

*TROIA REDUX: A MEDIEVAL TRADITION, AN OLD  
NORSE MYSTERY*

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Of all the heroic literature of the Middle Ages, no story is more widespread and celebrated than the story of Troy. Though the chief source of the medieval Troy legends, the brief Latin prose account *De excidio Troiae* of Dares Phrygius,<sup>1</sup> is itself disappointingly flat—a bare-bones outline of the events of the Trojan War—the medieval writers who adapted it succeeded admirably in fleshing out this skeleton, both with additional classical sources such as Vergil and Ovid and with imaginative embellishments drawn from medieval literary traditions native to the medieval adapters.<sup>2</sup> The results varied with each cultural matrix in which the Troy story was implanted, across the length and breadth of Europe; the French version of the twelfth century, *Le Roman de Troie*, is probably the best known,<sup>3</sup> but virtually every other country of medieval Europe, from Bulgaria in the east to Ireland in the west, produced its own retelling. In these circumstances, it is no wonder that even a land as remote as Iceland should have reworkings of the Troy legends cast into its own native form of narrative, the saga. The same process was also applied by medieval Scandinavian writers to other foreign story material, resulting in Old Norse sagas of Alexander the Great, Charlemagne, King Arthur *et al.*, in addition to countless sagas based on Scandinavian life and traditional Scandinavian heroes. But of the foreign-based sagas, that of Troy seems to have been of special interest to medieval Icelanders, to judge by the large number of distinct redactions still extant—three—of *Trójumanna saga* (i.e., "the saga of the Troy-men").<sup>4</sup>

What particular qualities does the story of Troy possess, that it has so captivated the imaginations of diverse audiences in many times and places? Surely what makes the Troy story stand out, above all, is the poignancy of the Trojan downfall, the enormous human loss involved in the destruction of an entire civilization. As Vergil put it, "Sunt lacrimae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt" (*Aeneid* I.462): "Here are the tears of things, and mortal matters touch the heart." And this aspect of the Troy legends would be especially appealing to medieval Scandinavian

writers and readers. Throughout the Germanic literature of the Middle Ages, the great traditional legends are legends of doomed heroism, of hopeless last stands against impossible odds. This quality can be seen in the Old English *Beowulf*, in the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*, in the ancient Germanic myth of Ragnarök, "the doom of the gods," and in many of the finest sagas of native Icelandic heroes such as *Grettis saga*, *Gísla saga*, and *Njáls saga*. One study of *Njáls saga*, Richard Allen's *Fire and Iron*, relates the plot-structure of that saga, its tragic downward curve, to the other Germanic legends just listed, and, as a parallel example from outside Germanic tradition, to the story of Troy.<sup>5</sup> The tragic downward curve in the Troy story is plain enough even in the scanty outline provided by Dares Phrygius' account; and one would therefore expect an Icelandic saga based chiefly on Dares Phrygius to emphasize the catastrophic tragedy of Troy's downfall.

Such is indeed the case with the earliest extant redaction of *Trójumanna saga*, the Alpha redaction. The Alpha redaction has also been called the "Dares Phrygius version" of the saga because it adheres most faithfully to Dares Phrygius' outline of events, with relatively little recourse to additional sources on the Trojan War such as Vergil and Ovid. At the same time, however, the Alpha redaction is the most inventive in fleshing out the Daretian skeleton with vivid description, dialogue, and character development of the Icelandic author's creation. All of these embellishments serve to point up the poignancy of valor in the face of inexorable fate that is inherent in the Troy story. For example, the two doomed heroic adversaries Hector and Achilles are played up most effectively in this redaction of the saga. And the Alpha redaction ends the story at the same point as Dares Phrygius' *De excidio Troiae* ends: with Troy in ruins, and the victorious Greeks departing to an unknown destiny. Because the *De excidio Troiae* is told from the viewpoint of a Trojan soldier who remained in Troy after the war—hence the name of the supposed author, Dares the Phrygian—the narrative professes ignorance of the later fortunes of the Greek characters. The tribulations of Agamemnon, Odysseus, and others, which in fuller accounts offset the sufferings of the Trojans, play no part in the *De excidio Troiae*, nor in the Alpha redaction of *Trójumanna saga*.

