

# The Political Symbolism of Ants and Bees in Old Norse Sources<sup>1</sup>

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In this article I discuss the political themes attached to the eusocial creatures, specifically ants and bees, in Old Norse sources. I consider the situation of Old Norse as a transnational literature, encompassing one country that lacked ants and bees (Iceland) and one that did not (Norway). Although the behavioural ecology of eusociality, or indeed the classification of ants and bees as taxonomically related, is a relatively recent development in human knowledge, I argue that the fundamental qualities of swarming and mutual aid were clearly recognisable long before modern science. The differing environments and differing political systems between Iceland and Norway are examined as factors shaping the depiction of eusocial insects. However, the Old Norse sources are also integrated into their European context in order to explore the abstract – even universal – ideological questions that are prompted when humans compare their own societies to those of ants and bees.

אֵא אַן עֵלְמַת בּוֹחִי עוּ בְכֵהָאֲנָהּ אִמָּא בְּבַחַת עֵלְמִי פִּלְא יִמְכֹן לֶאֱן לִיִּס פִּי אִסְתַּטְאֵהּ אֶאֱנִסְאֵן אַן יִבְחַת פִּי כְּבֵר לֵאִי שִׁי  
אוֹגַדַּת אִטְבִּיעֵהּ אֲנַמְל מְנַה בְּאִגְנַחָהּ וּמְנַה דּוֹן אִגְנַחָהּ וְלֵאִי שִׁי אוֹגַדַּת אִיִּצָּא דּוּדָא כְּתִיר אֶאֱרַגְל וְאֶכְר אֶקְל אֶרְגְל מְנַה  
וּמָא גֵאִיָּהּ הֶרְהָ אֶדּוּדָהּ וְהֶרְהָ אֲנַמְלָהּ אִמָּא אִמּוֹר הִי

It is beyond the power of man to confront the reason why some ants have wings and others do not, or why some insects have many legs and others have only a few, or *what is the purpose of a particular insect or ant.* - Maimonides, *Kitāb al-Sirāj*, 1168 (*Sirāj*: 92-93)

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Ef þu sier mora marga þat er fognudr

If you see many ants, that is a thing of joy. - *The Icelandic Somniale Danielis*, either 1200s or 1400s (*SomDan*: 33)

### Introduction

A much observed fact about medieval Icelandic political thought is that Icelanders were as aware of kings as every other medieval population, but never once saw one in Iceland itself (e.g., Andersson 1999: 923-934; Ármann Jakobsson 1997; Ashurst 2007; Meulengracht Sørensen 1977: 30-52). Something that has attracted virtually no comment is that Iceland was also an island entirely devoid of ants, bees, or any other eusocial insect, yet several Old Norse sources participate in a European tradition of using these insects to advance ideological arguments. Without any knowledge of these sources, one might suppose that this is a result of the fact that Iceland and Norway, especially prior to their union in 1262, were different societies, nonetheless constituting “a single reading public” (Stefán Karlsson 2004: 32). Old Norse literature, though it overwhelmingly survives today in Icelandic manuscripts, was a reservoir replenished by both Icelandic and Norwegian water carriers.

Indeed, in certain settings an Icelander could be considered a type of Norwegian, perhaps especially in the case of the cultural elite who travelled between the two countries (Hastrup 1984: 237-238; Long 2017: 225; Sverrir Jakobsson 1999: 96-98, though cf. the rest of Long’s chapter, and Callow 2004, amongst others). Genealogical vignettes found repeatedly in the Icelandic sagas reminded the elite of their ultimately Norwegian origins (a tendency which is still found occasionally in the modern period, Mundal 2018: 738-739; Höfig 2018: 762-763, while other sources stress a more ethnically diverse origin story for Icelanders, Cole 2018: 109). There were also cases of Icelandic-Norwegian intermarriage (Long 2017: 221-221). Particularly in the decades leading up to the union of 1262, portions of the Icelandic elite accepted Norwegian suzerainty over their *goðorðs*. Indeed, in 1261, the Norwegian king even deprived a powerful Icelandic magnate of his own territory on Icelandic soil (Jón Víðar Sigurðsson 1999: 74-76). Icelandic politicians of the thirteenth-century apparently adopted both theory and praxis from their Norwegian counterparts. The wedding of Flugumýri in 1253 was intended to cement an alliance between the Icelandic Haukdælir and Sturlungar clans. However, despite being between ostensibly Icelandic parties and taking place in Northern Iceland, it has been suggested that the families “used the wedding between King Hákon and Margrét Skúladóttir in 1225 as a model, with the seating and drinking arrangements in particular being influenced

by the Norwegian court” (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2015: 225). Oaths of allegiance were also incorporated from Norwegian politics, which in turn had derived them from the continental European tradition of the *iuramentum fidelitatis* (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999: 77–78; Bloch 2014: 156–157, 188–189). Might it simply be, then, that it was the Norwegians writing about the ants and the bees, and Icelanders reading about them? Can Icelandic musing on these insects be dismissed as another example of Icelanders merely receiving political ideas from Norway?

Alas, in Old Norse matters, as in many other areas of human endeavour, things are seldom simple. As we shall see, the Norwegian and Icelandic discussion of ants and bees are frequently intertwined. This article therefore has two principle aims. 1) On the plane of Old Norse as a transnational literature, situated between Iceland and Norway,<sup>2</sup> it examines the political symbolism attached to ants and bees (to avoid repetition also referred to *totum pro parte* as Hymenoptera or eusocial insects. 2) On the plane of the specifically Old Icelandic element of Old Norse, we will examine how far the absence of these insects from Iceland conditioned their use as symbols. We will begin by sketching the range of Hymenoptera in medieval Scandinavia. We will then pose the question of how far ants and bees were differentiated from other mini-beasts in the minds of Old Norse-speakers. From there, we will delimit the few cases where Icelanders avoided the use of Hymenopteran imagery, apparently on account of authors suspecting that their audiences would not understand it. With these Icelandic exceptions treated, we will approach the wider Old Norse tradition of using ants and bees to propose forms of social organisation that challenge political orthodoxy. The opposing tradition, of using ants and bees to argue for the virtue of obedience to authority, will also be explored. In closing, I will explore the position of ants and bees between Iceland and Norway’s differing politics – and between their differing environments, one with Hymenoptera and the other without. It will be proposed that the peculiarities of Norwegian-Icelandic politics can only partly explain the attraction humans feel to comparing themselves to eusocial insects: Primal, probably universal, responses to the idea of swarming ants and bees ought also to be

<sup>2</sup> Old Norse literature was presumably also being produced and consumed in the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and perhaps even the Western Isles and further afield in the Old Norse-speaking Diaspora. However, no literature survives which can be securely attached to these areas (skaldic verse which was allegedly recited in such settings is preserved exclusively in Icelandic sagas from the High Middle Ages, and the possibly Greenlandic *Atlamál in grænlenzku* is also not an open-and-shut case). Moreover, the small populations of Faroe and Greenland, and the availability of other written languages in the Western Isles, make it likely that Old Norse literary output in these regions was marginal at best.

taken into account. However, deeper reflection on the symbolism of ants and bees, independent of cultural differences, proves to be a still stronger factor.

This article is not a survey of all appearances of ants and bees in Old Norse sources. The entry by John Bernström for Hymenoptera in *Kulturbistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder* comes close to serving that function, although it is strongest on folkloric materials and East Norse literature. It is hoped that the present study will complement Bernström's efforts, particularly by expanding his comments on the Old Norse *Stjórn* and *Physiologus*, as well as including texts such as *Konungs skuggsjá* whose ant-content has not previously been appreciated (Bernström 1972: 134–135; the scene with the ant is also not explicitly treated either by Bagge 1994 in his study on natural imagery, or Bagge 1987 in his more general analysis of *Konungs skuggsjá*. This is entirely defensible as the ant section is only a small part of an otherwise enormously rich work, but the present article offers a chance to repair this omission).

### Historical Entomological Background

Historically, the Icelandic climate has been too cold for any ants or bees arriving by accident to survive over multiple winters. In fact, no successful ant colony was recorded in Iceland until a happy band of pioneers from the species *Lasius niger*, the common black ant, in 1994.<sup>3</sup> While Iceland had no bees or ants, the people who settled there from the 870s onwards mostly came from places that did, namely Norway and the British Isles (Byock 2001: 5–11; Hermann Pálsson 1996: 47–102). In our own time Norway is home to 58 species of ants, and there is no reason to think there were drastically fewer ants in medieval Norway than there are today. There is a profusion of the genus *Formica*, commonly called wood ants, modern Norwegian *skogmaur*, who are a particularly aggressive, acid-spraying<sup>4</sup> demographic (Kvamme & Wetås 2010: 28). On account of this bellicosity, it is not unreasonable to imagine that memories of ants survived across the generations once Norwegians reached ant-less Iceland.

Turning from ants to their more benign cousins, it is possible that bees had a particular experience of the Viking Age. Jordanes, writing before the Viking Age in 551, states that [*a*]pium ibi turba mellifica, ob nimium frigus nusquam reperitur “in that place [*Scandia*], the swarming of honey-making bees is nowhere to be found, on

<sup>3</sup> Annandale 1905: 215; Hölldobler & Wilson 1990: 370; Jón Már Halldórsson 2011. The claim of “accidentally imported ants” at Bessastaðir, in the time of Snorri Sturluson (McGovern 1990: 340) is a misunderstanding (Buckland 2019, personal communication).

<sup>4</sup> The ability to spray acid lies behind an alternative modern Norwegian name, *pissemaur*, Danish *pissemyre*, Swedish *pissmyra*, cf. Middle English *pisse mire* (Bernström 1972: 132).

account of too much cold”.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps Jordanes was misinformed here. Neither he nor his principal source, Cassiodorus, had ever been to Scandinavia. He only discussed the region because he viewed it as the *Urheimat* of the Goths, which has been shown to be a dubious project (Goffart 2005). Nonetheless, we should note Jordanes was writing close to the coldest point in the pre-Medieval Cold Period – a time when temperatures in Scandinavia were lower than they would be from the 900s onwards, and where there appears to have been a dearth of pollen in the environment (Cowling, Sykes & Bradshaw 2001). Jordanes may be right that the 550s were not a good time for Scandinavian bees, even if his claims of apine extinction are suspect.

