

J. HARRIS

## PHILOLOGY, ELEGY, AND CULTURAL CHANGE

PHILOLOGY'S concern with minutiae – one rune, one line, an individual poem, at most a group of similar poems, a genre – seems to occupy the opposite end of a spectrum from the grand form of historical generalization known as civilizational analysis.<sup>1</sup> Yet in the hands of a master of both ends of the spectrum, such as Sigurður Nordal, philology's small steps have sometimes led to cultural panoramas that can contribute at the highest level of the study of comparative civilizations, for the bold sweep of *Íslenzk menning* relies on intense case studies such as Nordal's seminal investigation of the religion of Egill Skalla-Grímsson.<sup>2</sup> Without attempting to emulate Nordal, my paper will implicitly argue a continuity from the building blocks of the particular (philology) through the controlled generalization of genre (elegy) to a limited window on an aspect of cultural dynamic; along the way we make a brief pause where genre leads in to literary interpretation. At every point, however, the philologist in me will cling as closely as possible to texts and for the most part to a ninth-century Swedish runic inscription, the Rök stone. My text and free translation stand as an appendix to this article, and I refer throughout to that text.<sup>3</sup>

### Philology

My understanding of the Rök inscription as a whole is heavily indebted to Lars Lönnroth's article of 1977, the first effort in this realm by a modern literary historian and literary critic.<sup>4</sup> The whole inscription consists of an

- 1 See the historical contributions to this volume, especially the essay of Jóhann Páll Árnason.
- 2 Sigurður Nordal 1942/1990. Cf. the reception of *Íslenzk menning* in the contributions of Jóhann Páll Árnason.
- 3 The Rök text and translation here and much of the discussion in this article depend on: Harris 2006b, 2009, and forthcoming.
- 4 Harris 2006b, especially 45–55; for his part, Lönnroth 1977 owes much to Wessén 1958.

opening memorial formula of two lines followed by three sections of narrative materials, each structured as two teasing Questions followed by an Answer. The first two sections consist of somewhat less controversial heroic materials while the third and climactic section, which is constructed around a sacred story, is little understood and heavily contested. Lönnroth's structural analysis, while basically very revealing, turned out to be too strict in some details. We differ, for example, on the intended arrangement of the three sections and on the damaged l. 20, which I believe constitutes a meta-level introduction to Section 3 rather than a concluding frame.<sup>5</sup>

Underlying the Rök inscription is almost certainly an oral genre, a traditional question-and-answer routine in skaldic verse known as *greppa-minni*. Remarkably enough, all three scholars responsible for this important development in modern Rök scholarship were present at the reading of this paper.<sup>6</sup> In fact, however, Sophus Bugge, the founding father of Rök scholarship, had already noticed this analogy before 1910,<sup>7</sup> but, unlike Lönnroth, Bugge did not integrate his insight into a larger interpretative structure where it could enter the chain of inference. In another of his proleptic insights, Bugge interpreted runic *mukmini* as *mog-minni*, which he translated 'Erinnerung an den Sohn'; later he retracted this suggestion in view of the preserved final *-u* after a short stressed vowel in *sunu* and *fjaru*, assuming that the language of Rök would require a form like *\*magu-minni*; but Bugge never accepted *múg-minni* 'Volkserinnerung' or *ung-menni* 'dem jungen Mann' (or later 'the youth') – the two main interpretive variants after Bugge's period – and at the time of his death was working on a new explanation.<sup>8</sup> In recent years Prof. Gun Widmark has revived

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My Rök articles were produced independently of, but contemporaneously with, a "new wave" of writings on this earliest masterpiece of Swedish literature, including: Andersson 2006; Barnes 2007; Ralph 2007a, 2007b; Schulte 2008; Malm 2008. I hope in the near future to take positions on these and a few other recent studies not noticed in Harris 2006b, 2009 (including: Lönnqvist 1999; Widmark 2001; Petersson 1991); I should mention already, however, that the far-reaching arguments of Bo Ralph (in 2007a, 2007b) are incompatible with my beliefs and assumptions though a closer engagement is not possible here.

<sup>5</sup> Harris 2006b and forthcoming.

<sup>6</sup> Vésteinn Ólason (1969); Lars Lönnroth (1977); Margaret Clunies Ross (Lönnroth 1977, 17, n. 21).

<sup>7</sup> Bugge 1910, 39, 244–45.

<sup>8</sup> Bugge 1910, 13–15 and Olrik's editorial addition 15, n. 1.

*mogminni*, rescuing Bugge's very early intuition with a theory based on history of the language: the earliest loss of final *-u* would have occurred precisely in a compound, and the spelling with *u* instead of *a* is justified by the u-umlaut which would have set in with the syncope of *u*.<sup>9</sup> I find this a convincing explanation, and in any case, *mogminni* is a great improvement from the literary and hermeneutic point of view, establishing a nexus between occasion and content that had been conspicuously absent.

