

Humanities Conference University of Iceland
 The Trouble with Memory II
 Irish-Icelandic Memory Studies
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10.45 – 12.15

The Middle Ages II

Pétur Knútsson: “Líadan and Cuirithir in *Laxdæla Saga*” (old title)

Úlfar Bragason: „Creating the Medieval Saga“ - genealogies and memory

Ciaran McDonough: “Acht do bhrígh go bhfuaras scríobhtha i sein-leabhraibh iad” (“Because I found them in some old books”): Medieval Memories and Nationalist Intentions in Nineteenth-Century Irish Antiquarianism

Pétur Knútsson: Líadan in *Laxdæla saga*: an oral dialogic?

Twelve years ago I published a paper in Icelandic¹ where I pointed out that the one thing that everybody knows about *Laxdæla Saga*, Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir’s famous reply to her son “To him I was worst whom I loved most”, appears to echo a line of the well-known Irish poem sometimes known as Líadan’s Lament, *an ro carus ro cráidius*, ‘whom I loved I harmed.’ Its many Irish connections are a prominent feature of *Laxdæla saga*, but for some curious reason no one as far as I know had chanced on this correspondence before my essay.^{2,3} The Líadan poem has been dated as 9th century, and seems to have had some currency in Ireland;⁴ and there were, as we shall see, Irish speakers in Guðrún’s neighbourhood, so this is not as outrageous as it sounds.

1 The phonetically driven oxymoron

Let us examine this correspondence before going any further.

metaplasmic oxymora:
þeim var ek verst er ek unna mest
“to him/them I was worst whom I loved most”
an ro carus ro cráidius
“whom I loved I harmed”

¹ Pétur Knútsson, „Þeim var ek verst: Líadan og Cuirithir í *Laxdælu*.“ *Ritið. Tímarit Hugvísindastofnunar Háskóla Íslands* /2003, 153-162

² Removed: *As far as I know*: but since Guðrún’s famous reply is perhaps the thing that everybody knows best about her, an Irish source would hardly have gone unnoticed if it had been found before.

³ removed: although Líadan has been mentioned in connection with Kormáks saga Gisli Sigurðsson? Follow up?

⁴ It’s mentioned for instance in other texts, e.g. the Old Woman of Beare, and it survives in 2 16th-cent manuscripts

To my mind there is little doubt that the Icelandic is a translation of the Irish.⁵ My argument centres on the verbs *carus* ‘I loved’ and *cráidius* ‘I harmed’ which are both first person in the simple past tense,⁶ but the particle *ro* makes the verb perfective: ‘I have loved, I have harmed’: the events are complete, the story is finished.⁷ The Icelandic seems to depart from the Irish in two ways: the Icelandic verbs are simple past, not perfect, and the two superlative adverbs ‘worst’ and ‘most’ are a new addition.— But in fact it is just this addition which convinces me of the textual connection, and this in two ways. Old Icelandic verbs are generally unmarked for aspect, so that *ek unna* could mean both ‘I loved’ and ‘I have loved’; but the presence of *mest* and *verst* has the same effect as the particles *ro...ro* in the Irish, in that the perfect aspect is established, the story is finished; I loved *most*, I harmed *worst*. — No less significantly, these two adverbs also complete the translation stylistically. The Irish is a striking oxymoron, a juxtaposition of two opposites. The verbs *carus* and *cráidius* have the same syntactical function with opposed meanings. In this case the trope is heightened with what medieval rhetoric calls *metaplasm*: the two words have strikingly similar phonetic shapes.⁸ The Icelandic translation manages to maintain this metaplasmic oxymoron both functionally and formally with the adverbs *mest* and *verst*. The translation is both accurate and elegant.

My 2003 paper is really no more than a footnote to Rory McTurk’s 2001 paper “Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir: An Icelandic Wife of Bath?”, and Rory’s paper in its turn builds on the work of scholars such as Hermann Pálsson, Gísli Sigurðsson, Helga Kress, Svava Jakobsdóttir, and Ármann Jakobsson (these references are in Rory’s and my papers.)

Pétur Knútsson. 2003. ‘Þeim var ek verst: Líadan og Cuirithir í *Laxdælu*.’ *Ritið* 153-162

McTurk, Rory. 2001. ‘Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir: and Icelandic Wife of Bath?’ *Sagnaheimur. Studies in honour of Hermann Pálsson*. Ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir and Rudolf Simek. 175-194

⁵ removed: The Irish relative particle *an* is not marked for number, and nor is the Icelandic *þeim*: either ‘him’ or ‘them’ did she love and harm.

⁶ to be exact: 1st person singular perfect indicative active, conjunct, syntactically relative (<http://www.utexas.edu/cola/centers/lrc/eieol/iriol-0-R.html>)

⁷ Ég þakkaTadhg Ó hÍfearnáin í írskudeild Háskólans í Limerick fyrir þessar skýringar.