With the other two redactions of the saga, however, a different literary tradition enters in, one which undercuts the stark tragedy of the Troy story by portraying offspring of Hector surviving

the war, growing up in Greece, but later returning to the site of Troy, reconquering it, and founding anew a glorious civilization there. With this new closure to the narrative, the essential nature of the Troy story changes radically: it is still a tale of great human loss and sacrifice, to be sure, but all the suffering that went on during the war is mitigated, in retrospect, by the revelation that the royal line of Troy survived to bring the city back to life, Phoenix-like, from its own ashes. From this perspective, the story of Troy is one of hope for the future, not of mourning for a glorious but vanished past. Clearly, the two later redactors of *Trójumanna saga* prized the Troy story for other reasons than those we have explored above. The melancholy savor that is so prominent in standard accounts of the Fall of Troy is absent from these two Old Norse texts. It is worth noting that these later redactions do not develop the characters of the dying heroes Hector and Achilles in the same way as the Alpha redaction had, nor do they sustain the fatalistic tone of the more richly-embellished Alpha redaction. In short, the approach taken by the two later redactors, and the end results of it, differ strikingly from those seen in the Alpha redaction. What could have inspired such radical alterations in the firmly-established classical tradition of the Troy story?

In fact, the classical tradition does contain a few features that point in the direction taken by the Beta and Hauskbók redactions. Vergil's account of the Trojan Aeneas surviving to found a great kingdom elsewhere shows that not all was lost when Troy fell, though the poet's powerful depiction of the very real hardships involved in Aeneas' later career often overwhelms the more hopeful message. The *Aeneid* even contains a glimpse of Andromache and Helenus making a new life for themselves in Greece (3.294-505), as the Old Norse texts also mention. Certainly these two redactions of *Trójumanna saga* have directly made use of the *Aeneid* for the description of Andromache and Helenus' new city, a duplicate of Troy even down to such details as the arrangement of its waterways. The *Aeneid* also supplies a summary of the rivalry between Pyrrhus and Orestes that led to Pyrrhus' death and Helenus' succession to his throne (3.321-36). But one cannot look to Vergil for any hint of a return to Troy by surviving sons of Hector.

Such a hint does occur in the twelfth-century French *Roman de Troie* of Benoit de St. More. This poem speaks of two sons of Andromache, though Benoit makes it clear that they are actually

half-brothers, one fathered by Hector and the other by Pyrrhus when Andromache was enslaved to him. The *Roman de Troie*, though largely based on Dares Phrygius, shows a general predilection for extending the Troy story beyond the end of the war by recounting the later fortunes of the returning Greeks, derived from sources narrated from a Greek perspective such as Dictys Cretensis;<sup>6</sup> and the section on Andromache's later life in Greece is a small part of this continuation or epilogue. The French poet speaks favorably of Andromache's sons, praising them as "Chevalier . . . Hardi e pro e honoré, e coneü e renomé" (lines 29794-96): "Hardy and valorous and honored knights, and well-known and renowned." A brilliant career is predicted for them, but in rather vague terms: they will succor wretched captives and exiles, and will win great honor and great lands for themselves (lines 29797-804); but a return to Troy itself is not specified. The potential for such a development is certainly there, however.

That potential was realized in certain prose reworkings of the *Roman de Troie* in the thirteenth century. But the later French developments in the story of Hector's son are not easy to explore. Many variants of the prose *Roman de Troie* exist in manuscript, but the only one that has been published in full, the Bodmer *Roman de Troie en prose*,<sup>7</sup> happens not to contain an expanded account of Hector's son, beyond what Benoit had already stated in his poem. The older edition of a different version of the prose *Roman*, edited by Constans and Faral in 1922, includes only the first half of the *Roman* and so, of course, does not go nearly as far as the epilogue mentioning Hector's son. Moreover, many of the texts containing an expanded story of Hector's son within the *Roman de Troie en prose* are incorporated into variant manuscripts of a massive historical chronicle known as the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*. None of its variants has yet been edited and published in full. An edition bringing together the varying Old French accounts of Hector's son—and entitled the *Roman de Landomata*, this being the French version of the classical name Laodamas—does exist, but only as an unpublished dissertation by John W. Cross.<sup>8</sup> A look at this dissertation reveals that the *Roman de Landomata*, though short by overall standards of French chivalric romance, has lengthened the adventures of Hector's son and his half-brother considerably by inventing episodes of knight-errantry in various exotic locales before the arrival of the two brothers at the ruins of Troy. In contrast, the Old Norse accounts of Hector's sons and their reconquest of Troy

shows no trace of these chivalric episodes; it is short and to the point, so much so that the two brothers even lack names (see appended translation). Though the Old Norse accounts could theoretically result from a drastic abridgement of the *Roman de Landomata*, coupled with some details from Vergil's *Aeneid*, this explanation seems highly unlikely. None of the saga-redactions exhibits traces of influence from the French *Roman de Troie* in any other part of the story, and it seems improbable that the Icelandic redactors should draw upon only one section of the *Roman de Troie* and ignore the rest; improbable especially when one considers the vast differences between the sprawling, episodic, chivalric *Roman de Landomata* and the succinct epilogue of the saga.

