Geraldine Barnes: *Bookish riddarasögur. Writing Romance in Medieval Iceland*. The Viking Collection 21. Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2014. Pp. 211.

Review by Alenka Divjak

Today it is generally accepted by the scholarship that the Icelandic *riddarasögur*, a corpus of ca. 30 Icelandic derivatives of medieval romance, supposedly written in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, are indebted to the translated *riddarasögur* in terms of their subject matter, style and ethos. However, apart from the motifs borrowed from the translated *riddarasögur*, such as feasts, tournaments, travels, bridal quests, fights, adventures in distant lands etc., several Icelandic *riddarasögur* derive a considerable portion of their narrative material from encyclopaedic and historiographical traditions, accessible to medieval Icelanders in various Old Norse translations and adaptations: encyclopaedias, the life of Alexander the Great, Sallust and Lucan's histories of the Roman fights in North Africa, the history of Troy, the history of the Jews, the adaptation of *Historia Regum Britanniae* etc. It is the function of all this encyclopaedic, geographical and historiographical material in the Icelandic *riddarasögur* as well the sagas' interaction with the world of books and learning which is the central topic in the monograph *Bookish riddarasögur* by Professor Emeritus Geraldine Barnes, who in her book focuses on ca. 15 Icelandic *riddarasögur* marked by a distinctive bookish and learned background. Professor Emeritus Barnes is noted for an extensive bibliography in the field of learned traditions in translated and Icelandic *riddarasögur*: *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* and Arthurian legend, medieval geography, giants, travels to exotic lands, a concept of monstrosity, the abuse of learning, Byzantium in *riddarasögur*, the legend of Prester John, and now she presents her work in this still rather unexplored field in an expanded and systematic book form.

The monograph comprises an introduction, five central chapters and a conclusion. After discussing general facts concerning Icelandic *riddarasögur,* such as their indebtedness to the translated *riddarasögur* in terms of subject matter, the question of their authors and audiences, a survey of scholarly work studying this learned dimension in Icelandic *riddarasögur*, Barnes draws attention to the geographical remoteness of medieval Iceland, the strategies with which its inhabitants tried to bridge this geographical distance from mainland Scandinavia and Europe, and Iceland's gradual loss of political influence in the Scandinavian world in the fourteenth century.

The second fact noted by Barnes is the readiness of Iceland in the later medieval period for the reception and creation of new lit. genres with a strong element of phantasy, such as *fornaldar* and *riddara sögur* which, as Barnes puts it: "form a category of Icelandic saga literature which operates in a temporal, social and geographical framework outside the experiential knowledge of its audience" (p. 10). This remark raises a question on what kind of learning the audiences of this new literature were likely to rely. The implication is that they may have relied on learned historiographical and geographical traditions, a body of knowledge with a status of validity, realiability and veracity which would help them to distinguish between the factual and fantastic, to separate seriousness from parody, irony, tongue-in-cheek remarks, moderation from megalomania, and Barnes's book is the most helpful springboard to our understanding of this complicated interplay of fact and fiction in Icelandic *riddarasögur*. Finally, according to Barnes, the romance narratives under discussion actively and creatively interact with the world of knowledge and books. This is indeed a central point made in the introduction and further explored in the following five chapters which examine different aspects of medieval learning and its functioning in various Icelandic *riddarasögur*.

The first chapter is dedicated to mapping the world in Icelandic *riddarasögur*. According to encyclopaedic traditions in medieval Iceland, based on classical and medieval geographical lore, the world is divided into the three continents: Europe, Asia and Africa, and loosely associated with the four cardinal directions: north, south, east and west, with the north having a subordinated and marginalised position in this division of the world. But in this chapter Barnes questions the stability of this geographical hierachy in medieval Icelandic tradition, arguing that from the thirteenth century onwards there were tendencies in medieval Iceland to mould traditional geographic concepts in such a way as to raise the importance of the north in relation to the south and east. Barnes refers to the study of Kevin Wanner, "Off-Center: Considering Directional Valences in Norse Cosmography" (*Speculum* 84: 36–72), which draws attention to the emergence of the original, secular and Icelandic geographical perspective in the thirteenth century. This perspective, seemingly independent from Latin clerical learning, does not accept a marginalised position of the north in the prevailing geographical division of the world, and Barnes in the first chapter further develops this argument about the existence of a rather different evaluation of the north in medieval Icelandic tradition, singling out three Icelandic *riddarasögur: Nitida saga*, *Victors saga ok Blávus* and *Vilhjálms saga sjóðs* in order to prove her point. In *Nitida saga* it is France which enjoys the highest esteem and not Byzantium and India as traditionally expected. Apart from that, Nitida, the queen of France, controls the

