

A Landscape of Conflict

Three Stories of the Faroe Conversions

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There are eighteen islands with several mountainous peaks, steep green slopes and sheer basalt cliffs, alive with sea birds. No trees grow on them except where people have planted and tended them themselves. There is hardly an area of level ground, little foreshore, many fjords, bays and narrow passages between the islands, and everything seems exposed to the northern weather and currents of the sea. Erosion is the pervasive feature of the landscape, and the natural scenery is abrupt, awesome, and beautiful.¹

Færeyinga saga, which tells the story of the partial colonization and conversion of the Faroe Islands by Norway around the year 1000, was written down in Iceland during the great period of saga production—around 1200—and is preserved in different texts, including *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and *Flateyjarbók*.² Its narrative is dramatic and

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1. From George Johnston's introduction to his translation of *Færeyinga saga* in *Thrond of Gotu: Two Icelandic sagas from the Flat Island Book* (Erin, Ontario: Porcupine's Quill Press, 1994), hereafter Johnston, 7.

2. For a recent study of medieval perceptions of the Christianizing process carried out by Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson in Norway, Iceland and the Faroes, see Sverre Bagge, "The Making of a Missionary King: The Medieval Accounts of Olaf Tryggvason and the Conversion of Norway," *JEGP* 105 (2006): 473–513. See also Bagge's "Christianization and State Formation in Early Medieval Norway," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 30 (2005): 107–34.

masterfully structured, and it contains many literary and folkloric themes that could be studied extensively. Two such recurring themes in the text are (1) the perilous sea voyage due to the pagan sorcerer Þrándr's witchcraft and (2) the Norwegian crown's Christianizing emissaries' rocky and difficult entry to the Faroes. These motifs dramatize the central conflict of the saga: colonial or imperial power and its opposition to individualistic pagan powers that rely on the forces of nature. The saga's basic narrative, somewhat ambiguous in its loyalties because of these motifs, lends itself to an interesting comparative study of the colonial process as depicted in *Færeyinga saga* and its "spin-offs," in particular a Faroese ballad called *Sigmunds kvæði* that was collected from the Faroese folk tradition in the nineteenth century, and a modern stamp issued by the Faroe post office in 2000.

This essay will examine the depiction of the Faroese land- and seascape in these three works—the saga, the ballad, and the postage stamp—with the aim of demonstrating how the Faroe ecology serves as a complex symbol of political, economic, and religious conflict in three distinct periods of Faroese history. It will also reveal how these themes serve to unify the saga as a carefully constructed literary product, as well to dramatize its central narrative conflict: the tension between the Norwegian project of Christianization, on the one hand, and regional landscapes and identities, on the other.

In this saga we can note a complex discourse of imperialism at work, with oral and written sources in dialogue, and with different voices subverting one another. It is a testament to the artistry of the redactor that it remains easy for the audience to see both sides of the story, and to sense the multiplicity of voices bolstering a work that is ultimately written with one authorial intention. In *Færeyinga saga* there is no simple binary of colonizer and colonized; rather, protean, loosely defined categories of citizenship, landscape, and personality shift continually in a fluid narrative, and the author's deployment of land- and seascapes reflects this fluidity. Most importantly, the depiction of the natural world as fundamentally resistant to possession by Sigmundr and Óláfr is the most effective narrative device in the saga, subtly underlining the difficulties of conquest. Difficult entry to the Faroes due to storm, wind, and wave is a result of Þrándr's sorcery, but it is also a manifestation of the islands' distinctness and power. The earth itself is resistant to entry: even after Sigmundr successfully

reaches land following his struggle with the waves, he usually has to scale great cliffs and earthworks in order to come ashore. Ultimately, the deaths of the main characters focus on the natural backdrop of the narrative.

What motivates the saga's Icelandic author to present the Faroe Islands in such a way? *Færeyinga saga* is an Icelandic text about a conflict between Faroe Islanders and the Norwegian crown. How can we unravel the complexities of this political constellation? A succinct description of Faroese economic circumstances makes the connection between the Faroes and Iceland quite clear: "The lack of wood, iron, and grain made the Faroese especially dependent on foreign trade. They bartered for these commodities with cloth (as the many loom stones suggest), wool, and feathers. The find at Sandur of ninety-eight coins from many devout countries (dated to 950–1050) proves wide commercial contacts."³ Iceland and the Faroe Islands are siblings, with parallel landscapes, parallel economies and, to a certain extent, parallel histories. Like the Faroes, Iceland lacked wood, iron, and grain, and was forced into a supplicant position toward more resource-rich political entities. Both fiercely independent island populations struggled against the mainland Scandinavian powers, principally Norway. Their landscapes are, on the one hand, imposing symbols of the islanders' strength and uniqueness; on the other hand, they are the very element that forces them to remain dependent on inimical overlords. These landscapes are the root and source of their pride and their subsequently fierce desire for independence, yet they are also the cause of their equally intense need for commodities that these landscapes cannot produce.

The landscapes of the Faroes and Iceland are often portrayed as neither fertile nor nourishing, but imposing and destructive.⁴ Take for example the sterility in this modern description of the Faroes: "The seventeen inhabitable [islands] offered no rich soils, no broad plains,

3. Hans Jacob Debes, "The Faroe Islands," in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf (New York: Garland, 1993), 184.

4. See *Hrafnkels saga* for an example of a similarly malicious landscape. However, cf. Margaret Clunies Ross, "Land-Taking and Text-Making," in *Text and Territory: Geographical Imagination in the European Middle Ages*, ed. Sylvia Tomasch and Sealy Gilles (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 162, for a contrasting reading of the Norse landscape as female. I consider both readings valid approaches to different texts, and sometimes to different moments within a given text.

no chance of wealth either from mineral resources or trade, no subject population, and no easy farming.”⁵ This explains to a large extent the Icelandic saga redactor’s interest in the otherwise insignificant Faroes: their struggles imposed by landscape mirror Iceland’s in many ways, and in 1200, around the time the saga was composed, these struggles were far from resolved. By 1152, the Faroe Islands became part of the archbishopric of Niðarós, and by the 1180s “the islands seem to have become a ‘tax land’ under the Norwegian Crown.”⁶ But the islands did not become part of Norway until 1270, a little under a century after the saga was written and two centuries after the action took place. Iceland and Greenland were also integrated into the Norwegian empire around this time. *Færeyinga saga* is not simply a history of a past, completed event; it documents a continuing struggle still taking place, not only in the Faroe Islands, but also in Iceland itself, and it is thus relevant not only as a piece of literary history, but also as a key to Icelandic authors’ ambivalent attitude toward their own island in many other sagas. Thus understanding the attitudes at work in the portrayal of the land- and seascape of the Faroe Islands helps us better identify the sense in many of the *Íslendingasögur* of an island that both nurtures and destroys—a place that, although beautiful, can be monstrous in its sudden and dangerous movements.

The situation of the medieval Faroes in relation to Norway is also roughly analogous to the process of colonization in other northern European histories, such as the English colonization of Ireland, the subjection of Wales and Brittany by the English and French respectively, the (later) Danish colonization of Greenland, and other regional imperial expansions. All of these peoples of Northern Europe may in some way have shared a common European culture, but their structures of power were unequal. Some of the same structures of power and resistance were present when the energies of the relatively unified medieval Scandinavian kingdom—in this case the efforts of Óláfr Tryggvason and later Óláfr Haraldsson—were trained on converting and exacting tribute from the autonomous satellite nations that had left for the sake of independence in waves of flight and colonization,

5. See Eric Christiansen, *The Norsemen in the Viking Age* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 217.

6. *Ibid.*, 184.

followed by resistance and engulfment. Although this is not typical Saidian colonialism, in *Færeyinga saga* religion and tax create structures for “othering.” Colonialism is not here as much a matter of race (although North Atlantic people are probably seen as more racially diverse than Norwegians) as it is about wealth, religion, and landscape. To see this more clearly, let us turn to the first text of interest in this cross-temporal comparative study.

Pagan witchcraft that controls the weather and the seas in particular is common in the Icelandic sagas.⁷ In *Færeyinga saga*, this theme is sustained and developed until it becomes an important means of expressing both the plot and the meaning of the saga, as the wily protagonist, Þrándr, uses weather magic to hinder and subvert the Norwegian rulers’ attempts to control the Faroese people, whom he leads. Generally, Þrándr uses his magic to slow down the Norwegian takeover, while conversely, the Christian hero Sigmundr does his best to complete that process. For example, Sigmundr attempts to reach the island, relying on the protection of the mighty King Óláfr Tryggvason, who is himself portrayed as a sort of sorcerer, but:

Nú rak á storm fyrir þeim, ok skilðusk þá skipin, ok hafa nú rekit mikit, svá at dægum skiptir. . . . Nú er at segja frá þeim Sigmundi at byrr kemr á fyrir þeim ok sigla nú at eyjunum, ok sjá þá at þeir eru komnir austan at Eyjum, ok eru þeir menn á með Sigmundi at kenna landsleg, ok eru þeir mjök komnir at Austrey. Sigmundr sagði at hann mundi þat helzt kjósa at fá vald á Þrándi. Ok er þá berr at eyjunni kemr á mót þeim bæði straumr ok stormr, svá at ekki er nálægt um at þeir næði eyjunni; fá tekit í Svíney, með því at menn váru kœnir ok liðgóðir.⁸

7. In his study of the figure of Thor as a wind god, Richard Perkins argues that “wind-magic may probably be said to be more common amongst pagan peoples than, say, Christians”; that wind and weather were seen as fickle, hard to predict, out of control, and a great mystery; and that wind magic used to the detriment of others appears often in the Icelandic saga corpus. See *Thor the Wind-Raiser and the Eyrarland Image* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2001), 9–12. A. E. J. Ogilvie and Gísli Pálsson discuss episodes of weather magic in *Laxdæla saga*, *Njáls saga*, *Eiríks saga rauða*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, *Fóstbræðra saga*, *Vatnsdæla saga*, and *Víglundar saga* in “Mood, Magic and Metaphor: Allusions to Weather and Climate in the Sagas of Icelanders,” in *Weather, Climate, Culture*, ed. S. Strauss and B. S. Orlove (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 264.

8. *Færeyinga saga*, *Ólafs saga Odds*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, Íslensk fornrit 25 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2006), hereafter ÍF 25, 51–52, chs. 23 and 24.

