

From Oral Prosimetrum to Viking Metal

Katarzyna Anna Kapitan

Abstract

The present study examines the *longue durée* of a medieval literary work through the lens of its transmission, adaptation, and reception, deeply anchored in these processes' historical contexts. It focuses on three stages in the transmission history of a single Old Norse saga, *Hrómundur saga Gripssonar*, and examines them in their historical, socio-political contexts. First, the article discusses the seventeenth-century prose adaptation of the story in the context of antiquarian interest in Old Norse narratives. Then it turns to the nineteenth-century prose adaptation of the story and analyses it from the perspective of the formation of Icelandic identity. Finally, it closes with the interpretation of the most recent performance of the story by the Faroese metal band Týr, and views it in the context of contemporary developments within the Faroese independence movement.

Keywords: Old Norse literature, reception history, adaptation history, medievalism, Viking Metal

Introduction

A number of Nordic legendary heroes have their deeds described in multiple adaptations, in various media and languages. One of the better-known stories that circulated widely through time and space, freely moving across generic, linguistic, and cultural boundaries, is the story of Sigurd the dragon slayer (Ice. Sigurður Fáfnisbani), which has an especially rich tradition stretching from the Middle Ages to today (see for example, Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2012). It is known from Old Norse works such as the *Poetic Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, younger Icelandic poetry, various Scandinavian ballads, and multiple modern adaptations, the most famous being Wagner's opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Among the lesser-known stories that circulated exclusively in Scandinavia throughout centuries is the story of Hrómundur, son of Gripur, which is the subject of the present study. Hrómundur, who is a native of Telemark in Norway and is responsible for, among other things, slaying the berserk Hröngvið and the mound-dweller Þráinn, as well as assisting King Ólafur in defeating Swedish kings, is a relatively obscure character from Old Norse literature. Not many know or realize that the story of Hrómundur in its multiple iterations has been

performed in Scandinavia for almost a thousand years. It was performed at the famous wedding feast at Reykhólar in 1119 described in *Dorgils saga ok Haflíða (PsH)*, part of the thirteenth-century *Sturlunga* compilation, as well as today: in February 2020, shortly before the start of global lockdowns due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Faroese Viking Metal band Týr performed a musical adaptation of the story together with the Symphony Orchestra of the Faroe Islands.

In light of the growing interest in the reception of Old Norse literature and its reuses in contemporary culture, which have been the subject of a number of recent publications, such as the collection of essays *The Vikings Reimagined* (Birkett & Dale 2020), there is a clear need for a closer investigation of the circumstances in which certain types of historical and/or literary references are rediscovered and utilized. Arguably, the rediscovery and reuse of historical references can be connected to the ideological and political agendas which they are supposed to serve and reinforce. While many Old Norse sagas exist in multiple adaptations in various media and languages, these adaptations are usually explored from the perspective of intertextual connections, rather than from the perspective of the historical context in which they have appeared.¹ However, analysis of their artistic production from a socio-political perspective can benefit our understanding of the process of adaptation and shed light on the roles these adaptations played in the cultural landscapes of past centuries. Following the paths laid down for Old Norse studies by, among others, Andrew Wawn (1994, 2000), Jón Karl Helgason (1998, 1999, 2001), and Heather O'Donoghue (2005, 2014), the present study examines the *longue durée* of a medieval literary work through the lens of its rewriting, transmission, adaptation, and reception, deeply anchored in these processes' historical contexts. This approach allows us not only to analyse the past processes of cultural production, but also to reflect on the use of Norse motifs in contemporary culture, and to engage critically with the presentation of these historical narratives today.

This study throws a spotlight on three moments in the transmission history of a single Old Norse saga, *Hrómundur saga Gr(e)ipssonar (HsG)*, and their socio-political circumstances. The history of the adaptation of Hrómundur-related materials includes multiple manifestations in prose and verse, most of which were examined over a century ago by Albert LeRoy Andrews (1911, 1912, 1913). The more recent adaptations have, however, so far escaped scholarly attention. *HsG*, as known from all modern editions and translations, is a seventeenth-century narrative, but due to its presumed medieval origins it gained a unique position in the history of Icelandic literature as the earliest legendary saga to be mentioned by name (Stefán Einarsson 1957:157–58, 1961:195–96). In his history of Icelandic literature Finnur Jónsson wrote the following about *Hrómundar saga*: “Alt í alt hører denne saga til de interessanteste og mest betydede” (Finnur Jónsson

1907:334) (All in all this saga belongs to the interesting and most important sagas). Even though Finnur Jónsson himself in his *Den oldnorske og oldislandske litteraturs historie* (Finnur Jónsson 1923:II, 802–803) revised his opinion by omitting the “mest betydende” part of the statement, *Hrómundar saga* remained one of the “most important” legendary sagas. It is listed in major reference works on medieval literature and culture such as *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (Jesch 1993) and the *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (Foote 1982–1989), and it has been frequently referenced in the discussion of the origins of the legendary sagas, oral and written forms of the sagas’ transmission, and, indirectly, in discussion of the credibility of the legendary sagas, making it probably the best-known example of a lost Old Norse-Icelandic saga (see for example, Heusler 1914; Liestøl 1945; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1952; Jón Helgason 1953; Foote 1953–1957; Sverrir Tómasson 1988; Mitchell 1991; Tulinius 1993, 2005; Úlfar Bragason 1994, 2005; O’Connor 2005; Driscoll 2009; Kapitan 2018).

