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Travelling to *Grikkland* and *Mikligarðr*: The Byzantine Empire and the Byzantines in Two Scandinavian Sagas

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The article focuses on representations of the Byzantine Empire and the Greeks in two sagas from Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*: *The Saga of Harald Sigurtharson (Hardruler)* and *The Saga of Sigurth the Crusader and His Brothers*, which provide examples of contacts between the Scandinavian and Byzantine worlds in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The author employs a quantitative analysis, exploring names, such as *Grikkland* (Greece), *Mikligarðr* (Constantinople), *Grikkjakonungr* (Emperor), *Grikk(j)ar* (Greek), and *Grikklandsha*f (Greek archipelago, Greek sea). Separating objective from legendary information, he seeks to answer the question: to what extent are the representations of the Byzantine Empire, its Emperor, and its capital in the two sagas reliable from a historical point of view?
Keywords: Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, Byzantine Empire, imagology, quantitative analysis.

As a critical exploration of "the origin and function of the characteristics of [certain] countries and peoples, as expressed textually" (Beller 7), imagology can contribute significantly to the study of life in the Middle Ages and, particularly, relations between ethnic groups in Europe and beyond. Alongside with historical, socio-linguistic, and literary-critical approaches to the study of images and auto- and hetero-stereotypes, the quantitative method, which has not been used in the humanities all that widely, can yield interesting results. These two approaches are fundamental to the present study of select representations of Byzantium and the Byzantines in two of Snorri Sturluson's sagas: *The Saga of Harald Sigurtharson (Hardruler)* and *The Saga of Sigurth the Crusader and His Brothers*.[1]

In these two sagas, representations of the Byzantine Empire are part of the narratives detailing the deeds and travels of Harald and Sigurth respectively. The sagas that make up *Heimskringla* were written in the thirteenth century, and as Lee M. Hollander remarks, the production of the whole *oeuvre* must have

[1] In Lee M. Hollander's English translation of *Heimskringla*, which is used in this article, the narrative of Sigurth the Crusader, or Sigurth the Jerusalem-farer, is part of *The Saga of the Sons of Magnús*. As stated in Hollander's Introduction, his translation follows "the manuscript 'Kringla' as edited by Bjarni Athalbjarnarson, with the variants of the other manuscripts, in three volumes (Aðalbjarnarson – Reykjavík – Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1941, 1945, 1951)" (xxv). I have chosen the title used to designate Sigurth's narrative in other translations of *Heimskringla*, such as Samulel Laing's 1844 rendition of it, but all my references, with one exception, are to Hollander's version of the original. The citation from Laing's translation is duly noted further on in the text. For Old Norse I have made use of Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla Eda. Sögur Noregs Konunga*, vol. 3. Anglicized forms of the names of historical figures, literary characters, gods, places, etc. mostly appear in quotations from the two English translations (e. g. "Miklagarth" rather than "Mikligarðr"). For the purposes of my quantitative analysis, I have made use of Old Norse place names and other words in that language. To avoid confusion, I have reained the Anglicized forms of the names of Harald, Sigurth, Olaf, and Magnus.

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been “the occupation of a lifetime” (xvii) for its author Snorri Sturluson. *Heimskringla* is considered to be “a composite, a portrait gallery of [the kings of Norway]” (Magnusson and Pálsson 14). While it is not a work of history in the modern sense, it can be described as “a series of *saga*-histories,” presenting the passage of time as “a continual flow” (Magnusson and Pálsson 14; italic in the original). Sturluson was not the first Icelander to write about the Nordic past: to produce *Heimskringla*, he drew upon the work of previous writers and even went so far as to acknowledge his debt to at least some of them; thus, he mentions the priest Ari Þorgilsson the Learned (1067 – 1148), who “first wrote history in the vernacular” (Hollander xvii). As far as honouring his sources is concerned, Sturluson was something of an innovator: as Hollander reminds us, acknowledgements of earlier texts and their authors only became part of the standard practice of serious European historians in the seventeenth century (xvii).