John Cross, in exploring the evolution of the *Roman de Landomata*, does point out some shorter treatments of the reconquest of Troy by early authors. As early as the fourth century A.D., the Christian historian Eusebius included a brief mention of Hector's sons—there is no distinction in their paternity here—and their return to their ancestral homeland. The English writer Bede, in the eighth century, echoes Eusebius in his overview of history, *De temporum ratione*: "Hectoris filii Ilium receperunt, expulsis Antenor's posteris, Heleno sibi subsidium ferente."<sup>9</sup> "The sons of Hector retook Ilium, having expelled the heirs of Antenor, with Helenus giving them aid." Covering the entire incident in a single terse sentence, these Latin chronicles seem to offer too little to serve as the source of the saga-epilogue, even in conjunction with Vergil's *Aeneid*. Certain details in the Old Norse accounts are unlike their counterparts in either Old French romance or Latin historiography. For example, Orestes' attack on Pyrrhus, according to Vergil, Dictys Cretensis, the French *Roman*, and all historical chronicles that go into such detail, occurred when Pyrrhus was worshiping at the temple of Delphi. Yet the Beta redaction of the saga states that Orestes shot Pyrrhus "in the woods," while the phrasing of the Hauksbók redaction, "Orestes constantly besieges Pyrrhus," seems to imply a siege of Pyrrhus' home—there is no mention of a temple. Furthermore, the role of Helenus in the brothers' reconquest of Troy, as told in the saga, differs from that in the French *Roman* and in the Latin historiographic tradition represented by Bede. Bede's phrase "Heleno sibi subsidium ferente" implies only that Helenus provided the brothers with supplies, not that he personally accompanied them. Though it is possible to speak of an alternative literary tradition of Trojan destiny that

involves the restoration of Troy by a son or sons of Hector, and that stems from Eusebius and culminates in the elaborations of the *Roman de Landomata* in the thirteenth century, encompassing *Trójumanna saga* in some fashion, the precise place of *Trójumanna saga* within the tradition is hard to determine.

But although it is still something of a mystery *how* the story of Hector's sons developed the way it did in the saga, it is a little easier to understand *why* the two later redactors took the option of mitigating the tragic story of Troy with a hopeful epilogue. Certain tendencies in medieval Christian thought encourage such a narrative movement. Surely it is no accident that the idea of *Troia redux*, a restored Troy, occurs first in early religious writers like Eusebius and Bede. From a Christian perspective, the overall story of mankind on earth is a story of great and tragic loss and suffering, but always with the hope held out of redemption, joy, and ultimate triumph. On a smaller scale, that archetypal narrative structure is reflected in many literary works characteristic of the Middle Ages. As we all know, the narrative thrust of medieval romance, typically, is toward a "happily ever after" ending for the hero's struggles. Moreover Georges Doutrepoint notes an especially marked tendency, in the *remanieurs* who converted French verse romances into prose, to extend the narrative down through later generations, through the offspring of the romance's main heroes.<sup>10</sup> Certainly the elaboration of the story of Hector's son in the *Landomata* section of the prose *Roman de Troie*, as opposed to the vague glimpse of the two brothers in Benoit's earlier poem, conforms to this pattern.

It is probably no coincidence that many Old Norse sagas exhibit the same tendency, even those in which the "tragic downward curve" that Allen speaks of is most conspicuous. Allen's main focus, *Njáls saga*, arguably the greatest literary achievement in the saga genre, deals with the transition of Icelandic society from pagan to Christian around the year A.D. 1000.<sup>11</sup> The central conflict in the saga is between the staunch holdouts for the old heroic pagan way of life, and the forward-looking characters, led by Njál, who welcome Christianity. Njál and his followers are eventually wiped out by their enemies in the great burning scene, which Allen sees as a small-scale parallel to the Fall of Troy; but the martyrdom of Njál and company is not in vain; the Christian conversion of Iceland does proceed, and one of Njál's people, Kári, even escapes the burning. Some rays of hope remain; the loss, the destruction, the tragedy, are not absolute. After Kári escapes the burning, he manages to get

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revenge on some of the burners, but then goes to France on pilgrimage, and later meets and becomes reconciled with a former opponent who had taken part in the burning but later had a change of heart and made a pilgrimage to Rome himself. Despite the climactic devastation of the burning scene, resolution of conflict and Christian serenity are the final notes sounded in the saga's dénouement. Other sagas are less overtly religious—*Grettis saga* is a good example—but nonetheless follow the same basic pattern of a central narrative that climaxes with the tragic death of the main character, capped off by a dénouement that traces the later life of one or more of his kinsmen. A subsidiary narrative of this sort is known in Old Norse as a *þáttur*, which means "thread"—a term which echoes the metaphor of unraveling found in the French word *dénouement* as well.

