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Scolding the Skald: The Construction of Cultural Memory in *Morkinskinna*'s *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*

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Abstract: Around the year 1060, the misbehaving Icelandic skald Sneglu-Halli arrives at the court of king Haraldr harðráði and manages to provoke the king and his fellow courtiers, yet he leaves a richer and more successful man as a result. A literary analysis of *Morkinskinna*'s *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* shows that the protagonist's portrayal is a deliberate if somewhat exaggerated construction of how Icelanders abroad should behave, as well as which memories of the 11th century the 13th century Icelanders wished to preserve. Sneglu-Halli's provocative behavior is seen as a positive character trait that, if pursued moderately, helps establish the uniqueness of the Icelander at court. This behavior is juxtaposed with the famous skald Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, whose undoubted success at court is downplayed in the þáttr due to his running away from his meager Icelandic beginnings. Cultural Memory studies are the key to understanding this artistic manipulation, since the way we remember the past establishes our perception of the present.[1]

> A society can hardly adapt itself to new conditions without redesigning its structure either by modifying the hierarchy and the relations among its various parts or by amalgamating, in whole or in part, with neighboring societies. (Halbwachs 1925 [1992], 156)

Memory meant a great deal to Iceland's medieval residents. This is self-evident from the abundance of manuscripts produced in this period, as well as their con-

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[1] This article's framework was first established in a course taught by Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir at Aarhus University—as a part of the Viking and Medieval Norse Studies program—and I would like to thank her for the systematic introduction into Cultural Memory and Memory studies. Many thanks are due to Ármann Jakobsson and Pernille Hermann for their crucial and very generous comments along the various stages of this article's writing. Finally, heartfelt thanks should be given for Steven D. Shema and Kevin French's English comments, and to the journal's anonymous reviewer and editorial staff. Any fault found in the article is entirely my own and not of any of the above mentioned, if memory serves.

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tent, which preserves stories from both the distant past and contemporary exploits. Collective or Cultural Memory studies are an obvious prism through which to look at these texts, already employed since the 1990s in fields as varied as Jewish studies (e. g., Bodemann 1996), Egyptology (e. g., Jan Assmann 1997), and American Studies (e. g., Beamish, Molotch and Flacks 1995), to mention but a few examples. Still, it is only in the recent decade or so that memory and Cultural Memory studies have gained a real foothold in Old Norse scholarship, manifested in two recent anthologies dedicated to these topics (Hermann and Mitchell 2013a; Hermann, Mitchell and Arnórsdóttir 2014). We now have a much greater (though far from complete) understanding of *how* these memories were constructed and *by whom*. And yet, though a few have taken upon themselves to answer why certain memories were manipulated in the Old Norse texts,[2] there is much unexplored territory left. If Cultural Memory is the way a society wishes to represent itself, what did medieval Icelanders wish to remember, and how did they wish to be remembered?[3]

This article's main case study is *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* from the Kings' saga *Morkinskinna*,[4] where the behavior of the two skalds Sneglu-Halli and Þjóðólfr is juxtaposed. Halli comes out of the *þáttr* with the audience's sympathies, and it is clear that this is a critical manipulation on the part of the story's author(s).[5] Sneglu-Halli fits well with the image of the 11th century skald that the author wished to promote, one that is different in its social background than the reality of the 13th century skald. A literary analysis of the text shows the mechanism behind the choices made in the characterization of the main skalds' characters. As the opening quote by Maurice Halbwachs suggests, there are two ways to deal with a changing landscape: re-adjustment or assimilation. Sneglu-Halli represents re-adjustment, Þjóðólfr assimilation.

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[2] Important examples of this being Pernille Hermann (2010), Björn Bandlien (2013) and Gísli Sigurðsson (2014).

[3] It is important to emphasize that a constructed past is not equal to a collective identity. While this study focuses on the way that *Morkinskinna*'s author dealt with certain issues of his time, other possible issues could arise as well as different means of dealing with the same ones. Halbwachs' choice of not discussing groups that are larger than certain social classes is noteworthy in this context (1992, 120–66). The social class represented in *Morkinskinna* is in no way the only force that operated in 13th century Icelandic society, and this saga's author is in no way its only voice.

[4] The term "Kings' saga" for *Morkinskinna* seems more up to date than "Kings' saga compilation" since the studies of Ármann Jakobsson (2002; 2014) and Andersson/Gade (2000) both indicate a programmatic and unified agency to this piece of writing.

[5] As to what precisely is meant by the use of the word 'author' in the context of the Old Norse texts, for the present article it suffices to indicate a conscious design and therefore agency to the text.

It is important to address the better-known version of this *þáttr* that appears in *Flateyjarbók*. This version has a different ending with additional stanzas composed by Halli that strengthen his image as a crude and coarse skald, and these differ greatly from the extant *Morkinskinna* (cf. Jakobsson 2014, 89). Throughout its text, the *Flateyjarbók* representation of Sneglu-Halli is of a much-more unpleasant individual, who knowingly directs insults that could be understood as *níð* against king Haraldr harðráði on two occasions, insults the queen, constantly uses vulgar language, and is eulogized very grimly by the king: “Á grauti mundi greyið sprungið hafa” (Guðmundsson, Bjarnar and Nordal, 1945, 215) [“The poor devil must have burst eating porridge” (Clark 1997, 357)].[6] It is important to realize that while these stories relate the same character and many similar events, what seem to be subtle differences between the two versions are actually significant in the overall characterization. *Morkinskinna*’s Sneglu-Halli ends the story on his way back to the Norwegian king where he presumably gained the king’s favor. *Flateyjarbók* has him insult the king and queen, and have his memory tarnished following his death. These are very different fates that paint images of very different men.[7]

The Use and Abuse of Cultural Memory

> When [...] the formative power of saga literature to shape cultural realities, that is, to construct memories, is recognized, the distinction between text and reality is blurred, and their cultural significance is equalized, something that eventually increases the sagas’ value as sources for medieval culture. (Hermann 2013, 351)

In the last decade or so it has become clearer that Old Icelandic literature can and should be treated as Cultural Memory, to the degree that this may be their *raison d’être* (Glauser 2000, 214–5; see also Hermann 2013, 334, 351). The linguistic turn has shown that discerning a past from text has more to do with representation of the event than with the event itself (see discussion in Spiegel 1999, 44–56; see also Stein 2005, 80–2 and Hermann 2007, 21). The study of Cultural Memory builds on these foundations. Jan Assmann provides this definition of the concept (as translated by John Czaplicka):

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[6] Clark’s translation of *greyið* here is very subtle (though he certainly does not shy away from obscenities earlier in the translation). The word could also be translated as ‘bitch’, a much less respectful eulogy for the dead skald.