Now a gale came against them, and ships were separated and much tossed about, and so it went on for days. . . . Now it is to be told of Sigmund and his crew that a favourable wind comes for them, and they sail towards the Islands and see that they are approaching the islands from the east, and there are men with Sigmund to ken the lie of the land, and they have come in close to Eysturoy. Sigmund said that he would most choose to lay hands on Thrand. But when they bear up toward the island there come against them both current and gale, so that they did not come near to reaching the island; they do get ashore on Svinoy because the men were skillful and handy seamen. (Johnston 60)

Þrándr's ability to control the weather and the sea makes it next to impossible for Sigmundr and his men to reach the island. The only factors in their favor are their skill and perseverance. On Þrándr's side are the land- and seascapes of the Faroes, the powers of the pagan gods, and an equally tenacious human personality. Although the end of the tale—the eventual conversion of the Faroe Islands—is here foreshadowed, the narrator also appears to enjoy depicting the intractability of the land and its people and indulging in a bit of *Schadenfreude* at Sigmundr's inability to reach the shore. In the passage just cited, the cause of the storm (Þrándr's magic) is elided, but Sigmundr continues to have trouble getting to and from the Faroes, and it gradually becomes clear that Þrándr is calling down the storm upon his enemies. Þrándr's reliance on weather magic even extends to using it against *himself* in order to avoid having to leave his islands to swear fealty to a foreign overlord:

En er Þrándr verður þess varr at Sigmundr ætlar at flytja hann á konungs fund, þá baðsk hann undan þeiri ferð. En Sigmundr lét þat ekki tjá, ok slógu landfestum þegar byr gaf. En er þeir váru eigi langt í haf komnir, þá hittu þeir bæði í strauma ok storm mikinn; urðu við þat aptreka til Færeyja ok brutu skip í spán ok týndu fé öllu, en mönnum varð borgit flestum. Sigmundr barg Þrándi ok mörgum ǫðrum. Þrándr sagði at eigi mundi þeim ferðin takask slétt ef þeir léti hann nauðgan fara. Sigmundr sagði at hann skyldi fara allt at einu, þó at honum þætti illt. Tók Sigmundr þá skip annat ok fé sitt at færa konungi fyrir skattinn, því at Sigmund skorti eigi lausafé. Láta þeir í haf í annat sinn; komask nú lengra áleiðis en fyrr; fá þó enn mótvíðri stór ok rekr þá apr til

Færeyja ok lesta skipit. Sigmundr sagði at honum þótti mikit farbann á liggja. Þrándr sagði at svá mundi fara hversu opt sem þeir leitaði til, svá at þeir flytti hann nauðgan með sér. (ÍF 25:73–74, ch. 31)

When Thrand finds that Sigmund is planning to bring him before the King he tries to beg off the voyage, but Sigmund was not persuaded, and they cast off moorings as soon as they were given a fair wind. But they had not gone far into the open sea when they met currents and a bad storm and they were driven back by these, right back to the Faroes, and smashed their ship to splinters and lost all their goods, but the men were saved, most of them. Sigmund saved Thrand and many others. Thrand said that they would not have a smooth crossing if they made him go against his will. Sigmund said that he must go anyhow, never mind that he did not like it. Sigmund took another ship then, and money of his own to bring for the King's tribute, for Sigmund was not lacking ready money. Again they put to sea, and make better headway than before, but again they meet strong winds and are driven back to the Faroes and damage the ship. Sigmund said that there seemed to be a curse on the trip. Thrand said it was bound to go this way so long as they tried to bring him against his will. (Johnston 68, ch. 30)

This episode causes considerable damage to all the humans involved—even Þrándr must be saved from drowning—but Sigmundr bears the brunt of this magic, as he loses all the goods and tribute he had amassed to bring to Norway, and must pay the tribute himself, as well as ready a new boat, which also becomes damaged. Sigmundr must also rescue the very man who caused him such trouble because his new belief system requires it of him, and he is not the kind of man who shirks his duty, however unpleasant it may be.

This passage resembles an episode in *Laxdæla saga* where the doomed Þórðr is sunk by the magician Kotkell. Þórðr, like Sigmundr, struggles against a magical storm, but his ship is capsized and destroyed. One wonders if the difference between the two heroes' experiences is that Sigmundr has Óláfr's luck backing him talismanically against Þrándr, and is thus able to make it out alive, unlike his counterpart in *Laxdæla saga*, who has no such supernatural powers behind him—permitting the sorcerer in that narrative to easily destroy his enemy at sea from land. The sea is a space where

one becomes more vulnerable to attack, and the machinations of a practiced sorcerer would typically spell doom for his target. Yet Sigmundr survives, unlike Þórðr. The saga's contemporaries would likely have recognized this difference and wondered at Sigmundr's survival, aware as they were of other stories where resistance against a weather sorcerer proves futile. Sigmundr's survival is a miracle, and serves as evidence that his message has a higher power behind it, a power that can overcome the "diabolical" forces of nature.⁹

Disruptive natural phenomena can seem equivalent to magic in the saga's logic—or at least the two qualities are seen as cousins in the service of Þrándr's strong will. Opposed to nature and Þrándr's primal, pagan power are the forces of civilization, order, leadership (contrasted with an individualism that often borders on myopic selfishness), and Christianity. In an article on the parallels between sagas and early historical novels, Joseph Harris argues that "the morphology of the historical passage [of the saga] is essentially stable; a monolithic new order overtakes an individualistic ancient one, empire, for example, succeeding provincialism." Such is the case in *Færeyinga saga*: "The balance of the two orders is, of course, never static, and a static presentation of the oppositions would in any case be ironically undermined by our knowledge that the new order, though modified in the dialectic of history, represents the way of the future, the writer's present."¹⁰ In this saga, these oppositions are performed on the natural stage of the Faroe Islands, and the scenery adds a third order to the old and the new—that of nature itself, which problematizes the straightforward, human-centered dialectic of history.

Þrándr's environmental trickery persists throughout the saga, as he repeatedly uses his magic to impede the Christian heroes Sigmundr and Óláfr Tryggvason in their attempts to bring the Faroes under rein. Several times, Óláfr provides Sigmundr with special ships to transport

9. Perkins notes how in various sagas the superior power of the Christian god is often set in explicit contrast with weaker pagan forces (*Thor the Wind-Raiser*, 14).

10. Joseph Harris, "Saga as Historical Novel," in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, ed. John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber, The Viking Collection: Studies in Northern Civilization 3 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), 187–219; repr. in "Speak Useful Words or Say Nothing": *Old Norse Studies by Joseph Harris*, ed. Susan E. Deskins and Thomas D. Hill, *Islandica* 53 (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 2008), 227–60.

him to the Faroes, and more often than not, they are destroyed in the journey, as we see in chapter 23:

Ferr Sigmundr til skipa sinna, ok er svá sagt at fimm tigur manna váru á hváru skipinu. Létu nú í haf, ok gaf þeim vel byri þar til er þeir höfðu fugl af eyjum, ok heldu samflota. Haraldr járnhauss var á skipi með Sigmundi, en Þórir stýrði ǫðru skipi. Nú rak á storm fyrir þeim, ok skilðusk þá skipin, ok hafa nú rekit mikit, svá at dægum skiptir. (ÍF 25:51, ch. 23)

Sigmund goes to his ships, and there are said to have been 50 men on each ship. They put to sea and a fair wind held for them until they saw birds from the islands, and they were able to keep their ships together. Harald Ironskull was on the ship with Sigmund, and Thorir commanded the other ship. Then a gale broke on them, the ships were separated, and they were separated before the wind for many days. (Johnston 53, ch. 23)

Sigmundr has no difficulty until he nears Þrándr's domain, as signaled by the presence of seabirds. Then his luck changes, and despite having a good strong crew, he takes days to reach land. Later in the conflict, Þrándr successfully feigns illness to avoid going to Norway—apparently he can control his appearance of health as well the elements, thus underlining his status as a “force of nature” in his own right. Other Faroese leaders go to the meeting with Óláfr, but they do not trust the king's transparently self-interested plans for the Faroes, and while they manage to resist his demands for a time, his personality and power ultimately force their capitulation, and compel the Faroes to pay tribute. The question remains: had Þrándr been there, would things have turned out differently? Is he a match for Óláfr? In diametric opposition to Óláfr's overt assertion of his prerogative as a Christian monarch, Þrándr resists underhandedly, relying on his covert command of the disruptive energies of nature and eschewing direct human confrontation.

Right after the meeting with the capitulating Faroese, the ship sent to collect tribute is lost at sea, as is the second one dispatched. The continual loss of good ships and loyal crews irritates Óláfr, and conquering the islands economically and spiritually becomes

something of a fixation. He seems unaccustomed to meeting resistance akin to Þrándr's:

Þat var á einu húsþingi er hann átti at hann hafði þat mál í munni, sagði frá mannskaða þeim er hann hafði látit af Færeyjum, "en skattr sá," segir hann, "er þeir hafa mér heitit, þá kemr ekki fram. Nú ætla ek enn þangat menn at senda eptir skattinum." Veik konungr þessu máli nokkut til ýmissa manna at til þeirrar ferðar skyldu ráðask. En þar kómu þau svör í mót at allir menn tölðusk undan fõrinni. (ÍF 25:97, ch. 43)

Next spring at a local court that King Olaf held he had this case on his mind, and he spoke about the losses in men he had suffered on account of the Faroes—and "that tribute," says he, "which they have pledged me, not an ounce of it comes. Now I am going to send men after that tribute again." The King put the proposal more or less to one man after another, that they should take on the voyage. But the answers that came back were that they all begged off the voyage. (Johnston 89, ch. 44)

All of Óláfr's tribute gatherers have grown afraid to go to the Faroes after the loss of vessel after vessel. This is potent magic indeed.

Only at the end of the saga, when all other major figures have been killed, does Þrándr's magic lose its potency, as he loses control of the very elements he previously commanded. He can no longer use water and storms to achieve his ends, and his other magical power—the ability to summon and control *draugar* and then dismiss them at will—fails him, and these same ghosts begin to haunt him. In this way, he is similar to another ambiguous protagonist who represents a moribund heroic value system, Grettir Ásmundarson, whose former strengths turn into weaknesses. We also find parallels in the account in *Njáls saga* of the magician Svanr who, as Ogilvie and Gísli Pálsson note, is ironically "said to have been drowned in a 'great storm,' his skills seemingly of no avail to him against this natural weather event."¹¹ Þrándr too is betrayed by the very nature whose forces he once marshaled, and the narrative hinges on this

11. Ogilvie, "Mood, Magic and Metaphor," 4.

pivotal change. When nature turns against those who previously wielded its powers, we know the fight is over, and arguably, that the land has lost its wild ally. For, as Harris puts it, “even though Sigmundr is slain three-fourths of the way through the saga and Þrándr lives on, it is clear that, like King Óláfr Tryggvason, the future belongs to Sigmundr and his ways; and this is worked out in the narrative of the second part of the saga where, during the reign of St. Óláfr, when Christianity was restored permanently in Norway and during that of Magnús Ólafsson, the heirs of Sigmundr stamp out the faction of Þrándr, and the old trickster dies, the saga says, of grief.”¹²

Although the redactor of *Færeyinga saga* is a Christian, and presumably does not long for the heathen days of old, a certain ambiguity in his portrayal of the power and glory of Þrándr’s sorcery and of the intractable roughness of the islands themselves, which seem to actively resist the various colonial impositions of tax, religion, and military levy—and the author’s apparent sympathy with this resistance—do remain strong forces in the text and suggest a reading that focuses on a subversive landscape. Scholarly consensus further invites such a reading, describing *Færeyinga saga* as “an enormous accretion of oral material that must have circulated earlier”; the written narrative is a product of many people’s voices, not all of which were necessarily sympathetic to the Christian colonial process.¹³ The author “cites no verse and apparently had no written sources; the anecdotes he built on must have come from the Faroes, but he evidently did not know the islands at first hand,” and Ólafur Halldórsson suggests that the author probably was confusing the islands out of ignorance of the topography of the archipelago.¹⁴ Despite evidence of a single author’s hand in the work, the material itself is at least partly from diverse Faroese accounts, that is, in the voice of a people who were in the process of being colonized.¹⁵

12. Harris, “Saga as Historical Novel,” 250–51.

13. See Theodore M. Andersson, “Kings’ Sagas,” in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. John Lindow and Carol J. Clover (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 221.

