

Kings and Kingship in Viking Northumbria

Rory McTurk
(University of Leeds)

In this paper, to be delivered in York, I should like to discuss two Viking kings of York, Ívarr (d. 873) and Rognvaldr (d. 920). Historically, these two were in all probability grandfather and grandson (Downham, 2004, 71), but in the X and Y versions of *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, dating respectively from the middle and second half of the thirteenth century (McTurk, 1991a, 54-55), they appear as brothers, and as sons of Ragnarr loðbrók. This latter, as I have argued elsewhere, is a legendary combination of two ninth-century historical figures: on the one hand Reginheri, a Viking leader who attacked Paris in 845; and, on the other, a woman, Loðbróka, who was named after a fertility goddess with whose cult she was associated, as may be deduced, I believe, from two stanzas spoken by a *trémaðr* ('wooden man') in the final chapter of the Y version of *Ragnars saga*, numbered 39 and 40 in Olsen's edition of the saga (1906-08, 174, 221-22) and thought to date from c.1100, as well as from the fact that, in the Maeshowe runic inscription now numbered 23, and dating most probably from c.1150 (Barnes, 1994, 39-40, 47-48, 178-86), Loðbrók appears to be referred to as female (McTurk, 1991a, 16-39).

In the first of the two relevant stanzas in *Ragnars saga*, the *trémaðr*, speaking in the first person, claims to have been set up near the sea (*hjá salti*) by the sons of one Loðbróka (*synir Loðbróku*) and to have been the object of a cult, the practice of which involved people's deaths (*blótinn til bana mǫnnum*), in the southern part of the Danish island of Samsø (*í Sámseyju sunnanverðri*). In the second stanza the *trémaðr* indicates that he was bidden (presumably by those who set him up) to stand (*þar báðu standa*), covered with moss, by a thorn-bush for as long as the coast endured, and states that the tears of the clouds (*skýja gráti*) now rain down upon him, and that neither flesh nor clothing (*hold né klæði*) protects him.

The main arguments for regarding Ívarr as a son of Reginheri/Ragnarr and Loðbróka may now be summarised (cf. McTurk, 1991a, 39-50). The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records the death in Devon in 878 of 'the brother of Inwære and Healfdene'. This shows clearly that Inwære (whose name corresponds to Ívarr) and Healfdene were brothers, and there are good reasons for thinking that the unnamed third brother was Hubba, who appears in the late tenth-century *Passio Sancti Eadmundi* by Abbo of Fleury as a close associate of Hinguar (= Inwære), and as his brother in the *Annals of St Neots* and in the accounts of Gaimar and Geoffrey of Wells, all from the twelfth century. There are also good reasons for doubting the accuracy of Æthelweard's late tenth-century account of the events in Devon in 878, which appears to contradict that of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* with regard to the identity of the brother who died in that year; and also for dismissing Æthelweard's information that Iuuar (= Inwære, Ívarr) died in 869, shortly after the slaying of King Edmund of East Anglia; if this information can indeed be dismissed, then Inwære/Ívarr may safely be identified with Imhar, the Viking king of Dublin, who according to the *Annals of Ulster* died in 873, *rex Nordmannorum totius Hiberniae et Britanniae*.

The Healfdene mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* seems to be identical with one Albann, who according to the *Annals of Ulster* died in Ireland at Strangford Lough in 877; and the twelfth-century Irish *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* appears to speak of this Albann, 'king of the dark heathens', as the son of Ragnall, a name which corresponds, albeit loosely, to Ragnarr. If the identification of this Ragnall with Ragnarr can be accepted, then it may be argued that Inwære/Ívarr/Imhar and Healfdene, and perhaps Hubba also, had a father named Ragnarr.

It may further be noted that Adam of Bremen, writing in c.1076, speaks of what appears to be this same Inwære/Ívarr/Imhar as *Inguar filius Lodparchi*, clearly seeing him as the son of someone with a name corresponding loosely to *loðbrók*; and that William of Jumièges, writing c.1070, refers to a certain Bier *Costae ferreae* ('Ironsides') as *Loibrocí regis filio*, as the son, that is, of a king whose name corresponds to *loðbrók* very closely. This Bier, whose name, nickname and parentage clearly link him with Björn járnsíða ('Ironsides'), who appears in *Ragnars saga* as a son of Ragnarr loðbrók, seems to have shared with that Björn a historical prototype in the Viking leader Berno, who, according to the contemporary and near-contemporary *Annales Bertiniani* and *Chronicon Fontanellense* respectively, was active on the Seine in the eight-fifties.

