

**Helpful Danes and Pagan Irishmen:
Saga Fantasies of the Viking Age in the British Isles**

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As we know, the medieval Icelandic sagas are not a reliable guide to the events of the Viking Age in the British Isles. Not only were they composed anywhere from 300 to 500 years after those events, a span of time that makes their accounts unlikely to be accurate in every detail, but their chronology is often incorrect (as when *Orkneyinga saga* dates the Battle of Clontarf nine years too early) and their depictions of ninth- and tenth-century practices anachronistically tend to reflect those of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (as in the description of feudalism in England that *Egils saga* attributes to Alfred the Great). Furthermore, the sagas were never intended to inform modern readers about the Vikings; they were written for contemporary purposes such as moral or ethical instruction, entertainment, political propaganda, exalting a patron's ancestors, and justifying claims to land or power. Given these major obstacles to historical reliability, which are presented by even the most historically oriented texts (e.g., *Landnámabók*, *Heimskringla*, and *Orkneyinga saga*), it is not surprising that the accounts of King Ælla of Northumbria or King Edgar of Wessex that we find in the highly fictional *fornaldarsögur* are largely ignored. However, these stories are worth looking at from the perspective of literary history. Saga authors depicting the Viking Age in the British Isles do not simply continue or elaborate the information that they inherit; they introduce significant changes that in turn are significantly changed by later authors. This process explains, I believe, the unusually consistent images found in one group of *fornaldarsögur*—the 'fantasies' of my title—but it is also worth examining for the light that it sheds on *Heimskringla* and indeed on the family sagas.

With respect to this material, the *fornaldarsögur* fall into two groups. One comprises the narratives invoking the myth of the Viking empire. This myth seems to have first appeared in *Skjöldunga saga*, which holds that a 'Viking empire' (that included Northumbria) was created by the conquests of the legendary Danish king Haraldr hilditönn (Storm, 1877).¹ Haraldr was defeated at the Battle of Brávellir by his nephew, a certain King Hringr. Medieval Icelandic historians came to identify him with another king named Sigurör hringr, who was by this time thought to be the father of the famous war-king Ragnarr loðbrók. Sigurör and Ragnarr in turn were said to be occupied with the task of winning back the lands that they had acquired through the victory over Haraldr. The 'Viking empire' lasted for three generations and came to an end when Ragnarr's sons divided it between them. Scholars agree that a Viking empire never existed, but these *fornaldarsögur* have a degree of historical accuracy in that they do describe Danes invading England, killing Northumbrian kings, and assuming rule there. As we will see, the *fornaldarsögur* that do not subscribe to this myth give quite the opposite impression about relations between the English kings and the Scandinavians who come visiting them.

¹ Rowe (forthcoming) provides a survey of some thirty Old Norse works pertaining to the myth of the Viking empire.

Before we turn to those sagas, we must first consider *Heimskringla*, where Snorri deploys *Skjöldunga saga*'s information about the conquest of Northumbria and the myth of the Viking empire for several purposes (Rowe, forthcoming). For example, the Viking empire establishes the boundaries of tenth-century Sweden and Denmark, and the first Norse conquest of Northumbria legitimizes Eiríkr blóðøx's rule at York. *Heimskringla* also describes the later Scandinavian kings who wanted to conquer England: Sveinn tjugguskegg, Knútr, Haraldr harðráði, and Magnús inn góði. They did actually try to make good on their ambitions, of course, but Snorri's accounts of them subvert the Viking-empire myth and thus need to be read in the context of that tradition. The story of Sveinn's death (*Óláfs saga helga*, chs. 12-15) is a good example:

When Sveinn had conquered England, Æthelred had fled to France, and the future St. Óláfr had arrived in England, Sveinn died in his bed suddenly one night, and the English said that St. Edmund had him killed, just as St. Mercurius slew Julian the Apostate. Æthelred returned to his kingdom, and Óláfr and a large company of Norwegians entered his service to fight the Danes and help him regain his patrimony. Óláfr apparently continued to aid Æthelred, for it is said that he was in charge of the defense of England.

