

## Old and new in Markús Skeggjason's *Eiríksdrápa*

It is still an unresolved question of literary history to what extent Danish kings emulated their Norwegian counterparts in employing the services of skalds to sing their praises, and what kind of skalds they employed. Poetry at the court of Knútr is relatively well documented, and has recently been much discussed (e.g. Frank 1994, Jesch 2000b, 2001a, Townend 2001). Some scraps of verse survive which may have been for Knútr's grandfather Haraldr Bluetooth and this, together with some other evidence for the cultivation of praise poetry in Denmark and for Danes (Jesch 2000a, 25–8), suggests that panegyrics in *dróttkvætt* may not have been purely a West Norse phenomenon, even though the few recorded skalds who composed for Danish kings seem to have been Icelanders. While the lack of skaldic poetry for Danes may be due to the accidents of preservation, it is also true that we expect Denmark to be a pioneer of innovation, a channel for cultural influences from the south, and not a museum for traditional Scandinavian practices. In this paper, I hope to show that the old and the new could be and were reconciled in the first decade of the twelfth century, paving the way for further developments.

Some 32 stanzas or part-stanzas survive of a *drápa* by the Icelandic lawspeaker Markús Skeggjason in praise of King Eiríkr eygðoðr Sveinsson (d. 1103). In this poem, the very conservative, traditional and by then well-established conventions of skaldic praise poetry are harnessed to a new task, that of building up a picture of the ideal king at the turn of the twelfth century. Both Paasche and Fidjestøl have remarked on the poem's strong Christian tinge and its innovative qualities. For Paasche (1914, 54), the poem, while still treating the king's expeditions and battles in time-honoured skaldic style, is much more interested in presenting 'en nordisk fyrste fra ... katolicismens rike vekstid'. Fidjestøl (1982, 245) also detects 'ein ny tone' in the poem despite its use of well-known kenning types and motifs. In this paper, I propose to explore the linguistic foundation of this new tone, the ways in which tradition and innovation combine in the poem at the level of diction to demonstrate that being a Christian ruler involved new ways of being a ruler as well as of being a Christian. Markús managed to indicate the new style of kingship he found in Denmark while still using traditional forms of skaldic language. His innovations are the culmination of a process that had been happening throughout the eleventh century (Paasche 1914, 11–18, 41–7), but he was the first to integrate the old and new fully, thereby creating a new type of panegyric.

The clash of old and new is typified in the following summary of Eiríkr's praiseworthy actions as king (Mark I,8a; *Knytl*, 216):

Vorgum eyddi Vinda fergir.  
Víking hepti konungr flkjum.  
Þjófa hendr lét þengill stýfa.  
Pegnum kumni ósið hegna.

The conqueror of Wends destroyed outlaws. The king decisively stopped *viking*. The ruler had thieves' hands chopped off. He curbed the rebellion of the landowners.

Composed just after the end of the Viking Age, *Eiríksdrápa* is the first recorded instance in skaldic verse of the abstract feminine noun *viking*, supposedly characterising that age.<sup>1</sup> It is not clear from this context what the activity of 'viking' actually entailed, but what is clear is that it was disapproved of, for the king is praised for putting a stop to it, along with

<sup>1</sup> There are three occurrences in late Viking Age runic inscriptions, see Jesch 2001b, 54–6.

the doings of outlaws, thieves and rebellious landowners.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the masculine noun *víkingr*, used of persons, although it occurs more frequently, is relatively rare in skaldic verse for what we would consider to be a defining concept of the period, and is more often than not used of the opponents of the king being praised, rather than of the ruler himself or his followers (Jesch 2001b, 44–54). In eleventh-century skaldic poetry, at least, ‘vikings’ were most likely to be the enemies of kings.

Yet many of those eleventh-century rulers undoubtedly behaved in ways that we would think justified describing them as ‘vikings’, making ship-borne excursions to places outside their dominions, where they raided and fought. In this paradox it is clear that, at the ideological level if not in practice, the nature of Scandinavian kingship was changing in the eleventh century, as the Viking Age drew to a close. Kings no longer were, or no longer were just, ‘vikings’. Kingship moved from what we might call the ‘viking’ model in which various king’s sons fight for wealth and power and against each other on their way to the top, to a more ‘medieval’ model, with a growing emphasis on dynastic, ecclesiastical and national concerns (Bagge 1991, 129–35). In this new model, the symbiotic relationship of church and monarchy benefited both.

