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ein runder Knäuel, so rollt' es uns leicht aus den Händen

International Scandinavian
and Medieval Studies
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Paul Celan

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Preben Meulengracht Sørensen and Yvonne S. Bonnetain

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Vowel change in thirteenth-century Icelandic: A first-hand witness*

FABRIZIO D. RASCHELLÀ

In the first part of his grammatical-rhetorical treatise (currently, yet improperly, known as the ‘Third [Icelandic] Grammatical Treatise’)¹, precisely in the chapter on the attributes of the letter, the Icelandic thirteenth-century scholar and poet Óláfr Þórðarson includes a rather extensive comparison between the Latin and the runic-Norse alphabet. In discussing the combinations of letters denoting diphthongs in both languages, he makes the following statement:²

Á látínu er diptongus fyrir þrennar sakir fundinn, fyrir hljóðfegrð ok sundrgrein ok samansetning, en í norrænu fyrir tvennar sakir, fyrir grein ok hljóðfegrð. Fyrir greinar sakir er diptongus fundinn í norrænu sem í þessum nöfnum: *mær* ok *sær*, at greina þau frá fornöfnum *sér* ok *mér*, ok öðrum þílikum; **en fyrir hljóðfegrð³ er diptongus fundinn sem hér: *løkr*, *øgr*, þvíat fegra þykkir hljóða heldr en *lækr*, *ægr*.**

*(In Latin the diphthong is found for three reasons: euphony, distinction, and composition, but in Norse for two reasons: distinction and euphony. For reasons of distinction the diphthong is found, in Norse, in nouns like *mær* [‘maid’] and *sær* [‘sea’], in order to distinguish them from the pronouns *sér* [‘oneself’] and *mér* [‘me’] and other similar [words]; for [reasons of] euphony the diphthong is found [in words] like *løkr* [‘brook’] and *øgr* [‘awful’], because it seems to sound better than [when the same words are pronounced] *lækr* and *ægr*.)*

This passage, which at a first reading may appear of secondary importance in the context of Óláfr’s discussion – if not completely confusing –, offers, at a clo-

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¹ The work, handed down in three principal manuscripts, AM 748 I 4to, AM 242 fol., and AM 757 a 4to, was critically edited for the first time by Björn Magnússon Ólsen in 1884. A second critical edition by Finnur Jónsson followed in 1927, which, contrary to the former, shows a normalized spelling, and is therefore more recommendable for practical purposes. (Björn’s and Finnur’s editions will hereafter be referred to as BMÓ and FJ respectively). Previous editions are practically straight transcriptions of either AM 748 I 4to or AM 242 fol. A complete translation of the treatise into German (the first of its kind in a modern language) accompanied by an essential commentary was made by T. Krömmelbein in 1998. For a thorough description of the manuscript transmission of Óláfr’s treatise, as well of its editions and translations, see BMÓ, xlviii-lxv, and Raschellà 1983, 277-287.

² Cf. BMÓ, 49:48-55, and FJ, 31:3-11. The final sentence is here emphasized through the bold character because of its central importance for the following discussion.

³ AM 242 fol. (the only MS preserving this passage) has here ‘hliðs fegrð’ (i.e. *hljóðsfegrð*), but compare the other occurrences of this word above.

ser examination, a valuable clue concerning the diachronic phonology of Icelandic which allows for the verification of a phonetic phenomenon which can otherwise only be indirectly observed and often with uncertainty. More precisely, it contains, in its final part, an important first-hand witness of a particular development in the Icelandic vowel system at the time of writing of the treatise which can normally be inferred only from the observation of the medieval Icelandic scribal practice.

It would be interesting, as a preliminary step, to identify the source – in all likelihood Latin – from which Óláfr derives his tripartite classification of the reasons for existence of the diphthongs. Yet, however carefully I have investigated and asked colleagues more experienced than me in the study of Latin grammatical literature for information, I have not been able to find any source – not even in works chronologically closer to Óláfr – presenting an identical or similar pattern for the explanation of the occurrence of diphthongs. However, the relevant point in the present discussion is not so much the identification of a source but the classification of the diphthong in itself – which is, all things considered, intuitive enough. Let us therefore examine more closely what Óláfr has to say in this connection about the ‘diphthongs’ in the Norse or, more exactly, the Icelandic language of his time.