Snorri makes two important interventions here. First, he reverses the story of Ívarr inn beinlausí, the Danish invader who has St. Edmund killed: here St. Edmund kills the Danish invader. Second, Snorri reverses the 'cruel invader' stereotype and sets the resulting 'helpful hero' against the invader: Óláfr helps Æthelred regain his kingdom, and then he continues to aid Æthelred by being in charge of the defense of England. As we will see, the *fornaldarsögur* that do not subscribe to the myth of the Viking empire will have their Scandinavian heroes playing exactly the same role.

As a 'helpful hero', Óláfr leads a second effort to help dispossessed English princes recover the crown (*Óláfs saga helga*, chs. 27-29):

When Óláfr arrives in Normandy, the sons of Æthelred make an alliance with him, promising him Northumbria if they can win England from Knútr's Danes. Óláfr sends his foster-father to England to enlist troops and gain the allegiance of influential men. After an initial success, they find themselves outnumbered. The princes withdraw to France, and Óláfr sails to Northumbria, where he fights another battle and wins much booty. Leaving his war-ships behind, he equips two merchantmen, and despite violent gales, his good crew and good luck bring them safely to Norway.

Other helpful heroes in *Heimskringla* are Eyvindr úrarhorn and Óláfr Tryggvason. Like St. Óláfr aiding the English royals, Eyvindr helps the Irish king Konofogor win a battle against Jarl Einar of Orkney (*Óláfs saga helga*, ch. 86), and Óláfr Tryggvason's good deed is to rescue his first wife from an unwanted suitor (*Óláfs saga Tryggvason-ar*, ch. 32).

Another theme found in *Heimskringla* that the *fornaldarsögur* will address is the superiority of English kings over their Scandinavian counterparts. For example, Edward appears to have the moral high ground over St. Óláfr's son Magnús (*Magnúss saga hins góða*, chs. 36-37) when Magnús, who rules both Denmark and Norway, lays claim to England as his inheritance from Hǫrða-Knútr. Edward replies that England is his patrimony, but if Magnús wants to come to England with an army, Edward will not

resist, and Magnús can be king after he kills Edward. Magnús decides that it is best to let Edward have his kingdom. There is also Haraldr harðráði's invasion of England (*Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*, chs. 79-92), where his royal luck runs out, compared with that of the English king. Another aspect of English superiority in this episode appears in the description of the English king's house-carls, who are so valiant that one of them is better than two of Haraldr's best men. England is also the place where another Norwegian king demonstrates his inferiority: the unpopular, avaricious, and stingy King Eysteinn Haraldsson leads a party to Scotland and England, ransacking Aberdeen, burning Whitby and Langton, and harrying far and wide (*Haraldssona saga*, ch. 20). Snorri comments dryly: 'Men differed greatly about [the value of] this expedition.'

A particularly interesting comparison between English kings and Norwegian ones emerges from the dealings between Haraldr hárfagri and Æthelstan (*Haralds saga hárfagra*, chs. 38-40, and *Hákonar saga góða* chs. 3-4):

Æthelstan sends Haraldr a sword that is presented to him hilt first. When he grasps the hilt, he is told that he has just made himself Æthelstan's man. In revenge, Haraldr tricks Æthelstan into accepting Haraldr's illegitimate son Hákon as his foster-son. Later, Æthelstan gives Hákon a sword that is the best ever brought to Norway. When Hákon returns to Norway and becomes king, his older brother Eiríkr decamps for the British Isles, raiding Scotland and northern England. Æthelstan then offers Eiríkr the lordship of North-umberland as a fiefdom if he will defend it from other Vikings. Eiríkr accepts and serves Æthelstan until the death of the latter. Hearing that Æthelstan's successor is likely to appoint another lord for Northumbria, Eiríkr gathers an army and attacks southern England, where he is killed by the army of Óláfr, the under-king and defender of that part of the country.

