

*Til Miklagarðs ok heiman:*

**The Norwegian Crusade as a Viking Expedition**

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Middle Ages, 300-1500

December 15th, 2016

In 1107, the Norwegian king Sigurð set off from Norway in order to fight the enemies of the newly established Kingdom of Jerusalem. Sigurð first sailed to England and then travelled south to the entrance of the Mediterranean, where he raided the Muslim coast of Iberia for some time. When he finally arrived in the Holy Lands a couple years later, his army sacked the city of Sidon and won many other victories on the battlefield. After these military successes, Sigurð travelled to Constantinople where he supposedly met with the Byzantine Emperor, and then continued by land through central Europe until he arrived back in Norway.

Many regard Sigurð as the first medieval king to lead a Crusade, and for this reason, he is often called “the Crusader” in English. However, Sigurd’s decision to sail to distant coasts with a large army was not spontaneous: it was the legacy of Scandinavian voyages of raiding and conquest during the Viking Age. Analysis of medieval sources from Norway and Iceland reveals that Sigurð’s journey followed a Viking-Age route from Norway to Constantinople, and the hit-and-run naval tactics that he employed while raiding along the Spanish coastline were characteristic of viking expeditions. Similarly, many of the soldiers who travelled with Sigurð did so with the hope of being able to join the Varangian guard in Constantinople like earlier Norse travellers had since the ninth century. Finally, Sigurð’s court skalds wrote poems commemorating his voyage of adventure in the same fashion as the poets of great conquerors during the Viking Age. Thus, early Scandinavian sources depict the Norwegian Crusade not as a campaign fought in the name of Latin Christendom, but a viking voyage of adventure in pursuit of wealth, land, and skaldic fame.

## Naval Navigation and Tactics

Sigurð's fleet followed naval routes established during the Viking Age while his army sailed from Scandinavia to the Kingdom of Jerusalem. During the early Viking Age, Norse contact with the Byzantine Empire and the Abbasid Caliphate had run through the rivers of eastern Europe, but by the eleventh century, Norwegian traders and vikings had begun to sail the so-called "Southern Route" through the Mediterranean as well.<sup>1</sup> Following this path, Sigurð's 60 ships sailed south through the Atlantic, stopped along the coasts of Spain, continued through the Mediterranean to Jerusalem, and then finally reached the end of their voyage at the city of Constantinople.<sup>2</sup>

While Sigurð's fleet sailed past the Iberian Peninsula, it engaged in viking-style raids against vulnerable targets on the coastline. According to *Heimskringla*, a thirteenth-century history of the kings of Norway written by the prolific Icelandic author Snorri Sturluson, the first raid-like engagement took place in Galicia against a local Christian lord who refused to trade winter provisions to Sigurð:

Then King Sigurd with a great body of men went against a castle which belonged to the earl; and the earl fled from it, having but few people. King Sigurd took there a great deal of victuals and of other booty, which he put on board of his ships, and then made ready and proceeded westward to Spain.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. M. Dawkins, "The Later History of the Varangian Guard: Some Notes," *Journal of Roman Studies* 37, no. 1-2 (1947), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/ABB10384F16125BEF18F3B9C87EDCA68/S007543580007605Xa.pdf/div-class-title-the-later-history-of-the-varangian-guard-some-notes-div.pdf>, accessed December 15, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://omac.org/Heimskringla/crusaders.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://omac.org/Heimskringla/crusaders.html>.