As already indicated, I will focus attention on the representations of Greece and the Greeks (*Grikkland, Grikklandseyjar, Grikk (j) ar, Grikkir, Grikkjum*) in the two sagas under consideration. In both of them, the multiethnic Byzantine Empire is primarily associated with Greece and the Greeks. My quantitative analysis shows that “Greece” and “Greeks” are among the most commonly used geographical and ethnic names in the sagas. In particular, they occur eight times, with “Greeks” (*Grikk (j) ar*) being the predominant name for describing the population of the Byzantine Empire. In addition, we can find related terms such as *Grikklandshaf* (the Greek archipelago, the Greek sea) and *Grikkland* (the Greek land).

In *The Saga of Harald Sigurtharson*, Sturluson portrays the Greeks in episodes dealing with Harald’s military service as the leader of the Varangian Guard of the Byzantine Emperor. Describing the campaigns led by Harald, Sturluson also presents the Greek detachment that fought alongside the Varangians. He speaks about rivalry between the Greeks and the Varangians. On one occasion, the rivalry escalates into a conflict as the two parties quarrel over their choice of night quarters during a military campaign in southern Italy and Sicily:

> Once, when they had been marching overland and were about to choose night quarters near some forest, the Varangians had arrived first at the spot where they intended to camp for the night and had chosen for their tents the places which had the best and highest location; for the land there is swampy, and when the rains come it is bad to be camped in low places. Then Gyrgir, the general of the army, arrived and when he saw where the Varangians had pitched their tents he commanded them to leave that place and camp somewhere else, saying that he wanted to pitch his tent there. (Sturluson 579)

The saga describes the Greek commander Gyrgir (Georgios) as an incompetent and ineffectual leader, who is easily swayed by Harald as the Varangian leader defends the rights and privileges of his corps. This is what Harald says to Gyrgir:

> “Whenever you are the first to arrive at night quarters, then you choose the location for camping, and then we pitch our tents somewhere else to suit ourselves. Do this now, you too, and pitch your tent where you will, in some other place. It was my impression that it was the privilege of the Varangians here in the empire of the Greek kings to be free and independent of everyone in all respects, owing service only to the king and the queen.” (Sturluson 579-80)

Further on Harald emerges as something of a *trickster* (see Sverrir Jakobsson’s article in the present issue) as he falsifies the result of what looks like a lot-casting competition between him and Gyrgir, and makes sure that “the Varangians should have first choice in all matters under dispute” (Sturluson 580). When the army starts fighting, Harald makes sure that everyone understands that he is the better leader:

> During the summer the whole army harried [in the countryside]. Whenever the whole army was together, Harald had his men keep away from battle or, at least, stay where there was least danger, saying that he wished to avoid losing his men. But when his troop was alone, he gave himself to fighting so furiously that he would either be victorious or else die. Thus it often hap-

pened that when Harald led he won the victory whilst Gyrgir did not. The soldiers took note of this and said they would have more success if Harald alone was general of the whole army; and they reproached the commander that neither he nor his men showed any efficiency. (Sturluson 580 – 81)

Eventually the Greek and the Varangian contingents separate, and it is the troops commanded by Harald who win booty and perform deeds of prowess:

> Gyrgir then proceeded with his army of Greeks, and it became apparent then who was most effective. Harald always was victorious and won booty, but the Greeks returned to *Miklagarth*, excepting the young men who wanted to gain riches. They joined Harald and chose him as their general. He proceeded with his army west to Africa, which the Varangians call Serkland [Saracen Land], and there he increased his strength greatly. In Saracen Land he gained possession of eighty cities. Some surrendered, some he took by force. Thereupon he proceeded to Sicily. (Sturluson 581)

Varangian military professionalism is thus opposed to Greek inefficiency in matters of war. The two sagas also provide descriptions of Greek customs. Certain local practices must have aroused the curiosity of the Scandinavians as they attempted to make sense of them by relying on their own customs and previous experience. In the narrative of Sigurth the Crusader we read about certain games organized in the Hippodrome (*Paðreimr*) in the Byzantine capital of Constantinople:

> [T]he emperor made preparations for the games, and then they were played in the usual fashion; and all the games that time went better for the emperor. The empress has half the game, and their men vie with each other. The Greeks say that if the emperor wins more games in the Hippodrome than the empress, then the emperor would be victorious in his expeditions. (Sturluson 698)

Whether the games were really organized and interpreted by the Byzantines in this way is doubtful, but the description certainly reflects Nordic notions of the relationship between the ruler and war, and these ideas seem to have been applied to Byzantine contests in the Hippodrome. There are indeed sagas which testify to the organization of competitive games at the Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish rulers' courts. Besides, a battle between prominent warriors or the leaders of opposing armies could determine the outcome of a military conflict. While the Byzantine practice, described by Sturluson, does not correspond to Byzantine historical reality, its interpretation, which is part of Sigurth's narrative, must have made it comprehensible to a Scandinavian audience.

The Saga of Harald Sigurtharson provides information about Byzantine geography. It also tells about Harald's exploits in other parts of Europe. For instance, Sturluson narrates that before sailing to Byzantium, Harald spent several years in *Garðaríki* (Russia), where he and his followers were welcomed by the country's ruler King Jarizleifr (Jaroslav, Yaroslav). Together with another noble Viking, Eilífr, the son of Earl Rögnvaldr, Harald was put in command of the military contingent whose responsibility it was to defend the country (Sturluson 578). According to Sigfús Blöndal and Þenedikt S. Benedikz, this part of Harald's life story is highly exaggerated; they nevertheless admit that "Jaroslav would have been pleased enough to make use of [Harald] and, in view of his royal lineage, would give him some kind of subordinate officer's rank" (54). Irrespective of what rank Harald may have been given, he and Eilífr apparently did a fair amount of fighting in the eastern Baltic:

in phalanx taut
both chieftains fought
East-Wends, pent tight
in sorry plight;
to Poles hard driven
harsh terms were given.[2]

[2] Sturlison quotes from Þjóðólfr's poem about Harald. See Sturluson (578).

According to *Heimskringla*, Harald subsequently travels to *Grikkland* (Greece) and reaches *Mikligarðr* (Constantinople) (Sturluson 578).

Analysing the use of names, such as *Grikkland* (Greek land) and *Grikklandshaf* (Greek archipelago, Greek sea), we can say that they are used correctly in the two sagas under discussion. In particular, in presenting King Sigurth the Crusader's voyage from the Holy Land to the Byzantine capital, Sturluson demonstrates relatively accurate knowledge of the eastern Mediterranean. According to the saga, King Sigurth sails from Palestine northwards to the island of Cyprus, and after a short stay, continues to Greece:

> After that, King Sigurth returned to his ships and made ready to leave Palestine. They sailed north to the island called *Kípr* [Cyprus], and there King Sigurth remained for some time. Then he sailed to Greece and moored the whole fleet by Angel's Ness [Cape Saint Angelo] and lay there for half a month. (Sturluson 697)

The geographical name *Grikklandshaf* (Greek sea, Greek archipelago) can be found relatively frequently in the sagas. In *The Saga of Harald Sigurtharson* Sturluson narrates that shortly after joining the service of Empress Zoe, Harald was sent with ships and troops to *Grikklandshaf* (Sturluson 579). In the narrative of Sigurth the Crusader, it is noted that the king reaches Palestine, sailing through *Grikklandshaf* (the Greek sea) (Sturluson 695). These and a number of other examples suggest that in the sagas under discussion *Grikklandshaf* may refer to the Ionian Sea, the Aegean Sea and, occasionally, to larger parts of the eastern Mediterranean. All this testifies to relatively reliable and accurate geographical knowledge of the seas and islands in southern Europe and the coastal areas of western Asia.