This episode is carefully constructed from doubled actions and paired characters: Haraldr is set against Æthelstan, and Eiríkr against Hákon; Æthelstan bestows two swords and forms relationships with two of Haraldr's sons; Eiríkr flees Norway and then Northumbria. The binary nature of the pairs produces the ethical interpretation: Norway is negatively aligned with paganism, tyrants, biological fathers, bad sons, and swords of trickery, whereas England is positively aligned with Christianity, just kings, spiritual fathers, good sons, and good swords. The initial events leave the dignity of the two kings unchanged, but subsequently Æthelstan and his foster-son clearly outshine Haraldr and his favorite son. The English king helps the Norwegians, not vice versa, and twice the English king is the benevolent source of power, wealth, and prestige. Moreover, he—not one of his prelates—becomes spiritual father to the Norwegians, first raising Hákon as a Christian and then requiring Eiríkr's baptism. Æthelstan comes to Eiríkr's aid by offering him Northumbria, but he is never seriously in need himself. In contrast, Eiríkr is unpopular everywhere he goes and does as much damage as the Vikings he is supposed to drive off. A coward, he fights only when he has a large army. His final stand is rendered heroic not because he is fighting against odds but because he falls in battle with five other kings and two sons of an earl. Here I am not arguing that Snorri deliberately recast the story of Eiríkr blóðox (which varied even among the Scandinavian sources that Snorri may have known; see

Downham, 2004, 56-63) to make certain points about the nature of kingship, Christianity, and the superiority of England or the inferiority of Norway. Perhaps he wrote it down exactly as he heard it or read it. My point is that Snorri's account is no more accurate than those in any of the *fornaldarsögur*, and it is only slightly less fantastic than his story of Óláfr Tryggvason's first marriage, which would not be out of place in a romance.

The third of *Heimskringla*'s themes that will be continued in the non-Viking-empire *fornaldarsögur* has to do with Ireland. This country is often the target of raiding (*Hákonar saga góða*, chs. 4-5; *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, chs. 9 and 30), such as that by Óláfr Tryggvason. More importantly, *Heimskringla* repeatedly characterizes the Irish as treacherous. Haraldr hárfagri's sons Fróði and Þorgísl are the first Norwegians to take possession of Dublin, but Fróði is soon poisoned, and Þorgísl's long rule does not prevent his being killed by the false Irish (*Haralds saga hárfagra*, ch. 33). St. Óláfr helps his nephew defeat a greedy Irish king who was the nephew's former ally (*Haralds saga Sigurðarson*, ch. 55), and Magnús berfættr is allied with an Irish king who betrays him and causes his death (*Magnúss saga berfætts*, chs. 23-25).

Let us turn now to the non-Viking-empire *fornaldarsögur*. They are *Gautreks saga* (before the early fifteenth century), *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (beginning of the fourteenth century), *Hálfðanar saga Brœnufóstra* (ca. 1300), *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* (end of the thirteenth century), *Hrólfs saga kraka* (before 1461), *Sǫrla saga sterka* (fourteenth or fifteenth century), and *Órvar-Odds saga* (end of the thirteenth or beginning of the fourteenth century).² These works give quite another picture of Scandinavian-English relations than the Viking-empire *fornaldarsögur* do. Rather than being cruel invaders, the Northmen are benevolent and helpful. They serve English kings in various ways, restoring exiled princes to the throne, organizing the land's defenses, killing malefactors, solving crimes, and rendering legal judgments. The kings for their part are grateful and reward the Scandinavians with warm friendship, lavish hospitality, valuable gifts, and often the hands of their daughters, who are inevitably also their only heirs. Despite the contrast with the hostilities portrayed in the first group of *fornaldarsögur*, it appears that the sagas in this second group depend somewhat on the first group for their information about England. For example, when they bother to use English names for the kings, those names are drawn from the legend of Ragnarr loðbrók: Ælla is the king of England in *Gautreks saga* and *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, and Edmund is king in *Órvar-Odds saga*. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* also seems to have borrowed other motifs from *Ragnars saga* (see below). These sagas stand in a complex relationship with *Heimskringla*, continuing the themes of the helpful hero and the treacherous Irish but rejecting the depiction of Scandinavian ambitions in England, the superiority of English kings, and the reality of warfare between Scandinavians in England.