Such an attack on the local castle relied on Sigurð's ability to strike while he outnumbered his opponent and escape the region by sea. Similar tactics were typical of viking raids throughout Europe from the ninth to eleventh centuries.<sup>4</sup> *Fagrskinna*, an early thirteenth-century history of Norwegian kings probably written in Norway, gives a different account of the same event:

Then he fell out with a certain jarl, and their exchanges reached the point where in the autumn the jarl broke the peace they had made between them, and King Sigurðr killed many of the jarl's men, and the jarl barely escaped. King Sigurðr acquired a large amount of property there, some as booty, and some as ransom for the men he had captured in battle.<sup>5</sup>

While *Fagrskinna* is thought to have been one of the many sources which influenced *Heimskringla*, the two chronicles diverge in many places, including here.<sup>6</sup> Although the account given in *Fagrskinna* makes Sigurð's actions sound more like defensive measures than a planned raid, the result was still similar in that his army "acquired a large amount of property" that it could carry off by ship. In addition, it is possible that the authors of *Fagrskinna*, writing from a celebratory point of view, added details like the "peace" broken by the local Galician ruler in order to justify Sigurð's attack on a fellow Christian. Regardless, we shall see that Scandinavian accounts record many other raids on Muslim targets as Sigurð's fleet continued its voyage along the coastline of the Iberian Peninsula.

Both *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna* suggest that Sigurð raided the Muslim territory around the city of Lisbon in a viking fashion. Snorri mentions that Sigurð recovered "great booty" from raiding the city, and cites a verse from Halldor Skvaldri, a court skald of Sigurð, commemorating the battle:

The son of kings on Lisbon's plains  
A third and bloody battle gains.

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<sup>4</sup> Neil Price, *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink, accessed December 15, 2016, <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=wuN-AgAAQBAJ>. 464.

<sup>5</sup> *Fagrskinna*, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/yale/reader.action?docID=10089736>. 253.

<sup>6</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://omac.org/Heimskringla/crusaders.html>.

He and his Norsemen boldly land,  
Running their stout ships on the strand.<sup>7</sup>

Halldor's image of Sigurð's men "running their stout ships on the strand" reflects the suddenness with which a viking army could disembark from its ships ready for battle. Such tactical maneuverability was an important component of raiding during the Viking Age, and Sigurð probably utilized it similarly while attacking Lisbon. *Fagrskinna* briefly mentions the same raid: "The following spring he set out for Spain, and when he came to the city which is called Lisbon, he besieged it with his army and fought a battle there and seized a great deal of property there."<sup>8</sup> Taken together, these two accounts suggest that Sigurð engaging in a viking-esque naval siege of Lisbon before departing by sea with the spoils he had pillaged.

*Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna* record further battles fought by Sigurð in Gibraltar and Formentera which could be interpreted as raiding. *Fagrskinna* recounts that "when King Sigurðr now sailed through the Straits of Gibraltar, there came against him a host of heathens, and there he fought his fifth battle and was victorious."<sup>9</sup> Snorri provides a skaldic poem to corroborate this battle in the Straits of Gibraltar, which are known as *Norfasund* in Old Norse:

Ye moistened your dry swords with blood,  
As through Norfasund ye stood;  
The screaming raven got a feast,  
As ye sailed onward to the East.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to this battle in Gibraltar, *Fagrskinna* also mentions that, upon reaching the island of Formentera off the eastern coast of Spain, Sigurð raided a fortified cave by building a siege

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<sup>7</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://omac1.org/Heimskringla/crusaders.html>.

<sup>8</sup> *Fagrskinna*, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/yale/reader.action?docID=10089736>. 253.

<sup>9</sup> *Fagrskinna*, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/yale/reader.action?docID=10089736>. 254.

<sup>10</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://omac1.org/Heimskringla/crusaders.html>.

contraption with one of his ships.<sup>11</sup> Such naval raids in the western Mediterranean along the “Southern Way” to Byzantium resembled Viking-Age raiding expeditions from a tactical point of view.