Interestingly, bees in Norway appear to have enjoyed an improvement in their fortunes during the Viking Age (793–1066). The earliest evidence unearthed by entomo-archaeology of bees in mainland Scandinavia comes from Viborg (c. 1000–1025) and Oslo (c. 1175–1225).<sup>6</sup> They are all examples of the European dark bee (*apis mellifera mellifera*). The Oslo bees were morphologically similar in terms of wing length, hindleg length, and proboscis length to bees of the same subspecies from Viking Age York, and the present day Isle of Man (Ruttner, Milner & Dews 2004: 40–48). Elsewhere, remains of bees found in Viking Age latrines have been excavated in York and Viborg (Kenward 2002: 10). At both York and Viborg, around the same time, people were accidentally ingesting the same drowned species of bee, plausibly as apine casualties of mead production. Did Norwegian vikings take bees with them to the British Isles? Did beehives sometimes form part of plunder extracted from England? Or, more likely, were beehives being moved in both directions across the North Sea, with Scandinavian and Insular bees cross-breeding in both locations? Space does not allow us to introduce properly the issue of post-human history, but it appears that just as humans in Northern Europe experienced a maritime revolution

<sup>5</sup> *Getica*: 17. Jordanes also mentions bees as a simile for the Goths’ migration. The mixed metaphor with childbirth (*gremium*) produces a colourful mental image: ... *quia gens, cuius originem flagitas ... ab huius insulae gremio uelut examen apium erumpens, in terram Europae aduenit*. “... for the people of whose origins you ask [the Goths] ... advance into the mainland of Europe, bursting forth from the mothers’ parts of this island [Scandza], just like a swarm of bees.” (*Getica*: 9).

<sup>6</sup> Kenward 2002: 4–5, 7, 10; Ruttner, Milner & Dews 2004: 40–41. A spurious claim is repeated in apicultural literature that St. Ansgar is relevant to the history of beekeeping: “The first historical record of ‘beekeeping’ in Sweden (which was of course, no more than an exploitation of the local bee population), dates from 900 A. D., found in a record of the monk and “Apostle of the North”, Ansgar (Ruttner, Milner & Dews 1990: 14). “Ansgar arrived in Birka in 829 ... and his book [!] *Vita Ansgarii* described the country as rich in honey” (Crane 1999: 235)

between the eighth and the eleventh centuries which we characterise as the Viking Age, so did bees.<sup>7</sup>

Memories of viking bees or angry Norwegian wood ants are only a minor contribution to how Old Norse-speakers understood eusocial insects, or why they persisted in writing about them despite their absence from the environment in the case of Icelanders. The major factor must be that ants and bees were types that recurred in a common, medieval Christian store of proverbs, fables, symbols, and rhetorical devices. We will soon turn to specific iterations of the ant and the bee as symbols, but for now it will suffice to say that in general they tend to come with implications of prudence, industriousness and social harmony (Bernström 1972: 132, 141). As the Old Norse *Elucidarius* (ca. 1200) puts it: *maurar oc congorvofor oc þau cuquende es svilo fremia ero tilþess scopof at vér takem dømme nýtz erveþes af þeira svilo* “ants and spiders and those creatures which perform labour were created so that we might take a useful example from the toil of their labour” (*Eluc*: 44). To my surprise, I have found no comprehensive work to have been written on the valences of ants, bees, or insects in general in medieval culture. An entry in *Kulturbistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder* provides some overview, although it is weighted more towards entomology than cultural history (Bernström 1971). A flawed attempt at a survey of medieval views on insects, written by natural scientists rather than humanists, has not been widely cited, and is mentioned here for the sake of completeness (Frank and McCoy 1991). A recent blogpost in conjunction with an exhibition provides some synopsis (Grollemond 2018). In an Old English context, there is one study on ants (Cesario 2012), one on insects more generally, though in onomastics (Baker 2015), and two on spiders (Cavell 2018; Cavell 2020). Ants go largely ignored in studies of the bestiary tradition, save for a useful mention in a broader myrmecine cultural history (Sleigh 2004: 47). Bestiary studies have not been substantially kinder to the bee (Crane 2013: 97–98; Hassig 1990–91: 156–157). It has been pointed out that Old Norse scholars have only glancingly touched upon the appearance of minibeasts in their corpus, even though details such as Loki’s transformation into a fly, a flea, and his potential affinity with spiders are promising topics (Bourns 2017: 344–345; Rohrbach 2009: 284–285). Animal studies and ecocritical approaches are two burgeoning fields in Old Norse (Abram 2019; Bourns 2017; Jennbert 2011; Phelpstead 2014; Rohrbach 2009) but bugs in general and ants and bees in particular have not yet played a meaningful role in this breakthrough.

<sup>7</sup> In Denmark and Sweden beekeeping had become a legislative concern by the early 1200s (Miller & Vogt 2015: 55–57, Crane 1999: 234–238). However, this appears to be an example of the cultural divide between East and West Norse sources, as beekeeping is not mentioned in Norwegian and Icelandic law codes.

### What was special about eusocial insects for Old Norse-speakers?

We must sketch out the pre-entomological understanding of eusocial insects accessible to a medieval commentator, particularly how transposable my concatenation of ants and bees is to the Middle Ages. I use two terms as convenient categories to designate ants and bees: 1) Hymenoptera, the overarching order of insects which includes ants, bees, wasps, and sawflies – though here we are only talking about the Hymenoptera found in Old Norse, i.e. ants and bees, and 2) eusocial insects. Paul Sherman identifies three prerequisites for a eusocial society: “(1) overlapping generations (mother and offspring live together), (2) reproductive division of labor (i.e., only a few individuals bear offspring), and (3) alloparental care (nonreproductives assist in rearing the young of breeders).” (Sherman 2002: 327) Properly speaking, these qualities pertain only to a very small number of species, albeit a colossal amount of biomass. Most of this is comprised of Hymenoptera, of which there are twelve thousand eusocial species. While eusociality is a term that would have been foreign to the medieval mind, it is important for our purposes that sources from the Middle Ages pay particular attention to ants and bees, and sometimes discuss them in the same breath on grounds of their common behaviours. I focus on ants and bees because they are the most attested eusocial insects in the Old Norse corpus. Wasps are scarcely mentioned at all (Bernström 1972: 138) and no other creatures exhibiting eusociality were known in medieval Scandinavia. It must be cautioned that ants and bees were not interchangeable in medieval thought. For example, on account of producing honey, the bee could be implicated in allegories on scripture. God’s word was associated with sweetness, and those who conserved and administered God’s word, i.e. the clergy and the cloistered, could therefore be compared to the bees and their honey (We shall see an Old Norse example of this later, but more generally Fulton Brown 2006: 78–193;<sup>8</sup> Harris 2017: 395–396; Woolfson 2010: 284–286; in medieval Islamic thought, similar to the Christian case, Gade 2019: 178–179; the tradition’s ultimate origins can be traced to the ancient Near East, Forti 2006: 331–336).

Long before modern scientific taxonomy, there are plenty of odd phenomena which suggest that humans have long been strangely moved by the eusocial insects. I will indicate here a few examples, chosen for their antiquity and their curiosity. Julius Pokorny (1948–59: 749) postulated that the common Indo-European root of the word for “ant” *\*morui* was supplanted by three largely anagrammatic forms, *\*uormo*, *\*mormo*, and *\*mouro*, precipitated by some kind of taboo surrounding speak-

<sup>8</sup> Although otherwise useful as a synopsis, Fulton Brown’s suggestion that the “current American campaigns against obesity and sweets ... [are] an attack upon God for fear of the sweet” (2006: 203) is too contentious to be recommended as part of the state of the field.

ing the name of the ant. When one considers the damage an ant infestation could do to a granary, a desire not to “speak the name of the devil” seems like a plausible explanation for the coining of the anagram avoidance terms.<sup>9</sup> Greco-Roman mythology furnishes us with the Bee of Artemis, and the Myrmidons of Homer and Ovid (Elderkin 1939: 203–213). When the grave of the last pagan king of the Franks, Childeric I (r. 457–481) was excavated in 1653, he was found to be wearing a cloak sewn with thirty golden bees (Werner 1999: 1819–20; Chiflet 1655: 321–330).

It may even be the case that our responses to the ant are not entirely acquired through culture, that is to say via learned behaviours. In medicine, the term “formication” refers to “the sensation of insects (specifically ants) crawling on the skin”.<sup>10</sup> Formication was known to Pliny, who first gave us the word in his *Naturalis Historia*. Here he dismisses the supposed folk remedy that formication could be treated by topical application of menstrual blood: *Quae ex mulierum corporibus traduntur, ad portentorum miracula accedunt ... sanguinem sisti inlito, item formicationes corporum* “Some [cures] drawn from the bodies of women should be assigned to the realm of fantasy ... the smearing of blood when there is formication of the body” (*NH*: 300). Formication was also described by medieval Islamic science, which termed it simply *نَمْلَة* *namlah* “ant” (Savage-Smith 2010: 110). Appropriately for our purposes, an example of formication survives in Old Norse.<sup>11</sup> Here, the narrator describes what it felt like for the pauper Valterus to feel his crippled legs healed by the Virgin Mary:

Sem sunginn var ottusongr ok dagr rann vpp, rann honum ok vpp dagsbrun gudligar myskunnar, kendi hann því likazt milli skinzins ok kiotzins, sem hans leggir ok fætr væri stroknir med vætu, eda mavrar hlaupi upp ok nidr vm. Þa gefr hann ser nu gott traust vm sina heilsu. Þa toku þeir knutar, sem saman hofdu dregit hans likam, at losna med mikilli brakan, því likazt sem þa er brotid er þurt hris, ok suo toku nockut fætrnir at retna. (*Mar*: 962)

<sup>9</sup> Consider the Germanic and Finnic practice of referring to bears via euphemisms (Frog 2008: 12–14). Although concerning Finnish *karhu* “the rough haired one” cf. Rédei (1988: 646).

