Consonance and Dissonance in Skaldic Poetry on War and Peace

Francesco Sangriso

Pour citer cet article

Heimskringla, prologue: I consider the poems as least corrupted sources if they are correctly composed and meaningfully interpreted.

These words are due to Snorri Sturluson, the greatest Icelandic writer of the first half of the thirteenth century, author of the Heimskringla where the story of the Norwegian kings from mythical origins up to the second half of the twelfth century is narrated in sixteen sagas, and where a great many poems are found, and are considered by the author and by most modern scholars to be real and fully reliable historical sources.

Poems become historical sources, said Snorri, if they are correctly composed. Only the poem that follows a set of rules and metrical and prosodic patterns can be considered a reliable source, allowing to draw trustworthy information about the memory of the past. This is a pivotal statement: the structural element is the determining factor. The compositional technique, which in skaldic poetry reaches considerable levels of complexity, is therefore not a refined formal ornament, or just a tool that ensures the use of the text, enhancing its harmony and allowing it to be committed to memory. It becomes, above all, the benchmark of the verses’ historical truthfulness.

Furthermore, in Heimskringla’s prologue, Snorri pointed out that the skalds were often present at the events celebrated in their verses. The facts had to be reported absolutely truthfully:

Heimskringla, prologue: We regard as true everything that is found in those poems about (...) expeditions and battles. It is indeed the habit of poets to praise most highly the one in whose presence they are at the time, but no one would dare to tell him to his face about deeds of his which all who listened, as well as the man himself, knew were falsehoods and fictions. That would be mockery and not praise. [Tókum vör þat alt fyrir satt, er í þeim kvæðum finnsl um ferðir (...) eða orrostur. En þat er háttr skálða at lofa þann mest, er þá eru þeir fyrir, en engi myndi...]

The purpose of the poems is the celebration of the deeds performed by kings, especially in the military field. The king is, above all, a warrior who legitimises himself through military victories and his fall is, in turn, the effect of a defeat on the battlefield. War and description of battles, therefore, take on a leading role.

In Snorri’s work, however, poets also play a very important role in aiding peace-building and poetry becomes a significant tool to achieve an agreement between conflicting parties. This ‘diplomacy of the poets’ highlights the skald’s pivotal role, and constitutes a tangible sign of power, and the high social status granted to those who had the ability to use linguistic tools with skill and knowledge, as demonstrated by the extraordinary level of metric and linguistic complexity in many poems.

It was a highly relevant element in a society such as the Nordic one, which was still based on oral performance, where the written word would assert itself only after the full conversion to Christianity. Moreover, the great power of the spoken word was already expressed in the name by which Old Norse language defined the poet: skáld. The etymology of the name is a subject of debate and it is believed that the term is derived from the Proto-Germanic *skeldan whose meaning should be ‘insulting with words’, hence the elements in the Germanic languages: Old High German skeltn, Middle High German schelten, Middle Low German schelden\(^2\).

This destructive power of the word can also become a verbal tool for building peace, as highlighted in Snorri’s work. The diplomacy of the poets would be decisive not only in wars between Scandinavian kings, but also in conflicts within the Norwegian kingdom, concerning both succession to the throne and the struggles for power between kingship and landed aristocracy.

The presence of several competitors, claiming the royal title, who aim to be the only holders of power, “is common practice among the Norwegians [mos est Norwagiensibus]” (Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagensium, chapter 31\(^3\)). This statement comes from Theodoricus Monachus, the author of the Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagensium, a Latin account of the kings of Norway from Haraldr Hárfagri, (‘the fine-haired’) who became prime ruler of the country in about the middle of ninth century. It is at this time that we find in Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla the first example of a poetical work promoting peace and settlement between conflicting parties.

The context is the struggle between Haraldr Hárfagri and his son Hálfdan Svarti (‘the black’), who attacked and burned the farm, where his rival brother Eiríkr Blóðøx


\(^{3}\) Quoted after the edition of Gustav Storm (1880) and the translation of David and Ian McDougall (1998).
('blood-axe') was staying. Eiríkr managed to save himself and reported the attack to his father Haraldr. The king gathered forces against his son Hálfdan and a fight was at hand, but Guthormr, a great poet, mediates for reconciliation between them, and the kings hold him in such great esteem that at his request they are reconcile. Jórunn Skáldmær ('poetess') composes some verses about these events, as we read in Snorri's account:

