

**SCANDINAVIAN HEROIC LEGEND AND FANTASY
FICTION: POUL ANDERSON – HROLF KRAKI'S SAGA**

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ABSTRACT

Hrolf Kraki's Saga (1974), an American fantasy fiction novel, represents the reception of medieval Scandinavian literature in popular culture, which has played a rather significant role since the 1970s. Poul Anderson treats the medieval sources pertaining to the Danish legendary king with exceptional fidelity and reconstructs the historical settings with almost scholarly care, creating a world more pagan than in his main source, the Icelandic *Hrólfs saga kraka*. Written at the height of the Cold War, Anderson's Iron Age dystopia is a praise of stability and order in the midst of a civilisation under perpetual threat.

Keywords

medieval Scandinavian literature, *Hrólfs saga kraka*, literary reception, medievalism, fantasy fiction, Poul Anderson

In recent years medieval Scandinavian scholarship is becoming increasingly occupied with the transmission and reception of medieval sources in post-medieval times, looking into the ways these sources were interpreted and represented in new contexts, be it scholarly reception, high or popular culture.¹ Poul Anderson (1926–2001), an American writer with an education in physics, is mainly known as an author of science fiction, but perhaps because of his Danish extraction, Nordic legend and mythology also captured his attention, and Anderson wrote several novels based on Nordic matter. Anderson was a prolific author; he published over a hundred titles and won numerous awards.

Hrolf Kraki's Saga was published in the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series in 1973. It represents a reconstruction of the legend of Hrólfr Kraki, enriched with a great deal of realistic detail adjusted to the taste of the contemporary reader. Hrólfr Kraki, a Danish prehistoric king, appears in numerous medieval Icelandic, Danish and English sources, the most comprehensive of which is the Icelandic mythical-heroic saga *Hrólfs saga kraka*

¹ To name some – a recent collection of articles on contemporary editorial approaches and textual variation in manuscript transmission is Quinn. Swedish scholarly reception of saga literature is treated in Wallethe. The cultural and political significance of the translations of *Njáls saga* has been investigated by Jón Karl Helgason. An article collection on mainly literary reception of Old Norse literature in Scandinavia and Britain has been edited by Wawn. A thesis on the post-medieval transmission and reception of *Hrólfs saga kraka* by Lansing should also be mentioned.

from around the 15th century. The fantasy *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* is popular entertainment literature aimed at a wide audience, as the inexpensive paperback octavo first edition equipped with a flamboyant eye-catching cover illustration suggests. The novel won the British Fantasy Award in 1974, a year after its first publication. It was reprinted in 1977 and 1988², also in paperback, and has been translated into German, French and Spanish.

The history of literature containing fantastic elements is long, and some critics even choose to trace its roots to the recording of the Homeric epics in 8th century B.C.³ Although its main predecessor is 19th-century Romanticism, fantasy as the mass-market paperback genre as we know it first entered the consciousness on the part of publishers, critics and the reading public in the mid-1960s with the American “pirate” release of *The Lord of the Rings*.⁴ An official Ballantine version was released the same year. Ian and Betty Ballantine had been publishers of science-fiction, but realized the potential of fantasy after the success of the *Lord of the Rings*. In 1969 they launched the Ballantine Adult Fantasy series, which contributed to the establishment of the genre. They printed sixty-five fantasy titles in the following five years.⁵ Content-based definitions of the fantasy genre are as many as the authors who have dealt with the subject. A standard working definition is given below.

