

"The Figure of the King: Arthur vs. Hrólfr."

A comparison of the figures of King Arthur--as he appears in the Old Norse Arthurian materials--and of Hrólfr kraki is suggested by a number of points of similarity, some very obvious, others perhaps less so. This remark, of course, applies primarily to various circumstances or events in the lives of Arthur and Hrólfr. It seemed to me though that a comparison of the descriptive verbal material which is associated with these two figures might also be of interest. My interest originally lay with the figure of Arthur, and the comparison with Hrólfr suggested itself only secondarily, so to speak. The figure of Arthur is somewhat more difficult to "define"--for reasons which we will come to directly--although both figures do, in fact, present problems. What I wish to do, then, is present a "composite" of each of the two, that is, the "image" which the audience--be it reader or hearer--of the respective sagas might have formed. I am well aware that there are numerous pitfalls with this kind of a study. I could spend the whole 20 minutes, and more, simply discussing them, but that I do not propose to do. So, I shall just forge ahead here. The comparison, very tentative though it may be, can possibly serve to delineate both figures more clearly.

As I said, Arthur is the somewhat more difficult figure to define. A general impression for the casual reader of the Arthurian sagas would probably be that of a very passive king, a shadowy figure in the background. If we consider any one of the riddarasögur by itself, something can be said about Arthur's

role, but not a great deal. He is certainly overshadowed by Erex or Íven or Parceval, and in Valvers Þáttir he plays no role at all. Möttuls saga is a rather different type of work, and Arthur's appearance in Brother Robert's Tristram is still different again and brings in the material also found in the Breta sögur. These are only some of the high lights, of course. To get the "composite," the image, which I am looking for, we have to amalgamate all this material. Such a process, however, is not entirely without medieval precedent--I use the term "medieval" somewhat loosely here. The process would seem to hypothesize an audience which was familiar with all, or at least most of the various works involved. Now it's an interesting fact that there are several 17th century manuscripts which present collections of the Arthurian material--for example, AM 181 fol. contains, among other texts, Ívens saga, Parcevals saga, Valvers Þáttir, Erex saga, and Möttuls saga. AM 179 fol. contains four of those five (not Erex saga), and its scribe, the industrious Jón Erlendsson, just happened also to prepare a copy or two of Hrólfs saga. But we can push this kind of activity back even farther in time. For example, there is Holm 6 4to, from about 1400, which contains the same four as 179 and may originally have included Erex saga as well. One manuscript of Breta sögur (AM 573 4to) from about 1350-75 also has Valvers Þáttir. And there is good evidence that the now lost "Ormsbók" from roughly the same period contained not only some of the Arthurian romances (e.g., Erex saga, Ívens saga, Parcevals saga) but also a version of Breta sögur. My point is that an audience such as

I am hypothesizing is not necessarily a figment of my imagination entirely.

Now to come to the figure of Arthur and the comparison with Hrólfr. An obvious point of similarity is the circle of twelve "champions." Note that in the two primary manuscripts of Erex saga--which are, however, 17th century copies--the twelve are referred to as "spekingar" and "ráðgjafar." But in the little vellum fragment (Lbs. 1230 III), dated at about 1475-1500, they are actually called "kappar." The fact that other outstanding figures--Charlemagne, for example--may also have a circle of twelve champions, does not vitiate the comparison between Arthur and Hrólfr. When Lars Lönnroth, in comparing Hrólfr and Charlemagne, dismisses the number twelve as "a cliché" (1975, p. 32), I am not sure that I completely agree. When he cites as a parallel Dietrich of Bern, as well as other heroes, fighting twelve opponents, this seems to me a quite different matter. However, I heartily agree with him when he says that similarities of literary structure are of much greater value than similarities in isolated themes and motifs (p. 34). For example, the fact that both Arthur and Hrólfr possess a famous sword--Arthur's "Kaleburnum" and Hrólfr's "Sköfnung"--is such a commonplace that it hardly deserves mention.

