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a cura di
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ESTRATTO

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Queen Ástríðr and Sigvatr Þórðarson: A Political Alliance. Three Skaldic Stanzas in Praise of Queen Ástríðr in Snorri's *Heimskringla*

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Old Norse literary sources present Queen Ástríðr, the daughter of Óláfr Skottkonung of Sweden, later the wife of Óláfr the Saint of Norway, with interesting aspects which link her both to the ancient tradition of the 'inciter' and to a modern powerful queen. She appears in two sagas of *Heimskringla*, in *Óláfs saga helga* and then in *Magnús saga ins góða* where she plays an important role as an inciter in a new and unusual space for a woman. She gives a memorable speech at the *þing*, a place where women were not allowed to enter and to have the word, an event recorded by Sigvatr Þórðarson, the famous skald of her dead husband, King Óláfr Haraldsson of Norway. Sigvatr dedicated three stanzas to her (all in *dróttkvætt*, the most eminent of skaldic metres) which Snorri quotes adding a notable prose passage. Snorri partly reports her words in direct speech and explains what is criptically told in Sigvatr's verses (perhaps Snorri uses some other oral sources combining them with Sigvatr's stanzas).

We do not know whether these stanzas were part of a longer poem. The presence in the saga of other stanzas related to Ástríðr, referring to different occasions, does not provide any evidence of such a possibility.[1]

Sigvatr's stanzas in praise of Queen Ástríðr are preserved only in the manuscripts of *Heimskringla* (*Hkr*. III 4-6):[2]

AM 63 fol., *Kringla* (K),[3] in Reykjavík, 1675-1700 (copied from an exemplar dating back to 1300)

AM 39 fol., vellum, in Reykjavík, 1300

AM 45, Codex Frisianus or *Frísbók*, vellum, in Reykjavík, 1300-1325

AM 38 fol., *Jöfraskinna* (J), paper, in Copenhagen, 1675-1700

AM 47 (E), vellum, in Reykjavík, 1300-1350

AM 761 4° paper, in Copenhagen, ca. 1700

[1] There has been a number of attempts to reconstruct a possible whole poem from these stanzas spread in Snorri's narration. We can presume a prose source Snorri was following (in which these stanzas were linked together). For example, the two stanzas addressing King Magnús, naming Ástríðr, might have been composed for the same occasion as those in praise of Ástríðr, as some verbal echoes seem to indicate (Jesch 1994: 1-2).

[2] See also Finnur Jónsson 1912: BI 231-32.

[3] *Kringla* (K) is the eldest manuscript and is generally considered the best.

Codex Holm. 18 fol., paper, in Stockholm (1650-1700)

According to most scholars (e.g. Judith Jesch)[4] it is not possible to find a satisfactory text in any of them. All have minor errors spread across them. Here I will use the version of the new edition of The Skaldic Project (2001-2013) by Judith Jesch as the basis of my investigation. Even if the text of J and E gives a complete version that makes sense, the copies of K present the best text, used for example by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson in his *Heimskringla* edition (BJARNI AÐALBJARNARSON 1951) – which I will use for the prose passages by Snorri (while Finnur Jónsson admits also other variants from other branches of manuscripts, both in Skj. B and in his edition of *Heimskringla*).

It is unlikely that we will ever be able to reconstruct the stanzas as they were composed by Sigvatr; however, we can be sure enough of the text which Snorri knew and inserted in his narration. The text of the stanzas is based on the comparison with other works by Sigvatr and with his biography.

Sigvatr's stanzas were famous since they are quoted by Snorri in *Magnús saga ins góða*, in *Heimskringla*. A praise poem for a woman, for her courage and political skills, was something absolutely unusual.[5] In honour of women we find few contemporary runic inscriptions, for example that in *fornyrðislag* on Hassmyra stone in Västmanland, Sweden, (JANSSON 1964: 69-76) and the couplet on Dynna stone in Norway (OLSEN 1941: 192-202). They praise women, but they both praise dead women for typical female abilities. Also archaeological evidence proves that important women might achieve public commemoration (Oseberg burial) or it may happen that queens could act in fields which were normally prohibited to other women. But no other praise poem except that for Queen Ástríðr is preserved. Therefore, Judith Jesch considers Sigvatr as an innovator (JESCH 1994: 7). From this point of view, it may be true.

