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The Varangian Guard in Literature

by

Rosie Susan Taylor

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

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in

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and

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Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in Scandinavian and Medieval Studies

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The Varangian Guard was a mercenary unit of many cultures, including Norse, that served the Byzantine Army from 988 to 1204. The 11th century is considered the heyday of Norse presence in the Guard, but few facts of their service have survived to today. The present dissertation argues that the Varangians as we know them are largely detached from their murky history, and are instead defined by their fictionalized depictions in literature, particularly the Old Norse sagas. In this context, these mercenaries are identifiable by Varangian symbols of great honor, immense wealth, and martial prowess, established through repetition in the Scandinavian corpus. However, the roles these characters play in their respective texts are highly individualized and heavily dependent on the surrounding narrative. As a result, they are malleable figures that fascinate due to their elite status and accomplishments, but adapt easily to reflect and explore the values of different time periods, settings, and formats of storytelling due to the lack of concrete history attached to them.

The first two chapters center on Varangians abroad, who are predominantly inspired by the most influential literary Varangian, Haraldr Sigurðarson. Chapter one looks at Haraldr himself and the construction of his early years in the poetry and kings' sagas. Chapter two deals with the further development of the Haraldr model into new genres via Bolli Bollason and Þorsteinn drómundr. The third chapter delves into Varangian veterans at home in the North: Bolli, Halldórr Snorrason, Gríss Sæmingsson, and Þorkell Þjóstarsson. These figures are much more diverse in their depictions, drawing heavily on the context of their respective sagas to provide commentary on contemporary rather than historical issues, from political tensions to combat trauma. The fourth chapter approaches two modern works featuring Varangians, the graphic novel *Northlanders* (2008-2011) and the video game *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017), and how these mercenaries are still being leveraged to tell relevant stories in today's world.

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Introduction

The last decade has seen a boom in scholarship on the Scandinavian presence in the East during the Viking and Middle Ages. This trend, moving away from older attempts to recreate an alternative history of the East from a Norse perspective, has opened new doors and avenues in the interpretation and reinterpretation of the relatively limited source material, shedding light on one of the lesser understood regions through which the Vikings traveled. Among these productive approaches are Þórir Jónsson Hraundal's argument that the Scandinavians in the East should be understood not as representing pure Norse culture, but a hybrid Norse-Eastern culture depending on the peoples with whom they came into contact; Fedir Androshchuk's suggestion that the study of the Viking Age should be approached as a transnational, rather than a national (or proto-national) history; and Sverrir Jakobsson's model of the Varangian legend that informs us less about the historical Guard and more about how the Icelanders viewed themselves in the 13th and 14th centuries.[1]

In reconsidering the Norse voyages to the East, its distinct geographical regions offer varying degrees of insight colored by available sources, types of extant materials, and the trajectory of modern scholarship. Eastern Europe features few native texts, and those from the Norse world are limited in detail or largely legendary; archaeology holds rich potential, but much of the study of this region has been overshadowed by the specter of the Normanist controversy.[2] The Caspian Sea region is present throughout the Arabic corpus, but is largely absent from Scandinavian sources, and excavations are difficult to launch due to ongoing geopolitical conflicts, with scholarship delayed until recently due to the rare and challenging dual requirement of expertise in Arabic and Old Norse disciplines. Byzantium, or the Eastern Roman Empire, holds similar barriers with Greek, and the presence of Scandinavians in its own corpus is obscured by the lack

[1] Þórir Jónsson Hraundal, "New Perspectives on Eastern Vikings/Rus in Arabic Sources," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 10 (2014); Fedir Androshchuk, *Vikings in the East: Essays on Contacts Along the Road to Byzantium 800-1100* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2014); Sverrir Jakobsson, *The Varangians: In God's Holy Fire* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

[2] The Normanist controversy was a long-standing debate on whether the Russian state was founded by Scandinavians or Slavic Rus' during the Middle Ages. National agendas on both sides resulted in the skewing and suppression of scholarship on early Norse presence in Eastern Europe for over two centuries. Originating in the 18th century, the controversy has been set aside in recent decades.

of a specific term for the Norse, who are typically referred to by the nebulous term *Rus'* along with many other peoples living north of the Empire. Moreover, Norse sagas concerning Byzantium lack concrete details and often drift into the fictional realm, while physical evidence is buried amidst countless other cultures spanning several millennia.

Each of these topics requires a degree of creativity in finding new questions to ask, especially regarding the literary sources. The treatment of the East in the Norse corpus is particularly rich, maintaining several constants in its depiction of the territory – great wealth, large cities, monstrous creatures, strange peoples and customs – while tweaking the details to match and enhance each surrounding narrative. The time gap between their subjects and their composition, and the unlikelihood that their authors actually traveled to these regions, or even knew anyone who had, implies inherent unfamiliarity with the subject matter. Yet the consistency with which the East is depicted indicates a cultural image in the zeitgeist that had formed over the centuries. This construct is partly based in reality, transmitted by travelers before, during, and after the Viking Age; but the protean nature of the East and its close association with the fantastic also signals imaginative additions that similarly grabbed the attention of author and audience alike. As a result, considering such depictions requires a willingness to embrace the fictionality inherent in these narratives.

Of these examples, the texts relating to the Varangian Guard are particularly notable as both fruitful and frustrating. Founded in 988 by Emperor Basil II, this renowned unit of Norse and Slavic mercenaries served as imperial bodyguards and in the vanguard of the Byzantine army. Unlike earlier mercenaries in the Empire, who arrived from Eastern Europe, the Varangian Guard attracted warriors coming directly from Scandinavia for the purpose of serving the "Greek king," and the those who lived to return home to the North were accorded the highest respect. The Norse contingent within the Guard began to shrink in the second half of the 11th century, replaced by Frankish and later English warriors fleeing the aftermath of 1066. By the time the unit dissolved voluntarily during the fall of Constantinople in 1204, it likely contained few, if any, Scandinavians.

Although the Guard was famous in its time and witnessed a prolonged afterlife in the popular mindset of the Middle Ages and beyond, little is concretely known about its actual history. The reverence for its warriors, however, is palpable in the later saga literature, and a certain fascination led to their incorporation in a wide variety of texts. The most famous Varangian was Haraldr Sigurðarson, King of Norway (r. 1046-1066), who spent his youth serving in the Mediterranean, and remains the only Norseman mentioned by name in the Byzantine sources. Many texts, both Norse and continental, make space for his Varangian adventures, and the kings' sagas in particular offer the corpus' longest and most detailed sequences about life in Byzantium. Haraldr's popularity in the medieval period spawned from both his sensational adventures and his charismatic personality, and he seems to have contributed the most by far to the image of the Varangian Guard in later centuries.

However, he is far from the only such figure in the sagas, although many of his fellow Varangians appear to be inspired directly or indirectly by Haraldr himself. Some of these characters, like Bolli Bollason of *Laxdœla saga* and Þorsteinn drómundr of *Grettis saga*, are depicted while abroad, offering varying levels of insight into the writers' skewed understanding of life in Constantinople and the day-to-day function of the Guard. Others are depicted upon their return home, including Haraldr's close companion Halldórr Snorrason, Gríss Sæmingsson of

Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds, and Þorkell Þjóstarsson of *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*. Like Byzantium itself, these characters feature core commonalities – great wealth, high status, and reputations as outstanding warriors – while also displaying noticeable variations that are closely dependent on their surrounding sagas.

The purpose of the present study is to take a closer look at these literary Varangians and consider the nature of the legacy of the Guard to which they have all contributed. The first chapter focuses on Haraldr, who is both the most historically grounded character and the likeliest influence on the rest of the cohort. The variants of his Mediterranean years in the Norse corpus provides a glimpse of the process by which his story shifted away from fact and into fiction, due to the inclusion of historically attested elements against which can be measured the degree to which the saga has drifted and how it has done so. The most significant example of this process is the blinding of Emperor Michael V Kalaphates, which is recorded in two Byzantine eyewitness accounts as an act of political mutilation against a failed ruler amidst a citywide uprising. In the Norse skaldic poems, however, the blinding is attributed to Haraldr himself, and by the time the narrative reaches the prose sagas, the maiming has transformed into the climax of a spurious love story that coincides with the prince's youthful rebellion against Byzantine authority. The adjustment of the context surrounding the blinding recasts the act in a manner that made more sense to 13th century Scandinavian audiences, and which ties deliberately into the development of Haraldr's character by the saga authors as they prepare him for the throne of Norway.

The second chapter focuses on other Varangians abroad, Bolli Bollason and Þorsteinn drómundr, who follow closely in Haraldr's footsteps while also distinguishing themselves as new variants of a now-established motif. Bolli is a product of his family's legacy, carrying on the symmetry of the best men in Iceland traveling abroad and winning gold and glory before returning home to settle down. As the last and youngest member to exhibit this behavior, Bolli's voyage is the most extreme, as he travels the farthest and accomplishes the most. The focus of this sequence is on his departure and homecoming, while his activities in Constantinople itself are left vague. The opposite is true of Þorsteinn, whose adventures are centered in Byzantium. After traveling all the way south to avenge the death of his famous half-brother, the outlaw Grettir Ásmundarson, Þorsteinn takes on a more passive role in a romance with local woman Spes. The merging of Haraldr's narrative with the Tristan legend signals a new chapter for the Varangian motif as it participates in the experimental merging of foreign and native genres.

The third chapter addresses the topic of retired Varangian, and it is here that the common narrative of these mercenaries begins to break down. Although these characters are typically respected and well-off in gold and honor, their fates after the Guard vary widely. Bolli Bollason pursues a successful career as a goði, still following in Haraldr's footsteps by taking on the mantle of authority upon his return. Halldórr Snorrason makes brief appearances immediately following his arrival in Norway in the king's company, and much of his depiction centers around his role as a primary source for Haraldr's adventures and a tool through which to explore the relationship between the independent Iceland and the Norwegian monarchy. Gríss Sæmingsson suffers as a punching bag for Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld for much of his saga, but a curious speech at the end of his tenure reflecting on his grief at the death of the Byzantine emperor signals a shift toward pathos in the challenges faced by veterans who struggle to reintegrate back into their native society. The tragedy of the veteran is explored in more detail through Þorkell Þjóstarsson, who, in his effort to find direction in his aimless life, resorts to unsuccessfully provoking the

status quo, and whose complete failure to find his way home implies a familiarity with the psychological impact of war and its pervasive presence in society on the part of the saga writer.

Finally, the Varangian legend does not stop in the Middle Ages – fascination with these figures continues on through the centuries all the way to the modern day. The last chapter looks at two contemporary depictions of the Varangian Guard in new media formats. The story "Sven the Returned" in the graphic novel series *Northlanders* follows a disillusioned warrior returning home from Byzantium to Orkney to claim his inheritance. Sven's inability to reconcile with his Norse roots had once driven him abroad, but when his homecoming forces him to reexamine the blame he once placed on his people, he comes to see that it stems from misplaced anger at himself, and undergoes a shift in his worldview that allows him to redefine his identity. The post-apocalyptic video game *Horizon Zero Dawn* features a remodeling of the Varangian Guard in the form of the Vanguard, an elite mercenary unit of rugged northern warriors serving a more powerful southern kingdom. A major storyline on the evolution of their troubled leader taps into central themes of gender, community, and trauma, leveraging the interplay between narrative and gameplay to question current issues and problematic trends.

The legacy of the Varangian Guard has strayed significantly from its historic origin. But given the relevance these remarkable mercenaries have maintained in the popular mindset and the stories they have helped tell over the centuries, it might be argued that the reality behind the myth is becoming less and less relevant. Although investigations into these roots have merit, there is too much we will never know about the men themselves – they have truly passed into the mists of history. But the legend that emerged from their accomplishments has achieved an immortality that has not only kept their name alive, but has significantly contributed to the fabric of society through that very fictionality once rued by scholars. The continuity of the Varangians' impact into the modern day is a tribute to their ability to adapt constantly to new genres and formats, even as this protean nature further complicates their elusive definition.

I

Haraldr the Varangian

The voyages of Varangians are poorly preserved in the Old Norse corpus. Not only are the men themselves few in number, but space devoted to their foreign activities in the sagas is typically brief, the journeys mentioned only in passing. It is tempting to explain away this lack of information as the result of general ignorance about Byzantium during the Varangians' tenure. The distance in time between the heyday of the Guard in the 11th century and the age of saga writing in the 13th century, as well as the geographical distance between Byzantium and Scandinavia, would have obscured the original narratives brought home by the historical warriors.

On closer inspection, however, it is more likely that the missing detail in these accounts is due to the highly fictional nature of itinerant Varangians in the sagas. In general, these figures are valued more for their ability to satisfy narrative patterns than to reflect historical reality. Voyages to Byzantium to join the Guard offer easy exits for accomplished characters, opportunities to earn great honor and wealth for budding heroes, and demonstrations of piety for staunch Christians – in essence, the expeditions are leveraged as shortcuts to plot points and character development. This usage is possible because the image of the Varangian abroad had been standardized over time into a single basic motif with only minor variation: a great warrior travels east and wins gold and glory, then either stays in Byzantium or returns home with remarkable wealth. The maintenance of the motif discourages greater detail and deviation, and its repeated usage in the sagas with little explanation as to its meaning indicates a degree of widespread knowledge of its definition.

This chapter will look at the origin and development of the figure of Varangian abroad, which centers around a single influential figure: Haraldr Sigurðarson, nicknamed harðráði [hard-ruler], king of Norway (r. 1046-1066). Haraldr, born around 1015, was the younger half-brother of King Óláfr Haraldsson (r. 1015-1030). After Óláfr was killed in the Battle of Stiklastaðr, in which Haraldr was wounded, the young prince fled Norway and traveled east to the court of

Prince Jarizleifr (Yaroslav I Vladimirovich) of Kyiv. There he served as a mercenary for several years before departing for Constantinople, where he joined the Varangian Guard around 1036 during the reign of Emperor Michael IV the Paphlagonian (r. 1034-1041).

Haraldr's highly successful career in the Mediterranean is attested in both Norse and Byzantine sources. A renowned fighter and charismatic leader, he rose quickly in the ranks, demonstrating boldness and cunning on the battlefield. He was deployed in two major conflicts – the 1038-1041 war against the Arabs in Sicily and a 1041 uprising in the Balkans – receiving two promotions, μαγγλαβίτης *manglavites* and σπαθαροκανδιδάτος *spatharokandidatos*, for his efforts. He remains the only Norseman mentioned by name in the extant Byzantine corpus, and, after the death of Michael IV, served under two further emperors, Michael V Kalaphates (r. 1041-1042) and Constantine IX Monomachos (1042-1055) before leaving Constantinople. After a quick stop back in Kyiv, during which he married Jarizleifr's daughter Ellisif, Haraldr returned to the North around 1045.

Norway and Denmark were now under the reign of his nephew, Magnús Óláfsson (r. 1035-1047). Although Haraldr initially joined forces with Sveinn Ástríðarson in an effort to destabilize Magnús' reign, he ultimately made a deal with his relative – the kingdom of Norway in exchange for half of his Byzantine gold. Magnús died the following year, bequeathing Denmark to Sveinn. Haraldr's two decade reign of Norway is in part defined by constant war between the two countries as he tried and failed to conquer Denmark, a venture in which he never succeeded. On the home front, despite firm opposition from several of Norway's leading families, Haraldr managed to consolidate his power through strength and violence, and was responsible for several significant domestic advancements, including the expansion of Christianity and the establishment of a royal mint.[1] In 1066, following the death of King Edward the Confessor, Haraldr invaded England in an attempt to claim the contested throne. He was defeated and killed by the forces of Harold Godwinson at the Battle of Stamford Bridge.

Haraldr's wide-ranging and ambitious career provides the baseline to the exciting narrative of his life story, which was immensely popular in the Middle Ages, attested by the many renditions, both native and foreign, of his adventures. But this literary fame is also compounded by Haraldr himself as a character. He is an aggressively colorful figure on the page: a fearless warrior, tall and handsome, with natural gifts of leadership, wisdom, and war that inspire instant loyalty among his followers. But he also possesses deep flaws – a hair-trigger temper, a propensity for tricks and jokes at others' expense, endless and ultimately destructive ambition – which create problems throughout his life with which he constantly struggles. Haraldr is, in other words, extraordinarily human in his dimensions, and his nature of conflicting extremes offered a compelling and attractive hero for medieval authors and audiences alike. Add to this image his position on the Norwegian throne, and both his profile and the impact of his actions are further maximized, making Haraldr a natural star of the medieval period.

The consistent inclusion of Haraldr's Varangian years in the kings' sagas emphasizes the exploration of his character that typifies many of his sagas. The sequence is designed to show off a rising star by establishing his defining characteristics in anticipation of his coming reign,

[1] On the influence of Byzantine coins in Scandinavia, see Svein H. Gullbekk, "Myntvesenet som kilde til statsutvikling i Norge ca. 1050-1080," in *Statsutvikling i Skandinavia i middelalderen*, edited by Sverre Bagge et al. (Oslo: Dreyers Forlag, 2012); Roland Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz: Bedingungen und Konsequenzen mittelalterlicher Kulturbeziehungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 351-58.

setting the stage for the major portion of the saga to come. The setting of Byzantium, a location close enough to be real but too distant for its stories to be verified by the average Norse, opens the door to a degree of indulgence in renditions of Haraldr's exploits. The exoticism of Byzantium bolsters his development as a king-in-training through exposure to historical systems within the empire, including centralized government, Orthodox Christianity, high culture, education, and largescale warfare, while also allowing for creative additions – dragon fights, romantic escapades, military stratagems – to add both excitement and nuance to the Norse impressions of both Haraldr and the Mediterranean region. The resulting image of a sensationally spirited hero coming of age at the edge of the map forms this popular narrative that continues to entertain audiences in the modern day. More than that, however, it influenced medieval authors in their renditions of other Varangians abroad, creating the foundation of a Varangian motif seen elsewhere in the corpus.

This chapter reads Haraldr as a model for the literary Varangians and their depictions across the sagas. Focusing on the climax of his Byzantine adventures – his arrest and imprisonment, the blinding of the Byzantine emperor, his escape from Constantinople, and his lavish arrival back in Norway – I argue that the construction of Haraldr in these sources centers around several key elements of both his character and the anticipated features of the East within the context of Norse literature. Of his character, we see early demonstrations of his keen abilities as leader and warrior, his cleverness and penchant for tricks, his piety, and his utter distaste for authority other than his own. Of the East, we witness the presence of immense wealth and the supernatural, and the image of Byzantium specifically as a center of religion, culture, and power. The merging of personality and space spawns a figure who is real enough to be believable, yet semi-legendary in nature and accomplishment, fitting for the historical reputation of the Varangians and compelling enough to become an enduring feature of the medieval corpus.

In so doing, these sources also offer valuable insight into the transition of the Varangians from history to fiction. Although the sagas incorporate a high degree of exaggeration and fabrication concerning Haraldr's activities, several plot points can be understood as factual touchstones, indicating the historicity behind the narrative. The most significant of these episodes is the 1042 blinding of Emperor Michael V Kalaphates, an event recorded in several contemporary Byzantine texts. Although these writings, including the two eyewitness accounts of Michael Psellos and Michael Attaleiates, sometimes contradict one another, they more often agree on the circumstances that led to the maiming of the erstwhile ruler, providing a window into how the Byzantines understood and rationalized the act and its associated drama. The Haraldr sources maintain the event of the blinding itself, but almost every other detail about the sequence is transformed to fit an alternative narrative informed more by Norse philosophy and cultural practices than the original southern context. As a result, this scene illustrates some ways in which Varangian narratives transformed over hundreds of years and thousands of miles in their own travels from Constantinople to distant Iceland.

Sources on Haraldr the Varangian

Many medieval sources touch on Haraldr's life, but not all of them cover his Varangian career. Of this subset, the *Strategikon* of Kekaumenos is among the earliest extant sources, and

remains the only known Byzantine text to mention any Norseman by name.[2] Though scarce on details, the passage, written in the 11th century, offers an overview of Haraldr's military career from the Byzantine perspective:

> Araltes [Haraldr], son of the king of the Varangians, had a brother Ioulavos [Óláfr]. After his father's death the latter took the father's royal power, placing his brother Araltes second to him in authority. But he, being still a lad, determined to visit the most blessed Emperor Michael the Paphlagonian, to pay his respects and to see for himself what Roman life was like. He brought with him a company of five hundred men of good family. He arrived there, and the emperor received him with proper courtesy and dispatched him with his force to Sicily, for a Roman army was engaged there in battle for the island. Araltes reached the island and accomplished great deeds of valour. On the subjugation of Sicily he returned with his army to the emperor, and he conferred on him the rank of *manglavities*. Thereafter the emperor found Delianos stirring up trouble in Bulgaria, and Araltes, taking his company, joined forces with the emperor and accomplished great deeds against the foe, worthy of his birth and noble character. When he had put down the Bulgarians the emperor returned (I too was there fighting for the emperor to the best of my power). When we came to the town of Mesinos the emperor rewarded him for what he had done in the fight, giving him the title of *spatharokandidates*. After the passing of the Emperor Michael and of his great nephew who had succeeded him, Araltes wished in the time of the Emperor Monomachos to get royal permission to return to his own land, but it was not forthcoming. Indeed, the road out was obstructed. Yet he slipped away and took the throne in his own country in place of his brother Ioulavos. And he did not complain about the titles *manglavities* or *spatharokandidates* he had been honoured with; but instead, as king he showed good faith and brotherly love towards the Romans.[3]

This discourse on Haraldr is one of three examples offered in a section on awarding ranks to foreigners. Herein, Kekaumenos warns rulers against granting too many honors or too great an office to such men, particularly those lacking royal heritage in their own countries. He argues that soldiers awarded with day-to-day needs ("νομίσματα οὐδαμινὰ καὶ ἄρτον" [a few coins and

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[2] The *Strategikon*, also called *Consilia et Narrationes*, is preserved in a single manuscript, Moscow Synodalis 298 (Vlad. 436) ff. 136vo – 229ro, likely produced in Trebizond in the 14th century. The text, an advice manual written by a former soldier, is believed to have been originally composed between 1075-1078, and is now attributed to one called Kekaumenos, after his father and grandfather mentioned by that name in the work.

[3] Ἀράλτης βασιλέως μὲν Βαραγγίας ἦν υἱός, ἔχων δὲ ἀδελφὸν τὸν Ἰούλαβον, ὃς καὶ μετὰ θάνατον τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ κατέσχε τὴν πατρικὴν βασιλείαν, προβαλόμενος Ἀράλτην τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ δεύτερον μετ'αὐτοῦ εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν. Ὃς δὴ καὶ νέος ὢν ἠθέλησεν εἰσελθεῖν καὶ προσκυνῆσαι τῷ μακαριωτάτῳ βασιλεῖ κῦρ Μιχαὴλ τῷ Παφλάγονι καὶ ἐν θέᾳ γενέσθαι τῆς ῥωμαϊκῆς καταστάσεως· ἤγαγε δὲ καὶ μετ'αὐτοῦ καὶ λαόν, ἄνδρας γενναίους πεντακοσίους· καὶ εἰσῆλθε, καὶ ἐδέξατο αὐτὸν ὁ βασιλεύς ὡς ἐνεδέχετο, καὶ ἀπέστειλεν αὐτὸν μετὰ τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ εἰς Σικελίαν· ἐκεῖ γὰρ ἦν ὁ ῥωμαϊκὸς στρατός, πολεμῶν τὴν νῆσον. Καὶ ἀπελθὼν ἐνεδείξατο ἔργα μεγάλα. Ὑποταγείσης δὲ τῆς Σικελίας ὑπέστρεψε μετὰ τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα, καὶ ἐτίμησεν αὐτὸν μαγγλαβίτην. Μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα ἔλαχε τό τεμουλτεῦσαι τὸν Δελιάνον εἰς Βουλγαρίαν. Καὶ ἐσυνεταξίδευσε καὶ ὁ Ἀράλτης μετὰ τοῦ βασιλέως, ἔχων τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἐνεδείξατο ἔργα εἰς τοὺς πολεμίους ἄξια τῆς εὐγενείας καὶ τῆς γενναιότητος αὐτοῦ. Ὑποτάξας δὲ τὴν Βουλγαρίαν ὁ βασιλεύς ὑπέστρεψεν. Ἤμην δὲ κἀγὼ τότε ἀγωνιζόμενος ὑπὲρ τοῦ βασιλέως κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν. Ἐλθόντων δὲ ἡμῶν ἐν Μοσυνουπόλει, ἀμειβόμενος αὐτῷ ὁ βασιλεύς ὑπὲρ ὧν ἀγωνίσατο ἐτίμησεν αὐτὸν σπαθαροκανδιδάτην. Μετὰ δὲ τὴν τελευτὴν τοῦ κῦρ Μιχαὴλ καὶ τοῦ ἀνεψιοῦ αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἀποβασιλέως ἠθέλησεν ἐπὶ τοῦ Μονομάχου αἰτησάμενος ὑποχωρῆσαι εἰς τὴν χώραν αὐτοῦ, καὶ οὐ συνεχωρήθη, ἀλλὰ γέγονεν αὐτῷ στενὴ ἡ ἔξοδος. Ὅμως λαθὼν ὑπεχώρησεν καὶ ἐβασίλευσεν εἰς τὴν χώραν αὐτοῦ ἀντὶ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ, Ἰουλάβου. Καὶ οὐκ ἐγόγγυσεν ὑπὲρ ὧν ἐτιμήθη μαγγλαβίτης ἢ σπαθαροκανδιδάτης, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον καὶ βασιλεύων ἐφύλαξε πίστιν καὶ ἀγάπην πρὸς Ῥωμαίους. Κεκαυμένος, *Στρατηγικόν*, edited by Demetres Tsounkarakes (Athens: Ekdoseis Kanake, 1996), 255-57; translation from Sverrir Jakobsson, "Araltes: The Evolution of a Varangian Stereotype," 56.

bread]) perform best, as they are dependent on the emperor for their well-being.[4] Once foreigners are promoted above a certain social status, identified by Kekaumenos as σπαθαροκανδιδάτος *spatharokandidates*, they are no longer reliant on their liege lord to get by, and will therefore grow lax and serve poorly.[5] Haraldr is the final example given, and the only one who reaches this maximum rank. The final commentary on his appreciation of his titles and continued friendship with Byzantium therefore commends Michael IV's handling of the Varangian's achievements – the awarded ranks were high enough to satisfy Haraldr, but not high enough for him to lose respect for the office of the emperor in favor of his own success.

The earliest indication of the impact of Haraldr's Varangian expedition may arguably be found among Swedish runestones. An uptick of inscriptions referring to the East in the eleventh century aligns with the height of Norse presence in the Varangian Guard. Greece is the location most frequently mentioned in these inscriptions, indicating both the popularity of the destination and an acknowledgement of the risks of such an endeavor, given that most of these runestones are raised to men who died on their journey. Magnus Källström has posited that some dedications in western and central Uppland dating to the window of Haraldr's voyage may honor Swedes who travelled with him and did not make it home.[6] Sverrir Jakobsson has suggested that the prevalence of Greece references does not necessarily mean that voyages to Byzantium were more frequent than others, but that they were "considered particularly worthy of commemoration."[7]

The earliest extant Norse sources that explicitly depict Haraldr in Byzantium are the skaldic poems said to have been composed in his court. Although these works are recorded much later, and may have been subject to alteration over the course of their pre-manuscript tenure, they mark the transition of his narrative from history into legend. The purpose of these encomiastic poems was to build and preserve their subjects' reputations through brief summaries of their greatest accomplishments. The deeds listed in the Haraldr poems are compiled and rendered to cast him in a positive light, allowing for implicit bias and a deliberate reframing of historical events to paint a favorable image of him. Because skaldic poetry played such a key role in crafting and preserving legacies, it is no surprise that Haraldr, as both a king and a man fascinated by his own legacy, was a great patron of skalds, inspiring the composition of several works that offer fleeting commentary on his victories in the Mediterranean.

The most prominent poem about Haraldr's Varangian days is Þjóðólfr Arnórsson's *Sexstefja*, which charts Haraldr's life story from his youthful participation in the Battle of Stiklastaðir in 1030 to his death at the Battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066. As an encomiastic composition, *Sexstefja* tells the king's story through a catalogue of individual deeds and events, focusing on dramatic martial conflicts between its hero and a series of opponents. Because the poem was

[4] Κεκαυμένος, *Στρατηγικόν*, 251.
[5] Charlotte Roueché has noted that Kekaumenos is not xenophobic in his discussion of foreigners in this passage; indeed, he seems pleased to have served alongside Haraldr. Rather, he warns of the cost to the empire and conditions for native soldiers if outsiders are promoted too highly: "this is a definition by allegiance, not race." Charlotte Roueché, "Defining the Foreign in Kekaumenos," in *Strangers to Themselves: The Byzantine Outsider*, edited by Dion C. Smythe (New York: Routledge, 2016), 210.
[6] Magnus Källström, "Byzantium Reflected in the Runic Inscriptions of Scandinavia," in *Byzamtium and the Viking World*, edited by Fedir Androshchuk, Jonathan Shepard, and Monica White (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2016), 180-81.
[7] Sverrir Jakobsson, *The Varangians: In God's Holy Fire* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 89-90.

composed after Haraldr's death, its memorial function eschews cohesive storytelling for a record of the high points in Haraldr's life, covering events and accomplishments that can be historically placed. Despite *Sexstefja*'s missing stanzas, it offers a dramatic perspective into Haraldr's victories around the Mediterranean, and kennings referring to his Varangian exploits can be found even in verses about his reign in Norway. Several stanzas from Stúfr Þórðarson's *Stúfsdrápa* are also preserved across several manuscripts. There is some discrepancy between the variants of *Stúfs þáttr* as to when this work was composed, with the long version noting that the skald recited his poem to Haraldr himself, and the short version stating that he composed an *erfidrápa* "funeral poem" called *Stúfsdrápa*. The extant stanzas indicate that Haraldr is deceased upon the drápa's final state; the poem referenced in the longer þáttr may have been an earlier version that was finished upon the king's death.

These poetic renditions of Haraldr's adventures in the East focus on different aspects of his travels, likely because of the troubled nature of their incomplete transmission. *Stúfsdrápa* contains two stanzas about his pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Two stanzas of *Sexstefja* and a single helming from an otherwise lost poem by Þórarinn Skeggjason discuss Haraldr's blinding of the Byzantine emperor Michael V Kalaphates. Sverrir Jakobsson has noted that these skaldic poems are the earliest attestation of Haraldr's connection to the maiming, and "can be regarded as evidence that there existed an oral tradition in Norway, even as early as in the eleventh century, which connects King Haraldr with the blinding of a Byzantine Emperor."[8] An apparent reference to the poem in *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* further supports their early dating in the development of Haraldr's Varangian identity in literature.[9]

Of the Scandinavian prose texts that cover his youth, the earliest extant source seems to be Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, a Latin history of the Danish people from the turn of the 13th century.[10] Saxo, writing in favor of the Danes, is ill-disposed toward the Norwegian king, given Haraldr's many years of aggression toward Denmark. *Gesta Danorum* mentions his Varangian years, but offers details only about Haraldr's fight with the dragon while imprisoned in Constantinople. Nonetheless, the passage is the first surviving source that links Haraldr's imprisonment with his escape from Byzantium. William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, preceding Saxo by several decades, also includes a short passage on the prince's arrest and defeat of a lion in the dungeon, but does not mention his flight from the city.[11]

Among Old Norse texts, the timeline begins with *Morkinskinna*, an Icelandic kings' saga written around 1220.[12] The text covers the lives of several Norwegian kings, from Magnús Óláfsson (r.1035-1047) to Sigurðr Haraldsson (r.1136-1155). The bulk of the work, however, deals with Haraldr Sigurðarson, and the author seem particularly taken by his life and character. The saga contains many skaldic verses and several þættir tied to Haraldr, as well as narratives

[8] Sverrir Jakobsson, *Varangians*, 92.
[9] Sverrir Jakobsson, *Varangians*, 92.
[10] The oldest fragment of *Gesta Danorum* is the Angers Fragment, written in Saxo's hand c. 1200. Three other fragments survive from c. 1275, but the oldest complete version is the 1514 printed edition by Christiern Pedersen titled *Danorum Regum heroumque Historiae*.
[11] *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, completed in 1125, survives in four versions across many manuscripts, and relates the history of England and its rulers from their arrival in Britain to c. 1125. The brief chapter discussing Haraldr and other Norwegian rulers comes amidst the narrative of the Norman conquest. The text gives Haraldr's nickname as *Haruagra* "fair-hair."
[12] *Morkinskinna* is preserved in a single manuscript, GKS 1009 fol. (c. 1275).

about Haraldr that do not appear elsewhere; the text also introduces the notion that Haraldr used a false name, Norðbrikt/Norðbrigt, while in Constantinople. The presence of a large lacuna in the manuscript at the start of Haraldr's Varangian career obscures some of the early sequences, but because several other kings' sagas are derived from *Morkinskinna*, the material is not entirely lost. *Flateyjarbók* is the most extensive of these descendants, and is used in modern editions and translations of *Morkinskinna* to fill in the lacuna; *Fagrskinna* is also derivative, though less detailed in its accounts.[13]

Beyond *Morkinskinna*, the most important source for Haraldr's early years is *Heimskringla*'s *Haralds saga Sigurðarson*.[14] Attributed to the prominent 13th century Icelander Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla* is a collection of kings' sagas covering the history of Norwegian rulers from the euhemerized Norse gods through the rule of Magnús Erlingsson (r.1161-1184). The section of *Haralds saga* dealing with his Varangian career is shorter than that of *Morkinskinna*, skipping a number of stories and streamlining the supernatural, notably omitting the dragon fight. However, it presents a similar narrative in its depiction of Haraldr's character. The later *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna* draws on both *Heimskringla* and a lost version of *Morkinskinna* to reintegrate some of these stanzas.[15]

Motives for Travel

Although the focus of this chapter is on the climax of Haraldr's Varangian career, his motive for travel offers useful context into his purpose in the Mediterranean and trajectory of his adventures. The foremost intention of Eastern travel among medieval Scandinavians is the accumulation of wealth and glory. For prospective members of the Varangian Guard, this is a universal motivation, which may operate alone, but is more often coupled with other reasons for the journey, or added to the mix later on. This last option seems to be the case for Haraldr, whose initial premise for traveling East is as a political refugee seeking safety in the court of Novgorod. Whether he had planned from the start to join the Varangian Guard is not mentioned in any sources – given his age (about 15 years old) and status (exile) following the Battle of Stiklastaðir, it is likely that his first thought was to escape Norway, and that the opportunity to enter the Byzantine emperor's service in pursuit of fame and gold arose later on.

Helen Damico has observed that journeys to Byzantium in the sagas often happen in two stages, and has suggested that the two phases of Haraldr's journey each come with separate motives.[16] The first stage is his journey from Norway to Novgorod, with the aim of escaping his

[13] *Flateyjarbók* (GkS 1005 fol.), completed around 1394, was commissioned by Jón Hákonarson and written by Jón Þórðarson and Magnús Þórhallsson. *Fagrskinna* was preserved in two manuscripts, a shorter and longer version, both of which were lost in the 1728 Copenhagen fire. The text has survived today due to 17th and 18th century copies made before the manuscripts' destruction.

[14] Many manuscripts of *Heimskringla* survive in varying states of completion. The earliest extant manuscript and the basis of most modern editions, Kringla, is dated c. 1270 and now consists of one leaf, Lbs. frg. 82., courtesy of the 1728 fire.

[15] The text survives in two manuscripts: *Hulda* (AM 66, late 14th century) and *Hrokkinskinna* (GKS 1010 fol., early 15th century with a 16th century addition).

[16] H. Damico, "The Voyage to Byzantium: The Evidence of the Sagas," Византийский временник 56 (1995): 108. Other characters who undergo two-stage journeys to the East and Mediterranean include Yngvarr víðförla, Eirekr víðförla, Sigurðr Jórsalafari, and Rǫgnvaldr Kali Kolsson.

enemies and seeking refuge in the court of Jarizleifr the Wise. The second stage is the voyage from Novgorod to Byzantium, a decision mainly fueled by his interested in wealth and status. But his rationale for travel according to the sagas is more complex than that of the standard mercenary, as may be expected of such a prominent man. Damico has argued that the unspoken but implicit motivation for his departure from Novgorod is Haraldr's quest to successfully woo Jarizleifr's daughter Ellisif. The Norse sources concur on a discussion between Jarizleifr and Haraldr, immediately prior to the latter's departure, on the need for the young prince to raise his status in order to be eligible for a potential marriage to Ellisif, but while Damico cites Haraldr's *Gamanvísur* as further evidence of the connection between his Varangian exploits and his interest in the princess, it is more plausible that these romantic verses were a later concoction linking the two, a bid to impress her after the fact rather than the reason for his enlistment in the emperor's service.[17]

Ellisif may be the subject of discussion between Jarizleifr and Haraldr presaging the latter's departure for Byzantium, but the crux of the discourse seems more keyed in to the fact that Haraldr is not yet ready to be declared a royal equal. Jarizleifr observes in *Morkinskinna* that "þat er líkligt at lengi mun aukask hans framaverk, svá sem nú hefsk upp. En at svá búnu til gǫfugs ráðs þá ertu eigi til féríkr ok landlauss maðr at svá fǫrnu" [it is quite likely that your deeds will continue to grow in the way they have begun, but just now you have not the means for such a distinguished marriage, and for the moment you are a landless man].[18] Haraldr has reached his maximum potential for career advancement during his stint as a mercenary in Novgorod, but he is still lacking in wealth, land, and status, elements necessary to arrange a marriage fit for the king he aspires to be. The proposed marriage to Ellisif is implicitly connected to his identity as a royal, and to arrange the former, he must achieve the latter. In this sense, Haraldr's departure from Novgorod to the higher stakes and greener pastures of Byzantium marks the continuation of his upward rise as predicted by Jarizleifr, with the ultimate goal of earning enough gold and honor to be recognized as a serious contender for the Norwegian throne – and, in the process, elligible for an appropriately royal marriage.

This motivation is further solidified by Haraldr's adoption of the Norðbrikt pseudonym in several sources, designed to both hide his royal identity and reference his exile from Norway.[19] Theodore Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade have suggested that *-brikt/-brigt* may derive from the legal term *brigð*, "the right to claim forfeited land," or the base noun's definition, "forfeiture, breaking, breach," indicating that Haraldr has a claim to the North, or has at least broken from it.[20] This choice of pseudonym both hides his identity from foreigners and provides a clue for fellow Norse-speakers as to his true heritage, a double-play that fits well with Haraldr's famous fondness for tricks.

According to *Morkinskinna*, Haraldr's own rationale for concealing his identity was because "þat er at viðrsýn gǫrt ef útlendir menn eru konunga synir" [foreigners are shunned when they

[17] Damico, "Voyage to Byzantium," 109.
[18] Ármann Jakobsson and Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson, ed., *Morkinskinna* I, Íslenzk Fornrit XXIII (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 2011), 86; Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade, *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030-1157)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 131.
[19] Haraldr takes on this name in *Morkinskinna* and its most closely related sources; it does not appear in *Heimskringla*.
[20] Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 426 n.9.

are the progeny of kings].[21] Although his father Sigurðr sýr is granted a tenuous genealogical connection to Haraldr hárfagri by the Norse corpus, he was no more than a petty king himself, and it was only through his marriage to Haraldr's mother Ásta Guðbrandsdóttir that their son had a claim to the throne. The lineage connecting Sigurðr sýr is now believed to have been an invention by medieval writers; if this is the case, the reference to Haraldr as a "konungs sonr" may be an attempt by *Morkinskinna*'s author to reinforce this recent tradition in the spirit of further legitimizing the primary focus of his narrative. Alternatively, the comment has the ring of a proverb and may be adapted from a general comment of the era, applied to monarchs regardless of its technical accuracy.[22] Either way, the Norðbrikt moniker seems to have been crafted solely for the sagas, as it does not appear in the poetry, foreign sources, or other sagas such as *Heimskringla* – and Kekaumenos' *Strategikon* mentions Haraldr by his proper name and references his royal heritage, indicating that, historically, the Byzantines were fully aware of who he was.[23]

The Varangian Years

The native accounts of Haraldr's time in Byzantium distinguish themselves as the only Norse sources to provide independent and detailed accounts, fictional or otherwise, of life in the Varangian Guard. Other texts are either derivative of Haraldr's experiences (e.g. *Grettis saga*) or present a brief, broad overview of general accomplishments (e.g. *Laxdœla saga*). In all medieval texts dealing with Varangians, the context of the surrounding saga determines how much Mediterranean content is included, and because Haraldr's time in the Varangian Guard is critical to the kings' saga format of building up his character as the future king of Norway, a great deal of attention is granted to the victories and escapades in his narratives. These anecdotes reveal much about who he is as a leader – charismatic, wise, skilled at combat, quick to anger. But Haraldr's unique and exciting character was also a crowd pleaser, and his narratives revel in the entertainment factor of his youthful tricks, banter, and exploits. The function of the lengthy sections on his Mediterranean accomplishments in the kings' sagas is thus twofold: they play a critical role in building the narrative of his life story, and they indulge in the excitement of his hijinks. The result is a wide variety of stories, fictional and fictionalized, that make up his adventures, from romantic escapades and supernatural battles to the famous military strategems, short anecdotes of wartime trickery often found in Byzantine and Rus' sources as well as Norse sagas set in the East.[24]

Because the Norse sources favor saga-relevant narratives over factual Varangian experiences, the Haraldr sequences have been both boon and hindrance to Varangian researchers trying to piece together an alternative Byzantine history through a Scandinavian lens. While valuable historical extractions from these texts have been made over the years, the focus of the present

[21] *ÍF* XXIII, 88; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 132.
[22] See for example *Hávamál* 86, which warns against trusting "barni konungs" [a king's child]. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, eds., *Eddukvæði* (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 2014), 339.
[23] Andersson and Gade have suggested that this ploy reflects the general paranoia among Byzantine rulers regarding pretenders to the throne. Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 426 n.9.
[24] For further discussion, see Robert Cook, "Russian History, Icelandic Story, and Byzantine Strategy in *Eymundar Þáttr Hringssonar*," *Viator* 17 (1986): 76. Due to their presence in Byzantine, Rus', and Norse sources, Adolph Stender-Petersen included such strategems in his "Varangian legend" category; Adolph Stender-Petersen, *Die Varägersaga als Quelle der altrussischen Chronik*, Acta Jutlandica 6.1 (Copenhagen: Reitzel, 1934), 23-25.

chapter's discussion of Haraldr's exploits centers on the image of the Varangians and their portrayal according to their respective literary contexts. Cast in this light, the many episodes that make up the Haraldr narratives are rich in their offerings as insights into how medieval writers constructed the Varangian legend. In using the climax of his Byzantine career as the access point in this discussion, the general composite story is as follows:

> Haraldr is arrested and thrown in prison by the emperor on false charges, while the true motive is implied to be Empress Zoe's jealousy over his romance with her cousin María. While in prison, Haraldr, in most sources, fights a dragon with the help of sidekicks Halldórr and Úlfr. A local woman has a dream in which St. Óláfr instructs her to free Haraldr from prison, and she follows through. Haraldr rouses his Varangians, and they break into the emperor's bedchamber and put out his eyes. Haraldr kidnaps María and makes his escape via sea. After evading the chain blocking the Bosporus, Haraldr frees María further up the coast. From there he returns to Jarizleifr in Novgorod, picks up his gold and his new wife Ellisif, and returns to the North.

As discussed above, the attribution of the emperor's blinding to Haraldr is the earliest extant aspect of the Varangian legend to emerge from his exploits, as it is the first verifiably fictional addition to his career via skaldic poetry. The expansion of this episode in the prose sources into the apex of his career develops the narrative further to incorporate prominent themes from the larger Varangian section – romance, leadership, politics, and the supernatural – as well as putting Haraldr's major personal attributes on display: charisma and martial prowess, piety and wisdom, quick wit and quicker temper.

Imprisonment

Arrest

Haraldr's troubles at the end of his time in Constantinople can be traced all the way back to the *Strategikon* passage recording his career. Kekaumenos makes no mention of prison in this passage, but his comment that "the road out [of Constantinople] was obstructed" for Haraldr has spawned several theories over the centuries about what might have caused such a dilemma. William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum* states that Haraldr defiled a noble woman, while Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* asserts that Haraldr was arrested for homicide; however, most medieval sources concur on an accusation of false charges of fiscal misconduct.[25] Extracting from these passages, Sigfús Blöndal has laid out several methods by which Haraldr could have made off with extra gold, ranging from independently led raids during the Sicilian campaign to possible overcollection on tax missions.[26]

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[25] Per William: "cuius iussu pro stupro illustris feminae leoni obiectus, beluam immanem nudo lacertorum nisu suffocauit" [in return for debauching a lady of distinguished family (Haraldr) had on his (the emperor's) orders been thrown to a lion, whereupon he strangled the raging beast with his bare hands]; R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson, and M. Winterbottom, eds., *William of Malmesbury: Gesta Regum Anglorum* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), III.260. Per Saxo: "A cuius rege homicidii crimine damnatus domestico draconi lacerandus obiectari precipitur" [Condemned by the emperor there (in Constantinople) on a charge of murder, he was sentenced to be thrown to the palace dragon, which would tear him to pieces]; Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes*, edited by Karsten Friis-Jensen, translated by Peter Foote (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 788-91.

[26] Sigfús Blöndal, *The Varangians of Byzantium*. *An Aspect of Byzantine Military History*, ed. Benedikt S. Benedikz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 78-88.

An alternative modern theory divides Haraldr's imprisonment and departure from Constantinople, placing the former under the reign of Michael V (r. 1041-1042) and the latter under the reign of Constantine IX (r. 1042-1055). The rationale behind this model stems from the chaotic nature of Michael's reign and the revolt that removed him from power. Davidson has considered the possibility of political motivations for Haraldr's arrest during the uprising. Several Byzantine sources describe the emperor's paranoia and the dramatic measures he took against his many enemies, both real and imagined. One such action, according to the *Chronographia* by Middle Byzantine author Michael Psellos, was the replacement of the existing imperial lifeguard with Scythian mercenaries. The structure of the palace guard at the time suggests that these replaced guards were probably Varangians, who may have been offended at losing their high placement next to the throne; moreover, it would not be unreasonable to imagine that Michael, who saw enemies everywhere and was in the habit of imprisoning, blinding, and/or castrating these perceived opponents, may have viewed Haraldr in particular, a foreign prince and Varangian leader, as a threat.[27] Although the Varangians are not mentioned by name in this section of the *Chronographia*, both Davidson and Sigfús Blöndal have linked them to the dissatisfied *Tauroskuthai*, Tauro-Scythians, whom Psellos notes were increasingly angered by the emperor's poor rule, and Davidson has pointed out that the mercenaries in the army generally held a poor opinion of Michael, including, presumably, the Varangian Guard.[28] Psellos' contemporary Michael Attaleiates does not mention the change to the imperial life-guard in his *History*, but, unlike Psellos, Attaleiates was not part of the imperial court and did not have insider knowledge of Michael's reign. He does write, however, that political captives were released from jail by protesters during the uprising that overthrew the emperor, adding potential fuel to Davidson's suggestion that Haraldr was among these freed prisoners.[29]

Sverrir Jakobsson has offered an alternative reading, that the hesitation to release Haraldr from both service and Byzantium stemmed from a mistrust of Norse mercenaries in the aftermath of the 1043 Rus' attack on Constantinople.[30] This theory aligns with the *Strategikon*'s description of Haraldr's career, which states that Haraldr requested leave from Emperor Constantine after the death of Michael V. The 1043 siege was a dramatic event in the minds of contemporary Constantinopolitans, as the battle took place in full view of the city, and several authors devote thrilling passages to the Byzantine victory. According to Attaleiates,

> On the first day of the week…the emperor deployed both types of forces [navy and infantry] and he himself sailed up in the imperial barge. He gave the signal for the battle to begin and attacked the enemy. The prows of his ships glowed with Median fire. Engaging with the enemy, he forced them to retreat after burning many of their ships, sending others to the depths with all hands, and taking some captive along with their crews.[31]

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[27] For the replacement of the Varangian Guard under Michael V, see Sigfús Blöndal, *Varangians of Byzantium*, 77.
[28] Blöndal, *Varangians of Byzantium*, 90; H. R. Ellis Davidson, *The Viking Road to Byzantium* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976), 221.
[29] Michael Attaleiates, *The History*, trans. Anthony Kaldellis and Dimitris Krallis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 24-5; Davidson, *Viking Road to Byzantium*, 224. Davidson's theory regarding Haraldr's release during the riots is based on Psellos, not Attaleiates; she does not reference Attaleiates in her discussion of Michael V's reign and ensuing riots.
[30] Sverrir Jakobsson, *Varangians*, 83.
[31] ἐν ἡμέρᾳ πρώτῃ τῆς ἑβδομάδος...ἀνῆλθε γὰρ καὶ αὐτὸς μετὰ τῆς βασιλικὴς νεώς, καὶ τὸ ἐνυάλιον ἀλαλάξαι προστάξας, ἐπῆλθε τοῖς ἐναντίοις, τὰς πρῴρας λελαμπρυσμένας ἔχων τῶν οἰκείων νεῶν τῷ μηδικῷ πυρί καὶ

Psellos similarly observes that "a great massacre of barbarians took place and a veritable stream of blood reddened the sea; one might well believe it came down the rivers off the mainland."[32] Davidson has speculated that a grudge held by the Rus' against Michael V may have led to the 1043 attack; this theory is a stretch, as the attack took place against a different emperor and medieval sources offer a wide range of alternative causes for the conflict.[33] Psellos himself states that the Rus' had been planning an attack since at least the reign of Michael IV. However, it is possible that both explanations of Haraldr's troubles hold truth – that his arrest and escape from prison was the result of Michael V's failed rule, while his difficulties leaving Constantinople occurred in the wake of the 1043 attack. As with so much of Haraldr's career, it is impossible to make a definitive conclusion on the historicity of these events.

The Old Norse sources generally concur that whatever caused his arrest and prevented him from leaving Constantinople in peace was a false charge, a premise that requires some additional context on the part of saga writers. The primary story that pervades the prose renditions of Haraldr's departure is the spurious romance between the Norwegian prince and María, the niece of Empress Zoe, a relationship that creates friction with Zoe, who has taken a shine to him. There is no record of such a niece, nor is there evidence of any shenanigans with the empress, who, although noted by Byzantine sources to have been lascivious in nature with a keen interest in much younger men, was of too high a rank to have associated with a mere mercenary such as Haraldr on such a familiar level. The sagas, however, position Haraldr as an equal to the Byzantine rulers, and combine this status with the common Northern literary motif of the lustful queen. The resulting drama has traditionally been skimmed over by scholars of the Varangians due to its clear fictionality. But from a literary perspective, its prevalence in the Haraldr corpus and common inclusion across the Norse sources indicates that this romance model was a popular trope in the Middle Ages due to its entertaining nature. More importantly, however, the romance forms an instrumental part of the narrative that lays groundwork for the climactic blinding.

The balance between the romance of María and the spurning of Zoe is key to positioning Haraldr between the two women and ensuring he is, for all intents and purposes, on the right side of love. María is a single woman with very few characterizations, a beautiful and young blank slate who is defined entirely by Haraldr's interest in her. She demonstrates some cleverness in one episode by helping Haraldr evade the emperor during a tryst, but she is an overall passive character whose primary purpose is to be wooed, visited, and eventually kidnapped by the hero. However, one notable feature of her persona is her royal blood, a fact that jeopardizes their relationship but also plays into Haraldr's own princely identity – the only match for him in Byzantium is one that is equal to his stature as perceived by his fellow Scandinavians. While Byzantine royals would have been off-limits to him historically, they are the predominant literary option for a future king in his own sagas.

Zoe receives more attention to her characterization, although she too is one-dimensional and highly derivative of other queens and queen-mothers in the saga corpus. Her role is to ignite Haraldr's interest in her and, when that fails, to persecute him unfairly. Haraldr's first encounter

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συρραγεὶς τούτοις φυγεῖν κατηνάγκασε, πολλὰς μὲν τῶν νεῶν κατακαύσας πυρί, ἄλλας αὐτάνδρους καταβαλὼν τῷ βυτῷ, τινὰς δ' αὐτοῖς πλωτῆρσι κεκρατηκώς. Attaleiates, *History*, 34-35.

[32] Γέγονέ τε τῶν βαρβάρων φόνος πολύς καὶ ὥσπερ ἐκ ποταμῶν ἄνωθεν ῥευμάτιον ὡς ἀληθῶς φόνιον τὴν θάλασσαν κατεφοίνισσεν. Michael Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, trans. E.R.A. Sewter (New York: Penguin, 1966), 203; Μιχαήλ Ψελλός, *Χρονογραφία Β*, ed. Vrasidas Karalis (Athens: Ekdoseis Kanake, 2004), 36.

[33] Davidson, *Viking Road to Byzantium*, 222.

with her in *Morkinskinna* sets the tone for their tumultuous relationship – soon after his arrival in Constantinople, she approaches him as he associates with his Varangians and asks for a lock of his hair. He responds by asking her for a sample of her pubic hair, a crude joke to which she does not respond. Although a small moment in the larger scheme of the Varangian sequence, it is the first demonstration of the saga's intent on equalizing the Norwegian and Byzantine thrones. Haraldr is in reality far lower on the social ladder than the empress. But in the world of the sagas, Zoe's status is diminished by her interest in a mere mercenary, while Haraldr's is raised by his impudent (and unpunished) response to a powerful woman. The scales are further tipped by the fact that Zoe is married – morally she is in the wrong for flirting with another man, while the unattached Haraldr has surpassed the Greek king in desirability. Needless to say, there is no mention of Haraldr's pending engagement to the Rus' princess Ellisif.[34]

The plot thickens as Haraldr develops his fondness for María, which in turn spurs Zoe to revenge as she and the Byzantine general Gyrgir repeatedly try to turn the emperor against him and catch him in the act. In one of the more climactic scenes from *Morkinskinna*, Haraldr is visiting María when the emperor arrives, tipped off by Gyrgir, to see if the rumors about this illicit romance are true. María deduces that something is amiss, and instructs Haraldr to escape via the sea below the chamber. The emperor finds her alone, and concludes that Haraldr is innocent. The image of the suspicious courtier attempting to rat out secret lovers to an unbelieving king is a prevalent feature in the romances as a popular source of entertainment to medieval audiences, and the later merging of this Haraldr episode with the classic oath scene from the Norse Tristan translations in *Grettis saga* ties these parallels even tighter. The excitement of Haraldr's close call combined with the loyalty of the princess and the outsmarting of the emperor furthers the young prince's cause as a scrappy but victorious hero always destined to come out on top – a fitting claimant to the Norwegian throne, and also the kind of man one might welcome in stories told around the longhouse hearth in the dead of winter.

Within the context of Haraldr's sagas, his romance with María is clearly designed for entertainment, but also taps into two larger themes in his Byzantine adventures. The first is the already-mentioned model of Haraldr as an equal to, and conqueror of, the Byzantines, which not only features in his confrontations with Zoe, but also in his dealings with Gyrgir and ultimately the emperor himself in the blinding episode. An notable feature of this narrative thread is that all the Byzantines are said to be related – according to the sagas, María and Gyrgir are both blood relatives of Zoe. These relations are historically false, as we know that María was not real, and that Gyrgir, known to the Byzantines as the famed general Georgios Maniaces, came from a southern Anatolian family and was not of imperial lineage.[35] The fictional ties between these characters likely stem from the general Scandinavian interest in genealogy, but may also invoke similar international kinship systems seen among enemies in the romances, such as the wide-ranging family of giants in *Tristrams saga* or the trolls in *Ála flekks saga*.

The other theme that crops up during Haraldr's romantic escapades is his use of trickery in solving problems. These tactics first appear in his confrontation with Gyrgir over camping arrangements, in which Haraldr outwits the general by casting rigged lots. The scene shows him making a fool of a man who, according to the organization of the army, should be his distant

[34] The fact that Haraldr has been attempting to win the hand of Jarizleifr's daughter Ellisif goes unmentioned throughout the Byzantine chapters in all sources.
[35] Davidson, *Viking Road to Byzantium*, 211.

superior; but, as in his dealings with Zoe, Haraldr manages to run rings around him, this time through use of deception. His avoidance of the emperor during the visit with María relies more on speed than wit, but is nevertheless based in trickery, a vanishing act that is perhaps not expected of such a bold warrior and leader – but this is Byzantium, where the normal Norse rules of engagement don't always apply.