Given the prominence of Northumbria as a part of England ruled by Scandinavians in both fact and fiction, it is curious that only one of the second group

² For the date of *Gautreks saga*, see Vermeyden (1993, 224a); for *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, see Naumann (1993a, 254b); for *Hálfðanar saga Brœnufóstra*, see Jorgensen (1993, 260b); for *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, see Naumann (1993b, 303a); for *Hrólfs saga kraka*, see Evans (1993a, 304a); for *Sǫrla saga sterka*, see Lukman (1977, 41) and Evans (1993b, 637a); and for *Órvar-Odds saga*, see Kroesen (1993, 744b).

of sagas mentions the region by name. In *Hrólfs saga kraka*, (chs. 6, 10, and 11) Hróar, one of the sons of the king of Denmark, leaves the rule of Denmark to his brother Helgi and establishes himself in the British Isles:

A king named Norðri ruled over Northumbria, and Hróar spent long years with him as his land's defender. They became close friends, and Hróar married Norðri's daughter Qgn and ruled with his father-in-law while Helgi ruled over Denmark. Hróar and Helgi's nephew then came to Northumbria, killed Hróar, usurped the royal title, and demanded the hand of Hróar's widow. As Norðri was now old, Helgi avenged his brother, and Qgn gave birth to Hróar's posthumous son, who became a famous warrior.

Just as Dan gives his name to Denmark, Norr to Norway, and Bráendr to Brándheimr, the similarity between the names of the king and his kingdom here suggests that Norðri is Northumbria's first ruler. Norðri does not appear elsewhere, so probably he is an invention of the saga author. But if Norðri is the first ruler of Northumbria, a Dane is its second ruler, and the saga implies that the Dane's son is its third ruler. This makes the Danish claim to Northumbria nearly as old as the realm itself. Here the saga author's political vision may have been influenced by the myth of the Viking empire. Not only was this cited several times in *Heimskringla*, but it was propagated by sagas about Óláfr Tryggvason that borrowed from *Heimskringla*, and it also appears in *Egils saga*, *Ragnarssona þáttur*, a version of *Hervarar saga*, and *Skjöldunga saga* and its derivatives, so by the time *Hrólfs saga* was composed the myth must have been quite well known.

In the rest of this group of sagas, the good relationship with the ruler of Northumbria is generalized to a good relationship with the king of part or all of England. In *Gautreks saga*, King Ælla of England generously gives the Scandinavian hero two fine little dogs in exchange for a gold ring. In *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, Hrólfur helps Harald, son of King Edgar of Winchester, regain his patrimony in England. In *Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra*, Hálfðan wins the love of the daughter of King Óláfr of England. They marry and rule Denmark until King Óláfr dies, and then they rule England until they are old. Their son Richard succeeds his father on the throne.³ In *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, while Hrólfur is visiting the aging King Ælla of England, he kills berserkers, stops crime, and helps settle law-cases. He becomes very popular with the English, and later his retainer becomes Ælla's land-defender. In *Sprla saga sterka*, England starts and ends the story as subordinate to Sweden, for it is governed by Astró, one of the Swedish king's kinsmen. In *Orvar-Odds saga*, Oddr sails to England and joins forces with Skolli, the son of a king of England who was killed by King Edmund. They march south to meet the usurper and defeat him in battle. Skolli offers England to Oddr, but he politely declines.

