As you like it? Narrative units recycled: Norðimbraland in sequences of saga writing

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As a small tribute to the generous hosts of the present conference it seems, to me at least, good and proper that we remind one another once again of saga references to those particular parts of the vestrland in which we are now assembled. I shall venture to do so by attempting to single out a narrative sequence which occurs in variant forms in several saga texts, all referring to events reported to have taken place in Norðimbraland or Norðumbraland, a toponym designating, of course, the part of England known in one of these texts and elsewhere in a different idiom as Northumbria. That is to say I want us to look once again at what is narrated in different saga texts about Eirikr Blood-Axe's flight from Norway to England and his subsequent fate there. There is, in the texts to be dealt with here, a short account of Eirskr Blood-Axe's arrival in England - where, as stated in the more elaborate versions, an earldom is bestowed on him by the king of England - king Aðalráðr. From this position Eirskr eventually died in vestrviking as it is phrased in some of these texts, the entire corpus of preserved texts being, in the first place the Historia Norwegiæ, Ágrip, The Great Saga of St. Óláfr, Heimskringla, Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta, Flateviarbók, and Fagrskinna. Also a small section of Theodorici Monachi Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagensium and the Orkneyinga saga need to be considered. In addition a passage from Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar is included in the discussion below. Even if the latter does not quite correspond to the sequence about Eirskr in the other texts, it seems to relate to a stock of narrative elements present in the quoted sequences from those texts, all as it seems connecting, in some way or other, to a common core of historical lore in Norway and Iceland about Northumbria. This observation, of course, is in no way a novelty to saga research. The historicity of all this has recently been reopened for discussion in an important article by Claire Downham (2004). The aim of the present contribution, though, is not primarily to discuss the source value or the historicity of the Icelandic-Norwegian literary tradition on this particular point, but rather to consider the literary variants per se as part of the process of saga writing in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. For this reason only the prose parts of what is related about Eirikr in Northumbria will be discussed.

Earlier research has, as we all know, devoted much time and energy to the difficult question of sources and textual interdependence. This is particularly true for the study of texts such as the ones just mentioned, all but three of which belong to the type of narrative commonly known as kings' sagas – a genre of sagas, which, unlike the family sagas, typically tells 'the same story [...] many times' to quote Theodore M. Andersson (1985, 197).

The question of interdependence in general between the larger texts involved here is, of course, too complex to be dealt with in any detail on the basis of short sequences of narrative such as the ones quoted below. As is well known the relationship between several of the texts has been discussed at great length elsewhere.

Some of the results arrived at are commonly accepted, some still open to discussion, it seems. There is, for instance, as convincingly pointed out by Ólafur Halldórsson (2001, v and 31f) every reason to think that the compiler of Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta used the first third of Heimskringla as his principal source for the part of the saga that contains the narrative sequence that interests us here. Furthermore the relevant part of Flateyjarbók obviously depends on Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta. The relevant sequence in Ágrip, it should be added, is no doubt preceded by a corresponding part of the Historia Norwegiæ (written in Latin, perhaps as early as ca. 1150, cf. Ekrem 1998, 14-21) on which it obviously leans heavily, and so on. Literary dependencies such as these notwithstanding, the scope of textual variation on a minor point like the one we have selected here, carries, it seems to me, an interest of its own as a characteristic feature of this particular type of narrative.

Even if fairly accurate copying from one text to another can be observed in some of these cases, a certain degree of variation will occur, it appears, between them. In other instances more substantial variation of narrative elements, omissions and expansions included, can be observed. A closer look at these short accounts of Eiríkr Blood-Axe's Northumbrian experience may then, I hope, teach us something about techniques of saga writing at a lower level of the process.

An internal comparison between the sequences relevant to us here may, of course, be carried out so as to cover narrative units or shorter sequences of varying scopes. In order not to end up in too minute detail we will, for the present purpose, single out for closer study just three shorter sequences from what is told about Eiríkr and Northumbria in these texts, that is to say the various sequences about: A. His flight from Norway to England. B. Bestowal of an earldom. C. Description of Northumbria.