14. See Johnston 9 (“Introduction”) and ÍF 25:xxxiv, respectively.

15. “Ólafur Halldórsson conjectures that he acquired this from Faroese tales and accounts, probably told by Faroese travelers” (Johnston 9).

Perhaps this is why the elements of conversion and imperialism, “two aspects of the new order,” are so closely related in *Færeyinga saga*, “where Þrándr is identified with provincial resistance to the crown and Sigmundur’s mission of conversion is closely bound up with the payment of tribute to Norway.”¹⁶ The author may have felt pressure to be fair to both camps that helped him write his story, for he sustains “a narrative that did equal justice to imposing missionary kings, Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson, and to their wily Faroese antagonist, Þrándr í Gøtu, presented as a man of superb cunning and supernatural power, who detests the Christianity forced on him.”¹⁷ The multiplicity of voices that have influenced *Færeyinga saga* is such that the resulting narrative is a composite product—only the sustained presence of the natural elements so powerfully depicted throughout the saga can unify and ground it.

To demonstrate the saga’s complex tone in terms of its depiction of both nature and of the actors in the story, we may consider Þrándr’s status as one of the protagonists of the tale, perhaps a result of the Faroese saga informants’ pride in their people and land. His ability to hinder sea crossings represents the remoteness of the Faroes and their isolation, as well as their power and “otherness.” That this individual’s resistance by means of magical storms and waters is a cipher for pagan resistance to Christianity generally is a first critical conclusion to draw, but I would argue for a more subtle reading of the forces at work here. According to saga and historical narratives of the settlement period, raiders and angry farmers leave increasingly untenable situations in Scandinavia and head westward into the insular North Atlantic—a place of cultural contact among Celtic, English, and Nordic cultures and a syncretic, shifting identity conditioned by settlement.¹⁸ But soon enough, the Christian empire catches up with them, as Thomas DuBois aptly summarizes:

16. Harris, “Saga as Historical Novel,” 258.

17. Peter Foote, “Færeyinga saga,” in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, 222.

18. To call the Norwegian Christian rulers leaders of an empire is a controversial claim; Norway is a small and lightly populated country. I follow other scholars in my choice of words to describe the re-colonizing project carried out by the Norwegian kings around the turn of the millennium, since it stretches east and west over vast expanses of land and sea and arguably affects at least ten independent countries. See Christiansen, *The Norsemen*, 216–19, and Harris, “Saga as Historical Novel,” 231.

By the end of the [saga era] the North had become transformed from a complex mosaic of interdependent non-Christian communities to an increasingly consolidated and religiously unified region, diminished in range from its earlier expanse and merged into a few large royal realms. Christianity had become installed as the fruit and agent of this unity and had begun to make inroads from its beachheads in Atlantic Scandinavia and the royal courts of the mainland outward toward the marginalized farmsteads and forest settlements of the region.¹⁹

This is a movement, painted in the broadest strokes, away from smaller, diverse ecoregions with distinct identities and toward satellites of a central Scandinavian monarchy. Þrándr, a deeply flawed, individualistic native of one of these western islands, may have represented the diversity of the pre-Christian past in the insular North Atlantic, thus explaining the saga's ambiguous tone where his mischief in concerned.²⁰ Þrándr is unique and difficult to categorize, like the region he represents.

In some ways, the saga writer's characterization of Þrándr is a familiar colonial depiction of an inferior, "defective" native; his red hair and freckles are genetic traits that require reining in or suppression. Other famous examples of freckled or red-headed men show the connection between archaic, regressive behavior and red hair to be a *topos*; Grettir Ásmundarson is freckled, as are Eric the Red and the unruly Thor himself. While Norwegians can also have red hair, Þrándr's appearance suggests he has been "othered" in some important way. As Joseph Harris observes, "Þrándr was clearly conceived as the shifty red-headed man of the medieval proverbs."²¹ Johnston argues that his reddish coloring is meant to identify him as "foxlike," and I believe this is likely, especially since Þrándr seems blessed with the olfactory capacities of a canine, like a similarly marginal figure in the saga, the outlaw Úlfr, later identified as Þorkell

19. Thomas A. DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 10.

20. Thus, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues, "stories of colonialism" that form a block of international experience similar from region to region are "part also of a very local, very specific experience." See "Imperialism, History, Writing, and Theory," in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Press, 1999), 24.

21. Harris, "Saga as Historical Novel," 246.

þurrafrost (“Dryfrost”).²² Like Dryfrost, who is able to smell the presence of the fugitive youngsters Sigmundr and Þórir in his house before he sees them, and who is clearly blessed with an exceptional sense of smell, Þrándr is able to smell Sigmundr, and when he needs to he can track him like a hound, all the way to his hiding place in an earthen hole (ÍF 25:83, ch. 38; Johnston 76, ch. 36). Both Þrándr’s and Úlfr’s superb senses of smell align them more with nature than the human world, making each an uncanny blend of beast and man.

In other ways, however, Þrándr is portrayed as a wise, handsome man, who has borne up well against the continued marginalization of his way of life. The somewhat conflicting account of Þrándr’s physical appearance might be evidence of the multiplicity of voices informing the saga, for at one point he is described as “fríðr sýnum” (handsome), while at another he is “heldr greppligr í ásjónu” (rather hard-faced).²³ Þrándr’s actions are also ambiguous; at times he seems morally slippery, lying or taking false oaths in order to get Sigmundr and Óláfr off his island. For example, he promises under duress to visit Earl Hákon in person to deliver his tribute, but escapes this obligation, as we have already seen, by destroying the ships taking him over to Norway. When Sigmundr returns alone and presents himself before the Norwegian leader, Earl Hákon dryly comments on Þrándr’s wiliness compared to Sigmundr’s earnest simplicity: “Eigi hafi þit orðit jafnslægir þit Þrándr; þætti mér ugðvíst at hann kæmi skjótt á minn fund” (You have not both been so sharp, you and Thrand. It seemed unlikely that he would be in a hurry to come to me).²⁴ On the other hand, Þrándr’s use of weather magic could be seen more sympathetically as an act of passive resistance, a way to stall an unfair arrangement through a strategic alliance with the formidable natural situation of the Faroes.

Þrándr’s behavior toward the representatives of Óláfr’s power is indeed overt flattery veiling an implicit menace, as we see when he takes pains to flatter Sigmundr, and when he meets Norway’s new representative, Karl mœrski (ÍF 25:60, ch. 25; Johnston 59, ch. 25).

22. Johnston argues that Þrándr’s red hair suggests “that in other respects also he might be like a fox” (122n).

23. ÍF 25:4 and 7, respectively. For further discussion of this apparent disparity of appearance, see Harris, “Saga as Historical Novel,” 246.

24. ÍF 25:58, ch. 24; Johnston 58, ch. 24.

Þrándr's dealings with Sigmundr's replacement are obsequious, even unctuous, as in this histrionic declaration:

Litlu síðar kom þar Þrándr ok fagnaði vel Karli. “Em ek,” segir hann, “feginn orðinn er slíkr drengur hefir komið hingat til lands várs með ørendi konungs várs, er vér erum allir skyldir undir at standa. Vil ek ekki annat, Karl, en þú farir til mín til vetrvistar ok þat með þér allt þíns liðs, er þinn vegur væri þá meiri en áðr.” Karl svarar at hann var áðr ráðinn at fara til Leifs, “en ek munda elligar,” segir hann, “fúsliga þiggja þetta boð.” Þrándr svarar: “Þá mun Leifi auðit vegsmuna af þessu. En eru nokkurir aðrir hlutir þá, þeir er ek mega svá gera at yðr sé liðsemð at?” (ÍF 25:99, ch. 48)

By and by along came Thrand and gave Karl a fine greeting. “I am overcome with delight,” said he, “that such a man has come over to our land here on our King's task, which we are all duty bound to stand behind. I will have nothing else, Karl, but you will come to my place for winter quarter and as many of your crew as may do dignity to your honour.” Karl answers that it was already arranged for him to go to Leif's—“but otherwise,” said he, “I would gladly accept this invitation.” Thrand answers, “The honour of this must be fated to Leif, then, but are there other things I might do that would be of help to you?” (Johnston 90–91, ch. 45)

In response to Þrándr's request to be of help, Karl makes him, ironically, the tax collector for Eysturoy and all the northerly isles. Unused to the way things are done in the Faroes, Karl has missed the veiled threat behind Þrándr's pretty words. His language is mocking, not sincere; a form of doublespeak. It seems likely that Karl mœrski would not have survived a winter stay at Þrándr's homestead. In many ways, Þrándr's mimicry of courtly language is in line with Homi Bhaba's formulation of the process of mimicry in postcolonial narratives—the suppressed colonial subject mimics the language, manners, and power structures of the colonizer while twisting them in a certain way, changing the meaning of the alien forms.²⁵ Throughout the saga Þrándr pretends

25. Homi K. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 85.

to take on the duties and responsibilities of Norwegian-style rule, only to twist or parody them: his production of a bag of bad silver as tax payment instead of a sincere tribute of good coin; the fact that his kinsmen establish a money-lending racket under his aegis in place of legitimate tribute-gathering; and of course, his famous twisting of the words of the Creed, are all travesties of imperial mechanisms of power.²⁶ His inversions of their meaning in his ironic performances are effective forms of passive resistance through mimicry.