When it comes to Scotland and Ireland, the two groups of *fornaldarsögur* reverse their historical accuracy. Whereas the 'Viking empire' sagas correctly recount that the king of Northumbria was killed and replaced by a Scandinavian, these same works make a radical omission in maintaining complete silence with regard to Scotland and Ireland. The non-Viking-empire sagas, in contrast, feature wholly fict-

³ The saga author may have gotten King Óláfr of England from ch. 4 of *Hákonar saga góða*, (see above).

ional accounts of Scandinavian restoring dispossessed Englishmen to the throne, but their political geography is more accurate than that of the 'Viking empire' sagas because they include Ireland and Scotland in their picture of the Viking-Age British Isles. Unlike the relationship between Scandinavians and the English, which these sagas represent as consistently positive, the relationship between the Scandinavians and the Scots varies from saga to saga. *Órvar-Odds saga* (ch. 11) depicts the Scots as hapless victims of Scandinavian raiders, for Oddr and Hjalmar make forays into Scotland, looting and burning everywhere they go, and there is no stopping them before they levy a tax on the entire country. *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* similarly opposes the Scots and the Scandinavians. The usurper of the English throne has substantial support from Scotland, so that at Ashington, the Scots and the English under the usurper are arrayed against the Danes and the dispossessed son of the true king. It comes as no surprise that Hrólf kills the usurper, and the Scots and the English flee. On the positive side is *Hálfðanar saga Brǫmfóstra*, in which Hálfðan rescues the three abducted children of the earl of Scotland. Unlike the relationship with England, where Hálfðan marries the heiress to the throne of England, eventually becomes king, and is succeeded by his son, there is no Scandinavian incursion into the Scottish ruling line. But in keeping with the general depiction of rulers in the British Isles as inferior to Scandinavian kings, the earl of Scotland is unable to find his abducted children and dies before his surviving son returns. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* goes one step further: where the son of the earl of Scotland is a minor character in *Hálfðanar saga Brǫmfóstra*, in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, the protagonist swears brotherhood with the son of the king of Scotland. The Scottish-Scandinavian alliance thus established is further reinforced with marriage between the king of Denmark and a Scottish princess.

As in *Heimskringla*, the relationship with Ireland is depicted as entirely negative by the non-Viking-empire *fornaldarsögur*. Whereas in *Landnámabók* and the family sagas, Irish royal blood is a source of pride for Icelanders, in the non-Viking-empire *fornaldarsögur* the king of Ireland is always hostile to Scandinavians and twice is characterized as an evil pagan. *Órvar-Odds saga* (chs. 11-12) manages a temporary establishment of good relations between the Irish and the Scandinavians: when the king of Ireland kills Oddr's foster-brother, and Oddr in return kills the king and his three sons, the king's daughter offers compensation for the foster-brother's death. In return, Oddr agrees to marry her and stay in Ireland for three years and preserve her rule. At the end of that time, Oddr and his men had rid Ireland of Vikings but had grown so tired of being there that nothing would induce them to stay. *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* (chs. 21 and 29-36) uses Ireland to invoke the 'Viking empire' sagas, particularly *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*. Hrólf wants his sworn-brother to marry the king of Ireland's daughter, and the ensuing expedition echoes Ívarr's and Ragnarr's expeditions to Northumbria. Like Ælla, the Irish king captures the Scandinavians and puts them in his death pit; like Randalín, the queen of the captured Scandinavian king leads an army; and like Ívarr summoning his siblings to Northumbria, the captive's sworn-brothers bring reinforcements. The Irish king is duly defeated and the marriage takes place, but later Hrólf's foster-brother gives up his claim to Ireland to Hrólf's son. Thus a member of the Swedish royal family becomes king of Ireland.

This depiction of the Irish, the Scots, and the English is not 'natural' or 'to be expected', for it diverges considerably from those found in *Íslendingabók*,

