

## WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE HEIMSKRINGLA

### I

The last Scandinavian publication of William Morris was the *Heimskringla* which he translated with Eiríkr Magnússon for *The Saga Library*.<sup>1</sup> But long before Morris and Magnússon met in 1869 to form a literary partnership which culminated in *The Saga Library*, even before the Icelander and the Englishman had translated *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu*, *Grettis Saga Ásmundarson*, and the *Völsunga Saga*, Morris had shown in his poetry that he was rather well versed in general Scandinavian matters. The *Heimskringla*, which he read as a young man in Samuel Laing's translation,<sup>2</sup> he seemed to be particularly well acquainted with; for we find that in certain of his poems written prior to his actual study of Old Norse language and literature (i.e., 1869), he used various traditional and historical materials of such a specific nature that we can identify many of them as having come from *The Stories of the Norwegian Kings*. In this brief essay I shall attempt to show, by citing several miscellaneous references, what Morris knew about the *Heimskringla* before he could read the Old Norse language.

### II

Four geographical allusions in Morris's "non-Norse" poems occur in *The Wanderers* (circa 1865–1868). The first two of these concern Vineland. Nicholas, one of the "certain gentlemen and mariners of Norway" who people the poem, in considering past explorations, tells his companions:

The land was good enow  
That Leif the son of Eric came unto,<sup>3</sup>

Following this, the gentleman continues to speak of Vineland in a manner which shows that Morris was fully aware of the dis-

<sup>1</sup> William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, *The Saga Library*, 6 vols., London, 1891–1905. The *Heimskringla* comprises Volumes III–VI.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Laing, *The Heimskringla, or Chronicle of the Kings of Norway*, 3 vols., London, 1844.

<sup>3</sup> *The Wanderers*, in *The Earthly Paradise, The Collected Works of William Morris*, with Introductions by his Daughter, May Morris (New York and London, 1910–15), III, 13.

covery which Leif made. It will be remembered that the *Heimskringla* is full of incidental reference to Leif, and contains at least one use of the name Vineland in connection with North America<sup>4</sup>; and it should be brought to mind at the same time that the Vineland voyages in the *Flateyjarbók* were not (in 1865) available to Morris.

In the same strain, Rolf, another gentleman in *The Wanderers*, weighs in his mind the voyages of the past, and says:

For all of one kind seemed to be  
The Vineland voyage o'er the unknown sea  
And Swegdir's search for Godhome.<sup>5</sup>

This allusion is a particularly accurate, though an ironic one. Rolf, a conservative person at best, is not so sure that the journey of the gentlemen and mariners of Norway toward the earthly paradise will prosper. Indeed, it may end like "Swegdir's search for Godhome"—as a wild-goose chase. Swegdir, son of Fjólfnir, son of Yngvi-Frey, went on a five-year journey in search of Godhome, for thither had Odin gone after his death. Swegdir travelled over all the earth; but he never found Godhome, and was finally trapped in a cave by a dwarf.<sup>6</sup>

Two other geographical references in *The Wanderers* serve to strengthen the Norse atmosphere, which is otherwise not very impressive, in that poem. The Wanderers, upon departure, agree to meet at "King Tryggvi's hill,"<sup>7</sup> which Morris also calls "King Tryggvi's mound." This hill, mound, or cairn of King Tryggvi (*Tryggvahreyr*) is situated, according to *Harald Grey-cloak's Saga*,<sup>8</sup> on Tryggvi's Isle, in Sweden. Tryggvi was tricked by King Gudrod, and ambushed; "And he lieth at the place which is now called Tryggvi's Cairn."<sup>9</sup>

The last geographical allusion deals also with Tryggvi. Rolf, chief speaker in *The Wanderers*, says:

<sup>4</sup> For references to Leif, see *The Story of Olaf Tryggvison, Saga Library*, III, 341, 355; and *The Story of Olaf the Holy, ibid.*, IV, 134, etc. For Vineland, see *Olaf Tryggvison, ibid.*, III, 355.

<sup>5</sup> *Collected Works*, III, 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ynglinga Saga, Saga Library*, III, 24-26.

<sup>7</sup> *Collected Works*, III, 10.