[7] It is not very surprising that in an article by Hermann Pálsson‘s where he discusses the image of the skald at court (1992), the examples he provides for Sneglu-Halli functioning as a court-fool are taken from those places where the *Flateyjarbók* version diverges from the *Morkinskinna* one. While it could certainly be argued that *Morkinskinna*’s Sneglu-Halli functions as a courtly-fool, this is achieved in a much more subtle way than in *Flateyjarbók*.

> The concept of cultural memory comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific in each epoch, whose "cultivation" serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image. Upon such collective knowledge, for the most part (but not exclusively) of the past, each group bases its awareness of unity and particularity. (1995, 132)

Social groups are united by their common memories, and these memories are constructs of a society's literature and traditions (Jan Assmann 2003, 165–6). By perpetuating this memory, the society is perpetuating itself. Halbwachs suggested that history and Collective Memory were in opposition. History refers to a past which is no longer attainable or being actively remembered—a past that is fading away. On the other hand, Collective Memory refers to a past that is living in the minds of the members of a society. Furthermore, history looks to stress development and change while Collective Memory stresses continuity (Halbwachs 1980, 78–83). Halbwachs seems to perceive history similarly to Nietzsche who cried out against the "Historical Sickness" where history no longer serves a function outside of scholarly knowledge (Nietzsche 1957; cf. Jan Assmann 2003, 170 ft. 45). This history vs. memory opposition seems less relevant (though it should certainly be addressed) when looking at the Old Icelandic literature—these were meant not only to contribute to a body of knowledge, but rather a living tradition that had real-life implications on the identity and the legitimacy of different groups within Icelandic society. The fact that these texts were 'living' and constantly changing as part of their manuscript form strengthens this point even more (cf. Glauser 2007; Hermann 2013, 342). These were specialized texts conveying Cultural Memory.

While 'Collective Memory' was a term coined by Maurice Halbwachs and 'Social Memory' by Aby Warburg, Jan and Aleida Assmann developed a distinction between the concepts of 'Communicative Memory' and 'Cultural Memory' that are both encompassed by 'Collective Memory.' They are distinguished through content, forms, media, time structure, and participation structure. While Communicative Memory designates memory the span of which is no longer than 80–100 years and its participation structure is diffuse, Cultural Memory harks back to more mythical times, only obtainable through specialized mediators, such as priests, rabbis, shamans, and bards, or specialized mediation, such as written texts (Jan Assmann 2010).

But how do we *actually* benefit from the use of Cultural Memory in a discussion about Old Norse literature?

Criticism of Cultural or Collective Memory as a field of study was sounded as early as 1996 when Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam declared that “collective memory is but a myth” (47), arguing that there is nothing new regarding Collective Memory that cannot be said about individual memory. In the field of Old Norse studies it is difficult to avoid the question raised by its students: how does this relatively new theory say anything that is different than what has been said before using tools of literary analysis or existing methods of historical inquisition?

Aleida Assmann states that the point of creating categories such as Cultural Memory:

> is certainly not to introduce further abstract theoretical constructs, but to investigate empirically with these conceptual tools how memories are generated on the level of individuals and groups, how they are transformed by media and reconstructed retrospectively according to present norms, aims, visions, and projects. (2006, 222)

Responding to similar criticism, Astrid Erll maintains that:

> What these criticisms overlook, of course, is that it is exactly the umbrella quality of these relatively new usages of “memory” which helps us see the (sometimes functional, sometimes analogical, sometimes metaphorical) relationships between such phenomena as ancient myths and the personal recollection of recent experience, and which enables disciplines as varied as psychology, history, sociology, and literary studies to engage in a stimulating dialogue. (2010, 2)

However, she admits, Cultural Memory’s “conceptual toolbox” is at a “fledgling stage” (2).[8]

It is precisely this lack of a conceptual toolbox that seems to spark many doubts regarding this field of studies. But in a way, this criticism misses the point. Cultural Memory provides a conceptual framework to *re-organize* much of what has been said in the past, one that allows further development of our understanding of Old Icelandic literature. The best examples of this are studies made by Jürg Glauser (2000) and Pernille Hermann (2010), which have dealt with how Old Icelandic sagas were used as ‘formative texts’ (Glauser) or ‘founding narratives’ (Hermann).

In this sense Pernille Hermann and Stephen Mitchell are right to argue that the concept of Cultural Memory is the best way to “[move] scholarship beyond the outdated and now-largely disregarded discussion that took as its starting point modern genre typologies, especially the dichotomy between history and fiction" (2013b, 263). Rather than denying the Old Icelandic texts their historical validity, looking at them through the binoculars of Cultural Memory actually re-affirms their place as historical sources, since their main role is now one of constructing the perceptions of the past (Hermann 2013, 351, quoted above; cf. Burke 1997, 43–59).

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[8] One possible avenue from which such a unified conceptual toolbox may arise is the approach offered by experimental psychologists William Hirst and Charles B. Stone (2015), through which certain operations of *Collective* Memory can be explained through the operations of *Individual* Memory (see discussion in footnote 21 below in the context of ‘organized oblivion’).