*Heimskringla, Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, chapter 36: Then men went between them. There was a certain noble person called Guthormr Sindri ('flint'). He was now in Hálfdan Svarti's troop, but he had previously been with King Haraldr and was a close friend of both of them. Guthormr was a great poet. He had composed poems about each of the two, father and son. They had offered him a reward, but he refused, and asked that they should grant him one request, and they had promised this. He then went to see King Haraldr and mediated for reconciliation between them and asked each of them to fulfil their promise and that they should be reconciled, and the kings held him in such great esteem that at his request they were reconciled (...). About these events, Jórunn Skáldmær ('poetess') composed some verses. [Fóru þá menn milli þeirra. Guthormr sindri hét eitt gøfugr maðr. Hann var í líði með Hálfdani svarta, en fyr hafði hann verit með Haraldi konungi ok var ástvínir beggja þeirra. Guthormr var skáld mikit. Hann hafði ort sitt kvæði um hvárn þeirra feðga. Þeir hofðu boðit honum laun, en hann neitti ok beiddisk, at þeir skyldi veita honum eina bæn, ok hofðu þeir því heitit. Hann forn þá á fund Haralds konungs ok bar sættarorðum millum þeirra ok bað þá hvárn veggja þeirra bænar ok þess, at þeir skyldi sættask, en konungur gerðu svá mikinn metað hans, at af hans bæn sættusk þeirr (...). Eptir þessi sögu orti jörunn skáldmær nøkkur ørendi.]

Only three half-stanzas and two complete stanzas of Jórunn's work are extant and the first – and probably the most important – element that has to be highlighted is that the verses were composed by a young unmarried woman, as indicated by her nickname *skáldmær*. Nothing is known about Jórunn, who is the only female poet among the skalds named in Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál*. We do not forget that the term *skáld*, which in Old Norse language defines a poet, is a neuter noun, applicable to men or women.

Jórunn immediately claims her role and authority, by directly addressing the recipient of the verses. His name, Hálfdan, is mentioned at the beginning of the stanza without any indication of his royal status. The poetess and king's son are at the same level. The power of her word is not less than the royal one:

*Sendibítr*, stanza 2⁴: Hálfdan, I have learned that Haraldr inn Hárfagri ('fair-hair') heard about (your) tough deeds, and that poem seems dark-faced to the tester of the sword ('warrior'). [Halfdan, frá, Harald inn hárfagra spyrja herðibrögð, en sjá bragr sýnisk svartleitr reyni lögðís.]

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⁴ Text and translation quoted after the edition of Diana Whaley (2012).

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Here we find relevant linguistic elements. The first relates to Hálfdan’s attack, defined by a compound: \textit{herðibrǫgð} (plural from \textit{herðibragð}). It is a \textit{hapax legomenon} that reveals a precise value judgement expressed by the verses.

In skaldic poetry, when the military virtues of a king are praised, bravery in battle, tactical skills and ability to obtain victory in the open field are emphasised. These features could be found in the first element of the compound. The substantive \textit{herði} means ‘hardihood’. The related verb \textit{herða} means ‘temper’, ‘harden’ and the agent noun \textit{herðir}, ‘hardener’, ‘strengthener’, is a base word in man- and warrior-\textit{kenningar}, as in the following examples:

\begin{quote}
Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, \textit{Fragment}, stanza 2\textsuperscript{7}: hardener of the shower of barbs (‘warrior’) [\textit{skúrar odda herðir}].

Stúfr Þórðarson, \textit{Stúfsdrápa}, stanza 2\textsuperscript{8}: strengthener of battle (‘warrior’) [\textit{gunnar herðir}].
\end{quote}

But in Jórunn’s verses we are dealing with an oxymoron, in which the second element of the compound contradicts the first: the substantive \textit{bragð} depicts ‘a sudden motion’, ‘a quick movement’, but also defines ‘cunning method, trick, device, ruse, scheme, underhand dealing, treachery’\textsuperscript{9}.

Jórunn creates a word by using linguistic material from the warlike universe, that here becomes a tool to utter a heavy charge against a warrior. As we read in the introduction to the verses, Hálfdan carries out a treacherous attack and his father is ready to take a bloody revenge:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Heimskringla}, \textit{Haralds saga ins hárfgra}, chapter 36: Hálfdan Svarti (...) went there with troops and surrounded the house they were in. Eiríkr was sleeping in an apartment outside the main building and managed to get out into the forest (...), but Hálfdan and his men burned down the residence and all the troops that were in it (...). The king became enormously angry at this and mustered an army. [Hálfdan svarti fór hann till með her ok tók hús á þeim. Eiríkr svaf í útiskemmu ok komsk út til skógar (...) en þeir Hálfdan brenndu upp bœinn ok allt lið, þat er inni var (...) Konungr varð þessu stórliga reiðr ok samnaði her saman.]
\end{quote}

