

GEISLI

Geisli (The Ray) is a skaldic lay in honour of Olav the Holy. It was written and performed in 1153 by the great Icelandic skald Einar Skulesson, who was a priest and marshall for King Øystein Haraldsson. Geisli is the earliest known skaldic lay – or drápa – with a Christian thematic that has been preserved in its entirety. It was commissioned by King Øystein and first recited in the cathedral in Trondheim during the national assembly called on the occasion of the establishing of a Norwegian archbishopric in 1153. According to the Old Norse Kings' saga Morkinskinna, a wonderful fragrant smell could be noticed when Einar recited his lay. The fact that the Flatøybok starts with Geisli creates the impression that this manuscript is a kind of assembly where various texts and individuals are called together for an important purpose – to discuss the position of Norway and Iceland in the world. It was Magnus Torhallsson who introduced Geisli into the manuscript, but Jon Tordsson also refers to Olav the Holy as 'the blossoming ray'. To think of the Flatøybok as a 'national assembly' also has a political aspect, with the kings' sagas representing the kingdom and the other sagas and tales Norway's tributary countries.

The poem also has a religious aspect – i.e. that Olav the Holy, the ray of God's sun, provides divine legitimacy with the aid of the newly established archbishopric to the Norwegian kingdom as an independent state in Europe.

The poem can also be read as a prayer to Saint Olav to invoke God to help Norway and its tributary countries out of their profound crisis at the end of the 14th century – to ask the Lord God to 'quietly adjust' things, as Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson formulates it in the Norwegian national anthem of 1870.

1.

But the best only,
three in one Godhead,
will words and prayers teach me,
wise the man granted such gift!
Splendid light the radiant ray
that the sun of grace gives.
To the far-famed Olav
My finest lay I here offer.

2.

That sun which scattered
this world's drear darkness,
is called the world's light.
While lord of the heavens
the bright-shining sun¹ let himself
be born a mere mortal beneath
a cloud of the sea's gleaming star².
Joy world-wide this engendered..

3.

The holy sun hastened then
to its setting, slid down
so as to reveal rays of an other
lovelier light. The greatest joy,
granted us was when all
of mankind gained new life
through him who his life
freely gave on the cross.

4.

Caring for all of creation
the crucified Christ
on the third day arose
with unparalleled power.
Knowledge I have that vast numbers
of earth's population
rose heavenward with him.
Surely this strengthens our hope.

5.

The best of all kings,
Almighty God's bountiful son,
ascended in splendour from earth
to the highest of halls.
High-praised, the king of the heavens
reigns over his angels in glory's seat,
the king of kings' housecarls
bow towards it each day.

6.

The king of glory, great doer of deeds,
gave gifts to man from a mighty spirit
and fearless folk testify this
to be so. Out of this
came the dutiful folk
serving solely the one true God.
The highest of kings invites everyone
to their home in heaven.

7.

Let all of us honour
the radiant ray that flashes
from God's high hall, the fine one,
he that's called Olav. Folk know
he shines far with signs and
portents under the wind-swept
heaven. Folk! Grasp the gist
of the words that I speak!

8.

King Øystein! Listen to words
of deeds undoubtedly great!
Brave-hearted Sigurd, heed now
my lay of high praise! May the servant³
these verses bear also to Inge!
The head of their mighty line⁴
I ask to empower my lay,
important this is to all.

9.

The most supreme of scholars,
him we call Jon, I ask
to heed to my lay, completed
and said aloud here.
Raise your hands! and I'll praise
the fine friend of the sun's supreme king⁵.
The bishopric's glory will grow
in the city where the holy king rests.

10.

It is fitting for me
to greet these fine folk with this lay
of the big-hearted Olav.
May the Lord God give me a bounty of words.
Nor have I ever formerly found
such a shining selection
of eminent men in one house!
All those well versed in such can bear witness.

¹ CHRIST

² THE VIRGIN MARY

³ I

⁴ OLAV

⁵ OLAV

11.

Trøndelag men, all men of this land
shall hear the eulogy
of the stout-hearted servant of Christ⁶
now living in God's highest hall.
This folk-king's glory
is famed far and wide. A king
to match him will never
again be born in this realm.

12.

Sigvat, I have been informed,
wrote lines on the deeds of the
fearless king. Folk have heard that
Ottar wrote of the king of his people.
Those renowned as great bards
have sung of the Møre-king's greatness.
It is done! Before the holy king
I bend the knee.

