

SUMMARY.

The ideal of the good king, even of the Christian rex iustus, has been investigated in Germanic heroic literature, notably Beowulf. This paper attempts to find a similar ideal of kingship in the fornaldarsögur, a group of sagas which despite their varying origins have all taken their present form within a century of each other and which all share a common regional bias in their subject matter. While some 300 kings are mentioned in this collection, less than 30 have had subjective evaluations made about them by their saga authors. Of this small group only Hrólfur kraki measures up to the ideal that can be seen in Beowulf, and even then only part way. For the remaining monarchs, physical prowess and eagerness for battle coupled with wisdom and such general characteristics as popularity and excellence seem to be sufficient to serve as an embodiment of kingly ideals. The fact that the good king is often difficult to distinguish from the good chieftain or jarl except in title suggests that for these sagas their writers did not have a very clear concept of the rôle of the king in society or else were little interested in it.

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What does it mean to be a good king? What are the characteristics, both public and private, which make a good ruler? It seems as if each era and every country has its own answers to these questions. Heroic literature, too, has its own value system against which to evaluate the kings which people its pages. For the early Anglo-Saxon period, one may find outlined some of the characteristics of the good king in Beowulf, and these very attributes were summed up by Levin L. Schücking in a masterly article published in 1929. Schücking's conclusions are found admirably summarized in J. M. Wallace-Hadrill's book on early Germanic kingship:

Beowulf is himself the embodiment of the Christian kingly virtues and at the same time of those traditional pagan kingly virtues that were compatible with Christianity. He was the rex justus: wise, pious, kind and humble, careful of and considerate for those he ruled; the dragon-slayer is in effect the Good Shepherd who perishes in protecting his flock. Dying, he is full of pride and thankfulness for what he has been able to do for his people; he looks back on his career as one of loyalty and faithfulness: no enemy has dared to attack his kingdom, he has committed no bad deeds, broken no oath, perpetrated no wrong against his relatives; he has acquired precious possessions for his people. Hrothgar, too, is a good king: peaceful, benevolent, fatherly, quick to accept divine decisions obediently, the enemy of pride. The poet emphasizes the intellectual and moral qualities proper to a ruler: he must be wise, prudent, a good speaker—in effect, a good teacher; he will care for his warriors and be friendly to them, benevolent and warm-hearted, self-renouncing and modest, humble about his triumphs, magnanimous to his enemies, welcoming to strangers, a pious prince of peace . . .

Now while this may be all very well with respect to Beowulf and other Germanic literature, the question arises does it still hold true for literature which, while purporting to be concerned with this Germanic heroic age, is written far from those places where took place the events it is describing and is, in its surviving form, dealing with events which for the most part took place four or more hundred years earlier. Such a body of literature is the collection known as the fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda, and for the purposes of this investigation it will be assumed that it is possible to deal with this collection as a group, and in addition, that these sagas, whatever their diverse origins, assumed their present written form sometime between the middle of the fourteenth and the middle of the fifteenth centuries. With this in mind it will be possible to come to some general conclusions about the ideal of kingship as seen through the eyes of a group of writers out in Iceland, who in all likelihood had had no personal experience

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in a royal court, and to whom the King was a distant figure in another land.

Practical considerations have made the omission of some of the works in the collection necessary, specifically those works that are consciously historical or genealogical in content: Sögubrot af fornkonungum, Frá Fornjóti og hans ættmönnum and Af Upplendinga konungum. It must also be admitted that the final word on what writers of this period considered necessary for one to be accounted a good king must wait until a similar analysis been made of the ideals of kingship in the riðarasögur, for these often differ from the fornaldarsögur only in subject matter and not in style and temperament. This attempt at a definition of a good king will be based upon the use of subjective analysis on the part of the saga writer himself. In this light it is usually of little interest to find out that a king is rikr ok fjölmennr, but more worthy of notice to encounter a king who is rikr ok ágætr, even though it may not be explained further what is meant by ágætr.