But in the Norwegian view of things, Þrándr represents not only paganism, but also the pluralistic complexities of local squabbling and civil war. As a representative of the pagan Faroese who cannot make up their mind about tax or God, his behavior toward his own relatives—his willingness to use them as fighting pawns, to take their goods and money, and to sell his foster children—is a testament to the still-pagan isles' need for a unifying Christian ruler. According to the colonial narrative, Þrándr is a bad leader who counsels his people into things that “aren't good for them” according to the colonial authority, such as their revolt against taxes and proselytizing. When he takes his countrymen aside to talk them out of accepting the rule of King Óláfr and Christianity, his equivocal language places him in a liminal position between their multiformity on the one hand and a monolithic power structure on the other. “The saga's implicit comparison between Sigmundr and the other main character Þrándr is a good example of old and new interwoven in a feud plot. Þrándr is underhanded, treacherous (not least to his own kin), secretive, a great manipulator, a magician. An Odinic figure, he himself never fights but uses his three nephews and others in his feuds.”²⁷

In additon to his control of weather and ocean and his superior sense of smell that allows him to track down his enemies, Þrándr is intimately connected with other aspects of the natural world as well. He can summon ghosts from land and sea, and his intimate knowledge of the topography and waterscapes of the Faroes affords him strategic advantages. From the Norwegian perspective, Þrándr's control of nature points to the unknown menace of a hostile country and people;

26. See Peter Foote's classic studies of this latter moment: “Þrándr and the Apostles” and “A note on Þránd's *Kredda*,” both reprinted in *Aurvandilstá: Norse Studies* (Odense University Press, 1984), 188–98 and 199–208, respectively.

27. Harris, “Saga as Historical Novel,” 246.

his superior knowledge of and power over the landscape are enviable and threatening. His innate connection with his native land marks both his power and his status as “savage.” But from the Faroese, and arguably Icelandic, perspective, his power over nature implies that he is useful to his allies and countrymen, much in the same way as that other sorcerer on a peripheral island, Þorbjörg, aids her countrymen in Greenland in times of dearth with weather magic in *Eiríks saga rauða*.²⁸ But ultimately, Þrándr is only an obstruction; as Valentin Mudimbe notes in his analysis of the politics of land ownership in colonial situations, “[N]on-Christians have no rights to possess or negotiate any dominion in the then-existing international context, and thus their land is objectively a *terra nullius*...that may be occupied and seized by Christians in order to exploit the richness meant by God to be shared by all humankind.”²⁹ He is ultimately seen as but an extension of the land, not a person to the extent that Sigmundr is, as the forced conversion episode demonstrates; Sigmundr is prepared to execute him summarily should Þrándr choose to maintain his friendship with those he calls “fornum vinum minum” (my old friends).³⁰ His desire to maintain his loyalty to the gods of his forefathers is not respected as a valid choice, and to compound insult with injury, he is compelled to come along with Sigmundr as he forcibly converts the rest of the island’s inhabitants.

While Þrándr is a complex, *allzumenschlich* figure, so too is his enemy, Sigmundr Brestisson. Far from being a simple pawn of Óláfr Tryggvason’s, Sigmundr is an ambivalent, troubled, and heroic figure, who does his best in spite of factors that make his role as cultural translator and mediator difficult. Although he represents the “imperial” aspect of Norwegian interests (just as Þrándr stands for the idiosyncratic islanders), he remains a complex, human figure, and not a mere cipher.³¹ Sigmundr is first backed by Earl Hákon as a tax

28. Reimund Kvideland and Henning K. Sehmsdorf note that “Fishermen and sailors employed the services of wise folk to make favourable sailing wind.” *Scandinavian Folk Belief and Legend* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 150.

29. Valentin Y. Mudimbe, “*Romanus Pontifex* (1454) and the Expansion of Europe,” in *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 30.

30. ÍF 25:73, ch. 31.

31. For an analysis of the “imperial aspect” of the sagas, see Harris, “Saga as Historical Novel,” 254.

collector to the Faroes and as a peacekeeper elsewhere; and then by King Óláfr Tryggvason as a missionary and tribute collector to the Faroes. Sigmundr does his best to faithfully represent the interests of church and state, but he is only one man, however heroic he may be, and he cannot bear the weight of these institutions on his shoulders. Thus, he ultimately fails, dying in the line of duty after sowing the seeds of a more stable future in the Faroes. After his death during the interregnum in Norway, Þrándr and his followers relapse, but Sigmundr's project is completed at the end of the saga by his descendants, with support from Óláfr inn helgi overseas.

Sigmundr's initial reluctance to carry out his assignment in a recalcitrant and backward region might be seen to prefigure the "white man's burden" in modern colonial narratives.³² Again, while the Faroese are ethnically identical to the Norwegians, they are characterized as uncouth, violent, temperamental, and aligned with threatening forces of nature. When Óláfr Tryggvason assigns him to convert the Faroese, "Sigmundr mæltisk undan því starfi" (Sigmund begged to be let off this work), not wanting to take on responsibility for so many contrary folk.³³ He knows their fighting spirit well, having been born in the Faroes and suffered their rough culture firsthand when his father was killed and he passed into slavery. Sigmundr's misgivings are well-founded: Þrándr's countrymen need little persuading to revolt against Sigmundr's "good news." Þrándr merely has to pull them aside at the *þing* and they return armed and ready to kill Sigmundr for trying to force Christianity and taxes on them (ÍF 25:72, ch. 30; Johnston 62, ch. 29). In spite of this frequent rough treatment, however, Sigmundr often sympathizes with the other side in this "clash of the relatively modern idea of the state with ancient liberties."³⁴ Faroese himself, he also identifies very strongly with outlaw figures. After his family is

32. "Take up the White Man's burden—
Send forth the best ye breed—
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child."

From Rudyard Kipling's poem, "The White Man's Burden," in *Rudyard Kipling's Verse* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1922), 371.

33. ÍF 25:71, ch. 30; Johnston 65, ch. 29.

34. Harris, "Saga as Historical Novel," 254.

murdered through Þrándr's conniving, he is fostered by Þrándr, who treacherously sells him and his cousin into slavery. He has the luck to be rescued from exposure and subsequently fostered by the outlaw Úlfr, or Þorkell Dryfrost. Later in life, however, Sigmundr becomes a sort of professional outlaw-hunter under orders from various Norwegian rulers. As someone rescued and fostered by an outlaw, he betrays his personal loyalties in doing so. But he remains ambivalent about these assignments, as attested by his readiness to reach a settlement with another outlaw, Haraldr járnhauss (Ironskull). He then becomes a negotiator for Haraldr Ironskull with Hákon, and, after some hard negotiation, he finally manages to ally Þorkell Dryfrost with Hákon (chs. 21 and 26). These actions further cement his role as a mediator between Norway and the remote fugitives on the margin of the (increasingly) centralized Norwegian state. In many ways, his fraught relationship with King Óláfr traces the general narrative pattern followed by exceptional Icelanders who go to court to prove their worth and gain riches, and who subsequently return to their homeland on political errands for Norwegian rulers, at times with disastrous consequences for their own lives and well-being.³⁵ Snorri Sturluson is another example of this type of figure, and in fact, his ultimate destruction in the line of "duty" closely parallels Sigmundr's. Again, the author is perhaps consciously paralleling Icelandic and Faroese heroes and their respective fortunes.

Sigmundr's assignments are not always attractive, but he typically manages to negotiate in such a way as to bring his far-flung quarry back to the Norwegian center. He succeeds until he is charged with bringing Þrándr back to Norway to meet with Hákon and later Óláfr. In his attempts to corral Þrándr, he consistently fails. The motif of heavy lifting identifies Sigmundr's emotional and physical burden, as well as his ambivalence toward his life's work. At a crucial point in the narrative, we learn that Sigmundr believes in nothing but his own might and main.³⁶ He will depend on that all-too-human

35. On this theme, see Vésteinn Ólason, "Den frie mannens selvforståelse i islandske sagaer og dikt," in *Medeltidens fødeelse*, ed. Anders Andrén, Symposier på Krapperrups Borg 1 (Nyhamnsläge: Gyllenstiernska Krapperrupsstiftelsen, 1989), 277–86.

36. "Þá mælti Hákon: 'Hvat segir þú mér til þess, hvern hefir þú átrúnað?' Sigmundr svarar: 'Ek trúí á mátt minn ok megin'" (Hakon said, "Tell me this, where do you place your trust?" Sigmundr answers, "I believe in my own might and main") [ÍF 25:50, ch. 23; Johnston 53, ch. 23].

force throughout the saga, as Sigmundr works for the Norwegians against the Swedes as well as against the Faroese. Sigmundr mediates between the crown on the one hand and the treacherous human political landscape and the dangerous natural spaces it inhabits on the other. He mediates between outlaws and kings. He negotiates against, then for, then ultimately against the rights of the wilder lands and the individualistic men shaped by them. His sympathy for Úlfr the outlaw and Haraldr Ironskull—and arguably for the difficult Þrándr—as well as his quasi-familial ties with Úlfr make it hard for him to sign on wholeheartedly with Norway's ambitions. Collectively, the work of tax-gathering and converting adds up to a weighty burden for one man to bear, and the saga emphasizes this sense of encumbrance through repetition of the motifs of Sigmundr carrying another man while he himself struggles to survive, of lifting a rock too heavy for a man, and of taking on the yoke of missionary activity. The first instance of this “heavy lifting” motif appears in chapter 10 in Sigmundr's youth:

Ganga nú ór Víkinni til Upplanda ok þannveg austan eptir Heiðmörk ok norðr til Dofrafjalls ok koma þar við vetr sjálfan, ok snjóvar þá á fyrir þeim ok vetrar. Ráða þeir þó á fjallit með litlu ráði, fara villt ok liggja úti svá at mörgum dægum skipti matarlausir, ok þá lagðisk Þórir fyrir ok biðr Sigmund þá hjálpa sér ok leita af fjallinu. Hann kvað at þeir skyldu báðir af koma eða hvárgi þeirra ella. En sá var munr krapta þeirra at Sigmundr leggjr Þóri á bak sér, ok veit þá heldr fyrir ofan. Dösuðusk nú mjök báðir; finna nú eitt kveld dalverpi nokkut á fjallinu ok fóru nú eftir því, ok um síðir kenna þeir reykjarþef, ok því næst finna þeir bæ ok ganga inn ok finna stofu. (ÍF 25:22, ch. 10)

They make their way out of the Vik to Uppland, and from there east through Heidmork and north to Dofrafjall and they get there at the onset of winter, the ways are snowed up in front of them and it grows wintry. Nevertheless they start on up the mountain without much forethought, they go astray and lie out without much food, and for many days, and then Thorir lies down, and he tells Sigmund to look after himself and find his way down from the mountain. He replied that either they both should come down or else neither. And there was

such difference in strength between them that Sigmund takes Thorir on his back; and it clears a little then, overhead. They both grow weaker and weaker; then one evening they come upon a narrow dale in the mountain, they go along it and at length they smell smoke; next thing they come upon a house and go in and come into the hearth-room. (Johnston 32, ch. 10)

