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Nicknames and Narratives in the Sagas*

I. Introductory – the nicknames

Prompted by the woman he desires as his consort, King Haraldr Hálfðanarson vows before his creator never to cut or comb his hair until he has brought all of Norway under his sole rule, or else to die in the attempt. Ten years later, his aim accomplished, he receives a haircut and a new name from Rognvaldr Mœrajarl:

Pá kǫlluðu þeir hann Harald lúfu, en síðan gaf Rognvaldr honum kenningarnafn ok kallaði hann Harald inn hárfagra, ok sǫgðu allir, er sá, at þat var it mesta sannnefni, því at hann hafði hár bæði mikit ok fagrt.

(*Heimskringla, Haralds saga hárfagra* ch. 23; see also ch. 4)

Hárfagri is of course one of most famous early Scandinavian nicknames – so famous that it is also attached, probably in error, to King Haraldr Sigurðarson in English and French accounts of his death at Stamford Bridge in 1066¹ – and it may well be authentic. There are, for instance, three skaldic occurrences which may be early, though none is completely secure as to text and date.² The sagas' interpretation of *lúfa*, which is otherwise unknown in

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Limitations of space prevent the inclusion of full source-references for all the nicknames mentioned, but they can be traced through Lind 1921. The difficult decision whether or not to translate nicknames has been resolved in the negative on the grounds that many are transparent, while others are untranslatable. English forms are, however, given when the context demands it, and again suggested translations can be found in Lind 1921.

¹ Including the 'D' version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*; see I 199 and II 256. G. Turville-Petre (1968, 3) suggests that the chroniclers may not be mistaken, but that Haraldr Sigurðarson may have inherited this nickname from his ancestor.

² *Hárfagri* occurs in (i) *Haraldskvæði* 1, as a v.l. to (normalised) *afar-auðga*, which latter is, however, preferable on metrical grounds; (ii) Jónunn skáldmærs *Sendibitr* 2, about which there are difficulties of dating (reviewed by Fidjestøl 1982, 180–1); and (iii) a suspect verse attributed to Þorbjörn hornklofi in *Fagrskinna A* (*Skjaldedigting* I A 21, v. 5). This last contains *lúfa* as well as *hárfagri*.

ON, as a nickname meaning ‘Shock-head’ or ‘Shaggy-head’ has, on the other hand, been challenged (e.g. by Moe 1926, esp. 134–40), and the story built around the two nicknames has the distinct ring of folk-tale or legend, which it shares with other parts of the saga.³ However, the success of the narrative does not depend on the historical authenticity of the nickname *hárfagri* or the story attached to it (and correspondingly this paper is mainly concerned with nicknames as presented within the sagas, independently of their supposed historicity or lack of it). The nickname, with its reference to fine-looking hair, adds distinction to this already outstanding king, and the explanation of its origin, curious and picturesque in itself, highlights the motif of vow and fulfilment which so successfully structures the first half of his saga, as it also does, in a less developed way, in *Fagrskinna* ch. 3. In *Egils saga*, the vow and the name *lúfa* are mentioned, but *hárfagri* is given no special prominence; this treatment of the names is suggestive of a different balance of sympathies.

The nicknames in the passage cited above are just two items from a large corpus. Over four thousand different items are listed in Lind’s *Norsk-isländska personbinamn* (1921), and on average each one was held by two different individuals (so Hødnebo 1974, 318).⁴ They range from the obvious and ordinary (*ungi*, *sterki*, *rauðr*, *nef*) to the lyrical, the whimsical and the slanderous (*eykyndill*, *haustmyrkr*, *kaldaljós*, *knarrarbringa*, *mqrnefr*, *meinfretr*). My concern throughout this paper, and particularly in part II, is less with the inventory of names in the sagas than with the use made of traditions about nicknames and their origins within narrative contexts. First, though, some explanations of terminology and other preliminaries are necessary.

The names under discussion here are additional characterising names which identify an individual more precisely than a forename alone (*Björn* or *Eyvindr*, *Hildir* or *Pórdís*) can. A name of this kind is most often referred to in ON as *kenningarnafn* (or *kenninafn*, which occurs as early as *Ynglingatal* v. 37, composed c. 900).⁵ Thus when Gilbert Foliot is introduced in *Thómass saga erkibyskups*, it is explained that Gilbert is his *eignarnafn*, and Foliot his *kenningarnafn* (translating Lat. *cognomentum*; quoted in Fritzner 1883–96,

³ For example, the idea of hair grown long and only cut when a certain feat is accomplished is paralleled in Tacitus’ account of the Chatti, who left their hair and beards unshorn until they had slain their first enemy (*Germania* ch. 31).

⁴ Other standard collections are Finnur Jónsson’s of 1907 and Kahle’s of 1910, which supplemented Finnur’s study by covering the later part of the period to 1400, and by fuller use of Norwegian and Icelandic documentary sources for the early period. Flom (1920, 352) estimated that Finnur Jónsson’s collection contains about 2800 names, Kahle’s about 1100. These two works are classified semantically, whereas Lind 1921, like Rygh 1871, is an alphabetic list.

⁵ Verse 37 is the only verse for which Claus Krag admits the possibility of a genuinely early date (1991, 166).

s.v. *kenningarnafn*).⁶ *Viðrnefni* is another alternative to *kenningarnafn*. In the *Flateyjarbók* account of Óláfr Tryggvason giving the poet Hallfreðr his celebrated nickname, the king says, “Vist ertu vandræðaskalld, en minn madr skaltu þó vera ok hafa samt vidrnefnnit” (I 326); the AM 61 fol. version refers to the nickname as both *viðrnefni* and *kenningarnafn* (*Hallfreðar saga* 1977, 45). The terms *auknefni* and *sannnefni* are also applied to additional names, and are discussed below. There is no agreed English terminology for anthroponymics, but the nearest equivalents to *kenningarnafn* are *byname* (cf. Swedish *binamn*) and *nickname*.⁷ The choice of *nickname* for the title of this paper was, I confess, governed partly by the interests of alliteration, but mainly by the fact that it is normally applied especially to those bynames which are the main topic of this paper: those which identify their bearer by reference to personal characteristics or particular incidents, rather than to relationships, places or occupations (see further below).⁸

The nickname normally supplements a forename, but in some cases it is used alone in place of the forename, and it can even oust it completely. The name *Snorri* was, according to *Eyrbyggja saga* ch. 12 and *Gísla saga* ch. 18, originally given as a nickname (first in the form *Snerrir*, then *Snorri*) to Þorgrímur Þorgrímsson when he proved a difficult child. As *Snorri goði*, he has a career of great distinction, and improves somewhat with age (*Eyrbyggja saga*, esp. ch. 65). The name was later used for descendants of *Snorri goði*, *Snorri Sturluson* among them, and for members of other families. Other names, including *Grettir* and *Skapti*, *Gellir* and *Sturla*, have a similar history. A nickname turned forename can also appear in the patronymics of offspring (e.g. *Gísli Súrsson*, or the *Krákneflingar*, collectively named from Þórður *krákunef*), in the nicknames of others (Þorbjörn *Skakkaskáld*, poet to Erlingr *skakki*), in names of places (*Gullberastaðir*, settled by Björn *gullberi*), of poems (*Gráfeldardrápa* from its dedicatee King Haraldr *gráfeldr*, *Stutfeldardrápa* from its poet Þórarinn *stutfeldr*), of weapons (*Selshefnir*, see p. 139), and even of phases in a battle (the *Orrahrið* at the battle of Stamford Bridge, named from Eysteinn ‘Moorcock’). In this way the switch of status from nicknames into forenames shown in the sagas repeats the process assumed to be already completed in an older stratum of forenames such as *Björn*, *Helgi* or *Steinn*.⁹

⁶ As Clunies Ross points out (1987, 56), *kenningarnafn* in the AM 674a, 4to text of the ON *Elucidarius* translates *agnomina*; the instances under discussion are angels’ names which refer to particular circumstances.