<sup>10</sup> Hinkle 2009: 313–314. An example that to my mind supports the proposition that formication is more biological than cultural can be found in the case of a patient with no previous history of psychiatric discomfort, who nonetheless spontaneously developed the condition and came very close to doing himself serious harm in extricating the non-existent ants (Heinecke & Carmody 2015: 190).

<sup>11</sup> The miracle has been identified as belonging to the “Poor Man Strikes Stone” tradition (Widding 1996: 96). The manuscript is eighteenth-century but the Norse legend itself was most likely translated somewhere in the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries.



When matins had been sung and the day rose, the daily well of divine mercy rose with it, [for] it felt most like that between his skin and his flesh as though his legs and feet were being caressed by fine rain, or as though ants were running up and down them. Then he allows himself to feel hope concerning his health. Then those joints which held his body together began to loosen with a great creaking noise, much as though they were breaking like dry kindling, and so his feet began to correct themselves.

While formication has various cultural expressions, its basic pathology appears to be universal. Certainly, a “hardwired” response to being covered in ants that prompts rapid and methodical removal would have been a distinct evolutionary advantage when early hominins still often slept outside, potentially sharing the ground with irate ants’ nests. While this speculation remains unprovable, at least it can be reasonably asserted that human reactions to the swarming of ants and their ilk are deeply felt. The human body has a response to that specific threat, apparently independent of the workings of the conscious mind. Modern scientific terminology – eusociality in particular – brings the human understanding of ants into sharper relief, but our fascination predates our words to describe it. I would contend that there is something that unifies Childeric’s bee strewn cloak, Ovid’s Myrmidons, and the formicant’s creeping skin: it is an apprehension of the eusocial creatures’ two most obvious qualities, multitudinousness and an impression of acting with a unified will. All eusocial species exhibit these traits, whether they are ants, bees, Damaraland mole rats, or the handful of species of “communist prawns” (the best described being *Synalpheus regalis*, see Emmett Duffy 1996).<sup>12</sup> Even an untrained eye can see they come in swarms that work cohesively. It is unsurprising that prehistoric, ancient, and medieval humans noticed this long before they had scientific terminology to describe it more accurately.

### **The Missing Ants of the Old Icelandic *Physiologus***

Despite the absence of ants and bees from Iceland, and the fact that they have largely scuttled out of sight of modern commentators, Old Norse authors consumed continental texts that dealt in ant and bee imagery. Icelanders may have left the actual creatures behind in Norway, but they still inhabited a thought-world in which eusocial insects had made a home. Only rarely did Icelanders diverge from Old Norse ant/bee-lore by redacting ants or bees from their continental exemplars. Although not directly relevant to the political symbolism which is our chief interest, the cases we are about to treat are necessary as they establish the most uniquely Icelandic position in the

<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to Hugh Atkinson for coining the term.

Old Norse tradition concerning Hymenoptera: Icelanders recusing themselves from the discussion altogether, apparently on account of an expectation that their audience would not be able to relate to symbols involving ants and bees. The Old Icelandic *Physiologus* is amongst the earliest surviving works of Old Norse literature, being a compact survey of various beasts and their moral symbolism from ca. 1200. There we find the following pronouncement:

Akr sá er í Babilon, þá er hann frævisk, þá leggjask í akrinn flugur, þær er kallask af alþýðu kleggjar; þær eta úr frækornit ok spilla svá ávextinum. En þær marka villumenn, þá er láta sem nýtt kenni, en þat er þó rangt, ok þarf við þeim at sjá. (*Phys*: 17)

There is a field in Babylon, and when it is in blossom, flies land in the field, the sort which the common people call “horseflies” [kleggjar, sing. kleggi]. They eat of the seed [i.e. the bran?] and thus destroy the fruit [i.e. the germ?]. And they symbolise heretics, those who pretend to teach what is new, but it is what is wrong [that they teach], and one must be on the look out for them.



*Illustration.* AM 673a I 4to, fol. 1v (Iceland, c. 1200): Kleggjar “horseflies” devour crops in a Babylonian field. The Old Norse translator’s Latin exemplar most likely depicted ants instead. The holes in the manuscript are due to it being used as a sieve during the eighteenth century. Reproduced with kind permission of the Arnamagnæan Institute, Copenhagen.

However, the horsefly is otherwise unknown in the rest of the European *Physiologus* tradition. Comparison with Latin texts of the same genre would lead one to expect ants at this juncture. Here, for example, is an English case from the “second family” of the Latin *Physiologus* (1100s). Not only is the creature an ant, not a horsefly, but it treats the metaphorical grain of scripture in precisely the opposite way. The Icelandic horsefly embodies spiritual deviancy (heretics). The English ant provides an exemplum *against* supposed spiritual deviancy (Jews):

Secunda natura est quando recondit grana in cubile suum, dividit ea in dui, ne forte pluvia infundantur in hieme et germinent grana et fame pereat. Sic et tu homo verba Veteris et Novi Testamenti divide, id est, discerne inter spiritualia et carnalia, ne littera te occidat, quoniam lex spiritualis est, sicut apostolus ait, *Littera enim occidit, spiritus autem vivificat*. Iudei namque solam litteram attendentes et spiritualem intellectum contemnentes famae necati sunt. (*Bestiary* 1: 163)

The second nature is, when the ant stores the grains in its nest, it divides them in two, lest by chance the grains be soaked by rain in winter and germinate, and the ant starve. Thus you, O man, divide the words of the Old and New Testaments, that is, distinguish between the spiritual and the carnal, lest the letter kill you, seeing that the law is spiritual, as the Apostle said: *For the letter killeth, but the spirit quickeneth* [2 Corinthian 3:6]. For the Jews, giving heed to the letter alone and scorning the spiritual meaning of character, have been killed.

One way to account for the Icelandic *Physiologus*'s divergence from the norm is to consider that the average Icelander, if they had not travelled abroad, would not have seen an ant for themselves, nor, for that matter, a Jew. The translator thus felt they had to eliminate these culturally non-transposable elements, and replace them with something less foreign. Exactly what might be meant by *kleggi* “horsefly” is not entirely clear. Pre-modern people seem to have been less fussy about precise taxonomic orders than we are (a tendency that still survives in folk taxonomies. What we call a “midge” might be one of at least twenty very different species). Indeed, when Snorri Sturluson tells the story of Loki turning into a sort of biting fly, he calls it neither a *kleggi* nor, say, a *mý* “mosquito”, but simply a *fluga* (SnE: 42; Bourns 2017: 345–346). Is the *kleggi* of the *Physiologus*, then, to be understood as it would be in modern Icelandic, i.e. a blood-sucking member of the Tabanidae? These are not found in Iceland today, the climate again being too cold. On the other hand, Horrebow

records what he calls *Bremse og Hestfluer* “Botflies and Horseflies” in the first natural history of Iceland, and describes hematophagic, parasitic behaviour which would seem to indicate Tabanidae or Oestridae (Horrebow 1752: 241). Might Horrebow be proof that *kleggi* may have sometimes meant horsefly in its modern sense, and that the horsefly was a creature that lived in Iceland during the Middle Ages, dying out only at some point after 1752? Even if horseflies *were* a part of the medieval Icelandic experience, the term *kleggi* in the 1200s was elastic enough to include any kind of unpleasant flying bug (ONP s. v. *kleggi*).

Indeed, the behaviour of the *kleggi* in the *Physiologus* obviously resembles that of a locust – also not a creature known in Iceland. Drawing on this observation, Marchand has argued that there was never an ant in the Icelandic translator’s source in the first place. He cites examples of locusts as undiscerning creatures in sources as varied as Pliny, Gregory the Great, Jerome, Peter the Lombard, Psalm 104:34, and Revelations 9:35 (Marchand 2000: 235). Most striking is the parallel he points out with Gregory’s *Moralia*. Here, Gregory explains points in Biblical typology where locusts can be interpreted either as Jews or as gentiles, prior to their conversion:

Locustorum nomine aliquando Judaicus populus, aliquando conversa gentilitas, aliquando adulantium lingua, aliquando vero per comparisonem resurrectio dominica, vel prædicatorum vita signatur ... Gentiles locustis significati, et adulantium linguæ quæ bonorum operum fructus devastant. - Locustorum quoque nomine gentilitas designatur, Salomone attestante, qui ait: *Florebit amygdalus, impinguabitur locusta, dissipabitur capparitis* [Ecclesiastes 12:5]. Amygdalus quippe florem prius cunctis arboribus ostendit. Et quid in flore amygdali nisi sanctæ Ecclesiæ primordia designantur? ... In qua mox locusta impinguata est, quia sicca gentilitatis sterilitas pinguedine est gratiæ cœlestis infusa. Capparitis dissipatur, quia cum gratiam fideo vocata gentilitas attigit, Judæa, in sua sterilitate remanens, bene vivendi ordinem amisit. (PL 76: 598–599)

The name of the locusts sometimes signifies the Jewish People, sometimes the converted gentiles, sometimes flattering tongues, or sometimes through contrast the Resurrection of the Lord, or the life of the preachers ... The gentiles are signified by the locust, and the flattery of tongues which destroy the fruits of good works. That by the locusts the name of gentile-kind can be signified is attested by Solomon, who says: “and the almond tree shall flourish, and the locust shall be a burden, and the caper bush shall fail” ... By this the locust becomes a

burden, for the torrid barrenness of the gentiles was turned to abundance by the pouring out of heavenly grace. The caper bush shall fail because when gentile-kind called for and received the grace of faith, Judaea, remaining in its barrenness, lost its well-being.

