

Jakub Morawiec, *Między poezją a polityką: Rozgrywki polityczne w Skandynawii XI wieku w świetle poezji ówczesnych skaldów* [Between Poetry and Politics: Political Games in Scandinavia in the Eleventh Century in the Light of Contemporary Skaldic Poetry of the Period], Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2016, 669 pp., Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Śląskiego w Katowicach, no. 3430, series Historia

Jakub Morawiec, a lecturer at the Silesian University in Katowice, is an author of many studies devoted to the history of medieval Scandinavia. His research interests focus on topics like the biography of Canute the Great, Slavic-Scandinavian contacts and, above all, skaldic poetry. The book under review is the author's post-doctoral dissertation (to obtain the degree of habilitated doctor) and the summary of his research into skaldic poetry (as the author lists his studies in the bibliography, I feel no obligation to quote them here — p. 646 f.). It is an attempt to provide a broader view of the political history of Scandinavia in the eleventh century through skaldic poems. Morawiec's book is overwhelming only in its length and, above all, the huge erudition of its author. This is why, and because I am not able to comment of all of its range, that the following remarks are quite selective.

First of all, we need to appreciate the fact that the study fills an unquestionable gap in Polish literature on the subject of skaldic poetry. With the exception of the author's earlier contributions, Polish readers have so far had to be satisfied with brief comments in the margins of a few popular works devoted to Icelandic sagas. Morawiec introduces us, in a systematic and competent manner, to the basic problems of skaldic poetry such as its metre, metaphors, genres, its distinction from Eddaic poetry and finally, biographies of its authors (pp. 33–260). He states that for him, the poetry is not an autonomous research subject but rather a source for the study of the period's political history. As a result he has to face several challenges: what are the characteristics of the sources that are of interest to him, to what extent are they reliable and useful in such research? Let us see what answers to these questions have been provided by the author.

Practically the entire corpus of skaldic poetry surviving to this day has done so in the form of scattered verses quoted in more substantial historiographic narratives originating in the twelfth century at the earliest. The oldest known example of this poetry is a couplet insulting the goddess Freya, apparently delivered by Hjalti Skeggjason during a session of the Icelandic Althing in the late tenth century. It is quoted by Ari the Wise in his *Íslendingabók* (Book of

the Icelanders) of 1122–33. This one example — incidentally not included by Jakub Morawiec in his study — shows the huge distance between the original and its literary account: in this particular case a temporal distance of far over one hundred years (not to mention the fact that even the *Íslendingabók* has survived only in much later copies). And what should we say about poems allegedly originating in the times of the first King of Norway, Harald Fairhair (in the ninth to tenth century) but known from thirteenth-century texts? The belief at the time was that on account of the strictness of the metre, their content had been faithfully preserved in its oral transmission. Yet today we know that versification was very much susceptible to change, as is evidenced by the ‘shifts’ found across different versions of the same pieces (pp. 15, 37–42).

Some historians have even challenged the fundamental authenticity of skaldic poetry, claiming that the poems were in fact written by the authors of sagas, who invented words they then attributed to well-known skalds, to put into the mouths of their protagonists. The device was to increase the credibility of their stories. This view has been criticized and firmly rejected by Morawiec (pp. 14, 20 f., 79–90). He maintains that the works of the skalds are rooted in the periods of their established authors and the events which they describe, and thus they enable scholars studying a particular period to speak in an authoritative manner on the subject.

There is another point at issue, namely, whether the verses should be analysed in the context of the accompanying prose (*prosimetrum*) or, on the contrary, whether they are autonomous utterances. The author opts for the latter analysis, de-contextualization. He explains this choice by referring to the discrepancies that may occur between the original author’s intention and later interpretations of the verse by subsequent authors (pp. 13, 15–17, 55–60). Morawiec believes that the new contexts in which the verses function only cause ‘additional confusion’ and hampers scholars’ work (for example pp. 348, 352, 455). However, I would argue that such confusion seems intellectually fruitful, as it enables us to get to know the historical culture of Scandinavia in the high Middle Ages. Moreover, we could even contend that the skaldic verses, even in the imperfect form transmitted to us, might be more ‘authentic’ than those of complete poems ‘prepared’ by modern publishers. In other words, we should focus not on the ‘original’ sense of the verses, but on their later reception and function in the world of the kings’ sagas rather than the historical reality of the early Middle Ages.

Indeed, Morawiec, who refers to ‘hard facts’, cannot escape the historical contexts of skaldic poetry. There is a certain contradiction in his stance. Owing to the scarcity of contemporary sources, the history of early medieval Scandinavia comes to us primarily (though not exclusively) from the kings’ sagas. These are not only late sources but also — as the best specialists have been emphasizing for years — still under-explored in *Quellenforschung*. Above all, however, they are the source of skaldic verses analysed by Morawiec, and these, given their philological and literary specificity, do not by themselves make it

possible to reconstruct the events of, for example, the eleventh century. Without such a reconstruction based on prose sources the highly ambiguous skaldic poetry certainly becomes much more difficult to interpret (as can be seen in the reference to Harald Hardrada's sea voyage from Sweden to Norway, discussed by the author on p. 532 f.). As a result, these scraps of poetry are more usable as a contribution to political history rather than a privileged source for its study.