Both treachery and revenge plans are found in Jórunn’s verses:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{5} Cleasby / Vigfusson, 1874, p. 257.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{7} Text and translation quoted after the edition of Karin Ellen Gade (2009).
\textsuperscript{8} Text and translation quoted after the edition of Karin Ellen Gade (2009).
\textsuperscript{9} Cleasby / Vigfusson, 1874, p. 75.
\end{quote}

\textit{Fabula / Les Colloques, « Fiat pax. Le désir de paix dans la littérature médiévale », 2023}

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The warrior and his followers, who have carried out the treacherous attack, are defined as óþjóð. Elements of the compound are the substantive þjóð ('people'), but also 'community', and the negative prefix ó.

In my opinion, in this instance, the term does not only mean ‘evil people’. Here the prefix takes on a pivotal meaning: it does not point out opposition but rather lack or deprivation. Hálfdan and his warriors are a ‘not-community’, a sort of social antimatter, composed of the antiparticles of the corresponding particles forming the ordinary social structure, and a collision between particles and anti-particles leads to a mutual annihilation. The poetess, by using only a privative prefix, succeeds in depicting in a complete way, how the consequence of an internal conflict in the community is the destruction of the community itself.

For this reason, says Jórunn, “that poem seems dark-faced to the tester of the sword [bragr sýnísk svartleitr reyni lǫgðis]” (Sendibítr, stanza 2). ‘The Black’ is Hálfdan’s nickname, but in the verses, this no longer refers to a physical feature, but becomes the hallmark of a negative judgement, that even becomes the characterizing element of the whole poem.

The ‘tester of the sword’ is a kenning for ‘warrior’, referred to Hálfdan, and a precise reference to the sword is present in the title of Jórunn’s work, Sendibítr (‘biting message’). The nominal form bítr, agent noun from the verb bíta, is a constitutive element of sword-names: Kvernbítr (‘mill-biter’), name of the king Hákon inn Góði’s sword (Heimkringla, Hákonar saga góða, chapters 28 and 31), and Leggbítr (‘leg-biter’), that of king Magnús Berfœttr (‘barelegged’) (Heimkringla, Magnúss saga berfœtts, chapters 24 and 25).

The poetic word has the power to strike, to bite, just as the sword. Also in this case, a word belonging to the warlike universe becomes a tool to declare a disagreement over a looming struggle, and Guthormr, the poet who settles the conflict, deserves more glory than the warriors:

Sendibítr, stanza 4: Where do two especially brave princes know of greater honour, fame of arrow-storm (‘battle’), granted to destroyers of moons of the prow-board (‘warriors’) than tough-minded land-rulers granted to firs of gold (‘men’) because of the praise of clear-sighted Sindri (perhaps ‘Spark’)? The trouble of the princes was
lifted. [Hvar vitu tveir einka þófrar meira veg, frama þóveðrs gǫrvan tungla tinglýrǫndum, an geðœhœrœir landrekar gerðu þollum golls fyr lof óblinds Sindra? Angr yngva of höfsk upp].

Sendibítr, stanza 5: The enemy of rings (‘generous man’) performed a powerful panegyric for Haraldr; Guthormr got good reward for the recited poem from the sovereign. The tree of battle (‘warrior’) ended the clash between the truly successful rulers; previously the army of (each of) the two princes had prepared for a storm of swords (‘battle’). [Stríðir hringa vann framm kveðinn ramman hróðr Haralds; Goðþormr hlaut góð laun kveðins óðar af Gauti. Runnr Gunnar brá rimmu raunframra skjǫldunga; óðr bjósk hér tveggja dǫblinga til hreggs hjǫrva.]

Poetry is no longer at the service of a king to celebrate his glory on the battlefield, but it is at the service of the poet himself, whose verses emphasizes the general benefit arising from peace and also – this should not be overlooked – his skill and ability to influence the behaviour of holders’ power.