To understand the above passage better, we must first compare it to a preceding passage in the treatise, in which Óláfr, starting from a runic ‘diphthong’ contained in an exemplifying sentence (which I have elsewhere called “king Valdemar’s futhark-sentence”)⁴, briefly reports the definition of the ‘diphthong’ according to the Greek and Latin tradition⁵ and presents a list of both the Latin and the runic-Norse diphthongs. The passage is the following:⁶

Par næst stendr †, þat hljóðar fyrir tveim raddarstöfum, † ok †, ok kalla Girkir þann staf diptongon, þat er tvíhljóðr á norræna tungu, ok eru fjórir diptongi í látínustafrófi, en fimm í rúnum. Diptongus er samanlíming tveggja raddarstafa í einni samstöfu, þeirra er báðir halda afli sínu. Þessir eru límingarstafir í rúnum: † fyrir ae, † fyrir au, † fyrir ei, ok er sá diptongus ekki í látínu, †⁷ fyrir ey, †⁸ fyrir eo. Oe⁸ er hinn fjórði diptongus í látínu ok er hann ekki í rúnum.

⁴ Raschellà 1994, 684 ff.

⁵ See footnotes in BMÓ, 47 (reformulated in Krömmelbein 1998, 69), with references to Priscian’s *Institutiones grammaticae* and to grammatical works written after Óláfr’s treatise which probably depend on the same sources.

⁶ Cf. BMÓ, 47:28/48:37, and FJ, 30:1-9.

⁷ So FJ (more exactly: \mathfrak{z}). AM 748 I 4to has the symbol \mathfrak{z} (elsewhere denoting the vowel *e*, as for example in the two previous occurrences), crossed in its lower part by a roundish stroke (\curvearrowright), which is, in fact, the abbreviation mark belonging to the word ‘Sumir’ in the line below. Yet, it is probable that just this abbreviation mark has covered the pre-existing slanting strokes departing from the vertical stroke of \mathfrak{z} . On the other hand, it seems reasonable that the ligature denoting the diphthong *ey* was a combination of the runic symbols for *e* (\mathfrak{e} , \mathfrak{e}) and *y* (\mathfrak{y} , \mathfrak{y}) respectively. As for AM 242 fol., this MS has a lacuna in this place.

⁸ Both MSS have here the symbol *z*, i.e. the current abbreviation for *ok*, which clearly makes no sense in this context. BMÓ (48 n. 36) argues, quite reasonably indeed, that this reading originates from a common ancestor of the two MSS, which presumably had the wrong reading *oc* instead of the original’s *oe*. FJ (30:8 + n. 8) accepts BMÓ’s conjecture, though gratuitously modifying it into *æ*.

(Then there is † [æ], which sounds for two vowels, † [a] and † [e]; the Greeks call this letter *díphthongos*, which means 'double sound' in the Norse language. There are four diphthongi in the Latin alphabet, but five in the runes. Diphthongus is the conjunction⁹ of two vowels in one syllable, each of which retains its own value. These are joined letters in the runes: † for ae, † for au, † for ei (this diphthong is not found in Latin), † for ey, † for eo. Oe is the fourth diphthong in Latin and is not found in the runes.)

If we connect and compare Óláfr's statements in the two passages, it clearly appears that the term 'diphthong' (*diptongus* or, in Norse translation, *tvíhljóðr* 'double sound') is here referred, in accordance with the Latin grammatical tradition, to both the graphic structure and the underlying phonetic value of the letter combinations included under such label; which aspect in particular is at issue can only be inferred from the context. In other words, while the 'diphthong' always implies the GRAPHIC combination of two vowel symbols, it does not always correspond to a proper diphthong, i.e. to the sequence of two isosyllabic vowel phones, on the PHONETIC level; on the contrary, it may denote a monophthong, that is to say a simple vowel, sharing some phonetic features with the two vowels which form the diphthong on the graphic level. At any rate, as far as the Norse (i.e. runic, on one hand, and Icelandic, on the other) 'diphthongs' are concerned, there is no doubt that the graphic aspect largely prevails in Óláfr's analysis. Basically, he uses the term *diptongus* ~ *tvíhljóðr* with the meaning 'graphic unit composed of two letters denoting vowels', no matter whether the two letters are separated or linked together. Exactly the same meaning he seems to attribute to the term *límingarstafr*, which he employs soon afterwards in introducing the runic ligatures: in fact, only three of the five runic *límingarstafr* (or *diptongi*) listed by Óláfr – †, †, †, and † – denote proper diphthongs in the Norse language (/au/, /ei/, and /ey/, respectively)¹⁰, while the remaining two – † and † – represent monophthongs (/æ/ and /ø/ respectively)¹¹.