The extensive introduction dealing with the question of sources is followed by the main body of the book (pp. 263–628). In each chapter the author first introduces the historical context of the events in question and then proceeds to analyse the skaldic verses. He is particularly interested in the way images of various rulers were created in them, and how this shaped the memory of their achievements. This part is divided into seven chapters dealing with fundamental episodes from the history of eleventh-century Scandinavia. These are: the Battle of Øresund (pp. 265–306), the reign of Saint Olaf (1015–30; pp. 307–406) and growth of his cult (pp. 447–524), the conquest of England by Canute the Great (pp. 407–46), attempts by Harald Hardrada (the Hard Ruler) to subjugate Denmark (pp. 525–70) and England (pp. 571–96), and finally the reign of Magnus Barefoot (1093–1103), which the author regards as the end of the Viking era (pp. 597–628). The topics have been selected not so much on the basis of the events' significance, but rather the degree of interest shown in them among the skalds. What is immediately striking (but by no means surprising) is their disproportionate focus on the history of Norway and less so on the history of Denmark, the British Isles and Slavic lands, not to mention Sweden. Another notable feature is a 'missing piece', in the form of the relatively long (1066–93) reign of Olaf the Peaceful.

Grounds for polemics can be found in some of the conclusions and historical interpretations presented in the book. First of all, it is difficult to agree that Olaf Tryggvason (who reigned in 995–1000) 'died a martyr's death' (p. 267). The ruler certainly contributed greatly to the Christianization of Norway and the islands of North Atlantic, and was seen as the one who paved the way for his successor and namesake (analogous to the figure of John the Baptist for Christ). However, I would not overestimate the traces of his cult (such as the title *beatus* found in reference to him in one chronicle — the anonymous *Historia Norwegie* likely dating to the second half of twelfth century), which did not really catch on in the Middle Ages. Nor was his defeat at Øresund regarded as death in a defence of the faith, as for example the later Battle of Stiklastaðir.

Writing about Saint Olaf (who reigned between 1015–30), the author claims that during his stay in England the future king 'actively supported Æthelred, when, in the spring of 1014, the latter began to make efforts to regain power'. On the other hand he notes that according to some scholars the young Olaf may have been supporting the other side, aiding Canute the Great to conquer England, whilst stating arbitrarily: 'there is not even any suggestion of such cooperation' (p. 310). The problem is that there are profound differences in

this respect between source accounts. Some of them do confirm that Olaf supported Æthelred II in his conflict with his brothers and even stood by his side during the Danish invasion. Others — such as William of Jumièges (V, 8) writing just a couple of decades later — claim it was the other way round. I do not wish to settle this debate here; however, we are certainly dealing with two mutually exclusive traditions concerning the relations between Olaf, Canute, and Æthelred and Edmund.¹ This precludes unequivocal interpretations which leave out the sources that contradict their initial thesis.

It is also a pity that the author too short comments on the (in my opinion) sensational information from the twenty-third stanza of Sigvat Þórðarson's *Erfidrápa* (Mournful Poem), that Saint Olaf restored sight to Vladimir the Great (p. 475). A question arises about the circumstances of this event. We know from the historiographic tradition of Rus' that Vladimir lost his sight shortly before his baptism and regained it immediately afterwards.² When it comes to Olaf, some narrative sources say that he was in Rus' during his youth, although this must have been towards the end of Vladimir's reign — far too late for him to have witnessed or taken any part in the prince's conversion (this is more likely for Tryggvason, who was also brought up in Rus'). In addition, Olaf returned to Rus' one year before his martyrdom and was warmly received by Yaroslav the Wise (is it possible that Sigvat's poem has the two rulers of Rus' confused?).

Let us now move to remarks of a different nature. Morawiec's book is generally written in a clear and interesting manner. Sometimes, however, it contains various repetitions, such as the same word occurring in two successive sentences (for example, pp. 84, 154). I have further qualms with some terminological extravagances, such as the use of the word 'postulate' referring to a source fact as opposed to a historical fact (for example, 'postulated humour' — p. 65; 'Olaf Tryggvason's actual or postulated position' — p. 276; 'postulated [...] size of the [...] fleets' — p. 555; 'postulated sainthood' — pp. 167, 473). Terms overused and misused by the author also include 'concept', usually referring to the idea of hierogamy (for example, on p. 139; incidentally, a Polish equivalent, *hierogamia*, of the Greek term *hierogamos* does exist) or 'potential' to describe a hypothetical interpretation of a source (for example, 'potentially authentic' — p. 123; 'potential irony' — p. 589).

The author gives the quotations from source accounts both in the original and in his own translation (p. 14). Such a translating endeavour requires much hard work, which certainly should be appreciated. As a result we get a veritable anthology of the earliest skaldic poetry with scholarly comments. The translations not only provide us with the content of skaldic poems, but also convey their raw style. Unfortunately, this sometimes renders them awkward and hard

¹ See Olav Tveito, 'Olav Haraldssons unge år og relasjonen til engelsk kongemakt. Momenter til et *crux interpretum*', *Collegium Medievale*, 21, 2008, pp. 158–81.

² See for example Jacek Banaszkiwicz, "Podanie bohaterskie" o Mieszku I zanotowane w kronice Galla Anonima (I, 4)', in idem, *Trzy po trzy o dziesiątym wieku*, Cracow, 2014, pp. 262–77.

to understand for an unprepared reader (here I mean the kennings in particular). They would benefit, if not from some literary treatment, then at least from better punctuation. I also wish that the stanzas in the poems had been numbered: this would facilitate reading the discussion about them considerably.

However, these reservations concerning methodology and interpretation do not change the generally positive impression the book under review makes. It is undoubtedly Jakub Morawiec's *opus magnum*, testifying to his extraordinary knowledge of his subject matter. We receive not only a mine of information about skaldic poetry, but also the first such serious contribution to the discussion about the Scandinavian Middle Ages from a Polish medievalist in many years. The book undoubtedly deserves to be published in one of the major conference or Scandinavian languages.

Rafał Rutkowski
(Warsaw)

(Translated by Anna Kijak)
(Proofreading by Yelizaveta Crofts)