An attitude similar to that expressed in Jórunn’s verses is found in the work of Sigvatr Þórðarson, who was the most important poet in the service of Óláfr Haraldsson, the holy king of Norway. Also in this case, the inspiration for the composition of the verses is a conflict within the Norwegian kingdom. King Magnús, Óláfr Haraldsson’s son, takes revenge against the landed elite, who are responsible for his father’s fall and death. In the saga devoted to Magnús, Snorri depicts the king’s behaviour in this way:

Heimskringla, Magnúss saga ins góða, chapter 15: Many (…) great possessions that had been owned by those on the farmers’ side that had fallen at Stiklarstaðir he arranged to be appropriated by the royal treasury. He also inflicted heavy punishments on many of the men that had opposed King Óláfr in that battle. Some of them he drove out of the country, and from some he exacted very heavy payments, for some he had their livestock destroyed. Then the landowners began to grumble (…). This grumbling was widespread in the country (…). Twelve men held a conference and it was agreed between them to choose by lot one person to tell the king of this grumbling. And it was settled that the poet Sigvatr was chosen. [Margar (…) stórar eignir lét hann þá falla í konungsgarð, þær er þeir hofðu átt, er fallit hofðu á Stiklarstaðum í bónda liði. Hann gerði ok við margra þa men stórar refsingar, er í þeirri orrostu hofðu verit í mót Ólafi konungr. Suma rak hann af landi, ok af sumum tók hann stórfé, fyrir sumum lét hann bú hóggva. På tóku baendr at gera kurr (…). Pessi kurr var viða í landi (…). Gengu tólf menn á málstefnu, ok samdissk þat með þeim at hluta til einn mann at segja konungi þenna kurr. En svá var til stillt, at Sigvatr skáld hlaut.]

The verses in which the poet, acting as a speaker of the Norwegian aristocracy, expresses his strong disagreement over Magnús’ harsh and repressive behaviour, are defined as Bersǫglisvísur (‘plain-speaking stanzas’). These verses are, perhaps, a unique case, in skaldic poetry, of a poem addressed to a king, whose purpose and
content are blame and open criticism of the royal power. This criticism is expressed without any reluctance or feeling of reverential respect, arising from the subjection relationship with the king, and this explains the title of the poem. However, all the formal features are very revealing indicators: the work is not a *drápa*, an extended poem with refrains. This is the most refined and of technically complex form of the skaldic poetry, and it is devoted to rules with royal title, whose value is assumed to be indisputable, precisely because they are those to whom verses are addressed in this particular poetic form. In the saga in which several *Bersǫglísvísur* stanzas are present, Snorri defines the poem as *flokkr*, a form not so elaborate as the *drápa*, without the tripartite division, that marks the *drápa*, consisting of *upphaf* (‘beginning section’), *stefjabálkr* (‘middle section’, containing one or more refrains (*stef*) and *slæmr* (‘concluding section’) and without *stef* (‘refrain’, which normally occurs in the second *helmingr* of a stanza).

These divergent features are not pointless, as different poetic devices match different assessments with reference to praise and honourof the poetic recipient. At the same time the poem is written in the meter usually adopted for encomiastic poems, *dróttkvætt*.

Furthermore, the *Bersǫglísvísur* are an original example of forensic rhetoric in poetic form, with a structured process, following, at least in part, the steps of the judicial oratory (*exordium*, *narratio*, *divisio*, *confirmatio*, *confutatio*, *conclusio*), as are found in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (‘Rhetoric for Herennius’), formerly attributed to Cicero and dating from the late 80s B.C.

Sigvatr, addressing the king directly, prepares the audience to listen to the poem. This is the *exordium*:

*Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 1, 3, 1:

The Introduction is the beginning of the discourse, and by it the hearer’s mind is prepared for attention. [*Exordium est principium orationis, per quod animus auditoris constituitur ad audiendum.*]

The poet grounds his legal standing on his relationship with Magnús's father, Óláfr Haraldsson, Norway's holy king. Sigvatr was not only poet at his court but was also his marshal and emissary, who played a diplomatic role in the conflict settlement between the Norwegian king and his Swedish namesake:

*Bersǫglísvísur*, stanza 2: I was with the lord, who gave gold to his loyal men and carrion to the ravens, throughout the lifetime of that king; he gained fame. [*Vask með gram, þeims bauð dróttinhollum gumnum goll en hrǫfnum hræ, ævi þess konungs; hann fekk nafn.*]
**Bersǫglisvísur**, stanza 16: Óláfr, not decreasing in princely honours, let me be promoted with rings; the belongings of the stout lord proved lasting. Throughout his entire lifetime, I constantly bore the gold of the sender of sea-warriors (‘king’) on both arms, and I was seldom sad. [Óláfr, órýrr dýrða jǫfra, lét mik framask með hringum; þing ins digra dróttins urðu drjúg. Of allan ald hans bark jafnt goll sendis flotna á hváritveggju hendi, ok vask sjáldan hryggr.]

