

BOOKS

Flavia Teoc, *Perspectiva sofianică în Saga regelui Harald. Studiu privind articularea sensului din unghiul textemelor kenning*, Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2020, 211 pp.

Perspectiva sofianică în Saga regelui Harald. Studiu privind articularea sensului din unghiul textemelor kenning (The Sophian Perspective in Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar), by PhD Flavia Teoc, proposes an in-depth analysis of the kenning metaphors from a linguistic perspective. Applying the integralist concepts of language theoretician Eugen Coșeriu and the literary Sophian perspective of the author, philologist and philosopher Lucian Blaga, the work offers an alternative interpretation of the meaning and creative process of the skaldic poetry, acquainting the reader with medieval Scandinavian mythology, history, literature, and culture – each



component essential for the understanding of the old poetic metaphors. The first chapter begins with an introduction to Coșeriu's five principles for linguistics as a science of cultures: the principle of objectivity, of humanism, of tradition, of anti-dogmatism and of response/ public utility.

The principle of objectivity proposes a straightforward analysis of the subject, that things would be simply defined as what they are, by their given name. However, as Coșeriu adds, a subject cannot be fully observed without interpretation. Therefore, the second principle introduces the human factor of liberty of expression and creativity, which



supposes an inherent intuitive understanding of language, followed by the principle of (linguistic) tradition. The anti-dogmatism implies that tradition should be mitigated in its completeness, staying true to its origins, and that it should be integrated into a common vision. And the final principle, that ties all the others together, is the understanding of language as an intuitive, human process, that is a creative activity and an instrument for communicating not only within the original language, but with other cultures as well. The following subchapter, “Eugeniu Coşeriu and the Scandinavian linguistic school” presents integralist linguistic theories of different Scandinavian philologists, such as: Louis Hjelmslev, Svend Johansen, Leiv Flydal, and many others.

The second chapter, “The Role of the Kenning Metaphor in the Medieval North”, begins with a short description of *The Prose Edda*, written by Snorri Sturluson to serve as a guide for young skalds (Norse poets that composed according to skaldic rules). Written after the christening of Scandinavia, *The Prose Edda* is fascinating not only in what it comprises, being the sole Medieval guide to skaldic poetry, but also through its context: Norse mythology retold through a Christian perspective. Trying to demythologise the origins of the gods, Snorri argued that the name of the Æsir gods was derived from Asia, and that they were the old rulers of Troy. He defined paganism as the unawareness of God's existence and the worship of more perceivable, yet misunderstood elements, such as the sun. According to his theory, the great foreign rulers which came to Scandinavia became deified through the same process. The work is divided into three chapters:

Gylfaginning, *Skáldskaparmál*, and *Háttatal*. *Gylfaginning* (The Beguiling of Gylfi) is much like a Christian's first encounter with the pagan world. The king Gylfi seeks out the palace of the gods, which is an illusion, and instead of finding Óðinn, he finds three men, that will engage with him in a competition where Gylfi can ask any question about the world until one of them would not know the answer. In this manner he finds out about the creation of the world and the exploits of the gods. *Skáldskaparmál* recounts the origins of the mead of poetry and defines what a kenning and a heiti represent. A kenning is a metaphor, composed of two or more corelated words, such as [Óðins mjǫð] (Óðin's mead), which refers to skaldic poetry. A heiti is a poetical synonym, a word that would replace the original term (attributing different names to words), such as 'ask' (ash-tree) for man (objects often denote living beings in skaldic poetry, and vice-versa). *Háttatal*, on the other hand, provides examples of skaldic poetry and its metrics. Therefore, the introduction into Norse mythology from the first chapter and the terminology presented in *Skáldskaparmál* are essential for decrypting the metaphors of skaldic poetry. Yet the kennings and heitis are not limited only to mythology, but also cover cultural aspects, traditions, historical facts, and a glimpse into the Norse way of perceiving life. The chapter continues with presenting the thesis of the work: *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar*, its hagiographical nature, the historical context, and linguistic analysis of the poetry that is recalled during the narration. It further explains the purpose and formation of the kenning metaphors through the research of Wilhelm Bode, Rudolf Meissner, Turville Petre, Roberta

Frank, Edith Marold, Sanda Tomescu Baciu, Gary Holland, and Stefan Einarsson.

