Vindla myrôir, Vindum hattr. Viking raids on the territory of Slavs in the light of skaldic poetry

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The problem of contacts between Scandinavians and their neighbours on the southern coast of the Baltic Sea absorbs many scholars, mainly historians and archaeologists, both in Poland and abroad (K. Śląski 1952, 30-45; G. Labuda, 1962, 300-323; L. Leciejewicz 1981, 157-168; B. Hårdh, B. Wyszmierska Werbart 1992; W. Łosiński 1997, 73-86; W. Duczko 2000, 23-42; L. P. Słupecki 2000, 49-59). It also involves the case of Viking raids on the Baltic coast inhabited by Slavs. Unlike the evidence for Western Europe (P. H. Sawyer 1997), Russia and Byzantium (H. R. Davidson 1976; Th. Noonan 1997, 134-155; W. Duczko 2004), our knowledge about Scandinavian attacks is comparatively small. This is due primarily to the lack of information in contemporary written sources. Godfred’s action against Reric in year 808 (Annales Fuldenses 808, 354), the expedition by Anund, a candidate for the Swedish throne, against some Slavic ‘town’ on the Baltic coast about year 850 (Rimbert c. 19, 17), and Magnús inn góði’s raid against Wolin in 1043 (Arnór Pórdarson, Magnúsdrápa, 306-311) are the only events of this type mentioned by contemporary sources.

This situation has been used by some scholars to promote a thesis about the southern Baltic shore which is unattractive for Scandinavians, removing the ‘Viking question’ from any discussion of the medieval history of this Slavic territory (H. Łowmiański 1957, 14-17; J. Żak 1967, 47). Nowadays, this tendency has been replaced by more and more opinions suggesting that different Scandinavian groups had a quite essential influence on the economic, cultural and political development of Slavic communities in the ninth to eleventh centuries (J. Callmer 1988, 654-674; H. Zoll-Adamikowa 1991, 53-62; M. Kara 1992, 33-47; W. Łosiński 1997, 73-86; P. Wielowiejski 2000, 84-85). Archaeology has had a particularly important role both in introducing new finds (W. Chudziak 2003, 117-126; B. Stanisławski 2003, 3-5) and interpreting those that are well known (M. Kara 1991, 99-120; 1998, 505-524; 2001, 113-140).

So far, skaldic poetry has not been widely used for the analysis of Viking raids on the territory of the Slavs. The first scholar to make serious use of skaldic stanzas was Leon Koczy (1934), G. Labuda (1964) and O. Pritsak (1981) have followed his example, but without any deeper consideration. But there are some poems (or particular stanzas) which can provide additional data that may widen our knowledge about this issue. I am thinking particularly about the epithets Vindla myrôir (murderer of Wends) and Vindum hattr (danger to the Wends), which are used by skalds in poems composed for several Scandinavian rulers.

The main aim of this analysis is to answer several basic questions:
- Why did skalds use such epithets in their works?
- Are these expressions connected with particular events and, if so, can we pinpoint what they are?
- Are we dealing only with some military encounters between Slavs and Scandinavians, or with longer-term activity?
Among the poems whose authors used these epithets one should mention an anonymous niddigt composed against Haraldr Bluetooth, king of Denmark:

bás sparn a mó marnar
morðkunnr Haraldr sunnan,
varð þa Vinða myrðir
vax eitt, i ham faxa,

en bergsalar Birgir
bándum rækr i landi
þat sá slíd i slúdi
órikr fyrirt líki.

When valiant Harald travelled south from the sea riding a mare, then the murderer of the Wends became almost like wax; although he was in a stallion’s form, the now powerless Birgir was driven from the country by peasants like a mare; folk saw this (Skjald. B1, 166).

This stanza is supposed to have been composed about 980 (Skjald. B1, 166; O. Pritsak 1981, 263), but its content seems to refer to the time of Sveinn tjúguskeggi’s rebellion against Harald in 986. I want to concentrate on the epithet used here by the poet - Vinða myrðir. Considering the fact that we know only one strophe of this niddigt, it is difficult to draw helpful conclusions. To judge from other similar examples, it seems unlikely that the skald was thinking of any one particular event when he referred to Harald in this way. He rather did it because of the general opinion of Harald as an enemy of the Slavs, which the king of Denmark probably deserved because of his hostile deeds towards the Slavs. The fact that the author of the niddigt felt no need to explain the epithet suggests that skalds felt either that it was not suitable to the general idea of the poem or that it was not worth mentioning.

