

Assembling the Olaf-archive? Verses in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*

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Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta (*ÓT*) is an early fourteenth-century compilation of material about King Óláfr Tryggvason. It is usually thought to have been composed in order to provide Óláfr Tryggvason, a king close to the Icelanders' hearts, with a saga as grand as the so-called Great Saga of his successor Óláfr helgi. *ÓT* seems to have been largely based on written sources, as we would expect of a work compiled so late about so central a figure. Long sections of it closely parallel text preserved in *Heimskringla*, in the various manuscripts of the Old Icelandic translation of Oddr Snorrason's Latin *Life of Óláfr (ÓTódd)*, *Færeyinga saga*, *Hallfreðar saga*, *Jómsvíkinga saga*, *Landnámabók*, and other minor sources. Presumably some borrowings are as yet undetected, and some will remain so.

Ólafur Halldórsson, who has produced the standard edition of *ÓT* (1958-2000), takes the view that the compiler's main source was *Heimskringla*, which provided a framework for him to augment with additional material. Ólafur points to the compiler's fondness for depicting direct speech, which often led him to add to the *Heimskringla* narrative (2000, 92; 2001, lix); another striking feature, which will be important in the following discussion, is the extended treatment of the climactic battles of Hjørungavágr and Svölðr.

A contrary current of thought, represented by Allan Berger (1999) and Sveinbjörn Rafnsson (2005), stresses the source-dependence not of *ÓT*, but of *Heimskringla*. Sveinbjörn suggests that what appears to be *ÓT*'s slavish adherence to *Heimskringla* in fact reflects a source common to both works, namely lost Olaf-sagas based on the Latin *Life of Óláfr* written by Gunnlaugr Leifsson. Berger, more radically, argues *Heimskringla* is not by Snorri and that its *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* is an abbreviation of *ÓT*. As *ÓT* represents this lost material more fully than *Heimskringla* does, it is in a sense (or for Berger, in every sense) the more primitive source. Sveinbjörn thinks Snorri's desire to incorporate Óláfr into a historical narrative about the Norwegian kingdom represents a later phase of development than the expansive, biographical mode of *ÓT*, which is presumed to reflect the lost Olaf-sagas which preceded it; Berger suggests the 'bare-bones, anti-legendary style' (1999, 12) of *Heimskringla* is the result of abbreviation.

Where all these accounts agree is in viewing *ÓT* as an archival, rather formless text, whose purpose is to gather up all the pre-existing material on Óláfr and arrange it in a roughly biographical shape. Their main point of divergence seems to be where to place this archival labour in literary-historical terms: before or after the more efficient kind of narrative represented by *Heimskringla*. One kind of source which has not attracted much attention in this debate is the verses in *ÓT*. There are 215 of them, the vast majority of which are clearly taken from written sources which are still extant in some form or other, among them a version of the Old Icelandic translation of *ÓTódd*,

a *Heimskringla* text of the y-class,¹ and *Hallfreðar saga*. However, a small subset of these 215 verses are only extant in *ÓT*, and it is these I will be concentrating on in this paper (note that I am using ‘verse’ as a collective term for whole- and half-stanzas, i.e. units of four or eight lines). They comprise:²

- 3 *lausavísur*: one attributed to a certain Bárðr á Upplöndum (*Skj* AI, 153, BI, 145); two to a man Óláfr encounters while sailing along the Norwegian coast (*Skj* AI, 179-80, *Skj* BI, 169-70).
- 5 verses from Bjarni Kolbeinsson’s *Jómsvíkingadrápa* (*Skj* AII, 1-10, BI, 1-10).
- 12 verses of Þorkell Gíslason’s *Búadrápa*, the only surviving trace of this poem (*Skj* AI, 553-5, BI, 536-8).
- 28 verses from Hallar-Steinn’s *Reksteffa*: the whole poem is also written out in the Bergsbók codex of *ÓT*, so the verses are not strictly speaking unique to this saga, but they are enclosed within its manuscript tradition (*Skj* AI, 543-53, BI, 525-35).
- 16 verses from Hallfreðr’s *Erfidrápa* for Óláfr Tryggvason (*Skj* AI, 155-73, BI, 147-63).