Haraldr's eventual arrest at the behest of the Byzantine emperor is not attributed to the emperor's own decision, but to Zoe's machinations:

> Ok nú gerisk af nýju óþokki dróttningar Zóe til Norðbrikts, ok var sú sǫk in fyrsta gefin honum at hann hefði gull þat er átti Grikkjakonungr ok hefði eigi upp greitt sem lǫg stóðu til ok hefði sjálfr meira af eignazk en konungs leyfi væri til, ok sagt at á þeiri stundu er hann var yfir Grikkjaher hefði nær ekki gull komit af galeiðum. En ǫnnur sǫk var þó reyndar til fundin með þessi at Zóe dróttning kenndi Norðbrikt at hann tíðkaðisk Máríu jungfrú, ok hennar hafði Norðbrikt beðit ok fengit eigi ráðit. Því at þat segja menn, þeir er verit hafa í Miklagarði, at Væringja minni svá frásagnar at Zóe sjálf vildi hafa hann.
>
> At this time Empress Zoe's dislike of Norðbrikt was rekindled. The first charge against him was that he kept the gold that belonged to the Byzantine Emperor and had not made payment according to the law, but had rather taken a larger portion than the emperor sanctioned. They said that during the time that he commanded the Byzantine army the galleys in his command had contributed almost no gold. The second charge brought against him was that Empress Zoe accused Norðbrikt of being familiar with the maiden Maria. Norðbrikt had asked for her hand in marriage but had not been granted it. People who have been in Constantinople within memory of the Varangians state that Zoe herself wanted him.[36]

The quick escalation of Haraldr's romance into a denied marriage proposal is omitted in *Heimskringla*, but the false charges and "true" cause of his misfortunes attributed to these oral sources – Zoe's lust – solidify the empress's role as enemy number one. While before she had been an inconvenience, now she has manipulated the law for a petty and unjustified cause with very real consequences. It is only natural that this romance-induce injustice triggers Haraldr's thoughts of revenge – but first, he has a dragon to fight.

The Dragon

The dragon living in the imperial prison does not appear in all versions of Haraldr's Varangian career: the story is omitted from *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna*, but included in *Morkinskinna, Flateyjarbók,* and *Gesta Danorum*. There is very little overt supernatural content in the Haraldr texts, and thus in many respects the dragon fight stands out in both subject and execution. The sequence does, however, fit within the larger Norse corpus and operates on several levels within Haraldr's adventures, displaying him as a canny tactician, a powerful fighter, and a champion favored by God.

Although the Haraldr narratives remain within the geographically known world, their eastern setting taps into the larger dual framework of the East visible in the Norse corpus. There were two versions of the East active in the Scandinavian worldview during this era – the traditional Eastern Europe known to the peripatetic Norse and the theoretical Christian Far East introduced

[36] *ÍF* XXIII, 109; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna,* 145.

during the conversion – that seem to have merged in its depiction in the written sources. The eastern region is both distant enough that its contents could not be immediately verified, and close enough that it was still relevant in everyday life. Although Norse travelers visited it regularly, there remained an air of esoteric mystique around that part of the world for the Scandinavians, a combination of reality and imagination that is explored in the saga corpus – the East represents the edge of the map, both literally and figuratively, and, like other distant regions like the far North and the western frontier in Vinland, holds its share of otherworldly surprises. While the precise nature of the East changes from text to text, there are consistent themes present throughout these sources that speak to a wider image of the region known and recognized across Scandinavia.

The most prominent supernatural associations with the East are found in the mythology and the *fornaldarsögur*. The euhemeristic migration myths in *Gesta Danorum*, *Ynglingasaga*, and *Snorra Edda* place the origin of the Norse pantheon in the East – in Byzantium, a Black Sea-adjacent Ásgarðr, and Troy respectively. Although these three texts individually provide only a limited image of the East, together they appear to be drawing from a similar pool of knowledge. The East is a place of unimaginable wealth – Byzantium is rich and has many inhabitants; Ásgarðr is the powerful capital of a larger nation; Troy is huge and resource-heavy, and the site of many marvelous buildings. The region is home to strange peoples and stranger customs: odd religions, many foreign languages, and the habitat of sorcerers and seers. But the East is also accessible: the locations are real, and the gods themselves, now rendered as humans, could travel west to Scandinavia, a familiar journey reversed by so many Norse travelers. Finally, it is imbued with the ultimate Scandinavian narrative – that of myth.

The *fornaldarsögur* dealing with the East draw heavily on similar images, the most prominent of which are *Yngvars saga víðfǫrla* and *Eireks saga víðfǫrla*. Bookending the euhemerism myths chronologically, the sagas, despite their surface differences, unite in their representation of the East. Both narratives, like the Varangian stories, have two geographical phases. The first stage is through known territory: Yngvarr travels from Sweden to Holmgarðr, and Eirekr from Norway to Constantinople. At these checkpoints, they obtain knowledge that either inspires or furthers their desire to find Paradise, a decision that leads them deeper into the larger Austrríki, taking them beyond known paths and opening the door for the fantastic to appear. For both characters, this means encounters with foreign peoples and strange animals; reversals of the natural order; the appearance of the monstrous in the form of giants and dragons; and great rewards of knowledge and gold. At the same time, the strong presence of Christianity pervades these sagas – they are both seeking the Christian Paradise, and Yngvarr is as much a missionary as an explorer, while *Eireks saga* emphasizes theological discourse throughout its brief narrative. These sagas, as with the euhemerization myths, continue to merge the two traditions of the East into narratives that are distinct from each but still exist within the same worldview.

Although the supernatural is not immensely prevalent in Byzantium in Haraldr's various life narratives, its appearance in this setting is not terribly surprising. While its presence in most sources is limited to the St. Óláfr miracle and the dragon fight at the end of Haraldr's Varangian tenure, *Flateyjarbók* preserves an additional story of serpentine magic in the first adventure of

his Byzantine career.[37] The story of Haraldr's defeat of the gold-hued man is strange, but is not thematically out of line with the rest of the saga, and in fact sets an excellent precedent for the story that is to follow. In sum, a Varangian called Erlendr asks Haraldr for advice when his wife goes mad. Upon investigation, Haraldr discovers that a strange man, beautiful and with gold-hued skin, has been visiting her at night and giving her precious gifts. He commissions the creation and blessing of a golden cross, and instructs her to gift it to the man on his next visit; the Varangians stake out the room and witness the man disappear into thin air when he touches the cross. Haraldr declares that "þessi maðr muni verit hafa fyrr meirr nǫkkurr vándr maðr ok orðinn nú at ormi ok mun liggja nǫkkurr á gulli" [this person used to be a wicked man and has turned into a serpent lying on a heap of gold].[38] He inquires about local snake nests, whereupon he takes his men to a nearby cliff and lights a bonfire, summoning the creature before it disappears. Although they fail to kill the beast, "ekki ørvænt þó orðit at honum hefði leizk bálit ok myndi eptir þetta fœra byggð sína" [it seemed not unlikely that the pyre had caused the serpent some grief and that he would move his lair].[39] That night, a local man has a dream in which he lends his boat to a man in exchange for payment left on board; the following day, he finds his boat recently used and a gold goblet awaiting him in the prow.[40]

The story offers the first demonstration of Haraldr's leadership while in Byzantium – we have been told that he effectively led mercenaries in Rus', but here we finally witness him in action. Despite being a newcomer to the Varangian Guard, his fellow mercenaries already trust him to the point that they ask him for help "alls þótti vera spakr maðr ok vitr" [since he seemed a wise and prudent man], an early sign of the young prince's charisma that draws loyal followers with little incentive.[41] Upon investigating the mad woman, Haraldr demonstrates his trademark wisdom, later a hallmark of his reign, in order to compassionately communicate with her. Although he can be quick to anger, his sagas consistently characterize him as a man who, when he takes the time to think things through, is notably wise in settling matters in a way that suits everyone. In the case of Erlendr's wife, Haraldr approaches her gently and succeeds in obtaining necessary information about the situation. His inclination to resolve the issue via the golden cross speaks to his identity as a Christian royal, reminding us of his relation to St. Óláfr and presaging his later pilgrimage to Jerusalem and rescue from prison by his holy half-brother. The revelation of the man as a gold-obsessed serpent is a recognizable variant of *Vǫlsunga saga*'s Fáfnir, and in line with two key features of the East in the Norse imagination: lots of gold and lots of dragons. Haraldr's failure to fully destroy the creature is curious, but does not seem to matter to anyone in the story – following the departure of the creature, "þótti ǫllum mǫnnum mikit vert um speki Norðbrikts, ok var hann vinsæll af Væringjum. Ok skilja þat allir at hann er mikils háttar maðr í ǫllum atgørðum ok ráðum sínum" [everyone was much impressed by

[37] Given the story's use of Haraldr's moniker Norðbrikt and its inclusion in *Flateyjarbók*, the narrative was most likely recorded in *Morkinskinna*, but unfortunately occurs in the manuscript's lacuna.
[38] *ÍF* XXIII, 90; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 133.
[39] *ÍF* XXIII, 90; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 133.
[40] The gifting of treasure from supernatural beings is a folklore motif found across cultures. Examples from the sagas include the golden ring given to Hrólfr by an *álfkona* for aiding her daughter in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, and the gold, silver, and weapons granted to Qrvar-Oddr by the giant Hildur for helping him catch a bear in *Qrvar-Odds saga*.
[41] *ÍF* XXIII, 90; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 133. The figure of Erlendr is intriguing in that he has a wife in Byzantium. Whether this woman is Norse or Byzantine, and what language she is speaking while conversing with Haraldr, is unknown; although it is certainly plausible that Varangians stayed in Byzantium and married Byzantine women, that is a life choice that receives very little attention in the sagas.

Norðbrikt's wisdom, and he became popular among the Varangians. Everyone grasped that he was an estimable man in all his accomplishments and counsel].[42] Haraldr's ability to resolve the issue is clearly the focus of this praise, but one might also consider his unquestioned loyalty to his own men, whom he took great time and effort to aid despite knowing them for only a short while.

The slaying of the prison dragon is more visceral in its combat scene, and emphasizes Haraldr's martial prowess and mind for military tactics over the wisdom and insight needed to chase off the gold-hued man. According to *Morkinskinna*, Haraldr, armed with only a small knife, a stick, and a sheepskin cloak, orchestrates the takedown of the dragon by strategically deploying his men:

> "Þu, Halldórr," segir hann, "skalt fara á hǫfuðit hans, en Úlfr er sterkastr, hann skal fara á sporðinn, því at þar er aflit ormanna. En ek hefi á mér tygilkníf lítinn þann. Mun ek ganga at honum framan ok vinna á honum þar sem mér sýnisk, því at minni treystumk ek hamingjunni bezt ok gæfunni at stýra knífinum."
>
> "You, Halldórr," he said, "should attack its head. Úlfr is the strongest and should attack the tail, because that is where the strength of serpents resides. I have a little knife and will go at him from the front and strike where it seems best because I have the greatest confidence in my own luck and good fortune in aiming the knife."[43]

The conquering of the serpent reflects Sigurðr's slaying of Fáfnir in *Vǫlsunga saga* in its employment of the surprise attack. While Sigurðr hides in a ditch and strikes Fáfnir from below, Haraldr and his men take advantage of the fact that their own dragon is sleeping at the time of their arrest and strike it prematurely. The Norwegian prince uses the sheepskin to soak up the inevitable poison emitted by the creature, and attacks its flank with the knife. The dragon is dispatched after a brief and humorous struggle – "en svá er hann sterkr at stundum hefir hann á lopti tvá hverja" [it was so powerful that it sometimes tossed two of them in the air simultaneously].[44]

The dragon slaying is also included in *Gesta Danorum* as the primary focus of Saxo's brief rendition of Haraldr's Varangian career. In this version, Haraldr bribes the warden to toss fish into the dungeon before their arrival, both to offset the dragon's hunger for fresh meat and to provide the prisoners with a little light, reflected off the fish scales, with which to see the beast. Accompanied by only one unnamed man who seemingly does nothing throughout the fight, Haraldr is devoid of his stick and sheepskin cloak, instead wearing only a loincloth ("for modesty's sake") in which he somehow manages to conceal a barber's razor. The corpses here

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[42] *ÍF* XXIII, 90-91; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 134.
[43] *ÍF* XXIII, 110; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 146. Halldórr's role in this attack is referenced in *Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar inn fyrri*, when he is mocked by Kali, a relative of Einar þambarskelfir: "Ekki em ek hræddr við hann mǫrlanda, þó at hann hafi mikil metorð af þér, því at vér hǫfum spurt, at hann var settr í dýflizu út á Grikklandi ok lá þar á ormshala athafnarlauss ok ekki megandi" [I am not afraid of that suet-eating Icelander, even though you regard him highly, for we have heard that he was thrown into a dungeon over in Greece, where he lay on the tail of a snake unable to do a thing]. Halldórr promptly kills Kali for this insult. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., "Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar inn fyrri," in *Laxdœla saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit V (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1934), 249-260 at 253; Anthony Maxwell, trans., "The Tale of Halldorr Snorrason I," in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* V (Reykjavik: Bókaútgáfan Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), 219-223 at 219.
[44] *ÍF* XXIII, 111; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 146.

are skeletal rather than rotting, and Haraldr uses some of their bones with his linen to make a cudgel. Unlike the *Morkinskinna* rendition, the dragon is fully awake upon their arrival:

> Cumque allapsus draco in obiectam perquam auide predam irrueret, dorsum eius ueloci saltu conscendens cultellum tonsorium, quem secum forte tectum attulerat, umbilico, qui solus ferro patebat, immersit.
>
> As soon as the dragon had slithered in, it rushed with immense voracity on the prey before it, but Harald took a flying leap and landed on its back; next he plunged a barber's razor, which he had chanced to have concealed on his person, into the reptile's navel, the only part penetrable by steel.[45]

This feat is so impressive that Saxo, despite his profound dislike of Haraldr, makes special note of the razor's fate: "Hunc cultellum Waldemarus rex res gestas cognoscendi ac referendi cupidissimus rubigine exesum uixque secandi sufficientem ministerio familiaribus sepe monstrabat" [This blade, now corroded by rust and scarcely fit to cut anything at all, was frequently shown by King Valdemar to his friends, for he was a man who was extremely keen to know about adventures and to relate them].[46]

The skill with which Haraldr and his companions dispatch the dragon is compounded by the fact that this is practically the only time in the Varangian narratives that we see Haraldr in combat. The poems and sagas glorify his deeds on the battlefield, and the results of his warfare are enumerated as proof of his effectiveness. But most of the conflicts depicted in further detail about this period in his life are ones in which he emerges victorious through trickery or resolves without the need for violence, such as the conquering of Sicilian towns, the lot casting against Gyrgir, and the incident with the gold-hued man. The sagas in particular tell us that he is a fearsome fighter in his younger years, but prefer to show his intellect instead. The dungeon battle is therefore not only the ultimate martial victory for a budding Norse hero due to the general reverence that comes with dragon-slaying, but also provides a source of insight into his physical and mental capabilities in a combat situation. The reverence for Haraldr's warrior reputation is further emphasized in these sources by his lack of armor and proper weapons – the young prince proves deadly against even the greatest foe in spite of his nakedness.[47]

The successful killing of the dragon is given further credence in *Morkinskinna* by its close association with prayer, and may be considered, in its own context, the last of three incidents centered on Haraldr's relationship with Christianity. The Varangian episodes, preoccupied by action, do not generally dispense much energy on the prince's piety, but Óláfr's appearance on a Varangian battlefield and Haraldr's pilgrimage to Jerusalem set up his reliance on prayer in the final boss battle in the dungeon. In the first scene, preserved in *Flateyjarbók* amidst *Morkinskinna*'s lacuna, Haraldr and his men are challenged by the emperor and Gyrgir to prove themselves in a battle against heathens. They pray to Óláfr and declare they will build a church in his honor in Constantinople should they win the fight:

> En þeir heiðingjar hǫfðu fyrir her sínum marga konunga, ok var blindr einn, ok var sá þó vitrastr...er þeir vildu þeim fram hleypa á Væringja þá urðu þær allar fastar. En í ǫðru lagi þá sér sá inn blindi maðr, er konungr var, mann ríða fyrir Væringjaher á hvítum hesti, ok af þessum

[45] Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 790-91.
[46] Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, 790-91.
[47] William of Malmesbury, who places a lion in the dungeon rather than a dragon, states that Haraldr strangled the creature bare-handed, indicating a wider tradition of this depiction of the prince; see n. 24.

> manni stóð heiðingjum svá mikil ógn at margar konungarnir flýðu, en sex urðu eptir. Ok lýkr með því at Væringjar hǫfðu sigr...
>
> The heathens had a number of kings commanding their army. One was blind, but he was the wisest of them…when they launched their charge against the Varangians, they all got tangled. By contrast, the blind king miraculously saw a man riding a white horse before the Varangian army, and the heathens stood in such fear of this man that many of the kings fled, while only six remained. It ended with the Varangians winning the victory.[48]

This is Óláfr's second appearance on a white horse in the same manuscript – he previously aided his son Magnús at the Battle of Hlýrskógsheiðr, and the symmetrical blessing of the two men adds further legitimacy to Haraldr and foreshadows his rise as Magnús' co-ruler.[49] The saint's participation in battle also unites Haraldr's legacy of warfare with his burgeoning identity as a Christian king.

His dedication to the faith is soon tested when the emperor moves to prevent the Varangians from dedicating their new church to Óláfr. He first bans them from using firewood to prepare their feast, but Haraldr sidesteps this problem by using "skipræ ok svǫrð ok valhnetr" [ship wreckage, brush, and walnuts].[50] The emperor subsequently removes the clapper from the church's bell so it cannot ring. Óláfr and Haraldr work together to overcome this final obstacle: the saint scares the Byzantine with a nightmare and infects him with a terrible sickness, leading the emperor to ask Haraldr how he can be saved. The young prince advises him to replace the clapper, which brings an end to the troubles. Haraldr tells the emperor to revere Óláfr for the rest of his life: "En konungr hét því ok endaði þat vel síðan" [This the emperor promised to do, and he kept his promise faithfully].[51] The implication that Haraldr compels the Byzantine ruler into the saint worship of his brother is a powerful addition to the construction of his character – not only do he and Óláfr mutually respect one another enough to solve problems in tandem, but Haraldr's piety is so great that he can sway even the emperor of a major center of Christianity in religious practice.

Several adventures later, Haraldr revisits his Christian identity and embarks on a journey to Jerusalem. Damico has noted that the final destination for Norse travelers in the East is generally determined in the sagas by the purpose of the voyage – the pilgrim aims for Jerusalem, while the "warrior-adventurer" seeks Constantinople.[52] Given the proximity of the two cities, however, many travelers visit both, even if they prioritize one over the other. Haraldr is the ultimate warrior-adventurer, and so Constantinople is his main base in the Mediterranean. However, his eventual trip to Jerusalem is preserved in two stanzas from Stúfr Þórðarson's *Stúfsdrápa*:

> 2. Fór ofrhugi inn øfri
> eggdjarfr und sik leggja

[48] *ÍF* XXIII, 95; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 136. s
[49] A similar scene is found in *Heimskringla*'s *Hákonar saga herðibreiðs*, in which a small group of Varangians vows to raise a church to St. Óláfr if they are victorious in a battle against great odds. The king of the heathens observes a distinguished man on a white horse leading the army, the enemy troops scatter in fear, and the Varangians win the day. Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, edited by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk Fornrit XXVIII (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1962), 371-72.
[50] *ÍF* XXIII, 96; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 137.
[51] *ÍF* XXIII, 96; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 137.
[52] Damico, "Voyage to Byzantium," 114. There are exceptions to this model, as in *Eireks saga víðfǫrla*, in which Eirekr seeks Constantinople, not Jerusalem, as the ultimate center of Christian knowledge.

– fold vas víga valdi
virk – Jórsali ór Girkjum.
Ok með ærnu ríki
óbrunnin kom gunnar
heimil jǫrð und herði.
Hafi ríks, þars vel líkar.

The very reckless one set out, sword-daring, from the Greeks to subjugate Jerusalem; the country was submissive to the controller of combats [WARRIOR]. And because of his abundant force the land was delivered as his due, unburned, to the strengthener of battle [WARRIOR]. May the powerful have, where it is good to be…

3. Stóðu rôð af reiði
(rann þat svikamǫnnum)
Egða grams á ýmsum
(orð) Jórðánar borðum.
Enn fyr afgerð sanna
– illa gat frá stilli –
þjóð fekk vísan váða.
Vist of aldr með Kristi.

The powers of the prince of the Egðir [NORWEGIAN KING = Haraldr] prevailed in wrath on both banks of the River Jordan; that news put an end to the traitors. And people got inevitable punishment for proven crimes; they were in dire straits because of the ruler. …Residence forever with Christ…[53]

In these verses, *Stúfsdrápa* presents Haraldr's pilgrimage as a martial victory, setting the stage with particularly strong combative language in the first helming of stanza 2. The image of Haraldr crusading against evil in Jerusalem with the aim to *leggja und sik* "subjugate" the Holy Land suits an encomium devoted to his conquests, although the reality of such an attack is clearly tenuous.

The final half-stanza on the punishment of people who had committed crimes seems to be in reference to the first helming's discussion of traitors at the Jordan. The phrase *illa gat frá stilli*, however, bears striking similarity to the line *gǫtu illa fór stillir* from stanza 7 of Þjóðólfr Arnórsson's *Sexstefja*, on the blinding of the Byzantine emperor. The phrases differ only in the direction of bad tidings and the associated identity of the *stillir* – in *Stúfsdrápa* the term refers to the perpetrator, Haraldr, while in *Sexstefja* it is the victim, the emperor. The few stanzas that survive from *Stúfsdrápa* do not mention the blinding; neither is there mention of Jerusalem in the extant portions of *Sexstefja*. However, the precise construction of the two lines exists only in these poems out of the surviving skaldic corpus, and both stanzas also use similar kennings for Haraldr as "lord of the Egðir," *gramr/allvaldr Egða*. These parallels are striking when considering that both verses are about Haraldr's Varangian career, composed in his court, by two Icelandic skalds who likely knew each other personally, and may indicate stylistic influences and poetic dialogue among Haraldr's encomiasts.

The prosimetrum in the kings' sagas slightly expands the information given by Stúfr, but offers few additional details. First Haraldr travels with his troops to Jerusalem and conquers the

[53] Kari Ellen Gade, ed., *SkP* II, 352-354

land: “Ok hvar sem hann fór um Jórsalaland váru náliga allar borgir ok staðir upp gefnir í hans vald; svá fylgði honum mikil hamingja” [And wherever he went in the territory of Jerusalem, almost all the fortified towns and settlements surrendered to his authority, so great was his good fortune].[54] What he does with his conquered lands once his journey is complete is left unsaid, as with his other conquests throughout the Mediterranean. He then visits the River Jordan, where he bathes and, as mentioned by *Stúfsdrápa*, clears out bandits and robbers to make the way safe for pilgrims. Finally, he donates an immense amount of gold and treasures, “svá mikit fé í gulli at engi kann markatal at” [so much money in gold that no one can calculate the amount], before returning to Constantinople.[55]

The Jerusalem sequence is a significant reminder for the audience that Haraldr is a Christian king, and the sagas capitalize on this timing by reintroducing Óláfr immediately following his brother’s return to Constantinople. *Morkinskinna* is particularly invested in the saint’s role during the prison sequence, containing a moment in which Haraldr seems to see Óláfr in the street on his way to the dungeon. Then, as he and his comrades sit on half-eaten corpses to take stock of their plight, Halldórr asks what they should do about the dragon, to which Haraldr responds: “Heita á Óláf konung, bróður minn, at hann leysi oss” [We should invoke my brother Saint Óláfr and ask him to release us].[56] The three men pray, and although we are not told the details of these prayers, their results are soon made clear – “með hamingju ok trausti Óláfs konungs ok hvatleik Haralds ok tjónaði liðsmanna hans þá sœfisk ormr, ok fá þeir hlaðit honum” [with the luck and aid of King Óláfr and Haraldr’s own valor, as well as the support of his followers, the serpent was overcome and they were able to get the best of it].[57] The partial attribution to the saint regarding their success against the beast is notable in its equal inclusion among the other reasons given for the victory, all three of which are important qualities for a king to possess – piety to the extent that he is favored by a saint, a strong fighting spirit, and the charisma to lead a loyal retinue, reinforced by the wisdom to correctly apply their strengths during the fight.

Both the dragon and Jerusalem sequences make much of Haraldr’s *hamingja* “luck.” While in the Holy Land, his successes are due to *mikil hamingja*; he predicts that his own *hamingjunni bezt ok gœfunni* will allow them to conquer the dragon, and is proven correct when the beast is felled *með hamingju*, among other boons. The repetition of the word and concept in back-to-back scenes of battle draws further attention to Haraldr’s martial prowess – he is not merely talented in combat, but he is also gifted with the good fortune of victory. The embedding of this feature of his character in these early chapters again operates to predict and explain the success of his coming rule, and the dual acknowledgement of his luck by both the author and Haraldr himself serves to emphasize its importance in the construction of his character.

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[54] *ÍF* XXIII, 106-7; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 144.
[55] *ÍF* XXIII, 108; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 144.
Although more detailed about his actions in the Holy Land, Haraldr’s expedition bears some similarities to the later pilgrimage of King Sigurðr Jórsalafari. The focus of Sigurðr’s reception in both Jerusalem and Constantinople is on his position as a monarch apropos of local rulers King Baldvini (Baldwin I) and Emperor Kirjalax (Alexios I Komnenos), with emphasis placed on their mutual attempts to test and impress each other with riches. Like Haraldr, however, Sigurðr bathes in the River Jordan and engages in warfare, this time alongside Baldvini to capture the city of Sidon, and the stanzas on Haraldr and Sigurðr’s travels both highlight the men’s status as warriors.
[56] *ÍF* XXIII, 110; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 146.
[57] *ÍF* XXIII, 111; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 146.

Although the dragon's defeat does not immediately lead to liberation, Óláfr doesn't keep them waiting for long. That night a local woman visits their prison tower. The saint has come to her in a dream, offering to cure her illness in exchange for the rescue of Haraldr and his men. Haraldr's role as a leader is again emphasized in the rescue, as he ensures that his companions are the first to be pulled out of the dungeon, while he brings up the rear. *Morkinskinna* includes a curious point here, as the woman explains that the saint "kvazk ekki vilja at bróðir hans væri hér píndr í Suðrlǫndum, þó at honum væri jafnan eigi at skapi hans tiltekjur" [said that he did not want his brother to be tormented in southern lands, even though his designs were not always agreeable to him].[58] This mild rebuke recalls a comment during Haraldr's visit to Jerusalem, a journey which he apparently makes because he "vill bœta sínar afgørðir við Guð" [wishes to atone for his transgressions against God].[59] It is not clear what actions he is addressing or which of his deeds have rubbed Óláfr the wrong way, but the leniency shown toward these lapses by the sagas' authors seem to set a precedent of encouraging intended audiences to show a degree of forgiveness to a king who lived in another time and who therefore may not always align with contemporary Christian sensibilities.

Taken together, the prison episode advances the elements of romance, combat, and piety, three features that have featured independently in the story so far, but are now interwoven into a single narrative and given greater weight in combination. This is the crescendo leading up to the inevitable climax – a wrong committed against the hero, a valorous combat victory, and subsequent validation by a saint. Now Haraldr is free, but things are still out of balance. With God and the Varangians on his side, the scales are primed for tipping back in the young prince's favor.

The Blinding

On the day after Easter in the year 1042, the Byzantine emperor Michael V Kalaphates was blinded in the streets of Constantinople. This act of mutilation, committed against the backdrop of a city-wide uprising, marked the end of a disastrous four month reign, and added yet another emperor to the growing list of short-lived rulers to take the throne during the 11th century. Byzantine eyewitnesses, captivated by the drama and violence of the event, recorded their analyses of Michael's rule through character studies, attempting to rationalize his poor behavior and decisions that led to his disastrous fate against the backdrop of rebellion. In distant Scandinavia, however, his downfall was immortalized as the climactic event in the Varangian career of Haraldr Sigurðarson. The scene of the attested blinding of Michael V operates as an historical event recast in the sagas as a tale of vengeance, converted into a fitting product of a corpus famed for its feud cycles. Although political blinding was an established practice in Middle Byzantium, however, it was rarely performed in Scandinavia, making Haraldr's method of revenge a relative anomaly within the context of Norse behavior. Two centuries after the maiming, Norse sources depict the blinding as the peak of the clash between Haraldr and the emperor, an interpretation that, informed by its new Scandinavian context, recasts the act as one of gendered violence through symbolic castration. The preservation and transformation of the blinding of Michael V across geographical and temporal boundaries is thus captured by two

[58] *ÍF* XXIII, 111; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 146.
[59] *ÍF* XXIII, 106; adapted from Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 144.

different literary traditions to achieve separate ends – the first in 11th century Constantinople, and the second in 13th century Iceland.

The Byzantine Sources

Michael V Kalaphates ruled for only four months in 1041-42, and is thus often skimmed over in both medieval and modern histories. Two notable Middle Byzantine writers of the 11th century, however, lived through and recorded his reign as eyewitnesses. While these sources do not reference Haraldr or the Varangians directly in their narratives of Michael, they nevertheless offer a window into events that Haraldr may have experienced. Michael Psellos' *Chronographia* and Michael Attaleiates' *History* both seek to explain why Michael was blinded, but, unlike the Scandinavian sources, the scene of blinding is not the anticipated climax of the narrative, but rather the inevitable result of a demonstrably weak and unstable reign. Thus, keeping their descriptions of the act itself to a minimum, Psellos and Attaleiates instead delve into what made Michael a bad ruler, and while both ultimately agree that his core character is to blame, they arrive at this conclusion through different paths.

Psellos (1018-1081) is one of the more extraordinary personalities of the Middle Byzantine period. A product of the then developing Constantinopolitan intellectual middle class, Psellos displayed extraordinary capacity for learning early in life, absorbing, by his mid-teens, all manner of subjects from philosophy and theology to medicine and astrology.[60] During the reign of Michael IV, the young luminary, by merit of his education rather than his rank, was appointed as an imperial secretary, and quickly integrated himself into palace culture.[61] At the age of 24, still working in the imperial court, he had a front row seat to the downfall of Michael V, a narrative which he preserved in his most famous work, the *Chronographia*, likely composed during the reign of Constantine X Doukas (r.1059-1067).[62]

The *Chronographia* appears, at first glance, to be a history of fourteen Byzantine rulers from Basil II to Michael VII Doukas – however, the genre of "history" with regard to this work is debatable, as the text skims over and even omits major events taking place in the empire in favor of biographies and encomia of rulers and their associates.[63] Furthermore, Psellos himself maintains a strong presence throughout the work. As Warren Treadgold has noted, "of the fourteen emperors and empresses who ruled during these years, Psellus lived under all fourteen, met all but two, served all but three, and was well acquainted with all but five."[64] As a result, his text is both intimate and circumspect – he has the details to portray these figures in great depth, but elements of partisanship, concern over his own position, or both prevent him from presenting entirely unbiased perspectives in his depiction of his subjects.[65] He also frequently includes his

[60] Warren Treadgold, *The Middle Byzantine Historians* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 273.
[61] Ibid. 273.
[62] Ibid. 276; Frederick Lauritzen, *The Depiction of Character in the Chronographia of Michael Psellos* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013), 14.
[63] Stratis Papaioannou, *Michael Psellos: Rhetoric and Authorship in Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1-2; Treadgold, *Middle Byzantine Historians*, 296.
[64] Treadgold, *Middle Byzantine Historians*, 289.
[65] George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 316. Treadgold has pointed out that "as a skillful courtier under a series of insecure absolute monarchs, Psellus could

own personal stories to relate the events he describes, keeping himself visible on the page in the capacity of a professional intellectual. Throughout his work, as observed by Stratis Papaioannou, "either loudly or tacitly, yet with sure persistence, he draws the reader's attention away from the *what*, toward the *who* of the discourse."[66]

The presence of the author saturates the *Chronographia*'s section on Michael V. Toward the beginning of his narrative of Michael's rule, Psellos offers an overview of the young emperor's personality – at this time Psellos was a secretary in Michael's court and had interacted with him personally. The resulting description is a troubling portrait of a volatile and unsteady ruler. In disposition, Michael was prone to quick changes of mind and temper – he might condemn a man to torture one day, and dine with him the next, while at the same time acting "a slave to his anger, changeable, stirred to hatred and wrath by any chance happening."[67] Moreover, Psellos highlights Michael's attitude toward his own position as emperor – he cowers when things go wrong, but "[throws] off the mask of servility" when his fortunes turn again.[68]

Frederick Lauritzen has divided Psellos' descriptions of rulers throughout the *Chronographia* into two categories, "that which constitutes the person and that which appears."[69] He further breaks down these two halves: the "inner person" consists of soul [ψυχή] and mind [γνώμη], and the outer person consists of manner [ἦθος] and appearance [εἶδος]. Within Lauritzen's model, Psellos' primary interests when it comes to defining character are the "inner" elements of soul and mind, because they are "the two aspects of the person which are least affected by the outside world…For Psellos they are something with which one is born. Thus personality is rooted in the soul and mind of the person."[70] If the inner person, therefore, is flawed, then the root of the entire person is flawed, a perspective visible particularly in Psellos' comments regarding the soul – if, as Lauritzen argues, the soul is consistent and its will is strong, then the character is strong; but "one of Psellos' worst criticisms of a person is that of being inconsistent" – the Greek term Lauritzen refers to is ποικιλότης, here meaning "variable."[71] This is the description awarded to Michael V: "This man was ever changing [ποκίλον] in life and his many appearances and their swift changes were the defining features of his soul."[72]

Moreover, not only is Michael inconsistent in his soul, but the relationship between his inner person and outer person as a whole is also erratic. As part of Michael's introduction in the *Chronographia*, Psellos states that "he had an extraordinary flair for concealing 'the fire beneath

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afford neither complete candor nor a reputation for deception; thus we should neither take everything he says at face value nor reject it without a good reason." Treadgold, *Middle Byzantine Historians*, 272.

[66] Papaioannou continues: "Just the pronoun 'I,' while it may not always be used in a self-referential fashion, appears approximately 1,500 times in his works." Papaioannou, *Michael Psellos*, 2.

[67] Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, 125-6. ὀργῆς τε γὰρ ἥττων ἦν καὶ ἄνθρωπος εὐμετάβολος, καὶ τὸ τυχὸν πρᾶγμα εἰς μῖσος αὐτὸν καὶ ὀργὴν ἀνερρίπιζεν. Ψελλός, *Χρονογραφία Α*, 254.

[68] ἀνελευθέρᾳ τε ψυχῇ χρώμενος. Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, 126. Ψελλός, *Χρονογραφία Α*, 252.

[69] Lauritzen, *Depiction of Character*, 35.

[70] Ibid. 36. Psellos also uses εὐμετάβολος, defined in Liddell-Scott-Jones as "changeable," in describing Michael; see for example n. 67. Lauritzen has also pointed out that parentage, another quality into which one is born, is also occasionally taken into account, and Michael V is indeed one of the emperors whose parentage is mentioned by Psellos, due to his father being of notably low status, a quality referred to in his title "Kalaphates," Caulker, in reference to his father's profession. H. G. Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), s.v. εὐμετάβολος; Lauritzen, *Depiction of Character*, 37.

[71] Lauritzen, *Depiction of Character*, 40.

[72] Ὁ γὰρ ἀνὴρ οὗτος χρῆμά τι **ποικίλον** ἐγεγόνει τῷ βίῳ, καὶ ἦν αὐτῷ χαρακτὴρ τῆς ψυχῆς τὸ πολύμορφον καὶ πολύστροφον. Ψελλός, *Χρονογραφία Α*, 252; translation from Lauritzen, *Depiction of Character*, 40.

the ashes,' that is to say, he hid an evil disposition under a kindly exterior."[73] This discrepancy between inner and outer person is most prominently displayed in Michael's dealings with his uncle, John the Orphanotrophos, whom he despises but to whom he appears submissive prior to his coronation, when his power is limited. John is apparently aware of Michael's duplicity, but upon his nephew's rise to the throne, the Orphanotrophos finds himself at the emperor's mercy and is soon permanently exiled. Psellos is here illustrating the fact that the emperor's interior, which has already shown a negative "inconsistency" in and of itself, is not reflected in the exterior – not only are the two aspects of his inner person, soul and mind, out of sync, but so too are the inner and outer persons.[74] Michael is, to Psellos, an unstable character through and through.

Michael's unsavory actions toward his relatives are not limited to John, but target his entire family, and are a feature of his depiction across sources. According to the *Chronographia*, the emperor, fueled by jealousy of his relatives' success, not only cared nothing for their wellbeing, but preferred instead to give power to, as Psellos puts it, "quite insignificant" people.[75] Included among these "insignificants" may be Michael's unit of Scythian eunuch mercenaries, who appear to have replaced the Varangian Guard as imperial bodyguards during his reign. Psellos is joined in commentary on Michael's treatment of his family by one of his contemporaries, Michael Attaleiates (c.1020-c.1085). Born in the provinces, Attaleiates came to Constantinople for his education and never left, operating as a lawyer and later a highly successful judge.[76] His most notable work is his *History*, a "blend of history and encomium" covering 10 emperors from Michael IV to Nikephoras III Botaneiates.[77] The text appears to have been written in two editions, the second of which likely used Psellos' *Chronographia* as a source for the earlier rulers.

While Attaleiates examines Michael from a different angle than Psellos, the figure of the emperor still remains contradictory. He claims Michael had associated himself with less-than-worthy men prior to his rise to the throne, but that upon his coronation he was "praised greatly and solemnly exalted" on account of his generosity handing out ranks to those whom Psellos refers to as "insignificant" – possibly because Attaleiates himself was a grateful recipient of such a promotion.[78] However, he soon turns back to the emperor's faults in his dismay at Michael's attacks on his relatives. While Psellos here appears more interested in the emperor's duplicity of character, Attaleiates focuses on the repercussions of such actions: "In this way he destroyed his family, which intelligent men saw as mindless zeal, for it deprived him of the crucial support of his relatives."[79]

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[73] Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, 103. δεινὸς δὲ εἴπερ τις ἀνθρώπων πῦρ μὲν ὑπὸ σποδιᾷ κρύψαι, γνώμην φημὶ πονηρὰν ὑπ' εὐνοίας προσχήματι, ἄτοπά τε ἐνθυμηθῆναί τε καὶ βουλεύσασθαι, ἀγνωμονέστατός τε πρὸς εὐπγέτας καὶ μηδενὶ χάριν εἰδώς, μήτε φιλίας μήτε τῆς περὶ ἐκεῖνον ἐπιμελείας καὶ θεραπείας. Ψελλός, *Χρονογραφία Α*, 202.
[74] Lauritzen, *Depiction of Character*, 60-1.
[75] Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, 126. κοινωνεῖν δὲ αὐτῷ τοῦ κράτους μικρὸν μὲν ἢ μηδένα τῶν ἁπάντων ἐβούλετο… Ψελλός, *Χρονογραφία Α*, 252.
[76] Treadgold, *Middle Byzantine Historians*, 312; Dimitris Krallis, *Michael Attaleiates and the Politics of Imperial Decline in Eleventh-Century Byzantium* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2012), xxi.
[77] Treadgold, *Middle Byzantine Historians*, 326.
[78] Michael Attaleiates, *History*, 16-7; Treadgold, *Middle Byzantine Historians*, 313.
[79] καὶ τὸ γένος αὐτοῦ τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον καταστρέψας, ἄφρονα ζῆλον προσφέρειν τοῖς συνετοῖς ἔδοξεν, ἐψιλωμένον ἑαυτὸν τοσαύτης βοηθείας ἀπεργασάμενος. Attaleiates, *The History*, 18-9.

Two elements stand out in particular in this passage. First, the implication of relatives as support is critical to both Psellos' and Attaleiates' narratives. Michael desires the support of his constituents, who have no entrenched loyalty to him, over the support of members of his own family, who would have naturally been on his side (indeed, the exiled John the Orphanotrophos was responsible for putting Michael on the throne). Moreover, Psellos states that Michael not only rids himself of relatives, but also the surrounding aristocracy: "he would then have the support of the many [the people] rather than the few [the nobility]."[80] This unconventional reliance on the populace is a flaw credited in both the *Chronographia* and the *History* as the ultimate cause of the emperor's downfall – he misjudges his own popularity with his people and pays the heaviest price when they see through his deception and revolt.

The other critical detail in Attaleiates' passage is the presence of "intelligent men" [συνετοί] who here call into question Michael's choice of supporters.[81] Whether these are specific advisors or the general community of learned men is impossible to tell, but Attaleiates seems to include them here to distinguish between moderation and irrational action, as well as the thoughts of many and the decision of one. As Dimitris Krallis has argued, the distancing of this "typical example of poor judgement" from "intelligent men" leaves the emperor "solely responsible for his poor choices and for his subsequent fall."[82] The wisdom ascribed to these wise men is further emphasized when they reappear several passages later, predicting a bad omen in the emperor's earlier-than-expected start to his extravagant Easter parade the day before the uprising.[83]

Psellos also illustrates Michael's lack of interest in advice, but at a different point in the narrative: not in the destruction of his family, but rather his attempted removal of his co-ruler Empress Zoe from power. Michael refers to both his inner circle and a wider net of "men of keen judgement and endowed with other intellectual qualities" [φρονήματος ἀκριβοῦς καὶ τῆς ἄλλης μετεσχηκότας **συνέσεως**] for advice as to whether he should go through with his plan.[84] Once again, a form of συνετός is used to describe them. A few egg him on, but most of these advisors, including several astrologers, with whom Psellos personally associated, advise him to either reconsider or abandon the plot all together. In response, Michael laughs off the warnings, insults the astrologers, and charges ahead with his plan. This dichotomy of a willingness to ask for advice and an unwillingness to accept it fits with Psellos' portrayal of Michael as an entity of inconsistencies, while again, along with Attaleiates, supporting the emperor's depiction as a self-destructive ruler with only himself – his contradictory character, his refusal to accept advice – to blame for the failure of his rule.[85]

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[80] Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, 131. ἵνα τοῖς πολλοῖς μᾶλλον ἢ τοῖς ὀλίγοις δορυφοροῖτο. Ψελλός, *Χρονογραφία Α*, 264.
[81] Krallis, *Michael Attaleiates*, 108.
[82] Ibid. 108-9.
[83] Attaleiates, *History*, 18-19; Krallis, *Michael Attaleiates*, 110.
[84] Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, 133; Ψελλός, *Χρονογραφία Α*, 266.
[85] A third major source for Michael's reign, John Skylitzes' *Synopsis of Byzantine History*, notably does not include this implication of sole blame in his narrative. Instead, it is John the Orphanotrophos who encourages Michael V to scheme against Empress Zoe, after she herself banishes the former to a monastery. Constantine, Michael's other uncle and advisor, is equally faulted by Michael himself. Krallis has posited that Skylitzes can be read as a "control case against which to read Attaleiates and Psellos," on account of discrepancies between the former and the latter two sources. For instance, while Attaleiates and Psellos include instances of bad omens predicting the fall of the emperor, Skylitzes omits these, as well as a deeper analysis of Michael's conflicted character, and his being the sole cause of his own ruin. Thus it has been argued that Skylitzes may be a more "historical" text in terms of a

The image of Michael V presented by Psellos and Attaleiates is fully established by the time they arrive at their inevitable conclusion: the blinding. This result was not foreign to the Byzantines, as they had witnessed multiple rulers suffer the same fate over the centuries, and therefore the act itself is not the focus of the scene. Psellos, for his part, is more interested in the public confirmation of Michael's poor character during the maiming, and he waxes dramatic about the day of the uprising, because he claims to have been in the church with Michael and his uncle and advisor Constantine before they are both taken away to be blinded. With Constantine denying his participation in the plot against Zoe, Psellos leverages him as a voice of reason against which to compare Michael. Upon being questioned by Psellos, the *nobilissimus* replies that he was fully aware that his nephew was "headstrong," but was not in a position to stop him from castrating every other male relative. Michael, for his part, acknowledges that he has been in the wrong: "Truly God is not unjust…and I am rightly paying the penalty for what I have done."[86]

This penance does not fortify the young emperor against his coming punishment. Rather, Psellos notes that upon hearing the sentence of blinding, Michael "showed the same weakness of character throughout the whole time of his tribulation. He moaned and wailed aloud, and whenever anyone approached him, he begged for help."[87] Here, in the final moments before the maiming, Michael's true nature finally emerges. All of his masks are stripped away, putting his feeble inner character on display for all to see. Constantine, whom Psellos now calls "a man of more dignified and steadfast character than his nephew," is again employed as a foil. Resigned to his fate, he staunchly volunteers to be blinded first, and after refusing to be tied down – "Look here. If you see me budge, *nail* me down!" – he has his eyes gouged out without a whimper.[88] Michael's reaction is quite the opposite. He sobs throughout his uncle's blinding, and upon his turn is bound by the executioner "to stop the violent twitching." After the blinding, Psellos does not dwell on Michael and Constantine, but immediately moves on to the next rulers, Zoe and Theodora, without looking back. His point has been made: Michael's many shifting façades could not hide his true character upon its final and irrevocable revelation, and upon his removal from power, "the insolence of the mob, so marked before, died away, and with it their fury against these men."[89]

In the *History*, Attaleiates focuses his account on the uprising itself from the perspective of the people, likely because he bore witness to the event from the crowds, unlike Psellos, who, as a palace employee, was at the emperor's side. He notes the favorable attitude with which the

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nonpartisan approach by focusing more on the facts he has at his disposal. At the same time, however, Attaleiates and Psellos were both eyewitnesses to Michael V's reign, while Skylitzes, born sometime in the 1040s, was relying on second-hand sources. In this case, then, distance may offer a more concrete perspective on the events as they happened, but Psellos and Attaleiates may be said to provide crucial insight into the mind of the emperor and his city at the time of the revolt. John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811-1057*, trans. John Wortley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 391-2; Krallis, *Michael Attaleiates*, 111.

[86] Ἀλλ' οὐκ ἠδίκει ὁ θεός, οὕτω ποιῶν, καί με ἡ δίκη τῶν πεπραγμένων ποινὰς εἰσπράττεται. Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, 147. Ψελλός, *Χρονογραφία Α*, 300.

[87] τὴν αὐτὴν διὰ παντὸς τοῦ κακοῦ ἐδείκνυ διάθεσιν τῆς ψυχῆς, τὰ μὲν οἰμώζων, τὰ δ' ἐπικοπτόμενος τὴν φωνήν, καὶ προσλιπαρῶν εἴ πού τις αὐτῷ προσέλθοι ἐπιεικῶς...Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, 149. Ψελλός, *Χρονογραφία Α*, 304.

[88] Σὺ δέ…ἀλλ' ἠν ἴδῃς οὕτω ποιοῦντα, καὶ προσπαττάλευσον. Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, 150. Ψελλός, *Χρονογραφία Α*, 306.

[89] λήγει τοῖς πολλοῖς τὸ πολὺ θράσος ἐκεῖνο καὶ ἡ ἐπ'ἐκείνους ὁπμή. Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, 150. Ψελλός, *Χρονογραφία Α*, 306.

Constantinopolitans react to the magnificent Easter parade, and their swift change of mind when the exile of Zoe is made public. Michael is mentioned cursorily, first when he gives a speech to the populace in which he attempts to lie his way out of the situation, and then at the blinding itself, when he and Constantine are led through the city on donkeys before they have their eyes put out. Much of the scene instead emphasizes the great turbulence in the city itself, with the mob freeing prisoners, destroying houses, ransacking churches, and "kindling a civil war."[90] Instead of letting events speak for themselves, as Psellos does, Attaleiates concludes Michael's reign with a piece of advice summarizing the take-away for the reader: "Let their dismal tale be remembered by posterity and may it set upon a better path anyone who intends to be ungrateful to his benefactors."[91]

In each of these accounts, both writers use Michael's short tenure to touch on deeper themes of empire and humanity. Psellos, in highlighting the young ruler's inconsistent character, presents us with a fatally flawed figure who was able to manipulate his way to the top, fooling even himself into thinking he was in control, only to be brutally confronted with the consequences of his lies and deception. Attaleiates looks to the reaction of the city itself, and elaborates on the high cost of poor judgement at the hands of an angry people. Both texts, by focusing on the process rather than the result, offer compatible snapshots of politics in 11th century Byzantium and a keen awareness of who was, and was not, fit to hold the office of *Basileus Romaion*.

The Norse Sources

Like the Byzantine texts, the Old Norse narratives of the life of Haraldr Sigurðarson preface his rule of Norway with his early years, setting the stage for the future king's reign through his adventures in the Varangian Guard. However, Haraldr, despite nuances in his depiction by the Scandinavian writers, is not given nearly as bad a rap as Michael, and with a Norwegian protagonist at the helm, the focus of the blinding is shifted from the Byzantine ruler to Haraldr. This act of maiming, transmitted to Northern Europe and passed down for two hundred years, picks up new connotations and is reformed through a lens more in sync with the Scandinavian understanding of political mutilation. Because the saga are more blunt and less detailed than the Byzantine texts in their presentation of the blinding, the action is addressed unadorned, without lengthy discussion or explanation of character or motive, and one must look to the wider Norse corpus to interpret this new perspective and the events leading up to the blinding as they unfold in the kings' sagas.

In contrast to the Byzantine Empire, blinding was rare in Scandinavia, but is frequently accompanied in the literature by castration, indicating strong connection between mutilation and the notion of gender in Norse society.[92] Carol Clover has argued for a one-sex model within Norse culture, in which male and female are not seen as two separate entities but rather two variations of one dominant gender. As Clover has stated, "the fault line runs not between males

[90] πόλεμον πολιτικὸν ἀνερρίπιζον. Attaleiates, *History*, 24-5.
[91] διήγημα γενόμενοι σκυθρωπὸν τοῖς μετέπειτα καὶ πρὸς τὸ κρεῖττον ἐπανόρθωσις τῶν ἀγνωμονεῖν ἐθελόντων πρὸς τοὺς εὐεργετήσαντας. Attaleiates, *History*, 28-9.
[92] Kari Ellen Gade has noted that the island provinces of Orkney, the Hebrides, and Man were exceptions to this rarity, as these regions saw a significant a number of blinding and castration cases. Kari Ellen Gade, "1236: Órækja meiddr ok heill gǫrr," *Gripla* 9 (1995): 123-24.

and females per se, but between able-bodied men (and the exceptional woman) on one hand and, on the other, a kind of rainbow coalition of everyone else (most women, children, slaves, and old, disabled, or otherwise disenfranchised men)."[93] These two categories allow for a more flexible understanding of gender and its association with status as seen in the sagas – outstanding women are able to attain higher status, while "disenfranchised" men are capable of losing their favorably masculine traits. In a society where public image and honor were so highly valued, the response to this chronic uncertainty of identity resulted in what Clover calls the "frantic machismo of Norse males."[94]

Several notably explicit examples of gender fluidity occur in the mythology. Often included alongside loaded insults in Norwegian and Swedish law codes is the practice of *seiðr*, one of two forms of Norse magic. Although *seiðr* was heavily associated with the feminine, its most famous practitioner was Óðinn, who, in his relentless pursuit of knowledge, raised seeresses and prophets from the dead, and once hanged himself from Yggdrasill, the World Tree, to access the underworld. Unlike Loki, who willingly morphs himself completely into female forms and even bears children as such, Óðinn never crosses the line of full transformation. He remains the god of war, a symbol of masculinity, while at the same time balancing his practice of feminine magic to gain the wisdom he desires.

It is telling, then, that Óðinn is half-blind. His removal of his own eye in the quest for knowledge associated with *seiðr* can be read as a form of semi-castration, a physical symbol of his wavering position on the line between genders. Annette Lassen has argued that, because Óðinn's wisdom stems from a feminine source through partial sacrifice of his masculinity, this wisdom only emerges not through loss of one gender but by a combination of the two; thus "Óðinn's connection to the feminine realm cannot be read as an indication of weakness."[95] Ármann Jakobsson has similarly suggested that Óðinn's manifestation of queerness does not have the power to impact his character because "being a god, he is above such categories."[96] Lassen further points out that one of Óðinn's many names is "Báleygr," meaning "Fire-Eyed." The ferocious eye motif is most frequently associated with Þórr, whose burning glare, often cited as a source of terror for his foes, is a physical manifestation of his hypermasculinity. In Óðinn's case, the title emphasizes his identity as a virile warrior via his remaining eye, informing us of just how much has been sacrificed for the sake of wisdom and, on the flip side, how much has been gained.[97]

The connection between eyes and gender is keenly reflected in the few instances of blinding preserved in the corpus of Norse literature, in which victims are often both blinded and castrated. These two injuries are listed by the Icelandic law text *Grágás* as "major wounds," and are only

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[93] Carol J. Clover, "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe," *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (1993): 380.
[94] Ibid. 380.
[95] Annette Lassen, "Höðr's Blindness and the Pledging of Óðinn's Eye: A Study of the Symbolic Value of the Eyes of Höðr, Óðinn and Þórr," *The 11th International Saga Conference: Old Norse Myths, Literature & Society*, eds. G. Barnes and M. Clunies Ross (Sydney: Center for Medieval Studies, University of Sydney, 2000), 225.
[96] Ármann Jakobsson, "Óðinn as Mother. The Old Norse Deviant Patriarch," *Arkiv För Nordisk Filologi* 126 (2011): 10.
[97] Indeed, Óðinn's single eye may be said to be his most defining feature, and often makes him identifiable, at least to the reader, when he is in disguise. Neil Price and Paul Mortimer have also explored the possibility of warriors mimicking Óðinn's appearance through helm design at Sutton Hoo; see Neil Price and Paul Mortimer, "An Eye for Odin? Divine Role-Playing in the Age of Sutton Hoo," *European Journal of Archaeology* 17, no. 3 (2014): 517–38.

enumerated for punitive use in extreme cases.[98] Castration is particularly scarce in the codes – it is reserved only as a preventative measure against vagrants and, in mainland Scandinavia, bestiality.[99] The so-called "major wounds" were not simply physically major, but socially as well. Although the law codes preserve the proposed application of these punishments, it is in the sagas that we see them put to use. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen has observed that "even though [the saga writers] are interested in bodily injuries, they do not explore mutilations that seem to serve no other purpose than to symbolize a man's powerlessness."[100] In this sense, castration and blinding work hand in hand to serve as an arguably overdetermined method of emasculation.