Calling Harald Bluetooth Murderer of the Wends is at least striking. This king of Denmark is well known as an ally especially of Polabian Slavs (G. Labuda 1960, 211). As a proof scholars mention his family ties with the Obodritian dynasty (Ch. Lübke 2000, 70; 2001, 31) and the fact that they had a common enemy – the Ottonian empire (G. Müller 1973, 123-125; E. Hoffmann 1984, 105-132). Moreover, in common opinion, Harald, thanks to these friendly relations, was able to find asylum in Wolin after being exiled from Denmark (G. Labuda 1954, 288-289; J. Žak 1967, 45-46; S. Rosik 2000, 209). All these facts stand in opposition to the epithet used by the skald, which, it is worth repeating, seems to suggest some solid and well understood tendency in Harald’s policy towards Slavs.

Perhaps this niddigt should be considered a good reason for revising our view of Harald’s relations with Slavs? Danish policy towards the Slavs was probably more complex, and alongside temporary alignments, there were probably also times of conflict. Presumably, the expression Vinða myrðir symbolized Danish raids on the Slavic shores of the Baltic, though it is impossible to say more about the chronology and targets of this activity.

Harald Bluetooth was not the only ruler to be described as Vinða myrðir. The same epithet is used by Einarr Helgason in Vellekla, where he commemorates Hákon Hlaðajari inn ríki:

Varð fyr Vinða myrði,
viðflægt, en gramr, síðan
gerðisk mest at morði
mannfall, við styr annan,

hlym-Narfi bað hverfa
hlifar flagða, ok lagði
Jalks við Šndurt-fylki
Sndur-v斯特, at landi.

The ruler met the Murderer of Wends in the next strife, and later many heroes fell in slaughter; the destroyer of shields ordered warships to be
left on the shore and prepared his warriors to fight (Vellekla 24, Skjald. B1, 121).

Vellekla (‘The Lack of Gold’) is the only one of Einarr’s works that survives in full (E. O. G. Turville-Petre 1976, 59-60). Scholars agree that it was composed ca. 986 (Skjald. B1, 121; O. Pritsak 1981, 265). The main subject of the poem is the struggles
led by jarl Hákon to gain power in Norway after the death of Harald gráfeldr. Most of it
concerns the fights between the jarl and Harald’s brothers, especially Ragnfróðr, who hoped to regain their lost power. Stanza 24, quoted above, presents a decisive
moment, when Hákon finally managed to defeat Ragnfróðr and drive him out of
Norway. According to Heimskríningla, the final battle took place at Thinganes, on the
border between Sogn and Hóðaland (Heimskríningla, 137-138). Further stanzas of the
poem refer to the war between Harald Bluetooth and Otto II in 974, in which Hákon
jarl supported Haraldr (Vellekla 26-32, Skjald. B1, 121-123). This war ended with the
death of the Scandinavian rulers and the splitting up of their alliance.

Although Einarr Helgason called the hero of his poem Vinða myrðir, it is hard
to find the circumstances that would justify the use of this epithet. A Slavic element
appears in this poem only when the skald refers to that battle between emperor Otto II
and the Danish-Norwegian army at the Danevirke. According toEinarr, there were
Saxon, Frisian and Slavic troops among the imperial army (Vellekla 28, Skjald. B1,
122). This would make it possible for Hákon jarl to have fought directly against Slavs
and for Einarr to call him Vinða myrðir, but this view seems unconvincing. First, the
expression Murderer of the Wends suggests that the jarl’s conflict with the Slavs was
victorious, whereas in fact it was the emperor who won the battle (K. Uhlrlitz, M.
Uhlrlitz 1902, 55). More importantly, Einarr uses the epithet Vinða myrðir in a
completely different context. If he had wanted to underline the connection of this
phrase with the battle at the Danevirke, he would certainly have called Hákon Vinða
myrðir when he was describing the jarl fighting against the emperor.