**Bersǫglisvísur**, stanza 3: I followed your father well, that generous lord, who wanted my company; now people are pleased with the peace. There was no gap in the ranks where I stood proudly in the midst of his men with my sword; one must make the forest denser with brush. [Fylgðak feðr þínum vel, þeim fémildum gram, es vildi fylgiu mína; nú eru þegnar fegnir frið. Vasat hlið á her, þars stóðk hræsinn í miðjumflokki hans með hjörvi; skal þjókkva við með hrísi.]

It has to be adequately highlighted how, behind the poetic representation, a criticism of the king comes out from the beginning. A king acts as a rex iustus if he keeps the community together and the poet underlines this in a following stanza:

**Bersǫglisvísur**, stanza 7: Young prince, I was with you that autumn when you came from the east; lord, you alone can secure the entire country; that will be heard. [Ungr þengill, vask með þér þat haust, es komt austan; stillir, matt einn hegna alla þörð; svá fregnisk.]

The poet maintains that he put himself at the service of the new king, because he could secure the entire country, as stillir (‘peacekeeper’). Stillir is a very ambivalent poetic synonym for king that is found in skaldic poetry. The term is an agent noun from the verb stilla (‘still’, ‘soothe’, ‘calm’). A king defined stillir, is really a warrior and the peacefulness he achieves, is the result of his military action, which defeats and destroys his enemies, as it’s clearly highlighted in these quotations, concerning king Haraldr inn Hárfagri and Haraldr Sigurðarson, two kings celebrated in poetry for their military virtues:

Þorbjǫrn Hornklofi, *Haraldskvæði (Hrafnsmál)*, stanza 9: The ruler set in motion the stud-horses of Nǫkkvi (a sea-king, ‘ships’) when he expected combat; there was thundering on shields. [Stillir brá stóðum Nǫkkva, es honum vas væni styrjar; hlǫmmun vas á hlífum.]

Bǫlverkr Arnórsson, *Drápa*, stanza 3: The valiant ruler reddened swords in battle. [Snjallr stillir rauð stöl í styr.]

Instead, in Sigvatr’s poetic view, stillir is the king who doesn’t need to use weapons to ensure a real peace, understood as the harmonious composition and coexistence

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11 Cleasby / Vigfusson, 1874, p. 593.

**Consonance and Dissonance in Skaldic Poetry on War and Peace**

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of the various existing interests, even conflicting ones, within the community, as we read in the second part of the cited stanza. Here it is pointed out that, when King Magnús came to Norway, he proceeded peacefully and prudently in all matters, so that people welcomed him with open arms:

_Bersǫglisvísur_, stanza 7: The countrymen then thought they had caught the bright heaven with their hands when you claimed the lands, king’s son, and were alive.

[Landfolk þóttusk þá hafa tekit heiðan himin hǫndum, es krafðir landa, burr lofðungs, ok lifðir.]

The verses almost literally reproduce the words addressed to King Hakon inn Góði (‘the Good’), when he gave back to the farmers their patrimonies, which the previous king, Haraldr, had taken from them:

_Heimskringla, Hákonar saga góða_, chapter 15: ‘What we farmers thought, King Hákon, when you held the first assembly here in Brándheimr and we had accepted you as king and received from you our ancestral rights, was that we then had heaven in our grasp.’

[Þat hugðu véðr, Hákon konungr, segir hann, at þá er þú hafðir it fyrra þing haft hér í Brándheimr, ok hoðum þik til konungs tekinn, ok þegi of þér óðǫl vár, at véðr hefðim þá höndum himin tekit.]

The reference to Hakon inn Góði is appropriate, because Hákon, as we read in the saga devoted to him in Snorri Sturluson’s work (Hákonar saga góða), tried, at least at the beginning of his kingdom, to seek an agreement with the landed elite, protecting its interests, in order to have the full support of the landowners. Sigvatr’s message to the king is plain spoken, as is the title of his work: to ensure peace, the king must, first of all, be a mediator and peace means full respect by the royal power of landowners’ interests, as the poet highlights in another stanza:

_Bersǫglisvísur_, stanza 5: Hákon (…) was called most just, and he punished hostile looting, and people loved him. Later men held firmly onto the laws of the most friendly foster-son of Æthelstan (= Hákon); the farmers are still slow to relinquish what they remember. [Hǫkun (…) hét fjölgegn ok réð hegna heiptar rán, en firar unnu hönum. Sídan helt þjóð fast á logum fjölblíðs fóstra Aðalsteins; enn eru bœndr seinir af, því minnir.]