This is certainly the case in the mutilation of Magnús Sigurðsson, who co-ruled Norway with Haraldr gilli beginning in 1130. After disagreements between the two kings culminated in a series of armed conflicts, Magnús was captured by Haraldr: "Var hann þá seldr í hendr konungs þrælum, en þeir veittu honum meizlur, stungu út augu hans ok hjoggu af annan fót, en síðast var hann geldr" [He was then handed over to the king's slaves, and they mutilated him, putting out his eyes and cutting off one leg and finally castrating him].[101] These three injuries strike at the core values of Norse kingship: Magnús is emasculated, rendered impotent, and deprived of independent mobility. Anthony Adams has observed that while injury itself was not considered emasculating – indeed, "to bear great pain and suffering with wit and stoic acceptance was culturally admirable and bestowed masculine virtue" – the resulting disability could impact a man's status.[102] If a single injury had such an effect, Magnús' threefold mutilation thus seems excessive. In looking at the history of co-rule in medieval Norway, however, dueling claims were often only resolved with the death of one of the kings. The case of Magnús and Haraldr is unusual in that Magnús remained alive after being deposed. Perhaps only this extreme infliction of disfigurement could have enabled Haraldr to remove his rival from power in lieu of death. Furthermore, the saga leaves the actual maiming to the king's slaves, thereby removing Haraldr from direct responsibility and, in doing so, saving some face without endangering his already dubious claim to the throne by killing or personally injuring the legitimate heir.[103]

A parallel episode of joint blinding and castration can be found in *Sturlunga saga*. Snorri Sturluson's illegitimate son Órækja Snorrason has been wreaking havoc in Iceland, robbing and harassing his neighbors. Snorri's nephew Sturla Sighvatsson, irritated by Órækja's actions and jealous of his coming inheritance, takes him captive on a glacier, where he puts out his eyes with a knife, partially castrates him, and leaves him in a cave. Before mutilating him, Sturla tells Órækja to think of his wife, directly mocking his soon-to-be-lost masculinity. However, the story

[98] "These injuries are assessed like major wounds: cutting out a man's tongue, poking out a man's eyes, knocking out a man's teeth, cutting off a man's nose or ears (and by cutting is meant when gristle or bone is reached), castrating a man, striking a shame-stroke across someone's buttocks." Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins, eds. and trans., *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1980), I:141.
[99] Vagrants were considered a burden on society and it was assumed that their children would be as well; castration in this case was a preventative measure.
[100] Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983), 81.
[101] *ÍF* XXVIII, 287; Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, translated by Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2015), 176. *Morkinskinna* states that Magnús lost both feet.
[102] Anthony Adams, "'He Took a Stone Away': Castration and Cruelty in the Old Norse *Sturlunga saga*," in *Castration and Culture in the Middle Ages*, ed. Larissa Tracy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013), 201.
[103] On the blinding of Magnús, see also Annette Lassen, *Øjet og blindheden: I norrøn litteratur og mytologi* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Forlag, 2003), 44.

takes a sudden turn for the better when Órækja reappears unharmed. Several attempts have been made to rationalize this strange twist. Kari Ellen Gade has posited that the story is fictional, inspired by Norwegian techniques of disempowerment used against kings and aspirants.[104] Adams has theorized that an unexplained miracle or over-exaggeration on the part of the author could account for the recovery.[105] Sean Lawing has suggested that the absence of more extreme injury was due to a lack of proficiency among Icelanders in the art of maiming.[106] Whatever the reason, despite Órækja's seemingly full recovery, Adams has pointed out that, upon closer inspection, not everything has healed. Órækja and his wife part ways, seemingly forever, dealing a blow to his virility and sexual prowess even as his body is physically restored.

Sturlunga saga is notorious within the Norse corpus for its bloodshed and violence, yet Órækja's mutilation stands out as one of its more gruesome scenes. The episode was likely meant to be equally shocking to its contemporary readers, given the reactions of other characters in the story. Sturla asks Þorsteinn langabein to perform the blinding, but he initially rebuffs the offer, stating he does not know how to use the tool, a peg, that Sturla has provided.[107] Later on, Sturla Þórðarson, believed to be the author of the saga, is refused absolution and told to seek a more powerful man for forgiveness for his role in the crime. Adams has stated that "mutilations such as castration and blinding were a particularly vile and cruel form of injury, a species of lingering death and continual torment enacted upon the bodies not of fellow men and warriors, but of deviants."[108] The practice of these injuries in the sagas reflects their reluctant presence in the law texts as an absolute final, and often disproportionate, resort.

The terrible treatment of Órækja, as well as the allotting of the blinding and castration of King Magnús to Haraldr's slaves, supports this Norse revulsion for physical emasculation and may be extended to one other instance of blinding in England, recounted in Henry of Huntingdon's *Historia Anglorum*, in which William, count of Mortain, was blinded by Henry I in 1106 for treason.[109] Blinding was often a punishment for treason in medieval Western Europe, an association explained by Geneviève Bührer-Thierry as ensuring that "the guilty man could not rejoice in the death of the king whom he had wanted to eliminate, because he could not see him."[110] However, Warren Hollister has observed that out of all of Henry's orders of mutilation, William's blinding was one of only two which were considered unjust, not because of the cause,

[104] Gade, "Órækja meiddr ok heill gǫrr," 126-28.
[105] Because *Sturlunga saga* is a "contemporary saga," and, in fact, by a member of the Sturlung family around which the saga revolves, substantial factual discrepancy is less likely to have occurred, although hyperbole remains a possibility; Adams, "He Took a Stone Away," 207-8.
[106] Sean B. Lawing, "Órækja at Surtshellir: Myth, Miracle, or Mistake?" (presentation, Yale Conference on Baltic and Scandinavian Studies, New Haven, CT, March 13-15, 2014).
[107] Sean Lawing has posited that the use of the peg that stymies Þorsteinn is due to Sturla's attempted mimicry of the gruesome blinding of an English priest, Ríkarðr, preserved in *Heimskringla*'s *Haraldssona saga*. Lawing, "Órækja at Surtshellir."
[108] Adams, "He Took a Stone Away," 190.
[109] Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum: History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Diana Greenway (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 698-99.
[110] Geneviève Bührer-Thierry, "'Just Anger' or 'Vengeful Anger'? The Punishment of Blinding in the Early Medieval West," in *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages*, ed. Barbara H. Rosenwein (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 78.

but because of how it was done – "secretly and without legal proceedings."[111] Such a private act indicated a personal vendetta being carried out by Henry, which may have been perceived as an abuse of power. This personal act is also seen in *Sturlunga saga*, in which Sturla has no legal reason to injure Órækja, but nevertheless smuggles him up to the glacier to mutilate him, and also mirrors the usurper Haraldr gilli's refusal to get his hands dirty with Magnús.

The Blinding of Michael V

As the narrative of Michael's blinding moves to Scandinavia, it undergoes a marked shift in format and focus. The earliest extant Norse source on the maiming is the poetry said to have been composed in Haraldr's court, notably Þjóðólfr Arnórsson's *Sexstefja*, in which the first entry on the list of Haraldr's greatest victories is the blinding of the emperor, described in stanzas 7-8:

7. Stólþengils lét stinga
– styrjǫld vas þá byrjuð –
eyðir augu bæði
út heiðingja sútar.
Lagði allvaldr Egða
austr á bragning hraustan
gráligt mark, en Girkja
gǫtu illa fór stillir.

The destroyer of the care [GLADDENER] of the wolf [lit. heath-goer] [WARRIOR] had both eyes of the emperor stabbed out; war was under way then. The overlord of the Egðir [NORWEGIAN KING = Haraldr] placed a hostile mark on the daring prince in the east, and the ruler of the Greeks [= Michael] travelled a dire road.

8. Ok hertoga hneykir
herfingnum lét stinga
– leyfð berk hans – ór hǫfði
haugs skundaði augu.

And the confounder of war-leaders [RULER] had the eyes stabbed out of the head of the war-captured impeller of the mound [GENEROUS RULER]; I proffer a eulogy of him [Haraldr].[112]

True to the form of encomiastic court poetry, the context that was so significant to the Byzantine authors is omitted in favor of the act itself, which is recast as a showdown between two rivals of equal standing in both politics and warfare. While the Byzantine Empire far outranked Norway in terms of political power, Haraldr's capability as an outstanding warrior was not bluster, and stanza 7 reinforces these strengths: Michael is a *stólþengill*, which Roberta Frank has interpreted as a term indicating reverence for the Byzantine throne, and Haraldr receives a classic warrior

[111] The other instance of supposedly unjust maiming during the reign of Henry I was the hanging or mutilation of fifty thieves by Ralph Basset; these men were suspected to have been wrongly accused. Warren C. Hollister, "Royal Acts of Mutilation: The Case against Henry I," *Albion* 10, no. 4 (1978): 338.
[112] Diana Whaley, ed., *SkP* II, 118-20.

kenning of wolf-feeder, variations of which appear elsewhere in the poem.[113] At the same time, the verse also boosts both parties, as Michael V is granted the warrior description *hraustr*, while Haraldr's future role as *allvaldr Egða* emphasizes his position as a ruler of people. The line *styrjǫld vas þá byrjuð* brings home this idea of evenly matched opponents by suggesting a war brought about by the maiming – a metaphorical consequence, as there is no further mention of this conflict in either poetry or prose, though the comment may refer to general hostility between the two men attested in the sagas or the anticipated reaction of an emperor on the receiving end of a violent act.[114]

Stanza 8 continues this trajectory by casting Michael as a ruler more in line with the Norse tradition than his native one. This half-stanza is preserved in a section of *Skáldskaparmál* on poetic words for men, under the term *hertogi*: "Hertogi heitir jarl ok er konungr svá kallaðr ok fyrir því er hann leiðir her til orrostu" [A *jarl* can be called a *hertogi*, and a *konungr* can also be referred to thus, since he leads his army to battle].[115] *Sexstefja* 8 is the proffered example of the term's poetic usage, in which Haraldr is referred to as *hneykir hertoga* "confounder of war-leaders," a kenning that applies the word in question to his enemies rather than himself. Considering his later reign, the use of *hertogi* is well-applied according to its *Edda* definition, as Haraldr's chief rivals are a *jarl*, Einarr þambarskelfir, and a *konungr*, Sveinn Ástríðarson. In this context, Michael V is the first ruler to fall before Haraldr, marking the shift in the Norwegian prince's narrative from defeat followed by exile to victory followed by homecoming, while simultaneously prefacing the struggles awaiting him in the coming years.[116] The final kenning employed for Michael, *skundaðr haugs*, is a curiosity that has spawned debate over the implications of *haugr* in this context. Diana Whaley has argued that *skundaðr* must relate to *skyndir*, which is found in kennings relating to treasure; thus the *haugr* may refer to burial mounds containing great wealth.[117] This reading ties in neatly with the popular portrayal of Byzantium as a trove of riches, and has led to the interpretation of 'generous ruler' for this

[113] Roberta Frank, *Old Norse Court Poetry: The Dróttkvætt Stanza* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 134. 'The destroyer of the care of the wolf' follows the idea that a successful warrior creates bodies out of his enemies which the wolf then feeds upon, removing its concerns of hunger.

[114] Regarding the role of the blinding itself in skaldic poetry, this form of mutilation was often performed against usurpers in Middle Byzantium. Michael V may be considered a usurper, as he became emperor via adoption and then exiled his co-ruler Zoe, seizing the throne for himself. If Scandinavians at this time were familiar with the association between blinding and usurpers in Constantinople, Haraldr's act of blinding Michael may have taken on additional meaning in the northern context – its incorporation into the poetry might introduce Haraldr's eagerness to inflict violence against perceived usurpers, particularly Sveinn Ástríðarson, later in his career. Even if this particular nuance did not survive transmission from Byzantium, the Norsification of Michael in these stanzas still sets a precedence for Haraldr's conflict with rulers he perceives as threats, and, if the poem was begun during Haraldr's lifetime, perhaps also a warning to his enemies. I am grateful to Maria Mavroudi for discussion on this topic.

[115] Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, edited by Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), 99; translation following Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, translated by Anthony Faulkes (London: Everyman, 1995), 145.

[116] The *Edda* lists *keisari* as 'it fyrsta ok it œzta heiti manns' [the first and highest term for man] above *konungr*; however, while this word is used for Byzantine emperors in prose, it appears only six times in the skaldic corpus, and never for a Byzantine. These stanzas are Sigv *Knútdr* 10^{I}, Mark *Eirdr* 24^{II}, Kálf *Kátr* 5^{VII} & 22^{VII}, Anon *Heil* 26^{VII}, and Anon *Mey* 23^{VII}. Faulkes, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, 145; Faulkes, *Edda*, 99.

[117] Diana Whaley, ed., *SkP* II, 120.

kenning, an image revived in the very next stanza as Haraldr's ship, upon departure from Garðar, *gekk með golli miklu* "advanced with much gold."[118]

Upon its incorporation into the prose narratives of Haraldr's life, the story of the blinding evolves once more. While the purpose of *Sexstefja* and its fellows is to capture the highlights of Haraldr's life in list-like form, the prose is driven by narrative, and requires these individual events to connect and build upon one another in story form. As a result, the blinding cannot sit unexplained in the story, but it also cannot be clarified via Byzantine rationale, because the politics of 11th century Byzantium were not well-known among the later Scandinavian authors, nor would this foreign context have translated well to their audiences.[119] The task of these writers is thus to provide a framework by which the act makes sense from a Norse perspective. The result, called a "rather silly romantic fable" by Sigfús Blöndal, is a clearly fictional love triangle narrative that nevertheless pulls this foreign incident further from its distant roots and towards an integrated part of the Norse narrative tradition. Although the blinding of Michael V in the Haraldr narratives is not accompanied by outright castration, the emasculating connotation of blinding and blindness in the wider Norse corpus is visible given the surrounding context of amorous drama.

The narrative of the romance presages the blinding scene by setting up the context in which the maiming occurs. Zoe's attraction to, and rejection by, Haraldr prepares the Norse audience for coming love story gone wrong. However, the nature of this revenge, due to a failed romance, is gendered in and of itself: Haraldr is denied Maria, the woman he purportedly loves, on account of another woman, Zoe, who manipulates her male co-ruler to throw him in jail and, in doing so, shames the young prince. In a literary corpus rife with tales of vengeance and feud, retaliation is expected, and one might even say necessary, and in this case matches the original offense: denial of romantic liaison and humiliation at the hands of a woman.[120]

Although Haraldr does not return the empress's favor within his own saga, her interest in him over the emperor is a matter of pride for the Varangian captain. The importance of Zoe's

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[118] Another possibility is the idea of mound-sitting as a practice for kings in the Germanic tradition. Diana Whaley, ed., *SkP* II, 121. I am grateful to Kate Heslop for discussion on these stanzas.

[119] There is ample evidence that Byzantine politics were not closely followed in medieval Scandinavia. A significant example, put forth by Sverrir Jakobsson, is the lack of Norse familiarity with one of the major conflicts in Byzantine history, that of the East-West schism between the Orthodox and Roman Churches; see Sverrir Jakobsson, "The Schism That Never Was: Old Norse Views on Byzantium and Russia," *Byzantoslavica* 1-2 (2008). A small example, relevant to the current topic, is the misnaming of Michael V as Constantine in the prose variants of Haraldr's life. It has been suggested that the misnomer comes from the fact that Michael was blinded alongside his uncle Constantine, and the two names have been confused. However, the name is more probably that of Michael's successor, Constantine IX Monomachos, as it is far likelier that Norse authors nearly two centuries later mixed up two of the many 11th century emperors than recalled the name of the uncle of such a minor ruler.

[120] While Haraldr himself would have had, in reality, nothing to do with the empress, Psellos notes in the *Chronographia* that despite a vast age difference and Zoe's legal duty as Michael's adopted mother, the two co-rulers were briefly lovers, a relationship the young emperor later regretted: καὶ ὅτι δεσπότιν προειρήκει ποτέ, ἐβούλετο καὶ τὴν γλῶσσαν τεμεῖν [τε] τοῖς ὀδοῦσι καὶ ἀποπτύσαι τὸ μέλος [he had once called her his "mistress" and the very thought of it made him feel like biting off his own tongue and spitting it away in disgust]; (Michael Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, 132; Ψελλός, *Χρονογραφία Α*, 264). It is possible that the Varangians, an integral part of palace life, had picked up on this fleeting relationship, or at least assumed that emperor and empress were somehow involved because they shared power. Zoe's known lascivious nature could not have helped her image. She was, however, married to both Michael's predecessor, Michael IV, and successor, Constantine IX, so for the bulk of Haraldr's time in Byzantium, the emperor and empress were indeed married.

attraction to Haraldr becomes clearer upon the saga writer's main departure from the historical facts of the blinding scene – its location. Physical space held great meaning for the Byzantines when it came to political mutilation, because the act frequently involved public shaming. Many times the punishment was carried out in the street, where it was made into an exhibition. Evelyne Patlagean has observed that priests accused of homosexuality were paraded through the city while the crowd called their names ahead of them, announcing their identity and transgressions to the populace.[121] The same appears to have been done with Michael, who, according to Psellos, encountered a mob which "made fun of them, naturally enough under the circumstances."[122] Attaleiates records that Michael was "loaded…onto a pitiful and wretched mule, an object of ridicule" upon being dragged from the church.[123]

Although the city-wide uprising described by Psellos could not have escaped the attention, nor the memories, of the Varangians, the Norse prose accounts of the blinding notably moves its location from the streets to the emperor's bedchamber. Here the issue of masculinity is explicitly confronted – Haraldr has won the attentions of the empress, who should by rights belong to the emperor, and he demonstrates this virile supremacy not by accepting her advances, but by taking the emperor's sight at the heart of their intimate space. The reworking of Michael's blinding evokes emasculation more than political intrigue, focusing on his social demotion over the loss of his throne, and further illustrates Haraldr's capacity for winning honor which, in accordance with the rest of the saga, foreshadows his successful future kingship. This readjustment of status between Haraldr and the emperor is further emphasized in the accompanying *Sexstefja* stanzas, included alongside the sagas' prose renditions, which levels the playing field between the two combatants, elevating Michael to Haraldr's level of martial prowess, and Haraldr to Michael's level of political authority, and so boosting what they lack in order to render them equals.

At the same time, while the saga does not offer an explicit opinion on the blinding, the scene can also be read to predict another facet of Haraldr's rule: while portrayed in his sagas and other sources as both a wise and respected leader, he is also impulsive and quick to anger. Given the aversion to castration seen in such cases as Magnús Sigurðsson and Órækja Snorrason, perhaps the blinding of Michael would have been similarly perceived by contemporary authors and audiences as an overreaction to an offense that should have merited a lesser retribution. Once again, the relocation of the scene from the streets to the bedroom may further suggest that Haraldr's actions were personal and private, and thus, like those of Henry I, unjust. Even this reading, however, does not necessarily reflect poorly on Haraldr – in looking at the king's broader portrayal in *Morkinskinna*, Jakobsson has observed that his lapses in temper "do not function as anecdotes belittling him as an individual but rather as exempla."[124] Even the best succumb to human nature.

The inclusion of Michael's blinding in *Haralds saga* is remarkable as a verifiable moment of Byzantine history preserved in the Scandinavian corpus, but neither set of sources should be used

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[121] Evelyne Patlagean, "Byzance et le Blason Pénal du Corps," in *Du Châtiment dans la Cité* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1984), 416.

[122] πληθύς προσπαίξαντες τούτοις ὁπόσα εἰκὸς τῷ καιρῷ...Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers*, 149. Ψελλός, *Χρονογραφία Α*, 304.

[123] καὶ βίᾳ τοῦτον ἐκτὸς ἑλκύσαντες, ἡμιόνῳ τῶν εὐτελεστέρων καὶ ταπεινῶν φόρτον τοῦτον τιθέασι καταγέλαστον. Attaleiates, *History*, 26-7.

[124] Ármann Jakobsson, "The Individual and the Ideal: The Representation of Royalty in *Morkinskinna*," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 81, no. 1 (2000): 81.

solely for measuring the veracity of the other, for neither is entirely factual, nor were they designed to be. The works of Psellos and Attaleiates, while objectively more historically accurate than the Norse sources, are still far from precise accounts of the time period – for example, despite both being self-proclaimed eyewitnesses to Michael's mutilation, they disagree on the method by which Michael and Constantine were blinded.[125] Rather, both authors prioritize their own agendas and perspectives over a formal historical record, instead offering a window into how two well-educated Byzantines perceived the personalities and impacts, good and bad, their rulers had on the populace and empire at large within the context of the volatile 11th and 12th centuries. On the other side of Europe, the incorporation of the blinding scene into the kings' sagas amidst a fictional feud narrative is difficult to parse in isolation. When put into the context of the wider net of sagas, however, the entwined themes of blinding and castration encourage further interpretations that were likely implicit to the medieval Scandinavian audience, but are lost on the modern reader.

Although the blinding of Michael is a point of historical fact, the narratives from both the Norse and the Byzantine sides are ultimately of most value for what they tell us about the frame of mind of the authors and their time periods. The use of this oft-overlooked emperor to explore concepts of kingship and power in two very different societies is a strange coincidence, in this case made possible only by the Varangian Guard itself. The return of these northern warriors from southern climes introduced such foreign elements into Norse societies, and prompted the incorporation of distant tales, whether true or not, into their native literary tradition, where Scandinavian skalds and storytellers developed them further and made them their own. In pinpointing the account's origin in history and its subsequent transformation into legend, we witness the inadvertent fame of a tragic young ruler, destined for the footnotes of Byzantium, whose fate made a journey he himself, for all his ideas of grandeur, could never have imagined.

Departure

Riding the high of violence and mayhem, Haraldr orchestrates his dramatic exit from Constantinople via one of his classic military stratagems. These acts of trickery most famously appear during his Sicilian campaign, in which he captures towns by tunnelling, faking his own death, and setting birds on fire. Such stratagems appear most prevalently in sagas with connections to the East, particularly within the genres of kings' sagas and *fornaldarsögur*, as well as *Gesta Danorum*.[126] Stender-Petersen has argued that these stories can be traced to the Mediterranean, and proposed that a narrative may be labeled a "Varangian legend" if it appears in Byzantine, Slavic, and Scandinavian literature, marking its journey from south to north.[127] Cook has pointed out that due to the almost complete lack of contemporary Slavic sources from this period, limiting the collection of Varangian legends to stories that appear in all three corpora

[125] Psellos, using variations of the verb κόπτω, states that Michael and Constantine had their eyes "cut through" and "cut out" (οἱ ὀφθαλμοί **διεκόπτοντο**...τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς **ἐκκοπεὶς**), while Attaleiates explains more precisely that "the pupils of their eyes were pierced" (τὰς κόρας τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν **ἐκεντήθησαν**); Skylitzes merely says that the crowd "blinds" them (**ἀποτυφλοῦσι**). Ψελλός, *Χρονογραφία Α*, 306; Attaleiates, *History*, 28; Ἰωάννης Σκυλίτζης, Σύνοψις Ιστοριών Β, edited by Eudoxos Tsolakis (Athens: Ekdoseis Kanake, 2011).

[126] Cook, "Russian History," 85. These stratagems are quite ancient in origin, appearing across various cultures. The bird tactic, for instance, is recommended in the *Arthashastra* by Kautilya, a Sanskrit treatise possibly written for Chandragupta Maurya (r. c. 321- c. 297 BC).

[127] Stender-Petersen, *Die Varägersaga*, 77-90.

is too ambitious. Instead, he has recommended widening the scope to stratagems that appear only in Byzantine and Norse literature, but have ties to Russia, such as those found in *Eymundar þáttr Hringssonar*.[128] Davidson has been more liberal in her assessment of these tales: "such stories may be accepted as part of a pattern, showing how a man of Harald's type might be expected to behave, rather than a factual record."[129]

Haraldr's escape from Byzantium appears in nearly all the sources in which his Varangian career is preserved. The *Morkinskinna* variant is as follows:

> Ok á þessi sǫmu nótt tekr Haraldr hǫllina, er inni var María jungfrúva, ok hǫfðu þeir hana brot með sér. Tóku síðan tvær galeiðr ok reru út í Sæviðarsund, en þar váru járnfestar yfir sundit. Ok þá mælti Haraldr: "Nú skulu menn skipask til ára á hvárritveggju galeiðinni, en allir þeir menn er eigi þarf til róðrarins þá skal hverr taka húðfat í faðm sér eða annan hǫfga ok hlaupa aptr í skipin ok vita ef á upp vili ganga fram á festarnar." Ok nú gera þeir svá ok renna skipin á upp, ok þegar er þau festi ok skriðinn tók af þá mælti Haraldr: "Nú skulu allir menn hlaupa fram í skipin ok hafa enn með sama hætti í fangi sér." Ok nú við þetta bragð steypisk sú galeiðin af fram járnfestunum er Haraldr sjálfr var á, en hin reið á festunum ok gekk í sundr, ok týndisk af þeiri þar í sundinu mjǫk mart manna, en sumir váru teknir af kafi. En við þetta komsk Haraldr á brot af Miklagarði ok fór svá síðan inn í Svartahaf.
>
> That same night Haraldr seized the hall in which the maiden María resided, and they took her away with them. Then they took two galleys and rowed out into Sæviðarsund (the Golden Horn), but there were iron chains across the strait. Haraldr said: "Men on both galleys should now be assigned to the oars, but all the men who are not needed for rowing should each take a sleeping roll or other weight in his arms and run to the stern of the ships to see if they will run up onto the chains." They did so, and the ships did run up on the chains, but as soon as the impetus was arrested and they came to a standstill, Haraldr said: "Now everyone should run forward to the prow and hold onto their weights." This device had the effect of pitching Haraldr's galley forward over the iron chains, but the other galley was suspended on the chain and broke in two. A great many men were lost in the strait, though some were rescued. Thus Haraldr escaped from Constantinople and out into the Black Sea.[130]

Although shorter and less elaborate than Haraldr's other stratagems employed in Sicily, this method of tackling chained off harbors has a similar provenance in Mediterranean warfare tactics, and appears to have had its roots in this tradition. Two classical histories covering the First Punic War contain examples of countering chains, both of which are preserved in a number of manuscripts from the medieval period and were thus known within the Byzantine world. One passage comes from Frontinus' *Strategemata*, and concerns an escape from the harbor at Syracuse.[131] Another version, set in Hippo, survives in the 12th century *Epitome Historion* by

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[128] Cook, "Russian History," 86.
[129] Davidson, *Viking Road to Byzantium*, 213.
[130] *ÍF* XXIII, 113-14; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 147-48.
[131] C. Duellius consul in portu Syracusano, quem temere intraverat, obiecta ad ingressum catena clausus universos in puppem rettulit milites atque ita resupina navigia magna remigantium vi concitavit; levatae prorae super catenam processerunt. Qua parte superata transgressi rursus milites proras presserunt, in quas versum pondus decursum super catenam dedit navibus. [When the consul Gaius Duellius was caught by a chain stretched across the entrance to the harbour of Syracuse, which he had rashly entered, he assembled all his soldiers in the sterns of the boats, and when the boats were thus tilted up, he propelled them forward with the full force of his oarsmen. Thus lifted up over the chain, the prows moved forward. When this part of the boats had been carried over, the soldiers, returning to the prows, depressed these, and the weight thus transferred to them permitted the boats to pass over the chain.] Frontinus,

John Zonaras, who follows Cassius Dio's *Historia Romana* in recounting the Roman portion of his historical narrative.[132] Of these versions, Stender-Petersen has suggested the Frontinus sample as the starting point of the stratagem's dissemination, while Blöndal has argued for a wider knowledge of the story in Byzantium, stating that "this ruse must have been the commonest of commonplaces in military tactics, and any competent commander would have known it; since Haraldr had spent a long time as an officer in Byzantine naval circles, he could hardly have failed to have heard it and noted it."[133] The apparent prevalence of the story in Byzantine literature would suggest that Blöndal's assertion of the story simply being in the air and commonly known among naval officers is probably correct, especially given the fame of the Bosphorus chain as those who employ a defense must also be aware of how it might be countered.

Military tactics involving chains and cables blocking off bodies of water were not unknown in Scandinavia either. Andersson and Gade have noted a similarity between Haraldr's Golden Horn adventure and an episode in *Heimskringla* about King Óláfr Haraldsson, in which he orchestrates the raising of a *kaðall* "cable" connected between two ships to capture Jarl Hákon Eiríksson.[134] The reversal of roles within the context of the *Heimskringla* narrative – Óláfr as perpetrator, Haraldr as escapee – offers a connection between the two brothers in their understanding and management of the stratagem. Óláfr, manning the cable, successfully takes out the hapless Hákon, who does not employ the method needed to evade the chain, possibly due to ignorance of the tactic, but more likely due to the element of surprise – unlike the other

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Stratagems. Aqueducts of Rome, trans. C. E. Bennett and Mary B. McElwain, Loeb Classical Library 174 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 38-39.

[132] τῶν δ' ἐπιχωρίων τὸ στόμα τοῦ λιμένος διαλαβόντων ἁλύσεσιν, ἐν περιστάσει ἐγένοντο, σοφία δὲ καὶ τύχῃ περιεγένοντο. σπουδῇ γάρ ταῖς ἁλύσεσι προσπεσόντες, ἐπεὶ προσάψασθαι αὐτῶν ἔμελλον οἱ ἔμβολοι τῶν νηῶν, μετέστησαν ἐς τὰς πρύμνας οἱ τοῦ πληρώματος, καὶ οὕτως αἱ πρῶραι κουφισθεῖσαι ὑπερῆραν τὰς ἁλύσεις, αὖθις δ' ἐς τὰς πρώρας αὐτῶν μεταπηδησάντων αἱ πρύμναι τῶν σκαφῶν ἐμετεωρίσθησαν. καὶ διεξέδραμον, καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο περὶ τὸ Πάνορμον ναυσὶ Καρχηδονίους ἐνίκησαν. [The natives (of Hippo) put chains across the mouth of the harbor, and the invaders found themselves in an awkward situation, but escaped by cleverness and good fortune. They made a quick dash at the chains, and just as the beaks of the ships were about to catch in them, the members of the crews moved back to the stern, and so the prows were lightened and cleared the chains; and again, when all rushed into the prows, the sterns of the vessels were lifted high in the air. Thus they effected their escape, and later near Panormus they conquered the Carthaginians on the sea.] Cassius Dio, *Dio's Roman History*, trans. Earnest Cary, vol. 2 (London: W. Heinemann, 1914-1927), 8:16.

[133] Stender-Petersen, *Die Varägersaga*, 97-98; Blöndal, *Varangians of Byzantium*, 99.

[134] Óláfr konungr helt inn af leið skipum sínum, er hann kom suðr yfir Fjalir, ok snøri inn til Sauðungssunda ok lagðisk þar, lágu sínum megin sundsins hváru skipinu ok hǫfðu milli sín kaðal digran. Á þeiri sǫmu stundu røri at sundinu Hákon jarl Eiríksson með skeið skipaðri, ok hugðu þeir vera í sundinu kaupskip tvau. Róa þeir í sundit fram milli skipanna. Nú draga þeir Óláfr konungr strengina upp undir miðjan kjǫl skeiðinni ok undu með vindásum. Þegar er nǫkkur festi, gekk upp aptr, en steypðisk fram, svá at sjárinn fell inn um sǫxin, fylldi skeiðna ok því næst hólfði. Óláfr konungr tók þar af sundi Hákon jarl ok alla þá menn hans, er þeir náðu handtaka, en suma drápu þeir, en sumir sukku niðr. [King Óláfr kept his ships inside the shipping lanes when he got south past Fjalir, and turned into Sauðungssund and hove to, lying with one ship each side of the sound holding between them a stout cable. Just at that moment Jarl Hákon Eiríksson rowed up to the sound with a manned warship, thinking they were two merchant ships in the sound. They row forward into the sound between the ships. Now King Óláfr and his men haul the cables up under the middle of the warship's keel and drew it in with windlasses. As soon as it took hold somewhere it rose up at the stern and dived down in front so that the sea flowed in over the bows, filled the warship and next it capsized. King Óláfr took Jarl Hákon out of the water there and all those of his men that they managed to catch hold of, but some they slew and some sank down]. Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, edited by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk Fornrit XXVII (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1945), 36-37; Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, vol. 2, translated by Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2014), 22.

stories, the cable is not already in place upon the ship's arrival, but is raised beneath the warship as it passes by in order to capsize it. Haraldr, on the receiving end of the chain at the Golden Horn, is able to prevent his ship from capsizing, but his second ship is not so lucky and meets a similar fate as Hákon's, with some of the crew dead and the rest surviving after being pulled from the water by the enemy. In both scenes, despite Haraldr's loss, the brothers emerge victorious, and the inclusion of the chain scene in *Heimskringla*'s *Haralds saga* relatively soon after Óláfr's role in the prison escape is, at the very least, noteworthy in its symmetry. Given the presence of the story in the Norse sources, it is possible that the chain stratagem was also popularly known in the North; but it seems reasonable to assume that the learned population knew about the great chain in Constantinople as one of its most famous features, either from Haraldr or other returning travelers.

The final stage of Haraldr's escape from Constantinople is his brief stop farther down the Bosphorus to release his romantic interest María. This is a small but important moment in his demonstration of political power and monarchal wisdom. According to *Morkinskinna*,

> Ok áðr en hann sigldi í hafit setti han jungfrú Máriu á land upp ok fekk henni gott fǫruneyti aptr til Miklagarðs ok bað hana segja Zóe dróttning at hon hefði með Haraldi brot farit ok spyrja hvé mikit vald hon hefir þá á honum eða hvárt þeira hefði nú ríkra orðit; lézk ekki hafa var orðit við at hon, dróttningin, hefði nú fyri staðit at eigi mætti hann fá jungfrúna sem hann vildi.
>
> Before he set sail, he put the maiden Maria on shore and provided her with a good escort back to Constantinople. He bade her tell Empress Zoe that she had departed in Haraldr's company, then ask her how great her power over him was and who had bested the other. He said that it was not clear to him that the empress had prevented him from taking the maiden away any time he wanted.[135]

Haraldr's focus on Zoe as his primary political enemy in this scene aligns with the larger narrative of romantic intrigue, but its close succession to the blinding of the Byzantine emperor also draws parallels in the political context of Haraldr's conflict with the empire. Zoe has caused him a great deal of irritation, but despite all she has done to bring him down, she is powerless to take real action against him without inciting the emperor to do it for her. Although the slander she perpetrates with the aid of Gyrgir harms his image, it is not until she finally convinces the emperor to throw Haraldr in prison that the Norwegian prince is truly incensed and feels the need to retaliate in kind.

After the attack on the emperor, Haraldr is compelled to respond to Zoe's slander accordingly. But his method is fairly even-handed, and demonstrates a more restrained approach towards her than might be expected following the violence of the blinding. The kidnapping and return of María does not harm Zoe physically or politically, but serves as a personal embarrassment and demonstration of what Haraldr is capable of. His posturing in the speech he instructs María to pass along to the empress further emphasizes Zoe's lack of power within the Norse sources – she is unable to woo Haraldr, she is unable to persecute him without the consent of the emperor, and, finally, she is unable to stop him from physically removing her own family member from the city she supposedly controls. The primary antagonist of his Varangian years is ultimately defeated by a straightforward reminder of her irrelevance in the larger scheme of the narrative, a fitting final blow in Haraldr's departure on his way to his own throne.

[135] *ÍF* XXIII, 114; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 148.

Homecoming

The final phase of Haraldr's Varangian years is his homecoming, an enduringly iconic feature of the Varangian motif. The significance of his triumphant return is reflected in lavish descriptions of Haraldr, his men, and his treasure; more importantly, these scenes reveal details about the native fascination with the Varangians, and why, specifically, they were so revered in their homeland. The focus of the language employed by the sagas is on symbols of wealth, power, and status, depicting a spectacle so grand that no one had seen the like before or since. In *Morkinskinna*, the sequence occurs in the midst of the manuscript's lacuna, but *Flateyjarbók* and *Fagrskinna* place it before the Byzantine sequence, a dramatic narrative choice that sets a wonderful precedent for the excitement of his adventures to come – by starting with the return, the writer builds anticipation of how he will attain these accomplishments, driving the audience onward to the Mediterranean. These texts also center their initial attention on the physical exhibition of the homecoming, primarily physical attributes embodied by ships and treasure. *Heimskringla* shifts the focus to Haraldr himself, putting the man in focus while also rearranging the narrative into chronological order to redirect the attention away from the trappings and towards the political implications of Haraldr's arrival.

The scene in *Flateyjarbók* opens with King Magnús in Skáney as he is alerted to the arrival of a ship from the east:

> Þat var allt gulli búit fyrir ofan sjó ok váru á drekahǫfuð fǫgr, en seglit var tvefalt pell af inum dýrstum vefjum. Ok er þessi nýlunda hófsk upp þá þótti mǫnnum mikils um vert. En þetta skip var með þess konar farmi at þat var fermt með rauðu purpuragulli, en allir veðrvitar váru svá at sjá sem rautt gull væri, svá ok allir spœnir í, en fyrir borðin innan þá váru vaskir drengir klæddir með dýrum vefjum ok pellum.
>
> It was all ornamented in gold above the water line and carried splendid dragon's heads fore and aft. The sail was of fine fabric sewn double and of the costliest manufacture. When this sighting was made, people thought it was remarkable news. As for the cargo, the ship was loaded with ruddy gold, and all the weathervanes glistened like gold, as did the dragon profiles. On board there were stout men clad in precious materials.[136]

The description of wealth in *Fagrskinna* bears many similarities, with slight shifts in details:

> Haraldr Sigurðarsonr hafði þrjú langskip ok þat, er hann stýrði sjálfr. Þar var yfir þess konar segl, at þat var pell gullskotit ok lagt tvéfalt fyrir, því at hvárgir skyldu þeir, er aptr væri eða frammi sjá et ófegra á pellunum. Á því skipi váru drekahǫfuð ok ǫll gulli búin, ok svá er sagt, at ekki skip eitt mun þat verit hafa á Norðrlǫndum, er jafnmikit gull mun á hafa verit eða dýrligir steinar eða pell eða margs konar aðrar gersimar.
>
> Haraldr Sigurðarson had three longships as well as the one which he commanded himself. Above it was a sail of this kind: it was of fine cloth woven with gold thread, and made of double thickness so that neither those who were behind nor those in front of it could see the less beautiful side of the cloth. On that ship were dragons' heads all decorated with gold, and it is said that there has never been a single ship in the Northern lands adorned with so much gold or precious stones or fine cloth or many other kinds of treasure.[137]

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[136] *ÍF* XXIII, 80; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 129.

[137] Bjarni Einarsson, ed., *Ágrip – Fagrskinna*, Íslenzk Fornrit 29 (Reykjavik: Híð Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1984), 226; Alison Finlay, *Fagrskinna, A Catalogue of the Kings of Norway* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 181.

The centerpiece of both passages are Haraldr's ships. Their role is more dramatic in *Flateyjarbók*, which defines its vessel before Haraldr is identified as its owner, introducing a pause in the narrative to allow for its description and enabling the author to clarify the physical evidence of Viking Age success before the prince's appearance encourages the continuation of the saga. But the narrative function of the ships contributes to both passages in two key ways. First, everything physical about Haraldr's return is anchored to the vessels – they bear his treasure and his retinue, who are themselves richly decorated with the trappings of his triumph. The ships are also easily decipherable by native Norse (both witnesses in the sagas and the texts' intended audiences) as symbols of the finest craftsmanship, reflecting the status and wealth of the man who owns them. The ships thus become ground zero linking the images the author is set to explore, making them a natural lynchpin for conveying princely success. And on a symbolic level, the ships tip the hat to Haraldr's identity in this scene: he is coming home from a distant land, and everything we are about to learn about him – his wealth, his adventures, his status – is tied to this expedition abroad.

With the scene established, both passages immediately note the presence of a returning Varangian's most iconic possession. Gold is referenced not only as wealth in and of itself, but also as ornamentation: it is part of both the cargo and the design of the ships, decorating their dragonheads and even sails. Although gold was certainly an historic product of Byzantine travel, its universal inclusion in Varangian treasure troves is likely exaggerated – plenty of other materials of value were brought back to Scandinavia from the Mediterranean, as noted by the *Fagrskinna* passage.[138] However, there was clearly a special association between Byzantium and gold in medieval Scandinavia, as attested in *Heimskringla*'s description of Haraldr's treasure: "Þetta var þó raundar Grikkjakonungs eiga ok auðr, sem allir menn segja, at þar sé rautt gull húsum fullum" [It was, however, really the property and wealth of the king of the Greeks, since everyone says that there are housefuls of red gold there].[139] The classification of *gull* may thus be interpreted as a catch-all term, a synecdoche referencing the most outstanding, valuable, and location-specific aspect of the hoard borne by a returning traveler.[140]

The other material consistently associated with returning Varangians is cloth. Often used as a universal currency, cloth was a standard and valuable trade commodity across the medieval world, and is often referenced in the sagas as an item both imported and exported by Norse travelers. The type of fabric used in the sails of Haraldr's ships is unspecified – cloth associated with Byzantium often implies silk, as the empire held a European monopoly in the industry until the 12th century, though silk sails would be a rich investment.[141] The two-sided nature of the sail

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[138] The term *purpuragull* is one signifier of the connection with Byzantium, as the word appears only twice in the Norse corpus, both times to describe Byzantine treasure. One instance is found in the above passage from *Flateyjarbók*; the other appears in *Morkinskinna* during Sigurðr Jórsalafari's time in Constantinople, when the emperor Kirjalax (Alexios I Komnenos) orders a portion of wealth to be presented to his Norse guest: "Farið nú þriðja sinni ok fœrið honum it dýrsta purpuragull ok hrokaða af því þessa cisterna" [Go now a third time and take him the reddest gold and fill these tubs to overflowing]. *ÍF* XXIV, 96; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 323.
[139] *ÍF* XXVIII, 100; Finlay and Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, 59.
[140] Despite the prominence of gold in these saga passages, hoards found in the North primarily consist of silver coins. The lack of gold coins is likely due to their superior value in eastern trade, causing them to be spent rather than buried. Björn Ambrosiani, "Birka and Scandinavia's Trade with the East," *Russian History* 32, no. 3/4 (2005).
[141] On the presence of Byzantine silk in the North, see Inga Hägg, "Birkas orientaliska praktplagg," *Fornvännen* 78 (1983); Anne Hedeager Krag, "Byzantine and Oriental Silks in Denmark, 800-1200," *Medieval Clothing and Textiles* 14 (2018).

emphasizes the amount of cloth Haraldr and his shipwrights had access to, as the doubled fabric was rare enough for the saga to explicitly comment upon, and would have cost twice as much to produce as a normal sail.[142] *Fagrskinna* additionally notes that Haraldr has a quantity of *pell* alongside the rest of his treasure, indicating that even this exorbitant usage of the material represents only a fraction of his supply.

Fabric also appears as clothing in the *Flateyjarbók* passage, which notes Haraldr's men as "klæddir með dýrum vefjum ok pellum" [clothed in precious fabric and cloth]. The role of the retinue again signals the fact that his treasure is not limited to a pile of goods on his ship, but is so excessive that he can afford to outfit many retainers. The adornment of his men in fine materials also demonstrates Haraldr's treatment of his followers – he is generous with his fortune, an excellent quality in a Norse leader that finds particular relevance in the subsequent scene, in which he makes his bid to Magnús to become king of Norway. At this point in both sources, we have seen Haraldr only as Óláfr's young half-brother who fled Norway many years prior, and we do not yet know what kind of ruler he will grow to be. The Varangian sequences that follow his homecoming reveal more detail about his capabilities as a charismatic and clever mercenary captain; but the image of his men lining the decks in their regalia is the first tangible indication that Haraldr knows how to distribute his wealth in a way that both benefits his followers and builds his own image, a combination that reinforces his image on the page as a future royal.

The final component of these scenes that adds dimension to Haraldr's arrival are comments regarding the reaction of witnesses. Phrases like *þá þótti mǫnnum* and *svá er sagt* operate as author insertions to verify and emphasize the incredible nature of the homecoming. Not only are those present in the harbor amazed by his show of wealth and power, but the image also sets a new standard by which this kind of fortune is measured. The implication that Haraldr's grandeur has passed into the realm of common knowledge lays additional groundwork for the remarkable legacy of a famous king with which we are about to be presented. But it also helps perpetrate the legendary element of the homecoming – the vagueness of these "everyone knows" statements indicates that the audience too should know the extraordinary nature of these scenes, directly inviting them to become part of the Varangian tradition.

Although similarly generous in its account of Haraldr's triumphant return, *Heimskringla* takes a different approach to its rendition. First, the text rearranges the order of events: Haraldr's homecoming is told in chronological sequence, after his Varangian years and immediately following a stint of raiding with Sveinn Ástríðarson in Sweden and Denmark. Second, the focus of the descriptions moves from the physical spectacle to Haraldr himself. Instead of beginning with the image of ships sailing into the harbor, the prince's return is heralded by word of mouth in a report to Magnús:

> Þat var ok sagt með, at Haraldr væri meiri en aðrir menn ok sterkari ok svá vitr, at honum var ekki ófœrt ok hann hafði ávallt sigr, er hann barðisk – hann var ok svá auðigr at gulli, at engi maðr vissi dœmi til.

[142] King Sigurðr Jórsalafari is also said to have double-sided sails during his voyage to the Mediterranean: "ǫll hans segl váru sett pellum, bæði þat er aptr vissi ok fram, því at hvárigir, aptrbyggjar né hinir er fram váru, vildu sjá it ófegra seglanna" [all of his sails were covered with precious fabric on both sides to make sure that neither those forward nor those aft would see what was less sightly on the sails]. *ÍF* XXIII, 95; Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna*, 322.

> It was also said as well, that Haraldr was bigger than other men and stronger and so intelligent that nothing was impossible to him and he was always victorious when he fought battles; he was also so wealthy in gold that people knew of no precedent.[143]

The summary of the characteristics demonstrated in the preceding Mediterranean chapters captures many of the qualities that will continue to define Haraldr following his coronation. At the same time, the pause in action to outline these attributes marks a shift in his role within the saga – his adventurous youth is coming to an end, and soon he will move into the new role of king. The wealth he has earned in Byzantium is mentioned as one component of his overall image, but it is only part of the whole, taking equal stature with more personal attributes.

The scenes following this summary entirely omits the grand entrance with treasure-filled ships. Instead, Haraldr reconciles with Magnús in secret, at which point they divide their wealth with each other: half of Magnús' kingdom for half of Haraldr's Mediterranean plunder. The impact of this narrative model is less dramatic than the other renditions, but allows for deeper focus on the interactions between Haraldr and his fellow rulers: first his friendship-turned-enmity with Sveinn, and then his reunion and negotiation with Magnús. These political developments are clearly of more interest to the author than the drama of his sudden appearance, and thus take center stage.

The saga eventually settles on a description of Haraldr's wealth, however, when he lays it out to divide with his nephew:

> Síðan lét Haraldr breiða niðr nautshúð mikla ok steypa þar á gullinu ór tǫskunum. Síðan váru skálir teknar ok met ok reitt í sundr féit, skipt ǫllu með vágum, ok þotti ǫllum mǫnnum, er sá, mikil furða, er í Norðrlǫndum skyldi vera svá mikit gull saman komit í einn stað. Þetta var þó raundar Grikkjakonungs eiga ok auðr, sem allir menn segja, at þar sé rautt gull húsum fullum.
>
> After that Haraldr had a great oxhide spread out on the ground and the gold from the bags poured onto it. Then scales and weights were got out and the wealth was weighed out in parts, everything divided by weight, and it seemed to everyone that was looking on a most amazing thing that so much gold should have been brought together in one place in the Northern Lands. It was, however, really the property and wealth of the king of the Greeks, since everyone says that there are housefuls of red gold there.[144]

Some elements from the other sources are missing here – there is no mention of cloth, nor is there a well-dressed retinue manning richly decorated vessels. But once again, the primary sign of wealth is gold, its amount emphasized even further in this scene by the discussion of scales and the active attempt to quantify it according to common measurements. There is also reference to the reaction of witnesses, again underscoring the unprecedented amount of riches. The final comment on the ownership of the gold is curious, and seems to cast some doubt on its legitimacy as Haraldr's own; however, this question does not seem to be a problem within the scene itself, as Magnús willingly accepts the treasure in exchange for the Norwegian throne.

The establishment of the homecoming as a core moment in a Varangian's life resonates across the Haraldr sources and beyond, almost certainly because it was, despite its grandeur, one of the easiest images to imagine for a contemporary audience. Less elaborate homecomings feature throughout the Norse corpus, and the return of a traveler seems to have been, as today, a

[143] *ÍF* XXVIII, 95; Finlay and Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, 56.
[144] *ÍF* XXVIII, 100; Finlay and Faulkes, *Heimskringla*, vol. 3, 59.

moment of celebration and a chance to display the tokens of distant lands. The distance and magnitude of experience undergone by the Varangians escalates the model to extreme measures, merging reality and fantasy into an image of great achievement quantified in a single snapshot that was easily recognizable to Norse audiences in the Saga Age.

Conclusion

The popularity of narratives about Haraldr Sigurðarson's early career owes a debt to the confluence of his rank, character, and historical achievements. His position as king of Norway drew automatic attention to his life story, and his rich and complex temperament made for a captivating protagonist. The outsized nature of his success – traveling to the far-off Mediterranean, serving with distinction in the Varangian Guard, and returning with unparalleled wealth – provides a succinct template for thrilling stories, and his own penchant for self-promotion helped make his exploits more widely known. In the hands of skalds, these tales began to take on an exaggerated tone, aligning with linguistic conventions in poetry and the role of verse as a reputation enhancer within the Norse world. The development of prose sagas expanded these dramatic snapshots of Haraldr's life into full-blown narratives that furthered the preservation of his legacy while capitalizing on the entertainment value inherent in his adventures.

Haraldr's prominence in the medieval corpus speaks to the success and popularity of these stories, and significantly influenced the image of the Varangian Guard in subsequent centuries. One such effect is his outsized presence in modern Varangian studies. The many versions of his life narrative make up a large portion of the few surviving Norse texts about the Guard, and his kings' sagas offer the longest and most detailed passages on Varangian activity in the extant sources. As a result, Haraldr is often the focal point of current scholarship on the Varangians, and may be considered the nexus of the field in many respects.

His impact is also felt in the wider saga tradition. Whether captivated by his character or desiring to connect their own protagonists back to a famous king, medieval authors drew heavily on Haraldr and his exploits to construct their own tales of Byzantine adventurers. This repetition generated a literary topos of the Varangian abroad, further excising the historical foundation from the developing legend. Haraldr's successors share his charisma, wealth, and generosity; they are beloved leaders and brilliant warriors with strong foundations in wisdom and piety. Though these men never surpass him in rank, they often take on aristocratic airs, and sometimes appear as nobles or goðar. Their full potential is only realized in Byzantium, a foreign space that also frames them as purveyors of entertainment. At the same time, the stock image of the Haraldr-inspired Varangian retains a degree of flexibility, allowing authors to adapt the topos for new genres, audiences, and time periods, just as the king himself displays subtle variations across his numerous sources. Haraldr's legacy thus forms the basis for a cast of characters luminous enough to turn heads and malleable enough to survive the test of time, leveraging their high profile to engage with diverse themes and anxieties of future generations.

II

Varangians Abroad

Few Varangians are extensively preserved in the medieval corpus beyond Haraldr. Those who have survived are typically found in the family sagas and occasionally the kings' sagas. The general pattern of the Varangian motif is the departure from the North, adventures in the Mediterranean, and the conclusion of the expedition, either in an elaborate and highly lauded homecoming or the decision to remain in Constantinople following marriage to a local woman. The historical basis and background for these journeys is largely lost – while it is possible that some of these characters did join the Guard, their stories as captured in the sagas are largely fictional. Their inclusion and construction in their respective narratives is thus deliberate and generally informed by and contribute to the context of each individual saga. At the same time, their close similarities with one another indicate an established and well-known model from which their authors were drawing, namely the figure of Haraldr Sigurðarson, whose presence is often implicit in these episodes, with the exception of *Grettis saga*, which is explicit in its inclusion of the king himself as a supporting character. The lack of significant detail attached to itinerant Varangians suggests that audiences too were familiar with the topos, as the sagas provide just enough information to imply the relevance of a Varangian identity without diving deeper than necessary for the characters to perform the roles for which they are invoked.

This section will focus on Bolli Bollason of *Laxdœla saga* and Þorsteinn drómundr of *Grettis saga*, who receive the most attention and longest sections devoted to their Varangian travels outside of the Haraldr texts.[1] *Laxdœla saga*'s primarily focus is on Icelandic drama, and while several notable sections take place in Ireland and Norway, the narrative quickly reverts to the impact of these travels once each respective hero has returned home. Bolli's time in Constantinople is the most spectacular yet shortest passage of these international excursions, and has little impact on the saga as a whole, coming right at the end as the feud cycle is winding

[1] Other Varangians in the sagas featured in more concise passages are Kolskeggr Hámundarson of *Njáls saga* and Gestr Þórhallason and Barði Guðmundarson of *Heiðarvíga saga*.

down. The Varangian sequence in *Grettis saga* is longer than that of *Laxdœla saga*, in part because the narrative follows Þorsteinn drómundr all the way to Byzantium instead of leaving him once he departs the North, as in Bolli's case. Although the avenging of Grettir's death should be witnessed by the audience, its relocation to such a far-flung setting casts this finale in a very different light than its preceding narrative. Similar to the heavy focus on entertainment seen in the depictions of Haraldr's exploits, the author subsequently takes advantage of the exotic setting to expand Þorsteinn's travels with further twists and turns, borrowing heavily from Haraldr episodes and the Tristan legend.

Bolli and Þorsteinn signal a shift in genre for the Varangians, from the kings' sagas of the Haraldr sources to the family sagas and beyond. Although they are both the main characters of their own sequences, they are not dominant within the larger works, appearing only in the final chapters. Bolli is heavily modeled after Haraldr in the manner of his departure for Constantinople and the elaborate description of his return, although his years in Byzantium itself are not described at length. He supposedly precedes Haraldr in joining the Varangians, and is linked by family to Haraldr's close companions Halldórr and Úlfr, who are abroad when Bolli returns. Þorsteinn's expedition is far more fanciful, and its presence in a family saga belies its true origins in the mimicry of the romance of Tristan and Isold, translated into Norse from French in the 13th century. This merging of romance and kings' saga points to authorial awareness of similarities between the genres, and while the light-hearted mood of the Byzantine episode is an awkward departure from the wider *Grettis saga*, it is not entirely out of left field for a writer that demonstrates a willingness to play with narrative conventions throughout the work. Although limited in their scope compared to their Norwegian predecessor, the incorporation of Bolli and Þorsteinn into the Old Norse corpus attests to the longevity of Haraldr and the Varangian motif as sources of entertainment through the Saga Age. Furthermore, the viability of such characters across multiple genres suggests their universal appeal and the fluidity with which these relatively stock figures could integrate into a variety of narratives to serve a variety of purposes.

Bolli Bollason

Laxdœla saga is one of the core texts of the family saga genre. These narratives typically focus on multiple generations of at least one family as they navigate the social and political landscape of Viking Age Iceland. The sagas almost always revolve around feud – the story begins with an irritant triggering hostilities which steadily grow more and more severe until a climax, usually violent, is reached, after which tensions are slowly resolved. The saga ends when equilibrium has been established once more. Characters are often based on historical figures, but are exaggerated and fictionalized due to the gap of two centuries between the Viking Age and Saga Age, and the structured narrative format that requires some flexibility with the facts. Though set in the past, the genre reflects contemporary anxieties about the uneasy balance of violence and the law, the delicate nature of relationships, and tensions surrounding societal paradigm shifts. In exploring such issues, these narratives essentially act as thought experiments, exploring what could happen if things went very wrong, and what it would take to rein in chaos and restore peace. The family sagas are the most popular texts in the Norse corpus today due to their modern storytelling techniques, bloody conflicts, and the memorably flawed men and women who haunt their pages.

The narrative of *Laxdœla saga* follows the descendants of Unnr in djúpúðga, a rare matriarch in a patriarchal society. The saga's most famous quality is its deep interest in women, who feature prominently throughout the narrative as clever and powerful operators, both through direct action and by influencing the men around them. At the center of the saga is a tragic love triangle – Kjartan Óláfsson, his foster-brother Bolli Þorleiksson, and the object of their love, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir. Though Kjartan and Guðrún seem destined for one another, she is reluctantly married to Bolli. Her disappointment and rage drive her to instigate a feud between the two best friends, ultimately resulting in Kjartan's death at the hands of Bolli, who is slain in return by Kjartan's family and friends. Guðrún and Bolli have two sons, Bolli and Þorleikr, who are too young to avenge their father at the time of his death. Years later, when they are in their early teens, Guðrún spurs them to vengeance, which they carry out to great acclaim. The elder Þorleikr subsequently goes abroad to Norway and becomes a great man; but his younger brother Bolli, following in the footsteps of earlier generations, is even more outstanding and grows into the most accomplished man in Iceland. Eventually Bolli too seeks his fortune abroad, first following his brother to Norway, and then voyaging to Constantinople to join the Varangian Guard.