In my résumé I also mentioned the manner in which Arthur and Hrólfr both meet their end--in a battle against a close relative. Arthur dies, or at least receives his mortal wound, fighting Modred, his nephew. There is also a woman involved, Arthur's queen--thus, a woman closely associated with the hero--whom

Modred has "married." Hrólfr dies fighting Hjörvarðr, his vassal, and the woman involved, in this case the real instigator of the calamity, is Skuld, Hrólfr's half-sister and wife of Hjörvarðr. Note, too, that in at least one tradition (cf. Beowulf) Hjörvarðr is actually Hrólfr's cousin.

If the final conflicts of Arthur and Hrólfr show certain parallels, the circumstances of their births are no less interesting. Arthur is--very possibly--the child of adultery, or at any rate "semi-adultery," and Hrólfr is the child of incest. Uther Pendragon is smitten with love for Igerne, wife of Duke Gorlois. Aided by Merlin's magic, Uther gains access to the duke's castle and, in the form of Gorlois, sleeps with Igerne. Thus, adultery is involved, although Igerne commits it unwittingly. Geoffrey expressly states (VIII:19) that Arthur was conceived that night. After the death of Gorlois, Uther does marry Igerne, and Breta sögur does not make clear exactly when Arthur was conceived. I will not go into all the details concerning Hrólfr, but King Helgi has a daughter Yrsa without being aware of it. One day Helgi, in disguise, comes upon Yrsa and is smitten with love for her. He takes her by force, although he later marries her. Hrólfr is their son, the child of incest, although here both parents are unwitting. The various parallels to the Arthur case are clear.

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One other parallel may be noted. Before the final sequence of events which will lead to the destruction of Arthur and Hrólfr there is a period of peace, five years for Arthur, simply a long while for Hrólfr ("langar stundir"). Then comes the time for a great celebration, of course Pentecost for Arthur and Yule for Hrólfr.

Naturally there appear to be some basic differences between Arthur and Hrólfr. Hrólfr is both king and warrior. He plays an active role in the saga, although it has been commented upon by various scholars that much of the saga, as we now have it, is devoted to persons other than Hrólfr. But when he appears, he does take a fairly active part in events. To be sure, Arthur in the Geoffrey tradition (Breta sögur, Tristrams saga) is quite similar in this respect, but in the romances his role appears rather different. Hrólfr is not without equivocal elements, however. He takes vigorous action to stop a fight at his court and acts as mediator between Svipdag and his berserks. He does not hesitate to criticize his "hirð" for their bad manners--the bone throwing--they dishonor him in this. Yet he has let this situation arise. Later, too, he must be reminded that his honor is not entirely unblemished, since he has not claimed his patrimony from King Aðils. In spite of all his valor, in the episode at Aðils' court it appears--several times--that Hrólfr needs the protection of his champions, and it is specifically stated that he can not stand the fire as well as they. Finnur Jónsson aptly describes this as "en ynkelig rolle" (Hrólfrs s., p. ix).

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Now it may be of some interest to examine the specific verbal material which is associated with Arthur and Hrólf--primarily the adjectives, of course, but also adverbs, nouns, and so on, as seems relevant. Here I would distinguish between "primary" and "secondary" material. By primary material I mean the adjectives (etc.) which the "author" applies to the figure, or which are applied by some one else in the story but in a "third-person context," where the force would be approximately the same as if the author were speaking. For example, when Svip tells his son he has heard that Hrólf is "Þerr ok stórgjöfull,

trúfastr ok vinavandr," I take these adjectives as having the same force as when the author tells us that Hrólfr became a "mikill mættamaðr." Secondary material, then, will include everything else, as, for example, when "ággætr" is used by a knight in direct address to Arthur. I trust it is clear why I consider such examples as having a different force. In the following I am concerned with only the primary material.