The only line not translated in the Appendix is l. 20. In a forthcoming article I attempt to reconstruct this damaged line; while my efforts yielded a range of possible readings rather than a single most probable result, the one I favor is: *nu'k minni meðr allu sagi einn: huaR iðgjald þa sunu aftir, fra* – which I translate freely as: “Now, speaking for myself (*einn*), I shall tell a *minni* in conclusion (*meðr allu*): Who received recompense after a son's death, I know” (Harris forthcoming). The thematically crucial word here is *iðgjald*, but the theoretical point brought out by the effort at reconstruction confirms the validity of Leo Spitzer's famous ‘philological circle’: everything in the line depends on the whole, and the whole is comprised of 28 lines with the same part-to-whole relationship. Hermeneutic progress is achieved by a movement back and forth between the whole and the part. This is definitely not ‘science’ in the usual English meaning of the word, and it provides only the remotest atoms of a larger historical point of view; but it is interesting to me that a rescue operation like reconstruction simply exaggerates and lays bare the basic hermeneutic circle.

I will return to Rök to discuss the content and meaning of this unique inscription, but it seems appropriate first to follow the trail adumbrated by the word *iðgjald*. The word is drawn from *Sonatorrek*, Egill Skallagrímsson's famous poem ‘The Irreparable Loss of Sons.’<sup>10</sup> This oral poem, composed in Iceland about 961,<sup>11</sup> has a number of interesting features in common with the inscription in stone from the western edge of Östergötland in the

<sup>9</sup> Widmark 1992 [1993], 29–31; Grønvik 2003, 48–49 also offers arguments against *múgr*; cf. Harris 2009, 39–40, n. 70.

<sup>10</sup> *Sonatorrek* has been edited many times; I mention as especially significant: Sigurður Nordal 1933, 243–57 (with the whole saga), Jón Helgason 1962, 29–38, Turville-Petre 1976, 24–41, and Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 2001. I quote from Jón Helgason's edition.

<sup>11</sup> I cannot do full justice to very recent skeptical discussion of *Sonatorrek* and its dating, but I cite as two major instances Baldur Hafstað 1995 (see index and especially p. 160) and Torfi Tulinius 2004 (see index) and, as an able reassertion of the older understanding of Egill, Jónas Kristjánsson 2006.

first half of the ninth century, despite the time and space separating them and despite great formal differences. Both of course are a father's memorial for a predeceased son. Unlike many later memorial stones, Rök tells nothing about the deeds of the honored dead, Vámóðr,<sup>12</sup> nothing even about his character except that he was 'death-doomed,' *faigian*, ON *feigr*, while Egill's Bøðvarr is characterized vaguely as a support to his father but principally by the negative fact that the 'stuff,' *efni*, of a bad man had not grown in him.<sup>13</sup> Neither of these paternal monuments fulfills our modern stereotyped expectation that a funeral elegy should elaborate on the accomplishments and good qualities of the dead, and both authors could be said to treat their early-dead son mainly in terms of *potential*: Bøðvarr had 'the makings of a man' or was *mannsefni*— if only he had been allowed to grow up before Odin plucked him — while Vámóðr was fated, perhaps from the outset.

*Sonatorrek* offers clues to a few specific words of Rök. Egill's title itself looks to be a nonce creation on the basis of the word *torrek*, which appears elsewhere only once but then in an intensely elegiac context where it is interpreted by Finnur Jónsson as 'heavy loss' or 'something difficult to replace'.<sup>14</sup> Varinn's *mogminni* may have been such a nonce formation based on *greppaminni*, but could Varinn also have intended it as a kind of theme word or even a title? More reliable is the help *Sonatorrek*'s phrase *vamma varr* offers in explanation of Rök's *via vari* (l. 27); in both cases we have the adjective *varr* complemented by a gen. pl., and since *Sonatorrek*'s is also the only example of this structure among the many instances of *varr* in *Lexicon Poeticum*, it may well be an archaic formula.<sup>15</sup>

The richest verbal connections between the two works are to be found in comparison with *Sonatorrek*'s crucial st. 17 (Jón Helgason 1962, 36):

Þat er ok mælt  
at engi geti

<sup>12</sup> I adopt this form of the name from Widmark 1993 with the further etymology offered in Harris 2009, 13, n. 7.

<sup>13</sup> *Sonatorrek* 11: *Veit ek þat siálfir / at i syni mínum / vara ills þegns / efni vaxit, / ef sá randviðr / røskvask næði / unz her-Gauts / hendr of tæki*. See the discussion in Harris 2009, 43, n. and 81.

<sup>14</sup> Finnur Jónsson 1931, s.v. *torrek*: "en vanskelig erstattelig genstand, svært tab."

<sup>15</sup> Finnur Jónsson 1931, s.v.; Harris 2006b, 71–73.

sonar iðgjöld  
 nema sialfr ali  
 enn þann nið  
 er qðrum sé  
 borinn maðr  
 í bróður stað.