The Albann/Healfdene of the *Annals of Ulster* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, mentioned above, may also be identified with an Halbdeni mentioned in the *Annales Fuldenses* for 873 as the brother of the Danish king Sigifridus and as active on the European continent (in Metz) in that year. The case for the identification is strengthened by the fact that 873 is one of the years in which the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* does not indicate that Healfdene was active in England. If this identification can be established, then Sigifridus, the brother of this Halbdeni (= Healfdene = Albann), son of Ragnall/Ragnarr, may be regarded as historically a brother of Inwære/Ívarr/Imhar (= *Inguar, filius Lodparchi*), and perhaps also of Hubba, as well as of Berno, *Loibrocí regis filius*. This same Sigifridus may then reasonably be taken as the historical prototype of Sigurðr ormr-í-auga ('Snake-in-eye'), who appears in *Ragnars saga* as a son of Ragnarr loðbrók.

There is thus a case for saying that Inwære, Healfdene, Hubba, Berno and Sigifridus, all of them active in the second half of the ninth century (the first two and the fifth of them as kings, if the relevant identifications can be accepted), were brothers. Of the five, Healfdene is the only one not to appear as a son of Ragnarr loðbrók in Scandinavian tradition; the others appear to have been the historical prototypes of, respectively, his sons Ívarr, Ubbo, Björn and Sigurðr, of whom Ubbo (who appears, like the other three, as a son of Regnerus Lothbrog in Book IX of Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*) seems to be the only one who was known exclusively to East Norse tradition. It may be noted that, in the contemporary and as nearly as possible contemporary sources adduced above, only one, the twelfth-century Irish *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, provides any evidence for these brothers having had a father named Ragnarr, and that only Adam of Bremen and William of Jumièges, both from the second half of the eleventh century, provide evidence for their having been sons of someone named Loðbrók. None of these sources gives any indication of an awareness of the two names Ragnarr and Loðbrók being used in combination for the same person. The first recorded instance of the names being so used is Ari Þorgilsson's

reference to *Ívarr Ragnarssonr loðbrókar* in his *Íslendingabók*, written between 1120 and 1133 (cf. McTurk, 1991a, 1). In the verses spoken by the *trémaðr*, referred to above and dating quite possibly from before the time of Ari (1068-1148) (McTurk, 1991a, 16-27), reference is made to *synir Loðbróku*, with no further personal name added; the genitive *Loðbróku* must presuppose a weak feminine nominative form *Loðbróka*, which, since *bróka* is recorded as a poetic term for 'woman' in one of the *pulur* preserved in manuscripts of Snorri's *Edda*, I take to be a woman's name, and a variant of the goddess-name **Lopkona* ('woman with luxuriant hair'), which, as Sahlgren (1918, 28-40) has shown, may be deduced from the Swedish place-name *Locknevi* (< **Lopkonuvé*) and seems to have been a *noa*-name (that is, a name used in place of one that is tabooed) for the fertility goddess Freyja. In the Maeshowe runic inscription, also referred to above and dating from somewhat after the time of Ari (d.1148), reference is made to the howe or mound of Loðbrók (*Loðbrókar*, strong genitive singular), and, immediately afterwards, to 'her sons' (*synir hennar*), a clear indication (in my view at least, McTurk, 1991a, 9-10; see however Barnes, 1994, 184-86) that the Loðbrók in question was female.

In writing earlier on this topic (McTurk, 1976, 101-03, 111-17; 1991a, 47-49) I have, I now suspect, exaggerated the difficulties in the way of identifying Reginheri, the leader of the Viking attack on Paris in 845, as the father of the brothers Halbdeni and Sigifridus. These difficulties have to do with the question of whether or not Reginheri was a member of the family of the Danish king Godofridus I (d. 810), all members of which, with the exception of one boy, Horicus II, appear to have been wiped out in a battle in 854, to judge from the account given in the *Annales Fuldenses* for that year. If this is to be believed, and if Reginheri, who died in all probability in 845, was indeed a member of that family, then Halbdeni and Sigifridus and any brothers they may have had cannot have been his sons, since the only surviving members of the family after 854 would have been Horicus II and his progeny. I would now acknowledge, however, more emphatically than I did in 1976 (p. 103), the possibility that the Fulda annalist has here presented the *succeeding* survivor of this royal family as its *sole* survivor, and that other members of the family may in fact have survived. At the same time I would emphasise that in seeking, as I am now doing, to establish the parentage of the five brothers under discussion, it is by no means essential to regard Reginheri as having been a member of the house of Godofridus I.