As previously introduced, the saga of Hrómundur is mentioned in the famous description of the wedding feast in Reykhólar from 1119, presented in *Dorgils saga og Hafliða* (Kålund 1906–1911; Brown 1952; Halldór Hermannsson 1945), but the literary form of the lost saga of Hrómundur is a matter of speculation. No other contemporary account of that story has survived, but based on references in *PsH* to the many verses that the story of Hrómundur contained, we can assume that saga existed in the form of an oral prosimetrum, that is, a literary composition consisting of alternating segments of prose and verse.² The frequently quoted passage from *PsH* reads as follows:

Hrólfr af Skálmarnesi sagði sögu frá Hrø[n]g[vi]ði víkingi ok frá Óláfi liðmannakonungi ok haugbroti Þráins berserks ok Hrómundi Gripssyni, ok **margar vísur með**. En þessari sögu var skemt Sverri konungi, ok kallaði hann slíkar lygisögur skemtiligastar. Ok þó **kunnu menn at telja ættir sínar** til Hrómundar Gripssonar. Þessa sögu hafði Hrólf sjálf samansetta. (Brown 1952:17–18, my emphases)

Hrólfr from Skálmarnes told a story about Hrøngvið the viking and Ólaf liðmannakonungur and the mound-breaking of Þráin the berserk and Hrómund Gripsson, **with many verses in it**. This story was used to entertain King Sverrir and he declared that such lying sagas were most amusing; **men can however trace their genealogies** to Hrómund Gripsson. Hrólf himself had composed this saga. (Foote 1953–57:226, my emphases)

The suggestion that the lost saga of Hrómundur contained verses is confirmed by the account of the medieval poem of Hrómundur in the form of *rímur* (sg. *ríma*, pl. *rímur*, Eng. rhymes). *Hrómundar rímur*, also known as *Griplur*, are believed to be derived from the lost **Hrómundar saga* and in various places they also refer to stanzas (Ice. *vísur*). Following Finnur Jónsson’s (1905–1922) edition of the poem in *Rímnsafn*, *Griplur* stanzas

I:30, I:39, and IV:7 include references to *visur*, but none of them is quoted directly. This speaks in favour of the hypothesis that **Hrómundar saga* was initially composed and performed in the form of a prosimetrum.

In addition to the information about the many verses that the lost saga of Hrómundur contained, *PsH* also states that many Icelanders could trace their genealogies back to Hrómundur Gripsson. Indeed, Hrómundur is mentioned in *The Book of Settlements* (Ice. *Landnámabók*), where he is presented as the great-grandfather of the first settlers of Iceland Ingólfur and Hjörleifur (Finnur Jónsson 1900:6). Here, he is presented as a native of Telemark, an inland region of southern Norway, whose sons Bjornólfur and Hróaldur settled in Dalsfjord in the western part of the country. Their sons, Örn and Hróaldur, were apparently the fathers of Ingólfur and Leifur, who, according to tradition, arrived in Iceland in the second half of the ninth century.³ This genealogical connection of Hrómundur to many contemporary Icelanders might have played a significant role in the saga's transmission history and its adaptations in Iceland, as the story has appeared in various artistic forms throughout centuries.

While not all of the turning points in the complicated transmission history of this story can be placed in time and space with high certainty, some of them can be easily identified, and this allows for the analysis of the cultural processes that appear to have led to the creation of subsequent adaptations. The present article analyses three snapshots from the transmission history of the story of Hrómundur in the context of different socio-political circumstances. First, it discusses the seventeenth-century prose adaptation of the story (*17HsG*) in the context of antiquarian interest in Old Norse narratives, which could serve the interests of early modern Scandinavian monarchies. The article then turns to the nineteenth-century prose adaptation of the story (*19HsG*) and analyses it from the perspective of the formation of Icelandic identity, which led to a growing interest in regaining independence from Denmark. Finally, it closes with the interpretation of the most recent performance of the story by the metal band Týr, and views it in the context of contemporary developments within the Faroese independence movement. The study concludes that in each case, political or ideological agendas seem to have worked as a catalyst for interest in Old Norse material in the Nordic countries. The article aims to show that regardless of the time period in which the Old Norse motifs were used, their uses can, to a certain extent, be related to the formation or cultivation of national identities through references to national(ized) cultural heritage and/or genealogies.

Royal Genealogies and Danish Historiography

The first early modern prose adaptation of the story of Hrómundur originated in Copenhagen at the end of the seventeenth century (thus henceforth

17HsG). Its appearance was associated with the burgeoning antiquarian movement in Scandinavia, which brought Old Norse literature to the attention of continental Europe.⁴ This increased interest in Old Norse material coincided with the period of intense wars between Denmark and Sweden over the *dominium maris baltici* (Baltic Sea dominion) (Kirby 1990; Lisk 1967), when both countries attempted to prove their supremacy by means of military and ideological battles. Old Norse literature played a significant role in this process, providing “ancient sources” for politically motivated scholars on both sides of the Øresund (Skovgaard-Petersen 1993; Lavender 2014; Gottskálk Jensson 2019; Kapitan 2022). As the early transmission history of *17HsG* shows, the circumstances of the saga’s appearance lie precisely on the border of Swedish and Danish interests.

One of the antiquarians who was interested in the story of Hrómundur was an Icelander employed at the Dano-Norwegian court, Thormod Torfæus (1636–1719). Torfæus first served as a royal translator tasked with translating Old Norse-Icelandic sagas into Danish. He later worked as a royal antiquarian and was sent to Iceland to collect manuscripts, and, finally, as a royal historiographer, he was tasked with writing a history of Norway in Latin (Páll Eggert Ólason 1948–1952:V, 190–91).⁵ Around the same time that Torfæus became royal historiographer, he wrote a letter to his acquaintance in Iceland, Rev. Torfi Jónsson (1617–1689), a nephew of bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson and the pastor of Gaulverjabær (Páll Eggert Ólason 1948–1952:V, 27–8). In the letter, he asked for help to acquire various sagas that he suspected to be potentially useful for his study of royal genealogies. One of the sagas he mentioned is that of Hrómundur, which Torfæus claims in the letter never to have seen.⁶