Here the word *iðgjöld* occurs in the context of Egill's contemptuous rejection of an old saying or proverb that allows one recompense, but only one, for a lost son, namely another born to replace him. Translated literally: 'This also is said, that no one may get recompense for a son unless he himself begets again the descendant who will be a man born for the other one, in the place of his brother.'<sup>16</sup> Of course *iðgjöld* itself appears in Rök only as a conjecture in l. 20, but the source verb is found in a pregnant context in ll. 21–22 in the question *hvaR vaRi guldinn at kvanaR husli* 'who was compensated for by the sacrifice of a woman.' The verb *gjalda* is multivalent and the syntax debated, but the *Sonatorrek* parallel helps to focus on an understanding of compensation as propagation of the family.<sup>17</sup> While *gjalda* in such a situation could refer to the 'compensation' provided by revenge, *iðgjöld* in *Sonatorrek* 17 shows that rebirth or its weaker form in birth of a dedicated fraternal substitute will not have been far from the minds of the members of the archaic, family-dominated societies under discussion. Egill's stanza shares other significant vocabulary with Rök: *sonr* 'son,' *niðr* 'descendant,' and *ala* 'to beget' are all important words in Rök, essential to its realization of a theme similar to that of *Sonatorrek* 17. Two further words from this stanza, *borinn* 'born' from *bera* and *bróðir* 'brother,' are also found in Rök though in another context.

More remarkable than the lexical sharing is an illuminating syntactic parallel. For st. 17 not only matches Rök's locution *vera borinn* + dat. but in addition shares the syntactic oddity of placing the past participle before the subject, so that we get parallels of sense and syntax like the following:

<sup>16</sup> I first published this interpretation, which diverges significantly from Turville-Petre 1976, 36–37, in Harris 1994, 54–55, but it goes back to a longer manuscript I circulated widely before 1982.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Grønvik 1990 and Harris 2006b, 61–62.

1	2	3	4	5
<i>hvaim</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>burinn</i>	<i>niðr</i>	<i>drængi</i>
5	2	3	4	5
<i>er</i>	<i>ðrum</i>	<i>sé</i>	<i>borinn</i>	<i>maðr í sonar stað</i>

I have argued that *Sonatorrek*, along with some neglected grammar, can help us to disambiguate this sentence in Rök, and with that clarification to move a step nearer to understanding the mythic content.<sup>18</sup>

## Genre

For all its difficulties, *Sonatorrek* is much better understood than Rök. From *Egils saga* and from his large body of authentic verse, we know Egill as we will never know Varinn; from the saga context, analogues elsewhere in the sagas, and other poems with similar occasion we can begin to say something about the genre and function of *Sonatorrek*, even if Egill's poem towers over other poems of its kind like the leek among the grasses. It is the saga author, not Egill, who calls the poem an *erfivæði*, and this occurrence of the word is unique; still, it is rightly taken as a genre term, along with *erfidrápa* and *erfiflokkur*, though less specific as to form. Ottar Grønvik in particular has been successful in exploring the word family of *erfi* and the institutions of inheritance, but the actual institutional or ritual role of the *erfivæði* itself remains obscure (Grønvik 1982; 1981, 162–89). *Egils saga* implies that no proper funeral could happen without such a poem, but the small number of remains of the genre from the private sphere throws a doubtful light on that claim. Bjarne Fidjestøl is the author of the only standard treatment of *erfivæði*, an article that is a model of philological workmanship. But to achieve such clarity, Fidjestøl narrowed the conception of the genre to a collection mostly restricted to early Christian court poems on the death of the Norwegian king (Fidjestøl 1989). In a recently published article, I followed in his wake but tried to reopen the focus to consider both private poems such as *Sonatorrek* and also the royal *erfidrápur*, which, I argued, shared a continuous generic space (Harris 2006a). Some of the private poems, for example, Vǫlu-Steinn's *Qgmundardrápa*,

<sup>18</sup> Harris 2006b, 57–61, 86–89.

have been received by tradition in the context of a narrative paradigm – a ‘myth’, if you like – in which a father suffers such grief for his early-dead son that he wishes to die – until recalled to life, poetry, and/or revenge by a relative. The story’s turn from death to life is in some cases attributed to salutary effects of poetry itself.<sup>19</sup> The full form of this narrative pattern as we find it in *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings*, as well as twice in *Egils saga*, specifies that the old man *takes to his bed to die*. It would be hard to imagine this story outside the family, yet even the much cooler court poems harbor some expressions of emotion: Sigvatr exclaims *Ólmr erumk harmr* ‘violent is my grief’ in his *Ólafsdrápa*, precisely in the tradition of Egill’s interjection *helnauð es þat* after the burial of his brother.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, some myth-based terminal motifs – desolation of the land; no better will be born; and this latter often linked to a separate apocalyptic motif – are scattered through much of the larger corpus of *erfíkvæði*.

A related red thread of this kind is a pattern of allusions to Baldr and to Ragnarök. It was Magnus Olsen who first traced the Baldr thread through Eyvindr’s *Hákonarmál* of c. 961, and, somewhat less certainly, in Sigvatr’s *Ólafsdrápa* of about 1040 (Olsen 1924; 1929). I continued that exercise with the anonymous *Eiríksmál* of c. 954 and the *Ólafserfidrápa* of Hallfreðr *vandræðaskald*, 1001 (Harris 1999). If these results hold, we can say that allusions to Baldr and Ragnarök constitute a *basso continuo* through the whole extant series of royal funeral poems from late pagan into early Christian times. But are these merely superficial allusive imitations, or were they signs of something deeper, something constitutive of the genre in early times? *Sonatorrek*, generically related but private rather than royal in setting, might tip the balance in answer to that question.

