

Why the Icelandic ‘Author’ was Interested in the Legitimacy of Throne Claimants during Norwegian Civil War?: The Evolution of Norse-Icelandic Historical Writing in the Light of 12th Century Scandinavia (Takahiro Narikawa)

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Around the Year 1130 is marked as a turning point for the Scandinavian Middle Ages. Succession disputes among several royal claimants, including some with dubious legitimacy, broke out in all of three developing Scandinavian kingdoms, Denmark, Norway and Sweden, and except for Denmark, it lasted roughly until the middle of the 13th century. Norway had ca. 20 claimants for the throne during that period, and only four of them met their natural deaths.¹ It is true that this political strife often led to the bloody and sometimes quite severe rivalry between the followers of each candidate, or political factions, but it also resulted in large-scale political-social transformations in the kingdoms: Many of the old secular aristocratic families fell (especially in case of Norway), and new ruling elites, including such dynasties like the Sverrir’s in Norway and the Folkungs in Sweden, rose.

Iceland, located far away in the North Atlantic, and medieval Icelandic literature seemed to be immune from this political development in the Scandinavian Peninsula, at least at a first glance. Twelfth-Iceland saw a gradual penetration of the written text in Latin alphabet into its society, but the age of the Sturlungs, characterized by the severe feuds among the fewer Icelandic aristocratic families and intervention from Norwegian rulers, had not begun yet.² In addition to the famous passage in the Book of the Icelanders (*Íslendingabók*),³ the introduction of the First Grammatical Treatise (*Fyrsta málfræðiritgerðin*), roughly dated to the middle of the twelfth century, testifies this early stage of the vernacular culture, by enumerating a series of genres of the Norse written texts the Icelanders had begun to written down by this time, as following: Laws (*lög*), genealogies (*áttvísi*), the Holy exegesis(?): *þýðingar helgar*, and the wise lore (*spakligu fröðri*) written down by Ari Þorgilsson.⁴ Among them, I have already argued the relationship between the genealogical interests of the 12th- and 13th century Icelanders and the political disorder in Norway at that time. In this paper, I shift my attention from the genealogies to the Christian literatures (*þýðingar helgar*) and contemporary historical writings, such as the Books of the Icelanders in this paper, and will attempt to demonstrate an aspect of the possible connection between the 12th century political turmoil in Scandinavia, so-called ‘Civil Wars’ period and the reception as well as the development of this genre into Iceland, especially focusing on one Icelander, Eiríkr Oddsson.

¹ C. Krag, *Norges historie fram til 1319* (Oslo, 2000), s. 103.

² For recent overview of the process of this so-called ‘textualization’ of medieval Norse-Icelandic society, see J. Quinn, “From Orality to Literacy in Medieval Iceland,” in: *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. M. Clunies-Ross (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 30-60; Concerning the classical accounts of the age of the Sturlungs, see Jón Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth*, trans. Haraldur Bessason (Winnipeg, 1974; rep., 2006), pp. 222-87.

³ Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, Kap. 10, í: ÍF, i (Reykjavík, 1968), bl. 23.

⁴ Hreinn Benediktsson (ed.), *The First Grammatical Treatise* (Reykjavík, 1972), p. 206.

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1. ‘Martyred’ Political Leaders in the 12th century Scandinavia and *Hryggjarstykki*

The ‘Civil Wars’ in 12th- and 13th century Scandinavia killed several political-factional leaders, including kings and pretenders alike, mentioned above, and some of these victims were later regarded as saints, and their death as a kind of ‘martyrdom’⁵: Two Olafs, i.e. Óláfr Tryggvason and St. Óláfr (Olaf) in Norway, two St. Cnut(s) in Denmark, and St. Erik in Sweden were very popular both during the Middle Ages and today, but there were also minor ones. Norway produced five such minor ‘saints’ during the twelfth century: Haraldr gilli Magnússon (d. 1136), Sigurðr slembidjárn (d. 1139), Óláfr Guðbrandsson ógæfa (d. 1173), Eysteinn Haraldsson (d. 1155), and Þorleifr breiðskeggr (d. 1190), alleged son of Eysteinn. They have not usually become the subject of hagiographic literatures to promote their sanctity: The references to their sanctity are largely passing and incidental entries in other sources like kings’ sagas.⁶ There are two Old Norse-Icelandic hagiographic sources, however, that who set Royal Pretender and Regicide Sigurðr slembidjárn as the work’s protagonist: The first work is memorial lay (*erfidrápa*) Sigurðarbálkr by Icelander Ívar Ingimundarson,⁷ another, prose work is *Hryggjarstykki*, allegedly written by Eiríkr Oddsson, also the Icelander.

