

On *Heliopolis* in *Yngvars saga víðfjörla*

The main part of *Yngvars saga víðfjörla*¹ relates a story of an expedition to the East which was undertaken by a group of the Swedes in the middle of the eleventh century. The historical authenticity of this event is supported by about 25 runic inscriptions on the stones which were erected in the vicinity of Lake Mälaren in Central Sweden to commemorate the fallen participants of the expedition. The fact that their leader, *Yngvar*, is mentioned in the inscriptions, allows us to regard them as a group of monuments connected with the same historical event. It also invites us to correlate the runic monuments and *YS*.

The saga does not abound in place-names which could facilitate mapping *Yngvar*'s route. It defines the place where the trip began, saying that thirty ships sailed from *Garðaríki* along a large river². Later on the text provides the names of two cities which the travellers visited. They passed *Citopolis*³, the city of Queen Silkisif, and came to *Heliopolis*⁴ in the realm of King Jolf. They went a bit further and spent some time at a place called *Siggeum*⁵, but came back to *Heliopolis*, close to which, as the saga says, the Swedes fought their last victorious battle. Their triumph turned into a tragedy: on the same night heathen women came to their camp, and after that a disease spread quickly among the warriors. The disease became fatal for the detachment: some warriors died there in the camp, many others died soon after they left *Heliopolis*⁶. The exact route of the expedition is a controversial subject⁷, and the study of the place-name *Heliopolis* can contribute to a better understanding of it.

In the Introduction to their English translation of *YS* Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards suggested that the author of the saga might have borrowed the name of *Heliopolis* from Isidore of Seville⁸ (circa 570 – 636), who in the *Etymologiae* says this about the city:

*Heliopolis urbs Aegypti, quae Latine interpretatur solis civitas, sicut septuaginta interpretes arbitrantur. Aedificata est autem a filiis Israel, in qua Petephres sacerdos fuit, cuius meminit Ezechiel*⁹.

An illustration of how medieval map-makers located *Heliopolis* in Egypt is given in a twelfth century map from Aix-en-Provence (the place-name *Heliopolis* is rendered as *Eleopolis* there). The map – of the TO-type, Eastward-oriented – illustrates the paragraph *De orbe* from Chapter XIV of the *Etymologiae*. As follows from the text in the map, the city is placed in the South-Eastern part of the world in the following context:

Central and South Asia:

[...]|| Eleopolis. || ...nesse[?].|| Memphis. || Egyptus. || Etyopia. ||¹⁰.

The author of the Aix-en-Provence map (as can be seen from the text inscribed on it) follows Isidore rather precisely: *Eleopolis* is shown close to Memphis, an old town in Egypt, located somewhat further to the South but not far from *Eleopolis*. The name of the country, *Egypt*, is written close by. Thus the map proves that the geographical tradition of Isidore was firmly established in European scholarship, and professional map-makers who followed it were well aware that *Heliopolis* of Isidore (now El-Matariya to the North-East of Cairo) was located in Lower Egypt.

The city was built on the bank of the channel connecting the Nile with the Red Sea. Old Egyptian writings (such as *The Texts of the Pyramids* and *The Book of the Dead*) and ancient authors (e.g. Strabo in his *Geography*, book XVII, cap. 1) often refer to the city. Herodotus, describing Egypt (*History*, book II), regards the city as the main orientation point of the area. A brief excursus into history shows that *Heliopolis* in Egypt was founded in the fourth century B.C. and devoted to the god Re. A large temple which was built there was

connected with the cult of the Sun and solar deities. After a short period of Roman rule (from the thirties of the first century A.D. till the year 395) and Byzantine (from 395 up to the forties of the seventh century), Egypt became part of the Arab Caliphate and experienced a strong Muslim influence. During the time of the Crusades (from 1096), Egypt was of general cognitive interest to the Europeans together with other Christian sites in Asia Minor and North Africa. A special interest in *Heliopolis* might have arisen during (or soon after) the fourth Crusade (1202–1204) in which Egypt was to be part of the route of the crusaders. Therefore an exact knowledge of the location of *Heliopolis* by map-makers from Aix-en-Provence in the twelfth century is not surprising at all.

Although Icelandic knowledge of early continental encyclopedias containing descriptions of faraway places must have been rather limited, there can be no doubt that by the end of the twelfth century Isidore's ideas, which constituted a synthesis of ancient tradition and Christian lore, reached Iceland and influenced the development of encyclopedic writing in the European North. Therefore the supposition of Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards that Isidore's *Etymologiae* might have been the source of information for the author of *YS* seems to be highly probable. It is supported by the fact that two of the very few place names mentioned in the saga (*Heliopolis* and *Siggeum*¹¹), could have been borrowed from Isidore. As Emil Olson suggested¹², the author might also have derived from Isidore the name of the flying dragon *Jaculus* depicted in the saga¹³.