Marchand's solution is erudite, though not without its problems. There is a verbal parallel between Gregory's *fructus devastant* "destroying fruit" and the Icelandic *spilla svá ávextinum* "thus destroy the fruit". The *Moralia* also uses the locust to articulate religious difference, in Gregory's case Jewish or gentile but in the Icelandic orthodox or heretic. However, the geographical setting of Babylon is not mentioned by Gregory, nor are there parallels in the Old Icelandic for the almond and the caper tree. Moreover, to entertain the theory that there were never ants in the Icelandic *Physiologus*'s Latin exemplar, we would need to believe that at some point an English, French, German etc. copyist of a *Physiologus* elected to remove the typical section on "ants as Jews" and replace it with an excerpt from Gregory's *Moralia* on locusts. I see no obvious motivation for this to have happened at any point in the transmission of the *Physiologus* before it reached Iceland, but the absence of ants provides an obvious potential explanation for why an Icelandic copyist would make that choice. The strength of Marchand's parallel is to demonstrate the store of tropes upon which our interventionist scribe could have drawn. Nonetheless, we arrive at the conclusion that it was still an Icelandic hand that plucked the ant from the text, and turned a role model into a villain.

An Early Modern analogue also provides a case of an Icelandic translator quietly removing a eusocial insect – this time a bee – missing from their environment. Post-medieval it may be, but the roots of the text in question extend from the first century AD. The pseudepigraphical *Book of Joseph and Aseneth* is a work with contested origins, plausibly dated to ca. 100, and originally written in Greek (Burchard 1965: 91–99; Cole 2017: 5–6). It tells the story of Aseneth, wife of Joseph (Genesis 41:45) with a focus on her courtship and her conversion to Judaism. The narrative enjoyed a degree of popularity in Western European letters following its translation into Latin during the late 1100s. This translation was incorporated into Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum Historiale* (ca. 1250). In one particularly vivid scene, the Archangel Michael appears to Aseneth and encourages her to eat a mysterious piece of honeycomb. Vincent tells the episode thus:

[“]Asser mihi & fauum melis[“]. Cumque illa contristata staret, eo quod fauum non haberet, ait ei Angelus, intra in cellarium tuum & uenies fauum mellis super

mensam tuam, & inuenit fauum candidum sicut ninem, & mel mundissimum, & odor eius suauis ... quoniam comedent de hoc fauo, quem fecerunt apes paradisi Dei, de rore rosarum in paradiso, & ex hoc comedunt omnes Angeli Dei ... [“]inspice fauum ; & exierunt de fauo Apes multæ candidæ sicut nix, & alæ earum purpureæ sicut Hiacinthus; circumdederunt omnes Asseneth & operabantur in manibus eius fauum mellis ... (SH: 43-44)

“Bring me also a honeycomb”. At this she became afraid, for she did not have one, but the angel said “you will go into your cellar and there will be a honeycomb upon your table”, and she found a honeycomb as white as snow, and the finest honey, and a sweet smell ... “for they [the blessed] eat of this honeycomb, which is made by the bees of Paradise from the dew of roses in Paradise, and all God’s angels eat this ... Look at the honeycomb” and many bees came out of the honeycomb, white as snow, and some of them were as purple as amethyst. They surrounded Asseneth and made in her hands anew a honeycomb ...

Vincent’s *Speculum* was in turn dismembered and sprinkled into *Stjórn*, an Old Norse compilation of translations and commentary on the Old Testament. We will need to pause our treatment of missing ants/bees here while we define this eclectic work. *Stjórn* is divided into three subtexts, *Stjórn I*, *II* and *III*. *Stjórn I* is essentially a translation Genesis up to chapter 18 of Exodus, interspersed with exegetical comments, most of which are translated from Vincent’s *Speculum* and Peter Comestor’s *Historia Scholastica*, but commentary is also drawn from an array of other sources, particularly Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae*. *Stjórn II* is an unadorned translation of Exodus from chapter 19 through to Deuteronomy. *Stjórn III* is a translation of Joshua up to the second book of Kings, spiced with exegetical commentary translated from Honorius Augustodensis and the *Liber Exceptionum* by Richard of St. Victor (Wolf 1990: 164, see also Astås 2009: xviii–xxxi). The three subtexts probably have independent origins. *Stjórn I* – the text of most interest to us because it features Aseneth’s bees and, as we shall see later, also some unusual ants – has a dedication to King Hákon Magnússon of Norway (r. 1299–1319).

By the middle of the fourteenth century at least one Icelandic manuscript had grouped the three *Stjórn* sisters as one, amalgamated text, AM 226 fol. Other manuscripts made groupings of two of the three, e.g. AM 227 fol, AM 228 fol, AM 229 fol. *Stjórn* was born. How Old Norse audiences perceived the text probably changed with time. Two 1548 inventories from Skálholt mention an Icelandic bible or a

fragment thereof (DI X: 618 [no. 556], 652 [no. 573]) which has reasonably been supposed to be *Stjórn* (Astås 2009: xvii). The title *Stjórn*, meaning “power, rule or governance” is also first attested in the early 1500s, and is somewhat gnomic: it may refer to the power of God in the Old Testament, the power of the priests in Second Temple period, or God’s dominion over man more generally etc (Astås 2010: 11–13). I suspect that in the thirteenth century the text was considered by some as an exegetical reference work for bible study, and by others as a compendium of moral instruction, geographical/historical knowledge, and colourful Christian lore. This is reflected in the title given in the prologue to *Stjórn I: heilagra manna blomstr* “the flowers of the saints” (Astås 2009: 3). In any case, for our present purposes it is important that in *Stjórn*, Vincent’s apes become Norse *býflugur* (lit. “bee flies”). The *favum* “honeycomb” is also correctly translated as *seimr*:

[“]Ber mer ok hunangs seím[,”] sagði engillín. ok sem hun stóð rýgg af þersum hans orðum fyrer þat er hun hafði engan seím at fæ honum þa sagði hann sua. Gakk inn ikiallara þinn ok þar á einu þínu borði mant þu hunangs seíminn finna. Varð henni ægi þersi. vān at hegoma at hon fann þar sua huítan seím sem snior veri ok hit skięrazta hunangh gefanda hinn sętazta ilm vvt af seér ... [“]þuiat af þersum hinum sama seím manv þeir bergia sem býflugur af guðs paradiso hafa gort ok saman borit. ok af rosavatni paradisi manv þeir drekka. Ok her af bergia aller guðs englar ... Sia nu seíminn sagði engillinn.[”] Sā hon þa at margar huítar býflugur sem snior flugu ok foru vvt af seíminum. enn sumar af þeim hōfðu rauðan purpura lít sem iacinctus. kringðu þer allar saman berandi ok gerandi af nýiv hunangs seim i hennar hōndum. (*Stj*: 315-317)

“Bring me honeycomb too”, said the angel, and while she stood afraid of these words of his because she had no honeycomb to give him he then said “Go into your pantry and there upon a certain table of yours you will find the honeycomb”. In folly, the hope never occurred to her, yet she found there a honeycomb, as white as snow, and the purest honey giving off the sweetest aroma ... “for they [who are blessed] will taste of this very honeycomb which bees from God’s Paradise have made and assembled, and they will drink of the rosewater of Paradise. And all of God’s angels taste of this ... Look at the honeycomb now”. Now she saw that many bees, as white as snow, came flying out of the honeycomb, and some of them had the reddish purple colour of amethyst. They all surrounded her, carrying and making anew a honeycomb in her hands.

*Stjórn*'s mixed Icelandic-Norwegian genealogy must be taken into account when considering the translator's strategy here. As seen, this is a text which had at least some connection to the Norwegian court, and Norvagisms are not infrequent in its orthography. On the other hand, *Stjórn* was first compiled into its present form in Iceland. All of its surviving manuscripts have an Icelandic provenance or an Icelandic hand, with the tenuous exception of NRA 60 C, which may be Norwegian (Astås 2009: 1). There has been extensive, even pendular, debate over the identity of the translator/translators involved in the different phases of the text (summarised by Astås 2009: 13–17, 43–44; the most decisive contribution being Wolf 1990). Space does not allow us to rehearse the contention here, but it suffices to say that it remains possible that both Icelanders and Norwegians were involved. Neither bees nor honeycomb were foreign to Norwegians of the 1200–1300s, so we should not expect substitutions from the Norwegian quarter. However, it is noteworthy that in the Icelandic reception of *Stjórn* nobody followed the example of the translator of the *Physiologus*. The bees stay put in all the surviving manuscripts. Perhaps this is because the primary audience of *Stjórn* in Iceland was the sort of educated churchman who was accustomed to hearing Biblical metaphors involving bees and honey, and who themselves may have visited Norway or worked with people who had. (This is not to say that *Stjórn* was a purely bookish text. The line between learned and laity could become blurred, especially in a vernacular literature such as Old Norse, and at least one study seems to imply an audience for *Stjórn* who also know the canonical *Íslendingasögur*, Schrunk Ericksen 1998). Centuries later, a separate Icelandic translation of the *Book of Joseph and Aseneth* was made between the years 1657–1676, by the priest Árni Halldórsson of Hruni (d. 1687). Árni's source text was a Danish chapbook of 1580, which reads:

[“]Hent mig oc en Honnig Kage[”.] Men der hun stod sorrigfuld (fordi hun ingen Honnig Kage haffde) ... [“]Oc alle de som komme til den Herre Gud met Penitentze de skulle æde aff disse Honnigkager som Guds Paradises Bier giort haffue aff de Rosen i Paradis. Aff dennem æde alle Guds Engle[”] ... [Assenath] sagde [“]See til Kagen[”.] Da komme der mange Bier vdaff Kagen huide som Sne oc deris Vinger vaare som Fløyel met mange Farffuer. De gaffue sig alle omkring Assenath oc virkede en Honnigkage i hendis Hender ... (Jacobsen & Paulli 1915: 15–16)

“Bring me also a honeycomb [lit. Honey cake].” But she stood there, full of sorrow (because she had no honeycomb) ... “And all those who come to the Lord



God with penitence shall eat of these honeycombs which the bees of God's Paradise have made from the roses in Paradise. From these all God's angels eat" ... [Aseneth] sagde "Look at the cake!". Many bees come out of the cake, as white as snow, and their wings were like velvet in many colours. They surrounded Aseneth and made a honeycomb in her hands ...

