

IN DEFENSE OF A LANGUAGE ERROR

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ABSTRACT

The verb *valda* ‘cause’ in Icelandic standardly has the past participle/supine *valdið*, but an alternative form is *ollið* (*ollað*). This verb governs dative case with objects, which is preserved in passive in standard Icelandic. However, in a few examples, nominative is found instead, in which case an inflected form of the participle shows up (*ollnar*), agreeing with the nominative subject of the passive clause. Such instances can be understood on the presumption that the speakers in question not only have the alternative form of the participle, but also substitute nominative for dative in passive (by Nominative Sickness). In this article I look at examples of the intuitively ill-formed form *ollnar*, and discuss its possible emergence. As it turns out, structures involving this form are completely “grammatical” in light of some morphological and morphosyntactic changes in Icelandic.

[1] A DEBATED FORM

Shortly before Christmas 2018 a short article appeared on the website of the Icelandic state radio (ruv.is). The article contained an interview with an Icelander holding a recent PhD degree in medical science about his specialty, a serious lung disease caused by pneumococcal bacteria (oh, how innocent this now looks in retrospect!). In the interview the young medical doctor stated among other things:

- (1) Árlega deyja um það bil 300 þúsund börn undir 5 ára vegna yearly die ca. 300 thousand children under 5 years because of sýkinga sem eru ollnar af þessari bakteríu þannig infections-PL.DAT that are-3PL caused-F.PL.NOM (?) by this bacterium so að hún getur verið mjög skaðleg... that it can be very harmful...
‘Every year about 300 thousand children under the age of five years old die because of infections which are caused (?) by this bacterium, so it can be very harmful...’

(<https://www.ruv.is/frett/bolusetning-dregur-ur-alvarlegum-sykingum>)

The story caught the attention of many people, but as is so often the case in Iceland, it was not so much for its content as for a tiny grammatical detail. Consequently, the important information doubtless contained in the news item was largely ignored by many readers because of the word *ollnar*, italicized in the example given in (1). This is apparently a past participle in the nominative plural feminine, whose masculine singular would be *ollinn* – but the question is, of which verb? Social media and internet language blogs were ablaze with indignation. Most people who expressed their opinion on this matter considered this usage plain and simple wrong. “There is no such form as *ollnar*,” they claimed; at best, some ridiculous confusion would seem to be going on here.

What is clear is that the structure *eru ollnar* is passive, as is shown both by the morphosyntax (the auxiliary *vera* ‘be’ plus a past participle) and the fact that there is also a *by*-phrase involved (*af þessari bakteríu* ‘by this bacterium’). The intended meaning of *eru ollnar* appears to be ‘are caused’ (the uncertainty is indicated by a question mark in the gloss and translation). However, the problem is that the most likely candidate for a verb that would fit in here is *valda* ‘cause’ (and ‘manage’, unlikely here), whose non-inflecting neuter singular form of the past participle, commonly called supine (Thráinsson 2007), is *valdið*. Thus, in “proper” Icelandic, it would be correct to say:

- (2) ... vegna sýkinga sem er valdið af þessari bakteríu.
 ... because of infections-PL.DAT that is-3SG caused-SUP by this bacterium
 ‘... because of infections which are caused by this bacterium.’

The issue can be illustrated more clearly by giving an example of a passive main clause containing an overt subject (the dative NP *sýkingum*), as shown in (3), rather than a relative clause where the subject is unexpressed.

- (3) Sýkingum er valdið af bakteríunni.
 infections-PL.DAT is-3SG caused-SUP by bacterium-DEF
 ‘Infections are caused by the bacterium.’

Whereas most participants in the discussion of *ollnar* were extremely critical, others tried to justify this usage, or at least to offer an excuse. Maybe it was just a slip of the tongue? After all, anyone can make a mistake.

But was it a mistake? I think not, and that is what I want to argue in this paper. In fact, the structure in (1) is completely “grammatical” in light of some morphological and morphosyntactic changes which are known to have happened in Icelandic. More precisely, this striking phenomenon falls into place on the presumption that the speaker in question not only has the alternative form of the participle, but also substitutes nominative for dative in passive by a

change known as Nominative Sickness.

