

ERIN MICHELLE GOERES:

The Poetics of Commemoration: Skaldic Verse and Social Memory, c. 890–1070.

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As its subtitle indicates, this study of commemorative skaldic verse in Norse-speaking royal and comital courts of the Viking Age is framed in terms of a ‘conception of memory as a social process, and of literary texts as expressions of that process’ (p. 3). The Introduction provides helpful orientation in scholarship on social or collective memory since the idea was developed by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. ‘The importance of the skald’s role as the articulator of social memory is nowhere more evident than in commemorative verse’ (p. 11), and throughout the book stress is placed on the way in which collective memory of the past functions to explain and support present identity. Goeres argues, moreover, that skalds are aware of the role that they play, so that their verse articulates not only social memory but also the process of social memory-making. The five central chapters of the book present a series of case studies. In each of the lucidly written chapters Goeres pays careful attention to the textual sources for the poems under discussion and the prose narrative contexts in which the verses are preserved. Although the book is primarily a study of skaldic poems, rather than of the later prosimetric texts in which alone they survive (in often incomplete form), Goeres recognises that it is not possible (or at least not sensible) simply to reconstruct the skaldic poems and ignore the prose in which they are embedded. Each chapter is characterized, too, by very careful close reading of the verse, with detailed analysis of diction and figurative language. Throughout the book previous scholarship is given its due without allowing the text to become weighed down by fussy footnoting.

Chapter 1 is concerned with Þjóðólfr ór Hvini’s *Ynglingatal* and its commemoration of the earliest Scandinavian kings. Goeres offers a convincing reading of the poem (which she accepts as early) as ‘playful, sardonic, and at times grotesque’ (p. 19). This poem is preserved only in Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla* and Goeres pays

particular attention to the ways in which Snorri conditions subsequent readings of the poem and to the 'unresolved tensions between the ways in which the poetic and the prose texts engage with the problems of commemoration and the construction of social memory' (p. 24). *Ynglingatal* emerges as revealing the poet's self-awareness of his role as articulator of social memory.

Chapter 2 moves on to consider poems that reflect on the afterlives of three Norwegian kings: Eiríkr blóðøx in the anonymous *Eiríksmál*, Hákon inn góði in *Hákonarmál*, and Óláfr Tryggvason in the memorial composed by Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld. The first two depict their (more or less pagan) subjects' entry into Valhalla; the last focuses on the anxiety and despair of Óláfr's followers after the Christian king's death. Unlike *Ynglingatal*, these poems were all composed soon after the death of the ruler concerned by a poet with first-hand knowledge of the king. The poets share with Þjóðólfr, however, an awareness of their role as creators of memory as they 'self-consciously examine the role of language and poetic discourse in their construction of a collective memory of the absent lord' (p. 84).

In Chapter 3 Goeres turns her attention to memorial poems in which the skalds react to the enforced change of allegiance occasioned by the deaths of their patrons, Kings Haraldr gráfeldr and Hákon inn góði. A poetic exchange between Glúmr Geirason and Eyvindr skáldaspillir is preserved embedded in very different prose narratives in *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla*, leading Goeres to note that 'Although the modern reconstruction of long poems encourages the reading of texts that no longer exist in that exact form, the saga authors too engage in a process of literary reconstruction in their preservation of these verses' (p. 97). The different ways in which these skalds work through the transition from one ruler to another emphasises that however important it may be to commemorate a dead patron, 'Poets and warriors rely on the patronage of living kings' (p. 110).

Quoting Jacques Le Goff on Christianity being a 'religion of remembrance', Goeres argues that Scandinavia's conversion radically altered the process of collective or social memory (p. 112). When the dead ruler becomes venerated as a saint, as was the case with King Óláfr Haraldsson, the generic conventions of hagiography influence

memorial poetry and the dead king lives on as a patron and a power among the living. Because many of Óláfr's miracles are granted to people from the lower classes, his skalds draw on new materials from beyond the ambit of the warrior elite who occupied the attention of earlier court poets. The political situation in Norway following Óláfr's death meant that poets commemorating him were also impelled to offer advice to the rulers who succeeded him. The chapter looks in detail at Þórarinn loftunga's *Glælognskviða* and poetry by Sigvatr Þórðarson, in whose verse 'the role of the court poet merges with that of hagiographer' (p. 145).

The final main chapter widens the book's scope to include poetry commemorating earls (or jarls) of Orkney as well as Norwegian kings. A compelling contrast is made between the comparatively detached verse by Arnórr jarlaskáld Þórðarson commemorating kings of Norway and the much more personal poetry in which he praises and remembers earls of Orkney who were not only his patrons but also his kinsmen and friends. Arnórr wrestles with the difficulty encapsulated in the plural of his nickname *jarlaskáld*: poet of earls. He celebrates rival earls, to both of whom he was close, and thus grapples with the 'divided loyalties' of this chapter's title.

As its conclusion claims, this book powerfully conveys a sense of the wide variety of different kinds (and different aims) of commemorative skaldic verse. Such verse is not only a memorial but also a legitimation of the political situation in the present and so is responsive to changes in royal ideology. In enriching the reader's sense of the variety of Old Norse memorial verse and the uses to which it was put this judicious and scholarly book makes a valuable contribution to skaldic studies and offers a model for further research.

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