The text of *Hryggjarstykki* itself was now lost, and we don’t know what the original work of *Hryggjarstykki* looked like. Two of the three major kings’ sagas, i.e. *Heimskringla* and *Morkinskinna*, however, explicitly refer to this ‘work (*bók*)’ as an important source of their accounts for the 1130s, specifying Eiríkr Oddsson as its author.⁸ Several studies, including the most recent and detailed one by Bjarni Guðnason, have tried to re-construct the original text, without doubt one of the oldest vernacular writings from medieval Iceland. The following two points are summaries of the observation by Bjarni’s latest study on reconstructing *Hryggjarstykki*: First of all, the scope of the now lost original version of *Hryggjarstykki* covered the period during 1130s, ended with the description of the torture as well as the death of Pretender Sigurðr slembidjárn.⁹ Bjarni argues convincingly that the time scope of the original was probably limited to the period between 1136 and

⁵ For better overview of this phenomena, see Haki Antonsson, *St. Magnús of Orkney: A Scandinavian Martyr-Cult in Context* (Leiden- Boston, 2007), pp. 103-45.

⁶ On Haraldr gilli Magnússon, *Haraldssona saga*, Kap. 1, í: *Heimskringla*, iii (ÍF XXVIII), útg. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (Reykjavík, 1951), bl. 303; As for Óláfr Guðbrandsson ógæfa and Eysteinn Haraldsson, respectively see *Mágnuss saga Erlingssonar*, Kap. 34, í: *Heimskringla*, iii, bl. 410 [Cf. *Fagrskinna*, Kap. 120, í: ÍF XXIX, útg. Bjarni Einarsson (Reykjavík, 1985), bl. 358]; *Haraldssona saga*, Kap. 32, í: *Heimskringla*, iii (ÍF XXVIII), bl. 345.

⁷ Ívar Ingimundarson, *Sigurðarbálkr*, ed. K. E. Gade, in: *Skaldic poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, ii: Poetry from the Kings’ sagas 2: From 1035 to c. 1300, part II*, ed. K. E. Gade (Turnhout, 2009), pp. 501-27.

⁸ *Haraldssona saga*, Kap. 11, í: *Heimskringla*, iii (ÍF XXVIII), bls. 318f.: Hann sagði Eiríki Oddssyni fyrir, en hann reit þessa frásögn. Eiríkr reit bók þá, er kölluð er Hryggjarstykki, Í þeirri bók er sagt frá Haraldi gilla ok tveimr sonum hans ok frá Magnúsi blinda ok frá Sigurði slembi, allt til dauða þeira; *Morkinskinna* (ÍF XXIV), ii, útg. Ármann Jakobsson & Þórður Ingi Guðjónsson (Reykjavík, 2011), bl. 185: Nú er at segja frá sonum Haralds konungs, Inga og Sigurði, sem sagt hefir vitr maðr ok skynsamr, Eiríkr Oddsson, ok er þessi frásögn est eptir sögu Hákonar maga, lends manns.

⁹ Bjarni Guðnason, *Fyrsta sagan* (Reykjavík, 1978), ss. 11-32.