Obviously, one example does not count for much in linguistic research, no more so than in textual scholarship. A celebrated Latin slogan which captures the tried and tested wisdom of classical studies states: *unus testis, nullus testis* ‘one example is no example.’ Or, as the Germans say: *Einmal ist keinmal...* I might mention, parenthetically, that I have tried to show elsewhere (Eythórsson 2005a) that this traditional opinion is not necessarily correct, and that in favorable circumstances even one example can be considered valid evidence of the existence of a particular grammatical feature.

But in any case, there is no need to worry about that here because there is indeed more than just one example of the structure *eru ollnar*. As it happens, there are at least two. To be sure, as far as I can see, no example of this kind occurs in the usual dictionaries and language corpora of Icelandic. Moreover, there is only one attestation in the recent *Gigaword corpus (Risamálheild)*, comprising 1.250.000.000 Icelandic running words (cf. Steingrímsson et al. 2018), but ironically, that is the very example given in (1) above. Fortunately, however, a second example, shown in (4), was found by means of an old-fashioned Google search on the Icelandic internet marketing forum *bland.is*. Interestingly, this example also involves a relative clause in which the unexpressed subject refers back to the accusative *viðgerðir* ‘repairs’ in a matrix clause.

- (4) ég er að spá[:] ég var að leigja af fyrirtæki íbúð sem á
 I am to wonder I was to rent from company apartment that owns
 heila blokk í hverfi í rvk, það var brotist inn hjá mér, og skemmt
 whole block in district in Reykjavík it was broken in at me and destroyed
 hitt og þetta, og þar á meðal íbúðin, þá er spurningin mín sú, er
 other and that and including apartment-DEF so is question-DEF mine this is
 það mitt að borga fyrir þær viðgerðir sem ollnar voru á íbúðinni sjálfri?
 it mine to pay for those repairs-F.PL.ACC that caused-F.PL.NOM (?) were-3PL
 on apartment-DEF itself

‘I’m wondering: I just rented an apartment from a company which has a whole apartment building in a district in Reykjavík. There was a break-in at my place, and various things destroyed, including the apartment, so my question is: Am I supposed to pay for the repairs which were caused (i.e., done) (?) on the apartment itself?’

(<https://bland.is/umraeda/brotist-inn/28640076/>)

So we have in reality two examples in Icelandic sources of the form *ollnar*, in both cases a past participle in the nominative plural feminine form, apparently meaning ‘caused’ (the second would actually be rendered more idiomatically in

English as ‘done’). Further examples have not been tracked down so far, but the (re)search is ongoing.

[2] SYNCHRONIC AND DIACHRONIC ASPECTS OF OLLNAR

The problem with *ollnar* is at least threefold. First, what is the meaning of this form? As mentioned above, the context would seem to require the meaning ‘cause’, in which case the form would be a past participle of *valda* ‘cause’; however, an inflected past participle to this verb is otherwise unattested, except potentially for the two instances given in (1) and (4) above. Second, could the form *ollnar* belong to some other verb than *valda*? A verb that suggests itself, for reasons that will be discussed below, would be *vella* ‘bubble, boil’. This possibility is in fact more unappealing than the first one, both formally and semantically. Finally, in addition to the aforementioned general lack of evidence, the form *ollnar* is problematic on account of the unexpected nominative case and its apparent agreement with a nominative argument, i.e. the silent subject of the relative clause, which is dependent on the antecedent in the matrix clause, the dative object *sýkingum* ‘infections’ in (1) and the accusative object *viðgerðir* in (4), respectively.

Given that the context requires the meaning ‘cause’, the form *ollnar* must somehow belong to the verb *valda*. The present active indicative of this verb is shown in the example in (5).

- (5) *Bakterían veldur sýkingum.*
 bacterium-DEF.NOM causes-3.SG infections-DAT
 ‘The bacterium causes infections.’

As already stated, however, the past participle of *valda* standardly occurs as the supine form *valdið*. If an inflected participle of this verb existed, it would presumably be regularly formed as “*valdnar*” rather than *ollnar* in the nominative plural feminine. We would then get a clause such as the one in (6).

- (6) *Sýkingar eru valdnar af bakteríunni.*
 infections-NOM are-3.PL caused-F.PL.NOM by bacterium-DEF
 Intended meaning: ‘Infections are caused by this bacterium.’

However, a form “*valdnar*” is not documented, whereas *ollnar* is, so we must take the latter seriously.

