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CYRUS THE GREAT IN ICELANDIC EPICS
A LITERARY STUDY

I

The Icelandic rimur-poets based their works on many different kinds of narrations. There are the Icelandic classical sagas, popular stories of heroes, kings and warriors of the past, stories of knights, persons from the history of mankind, and finally some books from the Bible. The great majority of this literature has never been printed, but is preserved in hand-written copies from different times. Among historical books, existing in many copies in the Landsbokasafn in Reykjavik (The National Library of Iceland) is the "History of Persian Kings", Sogur Persakonunga¹. The great historical scholar, The Right Reverend Finnur Jonsson mentions in his *Historia Ecclesiastica Islandiae*² that Reverend Benedikt Petursson (Benedictus Petri) who died in 1724, had translated into Icelandic *Buntingii Chronicon Regum Persarum*. The Icelandic translation is lost, so far as we know, but it is quoted by one of the copyist's, who has re-written the *Saga of Cyrus the Great*. This history of Cyrus is still to be found in 26 copies³, which proves its popularity in the country, as we may take for granted that some exemplaries of the book are lost. It is this saga of Cyrus the Persian King, that is of special interest, when we wish to study the epic poetry, as *the three poets, whose rimur of Cyrus we know up to this day, have all of them based their rimur on this story.*

II

The rimur of Cyrus are:

1. *Rimur af Cyrus Persakongi*, by Rev. Jon Sigmundsson, written in 1637. 20 rimur in the cycle. One copy preserved: AM 131, 8°.

¹ *Handritaskra Landsbokasafns* (The Catalogue of the National Library of Iceland).

² *Finni Johannaei Historia ecclesiastica Islandiae*, Tomus III. Havniae MDCCLXXV, p. 562.

³ *Rimnatal I-II. Finnur Sigmundsson tok saman*, Reykjavik 1966, p. 100.

2. *Rimur af Cyrus Persakongi*, by Guomundur Bjornsson, 15 rimur in the cycle, originally written in 1764. Three copies preserved: Lbs. 1197, 4^o, JS 587, 628, 4^o.
3. *Rimur af Cyrus Kongi*, by Daoi Nielsson, 17 rimur in the cycle. One manuscript existing: Lbs. 2748, 8^o.
The rimur were written in 1842⁴.

Besides this King Cyrus is mentioned in the introductory song of *Ulfarsrimur* by Þorlákur Guóbrandsson⁵ and the famous writer of rimur, Sigurour Breiðfjörð (1798-1846) includes *Rimur af Cyrus and Cambyses* in the list of his poetical production, but no manuscript of this cycle of rimur has been discovered⁶.

It is of interest to have some information about the three authors who independently of each other have written their rimur and based them on the same story of Cyrus. The first is living in the 17th century, the second in the 18th century and the third in the 19th century. This means that the story itself has existed in Icelandic so far back as early in the 17th century. The first author on the list, *Rev. Jon Sigmundsson*, gives us the information in the beginning of his work, that a friend of his, also a clergyman, had translated the story into Icelandic, probably from latin. In those days Icelandic scholars were rather well acquainted with the old Greek and Latin classics in the original language, besides the nordic languages, especially the German.

Rev. Jon Sigmundsson was born ca 1637 and died on Oct. 25th 1725. He was ordained minister (Lutheran) in 1659 and served in several parishes in South-Eastern Iceland, (Horgsland, Eioar, Mjoiðfjörður, Þykkvibaer, Desjarmyri). He was living in a very difficult period of the Icelandic history, and lost some children, who died from the consequences of undernourishment. A long controversy with his bishop gives us the idea, that he has been a man of courage and strength, in spite of his poverty, and after the death of the bishop he writes a brief verse, where he expresses his joy because he still, eighty years old, is allowed to celebrate the mass before the altar of his God. Besides the

⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 100f.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 400. This cycle of rimur does not deal with the life of King Cyrus, except that he has conquered Caldea and Babylon, and gave the Jews their freedom. His general Klarelíus leaves the country after Kambyses has become king, travels to Dalmatia and becomes a kong of Afrika. He is the father of the great hero Ulfar sterki (Ulfar the strong). The author obviously is writing pure fiction, using the names by random.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 101.

rimur of King Cyrus some of his sermons, prayers and hymns are still preserved in manuscripts⁷.