The *dróttkvætt* genre was especially used for praising war enterprises, seabattles (all men's action fields) and it was difficult to find and adapt the available vocabulary of this poetic genre to a woman.

Sigvatr's stanzas refer to an episode occurred after Óláfr the Saint's death (1030), where Ástríðr is in close connection to Sigvatr. Snorri relates that Magnús – Ástríðr's stepson who was then ten years old – and his men, on their way to Norway, sailed from Russia to Sweden and came to Sigtuna where Ástríðr lived with her brother, King Emund, after the death of her husband. Magnús was the son of King Óláfr the Saint and of a concubine. Also Ástríðr was the daughter of a concubine of King Óláfr Skottkonung, an element she had in common with Magnús: both were illegitimate children. When Magnús arrived at Sigtuna, she welcomed

[4] In an article of 1994, Judith Jesch says that scribes were more likely to intervene in the verse passages of the text they were copying than in the prose, so that the manuscript stemma of the work as a whole cannot be used automatically to reconstruct the verses contained in it (JESCH 1994: 5).

[5] It is worth noting that in 1219 Snorri composed a praise poem to Hákon's widow, Kristin, in Sweden, and received as a reward a banner which had belonged to King Eiríkr Knútsson of Sweden. Snorri's attempts to ingratiate himself with the Norwegian dignitaries are well known.

her stepson, and summoned immediately a numerous *þing* of Swedes at a place called Hangar. At the *þing* Queen Ástríðr spoke in favour of Magnús and urged the Swedes to help him in his expedition to Norway to claim his father's heritage.

She even followed Magnús to Norway, as any queen mother would have done, although she was not his mother. This is an important habit pointed out by Agneta Ney to whom I owe this point. Nordic queens followed their sons in wars and battles. If we investigate Old Norse literature, *Heimskringla* and other kings'sagas, it is difficult to meet scenes of departing between queen mothers and sons, unlike what happens in *riddarasögur* or in chivalric literary works originated in the European continent where this is a well known motif (Ney 2010: 97-98). The reason was that they often followed their sons in their expeditions. And Ástríðr did exactly what most queen mothers did.

I shall try to investigate the poem that Sigvatr composed as well as the circumstances in which it was delivered, and then I will compare it with the prose frame Snorri provided it with. To understand its message we have to turn to metrical, grammatical, lexical and stylistic criteria: therefore, an eclectic approach seems the most appropriate.

Trying to adapt the genre to this new purpose, first Sigvatr recalls Ástríðr's role as a daughter of a king, a wife of a king and a generous stepmother of a king, namely by reminding the audience of her dynastic function. Then Sigvatr mentions her political skills putting them into a religious light and stating that she has acted together with Christ (*með möttkum Krísti*). This strategy is reinforced by some lexical choices and stylistic devices which are deeply rooted in the structure of the poem.

1. Sigvatr's strategy

If we analyze the structure of the poem (puns, textual oppositions and lexical correspondences etc.), we find not only the praise of the queen, but, deeply hidden in the structure of the text, also the predominant role of the skald Sigvatr in Magnús's successful claiming to the throne of Norway. The three – Ástríðr, Magnús and Sigvatr – are interwoven in the language of the text so as to mirror their strong and long lasting friendship and political alliance.

Already since Ástríðr's marriage with King Óláfr the Saint, Sigvatr had played an important role in the diplomatic negotiations behind the wedding arrangements, according to Snorri in *Óláfssaga ins helga* – whom I am inclined to believe (other kings' sagas collections attribute the marriage negotiations only to Ástríðr and to her ability of convincing the king through her speeches). Her half-sister Ingigerðr should have married St Óláfr but her father Óláfr Skottknung changed his mind and gave Ingigerðr to King Jaroslav of Russia. Ástríðr took her sister's place and went to Kungahella to meet King Óláfr Haraldsson.