Representations of *Mikligarðr* (Constantinople) are of paramount importance in *Heimskringla*. My quantitative analysis shows a total of 27 mentions of *Mikligarðr* in the two sagas. *Mikligarðr* is thus by far more common than *Grikkland, Grikklandseyjar, Grikk(j) ar*, *Grikkir, Grikkjum* and *Grikklandshaf*. This is borne out by *The Saga of Harald Sigurtharson*, in which a significant number of Harald's escapades take place in the capital of the Byzantine Empire. There is also another interesting detail here, which can be found in other sagas as well: travel to Constantinople is very often associated with a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and a visit to Jerusalem. This is what Sturluson tells us about Harald:

> Harald for many years took part in the campaign just described, both in Serkland [Saracen Land] and in Sicily. After that he returned to *Miklagarth* with that army and remained there for a little while before starting out for Jerusalem Land. Then he left behind him there the payment in gold for his military services for the Greek king, and so did all Varangians who had been in this expedition with him. (586)

Interestingly, Harald is represented as doing quite a lot of fighting on his way to the Holy Land (586). However, he also behaves like a proper pilgrim, once he has reached his destination:

> Then he journeyed to the Jordan River and bathed in it, as is the custom of other palmers. Harald made great gifts to our Lord's sepulchre as well as to the Holy Cross and other sacred places in Jerusalem Land. He rendered the road safe all the way to the Jordan River and killed robbers and other disturbers of the peace. (Sturluson 586 –587)

Harald next returns to *Mikligarðr* (Constantinople), and when he learns that "Magnus, the son of Olaf, ha[s] become king of Norway and also of Denmark" (Sturluson 587),[3] he is seized with a strong desire to return to the north. Complications with Empress Zoe ensue when he gives up his service for Byzantium (Sturluson 587).

Predictably, *Mikligarðr* is represented as a source of untold riches in *Heimskringla*. Sturluson speaks at some length about the wealth that Harald acquired in the course of his military campaigns most

[3] The Norwegian King Magnus Olafsson (1035–1047).

of which was sent to King Jarizleif (Jaroslav) for safe-keeping (590). Upon his arrival in *Hólmgarðr*, Harald takes all his gold into his own keeping (Sturluson 590). The amount of gold and other treasure is enormous: "altogether it was more than had ever been seen in the North in one man's property" (Sturluson 590). Sturluson provides some information about the means by which the treasure – or at any rate, some of it – was acquired:

> Harald had been in "*pólútasvarf*" [palace plundering] three times whilst in Miklagarth. It is a custom there that every time the Greek emperor dies the Varangians are permitted to have "*pólútasvarf*." Then they are free to go through all the *pólútir* of the emperor where are kept his treasures, and every one may then freely help himself to whatever he lays his hands on. (Sturluson 590)

Blöndal and Benedikz are sceptical about Sturluson's definition of "*pólútasvarf"* according to which "the Varangians simply went around [the imperial palace] and helped themselves to anything they wanted" (80). They believe that such a view of the custom may have had to do with the possibility that "the Varangians who were on guard duty when the Emperor died were allowed to take certain precious objects as mementos of the occasion" (80). It might also be possible to link Sturluson's idea of "*pólútasvarf* " to an early Italian custom of sacking the Pope's palace when the reigning Pontiff died; however, this custom was abolished as early as 904 (Blöndal and Benedikz 81). A similar custom apparently existed in Baghdad when the Caliph died or was deposed (Blöndal and Benedikz 81). It also seems logical that "the [Varangian] guards … received large Imperial disbursements on the death of any Emperor, if only to secure their loyalty to the new incumbent of the Throne" (Blöndal and Benedikz 81). All this would suggest that the Varangians either approached their Byzantine experiences in terms of other customs with which they were familiar or that they fictionalized "real" experiences in order to convey the idea of *Mikligarðr* as a fabulously rich city in which it was possible to gain enormous wealth.[4]

The image of the Byzantine capital stands out with particular vividness in the narrative of Sigurth the Crusader. *Mikligarðr* is again represented as the site of splendour and great wealth. The narrative of Sigurth the Crusader opens with a story about some Norwegian men, who have recently returned from Palestine and *Mikligarðr*; inspired by accounts of their experiences, "a great many in Norway [wish] to undertake a like journey" (Sturluson 688). As a result, an expedition is equipped by Kings Sigurth and Eystein, and it is Sigurth who eventually becomes its leader (Sturluson 688).

