyes. This was his ice-breaker. He pawed the ground like a horse.]

The ox has a number of remarkable features, warranting his name *Harri* 'Lord' (Slotten 1965; cf. the name *Freyr* 'Lord'). Dapple-grey is the typical colour of otherworld animals in Celtic lore (cf. Old Irsh *ballach gorm* 'dappled grey'), such as the horse ridden by the sovereignty figure Rhiannon before Pwyll in the Welsh tale *Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed* (*Pwyll Pendefig Dyfed,* in *The Mabinogion* [2007]). The water horse (Irish *ech uisce*) who appears from the sea to perform a day's ploughing for Auðun in *Landnámabók* is also *apalgrár* and may be explained by Auðun's marriage to Mýrún, a captive Irish princess, just like Melkorka (Benediktsson 1968: 180). Harri, too, has an aquatic connection in his provision of drinking water. He is properly larger than other cattle. His four horns establish cosmic coordinates but it is the one that points downward that establishes his greater worth, since he can access drinking water for cattle overwintering outdoors (thus saving on hay and byre labour). Winter is turned into summer as in an Irish Otherworld kingdom. Harri also uncovers winter pasture under the snow, pawing like a horse, further blurring the distinction between real and surreal, or normal and unusual, taurine and equine nature (zoomorphic and other shape-shifting is common to both Norse and Celtic lore). Although less belligerent, he is reminiscent of the topography-altering bulls of Irish epics such as *Táin bó Cúailgne* (*The cattle-raid of Cooley*). A descriptive vignette shows him one severe winter leading a herd of steers to pasture sites that later bore his name, or so the saga would have it in a kind of animal *landnáma*. Tellingly for Óláfr, this unwittingly totemic animal is an ox not a bull, precluding both belligerence and progeny (this said in view of Kjartan's fate, despite Óláfr's large family). Yet when the ox is eighteen years old, the prized earth-oriented horn falls off, a realistic enough touch, and Óláfr has him slaughtered in the fall (not sacrificed), there being little room in a subsistence economy for sentimentality, although the reader may think this short-sighted. The fallen horn is a signal of changing times. This might be called Óláfr's primal mistake, which sets in motion a larger mechanism with fatal implications for his family. Subsequent decisions become even more difficult to make.

The next night Óláfr has an ominous dream in which a large, angry woman appears to him. "Hon tók til orða: 'Er þér svefns?' Hann kvazk vaka" (*Laxdæla saga* 1934: 84–85) ['She spoke: "Are you asleep?" He said that he was awake']. The spectral woman's question is actually wider-ranging than the present moment and might be interpreted, in view of the consequences, as 'aren't you yet aware?'[13] The woman continues:

[13] This is reminiscent of Óðinn's consultation of the seeress in *Vǫluspá*. The urgent need to grasp the importance of the *vǫlva*'s prophecy is brought home by the hammer-like refrain "Vitoð ér

> "Þér er svefns, en þó mun fyrir hitt ganga. Son minn hefir þú drepa látit ok látit koma ógørviligan mér til handa, ok fyrir þá sǫk skaltu eiga að sjá þinn son alblóðgan af mínu tilstilli; skal ek ok þann til velja, er ek veit at þér er ófalastr."
>
> ["You are asleep but it will all come down to the same thing. You have had my son killed and returned to me butchered, and for that reason you will have to see your son covered in blood by my doing; and I will choose the one that I know you would least want to part with."]

Óláfr can get no satisfactory explanation for the dream from his household or is unwilling to understand its true meaning, preferring to think it a false prediction of future events. Collective community experience, Icelandic "wisdom", seems to trump intuition here. Although Óláfr himself is inattentive to the supernatural dimension and dismisses his dream, its real-life outcome is apparent to others, like Gestr Oddleifsson, who not only foretells Guðrún's four marriages on the basis of four dreams but also sees Kjartan slain by Bolli.[14] He refrains from sharing this future event with Óláfr. The saga public, too, knows better, from the experience of literary convention. Only at this point is Guðrún introduced into the saga. The vengeance for the death of Harri will be years in the making.

