

'KOLLUM VÉR ÞANN SÆLAN, ER SJÁLFAN SIK HEFIR FYRIR KONUNG':
ALEXANDERS SAGA AND THE NORWEGIAN CROWN

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One of the most intriguing passages in *Alexanders saga* occurs when Alexander the Great is visited by a Scythian who makes what looks strangely like a plea for Icelandic independence from Norway.¹

Jón Helgason, in the introduction to his facsimile edition of the saga, alludes to this matter when he says that it would be difficult to imagine an Icelander working on the Scythians's speech, in the mid-thirteenth century, 'without feeling it as an Icelandic contribution to a current debate'.² But what is the drift of that contribution in the context of the saga as a whole? Is there reason to believe that the Scythian Ambassador's views can be equated with those of the saga-writer? Or does the saga-writer take sides with Alexander against his Scythian critic?

As it stands in the Old Norse text, the Scythian's speech paraphrases and compresses but retains the overall structure of the oration as it appears in Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis*, the late-twelfth-century Latin epic of which the saga is a 'translation' - that is to say, a close adaptation in the vernacular.³ The epic version itself abridges but follows the structure of the speech as set down in Walter's own major source, the *History of Alexander* by the Roman historian Quintus Curtius (Rufus).⁴ In all three versions the outline is as follows: insults relating to Alexander's greed and insatiability (saga 126₁₂₋₂₂, epic VIII.374-90, Curtius VII.8.12-13); the inevitability of death, which comes even to the great and ends their achievements (saga 126₂₂₋₂₉, epic VIII.391-403, Curt. VII.8.14-15); the innocence and freedom of the Scythians (saga 126₂₉₋₁₂₇, epic VIII.404-15, Curt. VII.8.16); description of the Scythian economy and armaments (saga 127₈₋₁₂, epic VIII.416-21, Curt. VII.8.17-18); second diatribe against Alexander's greed and the folly of wealth, greatly compressed in the saga (saga 127₁₂₋₁₇, epic VIII.422-31, Curt. VII.8.19-20); warnings against the difficulty and pointlessness of overcoming Scythia, or of trying to keep all nations in subjection at once (saga 127₁₈₋₁₂₈, epic VIII.432-47, Curt. VII.8.21-23); description of Fortune, with a warning to hold on to her (saga 128₆₋₁₆, epic VIII.448-59, Curt. VII.8.24-25); and sarcasm about Alexander's claim to godhead, leading to an offer of true friendship (saga 128₁₆₋₃₁, epic VIII.460-76, Curt. VII.8.26-30).

The central portion of the speech constitutes a description of the Scythians, which is adduced as evidence for why it would be pointless to conquer them (since they are very poor) and dangerous to attack them (since they would scatter into the wastelands of their country from where they could engage in guerilla warfare).

In the saga it is this description, or rather details from it, which suggests that parallels are being drawn between the situation of the Scythians and that of the Icelanders at the time when they were resisting pressure to accept the Norwegian king as their overlord. Accordingly we read that the Ambassador says to Alexander, *Ecke manntv þurfa her oc við borgir at briotaz eða kastala. þviat þessi þið hefir hvarke ser til varnar. byggir hon tøyðe morc. her oc hvar þar er oðrom monnum man hellðr obygelect þyckia*, 'Nor will you need to besiege cities or strongholds here, because this people has neither for her defence. She dwells here and there in the wilderness, which other men will think rather uninhabitable' (saga 127₃₁₋₁₂₈, corresponding to epic VIII.446-7, and Curt. VII.8.23). The local economy is principally pastoral (albeit oriented towards cattle rather than sheep), not money-based: *þu scallt oc vita hvað vér hovum vm at leika óvaro lande. Þu fe scortir eigi. tokom ver þar af at gnogo*

mat oc kleðe, 'You shall also know what we have for trading with in our land. There is no lack of livestock: we take from it food and clothing in plenty' (saga 127₈₋₁₀, corresponding loosely to epic VIII.417-20, Curt. VII.8.17-18). In addition, Scythia is a land *er allt her til hevir halldet sino frelsi*, 'which has kept its freedom all the time till now' (saga 127₂₃₋₂₄, epic VIII.436; not in Curtius). Above all, its freedom consists particularly in not having a king: *kaullom ver þann selan er sialvan sec hevir firer konung. oc helldr sino með frelsi*, 'We call that man happy who regards himself as king, and keeps his property in freedom' (saga 127₄₋₅, corresponding loosely to epic VIII.412-14; this is not in Curtius, who in fact mentions a Scythian king at VII.7.1).