Let's now turn back to the initial passage, in which Óláfr enumerates and exemplifies (although limited to the Norse language) the different 'reasons d'être' of the *diptongus*. In Latin, he writes, the diphthong may be due to three reasons: euphony (*hljóðfegrð*), distinction (*sundrgrein*), and composition (*samansetning*), while in Norse only two of these causes may be found, namely 'distinction' and

⁹ Literally: 'liming, gluing together'.

¹⁰ The fact that the diphthong /ei/ is not represented by a ligature but by a digraph is due to practical graphic reasons (see Raschellà 1994, 685 n. 24).

¹¹ As is well-known, modern linguists use two technically different terms, i.e. DIPHTHONG and DIGRAPH, thus making a clear distinction between the phonetic and the graphic level. In order to avoid misunderstandings, we should therefore refer to Óláfr's *diptongi* with the term 'digraphs', both when they stand for real diphthongs and when they represent monophthongs. However, not even the term 'digraph' appears to be entirely adequate in the present context, for, as we have seen, Óláfr includes among the *diptongi* also the LIGATURES (runic and not); this is, in fact, the proper meaning of the expressions *samanlíming* and *límingarstafr*, which Óláfr uses introducing the definition of *diptongus*. (On the complicated terminological question about the notions of 'diphthong' and 'ligature' in the Old Icelandic grammatical literature, see Raschellà 1982, 118-119, and Micillo 1994, 131-138).

'euphony'. He then gives one example for each item (it will be noticed that in both examples the Norse *diptongi* are in fact LIGATURES and represent, from both a synchronic and a diachronic point of view, MONOPHTHONGS, i.e. phonetically simple vowels).

The meaning of the first example, illustrating what in terms of modern linguistics can be called DISTINCTIVE OR OPPOSITIVE FUNCTION, is clear: the *diptongus* (here represented by the ligature *æ*) may help to distinguish one word from another which has, in the same (graphic) context, a simple, i.e. uncompounded, vowel (here: *é*), as it just happens in the case of *mæ*r and *sæ*r if compared with *mér* and *sér* respectively. Here we are in the presence of the GRAPHEMIC opposition between <*æ*> and <*é*>, which corresponds, on the phonological level, to the opposition between the Old Norse vowel phonemes /*ǣ*/ and /*ē*/ in the minimal pairs /*mǣr*/ vs. /*mē*r/ and /*sǣr*/ vs. /*sē*r/¹². This statement of Óláfr's is not surprising at all: it simply ascertains the necessity to represent different phonemes in different ways, so that the distinction of meaning of the words in which they are contained is preserved. The same exigency had been emphasized and convincingly justified already a century before, in Iceland, resorting to the same demonstrative device, i.e. the 'commutation test', by the author of the 'First Grammatical Treatise'¹³.

Rather puzzling, yet of much greater significance for its linguistic implications, is the second example, with which Óláfr illustrates the case of a *diptongus* due to reasons of euphony. Here he literally states that in words like *løkr* and *øgr* we have the 'diphthong' *ø* (a variant writing of *æ* or *eo*) because this "seems to sound better" (*fegra þykkir hljóða*) than when the same words are pronounced with *æ*, i.e. *læk*r and *ægr* respectively. It is therefore not, as in the previous case, a question of contrast between two distinctive linguistic entities, such as – using an expression familiar to the medieval Icelandic grammarians – to 'change [the meaning of] the discourse' (*skipta málinu*), but a simple alternative, which, in the words of the author, assumes the form of a recommendation, of an 'esthetic' advice¹⁴. Put into terms

¹² We may add that it is perhaps not by chance that Óláfr chooses just these two phonemes as examples, which were, in the Old Norse vowel system, very close to each other and could therefore more easily be confused.

¹³ See, for example, Hreinn B. 1972, 210 ff. (in particular, the passage 85:12-27) and the corresponding discussion on pp. 74-75. As far as Latin is concerned, a similar relationship may be observed e.g. in the pair *aequus* / *equus* mentioned in Alcuin's treatise on orthography or *Orthographia Albini Magistri* (GL, VII, 295); yet nowhere in Latin grammatical literature is such a relationship said to imply a 'distinctive function' of the diphthongs – at least not explicitly.