Due to the saga's insistence that Bolli was the first Norse Varangian, and because his expedition, according to *Laxdœla*'s timeline, occurs pre-Haraldr, Sverrir Jakobsson has proposed that "the tale of Bolli serves as a sort of foundation legend for the Varangian presence in Constantinople, which is introduced in *Morkinskinna*."[2] If this is the case, *Laxdœla saga* may be the vehicle through which the Varangian legend moves from the kings' sagas into the family sagas, considering the early dating of the text, its unusually long passage devoted to Varangian service, and Bolli's connections to Haraldr, through both familial relations with the king's Icelandic companions and the close resemblance between the homecomings of the two men.

Bolli is the third generation of Iceland's best to travel internationally, preceded by Óláfr pái and Kjartan Óláfsson, both of whom engaged in increasingly elaborate and empowering voyages abroad. Bolli may be seen as the culmination of these journeys, in both the nature of his travels and his final destination. Óláfr pái, already cutting an impressive figure in Iceland, departs his homeland at the urging of his mother Melkorka. He stops first in Norway, where he wins the good graces of King Haraldr gráfeldr and his mother Gunnhildr, and then heads to Ireland, where he proves his familial connection to King Mýrkjartan. After turning down the Irish crown, he returns to Norway to great fanfare: "leggr konungr ok Gunnhildr svá mikla virðing á Óláf, at engi útlendr maðr hafði slíka virðing af þeim þegit" [the king and Gunnhildr showed Olaf more honour than any other foreigner had ever been shown].[3] His homecoming is not described in detail, but word spreads of his ship's arrival:

> Óláfr varð frægr af ferð þessi; þá var ok kunnigt gǫrt kynferði Óláfs, at hann var dóttursonr Mýrkjartans Írakonungs. Spyrsk þetta um allt land ok þar með virðing sú, er ríkr menn hǫfðu á hann lagt, þeir er hann hafði heimsótt. Óláfr hafði ok mikit fé út haft...
>
> Olaf became renowned as a result of his journey and the news that he was the grandson of Myrkjartan, king of the Irish. The story spread throughout Iceland, together with reports of the

[2] Sverrir Jakobsson, *The Varangians: In God's Holy Fire* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 126.

[3] Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Laxdœla saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit V (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1934), 60; Keneva Kunz, trans., "The Saga of the People of Laxardal," in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* V, edited by Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavik: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), 29.

> honour the powerful men whom he had visited had shown him. Olaf had also brought great wealth home.[4]

The final comment about Óláfr's wealth is a standard annotation to a productive journey, but his success is more aptly measured through his effective networking: the now-proven familial connections in Ireland and newly forged alliances with Mýrkjartan and the Norwegian royals. As a young man launching himself into the social landscape, Óláfr faces a unique challenge as the son of a goði father and a slave mother, as his position on the spectrum of rank is still undetermined. His voyage establishes him as a viable man of influence through self-made means – he proves himself worthy of his father's rank while leveraging his mother's heritage, uniting both origins into a new image of power.

Kjartan's journey abroad, contrary to his father's, is entirely his idea, and many people, Óláfr included, advise against it. His departure comes amidst several premonitions and warnings that he chooses to ignore, casting a shadow over the voyage before it even begins. Kjartan too makes a beeline for Norway, but unlike his father and nephew Bolli, he does not leave the country, although he expresses interest on one occasion to head to England. Instead, he remains with King Óláfr Tryggvason, and the narrative predominantly dwells on his reluctant conversion to Christianity and accompanying drama. He stays abroad for several years and earns much honor and wealth while in the company of the king. The sequence in the saga is much longer than Óláfr's voyage, lending greater emphasis on the significance of Kjartan as a central character and the impact of his international adventures on the trajectory of the plot. Although Óláfr manages to win the respect of two sets of royals, his expedition is just that: an expedition. Kjartan, on the other hand, undergoes a prolonged period of service, outstripping his father's achievements in scope, general importance, and end result. The grandeur and sentimentality behind the gifts granted to Kjartan by King Óláfr and his sister Ingibjǫrg at the end of his tenure – the sword King's Gift and the fateful head-dress – further reinforce his success. However, his return home, like his departure, is overshadowed by local drama, split between local interest in Kjartan's reaction to the news that Guðrún has married Bolli, and his future wife Hrefna trying on the head-dress. Kjartan's journey should have been a triumph, but its disastrous consequences are further reinforced by the destruction of both royal gifts on Guðrún's orders, events that fan the flames of the ensuing violence.[5]

Although Bolli is not the direct descendent of Óláfr and Kjartan, his position as the son of Guðrún and Kjartan's foster-brother Bolli allows him to step in as the finest of the family's third generation of men.[6] As a result, his own journey to Norway follows in the footsteps of his predecessors, and, like Kjartan before him, Bolli outdoes his family members in the scale of his accomplishments abroad. While Óláfr departs at the urging of his mother in order to verify his heritage, and Kjartan goes abroad to prove himself and gain wealth and honor, Bolli is more

[4] *ÍF* V, 61; Kunz, "Laxardal," 30.

[5] The sword is stolen during a feast, and while the blade is later recovered, the scabbard is lost forever, greatly reducing the weapon's value. The headdress disappears and is never found, having been supposedly burned. The saga implicates Guðrún's brother Þórólfr in the thefts, acting on her bidding.

[6] The elevation of Bolli as the narrative's new hero instead of Kjartan's son Ásgeirr is a curious departure from the established lineage, and changes the trajectory of the saga's heroic genealogy. Little is known of Ásgeirr, only that he is fostered by his cousin Þorsteinn Kuggason after Kjartan's death, and may have avenged the death of his foster-father against Sámr Barkarson. No descendants are named. Barði Guðmundsson, "Tímatal annála um viðburði sögualdar," *Andvari* 61 (1936): 34; Joanne Shortt Butler, "The Mysterious Death of Þorsteinn Kuggason," *Gripla* 28 (2017): 64.

philosophical in his approach to international adventure. Although initially headed for Norway, Bolli seems to have had Constantinople in mind from the outset, telling Snorri goði: "Þat hefi ek lengi haft í hug mér, at ganga suðr um sinns sakar; þykkir maðr við þat fáviss verða, ef hann kannar ekki víðara en hér Ísland" [For a long time now I have wanted to make a journey south for a time; a man is considered to grow ignorant if he has explored no more than the shores of Iceland].[7] The element of curiosity is a key feature in other sagas set in the East, particularly *Yngvars saga viðfǫrla* and *Eireks saga viðfǫrla*, and its integration into the narrative comes at a fitting time for Bolli, whose entire life thus far has been embroiled in the killing of his father and the vengeance that followed. With the settlement finalized in the chapter immediately prior to his departure, Bolli has at last gained some independence from the violence that has overshadowed his youth; moreover, his brother Þorleikr has recently returned from his own time abroad in the service of King Óláfr in Norway. Now it is the younger brother's turn to see the world.

Bolli's independence in charting his own path to Byzantium is reflected in the wealth he takes with him. Although both Óláfr and Kjartan brought valuables on their travels, Bolli once again sets a new precedent by taking a sum large enough that he will never have to rely on others to support him during his voyage: "vil ek…engis manns miskunnarmaðr vera, hvárki hér né útanlendis" [I want charity from no man, either here or abroad].[8] This is an unusual mindset for an intended Varangian, as a major motive for going to Constantinople is typically to gain great fortune. While a warrior such as Bolli would be expected to eschew charity in favor of earned wealth, a fully funded Byzantine venture is a significant investment. Bolli is not purchasing a share in a ship, or travelling as the equal of other men to divide the cost of the voyage. Rather, he is running his own expedition, indicating that by northern standards, he is already a very wealthy man – although he welcomes payment while in Constantinople, visible in his glamorous homecoming, he is not exactly desperate for funds. If monetary gain is not his primary motive, then, his priority must be the other Varangian goal of acquiring honor. Bolli is older and more experienced in life than his fellow mercenaries: he is married with a child, and already runs a successful farm of his own. He does not need to prove himself abroad with youthful adventures and treasure-seeking missions; instead, his desire to push himself to greater accomplishments seems to stem from internal motivation, demonstrated in the clarity with which he presents his goals and the thoroughness with which he plans his voyage.

Bolli's behavior in Norway further illustrates his clear thinking. After purchasing a half-share of his brother's ship, he arrives in Niðaróss with Þorleikr to find that the king is wintering elsewhere. Bolli is not in a hurry to meet Óláfr, however, and remains where he has landed, putting his charisma and generosity on full display:

> Brátt fannsk þat, at Bolli myndi vera maðr framgjarn ok vildi vera fyrir ǫðrum mǫnnum; honum tóksk ok svá, því at maðrinn var ǫrlátr; fekk hann brátt mikla virðing í Nóregi. Bolli helt sveit um vetrinn í Þrándheimi, ok var auðkennt, hvar sem hann gekk til skytninga, at menn hans váru betr búnir at klæðum ok vápnum en annat bœjarfólk; hann skaut ok einn fyrir sveitunga sína alla, þá er þeir sátu í skytningum; þar eptir fór annat ǫrlæti hans ok stórmennska.
>
> It was soon apparent that Bolli was a man of ambition, who intended to be a leader among men. This he managed to do, not the least through his generosity. He was soon held in high esteem in Norway. That winter in Nidaros Bolli kept a company of men, and was recognized at once

[7] *ÍF* V, 211; Kunz, "Laxardal," 111.
[8] *ÍF* V, 211; Kunz, "Laxardal," 111.

> whenever he went drinking, as his men were better armed and dressed than other townspeople. He alone paid for the drinks of all his company when they went drinking. This was typical of his generosity and grand style.[9]

It is noteworthy that Bolli's activities are performed in a setting traditionally associated with the king of Norway, in the absence of said monarch. Although he does not take on the mantle of royalty, his actions draw the attention of Óláfr upon his return, "því at konungi þótti hann mikit afbragð annarra manna" [as the king felt him to be among the most exceptional of men].[10] Considering the degree to which Haraldr Sigurðarson's identity as a king-in-training contributes to his depiction as a Varangian throughout his sources, the association of Bolli with kingly activities in a kingly locale strengthens the image of the saga Varangians as on the level of royalty, even if they are not royalty themselves. Other than Haraldr, none of the Varangians are future monarchs – indeed, they are all Icelanders, eliminating that career path entirely. But their reputation and, more importantly, their conduct and charisma heavily mimic behavior expected of, and associated with, leaders of that caliber.[11]

Bolli's goal of fame and honor, hinted at in his initial explanation of his journey in a desire to rise above the "ignorant" who never travel outside of Iceland, is reinforced upon his departure from Norway. He confirms to his brother: "er þat satt at segja, at ek hafða þat ætlat, þá er ek fór af Íslandi, at eigi skyldi at spyrja til mín í ǫðru húsi" [to tell you the truth when I left Iceland I had intended that people would not hear of me settling down next door].[12] The offer of a title from Óláfr is similarly waved aside: "Allfúss væra ek, herra, at bindask yðr á hendr, en fara vil ek fyrst þangat, sem ek hefi áðr ætlat ok mik hefir lengi til fýst, en þenna kost vil ek gjarna taka, ef mér verðr aptrkvámu auðit" [More than willing enough am I, my lord, to enter your service, but I intend first to travel to the destination which I originally set out for and where I have long wished to go].[13] After setting out from Iceland with a great deal of money already, and making a name for himself through generosity while wintering in Niðaróss, Bolli continues this pattern of laudable behavior in Denmark, where "hann helt sik ok þar at engu óríkmannligar en þá er hann var í Nóregi" [he conducted himself there in a style no less luxurious than he had in Norway].[14] With his reputation gaining traction across the North, it is time for him to venture to more distant shores.

Little detail is given about Bolli's time in Byzantium or his service in the Varangian Guard, other than to confirm what we already know of him:

> Ok er Bolli hafði verit einn vetr í Danmǫrku, þá byrjar hann ferð sína út í lǫnd ok léttir eigi fyrr ferðinni en hann kemr út í Miklagarð. Hann var litla hríð þar, áðr hann kom sér í Væringjasetu;

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[9] *ÍF* V, 212-13; Kunz, "Laxardal," 111.
[10] *ÍF* V, 213; Kunz, "Laxardal," 112.
[11] Theodore Andersson has argued that "the figure of the Norwegian king was…a haunting presence in the sagas," and that the political tension between Norway and Iceland in the 13th century was explored in the family sagas by casting local characters as royal stand-ins to be challenged by local perspectives. It may be that Bolli is one such "phantom king" in his imitation of Haraldr in both *Laxdœla saga* and *Bolla þáttr Bollasonar*. The integration of monarchal mimic and saga hero within his character is particularly compelling in light of the relatively positive interactions between his forebears and the Norwegian kings: the friendship of Óláfr pái and Haraldr gráfeldr, and the fiery but firm relationship between Kjartan and Óláfr Tryggvason. Theodore M. Andersson, "The King of Iceland," *Speculum* 74, no. 4 (1999): 934.
[12] *ÍF* V, 213; Kunz, "Laxardal," 112.
[13] *ÍF* V, 213-14; Kunz, "Laxardal," 112.
[14] *ÍF* V, 214; Kunz, "Laxardal," 112.

> hǫfu vér ekki heyrt frásagnir, at neinn Norðmaðr hafi fyrr gengit á mála með Garðskonungi en Bolli Bollason. Var hann í Miklagarði mjǫk marga vetr ok þótti inn hraustasti maðr í ǫllum mannraunum ok gekk jafnan næst inum fremstum. Þótti Væringjum mikils vert um Bolla, meðan hann var í Miklagarði.
>
> After a year in Denmark, Bolli began his journey through foreign countries, not stopping until he reached Constantinople. After a short time there he entered the company of the Varangian guard, and we know no reports of northerners having entered the service of the Byzantine emperor before Bolli Bollason. He spent many years in Constantinople, where he was regarded as the most valiant of fighters in any perilous situation, where he was among the foremost of them. The Varangians thought highly of Bolli during his stay in Constantinople.[15]

The claim that no Norsemen had entered the service of the emperor before Bolli is not attested anywhere else in the saga corpus, and should be viewed with skepticism. However, passing references in *Laxdœla saga* of Haraldr Sigurðarson's closest Varangian companions, Úlfr Óspaksson and Halldórr Snorrason, seem to corroborate the internal timeline of the saga by placing Bolli in Byzantium slightly ahead of Haraldr and company. Following the death of Kjartan, all the sons of Ósvifr are named as guilty parties in the killing except for one, Óspakr, who has been outlawed due to a relationship with a woman named Aldís. This relationship produces a son, Úlfr, "er síðan var stallari Haralds konungs Sigurðarsonar" [who was later a marshal for King Haraldr Sigurðarson], making Úlfr a cousin of Bolli's.[16] On the other side of the family, Bolli's wife, Þórdís, is the daughter of Snorri goði, and her brother is Halldórr Snorrason. Although Halldórr does not appear in *Laxdœla saga*, he is mentioned in the final chapter, when Snorri bequeaths his farm to Bolli because "er sá ok nú minn sonr eigi hér á landi, er ek hygg, at þeira verði mestr maðr, er Halldórr er" [the son of mine whom I expect to be foremost among them, Halldórr, is not in this country now].[17] As this transaction occurs only a year after Bolli's return from abroad, the two men seem to have narrowly missed each other while in Byzantium, as King Óláfr Haraldsson is still alive when Bolli visits Norway, and no mention of his death or of Haraldr occurs during the brief overview of Bolli's time in the Varangian Guard.

Bolli's return reflects earlier homecomings in *Laxdœla saga*, but also holds many parallels with Haraldr's arrival back in Norway. There is, however, a significant shift in the type of wealth described – while the kings' sagas often focus on Haraldr's ships and their cargo, *Laxdœla saga* dwells primarily on the appearance of Bolli himself, without much description of vessel or wares:

> Þá er fjórir vetr váru liðnir frá drukknun Þorkels Eyjólfssonar, þá kom skip í Eyjafjǫrð; þat átti Bolli Bollason; váru þar á flestir norrœnir hásetar. Bolli hafði mikit fé út ok marga dýrgripi, er hǫfðingjar hǫfðu gefit honum. Bolli var svá mikill skartsmaðr, er hann kom út ór fǫr þessi, at hann vildi engi klæði bera nema skarlatsklæði ok pellsklæði, ok ǫll vápn hafði hann gullbúin. Hann var kallaðr Bolli in prúði. Hann lýsti því fyrir skipverjum sínum, at hann ætlaði vestrtil heraða sinna, ok fekk skip sitt ok varnað í hendr skipverjum sínum. Bolli ríðr frá skipi við tólfta mann; þeir váru allir í skarlatsklæðum fylgðarmenn Bolla ok riðu í gyldum sǫðlum; allir váru þeir listuligir menn, en þó bar Bolli af. Hann var í pellsklæðum, er Garðskonungr hafði gefit honum; hann hafði ýzta skarlatskápu rauða; hann var gyrðr Fótbít, ok váru at honum hjǫlt gull búin ok

[15] *ÍF* V, 214-15; Kunz, "Laxardal," 112.
[16] *ÍF* V, 157.
[17] *ÍF* V, 226; Kunz, "Laxardal," 118.

meðalkaflinn gulli vafiðr; hann hafði gyldan hjálm á hǫfði ok rauðan skjǫld á hlið, ok á dreginn riddari með gulli; hann hafði glaðel í hendi, sem títt er í útlǫndum, ok hvar sem þeir tóku gistingar, þá gáðu konur engis annars en horfa á Bolla ok skart hans ok þeira félaga.

Four winters after the drowning of Thorkel Eyjolfsson, a ship owned by Bolli Bollason sailed into Eyjafjord. Most of the crew were Norwegians. Bolli had brought with him a great deal of wealth from abroad and many treasures given him by princes. He had become such a fine dresser by the time he returned from his journey abroad that he wore only clothes of scarlet or silk brocade and all his weapons were decorated with gold. He became known as Bolli the Elegant. He declared to his crew that he intended to go westward to visit his own district and left the ship and its cargo in their hands. He took eleven men with him and all of them were dressed in clothes of scarlet and mounted on gilded saddles. They were all comely men, but Bolli was in a class by himself. He wore a suit of silk brocade given to him by the emperor of Byzantium, with a cloak of red scarlet outermost. About his waist he had girded the sword Leg-biter, now inlaid with gold at the top and shank, and gold bands wound about its hilt. On his head he wore a gilded helmet and he held a red shield at his side with the figure of a knight drawn on it in gold. He had a lance in his hand, as is common in foreign parts. Wherever the group stopped for the night, the women could do nothing but gaze at Bolli and the finery which he and his companions bore.[18]

As in the Haraldr passages, gold and cloth appear prominently in this sequence. Although Bolli's treasure is not quantified, gold is again used as decoration, this time in the form of gilded weapons, ornamented saddles, and armor. The high quality of fabric in the clothing of Bolli and his men is also noted, once more labeled as *pell*, and the distribution of wealth among his retinue reflects Haraldr's methods of generosity. Finally, the role of witnesses is referenced, both in the granting of his apparently widely-known nickname *inn prúði* "the elegant" and in the amusing and, for this saga, fitting comment about women paying him extra attention.[19]

But several new details are added: his weapons and gear, the decorated shield and foreign *glaðel*, are unusual for an Icelandic setting. The extra attention paid to Bolli's attire recalls earlier passages in the saga in the homecomings of Óláfr pái and Kjartan, both of which also feature gold and scarlet clothing. Óláfr, who decks himself out in preparation to ask for the hand of Þorgerðr Egilsdóttir, owns a gilded helm and scarlet suit from King Haraldr and a sword and spear from King Mýrkjartan. Kjartan, arming himself for the feast at Laugar, bears similar gifts from King Óláfr, as well as a decorated shield and a gilded spear; he is additionally depicted alongside a retinue. Following in these footsteps, Bolli's position as a third generation traveler induces an even more elaborate show. Right away, his new nickname *inn pruði* evokes that of Óláfr *pái* "the peacock" – the two characters receive their monikers for similar reasons, although Óláfr is so named before he goes abroad. The description of Bolli's garments exceeds those of his predecessors in their detail, and draws special attention to the gifts from the Byzantine emperor and the fact that his *glaðel* is *títt…í útlǫndum* "customary in foreign lands," as opposed to the more familiar swords and spears wielded by Kjartan and Óláfr. Even more impressively, he is the first to acquire excellent gear for his horses. Finally, the emphasis on his voyage to more distant territories is compounded by the fact that unlike the other two men, Bolli has no specific reason to dress up. He is not preparing for a marriage proposal or a feast; rather, he is engaging in the mundane activities of disembarking from his ship and travelling home. The fact that he is dressed to the nines for this excursion not only accentuates the degree of wealth to

[18] *ÍF* V, 224-25. Kunz, "Laxardal," 118.
[19] The nickname was famous enough to appear in the *Flateyjarbók* variant of *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*.

which he is now accustomed, but also taps into the importance of this particular stage of the Varangian experience. Simply arriving home is, for a Byzantine traveler, a big deal.

Bolli's presence as a Varangian in *Laxdœla saga* deftly bridges the gap between kings' saga and family saga, and appears to have been successful in transmitting the Varangian motif into new terrain. His reflection of Haraldr bolsters the image he cuts on the page, emphasizing his portrayal as the pinnacle of achievement within both Iceland and his own family. The saga's deep interest in its own society results in a lack of detail about his exploits in Byzantium, instead elaborating on scenes closer to home: his departure and return. Although the core of his depiction has recognizable roots in Haraldr's narratives, smaller adjustments better fit the Varangian character into the saga's symmetry by taking into account the history of Bolli's family and his need within the narrative structure to mirror and expand upon themes introduced earlier in the narrative. Thus the Varangian motif survives its transmission into the family sagas intact, but proves its malleability in how it is employed to leverage the local context of the saga itself.

Þorsteinn drómundr

Grettis saga is a similarly heavy-hitting text within the family saga genre.[20] Composed in the first half of the 14th century, it is one of the great outlaw sagas, a subgenre featuring men who refuse to leave Iceland after outlawry and attempt to live as long as possible in the harsh landscape with few allies. *Grettis saga* recounts the life of Grettir Ásmundarson, a liminal warrior whose gift of immense strength is paired with an aversion to social mores and an unquenchable thirst for violence. Youthful offenses put him at odds with his community as he antagonizes those around him, and the consequences of his behavior culminate in his outlawry. After a climactic fight with the troll Glámr, who curses him with diminished strength and a fear of the dark, Grettir is forced to confront his own humanity and begins to mellow. Over the course of his 19 years living as an outlaw, he becomes something of a folk hero in Iceland for his survival skills and extraordinary accomplishments, but finally succumbs to witchcraft shortly before his two decades of outlawry are set to end. Although the killing of an outlaw was legally perceived a positive act, Grettir's death is greatly mourned. He is avenged by his Norwegian half-brother Þorsteinn drómundr, who accomplishes his own great feat in pursuing Grettir's killer Þorbjǫrn ǫngull all the way to Constantinople and into the Varangian Guard. After slaying his target, Þorsteinn remains in Byzantium, marries a local woman, and lives a long and prosperous life.

The tone of this final section depicting Þorsteinn's adventures is a dramatic departure from the rest of the saga. Grettir's narrative is characterized by his aggressively hypermasculine activities at the edge of society battling berserkers, wild beasts, and the undead, as well as his legal troubles and struggle to survive in the wilds of Iceland while pursued by tenacious enemies. Although an impressive warrior himself, Þorsteinn does not share Grettir's inhuman strength, nor his penchant for trouble. The elder brother is instead highly civilized, a popular aristocrat known for his beautiful singing voice. Moreover, after dispatching Þorbjǫrn, Þorsteinn takes a back seat in his own story in favor of his lover Spes, a Byzantine noblewoman, for the remainder of the saga. The movement of the action from Iceland to Byzantium also marks a genre shift from

[20] Believed to have been composed around 1400, the saga is preserved in its earliest forms in AM 556 a 4to, AM 152 fol., AM 551 4to, and DG 10 fol., all dating to the early 1500s.

outlaw saga to romance, drawing direct influence from Norse translations of the Tristan legend as well as Haraldr's wooing of María from the kings' sagas.

Spesar þáttr, as this sequence has been named, has often been labelled a sub-par section of an otherwise brilliant saga. Although it does disrupt the flow of the larger work and appears initially disconnected from the narrative's themes, it remains consistent with the author's interest in merging genres and playing with storytelling conventions. While not wholly successful, it represents a work-in-progress – the integration of a foreign genre, romance, with a native one, kings' saga, within a family saga. The construction of *Spesar þáttr* around a Varangian character in a Byzantine setting is, however, a conscious response to the earlier saga. Grettir is an incomparable protagonist, unbeatable in strength and tortured complexity. His avenger must be equally accomplished to bring his story to a close, but cannot overlap his abilities. A Varangian is a clever solution to this problem – the label itself is shorthand for immense reputation and martial prowess, and allows for variation in character depiction and qualities. The relocation of the narrative to Constantinople also marks a clear end to Grettir's story, while allowing the saga writer to play with additional genres due to the nature of the new setting. The role of the Varangian abroad in *Spesar þáttr* is thus a vehicle for a calculated, if messy, exit from the saga, and its imperfections offer insight into a playfully experimental variation of the established Varangian motif.

Byzantium and the Varangian Guard in *Spesar þáttr*

The image of the Varangian Guard painted within *Grettis saga* balances the popular reputation of the famed warriors with the context of the preceding saga, and is closely tied to the nature of Byzantium as a setting. The author leverages Constantinople as both an exotic environment and a far-flung location vis-à-vis Iceland. At its most basic reading, the distance implies the effort with which Grettir's death is avenged, reinforcing the importance of his character within the saga's narrative and his lasting legacy in Iceland. However, the Byzantine setting also comes with a predetermined literary definition: this is a place famous for adventure, wealth, romance, and hijinks. Given the text's late composition, Byzantium's image in the Norse corpus was already well-established and was clearly known by the saga's highly educated author; the region's tropes may have contributed to his enthusiastic genre shift from outlaw saga to romance. As a result, the space of Byzantium not only influences the themes in this section, but also the narrative structure itself, and dictates the manner in which the Varangian Guard is used to further Þorsteinn's cause within the boundaries of its own literary topos.

Although Þorsteinn is the hero of this sequence, the action begins with the flight of his foe, Þorbjǫrn ǫngull, from Iceland to Norway. Although Þorbjǫrn has performed a legally laudable deed in slaying an outlaw, his reliance on magic in this endeavor undermines any honor he might have gained through the killing. The aftermath of Grettir's death leads to his departure from Iceland "meðan þeir lifðu eptir, er mál áttu eptir Illuga ok Gretti" [for as long as anyone remained alive who had a claim against him for killing Grettir and Illugi].[21] Byzantium is not his initial destination – following the pattern of Haraldr, Bolli, and other eastern travelers, he engages in a two-part voyage to Constantinople. Arriving in Norway, he shamelessly brags about

[21] Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Grettis saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit VII (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936), 268; Bernard Scudder, trans., *The Saga of Grettir the Strong* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 190-91.

the killing of Grettir before discovering the outlaw's half-brother Þorsteinn drómundr lives nearby. Alarmed, Þorbjǫrn quickly moves on:

> Í þenna tíma fór mart Norðmanna út í Miklagarð ok gengu þar á mála. Af því þótti Þorbirni fýsiligt at fara þangat ok afla sér svá fjár ok frægðar, en hafa sik eigi í Norðrlǫndum fyrir frændum Grettis. Bjó hann nú ferð sína ór Nóregi ok fór út í lǫnd ok létti eigi, fyrr en han kom út í Miklagarð ok gekk þar á mála...
>
> In those days many northerners went to Constantinople to serve as mercenaries. Thorbjorn was attracted by the idea of going there to earn fame and fortune and of keeping away from Scandinavia and Grettir's kinsmen. He made preparations to leave Norway and set off, not stopping until he reached Constantinople where he became a mercenary.[22]

Two of Þorbjǫrn's purposes for his voyage, *fé ok frægð* "wealth and renown," draws on the existing notion of Byzantium as a source of honor and wealth that is present in the travels of both Haraldr and Bolli. But his primary motive is more pressing – escaping the consequences of Grettir's killing. The inverse of this drive is vengeance, which triggers the reintroduction of Þorsteinn drómundr, who has thus far made only brief appearances much earlier in the saga. Upon hearing of Þorbjǫrn's boasting, Þorsteinn spends the winter quietly stewing in anger, reflecting on his old promise to Grettir that he would avenge his death. Upon hearing of Þorbjǫrn's departure from Norway, Þorsteinn follows, exiting his home turf and entering a new space, both geographically and narratively. His role in the saga thus far has been static and brief, offering aid and friendship to his brother without distinguishing himself on the page. But Þorsteinn's entrance into the Byzantine space allow his romantic side to emerge in a manner that expands his character into the full-fledged hero needed to fill his brother's shoes. Although Þorsteinn, like Bolli, is further along in life than Haraldr, his journey to Constantinople similarly enables him to come into his own in a manner impossible in his native country.

The lead-up to Þorsteinn's departure places him between Þorbjǫrn and Grettir as a sort of mediator, and he makes up one half of a contrasting pair with each man. As the "good Varangian" to Þorbjǫrn's "evil Varangian," Þorsteinn represents the positive, heroic reputation of the Guard, which is arguably sullied by Þorbjǫrn's presence and thus restored with his death. On a narrative level, the comparison with Þorbjǫrn emphasizes Þorsteinn's role as hero – the audience is not meant to side with Grettir's killer, and although we are already inclined to back Þorsteinn because he is Grettir's brother, his immediate placement as Þorbjǫrn's foil further pushes us to support him as the new protagonist, as he is far preferable to Grettir's killer. The model also alerts us to the fact that, with Grettir gone, Þorsteinn is undoubtedly the new hero of the saga, and we should focus our attention on him from now on, at least until the entrance of Spes.

The duality of Þorsteinn and Grettir is bolstered by both the context of the wider literature and his relationship with his brother as seen earlier in the saga. The model of one brother going abroad and the other remaining home is seen throughout the saga corpus, and includes several eastern travelers – Bolli and Þorleikr of *Laxdæla saga*, for instance, and two pairs from *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, Eyvindr and Sámr Bjarnarsonar and Þorkell and Þorgeirr Þjóstarssonar. In these pairings, it is often the elder brother who goes abroad and returns the greater man in honor, wealth, and martial abilities. The younger brother, by staying in Iceland, is

[22] *ÍF* VII, 271; adapted from Scudder, *Grettir the Strong*, 192.

less accomplished overall, but remains ingrained in the native system. The half-brothers in *Grettis saga* follow one part of this model – it is once again the elder brother who goes east, and he is successful in his earnings. However, unlike the other sets of brothers, Þorsteinn will never outstrip Grettir in terms of legacy. Although Þorsteinn surpasses the outlaw in wealth and status, Grettir will always be the better warrior and the more famous of the two due to his success in exile and legendary reputation. The sibling model is further complicated by their nationalities and upbringings: Grettir is a true son of Iceland, while Þorsteinn leads the illustrious life of a Norwegian aristocrat, and is thus never in direct competition with his brother.

The contrast between the brothers is heightened by their physical appearances and temperaments. Both characters are described as handsome and tall, but while Grettir is famously thick and brawny, Þorsteinn is very slim. The brothers themselves joke about these differences early in the saga – on seeing his relative sleeping, Þorsteinn comments that "einskis manns handleggi hefi ek slíka sét" [I have never seen any man with such arms], to which Grettir responds: "eigi þykkjumk ek slíkar tengr sét hafa, sem þú berr eptir, ok varla ætla ek þik kvenstyrkvan" [I don't think I've ever seen another pair of tongs like those arms of yours. I can't imagine you even have the strength of a woman].[23] Þorsteinn, returning the jesting to a serious topic, predicts that "þessir inir mjóvu handleggir munu þín hefna, ella mun þín aldri hefnt verða" [if these skinny arms don't avenge your death, nothing ever will].[24] The importance of Grettir's immense physicality drives key plot points throughout the saga, from his nickname *inn sterki* "the strong" to Glámr's curse that Grettir will never be stronger than when he kills the draugr. But despite the importance of Grettir's brawn to both character and narrative, this moment of foreshadowing indicates that there are more powers in the world than muscle – barely halfway through the saga, we are told that Þorsteinn will avenge his relative. There must be hidden strength in this pair of tongs.

One of Þorsteinn's talents, revealed shortly before the interaction over arm size, is his ability to effectively navigate political and social settings, a skill Grettir notably lacks. Þorsteinn plays the game of politics well enough to live as a wealthy and respected nobleman, banking on different methods, community integration and social mores, from Grettir's seclusion and antisocial traits. Both characters partake of the other's tendencies – the outlaw's fear of the dark necessitates companions later in life, while Þorsteinn voluntarily leaves his people to pursue lone vengeance in Byzantium and eventually retires as a hermit in Rome. In the long run, however, Þorsteinn never truly follows his brother into isolation, as he thrives at the heart of society and even his solo ventures embed him within major urban centers.

Their nicknames, *inn sterki* and *drómundr*, reflect their diverse approaches to life's problems. Grettir is excessively reactive, often eschewing analysis in favor of action. His propensity for violence drives the saga's narrative, and a lack of foresight creates or aggravates many of his problems. Þorsteinn, however, is "nǫkkut seinligr í viðbragði" [rather ponderous in his movements], a quality that reflects his general conduct – for the most part, he is not impetuous in his actions.[25] Upon hearing of Grettir's death and Þorbjǫrn's arrival in Norway, for instance, he does not rush into confrontation, because he does not know what Þorbjǫrn looks like. Instead, he patiently waits until he has absolute proof of his victim's identity before acting, even though this

[23] *ÍF* VII, 137-38; Scudder, *Grettir the Strong*, 96.
[24] *ÍF* VII, 138; Scudder, *Grettir the Strong*, 97.
[25] *ÍF* VII, 34; Scudder, *Grettir the Strong*, 23.

delay results in a lengthy voyage to Constantinople. His revenge is necessary and inevitable, but doing it correctly is just as important to achieve justice for Grettir. This meticulous manner is reinforced by the fact that, within the context of the saga, Þorbjǫrn is the only man Þorsteinn kills, emphasizing the distance between his logic-based problem solving and the blood-soaked legacy of Grettir.

The voyage to Byzantium adds nuance to the multi-layered hero model Þorsteinn embodies. His success in the Varangian Guard mimics the classic definition of Viking success: he is a great warrior, and earns a solid reputation for his efforts. He is also charismatic, to the point that his fellow mercenaries, and even Byzantine witnesses, sympathize with him in the killing of Þorbjǫrn. Although they arrest him according to local laws because he has no proof to back up the cause for his violence, they are inclined to believe his explanation. This trust, established very shortly after Þorsteinn's arrival in Constantinople, recalls the rapidity with which Haraldr's wisdom and charisma are recognized in the gold-hued man episode, and implies the ease with which Þorsteinn has slipped into the stereotypical Varangian identity.

However, Þorsteinn also relies on alternative methods to achieve Viking goals: the integration of the romance genre allows him to leverage his gentle nature, good looks, and talent for singing. Though his rich voice is mentioned early in the saga, only in Constantinople is he shown bursting into song, an act that attracts his lover Spes and saves him from certain death. Their subsequent affair rewards Þorsteinn handsomely – he becomes very rich, not through fighting, but because of gifts from his lover: "þótti Þorsteinn nú mikilhæfr, því at Spes lét hann ekki fé skorta" [Thorstein was considered a man of great standing now, since Spes made sure he had plenty of money].[26] He secures clothing in much the same fashion. Though seduction is an unconventional tactic of earning Varangian wealth, the Mediterranean setting allows for its success – Byzantine gold is Byzantine gold, after all, and we are still entertained by his means of acquisition. Thus Constantinople becomes a space in which Þorsteinn can truly make the most of gifts he already possessed, but which had only limited practical use in his home country. The combination of these features produces a hero that is part Norse and part romantic, but whose realization is only feasible in a non-Norse space.

The description of Byzantium itself is fairly limited, mostly visible through the characters themselves. However, the scene of Þorbjǫrn's killing offers a strange glimpse into the internal workings of the Varangian Guard. In this passage, the dramatic tension caused by the pair's ignorance of the other's appearance is finally resolved in an unusual depiction of a Varangian ceremony. According to the saga, the mercenaries partake in a *vápnaþing* "weapon assembly," in which they gather together and show off their weapons to the group before deploying. Þorbjǫrn presents Grettir's sword, now called *Grettisnaut* "Grettir's Gift," which the killer had taken from the outlaw after his death. As he relates the story of its procurement, Þorsteinn finally identifies him as the target of his vengeance and, poetically taking hold of *Grettisnaut*, slices open Þorbjǫrn's head, killing him instantly.

The ritual is unlikely to be historically accurate, especially considering how conveniently it reveals Þorbjǫrn's identity to Þorsteinn, but the scene nevertheless offers insight into how the saga writer pictured the day-to-day function of the mercenary unit. A strong communal element is palpable, with significant emphasis placed on reverence for weapons. The harsh punishment of

[26] *ÍF* VII, 276; Scudder, *Grettir the Strong*, 196.

Þorsteinn following the slaying suggests both the sacrilege of killing a man during such a potent ceremony and the seriousness with which the Varangians took criminal acts among their own. The self-governance they demonstrate reflects the high standards to which they held themselves and each other: "þá váru þat lǫg þeira, at hverr sá, er mann dræpi, skyldi engu fyrir týna nema lífinu" [it was the Varangians' law that any man who killed another should pay with nothing less than his own life].[27] All of these qualities are more likely to be based in values held by the Norse rather than the Varangians – for instance, the swift reaction against violence at this *vápnaþing* echoes the regulations of weapons at the legislative *þing*, and the warrior ritual may have roots in practices among the *lið* and other types of Norse warrior communities. The harsh internal punishment of wayward members, however, has an intriguing parallel in the *Synopsis* of John Skylitzes, in which a local woman kills a Varangian in self-defense during an attempted rape, whereupon his fellow mercenaries immediately reward her with his belongings and refuse his body burial rites.[28]

Þorsteinn and Haraldr

Þorbjǫrn's death marks the shift in the saga's dominant genre from outlaw saga to a combination of kings' saga and romance. At this point, the story as it relates to Grettir is largely concluded. Þorsteinn has avenged his brother's death, and accomplished an extraordinary feat in pulling off the killing so far from home. But although the violence is over, the adventure has just begun – we're still in Byzantium, after all, and it is at this point that Þorsteinn's parallels with Haraldr Sigurðarson take off.

The Haraldr connection throughout the subsequent narrative is not subtle, and the prince himself appears as a minor figure:

> Í þenna tíma var Haraldr Sigurðarson í Miklagarði, ok kom Þorsteinn sér í vináttu við hann...Fekk hann af Haraldi Sigurðarsyni inn mesta heiðr, því at hann virði frændsemi við hann; ok hans ráðum hefir Þorsteinn fram farit, at því er menn ætla.
>
> In those days Harald Sigurdarson was in Constantinople and Thorstein became friends with him…He earned great honour from Harald Sigurdarson, who respected their kinship, and it is thought that Thorstein followed his advice.[29]

Kinship between Grettir's family and the Norwegian monarch is referenced on two occasions earlier in the saga concerning Óláfr Haraldsson, with whom they share a great-great-grandfather, Ófeigr burlufótr. Because the connection is maternal, Haraldr shares this relationship, giving Þorsteinn a familial leg up on fellow Varangian Bolli, who is related to both of Haraldr's closest companions but not the king himself. The comment about Haraldr "respecting their kinship" references an earlier scene in which Grettir reminds Óláfr of their relationship when requesting to enter the king's service. Óláfr refuses this request – "miklu ertu meiri ógæfumaðr en þú megir fyrir þat með oss vera" [you are far too ill-fated to be with us] – but allows Grettir to go in peace

[27] *ÍF* VII, 273; Scudder, *Grettir the Strong*, 194.
[28] John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811-1057*, translated by John Wortley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 372. This punishment for rape, via death and confiscation of property, is not a Varangian tradition, but follows Byzantine law.
[29] *ÍF* VII, 276, 285; Scudder, *Grettir the Strong*, 196, 203.

with the understanding that he will return to Iceland the following summer.[30] Although Þorsteinn is far less of an *ógæfumaðr* than Grettir, the reinforcement of the familial connection between the two induces a moment of symmetry within the text, and reinforces the dramatized Þorsteinn's faux legitimacy as a Varangian through both his friendship and direct relationship with Haraldr, the primary inspiration for such literary Varangians.

The link also acknowledges the Haraldr narratives as source material for two of Þorsteinn's adventures, the dungeon scene and the escape from the seaside villa. In the first instance, the model of the imprisonment bears similarities to the original, but the details differ, setting up the foundation of the romance to follow. Þorsteinn's arrest is not brought about by the Byzantine imperial family, as in Haraldr's case; rather, Þorsteinn is arrested by the emperor's treasurer, whose presence at the Varangian weapon ceremony goes unexplained. Once in prison, awaiting his death or a ransom paid on his behalf, Þorsteinn is strangely unconcerned with his fate, and befriends his dolorous cellmate before bursting into song. His beautiful voice soon attracts a passer-by – a noblewoman called Spes, "harðla rík ok stórættuð" [very rich and of a good family], who pays his ransom.[31] Although not distinctly labelled as Byzantine, her unusual name and apparent inability to understand Þorsteinn's skaldic verses imply a local origin.

The role of women in the escapes of both Haraldr and Þorsteinn adds a feminine touch to these masculine narratives. In both cases, the women were drawn to save the men through unusual means – prayer and singing – which serve to highlight important non-martial qualities of these Norse characters. In Haraldr's case, the woman's connection to St. Óláfr reinforces his identity as a Christian monarch. In Þorsteinn's case, Spes' attraction to his singing signifies the shift to a more continental style of hero and narrative focusing on cultural conventions of the romances. The naming of Spes also departs from the anonymity of Haraldr's helper, anticipating her ensuing role as the main character of *Spesar þáttr*. But despite these differences, the scene's parallels alert audiences familiar with Haraldr's life story that Þorsteinn's adventures will be a variation on a familiar tale, breathing new life into an established popular narrative.

The second episode that links the two men is the escape from the seaside villa. The amorous couples are nearly caught in the act by their enemies, but the women spot danger just in time, and direct their lover to escape into the sea via a hatch in the floor. In *Morkinskinna*, this scene is brief and contributes to the larger saga by offering another instance of Haraldr one-upping the Byzantines through light-hearted means. The brevity of the episode may be attributed to the fact that Haraldr is the focus of the narrative, and once he gets away, the story is over. The *Grettis saga* variant, now the last in a series of romance-inspired adventures, plays more directly off the symmetry of the accompanying escapades. The primary character also changes from the man to the woman, drawing out the premise as Spes helps Þorsteinn slip away, diverts her husband, and anxiously awaits her lover's signal that he has survived his late night swim to safety. This expansion of the narrative adds a level of suspense that relies on the author's characterization of Spes as established in the preceding scenes. Because María is so one-dimensional, the primary audience for Haraldr's flight is the reader, who innately knows the main character will survive. But the audience for Þorsteinn's plunge is Spes, who does not benefit from a knowledge of narrative conventions, and is thus left to wonder about her lover's fate. Through her, we experience second-hand tension and subsequent relief when Þorsteinn shines his torch across the

[30] *ÍF* VII, 134; Scudder, *Grettir the Strong*, 94.
[31] *ÍF* VII, 274; Scudder, *Grettir the Strong*, 195.

waves, creating a more dynamic emotional experience that emphasizes the story's new romantic context.

Haraldr's introduction in the lead-up to their escapades sets up the connection between their narratives and encourages the saga's depiction of a positive rapport between the two Varangians. However, the saga's case for their camaraderie and the narrative's positive treatment of Haraldr is fleeting:

> Svá er sagt, at Þorsteinn yrði hirðmaðr Magnúss konungs…Þá kom útan ór Miklagarði Haraldr konungr Sigurðarson, ok gaf Magnús konungr honum hálfan Nóreg við sik. Váru þá báðir konungar í Nóregi um hríð…Eptir andlát Magnúss konungs unðu margir lítt, þeir sem hǫfðu verit vinir hans, því at allir unnu honum; en mǫnnum varð vangætt til lyndis Haralds konungs, því at hann var harðr ok refsingasamr.
>
> Thorstein is said to have become one of King Magnus the Good's men…Then King Harald Sigurdarson left Constantinople and King Magnús gave him a half-share in the kingdom of Norway. They were joint rulers of Norway for a while. Many of the people who had been friends with King Magnús were discontented after his death. They had all liked him, but found it difficult to secure the favour of King Harald, who was harsh and vindictive.[32]

The historical content of this passage follows the narrative of the kings' sagas, which cover the tension between Haraldr and the followers of Magnús. But *Grettis saga*'s shift in allegiance is particularly dramatic considering the prominence of Þorsteinn as the hero of its final act – after all, he is not only friends with Haraldr, but his character and adventures draw heavily from the prince's own source material. Haraldr is clearly an object of interest to the author, who has proven himself well-versed in his adventures; but this optimistic interpretation of his narrative apparently only lasts until he returns to Norway. Perhaps this realignment is due to the apolitical nature of Haraldr's Byzantine period, which is neutral ground in a storytelling context, compared to his more polarizing reign.

Whatever the author's reason, he not only turns against Haraldr in his own words, but also notes a swing in Þorsteinn's attitude against his former ally: "þá eggjuðu margir Þorstein at fara á fund Haralds konungs ok gerask honum handgenginn, en hann tók ekki undir þat" [many people urged Thorstein to meet King Harald and enter his service, but he would not agree].[33] Although there is no outright statement of enmity between the two men, this would not be the only friendship that ends upon Haraldr's return, as he undergoes a similar break with his close companion Halldórr Snorrason. Haraldr, for all his virtues, was a difficult man to know, and although *Grettis saga* instills his positive Varangian attributes – charisma, martial prowess, wisdom, and entertainment – in Þorsteinn, the text's acknowledgement of his flaws belies a realism otherwise lacking in this creative adaptation of his narrative.

[32] *ÍF* VII, 286; Scudder, *Grettir the Strong*, 204.
[33] *ÍF* VII, 286; Scudder, *Grettir the Strong*, 204.

Þorsteinn and Spes

Spesar þáttr's similarities with the romances, particularly the Tristan legend, is one of its most striking features.[34] The heart of Þorsteinn's adventure follows the central narrative of the romance genre: a single man falls hopelessly in love with a married woman and pursues her under the nose of her boorish husband while nearly getting caught again and again during their not-so-secret trysts. The climax of the *Grettis saga* relationship, in which Spes declares her innocence before God while Þorsteinn disguises himself as an old beggar, is taken straight out of the Tristan legend. While the narrative structure and plot elements remain the same, however, the deeper themes within the story have shifted to better align with its new context. Given the author's affinity for playing with genre throughout the work, the integration of the romances is clearly not meant to be a one-to-one transmission, but another addition to a fusion of genres that makes *Grettis saga* such a remarkable addition to the corpus. As a result, *Spesar þáttr* represents a transitory state of romance, still recognizably foreign but in the process of going native. The major departures from the Tristan legend in particular are visible in the proactive role of the woman, the lack of magic involved in the romance's origin, and the happy ending granted to the two lovers.

The woman of the romances are often passive, and their primary purpose in these narratives is to be physically beautiful and unattainable – an object of lustful desire for the male hero who pines for her body rather than her soul. She is typically a static figure with little to no character development, remaining at home with her husband while her lover travels widely and pines tragically for their unfulfilled love. The focus of the narrative is thus on the man and his emotional journey, and although Isold occasionally aids in Tristan's escapades from her husband, she remains a largely passive character, a victim of her circumstance with little depth beyond her physical beauty and purpose as the object of his desire.[35]

Spes takes on a more significant role in *Grettis saga*, surpassing Þorsteinn as the main character and instigating many of the events that constitute this final portion of the text. This trend begins at the start of their relationship: although Þorsteinn's singing attracts her to the prison, Spes initiates the negotiation that sees him released, and immediately hides him in her home. Her hands-on approach departs from Haraldr's rescuer, who frees the prince at the bidding of St. Óláfr and is guaranteed payment for the act through the curing of her illness. In contrast, Spes frees Þorsteinn with no prospect of compensation – she is simply interested in him, and takes the leap under her own counsel. The subsequent romance is similarly managed solely by Spes. While Tristan sneaks into the castle to visit Ísönd, Spes is the one smuggling Þorsteinn in to see her. He takes a back seat in this section of the saga, providing entertainment for her benefit but, when danger approaches, following her orders to conceal himself, whether in a chest, under a pile of cloth, or through a hidden hatch. And it is through her machinations that she finally divorces her husband and marries her lover.

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[34] There has been significant debate as to which version of Tristan was the direct source for *Grettis saga*; for an overview of scholarship, see Susanne Kramarz-Bein, "Der Spesar þáttr der Grettis saga: Tristan-Spuren in der Isländersaga," in *Festschrift für Rolf Heller*, edited by Heinrich Beck and Else Ebel (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000).

[35] This characterization of Isold is hammered home in *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*'s cave of statues sequence, in which Tristram crafts a literal statue of her to soothe his pain at their separation. Peter Jorgensen, trans., "Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar," in *Norse Romance I: The Tristan Legend*, ed. Marianne E. Kalinke (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 186-87.

The dynamic between the dominant Spes and subordinate Þorsteinn is particularly remarkable for its presence in the male-dominated *Grettis saga*. Grettir is the epitome of hypermasculinity, witnessed by his great physical strength, all-or-nothing approach to life, violent methods of problem-solving, and fierce defense of his sexual attributes. Þorsteinn is a great departure from this image in his diminished strength, reliance on a woman for success, and talent for singing, a quality not generally associated with saga heroes, but a lauded skill in the romances. Þorsteinn's subsequent reliance on Spes furthers a brand of effeminacy, but despite the context of the surrounding saga, this quality is not treated as a negative. Such flexibility is likely due in part to the exotic Byzantine setting, where traditional rules may be broken, and where straying outside the boundaries of masculine success can still count for something. Þorsteinn balances both worlds in accomplishing great deeds by Norse standards – like his brother, he has set a record for tenacity by traveling so far to avenge Grettir, and he completes his mission through appropriate violence. But once Þorsteinn's performance per the rules of the saga have been satisfied, he is free to express a gentler and more romantic brand of male success. The shift signifies a recasting of masculinity on a literary level, in which influence from external sources push alternative visions of what a protagonist can look like. Grettir is the last of the great saga heroes, both within his own narrative and in the timeline of saga writing. He embodies the old world struggling to survive in a new setting that can no longer accommodate his savage ilk. The saga's suggestion of Þorsteinn as Grettir's successor is informed by the author's own opinion of what comes next. On a broad scale, this could speak to his perception of changing social values at the time of writing, or, more narrowly, to his personal interest in romance as the next frontier of storytelling.

The narrative's use of the romance model dictates that Þorsteinn needs a partner in crime, but the outsized role of Spes allows their pairing to function even more effectively. Each character brings a different skillset to the table. Þorsteinn is a warrior, demonstrating quick thinking and brutal effectiveness in violent situations; and he is an artist, a charismatic singer and poet. Spes is cunning, ruthless, and socially adept – although Þorsteinn too is a social navigator back in Norway, these skills are less effective in Constantinople, where the native Spes is far more skilled at manipulating and gaslighting her countrymen to create and maintain private spaces for herself and Þorsteinn. She also ends her marriage to the hapless Sigurðr with no damage to her reputation or lifestyle. As a result of these machinations, Spes is also wealthy, bringing means into their union and establishing them both financially and socially in Byzantine high society. Both parties respect and bolster the strengths of the other, and are not shown to interfere with the other's activities. The strength of the married pair makes appearances elsewhere in the saga corpus, most notably in *Njáls saga*. Like Þorsteinn and Spes, Njáll and Bergþóra each embody two sides of their relationship, individually impressive but, once united, a power couple for the ages. This parallel is encouraged by the repetition of a key line in both sagas. During the burning of Njáll and his family, Bergþóra chooses to die with her husband, stating that "hefi ek því heitit honum, at eitt skyldi ganga yfir okkr bæði" [I promised him that one fate should await us both].[36] Spes employs the same phrase when explaining why she will accompany Þorsteinn to Rome: "ek vilda, at eitt gengi yfir okkr bæði" [I wanted both of us to meet the same fate].[37]

Although the romances often focus on the lust of a single man for a married woman, many make a point to condemn the sinful nature of these relationships under the eyes of God. The

[36] *ÍF* XII, 330; Robert Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 221.
[37] *ÍF* VII, 287; Scudder, *Grettir the Strong*, 205.

longest translation of Tristan in Old Norse, *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*, offers an exception to this perspective in its central oath-swearing scene, wherein Ísönd agrees to swear an oath in church, before God, that she is not having an affair in order to clear her name with her husband. On the way to the church, she encounters a muddy ditch, and an old beggar offers to carry her across. As they reach the other side, the beggar falls on top of Ísönd, landing with his hand on her inner thigh. After cursing him, she proceeds to the altar, where she successfully swears that no man has touched her, except her husband and the old beggar – who is, of course, Tristram in disguise. The ruse is enough to trick witnesses, but the truly scandalous feature of this scene is that God is made complicit in their deception, and, considering the lack of divine retribution, apparently condones their illicit love.

The fact that Tristram and Ísönd are allowed to carry on their affair without interference from God may relate to the cause of their relationship. Theirs is not a natural romance, having been caused by the accidental consumption of a powerful and irreversible love potion. It may be that God, or at least the various authors of the Tristan legend, take pity on the pair, who are unable to help their insatiable desires. They did not choose this life – and, more importantly, it does not give them pleasure. While they find pleasure in each other's company, these moments are few and far between. Much of the variants dwells on the lovers' painful periods of separation, as Tristram repeatedly travels abroad in self-imposed exile to keep himself away from Ísönd. The French and German versions of the legend pursue these emotional sequences more readily than the Norse translations, but some of the angst survived its transmission to Scandinavia. Thus although their romance brings them occasional joy, the overall theme of the narrative is one of tragedy: two young people, helplessly linked to one another due to magical powers outside of their control, spend their lives painfully pining for each other until they both die young, never able to realize a permanent relationship.

The narrative of *Spesar þáttr* has excised the elements of both supernatural and tragedy from its pages. There is no love potion, but rather a seemingly legitimate start to a romance – Spes is drawn to Þorsteinn's beautiful singing, and they subsequently fall quickly in love. The saga dwells only on episodes in which the couple are together, and there is no sign of angst in either character concerning their relationship. Overall, the narrative is quite cheerful, reveling in their romance and hijinks and ignoring any emotional fallout. These circumstances make Spes' oath-swearing scene all the more scandalous. Once again, God is made complicit in their relationship, and once again seems to bless it. But this time, the lovers have not been forced into their romance, nor are they suffering for it – they are simply having a fun affair under the nose of an ignorant husband who, in another departure from *Tristrams saga*, ultimately ends up divorced and destitute.[38]

Their collaboration with God is further hammered home at the end of the narrative, when Þorsteinn and Spes travel to Rome and seek guidance on how to atone for their past sin. Despite getting away with their relationship, the couple themselves know that what they did was wrong. However, upon asking at confessional what kind of penance they should pay, they are told:

[38] Marianne Kalinke has observed that Spes' use of her husband's accusations of adultery as grounds for divorce is an Icelandic touch that contributes to the "significant acculturation" of the *Tristrams saga* oath scene in its transmission into *Spesar þáttr*. 150-51. Marianne E. Kalinke, "Arthurian Echoes in Indigenous Icelandic Sagas," in *The Arthur of the North: The Arthurian Legend in the Norse and Rus' Realms*, edited by Marianne E. Kalinke (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 150-151.