<sup>8</sup> *Saga Library*, III, 211.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

Wick was once my home,  
 Where Tryggvi Olaf's son and Olaf's sire  
 Lit to the ancient Gods the sacred fire,  
 Unto whose line I am myself akin,  
 Through him who Astrid in old time did win,  
 King Olaf's widow.<sup>10</sup>

Wick is a saga-term for the territory on the Bay of Fold (now Christiania Fjórd), and the *Heimskringla* records that many of Tryggvi's activities were carried on there.<sup>11</sup> But not only is the place-name significant; the passage also indicates that Morris was acquainted with an intricate genealogy. By having him refer to Astrid, Morris allows Rolf to connect himself with the great former leaders of his people—a connection, it scarcely need be said, much to be desired among Norse heroes. Astrid was daughter to King Olaf of Sweden, and married King Olaf the Holy against her father's wishes. She separated from King Olaf, however, and went to live at the court of King Magnus.<sup>12</sup> "Him" to whom the speaker is related provides the mysterious and intangible link between Rolf and the imaginary royal genealogy which the English poet has constructed for him.

### III

Mention of both the great Olafs, Olaf the Holy and Olaf the son of Tryggvi, appears in other places in Morris's early poetry: the one in *The Wind*, published in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, 1858, the other in *The Wanderers*. "A Norse knight" [sic], the speaker in *The Wind*, recalling an almost forgotten glory, sees in his dreams a group of marching warriors. The last lines of the poem suggest that he was once one of their company:

I knew them by the arms that I was used to paint  
 Upon their long thin shields; but the colours were all grown faint,  
 And faint upon their banner was Olaf, king and saint.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Collected Works*, III, 12. Tryggvi was son of Olaf Geirsteadelf, son of Harald Fairhair; and was the father of Olaf Tryggvison—hence "Olaf's son and Olaf's sire."

<sup>11</sup> See *Harald Greycloak's Saga*. The "sacred fire" alluded to still eludes my searching.

<sup>12</sup> These events are related in the *Magnus Saga*, *Saga Library*, V, 11–12.

<sup>13</sup> *Collected Works*, I, 110.

Whether this army is meant to be King Olaf's own, or a later troop which carried his likeness as a token, is difficult to decide. The latter supposition may be preferable, for Olaf's own banner was decorated with a white snake.<sup>14</sup> It would be quite proper, of course, for the army of a later time to carry the picture of their patron-saint. It is possible that the poet assumed that bearing the Olaf flag into war would enhance the chances for miraculous victory.<sup>15</sup>

The other Olaf (the son of Tryggvi) is portrayed in the earlier version of *The Wanderers*<sup>16</sup> in the company of Odin. He appears in a dream to the Norse leader:

Waking I saw two ancient men  
There in the corner; of gold fine  
One wore a crown; about his head  
Shone rings of light, all armed was he  
And all his raiment was of red;  
He held a great axe handily.  
The other man was clad in blue  
One-eyed he was and held a spear:  
Olaf and Odin straight I knew  
And cried the cry that you did hear.<sup>17</sup>

If one were to seek a single passage which best illustrates Morris's early knowledge of the *Heimskringla*, this double reference to Olaf and Odin would serve. The crown, the rings of light, the red raiment, and the axe of Olaf Tryggvison are mentioned in various descriptions of the King in that saga which deals principally with him—from which source Morris indubitably obtained his impression of Olaf. "King Olaf . . . a foregilded shield he had," says the saga, "and a gold-wrought helm, and was easy to know from other men: a short red kirtle he had on over his byrny."<sup>18</sup> As for the axe: Olaf was so proficient with that implement of war, and did so many stout deeds with it,

<sup>14</sup> *The Story of Olaf the Holy, Saga Library*, IV, 57.

<sup>15</sup> Morris could have read of Olaf's miracles in either Laing's *Heimskringla* or in Thorpe's *Northern Mythology* (3 vols., London, 1851).

<sup>16</sup> The difference between the earlier, or "Unpublished" *Wanderers* and *The Wanderers* which Morris included with *The Earthly Paradise* is not very great. The first version was probably begun in 1865.

<sup>17</sup> *Collected Works*, XXIV, 91-92.

<sup>18</sup> *The Story of Olaf Tryggvison, Saga Library*, III, 336.

that Snorri sometimes speaks of the axe in connection with his other equipment.<sup>19</sup>

Odin is here pictured in a guise accurate enough to enable any *Edda* reader to identify him. He usually donned the blue (or grey) cloak when he went among men on earth. His one eye had been sacrificed as a pledge to Mímir for a drink from the sacred well.<sup>20</sup> And though the spear he carried (called Gungnir)<sup>21</sup> was more properly a part of his Asgard garb, it is no great violation of Norse mythology to place the spear in Odin's hand as he goes abroad on earth. The appearance of Odin and Olaf, together is also proper according to a legend in the *Olafs Saga*, wherein Odin comes to visit and beguile Olaf.<sup>22</sup> All things considered, the detailed information present in this allusion is exceedingly clarifying; and tells us a great deal about Morris's knowledge of the Olaf and Odin traditions at a time when we have usually supposed that his reading in Scandinavian documents had been rather sketchy.