I have argued that the Baldr myth, Odinic language, and the Ragnarök theme run through much of *Sonatorrek* as a submerged but easily reachable metaphor. I attempted to explain Egill’s use of the myth in terms of the relationship of archaic religious man to the divine pattern, a relationship made famous in the writings of Mircea Eliade and now almost synonymous with his name (Harris 1999). Applied to our materials, the Eliade hypothesis might run thus: since in the mythology the death of Baldr was the archetypal death and the archetypal sacrifice, the pattern set there by

<sup>19</sup> Discussed mainly in Harris 1994b.

<sup>20</sup> References in Harris 2006b.

Odin formed the model of paternal grief in real life, at least in circles of Odin worshippers. Egill's Odinic language, the ritual occasion of performance, and the situation of events – all suggest that Egill's own grief was a *re-presentatio* of the first death and first grief, that his poem and actions are modeled on a paradigm of religious tradition wherein he cast himself as a shadow of Odin and his lost sons as reflections of Baldr. This hypothesis gets us close to a possible explanation of the persistence of the Baldr allusions even into the court *erfíkvæði*, though with changes of emphasis, diminishment and eventual disappearance in the increasingly formal poetry of the Christian courts. But how *old* and how widespread might these connections between myth and elegy be?

Strange to say, there is a clear reflection of this web of connections in the OE *Beowulf*, where, bafflingly, we find not only an echo of the proverb Egill quoted in st. 17 of *Sonatorrek* and find it in connection with a version of the Baldr myth, but we find even the extra-poetic narrative pattern of the bereaved father who takes to bed to die. After nearly thirty years of writing about this suggestive nexus, I still cannot explain it simply and without metaphor; but the analogues in *Beowulf*, which, after all, stem not from English legend but from Gautish, southern Swedish sources, at least support the idea that in pre-Christian Scandinavia, myth, and especially the Baldr myth, was felt to be relevant to real-life grief and its expression in poetry. I will not go into more detail on *Beowulf* in the present context, but with all this in mind I would like to return to Rök and ask now about the content and plan of the little anthology of stories Varinn dedicated to Vámóðr.

## Literary interpretation

There are of course many debatable spots in my interpretation of the Rök text, but for the moment we are occupied here only with basic content. Section One concerns Theoderic the Great, and its Question Two gives us the teller's basic slant on the Theoderic material. It is a form of wonder perhaps specific to an oral culture: how can Theoderic have died nine generations ago but still be talked about. The Answer repeats the 'then-and-now' opposition of Question 2, but the stanza, the only strict verse in the



inscription, is aptly characterized by Andreas Heusler as a *Denkmal-epigramm*, a brief exercise in ekphrasis based on an eye-witness visit to the equestrian statue of Theoderic which Charlemagne had installed in the courtyard of his palace in Aachen; the date of this event, 801, gives us the earliest possible date for the inscription (Harris 2009, 34–35; Heusler 1941, 85). That, at least, is the belief I share with the majority of students of Rök; I realize that this specific source, like many other details, is debatable – and debated – but the source of the Theoderic verse, while important for a historical understanding of Rök and of its date, is oddly unimportant for a gross literary explication.<sup>21</sup>

In the hermeneutically more difficult Section 2, Question 2 asks the names of twenty kings who once ruled in Zealand and now lie dead on a battlefield there. The Answer lists their names in four groups of five ‘brothers’ with their four ‘fathers’; the brothers all bear the same name, ‘five Valkar sons of Ráðulfr’ and so on. Lönnroth had proposed as background something like an early oral *fornaldarsaga* featuring berserk ‘brothers’ with an especially good parallel in story and thula in the incident on Sámsey known from *Hervarar saga*, *Qrvar-Odds saga*, and Saxo. Though this is definitely the best constellation of *medieval* texts so far offered to complete and make intelligible the cryptic *early Viking Age* source, I criticized various details and tried to establish the anachronism as a disabling general critique. I offered an alternative based on earlier historical conditions (discussed below), but again the differences are not crucial to the kind of broad thematic interpretation we are advancing toward.

The third section, the bearer of Olrik’s weighty *Achtergewicht* (narrative emphasis on the last of a series), is the most important for interpretation.<sup>22</sup> After torturous examination of ll. 21–28, I proposed that in these Questions and their Answer we have a local Swedish variation of the myth of the death of a young god, best known in West Nordic as attached to Baldr, his father Odin, his ‘accidental’ slayer, his brother Høðr, and a newborn brother Váli or Bous, dedicated to avenge Baldr and specially engendered through the rape of a giant maiden Rindr (Harris 2006b). Equivalents

<sup>21</sup> Thus Lönnroth and I disagree sharply on the importance for Rök of the statue and on many other details but seem to be in broad agreement about the theme or meaning or message of this segment of the inscription.