Landnámabók, *Sturlunga saga*, the family sagas, and the *Íslendingaþættir*. These works frequently allude to the British Isles, but their many accounts fall into a small number of categories (partly due to duplicated references, with Viking kings such Óláfr hvíti and Þorsteinn rauði being mentioned in more than one work). Ireland is mentioned eighteen times (in *Eiríks saga rauða*, *Grettis saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, *Landnámabók*, and *Njáls saga*). Ten times it is the place of origin of Icelandic settlers (and sometimes a source of royal or aristocratic ancestry), four times it is the target of raids or conquest, three times it offers opportunities for Scandinavians to aid the native rulers, and once an event in Ireland is used as a chronological point of reference. Similarly, Scotland is mentioned eight times (in *Af Upplendinga konungum*, *Egils saga*, *Eiríks saga rauða*, *Laxdæla saga*, and *Landnámabók*). Six times it is a target of raids or conquest; twice it is a place of origin of Icelandic settlers. The Hebrides are mentioned fifteen times (in *Droplaugarsona saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Landnámabók*, and *Njáls saga*), seven times as a target of raids or conquest, three times as a place of origin of Icelandic settlers, three times as a way-station for travellers to other places, once in a religious context, and once as a place of fosterage. Here the Celtic lands are considered primarily as places to be raided or conquered (17 of the 39 total references), secondarily as places from which the settlers of Iceland came (15 of the 39), and only rarely as an arena for helpful heroes (3 of the 39). Celtic people demonstrate morality: bad slaves will be killed; good slaves will be rewarded.

These works mention Scotland, Ireland, and the Hebrides more often than England (39 references to the Celtic lands vs. 28 references to England), but more importantly, they thematize these places quite differently. Most frequently by far (9 of the 28), England is depicted as a center of trade (in *Egils saga*, *Gisla saga*, *Grettis saga*, *Gull-Ásu-Þórðar þáttur*, *Hallfreðar saga*, *Heiðarvíga saga*, *Landnámabók*, *Laxdæla saga*, and *Þorsteins þáttur uxafóts*). Next, English events are frequently (6 of the 28) used as chronological reference points (in *Íslendingabók*, *Grettis saga*, *Landnámabók*, and *Sturlunga saga*). Only occasionally (4 of the 28) is England depicted as an arena for helpful heroes (in *Bjarnar saga Hítadælakappa*, *Egils saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstunga*, and *Valla-Ljóts saga*), and in two of these cases (*Bjarnar saga Hítadælakappa* and *Egils saga*), this motif probably appears in imitation of the kings' sagas. Twice England is a target of raids or conquest (in *Kormáks saga* and *Ljósvetninga saga*), twice it is a way-station (in *Fóstbraðra saga* and *Njáls saga*), twice it is the place of origin of Icelandic settlers (*Landnámabók*), once it is mentioned in a religious context (*Heiðarvíga saga*), once it is a target of mockery (*Sneglu-Halla þáttur*), and once it is a place of fosterage (*Laxdæla saga*).

There were thus many perspectives on the Viking-Age British Isles available to medieval Icelanders, and the authors of the non-Viking-empire *formaldarsögur* clearly chose the one that would serve their ethical program as well as afford entertainment. But we must remember that these authors were not creating stories *de novo*; they were working from a centuries-old tradition of narratives about Scandinavians in the British Isles. This material ranges from the morality of 'evil pagans martyr good Christians' and the propaganda of 'Norsemen conquer Northumbria' to the more nuanced accounts in *Heimskringla* and the family sagas. And because the non-Viking-empire *formaldarsögur* are all fairly late compositions—even later than *Ragnars saga*

laðbrókar—it is significant that they do not simply repeat or elaborate the previous paradigms but actually reverse them.