A number of versions of the Saga of St Óláfr present an account of how the marriage of Ástríðr and King Óláfr was arranged. The *Legendary Saga of St Óláfr*

and some texts derived from a lost saga of St. Óláfr (by Stýrmir fróði Kárason) tell the same story: that Ástríðr took the initiative, visited the king twice and made the proposal, bringing messages and presents from her half-sister Ingigerðr. All these texts attribute her a strong power of persuasion. Snorri does not believe in this anecdote and does not report it even if scholars agree that he knew it. In *Heimskringla* Snorri reports that Sigvatr acted as an intermediary between Ástríðr and King Óláfr in order to promote the marriage. Already at that time Sigvatr and Ástríðr were allies. Their union had a long story and Sigvatr emphasizes it.

2. Poetic strategies

Now let us consider the textual strategies that Sigvatr uses. It is evident that the poem is not mere entertainment but has a clear political purpose: giving an official portrait of Ástríðr as well as pointing out the close relationships among her, Magnús, and the skald himself.

Hrein getum *hála launa*	Highly we will repay
hnossfjǫld *lofi* ossu	with our vows
Áleifs dœtr, sús átti	the bright daughter of Óláfr
jǫfurr sighvatastr digri.	whom the great King Óláfr married,
Þings beið herr á Hǫngrum	for the heap of jewels.
hundmargr Svíagrundar	A numerous host of Swedes
austr, er Ástríðr lýsti	was waiting for the thing in Hangar,
Áleifs sonar málum.	when Ástríðr illustrated
	the cause of Óláfr's son.*
(WHALEY 2012: 646)	

* Translations are my own if not otherwise indicated.

It is interesting to consider the relationships which personal pronouns express in the text. Many praise poems and *lausavísur* address directly the object of their panegyrics with the personal pronoun *þú*. Sigvatr refers to Ástríðr in the third person: he does not address Ástríðr directly, he addresses Magnús with fatherly tone, since he is his godfather. Ástríðr is the central figure, but she is not alone: she shares her position with Magnús and Sigvatr. Moreover, there are two first person references from the poet to his poem: he states that he can (*getum*) repay (*launa*) with his praise (*lofi ossu*) the many bright treasures (*hrein hnossfjǫld*)[6] Ástríðr has given him.

In Sigvatr's poetry, kennings do not occur so frequently as in earlier skaldic verse. His texts are generally more narrative (e. g., see *Austfararvísur,* where he relates a number of episodes occurred during his expedition from Norway to Västergötland). The syntax is not so complicated as to hide the meaning com-

[6] I would like to suggest a different interpretation of *hrein hnossfjǫld* as a kenning with referent 'woman', one of the several variations of the kenning of the type "land of jewels" to designate this referent, at least an allusion to such a kenning. I will return to this later.

pletely and the narration flows without too many phenomena of tmesis to interrupt the logical sequence. In general, post-conversion poetry is more accessible to the listeners for moral and religious reasons. Obscurity came to be considered as a negative quality.

In the first stanza we find two *viðkenningar*,[7] two circumlocutions – *Áleifs dœtr* to designate Ástríðr, and *Áleifs sonar* to designate Magnús. Their position at the beginning of the third and the eighth lines introduces a parallel between the two, establishing a link between them and stressing correspondences and common points in order to underline their union: namely the two genitives of the name *Áleifr* – both their fathers' name is Óláfr – although the two *Áleifr* refer to different kings: King Óláfr Skottkonungr of Sweden and King Óláfr the Saint of Norway.