Here, *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*'s role as an agent of Cultural Memory is shown to be inherent to the text rather than a theoretical concept superimposed on a story about the shenanigans of an awkward skald. This should not surprise anyone, because in their essence skalds were agents of memory. Kate Heslop has designated skaldic poetry as a Communicative rather than Cultural form of memory, meant to be performed for an audience contemporary to the events, rather than to be preserved for posterity. It becomes Cultural Memory only when it is written down (2014, 100), though Heslop points out that when addressing a distant past skaldic poetry can "embody cultural memory" (2014, 100). Skaldic poetry can be seen to be on the boundary between Communicative and Cultural Memory. Seen through Jan and Aleida Assmann's criteria for distinguishing between the two types of Memory (content, forms, media, me structure, and participation structure), skaldic verse has clear elements of both. Its contents represent both Autobiographical Memory (Poole 2014) and a mythical past. Its form could be in everyday settings (e. g., Þjóðólfr composing and performing skaldic poetry in the street, as discussed below) and could also be highly ceremonial (as is the case in *Laxdœla saga* when Úlfr Uggason performs a *drápa* in a very ceremonial setting (ÍF 5 80, cf. Hermann forthcoming)). Its media is a very specific and complex form of poetry, yet is spoken in a language that, in theory, should be accessible to anyone. Its time structure varies between the very recent and the very distant past. Finally, its participation is *both* diffuse and specialized. As will be discussed below, people from all parts of society would compose and had access to skaldic poetry. However, as is apparent from the stanzas' complex form, not everyone could *understand* skaldic poetry without training, though this might have had an informal nature (Mitchell 2013, 288). In their present state as textual representations, the skalds are undoubtedly agents of *Cultural* Memory, though their contemporary function as agents of *Communicative* Memory is important to keep in mind.

The connection between skalds and memory was contemporary both to the time of the poetry's composition and to the time of the texts preserving them. Skalds sought to authenticate their memory and dedicated space for this in their stanzas (Clunies Ross 2014). The skalds' autobiographical memory was used as an instructive tool that would dispense advice to their audience (Poole 2014, 125–6). Contemporary commentators such as Snorri Sturluson acknowledged skaldic poetry's function as testament of the past as well as a means of shaping the way that past is remembered (Clunies Ross 2005, 72–8). These elements should all be borne in mind when looking at *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*; much of the storyteller's energy is dedicated towards designing the way an agent of Cultural Memory is remembered.

Sneglu-Halla þáttr

> Hlýði allir menn, mér er mikil máls þǫrf. Ek skal kæra of óðindælu mína sjálfs. Mér er horfin hein ok heinarsufl, nál ok skreppa ok allt skjóðuskrúð, þat er betra er at hafa en missa. (282)[9]

Sneglu-Halla þáttr is an *Íslendingaþáttr*[10] that narrates the story of a skald who "foryfldisk heldr fás í orðum sínum." (ÍF 23, 270)[11] ["was not very reticent in his speech" (Andersson/Gade 2000, 243).] The odd Icelander Sneglu-Halli makes his way to the court of King Haraldr harðráði at around the year 1060 and proceeds to make an embarrassment of himself and those around him. His first interaction with King Haraldr is when the two meet at sea and exchange insults, and the narrative keeps it vague whether or not Halli is aware of this stranger's identity. Later on he is accepted in the king's court (without mention of the former insult exchange) and composes a stanza about the resident dwarf Túta, which Haraldr rewards handsomely. The story continues by telling us about how Halli runs off from the company of the king and his retinue in the street and is found eating gruel, which the king considers a great offence.[12] After refusing to eat gruel to death by order of the king, a new challenge is devised: the dwarf Túta is to carry a dish with a pig towards him, and Halli is required to compose a *vísa* by the time it reaches him. Failure will result in his death. Halli achieves this, and he regains the favor of the king. The story then turns to describe a quarrel between Halli and the court skald Þjóðólfr, where both men expose the other's lowly origins. Later, King Haraldr's tax collector Einarr fluga arrives at court, a man notorious for being an *ójafnaðarmaðr* (one who never pays compensation for the men he kills). Halli makes a bet with one of the court's retainers, saying that he will manage to get compensation from the tax collector, with the stakes being the retainer's gold ring and Halli's head. After Einarr relates how he had killed a man on a ship he encountered at sea, Halli pretends this is a kinsman of his and proceeds to request compensation from Einarr. Halli approaches Einarr twice, and is rejected and threatened. He addresses the king in this matter, and insinuates that he will spread an insulting verse if it is not resolved. King Haraldr demands that Einarr pay compensation, and afterwards Halli refuses to accept the retainer's gold ring although he won their bet, since his main motivation was to prove a point. After this, Halli travels to Denmark where he manages to silence a loud assembly by talking nonsense (again in order to win a bet, and quoted at the beginning of this sub-chapter). Then he turns to England where he composes a *kvæði* that is rewarded by the king pouring silver on his head; whatever amount of silver sticks is to be his reward.[13] Halli proceeds to rub tar on his head, so that as much silver as possible sticks onto it. The story ends with Halli seeking passage back to Norway, but the presence of a large group of Germans on board leaves no room on the ship, so he tells them that a large man appeared before him in a dream and recited an ominous skaldic stanza, implying that the ship's voyage will end badly. This gets rid of the Germans, and the *þáttr* ends by telling us that Halli stayed with the king in Norway for some time.

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[9] "Everyone listen, because this is important. I want to lodge a complaint about a problem. I have lost a whetstone and the whetstone lubricant, and a needle and bag, and everything that goes with the bag and is better to have than to lose" (Andersson/Gade 2000, 251).

[10] Pl. *Íslendingaþættir*, Old Icelandic episodes which feature an Icelandic protagonist as the main character. For a definition of this alleged genre and debate regarding the different scholarly approaches to it, cf. Rowe and Harris 2005, also see Jakobsson 2013.

[11] Íslenzk fornrit editions will henceforth be referred to as 'ÍF', the volume number following.

[12] The narrator does not explain the offence, but it seems that the king does not consider this food fit for a member of his retinue (cf. Andersson/Gade 2000, 442, note 8). In addition, it is implied that the king hasn't kept Halli well enough fed, after having promised to do so earlier (cf. Jakobsson 2014, 178).