Sigurð did not just use viking tactics while raiding the Spanish coast, but, in fact, many of the same regions in Iberia which he attacked were also raided by Norse expeditions in the ninth century. For example, during the reign of Ibn Al Rahman II, vikings sacked the cities of Cadiz and Medina Sidonia while raiding in the area around the Straits of Gibraltar.<sup>12</sup> In connection to this incident, Andalusian sources describe a great assault on a viking encampment at Tablada in which, although the camp was not taken, 1,000 Norse were killed and thirty viking ships destroyed using greek fire.<sup>13</sup> After the battle, 400 Norse captives were supposedly hanged in Seville.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, an raiding expedition led by the famous viking Bjorn Ironside targeted Galicia around the year 859.<sup>15</sup> Bjorn’s fleet was rather large considering the distance it had travelled; in fact, with approximately 62 ships, it was roughly the same size as Sigurð’s fleet roughly three centuries later.<sup>16</sup> Thus, even before the development of a Mediterranean sea route from Norway to

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<sup>11</sup> *Fagrskinna*, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/yale/reader.action?docID=10089736>. 254.

<sup>12</sup> Neil Price, "The Vikings in Spain, North Africa and the Mediterranean," in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink, accessed December 15, 2016, <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=wuN-AgAAQBAJ>. 464.

<sup>13</sup> Neil Price, "The Vikings in Spain, North Africa and the Mediterranean," in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink, accessed December 15, 2016, <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=wuN-AgAAQBAJ>. 464.

<sup>14</sup> Neil Price, "The Vikings in Spain, North Africa and the Mediterranean," in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink, accessed December 15, 2016, <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=wuN-AgAAQBAJ>. 464.

<sup>15</sup> Neil Price, "The Vikings in Spain, North Africa and the Mediterranean," in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink, accessed December 15, 2016, <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=wuN-AgAAQBAJ>. 464.

<sup>16</sup> Neil Price, "The Vikings in Spain, North Africa and the Mediterranean," in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink, accessed December 15, 2016, <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=wuN-AgAAQBAJ>. 465.

Byzantium, there was precedent in the Norse world for large Viking expeditions off the coasts of Iberia.

### The Lure of the Varangian Guard

According to the account given in *Heimskringla*, many of Sigurð's followers aimed to acquire land and wealth in Byzantium by serving as Varangian mercenaries like earlier Norse adventurers had before them. The account of Sigurð's life in *Heimskringla* begins shortly after Magnus the Barefoot's death left Sigurð ruling Norway together with his brother Eystein. Snorri tells us that the idea of a large-scale expedition to the Holy Lands arose after Norwegian warriors discussed such places with Norse travellers returning home:

Some had been to Jerusalem, some to Constantinople; and there they had made themselves renowned, and they had many kinds of novelties to talk about. By these extraordinary tidings many men in Norway were incited to the same expedition; and it was also told that the Northmen who liked to go into the military service at Constantinople found many opportunities of getting property. Then these Northmen desired much that one of the two kings, either Eystein or Sigurd, should go as commander of the troop which was preparing for this expedition.<sup>17</sup>

Such a story is consistent with the social dynamics of raiding in Viking Age Scandinavia, under which smaller groups of soldiers would swear themselves to powerful leaders in exchange for part of the plunder acquired abroad. According to Snorri, the goal of many of the soldiers on this expedition was not just to gain wealth through pillaging, but also, after they had fulfilled their

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<sup>17</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://omac1.org/Heimskringla/crusaders.html>.

obligations to Sigurð, to acquire land in Byzantium by joining the Varangian Guard. The Varangian Guard was initially an elite group of Rus warriors from the eastern reaches of the Scandinavian world, but by the eleventh century it also recruited Anglo-Saxons and West Norsemen like the Norwegian king Harald Harðraða.<sup>18</sup> Thus, *Heimskringla* reports that many of Sigurð's soldiers did end up joining the Guard when Sigurð himself returned home: "Then King Sigurd left Constantinople; but a great many Northmen remained, and went into the emperor's pay."<sup>19</sup>

