

The Prosimetrum of Old Norse Historiography — Looking for Parallels

Abstract

The present paper charts the development of the prosimetrum in the Old Norse kings' sagas. An introductory section illustrates the two main kinds of poetic citations found in the kings' sagas and presents the stated rationale for the inclusion of poetry in the kings' sagas. Section two gives a diachronic overview of the material showing how the balance between the two basic kinds of poetic citations changes across time and proposes a developmental model. Section three looks beyond the Old Norse materials and considers possible parallels to the Old Norse prosimetrum in the Medieval Latin and Arabic traditions.

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1. Introduction

Kings' sagas make up a considerable part of the Old Norse literary corpus. They were mainly composed in the late twelfth century and in the first half of the thirteenth although later writers continued to expand upon and rework texts that had come down to them until the late fourteenth century. The genre is generally held to have reached its apex with the compilation of *Heimskringla*, a compendium of royal biographies traditionally ascribed to the Icelander Snorri Sturluson, in the 1230s, which covers the rulers from the semi-legendary Norwegian ninth-century king Halfdán svarti until Magnús Erlingsson who fell in 1184. These biographical sagas are preceded by a saga that in a more cursory form traces the history of the Yngling dynasty back to its divine founders in legendary antiquity.

The writers and compilers of kings' sagas and compendia were concerned that their texts were regarded as trustworthy and reliable accounts of both the immediate and the more remote past, and different strategies of authentication can be observed in these texts. Among the more conspicuous ones, one may mention references to trustwor-

thy individuals and/or a specific line of transmission of information from the event to the moment of writing. In connection with the account of the killing of Sigurðr slembidjárn, a pretender to the Norwegian throne who caused a great deal of inconvenience for the ruling kings and their advisors in the 1130s, *Heimskringla* relates that a certain Hallr, son of Þorgeirr læknir Steinsson and a retainer of King Ingi,

var við staddr þessi tíðendi. Hann sagði Eiríki Oddssyni fyrir, en hann reit þessa frásögn [...] Enn nefnir Eiríkr fleiri menn, er honum sögðu frá þessum tíðendum, vitrir ok sannreyndir, ok váru nær, svá at þeir heyrðu eða sá atburðina, en sumt reit hann eptir sjálfs sín heyrn eða sýn. (*Heimskringla* III 318–19)

(was present at these events. He told them to Eiríkr Oddsson who wrote this story [...] Eiríkr also mentions other people who told him of these events, wise and proven to be truthful, who were close by so that they heard or saw the event, but he also wrote some as he himself had heard and seen it.)

Heimskringla's account of the killing of Sigurðr slembidjárn is, in turn, based on the written account of Eiríkr Oddsson. This strategy of authentication, which is relatively rare in the kings' sagas, is mentioned in the Prologue to *Heimskringla* where the author presents (some of) the sources upon which he has drawn when writing his account. He does however not spend much energy arguing for the validity of this procedure. This suggests that he considered it to be fairly evident as long as the individual links in the chain of transmission were wise, knowledgeable individuals in possession of a good memory. A similar strategy is occasionally used by the pioneering Icelandic historian Ari fróði Þorgilsson in his *Íslendingabók* (1122–33), who also refers more vaguely to old and wise men in the manner of other early works of history from the region.²

The *Heimskringla* prologue foregrounds another strategy of authentication that requires more authorial comment and justification, suggesting that its reliability was not considered to be equally obvious; and that strategy is the quotation of authenticating skaldic verses. The author proclaims that the formal court poetry and the commemorative poems presented at court constitute an important and trustworthy category of sources:

En þó þykki mér þat merkiligast til sannenda, er berum orðum er sagt í kvæðum eða oðrum kveðskap, þeim er svá var

2. A reference to a chain of transmission is found already in the first chapter of Ari's text (Ari fróði Þorgeirsson, *Íslendingabók* 4), while a general reference to wise men (*spakir menn*) can be found on page 9 and elsewhere. Nonspecific references to older informants are also made by the author of the pioneering *Historia Norwegie* (late twelfth century), who claims to rely on the assertions of his elders in every respect ("in omnibus seniorum asserciones secutus [sim]", *Historia Norwegie* 52). The roughly contemporary Danish historian Sven Aggesen similarly states that his text is based on what he learned by questioning "the old and those advanced in years" ("quantum ab annosis et ueteribus certa ualui inquisitione percunctari") Sven Aggesen, *Brevis Historia* 94. Mortensen discusses a shift in attitudes to oral sources that happens around this time, and shows how some, including Saxo, were "sometimes very reluctant" to admit that they did not draw information from a written book ("The Status of the 'Mythical Past'" 116 *et passim*).

ort um konunga eða aðra höfðingja, at þeir sjálfir heyrðu, eða í erfikvæðum þeim, er skáldin færðu sonum þeira.
(*Heimskringla* II 422)

3. They are almost exclusively preserved in sagas and treatises on poetics/grammar. It is unknown whether the poems/stanzas entered the written tradition with these texts or whether they had already been committed to writing before that.

4. Both medieval and modern scholars naturally admit stanzas may be imperfectly transmitted and interpreted. Cf. the prologue to the separate saga of Óláfr Haraldsson: “Þau orð, er í kveðskap standa, eru in sömu sem í fyrstu váru, ef rétt er kveðit, þótt hverr maðr hafi síðan numit af qðrum, ok má því ekki breyta” (*Heimskringla* II 422) (“The words used in poetry are the same as they were in initially, if the poetry is constructed correctly, even though it has gone from person to person, and they cannot be changed for this reason”).

5. While the prose sources leave us with the impression that this institution goes back to times immemorial, Fidjestøl has argued that the court poets only became an institution at court under earl Hákon Sigurðarson (r. c. 970–95) (“Have you heard a Poem Worth More” 127–28).

6. Jesch, discussing skaldic poetry in terms of “literacy *avant la lettre*” has compared the fixing of words in skaldic verse to the incision of words on stone in runic inscriptions. Arguing that the role of the skald “was not conceived as a poetical one [...] but rather the job of recording essential information to preserve it, which could be in either poetry or [runic] writing” (“Skaldic Verse, a Case of Literacy *avant la lettre*?” 192). See also Jesch “The ‘Meaning of the Narrative Moment’”, which lays out the rationale for Old Norse court poetry with great clarity.

(And yet, that seems to me most noteworthy as proof which is said in plain words in formal poems or other kinds of poetry, which were composed about kings and other leaders so that they themselves heard them, or in the commemorative poems which the skalds presented to their sons.)

The historical trustworthiness of these poems, the prologue claims, is secured by the fact they were first performed publicly before eye-witnesses to the events that were commemorated in the poetry. These poems were composed by poets affiliated with the courts of individual rulers or poets traveling between courts (both referred to as *skalds*, ON *skáld*). Once composed and performed the poems were memorized and transmitted orally by skalds, sometimes for centuries, until they were written down.³ To serve this authenticating function, the stanzas would have had to be memorized and transmitted verbatim. Medieval authors believed that these stanzas were by and large faithfully transmitted word for word and scholars studying these texts today tend to agree.⁴ Thus skaldic poems are not generally thought to be susceptible to the verbal transformations and instability that have come to be associated with orally transmitted poetry. The main function of skalds at the courts of kings is held to have been to preserve a record of deeds of the kings for posterity.⁵ One way to do this in a society with restricted literacy was to bind the words in poetic form.⁶ In *Heimskringla*, king Óláfr Haraldsson (d. 1030) is represented as giving direct expression to this when he, before his final battle at Stiklastaðir, instructs his skalds to position themselves where the battle is expected to be hardest so that they can see what happens in the battle and create a record of the events by composing poetic accounts of it afterwards (*Heimskringla* II 358).

A stanza from *Heimskringla*’s saga of Óláfr Haraldsson may serve as an example of this strategy of authentication. Óláfr’s youthful Viking expeditions are listed early in the saga. Among other deeds, we read, Óláfr conquered the castle Gunnvaldsborg and took its ruler Geirfiðr captive, demanding and receiving twelve thousands gold shillings in ransom. The saga continues:

Svá segir Sigvatr:
Þrettánda vann Þröenda,

þat vas flóttá bǫl, dróttinn
 snjallr í Seljupollum
 sunnarla styr kunnan.
 Upp lét gramr í gamla
 Gunnvaldsborg of morgin,
 Geirfiðr hét sá, gǫrva
 gengit, jarl of fenginn. (*Heimskringla* II 24)

(Thus says Sigvatr: “The brave lord of the Þrændir won a thirteenth famous battle south in Seljupollar. That was a misfortune for the escapees. The ruler had his host to enter old Gunnvaldsborg in the morning (and) capture the earl; he was called Geirfiðr).⁷

7. Since this article focuses on the prosimetrum of the kings’ sagas and the integration of prose and poetry, skaldic stanzas are quoted in the context of the kings’ sagas in which they appear rather than from the skaldic corpus edition. In presenting Skaldic stanzas, the original text and a translation is presented in the main text. A footnote will, in accordance with standard practice, rearrange the words of the stanza into prose order with the aim of indicating how the stanza is understood to be constructed grammatically: “Snjallr dróttinn Þrœnda vann þrettánda kunnan styr sunnarla í Seljupollum; þat vas flóttá bǫl. Gramr lét gǫrva gengit upp í gamla Gunnvaldsborg of morgin jarl of fenginn; Geirfiðr hét sá”. (Cf. Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Víkingarvísur* st. 13).

8. Fourteen stanzas and one half-stanza have been preserved (for details, see Jesch “Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Víkingarvísur*” 532). The king is directly addressed in sts. 2 and 11.

This (rather prosaic) stanza does not corroborate every detail of the prose-account, but it does authenticate the gist of it, namely that the castle was conquered, and its ruler taken captive. The stanza is a part of a longer poem, now known as *Víkingarvísur* “Viking Verses”, that catalogs Óláfr’s successes in his early campaigns. Sigvatr, the skald responsible for this poem, had not yet joined the retinue of Óláfr during these campaigns and was therefore not an eyewitness to the events he commemorated, but it is likely that the poem was performed in the presence of king Óláfr himself and his retinue.⁸ Thinking of this stanza in the terms of the *Heimskringla* prologue’s rationale for the inclusion of skaldic poetry in the text, one might state that the skald, Sigvatr, would not have said that Óláfr captured a castle and took its ruler hostage, if he merely camped on the fields beneath the castle and traded a bit with the locals, perhaps taking a few cows as he left. Hence, the information contained in the stanza is to be considered as trustworthy, or as the prologue expresses it: “Tǫkum vér þat allt fyrir satt, er í þeim kvæðum finnsk um ferðir þeira eða orrostur” (*Heimskringla* I 5) (“we consider all that which is said about their journeys and battles in those poems to be true”). The only caveat is that skalds are prone to flattery, but they would never dare to attribute deeds to their patrons which these had not committed; this would, as Snorri states in a celebrated phrase, be “háð en eigi lof” (*Heimskringla* I 5) (“mockery rather than praise”).

The *Separate Saga of Óláfr Haraldsson* is slightly earlier than *Heimskringla* but is otherwise closely related to that text and also traditionally held to have been composed by Snorri Sturluson. The prologue to this earlier work presents a more elaborate version of the argument for the greater trustworthiness of skaldic poetry over that of memory of events unaided by poetry:

Þau orð, er í kveðskap standa, eru in sǫmu sem í fyrstu váru, ef rétt er kveðit, þótt hverr maðr hafi síðan numit at ǫðrum, ok má því ekki breyta. En sǫgur þær er sagðar eru, þá er þat hætt, at eigi skilisk ǫllum á einn veg. En sumir hafa eigi minni, þá er frá líðr, hvernig þeim var sagt, ok gengsk þeim mjök í minni [*var. í munni*] optliga, ok verða frásagnir ómerkiligar (*Heimskringla* II 422; for the variant, see *Den store saga* 4).