Despite there being some three hundred kings mentioned either in detail or in passing in the fornaldarsögur, extended commentary on their kingly virtues are not all that common. Even so renowned a monarch as Ólafur Tryggvason is passed over without this kind of commentary in Þorsteins þáttur þéjarmagns, Helga þáttur Þórissonar, Norna-Gests þáttur and Yngvars saga víðförla. This may have been because Ólafur was so well known that any such commentary would have been superfluous. Still, it would have been interesting to have heard more about kings such as Goðmundur, konungur á Glæsisvöllum who appears also in Þorsteins þáttur þéjarmagns and Helga þáttur Þórissonar as well as Bösa saga og Herrauðs, especially since many lesser known or even kings as fictitious as Goðmundur are praised for their various virtues.

Of all the descriptions of kingly virtues in this collection of sagas, the one that comes the closest to that accorded Beowulf is the evaluation of Hrólfr Helgason kraki, konungur í Hleiðru, given by Svipur bóndi, the father of Svipdagur:

Svá er mér sagt frá Hrólfi konungi, at hann sé örr ok stórgjöfull, trúfastr ok vinavandr, svá at hans jafningi mun eigi finnast. Hann sparar eigi gull né gersemar nær við alla, er þiggja vilja. Hann er lágligr at líta, en mikill at reyna ok torveldr, manna fríðastr, stórlátr við ómilda, en ljúfr ok hógværr við vesala ok við alla þá, sem eigi brjóta bág í móti honum, manna lítillástr, svá at jafnblítt svarar hann fátökum sem ríköm. Svá er hann mikill ágætismaðr, at hans nafn mun eigi fyrnast, á meðan veröldin er byggð. 4

Here is indeed the good king, the rex iustus of the Christian moralists. It is even more revealing that this evaluation comes not out of the mouth of one of Hrólfr's social equals (whose reasons for making it might be suspect for any one of a number of reasons), but of one of his more insignificant subjects. 5 Hrólfr is energetic in his pursuit of justice, and the depiction of the king as humble and generous towards both rich and poor is unique

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among these sagas. Much more in line with what one comes to expect is the description of Hrólfr Gautreksson, konungur:

Hrólfr var manna mestr ok sterkastr, fríðr sýnum. Hann var fámálugr, fastorðr ok óframgjarn, ok þótt í móti væri gert eða mælt, lét hann fyrst sem hann vissi eigi, en nokkuru síðar, þá er aðra varði sízt, hefndi hann grimmliga sinna mótgerða . . . Hann var vinsæll af alþýðu, unnu menn honum mikit. 6

This presents quite another picture of the good king. Not here the humble and pious warrior, the teacher of his people, but a king who dominates by his physical presence, his taciturnity and the care by which he sees that he is never crossed without exacting vengeance. To make sure that his audience has missed none of this, the saga writer emphasizes it once again later on in his saga:

Svá er sagt frá Hrólfi konungi, at hann var allra manna mestr ok sterkastr. Hann var svá þungr, at engum hesti mátti hann ríða allan dag út, svá at eigi kafnaði eða spryngi undir honum, ok varð jafnan at skipta við hann. Hrólfr konungr var manna venstr ok kurteis ok at öllu vel skapaðr, hærðr manna bezt, breiðleitr ok mikilleitr, eygðr manna bezt ok fögr augun ok snör, miðmjór ok herðimikill ok manna bezt á sik kominn ok at öllu inn hæverskasti, hverjum manni betr vígr ok at öllum íþróttum búinn um fram hyern annan, þann er honum var samtíða á Norðrlöndum. Manna var hann vinsælastr. Hrólfr konungr var vitr maðr ok í öllu forsjáll, skynugr ok glöggþekkin. 7

Despite the fact that it may at first seem a little incongruous that a man whose bulk looms so large should also stand so full of the social graces, it is evident that one is intended not to overlook these other promising aspects of Hrólfr's personality. In addition to his social charm, Hrólfr is not only wise, but also prudent, sage and shrewd, and these aspects together with his handsome appearance and his physical prowess may be said to sum up the highest ideals of kinship in most of the fornaldarsögur where such matters may be of interest. Not that it is necessary for a king so described to exhibit any of these virtues in action (apart from his physical prowess), it is just sufficient that he has them.