*Morkinskinna*, a history of the Norwegian kings of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, gives two accounts of Sigurð's departure from Byzantium. One story claims that Sigurð, after leaving most of his army behind, sailed to Rome with one ship and then proceeded homeward from Italy ("*Þat er sagt at Sigurðr tók af skipi sinu höfuð mikit ok mjök vandat ok setti á Pétrskirkju. Síðan ferr Sigurðr konungr heim aftr til Noregs*").<sup>20</sup> Since *Fagrskinna* and *Heimskringla* do not mention Sigurð's journey to Rome, this first narrative seems less likely than the other: that Sigurð gave his fleet to Emperor Alexius Comnenus and returned to Norway by land through Bohemia, Germany, and Denmark like in *Heimskringla* ("*Ok áðr þeir keisari skilðisk í Miklagarði þá gaf Sigurðr konungr honum öll skip sín...Sigurðr konungr fór þá leið af Miklagarði um Ungaraland, Saxland, ok Danmörk*").<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> R. M. Dawkins, "The Later History of the Varangian Guard: Some Notes," *Journal of Roman Studies* 37, no. 1-2 (1947), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/ABB10384F16125BEF18F3B9C87EDCA68/S007543580007605Xa.pdf/div-class-title-the-later-history-of-the-varangian-guard-some-notes-div.pdf>, accessed December 15, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://omacl.org/Heimskringla/crusaders.html>.

<sup>20</sup> "Morkinskinna," in *Íslensk Fornrit* (2011). 98.

<sup>21</sup> "Morkinskinna," in *Íslensk Fornrit* (2011). 98-99.



*Ágrip af Noregskonunga sögum*, an older Norwegian text, records in similar phrasing to *Morkinskinna* that Sigurð visited Rome during the three years he spent in Constantinople, but that he returned home to Norway via the same overland route mentioned in the other sources (“*Tók af skipi sínu einu hófuð mikið ok fjár verð ok setti á Pétrskirkju. En heim í Nóreg sæknir hann um Ungeraland ok Saxland, of Danmörk efter þrjá vetr*”).<sup>22</sup> Thus, it is likely that Sigurð did in fact return to Norway by land; the alternate route suggested in *Morkinskinna* might stem from an attempt to collapse the two voyages, even if doing so does not make sense geographically. Regardless, either account of Sigurð’s return voyage suggests that Sigurð left behind much of his army in Byzantium when he returned home. This is consistent with *Heimskringla*’s claim that many of Sigurð’s soldiers joined the Varangian Guard like Norse travellers to Constantinople had done in previous centuries.

### Skaldic Praise of King Sigurð

According to the Norse skaldic tradition, adventurers and kings were immortalized in poetry by the fame of their great actions. *Hávamál*, an Eddic poem written from the point of view of the god Odin, succinctly expresses this worldview in two famous stanzas:

Cattle die,  
friends die,  
(a man) dies himself the same;  
but reknown  
never dies  
for he who gets a good one for himself.

Deýr fe,  
deyia frǫndr,  
deyr sialfr it sama;  
enn orztírr  
deyr aldregi  
hveim er ser goðan getr.

Cattle die,  
friends die,

Deyr fē,  
deyia frǫndr,

<sup>22</sup> "Ágrip," in Íslensk Fornrit (2011). 49.

(a man) dies himself the same;  
 I know one thing  
 that never dies:  
 the judgment about someone dead.<sup>23</sup>

deyr sialfr it sama;  
 ec veit einn  
 at aldri deýr:  
 domr vm dauþan hvern.<sup>24</sup>

These verses suggest that one's fame and memory ("*orǫttír*" and "*domr*") have the capacity to transcend the impermanence of life. From such a point of view, when skalds wrote poems about the great deeds of kings and jarls, they were preserving their patrons' memories by committing them to the enduring Norse poetic tradition.