After the proof of his legal standing, and the reference to the historical background on which he grounds his statements, the poet turns to the facts, the narratio:

_Rhetorica ad Herennium_, 1, 3, 2: The Narration or Statement of Facts sets forth the events that have occurred or might have occurred. [Narratio est rerum gestarum aut proinde ut gestarum expositio.]

The words of admonition directed to the king aim to remind him, as we read in the _Morkinskinna_14, that he should observe the laws that his father had established, and that he had guaranteed to the people when he came to Norway. The poet reminds
the king that he had promised a truce to everyone when he received the royal title, even if they had previously been opposed to his father, king Óláfr:

_Bersǫglisvísur_, stanza 9: Lord, your counsellors must not get enraged at my plain-speaking; that royal command will open the way for glory, king. The farmers claim they have other, inferior laws, unless the countrymen lie, than you promised people earlier. [Dóglingr, ráðgjafr yðrir skulut reiðask við bersǫgli; þat orð dróttins ryðr til dýrðar, konungr. Búendr kveðask hafa önnur verri log, nema landherr ljúgi, an þú hézt mǫnnum endr.]

After this assessment, the poet details his _confirmatio_:

_Rhetorica ad Herennium_, 1, 3, 4: Proof is the presentation of our arguments, together with their corroboration. [_Confirmatio est nostrorum argumentorum expositio cum adseveratione._]

A precise charge is made, backed up by evidence:

_Bersǫglisvísur_, stanza 13: Who urges you, vengeful lord, to go back on your promises? Frequently you test slender swords. A prosperous prince of the people must be true to his word; it is never proper for you to break your pledges, battle-increaser (‘warrior’). [Hverr eggjar þik, heiptarstrangr harri, at ganga á bak mǫlum þínum? Opt reynir þú þunn stöl. Fengsæll þengili fyrða skyli vesa fastorðr; aldri hæfir þér at tjúfa heit, hjaldrmögnuðr.]

Sigvatr asks the king to remember what he promised when he first came to Norway. According to the view of the people, he has not kept his word in every respect:

_Bersǫglisvísur_, stanza 10: Toppler of the thief (‘just ruler’), pay heed to the chatter of men which now is spreading here; the hand must be held back by moderation. He is a friend who offers a warning, but you, gladdener of the hawk of the tear of warm wounds (‘warrior’), must heed what the farmers want. [Veltir þjófs, gjalt varhuga viðr kvít hǫlða, þeims nú err heðra; skal of styttà hond í höfi. Vinrs, sós býðr vörnuð, en, varmra benja tármútaris teitir, hlýðið til, hvat búmenn vilja.]

Sigvatr’s _divisio_ is logical and consistent with the presentation:

_Rhetorica ad Herennium_, 1, 3, 3: By means of the Division we make clear what matters are agreed upon and what are contested, and announce what points we intend to take up. [_Divisio est per quam aperimus quid conveniat, quid in controversia sit, et per quam exponimus quibus de rebus simus acturi._]

The poet is fearful about what would happen and how long the country would be secure if things continued in the same vein:

_Bersǫglisvísur_, stanza 12: The threat is dangerous when all grey-haired men, as I hear, intend (to revolt) against the ruler; that must be prevented in advance. It’s
rather grim when assembly members hang their heads and stick their noses into their cloaks; silence has descended on your followers. [Hætts hót, þats allir hárir menn, es heyrík, ætla at möti skjöldungi; áðr skal ráða við því. Heldr greypts, þats þingmenn hneppta hófðum ok stinga nösum niðr í feldi; þogn hefr slegit á þegna.]

The charge made by the poet is particularly serious: the king is guilty of a treason against the same community that has accepted him as king, as is found in Snorri’s saga: when the farming community had the assembly, then at it Magnús was accepted at it as king over the whole country as widely as his father King Óláfr had ruled\(^\text{15}\), but the sovereign has failed in his duty to act with self-restraint. Prudence and moderation are essential virtues of a rex iustus. Lack of these can cause a confrontational clash between royal power and community. In this respect, the stanza mentioned previously is really meaningful, because it is probably the only example within a skaldic poem in which, in a poem addressed to a sovereign, there is a reference to a looming civil war, that only the poet can prevent, as he declares at the very beginning of his work:

_Bersǫglisvísur_, stanza 1: I hear that Sigvatr has dissuaded the lord from waging civil war. [Fregnk at Sighvatr hefr lattan gram at freista folkorrostu.]