The second author is *Guomundur Bjornsson*, born ca 1712 and died in 1784. He was a farmer who lived in different places in Borjarfjorour, South-Western Iceland, finally at Haukafell. He wrote quite many cycles of rimur, besides the one about Cyrus⁸.

The third author is *Daoi Nielsson*, born 1809 and died 1856. He lost his father when he was quite young and was brought up by some relatives under very poor circumstances. Most of his life he earned his living as an hired man on farms. Even if he has been occupied with manual labour, he was exceedingly productive as a writer and was often called Daoi "The Learned". His literary production includes both prose and poetry, especially rimur. Daoi Nielsson died in a snowstorm during a bookselling-travel in Northern Iceland⁹.

Porlakur Guobrandsson, the author of Rimur af Ulfaristerka (The first part) who mentions Cyrus in the introduction of the cycle, was a person of high standing. He was a descendant of some of the greatest scholars of the country and studied at the Diocesan School of Holar in Iceland and the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. He became a judge in Western Iceland. He was born ca 1672 and died in 1707, as a highly esteemed poet in his days¹⁰.

III

A story which has been rewritten by so many writers as the *Saga (History) of Cyrus the King of the Persians* is bound to show some marks of individual skill, understanding of language and other ordinary characteristics of such manuscripts. As the Icelandic language has been preserved in the same form for centuries, the differences do not affect the main character of the story itself. The writers do not divide the story exactly into the same number of chapters, and then even if the rimur cover the same subject-matter, the poets do not either have equally many rimur in the cycle. As the subject-matter is the same in the various manuscripts, a brief summary of one of the saga-manuscripts will give

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 94; Pall Eggert Olason, *Islenzkar aeviskrar*, III. bindi, Reykjavik 1950, p. 256.

⁸ Rimnatal, p. 50; Pall Eggert Olason, *op. cit.*, II. bindi, p. 132.

⁹ Rimnatal, p. 30; P.E.O., *op. cit.*, I. bindi, p. 303.

¹⁰ Rimnatal, p. 145 f; P. E. O., *op. cit.*, V. bindi p. 156.

sufficient idea of the content of the rimur without consideration to the three authors' interpretation or their personal poetic vocabulary.

For this purpose I am selecting a copy, written in 1853 by Einar Guonason in Sleggjulaekur¹¹.

The first two chapters deal with a subject-matter mostly based on Herodot's first book of *Historiai* (Her. I, 44, I, 107-113), the abandonment and escape of Cyrus. The third chapter will be dealt with later, as it is an insertion dealing with the name of Cyrus. The fourth chapter again continues with Herodot (I, 114-120), telling the story of the king's discovery of his son's being in life, the cruel revenge he takes on Harpagus, and the sending away of the young Cyrus. The fifth chapter seems to be more based on Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (I, iii, 17) dealing with the education of Cyrus. In Chapters six, seven, eight, the author turns again to Herodot (I, 123-130), describing the war with his grandfather, the assistance of Harpagus, and ending with Astiages' defeat. From the ninth chapter to the eleventh the story is based on the first part of Herodot's book (I, 50-86). Here King Croesus comes into the picture, his confidence to the oracles, his war with Cyrus and final defeat. After this the writer turns over to Cyrus' warfare against Babylon, in the twelfth Chapter, and the victory over King Baltazar. The subject-matter is from Herodot (I, 188-191), but the thirteenth and fourteenth chapters of the story are based on the Book of Daniel (Ch. 5-6). The last part of the Icelandic version of the Cyrus-saga deals with the warfare against the Massagetae, following the last chapters of Herodot's first book of *Historiai* (I, 201-214). This story covers the chapters fifteen to nineteen in the saga, but the final chapter, the twentieth, is a brief discussion about the disharmony between different historians regarding the death of Cyrus.