Óláfr's destiny

In her vengeance the dream-woman resembles the Irish Sín of *The violent death of Muichertach mac Erca* (*Aided Muircertaig meic Erca* 1964), who realizes her revenge on a king in all three cosmic dimensions. Here, the heedless Óláfr has destroyed his own luck, whose concrete expression was the ox Harri, both symbol and provider of prosperity. At this juncture Melkorka has all but left the saga and her preternatural influence on her son seems to have waned. She is mentioned only as having but a single son, one who resembles her Icelandic husband but is on friendly terms with Óláfr. The supernatural mother of Harri has features of the Norse *fylgja*, a tutelary spirit associated with a prominent member of a family, whose allegiance may shift (Mundal 1993). Hǫskuldr had earlier said that the luck of his family had passed to Óláfr. And it may even have been lost. At this point we realize that Óláfr, unlike Unnr the deep-minded, has no real understanding of his fortune, perhaps little awareness of the symbolic or supernatural dimension of existence itself, which is not all show. Here should be recalled his success attending the farmstead of Þórðr Goddi, Óláfr's foster-father, the run-up to his later successful farm at Hjarðarholt. There is no explicit association between the success of the farm and the aegis of the god Freyr or the fertility he might sponsor. Its name, in fact, looks away from the major gods. Rather than Hjarðarholt being under divine protection and shaped by myth, the mythology is contained in the hall itself, in the form of carved wooden

enn, eða hvat?" which we might translate into current idiom as 'Haven't you realized yet, or what?' (*Vǫluspá*, in *Eddukvæði* 2014: I.298, st. 27, et passim).

[14] On Guðrún, see Louis-Jensen (2000), Sävborg (2002), and Ármann Jakobsson (2008).

panels illustrating the tales. In Óláfr's governance as chieftain, there is no mention of the supervision of sacrifices. With the nickname "Peacock" his vanity makes Óláfr extroverted, not adequately introverted. Unconscious bearer of a charmed life, he may have thought the offer of an Irish kingship his due by virtue of his birth, but he never realizes that, despite his refusal of the kingship, his destiny is to be played out in Iceland under a Celtic-Norse aegis, and this in the dimension of material prosperity rather than in rulership or martial accomplishment. In medieval Irish lore, a king falls as a consequence of a sin or transgression, often within distinct, hierarchized spheres of life, e.g. injustice, not justice; cowardice, not bravery; economic or other exploitation or malfeasance, not the promotion of prosperity. Although Melkorka has attributes of a sovereignty figure and her grooming of her son resembles the Celtic maiden's selection of a consort, it may be that the implications of her name and her enslaved status skew the polyfunctionality associated with such figures and this affects the kind of legitimacy and power passed on to Óláfr, further qualified by Icelandic family luck. In the long run, however, Irish *flaith* 'sovereignty' is subject to Icelandic *ørlǫg* 'fate'.

To summarize, Óláfr is preordained from birth to a Celtic sovereignty figure to be pre-eminent in his community, with his centre of gravity in the spheres of prosperity and societal calm. Despite his decision not to accept the throne in Ireland, he brings the conditioning factors of his matrilineal descent back to Iceland and to his life there. Hence, his inability to disavow his heritage and his consequent "irrecusable election" to an Irish-inflected chieftain's status. Óláfr seeks prestige and status rather than raw power, and is in general celebratory of life. Óláfr's destiny unfolds not in legal wrangles or armed feud but, innocence inevitably lost, in the tangle of personal relations and human sexuality, the love between Kjartan and Guðrún, the marriage between Guðrún and Bolli. The somatic function, exercised naively, assures no more protection from the vagaries of human life than a kingship. Harri's mother's curse and Kjartan's death will not be realized through freak weather at sea or sorcery but through the relentless progression of human affairs, to some of which Óláfr himself has contributed, e.g. ceding to his wife's approval of the union between their daughter Þuríðr and Geirmundr, the Norwegian, the fosterage of Bolli in the interest of precluding feud, even Kjartan's orientation toward Norway and not Ireland.

