



Review: Kate Heslop, *Skaldic Mediologies: A New History of Skaldic Poetics*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2022, 296 pp.

By Bianca Patria

The aim of *Skaldic Mediologies: A New History of Skaldic Poetics* is to inaugurate the study of *mediality* in Viking Age and medieval Scandinavia by applying notions developed for the analysis of modern media to the study of Old Norse skaldic verse. The intention is to situate skaldic poetry “in the broader media landscape of the Viking Age” by “seek[ing] to describe how different media interacted in this particular historical setting” (p. 4). Given the many unanswered questions about the relationship between various Viking Age ‘media’, such as poetry and runic monuments, or myths as told in verse and the few, often later, iconographic sources, this is a promising venture. Here, I will discuss the book mainly from an Old Norse philologist’s perspective, focusing on what concerns the treatment of skaldic verse and related subjects. Heslop introduces her theoretical approach to mediality in the Introduction. This entails a synthesis of insights gained from the study of mass media technologies on the one hand, and pre-modern notions of *medium* as the often numinous and mysterious ‘in-between’ that, according to ancient and medieval doctrines, enabled sensory perception and knowledge, on the other. This perhaps unintuitive synthesis characterizes the discussion of notions that are central to the book’s focus, such as ‘perception/experience’, ‘belief’ and ‘representation’. This appears to have proven often challenging, despite the author’s methodological imperative to historicize the concept of medium, by placing it in its specific cultural and intellectual context (p. 10). The book is structured in three thematic sections devoted to the ‘interferences’ between the skaldic medium and, respectively, the ‘landscapes of commemoration’ shaped by burial mounds and runic monuments (Part 1: ‘Making Memories’), visual cues and visuality (Part 2: ‘Seeing Things’), and sonic cues, rhythmical poetry and music (Part 3: ‘Hearing Voices’). Each of these strands of inquiry is anchored to one element of skaldic poetics, namely: the typically Old Norse stanzaic form (*vísa*), the distinctive system of skaldic periphrases (*kenningar*), and the use of internal rhyme (*hendingar*). The general conclusions are presented at the end of the book, after a brief summary of the topics addressed in the previous chapters. The book displays breadth and erudition, but it also presents a

number of problems, often originating in the attempts at historicizing perceptions and notions associated with mediality. The close-up readings of selected skaldic stanzas are often plausible, although the book's general emphasis proves eventually tilted in favor of theoretical discussions rather than of concrete applications of new interpretive insights. Since the book 'does not follow a developmental trajectory' (p. 12) and can be challenging to navigate, I will first provide an overview of its structure, before addressing some of the methodological issues posed by the topic.

Part 1, 'Making Memories', draws a parallel between *Ynglingatal* and the Rök stone as early instances of memorial techniques with an 'inter-subjective and intermedial potential' (p. 185). The two 'monuments', both regarded as innovative departures from previous tradition, are examined in terms of their role within their local 'memorial landscape' as well as their possible links to Carolingian royal culture. Although the importance of figurative sources in the early Middle Ages is beyond doubt, their role is often overlooked in literary analyses; thus, Heslop's inclusion of Carolingian visual culture in the discussion of possible influences is a significant move. The analysis of the metre of the Rök stanza is subtle and essentially correct, although referring to *fornyrðislag* and *kviðuháttir* at this stage betrays a somewhat teleological perspective. Some of the arguments in the analysis of *Ynglingatal*, by contrast, prove less convincing (see below).

Section 2, 'Seeing Things', is devoted to visuality and is articulated in two sub-chapters: 'The Viking Eye' treats the mental images and visual suggestions summoned up by descriptive skaldic poems, whereas 'Seeing, Knowing and Believing in the *Prose Edda*' explores the theological and epistemological valence of sight in premodern optical and cognitive theory, "first counterpointing medieval learning with Norse homiletic reflections, then pursuing the impact of these theories on the account of ancient poetry given in the *Prose Edda*" (p. 111). The two sub-chapters differ significantly in focus and are only connected by the notion of the epiphanic experience of 'seeing the gods', which would link poems such as *Haustlong* and *Húsdrápa* to the epistemological value the author attributes to the concept of *sjónhverfing* ('visual illusion') in *Gylfaginning*. The concluding paragraphs thus explore the way in which mythological poems – carriers of "poetic moments of vision" – were embedded in the visual epistemology Heslop detects in Snorri's *Edda*.