As Sigmundr and Þórir are lost inland in a sea of wintry white, and are on the verge of death in the wilderness, Þórir lies down to die but Sigmundr carries him. His noble sacrifice and compassion seem to have an almost magical effect, as the sun appears and they soon come upon the lonely habitation of the beastlike outlaw Úlfr Dryfrost. But although Sigmundr survives and saves his cousin, we know that this expedition's outcome was resting on a knife's edge—things could have gone differently for these headstrong boys—and we recognize a foreshadowing of the risky adventures that will attract Sigmundr throughout later life. This episode is the first instance of Sigmundr as a heroic Christ-figure who bears crosses of loyalty and compassion in ensuring that his kinsman does not die of exposure in the sub-arctic winter. Shortly after this episode, Úlfr mentions in the context of his own life story a maxim that cautions against “lifting rocks too heavy for one's strength” (*taka stein um megn sér*), now explicitly establishing the notion of heavy lifting as a theme throughout the saga.³⁷ King Óláfr in turn charges Sigmundr with the task of bearing “the yoke of His service, to bring all your subjects to His glory.”³⁸ In the course of this ultimate task Sigmundr bears the cost of lost ships, lost tributes, and lost lives. He sustains losses of his own time and energy as well. Sigmundr finally loses his battle against the Faroes and the sea in his great swim across the sound, and although he is able to survive the nightlong swim in the freezing waters, he must carry his cousin Þórir and his supporter Einarr across the sound. In spite of his Herculean—or Beowulfian—efforts, both of his companions ultimately succumb to exhaustion and drown. Sigmundr lands likewise exhausted and unable to move on hostile shores, where he is beheaded by a farmer who covets his gold jewelry. He battles the

37. Johnston 39, ch. 15; ÍF 25:32, ch. 32.

38. Johnston 64, ch. 28; ÍF 25:70, ch. 29.

hostile elements bravely and successfully, but in the end he cannot overcome the recalcitrant and at times monstrous inhabitants of this landscape. These two forces combine to bring about his demise (ch. 72). He is destroyed like a beached whale, and the resources he carries on his body are similarly harvested.³⁹ Underscoring this bestialization, he is denied the human gesture of a Christian burial. Sigmundr's death on the beach is a final marker of his liminality, his ultimate destruction by the sea, and the fundamental change in perception of what he is—no longer a hero, but a washed-up instrument of a greater power.

Thus, while Þrándr uses meteorological magic and trickery, Sigmundr relies on his own "might and main," on the force of human perseverance without the aid of magic; he is the figure of the intrepid explorer/adventurer. As a final note on Sigmundr's role in this story of colonization, I would append an analogy between Sigmundr and a later Scandinavian one-man colonizer/mediator: the nineteenth- to early twentieth-century explorer and writer Knud Rasmussen. Rasmussen was a Dane with some Greenlandic blood who conducted sled trips across the Arctic in an endeavor that was to provide much of the primary material on pan-Inuit culture.⁴⁰ He was seen by the Danes as a tragic figure who spoke for the Inuit and tried to preserve their culture, all the while knowing he was exploiting them and narrowing their horizons, as well as codifying and translating their cultural products in his own voice. Knud Rasmussen was a liminal figure like Sigmundr, torn between sympathies for the people he contacted (and changed), and his obligations to his state and nationality. Like Sigmundr, who, as we have seen, bore the burden of taxing and Christianizing the Faroe Islands, Rasmussen

personally colonized the area, in the sense that he took care that Christianity was brought there, and established a trading station, the profits

39. I doubt that any Faroese storyteller—or Icelander, for that matter—would have failed to recognize the parallels between Sigmundr's tragic beaching, and the cyclic harvesting of whales stranded on the shores of North Atlantic islands, an important event for the physical and economic wellbeing of island dwellers.

40. See Kristen Thisted, "Voicing the Arctic: Knud Rasmussen and the Ambivalence of Cultural Translation," in *Arctic Discourses*, ed. Anka Ryall et al. (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 59–81.

from which were used not only to cover his own living expenses, but also to finance the seven so-called "Thule Expeditions," carried out between 1912 and 1933. . . . With his own upbringing in Greenland and close relations to the Greenlandic people, Rasmussen saw himself more or less as "chosen" for the project. (Thisted, "Voicing the Arctic," 61-62)

Similarly, Sigmundr carries out tasks for the Norwegian crown, bringing unruly elements under Norwegian control, collecting tribute and spreading Christianity; but he is clearly "chosen" to bear the good news to the Faroes, as a Faroe Islander himself by birth with close relations to those living there. In Rasmussen's case a thousand years later, Thisted continues, "his double identity as both Greenlander and Dane is the key to understanding the special mission Knud Rasmussen took upon himself as an interpreter between two worlds, the Inuit and the European." Similarly, Sigmundr's double identity makes him a mediator between two opposed worlds, a pivotal figure who bridges them and changes the colonized culture permanently as a consequence.

Prádr in contrast plays the role of a moribund icon of a dying culture akin to that played by some of the more memorable Inuit collaborators Knud Rasmussen meets along his journey. For example, "in Rasmussen's description Majuak [the Inuit storyteller who tells Rasmussen the best stories] is turned into an icon of a dying culture, and the story of the meeting on the island of Little Diomedes is turned into a *myth*, carrying a meaning that reaches far beyond the individuals acting in the story."⁴¹ Prádr's dramatic last stand, followed by his grief that his way of life has passed forever and by his death, shows similar contours. Moreover, Prádr's shifting alliances and ever changeable and fickle moods characterize him as impetuous and sullen, the classic "half-devil, half-child" of Kipling's famous formulation of the identity of the colonized figure. As a "savage" he is by nature so closely aligned with the behavior of his environment that they form a symbiosis in the saga. So too does Rasmussen view the Inuit, albeit more sympathetically than in Kipling's language: they are "children" of the capricious, unpredictable Arctic climate. "The Eskimo's temperament can be bright and sunlit like the water on the

41. Ibid., 75.

deep fjords on a summer's day. But it can also be wild and merciless like the big ocean, which eats into his land" and "the temperament of the Netsilik Eskimo is like one of the many lakes that fill his land: easily put in motion, but just as easily regaining its calm."⁴² It is the "service" of Knud Rasmussen to interpret and modify this wild nature for the benefit of civilization, just as it is Sigmundr's in the saga.

A final comparison between Sigmundr and Rasmussen is afforded through an intriguing inversion. Thisted tells us that "if Rasmussen was critical toward the Danish colonial administration, he was by no means against colonization as such."⁴³ Sigmundr is the reverse of this—he seems comfortable with Norwegian leadership, but critical of aspects of the colonial project, especially those that encroach on ancient freedoms. Thus even a brief appraisal reveals the profound ambivalence these cultural mediators manifested in their personal struggles with the task of colonization. Both perform firmly fixed roles, but they do so in ambivalent, nuanced ways.

For both sides represented in the saga, the Faroese landscape itself is intractable; even after Sigmundr converts the population by force, parts of the Faeroes keep slipping back into the old ways. In the end, both human protagonists are destroyed by the landscape of the Faroes—the islands themselves are the only clear winner in the epic conflict of human beings fighting for opposed value systems. Although the islands are marked by human struggle and buffeted by successive waves of peoples with different ideologies, they remain intractable, gorgeous, and harsh. I follow the foregoing discussion of the human characters Sigmundr and Þrándr with an in-depth analysis of two motifs central to the narrative of the saga: difficult sea crossings to and difficult entry into the Faroes. These motifs can take varying forms, but they uniformly emphasize the Faroese landscape itself as a formidable and damaging player in this great political drama.⁴⁴ The Faroe Islands are no exception to the rule of destruction they impose; in fact, their geography intensifies this disturbing quality. Tindhólmur, the highest mountain in the Faroes, is a volcanic island boasting five

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid., 78.

44. See Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953–1974* (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2004), 9–14, for whom the historical allure of "the island" resides in the fact that it creates a cyclic narrative of conquest played out *ad infinitum*.

spiky peaks. It is clearly a victim of erosion; half of the mountain or more has been eaten away by the sea, and it stands a spectacularly unbalanced half-mountain. From one angle, Tindhólmur looks like a whole mountain; from the facing perspective, it is just a very tall cliff; from a side perspective, it is exactly half a mountain. It is an unsettling, if beautiful, landform, because destructive processes are so visibly at work in its shape. One doubts that this geological reality would be lost on any human visitor or inhabitant of the Faroes.⁴⁵ The Faroe Islands are a broken series of igneous basalt formations cut by deep fjords and crevasses, and exist in the middle of the Norwegian Sea, far from everything else. The interior of the islands mimics the irregularity of the sea. A recent visitor writes in his travelogue: “The Faroe Islands are an archipelago of 18 upthrusted hunks of igneous rock in the middle of precisely nowhere, the stretch of North Atlantic halfway between Norway and Iceland. . . . The Faroes are easily the most moodily beautiful place I have ever been. Each island is a giant slice of elaborately tiered basalt, tilted to one side and covered in green, tussocky felt.”⁴⁶ The choice of words to describe the landscape gives us a sense of precarious impermanence; the islands are “upthrusted hunks” or “giant slice[s]” of tilted basalt. Such descriptions hardly invoke the monolithic stability of more permanent-seeming mountain ranges such as the Rockies in North America. The sublimity of the Faroes, this author seems to intimate, lies in their very impossibility, their teetering on the edge of destruction, at least in a geological timeframe.

The sloping highlands, the fractured rocky landscape with its chasms and crevasses so manifestly dangerous for man and beast, and the monstrous and changeable ocean, which surges straight through the center and around the periphery of the landforms—all of these make human identification with this land difficult. The Faroese landscape mirrors its seascape in its brokenness, its peril, and its changeability, and it is frighteningly inadequate in terms of natural

45. A Faroese postage stamp illustrates this surreal mountain: “The cruise on ‘Maria’ 1854: Gáshólmur & Tindhólmur” by Anker Eli Petersen, issued March 26, 2004, and in the Public Domain: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Faroese_stamps_2004#media-viewer/File:Faroe_stamp_479_maria_cruise_-_tindholumur.jpg.