island of Visio, located at the northern extremity of the earth and apparently an intimidating region, but its islet Skóga-blómi is a version of Paradise as well as an intellectual and intelligence centre, which makes the north intellectually superior to the east and south. In *Victors saga ok Blávus* the reputation of the north is further emphasised, as the Scandinavian north turns out to be militarily and morally superior to India, Africa and France together, taking control over the east and south governed by decadent and treacherous rulers. In *Vilhjálms saga sjóðs*, the superiority of the north over the south and east is demonstrated in a parodic way. The hero's achievements are greatly exaggerated, his quest for his abducted father, the king of England, and loaded with incredible geographical details, but the English prince eventually becomes the ruler of Babylon, which marks another victory of the north over the east and south. To sum up, Barnes so convincingly proves her point that after reading this chapter we could refer to remapping the world rather than just mapping it.

The second chapter focuses on the ethical dimension of education and the boundaries of knowledge acquisition, singling out *Kirialax saga*, *Dínus saga drambláta* in *Clári saga* as examples. *Kirialax saga*, where both the acquisition and application of knowledge are unmistakenly ethical and where the emphasis is on Kirialax's extensive travels in search for knowledge, is juxtaposed with *Dínus saga drambláta* in *Clári saga* which are, like *Kirialax saga*, notable for their exceptionally learned protagonists. However, in the two sagas the behaviour of the eponymous heroes and their brides as well as their search for knowledge do not have comparable ethical connotations. Both sagas are in the first place bridal quests which turn into battles between the sexes, which, in turn, leads to a gross abuse of knowledge as a tool with which to humiliate either a reluctant bride or a persistant suitor. Barnes argues that *Clári saga* provides a model for *Dínus saga drambláta*, drawing many parallels between both texts, nevertheless she makes it clear that the motif of unhealthy curiosity in *Clári saga* is not developed with as much consistency as in *Dínus saga drambláta*. The author's analysis of the unhealthy knowledge acquisition and its abuse in *Dínus saga drambláta* is undoubtedly the strongest part of the entire second chapter. Here Barnes draws attention to the erudition of the eponymous hero and his bride Philotemia which exceeds the "safe and acceptable" seven liberal arts. As a result, both protagonists get entangled in the world of magic and sorcery, magic being consistently used to the end of the saga, demonic magic by Philotemia's ally Anachorita, and the natural and acceptable optical illusions by Dínus' ally Heremita which eventually bring victory to the hero. Barnes's recognition of the philosophical roots of the abuse of knowledge in the saga presents a significant contribution to the scholarly research in this saga. Dínus and Philotemia's refusal to accept the boundaries of learning defies the

Augustinian ideal of the search for knowledge and wisdom. According to Augustine, *scientia* is a route to *sapientia*, the knowledge of divine truths, while in the saga *scientia* is an end in itself, unhealthy curiosity, a combination of lust and wickedness. This combination helps to explain Dínus' hunger for culinary novelties and Philotemia's dangerous experimenting with Dínus' feelings as well as the misfortunes both protagonists have to face as a result of their crossing the boundaries of knowledge acquisition.

