Oral Storytelling at the Court of King Haraldr harðraða: Storytelling and the storyteller in mid-eleventh century Norway, as depicted in Morkinskinna
Introduction

It used to be fashionable to gather up references in the written texts to oral storytelling and the recitation of poetry and present them to the world in such a way as to imply, if not claim, ‘There is oral tradition for you! The early Icelanders told stories and recited poetry to each other all the time!’¹

In his contribution to *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* Gísli Sigurðsson refers here to the scholars of the Viking Age who have attempted to reference examples of oral performance within the saga tradition.² His cynicism is valid, and he goes on to describe certain examples from Old Norse literature that have been taken at face value and proclaimed a template for what Sigurðsson calls ‘oral tradition.’ This ‘oral tradition’ sometimes is supposed to represent the culture of the entire span of Viking Age Scandinavia. Sigurðsson pinpoints two examples in the saga literature which have been used extensively as evidence: the first is the storytelling that occurs at the wedding at Reykjarhólar in 1119, in the saga Þorgils saga ok Haflíða; the second occurs in Sturlunga saga, when Sturla Þorðarson entertains the crew of a ship, and subsequently the queen, with his tale of the troll woman.³ Yet, this cynicism is perhaps misplaced when we see to what use some scholars have put these examples. Judy Quinn references both examples in her work ‘From orality to literacy in medieval Iceland’ in an effort to better understand how the society transitioned from oral to literate modes of transmission.⁴ Her treatment of the examples is sensitive, and helps to illustrate how the oral tradition may have functioned as the society transitioned to the literate society that left us the sagas.⁵ Stephen A. Mitchell, in his article ‘Performance and Norse Poetry: The Hydromel of Praise and the Effluvia of Scorn,’ uses both examples in order to indicate how an instance of performance in the text can help illustrate the concerns of

---

² Three terms are used in reference to oral literature in this paper, which will be further explained as they occur in the paper. The first is ‘oral tradition’, which refers to the performance of oral texts, but also to the transmission and content of the oral literature itself. The next is ‘oral performance,’ which refers to any poetry recitation or storytelling that is delivered orally. The third, and main focus of this paper is ‘oral storytelling,’ which refers specifically to the act of telling a prose narrative orally.
⁵ Quinn, pp. 45-46.
host/guest relationships and exchanges. The works of both scholars warrant the use of these examples because they are culturally and literarily relevant to their arguments. Sigurðsson’s objection, however, retains merit; for the examples of oral tradition to be culturally relevant it is inadvisable to take the evidence out of its literary context. Each example is fulfilling a function in the saga in which it is found, and the role of the anecdote in the literature will affect the nature of the cultural evidence that that anecdote would otherwise provide.

Preben Meulengracht Sørensen uses the examples of Sturla, the wedding at Reykjarihólar, and a third, the þátttr ‘Íslending þátttr sögufroða,’ to illustrate the nature of oral storytelling in early Icelandic society. In this last tale an Icelander comes to the court of King Haraldr harðraða Sigurðarson and entertains the court with several different stories, including one detailing the earlier, perhaps rather questionable activities of King Haraldr himself. Sørensen’s description of Icelandic society is, however, intentionally broad, and encompasses the entirety of the Viking Age, as well as some of the Medieval period. He is also using evidence out of context. What the þátttr seems to exemplify is the cultural place of a professional storyteller in the court of King Haraldr; as a storyteller this Icelander is able, without the help of poetry, to gain a living as an entertainer in an eleventh century Norwegian court. For the scholar this is particularly interesting because the extant sagas of Medieval Iceland partially originate from this oral tradition. One way this is recognized is by the identification of oral sources by the authors. Scholars are, therefore, very eager to locate an account of someone actually telling a story, or saga, that may have helped to generate the extant saga traditions. The approach of scholars like Quinn, Mitchell or Sørensen is valid, and useful, because the traces of an oral culture are apparent, and so we try to flesh it out with the evidence we have. However, the context of these examples must be taken into account, so that the scholar

8 There are many examples within Morkinskinna where the compiler(s) mention the source of the tradition that they are recording, and it turns out to be an oral source. See Chapter 2 for more info about narratorial interjections, and Chapter 3 for more about the substantiating of prose narrative in the text with skaldic verses. James E. Knirk,, ‘Konungsásgur’, in Medieval Scandinavia: an encyclopedia , ed. by Phillip Puliano (New York: Garland, 1993), p. 364.
does not forget that the source of the cultural evidence is also literature. This paper will undertake a detailed examination of some selected examples related to ‘Íslendings þátr sógufroða’ and will focus on the context of those examples to better understand what is implied, both literally and culturally, when the anecdotes are invoked.

Sørensen effectively uses the narratives to show the variation in the tradition of storytelling, but it is not within the scope of his work to connect these examples with their specific contexts. This is Sigurðsson’s complaint, that the examples of this supposed ‘oral tradition’ can not be taken out of their identifiable and specific context. It is the textuality of the evidence which generates the scholarly debate about how much the texts can be taken to reflect the society they portray;

It was not difficult for sceptics to challenge this line of argument. They could say that all such references had been filtered through writers who wanted to convince their readers that oral storytelling and poetry recitation had flourished in earlier times, and who lived to include formulaic references to oral sources in order to make their own text seem more authentic.9

‘Íslendings þátr sógufroða’ is a þátr found in the text of Morkinskinna.10 This is not the only example of oral storytelling at the court of King Haraldr within Morkinskinna. If you enhance your search, and look for characters who recite either prose (including sagas), poetry, or both, there are a great many instances in the text of oral performance in the presence of this particular king.11 However, if one is examining these as examples of a tradition of oral performance in the Norwegian court in the mid-eleventh century one should keep in mind Sigurðsson’s criticism of taking examples at face value, and take care not to use the examples as templates that say ‘yes, this was what the culture of King Haraldr’s court was like.’ In the case of ‘Íslendings þátr sógufroða,’ one should keep in mind that the þátr is part of the text of Morkinskinna, and that, consequently, the content of the narrative is influenced by the nature of the entire text. The action within the entire relevant section pertaining to Haraldr harðraða is influenced by the fact that the text was

9 Sigurðsson 2005, p. 281.
10 This is not the only redaction of the þátr. See Chapter 2.
11 Sørensen describes ‘saga’ as any form of storytelling. In this paper we will use story, and sometimes narrative to describe the oral prose form used in performance, which will include saga, but also other forms that can be differentiated from saga like þátr. Sørensen, p. 107.
composed by one or more authors, so there is therefore an intelligent force behind the evidence, guiding what is written in the text. It is the creative element which challenges any historical veracity in the text.

All the cultural evidence within the sagas comes with a literary context. Sørensen points out the paradox that the context for our study of the sagas comes from the sagas themselves.\textsuperscript{12} It is pertinent to the study of oral storytelling, as it is portrayed in \textit{Morkinskinna}, to examine variously what role the storytelling has in the þáttr, the subsequent role of the þáttr/þættir in the text, and finally how the text functions in the context of its cultural and historical settings. Using such a process, the scholar can begin to reconstruct how the text of \textit{Morkinskinna} affects the account of oral storytelling in this and the other þættir, and how the instances of storytelling reflect back on the nature of the text.

This paper will investigate a particular action (oral storytelling), within a particular culture (the court of King Haraldr harðraða), as it was depicted in a particular text (\textit{Morkinskinna}). The limitations of both setting and text make this a relatively small sample of oral storytelling. The fact that the same examples, such as the wedding at Reykjahólar in 1119, and the stories of Sturla Þorðarson, continue to resurface is reflective of a small body of evidence to begin with. It was decided this paper would concentrate exclusively on evidence from one specific section of one specific text because of the interest in reconstructing a certain depiction of oral storytelling, with regard to the place the action had in the culture, as it is seen in the literature. The choice of evaluating the context of \textit{Morkinskinna} was not random, as there is a concentration of examples of oral performance in this particular text, and even more specifically, in this particular section pertaining to Haraldr harðraða.

Using these examples, this paper will examine the literary construct of oral storytelling at Haraldr harðraða’s court in the text of \textit{Morkinskinna}. But the literature of \textit{Morkinskinna} does not exist in a vacuum, as scholars have investigated the role of the storyteller in various cultures, both living and dead, and have also tried to flesh out the culture of Haraldr harðraða. The first chapter, therefore, will look at how we view the role of oral storytelling, as scholars of Viking Age Scandinavia and as sociologists interested in the

\textsuperscript{12} Sørensen, p. 134.
place of the oral storyteller.\textsuperscript{13} The chapter will undertake to understand how storytelling can function in a society, in order to counteract the temptation to disregard entirely the evidence in \textit{Morkinskinna} as merely a literary construct. The second chapter will examine the nature of the evidence, including the context for the saga and manuscript of \textit{Morkinskinna}, and how this context affects the nature of the narrative within the text. The third chapter will involve an in-depth analysis of the instances of storytelling within the section of \textit{Morkinskinna} relating to the court of King Haraldr harðraða. This will include a discussion on the difficulty of defining storytelling, and an examination of ways the context of the saga is reflected in the examples will be included. The fourth chapter will examine the resulting cultural depiction of oral storytelling at Haraldr’s court within \textit{Morkinskinna}.

The goal of this paper is not to make absolute statements about the role of the storyteller in the historical court of King Haraldr. Instead it is putting this example, which other literary critics and historians have pointed to as an instance of oral storytelling, and tried to validate their claim, or at least to determine what is actually implied by this example and all other relevant examples in this section of \textit{Morkinskinna}. The intent is to avoid having an example without context, and in doing so provide a solid context for the cultural evidence, so other scholars might henceforth use this as an example of storytelling knowledgeable. There should be no separation of the sociological conclusions about the place of the oral storyteller in the society from the literary concepts of the function of storytelling in the text.\textsuperscript{14} The literary context will necessarily affect the nature of the cultural evidence, so that the two can not be disentangled. The conclusion drawn from examining oral storytelling at the court of King Haraldr, within the context of \textit{Morkinskinna}, is that the evidence for this particular cultural activity reflects the design of the compiler(s) of the text, ultimately reflecting the genre of \textit{Morkinskinna}. Thus, representing the genre of konungasögur,

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{13} Here I am using the term sociologist with the same implications as Ruth Finnegan in her book \textit{Oral Poetry}: ‘while the position of the poet, the function of oral poetry and the possible relations between 'literature’ and 'society' concern sociologists…’ Ruth H Finnegan, \textit{Oral Poetry: its nature, significance, and social context}, 1\textsuperscript{st} Midland Book edition. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. xx. This branch of sociology is sometimes differentiated as 'social anthropology.’ Finnegan, p.xx.  