We should not be surprised to read about Scandinavian kings who are braver, smarter, more generous, and more honorable than their English counterparts, but it is interesting that the evaluation of the two changed so drastically in a mere sixty or seventy years. The political situation of the Icelanders changed drastically during this period, of course, and it is easy to imagine that Snorri wrote as he did because he was anxious about the threat of Norwegian imperialism and hoped to defuse it historiographically by showing the shortcomings of its kings and the limits placed on their ambitions abroad. But why would selfless Scandinavians be more appealing to late thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelanders than the heroic conquerors of the Viking-empire stories? Why the focus on England, and why the denigration of Ireland, which used to be a source of prestige for Icelanders? Probably this is not some sort of jingoistic, pro-Norwegian reaction to *Heimskringla*. The helpful-hero *fornaldarsögur*, which describe how Northmen faithfully guard England's shores and restore displaced English kings to their thrones, do reverse the realities of the Viking Age, when Scandinavians did their best to conquer England and proved unreliable as land-defenders, but it is unlikely that these stories are deliberate efforts to whitewash history. Possibly a sense of Icelandic inferiority was being assuaged by stories showing that the kings of their ancestors were better than those of the English. But most likely the focus on England was the accidental result of mixing literary traditions stemming from the Viking Age with late-medieval values and the influence of romance. That is, England is not significant *per se*, for the stories could make exactly the same point if their heroes were visiting Charlemagne or the emperor of Byzantium instead of Ælla or Edmund. But because the building blocks of the narratives deal with Vikings in the British Isles, the place where the heroes' superiority is demonstrated happens to be England. Furthermore, the contemporary relationships of England, Scotland, and Ireland probably reinforced their treatment in these *fornaldarsögur*. Icelanders knew of England as a rich and powerful country, making it all the more satisfying to have Scandinavians flaunting their superiority there. Conversely, Ireland becomes ever more subjugated to England during this period, diminishing its appeal as a locus of prestigious ancestry and reinforcing the perception that it was a land to be raided or conquered.⁴

Finally, the focus on England raises the question of the Icelanders' cultural geography. Medieval Icelandic literature is usually organized around unchanging binary pairs such as 'Iceland/Norway' and 'pagan/Christian', but England's pairing is dynamic. The Viking-empire *fornaldarsögur* oppose it to Sweden and Denmark and assign it the values 'weakness' and 'deserving conquest'. Snorri opposes it to Norway and assigns the values 'morally superior' and 'immune from conquest'. The non-Viking-empire *fornaldarsögur* again oppose it to Sweden and Denmark but assign it the values 'weakness', 'wealth', and 'deserving protection'. In short, these works for

⁴ This is probably also the reason why the Viking-empire *fornaldarsögur* are uniformly silent about Ireland. Although Scandinavians obviously did win a long-term foothold in Ireland during the Viking Age, Ireland's loss of independence diminished its appeal for the authors of the Viking-empire *fornaldarsögur*, just as it would later for the authors of the non-Viking-empire *fornaldarsögur*.

the first time position England as feminine, like a courtly lady who is helpless in many ways but who yet has the power to bestow desirable favors. Sagas such as *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Hálfðanar saga Brǫnufóstra* that actually have Scandinavian heroes marrying English princesses illustrate this most explicitly. Such an interpretation of England may also have felt 'right' in the cultural geography of late-medieval Iceland because it integrated countries with close real-life ties to Iceland and Norway into the set of imaginary relationships that the Icelanders had long subscribed to. Where Iceland saw itself as the child of Norway, Denmark/Sweden and England became viewed as husband and wife.⁵ But that satisfying imagined relationship, which perhaps developed during Knútr's reign in England, soon diverged from reality. From 1363 to 1412, when *Gautreks saga* and *Sǫrla saga sterka* may have been written, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland were ruled by a woman. Not only did Margareta's gender make it difficult for Icelanders to think of her as their father, but the frequent poverty of her realm made it necessary for her to turn to England for help, as when she asked Richard II for the loan of ships to fight pirates in the Baltic (Tuck, 1972, 82-83)—just the opposite of the relationship envisioned in the non-Viking-empire *fornaldarsögur*. And after Margareta's reign, Iceland's 'English Century' began. This period probably saw the composition of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, but it definitely saw aggressive English behavior in Iceland, including the kidnapping of children and even the kidnapping of the Danish governor of Iceland himself (Gunnar Karlsson, 2000, 119)—again, just the opposite of the helpless English in these sagas. Matthew Townend (2003, 83) has recently explored some of the ways in which Viking-Age England was an important element in the construction of an Icelandic identity and world-view, and now we can see how this element functioned as Icelandic identities and world-views developed into the late Middle Ages.

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⁵ In 925, Sigtrygg, the Viking king of York, married Æthelstan's sister, but as he died the following year, the union had no lasting significance.

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