The version of *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* discussed here appears in the Kings' saga *Morkinskinna* (a name which can be translated to "Rotten Parchment"). The oldest extant *Morkinskinna* manuscript (GKS 1009 fol.) is dated to c. 1280 (Ármann Jakobsson 2014, 23–8), although the original manuscript (often referred to as "*The Oldest Morkinskinna*") is dated between the years 1217–22.[14] Until very recently, scholars have doubted whether the extant manuscript reflects the original one due to the many *þættir* (short stories) and skaldic poetry, which were perceived as interpolations added to the later manuscript. However, recent works of scholars such as Theodore M. Andersson and Kari E. Gade (2000), and Ármann Jakobsson (2002/2014) have shed new light on the matter, re-evaluating the question of interpolation, and establishing a clear individual agency in the text. Ármann

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[13] This is meant as an ironic reward because after Halli declares he must leave England and thus cannot perform the poem again, the king feels he has not gained much from the affair and wishes to reward the skald similarly: A reward that won't stick for a *kvæði* that won't 'stick.'

[14] The earliest extant *Morkinskinna* (GKS 1009 fol) is in no way the *only* extant *Morkinskinna*. The text also exists in other versions in the late 14th century *Hulda* (AM 66 fol), and early 15th century *Hrokkinskinna* (GKS 1010 fol). *Flateyjarbók* (GKS 1005 fol), written 1387–1394, contains many 'borrowings' from the *Morkinskinna* text as well (Jakobsson 2014, 23–8).

Jakobsson (2013) has recently argued that *þættir* were not perceived as a separate genre by their authors and contemporary audience, and that this was only a later development.[15] For the present study, however, the individual nature of the *þættir* matters less, as well as whether or not the date of *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*'s original composition was c. 1220, when *The Oldest Morkinskinna* was written, or at a different time. What is important to take from this discussion is that the inclusion of this *þáttr* in the earliest extant *Morkinskinna* was not at all 'by accident' or evidence of manuscript contamination. The degree to which *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* fits into the existing narrative is strengthened by Ármann Jakobsson's words: "The structure of this episode is comparable to *Morkinskinna* as a whole, and thus it may be said that the Halli episode is a sort of *Morkinskinna* writ small" (2014, 122).

To get a better understanding of the *þáttr*, we should pay no heed to the old warnings of New Criticism and look directly at the biography of the author of *Morkinskinna*. Indeed, the manuscript as well as the original work are anonymous, but a mixture of some healthy teleology and common sense can help us paint the broad-stroked picture of a possible author of the extant *Morkinskinna* text.[16] While the Icelandic identity of the author is mostly undisputed (Andersson/Gade 2000, 77–9), and it is even possible to claim that he himself had ventured out of Iceland to Norway (80),[17] Andersson/Gade go as far as claiming—based on oral and intertextual evidence—that the piece was composed in Munkaþverá in Eyjafjörður (69). This establishes a connection between this literary work and the Sturlungar, whose nearby residence at Grund c. 1220 would have had its influence on the writing (68). As Gade points out: "at least for one faction in the political struggle for power, namely the Sturlung family, skaldic poetry became a very important tool indeed" (2000, 88). As Torfi H. Tulinius (2009) has maintained, Snorri Sturluson used his literary abilities to gain what Pierre Bourdieu designated as 'cultural capital'; his knowledge of skaldic verse gave him social power and advantage (57–61; see also Wanner 2008, 53–73). Andersson/Gade's suggestion that the Sturlungar had their influence on the writing of *Morkinskinna* is thought-provoking, and it is interesting to consider how they wished the character of the 11th century skald to be represented and thus remembered, since they held so much stock in this artistic occupation.

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[15] In Ármann Jakobsson's words: "There was never any such thing as a medieval Icelandic short story." (Jakobsson 2013, 257).

[16] We should, of course, avoid taking the word "author" too literally, since in the preparation of a manuscript there is usually more than one voice at play (especially when there is more than one 'hand'). However, as mentioned above, Ármann Jakobsson has established convincingly that a unitary authorial design can be found for this kings' saga (2014; see especially 328–333) and this is an underlying assumption of the present article.

[17] While it would be relatively safe to assume that the author of *Morkinskinna* was a man, the role of women in preserving Cultural Memory is important to note, as female scribes (and perhaps authors) existed as well (cf. Arnórsdóttir 2013, 385–9; Wolf 2011, 14–6; and Óskarsdóttir 2006, 148–50).

Variances and Similarities

> You don't look different, but you have changed / I'm looking through you, you're not the same. (Lennon-McCartney)

For its contemporary audience (and for us as well), *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* was a tale of the past. Not a faraway *fornaldarsögur* past, but a past nonetheless. As Jan Assmann points out: "In order to be able to refer to it, one must grow an awareness of the past as such. This presupposes the following two factors: a) The past must not have vanished altogether, there ought to exist testimony; b) Such testimony has to show significant variance from 'Today'" (Jan Assmann 2003, 159). But how does the time narrated in *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* differ from the time of *Morkinskinna*'s 13th century authors?

When comparing the *Íslendingasögur*, and Old Norse literature in general, to the time of the contemporary authors, much emphasis is put on the fact that they correspond to a pagan past (e. g., Lönnroth 1969, Lindow 1997, and Hermann 2007). The time of King Haraldr harðráði, however, was not one of paganism—it is after the reign of the two Ólafr kings, and many decades after the Icelandic conversion. Thus, there is a religious continuity between the narrated and the narrator that would not indicate a substantial 'variance.' The characters of Sneglu-Halli and Þjóðólfr might also be seen to reflect a similar continuity, since the role of royal poets was a space occupied by Icelanders at the 13th century, as is apparent in the story of Sturla Þórðarson's interactions with King Magnús Hákonarson and his wife as told in *Sturlunga saga*'s *Sturlu þáttr* (*Sturlunga saga* 2, 231–5).