We must conclude that in the case of Vellekla, the epithet does not refer to any
particular encounters of Hákon’s against the Slavs. The audience of the poem probably
knew all about the hostile relations between the jarl and the Slavs and did not find the
expression surprising, since there is no further explanation of its use in the poem. But
there is another poem which refers to the jarl’s struggles with Slavs, namely Tindr
Hallkeless’s Hákonardrápa, which describes Hákon’s fight against the Danes at
Hjørungavåg in about 985. This battle ended with the jarl’s victory, and in one of his
stanzas (Hákonardrápa 4, Skjald. B1, 136) Tindr mentions Slavic troops supporting
the Danes. On the other hand, Einarr’s poem is probably earlier than Tindr’s, so it
seems unlikely that the reference to Hákon as Murderer of the Wends in Vellekla has
been influenced by Tindr’s poem (though it might be derived from memories of the
battle itself, in which Einarr took part). Nevertheless, I think that there is another
explanation why Einarr used this epithet in his poem.

Vellekla suggests that the conflict between jarl Hákon and Ragnfróðr was very
severe and that Hákon’s victory was far from being a foregone conclusion. Moreover,
by saying: allr Nórøgr glumði, þás Heðins veggiar Ullar för u saman eggðings (‘the
whole of Norway resounded, when the Ulir’s of walls of Heðinn gathered for the
fight’) (Vellekla 23, Skjald. B1, 121) Einarr suggests that this conflict was carefully
observed throughout the country. The same atmosphere is to be found in
Heimskringla, where Snorri, basing his account on Vellekla and Glúmr Geirason’s Gráfeldardrápa, adds that during the war with Hákon, Ragnfrøðr managed to gain temporary control over HSrøaland, Sogn and Røgaland (Heimskringla, 137). Even if Snorri’s account is more or less his own invention, one can assume that there were several struggles between these two opponents which were severe, cruel and long-lasting. The epithet Víða mýrőr suits this atmosphere very well. Einarr uses it in Vellekla not to remind his listeners about any particular fight between the jarl and the Slavs, but to underline Hákon’s strength, skill and courage in military affairs. Einarr is not alone in such a practice. He clearly felt that the best way of emphasizing Hákon’s attitude to war with Ragnfrøðr and letting listeners feel the atmosphere of those events was to call the jarl Murderer of the Wends. One must assume that Hákon was revealing the same qualities as he did during the attacks on the Slavic shores of the Baltic. The first raids on Slavic territory in which Hákon took part probably happened in the 960’s. We know from Glúmr Geirason’s Gráfeldardrápa that Harald gráfeldr led such raids against the eastern and southern shores of Baltic, and bearing in mind the early good relations between Hákon and the sons of Eirik blóðøx, it seems likely that the jarl of Hlaðir was a major participant in these campaigns.

King Óláfr Tryggvason of Norway is also called Víða mýrőr once. Thanks to his fame as a great warrior and generous ruler, Óláfr was surrounded by many skalds. Hallfreðr Ottarsson was the king’s favourite poet and the one best known to us. As Hallfreðr admits in one of his works, Óláfr was responsible for his conversion (Óláfsdrápa erfidrápa 26, Skjald. B1, 156; B. Einarsson 1981, 218). Hallfreðr composed two poems in honour of Óláfr: one drápa which refers to the King’s deeds before he gained power in Norway, and a second, the erfidrápa, which concentrates on the circumstances of his death in battle in Øresund. I would like to focus on the latter poem, composed probably in 1001, a year after Óláfr’s death (J. Morawiec 2004, 17-31). In stanza 7 we read:

Varð of Vinða mýrði
vigskys - en þat lysisk -
ramr und randar himni
rymr - knottu spjor glymja -,
There emerged strong turmoil under the shield near the Murderer of the Wends, spears were resounding as I describe; the steersman, hardy against wolves, with his strong shield withstood many battles with a host of men (Óláfsdrápa erfidrápa 7, Skjald. B1, 151-152).