Fantasy has many sub-genres, and *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* belongs to the so-called Nordic fantasy, the characteristic feature of which is that it is based on Northern European myths and legends.⁶ These were revitalized by German romanticism and became fashionable among other European nations. The 19th-century proponents of historical Nordic fantasy are Baron de la Motte Fouqué, a German Romanticist who inspired Wagner by his trilogy *Der Held des Nordens* (1810). William Morris was smitten by the “Northern thing”, and he produced saga translations in addition to original prose. S. Baring-Gould wrote *Grettir the Outlaw* in 1889 and H. Rider Haggard followed with his *Eric Brighteyes* in 1891. E. R. Edson published *The Worm Ouroboros* in 1922. Closer to Anderson's time, in the 1940s, L. Sprague DeCamp and Fletcher Pratt lightheartedly explored the world of the Aesir. Poul Anderson's *The Broken Sword*, his first Nordic fantasy, was published in 1954, the same year as Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring* – the first part of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Among Anderson's other novels based on Nordic matter are *War of the Gods* (1997), *The Golden Horn* (1980), *The Road of the Sea Horse* (1980) and *The Sign of the Raven* (1980), these last three all written in collaboration with Karen Anderson. Numerous later fantasy authors have explored Nordic matter, e.g. J. James, K. Blumer, Stephan Grundy, Nigel Frith, Dennis McKiernan, Mickey Zucker Reicher and Elizabeth Boyer.

Lin Carter, the Ballantine Editorial Consultant and an author of fantasy in his own right, states in his preface to *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* that the idea for the book arose during work on *The Broken Sword* and that it was originally supposed to be a collection of saga translations with the main focus on Hrólfr Kraki. Afterwards Anderson suggested to

² Benson and Stephensen-Payne 48.

³ See Stableford xiii.

⁴ Pringle 16.

⁵ Mendlesohn and James 76.

⁶ Clute and Grant 691–92.

the publisher that he would rather synthesize a new edition of this heroic literature. Why the novel appeared exactly when it did is not certain, but it is quite likely that Anderson (or the publisher) was following the fantasy-boom, when many science-fiction authors turned towards fantasy in the 1970s.⁷ The influence of Tolkien was considerable and generated new approaches to history in fantasy. Although the tendency is exemplified by medieval fantasy in the following quotation, it applies to Anderson's Nordic fantasy as well:

One of the consequences of Tolkien's work was to turn people's attention to real history and to real legend, and we begin to see fantasy writers consciously exploiting this material in a number of different ways. The two main streams can be divided into an attempt to construct a "real" Middle Ages and to write "real" stories behind "the myth".

(Mendlesohn and James 97)

Source Materials

Although it is popular fiction, Poul Anderson put a fair amount of research into his novel and gathered the available legendary material spread throughout several medieval Icelandic, Danish and English sources. From these contradictory and sometimes sketchy and fragmentary narratives he recreated the great story of Hrólfr Kraki, purified of the "errors" of transmission. His work therefore has some common traits with the scholarly *Sagengeschichte*⁸ which was practised mainly in the first half of the 20th century: "I have long wanted to make *a* reconstruction, if not *the* reconstruction: put together the best parts, fill in the gaps, use the old words where they seem right and otherwise find new ones" (Anderson, *Hrólfr Kraki's Saga* xix).

In the "learned" preface, the author introduces Hrólfr Kraki as a historical king of either Danish Jutland or Swedish Götaland living shortly after 520 AD. Thereafter he lists the various sources that document that the legend was known in the Scandinavian area from the 11th to the 17th century and compares the importance of this vast oral and literary Northern tradition to that of the Arthurian legends in England. The oral tradition would, according to Anderson, have reached its peak in the 10th century.⁹ Based on these facts, Anderson creates a historical setting for his tale in the distant time of the *Völkerwanderung* and introduces a frame narrative – a female storyteller at the 10th-century English court of King Æthelstan. There are deliberate anachronisms in the story, however, mainly belonging to the Viking age, which are explained by the distance between the time of narration and the narrated events. In the late Icelandic legendary saga of Hrólfr Kraki, which is the main source of the legend and also the main source of Anderson's novel, the cultural and ideological settings are also multi-layered and reflect the vast time-span in which the narrative circulated, be it in oral tradition or other written versions.