¹⁴ This passage is explicitly referred to also by the author of the 'Fourth Grammatical Treatise' in illustrating the rhetorical figure of euphony (*euphonia*), where he observes: "Óláfr segir ok: euphonia verðr þar sem [úfagrir (?)] límingarstafir eru skiptir í þá stafi, sem fegra hljóða, sem í þersum nöfnum: lækr ok ægr, þvíat æ þykkir hvarvitna lýta mál, nema þar sem skynsemi má fyrir gjalda, at þau orð, sem þat stendr í, dreifaz af þeim orðum sem á stendr í" (cf. BMÓ, 133-134): 'Óláfr says also that euphony occurs when [unpleasant (?)] ligatures are changed into those letters that have a better sound, as in the following nouns: lækr, ægr; because æ seems to spoil the language everywhere, except where it may be ascertained that the words in which it occurs are derived from words containing an á.' As will be noticed, the author of the Fourth Grammatical Treatise does not limit himself to quoting Óláfr, but adds also a brief comment of his own (cf. further below). As a counter-check on his remark about *á* as the only admissible starting point for words containing an *æ*, we may point out that the two words adduced by Óláfr as examples of the 'euphonic' use of *ø* in place of *æ* can be traced back to the Proto-Norse forms */*lōki*-/ and */*ōgia*-/, both containing the phoneme */*ō*/ (cf. Blöndal 1989, 592 [s.v. *lækur* (1)] and 1214 [s.v. *ægur*]).

of structural phonology: this comparison involves not two PHONEMES but two SUBPHONEMIC VARIANTS, of such a kind as to imply a dialectal, social or – in this case more likely – generational differentiation¹⁵.

It should further be noticed that this assertion is focused on the PHONETIC aspect, since Óláfr explicitly refers, here, to ‘sound’ (*hljóða*), i.e. to the pronunciation, of these words – although, of course, the need of diversification on the phonetic level consequently implies also a different graphic notation of the two ‘competing’ phonemes. At any rate, in order for Óláfr’s reasoning to be strictly coherent, the element contrasted with the *diptongus* ϕ should not be a *diptongus* (i.e. a graphic symbol composed of two vowels) itself. Yet, in fact, it is. Where, then, lies the difference “for reasons of euphony” between the first and the second members in the pairs *lǫkr* / *lækr* and *øgr* / *ægr*? Certainly not in the graphic structure of their vocalic elements, for both are ligatures (ϕ being the result of the fusion of *o* + *e*,¹⁶ and *æ* the result of *a* + *e*), nor in the phonetic one, for both represent monophthongs (/ø/ and /æ/ respectively).

In order to understand the right meaning of this remark and, above all, in order to justify its presence in Óláfr’s treatise, we must briefly consider the situation of the Icelandic vowel system in the thirteenth century, that is to say at the time in which the treatise was written¹⁷. We will do this starting from the observations of the late Jón Helgason about the internal rhymes (*hendingar*) in some skaldic stanzas reported in the Fourth Grammatical Treatise¹⁸. In an article which appeared in 1970 in the Faroese periodical *Fróðskaparrit*, the distinguished Icelandic scholar convincingly demonstrated that some *hendingar* contained in these stanzas presuppose a stage of the Icelandic language in which the opposition between the vowel phonemes /ø/ and /æ/ was still operating, but was just at that time becoming more and more unstable:

... í öllum þessum atriðisorðum eru sömu sérhljóðin endurtekin; orðin leika öll annaðhvort á á-i og æ-i eða á ó-i og æ-i. ... Þá er eðlilegt að gera sér í hugarlund að

¹⁵ A quite different meaning is that given to the term *euphonia* in Latin grammatical writings, where it mostly applies to phonetic phenomena implying assimilation (e.g. *bs* > *ps* and *bt* > *pt*, as in *scripsi, scriptum*; *inr* > *irr*- as in *irrumpe*; etc.; cf. Priscian, *Inst.*, I, 58 and II, 9 [GL, II, 43 and 49]) or dissimilation (e.g. *aufero* < *abfero*; cf. Priscian, *Inst.*, I, 23 [GL, II, 18]); in other words, it generally refers, there, to anything that makes the pronunciation simpler, smoother and clearer, sometimes even in contrast with the logical rules (cf. the following definition in Augustine’s *Ars breuiata*: “euphonia, id est suavitas bene sonandi, admissa est ad latinum sermonem. ut aspera temperet; et ab arte et ratione recessum est ubi asperitas offendebat auditum” [GL, V, 517]). However, it is also imaginable that somewhere – for example in Óláfr’s hypothetical source – the same term might be used, among other things, to characterize the classical pronunciation of the Latin diphthongs *ae* ([ae]) and *oe* ([oe]) as more distinct and elegant than the late and medieval one ([e]).