\textsuperscript{14} Finnegan also acknowledges the crucial intersection of those two disciplines when it comes to the investigation of oral storytelling; ‘two conventional disciplines on which this book chiefly draws are those of literature and sociology.’ Finnegan, p. xx.}
Morkinskinna depicts a time and place in Norway from the perspective of an Icelander, with the biases of an antiquarian. The result is that Morkinskinna shows oral storytelling to be a worthy and meaningful task as well as entertainment, and is employed by individuals, including the king, looking to accomplish their own ends in the mid-eleventh century Norwegian court.

Chapter 1: Oral Storytellers

For the investigation of the oral tradition Sigurðsson proposes a ‘comparative literary-cultural approach.’ When Sigurðsson is talking about the oral tradition he is including the cultural setting of oral storytelling, but he is also including the tradition through which the oral texts were transmitted. Sigurðsson’s approach to understanding this tradition involves a close study of the style and content of texts, which will yield clues to the oral origins. This is beyond the scope of this paper. However, he is also advocating an understanding of oral cultures, especially living oral cultures because this gives us paradigms for how oral literature might function within a society. This is crucial to a scholarly understanding of the Old Norse evidence, because the cynic would be inclined to divest the literature of any cultural relevance whatsoever. That we can trace an oral tradition within the texts indicates that there was a culture of oral performance; the only way that this evidence survives is in written texts. This remove from the oral culture puts the scholar at a disadvantage, as it takes us one more remove away from the texts in their original context. The rest of this paper shall look at the particular context and depiction of oral storytelling in Morkinskinna; in particular it shall look at the evidence of oral storytelling as it relates to the text as literature. Yet, as removed as the evidence is from the actual culture, we should not forget that this is a reflection of a historical society which performed texts orally; who told stories. It is, therefore, worth examining how oral storytelling has been known to function in society, so that we may ground the subsequent evidence in a tradition of scholarship which saw the genuine performance of oral literature.

This research is not interested in the transmission of oral texts, only how the texts were performed in a particular arena. Over the years much scholarly ink has been spilled over the development of writing in Scandinavia, and its relation and dependence on oral precedents. Evidence of the oral culture has been the object of most of the scholarly pursuits, to which we as scholars are greatly indebted, because it can be said with confidence that people did perform orally in Viking Age Scandinavia. ¹⁸ Not much ink has been spilt over the how, when and who of oral performance, but this relates to the earlier reference to the lack of examples of oral storytelling in the texts that make up the major body of evidence for the Viking Age. ¹⁹

More has been said about skalds than about storytellers, but again this is not unusual on the basis of the body of evidence. Skalds are often known by name, and while most of the skaldic poetry recorded in sagas serves the function of advancing the narrative or substantiating a tradition, there are more instances of the skalds performing for their patrons, or of people composing the occasional extemporaneous poem, than there are instances of individuals composing stories, professional or not. ²⁰

All societies are unique to their time and location, but the dearth of information causes the scholar to look for a starting point outside of Old Norse society. Social anthropologists investigate living cultures and have documented oral performance. Consequently, we are able to undertake a comparative cultural approach. It is prudent to start by looking to the work of Albert B. Lord and Milman Parry, who began their comparative study in the former Yugoslavia. These scholars studied the oral poetry and performance there during the first half of the twentieth century. The knowledge they gained from their interaction with a living tradition they then applied to dead oral traditions, especially Homeric poetry. Lord and Parry studied

---

¹⁸ Some of the scholars that speak of the oral tradition include Gísli Sigurðsson’s ‘Orality and Literacy in the Sagas of Icelanders’, Judy Quinn’s ‘From orality to literacy in medieval Iceland’, and Stefan Brink’s ‘Scandinavian Oral Society’.

¹⁹ For instance, Stefan Brink, in ‘Scandinavian Oral Society,’ is interested in whether or not it is possible to reconstruct oral culture. So he does start to illuminate the position of the oral performer, and he determines that ‘we end up with a picture of oral Scandinavian society where we must have had orators and specialists in traditions and customs.’ He logically deduces the need for someone to remember, and uses the ideology in the oral tradition to posit the ideology of the oral performer. So it is a description not concerned with the where and when of oral performance in the culture, but it is very much concerned with why. The whole article is illuminating the culture as oral transitions to written, so it is necessarily broad, and illuminating the place of the storyteller is not the aim of the article, though Brink does provide some interesting insights into the topic. Stefan Brink, ‘Scandinavian Oral Society’, in Literacy in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian Culture, ed. by Pernille Hermann (Denmark: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2005), p. 106.

the poets, but their resulting work deals less with the role of the poet in the society, where their main observation is that the more talented poets are indeed recognized for their gift, and more with the composition and maintenance of the poems.\textsuperscript{21} In this way they hoped to gain insight into how ancient poems had been composed, and how the tradition survived over time. This is not unlike the modern scholarly concern with how the skaldic poems and sagas that survived were maintained from the ‘oral culture’ long enough to be written down. The great legacy of Lord and Parry’s work is the oral-formulaic approach to the study of what Sigurðsson would call ‘orally derived literature.’\textsuperscript{22} While the oral-formulaic theory has fallen out of fashion with modern scholars, much of the groundwork for a comparative approach to oral literature was laid by Lord and Parry.\textsuperscript{23}

The current scholarship on oral literature in society owes a great deal to the work of Ruth Finnegan. She is one of the best advocates for a comparative approach to the study of oral tradition: ‘without some regard for a comparative perspective, even the most scholarly and specialised work can be ill-founded.’\textsuperscript{24} Her book \textit{Oral Poetry} seeks to address many of the issues that are particularly associated with oral literature.\textsuperscript{25} Finnegan has also inherited from the tradition of Lord and Parry, and gives their pioneering work detailed and thoughtful treatment in her book.\textsuperscript{26} She is also concerned with the oral tradition, the maintenance and composition of the literature, but it is also within the scope of her work to reflect on the place oral literature has within society/societies. Fundamental to the ensuing paper is the precept that ‘one can neither understand the organisation of literary activity in isolation from its social setting, nor grasp the functioning of the society without reference to the poetic activity which takes place among its members.’\textsuperscript{27}

In keeping with Sigurðsson’s prescription of a comparative literary-cultural approach to the investigation

\footnotesize{\bibliography{references}}
of oral tradition, it will be worthwhile to enumerate some of Finnegans arguments about the place of the poet and the poetry within a society. Finnegans is careful to point out that the role of the poet in each individual society is unique. Nevertheless, it does appear that patterns emerge as to how cultures interact with their oral literature.\textsuperscript{28} For instance, some of the roles a poet can have in society include a professional or specialist, who fills a full time occupation as a poet, possibly in a courtly setting; a semi-professional, sometimes itinerant poet, who might make a living reciting poetry or performing, but fills no fulltime position, a role perhaps filled by a skaldic poet or travelling specialist; or perhaps a member of a group who, having specialized knowledge, partakes in the literary tradition as a person among their peers who has a certain ability, which may perhaps be the case with certain courtiers who are able to showcase poetic talent, or have a particularly interesting story to tell.\textsuperscript{29} Finnegans, based on her comparative analysis of poetry in different cultures, argues that the poets are not anonymous, in that often the oral tradition is linked to some sort of romantic past, where the story is the property of an entire people, but that many poets or patrons have laid some sort of claim to certain compositions.\textsuperscript{30} She also states that the opposite should not be argued, that literature is not simply the work of an individual genius, but oral poetry in particular is subject to influence from many different venues. Literature itself is never created in a vacuum but will necessarily reflect the society in which it was created.\textsuperscript{31} Another relevant observation is that poetry can be recited alone, but that most often the audience is a large factor in the function of the poet and the poetry. Some poems, for instance, are recited amongst a group for their own benefit, some are recited at special functions, and some have very specific intended audiences.\textsuperscript{32} Poets can be the transmitters of the knowledge of heritage or ancestry through time, and so be meant to represent either a stabilizing force, or, Finnegans argues, they can be a force of social action or change.\textsuperscript{33} There are in fact several roles that literature will fulfill in society, and while Finnegans is dealing specifically with issues relating to oral

\textsuperscript{28} Finnegans, p. 170.  
\textsuperscript{29} Finnegans, pp. 188-201.  
\textsuperscript{30} Finnegans, pp. 201-206.  
\textsuperscript{31} Finnegans, pp. 210-213.  
\textsuperscript{32} Finnegans, pp. 214-231.  
\textsuperscript{33} Finnegans, pp. 242-243.
literature, for her, as for the scholars who are delving into the Norse oral tradition specifically, one finds that the boundaries between oral and written literature are inextricably blurred.\textsuperscript{34}

What makes Finnegan’s comparative approach to the oral tradition so successful is her sensitivity to the diversity among cultures. Throughout the work she advocates the individual case-study as the only way to properly understand how the literature functions in a particular culture. In the prologue to the Midlands edition of \textit{Oral Poetry} she says that even her own case-study on African oral literature would have been balanced more from a comparative perspective.\textsuperscript{35} A less sensitive work, and in this scholar’s opinion, a less successful study of the social implications of oral performance is Morton W. Bloomfield and Charles W. Dunn’s \textit{The Role of the Poet in Early Societies}. Part of the reason why it is less successful is because it is too dependent on an evolutionary theory of history.\textsuperscript{36} It maintains that up until the seventeenth century wisdom was the governing principal of all societies.\textsuperscript{37} They describe the early cultures examined in the text as ‘traditional’ societies, or ‘primal societies.’\textsuperscript{38} Nevertheless, their work attempts a comparison of the role of the poet among the early societies of the British Isles, including treatment of the role of the poet in the Norse tradition. In these early societies they associate wisdom with the culture, and this wisdom is then divided into two categories. The first is the category of philosophical wisdom, which comprises the particular worldview of that society. The second category is prudential wisdom, or all the stories that are told that explain how that worldview is related to the reality they see around them.\textsuperscript{39} For Bloomfield and Dunn ‘poets in particular are regarded as the discoverers, preservers, and transmitters of wisdom because they, unlike ordinary mortals, have acquired wisdom by a unique gift of vision granted specifically to them as a supernatural gift.’\textsuperscript{40} The act of reciting poetry is thus engaging in this particular wisdom, with honour accorded to those who could recite, and special honour accorded to those who were considered gifted.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{34} Finnegan, p. 272. \\
\textsuperscript{35} Finnegan, p. xxi. \\
\textsuperscript{36} This is one of the pitfalls that Finnegan warns of. Finnegan, p. 246. \\
\textsuperscript{37} Bloomfield and Dunn, p. 8. \\
\textsuperscript{38} Bloomfield and Dunn, p. 6 & 8. \\
\textsuperscript{39} Bloomfield and Dunn, p. 109. \\
\textsuperscript{40} Bloomfield and Dunn, p. 14.
\end{flushright}
For a paper whose focus is storytelling, it may appear that too much emphasis has been placed on poetry. For Bloomfield and Dunn this is not a problem. For them poetry is the word they use to encompass all literature and forms of discourse, except conversation.\footnote{Bloomfield and Dunn, p.1.} Storytelling and even the occasional speech would be included in this very broad category. Chapter 3 will further explore the relation of poetic performance to storytelling within the body of evidence. It will become apparent that in the text the reception of both forms of literature is closely linked. In Finnegan’s work there is an emphasis on the specific role of poets in society, but there is justification for applying many of her conclusions to the broader term of oral performance, which would include storytelling as well. Logically speaking, a storyteller could also fulfill the role as functionary, as entertainer, or as the carrier of a tradition. Finnegan admits that she herself has a wide definition of both ‘oral’ and ‘poetry’ in her book, which was necessitated by the diversity encountered in a comparative approach.\footnote{Finnegan, p. xiii.}

