



Araltes: The Evolution of a Varangian Stereotype

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In Old Norse texts, the legend of the Varangian is part of a larger trend in a positive textual relationship between the Nordic world and the Byzantine Empire. In this article, the subject of analysis is the evolution of the Varangian legend through the character of one of the best known Varangians, King Haraldr of Norway. The development of the narrative of Haraldr, from the earliest near-contemporary narratives to high medieval and late medieval romances, will be traced and used to highlight the evolution of the discourse on the Varangians and the development of certain narrative stereotypes.

Keywords: Varangians, Byzantine Empire, medieval Scandinavia, cultural memory.

Introduction

From the days of Basil II onwards, there seems to have been a contingent of Scandinavians serving in the Byzantine army. In the eleventh century, these soldiers started to go by the name of *Varangians*, which, by the time of the composition of the *Russian Primary Chronicle* (*Povest' vremennykh let*), had evolved into an ethnonym for the Scandinavian element among the Rus. Earlier the term “Rus” was used broadly to denote Scandinavians in the east but eventually became firmly associated with the extensively Slav-icized elite of Kievan Rus. The Varangians were thus categorized as the Scandinavian element within early Rus society. As the Rus became a predominantly Slavonic people, the Nordic element seemed more and more alien and external to them. This eventually resulted in the legend of the Varangian founders of the Russian state, who were regarded as different from the Russians of later times.

In Old Norse texts, the legend of the Varangian is part of a larger trend of a positive textual relationship between the Nordic world and the Byzantine Empire. A Varangian past was in itself a substantiation of a character's bravery and loyalty, his virtues needed no further confirmation. In contrast, a final career step as a Varangian could be regarded as a suitable remuneration for a noble and virtuous character.

In what follows, the subject of analysis is the evolution of the Varangian legend through the character of one of the best known Varangians, King Haraldr of Norway. The development of the narrative of Haraldr, from the earliest near-contemporary narratives to high medieval and late medieval romances will be traced and used to highlight the evolution of the discourse on the Varangians and the development of certain narrative stereotypes. The legend of Haraldr is an example of the fragile line between fact and fiction in medieval narratives but it also demonstrates how historical information evolves and becomes part of cultural memory. No memory can preserve the past. What remains is only that which society in each era can reconstruct within its contemporary frame of reference. Cultural memory relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation, sometimes by appropriation, sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation, or by transformation. The preservation and transformation of the historical memory of Haraldr is key to a study of a larger whole: the debate on the Varangians within Old Norse historical culture.

The King of the Varangians

One of the earliest preserved texts about King Haraldr is the so-called *Logos nouthetētikos pros basilea* (*Oration of Admonition for the Emperor*), a manual in Greek, which was composed between 1075 and 1078, and relates to warfare and the handling of public and domestic affairs. Its author offers advice, based on his own personal experience and drawing upon numerous historical examples from the events of the eleventh century. In this tome there is the following anecdote about a Scandinavian adventurer, who had served three Byzantine emperors:

Araltes [Old Norse Haraldr],¹ son of the king of the Varangians, had a brother Ioulavos [ON Ólafr]. After his father's death the latter took the father's royal power, placing his brother Araltes second to him in authority. But he, being still a lad, determined to visit the most blessed Emperor Michael the Paphlagonian, to pay his respects and to see for himself what Roman life was like. He brought with him a company of five hundred men of good family.

He arrived there, and the emperor received him with proper courtesy and dispatched him with his force to Sicily, for a Roman army was engaged there in battle for the island. Araltes reached the island and accomplished great deeds of valour. On the subjugation of Sicily he returned with his army to the emperor, and he conferred on him the rank of *manglavites*. Thereafter the emperor found Delianos stirring up trouble in Bulgaria, and Araltes, taking his company, joined forces with the emperor and accomplished great deeds against the foe, worthy of his birth and noble character. When he had put down the Bulgarians the emperor returned (I too was there fighting for the emperor to the best of my power). When we came to the town of Mesinos the emperor rewarded him for what he had done in the fight, giving him the title of *spatharokandidates*.

After the passing of the Emperor Michael and of his nephew who had succeeded him, Araltes wished in the time of the Emperor Monomachos to get royal permission to return to his own land, but it was not forthcoming. Indeed, the road out was obstructed. Yet he slipped away and took the throne in his own country in place of his brother Ioulavos. And he did not complain about the titles *manglavites* or *spatharokandidates* he had been honoured with; but instead, as king he showed good faith and brotherly love towards the Romans. (*Cecaumeni Strategikon* 97)²

As clearly stated in this narrative, the author had served alongside Haraldr, and he connects him with documented military expeditions of the Empire - in Sicily (1038-1041) and against the Bulgarians (1041). Haraldr seems to have served the Emperor as an independent associate, with his company of five hundred.³ Nevertheless, he accepted Byzantine titles and a rank and seems to have needed the permission of the Emperor to leave the army. According to the text cited above, the main tension between Haraldr and the Emperor is due to his desertion from service, although the author makes it clear that Haraldr maintained a good relationship with the Byzantine Empire after he succeeded his brother as “King of the Varangians.”

Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificium (*History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*) by Adam of Bremen, a Latin source composed at the same time as the *Strategikon*, refers to the brothers Haroldus (ON Haraldr) and Olaph (ON Ólafr) in such terms that it seems evident that these are the same persons involved. Here they appear as Kings of Norway. According to Adam, Ólafr was elected as King of Norway following the death of Sveinn, who had ruled both Denmark and Norway. This was contested by Chnud (ON Knútr), who inherited his father's kingdom in Denmark, and there was constant war between Ólafr and Knútr. Finally, Knútr managed to chase Ólafr from the throne. Ólafr then sought to reconquer Norway with the assistance of forces from Sweden and Iceland, but was killed in the process (*Quellen* 290, 296, 298, 300). However, following the deaths of Knútr and of his short-lived successor

¹ Old Norse will henceforward be abbreviated to ON.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations into English are the author's.

³ See Sigfús Blöndal, “The Last Exploits of Harald Sigurdsson in Greek Service.”

Sveinn, Magnús, the son of Ólafr, was elected King of Norway and he managed to conquer Denmark as well (*Quellen* 318). No brother of Ólafr features in the narrative until after the death of Magnús:

It is then related how Haroldus (Haraldr), the brother of the king and martyr Ólafr, had left his brother while the latter was still alive and gone to Constantinople, where he fought against Saracens at sea and Scythians in the interior. When Haraldr returned to Norway, his cousin Magnús seems to be no longer alive and a nephew of Knútr, Svein the son of Wolf (ON Sveinn Úlfsson), had become ruler of Denmark and Norway. Sveinn is referred to as a kinsman of Haraldr, although their exact family relationship is not stated. Haraldr accepted his brother's kingdom from Sveinn, with the rank of duke, but after he returned to Norway and was ensured of the loyalty of his subjects, he began a war against the Danes, which became as long-lasting as the previous war between Ólafr and Knútr. (*Quellen* 340, 342)

Although there is no major disagreement between the *Oration of Admonition* and Adam of Bremen, the latter seems to imply that Haraldr's sojourn in Constantinople was longer than had been indicated by Kekaumenos. According to *Gesta Hammaburgensis*, Haraldr was abroad for the last part of the reign of Ólafr, the reign of Knútr and his son Sveinn, the reign of Magnús Ólafsson, and the short-lived reign of Sveinn Úlfsson in Norway. Following the chronology of Adam of Bremen's work this would add up to fifteen or twenty years, and Haraldr would have left Norway before the death of his brother in 1030. Thus, he would have had to have spent some time elsewhere before coming to Constantinople during the reign of Michael IV the Paphlagonian, which began in 1034.

According to the *Oration of Admonition*, Haraldr brought a company of 500 men to Constantinople. If this army had accompanied him all the way from Norway, a possible reason for this would have been his brother's exile from Norway, during which Haraldr might have wanted to seek his fortune on his own. However, the circumstances of his journey to Constantinople are not made clear by either the *Oration of Admonition* or Adam of Bremen.

As Haraldr is called "king of the Varangians" in the *Oration of Admonition*, it raises questions about his relationship with the Scandinavians who were already present in Constantinople, going back to the company sent by Prince Vladimir during the time of Emperor Basil II. Was there a regular *Varangian Guard* in Constantinople which Haraldr joined on his arrival, or did his visit constitute the reestablishment of such a contingent, or was Haraldr's company separate from the Varangian Guard already present in Constantinople? The terminology used by the *Oration of Admonition* could indicate that Haraldr's company was regarded as a part of the Varangian contingent which was becoming established at this time. Conversely, the term "Varangian" might have had a more general meaning, as an appellation for any Scandinavian who did not belong to the principality of Rus.

The Thunderbolt of the North

Adam of Bremen was far from a neutral observer of Scandinavian politics. He had personally met King Sveinn Úlfsson and used him as a key source for his history of the Scandinavian kingdoms. In contrast, Adam took a dim view of Sveinn's nemesis, King Haraldr. He draws a vivid picture of the iniquities committed by Haraldr and describes him as an enemy of Christians:

King Haroldus surpassed all the madness of tyrants in his savage wildness. Many churches were destroyed by that man; many Christians were tortured to death by him. But he was a mighty man and renowned for the victories he had previously won in many wars with barbarians in Greece and in the Scythian regions. After he came into his fatherland, however, he never ceased from warfare; he was the thunderbolt of the north, a pestilence to all the Danish isles. (*Quellen* 346)

Adam lays particular emphasis on Haraldr's opposition to Adalbert, the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, who wanted to maintain the supremacy of his see over the whole of Scandinavia. He considered King Haraldr to be disobedient:

For these reasons the archbishop inflamed with zeal for God, sent his legates to the king, rebuking him by letter for his tyrannical presumption. In particular, however, did the prelate reprimand him about the offerings, which it was not lawful to appropriate to the use of laymen, and about the bishops whom he had unlawfully consecrated in Gaul or in England, in contempt of the archbishop himself, who by authority of the Apostolic See should rightly have consecrated them. (*Quellen* 348)

According to Adam, Haraldr was so enraged by these delegates that he threw them out of Norway and declared that there would be no ecclesiastical authority in the country other than himself. It seems that Haraldr was supported by his bishops, as Adam mentions a letter from Pope Alexander II which was addressed to them as well. It is evident that, in the mind of Adam, Haraldr's insubordination to the pope and the archbishop made him an enemy of Christianity, but this would hardly have been the view of Haraldr himself as he regarded the function of these institutions differently.