One immediately obvious point is that almost all these additional verses are from long poems. The *ÓT* compiler’s interests seem, therefore, to have been rather different from those of for example the *Morkinskinna* author or the author of *Óláfs saga helga en elzta*, who include many stanzas as the kernels of skald anecdotes. On this topic, Bjarne Fidjestøl observed that ‘skald anecdotes appear to be a source which never dried up, and one finds ever more of them in subsequent redactions and in late kings’ sagas’ (1982, 22). And Theodore Andersson and Kari Gade write in the introduction to their translation of *Morkinskinna* that the author ‘was not recording history but telling a story in which skaldic stanzas were supposed to be an integral part’ (2000, 57). The only additional verses in *ÓT* which could fall into this category are the three *lausavísur*, as these are the only ones which are presented as being spoken by a character in the saga. However these episodes are not skald anecdotes, and the speakers are not famous skalds. Rather they are recalcitrant pagans, and their speaking in verse seems intended to associate them with the pre-Christian past.

The verse attributed to Bárðr occurs in *Þorvalds þátr tasalda*. According to the *þátr*, Bárðr is a rich elderly farmer who lives in Oppland in central Norway. He is a ‘noble pagan’ who trusts only in his own might and main (*mátt ok megin*). Þorvaldr tasaldi visits him on behalf of King Óláfr Tryggvason in the summer of AD 998, and persuades him, after a struggle in which Bárðr delivers his only extant verse, to accept Christian baptism. Linguistic features in the verse itself suggest it is contemporaneous with the *þátr* (conventionally dated to the late thirteenth century), and it seems likely that it was composed specifically for inclusion in it.

¹ Or, so Sveinbjörn, from the lost *Óláfs saga* drawn on by *Heimskringla*: the consistently y-class nature of the readings in *ÓT*’s verses (demonstrated for the verses from Hallfreðr’s *Erfidrápa* in Heslop 2004) would seem to pose some problems for his theory.

² In the interests of saving space, I have not provided page references to the standard edition of *ÓT* for these 64 verses: the Skaldic Project website (<http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au>) keys the *Skj* references to verse numbers in *ÓT* 1958-2000.

The other two *lausavísur* are attributed to a *noðkvamaðr*, a man in a boat, whom Óláfr Tryggvason and his men encounter while on a missionary voyage in southern Norway. The *noðkvamaðr* speaks his verses in the course of a conversation with the king, at the end of which he capsizes his boat and disappears into the sea. The anecdote is typical of those in which the missionary king encounters and bests a representative of paganism, usually Óðinn or Þórr. The *noðkvamaðr* lacks obvious divine attributes, but it seems possible he is a giant. Indications of this are the saga's references to his superhuman size and strength; his calling himself in his first verse the son of Harðráðr (variant reading: Herráðr), cf. the giant-names Harðgreipr, Harðverkr (*SnE* 1998, I, 110, 114); and the fact that he rows for the cliffs when confronted by Óláfr. Richard Perkins (1999) has drawn our attention to the association of supernatural beings with prominent landmarks on the Norwegian coast. Finnur Jónsson thought the verses were old (1920-24, I, 466) but there is no internal evidence either way. It seems more likely to me that they were composed in association with the writing of this anecdote, in order to enhance the *noðkvamaðr*'s other-worldly, supernatural character.

All the other additional verses in *ÓT*, however, come from four skaldic long poems. *Jómsvíkingadrápa* and *Búadrápa* are twelfth/thirteenth-century poems about the battle of Hjörungavágr, where Hákon jarl defeated the Jómsvíkingar with the help of his tutelary deity Þorgerðr Hølgabrúðr. *Reksteffa* and Hallfreðr's *Erfidrápa* are both about Óláfr Tryggvason and especially his last battle at Svölðr, but are traditionally dated at least 100 years apart, the *Erfidrápa* to the very early eleventh century, *Reksteffa* to some time in the twelfth. All four of these long poems are treated in the 'evidential' fashion usual in the kings' sagas, in which single stanzas or half-stanzas are quoted and introduced with the words 'sem x segir'/'svá segir x'. There is no distinction made between Hallfreðr's verses and the other, much later poems as regards the manner in which the verses are cited. The informational content (names, dates, numbers etc.) of the stanzas is often in fact quite slight, though, and many of the citations serve rhetorical rather than informational ends. A major rhetorical function of the citations is that they allow the two set-piece battle descriptions to be greatly extended in *ÓT* relative to any extant sources. The battles of Hjörungavágr (c. 985) and Svölðr (c. 1000) bracketed Óláfr Tryggvason's career. Hjörungavágr was the arch-pagan Hákon's final triumph before being laid low by Óláfr, and Svölðr was the site of Óláfr's last stand and mysterious, perhaps divinely-assisted, disappearance. These battles were therefore also crucial turning-points in the compiler's narrative of Christianisation, and so he naturally wished to extend, elaborate, and embellish his description of them as much as possible.