⁷ *Nickname* is cognate with ON *auknafn*: cf. OE *ēac* ‘also’ + *nama*. It is formed through misdivision of ME *an ekename*, cf. “Neekname or eke name: Agnomen” in the fifteenth-century *Promptorium Parvulorum*.

⁸ I do not believe it useful to treat short or hypocoristic (pet-) forms as a type of nickname (despite certain common features), and these are outside the scope of this paper.

Whereas forenames are normally bestowed at, or quite soon after, birth, this is only rarely said to be the case with nicknames. Þorbjörg *hólmasól*'s nickname evidently refers to her birth on an islet in Eyjafjarðará when her parents were moving home (*Landnámabók* p. 252); and Snorri Sturluson's son Jón *murtr* owed his nickname (which designates a kind of small trout) to his slight build in childhood (*Íslendinga saga* ch. 16). Many nicknames, on the other hand, can only have been given in adulthood, such as those referring to occupation or status, or to characteristics such as beards or baldness, and this seems to have been the normal practice. *Skalla*-Grímr, for example, got his nickname from his premature baldness at the age of twenty-five (according to *Egils saga* ch. 20). Some nicknames, such as *Brennu*-(Njáll) or (Óláfr) *helgi* were self-evidently bestowed posthumously, and others probably were, (Haraldr) *harðráði* among them (Turville-Petre 1968, 3 and *Heimskringla* III, 1951, xxxix n. 1). Another general feature is that Nordic nicknames match those of other cultures in being given more frequently to men than women (Steffensen 1966–9, 181).

The nicknames are essentially personal and non-hereditary, though there is some tendency for them to be passed on within families. Ketill *blundr*'s descendants included Þorgeirr *blundr*, *Blund*-Ketill and Þóroddr *hrisablundr* (*Landnámabók* pp. 73–4); while in the case of *Ketill hængr*, grandfather and grandson, both forename and nickname were handed down, missing one generation, as was common practice with forenames alone. With the whimsical inventiveness that often characterises nickname-giving, themes rather than actual nicknames sometimes continued down the generations. Jórunn *mannvitsbrekka*, sister of Unnr or Auðr in djúpúðga, has Ketill *inn fíflski* as a son (*Landnámabók* pp. 322–3);¹⁰ while another family went in for seafaring allusions: Steinn *mjqksiglandi*, grandson of Þoðmóðr *ór búlkarúmi*, in turn had a grandson with the forename *Hafþórr*. Of course inherited names or name-types may reflect family resemblances. The Yngling king Ingjaldr *illráði* passes on his treacherous nature, and with it his unpleasant nickname, in the feminine form, to his daughter Ása in *Ynglinga saga* chs 39–40; while according to *Landnámabók* pp. 48–9, Hallr *goðlauss* and his father Helgi (in *Sturlubók*, or Þórir, in *Hauksbók*) *goðlauss* both merited the name: “Þeir feðgar vildu ekki blóta ok trúðu á mátt sinn.”

Family tradition thus partially accounts for the frequent co-occurrence of particular nicknames with particular forenames,¹¹ but there are doubtless

⁹ It is very difficult to judge the relative likelihood of a particular name being derived from a byname or being an original forename: see, e.g., Janzén 1947, 39–57.

¹⁰ Ketill's nickname is explained in *Fornmanna sögur* I 251: “Hann var vel kristinn; því kölluðu heiðingjar hann Ketil inn fíflska”. The alternative name *inn fíflski* which is ascribed to Ketill in *Laxdæla saga* is thought to be a later effort at improving the name (*Laxdæla saga* ch. 1 and n. 5). On the meaning of *mannvitsbrekka*, see Tveitane 1977.

¹¹ See Storm 1893 and Tassin 1981, mainly on forenames.

other factors involved when such couplings as *Eysteinn glumra*, *Óláfr geirstaðaalfr*, *Porleifr spaki* and *Hálfðan hvítbeinn* are attached to more than one person. One is the attraction of a famous nickname to a forename; others are authorial or scribal confusion, and the artificial duplication of what was originally one person. The individual cases and the phenomenon in general merit further attention.¹²

Choice – the option of the community to refer to an individual by a byname or not, and the selection of a particular byname – is an important aspect of these names. Patronymics, sometimes treated as a special category within or alongside the bynames, are different in kind, for they offer virtually no scope for choice, except that the father may be referred to by his forename (as in Leifr *Eiriksson*), his forename with nickname attached (Egill *Skalla-Grímsson*), his nickname alone (Gísli *Súrsson*) or a title (Loptr *Biskupsson* – an example that comes close to being a byname). The use of a metronymic is of course another quite common alternative (e.g. Þórðr *Ingunnarson*). Names referring to other relationships can, on the other hand, be counted among the bynames. Examples are Hákon *Aðalsteinsfóstri*, Árni *konungsmágr*, or Þórarinn *Ragabróðir*. Epithets referring to place are also often reckoned as bynames, as in the names of Þrándr *í Gøtu*, Oddr *breiðfirðingr*, *Dala-Guðbrandr* or Þórolfr *Mostrarskegg*. In some cases these locative names refer to place of operations rather than place of origin: Guðleikr *gerzki* and Hrafn *Hlymreksfari* traded in Garðar and Limerick rather than coming from those places. Designations of status or occupation are a difficult category. Some, such as *konungr* or *berserkr* or *skáld*, are attached to so many people that, unless they are further qualified (as in *Kolbrúnarskáld* or *vandræðaskáld*), they seem not so much to single out an individual as to label him or her as a member of a class, and they can therefore hardly be counted as bynames. This view is supported by the co-occurrence of these titles with names that clearly are bynames, as in Porkell máni *lqsgumaðr*. Other occupational designations, however, seem to have strong affinities with descriptive bynames. *Farmaðr*, for instance, is not dissimilar to *inn víðfqrli*, and *læknir* perhaps refers to healing as an accomplishment rather than an occupation; but the line is difficult to draw.

A very large number of bynames are either descriptive or commemorative. They refer not to external circumstances such as relationships, place or occupation, but to personal features of their bearers, or else to some unique event in which they were involved. I term these *nicknames* and regard them as a sub-category of byname, although some scholars would apply *byname* only to names of this type. They may designate people by reference to

¹² I am much indebted to Kees Samplonius for bringing this phenomenon (and other points of detail) to my attention and suggesting examples and explanations.

physical features, inborn (*hávi*, *rauðskeggr*) or acquired through accident or injury (*hoggvinkinni*, *bægifótr*, *tréfótr*), to their clothing or equipment (*loð-brók*, *rauðfeldr*), or to their temperament or habitual behaviour (*spaki*, *káti*, *kumbi*, *matkrákr*), including their religious practice (*Blót-*, *ókrístni*; and see Steffensen 1966–9, 179–91). Other large groups comprise names referring to living creatures (*hundr*, *refr*, *Hænsa-*, *hængr* or, for women, *rjúpa*) or objects (*Knarrar-*, *máni* or *stong*). Some compound names combine two different characterising features of their bearers. Þórðr *Lundar-skalli* was presumably bald as well as coming from Lundr, while *Øl-kofri*, eponymous hero of the *þáttr*, brews ale and wears a hood.¹³

The corpus of Old Norse-Icelandic bynames, as even a small sample shows, presents a fascinating variety of form and meaning. It can be classified quite successfully on the basis of morphological type (e.g. weak adjectives, with or without article, or prefixed genitive nouns, see Ekbo 1947, 271–8 and Hødnebo 1974, 319); but once external form is not the sole criterion, the ground is much more unsure. There are difficulties even with the very simple categories outlined in the previous paragraph, for, even setting aside the textually doubtful or semantically obscure, the names are not necessarily transparent, especially because of the possibility of either literal or figurative usage, and of direct or ironic application.

