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OLD NORSE-ICELANDIC *VEÐRVITI*: WEATHERVANE OR STANDARD, STATUS MARKER?

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Abstract

The thirteenth-century form *veðrviti* represents a folk etymology with a recast signification. Despite the misnomer of the literate period, the *veðrviti* of early Norse letters was not a ship's weathervane atop the mast but a stem-mounted metal marker of the worth and thus identity of the most prominent man on board. This eminence was also expressed in ship and crew size, and outfitting, and opulent ornamentation of highly visible, richly symbolic, more than functionally essential ship's parts and gear. The principal evidence for this lexical evolution is drawn from the sagas of Norwegian kings.

The Old Norse-Icelandic term *veðrviti* has generally been translated as 'weathervane' in English, with a comparable understanding in other languages. It figures in descriptions of lavishly decorated medieval warships, along with its decorated mounting clamps, ornamented and gilded dragon figureheads, mast and mast-steps, and sails and sailors in imported fabrics. Like the dragon-heads, it was purposefully put up and taken down according to circumstances. Literate medieval terminology notwithstanding, the *veðrviti* is clearly a standard in metal plate, with insignia and at times an animal carving, that proclaims that an eminent man, king, jarl, or archbishop, is on board. It is proposed that *veðrviti* replaced an original term *virðuviti* literally 'marker of status', 'standard' in a still poorly understood process of language substitution and familiarization in marine contexts.

As Hjalmar Falk's *Altnordisches Seewesen* of 1912 established, a great deal of information about Viking-era ship-building and sea-faring can be gleaned from such texts as the sagas of Icelanders, the histories of the Norwegian kings, even

skaldic verse. The textual evidence ranges from static formal descriptions of large royal warships to action-packed, sail-trimming activities such as tacking in the face of an adverse wind with the aid of a tacking spar (*beitiáss*) to boom out the sail over the sheer strake, or a sail-girth (*sikulgjörð*) to haul up the bunt or centre of sail in order to reduce its active area (“goose-winging” in modern sailing parlance).¹ Unlike the set pieces that are the descriptions, the dynamic scenes are never an end in themselves but are incorporated chiefly to further the narrative. Much is taken for granted by saga authors or poets, and the task of the literary historian is not so different from that of the archaeologist. Nautical archaeology has made enormous strides in the analysis of the preserved material evidence, with dendrochronology, soil and DNA analyses, but ships’ parts and gear fabricated in less resistant materials such as wool, flax, hemp, bast, hide, and tar are scantily represented. In some instances the clinker-built hulls are reduced to only the rust marks of long-vanished nails and rivets from the seams of the caulked wooden strakes.

The consequence of these varied factors is a considerable body of nautical terminology that is still debated as to just what it designates. For example, was the *húsasnotra* a carved wooden decoration at the prows of ships like that over house gables? If so, why would historical figures like the Karlsefni of the Vinland sagas and legendary figures like Þorvar-Oddr need to suspend sailing while they went to the woods to find suitable timber for a replacement of what is clearly a critical piece of sailing gear? An encased halyard block at the top of the mast is more plausible (Sayers 2022).

Another problematic term is *veðrviti*, which is generally translated ‘weathervane’ in English, with equivalents in other languages. Its incidence in modern editions and translations is without comment on whether it was pliant, like a pennant, or solid and rotary, like a vane, or on what information it might supply on weather conditions that was not already known to the experienced mariner from observing the action of the sail, wind and wave conditions, and the like. The interpretive history of this term in Old Norse-Icelandic lexicographical works will be reviewed below. First, however, the *veðrviti* in context.

In the saga of Haraldr Sigurðarson and Magnús góði Ólafsson, Haraldr’s dignified appearance off the coast of Skåne before Magnús, then king of Norway and Denmark, is in sharp contrast to his ruse-filled, action-packed military activity as head of the Varangian guard in the Byzantine empire and his steady accumulation of booty. In the form of gold, coins, and jewellery, these riches were then placed ‘off-shore’ with his future father-in-law, the Grand Prince Jaroslav of Rus’ (Androshchuk 2024). Haraldr often suppresses his identity or operates under an alias and disguise, so that there is something of the mystery ship in the following apparition.

¹ Apparently a discrete nautical term deriving from *sikul* ‘sword-strap’ (running over the shoulder) + *gjörð* ‘girth’. Lexicographical works consulted for this essay include Fritzner (1886–1896), Sigfús Blöndal (1920–1924), Cleasby et al. (1957), de Vries (1962), Degnbol et al. (1989–), and Heggstad et al. (1993). See too Snorri Sturluson’s treatment of bynames and metonyms for ships in skaldic poetry (Snorri Sturluson 2017).