Any parallels between the Scythians and the Icelanders should not, of course, be overstated. In the first place, all of the above points are based on material which the Norse translator found in Walter's poem. Second, there are details in the description which are most un-Icelandic: the Scythians are troglodytes (saga 126₃₃, epic VIII.364-5) who care very little for gold or other treasures (saga 127₁₁₋₁₂, based loosely on epic VIII.365). There is evidence, nevertheless, that the translator made some adjustments specifically to bring his text into line with the contemporary situation in Iceland. The statement, quoted above, describing the Scythian economy as predominantly pastoral is an adjustment of a passage in the epic (based in turn on Curt. VII.8.17-18) which characterises that economy as agrarian, in which cattle are used principally for ploughing and the unit of exchange is in grain: *Sunt armenta Scitis uomer cifus hasta sagitta*, 'For the Scythians there are cattle for ploughing, a plough-share, a drinking-cup, a spear, an arrow' (epic VIII.417); and *amicis Parta labore boum largimur farra*, 'on friends we lavish the grain produced by the oxen's toil' (VIII.419-20). I can see no reason for the changes made here by the Norse translator except that they reflect the lesser importance of grain-production in the economy of Iceland, where the every-day units of exchange were in head of cattle and lengths of woollen cloth. More important, however, is the fact that the reference to kings, in the description of what constitutes the Scythian idea of freedom, is the translator's addition. Whilst the saga declares the man to be happy who regards himself as king, Walter's text says that what creates happiness is for a man to be independent, or subject to his own law - *Esse sui iuris hominem* (epic VIII.412). For the Norse translator to remove an expression using the word 'law' in this context, and to replace it with one using the word 'king', would without doubt have been provocative in a situation in which independent Icelanders were subject to their own communal law but had no king over them, whether that situation was in the present or in the recent past. The fact that he made this change probably shows that he had such a situation in mind.

Given the close relationship between the three versions of the speech - in the Classical Latin history, in the medieval epic and in the saga - the differences in detail between them are very revealing of the attitudes taken by the three authors towards their material. It should be stressed, however, that the greatest overall difference is that the accounts by Walter and his Norse translator refer forward to the events and comments in their Book X, especially to the fact that Alexander achieves world-hegemony before being struck down by a conspiracy between the goddess Natura and the powers of Hell; the account by Curtius, on the other hand, does not. Neither the mythological conspiracy nor the supposed subjugation of the entire world features in Curtius' story, and this fact influences the kinds of irony which can be detected in what the Scythian says.

In all three versions of the address, in fact, an ironic note is struck at the very outset, alerting audiences to what is to follow. The Ambassador makes a vivid but

not very politic start by insulting the man whom he has come to conciliate (saga 126₁₂₋₁₄, corresponding to epic VIII.375-79, Curtius VII.8.12): *Verir þu konungr því hove mikill at licans vexte. sem agirni þín er mikil amarga vega. þa myndu þer verða rvm fátt í heimenom*, 'Were you proportionately large in stature, king, as your greed is great in many ways, there would be a lack of room for you in the world'.⁵ Curtius, writing in the context of Imperial Rome and from the perspective of the senatorial class, had to be circumspect about voicing anti-monarchical sentiments; accordingly, his version of the speech is preceded by a passage of elaborate irony which distances him from words of the Scythian delegation and at the same time hints that he agrees with them (Curt. VII.8.11): *Sic, quae locutus esse apud regem memoriae proditum est abhorrent forsitan moribus oratoribusque nostris, et tempora et ingenia cultiora sortitis. Sed, ut possit oratio eorum sperni, tamen fides nostra non debet*, 'Thus, the things which it is reported that they said to the king are perhaps inconsistent with our manners and orators, which are allotted more refined times and intellects. But, although their speech may be rejected, yet our faithfulness ought not to be'. Walter, followed by the Norse translator, omits this preamble and relies, typically enough, on the ability of his audience to perceive the intrinsic absurdity of beginning a peace mission in this high-handed manner, and eventually to notice in retrospect that the Scythian's aggressive insults clash with the offers of true friendship which he makes later in the same speech (saga 128₂₃₋₂₆, epic VIII.464-68, Curt. VII.8.27). Most significantly, by keeping the irony in the opening of the speech but suppressing Curtius' preliminary remarks, Walter has distanced himself from the Scythian's words, but without also implying that he really agrees with them as the Roman author did: in Curtius' work the irony here is at the expense of imperialist flatterers, but in Walter's it is at the expense of the Scythian himself. At the same time, of course, the opening of the speech is not wholly and unmistakably ironic in every respect: all three authors are no doubt interested in portraying the Ambassador as the representative of a blunt, simple, proud people who would not think of being overfaced by royalty. But even an audience of Icelanders who loved tales of how their sturdy compatriots (such as Halldórr Snorrason or Gunnlaugr orrmunga) stood up to difficult foreign rulers would not judge it sensible to insult a king whose co-operation was being sought.⁶ Egill Skalla-Grímsson's behaviour in the famous confrontation with Eiríkr blóðøx at York, for example, shows that a deferential attitude, even towards a king who was a declared enemy, could be respected if it was required by common sense.⁷