Hrólfs saga kraka is an Icelandic *fornaldarsaga*, also legendary or mythical-heroic saga, the existence of which was known in the mid-15th century, but it may have been com-

⁷ Mendlesohn and James 91.

⁸ See, e.g., Schneider.

⁹ Anderson, *Hrólfr Kraki's Saga* xvii–xx.

posed earlier. Ever since the coinage of the term by a 19th century Danish philologist,¹⁰ *fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* have been defined by the geography and time of action, which is Scandinavia at the time not covered by historical sources, i.e., before the settlement of Iceland.¹¹ *Hrólfs saga kraka* belongs to a sub-group – the heroic sagas, which are based on ancient heroic legends transmitted originally mainly through poetry. These heroic biographies have a tragic end, Norse gods often interfere with the lives of the heroes, there are plenty supernatural elements and also some stock-characters and motifs.

Hrólfs saga kraka does not only narrate the story of King Hrólfr Kraki himself, but also his forefathers of the Skjöldung dynasty and his foremost warriors. Hrólfr's father Helgi is involved in three sensational relationships that include rape, incest and consort with an elf-woman. The offspring of these liaisons are Hrólfr, a legitimate son and the representative of all royal virtues, and his semi-supernatural half-sister, who personifies the elf-woman's curse of Helgi's kin and causes Hrólfr's downfall. The high point of the life of King Hrólfr is his outwitting of the Swedish wizard and pagan sacrificer, King Aðils of Uppsala, the notorious centre of paganism. This section is oozing with sorcery and supernatural beings of various kinds, while Hrólfr and his retinue are depicted as courteous knights. The culmination of the saga is Hrólfr's final battle against Skuld, who attacks and defeats him through magic when he has lost favour of the god Odin. Hrólfr dies a heroic death accompanied by his young and devoted warriors.

Hrólfs saga kraka, the basis of Anderson's story, would in the terminology of fantasy be Anderson's "taproot text". The narrative corresponds roughly to the saga, and most characters and events appear in the same order. At several places Anderson uses almost direct quotations from the saga around which he builds up the remaining bulk consisting of "improved" narrative and sections from other sources.

Anderson may have used a popular 19th-century Danish translation of the saga by Frederik Winkel Horn. This is evident from the interpretation of a lexically difficult place in the text. The saga tells that the brothers Hroar and Helgi always wore cloaks to disguise themselves and thus evaded their bloodthirsty uncle. Because they never showed their faces or bodies, the saga tells us, people assumed that they had "geitir" and ridiculed them. All the English, German and Danish translations available in print by the time Anderson published his novel,¹² apart from Horn (Horn 229), translate the word "geitir" as "scabies". Horn seems to have consulted Fritzner's dictionary, however, which translates "geit" among other things as *mamma*, i.e. breast, citing the passage from *Hrólfs saga kraka* for illustration. Anderson chose the same interpretation as Horn and Fritzner. The following quotations are from the Icelandic original, the dictionary entry "geit" in Fritzner, an English translation of the passage in the saga and the corresponding passage in Anderson:

Pat segja sumir menn, at þeir muni með geitum vera fæddir, ok dára þá; þeir váru jafnan í kuflum ok tóku aldrei ofan kufshöttuna, ok ætluðu þat margir, at þeir mundu hafa geitir; (Finnur Jónsson 9)

¹⁰ Rafn in his three-volume edition *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda*.

¹¹ Several attempts have been made recently to redefine the corpus; for an overview see Tulinius 447–49.

¹² See Rafn, Horn, Herrmann, Mills and Gordon, and Jones.

geit

2) Diebryst, lat. mamma (som i Folkesproget: Land- stads n. Folkeviser S. 467¹²; Aasen 214 a²² fg; jvf sv. get Rietz 192 a¹⁰); þat segja sumir menn, at þeir muni með geitum vera fœddir, ok dára þá, því þeir vóru jafnan í kuflum ok tóku aldri ofan kuflshöttuna, ok ætluðu þat margir, at þeir mundu hafa geitr Fld. I, 9^{3. 6}.