Their mothers are not mentioned here, but the audience knew them and they could easily come to think that both Ástríðr and Magnús were the children of concubines and not of the kings' legitimate wives. Moreover, both have close connections with the skald himself: Sigvatr is Ástríðr's counsellor and Magnús's godfather (he even chose his name). It is a very effective triangle from which Álfhildr, Magnús's real mother, is excluded. In a half-stanza composed by Sigvatr when they were all in Norway at the royal court and Magnús had become king, the skald orders Álfhildr to leave the best seat to Ástríðr (*Hkr* III 20), and to give her precedence because this is God's will:

Ástríði láttu æðri,	Álfhildr! Give the best place
Álfhildr! En þik sjálfa,	to Ástríðr willingly,
þér þótt þinn stórum hagr,	although your position
þat vildi guð, batni.	has been improved – it was God's will.

(Whaley 2012: 736)

The divine intervention hangs over all Sigvatr's stanzas for the occasion, mirroring the new Christian ideology: the king appointed by divine intervention and Queen Ástríðr presented as an instrument of God's will.

I would like to suggest some levels and structures in the text forming parallel and, sometimes, contrary patterns of meanings which contribute to the political praising of this alliance and indicate Ástríðr's role as a divine messenger and as a kind of guiding 'madonna'. We find a correspondence between Ástríðr and Magnús, between Sigvatr and Ástríðr and between Sigvatr and Magnús: all are openly or secretly named in the poem to symbolize an indissoluble union.

The union of the queen and the skald is clearly underlined by the fourth line of the first stanza (*jǫfurr sighvatastr digri*) which contains two words, *sighvatastr* and *digri*, containing the two names Sigvatr and Ástríðr.[8] I would like to draw at-

[7] According to Snorri's denominations, a *viðkenning* corresponds to Latin *pronominatio* (Snorri Sturluson [1998]: 107).

[8] We have an internal rhyme between *Sigr-* or *Sig-* (*Sig-* neutrum "victory" in compounds, but also

tention to the pun resulting from the reading of both the adjectives one after the other. The end of the first and the beginning of the latter form together the name of the queen.

This kind of pun was common in skaldic tradition; wordplays often hid proper names (see Hallfreðr's puns with the name of Steingerðr which are well known) (FRANK 1978: 161), especially of women, because of the official prohibition of dedicating love poems (*mansöngvar*) to women. If we consider the memorial function of skaldic verse, with their particular metaphorical and figurative language – recently compared with the vividness of some runic images – it is evident that by hiding both names in two adjectives, the textual strategy intends to celebrate the influent and cooperating couple, formed by Sigvatr and Ástríðr, in their common effort to put Magnús on the throne of Norway.

The ambiguity which is typical of skaldic verse, as many scholars have already demonstrated (e.g. John Lindow who points out the analogy between certain kennings and some sorts of riddles with a binary structure; LINDOW 1975: 311-327), is also present in Sigvatr's stanzas for Ástríðr. Skalds may suggest some associations, based only on sound analogies, making their texts plurifunctional units where a number of semantic elements are at play contemporarily.

If we look at the above mentioned compound *hnossfjǫld* "the heap of jewels (or of precious things)", we can easily realize that it is acoustically very similar to *hnossfold* "the land of jewels (or of precious things) = woman", a frequent kenning for "woman" which can be found in Hallfreðr's or Kormákr's texts; therefore, it could be considered as a variant of it, referring to Ástríðr. Also the adjective *hrein* "bright, pure" could be intended as qualifying Ástríðr. Hence, I suggest the following interpretation:

Highly we will repay
with our vows
the bright land of jewels (*hnossfold* > kenning for Ástríðr), or: the heap of jewels
(*hnǫssfjǫld* > kenning for Ástríðr)
the daughter of Óláfr whom
the great victorious prince married.