(The words that are used in poetry are the same as they were in the beginning, if the poem is recited correctly, even though it has been learned by one individual from the other, and they cannot be changed. But when stories are told there is a danger that not everyone understand them in the same way; as time passes, some will not be able to recall them as they had heard them, and the stories are often confused by the mind/in the telling and become untrustworthy).

As a medium of exact preservation of information, words bound by poetic meter thus have a distinct advantage over stories in unbound words: They were perceived to be inalterable. The *Heimskringla* author, concerned as he is with the reliability and trustworthiness of his text, has taken the consequence of this, and the text (as edited in the *Íslensk fornrit* edition by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson) contains more than six hundred skaldic stanzas or half-stanzas. The vast majority of these, 83%, can be said to serve to bolster the historical credibility of the account in the manner of the stanza by Sigvatr quoted above.⁹ These stanzas are generally held to have been composed after rather than during the event they authenticate and were often part of a longer poem recounting the deeds of the patron of the poet.

If 83% serve a need for authentication, what then of the remaining 17%? They have been characterized as situational rather than as authenticating. They are, as Diana Whaley writes, represented as being “composed impromptu, in response to an event, a situation, a verbal cue, and they may themselves affect the course of events or the ensuing conversation” (“Skalds and Situational Verses” 251). Generalizing, one can say that while the official court poetry is public and focuses squarely on the ruler, chronicling his battles and victories, the situational stanzas are of a more private nature. They often deal with the king and the relations between him and his court poets, but they bring the poet, his experiences and not least his wit and poetic abilities into focus. While the authenticating stanzas are composed after the deed they commemorate, the situational stanzas constitute deeds in and of themselves.

9. This figure is based on my own count and classification of stanzas (see below for details).

10. As an exception to this rather generalized picture, one may mention Sigvatr Þórðarson's *Austrfararvísur*. Although the stanzas that make up this poem are presented as direct responses to events in *Heimskringla*, the text also makes clear that they belong to a larger poem (on this poem, see Fulk "Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Austrfararvísur*" and Wellendorf, "Austrfararvísur and Interreligious Contacts").

11. Stavnem's distinction is between 'diegetic' and 'extradiegetic', but 'intra-' has been added to 'diegetic' for clarity here and in the following.

12. Determining to which of the two groups any given stanza belongs is not an exact science. By Whaley's count 480 stanzas out of a total of 599 (= 81.5%) serve to authenticate the narrative' ("Skalds and Situational Verses" 254). The result of her tally thus points in the same direction as my own.

This results in a neat bipartition of poetic quotations in royal biographies into authenticating and situational stanzas. As a rule of the thumb the authenticating stanzas derive from official formal court poetry and are excerpted from longer poems, while the situational stanzas are occasional, informal, and improvised.¹⁰ Although this bipartition of poetic citations is well established in saga scholarship, it has also been questioned; and Whaley concludes her article on this matter by stating that the division does not "adequately capture what verses have to offer in their prose context" ("Skalds and Situational Verses" 263). A bipartition can nevertheless to a large extent be upheld if one uses an alternative set of more general labels that have been proposed by Rolf Stavnem ("Creating Tradition" 92–93). Using terms adapted from narratology, he differentiates between intradiegetic and extradiegetic stanzas.¹¹ That is: stanzas that belong to the level of the story and stanzas that belong to the storytelling. Determining to which level a given stanza belongs is usually quite straightforward and simply requires that one asks whether it is recited by the authorial voice of the saga (in which case it is extradiegetic) or by the skald to whom the stanza is attributed (which would make it an intradiegetic).¹² As an example of the former, extradiegetic, use of poetic citations, one may point to Sigvatr's stanza about Óláfr Haraldsson's youthful exploits. *Heimskringla* shows a strong preference for extradiegetic citations, but as the survey of the entire kings' saga complex in section 2 below will show, the approach of the *Heimskringla* author was not shared by all his predecessors. First, however, some examples of the intradiegetic, anecdotal use of skaldic stanzas will be given.

The nuts-stanzas

The so-called *Oldest Saga of Óláfr Haraldsson* (late twelfth century) and the *Legendary saga of Óláfr Haraldsson* (early thirteenth century) both relate that king Óláfr Haraldsson one day sent some nuts from his table to Sigvatr skáld and Óttarr svarti, the foremost poets and eulogists of his court, and asked them to split the nuts justly between themselves. Experienced saga readers may predict that a contest between the two skalds will follow in which each of the two attempts to win the goodwill of the king by displaying their wit and poetic skill by extemporizing a stanza that memorializes this rather trivial event. It is even likely that the king attempts to

13. Sigvatr and Óttarr were related, Sigvatr being Óttarr's paternal uncle.

feed discord between the two for the sake of entertainment. Unexpectedly, the two skalds made common front against the king.¹³ Sigvatr said:

Sændi mer enn mære
man þængill sa drængi
sið mun ec hælldr at roðre
nætr þioðkonongr vitrazc.
Oft en okr bað skipta
Ottar i tvau drottenn
ændazc mal sem minndi
manndiarfr faðurarve. (*Legendary saga* 136)¹⁴

14. The *Oldest Saga's* text of this anecdote is fragmentary (*Oldest saga* 2), and I have therefore cited the stanzas from the *Legendary Saga of Óláfr Haraldsson*.

(The famous mighty king sent me nuts; that lord keeps the retainers in mind. I will reveal myself rather late in praise poetry. Meals often come to an end, and the brave ruler asked Óttarr and me to split them in two, as one would [divide] a paternal inheritance).¹⁵

15. Enn mæri þjóðkonungr sendi mér hnetr; sá þængill man drengi; ek mun heldr sið vitrask at hróðri. Opt endask mál, en manndjarfr dróttinn bað okkr Óttar skipta í tvau sem myndi fǫðurarfi. (Cf. Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Lausavísa* 9)

While the stanza is not completely clear, the gist of it is that Sigvatr is disappointed by the royal display of largesse and suggests that he will be less prompt to praise the king in the future. Understood thus, the line “that lord keeps the retainers in mind” would be highly ironic. Óttarr, the second court poet, is also unhappy being paid peanuts and advises the king in no uncertain terms to be more generous henceforth:

Nætr sændi mer handan
randaðr alunbranda
aðr væntezc mer mæiri
min þing konongr hingat.
Mior er markar stiore
mæir er þar til flæira
niðrattu oss i aðru,
islanz mikils visi. (*Legendary saga* 138)

16. Konungr, hrǫnduðr ǫlunbranda, sendi mér hnetr hingat handan; aðr væntizk mér mín þing meiri. Mjorr er markar stjóri; meir er þar til fleira. Niðrattu [*ms.* uiðrattu] oss í ǫðru, vísi mikils íslands. (Cf. Óttarr svarti, *Lausavísa* 1 784–86).

(The generous king [thrower of arm-fire], sent nuts here to me from the other side; earlier I expected greater remuneration. The poet [ruler of the forest] is lean, there will be more later. Do not humiliate us a second time, king [chieftain of the great ice-land]).¹⁶

The anecdote concludes with Óttarr's stanza in both the *Oldest Saga*

17. The anecdote is found in *Oldest Saga 2* (fragmentarily), *Legendary Saga* 136–38 Tómasskinna (København, Det Kongelige Bibliotek, GKS 1008 fol.), *Den store saga II* 703, *Bæjarbók* (København, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 73b fol.), *Den store saga II* 705 and *Flateyjarbók* (Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, GKS 1005), *Den store saga II* 689.

18. Introductory remark: “Þa er þær Sighvatr oc Ottar varo við Olave kononge, þa varo þær ægi iammikils værdir sem fyrr. Þat var einn dag, at konongr sændi þæim nætr af borðe sinu. Þa quað Sighvatr visu þessa: [...]” (*Legendary saga* 136) (“When Sigvatr and Óttarr were with King Óláfr, then they were not regarded as highly as earlier. It happened one day that the king sent them nuts from his table, then Sigvatr recited this stanza: [...]”). Concluding remark: Konungr brosti at vísunum er þeir höfðu kveðit (*Den store saga II* 703) (“The king smiled over the stanzas which they had recited”).

and the *Legendary Saga*, and both texts launch into an anecdote about Óláfr and Þorfinnr munnr, another of the skalds of the king. The anecdote about the nuts is however found in a fair number of versions of the saga of king Óláfr,¹⁷ and the younger versions round off the anecdote by mentioning that the king smiled when he heard the stanzas;¹⁸ the point presumably being that he acknowledged that the court poets were disgruntled and that he was amused by the manner in which they alerted him to their dissatisfaction.

In a nutshell, the episode may be said to highlight the contractual nature of the relationship between a Norse king and his poets and the intersection of immaterial and material value systems. The king is expected to be generous towards his retainers, and his skalds will reciprocate by celebrating and immortalizing his munificence, his martial prowess, and his general awesomeness in verse. Should the king fail to keep his side of the bargain, his eulogizers may stop building his reputation and begin tearing it down. The anecdote is hardly alone in dealing with this theme, but it is fair to rank it among the minor episodes in the corpus of kings’ sagas. Yet it found its way into one of the earliest specimens of the genre, the so-called *Oldest Saga of Óláfr Haraldsson*. From the *Oldest Saga*, it entered the *Legendary Saga of Óláfr Haraldsson*. Styrmir Kárason the Learned (d. 1245), who was prior of the Augustinian house at Viðey in Iceland, also included it in his now lost saga of Óláfr Haraldsson, whence it entered the late medieval version known as the *Great Saga of Óláfr Haraldsson* – it is on the other hand strikingly absent from the snorronic texts *Heimskringla* and the *Separate saga of Óláfr Haraldsson*. So, in spite of its trifling nature, the anecdote must have had some appeal to saga compilers and, presumably, audiences. These texts about Óláfr Haraldsson also include many other seemingly inconsequential anecdotes that similarly center on skaldic stanzas. In fact, the scant remains of the *Oldest Saga* contain no less than eight such anecdotal stanzas (or fragments thereof).

All the sagas about Óláfr Haraldsson mentioned above are biographical and narrate in various levels of detail Óláfr’s career and deeds while in this world and from beyond the grave. They are likely to have been committed to writing in Iceland and it is equally likely that anecdotes such as the one about the nuts entered the written tradition not because they were particularly memorable, but because the stanzas at the center of the anecdote had been remembered. The stanzas, assuming that they are traditional, would have been committed to memory and transmitted orally for a century and a half or more

19. The possibility that the stanzas were composed by the individual who first committed the anecdote to writing, should not be excluded completely, but it does raise the question of why someone would invent a bagatelle such as the anecdote about the nuts.

20. The term is perhaps most closely associated with Beyschlag, “Möglichkeiten mündlicher Überlieferung”. Von See, “Skaldenstrophe und Sagaproza”, is skeptical about the existence of such *Begleitprosa*. See also Hofmann, “Sagaproza als Partner von Skaldenstrophen”, von See, “Mündliche Prosa und Skaldendichtung”, and more recently Ghosh, *Kings’ Sagas and Norwegian History* 25–100. Males prefers to avoid the term because skaldic stanzas “were transmitted in contexts that bore little resemblance to sagas (*The Poetic Genesis of Old Icelandic Literature* 212).”

21. Although the stanza attributed to Sigvatr does bear some of the hallmarks of his style, namely formal mastery and a lack of kennings.