The antiquarian interest of people like Torfæus in the story of Hrómundur most likely gave an immediate motivation for the creation of *17HsG*. All the earliest manuscripts of the saga are contemporary with the aforementioned letter from Torfæus to Torfi Jónsson, while textual analysis reveals that all the extant texts can be traced back to a single manuscript – Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, AM 601 b 4to – written by Jón Eggertsson, an Icelandic collaborator of the Swedish Society of Antiquities (*Antikvitetskollegium*). It has been argued that Jón Eggertsson probably wrote AM 601 b 4to while imprisoned in Copenhagen in the years 1684–87 (Kapitan & Stegmann 2019). His role nonetheless extends beyond that of a scribe, as he is also believed to be responsible for converting the *rímur* of Hrómundur into prose.⁷ Jón Eggertsson’s authorship of *17HsG* seems likely given the circumstances, since, as a poet, he had all the necessary skills to complete such an undertaking. Moreover, he had access to a manuscript that he acquired in Iceland in the early 1680s, which contained *Griplur*, among other sets of *rímur*.⁸ Therefore, the seventeenth-century saga can be seen as a summary of the contents of the *rímur*, prepared with a scholarly audience in mind.

Textual analysis of the oldest manuscripts of *17HsG* indicates that political agendas played a larger role in the creation of this saga than might otherwise be anticipated. In the manuscripts written by Jón Eggertsson, the name “Denmark” is consistently removed from the text of the saga. A comparison with the saga text preserved in the three oldest manuscripts (AM 601 b to, Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar, AM 587 b 4to, and Stockholm, Kungliga biblioteket, Papp. fol. nr 67) exemplifies this perfectly. In AM 601 b 4to, the text reads, “King Ólafur sailed from there and goes north to Denmark” (“Sigldi olafur kongr sua þadann, oc norþr til danmerkr”, AM 601 b 4to, f. 3r.), but the scribe deleted “Denmark” and replaced it with “his kingdom” (“sinz rijkis”, AM 601 b 4to, f. 3r). This emended reading made its way into a transcript of *Hrómundar saga* preserved in AM 587 b 4to, f. 5r–5v, and from there to the modern editions of the saga, starting with *Fornaldar sögur Nordrlanda eptir gömlum handritum* (Rafn 1829–1830:II, 371).⁹ Papp. fol. nr 67, which preserves another text of the saga written by Jón Eggertsson, also omits Denmark and reads, “King Ólafur sailed from there and home” (“Siglde Olafur kongr sua þadan og heim”, Papp. Fol. nr 67, f. 108r), with the vague and non-specific “home” replacing the more politically fraught “Denmark”. This intentional omission of Denmark may suggest that the saga’s Swedish audience, and in particular Jón Eggertsson’s employer, the Swedish Society of Antiquities, had little taste for stories about Danish heroes, favouring instead stories of general relevance to mainland Scandinavia.¹⁰ Indeed, *17HsG* describes a battle between King Ólafur and the Swedish kings, both named Hadding, making it relevant to legendary Swedish history. This version of the story made its way to the Swedish edition of the saga in *Nordiska kända dater i en sagoflock samlade om forna kongar och hjältar* (Björner 1737).

Even though there is no evidence that *17HsG* was ever directly used as a historical source in any of Torfæus’ historical works, and Torfæus himself eventually dismissed it as “worthless”,¹¹ the marginal annotations in Torfæus’ hand that appear in the manuscripts preserving the saga reveal his historical interest in the story. His main interest was evidently the saga’s presentation of royal genealogies; because of this, Torfæus paid great attention to the intertextual connections between various Old Norse texts and the inaccuracies that appear in them. This is clear from his comments in two manuscripts preserving *17HsG*, AM 587 b 4to and AM 193 e fol. In both, Torfæus comments that the accounts of *17HsG* should be compared to the accounts of other sagas: to *Göngu-Hrólf’s saga* in the case of AM 587 b 4to and to *Hálfs saga og Hálfsrekka* in AM 193 e fol. Neither of these texts would be seen as a historical source today, but in Torfæus’ time both were the basis of historical research.¹²

The evidence presented here demonstrates the close relationship between the rewriting of *Hrómundar saga* and the political and ideological world through which it moved. The political interests seem to have not only given

an impulse for writing of the saga, but they also significantly shaped its contents, at least with regard to certain geographical references. Moreover, the marginalia found in some of the oldest manuscripts attests to scholarly interest in the royal genealogies preserved in the legendary sagas, thus also bearing witness to the use of these types of sagas as historical sources at this time. Even though *17HsG* never played any significant role in providing evidence for Danish or Swedish supremacy, its early transmission shows that even historically irrelevant texts could not avoid ideological influence. The saga in its extant form came into being as a result of the politically oriented scholarship of the seventeenth century.

Common Men's Genealogies and Icelandic Nationalism

While the oldest manuscripts of *17HsG* bear witness to the historiographical interest in its royal genealogies and the geography of its action, the younger prose adaptation highlights the genealogical importance of its protagonist, the eponymous Hrómundur, by supplying a genealogy of his descendants at the end of the saga. Moreover, when King Ólafur is introduced at the beginning of the saga, he is not immediately attached to any specific geographical location, as he is in *17HsG* and *Griplur*: Scholarship has thus far been completely silent about this younger prose adaptation, and little is known about its origins, dating, and authorship. What is known, however, is that all four manuscripts that preserve this saga can be dated to the first half of the nineteenth century (therefore henceforth *19HsG*).¹³

While much may be said about the stylistic modifications and amplifications that characterize *19HsG* compared to the seventeenth-century saga, the saga's ending is especially interesting from the perspective of the present study. The ending of the nineteenth-century saga has been expanded with the addition of genealogical information concerning the descendants of Hrómundur, thus linking modern Icelanders to this legendary hero. Three out of four manuscripts explicitly name Björnólfur and Hróalfur (mostly likely corrupted from Hróaldur) as sons of Hrómundur.¹⁴ Furthermore, one of them, Lbs 2404 8vo, goes even further and supplies additional information about Hrómundur's grandchildren and great-grandchildren. There, the ending of the story reads as follows:

Tókoz brápt með Rómundi oc Svanhvit góþar ástir, þau átto þępi Sono oc Dætr þo hér sé frá atgjörþom þeira rítat, oc voru þau in mestu mikil menni oc stórar ęttir frá þeim komnar þeira Synir voru þeir Birónólfur oc Hróalfr Biörnólfr var faþir Arnar faþir Ingólfs landnámamans, enn son Hróálfs var Harþmar faþir Hiörleifs er Hiörleifs höfþi er vit kendur. (Lbs 2404 8vo, f. 100v)

Soon deep love arose between Hromundur and Svanhvit. They had both sons and daughters, even though there is [no] account of their deeds provided here. From

them descended greatest men and great dynasties. Their sons were Björnolf and Hroalf. Björnolf was the father of Örn, father of Ingolf the settler, and the son of Hroalf was Harðmar, father of Hjörleif, after whom Hjörleifshöfði is named.

This information tracing a genealogy from Hrómundur to Ingólfur must originate in *Landnámabók* where, as previously mentioned, both Ingólfur Arnason and Hjörleifur Hróðmarson are listed as Hrómundur's descendants and where Hjörleifshöfði is mentioned as the location where Hjörleifur settled.

There is good reason to assume that the political situation in Iceland at the beginning of the nineteenth century may well have influenced the shape of the younger adaptation of the story. The Alþingi was disbanded by the royal decree in the year 1800, and in 1809 Jørgen Jørgensen declared Iceland independent from Denmark and pronounced himself its ruler (Sigurður Líndal 1974–2016:IX, 5–86). Jørgensen's *coup d'état* was ultimately unsuccessful and can be seen as putting Icelanders' urge for independence from Denmark in question. Nevertheless, it seems quite possible that the Icelandic turn towards medieval sagas may have had something to do with the awakening of an Icelandic national identity. As the Napoleonic wars rolled across Europe and the socio-political conflicts leading to the Springtime of Nations started to appear across the continent, the growing importance of Iceland's past as a nation and of its genealogies for the formation of a distinct national identity may also be rooted in the sagas.

Appending genealogies to saga narratives is not an uncommon practice in the scribal culture of early modern Iceland, as it has been observed in manuscript transmissions of other sagas, for example, the recently discussed case of *Illuga saga* (Lavender 2020:73–76). What is intriguing in this attempt to connect the legendary saga hero to the history of Iceland is the intellectual milieu from which this younger *Hrómundar saga* most likely originates.

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, there had been no sustained separatist movement in Iceland, with some Icelandic intellectuals advocating for even closer cultural assimilation with Denmark. However, by the middle of the nineteenth century, nationalism dominated Icelandic discourse (see, for example, Guðmundur Hálfðanarson 2006; Halink 2017). The awakening of the nationalistic ideology is often associated with the Fjölnismenn, a group of Icelandic intellectuals in Copenhagen who had founded the journal *Fjölnir: Árrit handa Íslendingum*. The journal was published in Copenhagen between 1835 and 1847 and is considered the first Icelandic journal to be dedicated to literature, although it also published on history, politics, and natural sciences (Þórir Óskarsson 2006; Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson 1999). One of the Fjölnismenn was Konráð Gíslason, later professor at the University of Copenhagen and son of the Icelandic lay historian Gísli Konráðsson. Gísli Konráðsson in turn happens to be the scribe

responsible for one of the four manuscripts preserving *19HsG*: Lbs 2404 8vo, the very manuscript that expands the genealogies from Hrómundur to Ingólfur and Hjörleifur.

The emphasis on the descendants of Hrómundur in Lbs 2404 8vo reflects Gísli Konráðsson's clear interest in genealogy. As he stated in one of his letters to the folklorist Jón Árnason: "I have compiled so many genealogies that I cannot count them [...] all back to *Sturlunga*, the sagas, and *Landnámabók*" ("Ættartölur hefi eg svo margar saman tekið, að eg man ekki að telja þær, [...] allt fram að Sturlungu, Sögunum og Landnámu", Finnur Sigmundsson 1951:80). In this context, it is not surprising that the information from *Landnámabók* regarding the descendants of Hrómundur was added to the saga in a manuscript written by Gísli Konráðsson.

Gísli Konráðsson's interest in Icelandic history and genealogies was formed under the influence of Jón Espólin, for whom Gísli Konráðsson worked as a secretary (Stefán Einarsson 1948). Jón Espólin was a district administrator and lay historian with strong nationalistic sentiments. As Ingi Sigurðsson (1972:100–101) puts it, he "saw history as a means of establishing people's identity" and considered that "it would benefit the nation if people identified themselves with their ancestors, which was impossible without knowledge of history and genealogy." Because of his emphasis on history and genealogy in the formation of Icelandic identity, Stefán Einarsson considers Jón Espólin as an ideological forerunner of the Fjölismenn, and emphasizes the direct link between Jón Espólin and Konráð Gíslason through Gísli Konráðsson (Stefán Einarsson 1948:18).

The actual extent of Jón Espólin and Gísli Konráðsson's influence on Konráð Gíslason and the Fjölismenn is a matter for future investigation, but this genealogical addition in Lbs 2404 8vo gives us an insight into the ideological atmosphere in Iceland before the nationalistic Icelandic agenda gained full speed in Copenhagen in the middle of the century. It illustrates the role that medieval genealogies reaching into the settlement period played in the formation of Icelandic identity, which in turn led to the creation of the Icelandic independence movement.

The modification of the ending of the saga becomes even more intriguing when analysed in the context of other modifications that appear in the younger saga, compared to the seventeenth-century saga and the medieval *rímur* of Hrómundur. Table 1 presents a comparison of the opening lines of *17HsG* and *19HsG*, together with the corresponding passages of the *rímur*.