The description of Hrólfr Sturlaugsson (Göngu-Hrólfr) shares a number of points in common with that of Hrólfr Gautreksson, and the relationship seems not so much a matter of one saga influencing the other, but rather that the saga writers saw each as exhibiting similar characteristics:

Hrólfr Sturlaugsson var manna mestr, bæði at digrð ok hæð, ok svá þungr, at engi hestr fekk borit hann allan dag, ok var hann því jafnan á göngu. Manna var hann venstr at yfirlit. Ekki var hann siðblendinn við alþýðu, fór lítt með gleði ok skemmtan, utan helzt þótti hann gaman at fara í skotbakka ok vera at burtreiðum. Var hann svá þungr ok sterkr, at engi kom honum ór söðli, en ófímliga bar hann vápn fyrir sik,

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ok aldri bar hann vápn. Eæði var hann meinlauss ok gagnlauss flestum mönnum. 8

Göngu-Hrólfur, although a good king, is yet one step further removed from the ideal seen expressed in Hrólfur kraki. He relies only upon his strength, and has none of the counter-balancing social graces. He is taciturn as was Hrólfur Gautreksson, but it is a taciturnity that seems much more menacing than one arising out of a desire to keep one's own counsel. Nevertheless, there seems never to be any hint the Göngu-Hrólfur is anything but an admirable monarch—in so far as he has anything to do with the day to day activities of ruling his kingdom.

These are the only kings whose kingly attributes are discussed at any length, yet even in other situations the saga writers are still conscious of the qualities that single out a good king, although at times these may be indistinguishable from those same qualities that single out a good hero. One point of interest is that only few kings are praised by virtue of their strength alone. Eysteinn Prándarson, konungur, was said to rule over the Northern part of Norway:

Hann var ríkr ok stjórnsamr ok stilltr vel ok fríðr sýnum ok vandist snemma við allar íþrottir. Þær sem karlmann máttu fríða ok betra var át hafa en missa. Hann var vinfastr ok trúlyndr ok vinavandr, gleðimaðr mikill, svá at alla gleði mátti við hann eiga, en ef honum mislíkaði, þá var hann þunglyndr ok langrækr, en eigi mjök bráðskapaðr. 9

Certainly Eysteinn has been given some hints of a personality, which is more than can be said for Eiríkur, konungur af Gestrekalandi. Even though he has a considerable rôle to play in Göngu-Hrólf's saga, he is only given the briefest of sketches:

Eirekr konungr var stórr maðr ok ramr at afli, svartr ok stórskorinn mjök Var hann inn mesti hermaðr ok mjök óeirinn. 10

The single most important characteristic that the saga writers of the fornaldarsögur seem to have expected of a king is that he be wise. Now while no other monarch is accorded such extravagant wisdom as Hrólfur Gautreksson, this royal wisdom may be combined with a number of other factors. Ingi, konungur í Mannheimum, was also noted for his prowess at games:

Þessi saga byrjast af einum ágætum konungi, er Ingi hét. Hann var vel buinn maðr at öllum íþróttum, meiri ok mektugri, venni ok vitrari, stærri ok sterkari en hværr annarr maðr í veröldinni honum samtíða. 11

In content, although not in presentation, the description of Ingi is similar to that of Hreggviður, konungur í Garðaríki. There is the same emphasis of the strength and prowess of the king, while also finding time to praise his mental accomplishments, although in neither case is this wisdom ever put to the test:

Hann [Hreggviður] var mikill at vexti, sterkr at afli, manna vænstr ok vápndjarfastr, hugarfullr ok bardagamaðr mikill, vitr ok ráðugr, stórgjöfull við vini sína, stríðr ok refsingasamr við ovini sína. 12

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Usually no indication is given by the saga writer of what he conceives wisdom to be. Of Hálfðan, konungur í Garðaríki it is simply said: "Hann var vitr konungr ok vinsæll".¹³ Somewhat further on in the narrative in the middle of a battle sequence the author feels compelled to add a little more information about Hálfðan:

Hálfðan konungr gekk vel fram ok var inn fræknasti við bardaga ok inn hraustasti framgöngumaðr ok felldi margt manna.¹⁴

However, it is not clear from the narrative whether this is meant to gloss his wisdom or his popularity.

