

Call For Papers

St Magnús Symposium

Ruler, Poet, Saint: Rǫgnvaldr jarl Kali Kolsson and his World

Travel bursaries available for postgraduates and ECRs

The organisers of this special St Magnús Symposium invite abstracts of 3-400 words along the following theme. Please email abstracts to ins@uhi.ac.uk by 28 February 2022.



‘Tafl emk ǫrr at efla / íþróttir kannk níu’

(I am swift at playing board-games; I have nine skills), announces the young nobleman Kali Kolsson, before listing accomplishments as diverse as skiing, rowing, playing the harp, and composing verse (Orkneyinga saga ch. 58).

Kali, who would rule as Rǫgnvaldr, Earl of Orkney, from 1137-58/59, was a Renaissance man before the Renaissance, a medieval polymath who combined political responsibility with a passion for poetry and a spirit of adventure. Warrior, poet, crusader, saint: Rǫgnvaldr’s story encapsulates an uncommon diversity of experiences for the period. This conference will explore the history and literary representation of Rǫgnvaldr Kali Kolsson, set in the wider context of twelfth-century Orkney and the world beyond.

The complexity of Rǫgnvaldr’s character and the breadth of his travels and experiences will offer a focal point for further investigation into issues central to the study of medieval Scandinavian history and culture, including literary myth-making and the construction of social memory; the relationship between prose and verse in the Icelandic sagas and manuscript tradition; and the interaction between east and west during the medieval period. We hope this conference will rekindle interest in the understudied figure of Rǫgnvaldr Kali Kolsson, and that the life and times of this enigmatic Earl of Orkney will offer new perspectives for the study of the medieval north.

Travel bursaries funded by the Scottish Society for Northern Studies and The Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature. Applicants should email ins@uhi.ac.uk with their abstracts by 28th February 2022



The conference will be divided into four strands:

1. Rǫgnvaldr Kali Kolsson: ruler, poet, saint
2. Prose and Poetry in the North
3. Crusaders and the North
4. Orkney in the Twelfth Century and Beyond

We have confirmed two keynote speakers: Judith Jesch, Professor of Viking Studies at the University of Nottingham and Dr Ian Crockatt, poet and translator.

Strand 1: Rǫgnvaldr Kali Kolsson: ruler, poet, saint

Who was Rǫgnvaldr Kali Kolsson? How successful was he as Earl of Orkney? How did his political role interact with his identity as a poet and his legacy as a saint? How does his portrayal in Orkneyinga saga and other medieval texts compare with how he is remembered in Orkney today? This strand will explore the character of Rǫgnvaldr and the many ways his life and death have been represented, in both medieval and modern sources.

Strand 2: Prose and Poetry in the North

Rǫgnvaldr was a prominent and highly proficient poet, with 35 lausavísur (free-standing or extemporised verses) and 84 stanzas of Háttalykill (Key to Old Verse Forms) now attributed to him. Spanning such diverse topics as love, war, and skaldic metre, his work raises broader questions about the development and status of poetry in the medieval north. This strand will focus on the poetry attributed to Rǫgnvaldr while considering the relationship between verse and prose in Orkneyinga saga and related works. What can the study of such texts tell us about the poetry, historiography, and manuscript culture of the North Atlantic region?

Strand 3: Crusaders and the North

In 1151 Rǫgnvaldr set off in the footsteps of Sigurðr jórsalafari, Haraldr harðráði, and other Scandinavian adventurers to travel to the Holy Land. What can his expedition, and others like it, tell us about the relationship between east and west during the medieval period? What influence did foreign travel have on Rǫgnvaldr and his men, and on the northern communities from which they came? What can the depiction of non-Norse-speaking peoples tell us about medieval conceptions of race, religion and identity, and how can we engage productively with those depictions today?

Strand 4: Orkney in the Twelfth Century and Beyond

What sort of world did Rǫgnvaldr inhabit, and how typical was he with respect to those around him? What can historical and archaeological sources tell us about Orkney in the twelfth century and how do they compare with the world described in Orkneyinga saga? What was the relationship between Orkney and other territories in the North Atlantic region? This strand will investigate the historical and political context of Rǫgnvaldr's rule, both in Orkney and in world beyond his realm.

Practical information:

Date: 1-3 September 2022

Location: King Street Halls, Kirkwall

We are also planning an excursion to sites around Orkney and an event in the cathedral.

We expect the conference fee to be in the region of £120.

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