I have prepared two lists, one for Arthur and one for Hrólfr. The words are listed in alphabetical order, and I use the traditional (dictionary) citation form. This is to be understood to represent not only any inflected form but, for adjectives, the comparative and superlative as well. In most cases an expression like "manna fríðastr" does not add significantly different information from a simple "fríðr," at least for our purposes here. Words (or closely related forms) which occur on both lists are supplied with an asterisk, for easier identification. If a word occurs more than once within the same text, this is indicated. On the list for Arthur the text (or texts) in which the word occurs is also indicated in parentheses.

Up to this point I have said nothing about any problems with the various traditions surrounding Hrólfr. As with Arthur, though, Hrólfr is mentioned in more texts than just the saga that bears his name. Ultimately, the situation with Hrólfr may be even more complicated than with Arthur, and it is clear that the saga as we now have it is a late work and can be said to be botched in places (for example, see Jónsson, Hrólfrs s., pp. vi-viii). For purposes of this paper, however, I have concentrated

on the saga, with only an occasional reference to the other traditions. On the list I have included the few items from the Snorra Edda (marked SnE); Heimskringla, which also mentions Hrólfr, provides no relevant material.

Looking at the two lists, we can make several observations. The list for Arthur is nearly twice as long as the one for Hrólfr. To some extent that feature is obviously connected with the number of texts I used in each case. However, note that the various Arthurian texts tend to use mutually different words; over fifty of the items occur in only one text, and no single item occurs in all the texts. I could, of course, have reduced the number of items by combining, for example, "blífðliga" and "blíför," "ríkuliga" and "ríkr," perhaps "kurteisi" and "kurteiss," and so on. Another observation is that of the items for Hrólfr nearly one-third occur on the list for Arthur. Some of the other items are very "context bound"--for example, "kraki," "grannligr," "Þunnleitr." In this connection, notice that there is very little physical description--for Arthur only "mikill á vöxt" and "váenn at álitu," both from the same text (BS). Arthur is, in that respect, quite shadowy, although the overall composite is less so, and Hrólfr really does not fare much better.

Although in this paper I am not primarily interested in the "literary portrait," some mention of that subject may perhaps be relevant. What I have done by making the two lists is, of course, to wash out any portrait that might occur. For Arthur there is in fact nothing worth calling a portrait in Erex saga,

Ívens saga, Parcevals saga, or Tristrams saga. In Breta sögur, as was possibly to be expected, there is a portrait--"presentation segment" might be a better term (see Lönnroth, 1976, p. 118)--one which includes some 16 items (Jónsson, Hauksbók, p. 287:23-6). With an eye to Lars Lönnroth's study of the portrait (1965, p. 77), I would say that the example here is somewhat more informative than decorative, considering Arthur's action in the following sections. There is some alliteration, for example "fastnaemr ok forsjáll," "siðlátr ok sigrsáell," and perhaps an occasional touch of assonance, "harðr ok vápnðjarfr." As far as I can see, these sixteen items correspond to four in Geoffrey: "bonitas," "gratia," "largitas," "virtus," with a fifth added a few lines later, "probitas" (Hammer, p. 152:9-11 + 15-6). Note that here there are no physical characteristics. In Möttuls saga, then, there is a portrait, or presentation section, which is even more extensive than the one in Breta sögur--some 22 items (Cederschiöld-Wulff, pp. 1-2). Again there is some alliteration, for example "vaskasti at vápnnum"--and note "hagráðasti í ráðagörðum." To all this there appears to be absolutely nothing corresponding in the French. Thus, in both instances the Norse seems to have freely introduced a quantity of descriptive material.

For Hrólf there is also a portrait, though interestingly enough it is put in the mouth of Svip when he is talking to his son. Although Hrólf has been mentioned twice earlier in the saga, this is the first time he has really been "introduced." There are some 15 items, including a couple of physical ones,

"fríðr," "lágligr" (Slay, pp. 46-7). These are, incidentally, the only items of physical description, other than those already mentioned and specifically attached to Hrólfr's "name-giving." There is a bit of alliteration, for example "högr við vesala ok hógváerr." The characteristics of the presentation of Hrólfr are thus quite similar to those of Arthur.