Þat sama haust er Magnús konungr lá skipum sínum við Skáney sá þeir einn dag at skip sigldi austan fyrir land. Þat var allt gulli búit fyrir ofan sjó ok vǫru á drekahöfuð fögr, en seglit var tvefalt pell af inum dýrstum vefjum. Ok er þessi nýkunda hófk upp þá þótti mönnum mikils um vert. En þetta skip var með þess konar farmi at þat var fermt með rauðu purpuragulli, en allir veðrvita vǫru svá at sjá sem rauttgull væri, svá ok allir spænir í, en fyrir borðin innan þá vǫru vaskir drengir klæddir með dýrum vefjum ok pellum (*Morkinskinna* 2011, Ch. 10, 80)²

Two key terms remain untranslated in the following rendering:

‘That same autumn when King Magnús lay at anchor with his ships in Skåne they one day saw a ship sailing along the coast from the east. It was all decorated in gold above the waterline and had handsome dragons’ heads, and the sail was of doubled imported stuff from among the most expensive fabrics. And when this news spread on shore the men thought it very notable. And this is the kind of cargo that the ship was laded with: it was charged with fine red gold and all the *veðrvitar* were such that they seemed to be made of red gold too, as were the *spænir*, and on board there were stout men clothed in costly fabrics and imported cloth.’ (my translation, here and elsewhere. See, too, the translation *Morkinskinna* 2000)

This is the now concrete realization of the wealth that had been in Jaroslav’s safe-keeping. A number of details expand on the introduction of the ship and its immediate and more distant eastern provenance. The foreign word *pell* (< Latin *palium*) is used repeatedly; the sails seem to be of other than native wool or flax; the quality of the gold is emphasized by the foreign colour term *purpuri*; the paired dragon heads fitted over the stem and stern posts are apparently gilded; the crew is clothed in imported fabrics. The attention to the sail reminds the public that it would have been women’s work, in symbolic terms associated with Haraldr’s recent marriage to Jaroslav’s daughter Elizabeth (ON *Ellisif*) at the cost of a substantial bride-price.

Spænir, a term in this and comparable descriptions, has been disregarded by editors and translators, but will prove highly relevant to the thesis presented in the following. *Spænir* has been seen as a plural form of *spánn*, which had such meanings in a wood-working context as ‘chip, shaving’, or as a carved artifact, ‘shingle; spoon’. Blood-sprinkled wood chips were used in pre-Christian divination rites. In the marine context *spænir* are associated with the mounting of dragon figureheads on stem and stern posts, and with *veðrvitar*. They seem to have been subject to decoration or at least gilding. They might be conceived of as wedges used in securing such important gear, and something shaped like a rectangular board with a wooden tang can be imagined (see note 2 for the editor’s interpretation). Yet in mechanical terms the wedge is not a sure fastener and would leave an ornamented object at risk of detachment and loss. We do better to derive *spænir* in this use from the verb *spenna* ‘to span, clasp’. The instrument would then have been a wooden clamp, itself suitable

² The editor’s Note 4 reads: ‘*veðrviki*: merki sem sýnir vindátt. – *spænir*: þunnur plötur úr vönduðum við, lagðar á kinnung skips til skrauts.’

for carving and gilding. The nautical term most directly derives from *spönn* ‘span’ (variant plural *spænnir*), here as ‘spanning device’. Compare *spenna* ‘grasping’, *spenni* ‘locket’, *spennill*, *spennsl* ‘clasp’. The compound *enni-spánn*, in which the first element means ‘forehead’, is found in other texts. Since the ship’s curved bows were called ‘cheeks’ (*kinnungar*), the anthropomorphic imagery of the stem is consistent in this reference to the clamps holding dragon-heads to the stem post, imagined as a human head seen in profile.³

The saga of the two kings has another relevant ship scene, although the vessel is now King Magnús’s. It is equally splendid:

Ok einn dag veizlunnar váru menn úti staddir á haugum nokkurum, þar sem viðsynt var, ok höfðu margs konar leika. Ok er á leið dagum sá þeir skip eitt. Þat var glæsiliga búit með spánum ok veðrvitum, alskjaldat allt með stöfnum. Ok er þat nálgask inn at bænum þá sá þeir at þat var skipat vöskum mönnum ok höfðu kurteisligan róðr. Ok er nú umræða mikil hverrir vera munu (*Morkinskinna* 2011: Ch. 25, 148–149).

‘One of the feast days men were standing out in the fields, which offered a wide view, and were engaged in various games. As the day wore on, they sighted a ship. It was splendidly decorated with carved clamps and *veðrvitar*, and shields close-set along the railings from stem to stern. As it approached at vespers, they saw that it was manned by skilled men and rowed with a stately stroke. Now there was much speculation as to who it might be.’