(Fritzner and Komitéen for Gammelnorsk 574)

Some people said that they were born with scabies [or female breasts] and ridiculed them, because they always wore cloaks and never took the hood down, and many people thought that they had scabies [or female breasts].

(my translation)

To this same end, they always wore their coverings when in sight of anyone else.

A number of carls teased them, saying they must have misformed skulls or breasts like women.

(Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* 25)

Anderson does not state in his preface which edition or translation he used, and his knowledge of Old Norse would seem surprising given the fact that his formal education consisted of a BA in physics. Nevertheless, he had published translations of “heroic verse” from Old Norse in several magazines before he started writing the novel under discussion here.¹³ Also, as mentioned, Lin Carter states in his preface to the novel that the original idea was to present translations of key scenes from the sagas,¹⁴ and since the Danish 1876 translation may not have been accessible to Anderson, it may just be that he read the original text with the help of the Fritzner dictionary.

The material that Anderson uses for his text is quite broad and encompasses both the medieval sources of the legend of King Hrólfr and related material,¹⁵ but also some of the modern reworkings. While the Icelandic *Hrólfs saga kraka* starts *in medias res* with the Skjöldung brothers Hálfdan and Fróði, Anderson opens the text with a legendary history and geography of the Danish Skjöldungs and the Swedish Ynglings. The foundation myths about the forming of Denmark and the descent of Skjöldungs from Skjöld and Odin¹⁶ are taken from the Icelandic historian and poet Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfagynning*, *Ynglingasaga* (around 1220) and also from the Old English poem *Béowulf*. *The Song of Grotti* (*Gróttasöngur*), one of the lays of the *Poetic Edda*, is added in full, presumably in Poul Anderson's own translation.¹⁷ In the combinatory genealogy that he places in front of the text,¹⁸ the author adds two generations of Skjöldungs according to *Gesta Danorum* (completed around 1210–20) by the Danish chronicler Saxo Grammaticus, and starts the lineage from Frothi the peace god. He further expands the genealogy with persons and whole branches based on *Béowulf*.

¹³ Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* xiv.

¹⁴ Carter xiv.

¹⁵ For an overview of the medieval narratives pertaining to Hrólfr Kraki and their literary comparison see Vachunová.

¹⁶ Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* 5–7.

¹⁷ Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* 8–10.

¹⁸ Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* xv.

Anderson not only draws on the Old English tradition in constructing a genealogy, but he adds whole narratives taken from there. The legendary character of the Swedish warrior Béowulf from the Old English poem of the same name is by some identified with the Icelandic Böðvar Bjarki on the basis of the similarity of names and the motif of the slaying of the monster, while others point out that the late folk-tale elements in the saga prove no relation to *Béowulf*.¹⁹ According to the poem, Béowulf visits the court of the Danish king Hrothgar to help him get rid of a ravaging monster; the Old English Hrothgar is interpreted as the equivalent of the Old Icelandic Hróar. In *Hrólfs saga kraka* Böðvar Bjarki slays a winged monster that has been ravaging at the court of King Hrólfur. Anderson has chosen to introduce the story of Béowulf/Bjovulf in connection with the character of Hróar as in *Béowulf* separately²⁰ and at the same time to keep another monster slaying by Böðvar Bjarki at the court of King Hrólfur²¹ as in *Hrólfs saga kraka*. Anderson interprets the *Béowulf* monster as a descendant of a “dark” Skjöldung ancestor who had been cast out of society, and thus gives it a psychological explanation.²²

One example of Anderson’s use of the East Norse sources is his addition of the story of Starkad,²³ whom he associates with King Frothi and corresponding characters in his *Béowulf*-based genealogy. The entire narrative is taken from *Gesta Danorum*, however, where Starkad first appears several generations later, in Book VI, and is associated with another king named Frothi.