<sup>22</sup> Olrik 1909; and cf. Harris 2006b, 51, 98.

of all five of these actors appear in the Gautish story, where the slaying of Vilinn, the local name of the Baldr-figure, occurs at the hands of an actor denominated *jotunn*, but the focus of the story is not on the slaying or on revenge but on the compensation for Vilinn, namely the engendering of a brother, dedicated (as in *Sonatorrek* 17) to replace him and in Östergötland named Thor. The bereaved father, the Odin-figure is not named directly but called ‘the fane-respecting kinsman’ in the climactic line of the inscription, and his miraculous act of fathering the replacement brother happens at the ripe age of ninety. Of the sacred rape of Rindr we learn only through the phrase *at kvanaR husli* ‘through the sacrifice of a woman’; but von Friesen tells us that a local place name *Vrindarvé* makes it probable that Rindr was known in Östergötland under her West Nordic name.<sup>23</sup>

For a literary critic such a collection of narrative materials immediately poses the question, why just *these* stories and why in just *this* collocation. The numbering of *minni*’s in the heroic material shows that a selection was made, and the lack of numbering in the myth section suggests a different source. In any case, it is axiomatic that every inclusion implies exclusions, selection. This question, the why of selection and arrangement, only became available to scholars with Wessén’s 1958 break with the older, predominantly functional readings; Wessén gave us a shapely literary collection instead of fragmentary myths and incitements, but to my knowledge Lönnroth in 1977 was the first to ask the literary why-question and has been the most successful at answering it. Up to a point, I agree with him that “All three legends ... were concerned with *posterity* ...” (Lönnroth 1977, 50). But my understanding of the contents of the sections, especially Section 3, ended up being sufficiently different to elicit an alternative and less ‘heroic’ variant analysis that emphasized the elementary facts of life and death as understood through a myth shaped within the archaic family – concerned, that is, with the wonder of genetic continuity after the death of the beloved son. In the absence of any facts about Vámóðr, I suggested that Eliade’s paradigm of *homo religiosus*, while it could teach nothing concrete about Vámóðr, could at least reveal a mentality in the perceived homology between the real and mythical fathers and sons. The sparse wording of Section 3 cannot offer insight into Varinn’s mind comparable to that offered by *Sonatorrek*; still, we do have the expensive monument,

<sup>23</sup> On Rindr, Harris 2006b, 83–84; von Friesen 1920, 61.

and Varinn did *choose* this myth and can be credited with the exact emphases of the Rök version. Varinn assigned the myth pride of place in the inscription and selected the jarring word *faigian* in its first lines, a keynote that perhaps casts Vámóðr from the beginning in a role like that of the similarly fated Baldr, though we will never know whether in fact Baldr's dreams of death extended to the local Swedish Vilinn variant. So understood, the myth of Vilinn's death and the compensation for it, the engendering of his replacement brother – these constitute Varinn's consolation.

Thus the idea common to all three sections, bearing in mind that the third is the most decisive, has to do with the elementary continuation of life despite the reign of death: life persists while death comes and goes. I consider this analysis fairly obvious for Section 1 where, however, it is molded by its association with a heroic individual. Section 2 presents a challenge to the critic. Clearly it too deals with life and death and offers certain parallels to Section 1, but its affirmation of life in the midst of death seems to contradict the individuality of Section 1 and instead of *singularity* to reside in *plurality*, specifically in the pseudo-family structure of the *Männerbund*, where, as in the U.S. Marines, there is a sense of continuity between the living and the dead. The individual is submerged in a corporate consciousness that does not directly deny death but assures that the brotherhood will continue. The Lévi-Straussian structure of Rök's treatment of the theme of life and death thus begins to emerge: a classic binary opposition is established between the individual and the group that implies, in the language of myth, a problem, the solution to which, the mediating term, appears in Section 3 as death-and-birth, father-and-son, cyclicity within the blood family.

### Cultural position, cultural change

So where does this reading of Rök place it within the realm of literature or, on the other hand, within that of life? Is it an elegy in stone, the crystallization (rather, petrification) of funeral ritual? It certainly has affiliations with *Sonatorrek* and *erfíkvæði*, but the few critics who have actually tried to situate Rök have tended rather to place it within a social matrix, thus to find a *sitz-im-leben* (rather than *in der Literatur*). Lönnroth speculates especially

about its relevance to social hierarchies and about pedagogical function, while Widmark constructs a Varinn who is a *pulr* – this ancient and not fully understood office being constituted as a guardian of ethnically defined knowledge, tribal tradition. Rök's position among genres and media seems a less speculative matter than its position in society, but the significant fact about Rök in literary history is its uniqueness. Like *Beowulf*, the *Canterbury Tales*, and a few other masterpieces, it can be seen as a kind of *summa litterarum*, but *in parvo*, bringing together elements of the literary past in a form so new that it produces no significant heirs.<sup>24</sup> Does that mean it is insulated from cultural change?

One model of cultural change already applied to our field, but less well known than it deserves to be, is embodied in a modest booklet by an anthropologist of the sixties, Rosalie Wax, who wrote on “the changing ethos of the Vikings.” Wax derived the model from the anthropologist of peasant cultures James Redfield and explains it briefly:

The Little Tradition refers to the little community and to that which is transmitted informally (predominantly orally) from generation to generation; while the Great Tradition refers to the corps of disciples within a civilized society and to special wisdom, preserved in scriptures, which they guard and transmit (Wax 1969, 15).