Chapter three, "The Analysis of the Kenning Metaphors in Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar, from the perspective of integralist linguistics" spans over most of the book, covering five "macro-frameworks" of the saga, presenting the protagonist, Haraldr Sigurðarson, in unique circumstances, and how the kennings used in each poem belonging to these scenes have been detrimental to defining the context and revealing the text's hagiographical inclination. Each kenning is analysed from a semantic and cultural perspective, offering mythological, historical, and philological guidance (as needed) for the reader to understand the creation, and meaning of every metaphor used. One such kenning is [tandrauðs ormtorgs] (translated as "the flame-red dragon-hearth" by Flavia Teoc). To understand the kenning from a cultural perspective, the reader (or listener, as was the case for skaldic poetry) must be familiar with *Völsunga saga*, which contains a scene that influenced modern fantasy: the defeat of the dragon Fáfni, who was resting upon a heap of gold. Therefore, a kenning like [dragon's bed] would suggest gold, in the same manner as [dragon-hearth] does, being additionally attributed the visual image of "flame-red," easily interpretable for the glitter of gold. Moreover, the mention of the mythical dragon is not only for dramatic effect but anticipates Harald's own encounter with a serpent while imprisoned in Byzantium. Another example would be the analysis of the lexeme 'drifa' (meaning snowfall or hail) which is used to compose many kennings. The skald Einarr Helgason uses the kenning [Hárs drifu] (Óðin's hailstorm, 'Hárr' being a heiti for Óðinn) with the meaning of battle. He also names battle simply as 'hailstorm,'

or [the hailstorm of the woman of sharp blades (valkyrie)]. Flavia Teoc argues that, while hailstorm can mean battle, the image of snowfall, as recounted in the kenning [King Kraki's snowfall], signifies gold, which is understood only by those familiar with the stories of the semi-legendary king Kraki. A simple kenning as hailstorm can offer a glimpse into the way skaldic poetry was perceived. The struggle with the elements of the north, such as the rough climate, can easily bend one's imagination into comparing a snowstorm with a battle, an unavoidable struggle for life.

Chapter four begins with a definition of the Sophian concept, originally described by the theology philosopher Vladimir Solovyov by merging the two terms of "Ain-Soph" (terminology used in the interpretation of the Old Testament) and "Jah" (from the Jewish name of God, Yahweh). Thus, the name of Sophia becomes a bridge between God and His Creation. Moreover, Lucian Blaga defines a Sophian work as a transcendental creation descended from the Divine into the mortal plain through a revelatory receiver, in this case being Haraldr Sigurðarson. One such moment is recalled in the macro-framework of Harald's imprisonment in Byzantium, the defeat of the serpent, the marriage with Ellisif and his return to Scandinavia. The encounter with the serpent is a commemoration of the mythological past and Fáfni's defeat, contrasted with the scene of the marriage, symbolising the ever-changing world of the present, in which the saga takes place. The kenning mentioned above becomes complete only through the introduction of a Christian value: "the young man that hates [the flame-red dragon-hearth] (gold)." It is a metaphor that reshapes the pagan nature of skaldic poetry, perpetuating the tradition within a Christianised society.

To sum up, Flavia Teoc's *Perspectiva sofianică în Saga regelui Harald. Studiu privind articularea sensului din unghiul textemelor kenning* delves into the complicated nature of the saga narrative and its skaldic poetry. A saga in which Snorri Sturluson purposefully avoided any sources other than Scandinavian ones, in order to reshape the story of Haraldr Sigurðarson as that of a truly Christian king, who fought against a pagan past and promoted Christian values as related through the skaldic poems, semantically analysed by Flavia Teoc, who generously described the context and meaning of every kenning necessary for the decryption of the verses. Even though unique and provoking, Teoc's proposal that Haraldr was depicted as a

saintly figure could have been more thoroughly explored, since many other *heilagra manna sögur* (sagas of saints) do not only highlight, but purposefully radicalise the Christian character of the protagonists. However, Harald's Christian personality remains ambiguous, and it could still be discussed whether the telling of his deeds belongs to the hagiographical genre.

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