The onlookers’ speculation continues in a scene between the resident landowner Þrándr and his daughter Margrét. They remind themselves that there is no good reason to expect a house-call from King Magnús but are impressed by the ship and crew. Margrét is apprehensive, as well she might be, because the guest, indeed the king on an unannounced visit, will eventually have her ordered to his bed. No dragon heads are in evidence, since the arrival is otherwise not ostensibly threatening. The detailed scene of the ship heaving into sight establishes that the *veðrvitar* and their clamping devices, plus the outfitting of the crew, could serve to signal the elevated rank of a ship’s commander, if not necessarily his exact identity. Some kind of conventional symbolism, perhaps the very contours of the objects called *veðrvitar*, must have been in play, although without personal insignia such as a heraldic device. It should be borne in mind that one purpose of such highly visible ship’s fittings was to alert those on shore to a prestigious arrival. Conveying their signification at some distance, they allowed the landsmen lead time to prepare a suitable reception, as the text makes evident.

The very opposite situation is met in a manuscript of *The saga of Saint Olaf*, when King Knútr has his *veðrvitar* taken down so as not to reveal the presence of a man of standing on the ship. Instead, the vessel will appear more of a merchantman.

³ Cleasby et al. (1957) misleadingly identify the *ennispænnir* as ‘gilt beaks of dragon heads on ships’. The last term listed in Snorri’s list of ship parts (2017: 876–877, st. 10) is *húnsþænnir*, most plausibly the clamps holding the halyard block to the mast-top (Sayers 2023b).

Þá let hann ofan legia seglit oc sva viðu. Taca ofan veþrvita en sveipa scipit allt fyrir ofan siö með gram tiöldvum oc let roa í noccorum rumvum fram oc aptr (*Saga Ólafs konungs hins helga* 1941: 451–452).

‘Then he had the sail lowered and the mast unstepped. They took down the *veðrvitar* and covered the entire ship from the top down with shabby coverings and had some of the crew man a few rowing stations fore and aft.’

A merchant ship approaching the shore under oar power. But why take down *veðrvitar* if they were innocuous weathervanes? When the king chooses to reveal his identity, the text also details the process of restoring sail power, a shift from the static descriptions:

þvi nest vendu þæir undir lannd. ræistu viðuna oc fœða upp gullspono oc veðr vita. drogo upp segl sitt. þat var sva hvitt sem snior af halœyscum vaðom oc stafat með venndi (*Fagrskinna* 1902–1903: 168).

‘Next they turned toward land. They raised the mast in the mast-step and ran up the gilded clamps and *veðrvitar*. They hoisted their sail. It was as white as snow, of cloth from Hálogaland, with strips of fabric banded together.’

Ostentatious ships were not restricted to secular leaders: From *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*:

En er Hákon konúgr var búinn, sigldi hann af Túnsbergi með öllum herinum austr fyrir Foldina. Þeir Bárðr Gróuson sigldu á skip erkibiskups ok af stafninn i kinnúngum, en veðrvitana festi i seglinu; sigldi erkibiskup svá til Ekreyja til móts við konúng, ok fannst þat á, at konúngi míslíkaði þetta mjök (*Sturla Þórðarson* 1835: 78).

‘And when King Hákon was ready, he sailed with all his troops east from Tønsberg along the coast of Vestfold. Bárðr Gróuson and the others sailed on the archbishop’s ship, with its (decorated?) posts in the bow and stern, and *veðrvitana* attached atop the sail. The archbishop sailed to Öckerö in order to meet the king, and when this became known the king was very displeased over it.’

To turn, for a moment, from the sea and its richly ornamented ships, much of *Haralds saga* is informed, as noted above, by the motif of the ruse (ON *bragð*) as realized in aliases, disguises, hidden identities, military stratagems, and outright tricks. To gain access to a fortified town in the Mediterranean basin, the defences of which make other expedients inapplicable, he schemes to feign his own death, so that a funeral procession, mass, and burial may be carried out in the town. He is, after all, a Christian. To set up the sting,

“Þat er nú fyrst þá,” segir Norðrbrikt [Haraldr’s alias among the Greeks], “at leika ska niðr leggja, sem opt er mǫnnum titt at hafa er menn sitja um borgir, en tjald eitt skal gǫra af góðu pelli fra ǫðrum tjöldum stund þá at braut, ok veðrvitar skulu þar upp með gyldum stǫngum. Þangat skulu ganga fimm menn eða sex á hverjum degi til þess tjalds ok dveljask þar nakkvara stund ok fara avallt hryggvari á brot en þangat.” (*Morkinskinna* 2011: Ch. 14, 103).