Considering only its form, *ollnar* looks as if it should belong to the verb *vella* ‘bubble, boil’, which is mostly intransitive, but can also be transitive (‘make bubble, boil’). In fact, *ollnar* can be convincingly argued to be the correct form,

although otherwise unattested, of the past participle nominative plural feminine of *vella*.

- (7) *Sýkingar eru ollnar af bakteríunni.*
 infections-NOM are-3PL bubbled-F.PL.NOM (?) by bacterium-DEF
 Intended meaning: ‘Infections are bubbled (made bubble) (?) by this bacterium.’

In order to evaluate which of the two verbs *ollnar* belongs to, *valda* ‘cause’ or *vella* ‘bubble, boil’, it is instructive to consider the paradigms of the two verbs. In order to comprehend the apparent irregularity of the forms, it is worth stating that, historically, *valda* exhibits a “mixed” paradigm involving a “strong” (irregular) present tense vs. a “weak” (regular) past tense, whereas *vella* is a strong verb both in the present and the past (cf. Noreen 1923). For our purposes, it suffices to show only the indicative of the present and past tenses, as well as the past participle/supine. The relevant forms are given in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. (There is also an additional verb *valda* ‘guard’, which can be disregarded here.)

As the tables show, there are similarities between the forms in various slots of the paradigms of the two verbs which can be suspected of having given rise to mani-fold confusion among speakers of Icelandic, both in present-day Icelandic and in earlier periods of the language. Notice in particular the form *ollið* in Table 2, the supine of *vella*, in relation to which our form *ollnar* in (1) and (4) would make perfect sense as a past participle. That would highlight the paradox that the *form* itself (as if belonging to a verb meaning ‘bubble, boil’) and the *meaning* that makes most sense in the context (‘cause’) are acutely at odds with each other.

As to the overlap of the forms in the paradigms of *valda* and *vella*, the following changes known to have happened in the history of these verbs should be considered in some detail. First, among some speakers, the plural forms *ullum*, *ulluð*, *ullu* of the past tense of *vella* are also found in the past tense of *valda*. Such speakers would say things like (8b), with the third person plural past form *ullu*, rather than the “standard” *ollu* in (8a).

Present tense				
	Sg.		Pl.	
1 pers.	ég	veld	við	völdum
2 pers.	þú	veldur	þið	valdið
3 pers.	hann	veldur	þeir	valda
	hún		þær	
	það		þau	
Past tense				
	Sg.		Pl.	
1 pers.	ég	olli	við	ollum
2 pers.	þú	ollir	þið	olluð
3 pers.	hann	olli	þeir	ollu
	hún		þær	
	það		þau	
Supine				
valdið				

TABLE 1: valda ‘cause’

Present tense				
	Sg.		Pl.	
1 pers.	ég	vell	við	vellum
2 pers.	þú	vellur	þið	vellið
3 pers.	hann	vellur	þeir	vella
	hún		þær	
	það		þau	
Past tense				
	Sg.		Pl.	
1 pers.	ég	olli	við	ullum
2 pers.	þú	ollir	þið	ulluð
3 pers.	hann	olli	þeir	ullu
	hún		þær	
	það		þau	
Supine				
ollið				

TABLE 2: vella ‘bubble, boil’

- (8) a. Lyfin *ollu* honum óþægindum.
 medicines-DEF caused-3PL him discomfort
 b. Lyfin *ullu* honum óþægindum.
 medicines-DEF caused-3PL him discomfort
 ‘The medicines caused him discomfort.’

What appears to be going on with *ullu* for *ollu* is interparadigmatic leveling in the plural of the past tense of *valda* on the model of *vella*.

Second, while the supine of *valda* is standardly *valdið* and the supine of *vella* is *ollið*, it must now be observed that the form *ollið* (or *ollað*) also occurs as the supine of *valda*. Thus, the pattern in (9a) is considered standard Icelandic, but some speakers find (9b) more natural. The usage with *ollið* (*ollað*), as in (9b), is regarded as substandard by language purists, as discussed by Rögnvaldsson (2019), and is advised against in some Icelandic grammars (e.g. *The Database of Modern Icelandic Inflection* (n.d.)).

- (9) a. Þetta hefur *valdið* nokkrum vandræðum
 this has caused-SUP some trouble
 b. Þetta hefur *ollið* (*ollað*) nokkrum vandræðum.
 this has caused-SUP some trouble
 ‘This has caused some trouble.’