As our purpose is not at present to discuss at any length the question of interdependence between each of these texts, a quick look at the first of these thematic units (point A above) will suffice to provide a rough grouping of the ten sequences. Firstly, then, the sequences numbered as 3, 4, 5, and 6 below, constitute a major subgroup about Eirskr's flight from Norway telling us that he first travelled to the Orkneys with many men and from there south to England, raiding Scotland en route, according to nos. 4, 5, and 6 - the latter three slightly more elaborate than the first one, and close enough to one another to be regarded as variants of the same version of the text - equal to those that originate from copying processes elsewhere. Variation within a group such as this is, in consequence, primarily of a linguistic and philological interest and shall be left at that for the present purpose. The sequence no. 3 just states that Eirikr travelled south from the Orkneys with an army. It may well be considered as a base upon which the others have expanded, but should, nevertheless, be regarded as a text version of its own in this context. When it comes to describing Northumbria, sequence no. 6 makes it one third of England as opposed to one fifth in the two other variants of this version (sequences 4 and 5). This may, however, reflect a quite common error in the copying process affecting details belonging to the category of accidentals, to borrow a term from modern textual criticism (cf. Greg 1966, 374-391). Sequence no. 9, which is a translation into early modern Danish, seems close to sequences nos. 4-6, but is abbreviated to a degree that makes it a version of its own.

The sequences nos. 1, 2, 7, and 8 all very briefly tell that Eirikr fled to England, 2 being the more elaborate, mentioning the accompanying men (skipaliði) and raids en

route (útilegu ok hernaði). Sequence no. 10 relates only marginally to this story, of course, standing quite apart from the other sequences as it does. Sequence 7 considerably differs from nos. 1 and 2 when it comes to points B and C stated above, where it is closer to nos. 4-6. This clearly makes it a version of it own, as is the case also with sequences nos. 1, 2, and 8.

Textual variation within a narrative sequence of fairly limited scope such as the one about Eiríkr Blood-Axe's Northumbrian experience to a great extent, then, confirms what is already well known about the textual history and the interrelations between the larger works from which they are taken. This leaves us with three main groups of sequences containing variation — omissions included — of a few narrative units in seven plus one versions of the story of Eiríkr Blood-Axe and Norðimbraland — the seven versions being the following of the sequences listed below: I (no. 1) (Historia Norwegiæ), II (no. 2) (Ágrip), III (no. 3) (The Great saga of St. Óláfr), IV (nos. 4–6) (Heimskringla, Oláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta, Flateyjarbók), V (no. 7) (Fagrskinna), VI (no. 8) (Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagensium), and VII (no. 9) the Orkneyinga saga. Sequence no. 10 (Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar) will be left at that for the moment.

If they were listed in the assumed chronological order Fagrskinna should, of course, be placed before Oláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta and Flateyjarbók. The Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagensium was composed, it seems, some time between 1178 and 1183 (Foote 1998, xii). This leaves us with six plus one versions being composed within a fairly short period of time – between the 1150's and the (late) 1230's, judging from the present state of research. The exact dating of the version constituted by sequence no. 9 cannot be established with any degree of certainty. The translation is assumed to have been done in Western Norway in the latter half of the sixteenth century (Finnbogi Guðmundsson 1965, cxvi). It cannot be established, however, whether or not the transmitted text in itself constitutes an abbreviation, compared to sequences nos. 4–6, or if this is due to an edited text in the old language from which it has been translated. For that reason this version is less interesting to the present discussion.

On looking more closely at what is said about the appointment of Eirskr as Earl of Northumbria (point B above) the following narrative units can be identified in the corpus taken as a whole:

- 1) He is well received by his brother's foster-father (no. 1)
- 2) He is cleansed at the baptismal font / is (to be) baptised (nos. 1, 4-6 and 7)
- 3) He is appointed earl of (the whole of) Northumbria (by the king) (nos.
- 1, 2, 7, and 9)
- 4) He is offered Northumbria by the king in order to obtain peace between Eirskr and Hákon (nos. 3 and 9)
- 5) He accepts this (nos. 3 and 9)
- 6) Negotiations between the kings result in an agreement that Eirikr should take over Northumbria in order to defend it against Danes and other Vikings (nos. 4-6)
- 7) He agrees to defend Northumbria [and to be baptised] (nos. 4-6)