The scholar Thomas King has undertaken a specialized study of the role of the storyteller in Native Canadian society.\footnote{King’s text is a generalized introduction to the phenomenon of storytelling in Native Canadian cultures, and so he presents the diverse Native cultures as a unified whole, to serve as an introduction.\footnote{Thomas King, \textit{The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative: 2003 Massey Lecture} (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 2003), p. 23.}} This is an individual study of a society which is more prone to storytelling than to poetry recitation. In his book he demonstrates how, in recent times, the art of storytelling, and the resultant stories, were particularly functional within the society that generated them, but that when taken out of that specific context they were not understood on the same level by non-members of the society.\footnote{Thomas King, \textit{The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative: 2003 Massey Lecture} (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 2003), p. 23.} This is one of the specialized studies available should scholars look to undertake a comparative approach with other storytelling societies, though the differences between that society and the Norse society depicted in \textit{Morkinskinna} are vast. A study like that of the Native Canadian society offers a paradigm of how oral storytelling can function in society. In this way the scholar may find something besides the literature to ground the evidence in reality. In this way, this study will benefit from Ruth Finnegan’s insights into the role of the poet in individual societies.
This paper is interested in a specialized study of oral storytelling. Finnegan points out to those undertaking a specialized study,

while the sociologist must (rightly) insist on the significance of the social context of literature and search for the recurrent patterns that manifest themselves in socially organised literary activity, he should also remember the role of literature as the medium for the creative imagination of man.\(^{45}\)

The literature will thus be closely analyzed, and ultimately the depiction of the culture that will result will be a literary one; however, the evidence in the text is a reflection of a society who, though the context of their literary traditions is hard to pin down, is believed to have maintained an extensive oral tradition.

**Chapter 2: Morkinskinna**

*Morkinskinna* was chosen because of its inclusion of several instances of oral storytelling in one cultural setting. The reason why the evidence of one instead of several texts is being examined is because this allows the scholar to evaluate the biases of the individual text. Also, this allows the examination of the function of a particular theme, oral storytelling at the court of King Haraldr harðraða, within the framework of the entire text. This paper is approaching the evidence in terms of its literary function, but it is also approaching the text as a cultural footprint, yielding some evidence of the historical activities it seeks to represent. This chapter will define the nature of the evidence and examine the context of the saga and the manuscript of *Morkinskinna* and how this affects the nature of the narrative within the text.

The term *Morkinskinna* refers to a particular manuscript which is now housed in the Det kongelige bibliotek in Copenhagen, under the signature Gamle Kongelige Samling 1009 fol.\(^{46}\) The manuscript was designated *Morkinskinna*, meaning rotten parchment, in the 17\(^{th}\) century, but the term has been applied to the text contained within that particular manuscript, and all sister manuscripts which appear to contain


\(^{46}\) Andersson and Gade, p. 5.
versions of the same text. The term is representative of both the physical manuscript, as is abundantly clear by the very physical nature of the name, and to the inherent textual tradition. The Morkinskinna manuscript is the major representative of the text, but it is itself not complete. Within the narrative of the text there appears to be a very sudden stop at around chapter 100, so that the chronology represented in Morkinskinna runs from 1030-1157, whereas external and internal evidence indicates that the text originally spanned the years 1030-1177. Within the body of the text there are also several lacunae. From what is extant of the physical manuscript one can extrapolate what is clearly missing from other manuscripts which represent the same tradition, or from manuscripts that contain complete episodes which appear to be cut off in the physical text. For instance, some of Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade’s translation and interpretation of Morkinskinna comes from manuscripts such as Flateyjarbók. In Andersson and Gade’s, as well as Finnur Jónsson’s interpretation of the text, the narrative stops after chapter 100 because it is not possible to extrapolate with any degree of certainty what exactly was recorded in that last section of the manuscript. This text, as defined by the manuscript Morkinskinna but not entirely dependent on it, is the one that is being dealt with in this investigation. While we do not negate the importance of the physicality of the manuscript, in this case it is not as important as the text that it embodies, save for the fact that it helps to define our text’s unique character, and the limitations of the narrative’s scope.

The text of Morkinskinna is defined in reference to this extant manuscript, but for many scholars this tradition is not the representative of the original narrative. This manuscript was composed around the end of the thirteenth century, however, within the text there are several clues for dating an earlier version of the

47 Andersson and Gade, p. 5.
49 Andersson and Gade, pp. 5-6.
50 Andersson and Gade, p. 5.
51 Louis-Jensen, p. 419. Throughout this paper we will be using the chapter numbers assigned by Andersson and Gade. Jónsson does divide the text into chapters with different headings, corresponding with the chapter titles in Andersson and Gade, but he does not number them. Andersson and Gade’s interpretation was the primary text used for the investigation of this essay, and Jónsson’s was secondary to this, so when there are discrepancies between the two this paper defers to Andersson and Gade.
narrative to between the years 1217 and 1222. The evidence survived into the extant version of the text, though it is clear that the narrative did not survive unchanged from this early thirteenth century redaction. This older text is supposed to represent a more original redaction of the tradition, and has been named *Oldest Morkinskinna by previous scholars.

While scholars may not have been interested in the role of the performer in Old Norse society, or have been dissuaded from pursuing this topic by the scarcity of the evidence, what has been pursued in full force is the way that certain texts interact and relate to each other. While there is still room for reasonable doubt, there is some accord among scholars that *Oldest Morkinskinna was a source, or was derived from a common source, for the more extensively studied Fagrskinna and Heimskringla. These three sagas are representative of the longer, more compendious sagas that James E. Knirk says represent the classical period of konungasögur. Knirk says that this classical period lasted approximately from 1220-1280, but that konungasögur was really at its height in the years these three sagas were supposedly recorded, that is 1220-1240. These three sagas are surveys of the reign of several kings, detailing several generations of Norwegian monarchs in one compendium. There are other sagas that are said to belong to this grouping, though many, like *Hryggjarstyikki, are no longer extant. The genre of konungasögur includes other surveys of kings, as well as sagas of single monarchs, particularly the two Óláfrs, who are given most of the credit for the conversion of the Scandinavian world. Scholars have traced the evolution of the genre back through the smaller synoptic sagas written in Norway, to the genre of hagiography and the European tradition of writing local annals. Many scholars would have the genre of konungasögur culminate in

52 The evidence is that Skúli, son of Tostig is called Skúli jarl, so that probably dates the text to sometime after 1217. However, in chapter 69, when the compiler(s) ends the genealogy of Saxi in Vík with Jón, this may indicate that the narrative was composed before 1221-2. Andersson and Gade, pp. 66-67.; Louis-Jensen, p. 419.
53 Andersson and Gade, p. 8.
55 Knirk, p. 364.
56 Andersson and Gade, p. 61.; Finlay, p.10; Knirk, p. 363.
57 Knirk, pp. 363-364.
these three sagas, and with *Heimskringla* in particular. The manuscript tradition and the popularity of this particular text within Scandinavia since the middle ages would vindicate this assumption.

Arguably, one of the most interesting aspects of this genre is that the most representative texts were written by Icelanders, though the subject material is that of a Norwegian kingly past. During this period, where it is assumed that these texts are being composed, Iceland and Norway were not necessarily on the best of terms, having been disputing trading rights, and ultimately culminating in the subjugation of Iceland to Norway in 1262-4. Ármann Jakobsson does not see this as necessarily a contradiction. Within the genre of konungasögur Jakobsson has identified an interest in kingship. This is demonstrated, not only because the kings are the primary subject matter for the sagas, but in the treatment of the kings’ laws and decision making processes. The claim is not that these texts reflected everyone’s tastes, but that they were representative of people who were interested in literature with a more sophisticated subject matter, and that the konungasögur reflected the interests of those who considered themselves high-minded. The content of these texts might have even been flattering for the chieftains who held especially large amounts of power in Iceland at this time, either by associating them with the tales of great kings, or by appealing to their sense of pride by choosing haughty subject matter for the tales that were told to them. Within the genre there is an implicit defence of power in the hands of one person; in fact, Jakobsson noted that this is one of the themes of *Morkinskinna* in particular. This does not mean that the complexity of the text does not allow for criticisms of the monarchs as well, only that there is an element of approval of the ideology behind kingship.

61 Jakobsson 1997, p. 320.
62 Jakobsson 1997, p. 319. This will be substantiated by the content of *Morkinskinna* in Chapter 3.
64 Jakobsson 1997, p. 319.
Morkinskinna, it has been noted, has more of an Icelandic tint than the other two compendia. This is largely due to its mode of composition. Unlike Fagrskinna and Heimskringla, Morkinskinna is filled with what are called þættir, or individual tales that some literary critics would say are divergences from the main narrative of the text. Þáttr, or the plural þættir, is a modern (and once medieval) designation for these individual short narratives as they are separated from the body of the main text. Morkinskinna as a whole tells the story of the kings of Norway who ruled between the years 1030-1157, but it is particularly interesting because it is completed with these side plots where the king engages in activities that don’t contribute necessarily to the story of how he ruled Norway. Sometimes the king is a side-character, a foil for the protagonist of the þáttr, a situation that is scarce, if not absent, from both Fagrskinna and Heimskringla. For the investigation of the cultural trait of storytelling, however, we are fortunate that many þættir have been included in the body of the narrative because our information tends not to be present in the material that the compilers of Fagrskinna and Heimskringla thought to be most relevant to the story.