Despite certain gross overall differences, there are a number of points of similarity between Arthur and Hrólfr, both in major and minor circumstances in their stories, and in the descriptive verbal material associated with them. A comparison of the two figures helps to sharpen the focus on both.

Arthur

- *ágdætr (BS, ES, IS)
 áhyggjyfullr (PS--2x)
 angraðr (PS)
 beinisamr (MS)
 blífðliga (IS)
 *blíför (IS, MS)
 *drengskapr (MS, TS)
 dýrliqr (MS)
 fastnáðmr (BS)
 forsjáleysi (BS)
 forsjáll (BS)
 forvitinn (MS)
 *(víð-)fráðegr (BS, IS, MS--3x,
 TS--2x)
 *fróðekleikr (MS)
 fullkominn (í öllum höfðingskap)
 (MS)
 *glaðr (BS)
 góðr (vinum) (BS)
 góðgjarn (í miskunnsemd) (MS)
 góðvili (TS)
 grimr (úvinum) (BS)
 guðhráðdr (MS)
 hagraðr (MS)
 harðr (BS, MS)
 *hreysti (TS--2x)
 huggóðði (MS)
 (engi) illgíræð (MS)
- kapp (BS)
 (mikill) kappi (BS)
 kurteisí (MS)
 kurteiss IS, Janv, TS)
 (mikils) lofs (verðr) (MS)
 *megn (ES)
 (vel) mennt (BS)
 *mikill (á vöxt) (BS)
 mildleikr (MS)
 *mildr (at gjöfum) (MS--2x)
 miskunnsamr (MS)
 mjúklyndr (góðum) (MS)
 *(kóngr) þrýði (ES)
 riddaraskap (TS)
 ríkr (ES, TS)
 ríkuliga (MS)
 rúskr (í framgöngum) (BS)
 siðlátr (BS)
 siðugr (MS)
 sigr (TS)
 sigrsæll (BS)
 spekingr (BS)
 sterkr (BS)
 sœmd (TS)
 tiguligr (MS)

Arthur (cont.)

vald (ES)
vápndjarfr (BS)
vaskleikr (TS)
vaskr (at vápnum) (MS)
vinr (guðs ok góðra manna) (BS)
vinsæll (IS, MS)
virðuliga (ES)
váenn (at álit) (BS)
(engi) þfund (MS)
*Þrr (at fé) (BS)

BS = Breta sǫgur

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Hrólf

*ágæti (+ SnE)	rausn (2x)
*blítt	(gott) skap
*drengiliga	stórlátr (við úmilda)
fríðr	stórláeti (2x)
*fráðgr	torveldr
*(fróeknleikr SnE)	trúfastr
(stór-)gjðfull	úlfkr (ðörum kóngum í bardaga)
*glaðr	vegr
(grannligr SnE--2x)	verjast vel
heiðr	vinavandr
hógværr	Þunnleitr
*hreysti	*ðrr
hugprýði (3x)	
hóðgr (við vessala)	
kraki (í andlitinu) (+ SnE)	
lágligr (at líta)	
Lítillátr	
(lítilláeti SnE)	
ljúfr	
mátr	
*megn	
*mikill (at reyna)	
*míldr (at fé) (+ SnE)	
(mikill) máætamaðr	
(með öngum) ótta	
*prýði	

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Now it may be of some interest to examine the specific verbal material which is associated with Arthur and Hrólfr--primarily the adjectives, of course, but also adverbs, nouns, and so on, as seems relevant. Here I would distinguish between "primary" and "secondary" material. By primary material I mean the adjectives (etc.) which the "author" applies to the figure, or which are applied by some one else in the story but in a "third-person context," where the force would be approximately the same as if the author were speaking. For example, when Svip tells his son he has heard that Hrólfr is "Þurr ok stórgjöfull,

trúfastr ok vinavandr," I take these adjectives as having the same force as when the author tells us that Hrólfr became a "mikill mættamaðr." Secondary material, then, will include everything else, as, for example, when "ágdætr" is used by a knight in direct address to Arthur. I trust it is clear why I consider such examples as having a different force. In the following I am concerned with only the primary material.