#### IV

The last historical reference which we may examine with profit is the most subtle of all. Consisting of but two lines from the unpublished version of *The Wanderers*, it reveals an acquaintance with Norse genealogy which could certainly not be garnered from a mere cursory reading of the *Heimskringla*. Nicholas speaks:

From Harald Fairhair am I sprung  
And thence from Odin in right line.<sup>23</sup>

The theory that Harald Fairhair descended from Odin follows the common tradition spoken of above; a custom which allows the saga-writer to connect his hero or heroes with the leaders (and Gods) of the Norse peoples. In Harald's case, the family tree finds its roots in Odin himself. This genealogy, as we find it

<sup>19</sup> For one instance see *ibid.*, p. 266.      <sup>20</sup> *Völuspá*, stanzas 28–29.

<sup>21</sup> *Sigrdrífumál*, stanza 17. It is interesting to note in passing that Gungnir, Odin's spear, is called a *sword* in Magnússon's "Alphabetical List of Persons, Places, and Things in the Story," in *The Story of the Volsungs, Collected Works*, VII, 487.

<sup>22</sup> See *Saga Library*, III, 314: "Of King Olaf and the Guiles of Odin."

<sup>23</sup> *Collected Works*, XXIV, 127.

even in this early poem of William Morris, may be reconstructed—in reverse order—in two steps: first, Harald’s ancestry back to Sigurd the Volsung; and second, Sigurd’s ancestry back to Odin. Nicholas speaks of his own descent from Harald as though such an heritage were to be expected in a person like himself. The bare outlines of the royal and mythical genealogies are given here<sup>24</sup>:

Odin  
|  
Sigi  
|  
Rerir  
|  
Volsung  
|  
Sigmund  
|  
Sigurd

The child Aslaug, in some versions of the Volsung story the daughter of Sigurd and Brynhild by a marriage which occurred before that of Sigurd and Gudrun, and in others a love-child of Sigurd and Brynhild’s illicit union, is married to Ragnar Lodbrok, and from them descends the line of Harald—the line to which Nicholas claims he belongs:

Sigurd-Brynhild  
| m  
Auslaug-Ragnar Lodbrok  
|  
Sigurd Worm-in-Eye  
| m  
Helgi-Keen-Aslaug  
|  
Sigurd-Hart  
| m  
Ragnhild-Halfdan the Black  
|  
Harald Fairhair

<sup>24</sup> It should be remembered, of course, that when Morris wrote these lines he had no such specific knowledge of the Volsungs as he had in 1870, the year in which he and Magnússon published their translation of the *Völsunga Saga*. He doubtless discovered Harald’s descent in *The Story of Halfdan the Black*. See *Saga Library*, III, 77–87.

There is nothing to be gained from the assumption that Morris comprehended the details of this alleged genealogy as early as 1865–68, though it is certain that he was well acquainted with it after 1870. Yet we cannot deny that the two lines which describe Nicholas' historical and mythical ancestors contain an abundance of information. This information we may not ignore as we attempt to discover what Morris knew about the *Heimskringla* in the period just preceding his collaboration with Magnússon.

## V

William Morris's most significant contributions to the literary relations of the English and Scandinavian peoples are of course to be found in the sagas he translated with Magnússon, and in the English poems which he based upon Old Norse themes. The greatest of these, the *Gudrun* and the *Sigurd*, were written after Magnússon had made a fairly competent Icelandic scholar out of an enthusiastic pupil. And if we wish to determine in what ways Morris schooled himself in Scandinavian matters before he became the English bard of the Northern Olympus, we must consider carefully the importance of the *Heimskringla* materials which were available to the poet in Laing's translation. Yet I daresay that these apparently casual Norse allusions, found in the poems of Morris's "pre-Norse" period, have a significance of their own. They belong as much to the history of Anglo-Icelandic literary relations in the nineteenth century as they do to that more immediate subject, to the understanding of which I have attempted to contribute—the history of William Morris's development as a re-creator of Old Norse themes.

KARL LITZENBERG

*The University of Michigan*