The names referring to animals and objects are particularly elusive, since they have affinity with other categories, but it is only sometimes possible to know which. Þórir *hjqrtr* is described in Snorri's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ch. 78 as “allra manna fóthvatastr”, which presumably accounts for his nickname, while *Hafr*-Björn is said to be named from his huge flock of goats, which multiplied wonderfully with the help of a visiting buck after Björn had, in a dream, gone into partnership with a troll (*Landnámabók* pp. 330–1). Another ‘goat’ nickname, *Geitar-*, was allegedly bestowed on a Greenlander called Hallr who wandered over the glaciers and wastes of Norway sustained only by the milk of a goat he led with him.¹⁴ But other men nicknamed *goat* may have looked, sounded, or behaved like a goat, owned many goats or had an interesting adventure involving a goat. In the same way, *Skjaldar*-Björn is said to have got his nickname, which replaced his previous one of *Hella*-Björn, from arriving in Iceland in a ship well furnished with shields (*Landnámabók* p. 197); but what of Þorkell *dráttarhamarr*? Without a prose narrative to point the way we can only speculate.

Even the line between physical and temperamental features is not always

¹³ See Ekbo 1947, 279–82 and Hødnebo 1974, 319–21 for fuller typological accounts of bynames. A typology for modern Icelandic bynames, based on material which provides an interesting basis for comparison with the medieval material, is offered by Hale 1981.

¹⁴ In a treatise extracted from a version of *Elucidarius* and preserved in the seventeenth-century AM 779b, 4to, printed in Simek 1990, 588.

easy to draw. Does the nickname *munnr* refer to a big (or otherwise distinctive) mouth, or a loud mouth? King Sigurðr Haraldsson, sometimes referred to as *munnr*, is described by Snorri Sturluson as having an ugly mouth amidst otherwise good features, and as being extremely eloquent (*Haraldssona saga* ch. 21); but a modern example of *kjafur* ‘mouth, jaw, chops’ for a gross talker (Hale 1981, 400) could support a figurative interpretation in some cases. Were the many men nicknamed *hvíti* all simply fair-haired, or is there also some implication of cowardice, as there seems to be when Steinarr Qnundarson jeers at the youngest son of Egill Skalla-Grímsson, handsome and light-haired, “Rennr þú nú, Þorsteinn hvíti?” (*Egils saga* ch. 84).¹⁵ Similarly, did the skald Björn *krepphend* suffer from a crippled hand, perhaps due to Dupuytren’s contracture, or was he tight-fisted? Even where no such ambiguity exists, apparently plain descriptions may be either direct or humorously inverted. According to saga-accounts, Stúfr *inn blindi* really was blind (*Morkinskinna* p. 251); Hálfðan *svarti* black-haired (*Hálfðanar saga svarta* ch. 1) and Hákon *herðibreiðr* broad-shouldered (*Magnúss saga Erlingssonar* ch. 8). Of King Eaðvarðr Aðalráðsson of England, known as *inn góði*, Snorri simply says, “hann var svá” (*Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* ch. 75). Again, men are normally nicknamed *auðgi* with good reason, to judge from the saga-writers, who point this out surprisingly often. “Þorfinnr kaupmadr edr Þorfinnr en auðgi” is so rich that he does not know how much he owns (*Morkinskinna* p. 172), while Úlfr *inn auðgi* owns fourteen or fifteen farms until deprived of all but one by the king (*Morkinskinna* pp. 189, 193–4); there are at least two further examples (Geirr and Álfr) in *Egils saga* and two (Kolskeggr and Bersi) in *Íslendinga saga*. On the other hand, Þórðr *inn lági* was “manna hæstr” (*Heimskringla, Óláfs saga helga* ch. 135), and Þorbjörn *skrjúpr* in *Laxdæla saga* scarcely shows the feebleness to which his rare nickname refers: he is not only wealthy but also “mikill maðr . . . vexti ok rammr at afli” (ch. 11).

The distinction between nicknames which are “true” or appropriate, and those which are whimsical, ironic, perverse or downright slanderous, would certainly have been important to the bearer, and it is recognised in the lexical opposition between *sannnefni* and *auknefni/lauk(a)nafn*. The *auknefni* was frequently abusive, and if it gave offence it was punishable by lesser outlawry (see further section II, 4). William, Conqueror of England in 1066, is made to protest in *Flateyjarbók*, “eigi er ek bastadr nema at auknefni” (III, 464). Some *auknefni*, however, were simply inappropriate. The swarthy Óttarr *birtingr*’s nickname (which refers to a kind of fish) is called *auknefni* in Hulda (*Fornmanna sögur* VII 157). Similarly, the handsome Helgi Snorra-

¹⁵ Cf. “hvítan mann ok huglausan,” applied to Kjartan in *Laxdæla saga* ch. 52, and the comic testing of the braggart Björn hvíti in *Njáls saga* chs 150–2.

son, endowed with abundant, fair hair, is known as *inn hvíti* (*Fóstbræðra saga* ch. 12, *Möðruvallabók* text), and *Flateyjarbók* (II 156) adds explicitly that his *kenningarnafn* was not an *auknefni*. It was, in other words, a *sannnefni*, a realistic description, just like *hárfagri*, so labelled in the comment by Snorri quoted on p. 122 above. The idea of being true to a nickname is further discussed in section II, 3, and see Clunies Ross 1987, 58–9.

There are, as many of the above illustrations show, semantic properties which cannot be captured, and distinctions which cannot be made, by taking the nicknames in isolation, without reference to the explanations attached to them in the saga-literature; and the prose passages have more to offer besides. They can indicate, for instance, whether the name was bestowed on the basis of a particular incident or a general characteristic. It would be reasonable to surmise, for instance, that *Helgi inn magri* was naturally thin, and this may be historically correct, yet according to tradition he was so named by his dismayed parents on finding him sadly undernourished after two years' fosterage in the Hebrides (*Landnámabók* pp. 248–9). The sagas also contain much traditional material about the circumstances of nicknaming, showing especially by whom they were given and with what intent – to praise, defame or merely describe the recipient. According to *Laxdæla saga*, the twelve-year-old Óláfr *pái*, exceptionally handsome, accomplished and well-dressed, received his exotic nickname, like his forename, from his fond and admiring father Hǫskuldr (ch. 16). Without this context we might suspect malice and envy behind the name. A name like *skegglauss*, meanwhile, might have been given without particularly dire intent, but the spirit and circumstances in which Njáll is called this ensure that it becomes a spur to killings (see further section II, 4). The great majority of nicknames mentioned in the sagas go unexplained; but there are nevertheless many saga-passages which do comment on them, and from the onomastic point of view this is a valuable resource which, for instance, far surpasses the narrative sources available for the elucidation of Middle English surnames (see, e.g., Reaney 1967, 222–3; Clark 1981, 83, gives a rare twelfth-century example of an etymological anecdote).

The evidence of the sagas is an enviable resource, but a hazardous one if used uncritically. There is ample early evidence of byname-giving to be gained from runic inscriptions, skaldic verse, and place-names from the Scandinavian homelands and colonies, and from foreign chronicles (see Hødnebo 1974 and Lind 1921, *passim*), and there is no reason to doubt that the picture of name-giving habits found in the sagas reflects cultural actuality. Bynames were clearly flourishing at the time of the settlement of Iceland, and their use continued, although perhaps less vigorously, into the thirteenth century and beyond. However, this is not to say that individual names and their origins are necessarily authentic.