A more detailed look at how the compiler treats these long poems will cast light on his literary aims. I will begin with *Reksteffa* and *Jómsvíkingadrápa*, as with these works we are in the fortunate position of also possessing more or less complete texts of the two poems written out as wholes. They therefore offer a rare insight into the process by which one kind of saga prosimetrum (that involving the citation of pre-existing verses) was made. *Jómsvíkingadrápa* is also transmitted in the R manuscript of *Snorra Edda*, in which its first forty stanzas are written out in an uninterrupted sequence, immediately after *Háttatal*, filling folios 53v and 54r. The *drápa* breaks off at the bottom of fol. 54r. The five stanzas unique to *ÓT* clearly belong to the poem's

conclusion, as they recount the end of the narrative. A few stanzas are probably missing between the last verse in *Snorra Edda* and the first in *ÓT*, and it is highly likely that *Jómsvíkingadrápa* ended with self-referential flourishes similar to those with which it began; all these verses are, *sáði*, lost.

ÓT omits the entire opening section of *Jómsvíkingadrápa* (vv. 1-9). As is well known, Bjarni begins by mocking two key skaldic framing conventions: the bid for a hearing, and the claim of Odinic inspiration. Bjarni claims his poem is the outcome neither of divine inspiration nor of the need to serve up *Yggjar bjórr* for *ættgóðir ýtar*: no one has asked him for a poem, and perhaps no-one is listening, but he will present (*framfæra*) one anyway. This is a radical rejection of what seem to have been traditional conceptions of the skald's relationship to his material and his audience. Instead Bjarni swerves abruptly into a personal narrative of disappointed love. He was in love with a woman for a long time, but she rejected him; he suffers, as do so many others, but until now he has not composed poetry about this. The juxtaposition of this narrative with the rejection of convention in the preceding two stanzas suggests Bjarni is proposing an alternative model for skaldic activity here. As Erik Noreen pointed out (1926, 259-60), the relevance of Bjarni's own story to the *Jómsvíking* material lies in their shared erotic themes. Vagn swears an oath to marry his enemy's daughter, a vow which he realises by reciting a poem about her as he is about to be executed, thereby saving his own life and winning her hand. It has long been recognised that the combination of these various motifs in *Jómsvíkingadrápa* shows influence from the ideology of courtly love (see e.g. Bjarni Einarsson 1951, de Vries 1964, II, 35).

But the question of influences is not central to my argument here. Rather, what is interesting is the shift in the skald's standpoint in relation to the indigenous tradition. Bjarni rejects not only the traditional idea of a relationship of necessity existing between skald and *yrkisefni* – that is to say, that poetic performance is a divinely inspired, almost involuntary act (think of the imagery of poetic speech as vomiting), and that the skald's material comprises events he has personally experienced or been told about by eyewitnesses – but also the face-to-face, socially instrumental performance context. Instead the skald's persona is narrativised, and furthermore his personal narrative bears a metaphorical, rather than metonymic, relationship to the content of the poem. To put it another way: Bjarni's response to the challenge of composing a *sögukvæði* (st. 5), a poem telling of events he could not convincingly profess personal participation in, is to seek other means of constructing an authoritative speaking position. He finds this poetic authority in the claim of emotional identification with his subject-matter, a claim conveyed as personal narrative. Lindow stresses the importance of narrative in *Jómsvíkingadrápa*, which he sees as 'cloaking ... an entire linear narrative, replete with detail, internally consistent and comprehensible on its own terms, in the form of a skaldic *drápa*' (1982, 112) and suggests *sögukvæði* be translated 'narrative' rather than 'historical' poem. I agree that *Jómsvíkingadrápa*'s commitment to sequentially narrating the story of the *Jómsvíkingar* is striking, but would suggest that its parallel narrativisation of the skald's own situation constitutes an even more significant break with tradition.

