

The origin of skaldic poetry – aristocratic and/or royal centres within the ancient Swedish and Danish cultural sphere

A considerable body of evidence – historical, archaeological, genetic and anthropological – leads us to conclude that Iceland was settled by people of Gaelic and Scandinavian origin and that the Scandinavian component had its origin within the Swedish and Danish cultural sphere. Contrary to popular belief, no evidence has been produced in favour of the theory that the settlers of Iceland were predominately Norwegians. This doctrinaire theory – accepted by scholars almost *en masse* – has some extremely obvious political, social and nationalistic aspects; hence, we have here an excellent example of pure national historiography. Critical voices have been raised against this theory many times, but other interpretations than the accepted ones have largely been ignored and marginalized. It is clear that this theory has to be seen in light of the political situation in Iceland in the 11-14th centuries and the nationalistic movements in Iceland and Norway in the 19th and 20th centuries. The aristocracy in Iceland, in the 11-14th centuries, seems to have chosen to identify with the Norwegians. Undoubtedly, this was done for economical, political and social reasons.

In this context it is appropriate to mention that (i) the Icelanders are called North Danes in a reliable Icelandic source from the 12th century, i.e. in the Icelandic *Merlínússpá*, (ii) we learn in the Old English *Orosius* that the North Danes lived on the Danish islands, in the coastal areas of western Sweden and in what is now southern and south-eastern Norway, (iii) the typical geographical locations for the course of events described in the Icelandic *Fornaldarsögur* 'tales of the distant past' are Gautland, Denmark and southern Norway (Krag, 1991, 219-220), (iv) there seems to be a clear connection between the emigration to Iceland from Scandinavia and the Danes temporarily (in the period in question) losing their traditional authority in Norway, (v) there are indications that Harald Fairhair, the famous king of the Norwegians, began his career as a vassal of the Danish king, but made himself independent when the Danes could not (in the period in question) assert their traditional authority in Norway (Lund, 1995, 213), (vi) the famous battle in Hafrsfjord in the Rogaland county in south-western Norway (most likely c.890-900) almost certainly took place because an army from Denmark and/or what was to become south-eastern Norway (the Vestfold county, etc.) arrived there and tried, without luck, to crush the Norwegian revolt and to restore traditional Danish overlordship, (vii) the battle in Hafrsfjord, which was safely within the Norwegian heartland, marked the end of Danish rule in Norway for a considerable time (Guðmundsson (Guthmundsson), 1967, 15), (viii) the traditional explanation

(supported by historical sources) for the emigration to Iceland is the outcome of this battle, and (ix) "A closer look at the background of the settlers of the respective parts of the country proves a persistent connection with Danish kingship, traced back to King Haraldur Wartooth" (Pálsson, 1986, 4).

Barði Guðmundsson (see below) – a Professor of History at the University of Iceland – did some extremely valuable research on skaldic poetry in Iceland and its origin. It is clear from Barði's research that (i) the origin of skaldic poetry is to be found within the ancient Swedish and Danish cultural sphere, and (ii) that influential aristocratic settlers' families in Iceland were of Swedish and Danish origin.

It is appropriate to quote Sigurður Nordal (1990, 186) (my remarks are in the square brackets):

Although it will not be discussed further here, it is well to mention in passing that in Skáldatal all the earliest skalds, who flourished before the days of King Haraldr Fairhair, are shown to have composed poems about Danish and Swedish kings. It is also notable that there exists a quarter of a stanza in dróttkvætt in a Swedish runic inscription as well as an entire stanza on a runic stone [the *Karlevi* rune stone] from Öland [a Swedish island in the Baltic Sea] erected in memory of a Danish chieftain, whereas there are no traces known of this meter in verse fragments preserved on Old Norwegian rune stones.

Nordal, Sigurður, 1990.

Icelandic Culture. Translation with notes by Vilhjálmur T. Bjarnar (Cornell University Library, New York). This work was originally published in Icelandic in 1942 under the name *Íslenszk Menning*.