The third chapter focuses on the attitude of Icelandic *riddarasögur* towards the history of the world and the ekphrasis as a means of intepreting distant past. In the Icelandic *riddara sögur* under discussion: *Saulus saga ok Nikanors*, *Ectors saga*, *Vihjálms saga sjóðs* and *Adonias saga* the ekphrasis, description of a work of art, has a recognisable narrative function, serving as the best means of transmitting texts, stories and images from the past. The ekphrasis is often associated with walls as they provide plenty of space for pictorial narrativces and corresponding written accounts, and Barnes dedicates considerable attention to this type of ekphrasis, as indicated by her analysis, for example, of the images and inscriptions on the walls in *Konraðs saga keisarasonar*, *Clári saga*, *Sigurðar saga þögla*, *Dínus saga drambláta*. On the other hand, she discusses with even greater precision another type of ekphrasis, the description of shields owned by the heroes from a distant past. This recension will focus on only two examples of her analysis, the description of the shield of Abel of Cappadocia in *Saulus saga ok Nikanors* and the shield of the eponymous hero in *Vihjálms saga sjóðs.* The shield of Abel of Cappadocia depicts Troy, Babylon and Macedonia, mighty kingdoms, which all perished in the course of time just as Abel, the owner of the shield, will perish in his time. Medieval readers must have had at least a basic knowledge of historiography as well as the awareness of the fickleness of Fortune to understand the message embedded on Abel's shield. Medieval readers would have also found it difficult to understand the parodic paintings on the shield previously belonging to the ancient hero Hector in *Vihjálms saga sjóðs*, obtained in a game of chess by the eponymous hero, without some basic familiarity with historiography. Instead of depicting battles, the shield focuses on the search for the Golden Fleece, the marriage of Helen and Menelaus, Laomedon's death, Alexander's death in Babylon, all morally dubious events, in stark contrast to conventional images of brave heroes in the battlefield. The authors's meticulous and brilliant analysis of both shields stresses the importance of smaller items in Icelandic *riddarasögur* which should not be dismissed as mere luxury items, enhancing the prestige of their owners, but their images and inscriptions should be studied with equal care as walls in order to decipher their symbolic message.

Defending Christendom is a long and thematically demanding chapter and it would be virtually impossible to properly evaluate all the scholarly effort and expertise invested in this topic by the author, whose detailed examination and insightful interpretation of the encyclopaedic material in *Rémundar saga* deserves most appreciation. This recension focuses on only two issues: first, the discussion of the references to contemporary or nearly contemporary history in *Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns*, *Saulus saga ok Nikanors* and *Kirialax saga* and second, *Rémundar saga*'s reshaping of the thirteenth-century actualities. In the sagas, concentrated in the first group, it is the Saracens who are the villains. In *Jarlamanns saga ok Hermanns*, the pagan Ermanus from Apulia threatens Byzantium, in *Saulus saga ok Nikanors* the infidels temporarily occupy Bari, abduct the protagonist's bride, and imprison her in Acre in Syria, which leads to the suggestions that the united crusader army should invade Acre, which, however, is rejected as an impractical solution, and in *Kirialax saga* Soldan of Babylon emerges as an intimidating opponent. Apulia was for a long time under a strong Muslim influence and Bari was temporarily occupied by the Muslims in the ninth century. The fall of Acre in 1292 paralysed Europe and the idea proposed in *Saulus saga ok Nikanors* to invade Acre as well as the rejection of this idea have a historical basis in abortive ecclesiastical attempts in the early fourteenth century to launch another crusade and reconquer the Holy Land. All these historical facts are meticulously presented and discussed by the author who thus effectively highlights an interplay between fact and fiction in the discussed sagas. Bari and Apulia were in the fourteenth century firmly in Christian hands, and consequently, references to them could hardly be found alarming by the audience, Acre, lost to Christendom, on the other hand, must have been seen as a real threat. Another such a threat was represented by New Babylon in Egypt, the capital of a formidable Muslim political entity, which in the late thirteenth century obliterated the last traces of Christian colonies in Syria. *Kirialax saga* mentions Babylon as the capital of Soldan who threatens to enslave Phrygia, and as Old Babylon in Asia tends to be depicted as a dilapidated town in Icelandic *riddarasögur*, it is most likely that the saga refers to New Babylon in Egypt as Soldan's capital. If we accept this assumption, then Babylon in *Kirialax saga* has a ring of actuality, as New Babylon was as firmly in Muslim hands as Acre. It is therefore unfortunate that the author did not mention the associations of this city with the Muslim world in order to stress a combination of fiction and actuality associated with Kirialax's victory in Phrygia.