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1139, focusing the events happened between the deaths of two Norwegian rulers, i.e. Haraldr gilli and Sigurðr slombidjárn. This observation is roughly based on the descriptions of both kings’ sagas, and he suggests further that *Hryggjarstycki* was originally intended as ‘Sagas of Sigurðr slombidjárn’. Secondly, none of the extant texts in three major kings’ sagas, are dependent each other on the textual transmission: Each of the texts, *Morkinskinna*, *Fagrskinna*, and *Heimskringla*, represents independent descendant of the the original *Hryggjarstycki*,¹⁰ although we cannot exclude the possibility that the now lost older-*Morkinskinna* (ÆMSk) mediated the textual transmission, and the extant version of *Morkinskinna* (MSkMS: GKS 1009 fol., usually dated around 1275) is the best among them that represent lost texts of *Hryggjarstycki*, containing ca. 6000 words,¹¹ in contrast to *Fagrskinna* (ca. 1800) and *Heimskringla* (ca. 5600 words).¹²

We don’t have enough time to take these arguments by Bjarni in scrutiny today, neither do I have enough knowledge to conduct such task. Instead, I mean to complement his textual analysis with the following two points, mainly from the contextual point of view: A) How the Icelandic author of this text, allegedly Eiríkr Oddsson, collected the information about contemporary event in Scandinavia ?, and, B) Why the author organized and record such events in form of *Hryggjarstycki* ?

2. *Hryggjarstycki*’s Informants and Author Eiríkr Oddsson

One of the striking features of *Hryggjarstycki* is a wide circle of its informants over the Scandinavian Peninsula, including both the Scandinavians and the Icelandic author’s fellow countrymen, i.e. the Icelanders in Scandinavia. The accounts of kings’ sagas, cited above, allude that Eiríkr got acquainted with the following people, and succeeded in getting information of relevant events for his later work: Hallr Þorgeilsson [retinue of Norwegian King Ingi krokrygg Haraldsson gilla (d. 1161)], Ívarr skrauthanki Kálfsson [later bishop of Trondheim (1140s: d. before c. 1150)], via Guðríðr Birgisdóttir [sister of Jón Birgisson (d. 1157)], Hákon magi [aristocrat (*lend mann*) under the reign of the sons of Harald gilli], and Ketill the Dane (d.1150), provost of St. Mary’s in Ålborg, Denmark, who later canonized as ‘Ketill the Confessor’, and other, ‘many, wise and truth-telling men’.¹³ Although the majority of them seemed to belong to the upper strata of society, both of secular and of clerical background, They included both the protagonist’s former supporters and ex-foes, and further, in and out of Norway.

These wide and varied origins of the informants can be interpreted in either of two ways: The first possibility is that the author diligently established a variety of connections to gather the information for his work to be written. This model regards Eiríkr as a kind of medieval precursor of

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, ss. 54f.

¹¹ *Morkinskinna*, ii (ÍF XXIV), bls. 185-210.

¹² From: *Magnúss saga blinda ok Haralds gilla*, Kap. 13, to: *Haraldssona saga*, Kap. 12, í: *Heimskringla*, iii (ÍF XXVIII), bls. 297-320.

¹³ *Haraldssona saga*, Kap. 11, í: *Heimskringla*, iii (ÍF XXVIII), bls. 318 (Hallr Þorgeilsson), 319 (Hákon magi and others); Kap. 10, í: *Heimskringla*, iii (ÍF XXVIII), bls. 317 (Guðríðr Birgisdóttir); Kap. 10, í: *Heimskringla*, iii (ÍF XXVIII), bls. 320 (Provost Ketill). Cf. *Morkinskinna* (ÍF XXIV), ii, bls. 185 (Hákon magi and others), 206 (Gyriðr = Guðríðr Birgisdóttir).

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nowadays journalist: He went around Scandinavia, collected the information about Sigurðr slembidjárn, and arranged ‘his’ narrative based on them in his homeland (perhaps). It would be almost impossible for the Iceland to exchange letters with pen pals in the first half of the twelfth century,¹⁴ so he would have to visit Scandinavia and to speak to the people concerned in person. Alternatively, the persons concerned, mentioned above, may have represented the tip of the iceberg of a much extensive network of the personnel that Eiríkr had already get acquainted with before he decided to write *Hryggjarstykki* down. In either case, we have to ask another question here: why this Icelandic author had, or tried to establish such a wide variant of acquaintances in Scandinavia? Was it typical for the 12th- century Icelanders, or, even for the Scandinavians?