Interestingly, Hallfreðr is not the only poet who called Óláfr Tryggvason Vinða mýrðr. Halldór Ókrísmi, who had taken part in the battle in Øresund among the troops of Eirik Hlaðjarl, composed a poem called Eiriksflókr some time after the battle, maybe around 1010 (Skjald. B1, 193; O. Pritsak 1981, 270-271; J. Morawiec 2004, 22) in which he refers to Eirikr’s participation at Øresund:

Hét á heiptar nýta
hungrreið - með Áleifi
aptr stokk þjóð of þóptur -
þenguill sina drengi,
þás hafvita hSfðu
hallendr of gram snjallan
- varð fyr Vinða mýrði
vápiridj - lokit skeiðum.
The well-disposed prince gave orders to his people skilled in war—warriors jumped with Óláfr back above the steerman’s bench; then warriors surrounded the brave king with ships, there was a fight near the Murderer of the Wends (Eyríksflokkr 6, Skjald. B1, 194).

Unlike the previous examples, the reason why Óláfr Tryggvason is called Vínda myrðr seems in this case to be quite obvious. Both skalds describe him in this way with reference to the battle in Øresund. Since some Slavs fought against Óláfr in this battle (G. Labuda 1964, 122; J. Morawiec 2004, 28), one could suppose that this very encounter was reason enough for Hallfreðr and Halldórr to use such an epithet (G. Labuda 1999, 237).

But this conclusion seems rather unsatisfactory. Óláfr Tryggvason’s hostile relations with the territory of the Slavs certainly cannot be limited to one battle in the year 1000, as we can see from Hallfreðr’s Óláfsdrápa, which was probably composed at the beginning of Óláfr’s reign (Skjald. B1, 148) and refers mainly to his deeds before the year 995. In stanza 4, recalling Óláfr’s victories over Jamts, Gotlanders and the people of Scania, Hallfreðr adds ok Vínda vanðisk hann végrimr á þat snimma (‘and he soon made the Wends get used to that’) (Óláfsdrápa 4, Skjald. B1, 149). This rather brief reference by Hallfreðr allowed later saga-authors to create a legend about Óláfr’s special contacts with the territory of the Slavs, his stay in Wolin and marriage with Geira, daughter of Burizlafra, the mighty king of the Slavs (Heimskringla, 142-143; Fagrskinna, 56; Odd Snorrason, 14-15; there is no space here to dwell on this story, but see Labuda (1954, 1964), who demonstrates that most saga narratives on this subject are probably derived from insecure and obscure references in skaldic poetry.

This does not mean that Óláfr Tryggvason had no contacts with Slavs. The stanza of Hallfreðr’s Óláfsdrápa mentioned above gives us some support, and the poet defines the character of these relations quite clearly. According to him, Óláfr attacked the Slavic shores of the Baltic before he gained power in Norway, and it seems from the poem that it was a rather long-lasting activity if the Slavs soon got used to his threat. Exactly where Óláfr directed his raids is still an open question, but the Oder estuary seems a sensible option. Similarly, the chronology must remain speculative, since we know few dates in Óláfr Tryggvason’s life for certain (J. Morawiec, forthcoming). One can only assume that these raids took place in the 980’s, according to Óláfsdrápa, just before Óláfr’s appearance in England.

In my opinion it was Óláfr’s military activity undertaken before he became king of Norway, not the battle in Øresund, which was the reason for calling him Vínda myrðr. The oblique reference in Óláfsdrápa suggests that Óláfr Tryggvason had organized other raids on the territory of the Slavs, which contributed to his fame and prestige as a warrior, and the determination and bravery shown during these actions fully justified him being called Murderer of the Wends.

Óláfr Haraldsson was another king of Norway who was distinguished as an enemy of Slavs by skalds. Sigvatr Þórðarson was one of the best known poets connected with his court; shortly after his introduction to the court he became not only Óláfr’s favourite skald but also his adviser and diplomat (O. Prisak 1981, 273; E. O. G. Turville-Petre 1976, 77; W. Duczko 2002, 19). Sigvatr composed several poems in honour of Óláfr Haraldsson. I would like to pay special attention to Vikingavisur which refers to the King’s victories in Viking expeditions. Although its date is
uncertain, it is probably one of Sigvatr’s earliest works (Skjald. B1, 213; O. Pritsak 1981, 273; A. Campbell 1971, 10):

Veitk, at viga mætr
Vinðum háttren ättta
- styrtk gekk våstór – at virki
- verðungar – styrt gerði;

sinn m$’ttu bæ banna
borg Kantara – sorgar
mart fekst – prúðum – Portum
portgreifar Áleif. 