Unlike in the sagas mentioned above, in *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* the greatest threat to Christianity are Tatars, not Muslims. Their occupation of Germany, homeland of the eponymous hero, is evocative of the Mongol conquest of Hungary in 1241

which arose fears that the fall of Germany was soon to follow. Barnes recognises a meaningful factual detail that in Germany the invaders were primarily interested in collecting tributes, but they tolerated the Christian faith, which corresponds to contemporary, thirteenth-century reports about the Mongol religious tolerance. Apart from revealing the knowledge about the Mongols, *Rémundar saga keisarasonar* displays its familiarity with the story of Prester John, also widespread in the thirteenth century, namely that a strong king from the east is willing to aid the Christians in their fight agains the Muslims, the most desirable news to the declining crusader states in Syria. Here Barnes again notices an interplay of fact and fiction. *Rémundar saga* thus attributes to a fictitious German prince a military and moral success about which medieval Europe of the thirteenth century could only dream: the victory over the Mongols and marriage alliance with Prester John of India, which was indeed a radical narrative solution even in a romance.

The last chapter dedicated to Constantinople in Icelandic *riddarasöur*: Sailing to Byzantium is subdivided into five subchapters. The first subchapter: Western perspectives is dedicated to the animosity felt in the medieval west for Constantinople. The next subchapter: The Northern viewpoints, by contrast, provides ample evidence for the existence of a radically different view of the city in Old Norse tradition, based primarily on Icelandic family sagas, kings' sagas and encyclopaedias, while the remaining three subchapters examine the attitude of Icelandic *riddarasögur* towards this sophisticated city which evoked so much passion in the Middle Ages. In the subchapter: Constantinople in the *riddarasögur* Barnes discusses *Jarlmanns saga ok Hermanns*, *Bærings saga*, *Dámusta saga*, *Konráðs saga keisarasonar*, which all together create a multi-faceted image of the city as a model of chivalry, sophistication, religious devotion, advanced architecture, public ritual and effective medical treatment, which is all carefully explored by the author. *Sigrgarðs saga ok Valbrands* and *Kirialax saga*, by contrast, have been alloted their own individual subchapters. In the first saga, Constantinople functions as an undisputed moral authority whose influence is felt in England, Nubia and Hungary. The main protagonist Sigrgarðr the younger is the grandson of an English king, the son of a Nubian princess, the husband of a Hungarian princess and most importantly, the great nephew of a Byzantine emperor, which leads to the creation of an extensive network of alliances which unite Africa, Asia, Central and Northern Europe. Barnes provides ample historical evidence about the empire's friendly relations with all these countries: the empire's cultural influence on Nubia until the beginning of the thirteenth century, familial relations with Hungary in the same period as well as good relations with England, which were, again, based on historical facts: many Anglo-Saxons were serving in the Varangian Guard

after 1066 and in the twelfth century Manuel I and Henry II had good relations as well. Another interplay of fact and fiction, with the purpose of demonstrating the prestige of alliances promoted by Constantinople, which deserves to be studied in its own subchapter.