About particular nicknames there are quite often disagreements between sources, as in the case of the magnificent daughter of Ketill flatnefr, about whose nickname the sources disagree (*djúpúðga* or *djúpauðga* both being found, for example, in manuscripts of *Laxdæla saga* ch. 1), just as they do about her forename (*Unnr* in *Laxdæla saga*, *Auðr* in *Íslendingabók*, *Landnámabók* and elsewhere). In some instances where more than one nickname is attached to one and the same character, they may be genuine alternatives, current either simultaneously or consecutively, or they may reflect the uncertainty of the tradition. For a different reason – because of the unnatural neatness of the nicknames and the story to which they are attached – the three Swedish brothers in the *Heimskringla Óláfs saga helga* ch. 94 may be suspect: Arnviðr *blindr* (“hann var sýndr svá lítt, at varla var hann herfœrr”), Þorviðr *stami* (“hann fekk eigi mælt tveimr orðum lengra samt”), and Freyviðr *daufi* (“hann heyrði illa”). It is also possible that some nicknames are eponymous fabrications by saga-authors, or by the makers of the traditions they inherited. *Hegranes* is said in *Landnámabók* p. 233 to be named from the otherwise unknown Hávarðr *inn hegri*, but the grey heron, a familiar migrant species in Iceland, seems an equally likely eponym, and if the place-name etymology is doubtful, so too may be the nickname. The group of names with *Gufu-* as the specific presents a similar puzzle. *Gufuá*, *Gufudalr*, *Gufufjqrðr* and *Gufuskálar* in west and north-west Iceland are, according to *Egils saga* ch. 77 and the *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók* versions of *Landnámabók* (pp. 166–7), named from Ketill *gufa* Ørlygsson; the *Þórðarbók* and *Melabók* versions have *Gufi/Gufa* Ketilsson as the etymon (*Landnámabók* pp. 67–8, n. 5 and 168–9). The specific, however, looks suspiciously like the word ‘steam’, referring perhaps to a geothermal area, and it is interpreted so in Cleasby-Vigfusson 1957 (s. v. *gufa*). This in fact turns out not to be justified by the geography of the areas in question, but a different topographical explanation is to hand, for these places are hung about on warm days by distinctive layers of mist caused by evaporation from the tidal mud-flats and adjacent fields (Þórhallur Vilmundarson 1981, 92–8, who strongly prefers this explanation to derivation from a nickname or personal name).

The sagas’ explanations of nicknames may likewise be ancient and true or else fanciful re-interpretations penned by saga-writers or formed in the popular imagination at some earlier stage. The claim that Óttarr *vendilkráka* was given his name posthumously by his Danish enemies, who sent a wooden crow to the Swedes, saying their king was worth no more than it now, is thoroughly implausible (*Ynglinga saga* ch. 27 and n. 2), and the story of Þorbjörn *súrr* in *Gísla saga* looks another likely example of the “fanciful” category. In other cases it may be difficult to see which came first – nickname or narrative. Magnús *berfættir*, so named, according to Snorri, because he

and his men adopted the kilt during their time in the British Isles (*Magnúss saga berfætts* ch. 16 and n. 3), suffered a halberd-thrust through both legs above the knee in his last battle, although the death-wound was to the throat (ch. 25). Was this coincidence; is it the true origin of the king's name; or is it a neatly apt piece of guesswork about the details of the king's death?¹⁶ In other cases a more obvious and prosaic explanation of a name suggests itself than the traditional, picturesque, one. We may wonder whether Qlvir *barnakarl* was truly a tender-hearted Viking who did not relish tossing children on spear-points, as *Landnámabók* pp. 379–80 would have him, or whether he was simply named from his many children, in much the same way that Gunnhildr, queen of Eiríkr blóðøx, is referred to as *konungamóðir* (Kahle 1910, 187, Ekbo 1947, 280).¹⁷

In general, therefore, a balance between trust and scepticism is necessary if saga-accounts are to be used for onomastic studies. They are an immensely rich source of information about general name-giving practices in medieval Scandinavia, and much of the detail may be correct, but it can rarely be checked and its reliability is far from guaranteed.

So far the focus has been on the nicknames themselves, and on the light thrown on their meanings and intent by prose narratives. But from here on attention is turned to the narratives themselves, and the plausibility or implausibility of the saga-writers' claims about particular nicknames will be irrelevant. It is sufficient that the saga-writers are taking an actual cultural practice and using it to their own ends – whether these are to preserve traditions about the past, to edify their audience, or produce an amusing tale – in much the same way that the sagas' accounts of premonitory dreams, impromptu verses, and clever quips at the point of death probably reflect genuine beliefs and practices, polished and deployed for literary ends. The following discussion moves from the more straightforward and mundane uses of nicknames in sagas to the more complex and dynamic.

II. Nicknames within saga narratives

1. *Nicknames used without direct comment*

The nickname combines the characteristics of the appellative and the personal name.¹⁸ As an appellative, it has semantic value which makes appeal to the reader's imagination and memory. Characters with nicknames are, other

¹⁶ I am grateful to James Knirk for raising this point.

¹⁷ Compare also, perhaps, the English surname *Barnfather* and variants. Three sons of Qlvir are named in *Grettis saga*, and his descendants were many and distinguished (ch. 3 and p. 7 n. 3).

¹⁸ This ambiguous status of bynames partly accounts for the dilemma of saga-translators and others, whether to translate them or not. The authors of late twelfth-century accounts of Nordic

things being equal, more memorable than those without, and genealogical passages are enlivened by them. On the other hand, as a personal name, the nickname's dominant function may be to denote and identify, and its original connotations (including bad ones) may fade. As already seen, a nickname can be passed on to a descendant whom it may or may not suit, and it can replace an individual's forename. It is therefore not surprising that the great majority of them – even when attached to prominent individuals such as Ketill *hængr*, Einarr *þambarskelfir* or Þórðr *kakali* – are used by saga-writers in an purely referential way, without any direct comment at all (on *þambarskelfir*, see Saltnessand 1968).

Saga-characters who possess a nickname may be referred to by their forename, nickname or both. The use of the nickname in isolation is rare: Egill Skalla-Grímsson, exulting in a *lausavísa* over his killing of a son of his enemy Eiríkr blóðøx, uses the damning nickname alone (*Egils saga* ch. 57 – the chapter in which he also sets up a *níðstǫng* against Eiríkr and Gunnhildr). An atmosphere of prophetic curse similarly attends Ósvífr Helgason's retort to Auðun festargarmr, whom he addresses twice in a single sentence by his nickname alone (once as *festarhundr*, once as *festargarmr*, *Laxdæla saga* ch. 51). Outside verse quotations and direct speech, however, the use of nicknames alone tends to be much blander, and virtually limited to those that are in process of turning into forenames. The most usual pattern is for the full form of the name – forename and nickname – to be used when a character is first introduced, or reintroduced after an absence, or when disambiguation is needed (as illustrated in the next paragraph), but for the forename alone to be used elsewhere. Thus the full form, with nickname, can be regarded as the marked form, and sometimes, especially when placed in the mouths of the protagonists in direct or indirect speech, it is expressive of mood and tone in much the same way that the nickname alone can be. When Sigurðr Jórsalafari, now mentally ill, calls for meat on a Friday, the diminutive Áslákr hani is the only one of his liegemen who dares break the uneasy silence. The king parries his tactful objections with, "Hvat villdir þv Aslacr hani eða hvat syniz þer . . . En þott sva se Aslacr hani . . ." The insistent use of the nickname gives his utterance a distinctly menacing tone. Later, his spirits and sanity temporarily restored, the king addresses Áslákr on the subject of reward for his courage, omitting the nickname, and gives him three farms (*Morkinskinna* pp. 393–4). Here it seems to be the fact that

history illustrate the flexible response. The contents list of Theodoricus' *Historia*, for instance, contains "De Haraldo pulchre-comato" (who is later also "benecomatus") on the one hand, but "De reditu Haraldi hardrad(e)r/hardraðr de Graecia" (p. 5) on the other. *Historia Norvegiæ* offers a similar blend of vernacular and Latin versions of names. On the semantics of names, see Pamp 1979.