On the other hand, the Ambassador's opening gambit is followed by a list of jibes, all on the theme of Alexander's insatiability, which do at least turn out to have some accuracy, no matter how tactless it may be to hurl them in the king's face. In the saga and to a lesser extent in the epic, however, they are fulfilled in ways quite different from those implied by their context as Curtius originally set it down. Curtius' Scythian declares that Alexander, if he could span the whole world, would then want to encompass the sun; and this is explicitly adduced as a simile for Alexander's wish to attain what he can never have (Curt. VII.8.12-13). The implication, fulfilled in the later books of Curtius' work, is that Alexander will attain neither the sun nor the earth. Walter keeps the same imagery, with much the same point, but clarifies the fact that Alexander would not only wish to explore the sun but also to govern it (epic VIII.380-85), thus turning the image into one of heavenly rule. For his part, the Norse translator does away with the imagery altogether and opts for direct statement when he makes his Scythian tell Alexander that *þot þu fengir undir þec lagi alla heims bygd at þer þotte eigi þorf vinna. nema þu stiornaðir oc himinriki*, 'although you manage to subdue all the inhabited world, you would not think it sufficient unless you also governed the kingdom of heaven' (126₁₄₋₁₆). In its

immediate context this looks like an unanswerable rebuke, but it is undercut by the fact that in the upshot of both the saga and the epic Alexander does manage to subdue the all the inhabited world, and dies in the expectation of going to share the rule of heaven (saga 149²²⁻¹⁵⁰₁₈ and 153¹⁹⁻³¹, epic X.216-52 and X.405-17). As to the conqueror's insatiability, it turns out to be true that he is not satisfied even with the entire world; but he gives perfectly sensible reasons why he cannot simply stop and let his army rest idle (saga 151¹³⁻²⁶, epic X.312-7). Concerning Alexander's next move after having subdued all nations, however, the Scythian turns out to be quite wrong when he says mockingly, in all three versions, that there will be nothing left to do *nema faz við en olmosto dýr. eða beriaz við aðrar vettir. oc vera kann at þu þindir oc scynlausa scepno fioll eða mercr til þess. at hon scyle þiona þinom ofsa*, 'except to contend against the fiercest beasts or to fight with other creatures; and perhaps you may also torment senseless creation, mountains or forests, so that it will serve your tyranny' (saga 126¹⁹⁻²², corresponding to epic VIII.385-90, and Curt. VII.8.13). In fact Alexander has a potentially much more adventurous and worthwhile purpose in mind, though it is the one which brings about his death, namely to conquer the 'other world' of the Antipodes (saga 144⁷⁻¹⁰ and 151^{15-16, 20-2, 26-7}, epic IX.566-70 and X.314-20).

Having insulted Alexander, the Scythian Ambassador moves on to give him a warning *at en hesto tre þott þau stande ásterkum stofne verða iafnan felld álitille stundo*, 'that the highest trees, though they stand on a firm base, are always felled in a short space of time' (saga 126²²⁻²⁴, epic VIII.391-93, Curt. VII.8.14). Various images follow, all to the effect that *enge ma fyrir dauðanom úruggr vera. ollom kemr hann ákné*, 'no-one can be safe before death: it brings all to their knees' (126^{28,9}, corresponding to epic VIII.400-403, and Curt. VII.8.15). This looks like a canny foretelling of Alexander's sudden demise, or almost a prophecy of judgement against him; but there are a number of ironies involved here. First: in the epic and the saga but not in Curtius' work, Alexander does not die fully satisfied and at rest - things which could never be - but he lives long enough to accept the surrender of every nation on earth in fulfilment of God's promise to him (saga 17¹⁷⁻⁸, epic I.532-3), as mentioned above. If the warning, therefore, was meant to hint that Alexander would be bilked of that objective and so get his comeuppance, it was wide of the mark. If it was not meant to hint any such thing, then it was merely a platitude which applies to all people equally. On this second point, Walter and the Norse translator certainly give prominence, in the closing pages of their works, to the theme of the universality of death; but Alexander's relevance to the moral that death comes to one and all is that he proves it to apply even - but not especially - to one so great. (See, in particular, saga 154²³⁻³¹ and epic X.442-50). Third and most important, the Ambassador's warning turns out to apply most immediately to his own proud and self-sufficient nation, which is brought down by Alexander in the days following the speech. The irony here is made completely explicit by Walter (but not by Curtius): he takes the Ambassador's image (VIII.391-93) of the sudden fall of a great tree, which in this version is blown over rather than chopped down, and makes it into an epic simile for the fall of the Scythians, where Alexander is the rough wind that sends the tree crashing (VIII.482-95). Following his procedure of curtailing Walter's poetical flights, the Norse translator omits this entire verse paragraph and thus, unfortunately, loses the explicit irony; but his text retains the glaringly obvious fact that the Ambassador's baleful warnings of being suddenly laid low are promptly fulfilled on himself and his own people (see 128³⁰⁻¹²⁹₆).