An example of such skaldic poetry is *Knútsdrápa*, which recounts Cnut the Great's conquest of England during the early eleventh century. The author Ottar svarti celebrates the accomplishments of King Cnut as follows:

You arrayed the host of the men of Skane, free-handed adorning of Van's reindeer of the sail.  
 The wind filled the canvas, Prince, above your head. You turned all your prows westward  
 out to sea. Where you went, you made your name renowned.<sup>25</sup>

In Ottar's verse, Cnut's renown derives from his adventurous voyage "westward out to sea" and successful battles against the Anglo-Saxons ("the host of the men of Skane"). "Free-handed adorning of Van's reindeer of the sail" is triumphant poetic language which describes Cnut on board one of his ships. Thus, Ottar's verse attempts to solidify Cnut's legacy as a naval conqueror through oral poetry.

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<sup>23</sup> I am providing my own literal translation of the Old Norse text

<sup>24</sup> *Hávamál*, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://etext.old.no/Bugge/havamal.html>.

<sup>25</sup> *Knútsdrápa*, accessed December 15, 2016, [http://historyonline.chadwyck.co.uk/getImage?productsuffix=\\_studyunits&action=printview&in=gif&out=pdf&src=/ehd/ehd00191/conv/ehd00191.pdf&IE=.pdf](http://historyonline.chadwyck.co.uk/getImage?productsuffix=_studyunits&action=printview&in=gif&out=pdf&src=/ehd/ehd00191/conv/ehd00191.pdf&IE=.pdf).

Drawing on such traditions, skaldic accounts of the Norwegian Crusade portray Sigurð as a Viking king worthy of great fame for his naval expeditions of conquest. *Heimskringla* quotes the words of Einar Skulason, a Norse skald in the court of Sigurð:

Good reason has the skald to sing  
 The generous temper of the king,  
 Whose sea-cold keel from northern waves  
 Ploughs the blue sea that green isles laves.  
 At Acre scarce were we made fast,  
 In holy ground our anchors cast,  
 When the king made a joyful morn  
 To all who toil with him had borne.<sup>26</sup>

In true skaldic fashion, Einar's verse celebrates the adventurousness which compelled Sigurð to sail "from northern waves" to the "blue sea". Similarly, he describes the "joyful morn" which Sigurð brings about after his military success in the Holy Land, contending that such greatness gives "good reason" for future skalds to preserve Sigurð's legacy.

Similarly, Halldor Skvaldri recounts the "renown" of Sigurð's aforementioned attack on a fortified cave on the island of Formentera:

'Twas a feat of renown,  
 The boat lowered down,  
 With a boat's crew brave,  
 In front of the cave;  
 While up the rock scaling,  
 And comrades up trailing,  
 The Norsemen gain,  
 And the blumen are slain.<sup>27</sup>

In this poem, Halldor describes the daring plan which Sigurð executed in order to take the cave: namely, that he lowered a ship from the cliff above the cave's entrance in order attack the soldiers in

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<sup>26</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://omac1.org/Heimskringla/crusaders.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://omac1.org/Heimskringla/crusaders.html>.

its mouth from a better angle. Halldor celebrates both the bravery of the “boat’s crew” and the tactical genius which allowed Sigurð to conquer the island successfully.

Another skaldic poem in *Heimskringla* celebrates Sigurð’s victorious siege at Saet, where he fought alongside King Baldwin of Jerusalem after reaching the Holy Land. Snorri describes how Sigurð’s army acquired a “great treasure of money” and much “booty” after taking the city, and quotes the following verse from Halldor Skvaldri:

He who for wolves provides the feast  
Seized on the city in the East,  
The heathen nest; and honour drew,  
And gold to give, from those he slew.<sup>28</sup>

This verse displays many typical characteristics of skaldic poetry. For instance, it talks about the carnage of a victorious battle as a “feast” for scavenging animals. It also emphasizes the “honour” which Sigurð acquired via the siege of Saet, and describes Sigurð as a giver of “gold” for his followers. In such a way, Sigurð’s journey through the Mediterranean was solidified in the skaldic record similarly to earlier conquests during the Viking Age.