In light of the above, I offer the following conclusion: when discussing the origin of skaldic poetry we have to turn our attention to aristocratic and/or royal centres within the ancient Swedish and Danish cultural sphere, for example, centres in what was to become south-eastern (e.g. in the Kaupang area) and eastern Norway (these territories more or less correspond to the *Østlandet* region), as well as Lejre in Denmark and Gamla Uppsala in Sweden (these centres represented special regions with their own unique characteristics).

Note that the excavations at Kaupang in Vestfold, along with a considerable body of various other evidence drawn from historical sources and archaeological research, indicate in no uncertain terms that this important trading town and aristocratic centre was founded by the Danes (as expected) around 800, i.e. either during the reign of the Danish king

Godfred or his (probable) father King Sigfred, Godfred being the more likely candidate (Skre & Stylegar, 2004, 33-34). It may be reasoned that the demise of Kaupang around 900, when the town was abandoned quite suddenly (the urban community suddenly disappeared) (Skre & Stylegar, 2004, 74-78, *passim*), has to be seen in light of a changed political landscape and military aggression (see below).

King Harald Fairhair established a powerful Norwegian kingdom, the power base of which was (understandably) in south-western Norway, and he most likely managed to break Danish supremacy in what was to become south-eastern Norway. Note that Norway, prior to and during the 9th century, corresponded more or less to the *Vestlandet* region, of which the ancient Norwegian heartlands, the Hordaland and Rogaland counties, constitute a large part (fig. 1).

In Guðmundsson's book, *The origin of the Icelanders*, there are six chapters concerning skaldic poetry and its origin (pp. 23-122):

1. Skalds, Magic, Women's Rights
2. Skalds, Swine, Saur- Farms
3. Skalds, "Easterners," -AR Names
4. Skalds, Sacrifices to Frey, Antiquities
5. Skalds, Names, Genealogies
6. Skalds, Ring Swords, Hildisvín

Professor of History, Barði Guðmundsson (1900-1957), published his research findings in Icelandic journals between 1942 and 1951. His work, which is a collection of his papers (safn ritgerða) published in this period, was published in 1959 under the name *Uppruni Íslendinga* 'the origin of the Icelanders' (edited by Skúli Þórðarson and Stefán Pjetursson). A shortened version of the work (many papers are left out) was published in English in 1967 under the name *The origin of the Icelanders*. It was translated and annotated by Lee M. Hollander, Professor of Germanic Languages at the University of Texas. Hollander translated to English much of the best prose and poetry of the old North, and a number of sagas, including *Eyrbyggja saga* with Paul Schach (1959). Barði Guðmundsson was a Member of Parliament (*Alþingi*) in the period 1942-1949 and was the National Archivist of Iceland (þjóðskjalavörður) from 1935 until his death in 1957.

See the following link for information about an international project to edit the corpus of medieval skaldic poetry:

<http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/>

The editors can be found on this link:

<http://skaldic.arts.usyd.edu.au/db.php?table=editors>

Genetic studies

The conclusions of three genetic studies, published in the *American Journal of Human Genetics* in 2000 and 2001, indicate that about 40-45% of the Icelandic founding population had their origin in the British Isles, mainly in Ireland and Scotland, though other parts of the British Isles have to be accounted for.

See section 1.11: Gaelic influence in medieval Iceland

Egyptian influence and sacred geometry in ancient and medieval Scandinavia

Please see: <http://frontpage.simnet.is/einargb/>

PS The following quotation is from section 1.2 (also on the website): "Einar Pálsson's uncovering in ninth- and tenth-century Iceland of the indubitable signs of a mathematically structured Pythagorean philosophical ground that was identical in all essentials with that of Cosimo de' Medici's fifteenth-century Florentine academy confirms the case, once and for all..." (Campbell, 1992, 114).

Also by this author:

Ohthere's *Sciringes heal* was situated in the Rogaland or Vest-Agder county in south-western Norway, most likely at the *Huseby/Lunde* central-place complex on the Lista peninsula in the Vest-Agder county

Ohthere's report in the Old English *Orosius*: a critical approach

ISBN 9979-70-116-1

Please see: <http://www.internet.is/einargb/oht.pdf>

Egyptian influence and sacred geometry in ancient and medieval Scandinavia

ISBN 9979-60-757-2

Please see: <http://frontpage.simnet.is/einargb/>

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Figure 1

The regional division of Norway