The two sub-chapters of Part 3 ('Hearing Voices') address, respectively, the aural effects of prosody and rhymes in *dróttkvætt* stanzas on the one hand, and the imprint of medieval music speculations on the Icelandic *Second Grammatical Treatise* (SGT) on the other. 'The Noise of Poetry' treats both the aesthetic and mnemonic functions of *hendingar*, providing valid close-up readings of selected stanzas from *Glymdrápa* (p. 143–49). 'A Poetry Machine' treats the interest for musical instruments and singing used as cognitive metaphors in the two redactions of SGT, indicating plausible precedents in medieval musical doctrines rather than in the grammatical tradition. At the end of the chapter, the author proposes a possible environment for the Latinate interests in music theory and accentual, syllable-counting poetry which would have informed new analyses of skaldic poetry, as reflected in works such as SGT and the commentary to *Háttatal*'s stanzas. Whether or not the author attributes the latter to Snorri remains, however, elusively unclear (p. 177–78).¹

Finally, in the conclusions, the author challenges an allegedly naïve conception of skaldic poems' "singularity and authoredness", drawing attention to the long period of "rhapsodic re-performance of skaldic encomium" implied in oral transmission, and proposes, for future research, to "take the new philological turn away from recension" and shift the focus from the originally performed poem to the much larger and later corpus of skaldic stanzas as they are preserved in the individual manuscript witnesses (p. 189–92).² The book thus addresses a multitude of diverse topics and Heslop has interesting points to make on many of them. I turn now to a representative selection of problems.

1. The question, posed by Möbius (Th. Möbius (ed.), 1881, *Háttatal Snorra Sturlusonar*, Halle) and Boer (R. C. Boer, 1927, 'Om kommentaren til *Háttatal*', ANF 43, 67–93), was thoroughly investigated and convincingly answered by Finnur Jónsson (1929, 'Snorri Sturlusons *Háttatal*', ANF 45, 229–69), a reference Heslop omits.
2. In her discussion of oral transmission of skaldic poems by means of re-performance, Heslop uses the adjective *rhapsodic* (p. 12, 189), without, however, clarifying its implications. If not indicating the performances of the rhapsodes themselves, the term is generally intended to mean 'fragmentary, non-unitary'. Skaldic stanzas are fragmentarily attested in written prosimetrical works, but there is no evidence nor any reason to believe that their oral performance, in normal circumstances, would have been rhapsodic. If, by contrast, the author maintains that that was the case, she should explicitly argue her hypothesis.

A Preliminary Problem: Who is the Audience?

In several passages, Heslop seems to suggest, although hardly ever explicitly, that traditional scholarly attempts at a text-critical reconstruction of authorial and unitary skaldic poems conceal considerable epistemological risks and are riddled with unrealistic expectations (p. 154, 191).³ She proposes, then, to shift the focus from the traditional ‘author-centrism of much work on skaldic poetry’ (p. 185) to reception, intended not only in the medial and cognitive meanings explored in the book, but also in the sense of manuscript transmission and scribal revision advocated in the book’s conclusions. In approaching “the skaldic medium”, the author’s focus is thus programmatically turned from the moment of authorial composition to that of reception/perception. Moving from a “stable, static, and authorial” to a “more dynamic, processual, and collaborative understanding of skaldic poetry” (p. 12) would allow to “investigate the conditions of possibility for poetic performance in the Viking Age” (p. 3). An example of such a shift in perspective is found in the chapter about skaldic shield-poems, where the author proposes to abandon scholarly obsessions with archaeological *Realien* (“the hallmark of nineteenth-century positivism”, p. 85) and rather to focus on the “*mental* images [shield] poems summon up”, maintaining that “skaldic picture poems are more revealing of Viking Age practices of visual interpretation than they are