The Ambassador now embarks on his description of the Scythians, beginning with an assertion, given as the first reason why there should be no attack, that they are

innocent of doing Alexander any harm: *Seg mer Alexander hvat hovum ver Scithe til saka gort við þec. Ecke hovom vér barz únöte þér. oc af því lautv oss sfríðe vera*, 'Tell me, Alexander, what crimes have we Scythians committed against you? We have not fought against you. And therefore let us be at peace' (saga 126²⁹⁻³², epic VIII.404-5, Curt. VII.8.16). The last clause has been added by the translator, but it is implied, anyway, in Walter's text. As an invocation of natural justice this will strike most modern readers as fair and cogent; but a medieval Norse audience, if not Walter's French one, would probably have seen things in a different light. Óláfr Haraldsson for example, when making his pitch for sovereignty in *Óláfs saga helga*, explains in a very matter-of-fact way that he has previously lived as a mercenary and a pirate, adding that *Hefir margr maðr fyrir oss, sá er saklauss hefir verit, orðit at láta féit, en sumir líftit með*, 'Many a man who was guiltless has had to give up his property for our benefit, and some their life as well.'⁸ Attacking the innocent, according to this presentation of the hero-saint, is clearly not quite right - but it is not quite wrong, either. The Norse audience's reaction to the Scythian protestation of innocence, therefore, is likely to have been that it was fair enough but rather beside the point. God had promised Alexander the subjection of all peoples, so the Scythians would have to submit or be attacked - innocent or not.

The next reason why Alexander should not attack, which the Ambassador gives as part of his description of the Scythian nation, comes in the form of a warning that Alexander should not go beyond *þat marc. er naturan hefir sett þér oc oðrom er alla gerer at sonno sela. þa er hennar raðe villa fylgia*, 'that boundary mark which Nature, who makes truly happy all those who will follow her counsel, has set for you and for others' (127⁷⁻⁸). The corresponding lines of the epic (VIII.414-5) are simply a warning not to exceed *modum finemque*, 'the limit and boundary' - without the explicit reference to Nature, which has been imported from an earlier sentence at line VIII.410. By linking Nature explicitly with the idea of boundaries, at this point, the Norse translator has made the Scythian's words look like a premonition of the events which will bring about Alexander's death. As such they are a palpable hit, since the goddess Natura conspires with the powers of hell against Alexander precisely because of his declaration, at the end of Book IX (saga 144⁷⁻¹⁰), that he would like to explore and conquer the 'second world'. As the epic (but not the saga) takes the trouble to explain, the 'second world' consists of the hidden lands *quas Natura remouit Gentibus*, 'which Natura has set apart from the nations' (lines IX.574-5): hence her wrath. There is irony at the Scythian's expense even in this, however, because Natura's actions in Book X, as presented by the *saga* as well as the *epic*, are by no means moral or just: when Alexander is struck down, he is guilty of nothing in this connection other than expressing a wish, whereas Natura exaggerates or even lies about Alexander's intentions, and she colludes with the devil without consulting God (saga 145³⁵⁻¹⁴⁷, epic X.55-104). To the extent that his words are a foreshadowing of Alexander's death, therefore, the Ambassador does himself little good by linking his own moral arguments with the figure of Natura.