Other kings whom the saga writers note for their wisdom are Angantýr Heiðreksson¹⁵, Herþjófr Húnþjófsson, konungur á Hörðalandi¹⁶, Hringur, konungur í Danmörk ("Hann var vitr ok vinsæll."¹⁷) and Hringur Skjaldarson, konungur í Danmörk ("Hringr konungr var vitr maðr ok vinsæll ok mildr af fé ok inn mesti bardagamaðr."¹⁸) and Gauti Óðinsson, konungur í Gautlandi ("...hann var vitr maðr ok vel stilltr, mildr ok máldjarfr."¹⁹). On one occasion it is even possible for a writer to characterise a king as being wise, even when all the king's other aualities are negative and he is a notorious pagan to boot. This is Eysteinn beli inn illráði Haraldsson, konungur í Uppsölum:

Eysteinn konungr var ríkr ok fjölmennr, illgjarn en þó vitr . . . Hann var blótmaðr mikill . . .²⁰

So important did it seem to have to be for a king to be wise, that on two occasions when there were mentioned kings who were admirable in all other respects except this, that fact was noted. Gautrekur inn mildi Gautason is an excellent king and a good fighter, but as the saga writer says at the end of Gautreks saga while admitting these aspects of his character to be true:

Var hann meir ágætr at örleik sínum ok framgöngu, en eigi er þat sagt, at hann væri djúpvitr, en þó var hann vinsæll ok stórgjöfull ok inihaverskligasti at sjá.²¹

Likewise Gormr Knútsson inn gamli, Danakonungur is characterised as having been a great warrior, but not all that bright:

Gormr Knútsson var allra manna mestr ok sterkastr ok inn mesti atgervimaðr um alla hluti, en ekki var hann svá vitr sem verit höfðu inir fyrri frændr hans.²²

Apart from wisdom no other characteristic appears to be especially singled out as necessary for the good king. Usually it is enough that he be able to be characterised as simply being 'excellent'. Gautrekur Gautason in Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar is so described, but the writer makes some effort to indicate what he means by this:

Hann var ágætr konungr fyrir mægra hluta sakir, vinsæll ok stjörgjöfull, svá at hans mildi er jafnan við brugðit, þá er fornkonunga er getit.²³

When he dies his death causes sorrow not only to his wife, but to all the inhabitants of his kingdom because "engi konungr hafði verit ástsælli sakir örleiks ok umhyggju".²⁴ On only one other occasion is there any indication made of what might be meant by ágætr, and even this is in the most general of terms. Helgi

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Hildibrandsson is the father of Hildibrandur Húnakappi in Ásmundar saga kappabana:

Helgi hét konungur ágætr. Hann var hermaður mikill. 25 Here excellence is seen as being synonymous with fighting spirit. Even so this is more than is usually the case, where all that is necessary to identify a good king is that he be ríkr ok ágætr. Of Beli Skatason, konungur í Sogni it is said that he was "inn mesti ágætismaður" 26, while Buðli, konungur í Sviðbjóð is "ríkr ok ágætr" 27. Ella, konungur á Englalandi "var ríkr konungur ok ágætr" 28 and Eylimí Hjálmpérsson is also "ríkr ok ágætr" 29. Helgi Hálfðanarson, konungur í Danmörku, on the other hand seems to have had to prove himself in battle first:

Eftir þat heldr Helgi konungur í hernað ok var ágætr maður. 30

There are four other occasions when kings seem to be singled out as being worthy although only one of these examples gives any detail at all about what is meant by this praise. Aðalbríkt Aðalmondsson, konungur á Norðimbralandi "var góðr konungur ok varð gamall" 31. The author is silent on any of Aðalbríkt's accomplishments, even though the deeds of his forefathers have been gone into in some detail without these kings being specially characterised despite their being responsible for the introduction of Christianity into the region. All that distinguishes Ólafur, konungur in Naumdælafylki from his reprehensible son Ingjaldur inn illi, is that Ólafur "var vinsæll" 32. Atli Buðlason was fierce and ugly, which is usually sufficient to type-cast a man as evil but in this case an exception is made even though it is rather vague to say the he was 'noble':