22. It must be admitted that Sneglu-Halli’s poetry often is less tactful than that of a Sigvatr or an Óttarr, but Sneglu-Halli is ascribed improvised stanzas in which he, like Óttarr did, gives vent to his dissatisfaction with the fare he receives at court (*Sneglu-Halla þátr* 271–75).

by generations of poetic specialists who were themselves active practitioners of the skaldic art.¹⁹ Although little is known about how skalds memorized and performed the poetry of their forerunners in the art, it is surmised that extemporized and occasional stanzas, such as the two presented above, circulated orally along with some contextual information that staged the stanzas by explaining the situation that gave rise to them and attributing them to certain skalds affiliated with particular courts. Scholars studying the nuts and bolts of saga composition usually discuss this contextual information under the heading *Begleitprosa* “accompanying prose” and focus on the stability, detailedness and historical reliability of this *Begleitprosa*. As one would expect, opinions differ and some scholars have argued that the *Begleitprosa* is stable, detailed and hence reliable as a historical source (e.g. Beyschlag) while others have argued the opposite (e.g. von See).²⁰

The author of the *Oldest Saga*, the first saga known to include the nuts-stanzas, was in all likelihood conversant with this traditional *Begleitprosa*, whether through active participation in the skaldic tradition or by having conferred with an active participant. The two stanzas presented above need however not have been transmitted with a comprehensive narrative context explaining the circumstances of their composition. The passing of the nuts as well as the king’s reason for doing so could have been extrapolated from the stanzas at any point during their oral and written transmission. The contents of the stanzas do not point specifically to the court of king Óláfr nor do they indicate that the poets in question were Sigváttr and Óttarr.²¹ It is therefore possible that the *Begleitprosa* could have contained this information, but one might equally well imagine that the stanzas became attached to these two poets at some stage in the course of their transmission because Sigvatr and Óttarr hold a prominent position in the tradition. One could also easily imagine a setting a quarter of a century later at the court of Óláfr’s half-brother Haraldr harðráði, in which case the two stanzas could have been composed by other poets, such as Sneglu-Halli and Þjóðólfr Arnórsson.²² The intradiegetic stanzas of the nuts-anecdote differ from the extradiegetic in that they occupy the center of attention, rather than having the subordinate evidentiary role typical of the extradiegetic stanzas. Knowledge of the situation that occasioned the stanzas may have been transmitted along with the stanzas, but there is also a distinct possibility that this context was reimagined at any point during the transmission.

The sword-stanza

This potential for instability, misattribution, restaging and recontextualization of stanzas is illustrated by another anecdote contained in the *Oldest* and in the *Legendary Saga*. Again, a verse stands at its center:

Sværð standa her sunda
sars læyuum ver arar
hærstillis þarf ec hylli
holl ráð buin gulli.
Við tœka ec vika,
vil ec enn með þer kœnnir
ællz ef æitthvært vildir,
alvaldr geva skalde (*Legendary saga* 132).²³

23. The *Oldest Saga*'s text of this stanza is incomplete, and I have therefore cited the stanza from the *Legendary Saga*.

(Swords stand here, decorated with gold; we praise the swords [harbingers of wound ponds]. I need the favor of the army-commander, wholesome conditions [*or* sound advice]. If you gave the poet something, ruler of all, I would receive it. I want to remain with you, king [trier of fire of inlets]).²⁴

24. Sverð standa hér, búin gulli; vér leyfum árar sárs sunda. Ek þarf hylli herstillis, holl ráð. Allvaldr, ef eitt hvert vildir gefa skáldi, ek tœka við. Vil ec enn með þér, kœnnir elds vika. (Cf. Bersi Skáld-Torfuson, *Lausavisa* 795–7). As the text is preserved in the text of the *Legendary Saga* the phrase “hærstillis þarf ec hylli | holl ráð” (“I need a favor of the army-commander, wholesome conditions [*or* sound advice]”) is unsatisfactory from a semantic and grammatical point of view. An anonymous reviewer of this article suggests constructing “gulli búin” with “holl ráð”: “I need a favor of the army-commander, good advice decorated with gold”. Whaley who avoids the problem by following the more satisfactory *Kringla*-text in *AM* 36 fol., prints “herstillis verðr hylli | hollust” (“the favor (of the army-commander) [RULER] BECOMES MOST GRACIOUS”).

The *Oldest Saga* gives the following, somewhat fragmentary, context:

Þat er sagt at eitt hvert sinn at konungrinn Óláfr sat í loftum nökkurum, en [stóðu fyrir] honum sverð mǫrg ok hǫrfðu upp hjöltin á ǫllum. Óttarr skáld [kvað] þá vísu þessa: [...] Konungr mælti: “At vísu skal ek gefa þé|...” (*Oldest saga* 7).

(It is said that once when the king Óláfr sat in some loft, many swords stood before him and all their hilts pointed upwards. Óttarr the skald then recited this stanza: [...] The king said: Sure, I will give you [one]).

25. This would be the same Óláfr and the same Óttarr as in the anecdote about the nuts.

The stanza is quite vague in terms of particulars. As in the case of the nuts-stanzas, neither the persons involved nor the specific setting can be extrapolated from the stanza: *allvaldr* ‘ruler’ and *skáld* ‘poet’ are fairly generic terms and could refer to many others beside King Óláfr and Óttarr.²⁵ The distinct detail that the hilts of the swords are pointing upwards is not necessarily drawn from the stanza although that could be a literal interpretation of the first verb: “swords stand. . .” rather than, say, “swords lean . . .” or “swords lie . . .”. Be that as it may, at this point in time both hilts and blades of swords could be decorated with gold,²⁶ so the mention of the inlay does not help identifying the exact positioning of the swords either. On the other hand, the

26. See e.g. the eleventh century Leikimäki sword (Pierce 138).

stanza mentions that the favor of the king is at stake, which is not reflected in the prose context.

The *Oldest* and *Legendary Saga* agree in all essential details, but other sagas present the stanza in other contexts. In Styrmir Kárason's *Articuli* the stanza is not attributed to Óttarr but to a certain Bersi Skáld-Torfuson. The context reads:

Annarr var sá maðr er Bersi hét ok var Skáld-Torfuson; hann var ok skáld gótt. Bersi var rægðr við konunginn ok sagt at hann kynni ekki at yrkja né kveða þat er ei var áðr kveðit. Þá lét konungr taka mǫrg sverð ok bregða ok setja niðr nǫkkut [*ms. nǫkð*] í eina litla stofu. Þá let konungr kalla Bersa, en er Bersi kom þá mælti konungr at hann skyldi yrkja um þat er sverðin váru upp reist. Þá kvað Bersi: [...] Þá gaf konungr Bersa eitt gótt sverð. (*Den store saga* II 690)

(A second one [skald at court] was the one who was called Bersi and was the son of Skáld-Torfa. He was also a great skald. Someone slandered Bersi in front of the king and it was said that he was unable to compose or recite poetry which had not already been composed. Then the king had many swords taken and drawn and fixed somewhat [in the floor] in a small room. Then the king had Bersi called and when Bersi came the king said that he should compose about the fact that the swords stood erect. Then Bersi recited: [...] Then the king gave Bersi a good sword).

27. Another example is found in the saga of Óláfr Tryggvason where the king challenges the skald Hallfreðr to compose a stanza in which he uses the word *sverð* 'sword' in every line (*Heimskringla* I 331).

28. The intercalated phrase in which the poet expresses his wish to remain with the king fits well with what we know about Bersi's biography. For *Heimskringla* (which does not attribute this stanza to Bersi) tells that Bersi had been affiliated with Jarl Sveinn (one of king Óláfr's opponents) and had been put in chains by Óláfr. *Heimskringla* then cites three stanzas of a flokk Bersi composed for Óláfr (presumably "head-ransom stanzas" composed to save his life) (*Heimskringla* II 65–67).

In terms of staging, this anecdote presents a variant of a well-known and fairly common motif in such anecdotes: the king challenges the poet to improvise a stanza that fulfills certain criteria of a formal nature or as regards the content of the stanza. Its conventional nature can be illustrated by the fact that the following anecdote in the *Legendary Saga* gives another example of the same motif. In that case, king Óláfr challenges a skald by the name of Þorfinnr to compose an ekphrastic stanza about a tapestry hanging on a wall.²⁷ Although, one may think that Bersi does not really fulfill the challenge by describing the erect swords, the king was apparently satisfied with the outcome and rewarded the skald.²⁸

Heimskringla and the *Separate saga of Óláfr Haraldsson*, finally, cite the very same stanza, but they attribute it to Sigvatr skáld and present it in a very different context. The version in *Heimskringla* reads:

Óláfr konungr hafði jólaboð mikit, ok var þá komit til hans mart stórmenni. Þat var inn sjaunda dag jóla, at konungr gekk ok fáir menn með honum. Sigvatr fylgði konungi dag ok nótt. Hann var þá með honum. Þeir gengu í hús eitt. Þar váru hirðir í dýrgripir konungs. Hann hafði þá hafðan viðrbúnað mikinn, sem vanði var til, heimt saman dýrgripi sína til þess at gefa vingjafar it átta kveld jóla. Þar stóðu í húsinu sverð eigi allfá gullbúin. Þá kvað Sigvatr: . . . Konungr tók eitt hvert sverðit ok gaf honum. Var þar gulli vafiðr meðalkaflinn ok gullbúin hjólt. Var sá gripr allgóðr, en gjöfin var eigi ofundlaus, ok heyrði þat síðan (*Heimskringla* II 296–97).

(King Óláfr had invited many to the Christmas celebrations and many men of rank had come to him. It was the seventh day after Christmas and the king was out walking and a few men with him. Sigvatr attended the king day and night and was with him at this point. They entered some building. In this building, the king's treasures were kept. He had then made great preparations, as was customary, and gathered his treasures in order to give his men tokens of his friendship on the eighth night of Christmas. No small number of swords adorned with gold stood there in the building. Then Sigvatr said: [the stanza is quoted]. The king took one of the swords and gave it to him. The haft was wound with gold and the hilt had gold inlays. This was a very precious item, but the gift was not without envy and this came to light later).

It is commonly held that the author of the *Heimskringla* compendium had access to and used at least one of the three earlier texts containing the stanza.²⁹ So when *Heimskringla*'s staging differs from those of earlier texts, it is likely that the author of this text made a conscious choice to replace the received context and with a newly devised one that suited his aims and taste better. In this particular case, the *Heimskringla* author shows great skill in his ability to incorporate the stanza into one of the larger narrative threads of his version of the saga of Óláfr Haraldsson. Sigvatr is by no means a random choice when it comes to attributing the stanza to a skald for in another poem he mentions that the king gave him a gold-inlaid sword. This is in his memorial poem on Óláfr, *Erfidrápa Óláfr Haraldssonar*, where Sigvatr mentions that he did not bring the gold-wound sword, given to him by the king, on his journey to Rome (*Erfidrápa* st. 27). It is likely that this mention first spurred the author of *Heimskringla* to attribute the

29. See e.g. the charts the interrelations of the texts belonging to the kings' saga complex presented by Andersson, "Kings' sagas" 204, and Fidjestøl, *Det norrøne fyrstediktet* 10.

stanza on the swords to Sigvatr, as Sigurður Nordal once suggested (*Om Olaf den Helliges saga* 156). It is however impossible to determine whether the author saw this as an innovation and improvement of the tradition or an emendation and correction of tradition. In either case, depicting Sigvatr as stealing a march on the other retainers and thus receiving the best gift from the king at Christmas certainly feeds into the prominent theme of jealousy and competition among the skalds at court. The deftness of the *Heimskringla* author is also evident in the way he integrates a reference to the sword with the golden hilt much later in the saga when Þórmóðr, yet another of the king's skalds, compares his own undying loyalty to the king to Sigvatr's more lukewarm attitude: “Þess vætti ek, konungr, hvárt sem friðr er betri eða verri, at ek sjá nær yðr staddr, meðan ek á þess kost, hvat sem vér spyrjum til, hvar Sigvatr ferr með gullinhjaltann” (*Heimskringla* II 362) (“I expect, king, that, regardless of how this turns out [*lit.* whether the peace is better or worse], I will remain by your side, as long as possible, no matter what we hear of the whereabouts of Sigvatr and the golden hilt”).³⁰

30. Another reference to the gift of the sword with the golden hilt is found in an addition to *The Great Saga of Óláfr Haraldsson* that is found in the Flateyjarbók manuscript. There, Þórmóðr sarcastically asks the king why he does not ask Sigvatr to entertain the men “ok launa gullinhjaltann er þú, konungr, gaf honum í jólagjöf í fyrra vetri” (*Den store saga* II 821) (“and give recompense for the golden hilt that you, king, gave him as a Christmas gift last year”). The king, however, defends Sigvatr and tells that he is more useful where he is now, praying in Rome, than he would be by the king's side.