the nickname is used that is significant, rather than its specific associations (in this case with the cock). Similarly, in *Egils saga* (chs 3 and 6), Haraldr lúfa, later hárfagri, is addressed as *Haraldr lúfa* only by his enemy Kveldúlfr. The full name of Óláfr Haraldsson, posthumously (*inn*) *helgi*, but *inn digri* in his lifetime, is also used as a marked term with stronger resonance than the *Óláfr* or *Óláfr konungr* which is normal throughout the *Heimskringla* saga about him. It is frequently placed in the mouths of hostile parties. The Upland king Hrærekr, making an attempt on Óláfr's life, jibes, "Flýr þú nú, Óláfr digri, fyrir mér blindum" (*Óláfs saga helga* ch. 84), while Sigríðr Skjálgsdóttir, hot for revenge for her son Ásbjörn Selsbani, wants Þórir hundr to put a spear through the breast of *Óláfr digri* (ch. 123). In the case of *digri* the particular associations of the name also come into play. It may derive from Óláfr's robust build (*Óláfs saga helga* ch. 3), and it may be partially hereditary, echoing the nickname *digrbeinn* or *digri* held by the king's ancestor Óláfr Geirstaðaálfr Guðrøðarson (see Fritzner 1883–96, s.v. *digr*); but its other main connotation, of arrogance, is exploited by his Swedish enemies. When Ásgautr ármaðr receives an unfavourable reply to the message he has just delivered from Óláfr King of the Swedes, he says, "Eigi er undarligt, at þú sér kallaðr Óláfr digri. Allstórliga svarar þú orðsending slíks hqfðingja" (ch. 59). The form *Óláfr digri* or *inn digri maðr* continues to be used in the following chapters by all those connected with the Swedish court, in deference to the Swedish king's loathing of any mention of his namesake.

One reason that nicknames are given is to obviate confusion between namesakes (Hale 1981, 397, Holland 1990, 256–7), and they often retain this function in saga narratives. *Ungi* or *inn yngri* is the most obvious case, as in *Eilífr ungi*, son of *Eilífr* (*Landnámabók* p. 356), but other nicknames too serve to distinguish members of the same family or community. The twin sons of Haraldr hárfagri, unimaginatively given the joint name of *Hálfðan*, are differentiated by their nicknames, *hvíti* and *svarti* (*Haralds saga hárfagra* ch. 17). The two brothers who work for Óláfr pái in *Laxdæla saga* are both *Án*, again 'White' and 'Black', until *Án svart*i acquires the more interesting nickname of *hrismagi* (see below).¹⁹ In the thirteenth century, *Dansa-Bergr* and *Tafl-Bergr* were members of Snorri Sturluson's household at the same time (*Íslendinga saga* ch. 46), and two Norwegian seamen, *Bárðr garðar-brjótr* and *Bárðr trébót*, were given hospitality by Þórðr and Sturla Sigvatsson (ch. 58). In literature as in life, such nicknames can provide welcome disambiguation where namesakes rub shoulders. A passage such as Snorri's *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ch. 15, for instance, in which five Haralds are

¹⁹ The two *Hálfðans* and two *Áns* are, surprisingly, the only pairs of homonymous siblings out of fourteen cited by Tassin (1981, 63–4, n. 1) to be distinguished by nicknames.

mentioned within a single page, would be hopelessly confusing without the nicknames *gráfeldr*, *grenski*, *Gull-* and *hárfagri* and the title (*Dana*)*konungr*.

2. Anecdotes of nickname origins

I turn now to the passages where nicknames are not merely used in passing but are a focus of attention. The sagas contain many accounts of the origins of nicknames, especially those which, according to tradition, derive from specific incidents. The best source for these is *Landnámabók*. An example taken more or less at random is the note about Þúríðr *sundafyllir*: “Hon var því kǫlluð sundafyllir, at hon seiddi til þess í hallæri í Hálogaland, at hvert sund var fullt af fiskum” (p. 186). The compiler’s motivation here seems to lie between antiquarian duty, and delight in curious anecdote. He knows the name, and there is either a traditional explanation attached to it, or he conjectures one. Catch-phrases such as “því var hann kallaðr N.” (e.g. Eyvindr *austmaðr*) or “síðan var hann N. kallaðr” (e.g. *Hafr*-Björn) very commonly link incident and name in these passages, although it is merely implicit in some, as when we read that: “Þorgeirr höggvinkinni var hirðmaðr Hákonar konungs Aðalsteinsfóstra: hann fekk á Fitjum kinnarsár ok orð gott” (*Landnámabók* p. 66).²⁰

In some cases the emphasis is not so much on the bearer of the nickname as on the situation which gave rise to it. Þorbjörn *smjqr* was not important in himself, but what he said about Iceland was, and his nickname ‘Butter’ neatly caps the accounts of the new land that the first voyagers took back to the Scandinavian homelands. Flóki Vilgerðarson (himself dubbed *Hrafna-Flóki* because of his Noah-like deployment of ravens) has only bad to say of the land, and names it *Ísland*; Herjólfur tells of the good and the bad; but Þórólfr sees it as a promised land, reporting that butter drips from every blade of grass (*Landnámabók* pp. 38–9).

In *Landnámabók*, with its encyclopædic though summary coverage of the settlement, the brief tales which explain nickname origins are very much like the numerous anecdotes accounting for place-names in the work: they are entertaining, but their effect is rather remote and static. The bearers of the nicknames are distant in time from compiler and audience, and only fleetingly glimpsed. This is also true of some similar passages in the more elaborate narratives of the *Íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*. If the person in question has only a minor rôle, and/or if, as is often the case, the nickname commemorates a single and rather trivial incident, the anecdote may again be quaintly interesting in itself, but not significant in any broader context.

²⁰ There is some confusion over this character and his name in the sources: see *Landnámabók* p. 284, n. 2.

Snorri Sturluson provides a good, if gruesome, example of this. In *Haralds saga hárfagra* ch. 22 he records the death of the Scottish jarl Melbrigði *tqnn* at the hands of Sigurðr jarl of Orkney. Sigurðr ties his enemy's head to his saddle-strap, but as he rides along a tooth jutting out from the head pierces his leg; the wound swells and causes his death. The detail about the tooth (which looks like a folk anecdote arising from the nickname) comes close to being gratuitous, but is not so since it accounts for the death of a jarl. Snorri also gives an anecdotal explanation of Haraldr *gráfeldr*'s nickname, not just that he habitually wore a cloak of grey skin but that he one day accepted one as a gift from an Icelandic trader, so setting a fashion (which is followed, incidentally, by Hrútr Herjólfsson in *Laxdæla saga* ch. 37) and stimulating demand hugely (*Haralds saga gráfeldar* ch. 7). In general, though, Snorri has little time in *Heimskringla* for trivial characters or incidents, and reserves explanations for the nicknames of kings and other prominent characters, most of which refer to physical or moral qualities (see the following section). The simple, paratactic nature of *Ynglinga saga* might have lent itself to nickname explanations in the manner of *Landnámabók*, but these are seldom found.

The brevity of the passages so far examined is typical of the explanations of nicknames which derive from particular incidents, although they can be more elaborate. *Grettis saga* ch. 2, for instance, offers quite a full account of Qnundr Ófeigsson's part in the battle of Hafrsfjörðr, with the injury which earned him a wooden leg and the nickname *tréfótr* as one of its salient points. Similarly, the nickname 'Hell-skin' or 'Swarthy-skin' gives the writer of *Geirmundar þáttur heljarskins* a good cue for a tale (*Sturlunga saga* I 5–7; cf. *Landnámabók* pp. 150–2).