At that time secular and ecclesiastical politics were closely interwoven, and each actor involved, the kings of Denmark and Norway and the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, had their own interests and priorities. Even if Archbishop Adalbert and King Sveinn were allies in their struggle against King Haraldr, their interests were not always aligned and the king had been lobbying to obtain a native-born archbishop for Denmark, starting the process that led to the founding of the Archbishopric in Lund in 1104. The distinctions made by the contemporary witnesses can be misleading. Even if Adam paints a dark picture of Haraldr, in contrast to his saintly brother Ólafr, the discrepancy between their ecclesiastical politics does not seem to have been all that great, as Ólafr had also followed the practice of appointing bishops from England instead of following the guidance of the archbishop in all matters. Adam seems to have felt at greater liberty to criticize Haraldr than his saintly brother, whose transgressions were, in any case, long in the past.

What role, if any, did Haraldr's "brotherly love" for the Byzantine Empire play in this complex political situation? Adam does not mention their relationship nor does he imply that Haraldr tried to introduce the customs of the Byzantine Empire rather than those of the Latin west. In fact, the only person he discusses as an adherent of Greek ecclesiastical customs is Archbishop Adalbert, who used "another Roman or Greek tradition" at three masses, and had, according to Adam, a love for the Greeks "whom he sought also to imitate in dress and manners" (*Quellen* 362, 366). Adam, however, mentions no such imitation on the part of King Haraldr.

The greatest novelty in statecraft which can be attributed to Haraldr is his issue of coinage on a large scale, which was continued by his successors. Before his time, however, the issue of coins by Norwegian kings had been sporadic and the coins had been imitations of Anglo-Saxon models. Haraldr, on the other hand, increased the scope of monetization and issued newly designed coins. Haraldr also seems to have attempted to establish a monopoly over the coins in circulation. Both Haraldr and his Danish counterpart, Sveinn Úlfsson, used debased currency, which was not common in Europe at the time, with the exception of the Byzantine Empire. They were able to do this only due to the monopolization of coinage within their kingdoms.

It seems that both Haraldr and Sveinn looked to the Byzantine Empire as a model for a more centralized administration, exemplified by their establishing a national monopoly on coinage. Both of these rulers imitated the design of Byzantine coins, a practice which had been initiated by the Swedish king Ólafr in the early eleventh century. There is, however, a difference between Sveinn's and Haraldr's imitations, as the former issued coins that are a copy of a single model, whereas Haraldr did not imitate specific Byzantine coins, but Byzantine coins in general, thus demonstrating a conscious appropriation of the image of empire. Therefore, he copied both the imagery and the idea of a monetary system, in order to solidify his rule and create a more stable kingdom. It seems that his rival Sveinn Úlfsson tried to learn from his adversary in both respects (see Gullbekk, "Myntvesenet som kilde til statsutvikling").

Haraldr of Norway and Sveinn of Denmark thus both represent a new type of a Scandinavian king. They were both adventurers who continued the practice of earlier Viking rulers of creating a North Sea empire. Both sought to rule Denmark and Norway simultaneously and both held designs on the English

crown. According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Haraldr mounted a large-scale invasion in 1066, as he arrived with a fleet of 300 ships and conquered York, but, following initial success, the mission ended with his defeat and death in battle. A fleet sent by Sveinn in 1075, also mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, contained 200 ships, but, according to the chronicle, this army was reluctant to fight the forces of the English king and instead went to Flanders, following a single raid on York (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* D, E). The failure of both Haraldr and Sveinn to conquer England can be taken as the signal of the end of the Viking Age. The priorities of the Scandinavian kings were changing.

However, in respect of their administration of their kingdoms, Haraldr and Sveinn both went beyond the practice of earlier kings and attempted to create strong national monarchies. The model for this seems to have come from the Byzantine Empire, and Haraldr, in particular, seems to have been an avid student of the practices of the Empire which he had studied first-hand. As a king he not only showed “good faith and brotherly love towards the Romans,” he actively imitated them in order to strengthen his own position and that of his kingdom.

The Rus and the Scandinavians

The mystery of King Haraldr’s location in the period between his brother’s exile (c. 1028) and his own arrival in Constantinople (between 1034 and 1038) remains unsolved. There is no connection between Haraldr and the Rus mentioned in either the *Oration of Admonition* or in the *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*. Thus, it is unclear whether Haraldr brought his company through the lands of the Rus or by sea through the Straits of Gibraltar and the Mediterranean, a route favoured by Scandinavian crusaders in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

In some of the later manuscripts of the *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen* there is a note (*scholion*), which states that, following his return from Constantinople, Haraldr married the daughter of the King of Rus, Gerzlef (Yaroslav). Apart from this, Yaroslav is only mentioned once in Adam’s narrative, which says that he married Ingrad (Ingiriðr), the daughter of King Ólafr of Sweden. Thus, no connection is made between Haraldr and Yaroslav in Adam’s original version.

According to the *Primary Chronicle*, Yaroslav became Prince of Novgorod around 1012, and in 1036 he became “sole ruler in the land of Rus“ (66), where he reigned until his death in 1054. He is the ruler who is called George in the *Sermon on Law and Grace* by Metropolitan Hilarion (123). The *Primary Chronicle* claims that in 1015, Yaroslav, fearing an attack from his father Vladimir, “sent overseas and imported Varangian reinforcements“ (58), which might provide some context to his marriage to the daughter of the Swedish king. In 1030, the *Primary Chronicle* mentions a war between Yaroslav and the Fenno-Ugric Chud and, in 1031, a campaign by Yaroslav and his brother Mstislav against Poland, following the death of King Boleslaw (65). No mention is made of Varangians participating in either of these wars, but the description that they get in the *Primary Chronicle* is rather laconic.