⁸ removed: with the same initial consonants, the same endings, and in fact the same vowels (the two *i*’s in *cráidius* are not sounded, but serve to palatalize the *d*)

Rory is concerned with the correspondences between the figure of Guðrún in *Laxdæla* and Chaucer's Wife of Bath. He deals at length with the theme of the Loathly Lady which is to be found widely in European literature and we can summarize some of these correspondences here:

The Woman by the Well and her five husbands	
•	John 4.6-26, the Samaritan woman by Jakob's Well: 4+1 husbands
•	The <i>Loathly Lady</i> theme: the 4+1 sons of King Eochaid and the Hag by the Well
•	the Wife of <i>Bath</i> and her 4+1 husbands
•	Guðrún at <i>Laugar</i> and her 4 husbands + Kjartan

	Samaritan Woman	Eochaid's sons	Líadan	Guðrún	Wife of Bath
5 men	X	X		X	X
one special	X	X	(X)	X	X
meeting by a well	X	X	X	X	X ("Bath")
headdress			X	X	X
lover sails away			X	X	
takes the veil			X	X	

2 Indexicality

I have never got round to making an English translation of this old essay, and anyway it would need rewriting today in order to bring it into line with various ideas I have written about since. In particular, I have been concerned with the indexicality of textual discourse, the way texts signal their relationship with other texts, and also with what we might think of as an extratextual reality, if such a thing exists.

Bakhtin is useful here as a starting point. But dialogic discourse, novelistic discourse, the plurality of voices in a single linguistic channel, was treated by Bakhtin as a feature of literature, of lettered, written language, more

especially a feature of later fiction, of the novel.⁹ On this view, my subtitle, “an oral dialogic?” is a contradiction in terms. The oral narrative is supposed to be monologic, just as it is strictly sequential, like Augustine’s psalm: one does not go back in an oral narrative to re-read the sentence and listen to the underlying voices. But this does not square with my reading of the final pages of *Laxdæla saga*, which I see as an example of dialogic or novelistic discourse apparently surviving from an oral medium.

The only specific contribution that my paper makes to the Irish connection in *Laxdæla* is to point out the correspondences between the stories of Líadan and of Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir, in particular the quotation from the Irish poem. However the questions that arise in the wake of this correspondence lead me off on a rather different tack which seems to me to be of more importance than the correspondence itself. Rory again provides me with a starting point when he concludes that “*Laxdæla Saga* and Chaucer’s work were both influenced, independently of one another, by the Irish tale” [of the Loathly Lady and Níall son of Eochaid]. My approach is to home in on the term “influenced”, and ask what exactly is going on when both Chaucer and the *Laxdæla* author are “influenced” by an Irish work¹⁰. If we ask how this theme of the Woman by the Well and her Five Husbands migrates from the story of Jesus talking to the Samaritan woman (John 4. 26ff) to Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir in *Laxdæla* and Chaucer’s Wife of Bath and heaven knows how many other women waiting at wells for some hero to come and ask them for a sip of water—then the question

⁹ But I think it is not correct to say that B limited dialogic discourse to the novel. “Novelistic discourse is poetic discourse, but one that does not fit within the frame provided by the concept of poetic discourse as it now exists“. p.269. Addison, Ottava Rima and Novelistic Discourse. „Clearly, *ottava rima* could not have originated as an English oral form, for it requires too many rhymes for this rhyme-poor, relatively uninflected language”: the author stresses that this is not oral. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jnt/summary/v034/34.2addison.html>, “In “Discourse in the Novel,” Mikhail Bakhtin goes to some lengths to distinguish novelistic from poetic discourse.”

Bakhtin stresses (2002:264) the overriding monologic nature of poetic style:

But—we repeat—in the majority of poetic genres, the unity of the language system and the unity (and uniqueness) of the poet’s individuality as reflected in his language and speech, are indispensable prerequisites of poetic style. The novel, however, not only does not require these conditions but (as we have said) even makes of the internal stratification of language, of its social heteroglossia and the variety of individual voices in it, the prerequisite for authentic novelistic prose.”