A description of Northumbria (point C above) is given in variants 3, 4-6, 7 and 9 only, containing the following units:

- 1) Northumbria is said to be one fifth of the whole of England (nos. 3, 4-6, and 9)
- 2) Eirlkr resides in York as, according to tradition, did the sons of Lodbrok (nos. 4-6)
- 3) Northumbria has been inhabited primarily by Norsemen since the sons of Lodbrok conquered the land (nos. 4-6)
- 4) Northumbria owes its name to the Norsemen, because they ruled the land for a long time (nos. 7)
- 5) Many place-names are given in the Norse tongue such as Grimsby and Hauksfljót (nos. 4-6 and 7)

As we have seen already only part of this knowledge can be understood as having been transmitted merely by copying from one written text to another – that is to say the pieces of information transmitted from one variant to another within one version as seen in sequences 4–6. This implies that the accumulated knowledge about Eirikr in Northumbria in medieval Norse historiography, as we know it today, must have been extracted from various sources – written and possibly oral. Even if it is not a theme in the present discussion there is every reason to go along with Downham's hypothesis that 'in the Scandinavian sources, legends concerning Eirikr blóðøx became influenced by, and were combined with the legends of Eirikr of York', this to a certain degree 'on the assumption that they depend on an oral tradition' (Downham 2004, 55 & 58). At any rate there certainly was not a chronological unidirectional process in which the accumulation of information took place by way of transmission from one written version to the next.

Whatever textual interrelation there is between the seven versions we have identified here, most of them seem to have been edited in some way or other from a larger stock of information than is contained in any one version. If we take a look at what is told in the sequences concerning point B above, the narrative unit about Eirikr's baptism is present – in variant forms – in sequences nos. 1, 4–6 and 7 only, having been left out of nos. 2, 3, 8, and 9. Several scholars have explained the similarities for instance between Historia Norwegiæ and Agrip as the result of their having a common source, even if there is nothing to contradict the possibility that Agrip used Historia Norwegiæ directly (cf. Driscoll 1995, xv with references). In either case the omission of the narrative unit about the baptism in Ágrip should be seen as a deliberate editorial act in the making of the saga narrative about Eirikr in Northumbria – turning the story in a certain direction. The point for us to notice here is that Agrip does not include the piece of information about Eirikr's baptism in its narrative – information, we must assume, that was available to the compiler of that particular text.

Furthermore, variants 1, 2 and 7 simply state as a fact that Eirskr was appointed Earl of Northumbria by the English king. No. 8 just relates that he was honoured by the king, whereas nos. 3 and 4-6 connect specific (but different) conditions to the appointment. Within the context of saga writing this kind of narrative amplification obviously serves the function of historical motivation or explanation — a recycled narrative unit developed so as to give individual features to the texts.

When it comes to the description of Northumbria (point C above) this, as we have seen, is a part of the narrative that is totally absent from sequences 1, 2, and 8. Furthermore, the information about the relative size of Northumbria is, in this context, present only in 3, 4–6, and 9, that is to say primarily in the variants which, as we all know, are commonly attributed to Snorri Sturluson. The occurrence of a small detail such as this in Egils saga – in a somewhat different narrative context – is worth noticing. Even if it does not, of course, prove anything, it is there to remind us of the long-lasting discussion about the authorship of Agla. Indeed, a narrative unit recycled.

The fourth version (sequences nos. 4-6) alone amplifies the text by expanding on the Norse history of Northumbria, adding the story about the sons of Lodbrok in York and the subsequent harryings of Danes and Norwegians after their having lost the land - again obviously serving the function of historical motivation or explanation, as is the reference to numerous place-names of Norse origin. Version V (no. 7) (Fagrskinna) seems to be edited much on the basis of the same historical knowledge as version III and IV (nos. 3 and 4-6) (cf. also Indrebø 1917, 132ff. and Finlay 2004, 11). In Fagrskinna, however, the Danes are edited out - Northumbria or Nordumbraland, this version claims, owes its name to the Norwegians because of their long domination of the area – a point evidenced by the very same place-names as given in evidence for the presence of Danes and Norwegians in version IV (nos. 4-6). Grimsbær and Hauksfliot/Haugsfliot. Whether Fagrskinna derives this from Heimskringla (no. 4) or from some common source, cannot, of course, be established on the basis of this particular point alone. In its insisting on the Norwegian element, ruling out the Danes in its presentation of Northumbrian history prior to Eirikr Blood-Axe. Fagrskinna does, however, demonstrate a deliberate editorial will to lead the narrative in a more specific direction than we find in version IV (nos. 4-6). A pro-Norwegian or anti-Danish bias in Fagrskinna, already pointed to by Indrebø (1917, 257f), may then be taken to have been decisive even for its presentation of Scando-Northumbrian historical relations, that is to say at a relative low level of the saga narrative as a whole.