This second example then, in addition to showing how skaldic stanzas may form the poetic core of anecdotes that play out at the court of kings, also highlights how the relatively stable nucleus formed by the stanza is presented against a flexible backdrop that may vary in many, if not all, details. That the stanzas have primacy is shown by the simple fact that the anecdotes would have little point without the poetry. Of the three different contexts for the swordstanza suggested by the sagas, the editor of the classic corpus edition, Finnur Jónsson, chose to present the stanza among those of Bersi Skáld-Torfuson (*Skj* BI 256). The recent corpus edition does the same, but without presenting arguments for preferring this attribution over the alternatives (Whaley, *Bersi Skáld-Torfuson* 795–97). While it is impossible to determine the actual historical situation that gave rise to the stanza and the identity of the originator and the addressee, this dubious contextual information is paradoxically indispensable for any attempt at understanding the meaning of a stanza. Severing stanzas from their prose context may be possible, but whether one accepts the prose contexts or rejects them, turning a blind eye to them, is not an option.

The royal biographies of the kings' sagas were generally conceived of as historical texts, relating historical fact, and their authors, Snorri Sturluson in particular, were at pains to stress the veridical nature of their accounts by including authenticating poems about “journeys and battles” that had been performed before eyewitnesses to the events

commemorated. This apparent need to include sources has been connected with a newly arisen “impersonal concept of truth” that followed in the wake of the recent spread of parchment literacy, in which the truthfulness of an account no longer depended upon the perceived reliability or authority of the narrator but on his ability to trace it back to commonly recognized authorities (paraphrased from Meulengracht Sørensen, “The Prosimetrum Form” 175).

Of the three examples discussed above, it is only the example from Sigvatr’s *Víkingarvísur* that can be said to fulfill this authenticating, extradiegetic, function. The stanzas about the nuts and the sword served a different, more anecdotal, intradiegetic function and it is striking that the *Heimskringla* author choose to leave out the stanzas about the nuts and recontextualize and reattribute the sword stanza. By doing so, he was able to integrate an anecdotal stanza into one of the larger narrative threads of his account of the life and rule of Óláfr Haraldsson and thus turn a trifling stanza into a consequential one. This however came at a cost and the example focused attention on the instability of whatever *Begleitprosa* there might have been.

This distinction between intra- and extradiegetic stanzas brings out a characteristic feature of Old Norse historiography and the following section will trace the development of this feature diachronically by studying how the proportion of intradiegetic to extradiegetic stanzas change over time.

2. A Diachronic View

83% of the stanzas quoted in *Heimskringla*, the apogee of the kings’ saga genre, are as mentioned extradiegetic and it has become a commonplace of saga scholarship to observe that the kings’ sagas and the sagas of Icelanders use verses in different ways.³¹ Using the terms adopted here, one may say that verses in the kings’ sagas mainly are extradiegetic while verses in the sagas of Icelanders predominantly are intradiegetic. But while the stanzas of the sagas of Icelanders remain predominantly intradiegetic throughout the history of that genre, the proportion of intradiegetic stanzas to extradiegetic ones decline over time in the kings’ sagas.³² This variance may partly be attributed to literary development, the availability of materials, and the changing taste and shifting priorities of authors and audiences over time. While the fragmentary preservation of the earliest representatives of the genre, uncertainties of chronology, and other factors

31. See Bjarni Einarsson, “On the Rôle of Verse”, who, distinguishing between stanzas quoted as evidence and stanzas that are a part of the narrative, gives figures for various genres and texts.

32. The use of poetic quotations in the sagas of Icelanders will not be discussed in the present context, but the cause of the dearth of extradiegetic stanzas in this genre may be that the chieftains of saga age Iceland do not appear to have had a *hirðskáld* institution like that of courts abroad.

make it difficult to trace a neat unidirectional development, the proportion of extradiegetic stanzas to intradiegetic ones is overall lower in the older part of the corpus, while the younger show a marked predilection for extradiegetic stanzas.

The table and chart below present the texts in the kings' saga complex in rough chronological order (from oldest to youngest) and indicate the proportion of intradiegetic to extradiegetic stanzas. The figures are based on my own count and classification of stanzas. In most cases it is fairly straightforward to determine the category to which a stanza belongs. Intradiegetic stanzas are often part of an anecdote where the skald plays a prominent role and they are typically introduced with the phrase *þá kvað N.N.* 'then N.N. spoke [a verse]' (or something similar), indicating that the skald responds to the situation in which he finds himself. Extradiegetic stanzas on the other hand typically follow a statement of fact made by the saga author and are often introduced with the words *svá kvað N.N.* 'N.N. spoke thus'. The tallies have been made using the Íslenzk fornrit editions where available; the *Oldest Saga*, the *Legendary Saga*, the *Separate Saga* and *Hákonar saga Ívarssonar* have not been published in the Íslenzk fornrit, and for these texts, I rely on the editions by Storm, Heinrichs *et al.*, Johnsen and Jón Helgason and Jón Helgason and Jakob Benediktsson respectively. The texts within the corpus vary significantly in terms of length and the number of stanzas they include. The table and the chart therefore also present the total number of stanzas of each text (N). The figures in the last column (Stanzas per page) are only approximate as the number of words per page varies considerably from one text to the other, often depending on the number and length of the notes added by the editors, they nevertheless give an indication of the density of verse in each text. Three texts normally included in the kings' saga complex are not included in the chart because they do not contain any stanzas in their present form. These are *Færeyinga saga*, *Boglunga sögur* and *Magnús saga lagabætis*.

Text	Intradiegetic	Extradiegetic	N	Stanzas per page
<i>Ágrip</i>	43%	57%	7	0.13
<i>Orkneyinga saga</i>	74%	26%	82	0.27
<i>Jómsvíkinga saga</i>	85%	15%	7	0.05
<i>Oldest Saga of Óláfr Haraldsson</i>	100%	0%	8	1.33
<i>Sverris saga</i>	94%	6%	18	0.06
<i>Legendary Saga of Óláfr H.</i>	41%	58%	63	0.58
<i>Morkinskinna</i>	23%	77%	328	0.58
<i>Hákonar saga Ívarssonar</i>	20%	80%	10	0.29
<i>Fagrskinna</i>	10%	90%	272	0.88
<i>Óláfs saga by Oddr munkr</i>	7%	93%	17	0.14
<i>Separate Saga of Óláfr H.</i>	29%	71%	212	0.32
<i>Heimskringla</i>	17%	83%	604	0.72
<i>Knytlinga saga</i>	2%	98%	60	0.26
<i>Hákonar saga</i>	7%	93%	121	0.28

Some comments on the inclusion of poetry in individual texts are warranted:

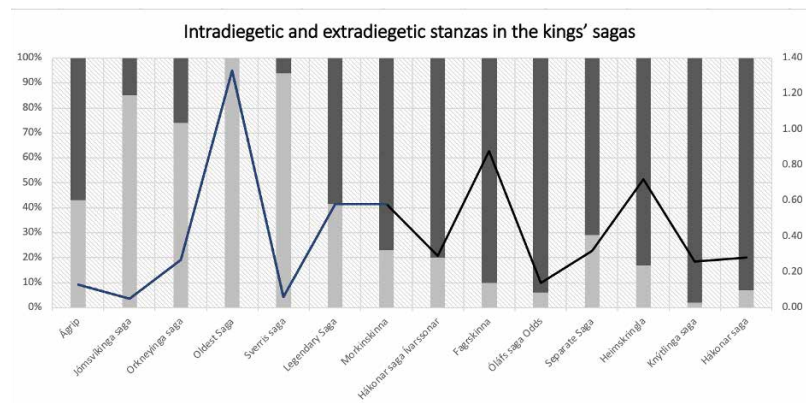
Ágrip, the only vernacular text among the early Norwegian histories, contains only seven poetic quotations, four of which are extradiegetic. The text is however an outlier in the corpus, and it is generally held that it was composed by a Norwegian not well versed in the courtly skaldic tradition (see Driscoll, *Ágrip* xvii–xviii).

Orkneyinga saga and *Jómsvíkinga saga* are often discussed along with the kings' sagas although they do not focus on kings, and they have therefore been included in the chart. *Orkneyinga saga*, which focuses on the earls of Orkney, Earl Rognvaldr in particular, is the most interesting of the two in regard to prosimetrum. It contains no less than eighty-two stanzas, the majority of which (74%) are intradiegetic. As these stanzas are clustered in the first third of the saga and mainly attributed to Arnórr jarlaskáld, they call attention to the fact that the availability of skaldic materials may have been an important factor as well and it can be assumed that the author would have included additional extradiegetic stanzas had they been available to him. The saga, as published in the Íslenzk fornrit edition used here, is reconstituted on the basis of a number of manuscripts that show considerable variation and none of which presents *Orkneyinga saga* as a complete integral text. In her discussion of these and related issues, Jesch argues that the manuscripts should not be considered as witnesses to an original saga composed at a specific point in time but as witnesses to the development of the saga across time. Jesch also illustrates the tendency of the late manuscript Flateyjarbók Reykjavík, GkS 1005 fol., 1387–94,

which is the only available witness for about half the saga as reconstituted in the Íslensk fornrit edition, to excise extradiegetic stanzas found in the text at earlier stages in its development (Jesch, “*Orkneyinga saga: A Work in Progress*” 162). The proportion of intradiegetic to extradiegetic stanzas given in the table and the chart for *Orkneyinga saga* may therefore not accurately represent those of the hypothetical early saga.

The so-called *Oldest Saga of Óláfr Haraldsson* is only preserved in the form of small parchment fragments dated c. 1225 (Oslo, Riksarkivet, NRA 52). The fragmentary preservation of the saga has prevented scholars from making certain pronouncements about the entirety of the saga, but it is noteworthy that all eight stanzas that are contained on these scraps of parchment, that is 100%, are intradiegetic and hence part of the narrative. *The Oldest Saga* is considered an early version of the work that is known as *The Legendary Saga of Óláfr Haraldsson* which is preserved in its entirety. In the *Legendary Saga* on the other hand the majority of the stanzas are extradiegetic. Given the close relationship between the *Oldest* and the *Legendary Sagas* it is possible that the *Oldest Saga* also included many extradiegetic stanzas in its original form, but it is impossible to tell with certainty. The *Legendary Saga* stands out among the early texts in that extradiegetic stanzas outnumber intradiegetic quotations. This is partly explained by the fact that some extradiegetic stanzas are quoted in larger chunks (sts. 2–11 *Liðmannaflokkur* and sts. 45–50 *Tögdrápa*).

Figure 1: Left axis and columns: Intradiegetic (light gray) and extradiegetic (dark gray) stanzas. Right axis and line: Number of stanzas per page



From the same early period stems *Sverris saga*, the saga of king Sverrir Sigurðarson. Although commissioned by the king himself, the saga is difficult to date and was not completed until after the death of Sverrir in 1202. It contains eighteen poetic quotations of which one stanza (st. 1) is extradiegetic. This number is surprisingly low when one considers that Sverrir, according to *Skáldatal* ‘the Enumeration of Poets’ was the ruler with whom most skalds were associated.³³

33. The Kringla-version of *Skáldatal* 255, lists no less than thirteen named poets who composed about the king. Of these, it is only Blakkr skáld who is actually cited in *Sverris saga*.