From this brief survey of the subject-matter of the Cyrus-saga may be seen, that the author is not entirely dependent on Herodot, even if he makes use of his book. He does not arrange the events in the same order as the Greek historian. Secondly he never translates from Herodot's book, but quite often tells the story freely in his own words. There is no doubt, that the original author of Cyrus Saga has made use of several other sources than Herodot. In the concluding chapter of the book he mentions writers like Herodot, Justinus, Xenophon and Menastes. Possibly he may have selected his material from other

¹¹ Lbs. 468, 4°, Sagann af Cyro Persakongi, 1853. Meo hendi Einars Guonasonar a Sleggjulaek.

scholars, but as I do not have that literature at hand, and as my main intention is the study of the rimur, I am leaving out further study of the origin of the history of Cyrus as such. The author may have been under some influence of the stories of Persian kings, mentioned above. It is also a matter of great interest to take into consideration the motifs of the saga, especially the motifs which have been known by the common people of Iceland, who enjoyed the rimur, when they were chanted in the homes. In this matter I wish to refer to scholars of comparative folklore and mythology, for example Dr. Heinrich Lessmann's book, «Die Kyrossage in Europa»¹², even if some of his explanations may seem to be rather far-fetched. He proves that some of the motifs are also well known from Nordic literature. However, the relationship between the Greek histories of Cyrus the Great and the mythical traditions of Europe and Asia will have to be left out of consideration. On the other hand the *rimur* will lead our attention to the picture of the great hero, and how the three poets make the story actual or educational for their own audience.

IV

Cyrus' character is described in the 5th chapter of the History of Cyrus, and all the poets seem to stress the same points. Jon Sigmundsson says, that Cyrus is a person with a great self-control, patient and obedient to laws and regulations (4th rima). He is pious, righteous and popular among his nation (5th rima). Guomundur Bjornsson speaks with real admiration of Cyrus as a hero who at the same time is mild and generous and never showing any outward signs of emotion. He is also exceedingly righteous when acting as a judge (3rd and 5th rima). All the poets stress the high standard of the Persians as a law-abiding nation, where the king and queen are obliged to obey the law like anyone else. In support of their view they quote the legend of King Ahasverus and Queen Vashti (The Book of Esther, Ch. 1.) Especially Guomundur Bjornsson admires Cyrus as an eloquent speaker and compares him with a long list of public speakers and scholars of all ages (7th rima). All three poets speak of Cyrus with great admiration, and praise him with strong superlatives, but once they (especially Guomundur Bjornsson) find it necessary to excuse his

¹² Heinrich Lessmann. *Die Kyrossage in Europa*, Charlottenburg, 1906. Comp. Proi. Stith Thompson, *The Folktale*, London 1946.

behaviour. That is when Cyrus attacks the Massagetae. But here he lays the stress on man's, even the great king's dependence on *fate*. This is quite in harmony with the common belief in Iceland, up to our own days, that a person who is approaching death is liable to behave contrary to his or her nature and ordinary principles. The last of the poets, Daði Nielsón, gives the same picture of Cyrus as his colleagues, but perhaps is more inclined to point out the mercy, goodness and gentleness of the king.

It should be noticed that even if the author of the Saga of Cyrus is using the Greek Authors as his sources, both he and the poets to a still higher degree are using expressions which are traditional in romances and similar stories of knights, popular in Europe (Riddarasögur). For instance it is a typical trait from the romances, that Cyrus in the rimur is said to cut off three, four or five heads in one stroke during a battle.

The great authority on the origin of Icelandic rimur Dr. Björn K. Þorólfsson, in his very remarkable book about Rimur before 1600, quotes many rimur which include pictures of kings, closely related to the expressions which the authors of Cyrusrimur are making use of¹³.