Interestingly, some skaldic poems in *Heimskringla* uses Christian language to celebrate Sigurð’s accomplishments. One such verse is attributed to Einar Skulason, a skald in Sigurð’s court who was also a priest:

To Jerusalem he came,  
He who loves war's noble game,  
(The skald no greater monarch finds  
Beneath the heaven's wide hall of winds)  
All sin and evil from him flings

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<sup>28</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://omac1.org/Heimskringla/crusaders.html>.

In Jordan's wave: for all his sins  
(Which all must praise) he pardon wins.<sup>29</sup>

In the same way as other skaldic poems, this verse celebrates Sigurð's military prowess as a ruler who "loves war's noble game." In addition, it Christianizes this idea by suggesting that Sigurð's expeditions to "Jordan's wave" and victories in the Holy Land win him "pardon" for his sins in addition to worldly renown. Such poetry synthesizes skaldic traditions with Christian religious concepts.

Other Christianized skaldic verse was written throughout the North Atlantic world during the late Viking Age. We have already seen how the skaldic poem *Knútsdrápa* was written about Cnut the Great, the Christian king of Norway, Denmark, and England. Although *Knútsdrápa* was not explicitly Christian in content, other skaldic poetry was, such as this verse by Skapti Þoroddson recorded in Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál*, a thirteenth century instructional text on the skaldic arts:

The King of Monks is greatest  
Of might, for God all governs;  
Christ's power wrought this earth all,  
And raised the Hall of Rome.<sup>30</sup>

Skapti sings the praise of Christ in this poem, ascribing him the "might" of a traditional Norse hero. The "Hall of Rome" is presumably a reference to the papacy. *The Wanderer*, an Anglo-Saxon poem recorded during the late tenth century, even provides a Christian version of the famous stanzas from the pagan poem *Hávamál* quoted earlier:

Here money is fleeting,  
here friend is fleeting,

Her bið feoh læne,  
her bið freond læne,

<sup>29</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://omac1.org/Heimskringla/crusaders.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Skáldskaparmál*, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/pre/pre05.htm>.

here man is fleeting,	her bið mon læne,
here kinsman is fleeting...	her bið mæg læne...
It is better for the one that seeks	Wel bið þam þe him are seceð,
consolation from the father in the heavens,	frofre to Fæder on heofonum,
where, for us, all permanence rests.	þær us eal seo fæstnung stondeð. <sup>31</sup>

Both this section from *the Wanderer* and the Christian skaldic verse quoted by Snorri are attempts by poets during the late Viking Age to incorporate Christian ideas into the skaldic tradition. Thus, the Christian elements of skaldic verse written in praise of Sigurð's journey had clear antecedents in the late Viking Age.

### Conclusion

In many ways, the Norwegian Crusade depicted in Scandinavian sources is a natural continuation of the viking naval expeditions launched from Scandinavia during preceding centuries. Although the primary target of Sigurð's army was the Muslim world and not Christendom, Sigurð's ships followed a Viking-Age sea route and used viking tactics while raiding off the coast of Iberia. In fact, some of the regions which Sigurð attacked had been harried by other Norse expeditions in previous centuries. When the Norwegian army finally arrived in Constantinople, many of Sigurð's men joined the ranks of the Varangian Guard like Scandinavians travellers had been doing for generations. Sigurð's adventures were even crystallized in the same skaldic lore as those of Viking-Age heroes and kings like Bjorn Ironside and Cnut the Great. For these reasons, it is useful to think about the first European monarch to lead a Crusade as a viking king who inherited

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<sup>31</sup> *The Wanderer*, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://www.anglo-saxons.net/hwaet/?do=get&type=text&id=wdr>.

the military tactics and worldview of his predecessors; centuries of Scandinavian exploration and naval warfare set the stage for Sigurð's journey to the Middle East.