The incidents so far mentioned are generally set in a kind of secondary past, taking place before the main action of the prose, but when such nickname-giving takes place within the principal time-scale of the saga, hence in the protagonists' own present, more interesting narrative capital is provided for the writer. When Án svarti in *Laxdæla saga* ch. 48 dreams that a monstrous woman tears out his entrails and replaces them by brushwood, Kjartan Óláfsson and his companions think it a huge joke and propose a new nickname of *hrísmagi*. The dream, however, has a serious function in presaging death in the next chapter – for Kjartan. The sorely wounded Án, after a second, complementary, dream, comes to life (to the great alarm of onlookers who thought him dead), makes a complete recovery and is thereafter known by his new nickname, 'Brushwood-belly'. The tale of how Þorsteinn *flqskubak* received his nickname after a leather drinking flask slung round his back saved him from an unfriendly axe has a similarly bizarre mix of menace and homeliness about it (*Grettis saga* ch. 11).

3. Character-describing nicknames within narratives

Many early Nordic nicknames refer to character or habitual behaviour and hence, as in other cultures, function partly to establish social norms, congratulating and encouraging those who conform or ridiculing and censuring those who do not (Holland 1990, 260). Nicknames of this sort are often more transparent in meaning than the incident-derived ones, but they occasionally receive explicit explanation or elaboration in the sagas. Hálfðan *inn mildi ok inn matarilli*, Snorri remarks, paid his men in gold coin as freely as other kings in silver coin; but he was mean with food (*Ynglinga saga* ch. 47).

The interest of such nicknames in the sagas does not, however, lie principally in their origins, but in the way they highlight a particular personal trait. In *Íslendinga saga* ch. 118, for example, the monk Magnús *tqlusveinn*, “ekki merkr, en miðlungi réttorðr”, simply behaves in accordance with his nickname and brief description. Minor characters like this are essentially straightforward, but they can form part of more complex structures within a saga. *Víga-Hrappr* and Þórhalla *málga* in *Laxdæla saga* are unimportant in themselves, but the characteristics epitomised by their nicknames, respectively violence and malicious gossip, are essential to the development of the plot. Another character who lives up to his nickname is Björn *eitrkveisa* (probably ‘Poison-boil’), who is briefly glimpsed in the opening pages of *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* in *Heimskringla*, and in his case the nickname also contributes to the manipulation of audience sympathies. He drives out Queen Ástriðr, who seeks refuge at his farm as she flees from the agents of Gunnhildr with her infant son Óláfr, and he collaborates with her enemies (chs 3–4). Björn’s venomous nickname ensures the worst possible view of his behaviour, and, along with other narrative devices, tips sympathies emphatically onto the side of Ástriðr and Óláfr. Traditional nicknames were, however, not always so convenient: the loyal foster-father of Ástriðr, who also appears in these opening chapters, was the unattractively-named Þórólfr *Lúsarskegg*.

The idea of being true to a nickname, or living up to it (whether this is desirable or not) is expressed by the phrase *sanna nafn sitt* (cf. the noun *sannnefni*), and it is employed within the sagas both in direct speech and in third-person narrative. Snorri’s comment that Rognvaldr Mærajarl was known as “Rognvaldr inn ríki ok inn ráðsvinni, ok kalla menn, at hvárt tveggja væri sannnefni” suggests the notion of public discussion as to whether a person’s behaviour matched his or her nickname (*Haralds saga hárfagra* ch. 10). In *Morkinskinna* Haraldr Sigurðarson puts the nickname of Brandr *inn qrvi* to a practical test, and finds him not only generous, but also sagacious (pp. 194–5). In an episode attributed to the thirteenth century, Sturla Sigvatsson’s disinclination to join a fight prompts Snorri Þorvaldsson

to say, “Hvi sækir hann Sturla eigi at? Ok ætla ek, at Dala-Freyr sanni nú nafn sitt ok standi eigi nær” (*Íslendinga saga* ch. 85; Sturla is also referred to slightly as *Dala-Freyr* in ch. 71). A favourable nickname could impose a duty on the bearer. Sturla’s contemporary Bishop Guðmundr Arason inn góði, according to the saga about him in AM 657 c 4°, ordained the twenty-year-old Einarr Ásbjarnarson, “ok gaf honum þat kenningar nafn, at hann skyldi heita Einarr klerkr, ok kvað honum þat sannefni, en eigi auknefni. Sagði Guðmundr biskup hann mundo halda vígslum sínum ok öllum nafnbótum meðan hann lifði.” Einarr fulfils this amply, living an upright life until he dies at an age approaching 120 “ok var hann þá á xij. tigi gamall vetra”; *Biskupa sögur* I 589–90).

In the light of all this it is natural that a nickname held by a central figure should, especially in shorter sagas and *þættir*, provide a vital thematic keynote. In *Hallfreðar saga* the giving of the nickname *vandræðaskáld* understrikes the skald’s new allegiance to King Óláfr, just as his baptism formally marks his acceptance of the Christian religion. The name also, however, expresses the difficulty with which Hallfreðr took these steps, and more generally encapsulates the hero’s wayward temperament and hence the totality of his experience, so that it can be said of the saga that “the one theme which unites its many and various episodes is the justification of Hallfred’s nickname *vandræðaskáld*” (Wright 1973, 18). The nickname of Gunnarr *helmingr* in *Qgmundar þátr dytts* is similarly rich in implication. Referring primarily to his parti-coloured garb, it also captures his correspondingly shifting identity (discussed in Roscoe 1992, 112), and, perhaps, his rôle as co-hero of the *þátr*. Again, *Grettis saga* and *Orms þátr* illustrate, with varying degrees of subtlety, the legendary strength which gave their heroes their common nickname *inn sterki*, while the brief *Porsteins þátr sqgufróða* is nothing but an elaboration on his nickname.

An interesting twist to the idea of living up to, or proving, one’s nickname is given by the saga-character whose life changes in such a way that he grows out of his nickname, which may stick to him nevertheless. Hrafnkell *Freysgoði*’s renunciation of the pagan gods is a celebrated instance (*Hrafnkels saga* ch. 7), while the whole of *Hreiðars þátr* (*Morkinskinna* pp. 124–36) is devoted to revealing unexpected accomplishments in a man who has been generally deemed a fool and dubbed *inn heimski*.

The ambitious scale of *Heimskringla* gives its author the opportunity to exploit nicknames, like many other traditional resources, in a quite rich and complex way. Hálfdan inn mildi ok inn matarilli, mentioned above, has, like most kings in *Ynglinga saga*, only one chapter to himself. But where a reign is drawn more fully, the king’s nickname and any explanation attached to it can, by giving public recognition to a salient characteristic, provide a measure against which his whole career can be judged. The writer, and the

reader, of the sagas of Hákon Aðalsteinsfóstri or of Magnús Ólafsson are challenged by their common nickname *góði* to consider exactly in what respects the name matches their character and behaviour. Further, throughout *Heimskringla* the nicknames of kings highlight different temperaments and different styles of kingship, contributing much to Snorri's continuous and penetrating examination of the nature of kingship. The power-hungry Eiríkr *blóðøx*, for example, murders his more peaceable brother Björn *farmaðr* or *kaupmaðr* (*Haralds saga hárfagra* ch. 35), and Sigurðr *Jórsalafari* earns his nickname with crusading adventures in the Near East while his nicknameless brother Eysteinn, like *Braut-Önundr* in *Ynglinga saga* ch. 33 or Óláfr *kyrri* in his saga, dedicates himself to less glamorous but more lasting civil works (hence their *mannjafnaðr* in *Magnússona saga* ch. 21).