The rhetorical figure (the kenning) referred to Ástríðr would stress the shining quality of the queen corresponding to the following *Ástríðr lýsti* in the seventh line: the verb means here "illustrated or explained" Magnús's *mál*, Magnús's "cause", but it usually means also "to illuminate, to lighten". Here it might evoke Ástríðr's function as a bright light, a star like a comet, under whose guidance Magnús would be able to conquer the crown of Norway. She would guide Magnús as the comet had guided the three kings: a biblical allusion which belongs to the spirit of Sigvatr's text constantly stressing the alliance between the Christian god

Sigr- masculine "victory") and *digr* (KUHN 1983: 77), when *-r* follows another consonant (especially *b, d*, or *g*) both consonants partecipate in the intended rhyme.

and the Norwegian monarchy. The word *austr* "east" at the beginning of the same line reinforces this possibility.

In the second stanza, alliterations create a pattern through which the name *Magnús* (repeated twice) is connected to the idea of power and greatness (*máttit*, *margnenninn*, *meir, mest, mátkum*).

Máttit hon við hættna,	She could not have given
heil ráð Svía deila	the brave Swedes better counsel
meir, þótt Magnús væri	even if the very bold
margnenninn sonr hennar;	Magnús were her own son.
olli hón því, at allri	Above all she managed
áttleifð Haralds knátti,	to make Magnús seize,
mest með mátkum Kristi,	next after the mighty Christ,
Magnús konungr fagna.	the whole of Haraldr's heritage.

(Whaley 2012: 648)

In the third stanza the active role of Ástríðr is stressed again by *á mennsku*; the word *mennska* is to be intended here as "manly, masculine" rather than in the more general meaning of "human" (despite the Christian context, also Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson interprets in this sense, *Hkr* III 6).

Mildr á mennsku *at gjalda*	The mild Magnús has to repay
Magnús, (en því fǫgnum),	Ástríðr (and we gladden us)
þat gerði vin virða	for her brave action
víðlendan*, Ástríði;*	which has made *the friend of men*
hon hefr svá komit sínum,	owner of vast lands.
sǫnn, at fá mun ǫnnur,	She has helped her step-son with counsel
(orð geri ek drós til dýrðar),	as few others would have done;
djúpráð *kona* stjúpi.	true words I will tell
	to the wise woman's honour.

(Whaley 2012: 649)

In the Old Norse world, speeches were an effective means to underline and visualize important points and situations. They mark crucial moments of the history of Scandinavia. For example, the speech of Úlfr Spáki at the Icelandic *alþing* in 999, when Icelanders accepted Christianity. By her speech at the assembly, Ástríðr stresses the importance of dynasty and succession.

Here the Swedish contribution is strongly underlined since the Swedes are presented as bold and the primary role of the Swedish queen is confirmed: Ástríðr has paved Magnús's way to the Norwegian throne. She has acted as if she had been Magnús's mother. And the text emphasizes that she is not, by contrast, stressing her generosity, expressed again by the final word of the third stanza *stjúpi* "step-son", referred to Magnús, which makes his duty of repaying Ástríðr sound more like an order than a simple exhortation.

In the third stanza, in his role of adviser for his godson, Sigvatr openly invites

Magnús to repay his debt to Ástríðr for all she has done for him: she has made him *víðlendr* "owner of many lands".

She is called here *djúpráð kona* and Sigvatr states that he will praise her with true words. Her function as a good advisor was already indicated by the adjective *heilráðr* in the second line of the second stanza, not surprisingly related to a woman: since the function of giving advice often occurs among female activities in Old Norse literature.

We find here a kenning for 'king' whose referent is Magnús, *vin virða* "friend of men", which casts light on Magnús's relationships with his subjects and also justifies his nickname *inn góði*, stressing the particular quality of this king as well as the positive results of Ástríðr's and Sigvatr's collaboration. It is also worth observing that no kenning with a pagan god as a first element is contained in the text.

