Meylan, Nicolas Tournhout Brepols 2014 Pp. x, 232 €75.00 (hardback) review Transformed encoding to P5 TEI.

Nicolas Meylan develops an approach to magic in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelandic texts as it relates to political discourses, particularly kingship, across six chapters: (1) Theorizing Magic, (2) The Vocabulary of Old Norse Magic, (3) Magic, Discourse of Invective, (4) Magic, Discourse of Power, (5) Magic, Kings, and Poetry, and (6) Miracles, Saints, and Magic. While previous studies of magic in Old Icelandic texts and culture have focused on ritual and practitioners, this book provides performative analyses of magic's role in the textual representations of political life. In this respect Meylan has succeeded in advancing the theoretical range of an old topic that generally looks either backwards from the period of textual composition to mythological-religious origins and connections, for instance, to shamanism, or forward to early modern Scandinavia in the age of the pan-European witch hunts.

The first chapter (Theorizing Magic) positions "magic as discourse" against the historical (and broader social-science oriented) search for origins, description of practices, and cataloguing and analysis of accusations that dominate within the larger field and in studies of the Scandinavian world. In this discursive sense Meylen connects the textual world to the political, in which magic is "a dynamic, socially constructed, and historically determined social practice (not to be confused with the putative actual practice of magic)," ultimately part of a common, shared definition of magic vis-à-vis religion within the medieval Scandinavian society (11). Turning to a survey of previous studies embedded in lexical or categorical approaches, the author selects the English word magic as an umbrella for the rich vernacular vocabulary presented in the second chapter. The sources of Old Norse-Icelandic magic employed here include prose (sagas of all genres and legal texts) and poetry (skaldic and eddic), with the exclusion of runic "texts."

From a lexical perspective the world of Old Norse magic was already highly developed by the time it became part of the written record, which is evident not only in the profusion of terms but also in their apparent gradations of meaning. Leaving aside the philological approach as a means to describe origins or practices, Meylan discusses these terms in the second chapter (The Vocabulary of Old Norse Magic) in the Christian context of their use and their shifting, sometimes porous boundaries, in order to situate them within a discourse of knowledge and power. Vernacular terms can operate both as glosses for much-discussed Latin terms, such as maleficus or incantatio in Stjórm, and indigenously, but the latter only within the milieu already established by associations with literary language and later models of thought about magic. Magic and Kingship in Medieval Iceland reaches to the heart of this dense topic with an overview of the major terms and their stakes and offers on occasion new ideas about them based on brief readings of textual passages. These skeletal suggestions are given flesh in subsequent chapters.

Turning to the anthropological construction of accusation discourses, the third chapter (Magic, Discourse of Invective) provides arguments for magic as a means to explaining otherwise ignominious royal defeats and prop up the institution of Norwegian kingship and royal legitimacy. Extended readings of lexemes, events, and contexts in Grettis saga, Grágás, and several other texts support the notion that magic was used by those in power (viewed on the side of religion) as an explanation for setbacks from those in lesser positions (viewed on the side on anti-religion), and, furthermore, served as legitimization for that most powerful of medieval Nordic disgraces, outlawry and its attendant dishonor.

Opposite negative discourses are those of magic as power, which also appear in the fourth chapter (Magic, Discourse of Power) in first-person contexts apart from the implicit condemnation by association from the previous discussion. One example comes from Rauðulf's þáttar in a fourteenth-century manuscript of St. Ola's saga in which one Rauðulf bóndi, despite his lowly status, impresses Óláf with his ability to make pronouncements about the future. A question arises of this power's origin – prophecy or magic – and the king decides that it cannot be magic because his host is a good Christian. Rauðulf counters that his powers come from certain "natural" phenomena, among them dreams, astrology, and observation. There certainly is space within this discourse for a positive reading of magic as power, particularly as the power of knowledge, but this section appears somewhat more tenuous than the previous set of accusatorial invectives. The author, understanding myth in a sense that has long been operational (i.e., myth as living discourse and ideology within a society rather than a cataloguing of deity stories), considers that the situation of magic in the Poetic Edda may reflect a temporal distancing that removes the actors from Christian condemnation, which is later taken up as a speculative answer to power—the powerless could have constructed alternate, positive definitions of magic, enfranchising the inhabitants of what the Norwegians viewed as a remote and simple colony. There is, however, need for this type of speculation within Old Norse studies, particularly as they continue to move toward the present of composition and textual production and ever further away from the mythic or settlement periods.