3. “Despite the best efforts of the poems’ editors, who are *obliged* to produce a single text and so to argue for the *superiority* of one of these readings, it is not easy to decide which interpretation to offer” (p. 154, my emphasis). “Such scholarly evaluations reveal a desire for “an original” in two senses of the word. SGT’s editors seek the *lost original version* of the treatise. [...] The search for the *original version* of the text is, therefore, also a search for its “aim and value”, as Raschellà put it” (p. 161, my emphasis). These appear to be misrepresentations or misunderstandings of what textual criticism is as a discipline, since the reconstruction of an archetype is crucially *not* the reconstruction of the ‘original text’. Especially, the attribution of an alleged value judgement to considerations based on probability and plausibility is Heslop’s arbitrary interpretation. At another point, the author states: “[Skaldic stanzas quoted in prosimetra] often occur in multiple manuscripts, enabling editors, *at least in theory*, to use the techniques of stemmatic recension to reconstruct an archetype [...] Behind the archetype lie lost manuscripts, as in almost all medieval traditions, and then – less common – *an unsecured leap* over generations of oral transmission back to the original live performance” (p. 191, my emphasis). Heslop is here describing the normal preconditions of philological research itself and investigating them is exactly the point of disciplines like textual criticism, historical linguistics, and metrics. These provide quite a few seatbelts to make the leap significantly more secure.

of lost shields” (p. 81). There are two orders of reasons why such an enterprise, far from looking epistemically safer, strikes me, in fact, as methodologically rather demanding. The first difficulty lies in the limits inherent in any attainable historical contextualization of a listener’s aesthetic experience. The second, more obvious one lies in the difficulty of defining who this ‘listener’ is supposed to be in the first place. How do we define the skaldic audience? Whose perceptions, whose ‘mental images’ and ‘practices of visual interpretation’ are we addressing? Are we dealing with the first intended audience the skald had in mind when composing the verse, are we talking about all the later audiences who attended re-performances, and/or of the later, learned audiences who, several centuries after their composition, read, transcribed, quoted, and probably studied the same stanzas? Heslop’s inclusive approach would seem to suggest that all these audiences are meant, but the matter is never explicitly discussed. In lack of a clear distinction between the historically situated audiences, must we assume that the mental images and sonic effects described by the author should equally apply to all audiences of all times? In light of the often demonstrably poor scribal understanding of early poetry and, for instance, of Snorri’s religious re-interpretation of some poems, such a perspective is clearly untenable. In addition, such a conclusion stands in open contradiction to Heslop’s own historicizing imperative, and, in the end, this does not seem to be her intention. In fact, her analyses seem often to target the skald’s originally intended audience, as the following quotations suggest:

When telling well-worn stories such as the Jǫrmunrekkr narrative, *the poet attempts to persuade the audience* of his own perspective on the narrative [...]. (p. 98, my emphasis)

Here, perhaps because the second observer is a female [i.e. the woman addressed in the stanza by Þjóðólf Arnórsson] a different set of conventions is activated: the skald becomes a privileged interpreter of the visual realm, able to offer *the silent female observer an enhanced experience of the percept*. (p. 92, my emphasis)

Enargeia’s explosive emotional tenor [...] projects *the feelings of the listening retinue (drótt)* onto the main tool of its trade, the longships which terrorized the North Atlantic and Mediterranean. (p. 93, my emphasis)

At another point, Heslop explores the relation between the description of Hildir in *Ragnarsdrápa*'s account of the Hjaðningavíg and a nearly contemporary iconographic theme, indirectly witnessed by Gotlandic picture stones (p. 97–99). Here, an excellent point is made regarding the space opened between conventionalized iconographic representations and the skald's creative re-interpretation thereof, concretely exploring the expressive potential of Viking Age artistic products from an intermedial perspective:

Against this visual tradition [i.e. the iconography of the “woman between warriors” attested on Gotland picture stones] *Bragi's viewpoint stands out in high relief*. The poem's demonic imagery is strikingly different from the visual motif, a distance from conventional imagery that opens up a space *for the poetic speaker's own perspective*. (p. 98, my emphasis)

I find this analysis convincing, but is this really a reconstruction of an alleged audience's perceived aesthetic experience? How should this operation distinguish itself from traditional, ‘author-centred’ reconstructions of Bragi's intentions? In fact, Heslop's analysis takes its cue from the well-established practice of comparing the poem's reconstructed text to a hypothetical iconographical source, somewhat reviving a positivistic passion for concrete objects – so nineteenth-century! As matters stand, I consider this a scholar's best available option and, indeed, Heslop's analysis proves it. But when she describes “the multisensorial vividness striven after by ekphrastic poets” (p. 101), it becomes clear that the unspecified audience's experience and the unknown author's intentions coincide, as two faces of the same scholarly abstraction, two equal attempts at fleshing out the lost circumstances of a mysterious original performance. Indeed, in the case of skaldic poems, the notions of ‘author’ and ‘intended audience’ can only be treated as textual features, to be reconstructed by means of the only reality we can really say anything about, namely the text itself. Isolating one of these two aspects does not appear to be any safer epistemically than focusing solely on the other. Rather, a plausible analysis can be achieved by addressing the reality of the text, in all its manifestations, with concrete and explicit arguments.

A Theoretical Problem: Historicizing Perceptions

In truth, Heslop is conscious of the challenges of historicizing audience perceptions and, in order to bridge this gap, she resorts to an impressive body of theoretical literature, spanning antique, medieval, modern and post-modern thought. Many of the sources quoted, however, are admittedly of dubious relevance for the pre-modern Scandinavian context, since their actual availability to the creators of the commented texts is in most instances unprovable and often unlikely, as remarked by the author herself.⁴ The impressive mass of quotations therefore provides typological parallels or valuable and learned glosses to the examined texts but can rarely indicate their actual precedents or intellectual underpinnings. In other cases, this quotation anxiety defeats its own purpose and proves decidedly anti-historicizing. I will provide a couple of such examples. When discussing skaldic panegyrics and their themes, the definition of the concept of 'glory' is quoted from the contemporary moral philosopher Sophie Grace:

[Glory is] the distinction that arises from outstanding performance in a culturally valued practice. It manifests itself in a wide range of historical contexts, ranging from Homeric poetry, through Greek philosophy, through the Allied war effort in the Second World War, to modern sporting, artistic and cultural performances. Glory, she suggests, is "a kind of radiance". (p. 135)

Does this elusive definition take us any closer to the historically and culturally situated conception of glory of Viking Age warrior societies, as it emerges from skaldic poems? In fact, if we want to go sensorial, Old Norse glory, *bróðr*, like Latin *gloria* and Homeric Greek κλέος, Old Church Slavonic *slava*, etc. had to do with hearing rather than with seeing – it was a matter of reputation, of what was said about someone. The discussion of universalizing theoretical concepts, while intellectually taxing for the reader, may often be indifferent or detrimental to the analysis. In chapter 3, Heslop states that, in order to be employed to "inter-

4. "Many aspects of the reception of this complex body of theory [i.e. antique and medieval theories about sensory perception] in the medieval North remain unclear. The poor preservation of Latin texts from medieval Scandinavia means it is hard to tell how much of this material reached there" (p. 115).