I know that warrior, danger to the Wends, carried on his eighth fight near
the castle; the king broke through with great force; the defenders of the
castle did not manage to defend their town, Canterbury; great sorrow
befell the proud inhabitants of Partar (Vikingavisur 8, Skjald. B1, 215).

Once again, the epithet connected with hostile relations with Slavs, Vinðum hátt, is
used by the skald in a context which does not refer to any inhabitants of the southern
shores of the Baltic. This stanza describes a Viking raid on Canterbury in which Óláfr
Haraldsson took part. It can be identified with events described by The Anglo-Saxon
Chronicle in 1011, when Canterbury was besieged by a Viking army led by Borkell
háfi (ASC 1011; 91; O. Moberg 1941, 36,40; A. Campbell 1971, 9-10; S. Keynes
1994, 54-57).

There is now no doubt that Óláfr Haraldsson participated in Borkell’s army. In
August 1009 his troops had landed at Sandwich, crossed Kent and unsuccessfully
attacked London. The next year his army had moved to East Anglia and won the
battle at Hringmere with earl Ulfkell. Then Borkell’s army moved to Canterbury and
besieged it. The town was finally captured and plundered. The Vikings kidnapped
Archbishop Ælifheah, who was soon killed. Only then did Æthelred II decide to pay the
Vikings Danegeld (forty-eight thousands pounds of silver) (ASC 1009-1012, 89-92).

Sigvatr Pórðarson’s Vikingavisur seem to confirm that Óláfr Haraldsson took
part in the siege of Canterbury. The poem describes the attack on London
(Vikingavisur 6, Skjald. B1, 214), the battle at Hringmere (Vikingavisur 7, Skjald. B1,
214) and the action against Canterbury. The important thing is that Óláfr’s deeds in
England made Sigvatr call him danger to the Wends, although it is impossible to find
any reference in this poem to the king’s hostile relations with Slavs. Some time ago. G.
Labuda suggested that there may have been some Slavs among the defenders of
Canterbury (1964, 135) but this opinion is unconvincing. That is why one should
consider two questions. First, why did the scald use this epithet when it does not
reflect any contacts with Slavs? Second, is there any chance of identifying when such
hostile relations between Óláfr and the Slavs could have happened?

Considering the first question, it is worth focusing once more on the context in
which Sigvatr calls Óláfr Vinðum hátt: the activity of Borkell’s army in England,
culminating in the attack on Canterbury and the dramatic kidnapping and killing of
Archbishop Ælifheah. These events showed the great determination of the invaders to
gain booty, which is confirmed by the fact that they gave up their activity when the
English king decided to pay them Danegeld. It is probable that the skald wanted to let
his listeners feel the full atmosphere of these dramatic and cruel fights. This
atmosphere was symbolised by a very spectacular deed - kidnapping and killing the
most important clergyman in the country. In this case, the epithet Vinðum hátt is used
by Sigvatr to show Óláfr’s determination, courage and bravery in battle. The aim was
not to remind listeners of the King’s hostility towards Slavs, but to give a vivid reconstruction of Öláfr’s attitude to the fighting at Canterbury in September 1011.

Öláfr Haraldsson’s military activity in England from 1009 to 1012 certainly gave Sigvatr good reason to call him Engla stríði (‘enemy of the English’) in erfdrápa Öláfa helga (Skjald. B1, 243), even though Öláfr supported Æthelred II on his return to England in 1014 after the death of Sveinn tjúguskegg (see Ottar Svartri’s Hofudlaun (Skjald. B1, 269; A .Campbell 1971, 11-12).