The narrative of Morkinskinna begins in the year 1030, with the battle of Stiklastaðir. And so, based on the dating of the *Oldest Morkinskinna to 1217-1222, it is clear that the text represents some traditions that have been developing over approximately one hundred and ninety years. The Morkinskinna manuscript was written at the end of the thirteenth century, but the *Oldest Morkinskinna was composed more than fifty years earlier. The written Morkinskinna tradition itself, therefore, was developing over at least half a century before it came to be embodied in the extant manuscript. The difficulty with the extant manuscript has often been: which of the þættir are representative of the tradition of *Oldest Morkinskinna, and which þættir were later interpolations in the text. The scholar Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson believed that

69 Rowe and Harris, p. 462.
70 Jakobsson 1997, p. 318.
71 Andersson and Gade, p. 66.
‘Íslendings þáttr sögufroða’ was an interpolated þáttr and was not representative of the original tradition.\textsuperscript{72} It is Andersson and Gade’s argument that whatever þættir were included in the original text, that text was nevertheless characterized by such þættir.\textsuperscript{73} Elizabeth Rowe and Joseph Harris point out that the scholarship about the place of þættir in the text used to be characterized by this need to separate the individual episodes from the bulk of the text, and to examine their transmission individually.\textsuperscript{74} It is now more of the scholarly trend to look at the þættir as part of the text as a whole, and to see how they reflect on the narrative when taken in context with the rest of the text.\textsuperscript{75} Consequently, one can assume that the þættir represent the traditions that were present throughout the thirteenth century, but that whatever þættir were included, or interpolated later, they were meant to add to the entire text of \textit{Morkinskinna}, which was already characterized by such þættir, and not to exist on their own. This is why the context of the whole of \textit{Morkinskinna} is being used to reflect on the evidence presented in some of the individual þættir.

The perspective of the compiler(s) of the text is better understood when you compare \textit{Morkinskinna} with the other two grand historical surveys, \textit{Fagrskinna} and \textit{Heimskringla}. Haraldr harðraða died in 1066, so at least 150 years separated the historical Harald from the traditions recorded in the *Oldest \textit{Morkinskinna}. For the recording of events, the author of \textit{Fagrskinna}, and Snorri Sturluson of \textit{Heimskringla} have been lauded as proper historians, since their narrative has been stripped of most of the supernatural elements and superfluous episodes.\textsuperscript{76} Snorri in particular is praised for his ability to create a flowing narrative.\textsuperscript{77} According to Andersson and Gade, the compiler(s) of Morkinskinna ‘was more of a storyteller than a critical historian like Snorri and the author of Fagrskinna. He was at home in the traditions of prose and of poetry, but his interest seems to lie in the stories and the stanzas themselves rather than in their

\textsuperscript{72} Andersson and Gade, pp. 13&22.
\textsuperscript{73} Andersson and Gade, p. 24.; Rowe and Harris, p. 466.
\textsuperscript{74} Rowe and Harris, p. 462.
\textsuperscript{75} Rowe and Harris, p. 466.
\textsuperscript{76} Jakobsson 2005, p. 396.
\textsuperscript{77} Hollander, p. xxii.
historical value.' However, this concern for content can be evidenced in all three narratives. This is a passage that appears in all three texts:

og liggja þo nídre osagder miklu fleire hlutir þeir sem osagdir eru af hans [Haraldr’s] afreksverkum og kemr mest til þess ofrodeleikr vor ok þat med ath ver vilium eigi rita uîtesburdarlausaar saugur þott ur hofum heyrþ þer frasagnir. Þuiat oss þikir betra atu hiedan af se uïd aukit helldr en þetta sama þurfe aptr ath taka.79

There is evidence that the *Oldest Morkinskinna, or the common ancestor, provided this statement within the narrative of Haraldr harðraða, indicating that the compiler of that section was mindful of the þættir that were included. Indeed, within Morkinskinna there are many instances where the compiler(s) indicate that they are aware of the origins and historicity of the traditions that they are including. An editing force is in evidence, for instance, when there is evidence of the management of several different narratives; at the beginning of chapter 14 the narrator interjects with ‘nv er þa til sogo vt tacu er fyr var fra horfit.’80 This is not the only time where this phrase is used to mark a shift in the narrative, and it indicates that someone has thought about composition.81 There is also the case when the narrator presents two different versions of events, or makes an effort to substantiate claims made in the text. As an example, in chapter 49 there is a description of Tostig’s conversations with King Haraldr, and yet an opposing tradition is also recorded: ‘oc þat segia sumir menn at Tosti i. sendi Gothorm Gvnhilldar s. til fvnda r við Haralld Konvng.’82 There is

78 Andersson and Gade, p. 57.
79 Morkinskinna. ed. by Finnur Jónsson, SUGNL, 53 (Copenhagen: J. Jørgensen & Co., 1932), p. 170. The references in this paper will come from Finnur Jónsson’s interpretation of Morkinskinna because, though it is from 1932, his interpretation stays closest to the original language, though this is, however, still un-normalized. As stated above, this paper’s interpretation of Morkinskinna has been guided by Andersson and Gade’s most recent edition. Therefore, the Old Norse is supplied by Jónsson, but Andersson and Gade’s English translation will be supplied in the footnotes: ‘but by far the greatest number of his [Haraldr’s] deeds have not been told. That can be explained chiefly from our lack of information and our reluctance to write down unattested tales even if we have heard some stories, for it seems better to us that our account should be supplemented in the future instead of our being obliged to retract this version.’ Morkinskinna: the earliest Icelandic chronicle of the Norwegian Kings (1030-1157), trans. by Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2000), ch. 32, p. 204. Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla: history of the kings of Norway, trans by Lee M. Hollander (Austin:University of Texas Press, 1964), ch. 36, p. 607. Fagrskinna: a Catalogue of the kings of Norway, trans. by Alison Finlay (Leiden: Brill, 2004), ch. 56, p. 208.
81 For example, it can also be seen in Morkinskinna 2000, ch.1, p. 97. ‘nu er þar til mals ath taka at.’ Morkinskinna 1932, p. 17.
82 Morkinskinna 1932, p. 264. Jónsson’s use of manuscripts is detailed in the introduction to his edition of the text. For more information about the variation in orthography, or the use of short forms in manuscripts see: Guðvarðus Már
also evidence of an effort to record a few of the transmission traditions for individual episodes. This is seen in the description of Haraldr's recovery, the narrator accounts for the information by saying that at the farm where Haraldr was healed, ‘en sa bonde at te sier son frumunxta og seigia bondason fra þui hund visse til eptir bordagam aa stiklastadum.’83 Andersson and Gade do also remark that the compiler(s) were concerned with how and why traditions were transmitted.84 Yet, is it an accurate reflection of the text to say that the people who were more concerned with the flow of the narrative were more concerned about the historicity? It is not necessarily more accurate to pick and choose which tradition you will or will not propagate than to record more of the traditions despite the divergent nature of the narratives. Regardless of who was a better historian, what is common to all three texts is this regard for what is accurate, or for what can be substantiated.

The concern for historicity in the text, or the intended veracity of the stories, and the supposed haughtiness of both audience compiler(s) should be kept in mind when looking at the content of the narrative. The forces behind the compilation of Morkinskinna were concerned with history, but we know that their perspective was of a person reflecting on a past age, looking to record these traditions for people who were perhaps concerned with their own power in the present. In addition, the perspective is that of an Icelander, looking at the precedent of the Norwegian kingship, and while it was perhaps not always consciously done, reflecting the Icelandic interest in the ideology behind kingship. It was expected that the audience would be made up of people who were interested in what had gone before, including chieftains, kings, or other ‘historians,’ and all this will affect the evidence for oral storytelling, because the þættir were part of this textual tradition, and the content in the episodes will reflect the nature of Morkinskinna as a piece of literature.

‘but some people relate that Jarl Tostig sent Gunnhildr’s son Guthormr to treat with King Haraldr.’ Morkinskinna 2000, ch. 49, p. 263.
83 Morkinskinna 1932, p. 57. ‘the farmer had a grown son, who gave an account of what he knew after the battle of Stiklastadir.’ Morkinskinna 2000, ch. 9, p. 131.
84 Andersson and Gade, p. 83.
Chapter 3: Oral Storytelling: The exempla

This is then how the text of Morkinskinna may be understood. One thing that is clear is that the context of genre and place and time of composition will affect the nature of the text. However, the entire text of Morkinskinna is not being examined here, just the section pertaining to the rule of Haraldr harðraða. Yet this section is as governed by context and authorial intention as the rest of the text. In the narrative of Morkinskinna, Haraldr harðraða’s ‘saga’ occupies a prominent place, with more space devoted to this particular monarch than any of the others mentioned. Therefore many þættir are set in Haraldr’s presence. This helps to paint a picture of Haraldr’s court and court life. The disparate accounts of oral storytelling have been taken from a single section in order to demonstrate how the text of Morkinskinna recreates this activity in the context of one particular setting. Just as the intention to be high-minded was indicated by Jakobsson to be characteristic of konungasögur, the instances of oral storytelling will also illustrate the intention of the text to be taken seriously. The evidence does not reflect a streamlined narrative, as you would find in Heimskringla or Fagrskinna, but it does serve a purpose not only in the plot of the individual episodes, but in the text as a whole. The oral storytelling is always used to either add to the audience’s understanding of the king, or to push the Icelandic agenda by showing the capabilities of the Icelanders who went to King Haraldr’s court. These are two themes identified by Jakobsson as especially apparent in the þættir of Morkinskinna. These examples will now be examined in order to see how each episode portrays oral storytelling, but also to note what role each particular example is serving in the text.

The difficulty of searching the text for examples is trying to define exactly what should be included as an example of oral storytelling. If one looks at the whole phenomenon of oral performance within the text, it is easier to start with poetic recitation. It is apparent when a stanza has been used in the text because, typographically, it looks different from prose in written form. The scope of this paper does not include how the stanzas were included in the manuscript tradition, but acknowledges that the inherited scholarly

86 Finnegan, p. 25.
tradition, represented by Finnur Jónsson and Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade, set the poetry so that it is thus recognizable. In addition to the typographic aids, skaldic poetry has a very distinct form, usually recognizable in the text; being written as drápa or flokkr the recorded poetry often using recognized metres like dróttkvætt. It is not so easy in the text to tell when someone is telling a story.

Bloomfield and Dunn said that anything that was not conversation was to be fitted into their definition of poetry. Within the following instances it will become clear that conversation is implied in at least one of the examples. So what is the difference between regular speech, and the telling of a story? A tempting definition would be that it is intended to be entertainment, but there will be at least one example as well where the entertainment is implied in the frame that sets up the story, but that is not the intention of the storyteller. The implication that the way in which someone is speaking was designed to entertain someone, and the use of actual narratives within the narrative that follow a logical stylistic progression from beginning to conclusion, was definitive for the following examples.

