

No. III.—*Notes on some of the ancient Songs of Faroe. In a letter to JOHN ADAMSON, Esq., F. S. A., &c., Secretary. By W. C. TREVELYAN, Esq.*

DEAR SIR,

IN the ancient historical ballads of Faroe, now in daily use there, we find a remarkable, and perhaps the only existing, instance of a record of historical events having been preserved for many centuries by oral tradition alone; a custom to which Tacitus alludes, when treating of the ancient Germans, he says, “celebrant carminibus antiquis (quod unum apud illos memoriæ ac annalium genus est) Tuistonem Deum, terrâ editum, et filium Mannum.—*Germ. II.*”

Some of those now preserved in Faroe have strong marks of being ten centuries old, and, though changed a little in course of time by alterations and additions, retain the most important part of their original form and contents.

The natives of these islands often amuse themselves during the winter months and at other festive times with dancing, in which old and young join; but not having yet adopted instrumental music at those times, they move in cadence to their songs,* which are sung by one or other of the dancers and all, who can join at least in the chorus. In these dances men and women promiscuously hold each other by the hand, and forming either into a circle or a line make three measured steps either forwards or to one side, then balance a little or remain still a moment, and then proceed as before.

The design of the song is not merely as music to regulate the steps, but

* The Icelanders appear also to have used songs in their dances; in *Sturlunga Saga*, in the 13th century, a strophe is given as a dancing tune. Arngrim Jonas, who wrote in the beginning of the 17th century, mentions dances under the name of “Vivivaki,” where the steps were regulated by the sound of a song. Eggert Olafsen, who travelled in Iceland in the middle of last century, talks of these Vivivakis as still in use; but from the remains of these songs which have been obtained, they appeared not to have been historical like those of the Faroese.—See a specimen of a *Vivivaki*, in Muller’s introduction to Lyngbye’s *Færosike Quæder*, p. 37.

at the same time by the subject to interest the hearers, in which, as may be perceived by observing the countenances and gestures of the dancers, they generally succeed. This gives to the dance, notwithstanding its monotony, so great a degree of interest that persons of all ages continue sometimes the whole evening in motion.

It is probably from this custom having been continued from a very early period that we owe the preservation of many very ancient ballads, some of which are of great historical interest.

On certain festive occasions they use particular songs, as at their weddings; some of which, as well as the dances by which they are accompanied, are so grave, that it formerly was not thought indecorous for clergymen to join in them in their canonicals. Some of their songs are modern Danish, but the greater part in their own language, and these are in such abundance that in some of the larger villages the same song is scarcely ever heard twice in one winter. They also frequently compose new songs on remarkable occurrences, or when opportunities offer for shewing their satire. These satirical songs are brought into use for their dances in the following manner:—It is so contrived that the hero of the piece should be present without being aware of what is to occur; two stout young men seize each a hand when the song is begun, the dance proceeds, and he is thus obliged, *nolens volens*, to figure through the whole of it. If this is effected, the song becomes afterwards in common use on festive occasions.*

Many of their old songs are of remarkable length; the most popular of them and one of the most ancient, the Song of Sigurd (*Sjúra Queði*) as published by Lyngbye, is composed of twelve cantos, containing altogether above four thousand lines; and this number when it is sung is doubled, as at the end of every stanza of four lines a chorus of the same length is repeated. And it is a remarkable fact, that no

* Besides the *Sjúra Queði*, there exist poems on the Battle of Runcival (*Runsivals Strúi*), called also Roulund's *Queði* (*Carla Magnussa Dreimur*), Charlemagne's Dream, and some relating to the Knights of the Round Table, which they may have obtained from Icelandic translations made in the beginning of the 13th century, and *Sigmunda Queði*, an interesting poem concerning the renowned hero of Faroe, Sigmund Brestesen, who was born in 966, died in 1002; much of it has been quoted by L. Debes in his *Færoa Reserata*, and by Torfæus in his *Commentatio Historica de Rebus gestis Færeyensium*, 1695.

manuscript of them exists or is known to have existed in Faroe, but that they have been preserved solely by oral tradition.

Svabo made a collection of fifty-two songs in Faroe, in the years 1781–82, which is now preserved in the King's Library at Copenhagen, in three 4to. volumes. Preceding each song he has given in Danish a short sketch of its contents.