Attaching a *þáttur* to an Old Norse saga serves the same purpose as the continuations so common in chivalric romances: the survival of later generations allows a glimmer of hope to illumine even the darkest tragedy; it is the proverbial silver lining that enables humanity to endure the clouds. Surely it is in this spirit that the *þáttur* concerning Hector's sons was created in the two later redactions of *Trójumanna saga*. Although this *þáttur* presents some technical problems for the literary historian, and although it defies the starker tragic vision of the pagan Troy legends, it succeeds in grounding the Old Norse retelling of the Troy story firmly in medieval Christian tradition.

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Notes

1. The most recent edition of *Dareti Phrygii de excidio Troiae historia* is that of Ferdinand Meister (Leipzig: Teubner, 1873). The text has been translated into English by R.M. Frazer in *The Trojan War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966).
2. The most comprehensive survey of the medieval Troy legends is found in the Introduction and Appendix B of Mary Barnicle's edition of the Middle English *The Seege or Batayle of Troy* for the Early English Text Society (London: Oxford University Press, 1927). More up to date, but more limited in scope, is Robert M. Lumiansky's essay "Legends of Troy" in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, ed. J. Burke Severs (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967), vol. 1, 114-18.
3. Benoit de St. More, *Le Roman de Troie*, ed. Léopold Constans, 6 vols., Société des Anciens Textes Français (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1904-12).
4. The Alpha redaction has been edited by Jonna Louis-Jensen in *Trójumanna saga: the Dares Phrygius Version*, Editiones Arnarnaganaeanae Series A, vol. 9 (Copenhagen: Reitzels, 1981); the two later redactions, known as the Beta and Hauksbók redactions, have also been edited by Louis-Jensen, in *Trójumanna saga*, Editiones Arnarnaganaeanae Series A, vol. 8 (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1963). Alpha and Beta are dated mid-13th century; the *Hauksbók* redaction is early 14th century.
5. Richard F. Allen, *Fire and Iron: Critical Approaches to Njáls Saga* (N.p.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), 128-31.
6. Dictys Cretensis, *Ephemeridos Belli Troiani Libri*, ed. Werner Eisenhut (Leipzig: Teubner, 1958). An English translation appears in Frazer's *The Trojan War* (see note 1 above).



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7. *Le Roman de Troie en prose (Version du Codex Bodmer 147)*, ed. Françoise Vieillard (Cologne-Geneva: Bibliotheca Bodmeriana, 1979). For the other version, of which only the first half appears, see *Le Roman de Troie en prose*, ed. Léopold Constans and Edmond Faral (Paris: Champion, 1922).
8. John W. Cross, "Le Roman de Landomata: A Critical Edition and Study," Diss. University of Connecticut, 1974.
9. Bede, *De Temporum Ratione*, ed. Theodor Mommsen, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Chronica Minora*, vol. 3 (Munich: MGH, 1981), 261.
10. Georges Doutrepoint, *Les Mises en Prose des Épopées et des Romans chevalresques du XIVe au XVIe siècle* (Brussels: Académie Royale de Belge, 1939), 344.
11. The standard edition of *Njáls saga* is that of Einar Ólafur Sveinsson in the Íslenzk Fornrit series, vol. 12 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1954). The best English translation is that of Hermann Pálsson, *Njal's Saga* (Penguin, 1960).

APPENDIX

Relevant passages from the Beta and Hauksbók redactions of *Trojumanna saga*. Like all English translations in this paper, the rendering is my own. It is based on Louis-Jensen's 1963 edition of *Trójumanna saga*, 233-38.