Close studies of textual variation on a relatively synchronic level may therefore help us better to see the literary merits and techniques of medieval Norse-Icelandic historiography than a diachronic approach which has the issue of sources and textual interdependencies as its main focus. It may even help us to come to grips with difficulties which may be encountered in that line of research – having, among many other things, resulted in the need to postulate three different versions of Hryggjarstykki as sources for the sections on Sigurðr slembidjákn in Morkinskinna, Fagrskinna, and Heimskringla respectivlely – in order to explain the variation between them (cf. Bjarni Guðnason 1978, 54f) etc.

The same story could obviously be told many times, but not necessarily with exactly the same purpose, that is to say more or less 'as you like it'. Whether or not the variation encountered in Norwegian-Icelandic texts about Eirskr blooøx derives from what Downham takes to be 'Scandinavian pseudo-history' cannot be established on the basis of a textual comparison like the present one. It certainly does not contradict the claim, however, that 'Scandinavian historians and saga-writers may have been keen to develop stories about the son of Haraldr harfagri in England' (Downham 2004, 69f.).

Textual sequences used

1. Historia Norwegiæ:

...regno privatus in Angliam profugus secessit; ibi a pædagogo fratris sui bene susceptus fonteque baptismatis lotus toti Northimbriæ comes præficitur eratque omnibus gratissimus, quousque improba uxor ejus scilicet Gunnilda illo adventasset. Cujus pestiferam rabiem non ferentes Northimbri jugum illorum intollerabile statim a se discusserunt; at ille in Hispania finibus cum piraticam exerceret, bello temptatus occubuit....

[ed. Storm, 1880, 105f.]

2. Agrip:

En þat gorðisk þá umb Biríks ævi blóðøxar er hann flýði ór landi at hann fluttisk með skipaliði vestr til Englands ok var í útílegu ok hernaði ok beiddisk miskunnar af England konungi, sem Aðalsteinn konungr hafði hónum heitit, en hann þá af konunginum jarlsríki á Norðimbralandi, gerðisk þar enn með róðum Gunnhildar konu sinnar svá grimmr ok greypr við lýð sinn at hann þóttisk varla bera mega. Af því réðsk hann í hernuð ok í víking víða í Vestrlandum, ok fell Eiríkr í Spáníalandi.

[ed. Driscoll, 1995, 16]

3. The Great Saga of Óláfr Haraldsson:

For hann [=Eiríkr] fyrst til Oreneyia. oc hafði hann með ser lið mikit. siðan sigldi hann suðr til Englanz. oc for þar með herseilldi. Aþalsteinn Engla konungr sendi orð Eirici. oc bauð honom at taca af ser rici í Englandi. oc villdi þat vinna til settar með þeim bræðrom Eiriki oc Haconi at gefa honom Norðimbraland. er kallaðr er enn .v. lutr Englanz. Þann cost þa Eiríkr. var hann konungr i Norðimbralandi meðan hann lifði. Eiricr fell i vestrviking.