Bakhtin speaks of the novel as being a whole constructed “out of heteroglot, multi-voiced, multi-styled and often multi-language elements”(265).

p.266 „vernacular extraliterary narration (*skaz*)“

¹⁰ We should remember that “influence” is an astrological term referring to the influence of the planets on the sublunary world, an idea that Galileo ridiculed when Kepler suggested that the heavenly bodies were somehow “influencing” each other and also causing our ocean tides. Newton agreed with Kepler and called this influence “heaviness”—*gravitas*—which gives us our modern term “gravity” so that we feel we understand it because it has a name, and a mathematical definition of gravity sounds more “scientific” than an analogue concept of “influence”.¹⁰ And in our discipline, scholars have attempted to nail down the Irish “influence” by speaking of “intertextuality” and “recurrent motifs”, and as always with terminology we tend to nod wisely as soon as the thing is named

itself becomes a much larger one and its focus is no longer on any particular protagonists, genres or cultures. It becomes a general textual problem, a problem of textual semantics, the problem of how a text expresses meaning, how it relates to other texts, and how the various voices which speak out of any text—how they are hidden there, how they arise, and what multiple and often diverse layers of meaning they express.¹¹

We can compute the correspondence between Líadan's and Guðrún's words well enough to show that, this time at least, the coincidence is not simply created by our 21st-century reading. Of course it *is* created by our 21-cent. reading but the text itself gives us reason so conclude that it had also been evident at an earlier stage .

3 The Irish connections in Laxdæla

The question of the Irish element in the settlement of Iceland seems to have undergone some quite considerable modifications over the last half century or so, and without treading on anybody's toes I think it is safe to assume that at least in some areas of Iceland, for instance the location of *Laxdæla saga*, Breiðafjörður and the Dalir, there was a strong Irish element from the beginning.



The canonical settler in the area according to *Laxdæla*, *Landnámabók* and other sources, is Auður or Unnur djúpúðga,



¹¹ removed: How they arise: the original author? the reader? the academic who chances on hidden correspondences? Readerly flights of fancy? These are all movements of the text which claim consideration.

But of course if we want to address this problem in any way we have to talk about the particular instances, and look at their particular textual mechanics. I do this in my 2003 paper by comparing Guðrún's Þeim var ek verst and Líadan's an ro carus ro cráidius and asking where the similarity—the “influence”—lies. --This means immediately that we have to contend with the question which always arises in these cases: isn't the theme so commonplace that it is no great coincidence that it should arise in these two barely related texts? But even if that were so, this “commonplace theme” *is* the “influence”, and we need to explain how it radiates over the two texts. Yes, Kepler's “influence” *does* work, and we can compute its effects tolerably well. And as I show in my essay

a Norwegian woman who had stayed long enough in Ireland and Scotland to raise children and grandchildren there before coming on to Iceland, had converted to Christianity and brought a largely Irish-speaking retinue with her.¹² (I have written elsewhere on the historicity of these accounts and concluded that that the question is, hermeneutically speaking, not a question and that makes sense in the form we ask it.¹³) In my 2003 paper on *Líadan* I point to certain indications in *Laxdæla saga* that both Icelandic and Irish were spoken languages at least in this area at the time.

To add to this, as Gísli has documented, Norsemen in Ireland ran a lively slave-trade centred in Dublin,¹⁴ and the Norse land-owners in Breiðafjörður were among their customers.¹⁵ Irish becomes the tongue of slaves, the bonded peoples whose story is muted; and among them are the silent women.



Unnur's great-grandson Höskuldur brings home to Iceland a woman slave named Melkorka, reportedly of royal Irish descent like a lot of other slave-woman, among them Niall's mother ^(hækkun í hafí). And Melkorka is a silent woman: she does not speak. In other words Höskuldur fails to hear her—until he realises that their son, the gallant young Ólafur pá, also speaks her language. (This interestingly tells us that Höskuldur didn't speak Irish.) Melkorka is Kjartan's grandmother and a close neighbour of Guðrún at Laugar. Both Kjartan and Guðrún would have heard Irish around them: as children of well-to-do landowners they would have been tended by Irish servants and they may well have understood the language. It is also reasonable to suggest that the ninth-century poem about *Líadan*, which we know had currency in Ireland, was known to them. At all event, Guðrún appears to quote from it.

¹² removed: Her brother Björn had not stopped in the British Isles but come straight to Iceland and settled the area at least twenty years before; according to Landnáma he was the only one of Auður's five brothers and sisters not to have adopted Christianity, and was known as Björn the Easterner, which we might read to mean that he spoke no Irish and that this was uncharacteristic of the general population. Björn is the ancestor of Guðrún Ósvífursdóttur; Unnur of both Kjartan, Guðrún's lover, and Bolli, her husband and father of her son of the same name.

¹³ „Lögheimili sannleikans: Ari fróði og sagnfræðin.“ *Ritið* 3/2010, 73-93

¹⁴ Gísli Sigurðsson, *Gaelic Influence in Iceland*, 2. útg., Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2000, p. viii and 30-34, names Dublin as an important centre of the slave-trade in the 9th and early 10th centuries.

¹⁵ removed: The Icelandic word for a bondswoman is *ambátt*, again an old Celtic loan in the Germanic languages.



