Reinhard Hennig, Emily Lethbridge, Michael Schulte (eds.), *Ecocriticism and Old Norse Studies. Nature and the Environment in Old Norse Literature and Culture*, Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2023, 312 pp.

The volume *Ecocriticism and Old Norse Studies. Nature and the Environment in Old Norse Literature and Culture* edited by Reinhard Hennig, Emily Lethbridge, and Michael Schulte, brings together the fields of ecocriticism and that of Old Norse studies, with the aim of creating bridges between these two areas of research and being the first anthology that addresses this mix. It is the seventh volume in *The North Atlantic World. Land and Sea as Cultural Space, AD 400–1900* series from Brepols Publishing, edited by Alexandra Sanmark. As the editors note in the introduction, little attention has so far been given to the intersection of these two fields, which is regretful, since medieval and Old Norse studies could contribute greatly to ecocritical research (p. 13) which is naturally, but unfortunately, mostly concentrated on modern and contemporary literature. Some notable works that have aimed to combine these two areas of research are "Ecocriticism and Middle English Literature", an article published by Rebecca M. Douglass in 1998, Gillian Rudd's 2007 book *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature*, Connie Scarborough's *Inscribing the Environment: Ecocritical Approaches to Medieval Spanish Literature* from 2013, and Christopher Abram's *Evergreen Ash: Ecology and Catastrophe in Old Norse Myth and Literature* from 2019.

The book is divided into eleven chapters, with the first one being an introductory review of existing published research conducted at the intersection of ecocriticism and Old Norse studies. The introduction starts by presenting some of the theoretical aspects with regard to ecocriticism, as well as a number of trends and directions within the field. The two main tendencies in present-day ecocriticism are, according to the editors, the following: the first one is "based on the assumption that anthropocentrism lies at the root of most ecological problems – that is, a human-centred worldview, with humans being perceived as standing outside and above 'nature'" (p. 15), while the second one "does not necessarily deny an intrinsic value of the non-human but is more interested in questions relating to human use of natural resources and the consequences of environmental and climatic change for humans" (p. 15). Some more recent trends, for instance, material ecocriticism, succeed in combining these two tendencies. The second part of the introduction is dedicated to scholarship that has employed ecocritical approaches in its study of premodern literature. The editors claim there are two issues which may arise when premodern literature is investigated through an ecocritical lens: on the one hand, there is the risk of anachronism (projecting our own, modern anxieties about

the changes of the environment and the climate into sources that do not, in fact, take up such issues), and on the other hand there is the question of realism.

The introduction is followed by Hannah Burrows' chapter, *Aesthetic Expressions of Nature in Skaldic Verse*, which deals with different representations of Old Norse skaldic aesthetics of the natural world. The conclusion the author draws is surprising and suggests a distinctiveness for skaldic verse: it appreciates what is beautiful, but also what is contradictory or simply noteworthy, and sparks aesthetic appreciation beyond what could be considered visually appealing or unappealing (p. 58). This happens especially in the context of *kennings*, which "allow momentary glimpses into superficially hidden qualities of natural (and other) phenomena" (p. 59). The sea is of particular interest here: it is depicted both as "ugly", and as a challenge that defies humans and engenders the creation of mutual, shared meanings.

The second chapter, *Trees in the Saga Dreamscape*, written by Timothy Bourns, concerns the issue of dream-trees (common in the kings' sagas and the sagas of Icelanders), discussing the metaphorical links between trees and humans. Bourns also investigates the use of the words *fagr* and *fagrgrænn* in these texts, and the connection between the aesthetic appreciation of the trees and their vitality, symbolised by the colour green. At the end of the chapter, Bourns explores the chronotope of these dream-environments, or dreamscapes, as he calls them, suggesting that these realities are governed by unique rules of time and space (p. 67).

Jonas Koesling's chapter, titled *"Brúðir berserkja barðak í hlés eyju". A Material-Ecocritical Consideration of the Role of the Sea in Myths and Rituals of Premodern Scandinavia*, investigates the depiction and representation of the sea in Old Norse literature, from a material-ecocritical standpoint. The author argues for the sea's "agential entanglements and corporeal expressions" (p. 108) in this more-than-human world, claiming that the numerous references and connections to the maritime-oceanic world in premodern Old Norse literature place *Homo sapiens* on the same level with other non-human entities and realities, such as, among others, the sea itself (p. 108). In this context, Koesling proposes a continuation of the material-ecocritical project, which could include (so-called) supernatural forces, because, as the author claims, the poetic-literary representations analysed in this chapter seem to situate (or at least bridge) divine or more-than-physical forces in the human, earthy, material world.

The fifth chapter, authored by Elizabeth Walgenbach and titled *Legal Perspectives on Nature in Old Norse-Icelandic Lawcodes*, investigates the way in which laws from medieval Iceland, both secular and those of the Church, shape a certain view towards the natural world and natural resources. While in secular law codes such as Grágás and Jónsbók the focus falls on resource management and resource distribution, when it comes to Christian laws, resource management does not seem such a pressing concern. These laws mostly "modify wider legal norms in canon law in order to accommodate local realities of climate and scarce resources" (p. 133), suggesting humility towards forces out of human control such as the ocean or the weather (p. 132).