4. Derogatory nicknames in action

The abusive nickname must be a near-universal phenomenon: Holland speaks, in a survey of research on nicknaming in several cultures, of nicknames that “arise as agents of ego-identity and oral aggression” (1990, 262–3). Many are recorded from medieval Scandinavia, and their potential for social disruption is recognised in law when *Grágás* stipulates that to award a nickname that gives offence is punishable by lesser outlawry: “Ef maðr gefr manne nafn annat en hann eigi oc varðar þat fiör baugs garð ef hin vill reiðaz við sva er oc ef maðr reiðir avknefni til haðungar honom oc varðar þat fiör bavgs garð . . .” (*Staðarhólsbók*, 1879 edition, 391–2). It is not surprising that a literature so consistently concerned with individual and familial strife as the Icelandic sagas should contain many incidents in which this disruptive potential is actualised – in which the bestowing of a nickname, or the pointed use of a pre-existing one, provokes physical violence. In *Sturlunga saga*, for instance, the *auknefni* (v.l. *viðrnefni*) of *dúnvettir* ‘?down gloves/pillows’ which the aggressive Þóralfr Bjarnason gives to Brandr Kolbeinsson and Ísarr Pálsson is a contributory factor in his own death (*Íslendinga saga* ch. 142).

King Haraldr Sigurðarson was, according to a tradition which was evidently much relished by the writer of *Morkinskinna*, touchy about his father's nickname *sýr*, with its assumed meaning of ‘sow’ (whatever its actual etymology, on which see Schrodtt 1979). This was presumably more because of its potential for sexual innuendo than its associations with farm management, at which Sigurðr excelled. Haraldr flies into a rage in *Hreiðars þáttur* as he realises that the beautifully-executed boar figure with which Hreiðarr presents him is actually a sow; Hreiðarr only just escapes with his life (*Morkinskinna* p. 135). The same theme appears within a versified slanging match also narrated in *Morkinskinna*, pp. 109–10. King Haraldr, finding himself

seated opposite the taciturn Þórir, half-brother of King Magnús, attempts to rouse him by a four-line *kviðlingr* in which he calls him unreasonable and mentions that he's heard that his father was called *hvinngestr* 'Thief'. Magnús supplies Þórir with a retaliatory verse to learn and deliver to Haraldr, in which he remarks that even if his father did have that nickname, he did not make a fence round a horse-phallus as Haraldr's father Sigurðr sýr did. Not surprisingly, Haraldr on hearing this makes to kill Þórir, who is saved by Magnús and given a seat next to himself. Another skald, Stúfr inn blindi Kattarson, seems to have caught Haraldr in a more benign mood, for in his (prose) exchange with him about their fathers' names it is Haraldr himself who offers a quip about "the young sow (*gylltrín*) my father was named after", and the conversation stays at the level of good-natured banter (*Morkinskinna* p. 252). Still in *Morkinskinna*, but now in a (somewhat defective) section about Sigurðr Jórsalafari, Þórarinn stutfeldr is commissioned by Árni fjöruskeifr on behalf of the king to produce a verse including a reference to Hákon Serksson and his nickname *mqrstrútr* ('Suet-hood'). Þórarinn somewhat exceeds his brief, but is accepted into Hákon's troop. He then makes amends to Hákon by composing a verse about Árni *fjöruskeifr* (? 'Shore-crooked'), again incorporating the nickname. The verse infuriates Árni, who rushes at him, but is pacified, and Þórarinn lives to declaim his poem *Stutfeldardrápa* (named from the nickname he had been given the previous day; *Morkinskinna* pp. 385–7).

A nickname which itself commemorates a killing can provide excellent kindling for smouldering thoughts of revenge. Among the company of Norwegians cutting a way for their ships through the ice on Vænir (Lake Vänern), one tackles the task with frenzied energy. A comrade comments on the zeal of "Hallr *Koðránsbani*", on hearing which a man rushes from another ship and strikes him his death blow. This is Þormóðr Eindriðason; he has never seen Hallr before, and was one year old when Koðrán, who was his mother's cousin, met his death (*Heimskringla, Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* ch. 72; *Morkinskinna* p. 233; the *Morkinskinna* writer makes it explicit that Þormóðr kills Hallr "þvíat hann stoþz eigi er hrosat veri vigino Koþrans"). Earlier in *Heimskringla*, the nickname of Ásbjörn *Selsbani* forms part of an elaborate narrative of revenge. In *Óláfs saga helga* ch. 123 his ship is sighted by his enemies. Karli says, "Þar sitr hann Selsbani við stýrt í blám kyrtli." Ásmundr answers, "Ek skal fá honum rauðan kyrtli" and puts his spear straight through him. Soon afterwards, Ásbjörn's mother Sigríðr gives the spear, and with it the duty of revenge, to Þórir hundr, who ten chapters later kills Karli with the same weapon, saying that he expects Karli will recognise the spear *Selshefnir*.

Elsewhere a nickname is not necessarily derogatory, and is not itself a cause of contention, but can be used by a saga-author as a focus of barbed

wit, often directed against someone who is also a target of physical assault. After a fight scene in *Eyrbyggja saga* ch. 56, Snorri goði congratulates his nephew Kjartan frá Fróðá, “Fram sóttir þú nú í dag, Breiðvíkingrinn”, to which Kjartan replies in some anger, “Eigi þarftu at bregða mér ætt minni”. The nickname (which appears not to have become “official”) alludes to Kjartan’s presumed natural father, Björn Breiðvíkingakappi. The remaining examples of which I am aware involve terms for animals or objects which readily function as nicknames or as common nouns, and the contexts, although not necessarily violent, frequently are so. Óláfr Tryggvason sends his dog after Þórir *hjótr* saying, “Vígi, tak hjórtinn”. The dog duly halts Þórir, who is despatched by the king’s halberd (*Heimskringla, Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* ch. 73). This kind of word-play is clearly akin to the play on forenames which are also animal names, and the two co-occur in the climactic scene at Stiklarstaðir. Finding that weapons cannot pierce Þórir *hundr* (who is protected by an enchanted coat of reindeer skin), the fated Óláfr Haraldsson shouts to Björn stallari “Ber þú hundinn, er eigi bita járn”. Þórir responds with a successful spear-thrust and the remark, “Svá bauto vér björnuna” (*Óláfs saga helga* ch. 228). Grim humour of a similar kind is found in an episode in *Guðmundar saga* (AM 657 c 4^o). In the midst of a battle, Bessi Vermundarson rushes forward demanding the whereabouts of Qgmundr *sneis* (whose nickname refers to a skewer, especially for sausages). Naddr, a supporter of Qgmundr, replies, “Þat er líkara, Mó-Bessi, at þú hittir oddinn á hjalta sneisinni [sword], áðr sjá dagr líði af, ok ósýnna, at þú sneisir mör þinn optarr þá er it skilit”. Bessi kills Naddr, but Qgmundr now enters the scene and quickly fulfils his own prediction that Bessi won’t have long to boast of the killing. The narrator comments wryly, “dó Bessi þar, ok fann svá sneis, er hann leitaði um daginn þá er þeir Naddr töluðust við um daginn” [sic] (*Biskupa sögur* I 568–9).

The incidents noted so far in this section illustrate the way that the latent force of established nicknames can be released within a narrative where human sensibilities are raw. When the actual process of nicknaming is brought before our eyes the effect can be still more powerful. The hero’s nickname, itself produced by a small incident, becomes the starting-point for the entire action of *Porsteins þátr stangarhöggs*. Deliberately wounded by his rival at a horse-fight, the essentially reasonable Porsteinn is prepared to overlook the matter, but when his jeering enemies add insult to the injury and award him the commemorative nickname, this leads to the sequence of goading, revenge, counter-revenge, and eventual reconciliation which is the backbone of the tale. The plot of *Qgmundar þátr dyts* is not dissimilar.