Kjartan is of course an Irish name; and Guðrún's father Ósvífr bears the name of the Anglo-Saxon king who championed Irish Christianity against the Roman rite in the 7th century, King Oswiu of Northumbria. Ósvífr's grandmother bore the Irish name Kaðlín (Caithlin).

Notice I am speaking now as if the story were historically true. I am content to keep an open mind about this, but those of you who don't wish to accept any historicity can perhaps settle for a generalised Irish presence in Breiðarfjörður during the settlement and probably later, and acknowledge that Irish oral traditions such as Líadan were also likely to have been present. The question of the fact or fiction of the saga is now the subject of the conclusion of my paper.

4. The question of the fact or fiction of the saga is now the subject of the conclusion of my paper.

If we read the final pages of Laxdæla saga with Líadan in mind, we find that the narrative becomes remarkably contrived. Guðrún is an frail old woman who has taken the veil and become Iceland's first Christian recluse: she has seen the death of all her four husbands and of Kjartan, to whom she was betrothed but who betrayed her—and/or she betrayed him ^{it's that sort of story}. She has been instrumental in the deaths of first Kjartan, and then Bolli Kjartan's comrade whom she married when she believed Kjartan had broken his vows to her ^{at all events he was having it off with a royal lady in Norway}. Her son by Bolli, who bears his father's name, asks her at the very end of the saga whom of all the men in her life she loved most. If we grant that she replies by quoting an old Irish song then Bolli's question is simply a cue for the quote: the narrative betrays its dialogic, novelistic quality. It is as if she were to reply "The old triangle goes jingle jangle."

<p>metaplasmic oxymora:</p> <p>þeim var ek verst er ek unna mest “to him/them I was worst whom I loved most”</p> <p>an ro carus ro cráidius “whom I loved I harmed”</p>

It seems clear that the writer of the saga as we have it was unaware of this subtext: he or she records the Icelandic words as a monologic narrative, without a glimmer of acknowledgement of the underlying Irish. (The saga is written 200 years after the events described and we have no evidence of Irish being spoken in Iceland in the literate period.) Or is s/he writing tongue in cheek, making fun of Bolli who obviously doesn't get the punch-line? For Bolli amazingly replies portentiously, using the royal plural, “It seems to us that this was a very earnest answer indeed.” He simply doesn't get it. He's a prick.

I don't know what to make of this. Is the writer actually trying to show us what a prick he is? Does the writer know what Guðrún's words mean?

For in fact Guðrún's reply rings very true at some level of the story, and is indeed extraordinarily apt for what we can imagine as her state of mind. She wards off Bolli's impudent question by humming an old tune, but there is a dialogic voice here which evokes an old and well-known story with its obvious references to her own story. Other verses of the Irish poem come to mind: in particular verse 9:

<p>Líadan verse 9</p> <p>Ní chela: ba hésium mo chrideserc, cía no carainn cách chena.</p> <p>Conceal it not: he was my heart's love, even though I should love all others besides.</p> <p>(Murphy)</p>
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This is an apt reference to Guðrún herself, and her relationships with Kjartan her estranged lover and Bolli her husband and his estranged comrade. As such it is a clear mark of artifice, of fiction, and of novelistic discourse.

But Líadan's voice speaks to us only through this textual archaeology: it seems to be invisible in the manuscript that has come down to us. This tells us various things about the prehistory of the manuscript: it tells us that the literary reference to the Irish poem did exist as an element of the narrative at an earlier,

presumably oral period. The novelistic element¹⁶ in the story stretches back into the oral past. This tells us little of Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir's historicity, any more than the 16th-century Irish manuscripts tell us about Líadan's historicity. What it does tell us however is that this heteroglossia, to use Bakhtin's term, the plurality of both language and of speaking voice, were central elements in the story from its putative oral inception.¹⁷

I finish with a photograph taken yesterday morning of snowdrops in my garden. The underlying meaning comes to the surface as the text thaws.



¹⁶ In a series of articles in recent years I have sought to widen the Bakhtinian concept of dialogic discourse to include the plurivocal aspect of various types of what has been called intertextuality. The general movement of indexicality in syntactic relationships can be extended to define discourse relationships, and indeed intertextual and extratextual connections. Outside of syntax, indexicality can become pollexicality. Bakhtinian dialogic discourse may turn out to be fully definable in terms of pollexicality.

¹⁷ An alternative to postulating an oral dialogic is of course to suggest an Icelandic Irish manuscript tradition. Actually, Ari does exactly this, in claiming that the original Irish settlers who left when the Norse arrived left behind them Irish utensils and books. Which incidentally implies that there were people around who could recognise Irish writing! Another possibility is that there was a lost manuscript of Guðrún's story where her quote from Líadan was explicit.