The same point applies to what the Ambassador has more immediately in mind when he tells Alexander not to over step the mark, which is simply a warning against going outside the behavioural limits of the happy man who *hellðr sino með frelsi en gírniz ecke annara*, 'keeps his own property in freedom and does not covet that of others' (saga 127⁵, epic VIII.413; not in Curtius). Even this temperate advice is compromised by being linked with the Scythians' radical primitivism: *Ver hofom hella fyrir hallir. oc latom oss þorv vinna þat er naturan sialf en fyrsta moðer vár vill hafa gefet*, 'We have caves for halls and we let that suffice us which Nature herself, our first mother, has given' (saga 126³³⁻¹²⁷, corresponding to epic VIII.364-5 and

VIII.409-10; not in Curtius). Furthermore, the assumption underlying all of this passage is that Alexander's reason for wanting to attack Scythia is primarily one of greed for material possessions. Hence the Ambassador stresses the self-imposed poverty of his nation and turns it into a stinging jibe by declaring his amazement, considering the scale of Alexander's other conquests, that *þér þickir eigi scomm lat seilaz til busmala vars*, 'it does not seem shameful to you to stretch out your hand towards our cattle' (saga 127₁₄₋₁₅, epic VIII.425-6, Curt. VII.8.19). But this, too, is wide of the mark: the passage which follows the speech refutes the accusation of greed, and emphasises Alexander's generosity towards the Scythians, along with his other new subjects, once he has conquered them. Indeed, *hann var miclo milldare en aðrir hofðingjar*, 'he was much more gracious than other generals', in that those whom he had subjugated by force were treated *eigi með horðom oc ágiarmlegom kraufom. heildir með konunglegre millde*, 'not with hard and greedy demands but with royal kindness' (saga 129_{17-18, 20-1}, corresponding to epic VIII.507-9 and, loosely, to Curt. VII.9.18).

Alexander's supposed love of material wealth, and the deleterious effect of riches as opposed to healthy Scythian poverty, are also translated into military terms. The Ambassador taunts his would-be conqueror with fielding a lumbering army *er dregr epúir ser nalgia allt veralldar gull*, 'which drags after it nearly all the world's gold'; by contrast, the austere Scythians - lightly armed, supremely manoeuvrable and not tied to defending any treasured bases - will be formidable enemies *þviat þeir mego vera fiarri yðr þa er þeir vilia sva. en þa er þer etlet at þeir se langt þrott kann vera at þvi nest kome þeir fram therbuðom yðar sialfra*, 'because they can be far away from you when they wish, but then, when you think that they are a long way off, perhaps they may appear at that very moment in your camp itself' (saga 127₂₇₋₃₁, epic VIII.438-42, Curt. VII.8.22). This is no empty vaunt: although the Norse translator does away with Walter's remark (based on Curtius VII.8.18) that they have already overcome the Assyrians, Medes and Persian (epic VIII.490-1), there is no mistaking the real martial capability of the Scythian nation *er varla finnz harðara undir heimsolenne*, 'than which a hardier one is scarcely found in the world' (saga 129₁₂; no exact parallel in the epic). Nevertheless, the Ambassador's confidence turns out to be mistaken and his warnings about Scythian strength, like those concerning the likelihood of sudden death, misforecast the outcome of the conflict: although it costs Alexander some trouble, *lettir eige fyr en hann leggr undir sec allt Scithiam*, 'he does not hold back until he subdues the whole of Scythia' (saga 129_{6,7}, corresponding loosely to epic VIII.480-1). After that, if there is any consolation for the military pride of the defeated it is that the news of their fall totally demoralises the surrounding nations who know that no-one has conquered the Scythians before Alexander, and now *þyckir þat liclict flestum er spyria at ongom myne tioa við honom at risa*, 'it seems likely to most who hear, that it will profit no-one to rise against him' (saga 129₁₂₋₁₄, corresponding to epic VIII.502-4, Curt. VII.9.17). The last point also goes some way towards answering the Ambassador's earlier comment (saga 127₁₈₋₂₁, corresponding loosely to epic VIII.433-5; see Curt. VII.8.21) that it will be impossible to keep from rebellion all those nations which have already surrendered. In fact, Alexander's reputation for strength linked with generosity ensures that, when all nations submit to him, not one of them plays false except the Romans (saga 151₂₂₋₂₇, epic X.322-8) - an exception for which there is the underlying theological reason that God's promise to make Alexander monarch of all peoples must be fulfilled and at the same time Rome must be kept separate for her unique rôle of world-hegemony in the time of Christ.