The author of *Njáls saga*, who in general shows little interest in nicknames, gives his hero an uncomplimentary nickname not attached to him in *Landnámabók*, and graphically shows its fatal effects. The bestowing of the

nickname is shown in stages which are deftly worked into the account of mounting violence between the households of Gunnarr and Njáll. In ch. 20, when Njáll is formally introduced, the author adds to his tally of (wholly admirable) attributes the remark that *honum óx eigi skegg*. In ch. 35 Hallgerðr, feeling herself publicly slighted, throws a casual taunt at Bergþóra about her turtle-backed nails and her husband's beardlessness ("Ekki er þó kosta munr með ykkur Njáli: þú hefir kartnagl á hverjum fingri, en hann er skegglaus"). Bergþóra retorts that Hallgerðr's previous husband, Þorvaldr, was not beardless, but she arranged his slaying nevertheless. Some time later, Hallgerðr refers to Njáll as "karl inn skegglaus" (ch. 41), and soon afterwards, during the uneasy truce which follows the killing of the Njáls-sons' foster-father Þórðr leysingjarson, formally proposes it as a nickname to her gathered household, adding one for his more hirsute sons: "Köllum hann nú karl inn skegglaus, en sonu hans taðskegginga." She calls upon Sigmundr, a vicious rogue, and killer of Þórðr, to make verses about the names, which he gladly does, though they are not quoted in the saga. Gunnarr, overhearing the malicious laughter which results, is furious, and when the news of the insult reaches Bergþórshváll it provides the final spur to revenge (ch. 44). The dangerous potency of the nicknames is not exhausted, however. Their originator, Hallgerðr, flings them, curse-like, directly at the Njáls-sons in her final appearance (ch. 91), but more than this, they form part of the climax of the scene at the Alþing which directly provokes the burning of Njáll and his family. Flosi, seeing a silk robe among the pile of money and goods offered as compensation for the death of Hǫskuldr Þráinsson, gets no reply to his demand who gave it. Skarpheðinn asks him who he thinks was the donor. "Ef þú vill þat vita", says Flosi, "þá mun ek segja þér, hvat ek ætla: þat er mín ætlan, at til hafi gefit faðir þinn, karl inn skegglaus, því at margir vitu eigi, er hann sjá, hvárt hann er karlmaðr eða kona". Skarpheðinn responds at first calmly, then with abuse so obscene that all hope of reconciliation is kicked away as Flosi knocks down the heap of goods (ch. 123; see further Dronke 1981, esp. pp. 11–13 and 21). In these scenes, as in the *Morkinskinna* anecdotes about Haraldr Sigurðarson, the charge of effeminacy implicit in the nickname, and its association with the making of slanderous verses, show the abusive nickname for precisely what it is: a form of *níð* (cf. Clunies Ross 1987, esp. pp. 59 and 67).

This is nowhere more evident than in the late *Króka-Refs saga* in which the hero, settled in Greenland, is dubbed Refr *inn rafi* by his neighbours, Þorgils víkrskalli and his four sons. The nickname refers to Refr's alleged cowardice in the face of a polar bear, but still more to the other kind of unmanliness: "... heldr var hann kona ína níundi hverju nótt ok þurfti þá karlmanns, ok var hann því kallaðr Refr inn rafi" (ch. 7). Refr's name is only cleared by the killing of all five slanderers.

Implications of mannishness in women are rarer than the reverse, but in a famous episode in *Laxdæla saga* ch. 35, Guðrún Ósvífsdóttir taunts Þórður Ingunnarson with his wife's strange habits of dress, claiming in evidence that she is known as *Bróka-Auðr*. She is duly divorced on the grounds that “hon skarsk í setgeirabrækr sem karlkonur”, and when she rides off to take violent revenge on Þórður, she is “at vísu í brókum”. Here, as in the other examples in this section, we have the extreme case of the socially normative nickname.

III. Conclusion, with some comparisons

The Icelandic sagas have much to tell about nicknaming practices in the Viking Age and beyond – about the possible types of nicknames, the people who gave and received them, the reasons why they did so, and more; and this is, in a general way, of great value to onomastic study, although the sagas cannot necessarily be relied upon for specifics. There are, meanwhile, many ways in which the nicknames enrich saga prose, and three in particular have been discussed above. Nicknames occasion anecdotes about their origins, especially in accounts of the settlement of Iceland; they provide a focus for the exploration of character; and the giving or using of a name, especially a derogatory one, can itself play a dynamic part in the action of a saga.

Some of the anecdotes of nickname origins may be very old, even if not historically true. They may not have had the advantage of practical utility to encourage their accurate preservation, in the way that traditions about the settlement and later ownership of land did (Jakob Benediktsson, *Landnámabók*, p. cxxix), but it seems likely that questions about the curious nicknames of ancestors should have been asked, and stories told in answer to these down the generations. It may therefore be reasonable to see tales about nickname origins as one of the forms that oral tradition could have taken, alongside genealogies, narratives attached to verses, anecdotal place-name etymologies,²¹ and stories arising from material objects (on which, see Perkins 1989).

Nicknames, and the narratives built around them, are in some ways a counterpart, at a humble level, to the verses which are quoted so abundantly in the sagas. They are a manifestation of a lively verbal creativity which breaks through the normally quite unambitious vocabulary and nomenclature of saga prose. Some of them, such as *skáldaspillir*, *austmannaskelfir*, *gullberi* or *eykyndill*, are formally and semantically reminiscent of common

²¹ As with nicknames, it is most often the (supposedly) incident-derived place-names that are the subject of explanatory narratives (e.g. *Dögurðarnes* and *Kamsnes* in *Laxdæla saga* ch. 5 and *Landnámabók* ch. 97). The place-names such as *Rauðamel* or *Breiðafjqrðr* which are, in parallel with nicknames, “character-describing” scarcely need explanation.

types of kenning, and if broad definitions of both byname and kenning are employed, the two systems range similarly from the literal to the metonymic or metaphorical. The literal may be illustrated by (Karl) *inn mærski*; cf. *Mæra gramr/hilmir/pengill*, or (Hallr) *Koðránsbani*; cf. *bani Belja*, a kenning for Freyr; and the metonymic/metaphorical by (Hrærekr) *sløngvanbaugi*; cf. *bauga sløngvir*, *baugskyndir* etc., referring to a (generous) prince or man, or (Jórunn) *mannvitsbrekka*; cf. *menbrekka*, ‘necklace-slope’, hence ‘woman’ (*pace* Tveitane 1977).²² The analogy is, of course, not complete, not least because the system of kennings is much more stereotyped than the nicknames, and indeed the nicknames are attached to individuals in a much more intimate and idiosyncratic way (e.g. *hvalmagi*, *stami*, *hestageldir*). There are, however, other similarities between nickname-giving and verse-making. In society, they fulfil similar functions, representing public awards of praise, more or less affectionate acceptance or biting defamation. Like skaldic verses, these names can encapsulate moments of history, grand or trivial: Margrét *friðkolla* marries Magnús berfættr to seal a peace with the Swedish King Ingi (*Magnúss saga berfætts* ch. 15); Pétr *byrðarsveinn* carries the five-year-old King Sigurðr at an assembly (*Haraldssona saga* ch. 9).²³ In prose works, the nicknames are sometimes used to corroborate and epitomise a narrative (e.g. Þórólfr *smjqr*, p. 134 above), rather in the manner of a skaldic quotation, and something of the more dynamic rôle of skalds and their verses is shared when the bestowing of a new nickname or the use of an old one forms the kernel of a dramatically presented scene, much as a *lausavísa* frequently does.

To conclude, the nicknames of medieval Scandinavia are fascinating in their own right, many of them linguistic *jeux d’esprit* which cast glints of light on lives otherwise dark to us; and in the hands of tradition-makers and saga-writers they play a modest but often memorable rôle in the shaping of stories about the past.

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²² See further the illuminating discussion of “Concepts of secondary naming in early Icelandic” and “*Kenningarnafn* and *kenning*” by Margaret Clunies Ross, 1987, 55–61.

²³ Compare the examples of skaldic “snapshots” given by Frank (1978, 25).

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