King Sigurth and his companions undertake a long sea voyage along the coasts of western and southern Europe, and across the Mediterranean, to the Holy Land. Having been entertained by King Balduin (Baldwin of Boulogne, King of Jerusalem, r. 1100 – 1118) and having acquired a splinter of the Holy Cross and other precious relics, Sigurth leaves for *Mikligarðr.* This is what we are told about his journey to, and arrival in, the Byzantine capital:

> When King Sigurth sailed in to Miklagarth he kept close to the shore. There, towns and castles and villages follow the shore without a break. The people on land could see all the billowing sails, nor was there any opening between them, so that it looked like an unbroken wall. All the people stood outside to behold the sailing of King Sigurth. Also Emperor Kirjalax had heard of the approach of King Sigurth, and he had the castle gate of *Miklagarth* opened which is called *Gullvarta* [Golden Gate] That gate the emperor is to ride through when he has been away for a long time from *Miklagarth* and returns victorious. (Sturluson 697-698)

Further on Sturluson informs us that the Emperor "had precious stuffs laid on all streets of the city leading from *Gullvarta* to *Laktjarnir*" (698). "*Laktjarnir"* refers to the Blachernae neighbourhood in which the Blachernae Royal Palace was situated (see Hollander 822). Sturluson does not provide a description of that palace; he only states that it is "the most splendid imperial palace" (697).

Interestingly, Sigurth instructs his companions "to ride into the city with a proud bearing and not to show any astonishment at all at the new things they might see" (Sturluson 698). This restraint may

[4] For an overview of other interpretations of "*pólútasvarf*," see Blöndal and Benedikz (81 – 86).

have been intended as a ploy to trick the Byzantine Emperor into paying the Scandinavians more for their services, although no mention is made in *Heimskringla* of Sigurth doing military service in Byzantium.

Sturluson offers a fairly detailed description of the Hippodrome (*Paðreimr*):

> A high wall surrounds a flat plain, which may be compared to a round bare *Thing*-place, with earthen banks all around at the stone wall, on which banks the spectators sit; but the games themselves are in the flat plain. There are many sorts of old events represented concerning the Asas, Volsungs, and Giukungs, in these games; and all the figures are cast in copper, or metal, with so great art that they appear to be living things; and to the people it appears as if they were really present in the games. The games themselves are so artfully and cleverly managed, that people appear to be riding in the air; and at them also are used shot-fire, and all kinds of harp-playing, singing, and music instruments.[5]

To produce the above account, Sturluson may have been influenced by the descriptions of eyewitnesses, who had visited Constantinople. Significantly, to provide an idea of the size of the Hippodrome that would be comprehensible to a Norse audience, he compares it to "a *Thing*-place," that is, the place where a Scandinavian parliamentary assemply would usually be held. Sturluson further claims that the "old events," represented in the Byzantine games, involved characters from Norse mythology, such as "the Assas" (the *Æsir*, the gods of Asgard), as well as Volsungs (ON *Völsungar*) and Giukungs (Gjukungs, ON *Gjúkungar*) from *The Saga of the Volsungs*. The quote also mentions the statues that were placed in the Hippodrome by the Emperor Constantine. As Peter Sarris explains, "Constantine decorated the Hippodrome with … statues of pagan deities, wild animals, and legendary creatures such as sphinxes" (21). The fiery spectacles, acrobatic feats, and musical performances accompanying the games in the Hippodrome are likewise duly noted. Irrespective of whether it is "accurate" or "fanciful," Sturluson's description of the Hippodrome and the activities that were reported to take place in it is an example of *cultural translation*: cultural difference is mediated through *naturalization* to Norse cultural categories (see Sturge 66).