The Early Modern Danish is not radically different from Vincent here, save for the bees' more luxurious wings. Árni's translation moves a little further afield:

'sæk þú mer eina hunängs kóku'. Enn hün vard sorgende af því hun hafði 'oungua, ... ["og aller sem til hans koma med reittra ydran skulú eta af þessu braude, sem Paradísar fuglar gióra af þeim rosum sem þar vaxa. Af þessú braude eta einglar guds[']" ... [Assenat] sagde: 'sä til kokúnnar!' Þä komú þar margar flúger ütáf, hvytar sem sniör, vængerner sem flugurr med mislitum farva, og flugu allt um kryng Assenat og giördu eina hünängs kóku i hennar höndúm... (BJAs: 183–184)

"Bring me a honey cake." But she became aggrieved because she had none ... "And all who come to Him with true repentance shall eat of this bread, which the Birds of Paradise make of the roses which grow there. God's angels eat of this bread" ... [Aseneth] said: "Look at the cake!". Then many flies came out of it, white as snow, wings like flies with various colours, and they flew all around Aseneth and made a honey cake in her hands ...

Early Modern Danish *Honnigkage* could refer both to honeycomb and honey cake (Kalkar 1976: 264). In the *Danish Book of Joseph and Aseneth*, it appears that the word is intended to mean honeycomb, but as the Icelandic synonymously refers to the *hunängskaka as brauð*, Árni must be thinking of honey cake (in Denmark today a sort of dark spongecake but in the Early Modern period probably more akin to German *Lebkuchern*). Confusingly, this cake is made not by bees but by *Paradísar fuglar* "Birds of Paradise". Perhaps Árni decided he could not write *býflugur* "bees" as the *Stjórn* translator had done three centuries prior, and so intended to write *flugur/flugir* "flies" but accidentally wrote *fuglar* "birds" instead. Or perhaps he consciously intended to trade the bees for the Birds of Paradise. The idea that there are bees in the Otherworld is not unique to the *Aseneth*-tradition (Cole 2017: 24–26) but it is a fairly obscure motif. The distant existence of the Birds of Paradise, on the other hand, would plausibly have been known to an educated Early Modern intellectual, as the idea that

there birds in the east who came from Heaven had been circulating in print since the time of Magellan (Lawrence 2018: 97–100).

This excursus has demonstrated that only very rarely did the Icelandic contingent of the Old Norse canon react to eusocial insects in European source texts by translating them away. We will now turn to examples of the more usual response of Old Norse authors, Icelandic as well as Norwegian, when confronted with the ants and bees they encountered in European letters: not only to adopt them, but sometimes to adapt them.

### Ants and bees as radical social models for humans

Some medieval thinkers were aware that eusocial creatures had queens. Owing to apiculture, this was well known concerning bees. In *De Animalibus*, Albertus Magnus (d. 1280) discusses the royal monopoly on breeding in a fashion which would satisfy a modern behavioural ecologist: *et sicut in antehabitis determinatum est, opinio Aristotelis est quod rex apum generaliter omnium apum sit mater: et pro argumento habet quia non invenitur semen nisi in domo sua* “And thus as was previously established, Aristotle’s opinion is that the king of the bees is generally the mother of all the bees. For this argument, he has the fact that semen is found only in its home” (*Animalibus*: 1580). On ants, the issue of social structure was much more obscure (as one might expect; a human has use for a bee queen but not for an ant queen). Albertus implies that all ants can breed, and suggests that the phenomenon known by children as “flying ant day” is the result of all the ants coming of age, rather than only a particular, breeding caste: *in senectute etiam quaedam volare incipiunt* “in old age, some of them also begin to fly” (*Animalibus*: 1586).

In fact, the social organisation of all the eusocial Hymenoptera is broadly similar, but in the pre-modern period ants were especially perceived as a self-governing polity that pursued its collective interests, rather than supporting a hegemonic authority. Appropriately enough for Old Norse philologists, the early twentieth century myrmecologist Caryl Haskins chose the Icelandic Commonwealth as the model for a radically mutual altruism to which he felt that certain species of ants were analogous. In a chapter of his 1939 book *Of Ants and Men*, he devotes one chapter to the power struggle of whom the eusocial creatures serve (that chapter is entitled “Fascism or Communism?”):

[L]et us notice for a moment the remarkable superficial similarities of the primitive ant colony and the young democracy of the human present and near past. There is much to link the primitive German folk-community, the Anglo-

Saxon hundred, the New England township, and the Japanese village state with a colony of the lower Myrmicine ants ... When we examine the early village-state or the typically Germanic community as it was represented particularly in early Saxony and in England and Iceland abroad and in colonial New England at home, the analogy to the smaller, less conspicuous type of Myrmicine community becomes more striking ... Personal agility and resourcefulness is much less at a premium in such an organisation, but constant, steady coöperation between individuals has become far more important. Humans and ants alike become modified to this condition. (Haskins 1939: 129–131)

Haskins's characterisation of pre-1262 Iceland as a society of "constant, steady coöperation between individuals" may raise eyebrows. It is certainly in opposition to Tom Shippey's oft-cited summary of the Commonwealth's failure: "it was a country that ought to have been a Utopia. It had: no foreign policy, no defence forces, no king, no lords, no peasants, no dispossessed aborigines, no battles (till late on), no dangerous animals, and no very clear taxes. What, given this blank slate, could possibly go wrong? Why is their literature all about killing each other?" (1989: 16–17). There are those who maintain that the Icelandic political project succeeded in creating a harmonious society (Friedman 1979; Kerekes & Williamson 2012). However, defences such as Friedman's favourable comparison of the violence in the sagas to the murder rate in the United States 1) do not take into account that sagas are a very different type of source material to governmentally recorded crime statistics, and 2) do not account for the fact that strife, often involving gruesome violence, is not just a freak occurrence in the *samtíðarsögur*, but is instead their chief subject. (The *samtíðarsögur* are the genre of Old Norse saga which describe the contemporary events of the High Middle Ages.) Any number of examples could be cited here. The removal of one of Órækja Snorrason's eyes and one of his testicles, at the hands of his uncle Sturla Sighvatsson (d. 1238), while his uncle tells him to *minnaz Arnbjargar* "think of Arnbjörg [Órækja's wife]" (*Stu*: 485) is just one of many cases in the saga material of people behaving with rather less altruism than ants have been imagined to do by those imagining political allegories (on this scene, Gade 1995).

The closest thing to an organ of mutual aid in medieval Icelandic law appears to have been the *breppr* (Jón Jóhannesson 1974: 83–89; Byock 1993: 121–122). This was an administrative district co-ordinated by farmers, who at least in theory paid a quarter of their tithe at St. Martin's day into a fund that could be used for local infrastructure, responding to emergencies, and welfare for the indigent (Magnús Már Lárusson 1962). However, it must be cautioned that most of our sources for the work-

ings for the *hreppr* are prescriptive: They come from law codes such as *Grágás* (*Grg* I: 206, 229–230; *Grg* II: 13), *Jónsbók* (*Jb*: 100–110, 291) or the *Réttarbót* (“amendment”) of King Eiríkr Magnússon (r. 1280–1299) (*DI* II: 293–294). When the *hreppar* infrequently appear in the *samtíðarsögur*, they are used as points of geographical reference or in the context of characters having to attend meetings about their administration (e.g. *Stu*: 57–58, 223, 476). We do not find *hreppsmenn* meeting to repair bridges or provide lodging to down-on-their-luck itinerant workers, not even as a background for conflict in the way that the *Íslendingasögur* features settings of people meeting to flense whales or observe horsefights. (The That is to say, the evidence for the *hreppar* actually performing the socially cohesive functions they were supposed to undertake is poor. So far, not so very ant-like. But if Haskins can be queried for seeing radical communalism in the Icelanders, it is appropriate that at least some medieval Icelanders saw radical communalism in the ants.

The early fourteenth-century Biblical and exegetical compendium *Stjórn I* contains such an effort. Here we find the Old Norse version of the “giant gold-digging ants of India”-tradition (on which more generally, see Reimer 2006: 167–178; Karttunen 2008: 19–20). The Old Norse rendition may have been taken from St. Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae*, or possibly Vincent of Beauvais’s *variorum* reproduction thereof in his *Speculum Naturale*. Isidore took his version from Herodotos’s *Histories*, and Herodotos, perhaps via a Persian informant, was reproducing the tale of the ?????? *śāpīlikā* found in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* (Sharma 2008). Vincent collates several sources which locate the ants in India, including Solinus who records them *in regione septrionalium Indorum, qui dardæ vocantur* “in the region of North India which is called Dardistan” (*SN*: 1536). But Vincent also includes sources placing them in Ethiopia, as they are according to Isidore, and this appears to be the reason that the Old Norse translator puts them in Bláland – a term with variable meanings but often indicating sub-Saharan Africa, as opposed to Serkland, which is usually used to denote the Arab world, including the Maghreb:

Formica hueria er ver kollum maura erv þar mýcklu stærre enn i oðrum stöðum ok miðk undarlega vorðner sik. Maur er sua forsialt kuikendi sem menn uita at hann samkar þat ok saman dregr á sumrum sem hann etr a uetrum eínkannlegha hueití korn eðr þerskýns miðl a korn skurðartima enn vpp a býgg girníz hann ekkí giarna. Enn a blandi segiz at hann uerði sua storr sem smá rakkar. Greffr hann þar upp meðr fotum sinum sanda þa sem gelliger eru atsia. Geýmer þeim siðan ok varð ueiter sem vanduirklegaz at eingi beri þeim ibrott. enn þa sem til þers býria sik at bera þa ibrott. sérer hann til dauðs. (*Stj*: 150–151)

Every formica, which we call ants, are much larger [in Africa] than in other places and behave very strangely. The ant is that animal of which men know that he collects and amasses in the summer that which he eats in the winter, every ear of corn or every kind of meal from the corn at harvest time but he yearns not after the barley particularly much. But in Bláland it is said that he gets as big as small dogs. He digs up with his feet that sand which is golden in appearance. Then he stores it and guards it so ferociously that no one can take it away, and those who start to take it away, he goes to death.