In 1036, soon after he had become sole ruler of the Rus, Yaroslav again had need of Varangian reinforcements, following an attack by the Pechenegs:

While Yaroslav was still at Novgorod, news came to him that the Pechenegs were besieging Kiev. He then collected a large army of Varangians and Slavs, returned to Kiev, and entered his city. The Pechenegs were innumerable. Yaroslav made a sally from the city and marshalled his forces, placing the Varangians in the centre, the men of Kiev on the right flank, and the men of Novgorod on the left. When they had taken position before the city, the Pechenegs advanced, and they met on the spot where the metropolitan church of St. Sophia now stands. At that time, as a matter of fact, there were fields outside the city. The combat was fierce, but toward evening Yaroslav with difficulty won the upper hand. The Pechenegs fled in various directions, but as they did not know in what quarter to flee, they were drowned, some in the Setoml’, some in other streams, while the remnant of them disappeared from that day to this. (67)

This campaign against the Pechenegs, who are often called Scythians in Greek sources, might indeed be the war “in the Scythian regions,” referred to in the *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bre-*

men (*Quellen* 346; see also Ciggaar 397–401). However, it is mentioned earlier in Adam of Bremen's narrative that Haraldr had fought against the Scythians during his sojourn with the Byzantine Emperor in Constantinople (*Quellen* 340). It is thus far from certain that Haraldr was involved in Yaroslav's campaign against the Pechenegs.

A familial connection between Haraldr and Prince Yaroslav is possible, and it is equally possible that Haraldr had served Yaroslav before he went to Constantinople. However, this depends on the validity of the aforementioned *scholion*, which is the earliest source to speak of such a relationship. However, it is possible that some of the *scholia* added to Adam's work can be traced to a very early version of the work, perhaps even to Adam himself, especially those found in many versions of his work. This criterion applies to the *scholion* in question, which may, with some reservations, be considered a near-contemporary source.

Haraldr's alliance with Prince Yaroslav might not have been easy to reconcile with his alliance with the Byzantine Emperor. In 1043 the Rus attacked Constantinople, for the first time since a contingent of Rus warriors had been sent to Basil II in 989. According to Skylitzes, there had been "a quarrel in Constantinople with certain Scythian traders, a conflict arose from this and a certain famous Scythian was slain" (430). The ruler of the Scythians took the incident badly, because he was by nature "an impetuous man, and very indulgent towards his passions" (430). Skylitzes calls the leader of the Rus Vladimir, but according to the *Primary Chronicle*, that was the name of a son of Yaroslav, whom he had appointed leader of the expedition (67). Skylitzes also relates that Vladimir recruited many warriors from the northern islands of the ocean, that is, Scandinavia. Later on, Skylitzes says that Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos, the one who had denied King Haraldr permission to return to his homeland, regarded the war's cause as "a trivial matter," which did not justify a military expedition by the Rus (430). Michael Psellos also describes the incident in his *Chronographia* and regards the attack as unjustified, as Constantine had not been hostile towards the Rus. According to him, the attack arose from the nature of the Rus who "are the whole time raving and have raged against the empire of the Romans, and on each of the occasions they have made up this or that as a reason and have made it the pretext for war against us" (2: 8). Michael Attaleiates supports Psellos' account, in that he states that the Byzantine authorities were unprepared, as this invasion was unforeseen (32).

The reasons for the attack are secondary to our purposes here. The important fact is that, according to Skylitzes, Scandinavians took part in it. Haraldr, as the son-in-law of Yaroslav, might have had personal connections in this expedition, whether he was already married to Yaroslav's daughter at the time, or if this only happened later, presumably in recognition of some previous relationship between the in-laws. However, this hardly seems reconcilable with the statement made in the *Oration of Admonition* concerning Haraldr's long-term friendship with the Byzantine Empire. On the strength of that source alone, one must assume that Haraldr was not directly or indirectly involved in the attack on Constantinople, despite any previous or subsequent relationship with Yaroslav's family.

It is, however, more likely that the Rus attack on Constantinople was the reason that Haraldr was considered suspect and denied leave by Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos (see also Filipchuk 198–201). As the *Oration of Admonition* implies, these suspicions must have been proved unjustified in the end, as Haraldr had served the Emperor well and would remain the friend and ally of the Byzantine Empire. His hasty departure from Constantinople would then be directly connected with the tension prevalent in the city during the attack of the Rus and its aftermath.

Poetic Justice

Before the twelfth century, hardly anything can be found about the Rus and the Varangians in Scandinavian sources. The major exceptions are runestones from the eleventh century, which are primarily located in Sweden, and some skaldic poems, which were mainly preserved in Iceland. Neither type of source offers more than a few names and possible events which can tentatively be connected to what we know about the Varangians from other sources. Nevertheless, as they offer the earliest Scandinavian evidence on the Eastern Vikings, the content and nature of these sources merits a brief discussion.

Of these two types of sources, the runestones are the only ones that stem unambiguously from the eleventh century. It is noteworthy that earlier Swedish runestones contain almost no information concerning the eastern journeys of Scandinavians, a notable exception being the stone at Kälvesten. In contrast to the scarcity of runic inscriptions mentioning the eastern journeys from the ninth and tenth centuries, there is an abundance of references to them in inscriptions from the eleventh century. The increase in such references coincides with the heyday of the Varangian Guard in Constantinople.