One trait in Cyrus' character has to be mentioned specially, as it is interpreted by the Icelandic poets very differently from what might be expected. I am referring to Cyrus' piety and religion, which in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* is very often spoken of with great respect. In *Ulfarsrimur* the author says that the prophet Daniel has "taught" the king and all his people the Christian faith. (*Ulfarsrimur* 1, 14). This peculiar statement is not caused by ignorance, but rather a certain traditional understanding of the Christian faith.

According to *Cyrus-saga*, quoting the Book of Daniel (Chapter 12), King Cyrus, Darius Medes (who is supposed to be his uncle), the queen, the children and the whole court, including the old foster-parents, accept the religion of the prophet. Rev. John Sigmundsson (16th rima) sees Cyrus received in heaven, surrounded by a glory of light, and he shines like a sun at the throne of the Lamb. Guomundur Björnsson describes Cyrus' enthusiasm in "knowing right" the "pure faith" (3rd rima). In both those terms we hear the echo from the preaching of the Church during the period of orthodoxy when correct dogmatic teaching was regarded as the essence of religious life. Finally it might be mentioned that Cyrus has been given the Holy Spirit.

¹³ Björn K. Þorólfsson, *Op. cit.*, pp. 248-250 pass.

The reason why King Cyrus could be regarded Christian is in the first place, that the authors of the saga and the rimur as well included the Old Testament in Christian teaching, no less than the New Testament. They understand the willingness of Cyrus to send the Jews to their own country back from the exile in Babylon as an evidence for the king's personal consent to the "Christian" faith. Thirdly the typological interpretation of the Bible has given the name of Cyrus a special value. In the 3rd chapter of the Cyrus-saga the writer quotes the 44th and 45th chapters of the Book of Isaiah. We are not concerned with the modern exegetical interpretation of the Biblical passages, but the tradition behind the Cyrus-saga finds in Deutero-Isaiah an evidence for King Cyrus being given his name by the divine Spirit 130 years before his birth. The author of the saga mentions seven persons, whom God has given their names. They are Ishmael, Isaac, Samson the strong, *this Cyrus*, King Josiah, John the Baptist, and "our blessed Immanuel, the Saviour of the World", whose "*fyrirmynd*" is found in the other six. The word "*fyrirmynd*" was then the ordinary expression for "type"¹⁴. Such a list of types will be found in the rabbinic literature. The rabbis maintained that the number of persons, given their names by God, were several, and in Pirque R. Eliezer 32, Messiah himself is counted as one of six. This means that the Cyrus-saga is basing its theory on an old tradition, when Cyrus is included into the list of Messianic types¹⁵. Typology, briefly speaking, has been defined as "the doctrine that the things in the Christian dispensation are symbolized or prefigured by things in the Old Testament"¹⁶. This does not mean,

¹⁴ Comp. Hallgrímur Pjetursson, *Passíusálmur, where Isaac's carrying of the wood for his own sacrifice is a "type of Jesus carrying of His own cross.* (Pass. 30, 8),

¹⁵ Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, aus Talmud und Midrash*, I. Band, p. 63.

¹⁶ John Marsh, *Saint John* (The Pelican Gospel Commentaries), Harmondsworth 1968, p. 56. — See also following articles: Goppelt, in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, Stuttgart, 1969, VIII, p. 246 ff. J. R. Darbyshire, *Typology* (Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. 12). Louis H. Gray, *Achaemenians* (Enc. of Rel. and Eth. vol. 8). Prof. A. Guillaume, in his commentary on the Book of Isaiah (in a New Commentary on Holy Scripture, London 1943, p. 465) points out the similarity between the inscription of Cyrus and Isaiah's passages (ad Is. 40, 1-8), which some scholars think are an evidence of the prophet's familiarity with the court-style of Babylon. The reason why the authors of the Cyrus-saga and the rimur believe that Cyrus has been "named" by God *before* his birth, is simply that they have taken for granted that the whole Book of Isaiah is written by one prophet, and do not consider that the chapters they are quoting, have been written later (by an