A conspicuous borrowing from the poem *Helge* (1814) by the Danish Romanticist Adam Oehlenschläger is the depiction of the elf-woman, who in the Icelandic saga seduces Helgi and lays curse on his kin, while in Oehlenschläger’s version the supernatural female is a seductive mermaid. Anderson also associates the elf-woman with the perilous sea and depicts her as a daughter of the Old Norse water-deity Rán: “Do as I say, and it may be we can still halt the bad luck you have sown in my womb. Our child must be born undersea; for mine is the blood of Rán” (Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki’s Saga* 90).

Heroic Legend and Fantasy Fiction

Although Anderson collected his stories from various sources, he gave them a unified literary shape. The narrative mode in the Icelandic source text is that of a third-person objective narrator, who merely describes the characters’ actions. The motives for their actions are left unstated, and lyrical descriptions of characters’ feelings are almost non-existent. Any evaluation of the actions is communicated as the opinion of the general public – “people said” – or of other characters, but outspoken moralizing is on the whole rather rare. Although supernatural elements are predominant in Anderson’s novel, the style and narrative technique are realistic. The characters and the world they live in are intended to be credible and life-like. The omniscient third-person narrator describes the

¹⁹ See Chambers. Others point out late folk-tale elements in the saga that can by no means be related; see, e.g., Caldwell 275.

²⁰ Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki’s Saga* 65.

²¹ Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki’s Saga* 177.

²² Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki’s Saga* 65.

²³ Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki’s Saga* 110–11.

characters' motives and feelings by referring to their actions and appearances and the reactions of others, or by describing them directly, often supported by lyrical images of nature. The narrative technique is therefore derived in part from the saga, but Anderson "reads" the silences, filling in a great deal of information which is perhaps implicit but absent from the original text and which he has had therefore to make up.

An example of a mental state hinted at in the saga and expanded by the author is Helgi's grief after he loses Yrsa and begets a child with the elf-woman. Helgi's feelings are described in one sentence in the saga: "Þat er sagt eithvert sinn, at Helgi konungr býr ferð sína úr landi ok ætlar svá at hyggja af harmi sínum" (Finnur Jónsson 32) (It is told that Helgi prepared for a journey abroad to soothe his sorrow. – my translation). Anderson, nevertheless, throws Helgi into an outright depression, which he depicts in the following way: "Then grief came back upon him. He kept from his former wildness and drunkenness, dwelt in Leidhra and steered things well. But he spoke hardly more than he must, never laughed, and went for many long rides alone or sat staring hour after hour into the fire." (Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* 92) The description of Helgi's emotional state is developed over the following four pages, where his sadness contrasts with the warmth and growth of spring: "That was a mild and early year. Hawthorns were white across the land, roads dry and heaven full of songbirds, when the kings rode forth from the temple just behind Frey's wagon." (Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* 92)

Most of the novel is in prose, but, as mentioned, there are some passages of verse, which are both translations of verses present in the saga or taken from elsewhere. The poetry is doubtless included to give the text an elevated and authentic air. The same can be said of the style of the language, which tends towards the archaic in the use of inverted word order and slightly archaic expressions, as in: "In Leidhra on Zealand dwelt King Halfdan and his queen Sigridh." (Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* 12) The use of expressions existing in Old English or Old Norse serves the same purpose, as in the following example: "Its stockade loomed above them, *swart* against a *sallow* heaven, as they climbed from the river road." (Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* 98, my italics)

As has been mentioned, Anderson attempts to create a credible historical setting for his novel, where most supernatural appearances are related to religious practice. As an aid to the reader unfamiliar with the culture and customs of the Scandinavian Viking (or pre-Viking) age, the author introduces extensive descriptions of interiors and rites, as in this description of the sacrifices at the Uppsala temple:

At holy times, most of the shire could crowd within. Then the foremost men slaughtered horses, caught the blood in bowls, sprinkled it off willow twigs onto the folk; in giant kettles seethed the meat, of which all partook. Otherwise women tended the temple, cleaned it, washed the gods in water from a holy spring. But in the shaw both men and beasts were hanged up, speared and left for the ravens. Thither Adhils was wont to go by himself, to make offerings and wizardries.

(Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* 98–99)

Anderson's construction of a fantasy world with a certain level of historical authenticity expands to the character's world-view. Pagan religion is an inherent part of their mindset, and references to Old Norse mythology are frequent in direct speech, for ex-

ample in the scene of King Helgi's death, where the last words of the king are an allusion to Ragnarök, as described in the Eddic poem *Völuspá*: "Men heard Helgi croak, 'Garm breaks loose. He has swallowed the moon –' He fell, and the river bore seaward what little was left of his blood." (Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* 107)

The *terminus technicus* for the above-mentioned strategy of creating a realistic fantasy world is "rationalized fantasy", as defined in Stableford's *Historical Dictionary of Fantasy Literature*:

A fourth meaning often encountered in reviews and commentaries is equivalent to the description of "de-supernaturalized fantasy" used in these pages; it refers to historical fictions that focus intently on the substance of myth and legend, employing viewpoint characters who take belief in magic and the supernatural for granted but refrain from featuring any occurrences that a rationalist reader would construe as magical or supernatural.

(Stableford 340)

The mythological setting of the story is what qualifies it as fantasy in the first place. The Clute-Grant encyclopaedia, which is the standard work on the genre, gives the following definition of fantasy, with some extra explanations and reservations: "A fantasy text is a self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it; when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though stories set there may be possible in its terms." (Clute and Grant 338)

Anderson's "otherworld" is constructed upon supernatural elements present in his source texts combined with explanatory facts supplied by historians of religion. It is the presence of pagan beliefs, cult and magic that makes the world impossible to us, even though it may to some extent reflect the beliefs and practices of Nordic peoples in a particular historical time. Allusions to mythology are overused in the novel and, of the original sources, they can only be compared to skaldic poetry in frequency. It is obvious that such overuse of mythology actually does not contribute to the historical authentication of the characters. Nevertheless, Anderson admits that portraying the value system of the time is a difficult task:

A greater hazard lies in the very spirit of the saga. Here is no *Lord of the Rings*, work of a civilized, Christian author [...] Hrolf Kraki lived in the midnight of the Dark Ages. [...] Love, loyalty, honesty beyond the most niggling technicalities, were only for one's kindred, chieftain, and closest friends. The rest of mankind were foemen or prey [...] Adam Oehlenschläger, writing in the Romantic era, could sentimentalize Helgi, Hroar and Hrolf. I would not.

(Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki's Saga* xix–xx)

From this it might appear that Anderson reads his main source, the late-medieval Icelandic *Hrólfs saga kraka*, as a true portrayal of a 6th-century "spirit." It is true that the Christian perspective is less openly articulated in the saga than in other adaptations of the matter, be it the 12th-century Saxo Grammaticus or the 19th-century Oehlenschläger. Even so, there is a Christian epilogue in the saga, in which the author criticizes the characters for being ignorant of the Lord, the depiction of Hrólfur and his retinue is in places modelled on Christian chivalric literature, and magic as well as the god Odin is portrayed as evil. Magic is always associated with negative characters in the saga, other than in mild forms as a means of self-

defence for Vífill and Böðvar Bjarki. Hrólfr is said never to have made sacrifices and to have believed in “mátt sinn og megin” (his own might and power) (Finnur Jónsson 96), and finally he condemns Odin.²⁴ Anderson makes the story even more “pagan” than in the Icelandic source by setting it in the “midnight of the Dark Ages”, as he includes descriptions of cultic practices in which all the characters are assumed to have been practitioners at some stage. The negative characters are associated with cultic practices which include human offering. In the spirit of the saga, whether Anderson recognizes it as Christian or not, he makes Hrólfr criticize human sacrifices and turn away from pagan religion altogether:

One thing that had Hrolf Kraki busy for a while was that he stopped making offerings of his own: “Odin has become our foe”, he said. “Besides, I never did like the hanging and drowning of helpless men, and always gave only beasts. As for those, I can’t see that the slaughters which Adhils held were of much use to him.”

(Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki’s Saga* 229)

Even though Anderson distances himself from Oehenschläger’s Christian and sentimentalizing take on the matter, he does borrow some features from Oehenschläger’s poem *Helge*, based on *Helga þáttur of Hrólfs saga kraka*. Anderson’s Hroar is modelled on Oehenschläger’s exemplary Roe, who represents the constructive element of law and order. Hroar acts as a peacemaker and says it is better to create stability and promote development and education rather than waste efforts on damaging war:

May not a fame better and longer-lived come from building the land? We’ve worked for many lifetimes – nailing down peace within and without this kingdom, clearing fields, raising houses, launching ships for fishery and trade, making good laws and seeing that they’re kept, bringing in outland art...

(Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki’s Saga* 59)

This is one of the few ideological twists imposed by Anderson on the original material. In the character of Hroar he seems to be promoting the positive and constructive powers of modern civilization, which contrast with the “barbarian” chaos of the Dark Ages. The theme of law and order is present in other works by Anderson, and is, according to Sandra Miesel, a transformation of the law of thermodynamics – entropy:

Anderson translates thermodynamics into metaphysics for his fantasies. Here, the physical equations relating to order and entropy are replaced by a mystical struggle between the principles of Law (order) and Chaos (disorder). But Law in Anderson’s universe is order in the life-building sense of the term.

(Miesel 7)

However inventive Miesel’s theory may sound, it can be argued that the theme of law versus chaos is present not only in Oehenschläger, but also in mythological narratives from around the world. Anderson’s interest in the study of myths and legends, particularly the Nordic ones, was extensive, as is documented not only by his preface to *Hrolf Kraki’s Saga*, but also by the afterword to *War of the Gods*, a story of Hadding.²⁵

²⁴ Finnur Jónsson 93.

²⁵ Anderson, *War of the Gods* 299–304.

At the height of the Cold War, the author was aware of the fragility of the political and social order and, perhaps, wanted to point out the benefits of stability and security by presenting a frightening image of previous stages in the evolution of Western society: “If nothing else, we today need a reminder that we must never take civilization for granted.” (Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki’s Saga* xx)

Although Anderson has put this message into the novel, his overall take on the subject is not ideologizing. Rather, his main concern is to preserve the original message of the material and merely to make it understandable and entertaining enough for a contemporary reader. The values of pre-Christian Scandinavia expressed in the saga, such as fidelity of the members of the *comitatus* to their chieftain, respected qualities in a leader such as prowess, generosity and the just resolution of conflicts, a strong family identity and obligations to family members remain the dominant values in Anderson’s novel. The tragic nature of his “taproot text” and the author’s faithful adherence to it makes the story a somewhat atypical fantasy. According to Clute and Grant, “Tragic fantasy exists, but is uncommon” (Clute and Grant 339).

Anderson does shift proportions between the characters, adding a little here and there, but their basic characteristics as depicted in the saga are preserved. Many extra characters are introduced or given names in order to create a fuller narrative. There are far more romantic involvements and descriptions of such feelings than in the saga. For example the love which Anderson suggests there was between queen Yrsa and the champion Svipdag is not to be found in the saga. Yrsa is clearly moved by the fact that Svipdag is leaving the court: “The distaff fell from her hands. She reached out. ‘Oh, why must you go?’” (Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki’s Saga* 135) The attraction of one of King Hring’s messengers, called Ivar in the novel, to the future queen Hvit is similarly absent in the saga: “And surely she was fair; he could lie awake lusting for her.” (Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki’s Saga* 147)