To help illustrate the difficulty of identifying what is an example of oral storytelling in the text, some textual evidence shall be employed. The very first person to recite a stanza in the presence of King Haraldr is Haraldr himself. In chapter 9, Haraldr is enacting his escape from the battle of Stiklastaðir, in 1030, where King Óláfr lost his life. When Haraldr was wounded he was brought to the house of a farmer to be healed. The story of Haraldr’s sojourn at the house is told in first person, as if it were a verbatim account. The account itself is attributed to the farmer’s son, as was mentioned above. The suggestion is that we are reading an eye witness account of the events at the farmhouse, and this lends credence to the particular chain of events. This suggests a very interesting transmission to the compiler(s), because if it is an oral tradition it was received from the perspective of first person. For the compiler(s) to have created this particular style of transmission seems unlikely simply because it is not characteristic of the rest of the text, and there is no particular reason why this episode in particular would be told in first person. Also, this very first stanza is embedded in the first person narrative:

87 Bloomfield and Dunn, p. 1.
Furthermore, the narrative within our narrative ends with; ‘þessa frasogn visse Magnus Konungr og adrir menn j Noregi.’ The narrative is clearly a story, as it is so called by the text, and because it is set apart from the rest of the text as a particular tradition, told in first person. Who told the story is known, as the tradition is attributed to the farmer’s son. Nevertheless, this is not an example of oral storytelling, because what we have here is a story without the context of when it is told. It is part of the oral tradition, in that the compiler(s) seem to have tried to chart a little of the transmission. The story itself, however, is not told, but is used to substantiate the story in the text. Like most of the stanzas within the konungasögur Morkinskinna, Heimskringla and Fagrskinna, this story is used as a tool to convince us of the veracity of the tradition, by tracing a particular chain of events to a credible source. This is not oral performance, but the inclusion of several forms of narrative within the text. The recitation of the stanza would be a little more difficult to classify. It fits the category of oral performance, in that there is a performer in the person of King Haraldr. Also, it is known where the poem was recited; the farmer’s son leads the king away from the house. There is also an implied audience, which Finnegan points out is not necessarily required for all oral recitation, but does help with the performance aspect. However, its context in the action makes it more a piece of the narrative than an action in the narrative. The composition and recitation is inconsequential, what is trying to be expressed is the mood of the king. If a complete paper on oral performance in the text were attempted this example should be included, but the importance is all in the content of the poem, and not necessarily in the performance of the poem. Our examples focus more on

---

88 ‘Now I’m slinking from wood to wood with little honor: who knows if I won’t become famous far and wide in the end?’ Morkinskinna 2000, ch. 9, p. 130. This stanza has been referenced from Andersson and Gade’s Morkinskinna as opposed to Jónsson’s, as it is Andersson and Gade’s edition that is guiding the paper, while Jónsson’s is being used to reference the language. Since the stanzas appear in Old Norse in Andersson and Gade there was no need to reference the Jónsson version, though it should be noted that this stanza appears in Jónsson in a different form.

89 Morkinskinna 1932, p. 57. ‘King Magnus and others in Norway know of this story.’ Morkinskinna 2000, ch. 9, p. 130.


91 Finnegan, p. 216.
actual performance, where the content of the stories may still be important to the narrative, but there is a clear value placed on the act as well as the content.

The question will arise whether it is worthwhile to talk about poetic recitation, if the specific aim of the paper is the place of oral storytelling in the court of King Haraldr. The two acts, as is clear from the examples, are not so distinct that one can devote an entire paper to oral storytelling without mentioning skaldic poetry. The performance of both stories and poems fit into the category of ‘oral performance.’ To illustrate the similarities in format between poetry recitation and oral storytelling one example of skaldic poetry performance at the court of King Haraldr should be explored. Chapter 21 is the first instance of the court poet in the primal state, who appears so often in the theories of Bloomfield and Dunn. Arnórr jarlaskáld arrives with poems prepared, both for King Haraldr, and for King Magnús who ruled jointly with Haraldr at the beginning of Haraldr’s reign. Arnórr is in the midst of tarring his ship when he is called to perform, and heads off ‘þo ecki af ser tiorona.’ Here is a glimpse of the real prestige that is afforded to the professional, or semi-professional poet if one applies some of the categories conceived by Ruth Finnegan. Both kings are anxious to have their praise-poem first, showing the impact of performance to be great, in that it is something that is coveted by both rulers. In addition, throughout Magnús’s poem Haraldr has the occasional thing to say in regards to the progression of the poem; first that Arnórr should get to the point, and then that he should not praise Magnús at Haraldr’s expense. Haraldr is concerned about the efficacy of the poem, a concern which is restated at the end of Haraldr’s own poem, ‘Blágagladrápa,’ or the black goose panegyric; ‘sia kvnnom ver hver mvnr queþanna er. mitr queþi mon brott níþr falla oc engi kvnna. en drapa þesi er ort er vm M. Konvng mon queþin meþan Norþrlond ero bygð.’ Nevertheless, Haraldr gives Arnórr a spear inlaid with gold for his efforts, while Magnús presents him with a gold ring and a trading vessel with a full cargo. As he departs he promises that he will have

---

92 Bloomfield and Dunn, pp. 18-19.


94 Finnegan, p. 199.

95 Morkinskinna 1932, p. 118, ‘I can see the difference between the poems. Mine will soon be forgotten and no one will be able to recite it, but the poem composed about King Magnús will be recited as long as the North is peopled.’ Morkinskinna 2000, ch. 21, p. 167.
another poem for Haraldr. This þátrr accomplishes several things in the context of the whole text. The purpose of the þátrr itself appears to be to give a history of the tradition behind the Magnúsdrápa, and the details of how and why it is performed. Within the whole text, the anecdote functions first as an exemplum of the personality of both kings. Haraldr is wise, and the tradition here has him accurately predict the future of both poems. His critiques are valid. But Magnús is the better of the two men, as is reflected not only in their poems, but in Magnús’s patience in dealing with the interjections of Haraldr. Within the text as a whole, it also serves the function of demonstrating the prestige given to the Icelandic skald, particularly Arnórr jarlaskáld at the kingly Norwegian court, because of his poetic gift. This is the particularly Icelandic slant showing through the text particularly within these anecdotes. Andersson and Gade say that perhaps this anecdote originated with Arnórr himself.96 This episode is taken to be representative of the larger poetic tradition, with the addendum that just as all the storytelling episodes vary in form and content, so do all the poetic recitations within the text. The professional performer, whose gifts are highly coveted, appreciated and rewarded will stand in for similar poetic performances, and help to give a larger context of oral performance to the individual episodes of oral storytelling.

The very first mention of an oral storyteller occurs in chapter 35. The king and one of his courtiers, Einarr þambarskelfir, with whom he has had many quarrels, are enjoying a private dialogue. Since it is short the account shall be included here;

\[\text{\textit{\`pat er \`n v fra sagt en einhverio sinni at Haralldr Konungr bav\`d Einari \`ambascelfi til sin til veizlo oc melti til navcverrar vungunar me\`d \`heim konungi. konungr fagna\`ht homol vel oc setr bordin voro bravto. sotv \`heir eftir hvirfini konvngr oc Einarr oc villdar Menn. Sato i halminom oc voro dynur lag\`bar at baki \`heim konvngr oc Einarr toko hial imilli sin oc scemtn. segir konungr fra mavrgom afrecs vercom sinom i vtla\'vdom oc fra \`pat at sva var sem Einarr leiddi \`pat e\`ki sem svefn navckverr li\'pi ahann. Einarr var \`pa gamal mivk. oc \`n v er konungr fann \`pat at Einarr leiddi e\`ki oc \`otti sem hann o\`viri frasavgnina oc \`ottiz finna be\`pi \`n myct hava sitt scap oc sveigt som\`pyccis me\`d \`heim.}}\]

96 Andersson and Gade, note 1, p. 431.
97 Morkinskinna 1932, p. 178. ‘we are told that at one time King Haraldr invited Einarr þambarskelfir to a feast and held out the promise of friendly relations. The king gave him a good reception and placed him on the seat next to him. In the evening when they had eaten, the tables were removed and the king and Einarr, with their confidants remained at drink. They sat on straw with cushions behind them. The king and Einarr began to converse and entertain each other. The king told of some of his exploits abroad and noticed that Einarr was not paying attention and was dozing off. Einarr was a very old man at that time. When the king realized that Einarr was not paying attention and seemed to be belittling the story, he considered that both at recent and at other times in their dealing Einarr wished to pay him no heed, despite the fact that he had now softened his disposition and initiated friendly relations.’ Morkinskinna 2000, ch. 35, p. 210.
This is one of the final episodes before the tale recounts Einarr’s death at the hands of the king. This was chosen as an example because, while there is no narrative included here that can be analyzed, it is clear that narratives are being told for the sake of entertainment. The key phrases for this interpretation include, ‘konvngr oc Einarr toko hial imilli sin oc scemtun,’ ‘segir konungr fra mavrgom afrecs vercom sinom i vtlavndom,’ and ‘oc nv er konungr fann þat at Einarr leiddi eKi oc þotti sem hann ovirþi frasavgnina.’ These use key vocabulary for the identification of oral storytelling. It is clear here that were it not for these key phrases, this episode would easily be mistaken for regular conversation. Once it is identified as storytelling it is a particularly interesting example because of the amount of detail that goes into the account. Within the text the instance of Einarr’s disregard for Haraldr’s stories is used to augment the personal nature of the dispute between the two men. In addition, it shows the character of the king as being sensitive, and prone to temper, since this is one of the final straws that leads ultimately to Einarr’s death. The picture it presents of storytelling is that the act itself can be used to pass the time, or for entertainment.

In Finnegan’s account of storytellers, this would be an instance of storytelling occurring among a group of peers, who are looking to entertain themselves and so they ‘sin oc scemtun.’ Andersson and Gade comment on ‘frasavgnina’ in the esteem of the characters; ‘the king appears to be as eager to tell his adventures as he is to listen to them as they are told by another in Ch. 40 below.’

Our next example, from chapter 37, is an instance of storytelling that comes accompanied with the story. Once again, the action happens at a feast, and the performer is, again, King Haraldr himself. In this instance he has been travelling in Upplǒnd, and a man named Úlfr auðgi sends Haraldr an invitation to a feast. The story that Haraldr tells to the attendees of the feast is enlightening, as the end result is that Úlfr is threatened with being reduced to a slave because of his relation to the characters within the story. But, the prelude to the story is most interesting:

98 ‘they began to converse and entertain each other’; ‘the king told of some of his exploits abroad’; ‘the king realized that Einarr was not paying attention and seemed to be belittling the story’
99 Finnegan, p. 195. ‘entertain each other’
100 Andersson and Gade, note 6, p. 437.
The king actually begins the story, progresses through several events, and concludes with his account of the defeat of the antagonist and his assessment of the resulting implications of the story for Haraldr’s host. Úlfr does not end up a slave, but is instead left with one of his fifteen farms, and is divested of all his valuables by King Haraldr. This is an instance of storytelling, first of all because of the presence of the developed narrative as recited by one of the characters. It is also identified as storytelling by the expectations of the audience expressed in the build up to the story. They expect ‘scemton.’ And Haraldr says he will tell ‘reþo litla þa.’ Within the text this tale enhances the image of the king in Upplǫnd, who merits the title harðraða, dispensing rather severe justice. The inclusion of the story also shows that the king is clever. It has already been seen in the text that Haraldr is capable of reciting poetry, but this shows also that he can engage in storytelling. This instance of storytelling is more what one would associate with performance, as it is a single performer who is intent on ‘entertaining’ a larger group. The performer is still not a professional, but nor is it an ordinary member of the group. The reception of the audience, and their insistence ‘quoþv veizlunni micla pryþi oc soma ef slicr Maþr scemti,’ gives the king special honour. The king is using the story to accomplish his own ends, which is both part of the cultural picture of the function of storytelling, and also part of the reason why this instance of storytelling is included in the text. However, the audience is expecting entertainment, to pass the time at the feast, even though the king has something else entirely in mind.