Atli var grimmr maður, mikill ok svartr ok þó tíguligr ok inn mesti hermaður. 33

The fourth example is of a king who acquired some of his nobility through contact with another king, presumably greater than him, in this case Knútur inn ríki Sveinsson, Danakonungur:

Erlingr konungur þótti höfðingi mikill ok stórauðigr, því at hann hafði lengi verið með Knúti konungi inum ríka ok hafði öðlast af honum mikinn auð, fé ok góða gripi. 34

Before turning to summarize the ideal of kingship that emerges out of these sagas, it should be mentioned that only two kings are characterised as being specifically ignoble. The first is Fróði, konungur í Danmörk, son of Fróði inn frakni Friðleifsson, who is pointedly contrasted in temperament with his brother, Hálfðan, also konungur í Danmörk;

Hálfðan konungur var hyrr ok hægr ok góðlyndr, en Fróði var inn mesti ribbaldi. . . . Gengu þar flestir nauðugir til, því að Fróði konungur var allra manna óvinsælastr. . . . 35

Ingjaldur inn illi Ólafsson, konungur í Naumdælafylki, was, as has been seen, contrasted with his father who was said to have been popular. Ingjaldur was "undirhyggjumaður inn mesti" and is said to have two henchmen of similar to himself "uppivöðslu-miklir ok tilleitnir" 36. Ingjaldur is also said to have earned

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his nickname at the hands of his subjects after his having killed Þórir þegn Bjarnason, the brother of Án bogsveigir:

Þetta verk mæltist mjök illa fyrir, ok var hann nú kallaðr Ingjaldr inn ill af hverjum manni. 37

Only these few kings, all of which have been dealt with in this survey, have been commented upon by the saga authors. Despite this paucity of information it is possible to get an idea of what these writers saw as the necessary prerequisites for kingship. The resulting picture is one that is certainly not pagan Germanic (nor at this late date should it be expected to be), yet neither is it specifically Christian, although much of this ideal portrait is not incompatible with Christian teaching. Those aspects which are furthest from the ideals of Christianity are those having to do with the physical appearance and warlike behaviour of the monarch. A king should be handsome and strong, well accomplished in everything. His imposing figure should also be well to the forefront in any battle or conflict. Only Hrólfur kraki seems not to fit this model, but then no other king in these sagas is so accomplished in the social and spiritual graces as is Hrólfur. A king can always be assumed to be powerful, excellent and popular, even if it is not explained what is meant by each of these characteristics. It helps if he is wise and thoughtful. Some of this could be reflected in his generosity and his popularity with his supporters. He may be liberal to his friends and ruthless with his opponents, but this trait is not altogether necessary. All in all, apart from Hrólfur kraki, this is not exactly the portrait of the rex iustus, even though this portrait of a king may partake of some of the required attributes. Still this ideal of kingship in the fornaldarsögur is so removed from the spirit of the time in which most of the stories are set, that any association with paganism is sufficient to damn such a king or indeed any person so associated. In some ways it is difficult to distinguish the good king from the good chieftain or the good jarl and as a result it is possible to conclude by stating that, for the most part, the Icelandic authors of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries who were responsible for the fornaldarsögur had not too clear an idea of what it meant to be a king, let alone a good one, but they were sure that such people did exist, and that they could be divided into good and bad. There was an ideal of kingship, which, even if not always clearly expressed, was sufficiently well known that a saga author could always be confident to be able to identify a good king should he ever come across one.

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Notes

- 1) Levin L. Schücking, "Das Königsideal im Beowulf", MHRA Bulletin, iii (1929), 143-54. English translation in An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, ed. L. E. Nicholson (Notre Dame, 1963), 35-49.
- 2) J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent (Oxford, 1971), 121-2.
- 3) That some of the writers of the fornaldarsögur at least were aware of the dubious historical nature of their material seems clear from the closing paragraph of Göngu-Hrólf's saga. The passage also seems to indicate that the writer recognizes that whatever the source material, a certain amount of authorial interpretation went into a saga's composition.