In the *Gigaword corpus*, the standard form *valdið* is much more common than *ollið*, for instance with the third person singular of the perfect auxiliary (12.396 vs. 273 hits; *ollað* is only found three times in the perfect). As Rögnvaldsson (2019) remarks, however, the “substandard” forms may be more common in the spoken language than in written texts.

Historically, the form *valdið* is original in Old Norse-Icelandic, but *ollað* also occurs in old sources (cf. Noreen 1923), where it is actually slightly more common than *valdið* (9 vs. 7 examples, according to Rögnvaldsson 2019). On the other hand, the variant *ollið*, which outnumbers *ollað* by far in the modern language, as we have seen, is not found in Old Norse-Icelandic. As to the origin of the alternative forms *ollað* and *ollið*, they are presumably analogical to the forms of the past tense (*olli*, *ollir*, *olli*, *ollum*, *olluð*, *ollu*), reflecting a Proto-Norse (PN) zero grade form **wulþ-* to the full grade form PN **walð-* in *valda*. However, the existence of the supine *ollið* (PN **wuln-*) in the paradigm of *vella* (PN **weln-*) may have helped in their creation as well, at least in the case of the more recent form *ollið*; if so, this would be a remarkable case of both intraparadigmatic and interparadigmatic leveling within the same verbal paradigm. (See Magnússon 1989, under the entries *valda* and *vella* (2), for the etymology and derivational

history of these forms.)

Third, it can be mentioned as an aside that the verb *valda* can also mean ‘manage’. In this meaning, however, the past tense is rare (and dispreferred) in the standard language (*Database of Modern Icelandic Inflection* (n.d.)). Thus, while *valda* is common in the meaning ‘manage’ in the present tense, some other verb is normally used in the past tense, for example *ráða við* ‘be able to deal with’ (e.g. Rögnvaldsson 2019).

- (10) a. Hann *veldur* þessu verkefni ekki.
 he manages-3PRES this task not
 ‘He can’t manage this task.’
- b. Hann *réð* ekki *við* þetta verkefni.
 he was-able-to-deal-3PAST not with this task
 ‘He wasn’t able to manage this task.’

An explanation of this curious fact is not readily available, but it underscores the uncertainty many speakers have with the past tense of *valda* (historically showing “weak” forms vis-à-vis the “strong” present, as stated above). Moreover, as is often the case with prescriptive rules, some people disregard it and use the past tense *olli* with this verb in the meaning ‘manage’ anyway.

- (11) Stjórnin *olli* ekki verkefninu.
 government-DEF managed-3PAST not task-DEF
 ‘The government wasn’t able to manage the task.’
 (<https://palo.blog.is/blog/palo/entry/1000848/>)

In view of this information, let us return to the question we left unanswered above: Which verb does the form *ollnar* belong to? As we have seen, the possibilities are *valda* ‘cause’ (hardly ‘manage’) and *vella* ‘bubble, boil’ (or ‘make bubble, boil’). There is an overlap between these verbs for some speakers in that (i) the past tense of *valda* can be formally identical in the plural to that of *vella* (first person plural *ullum*, etc.), and (ii) the supine of the two verbs can also be formally identical (*ollið*). However, although *ollnar* might formally belong to *vella*, the semantics is a knock-down argument against that option. It does not seem to make any sense to say that bacteria make an infection ‘bubble’, as would be required in the example in (1), let alone that repairs ‘bubble’ or ‘are bubbled’, as would be the case in (4). So, the assumption that *ollnar* is from *vella*, although formally possible, is semantically absurd. On the basis of the meaning that is the best fit in the context (i.e., ‘cause’), the conclusion is that the form must belong to *valda*. This is also formally plausible, because, as we showed, for some speakers the alternative form of the supine is *ollið* (*ollað*).

Before we can conclude our discussion of the form *ollnar*, however, two remaining problems must be addressed. First, *ollnar* appears to be nominative, but as repeatedly stated, no such form is attested except for the two examples adduced above. Second, even granting that the inflected form of the past participle were possible, the use of the supine would be expected given that *valda* takes the dative, as shown in the active clause in (12a). In standard Icelandic dative case of objects is “preserved” in passive (*sýkingum*) and the main verb occurs in the supine form (*valdið*) together with the auxiliary *vera* ‘be’, as shown in (12b). The dative NP does not normally become nominative, contrary to (12c).