Some general facts can be gathered from the eleventh century runic inscriptions concerning the eastern journeys. Greece (ON *Grikkland*) is the foreign country most frequently mentioned in such inscriptions (Jansson 45), which does not in itself indicate that journeys thither were more frequent than to some other countries, but it does imply that such journeys were considered particularly worthy of commemoration. A more important factor than mere frequency of trips might be that many of those travelling there did not return. The inscriptions are devoted to the memory of notable men who had died “among the Greeks” (ON *i Grikkium*). This country was often a final destination, perhaps not only due to the hazards of travelling there, but also because Scandinavians could make a lasting career in it.

The use of the terms *Grikkland* and *Grikkir* to denote the Byzantine Empire and the Greeks is also noteworthy. These terms were primarily used by authors writing in Latin rather than Greek, and they were not used by the citizens of the Byzantine Empire for self-identification, as they regarded themselves as Romans rather than Greeks or Hellenes. Thus, the runic inscriptions give an indication that the Swedish discourse on the Byzantine Empire was influenced by Latin intermediaries rather than being a part of a completely independent oral tradition.

The runic inscriptions are the earliest Scandinavian sources dealing with the journeys of the Vikings to the east. There is more doubt concerning the Skaldic poetry which is found in thirteenth-century sagas, but seems to be of earlier provenance. Firstly, there is always the possibility that a poem which an author attributes to an earlier author might actually be of a later date. Secondly, even if the poems originally belonged to the period attributed to them by saga authors, they formed a part of a living oral tradition, they were not fossils surviving intact in amber, preserved for their discovery by a later generation. A rigid metric form is in itself no guarantee that a word or a line in a skaldic poem cannot be replaced by another word or a line equally fitted to the metric form.

Nevertheless, it is a fact that several poems attributed to poets at the court of King Haraldr of Norway were preserved and later written down in thirteenth-century sagas. One such poem by Bólverkr Arnórsson is found in two kings’ sagas from the thirteenth-century, *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*. In the second half of a stanza it is claimed that:

Mætr hilmir sá malma
Miklagarðs fyr barði;
morg skriðu beit at borgar
barmfogr hôum armi.

(The glorious monarch saw metal-roofed Constantinople before the bow; many rim-fair ships advanced toward the tall rampart of the city.) (*Den norsk-islandske* 1: 385).

The riches Haraldr gained in the service of the Byzantine Emperor became a stock feature of the poetry ascribed to his court poets. The relationship between Haraldr and the rich countries of the east is usually described in general terms, with a marked emphasis on the riches he acquired there. Poetry thus makes a significant addition to Haraldr’s representation in the main textual sources, the *Oration of Admonition* and the *Gesta Hammaburgensis*.

There is little precise factual detail to be gained from court poetry, with one important exception. This is from the poem *Sexstefja* by Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, one of Haraldr’s main poets, who mentions eighteen battles fought by Haraldr. A reference is also made to the blinding of the Byzantine Emperor. The stanza is found in the kings’ sagas *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla*, and goes as follows:

Stólþengils lét stinga
– styrjöld vas þá byrjuð –
eyðir augu bæði
út heiðingja sútar.

Lagði allvaldr Egða
austr á bragning hraustan
gráligt mark, en Girkja
götu illa fór stillir.

(The destroyer of the care of the wolf had both eyes of the emperor stabbed out; war was under way then. The overlord of the Egðir placed a hostile mark on the daring prince in the east, and the ruler of the Greeks travelled a dire road.) (*Den norsk-islandske* 1: 370)

The stanza must, however, be older than the texts in which it is found as a reference seems to be made to it in the late twelfth century source *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* (*Monumenta historica Norvegiæ* 57). There is also a reference to the blinding of the Emperor in a half-stanza by Þórarinn Skeggjason, from an otherwise unknown poem devoted to Haraldr (*Den norsk-islandske* 1:400). Also, the authors of *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* seem to be unaware of the eleventh-century context of these poems, and use them as evidence that Haraldr had blinded the Emperor Constantine Monomachos. However, the only Byzantine Emperor who suffered this kind of punishment was Michael Calaphates in 1042, and, if they are genuinely from the eleventh century, the poems seem to attribute that particular deed to Haraldr. No early textual source connects Haraldr with this event but the poems can be regarded as evidence that there existed an oral tradition in Norway, even as early as in the eleventh century, which connected King Haraldr with the blinding of a Byzantine Emperor.

Thus, the scant contemporary Scandinavian sources at our disposal provide evidence that in the eleventh century Nordic warriors travelled to Constantinople where some of them led military bands and acquired some wealth “among the Greeks,” but not everyone returned. Court poets associated with King Haraldr confirm what is known from Greek and Latin sources: that he travelled to Constantinople and gained a fortune in the service of the Byzantine Emperor. The main new piece of information, not mentioned in any other sources apart from the Scandinavian ones, is that Haraldr took part in the blinding of the Byzantine Emperor. Even if this was just a boast, it is evident that the event was known in Scandinavia, even if the poems were later used as evidence for the false claim that Haraldr had blinded Emperor Constantine IX on the occasion of his escape from Constantinople.

The runestones and skaldic poems are the only types of Scandinavian texts, which can be traced to the heyday of the Varangian Guard. In the twelfth century, the Latin alphabet and a flowering literary culture came to Scandinavia, but the relationship of Scandinavians with the holy city of Constantinople was now influenced by a new context, that of the Crusades.