Unfortunately, no source on Eiríkr Oddsson besides some allusions in kings’ sagas is available to us, so it is very difficult to reconstruct his background. What the sources tell us as following: He ‘himself and his sons took part in the expeditions, and most of the wars’, and ‘heard these events of Einarr Pálsson spoken in Bergen’, so, ‘he wrote his accounts down, after what he heard and what he saw’.¹⁵ We even don’t know, however, whether Eiríkr had really adhered to the political faction of *Hryggjarstykki*’s protagonist, Sigurðr slembidjárn, and further, whether Eiríkr had ever met his hero in person. The accounts of *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* about the final battle of Sigurðr at Holmengrã (Hólm inn grã) explicitly cite two witnesses, Hallr Þorgeilsson and Ívarr skrauthanki Kálfsson, as an authority on Sigurðr’s downfall, not Eiríkr, the author, himself.¹⁶ In other words, it is no reason to suppose that Eiríkr himself was also present at this crucial battle. The accounts of the battle at Holmengrã and the following death of Sigurðr must have constituted the majority of work, which could be a fairly short one, consisting of only one or two leaves of parchments.¹⁷ If so, why did Eiríkr decide to write the life of Sigurðr whom he had perhaps felt not so strong sympathy?

3. Being an Icelander in Scandinavia during ‘Civil Wars’ Period

It is the relationship between Eiríkr’s Icelandic background and the way of collecting, and further, organizing the information he had obtained together, that needs to be focused upon here: I suggest that we regards him as an epitome of the 12th- century Icelanders those who served rulers and other aristocrats in Scandinavian kingdoms with their art of literature. Icelanders had achieved fame as excellent skalds at latest since the middle of the 10th century.¹⁸ The skalds wandered from

¹⁴ The oldest extant (albeit in translation) text of the correspondence between Iceland and Scandinavia is the letter of admonition, written by Archbishop Eysteinn of Trondheim around 1173, to the Icelanders. *Diplomatarium Islandicum*, i, útg. Jón Sigurðsson (København, 1857), nr. 38, bls. 218-23.

¹⁵ Respectively from: *Morkinskinna* (ÍF XXIV), ii, Kap. 96, bls. 185: ...han sjálft ok synir hans váru í þessum ferðum ok í flestum orrostum; *Haraldssona saga*, Kap. 7, í: *Heimskringla*, iii (ÍF XXVIII), bl. 313: Svá segir Eiríkr Oddsson... at hann heyrði í Björgyn segja frá þessum atburðum Einar Pálsson; *Haraldssona saga*, Kap. 11, í: *Heimskringla*, iii (ÍF XXVIII), bl. 319: ...reit hann eptir sjálfs sin heyrn eða sýn.

¹⁶ See note 13.

¹⁷ A. Holtmark, “Hryggjarstykki,” *Historisk tidsskrift* (norsk) 45 (1966), ss. 60-64.

¹⁸ K. E. Gade, “Poetry and its Changing Importance in Medieval Icelandic Culture,” in: *Old*

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one court of the magnates to another in Scandinavia, and dedicated a panegyric to their ‘lords’, composed in a strict and complicated meters with full of mythical metaphors (kennings). Due to their profession, they had to be familiar with the deeds of their potential patrons, and to establish powerful connections among them. These professional characteristics arguably made the skalds and their works the best kind of the contemporary sources for Scandinavian history. Recent studies have also shed light on the resurgence of the interest in this skaldic culture amongst the 12th- and 13th century Icelandic elites as a literary tool in the social competition and differentiation.¹⁹ Guðrún Norðal, to take an example, focuses on the life and work of Einarr Skúlason (c. 1090- after c. 1155), the Icelandic skald from the first half of the 12th century, illustrating such an important role of Icelandic elites in this vernacular as well as Christian-Norse cultural ‘renaissance’.²⁰ The list of skalds (*Skáldatal*) from medieval Icelandic manuscripts indeed enumerates 12 Scandinavian dignitaries Einarr supposedly worked for, including 1 king of Sweden, 1 earl (jarl) in Sweden and 2 Norwegian magnates.²¹