> en fyrir þann skuld, at þau hǫfðu sjálf orkazk hugar á at bœta sína meinbugi án allri þrøngvan ok hatri af kirkjunnar formǫnnum, þá var þeim létt um allar álǫgur, svá sem fremst mátti vera, en beðin með blíðu, at þau skipaði nú sem skynsamligast fyrir sinni sál ok lifði hreinliga þaðan í frá, at fenginni lausn allra sinna mála. Þóttu þau vel ok vitrliga farit hafa.
>
> because they had made up their minds to atone for their shortcomings without any compulsion or enmity on the part of men of the Church, they were released from all imposition as far as was possible, and were kindly asked to provide wisely for their souls and live pure lives thereafter, once they had been granted total absolution. They were felt to have conducted themselves wisely.[39]

This verdict is suspicious, as Spes and Þorsteinn have at this point been together for around 15 years, had several children, and lived full lives following their initial affair – in other words, it took them a decade and a half to come clean about their sin, but because they did so willingly, they are immediately forgiven for several serious religious transgressions by the central institution of Christianity. Despite the judgement, Spes suggests they pay for their sins anyway and live as ascetics for the rest of their lives, "kann vera, at heimskir menn dragi sér til eptirdœma okkra ina fyrri ævi" [since foolish men may follow the example we set earlier in our lives].[40] Thus while God and the Church forgive the couple for a life built on infidelity, the couple themselves voluntarily make amends; nevertheless, their penance is still on their own terms, and although Spes makes one reference to *ógæfa* "misfortune," there is no evidence within the saga itself that they shared anything other than happiness in their lives together from beginning to end. Indeed, the saga goes so far as to comment that "hafa þat flestir menn sagt, at Þorsteinn drómundr ok hans kona Spes þykkja verit hafa inir mestu gæfumenn, ór því sem ráða var" [most people regarded Thorstein Dromund and his wife Spes as the most fortunate of people, considering the situation they found themselves in].[41]

Although entertainment is a dominant feature of the romances, the continental variants of the Tristan legend delight in the tragedy of the two lovers' predicament while incorporating their amusing escapades to fuel and structure the narrative. The Norwegian translations eliminates some of Tristan's emotional inner life, realigning the balance between tragedy and entertainment. In *Grettis saga*, we see the next phase of this incorporation of romance into the native corpus – the tragedy has been removed entirely, visible only in now-meaningless vestiges, while the focus of the narrative is solely on entertainment. The Byzantine setting is a key component in this adjustment, as a location that anticipates exotic entertainment within the saga corpus. Given the enthusiasm with which Þorsteinn and Spes' illicit affair is portrayed, it seems likely that such a happy narrative, free from consequence, could only have occurred somewhere so distant, and with a foreign woman. The position of the Varangian Guard at the heart of this fictional world further contributes to the theater in drawing inspiration from the Haraldr material, which is similarly playful much of the time, even in its darkest moments.

Within the context of *Grettis saga*, however, it is equally likely that the lighthearted nature of *Spesar þáttr* owes a debt to its location within the larger narrative – the end. Given the dark and unjust nature of Grettir's demise, the sudden transition to a cheerful episode is jarring, but attempts to leave the audience in a better mood than a more ambiguous conclusion. Although

[39] *ÍF* VII, 288; Scudder, *Grettir the Strong*, 206.
[40] *ÍF* VII, 289; Scudder, *Grettir the Strong*, 206.
[41] *ÍF* VII, 289; Scudder, *Grettir the Strong*, 206.

Spes and Þorsteinn's adventure is in many ways too sweet considering the weight of the rest of the saga, and too conclusive in its closure, it brings the story of Grettir to a positive close with an eye towards a brighter future.

Grettis saga is the only extent work to overtly combine romance and the topos of the Varangian abroad, but stylistic parallels already existed in earlier depictions of the Guard. The repeated escapades of the romances bear similarities to those performed by Haraldr in the Mediterranean according to the kings' sagas, and the rhythm of amorous near-misses recalls his series of stratagems in Sicily.[42] The formula's appeal is palpable in the widespread nature of both narratives, and likely drew a similar type of audience who enjoyed the light drama of amusing hijinks. The familial relationships between Haraldr's Byzantine foes mirror the network of giants in *Tristrams saga* and related texts, and Marianne Kalinke has highlighted Bolli's homecoming as an example of the repetition of the arming sequence, a common motif in romances, in the wider corpus.[43] Women often play one-dimensional roles as objects of desire, as María and Ellisif, or the desiring, as Bolli's admirers.[44] Finally, both romances and Varangian narratives engage with foreign spaces. These locales allow for brushes with the supernatural – both Haraldr and Tristan fight dragons, for instance – and enable the hero to earn great honor and wealth otherwise unattainable in their homeland, sometimes in very unconventional ways.

As a result, the merging of the Haraldr-inspired Varangian with Tristan in *Grettis saga* is by no means a stretch; rather, the two narratives are compatible as a base upon which the author may develop an expanded premise. The simplistic object of affection seen in Isold and María evolves into the fully fledged protagonist of Spes, and Þorsteinn's success as a Varangian is now determined not only by his martial prowess, but also romantic conquest. There are still gaps in the thematic flow of the narrative – the Tristan legend's Christian commentary is too diluted to make sense in this context, but is not replaced by alternative interpretation. Thus *Spesar þáttr* may be read as a work-in-progress, the partial but not yet complete integration of the foreign genre of the romance into the native corpus via the Varangian character who is himself partially in and partially out of his homeland.

Conclusion

The development of the Varangian abroad in the family sagas demonstrates the staying power of these warriors in the literary world, even as the Guard itself ceased to exist. While Norse participation in the unit peaked in the 11th century, the increasingly international Varangian division remained part of the Byzantine army until 1204, when they voluntarily disbanded during the fall of Constantinople. The end of their era coincided with the beginning of the Saga Age, closing one door on their history and opening another for their legend. The integration of the Haraldr model into new genres expanded the Varangians' reach, ensuring that more readers encountered their distinctive personas and heroic deeds in new contexts. But

[42] Theodore Andersson has noted that the specifics of *Spesar þáttr*'s trio of antics bear similarities to incidents found elsewhere in the Old Norse corpus, and seem to tie into a larger trend of escape tales in the North. Theodore M. Andersson, "From News to Narrative: Escape Tales in Medieval Iceland," *Scandinavian Studies* 86, no. 4 (2014): 390.
[43] Marianne Kalinke, "Arthur, King of Iceland," *Scandinavian Studies* 87, no. 1 (2015): 15, n.8. The earliest such scene is from *Breta sögur*, and concerns the arming of King Arthur.
[44] The figure of Zoe is more akin to the Norse trope of the evil queen.

although the mercenaries adapted well to novel surroundings, they never strayed far from the central topos, reconfirming the features that made Haraldr a point of fascination in the Middle Ages. The recurrence of the Varangian abroad indicates a relatively widespread familiarity with their brand and a willingness to preserve it, and also suggests a general appreciation of these characters among medieval audiences.

Haraldr's Mediterranean expedition lays the groundwork for his reign of Norway, and thus appears at the start of his sagas – but the opposite is true of his successors. The expeditions of Bolli Bollason and Þorsteinn drómundr conclude their sagas, and the same pattern is visible in more concise Varangian passages: the voyage of *Heiðarvíga saga*'s Barðr Guðmundarson also wraps up that narrative, while the same text's Gestr Þórhallason and *Njáls saga*'s Kolskeggr Hámundarson are out of their sagas upon arrival in Constantinople.[45] Haraldr's descendants only follow his lead until he becomes king, after which their stories are largely over. This pattern in the family sagas speaks to the localized nature of the genre – the focus is on Iceland with excursions to the wider North, and there is a reluctance to follow characters extensively to distant locations like Byzantium. But the break from Haraldr also indicates the super-charged nature of the Varangians. While Haraldr is portrayed as a remarkable but imperfect figure, the later mercenaries have been scrubbed of flaws. In a genre intrigued by humanity's shortcomings, they attain near-perfection upon entry into the Guard and become, simply put, too good to be true. The Varangian abroad maximizes his potential so greatly that his participation in the sagas must be cut short by departure or relegated to the narrative's conclusion. In order to fully integrate into this setting, then, he must evolve once more: he must leave his glory days behind, rediscover his shortcomings, and drift away from Haraldr to find inspiration elsewhere.

[45] Although Bolli is granted a sequel in the later *Bolla þáttr Bollasonar* about his life in Iceland after his return, his expedition is part of the conclusion of the larger *Laxdœla saga*.

III

Varangian Veterans

The fate of the Varangian after the conclusion of his service varies in the medieval sources. Some remain in Byzantium, but little is known of these lives beyond Þorsteinn drómundr – the archaeology of their existence is obscure, and Norse narratives do not generally follow them after they retire; neither are they mentioned, at least identifiably, in Byzantine sources. But it seems that many Varangians returned home to the North once released from their duties. Material evidence such as Byzantine artifacts found in Scandinavia and runestones carved for those who died in the East indicate the reappearance of travelers from the Mediterranean region, though it is nearly impossible to distinguish the Varangian Guard from other voyagers like merchants, explorers, and different branches of mercenaries from these sources. The sagas, while also vague at times, are more likely to identify specific returnees as members of the Guard. As with the Varangians abroad addressed in the previous chapters, the construction of these characters is less historical and more reliant on surrounding narrative, but offer greater detail and context on the trajectories of post-Varangian lives.

The most visible Varangian veteran is Haraldr Sigurðarson, who retires to become king of Norway. Characteristics introduced during his youth manifest in full force upon his ascension to the throne, but the calculated construction of his Mediterranean years makes it difficult to discern whether these qualities truly had roots in Byzantium, or if they were observed by Haraldr's biographers and added to the early chapters in hindsight in an effort to explain their origin. Some aspects of his reign, like the establishment of the royal mint, seem to have been inspired by exposure to Byzantine practices and institutions. Other factors are more nebulous. It is tempting, for instance, to wonder if his endless ambition and appetite for territorial expansion were inspired by his close proximity to the emperor and the powerful military mechanism of the

Empire. But many Norse rulers demonstrate similar traits, and the sagas' overwhelming focus on Haraldr's identity as a king largely obscures his status as a veteran.[1]

Other characters exist in the sagas who return from the Guard to more mundane retirements, offering clearer connections between their service and post-Byzantium fates. This chapter discusses four prominent former Varangians and their respective texts: Halldórr Snorrason and *Halldórs þættir Snorrasonar* (*hinn fyrri* and *hinn síðari*); Bolli Bollason and *Bolla þáttr Bollasonar*; Gríss Sæmingsson and *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*; and Þorkell Þjóstarsson and *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*.[2] Similar to the narratives explored in previous chapters, the stories of retired Varangians are unreliable and highly problematic from an historical perspective. The sagas are written several centuries after the return of these men, and the characters themselves are designed to play a specific role in their narratives. Accordingly, some characters are fictionalized versions of historically attested figures, while others are almost certainly fictional all the way through. Because all of these characters and texts are Icelandic, the worldview and perspectives explored through these Varangians are also closely informed by that context.

However, unlike active duty Varangians, who all seem to be variants of Haraldr, retired Varangians do not follow a pre-established motif. Rather, they are even more context-specific in their portrayals – although there may be occasional shared similarities between individuals, there is no blanket definition of a former Varangian in the sagas, and their overall roles are designed to apply specifically to the context of the saga in which they appear. As a result, as with the Varangians abroad of the previous chapter, it is crucial to look at the narrative(s) in which each man is situated and ask the question of why this character's Varangian past is necessary to the story at hand and what role it plays in the saga.

Although Halldórr Snorrason is best known for his time spent with Haraldr in Byzantium, the little we know of his life largely takes place after his departure from the Varangian Guard. The kings' saga þættir largely leverage his Varangian identity to verify him as a trusted primary source for the stories of Haraldr's youthful adventures, while the family sagas focus on his well-known descendants. But Halldórr himself is a complex figure, stubborn yet heroic, loyal but self-righteous, with a complete disregard for authority. This last quality endears him to Haraldr in Byzantium, who shares this rebellious streak; but as soon as Haraldr becomes king, he takes on the mantle of power against which Halldórr has bucked his entire life. The breakdown of their friendship bears striking similarities to the dissolution of Haraldr's relationship with the Byzantines, with the original split between the North and the Mediterranean reenacted as a division between Iceland and Norway. Despite their bitter parting, however, Halldórr does not appear to hold ill-will against the king, instead retelling the stories of their youthful adventures to the next generation in such accurate detail that Haraldr himself, hearing a third party relate his life story many years later, is satisfied that the truth has been told. The literary interest in Halldórr is therefore twofold: the conflict between Icelander and Norwegian king is a point of

[1] On potential Byzantine influence on Haraldr's rule, see Roland Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz: Bedingungen und Konsequenzen mittelalterlicher Kulturbeziehungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 350-70.
[2] *Hrafnkels saga* contains two travelers who have been to Byzantium, Þorkell and Eyvindr Þorbjarnarson; the latter will be explored as a comparison to Þorkell, but, as a merchant and not a member of the Varangian Guard, he does not play a prominent role in the present study.

fascination to the Icelandic writers of the kings' sagas, while his deep involvement in Haraldr's life and penchant for telling tales makes him a primary source in preserving the king's legacy.

Bolli Bollason is also granted a þáttr covering his post-Byzantium life in *Bolla þáttr Bollasonar*. This tale, a miniature family saga and later expansion of the *Laxdœla saga* narrative, covers a dispute in northern Iceland that spirals into violence. Bolli's Varangian identity, though mentioned, is not a central feature of the story, but his fate bears similarities to Haraldr's trajectory, as Bolli too finds a new career as a man of power upon his return, accepting the goðorð of Snorri goði in the absence of Halldórr Snorrason. He also displays similar signs of great ambition and risk-taking as Haraldr, though on a smaller scale – he deals in districts rather than countries, and does not seek to conquer, but to impress. This approach is more in line with the Icelandic power system, within whose boundaries Bolli succeeds in pulling off extraordinary deeds, both in the law court and on the battlefield, that leave his fellows in awe. Given his heritage, Bolli is already following in the footsteps of greatness, and disentangling his family's tradition of impressive men from the legacy of his Varangian service is challenging when the þáttr itself does not elaborate. But the text follows up on his portrayal in the final chapters of *Laxdœla saga* – if each generation produces increasingly remarkable men, then Bolli Bollason is the most remarkable of them all. Yet even after serving prominently in the Varangian Guard, Bolli still has a great deal to prove, if only to himself, and the þáttr's very existence, drawing out the story begun in the original saga, speaks to the medieval fascination with native characters of his heroic ilk.

Hallfreðar saga features the character of Gríss Sæmingsson, a near-sighted and unimpressive figure who unwittingly becomes Hallfreðr's self-proclaimed rival in romance. Gríss is recruited by the family of the skald's love interest to marry her and get her away from Hallfreðr, and he is subjected over the years to many insults by the poet, often in verse form. Although a relatively minor character in the larger story, Gríss takes center stage in one of the saga's most important scenes, in which Hallfreðr receives news of the death of King Óláfr Tryggvason. While the other Icelanders mock the skald for his deep depression, Gríss offers kind words, comparing Hallfreðr's grief to his own upon the death of the Byzantine emperor while he was serving in the Varangian Guard. The empathy shown by Gríss in Hallfreðr's darkest moment does not completely free him from offending verses, but he enlightens both the saga's characters and the saga's audience about an experience, the loss of a monarch, with which parliamentary Iceland would not have been fully familiar.

While Gríss's perspective goes against the Icelandic grain in a manner that ultimately leads to a positive outcome, Þorkell Þjóstarsson of *Hrafnkels saga* pushes a similar narrative in far greater detail and with more costly results. Having returned from Constantinople two years prior to the saga's action, Þorkell is recruited by Sámr to strengthen his lawsuit against Hrafnkell over the killing of Sámr's young cousin Einarr. Þorkell pushes his goði brother Þorsteinn to back the case when no other goði will go against Hrafnkell, a move that, despite ultimately backfiring, deepens the complexity of the saga's narrative. Þorkell's meddling redirects and expands the action of the saga, as he not only offers verbal commentary on his rationale in backing Sámr's case, but actively plays out an alternative concept of morality that both clashes with and emphasizes that of the native Icelanders, represented by Hrafnkell. Þorkell's struggle to reintegrate after returning home from Byzantium, and his enlightening articulation of his situation, also captures the timeless reality faced by soldiers fighting foreign wars and the challenges that accompany the transition from active duty to civilian life.

There are several ways in which these four retired Varangians might be sorted in a study of their portrayal and representation in the saga corpus. Genre-wise, Halldórr is primarily a product of the kings' sagas, while Bolli, Gríss, and Þorkell emerge from the family sagas. From a narrative perspective, Halldórr and Bolli's stories begin with their Byzantine service and continue through their return to the North, while Gríss and Þorkell exist in the sagas only after they have arrived home. Both models reflect the limited similarities between certain characters and how they are depicted in their respective texts. A key aspect of Halldórr's treatment in the kings' sagas is his role as a reliable source for exotic tales, a specific interest of the genre that is not as visible among the Varangians of the family sagas. His story also reflects the complex interface between the Norwegian monarchy and Icelandic independence that was pervasive in the zeitgeist of Saga Age Iceland.

On the other end of the spectrum, Gríss and Þorkell are both used to provide non-native commentary on local problems for primarily narrative purposes. They have no past or future other than what is immediately relevant to the saga material, and they are placed in their respective texts to play the role of a pseudo-outsider, someone who is Iceland-born but possesses the worldview of a foreigner. The commentary they provide on the events of their sagas introduces perspectives that often conflict with Icelandic values, adding additional nuance to the issues in play. They also explore, in different degrees, the concept of the veteran soldier and the emotional burden of war and conflict that must have been pervasive in the medieval North and thus familiar to saga audiences.

Bolli Bollason fits well between these two categories, sharing features with both. He bears the most similarities with Haraldr, and is the only one of the four with a leadership position waiting for him upon his return. But although Bolli is less of an outsider than Gríss and Þorkell, he still shows signs of being "not quite Icelandic" in light of his remarkable accomplishments in *Bolla þáttr* that shock his fellows, but on a level that impresses rather than alienates them. In this sense, he sits on one end of the trifecta of family saga Varangians – Bolli performs higher than normal within the bounds of Icelandic society; Gríss seeks to add something new to the status quo without challenging it; and Þorkell tries to break the system altogether and fails.

If it is indeed the case, as Sverrir Jakobsson has suggested, that the Icelanders were initially unfamiliar with the Varangian Guard as an historical unit in the early days of saga writing, then the use of retired Varangians in the family sagas is all the more relevant to the question of how these literary figures developed far beyond their historical origins.[3] The Varangian abroad may find his origins in the story of Haraldr Sigurðarson, but the retired Varangian is a far more diverse category, without a baseline character from which the others have emerged. If neither history nor character motif can explain their formation in the sagas, then they must be inspired by other sources. Their high degree of fictionality and close relationship to the narratives of their respective texts indicates that their origins must be considered from the perspective of social context, and that they are less representative of actual people, and more so of concepts that were relevant to both saga writer and intended audience.

[3] Sverrir Jakobsson, *Varangians*, 125.

Halldórr Snorrason

Of Haraldr's two *stallarar* in Constantinople, little is spoken of Úlfr Óspaksson beyond his genealogical import.[4] Halldórr Snorrason, however, is a more prominent figure within the kings' sagas, particularly in the þættir. The son of Snorri goði, Halldórr is primarily remembered for his recounting of the adventures he experienced in the Mediterranean alongside Haraldr, but his character, reticent and disagreeable, is highly visible in these narratives. The strong personalities of Halldórr and Haraldr initially spark a tight friendship while in the Varangian Guard. But upon their return home, their mutual loathing of authority backfires as Haraldr becomes king and Halldórr rebels against this new power. The steady breakdown of their friendship is a key feature of Halldórr's þættir and offers insight into both characters as representatives of tension between Iceland and Norway.

Of the sources in which Halldórr features, his two þættir from the kings' sagas are the most prominent. Both narratives cover incidents following his arrival back in Norway and the animosity that develops between Halldórr and Haraldr. *Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar hinn fyrri*, found in *Flateyjarbók*, concerns a killing committed by Halldórr against a relative of Einarr þambarskelfir, using the growing antagonism with Haraldr as a frame device in a longer story about Óláfr Tryggvason. *Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar hinn síðari*, from *Morkinskinna*, centers on his relationship with the king and the events that lead to the conclusion of their friendship. Halldórr is also referenced in another *Morkinskinna* tale, *Íslendings þáttr sögufróða*, as a source for the young storyteller's narrative about Haraldr's life. Finally, he is mentioned briefly in the family sagas in conjunction with his famous father, Snorri goði, and as the progenitor of several prominent lineages.

Both of Halldórr's þættir describe him in a similar manner, and match his characterization elsewhere in Haraldr's larger sagas. According to *hinn fyrri*, "Halldórr var stríðmæltr ok harðorðr, en mjǫk fátalaðr...Halldórr var þykkjumikill sem aðrir Íslendingar, ok þótti illa, er hann fekk eigi þat, er hann beiddi" [Halldor could speak aggressively and had a sharp tongue but generally spoke little…Halldor was strong-tempered, like other Icelanders, and did not like it when he failed to get what he asked for].[5] *Halldórs þáttr hinn síðari* offers further detail in its final chapter:

> Halldórr Snorrason var mikill maðr vexti ok fríðr sýnum, allra manna styrkastr ok vápndjarfastr. Þat vitni bar Haraldr konungr Halldóri, at hann hefði verit með honum allra manna svá, at sízt brygði við váveifliga hluti, hvárt sem at hǫndum bar mannháska eða fagnaðartíðendi, þá var hann hvárki at glaðari né óglaðari; eigi neytti hann matar eða drakk eða svaf meira né minna en vanði hans var til, hvárt sem hann mœtti blíðu eða stríðu. Halldórr var maðr fámæltr, stuttorðr, bermæltr, stygglyndr ok ómjúkr, kappgjarn í ǫllum hlutum, við hvern sem hann átti um; en þat kom illa við Harald konung, er hann hafði nóga aðra þjónustumenn; kómu þeir því lítt lyndi saman, síðan Haraldr varð konungr í Nóregi.
>
> Halldor Snorrason was a large, handsome man, the strongest and most courageous of men in battle. King Haraldr bore witness to the fact that of all the men who had been with him, Halldor was the one who was least affected by shocks; whether faced with mortal danger or joyful news,

[4] Úlfr's most famous descendent is Eysteinn Erlendsson, archbishop of Niðaróss.
[5] Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., "Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar inn fyrri," in *Laxdœla saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit V (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1934), 252; Anthony Maxwell, trans., "The Tale of Halldor Snorrason I," in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* V, edited by Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavik: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), 219.

> he was never more or less happy than usual. He never ate food or drank or slept more or less than he was accustomed to, whether the times were good or bad. Halldor was a man of few words. He spoke abruptly and frankly, was sharp-tempered and rough, and highly competitive in all things with anyone he had dealings with. This caused trouble with King Haraldr when he had enough other men to serve him. That is why they got on so badly together after Haraldr became King of Norway.[6]

The general consensus in these passages is that Halldórr was an exceptional warrior of few words, but with a challenging character. His abilities on the battlefield and his overall conduct in taking everything in stride seems fitting for his elite status as not only a Varangian, but Haraldr's right hand man. At the same time, his reticence further emphasizes the impact of his harsh words and strong temper, and strangely conflicts with his depiction as an avid teller of tales. The breakdown of Halldórr's character in the second passage in particular is reflective of the encomia often seen at the end of sagas or after the death of a notable character; in this case, Halldórr is not dead, but he is "out of the saga." But the detailed account also adds further dimension to its preceding story, as Haraldr is also similarly complex, and the clash between the two men, while outwardly straightforward, holds a great deal of nuance that is further informed by this character analysis.

Although the two friends remain tight in Byzantium, cracks in their friendship appear early on, possibly added later to preface their eventual falling out. Upon their return to Norway, however, Haraldr and Halldórr's relationship breaks down completely. *Halldórs þáttr hinn fyrri* begins with a disagreement over whether Haraldr should make amends with another Icelander, Eilífr, who has killed one of Haraldr's men. The king refuses, and Halldórr, enraged, leaves the court with Eilífr and goes to Einarr þambarskelfir. Here he begins his tradition of relating tales of his foreign travels, regaling Einarr's wife Bergljót with stories of his Varangian adventures with Haraldr. A relative of Einarr's, Kali, begins to mock Halldórr behind his back, culminating in an insult about Halldórr's role in the dragon-slaying incident in the Constantinopolitan prison: "Ekki em ek hræddr við hann mǫrlanda, þó at hann hafi mikil metorð af þér, því at vér hǫfum spurt, at hann var settr í dýflizu út á Grikklandi ok lá þar á ormshala athafnarlauss ok ekki megandi" [We are not afraid of that suet-eating Icelander, even though you regard him highly, for we have heard that he was thrown into a dungeon over in Greece, where he lay on the tail of a snake unable to do a thing].[7] Halldórr promptly kills Kali, and the remainder of the tale is dominated by Einarr's response to the slaying. He tells a lengthy story about being rescued from slavery by an undead Óláfr Tryggvason, who advises him to repay the deed by enacting the same kindness on someone else who will offend him in the future. Einarr decides that the king must have been referring to Halldórr, pays restitution to Kali's family himself, and forgives the Icelander, who returns to Haraldr and makes peace with him, at least for the time being.

Due to the tale's focus on Óláfr Tryggvason, not a great deal of information is given about Halldórr; but his behavior in the opening section is consistent with his initial description. He is surly, ill-tempered, and a bit rash, displaying dramatic recalcitrance by abruptly quitting Haraldr's court over a small quarrel – and now he has committed a major faux pas by killing a kinsman of his host inside his host's hall. But his storytelling, though mentioned in passing, is

[6] Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., "Halldórs þáttr Snorrasonar hinn síðari," in *Laxdœla saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit V (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1934), 276; Terry Gunnell, trans., "The Tale of Halldor Snorrason II," in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* V, edited by Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavik: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), 230.
[7] *ÍF* V, 253; Maxwell, "Halldor Snorrason I," 219.

also a key feature of the narrative. Halldórr is frequently said to be taciturn in nature, yet the repeated mention of his recounting tales about his Varangian exploits with Haraldr seems to be the exception to this characterization. The kings' sagas' reference to this habit is likely due to Halldórr's role as a source for the sagas' Mediterranean chapters. Halldórr is an eyewitness for Haraldr's adventures, and it is through him that such stories were passed down, eventually ending up in the hands of the saga writers.

His storytelling acquires a particularly prescient role in the opening scene. Kali insults Halldórr by misconstruing a narrative with which Halldórr himself was involved; moreover, the dragon's defeat is also one of the most exciting adventures and greatest deeds he performed by Haraldr's side. Halldórr's rage upon hearing Kali's insult speaks to the consequences of telling tales poorly. Setting aside the fictionality of the dragon, people's reputations depended upon the truthfulness of the narrator, and Kali's version, skewed by falsehood, is slanderous toward Halldórr. Although his violent response is socially irresponsible, the Icelander is saved by his own talent for storytelling – his success in regaling Einarr's wife Bergljót earns him her support, and she immediately jumps to his defense after the slaying. Thus while the death of Kali warns against misrepresenting such anecdotes, the support of Bergljót reinforces their power when told correctly.

Halldórs þáttr hinn síðari is a lengthier narrative that takes place after the events of *hinn fyrri*, and focuses entirely on the relationship between Halldórr and Haraldr after returning to Norway. The tale begins with Halldórr's announcement to Haraldr that he wishes to sail to Iceland. He is unable to do so on his own terms as he has spent all his money, so the king gifts Halldórr a ship and a crew, if the Icelander gathers the men. When Halldórr fails to recruit even a single sailor due to the number of ships already preparing to depart, Haraldr solves this problem with one of his tricks, publicly announcing that because of potential hostility with Denmark, no ships will be allowed to leave Norway except for Halldórr's. Eager sailors flock to Halldórr for a place on his vessel, and he quickly assembles his crew, at which point Haraldr recants, informing the public that the ban on travel was due to a false alarm.

Halldórr's lack of money is a stark departure from the usual unimaginable wealth of returning Varangians, and seems to contradict the tale's concluding comments regarding his moderate approach to earthly pleasures. While he must have brought home a small fortune, its disappearance so soon after his return may be indicative of the fact that Haraldr receives the biggest cut, as, unlike other Varangians, Halldórr is not the primary figure in his own Mediterranean narrative, but a secondary one. The king's own wealth is cut in half when he splits his earnings with Magnús in exchange for the Norwegian throne, an act that could have further diminished the division among his followers. Nevertheless, Halldórr must have received a significant portion of their spoils as Haraldr's trusted friend and because of the king's reputation for generosity, and the þáttr seems to imply that Halldórr is quite the spendthrift – when directly asked by the king how he is distributing his money, the Icelander vaguely replies, "Skjótt ætla ek at verja, því at ekki er til nema ígangsklæði mín" [I'm spending it quickly, because I have nothing but the clothes I am wearing].[8] Despite his own surprise at how fast Halldórr's money has gone, Haraldr takes care of everything his friend needs to travel home, from financing a ship and crew to conjuring nonexistent sailors. The king's trick on his own people is not particularly

[8] *ÍF* V, 265; Gunnell, "Halldor Snorrason II," 224.

kind, but speaks to the value he places on Halldórr following their many adventures, and the lengths to which he will go to make sure his companion never wants for anything.

Halldórr makes it home to Iceland and winters with his father before returning to Haraldr's retinue in the spring. There is a conflict here in the timeline of his trip that casts some doubt on its veracity. The þáttr's claim that Halldórr spent the winter with Snorri goði after serving in Constantinople and Norway would place this voyage in the late 1040s. But *Laxdœla saga* contends that Snorri's death occurred one year after the death of King Óláfr Haraldsson and while Halldórr is abroad, around 1031. *Eyrbyggja saga* concurs with this timeline, but openly names *Laxdœla saga* as one of its sources, which in turn names its own source as Ari Þorgilsson, who knew Snorri's family well – one of his listed sources for *Íslendingabók* is the goði's daughter Þuríðr.[9] *Ævi Snorra goða*, a short text on the life of Snorri possibly written by Ari, also states that the goði's death occurred one year after that of King Óláfr, and is another potential source for *Eyrbyggja saga*, having been preserved in the same manuscript. It is hard to imagine that the death of someone as important as Snorri, especially in conjunction with the major figure of Óláfr Haraldsson, would be so greatly mistaken in the kings' sagas, but given the nature of transmission, it is more plausible that the þáttr is the incorrect source.

Whatever Halldórr's reason for traveling to Iceland, the tale notes that upon his return, he and Haraldr are not as close as they had been before, setting the stage for the ensuing conflict. As the season turns to winter, others become aware of the growing chill between the former friends. Haraldr snaps one evening, accusing Halldórr of not drinking his fill at the feast and choosing *vændiskonur* [prostitutes] over service to his king. Although their friend Bárðr attempts to help them overcome their differences, another of Haraldr's tricks soon pushes the friendship beyond the realm of salvation. During Yule, the king deliberately rings the bell summoning his men to court much earlier than usual, and many subsequently arrive late to court, Halldórr included. Tardiness is technically a punishable breach in etiquette, wherein the offenders "settusk í hálm um daginn ok skyldu drekka vítin" [had to sit in the straw all day long, and were supposed to drink the forfeit-cup].[10] Correctly assessing that the situation was orchestrated by Haraldr, Halldórr refuses to drink until the king himself brings him the cup, at which point the Icelander acquiesces, albeit with an insult: "'Vera má þat, konungr,' segir Halldórr, 'at þú komir því á leið, at ek drekka, en þat kann ek þó segja þér, at eigi myndi Sigurðr sýr fá nauðgat Snorra goða til'" ["It may well be that you will bring it about that I drink, King," said Halldor. "But I can tell you that Sigurd Sow wouldn't have managed to force Snorri the Godi to do so"].[11]

This scene demonstrates the root of both friendship and animosity between the two men – the similarity of their natures. While they earn each other's respect on the battlefield and through their unwavering loyalty toward their fellow warriors, both are also extremely proud and have a strong distaste for authority. In Byzantium these features work in their favor, as their temperaments are united against the common enemy of the "other": the foes of the Byzantines against which the Varangian Guard is deployed and, ultimately, the Byzantine rulers themselves. Haraldr's stratagems in Sicily benefit Halldórr and enrich them both, and his antagonism toward the Byzantines in power – first Gyrgir, then Zoe, and finally the emperor himself – similarly

[9] Jakob Benediktsson, *Íslendingabók – Landnámabók*, Islenzk Fornrit I (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1967), 4.
[10] *ÍF* V, 269; Gunnell, "Halldor Snorrason II," 226.
[11] *ÍF* V, 269; Gunnell, "Halldor Snorrason II," 226.

satisfies their mutual impulse to prove superiority. But back home, Haraldr and Halldórr have fewer outsiders on which to enact their subversive activities and begin to turn on each other. Haraldr resorts to duping his own people, and Halldórr transfers his distaste for authority to Haraldr.

Because they are both immensely proud men, neither can appreciate having the tables turned on them. Halldórr, who once profited from Haraldr's tricks, is now angered at becoming their target, while Haraldr, who will continue to challenge the authority of others throughout his life, cannot accept a dose of his own medicine, even, or perhaps especially, from his closest friend. Halldórr's comparison of their fathers in the face of the forfeit-cup drives this point home – he knows that Haraldr is sensitive about his father's status, and his calculated attack on the king's Achilles heel over an otherwise minor incident demonstrates the degree to which he feels humiliated by the bell-ringing episode and the earlier insult at the Yule feast. At the same time, his public reminder of Haraldr's lesser paternal legacy and his own laudable heritage as the son of an accomplished goði strikes a nerve deep within the king. Halldórr himself knows he has crossed a line, and when Bárðr tries to prevent him from insulting Haraldr yet again, this time by questioning the quality of the silver in their wages, he simply states that "litlu hættir nú til" [I've got little to lose].[12]

Haraldr soon tries to repay Halldórr in kind by openly questioning his steering commands while sailing south, but the situation comically backfires, as Halldórr's commands prove correct when Haraldr navigates the ship into an island. But at this point in the narrative, the key difference between the men begins to emerge: while Halldórr is always off the leash, Haraldr has the capacity to restrain himself. After taking space to rethink the situation, the king acknowledges both his fondness for Halldórr and the many benefits of keeping the Icelander in the royal retinue. Haraldr makes an immense push to keep him in his service, forgiving his recent offenses and, on Bárðr recommendation, repaying him the controversial wages, this time in full silver. He even pulls strings to give the Icelander command over a ship of his own, and Bárðr tells Halldórr: "Sér þú eigi, at þú hefir slíkt, er þú brekar af konungi, ok hann vill, at þú hafir slíkt af honum, sem þú þykkisk þurfa" [Can't you see that whatever you nag the king about, you get? He wants you to have from him what you say you need].[13] Although Haraldr, similarly hot-headed at times, may get caught up in the moment by Halldórr's actions and insults, the great value he places in his friend wins out in the long run and pushes him to swallow his pride for the sake of amends. Perhaps the king, when given some space, appreciates that the very characteristics that drew the two together as young men are coming home to roost, and that Halldórr is pushing boundaries just as he himself has always done.

The final encounter between Halldórr and Haraldr bears a striking resemblance to the climax of their time in Byzantium. After a dispute arises over the ship Haraldr had gifted to Halldórr, the king settles the matter by buying the ship from Halldórr and returning it to its previous owner. The Icelander receives the promised sum save a half-mark of gold, about which Haraldr remains cagey, never completing the payment. Why he refuses to pay the final amount is unstated in the text, but he may be holding out in a bid to keep Halldórr, who is planning his permanent return to Iceland, in his service. Whatever the reason, on the eve of his departure, Halldórr breaks into the royal bedchamber, and, armed to the teeth, once again demands the remaining gold. Haraldr tries

[12] *ÍF* V, 270; Gunnell, "Halldor Snorrason II," 226.
[13] *ÍF* V, 272; Gunnell, "Halldor Snorrason II," 228.

to stall, but his queen, fearing he will kill the king, gives him a ring off her arm at Halldórr's request. The scene's similarities with the blinding of the Byzantine emperor extend to the aftermath, as Halldórr, knowing he has crossed the final threshold, but also confident that Haraldr has done the same by denying him rightful pay, tells his men to run to the ship. They take off immediately, and the Norwegians respond in kind:

> Ok er þeir sigldu út, skorti eigi hornblástr í bœnum, ok þat sá þeir síðast, at þrjú langskip váru á floti ok lǫgðu eptir þeim, en þó berr þá undan ok í haf; skilr þar með þeim, ok byrjaði Halldóri vel út til Íslands, en konungsmenn hurfu aptr, er þeir sá, er Halldór bar undan ok í haf út.
>
> While they were sailing out, there was no lack of horn-blowing in the town. The last thing they [Halldórr and his men] saw was that three longships were afloat, and were setting off after them. They pulled ahead, though, and reached the sea. There they got separated, and Halldórr made a good start for Iceland. The king's men turned back when they saw that Halldórr was pulling ahead and had reached the open sea.[14]

As in the confrontation in Constantinople, a decorated soldier is snubbed by a monarch over money matters and deception, and violently invades the bedchamber in response. He then takes to his ships and, after overcoming a brief hurdle, finds freedom in open water.

The parallels between these two scenes, sharing the same manuscripts and involving the same characters, appears deliberate, but this sequel is designed to evoke a different emotional response from the audience. While the maimed emperor remains an undeveloped nemesis in the larger king's saga, the split between the two established figures of Haraldr and Halldórr arguably holds greater impact because we know these men, we are invested in them, and we have witnessed the steady and unavoidable decline of a great friendship. Thus while the blinding of the emperor is one-sided and sensational, the robbery in Norway, involving no physical injury, signifies a form of internal personal tragedy. At the same time, there is entertainment to be found in seeing the two men act exactly as expected under such bizarre circumstances – Haraldr displaying bravado and stubbornness even at the wrong end of a sword, and Halldórr taking on a scrappy heroism as he sticks it to the man in a most unconventional, but extremely effective, manner. Considering the long history between these two extraordinary men, this climactic scene is a fitting capstone to such a stormy relationship, and offers a memorable farewell as they part for the last time.

The composition of these two þættir and their exploration of Halldórr and Haraldr's friendship came at a time when Iceland was closely reconsidering the nature of its association with Norway. The 13th century saw a crisis of the Commonwealth and increasing pressure from the Norwegian crown to bring the island under its control, with King Hákon Hákonarson pushing his Icelandic allies to spread his agenda among their compatriots. Iceland ultimately accepted Norwegian rule, completing the process in 1264. Many sagas demonstrate a fascination with this international drama, depicting interactions between Icelandic heroes and Norwegian kings that range from extremely hostile, as in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, to positively productive, as in *Laxdœla saga*. The kings' saga þættir are largely characterized by their focus on Icelandic protagonists in the midst of sagas about Norwegian kings, and thus also contribute to this branch of literary exploration.

[14] *ÍF* V, 275; Gunnell, "Halldor Snorrason II," 230.

Halldórs þættir follows the general thread of these tales in portraying its Icelandic protagonist as grumpy and disruptive, while the king finds himself challenged and ultimately "defeated" by this behavior. Halldórr's snipe in *hinn síðari* about Snorri goði and Sigurðr sýr seems designed to please an Icelandic audience, as does a later comment by Haraldr himself when a Norwegian follower takes issue with Halldórr: "Hanns ætt er eigi verri á Íslandi en þín hér í Nóregi, ok eigi hefir enn alllangt síðan liðit, er þeir váru norrœnir, er nú byggja Ísland" [His family in Iceland is no worse than yours here in Norway. It is not so long ago that those now living in Iceland were Norwegian.][15] Despite Halldórr's victories, however, Haraldr is not too sullied by the narrative, an attestation to the þættir's typically light-hearted premise of Icelanders running rings around Norwegian rulers without doing permanent damage to their reputations.

According to *Halldórs þáttr hinn síðari,* Halldórr retires peacefully upon his return to Iceland, establishing a farm and dying many years later of old age. Although he and Haraldr never meet again, the king reaches out twice over the years: first, to ask Halldórr to rejoin his retinue, which the Icelander ignores, saying Haraldr will probably have him hanged instead; and second, to request a shipment of fox skins many years later, to which Halldórr acquiesces. But although Halldórr's post-Haraldr life is left mostly unexplored, we do know that he continued to tell his stories, a tradition he began while still in the king's service, and, according to *Íslendings þáttr sögufróða,* avidly continued back home. This short narrative tells of an unnamed Icelander who travels to Haraldr's court and relates many tales, exhausting his repertoire until the only story he has left is that of Haraldr himself. At the king's urging, he relates the tale over Yule, a feat met with great praise from Haraldr. When asked how he learned of these adventures so accurately and thoroughly,

> hann svarar: "þat var vanði minn út á landinu at ek fór hvert sumar til þings, ok namk hvert sumar af sǫgunni nǫkkvat at Halldóri Snorrasynni." "Þá er eigi kynligt," segir konungr, "at þú kunnir vel."
>
> He replied: It was my custom out in Iceland to go to the thingmeeting every summer, and every summer I learned something of the story from Halldórr Snorrason. "Then it is not surprising," said the king," that you know the story so well."[16]

Although the two men part in animosity, they do not appear to have held onto any grudges. Halldórr does not malign the king in the stories he tells, but relates them truthfully, so much so that Haraldr himself enjoys hearing them from a third party. Haraldr in turn rewards the young storyteller and makes public note of the fact that Halldórr has done the tales justice. The þáttr thus operates as another verification of Halldórr's stories as a trustworthy source for the Byzantine chapter of Haraldr's life within the context of the kings' sagas – not only was he an eyewitness, but even Haraldr himself gave his narratives the seal of approval.

The remainder of Halldórr's life is left largely unexplored in the medieval corpus, but while his biggest legacy within the kings' sagas is his role as transmitter of stories about Haraldr, the Icelandic and contemporary sagas focus more on his role as progenitor of prominent descendants. *Eyrbyggja saga* tells us that "Halldórr var gǫfgastr sona Snorra goða; hann bjó í Hjarðarholti í Laxárdal; frá honum eru komnir Sturlungar ok Vatnfirðingar" [Halldórr was the noblest of Snorri goði's sons; he lived in Hjarðarholt in Laxárdalr; from him were descended the

[15] *ÍF* V, 273; Gunnell, "Halldor Snorrason II," 228.
[16] *ÍF* XXIII, 236; Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade, *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030-1157)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 223.

Sturlung and Vatnsfjǫrðr families].[17] Little else is related elsewhere beyond similar statements and a brief comment in *Laxdœla saga* that he is out of the country upon Bolli's return, and his travel to Byzantium goes unobserved in the family sagas. It seems that this chapter of his life is more important in the kings' sagas, while his relevance in other genres relies on his genealogy, not only in his connection to Snorri goði, but also as a progenitor of the Sturlung clan that held such sway during the Saga Age.

According to *Laxdœla saga,* Snorri grants his farm and goðorð to Bolli Bollason rather than Halldórr, despite stating that he is the most accomplished of his sons. Bolli, married to Snorri's daughter and having spent much of his youth at Snorri's farm, is a solid choice for the title, but the switch in heirs still begs the question of why Halldórr was removed from the running. The situation parallels that of Þorkell Þjóstarsson in *Hrafnkels saga,* who similarly does not receive his own father's goðorð, albeit at his own request. Þorkell's reasoning is that after his time spent in Byzantium, he no longer understands Iceland intimately enough to carry out the duties of a goði, compared to his brother Þorsteinn, who remains at home. Snorri tells Bolli that his gift of home and goðorð is due to Halldórr's absence abroad, suggesting the father's understanding that his son will be gone for a long time, perhaps long enough that Snorri will be dead upon his return. This assumption proves true, as *Laxdœla saga*'s timeline implies that Halldórr has left shortly before Bolli's homecoming, and the kings' sagas tell us he will remain abroad for well over a decade before returning home permanently. By the time of his arrival back in Iceland, he would have spent at least half his life out of the country, which would have made for a challenging transition into the highly localized duties of a goði. Given Halldórr's temperament, he may not have been interested in such a position of authority anyway. Nevertheless, the goðorð is still transferred to a former Varangian, but one who travels later in life and, despite his penchant for extravagance, remains tuned to the fabric of Icelandic life in ways his fellow veterans do not.

Bolli Bollason

The omission of Halldórr's Varangian career in *Laxdœla saga* is all the more noticeable for the text's prominent inclusion of Bolli Bollason's journey and homecoming. The aftermath of Bolli's career in Byzantium is barely mentioned in the final scenes of the saga, beyond his acceptance of Snorri's goðorð and the famous question he puts to his mother Guðrún regarding which of her four husbands she loved most. But Bolli's story continues in *Bolla þáttr Bollasonar*, a short tale set some years after Bolli's return. This tale is found only in conjunction with *Laxdœla saga,* a later composition preserved in its oldest form in *Mǫðruvallabók*. The narrative follows Bolli on a journey north that soon spirals into lawsuits and violence. He emerges victorious, earning the respect of his fellow Icelanders for not only resolving the issues at hand, but doing so in an entirely different district than his own. Although his Varangian experience does not play an explicit role in the þáttr, it arguably plays an *implicit* one as a driving force in Bolli's accomplishments, as well as furthering the narrative similarities between Bolli and Haraldr Sigurðarson that began in *Laxdœla saga*.

[17] Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, eds., *Eyrbyggja saga*, Íslenzk Fórnrit IV (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1935), 182.

The þáttr begins with the killing of a violent and destructive bull. The bull's owner Þórólfr retaliates by slaying his neighbor's young son, and Bolli is asked to intervene by the boy's mother, his cousin. Although the matter has arisen in a district in which he has no legal power, Bolli accepts the call and wins the subsequent lawsuit with help from his ally Arnórr. Þórólfr is outlawed and makes plans to leave Iceland, which, under normal circumstances, should have concluded the matter. However, Bolli goes one step further by pursuing the man before he leaves the country, killing him just as he boards the ship to Norway. People are impressed by this deed:

> fær hann af þessu virðing mikla, ok þótti mǫnnum farit skǫruliga; hefir sekðan manninn í ǫðrum fjórðungi, en síðan riðit einn saman í hendr óvinum sínum ok drepit hann þar.
>
> he earned himself a great deal of honour by this, as men thought it quite an accomplishment to have the man outlawed in another district and then venture alone into the hands of his enemies and kill him there.[18]

Bolli's willingness to lend a hand to a family member is in line with his noble character, already well-established in *Laxdœla saga*. His legal victory is also impressive, and marks the start of the þáttr's preoccupation with legal proceedings and terminology, in contrast to the larger saga.[19] Although this legal wrangling is a newer addition to Bolli's character, his tenacity and victory, as well as his well-rounded abilities both at court and in tracking down his victim, fit his established image. The prosecution in another district and his initiative in killing the outlaw, however, goes beyond the pale, and although the narrative does not directly mention his Varangian legacy during this sequence, the level of ambition and skill necessary to undertake such a venture highlights how accomplished Bolli has become. If the Varangians represent the best of the best, and Bolli is the best of the Varangians, it stands to reason that if anyone could pull off such a feat, it would be Bolli. The risks, both social and physical, are very high, but he seems to thrive under pressure, just as a good Varangian should.

But to even solve the problem in this manner reveals some serious out-of-the-box thinking. The tale indicates that the Icelanders are most impressed by the fact that these feats were performed in another district. The lengths to which Bolli goes to bring the matter to its full conclusion counters the norm, and suggests a degree of otherness in Bolli. A lifelong Icelander may not think to cross district lines in such cases, but due to his time outside the country, Bolli appears more flexible in his approach to solving social issues. Although this reading is theoretical, other forms of abstract thinking are visible across the former Varangians in the family sagas, explored in subsequent sections of this chapter. The failure of an outsider perspective would have highlighted strengths within the Icelandic system. Bolli's case, however, is the opposite – although outrageous from a native point of view, his actions do not go against the grain of social mores, but push them to their limits.

Bolli's ambition in dominating legal proceedings in another district offers the first echo of Haraldr Sigurðarson in his post-Byzantium persona. Haraldr too is highly ambitious, and, as king

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[18] Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., "Bolla þáttr," in *Laxdœla saga*, Islenzk Fornrit V (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1934), 236; Keneva Kunz, trans., "Bolli Bollason's Tale," in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* V, edited by Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavik: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), 123.

[19] Daniela Hahn, "Social and Diegetic Hierarchies in Cases of Thievery. A Study of *Mǫðruvallabók*," in *Narrating Law and Laws of Narration in Medieval Scandinavia*, ed. Roland Scheel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 194-95. On the seemingly deliberate avoidance of legal terminology in *Laxdœla saga*, see Hannah Burrows, "Cold Cases: Law and Legal Detail in the *Íslendingasögur*," *Parergon* 26, no. 1 (2009): 47.

of Norway, pursues greatness through the attempted conquering of other nations throughout his life. Bolli is not trying to subjugate the northern district, but he does become its champion of sorts, asserting a level of dominance that does not threaten the goði in power, but, within the boundaries of the Icelandic societal structure, goes above and beyond the normal call of duty for someone in his position.

Following the death of Þórólfr, the matter seems to have been conclusively settled, and Bolli begins his journey home. But the story is far from a peaceful ending. Although the situation has been legally resolved, Bolli's actions have ruffled feathers in the north, and the latent hostility has yet to be addressed. The spark that reignites the action is an unfortunate encounter with the stingy farmer Helgi. When the travelers stop to feed their horses at a haystack outside Helgi's small farm, Bolli advises them to take as little hay as possible. The farmer's wife Sigríðr, noticing the intrusion, tells her husband to let it slide, as "þeir einir munu þar menn vera, at þat mun ráð, at spara eigi hey við" [the only ones who would do that are men on whom one shouldn't spare the hay].[20] Helgi, dismissing her prophetic words, runs out to challenge them. Bolli offers Helgi money to cover the hay, but the only thing the farmer wants is Bolli's spear King's Gift, a request that is summarily refused. Helgi ultimately charges Bolli as a thief and, upon learning he has been traveling, a vagrant. Bolli retaliates by charging Helgi with slander and treachery, but the comedy takes a more serious turn when he is soon asked by Sigríðr's kinsman Þorsteinn to drop all charges and let the matter slide. Although Bolli acknowledges the lack of meaning in pursuing a lawsuit – "Þat er víst, at þetta er engis vert; mun ek mér ok ekki um þetta gefa" [It's true enough that this is nothing of worth. Nor do I intend to let it upset me] – he refuses to let Helgi off the hook, even when Þorsteinn offers a gift of twelve magnificent horses and his continued friendship.[21] This snub only fans the flames, setting the stage for a violent clash.

Daniela Hahn has pointed out that this sequence between Bolli and Helgi closely follows proceedings laid out in §227 of *Grágás* (*Konungsbók*), a section dealing with prosecution for theft.[22] Helgi's use of the term *þjófnaðr* "theft" when describing Bolli's action redefines the transgression of his accusation. The implications of *þjófnaðr* is defined in a legal passage stipulating that the assumed cost of the stolen item must meet a minimum requirement of half an ounce-unit for outlawry to be on the table. Clearly, the hay does not meet these requirements. Following *Grágás*, Helgi's subsequent charge for *skóggangssǫk* "case of outlawry" is met with Bolli's counter-charge of *illmæli* "slander," and it is at this point in the episode that the role of social rank takes the wheel.

Hahn has observed that Helgi, a lower class farmer, relies on his wife of higher birth to attempt reconciliation with the even higher ranked Bolli once he realizes he has challenged a man far more powerful and educated in the law than himself. Sigríðr has already shown herself to be more worldly than her husband through her wise observation that Bolli should be allowed to take the hay in the first place. Helgi's dismissal of her comment proves him to be the more socially ignorant of the two, a trait supported by his subsequent mistreatment of Bolli. The farmer's desperate request to his wife to right his wrongs confirms his position at the bottom of the ladder, and further emphasizes his distance from the confident and unmovable Bolli within

[20] *ÍF* V, 239; Kunz, "Bolli's Tale," 125.
[21] *ÍF* V, 242; Kunz, "Bolli's Tale," 127.
[22] Hahn, "Social and Diegetic Hierarchies," 194-95.

the social structure. Through her role in this sequence, Sigríðr also carries on the legacy of impressive women forged in *Laxdœla saga*, and her prudent bearing and laudable actions throughout this incident earn the respect of Bolli, who rewards her at the end of the þáttr by taking her back to Laxárdalr and generously providing for her.

Although Sigríðr attempts to smooth things over, things continue to go from bad to worse. Hahn has noted that "although Bolli was still willing to compensate generously at the moment of the accusation, the charge of theft obviously represents such a strong offense that even Þorsteinn, with whom Bolli is on friendly terms, cannot appease him."[23] Bolli is well within his rights not to acquiesce to these overtures from a legal perspective, because he understands the implicit consequences of Helgi's terminology, even as the farmer himself, a poor man with limited understanding of the law, does not. Much as the þáttr has already sided with Sigríðr over Helgi, so too does the narrative throw its weight behind Bolli, emphasizing his measured response versus the unhinged and ridiculous speech of the farmer. In this sense, the scene is arguably didactic, illustrating why one should never throw around legalese if one does not thoroughly understand its nuances, which in turn is a luxury generally afforded only to the upper classes. The tale's distinction of Bolli as a powerful man is thus put to the test, and he passes with flying colors – not only because he has command over a higher level of knowledge than the farmer, but also because of his conduct, which is fair and just throughout. Bolli is not only upper class in name, but in nature as well.

Despite his by-the-book approach to the issue, however, Bolli does reveal a personal stake in the matter: the spear's inclusion in Helgi's demands contributes to his anger toward the farmer by his own admission. This *konungsnautr* "King's Gift" is not a trophy from Byzantium – the description of Bolli's homecoming mentions the now-gilded sword Leg-biter and an un-named *glaðel*. Instead, the weapon appears to be a family heirloom from Óláfr pái, who was gifted a *spjót gullrekit* "gold-inlaid spear" by King Mýrkjartan upon his departure from Ireland, and which he later uses to kill the undead Hrappr: "Óláfr tekr í hǫnd sér spjótit gullrekna, konungsnaut" [Óláfr took into his hands the gold-inlaid spear, King's Gift].[24] Helgi's offense in demanding the spear is threefold. First, it is a valuable item in both material and legacy, and unworthy of being traded for hay. Second, it is Bolli's primary weapon at the time of their encounter, a key possession in a hostile land as well as a symbol of his high status. Third, and most importantly, it is already destined to be gifted to someone else. Bolli has earmarked King's Gift for his ally Guðmundr inn ríki Eyjólfsson, along with an arm-ring given to Bolli by the Byzantine emperor. The story of Helgi accompanies the gift-giving process when the two men finally meet:

> en þat hugða ek, þá er Helgi fólit lét sem heimskligast ok mælti hvert óorðan at ǫðru við oss ok vildi hafa spjótit konungsnaut ór hendi mér fyrir einn heyvǫndul, at ek skylda freista, at hann fengi ǫmbun orða sinna; hefi ek ok annat ætlat fyrir spjótinu, at ek mynda heldr gefa þér ok þar með gullhringinn, þann er stólkonungrinn gaf mér; hygg ek nú, at gripirnir sé betr niðr komnir en þá, at Helgi hefði þá.
>
> While that fool Helgi was carrying on so stupidly, speaking one libellous charge after another, and hoping to take my spear King's Gift off me for a mere tuft of hay, I thought to myself that I would see to it that he got what he deserved for those words. I have other plans for my spear and intend to give it

[23] Hahn, "Social and Diegetic Hierarchies," 195.
[24] *ÍF* V, 59, 69.

> to you, along with the gold arm ring that the emperor gave me. I feel that the treasures are better off in your hands than in Helgi's clutches.[25]

The spear's past, as an important family heirloom, and future, as an intended gift to someone of high status and mutual respect, therefore boosts the importance of the object, and Helgi's demand of the object in exchange for hay is an insult that threatens to cheapen both the weapon and the gift.

The undervaluing of the spear is also an undervaluing of Bolli himself, an impressive figure in the Icelandic landscape despite being unrecognized by the farmer. The restoration of the spear's importance is thus implicitly connected to the restoration of Bolli's own image, and is necessary to prevent the snowballing of mistreatment and underappreciation. As a goði and a member of a prominent family, Bolli cannot afford to be slandered, even in another district. Accordingly, his highly legal approach in dealing with such a fool may be partly informed by a desire to make an example out of Helgi, setting a precedent regarding Bolli's treatment and where he stands in society. But to what extent does this "keeping face" reflect his duty to his goðorð versus his personal sense of self-worth? It is impossible to disentangle them within the parameters of the narrative, as there is no direct discourse offered by the tale itself. However, it becomes clear throughout the þáttr that Bolli holds himself in high esteem, values his public image, and demonstrates exceptional wisdom and charismatic leadership – once again, qualities he shares with Haraldr Sigurðarson.