- (12) a. *Bakteríur valda sýkingum.*
bacteria cause-3PL infections-DAT
‘Bacteria cause infections.’
- b. *Sýkingum er valdið (af bakteríum).*
infections-PL.DAT is-3SG caused-SUP (by bacteria)
‘Infections are caused by bacteria.’
- c. *Sýkingar eru ollnar (af bakteríum).*
infections-PL.NOM are-3PL caused-F.PL.NOM by bacteria
‘Infections are caused (by bacteria).’

On the other hand, accusative case of objects is not “preserved” in passive but appears as nominative (13b).

- (13) a. *Guðmundur las bókina.*
Guðmundur read-3PAST book-DEF.ACC
‘Guðmundur read the book.’
- b. *Bókin var lesin (af Guðmundi).*
book-DEF.NOM was read by Guðmundur
‘The book was read (by Guðmundur).’

At this point a reader might be forgiven for asking if the whole business with the aberrant form *ollnar* is complete madness. Maybe so – but there is method in it. There is indeed a rationale for the unusual form of the past participle *ollnar* in (1) and (4) which can be easily explained on the basis of some general tendencies of language change. What is manifested here is (i) the use of the innovative form of the past participle to *valda* which arose by intra- and interparadigmatic leveling, and (ii) the replacement of dative case with subjects by nominative case – a change known as Nominative Substitution or, less politely, Nominative Sickness, mainly targeting oblique (accusative and dative) theme subjects (e.g. Eythórsson 2002, Eythórsson et al. 2012).

This type of change is rather inconspicuous, and many speakers are unaware

of its existence. Therefore, it has not been the target of the same kind of vitriolic attacks as the much more notorious Dative Sickness, exemplified in (14), substituting dative for an original accusative with experiencer subjects (cf. Eythórsson 2002 and many others).

- (14) a. *Mig langar í nammi.*
me-ACC wants in sweets
b. *Mér langar í nammi.*
me-DAT wants in sweets
'I want sweets.'

Despite being less well-known, Nominative Sickness is nevertheless quite common in Icelandic, as in the active clause in (15b):

- (15) a. *Bátinn rak að landi.*
boat-DEF.ACC drifted to land
b. *Báturinn rak að landi.*
boat-DEF.NOM drifted to land
'The boat drifted to the land.'

It has usually been thought that Nominative Sickness does not occur in passive in Icelandic, i.e. with objects promoted to subject (e.g. Thráinsson 2007, Eythórsson 2017, Eythórsson & Thráinsson 2017, Eythórsson et al. 2012). However, recent research has shown that there are indeed numerous cases of Nominative Sickness in passive in this language. In particular, Hlíf Árnadóttir has collected a number of such examples, where nominative is found with the verbs *úthúða* 'revile' and *henda út* 'throw out', for instance, both of which govern dative case with objects. Contrary to the standard language, the dative is not preserved in passive in the examples in (16), where the nominative shows up instead.

- (16) a. *Ferðalagið var fjölbreytt og ég var m.a. úthúðuð*
trip-DEF was varied and I-NOM was i.a. reviled-F.SG.NOM
af einhverjum manni í Leifsstöð fyrir að skamma ekki barnið mitt
by some man in Leif Ericson Airport for to scold not the-child mine
fyrir hlut sem ég ekki sá.
for thing that I not saw

'The trip had its ups and downs and I was, among other things, reviled by a man in Leif Ericson Airport for not scolding my child for something I didn't see.'

(Árnadóttir, p.c., example from Facebook)

- b. Ein af ástæðunum af hverju *maður* er *hentur* út er einmitt
 one of the reasons why one-NOM is thrown-M.SG.NOM out is exactly
 útaf fölsuðu nafni sem er ekki til á þjóðskrá né hjá FBI löggunni.
 because-of false name that is not to in national-register nor with
 FBI cops
 ‘One of the reasons why you are thrown out is exactly because of a
 false name which doesn’t exist in the national register nor with the
 FBI cops.’