All the King's Men

Around 1220, an Icelandic king's saga, later called *Morkinskinna*, was composed. Its subject is the history of the Norwegian kings between 1035 and 1157. King Haraldr plays a major role in this narrative, to the point of being the leading character (see Á. Jakobsson, *A Sense of Belonging* 244 – 46). In the first part of the text, the travels of King Haraldr to the realm of Prince Yaroslav of Rus and the Byzantine Empire are described in some detail, partly using skaldic verse by Haraldr's court poets, which had been preserved orally, but also borrowing from romantic legends concerning Haraldr's strategic genius, his rivalry with the Byzantine general Georgios Maniakes and his romantic liaison with a Byzantine princess called Maria. Haraldr appears in the king's sagas as an unusual character among Norwegian kings, characterized by cunning and self-control rather than simply by bravery and strength (see Bagge 177 – 79).

This material is mostly legendary and exemplifies the living oral tradition recounting Haraldr's exploits in the service of the Byzantine Emperor. As in other sections of *Morkinskinna*, the role of Icelanders is heavily emphasized, as King Haraldr became popular in thirteenth-century historiography as a “friend of Iceland” (see Á. Jakobsson, “The Making of a Viking King”). According to the saga, when Haraldr arrived incognito in Constantinople, “a great multitude of Norsemen were already there and were called Varangians [*Væringjar*]. There was an Icelander named Már, who was the son of Húnröðr and the father of Hafliði Másson. He was a distinguished leader of men” (*Íslenzk fornrit XXIII*: 88). This Már then investigated the group by speaking to Halldórr Snorrason, an Icelander in the retinue of Haraldr. Not much is said further concerning these Icelanders but it should be noted that they were the

ancestors of prominent twelfth-century leaders. Hafliði, the son of Már, was responsible for the writing of the Icelandic law in 1118 and was one of the most important Icelandic chieftains of his time. Halldórr was the maternal grandfather of Þórðr Gilsson, a contemporary of Hafliði and the ancestor of the powerful clan of the Sturlungar. The relationship of these two venerable ancestors with King Haraldr must have been an important part of the oral tradition within these great families, although there is not much specific detail devoted to their sojourn in Constantinople.

Later in the narrative, it is claimed that due to his amorous liaison with Maria, Haraldr “was thrown into the dungeon together with two of his men, the chamberlain Úlfr and Halldórr Snorrason” (*Íslenzk fornrit XXIII*: 109). Although this tale is an oral legend, the important fact in the context is that these two eminent followers of Haraldr were both Icelanders. However, the family of Úlfr Óspaksson, the chamberlain of Haraldr, was to remain in Norway and he was the ancestor of Archbishop Eysteinn of Nidaros (r. 1161 – 1188). Thus, we have two Icelandic families and one Norwegian connected with the narrative of King Haraldr’s adventures in the Byzantine Empire.

There are no Sagas of the Icelanders demonstrably older than *Morkinskinna*, and in fact the evolution of this genre has sometimes been traced, from small episodes (*þættir*) embedded in the narrative of this kings’ saga, which is very much concerned with the relationship between Icelanders and the Norwegian kings. The Varangians are introduced as a group not generally known to the putative audience of the saga. This may be a literary convention but might also stem from the fact that the term had not been much in use about the Norsemen who entered the Emperor’s service in the twelfth century. In the Sagas of the Icelanders, however, its use was to become very common.

There is no general consensus about which of the sagas are the oldest. Among the sagas, which indisputably belong to the oldest group, is *Laxdæla* saga, which is devoted to events in the Western Quarter (ON *Vestfirðingafjórðungur*) of Iceland, which happened to Icelanders of an earlier generation than Halldórr Snorrason, Úlfr Óspaksson, and Már Húnröðarson. As is common with oral tradition, the narratives become more detailed and informative as the events depicted go further back in time.

The last section of *Laxdæla* saga is devoted to the political alliance between the chieftain Snorri Þorgrímsson at Sælingsdalstunga and Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir at Helgafell. Both had familial connections to the Icelandic followers of King Haraldr as Snorri was the father of Halldórr Snorrason and Guðrún, the paternal aunt of Úlfr Óspaksson. These two men do not play a major role in the narrative but the focus is on the son of Guðrún, Bolli Bollason, who married Þórdís, the daughter of Snorri, and was later to inherit his farm at Sælingsdalstunga.

In *Laxdæla* saga, there is an episode devoted to the foreign travels of Bolli Bollason, which are dated to the last years of King Ólafr of Norway (d. 1030). According to the saga, Bolli told his father-in-law that he had for a long time been minded “to go for once into southern lands; for a man is deemed to grow benighted if he learns to know nothing farther afield than what is to be seen here in Iceland” (*Íslenzk fornrit V*: 211). He then went to the royal courts of Norway and Denmark where he was granted great respect. It is then related that

When Bolli had spent a winter in Denmark he started on his journey out into foreign countries, and did not halt in his journey till he came to Mikligarðr (Constantinople). He was there only a short time before he got himself into the Varangian Guard, and, from what we have heard, no Norseman had ever gone to take warpay from the king there before Bolli Bollason. He tarried in Constantinople for some winters, and was thought to be the most valiant in all deeds that try a man, and always went next to those in the forefront. The Varangians accounted Bolli most highly of whilst he was with them in Constantinople. (*Íslenzk fornrit V*: 214 – 15)