In 1817, the celebrated botanist Lyngbye spent some months in Faroe, collecting materials for his valuable work on *Confervæ*. He at the same time transcribed from recital several of their songs, the most remarkable of which were published by him in Denmark, in 1822, with a Danish metrical translation, and a valuable preface by Professor Muller, from which I have drawn some of the materials for this notice.

The publication of this volume is the most extensive contribution which has been made to the printed works in the Faroese language, and by much the most important to philologists, as before it there had only appeared in print one or two songs and a fragment of a dialogue—the latter is in Landt's *Description of the Faroe Islands*. A translation of the Gospel of St. Matthew into Faroese has been some time in preparation by the Rev. Mr. Schroter, who is also engaged in a valuable historical and statistical account of those islands. Rask has given a sketch of the Grammar in his *Icelandic Grammar*, p. 262—282. Svabo some years ago collected materials for a Dictionary, but when I saw them in Thorshavn, in 1821, they appeared to be in a very unarranged state.

In Muller's preface to Lyngbye's work a list is given, from Mr. Schroter of Faroe, of 166 songs which he considers to be above a century old.

Some of the songs appear to have a connection with the subjects of the Edda, which is on good grounds supposed to have been written in the 8th and 9th centuries—and then to have been elaborated on poems of a still more ancient date, and to have been composed before the introduction of christianity. Though they have had a christian complexion given to them by the introduction and substitution of the names of saints, and of some christian customs in the room of those of the heathen, thus confirming the tradition that a prohibition was formerly in force against their use, yet some marks of heathenism are still found scattered through them.

For an account of the common origin of these poems about Sigurd* and his family, traces of which are found amongst the most ancient popular literature of all the people who are generally reckoned of Teutonic race (as in the *Nibelungenlied*, the most celebrated of the German poems of the middle ages, &c), I beg to refer to the Introduction to Jamieson's *Illustrations of Northern Antiquities*, p. 38.

With regard to the age of the *Síura Quæði* we may be sure, that it has not been composed in the islands in modern times, and nothing is there known of the sources from which the facts could be derived, neither could it be taken from the old Danish ballads, which contain but a small portion of the subject and that often given differently. Some may have been translated from the German, when the Hans Towns had an establishment on the Islands; but they differ throughout so much from the old German songs, and shew so close a connection with the old Norwegian, that we can scarcely consider them as a mere translation from the former. They have a great resemblance to some of the Icelandic poems, and from the close coincidence between it and the *Volsungasaga*, they appear to have had one common origin.† Muller in the Introduction, already alluded to, to Lyngbye's volume, p. 25—34, has at some length shewn the points of resemblance and of difference in the narrative as related in the *Síura Quæði*, the *Volsungasaga* and the *Vilkinasaga*.

The natives do not even now possess or make transcripts of their ancient songs, all who sing them have learned them from others, who in their turn have received this heir-loom from a previous generation. This shews that the communication by oral tradition is a custom of long standing and deeply rooted amongst this people, probably derived from the usages and necessities of times long gone by; we cannot otherwise readily conceive how a subject, which has obtained such universal esteem, should not have long

* Sigmund King of Hunsigov, in Hunaland, was a son of Volsung, the ancestor of Volsungi: he had a sister Signe married to King Siggier, in Gothland; he was twice married, first to Broghilde who bore him a son, Sinfotle, next to Hiordise, who after his death bore the renowned Sigurd the Hero of the *Síura Quæði*, the most remarkable both for its poetic worth and for the copiousness of its subject, and the most popular of all the Faroese poems. See Lyngbye *Faroiske Quæder*, p. 46. Muller's *Saga Bibliothek*, vol. ii. p. 36.

† The originals were perhaps brought to Faroe by some of the first Colonists from Norway; in the 9th or 10th century.

ago been written down, or that what has been once received in writing should afterwards have only been transmitted to posterity orally, especially among a people who understand the use of letters.

There is a tradition in the Islands that all the most ancient of these poems were taken from a large MS. book, found on board an Icelandic ship stranded in Sandoe ; but this does not appear to rest on any good foundation ; and were it so, it would refer to a very ancient period, as now the language varies so much from the Icelandic, that I do not think any of the natives would be able to read such a book.

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