Bjarni's rather remarkable innovation seems to have been of no interest to the *ÓT* compiler, however, who also omitted the *stef*-verses in which the *amor courtois* conceit is extended with a complaint that the skald is robbed of joy by a nobleman's

wife. It is of course impossible to be certain whether the selection from *Jómsvíkingadrápa* was made by the *ÓT* compiler himself or by his source, though Ólafur Halldórsson thinks the former is more likely (2000, 91). The firmly linear and sequential narrative of *Jómsvíkingadrápa* does, however, mean that its stanzas are quoted in sequence in *ÓT* (assuming, as I think we have to, that the sequence in *Snorra Edda* is the original one).

The *ÓT* compiler's treatment of *Reksteffa* is rather different. *Reksteffa* is transmitted as a whole poem in Bergsbók, where it is attributed to Hallar-Steinn, in a collection of four skaldic long poems written into the manuscript between the 'Great' sagas of Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr helgi. The text of *Reksteffa* in Bergsbók is complete, and once again its stanza ordering may be presumed to be the closest we can get to its author's intentions. As was the case with *Jómsvíkingadrápa*, the compiler omits the metapoetic introductory and concluding stanzas (1 and 32-33), as well as the skald's announcement of the *slæmr* or final section in st. 24. It is less obvious why he omits four more stanzas from the main body of the poem: sts. 7 and 8 describing Óláfr's arrival in Norway, crushing of the jarls of Hlaðir, and imposition of righteous government; and sts. 10 and 11 in which the skald announces that Óláfr Christianised five countries and gives their names: Norway, Iceland, Shetland, Orkney and Greenland. It might be that the mention of five countries did not tally with the compiler's prose sources (among them *ÓT Odd*) which listed six, but *ÓT* itself does not include either the five-country or the six-country version of the list. It is even more difficult to see why sts. 7 and 8 were omitted.

More instructive than the omissions for an analysis of the compiler's aims, however, are his reorderings. He has gone about his task here in quite a different fashion than with *Jómsvíkingadrápa*. If we compare the Bergsbók text of *Reksteffa* to the verses cited in *ÓT*'s prose, it is apparent that quite a lot of reordering of the stanzas has gone on. The Battle of Svölör is at the centre of *Reksteffa*. It is preceded by reports of Óláfr's youthful Viking exploits and kingly attributes such as generosity, and succeeded by a sequence of stanzas recounting legendary feats of strength, agility, and daring such as walking along the oars of his ship, juggling swords and so on. The *ÓT* compiler not only moves the Svölör section as a whole to the end of his sequence of quotations from *Reksteffa* where, interwoven with quotations from Hallfreðr's *Erfdrápa*, it forms the final set-piece of his saga; he also recasts it to tally with his prose narrative.

The narrative of the Battle of Svölör in *ÓT* essentially falls into two phases. This is despite the heavy emphasis in virtually all extant sources on the fact that Óláfr had to fight three enemies: the Danish king Sveinn tjúguskegg; Óláfr skötkonungr of Gautland, Sveinn's stepson, and his Swedes; and Eirekr jarl, exiled son of the murdered Hákon jarl (and Sveinn's son-in-law). The idea of three enemies (important, along with the treachery of Sigvaldi, as an explanation for how so significant a figure as Óláfr Tryggvason came to be defeated) was reinforced by the tradition of Óláfr's words to his men before the battle. The effeminate Danes had no guts, he told them, and they had nothing to fear from Swedish horse-eaters, who would be better off at home licking their sacrificial bowls; but they could expect a hard fight from Eirekr's men, 'Norð menn sem ver ervm' (*ÓT* 1958-2000, II, 262-3). In *ÓT* the contrast of hardy Norwegians with hapless Danes and Swedes is, if anything, intensified, as

Sveinn's and Óláfr skötkonungr's attacks are telescoped together and jointly overshadowed by the extended narrative of Eirekr jarl's fierce attack. This motivation is particularly clear in the compiler's treatment of st. 16. In *Reksteffa* this stanza serves as a summary introduction to the Svǫldr-narrative as a whole, and praises Óláfr for his battle with *doglinga þrenna* 'three chieftains'. In *ÓT* it instead concludes Phase I of the battle, the fights with Sveinn and Óláfr skötkonungr, and the *doglinga þrenna* accordingly become *doglinga tvenna* 'two chieftains'. The component *helmingar* of stanzas 16, 20 and 21 are cited separately, out of sequence, to point the articulation of the phases of battle in the prose.