(Árnadóttir 2012)

Moreover, Benediktsdóttir (2008) has shown that Nominative Sickness in passive is found in Icelandic child language, for example with a seven-year-old girl using the verb *henda* ‘throw’, which takes a dative object. In the passive clause in (17) the dative is not preserved and nominative occurs instead, with which the past participle agrees.

- (17) *Hann var hentur í hausinn á Palla*
 he-NOM was thrown-M.SG.NOM in head-DEF on Palli
 ‘He was thrown in Palli’s head.’

(Benediktsdóttir 2008)

An additional important observation, made by an anonymous reviewer, is that both cases of *ollnar* discussed above involve relative clauses where the subject is non-overt. Impressionistically, Nominative Sickness may be more pervasive when the subject is missing than when it is overt, as in the example in (18), involving Conjunction Reduction.

- (18) *Ég dáist að sjálfstraustinu hennar og dreymi um að hafa bara hluta af því*
 I admire self-confidence hers and dream-1SG of to have only part of it
 ‘I admire her self-confidence and dream of having only part of it.’
 (<https://www.dv.is/fokus/2020/10/03/gegnsaer-brudkaupskjoll-vekur-athygli-thetta-eru-bara-naerfot/>; Einar Freyr Sigurðsson, p.c.)

In standard Icelandic *dreyma* ‘dream’ takes an accusative subject and the verb is in the default third person singular. In (18), however, *dreyma* is in the first person singular, agreeing with a missing nominative subject of the second conjunct. To my knowledge, however, this issue has so far not been studied systematically, and therefore I will refrain from making further claims on it at this point.

Incidentally, Nominative Sickness is also known to have operated in Faroese

and other languages, including Mainland Scandinavian, both in active and passive clauses (cf. Eythórsson et al. 2012, Eythórsson & Thráinsson 2017). So the fact that Nominative Sickness is being found in passive in Icelandic non-standard language and child language is further evidence for the hypothesis that “Faroese is the Icelandic of the future” (Eythórsson 2005b).

[3] TAKING STOCK

In light of the preceding discussion, the example in (1) can be explained as follows. An alternative form to the supine *valdið* is *ollið* (*ollað*). This form arose by analogy to the past tense forms *olli*, *ollum* etc. (intraparadigmatic leveling), and was presumably also helped along by the supine of the verb *vella* (interparadigmatic analogy). With speakers who have the alternative form the past participle feminine is correctly formed as *ollnar* (the nominative singular masculine would be *ollinn*, the feminine *ollin*, etc.). Since *valda* governs dative case with objects, it would have been natural to passivize it like this:

- (19) *Sýkingum er ollið.*
 infections-DAT is-3SG caused-SUP
 ‘Infections are caused.’

But in addition to the alternative form of the present participle, the speakers of the structures shown in (1) and (4) also have Nominative Sickness, and therefore the dative gives way to nominative when the NP has the grammatical function of a subject. What is newsworthy is that this happens in a passive clause, where Nominative Sickness has been considered non-existent in Icelandic. However, passive structures are indeed not immune to this change, as demonstrated by various other cases which have been uncovered, in particular by Hlíf Árnadóttir and Ásbjörg Benediktsdóttir. Consequently, from the point of view of the speaker quoted in (1), it is perfectly grammatical to say:

- (20) a. *Sýkingar eru ollnar.*
 infections-NOM are-3PL caused-F.PL
 ‘Infections are caused.’
 b. *Sýkingar sem eru ollnar.*
 infections-NOM that are-3PL caused-F.PL
 ‘Infections which are caused.’

All of this is totally obvious once it has been pointed out, isn’t it? As one of my professors once quipped when I was a young student of linguistics: “Everything which is said is right... except for what is obviously wrong.” The goal of this paper was to argue that although the utterance in (1) is “obviously wrong” from the

point of view of the standard, or prescriptive, grammar of Icelandic, it can be shown to be “right” in the actual grammar of some Icelandic speakers.

MINNINGARORÐ

Í huga mínum verður Janne alltaf þessi dásamlega eldklára og eituhressa skel-libjalla og orkubolti sem ég kynntist fyrir löngu í Ósló. Frábær og dugandi fræðimaður – en líka mjög góð, vingjarnleg og heilsteypt manneskja.

To me, Janne will always remain that wonderful person I first got to know way back when in Oslo, bursting with joy, energy and intelligence! An excellent and efficient scholar – but also a very kind, friendly and solid human being.

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