The next example of storytelling is contained in ‘Sneglu-Halli þátttr.’ This entire þátttr, which is chapter 43 in Andersson and Gade, is about an Icelander who becomes a skald in the court of King

\[101\] Morkinskinna 1932, p. 190. ‘one time, when the men had sat down at the feast, the King spoke up and said: ‘It is fitting,’ he said, ‘that we should provide some entertainment for this feast.’ Everyone said that it would honour and adorn the feast greatly if such a man were to provide entertainment.’

\[102\] ‘entertainment’

\[103\] ‘a little story’

\[104\] ‘that it would honour and adorn the feast greatly if such a man were to provide entertainment’
Haraldr, and the whole þátr is filled with instances of oral performance. The circumstances that prompt the oral storytelling begin when Haraldr, after having shown on various occasions his skill with a stanza, and having competed already with Þjóðólfr Arnórsson the skald, and rival at the court of King Haraldr, asks to recite a poem that he has composed about the king. Halli professes to have no experience in this matter, and Þjóðólfr calls him out for lying. The two rivals then engage in ‘senna’, ‘a ritual exchange of insults,’ trying to discredit the other in the eyes of the king.\(^\text{105}\) Þjóðólfr says that in fact Halli has composed the ‘kolluvísur,’ or the ‘Bessie verses,’ in honour of cows, belittling the content of the poems. Halli responds by saying that Þjóðólfr has composed the ‘sóptrogvísur,’ or ‘Ashcan verses.’\(^\text{106}\) Eventually the attacks become quite personal and Þjóðólfr says that Halli has let his father go unavenged. Halli responds to this slight by saying:

\[
\text{herra s. hann Þioðolfr ma þvi vm slica lvti diarfliga repa. þvi at øngan veit ek sins faþur iafn greyplinga hefti hafa. Hvatar er at merkiom of þat s. k. at hann hafu þat mielo framaR gort en aþrir Menn. Þat þa herra s. h. at Þioðolfr hefir etid faþar bana sinn. Konungr melti. Hvi megi sva vera.} \text{107}
\]

The king can not let this go unexplained, and so, at the prompting of the king, Halli tells the story of the humiliating death of Þjóðólfr’s father. Apparently, while taking a calf home to feed his hungry family, he accidentally hung himself by allowing the calf’s rope to slip around his neck while trying to climb over a wall. And then ‘Þioðolfr snęddi þan kalf at sinom lvta.’\(^\text{108}\) ‘Konungr melti. Þat mindi iafnt hefliga.’\(^\text{109}\) This incites Þjóðólfr’s anger, and he rises to strike Halli, though he is out of witty responses. It is not indicated by the vocabulary that the character is telling a story as it is in the other examples. There is no mention of ‘entertainment,’ but entertainment is implied by the setting, in that the circumstances for the story were generated by a professed desire to engage in oral performance. Also, the audience is a captive one, and is intent on being informed by the story, if not also entertained. The king’s response of ‘hvi megi sva vera’

\(^{105}\) Mitchell, p. 184.  
\(^{107}\) Morkinskinna 1932, p. 240. “Sire… Þjóðólfr is privileged to talk very freely about such things because I know of no one who has avenged his father more fiercely.”  
““What is the evidence,” asked the king, “that he has carried out the task more effectively than others?”  
““The evidence,” said Halli, “is that he ate his father’s killer.”  
The king asked: “How can that be?” Morkinskinna 2000, ch. 43, p. 248.  
might indicate entertainment, but there is not enough evidence to say this with confidence. The construction of the account of Þjóðólfr’s father’s death, however, is clearly a prose narrative. A series of causal events are outlined that lead to Þjóðólfr eating his father’s killer, and the extended nature of the speech without interruption from the audience would suggest that this is not normal conversation. The climax of this episode between Halli and Þjóðólfr in ‘Sneglu-Halla þáttr’ is the storytelling, because it is this story which makes Halli the victor. While the end result is that Halli is allowed to recite his praise poem; that poem is not included while the story is. The tale, and the oral storytelling, was included because it advanced the rivalry between the two characters, and it was the tool used to show that, of the two, Halli was the more capable performer. Within the text, however, the whole þáttr seems to be an extended example of skaldic activity at the court of King Haraldr. Tommy Danielsson notes as well that the þáttr does have a fascination with ‘verbal talents.’ The rest of the þáttr is very concentrated on the composition aspect of poetry, as well as the instances where both Halli and Þjóðólfr perform. It deals with different kinds of subject matter, from the Frisian dwarf dressed in Haraldr’s armaments, to Halli’s praise poem for Haraldr which was already mentioned. What is interesting is that it is the intent of this þáttr to involve Haraldr in the composition process, having him name the subject matter, and prompting the performances; he is also seen here as the prompt for the storytelling. Here Haraldr is a foil for the protagonist Halli, whose efforts are the þáttr’s main focus. This is one of the episodes which have caused scholars to associate Morkinskinna with a particularly Icelandic perspective. It shows what was, and could be, achieved by gifted Icelanders at the court of King Haraldr. The storytelling is simply one of the weapons in the arsenal of this gifted skald, who used poetry to advance his own cause in Haraldr’s presence. His ability to compose poetry on one occasion saves his life. The ability to tell a story here serves the purpose of plying the final insult to his rival, and like the poetry, advances Halli in the esteem of Haraldr.

110 ‘that would seem reasonable’
The fourth and final example is that which prompted this investigation of *Morkinskinna*. The tale has been labelled, ‘Íslending þátrr sögufróða,’ though the title of the chapter in Jónsson’s text is ‘fra scemton Islandings.’\(^{112}\) In Andersson and Gade’s text it is chapter 40. As was indicated in the introduction, it is the story of an Icelander who comes to the court of King Haraldr. Haraldr asks if he has any ‘nocqveria freþi en hann letz kvnna sagvur,’ or that he is ‘søgufróði,’ knowledgeable of stories.\(^{113}\) He is received at court with the condition ‘hann skal þes scylldr at scemta avallt’\(^{114}\) He receives clothes from the king’s retainers, and weapons from the king in return for his stories. Here one is reminded of some of the gifts that Arnórr received for reciting his poems for the kings. Then the Icelander becomes downcast, which gives Haraldr another chance to show his wisdom. He says to the Icelander: ‘þes get ec til s. hann at nvalor vppi savgur þinar þu hefr avallt scemt ietvri sem beizt hefir mun þer mv illt þiccia at þrioti at iolunom.’\(^{115}\) The Icelander worries, ‘ein er sagan eftir oc þori ec þa eigi her at segja. þvi at þat er utterðar saga þin.’\(^{116}\) But Haraldr arranges for the story to last over for the entire extent of Christmas, and in the end is happy with the Icelander’s accurate rendering of the story. Haraldr asks how he learned that particular tale. The Icelander says, ‘þat var vandi minn vt a landino at ec for hvert sumar til þings oc narnm huert sumar af savgunni navcquaþ at Halldori Sn.,’ who is a character who appeared several times previously in the *Morkinskinna* text including in his own þátrr.\(^{117}\) The result is that ‘konungr fecc honom [the Icelander] goþan keypeyri oc varþ hann prosea Maþr.’\(^{118}\) It is not difficult to see why scholars might latch on to this example as an instance of oral storytelling because it is the richest in detail relevant to the actual performance of oral texts. This paper has enumerated on several occasions there are several difficulties with


\(^{113}\) *Morkinskinna* 1932, p. 199. ‘sort of learning, and he said that he could tell stories.’ *Morkinskinna* 2000, ch. 40, p. 222.

\(^{114}\) *Morkinskinna* 1932, p. 199. ‘that he was obligated to provide entertainment any time.’ *Morkinskinna* 2000, ch. 40, p. 222.

\(^{115}\) *Morkinskinna* 1932, pp.199-200. ‘I will guess that you have now exhausted your store of tales. You have entertained us this winter as is most fitting, and now you are probably distressed that the supply runs out just at Christmas.’ *Morkinskinna* 2000, ch. 40, p. 223.

\(^{116}\) *Morkinskinna* 1932, p. 200. ‘I have only one story left and I do not dare to tell it here because it is the story of your foreign adventures.’ *Morkinskinna* 2000, ch. 40, p. 223.

\(^{117}\) *Morkinskinna* 1932, p. 200. ‘it was my custom out in Iceland to go to the thingmeeting every summer, and every summer I learned something of the story from Halldórr Snorrason.’ *Morkinskinna* 2000, ch. 40, p.223.

taking these tales out of their context. It portrays the court of King Haraldr but could easily reflect a
tradition closer to the time of *Morkinskinna*’s composition. There is no need for a justification of this þáttur
as a valid example of oral storytelling in the text, as this action is evinced throughout the entire episode.

Within the context of *Morkinskinna*, the þáttur is once again serving the purpose of demonstrating the
particular character of the king. He is interested in the stories of the Icelander, and his ability to gauge the
Icelander’s difficulties shows that he is wise. He is the one that rations the story to fit the days of
Christmas. In addition, it is for good reason that the Icelander shows trepidation before telling the story of
Haraldr’s early exploits, as Haraldr is not exactly saintly.119 As in the account of Sneglu-Halli, the focus is
on the Icelander. Here the Icelander and Haraldr share the role of protagonist, and play off each other. This
only augments the role of the Icelander at the court and once again pushes the agenda that the Icelanders
were prominent retainers at the Norwegian court. They were the ones who propagated the subsequent
traditions. The þáttur paints a very detailed picture of storytelling nonetheless. The storyteller is a
professional in this scenario, not unlike Halli, except that he is professional in storytelling alone. He is
maintained at the court based on the fact that he is sögufróði, and entertained them during the winter, ‘as is
most fitting.’ The saga that he has learnt can be told over several days, and is not confined to a single
sitting.120 The final point of the episode, that the Icelander was rewarded for/despite his risky choice of
story, echoes what Snorri Sturluson says about skaldic poetry:

> en þat er háttur skálda at lofa þann mest, en þá eru þeir fyrir, en engi myndi þat þora at segja sjálfum
> honum þau verk hans, er allir þeir, er heyrði, vissi at hégómi væri ok skrøk, ok svá sjálfr hann. Þat
> væri þá háð, en eigi lof.121

---

119 This is seen not only in *Morkinskinna*’s account of these early exploits, but in Haraldr’s comparison with Magnús
he is a severe ruler and much more reckless. *Morkinskinna*, ch. 10-13, pp. 134-151.
120 There is a possibility that, if it were representing a tradition where manuscripts were present, then it is easy to see a
single text being read from over the span of several days. However, here is an instance where comparison with other
cultures that have an oral storytelling tradition is useful, because it is also the case among many native Canadian
societies that engage in oral narrative, that certain tales are designed to be told over several days, and that some are
designed for special occasions.
121 Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk Fornrit Series, XXVI (Reykjavík: Hið
Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1941), p. 5. ‘it is [to be sure] the habit of poets to give highest praise to those princes in whose
presence they are, but no one would have dared to tell them to their faces about deeds which all who listened, as well
as the prince himself, knew were only falsehoods and fabrication. That would have been mockery, still not praise.’
Sturluson 1964, p. 4.
This is the case for the Icelander as well. Also, the storyteller presumably learned his tales in different ways, like at the ‘thingmeeting,’ and that they were not his very own composition, so that it was possible for the store of sagas that made him ‘sǫgufroði’ to become exhausted.