Another trace of the *ÓT* compiler's editorial activities is his treatment of st. 18, a general fight-description which he moves close to the beginning of the Svǫldr-sequence. The prose introduction to st. 18 combines material from that stanza with more specific material from st. 17 – the information that Óláfr skötkonungr fought with his namesake and fled – though st. 17 itself is not quoted until later in the chapter, where the defeat of the Swedes is described. The compiler evidently had both stanzas in mind while writing the introduction to st. 18. In general these prose introductions closely follow the content of the verses and appear to have been generated out of them. It is also worth noting that there is a degree of uncertainty in the manuscripts as to who *Reksteffa* is by. The unrevised redaction of *ÓT*, like *Bergsbók*, attributes it to Hallar-Steinn (or on one occasion 'hallar ste. son'), but the revised redaction represented in *Flateyjarbók* consistently attributes it to a 'Markús lögmaðr [or: lögsoðgumaðr]'.¹

The *ÓT* compiler's treatment of *Jómsvíkingadrápa* and *Reksteffa* casts an interesting, if not altogether startling, light on his literary aspirations. Frands Herschend recently observed that 'collections aiming at documentation are ... something radically different from a collection of excerpts intended to form the basis of a literary project' and, in the case of the Codex Regius of the *Poetic Edda*, 'our compiler ... probably felt that a composition of poetry and tales could make up a literary work' (2002, 122, 136). Certainly the archival urge, the sense of being a 'collection aiming at documentation', can often be discerned in *ÓT*. Clear instances of this are the citations of verses to support details additional to those found in the compiler's prose sources (e.g. *Reksteffa* 6b, where the information that Óláfr burned villages in the course of his Viking raids is not in the *Heimskringla* prose he otherwise draws on at this point; *Reksteffa* 21a, which gives the number of ships Eirekr used in his attack), or to back up statements the compiler already had from his prose sources (*Reksteffa* 21b, where the same information is supplied by the prose preceding the verse, taken from *Heimskringla*).

However, the additional verses also serve rhetorical and thematic purposes more usually associated with a literary work than an archive or collection. The intradiegetic verses – those attributed to Bárðr and the *noðkvamaðr* – mark their speakers out as representatives of the old, pagan world-view. And the substantial quotations from *Jómsvíkingadrápa*, *Búadrápa* and *Reksteffa* do not merely perform the relatively straightforward duties of narrative retardation and emphasis, but also help the compiler structure and sequence his accounts of events so as to heighten the impact of his key themes. As I have shown for the *Reksteffa* citations, the two-phase account of the Battle of Svǫldr emphasises the Norwegian Eirekr jarl's role and downplays the

importance of the Dane Sveinn tjúguskegg, whose son's vassal Eirekr was in fact soon to be.

The compiler's literary aims are also visible in the verses he omits from these poems, and in how he treats them compared to his citations from Hallfreðr's *Erfidrápa*, a poem which, despite some recent scepticism (Sveinbjörn Rafnsson 2005, 40-47) I see no pressing reason to consider a twelfth-century forgery. The consciousness of a skaldic tradition and their own place within it which is exhibited in the introductory and closing stanzas of *Reksteffa* and *Jómsvíkingadrápa* is, like the intertextuality noted by Attwood (1996), a hallmark of twelfth-century (and later) Christian skaldic poetry. It is also apparent, for example, in the probably twelfth-century poem on Óláfr Tryggvason wrongly attributed to Hallfreðr which forms a pendant to *Reksteffa* in the Bergsbók manuscript. It seems likely that this diachronic self-consciousness – this particular 'sense of history' – is a consequence of the move to written transmission (and perhaps composition?); it also appears outside the subgenre of Christian skaldic poetry in Snorri's naming of metrical variants in *Háttatal* after historical skalds. But it is precisely these metapoetic stanzas, with their display of a new kind of relationship between poet, material and audience, which the *ÓT* compiler omits. The example of his citations from the *Erfidrápa*, which include all the extant stanzas in which Hallfreðr weighs his sources, expresses his growing conviction that Óláfr is dead, and prays for his the repose of his godfather's soul in heaven, demonstrates that purging *ÓT* of personal sentiment or metapoetic reflection was not a general plan of the compiler's. Rather he seems to have specifically excised these 'modern' traits from *Reksteffa* and *Jómsvíkingadrápa*, producing the illusion not only that all three poems are equally old and authoritative but also that all three skalds construct their relationships with *yrkisefni* and audience in the same terms of authenticity and presence.