rogate the historically situated visibility of Viking and medieval Scandinavia” the concept of *ekphrasis* needs to be historicized (p. 88). Since there is no trace of this notion in Old Norse texts, however, the author resorts to the evidence provided by ancient rhetorical handbooks, maintaining that these “offer an *obvious starting point* for analyzing the skaldic picture poems, because Viking Age skalds, like antique forensic orators, *worked in a highly competitive performance culture that valued the ability to persuade*” (p. 88, my emphasis). The vagueness of this premise defeats the declared purpose of historicization: contemporary academics also work in a highly competitive performance culture that arguably values the ability to persuade, but this does not mean that their rhetorical tools would offer an obvious parallel for historicized Viking Age perceptions. The notion of *ekphrasis* was borrowed by skaldicists primarily to describe the nature of the relationship between the so-called shield-poems (a label often extended to *Húsdrápa*) and their – alleged, real, pretextual? – iconographic sources. The point of classic *ekphrasis*, by contrast, lies not so much in the relation to the alleged figurative cue, but rather in the narratological function of the trope, which allowed the poet to introduce a subject totally unrelated to the one at hand. In the epic tradition, from Homer to Nonnus of Panopolis via Virgil, Ovid and Tatius, *ekphrasis* is primarily a device providing the pretext for inserting a long narrative excursus – usually with mythological content – within the main narrative frame. The prominence of this narratological aspect in classical *ekphrasis* is thus already at odds with the application of the term to the skaldic ‘picture-based’ poems, where the description of the decorated object is declaredly the poem’s *raison d’être*. It is only in the context of rhetorical teaching that *ekphrasis*, as a pedantic school-room stylistic exercise based on the *loci classici*, becomes a self-standing genre, losing its relationship to an overarching narrative strand. In any event, the dependency on a visual source remains, at least formally, the defining feature of the trope. Heslop’s understanding, by contrast, which is based on Late Antique rhetorical definitions, declaredly dismisses the notion of a “verbal representation of a graphic representation” (p. 105), focusing uniquely on the property of *enargeia*, the force of visual representation indicated by Hermogene as one of the typical characteristics of ekphrastic descriptions:

What made ekphrasis distinctive for ancient rhetoricians was not its relationship to the visual arts, but *its effect on its audience*, summed up in the word *enargeia* (“clarity, vividness”). (p. 88–89, my emphasis)

This interpretation seems an arbitrary restriction and deviation from the common understanding of a trope whose applicability to skaldic poems already appears problematic. The stretch becomes obvious when the term is extended to include stanzas that, far from signaling any metatextual relationship to a graphic source, simply contain straightforward descriptions of objects, such as Þjóðólfr Arnórsson’s *lausavísa* that compares a ship to an animal (p. 91–93). It is unclear how the eight-lines description of a ship attributed to an eleventh-century skald can relate to rhetorical notions of virtuoso depictions elaborated by Late Antique and Byzantine rhetors and based on a centuries-old tradition of literary comment to epic verse. In the concluding paragraph, the author comments explicitly on the convenience of her use of the term *ekphrasis*, which “open[s] up a wider range of potential comparators than a field-internal term like *bil-leðbeskrivende dikt* does” and, she claims, “such openings prove productive” (p. 105). The reader is nonetheless left with the sense of an *ad hoc* and probably unnecessary stretching of the accepted use of rhetorical categories. Heslop has produced a more general applicability of the term but at the cost of flattening the considerable differences between the classical and the Old Norse traditions, and this is clearly a counterproductive attempt at historicization. Instead, she could simply have stated, right from the beginning, her intention to conduct close-up readings of various skaldic poems with a strong emphasis on visuality.

Another example of a problematic attempt at historicization concerns pre-modern perceptions of pun and wordplay. In the context of the discussion of Óláfr Þórðarson’s somewhat puzzling identification of *paronomasia* and *aðalhending*, Heslop indicates a presumed “scholarly discomfort” and “scholarly distaste” with the notion of pun, a phenomenon which, she suggests, scholars would regard as too trivial to seriously enter the grammatical discourse (p. 152). The opinions she draws upon, however, belong exclusively to a few stern critics of Shakespearian puns, which were often aimed at shocking and scandalizing, as they clearly did. Unlike eighteenth-century critics of Shakespeare, however, few scholars today would deny the relevance of puns in medieval textual culture and vernacular literatures, thus the apologetic tone Heslop as-

sumes seems unwarranted. More importantly, however, the description of the preconditions for medieval verbal puns is rather confused:

Despite scholarly distaste, premodern European literatures are rife with puns. Vernacular languages were highly productive of homophony due to sound changes such as the falling together of unstressed vowels. No dictionaries yet existed to demarcate individual words as “discrete semantic units [...] circumscrib[ing] their potential for meaning”. Pronunciation and orthography tended to be variable and unfixed; parts of speech and syntax were more fluid. And authoritative works such as Isidore’s *Etymologies* lent their stamp of approval to uses of language which “served to blur the distinction among words of similar sounds rather than differentiate them with an origin and history of their own”. (p. 152)

In Heslop’s analysis, an alleged fluidity in orthography, linguistics, and even in learned medieval reflection is postulated, as if these three distinct domains could similarly concur to affect the native speakers’ mental lexicon and their capacity to draw distinctions between lexemes. Moreover, the lack of standardization characteristic of medieval orthography is apparently projected onto morpho-syntax and semantics. The rules governing language behaviour, however, are no stricter or looser depending on the existence of a standardized orthographic norm, nor does the semantic ability of a speaker depend on the availability of etymological dictionaries. In fact, skaldic punning (e.g. *ofljóst*) is predicated not on confusion and fluidity, but on the opposite: the listener must first identify the intended word and then replace it with either an identical form (homonym) or meaning (synonym). Paradoxically – and, I imagine, unintentionally – Heslop’s claims about alleged fluidity and confusion result in a belittling of medieval speakers’ linguistic insight, which, in the case of Norse learned men, is both proverbially advanced and exceptionally well-documented. Suffice it to mention, that the First Grammarian boasts about having isolated, by means of minimal pairs, thirty-six phonemic oppositions (some of which are allophonic, really) in Old Norse’s vocalism only.⁵ A similar linguistic acumen emerges from tropes based on the juxtaposition of homonyms and synonyms, such as the *refhvarf* stanzas in *Háttalykill* and *Háttatal*.⁶ Finally, it is unclear what is

5. Hreinn Benediktsson (1972), *The First Grammatical Treatise*, (ed.), Institute for Nordic Linguistics, Reykjavík, p. 222.

implied by the claim that “vernacular languages were highly productive of homophony due to sound changes such as the falling together of unstressed vowels”. Is it, perhaps, suggested that classical languages, by contrast, were poor in homophones and not subject to phonemic mergers? In sum, Heslop’s discussion may be rhetorically compelling, but the relevance to the debate of the categories employed remains unclear. Subjectivist preoccupations and the unwarranted extension of vague notions onto medieval linguistic behaviour at large prove an obstacle to a plausible analysis compatible not only with the practices attested in medieval sources, but also with basic notions of contemporary linguistics.

In another instance the reader is left to wonder whether the author’s choice of words is exclusively directed at a contemporary audience or if it should be taken seriously, as an analytical category relevant to a medieval context. The paragraph treating the Hildir episode in Bragi’s *Ragnarsdrápa*, is titled ‘Antifeminist *enargeia*’. The intrigued reader will search in vain for an explicit discussion of this elusive concept in the following pages, but will only find that Bragi’s connotation of Hildir, the female protagonist of the *Hjaðningavíg* myth, is extremely negative. Does the negative characterization of a female character classify as *antifeminist*? And, most of all, since historicized perception is central to the book’s aims, is this a category meaningful at all to describe the ninth-century poet’s — or his audience’s, for that matter — opinion about the evil Hildir?