When the earliest extant *Morkinskinna* was written, it was more or less fifteen years since the Norwegian monarchy gained power over Iceland. When *The Oldest Morkinskinna* was written, presumably in the third decade of the 13th century, Iceland was in the midst of a trade dispute with Norway, which was only resolved when Snorri Sturluson intervened and promised to bring the island under the monarchy's control (*Íslendinga saga* in *Sturlunga saga* 1, 277–9).[18] Thus, an identifiable 'variance' is the Icelanders' sense of loss of their sovereignty. Scholars such as Patricia Boulhosa have argued that the submission to the Norwegian king resulted from a “continuous political development, rather than a rupture” (2005, 209), and that “there is no indication in the sagas that the Icelandic past had been more ‘lost’ than any other, nor that the Icelanders had forgotten it” (41). These are challenging arguments, and while the historical argument might ring true,[19] the argument that the distance from the past was not significant seems to mainly be a reaction to those who lament over the “supposed decadence” (41) of Icelandic society after the submission to the Norwegian king. An example where a true fear of loss and change is most evident can be found in Einarr of Þverá’s eloquent speech against King Ólafr helgi’s request of the island Grímsey,[20] where he warns that if his fellow countrymen allow this it could start a process that would end with a loss of freedom (*frelsi*, ÍF 27, 216). Whether the product of a long-term development or a relatively quick rupture, the political reality of ‘today’ was still seen as different than the way things were in a figurative ‘yesterday.’

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[18] Cf. Pálsson (1992, XX) who suggests that the island given to Hreiðarr and his declaration "þar skal ek samtengja með Nóreg ok Ísland" (ÍF 23, 164) could be tied to this very historical event.

A Dispute of Skaldic Proportions

> The way in which the novel foregrounds certain figures in the past as worthy of being remembered suggests that discussions regarding cultural memory need to be extended beyond questions of authenticity and origins, where they are usually concentrated, to include other functions and values, such as exemplariness. (Rigney 2004, 381)

Sneglu-Halli is independence personified. He starts off the *þáttr* by (perhaps unwittingly) implying that King Haraldr is on the receiving-end of a sodomitic act after the king teases him.[21] He dares to run off from the king’s audience to sit on the street and eat *grautr* (porridge, or “greasy gruel” (Andersson/Gade 2000, 246)). He manipulates the *ójafnaðarmaðr* Einarr fluga into giving him compensation for an invented wrong in order to win a bet. He speaks nonsense in order to silence an entire Danish *þing*, also to win a bet. One cannot help but appreciate and sympathize with this ingenious Icelander, and it seems probable that the *þáttr*'s contemporary audience would react similarly.

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[19] But see Þorláksson (2007), where he sums up Boulhosa’s argument that the agreement between the Norwegian king and the Icelanders was a later construction, and his own response to this.

[20] Einarr is always in top form when it comes to ruining his brother Guðmundr inn ríki’s ill-advised plans.

[21] ‘Sodomitic’ rather than ‘homosexual’ since the latter term refers to a modern concept while the former is more contemporary to medieval times. The decision to use this term rather than others available is reinforced by the fact that an authority such as Albertus Magnus defined ‘sodomy’ as “a sin against nature, of a man with a man, or of a woman with a woman” (Jacquart/Thomasset 1988, 161; cf. Boswell 1981, 316–8).

In addition to the listeners and readers of the story, this character manages to gain the favor of the Norwegian and English king, as well as to play according to the rules of honor by refusing to accept the winnings of a wager because his opponent "[hafði] drengliga af við mik um málit." (ÍF 23, 281) ["[had] dealt with me very decently in this affair" (Andersson/Gade 2000, 250)]. Halli is also a remarkable poet, able to compose a stanza within a very short time span, with the added pressure of his life hanging on the balance. His words are so efficient and dangerous that the threat of them alone forces Einarr fluga to pay compensation for a deed he did not even commit.

The praise for Halli's poetry does not come from a late 13th century king and queen whose abilities to appreciate good poetry comes into question in *Sturlu þáttr* (Jakobsson and Guðjónsson 2, 233; cf. Clunies Ross 2005, 220), but rather from the poetically educated Haraldr harðráði, who in *Morkinskinna* scolds a skald who did not employ "jafn hátt" (ÍF 23, 286; Andersson/Gade translate this as "true rime" (2000, 253)), who also predicts which *drápa* will be forgotten and which remembered (ÍF 23, 137–9), and who generally surrounds himself with poets and poetry (cf. Gade 2000, 80–1). When this well-versed king declares a stanza well-versed, it seems sensible to trust him.

All these characteristics serve to make Halli a positive character, someone worthy of imitating. Halli is in many respects an anti-hero with problematic morals and behavior. But although his coarse style may be an initial source of unease, his successes against the 'stuck-up' skald Þjóðólfr and Einarr fluga help to gain the favor of the *þáttr*'s audience. This is in addition to the sympathy he gains through his entertainment value. While Sneglu-Halli's character is meant to entertain, or to function as a figure of fun, he always manages to avoid becoming entirely ridiculous, and keeps the audience's sympathy. The author manages this by crafting a sympathetic back-story of the character who grew up fatherless and had to mind the cows at a young age. He shows decency in his dealings with the courtier when he gives up his reward for their bet regarding Einarr fluga. The harsh *níð*-implication directed against the king is done in response to the latter's egging question, and it is not clear whether or not Halli is aware of his target's identity. He is constantly rewarded for his behavior and is never indecent or entirely humiliates himself, though he clearly has less regard for appearances.

Thus, Halli becomes a positive representation of a skald of the past, someone whom the audience of the *þáttr*'s 'today' should aspire to be like. But this might render the modern reader confused. If Sneglu-Halli is coarse and audacious, is the contemporary audience encouraged to behave like this as well? The short answer—yes. The representation of Þjóðólfr may be the key to this.