Having observed all the wonders of *Mikligarðr*, Sigurth prepares to go back home to Norway. His parting gesture is to give all his ships to the Byzantine Emperor. The Emperor re-pays him in kind: "Emperor Kirjalax gave King Sigurth many horses and furnished him guides through all his lands" (Sturluson 698). While Sigurth chooses to take his leave and start on an overland journey back to Norway, "a great many of his men" stay behind and opt for military service with the Emperor (Sturluson 698). The Varangian adventure apparently goes on – for some of the Scandinavians at least.

As we saw, the two sagas mention specific localities in Constantinople. In addition, they represent the Byzantine capital as an extremely crowded, colourful, and rich city. Predictably, romantic and legendary motifs can be found in the representation of Constantinople, and they are above all part of its image as the site of fabulous wealth. The largely legendary custom of "*pólútasvarf"* would seem to be one of those romantic elements in *Heimskringla*. Underlying it is the belief that Constantinople offers great opportunities for enrichment through military service. On the other hand, the romantic image of the Byzantine capital reflects the considerable difference between standards of life in Scandinavia and Constantinople. Life in the European north was very hard and the luxury that characterized the lives of certain people in a cosmopolitan and commercially vibrant city such as Constantinople was unheard of in the Varangians' homeland(s).

The image of the Byzantine Emperor plays an important role in the sagas under consideration. My quantitative analysis reveals forty mentions of the ruler of Byzantium, and this includes mentions of specific emperors. This by far surpasses the number of mentions of the ethnonym "Greek" and geographical names, such as "Greek land" and "Greek sea," and even the mentions of the Byzantine capital of Constantinople. The Emperor is usually identified as "*Grikkjakonungr," "Kirjalax keisari," "Kirjalax konungr" "Kirjalax Miklagarðskeisari* (the emperor, the Greek *Konung*, Lord Caesar, the Caesar of Constantinople). He may simply be called "*Kirjalax"* (the Lord). However, a number of Byzantine rulers

[5] The quotation is from Samuel Laing's translation of *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, p. 863.

are identified by their names: *Michael Kátalactús* (Michael Katalaktes) (Sturluson 579), *Konstantínus Mónomákús* (Constantine IX Monomachus) (Sturluson 587), and *Queen Zóë* (Empress Zoe) (Sturluson 587). *The Saga of Harald Sigurtharson* also mentions a less eminent member of the Byzantine imperial family: the "beautiful young maiden Máría, [who] was the daughter of Queen Zóë's brother" (Sturluson 587). Some of Harald's trouble in Constantinople has to do with his wish to marry the girl and Empress Zoe's unwillingness to permit the match (Sturluson 587). According to the same saga, Harald is imprisoned but gets out of prison with the help of "a lady of high degree," who had been healed by "Holy King Olaf" (Sturluson 588). Having assumed command of the Varangian corps, he makes his way into the imperial palace and puts out the eyes of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine Monomachus (Sturluson 588). Needless to say, this story is purely fictitious.

Of particular interest is also the information about the genealogy of the Byzantine emperors. Sturluson presents a long list of western rulers in kinship with the Byzantine emperors that ends with the Sicilian King *Rothgeir* (Roger II), whose daughter, according to *Heimskringla*, was married to Emperor *Mánúli* (Emanuel Komnenos) (Sturluson 694). According to Sturluson, "their son was Emperor Kir-jalax [Kyr-Alexios]" (694). He was presumably the ruler of Byzantium, who provided lavish entertainment for Sigurth and his companions on their arrival in Constantinople from the Holy Land. All this is far from accurate in historical terms. The daughter of Roger II was not married to Emanuel Komnenos, and Sigurth the Crusader visited Constantinople during the reign of Alexios I Komnenos (1087 – 1118) rather than during that of Alexios II Komnenos (1180 – 1183). While Sturluson's claims about the lineage of certain Byzantine emperors (*Kirjalax keisari, Kirjalax Miklagarthskeisara*) are not based on historical fact, we may nevertheless view them as part of an attempt to place the stories that he tells in a recognizable historical context. There may be a modicum of historical truth in what he narrates but there is also a lot of fiction. For instance, Emperor Constantine IX Monomachus really acquired the crown by marrying Empress Zoe, but he died of natural causes and was not captured and blinded by Harald and his Varangians, as Sturluson claims.