13.

Boldly the raven-beak red-stainer
many a fine deed performed in battle.
Certain it is that the king
only paid for his sins to
God alone. The Trøndelag king
kind to his people, from them
concealed his great goodness,
few kings are born more excellent.

14.

The seeker of glory whose faith
was in God, ruled twelve winters
and three⁷ for his people
before the courageous king fell
in the shield-clamour at Olveshaugen.
A better king
they will never produce.
For us may he ward off all evil!

15.

In truth I have heard that the good
Rauma king told his able retinue
his dream, before they did battle.
– The folk enjoys the king's might –
The well-governing Horda king
saw a fine ladder raised, reaching
from earth to the heavens.
Meet it is to praise his greatness.

16.

And the one much lauded,
the lavish gold-giver⁸
then had in mind
to make his climb skywards.
The merciful ruler of all the world,
he who watches over his people,
had the heavens then open
to receive the good king.

17.

I have heard that at Stiklestad
a battle since was fought.
The wide-ruling warrior let blood run from
the wounds of inland Trøndelag men.
I also heard that the mighty king was
robbed of his earthly life by
warriors that felled the prince,
and committed so great a sin.

18.

A refrain worthy of his virtues
I will, if able, compose.
Of kings the greatest! His praise
a royal court most should hear.
God's knight indeed will everyone
from all their trials set free.
All good Olav wishes the lord of the sun
will grant for all to see.

19.

The sun was unable to shine
when the hero's life ended.
The lord of the heavens
showed us the sign
that long since once was shown
when the sun's light was snuffed
at the death of our saviour.
May fortune follow my tongue!

20.

At once came great signs
and portents where the hero fought
against those kinsmen.
The king did not turn
to sin. Later light gleamed o'er the
king's dead corpse, for
the self-same day God took
the king's soul up unto himself.

⁶ OLAV

⁷ MAKING 15 IN ALL

⁸ EXPRESSION FOR 'THE GENEROUS OLAV'

21.

The finest of all resting-places (*lege?*)
enhances the Horda king's splendour.
My lay of praise I thither address.
A better king will never be born.
God's knight indeed will everyone
from all their trials set free.
All good Olav wishes the lord of the sun
will grant for all to see.

22.

They washed the precious sweat
from the mighty king's corpse,
Hope gladdens the mind at his
pure healing water,
and true it was that the Sogn king's wounds
to God were so dear. His carls
laid him in his grave, the humble
shall hear of his exploits.

23.

I will begin to praise
his deeds of great mildness:
A blind man later appeared
there where people had washed
the king's body, good fortune befell him.
His eyes, without sight, he moistened in water
from that same well in which people knew
Olav's blood once had mingled.

24.

The main regained his sight from the
king's pure blood. Such good fortune!
Such thing so miraculous
never will pass from folk's memory.
God's knight indeed will everyone
from all their trials set free.
All good Olav wishes the lord of the sun
will grant for all to see.

25.

He who lavished gold
was twelve months
and five nights
hidden deep in the sand,
ere the almighty lord of lords⁹
let the deed-hungry wolf-feeder's
coffin of wood
come up from the earth.

26.

A man who had once had his tongue
cut out, was once more able
to speak, where the glorious
king rests. The fame of the
Egda king mighty in battle travels far
because of this wonder. The miraculous
power of the young king is praised by all
where the Norse tongue is spoken.

27.

Undaunted men should always ask
the father of Magnus the Good for help.
People are plagued by much
while they live on this earth.
God's knight indeed will everyone
from all their trials set free.
All good Olav wishes the lord of the sun
will grant for all to see.

28.

He who lets down the gold (*? senker*)
showed himself to his son
in dreams, the lord of Earth said
he would follow the brave one,
before the fearless prince
fought at Lyrskogsheien
against the hordes of the heathens,
where the wolf had plenty to eat.

29.

Magnus the Good let the raven
relish lashings of food,
the warrior red-stained
the brown-eagle's beak. Folk
fled in fear and great dread.
Sharp blades bit hard
to the grief of Wendish women.
Wolves gaped wide over corpses.

30.

The truth is the good friend
of our saviour gave
his fearless successor the victory.
I praise the daring king's work.
God's knight indeed will everyone
from all their trials set free.
All good Olav wishes the lord of the sun
will grant for all to see.

⁹ GOD

31.