34. Only one folio of *Magnús saga lagabætis* has been preserved, so the absence of skaldic material in that text may be explained by the fragmentary state of the text.

35. Some, see Stavnem, “Creating Traditions” 88–90, have suggested that the stanzas entered the vernacular version of the saga via the kings’ saga compilation *Fagrskinna*, conventionally dated to c. 1220.

36. The vernacular version of the stanza has usually been given primacy, but Gottskálk Jensson, “Nær mun ek Stefna”, argues that it is the Latin version which is oldest. He does not discuss why Oddr would include a self-composed stanza or whether there were others. For a discussion that defends the conventional view, see Andersson, *Oddr munkr* 20–26.

37. The saga relates the following interchange which took place before the battle by the mouth of the river Niz: Þá váru þar með jarli skáld nokkur. Spurðu þeir þá ef jarl vildi láta yrkja nokkut. Hann kvezk ekki vilja yrkja láta, það menn meir gæta at berjask sem bezt enn yrkja sem flest. Kvazk engum trúa skáldunum [*ms. skálkunum*] (*Hákonar saga Ívarssonar* 28) (“Some skálds were with the Jarl at that point. They asked whether the jarl wanted to have some poetry composed. He said he did not want to have poetry composed, and asked his men be more concerned with the quality of their fighting than with the quantity of their poetry. He said that he did not believe any of the poets”).

38. *Hákonar saga Ívarssonar* has traditionally been considered to be among the sources for *Heimskringla* and dated to the 1220s. Bagge, “*Hákonar saga Ívarssonar*” has recently advanced arguments for dating the saga to the late Middle Ages (see also Andersson, “*Hákonar saga Ívarssonar*” and Bagge “*Datering av Hákonar saga*”). The arguments given by Bagge and Andersson do not settle the question conclusively, and I have provisionally placed the saga earlier than *Heimskringla* in the table.

One explanation for the dearth of skaldic materials in *Sverris saga* can be that its author, Abbot Karl Jónsson, was not well versed in the Skaldic tradition and knew little of the poetry composed about the king. An alternative explanation, which does not exclude the first, could be that *Sverris saga* relates events of the recent past that were still within communicative memory when the saga was written, and that the author therefore did not see a need to back up his account with skaldic evidence. This could also explain the complete absence of skaldic stanzas in *Boglunga saga* and *Magnús saga lagabætis* (not included in the chart).³⁴

Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar by Oddr munkr is usually considered among the earliest preserved kings’ sagas and dated to c. 1190 (see Andersson, “The First Icelandic King’s Saga”). This text contains seventeen or eighteen stanzas (depending on which manuscript one reads), the majority of which are extradiegetic. Oddr composed his work in Latin, but the preserved texts are in the vernacular and date from the second half of the thirteenth century. Given that it is difficult (though presumably not impossible) to translate skaldic poetry into Latin, scholarly consensus holds that most of these stanzas were added to the text when it was translated or reworked into the vernacular. Unfortunately, the questions of the date of the translation/vernacular reworking and the extent to which the translation has been interpolated at a later stage are unlikely to be resolved.³⁵ Because of these complexities, the saga is placed among the later rather than the earlier kings’ sagas in the chart above. There is evidence to suggest that at least one Latin stanza was included in Oddr’s original text. It would seem that this stanza was extradiegetic in its original Latin context, but it can hardly be said to have been evidential in the manner of the later kings’ sagas.³⁶

None of the stanzas in the fragmentarily preserved *Hákonar saga Ívarssonar* are attributed to or associated with its protagonist. This can be attributed to the fact that Hákon, according to his own saga, did not appreciate skaldic poetry.³⁷ This is also reflected in *Skáldatal* 257, which does not list any poets next to his name.³⁸

The *Morkinskinna* compilation, finally, is usually dated to c. 1220, but the *Morkinskinna* manuscript (København, Det Kongelige Bibliotek, GkS 1009 fol.) is half a century younger and it would seem that at least some of the extradiegetic stanzas were added to the manuscript after the initial composition of the text. See the discussion in Andersson and Gade, *Morkinskinna* 25–57, in particular the discussion of Ívarr Ingimundarson’s *Sigurðarbálkr* on pages 46–56.

Returning to the nuts and bolts of saga writing, it is worth recalling that the extradiegetic stanzas typically are attached to reports of battles and journeys of the kings, that is to political history and events that can be considered to be of general or public importance within the kingdom. Intradiegetic stanzas on the other hand are usually connected with minor anecdotes that may be entertaining and humorous but that can hardly be considered of great importance for the kingdom as a whole. It should also be reiterated that there are many uncertainties regarding the dating and transmission of these texts. Nevertheless, it seems feasible to draw a line between earlier texts (ending with the *Legendary Saga of Óláfr Haraldsson*) where one sees a preponderance of intradiegetic stanzas and later texts beginning with *Morkinskinna* where the extradiegetic stanzas dominate.

This does not mean that writers of the early group of texts did not draw facts from official skaldic poetry, only that they did not see the same need to systematically authenticate their accounts by citing this poetry as the later writers did. Already Theodoricus, writing in Latin, probably writing around 1180 (McDougall and McDougall, *Theodoricus monachus* xii; Kraggerud, *Theodoricus* xxxiv), claims in the opening paragraph of his prologue that he has drawn much information from the ancient poems in which the deeds of the Norwegian kings were mentioned.³⁹ However, he does not cite any of this poetry, preferring to quote authorities from Classical Antiquity, often poetry, in a manner reminiscent of Latin historians. Gudrun Lange has sought to identify the skaldic poems that Theodoricus is likely to have built upon and it is striking that they all belong to the formal courtly kind, i.e. are *drápur* or *flokkar* (Lange, *Die Anfänge* 55–98).⁴⁰ The texts in the early group also occasionally appeal to the evidentiary authority of skaldic poetry without citing particular stanzas. One example of this is found in *Ágrip* where the author mentions that the information he gives on King (later Jarl) Hersir can be supported by Eyvindr Finnsson's poem *Háleygjatal* (*Ágrip*, 24–26), but without including an evidentiary stanza. The assumption appears to be that the status of the poem as a container of historically reliable information is sufficient to vouch for the trustworthiness of the report.

Looking beyond *Heimskringla*, it should be mentioned that poetic citations lose part of their evidentiary function towards the end of the tradition when they turn into a more formal decorative element in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* from the 1260s. The author of *Hákonar saga*, Sturla Þórðarson, included 121 stanzas in his saga.⁴¹ While 93% of them are extradiegetic, their evidential status is more

39. Opere pretium duxi, Vir Illustrissime, pauca hec de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium breuiter annotare et prout sagaciter perquirere potuimus ab eis, penes quos horum memoria precipue uigere creditur, quos nos Islendinga uocamus, qui hec in suis antiquis carminibus percelebrata recolunt (“I have believed it worth the effort, most distinguished of men, to write these few brief notes on the early kings of Norway and as accurately as we have been able to ascertain from those among whom their memory is thought especially to thrive, the folk we call Icelanders, who often mention and recall events in their age-old poems”) (Theodoricus 4).

40. To the question of how Theodoricus gained this knowledge, she proposes that he drew on a manuscript which contained an anthology of such poems (Lange, *Die Anfänge* 96–97; see also Kraggerud, *Theodoricus* lxxvii–lxxviii). While this is certainly not impossible, no such anthologies are known from the middle ages.

41. In addition to the 120 numbered stanzas in the ÍF edition, there is an unnumbered stanza by Jarl Skúli (eds. Þorleifur Hauksson et al., 2013, II, 21).

questionable since by far the majority were composed by the author himself, parallel to his composition of the saga. Interestingly, Sturla still uses conventional third person phrases so introduce his verse into the narrative in the manner of the earlier sagas: “svá kvað Sturla [...]” (“Sturla said thus [...]”). Later compilations (not included in the table and chart above) continue to cite poetry and also add extradiegetic stanzas, although some of these postdate the information they are meant to authenticate by more than a century.⁴²

Taking the use of poetic quotations in the sagas as an indicator, one may therefore sketch the following development of the use of poetic citations in the kings’ saga tradition:⁴³

42. An example of this is discussed by Stavnem, “Creating Tradition” 95–100.

43. This developmental model modifies and elaborates upon Meulengracht Sørensen, “The Prosimetrum Form” 182–83.

1. Official skaldic verse is seen as a storehouse of facts that the historiographer can draw upon but does not need to cite (e.g. Theodoricus).
2. Occasional (intradiegetic) stanzas are cited for their own sake as they form the core of interesting anecdotes and humorous incidents highlighting certain aspects of life in the royal retinue (e.g. *Oldest Saga*). Official skaldic verse continues to function as a storehouse of fact but now need to be cited as the authority of the historiographer no longer suffices to authenticate the account (e.g. *Orkneyinga saga*).
3. Saga writers begin to weed out anecdotal intradiegetic stanzas and their related anecdotes with the result that the more official extradiegetic authenticating stanzas dominate (e.g. *Separate saga of Óláfr Haraldsson*).
4. Skaldic verse appears to lose its authenticating function and becomes a formal decorative element of Old Norse historiography (*Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*).

The transition from the first to the second stage can possibly be explained as a consequence of the increased importance of Icelandic authors who in addition to being conversant with the tradition of official court poetry also were well-versed in the tradition of occasional verse that had accrued around Icelandic court poets. The addition of this lighter material off-set the more chronicle-like focus on major events of large-scale political significance with minor, unofficial, but also entertaining anecdotes. The proportion of these two different kinds of material varies from one text to the other, but it seems that author of *Separate Saga of Óláfr Haraldsson* and *Heimskringla* actively sought to weed out some of the anecdotal material and strike a different balance between the two kinds of material. That this was

a matter actively reflected upon is evident from the conclusion of the longer version of the prologue to the *Separate Saga of Óláfr Haraldsson*, where one reads:

Veit ek, at svá man þykkja, ef útan lands kóm sá frásagn,
sem ek hafa mjök sagt frá íslenzkum mǫnnum, en þat berr til
þess, at íslenzkir menn, þeir er þessi tíðendi sá eða heyrðu,
báru higat til lands þessar frásagnir, ok hafa menn síðan at
þeim numit. En þó rita ek flest eptir því, sem ek finn í
kvæðum skálda þeira, er váru með Óláfi konungi
(*Heimskringla* II 422).⁴⁴

44. It is uncertain whether or not this passage was written by Snorri Sturluson or a later redactor (see Johnsen and Jón Helgason, *Den store saga* 1125–27).

(If this account becomes known abroad [i.e. outside of Iceland], I know that it may seem as if I have focused unduly on Icelanders. But the reason for this is that Icelanders, who saw or heard about these events, brought these accounts out here to this land and people have subsequently learned from them. Yet, I write most in accordance with that I find in the poems of those skalds who were with king Óláfr.)

Although the author had made a conscious effort to weed out some of the anecdotal material about Icelanders, he understood his account has a distinct Icelandic bias.