It is not known whether the adventures of Bolli’s kinsmen, Halldórr and Úlfr, were known to the author of *Laxdæla* saga, but it seems likely, as they concerned the same family. It could be argued that the tale of Bolli serves as some sort of founding legend for the Varangian presence in Constantinople, which is introduced in *Morkinskinna*. The description of Bolli’s return to Iceland around 1030 has clear echoes of the description of King Haraldr’s wealth, as it is depicted in *Morkinskinna*:

Bolli brought out with him much wealth, and many precious things that lords abroad had given him. Bolli was so great a man for show when he came back from this journey that he would wear no clothes but of scarlet and fur, and all his weapons were adorned with gold. He was called Bolli the courteous. He made it known to his ship-masters that he was going west to his own countryside, and he left his ship and goods in the hands of his crew. Bolli rode from the ship with twelve men, and all his followers were dressed in scarlet, and rode on gilt saddles, and all were they a trusty band, though Bolli was peerless among them. He had on the clothes of fur which the Emperor had given him, he had over all a scarlet cape; and he had the sword Footbiter girt on him, the hilt of which was adorned with gold, and the grip woven with gold, he had a gilded helmet on his head, and a red shield on his flank, with a knight painted on it in gold. He had a dagger in his hand, as is the custom in foreign lands; and whenever they took quarters the women paid heed to nothing but gazing at Bolli and his grandeur, and that of his followers. (*Íslenzk fornrit V*: 224 –25)

This description of a Varangian, who has returned from the east, is made up of elements that occur in earlier narratives. The adorned sword, in this case, Bolli's inheritance from his father, was much coveted by the great and the good. The wealth and manners of Bolli and his followers bring to mind the immense wealth of the Norwegian king Haraldr as described in earlier narratives, which, however, are set a few decades later. As the saga is composed around 220 years after this event, the historicity of the episode is open to contention, and Bolli's journey to Constantinople and his service among the Varangians are not mentioned in any other narratives apart from *Laxdæla* saga. What we have here is an idealized picture of a Varangian's return, as it appeared to later generations. The return of Bolli makes up for all the lost tales of how persons such as Halldórr Snorrason and Úlfr Óspaksson would have been seen on their return from the great metropolis. This is how it all started, according to *Laxdæla* saga.

Or did it? This view of Icelandic history in which people from a few families from the Western Quarter appear as the innovators of important things in society goes back to the early twelfth-century *Íslendingabók*, composed by Ari Þorgilsson, a descendant of Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir through Gellir Þorkelsson, a half-brother of Bolli Bollason. There were other versions of the Christianization narrative in circulation, many of which focused on the role of people from the western part of the Northern Quarter, the vicinity of the monastery of Þingeyrar, founded in 1133. This is, for instance, apparent in the stories of Iceland's Christianization. In the early thirteenth-century source, *Kristni* saga, the role of missionaries from this region, who are not mentioned in *Íslendingabók*, is emphasized, and these missionaries are depicted as important precursors of the individuals given credit in *Íslendingabók* (see S. Jakobsson 15 – 21).

Dungeons and Dragons

Both *Gesta Danorum* and *Morkinskinna* offer accounts of King Haraldr's stay in Constantinople, which culminate in him getting into trouble with the Byzantine Emperor. According to Saxo Grammaticus, King Haraldr was accused of murder and thrown into a dungeon where a mighty dragon lived. Haraldr concealed a small knife on his person and managed to stab the dragon in its only vulnerable spot. According to Saxo, the Danish King Valdemar (r. 1157 – 1182) came into the possession of this knife and would often show it to his friends, although by that time the knife had become rather rusty. Haraldr was then rewarded by the Emperor for his bravery and forgiven for his ill deeds (Grammaticus 2: 10, 12). In an earlier version, related by William of Malmesbury, Haraldr had strangled a lion in Constantinople (1: 479 – 481) but a dragon must have seemed a more compelling monster for a Scandinavian audience.

Morkinskinna offers a more complicated account of the story of the monster. According to this source, Haraldr had committed two offences against the Emperor, neither of them murder. He had taken a larger portion of the gold that belonged to the Emperor than the amount sanctioned by Byzantine law, and had made advances to the niece of Queen Zoe, Maria, and asked for her hand in marriage. According to *Morkinskinna*, "people, who had been in Constantinople within memory of the Varangians, state that Zoe herself wanted him" (*Íslenzk fornrit XXIII*: 109). As in the narrative of Saxo, Haraldr killed

the monster, this time with the help of his Icelandic companions. He was then saved from the dungeon through a miracle involving his brother, Saint Óláfr, and an ailing widow, who let him out. Then it is related how he blinded the Emperor, kidnapped the maiden Maria but later released her and sent her back to Constantinople (*Íslenzk fornrit* XXIII: 108-14). This is the only episode in which the relationship between the Nordic King and the Byzantine Emperor becomes truly antagonistic, although the Emperor is not burdened with the greater share of the blame for the hostilities. The jealousy of Queen Zoe and the avarice of King Haraldr, who retains the character of an anti-hero throughout the narrative, are the main reasons for the hostilities.

In the Sagas of the Icelanders, the Byzantine Emperor is never portrayed in such a hostile role. He is mainly depicted as a generous employer, who contributes to the honour of the Nordic characters fighting for him. In very few cases, the Emperor himself makes an appearance and then his role is usually to attest to the protagonist's abilities, just as he is portrayed as acknowledging Haraldr's slaying of the dragon in the narrative of Saxo.