An Argumentative Problem. Or *The Sky is Always Bluer...*⁷

Catenulate structure is fractal in *kviðuháttir* poetry, dominating not only each stanza, which heaps up kennings for the same object, but also the poems in their entirety, which tend to be organized as lists. (p. 56)

Heslop’s argumentative style proves at times challenging, not only linguistically, but also conceptually, as it tends to proceed by juxtapositions of a multitude of quotations and disparate information. These often offer

6. Rognvaldr jarl and Hallr Þórarinnsson, *Háttalykill*, sts 39–40; Snorri Sturluson, *Háttatal*, sts 17–22, both in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics. Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 3*, ed. by Kari Ellen Gade and Edith Marold, Turnhout: Brepols, pp. 1047–48 and 1121–28.
7. Rino Gaetano, 1975, *Ma il cielo è sempre più blu*.

a rhetorical cue to the author's next argumentative step, but the logic behind them seems often a cumulative or associative one, at detriment of the linearity of the argument. More importantly, proceeding by suggestive parallels can soon become a methodological problem, since the simple juxtaposition of two topics, without the formulation of a plausible causal link between them, does not amount to the advancement of a hypothesis and hinders the reader's evaluation. I will discuss one instance of this methodological impasse. In her analysis of *Ynglingatal*, the author seems to strongly suggest that portraits of rulers and Christian iconographies against a dark blue background, as found in Carolingian illuminated manuscripts, may lie behind *Ynglingatal*'s claim that Rognvaldr is the "best under the blue sky" (*bazt und blǫum himni*) (p. 34). Due to the rarity of blue pigments in the early Middle Ages, Heslop argues that this color would have been strongly associated with royalty. The parallel with *Ynglingatal* is based on the fact that the Old Norse adjective *blár* normally indicates a dark shade of blue bordering black and, as such, a color seldom associated with the sky in Old Norse texts. The phrase *blár himinn* in *Ynglingatal* is the only early occurrence of this collocation, and this would make it 'in fact, the most unconventional feature of the stanza' (p. 33), perhaps reflecting the influence of foreign royal portraits characterized by the use of the luxurious pigment. Although, as noted above, the exploration of possible interactions with Carolingian visual culture is an important asset to Heslop's analysis, the argument based on the semantics of the word *blár* appears decidedly weak. The Old Norse adjective *blár* covers indeed a broader spectrum than modern Scandinavian *blå* (or English *blue*, for that matter), ranging from various shades of blue to livid purple and black. *Blár* is, however, the color of the sea (*blárǫst* 'the blue path' *Hákonardrápa góða*, st. 2/2; *bló hrǫnn* 'the blue wave', *Búadrápa* 2/5), presumably of the sky,⁸ but also of the iris of blue-eyed people ("auga hans var annat blátt en annat svart", *Hróa þátrr heimska*, ONP). Most of the occurrences of this word seem indeed to indicate a dark

8. The *heiti* for sky *viðbláinn* and *vindbláinn* occurring in *þulur* (Elena Gurevich, 2017, 'Anonymous *Þulur*, *Himins heiti* I', in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics. Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* 3, Kari Ellen Gade and Edith Marold (eds), Turnhout: Brepols, p. 906), are explained away by Heslop as 'show[ing] influence from Christian teachings of the three heavens and reflect[ing] the thirteenth-century rise in status of the color blue' (footnote 79, p. 205). These claims are not substantiated, however, thus risking circular reasoning.

shade of blue, but in the absence of another word to indicate light-blue shades, we must assume that the term simply covered a broader spectrum, which included, rather than excluded, light-blue and sky-blue as well. Besides, the semantic range of terms for colors is typically scalar, variable and culturally specific. To the same Indo-European root that produces Proto-Germanic **blēwaz*, correspond Latin *flavus* and Old Irish *glass*, which both spanned a multitude of nuances of yellow, gray, blue and green. In turn, the Germanic cognates of Old Norse *blár* produced forms such as Old French *bleu* and Italian *biado* or *biavo* (through Latinized forms such as *blāvus* and *blōius*), meaning ‘pale, pallid, wan, light-colored; blond; discolored; blue, blue-gray’. Heslop’s Carolingian connection, literally hanging by the thread of an uncertain semantic nuance, is thus decidedly tenuous. This is probably why the author refrains from any strong statement:

[Carolingian] images that are *a compelling visual counterpart* to *Ynglingatal*’s claim ... (p. 34, my emphasis)

This heaven is blue *perhaps* in imitation of the iconographic use of that color in Carolingian miniatures. (p. 39, my emphasis)

Thus, despite speculating about this suggestive parallel, Heslop refrains from conclusively arguing in one way or the other. A similarly suggestive tone is used to advance a further hypothesis, namely that *Ynglingatal*’s sequence of grotesque Svǫljóð kings followed by a group of more well-behaved Vík rulers would correspond to the decorative program of Louis the Pious’ palace at Ingelheim, as described in Ermoldus Nigellus’ panegyric *In honorem Hludowici*: “A longer series of bloody and disastrous foreign kings followed by a shorter sequence of five exemplary “ancestral” rulers *corresponds neatly* to *Ynglingatal*’s pattern...” (p. 36, my emphasis). This parallel as well eludes falsification, and the hypothesis significantly remains just a warmly suggested similarity. This persistent ambiguity, however, undermines the following construction of a progressive argumentation:

Images of kingship that drew on Carolingian iconography of the sovereign *could have been useful* insofar as they were directed at opponents, the Danish rulers of Østfold, who were themselves impressed by such trappings. (p. 39, my emphasis)

Here, the reader is left to wonder: first, is now the author taking the ‘blue sky’ argument as an established fact? And second, is now the author advancing a new hypothesis, on the basis of that argument? The suggested link to Carolingian material culture may draw some indirect strength from the more plausible relationship, posited by some scholars and seemingly endorsed by Heslop (p. 74), between the horse-riding Þjóðríkr described in the Rök stanza and the equestrian statue of Theoderic the Great, moved from Ravenna to Aachen by Charlemagne himself around the year 801. But, again, contiguity and parallel associations can hardly suffice to establish plausible historical links, and what is true of the Rök stanza is not necessarily true of *Ynglingatal*. The problem, in sum, is a methodological one: should the reader consider these suggestive reflections as advanced hypotheses or not? A cautious wording might well be a matter of scientific concern, as well as of aesthetic and stylistic preference, but my impression is that the argumentation would often have greatly benefited from an earlier and clearer statement of the author’s hypotheses, followed by an explicit testing thereof. The lack of an explicit methodology makes it impossible to evaluate the plausibility of many of Heslop’s claims, whereas it renders others unlikely. It is, moreover, somewhat puzzling that, while some doubtful parallels, such as the one with Carolingian illuminated manuscripts, are pursued with such tenacity, others, that seem more plausible and potentially relevant to the book’s topic, are not even discussed. For instance, the author barely mentions in a footnote that “it is *a strange coincidence* that one of the Aspa stones, Sö 136, now lost, calls its dedicatee *und himni bæztr* (‘best under heaven’)” (n. 20, p. 200, my emphasis). Considering the degree of lexical overlapping and interchange between the lexicon of Old Norse poetry (both eddic and skaldic) and the diction of runic monuments, the ‘coincidence’ may be not so strange, but certainly worth of exploration, especially in a book about “interferences” between the “new media of the early Viking Age” (p. 185, 16).

In general, despite its considerable merits, *Skaldic Mediologies* does not really correspond to the *New History of Skaldic Poetics* promised in the subtitle. The work appears rather to be a highly personal and at times impressively complex re-elaboration and reflection on several topics, spanning different disciplines and displaying remarkable erudition. While impressive, these characteristics limit the readership to specialists, making the work hardly suited for students. The skaldic scholar will har-

vest a plethora of minute information, extensive bibliographical references, and detailed expositions of several scholarly debates, as well as countless points of interest. The book's greatest merit remains, in my opinion, the originality of its main insight, namely that of analyzing skaldic verse within the broader context of the Viking Age 'media landscape', an ambitious goal that has proved challenging. Heslop's interdisciplinary approach has the potential of opening up new and promising lines of inquiry, but such a blend of perspectives requires considerable methodological rigor in order not to engender epistemological problems.

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