The following two observations can be drawn from a series of the rulers, served by Einarr Skúlason. The first one is the high mobility of the twelfth-century Icelanders with the skaldic arts beyond the emerging political, geographical, and linguistic border(s). A young lad from Iceland, with enough education and skill, could travel around Scandinavia, and accumulate not only his reputation as a skald, but also, the friendship with dignitaries as well as the knowledge of ongoing political events. Hence, Icelanders was likely to enjoy an advantageous position over his Scandinavian rivals owing to this kind of mobility. Recent historical studies on the 12th century Scandinavia repeatedly emphasize the fluidity of various political factions, especially in its earlier phase of the ‘Civil Wars’ period(-c. 1160),²² we can nevertheless detect a certain tendency from the shifting alliances of the skalds: While non-Icelandic (Norwegian?) skalds tended to serve the son or younger brother of their former lord(s), Icelandic skalds seemed to be relatively less tentative to shift their alliance to their former lord’s rival, as if serving their lords as a kind of professional. We can see it in the case of another Icelandic skald, Ívar Ingimundarsonr, who composed another source for Sigurðr slembidjárn, *Sigurðarbálkr*. Although only *Sigurðarbálkr* for Sigurðr is extant now, the list of skalds (*Skáldatal*) tells us that he served 3 kings of Norway before Sigurðr: Magnús berföttr Ólafsson (d. 1103), two of Magnússon, Eysteinn (d. 1122) and Sigurðr Jórsalafari (d. 1130). Eiríkr Oddsson and his fellow

Icelandic Literature and Society, ed. M. Clunies-Ross (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 61-95, esp. at pp. 70-73.

¹⁹ Guðrún Norðal, *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the 12th and 13th Centuries* (Toronto, 2001).

²⁰ Ead., *Skaldic Versifying and Social Discrimination in Medieval Iceland* (London, 2001).

²¹ *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar: nafnaþulur og skáldatal*, útg. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík, 1954), bls. 254, 58, 260, 263f., 268.

²² S. Bagge, “The Structures of the Political Factions in the Internal Struggles of the Scandinavian Countries during the High Middle Ages,” *Scandinavian Journal of History* 24-3 (1999), pp. 299-320, esp. at pp. 312-17; B. Opheim, “Med stønad frå frendar og vener”: *Slektskap og venskap som partidannande faktorar i den norske innbyrdesstriden 1130-1208* (Hovedoppgåve, Historisk institutt, UiB, 1996), særleg på Kap. 3.

countrymen could share such, in a sense, 'professional' attitude to their lord.

The second observation obtained from the scrutiny of the career of such 'professional', 'wandering' skalds from 12th century Iceland is that the Old-Norse panegyric was still in demand over emerging all the three Scandinavian kingdoms. Indeed, a new sub-genre of royal panegyric gave birth around 1100, as a result of the intensifying cultural communication between Christian rulers in Scandinavian Peninsula and Icelandic skalds: While skaldic poets had already had a long tradition of commemorating their former, dead lord by composing a memorial lay (*erfidrápa*) during pre-Christian era, the new Christian *erfidrápa*, based on the Christian notion of rulership, appeared in 11th century Scandinavia, and shifted its focus further from the dead ruler's personal salvation to what the ruler had done for the salvation of the people of the realm.²³ According to Clunies-Ross, *Eiríksdrápa* (c. 1105), composed by Icelander Markús Skeggjason and dedicated to Late King Erik Ejegod of Denmark (d. 1104), epitomizes such development of Christian royal panegyric, praising King Erik as a defender of the church.²⁴ *Sigurðarbálkr* was also one of this new *erfidrápar*, comparing the suffering of Sigurðr slembidjárn with the Passion of Jesus.²⁵ As we shall see in the next section, this pattern of cultural development- the arrival as a product of the cultural encounter between the Danes and the Icelanders, and its wide diffusion into the Old-Norse world, equally applies to the evolution of historical writing in Iceland, represented by *Hryggjarstykki*.