I have prepared two lists, one for Arthur and one for Hrólfr. The words are listed in alphabetical order, and I use the traditional (dictionary) citation form. This is to be understood to represent not only any inflected form but, for adjectives, the comparative and superlative as well. In most cases an expression like "manna fríðastr" does not add significantly different information from a simple "fríðr," at least for our purposes here. Words (or closely related forms) which occur on both lists are supplied with an asterisk, for easier identification. If a word occurs more than once within the same text, this is indicated. On the list for Arthur the text (or texts) in which the word occurs is also indicated in parentheses.

Up to this point I have said nothing about any problems with the various traditions surrounding Hrólfr. As with Arthur, though, Hrólfr is mentioned in more texts than just the saga that bears his name. Ultimately, the situation with Hrólfr may be even more complicated than with Arthur, and it is clear that the saga as we now have it is a late work and can be said to be botched in places (for example, see Jónsson, Hrólfrs s., pp. vi-viii). For purposes of this paper, however, I have concentrated

on the saga, with only an occasional reference to the other traditions. On the list I have included the few items from the Snorra Edda (marked SnE); Heimskringla, which also mentions Hrólfr, provides no relevant material.

Looking at the two lists, we can make several observations. The list for Arthur is nearly twice as long as the one for Hrólfr. To some extent that feature is obviously connected with the number of texts I used in each case. However, note that the various Arthurian texts tend to use mutually different words; over fifty of the items occur in only one text, and no single item occurs in all the texts. I could, of course, have reduced the number of items by combining, for example, "blföliga" and "blförr," "ríkuliga" and "ríkr," perhaps "kurteis" and "kurteiss," and so on. Another observation is that of the items for Hrólfr nearly one-third occur on the list for Arthur. Some of the other items are very "context bound"--for example, "kraki," "grannligr," "Funnleitr." In this connection, notice that there is very little physical description--for Arthur only "mikill á vöxt" and "váenn at álitu," both from the same text (BS). Arthur is, in that respect, quite shadowy, although the overall composite is less so, and Hrólfr really does not fare much better.

Although in this paper I am not primarily interested in the "literary portrait," some mention of that subject may perhaps be relevant. What I have done by making the two lists is, of course, to wash out any portrait that might occur. For Arthur there is in fact nothing worth calling a portrait in Erex saga,

Ivens saga, Parcevals saga, or Tristrans saga. In Breta sögur, as was possibly to be expected, there is a portrait--"presentation segment" might be a better term (see Lönnroth, 1976, p. 118)--one which includes some 16 items (Jónsson, Hauksbók, p. 287:23-6). With an eye to Lars Lönnroth's study of the portrait (1965, p. 77), I would say that the example here is somewhat more informative than decorative, considering Arthur's action in the following sections. There is some alliteration, for example "fastnaemr ok forsjaáll," "siðlátr ok sigrsaell," and perhaps an occasional touch of assonance, "harðr ok vápnðjarfr." As far as I can see, these sixteen items correspond to four in Geoffrey: "bonitas," "gratia," "largitas," "virtus," with a fifth added a few lines later, "probitas" (Hammer, p. 152:9-11 + 15-6). Note that here there are no physical characteristics. In Möttula saga, then, there is a portrait, or presentation section, which is even more extensive than the one in Breta sögur--some 22 items (Cederschiöld-Wulff, pp. 1-2). Again there is some alliteration, for example "vaskasti at vápnnum"--and note "hagraðasti í ráðagörðum." To all this there appears to be absolutely nothing corresponding in the French. Thus, in both instances the Norse seems to have freely introduced a quantity of descriptive material.