‘Now the first thing we will do,’ said Norðrbrikt, ‘is to break off such games as are commonly played when men are laying siege to a town. And a tent of fine cloth should be raised, set apart from the other tents, and the *veðrvitar* should be mounted on gilded poles. Every day five or six men should go into this tent and stay a while and always leave looking more distressed than when they came there.’⁴

The leader’s illness in his sequestered tent will become known to everyone and the request for in-town services made the more plausible. The mention of precious textiles and golden poles suggests that the *veðrvitar* must have been of comparable significance and value. It is hard to believe a pennant in fabric that was subject to uncertain winds would serve the end of unequivocally identifying the leader’s tent. The context suggests that this gear has been, or will be, brought from Haraldr’s ship, both for safe-keeping and to extend its function to situations on shore, circumstances where a weathervane in its basic function would have little role or reason to be mentioned in the narrative.

Veðrvitar figure without any great ideological or functional import in descriptions of fine ships, however brief, and, at the other end of the spectrum, in scenes of complex political relations among mariners. Three further excerpts will illustrate the flexibility of the motif. Before one of several naval engagements, the long-lived, legendary hero Qrvar-Oddr decorates a newly acquired vessel, to be renamed *Hálfðanarnaut*, ‘Hálfðan’s Gift’.

Allan lét Oddr steina drekann Hálfðanarnaut ok gulli lætr hann búa drekhöfuðin bæði ok svá veðvitann, en þá er búin var ferð þeira, þá gengr Oddr til fundar við Grím (Örvar-Odds saga 1888: Ch. 15, 58).

‘Oddr had the dragon-ship *Hálfðan’s Gift* all painted and he had the two dragon heads and also the *veðrvitar* decorated with gold, and when preparations for their voyage had been completed, he went to see Grím (his father).’

A much fuller and more fraught description is preserved in *Orkneyinga saga*. Earl Rögnvaldr Brúsason is seen making long and detailed preparations for a pilgrimage of Orcadian and Norwegian leaders to the Holy Land. A descriptive passage throws considerable light on the distinction between dragons’ heads and *veðrvitar*, occasions for their use, and between the commander of a fleet and one of his aristocratic fellow pilgrims.

⁴ The assumed name, *Norðrbrikt*, is open to two interpretations of the second element: ‘changeable, deceitful’ when thought derived from *brigðr*, or ‘right to reclaim landed property’ when associated with *brigð*. Tricky Northman and/or rightful claimant to land in the North. Another tent scene, this from the saga of Haraldr’s half-brother Ólafur, reads: ‘Konungstíalldit uar hardla dyrligt ok uel gert. Þar voru fíorar stukur af ok staung mikil upp ór ok knappr a ór gulle ok uedruite með’ (*Eymundar þáttur*, 1862:128; The king’s tent was very opulent and well made. There were four wings out from it and a great post rising up out of it and a knob in gold on top along with *veðrvitar*’).

Þar var ok skip þat fyrir bryggjum, er Jón hafði látit gera jarli; var þat hálfertøgt at rúmatali ok vandat forkunnar mjök at smið ok búit allt ok gulli lagt, allir ennisþæinir ok veðrvitar, ok viðá annars staðar búit; var skipit in mesta gersimi þess konar (*Orkneyinga saga* 1955: Ch. 85, 204–205).

‘And there was a ship lying off the quays that Jón *fótr* had had constructed for the earl. It had 35 rowing stations and was very elaborately crafted, and was decorated with gold all over the stem and stern, the stem clamps and *veðrvitar*, as well as the mast, mast-step, and keelson, and every place else was similarly ornamented. The ship was the most costly of its kind.’

The Earl’s ship is on a huge scale with rowing stations for 70 men, and is lavishly ornamented with carved decorations, gilded *ennisþæinir* and *veðrvitra*. It is intended to be the mostly costly ship of its times. No dragon heads are mentioned; the voyage is a stage in a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In sum, the warship of the Early of Orkney is a magnificent construction, intended to be the pride of his fleet, which is readying itself for the trip to the Mediterranean. Then another ship appears on the scene. Competitive sailing in brisk weather ensues, as the smaller vessel is faster than the Earl’s. The second ship is described as follows:

Þá sá þeir sigla eptir sér tvau skip mikil, ok gengu þegar eptir þeim ok um þá fram. Þat skip var annat vandat mjök, þat var dreki; var bæði höfuðin ok krókar aprt mjök gullbúit; þat var hlýrbjart ok steint allt fyrir ofan sjá, þar er bæta þótti. Jarlsmenn mæltu, at þar myndi Eindriði fara, – ‘ok hefir hann þat lítt haldit, er mælt var, et engi skyldi búit skip hafa nema þér, herra’ (*Orkneyinga saga* 1955: Ch. 85, 205).

‘Then they saw two great ships sailing behind them, which immediately gained on them and passed them. One of the ships was very large and well constructed; it was of the dragon-ship class. Both the stem and stern, and the spirals ending the aft stem were decorated in gold, as were the bow, and all the hull above the water-line, and it was painted everywhere it could be made to look more impressive. The jarl’s men said that it might well be Eindriði coursing there – “and he has paid little heed to the injunction that no-one should have a decorated ship but you, Sire.”’