This picture accords with the other examples. All the examples tell stories that are both pertinent to the moment, and that pertain to events that have recently occurred. Even if, like the story that Haraldr directs at Úlfr, the event is from the past it is assumed in the telling that there is some historical veracity to the story. The implication that the story is true justifies Haraldr’s degradation of Úlfr auðgi (the wealthy) to slave. The stories that are told in *Morkinskinna* are not told simply for entertainment. The two stories that are told in the context of the instances of oral storytelling both impact directly the intended audience in the text. The stories that are recorded, that of Úlfr’s ancestor and of Þjóðólfr’s father reverberate in that particular moment in the text. Within the two other examples which do not recount the stories, it is instead the performance itself which plays a role in the plot of the þættir. In these two latter cases the stories were intended as entertainment. In the case of Haraldr’s conversing with Einarr, the performance advances the plot by increasing the enmity between the characters. In the case of the ‘Íslendinga þáttr sǫgufroða,’ performance furthers the character development of the king in the text and advocates a worthy place for Icelanders at the Norwegian court. Even among the stories that were presumably entertaining, the ones alluded to were also assumed historical. This accords with the nature of *Morkinskinna* as a text.

*Morkinskinna* is also intended to be history. These episodes are not included frivolously but with a purpose. The seriousness of the stories and the storytelling reflects the serious literature that was konungasögur. The cultural picture that results is governed by the functions of the evidence within the text. And so this wonderfully detailed example of oral storytelling, ‘Íslendinga þáttr sǫgufroða,’ accomplishes several things within *Morkinskinna*. The anecdote shows the character of the king as wise if not always necessarily good. This is echoed in the other þættir, including in the episode where Haraldr is juxtaposed with Magnús by the skill of Arnórr jarlaskáld. It also shows the place of the Icelander in the court of King Haraldr which would result in the rich saga tradition which helped generate the numerous texts that are still
extant in Iceland. And the Icelander, in Íslendinga þáttr sögufroða, may be entertaining the court, ‘as is most fitting,’ but it is not frivolous.

Chapter 4: Oral Storytelling: Cultural depiction in *Morkinskinna*

The manuscript of *Morkinskinna* was constructed by several compilers, and at least two scribes.¹²² Sørensen notes that ‘many also contributed to the story-telling, both before and after the stories become written sagas.’¹²³ *Heimskringla* has been preferred because its construction has been regarded as more precise. *Morkinskinna* does not reflect a streamlined narrative, but it does reflect the nature of the konungasögur to be for the more serious minded person. Possibly it was intended for other students of history, as is evidenced by the possible use of * Oldest Morkinskinna* as a source for both *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna*. A high-minded nature is also reflected in these instances of oral storytelling, as was seen in the analysis of the examples. So, the resulting cultural picture should not be removed from the literature, as the examples all fulfill a literary role and are characterized by their function in the text. It was not the concern of the compiler(s) to present an accurate picture of oral storytelling at court, and perhaps this is indicative of a continuing tradition; if your audience were familiar with the activity already, they would not be interested in having the properties of that activity described to them. Yet when the act facilitates the demonstration of something else, it is included.

The text demonstrates some of the varied roles a storyteller might fulfill at the court of King Haraldr. Haraldr ruled from 1046-1066, and spent the better part of his reign consolidating his power and fighting with King Sveinn of Denmark.¹²⁴ Within the text Haraldr surrounds himself with courtiers, and there was a good proportion of Icelanders among the king’s retainers. This is the setting which the examples compliment. The first role that storytelling fulfills is as an activity to pass the time. The king is telling

¹²² Andersson and Gade, p. 5.
¹²³ Sørensen, p. 133.
Einarr a story; what that story is is inconsequential, as it was a pastime, undertaken amongst peers, as a function of people in regular conversation and friendship. The second example constitutes an individual, who considers himself worthy, performing in front of a group. It was not just anyone who got up to speak, it was the king. Nevertheless, Haraldr is not a professional among the group, though he is considered wise. Either because of this trait, or because he was a man of high rank, the group professes that they would be honoured by his entertainment (though the result may have been other than was originally imagined). The third example exhibits prose narrative as a tool as useful in the arsenal of a professional performer as skaldic poetry. It also shows that the story could be prompted by the king just as easily as a stanza. The last example is ‘Íslendings þáttur sögufroða,’ which demonstrates the existence of the complete professional, the sögufroði who performs for the court of King Haraldr as professionally as Þjóðólfur the skald or Arnórr jarlaskáld. It is not uncharacteristic of oral traditions that each time someone tells a story, the set of circumstances governing the act would be slightly different. This gives the examples a semblance of reality. All the same, each specific example is governed by its individual place in the literature, and since there is so much variance between the examples one would not say that any of the episodes characterizes the act of storytelling in that particular cultural setting. One would be inclined to focus on ‘Íslendings þáttur sögufroða’ because of the detail afforded the act of storytelling.

The storytelling should not be entirely extricated from the skaldic performance. As we have seen, from the viewpoint of the text they are similar in nature and function. There appear to be similarities in the way that the stories and the stanzas are presented to the court, and the sögufroði Icelander seems to be as entitled to rewards as Arnórr. Sneglu-Halli and King Haraldr show that those proficient in the act of storytelling were not necessarily separate from those who recited poetry. The performance of skaldic poetry has also been inserted into the text to show the character of the king, and to highlight the special abilities of Icelanders. Arnórr and Þjóðólfur are two skalds, whose differences show that there is variation among the instances of poetry recitation as well, as Arnórr is more of what Finnegan would call a semi-professional, or itinerant poet in this narrative, travelling from court to court, and Þjóðólfur is the
professional, occupying the permanent position. While there are similarities in the treatment of types of oral performance, it is not the same thing to recite poetry as it is to tell a story. The ability to compose a poem takes a great deal of ability, and this is recognized in the text. In the þátr of Sneglu-Halli there is a lot of emphasis on the composition of poetry, such as when the king challenges Halli to compose for his life. There is no consideration for the composition of stories.

This is not to say that the act of storytelling does not take some sort of skill. The ability to perform the text fits into the category of oral performance, just as poetry does. It is interesting to note, however, that while emphasis is given to the composition of poems in Morkinskinna, it is implied that stories are already known to the performer. The specific skill required is embodied in the term ‘frœði,’ as in ‘sǫgufroði.’ Sørensen says that the two concepts of saga and frœði are related just as knowledge is related to narration.  

Both Sørensen and Brink associate the term frœði with a fixed historical tradition. Brink says the body of the oral tradition is represented by ‘forn frœði.’ As Elena Garevich points out we do not even know about the type of training that skalds would receive, so it is expected that for those who were engaged to tell stories we know even less about their training. Frœði, however, is a term you see in other places, outside of Morkinskinna, as nicknames describing people who followed some sort of learned tradition. Ari Þorgilsson and Sæmundr Sigfússon were both given the nickname ‘hinn froði,’ and Snorri lists their no longer extant konungasögur as sources for Heimskringla. Jakobsson says that this appellation designates them as the first recognized historians. Jesse L. Byock also deduces that ‘a sagateller’s art as based less on invention than on skill in describing traditional actions.’ Upon examining the above examples, you can see that the remembrance, not the composition, is the prime task of the storyteller; the king is telling tales of his exploits, a story that he is not creating himself but that was formed first outside

---

125 Sørensen, p. 107.
126 Sørensen, p. 108.
127 Brink, p. 83.
of the creative process by actual events. The second and the third example both are stories of events that affect the people in the presence of the storyteller, so the truth of the story is attested to by the presence of a knowledgeable audience. In the fourth example, what has been of interest to many scholars is that when the Icelander runs out of stories (as he presumably had a set number of them that he already knew), he tells stories of Haraldr’s own adventures, the truth of which Haraldr would most certainly know. Even that was not a story concocted from accounts, but the sǫgufroði individual actually learned it in its entirety from Halldórr Snorrason while both were in Iceland. So the storyteller plies a different trade than the skald, and this is no doubt part of the reason why skalds are named, like Þjóðólfr and Arnórr, and that skaldic poetry is often attributed to its composer. According to the text, the only storyteller who actually composes a story is the one who fashions the tale of his own exploits. If scholars look to Morkinskinna, the storytellers are Haraldr harðraða (the king), Sneglu-Halli (a skald) and an anonymous Icelander. So the result is that the role of storyteller in the court of King Haraldr was diffused among the courtly society to capable people; the king himself is actually known for his wisdom, and Sneglu-Halli has already proven himself an apt performer, and the anonymous Icelander is labelled sǫgufroði, so that each individual’s capability is attested to. The storyteller could be any wise person at court; in essence storytelling could, but shouldn’t, be undertaken by everyone.

Relevant to the cultural picture of oral storytelling is the setting of this activity. Despite the differences in the form of storytelling, all four of these concrete examples happen at feast settings. The retainers of King Haraldr move about with him, so that the court setting moves, but feasts are located within a hall setting. Brink has identified the hall, where the feasts take place as an arena in Old Norse culture for ‘vertical communication,’ as if between a statused individual and their group.131 The account of Arnórr jarlaskáld was chosen as an example of oral performance because it is comparable to the storytelling examples not only because of the nature of the exchange between poet and patron, but also because of the formal court setting in which the anecdote takes place. It should be noted that there is more

131 Brink, p. 79.
variety in the setting of the oral recitation of poetry, though this may be in part to the greater number of poetic recitations mentioned in the text, or perhaps it is another difference between these two literary forms, there is not enough evidence to say one way or another.

