

# London Bridge and the archaeology of a nursery rhyme

John Clark

IN THE RECENT MoLAS monograph on the archaeology of London Bridge, Bruce Watson and Tony Dyson give their chapter on the archaeological and documentary evidence for continuing damage and repairs to the medieval stone bridge the title 'London Bridge is broken down'.<sup>1</sup> They head the chapter with verses from the well-known 'nursery rhyme' of the same name -- the familiar version in which each verse ends with the words 'My fair lady'.

Admitting that the rhyme is 'of unknown antiquity' (no version of it is recorded before the late 17th century<sup>2</sup>), they suggest that the 'fair lady' in question might have been Henry III's queen, Eleanor of Provence. Queen Eleanor had custody of the bridge revenues from 1269 to about 1281 'and may well have contributed to the ruinous state into which the bridge fell by that date'. Wisely, perhaps, they do not pursue this intriguing hypothesis very far. For equally one might turn to the earliest printed version of the same song, in which the verses are punctuated instead by the lines 'Dance over my Lady Lee[or Lea]' and 'With a gay lady'.<sup>3</sup> On the basis of this text (though it is only remembered from the days of Charles II) one might suggest another royal lady as the original of the verse -- Henry I's queen Maud, who between 1110 and 1118 was responsible for building the series of bridges that carried the London-Colchester road across the River Lea and its side streams between Bow and Stratford.<sup>4</sup> London children, of course, knew of the River Lea, but in a good example of 'Chinese whispers' at work, children in

Glasgow sang 'Dan's sister and Lady Ann' and those in Belfast sang 'Grant said the little bee'.<sup>5</sup>

Yet the discussions of this rhyme and the accompanying children's games by Iona and Peter Opie in the *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* and their subsequent book *The Singing Game*, together with that by Alice Bertha Gomme (later Lady Gomme) before them, suggest that reference to any particular 'lady', to any particular occasion, or even to any particular bridge, is unlikely.<sup>6</sup> Variations of a game in which the participants file under an 'arch' formed by the outstretched arms of two of their number, and in which the last to pass under is 'captured' when the arch 'falls', have been widespread in Europe. They are often associated with a song describing the fall of a bridge and attempts to repair it with various likely and unlikely materials and to guard it from harm. There are, for example, versions from Germany (where it may be Merseburg or Magdeburg Bridge or simply 'the golden bridge'), Scandinavia, Spain and France.

Writing in the 1890s, Mrs Gomme drew attention to both the manner in which the game ends with the capture of a 'prisoner' and the rhyme's insistence on the need to set a watchman -- 'Set a man to watch all night' and 'Then we must set a man to watch' in the two English texts, and similar expressions in some continental versions. Following the then fashionable practice among Victorian folklorists of attributing a very early 'primitive' or 'pagan' origin to popular beliefs and traditions, she concludes 'Looking to the fact of the widespread superstition of the foundation sacrifice, it would

1. B. Watson, T. Brigham and T. Dyson *London Bridge: 2000 Years of a River Crossing* MoLAS Monograph 8 (2001) 128-39.

2. I. and P. Opie *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (1951; new edn 1997) 318-25; *The Singing Game* (1985) 61-7.

3. *Op cit* fn 2 (*Dictionary*) 320.

4. W R Powell (ed) *A History of the County of Essex* vol VI (1973) 59. Or possibly the 'lady' might be one of the Abbesses of Barking, who in the 13th century were in dispute with the Abbot of Stratford about who was responsible for the

upkeep of the Lea bridges, which were as notoriously dilapidated as London Bridge itself.

5. *Op cit* fn 2 (*The Singing Game*) 64; Alice Bertha Gomme *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1894-8) 346.

6. *Loc cit* fn 2; *op cit* fn 5, 333-50. Mrs Gomme's two volumes on games were the only part to be completed of a multi-volume dictionary of British folklore projected by her husband George Laurence Gomme.

seem that we may have here a tradition of this rite'.<sup>7</sup> In other words, presumably, a captive is to be taken, and then to be buried beneath the foundations of the bridge to serve as its perpetual guardian or watchman. She quotes 'the actual facts of contemporary savagery' (in Calcutta in 1872!) as evidence for a belief that human sacrifices must be buried under the piers to ensure that a new bridge will stand. Although recent folklorists would take a more sceptical view of the survival of 'primitive' beliefs, we find the Opies offering the same interpretation in 1951 and 1985: 'Bridge building is a hazardous undertaking, and it has long been thought sensible to propitiate the river with a sacrifice, a human life if possible'.<sup>8</sup> Such practices are rather better evidenced in tradition than in reality -- and excavations at London Bridge have, I believe, revealed no trace of human sacrifices beneath the foundations! Given that the rhyme itself is so widespread, even if we were to accept it as evidence of a 'primitive' belief, the song would tell us no more about a tradition of human sacrifice specifically at London Bridge than it does about the involvement of a 'gay lady' in its repair.