In the fifth chapter (Magic, Kings, and Poetry), Icelandic reactions to Norwegian power are again the subject, though here in the spaces provided by a "slippage between [magic] and another—legitimate—category, poetry" (126). After a brief introduction to the history and contemporary historiography of Hákon Håkonarson's acquisition of Iceland and his policies toward it, Meylan discusses the discourses of magic present in the Prose Edda, Egils saga, and Porleifs þáttar jarlaskáldeyss. These texts present subversive models, for example, the deluding of a king in Gylfaginning through magic is yet an endorsement of the "power of persuasion" (137), also set in opposition through the illusions in the tale of Ótgarðaloki. Egill and his saga is likewise viewed through a group of oppositions (gender, location, use or lack of magic, etc.) with a clear link to poetry. The third text, Porleifs þáttar, deals with an Icelander who exacts his revenge on a Norwegian jarl with a dráp an decidedly discrepant content and an itching curse, only to be killed in retaliation by a magical automat.
of driftwood. Together, these three examples offer a subversive space in which Icelanders could equate literature with contemporary political situations and feelings of powerlessness, practice magic of a poetic nature and thus isolated from certain types of Christian condemnation, and nevertheless retain distance between religion and demonic or other forms of magic.

Finally, chapter six (Miracles, Saints, and Magic) links the construction of a politicized discourse of magic from previous chapters to the fourteenth-century Icelandic church, specifically in the creation of the L recension of Jón's saga helga as a hagiographical legitimation of the northern Icelanders' desired saint. Several episodes are read as intertextually magical, alluding to Odin, magical gestures, and other devices familiar to Icelanders from saga literature and eddic texts generally, but not overt in such a way as to arouse suspicion of Jón's holiness. Answering the question of these tropes' survival as an ideological reflection in the affirmative, Meylan notes that the central opposition remains firmly against Norwegian royalty and that Jón, in the discursive realm of textual magic, is free to condemn sorcery as negative religion while exercising a saintly power reminiscent of magic in more than mere form.

The book provides a brief summary and conclusion, a thorough bibliography, and an index. While some of the readings and connections will appeal to a greater or lesser extent according to a reader's inclination toward speculation, this reader finds the whole to be a well-argued contribution to the world of medieval Icelandic textual composition and transmission and to studies of magic in the medieval North. The book stands on its own merits but is also a good addition to other recent works on magic in medieval Scandinavia. [1] The core opposition—the powerful (Norway) and the powerless (Iceland)—is in fact a widespread motif in disparate textual records and genres and takes no special pleading to serve as a viable source of analogy. Ultimately, Meylan has provided thoughtful reflections on the possibilities found in the interstices between magic and poetry, magic and religion, and practice and discourse.

Note:


"Meylan has provided thoughtful reflections on the possibilities found in the interstices between magic and poetry, magic and religion, and practice and discourse." (Adam Oberlin, in: The Medieval Review, February 2015, 15.02.07). "In my opinion, Meylan's book offers an important contribution to the history of religions and the study of magic in Norse contexts. Since few scholars working in this field of research discuss the nature of the medieval texts thoroughly, their ideological content and meaning for the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century readers is also quite innovat Article excerpt. Meylan, Nicolas, Magic and Kingship in Medieval Iceland: The Construction of a Discourse of Political Resistance (Studies in Viking and Medieval Scandinavia, 3), Turnhout, Brepols, 2014; hardback; pp. x, 233; 1 b/w table; R.R.P. [euro]75.00; ISBN 9782503551579. Nicolas Meylan's first monograph is intriguingly titled: settled in the late ninth and early tenth centuries, medieval Iceland was famously king-less, administered instead by a chieftaincy and legal system that allows its current parliament, the Alpingi, to claim status as the oldest in the world. Almost as famousl Scholars of medieval Ashkenaz (Northern France and Germany) have long noticed and analyzed such parallels in areas related to the domestic sphere, such as childbirth and childrearing rituals, as well as in academic trends and literary genres. In his new book, A Remembrance of His Wonders: Nature and the Supernatural in Medieval Ashkenaz, David Shyovitz offers a fresh look at the question of primacy through two distinct but overlapping lenses. Shyovitz examines medieval approaches to the natural world, particularly as experienced and explained by Hasidei Ashkenaz, who are individuals inclined t