The realisation that *Jómsvíkingadrápa*, *Reksteffa* and Hallfreðr's *Erfidrápa* are treated to all intents and purposes identically by the *ÓT* compiler, despite the many pages which separate them in our literary histories, leads me to a final point. The question of where the *ÓT* compiler got the additional stanzas of the *Erfidrápa* from – a poem composed some three centuries before – is a tantalising one, particularly if one is trying to edit these stanzas. Of course it is ultimately unanswerable. But it seems to me that the evidence points in the direction of a written source, and a non-prosimetric one at that. The postulation of such a source for the compiler's citations from *Jómsvíkingadrápa* and *Reksteffa* is made credible by the fact that such texts of these poems are still extant, in the Codex Regius of *Snorra Edda* and in Bergsbók respectively. The foregoing analysis has demonstrated the following six features of his citations from *Reksteffa*:

1. The prose introductions often baldly paraphrase the verses; compare e.g. the verses cited from *Heimskringla* and *ÓTÓdd*, which the *ÓT* compiler quotes along with their artful prose introductions.
2. Single *helmingar*, or half-verses, are frequently quoted, often *b-helmingar*.
3. Verses are quoted out of order.
4. In at least one case the prose introduction to a verse suggests the compiler had another verse in mind while writing.
5. The wording of one verse is altered so it fits better into the prose narrative.

6. There is a degree of uncertainty as to attribution. These characteristics suggest the *ÓT* compiler's source for *Reksteffa* was neither a pre-existing prosimetrum (1, 4), nor a well-known poem committed to memory and passed down to him in oral tradition (2, 3, 5, 6). Rather, they imply he worked with a written text of the whole poem in front of him, one he could re-order, subdivide, and edit at will (intriguingly, there is additional evidence for a written text of *Reksteffa*, albeit of a rather different sort, in a runic inscription on a wooden stick from Bryggen in Bergen, which quotes a kenning from st. 16).³ As we lack a complete text of the *Erfdrápa*, it is impossible to be certain whether the *ÓT* compiler also re-ordered its verses (though editors concur that at least one verse has been moved from its original place: see Bjarne Fidjestøl 1982, 110). And the citations from the *Erfdrápa* in a wide range of written sources mean there is no question but that it was a well-known work and – if it is taken to be genuine – its transmission included an oral stage. However the quotation of single *helmingar* and the paraphrases of verses in their prose introductions are as much the case for the *Erfdrápa* citations as they are of the *Reksteffa* ones. In a manuscript like Bergsbók – or AM 398 4to, containing *Guðmundar saga biskups* and Árni's *Guðmundar drápa*, or the manuscripts of *Egils saga* and *Grettis saga* in which *Arinbjarnarkviða* and *Grettisfærsla* have been added at the end – we may have a model for what such a codex could have been like. Granted, these manuscripts are mainly from the fifteenth century or later, and so significantly younger than the lost codex whose existence I am hypothesising. However if Margaret Cormack (2003) is right in seeing the model of the *opus geminatum* as decisive for the yoking of a prose and a poetic *vita* in these manuscripts, there is no reason why this form could not have been imitated in Iceland prior to the fourteenth century, as it had long been popular in Continental and Anglo-Saxon episcopal hagiography (Coates 1998).

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³ Bergen (Bryggen) rune-stick B057, dated to c. 1300. The kenning is *Ekkils ýtíblökkum*, which is l. 7 of *Reksteffa* 16 (first identified by Olafur Halldorsson; information courtesy of Runearkivet, Oslo).

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