3. Comparisons

Before beginning to search for parallels to the prosimetric form of Old Norse vernacular historiography, it may be useful to consider briefly why this is a worthwhile undertaking. A great deal of scholarship on Old Norse literature and literary history is still carried out under the aegis of a desire to highlight features that are uniquely distinctive of the saga literature and Old Norse poetry. Another, more ecumenical, tradition has sought to emphasize how the Old Norse literary tradition grew from the soil of the literary traditions of papal Europe through adoption and modification. Naturally, these two positions only provide the outermost points of a scale, and most scholars place themselves somewhere along this scale rather than at its extremes. While I may tend to adopt the more ecumenical position as my point of departure, there are features of the tradition that lend themselves poorly to explication within this paradigm of cultural transfer. As suggested above, the Old Norse prosimetricum of

Heimskringla and similar texts (stage 3 in the model outlined above) is the result of a historical development in the course of which poetry was integrated into the text in order to serve a specific (evidential) purpose. This development can be understood as a response to a perceived need among saga writers for authentication. Since this development is understood as an internal process within Old Norse vernacular historiography – although it happened in response to intellectual currents reaching Old Norse historiographers from abroad – one would not necessarily expect that Old Norse writers found inspiration for this form in some other historiographical tradition and imitated that tradition.⁴⁵ At the same time, it may be worthwhile to avoid the essentializing pitfalls that follow most arguments for Old Norse cultural exceptionalism. I therefore find that a comparative approach that attempts to contextualize the comparanda properly is likely to be illuminating, even when direct lines of transfer cannot be established.

Before continuing, it will also be useful to reiterate the central characteristics of the prosimetrum of the kings' sagas that have been discussed above:

1. The authors incorporate already *existing poetry* into their works.
2. This poetry is composed by, or at least believed to be composed by, *historical* individuals, often professional poets, that
 - a. play a part in the events narrated

or

 - b. based their poetry on reports from others who had participated in the events.
3. The relation between prose and poetry can generally be characterized in two different ways:
 - a. The historical narrative *stages* and *contextualizes* the poetry by creating or recreating a/the situation giving rise to the stanza (intradiegetic stanzas).
 - b. the poetry *authenticates* the historical narrative some facts of which may be *extrapolated* from the poetry (extradiegetic stanzas).⁴⁶

Many scholars have sought the origin of the Old Norse prosimetrum in prose elaborations on Eddic poetry as one can see it in the heroic section of the *Codex Regius* compilation of Eddic poetry. This topic is most recently discussed by Males who also points to parallels in Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* and Irish texts. While Males, *The Poetic Genesis* 194–276, emphasizes some of the characteristics out-

45. Fidjestøl, *Det norrøne fyrstediktet* 20–21, suggested in passing that it was *Ágrip* that introduced the practice of citing verse into ON historiography and that the author of *Ágrip* used was inspired by the use of verse in Theodoricus's *De antiquitate regum norwagiesium*. Röhn, "Skaldenstrophe und norrøne Geschichtsschreibung", following a comparison and analysis of the use of verse in the two texts, rejected this suggestion, but without suggesting an alternative.

46. These characteristics do not apply to *Hákonar saga* which as, mentioned above, represents a late innovation in the use of verse in the kings' saga tradition.

47. See the discussions by Lassen, “Indigenous and Latin Literature” and Wellendorf, “Ecclesiastical Literature and Hagiography”.

48. Pabst does not discuss the ON tradition in any detail, but he does touch upon it in connection with his discussion of Saxo Grammaticus’s use of the prosimetrum (*Prosimetrum* 924–38) where he argues that the influence of the historical sagas on Saxo is minimal (“sehr gering”, *Prosimetrum* 932); Friis-Jensen attributes greater significance to the vernacular tradition (see below).

49. Males, in his discussion of possible Latin parallels to the Old Norse prosimetrum, considers Henry of Huntingdon the “the nearest counterpart” (*The Poetic Genesis* 207 n. 56). In six cases in his *Historia Anglorum*, Henry probably translates very short passages of pre-existing, but now lost, vernacular poetry into Latin; and in one additional case, he renders the Old English poem *Brunanburh* into a Latin that seeks to imitate the rhythm and alliteration of the original text. His stated purpose for this effort is to render the “foreign words and [rhetorical] figures” of the old poem faithfully into Latin so that “we may learn the gravity of the deeds and spirits of that people from the gravity of their words” (“extraneis tam uerbis quam figuris [...] Vt [...] ex grauitate uerborum grauitatem actuum et animorum gentis illius condiscamus”) (Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum* 310). The various versions *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* include some poems and Henry ‘no doubt’ worked from a now lost manuscript the *Chronicle*, often referring to this vernacular sources as “the writing of the ancients” (Greenway, *Henry xci*).

50. This is in *Gesta danorum* i.1.1 where Saxo disagrees with Dudo on the origin of the Danes. The other two historians, to whom Saxo refers, are Bede (*Gesta Danorum* i.1.2) and Paul the Deacon (*Gesta Danorum* viii.1.3.2), but their histories are not prosimetric (though both do contain a few poems).

51. Christiansen’s translation of Dudo’s text contains a handy index of the poems in the text and their meters (Christiansen, *Dudo of St. Quentin* 236–37).

lined above, his subsequent discussion takes a different direction and focuses on the sagas of Icelanders and the pseudonymous stanzas included in this part of the corpus.

Most saga scholars would agree that the earliest Old Norse writings are somehow indebted to Latin textual models that reached Scandinavia from papal Europe.⁴⁷ Looking to the continent and Latin historiography for parallels or even models for the prosimetric form therefore seems obvious. Nevertheless, perusal of Bernhard Pabst’s *Prosimetrum*, a colossal monograph on Latin prosimetra from Late Antiquity to the Late Middle Ages did not bring to light any texts that integrate prose and poetry in a composite form comparable to that of the Old Norse historiographical tradition.⁴⁸ The closest contender may be the Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus who is roughly contemporary with the early Old Norse vernacular specimens of the prosimetrum.⁴⁹ Saxo’s use of the prosimetric form will be discussed briefly below, but first some remarks will be made on Dudo of St. Quentin’s *Historia Normannorum* (early eleventh century); another exuberantly prosimetric work of historiography and one of the few texts to which Saxo refers directly in *Gesta Danorum*.⁵⁰

Dudo included almost ninety poems or verse sequences in his four-book long history of the Normans, and like Saxo he employs a great number of different meters.⁵¹ All but two of Dudo’s verse sequences are extradiegetic. The two intradiegetic sequences are found in his second book, and this book will be given as an example of how verse sequences are employed by Dudo. The second book is devoted to the founding figure Rollo who is portrayed as a ‘Viking Aeneas’ fulfilling the destiny laid out for him (Christiansen, *Dudo of St. Quentin* xix). It contains eleven verse sequences, all but one of which are composed in epic dactylic hexameters; the sole exception is the first verse sequence which is composed in elegiac distichs. Nine of the verse sequences are extradiegetic: The book is framed by authorial poetic paratexts in the form of a preface and an epilogue where Dudo expresses concerns about his ability to complete his lofty undertaking and prays for divine support. Six of the remaining verse sequences are authorial apostrophes addressing Rollo, spurring him onwards and reassuring him that a great future awaits him in Normandy. There is also one apostrophe addressed to Dacia (i.e. Denmark) and Francia, assuring them that there will be peace between the two peoples in the future. Two poems, finally, are intradiegetic and given as direct speech in the text: In one, the English King Alstemus beseeches Rollo to stay in England and take as much of it as he wishes

and suggests that they enter a pact of mutual help and support. In the second, the still unbaptized Rollo prays to the Christian God for a safe crossing from England to Francia. These verse sequences, which were all composed by Dudo himself, would not have circulated independently of the text prior to its composition, rather they were “designed to function, specifically with, and inextricably from, the prose text” (Pohl, *Dudo of St. Quentin’s Historia* 134). They can for the most part be removed from the text without damaging the narrative of the work,⁵² although they do of course shape the reader’s perception and experience of the narrative presented by Dudo. The only real exception is Alstemus’ address to Rollo, which forms a part of a dialogue between the two, and Rollo’s prayer (Dudo of St. Quentin, *De moribus* 148 and 149; transl. Christiansen *Dudo of St. Quentin*, 31 and 32). As mentioned above, these are the only two verse sequences in the entire work that are given in the voice of characters in the story.⁵³

It has been suggested that Dudo’s use of the prosimetric form betrays some indirect familiarity with Norse prosimetric narratives, but the “oral stylisms from his vernacular sources and the saga-like *prosimetrum* form of his narrative are so overlaid with clerical rhetoric ... that it is pretty difficult to ascertain the exact nature of the oral source materials” (Amory, “The *dönsk tunga*” 284). However, the content, style, and purpose of the verse sections of Dudo’s work are so unlike those found in preserved Norse texts that this seems unlikely. Another work of historiography which provides a better illustration of what a work inspired by Latin and vernacular Scandinavian forms could look like is Saxo Grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum* (probably completed by 1208; Friis-Jensen, “When did Saxo Finish his *Gesta Danorum*?”).

While Saxo may have studied a manuscript of Dudo closely, as argued by Friis-Jensen, (“Dudo of St. Quentin and Saxo Grammaticus”), the two historiographers do not see the same need to refer to sources. Overall, Dudo is fairly vague on the topic of his sources and stresses the pioneering nature of his endeavor, but he does mention that Count Rodulf of Ivry related the contents of the book to him.⁵⁴ Rodulf was the half-brother of Richard I and had commissioned Dudo’s work. Saxo on the other hand declares in his preface that he partly has relied on songs (*carminibus*) in the vernacular carved on rocks, and he continues: “Quorum [*sc. carminum*] uestigiis ceu quibusdam antiquitatis uoluminibus inherens tenorem ueris translationis passibus emulatus metra metris reddanda curasse” (“Adhering to the tracks of these verses, as if to some ancient volumes, and following the sense with the true steps of a translator, I have assiduously ren-

52. Indeed, a number of manuscripts leaves out the verse sequences. For a discussion of this, see Pohl, *Dudo of St. Quentin’s Historia* 84–108.

53. Two additional verse sequences, a description of Alstignus (Dudo of St. Quentin, *De moribus* 130; transl. Christiansen, *Dudo of St. Quentin* 16–17) and a description of the meeting between Rollo and his son William (Dudo of St. Quentin, *De moribus* 182; transl. Christiansen, *Dudo of St. Quentin*, 60), seem closer integrated with the text than the remaining ones.

54. “Rodulfe . . . cuius quæ constant libro hoc conscripta relatu” (Dudo of St. Quentin, *De moribus* 126) (“Rolf . . . who told what in this volume stands inscribed”; transl. Christiansen, *Dudo of St. Quentin* 11). This is in a prefatory poem addressed too Rodulf.

55. Saxo also refers more generally to the historical treasure-trove of the Icelanders whose accounts he has adopted: “[Tylenses. . .] quorum thesauros historicarum rerum pignoribus refertos curiosus consulens haut parum presentis operis partem ex eorum relationis imitatione contexui” (Pr.1.4, Saxo Grammaticus *Gesta Danorum* 6).

56. Although he may have invented some of the verse sequences and amplified or expanded on others, Old Norse vernacular parallels show that at least some of them are based on preexisting vernacular poetry. The claim that these verses were carved on rocks is less credible.

57. On Saxo’s prosimetrum and its relation to Latin and vernacular Old Norse prosimetra, see Friis-Jensen, *Saxo Grammaticus as a Latin Poet* 29–63 *et passim*.

58. “Hans kvæði eru fornuzt þeirra sem menn kunnu nú (*Skáldatal* 251) [“his poems are the oldest of those people know now.”].

dered one poem by another”) (Saxo Grammaticus *Gesta Danorum* 6 and 7). The result of this procedure is that his chronicle should be considered “quam antiquitus edita” (“as the utterance of antiquity”) (Saxo Grammaticus *Gesta Danorum* 6 and 7).⁵⁵ Saxo’s verse sequences thus contrast with those of Dudo by being based on poems that had an existence prior to and independently of Saxo’s history.⁵⁶ In his study of Saxo’s use of the prosimetrum, Friis-Jensen stresses that all poetic sections are given as direct speech by the characters in the text.⁵⁷ Saxo’s use of poetry is in other words overwhelmingly intradiegetic. Jaeger characterizes the contrasting use of verse by Dudo and Saxo well, writing: “Dudo’s poems happen outside the narrative, looking in; Saxo’s happen exclusively within the narrative” (“Dudo of St. Quentin and Saxo Grammaticus” 245).