Norway is a dynamic for good and ill throughout the saga. Like Óláfr and his father Hǫskuldr before him, Kjartan is drawn to the Norwegian court and is well received there by king Óláfr Tryggvason. But Kjartan and his fellow Icelanders are held as semi-hostages at the court as part of the king's effort to convert Iceland to Christianity. When Kjartan is thus delayed abroad, Guðrún half-heartedly marries Bolli; Kjartan returns and marries Hrefna. Petty theft of a fine headdress leads, inevitably those experienced with saga style will conclude, to Bolli killing Kjartan. The Norwegian sword is thus paired with the Norwegian headdress in bringing harm to Iceland. The saga never explicitly lays blame for this outcome at the feet of Óláfr but, given his predisposition or destiny, such a result appears, in hindsight, inevitable. Thus, like the threat to the earliest Icelandic ethnic purity in the form of female Irish slaves or mixed-race Hebridean sorcerers, so the established pre-Christian religion, law, and

Icelandic independence are later subject to a Norwegian threat that will eventually be succeeded by hegemonic political attention to Iceland in the thirteenth century, the age of saga writing. The attraction to, and appropriation by, foreign cultures and polities condition Icelandic agency. Óláfr takes from his Irish heritage what seems to have served Iceland well, despite his deficient awareness of supernatural support. Yet the principles of his chieftainship, the conciliatory, consensual resolution of dispute, are not be passed on to the nation as a whole. Instead, family feud grows into factional warfare, as illustrated by *Sturlunga saga*.

The saga's treatment of conventional compositional techniques offers another perspective on the narrative trajectory of the saga. Although initiated off-stage, part of Óláfr's family history begins in the violence of abduction, enslavement, and sexual exploitation. Melkorka rises above this debasement to a kind of domestic Icelandic normalcy. Her son will be even more fortunate as a candidate to an Irish kingship, then successful farmer and chieftain in Iceland. Here his mother's influence, hereditary and preternatural, will be complemented by, and seemingly cede to, the favour of his paternal family's tutelary spirit, the mother of Harri. After perhaps more than two decades of prosperity, Óláfr's superficiality, his failure to recognize realities that underlie symbols and totems, his lack of curiosity over the depths of human life in the greater cosmic setting, allow him to make a fatal error of judgment. He curtails his good fortune through a short-sighted act of utilitarian economy, slaughtering Harri. With this, just after the arrival of the fatal Norwegian sword Fótbítr in Iceland, the narrative arc begins its downward swing. Norway and the Norwegian court again exert their destabilizing attraction, more telling it its effects than its Irish counterpart, and violence, before which Óláfr is powerless, re-enters the saga. Kjartan declines to defend himself before Bolli, a chosen powerlessness that that reflects, although in inverted fashion, his grandmother's unwilled subjugation. Although it precedes it by several decades, Óláfr's career resembles the Iceland of the eleventh century. Christianized and thus a member of the greater European cultural community, the island nation has yet to succumb to the factional violence among leading families that is recounted in *Sturlunga saga* and the social aspirations it developed in relations with the Norwegian kingship.

Laxdæla saga, Landnámabók, and the claims of Celtic ancestry

In 2019, *Norse-Gaelic contacts in a Viking world* introduced a significant new perspective in the evaluation of Irish onomastics in the charter narrative *Landnámabók* and the thematically associated sagas of Icelanders. Etchingham and colleagues write of the role of Kjarvalr *Írakonungr* and other prestigious Gaelic-named persons in *Landnámabók*:

> These [names] belong to the later thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, when the Icelandic elite needed to bolster its position as it was absorbed into the Norwegian kingdom. A key strategy was to claim prestigious ancestry while setting out the Icelanders' historic entitlement to their land. Claiming prestigious Gaelic ancestry,

> specifically, served the purpose of enabling the Icelandic elite to match the ancestry of their Norwegian counterparts.[15]

Noted by the authors but perhaps given insufficient weight is the fact that such ancestry implied early affiliation with Christianity and its attendant literacy and learning. Ireland had been converted centuries before the proselytizing activities of Norwegian kings Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson (St. Óláfr). This naming practice is also to be set in relation to the avowed purpose of the *Book of Settlements*, viz., to demonstrate that Icelanders are not descended from slaves or scoundrels.[16] *Landnámabók* was then intended to be seen as the product of an extremely rich cultural tradition as well as an account of the settlement and elite origins of its principals. Prominent Icelanders of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries sought to make themselves as valued at the Norwegian court as their ancestors, in the bloom of youth, had been in an earlier age.