This change in models of kingship can be tracked in the vocabulary and diction of skaldic verse. The praise poetry of the skalds was originally developed within the ‘viking’ model, and is superbly adapted for its function of glorifying the king for his skills in sailing, his smash-and-grab raids in faraway places, his successes in more formal battles on land and at sea, and his generosity to his followers that makes it all possible. With new models of kingship, the panegyric poetry had to develop too. Throughout the eleventh century we can see the skalds adapting their poetry to new kinds of kingship in various clever ways, and these experiments are what made Markús’ poem possible in the first decade of the next century.

Old-style war-leaders could only be celebrated after they had achieved their successes, for after all no one could predict who would win out in the ‘viking’ model of kingship. But in the new order, some kings could be celebrated even before they had achieved anything, as we can see in poetry composed for Magnús góði Óláfsson, who acceded to the throne of Norway in 1034 at the age of ten. The retrospective poems documenting the achievements of Magnús’ father Óláfr and his arch-rival Knútr often begin by presenting the king as a young warrior launching a warship and thereby his career (Jesch 2000b, 250). In their case this was indeed how they had set out on the path to kingship. But such a beginning had become conventional enough by the time of Magnús that it could be used even though it was not exactly appropriate, as for instance in Arnórr’s *Magnústrápa* (Arn III,1; *Hkr* III, 3):

Nú hykk rjóðanda reiðu  
rögors, þvítt veitk górvu,  
þegi seimbrotar, segja  
seggjum hneitis eggja.  
Vass ellifu allra  
ormsetrs hati vetrar,  
hraustr þás herskip glæsti  
Hörða vinn fr Götum.

Now I plan to tell men the deeds of the battle-brisk reddener of the sword’s blades, because I know them in detail; the breakers of gold [generous men] should be silent. The disburser of the dragon’s bed [gold→generous man] was not fully eleven years old when the bold friend of the Hörðar [Magnús] prepared (a) splendid warship(s) from out of Russia.

<sup>2</sup> For this pejorative use of *þegn*, see Jesch 1993, 167–9.

This opening stanza builds on the kind of opening stanzas in which the hero's career begins when he goes out on his first military expedition (e.g. Sigv.I; Ótt II,3; Ótt III,1). Like his father before him (cf. Ótt II,3), Magnús' career also starts with the launch of a ship, even though it is clear that someone who is only ten years old can hardly be leading a viking expedition. Instead, the emphasis on the splendour of the ship suggests something more like a triumphal voyage or royal progress. The stanza avoids actually asserting that Magnús engaged in any fighting, yet it contrives to hint that he did so in the complex warrior-kenning applied to him (*rógor* *rjóðanda hneitis eggja*). As well as the warrior-kenning, Arnórr also uses a generosity-kenning (*ormsetrs hati*) and calls him *Horda vinr*, another phrase-type often used of kings (Whaley 1998, 148, 184). In these three kennings and phrases, the poet paints an image of the ideal king of Norway: warlike, generous and powerful. While Knútr and Óláfr were the authors of all the deeds that were celebrated in the poems praising them, Magnús was at the time of his accession not yet the author of any deeds and the poet's phrases are anticipatory. Armed with the knowledge of his later achievements, the poet cleverly elides these with the description of the immature ten-year-old sailing out of Russia, not yet a king. Arnórr's introductory stanza makes Magnús a king before the fact, the retrospective poem creating a role for the boy before he has had a chance to create it for himself. That role is a traditional one, using a range of the conventions of skaldic poetry.

This example has been analysed in some detail to show how a skald can accommodate new political realities within the traditional styles and structures of the *dróttkvætt* panegyric. Arnórr was a pioneer in other ways, too, for instance in the use of the *hrynhent* for his other poem on Magnús, known from its metre as *Hrynhenda* (Whaley 1998, 79-80). *Hrynhenda* was of course the model for Markús Skeggjason's *Eiriksdrápa*. Although *hrynhent* became popular after Markús in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, his poem is the first one to use this metre since Arnórr. Moreover, *Eiriksdrápa* has some echoes of Arnórr's poems in it (Olsen 1921, 163, Whaley 1998, 61, Jesch 2001b, 148), and Markús follows Arnórr in his practice of combining tradition and innovation in his presentation of the king.