of course, that Cyrus is looked upon as a Messiah, but that some similarities will be found with Messiah in Cyrus' person and life and most of all in his *call from God* as a servant of divine Providence. Consequently Daði Nielsson makes the king say to Astyages, that a war against him (Cyrus) had been a war against God (7th rima). The theologian Rev. Jon Sigmundsson in his 16th rima gives perhaps the best explanation of Cyrus' importance for the history of salvation. Cyrus who saves the prophet Daniel from the lions, serves the law of God, before the birth of the saviour into the world. He is the type of the true saviour, who saves mankind, that has been exiled from God's grace.

V

In modern Christian Theology the term actualization is quite common. By that we mean an effort to interpret the texts of the Bible so that they will be actual for modern people in the present situation. As I see it, this term can also be used in connection with the sacred literature of any religion, and even secular works of past ages. This is both an exegetic and hermeneutic question, how old texts can be useful for the thinking of the contemporaries of the preacher, the poet or the scholar who is interpreting the literature of the past. Consequently it is quite in order to study how the Icelandic poets applied the story of Cyrus to their own times. Such an actualization of the subject-matter of the story will usually be found in the introductory stanzas of each rima in the cycle, the so-called mansongur¹⁷ which really means a maiden-song or lovesong. The mansongur seems to have its origin in a certain genre within the literature of the medieval ages. The poet is addressing a woman, for whom he is supposed to write his poetry, and quite often he is expressing his own inability to reach what he is aiming at, either because of old age or lack of artistic gifts. Gradually the rimur-poets felt themselves more free to discuss many different things in the mansongur, and in many cases the introduction of the rima reveals religious, philosophical or educational ideas, provoked directly or indirectly by the subject-matter of the story that is re-told

unknown author, now called Deutero-Isaiah). The inscription prof. Guillaume is referring to is no doubt the Cylinder of Cyrus.

¹⁷ Björn K. Þorláksson, *op. cit.*, pp. 256-284; Sir William Craigie, *Op. cit.*, I, pp. 291 ff.

in the rima. It is from this point of view that we take a brief look at the mansongvar (plur.) in the rimur of Cyrus.

The Reverend Jon Sigmundsson, as might be expected, is the most religious. The rescue of the child Cyrus makes him think of the power of Christ who conquers the evil. Spaco's mercy proves the nobility of women's feelings. Astyages' cruelty is an example of the painful consequences of anger and envy. When Cyrus is fleeing to the gates of his citadel, but regains his courage, because of the women's reactions, the poet thinks of the Saviour rescuing man from the power of Satan. And perhaps the ladies also contribute to the saving of men. Astyages is defeated and Cyrus becomes the victor. That proves that the whole world belongs to God, who give and takes. Solon's conversation with King Croesus reminds the poet of the value of good behaviour and humility in successful life. Croesus's negative attitude to Solon, and his effort to know the will of the gods, gives the clergyman an opportunity to render a brief sermon about true wisdom as the "queen" among the gifts of God. Firstly the wisdom of knowing God, using His gifts and living according to His commandments. Secondly true wisdom means the knowledge of oneself. However, Mammon makes many people blind, and the rich imagine that they are the greatest of all. King Croesus' defeat shows how pride and arrogance will be punished by God. The invasion into his citadel is an example of the uncertainty of high honour and esteem. Cyrus plans to attack the queen of the Massagetae and his mock proposals of marriage show the evil consequences of envy and greed. The treasures of heaven are more worth than the treasures of this world. Cyrus' vision in a dream reminds the poet of God's providence as deciding about fortune and good luck.