Þjóðólfr Arnórsson is featured heavily in *Morkinskinna* as king Haraldr's loyal skald, who follows him to his final battle at Stamford Bridge. He is a very capable poet. Besides the fact that he is kept as retainer to king Haraldr, who has been established earlier as an expert in the field of poetry, a passage from the *þáttr* has Þjóðólfr composing two stanzas on the spot that prove to be quite witty and original, which demonstrates his masterful control of the poetic material and technique. Þjóðólfr, we are told, was thought to be "nǫkkvat ǫfundsjúkr við þá menn er kvámu til hirðarinnar." (ÍF 23, 271) ["a bit envious toward the men who came to court" (Andersson/Gade 2000, 244)]. When Halli receives a gift from the king for a well composed stanza, "Þjóðólfi fannsk fátt um." (ÍF 23, 273) ["Þjóðólfr was not pleased" (Andersson/Gade 2000, 245)]. Likewise, when Halli runs off from the king's retinue and eating gruel in the street "þykkir Þjóðólfi þetta hlœgligt er Halli hefir til tekit." (ÍF 23, 275) ["Þjóðólfr thought that his prank was ridiculous" (Andersson/Gade 2000, 246)].[22] When the men at court taunt Sneglu-Halli about Þjóðólfr's superior capabilities, his response is priceless: "Eigi em ek jafn gott skáld sem Þjóðólfr, en þá mun mér first of fara ef ek emk eigi við staddr." (ÍF 23, 273) ["I am not as good a skald as Þjóðólfr, least of all when I am not present" (Andersson/Gade 2000, 245). This mutual hostility finally comes out in the open when Þjóðólfr ridicules verses that Halli had composed for his cows in the past, and Halli retaliates by exposing even more ludicrous verses that Þjóðólfr composed during his childhood in Iceland, which were meant to encourage fellow children in his household while they were carrying ashes out of the house-fire. Matters escalate further when Þjóðólfr accuses Halli of not avenging the death of his own father. Halli evades this accusation by explaining that a settlement was made when he was young. He did not pursue the matter further so that he would not be called a truce breaker. Halli then 'drops the bomb' by telling king Haraldr about how Þjóðólfr's father was killed by a calf, which Þjóðólfr proceeded to eat, thus eating his father's killer. Halli viciously frames this narrative with the sentence "øngan veit ek síns fǫður jafn greypliga hefnt hafa." (ÍF 23, 277) ["I know of no one who has avenged his father more fiercely" (Andersson/Gade 2000, 248)]. This insult goes too far and Þjóðólfr responds by attacking Halli, who is saved by the intervention of the king.

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[22] In Ármann Jakobsson's 2014 *A Sense of Belonging*, this line is translated as "Þjóðólfr considers Halli's misstep amusing" (182–3), which seems to be a more accurate translation, and it serves more to vilify Þjóðólfr rather than portray him as someone who is embarrassed by his fellow Icelander's behavior, which is the function of Andersson/Gade's translation. Both translations establish Þjóðólfr as opposition to Halli, even if one shows more tenderness towards the skald and the other paints him more as a petty rival to the *þáttr*'s protagonist.

Clearly, throughout his presence at the court, Halli strikes an exposed nerve of Þjóðólfr's (Jakobsson 2014, 291). Halli's coarse behavior is a constant and hurtful reminder of Þjóðólfr's meager and tragic background, a 'past' from which he is trying to run away. This escape from the past is best illustrated in a scene following the introduction of Þjóðólfr into the *þáttr*. As king Haraldr and the poet are walking down the street, they come across a tanner and blacksmith in the middle of a quarrel. King Haraldr requests that Þjóðólfr compose a stanza about this occurrence, and the poet's initial reaction is to refuse. Upon the king's insistence, Þjóðólfr composes two stanzas about the incident, one comparing them to Þórr and Geirrøðr, the other to Sigurðr and Fáfnir; both topics clearly dealing with Scandinavia's mythic past. His refusal to compose the stanzas could indicate Þjóðólfr's uneasiness with his meager background, and the days when he would compose verses to encourage children carrying ash. A fight between a tanner and a blacksmith is not material worthy of a poet of his present caliber, unlike his position in the past when meager topics such as this would perhaps be passable. That the stanzas' topic turned out to be Scandinavia's mythic past stresses Þjóðólfr's situation as a man avoiding his past. This is in sharp contrast to Halli, whose first interaction with the king is banter that plays on the double meaning between the monstrous Agði and the place-name Agðanes (cf. Perkins 1999; ÍF 23, 270–1 ft. 5).

It seems that in *Morkinskinna*, the biggest transgression an Icelander can do is to run away from one's past. If we look to *Hreiðars þáttr* in the same kings' saga, we can see this even more clearly. There, the eponymous hero joins his brother Þórðr to the court of the Norwegian king Magnús góði. While Þórðr is treated respectfully and cordially by the king, it is the oddly behaved Hreiðarr who achieves real intimacy with him, embodied in the scene where the protagonist circles the undressed king and examines his body. As Faulkes points out, Hreiðarr "eventually completely overshadows his conventional and mediocre brother, who is not even mentioned in the second half of the story" (Faulkes 1978, 17). Þórðr's last appearance comes after the king tells Hreiðarr that the two brothers may join his entourage. Þórðr's reaction to this news is to tell his brother that "Bú þik þá sœmiliga at klæðum eða vápnum. [...] Ok skipask margir menn vel við góðan búning, enda er vandara at búa sik í konungs herbergi en annars staðar, ok verðr síðr at hlœgi gǫrr af hirðmǫnnum" (ÍF 23, 157–8) ["Provide yourself with proper clothes and weapons. [...] Many men respond well to fine clothes, and it is harder to meet the standard at the king's court than elsewhere. It is important not to become the object of the courtiers' mockery" (Andersson/Gade 2000, 175)]. In Þórðr's opinion the best way to behave at the Norwegian court is by imitating, in manner and dress, the Norwegian courtiers. Hreiðarr, however, insists on clothes that will set him apart from the other courtiers, and agrees to wear *vaðmálsklæði* (ÍF 23, 158;

translated by Andersson/Gade as "clothes of homespun" (2000, 175)).[23] This interaction realizes the opposition between modification and amalgamation noted by Halbwachs in the opening epigraph, and that this opposition should be expressed through clothes and appearances is predictable given their importance in shaping remembrance and identity (Connerton 1989, 10–2, 72–104). Hreiðarr modifies his appearance by giving up the clothes that make him look entirely ridiculous, but remains with those that maintain his difference from the other court members. Þórðr suggests a complete amalgamation in hope to become indistinguishable from the other courtiers. The author of *Morkinskinna* is not interested in 'turn-coats' such as these, and turns away from Þórðr to focus solely on his more authentic Icelandic brother's exploits at court.