¹⁶ Concerning the origin of the letter ϕ in Icelandic writing, see Hreinn B. 1965, 28-30. It is not unlikely that the original of Óláfr’s treatise had, in this place, a notation different from that occurring in AM 242 fol., a notation in which the two components of the ligature were more evident. This hypothesis is suggested by the introductory passage on the diphthongs as handed down in the two manuscripts, where the runic ligature ϕ is now rendered with the Latin sequence *eo* (AM 748 I 4to), now ‘glossed’ as “*e ok o*” (AM 242 fol.); cf. BMÓ, 48:35 + n., and FJ, 30:8 + n.

¹⁷ On the basis of historical evidence, the work may be dated to the decade between 1242 and 1252 (cf. BMÓ, xxxv-xxxvii, and Raschellà 1994, 313).

¹⁸ Cf. BMÓ, 134. The stanzas occur in the same paragraph on ‘euphony’ containing the reference to Óláfr’s passage (see n. 14 above).

hér sé verið að víkja að atburðum sem gerðust á 13du öld, ... Úr vísnum skáldsins þykist ég lesa þetta: Hann er uppi á þeim tímum þegar æ er að þoka, en æ kemur þess í stað. Líklega er hann hniginn á efra aldur; ...¹⁹

As a matter of fact, /ø/ was gradually absorbed by /æ/ and the opposition between them disappeared from the Icelandic vowel system in the course of the thirteenth century. Jón Helgason observes further that the author of the stanzas seems to warn his audience that the loss of this distinction may endanger the consciousness of the linguistic relationship existing among certain words:

... hann vill brýna fyrir mönnum að um leið og æ hverfi, óskýrist ætterni orðanna. ... það eru málsþjöll að láta muninn á þessum hljóðum tynast.²⁰

In support of what Jón argued on the sole basis of the (mainly etymological) evidence provided by these skaldic stanzas in the Fourth Grammatical Treatise there is quite an extensive literature on the development of the Icelandic vowel system from its remotest, i.e. common West Scandinavian, origins to modern times. Among other studies, those carried out by Hreinn Benediktsson deserve particular mention; all of them are based, as far as the medieval period is concerned, upon a strict and detailed analysis of the manuscript evidence²¹. These studies unanimously confirm that the merger of Icelandic /ø/ and /æ/ into /æ/, which began in the first decades of the thirteenth century, had spread out and reached a relative stability all over the country (with possible rare exceptions) around the middle of the same century²². Hints at this typically Icelandic phenomenon and its presumable chronology can also be found in traditional grammars and handbooks of Old Norse²³.

A characteristic of the period in which both pronunciations coexisted (at least in speakers belonging to different age groups) was, besides the ever growing tendency to generalize æ-spellings for both /æ/ and /ø/, the frequent occurrence of 'inverse spellings', i.e. the use of typical ø-spellings to denote etymological /æ/. Inverse spellings characterize in particular the transitional stage (ca. 1225-1275), in which there was a predominant tendency to retain, together with the old pronunciation, the traditional spellings (as Óláfr professes and the author of the Fourth Grammatical Treatise reaffirms) or even to introduce improperly archaic, i.e. hypercorrect forms²⁴.

Just at the centre of this period we find Óláfr's work,²⁵ which, besides confirming the data deriving from manuscript evidence, offers an immediate witness – the only one throughout the Middle Ages – of a significant change in the Icelandic vowel system at the very moment of its manifestation.

¹⁹ Jón H. 1970, 208.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The following list includes only those of Hreinn's investigations that are most relevant to the present subject: Hreinn B. 1959, particularly pp. 295-298; Hreinn B. 1962, particularly col. 488; Hreinn B. 1965 (reflecting a paleographic-orthographic perspective), particularly pp. 62-70.

²² Hreinn B. 1959, 297; 1962, 488; 1965, 62 and 67; cf. Finnur J. 1919, 314.

²³ Just one authoritative example will suffice: Noreen 1923, 107 (§ 120).

²⁴ Cf. Hreinn B. 1965, 68-69.

²⁵ Cf. n. 17 above.

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