As a move to head off an attack nothing could be more ill-advised than to question Alexander's military prowess, as the Ambassador has just done - except perhaps to jeer at his good fortune, as the Ambassador now does: *hallt nú fast hamingjonne meðan kostr geriz á þvíat hon er harðla vóllt*, 'Hold fast now to Fortune while opportunity arises, because she is very unstable,' he says (saga 128⁷⁻⁸, epic VIII.448-50, Curt. VII.8.24). A little later he adds: *þá get þess meðan hon rettir at þér hendrnar. at þú takir oc vengena at eigi flýge hon frá þer fyr en þec vare*, 'While she stretches out her hands to you, take care that you also seize her wings so that she might not fly from you before you are aware' (saga 128¹⁴⁻¹⁶, epic VIII.458-9, Curt. VII.8.25). As advice this is absurd, of course, because it is the nature of Fortune that *þegar er hon vill sva fér ecke halldet henne nauðigri*, 'the moment she so wishes, you cannot hold her against her will', as the Ambassador himself points out (saga 128⁸⁻⁹, epic VIII.450, Curt. VII.8.24). All the more unwise, then, is the suggestion that Alexander should use Fortune's current favour at *þv gerir enda nockorn áufriðenom. takir hvíld eptir langt erveðe. ferir þic sialfr thótf fyr en hon late vellta kvelet vndir þer*, 'so that you might make an end to the state of war; take a rest after long toil; bring yourself into proportion before she lets the wheel turn under you' (saga 128¹⁰⁻¹³, epic VIII.451-5, corresponding loosely to Curt. VII.8.24-5). To a man of Alexander's mettle, this is practically an incitement to attack; and to do so would surely be a more logical way of capitalising on Fortune's present goodwill than doing nothing would be. Apart from this, the objections to what the Ambassador says here are variations on those made against his comments on sudden death. By jibing at Alexander on the subject of Fortune, the Scythian is tempting fate, since it is he and his people who are promptly thrown down by the turn of Fortune's wheel. As for Alexander and his longer-term career, it is true that Fortune does not in the end save her 'foster-son' from death by poisoning (saga 153⁶⁻¹¹, epic X.388-92) and so her wheel does turn under him at last, as it must for all people; but that is not until she has carried him up as high as a man can go, since it is Fortune who is directly accredited in Book X with having made Alexander absolute monarch over the world (saga 149³³⁻¹⁵⁰, epic X.216-8), in fulfilment of the divine promise.

The Scythian now begins his peroration, as he began the speech, with an insulting piece of sarcasm. This time the reference is not to Alexander's physical stature, but to his claim that he was the son of Jupiter - a theme which Walter and his translator generally avoid, but to which they allude, briefly and with some obscurity, in Book X (saga 152¹⁰⁻⁵, epic X.351-5). Notable in the Norse version of the speech, by contrast with those of Walter and Curtius, is that the Ambassador puts the whole matter on the footing of what other men say about Alexander, rather than what Alexander claims for himself: *Nu ef sva er sem sumir kvitta. at þu ser guð en eigi maðr. þá byriar þér hellðr at miðla monnum þat gott er þu maðr gnogt til hava. en taka frá þeim þat litla er þeir hava*, 'Now if it is as some report, that you are a god and not a man, then it behoves you to share with men the good which you can possess abundantly, rather than to take from them the little which they have' (saga 128¹⁶⁻¹⁹, corresponding to epic VIII.460-1, Curt. VII.8.26). By inserting the phrase 'as some report', the Norse translator has cast further doubt on the matter and thus intensified the Ambassador's sarcasm, but at the same time he has distanced Alexander himself from a very damaging claim. This detail aside, the jibe is in reality just another variation on the theme of Alexander's supposed greed, which has been dealt with above. It remains only for the Ambassador to add that, if Alexander is merely a man, it would be stupid to let his pride make him forget the fact.

Finally, after these insults but without preparation or transition in any of the three versions of the speech, comes a sudden offer of alliance: *Oc ef þu letr oss ffríðe*