Similarly, it is revealing that Þjóðólfr's last appearance in *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* is when he is exposed by Halli as running away from the past. Indeed, he will appear further on in *Morkinskinna*, but is then referred to ironically as *þjóðskáld* (ÍF 23, 286; Andersson/Gade (2000, 253) translate this as "great poet")[24] by king Haraldr for not creating a correct full rime, or as the composer of verses commemorating the king's last battle in England. In a *þáttr* which focuses on the accomplishments of an Icelander, someone who is not true to his origins cannot find his place.

As Anthony J. Gilbert shows, "lack of social finesse is something that becomes a characteristic of Icelanders abroad" (1991, 412). Indeed, it is possible to notice a certain display of social ineptitude in many interactions between the Icelanders and the Norwegians, including the *Laxdæla saga* version of the famous meeting between Kjartan and king Ólafr helgi (ÍF 5, 117–8), where Kjartan displayed much disregard towards 'proper' behavior at the Norwegian court and towards the Norwegian monarch (cf. Gilbert 1991, 410–1), Glúmr Eyjólfsson's taking the role of the outsider in *Víga-Glúms saga* (ÍF 9, 16–9), and even Grettir's mishaps in Norway (ÍF 7, 127–34), which ultimately lead to his full-outlawry and death. But perhaps this awkwardness was not something the *Morkinskinna* author felt very awkward about. Why else would he reward the characters of 'foolish' Hreiðarr,[25] stubborn Auðunn or coarse Halli at the end of their *þættir*?

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[23] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (1995, 159) points out that *Jónsbók* actually includes sections on how one is meant to dress in accordence with their own class, and that Icelanders were under the same distinctive banner when part of the royal retinue.

[24] This might also be a shortening of "Þjóðólfr skáld" due to a copyist error (ÍF 23, 286 ft. 1).

[25] Despite Gilbert's argument (1991, 422), it seems that Hreiðarr‘s success does not come from him conforming to the Norwegian courtly behavior, but rather by persisting in his 'foolish' manner, though certainly honing his skill in the process. This is exemplified by his genius insult towards Haraldr harðráði in the form of a gilded sow, his strangely structured *kvæði* dedicated to king Magnús góði, and his sly reaction to King Magnús's offer of giving him an island, implying

Who Are the Skalds, Actually?

> When thinking about memory, we must start with forgetting (Aleida Assmann 2010, 97)

Looking at the history of the skalds in the Norwegian court, it is interesting to note that after the death of Haraldr harðráði, and until the end of the 11th century, “it is tempting to draw [the conclusion that] the composition of royal panegyrics was mostly in the hands of professional poets who spent their lives in Norway and had scant ties to Iceland” (Gade 2000, 84), Einarr Skúlason being the notable exception to this (83), though his ties to Iceland are not uncontested (cf. ÍF 24, 87 ft. 2). Thus, while skaldic poetry survived in Iceland during the 12th century (see Nordal 2001, 19–40), there is a gap of more than a century between the Viking Age (pagan and Christian alike) and the early 13th century during which the Icelanders were not the driving force of skaldic poetry at the Norwegian court.[26]

As Aleida Assmann’s quote above indicates, when looking at cultural memory, it is productive to not only look at what is being remembered, but also at what has been forgotten. In Peter Burke’s words: “It is often said that history is written by the victors. It might also be said that history is forgotten by the victors” (1997, 54). These cases of “organized oblivion” (Burke 1997, 57; a term that originally appeared in Connerton (1989, 14)) can be a crucial part of the battle between different kinds of memories with implications on “personal and political identities” (Kenny 1999, 421). What kind of identity of the Icelandic skald is the author of *Morkinskinna* encouraging its audience to forget?[27]

Ann Rigney has pointed out that one of literature’s Cultural Memory functions is to foreground certain characters in history and to repress the representation of others (Ann Rigney 2004, 181–182; see quote at beginning of the previous sub-

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through his likely feigned enthusiasm that perhaps it would be wisest not to meddle with the rulership of an island (cf. Andersson/Gade 2000, 78).

[26] As Gade phrases this “With the death of Haraldr at the battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066 the heyday of the Icelandic court poets came to a temporary close” (2000, 81), pointing out conspicuously scarce information regarding Icelanders at the Norwegian court compared to the periods proceeding this one. While Icelanders never disappeared from the Royal scene, their presence was significantly less felt.

[27] While it may be wisest to avoid a term such as ‘social amnesia’ since it implies actual forgetting rather than silence (cf. Roediger and Wertsch 2008, 18), recent studies presented by experimental psychologists William Hirst and Charles B. Stone have shown the effects of ‘Retrieval-Induced Forgetting’ (2015, 107). Essentially, they argue that when a *known* event is *retold*, the components that the speaker omits are more readily forgotten. While the sagas were written texts, they were frequently read out, the reader thus giving the narrative a face.

chapter). The representation of Þjóðólfr in the *þáttr* shows us that an Icelander not ‘owning up’ to his own heritage is not worth the author’s time. The personality of the skald is only interesting if it belongs to one who follows the norms of Icelandic behavior. Halli’s character reminds us of similar representations of Icelanders in the saga corpus. Like Egill, he must compose poetry in order to save his own life. Like Kjartan, he meets the king while at sea without knowing his identity and contends with him. Like Gunnlaugr ormstunga he travels around Northern Europe, reciting his verses to kings and earls and gets into a dispute with a fellow skald. And most importantly—like Hreiðarr, the key to his success abroad is his persistence in his ‘foolish’ manner. Þjóðólfr does not adopt this behavior, but, on the contrary, he shows his blatant disgust towards it. He wishes to become a Norwegian, and thus a Norwegian skald.