It is still not clear whether Icelandic clerics had access to the manuscripts of Isidore's works which were produced on the continent, or whether parts of his voluminous opus were retold to their fellows by monks and laymen who learned about Isidore at continental universities. The limited number of verbal connections (three) is insufficient to prove that the author of *YS* took them directly from a *written* text of the *Etymologiae*, and in fact it is more likely that his source was a retelling or adaptation of Isidore. But in either case we have to assume that the cleric who compiled *YS* was a learned man with a wide background, and that he – and this is particularly important – used his source consistently. He picked out the names (both place-names as well as the name for the dragon) from different parts (books) of Isidore's work: *Heliopolis* in Egypt (Book XV), *Siggeum* – a promontory at the Asian part of the Dardanelles (Book XIV), and the dragon *Jaculus*, borrowed from the description of Arabia (Book XII). His choice seems to have been deliberate because all the names fit into a contextually narrow area at the Southern coast of the Mediterranean, be it Asia Minor or North Africa. The author of *YS* seems to have been convinced that all the geographical names that he mentioned belonged to the same geographical region, i.e. to the southern *þriðjung* of the known world.

It might be the case that from this vast area the author chose the name of the city which was both familiar to him and easily recognizable by the audience which listened to (or read) his saga. One cannot be sure that general acquaintance with the place-name *Heliopolis* stemmed from a thorough study of Isidore. We can, however, be nearly certain that Christian Icelanders might have heard about *Heliopolis* in a life-story of Saint Barbara, who was a popular saint both in the West (including Scandinavia and Iceland¹⁴) and in the East (Russia in particular); her cult reached Iceland from the Continent and spread throughout the country in the twelfth century¹⁵. The churches at Haukadalur and Reykjaholt in the South and in the East of the country had St. Barbara as their patron, together with other saints who were popular in Iceland¹⁶.

Legends of St. Barbara exist in several traditions and differ in many details. Among others there is a controversy as to the place of Barbara's martyrdom – Nicomedia, Tuscany, Rome or *Heliopolis*¹⁷. Icelandic legendary tradition (as reflected in *Barbare saga*) supports the last of these and mentions *Heliopolis* (*Sólarstaðr*¹⁸) as the city in which the saint was martyred during the reign of Emperor Maximian (305–311) in about the year 306, and the

place where she was buried¹⁹. This *Heliopolis* (modern Baalbek), bearing the same name as the city in Isidore, was located in Coelesyria. The city was built on the site of a temple erected in the eighteenth century B.C., connected with the cult of Vaal, which was widely spread in Phoenicia, Syria and Palestine during the second and first millennia B.C. Vaal, originally the god of the Sun and natural phenomena (such as lightning, thunder and thunderstorm), gradually became transformed into a belligerent and severe supervisor of royal power in the area. The cult of Vaal existed in Palestine till the seventh century B.C. and rivaled the cult of the Jewish god Yahweh. The range of ancient sources which provide evidence about *Heliopolis* in Syria is rather limited. Lucian, one of the ancient authors who were widely-known in medieval Europe, referred to this city in his writings. Byzantine medieval sources mention it quite often.

We are not able to verify whether the people who prayed and hoped for St. Barbara were aware of the existence of the two cities named *Heliopolis* as well as of any details about their "solar" pagan past. What is more significant is that the semantics of the place-name could have been easily interpreted by any person with even a very limited knowledge of Greek as "The City of the Sun". This is an additional feature of the place-name that might have led the author of *YS* to choose the name *Heliopolis*. Icelandic religious skaldic poetry preserved kennings depicting Christ or God with solar components as part of their structure²⁰. The first instances of such compositions are known as early as in the tenth or eleventh century, and the tradition lasted for centuries²¹. Thus the local poetic tradition known to the audience assisted it in interpreting the *Heliopolis* of *YS* as "The City of the Sun" and facilitated an understanding of the saga as a story about Christian missionaries²² who led the way to the Holy Land and fought for Christian faith against pagans.

Inadequate knowledge in the North of Europe of distant parts of the eucumene resulted in the fact that the mental map of it (which existed in people's minds) was rather conventional. The two cities bearing the name *Heliopolis* (one of them located in North-Eastern Africa and the other in Asia Minor) could have easily become contaminated and taken as one geographical object. It is equally possible that one city was taken for the other. The history of both cities gave grounds for their assimilation: both cities were at one time centres of pagan worship for the local population; both of them experienced Muslim influence; at the time of the Crusades the whole area where both cities belonged was regarded as the Holy Land and therefore was of particular concern for the Christian Church. The names of the cities of pagan sun-worshippers in Ancient Egypt and Syria, when brought into relation with the Christian "City of the Sun", might have produced different associations in people's minds. *Heliopolis* is an example demonstrating the way in which foreign geographical names, borrowed from continental writings, might have been adapted and interpreted by medieval Icelanders.

Finally I would like to make it clear that the supposition about a possible deliberate choice by the author of *YS* of the place-name *Heliopolis* from Isidore's *Etymologiae* should not lead to an immediate conclusion that in the middle of the eleventh century Yngvar's expedition actually followed this route. On the contrary the fact of borrowing from the *Etymologiae* to depict the route of the expedition testifies to a low probability of the author's awareness of the exact details of Yngvar's travel. It is more reliable to assume that the author might have got some idea (in oral tradition that has not been fixed in the written form?) that the South was the general direction of Yngvar's travel. In order to keep to historical truth in his writing he might have picked out the (only) place-name that could satisfy both his and his audience's knowledge of that distant region.