For Hrólf there is also a portrait, though interestingly enough it is put in the mouth of Svip when he is talking to his son. Although Hrólf has been mentioned twice earlier in the saga, this is the first time he has really been "introduced." There are some 15 items, including a couple of physical ones,

"fríðr," "lágliðr" (Slay, pp. 46-7). These are, incidentally, the only items of physical description, other than those already mentioned and specifically attached to Hrólfr's "name-giving." There is a bit of alliteration, for example "högr við vesala ok högværr." The characteristics of the presentation of Hrólfr are thus quite similar to those of Arthur.

Despite certain gross overall differences, there are a number of points of similarity between Arthur and Hrólfr, both in major and minor circumstances in their stories, and in the descriptive verbal material associated with them. A comparison of the two figures helps to sharpen the focus on both.

Arthur

- *ágaðetr (BS, ES, IS)
 áhyggjyfullr (PS--2x)
 angraðr (PS)
 beinisamr (MS)
 blföliga (IS)
 *blförr (IS, MS)
 *drengskapr (MS, TS)
 dýrliqr (MS)
 fastnaðmr (BS)
 forsjáleysi (BS)
 forsjáll (BS)
 forvitinn (MS)
 *(víð-)fráðegr (BS, IS, MS--3x,
 TS--2x)
 *fröekleikr (MS)
 fullkominn (í öllum höfðingskap)
 (MS)
 *glaðr (BS)
 góðr (vinum) (BS)
 góðgjarn (í miskunnsemd) (MS)
 góðvili (TS)
 grimr (úvinum) (BS)
 guðhráðdr (MS)
 hagraðr (MS)
 harðr (BS, MS)
 *hreysti (TS--2x)
 huggóðði (MS)
 (engi) illgiræð (MS)
 kapp (BS)
 (mikill) kappi (BS)
 kurteisí (MS)
 kurteiss IS, Janv, TS)
 (mikils) lofs (verðr) (MS)
 *megn (ES)
 (vel) mennt (BS)
 *mikill (á vöxt) (BS)
 mildleikr (MS)
 *mildr (at gjöfum) (MS--2x)
 miskunnsamr (MS)
 mjúklyndr (göðum) (MS)
 *(kóns) þrýði (ES)
 riddaraskap (TS)
 ríkr (ES, TS)
 ríkuliga (MS)
 rúskr (í framgöngum) (BS)
 siðlátr (BS)
 siðugr (MS)
 sigr (TS)
 sigrsæll (BS)
 spekingr (BS)
 sterkr (BS)
 sœmd (TS)
 tiguligr (MS)

Arthur (cont.)

vald (ES)
vápndjarfr (BS)
vaskleikr (TS)
vaskr (at vápnum) (MS)
vinr (guðs ok góðra manna) (BS)
vinsæll (IS, MS)
virðuliga (ES)
váenn (at álit) (BS)
(engi) þfund (MS)
*Þrr (at fé) (BS)

BS = Breta sögur

ES = Erex saga

IS = Ívens saga

Janv = Janvals ljóð

MS = Móttuls saga

PS = Parcevals saga

TS = Tristrams saga

Hrólf

*ágæti (+ SnE)	raun (2x)
*blítt	(gott) skap
*drengiliga	stórlátr (við úmilda)
fríðr	stórláeti (2x)
*fráðgr	torveldr
*(fróðknleikr SnE)	trúfastr
(stór-)gjófull	úlfkr (Þórum kóngum í bardaga)
*glaðr	vegr
(grannligr SnE--2x)	verjast vel
heiðr	vinavandr
hógværr	Þunnleitr
*hreysti	*Þrr
hugprýði (3x)	
hóðgr (við vesala)	
kraki (í andlitinu) (+ SnE)	
lágligr (at líta)	
lífillátr	
(lífilláeti SnE)	
ljúfr	
mátr	
*megn	
*mikill (at reyna)	
*míldr (at fé) (+ SnE)	
(mikill) mættamaðr	
(með öngum) ótta	
*prýði	

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