<i>17HsG</i>	<i>19HsG</i>	<i>Griplur</i>
Sá kongr ríeþe fyrir Gorderom /i danmorc/ er Olafri hiet	Sva hefr Sögo þessa, at á þeim tímum sem margir Stólkongar voro í Norvegi, Danmorco oc Svíþjóþ, gorþost margir Höfþingjar oc stormektugir Herrar, Greifar oc Jarlar, sem bruto sic til rícja oc landa, herjuþo sva vel á vetrom sem sumrom, oc öbluþo sér sva fjár oc frægþa. A medal þessara oc þvilíkra var einn micils verþr Kongr, sem Olafri hiet	Ólaf nefni eg ítran gram, er átti að stýra Hörðum, Lofðung helt með landi fram Lægis dýrum vörðum. Gnóðar-Ásmundr grams var feðr, Gumna fára líki, Sá bauð jafnan sverða veðr Og svipti af kóngum ríki

Table 1. A comparison of the ways in which King Ólafur is introduced in *17HsG*, *19HsG*, and *Griplur*.

As discussed elsewhere, King Ólafur is presented as a king of Hordaland in Norway in the medieval *rímur* of Hrómundur, while in the seventeenth-century saga he is made into a Danish king (Kapitan 2022). The nineteenth-century saga does not specify Ólafur's domain in the opening of the text, introducing him instead as one of many petty kings that ruled over Norway, Denmark, and Sweden in the distant past. The geographical vagueness of Ólafur's introduction can be seen as an intentional intervention in the saga's text, with the purpose of detaching it from a mainland Scandinavian context. At a time when not only Scandinavian but also German scholars increasingly started to consider Old Norse-Icelandic literature as part of their national heritage, detaching Ólafur from Denmark (or Norway) and explicitly linking Hrómundur to the first settlers of Iceland can be seen as an early attempt to (re)claim Old Norse-Icelandic literature for Iceland. By emphasizing that modern Icelanders are descendants of legendary heroes such as Hrómundur, the writer of the saga and its later copyists seem to be highlighting their cultural superiority over other Scandinavians.¹⁵

Viking Metal and Faroese Nationalism

The most recent performance of the story of Hrómundur was done by the Faroese Viking Metal band Týr. During their recent concert with the Symphony Orchestra of the Faroe Islands on 8 February 2020 at the Norðurlandahúsið in Tórshavn, Týr performed their track “Ramund hin unge”, which is directly related to the lost *Hrómundar saga*. This provides us with valuable insight into the modern reception or reappropriation of Old Norse materials in contemporary popular culture.¹⁶

“Ramund hin unge” is a Viking Metal adaptation of the Danish traditional ballad *Ramund* (Nyerup & Rahbek 1813:IV, 334–40). This Danish ballad is itself most likely a translation of the Swedish ballad *Ramunder* (Arwidsson 1834:114–120), one of many Scandinavian ballads narrating the deeds of a hero named Ramund, who is also called Ramunder, Rambold, or Ranild in various Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish versions. These are in turn related to the story of Hrómundur and the Icelandic set of *rimur* (Andrews 1912). The relationships between the seventeenth-century *Hrómundar saga* and the Scandinavian ballads was already noted by Erik Julius Björner in his *Nordiska kända dater* (1737), but it was Svend Grundtvig (1853:359–372) in his *Danmarks gamle Folkeviser* who first presented convincing argumentation for these relationships and identified corresponding characters in various versions. According to Albert LeRoy Andrews, of the four ballad versions that he analysed (two Danish, one Norwegian, and one Swedish), the oldest and the most original is the Danish ballad *Rigen Rambolt og Aller hin stærke*, preserved in Karen Brahe’s folio manuscript from 1550–60. He concluded that this version is independent of the Icelandic *rimur* and that its sources may even go back to the lost saga mentioned in the *Sturlunga* compilation. No Faroese variant of this ballad is known to me.

The lyrics of the metal song “Ramund hin unge”, detached from its long adaptation history, do not clearly resonate with *Hrómundar saga* in the form we know it today. Only three independent episodes establish the core of the song: the sewing of Ramund’s cloths, the killing of seven giants, and the killing of a certain emperor. Out of the 24 stanzas of the traditional *Ramund*, as published in Nyerup and Rahbek’s edition, Týr selected only five stanzas for the lyrics of “Ramund hin unge”, which were accompanied by a metal adaptation of a traditional Danish melody. It is worth emphasizing that Týr’s performances of material based on Norse or Scandinavian motifs are not limited to the single aforementioned local event in the Faroe Islands. Among other Norse-inspired songs, “Ramund hin unge” has been performed throughout Europe and North America: for example, it was included in the setlist of the band’s international tour in 2019, during which this song could be heard in venues from the United States, through Europe, to Turkey.

The song was first released in 2003 on the *Eric the Red* album together with one other adaptation of an Old Norse legendary saga, the Faroese ballad “Regin Smiður”, which is related to the Sigurður the dragon slayer tradition mentioned in the introduction to this article. *Eric the Red* takes its title from the last song on this album, inspired by the story of Eiríkur Þorvaldsson (known as *rauði*, “the Red”), the first settler of Greenland, an outlaw from Iceland of Norwegian origin, and known for his persistence in following paganism. One of the contributors to the *Encyclopaedia Metallum* described the album the following way:

the authentic Faroese viking metal band Týr follows up with an album about the legendary Eric The Red, along with other famous figures and events in viking history [...] These guys don't just talk about vikings, they sing it in the right language, are inspired by actual historical events, and rehash some famous folk melodies and texts on this release as well.¹⁷

The “authenticity” of the band, “rightness” of the language, and references to “actual historical events” seem to play a significant role in the band's perception and reception by their fans. Comments in a similar vein can be found on various internet forums where metal fans express their opinions about the album. Coming from the Faroe Islands and singing in Faroese about “famous” figures of the Norse past, such as Sigurður and Eiríkur (or the not so famous Hrómundur), gives Týr additional credibility that seems to be valued highly among their fans.