Some of Anderson’s female characters also seem to represent gender issues and to speak for a reassessment of gender roles, if not for equal rights of the sexes. Skuld, for example, not only desires the political power her brother Hrólfur has, but also his masculine lifestyle, as opposed to the dreary female role: “‘A wife!’ She fled. ‘To cook, brew, wash, sweep, oversee and wait on a pack of drunken oafs – to be swived whenever it pleases that one of them who calls me his, and each year set my life at stake, in blood and anguish, to farrow – No!’” (Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki’s Saga* 126) And similarly, in another speech of Skuld:

You dwell in great halls, you make merry with friends and lemans, you fare across lands and seas, you meet new men and hear new tales, skalds chant your praises, you play draughts across whole kingdoms with men for pieces, and when you’re dead they’ll remember you, you won’t rot forgotten ... Do *you* think your father’s daughter, born undersea to an elven woman, will not seek for the same?

(Anderson, *Hrolf Kraki’s Saga* 126)

It is only Olof who has masculine traits in the saga, and Anderson develops this theme and transfers it to Skuld as well. One must be careful, though, to call him an active supporter of women’s rights, since Skuld is depicted as a little anomalous because of her partly supernatural origin and becomes the greatest evil of the story, King Hrólf’s main opponent.

Anderson's novel is an example of how medieval legendary Nordic material continued its life in the 20th century, as authors of fantasy took up the heritage of 19th-century Romanticism which brought renewed interest in Old Norse matters. Myths and legends became fashionable, as did the Arthurian cycle and things medieval in general. Indeed, Anderson not only turned to the Nordic matter but also borrowed from the Danish Romanticist Oehlenschläger, who had previously dealt with the same subject.

The figure of J. R. R. Tolkien was decisive for the modern genre of fantasy. Tolkien influenced Anderson in several ways. He contributed to the boom of fantasy literature in the U.S., which probably made it possible for Anderson, who was mainly an author of science-fiction, to publish his fantasy book at Ballantine, and he may also have inspired Anderson to devote an almost scholarly attention to his source material. Unlike Tolkien, who "transfigured" his "taproot texts," Anderson "recycled" in a manner of more or less straightforward retelling. Anderson remained more faithful to his original material than any of his predecessors and he treated it with almost scholarly care. He re-created the historical setting to the extent that his version became more pagan and brutal than any of the other existing ones. Anderson's novel may be called the ultimate "summa" of the existing versions of the story, and he did not hesitate to borrow from any of them.

The reason Anderson remained so faithful to his sources may be that he had a particular fondness and respect for the material, which belonged to the nation of his own ancestry. He might also have been affected by the heroic morality of the source. But first and foremost, he wanted to distance himself from Tolkien and others who invested their sources with a Christian point of view. Anderson's Iron Age dystopia, written as it was at the height of the Cold War, presents a frightening image of what the shaky Western civilisation could once again become.

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SKANDINÁVSKÉ HRDINSKÉ POVĚSTI A ŽÁNŘ FANTASY POUL ANDERSON – HROLF KRAKI'S SAGA

Résumé

Hrolf Kraki's Saga (*Sága o Hrólfu krakim*, 1974), americký román žánru fantasy, představuje recepci středověké severské literatury v populární kultuře, která je od 70. let minulého století vcelku rozšířená. Poul Anderson přetváří středověké prameny týkající se bájného dánského krále Hrólfů krakiho s neobvykolou věrností a rekonstruuje historické zasazení s téměř badatelskou precizností, takže vytváří prostředí více pohanské, než je samotný jeho hlavní pramen, islandská *Hrólf's saga kraka* (*Sága o Hrólfu krakim*, přibl. 15. stol.). Andersonova dystopie doby bronzové psaná v době vrcholící studené války je chválou stability a řádu uprostřed civilizace vystavené stálému ohrožení.