Viewed from this ideological perspective, *Laxdæla saga*, also thought to be a thirteenth-century production, appears not to be an unquestioning participant in this propaganda exercise. Melkorka's royal origins cede to her status as a bought and sold enslaved concubine, contradicting *Landnámabók*'s stated aim to rewrite the thraldom that accompanied the settlement of Iceland; her willed mutism conceals rather than displays and exploits her aristocratic Irish antecedents; her son Óláfr's cultural and preternatural advantages do not shield him from family tragedy. The appeal of the Norwegian court, the status symbol at which the *Book of settlements* takes indirect aim, seduces Kjartan (who gravitates toward Norway, not Ireland) into staying past the agreed-on date and precipitates discord, whose consequences will include his own death. A Norwegian sword and Norwegian head-dress are the tools of tragedy. In sum, neither Ireland nor Norway serves the principals of the saga particularly well. Guðrún, its heroine, does not remain unaffected by these poles of attraction in the course of her four marriages but survives events to become a nun.[17] While *Laxdæla saga* has been cited as a pointed rejection of an Irish monarchic model, it remains doubtful how much Icelanders really knew of the Irish monarchy. With even greater point it calls into question the simplistic citing in *Landnámabók* of

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[15] Etchingham et al. (2019: 357). In contrast to the self-effacement of Melkorka, the Irish princess Myrún, daughter of King Maddaðr, promotes the success of her settler husband, Auðun *stoti* Válason, by apparently calling up a very Irish seeming water horse (Ir. *ech uisce*) for a day's ploughing (Benediktsson, *Landnámabók*, 1986: 120). In this she exhibits the conferral of success seen in the activities of other Celtic sovereignty figures. If ploughing is seen as a technique of claiming land, she also assists her husband in the matter of title to the land.

[16] "… þat er margra manna mál, at þat sé óskyldr fróðleikr at rita landnam. En ver þykjumsk heldr svara kunna utlendum mǫnnum, þa er þeir bregða oss þvi, at vér séim komnir af þrǫlum eða illmennum, ef vér vitum vist várar kynferðir sannar …" (Benediktsson 1968: cii);

["People often say that writing about the Settlements is irrelevant learning, but we think we can better meet the criticism of foreigners when they accuse us of being descended from slaves or scoundrels, if we know for certain the truth about our ancestry" (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards 1972: 6)].

[17] See Louis-Jensen (2000), Sãvborg (2000), and Ármann Jakobsson (2008).

(fictitious, imagined?) prestigious Irish ancestors as relevant to the pretensions of the emergent Icelandic elite. The author of *Laxdæla saga* may have seen his contemporaries poised to take the bait in Norway that Óláfr had rejected in Ireland. He warns that they may be misjudging the source and prospects of their good fortune to have been born Icelanders.

Conclusion

From its introductory chapters *Laxdæla saga* is replete with Irish echoes in addition to the foregrounding in the early chapters of the princess Melkorka ('Smooth Oat') and her gifted son Óláfr. The sagaman seems familiar with Irish story-telling tradition, in addition to such specifics as Irish names and the legal status of traders in Ireland. This is most apparent in the choice offered Óláfr: to be an Irish king or Icelandic stockman and chieftain. Óláfr moves out confidently from liminal situations to navigate a series of traverses, earning his foster-father's love, winning gifts from Norwegian and Irish royalty, duping his half-brothers in a family inheritance, purchasing land ill-gotten in another dubious inheritance, laying its resident revenant, and as a chieftain governing in a generous and conciliatory fashion that satisfies all parties in what appears a fortunate, peaceful enclave yet one not impervious to external disruption. In the end, Óláfr is hostage to his irrecusable election as an Celtic-tempered magnate and chieftain, and does not recognize the supernatural backdrop to his good fortune. Our recognition, on the other hand, of the antecedents of his destiny dictates a revision to the assessment of this important figure in Icelandic literature.

It is now established that Icelandic writers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries quite consciously addressed questions of governance and legitimacy, but ignored Irish models that had become known from earlier raiding, trading, residence and rule in the Celtic realms, and subsequent emigration to Iceland. As illustrated in the slaughter of the exceptional ox Harri, Óláfr remains unaware of the supernatural maternal and paternal sources of his good fortune. By the time of the saga's composition, the imagined heroic golden age was being viewed from the religious and cultural vantage points of Christianity and its administrative procedures, literacy, and Latin learning, the push and pull of integration into the European system of religion, kingdoms, and cultures, and factional political conflict. Like Kjartan, who for complex reasons will not defend himself against his foster-brother Bolli, so Iceland before Norway. At the same time, the period to which the creation of the saga is referred, the Icelandic elite mounted a skilful propaganda effort, in which onomastics and genealogy play a central role, in order to secure a privileged place within the Norwegian monarchic scheme. *Laxdæla saga* expresses doubt at the prospects of this ingratiation. The sagaman's tacit prognosis is that Iceland's downfall will be that of Óláfr, Kjartan, and Bolli writ large.