The Byzantine Emperor is portrayed in the two sagas as a figure possessed of great wealth. Those, who do military service for him, acquire a lot of gold and other valuable objects. This is well illustrated by the exchange of gifts between the two contenders for the Norwegian throne, Magnus and Harald. Magnus gifts Harald's followers with valuable weapons and rich garments but Harald outdoes him in generosity and shares with him the enormous quantity of gold that he has acquired in the course of a long military career as the commander of the Varangian Guard (Sturluson 595).

On the whole, the two sagas under consideration project a generalized and largely idealized image of the Byzantine Emperor as the ruler of a fabulously rich country in the south-east. His ties to the the Varangian corps and its commanders are emphasized. In the narrative of Sigurth in particular the Emperor emerges as a generous monarch who is highly appreciative of the Varangian presence in his capital.

Interestingly, apart from approaching the multiethnic Byzantine Empire in terms of the Greek element in it, the sagas mention Bulgaria, but do not refer in any way to any particular Bulgarians, eminent or otherwise. Harald Sigurtharson is described in a skaldic poem by Þjóðólfr as "Bulgary's destroyer" (Sturluson 577), but Sturluson's translator Hollander remarks in a footnote that this is "a reference to a later exploit of Harald, not known to Snorri" (577). In any case, it would appear that Harald did some fighting in Bulgaria, although the historical context remains unclear.

Having presented the Byzantine Emperor with his ships, Sigurth has to travel to Norway by land. We are told that he "marched into Bulgaria, then through Hungary, Pannonia, Swabia, and Bavaria" (Sturluson 698). Again, no specific details are provided. We can only add that King Sigurth probably "marched" through the Bulgarian lands in the summer of 1100.

In closing, we can say that the two sagas shed light on Norse perceptions of the multiethnic Byzantine Empire, which, as already remarked, is approached through the prism of *Greekness*. They provide significant insights into representations of Byzantine imperial power and wealth as embodied in the figure of the Emperor. Accurate knowledge of certain geographical locations is displayed in the sagas. Scandinavian seafarers apparently sailed along important waterways to reach "the Greek sea" and the "Greek islands." Apart from dwelling on Constantinople at some length, the sagas speak of territories

that could be reached by way of the Byzantine capital: Palestine and the Bulgarian lands are among those. *The Saga of Harald Sigurtharson* tells about tensions between Varangians and Greeks, as is illustrated by the Gyrgir episode and King Harald's imprisonment.

The image of the Byzantine Emperor plays a major role in the sagas. We get a clearer view of the ruler(s) of Byzantium in *The Saga of Harald Sigurtharson* while the narrative of Sigurth the Crusader only conveys a vague notion of the Emperor. Both sagas, however, project a romantic image of the *Basileus* as a monarch possessed of fabulous wealth. Despite that, he is represented as having to comply with the wishes and needs of his Varangian mercenaries and, above all, with those of their commander. Such a view is obviously the product of the author's imagination and patriotic leanings and does not reflect historical or political reality.

As already pointed out, representations of the imperial capital of Constantinople are of paramount importance in the symbolic economy of the sagas. Sturluson's descriptions of the city of Constantine are rich in significant detail, which suggests that the author must have relied on the stories of numerous travellers and eyewitnesses. Some of the renditions of the city's architectural landmarks may even be described as realistic.

All that can be concluded from the evidence that the sagas provide is that despite numerous contacts and interactions between Scandinavians and Byzantines, the Eastern Roman Empire was perceived as an idealized and semi-legendary space. In the two sagas, the capital city of Constantinople synecdochically stands for the whole of the Empire. However, despite their inauthenticity, these images were to endure and shape Scandinavian perceptions of the south for the rest of the Middle Ages.

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