The Lady and the Varangian

In *Morkinskinna*, King Haraldr, having slain a ferocious dragon, manages to escape from the dungeon into which he was thrown by the Emperor, with the aid of an ailing widow. The widow is motivated solely by piety, as she has had a vision of Saint Óláfr, King Haraldr's martyred brother, exhorting her to aid his escape.

In *Grettis* saga, an Icelandic saga composed around 1400, the noble lady makes a reappearance, along with various other characters from earlier Varangian tales. Thus, there is the avenger, who travels to Constantinople to even the score for a relative killed in Iceland. There is a man thrown into a dungeon but saved through a timely intervention. There is also a motif from *The Tale of Tristan and Isolde*, where a woman and her lover stage an elaborate scene in order to enable her to swear the right oath and deceive her audience at the same time. And finally, there is the motif of the virtuous hermit, who atones for previous sins in a cave. By combining all these motifs, *Grettis* saga became a classic Varangian tale for subsequent generations.

The protagonist of the Varangian episode in *Grettis* saga is the older brother of Grettir, Þorsteinn "drómundur." His connection with the Byzantine Empire is apparent in his nickname, "drómundur," which alludes to the type of Byzantine galley, δρόμων, prevalent in the Imperial Army before 1204, when it was replaced by Italian-style galleys. Following the killing of Grettir, his slayer, Þorbjörn Öngull, travels to Constantinople and enters the Emperor's service. Þorsteinn follows his brother's killer to Byzantium and they both join the Varangians. In the saga it is stated that this happened during the reign of "Mikael katalak," that is, at the time when King Haraldr, too, was in Constantinople. The Varangians hold "a meeting with weapons" at which each of them shows off his collection of arms. Þorbjörn brings to the meeting the sword with which he slew Grettir and brags about its previous history. The sword is passed around and when it reaches Þorsteinn, he kills Þorbjörn with it. He is then imprisoned by the authorities of the city (*Íslenzk fornrit* VII: 271-73).

In prison Þorsteinn passes his time singing. A noble lady, called by the Latin name of Spes ("hope"), who has been married for money to a man called Sigurðr, hears the singing and pays a ransom for his release. He then lives with her but also re-joins the Varangian Guard and goes on expeditions with them. It is said that he acquits himself well and makes friends with Haraldr Sigurðarson, who tries to help him by providing useful advice as Þorsteinn gets into trouble. A tale of intrigue evolves around Þorsteinn and Spes as they become lovers and have to resort to various machinations to fool her husband. In the end she swears an oath to prove her innocence and resorts to a ruse with Þorsteinn in order to appear blameless without having recourse to open falsehood. It is implied that King Haraldr has a part in this artifice. Spes then divorces her husband, manages to gain most of his wealth, and Sigurðr is banished from the country (*Íslenzk fornrit* VII: 274-85). Þorsteinn marries Spes, and they spend two years in Constantinople, but then travel to Norway where they have children, and Þorsteinn becomes a follower of King Magnús.

When Haraldr returns to Norway, Þorsteinn is an old man and does not enter his service. Instead Þorsteinn and Spes sell their property and travel to Rome, where they seek penance from the Pope. Fol-

lowing their absolution at the hands of the Pontiff, they separate and each retires to a cave to live as a recluse. Thus, they end their lives in peace with God, having been happily married before (*Íslenzk fornrit* VII: 285 – 89).

As already mentioned, there is very little originality in this part of *Grettis* saga. It is an amalgamation of earlier Varangian tales, intertwined with a romantic narrative. This was, in fact, what made the episode into an enduring classic, as it contained all the elements of the Varangian legend within a single narrative. At the time when it was composed, the Varangians had become part of a remote past: characters in a romantic plot with no connection to latter-day reality.

Conclusion

The Varangian adventures of King Haraldr developed into a narrative tradition with its own characteristics. In the earliest texts, *Oration of Admonition* and *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, the information concerning Haraldr is conflicting, as the narrators had their own interests and attitudes to his activities and his relationship with the Byzantine Empire. What is certain is that King Haraldr was clearly a friend and ally of the Empire, although he had become suspect in the eyes of the Emperor for a brief period time, following the 1043 attack on Constantinople by the Rus.

In Old Norse sources, this picture is modified, originally in court poetry, in which Haraldr was associated with the blinding of a Byzantine Emperor. There is no other evidence to suggest that Haraldr had anything to do with that, and it certainly seems likely that this would have been mentioned in the eleventh-century narratives, if that had been the case. However, an Emperor was blinded as a result of an uprising in 1042, and the verse connecting Haraldr with that can be regarded as the first stage in the evolution of his legend.

In thirteenth-century kings' sagas, there is much interest in Haraldr's turbulent relationship with the Byzantine Emperor. Significantly, the conflict between them is not attributed to any geopolitical reason, and the Scandinavian narrators agree on the most implausible part of the narrative: Haraldr's imprisonment in a jail, which also houses a dragon. However, they disagree on whether the cause for this was some crime of his or a romantic involvement with a niece of the Empress. A new element is also included in the story of Haraldr: the involvement of Icelandic companions in his adventures.

It could be argued that the stereotypical Varangian found in the Sagas of the Icelanders is based mostly on King Haraldr and his Icelandic companions. In late medieval narratives, such as *Grettis* saga, Haraldr appears as a familiar figure, a trickster who aids the main characters in romantic and sometimes immoral pursuits. He is an ambivalent figure, who is not to be trusted – even by those who benefit from his artful counsel.

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