Guomundur Bjornsson begins his rima saying directly that the story of Cyrus should make people see how the "Wheel of fortune is turning", so that some persons are exalted and others humiliated. This author does not stress the religious point of view, but he has a tendency to moralizing in a rather peculiar way. His method is to use long lists of names, taken from the history of mankind in different times. If he has constructed the lists on the basis of his own original reading, he has been a man of enormous learning. But it is also quite possible that he has found the lists ready-made in some kind of a textbook of history. Certain points in his mansongvar (plur.) show that he is interested in social problems and particular events in the history of Iceland. When he is telling the story of the abandonment of the child Cyrus, he mentions that such cruelty was a pagan custom, abandoned after the acceptance

of the "true faith". This is an echo from the history of Iceland. The bringing up of the boy leads the attention to the duties of the parents in general and an acknowledgement of the contribution of the fostermothers to the education of young children. The most sarcastic criticism on contemporary authorities who should take care of poor children and orphans, is Guomundur Bjornsson's advice to send them to Astyages in order to get rid of them. Somewhat later in a different connection he makes a list of "bad men", not least those who have murdered their relatives or killed small children. The first name of the list is Cain. Then the poet asks the ladies that listen to his rima, to be careful not to act like the women of Persepolis, as they might threaten the men to run into a greater danger. He writes a list of groups of women who played an important part in the defence of cities. The story of Solon's sincerity towards King Croesus inspires the poet to make a list of 27 men who showed the same kind of courage. Finally he says that in his praise he had Cyrus in mind. When Croesus does not follow the advice of Solon but relied on the oracle, the writer gives the names of several men who worshipped idols instead of the "Bright Flower of Paradise". Croesus' defeat and victory is an example of wealthy and powerful men being a cause of fear, the list beginning with "Soroaster" and ending with Julius Caesar. God has not given the Icelandic nation any such wealth, but great intellectual gifts, so there is no reason to envy the rich. Cyrus gives the Jews permission to go back to their country. He is an example of a good sovereign, and now the poet constructs a list of such rulers, beginning with Moses and ending with King Olaf (Tryggvason) of Norway who contributed to the Christianizing of Iceland. In spite of his admiration of Cyrus, he cannot help criticizing his attack on the Massagetae. Without any list of people for the purpose of illustration, he expresses the traditional philosophy of satisfaction, in spite of poverty, and avoiding greed. Finally the poet gives a few examples of great heroes, all nordic, who relied too much upon wealth, power and courage, but when Cyrus lost his life in the battle, "Fortune" herself wept, as she could not rescue his life.

Daði Nielsson usually writes brief *Mansongvar* (plur.) and they are always the traditional complaints of his own lack of poetical skill. Only once the subject-matter of the saga seems to inspire him to some thinking on human problems. When young Cyrus comes back to his parents, the poet reminds his audience of the fact that even if the children of this world often do a great harm, the way is open to pray to the highest God about His grace. He is the shelter. Perhaps this

author has been rather reluctant in revealing much of his inner thoughts and feeling, but a story of young Cyrus, who escaped from his former difficulties and enjoyed good education, has been actual for him because of his own experience as a poor and friendless boy who thanks to his self-education earned the title "the learned". If so, this is the true actualization of the old text.

As a matter of fact, this elementary study of the rimur of King Cyrus, leaves out many things worth further investigation. I have not dealt with the variety of metres, the form of musical chanting, individual vocabulary or details in the metaphoric terms. There also remains to compare the history of Cyrus which the rimur-poets used with the many copies of the "History of Persian Kings". Great authorities in Nordic literature have not, so far as I know, discovered any sagas of Cyrus in the Scandinavian countries outside Iceland, although the history of ancient Persia of course has been a matter of study in schools and universities. One Icelandic author of a history of Persian kings in the 19th century quotes the Danish historian and playwright Ludvig Holberg¹⁸. However, I hope that my brief thesis will provoke some interest in further study. At any rate, the existence of a Cyrus-saga and Cyrusrimur in Iceland will show that Xenophon's words, which we quoted in the beginning, have proved to be prophetic, — as Cyrus the Great has been praised in song and story "among barbarians" in the far north for quite a few centuries.

¹⁸ IB 463, 8°, Persiskar konunga kronikur eftir Halldor Jakobsson.