The period of Celtic influence on the settlement of Iceland and organization of the new commonwealth was brief and is perhaps to be counted in a few human gen-

erations, some traditional personal names, and quite likely an imperfectly preserved story-telling tradition. Significantly, the attribute "Hebridean" for immigrants of mixed Norse and Gaelic ancestry quickly became a signal to raise suspicions of, variously, sorcery, violence, intransigent behaviour – all the familiar ascriptions of xenophobia. While the DNA evidence for settlement demographics is unmistakable as to a substantial Gaelic female component, the Irish and Scottish cultural influence on early Iceland is still to be fully surveyed and assessed.

Appendix

A scrupulous edition and translation by Charlene M. Eska (2019) of a previously little known Irish legal text, *Anfuigell* (*Mis- or Non-Judgments*) illuminates skipper Ǫrn's familiarity with Irish legal praxis. An early section of *Anfuigell* treats of unaccompanied persons who make land in Ireland. Here personal identity and thus one's status in a recognized jurisdictional and tribal context are paramount. The person may, for example, be a condemned criminal who has been set adrift. Or he may be a *deorad Dé*, an 'exile of God', that is, a monk who complements his ascetic practices by taking to the sea alone and putting himself in the hands of God. He is allowed to land providing that he can establish his identity through three "miracles". If he cannot thus prove his identity, a portion of his goods and a share of his vessel are subject to confiscation. We meet this situation again when the Irish-speaking Óláfr denies any need for an interpreter and will later reply to the first personal questions from the Irish side. The legal text goes on to confirm the provisions summarized in Kelly's *Guide to early Irish law* (1988: 107–108), viz., that items that wash up on shore go to the owner of the adjacent land and goods recovered from the sea belong to the finder, but not necessarily in their entirety. In several instances the sections in *Anfuigell* have the nature of "what if" scenarios.

Here is a more extensive passage on ship-wrecks, couched in the universally overdetermined language of lawyers. A *sét* is an item or unit of value and may be concretely realized in various goods; a *túath* is a people, tribe, the inhabitants of a small kingdom.

> In tan is fo tomus flatha urdalta tainic in barc, sét foraice uingi d'fire tire, ⁊ leth na bairce don flaith, ⁊ in leth aili do beth acu fein re cendaigecht. Mainib fo tomus flatha urdalta acht re cendaigecht cena, is comraind bairce dligthige ara leth ⁊ in leth doib do cendaigecht diles. Diama ferr leo techt doib as gin ni do fagbail, is fir tire ⁊ flatha a tuinide .i. ł tuinide a cota fein do beth ina laim, no is fir tire a tuinide co ti flaith dia comraind. Mane thechta cura .i. barc focherd ingra fo anmai(m) .i. iter dis .i. ingell do tiachtain fo tomus flatha urdalta gin trebaire air im tiachtain, no connartha .i. trebaire air im tiachtain dar cend.
>
> [When the ship came seeking a specific lord, a *sét* worth an ounce is given to the owner of the land (on which the ship landed) and half the value of the ship to the lord, and the other half they have themselves for commerce. If the ship did not come seeking a specific lord but rather for commerce, there is a division of a lawful ship for the half

> of the *túath* and the other half for the sailors for lawful commerce. If it is preferable for the locals for the sailors to depart without obtaining anything, it is the possession of the owner of the land and of the lord, i.e. or possession of his own share to be in his hand, or it is the possession of the owner of the land until the lord comes to divide it. Unless it has guarantees, i.e. a ship casts anchor to stay, i.e. between two people, i.e. a promise to come seeking a specific lord without surety for him regarding coming or contracts, i.e. a surety for him regarding coming in return.][18]

We may imagine Óláfr and the male public of *Laxdæla saga* as being broadly familiar with this situation. We also see the legal basis for the traders' need for interpreters and Óláfr's skilled handling of the issue.

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[18] Eska (2019: 25, 168–169); pronouns are replaced with the editor's suggested identifications.

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