The archaeology is sparse on the subject of royal halls from this time period, nevertheless, Lydia Klos’s description of the hall before Óláfr kyrri helps illuminate how storytelling may have functioned in that specific setting. The halls tended to contain two table rows lengthways to the wall separated by a long fire in the middle which prompted intimate conversation with those closest to you. The high-seat was placed in the middle, on the lengthways side of the hall, so that even the king was best disposed to speak to the people closest to him. Frands Herschend, in his description of the development of the hall asks ‘what can be done in the hall other than eat and drink and talk and entertain neighbouring hall-owners, while developing an oral fiction. This entertainment between tablemates would prompt the kind of oral storytelling as occurred between the king and Einarr. If you look at the examples, the compiler(s) of Morkinskinna have the people wishing to petition the king approach him. In this way Sneglu-Halli approaches the king to recite a poem, though Þjóðólfr is already positioned next to the king, which was a sign that Þjóðólfr holds a place of honour among Haraldr’s retainers. Arnórr too is said to have approached the kings. But when the king tells his story about Úlfr, it is presumed that the group is the audience, and that they all intended to be honoured by the king’s entertainment, so that it was also possible in the hall to gain a greater audience.

A brief mention should also be made of another forum that is discussed for the transmission of stories, and that is the assembly place. In ‘Íslendinga þáttr sognfróða’ they mention the ‘þing’ specifically as the location where the Icelander learned the story of King Haraldr’s younger years. It shares several attributes with the hall that make it ideal for the transmission of stories, including as a focal point of social gathering.

---

133 Klos, p.17.
135 Klos, p. 19.
Brink describes it as a place of ‘horizontal communication,’ where Halldórr and Halli could entertain each other, not unlike the king and Einarr are reported to do.\textsuperscript{136} It was an important place of exchange in Iceland, and was a forum where people could exchange the stories of their own exploits.

The difficulty again is associating the literary picture of a culture with the culture that really existed, as storytelling is not something that will be evinced by archaeology. The tradition that is extant may have been affected by the passing of time, and more contemporary practices, but it passes on a picture of a diffused practice, that happens at places of social gathering. Around the persona of Haraldr it is undertaken particularly at feast settings. Feasting must certainly have occurred, and the layout of the hall is conducive to the storytelling that is represented here. Again, the picture that results is literary, but it is reflective of whatever oral tradition existed which propagated the stories themselves, that survived to be transmitted into the written texts.

\textbf{Conclusion}

There is a great deal more evidence in the text of oral performance. There was not scope in this paper for equal treatment of both storytelling and poetry recitation, though the poetry is very much a part of the same tradition, and so could not in good conscience be entirely neglected. Even in the relevant section of text there were a great many other examples that would be worth examining, such as the poetry contest in chapter 44, where Haraldr and Pjóðólfur compete with a fisherman, who turns out to be Þorgils, one of Óláfr helgi’s warriors who fought alongside him at the battle of Stiklastaðir.\textsuperscript{137} One thing worth mentioning is the use of the word ‘skemmtan,’ or ‘scemton’ as it appears in Jónsson’s edition. This term was noted by Preben Meulengracht Sørensen in conjunction with freði. Sørensen describes skemmtan as a pastime or entertainment, which could include either storytelling or poetry recitation.\textsuperscript{138} Throughout the relevant

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{136} Brink, p. 79.
\item \textsuperscript{137} \textit{Morkinskinna} 2000, ch. 44, p. 252-254.
\item \textsuperscript{138} Sørensen, p. 134.
\end{itemize}
section of text there are many instances where people attend a feast, or spend the winter at the hall of another, and are ‘entertained.’ In the second example of storytelling, the people expect that they will be entertained by Haraldr, who has offered to proffer such ‘scearton’ in the form of a story. Therefore, the use of ‘skemmtan’ throughout the rest of the text opens up perhaps a wider interpretation of storytelling instances in the relevant section, though it is hard to say with certainty that storytelling is necessarily implied when that vocabulary is used. All we know is that the possibility of storytelling is great, as the medium of winter feasting is well suited for such entertainment.

Now that this picture of what storytelling means in *Morkinskinna* when it is used in the context of this one particular setting has started to form, what would now be a benefit is to take the conclusions arrived at here and to apply them to other texts. An examination of the context of *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* or *Sturlunga saga*, with reference to a study such as this one, will help diminish the likelihood of such instances being taken as cultural exempla without literary context. There is also benefit from comparing this society with the rest of the text, to see if the culture of Haraldr’s court gets unique treatment or if there is continuity of culture throughout the text, as would be likely considering the antiquarian viewpoint, though we arrive again at one of our original dilemmas; lack of existing evidence. In *Morkinskinna* there are other examples of oral performance, but no clear cut examples of oral storytelling; the instances are concentrated around the figure of King Haraldr.

According to Andersson and Gade, 60% of the entire text of Morkinskinna is dedicated to the reign of Magnús inn goði and Haraldr harðraða, and that within that section of text 70% is given over to þættir. It is pertinent to think about why so many traditions were associated with the figure of King Haraldr. It could be that, since he was the second king to rule after Óláfr helgi, whose efforts to bring Christianity to Norway and abroad, and his subsequent acceptance into the ranks of sainthood, made his saga one that was particularly proliferated. There is a possibility also that Haraldr’s reign simply corresponded with the

---

139 References to someone being ‘entertained,’ or enjoying ‘festivities’ are located in Andersson and Gade’s *Morkinskinna* at the following locations: Ch. 3, p. 102; Ch. 14, p. 154; Ch. 20, p. 164; Ch. 39, p. 220 and Ch. 41, p. 224. More work could be done in tracing the similarities in the English phrasing in Andersson and Gade’s text to similarities in the Old Norse vocabulary.
140 Andersson and Gade, p. 2.
golden age of skaldic poetry, so that þættir and stanzas about him survive due to the fact that he was subject material for some of the best poets.\textsuperscript{141} Perhaps it was his personal interest in skalds, as is indicated by the texts themselves: ‘

er mikil sagu fra Haralldi Konunge j kuædi sett þau er honum samtida uoru vm hann kuodin of færda honum sialfum þeir set ortu. vor Haralldr Konungr þui mikill uinr þeirra ath honum þotte gott lofti þuint hann uar þessa heims hofdingi hinn mesti.\textsuperscript{142}

The text also says that he was a particular friend to Icelanders, which may be why so much about Haraldr survives in the Icelandic tradition.\textsuperscript{143} The most likely explanation is some combination of these factors, or other ones unaccounted for here, that would explain why so much of \textit{Morkinskinna} is given over to a narrative about Haraldr. While it is speculation, it is still relevant because it reflects on the historical reality of the culture that is being portrayed. Andersson and Gade say that some of Sigurðr jórsalafari’s stories may have been associated with Haraldr, because, the way the kings’ temperaments are portrayed, their personalities could be interchangeable.\textsuperscript{144} So the stories may not be meant to reflect King Haraldr’s court, but when originally composed reflected a court from the mid-twelfth century.

It has been determined that the perspective of the text is that of an antiquarian who was reflecting on worthy subject material. The compiler(s), at least some, were separated from the events detailed in the narrative by about 150 years and a large body of water. This is reflected in the desire of the text to remark on the place of the exceptional Icelanders at the Norwegian court. This particularly Icelandic slant has generated the individual þættir, which have provided the bulk of the evidence for oral storytelling. The þættir here contribute to the text of \textit{Morkinskinna}, which is an exemplum of the genre koungasögur. This genre was also developed in Iceland, and it reflects upon the ideology of kingship. The intended audience of \textit{Morkinskinna} would be those who were expecting a text containing subject matter of high value. The

\textsuperscript{141} Judith Jesch, ‘Skaldic Verse, a Case of Literacy Avant la Lettre?’, in \textit{Literacy in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian Culture}, ed. by Pernille Hermann (Denmark: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2005), p. 188. Here we are referencing that skaldic poetry flourished particularly in the late tenth and the eleventh centuries.

\textsuperscript{142} \textit{Morkinskinna} 1932, p. 170. ‘a great narrative of King Haraldr is recorded in the poems composed during his lifetime, and they were recited to him by those who composed them. King Haraldr was a great friend to them because he appreciated their praise, being, as he was, the greatest chieftain in the world.’ \textit{Morkinskinna} 2000, ch. 32, p. 204.

\textsuperscript{143} \textit{Morkinskinna} 2000, ch. 32, p. 204. ‘hann hefir verit altra Noregs Konunga vinslælaztr uid Jslendinga.’ \textit{Morkinskinna} 1932, p. 170.

\textsuperscript{144} Andersson and Gade, note 10, p. 452.
high-minded nature of *Morkinskinna* is reflected in the individual episodes of oral storytelling. The stories told are about the recent exploits, or are historical tales, from the not so distant past, whose content affects the audience within the narrative. The storytellers themselves only deal with worthy material, or material that furthers their own cause in the progression of the text. This is why the culture can not be separated from the literature. Due to what survives in the Old Norse tradition, someone at the time of King Haraldr would have been telling the kind of stories that would end up in fornaldursögur, or the stories that explain the mythology behind the kennings that are everywhere present in the konungasögur, but this is not courtly culture that is evinced in *Morkinskinna*. Instead the storytelling reflects the desire of the presumed audience for the high-minded subject matter. Bloomfield and Dunn would have it that the role of the storyteller is to pass on the wisdom associated with a particular worldview. Instead, while they are passing on a tradition, it is not of the innate and unseen workings of the world, but of the everyday and the historically important. The storyteller is supposed to be froðr, and draw on existing or verifiable traditions. What is seen here is more akin to our modern newsreader, or our modern historian than to the oral storyteller who tells of creation in Thomas King’s Native Canadian society. This is the cultural picture that results, though we know that the compiler(s) of the text are using these instances of storytelling to advance the cause and character of the king, to advance the plot, or to advance an Icelandic agenda. Thus the storyteller in the court of King Haraldr is, here, not the transmitter of an ancient wisdom, but a functionary, whose role is as courtier, as entertainer and as the recorder of the current events. But it may be that the storytellers mentioned here may have been the very ones who began the tradition about the court of King Haraldr, that eventually unfolded into the text that is read today in *Morkinskinna*.

**Word Count: 14, 549**

---

145 Quinn, p. 38
146 King, pp. 1-12.
Bibliography


Garevich, Elena, ‘‘Ok varð it mesta skáld’’, some observations on the problem of skaldic training’, *Collegium Medievale*, 9:1-2 (1996-8) 57-71


Jesch, Judith, ‘Skaldic Verse, a Case of Literacy Avant la Lettre?’, in *Literacy in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian Culture*, ed. by Pernille Hermann (Denmark: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2005), pp. 187-210


Quinn, Judy, ‘From orality to literacy in medieval Iceland’, in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society*, ed. by Margaret Clunies Ross, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 30-60


Sturluson, Snorri, *Heimskringla*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk Forrit Series, XXVI (Reykjavík: Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1941)


Thorsson, Örnólfur et al. eds., *The Sagas of Icelanders* (USA: Penguin Classics, 2001)