Bolli's refusal to make amends soon triggers a small battle, during which he kills Helgi with, poetically, a spear, although not King's Gift, which has already been handed over to Guðmundr. The tale's coda once again emphasizes the aura of greatness surrounding Bolli. His friend Arnórr observes:

> Mikla heill hefir þú til borit um ferð þessa, við slíkan mann sem þú áttir, þar er Þorsteinn var; er þat sannast um at tala, at fáir eða engir hǫfðingjar munu sótt hafa meira frama ór ǫðrum heruðum norðr hingat en þú, þeir sem jafnmarga ǫfundarmen áttu hér fyrir.
>
> You have been very lucky in this journey, and in your dealings with a man like Thorstein. It can be truly said that few if any chieftains from other districts will have gained more honour here in the north, especially considering how many men bore grudges against you beforehand.[26]

The praise of Arnórr, a powerful ally and witness to the action of the tale from the start, neatly sums up the narrative's message about Bolli. His deeds are framed from two angles – not only did Bolli beat extreme odds due to the number of his enemies, but he also pulled off a victory that few others, even his fellow *hǫfðingjar,* could have accomplished. Arnórr further notes that Bolli possesses *mikla heill* "great luck," a factor that was, as Bettina Sejbjerg Sommer has argued, "a requisite part of an ideal personality," and which further affirms his characterization as a man of truly heroic standing.[27]

Bolli's victory lap continues in the final lines of the þáttr: "Sitr Bolli nú í búi sínu með mikilli virðingu. Þessi ferð Bolla var gǫr at nýjum sǫgum um allar sveitir, ok tǫluðu allir einn veg um, at slík þótti varla farin hafa verit náliga; óx virðing hans af slíku ok mǫrgu ǫðru" [Bolli now lived quietly on his farm and enjoyed great respect. This journey of Bolli's became the subject of new

[25] *ÍF* V, 243; Kunz, "Bolli's Tale," 128.
[26] *ÍF* V, 248; Kunz, "Bolli's Tale," 130.
[27] Bettina Sejbjerg Sommer, "The Norse Concept of Luck," *Scandinavian Studies* 79, no. 3 (2007): 276.

stories in all districts. Everyone felt that hardly any journey had been made to equal it. He gained in respect from this and many other things].[28] One of these *sǫgur* appears to be the þáttr itself, verifying its own contents through the implied fame and popularity of its protagonist's deeds. The writer's favorable opinion of Bolli inn prúði is clear, as is the appeal of such an immense character to the people of medieval Iceland.

Like Haraldr, Bolli's Varangian identity is a critical piece of his development, but forms only one part of a larger whole. At the end of the day, Bolli is an Icelandic hero first, and a Varangian second. His Byzantine career is leveraged by *Laxdœla saga* to support and strengthen an already outstanding character, one who captivated audiences so much that a sequel was finally added in the form of *Bolla þáttr*. This tale, in furthering his legend through additional deeds, also expands his character, revealing new qualities that only age and experience can bring. After a youth filled with violence and bloodshed, Bolli has returned home and transitioned into a new phase of life, one that requires wisdom, learning, and moderation. He excels in all these virtues, demonstrating the great value of a Varangian who successfully reintegrates into society, leading by example in both the vanguard and the longhouse.

Bolli's voyage to Byzantium is referenced in one more narrative, this time from the kings' sagas. At the end of *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*, Haraldr Sigurðarson receives sad news from across the Atlantic:

> Haraldr spurði lát tveggja hirðmanna sinna af Íslandi, Bolla ins prúða ok Sneglu-Halla. Hann svaraði svá til Bolla: "Fyrir dǫrrum mun drengrinn hnigit hafa." En til Halla sagði hann svá: "Á grauti myndi greyit sprungit hafa."
>
> Harald learned of the deaths of two of his men from Iceland, Bolli the Elegant and Sarcastic Halli. He said of Bolli, "The warrior must have fallen victim to spears." But of Halli he said, "The poor devil must have burst eating porridge."[29]

An older and shorter version of the þáttr is preserved in *Morkinskinna*, but the line about Bolli exists only in the tale's larger and more famous variant from *Flateyjarbók*. This is the sole mention of Bolli having served Haraldr, and its later inclusion into Halli's narrative offers a couple points of discourse. The alliteration in these lines appears to be a key impetus in its inclusion, wrapping up a þáttr about Haraldr's skalds with a taste of poetic composition from the king himself. But from an historical perspective, it is impossible for Bolli to have been Haraldr's *hirðmaðr* in any capacity. He serves Óláfr Haraldsson while in Norway according to *Laxdœla saga*, predating Haraldr's reign, although the young prince could have been around the court at the time. Bolli departs for Byzantium and returns just before Snorri goði's death, one year after the death of Óláfr. Estimates place Haraldr in Byzantium about two years after his flight from Norway, making any overlap between the two in the Varangian Guard unlikely, and Bolli spent the rest of his life in Iceland without serving another Norwegian king.[30]

The one basis for Haraldr to claim a connection with Bolli is their possible interaction during the Icelander's initial visit to Norway, but the link between them is almost certainly a later

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[28] *ÍF* V, 248; Kunz, "Bolli's Tale," 130.

[29] Jónas Kristjánsson, ed., "Sneglu-Halla Þáttr," in *Eyfirðinga Sǫgur*, Íslenzk Fornrit IX (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1967), 295; George Clark, trans., "The Tale of Sarcastic Halli," in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* I, edited by Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavik: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), 357.

[30] For a discussion on the date of Haraldr's arrival in Constantinople, see Jonathan Shepard, "A Note on Harold Hardraada: The Date of His Arrival at Byzantium," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 22 (1973).

fabrication motivated by author and narrative. This explanation is encouraged by the lack of any direct mention of Haraldr in other Bolli narratives, despite the familiarity with the image of Haraldr the Varangian displayed in *Laxdœla saga*'s homecoming scene. Within the context of *Flateyjarbók*, the impulse to directly link the two figures may emerge from the Icelandic author's desire to connect one of the text's main characters, Haraldr, and a famous Icelander for the sake of local interests – his own, the audience's, or both. The fact that this connection is made in a þáttr, a form of narrative predominantly about Icelanders, makes the reference to Bolli all the more natural: we as the audience are already thinking about Iceland due to Halli and his shenanigans, so the mention of an additional hometown hero is the cherry on the sundae.

The text also assumes prior acquaintance with Bolli through its use of his nickname *inn prúði* as his only introduction. Bolli is employed as a known quantity to *Flateyjarbók*'s anticipated audience, and the humor of Haraldr's comments is dependent on this knowledge in comparing the deaths of the two men. They died as they lived: a staunch and adventurous warrior, and an against-the-grain jokester skald. In a way, the characterizations of these two men as part of Haraldr's retinue reflect on the king himself – the diversity of his companions tap into the diversity of his character, because he too shares these contradictory yet strangely compatible facets, coexisting to form a delightfully fascinating character with immense literary staying power. As a part of this composition, then, and in a strange turn of events, Bolli has finally graduated from his early years as a mimic of Haraldr to being his direct associate – not only his follower, but someone who is remembered with reverence and admiration by the original Varangian himself.

Gríss Sæmingsson

Hallfreðar saga is one of the skald sagas, a small branch of the corpus that centers around four main texts – *Kormáks saga*, *Hallfreðar saga*, *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*, and *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* – and several close relatives.[31] These narratives share a similar story structure: the poet becomes entangled in a love triangle with the woman he adores and her mundane husband; he goes abroad to serve a foreign king; and he returns to Iceland to resume his romance until his often untimely death. *Kormáks saga*, *Bjarnar saga*, and *Gunnlaugs saga* focus primarily on their romantic tragedies, with many of their poetic verses devoted to themes of love and loss. *Hallfreðar saga*, however, is more interested in the skald's time abroad in service to King Óláfr Tryggvason and his subsequent struggle to convert to Christianity. Hallfreðr's poetry about his love for Kolfinna Ávaldadóttir is less dramatic than the romantic verses of his fellows, and he prefers to compliment the object of his affection and insult her husband rather than dwell on the fact that they cannot be together as man and wife.

The minor role of Kolfinna's ridiculed spouse finds a surprising foothold in the Varangian tradition – Gríss Sæmingsson is a retired mercenary living peacefully on his farm when he is recruited as Hallfreðr's reluctant rival. He is recommended as a suitor to Kolfinna's father Ávaldi, who seeks to halt Hallfreðr's aggressive advances toward his daughter by marrying her off. Gríss is noted to be "auðigr maðr ok vinsæll" [a wealthy and popular man], and the saga is quick to highlight his illustrious background: "hafði hann verit út í Miklagarð ok fengit þar

[31] *Hallfreðar saga* survives in two versions: a standalone saga in *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol., c. 1330-70) and one preserved in sections throughout *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (AM 61 fol., c. 1400, and variants).

miklar sœmðir" [he had travelled abroad as far as Constantinople and won great honour there].[32] He is not called a Varangian in the text, perhaps indicating, as Sverrir Jakobsson has posited, that the term had not yet come into wide use in Iceland at the time of the saga's composition, generally dated to the early thirteenth century.[33]

Little is known about Gríss outside the context of the saga, but he does have a brief presence in other sources in connection with Hallfreðr. *Landnámabók* mentions him alongside Eyvindr sørkvir and his family:

> Annarr son Eyvindar var Hermundr, faðir Hildar, er átti Ávaldi Ingjaldsson. Þeira bǫrn váru þau Kolfinna, er átti Gríss Sæmingsson, ok Brandr, er vá Galta Óttarsson á Húnavatsþingi fyrir níð Hallfreðar.
>
> Another of Eyvindr's sons was Hermundr, father of Hildr, who married Ávaldi Ingjaldsson. Their children were Kolfinna, who married Gríss Sæmingsson, and Brandr, who slew Galti Óttarsson at the Húnavatsþing because of Hallfreðr's slander.[34]

Gríss also appears in *Vatnsdœla saga*: "Opt kom Hallfreðr til Skegg-Ávalda ok talaði við dóttur hans, er Kolfinna hét. Þeirar konu fekk Gríss Sæmingsson, en þó lék it sama orð á með þeim Hallfreði, sem segir í sǫgu hans" [Hallfred often visited Beard-Ávaldi's homestead and talked with his daughter who was named Kolfinna. Gris Saemingsson married this woman but there were rumours about her and Hallfred, as is told in his saga].[35] Neither text references Gríss's time abroad in Byzantium, but these passages focus on other characters, and are mostly concerned with the killing of Hallfreðr's brother Galti at the Húnavatnsþing, an incident which, according to *Hallfreðar saga*, was triggered by the skald's verses about Gríss. The *Landnámabók* segment in particular seems to confirm that a man named Gríss Sæmingsson married Ávaldi's daughter Kolfinna, but the bulk of what we know of him comes from *Hallfreðar saga*, which paints him more as an archetype, the poet's romantic rival, than an historical figure.

Given the gap in time between his life and the composition of the saga, and how little information is preserved about him in *Landnámabók*, it is perhaps no surprise that the saga writer saw an opportunity to embellish the truth to fit his new narrative, and it is possible that the original Gríss was not a Varangian at all. If Gríss had served in the Byzantine army, he would have done so some decades earlier than Bolli Bollason, who in turn predated Haraldr by several years.[36] Sigfús Blöndal has estimated the timing of Gríss's wedding to Kolfinna as either 970 or 986, and given that he had returned to Iceland some time before they met, both dates would place him in Byzantium well before the founding of the Varangian Guard in 988.[37] It is likely that Norse mercenaries served in the Empire before the formal establishment of the unit, but his

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[32] Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., "Hallfreðar saga," in *Vatnsdœla saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit VIII (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1939), 144; Diana Whaley, trans., "The Saga of Hallfred the Troublesome Poet," in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* I, edited by Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavik: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), 229.
[33] Sverrir Jakobsson, *Varangians*, 127.
[34] *ÍF* I, 224.
[35] *ÍF* VIII, 122-23; Andrew Wawn, trans., "The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal," in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* IV, edited by Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavik: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), 62.
[36] *Heiðarvíga saga*'s Gestr Þórhallason also predates Bolli as a Varangian according to its chronology, so there was some variation as to the identity of the first Norseman serving the Byzantine emperor. Scheel, *Skandinavien und Byzanz*, 746; Sverrir Jakobsson, *Varangians*, 127.
[37] Sigfús Blöndal, *The Varangians of Byzantium*. *An Aspect of Byzantine Military History*, ed. Benedikt S. Benedikz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 194.

presence there would have been unusual and perhaps worth mentioning in the corpus, given *Laxdœla saga*'s apparent interest in identifying the first Icelandic Varangian in Bolli Bollason. At the same time, the family sagas omit Halldórr's connection to Byzantium because it is not relevant to the narratives in which he is mentioned, indicating that no matter how impressive the Varangians are, their identity is only brought up when pertinent to the plot. This pattern creates a strange inverse between Halldórr and Gríss, wherein the former was an historical Varangian but is not identified as such when it is irrelevant to the narrative, while the latter may not have been a Varangian but is granted the title because such a background is necessary for the ensuing story.

Whether or not Gríss actually was a mercenary in Byzantium, he certainly takes on that mantle within the context of *Hallfreðar saga*. Following the topos established by others before him, one of the primary markers of his foreign travels are his weapons. His first appearance is marked by his ownership of a "gullrekit spjót" [gold-inlaid spear], echoing the gilded weapon motif attached to other saga Varangians.[38] A later version of the saga also grants him "sverðit þat, er Garðskonungr hafði gefit honum" [the sword which the Byzantine king had given him].[39] Weapons gifted by foreign kings are of course not limited to Byzantium, but their repeated association with these mercenaries allows the objects to operate as short-hand for wealth, status, and martial prowess with no clarification needed as to their meaning.[40]

But Gríss is not the automatic hero his status might afford him in other contexts. Although he is introduced as popular and well-liked, his primary role in the saga is to be the butt of jokes and the outsized villain of Hallfreðr's imagination. His name, "pig," is demeaning, and he does not cut the most impressive figure in the saga landscape – politically, he is often accompanied by his more powerful allies; physically, he described as "heldr óskyggn ok súreygr" [rather dim-sighted and blear-eyed].[41] Jenny Jochens has suggested that Gríss is of advanced age on account of his ocular shortcomings and his wealth, and although a voyage to Byzantium would have expedited his prosperity, it seems reasonable to read him as an older character, especially compared to Hallfreðr and Kolfinna.[42] The biggest indicator of his maturity are the close parallels between his life trajectory and that of Hallfreðr. Their paths are very similar, but Gríss is further along – while the skald is looking forward to travels abroad in service of foreign kings, Gríss has already done so and is now settled back in Iceland. Despite his heroic shortcomings, however, Gríss possesses the one weapon against which Hallfreðr's ill-conceived schemes consistently fail: his priority is peace, and his propensity to forgive ultimately casts him in a positive light that culminates in an extraordinary act of kindness toward his rival that makes his Varangian experience socially relevant in a most unusual manner.

The initial encounter between Hallfreðr and Gríss takes place at Kolfinna's home, where she and Hallfreðr caress each other in front of her family and guests. Insults fly and a chase ensues, resulting in the poet's capture. Hallfreðr's father Óttarr arrives to resolve the issue, and Gríss,

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[38] *ÍF* VIII, 144, 145; Whaley, "Hallfred," 229.
[39] *ÍF* VIII, 191.
[40] Gríss's possession of weapons he could only have attained abroad may indicate that he did in fact travel abroad, but not necessarily to Byzantium.
[41] *Gríss* is a very rare name in the sagas. Although employed as a nickname for several characters throughout the corpus, the proper name is shared with only one other man, Koll-Gríss of *Heiðarvíga saga*. *ÍF* VIII, 145; Whaley, "Hallfred," 230.
[42] Jenny Jochens, "Representations of Skalds in the Sagas 2: Gender Relations," in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. Russell Poole (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001), 317.

though the object of sharp words, immediately acquiesces to a request for self-judgment: "at því sættusk þeir ok skilðu við svá búit" [they made peace and parted, leaving things at that].[43] As a target of, but not a participant in, the earlier insults, Gríss is aware of the threat Hallfreðr poses to him by setting himself up as a personal rival. However, rather than getting caught up in the moment like the others, Gríss demonstrates, for the first of many times, his ability to see the big picture, commenting that Hallfreðr's actions come from arrogance and declaring the fight over with the arrival of a larger contingent of men in support of the poet. Mindful that his problems with the skald will continue, Gríss is circumspect enough to see that the cost of pursuing him now outweighs the benefits of backing off, and he is the only member of his party who pulls the reins to smooth things over. Although the settlement is decided in Hallfreðr's favor, Gríss ultimately comes out well from this encounter, reacting when socially required but keeping control of his emotions and responding in a reserved and appropriate manner in order to keep the peace. Above all, this first encounter between the two men reveals Gríss to be the opposite of Hallfreðr, who is a hopeless slave to his sentiments and rarely, if ever, thinks ahead, acting on impulse with little regard for consequences.

The settlement between Gríss and Hallfreðr is decided at one hundred silver in the poet's favor. Hallfreðr refuses to accept the payment, stating "svá segir mér hugr um, at vár vandræði verði lǫng" [I have a feeling that the trouble between him and myself will last a long time], a turn of phrase that perhaps anticipates his soon-to-be nickname *vandræðaskáld*.[44] Gríss soon marries Kolfinna, although the saga states that she has little love for him – this may be due to his older age, but more likely because, like most saga marriages, it is a political one. But the rivalry between the two men is put on hold when Hallfreðr goes abroad, a section that makes up the major portion of the saga, and focuses on his relationship with King Óláfr, his evolution as a skald, and his struggle to convert permanently to Christianity. After some years abroad, and many adventures later, Hallfreðr returns to Iceland – and picks up right where he left off.

The poet's first stop is the shieling where Kolfinna is watching sheep. Their association is rekindled, though whether Kolfinna is a willing participant is unclear. After their night together, however, Hallfreðr begins to antagonize her by composing insulting verses about Gríss. These stanzas cast Gríss as a shambling and repugnant figure, a backwards farmer dripping with sweat and crawling ungracefully into the marriage bed. Hallfreðr is not subtle in his disparaging language, employing direct similes, unusual for skaldic poetry, to cast Kolfinna as a swan and Gríss as an unattractive fulmar.[45] Although she is not overly fond of her husband, Kolfinna is concerned about Hallfreðr's boldness, especially when he attributes the poems to her, and she refuses his offered gift of the cloak King's Gift. It is not long before Gríss finds out that something is amiss at the shielings, and he soon deduces what the poet has done.

Another chase begins, but once again, Gríss is not as aggressive as one might expect given the situation and his former career as a Varangian mercenary. He throws a single spear at Hallfreðr, but the poet catches it and throws it back, killing Gríss's companion Einarr. Gríss subsequently orders his men to pursue him, but does not do so himself. When tempers cool and both sides begin talking, Hallfreðr is advised to compensate Gríss and refuses. This situation has evolved from the previous one: while the original settlement was arranged by the poet's father,

[43] *ÍF* VIII, 148-49; Whaley, "Hallfred," 231.
[44] *ÍF* VIII, 150; Whaley, "Hallfred," 232.
[45] Diana Whaley, *Sagas of Warrior-Poets* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 278 n. 36.

Gríss was found at fault and paid his dues, while Hallfreðr refused to accept the sum. Now Hallfreðr is declared the one at fault, but there is no formal arbitration. Gríss requests Hallfreðr's two arm rings, but he is summarily denied. One of these rings was gifted to the skald by King Óláfr, who instructed him to be buried with it; in this case, Hallfreðr is somewhat justified in refusing payment, but the chances of Gríss knowing the reason are slim.

The lack of a more powerful figure, or at least a figure whom Hallfreðr respects, to negotiate a settlement over the death of Einarr and the insults to Gríss results in an unresolved conflict in which the poet delights. His ultimate goal in his dealings with Gríss has always been a duel to the death. The Varangian, however, has now conclusively demonstrated that he prefers to settle disagreements, and through inaction has repeatedly proven his unwillingness to rise to Hallfreðr's attempts to antagonize him unless socially necessary – and even then, his responses are not particularly assertive. If he pursues the poet at all, Gríss captures him and releases him immediately, or throws one spear. Others, like Gríss's friend Már, go after Hallfreðr on their own, but apparently not at the Varangian's request; rather, they are independent agents of a friend in need or are themselves the target of Hallfreðr's sharp tongue. Their lack of success in wrangling the poet plays into the narrative model of Hallfreðr as protagonist – he is the primary source of entertainment for the audience, and his outrageous antics and complete defiance of social mores drive the action of the saga. Like other similarly iconoclastic saga characters, Hallfreðr would be a nightmare to deal with in the real world, but provides the necessary fuel for a good story.[46]

One explanation for Gríss's watered down responses may be the fact that he is not the only antagonist in the saga. Torfi Tulinius has pointed out that "the real conflict is not between Gríss and Hallfreðr but between the families of Óttarr and Ávaldi, where one will not recognize the social preeminence of the other."[47] This model explains the slaying of Galti at the Húnavatnsþing: it is not Gríss, the target of Hallfreðr's insulting verses, who wields the sword, but one of Kolfinna's brothers, either Brandr or Hermundr depending on the version of the saga. The offenses committed against Gríss are unpleasant, but the involvement of Kolfinna pushes the issue into the purview of Ávaldi's family, who take necessary actions to quash the poet's words and deeds. Another figure who shares the burden of Hallfreðr's discontent is Már, friend of Ávaldi and Gríss; his personal involvement seems to stem from his role in organizing the marriage between Kolfinna and Gríss. So the Varangian is not *the* enemy, but one of several against whom the poet rails, and his character is less of a presence on the page because he shares this limelight.

Even with this lesser position, Gríss is still a reluctant adversary, and Hallfreðr is the one who must carry the "feud," a task which he savors. But even his worst insults fail to provoke Gríss into more than a cursory response. It is possible that Gríss is simply slow, and operates as a foil against the clever Hallfreðr, who runs circles around him to the amusement of the audience. But although he is not quick to action, he is not stupid in his dealings with Hallfreðr – rather, he has different priorities. The one-sided nature of the conflict emphasizes Gríss's disinterest in

[46] The model of repeated escapades echoes the romances, as does the love triangle between a beautiful woman, her dull husband, and a young hot-blooded man; now, however, the Varangian is on the receiving end of the romantic adventure.

[47] Torfi H. Tulinius, "The Prosimetrum Form 2: Verses as an Influence in Saga Composition and Interpretation," in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. Russell Poole (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001), 204.

engaging with the skald unless he absolutely has to, and because his character is specifically designed for this narrative, there may be a deeper reason why he is so unresponsive. Despite his near-sightedness and demeaning name, the saga does not mention his intelligence nor his fighting prowess, nor do we see these features fully in action. But we do know that he is a former Varangian – and only the best of the best can achieve that title.

Again, the fact that Hallfreðr seems to repeatedly make a fool of him might reflect on the poet himself, that he is so clever that he can make even a Varangian look like an idiot. However, it is also possible that Gríss deliberately refrains from action. As a veteran of the Guard, he has lived the high life on the other side of the world, seen and done things unimaginable to the everyday Icelander, and has had much bigger fish to fry during his lifetime than even the adventurous Hallfreðr. On the scale of adversaries Gríss has faced, Hallfreðr must be a small fry, and it may be that, given his life experience, the Varangian sees no point in engaging with such a pest. He responds only to the poet's most egregious offenses, actions for which the Icelandic social structure would demand action: caressing his future bride in public, spending the night with her in the shieling, killing a man. But he lets the lesser offenses slide, and is not terribly invested in pursuing even the large matters to any conclusion other than peace. In other words, he maintains a social status quo, reacting only when necessary to keep himself in the black, but never going so far as to stand out among his peers.

The exception to this approach is the sequence at the Húnavatnsþing. But before broaching this critical scene, it is worth noting that the *Vatnsdœla saga* summary of these events offers a different take on Gríss's reaction to Hallfreðr's visit to Kolfinna at the shieling and the subsequent fallout:

> Ok eitt sinn, er hann kom út, því at hann var farmaðr, en Gríss var á þingi, þá kom Hallfreðr þar, sem Kolfinna var í seli, ok lá þar hjá henni, Ok er [Gríss] vissi þetta, líkar honum stórilla, en Hallfreðr fór útan þegar samsumars.
>
> Once, when he came to Iceland – he was then a seaman – and Gris was at the assembly, Hallfred made his way to where Kolfinna was in a shieling, and slept with her there. And when Gris found out about this, he was extremely angry, and at once Hallfred went abroad that same summer.[48]

Although brief, the passage implies that Hallfreðr fled Iceland due to Gríss's rage at the incident. *Hallfreðar saga* does not tell the same story: the poet does travel abroad again, but not until much later and on his own terms, after he and Gríss finally bury the hatchet at the assembly. Whether *Vatnsdœla saga* is drawing on historical events or an earlier version of the saga, the change suggests the degree to which *Hallfreðar saga* is expanding upon an existing story, taking points of common knowledge – here the episode at the shieling and the killing of Galti – and crafting additional plot points in between to create a different kind of narrative experience. This shift is also visible in the readjustment of the assembly scene's climax, as both *Landnámabók* and *Vatnsdœla saga* highlight the killing of Galti as the major point of action, while *Hallfreðar saga* favors the news of King Óláfr's death.

The dealings at the Húnavatnsþing are precipitated by more unflattering verses, unrecorded in the saga, by Hallfreðr about Gríss. The Varangian goes to his goði Húnrøðr for advice, again not taking immediate action but asking those more in tune with the social and political landscape about the proper route forward. Following Húnrøðr's recommendation, Gríss summons Hallfreðr

[48] *ÍF* VIII, 122-23; Wawn, "Vatnsdal," 62.

to the assembly over the killing of Einarr – not the many slanderous verses. The version of *Hallfreðar saga* in *Óláfs saga* mentions that Einarr is Gríss's cousin, adding extra incentive to pursue legal action against the skald. But it is significant that although the verses are a source of concern for the Varangian – "því at Hallfreðr herðir at eins fjándskap við mik" [because Hallfreðr pushes solely for enmity with me] – the lawsuit is about the killing, an event that was a product of the hostility between the two men, not its origin.[49] Hallfreðr and his brother Galti visit a friend to ask for arbitration in the case brought against the poet by Gríss concerning the death of Einarr in the previous chapter, and Kolfinna's brother ambushes Galti as he emerges from the booth. Hallfreðr and his allies immediately confront Gríss to give up the killer, who has already made a getaway disguised in women's clothes. Unable to avenge his brother, Hallfreðr settles for a duel with Gríss. At this point the saga makes the seemingly non-sequitur remark that Gríss is bearing a sword gifted to him by the Byzantine emperor, perhaps to remind us of his Varangian identity that is about to become highly relevant.

The duel is scheduled for the following day, but that night, Hallfreðr receives a dream visitation from King Óláfr, who advises him:

> þú ætlask ógott ráð fyrir at berjask við Grís við ill málaefni, en hann hefir svá fyrir mælt ok beðit guð, at sá ykkar skyldi sigr fá, er betri málaefni hefði. Haf ráð mitt, tak með þǫkkum, at engi hólmganga verði, ok bœt fé. En á morgin, er þú ert klæddr, gakk út á holt þat, er hjá þingstaðnum er, þar sem gǫtur mœtask; menn muntu sjá ríða, ok haf við þá tal, ok kann vera, at þér þykki þá annat meira vert en hólmganga Gríss, ok hirð eigi, þótt honum þykki sem þú hræðisk.
>
> you are set on a wrongful course in fighting Gris in such a bad cause, and he has prayed, asking God that whichever of you has the better cause should have the victory. Take my advice – accept with thanks that there should be no duel, and pay compensation. And in the morning when you are dressed, go out to the hillock beside the assembly-place, where the tracks meet. You will see some men riding. Get into conversation with them, and it may be that after that you will feel there is something more important than a duel with Gris, and don't pay any heed even if he thinks you are afraid.[50]

Óláfr's dream appearance revives a guiding presence in Hallfreðr's life on the eve of a major turning point in his life. The skald is almost impossible to control, and the only people who have ever managed to rein him in are his natural father Óttarr and spiritual father King Óláfr, both of whom are now dead. The return of the latter to provide advice and commentary not only stabilizes Hallfreðr's ensuing actions, as we know by now that the skald will do his best to heed the king's words, but also allows the saga writer to reintegrate Christian themes from the narrative's mainland sequence.

Although the king's focus is on Hallfreðr, he notes that Gríss is a devout Christian, new information that has not yet been featured in the saga. The Varangian's prayers to God on the eve of the duel, that the man with a stronger cause should emerge victorious, indicates a level of humility that we have come to expect of his character. He does not directly wish himself to win, but he leaves it up to God to decide the outcome. More pressingly, the revelation of Gríss's piety appears in sharp contrast to Hallfreðr's own troubled Christian path, and operates as an implicit component of Óláfr's address – another reminder of the skald's repeated failure to fully convert, a weakness that his opponent does not share. The king's rationale for Hallfreðr to withdraw from

[49] *ÍF* VIII, 188.
[50] *ÍF* VIII, 192; Whaley, "Hallfred," 249.

the duel stems from the fact that Gríss has prayed for the best cause to win, indicating that the poet's cause is the weaker of the two. In clarifying the rationale behind the prediction of victory, Óláfr encourages Hallfreðr once more to put his faith in the Christian God. The connection between divine providence and the king strengthens his words of advice – as John Lindow has noted, in this case "to go against God is to go against Óláfr Tryggvason."[51]

Beholden to his liege lord, Hallfreðr follows his advice, and upon meeting the men at the crossroads, is informed of Óláfr's death. His reaction of grief is palpable: "Hallfreðr varð svá við sem hann væri steini lostinn ok gekk þegar heim til búðar með miklum harmi ok lagðisk þegar niðr í rúm sitt" [Hallfred started as though he had been hit by a stone, and at once walked back to his booth in great sorrow, and lay straight down on his bed].[52] His emotional state and absence at the duel are noted by his fellows, and they immediately mock him, calling him a coward. At this point, however, Gríss steps in and, despite their long history of hostility, makes a case for Hallfreðr's pain:

> Þat er ekki á þá leið; minna sóma hafða ek af Garðskonungi, ok þóttu mér þau mest tíðendi, er ek missta hǫfðingja míns; er heit lánardrottins ást, ok er gott, er ek skal eigi berjask við konungsgiptuna; vil ek enn, at Þorkell dœmi, sem ætlat var.
>
> It is not that way at all. I had less honour from the emperor of Byzantium, yet it struck me as the greatest news when I lost my sovereign. Love for a liege lord burns hot; and it is well that I will not be fighting against the king's luck. I still want Thorkel to arbitrate, as was the plan.[53]

Gríss's role in clarifying Hallfreðr's position operates on two levels. The first is the role of Christianity in this sequence. Conversion has been a struggle for the poet throughout the portion of the saga set in Norway and Sweden, but Óláfr's dream reawakens the topic back in Iceland. Hallfreðr may have wormed his way around the conversion while abroad, but has not addressed it upon his return home. Óláfr's reminder that Christianity is not a temporary faith but a lifelong commitment comes together with his acknowledgement of the devout Gríss, who leaves the results of the duel in God's hands rather than his own. If the motif of Christianity is maintained through the Varangian's defense of Hallfreðr, his short speech may be read as an example of turning the other cheek, or, at the very least, a more selfless approach to problem-solving. This attitude suits Gríss, who has focused on resolving troubles throughout the saga; but his faith, now openly referenced by Óláfr, may explain his moderate nature to some degree, and further demarcates the characterizations of Gríss and Hallfreðr as opposites. From a narrative perspective, too, the role of Óláfr as an agent of Christian arbitration is not an isolated occurrence in the skald sagas, bearing similarities to a scene in *Bjarnar saga* in which the hostility between Bjǫrn and Þórðr is similarly mediated by Óláfr helgi.[54] In both cases, the structure of the sequences promotes Christianity as a proponent of negotiation and peace.

Gríss's speech may also be read as a didactic approach to the concept of sovereignty. Within the saga, only Gríss and Óláfr understand the pain Hallfreðr experiences upon learning of the death of his lord. Although travel to Norway and service to the king was a part of the Icelandic

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[51] John Lindow, "Skald Sagas in their Literary Context 1: Related Icelandic Genres," in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. Russell Poole (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001), 228.
[52] *ÍF* VIII, 192; Whaley, "Hallfred," 249.
[53] *ÍF* VIII, 192-93; Whaley, "Hallfred," 250.
[54] Margaret Clunies Ross, "The Skald Sagas as a Genre: Definition and Typical Features," in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. Russell Poole (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001), 46-47.

experience, it was not a universal one, a fact brought home in *Hallfreðar saga* through the mockery the poet faces when he fails to show for the duel. The locals, both Hallfreðr's friends and Gríss's followers, completely overlook his attachment to the king, focusing instead on his refusal to fight. The Varangian's words redirect their attention by teaching them about a relationship – the love between king and follower – with which they are otherwise unfamiliar. In doing so, he shares an emotionally charged moment from his past as he draws on his experience of serving the Byzantine emperor. The saga does not reveal the reactions of his listeners within the narrative, instead leaving it up to the saga's audience to find meaning in Gríss's words.

The element of reminiscence is similarly integrated into this passage. One key theme explored in the skald sagas is the tension between the man who stays in Iceland and the man who leaves to see the world. The man who stays has a better chance of winning the girl, but risks leading an uninteresting and less extravagant lifestyle. The man who leaves has the benefit of adventure, worldly experience, and riches, but risks losing the girl, who may not wait for him to return. The model is less of a focus in *Hallfreðar saga* than the other skald sagas, but is visible in the itinerant Hallfreðr's inability to win Kolfinna for himself.

Within this system, Gríss is the boring husband who gets the girl while the skald goes off into the wider world – and in many respects he is the less interesting of the two characters next to the colorful Hallfreðr. But Gríss is not the man who stayed home; rather, he has accomplished the goal of the travelling man, having adventured widely in his younger years before returning to settle down with wife and farm. The saga acknowledges his great wealth, and he still walks around with his Byzantine sword on full display. Jochens has called Gríss "a saga hero in need of rehabilitation," and this certainly seems to be the case: for a boring husband, he has led an exceptional life, and his speech at the assembly grants him a moment in the spotlight to address his past and what it has given him, in this case insight into an emotional experience that his fellows have not experienced, and probably never will.[55]

Gríss's portrayal as a farmer first and Varangian second is reflected in Hallfreðr's many verses about him, which are full of farm imagery and paint his rival as lumbering, sweaty, and a little too interested in his animals. A far cry from the heroic stature of the Varangian motif – but Gríss's status as a mercenary has clearly declined over the years since his return.[56] He still bears his sword and gilded spear as symbols of his journey, and he remains rich, but the saga does not otherwise mention further attributes one might associate with a Varangian. Gríss does not wear fancy clothes, nor is he surrounded by a retinue of followers equally decked out in gold and silk. This portrayal is consistent with other saga characters who travel abroad, not necessarily to Byzantium, who bear the marks of their voyage for a little while before sinking back into standard presentation with the odd totem of their foreign ventures. Even Hallfreðr himself arrives home in colorful attire; but these clothes are not mentioned again after his initial days home, though he continues to wear the arm rings gifted to him by multiple rulers. Gríss is in a later phase of this decline in status, and the revival of his Varangian career via his speech restores some of its associated prestige, a reminder of past glory that shaped him in his youth. But at the end of the day, it is only a fleeting visitation in an aging man, a distant memory of excitement and adventure now obscured by farm chores and a loveless marriage.

[55] Jochens, "Representations of Skalds," 327.
[56] Diana Whaley, "Representations of Skalds in the Sagas 1: Social and Professional Relations," in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. Russell Poole (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001), 304.

Despite his compassion, Gríss ends his statement with a call to continue the lawsuit. He can forgive Hallfreðr for backing out of the duel, but the Varangian's sympathies alone cannot absolve the skald for his misdeeds. The resulting settlement, decided in Gríss's favor, is the final matter between the two men. Hallfreðr, true to form, releases one more verse, a parting shot outlining his reluctance at paying out to his longtime rival. But he hands over the money all the same, bringing an end to his long vendetta. Gríss is out of the saga following this sequence – he has finally achieved the peace he has sought throughout the narrative. Although Hallfreðr does not acknowledge Gríss's defense of him at the assembly, his fairly benign reception of the settlement speaks loudly enough. He is no longer combative, and the verse he composes centers on his own reluctance to pay rather than insulting Gríss. It is almost as if he is obligated to maintain his crusty persona, stubborn to the end and putting up a semblance of a fight simply because he is Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld – forever Gríss's enemy, if only in name.

Þorkell Þjóstarsson

The decline of the Varangian's status after returning home depicted in *Hallfreðar saga* is explored more thoroughly, and more vocally, via the character of Þorkell Þjóstarsson in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*.[57] While Gríss has been back in Iceland for many years, Þorkell has returned only two years prior to the saga's action, and is still in the early phase of reintegrating into society. Of the retired Varangians discussed in this chapter, he is by far the most outspoken about his experience coming home and his struggles to find his way after such a spectacular adventure abroad. Like Gríss, Þorkell offers new insight into local problems, inspired by foreign perspectives; like Bolli, he is driven to push the status quo and challenge the existing parameters of Icelandic society. But although things do not work out as intended, his failure to rework the moral system at play in the saga reinforces the strength of the native model. At the same time, Þorkell's articulation of his personal struggles since returning home offers a window into the broader experience of Norse veterans as perceived by the saga's author.

Þorkell enters the saga at a critical point, when Sámr and Þorbjǫrn, intent on suing Hrafnkell, arrive at the Alþing and seek the backing of more powerful men. Given Hrafnkell's reputation for winning lawsuits and the strength of his case in the killing of Einarr, the other goðar refuse to help the two poor farmers. Dejected, they take an early morning walk by the river, where they encounter a group of five men:

> Sá var hár maðr ok ekki þrekligr, er fyrstr gekk, í laufgrœnum kyrtli ok hafði búit sverð í hendi, réttleitr maðr ok rauðlitaðr ok vel í yfirbragði, ljósjarpr á hár ok mjǫk hærðr. Sjá maðr var auðkenniligr, því at hann hafði ljósan lepp í hári sínu inum vinstra megin.
>
> The man in front was tall, but not particularly strongly built. He was wearing a leaf-green tunic and carrying an ornamented sword in his hand. He was a man with regular features, a ruddy face,

[57] *Hrafnkels saga* was likely composed in the 13th century. Its oldest and only vellum fragment, AM 162 I fol., is dated to around 1500; the saga otherwise survives in later paper manuscripts. Current editions and translations largely rely on the 17th century AM 551 c 4to.

> and an air of distinction, with light chestnut hair and good eyes. This man was easily recognisable because he had a light streak in his hair on the left side.[58]

It is clear from this level of detail that Þorkell is someone of great importance within the context of the narrative. No other character receives the same level of physical description from the writer, and we are meant to pay attention to him. There is much of interest in these specifics – his green clothes and decorated sword indicate power and wealth, and alludes to travel in his past, as these are clearly trappings that originated overseas. The weapon also suggests skill as a warrior. His physical description is more personal, with a slimness that echoes Þorsteinn drómundr rather than a bulky saga hero, but his noble bearing supports his clothes, and the unusual streak in his hair, by which he later nicknames himself, also sets him apart from the typical Icelandic man.

Sámr and Þorbjǫrn, drawn to this remarkable sight, immediately approach Þorkell to ask if he is a *goðorðsmaðr*. Their initial reading of his appearance matches the audience's deduction – that he is rich and powerful. But Þorkell simultaneously confirms and denies this characterization in his response:

> Ek em einn einhleypingr. Kom ek út í fyrra vetr. Hefi ek verit útan sjau vetr ok farit út í Miklagarð, en em handgenginn Garðskonunginum. En nú em ek á vist með bróður mínum, þeim er Þorgeirr heitir.
>
> I'm unattached. I came home the year before last. I'd been abroad for seven years, and been to Constantinople. I am a sworn follower of the Greek Emperor but am now staying with my brother whose name is Thorgeir.[59]

There is irony in the contrast between Þorkell's self-description as an *einhleypingr* "one without a hearth or home" and his identity as a veteran of the Varangian Guard.[60] William Ian Miller has noted that the term is used earlier in the saga to describe Sámr's companions at the Alþing.[61] In this case, Hrafnkell has taken all his thingmen with him, so Sámr is left with everyone else for his own supporters: those who are very poor, of low status, and/or unattached to land. Þorkell may be a wanderer, but he is not of the same ilk as Sámr's cohort, as he is obviously wealthy and of high rank. His use of the term must therefore be ironic, a reading supported by his immediate clarification that he was an elite mercenary in Constantinople, an impressive background that further emphasizes his superior social status.[62] Sverrir Jakobsson has posited that Þorkell's use of the term implies general displeasure at his reduced rank, having dropped from a valued member of the Guard to his brother's underling.[63] At the same time, those described as *einhleypingar* during the Saga Age – the usage most familiar to both author and intended audience – were often characterized as disruptive troublemakers harrying society from the margins. Although Þorkell is

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[58] Jón Jóhannesson, ed., "Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða," in *Austfirðinga sǫgur*, Íslenzk Fornrit XI (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1950), 111; Terry Gunnell, trans., "The Saga of Hrafnkel Frey's Godi," in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* V, edited by Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavik: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), 268.
[59] *ÍF* XI, 111; Gunnell, "Hrafnkel," 269.
[60] Richard Cleasby, Gudbrand Vigfusson, and William A. Craigie, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), s.v. einhleypingr.
[61] William Ian Miller, *Hrafnkel or the Ambiguities: Hard Cases, Hard Choices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 31.
[62] Miller, *Hrafnkel or the Ambiguities*, 31.
[63] Sverrir Jakobsson, *Varangians*, 129.

not a landless ruffian, he does prove to be a disruptive presence to the Icelandic legal system who has (re)appeared from a foreign space, so there is an odd grain of truth to his self-definition. The elaborate response thus adds further detail to our growing image of Þorkell – he is clever and educated, a bit of a trickster, and very worldly in his travel experience.

Þorkell's introduction bears many similarities to the motif of the returning Varangian. He is wearing the elegant clothes of a far-traveler, and his weapon, though not gilded, is exquisite enough to merit special mention and echoes those borne by many other Varangians, including Gríss and Bolli, throughout the corpus. The fact that he is holding, not wearing, the sword draws further attention to the object. He is also accompanied by a small retinue, and cuts such an impressive figure that he is taken for a goði. As far as Varangian homecomings go, the only feature he is missing is a treasure-laden ship. But Þorkell is not a homecoming Varangian – he has been home for two years. Why does he maintain such a high visual profile so long after he has returned? There is certainly a degree of showboating, anticipating his fondness for theatrics throughout the saga. But I would argue that his introductory display is also informed by context beyond the narrative. If one considers the broader context of both the Varangian Guard and the enduring experience of war veterans, Þorkell's depiction acquires much deeper nuance.

In a nutshell: A man grows up in the small, insular society of Iceland. He travels abroad and heads east. The voyage down the river systems is dangerous, full of rapids and hostile peoples, and not everyone in his company survives. Then he arrives in Constantinople. It is the largest and wealthiest city he has ever seen. He swears loyalty to the emperor and witnesses the pomp and circumstance of the Byzantine court. He may convert to a new form of Christianity, and he learns a little Greek. He deploys to *more* foreign lands and fights against *more* esoteric cultures. He makes a lot of money. He fights a lot of battles. He witnesses many deaths. And, over the course of several years, he adapts to his surroundings and becomes, to some degree, Byzantine.

Then he comes home.

What then? One might here consider Achilles and the fateful choice of a short glorious life versus a long one in obscurity, or, within the Norse corpus, Egill Skallagrímsson and the torment of his post-warrior years. Þorkell Þjóstarsson is at a similar turning point in his own journey. He has, for all intents and purposes, lived a magnificent life for seven years, and upon arriving back in Iceland, he most likely faced a glorious homecoming, especially as the eldest son of a goði –a celebration worthy of a returning hero.

And afterwards? After living in one of the major centers of the world, and being part of something far greater than himself, he is now back in small, insular Iceland. Þorkell is a changed man in an unchanged country. He has a goðorð that his brother has been keeping for him, but Þorgeirr, who has remained in Iceland, knows the people and the politics far better. Þorkell allows his brother to keep the goðorð. So what else is a returning Varangian meant to do? Perhaps he rides the coat tails of his adventures for a while. But after a certain point, everyone has seen his new clothes and weapons, everyone has heard his stories, and everyone has spent their admiration and returned to normal life, and come to see him, two years on, as quotidian once more.

In his introductory scene, Þorkell is clearly clinging to his past as the most visible aspect of his identity. But as the scene with Þorgeirr unfolds, the saga clarifies that this characteristic runs

deeper than his appearance: "ek óráðinn, hvat er ek vil af mér gera at bragði. En þú veizt, frændi, at ek hefi til fás hlutazk, síðan ek kom til Íslands" [at this time I am undecided about what I want to do with myself. You know, kinsman, that I haven't really taken part in anything since I came back to Iceland].[64] Between his admission, to both Sámr and his brother, of his lack of direction following Byzantium and his exquisite regalia donned merely for an early morning stroll, it seems that Þorkell's deep attachment to his glory days is standing in the way of his reintegration into Icelandic society – and this situation may not be voluntary. Read through the lens of trauma as observed in war veterans, it is more likely that he is trapped in the past, psychologically incapable of moving forward.

The basic definition of trauma is the lasting impact of an overwhelming incident or incidents on the human psyche. Its core narrative is lack of control:

> At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. When the force is that of nature, we speak of disasters. When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning.[65]

Such events typically render a sensation of "intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation," under which circumstances a person's memory "becomes overwhelmed and breaks down."[66] Although the symptoms of trauma vary from person to person, it is characterized by an unconscious struggle within the brain itself, which is driven to simultaneously block out the initial event and recall it in great detail. The resulting conflict leaves trauma survivors both haunted by their past and unable to remember it with the clarity necessary to confront the experience and proceed with their lives.

The immense violence of war has long been recognized as having a lasting impact on soldiers' lives, but it was not explicitly incorporated under the umbrella of trauma studies until the 20th century.[67] The First World War triggered the initial widescale investigations into what was then called "shell-shock" due to the unprecedented scale of the conflict, which magnified the issue of combat trauma to a degree that militaries could not ignore. The close follow-up of the Second World War maintained psychiatric interest in the topic, and led to a major breakthrough in the field: while before, combat neurosis was considered a sign of moral failing, now it was understood that *everyone* succumbs to the stress of the warzone after a certain point, and it is not a question of *who*, but *when*.[68]

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[64] *ÍF* XI, 111; Gunnell, "Hrafnkel," 271.
[65] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 33.
[66] N. C. Andreasen, "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," in *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry*, 4th ed., ed. H. I. Kaplan and B. J. Sadock (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1985); Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps Score* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 178.
[67] The historically spotty field of combat stress was traditionally spearheaded by military commands, whose goal in tackling the psychological impact of war was to treat soldiers such that they could return to the frontlines. Although this approach is the standard modus operandi for general combat medicine, the studies overlooked the now-known fact that trauma is a long-term condition that lingers far beyond the battlefield. However, the motivation in studying combat stress insofar as it was necessary to get soldiers back to war meant that there was only interest in the subject *during* war. Once the conflict was over, any formal progress on the topic was concluded, and was therefore not widescale enough to advance the field to any meaningful ends until the 20th century.
[68] On the initial theories by British psychiatrists on this subject during WWI, see Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 22; on the results of the United States Army's study following WWII, see John W. Appel and Gilbert W. Beebe,

While military-funded studies focused primarily on the impact of trauma among active duty soldiers, civilian studies soon began investigating its long-term impact on veterans. Abram Kardiner, an early expert in the field throughout WWI and WWII, argued that the "declining status of the veteran after a war" played a critical role in the ignorance about the larger impact of combat trauma.[69] The Vietnam War proved to be the watershed moment for the widespread acknowledgement of combat-induced post-traumatic stress, with veterans finally speaking out about their continued psychological suffering as a result of the conflict. However, even in the aftermath of Vietnam, trauma was still defined by the American Psychiatric Association as "outside the range of usual human experience," and it is only in more recent decades that psychological consequences of war have been proven inevitable and almost universal among soldiers in any conflict.

Despite these medical advances, the social stigma of combat trauma still persists today. Mental illness remains an invisible disease, and carries a connotation of fragility and imagined symptoms. Combat trauma is a particularly challenging topic given the heroic sheen soldiers are generally afforded, a one-dimensional pedestalled image that does not allow for vulnerabilities or flaws, and does not reflect the individual experiences of the average human in a warzone. The macho environment bred in militaries similarly dissuades active duty soldiers from expressing signs of what might be considered weakness, despite PTSD being a natural consequence of their career. And beyond the military, veterans continue to experience the steady decline of their soldier status over time, as observed by Kardiner in 1948.[70]

The current field of combat trauma now acknowledges that its pervasive presence in the universal human experience is not limited to the modern day. Several studies have treated historical conflicts through the lens of psychiatry, the most famous of which are Jonathan Shay's books *Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America*. Shay employs the works of Homer as access points into Vietnam veterans struggling with PTSD, highlighting compelling parallels and insights from the ancient texts. However, identifying trauma in premodern literature has its challenges. The vocabulary we use today is contemporary, and there are many historical terms that could mean trauma, but are vague enough that we cannot be certain. Narrowing the topic of trauma to that experienced by soldiers is even more difficult, as soldiers in early literature often come with a predefined image – that of a hero – which typically follows cultural tropes and obscures the experience of the individual.

Þorkell's struggle to reintegrate into society is not analyzed from a psychiatric angle in the sagas. But the behavior he displays and the thoughts he voices in his frequent dialogue align with common symptoms of modern veterans dealing with combat trauma. From a bird's eye view, Þorkell's inability to blend with the scenery indicates a gap between his self-identity and his surroundings, a common experience among trauma survivors, veteran or otherwise, who lose touch with themselves when their brains turn off normal contextual awareness in order to cope with the core event. In doing so, they also turn off the ability to place themselves in the world, an

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"Preventive Psychiatry: An Epidemiologic Approach," *JAMA*, 131, no. 18 (1946): 1470. Appel and Beebe calculated how many days a man could stay in a combat zone before breaking, and estimated that most soldiers could last 200-240 aggregate days before they were "through as a combat soldier."

[69] Abram Kardiner and Herbert Spiegel, *War Stress and Neurotic Illness* (New York: Paul B. Hoeber, 1947), 1.

[70] This decline is compounded today by the controversial nature of recent wars, which has further impacted the prestige of the military hero – while WWII veterans are still lauded as heroes, their counterparts from conflicts like Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan have borne a portion of the public anger at the muddied politics of these wars.

experience that often manifests as lack of direction in life and failure to forge a future due to the heavy weight of the past.[71] Þorkell clearly falls into this category, but more specific marks of trauma and his veteran status are visible in both his appearance and speech as the saga continues to unveil him.

Considering the context of a military regiment like the Varangian Guard, one element of Þorkell's mercenary lifestyle that he has lost upon returning home is the camaraderie of his fellow warriors. Modern studies of combat trauma have observed that the condition's most significant mitigating factor is the relationship between the individual soldier and his unit. W. H. R. Rivers, a British psychiatrist during WWI and an early specialist in trauma, noted that the most important drive for a soldier recovering from shell-shock was loyalty to his fellow soldiers – a more powerful motive than patriotism or belief in the larger cause of the war.[72] WWII confirmed this observation, with a large-scale study by the United States Army concluding that

> the strongest force which keeps a man going in combat is his self respect and pride. Its strength depends on the bond existing between himself and his fellow soldiers. In this regard there is a decided disadvantage in going overseas and into combat as an individual.[73]

The psychology behind this phenomenon may be explained through recent theories of ingroup identification and identity fusion. Ingroups are social organizations that are distinct from outgroups by means of inherited or learned traits, and ingroup identification is the degree to which an individual's self-conception aligns with the identity of the group.[74] The more an individual's sense of self overlaps with the group's identity, the more connected they feel to this community overall, and are more likely to put themselves at risk for the group's survival and remain faithful if the group is challenged.[75]

An extreme form of identification with an ingroup can result in identity fusion, in which the individual views their fellow members as family.[76] This process is especially prevalent among groups who have mutually survived traumatic experiences and who engage in physical rituals, two traits heavily associated with warfare.[77] An examination of military cohesion among Argentinian and British troops during the Falklands/Malvinas War showed that battlefield

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[71] van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps Score*, 94.
[72] For further discussion, see Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 22.
[73] Appel and Beebe, "Preventive Psychiatry," 1474.
[74] Linda R. Tropp and Stephen C. Wright, "Ingroup Identification as the Inclusion of Ingroup in the Self," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 27, no. 5 (2001): 585-86; Lise Jans et al., "The Development of Group Influence on In-Group Identification: A Multilevel Approach," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 18, no. 2 (2015): 191-92.
[75] Heather J. Smith and Tom R. Tyler, "Choosing the Right Pond: The Impact of Group Membership on Self-Esteem and Group-Oriented Behavior," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 33 (1997): 148-51; Tropp and Wright, "Ingroup Identification," 586; William B. Swann Jr. and Michael D. Buhrmester, "Identity Fusion," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 24, no. 1 (2015): 55.
[76] Hart and Lancaster have noted a key difference between identity fusion and social identification theory. While the latter indicates a relinquishment of the individual in favor of group identity, the former indicates cohesion to the group without giving up the sense of the individual. As outlined by Hart and Lancaster, identity fusion is defined thus: "(1) individuals are bound with other *individual* within a group, becoming the central component to one's personal self-concept; (2) one's personal identity is maintained while coinciding with their group membership; and (3) members feel a profound sense of 'oneness' with other members, which influences behavior." Roland Hart and Steven L. Lancaster, "Identity Fusion in U.S. Military Members," *Armed Forces & Society* 45, no. 1 (2019): 46.
[77] Harvey Whitehouse and Jonathan A. Lanman, "The Ties That Bind Us: Ritual, Fusion, and Identification," *Current Anthropology* 55, no. 6 (2014).

success was heavily dependent on horizontal bonding (among peers) and vertical bonding (between subordinate and superior).[78] Factors that enhanced horizontal bonding included rituals associated with strong religious beliefs and shared concepts of valor and masculinity, while a crucial contributor to vertical bonding was mutual experience under fire, where ranks lost meaning in the face of survival and fear.[79] A study of Libyan revolutionaries in the 2011 Civil War demonstrated that while 97% of participants considered themselves "fused" to their unit, 45% of combatants considered themselves more fused to their unit than to their own families, compared to 28% of non-combatants.[80]

Ben Raffield et al. have argued that ingroup identification and identity fusion may have contributed to the formation of the Viking *lið*.[81] Evidence in archaeological and textual sources indicate the use of material markers – clothing styles, flags, customization of equipment such as shields and ships – by groups to distinguish themselves from others. The taking of oaths by new members also served as gateway from the "outside" to the "inside," and acted as an acknowledgement of shared ideology among members of the group, which may in turn have been determined by physical characteristics and/or shared worldview. Although some members of a *lið* may have originated from the same clan, the parameters of ingroup identification and identity fusion allowed warriors of all backgrounds to unite under a single banner as a cohesive group further strengthened by exposure to extreme environments – namely warzones, often in foreign lands.

Read in this light, the Varangian Guard may also be considered an example of ingroup identification and identity fusion. The unit included Norsemen from all over the North: archaeological evidence points to significant Swedish presence in Byzantium, while the sagas show the Norwegian Haraldr fighting side-by-side with his Icelandic companions Halldórr and Úlfr. And the Guard was not limited to Scandinavians, with Slavs and other cultures filling out the ranks. Despite the unit's diverse composition, these mercenaries were well-known to the Byzantines as a powerful force on the battlefield because of their cohesion, which created an outsized reputation belying their relatively small number. Material markers are also visible, not only in the literary descriptions in the Byzantine sources, but also in manuscript illuminations. The famous Madrid Skylitzes manuscript shows Varangians in the background in matching gilded armor, waving banners and displaying their trademark axes (figure 1).