3. Narrative strategies

Now let us see how Snorri uses these stanzas in his narrative strategy. In *Magnús saga ins góða*, he tries to combine different episodes – and the related stanzas – going forward and backward in the narration, without following a chronological order. This makes it difficult to follow what happened. We find the very beginning of these events at the end of *Óláfssaga ins helga* (*Hkr* II 414-15), where Einarr Þambarskelfir and Kálf Árnason go to Russia in order to take Magnús to Norway. Then, in *Magnús saga ins góða*, Snorri narrates Ástríðr's and Sigvatr's welcome to Magnús in Sweden by a long and detailed account, quoting Sigvatr's stanzas (those in praise of Ástríðr, plus two others addressed to Magnús and finally the above quoted half-stanza addressed to Álfhildr, Magnús's mother), unlike the other collections of kings'sagas where such stanzas are completely omitted.

Snorri underlines Ástríðr's ability in speaking, stating: *Síðan talaði hon langt ok snjalt.* (SNORRI STURLUSON [1951]: 5) "Then she spoke long and cleverly" and reports her speech:

> […] *Hér er nú kominn með oss sonr hins helga Ólafs konungs, er Magnús heitir; ætlar nú ferð sína til Nóregs at sækja föðurarf sinn. Er mér skylda mikil at styrkja hann til þessarar ferðar, því at hann er stjúpsonr minn, svá sem þat er öllum kunnigt, bæði Svíum ok Norðmönnum. Skal ek hér engan hlut til spara, þann er ek hefi föng á, at hans styrkr mætti mestr verða, bæði fjölmenni þat, er ek á forráð á, ok svá fé. Svá þeir allir, er til þessar ferðar ráðast með honum, skulu eiga heimla mína vináttu fullkomna. Ek vil því ok lýsa, at ek skal ráðast til ferðarinnar með honum. Mun þat þá öllum auðsýnt, at ek spari eigi aðra hluti til liðsemðar við hann, þá er ek má honum veita.* (SNORRI STURLUSON [1951]: 4-5)
> ([…] Here is come to us a son of Olaf the Saint, called Magnus, who intends to make an expedition to Norway to seek his father's heritage. It is my great duty to give him aid towards this expedition; for he is my stepson, as is well known to all, both Swedes and Norwegians. Neither shall he want men or money, in so far as I can procure them or have influence, in order that his strength may be as great as possible; and all the men who will support this cause of his shall have

> my fullest friendship; and I would have it known that I intend to go with him myself on this attempt, so all may see I will spare nothing that is in my power to help him.) (Snorri Sturluson [1964]: 538).

and stresses her success in convincing the Swedes, by emphazising their opposition, while in Sigvatr's stanzas nothing is said about their initial refusal to follow Ástríðr's advice:

> […] *En er hon hætti, þá svöruðu margir, sögðu svá: at Svíar höfðu litla tírarför farit til Nóregs, þá er þeir fylgðu Ólafi konungi, feðr hans, ok er eigi hér betra at ván, er þessi konungr er, segja þeir; eru men fyrir þá sök úfúsir þessar ferðar.* (Snorri Sturluson [1951]: 5)
> ([…] But when she had ended many replied thus: The Swedes made no honourable progress in Norway when they followed King Olaf his father, and now no better success is to be expected, as this man is but in years of boyhood; and therefore we have little inclination for this expedition.) (Snorri Sturluson [1964]: 538).

On the contrary, Snorri emphasizes her second attempt when she says:

> […] *Allir þeir, er nökkurir hreystimenn vilja vera, munu ekki æðrast um slíkt. En ef menn hafa látit frændr sína með hinum helga Ólafi konungi eða sjálfir sár fengit, þá er þat nú drengskapr at fara nú til Nóregs ok hefna þess. Kom Ástríðr svá orðum sínum ok liðveizlu, at fjöldi liðs varð til með Ástríði at fylgja honum til Nóregs.*(Snorri Sturluson 1951: 5)
> ([…] All men who wish to be thought of true courage must not be deterred by such considerations. If any have lost connections at the side of King Olaf, or been wounded themselves, now is the time to show a man's heart and courage, and go to Norway to take vengeance. Ástríðr succeeded so far with words and encouragement that many men determined to go with her, and follow King Magnus to Norway.) (Snorri Sturluson [1964]: 539).