sitia. þa monom ver vera vinir þinir, 'And if you let us remain at peace, we will be your friends' (saga 128²³⁻⁴, epic VIII.464-5, Curt. VII.8.27). It may be suspected that some connection had dropped out of Curtius' text; but in that case, Walter and the Norse translator were clearly satisfied with the result, perhaps because the disparity of tone between the insults and the offer of friendship is so glaringly odd that it raises questions as to whether the offer can be genuine. Be that as it may, what is certain is that Walter, following Curtius VII.8.27, makes his Ambassador continue by insisting on conditions of equality in a way which must have sounded very dubious to audiences in the hierarchy-minded Middle Ages: *firmissimus inter Equales interque pares est nodus amoris*, 'the bond of love is strongest between equals and between those who are alike' (epic VIII.465-6). Walter probably has an eye on the feudal system at this point since, ironically, he employs the word *amor*, a term frequently used to signify the relationship between vassal and lord; the first-century Roman Curtius, on the other hand, used *amicitia* ('friendship').⁹ For his part the Norse translator, possibly thinking again of the situation with regard to Iceland and Norway, removes all reference to equality and contents himself with making the Ambassador stress at *sv vinátta kvnne tryggast at verða er þeir binda sin amillom er aðr hafe hvarigir yvir aðra komet*, 'that the friendship which is capable of being the truest is that agreed between those, of whom neither party has previously defeated the other' (saga 128²⁴⁻⁶, corresponding to epic VIII.465-9, Curt. VIII.8.27). What the Ambassador has at the forefront of his mind is that an unwilling and subservient ally cannot be trusted because he *hyggr iafnan flátt þott hann late stundom fagr*, 'always thinks false, though he act fair at times' (saga 128³¹, corresponding loosely to epic VIII.476, Curt. VII.8.28). This ominous warning is the Ambassador's final word, a fact which contains ironies of its own since it leaves the impression that he and the Scythians would be capable of dissimulating friendship if they were conquered, and this compromises the credibility of his offer now. In addition, the remark is another premonition of the circumstances surrounding Alexander's death, and like the others it turns out to be off-target. The Norse translator handles this point with careful irony when he re-uses the same well-known phrase about thinking false whilst acting fair, this time applying it to Antipater, the man who gave Alexander poison (saga 148¹³⁻¹⁴, see epic VIII.150-3): far from being a conquered alien, Antipater was the Macedonian regent and fellow-countryman of Alexander, whom he had served from the very first.

But whatever the nuances, ironies or intimations of the Ambassador's final words may be, his general point is very clear: *þu þarft eigi þat at etla at þeir verðe þér tryggvir. er þu þrengvir undir þec með ofrasle*, 'You need not expect that they whom you subjugate with overwhelming force will be true to you' (saga 128²⁶⁻⁸, corresponding to epic VIII.470, Curt. VII.8.28). And on this point of crucial importance to the viability of empire, the Ambassador turns out to be quite wrong. Whether it was to be expected or not in the aftermath of the Scythian débâcle, it is stated explicitly of Alexander - and with greater emphasis in the saga than in the epic - that *þa ena saumo. er hann hafðe oc vndir sec lagt með styrkinom. batt hann síðan ffultri ast við sec*, 'the same men whom he had also subjugated by force, he subsequently bound to himself in complete affection' (saga 129¹⁸⁻²⁰, epic VIII.508-9; not in Curtius).

It can now be seen that the Scythian Ambassador's speech, as it appears in the saga, is tantamount to a conspectus of the moral themes standardly used against Alexander in the Middle Ages. His supposed material greed, insatiable love of conquest and unceasing restlessness are discussed at length; so is his reliance on Fortune, by whose bounty he allegedly becomes enfeebled; and the *victor victus* theme is well

represented by that of the universality of death which brings an end to all achievement. The difficult subject of Alexander's claim to be the son of Jupiter is touched upon, with its implications of overweening pride; and there are hints, at least, of his willingness to adventure beyond the limits set for mankind by Nature. In this respect, the speech anticipates the treatment of the same themes in the last book, and it must be judged in the light of how they are finally worked out there, together with the bearings of its own internal logic and what is said about the aftermath of the conquest.

Viewed in that light, it is evident that not one of the Scythian's warnings holds good in the short term, and not one intimation of Alexander's ultimate fate turns out to be accurate. None of his moral points is immune to serious objection, except perhaps the one which declares attacking the innocent to be less than fair - and even that point could be lost on a Norse audience. Most important, nothing of the Ambassador's sarcasm really strikes home against Alexander; instead the ironies are at his own expense, and that of his people. All this, furthermore, is in addition to the fact that the address, with its mass of provocations and insults, is very inept as a piece of diplomacy. However much some of its sentiments may appeal to modern taste, therefore, the speech in its overall context must not be read as an argument for freedom and national independence: the balance of judgement comes down altogether in Alexander's favour and against the Scythians, despite their impressive blend of austere morals and military strength.

It cannot be demonstrated conclusively that the Norse translator adjusted details of the speech so as to prompt associations with the issue of Norwegian sovereignty over Iceland; but it is likely that he did. And it is scarcely possible that the speech could have been heard in the thirteenth century without those associations coming to mind. But in that case the passage cannot be interpreted as a brief plea for Icelandic independence. On the contrary, it must be seen, in this respect, as one which is favourable to the Norwegian king, and is bound into the saga as a whole by a tight web of correspondences: it is integrally part of the work's structure and of its political strategy, which can therefore be seen to be pro-monarchical and pro-Norwegian.