The shift from narrative to direct discourse toward the close of this excerpt signals the importance of the matter at hand. Dragon heads indicate an aggressive self-presentation but for present purposes it is the absence of any mention of *veðrvitrar* that is telling. Were weathervanes indispensable on ships and also the object of considerable decoration, some mention would be expected in an otherwise conventional description. To anticipate the later discussion, the fundamental distinction between the two ships, their commanders, and crews is that the Earl leads the fleet and the Norwegian chieftain Eindriði *ungi* is nominally under his command. No explicit statement of status is made; other symbols or their absence suffice. The ship and its sailing ability also speak for themselves. This lightly provocative scene will have consequences in Rognvaldr’s later relations with Eindriði.

As might be expected, the term *veðrviti* is found in other prestigious literary contexts, such as the history of Charlemagne.

Með þessum siglir konungr Agulandus brott or Affrica, er hans ferð hin skrautligasta, því at viða leiptrar af á sjóinn brott, þá er sólin fagrt skein á búnar snekkjur, gyld drekahöfuð, glóandi veðrvita, segl einkar sœmilig með ýmissum litum, rauðum sem blóð eðr hvítum sem snjór (*Af Agulando konungi in Karlamagnus saga* 1860: 137).

‘After those events King Agulandus sailed away from Africa, and his voyage was in the most sumptuous fashion, in that flashes of light glinted from afar off the sea as the bright sun shone on the ornamented *snekkjur* (class of war-ship), gilded dragon heads, glistening *veðrvitar*, along with the very appropriate sail in its varying colours, red as blood and white as snow.’

Interesting here is the author’s awareness of the seemingly innate luminosity of objects illuminated from both above (the sun) and below (the sun’s rays reflected off the sea). Visibility is enhanced and symbols become numinous. Little of this would be of import in the case of a simple weathervane.

Snorri Sturluson does not list *veðrviti* among the *heiti* or bynames that might be used metonymically to designate a ship in skaldic verse, although, as noted above, he has *húnsþæmir* used to secure the encased halyard block to the top of the mast (*húnn*). But elsewhere in *Skaldskaparmál* Snorri cites a stanza from a poet tentatively identified as Einarr Skúlason that illustrates a byname for the sea and in so doing names our key part:

Lögr þvær flaut, en fagrir,
– flóðs vaskar brim glóðum –
þars sær á hlið hvára
hlymr, veðrvitar glymja. (Einarr Skúlason 2017: 165)

Editor and translator Kari Ellen Gade renders this as:

‘The ocean washes the ships, and fair weather-vanes resound where the sea roars on each side; the surf cleanses embers of the flood [GOLD].’

If some kind of rotating device is here envisaged, ‘rattle’ might be preferred over ‘resound’ in order to capture the noise of movement in its mounting, rather than that of the wind howling around a vane. This same understanding of weathervane is met in Anthony Faulkes’s earlier edition and translation of Snorri’s work: *veðrviti* ‘weather-vane’ (Snorri Sturluson 1998, Vol 1, 93, st. 346, glossed ‘weather-vane’).

The modern lexicographical history of *veðrviti* begins with Johan Fritzner’s dictionary of Old Norse (*Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog*), where *veðrviti* is glossed ‘Fløi som dreier sig efter Vinden og viser hvorfra den blæser.’ Sigfús Blöndal and his *Íslensk-dönsk orðabók* (1920–1924) followed with the definition ‘vejrhanne’. His textual attestations show 1) gear mounted atop the mast; 2) its removal in conjunction with the lowering of the sail; and 3) its glittering in the sun on great warships. Next Cleasby et al. (1957) identified the object as a ‘vane’ in *An Icelandic-English dictionary*. Etymologist Jan de Vries glosses the compound *veðrviti* with ‘windfahne’ in the *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (1957). Heggstad, Hødnebo, and Simensen (1993, *Norron ordbok*) has the gloss ‘vinvisar, vèrfløy’.

To bring matters up to the present, full treatment in the *Dictionary of Old Norse prose* has not yet reached the letter V. But a provisional cataloguing entry lists more than 30 manuscript instances of *veðrviti* but does not, however, include a definition. A majority of these conjoins decorated dragon heads and *veðrvitar* in capsule descriptions. Lexicographical entries apart, the fullest discussion of *veðrviti* is in Hjalmar Falk's *Altnordische Seewesen* from 1912, although his choice of textual examples seems determined by the premise of an identification of the instrument as a weathercock (*Wetterhahn*, 12), rather than admitting of a differing conclusion deduced from the evidence. Except in their mutual suitability for decoration, there appears a functional disparity between prow decorations and weathervanes that would seem open only to some symbolic reconciliation.