Notes:

¹ *Yngvars saga víðfjrla*, ed. Emil Olson (København, 1912) [hereafter: *YS*].

² *YS*, p. 12.

³ *YS*, pp. 15–16.

⁴ *YS*, pp. 17–18.

⁵ *YS*, p. 23.

⁶ *YS*, pp. 17–27.

⁷ See: J. Shepard, 'Yngvar's Expedition to the East and a Russian Inscribed Cross', *Saga-Book, 1982–1985*, vol. XXI, parts 3–4, pp. 222–292; G. Glazyrina, *The Saga of Yngvar the Far-Traveller: Text, translation, commentary* (Moscow, 2002; in Russian), pp. 152–168.

⁸ *Vikings in Russia. Yngvar's Saga and Eymund's Saga*, Translated and Introduced by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Edinburgh, 1989) [hereafter: *Vikings in Russia*], p. 7.

⁹ *Isidori hispalensis episkopi etymologiarvm sive originvm*, ed. W.M.Lindsay. B. I-II (Oxonii, 1911) [hereafter: *Isidorus*]. Lib. XV. i:33.

¹⁰ L. Chekin, *Cartography of Christian Middle Ages. VIII–XIII centuries: Texts, translation, commentary* (Moscow, 1999; in Russian), pp. 63–64, map No 15. The text in the italics does not belong to the map and was added by Leonid Chekin.

¹¹ *Isidorus*. Lib. XIV:vii ("Sigeus promuntorium Asiae, ubi Hellespontus apertius dilatatur").

¹² E. Olson, 'Inledning' in *YS*, p. LXXXIII–LXXXIV. See also: *Vikings in Russia*, p. 7.

¹³ *YS*, pp. 14, 42; *Isidorus*. Lib. XII:29 ("Iaculus serpens volans").

¹⁴ Sv. Hallberg, R. Norberg, O. Odenius, 'Den heliga Barbara i Svensk kult och konst under medeltiden', *Med hammare och fackla* 25 (1967), pp. 83–191; K. Wolf, 'Old Swedish Legends of Saint Barbara', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 1999, b. 114, pp. 63–88; *The Old Norse Icelandic Legend of Saint Barbara*, ed. by Kirsten Wolf (Toronto, 2000) [hereafter: *The Old Norse Icelandic Legend*].

¹⁵ M. Cormack, *The Saints in Iceland: Their Veneration From the Conversion to 1400* (Bruxelles, 1994), pp. 82–83.

¹⁶ *The Old Norse-Icelandic Legend*, pp. 69–70.

¹⁷ *The Old Norse-Icelandic Legend*, pp. 3–4.

¹⁸ *The Old Norse-Icelandic Legend*, p. 154.

¹⁹ Local traditions also give different versions of how St. Barbara's cult formed. Thus, according to the Russian version of the Orthodox tradition in the fourth or sixth century (?) St. Barbara (*Cs. Bapsapa*)'s body was moved to Constantinople and buried there in the cathedral which was built for that purpose. The fast development of the cult started soon after *Cs. Bapsapa*'s relic was brought to Russia by *Bapsapa*, the daughter of the Byzantine Emperor Alexius Comnene in 1108, when she got married to Russian Great Prince Svyatopolk. Relic of *Cs. Bapsapa*'s body rested in St. Vladimir Cathedral in Kiev which became a place of frequent pilgrimage. Within half a century a legend of *Cs. Bapsapa* was compiled and an icon of her image was brought from Kiev to the North of Russia, as far as Vologda. It was believed that *Cs. Bapsapa* rendered protection against storms at sea and against fire at land, and that wearing her image prevented unexpected and violent death. The new saint's ability to protect people in everyday situations met the needs of the believers and therefore the cult of *Cs. Bapsapa* spread quickly in Russia.

²⁰ Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of literacy. The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Toronto, Buffalo, London, 2001), p. 293; note 32 on p. 380.

²¹ Here are several examples. For the eleventh century: in *Rognvaldsdrápa* by Arnórr Þórðarson jarlaskáld (*Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, udg. av Finnur Jónsson (København, 1973, 2nd ed.) [hereafter: *Skj*], B-I, p. 306, 3; p. 326, 1). For the twelfth century: Eilífr kúlnasveinn *Kristsdrápa* (?), *el. brudstykker af digte* (?) (*Skj*. B-I, p. 565, 1); *Leidarvisan* (*Skj*. B-I, pp. 629–630, 30–31); Gamli kanóki *Harmsól* (*Skj*. B-I, p. 551, 10; p. 555, 27). For the thirteenth century: Kolbeinn Tumason *Jónsvisur* (*Skj*. B-II, p. 46, 3); *Liknarbraut* (*Skj*. B-II, p. 166, 22; p. 171, 42). For the fourteenth century: Árni Jónsson *Guðmundar drápa* (*Skj*. B-II, pp. 443–444, 13; p. 453, 49).

²² *Vikings in Russia*, pp. 2–3.