True it is that Guttorm
let people make a statue
adorned with silver and gold
in honour of the victorious king,
a crucifix that the people have
in memory of the great portents.
The king's kinsman gave this which
stands in the middle of Christ's church.

32.

People south in Skåne have told us
of a woman who wished
to bake bread on the mass day
of the most mild Olav.
When though the bakerwoman
wished to see her glowing-hot bread
the dough had turned to granite
for the Danish woman.

33.

Since then the holy day
of the prudent prince has been kept
throughout Denmark. True and certain
it is, the word we have from the south.
God's knight indeed will everyone
from all their trials set free.
All good Olav wishes the lord of the sun
will grant for all to see.

34.

A haughty lady, high in rank,
had a poor young man's tongue
cut off at the root
for a mere trifle.
Beyond all doubt, a few weeks later
we saw this gold-spender
bereft of all speech
when we were at the place called Lid.

35.

I have heard that this weapon-foe
later paid a visit to the one
who aids those in distress,
and helps the poor and wretched.
Here both speech and tongue
were restored to him.
Once more I shall sing aloud of
him who lavishes the noble gold.

36.

The glory of the mighty monarch
is now known afar for such signs.
The Horda king's high repute flies
out over the inhabited lands.
God's knight indeed will everyone
from all their trials set free.
All good Olav wishes the lord of the sun
will grant for all to see.

37.

The Wends – long since
lost to the faith – I know for sure
mutilated a man at the coast
in most fearful fashion –
of this I now rhyme.
They cut the tongue of praise and song
out of the throat
of the well-known man.

38.

He who sailed on the ship
then sought out Olav's
gold-adorned casket
– may I find words for this –
and the holy king restored
the gift of speech to him who
valiantly had gladdened the raven¹⁰.
I know this to be true!

39.

High honour is the holy king
granted by the world's doomsayer:¹¹
The brave prince will have his place
amongst the heavenly host.
God's knight indeed will everyone
from all their trials set free.
All good Olav wishes the lord of the sun
will grant for all to see.

40.

Neite I have heard is the name
of Olav's sword, which gave
the golden-footed eagle
a profusion of food in battle.
With it the Rauma king
clove thin shields at Stiklestad,
where the swung sword bit
in its gleaming ray.

¹⁰ THE WARRIOR

¹¹ GOD

41.

When the courageous
descendant of kings fell
to the ground, and the battle ended,
a Swedish man took the sword
from the Trøndelag king.
The bountiful king's sword
was later found, adorned with gold
in the battle-brave Greek army.

42.

Now the people's prince, who gave
arm-gold to his men, finds
a fine thing of honour. Young Eindride
gave the poem this account.
God's knight indeed will everyone
from all their trials set free.
All good Olav wishes the lord of the sun
will grant for all to see.

43.

It is hard for me to write my verse
for the poem is to tell of
the prince who gave away rings,
the strength of the wise king
the people's friend who heals.
For the signs of the king of
heaven's light come forth
one after the other.

44.

The warrior, who so well knew
the clamour of battle, buckled on
the well-whetted sword
late that evening,
The able man of war
in the army of the glorious
emperor fell asleep on the field
under an open sky.

45.

The dawn came, and suddenly
the strong man missed
his gold-adorned sword.
The useful receiver of gold
could see the palate-blocker
of the wolf-brood¹²
lying far away from him
on the flat expanse of field.

46.

Three successive nights did the mighty,
glorious brother of Harald
give this warrior such signs,
before the valiant carls
informed the emperor
of these great omens.
Gleaming is the great work
of this prince of exploits.

47.

The let the emperor give
the gull-earth's fire¹³ in exchange
for the sword Olav had owned.
– I level out the poem
with the tool of poetry –
The emperor had the shield-spoiler¹⁴
placed beside the altar
decorated with gold.

48.

Harald's heir who helps greatly
performs great exploits
clearly seen in the battles
of Greece, of this words pass
among men. I have heard
that Olav's glory is fully revealed
beneath the open sky. No story-teller
will find a better king.

49.

Loud did the battle rage
on the wide expanses of Petzina,
– the war-gull¹⁵ appeased its hunger
in the clamour of battle –
so that folk were felled
in thousands by the sword,
the helmet-harming battle hardened.
The Greeks fled the field.

50.