The term _folkorrostu_, in the rare cases in which it appears in skaldic poetry, means ‘major battle’, a battle in which there are many fighters, as in another of Sigvatr’s poem, a _drápa_ commemorating the holy king Óláfr Haraldsson: “The ambitious leader waged twenty major battles. [Framráðr fylkir háði tjogu folkorrostur.]” (Erfidrápa Óláfs helga, stanza 22\(^\text{16}\)). Only in the _Bersǫglisvísur_ the constituent takes on the meaning of ‘battle or war fought between different factions of the population’ (ibid., stanza 1).

Also noteworthy is the poetic representation of the looming civil war: the conflict is now considered almost certain by those who are the custodians, by virtue of age, of the wisdom of community (hárir menn), and the description of the assembly is troubling, because it is usually a place where heated arguments take place, but now it is pervaded by a fraught silence (þogn hefr slegit á þegna). Those present bow their heads and hide the face in their cloaks (þingmenn hneppta hófðum ok stinga nösum niðr í feldi), ready to unleash their anger, just as the warriors, just before of the decisive assault, cover their faces with shields. This gloomy representation is the backdrop against which the strongest argument is submitted: the king’s treason against the community and his violent behaviour are inconsistent with royal dignity:

_Bersǫglisvísur_, stanza 11: Who urges you, battle-promoter (‘warrior’), to slay the livestock of your subjects? It is insolence for a prince to do that in his own land. No

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\(^{15}\) Heimskringla, Magnúss saga ins góða, chapter 3.

\(^{16}\) Text and translation quoted after the edition of Diana Whaley (2012).

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one had earlier advised a young ruler in such a way; I think your troops are tired of plunder; people are angry, king. [Hverr eggjar þik, hjaldrgegnir, höggva bú þegna? Es ofrausn jöfri at vinna þat innanlands. Engr haföi áðr råðit ungur bragningi svá; hykk rekkum þínum leiðask rán; reiðrs herr, konungr.]

It is on these grounds that the poet builds his confutatio: “Refutation is the destruction of our adversaries ‘arguments [Con futatio est contrariorum locorum dissolutio]’ (Rhetorica ad Herennium, 1, 3, 5). Every act carried out by a ruler who no longer has royal status is unlawful, it is not exercise of royal power, but autocracy:

Bersǫglisvísur, stanza 14: They all say the same thing: ‘my lord appropriates his subjects’ ancestral properties’; proud farmers revolt. That man, who parcels out his patrimony to the king’s counts according to precipitate rulings, will call that robbery. [Eitt es móti, þats mæla: ‘dróttinn minn leggr eign sína á óðöl þegna’; gögir bœndr òfgask. Seggr, hinns selr út foðurleifð sína greifum konungs at fellidómi flaums, mun telja rán í því.]

This type of seizure was a necessary element to ensure an economic basis for royal power, by taking away land assets from those who could exert their influence through the possession of the main source of wealth.

After this representation, where poetic wisdom and a strict logic are merged, the king becomes accountable to the people and can be overthrown by them, as it is found in the words of landowners, as reported by Snorri:

Heimskringla, Magnúss saga ins góða: chapter 15: The landowners began to grumble and said among themselves: ‘What can this king mean by acting towards us contrary to the laws that King Hákôn inn góði (’the Good’) established? Does he not remember that we have never put up with loss of our rights? He will go the same way as his father or some of the other rulers that we have deprived of life when we got tired of their tyranny and lawlessness’. [Þá tóku bœndr at gera kurr ok mæltu sín í milli: „Hvat mun konungr þessi fyrir ætla, er hann brýtr log á oss, þau er setti Hákon konungr inn góði? Man hann eigi þat, at vör hofum jafnan eigi polat varnþætt? Mun hann haða farar foður sín, eða annarra hofþingja þeira, er vör hofum af lífi tekit, þá er oss leiddisk ofsi þeira ok loglausa”.

The foundation of the uprising, as a result of which a possible regicide is feared, lies in the claim of the full right of the community to free itself from the bond of submission to the king, if he is not the guarantor of the collective will, that is the embodiment or expression of its common interest. It is the so-called jus resistendi already theorized in Thomas Aquinas’ Summa Theologiae:

Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, Part II-II, Question 42, Article 2, Reply¹⁷: A tyrannical regime is not a just regime, since it is ordered not toward the common good, but toward the private good of the ruler (...). And disturbing this sort of

¹⁷ Quoted after the anonymous online edition of the Corpus Thomisticum and the translation of Alfred John Freddoso (2022).
regime does not have the character of sedition (...). It is instead the tyrant who is seditious and who feeds discord and sedition among the people subject to him, so that he can more securely dominate them. For a regime is tyrannical when it is ordered toward the proper good of the ruler accompanied by harm to the multitude. [Quod regimen tyrannicum non est iustum, quia non ordinatur ad bonum commune, sed ad bonum privatum regentis (...). Et ideo perturbatio huius regininis non habet rationem seditionis (...). Magis autem tyrannus seditiosus est, qui in populo sibi subiecto discordias et seditiones nutrit, ut tutius dominari possit. Hoc enim tyrannicum est, cum sit ordinatum ad bonum proprium præsidentis cum multitudinis nocumento.]