Týr is one of many representatives of the genre known as Viking Metal, in which Old Norse motifs play a significant role. It is a relatively new music genre with its roots in the 1990s when, under the influences of the Swedish black metal band Bathory, Nordic heavy metal musicians started to engage with Old Norse material (Heesch 2010; Helden 2010).¹⁸ The release of Bathory's album *Blood Fire Death* in 1988 marks the symbolic beginning of the genre, with its introductory song “Odens Ride Over Nordland” and the album's cover featuring Peter Nicolai Arbo's painting *Åsgårdsreien* from 1872 (Heesch & Kopański 2018; Trafford & Pluskowski 2007). The painting, inspired by the poem of the same name by the Norwegian author Johan Sebastian Welhaven, depicts the horde of warriors riding out of the dark clouds with a crowned Þór above them, portrayed in his goat-driven chariot and holding his hammer, highlighted by the sun (Huvaere 2018). Nordic metal bands have subsequently drawn on a similar stock of viking imagery and clichés, from depictions of viking warriors to the expansive use of runes and reproductions of actual medieval artefacts, most frequently the Thor's hammer. Týr is not any different in this regard, with their album covers drawing strongly on Norse imagery and promotional photos featuring band members wearing chain mail and carrying swords and axes.¹⁹

Imke von Helden recently observed that, broadly understood, national identity plays an important role in the Viking Metal scene, where pagan beliefs and viking ancestry are frequently emphasized by various means:

Nationality and a deep interest in the own country's history are deeply embedded in Viking metal [...] The link between Scandinavian musicians and their Viking roots is often stressed in promotion material and in interviews. Many Viking metal musicians turned away from the black metal-linked Satanism of the early 1990s – when young Norwegian musicians burned down medieval stave churches – to Viking motifs and more indistinct allusions to “old gods” and the subject of the Christian oppression of their heathen ancestors. (Helden 2010:258)

Similarly, Trafford and Pluskowski (2007:64–70) pointed out that not only the artists performing within the Viking Metal scene, but also their fans, frequently emphasize their connection to the “Vikings” by ancestry and take pride in their national heritage. While there is sometimes a fine line between the more benign expression of pride in national heritage and the jingoistic expression of white Scandinavian supremacy, one may consider whether turning to Norse motifs in Scandinavia cannot be interpreted as an expression of cultural racism, which is inherently based on history and culture.²⁰

While Týr have definitely rejected any accusations of right-wing sentiments,²¹ and throughout the years have made a shift from describing themselves as Viking Metal to Folk Metal,²² they are known for taking pride in the heritage of the Faroe Islands and being in favour of Faroese independence.²³ This is expressed, for example, in their band merchandise. One of the band’s T-shirt designs features the Faroese flag together with a quotation from the Faroese national anthem: “at bera tað merkið, sum eyðkennir verkið.” Moreover, it is worth noting that one of the band’s greatest hits, “Ormurin Langi” (from their first full-length album *How Far to Asgaard*), is a Viking Metal adaptation of a ballad of the same title written by the Faroese poet Jens Christian Djurhuus (1773–1853) who, according to Deeks (2016:104), was known for “expressing views against the ruling Danish authorities in the Faroe Islands”.

The Faroe Islands, which have been a part of the Danish kingdom for the past six centuries,²⁴ have experienced growing interest in self-determination since the Christmas Meeting of 1888, but only after the Second World War did the separatist movement gain momentum (Ackrén 2006; Jacobsen 2012; Hoff 2012; Adler-Nissen 2014). Currently, a number of parties in the Faroese parliament (Løgting) are proponents of Faroese independence, but they do not hold a majority (Krog 2019; Coogan 2019). In this context, it is not surprising that a band originating in a country where “a considerable part of the population [...] still feels that they have unresolved national issues within the current constitutional framework with Denmark”²⁵ – as can be read on the official website of the Faroese government *faroeislands.fo* – seeks inspiration in the local ballad tradition and Norse cultural heritage to build their own national identity. The use of Norse imagery for this same purpose has also taken place in other Nordic countries, especially since the heyday of Romanticism.²⁶ Even today, as Annika Olsson (2015) recently observed, all the Nordic countries claim the Old Norse-Icelandic sagas to be part of their cultural heritage.²⁷ When the Danish state does not recognize the Faroe Islands as a separate nation, but rather sees its people as a “community within the Danish nation” (Adler-Nissen 2014:9–10), it is not surprising that this very same community seeks ways of separating themselves from Danish culture.

During the February 2020 performance with the Symphony Orchestra of the Faroe Islands various traditional Faroese and Old Norse motifs

featured strongly throughout the evening. The setlist of this show included, for instance, “Ragnars Kvæði”, based on a Faroese ballad about Ragnar Loðbrók; “The Lay of Thrym”, alluding to the events described in *Brymskviða*, one of the most popular of the Eddic poems; and the aforementioned “Ormurin Langi”, based on a Faroese ballad about the Norwegian king Ólafur Tryggvason and his famous ship during the battle of Svolder.

The performance of Týr’s repertoire with the Symphony Orchestra of the Faroe Islands was a major commercial success, with all shows selling out. A show of this scale, taking place in one of the major cultural institutions of the Faroe Islands,²⁸ might be interpreted as lending official sanction to nationalistic sentiments among the population of the Faroe Islands.²⁹ However, the paradox of this appropriation of Norse material to serve political and ideological interests lies in the practice of reaching to a common Nordic heritage to empower local separatisms.³⁰ The choice of the Danish ballad *Ramund* – believed to be a translation of a Swedish ballad, which in turn has its roots in a medieval Danish ballad – by a band that supports Faroese independence from Denmark, exemplifies this intriguing combination of common heritage and separatist discourses.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to demonstrate how over the course of many centuries, political and ideological agendas have catalysed interest in Old Norse material. This material has been used to legitimize first dynastic claims and later national pride through references to cultural heritage and/or genealogies. By analysing three adaptations of the story of Hrómundur in various media and in different historical contexts, the present study has shown the ways in which socio-political circumstances can influence the cultural production of a narrative, from providing a direct impulse to writing an early modern saga, through modifications and amplifications of the narrative, to serving as inspiration for contemporary artists.