According to the *Stjórn I* author, the Blálandic ants collect grain, mine for gold, and refuse to give tribute to anyone. If their hoards are threatened, the would-be larcenist will be mercilessly attacked. There is no suggestion whatsoever that they have a queen or any caste divisions within the colony. In this sense, they have something in common with the famous ants of Proverbs 6:6-8: “Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise, which *having no guide, overseer or ruler*, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest”.<sup>13</sup> This is a muscular form of collective living. They defend themselves ferociously. Moreover, they thrive physically - note that the African ants *verða svá stórr sem smá rakkar* “get as big as small dogs”.<sup>14</sup>

The detail that the hot climates of the world contain ants who dig for gold is not the *Stjórn I* compiler’s own innovation, but it nonetheless helps to position the Blálandic ants as potential analogues for human behaviour. In lusting for gold - a resource that they do not need to consume for calories - they show that their lives, like ours, are driven by complex desires, in excess of just filling their stomachs. Imagining that non-human creatures had impulses and feelings beyond their immediate survival would not been natural for medieval audiences. The unicorn sought out virginity. The pelican tore at its breast to feed its own young in times of strife. The *donestre* lived on an isolated island in the Red Sea. They lured unwary

<sup>13</sup> My emphasis. King Solomon evidently was not convinced by the common misconception that the queen of a colony “rules” it. It is more accurate to say that the breeding class, represented by the queen, achieves a monopoly on fecundity. She then has resources provided to her by her children. She is not able to give strategic orders.

<sup>14</sup> A sophisticated reading of an Old English iteration of the “ants as big as dogs” motif, if I have understood the author’s argument correctly, is that the ant-dogs are defending the “gold” of the classical tradition from an Early Medieval English reader, while the same reader is also the original possessor of that gold (Kim 1997: 49–50). However, such an interpretation can hardly be applied to our Old Norse texts, which are not illustrated as the Old English *Wonders of the East* is. See also Grollemond 2017 for a further example of drawing ants as dogs.

travellers by addressing them cordially in human language, then ate them alive, but afterwards wept over their remains: A creature, perhaps, who was both hungry for meat and crushingly lonely, damned always to frustrate the one desire at the expense of the other (for other interpretations, see Cohen 1999: 2–5; Kim 2003). However, if the medieval imagination would not have found the contention surprising, the fact that it would surprise the modern reader can still underline its political significance. Marx differentiated the activity of humans and of ants thus:

The practical creation of an *objective world*, the *fashioning* of inorganic nature, is proof that man is a conscious species-being, i.e. a being which treats the species as its own essential being or itself as a species-being. It is true that animals also produce. They build nests and dwelling places, like the bee, the beavers, the ant, etc. But they produce only their own immediate needs or those of their young. They produce one-sidedly, while man produces universally. (Marx 1992: 329; see also Marx & Engels 1973: 42–43)

From a materialist perspective, the imaginary Blálandic ant is thus more like a human than the ants of the real world, in that it feels a human-like impulse to gather articles which are extraneous to its own basic survival needs. Of course, whether they “produce” anything with the gold is unknown. *Stjórn I*, like the rest of the “giant ants of the east” tradition, leaves it to the reader’s imagination to wonder what the *formicae* are doing with their bounty. Do they collect it for its aesthetic value? Or does it have some political meaning as a symbol for power? Either way, the gold-hungry ants are inoculated against the accusation that their social organisation is autonomic, instinctive and thus impossible for humans to learn from. Their uncanny likeness to our appetites leaves open the possibility that humans too could shape such a political order, if they so chose.

Indeed, the industry and apparent egalitarianism of the eusocial insects have long made them models for the lifestyles and identities of radical social movements. Thinkers such as Peter Kropotkin would have been proud to be compared to the hive-dwellers. Working away in secluded communities, with an incessant industry that humans can only emulate when in the grip of acute ideological fervour, it is not hard to see how a desire to emulate eusociality takes hold – and how dangerous that prospect must appear to people in authority. To cite one of Kropotkin’s eulogies to the Hymenoptera:

However terrible the wars between different species, and whatever the atrocities committed at war-time, mutual aid within the community, self-devotion grown into a habit, and very often self sacrifice for the common welfare, are the rule. The ants and termites have renounced the “Hobbesian war,” and they are the better for it. Their wonderful nests, their buildings, superior in relative size to those of man, their paved roads and overground vaulted galleries; their spacious halls and granaries ... and finally their courage, pluck, and superior intelligence – all these are the natural outcome of the mutual aid which they practise at every stage of their busy and laborious lives. (Kropotkin 1902: 14)

There are probably not many points on which the nineteenth-century Russian anarchist warlord Kropotkin and the eleventh-century Icelandic bishop Jón Ógmundarson (d. 1121) would agree. But had the two men ever had a chance to sit down together for a cup of tea (or perhaps mead), they would apparently have had thoughts in common concerning bees. In *Jóns saga Hólarbyskups* (L Recension, c. 1330s) we hear the following account of daily life amongst the community of ecclesiastics and sheltered paupers centred around Jón’s estate at Hólar:

her mátti síá um oll hus byskups mickla iðn ok athofn. Sumir lásv heil<a>gar Ritningar. sumir rituði. sumir sungv Sumir namu sumir kenðu. engi var ofund / þeira I [sic] millum eða sundr þycki. engi ágangr eða þrættne. huer uilldi annan ser meira háttar. lyðni hellt þar huer uid annan. ok þegar signum var til tíða gortt. skundudu allir þegar or sinum smá kofum til kirkiunnar. sætligan seim sem þrifir byflygi til bystoks heilagrar kirkiu meðr ser berandi. huert þeir hófðu samann borið or lystuligum vinkiallari heilagra Ritninga. (*JBp*: 87)

Here one could see all around the bishop’s house great industry and application. Some were reading the holy scriptures, some were writing. Some were singing. Some were studying, some were teaching. There was no jealousy nor division amongst them, no aggression or arguments. Everybody wanted more for each other than themselves. Obedience to one another reigned there, and when the sign was given for the Hours, they all hurried straight away out of their little huts to the church, a sweet honeycomb, as the beeswarm throngs to the beehive of the holy church, bringing with it what each of them had brought together out of the rich wine-cellar of holy scripture.

Jón may have seen a beehive for himself during his sojourns in Norway and the continent, but apiaries were foreign to the Icelanders until the middle of the twentieth century, when the necessary articles were first imported from abroad. Honey in Iceland appears to have been an imported good (*Jb*: 221). However, rather than actual experience of beehives either on the part of Jón or the saga author, the source for this locution appears to be St. Aldhelm's (d. 709) *De Virginitate Prosa*, which presents the oft-repeated allegory between bees and monks in largely similar terms (on Aldhelm and the bees, see Casiday 2004). *Jóns saga helga* is party to a long tradition of comparing monasteries to eusocial colonies, attested both in European sources and elsewhere in Old Norse literature (Parsons and Townsend 2012, 434-435). Consider for example *Málkus saga* (ca. 1360s–1380s), the Old Norse translation of St. Jerome's *Vita Malchi*. There, when St. Malchus (d. ca. 390) is recalling ruefully the monastery he left behind, the following happens:

... þá er ek var í þessi ætlan, leit ek í iardrifu nuckura langa ok miova: vall ok udi maurum su rifa, en þeir voru allir í starfi ok undir byrdum, ok var byrdrin meiri, en sa sem bar; adrir baru frio með munni sinum, adrir fluttu molld or holum, allir hofdu einhveria sýslu firi hondum; ef nuckur do, þá var þat sumra sýsla at flytia likami brott með fullu skilríki; ef annar for mot odrum, þá vægdi hverr firi odrum. Fogr var mer sia syn ok nytiafull, minntumz ek a þat, er Solomon sagdi við lata menn, hann bad þá marka af atfærslu maursins ok því fylgia; þvíat hverr vann annars sýslu ok lietti annars byrði ... (*Malc*: 443–444)

... then when I was in this mood, I looked down into a certain crack in the earth, which was rather long and deep. There was turf and dust amongst the ants of this crack, but they were all at work and carrying things, and those things weighed more than those who carried them. Others were carrying seeds in their mouths, others were moving dirt out of holes. All of them had some kind of duty on their hands. If one died, it was the duty of some to move the body away with total decisiveness. If others went against each other, then each defended the other. This sight was beautiful and useful to me. I was reminded of that which Solomon had said to the lazy men. He bade them note the behaviour of the ant and then to follow it, because each saw to the other's duties and lightened each other's load ...

Regardless of its etiology, the comparison between the monastery and the eusocial colony is apt because both present radical alternatives to the organisation of the



dominant mode of production, be that medieval client feudalism or modern capitalism. The reality, of course, was that the monasteries participated in feudalism like any other estate. In different regions of Europe, they collected feudal dues, asserted rights over the peasantry, engaged agricultural labourers on leased estates etc. But the ideal from the perspective of a novice was a life outside of the system of land rents, peasant bondage, and hereditary social status that otherwise characterised the feudal mode of production (Anderson 2013: 134–136; Bloch 2014: 93, 453–454; Wickham 2009: 66–67). To use the language of *Málkus saga*, they suggest that the purpose of *starfi* or *sýsla* (both meaning “work”) is not the pursuit of profit, as per the capitalist mode, nor the feeding of our betters, as per the feudal. Instead, Malchus’s ants suggest that labour must be for the easing of our fellow’s conditions. *Málkus saga* is particularly interesting in this light for its citation of Proverbs 6:6–8 “... having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer ...”. Not only do the ants attend to each other’s needs, they do so without a coercive power standing over them, just like the Blálandic ants of *Stjórn*. This is mutual aid at its most freeing.

#### **Ants as models for conformity and obedience**

Elsewhere in Old Norse sources, image of the mutually-aiding ant, working cooperatively but defending its liberty against humans, was not so well received. The *Prester John Letter* was apparently circulating in the Norwegian court of Hákon Hákonarson (r. 1217–1263) in the 1250s, as *Konungs skuggsjá* attests with its reference to: *þá bok er gior var a indija landi ... þar sie margt vndarlíga j sagt* (Kgs: 13, see Larrington 2004: 96–97; Schnell 2000: 64–65) – “that book which was made in India ... in which many wondrous things are said” (we shall return to *Konungs skuggsjá* presently). The Norwegian *Letter* itself does not survive, but a brief survey of the surviving Latin tradition reveals that the proud ants of Ethiopia / India / Bláland did not fare well in the Johannian account. One letter boasts of the gold mining ants that: *Istae namque formicae ab occasu solis usque ad terciam horam diei sunt sub terra et tota nocte fodiunt aurum purissimum et proferunt in lucem* “From the setting of the sun until the third hour, all night and under ground there are ants who are digging out the most pure gold and bringing it up to the surface [for me]” (DPJ: 911). Where in *Stjórn I* the ants vigorously defended their treasure for the good of the colony as a whole, Prester John is a king so great that the ants are reduced to miners in his service.