[ed. O.A. Johnsen and Jón Helgason, 1941, 17]

4. Heimskringla:

Fór hann fyrst til Orkneyja ok hafði þaðan með sér lið míkit. Þá siglidi hann suðr til Englands ok herjaði um Skotland, hvar sem hann kom við land. Hann herjaði alt norðr um England. Aðalsteinn Englakonungr sendi orð Eiríki ok bauð honum at taka af sér ríki í Englandi, sagði svá, at Haraldr konungr, faðir hans, var mikill vinr Aðalsteins konungs, svá at hann vill þat virða við son hans. Fóru þá menn í milli konunganna, ok semsk þat með einkamálum, at Eiríkr konungr tók Norðimbraland at halda af Aðalsteini konungi ok verja þar land fyrir Donum ok oðrum víkingum. Eiríkr skyldi láta skírask ok kona hans ok bom þeira ok allt lið hans, þat er honum hafði fylgt þangat. Tók Eiríkr þenna kost. Var hann þá skírðr ok tók rétta trú. Norðimbraland er kallat fimmtungr Englands. Hann hafði atsetu í Jórvík, þar sem menn segja, at fyrr hafi setit Loðbrókarsynir. Norðimbraland var mest byggt Norðmonnum, síðan er Loðbrókarsynir unnu landit. Herjuðu Danir ok Norðmenn optliga þangat, síðan er vald landsins hafði undan þeim gengit. Morg heiti landsins eru þar gefin á norræna tungu, Grimsbær ok Hauksfljót ok morg onnur.

IV. KAPÍTULI

Eiríkr konungr hafði fjolmenni mikit um sik, helt þar fjolða Norðmanna, er austan hafði farit með honum, ok enn kómu margir vinir hans síðan af Nóregi. Han hafði land lítit. Þá fór hann jafnan í hernað á sumrum, herjaðu á Skotland ok Suðreyjar, Írland ok Bretland ok aflaði sér svá fjár.

[ÍF XXVI, 152-53]

5. Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta:

for hann fyrst til Orkn eyia ok hafdi þaðan með ser lið mikit. Þa sigldi hann suðr til Englandz ok tok at heria. En er þat spurði Aþalsteinn konungr. Þa sendi hann menn sína til Eiriks ok bauð honum at taka at ser land i líen. letz þar uilia sina kosti til leggia. at þeir Hakon deilldi enga v hæfu. Eirikr konungr þekktiz þann kost, foro þa menn imilli konunganna, ok samðiz þat með eínka malum, at Eirikr skylldi hallda Norðimbra land af Aðalsteini konungi ok veria þar landit fyrir Dönum ok ðörum uikingum. Birikr skylldi lata skiraz, kona hans ok börn ok alt lið þat er honum hafði þangat fylgt. Var Eirikr þa skirdr ok tok tru retta. Norðimbraland er kallat firntungr Englandz, Eirikr hafði at setu j lorvik, þar sem menn segia at fyrr hafi setir Loð brokar s(ynir). Norðimbraland var mest byggt Norð mönnum siþan Loðbrokar s(ynir) uunnu landit, heriuðo þar optliga siþan Danir ok Nordmenn, er ualld landzins hafði gengit undan þeim. Mörg heíti landzins ero þar gefin at noræna tungu sem Grims sker¹ ok Hauks fliot ok mörg öður. En þviat Eirikr konungr hafði lönd litil en helt þar fiolda mikinn Norðmanna er austan höfðu farit með honum, ok enn komo margir uinir hans siþan af Noregi, þa for hann iafnan ihernat æ|sumrum, hann heriaði vm Skotland ok Suðr eyiar, Írland ok Bretland, ok aflaði ser sva fiar.

[Ólafur Halldórsson (ed.) 1958, 22-23]