In *Kirialax saga* the primacy of Constantinople over the Mediterranean world remains unchallenged throughout the saga, this supremacy being most clearly visible in relation to the declining western empire constantly threatened by Huns, Vandals and King Arthur. Kålund had already identified the imperial palace in Constantinople in *Karlamagnús saga* as a potential source for a description of the imperial palace in *Kirialax saga*, but Barnes draws attention to the fact that the central part of the palace, the circular daïs occupied by the bride and her twelve maids at the wedding is evocative of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and that it is also possible to draw parallels between the thirteen seats on the daïs and the thirteen seats occupied by Jesus and Apostles in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Barnes's linking of the imperial palace in Constantinople and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre presents another stage in the scholarly interpretation of the role of Constantinople in *Kirialax saga* as it highlights a spiritual and Christian dimension of the city. She even refers to the *translatio studii et imperii* from Jerusalem to Constantinople and this is indeed a good point, based on historical facts. It was Constantine I and his mother, St Helen, who were instrumental in transforming provincial Jerusalem, which did not enjoy much esteem among early Christians of the second and the third centuries, into the most prestigious centre of Christianity, strengthening in this way their control over a new influential religion.

In Icelandic *riddarasögur* Constantinople is presented as an undisputed political, moral and religious authority and the alliances and familial relations with it seen a source of prestige. The most obvious example of this regard is *Sigrgarðs saga ok Valbrands* where the Byzantine emperor is depicted as the leader of a mighty coalition embracing the countries of Asia, Africa and Europe, and in *Kirialax saga* Constantinople's prestige is further enhanced by a spiritual *translatio studii et imperii* from Jerusalem to Constantinople. These favourable notions, existing in the literary genre of Icelandic *riddarasögur*, supposedly written in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when the decline of Constantinople was public knowledge, imply that the Icelandic romance writers were prepared to defy prevailing western views if they were in opposition to their own ideas and values. In case of Constantinople, precedence was given to their native traditions which far more honestly and wisely assessed the greatness of Constantinople than the sulky west, and that was a radical literary statement.

The conclusion focuses on the preservation and modification of the Icelandic *riddarasögur* in the post-Reformation period, which in turn raises a question of their audience in this period. Unlike the medieval audience which remains elusive due to the absence of reliable documentary evidence, but whose learning must have been considerable in order to understand a learned dimension in Icelandic *riddarasögur*, a substantial number of preserved manuscripts from the post-Reformation period gives us a better insight into the taste and mentality of the post-medieval audience. In this final chapter Barnes also comes to convincing conclusions. Even though Icelandic *riddarasögur* were absorbed in popular culture in the post-reformation period, individual sagas within the corpus enjoyed a varying degree of interest. Thus *Kirialax saga* with its strict morality, based on medieval ideals, and lack of sensations survives in fewer than twelve complete or incomplete copies, while *Dínus saga drambláta* with its love of sensationalism, sorcery and battles between the sexes enjoyed a far wider publicity, as suggested by at least twenty-three surviving manuscripts. Barnes therefore recognises a post-Reformation tendency to 'remove' and 'delete' the sagas' medieval ethical framework, thus changing the texts under discussion into entertaining stories, singling out *Dínus saga drambláta* as a telling example of such modifications. The need for a systematic examination of post-Reformation versions of other Icelandic *riddarasögur* is obvious.

The book presents a vital contribution to the scholarly research in the learned traditions of Icelandic *riddarasögur*. It is necessary to point out that so far no-one has studied this learned dimension of the Icelandic *riddarasögur* as a corpus in such a consistent, systematic and comprehensive manner, in such depth and with so much insight and energy. This scholarly effort and expertise in turn resulted in many convincing and original conclusions which will have to be taken into account by all future researchers in this field. Ethical problems of knowledge acquisition and its application, the defense of Christianity, a sense of distant past have a central narrative and structural function in a number of Icelandic *riddarasögur*, as proved by the second, third and the fourth chapters. But apart from creating good stories on the basis of learned traditions, romance writers in Iceland were, as convincingly argued by Barnes, capable of more radical literary actions as well. Thus in a number of Icelandic *riddarsögur* they demonstrate their ability to mould the imported learned material in such a way as to question prevailing traditional views on geography and politics, substitute them with their own notions instead. To sum up, this monograph is such an excellent springboard to further research in this basically unexplored field that any further research would be seriously impaired without studying this book which encourages its readers to study, do research and above all, think originally and creatively.

Alenka Divjak
Institut nove revije, Zavod za humanistiko, Lubljana, Slovenia