A crucial difference between Saxo and the kings’ sagas in their inclusion of pre-existing poetry is that they draw on two different bodies of poetry. The authors of the kings’ sagas, as discussed above, avail themselves of poetry attributed to historical individuals, mostly professional skalds, and the biography of the skald helps to anchor them in time and space. Saxo, on the other hand, draws on poetry of the Eddic kind and his prosimetrum thus resembles the prosimetrum of the legendary *fornaldarsögur* rather than that of the historical kings’ sagas (see Friis-Jensen, *Saxo Grammaticus as a Latin Poet* 58–62). In the *fornaldarsögur* characters, who are not otherwise presented as poets, may at moments of heightened emotion or narrative intensity, often in connection with heroic deeds, suddenly burst into verse instead of communicating in regular prose. The main exception is the legendary warrior Starkaðr/Starcatherus, whose poetic abilities are widely acknowledged in the tradition. Starkaðr belongs to the very beginning of the tradition and according to *Skáldatal* his poems are the oldest that are known.⁵⁸ *Skáldatal* does not link him to a particular ruler, but simply states that he composed about the kings of the Danes suggesting that he is understood to have preceded the time of the institutionalization of role of the court poets. Indeed, it has been suggested that Starkaðr should be understood as a *þulr*, an “ancient court functionary, who was warrior, poet, prophet, historian, and satirist” (Clunies Ross, “Poet into Myth” 37 *et passim*), rather than a *skáld*. The poetry ascribed to him is of the Eddic rather than Skaldic type and the deeds attributed to him in the saga tradition also show that he belongs to the legendary rather than the historical period. Starkaðr is thus a figure of a very different caliber from a Sigvatr or an Óttarr and belongs squarely in the legendary past. Finally, it is

59. The final verse sequences in the work are Starcatherus’/Starkaðr’s poems found in Book 8.

60. *Magnús saga* is only fragmentarily preserved and it is uncertain whether the lost parts contained any poetry. *Boglunga saga*, which covers the period 1202–17, does not include any poetry in its present form.

noteworthy that all verse sequences in Saxo’s text are found in the legendary section, suggesting that the verses are indeed “utterances of antiquity” rather than statements of a more recent date.⁵⁹

The absence of obvious parallels to the Norse historical prosimetrum in the medieval Latin tradition may be explained by pointing to two circumstances that have been important for the development of Old Norse historiography that are not generally paralleled in the Latin language historiography. Firstly, Old Norse historiographical works partly cover the period before the parchment-based book culture had established itself in the North and a sizeable part of the poetry included in the texts originated as oral poetry and stems from this largely pre-literate age. To this point, one may also add that the kings’ sagas covering the thirteenth century, i.e., a period in which both parchment literacy and a textual bureaucracy were firmly established in Norway and Iceland, use poetry in a different way from texts covering earlier periods, in the case of *Hákonar saga* (phase 4 in the model outlined above); or they leave out poetry altogether, in the cases of *Boglunga saga* and *Magnús saga lagabætis*.⁶⁰ Secondly, but of equal importance, there is the issue of language. Poetry predating the *ritöld* or age of writing would be composed in the vernacular poetic idiom of the poet which means that a historian writing in Latin would need to recreate the poetry in Latin, and hence forfeit at least some of the evidentiary function, dependent as it is, on verbatim preservation. Thus Saxo Grammaticus did not include “old poems as they were, but rather as they would have been had pre-Christian Danes been in a position to write Latin” (Meulengracht Sørensen, “The Prosimetrum Form” 186). While I do not wish to propose inordinately simple explanations for complex literary developments, I would like to suggest that the two factors of orality and vernacularity in tandem played a considerable role in the shaping of the Old Norse prosimetrum of the kings’ sagas.

This suggestion might be given some weight if it were possible to identify other traditions that developed under similar circumstances – i.e. traditions where historiography was produced that a) represents a period with little or restricted use of literacy, that b) uses sources from that period, that c) is written in the language that was used during that period – and developed with similar results: prosimetric historiography that combines prose with intradiegetic and extradiegetic stanzas in a manner similar to that of the kings’ sagas. Identifying and discussing such a tradition necessitates looking beyond materials that are usually discussed in the context of Old Norse

historiography. As an example of such a tradition, I would like to present briefly some aspects of the early Arabic language tradition which is indeed partly prosimetric.

As is the case with the Old Norse tradition, the early Arabic tradition spans the semi-oral and the literate period and, while pre-Christian poetry remained an important intangible heritage in the Old Norse world after the conversion to Christianity, pre-Islamic Arabic poetry came to enjoy a similar position in the Islamicate world.⁶¹ Pre-Islamic poetry was valued for a variety of reasons of a linguistic, poetic and social nature, that may also to some degree find parallels in the Old Norse tradition. In this context, it is the poetry's reputed importance for the transmission of historical information that is of relevance. The scholar al-Jāhīz, who was active in ninth century Baghdad, articulates this function of poetry as follows:

Every nation relies on one of several ways and means for the full preservation of their exploits and the protection of their glories [from falling into oblivion]. The Arabs, in their Time of Ignorance [before Islam], used to strive to immortalize them [i.e., their glorious deeds] by relying for that on poetry. . . and that was their archive.⁶²

The notion that societies without literacy or with restricted literacy use poetry to keep the memory of past deeds alive is fairly commonplace and can be found in many writers from antiquity onwards. One example is Tacitus who claims that old songs are the only form of historical tradition among the Germani.⁶³ The notion of poetry as the 'archive of the Arabs' is echoed by many subsequent writers and one may see it fulfilling this function in the body of materials that is referred to as *Ayyām al-ʿArab*, literally "the days of the Arabs", but conventionally rendered as "The Battle Days of the Arabs". These tales contain pre-Islamic tribal lore of various groups of North Arabian Bedouins and usually relate battles, minor skirmishes and raids. They are held to have been collected and committed to writing in the late Umayyad and early Abbasid periods by philologists, the most prominent collector being the Basran Abū ʿUbayda (d. 209AH/825AD).⁶⁴ While his collections of Battle Days have not survived, they were used and quoted extensively by later authorities – philologists, encyclopedists and eventually historians – whose works have been preserved.⁶⁵ The Battle Days are generally narrated in a fairly straightforward vivid realistic prose style interspersed with dialogue. Occasionally one finds that shorter poems improvised by participants in

61. One may also suggest that there are significant and interesting parallels between the way Muslim writers drew on pre-Islamic poetry in order to create an Arab identity and the way in which Old Norse authors sought to create a Norse identity using pre-Christian poetry.

62. Cited from Heinrichs, "Prosimetrical Genres in Classical Arabic Literature" 251, upon whom I rely for a part of the following. The quote is from *Kitāb al-Hayawān*.

63. "[...] carminibus antiquis, quod unum apud illos memoriae et annalium genus est [...]" (Tacitus, *Germania* 70) and Jordanes mentions *carmina prisca* (*Getica*, 61). In literate societies on the other hand, poetry may have a very different status. Cf. e.g. Plutarch who mentions the saying: πολλὰ ψεύδονται ἄοιδοί ["Many the lies the poets tell"] (Plutarch, "How a Young Man Should Study Poetry" 82 and 83.)

64. The biographical encyclopedist Ibn Khallikān (d. 1282) ascribes two collections of battle days to Abū ʿUbayda; a shorter one containing seventy-five such accounts and a longer one containing no less than 1200 accounts (Ibn Khallikan, *Biographical Dictionary* III 393). The reliability of these figures is naturally open to question.

65. The rather complex textual and transmissional history is presented by Toral-Niehoff, "Talking about Arab Origins". The constructedness of the pre-Islamic age as it appears in the pre-served sources is highlighted by Drory, "The Abbasid Construction of the Jahiliyya" and more recently Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*.

66. See the characterizations by Heinrichs, “Prosimetrical Genres in Classical Arabic Literature” 254–55 and Toral-Niehoff, “Talking about Arab Origins” 45–46. A foundational and informative treatment of the literary aspects of the corpus is found in Caskel, “Aijām al-‘Arab”, while Meyer, *Der historische Gehalt der Aiyām al-‘arab*, discusses the use of these texts as historical sources.

67. While the present contribution focuses on prosimetrum of the kings’ sagas, this point is also of interest for the grammatical and mythological materials in contained in the Prose *Edda*.

the course of the events related have been inserted in the narrative. At the end of the narratives, one often finds longer panegyric poems connected with the events in which victors are praised, opponents are mocked, and the dead are remembered.⁶⁶

In his article on the prosimetrum in classical Arabic literature, Wolfhart Heinrichs divides the poetic citations in the Battle Days into action poems and commentary poems (“Prosimetrical Genres in Classical Arabic Literature” 259), a division that recalls the situational (intradiegetic) and authenticating (extradiegetic) poems of Old Norse historiography. The action poems are spoken by characters in the narratives while the commentary poems corroborate the accounts; “there is a dialectic between prose and poetry,” Heinrichs writes, “the poetry cannot really be understood without the prose, and the prose is not considered trustworthy and true without poetry to corroborate it” (“Prosimetrical Genres in Classical Arabic Literature” 260). A consequence of this, Heinrichs continues, is that “evidentiary verse . . . became the ubiquitous method of proving a point which in turn transformed the ancient poetry into a corpus of classical authority” (“Prosimetrical Genres in Classical Arabic Literature” 261).⁶⁷ Irrespectively of whether these features, which are characteristic of the Battle Days in their written forms, are inherited from their original oral mode of presentation, as argued by Heinrichs (“Prosimetrical Genres in Classical Arabic Literature” 253–61) or not, the characterization of the written prosimetric Battle Days resembles characterizations of the equally prosimetric kings’ sagas to a remarkable degree. One could also highlight the importance of genealogies, geographical accuracy, the ideals of aggressive masculinity, the commitment to revenge and the notion of shared honor (see Toral-Niehoff, “Talking about Arab Origins” 48–50), as well as the prominent role of female inciters in the narratives in the forms in which they have been committed to writing. These are all features which can easily be found in Old Norse literature as well, although they may be more pronounced in the sagas of Icelanders than in the saga of kings which are the focus of this discussion. In the most general terms, one can then observe parallels between the Arabic accounts of Battle Days and Old Norse saga literature in respect to narrative, ideological and formal elements. In the present context, narrative elements and ideology will be left aside and the focus will be on the prosimetric form. Two examples of Battle Day accounts with integrated verses will be briefly presented and examples of how verse are integrated in these two accounts will be given. The first, the *Bat-*

the *Day of Shi‘b Jabala*, is drawn from a philological work commenting on poetry while the second, the *Battle Day of Dhū Qār*, is from a historiographic work.