Halli fits well with the constructed image of the skald that the author of *Morkinskinna* wished to create. Þjóðólfr does not, and thus he is brushed aside in the *þáttr* and in the following episode is mocked by the king. As the cultural currency of the Icelanders is based on their role as court poets, they cannot afford to be represented by people who do not fit with this paradigm. The existence of Þjóðólfr as court skald cannot be erased; after all, the author is a historian and the importance of the information his verses provide about king Haraldr’s reign is too valuable to neglect (cf. O’Donoghue 2005, 10–77) and probably too well known to eradicate. However, it is more than possible to manipulate his image so that he will be looked down upon, ensuring that his memory be associated with a negative value when set against the endorsement of the model of behavior represented by Halli.

Halli’s representation also encourages its audience to forget certain facts about their present. Guðrún Nordal points out that the skalds whose verses we know of do not represent the entire corpus of 13th century Icelandic poetry and are definitely influenced by the aristocratic bias of the *samtíðasögur*’s authors. However, she also notes that in order to have the means to travel outside of Iceland during that time, one must have come from a very well-off family (2001, 142). While Halli may come from ‘the slums’ (cf. Patrick 2008), the Icelandic skalds of the 13th century certainly do not. A man with a poor background like Halli could not have afforded to travel abroad in the 13th century, when financial circumstances and the frequency and costs of voyages from Iceland were much different than they were in the mid-11th century (Guðrún Nordal 2001, 142).

There seems to be little point in blowing the whistle on the 13th century author of *Morkinskinna*. However, pointing out these discrepancies between the constructed image of the skald and the 13th century reality serves the purpose of understanding how these people, or at least *Morkinskinna*’s author, perceived themselves, and perhaps also how they wished to be viewed by others. As Ármann Jakobsson notes:

> Although the author of *Morkinskinna* and other Icelandic royal courtiers in 13th-century Norway could see themselves in figures such as Sigvatr and Arnórr, most of them had no doubt also (and perhaps more often) endured experiences resembling those of Hreiðarr the Simple, Auðun of the Westfjords or Sneglu-Halli when they first went abroad. Behind every perfectly turned out courtier is the child who understood nothing and stuck out like a sore thumb at court. (2014, 290)

While Ármann Jakobsson refers to the awkwardness of Icelanders abroad rather than to their financial situation, it is worth pointing out that compared to the riches of the established monarchy and the European-influenced courtier behavior, even a relatively rich Icelandic aristocrat would have felt poor, out of his place, and 'out of his league.' Although this past might be seen as shameful (Þjóðólfr certainly felt this way), they are also aware that it is this aura of Otherness that establishes them as "hugkvæmir margir" as king Magnús góði calls Icelanders (ÍF 23, 156).[28]

Moreover, this image of the poor and true Icelander may very well be a reaction to the political situation of the 13th century, and fits both the time of *The Oldest Morkinskinna* (c. 1220) and of the extant *Morkinskinna* (c. 1280). As mentioned above, both were written at times when Icelandic individual identity was being questioned. It was necessary to find a unifying factor for the Icelandic people, which they could hang on to even in the face of losing their independence. Jan Assmann observes that "society does not receive new ideas by replacing its own past for them, but by taking possession of the past of groups other than those which hitherto determined it" (2003, 169). As mentioned above, when the Christian skald Þjóðólfr is asked by king Haraldr harðráði to compose two stanzas on the spot, kennings about Þórr, Geirrøðr, Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and Fáfnir are employed—all pagan references (ÍF 23, 271–2 st. 119 and 120). Two of Halli's stanzas also make use of the pagan gods Njǫrðr (276 st. 124) and Rán (283 st. 125) for kennings. These connect the act of creating skaldic poetry in the *þáttr* with pagan myths, something that was not necessarily intuitive at the time of *Morkinskinna*'s composition (Clunies Ross 2005, 114–40). As Icelandic identity was in danger of being lost, *Morkinskinna*'s author grabbed at the memory of his people's past, and constructed it to suit their present.

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[28] Andersson/Gade translate this as "sly lot" (2000, 172). Though perhaps "ingenious" would be a more proper word choice (cf. Jakobsson 2014, 287).

Conclusion

> Hvat skyldir þú fara útan af Íslandi til ríkra manna ok gørask svá at undrum?” (ÍF 23, 274)[29]

When we examine how 13th century Icelanders remembered their past, it becomes apparent that political needs and local concerns converged, and created a necessity for an Icelandic role model. This was found in the unlikely character of Sneglu-Halli, the insulter of kings and contender of ‘stuck-up’ courtiers. In order to preserve their cultural currency as skalds, the Icelanders needed to establish a memory and tradition of unique behavior at court, a behavior that skalds such as Þjóðólfr, successful as they were, could not support. Þjóðólfr is not the ‘bad guy’ of *Morkinskinna*. He is simply used as a negative model of behavior, as an opposition to the correctly unique manners of Halli. That the battlefield of proper Icelandic behavior at court should be fought so ferociously by two skalds is by no means an accident; skalds were seen as individuals with whom people’s sympathies lie, individuals whose Autobiographical Memory became a part of society’s Cultural Memory. When Sneglu-Halli runs off to eat gruel rather than to be in the presence of the king, he is making a statement of independence. But when the king proceeds to try and force him to eat gruel to death, he refuses to do so. This clarifies the pragmatic moral of the story: be true to your origins, but not unwisely so. This is an important reminder to the Icelanders still adjusting to the Norwegian rule at c. 1280. Don’t linger in the past, remember it.

Cultural Memory shows us how skaldic ‘culture’ is constructed through ‘memory.’ The skald Sneglu-Halli’s outlandish behavior was not something to be ashamed of, as Þjóðólfr was. It was something that allowed him to approach and reproach the king with harsh language, to imply that he is *argr* and get away with it, to gain riches, and to make a statement about the unjustified behavior of an *ójafnaðarmaðr*. This changing Icelandic society constructed ‘past’ in order to influence its ‘present’, turning their shortcomings into advantages. There should thus be no surprise that stories such as *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* and *Hreiðars þáttr* continued to remain popular throughout the years. Anyone can be courteous. But not everyone can be court skalds. Sneglu-Halli’s uniqueness at court is not a weakness, but rather something to be proud of. Something to be remembered.

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[29] “What was the point of leaving Iceland to visit great men just to make a spectacle of yourself?” (Andersson/Gade 2000, 246).

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