The political implications of seeing a well-organised multitude made into unquestioning servants are obviously attractive to any party in the business of exercising power. Charlotte Sleight (2004: 49, 28–50, 56–57) notes the existence of a trans-

historical “fantasy of employing these miniaturized powers of the world [ants] as one’s personal army”, attested in the myths of Cupid’s ants rescuing Psyche, Aeacus and his Myrmidons, the diary of Otto von Bismarck and perhaps even in the childhood recollections of the renowned myrmecologists Auguste Forel and E. O. Wilson. In support of Sleigh’s observation, it ought to be noted that the *Prester John Letter* is a piece of literature originally intended to be sent from one royal court to another. It was a chain letter spreading amongst those who were immersed in the business of government. For an audience of rulers and administrators, seeing the Isidorean ants subjugated and turned into obedient subjects must have been quite a thrill.

The reception by elites of the ant as a political symbol brings us neatly back to *Konungs skuggsjá*. The text is an eclectic work, part *speculum principum* (a medieval genre of political education for rulers), part treatise on natural philosophy, part encyclopedia. As previously mentioned, it was composed in Norway in the 1250s at the court of Hákon Hákonarson, probably in no little part for the edification of his heir, Magnús lagabœtir (r. 1263–1280) (Schreiner 1971: 36–47; Geelmuyden 1971: 119, 124). It has been suggested that it was authored by an Icelander, perhaps even the Icelandic intellectual Brandr Jónsson (d. 1264) though this is conjectural (Kirby 1986: 169–181; cf. Bagge 1987: 218–224). The text has been described as an expression of a “reform programme” (Bagge 2000: 45) in which the author sets out a vision of how Norway might be made to function as a well-organised state, run on principles loftier than simply “this is the way things have always been” or “might makes right”. In addition to attesting the knowledge of the *Prester John Letter* in Norway, it has its own thoughts on the parable of the ant:

Einn litell maðkr er maur heitir. hann ma kenna þitrum mannum micla hagspæki. hvart sæm hældr er kaupmaðr eða bonnde oc iamþæl konongum sæm smœrum monnum. Hann kenner konongom nær þeir skolu borger gœra eða castala. Hann kenner oc bonnda oc kaupmanne mæð sama hætte. hvæssó ákaflæga eða hværn tima þeir skolo sina syslo framme hafa þvi at sa er retta skilning hæfir oc hyggir hann þanndlega at hans at hæfi þa ma hann mykit marca oc draga ser til nytæmdar. Oll annur kþikennde þvart sæm eru rein eða úrein þa fagna þæssum tima oc leita sþa sinnar næringar a þarmu sumre mæð allre þiðrsyn at þau mæge orugglig stanndaz allan hasca þætrlegrar nauðar. (Kgs: 9)

There is a little creepy-crawly which is called the ant. It can teach wise men great prudence, whether one is a merchant or a farmer, or even [for] kings just as

much as lesser men. It teaches kings when they should build fortresses or castles. It teaches also farmers and merchants in the same way, how carefully they should – or at what time – they should go about their business, because he who has the correct understanding and thinks about its [the ant’s] business in detail will notice a lot, and find it to be of use to oneself. All other creatures, whether they are clean or unclean, celebrate this period [the summer] and so look for their nourishment in the warm summer with a view towards that they may safely withstand all the danger of wintry hardships.

In this passage different readings of the ant’s message are proposed for different social classes. The author suggests that the *konungr* “king” will learn from the ant how to go about building visible manifestations of his power, i.e. castles and fortifications. The *bóndi* “farmer” and the *kaupmaðr* “merchant” are reminded that summer is also the best time for them to perform their labour. In a text otherwise characterised by delicate allegory and stylistic finesse, this particular allegory is shallow and unconvincing. It would already have been more than apparent to kings, merchants and farmers that summer was a good time to undertake construction work, to trade, and to farm. In practical terms, the advice is no more insightful nor less blindingly obvious than “don’t go out in a Norwegian winter without a coat”. The basic idea of the ant toiling in the summer to its benefit in the winter is clearly from Proverbs 6. Incidentally, the same Solomonic quote is also found in an Old Norse version of an *exemplum* by Petrus Alfonsi, (d. 1140), where it is misattributed to Balaam (*Æv*: 164). We also previously saw it referenced in *Stjórn I* (*Maur er sua forsialt kúikendi sem menn uita at hann samkar þat ok saman dregr á sumrum sem hann etr a uetrum*).

I would suggest that what is really being communicated by the *Konungs skuggsjá* ant is an ideological imperative. Despite the author’s protests to the contrary, the ant is not supposed to instruct people *how* to go about their business. Instead, it is an injunction that the natural order commands one simply to *continue* going about one’s business, without questioning or resistance: The *Konungs skuggsjá* ant encourages rulers to rule, and workers to work. The most advanced reading one can posit is that the image of the ant humbly going about its work is intended to fortify the general tendency in *Konungs skuggsjá* to depict royal authority as a natural order. The supposed harmony of nature is used as a model for how the kingdom ought to look if all its subjects were docile in accepting their station (Bagge 1994: 14–25). This directive seems almost banal in comparison to the baroque, continental Latin tradition of deploying eusocial insects in allegories justifying the political order. As a survey of European comparanda would necessitate a quite different, much larger work, we

shall limit ourselves to just one particularly striking example. One “second family bestiary” from an early thirteenth-century manuscript (Cambridge University Library, MS Ii. 4. 26) contains the following passage:

[Bees] arrange their own king for themselves. They create a popular state, and, although they are placed under a king, they are free. For the king does not merely hold the privilege of giving judgement, but he also excites a feeling of allegiance, both because the Bees love him on the ground that he was appointed by themselves and also because they honour him for being at the head of so great a swarm. Moreover, the king does not become their leader by lot, for in casting lots there is the element of chance rather than good judgement, and often by the irrational misfortune of luck somebody who is worse gets preferred to better men. A King Bee, on the contrary, is formed with clear natural signs, so that he can be distinguished by the size of his body and by his appearance. What is more, the peculiarity of a king is the clemency of his character, for even if he has a sting he does not use it in punishment – since there are unwritten laws in Nature, not laid down but customary, to the effect that those who have the greatest power should be the most lenient. (*Bestiary 2: 154–155*)<sup>15</sup>

Here the distinction between ant and bee becomes relevant. As seen, medieval commentators usually recognised that bees had royalty. But the only case we have seen in this article of an ant having a monarch was from the *Prester John* letter, and there the king was a human, ruling the ants as a species outsider. There was nothing to stop the author of *Konungs skuggsjá* using the bee instead of the ant to make his point. Bees too build their nests in summer, after all, and then the Norwegian king could have been compared with apine royalty. Instead, by comparing Norwegian society to the ant colony, the author implies that the king is given his position by natural law which he does not himself control. This is not so much a gesture towards equality in birth and difference in station, as an appeal to the unarguability of the king’s power. Tellingly, the moral of the ant does not address the lower orders at all; presumably their obeisance was taken for granted. The *bóndi* here must primarily refer to the landed gentry of Norway and Iceland, i.e. men who owned farms rather than farmhands. One strongly suspects that the intended audiences of *Konungs skuggsjá* are only those classes that might have sufficient capital to mount a threat to the throne. The *kaupmaðr* perhaps encapsulated a more diverse group than the *bóndi*. By

<sup>15</sup> I cite the translation because no edition exists of the Latin text, save for a facsimile which I have not been able to access.

the thirteenth century, Norway's indigenous merchants must still have been not wholly unlike the vikings of centuries prior: they were Old Norse-speaking seafarers, primarily interested in the British Isles, albeit not in such a violent and predatory manner as their forebears. However, Hákon Hákonarson's rule also saw the arrival to Norway in significant numbers of a very different sort of merchant: the Low German-speaking Hansard, more oriented towards trade with the continent than Britain, and more inclined to feel a sense of loyalty to Lübeck than the Norwegian crown (Wubs-Mrozewicz 2008: 37–41; Cole 2019: 22). Nonetheless, being written in the native language of Norway,<sup>16</sup> and being intended primarily for Hákon's court, *Konungs skuggsjá* would not have been the ideal venue for the king to assert his authority over his Hanseatic subjects. The lesson of the ant to the merchant pertains to the Hansards *de facto*, but it is more a signal that the crown expects obedience from everyone than an argument directed towards a particular constituency.

The *Konungs skuggsjá* author was well-read and knowledgeable (e.g. Holtmark 1971: 93–103; Holm-Olsen 1971: 104–198; Meyer 1971: 130–137), and it is therefore likely that he was responding to the principles of co-operation and resistance to coercion embodied in other images of the eusocial creatures, of the types we have seen in *Jóns saga*, *Málkus saga*, and *Stjórn*. Certainly, his message is boldly opposite to theirs. He could not have known the Old Norse *Málkus saga* as it was written more than a century later, although he could have known the Latin original. He would have been of the right age to know *Jóns saga* in its earlier redactions and of the right age and background to know the gold-digging ants of St. Isidore, later cited in *Stjórn I*. It need not even be the case that the *Konungs skuggsjá* author had a particular text in mind with which he intended to disagree. He might simply have been rejecting the subversive, counterhegemonic idea of the ant, which is an interpretation that has reoccurred (e.g. Haskins, Kropotkin, the medieval examples we have seen), probably for as long as human beings have lived alongside hive creatures, and had societies sufficiently complex to engender dissent.