The highly purposeful marine descriptions of symbolic objects decorated in gold, the display of shields along the hull, and the stalwart rowers combine to create a dense context of wealth and power suggestive of high rank, one in which a simple device to chart the wind is completely at odds. We note the total lack of any reference to *veðrvitar* on warships abroad on Viking raids, an activity for which information on wind and weather would have been even more critical than in a king's carefully staged and stately approach. Eindriði's measured infraction of Rǫgnvaldr's conditions for the joint fleet – opulent ship but no indication of *veðrviti* – is telling in this context. Why would a weathervane, an apparently vital piece of ship's gear, be subject to dismounting under specific circumstances? Objections to identifying *veðrvitar* as weathervanes could surely be multiplied.

Despite the ongoing identification in contemporary scholarship of *veðrviti* as 'weathervane', all the circumstantial evidence reviewed above points not to a fluttering pennant or more substantial vane, but to a sheet of metal held in place with clamps on the stem post, at times, atop the mast. The standard generally had two straight and one curved sides, and was perforated and engraved with symbolic information, and at times bore an imposing animal figure such as a dragon or lion mounted on top. Preserved examples indicate mounting on a rod, with the possibility of a broad arc of rotary movement. Several such standards have been preserved in Scandinavian churches (Bill et al. 2007: front and back covers and 2, 16–17, and 66 for illustrations of preserved examples). The standard was intended to inform viewers that a man of rank was on board, although information on specific family descent seems not to have been incorporated. The function of the *veðrviti* was then not to acquire ephemeral information on current wind conditions but to convey fundamental information on prominent men on board, such as earls, princes, kings, and archbishops. Correcting generations of lexicographers and drawing on their own experiential learning, the replica builders and editorial staff of the Roskilde Ship Museum responsible for *Welcome on board: The sea stallion from Glendalough: A Viking longship recreated* (2007) states with little sense of irony: 'The function of the weather-vane on the prow of the ship is not to show the direction of the wind but to show who is coming.'⁵

⁵ Bill et al. (2007: 17); this introductory statement continues in its Dano-English, 'The gilded metal gleams and reflects itself in the sun so that already from a long distance away it can

Like the dragon figureheads, with which they are often paired in descriptions and other narrative, the *veðrvitar* were not permanent features of these prestigious ships but could be mounted and removed according to circumstance. The dragon heads on a warship symbolize martial readiness or hostile intent, the standards for the presence of a man of high rank qualified to act on this resolve. With their elevated mountings, both would have been highly visible, in fact, as the ship hove to over the horizon. The distinction noted above between the ship of Earl Rognvaldr and that of the Norwegian chieftain Eindriði, with the one sailing under standards and the other under dragon heads, is telling both for the modern reader and contemporary observers. Just as the names of individual ships' parts could be deployed in skaldic poetry as metonyms standing in for the ship as a whole, so the dragons' heads, standards, clamps, gilded and painted woodwork are all representative of the leader. The ship itself is a miniaturization of the kingdom or earldom under good, active rule. Mounted on the prow or mast top the standard appears to lead the wind and the sail, raw natural power under effective male command.

On the basis of evidence pointing to the *veðrviti* as a standard, it is hypothesized that the term's archaic form in Old Norse-Icelandic was **virðuviti*, literally 'worth-marker, status emblem'.⁶ The noun **virða* is not preserved as a nominal simplex in Old Norse-Icelandic but we find under this head-word a cross-reference to *úvirða* 'disregard'. The root is met in compounds as *-virði* 'the worth of a thing, value'. These forms are related to the verb *virða* 'to fix the worth of a thing'; note, too, *virðing* 'valuation, taxation' and *virðiligr* 'worthy, worshipful'. With the accompanying *-viti* element unproblematically identified as 'marker, signal', the question must be addressed of just why and how the lexeme *veðr* came to replace **virðu-* in the compound. First, however, a brief recall of the above-discussed ruse of Haraldr *harðráði* staging his illness and death in a tent outside a besieged Mediterranean town: '... var um þat tialld virðvliga bvít. Settar vpp háfar steing, ok þar vpp gylldir veðrvitar' (they erected a worthily decorated tent. They put up tall poles and on top of them gilded standards).⁷ The use of the adjective *virðuligr* may be only fortuitous but is nonetheless revelatory of a mindset. For the development proposed

be seen that this is a particularly splendid vessel. The motifs depicted on the vane are those appropriate for a ruler, showing the battle between good and evil. The weather-vane sits loose so that it can be removed when the ship is not in use—or if one does not want to betray who is coming.' A commander's ownership of a richly decorated weathervane is a bit like investing in a \$50,000 wrist watch for its compass function.

⁶ Cleasby et al. (1957), which, however, is identified as a verb, 'to disregard, slight'.