Although Mrs Gomme is convinced that games and songs of the 'London Bridge is broken down' type reflect an original belief in the efficacy of human sacrifice as an aid to bridge building, she also notes (rather confusingly) a literary parallel that she feels may suggest a different inspiration for the rhyme -- or rather, perhaps, an occasion when London Bridge was indeed broken down and would require extraordinary measures to ensure its stable rebuilding and continued safety.<sup>9</sup> She refers to the *Heimskringla* of the Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson, and his account of the attack on London Bridge made by Olaf Haroldson (St Olaf) of Norway, in which Olaf succeeded in pulling down the bridge with its defenders.<sup>10</sup> She quotes (in translation) the verse apparently describing this event that Snorri attributes to the 'skald' Ottar the Black:

London Bridge is broken down,  
Gold is won and bright renown;  
Shields resounding,  
War-horns sounding,

Hild is shouting in the din;  
Arrows singing,  
Mail-coats ringing,  
Odin makes our Olaf win.

The first line presents an irresistible temptation. Mrs Gomme continues: 'If this is anything more than an accidental parallel, we come back to an historical episode wherein the breaking down and rebuilding of London Bridge occur, and it looks as if the two streams down which this tradition has travelled, namely, first through the game, and second, through the song, both refer to the same event.'

Peter Jackson put the case even more strongly in 1971: 'There is little reason to doubt that in this warlike song there is the origin of the famous nursery rhyme. Countless generations of children have been playing games to the chant "London Bridge is Falling Down" ever since'.<sup>11</sup> This has become a popular and widely-accepted view of the origins of the rhyme, repeated for example in the authoritative *London Encyclopaedia*.<sup>12</sup> In response, one might of course counter that, although some versions of the rhyme indeed refer to the bridge as 'broken down', others say 'falling down', and the dangers foreseen are mostly natural ones -- 'Wood and clay will wash away', 'Bricks and mortar will not stay', or 'Iron and steel will bend and bow' -- not warlike attack. Even the watchman is to guard against thieves making off with the building materials ('Silver and gold will be stolen away' in the final instance) not against Viking warships.

In fact, as early as 1930 Margaret Ashdown had noted that the version of this stanza quoted by Mrs Gomme was 'a spirited and exceedingly free rendering' and that 'it would seem that this somewhat misleading paraphrase of Ottar's verse has given colour to the suggestion that the old singing game is connected with the episode commemorated by Ottar'.<sup>13</sup>

The translation of the *Heimskringla* used by Mrs Gomme and later by Peter Jackson is that by Samuel Laing. In providing helpful up-to-date texts and translations of some of the saga accounts of the attack on London Bridge in an appendix to the new MoLAS volume, Jan Ragnar Hagland refers to

7. *Op cit* fn 5, 346-7.

8. *Op cit* fn 2 (*The Singing Game*) 64, citing a reported occurrence in Assam in 1939.

9. *Op cit* fn 5, 349-50.

10. The episode is referred to in *op cit* fn 1, 53, 57 and 232-3. Watson and his co-authors do not discuss the linked problems of *when* this event took place (it is not mentioned in the *Anglo-*

*Saxon Chronicle*) or on *which* side Olaf was really fighting at the time! See D. Whitelock (ed) *English Historical Documents c.500-1042* 2nd edn (1979) 332-3.