Returning home would have been immensely challenging for this tight-knit community. In the modern era, the breakup of military units often causes problems for soldiers attempting to reintegrate into civilian life. The sudden absence of the family one helped create under fire can negatively impact the road home, and it is not unusual to find reports from 20th and 21st century conflicts in which soldiers wish they could return to the warzone, in large part because of their attachment to their fellow combatants. Social comradery among veterans is also a common prescription by psychologists and psychiatrists for those struggling mentally after their

[78] Nora Kinzer Stewart, *Mates and Muchachos: Unit Cohesion in the Falklands/Malvinas War* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 1991), 27-30.
[79] Stewart, *Mates and Muchachos*, 88-92, 124-28.
[80] Harvey Whitehouse et al., "Brothers in Arms: Libyan Revolutionaries Bond Like Family," *PNAS* 111, no. 50 (2014): 17783.
[81] Ben Raffield et al., "Ingroup Identification, Identity Fusion, and the Formation of Viking War Bands," *World Archaeology* 48, no. 1 (2016): 35-50.



Figure 1: Varangians attending a funeral in the Madrid Skylitzes (Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, Vitr. 26-2)

discharge.[82] The fact that this separation remains a major issue today, in a technological world in which veterans can theoretically communicate with anyone from their unit at any time, from anywhere, and through countless methods indicates, first, how difficult it remains for veterans to ask for help, and, second, that distance still matters, despite the ubiquity of the internet.

The Middle Ages had no such extensive communication network. Once you were home, your options for remaining in touch with someone from another region were sparse, and travel between locations was arduous and risky. After a warband broke up and everyone returned to their respective homes, it was very likely that many would never see or hear from their fellows again. The breakup of the unit during this period of history must have been a traumatic event in and of itself, even more so than today. For the Varangians, it was surely even more dramatic than the average *lið*, due to the extreme diversity of their members, the radical nature of their cultural experience, and the immense scale and violence of the battles in which they participated, the combination of which would have fostered an extremely tight-knit band of brothers.[83]

Given this context, Þorkell represents an extreme example of a common occurrence, the dissolution of the *lið*, in the medieval North. He has returned home alone, and no one else in the saga, not even fellow eastern traveler Eyvindr (a merchant, not a mercenary) truly understands the isolation he experiences. The fact that he clings to the trappings of his time abroad may indicate a strong desire, conscious or unconscious, to maintain an attachment to not only his experience, but also his "people," the family he formed while under duress in hostile and foreign lands. Þorkell looks strange walking around like this in the middle of Iceland, but going off the theory of identity fusion among Viking warbands, his get-up would have been perfectly normal among his peers and in another setting, in this case Byzantium. The small retinue he has recruited to accompany him at the Alþing may be an attempt to recreate this ingroup, just as homecoming Varangians deck out their fellow travelers in the same exotic fashion they wear themselves.

Ultimately, Þorkell continues to play the role of a member of an ingroup that, upon his departure from Constantinople, has moved on without him. His reluctance to disentangle himself from this group alienates him in Iceland, where he remains its sole representative. In this light, Þorkell's involvement with Sámr and Þorbjǫrn emerges from an interest in making a new connection with people who seem to share his worldview, at least concerning morality, one feature of the identity of his ingroup. The conflict between Sámr and Hrafnkell strikes a chord with him as a retired warrior – the powerful oppressing the weak. As Þorkell tells his brother: "Þat má vera, at svá fœri mér at, ef ek væra hǫfðingi, at mér þœtti illt at deila við Hrafnkel, en eigi sýnisk mér svá, fyrir því at mér þœtti við þann bezt at eiga, er allir hrekjask fyrir áðr" [Perhaps I would think twice about quarrelling with Hrafnkell if I were a chieftain, but I do not think so, because I prefer to challenge someone who has overcome everyone else].[84] This kind of language has a heroic, martial ring to it, and echoes the classic depiction of the Varangian hero,

[82] On the role of unit associations as support for veterans and families, see Jonathan Shay, *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 221-22; on the importance of seeking help from fellow soldiers as a preventative measure against military suicides, see John Bateson, *The Last and Greatest Battle: Finding the Will, Commitment, and Strategy to End Military Suicides* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 232-235.

[83] On the nature of Middle Byzantine warfare and its psychological impact, see Pavlos Ntafoulis, "A War Psychiatry Approach to Warfare in the Middle Byzantine Period," *History of Psychiatry* 27, no. 4 (2016).

[84] Jón Jóhannesson, "Hrafnkels saga," 114; my translation.

in line with Haraldr, Bolli, and even Eyvindr, who insists on riding to his death because to flee would be ignoble.

But there is no battle for Þorkell – instead, his ensuing involvement in the dispute reveals how far his mentality has drifted from his Icelandic roots. Rather than working with the two farmers, he takes on a more dominant role that blinds him to the fact that Sámr and Þorbjǫrn have a different motivation from his own in pursuing this case, and thus envision a different and less spectacular result. They seek personal justice for Einarr, while Þorkell challenges the larger system that led to the shepherd's death. Miller has called Þorkell a "composer of scripts," likening him to a theater director who crafts scenes, watches them play out, and then provides commentary on their action.[85] This side of his character is most visible in the scene at the Alþing. In order to gain Þorgeirr's backing for their case against Hrafnkell, Þorkell tells his new friends to go into his brother's tent, where he is resting with a sore toe. The Varangian advises Þorbjǫrn to pull on the afflicted digit, "ok vit, hversu hann verðr við" [and see how he reacts].[86] Sámr questions this logic, but Þorkell takes a firm stand for his guidelines: "Annat hvárt verði þit at gera, at hafa þat, sem ek legg til, eða leita ekki ráða til mín" [You are going to have to do one thing or the other: either you accept what I propose, or you don't come to me for advice].[87]

There have been many analyses of the toe-pulling scene, as Þorkell's atypical discourse and rhetorical acrobatics have generated much interest within Old Norse scholarship.[88] But the crux of the sequence is that Sámr and Þorbjǫrn are merely actors setting up the premise of Þorkell's argument – that it is impossible for someone to truly know another's pain, but through the injury to Þorgeirr's toe and his inability to avenge his discomfort on an innocent but clumsy old man, the goði might understand a fraction of the father's suffering at losing his son without recourse. Although eloquently presented, this reasoning does not succeed in convincing Þorgeirr, who is wise to his brother's gambits. It is only when Þorkell begins to sulk that the younger brother comes around and agrees to become yet another cast member in this growing production.[89]

Although he professes to understand why Þorgeirr does not want to take Sámr and Þorbjǫrn's case, Þorkell misses the forest for the trees. He now possesses a different moral compass and a different sense of justice from both his goði brother and the farmers of the East Fjords, a perspective so counter to the native attitude that it can only be wielded by someone with one foot outside the Icelandic milieu. Even the fact that Þorkell is allowed to act on this different system of thought requires a suspension of belief regarding real world politics and law.[90] Although Þorgeirr recognizes that his brother is attempting to manipulate him, he agrees to follow

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[85] Miller, *Hrafnkel or the Ambiguities*, 114.
[86] *ÍF* XI, 113; Gunnell, "Hrafnkel," 270.
[87] *ÍF* XI, 113; Gunnell, "Hrafnkel," 270.
[88] See for example W. F. Bolton, "The Heart of *Hrafnkatla*," *Scandinavian Studies* 43, no. 1 (1971); Fredrik J. Heinemann, "The Heart of *Hrafnkatla* Again," *Scandinavian Studies* 47, no. 4 (1975); Kathleen E. Dubs, "The Discourse of Persuasion in *Hrafnkatla*," *Scandinavian Studies* 49, no. 4 (1977): 469-72; Kaaren Grimstad and Maria Bonner, "*Sá er svinnr er sik kann*: Persuasion and Image in *Hrafnkels saga*," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 118 (2003); Miller, *Hrafnkel or the Ambiguities*, 117-124.
[89] Þorkell's fondness for teaching lessons about mutual pain is repeated in the scene in which he tortures Hrafnkell: "Þat hǫfum vér heyrt, at þú hafir lítt verit leiðitamr þínum óvinum, ok er vel nú, at þú kennir þess í dag á þér" [We've heard that you've been rather deaf to the pleading of your enemies, and it is right that you should suffer the same treatment today]; *ÍF* XI, 120; Gunnell, "Hrafnkel," 273. For further discussion, see Miller, *Hrafnkel or the Ambiguities*, 133-36.
[90] Miller, *Hrafnkel or the Ambiguities*, 111.

Þorkell's urging to help the two farmers. This decision is against his better judgment – the goðar have valid reasons to refrain from backing Hrafnkell's opposition – but he indulges his brother nonetheless. It is possible that he recognizes his brother's struggle to reintegrate into Icelandic society, and wishes to help his attempt to make himself relevant again. Or perhaps he just wants Þorkell off his back for a while. Whatever his reason, Þorgeirr chooses his outsider brother's ill-conceived plan over his own political judgment and makes good on his aid, enabling an untenable situation that must be corrected by the saga's conclusion. Þorkell thus operates as a foil against which to highlight the system guiding the thoughts and actions of everyone else – Þorgeirr, Hrafnkell, and ultimately Sámr, who makes the decision, counter to the brothers' advice, to offer his adversary the choice of life.

The contrast between Þorkell and Þorgeirr is further emphasized by their backgrounds: while the elder brother has gone abroad, the younger brother has remained home. This situation factors into their distribution of the goðorð, as Þorgeirr is far more in tune with the locals, while Þorkell is not only out of touch but also relatively disinterested in such mundane matters. This pair model is also reflected in Sámr and his own brother Eyvindr. Once again, the older of the two has gone abroad to Byzantium, this time as a merchant, while the other has stayed in Iceland to work the land; the symmetry is reinforced by the fact that both Eyvindr and Þorkell are abroad for the same amount of time, seven years. Because Sámr's family is of a lower class than the Þjóstarssons, however, Eyvindr's voyage would have had a greater socio-economic impact on their family. His humble origins may also explain why he takes up a career in trade over mercenary work, as the former profession does not require as much financial investment or prior combat training as the latter, which caters to a background much more accessible to the son of a prominent goði like Þorkell.

Eyvindr is the more straightforward of the two eastern travelers, and his presence on the page is presented as a standard Varangian homecoming. As per the established motif, Eyvindr is a model of success, arriving in style with his colorful clothes, exquisite shields, and loyal retinue. He is a fine example of Viking Age success, and personifies the raw concept behind the eastern voyages: the greater the risk, the greater the rewards. Nonetheless, *Hrafnkels saga*, with its morally ambiguous characters and farmers' quarrel narrative, lacks a central heroic figure – instead, this role is given to Eyvindr, a minor character in the grand scheme of things, who promptly dies within two pages of his arrival on set. Such a reversal of fortune is appropriate within the context of the saga, as this is a narrative with no space or purpose for a larger-than-life hero. Indeed, the saga defies black-and-white categorization in every respect, and Eyvindr is simply out of place within such grey territory. Thus his one-dimensional characterization suggests that he is not so much a character as a prop.

In this sense, the saga's garnishing of Eyvindr's character with time spent in Byzantium takes on a more nuanced purpose. At the time of his entrance, the saga has reached a narrative point that requires Hrafnkell to take violent action in order to restore the status he has lost throughout this ordeal, and Sámr's noble brother is an ideal sacrifice. The fact that Eyvindr is wealthy, honorable, and good with a sword could be enough to make him an appropriate target. But read against other depictions of Varangian heroes across the Norse corpus, the addition of Austrvegr to Eyvindr's resumé raises his profile exponentially, a qualification further reinforced by his outsized portrayal as the saga's only heroic figure. His slaying by Hrafnkell effectively communicates the degree to which the goði has been affected by Sámr's lawsuit and its fallout,

including, presumably, his torture at the hands of the Þjóstarssons: only the fall of a man as renowned as Eyvindr can rebalance the scales. The literary trope of the legendary Varangian is thus used to clarify cause and effect within the saga.

Eyvindr and Þorkell work side by side, two Varangians prodding the central questions of the saga from opposite directions. Þorkell drives the early narrative by maintaining pressure on, and creating tension with, the native parsing of the complex moral premise, while Eyvindr's death validates Hrafnkell's losses and condemns the degree to which Sámr has acted on Þorkell's advice. In trying to unite the East Fjord farmers under his invisible banner, Þorkell pushes too hard. His actors are not actors, but real people; more than that, they are full-blooded Icelanders. However interested Sámr and Þorbjǫrn may be in Þorkell's plan to put Hrafnkell in his place, their own motives are homegrown, governed by grief over a slain son, and dovetail with the Varangian's objective only as long as they believe in his input. Once they have outgrown his puppet strings, he fades into the background.

Þorkell appears once more at the end of the saga, when Sámr returns to the brothers to again ask for help. This time, Þorgeirr takes the lead, speaking for them both in refusing aid. Þorkell's attempt to make Sámr into something greater has failed, as well it should have – the Varangian is not acting in Sámr's best interest, but his own, while Sámr has allowed himself to be directed by someone else against his better judgment, just as when his uncle convinced him to prosecute Hrafnkell in the first place. Notably, the previously outspoken Þorkell remains silent during this final scene, and for the rest of the saga, having ceded, like his goðorð, all control of the situation to Þorgeirr at last. Even more intriguing, however, is the trajectory of Þorkell's life since we last encountered him: upon Sámr's arrival, we learn that "þá var Þorkell nýkominn út ór för. Hann hafði verit útan fjóra vetr" [Þorkell had just returned from a voyage. He had been abroad for four years].[91] The erstwhile Varangian, unable to find his place in Iceland after his experience in the Mediterranean, ultimately continues to seek his fortune, and his life, elsewhere. Much like Eyvindr, though far less violently, there can be no homecoming for Þorkell the *man* – however, Þorkell the *literary device* has played his role effectively and achieved his end.

Although Þorkell and Eyvindr are almost certainly fictional, their inclusion within a narrative like *Hrafnkels saga* continues to speak to a wider, more realistic trend among former Varangians. There is no room here for the construct of the Varangians of legend, because they are too large and too idealistic for the saga, and the fate of its own Varangians speaks clearly to this. Eyvindr is the closest thing to a hero the saga has, and he is killed off almost instantly. Þorkell may be a hero in another setting – an eastern one – but back in Iceland, his talents and perspectives are out of place and not suited to local politics.

Yet Þorkell's behavior hints at a grain of truth around which his character is built. The element of trauma is implicit in his story: a soldier fighting in distant wars returns home and, unable to leave the battlefield behind, loses his way. This has been the story of veterans for millennia, and still rings true today. Trauma is an unavoidable ingredient of the human condition, especially in violent professions, and the seamless nature with which the saga constructs and deploys the character of Þorkell implies a familiarity, among author and audience, with this type of limbo. Whether deliberate or incidental, *Hrafnkels saga* presents an unusually complete image

[91] *ÍF* XI, 280; Gunnell, "Hrafnkel," 280.

of these legendary warriors – the triumph of the victorious Varangian returning home in style, and the tragedy of the aimless Varangian, no longer in sync with his homeland, but tied to it nonetheless.

Conclusion

The Varangian Guard offers a unique access point into the psychology of Viking Age and medieval Scandinavia. Within both history and literature, Varangians returning from Byzantium stand out as significantly different from the average Norseman. The overt reason for their individuality is that they have traveled an unusually far distance and visited a part of the world that few of their fellows would ever see. In doing so, they have experienced things few others would ever experience. But the most important differentiation between the Varangians and their fellow Scandinavians within the context of the sagas is not the bare fact that they have experienced things others have not – it is that they are *changed men* because of it.

In this light, the contributions made to the Old Norse corpus by the veterans of the Guard take on new dimensions. These men are not only crafted by and for their respective narratives, but their representations in the sagas draw on and reflect the medieval understanding of what a changed man looks like. They have undergone social, political, cultural and religious changes. But at the core of their composition lies psychological change, and this facet is most visible through the lens of trauma. The Viking Age is defined by the act of men traveling internationally to wage war, and violent conflicts continued through the medieval era that followed. Many of these combatants returned home upon retiring, effectively creating a society of veterans enduring the aftermath of their careers. However fictionalized the Varangians may be in the sagas, the psychology behind their experience is not only based in reality, but reflects a deeply ingrained part of the landscape; some saga writers may have even lived it themselves. As a result, we can read these characters as vehicles built to explore a very familiar component of the medieval North. The Varangians of the sagas represent one of most extreme forms of this experience, placing them in a powerful narrative position to give voice to a deeply personal emotional journey that must have been as immensely difficult for medieval warriors to articulate as it remains for modern soldiers.

The element of veteran identity may also be observed, to varying degrees, in the other retired Varangians in this chapter. Gríss is a textbook example of veterans losing status over time, as he long ago ceased to be defined by his Varangian identity, and is now simply a farmer like everyone else. However, the revival of his past through his speech and the vividness with which he articulates his now-distant emotional experience suggests that although much time has passed, he still relives the scene of the emperor's death as if it were yesterday. Gríss has also continued to prominently bear his gifted sword and gilded spear, indicating that, like Þorkell, he sees these weapons as a core part of his identity, and suggesting that he too has never fully left that ingroup behind. Gríss' frequent reliance on more powerful friends demonstrates a lack of ambition in his post-Byzantium career, and his desire to maintain the status quo in a way that keeps his profile under the radar departs from the more ambitious Bolli, but matches the aimless wandering of Þorkell and the absence of Halldórr from the sagas after his return to Iceland. Gríss and Halldórr thus share similar trajectories in settling down on their farms and recounting their youthful accomplishments to the next generation, blending back into society in a manner that does not

stand out to the locals while clinging to their Varangian days as the defining chapter of their lives.

Despite the limited sources on Halldórr, his time in Byzantium seems to have left a mark on him as well. It is possible that he suffered a similar fate to Þorkell regarding his departure from the ingroup, though for Halldórr, this process would have been more gradual. After leaving the larger brotherhood of the Varangian Guard, he transitions into Haraldr's warband along with other Byzantine veterans. But despite the familiar faces, Halldórr finds himself at odds with the new setting and royal hierarchy, and he fails to adjust to life in Norway. He finds two outlets for his disappointment – fencing with Haraldr and developing his new talent for telling tales, which he begins immediately upon arrival back in the North. It seems Halldórr misses Byzantium as soon as he departs, and although his eventual flight back to Iceland finalizes his physical removal from the Varangian community, his continued fame as a storyteller centers solely on the relating of his youthful adventures, preserving his perpetual reminiscence of the past while his future is unremarkable enough to remain untold in the extant corpus.

On the other side of the coin, Bolli excels both in Byzantium and Iceland. There are signs that he is affected by ambition, through his pursuit of lawsuits in other districts, assassinating an outlaw amid enemies before the man leaves the country, and the pride he demonstrates in facing off with the ornery farmer Helgi. Bolli comes out well in his endeavors, and, successfully settling back into Icelandic life, is clearly well-suited for his goðorð. He has not forgotten how Icelandic society operates; rather, he knows it so well that he exploits it in order to push the boundaries far enough to stand out, but not enough to break them. A key factor in his ability to reintegrate so successfully is likely his age. Although still young when he leaves for Byzantium, Bolli is older than the other saga Varangians, has undergone significant life experiences, and has already begun his adult life – by the time he leaves, he has avenged his father's death, is married with a child, and owns and manages his own farm. Modern studies have demonstrated that impact of major life events, including war, are greater and more persistent for younger people, as these events take place while the brain is still developing. Participating in an elite mercenary unit on the other side of the world involves both intense violence and a major cultural shift to which younger members would have been more susceptible. It is logical that the more mature Bolli may have been less affected by some of the negative effects of his travels, making it easier, at least on the surface, for reentry to be a success. His subsequent success in the social sphere outstrips that of his peers, focusing on the positive benefits of a Varangian career as opposed to the alternative fates witnessed in the other characters.

The narratives of Halldórr, Bolli, Gríss, and Þorkell each contribute an important thread to the tapestry of the Varangian legacy. Together, they tell a version of the Varangian experience, a narrative pieced together from fragments scattered across the Norse corpus. Ultimately, the presence of the Guard in the Norse literary tradition is a dilution of historical identity – but it remains distinctly Varangian, because these figures, no matter how realistic, no matter how fictional, remain highly visible on the page. Their legacy during the Middle Ages is maintained and magnified over the years, keeping them alive even as the warriors themselves have begun to pass into the mists of history. They are defined outwardly by their unusual accomplishments, a vestige of their semi-Norse, semi-Byzantine existence that, coming full circle, has now become an integrated part of their homeland. But on the inside, they deeply reflect the people by whom, and for whom, they were written. In so doing, they have maintained an enduring relevance that leverages their exotic heritage in order to tell stories that meant something to the people of the

medieval North, and which continue to inform readers today about not only the past, but the human experience itself.

IV

Modern Varangians

The evolution of the Varangian Guard's legacy in medieval literature established a lasting memory of these mercenaries generations past their heyday. That memory has persisted far beyond the Middle Ages, a testament to the timeless appeal of their exotic narratives and elite warrior identities. The recurrence of the Varangians in modern centuries has been witnessed on several fronts, including Þorleifur Repp's addition of Thorleif the Earl's Skald in his English adaptation of *Færeyinga saga* (c. 1832); the identity of narrator Rolf's father as a Varangian in William Morris' "The Wanderer" (1868-70); and the Bulgar gold sequence in Frans G. Bengtsson's *Röde Orm* (*The Long Ships*, 1941-45). Although these characters remain marginal figures, their appearances, as in the sagas, significantly contribute to their respective works. Andrew Wawn has argued that Thorleif may be read as a revealing self-portrait of Repp, an idealistic portrayal of the author during a dark time.[1] Morris' *The Earthly Paradise* relates the exchanging of tales between Norsemen and Greeks, and the reference to the Varangian Guard in the Prologue establishes an innate connection between the two traditions.[2] The journey of Bengtsson's protagonists into the East expands the novel's depiction of the Viking world, and facilitates deeper interactions among diverse cultures and religions in accordance with the work's premise.

In recent decades, technological advances have inspired and enabled new forms of storytelling, encouraging innovative methods of narrative structure, worldbuilding, and audience engagement. These novel methodologies allow stories of the past to engage with modern themes on a global stage in ways never before seen. The Varangians have maintained their subtle presence, featuring not only in prose fiction, but also in formats such as graphic novels and video games, finally transcending text and acquiring concrete forms in these visual narratives.

[1] Andrew Wawn, "The Silk-Clad Varangian: Þorleifur Repp and *Færeyinga saga*," *Saga-Book* 23 (1990-93): 67-68.
[2] Karl O. E. Anderson, "Scandinavian Elements in the Works of William Morris," PhD diss. (Harvard University, 1940), 18-19.

This chapter will look to two recent works: "Sven the Returned," a 2008 story from the graphic novel series *Northlanders* by Brian Wood, and *Horizon Zero Dawn*, a 2017 video game developed by Guerrilla Games. "Sven the Returned" follows a Varangian mercenary returning home to Orkney as he struggles to untangle his own identity. His failure to live up to Norse values as a child has estranged him from his homeland, but even his success in Byzantium cannot give him the answers he seeks. The visual format of the graphic novel allows for cinematic pacing and visual themes through color and spatial arrangement to add further nuance to Sven's inner and outer conflicts and eventual reconciliation with both himself and his northern roots. In *Horizon Zero Dawn,* the Varangians are reworked in a futuristic setting as the Vanguard, a unit of elite Germanic- and Slavic-inspired northern warriors serving a more powerful southern empire in tropical climes. Against a post-apocalyptic backdrop of overgrown ruins, primitive tribes, and animalistic machines, the Vanguard leader Erend's growth in the face of sudden tragedy makes use of narrative, gameplay, and worldbuilding to expand and strengthen the game's larger messages of community and identity. In both works, the Varangian legacy bridges past and present as the mercenaries contribute their unique assets to powerful and acclaimed narratives designed for current audiences.

Northlanders

"But, lord…they're *Norse!* Like us!"

"No – they're Norsemen. We're *Varangian*. We're *better*."[3]

So begins "Sven the Returned," with a bold statement by the titular character heralding the conflicts to come. The commander of a Varangian unit, Sven is charismatic and ruthless, with total disdain for the northern homeland he left behind as a child. Upon receiving word that his chieftain father has died, he travels from Constantinople to Orkney to claim the inheritance stolen in his absence by his uncle Gorm. But his arrival and subsequent struggle for his lost wealth forces Sven to reevaluate the identity that he has carefully crafted around his departure from the Norse world and subsequent embracing of the Varangian Guard. His reassessment of past traumas and deconstruction of self pushes him to confront the question: why did he *really* return to Orkney?

Released in October 2008, "Sven the Returned" was the inaugural story of the graphic novel series *Northlanders,* written by Brian Wood and published by Vertigo from 2008-2013. The collection features independent but thematically connected narratives set against the backdrop of the Viking Age, and Sven's story, featuring the brutality and humanity captured throughout the series, is among its longest. The graphic novel medium merges concise text and gritty art to craft a dynamic image of the fictionalized past, leveraging page design and panel format to manage pacing and capitalize on narrative moments. Thematic use of color and visual cues add nuance to the modernized writing, resulting in a full-bodied tale that reworks saga material into a character study for the modern day.

[3] Brian Wood, "Sven the Returned," in *Northlanders, Book 1: The Anglo-Saxon Saga* (Burbank: DC Comics/Vertigo, 2016), 108.

Establishing the Varangian

Works of historical fiction require the management of a double narrative: historical context and fictional story. In the case of "Sven the Returned," the context is unusually tricky due to its narrow focus on the Varangian Guard, a topic that is buried within the larger Viking Age and with which very few people are familiar. Because Sven's character arc is closely tied to this identity, the novel's opening scene balances both history and story as the Varangians encounter a Norse ship off the coast of Constantinople. After attacking and killing many of the interlopers, Sven learns from the last survivor that they have come from Orkney to report his father's death, whereupon Sven kills the man and declares he is returning home.

The scene's first lines, quoted above, succinctly introduce the Guard – an anonymous mercenary informs us that the characters in both ships are of Norse origin, while Sven clarifies that he and his men make up of a subset of the Norse, called Varangian. According to him, they are "better" than the cultural whole, a claim that plays out in the art of the following pages, which, featuring almost no dialogue, illustrate the carnage as the Orkney men are massacred by the martially superior mercenaries (figure 2). A brief conversation between Sven and the lone survivor further demarcates the two groups, as Sven robs the doomed man of his Thor's hammer charm because "my girlfriend thinks these trinkets are exotic."[4] Although he allows the man to die with a sword in his hand, he denies him the comfort of a religious talisman in his final moments, demonstrating a conscious detachment from his home culture: even the gods of the North are worthy only of scorn. The profound lack of empathy inherent in this act is compounded by the killing itself, which is, quite literally, the shooting (or stabbing) of the messenger.

Right from the story's first frames, the disconnection between Sven and his homeland – the rift that drives the narrative – is placed front and center. Through his categorization of the Orkney men on the ship, we understand that he does not associate himself with their kind. Only then are other elements of his character established: he is an impressive warrior and a respected leader, yet ruthless against his enemies, preferring to act first and ask questions later. But his inconsistent nature, reflecting inner turmoil, also reveals itself in this sequence. His show of disdain for the Norse is clear in the slaughter he commits against them, his sacrilege against the gods, and his anger at the messenger's assumption that he will immediately return home upon receiving the news of his father's death. Yet despite exhibiting an apparent disinterest in traveling to the North, Sven ends the scene by declaring he will, in fact, embark on the journey,

and the following page cuts to his arrival back in Orkney. The misdirection presages Sven's unreliability as a narrator, which stems primarily from his own contorted psyche that both draws him toward and repels him from his past.

The opening scene also introduces an important visual theme of the unfolding novel – the association of the Varangians and the color red. The battle establishes the color scheme of both parties, with the Varangians in scarlet tunics and the Orkney men wearing shades of grey and brown. This distinction clarifies the fast-paced combat action of these early pages, but also teaches the reader to bear the bright color in mind, as Sven retains his red clothes for the

[4] Wood, "Sven the Returned," 111.



Figure 2: Sven and his Varangians attack a Norse ship in the Bosphorus; Wood, "Sven the Returned," 108.



Figure 3: Sven arrives home to the Orkneys; Wood, "Sven the Returned," 115.

remainder of the story. They take on new meaning in the second scene, in which Sven arrives back in Orkney: unlike before, when he was one of many wearing red, now he is the only one in such garish dress, while everything around him – characters, clothes, landscapes – are rendered in drab shades (figure 3). The contrast's consistency throughout the narrative harkens back to the sagas, in which returning travelers, such as the men of *Laxdœla saga* discussed in chapter two, are often depicted wearing red silk, indicative of high quality clothing only attainable abroad. Thus Sven's attire is a constant reminder of his foreign travels and close ties with Byzantium and, on the flip side, his lack of native allegiance.

This motif also implies a desire to cling to his Varangian identity. For the majority of the narrative, he plans on returning to Constantinople and rejoining the Guard once his mission in Orkney is complete; it is therefore understandable that he does not want to relinquish his ties to this ingroup. But Sven is also showboating, relishing in the display of his fancy clothes as his inner monologue derides his native settlement of Grimness. On a visual level, the crimson shade stands out to readers, who can easily track the character from frame to frame, and which enables dramatic illustrations at key plot moments in which Sven is almost glowing against darker backdrops. But red is also used for one other prominent feature of the story – blood. The eye-catching color thus elevates Sven both on the page and in the gloomy world of Orkney, but also unavoidably links him with his violent profession and the vicious battles to come.

After the preface of the Bosphorus battle, Sven's arrival in Grimness launches the story proper. The first section relates the aftermath of his return and the beginning of his solo struggle against Gorm and his warband. Sven isolates himself from his northern surroundings, encountering old acquaintances but keeping them at arm's length as he pursues his vengeance alone and vastly outnumbered. A major tragedy triggers a lengthy intermission in the form of a flashback, in which Sven revisits the events that led to his departure from Orkney many years earlier, how he came to Constantinople, and his entry into the Varangian Guard. The second half of the narrative sees him rework his sense of identity, and reconcile the Byzantine and Norse elements of his past. Sven finally allows himself to engage with his surroundings, forging alliances and leveraging his Varangian experience as something to be shared rather than a tool for perpetuate division. In the present discussion, I will begin with the flashback, as it provides the basis of Sven's character and why he has broken from Norse society, before moving to his Orkney homecoming.

Severance

From his youth, Sven finds himself at odds with the Norse worldview that, in his eyes, reveres death over life. A monologue accompanying his memory of his original departure from Orkney clarifies his perspective:

> I never understood it, even as a child – why die when you can live? "Odin's hall." The place in Valhalla where, after you die, you get to hang out and eat and get drunk for an eternity. Something else I didn't understand. The warriors I've met *ache* with the desire to join other fallen men in this dubious afterlife. Feasting halls are *filthy*, they stink, people throw food on the floor for the dogs, they vomit across the tables. They *yell* and *fight* and *piss in the corners*. And for this reward, *dying* is considered a *noble* thing? I chose *not* to die. I chose to disbelieve in the afterlife of the Norse. I chose to *live*. Live to get rich. Live to get revenge. At all costs. And by living, I

> defied what my culture says is preferable, what it says men of honor must do. My actions show not all Norse are the same, that we're not simple savages. My way was a *better* way.[5]

The characterization of the Viking world in this passage is heavy-handed, but reveals the extent to which Sven has defined the nature of his own character in opposition to the North's way of life. The reference to Valhalla stems from his mother's speech on the previous page, in which she screams at him for running away from a one man attack on their farm, leaving her to be victimized by Gorm. Such extreme situations of violence defy the social mores we usually live by and often expose unexpected reactions to their absence; it is typically impossible to determine whether fight or flight will kick in when confronted by extreme situations until one first encounters it. In this case, Sven has discovered that his kneejerk reaction is flight, a cowardly act by his culture's standards, but a natural one for children that can be overcome with time and maturity. However, instead of taking responsibility for his unanticipated response, Sven transfers blame onto the Norse system. The community's obsession with death and Valhalla must have driven his mother's disappointment in him, not the fact that she needed his protection and he failed to deliver. His reverence for life must have inspired him to hide, not a desperate act of self-preservation. Sven's misplaced justification for his actions serves as the foundation for his flawed reading of his society of origin, and marks the transformation of his self-perception into self-reverence, as he eschews the Norse pantheon in favor of "life," or, more precisely, himself.

The art accompanying Sven's rant against his native culture further emphasizes his perceived isolation and encourages a careful reading of the lengthy monologue. Preceding pages relating his inability to protect his mother are fast-paced, stylized with many smaller boxes and faces wrought with strong emotion, and oozing frantic drama such that dialogue overflows the panels' confines (figure 4). Sven's subsequent departure presses pause on the story's speed with a full page illustration of his small form venturing, alone at night, into the wider world (figure 5). The foreground he leaves behind is tinted red and orange, reflecting the flames of his family's burning longhouse, but the warm shades also signify his exit from the light of civilization. The small figure of child Sven, dwarfed further by huge flanking cliffs, faces away from the viewer as he transitions from foreground to background. What lies ahead is a cold world cast in blue – a barren and unknown wasteland. The deep shades carry through to the facing page, which returns to multiple panels, but far fewer than before and neatly stacked for slower, procedural reading (figure 6). These wide images offer a montage of Sven in the wilderness, lonely and insignificant against the monotone landscape as he agonizes over his hatred for the Norse. The final image is of the starry sky, accompanying his comment on the superiority of "my way" and implying a hope that, somewhere and somehow, he will achieve his goal to "live."

Sven has clearly ruminated on his worldview prior to the attack on his farm, but its resulting trauma reinforces his conviction in his own philosophical superiority. His vulgar characterization of the Norse feast, a central cultural activity, targets the heart of the social fabric of the North – these festivities beget and strengthen alliances, which are crucial for success and, more importantly, survival in a harsh environment. Sven's condescension is further radicalized when he is taken as a slave by fellow Norsemen who find him the morning after he leaves Grimness, an experience that confirms his belief that his people are truly the lowest of the low. Years of enslavement eventually land him in Constantinople, where his fortunes finally begin to change upon being sold to a rich merchant. Now fully separated from the Norse world for the first time,

[5] Wood, "Sven the Returned," 205.



Figure 4: Sven fails to protect his mother; Wood, "Sven the Returned," 203.



Figure 5: Sven departs Grimness; Wood, "Sven the Returned," 204.



Figure 6: Sven travels in the wilderness; Wood, "Sven the Returned," 205.



Figure 7: Sven protects Zoe on the beach; Wood, "Sven the Returned," 213.

Sven begins to mature and grow into himself. The merchant's daughter, conspicuously named Zoe, becomes the object of his affection, marking the start of several loose parallels between Sven's story and that of Haraldr Sigurðarson.

Sven's watershed moment comes during an attempted assassination of Zoe several months later. Trusting his gut instinct that several approaching men pose her an imminent threat, Sven jumps into action and brutally kills a man with a rock – "I didn't give it even a half-second's thought."[6] He has overcome the flight instinct of his youth, and discovered a protective reflex and penchant for violence. But he also demonstrates an inner wisdom: though he is only able to kill two of the four attackers, he manages to talk down the remaining men and negotiate Zoe's survival, and his own, through bribery. As with his departure from Orkney, a full page illustration slows the reader's pace so that we can fully appreciate the importance of this moment in Sven's development as both a man and a character (figure 7). The page is interrupted only by a small corner panel showing the attackers exchanging a look as they consider his proposition – the first time adults have taken Sven seriously, encouraging us to do the same and revealing the extent of his maturation, such that others are starting to notice the change.

Despite this breakthrough, or perhaps because of it, Sven remains firm in his conviction that his actions do not coincide with Norse philosophy, maintaining the barrier between his origins and his present self. His coming of age in Byzantium encourages this stance, because he sees his own values reflected in that society. Sven's desire to live equates to flinging himself into hedonism to a degree only available in a rich and developed capital like Constantinople. His romance with Zoe provides stability, while her patronage grants him significant wealth and their open relationship enables further dalliance with other women. "These were modern times, in a modern city," he muses. "Should not relationships be modern too?"[7] Violence is another indulgence, as he hones his warrior skills through assassination and war, eliminating Zoe's enemies and joining the Varangian Guard through her sponsorship. Sven's ascension to division commander as seen in the story's first scene is a testament to both hard work and luck, and speaks to how much he has outgrown the scared little boy who abandoned his mother so many years before. Nonetheless, he maintains a foothold in his Norse heritage by the very act of joining the Guard, as his membership in a mercenary company of Northern warriors is ironically determined by that feature he despises so much.

Return

Sven's simultaneous denial of his own people and determination to make them acknowledge his superiority complicate his decision to return to Orkney. The story's early pages posit that his only goal is to regain his father's wealth that should have passed to him. Sven has no intention of remaining in the North, but his fondness for money and the finer things of life form the basis of his argument as to why this voyage aligns with his worldview. However, as the narrative unfolds, Sven is revealed to be a thoroughly unreliable narrator. By his own admission, Zoe has more money than everyone in Orkney combined, and has already been generous with him; he is also a successful Varangian, and it becomes clear that he has no need for his father's relatively paltry wealth given the amount he already holds. It is later revealed that according to the *Northlanders*'

[6] Wood, "Sven the Returned," 211.
[7] Wood, "Sven the Returned," 218.

version of the Varangian Guard, those who leave the unit are not permitted to return. Gorm's right-hand man Hakkar correctly deduces that Sven was counting on his father's wealth to bribe his way back into the Guard upon returning to Byzantium. The voyage, then, was an immense risk to his Varangian lifestyle with no long-term reward – not only did Sven put his entire career on the line to reclaim his inheritance, but this money would have been spent immediately upon his return to Constantinople, without adding to his own wealth in any way.

At the same time, given the size of his ego, the only thing missing from his current success is the chance to rub it in the faces of those who mocked and rejected him so many years ago. His return creates an opportunity for triumph, a demonstration of the Varangian way that he presumes will show how low Orkney rank within the wider context of medieval Europe. Unfortunately for Sven, despite his attempt at a Varangian homecoming complete with ornate weaponry and bright red clothing, the denizens of Grimness are anything but impressed by his evolution, and acknowledge no change in his character, an offense that only enrages the Varangian further.

The longer Sven remains in Orkney, the more these purposes for returning home waver. Pursuing a small inheritance and showing off are weak reasons for the huge undertaking, both geographically and emotionally, of traveling from Constantinople to Orkney. There must be something deeper to his impulse, and as the war between Sven and Gorm rages on, the narrative enters a new phase as he tries to figure out what that reason might be. This portion of the text is one of escalating violence, as Sven, now acknowledging that his mere presence has failed to achieve either of his original goals, resorts to a formidable show of force, picking off Gorm's men in increasingly dramatic and gruesome ways to shock the people of Grimness into submission (figure 8).



Figure 8: Sven dons the bloody head of a stag to scare his superstitious foes before battle; Wood, "Sven the Returned," 164.

The biggest hurdle for Sven's progression is his over-reliance on his strength as an individual. His lifelong knack for survival has instilled a deep sense of confidence in himself and wariness of others. As he gathers intel on Grimness, Sven observes that "a detachment of Varangians could take this place inside of a *day*…but Gorm has archers. And I am but *one* Varangian. So this will have to be a *tactical action*."[8] His response to taking down a fortified

[8] Wood, "Sven the Returned," 136.

town is to adjust his methods and accommodate a solo venture, a laudable if foolish tactic that nonetheless reflects once more his sense of arrogance as a Varangian. As it turns out, he does have the skill to maintain a one-man war for a time, drawing extensively on talents acquired in Constantinople to keep himself alive and the enemy on their toes. His superior combat abilities pay off in battle, and his clever guerrilla tactics demonstrate the Varangian knack for out-of-the-box thinking seen in the medieval sagas, particularly the stratagems used by Haraldr Sigurðarson. Sven keeps his enemies guessing, taking advantage of Gorm's superstitious nature by striking quickly and quietly, leaving only bodies in his wake. The corpses stymie his uncle, who, having underestimated Sven from the start, forgets about his nephew and becomes convinced that his foe is actually a draugr. Gorm's right-hand Hakkar is more of a realist and sees through Sven's smoke screen, but even he admits the Varangian's skill: "As a warrior, you're good. As a *tactician*, you're better."[9]

For all Sven's talent, however, he lacks the means to win the struggle. His foes are too many, and he is only one man. Allies are a necessity. But with his utter disdain for the inhabitants of Orkney, he holds a high bar for partnership. He is, after all, "one Varangian" – the only one around, and no one else lives up to his expectations. Although he makes one failed attempt to recruit men from another settlement into a warband, he is generally reluctant to befriend anyone on the island, even as a select few begin to reach out olive branches. The first to do so is an older couple, Ivarsson and his wife, who were Sven's childhood neighbors. Taking him in after an injury, Ivarsson sympathizes with Sven's difficulty returning home:

> As a younger man, I travelled with the Jomsvikings. I've seen many of the same great cities as *you* have. I understand the *appeal*…There's a lot of flash and excitement to be had in your world, Sven, but there's no *soul*, no *meaning*. Everything's moving too *fast* for that. Give it time, Sven. What seems *small* and *quiet* will come to have a greater meaning…if you open your mind to it.[10]

Although Sven appreciates the elderly pair's help, he is not interested in the old man's stories, and listens closely only to detect intel about Gorm. His inner dialogue overlays Iversson's narrative with cynical remarks, and although he is polite to the couple, he leaves as soon as possible and makes no attempt to recruit them to his cause, using them only for first aid and information. But Ivarsson's speech lays significant groundwork for the Varangian's character arc. As a veteran of the elite Jomsvikings, Ivarsson is an older version of Sven, and although the younger man is clearly not open-minded enough to find any meaning in the "small and quiet," the insertion of these observations so early in the narrative offers a clue for the reader as to what we might expect from Sven's arc. His fixation on his Varangian identity through increasingly dramatic actions against Gorm, constant derision of his surroundings, and luxury attire speaks to a desire to keep the "flash and excitement" of Constantinople alive in his day-to-day life. That quality is what makes him stand out in Orkney, after all, and represents a world to which he expects to soon return. But there is a decadence about his version of Byzantium, and the question of soul and meaning, though dismissed by Sven in the moment, returns later to haunt his thoughts.

Sven is not alone in his preoccupation with the Mediterranean lifestyle. Another local soon seeks him out: Thora, a young woman who was his first love in childhood. Their mutual attraction reignites as she begins to visit him in the evenings, but she is not the same girl he left

[9] Wood, "Sven the Returned," 194.
[10] Wood, "Sven the Returned," 137.

behind all those years ago. She is worn down, tired, and lacks a zest for life, and it is soon revealed that she is spying on Sven for Gorm. But the true purpose of Thora's amorous advances is deeper than her fear-driven allegiance to a cruel master, as Sven quickly deduces:

> Now that I'm *back*, she sees me as her salvation…The most mundane details I give her of my life in Miklagard sets her heart *racing*. I can feel it. And every night she asks me, if I'll save her life, if I'll take her away from her miserable existence, if I'll share *my world* with her. I haven't answered yet.[11]

Downtrodden and abused, Thora imagines an alternate reality through Sven, full of excitement, adventure, and lust that he represents, and that only he can offer. He is a symbol of the life she could have led had she not stayed in Grimness, and her obsession with this new path begins to override her loyalty to the sadistic Gorm. Just as Ivarsson represents Sven's future, Thora symbolizes his past, a miserable being trapped in a hated society, whose only way out is to dream of a better life in an exotic faraway land. But Sven, repeating his interaction with Ivarsson, only tolerates her insofar as she lets slip useful information on his uncle and his forces. Like Gorm, he too is using Thora to gain intel on his enemy, and his cold manipulations further reinforce the emotional gap he maintains between himself and the Norse population.

In Sven's firm refusal to forge alliances with his countrymen, there is one factor for which he does not account – one of Orkney's denizens is not Norse. His initially hostile interactions with a mysterious woman in the hills slowly develop into mutual respect as she unveils herself as the last Scot in the islands. Like Sven, Enna exists in solitude, but her isolation is due to the death of her clan at the hands of Norse invaders many years earlier. She has been fighting for existence ever since, living in a cave and relying on her exemplary archery skills to defend her territory. A woman of few words, she attacks Sven on their first encounter, signifying the threat she perceives in him – she does not see a Varangian, but rather another Norseman encroaching on her land. Despite his own attempts to differentiate himself from the rest of his people, the only outsider around does not pick up on his calculated presentation.

Sven takes his revenge on Enna by ambushing her camp and destroying her bow. But despite this rough beginning, he soon reconsiders her usefulness in his larger goal when she saves his life during a skirmish with several Grimness warriors. Enna is an established outcast, with the knowledge and infrastructure needed to survive the coming winter. She also shares his hatred of the Norse, and her talents compliment his: she is as skilled with a bow as he is with a sword. Sven extends an olive branch by crafting her a new bow to replace the one he snapped, and soon moves into her cave, though a relationship does not immediately blossom. There are more important matters afoot.

The end of act one comes drenched in blood. Sven's campaign has stretched on for months, and now, in the dead of winter, Hakkar finally strikes back. The retaliation begins with the killing of Ivarsson and his wife, cut down outside their longhouse. Sven's discovery of their bodies sparks his first major emotional moment in the narrative, and is swiftly followed by the revelation that Hakkar has sent a man to Byzantium and killed Sven's lover Zoe, bringing back her head as proof. His shock at the three deaths triggers the lengthy flashback of his origin story, sending Sven back in time to figure out how and why he has ended up at this point. By the end of

[11] Wood, "Sven the Returned," 161.

his recollection, he is a changed man. His initial reasons for traveling back home are now fully relegated to the back burner, and a new purpose takes over – revenge.

Reunification

Sven's quest for vengeance marks the first step in his reevaluation of self. Thus far he has acted solely on his own interests: his weak motives for returning to Orkney – accumulation of unnecessary wealth and desire to show up those who once scorned him – are driven by self-admiration and shallow personal gain. Despite his physical maturity in Constantinople, Sven has not outgrown his childhood pattern of blaming everyone else for his failings, enabling his high self-esteem and allowing that egotism to drive his agenda. But with the deaths of Ivarsson, his wife, and Zoe, Sven finally experiences consequences for his self-obsession. His enemies cannot catch him, so they target those around him, the women and elderly who showed him only kindness and love. Once again, he has failed to shield those closest to him. This time, however, he did not run away – rather, distracted by his own aura, he was not paying attention.

The slayings push Sven to further violence, now committed in the name of those killed. A telling exchange with Enna reveals his developing mindset:

> ENNA: How long are you going to keep doing this?
> SVEN: How many do I have to kill to bring the dead back?
> ENNA: Sven…the dead *don't* come back.
> SVEN: I know they don't. So I'll kill as many as I *can* until I have to join them.[12]

Sven is no longer exclusively pursuing his own agenda, but his bloodlust and sacrifice is not as noble as he makes it seem. As Enna points out, the people for whom he now fights are gone forever. His actions on behalf of the slain thus function as an outlet for his own guilt and rage, which once again centers the situation on himself. Though Sven is growing more aware of his egotism, he is still trapped in its cycle, and he has yet to learn how to value the living while they are still here – Enna, his only ally, suffers from his obsession as, to her dismay and disgust, he decorates her peaceful lair with the heads of the men he kills (figure 9).

But Sven is also grappling with another loss, that of his life in Byzantium. Constantinople was his refuge from the North, offering him a new life and distance from his Orkney roots. Now, with Zoe's murder, it has been desecrated by the Grimness warriors – the barrier between north and south was an illusion, and the apparent ease with which they infiltrated Sven's world has sullied it forever. Along with this violation of his past, Zoe's death also concludes any future he once imagined with her, or with the Varangian Guard. Sven has reached a point of no return, and his hopelessness is inherent in his actions and in the brightly colored art depicting his rampage. Unable to rejoin the ranks of crimson tunics, he settles for the only red he can find in this landscape: blood.

[12] Wood, "Sven the Returned," 226.



Figure 9: Sven adds a personal touch to Enna's hideout; Wood, "Sven the Returned," 227.

Now confronted with the reality of life as a Varangian veteran, Sven is primed for new direction, but cannot find it himself. Fortunately, others on the island have a plan for him. His increasingly bold and reckless attacks draw the attention of a nearby settlement, and a small group of men who had previously rejected his offer to join his fight against Gorm seek him out to reopen talks of an alliance. They address him as "Sven of Orkney," and soon after call him "Norseman" – and for the first time in the story, Sven accepts, and even welcomes, the title. In these men, he finally gains the admiration he had previously been so desperate to find. But while before he wanted only one-sided veneration, now he appreciates the value in mutual esteem. They respect his tenacity, and he respects their humble request for leadership. The scene closes, for once, on a positive note, with Sven cracking a joke as the whole group fills the beach with laughter, much to the relief of Enna, who watches approvingly from afar.

Sven's approval of the title "Norseman" signals the climax of his character arc. Since the story's start, he has been caught between his Varangian life in Constantinople and the Norse heritage that he has tried, and failed, to leave behind. His impulse to return to Orkney is now revealed to stem from a need to reconcile these two identities and heal his fractured interior. As Sven and Gorm's forces gather for the final conflict, Enna compares Sven's divided spirit to that of the island, made up of nominally Norse settlements that despise one another for their

differences, refusing to cooperate. “Don’t let your people break apart from each other, Sven,” she tells him. “Keep your unity and identity. Or you’ll all be lost *forever*.”[13] In the end, Sven’s unique cross-cultural nature makes him the only Norseman capable of mending these wounds. His Varangian experience grants him crucial tools of warfare and leadership, while his extended time abroad has cleared allegiance to any one clan – he is not “Sven of Grimness,” but “Sven of Orkney.”

The day of battle begins with Sven’s acknowledgement of his own personal victory in finding his inner peace. He thanks both his allies and his enemies – they have all contributed to his reconciliation with himself and growth as a character. The dramatic two-page spread illustrating the scene is one of the most striking art pieces in the story, and pays tribute to his new place in the world: though still wearing red, he is no longer the central figure in the crowd, but one of many Norsemen, ready to fight for a cause much larger than himself (figure 10). Sven has found his equilibrium, and now he must put the lessons learned into practice and help his people do the same.

But the narrative holds one more twist. Much as the Norse once arrived to take the land from the Scots, an army of Saxons lands mid-battle to claim Orkney for themselves. Sven, realizing that all hands are needed on deck, does not hesitate to volunteer a truce between his warband and that of Grimness. The alliance is the ultimate test of his development, as he immediately trusts his Varangian instincts for military tactics rather than his personal vendetta against Gorm, to the benefit of all involved. Part of his bid to unite the clans is his statement that “today…we are all just Norsemen,” the first time he has used the term for himself and bringing the story full circle from the very first scene (figure 11).[14]

The battle against the Saxons goes poorly, although its chaos allows for the conclusion of Sven’s vendetta with Gorm. He takes little pleasure in killing his uncle: “My inheritance seemed unnecessary now. And his death would not stop the Saxons.”[15] As the Norse army retreats, Sven acknowledges that his work as unifier has already accomplished its goal. He has shown the men of Orkney how to come together and what they can achieve when they put aside their differences. But he also realizes that the land is theirs, not his, and it is time for him to leave. He orchestrates a theatrical truce with the Saxons to buy the Norse time to get back on their feet and fight another day, and then reaches out to Hakkar, who is more a child of this land than he, passing on Byzantine military tactics and entrusting him with the title of lord of Orkney in his stead.

The final scenes see Sven leaving the islands with Enna. He has found an inner peace between the two sides of his soul, Norse and Varangian, but he has strayed so far from both that neither can offer him a home. His hybrid nature requires a new space where he and Enna, a similarly liminal figure, can forge their own future. They settle in the Faroes, and the epilogue reveals they eventually have a son. As he concludes the story of his life with the infant in his arms, the panels reveal that Sven has finally set his red clothes aside (figure 12). Dressed in the greys and browns of the North, he now values the small and the quiet that Ivarsson once

[13] Wood, “Sven the Returned,” 233.
[14] Wood, “Sven the Returned,” 250-51.
[15] Wood, “Sven the Returned,” 263.



Figure 10: Sven and Gorm prepare for battle; Wood, "Sven the Returned," 236-37.

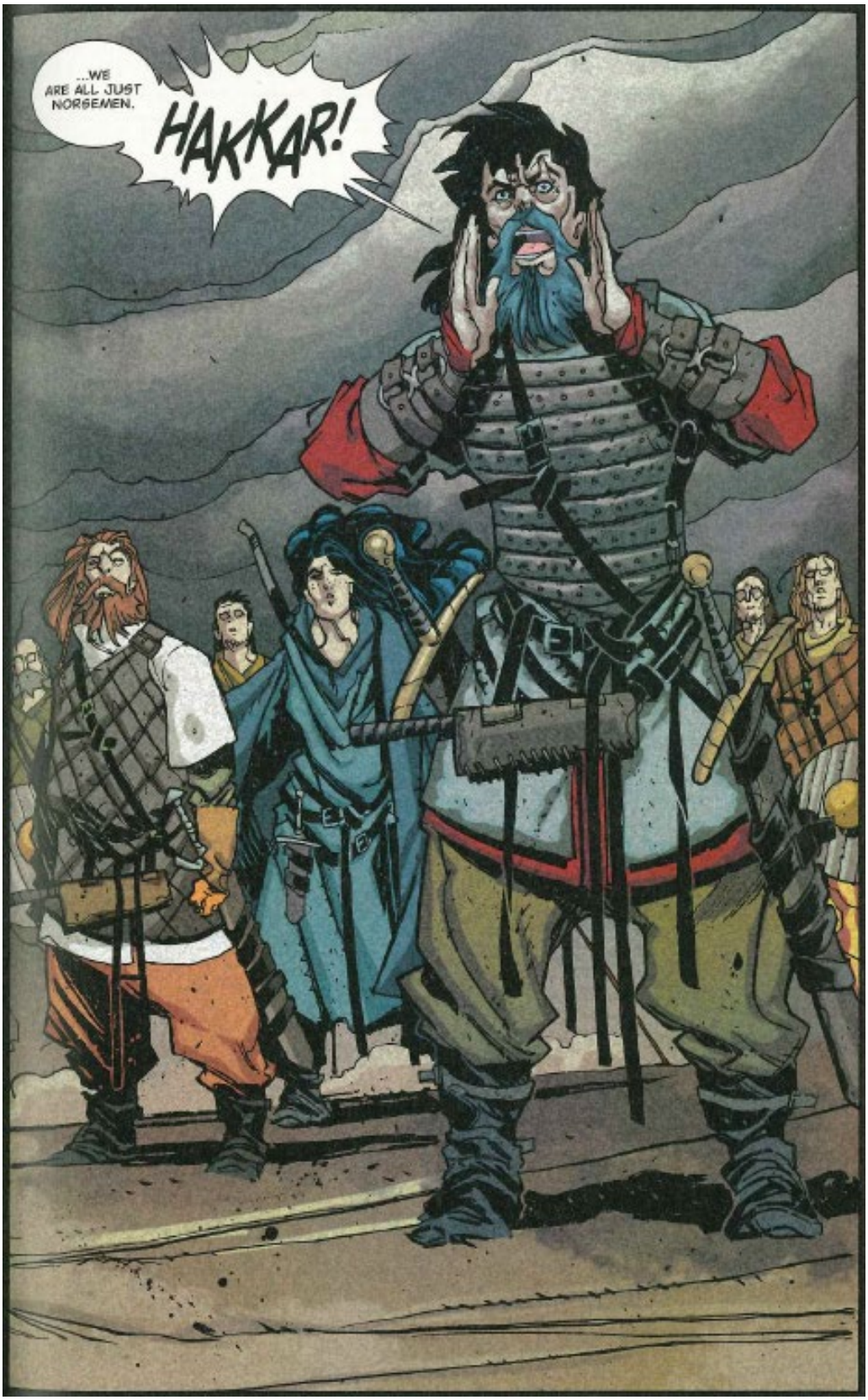


Figure 11: "We are all just Norsemen"; Wood, "Sven the Returned," 251.

described, paying homage to his dual origins through the telling of tales, but finding meaning in the present in a land that is, for now, a blank canvas.



Figure 12: An aging Sven in the Faroes; Wood, "Sven the Returned," 289.