On the admittedly bold assumption that we are dealing here with full brothers rather than half-brothers, I would suggest that the father of Inwære, Healfdene, Hubba, Berno and Sigifridus was Reginheri, the leader of the Viking attack on Paris in 845, and that their mother was Loðbróka, a woman named after and associated with the cult of a fertility goddess. In other words, Reginheri and Loðbróka were historically husband and wife, and the parents of these five brothers (McTurk, 1991b, 351). Through confusion of the proper noun *Loðbróka* with the common noun *loðbrók*, which it seems could be applied just as easily to a man as to a woman (cf. *Haukr hábrók*, *Hallgerðr langbrók*), the common noun *loðbrók* came to be applied as a nickname to Reginheri (remembered as Ragnarr), and the historical Loðbróka was largely forgotten, though a memory of her may lie behind the development, in the X and Y versions of *Ragnars saga*, of the figure of Áslaug, presented there as Ragnarr's

second wife and the mother of his sons Ívarr, Björn, Hvítserkr, Rognvaldr, and Sigurðr.

Of the five last-named sons, the first two and the fifth have been accounted for above. The third of them, Hvítserkr, has, as far as I know, no historical prototype, but the fourth, Rognvaldr, seems to have had as such a prototype the Viking king of York, Rægnald (d. 920), who, as shown most recently by Downham (2004, 71), was in all likelihood a grandson of Ívarr (d. 873), as indicated above. Contemporary sources leave some doubt as to the precise location (and even date) of the death of this Rægnald (Smyth, 1975, 112-13). The anonymous poem *Krákumál*, dating most probably from the twelfth century, placed in the mouth of Loðbrók as he dies in King Ella's snake-pit, and clearly presupposing acceptance of the equation of Ragnarr with Loðbrók, records in st. 15 the death of one Rognvaldr in the Hebrides, without specifying that he was the speaker's son. The X and Y versions of *Ragnars saga*, on the other hand, state that Rognvaldr, who at this stage of the saga's account was the youngest of Ragnarr's sons by Áslaug (since Sigurðr *ormr-i-auga* had not yet been born) died at Hvítabær. As referred to in the saga, this Hvítabær is almost certainly the inland town of Vitaby, near Kivik in Skåne. It is possible, however, that the saga's account preserves an imperfectly remembered tradition of the Northumbrian harbour town of Whitby in connection with Rægnald. I have argued elsewhere (McTurk, 1991a, 98-114) that *Krákumál* and *Ragnars saga* preserve respectively western and eastern branches of a tradition of Rægnald of York, locating his death in different places.

Returning now to the generation of Inwære and his brothers, I should like to discuss briefly the nicknames of Ívarr, Björn and Sigurðr as preserved in Scandinavian tradition (cf. McTurk, 1991a, 40-41). Björn's nickname, *járnsíða* ('Ironside'), clearly reflects that of Bier, *Costae ferreae*, as recorded by William of Jumièges, and there seems little doubt that it refers to a mail-shirt, such as a Viking might be expected to have worn. Ívarr's nickname, *beinlauss* ('Boneless') and that of Sigurðr, *ormr-i-auga* ('Snake-in-eye'), are, by contrast, relatively problematic. To deal with Ívarr's nickname first, one theory is that it reflects a misunderstanding of the Latin adjective *exosus* 'cruel' as *exos* 'boneless', an explanation that would accord well with Adam of Bremen's description of Inguar as *crudelissimus* (J. de Vries, 1928, 259-60). Another theory, recently revived by Nabil Shaban in a television programme entitled 'The strangest Viking' and shown on Channel 4 on 12 June, 2003, is that the nickname refers to the medical condition known as *osteogenesis imperfecta*, or brittle-bone disease (Seedorff, 1949).