Her answer to their objection was that those who were wounded or had lost relatives fighting at the side of her husband Óláfr the Saint, should follow Magnús to Norway and take revenge.

Women who incite and urge to battle is a pattern with a long history and tradition in the Germanic world: Tacitus in his *Germania* describes Germanic women as useful auxiliaries providing the warriors with food and encouragement.

Here Snorri depicts Ástríðr as a real Germanic inciter urging men to take revenge. This way he tries to portrait her by unifying her masculine behaviour with the Germanic female archetype of the *Hetzerin,* thus putting her into a mythical light. While in the 11th century Sigvatr's concern is all about presenting her as acting in accordance to the Almighty Christ's will, in the 13th century there was no need to stress her Christian faith. Snorri seems rather to operate a reconciliation between her and the old traditional values, rooted in the ancient Germanic world – she speaks of courage and revenge – to point out Ástríðr's importance in the dynastic as well as cultural continuity of the Norwegian monarchy.

We must consider the renewed interest in antiquarian matters between the end of the 12th century and the beginning of the 13th, from a learned point of view. That could be also the reason why these stanzas and the connected episode are present only in *Heimskringla* and not in other kings'sagas collections, where these features might been considered too active and socially unappropriate for a woman.

Ástríðr trespasses over her gender limits, but Snorri manages to make her fall back within them.

It is difficult to establish a woman's role basing it on literature.The gender role pattern appears in many Old Norse texts, but it is not easy to draw any conclusion about the real life of women. Literary forms do not mirror social facts in an immediate way. A given motif, for example, is naturally an element of the content of a work, but its function may be considered as an element of form.

Bjarne Fidjestøl warns against believing that the picture of women in sagas of Icelanders is a true image of life in Iceland in the saga age. If it were, then we could believe that the chief role of women at the time was to urge their husbands on to battle and death. Instead of interpreting such a motif as a reflection of real life, Fidjestøl prefers to see it as a literary convention or as a feature characteristic of the genre 'to impell the action onward leading to a new chain of events' (FIDJESTØL1997: 336). But he makes it clear that the prime motif associated with woman in these sagas is her role as the inciter.[9]

Nevertheless, he minimizes women's role in the real life while he stresses their literary function: women remain etched sharpest on the reader's memory and stand out as superb in saga-literature. In his study *Out they will look the lovely ladies. Views of women in Old Norse literature*, after his survey of examples of female roles in Old Norse literature, he concludes that women have rather insignificant parts (FIDJESTØL 1997: 341-342).[10] Therefore, Sigvatr's stanzas dedicated to Ástríðr are outstanding. But Fidjestøl does not mention neither them nor the episode in *Heimskringla* where Ástríðr plays a very active political role.

On the contrary, he mentions Sigvatr's verses in *Austrfararvísur* where women are described as passive observers of men's enterprises and he mentions them, but he does not include them among his *lovkvad om fyrstar* "praise poems for princes" (FIDJESTØL 1982).

And Fidjestøl is not alone. As Judith Jesch (1994) points out in her article on these three skaldic stanzas, we can observe a lack of attention from the majority of scholars.

[9] In 51 scenes, women egg their husbands and sons to embark on violence (first of all Guðrún Óláfsdottir, in *Laxdœlasaga,* who is a saga character with an aura of heroic poetry about her – *Laxdœlasaga* was composed under the influence of the Eddic poems in which Brynhildr incites her husband to kill Sigurðr as Guðrún incites Bolli to kill Kjartan).

[10] Even in *rímur*, later Medieval Icelandic narrative poems, women play an important role as addressees, but they have nothing to do with the story, they have to listen to the recitation of men's adventures.

Paasche (1917: 80) shows surprise for a praise poem dedicated to a woman, Petersen names these stanzas and regrets that some other stanzas could be lost, and Hollander does not mention them at all (Jesch 1994: 6); Bjarni Einarsson 1969: 28 mentions only Óttar's lost *mansöngr*, the love poem Óttar inn svarti, one of St Óláfr's skalds, composed for Ástríðr, at an occasion narrated in an episode which provides an interesting evidence of her character.