4. Question of A Genre and Style of Writing: Memorial Lay (*erfidrápa*) versus Prose Historical Writing

It is time to shift our attention from the skaldic verses to *Hryggjarstykki* again. As shown above, two contemporary sources of Sigurðr slembidjárn, i. e. *Hryggjarstykki* and memorial lay (*erfidrápa*) *Sigurðarbálkr*, share several characteristics in connections to potential informants, author's relation to the subject, and so on, derived from the fact that both were the work of the Icelanders. We need now to explore the difference between these two works, or genres, as well as the similarities. If Old Norse-Icelandic royal panegyric was still in high demand over Scandinavian Peninsula, why did not Eiríkr Oddsson arrange his accounts in the skaldic poetry? Was it a result of conscious choice of the genre? To answer this question should be a key to understand the evolution of the prose style writing about contemporary political events in Scandinavia, represented by *Hryggjarstykki*.

I would like to focus attention to one of the most fundamental questions on the lost, original accounts of *Hryggjarstykki*, which I dare not to have explored so far. What was the style of writing of the original work? Put it in more plain way, whether lost *Hryggjarstykki* contained skaldic verses, especially from *Sigurðarbálkr*, in its accounts? This question is also relevant to different styles of writing amongst the vernacular historical writing in Iceland, in its infancy: While 'authors' of the

²³ M. Clunies-Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Woodbridge, 2005), pp. 48-51.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 129f.; Markús Skeggjason, *Eiríksdrápa*, Sts. 23, 25, ed. J. Carroll, in: *Skaldic poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, ii: Poetry from the Kings' sagas 2*, part I, pp. 432-60, at pp. 452-55.

²⁵ Ívar Ingimundarson, *Sigurðarbálkr*, Sts. 43-45, ed. K. E. Gade, in: *Skaldic poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, ii: Poetry from the Kings' sagas 2: From 1035 to c. 1300, part II*, pp. 526f.

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later, ‘classical’ kings’ sagas incorporate the skaldic stanzas of royal panegyric into their prose narrative, as authorities on the past history of Scandinavian ruler, the book of the Icelanders, oldest historical writing in Iceland, never cite skaldic verses. And, according to the generally accepted opinion, the original version of *Hryggjarstykki* did not appear to cite skaldic stanzas as authorities.²⁶

It does mean neither that Eiríkr Oddsson did not use *Sigurðarbálkr* as a source for his hero, however, nor that *Sigurðarbálkr*, memorial lay (*erfidrápa*) dedicated to the regicide, was not so disseminated widely enough to be available to the authors of historical writing, such as Eiríkr. By contraries, previous researches have suggested that Eiríkr extensively made use of this material.²⁷ If so, why he did not follow his predecessor’s path, i.e. composed another memorial lay for Sigurðr, or, just mention as authorities of the events? The dichotomy between the oral and the written must have been irrelevant to him: The authorities of the events were almost exclusively oral ones.²⁸ Hence, it is plausible to suppose that Eiríkr made a deliberate choice not to refer to Ívarr’s poem.

I suggest here that original *Hryggjarstykki*’s style of writing can be regarded as a counterpart to Christian royal panegyric. It means that the prose historical writing and the skaldic, panegyric verse on dignitaries (rulers and aristocrats) in Scandinavia evolved in parallel during 12th- century Iceland. We have at least some reason for believing that the art of courtly skaldic poem or memorial lay did not satisfy the need of all the 12th-century Icelanders, especially those who were eager to survive the social competition also with their Scandinavian fellows. Gade analyzes change of the social origin of skalds, and concludes that the (near) monopoly of the Icelandic skalds within the ruler’s courts in Scandinavia was over by the beginning of the 12th century.²⁹ Subsequently, non-Icelandic, probably Norwegian, skalds appeared to come to occupy the mainstream faction among the skalds, although their panegyrics are not recorded in the manuscripts of kings’ sagas, produced in Iceland. It was about just a time when aggravating succession disputes impacted also upon the ideological struggles among royal claimants to reinforce their legitimacy.³⁰ It is natural to presume some sorts of interrelation between this rise of non-Icelandic skalds and the evolution of historical writings in Iceland, and between such literary developments in Iceland and the contemporary political developments in Scandinavia.

Gade also argues that the rise of the vernacular saga writing, relying rather on oral informants than on skaldic panegyrics as an authority, lessened the prominence of the Icelanders in the field of skaldic court poetry in Scandinavia.³¹ My suggestion as for this matter, however, is to modify her

²⁶ Cf. Bjarni Guðnason, *Fyrsta sagan*, ss. 44-48; Theodore M. Anderson & Kari E. Gade (trans.), *Morkinskinna: The earliest Icelandic Chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030-1157)* (Ithaca, NY, 2000), p. 46; Gade, “Poetry and its Changing Importance,” p. 69.

