Anglo-Saxons and Icelanders at Byzantium
With special reference to the Icelandic Sage of St. Edward the Confessor

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The paper as read at the Conference was in two main parts. The first consisted of a general survey of Icelandic references to Byzantium, about visits there by Norse heroes, and about their service in the Varangian Guard. These Icelandic traditions raise, in acute form, some characteristic problems of Icelandic literature and history. To what extent are they fictional, to what extent do they reflect the facts of history? From the point of view of the Byzantine scholar, what additional information about Byzantine matters can the Icelandic stories provide?

The second part of the paper was concerned with the Icelandic saga of St. Edward the Confessor, or Edward's saga as I shall refer to it hereafter. A particular interest of this saga is that it contains an account of an Anglo-Saxon migration to Byzantium after the Norman Conquest. Until lately no source for, or close analogue to, this story was known; but Dr. K.N. Ciggaar and Miss Christine Fell have demonstrated its resemblance to a previously unpublished section of a thirteenth-century chronicle from Laon in northern France, the Chronicon Laudunense. Consequently Edward's saga has recently attracted a good deal of scholarly attention.

The paper as now presented in revised form is again in two parts, but the first is much condensed, and the second expanded and corrected to incorporate material which was not to hand when the original paper was read.

I

The most famous Norse Varangian of all was Haraldr Sigurðarson, or Harald Hardradi as he is often referred to in English sources, who was in Byzantium from about 1034 to 1043. He later became King of Norway, and met his death in battle against the English Harold at Stamford Bridge near York in 1066.

Harald Hardradi's doings in Byzantium are amply, indeed generously, recorded in Norse traditions in both prose and verse. Of the central fact of his presence and service there, there is no doubt. It is confirmed by a late eleventh-century Greek source, the Book of Advice to an Emperor attributed to Cecaumenos, where his name is given as Araltes. Various other details given place the identification beyond suspicion. His honours and rank — first manglavites or belt-wearer, then spatharokandidates or troop-leader — indicate however a lower place in Byzantine affairs than the developed Norse traditions assert. This may be due simply to a tendency for a Norse hero's deeds to develop in the telling, but it is also possible that the propaganda purpose of the Book of Advice to an Emperor would be better served by some depreciation of Harald's actual importance.

The best-known Icelandic prose account of Harald is that by the author Snorri Sturluson, Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar, in his creative compilation of lives of the Kings of Norway, Heimskringla, written about 1225. Among Snorri's sources were earlier written collections of lives of the Kings of Norway, scaldic poems
about Harald (many of them contained in these collections), and oral stories circulating in Iceland. One oral informant specifically named in Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar, and frequently mentioned in other stories, is Halldórr Snorrason, a distant relative of Snorri Sturluson. It is said that Halldórr had served with Harald Hardrædi in Byzantium, and, on his return to Iceland, told stories about their adventures abroad. Other Icelanders learned these stories from him.4

It may be thought unlikely that such oral stories could have survived uncorrupted until they were written down almost two centuries later, and certainly many of the tales told about Harald in Heimskringla and other writings are fanciful; but oral tradition in Iceland was strong, and especially in families such as Snorri Sturluson’s. Snorri’s account of Harald’s campaigning in Sicily is confirmed by the Book of Advice to an Emperor, at least in the essential fact of his participation; conversely, Snorri and other writers record the name of the commander of the Byzantine forces as Gyrgir or Georgius, that is, Georgios Maniakes, although they no doubt err in making Harald the dominant partner of the relationship. No doubt, too, the stories of how Harald took some Sicilian cities by various stratagems are fictional (see, for example, Haralds saga, chapters 6, 7 and 10). The story told in chapters 8 and 9, on the other hand, and said to have been brought to Iceland by Halldórr Snorrason’s. Snorri’s account of Harald’s campaign in Sicily is confirmed by the Book of Advice to an Emperor, at least in the essential fact of his participation; conversely, Snorri and other writers record the name of the commander of the Byzantine forces as Gyrgir or Georgius, that is, Georgios Maniakes, although they no doubt err in making Harald the dominant partner of the relationship. No doubt, too, the stories of how Harald took some Sicilian cities by various stratagems are fictional (see, for example, Haralds saga, chapters 6, 7 and 10). The story told in chapters 8 and 9, on the other hand, and said to have been brought to Iceland by Halldórr Snorrason’s.

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Similarly, the scaldic verses about Harald’s exploits may deserve respect as historical sources. For example, one by the Icelandic scald Þjóðólfr Arnórrson describes Harald’s part in the blinding of an emperor, presumably Michael V in 1042:

Stólþengils lét stinga
-stýrjold var þá byrjuð-
eyðir augun bæði
út heiðingja sútar;
lagði allvaldr Egða
austr á bragning hraustan
gráligt mark, en Girkja
gót illa for stillir.

The destroyer of the sorrow (hunger) of the heath-dweller (wolf)—i.e., one who feeds the wolf, the warrior (here Harald)—had both the eyes of the Emperor poked out; war began then; the sole ruler of the men of Agðir—i.e., the king of Norway—put a cruel mark on the bold prince in the east; the ruler of the Greeks suffered a cruel fate.7

Snorri’s prose account in Haralds saga names this emperor as Konstantínus Mónomákos, but that is no reason to be suspicious of the verse (which does not name the emperor); nor can I follow Professor Gwyn Jones when he says “Heimskringla’s insistence that Harald personally gouged out the emperor’s eyes is made suspect by its choice of Constantine Monomachus in the true victim’s stead”. The text of Heimskringla here is not substantially different from that of Morkinskinna, Snorri’s chief written source; and what both texts mean, I think, despite Gwyn Jones’ comment and the Penguin translation (“Harald himself blinded the Byzantine emperor”) is that Harald (in Icelandic Haraldr, unambiguously