Although not all adaptations of the story can be clearly and precisely associated with particular historical events, the selected cases suggest that the reception of stories about the Scandinavian past is inflected by the ideological atmospheres that characterize certain regions and periods.

The creation of *17HsG* was a response to antiquarian interest in Old Norse literature as historical sources, which could serve the Danish absolute monarchy in its ideological contest with its neighbours across the Øresund and vice versa. This generated scholarly interest in royal genealogy and the geography of the events described in the legendary sagas. This interest is attested in the oldest manuscripts preserving *17HsG*, in the form of marginal notes supplied by the Dano-Norwegian royal antiquarian and historiographer Torfæus.

The reshaping of the saga of *Hrómundur* in the nineteenth century gives insight into the ideological atmosphere in Iceland in the years shortly before Icelandic nationalistic sentiments were clearly articulated or defined by Icelandic intellectuals in Copenhagen. The vague introduction of King Ólafur as one of many Scandinavian kings at the beginning of the saga shifts the geographical relevance of the saga from Denmark (as in *17HsG*) to an unspecified Nordic region. The genealogical additions at the end of *19HsG*, linking *Hrómundur* to the first settlers of Iceland, illustrate the importance of medieval genealogies reaching back to the settlement period for the creation of Icelandic national identity and provide a means of accumulating cultural capital for Icelanders, as direct descendants of famous legendary heroes.

The most recent adaptation of the story of *Hrómundur* into the Viking Metal genre acquires deeper contemporary relevance when viewed from the perspective of the Faroese independence movement. At a time when the Danish state does not recognize the Faroese people as a nation, the harnessing of Norse imagery to foster the national identity of the Faroese population seems to tread the same paths as those laid out in other Nordic countries in earlier centuries.

The present study does not claim that *Hrómundar saga Gr(e)ipssonar* played a special role in the creation of national identities in Denmark, Iceland, or the Faroe Islands in particular, but rather illustrates how historical circumstances can influence the transmission of such an unassuming story. Such a diachronic perspective on the history of its adaptations gives us valuable insight into the mechanisms of cultural production across centuries and sheds light on the role that political and ideological agendas, consciously articulated or not, have played and still play in the creation, dissemination and preservation of cultural artefacts. The value of analysing historical literary transmission in close relation to political history and the history of ideas lies in its potential for expanding our understanding of contemporary modes of cultural production, and in revealing the interests and agendas that underlie comparable artistic expressions today.

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Katarzyna Anna Kapitan
HM Queen Margrethe II Distinguished Research Fellow
Det Nationalhistoriske Museum på Frederiksborg Slot,
Þjóðminjasafn Íslands & Háskóli Íslands
e-mail: k.a.kapitan@gmail.com

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¹ A notable exception is Philip Lavender’s monograph from 2020, as well as works by Teresa Lansing (2012, 2016).

² This has most recently been rehearsed by Males (2020). On the prosimetrum in Old Norse literature see, for example, Harris (1997) and Sørensen (2001).

³ The same information is included in *Flóamanna saga* (Finnur Jónsson 1932), but its account is secondary to *Landnámabók*.

⁴ The first known official letter issued in Denmark concerning the collection of materials in Iceland was issued on 17 April 1596 by Christian IV. In 1594, Niels Krag became an official historiographer of the Danish crown and received the assignment of writing a history of Denmark in Latin (Jørgensen 1931:103). Only two years earlier in 1592–93, an Icelandic scholar named Arngrímur Jónsson resided in Copenhagen, where he published his *Brevis commentarius de Islandia* and established scholarly networks with influential Danes including Chancellor Arild Huitfeldt, Niels Krag, and Jon Jacobsen Venusin, with whom he discussed the richness of the Icelandic literary tradition. See Jakob Benediktsson (1950–1957), especially volume IV.

⁵ For more information on the life and work of Torfæus see, for example, Hedeager (2004), Jacobsen (2004), Erichsen (1786–1788), Roggen (2006), and Skovgaard-Petersen (2001). See also the introduction to the Norwegian translation of his *History of Norway* (Torfæus 2008–2014).

⁶ The letter is preserved in Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 285 b IV fol., f. 13v. The transcription of the relevant passage has been published by Kapitan (2022).

⁷ Already Árni Magnússon in his notes on various sagas considered *Hrómundar saga* as “impostura [...] Jóns Eggertssonar” (Jón Helgason 1980:41). Later, Jón Eggertson’s role as the author of *17HsG* was suggested by, for example, Bjarni Einarsson (1955), Jón Helgason (1979), and Jucknies (2009), as well as being recently discussed by Kapitan & Stegmann (2019) and Kapitan (2022).

⁸ For more information on the manuscripts that Jón Eggertson acquired in Iceland see, for example, Klemming (1880–1882), Jucknies (2009), and Kapitan (2022).

⁹ The exception is the 1737 edition by Björner (p. 8, sagas individually paginated), as it is based on another manuscript, Papp. Fol. nr 67.

¹⁰ This has been further discussed elsewhere, in Kapitan (2022). A similar tendency can be seen in the Swedish part of the *Illuga saga* tradition, discussed by Lavender (2020).

¹¹ Torfæus' opinion about the saga can be extrapolated from the comment that appears in Árni Magnússon's notes: "Saga af Hrómundi Greipssýni er einiskis verd. Þormóður Torfason in Epistola quadam mihi scripta, ad skilia sú sem eg hafdi sent honum. Et verum est, impostura enim est, Jons Eggertssonar." Árni's notes have been edited by Jón Helgason (1980:41).