The traditional aspects of *Eiriksdrápa* are easily demonstrated: much of Markús' praise of Eiríkr is not very different from that of earlier skalds and their patrons. Eiríkr is shown as a successful sea-captain (Mark I,5-6,16) and as the commander of a fleet (Mark I,24). He is the consummate war-leader (Mark I,17-19) who does his share of killing (Mark I,20) and successfully conquers fortifications and destroys habitations in Wendland (Mark I,21-23). He is, of course, generous to his followers (Mark I,3,7), but stern and unyielding with anyone who tries to oppose him (Mark I,32).

But this traditional picture is only part of the story. Much of the poem is concerned with building up a more modern image of the ideal Christian king around the turn of the twelfth century. Eiríkr has not only a *fræknlig hjarta* 'brave heart', but also *minni gnógt ok manvit annat mest* 'sufficient [i.e. a good] memory and most other forms of intelligence'; he also has *snilli* 'eloquence' and he learned *margar tungur* 'many languages' as a youth (Mark I,9). He travels extensively, making pilgrimages to Italy (Mark I,10-12) and the Holy Land (Mark I,28). He is feted by and receives gifts from the rulers of Russia (Mark I,4), France and Germany (Mark I,26), and Constantinople (Mark I,29-30). At home he punishes miscreants and is a just upholder of God's law (Mark I,8). With the support of the Pope, he moves the archbishopric from Germany to Lund, in Denmark, appointing Ozurr as archbishop (Mark I,13-14,27). He causes many churches to be built, including five in stone (Mark I,25). So it is

no wonder that the poet declares that *engi maðr veit fremra pengil* ‘no one knows a more excellent prince’ (Mark I,2).<sup>3</sup>

The newness of this view of kingship becomes particularly clear when we contrast *Eiríksdrápa* with the poems in praise of his exact contemporary, the Norwegian king Magnús berfœttr. Fragments survive of poems by Björn krepphendi and Porkell hamarskáld, both in *dróttkvætt*, while we also have what appears to be a complete poem in *fornyrðislag* by Gísli Íllugason. Despite the fact that these poets also seem influenced by Arnórr (Jesch 1996, 123-4), they eschew the *hyrnhet* metre, and use only traditional motifs in praising Magnús. He is an old-style viking, whose main achievements, according to the poems, are a series of raids at home and abroad, mostly in Britain and Ireland. Both Magnús and Eiríkr died far from home, but it is entirely characteristic that Eiríkr died in Cyprus, on his way to the Holy Land from Constantinople (Fellmann 1938), while Magnús died on a raid in Ulster.

The poems in praise of Magnús berfœttr and Eiríkr use the same traditional skaldic vocabulary, but Markús uses this vocabulary to express new ideas. Eiríkr is presented in traditional fashion as a generous king. He is called a *hringvarpaðr* ‘ring-caster’, someone who distributes wealth to those around him (Mark I,3) and this distribution of wealth is explored at some length later in the poem (Mark I,7; *Knytl*, 214):

Drengir þeigu auð af Yngva.  
Orr fylkir gaf sverð ok knorrū.  
Eiríkr veitti opt ok stórum  
armleggjar røf dýrðar seggjum.  
Hringum eydi hoddā slengvir  
hildar ramr, en stillir framði  
firða kyn, svát flestir urðu.  
Fróða stóls, af hónum góðir.

The *drengir* received wealth from the king. The generous captain gave swords and ships. Eiríkr granted often and lavishly man’s amber [gold] to men of excellence. The battle-brave distributor of treasure destroyed rings, and the occupant of Fróði’s throne honoured men so that most became enhanced by him.