46. Metcalf, Steven, “Into the Mystical Unreal Reality of the Faroe Islands,” *New York Times Travel Magazine*, March 25, 2007.

resources. Yet in spite of, if not because of this, a strong sense of proud nationalism infuses the saga, even more so in the later *Sigmunds kvæði*. The landscape is in a constant state of flux and negotiation with the sea, and is supremely liminal, as are the endless shifting, clashing, and merging of its human inhabitants. Their convoluted conflict becomes increasingly difficult to track, even by saga standards, as the story progresses. One party gains ground and the other loses it, only to see the advantage reversed in the next encounter; the ebb and flow of the sea underlie this narrative. As we will see, the motif of the perilous sea voyage is regularly followed by an easy one, a difficult entry into the Faroes followed by an easy escape, or vice versa. Thus the saga's rhythms of conflict follow those of the Faroes themselves.⁴⁷

As a site of narrative, the Faroes are linked generically with both Iceland and Norway and other small island nations, yet special and unique. The resilience of the Faroes, along with their precarious position, draws attention to their power as a player in the stories taking place in their land- and seascapes. In terms of topography, human mapping, and history, it is difficult to transfigure the Faroes with human processes, although nature can work on nature in geological time as the sea carves out more and more of the islands. It seems likely the early settlers were aware of this process, and this geographical reality can have the effect of dwarfing the saga's human conflict at times. In his study of early medieval northern landscapes, Alfred K. Siewers argues that some literary descriptions of place function as "a nexus of connective energies—divine, human, and what might be called environmental—with ethical meaning." In his analysis of the Irish story *Tochmarc Étaíne*, he argues that "the otherworldly mounds in the landscape form a network of resistance to the objectifying military power of the high kingship."⁴⁸ Similarly, this Faroese archipelago of fjords, rocky passages among the eighteen islands, basalt, mountains, little or no flat land, and a punishing subarctic climate forms a multiplex network of resistance not only to political power, but also to the human making of meaning in general. It imposes a

47. For example, some of the deep-cut tidal channels that flow between individual islands change direction every six hours, much like a one-way street in a big city that responds directionally to traffic patterns; the Faroese must be unusually in tune with these natural habits of the islands in order to navigate their landscape without serious mishap.

48. Alfred K. Siewers, *Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to Early Medieval Landscape* (New York: Macmillan, 2009), 39.

higher ethic of nature onto a story of human conflict. Siewers argues for a reading of Early Irish materials in “the non-modern sense of ecoregion as story,”⁴⁹ and I advocate the same for *Færeyinga saga*. The ecocentric textuality of *Færeyinga saga*, applying the words of Siewers again, “implicates the mortality of human experience in a mix of alternate ecological temporality, regional landscape, and frameworks of multiple dialogues.”⁵⁰ Now I will turn to the natural motifs of sea crossings and difficult entry to the islands that emphasize the ebb-and-flow quality of *Færeyinga saga*.

Beyond the specific moments where Þrándr uses weather magic to halt or destroy vessels crossing to and from the Faroes, there are many other instances in the saga where characters have difficulty making the sea crossing (chs. 23, 30, 35, 44). Sometimes friends of Þrándr have difficulty on the water, although it is unclear whether Þrándr is the ultimate cause of this difficulty (e.g., ch. 48). Most of these difficulties supervene in the context of shipwreck, a common enough occurrence in a land where ships can easily become misdirected.⁵¹ Shipwrecks are, like whale beachings, a natural, economically consequential occurrence. Here again, it remains ambiguous whether Þrándr is the cause of his friends’ and kinsmen’s bad luck. After he has had some trouble controlling the behavior of his unruly and roguish kinsmen, they are conveniently shipwrecked, and then return as *draugar* to haunt him:

Nú láta þeir Sigurðr í haf ok eru tólf menn saman á skipi, ok er þat orð á at þeir ætli at halda til Íslands. Ok er þeir hafa skamma stund í hafi verit, þá rekr á storm mikinn, ok helzk veðrit nær viku. Þat vissu allir þeir er á landi vátu at þetta var þeim Sigurði í móti sem mest, ok sagði monnum óvænt hugr um þeira ferð. Ok er á leið haustit fundusk rekar af skipi þeira í Austrey. Ok er vetr kom, gerðusk aptrgöngur miklar í Gøtu ok víða í Austrey, ok sýndusk þeir opt, frændr Þrándar, ok varð monnum at þessu mikít mein: sumir fengu beinbrot eða önnur meizl. Þeir sóttu Þránd svá mjök at hann þorði hvergi einn at ganga um vetrinn. Var nú mikít orð á þessu. (ÍF 25:103–104, ch. 49)

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid., 54.

51. Animals also succumb to the treacherous tides of the Faroes; every year, scores of pilot whales are slaughtered by the inhabitants when they are drawn into the bays.

So Sigurd and the others put to sea, twelve men all told on the ship, and the word is that they intend to make for Iceland, and when they have been at sea a short while a big storm comes up, the weather holds nearly a week. Everyone on shore knew this was dead against Sigurd and the rest of them and forebodings were gloomy about their trip. And when fall had passed, jetsam was found from their ship on Eysturoy, and when winter came there were mighty hauntings at Gotu and all over on Eysturoy, and Thrand's kinsmen often showed themselves and people suffered much hurt from it, some got broken bones or other hurts. They went after Thrand so much that he did not dare go alone anywhere during the winter. There was much talk about this. (Johnston 94–95, ch. 46)

In another episode, three Norwegian brothers are picked out of the wreckage by Þrándr's thuggish kinsmen, Sigurðr, Þórðr, and Gautr. They get a taste of their own medicine when the sailors turn out to be worse thugs than they are, causing trouble throughout the district, and making matters even more complicated for the conflict-prone trio (ÍF 25:107–13, chs. 50–55; Johnston 98–104, chs. 48–53). One suspects this, too, to have been a plan of Þrándr's. Thus an alliance with nature can impose ethical norms upon the most straightforwardly evil characters in the saga.

The motif of the supernaturally impeded sea crossing is also frequently reversed. Although a character like Sigmundr or Þrándr may easily cross the ocean, the redactor intimates that this facility is not due to natural causes, but rather to luck or supernatural power. Consider, for instance, the fact that Sigmundr has a good crossing after he reluctantly agrees to convert the Faroes. Likely lurking in the saga audience's mind is this question: Is Óláfr's good magic helping him (ÍF 25:71, ch. 30; Johnston 65, ch. 29)? In another instance good weather helps Þrándr's kinsman Sigurðr escape an ordeal by hot iron (ÍF 25:96, ch. 45; Johnston 88, ch. 44). The language of the passage makes the sudden clearing of the sea passage seem like more than a coincidence. This time, however, the supernatural aid is diabolical or at least pagan, helping Sigurðr escape the consequences of his evil deeds.

Another difficulty in sea-crossing is maritime ambush: a character leaves land in an attempt to reach another island in the Faroes, but is

attacked at sea by his enemies. A spectacular ambush at sea leads to an equally spectacular fight on a cliff, and Brestir's fall off it leaves both Sigmundur and Þórir orphaned. In chapter 37 (Johnston 35), Þrándr attacks Sigmundur in a narrow island channel:

Ok nokkuru síðar um sumarit fór Sigmundur á skipi ok þeir þrír saman at landsskyldum sínum. Þeir reru í eitt þröngt sund milli eyja nokkurra. Ok er þeir kómu úr sundinu, þá sigldi þar skip á móti þeim ok átti allskammt [til] þeira. Þeir kenndu menn þessa, ok váru þar Götuskeggjar, Þrándr ok þeir tólf saman. (ÍF 25:81, ch. 37)

Somewhat later in the summer Sigmundur rowed off to collect his rents, the other two with him. They rowed through a narrow sound between some islands and when they came out of the sound a boat was sailing toward them and it was almost right on them. They recognized the men, they were the Gotu-men, Thrand and eleven with him. (Johnston 74, ch. 35)

In this surprise attack, Þrándr uses his intimate knowledge of the Faroe land- and seascape to gain a tactical advantage, while Sigmundur counters with his signature reliance on pure human strength. At this moment, when Sigmundur pushes over his enemies' boats, the author tells us his luck shifts. Perhaps Sigmundur, in his spectacular victory over his enemy against all odds, in a very tight situation, has used up the last of his luck; his might and main have run out. These motifs—a perilous sea crossing, a difficult entry into the Faroes, and the lifting of a weight too heavy for one human to bear—converge in Sigmundur's intense, condensed, emotional death. He must bear his kinsmen across a vast sound on his back, and he is too weak to secure safe entry to the islands. (These acts arguably portray Sigmundur, once more, as a sort of hybrid ship/whale/man.) He is surreptitiously buried on the seashore—a marginal place—without witnesses. We have the sense of two great powers at play, larger than any human players: a recalcitrant nature and God's civilizing process. People, no matter how strong, are ground up in the clash.

We have now seen the diversity of ways in which the saga explores the motif of the sea crossing, as pagan/natural and Christian/human forces help and hinder protagonists in their transits to and from the

islands. Now let us look at a similar process that takes place once the ships have reached the shore, or nearly so: the journey has rarely ended at this point, for protagonists and antagonists alike must contend with the rocky landscape of the Faroe Islands, scaling cliffs or negotiating rough beaches. Once the vessels have been moored, they must be protected to prevent their destruction. Finally, the motif of the difficult entry, like that of the perilous sea crossing, can be reversed, as characters escape from land with trouble. This difficulty of entry is highlighted in the various approaches to Skuvoy. Skuvoy seems to be the focus of the saga's description of fortress-like landscapes, doubtless due to its imposing topography.⁵² Skuvoy is explicitly described as a steep fortress, whose natural defenses of cliffs and raging coastline are augmented by man-made outworks in a strategic alliance between humans and landscape: "Skúfey er svá háttat, at hon er svá brøtt at þar er hit bezta vígi; er þar ein uppganga, ok svá segja þeir at eigi mun eyin sótt verða ef fyrir eru tuttugu karlar eða þrír tigur, at aldri komi svá margr til at sótt verði" (Skuvoy is so steep-sided that it makes a good fortress: there is one cliff path on it and they say that the island will never be taken if it is manned by twenty or thirty fighting men; it will not be taken, however many men attack it).⁵³ The island is by nature a martial landscape, echoing the military structures of man, yet greater than any fortification. The outworks Qzurr (Faroese: Øssur) has built on top of the island are almost an insult to the superior natural defenses of the landform. In his attack on the island, however, Sigmundr is fortunate to find few guards on Skuvoy, and his men start breaking apart the earthworks in what resembles an accelerated erosive process, an echo of the waves breaking inexorably against the land below them. But while they can destroy the works of men, the island will yet expel them. In the chase and battle that ensue, Sigmundr is trapped on the other side of a land rift. Although his exceptional strength allows him, unlike allies and pursuers, to leap across the chasm, he lands on the edge of

52. Ólafur Hálldorsson argues that the geography is transposed, the author having confused Skuvoy with Dimun (ÍF 25:xxxiv). A cursory study of photographs of these respective islands makes this seem likely, but for the sake of this study, i.e., since we are dealing with saga narrative and not a geographical or geological survey, I take the author's descriptions at face value.

53. ÍF 25:48, ch. 22; Johnston 52, ch. 22.

the sea strand and is pushed into the sea—a fate that underscores his marginality.