Considering the second question it is worth mentioning that there is no reason to challenge the poet’s words when he calls Öláfr danger to the Wends. Again, one can assume that listeners to Sigvatr’s poem knew exactly in what context the King had been hostile towards Slavs. One can ask if other sources can say something more precise about the chronology of military relations between Öláfr and the Slavs. We can find some support in Ottar Svartri’s Hofudlaun. In stanza 4 the skald says to the king: ottuð skreyttum flaustum með orum land af landi austr i salt (‘you led the gilded ships from land to land on the Baltic’) (Skjald. B1, 268). Ottar uses this phrase in a description of Öláfr’s activity in the Baltic when he was attacking Denmark, Sweden and the territory of the Balts (Hofudlaun 3, 5-6, Skjald. B1, 268-269). According to him, these events had happened before Öláfr came to England, i.e. before 1009 (O. Moberg 1941, 86; A .Campbell 1971, 9). This agrees with Sigvatr Dóðarson’s Vikingavísur, and it is to this period that one should date Öláfr’s hostile contacts with the inhabitants of the southern shores of the Baltic, and the time when he earned the title of Vindum háttr. It is of course difficult to be precise about when and where Öláfr undertook his raids on the territory of Slavs. They were obviously remembered as examples of his courage, bravery and advanced war skills if the skald did not hesitate to call his ruler Vindum háttr when he wanted to describe his attributes.

I would now like to suggest answers to my opening questions:

1. The epithets Vindó myrói and Vindum háttr in the stanzas discussed above are used to describe the war skills of particular rulers in a suitable manner. Poets used them to underline their bravery, determination and scorn of death, i.e. all those qualities which every ruler and chieftain should possess. Moreover, these expressions were used by skalds to refer to crucial moments in their heroes’ lives. These moments were not connected with Slavs at all, and even the fact that Slavic troops took part in the battle in Øresund does not change this general impression. Thus one can assume that the epithets Vindó myrói and Vindum háttr did not remind audiences of a hero’s hostility towards Slavs, but served as elegant synonyms for a warlike and victorious ruler and chieftain.

2. The epithets Vindó myrói and Vindum háttr probably arose out of hostile relations between Scandinavians and Slavs, otherwise the rulers mentioned above would not have been referred to by poets in this way. The available sources do not allow us to be more precise about those relations and their character. Hákon Hlaðsjarl inn riki may have participated in Harald gráfeldi’s raids in the Baltic in early 960’s. Öláfr Tryggvason was known as a Vindó myrói thanks to raids he had undertaken in the late 980’s, just before he came to England. The same explanation applies to Öláfr Haraldsson, who deserved the title Vindum háttr because he had raided Slavic shores shortly before 1009.
3. The stanzas presented above refer to different persons between the mid-tenth century and the early eleventh, but this does not mean that there were no hostile encounters between Scandinavians and Slavs before or after this period. But the fact that the titles are attributed to different rulers supports the view that these examples of hostility were not accidental. According to Hallfreðr Ottarsson, Óláfr Tryggvason made the Slavs get used to the need to be aware of his danger. This could hardly have been achieved without a larger number of raids. The lack of any explanation of these poetic expressions suggests a common knowledge about hostile relations with Slavs which could only have been the effect of frequent military activities on the southern shores of the Baltic, which the remaining fragments of skaldic poetry suggest were raids directed at gaining plunder, fame and reputation. As the examples of Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson demonstrate, these were the attributes needed to gain power. The expressions Vinða myrðir and Vinðum háttir seem to suggest that we are dealing with activities that were victorious and had long-lasting effects.

4. The available sources do not allow us to be more precise about the chronology and particular aims of these raids. The fact that later sagas connect Haraldr Bluetooth and Óláfr Tryggvason with the Oder estuary can be treated as some suggestion. Bearing in mind our knowledge about Viking activities of this type from other territories, one may assume that they concentrated on major ports, of which there were many along the Baltic coast, since this would enable these rulers to get the resources they needed in their political affairs. The examples of the Danish King Godfred, who burned and destroyed Reric of the Obodrites in 808, and Magnus the Good of Norway, who attacked Wolin in 1043, seem to support such a view.

Abbreviations:

Skjald. - F. Jónsson, Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning, B1 rettet tekst, København og Kristania 1912.

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