*Beta redaction*

*Here begins the story of Hector's sons:* And when this war was over altogether, and each man had set out for his native land, Neoptolemus Pyrrhus took Andromache, who had been Hector's wife, and they went to Epirus. Helenus went with them and was in Pyrrhus' good graces. Helenus was faithful to him in his counsels. When Pyrrhus and Andromache had been together for a little while, he wanted to release her and marry Hermione, the daughter of Menelaus and Helen the fair. And he had been betrothed to her when they were besieging the city of Troy, and he said it was advisable for him to proceed with the affair. Helenus said that Pyrrhus would never prosper if he did so. Now this plan came before Orestes, son of King Agamemnon, for he (Orestes) claimed that Hermione was betrothed to him by her grandfather Tyndareus, and he said he would either die or prevent this plan. Then he goes and ambushes him (Pyrrhus) in the woods and fatally shoots him with an arrow, but Pyrrhus survived until he reached home. He gave Helenus his whole realm

*Hauksbók redaction*

And when the war was over and everyone had gone away to his home, Neoptolemus Pyrrhus took Andromache, who had been Hector's wife, and they went to Epirus. Helenus went with them. Pyrrhus was a very overbearing man in most matters, and when he and Andromache had not long been together, he wanted to release her and marry Hermione, the daughter of Menelaus and Helen the fair. And Menelaus said that he (Pyrrhus) had been betrothed to her when they were besieging the city of Troy; and he said he would proceed with her. But Helenus dissuaded him much and said he did not think her closest kin were very lucky men, and he thought it likely that some evil would result if the affair proceeded. And now this plan came before Orestes, son of King Agamemnon, and he was very angry and said that Hermione was betrothed to him by Tyndareus, her foster-father. And he said he would either prevent this plan or lose his life. And now Orestes constantly besieges Pyrrhus, and at last he hit him with an arrow. And he was brought home still living,

*Beta redaction*

that he owned, and also Andromache. And after that he died. Then Helenus and Andromache took over the kingdom and built a great city in the likeness of Troy, for there were waters there like those of the previous city of Troy. King Priam's kinsmen outside Phrygia were very angry about the Trojan War. Because of it they were almost all exiled, and they settled in various places, as will be told later; but many wandered so aimlessly that they never achieved prosperity or ease as long as they lived. Antenor remained in Troy for a while, with King Agamemnon's permission. He cleared out the city and cleaned up after the war. And there was little building in the city, but at first the land was so blessed that there was abundance everywhere, as soon as the war was over. The sons of Hector and Andromache were strong and promising men, and they learned that undeserving men dwelt in Troy, which they regarded as their native land. They asked Helenus to give them support, and they planned an expedition for themselves against them. They said they wanted to

*Hauksbók redaction*

and then he gave Andromache to Helenus, and with her all his kingdom in Epirus. And after that he died. And they took over the kingdom and built a great city in the likeness of Troy. There the sons of Andromache and Hector grew up big and strong, and promising in leadership. And after the Trojan War, all of King Priam's kinsmen were utterly exiled, and they settled in various places, and many wandered so aimlessly that they never got any ease as long as they lived. But Antenor, as was mentioned before, was in the city of Troy after the Greeks went away. And he cleaned up and cleared the city and settled there for a while, with King Agamemnon's permission. And there was little building in the city, but at first the land was so blessed, as soon as there was peace, that there were no few who settled there. And when Hector's sons were grown up, they learned what had happened in Troy, which they regarded as their native land: that undeserving men dwelt there. Now they asked Helenus to give them men and ships and to go himself

*Beta redaction*

occupy the city of Troy and drive out the men who had settled there without their permission. Helenus granted them this and got them men. And he himself went with them. And no more is told of their voyage until they reached Troy. Now when the inhabitants became aware that Helenus had come there with Hector's sons, and that they would attack the city with fire and swordpoint, they realized they had no power to resist them, and they surrendered themselves and the city into their power. Helenus established his nephews there and strengthened their realm, and they dwelt there all their lives, and their descendants afterward. But Antenor and all his kin went away. Helenus went back to his kingdom and remained there as long as he lived, in great popularity and honor. Now is completed this saga, which has been the most illustrious of all the old tales in the world, in the estimation of all the wisest men.

*Hauksbók redaction*

with them to Troy and clear out the men who had settled there, and overthrow them and settle down there. Helenus granted them this, and they went with an army to Troy. And when the inhabitants became aware that Helenus had come there with Hector's sons and that they would attack the city with swordpoint and sword-edge rather than turn back, they realized that they had no power to resist them, and they surrendered themselves and the city into their power. Helenus established his nephews there and strengthened their realm, and they dwelt there all their lives, and their descendants dwelt there afterward. And Helenus went back to Epirus and remained there as long as he lived. And now is completed the saga which has been the most illustrious in the world, in heathendom, in the estimation of all men who are wise and who are acquainted with the most sagas.