The right of the uprising may be invoked when the king is no longer a primus inter pares, who among his tasks practices defence and protection of values and rules belonging to the tradition, as can be found in kingship’s Arthurian model:

Chrétien de Troyes, Erec et Enide, v. 1756-1770\(^\text{18}\): I am a king, therefore I must not lie, and I must not permit any rudeness, injustice or arrogance; I must defend reason and right, since it is the business of a loyal king to keep the law, truth, faith and justice. I would in no way wish to commit any disloyalty or wrong, either towards the weak or towards the strong. It’s not fitting that someone complains about me, and I don’t want that customs and habits are given up, which my ancestors were able to keep unchanged. [Je suis rois, si ne doit mantir, / Ne vilenie consantir, / Ne fauseté ne desmesure; / Reison doi garder et droiture, / Qu’il appartient a leal roi / Que il doit maintenir la loi, / Verité et foi et justise. / Je ne voldroie an nule guise / Fere deslëauté ne tort, /Ne plus au foible que au fort. / N’est droiz que nus de moi se plaingne / Et je ne voel pas que remaigne /La costume ne li usages / Qui siaut maintenir mes lignages.]

Sovereignty doesn’t mean imposition of the king’s will over a dominion understood as the king’s ‘private property’. The sovereign is, first of all, the supreme guarantor of a system, which finds its foundation in the community itself and in its values handed down by tradition.

The boldness and value of Sigvatr’s composition lie precisely in the declaration in poetic form of these political and juridical issues. This feature enables us to fully insert this poem within the history of European culture and leads to question the idea of a Sonderweg of the Nordic area, a supposed special path, by which political structures in Scandinavian countries would have developed in a way that could not be traced back to a broader geopolitical perspective.

As a prosecutor, who acts in the interests of justice and not solely for the purpose of obtaining a conviction, the poet ends his charge and formalises his requests in his conclusio:

\(^{18}\) Quoted after the edition of Cristina Noacco (2007) with my own translation.
The poet emphasises his loyalty to the king, but it is a rhetorical device because, at the same time, Sigvatr strongly reasserts the issue of his autonomy, fearing to put his skill at the service of the enemy, the Danish king Hrðaknútr, if his presence is not accepted by the king. This is a powerful claim of full freedom not only for the poet but also and above all for the poetry itself:

Bersǫglisvísur, stanza 17: Sigvatr’s heart will be there in Hrðaknútr’s hall unless generous King Magnús welcomes the skald very well. I followed the fathers of them both; then I was still altogether beardless; my tongue brought me gold as a youth. [Hugr Sighvats es hizig í garði Hrðaknúts, nema mildr Magnús konungr fagni skaldi mjökk vel. Fórk með feðrum þeira beggja; þá vask enn með òllu óskeggjaðr; tunga fekk ungum mér golls.]

According to Snorri’s saga, the poet’s words achieve expected outcomes:

Heimskringla, Magnúss saga ins góða, chapter 16: After this warning the king changed for the better. Many people also used the same arguments with the king. So it came about that the king held discussions with the wisest people, and they then agreed on their laws (...). King Magnús became popular and beloved of all the people in the country. He was for this reason known as Magnús inn góði (‘the Good’). [Eptir þessa áminning skipaðisk konungr vel. Fluttu ok margir ok þessi orð fyrir konungi. Kom þá svá, at konungr átti tal við ína vitrustu menn, ok sómdu þeir þá log sin (...). Magnús konungr gerðisk vinsaël ok ástsaël òllu landsfókki. Var hann fyrir þá sok kallaðr Magnús inn góði].

Although the two poems examined here were composed at different times, they have in common, in addition to the request to put an end to conflicts, expressed in the verses, the presence of criticism towards kingship, an element that needs to be highlighted in the context of the skaldic poetry. They are, therefore, two significant testaments within the long and troubled history of the relationship between poetry and power.
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**PLAN**

**AUTEUR**

Francesco Sangriso  
[Voir ses autres contributions](mailto:artali67@hotmail.com), University of Genoa