The *Battle Day of Shi‘b Jabala* is found in the compilation and commentary on the *naqā‘id* ‘flytings’ of Jarīr and al-Farazdaq. Jarīr and al-Farazdaq were engaged in a poetic duel or quarrel that lasted more than forty years and resulted in more than one hundred (often lengthy) poems in which they lampooned and lambasted each other and their respective tribes.⁶⁸ Their rivalry did not come to an end until al-Farazdaq died in 729. Both came from a Bedouin background and their poetry, which included many archaic expressions and references to tribal lore and genealogy, was compiled by the Abū ‘Ubaida mentioned above. He also produced a lengthy commentary on their poems focusing on philological and historical matters.⁶⁹ Several Battle Days are recounted as parts of this historical commentary. In l. 65 of poem 64, Jarīr says (*Naqā‘id Jarīr wa-l-Farazdaq* II 652):

وَلَسْنَا بِذَبْحِ الْجَيْشِ يَوْمَ أَوَارَةَ وَلَمْ يَسْتَيْحِنَا عَامِرٌ وَقَنَابِلُهُ

We are not the victims of the troops on the (battle) day of Uwāra

and ‘Āmir and his band of horsemen did not plunder us.⁷⁰

To this line is added a comprehensive commentary that elucidates the references to the “Battle of Uwāra” and “‘Āmir and his band” by relating the *Battle Day of Uwāra* (*Naqā‘id Jarīr wa-l-Farazdaq* II 652–54) and the lengthy *Battle Day of Shi‘b Jabala* (*Naqā‘id Jarīr wa-l-Farazdaq* II 654–78), both of which combine prose and poetry. Shi‘b Jabala ‘the Ravine of Jabala’, the place where the battle was fought, is a mountain in Central Arabia. The text states that this battle was “one of the [three] most violent warfares of the Arabs” in pre-Islamic times and dates it to “seventeen years before the birth of the Prophet” (Lichtenstädter, *Introduction to Classical Arabic Literature* 160 and 174). In this battle, ‘Āmir b. Ṣa‘ṣa‘a routed his opponents, among whom were ancestors of al-Farazdaq. The account of the Battle Day includes twenty-one verse sequences;⁷¹ thirteen of these are extradiegetic, while the remaining are intradiegetic and part of the narrative. As a simple example of an intradiegetic verse citation, one may quote the following lines which contain the sixth verse citation in the *Battle Day of Shi‘b Jabala*:

Then Mu‘āwiya b. ‘Ubāda b. ‘Uqayl who was left-handed

68. See Jayyusi, “Umayyad Poetry” 401–13, for a presentation of the two and their poetic contest. She writes inter alia: “The *naqā‘id* became a vehicle of competition in which poetic skill was demonstrated. Large audiences gathered round the poets, each standing in his corner in al-Mirbad [in Basra, present-day Iraq], often especially dressed up for the occasion. The audiences would often break out into peals of laughter, especially when they listened to Jarīr’s invective, which was full of mischievous barbs and comical imagery” (Jayyusi, “Umayyad Poetry” 410).

69. The *isnād* or chain of transmission of the preserved text of the main manuscript used in Bevan’s edition is Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb > al-Sukkarī > Muḥammad ibn al-‘Abbās al-Yazīdī. All three, but especially the last have added to the text (*Naqā‘id Jarīr wa-l-Farazdaq* I xi). This makes it difficult to tell the different historical layers of the text from one another and determine what Abū ‘Ubaida wrote initially.

70. Below I rely on Lichtenstädter’s English translation of the *Battle Day of Shi‘b Jabala*, but her translation has excised the account from the philological commentary and does not include the text by Jarīr that motivated the inclusion of the account. I have not been able to locate a full translation of *Naqā‘id Jarīr wa-l-Farazdaq* and cite the original along with my own translation here. Where translations are available, I do not cite the Arabic text.

71. Two verse sequences are exchanges in verse between characters in the narrative.

came up to them and said:

I am the left-handed youth
in me is good and evil
but evil in me is more.

The B. Asad took that as an evil omen [and] said: ‘Turn back from them and obey us.’ (transl. Lichtenstädter, *Introduction to Classical Arabic Literature* 166)

As an example of an extradiegetic quotation, one may cite the seventeenth verse quotation:

‘Amr b. Ḥaṣḥās b. Waḥb b. A‘yā’ b. Ṭarīf al-Asadī was encircled by attackers and Ma‘qil b. ‘Āmir b. Maw‘ala saved and nursed and clothed him. About this event Ma‘qil said:
I have extended help to Ibn Ḥaṣḥās b. Waḥb at the plain of Dhu-l-Jidhāt with a noble hand
I held back from him the horse al-Dahmā’ when I was present while any friend of his was far away . . .
(3 additional lines of poetry follow, transl. Lichtenstädter, *Introduction to Classical Arabic Literature* 171).

The *Battle Day of Shī‘b Jabala* is, as mentioned, found in the philological and historical commentary to a vast body of poetry where its inclusion is motivated by the reference to “‘Āmir and his band of horsemen”.

The second example of a Battle Day given here, the *Battle Day of Dhū Qār*, illustrates how such an account may be inserted in a work of historiography. It is found in al-Ṭabarī’s massive early tenth century *History of Prophets and Kings* (V 338–70).⁷² In this section of his work, al-Ṭabarī combines two basic Battle Day accounts, ascribed to Abū ‘Ubayda and ibn al-Kalbī. Al-Ṭabarī’s work postdates these two sources by more than a century, but he is held to have reproduced the accounts, including their poetry, faithfully in his text (see Heath, “Some Functions of Poetry” 46–47). Dhū Qār is the name of the location near the Euphrates where the battle that forms the climax of the account was fought. This particular Battle Day stands out in the corpus in that it does not recount a conflict between two Arab tribes or confederations but rather a fairly large-scale confrontation between the Banū Bakr tribe and the host of the Sasanian king (which also included his Arabic vassals). This clash would have happened in the early 600s. Al-Ṭabarī’s account of this battle day contains twenty-four poetic passages varying in length between one and nine lines.

The Arabist Peter Heath has discussed the poetic quotations in

72. Although Al-Ṭabarī wrote in Arabic, he is generally considered a Persian historiographer and his *nisba* indicates that he hailed from Tabaristan (on the south coast of the Caspian sea).

73. He writes: “Although [a certain sequence of] poems represent narrative incidents or actions that form part of the sequence of events that drive the narrative forward, in one sense they still fall into Heinrich’s category of *‘aqd wa-ḥall* [i.e. solidifying and dissolving poetry, one of Heinrich’s subcategories of commentary poems] (Heath, “Some Functions of Poetry” 49).”

this part of al-Ṭabarī’s work using Heinrich’s division into commentary poems and action poems as his point of departure (“Some Functions of Poetry” 47–50). As was the case with the division of Old Norse poetic quotations into authenticating and situational poems, the distinction turns out to be difficult to uphold.⁷³ However, dividing the quotations into intradiegetic and extradiegetic quotations seems a fairly straightforward task. By my count, there are fourteen intradiegetic quotations and ten extradiegetic. A clear example of the first (intradiegetic) category is provided by some lines in which one of the leaders of the Banū Bakr urges his men forward:

The people began to urge on their fellows and to compose *rajaz* verses [to encourage them]. Ḥanzalah b. Tha‘labah recited:

Your host have already become a compact mass, so fight fiercely! What excuse shall I have, since I am strongly armed and robust? . . . [five additional lines follow] (Al-Ṭabarī, *History of Prophets and Kings* V 363).

A clear example of an extradiegetic citation comes at the beginning of the account when the sons of the Lakhmid king al-Mundhir b. al-Mundhir are introduced:

Because of their handsome appearance, the entire group of his sons were known as al-Ashāhib (“the Shining Ones”), as al-A‘shā says:

The sons of al-Mundhir, the Shining Ones, go forth in the morning in al-Ḥirah with their swords (Al-Ṭabarī, *History of Prophets and Kings* V 341).

It bears mention that the line quoted here is an excerpt from a longer poem that is more fully preserved elsewhere and that al-A‘shā is a well-known contemporary poet and panegyrist who is also quoted further on in the *Battle Day of Dhū Qār*.⁷⁴

Al-Ṭabarī’s history contains a second account of a Battle Day: *The Battle Day of al-Ṣafaqa* (V 289–94). This Battle Day contains two poems: one intradiegetic by a certain Ubayy bin Wabh (in which he relates how he forces open the gates of the fort of al-Mushaqqar) and one extradiegetic by al-A‘shā (which authenticates the information that a hundred captives were released, although they were not grateful).

Formally speaking, the parallels between the prosimetra of the Old Norse kings’ sagas and the Battle Days of the Arabs as regards their use of intradiegetic and extradiegetic poetic citations are clear.

74. For a comparison of the poetry of al-A‘shā about the battle with the way the battle is depicted in later texts, see Webb, *Imagining the Arabs* 89–95.

75. Al-A'shā is considered the first professional Arab poet.

The examples from the historian al-Ṭabarī resemble the examples of the Norse prosimetrum better than those of the philological commentary in that the extradiegetic verse is not only given as evidential quotations, but also in that they are by a professional poet.⁷⁵ The intradiegetic verses in both the examples of both the philologist and the historian, on the other hand, are not by professional poets, in the manner of those of the kings' sagas given above (the examples of the nuts-stanzas and the sword-stanza), rather they recited by characters who at moments of heightened emotion bursts into verse instead of communicating in regular prose; similarly to the way poetry is used in the *fornaldarsögur* and in Saxo.

4. Concluding remarks

Comparative endeavors can be, and have been, criticized as being essentializing at their core. They work by stripping away, arbitrarily or at least according to the whims of the one doing the comparison, particulars in order to bring a specific element into focus. The historical contexts of the comparanda may suffer as these are raised to the level where comparison becomes meaningful. Furthermore, comparing and contrasting, observing parallels and hopefully invoking some sense of wonder at the fact that A in some respects is similar to B, cannot count as a goal in itself. If one is satisfied that the parallels presented are indeed parallels, the obvious next step would be to evaluate the significance of the similarities and account for their existence. In this particular case, one may wonder why the Old Norse and the Arabic works of historiography presented here resemble one another in their deployment of the specific prosimetric form.

Reliable historical evidence suggests that representatives of the Islamicate and Norse worlds met on various occasions during the Viking age (in particular in the areas around the Black and the Caspian Seas and on the Iberian Peninsula) and in the twelfth century (in connection with pilgrimages and crusades). Cultural exchange is likely to have occurred on these occasions, but an explanation relying on direct historical contact does not seem likely in this case. It seems more promising to argue that similar circumstances led to similar outcomes. Both two traditions discussed here valued poems by historical characters from a period with little or restricted literacy. This poetry entered the two written traditions in different ways and the development of the two historiographical traditions follow dis-

tinct paths which means that the stages of the development of the use of poetic citations in Old Norse historiography outlined above cannot be paralleled in the Arabic tradition.

While the materials examined do not suffice to show that traditions that have preserved poetry from a period with restricted literacy as a rule develop a tradition of prosimetric historiography, it should be worthwhile to examine other traditions that developed against such a background. It would also be of interest to explore the Arabic tradition in greater detail, in particular in order to see how anecdotes about poets are incorporated into works of historiography.

This paper has argued that one can detect a development in the quotation of skaldic materials in historiography. The skalds served as the creators and custodians of the memories of the deeds of kings. Early historiographers of the local past drew on this skaldic material when fashioning their works but without seeing a need to cite this material. Soon the chronicle-like works of the earliest historiographers were supplemented by anecdotal materials about skalds and their experiences at court as well as a smaller number of stanzas whose primary function was to strengthen the authorial claims of truthfulness. As the tradition develops the later kind of verse-quotations begin to dominate at the expense of the anecdotal materials. At the end of the tradition, the importance of the court poets appears to diminish.⁷⁶ The final skaldic stanza quoted in *Knýtlinga saga* is by a disgruntled skald who notes the Danish king prefers “*fiðlur* [. . .] *ok pípur*” (“fiddles and flutes”) (*Knýtlinga saga*, 275; Einarr Skúlason, *Lausavísur* 3) to skaldic poetry. At the same time, it seems that the expectation that a proper kings’ saga should contain verse celebrating the deeds of kings remained. Sturla Þórðason addressed this situation by including many of his own stanzas in the saga he wrote about Hákon Hákonarson. The final section of the article discussed possible parallels to the Old Norse prosimetrum in Latin and Arabic language historiography and showed how one might find parallels to the Norse prosimetrum in Arabic language texts.

76. Little is known about the court poets and their poetry from the late twelfth and early thirteenth century. See the survey by Gade, “Poetry and Its Changing Importance” 81–84.

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