A more recent suggestion (McTurk, 1991a, 40-41; 1991b, 357-58) is that the nickname *beinlauss* ('Boneless') reflects a *noa*-name for the wind, and that it might imply that Ívarr was a skilful navigator; there is evidence in Norwegian folk tradition for the word *beinlaus* (and sometimes the expression *Ivar beinlaus*) being used by fishermen as a *noa*-term for the wind. The so-called *Ragnarssona þáttur*, preserved in *Hauksbók* of the early fourteenth century and apparently reflecting an older version of *Ragnars saga* than either X or Y, indicates that the nickname had to do with its bearer's sexual impotence. The evidence of the Old English riddle to which the answer is 'dough', preserved in the Exeter Book, most probably from the late tenth century, and to which I have recently drawn attention in this context (McTurk, 1999a, 202-04),

suggests, however, that the expression 'boneless' could be used just as easily in a context of sexual potency as in one of impotence, as I also pointed out in the discussion following my paper at the Tenth International Saga Conference in Trondheim in 1997. Of the various suggestions summarised here, those relating to the wind and to sexual impotence and/or potency are the ones that seem to me most convincing.

As for the nickname of Sigurðr, *ormr-i-auga* ('Snake-in-eye'), it has been suggested that this refers to the eye condition known as *nystagmus* (Reichborn-Kjennerud, 1923, 26). My own suggestion (McTurk, 1991b, 358-59) is that the *auga* element in the nickname should be understood in the sense of 'narrow opening' (as in *vindauga* 'window'), and that the nickname alludes to the myth of Óðinn crawling in the form of a serpent (*ormr*) through the narrow opening (*auga*) bored for him by Baugi in the mountain Hnifbjörg (as told in the *Skáldskaparmál* section of Snorri's *Edda*), so that he could gain access to the giantess Gunnlōð and to the poetic mead, a myth which Svava Jakobsdóttir (1988) has linked convincingly to kingship inauguration rituals, in which the king was ritually married to the land in order to bring fertility.

According to Wormald (1982, 147), 'The Viking Age saw Scandinavian kingship grow from *Volkskönigtum* [tribal kingship] to *Heerkönigtum* [military kingship], as that of other Germanic peoples had earlier, and this growth was both cause and effect of Viking activity.' The transition from the former kind of kingship to the latter seems to be reflected in the names and activities of the family of Ragnarr and Loðbróka, to judge from what we know of their activities and from what we can deduce from some of their names. Although Reginheri/Ragnarr is nowhere described as a king in contemporary or near-contemporary sources, his attack on Paris in 845 tends to link him with the relatively new type of kingship, *Heerkönigtum*, whether or not he was a member of the family of Godofridus I; there is clear contemporary and near-contemporary evidence that he was closely connected to the court of Horicus I, who, as one of the sons of this Godofridus, was himself a member of that family (McTurk, 1976, 98-117). Loðbróka, whose name, as explained above, suggests associations with a fertility cult, seems on the other hand to have had links with the older type of kingship, *Volkskönigtum*, and to been involved in some way with the cult of the fertility goddess after whom she appears to have been named; her association with a *trémaðr* may indeed suggest that she participated in a ritual marriage in which a wooden effigy of the fertility god Freyr took the place of a human bridegroom. Evidence for rituals of this kind, which are likely to have been practised in the relatively settled, agriculturally-based communities of pre-Viking Scandinavia, is found in *Gunnars þátr helmings*, preserved in *Flateyjarbók* of the late fourteenth century (Orton, 2005, 304; cf. McTurk, 1991a, 27-29).

The nickname *ormr-i-auga*, as explained above, also seems to suggest connections with rituals of this kind, and hence with *Volkskönigtum* rather than with *Heerkönigtum*. Since the wind can help as well as hinder the growth of the soil, the nickname *beinlauss*, if understood as a *noa*-term for the wind, may be seen as having associations of fertility, as may, of course, its possible connotations of sexual potency, mentioned above. Its connections would then be more with *Volkskönigtum* than with *Heerkönigtum*. If, on the other hand, the 'wind' meaning is taken to be associated with

the navigation of a ship, as also suggested above, and hence with Viking activity, then the meaning of the nickname arguably links it more with *Heerkönigtum* than with *Völskönigtum*. The nickname *járnsíða*, if understood, as it surely must be, as referring to armour, of course has associations predominantly, if not exclusively, with *Heerkönigtum*, and what little is known for certain of the life (and death) of Rægnald of York tends to associate him with this latter type of kingship also.