⁷ Cited by the *Dictionary of Old Norse prose* (1989–) from the Hulda manuscript and working documents of Jonna Louis-Jensen as Huldal 11224, AM 66 fol (Louis-Jensen in spe [EA A 11]. Later in the manuscript we find: "Haraldr hafði skip stór, ok allvel bvín. var ferð hans hin skravtligsta. ok matti langt sia til er solin skein á gylld drekahofvt, ok veðrvíta er vorv á skipvm hans, er hann hiellt svnnan. sem Valgarðr af Velli segir ..." ('Haraldr had a great ship, everywhere highly ornamented. His course was most splendid. And there could be seen from afar, when the sun shone, the gilded dragon heads and standards that were on his ship, as he made his way from the south.' As Valgarðr af Velli says ...). Poem only reproduced in "Valgarðr á Velli" (2009).

here, the philology of an earlier century might have looked first to a phonological transformation: metathesis (/rð/ > /ðr/), vowel dissimilation (/i-u-i-i/ > /e-i-i/), or similar. But this is very unlikely to be the case. A wholesale substitution seems more economical.⁸

To explain just why and how this lexical substitution occurred requires some speculative prefatory remarks. The play and interplay of lexis is an understudied topic in Old Norse-Icelandic scholarship. Under this heading may be grouped word avoidance and substitution – what in other cultures might involve *tabu* and *noa* words – as when *Úlfr* is employed as a personal name but replaced by *vargr* in reference to the animal, just as *Björn* is replaced by *bjarndýr* as therionym for this predator, or in the language of the sea, in which older, allusive form are preferred to terrestrial terminology to designate key gear and placate the marine spirits. At sea statements of intent and purpose are avoided so that there is no talk of raiding and pillaging but of ‘going off’ for the summer: *víkja* > *víking* (Sayers 2019). This indirect approach to designation is also apparent in what seems the abandon of discrete nautical terms in favour of a familiarization, e.g. the possibility that *kerling* for ‘mast step’ did not originate in crude sexual imagery (‘old woman’) but in a diminutive of *kar* ‘vessel, receptacle’ or that the mysterious *húsasnotra* was not related to domestic neatness or house decoration but originated in a **húnsnúðr* ‘rotary device on the mast-top’, thus a mast-mounted halyard block (Sayers 2023b). Another form of lexical substitution is met in the encryption of the names of family members, friends, and lovers, in which one element of a compound word is replaced by a synonym, while the other is replaced by a (near-)homophone (i.e. with the structure but not the intent of a pun). The elements are proximate in a given skaldic stanza but not conjoined. The better known kenning, the *heiti*, and the over-elaborate metaphor (the trope called *ofljóst* ‘too clear’ or ‘too brilliant’) are at home here. Word clustering and its reverse, polysemanticism, are realized, as when Haraldr *harðráði* composes a suite of *gamanvísur* ‘light verse’ (Haraldr *harðráði* Sigurðarson 2009), courting

Inn vas í, sem brynni,
iðglíkt séa miðjan,
eldr, þars yðrum helduð,
orms munn, skipum sunnan.

Skeið bar skolpt inn rauða;
skein af golli hreinu;
dreki fór dagleið mikla;
dúfu braut und húfi.

Looking into the middle of the dragon-ship’s mouth, it was just as if fire was burning where you steered your ships from the south. The warship carried its red skull; it glowed from the pure gold; the dragon-ship sailed a long day’s journey; the wave broke beneath the hull.

⁸ In the interest of thoroughness, one must ask whether, at some point in the semantic development, the homophone of *veðr* as ‘weather’, that is, *veðr* as ‘ram, wether’, might have been in play here. In symbolic terms, the ram was certainly sufficiently bellicose (cf. *veðr* as ‘battering ram’), and martial-looking rams figured in episcopal insignia (a reflection of the Lamb of God) along with separate standard motifs (Bernström 1960). Yet we have no known instance of a ram mounted on the upper edge of the *veðrviti* as is the case with the lion and dragon. Ovine symbolism then seems excluded.

stanzas that play on the verbs *skolla* as ‘hover’ but also ‘dangle’ at the end of a real or imaginary line (as might be a suitor left unanswered), and *skúlka* to ‘skulk’, with an echo of the name *Skolli* for the fox. As fox to henhouse, so the warrior-poet to the royal household with its prized virgin Russian princess. With the disarticulated syntax that facilitates the satisfaction of the metrical criteria of skaldic verse and demands so much cultural competence on the part of its public to attain meaning, the individual stanza seems like an old-fashioned wooden puzzle – and poetic composition was often likened to wood-working – that challenges its de- and reconstruction. The interpenetration and interdependence of lexicon encountered in the verse, the interplay of individual words, create not a diachronic echo in time but rather synchronic overtones of the surface narrative, as with a musical instrument. To stay with Haraldr, other favoured literary devices are a sudden drop in register and *tvírædi* ‘ambiguity, ambivalence, double-speak’, which entails that a poetic utterance have both an overt, at times scurrilous, signification, and a more covert but defensible meaning that is quite innocuous (Sayers 2021).