11. P. Jackson *London Bridge* (1971) 5.

12. B. Weinreb and C. Hibbert *The London Encyclopaedia* (1983) 481-2.

13. M. Ashdown *English and Norse Documents Relating to the Reign of Ethelred the Unready* (1930) 220.

Laing's translation as 'the standard English translation'.<sup>14</sup> It is 'standard' perhaps in that it is the most widely known, but its appearance in the bibliography of the new book as 'Laing 1964' may be (quite unintentionally) misleading. Far from being a 1964 translation, Samuel Laing's work first appeared in 1844.<sup>15</sup> It was never intended -- particularly in its treatment of skaldic verse -- to be a literal translation, and has all the verve and scant adherence to the original that one might expect of an early Victorian production. It was reprinted in a new edition in 1889, and then in at least four editions in Dent's 'Everyman Library' between 1915 and 1964.<sup>16</sup> When Jacqueline Simpson edited and revised the text for the latest of these in 1964, she noted that 'The verses have been much revised (though in such a way as to preserve the style of Laing's couplets), since a more accurate rendering was often essential if Snorri's handling of these primary sources was to be appreciated'.<sup>17</sup> The revised version of Ottar's stanza is as follows:

London Bridge is broken down, -  
By thee, O warrior of renown.  
Shields resounding,  
War-horns sounding,  
Thou hast raised a storm of war!  
Arrows singing,  
Mail-coats ringing --  
Battle rages more and more!<sup>18</sup>

It seems to have lost some poetic force in the revision, whilst retaining the famous first line! However, that first line itself is extremely suspect.

When in 1930 Margaret Ashdown brought together the chief Old English and Old Norse historical sources for the reign of Ethelred the Unready, to illustrate the events leading up to the accession of Cnut as king of England, she printed the text in the original language with a close modern translation on the facing page. There we can see Ottar the Black's verse just as Snorri Sturluson quoted it in Old Norse -- and even with no knowledge of the language we notice that 'London Bridge' certainly does not appear at the beginning of the first line.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, 'bryggjur

('bridge(s)') is in line 2 and, thanks to rather convoluted word order, 'Lunduna' is postponed until line 4. Ashdown's translation reflects the obscure and allusive language while simplifying the word order:

And further, O prover of the serpent of Ygg's storms, valiant in war, you broke down London's bridge. It was granted you to win lands. Iron ring-swords, swung fiercely in the war-meeting, had their course, while old shields sprang asunder. Battle waxed fierce at that.

This then, more or less, was what Ottar wrote. Clearly, neither his original Old Norse verse, nor any reasonably accurate English version of it, influenced the opening line of the familiar English song. And equally clearly Samuel Laing's 'somewhat misleading paraphrase', published in 1844, could not have influenced a song known from at least the 17th century. Is it then just 'an accidental parallel', as Mrs Gomme wondered?

Probably not. It is surely most likely that Laing, intent on translating into resounding English couplets the obscurities of skaldic verse, and faced with a reference to Olaf 'breaking down' London Bridge, found inspiration in a rhyme that was as well known to him as it was to Mrs Gomme, the Opies and Peter Jackson. He has taken the phrase 'you broke down London's bridge' and recast it in a familiar and memorable form, and given it prominence as the first line of his verse. There is *no* other connection between the words of Ottar's verse and the rhyme first recorded in the 17th century.

One might still argue that the singing game *could* recall the day when Olaf 'broke down' London Bridge, and does so independently of Ottar's verse. Many things are possible, though historians -- and folklorists -- would prefer rather more evidence of continuity. But we must surely conclude that, far from Ottar the Black inspiring the nursery rhyme, the nursery rhyme inspired Ottar the Black -- or at least his Victorian translator, and thus the form in which his verses are known to readers of the Everyman edition of Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*.

14. *Op cit* fn 1, 232-3. Unfortunately Hagland does not include Ottar's verse in his new translation.

15. The translator was Samuel Laing 'the Elder' (1780-1868), Orkney-born businessman, traveller and author of books about Scandinavia and other parts of Europe. *The Dictionary of National Biography* (1909) describes his translation of *Heimskringla* as 'more vigorous than accurate'. He should not be confused with his son Samuel Laing 'the Younger' (1812-97), politician, railway promoter and popular author on science, evolution and rationalism.

16. *The Heimskringla; or, Chronicle of the Kings of Norway, Translated from the Icelandic of Snorro Sturleson, with a Preliminary Dissertation*, by S Laing (1844); Second edition, revised, with notes, by R B Anderson (1889); *Heimskringla: The Olaf Sagas...* With introduction and notes by John Beveridge (1915) etc.

17. Snorri Sturluson *Heimskringla* Part One *The Olaf Saga* trans Samuel Laing, revised Jacqueline Simpson (1964) xxxv.

18. *Ibid* 124.

19. *Op cit* fn 13, 156-7.