Nú þótt þessi saga þykki ekki samhljóða verða öðrum sögum, þeim er at ganga þessu máli, um manna nöfn ok atburði, hvat er hverr vann eða gerði með frægð eða vizku, fíkölkynngi eða svikum eða hvar höfðingjarnir ríktu, þá er þat líkligast, at þeir, er skrifat hafa ok samsett þessi tíðendi, munu eitthvert hafa fyrir sér haft, annathvart forn kvæði eða fróðra manna sögn. Munu þær ok fár eða engar fornra manna sögur, at menn vilji með eiðum sanna, at svá hafi verit sem sagðar eru, því at flestar verða orðum auknar, verða ok eigi öll orð ok atvik greind í sumum stöðum, því at flest er seinna en segir. Stundum því bezt at last eigi eða kalla lýgð fróðra manna sagnir, nema hann kunni með meirum líkendum at segja eða orðfæriligar fram at bera. Hafa ok forn kvæði ok frásagnir meir verit fram sett til stundligrar gleði en ævinligs átrúnaðar. Verðr ok fátt svá ólíkliga sagt, at eigi finnist sönn dæmi til, at annat hafi svá orðit. Þat er ok sannliga ritat, er guð hefir lánat heiðnum mönnum einn veg sem kristnum vit ok skilning um jarðliga hluti, þar með frábæriligan frækneik, auðæfi ok ágæta skapan.

Göngu-Hrólf's saga in Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda, (ed. Guðni Jónsson, 4 vols. ([Akureyri], 1954), III, 279-80. All references to the fornaldarsögur are to this edition.

- 4) Hrólf's saga kraka, I, 40.
- 5) Despite the fact that this present analysis is confined to the fornaldarsögur, in evaluating the weight to be given to the speech of a farmer, one cannot but help be reminded of the section in Ólafs saga helga, which clearly presents the relationship that existed between the monarch and the independent farmers he ruled:

Yfir hverjum lögum er lögmaðr, ok ræðr hann mesta við boendr, því at þat skulu lög vera, er hann ræðr up at kveða. En ef konungr eða jarl eða byskupar fara yfir landit ok eigu þing við boendr, þá svarar lögmaðr

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af hendi bónda, en þeir fylgja honum allir svá, at varla þora ofreflismenn at koma á alþingi þeirra, ef eigi lofa bændr ok lögmaðr.

Ólafs saga helga in Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnason, Íslensk fornrit, XXVI-VVIII (Reykjavík, 1941-1951), II (1945), 110.

- 6) Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar, IV, 58.
- 7) IV, 69.
- 8) Göngu-Hrólfs saga, III, 173-4.
- 9) Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar, IV, 247.
- 10) Göngu-Hrólfs saga, III, 166.
- 11) Hjálpés saga og Ölvis, IV, 179.
- 12) Göngu-Hrólfs saga, III, 164.
- 13) Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar, IV, 106.
- 14) IV, 125.
- 15) Hervarar saga og Heiðreks, II, 51.
- 16) Gautreks saga, IV, 11.
- 17) Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra, IV, 289.
- 18) Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra, III, 413.
- 19) Gautreks saga, IV, 1. Gauti is also mentioned in Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar and Bósa saga og Herrauðs without any comment.
- 20) Ragnars saga Loðbrókar, I, 242.
- 21) Gautreks saga, IV, 50
- 22) Þáttur af Ragnars sonum, I, 299.
- 23) Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar, IV, 53.
- 24) IV, 65.
- 25) Ásmundar saga kappabana, I, 388.
- 26) Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar, III, 46.
- 27) Ásmundar saga kappabana, I, 385.
- 28) Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar, IV, 135. Ella is also mentioned in Gautreks saga but without comment.
- 29) Völsunga saga, I, 135.
- 30) Hrólfs saga kraka, I 19.
- 31) Þáttur af Ragnars sonum, I, 300.
- 32) Áns saga bogsveigis, II, 367

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- 33) Völsunga saga, I 169.
- 34) Sörla saga sterka, III, 369.
- 35) Hrólf's saga kraka, I, 1-2.
- 36) Áns saga bogsveigis, II, 367.
- 37) II, 394.

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