The fortress-like structures of the smaller islands in the Faroes can of course be used just as effectively to keep people in as keep them out, as we see when Sigmundr imprisons Þrándr on an island after Þrándr attacks him there. Sigmundr manages to escape Þrándr and his companions, smash their boats, and row away. Desperation forces Þrándr to burn a signal fire: “Þeir Þrándr brenndu vita, ok var róit til þeira, ok fóru þeir heim í Gøtu” (Thrand and his men burned a signal fire and were rowed out to, and they went home to Gotu).⁵⁴ His control of weather and the sea can do nothing for him now—he is in a natural jail. While larger islands with cliffs make a defender’s position nearly unimpregnable, when boating to smaller islands one is vulnerable. Thus the landscape itself facilitates certain kinds of violence. The saga presents the islands variously as fortresses, open plains, or jails, depending on topography and other factors, such as luck. In spite of this focus on and sensitivity to landscape, the saga’s geography is remarkably imprecise. Phrases such as *til einnar eyjar*, “to a certain island,”⁵⁵ hardly offer the detailed place-name descriptions found in many of the Icelandic sagas.

Færeyinga saga offers one of the most nuanced depictions of the difficulties and ambiguities of colonialism and conversion in Old Norse-Icelandic literature. Unlike *Færeyinga saga*, most of the kings’ sagas place the pagan/Christian divide in much more starkly biased relief.⁵⁶ Other conversion narratives do not cast an inveterate enemy of the faith at the center of the story, making his perspective seem comprehensible, and even justifiable. Every step Þrándr takes in his one-man war against Christianity and Norwegian rule makes sense from his perspective. He never makes a move that is irrational or unreasoned. “His indefatigable scheming and play-acting are comical to the point of buffoonery, yet they are effective, and their comicality does not take away from the dignity at his core,”⁵⁷ and most importantly, Þrándr is granted the dignity of a choice. The redactor, with

54. ÍF 25:80, ch. 37; Johnston 74, ch. 35.

55. ÍF 25:112, ch. 55; Johnston 103, ch. 52.

56. See Harris, “Saga as Historical Novel,” 234–35.

57. Johnston 13 (“Introduction”).

his repeated collocation of religion and taxes, shows the conflict to be as much an economic as a religious one. This is important to our understanding of these struggles as occurring in a context of colonization, with economic as well as ideological ramifications.

In the first chapter of *Færeyinga saga*, a connection with Iceland is already made explicit; Auðr djúpúðga (the Deepminded) stops in the Faroes and leaves her daughter Ólof (whose name perhaps prefigures those of the great Christian kings) on the islands before moving on to “other empty lands.”⁵⁸ This is part of the saga’s selective interpretation of history—the islands are devoid of people, and no mention is made of signs of habitation by Irish monks known to have occupied the islands before Norwegian settlement. This seems noteworthy, since the sagas of the settlement of Iceland generally take pains to mention Christian monks who inhabited the land previously. Auðr makes a lasting impression on the Faroes, preparing them for colonization at the end of the saga by Christianity. Margaret Clunies Ross argues that the religious objects left behind by the Irish monks who lived in both Iceland and the Faroes—and I would add by extension Auðr’s influence on the landscape of the Faroes—changed the landscape’s meaning in the eyes of the Norsemen: “[T]hese religious objects were probably also thought of as imbued with spiritual force, so that, although Iceland did not become Christian again for over one hundred years, the land remained subject to their powers, and there was a sense in which the territory of Iceland itself remained Christian even though its human inhabitants for the most part did not.”⁵⁹

If Christianity and Icelandic connections are part of the fabric of the Faroes’ history from the very beginning, so too is Norway. The settlers originated there, and the author takes care to mention that the islands were considered to be held “in fief” from Haraldr gráfeldr (Grycloak) (ÍF 25:3, ch. 1; Johnston 19, ch. 1). Moreover, both protagonists journey to Norway to prove their worth early in their careers. But although Iceland and Norway are influences, as are the traces of Christianity left in the Faroes, they are not the land itself, which has a tendency to ultimately resist any human meaning-making. It is, if anything, fickle and elemental, allying itself with one side or the other

58. ÍF 25:3, ch. 1; Johnston 19, ch. 1.

59. Clunies Ross, “Land-Taking and Text-Making,” 174.

as long as luck holds, but just as quickly destroying either. Moreover, in contrast to the landbound stability and fixed identity of Norway as “Motherland,” the western islands are different, paradoxically both exile and original, bearers of the original sin as well as the original power of paganism. Each island in the West Atlantic becomes a parable of the other, and so Iceland reiterates the history of the Faroes, Orkney, the Isle of Man, and England. Each becomes one instance in the repeated pattern of imperial colonization, as the Scandinavian kings, constrained by the Arctic Circle to the north and the great medieval states to the south, expand ever eastward and westward.

Færeyinga saga, with its incremental repetition of certain motifs such as sea voyages in storms, or the three men with a hand in Sigmundur’s father’s death, was structurally well suited for reinterpretation as a ballad. The vital tradition of Faroese balladry has produced many different versions of the stories first recorded in *Færeyinga saga*. A study of these ballads points to the same vexed issues of transmission and cultural perspective as in the saga, but the direction is arguably reversed—from Iceland back to the Faroes. In the Faroese ballads about Sigmundur’s efforts, we find the series of incrementally repeated motifs gracefully transferred from one medium to another, regardless of time and place or political agenda. They are used to different effect, but the tensions they give voice to remain constant. Although Stephen Mitchell notes that in some cases “we can be confident that the Faroese ballad, although not collected until the 19th century, antedated all published versions of the Old Norse text,” this is not the case here.⁶⁰ *Sigmunds kvæði eldra* follows the action of the saga too closely to be a different form of the story entirely. So in *Sigmunds kvæði* we have the highly oral byproduct of a literary text, a Faroese reworking of an Icelandic cultural document, instead of an Icelandic reworking of a product of Faroese culture. In the case of this later reshaping of this story, the ballad of Sigmundur (now in modern orthography) is motivated by direct, not oblique, nationalism; yet, perhaps due to the necessarily simplifying process of ballad-making, the moral issues become more black and white—pro Christianity via Norway, and contra paganism in the Faroes.

60. Stephen A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 148.

A conflict of wills expressed through the landscape is not uncommon in European balladry, but this instance is special in that it documents the ways in which a Faroese reader of the medieval text seized upon its motifs of the dangers of nature as a means of translating it into ballad form.⁶¹ The two genres speak the same language of incremental repetition and pathetic fallacy. In the saga the motif of the difficult landscape is an intermittent if dominant sign of power. In the ballads, however, it becomes the focus, providing an example of the processes of transposing a literary narrative into ballad form. The ballad maker fixates on land- and seascapes in order to reduce the narrative to its bare essentials while maintaining, or even enhancing, its dramatic effect. He is also composing this version for the entertainment of his countrymen, who know the land- and seascape of the Faroes intimately, and uses these motifs to heighten their connection with the story.

The ballad maker retains the theme of arduously achieved control over the landscape, the motif of weather magic, and the ideal of human heroism in the face of the perilous natural world. In this passage, Sigmundur struggles to land while malevolent natural/magical power pushes against the boat:

Sjógvurin brýtur streyma strítt,
einki aktar Sigmund[ur] slíkt.
Sjógvurin brýtur sum boðafles,
“Haldum beint á Mjóvanes!”
Sjógvurin gerst nú gulur, nú blá,
sandurin uppi á tilju lá.
Tekur at rúka sandur og sjógvur:
“Nú er Tróndur vorðin óður.”
Náttina eina, dagarnar tveir,
Sigmundur úti fyri Gøtu lá.
Tó ið vær kostum lív og lund,
vær náum ei á Gøtu sund.
Tó ið vær kostum lív og and,

61. For a general study of natural elements used to dramatic effect in balladry, see Edith Randam Rogers, *The Perilous Hunt* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1980).

náum vit ei á Gøtu sand.
 Vær náum ei á Gøtu sand,
 Tróndur ristir mót os gand.⁶² (couplets lines 17–24)

The breaking waves, the strong currents / Sigmund never let such things deter him. / The breaking waves crashing so fierce, / “Keep the course for Mjóvanes!” / The sea suddenly turned yellow, then blue, / and swept sand across the ship’s deck. / A furious blast of sand and sea: / “Now Þrándr’s anger is roused.” / One night and two days, / Sigmund weathered the storm, unable to advance. / “This could end up costing us body and soul. / Never shall we reach Gøta strand. / We shall never reach Gøta strand. / Þrándr is using sorcery against us.”

The incremental repetition of the sea-wave motif lends a sense of menace and foreboding to the ship-launching prior to the sea voyages to the Faroes; in the first instance, we know it is a choppy sea because the waves break as they would on a reef on the sandy beach in Norway. As the ship pushes off from shore, the waves become more menacing as they reappear in the next few stanzas, turning from blue to yellow to black, making it clear that this storm is the result of sorcery. The water becomes so agitated that sand from the ocean floor weighs down the vessel. These events may terrify, but the heroic men on board hold their course, pushing through the rough weather in spite of the malicious enchantment. Soon, the waves break violently in the middle of the ocean—Sigmundr had never seen anything like it, we are told. When the sand begins to mix in equal parts with the ocean, clearly something is seriously amiss—the very fundament of the ocean has been aroused to anger by Þrándr’s magic. When he notes the churning sand and sea, and especially the steaming water, Sigmundr declares in a litotes: “Now Þrándr is angry with us.” The understated magic of the saga has been discarded in favor of a monstrous, unnaturally churning ocean. The ballad maker’s exaggeration of the supernatural would likely appeal to the ballad’s local audience, all of whom would

62. I cite the Version A text of “Sigmunds kvæði eldra,” also known as F22, A, from *Føroya Kvæði: Corpus Carminum Færoensium a Sven Grundtvig et J. Bloch Comparatum*, ed. N. Djurhuus and C. Matras, 8 vols. (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1941–2003), 1:453–55.

be used to this sort of struggle against the elements in their everyday lives in the harsh Faroes.

Later in the ballad, Sigmundur encounters another magical storm, and his ship's deck buckles like a hoop from the strain of trying to land while Þrándr's magic pushes the vessel away. The power of this motif is yet again enhanced vis-à-vis the saga, but gone are the mystery and ambiguity. The landscape is even more supernatural and spectacular in the ballad than in the saga, but the menace is only one-way: Þrándr is a pagan sorcerer and his magic is destructive—end of story. The double-edged nature of Þrándr's relationship to nature so carefully depicted in the saga is nowhere evident.