At first sight, this appears to be an utterly conventional stanza, showing a successful king rewarding his followers. Indeed, the word *drengir*, which I have not translated here, often connotes precisely the closest followers of a military leader, who fight nearest him in battle and who are commensurately rewarded for this (Jesch 2001b, 216-32). But at this point in *Eiríksdrápa* there have been no battles and no references to the king’s followers. Later on in the poem, to be sure, Eiríkr fights battles in Wendland, and the *drengir* make an appearance as standard-bearers (Mark I,18), though there is no mention there of any reward they received, indeed they are if anything rather faceless and unheroic, reduced to standard-bearing. Stanza 7 is, I would argue, not a conventional comitatus-rewarding scene, but shows a new kind of gift-giving altogether, a gift-giving which is political and diplomatic, and which reaches out beyond the war-band. The gifts themselves are traditional (*auðr* ‘wealth’, especially swords, ships, gold and ‘rings’). However, the process seems more to be one of building up a loyal aristocracy. We may note that the gift-giving happens *opt ok stórum* ‘often and lavishly’. Eiríkr is not only a war-leader, but *stillir Fróða stóls* ‘the occupant of Fróði’s throne’, a ruler in a long-established dynasty. The verb *framði*, which I have translated as ‘honoured’, literally means ‘put forward, promoted’ and has a strong connotation of political advancement. The recipients of Eiríkr’s gifts are *dýrðar seggjir* ‘men of excellence’, with the

<sup>3</sup> This view of Eiríkr accords with that presented by Saxo, though there is some dispute over whether Saxo knew Markús’ poem. Christiansen (1980, 261) thinks he did not, Bjarni Guðnason (*Knytlingsa saga*, cxxxvii-xli) is inclined to think that he did.

word *dýrð* having a strong connotation of moral excellence, rather than necessarily excellence in battle. And finally, the adjective *góðir* ‘good’ must in this context have its occasional connotation of ‘nobility’ or ‘status’, since the poet can hardly be suggesting that Eiríkr’s men became ‘better’ in a moral sense as a result of receiving his gold. The significance of this adjective is further underscored by its final, memorable position in the stanza.

It is also noteworthy that this stanza is the only description of Eiríkr’s generosity in the poem. Yet scenes of gift-giving abound and, in every other one, it is Eiríkr who is the recipient of lavish gifts, all from foreign rulers. He visits the rulers of Russia, apparently for the sole purpose of receiving gifts from them (the word used is again *auðr* ‘wealth’) and as a result he becomes widely renowned in those regions (Mark I,4). On his second pilgrimage he is on the receiving end of *auðr* ‘wealth’ from the ruler of *Frakkland* and of *gjafar* ‘gifts’ from a powerful emperor, probably the German one (Mark I,26). Later, but still on the same trip, people emerge from unspecified large cities to welcome Eiríkr with religious processions and luxuriously decorated reliquaries and crosses (*hnossum gfguð skrin ok krossa*), though it is not clear whether he actually gets to take any of these away with him (Mark I,29). In Constantinople, the gift-giving reaches its climax when the Emperor himself (Alexius I) give Eiríkr half a *lestr* of gold, some robes and fourteen warships. Blöndal and Benedikz (1978, 135-6) have argued that these ‘gifts’ were not in fact gifts but payments to Eiríkr for the outfitting of a fleet for those of his followers who had ‘entered the Imperial service as Varangians’. However, it is not so much the historical fact I am interested in, as the royal picture that emerges from Markús’ poem, in which the Danish king is very much an actor on the world stage, a statesman like the rulers of Russia, France, Germany and Constantinople. The honour they show him increases his prestige, just as he in his turn honours and enriches the Danish aristocracy.

It is useful to compare what is said about gift-giving in the poems about Magnús berfœttr. He is called a *vellmilldr konungr* ‘gold-generous king’ (Pham I,4) and a *linns láðgefendr* ‘giver of the land of the serpent [gold]’ (Gísl I,2). A fragment by Porkell hamarskáld also describes a king’s gift of a gilded weapon to the poet (Pham II,1), though it is not certain which king this was. But these are the only examples in the admittedly fragmentary corpus of poems about Magnús, and there is certainly no indication in any poem about him of the kind of political and diplomatic gift-giving and -receiving which is so prominent in *Eiríksdrápa*.

