



Kyngervi



Saga Conference, 12-17 August 2018, Reykjavík &
Reykholt, Iceland

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The 17th International Saga Conference was hosted by the University of Iceland and Árni Magnússon Institute between Reykjavík and Reykholt. Appropriately for its location in Iceland, the theme of the conference was the *Íslendingasögur*, or the sagas of Icelanders. Hundreds of scholars descended upon Reykjavík for a week of lively discussion about a wide range of topics related to the *Íslendingasögur*.

Each session of the conference consisted of seven parallel panels: as such, this report cannot cover all the papers, and will instead draw particular attention to the papers that pertain to the theme of *Kyngervi*.

The first day did not contain any papers; instead, registration opened alongside a wine reception. This was an excellent chance for delegates to reunite with friends and meet new people. There was also a specific reception hosted within this by NECRON, the Network of Early Career Researchers in Old Norse. This was a particularly friendly environment for younger scholars to start their conference experience, and I am grateful to NECRON for creating this space.

Monday, 13th of August was the first full day of the conference, and was opened by Icelandic President Guðni Th. Jóhannesson, previously a lecturer in the History department of the University of Iceland. Following this, Richard Cole introduced the keynote speaker, Carol Clover, who discussed the nature of facts in *Njáls saga*. It was a powerful opening to the conference.²

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² In this and other conference papers in *Kyngervi*, the decision has been made to not include the affiliations of scholars. Many people are independent scholars working outside the academy, and this decision has been made in order to normalise this practice without drawing attention to it.

A session that particularly stole my attention on this first day was part of the 'Ideas and Worldview' strand, exploring the topic of 'The Supernatural.' The first paper in this session was Kristen Mills discussing 'Death, Gender, and the Afterlife.' She questioned what women saw for themselves within the concept of the afterlife: *valhöll* is notoriously told to be a sphere for men, so where did the women go? She explored a number of texts, but noted that everything we argue within this context reacts to Snorri Sturluson's work, first and foremost. This paper sparked lively discussion regarding source criticism and pre-Christian Scandinavian beliefs surrounding the afterlife. In the same session, Matthew Roby also presented his paper titled 'Till (Un)Death Do Us Part: Post-Menopausal Sexualities, Revenant Partners, and Romantic Foils in the *Melabók* Attestation of *Eyrbyggja saga*.' Roby led an interesting discussion about the way menopause and age is presented within the saga, noting the blood rain and blood moon as reflecting Þorgunna's menopausal status. It was very refreshing to attend a paper that discussed a key part of many women's life experience that is often ignored or silenced, and was in turn very thought-provoking.

The second day of the conference took place in Reykholt: coaches were provided to transport the delegates north into the remote area of Iceland where Snorri Sturluson spent his time. Reykholt is the home of Snorrastofa, an independent research institute dedicated to work on medieval Iceland.

The papers throughout the day continued to be dedicated to a large range of themes. Some papers that particularly caught my attention included Sophie Bønding's paper "'Kosti mun ek gera yðr... at þér skuluð reyna, hvár betri er trúan": 'Accumulation' and 'Eradication' as Strategies of Christianisation;' Tiffany Nicole White's paper 'Hǫrða-, Hǫrga-, Hǫlda-, or Hǫlgabruðr? The Manuscript Evidence for Þorgerðr,' and Ingunn Ásdísardóttir's "'In arma" in *Drymskviða*.' Overall, the day in Reykholt was a wonderful experience, allowing delegates not only the opportunity to continue to share their work, but to experience a different part of what Iceland has to offer. Following the day of papers, an optional excursion was available, in which attendees visited Þingvellir.

The following day took place back in Reykjavík. The first session consisted of a number of panels covering a range of topics. I attended the panel titled ‘Freyr: His Role and Function in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion.’ Chaired by Jens Peter Schjødt, the panel also consisted of Stefan Brink, Terry Gunnell, Rudolf Simek, and Olof Sundqvist. With these scholars being some of the biggest names in History of Religion, the large room was packed out, with standing room only even after extra chairs were brought in. Prior to the panel it had been criticised online for being a ‘manel:’ a panel that only featured men. This was particularly striking throughout, but Margaret Clunies Ross was very vocal during the discussion at the end, providing at least one female voice. The panel itself was fascinating, with each scholar addressing the lack of sources and information about Freyr from a different perspective, using a variety of methodological approaches to bring a sharper view of Freyr into focus.

In the afternoon I attended a range of papers: of particular note is Anna Katharine Heiniger’s paper on ‘Experiencing Liminality in the *Íslendingasögur*.’ Based on work from her PhD thesis, Heiniger criticised how freely the term ‘liminality’ is used, and instead returned to key theorists on the topic to define seven qualities that are key to making something liminal. She highlighted that ‘liminal’ does not inherently mean anything marginal, hybrid, or supernatural, and instead draws on elements of rituality, permanence, and transformations. This excellent paper made me and many others in the room pause and consider our uses of liminality, and question whether it is always the appropriate term.

The evening reception took place at Listasafn Íslands, the National Gallery of Iceland, where food, wine, beer, and soft drinks were provided while we explored the art on display. Lively discussions continued as friendships and networks were formed, and the atmosphere was notably positive.

The fourth day of the conference was the day of excursions: an excellent opportunity for delegates to see the incredible Iceland landscape and see the settings of the Icelandic sagas. There were four options: the south, or *Njáls saga* territory, which included Skálholt, Hvolvöllur, Fjlótshlíð, Stóra-Dímon, Bergþórshvoll, and Oddi; the west, which included areas from *Laxdæla saga*,

Vinland saga, and *Eyrbyggja saga*, such as Eiríksstaðir, Búðadalur, and Stykkishólmur; Reykjanes peninsular, stopping at Kleifarvatn, Krýsuvík, and Grindavík; and a hiking trip from Hvalföður to Þingvellir known as the *leggjabrjótur*, or leg-breaker. Alongside this, NECRON also organised an unofficial excursion to Gleyma for those who could not afford the official tours. While I did not attend any of these myself, everyone who did attend these spoke highly of them all, and it was an excellent addition to the conference.

The final day of the conference continued to be at an excellent standard and variety. A morning paper of note was ‘Assholes in the *Íslendingasögur*’ from Asger Mathias Valentin Nordvig, in which he questioned the motives of bad behaviour and social standards. This paper was both informative and engaging, with Nordvig making the audience laugh throughout.

The final paper I will note here took place in the last session on Friday. Leszek Gardela presented his paper ‘Amazons of the North: The Search for Armed Females in the Viking World,’ giving a succinct tour of his larger ‘Amazons of the North’ project. Within this paper, Gardela focused his attention on axes and the regularity with which they are buried with women: he noted that axes are not just weapons, but tools of the household too, and we must be wary of interpreting various objects such as this through a modern lens.

The final evening of the conference featured the conference dinner, with a number of attendees socialising at the student bar as a cheaper alternative. After the conference meal was over, we joined together for a disco, which was a spectacular event, and demonstrated the wonderful bonds that had been formed throughout the week and the wonderful personalities in the field.

The conference was, overall, a resounding success. A huge range of topics were discussed surrounding the *Íslendingasögur*, such as gender, manuscripts studies, methodological approaches, international connections, reception, and much more.

The conference takes place every three years: the 18th International Saga Conference will be hosted between Helsinki, Finland and Tallinn, Estonia in 2021: the theme will be ‘Developing Dialogues Between Sagas, Archaeology, Language and Folklore.’