Yet, despite this array of the intentions, ways, and means of poetical vocabulary substitution, none seems to offer a key to the hypothetical **virðuviti* > *veðrviti* development that is proposed here. An analogy will prove illuminating, but only as to process, not cause. A well-practiced poetic meter in Old Norse-Icelandic was called *kviðuháttr*, from *kviða* ‘song, poem’ + *háttr* ‘meter, form’. This seems an imprecise designation for the meter of such sharply contoured poems as *Ynglingatal*, a poetical enumeration of early Swedish kings, their place and manner of death, or other pointedly historical poems. Early Scandinavian poetics also knew the *orðskviðuháttr*, the meter of poems which were characterized by old saws and adages. The source is clearly *orðskviðr* ‘proverb’, that is, a compound with *kviðr* ‘verdict’. Just as the proverb is a commonsense verdict on timeless human behaviour, so the reconstructed original form of *kviðuháttr* would have been **kviðsháttr* with a meaning like ‘verdict verse’, history’s judgment on legendary rulers (Sayers 2023a). This example displays the same kind of wholesale substitution of vocabulary and familiarization of phrase as evidenced in the terminological shift from **virðuviti* ‘marker of status’ to *veðrviti* ‘weather indicator’. The latter is not exactly a trivialization but still moves the combination of phonology and semantics toward the everyday, while maintaining a marine relevance, just as *kviðuháttr*, from **kviðsháttr*, still references poetic form. Is it merely fortuitous that all four words here considered contain the phoneme /ð/? Did it have some inherent mutability? All told, however, the metrical analogy does little to explain the social factors that would have promoted such exchanges. Reluctantly, we must invoke folk etymology – the etymologist’s last resort – a term that is equally problematic as concerns the mechanics at work – or in play.

To return to marine standards and their illegitimate offspring, weathervanes, there was, perhaps under social pressures that cannot now be teased out, an inversion in the hierarchy of functions. In the marine context, where word substitution was practiced in other varied ways, and with the unexplained obsolescence of **virða*

as noun in any other context, we perceive a prioritization in perceptions of the ship's rich appearance over its eminent passenger. This "democratization" of the visual phenomenon is facilitated by the standard having some of the properties, if not the full function, of a wind vane, i.e. mobility under the effects of wind. Symbolically, the standard is aligned with the wind, the master's intent, and the ship's course. In a popular sense, the neologism *veðrviti* may still have been understood as a marker, not only of weather conditions but also of commander status. But it was in the wind, not for it. The juxtaposition in literary descriptions of fine warships, stem-mounted standards, their gilded clamps, dragons' heads, arrays of fine shields, and well-outfitted crews all point to opulence but now necessarily less to status. In a sense, the full-bodied literary descriptions of ships in sagas and poems arrogate and subsume much of the function of the term that originally meant 'status marker'. Stylistic device replaces lexis.

At this juncture, another hypothesis must be explored to explain how true weathervanes and/or their linguistic designation might serve as an indicator of status, wealth, and power. Here it would not be lexical change that drives the development but rather, broadly speaking, technological change, albeit in response to social needs. Let us imagine that the weather indicator that would have been a common feature on a well-to-do farmhouse was paralleled on early ships in the form of a fluttering pennant, whose movement would supply information on the wind and whose colours might reveal provenance and ownership, a first step in signifying: *veðrviti*, a weathervane. As society became more complex and regional magnates with political and economic power emerged, the pennant was replaced with a standard in metal that had a different essential function, although the old name *veðrviti* was retained as conventional. In this scenario there would be no need to invoke an unattested **virðuviti*, explicitly 'status marker'. Although this is the most economical solution to the perceived disparity between the function and name of standards, it seems more plausible that an instrument invested with so much symbolic and material worth would initially have had discreet terminology, even if this were susceptible at a later date to the familiarization posited above. In contrast, dragon figureheads maintained their overt and powerful symbolism without modification well into the Christian period, suggesting that they carried no disqualifying pagan affinity.

To return to the broad topic of language substitution, this is uncharted territory, not only for marine terminology but for popular language generally, as it cruises freely beyond the shores of literate convention. Even without an explanation that posits cause, some conclusions in the matter of *veðrvitar* are, however, obvious. Despite the misnomer of the literate period, the mast- and stem-mounted, richly worked *veðrviti* of early Norse letters was not a ship's weathervane in a true sense but a marker of the worth of the most prominent man on board, a metonym for the eminence expressed in ship and crew size and outfitting, and opulent ornamentation of highly visible, richly symbolic more than functionally essential ship's parts and gear.

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