Taken in this way, the message to the Icelanders would not seem to be very inspiring: it says, in effect, that even the people of a proud, hardy, independent nation should submit to a foreign king when it becomes inevitable, and that they can then hope for favour - provided that the king is good and that they stay loyal to him. (This message, be it noted, does not imply that *Alexanders saga* was written in the early 1260s. It would have been apposite at any time towards the end of the Sturlung Age, and would have remained relevant long after Icelandic independence had been surrendered.)

Rather more positive is the message to the king - the true addressee, we may suspect. His responsibility, the passage suggests, is to be gracious to all his subjects, including those who had opposed him, and especially to bind them to himself in complete affection by not setting heavy taxes. Above all, of course, he should aspire to emulate Alexander, of whom the Norse translator declares with magnificent sophistry *at eige geck honom grimleicr til er hann vilde allar þiðer undir sec leggia. heilir þviat tollom heiminom. vilde hann þngan vera lata. sva at millde sem at rike sinn iafningia*, 'that it was not on account of cruelty that he wanted to subjugate all peoples but because he would let no-one in all the world be his equal, in mercy as in power' (saga 129²⁵⁻⁸, corresponding loosely to epic VIII.511-3, Curt. VII.9.18).

NOTES

¹ *Alexanders saga: Islandsk oversættelse ved Brandr Jónsson*, ed. by Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1925), 126₁₂-128₃₂. All quotations from the saga, and page-references to it, relate to this edition. Translations are my own.

² *Alexanders saga. The Arna-Magnæan Manuscript 519a 4^o*, facsimile edition by Jón Helgason with Introduction translated by D. Slay, *Manuscripta Islandica* 7 (Copenhagen, 1966), xxviii. Jón's comments here are sympathetic, at least, to the notion that *Alexanders saga* may have been written by Brandr Jónsson, perhaps when he was in Norway to be consecrated bishop of Hólar (winter 1262-3): Brandr spent Yule as the guest of Kings Hákon and Magnús, and could have received a commission then. The present paper, however, does not depend in any way on that proposed authorship or date, and does not seek to support either. All that is necessary for the argument here is that the saga was written in the decades when the Norwegian take-over of Iceland was either a contentious possibility or still a reasonably fresh memory. Linguistic considerations make it likely that the author was an Icelander, but even this is not taken for granted here: hence the word 'Norse' rather than 'Icelandic' is used for matters relating to the author and his work.

³ Walter of Châtillon, *Galteri de Castellione Alexandreis*, ed. by Marvin L. Colker (Padua, 1978). All quotations are taken from this edition. Translations are my own.

⁴ Quintus Curtius, *History of Alexander*, ed. with English translation by John C. Rolfe, 2 vols, Loeb Classical Library 368 (London, 1948). Latin quotations are from this edition, but translations given in this paper are my own. Curtius' biographical details are not known for certain, but his probable date and social perspective are well summed up by Robin Lane Fox, *Alexander the Great*, 2nd (Putura) ed. (London, 1975), p. 500: 'I guess that he wrote c. A.D. 45 with a lively memory of the late emperor Caligula, whose favour for Alexander and alleged taste for oriental customs were much to the dislike of senatorial contemporaries.'

⁵ The insult here depends not only on the reference to greed but also on the allusion to Alexander's small stature, which has been mentioned in connection with the visit of the Amazon Queen, (saga 116₂₂₋₆, epic VIII.24-32, Curtius VI.5.29).

⁶ *Halldórs þátr Snorrasonar inn síðari*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, in *Íslenzk fornrit* 5 (Reykjavik, 1934), 274-5. *Gunnlaugs saga ormsungu in Borgfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, *Íslenzk fornrit* 3 (Reykjavik, 1938), 69.

⁷ *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, *Íslenzk fornrit* 2 (Reykjavik, 1933), 179-94.

⁸ *Óláfs saga helga in Heimskringla*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, 3 vols, *Íslenzk fornrit* 22-4 (Reykjavik, 1979), vol. III, 43.

⁹ For a discussion of feudal love, see David Herlihy, *The History of Feudalism* (London, 1971), p. 71. Love of this type has had a significant rôle in vernacular literature. Charlemagne's followers in the *Chanson de Roland*, for example, are bound to him 'like any vassal to his lord [...] in love and faith ('*par amour e par feid*', vv 86, 3801, 3810)': Glyn Burgess, trans., *The Song of Roland* (London, 1990). The same term was also used for the obligation of lords to their followers: see the glossary to the *Poema de mio Cid*, ed. by Colin Smith (Oxford, 1972), where *amor* is given as 'grace, (feudal) favour'. The granting of King Alfonso's *amor* to Rodrigo in the *Cid* (lines 1945 and 2032), in fact, is one of the crucial issues in that great poem.