Another example of how Markús uses traditional vocabulary to express new ideas is in his description of Eiríkr’s departure for the Holy Land (Mark I,28; Knýtl, 235):

Lýst skal hitt, es læknask fýstisk  
liðraustr konungr sér en iðri.  
Nordan för með helming harðan  
hersa mœðir söl at grœða,  
Harri bjósk til heims ens dýrra.  
Hann gerði for út at kanna,  
buðlungr vildi bjart líf qðiask,  
byggð Jórsala friði tryggða.

This shall be shown, that the troop-bold king was eager to doctor his inner wounds. The conqueror of chieftains went from the north with a hard troop-division to heal his soul. The leader prepared a trip to the more glorious world. He made a trip abroad to get to know the settlement of Jerusalem, secured by peace; the prince wished to achieve a bright [sinless] life.

Eiríkr was by no means the first Scandinavian king to go on pilgrimage. Knútr walked all the way to Rome, we are told in Pórarinn loftunga’s *Togdrápa*. Haraldr harðráði certainly was in Palestine, though it is not entirely clear in what circumstances (Jesch 2001b, 101). And Eiríkr himself had been to Rome and Bari on a previous trip. What is new in Markús’ poem is

this idea of pilgrimage as a spiritual voyage, this concern with the inner life and the soul. Yet lurking behind the gloss of humility and spirituality in this stanza is still the traditional image of a king setting out on a military expedition, particularly a naval one.<sup>4</sup> He is a *liðhraustr konungr* a ‘king bold/valiant because of his troop’, he sets out, not just with any old *helmingr* ‘troop, division of a troop’, but with a ‘hard’ one, i.e. one that is experienced and reliable. And he is a *harri* ‘leader’, a *hersa mæðir* ‘conqueror of chieftains’, and a *buðlungr* ‘prince’, all traditional ways of referring to a military leader.

We may well wonder to what extent Eiríkr really was going east to save his soul, and to what extent he had more worldly ambitions to do some mercenary work for the Byzantine Emperor. What we can say however is that the Icelandic lawspeaker Markús Skeggjason chose to present the king’s trip east as a spiritual voyage, possibly because the poem was going to be performed in an ecclesiastical context. The poem is posthumous, and Magnus Olsen once suggested (1921, 166) that it was composed in order to be delivered by the Icelandic bishop Jón Ógmundarson to Eiríkr’s brother and successor Nikulás in both spoken and written form in 1105. The occasion was Jón’s consecration to the see of Hólar by the new archbishop Qzurr, who had recently been appointed by Eiríkr to the newly-established archbishopric of Lund. The poem was no doubt intended to edify the new king and to encourage him in similarly Christian practices and, especially, in supporting the Church. But Markús packaged this message in the conventions and traditional forms of praise poetry, and was careful to present Eiríkr as the latest in a long line of warrior kings, like so many Norwegian and Danish kings before him. *Eiríksdrápa* bridges the gap between the praise poetry of the mid-eleventh century, which may occasionally be Christian in tone but is still overwhelmingly traditional in subject-matter, and the Christian poetry of the mid-twelfth century (Attwood 1996), which may be traditional in form, but is entirely Christian in subject-matter. Like the older praise poetry, and at least one of the twelfth-century poems (*Geisl*), it is addressed to a royal audience, but like the latter, that audience is also ecclesiastical, in both membership and location (Attwood 1996, 224–5). If Olsen is right, then *Eiríksdrápa* may also have been the first long skaldic poem to be composed in written rather than oral form (though it is hard to find evidence for this one way or the other).

We can see the gradual waning of the Viking Age in skaldic praise poetry throughout the eleventh century, but it is first in Markús Skeggjason’s *Eiríksdrápa* that we can finally say that the new, ‘medieval’ model of kingship has replaced the old ‘viking’ model and that Christian concepts of the monarchy are firmly established. The Viking Age did not end suddenly. *Eiríksdrápa* still has traces of the Viking ideal, but it more obviously represents the new ways of thinking. Its very continuity with earlier skaldic poetry shows once again how skilfully Scandinavians negotiated the transition from a pagan, viking way of life, to a Christian, medieval one, without suddenly or completely abandoning the well-entrenched old ways. New wine is served in old bottles. In poetry, as in so many other areas of life, this is the Viking Achievement.

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<sup>4</sup> On the naval connotations of *lið* and *helmingr*, see Jesch 2001b, 187-95, 202-3.

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