¹² On the early modern approaches to legendary sagas and their historicity, see works by, for example, Hedeager (2004), Jørgensen (2008), and O'Connor (2018).

¹³ The saga manuscripts are Lbs 2404 8vo, Lbs 1572 4to, Lbs 679 4to, and BL Add 11,109. The first study of the younger adaptation was recently published by Kapitan (2021a).

¹⁴ Based on the tentative stemma of this saga presented by Kapitan (2018:152), it can be assumed that the archetype of this tradition did not include the names of Hrómundur's sons and that this information had been introduced in the common ancestor of the three manuscripts that include these names. At the same time, we cannot overlook the possibility that the fourth manuscript (or its exemplar) actually deleted the names of Hrómundur's sons.

¹⁵ On different ways of utilizing Old Norse-Icelandic literature in Denmark, Iceland, and Germany see Halink (2017).

¹⁶ The concert setlist can be found at <https://www.setlist.fm/setlist/tyr/2020/norurlandahusi-torshavn-faroe-islands-439877cf.html> (last accessed 8 May 2020). The recording is available on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/BkQ8YhLgrqg> (last accessed 8 May 2020).

¹⁷ Post by the user kluseba, published on the 14 July 2014 in Encyclopaedia Metallum: https://www.metal-archives.com/reviews/Týr/Eric_the_Red/33053/ (last accessed 25 May 2021).

¹⁸ Recently, Jón Karl Helgason (2017:133–152) drafted an overview of the developments in the use of Old Norse motifs in music ranging all the way from Johan Ernst Hartmann, through Richard Wagner, to Viking Metal.

¹⁹ The use of Norse imagery is a constant feature of Týr's artistic production, but the 2009 album *By the Light of the Northern Star* is an exemplary case, with promotional shots of the band members dressed as medieval warriors (or vikings) – wearing chain mail and carrying swords and axes – and the cover graphic featuring a viking carrying a sword standing on a hill with a longship sailing into a fjord in the background. Images can be found on the band's MySpace profile: <https://myspace.com/tyr1/mixes/classic-by-the-light-of-the-northern-star-362273> (last accessed 26 May 2021).

²⁰ On cultural racism in Scandinavia (with Denmark as the main focus) see, for example, Wren (2001) and the further literature therein.

²¹ A few years ago, the Berlin Centre for Fascism Research argued that the engagement of Týr and some sections of their audience with white supremacist imagery is troubling (Anonymous 2008). Even though the band rejected accusations of sympathizing with white supremacists, the incident resulted in a number of shows in Germany being cancelled. As a response to the accusations posed by, among others, the Berlin Centre for Fascism Research, the band released on their 2011 album entitled *The Lay of Thrym* a song with the provocative title "Shadow of the Swastika" and with even more controversial lyrics including lines such as, "You who think the hue of your hide means you are to blame / And your father's misdeeds are his son's to carry in shame / Not mine I'll take no part, you can shove the sins of your father / Where no light may pass and kiss my Scandinavian ass". Even though the songwriter, Heri Joensen, considers the song a strong response to the accusations, arguing that "all of those who could read knew that we don't represent any racist values" (Joensen & Metalist NY Magazine 2013), one might ask whether the imagery used in the song actually strengthens their claims, or whether it might trigger the opposite reception. An interview with the other band members might give the impression that the band is attempting to "reclaim" the swastika instead of dismissing it (Týr & WandererOfKalevala 2011).

²² The band has consciously changed the way it presents itself over time. While the band's biography on their old website, now only available through Wayback Machine, stated that "Almost every song is based on Faroese or Norwegian lore, and is riveted in the garb of the folk metal genre. Its approach unmistakably creates very true Viking metal." (<https://web>.

archive.org/web/20150325143801/http://www.tyr.fo/biography, (last accessed 20 May 2020), no mentions of vikings appear in the current biography, and only Faroese elements are emphasized. Recently on Týr's use of Faroese ballad material, see Christensen (2019). For Faroese metal music in general, see Green (2014).

²³ The pro-independence stand can be concluded from the interview with the band's front man Heri Joensen published on the *Norse Myth* website (Joensen & Seigfried 2013).

²⁴ The Kalmar Union from 1397 can be seen as the beginning of the relationship between the Faroe Islands and Denmark, but the Faroe Islands were a Norwegian dependency until the Treaty of Kiel in 1814 (Adler-Nissen 2014:4).

²⁵ See the article "Faroese Nation Building" at <https://www.faroeislands.fo/the-big-picture/history/faroese-nation-building/> (last accessed 20 May 2020).

²⁶ A good overview of the role of Old Norse in Scandinavian nationalism can be found in Lassen (2008).

²⁷ While Olsson focuses on literary histories of Scandinavian countries, also popular culture across the Nordics seems to draw widely on Old Norse motifs. As an example of that it is worth mentioning that recently the Swedish folk rock band Garmarna recorded their version of the ballad of Hrómundur in Swedish: song called "Ramunder" appeared on their latest album *Förbundet* released in November 2020. I would like to thank Sheryl McDonald Werronen for bringing this to my attention.

²⁸ Norðurlandahúsið in Tórshavn is directly under the Nordic Council of Ministers. Further details can be found at <https://www.nlh.fo/fo/um-husid/vaelkomin/> (last accessed 22 May 2020).

²⁹ Perhaps it is similar to the Norwegian case analysed by Taylor (2010:162), where Black Metal was just one of the expression of "ideologies of ethnic and racial nationalism, glorifying a myth of pre-modern, pre-Christian and pre-immigration."

³⁰ On Scandinavian exceptionalism see, for example, Geyer (2003) and Fochesato & Bowles (2015).

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Editorial address:

Prof. Arne Bugge Amundsen

Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages

University of Oslo

Box 1010 Blindern

NO–0315 Oslo, Norway

phone + 4792244774

e-mail: a.b.amundsen@ikos.uio.no

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