The *Konungs skuggsjá* ant has an automatic sense for the most propitious and (from a royal perspective) morally upright course: it knows instinctively when is best to concentrate its labours, it is diligent, and unlike the Blálandic ant it does not suggest the value of forming an autonomous egalitarian collective. In this regard, it resembles the ant-lore we saw earlier in the “second family” of the Latin *Physiologus* tradition (1100s). The English *Physiologus* cited previously was clear in its view that Jews were all too inferior to ants in one important regard: while the ant was a creature of

<sup>16</sup> A later Latin abridgement was produced in the fourteenth century, at the behest of one Duchess Ingibjörg and possibly by a Danish or Swedish translator (Storm 1883: 110–112).

prudence, automatically separating the needful from the superfluous, the Jews were creatures of laxity and error, falling too easily under the sway of – from a Christian perspective – despicable readings. Importantly, an ant does not rely on complicated thought processes to discern the edible from the inedible. It just knows. In the same way, a good Christian should be able to avoid heresy, not by refuting its often seductive intellectual whiles, but via an ant-like gut feeling (Sleigh 2004: 59). If the author of *Konungs skuggsjá* was, as has been suggested, a cleric with royal sympathies, (Bagge 1987: esp. 143–153) perhaps a man like Brandr Jónsson (d. 1264) (Kirby 1986: 176–179, see also Cole 2015: 225–228), he would have been well-placed to make the transposition from “ant as good Christian” to “ant as good subject”.

### The limits of context

It is an alluring prospect to map the differing views of the ant, subversive versus conservative, onto the contours of Icelandic-Norwegian relations in the middle of the thirteenth century. *Konungs skuggsjá* was composed in the 1250s, at a time when Iceland was still a kingless society, but when the move towards Icelandic submission to the Norwegian crown, which would be resolved in 1262, was already in progress. Indeed, if Brandr Jónsson really were the author of *Konungs skuggsjá*, the proposition that one should automatically submit to the authority of natural order, i.e. monarchy, would accord with the political ideology we see in his other writings, namely *Alexanders saga* and *Gyðinga saga* (Ashurst 2011; Ashurst 2009: esp. 202–223; Cole 2015: 218–228, 204–207). An Icelandic author with Norwegian sympathies, or indeed a Norwegian who took the supremacy of Hákon over the West Norse-speaking world for granted, might well have been happy with the degree of ambiguity in his statement that the lesson of the ant should apply to the *bóndi*. Is it the archetypal Norwegian *bóndi* who is meant, i.e. a person who already theoretically should be loyal to the throne? Or is the audience supposed to include the Icelandic *bóndi* too, a class of whom significant numbers in the 1250s were yet to pledge their allegiance to Hákon? The matter is not clear, and it is conceivable that is just what the author intended.

*Stjórn I*, on the other hand, is a product of a later age. By the beginning of the 1300s, a middle-aged Icelander would not have known a time when Iceland was not a part of Norway (although the *Íslendingasögur* provided pseudohistorical memories). The late thirteenth century and early fourteenth century were times of unrest in Iceland, with bishop Árni Þorláksson of Skálholt (d. 1298) embarking on an ambitious project to expropriate the farm-holdings of the Icelandic secular elite, but this was fundamentally a struggle between two high-status cliques: clerics and *stórbændr* “elite farmers”. There is little to suggest that there was a risk of a widespread, radical social

movement from below (on such movements in Europe, see Hilton 1973: 96–136). There were scattered cases of disputes between Icelandic taxpayers and Norwegian collectors (Árni Daniél Júlíusson 2004: 125–127) in the first decade of the 1300s, including the case of a Norwegian tax collector, attacked by an Icelandic posse and possibly dying of his wounds in 1305 (Árni Daniél Júlíusson 2004: 125). However, I am tempted to view this unrest as demonstrative of the natural tensions of feudal society, rather than evidence of any serious secessionist desires. Norway in the early fourteenth century was similarly stable, with King Hákon Magnússon (r. 1299–1319), to whom *Stjórn* is dedicated, seeing no threats to this throne, the civil war period being over, and a campaign of extensive legal reform being underway. Perhaps this was a time where the image of the socially radical ant, such as we also saw in *Jóns saga helga* and *Málkus saga*, could be safely entertained as nothing more than a curiosity? An opposite reading can proceed from the observation that only one of our sources, *Konungs skuggsjá*, attempts to use the image of the ant or the bee in an original way to make an argument that can be directly connected to Icelandic-Norwegian politics. Perhaps our fourteenth-century sources proceed gingerly around the image of the ant, confining themselves to abstract arguments, so as not to disturb the status quo?

Either way, the Icelandic-Norwegian frame outlined above is somewhat reductive. It is true that *Konungs skuggsjá* can be bound to the specific context of Hákon Hákonarson's court, but it may have had an Icelandic author and it definitely had an extensive Icelandic reception. In fact, 49 of its manuscript witnesses are from Iceland and just six can be reliably traced to Norway (Holm-Olsen 1952: 38–97). *Stjórn* is a still more complicated work. We have only examined one portion thereof, namely *Stjórn I*, but a further two portions exist, *Stjórn II* (c. 1200–1225) and *Stjórn III* (c. 1250). The prologue to *Stjórn I* places at least that portion in Hákon Magnússon's court, but the only medieval manuscript to feature all three portions presented together is from Iceland (the richly illuminated AM 226 fol., c. 1350). Despite its apparently Norwegian genesis, here too there are questions of Icelandic influence and Icelandic reception. Context-specific readings of the eusocial insects in Old Norse literature are informative, but we must not let High Medieval Icelandic-Norwegian *Realpolitik* exclude the role of an abstract factor, namely, ideology.

### **Conclusion: The primal, ambiguous valence of the swarm**

To write history, philology, or any other sort of humanities is to confront repeatedly the contingency of human behaviour, be that cultural behaviour (e.g., the aesthetics of a given piece of literature) or political behaviour (e.g., the organisation of a given

state). In the words of Marx and Engels put it, “as individuals express their life, so they are ... The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production” (Marx & Engels 1973: 42). Beyond the confines of materialism, comparisons and counterfactuals always lurk in the background, reminding us that there is nothing ineluctable about any expression of human nature. To an interlocutor who would say that, for example, all cultures must acknowledge hard biological facts, such as the role of sexual intercourse in conception, the anthropologist pipes up with examples of Trobriand Islanders or Australian Aborigines who to differing degrees separate sex and conception in their world-view (e.g. Merlan 1986, for summary Spiro 1972 *contra* Montague 1971). Ants and bees present a knotty case in this context. Phenomena such as fornication tempt us towards thinking that there could be something universal in how we respond to swarming insects. What quality was it that was recognisable to human observers long before the word “eusociality” was even coined? It was their multitudinousness. Both the subversive and the conservative allegory of the ant/bee must proceed from the point that they are many. Importantly, this many-ness is not a casual observation, but a detail that seems to be mesmeric. Once captivated by the swarm, the subversive view highlights the way that their large numbers act with co-operation. The conservative view stresses their obedience and conformity. Nonetheless, it is the swarming quality upon which both interpretations depend. Even the primal response of fornication is essentially founded on the recognition that ants operate in large groups: patients suffering from fornication always imagines that they have been totally overrun by ants. Never do they imagine that it is only one ant which is running around inside their body.

On further reflection, though, I find that Old Norse ants and bees are more demonstrative of the argument for the contingency of culture, than a vindication of the importance of instinct. It may well be that something primeval is what draws our gaze to the ant or the bee more than, say, the woodlouse or the silverfish. But once our gaze is drawn, it is frequently the political implications of these creatures’ behaviour (real or imagined) that captivates us: A politics which is anything but instinctual and immutable, but instead open to interpretation. Even in a country which did not have ants or bees until the late twentieth century, they proved to be powerful symbols. The examples we have seen above are relatively sophisticated allegories, all of which to differing degrees are conditioned by continental European influence. *Málkus saga* and the *Stjórn I* episode are direct translations of a Latin source. *Jóns saga helga* was probably influenced by Aldhelm. *Konungs skuggsjá* in its meditation on the ant is more independent of European models than the others but clearly resonates with Proverbs 6: 6-8 and possibly the *Physiologus*.



I would propose that a recognition of the malleability of the ant as a political symbol explains the otherwise enigmatic pronouncement in the Old Icelandic *Somniale Danielis*, cited in the epigraph to this study. *Somniales Danielis* are manuals of dream interpretation, first attested in Greek, moving into the Latin tradition in late antiquity, from there into various European vernaculars, and also found in Arabic, Armenian, and Hebrew. These *Somniales* are normally spuriously attributed to the prophet Daniel. They tend to be produced both by copying or translating manuscript exemplars, and apparently through the addition of folk wisdom, as there is considerable heterodoxy amongst them. The Icelandic *Somniale* has been dated either to the period of literary activity around 1200, or to the 1400s (*SomDan*: 27). Ants are not unusual in *Somniales*, where they tend to be portents of misfortune and death (e.g., *Oneirocriticon*: 180; Chardonnes 2015: 146). However, the Old Norse interpretation is positive, if cryptic: *Ef þu sier mora marga þat er fognudr* “If you see many ants, that is a thing of joy”. *Somniales* are fundamentally oneiromantic, so the implication here must be that not long after a dream of ants, something pleasant will befall the dreamer.

What made the Icelandic translator diverge from orthodoxy, and attach positive connotations to the ant? Part of the answer is arguably in his climate. If he had no experiences with the biting or stinging of *Myrmica rubra* or *Formica rufa*, on account of his ant-less Icelandic existence, then he would have no reason to respond negatively to ants. However, the environmental conditions only preclude a negative interpretation. They do not alone engender a positive one. Here, it is sensible to imagine that a person as learned as a translator knew of a common tradition, both in Old Norse and Latin, which assigned potency to ants and bees as symbols. In the examples we have seen, ants and bees are never warnings of how society ought not to look, but instead contain lessons for a how society should be organised. The problem is that the same symbol contains at least two contrary lessons: 1) That ants denote the peace and security of ordered conformity 2) That they denote radical altruism, and the hope of a better society. The medieval Icelandic dream-interpreter recognised both the desirability and mutability of the swarm as a political symbol. By staying tight-lipped, he let the dreamer equally take comfort in order, or yearn for change.

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