The ballad maker's highlighting of the environmental elements of the narrative can be viewed as a literary-critical reading of another text. He underscores the power of the water as a supernaturally dangerous force, and amplifies other natural elements, repeating them incrementally such that they gain in power and force as the ballad develops. In conjunction with the perilous supernatural sea crossing is the motif of the deadly rocks, a balladic reduction of the saga's theme of difficult entry. It is repeated many times in both saga and ballad, further emphasizing the natural menace of the Faroes. The narrow yet amenable beach is contrasted with the rocky danger nearby. In the ballad, the hero's difficult ascent to the island is also amplified, as the power and danger of the great cliffs on the island's shore are emphasized:

Sigmundur tekur sín kaðal í hond,
 búgyið spjótið rennir á land.
 Hann skeyt upp í grønan vall,
 oddurin niður í grótið gall.
 Tríati favnar var björgið hátt,
 Sigmundur lesti seg við ein tátt.
 Á gøtuni lógu garpar tveir,
 bráðan bana fingur teir. (couplets 47–50)

Sigmund takes his rope in hand / and casts a ready spear toward land. / It shot up to the grassy cliff, / and its point lodged into the rock. / The cliff was thirty fathoms high, / Sigmund drew himself up along the line. / On the path there were two men, / they both quickly met their deaths.

Sigmundur, in keeping with his actions in the saga, fights nature with his might and main, but the meaning of this encounter has shifted significantly. His death-defying scaling of the cliffs is classic swashbuckling, and we urge him upwards, admiring his human ingenuity. The cliffs have lost a little of their menacing alterity and have just become another obstacle to be conquered. This motif of the rocky shore as a place of death reaches its fullest development in the most powerful moment of the ballad, when Sigmundur kills his opponent Øssur. Before Øssur dies, he and Sigmundur are somewhat reconciled, and their burial agreement amplifies the emotional content of the narrative, creating a truly moving story of nobility and fate. In a typical balladic adaptation, which simplifies while maintaining the narrative's emotional core and its ability to move its audience, Øssur asks Sigmundur, his killer, to bury him near the seashore with his feet facing the ocean so he can "see" the waves crashing against his homeland from his grave (line 67): "Tað var Øssurs síðsta orð: / 'Høvdið skal venda mót Grønuskor'" (Øssur's last words were: "My head should point toward Grønaskor"). In the saga narrative, Øssur is not buried at all; this section appears to be a balladic addition intended to lead the audience to the emotional core of the narrative, as the emphasis on the dying man's deep appreciation of the wild land- and seascape of the Faroes invokes the listeners' patriotic pride in their homeland; his last words are an encomium of the beauty of his country. Again, his words mark the landscape as both beloved and murderous; both men end up dead on the rocks, Øssur because he is a part of the landscape and loves it, Sigmundur because he is fated to perish on his mission.

The menace and beauty of the Faroese landscape come even more to the fore in the distillation inherent in the process of ballad-making. The political message of the saga—the island's ambiguous political history—is lost as the ballad maker reduces the work to its emotional core: a supernatural tale of heroism, of good versus evil. We can see this clearly in the way the ballad begins with an invocation of King Óláfr as the catalyst of the story (lines 7–8): "Ólavur kongur kristnum býður, / Gud og milda[r] miskunnstíðir" (King Óláfr offers Christians / God and gentle times of mercy).

Thus the beginning of the ballad narrative is framed within a Christianizing context, leaving little room for sympathizers with Faroese independence such as is traceable in the saga. Musically, the

ballad's major modality in lilting, positive-sounding major thirds and fourths creates one of the brightest chords of all and a comfortably resolving perfect cadence that terminates each stanza—musical elements that will place the ballad unambiguously in the service of nationalistic and nationwide celebration. The outcome of the conflict is thus known and prefigured in the melody itself. This is not a song of tragic loss and hard gain, but a cheerful tune for performance. In fact, since Faroese ballads are and were performed at times of celebration and holidays, it was likely performed, among other times, on the festival day of the other great Christianizing Óláfr, who appears at the end of the saga and arguably lies figurally behind his namesake in *Sigmunds kvæði*.

That saint Óláfr is the patron saint of the Faroes is significant in this context. If we trust the evidence of the ballad, the modern Faroese seem to fundamentally identify with and claim as theirs the stormy imperialism of the Norwegians. The past is past, and complex issues of colonialism, religion, and national identity versus regionalism have lost their poignancy, making it easier for the ballad maker to simplify the conflict as a strictly religious one. However, the ballad maker retains the saga's uncontrollable landscape, its weather magic, and its human heroism in the face of a beautiful yet malevolent nature.

This brief discussion of two versions of the story of the Norwegian conversion and political annexing of the Faroes has pointed out the importance of natural imagery in the furthering of the narrative. The saga and the ballad are similar accounts with a few major differences. One is an orally inspired, yet highly literate, heroic history, compiled and written down by a man from a country with a parallel history—another “fishing place” on the margins of Scandinavian culture; it is a sustained narrative of a perilous landscape, with an intimate, albeit inaccurate, portrait of the geography of the islands, themselves portrayed as an almost impregnable fortress. The other is a literarily-inspired oral creation, which after having been “frozen” by the ballad collectors, becomes literary again, only to be recreated once more orally in performance by the Faroese. This ballad expresses more than an oblique Icelandic interest in a “somewhere else” that is “like us” as in *Færeyinga saga*—it is a nationalistic account of the foundational history of “our land.” Due in part to the

simplifying process of ballad production and in part to the passage of time, the depiction of Þrándr as a villain and sorcerer retains no trace of pride in independent islands with a pagan past, as we find in the saga. The one aspect of the story that remains constant is the sense of awe and wonder at the force of the natural onslaught of water and waves.

As a postscript, as well as a micro-study of modern Faroese medievalism, I conclude with a brief discussion of a millennial-anniversary stamp produced by the Faroe post office. Its iconography, although ostensibly celebrating the islands' dual pagan and Christian heritage, betrays in its use of color and light the same ambiguity about a pagan past and a Christian present that we find in the saga. Þrándr stands on a rock as the waves he has summoned crash around him.⁶³ His profile is primitive, perhaps even a bit Neanderthal-like, and he holds Thor's hammer in the air as a prophylactic against the Christian magic coming from the sea, symbolized by ships with masts in the shape of crosses being pushed forward by streaming rays of light emanating from a hopeful dawning sun. Þrándr, in contrast to the brilliance of the seascape, is a dark figure standing on dark rocks—surrounded by brilliant waves that crash about him as they move in from the Norwegian ships—he is an icon of a dimly-remembered, benighted heathenism. In fact, his gesture of defiance could also be seen in his shielding his eyes to avoid being blinded (or to avoid “seeing the light,” as it were); perhaps this is the artist's intention, as Þrándr, according to the saga, goes blind toward the end of his life, and this blindness seems intended as another sign of his spiritual perdition.

His land, the islands of the Faroes that the stamp ostensibly celebrates, is draped in darkness; the nature he inhabits looks chaotic and violent whereas the Christians' looks relatively controlled and brilliant. Out of some sense of ecumenism, however (and perhaps because neo-paganism is one of Europe's fastest-growing religions), the artist depicts the cross on the upper right corner of the stamp and the modern symbol of Odin's cross on the left-hand corner, as if celebrating both religions of the islands. But even the orientation

63. The stamp is first in a series dedicated to Christianity in the Faroes by Anker Eli Petersen, issued by the Postverk Føroya on February 21, 2000, and viewable in color in the Public Domain: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f9/Faroe_stamp_36Qarrival_of_christianity.jpg

of these symbols gives away the artist's—and the post-office officials'—inclinations, as the sinister religion is on the left side, and the "right" one is, of course, on the right. The rectangular stamp is divided by a diagonal line running from the top left to the bottom right, creating two equal halves—the bottom left is dark, sinister, and organically structured; the top right is bright, glorious, and geometric. One is reminded of the equation of light with God's love. Hence, in the stamp, the course of Faroese history is aligned with the course of world and salvation history. Moreover, the choice of the Odinic cross as the symbol for the surely quite syncretic religion of the Faroe Islands simplifies a complex praxis and relates it to comprehensible, and potentially risible, modern pagan practice. The Odinic cross, a circle surrounding a cross, also contains within itself the symbology of the coming, conquering religion.

Even *Prádr*'s hammer, the only part of the pagan half of the composition that pushes into the Christian section, looks like an underdeveloped cross—decidedly puny and ineffectual in the face of so many crosses and other symbols of triumphant Christianity, but also a prefiguration to be fulfilled by the advent of the true cross. The mainsails appear to be furled (as they might well be when approaching shore), but also giving the impression that the ships are being propelled by divine (Christian) power rather than (pagan) forces of nature, i.e., wind and tide. On this stamp, the natural power *Prádr* commands is at the forefront of the work of art, a symbol of the power and beauty of the Faroese landscape, while the Christian ships are "other"—newcomers with a different kind of power bolstering them. One detects, crossing behind the rays of light, a Faroese flag, which is itself a cross turned on its side, and a version of the Danish flag, the banner of the current protector of the islands. Thus the islands' distant political future is already present in an image that ostensibly provides a snapshot of an earlier cultural collision.

The artist has depicted *Prádr* and his religion as moribund, doomed, and worth losing. This is a common move in colonial narratives and image-making, and I believe it would be useful to draw some connections between the depictions of the near-extinct pagan "native" and his archetypal relative, the doomed Native American. In his study of the iconography of the Native Americans produced by white settlers and artists, Nicholas Thomas writes, "The evocation of the native Americans has a conditional quality: not 'here they

are,' but 'here is their passing.' As in E. S. Curtis's classic images of noble Indians vanishing into the mists, the landscape or their own melancholy, so also in . . . the many settler-colonial representations of 'The Last of the . . .' this fading to absence is determined by the presence of another figure, a white protagonist who is in some cases a settler, in others a writer able to record the truth of an extinguished culture."⁶⁴ This same powerful iconography applies in some ways to this image on the Faroe stamp, and, I would argue, to the ballad and the saga as well. Doubtless a large number of sagas contain similar snapshots of a moribund pagan past, similar scenes of passing written from the vantage point of a future where the outcome is clear.⁶⁵

However the image of the native pagan may change throughout these three works—the saga, the ballad, and the postage stamp—the Faroese landscape remains a powerful player up to the present day; its human ally may lose his force and effectiveness, but the wild Faroe beach still remains, and the waves crash as violently as ever against its rocks. In the image on the stamp, the landscape is broken down into even more iconic chunks than in the ballad—just sea, rocks, and sand. The emotional—and ecological—core of the conflict is packed into the elements of this tiny image with tight, telegraphic intensity. The wonder of the Faroese stamp lies in the way it showcases a surprising narrative consistency from medieval saga, to modern ballad, to contemporary image—three works that testify to the persistence of the themes of the intractability and the resilience of the Faroe Islands, however else the focus on the interplay of their human inhabitants may shift.

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64. Nicholas Thomas, "The Primitivist and the Postcolonial," in *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel, and Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 178.

65. The notion of the Norse pagan as a sort of noble savage has been widely discussed. See Harris, "Saga as Historical Novel," and Lars Lönnroth, "The Noble Heathen," *Scandinavian Studies* 41 (1969): 1–29. The parallel between the white American iconography of nostalgia and the overcoming of nature and paganism by imperial religion as represented in the sagas would be a topic ripe for further study.

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