In the chapter titled *Imagining a Viking Age Risk Society: Environmental Treats, Risks, and Manufactured Uncertainties in the Sagas of Icelanders*, Reinhard Hennig compares Old Norse literary sources such as the sagas of the Icelanders with Ulrich Beck's theory of the "risk society" and his categorization of three different types of risk. These include (1) threats (which have "divine" or "natural" origins), (2) risks (which imply human decisions), and (3) manufactured uncertainties, which are "collectively produced, unavoidable for individuals, uncontrollable, and widespread in space and time" (p. 31) and only exist in modern industrialised societies. However, Hennig argues that a form of manufactured uncertainty is also present in the Old Norse pre-modern society, especially when it comes to transformations of society such as Christianization.

Tifany Nicole White's chapter, *Out of the Garden and into the Forest: The Corruption of the Natural World in Old Icelandic Literature*, focuses on the way in which certain concepts used in Christian literature (such as wilderness, the forest, and the garden) operated in medieval Iceland. White analyses texts such as the Bible, apocryphal literature, and hagiographic texts, and argues that these concepts were not only translated from Latin, but also adapted to the cultural background of medieval Iceland, "creating a unique regional Christianity that was at the same time a part of a larger politico-economic structure, the medieval Christian Church" (p. 167).

The next chapter, *Askr and Embla: The Creation of Man from Trees*, written by Sabine Heidi Walther, examines an anthropogony illustrated in the eddic poem *Vǫluspá*, in which it is revealed that man was created from two trees: Askr (male) and Embla (female). This creation myth could be interpreted as a depiction of a "non-hierarchical relationship between humans and their environment" (p. 202), since humans are actually created from the nonhuman environment. Walther argues that even though there is the risk of reading this as a pre-Christian Nordic "pagan" cosmogony (as opposed to a Christian interpretation) it can also be read as an amalgam between the two, a way of integrating the newly assimilated Christian beliefs into the pagan tradition.

Stefa G. Eriksen's chapter, *The Establishment of Niðaróss: The Nexus between Urban, Environmental, Political, and Salvation History*, investigates the symbiosis between natural and cultural (urban or rural) environments in Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, more specifically in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* and *Óláfs saga helga*. Eriksen's analysis mostly revolves around the urban centre of Niðaróss, depicted as a "blend of the natural and built environment" (p. 242). The natural and the cultural space are therefore not separated and independent; they collaborate, shape and create one another through mutual effort.

In the chapter titled *Imagining Trees in* Mágus saga jarls, Philip Lavender analyses the depiction of trees in the saga *Mágus saga jarls* and the way in which trees seem to effectively interact with humans. In one episode of the saga, which Lavender concentrates on in his research, the tree seems to engulf and then absorb the human into its materiality. This could be interpreted, according to the author,

as an *assemblage* in Jane Bennett's sense, a system where human and nonhuman identities and bodies communicate and shape one another. These stories do, however, blend "Nordic and continental traditions, religious and secular ones" (p. 264), and must therefore be investigated in relation to the (non-Icelandic) source-texts.

The last chapter of the volume, namely Juliane Egerer's *Son of the Soil and Son of Óðinn. Unveiling a Farmer's* Eddic Poetry *(1920) and Colonial Germanic Concepts of Nature in South West Africa, Now Namibia*, aims, as the author claims, to decolonise ecocriticism. It investigates the writings of a German farmer, Wilhelm Ludwig Geverhard Elmenhorst, who participated in the German colonization of South West Africa (today Namibia), at the beginning of the twentieth century. Elmenhorst's writing uses eddic poetry in order to "legitimize and glorify Germanocentric worldviews of German colonialism, supremacy, and racism" (p. 292). His interpretation of Old Norse myths posits that the Germanic people find themselves in a strong and mystical relationship with nature; this renders their colonial practices justifiable and permissible, since it is their duty and right to create and maintain the mythical German Empire.

This volume represents an important and extremely necessary contribution to the field of ecocriticism and that of Old Norse studies, since it enriches both and creates new pathways that are worthy of investigation. Most of the ecocritical research conducted nowadays investigates modern and contemporary literature, and rightfully so, since such texts are imbued with the (eco-)anxiety of an imminent climate crisis. However, as this volume succeeds in demonstrating, reading pre-modern literary sources through the lens of ecocritical theories can be just as fruitful; maybe even more so. The volume is aimed at readers who already have a background in Old Norse studies, as it deals with complex, specialized strands of analysis which require a certain expertise in the field. Additionally, even though the chapters are diverse and take up varied themes, approaches, and methodologies, the volume is coherent and well-organised. As the editors mention in the introduction, this meeting between two fields of research, ecocriticism and Old Norse studies, is still in its early stages and, because of this, the volume provides very much needed input that will certainly inspire further research.

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