²⁷ Bjarni Guðnason, *Fyrsta sagan*, ss. 82-90.

²⁸ See above, note 13.

²⁹ Gade, “Poetry and its Changing Importance,” pp. 82-84.

³⁰ Takahiro Narikawa, “Dreams in Old Norse-Icelandic Royal Biographies as Representations of the Dynastic Identity: The Case of the Fairhair Dynasty,” In: *Preprint for the 15th International Saga Conference*, ed. A. Matthias V. Nordvig & Lisbeth H. Torfing (Århus, 2012), pp. 44-48, at p. 46.

³¹ Gade, “Poetry and its Changing Importance,” p. 84.

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hypothesis, namely to reverse the cause-and-effect relationship: 12th century Icelanders who faced difficulty in dominating the praising court poem sought to break new ground in the new genre of source to promote the legitimacy of their patron as well as the solidarity within the political faction, then we adapted foreign literary genre into vernacular Old Norse-Icelandic, to meet their purpose. Evidences that confirms this conjecture is twofold. First one is the problem of audience. Even in the last of the 12th century Norwegian patron and audience appeared still to understand as well as to evaluate the value of Christianized memorial lay (*erfidrápa*) as a political-ideological instrument, and a few skalds actually continued to engage in composing this genre. Blakkr’s *Breiðskegdrápa*, in memory of rebellion’s leader Þorleifr breiðskeggr (killed 1191), testifies the vitality of this genre itself, although this poem is a little exceptional in its sarcastic attitude to the subject.³² The second argument to confirm the hypothesis concerns the contribution of foreign influence to the establishment of the new genre. Recent studies, such as Bjarni Guðnason and Haki Antonsson, reach an agreement in regard with the importance of the influence of foreign literature, namely Danish, for its style, although their opinions differ in the possible connection between *Hryggjarstykki* and the lost *vita* of St. Magnús of Orkney.³³ Aalborg in Denmark, burial place of Sigurðr slembidjárn, functioned through 12th century as a sort of asylum for Norwegian throne contenders, and was also known for the fact that the city received another royalty from Norway whom ‘some Danes’ regarded him as a saint, i.e. Óláfr Guðbrandsson ógæfa. Even Provost Ketill, the informant on the burial of Sigurðr, himself was later canonized. Was this city an ideal place for Icelandic Eiríkr to learn new mode of literature and to adapt it to his work, in order to attract attention of wider audiences, including some Danes and Icelanders those who belonged to the faction of his hero, Sigurðr?

5. Concluding Remarks

As Bjarni Guðnason remarked, the exact purpose and context of writing *Hryggjarstykki* was almost impossible to reconstruct,³⁴ so much of my argument here remain hypothetical at most. Nevertheless, the ambiguity encompassing the work and its circumstances does not diminish the literary as well as historical importance of this work, namely as a milestone for kings’ saga for the later generation. The argument of this paper shows a complexity of the development of the writing culture in Iceland, which often intertwined with the contemporary political upheavals in Scandinavia, as well as the changing relationship between the Icelandic elites and foreign cultural milieu. The evolution of the vernacular prose writing in Iceland, epitomized by *Hryggjarstykki* and its author Eiríkr Oddsson, should be considered within such nexus, together with adjacent field of study, such as Scandinavian history and a history of Old-Norse skaldic poetry.

³² Blakkr, *Breiðskeggsdrápa*, Sts. 1f., ed. K. E. Gade, in: *Skaldic poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, ii: *Poetry from the Kings’ sagas* 2, part II, pp. 647f. According to Gade, the editor of the latest critical edition, we cannot identify the poet’s nationality with any certainty (“Biography”, p. 647)

³³ Bjarni Guðnason, *Fyrsta sagan*, s. 124; Haki Antonsson, *St. Magnús of Orkney*, pp. 171f,

³⁴ Bjarni Guðnason, *Fyrsta sagan*, s. 124.

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