According to an Icelandic *þáttr*, *Óttars þáttr svarta*, the skald Óttarr, a relative of Sigvatr's, made a verse for Ástríðr. But the text is not recorded in the *þáttr* (Óttar's poem is only mentioned there as a *mansöngr*, a love poem). It is told that it made the king so angry as to condemn the skald to death (we know from Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish law-codes that a *mansöngr* for a woman could cost one's life in medieval Scandinavia). Thanks to the relationships between Óttarr and the powerful Sigvatr, the latter helped Óttarr to find a solution by making a poem for the king, which was called *höfuðlausn* "head-ransom", exactly like the more famous poem of Egill Skallagrímsson. Thanks to Sigvatr's advice, like Egill, Óttarr made another poem, this time for the king, and he had his life saved. At the end of the *þáttr*, something interesting is reported. While King Óláfr Haraldsson is repaying his skald, Queen Ástríðr also wants to repay the poet for the poem dedicated to her, although prohibited by the king, showing a strong mind and a certain independence from her husband.

> *Óláfr konungr dró gullhring af hendi sér og gaf Óttari. Ástríðr dróttning renndi fingrgulli á gólfit til Óttars ok mælti: "Taktu, skáld, gneista þann ok eig." Óláfr konungr mælti: "Var svá, at þú máttir eigi alls bindast at sýna þitt vinfengi við Óttar." Drottning svarar: "Eigi meguð þér kunna mik um þat, herra, ok ek vilja launa mitt lof sem þér yðvart."* (*Flateyjarbók* 1868, III: 242)
> (King Óláfr took a goldring from his finger and gave it to Óttarr. Queen Ástríðr let a goldring fall on the floor towards Óttarr and said: "Take, skald, this brilliant thing and have it!" King Óláfr said: "Watch out not to show your frienship with Óttarr."
> The Queen answered: "You do not need to tell me how to behave, sir. I want to repay my praise poem as you did with yours!")

Conclusions

Behind the two *höfuðlausn*, that of Egill's and that of Óttar's, we have two strong women, rather influent over their husbands: but while Queen Gunnhildr represents a negative character, a malevolent inciter, Ástríðr represents the female positive strength, not only in kings'sagas but in Icelandic sagas as well, as the *þáttr* demonstrates.

It is, however, worth observing that all the sources agree on Ástríðr's speaking ability and – what is even more interesting – in unwomanly fashion, even though they refer to different occasions. Also the *þáttr* of Óttarr inn svarti, although his poem is not preserved and we do not believe in the historical value of the episode,

attributes a strong and indipendent character to this queen whose behaviour seems to have been rather unconventional.

In Snorri's portait of Ástríðr the old traditional role, later transformed into a literary motif, revives. In a time when it was being established as a literary convention, Ástríðr takes the form of a real inciter. But Sigvatr did not allude to such a behaviour in his poetry. He did not paint her that way.

In Snorri's narration, Sigvatr is also presented as a character and not only as a source for what he tells: some parts of the saga are therefore devoted to the life of the skald (when he was in Rome, at the time of Stiklastaðir (1030); when, after the death of St Óláfr, he was very sad in Norway, so that he decided to join Ástríðr in Sweden; when he and Ástríðr welcome Magnús coming from Russia, and when they accompany Magnús to Norway).

Snorri wants to celebrate the collaboration between a queen and an Icelandic skald in favour of the continuity of the Norwegian royal dynasty. Like Sigvatr, Snorri himself is an Icelandic skald, working for the Norwegian monarch, Hákon Hákonarson. We know that Snorri was involved in diplomatic plans concerning the political relationships between Iceland and Norway. By quoting the episode and Sigvatr's praise poem for Ástríðr, he reminds the king of the importance of such an alliance between an Icelandic skald (as he himself is) and a queen, widow of a Norwegian king, for the Norwegian monarchy.

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