When the army could so little
the wretched prince's kingdom,
Miklagard and wide tracts of land,
would have lain in hostile hands,
if but a few from the emperor's guard
had not carried their shields forward
in battle. Their weapons gleamed
in the shade of the shields. (? *vær*)

¹² THE SWORD

¹³ GOLD

¹⁴ THE SWORD

¹⁵ THE RAVEN

51.
Courageous men trustingly called
on the mighty Olav,
Their fear completely vanished!
The clamour of battle grew there
where sixty men stood
against one in the deluge of arrows –
There the bloody shields
were cleft in twain.

52.
The heathen army advanced
against the good men's kingdom,
a hard steel-rain fell, straight
towards the helmet-clad men.
Four hundred and fifty Norwegians,
those who dared draw near
to those fallen on the field of battle,
gained a glorious, far-flung reputation.

53.
Glad men conquered the ring
of chariots, where the wolves
found weapon-mangled corpses.
The noble king salvaged the carls.
People are eager to tell of
the young, valiant, gold-clad
king's work which is known
throughout the world.

54.
It is now necessary for me
to make it known to folk
in new verses, the final deeds, this is
not the least of what I must do!
With all our strength we should praise
God's power. May the world's healer
grant the high, protecting
king such a gift of fortune.

55.
The servant of the king
of mankind was subject to
people's cold envy.
Many a soul becomes evil by
going astray. Lies have turned men
from devotedness to enmity,
with the powerful blows of rage
the reign of peace is sometimes broken.

56.
Those who often stained their sword
struck a healthy man's foot on the
sandy beach. Hard grows men's hatred
from the root of mortal sorrow.
And severed the organ of praise¹⁶
and put out the eyes
of the priest's head.
So dangerous were things for him.

57.
His praising tongue was grasped
by a pair of tongs and
cut three times with a knife.
So cruelly did they treat him.
The man lay shamefully
mutilated on the shore.
Many have surely given up
the ghost for lesser tribulations.

58.
May the king be praised who
enabled the fine man once more
to have use of wounded foot,
stuck-out eyes and cut-off tongue.
Olav's pure hand healed all
hurts¹⁷ of this God's thrall. But those
who started such enmity against
the Lord's friend shall pay their debt.

59.
The good witness of glory gains
all kinds of higher bliss, better
than any man can imagine.
I can safely say this, for the
saviour's faithful friend displays
such miracles here on earth,
after having had his life taken.
The people's ruler refrained from sin.

60.
When but young the king was
taken from here, from great
sorrows. So does God test
the best of his friends.
The valiant protector of men
now lives at the lord of heaven's
highest most pleasing sight, where
bliss is unbroken.

¹⁶ TONGUE

¹⁷ WOUNDS

61.

Who is so wise that his
tongue can fully tell
of the heavenly king's
gifts in this life?
Those who give the faithful king
of the storm-hall to their (? *uværssal*)
precious friend. All men
can see the king's gleaming casket.

62.

I know that the world's chief lord
had the archbishopric brought here
to this city. The glorious king
of the sun brings men
salvation. Here three are holy,
a splinter from the cross of suffering.
Our overlord, heaven's creator!
Save for ever us who pray!

63.

People benefit greatly from
the mercy of eloquent Olav.
I have shed light on
the greatness of the powerful king.
May the people of this land bow
to this fine branch from
the king of heaven's elm. Blessed is
whoever becomes his faithful friend.

64.

I have only told but a few
of the host of the peace-loving
Olav's signs and tokens. Clear
words come from my skaldic seat.
Every man who spreads praise
of him who glorifies
the lord of the sun gains
the love of the lord of heaven,

65.

just as the renowned, faithful
friend of the saviour plainly
can free good folk from heavy
trials and tribulations by faith.
Those men who tell
that the people wrote this
about the king will enjoy
Christ's love in full measure.

66.

I have told the princely house
of the magnificent works
of the holy Olav,
gladly the mind of the wordsmith
follows. Great reward
I gain from him. God's blessing
helped to ensure that
this well-crafted lay is fitting.

67.

This lay would be richly
rewarded by the king's
forged ring – I know well
the prince's generosity –
if the warlike king
of his people, the gold-hater
Sigurd the Elder were alive.
To this king I give my praise.

68.

Mighty king! I have fulfilled
your request, without a doubt
I have advanced the glory of
the far-famed king as best I could.
You, most outstanding Øystein, tell
people how I have spoken my eulogy.
Let us love the true path to the lord
of the starry welkin. – I am silent.