Against this background, it may be argued that the basic theme of the two stanzas spoken by the *trémaðr*, and referred to above, is the transition from *Völskönigtum* to *Heerkönigtum*, which Wormald has shown to be characteristic of Scandinavia in the Viking Age. The *trémaðr* is lamenting the fact that he is no longer used by the sons of Loðbróka in rituals associated with 'good kings and fertility' (as opposed to 'bad kings and famine', see Wormald, 1982, 145), such as their mother might have presided over or participated in, and such as are likely to have occurred regularly in many parts of Scandinavia before the Viking Age. The reason for their neglect of the *trémaðr* is that the sons of Loðbróka have now developed a preference – perhaps under their father's influence, if Reginheri was indeed their father – for the relatively new, military type of kingship that has developed with the Viking expansion. The accounts of Ragnarr loðbrók and his sons in Scandinavian tradition, late and legendary though they are, thus have a value for the historian in reflecting a transition in the Viking Age from one kind of kingship to another.

Given the York context of this paper, I cannot resist rehearsing briefly, in conclusion, an idea that I have published elsewhere, both in Icelandic and in English, but in relatively inaccessible places (McTurk, 1994; 1999b, 126-31). This relates to what is presented in medieval Scandinavian literary sources as a form of torture, called the blood-eagle (*blóðørn*), on which Roberta Frank has published extensively, most notably in 1984. Frank argues convincingly that the whole idea of blood-eagling, which in the literary sources involves, in its most dramatic form, cutting a victim's back and pulling out his lungs in such a way as to make them resemble an eagle's wings, has derived from a misunderstanding of a sentence in Sigvatr Þórðarson's poem *Knútsdrápa* (c.1038): *Ok Ellu bak/ at lét, hinn's sat/ Ívarr, ara, Jörvík, skorit*. The meaning here, as Frank understands it, is: 'And Ívarr, the one who dwelt at York, had Ella's back cut with an eagle.' Taking the word *ara* 'with an eagle' as an instrumental dative form (of *ari*, m.), Frank argues that the eagle in question is a bird of prey, such as is typically referred to in Old Norse and Old English battle-poetry as feeding off the bodies of the slain. It seems to me that if the word *ara*, as used here, is to be understood in this way, it is questionable to take the form *ara* as an instrumental dative; it would surely be preferable to take it as a dative of the indirect object ('for an eagle'), if the word were to be so understood. Taking it as an instrumental dative would imply that Ívarr had control over the eagle in question, in the manner of a falconer, which would surely be at variance with the ways in which eagles are portrayed as birds of battle in Old Norse-Icelandic poetry: for all the conventional character that the poetry imparts to them, these eagles must surely have been regarded as untameable, by human beings at least, and as acting beyond the wishes and instructions of men. They are closely related to Óðinn, the god of the slain, and are semi-supernatural beings that can hardly be called upon to cut one's enemies' backs whenever one feels like it. If the word is to be understood as referring to the eagle as a

bird of battle, its form needs, I repeat, to be taken as reflecting a dative of the indirect object in such a way as to give the meaning: 'And Ívarr [...] had Ella's back cut for an eagle', which is, I admit, a possible interpretation of the passage.

Here it may be noted, however, that another, cognate word for eagle in Old Norse, *ørn*, could be used in poetry to mean 'sword'. This is shown by its inclusion in a *þula*, or poetic list, entitled *Sverða heiti* and preserved in manuscripts of Snorri's *Edda* (see McTurk, 1994, 541; 1999b, 129-30). Of the two words for 'eagle', *ari* and *ørn*, the former seems to have been the rarer and more poetic one; the two words are however, etymologically related, as already indicated, and, in signifying the concept 'eagle', at least, have basically the same meaning. In view of this, and of the fact that *ørn*, according to the *þula*, could mean 'sword' in poetry, it seems reasonable to suppose that *ari* could as well, provided, of course, that this meaning fitted the context. With this in mind, I suggest the following translation of the *Knútsdrápa* passage, taking the form *ara*, like Frank, as an instrumental dative: 'And Ívarr, the one who dwelt at York, had Ella's back cut with a sword.' In other words: Ívarr put Ella to flight. Once eagles of different kinds, whether blood-eagles or battle-eagles, are forgotten, and the idea of a sword – sanctioned, I believe, by the *þula* to which I have referred – is put in its place, interpretation of the *Knútsdrápa* passage, from which the complicated idea of the blood-eagle seems to have arisen, becomes relatively simple and straightforward.

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