This quotation leaves to the imagination the dynamic between Great and Little, and the explanatory power of this simple model of big fish eating little fish may have its limits. In the age of globalization, however, we do not require much subtlety on this subject. Students of Old Scandinavian literature have long been accustomed to triumphalist presentations of the Continental Great Tradition and to demonstrations that apparent survivals of Scandinavian Little Traditions are in fact *invented* traditions. Instinctively I would like to celebrate the local and instances of resistance to progress, but the resistance – for example the Thor's hammers cast alongside crosses – may be based on imitation and so be sad signs of the inexorable homogenization, the cultural equivalent of loss of species. Long ago I tried to advance an argument that it was later awareness of this kind of cultural

<sup>24</sup> Argued for *Beowulf* in Harris 1991, for Rök in Harris 2009.

change that made 'saga' a kind of 'historical novel' and so an analogue of the literary phenomenon known since the Romantic period (Harris 1986). Today, though, I would like to ask whether anything can be learned about cultural change in the early Viking Age through one of its *failures*. The Rök Stone continues to be my example.

In her article on the social background of Rök, Gun Widmark pointed out that Varinn's lifetime was the flourishing time of the Swedish trading town of Birka and that the Carolingian missionary Ansgar, who preached in Birka and ministered to its Christian population, was Varinn's contemporary (Widmark 1997). Widmark imagined Varinn as fearing that a new age was at hand which would espouse different ideals and that soon enough many of his countrymen would lose interest in the ancient local traditions he saw it as his duty to pass on, and Rök was his solution to this anxiety. In short, her Varinn saw his early ninth century as a time of cultural crisis when influences from the South seemed to threaten the Little Tradition. Normally I might have applauded this hypothesis of resistance, but I read Widmark while engaged in completing a study focused, partly, on the West Germanic elements – Frankish, Frisian, and English – in Rök, a study which envisions Varinn rather as a man ahead of his time. Let me summarize the elements that contrast with Widmark's fearful, conservative Varinn (Harris 2009).

Old English sources offer a few striking artistic analogues of the stone's multi-stranded, anthology-like lay-out, notably in the Franks Casket (c. 700) and the (probably) early OE poems *Deor* and *Widsith*. Though all may be regarded as examples of 'panel structure,' the arrangements are not mechanical; in Rök, as in the English works, subject matter may not be fully contained within its 'panel.' For the Anglo-Saxonist, Rök's triadic progression within a two-part structure echoes *Beowulf*; more generally the idea of the ordered collection (as in the *Beowulf* manuscript) has a familiar feel. But ON also has its mythic-heroic order in the Codex Regius of the Elder Edda and such order literally arranged in panels in the Gotlandic picture stones, and aesthetic patterns probably convince few readers of cultural affiliations. The ultimately West Germanic source of the narrative material of the Theoderic section is, however, hardly in dispute in the broad sense that information about the master of Italy from 493 to 526 will have entered Scandinavia via the West. The *Hreiðgotar* are

familiar to Anglo-Saxonists from *Widsith*; but though *Widsith* knows the Goths, it does not mention Theoderic. Rök's connection with *Deor* is closer. The Þjóðrekr of Rök was *skati Mæringa* 'lord of the Mærings' while *Deor*'s Peodric 'ruled for thirty winters the fortress of the Mærings' (ll.18-19a).<sup>25</sup> These Mærings are difficult to place, but the connection between Rök and *Deor* is an intimate one. A further parallel may perhaps be seen between *dæmir enn um sakar* and *Deor's þæt was monegum cuð* 'that was known to many' (l. 19), both perhaps referring not just to Theoderic's lasting fame but to the mixture of blame and praise in that great reputation – the blame of course ultimately stemming from his heresy. The identity of both Theoderics with each other and with Theoderic the Great, the later Dietrich von Bern, is, in my opinion, conclusive, and I have already revealed that I am convinced by the argument, which goes back at least as far as 1889, that Rök's *fornyrðislag* stanza is ultimately traceable to an eyewitness of the famous statue in Aachen. Varinn's knowledge that Theoderic the Great died "nine ages ago" was remarkably accurate; counting from 526 at 30 years per generation we arrive at 796. Despite the folk-poetic ring of 'nine ages ago,' this cannot be an accident, and elements of possible Carolingian origin begin to accumulate.

Section 2 continues this accumulation. There the Answer is a *Widsith*-like thula of eight names, which show at the very least a strong West Germanic strain. Two of the fathers' names are probably West Germanic, while the other two are attested in both North and West; the sons show two definitely West Germanic names and two where the evidence is inconclusive but compatible with West Germanic origin. Von Friesen, whose extensive work on the names I have depended on – perhaps too much, but not blindly – sifted the onomastic evidence carefully and concluded that in general the names could be explained as "af icke-nordisk börd" (1920, 81, 76–81), possibly Frisian.

In my article I follow von Friesen (and to an extent Höfler 1952, 308–17) in imagining an historical background in Frisian trade along the Birka-Haithabu-Dorstad axis and in positing a foreground in the kind of *Männerbund* that was the foundation of such trading-and-raiding companies of the earliest Viking Age. The placement of events on Zealand brings the numerical symmetries of the brother-bands into contact with the simi-

<sup>25</sup> *Deor* and *Widsith* are cited from Krappe 1936.

larly symmetrical organization of early Viking Age fortresses of the Trelleborg type, though I have not been able to use this insight of Höfler's in any very exact way. I sought an oral literary milieu that, unlike Lönnroth's West Nordic *fornaldarsaga*, looked south and west and found some similarities worth mentioning in praise poetry, Heusler's *Preislied/Zeitgedicht*. This imagined West Germanic origin requires, I would argue, no *more* unmoored belief than any other attempt to explain this puzzling material. All are speculations into the void of an oral period, but the whole nature of Rök presumes that this foreign material was not entirely new but already existed as stories in the memory of the audience of the inscription.