"Sven the Returned" is ambitious in the wide-ranging nature of its premise and settings. The visual distinction between Constantinople and Orkney, and the balancing of Sven as a simultaneously foreign and native character, rely heavily on the use of color schemes, while the varying levels of action are communicated through careful page design. Sven is, at his core, a challenging character to support, as he is self-centered and initially lacks empathy in many of his interactions. These qualities are mediated in the text by his dry humor and in the art by his heroic aesthetic and exciting antics – though we may not always agree with Sven's rationale, he is thrilling to watch, and his arc is natural and authentic.

His embodiment of the medieval Varangian is particularly potent in the narrative's exploration of his hybrid identity and subsequent difficulty in reconciling his Norse and Byzantine characteristics. The fictional constructs of his childhood trauma and enslavement increase the odds in dramatizing a hatred for the North rather than the more neutral disconnect expressed in the sagas due to extended time abroad. But the inherent tension of his inner divide speaks to the globalized world of today, in which multicultural identities have become a frequent talking point. The graphic novel emphasizes the violence and bloodshed of the Viking Age and leans into Sven's identity as an elite soldier as brands of entertainment to draw audiences. But beyond the gore, the extremity of Sven's reckoning holds truths to which many readers living between cultures may relate, communicating the timelessness of such experiences while also reworking the past to better reflect contemporary experiences.

Horizon Zero Dawn

One thousand years in the future, the cities of the American West are in ruins. Nature has reclaimed the land. Complex machines, styled after long-dead animal species, roam freely. Humanity has been reduced to a small population, and lead primitive and desperate lives, wielding bows and spears against the machines and each other. And among their greatest warriors – a unit of elite northern mercenaries, serving as royal body guards to an advanced tropical empire in the south.

This is the world of the *Horizon* franchise, and the setting of the Varangian Guard's most creative revival in modern fiction. Video games are currently leading contributors to the pop culture resurgence of the Viking Age, and many titles directly incorporate the Norse world – primarily mythology, legend, and aesthetic – into their narrative, gameplay, and environments. The Varangian Guard have maintained their presence on the margins of these games, occasionally visible but rarely taking on prominent roles.[16] But the appearance of these warriors in the world of video games has also inspired a degree of creativity – new translations of their identities into different settings, time periods, and cultural backgrounds. *Horizon Zero Dawn*, developed by Amsterdam-based Guerrilla Games and published by Sony Interactive Entertainment in 2017, is a remarkable example of how the Varangian model can be reforged to both expand on themes from medieval literature and introduce new topics that speak directly to modern audiences. Their rebirth in *Horizon* as the futuristic warriors called the Vanguard draws from, and builds on, the game's core themes of trauma, gender, and community to add a unique and evocative component to a vibrant award-winning game.

Background

The premise of *Horizon Zero Dawn* begins with a cataclysmic event in our near future that brings humanity to the brink of extinction. A millennium later, Earth has effectively reset. Humans still inhabit the landscape, primitive and few, divided into tribes and struggling to survive in an increasingly hostile world. The history and knowledge of the "Old Ones" are lost, and the ruins of our civilization, eroded and buried under centuries of plant growth, have been labelled as forbidden and cursed. Mysterious animalistic machines (or "robot dinosaurs") now peacefully maintain the biosphere through a complex ecosystem of their own (figures 13-14). Although the machines have historically been passive towards mankind, they have recently grown hostile, with new and more dangerous machines appearing periodically from the West. The stress of the machines' inexplicable aggression, combined with the tense fallout of a recent war between the tribes, threatens the fragile existence of the human population.

[16] Their most recent major appearance comes in the grand strategy series *Crusader Kings III* (Paradox Interactive, 2020), in which you control and manage countries in medieval Europe, Asia, and Africa. If you rule the Byzantine Empire, you can establish the Varangian Guard and deploy them in your wars. If you rule a Nordic land, you can send family members to join the Guard, whereupon they leave for 3-5 years and return with a "Varangian" trait that boosts their abilities in combat and diplomacy. One of the game's starting characters in its 1066 timeline is Haraldr Sigurðarson, who comes with this trait already. You may also engage in a "Varangian Adventure," allowing you to relocate your kingdom to another region; this mechanic allows for some unusual reworkings of history, and there is an in-game achievement for establishing a culturally Norse kingdom on an island in the Indian Ocean. Beyond the implication of the Varangians' fame in combat and glory, *Crusader Kings'* use of the Guard is not historically informed, and is primarily designed to provide unique gameplay.



Figure 13: A Bellowback flanked by Watchers; Guerilla Games Press Kit, Horizon Zero Dawn.



Figure 14: The series' iconic Tallneck machine; Guerrilla Games Press Kit, Horizon Forbidden West.

In this setting, you play as Aloy, a young woman exiled at birth by her tribe. Aloy's sole desire in life is to find out where she came from, a purpose that leads her beyond her homeland and into the wider world searching for answers. Her only clue is the name of a scientist, Elisabet Sobek, who was involved in saving humanity 1000 years ago. As Aloy seeks the truth of her origins, she ultimately discovers that the cause of humanity's downfall was a robot apocalypse, courtesy of an army of self-replicating war machines fueled by biomass going rogue across the planet and consuming all life in the process. Understanding that humanity would be wiped out no matter what, Sobek organized and led Project Zero Dawn, a global effort to build an AI called GAIA that would outlive humanity, halt the robots, and regrow and repopulate Earth once the planet was safe. GAIA was successful in this endeavor, producing the current world and adding the machines to maintain it. But now one of GAIA's subprograms, HADES, has gone rogue, destabilizing the world and forcing GAIA to recreate the one person who can fix the system, its creator Sobek, in the form of a clone: Aloy.

Aloy is thus the answer to the problems of both past and present. She alone can tackle the work that Sobek initiated a millennium earlier, and prevent the threat of HADES to save her own world in the current day. The task requires Aloy to place herself in danger for the sake of humanity, a daunting task for a character who, raised in exile, long ago learned to rely on no one but herself. Aloy's personal journey throughout the game challenges her high independence and difficulty connecting with others, and slowly sees her help others, build friendships, and, ultimately, put her life on the line for the biggest tribe of all, the entirety of the human race, to accomplish something only she can do.

Genre-wise, *Horizon Zero Dawn* is classified as an open world role-play game (RPG). In an RPG, the player controls one or more fictional characters within a game world – the player does not play as oneself, but "role-plays" a different identity. This genre typically features a core narrative, often in the form of sequential quests that, like chapters of a book, make up the storyline, and the player-controlled character, or avatar, generally undergoes a personal arc in the process. An open world game provides a setting, the world, that is larger than the game story itself, and may be explored outside of quests at any time. Open world games typically have many features in the landscape that would remain undiscovered if one simply stuck to the main story. These features come in many forms – treasure, special activities, upgrades for the avatar (e.g. armor or weapons), or additional world quests that may be unrelated to the main story but help expand and flesh out the world.

The RPG and open world genres are highly compatible in creating dynamic game experiences that provide a structured core narrative while also offering the sensation of free will and endless choice that is so valued by player audiences. In the case of *Horizon Zero Dawn*, the RPG element centers around the main storyline of Aloy's journey, while the open world element allows for additional exploration of this new yet familiar world. *Horizon* is set in the U.S. states of Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, and Arizona, and iconic locations are both recognizable and foreign – Denver is a ruin, while Yellowstone National Park and Monument Valley, impacted by climate change, have become tundra and jungle respectively. There are many secrets to be found in nooks and crannies throughout the world. You can track down treasure chests, finding supplies from the current day or trinkets, like coffee mugs ("ancient vessels") or keyrings ("ancient chimes"), from the Old Ones and their Metal World. You can hunt machines, knocking off components to weaken them and harvesting their parts to craft ammunition or upgrade your weapons. You can acquire new technology to override machines and ride them, or pit them

against each other to help you in battle. You can engage with the many human denizens of the world, who will ask you to help them with problems or tasks, and will reward you with money and additional information about the world. All told, the narrative of *Horizon* is only one part of the experience offered by the game, and the nature of its gameplay systems like combat, crafting, exploration, and questing are equally important in examining the role of the Vanguard in this strange new world.

The Vanguard: Worldbuilding

Horizon's worldbuilding is rich and deep, featuring several tribes that draw on and combine real world cultures with the environment and history of the game's fictional setting. The cyber element of humanity's development alongside machines also factors into their architecture, attire, and level of technological advancement, which is approximately at the early medieval level. The Vanguard are in a unique position in that they are members of one tribe, the Oseram, living among and serving another, the Carja. Although neither is a one-to-one match with the Norse and the Byzantines, both cultures are distinctive, and qualities of both real world civilizations can be seen in their depictions and the roles they play within the game world.

The Oseram are a northern tribe of hardy craftsmen and warriors. Known primarily as "tinkerers," they are the most technologically advanced of the game's tribes, and the only people to have discovered how to smelt and forge iron.[17] This knowledge, and their exceptional curiosity about the function of machines, have led them to develop their own mechanical contraptions, as *Horizon*'s Weapons and Robots Art Director, Roy Postma, explains:

> We conceived of the Oseram as the master tinkerers of *Horizon Zero Dawn*. This allowed us to integrate more mechanically and technically advanced machine elements in their weapons and tools. Integrating them with a roughly medieval level of technology created some surprising results, and we were excited to see how well they worked together.[18]

Although driven by a function-over-form aesthetic, the Oseram appreciate good craftsmanship, visible in the combination of clever design and wear-and-tear in their settlements and attire. As a people, the Oseram are rough around the edges, known as a boisterous population fond of fighting and drinking. Although women legally have a large degree of agency, men typically hold more power, dominating politics, industry, and warfare.[19]

The homeland of the Oseram, the Claim, is never seen in game; instead, their culture is witnessed through travelers and settlers within other tribes' territories. As a result, the player experiences the Oseram through the lens of itinerants, who offer snapshots of the culture rather than a cohesive whole. As a result, the tribe is clearly defined in its major aspects, but retains an air of mystery around details ranging from its history to daily life. Some of the gaps are boosted by in-game discoverable texts, or datapoints, about the Oseram, including one lengthy description of the Claim by a Carja traveler describing the tribe's governing structure, and

[17] Paul Davies, *The Art of Horizon Zero Dawn* (London: Titan Books, 2017), 77.
[18] Davies, *Art of Horizon Zero Dawn*, 89.
[19] "While women are said to be as influential as the men in general leadership, overall Oseram government is male-dominated; women are welcomed and heard during debate, but their place is considered to be in the village, while men handle hunting, excavation and trade." Davies, *Art of Horizon Zero Dawn*, 78.

another detailing the Oseram world myth.[20] Additional information has been offered by Guerilla through interviews or additional publications such as the concept book *The Art of Horizon Zero Dawn* and the graphic novel *Horizon Zero Dawn: Liberation*.

The Oseram have been noted by developers to be one of the game's more abstract tribes, in that they are not based primarily on one culture, but several. One core inspiration came from the Cossacks, while other aspects of the Oseram draw clear parallels to the medieval Germanic world, both Anglo-Saxon and Norse. These elements are visible in titles and naming practices – their leaders are "ealdormen," their raiders are "Freebooters," and Oseram characters have pseudo-Germanic names like Brageld, Jorund, and Thorden. A datapoint indicts a certain Ohlgrud Smithsson on charges including "reneging on blood oaths," also a serious offence in the Norse world, while another passage, written by the humorously judgmental Well-Traveled Aram, echoes the tone of Ahmad ibn Fadlan's 921 encounter with the Volga Rus' in describing a visit to the Claim, rife with critique of filth – "regard for cleanliness is not an Oseram virtue" – and an aside on fouled water.[21] While the Oseram were clearly designed not to match any historical people, enough parallels indicate that Norse culture was at least part of the recipe in their design; moreover, the connection with the Cossacks further encourages a closer look at the imitation of the Varangian Guard as an eastern faction of Scandinavian mercenaries.

The Carja are modeled primarily after medieval India and other cultures across Asia, and the direct parallels between the Carja and the Byzantines are slim at best. However, based on *Horizon*'s world system, I would argue that the Carja Sundom plays a comparable political and cultural role within the universe as the Byzantine Empire in medieval Europe. The Sundom is the largest, wealthiest, and most powerful kingdom in the game. Its centralized government has enabled stability and expansion, and the success of the tribe is visible in features such as the expensive maintenance of its standing army and strong advancements in the arts, including sophisticated decorative architecture and a fondness for mosaics (figure 15). The Sundom is located between the Savage East and the Forbidden West, and both *Zero Dawn* and its sequel, *Horizon Forbidden West* (2022), witness the Carja negotiating with tribes on both sides, similar to Byzantium's position between the Middle East and Western Europe, managing threats and allies in both directions. Finally, the Carja capital, Meridian, is the largest settlement and arguably the only city in either game. Perched atop the lofty mesas of Monument Valley, Meridian is the major nexus of trade and society for the known world. It is also multicultural in both community and construction – while the city proper was built by the Carja, its huge elevators enabling travel between valley and mesa were designed and crafted by the Oseram. Ultimately the Carja reflect many features expected of a powerful early medieval political state, and demonstrate a similar level of cultural advancement and sphere of influence as the Byzantine Empire in the heyday of the Varangian Guard.

The Vanguard stands between these two tribes as Oseram Freebooters now serving the Carja as highly regarded mercenaries and personal bodyguards to the Sun-King (figure 16). This unusual union was founded in the midst of a recent war, when the exiled Carja prince Avad allied with renowned Oseram warrior Ersa to overthrow the brutal reign of his father Jiran. The army they raised together was successful in its goal, installing Avad on the throne as the present Sun-King. Although the rationale behind the formation of the Vanguard has not been revealed in

[20] "The Old Ones," *Horizon Zero Dawn*; "The Claim," *Horizon Zero Dawn*.
[21] "A Summons from the Claim," *Horizon Zero Dawn: The Frozen Wilds*; "The Claim," *Horizon Zero Dawn*.



Figure 15: A mosaic of a Thunderjaw in the Carja capital of Meridian; Horizon Zero Dawn.



Figure 16: Sun-King Avad flanked by two Vanguardsmen; Horizon Zero Dawn.

any current media – whether it was a request made by Avad, an offer by Ersa, or a joint decision – they remain a prominent presence in Meridian two years after the Liberation. Because they are primarily royal bodyguards, they are primarily found in and around the city proper. However, the Vanguard are also entrusted with critical political missions to repair the Carja's relationships with neighboring tribes that were brutalized during the war, including Aloy's own, the Nora.

The Vanguard: Narrative and Gameplay

Aloy first encounters the Vanguard very early in the story, during a trial, the Proving, she undergoes to join the Nora tribe as a full citizen. An emissary from the Carja has come to deliver a message of apology to the Nora from Avad regarding the war, accompanied by Erend, the Vanguard's second-in-command. When the hostile crowd begins protesting the Carja's speech, Erend takes the stage to mediate the tension (figure 17):

> I'm Oseram, not Carja, so I'll put it to you straight: the 13th Sun-King was a murderous bung. He was! A tyrant and a monster. Raided my tribe for blood sacrifice, just like yours. My own sister was taken. I hated the Carja! But the 13th king is dead two years now, and who killed him? The 14th! Not because he lusted for power, but because someone had to put an end to his father's atrocities. The message that this poor priest means to read is an apology. Straight from the lips of the 14th king. So please, can't you lend him your ears?[22]

The success of Erend's speech in calming the gathering operates on several levels. His language is far more casual than that of the emissary, who reads off a formal letter. Erend's words are honest, spontaneous, and grammatically straightforward, with short sentences that are easy to follow and digest. The structure of his discourse is similarly effective: he begins by agreeing with the source of the crowd's rage, the bloodbath initiated by the 13th Sun-King, Jiran. Once he grabs their attention, he is able to set up the dichotomy between the 13th and 14th rulers, casting Avad in a positive light by placing him in opposition with his mad father. Finally, Erend's identity as an Oseram, a neutral third party, makes him a more appealing orator to the Nora, who have no quarrel with his tribe. After all, he too was victimized by the war, and shares their pain and rage. By portraying himself as an example of intertribal unity, Erend is able to reach across cultural boundaries in ways the despised Carja cannot.

The game uses a cinematic cut-scene to depict this sequence, so the player cannot control Aloy during the speech and must focus on Erend's words. But as soon as the Carja emissary returns to read his letter, the cutscene ends and the next quest begins. The player, back in control of Aloy, is encouraged to investigate this new mission. If they pursue it, they will be distracted from the letter's contents because they are focused on performing gameplay. If they choose to stay and listen, the speech will be interrupted by dialogue recommending departure. The emphasis of the scene is thus overtly on Erend's oration – the emissary's words are not important, but the conflict induced by his small role is the vehicle for the Vanguardsman's introduction, in which he comes across as empathetic, straight-forward, relatable, and firmly loyal to the Sun-King.

This impression is confirmed shortly thereafter, when the player is given an opportunity to speak with him directly and ask him about himself and the world at large. Sensing she is

[22] *Horizon Zero Dawn*.



Figure 17: Erend delivers his speech to the Nora, with the Carja emissary in the background; Horizon Zero Dawn.

different from the other Nora, Erend is intrigued by Aloy and takes an immediate liking to her. He is the first character in the game to offer up significant information about the world, and his responses to Aloy's questions reveal that he is well-versed in current affairs involving the Carja, the Oseram, and the recent war due to his high court rank. However, he is by no means an intellectual, and there are limits to his interest and knowledge that leave many topics unanswered – the problem of the hostile machines, for instance, are a mystery to him. As a result, the conversation with Erend offers a window into some of the game's larger topics with enough hints to engage the player's curiosity without giving too much of the game away. At the end of the interaction, Erend asks you to seek him out when you arrive in the Carja capital of Meridian, confirming his place as one of the game's recurring supporting characters.

Once you arrive in the big city, the game prompts you to find Erend as part of the main questline. This sequence introduces the player to Sun-King Avad during a cutscene, a short video clip that suspends the player's ability to control Aloy in order to focus on a narrative sequence. The cutscene format reveals a friendly but formal interplay between ruler and mercenary through both dialogue and animation, which the player, free from the distraction of gameplay, is more likely to pick up on and integrate into their growing image of *Horizon*'s complex intertribal dynamic. In this case, the Vanguard remains under Avad in the Carja hierarchy, but not too far down, holding a degree of familiarity that implies their high standing and the mutual respect they and the Sun-King hold for one another.

However, something is amiss with Erend – he has been drinking, and he is quite distraught. His older sister, Ersa, captain of the Vanguard, has vanished. Erend is now in charge, and he is not managing well, worried about the loss of his idol and doubting his ability to fill her shoes. Noticing similarities between Ersa and Aloy, and attempting to strengthen their budding friendship, Erend asks her to help him find his sister and whoever is responsible for her disappearance.

The ensuing questline about Erend, Ersa, and the Vanguard is a branch of the central storyline, not part of the core narrative, but required for the completion of the game. Although secondary to the larger plot, it is one of the game's strongest, tapping into all three of the game's major themes – gender, community, and trauma. On the first front, the game is very proactive in addressing the role of gender in society. Video games have historically featured male protagonists far more than female ones. In 2015, 9% of avatars were female, compared to 32% male; the other 59% fell into other categories.[23] 2016 saw only 2% female compared to 41% male. In 2017, the year of *Horizon*'s release, 7% were female to 26% male. This trend continued through 2018 and 2019, but 2020 witnessed a huge jump up to 18% female to 23% male. The change reflects growing pressure from video game audiences, who are nearly 50% female, to see more representation in games, while the slow progress may be attributed to the high imbalance of men to women in game development, which is currently around 5:1.

Horizon stands out as a significantly large title featuring an exclusively female character, and it uses its platform to comment on gender issues. The tutorial, Aloy's childhood, is set in a space that favors gender equality, allowing for both narrative and character to be established in a fairly neutral zone before taking on some of the game's more challenging topics. Aloy's tribe, the

[23] Of the remaining percentage, 46% offered multiple options for gender based on the player's choice, and 13% did not have a gender (often first person games in which you cannot see the avatar). Anita Sarkeesian and Carolyn Petit, "More Video Games Featured Women This Year. Will It Last?" *Wired*, October 15, 2020.

Nora, is highly matriarchal, and all positions of power are held by women. In this context, the protagonist's impressive accomplishments are in line with her native cultural expectations. But men are similarly respected in this community – Aloy is raised and trained by her male mentor Rost, and her success as an athlete and warrior has stemmed from a combination of his teaching and her tenacity.

Beyond Nora lands, however, things are not always so equal. Much of the rest of the world is set in Carja territory, and theirs is a patriarchal society, strongly favoring men in power. Here, Aloy continues to distinguish herself, but is now confronted by varying degrees of sexism. The most potent forms, however, target other NPCs with whom Aloy is associated. A particularly strong storyline centers on the Hunter's Lodge, an elite intertribal society based in Meridian. These hunters specialize in taking down the most dangerous and powerful machines, and have always been led by men. However, the recent war has wiped out many young male hunters, and for the first time a woman, Talanah, has joined the Lodge, taking the place of her deceased father and brother. Her progress in the Lodge is impeded by Ahsis, its current Sunhawk, or leader, a spiteful man who sees only her gender and not her immense potential. When Aloy joins the Lodge after completing hunting challenges around the world, she is assigned as Talanah's trainee. But Ahsis' attempt to lumps the women together in the hopes of keeping them out of the way backfires dramatically. After a lengthy questline, the player helps Talanah rise to the position of Sunhawk, ousting Ahsis and his cronies entirely. In her ascension, Talanah becomes the first woman to lead the Hunter's Lodge. Some of the male hunters are thrilled, while others are not, and the populace is similarly divided – once you finish this story, you may overhear the city's population discussing this unusual occurrence as a positive or negative sign of cultural progression.

The game's decision to imbue the narrative of sexism in another character makes use of a unique narrative tactic available in video games, in which the protagonist is not actually the player, but a non-player character (NPC). There are limitations to fleshing out avatars because game writers must always leave space for the player to insert themself and "finish" the character with their own personality, worldview, and goals. There is also a degree of separation between the player and the fictional universe – the player inhabits both the real world and the game world, and may choose to check out of the latter at any time. Developers have much more control over NPCs, as their distance from the player allows for the creation of more complete characters who maintain an undivided focus on the game world, their only reality. As a result, NPCs make for compelling protagonists that facilitate audience immersion in the world while offering alternative perspectives with which the player may not otherwise be convinced to engage.

As part of a tripartite classification model of emotional experiences in video games, Andrew Walsh has argued that games may engage directly or indirectly with emotion on the part of the player.[24] As opposed to *simulation*, in which the emotion depicted in a game matches the one triggered in the player, *representation* means that the emotion depicted in the game is *not* the same emotion that the player feels, but rather induces a different emotional state. Walsh has pointed out that representation creates space between the emotion and the player, which is advantageous for games dealing with subjects too intense and challenging to explore directly through simulation. Because *Horizon Zero Dawn* is a game designed to invite players into its

[24] Andrew Walsh, "Press Y to Cry: Generating Emotions in Videogame Narrative" (presentation, GDC, virtual, July 2021).

emotional experience rather than scare them off, the gendered hostility expressed by Ahsis would be out of sync and difficult for audiences to experience directly through simulation, and distressing for them to witness it performed on their beloved avatar Aloy. The positioning of Talanah as the protagonist and target of such fervent enmity creates additional space between the discourse and the player, reducing the chance of a negative response on the part of the audience while inviting them to think more critically about the implicit commentary on sexism, toxic masculinity, and female empowerment.

The Vanguard storyline, comparable to the Hunter's Lodge in size and scope, similarly challenges the topic of gender, but from the opposite direction. While the Hunter's Lodge sees Aloy assisting a fellow woman, the Vanguard sees her helping a man, Erend, who is struggling with his identity and definition of masculinity. Erend is in an unusual position – he is an Oseram warrior in male-dominated profession, from a tribe that predominantly values men in combat. His idea of martial leadership is thus strongly influenced by his tribe's views on men and masculinity. At the same time, his hero and role model is his older sister Ersa, one of the few high-ranking female warriors in Oseram society and one of the greatest fighters in the known world. Even in Ersa's absence, her presence is potent throughout the storyline, and Erend's reverence for her and everything she has endured and accomplished paints a picture stronger than she herself would have created had she been on the screen. Erend is thus caught between the two genders – up until now, he has modeled himself after both the hypermasculine warrior and his sister's distinct leadership style. Shielded by Ersa from much of the Oserams' gendered hierarchy, he has been free to develop on his own terms and pick his own idols. In her absence, however, he is now in the spotlight, with his irregularities on full blast. Should he pick traditional Oseram masculinity or Ersa's more nuanced approach? Never the intellectual, Erend is unable to make a decision, and, stuck, he has ceased to move forward at all.

In a compelling twist, it is only with the help of another woman, Aloy, that Erend has a chance to prove, to both himself and others, what kind of man he really is. Despite his hypermasculine persona, the fact that Erend's first instinct when asking for help is to seek out Aloy, who, by his own admission, reminds him of Ersa, shows how far he has strayed from the classic male Oseram worldview thanks to the influence of his sister, reinforced by his own innate openminded nature that draws him towards paths even he does not fully understand. As a result, he is highly receptive to the advice given to him by the player, via Aloy, right from the start.

The story's gameplay encourages this connection between the two characters. Soon after you encounter Erend, news arrives that Ersa has been found – dead. The site of the killing is north of the city, on a plateau topped with massive disintegrating satellite dishes. Erend, suspicious of the report's veracity, asks you to join him at the site to investigate further. Although the body has already been removed, the site is largely undisturbed, and the open world mechanic shifts into a minigame in which the player must search for evidence of a cover-up. Erend waits nearby, as he does not have access to the technology Aloy uses to scan the area. His reliance on you suits your role as the hero of the story, but also reinforces his position within this quest narrative – as much as you the player are the driving force in moving the game forward, Aloy the avatar is the driving force in helping Erend unravel the mystery and evolve as a character.

At the same time, Erend's need for Aloy also addresses her own journey learning to be part of a community rather than operating as an isolated individual. Because of Erend's role as one of Aloy's first potential friends, and because he is written in a manner that makes him both

entertaining and likable, the player is encouraged by the game to help him out; after all, he has dedicated his own time and energy helping you. But aiding in Erend's quest to find Ersa and himself provides an important step forward for Aloy. On a basic level, she is one individual helping another, a model within her comfort zone as an independent solo traveler. But in aiding Erend, she is also aiding the Vanguard, and in aiding the Vanguard, she is aiding two tribes, the Oseram and the Carja. Although the narrative does not overtly address these connections in these early quests, Aloy is slowly being introduced to the concept of putting the community before the individual. Moreover, the bond Aloy forms with Erend throughout this questline also forms the basis for a new community, this time focused around her. This group becomes relevant during the game's finale, in which the friends she has made throughout the game come together as her allies to help her in the final battle against HADES.

The developing friendship between Aloy and Erend is again reinforced by gameplay in the quest itself. After finding the necessary clues, Aloy figures out that the dead body is not Ersa, but a decoy so that the Vanguard leader could be captured alive. But before they can decide their next move, Erend and Aloy are beset upon by several attackers. Unlike the clue sequence, which Aloy does on her own while Erend waits, both of them participate in fighting off the enemies. Although, as a player, you could have handled them on your own, Erend's identity as a Vanguardsman begs his involvement in the skirmish – he is, after all, a renowned warrior. Skipping a fight would be out of character for him, and would break the player's immersion. Narratively, his participation also serves as a further reminder that Aloy really does need other people to make it in this world, contrary to her own opinion. Erend proves himself a staunch ally in this sequence – it is the first time we see him in combat, and he lives up to his reputation; but more than that, we are given clear evidence that he has her back. Although the dialogue tells us as much, the gameplay and quest structure, combining the activities of independent clue searching and allied combat, works with the narrative to reinforce both Erend's need for Aloy's and his impulse to support her as both an ally and a trusted friend.

Once the enemies are dispatched, Erend tells Aloy that he will check the body that was found here, and to meet him in Meridian. Here we have an opportunity to take our time exploring the world on our way back – or to not go back at all. Our initial meeting with Erend when he asks for our help also opens the next chapter in the main storyline, in which Aloy must travel to the northern edge of the map. From a geographical perspective, it makes sense to do the Vanguard sequence at the mesa on your way to the main quest objective in the far north. Or you could do it on the return journey. Either way, unless you are dying to know what happened to Ersa, there is a good chance that the average player will be engaged in other activities for a significant period before they return to Erend in Meridian.

This kind of approach to narrative is rare in other media, but extremely common in video games. Barring strictly linear games, developers do not know the pace at which individual players will experience their story. This is especially true of open world games. Large titles like *Horizon Zero Dawn* take many hours to complete – the main questline of the base game on normal difficulty takes around 30 hours of play time, without engaging in extra activities or actively exploring the world.[25] The average player completing all side missions and achievements will spend around 80 hours in game. My first playthrough, as someone who has to see and do *everything*, took 125 hours. Every player brings different priorities to the table. They

[25] The game has six levels of difficulty: story, easy, normal, hard, very hard, and ultra hard.

might exclusively play the story, in which case they will experience each chapter in subsequent form. Or, like me, they might wander for hours between quests, unlocking new regions, collecting artifacts, and engaging with other small activities in between. Furthermore, open world games actively encourage a slower pace regarding the central narrative. Exploring the game world allows you to level up, acquire stronger gear, and obtain new items and tools that help you in the main story. So you are never penalized for going off on your own – in fact, you might have a harder time completing the game if you do not go off to empower yourself within the larger world.

Because the Vanguard questline is a branch of the main story, it automatically takes second place in most player's priorities. Erend has proven himself early on as a figure who is knowledgeable about the current world, and working with him to solve Ersa's disappearance promises to enlighten the player further about the problems and history of the modern day. The core questline is also concerned with this topic, but its primary focus is on what happened 1000 years ago. Erend is fully ignorant on this matter, so if the player is more interested in Aloy, the end of our civilization, and why these dangerous machines keep attacking us, they will naturally be drawn first to the main quest. As a result, most players will experience large gaps in the middle of the Vanguard story.

This model holds unique challenges from the narrative perspective, as players may forget where they are in the story if enough time and adventures have passed. The game attempts to combat this problem through dialogue, as Aloy will comment upon entering Meridian that she should really go see Erend about the unidentified corpse to remind the player that they have a partially finished questline in the area. But the format also has its advantages – the player is responsible for checking back in with Erend, who will not move forward without you checking in. From a game design perspective, this quality challenges the immersion of a dynamic living world that functions with or without the player, but, in our case, further reinforces Erend's need for Aloy.

Exploring the world between quests also helps enhance the questline itself, because as you explore the world, you learn more about it. One prominent way in which *Horizon* leverages its world to tell a larger story is through world quests. World quests are independent of the main storyline, and are typically offered by NPCs scattered throughout the game world. These characters are marked with an exclamation point above their heads, and will engage with you if you talk with them. World quests are a common gameplay feature of open world RPGs, but *Horizon* uses them to great effect, as all of them tap into and reinforce larger themes within the game itself.

A key feature of these world quests is trauma following the brutal war during which the Vanguard was founded, and which concluded shortly before the game's present day. The conflict is introduced early in the main narrative, but its aftermath is most visible in *Horizon*'s open world content. Sometimes it emerges through dialogue and worldbuilding, as in the depiction of the Nora tribe, which suffered massive losses during the war, losing most of its population and much of its land. The Nora are an historically xenophobic people, with strict laws about who can access their lands. The war has only ramped up this aspect of their worldview, and their extreme distrust of outsiders goes hand in hand with their comments, to Aloy and to each other, about the people that perished in the war. Every Nora, it seems, has lost someone to the Carja, and their hatred of the outside world extends to mandatory exile for all Nora who leave their homeland for

any reason. Aloy is exempt from this law, as she is given permission by the matriarchs for her own journey, but many Nora encountered in the wider world are not so fortunate.

The world quests offer a similar perspective on the war. These stories are small, and often take only a short time to complete. But they offer insight into the everyday lives of the people in the world of *Horizon*. Among these quests that tap into war trauma, some deal with the war's survivors: an Oseram man outside Meridian asks for help preserving the memory of his partner, while a Carja man is robbed of a treasured heirloom that was passed down from his soldier father, and needs help recovering it. Other perspectives come from the younger generation, who did not fight, but now live in this post-conflict world: a young woman searching for her missing lover, whose family fought on the other side of the war from her own, must keep their love a secret from their parents. These diverse perspectives on the war fill in gaps in what we know about the conflict and humanize the facts we receive at the start of the game. We have heard the perspective of the main characters, who are leaders in the world. But through the world quests, we learn about the everyday people, from poor farmers to wealthy nobles, and how the war has affected them in every aspect of their lives.[26]

The war narrative is central to that of the Vanguard, who were formed because of the conflict, and whose continued existence is driven by a need to keep the peace between formerly warring tribes. Both Erend and Ersa are veterans, and Ersa in particular suffered terribly in the conflict, surviving an attempted human sacrifice and slavery before being freed in secret by Avad. As it turns out, once you arrive back in Meridian to meet Erend about the decoy corpse at the site of Ersa's kidnapping, he and Avad deduce that her captor is in fact an old foe from the war, a fellow Oseram named Dervahl. Although initially an ally of Erend and Ersa's, fighting alongside Avad's Carja to save the tribe, Dervahl went mad after his family was killed and ultimately turned against his former allies. Now, several years later, he is seeking his vengeance, starting, but not ending, with Ersa.

Once this revelation has been unearthed, the Vanguard questline begins to spin into high gear. The stakes are rising – now we know that Ersa is still alive, and that this is likely only the beginning of Dervahl's plan. But Erend is also out for blood, and although he still needs your help, his rage is beginning to boil over, spurring him into greater action than before now that he has a target in his sights. This is the kind of mission Erend is built for: he is not a complex man, and mysteries and politics are not his bailiwick. Instead, his strength lies in his martial prowess – give him a target and a weapon, and he will deliver.

The combination of the acceleration of the plot and the heightened action role Erend will now take on leads to larger developments in the quest's gameplay as well. So far we have engaged in a scavenger hunt and fought a few weaker enemies. But as the player travels north with Erend and his men to seek out Dervahl's hideout, the game's difficulty increases as we are confronted by Dervahl's welcoming committee of more powerful machines and human foes. Just as the enemies increase, however, so too do the allies. While Aloy has so far worked with Erend

[26] The open world content on trauma is not limited to world quests about the current day. You can also find fragments of text and audio in ruins from the past that offer brief insights into the lives of the Old Ones (us) around the time their world was coming to an end. Many datapoints, in the form of diaries, emails, news articles, and other records, acknowledge the coming apocalypse, and capture emotional responses from people of all walks of life trying to come to terms with the fact that their deaths are imminent and that humanity has almost no hope of a future.

alone, their operation has now grown to include several of his Vanguardsmen. From a gameplay perspective, their presence on the battlefield eases the difficulty of being beset by so many enemies. But they also signal the growth of Aloy's sphere of influence – while her alliance with Erend began as a personal favor between two individuals, her dedication to his cause in saving the Vanguard's leader has also earned her an alliance with the Vanguard itself.

Upon entering Dervahl's workshop after the fight, Ersa is finally found. The good news is that she is alive – the bad news is that she is fatally injured, and Dervahl is already gone. In a moving cutscene, Erend holds Ersa and they exchange their final words. Warning him and the player that Dervahl's real target is Meridian, she tells him bluntly: "Your king needs you. No more playing around – you're going to have to grow up fast."[27] Erend vows not to let her down as she dies (figure 18).

The death of Ersa marks the end of the second phase of the questline, and paves the way for the final act. Erend's priority in finding her is obvious – she is his older sister and idol, and his reasons are highly personal. But Ersa's final comments remind him of his other allegiance. Now that Ersa is dead, Erend is the leader of the Vanguard, and that comes with additional responsibilities that up until now he has been neglecting in his grief and confusion. The Vanguard serves the Sun-King, and the Sun-King is now in direct danger. Although Erend the Oseram would prioritize the fate of his sister, Erend Vanguardsman must hold the safety of the Sun-King higher than his personal relationships. So far he has failed in this duty, wallowing in alcohol and allowing his grief and guilt to take over. But now, confronted with a real threat to his liege, it is time for him to step up and accept the mantle of leadership, because if he doesn't, no one will.

And fortunately he is not alone. After all this set-up, the player is now ideally invested in finishing this narrative. As we gear up for the final battle back in Meridian, the importance of the questline to Aloy's development increases once again. Her alliance with Erend has grown into an alliance with the Vanguard, and now that alliance has grown again into one with the Sun-King Avad. While he has previously expressed a strong liking for you, he now doubles down on his investment in your success by revealing that he and Ersa were lovers. A favor in finding Ersa turned out to also be a personal favor to one of the most powerful political figures in *Horizon*'s world, and a friendship with him comes with the allegiance of his people. Within this questline alone, Aloy has gone from a solo traveler to a champion of two tribes, Oseram and Carja, resulting in a firm alliance with both that will pay off in the main questline.

The final quest of the series sees Aloy and Erend diffusing a large bomb designed to destroy Meridian. Aloy takes on a primary role in the confrontation of Dervahl, during which both Erend and Avad are incapacitated. Their fates lie in the player's hands, and Dervahl, as the final boss of the questline, presents a significant challenge. But the real sign of Erend's growth emerges once Dervahl has been taken down. Erend's instinct throughout the later questline is to kill Dervahl himself for what he did to Ersa. But before the final battle, Avad requests that Dervahl be kept alive. Once Aloy has defeated the mad Oseram, Erend is the first on the scene, and sees a chance to kill Dervahl. The Vanguardsman has a choice to make – follow through with his personal vendetta or act in the name of his king. After a moment's hesitation, Erend lowers his war hammer and knocks out his foe instead (figure 19). In a sense, one might argue that his hand has

[27] "Into the Borderlands," *Horizon Zero Dawn*.

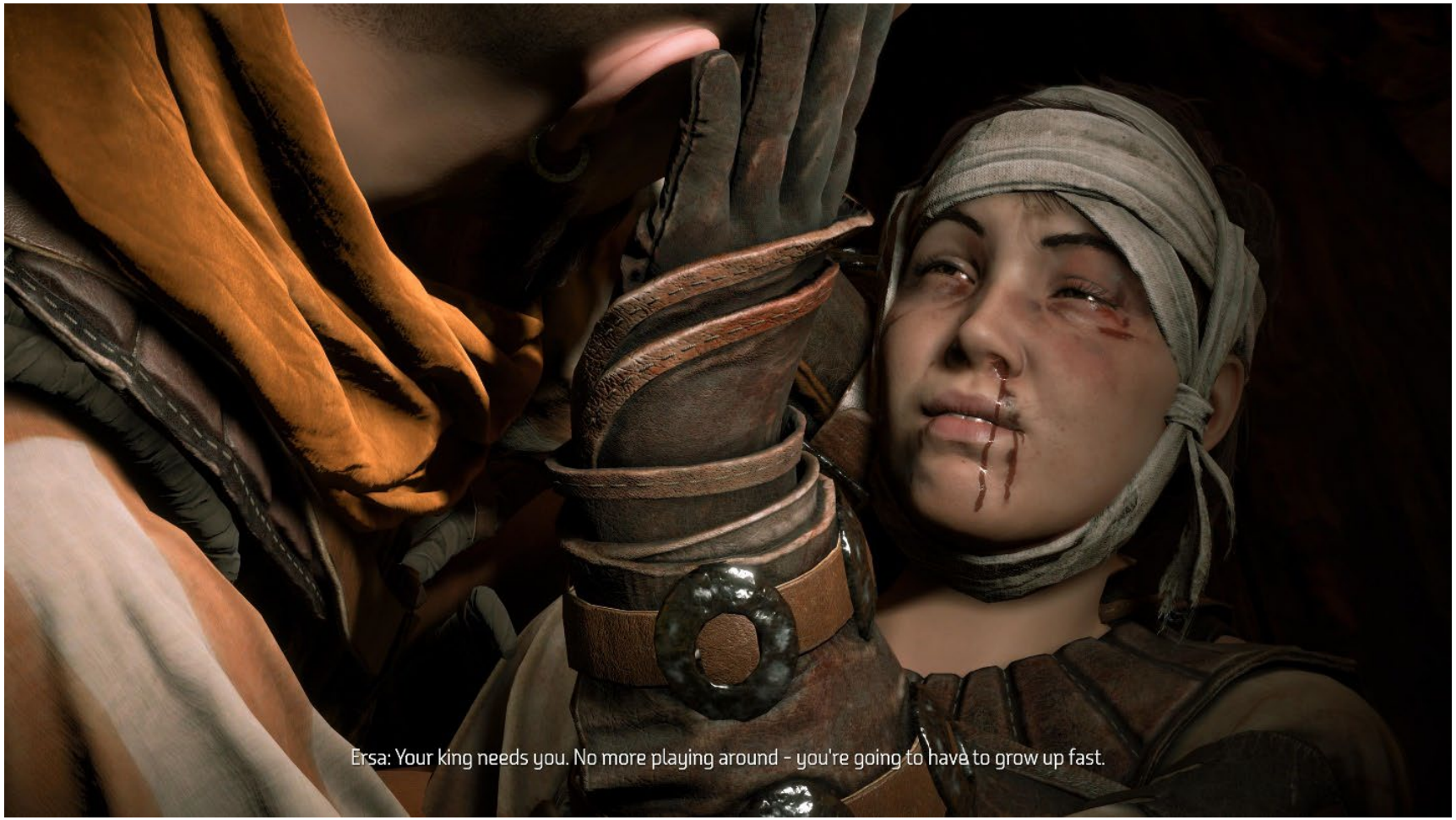


Figure 18: Ersa's untimely demise; Horizon Zero Dawn.



Figure 19: An unconscious Dervahl is dragged away by the Vanguard; Horizon Zero Dawn.

been stopped by the ghost of Ersa – but Erend himself has also grown up as promised, choosing to follow his sister's lead in her loyalty to Avad while allowing himself a small taste of violent justice, striking a balance on his own that signals a new chapter for him as an embodiment of both Ersa's leadership and his own brand of male Oseram aggression.

Beyond *Zero Dawn*

The bond formed between Aloy and Erend through the course of *Horizon Zero Dawn* comes full circle during the game's final battle, in which the Vanguard unite with other allies under Aloy to take HADES head on. The development of their friendship through both narrative and gameplay encourages a bond between player and character that draws strength from the multilevel storytelling made possible by the video game format. The contribution of the Vanguard questline to the overall themes of the game ground these concepts in concrete actions and dialogue that remain with the player long after they put down the controller.

The popularity of Erend, both within Guerrilla's studio and among global audiences, has manifested further renditions of his character. *Horizon Zero Dawn: Liberation* (2022) is a graphic novel set during the events of the game, following Erend and Aloy as they pursue a member of Dervahl's crew. The narrative offers additional backstory about the Liberation of Meridian by Ersa and Avad, and how Dervahl came to be their sworn enemy. *Horizon Forbidden West* (2022) is the sequel game to *Zero Dawn*, in which Aloy continues her journey to resolve old and new problems facing humanity. Erend is again a prominent supporting character, appearing as the Oseram representative of Aloy's intertribal faction. He participates in a small quest later in the game, helping Aloy defeat yet another of Dervahl's followers leading an anti-Carja rebel group. One prominent addition to his character in *Forbidden West* is his engagement with Aloy's advanced technology, used to compile and study large amounts of data about the past (figure 20). Though the intellectually disinclined Vanguardsman struggles as a student, he pursues the task to the best of his abilities on his own terms – mainly to the soundtrack of a dissonant homemade rock song from the original game that he finds in the archives.

The Vanguard mercenaries add nuance to the world of *Horizon* as modern counterparts to their medieval forebears. Their engagement with trauma reflects that of the Varangian Guard in the sagas – they are forged in war, and are continually haunted by past enemies that refuse to allow their transition to more peaceful times. The gender narrative is a new addition, with Ersa's role as the founder and leader of the Vanguard marking a departure from the historically male unit. Her leadership and Erend's struggle to find his own definition of masculinity are closely tied to current conversations and changing perceptions on gender. The contribution of the Vanguard to the community narrative is context-specific to the game's core story about Aloy's character arc. In their three-pronged purpose in *Horizon*'s narrative, then, these warriors embody one connection to the past, one to the present, and one to the internal story, maintaining the Varangian balance of tying back to a topos while adapting to new eras, settings, and audiences.

One feature that has yet to be fully explored in the Vanguard's story is their position between two cultures. Erend's introductory speech in *Zero Dawn* emphasizes his role as mediator for the Carja and Nora due to his neutral Oseram heritage, while *Forbidden West* includes a handful of text and dialogue lines indicating that the Vanguard are perceived by some Oseram as semi-outsiders or even traitors due to their allegiance to the Sun-King. The mercenaries have not been



Figure 20: Erend engages with new technology; Horizon Forbidden West.

overtly portrayed in the series as a multicultural group, but a handful of characters in *Forbidden West* are shown to straddle two tribes, opening the door for further exploration of intertribal identities.[28] Whether the Vanguard, living in the heart of Carja culture, have or will adapt to their surroundings to form any level of hybridity remains to be seen in future entries.

The Varangian Today

The reworking of the Varangian Guard in modern media reinforces its staying power, established in the medieval sagas, as a powerful vehicle of storytelling. Many of the Varangians' core literary qualities have persisted – they are impressive warriors, often wealthy, who merge cultures and voice perspectives shared by no one else in their narratives. They also remain malleable, distinct from one another and featuring characterizations highly dependent on the context of their surrounding stories. Much as they spoke clearly to audiences in the Middle Ages, so too do they continue to proactively communicate with today's world, successfully transitioning into new media formats and engaging with universal issues. Some of these topics carry over from their medieval origins, including multiculturalism, trauma, and veteran identity, while others are more recent additions, such as violence, gender, and community.

One point of evolution in their legacy is the decreasing relevance of their historical identity. The Haraldr sources provide a combination of history and fiction, emphasizing the latter but preserving some elements rooted in fact, such as the blinding of Michael V and the identity of Haraldr himself. Later sagas maintained some historical figures, such as Halldórr Snorrason, while continuing to advance fictional narratives surrounding them; but more often writers created new characters, like Þorsteinn drómundr and Þorkell Þjóstarsson, who carried on the identity but not the history. *Northlanders* taps into this tradition, making a point to define the Varangian Guard and placing it within the context of the Viking Age. Sven is of course entirely fictional, and, like *Grettis saga*, the story adds its own parameters to the Guard with the narratively convenient rule that those who leave its ranks cannot return. Thus Sven transmits the title of Varangian, but, in the same manner of the sagas, customizes both the unit and the mercenary to fit the story the author is trying to tell.

Horizon Zero Dawn excises this context entirely. There is no Viking Age in this world, so the historical basis of the Varangians is even less relevant than in other texts. To those familiar with this narrow piece of the past, their original name is echoed in the new title "Vanguard," but the vast majority of players will register a fictional moniker with no prior association. This departure marks a new era – first the characters were detached from history, and now the institution itself is

[28] The most prominent of these characters is Fashav, cousin of Sun-King Avad, who was born Carja and taken captive by the Tenakth, a tribe introduced in *Forbidden West*, as a prisoner of war. Fashav joins the Tenakth and adopts their visual appearance, behavior, and values over the course of several years, but still considers himself part Carja. The player encounters him on his way back to the Sundom, where he plans to negotiate a truce between the two tribes by leveraging his membership in both. Unfortunately, he is killed shortly thereafter. A handful of minor characters are also shown to have switched tribes. Jaxx is a Tenakth warrior who was traded to the agricultural Utaru tribe to teach them how to fight. He is depicted in Utaru clothing with visible Tenakth tattoos, and admits to Aloy that he initially struggled to integrate into his new home, but has now found his peace. A questline shows him helping a younger Tenakth, Korreh, also join the Utaru tribe. One other character, Nessa, is born Carja but, like Fashav, became Tenakth after being captured during the war. She is not truly a hybrid character, as she has fully embraced her Tenakth identity, rejecting her Carja roots and changing her name to Ritakka.

removed. But there are still enough traces of the original mercenaries to detect their presence: they are inspired by Germanic and Slavic cultures, they are elite warriors from the north, and they serve as bodyguards in a powerful southern kingdom. In the context of *Horizon*, the model is far more important than any label, so as not to weigh down a new world with too many old faces.

Can such warriors be classified as Varangians if they are unrecognizable to all but a select few? In truth, this question could be asked of any Norse Varangian after the 12th century. They are united by their literary tradition as reflections of a core motif that diverge from one another at every turn. The Varangian Guard's true origins have long ceased to matter – instead, the mercenaries' survival have been enabled by their capacity to be leveraged as storytelling devices, and their longevity has been determined by the favorable reaction of audiences to their presence. The entry of the Guard into modern fiction reflects these same practices, making Sven and Erend natural successors to this still-evolving tradition.

Conclusion

The tradition of the Varangian Guard in literature preserves a far more cohesive "history" of their existence than the little that remains of their factual origins. This history is less reflective of the mercenaries themselves, and more so of the authors who crafted them and the audiences who received them. Although the Varangians are identifiable by their commonalities, the meat of their lasting presence in fiction is found in their differences from one another. These variations reflect their wide range of contributions to the literary sphere as authorial tools created to observe, comment upon, and critique societal moments and trends across ages.

What makes the Varangians so compelling as a vehicle of commentary is their basis in idealistic, larger than life imagery. Elite soldiers are idolized for their physicality, accomplishments, and self-sacrifice, and their heroic stature reflects an interpretation of humanity at its finest. But the nuances of these dimensions evolve across time and place, and prove highly dependent on the values of author, audience, and society. This is the narrative of the Varangians – the long afterlives of these men are characterized by the developing concept of the ideal projected upon them.

Much like the Varangian topos, Haraldr Sigurðarson is himself deliberately constructed around an archetype: Norse royalty. A ruler according to the sagas should be generous and wise, an excellent fighter and general who possesses great wealth and charisma. Haraldr riffs off this standard, but his sources add variation to distinguish him from other kings, contributing qualities such as his cunning nature, poetic inclinations, and quick temper. Because he is an historical figure, many of his characteristics are likely rooted in truth, individually exaggerated or diminished in each narrative depending on the author's agenda and opinion of his reign. His historic association with the Varangian Guard as the environment of his early development imbues subsequent mercenaries with elements of this royal topos. As a result, the unit's depiction in the sagas develops out of this pre-established kingship motif, endowing the warriors with a level of influence that enhances their exclusivity as revered guards of the Byzantine court.

Haraldr's polarizing reign resulted in both positive and negative depictions of his character in the medieval sources, and even his more laudatory sagas do not shy away from revealing his faults and weaknesses. Subsequent Varangians do not share the same obligations to historicity and political commentary. Bolli Bollason and Þorsteinn drómundr sidestep the realism in which

Haraldr is grounded, and their entrances at the end of their sagas, when the story is wrapping up and has no room for further complexity, do not invite critical depictions of their flaws. Instead, they are pure forms of success, representing the ideal of their era as perceived by writers of the 13th and 14th centuries. For Bolli, this means Viking Age success, harkening back to Haraldr's homecoming through associations with gold, *pell*, and exquisitely attired followers. For Þorsteinn, who represents a later form of hero to offset Grettir, achievement is demonstrated through his social, romantic, and religious triumphs.

Within their respective narratives, these men are much beloved, highly praised by other characters and devoid of blemish. From a reader's perspective, more critique may be found. Both men are so accomplished that few if any audience members can truly relate to them; they are immaculate and, while pleasing to imagine and project upon, they are not sustainable for lengthy narratives. Bolli and Þorsteinn are relatively shallow in their Varangian sequences. Although Bolli's voyage to Constantinople adds to the larger picture of his life, the passage itself holds little action and is easily overshadowed by more dramatic scenes, such as the vengeance for his father's death and even his compelling question for Guðrún. Þorsteinn's pursuit and slaying of Þorbjǫrn ǫngull is an exciting episode driven by suspense and violence, but once he settles into Constantinople, the angst that drove him to avenge his half-brother fades away, and he falls flat as a character. There is nothing inherently wrong with his persona – and that is precisely the problem. His biggest flaw is that he is simply too pristine, and thus far less interesting than the other characters in the saga. Perhaps this is why the author saw fit to replace him with Spes as protagonist.

The ideal of the elite is challenged in the depiction of Varangian veterans. Separated from their picture-perfect expeditions, these characters are knocked back into the real world by the sagas' indomitable fascination with the complexities of the human experience, making them more readily accessible to the everyday reader. The veterans display relatable flaws, often drawing on other archetypes aligned with contemporary perspectives and anxieties. Halldórr Snorrason's disagreeable nature is influenced by the grumpy Viking trope omnipresent in the sagas. His weaponization of this attribute in his clash with Haraldr offers commentary on the larger 13th century debate surrounding Iceland's future apropos Norway. On a narrative level, the focus on his storytelling skills speaks to authorial concerns about verifying the kings' sagas, and adds further fuel to the central Varangian narrative of Haraldr. Bolli continues his legacy as the ideal man in *Bolla þáttr*, but engages with more mundane occurrences, illustrating methods by which average social problems may be successfully resolved with minimal fallout. This angle is most apparent in the Helgi incident, where legal formula plays out in narrative form in a manner that is both educational and entertaining.

Darker emotions of social digression and trauma are found in the portrayals of Gríss Sæmingsson and Þorkell Þjóstarsson. Gríss is tricky to parse due to his minor role and formulaic depiction as the dull husband of the skald sagas, but his lack of action and heavy reliance on the aid of others run so counter to the depiction of Varangians elsewhere that he must be drawing from a new source of inspiration. His character is contradictory: though he is designed as the butt of jokes, his closing speech holds a level of pathos that undermines the humor of earlier pages. Gríss comes across as a man trying to live a normal life by keeping his head down and maintaining peace and equilibrium. In this sense, the comedy is perhaps not so much Hallfreðr's attempts to make his rival look foolish, but his obnoxious disruptions of the quiet existence the Varangian so desperately seeks. Gríss is smart in his choices, forgiving when possible and acting

when necessary, and he requests and follows good advice with consistently positive results. As a character who reflects on his past but does not let it dominate his present, his choices reveal similar success to Bolli in managing social situations, but at a lower and more trivial level that was likely more relatable for the average Icelandic audience member.

Unlike his fellow veterans, Þorkell is unique in his lack of basis in a topos beyond the Varangian. The relative depth of his character seems instead to be informed by the author's observations of veterans in society. Both Þorkell's words and actions imply a significant understanding of the effects of trauma and the challenges of reintegrating into one's native society. He is a solid example of how even the most powerful among us can stumble – he is clearly a highly accomplished individual, but his difficulty managing the aftermath of his travels demonstrates that even a Varangian struggles with life, a message sympathetic to medieval audiences wrestling with similar emotions. Þorkell's intellectual interest in communicating pain is appropriate for the errant veteran, and one might wonder at his fascination with such a topic, given his own statement on his struggle as a stranger in his homeland.

Modern Varangians similarly maintain and challenge the image of the ideal, finding new outlets to accommodate current perspectives. Sven's elite nature is emphasized in *Northlanders* to counteract the less attractive elements of his character. Readers are drawn to his stylish appearance and extraordinary feats, but his inner character is not one to admire. Rather, Sven's excessive pride in his heroic status is his biggest flaw, and his arc is only complete when he separates his ego from his talents, using them to serve the community rather than himself. Erend boasts the same level of capabilities, but the opposite attitude – he is insecure of his position and potential, which is equally detrimental to his contribution to society. His breakthrough in learning to appreciate what he already possesses allows him to unlock an inner strength that benefits both himself and those around him. The integration of his self-discovery with his reevaluation of gender norms conveys an additional point about notions of masculinity. If a high-achieving persona like Erend can break out of aging social preconceptions, audience members might take that lesson into their lives and consider altering their own perspectives.

The small but persistent role of the Varangian Guard in literature from the Middle Ages to the modern day attests to the staying power these mercenaries bring to the table. Given their limited presence, they hit far above their weight, with each new character fascinating audiences while pushing them to think critically about each other and the world. The Varangians' penchant for adaptation means that their story is far from over – they will have more to tell us in the years to come. But despite the fictionality of their depictions, the very survival of the Guard itself is a remarkable feat, and it seems reasonable to assume its original warriors would appreciate their stories continuing to captivate so many centuries after their departure.

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