6. Flateyjarbók:

for hann fyst til Orkneyia ok hafde badan lid mikit med ser. þa siglde hann sudr til Einglands ok heriade bar. En er bat spurdeAdalradr konungr. ba sendi hann menn til Æiriks ok baud honum at taka bar af lande, letz bar uilea sina koste til leggia at beir Hakon konungr deillde onguar uhefur. Æirikr konungr bektizst bann kost, foru ba menn mille konunganna ok samdizst bat med einkamálum at Æirekr skyllde hallda Nordimbraland af Adalrade kon ungi ok veria landit firir Dönum edr ödrum vikingum. Æirekr skyllde skirazst lata ok kona hans ok bornn ok alt hans lid er med honum hafde farit. var Æirekr þa skirdr ok (tok) vid tru ok alt lid hans, sidan tok hann skatta ok skylldr af Nordimbralande ok settizst bar ym kyrt, er bat kallat bridiungr af Einglande. Æirikr sat j Jorvik þar er menn segia at fyrr hafui setit Lodbrokar synir, Nordimbraland er kallada af Nordmonnum sidan þeir bygdu þat, en sidan Lodbrokar synir heriudu bar ok vnnu landit, sua eigi sidr heriudu bar Nordmenn ok Danir optliga. buiat ualld landzins hafde ba vndan beim geingit. Morg heite landzsins eru bar gefin a norræna tungu sem Grimsbærr ok Haugsfliot ok enn fleire. En þui at Æirekr konungr hafde land litit en helt bar fiollda Nordmanna er austan hofdu farit med honum ok nordan kuomu margir vinir hans af Noregi ok for hann jafnan j hernad a sumrum. hann heriade vm Skotland Sudreyiar ok Irland ok Bretland ok aflade ser sua fiar.

[Vigfusson & Unger 1860, 50-51]

¹ Var.: Grims bær, gorms sker.

7. Fagrskinna:

for Eiríkr or lannde oc sotti a fund Aðalsteins konongs. eptir hans vinmælum er hann hafþi sent með Hacone, fostrsyne sinum at Æirikr skullde vælkominn með Aðalsteini ef han villde eigi uþokkaz bræðr sinum. Hacone eðr beriazt við hann, feck Aðalsteinn Eiriki kononge at friðlannde oc ivirsocn Norðumbraland, þar toc Eiríkr skirn oc tru retta. Norðumbraland er kallað af heiti Norðmanna, firir þær sakir at Norðmenn hava langum haft riki ivir þvi lannde, þar ero morg ornofn, gefinn með norrænne tungu, sva sem er Grimbsbær oc Haugsfliot.

K.7. Eiríkr tækr riki a Norðhumbralannde.

Eiríkr konungr þa er hann toc riki a Norðumbralande, hugsaðe firi ser hversu viðlendr faðir hans var. þa er hann reð firir oilom Noreghi, oc morgum skattlandum, oc þottiz litit hava til forræðes, oc firi þa sok lagðiz hann i vestrviking oc heriaðe viða a Vestrlond.

[ed. Finnur Jónsson, 1902-03, 26-27]

Theodoricus Monachus:

Ipse vero Ericus ad Angliam navigavit et a rege honorifice suspectus ibidem diem obit. Iste annis tribus regnavit, quorum duos solus, tertium cum fratre.

[ed. Storm, 1880, 7]

9. Orkneyjinga saga;

..hand seglede i Vestersøen oc førdte Kriig paa Skotland oc norden paa England. Oc den tid Adelstein Kong fick det at vide, da sende hand mend til Eric hoc bød at faa hannem noget land, oc lod at hand haffde veret Kong Haralds gode Ven, oc det vilde hand lade kende paa hans Søn; dertil sagde hand at hand vilde forliige hannem met Kong Hagen, sin Fostresøn. Det behagede Erich Kong, oc fick hand Norduumbreland at raade for; det er femte Parten aff Engelland. Men fordi at Kong Erich haffdel idet Land oc megit folck, da fattedis hannem Pending; derfor vaar hand ude om Sommeren oc krigede, men om Vinteren vaar hand udi sit Riige; beholt hand det saa lenge Kong Adelstein leffuede; hand døde den tid han haffde veret Konning i 14 Aar.

[IF XXXIV, 17-18]

10. Egils saga:

Norðimbraland er kallat fimmtungr Englands, ok er þat norðast, næst Skotlandi fyrir austan: þat hofðu haft at fornu Danakonungar; Jórvík er þar hofuðstaðr. Þat ríki átti Aðalsteinn ok hafði sett yfir jarla tvá; hét annarr Álfgeirr, en annarrr Goðrekr; þeir sátu þar til landvarnar, bæði fyrir ágangi Skota ok Dana eða Norðmanna, er mjok herjuðu á landit ok þóttusk eiga tilkall mikit þar til lands, því at á Norðimbralandi váru þeir einir menn, ef nokkut var til, at danska ætt átti at faðerni eða móðerni, en margir hvárirtveggju.

[ÍF IL 129]

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