The West Germanic elements that appear in the Rök text can all be attributed to 'oral tradition,' but oral tradition need not be a disembodied ('superorganic,' in the idiom of folkloristics) force moving in mysterious waves; one conceptualizes it so vaguely only when no actual *tradition-bearers* are available as its vectors. With many other Rök scholars I believe a more direct connection, ultimately an eye-witness, is implicit in the relationship of the Theoderic verse and the Aachen statue. Other features, such as the Swedish monument's apparent allusion to Theoderic's compromised fame or when he lived, *could* have been brought from the land of the Franks and Frisians by the kind of individual Swedish traveler to Dorstad whom we meet and hear quoted in Rimbert's *Life of St. Ansgar* (1884, 58).

Is it possible that Varinn's unique decision to record his selection of legends in writing – "eine revolutionierende Idee," as Meulengracht Sørensen calls it (2001, 133) – could have been one of the West Germanic, specifically Frankish, influences? Some later runic memorials quote bits of appropriate verse, and myths and legends were rendered pictorially in the North; but no other rune stone attempts to record a collection of such *minni* in writing. Our hypothetical Swedish visitor, setting out from Birka, will have traveled after 801 to Dorstad and further, up the Maas to Aachen. He will have been curious enough about the great emperor to admire the newly arrived statue of his famous and controversial predecessor, Theoderic. Perhaps among the things he learned there (Theoderic's bad reputation, how long ago he lived?) one concerned the emperor's activities after 800 in improvement of native law, including having the oral laws written down. Perhaps he heard that the emperor was even having ancient

story-telling poems collected and reduced to writing – in Einhard’s famous words: ‘[Karl] also had the old rude songs that celebrate the deeds and wars of the ancient kings written out for transmission to posterity’ – *barbara et antiquissima carmina, quibus veterum regum actus et bella canebantur, scripsit memoriaeque mandavit*. In the context of such a collection perhaps references to *memoria* reminded him of his native *minni* with a somewhat similar range of meanings centering on ‘memory, remembrance.’ Einhard’s *memoriae mandare* is debated by specialists; but in context its meaning cannot have been far from ‘preserve for posterity (in letters).’<sup>26</sup> For the Swede – whose stories *were* ‘memory’ and ‘memory’ story – the possibility of *writing* stories or poems *pro memoria* was a new idea and one from an authoritative source. But it did have a partial analogue at home where runic writing was already associated with monumentalization, often to preserve the memory of individuals in stones and runes that were to last until Ragnarök. Ideas, like seeds, may fall on ready ground, or not. Did our imaginary Swedish visitor carry his new idea back with him to Östergötland, where, sometime after the death of young Vámóðr, Varinn applied it to a memorial, resulting in a monument unique in literary history but one with a familiar feeling for the Anglo-Saxonist?

So I disagree with Widmark about the conservative impulses to be read out of the Rök monument. Yet she and Meulengracht Sørensen were rightly – though only implicitly – groping toward a placement of Rök not just in relation to society and culture, as Wessén and Lönnroth do, but in relation to *different* cultures and their interactions. Concerning the anxious Varinn’s decision “att anförtro sina minnen åt det beständigaste av allt: sten” (Widmark 1997, 172), Widmark asked: “Ristade kanske Varin egentligen inte alls för någon läsare utan såg i stenen en sorts robot som på något magiskt plan för all evighet fyller den uppgift som hade varit hans?” (173). In other words, the motivation is resistance to cultural change and the technology, though new, is home-grown. Meulengracht Sørensen was closer to my understanding of the matter when he emphasized the utter uniqueness of Rök, the implausibility of Varinn’s experiment with extensive writing on stone, and the lack of any evidence of reception: “und tatsächlich fand das großangelegte Schriftexperiment von Rök auch nirgens,

<sup>26</sup> On *Vita Karoli*, ch. 29, and the *Heldenliedebuch*, see Haubrichs 1989 and Harris 2009, 45 n. 85.



soviel wir wissen, Nachahmung" (2001, 133). Meulengracht Sørensen's principal concern in this article was, however, quite a different one, in fact about source criticism and allowable anachronism; these remarks on medi-ality are a fruitful digression, but the word 'revolutionizing,' without a prefix such as 'potential' or 'would-be,' hardly seems to describe Varinn's idea in its results.<sup>27</sup>

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Rök is a cul-de-sac, a dead end with regard to cultural change, but can anything about the larger subject be learned from such a failure? A philologist is likely to have little confidence at this level of generalization. Nevertheless, some closing axioms present themselves. When a cultural anomaly appears in situations of potential intercultural influence, hasty embrace of the foreign may be a likely hypothesis, along with maladaptation to the receiving culture. Technology is a main vector of change, along with prestige and fashion, but native common sense may resist even an apparently bright idea. In terms of broadest cultural history, Rök should be portrayed as an early stage in the battle of literacy with orality where, clearly, orality won out. Yet scholars naturally see it not as something novel, but as a witness to an archaic time – both points of view have their value, the Little Tradition and the glimpse into the uneven progress of the Great Tradition.

<sup>27</sup> On memory and the mediality of Rök see now also Schulte 2008 and Malm 2008.

## APPENDIX: THE RÖK INSCRIPTION, A REFERENCE TEXT

[The letters A-E refer to sides of the stone. The line numbering, however, is sequential 1–28, following Wessén 1958; OSw normalization also follows Wessén. Transcription of l. 20 (with underdotting indicating conjectural runes) is that of Grønvik 2003, 67. The reversal of Wessén's order in lines 27–28 is argued for in Harris 2006b.]

Dedication (lines 1–2, side A):

*Aft Vamóð standa runaR þar. / Æn Varinn faði, faðir aft faigian sunu.*

In memory of Vámóðr stand these runes. But Varinn wrote them, a father in memory of his death-doomed son.

Narrative Section one (3–11, A–B; Theoderic section):

First Question/hint (3–5): *Sagum mögminni þat: hværiaR valraubaR vaRin tvar / þar, svað tvalf sinnum vaRin nummar at valraubu, / baðar saman a ymissum mannum?*

I pronounce this hint for the lad: Which were the two war-spoils which, both together, were taken twelve times in booty-taking from different men?

Second Question/hint (5–8): *Þat sagum anna/rt: hvar fur niu aldum an urði fiaru / meðr Hraifgutum, auk do/mir æn umb sakar?*

This I pronounce as second: Who became without life (died) among the Hreið-Goths nine ages ago, and yet his affairs are still under discussion?

Answer (A9–B11): *Reð Þjóðrikr him þurmoði,  
stillir / flutna, strandu HraifmaraR.  
Sitir nu garur a [B]guta sinum,  
skialdi umb fatlaðr, skati Mæringa.*

Þjóðrikr the bold, ruler of sea-warriors, (once) ruled the shore of the Gothic Sea. Now he sits outfitted on his Gothic steed, with his shield buckled on, prince of the Mærings.

Narrative Section two (12–19; side C; the twenty kings):

First Question/hint (12–14): *Þat sagum tvalfja, hvar hæstr se Gu/nnar etu vettvangi a, kunungaR tvaik tigr sva/ð a liggia?*

This I pronounce as twelfth: Where does the steed of Gunnr see food on the battlefield that twenty kings are lying on?

Second Question/hint (14–17): *Þat sagum þrettaunda, hvariR t/vaiR tigiR kun-ungaR satin at Siolundi fia/gura vintur at fiagurum namþnum, burn/ir fiagurum brøðrum?*

This I pronounce as thirteenth: Which twenty kings sat on Zealand for four winters under four names, sons of four brothers?

Answer (17–19): *ValkaR fim, Raðulfs sy/nir, HraiðulfaR fim, Rugulfs synir, Haislar fim, Haruð/s synir, Kynmundar fim, Bernar synir.*

Five Valkar, sons of Ráðulfr; five Hreiðulfar, sons of Rugulfr; five Haislar, sons of Hqrðr; five Kynmundar, sons of Björn.

Line 20 (after Grønvik): **nukmīñīmīRāluṣāḳiainhuaR[...]*ftiRfra***

Narrative Section three (21–26, 28, 27; C, D, C top, E):

First Question/hint (21–22): *Sagum mōgmīnni þat: hvaR Inguld/inga vaRi gul-dinn at kvanaR husli?*

I pronounce this hint for the lad: Who among the descendants of Ing-Valdr was compensated for through the sacrifice of a woman?

Second Question/hint (23–24): *Sagum mōgmīnni: [h]vaim se burinn nið/R drængi?*

I pronounce a (further) hint for the lad: To whom was a son born for a gal-lant young man?

Answer (24–26, 28, 27): *Vilinn es þat • knua knatt/i iatun. Vilinn es þat • Nyti. / Sagum mōgmīnni: Þor / ol nirððR, / sefi via vari.*

Vilinn it is, whom the enemy slew. Vilinn it is: may he enjoy (this monu-ment). I pronounce a (final?) hint for the lad: At ninety, the Kinsman, respec-ter of shrines, engendered Þórr.

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#### SUMMARY

Citing Sigurður Nordal as a model, the article attempts to bring philology, with its concern with minutiae, into dialogue with the grand sweep of Nordic civilizational analysis that formed the focus of the workshop as a whole. The paper argues a continuity from the building blocks of the particular through the controlled generalization of genre (and interpretation) to a limited window on one aspect of cultural dynamic. The examples of philology ascending toward broad cultural history are supplied by Egill Skalla-Grímsson's *Sonatorrek* and the Swedish Rök inscription. The genre in question is *erfíkvæði*, which, however, is treated as a form of cross-cultural 'elegy,' thus opening toward the memorial inscription. The Rök inscription is, in conclusion, assessed in its relation to hegemonic influence from the Continent, advancing communications technology, and possible nativistic resistance.

*J. Harris*  
Harvard University  
[harris@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:harris@fas.harvard.edu)

